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On the Coevalities of the Contemporary in Cambodia

Review: *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things* by
Chan Dany

Roger Nelson

Abstract

A review of visual artist Chan Dany's solo exhibition *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things*, held at SA SA BASSAC gallery in Phnom Penh from May 23 to July 28, 2013, incorporating some reflections on contemporaneity in Cambodia.

About the Author

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Chan Dany's second solo exhibition in Phnom Penh, *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things*, was a testament to the artist's avowal that he is "very interested in anything that is very beautiful (ស្រស់ស្រាយ *sa'aat*), anything that is wanted by people."¹ Chan's finely detailed and alluringly sparkling works embody an aesthetic of playful exuberance popular among (or "wanted by") many urban young people in Cambodia. I view Chan's exhibition as an articulation of contemporaneity in Cambodia that reveals at once the country's rapidly changing relationship to global markets, as well its deep links with history, particularly of the

colonial period.² In this essay, I will draw extensively on conversations with Chan,³ as well as advance some tentative propositions on the nature of the contemporary in the Cambodian context.

Chan was born in 1984 in Prey Veng, a province east of Phnom Penh, and has lived and worked in the capital since 1999. He has exhibited nationally since 2003 and internationally since 2008, including in historically significant Cambodian exhibitions such as *In Transition* at Reyum Institute in 2006, as well as in *Strategies from Within*, curated by

I acknowledge the continuing sovereignty of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations as the Indigenous owners of the land, in Melbourne, Australia, where this paper was written. As is customary, I offer my respects to the Wurundjeri elders, past and present. I am grateful to the artists and curators Chan Dany (ចាន់ ដានី), Khvay Samnang (ខ្មែរ សំណាង), Lim Sokchanlina (លីម សុខចាន់លីណា), Erin Gleeson and Vuth Lyno (វុធ លីណា) for conversations during 2012, 2013 and 2014 that have assisted in the development of many of the ideas I articulate here. Thanks also to Vuth Lyno for advice on some translations, and to Chum Chanveasna (ជុំ ច័ន្ទវិសនា) at SA SA BASSAC for access to gallery archives, and for kindly supplying the images reproduced here. An earlier version of this essay was presented in 2013 as a paper at the 4th Annual International Siem Reap Conference on Special Topics in Khmer Studies, titled *Don't Abandon the Indirect Road: Divergent Approaches to Cambodian Visual Culture*, convened by the Centre for Khmer Studies, the Friends of Khmer Culture Incorporated, the University of Sydney, the École française d'Extrême-Orient, and the APSARA National Authority. I am grateful to the conference organizers and for comments offered by conference attendees. I would also like to thank the anonymous *Contemporaneity* reviewer for invaluable contributions.

In this essay, Cambodian family names precede first names.

¹ Chan Dany, conversation with the author, July 2013. All references to Chan Dany are from conversations with the author in Phnom Penh during 2012, 2013 and 2014. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Khmer to English are by the author.

² By contemporaneity, I refer broadly to the nature of current conditions, especially as compared to past historical epochs, and also to attitudes and approaches toward the experience of the present time. Defining contemporaneity is a particularly complex task, which may explain why so many critics and scholars use the term without any attempt at explanation. I offer this short sentence as a gesture at minimizing misunderstanding, while also recognizing that—in the words of Geeta Kapur—"The term contemporary gives a definitional ambiguity to the present." Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2007 [2000]), 276.

³ For a discussion of the importance of the testimony of the artist in settings that largely lack written archives, see: Nora A. Taylor, "The Southeast Asian Art Historian as Ethnographer?", *Third Text* 25, no. 4 (2011): 475-488.



Figure 1

Chan Dany, *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things*, SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh. Installation view. Photograph by Lim Sokchanlina. Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

Biljana Ciric in Shanghai in 2008, and in 2013's *Art Basel Hong Kong*.⁴ Chan is one of very few exhibiting Cambodian artists born since the 1979 fall of the Khmer Rouge regime to consistently utilize "traditional" Cambodian imagery: that is, forms of ornamentation that have been continuously in use for centuries. A significant contributor to Chan's interest in Cambodian traditions is his education at Phnom Penh's important but now-defunct Reyum Institute. As will be discussed below, this education provided Chan with a locally unique opportunity to explore a variety of styles including Cambodian traditions, drawing from life, and "free" experimentation. In neighboring Vietnam and Thailand, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia and Asia more broadly, contemporary artists—including of Chan's generation—regularly draw on inherited visual languages and traditions.⁵ The comparative rarity of such practices in Cambodia is a rich site for future discussion, beyond the scope of this essay. The unusual nature of colonial policies in Cambodia (as compared to elsewhere in former Indochina), as well as more recent ruptures in the narrative of modernity (most notably Pol Pot's declaration of "year zero" in 1975), are surely key contributors to this comparative rarity, as is the nature of systems of patronage that have developed in recent decades, both for practices termed "contemporary art" and for those deemed "traditional crafts."

⁴ Chan was selected by the website *Cool Hunting* as a highlight of "the Asian component." See Josh Rubin, "Art Basel Hong Kong: East. Highlights from the Asian component of the recent fair," *Cool Hunting*, May 30, 2013, <http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/art-basel-hong-kong-east.php>.

⁵ For a broader discussion of what is termed "neotraditionalism" in Asian art (although without consideration of the case of Cambodia), see John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998), 71-87. See also John Clark, *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980 to 1999* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2010), 89-93 and 140-43. For a discussion of the shifting ideological functions of "tradition" in the contemporary context, see Kapur *When Was Modernism*, esp. 267-282.



Figure 2

Chan Dany, *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things (Diamond in the Flower)*, 2013. Lycra, lace, plastic beads, sequins, cotton thread. 100 x 150 cm. Photograph by Lim Sokchanlina. Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

Most regularly exhibiting artists of Chan's generation (and there are presently a few dozen) work with photography, video, performance or participatory practice, or else make paintings that are usually figurative and reminiscent of expressionism and surrealism. By contrast, Chan's practice, in various media, is consistently based in designs drawn from the Khmer *kbach* (ក្បាច់), a codified system of design and ornamentation found throughout Cambodia and in neighboring areas. The Khmer *kbach* originated more than a millennium ago, and its dozens of design forms are still in regular use today in architecture, painting, carving and textiles.⁶ Although closely associated with the decoration of temples, the *kbach* is not strictly a religious form. As shall be seen below, *kbach* designs are today used to embellish all manner of surfaces, including paving tiles. Chan's detailed knowledge of and near-exclusive use of *kbach*, as well as his non-fluency in English and his disinclination to travel, make him unusual among his generation of exhibiting artists in Cambodia. Most are generally more cosmopolitan in outlook, and well-networked with artists and spaces internationally, particularly in Southeast and East Asia, North America and (to a lesser degree) Europe.

In *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things*, ten equally sized works were evenly spaced in the white cube of SA SA BASSAC, a gallery and resource center in central Phnom Penh

⁶ Chan Vitharin and Preap Chanmara, *Kbach: A Study of Khmer Ornament*, ed. Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, trans. Ingrid Muan (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2005), i-v.

that operates on both a non-profit and commercial basis.⁷ Nine works hung in portrait orientation along the gallery walls, and one lay flat on a low platform on the floor (Fig. 1). As suggested by the exhibition's title, the works were based on the form of the *sampot*, a rectangular cloth worn by men and women throughout much of South and Southeast Asia. According to a short catalogue produced by the gallery for the exhibition, the "common *sampot hol* has over 200 codified patterns, which vary by region in terms of their geometric and organic lines, lattices, stars and dots, flora and fauna motifs."⁸ A *sampot* is always more intricately patterned along its bottom edge, nearest to the wearer's feet. With this in mind, Chan has embellished the lower section of each of the ten works exhibited. The sole horizontally oriented piece, *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things (Diamond in the Flower)* (2013), is decorated along its longer edge: the artist explains that it can thus be thought of as a kind of short skirt, of the style he observes are now worn by more "modern" (ខ្លាំងរឹប *tomnerb*) young women (Fig. 2).

Chan's interest in habits of dress is symptomatic of a larger issue: the coequality of ancient and new cultural forms.⁹ In contemporary Cambodia, most young men and women tend to dress in what they generally refer to as "foreign/Western" (បារាំង *barang*) or "modern" styles of clothing, except for at special occasions such as weddings. Many older women, though, continue to wear the *sampot* daily (as well as other traditional garments, such as the *krama* checkered scarf). This concurrence of old and new ways of dressing is a small but revealing example of the multiplicity of experiences comprising contemporaneity in Cambodia.¹⁰ The convergence of influences is complicated by the relationship between older generations and those born after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, as well as by the marked divide between urban and rural lifestyles, and the growing gap between rich and poor. In inviting his audiences to look closely at and think deeply about the *sampot*, Chan prompts a meditation on clothing as an emblem of shifting attitudes and aesthetics, which in turn will lead some viewers to ponder the larger changes to which it points.¹¹ Of course, the artist is also proudly celebrating the rich tradition of textile designs in his country, which continues to be a source of pride for young people, and of inspiration for the country's fast-growing fashion industry.¹²

⁷ An eleventh work was created for the series, but not included in the exhibition. Its title is *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things (Diamond in the Flower II)*, 2013.

⁸ SA SA BASSAC [Erin Gleeson], *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things*, exh. cat., Phnom Penh: SA SA BASSAC, 2013, n.p. Also available online, <http://sasabassac.com/exhibitions/20_sampot/sampot.htm>.

⁹ One possible inspiration for Chan's interest in clothing, and in what it can tell about history and culture, is a publication by Reyum Publishing, which was affiliated with the Reyum Institute, where Chan studied. Likely the only monograph on this topic, it is: Chea Narin, Chea Sopheary, Kem Sonine and Preap Chanmara, *Seams of Change: Clothing and the Care of the Self in Late 19th and 20th Century Cambodia*, ed. Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, trans. Ingrid Muan (Phnom Penh: Reyum Publishing, 2003).

¹⁰ For a broader discussion of the ways in which dress reflects and articulates historical and especially political contexts, see Mina Roces and Louise Edwards, "Trans-national Flows and the Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas," in *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas*, ed. Mina Roces and Louise Edwards (Eastbourne, UK and Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2010 [2007]), 1-18.

¹¹ Interestingly, the sole Khmer language review of the exhibition opens with a lengthy discussion of the place of the *sampot* in present-day dress. លោក ស៊ីតា [Laok Sorita], "គំនូរស្តីពីសំពត់ខ្មែរត្រូវបានតាំងបង្ហាញ" ["Komnuu Sdey Pi Sampot Khmer Trew Baan Tang Bonghaan" "Paintings About Khmer Sampot Were Shown"], *Khmer Daily*, 17 July 2013.

¹² For example, from 2014, national fashion festivals will be held three times; previously there was only one annually.



Figure 3

Chan Dany, *Kbach Phni Vois (Wooden Door)*, 2008.
Colored pencil shavings, wood, glue. 200 x 100 x 3 cm.
Collection of Richard W. Rouse. Courtesy of the artist
and SA SA BASSAC.

The artist's choice of materials is revealing of Cambodia's rapidly transforming yet still volatile relationship to the globalized economy. The works shown in *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things* are all made with brightly colored fabric stretched over a rectangular frame, and each is adorned with sequins, beads and thread, as well as lace and other fabrics in some works. The alluring sparkle of the works recalls the jeweled and gold-encrusted costumes traditionally worn by dancers in Cambodia's royal ballet. Yet the glittering appearance of the works can also be seen as reflecting a kind of aesthetic of exuberance and even excess, typical of newer trends popular among urban Cambodians of Chan's generation. Born in the aftermath of war, many have experienced a recent and rapid increase in access to new products and technologies, as well as disposable income, engendering myriad cultural changes in Cambodia's cities that are closely watched by many young artists.¹³ While many artists are roundly critical of transformations in urban environments, in conversation Chan prefers to stress that "in many cases, new development is a positive thing;" an enthusiasm seemingly shared by many of his age in Phnom Penh.¹⁴

¹³ Little sustained scholarly attention has been paid to this phenomenon to date, despite a growing body of journalistic coverage. It is artists, especially in Phnom Penh, who are among the most active in charting unfolding changes in youth culture. Early examples include the performance and photography series *My Motorbike and Me* (2009) by Lim Sokchanlina and the painting series *In the Club* (2011) by Ouk Sochivy (អ៊ុក សុចីវី). More recently, photographs by Kim Hak (គីម ហាក់) and Lim Sokchanlina depict new fashions and recreational activities observed at Koh Pich (Diamond Island), a popular youth hangout in Phnom Penh.

¹⁴ Roger Nelson, "Interview: Chan Dany," in *Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology. Contemporary Art and Urban Change in Cambodia*, ed. Erin Gleeson (Berlin: ifa [Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen], 2013), 27. Translation by Vuth Lyno.



Figure 4

Chan Dany, *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things (Raindrops on the Wave)*, 2012. Lycra, lace, plastic beads, sequins, cotton thread. 100cm x 150cm. Detail. Photograph by Lim Sokchanlina. Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

The use of fabrics and embroidery in *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things* marks a shift from Chan's prior solo exhibition—consisting of small gouache paintings on paper—and also from his ongoing use of pencil shavings pasted on wood as a medium for *kbach* designs (Fig. 3).¹⁵ Chan's pause from working with pencil shavings was prompted in part by a problem with supply. He prefers to use pencils with flat-edged wooden cylinders, as the shavings from these form an agreeably crinkled pattern. But for several months during 2012, Chan's preferred kind of pencils was not available anywhere in Phnom Penh. This is a common predicament. Although large supermarkets and malls have become more prevalent in the last half-decade or so, offering an unprecedented array of consumer items sourced from all over the world, Chan's temporary inability to find quality hexagonal pencils is somehow still unsurprising.¹⁶ Cambodia lacks a dedicated supplier of fine art materials, delivery of mail is often unreliable, and supply of specialty items is unpredictable. Although contemporary Cambodia's participation in the neoliberal global economy is unmistakably increasing, its integration into international markets remains partial and inconsistent, a situation that is reflected in the materials available for Chan to use.

¹⁵ One of the only published reviews of Chan's work has suggested that the artist's use of pencil shavings was an "idea...born [sic] of thrift" (Rebecca Catching, "Earth, Water and Fire," review of *Accumulations*, a group exhibition curated by Erin Gleeson, *Art Slant*, November 18, 2009. <<http://www.artslant.com/ew/articles/show/11594>>). In conversation with me, the artist has insisted that in fact his use of pencil shavings was an idea borne of a desire to innovate, and thereby to please his teachers at the Reyum Institute.

¹⁶ Lucky Market was the first supermarket in Cambodia, opening in Phnom Penh in 1993. See <http://www.luckymarketgroup.com/home.html>. For further discussion of the rapid changes in conditions and availability of goods in Phnom Penh, see Milton Osborne, *Phnom Penh: A Cultural and Literary History* (Oxford, UK: Signal Books, 2008). For a discussion of changes in the appearance of Cambodian shops and marketplaces, see Ingrid Muan, "Selling Space: Socialism and Signage in Phnom Penh after the Khmer Rouge," *Udaya. Journal of Khmer Studies* 6 (2005): 69-82.



Figure 5

Designer unknown, unnamed *khlaong twie* (pagoda entrance gate), Koh Pich (Diamond Island), Phnom Penh, 2013. Photograph by Roger Nelson.

With an increased availability of consumer goods come both opportunities and challenges. This familiar tension is reflected in the glittering surfaces of Chan's works. The gem-like plastic beads, sparkling sequins, brightly colored synthetic fabrics, and fine laces that Chan favors are now widely available in local open-air markets in Phnom Penh, and at affordable prices; according to my conversations with market sellers, most are imported from elsewhere in Asia. But just a few years ago, such goods were hard to find in Cambodia, and harder still for an artist like Chan to afford. Yet alongside the expansion in this popular market comes a surge in investment from high-end luxury goods manufacturers. In 2013, the multi-billion dollar US-based jewelry company, Tiffany & Co, announced that it was constructing a diamond-polishing factory in Cambodia. Manufacturing bosses predictably insisted that the renewed interest from high-end companies is further reason to keep factory workers' wages low.¹⁷

Contemporary Cambodia (like countless other places, but perhaps more so than many) is caught between at times sharply opposing interests. Chan's use of newly available imported fabrics—including synthetic versions of European-style lace (Fig. 4)—to create forms of *kbach* known in Cambodia for centuries is a visual manifestation of this conflicted and contradictory contemporaneity, albeit a quiet and indirect one. After all, for centuries *kbach* were rendered by hand through laborious processes using mostly precious and/or permanent materials. Chan's process remains laborious and his designs follow ancient

¹⁷ Keith Bradsher, "Hello, Cambodia," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2013, B1.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/09/business/global/wary-of-events-in-china-foreign-investors-head-to-cambodia.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

codified patterns, yet his materials are mass-produced and foreign in design and manufacture. The artist's attitude, which seems widely shared, is that the mass-production of a material does not necessarily diminish its value or appeal. The exhibition's aesthetic is at once transnational and uniquely Cambodian; perhaps *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things* can be understood as an expression of what has been termed "cosmopolitanism."¹⁸ This hybrid quality is popular among young Cambodians and prized by Chan. For example, on Phnom Penh's Koh Pich (Diamond Island), a favorite destination for teenagers and 20-somethings, reinventions of ancient Khmer temples stand alongside a Grecian-style columned city hall that is a reproduction of similar buildings in the US, themselves modeled on European antecedents. Nearby, a newly erected *khlaong twie* (pagoda entrance gate) glows brightly: it is made from illuminated plastic and colored electric lights, in a manner that is popular in neighboring Thailand, yet previously unknown in Cambodia. Traditionally, such structures are built from concrete or stone. Yet despite its novel use of materials, this new *khlaong twie* faithfully reproduces the ancient Khmer *kbach* designs. It looks perfectly at home in a privately owned but publicly accessible space that is variously decorated with French-style statuary and a polystyrene model of the Preah Vihear temple (located on the contested border with Thailand), all standing on Cambodian paving tiles bearing *kbach* designs (Fig. 5)¹⁹. This is a place that Chan enthusiastically enjoys and visits often. Chan's exhibition can be seen as a comparable expression of hybrid contemporaneity, utilizing both novel materials and ancient designs.²⁰

It is important to remember, though, that this blending of traditional Khmer forms, including *kbach*, with new materials and designs is by no means a recent development. Scholars of the postcolonial sometimes tend to overstate the novelty of hybridity; while it is an important and revealing phenomenon, it is certainly not a new condition, nor one limited to the postcolonial era. In her detailed study of the French colonial period in Cambodia, Penny Edwards describes numerous cases of collaborative exchange between the colonizers and the colonized. One particularly memorable example is in the joint planning of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. According to Edwards, the French insisted on a more solid method of construction than the traditional wood, while the Cambodians adapted new materials to suit their own preferences and requirements.²¹ And it is not only in architecture that a transnational and intercultural exchange can be observed, dating back to the colonial era and beyond. Many of the performing arts, widely held to be uniquely Khmer, can also be seen to be of mixed origins, and deeply interconnected with comparable forms in neighboring

¹⁸ Jeroen De Kloet and Edwin Jurriëns, "Introduction" to *Cosmopatriots: On Distant Belongings and Close Encounters*, ed. Jeroen De Kloet and Edwin Jurriëns (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007): 9-18.

¹⁹ The space is not fenced, and is visited by hundreds of people daily, much like a public park. Yet when photographing this structure, I was approached by a private security guard and ordered to put away my camera and move on.

²⁰ My conception of hybridity is informed in part by Nikos Papastergiadis's notion that "the concept of hybridity can be used to illuminate three levels of cultural transformation: effects, processes, and critical consciousness." That is, contemporary culture itself can be seen to be hybrid, as can the practices of artists such as Chan who engage with that cultural hybridity. See Nikos Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture* (Cambridge, UK and Maiden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 117.

²¹ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007): 40-64.

countries.²² Moreover, approaches to textiles can be seen to share numerous similarities across national borders within Southeast Asia (and beyond).²³ Chan's blending of Khmer *kbach* forms with imported decorative fabrics reflects the increasingly globalized nature of the contemporary marketplace in Cambodia, while also continuing a long-standing tradition of transnational transaction.

Chan's exhibition displays further connections with the colonial era in the artist's method of composition. The artist plans each work in its totality, as a whole image, before then filling in the often intricate detailing within the frame. Because he is working with industrially produced materials, many of which have their own pre-existing patterning, the final form of Chan's works is ultimately determined by the interplay between the artist's initial design, and the patterning on the fabrics he is using. Crucially, Chan explains that this mode of composition is derived not from the codified traditions for working with Khmer *kbach*, but rather from his classes in "modern drawing" (គំនូរមើលឃើញ *komnuu merl-khern*, as it was termed at his school²⁴): that is, drawing from life. And so, Chan is using a compositional method that he regards as "modern" and "Western"—derived from drawing from life—in order to create an artwork that uses both new and ancient design forms from Cambodian and other sources. This is a quintessentially hybrid mode of practice. Drawing from life is a compositional method that was first introduced to Cambodia by the French, who also strictly controlled its use by Cambodian artists, in a manner that sharply distinguished Cambodia from the rest of Indochina under colonial rule. This dynamic is detailed in the late Ingrid Muan's rich study of the establishment of formal art education during the colonial period. The French authorities displayed a marked anxiety about the "destruction" of "traditional" Cambodian art by introduced forms, and as such forbade their intermixing.²⁵ Chan's use of a colonially introduced method of composition to plan an image based on ancient Khmer *kbach* forms can thus be read as constituting both a deep link with and an implicit challenge to the colonial art education system in Cambodia. In planning his works as he was taught to plan a drawing from life, and then filling in details with forms he was taught in classes on *kbach*, Chan's hybrid approach transgresses the rules established by the French colonizers and still often enforced in the Cambodian university system today.

The implied continuity between the colonial era and the present, discernable in Chan's use of "modern drawing" compositional techniques for working with *kbach* forms, is noteworthy in two ways. Firstly, it serves as a counter to the pervasive tendency to regard the contemporary as having emerged either from Euro-American modernism or else almost out of nowhere, or to blindly accept that—in the at once truistic and arguably ahistorical words of Terry Smith (although any number of similar examples from other scholars could

²² This is the case throughout Southeast Asia. See Matthew Isaac Cohen and Laura Noszlopy, "Introduction: The Transnational Dynamic in Southeast Asian Performance," in *Contemporary Southeast Asian Performance: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Matthew Isaac Cohen and Laura Noszlopy (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 1-24.

²³ See Jane Puranananda, ed., *The Secrets of Southeast Asian Textiles: Myth, Status and the Supernatural: The James H.W. Thompson Foundation Symposium Papers* (Bangkok: The James H.W. Thompson Foundation, 2007).

²⁴ Ingrid Muan, in her detailed study of the establishment of formal art education under the French protectorate, contends that គំនូរមើលឃើញ *komnuu merl-khern* (usually translated as "modern drawing" or "modern painting," although a more literal translation would be "painting look and see") is a term that was first developed in the mid-20th century. See Ingrid Muan, "Citing Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration 1918-2000" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2001), 273-275.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20-28.

have been chosen)—“things really are different than they were before.”²⁶ It should be noted that elsewhere Smith argues convincingly for a more nuanced sense of the multiplicity of the contemporary, noting the persistence of modes of being from the past, and suggesting that “distinctive temporalities coexist in their distinctive otherness.”²⁷ The apparent incongruity between these two attitudes—one of sweeping generalization, and the other of sensitivity to difference—is by no means limited to Smith. Indeed, he is far more alert to the continuing presence and importance of the past within the present than many commentators on contemporaneity. But the notion that the present is somehow so radically novel as to be disconnected from the past is insidiously rife in experiences of and commentary on contemporary life and contemporary art. It is a notion that Chan’s exhibition elegantly unsettles.

Careful attention to important but overlooked historical continuities can mitigate against this sense of rupture. More specifically, though, to discern a suppressed continuity between the colonial and the contemporary eras is of particular significance in Cambodia, given the near-complete annihilation of known culture during the Khmer Rouge’s 1975–79 regime. It is widely believed that 90 per cent of all artists and intellectuals were killed or exiled during those years. This throws into stark relief the latent progressivist Eurocentrism of Smith’s repeated assertion that “the shift...from modern to contemporary art” was “nascent during the 1950s, emergent in the 1960s, contested during the 1970s, but unmistakable since the 1980s.”²⁸ Such a statement elides the significant extent to which the experience of those decades was radically different in different parts of the world. The 1970s in Cambodia were “contested” in a tragically singular manner. And despite the global economy’s “unmistakable” incursions during the 1990s and 2000s, there is much in Cambodian art and culture that remains unchanged, alongside and in inter-animating relationship with those “things” that “really are different than they were before.”

The serious flaws in Smith’s periodization when applied to Cambodia (and many other locations in the “postcolonial constellation”) suggest that the relationship of the modern to the contemporary is more usefully conceived in paradigmatic terms.²⁹ Indeed, Smith himself has elsewhere succinctly observed that the “worldwide shift from modern to contemporary” has definitively *not* “occurred in the same way, much less at the same time, in each cultural region and in each art-producing locality across the world,” arguing instead that this shift “occurred—and continues to occur—in different ways and to varying degrees.”³⁰ Such a conception is infinitely preferable to Smith’s sweeping periodization, quoted above. Notably, in the article in which Smith proposes this more modulated view that emphasizes “different ways and . . . varying degrees,” he also modifies his periodization. In this article, he argues that the “worldwide shift from modern to contemporary . . . was prefigured in *some* late

²⁶ Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 179.

²⁷ Terry Smith, “Currents of World-Making in Contemporary Art,” *World Art* 1, no. 2 (September 2011): 175.

²⁸ Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 5. Smith repeats this assertion, word for word, in Terry Smith, “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art,” *Art Bulletin* 92, no. 4 (2010): 369.

²⁹The term is borrowed from Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008): 207–245.

³⁰ Smith, “Currents of World-Making,” 177.

modern art during the 1950s, took definitive shape in the 1980s and . . . continues to unfold through the present."³¹ The addition of the qualifying determiner "some" is small but significant, and allows for a more discursive and less linear understanding of contemporaneity, one in which Chan's work, with its commingling of old and new (as well as specifically Khmer as well as transnational forms) can more comfortably be accommodated.

So, contemporaneity is more helpfully conceived of as an attitude rather than an epoch. When not proposing broad periodizations, Smith generally shares this paradigmatic view. He has insightfully proposed that "an alertness to contemporaneity" has been "always available to art and often taken up...with show-stopping brilliance;"³² with this in mind, we might imagine that Chan's discernment of the present-ness of *kbach* can also be found in earlier usages of the Khmer ornamentation, including during Cambodia's colonial period. Indeed, in many parts of Southeast Asia the modern and the contemporary have been imagined to be coexisting; moreover Peter Osborne has controversially proposed that it is in fact only from the vantage point of the contemporary that the notion of multiple modernities can be conceived.³³ Chan's exhibition may be a *Collection of Small Things* but those "small things"—including a sustained consideration of dress, of the marketplace, and of compositional techniques derived from the colonial era—point to very big issues in Cambodian contemporaneity indeed.

Chan's method of composition is sometimes evident in faint pencil lines visible on the image surface, which the artist has used in plotting the position of the various components. These sketch marks resemble those made during a drawing from life: notably, they demonstrate that these works were composed without the aid of a grid. Chan embellishes some sketch marks with sequins, at once obscuring and drawing attention to these features. The gallery catalogue for the exhibition perceptively observes that Chan's "Attention to detail is both obvious and questionable" since "Sketch marks are present, straight lines seem unachievable, complete and incomplete sections of embroidery are juxtaposed." The catalogue author proposes that these qualities "encourag[e] reflection on perfection and imperfection."³⁴ I would add that this aspect of Chan's work invites a reconsideration of the connections between contemporary art-making practices and colonial art education structures, again suggesting a suppressed continuity in Cambodian art and art education. Chan's school, unlike the Royal University of Fine Arts established by the French, was a nurturing place that encouraged experimentation and included art history classes. By contrast, the Royal University of Fine Arts curriculum in 2014 remains almost wholly unchanged from that implemented by the French. There is no schooling in new media or art history, and experimentation is strictly proscribed within media and disciplines.³⁵ That Chan was able (and indeed encouraged) to study *kbach* as well as drawing from life, and also the more experimental activities that were called "free drawing," is an historical novelty in

³¹ Smith, "Currents of World-Making," 177. Emphasis added.

³² Ibid.

³³ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 25-26. This is a provocative and arguably Eurocentric statement that I will address in a future discussion.

³⁴ SA SA BASSAC [Gleeson], *Sampot*, exh. cat., n.p.

³⁵ For a more detailed discussion of visual arts education in contemporary Cambodia, including at the Royal University of Fine Arts, see Vuth Lino's contribution in the 2014 issue of *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* (forthcoming).



Figure 6

Chan Dany, *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things (More Dok Chan Flowers)*, 2012. Lycra, lace, plastic beads, sequins, cotton thread. 100 x 150cm. Photograph by Lim Sokchanlina. Courtesy

Cambodia that did not exist in any systematic sense before the establishment of the Reyum Institute, and has not existed since the discontinuation of classes there.

According to Chan Vitharin and Preap Chanmara's authoritative study on *kbach*, "students trying to learn *kbach* tend to simply copy from these examples, replicating complex ornaments without understanding the system through which they are formed." As a result, the authors contend, these students "generally do not have the ability to create new compositions of ornaments, or to use the existing ornamental language for their own purposes."³⁶ Common techniques of reproduction compound this situation. The use of the grid to aid in copying, introduced by the French and identified by Muan as endemic ever since, is one contributing factor. Another is the growing use of molds and concrete to make *kbach* forms for architectural purposes, replacing more laborious carving techniques. Chan's innovative treatment of *kbach* forms is unusual, and is the aspect of his work most commonly remarked on by local audiences.

In *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things (More Dok Chan Flowers)*, (2013) (Fig. 6), twelve *kbach dok chan* (ក្បាច់ ដក់ចំន) forms (also called *kbach pkaa chan* ក្បាច់ ផ្កាចំន), all pink in color, are spread across a red background. Although the name of this *kbach* design means "chan flower," the form is in fact derived from the skin of a fruit—not a flower. The *chan* is a soft, round fruit, and must be peeled to be eaten. After the sweet flesh has been scooped out, the skin resembles the shape of a flower: hence the *kbach* design is named "chan flower." The artist plays on the origin of this design by surrounding each large *kbach dok chan* design with many smaller flowers, all of them prefabricated by the producers of the fabric he has used. Other works from the exhibition exhibit a similar playfulness, using the form of the *kbach chakachan* (ក្បាច់ ច័ក្កចំន). This design form is based on the shape of a glutinous rice dessert called the *chakachan* cake, which is served in diamond-shaped pieces. Several works on show, including *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things*

³⁶ Chan and Preap, *Kbach*, i.



Figure 7

Chan Dany, *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things (The Light of Color)*, 2013. Lycra, plastic lace, beads, cotton thread, 100cm x 150cm. Photograph by Lim Sokchanlina. Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

(*The Light of Color*) (2013), feature the *kbach chakachan* form. In this work, Chan has stretched a prefabricated piece of lace across the entire picture surface. The lace is not recognizably Cambodian in design. Yet by embellishing its evenly spread circular pattern with plastic jewels and sequins of three different colors carefully placed in alternating order, Chan superimposes on this unremarkable, vaguely European-seeming lace a pattern that, while perhaps universally familiar, is also specifically Khmer: that of the diamond, which for the artist is in fact the *kbach chakachan*. To viewers more familiar with Euro-American modernism, *Sampot: The Collection of Small Things (The Light of Color)* (Fig. 7) may appear as a kind of grid. Yet Chan has playfully embedded in its simple yet carefully structured surface the shape of a Cambodian *chakachan* cake, codified over centuries into the *kbach chakachan* design form. The artist's composition here—as well as its reception by local audiences—may be considered an example of a particularly Cambodian way of seeing.³⁷ It is broadly appealing, yet also culturally specific.

In Chan's exhibition, a vision of Cambodia emerges that is at once old and new, local and global. This articulation of contemporaneity refuses the dominant narrative about the nation, centered on the temples of Angkor Wat and the traumas of the Khmer Rouge. Yet it also resists the tendency to overlook or downplay historical continuities. In his attention to the *sampot* and manners of dress, his use of newly available imported materials, his employment of compositional methods derived from drawing from life to plan works that utilize ancient Khmer *kbach* forms, and his inventive superimpositions of those design forms on prefabricated laces, Chan reveals the multiplicity of contemporaneity in Cambodia. His glittering works illuminate the coequality of influences and interests that make this artist so fascinating, and his context so crucial to a nuanced understanding of the world today.

³⁷ The editors of *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* helpfully characterize the late Ingrid Muan's scholarly work as having asked: "what and how do Cambodians see?" They also note "the concomitance of her scholarly research" into French colonial "revival" of *kbach* and her involvement in the publication of Chan and Preap's monograph on the topic, a "complex exchange" indeed, the complexities of which are continued in Chan's exhibition, and indeed in this review essay. See Ang Chouléan and Ashley Thompson, "From the Editors," *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* 6 (2005): 7-10.



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