

A FOREST OF SPIRITS KHAVAY SAMNANG

CURATED BY ABHIJAN TOTO

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How might we engage with the dance of materialities in an animated world? Material, from an animistic perspective, is not mute. It speaks back, it argues, it refuses, and sometimes, it transforms. *Preah Kunlong* (The Way of Spirits) grew out of the artist's engagement with the movements in Areng Valley, working closely with the indigenous Chong communities of the Koh Kong region in the Cardamom Mountains of Cambodia. The Chong communities are an ethnic minority in Cambodia who trace their origins in Siam. The forest is at the heart of Chong cosmology: they believe in *Lok Ta* (ancestral guardian spirits) and *Neak Ta* (spirits of sacred places, animals or trees) who maintain the balance between the needs of human and non-human communities, providing protection to hunters and injunctions against the selfish exploitation of nature for human needs.

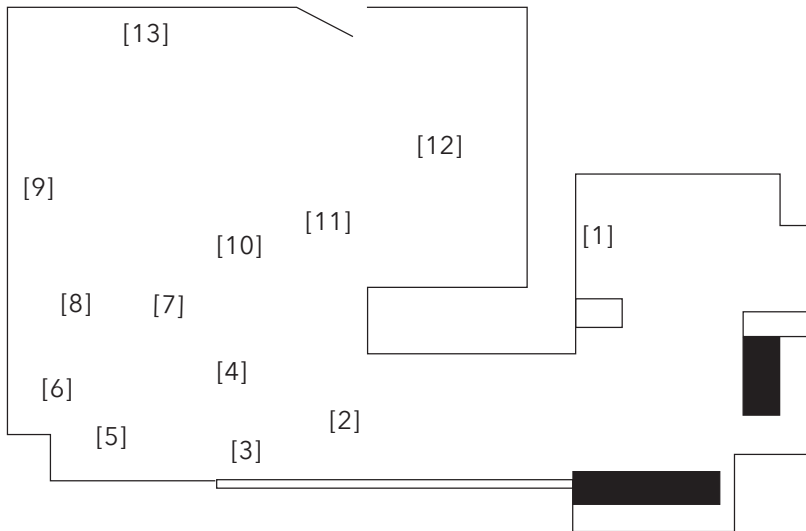
In 2014, the Cambodian government struck a deal with the Chinese state-owned company Sinohydro to construct a number of dams across the country. Among the almost half a dozen projects that were planned was one meant to damn the Stung Areng, a major tributary of the Mekong. This proposed dam would drown the Areng Valley, driving out the indigenous Chong population, and wreak havoc on one of Cambodia's most bio-diverse areas, home to the endangered Siamese crocodile and to wild elephants. Through direct action and sit-ins, they were able to mobilize sentiments around the country and internationally. At a crucial turning point, a group of monks from Phnom Penh made the arduous journey to the Areng Valley to support the claims of the villagers. All these actions combined, and with the support of a large network of non-governmental organizations, were able to produce enough pressure on the government to make them reconsider their plans. Ultimately, the project was shelved, and the Sinohydro had to withdraw from Areng Valley.

Over the course of more than a year, Samnang drew on his long practice of collectivity to engage with the fraught context of the Areng Valley. Through repeated meetings and the growth of mutual understanding, a space of solidarity and comradeship was produced. The conversations Samnang had eventually developed into a series of workshops where he taught the members of the community how to make masks out of the vines they found in the forest. Difficult to handle and manipulate, the material gave form to a number of spirits of place, a constellation of *Neah Ta*, emerging as guardians of sacred sites. Masks are magical objects that transform their wearer. Samnang gave the masks to his long-time collaborator Rady Nget, a classically-trained *Lakhoan Koal* dancer. Nget borrowed from the vocabulary of *Lakhoan Koal*, improvising on the classical form's narrative mode to investigate the body, and through this to exceed the human.

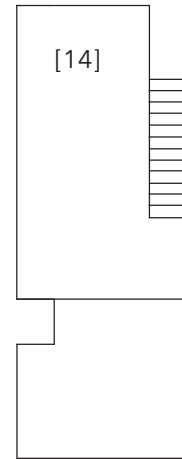
In this latest iteration of *Preah Kunlong*, Samnang adds yet another layer of entanglement, by recasting them in bronze. He thus places them at the intersection of another flow of material, and of other histories. In the process of production, Samnang collaborated with craftsmen who once professed mastery of sacred sculptural arts, but now ply their trade only in making simply cast Buddhas. *Preah Kunlong* thus produces encounters and moments of intersection of flows. It moves across the human and non-human worlds, from local narratives to global geopolitics, to material histories, drawing an intricate web across all these.

FLOORPLAN

1st Floor



2nd Floor



List of works

- [1] Preah Kunlong, Digital C-Print, 2016-2017
- [2] Rabbit, Recycle bronze and steel, 2019
- [3] Monkey, Recycle bronze and steel, 2019
- [4] Deer, Recycle bronze and steel, 2019
- [5] Crab, Recycle bronze and steel, 2019
- [6] Peacock, Recycle bronze and steel, 2019
- [7] Eel, Recycle bronze and steel, 2019
- [8] Wild Pig, Recycle bronze and steel, 2019
- [9] Elephant, Recycle bronze and steel, 2019
- [10] Cow, Recycle bronze and steel, 2019
- [11] Crocodile, Recycle bronze and steel, 2019
- [12] Wild Chicken, Recycle bronze and steel, 2019
- [13] Preah Kunlong, 2-Channels HD Videos, 2017
- [14] Cow, Vine, 2017