



# Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column written by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.



2015 marks the 40th anniversary of the Khmer Rouge forces seizing power in Cambodia. When Pol Pot's ultra-communist troops took Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital city, few realised this would trigger one of the worst human tragedies of the last century. When the country was liberated by Vietnamese troops three years and eight months later, the Cambodian genocide is estimated to have cost the lives of 1 700 000 people – approximately 21 per cent of the country's population at the time. The subsequent civil war lasted until nearly the end of the 1990s and turned this South-East Asian kingdom on the Mekong River into one of the world's poorest countries. It was not until 2007 that a tribunal, supported by the United Nations, began its work of trialling senior Khmer Rouge officials for crimes perpetrated during the Pol Pot years.

The question is how a country can heal from this troubled past and how it is able to overcome the psychological effects that these traumatising years left on the survivors and their descendants.

The trials against the main perpetrators of the Khmer Rouge have come very late and it does not seem that they could trigger a process of healing through a real debate on what happened and how to integrate this past into the country's identity. Too many of the people in power were part of that regime and have no interest in exposing evidence.

In a society that is more or less occupied with surviving and making ends meet, silence about the past seems to be the easiest way to move on. The parents want to spare their children the traumatic experiences they went through, and the children grow up amid a silence too loud to hear over.

It is the arts that play an important role in overcoming that silence and confronting the Cambodians with what is such an unwelcome part of their collective memory.

Rithy Panh is Cambodia's most famous filmmaker, born in Phnom Penh in 1964. In his latest film *The Missing Picture* (2013), he recounts his own and his family's trauma during the Khmer Rouge time. It was only thanks to good luck that he himself survived.

*The Missing Picture* is an interdisciplinary masterpiece that makes use of the propaganda films of the Khmer Rouge as a kind of background in which the clay figures, created by artist Sarith Mang, are mounted and, in their suffering,

brutally juxtapose this contemptuous landscape of supposed happiness and prosperity. Above this scenery there is the voice of the survivor telling his story and thus integrating oral literature into this most unusual setting. The film's innovative artistic concept has already turned it into a milestone not just of Cambodian art, but art in general. Through his clay figures, Rithy Panh succeeds in making the crimes of the Khmer Rouges visible, thwarting those who had deliberately avoided leaving any visual documents of the regime's oppression behind.

*The Missing Picture* visualises the horror of the Khmer Rouge time and gives the suffering and trauma a face.

Besides dealing with the traumatic past in his own work Rithy Panh founded the Bophana Centre in Phnom Penh. It is a place to promote the Cambodian young film scene. The centre has also gathered an archive of visual and audio footage since Cambodian independence in 1953. This archive is accessible to everyone and enables scientific and artistic research of the past and its ramifications.

Another important figure in the Cambodian art scene is Khmer-American artist Anida Yoeu Ali, a Muslim Khmer, who was born in Battambang in 1974 and grew up in exile in the United States. She moved to Phnom Penh (once the hometown of her father) in 2011 after residing outside of Cambodia for over three decades.

Ali is a versatile artist; her works span performance, installation, video, poetry, public interventions and political agitation. In her art making, Ali is dedicated to interdisciplinary approaches, her installations and

performances investigate the artistic, spiritual and political collisions of a hybrid transnational identity.

Her long-term project *The Buddhist Bug* is an interdisciplinary performance art born out of questioning identity and the notion of otherness. It draws on the religious iconography of both Islam and Buddhism. It is a creation inspired by her personal inability to reconcile her fascination with Buddhism alongside her upbringing as a Khmer Muslim and also an attempt to capture a quickly changing Cambodian urban and rural landscape. Set amongst everyday people in ordinary moments, the *Bug* provokes obvious questions of belonging and displacement.

It is an otherworldly character, with bright orange 'skin' the colour of Buddhist monk robes and a headpiece based on the Islamic hijab.

The metres and metres of textile act as skin, as a way for the surface of her body to extend into public spaces and habituating the in-between spaces that are so often neglected.

In her art works and her poetry Anida Yoeu Ali is developing stories and narratives that exist out of the conventional, that depart the comfort zones of known spaces and ideas to enable a dialogue that contributes to a collective healing.

It is the scrutiny of the past that marks a departure into the future for many Cambodian artists today. How the younger generation deals with the contradictions of Cambodia's reality today will be told another time.

Anida Yoeu Ali, who recently won the Sovereign Art Prize, will be the guest of the Sylt Foundation in January 2016 and will bring *The Buddhist Bug* to Johannesburg. **CF**



*Roll Call*, from The Buddhist Bug series by Anida Yoeu Ali, Digital c-print, 2014; Photo courtesy of Studio Revolt



*Campus Dining*, from The Buddhist Bug series by Anida Yoeu Ali, Digital c-print, 2012; Photo courtesy of Studio Revolt



*Spiral Alley*, from The Buddhist Bug series by Anida Yoeu Ali, Digital c-print, 2012; Photo courtesy of Studio Revolt