

Lifestyle

History lesson in KR bastion

Roth Meas

BOOKS detailing what happened during the Khmer Rouge era have finally reached young people living in the regime's final stronghold, Anlong Veng.

Last Friday, the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam), an NGO that focuses on historical memory and education, distributed more than 1,000 copies of the book *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* to students of the Anlong Veng High School. Most of the students' parents are former Khmer Rouge supporters.

The book distribution also included the unveiling of an Anlong Veng genocide memorial, the first of its kind in the region. The monument's engraving reads: "Learning about the history of Democratic Kampuchea is to prevent genocide."

Promotion of awareness and education of Khmer Rouge history is considered critical by DC-CAM for reconciliation between perpetrators and victims.

"As I talked to people here, only a few of them disagreed with us. Most didn't mind us educating their children

about Khmer Rouge history," says Dy Kamboly, the team leader of genocide education at DC-Cam and the author of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea*.

"We have hosted more than 20 similar events in other provinces, but we invited only students. Here, we had to invite older people so we could avoid confusion."

Theam Song Hor, a history teacher at Anlong Veng High School, says that although the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports provides a textbook for use by his Grade 12 students, it is not as detailed as Dy Kamboly's.

The government's book has only one lesson about the 1975-1979 regime, Theam Song Hor says, and the ministry requires him to teach his students the material for only a few hours.

"The book from the ministry just tells the main points: how that regime happened, how many administration zones were divided, and who the permanent committees were between 1975 and 1979.

"So my students still don't know why they called the Anlong Veng district a Khmer Rouge stronghold."

But Theam Song Hor has not been afraid to take the

discussion with his students beyond the contents of the official government textbook.

"Before we started teaching Khmer Rouge history, we were told by DC-Cam to encourage students to speak openly about the Khmer Rouge and to acknowledge the past, but never to teach them to hate their parents because of their background," he says.

During the ceremony, Ton Sa Im, Under-Secretary of State of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, appealed to older people to tell their children about what had happened in the past, "so our younger generation will learn from our experience".

Yim Phanna, the governor of Anlong Veng district and a former Khmer Rouge soldier, encouraged residents to participate in the process of historical education.

"Even though war has finished, and this place was reformed and developed, regret still stays with us. It insists that we not let that regime happen again," he said.

"To prevent that regime happening again, we have to tell the past story broadly to the next generation.

Ron Noun, a 19-year-old Grade 11 student at Anlong Veng High School, said his



Ton Sa Im, Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry of Education, presents students in Anlong Veng, the final Khmer Rouge stronghold, with copies of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea*. HONG MINEA

mother had told him that she had been a Khmer Rouge soldier, but she had never revealed whether she wit-

nessed killings. "Maybe my mother was still young during the Khmer Rouge regime, so she didn't know much

about what was happening," Ron Noun said.

"Anyway, I will read the book to find out more." ■



JavaArts' first artist-in-residence, Anida Yoeu Ali, will display a striking series of photographs such as this one taken at Boeung Kak lake as part of her new exhibit opening tonight at Java Café. PHOTO SUPPLIED

Java's artist-in-residence displays surreal scenes

Sean Gleeson

IN the thick of a typical lunch rush upstairs at Tonle Bassac's Java Café, Anida Yoeu Ali takes a half-hour respite from a frantic week.

At various points inside are the emerging signs of the room's impending transformation: bare mannequins, a smattering of test prints, and the frenzied air of creative tension that always accompanies an impending deadline.

Ali, the Cambodia-born, Chicago-raised co-founder of local arts collaborative Studio Revolt, is capping off her association with the long-standing Phnom Penh creative hub with one of her most ambitious projects to date.

Following a three-month stint as JavaArts' inaugural artist-in-residence, Ali tonight launches *The Space Between Inside/Outside*, a trove of lush panoramic photography, sculpture and installations.

Underpinning the exhibition is a series of images by local photographer and regular Studio Revolt collaborator Vinh Dao. Set against the ruins of Boeung Kak, dilapidated shopfronts in Stung Meanchey and

a pastoral field on the road to Takeo, each depicts Ali shrouded in a pair of flamboyant fabrics that will also be used to gild the café's walls for the duration of the exhibition.

One particularly striking picture shows the artist sitting on an incongruously oversized replica of the ubiquitous plastic stools of Cambodia's street eateries, brandishing a ream of red fabric against a backdrop of wet-season greenery.

A strong wind carries the fabric into the air and looks set to envelop the horizon.

When she reviewed the shot, Ali realised she and her team had unwittingly recreated the aesthetic of the Naga serpent from Hindu and Buddhist mythology.

As Ali had recently concluded a Fulbright scholarship researching Cambodian creation stories, it was a vindication of her fondness for incorporating sudden, spontaneous reactions to external elements in her work.

"I love performance because it's very much about catching the moment within the boundaries I create for the composition," she says.

"Hearing my photographer

react - saying 'Yeah, yeah, that's cool, oh my God!' - that, to me, is a huge part of the process.

"This is a solo show, it's my idea, my concepts, I'm the instigator, conceiver and whatever else, but it takes a whole lot of people to make my ideas into reality.

"That's part of the artistic joy, because everybody involved is invested."

Ali, who plans to continue her endeavours in Phnom Penh indefinitely, says the contemporary art and performance scene emerging in Cambodia has been a rich font of inspiration for her work.

"It's almost like I was just sketching things in Chicago. The work I was doing was just tiny sketches to what is actually realised here," Ali says.

"I feel like work is varied here. I enjoy more of the performance work and some of the installation work that's been done, and I feel like I'm responding to the energy that drives the work here."

The Space Between Inside/Outside opens tonight at 6pm at Java Café and Gallery, #56 Sihanouk Blvd, Phnom Penh, and will run until August 5. ■