

D V A N

diasporic vietnamese artists network

Nude Dudes and Nukes—Photography in Phnom Penh—Winter 2010 and Spring 2011

Posted on [May 16, 2011](#) by [Julie Thi Underhill](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

This compelling overview of Phnom Penh's photography scene, written by Christopher Hearle and Thien-Huong Ninh, features the captivating work of Việt Lê, Heng Ravuth, and Vandy Rattana. The authors write that "these artists grapple with what it means to be laid bare, both wrought and stripped of the pretenses of geo-politics, identity politics and popular culture." What a way to succinctly introduce these nude dudes and nukes of distinction!



Photography has recently been the highlight of the art and cultural scene in Phnom Penh. Although Cambodia's traumatic past has been [infamously documented](#) through photography, a present generation of artists is challenging the rules and the changing the face of photography in the region. Depicting soundscapes, bodyscapes and landscapes—from homoerotic boy bands and

nude (self-) portraits to bomb craters—Phnom Penh’s growing art scene embraces provocative subject matter. Nudity and politically sensitive topics can be censored here ([as it is in the U.S.](#), Việt Nam and the rest of the world), yet these photographers continue to question bodies of power. Real and metaphorical bodies become a central focus—campy, sensual and vulnerable human bodies, bodies of land.

As residents and roommates in Phnom Penh in Cambodia, we attended several events from November 2010 through March 2011—namely [Việt Lê’s *boy bang!*](#) opening and artist talk, the Photo Phnom Penh Festival (we will focus on [Heng Ravuth’s](#) work), and the grand opening of contemporary art space [SA SA BASSAC](#) and its inaugural show, [Vandy Rattana’s *Bomb Ponds*](#).

The rise of contemporary fine art photography in Phnom Penh can perhaps be traced to year-long photography workshops held by Stephane Janin at Popil Photo Gallery (opened in 2005 but now closed). Its participants included five of the six members of Stiev Selapak artist collective who founded [Sa Sa Art Gallery](#) and [Sa Sa Art Projects](#). These founders are now highly active artists who work primarily in photography (as well as installation and performance): Heng Ravuth, Khvay Samnang, Kong Vollak, Lim Sokchanlina, Vandy Rattana and Vuth Lyno. Local and international artists continue to share ideas and inspiration with each other and the public through a rich range of exhibitions, workshops and talks—a slice of which we’re sharing with you.

The Việt Lê [boy bang!](#) opening was held on Thursday November 4, 2010 at [Java Gallery](#), Phnom Penh. Over two hundred friends, art lovers, tourists and people passing by came to look at the series of photographs which depicted several faux Asian boy bands in various campy disguises—the series slyly comments on the international flows of pop and politics. In keeping with the boy band theme of the evening, *Cartoon Emo*—one of Cambodia’s hottest contemporary musical groups—rocked the packed event. Gallery goers and groupies transformed the space into a mosh pit of sorts, with the crowd spilling out onto the sidewalk.



Cartoon Emo, art fans, and groupies at the opening

Just over two weeks later and despite heavy rain, a crowd of about twenty men, women, old, young, artists, non-artists, lay people and even a saffron-garbed monk gathered at Java to listen to Lê's presentation about his art work and a career that spans twenty years. The opening PowerPoint slide had 'pornography' in the title and we braced ourselves for what was about to come (the talk was entitled "Photography, Pornography and Autobiography").



Lê's career trajectory as a queer-identified artist was shaped by various personal encounters, including numerous local and international art residencies; among them one at the Fine Arts Work Center in the gay resort town of Provincetown, Massachusetts, USA, once dubbed "Protease Town" in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic. His intimate photographs dealing with loss, longing and masculinity, features gay men in their homes—some in quite sexual acts. The [*pictures of you*](#) series has been produced over the span of a decade.



“From sex to death,” Lê joked and showed a photograph of his dead father. In this challenging diptych from the [still series](#) (2001-09), Lê candidly pictures his father lying in his death bed. A thick tube connects his father’s body to a large yellow urine bag; the color of his father’s skin and the urine is the same. From life to death in the diaspora, his father cannot escape the racial calculus of yellowness imposed and injected into his body. Another related image evokes the Neoclassical painting *The Death of Marat* (1793) by Jacques-Louis David. Lê often references art history but the distinctive themes of displacement and racialization raise his work to a level of personal reflections and sensibilities.



Lê’s wide span of creative production also includes performance. In a durational performance entitled *incredible indelible invisible man* which parodies other [performance art tropes](#), he paints his nude self entirely white with body paint (against a white background) as mimicry of the obsession for whiteness within and without Asia. He then violently rubs the paint off himself, crawls to another area and repaints himself black (in a dark setting, almost disappearing into the environment). In doing so, he reveals and questions black-white racial binaries, stereotypes, as well as political visibility and invisibility. The [two-hour performance](#) is documented via a series of photographs.



documentation of two-hour site specific performance, Highways Performance Space, Santa Monica, California, USA

The body features prominently in Lê's work, whether at play or at (eternal) rest; he deals with issues of the body politic.

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The second major event in the capital of 'the Kingdom' was the 3rd Annual [Photo Phnom Penh Festival](#). It had twenty three exhibitions held around the city, showcasing the works of ten emerging Cambodian photographers in a country where the art scene is very young and where it is often challenging for up and coming artists to get the platform to display their work. Given that the event was held during the peak tourist season, these photographers had the opportunity to reach to large international audience.

Although several exhibitions were held in traditional art spaces in Phnom Penh, such as the Royal University of Fine Arts and the Royal University of Phnom Penh, many others were also held in the open-air in order to reach out to the general Cambodian public who frequent the public spaces in the cooler evening hours. On the final two evenings of the festival, photographs were projected onto large screens in Wat Botum Park, a popular place for people to go and walk and exercise. Photographs were also displayed on boats going up and down the Tonle Sap River for the whole week, celebrating the end of the rainy season and delighting tourists and locals alike who were strolling down the popular Riverside area. Some exhibitions were further away from the Royal Palace/Riverside area, and thus *tuk-tuk* drivers were hired for the day to take enthusiasts from one art space to the next for only a few dollars.

The festival was organized by the Centre Culturel Français Cambodge and its Artistic Director was Christian Caujolle, who created the Department of Photography in the French newspaper *Libération*. The program also included 'A night at the church' which was set in a old French church, 'Straight from the Heart' and 'The night of Europe-Asia' which looked at the intersections of culture between the two continents.

Among the ten selected Cambodian artists included Heng Ravuth, whose photographs consisted of blurred nude self-portraits, part of his *Nudes* (2010) series. His oeuvre consists of several series of nudes, some abstracted, others more representational, in different formats and colors.



Image courtesy of the artist

Heng speaks of the difficulties of dealing with sensitive corporeal representations. He explains the meaning and the motivation behind capturing these images:

Nudity, particularly in Cambodian culture, sounds uncomfortable and sometimes disturbing as it strongly connects to the very intimate privacy of bodies that we usually don't talk about. It also connects to shame and dignity and therefore we seem to try to hide it.



Image courtesy of the artist

Heng discusses both the beauty and the banality of our bodies and our lived experiences through his works.

Even though we try to cover our nudity with clothes, it's still part of us. Therefore I want to show to people that nudity is us and that everyone is actually nude. This photo series seem dark and somehow unclear, because I want to create a mysterious world, yet there is still beauty inside. Most of the time, I try to show movement of my body amidst sadness, longing and loneliness.



image from Photo Phnom Penh website

This longing and loneliness, this intimacy and distance is poignantly expressed by the black and white series. Through the movement of the artist's nude body, frozen on film, Heng deals with absence and presence (as Barthes has commented on), and the fact that one must continue to move through life's losses in a lonely landscape of mind and body.

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Lastly, in thinking about physical and psychic landscapes, and the links between minds and bodies, we want to share with you [SA SA BASSAC's](#) debut exhibition featuring Vandy Rattana's haunting [Bomb Ponds](#) series (2009), which opened February 17, 2011 and is currently on view through March 20, 2011.

The emerging artist, whose work has been featured in several prominent international exhibitions and is collected by the Singapore Art Museum, now divides his time between Phnom Penh and Paris. In an [earlier diacritics post](#), we had introduced to you [Sa Sa Art Gallery](#), which was founded by several Phnom Penh-based photographers in 2009. Since then they have expanded their operations which now includes a satellite space called [Sa Sa Art Projects](#) for exhibitions, talks and residencies housed in a legendary International-style low-income apartment bloc called [The Building](#), part of the Bassac riverfront development designed and executed by Ly Bun Hap and Khmer starchitect [Vann Molyvann](#). Sa Sa Gallery has moved and joined forces with contemporary Khmer art curator and scholar [Erin Gleeson](#), renaming itself SA SA BASSAC; it is now near the Riverside (more information at the end of this post).



រណ្តៅបែ The Bomb Ponds
ដោយ វណ្ណ រតនា by Vandy Rattana
17 February through 20 March 2011
Opening 17 February from 6:00 to 8:30pm
N-វណ្ណរតនា SA SA BASSAC
#18 (upstairs) Sothearos Blvd
Thu - Fri, 2pm-6pm +855 (0)77 374 110
Sat - Sun, 10am-6pm info@saasabassac.com
= by appointment www.saasabassac.com

'The Bomb Ponds' opening invite

People crammed into the recently opened SA SA BASSAC to see Vandy Rattana’s exhibition its opening night. After going up two flights of stairs, we entered a spacious room which was painted entirely white. Vandy’s photographs were displayed around the room as well as a video being projected onto the wall that had recordings with people who are living near the bomb ponds, many of whom were there when the bombs fell. The photographs and video ignited conversations and opinions with Khmers and Americans, who were discussing the political nature of the art.

The “bomb ponds” which Vandy Rattana’s solo show explores are the craters caused by mass bombings during the Vietnam War, specifically Nixon’s “secret war” in Cambodia and Laos in which [2,756,941 tons of bombs](#) were dropped in Cambodia (Owen and Kiernan). Nixon’s failed four year carpet-bombing campaign (1969 to roughly 1973), intended to quickly end military engagement in the area, only increased anti-U.S., anti-imperialist sentiment and aided the French-educated revolutionary Pol Pot’s infamous rise to power. Referring to these traumas the artist notes, *“There is a Khmer proverb that says: You can hear something a thousand times and not know it, yet if you see it with your eyes just once, you know.”* This horrific past is over-determined, both invisible and hypervisible, both indelible and willfully forgotten for both Khmers and the international community. The photographer’s images are serene, uncanny. The beautiful haunted landscapes point at both the traumatic legacies of nukes *and* the passage of time and the “healing” and erasure it brings. There are no bodies visible, only bodies of water. In

this series, the artist seeks to create a new body of knowledge. The press release for the show states:

Dissatisfied with the level of documentation produced on the subject, Vandy Rattana traveled to the ten Cambodian provinces most severely bombed in the U.S. military campaign during the Vietnam War. Along the way, he engaged villagers in locating and testifying to the existence of the craters made by the bombings, known in the Khmer language as the “bomb ponds.”



Image from the artist’s website

The afterlife of trauma is indelible. From marred landscapes to bodily landscapes, these photographers wrestle with intimate memories as they are etched in public and private consciousness through personal narratives and popular culture. Through different formal techniques ranging from “documentary” approaches to more evocative gestures, these artists grapple with what it means to be laid bare, both wrought *and* stripped of the pretenses of geo-politics, identity politics and popular culture.

While the emerging art scene of photography in Cambodia bridges the country to an international community of artistic creation and exchanges, Việt Lê’s *boy bang!* series, the Photo Phnom Penh Festival (and specifically Heng Ravuth’s *Nude* series) and Vandy Rattana’s *The Bomb Ponds* exhibition reveal that photographic production for artists of color also bear important accountabilities to personal and local histories and cultural life. For these photographers, the challenge has less to do with becoming “universally” connected and understood but to

continually struggle to inspect such temptations in order to remain genuinely grounded. It is from this angle that they could lay bare their own aesthetics and introspection rather than being catapulted into the fantasy of universalism.

—Christopher Hearle and Thien-Huong Ninh wrote this in March 2011

Christopher Hearle lives in Phnom Penh and works for a Cambodian consulting company, SBK Research and Development, which does project management, monitoring, evaluation and research. Although his work is related to international development, he has a strong interest in the arts and culture in Cambodia.

Thien-Huong Ninh is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Southern California, whose research examines Vietnamese diaspora, religious life, and transnational networks.

Special thanks to Erin Gleeson, Heng Ravuth, Việt Lê, Vandy Rattana, and Lyno Vuth.

SA SA BASSAC

#18, 2nd floor, Sothearos Blvd, Phnom Penh

Thu-Fri 2pm-6pm

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