



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL  
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

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MASS. CULTURAL COUNCIL

FIELDNOTES

Accession Numbers:

KN-03-1-FN

KN-03-1-C1 &amp; 2

KN-03-1-CS1-42

KN-03-3-M1-6

Fieldnotes

Audio recordings

Photographic documentation

Additional materials

Date(s): 2/25/03

Related Accession Numbers:

Individual/Group/Event: exhibit of Cambodian artists and subsequent interviews with Yary Livan  
(ceramic master, sculptor, and painter) and Samkhann Khoeun (his patron and translator)

Fieldworker(s): Kathy NeustadtLocation of Interview: Brush Art Gallery, The Magic Basement (studio) [also Harvard Ceramic Studio]Street Address: The Magic Basement: [REDACTED]City: [REDACTED] Zip: [REDACTED] Co: [REDACTED]Contact person (if different from above): Samkhann KhoeunTitle: benefactor for Yary Livan, master potter, providing a studio for [REDACTED]Sponsoring organization (for event or group): [REDACTED]Address (if different from above): [REDACTED]Phone: Daytime: [REDACTED] Evening: [REDACTED]E-mail: [REDACTED] Website: [REDACTED]Special Needs (including translation): Samkhann translated for Yary, whose English is limited

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community): the work of Yary Livan, the only surviving master of traditional Cambodian ceramics and kiln building

Traditions noted for follow-up: Kiln building, with Yary. Also Seasia, the hip-hop trio from Lowell  
which combines traditional Khmer music and modern American youth musical genres

Other Possible Contacts: there are two other artists in Lowell featured in the exhibit (Chath pierSath and Domnang Pin, who is working with Yary in clay) and other artists in the community, as well. Grassroots projects and organizations are afoot to support and feature Cambodian arts/artists of Lowell and Cambodia which are worth knowing about. Samkhann Khoeun is a cultural treasure in his own right, advocating, promoting, and patronizing Khmer artists here and abroad as he does.

**Summary Description:** Brush Gallery and The Magic Basement tours, 2/25/03, from 3:30-7:30 pm [Also two visits to the Harvard Ceramic Studio to see Yary teaching master classes, January 11 and August 18, 2003]

I started off at the Brush Gallery in Lowell, Massachusetts for a viewing of the exhibit “Emerging Voices. Healing Souls: Contemporary Cambodian Artists in the Aftermath of War” [see KN-03-1-M2 and M8 and KN-03-1-CS1-8] This included works by Khem Chantha, Ieng Hoeun, Vann Nath, Chanthou Oeur, Chath pierSath, Domnang Pin, Duong Saree, Leng Sekong, Chimm Sothy, Somnang Yong, and Yary Livan. (Of these 11 artists, Yary, Domnang, and Chath all live in Lowell; Khem lives in Canada, Chanthou in Maryland, and Samnang in Providence; the rest live in Cambodia). The show—which opened February 9 and runs through May 2—is supported in part by the MCC and the Lowell Cultural Council, as well as smaller foundation grants, and is the 5<sup>th</sup> presentation of the “Building Community Through Culture Program,” a collaboration between the Gallery and U Mass/Lowell. It is also an extension of an earlier exhibit “The Spirit of Cambodia... a tribute,” presented at Providence College and the Rhode Island Foundation in 2002 by curator Ann Norton, director of the Asian Studies and Art History Department at Providence College, which apparently received a lot of attention and enthusiastic reception. (Norton is one of the panelists who will be discussing Cambodian arts on April 26 at the Brush. The other gallery program is an artist gallery/slide talk and poetry reading by Chanthou Ouen on March 29 [see KN-03-1-M6].)

It is Yary, the master ceramicist, whose work I was there to see. I had already met Yary and Domnang in January at the Harvard Ceramics Studio, where Yary was giving a class on Cambodian ceramic decoration as an artist-in-residence there and Domnang, a younger artist—a sculptor and painter—was doing his translating [see KN-03-1-M7]. Trained at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh during the early 70s, Yary was among a small group who studied traditional ceramics. All but 3 of his classmates were killed by the Khmer Rouge, who took over Phnom Penh, the country, and the entire culture shortly before Yary would have graduated. Yary is, today, as the flyer for his master classes states, “the only surviving master of traditional Cambodian ceramics and kiln building.” This was reason enough for me to want to learn more about him, of course, but Yary’s work and methods were fascinating, and Domnang’s translation was intriguing: lots about the ancient Angkorian tradition of design—most obviously expressed in the bas reliefs at Angkor Wat—which had its own grammar within which various kinds of design elements could be interchanged (like parts of speech in a sentence). These fascinating concepts of a design tradition were augmented by Yary’s deft and beautiful presentation/performance of the grammatical construction in action.

In addition to me, there are in attendance at the gallery: Yary Livan; Janice Pokorski, who is working with Cambodian artists on some other local projects; Nancy Selvage, a friend of and advocate for Yary and director of Harvard’s Ceramic Studio, where Yary is an artist-in residence; and Roz Cummins, editor of the *Arts Spectrum* newsletter of the Office for the Arts at Harvard, who is writing an article for *Studio Potter* about Yary (at Nancy’s suggestion). We all spend some time looking at the group’s work and at Yary’s pottery: eight or 10 pieces, including one with elephants and one, a turtle, used to hold the water that the monks use for blessing [see CS5]. In addition, there is the door-sized wall panel [CS4] of an apsara made from ceramic pieces (one writer in a review in the Lowell *Sun* posits that “the reassembled parts suggest Cambodia itself: exquisite, torn to pieces, roughly restored”). Yary also walked us through the symbolism of his painting “Nobody Can Destroy You But You” [see KN-03-1-CS1-2 and KN-03-1-M1] which is about the depravation caused by (and the cause of) Cambodia’s war, its politics (the role of the Vietnamese, for example), and the future and freedom that America represents for Cambodians—where they are all babies, no matter what age (“I had to learn to talk and walk and take the train and everything was new, and I was a baby”).

From there, we went to the home of Samkhann Khoeun, where “Treiso Arts” c/o “The Magic Basement Studio” is housed: studio space for Yary Livan and Domnang Pin (Domnang—an interesting artist and person in his own right and well worth knowing more about—is studying ceramics with Yary). Samkhann used to be the president of the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association and is now working at Middlesex Community College running “Student Connections,” where he tries to help Cambodian students get through high school and go on to college (he has considered attending Harvard’s mid-career development program, as well). He is a great supporter of the arts and of his culture, in general—in Lowell and Cambodia, and anywhere where Cambodian artists live and work—and is involved with lots of organizational support efforts. He has taken a particular shine to Yary and his work, thinking both to be very important. Samkhann, like Yary, feels a profound obligation—founded largely on guilt about having survived the atrocities in Cambodia—to do this cultural work, and both seem to be working nearly ceaselessly to communicate through art and activism in ways that will revitalize and support their culture and countrymen. They are both remarkable men, and the more time I have spent with them and their work, the more inclined I am to see both and each as worthy of recognition and support.

“Welcome to the magic basement studio,” said Janice, as she threw open the bulkhead behind Samkhann’s house for us to enter (Samkhann has printed up cards with the name, “The Magic Basement Studio,” so it is more formal than I imagined at first). Inside, we are greeted by a large creature that I had seen at Angkor, a kind of curlicued griffin/lion kind of creature [CS19] (it has a name; I do not remember), perhaps 4 feet tall, made by Domnang. Samkhann explained that it is a piece they hope to figure out how to cast in cement (there was some discussion at this point about *what* to make it from, comparing some of the pros and cons of what they have tried and hope to try. There were also two kilns in this entryway, one of which drew too much power for the house to support; the other they hadn’t yet tried. Behind it were some shelves with pottery by Yary of various sorts [CS7-9].

Further in, more shelves, paintings and ceramics in progress, and a kind of mini-gallery of several painted works by some of the artists in the Brush show. Of particular interest, the work-for-hire that Samkhann is helping find to support Yary [CS10-13]: a couple of portraits Yary is currently working on include the elderly parents of a patron from yellowed photographs and a quite large Tarzan and Sheena kind of picture of a young, nubile couple (their photos clipped to the top edge of the easel). Across the room, another large portrait of a young couple (recently married, I believe) standing in a field, almost a jungle, of blooming flowers. The traditionalist who carries a banner of “authenticity” would be inclined to back out here and now, but there’s so much more to learn by laying the banner down and venturing further—much more to learn and understand about art and life and the relationship between the two.

Necessity—absolute necessity—is not only the mother of invention but also the rice and veggies that keep body and the traditional soul/skills/and aesthetics together to be *able* to make any art in the first place. Samkhann talked at length about various plans the three men are working on to make Yary and Domnang’s work both available and affordable to the larger Cambodian community. The art needs to be maintained, and the artists need to make livings. He talks about how they are working on mass-producing the creature in the first room. Also the apsaras (the celestial angels from the time of the Khmer Empire, 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries—the model for Cambodia’s classical dance—and intercessors between the gods and human beings) that Yary is now casting from plaster [CS17, for example] but which they wish to make from cement so it can withstand the harsh weather conditions of being outside, in frames set into fences around people’s homes.

Yary is currently using rubber molds to duplicate the apsaras. This is new knowledge and mastery for him, since the traditional method for replicating a traditional piece of ceramics is to make it all over again from scratch. Indeed, it is worth noting here that these Angkor motifs and figures would NOT have been made of clay in the first place: at Angkor, the original work is miles of bas-reliefs carved into

the enormous sand stone and basalt stones that make up the Khmer imperial city. This translation of traditional carving/sculpture into modern “traditional” ceramics is one of Yary’s unique contributions to the survival of Cambodian art and culture in the diaspora.

In addition to replicating figures, Yary is also casting various decorative motifs and panels from the stone carvings of Angkor Wat that can be used in a variety of ways—including as the frames for some of the large paintings he is commissioned to do [CS11]. (The frames are made of lightweight materials—as are some of the panels, and other methods and materials for reproducing them are under discussion.)

After a full tour of the basement—complete with visits from Samkhann’s children and lots of other comings and going—we go upstairs, to Samkhann’s family’s living space. There he gives us another tour of the artwork that he is collecting, particularly from visits to Cambodia, where he goes so far as to make suggestions to artists for greater marketability and also looks to collect art by and about women (a topic/layer of culture that he notes is little studied and full of unknowns). He has a collection of instruments (only one of which he plays), lots of books on Asian/Cambodian history and culture, and lots of other cultural artifacts. The theme in all of it is his desire to help Cambodians in the Us, Cambodia, and elsewhere to reclaim themselves through their traditions, to feel proud, and to survive. Survival is a big theme.

Roz then interviews Yary for an article in *Potter’s Studio* (the preeminent potters’ “trade” journal) about his life, his upbringing, his education, and then—inevitably—the topic becomes life under the Khmer Rouge [much of this is summarized in my nominating letter for the National Heritage Fellowships]: grisly, tragic, impossible to comprehend. Yary tears up at several points and breaks down at the point where he is telling of his family’s imprisonment with a refugee camp at the point that his wife delivered their 3<sup>rd</sup> child. Samkhann responds emotionally at these points and expresses his own suffering, as well—he was in the same camp, for example, and knew the cruelties meted out there; he also told of surviving by learning how to retrieve palm sugar. The group listening feels their own guilt at producing this vicarious suffering, although—and I noticed this in Cambodia, as well—Cambodians do not shy away from telling their stories (it feels remarkably healthy to me, but I am sure that it’s all way more complex than that simple estimation can encompass).

The room became a full house of compassion during the course of Yary’s biographical soliloquy, not simply because the stories were so harsh—and they were—but also because Yary himself seems so gentle and kind. Beyond that, it amazes everyone listening that it is possible to not only survive these atrocities and be sane but to continue to try to create beauty and to affirm life so tangibly...it is so much more than seems possible or probable. I find myself amazed with the capacity of human beings to find/make meaning out of darkness. Yary seems a very special person in this regard (as does Samkhann, I might add), and the people in the room represent just a small number of his fans: people who want to help him and his family in anyway they can. It is very easy to understand why and to become a card-carrying member of the club.

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The two sessions at the Harvard Ceramics Studio (across the river, in Allston) were much more professional sessions. In the first instance (on January 11), Roz Cummins, a former student of mine—knowing my interests in culture and Cambodia—had asked if I would be interested in hearing Yary give a master class. Immediately thereafter, I contacted Maggie Holtzberg to ask if I could do some impromptu fieldwork with Yary: he was so clearly “the real thing.” With Domnang Pin as his translator, Yary gave a fascinating presentation in which he discussed and demonstrated some of the design principles, strategies, and techniques of traditional Khmer ceramics art [Samkhann, particularly, makes a point of using the term ceramics and ceramicist instead of pottery and potter, the latter representing—as

far as I can make out—the vernacular and functional folk counterpart to what is considered a High Culture art form]. The “grammar” of design, which originated with the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat, and which was taught to him in art school [see the designs in the nomination narrative and CS37], is a fascinating concept, and even more wonderful to see executed [CS37-40].

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> session on August 18, the class was more interactive, as students had been working already for weeks with him and had projects/pieces of their own to work on [CS41-42]. The students tried to describe to me how difficult the carving techniques were, how demanding and subtle the angling and incisions [see CS 38-40]. During this time, Yary was able to show me the work he was producing there: a combination of classic forms/shapes [CS22-24, 29-30, 33-36] and decorating styles—painting with glaze [e.g., CS34] as well as carving/incisions in the clay face [27-28]—along with innovations in shapes [CS 34-36] and colors [CS 35-36] that he had come up with. A kiln was also just being opened while I was there, and I watched Yary’s excitement as pieces of his were brought out. He was particularly excited about his spirit house [CS31-32], which is a traditional form—usually placed in front of a home, where offerings are made to the devodas, the gods and spirits—but one that is traditionally made out of wood. He was excited to have made one of clay.

It was clear from attending Yary’s class at Harvard that his work was worth documenting. As I learned more about his personal story—with the fact that he is the sole survivor of the royal art school; the last repository of a tradition of training and knowledge of ceramics art and firing—it became obvious that he and his work also needed to be recognized and supported. So, in addition to the normal documentation for the Massachusetts Cultural Council, I prepared a nomination on behalf of Yary for the NEA’s National Heritage Fellowship awards [enclosed]. Arduous, as always to pull together, the support materials reinforced everything I was concluding from my own research and added to it immeasurably. Yary’s work is significant in and to the world’s art community; he is recognized and honored within the Cambodian community in this country, and in Lowell, particularly; his participation in the larger community is active and life-affirming; he is much beloved by those who work with him and get to know him. For my own part, it has been an honor to work with Yary, a touching experience, and a matter of some very significant karma, even if I’m not sure what I mean by that. This is good stuff.