

## ***What is lost and what is found: Sopheak Sam on grief, mixed-media, and cycles of displacement***

Concrete, wood, hardware. Fabric, lace, paper pulp, garlands. “Hard and soft” is just one of the many dualities in Sopheak Sam’s work. Oscillating between representation and abstraction - and fact and mythology - allows Sam to talk sensitively about the Cambodian genocide in the late 70s, as well as their familial relationship to that specific time and place, to address contemporary issues through a historical lens. Through a collage-like approach with assembling various hard and soft materials, the artist’s playful and innovative use of mixed-media allows them to bite into perhaps the biggest dichotomy of them all: life and death.

Sam’s work is also very personal. The artist uses their brother’s collection of photos (from their time as a teacher’s aide at a refugee camp in Thailand) as a starting point to talk about ideas around grief, ritual, and displacement. Instead of reprinting the photos in their entirety, and making them completely legible, Sam is using alternative processes such as cyanotype and Xerox transfers to literally lift the visual information from one surface to another. That transfer - *transformation* - goes a long way. The magic of these processes is in highlighting what information - figures, foliage, architecture - becomes legible and recognizable, and what is unidentifiable, lost. This transformation, while a way to feature certain details without giving it all away, is simultaneously a purposeful act of erasure and redaction as well. We’re not meant to see everything, know everything, to experience the atrocities that the artist’s family has faced. Sam is not placing that burden on us.

In conjunction with an intentional erasure, Sam’s use of materials further softens the violence and catastrophic events that underlie the photos. We’re comforted by semi-transparent layers of hand-dyed fabric and screen-printed textiles. The opacity and porousness of the materials (and the vibrancy in which narrative and visual information is communicated) also echoes the artist’s concerns around memory and time. We find ourselves in a dream (or more accurately, nightmare) between the 1970s and 2025, between time and space, life and death, here and elsewhere. It also seems as if all of Sam’s materials are performing multiple roles all at once. Fabrics and textiles are transformed (at least conceptually) into harder fare, and vice versa. Everything is on double duty. And this transformation is key to unlocking ideas around animism, rebirth, and ultimately, the frailty of life itself.

This tension between what is physically soft (the cyanotypes printed on fabric and silk) and what is evidently hard (the larger wooden structures and the heavy cinder blocks that are physically holding the wooden supports in place) is where Sam can really flourish. This space allows Sam to share - and confront - highly sensitive images pulled from a war-torn nightmare, in a very accessible and delicate way. This generous collaboration of materials - and collaboration with the artists’ family - grants us a pause. A gift. One that I hope allows me to be in the present as best as possible.