



Cambodia's KRouge genocide inspires first of its kind art exhibit

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PHNOM PENH (AFP) — Forced from his home by the Khmer Rouge, Svay Ken remembers joining tens of thousands of other Cambodians choking the roads leading away from the capital Phnom Penh more than 30 years ago.

Carrying what few household goods he could grab in the frantic hours after the communist guerrillas' seizure of the city, he clutched his children's hands, terrified they would be swallowed by the crush of bodies.

Although not yet the painter he would become, Svay Ken -- now a frail but driven 76-year-old who has emerged as one of Cambodia's pre-eminent contemporary artists -- remembers desperately trying to commit each moment of his ordeal to memory.

"I thought that if I survived this, I would record these experiences in paint to preserve the memory of what I experienced," he recalls, sitting in the living room of his Phnom Penh apartment.

One of those memories, rendered in a primitive style, shows grim, black-clad patients lining up to be fed out of a communal bucket.

Entitled "Khmer Rouge hospital," it is among two dozen works displayed at Phnom Penh art gallery Meta House in the first exhibit of its kind, called "Art of Survival".

Through paint, sculpture, charcoal or pencil, Cambodian artists have converged to create works inspired by the 1975-1979 rule of the Khmer Rouge, during which as many as two million people died of starvation and overwork, or were executed by the regime.

But organisers say it reaches beyond Cambodia's genocide to illuminate some more universal truths about humanity and its capacity to both hurt and heal, and they hope to take the exhibit on the international circuit.

"Examining the complexity and horror of the Pol Pot regime is not only important and relevant for the Cambodian people -- it is of great concern for the rest of the world as well," says American artist Bradford Edwards.

"The weathered cliché 'It can happen anywhere' must be applied here, for no nation is immune to the possibility of genocide," he adds.

For Edwards, who has set out to expand the show in order to introduce a global audience to Cambodian artists, "Art of Survival" serves dual purposes: to create art out of one of

Cambodia's most destructive periods and to open a window onto the country's nascent art scene.

"I'm trying to make this exhibition appeal to the widest variety of people," he said.

"Art of Survival" spans the range of emotions and experiences that are tied to the defining moment in modern Cambodia's history.

Fear and violence are evident in the more literal works of older artists who survived the regime -- bleached skulls crowding canvases, or a bound and blindfolded figure bending under the foot of a Khmer Rouge cadre.

Younger artists born in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge's rule produced more abstract interpretations of the genocide, like Vandy Rattana's "Going Fanatic," a photograph of squares of light crowded between the communist movement's hammer and sickle and two blocks representing the United States.

"It's a political chessboard," says the 28 year-old.

"Cambodia's war was not just created by Cambodia -- it belonged to the world. If we talk about war in Cambodia we need to talk about Vietnam, the United States," he adds.

The exhibition, he says, "gives me a voice to say something about my history".

Edwards says this dialogue through art is long overdue, and calls the exhibit "an accumulation of years" of collective trauma and recovery.

"We've been waiting for an art show that deals with the Khmer Rouge period specifically. I would call this a 29-year process," he says.

"It is much more than an art exhibit because of the context in which it is taking place," he adds.

The "Art of Survival" coincides with efforts to bring former Khmer Rouge leaders to justice after nearly three decades.

Cambodia's genocide tribunal expects later this year to prosecute the first of five senior cadres currently in its custody in what many see as the biggest step yet towards the country's reconciliation with its brutal past.

The UN-backed court gives weight to the art. The art, in turn, is a tangible sign of Cambodia's emergence from beneath the shadow of the Khmer Rouge, says Meta House's director Nico Mesterharm.

"Art is a marker of development," says Mesterharm, a German documentary maker who has positioned his gallery at the forefront of Cambodia's cultural recovery.

"We see 'Art of Survival' as a platform for a community dialogue. We hope that our project contributes to the reconciliation process," he says.