



PUBLISHED IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE  
EXHIBITION "WAITING FOR ENLIGHTENMENT"  
ORGANIZED BY SHANE LEVI, SAVANNA  
NELSON, AND SOPHEAK SAM AT THE  
DISTILLERY GALLERY.

JUNE 1, 2022 – JULY 9, 2022.

"WAITING FOR ENLIGHTENMENT" IS MADE  
POSSIBLE BY INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT AND  
DONATIONS.

EDITED BY MELISSA TENG AND SOPHEAK SAM.

© 2022 SOPHEAK SAM

ALL IMAGES USED COURTESY OF THE ARTIST  
UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED.

## THE DISTILLERY GALLERY

516 E. 2ND STREET, SOUTH BOSTON

The Distillery Gallery is an Artist Run Gallery  
& Project Space located in South Boston, with  
a focus on promoting interesting and engaging  
art, working with artists from the Distillery,  
Boston, and beyond.

# រង់ចាំចូលនិព្វាន

## WAITING FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

Time is played by a serpent in Sopheap Sam's (b.1989, Thai-Cambodian border) first solo exhibition, **រង់ចាំចូលនិព្វាន** **Waiting for Enlightenment**.

Traversing picture planes and video screens, the serpent is a pervasive multidimensional being, but like other symbolic beings of western evil and sin, it is demonized for ruination or pillaged for pleasure—never permitted a peaceful journey to self transformation or enlightenment.

Sam's multidisciplinary work comprising drawings, paintings, artist books, and video traces cultural hybridity, queer futurity, religious iconography, and the fabulation of a marred political history between the U.S. and Cambodia.

A child refugee born in the aftermath of the Cambodian genocide, the artist's personal entanglement with the historicization of the Khmer experience posits the exhibition as an embodied site for individual and collective searching.

Crawled from an existential fever dream, the serpent is an avatar that cruises through liminal spaces of representation, duality, belonging, spirituality, and utopia. It is birthed infinitely from a recurring cycle of displacement, loss, and love.

# រង់ចាំ...ចាំសង្សារ

## WAIT...REMEMBER YOUR LOVER<sup>1</sup>

by Melissa Q. Teng

1. A year ago, Sopheak Sam told me they wanted to be a snake. The waning summer had brought out everyone like nostalgia, but we were tucked away in a blood- and jewel-toned jazz bar called the Mad Monkfish, one of the rare local spots offering Thai-Cambodian dry noodles.

Sam shared **The artist in hissssss studio** on their phone, a portrait of a young painter taking measurements with their brush, working out of an empty studio with its only window closed. They have the head of a green viper, with yellow eyes curious for their human subject and a long tongue darting out, perhaps to take more measurements. The extraordinary-ness of this inter-being's survival contradicts the mundane-ness of their daily pleasures, a tension held in so many displaced peoples.



**The artist in hissssss studio, 12" x 16", 2021, Oil on canvas.**

In the Western Bible, the snake symbolizes evil and temptation from man's garden paradise. But in Southeast Asian cultures, the snake is known as a wise, healing, and beautiful inter-being who protected the Buddha from the elements. The snake is an avatar, Sam

1. Title is a lyric from the song, ចាំសង្សារ (Cham Songsa, translation: Remember Your Lover), by Sokun Nisa. © Ramsey Hang Meas, 2011.



ព្រឺត្រី (Pray for Me), 40" x 26", 2021, Mixed media on paper: oil, acrylic, soft pastels.

explained, who dwells in liminal spaces and is always becoming —

They paused to greet our waiter. “I’ll have the កាយតើយាង (kuyteav haeng) and, umm, the bitches brew.” Fruity cocktail in hand, Sam added: And snakes are kinda shady.

Today, snakes are still omnipresent in Sam’s works, but gone are the plain studio walls. The avatar has made its way to vastly different realms of religious symbols and karmic mythology: of architectural aesthetics and Khmer ornamentation, of vibrant decorations from silk textiles, and of Buddhist palm leaf manuscripts.

Sumptuous as their surroundings may be, the snake is still quite hungry and finding ways to pass time, often keeping the company of (and, yes,

sometimes feasting on) a faceless figure. In **Pray For Me**, the snake lays with their stand-in human, posing as both the reclining Buddha and reclining nudes in canonical Western art. Yet its eyes continue to wander, perhaps knowing that it will soon have to shed its skin and that this moment, of bodily pleasure and symbolism, is only skin-deep.

**2.** The difference between pleasure and enlightenment is time. If pleasure is a temporary release from suffering, then enlightenment is a radiant release from temporary pleasures. Suffering and pleasure are non-binary: you cannot have or deny one without the other. In a conforming society, where structures of power produce suffering for those who are different, feeling good becomes maintenance.



Enlightenment is a long, reparative walk — moving through unfamiliar muscles, meeting alternative paths in strangers, feeling your cells cycle through. You become a different being, and your world comes with you.

**3.** The difference between pleasure and enlightenment is also labor. Often relationships to labor are inherited. When we see our family's labor be demonized, be covert, or not bear fruit, that message takes root under our skin.

The architectural aesthetics of kbach, or Khmer ornamentation, became a way to speak to the laborer's gaze. "I don't have the money to frame my works on paper, [but] I've always shown my drawings pinned up, which can be seen as 'less than' in a gallery setting," Sam described. Though initially

a way to "resolve" the edges and framing of their works, the act of designing and cutting kbach became therapeutic.

"I thought it would take me three hours, but it took me just one. I sort of just went for it, and it was satisfying," Sam described.

Kbach forces the artist to slow down, make calculations, and anticipate symmetry. Sam first learned this labor-intensive art form in community college in Lowell, but at that point, it felt like a chore.

Similarly, on a recent Buddhist retreat, Sam realized they share familial experiences with the other Cambodian guests, but felt a knowledge gap around core Buddhist beliefs and the daily labor in which these are embodied.



190 (Eden), Approx. 168" x 48" (14 ft x 8 ft), 2021, Mixed media on paper: acrylic and soft pastels.

"I left the retreat realizing I'm not a very good Buddhist.," Sam recalled. "[I met] a Cambodian mother and daughter, who were very well-connected with the temple and knew all the monks in Cambodia and across America."

"I have so much respect for Cambodian silk weavers. They have such a long strenuous process of extracting silk, using natural or chemical dyes. As a stupid silly little painter, if I can work a little harder to get to that level of resolution those artists get to, I'm honored to have my work even in conversation," Sam reflected.

They continue: "It's fucked up, getting to live this privileged life, without having to experience the devastation

of war firsthand, being born at the end of all that. Thinking back to that labor helps to reintroduce me to my family's Buddhist practice: slowing down to offer alms to my ancestors.

Forgive me. I'm going to try ... I feel a lot of guilt doing all the things I'm doing, experiencing something they should have had: a fulfilling, meaningful life, a peaceful life."

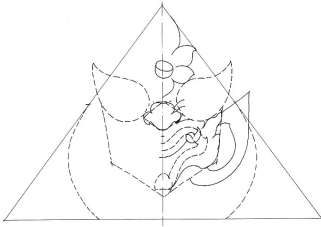
Excavating for themselves — through symbols, spaces, public learning — Sam takes us along the walk towards collective becoming.



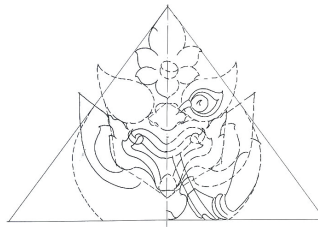




ពានិរត្តិ (Ouroboros), Triptych: 135" x 60", Each: 45" x 60", 2021, Acrylic and oil on canvas. Photo by Mel Taing.



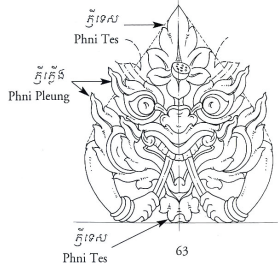
60



61



62



63

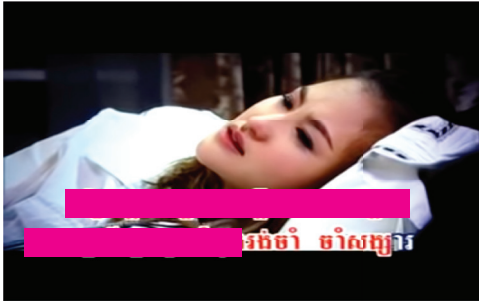
Vitharin, Chan. Kbach: A Study of Khmer Ornament, Reyum Publishing, 2005, p. 93.

# SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

Sam pulls from visual culture and popular media at the intersection of ancient, modern, and contemporary (mostly from Cambodia, but sometimes Thailand), including postwar films, Buddhist palm leaf manuscripts, karaoke music videos, silk textiles, and queer film and television series across mainland Southeast Asia.



Scenes from the Bhuridatta Jataka in a paper folding book containing extracts from the Tipitaka in Pali language in Khmer script. Central Thailand, 19th century (British Library, Or.16552 f.16).



Screenshot from the karaoke music video ចាំសង្ឃារ (Cham Songsa), translation: Remember Your Lover by Sokun Nisa. © Ramsey Hang Meas, 2011.



Still image from ព្រេងច័ន្ទលើចំបាំង (English title: I Told Sunset About You), 2020-21. Produced by Nadao Bangkok. Directed by Naruebet Kuno.



Promotional poster for The Snake King's Wife (Khmer: ពស់ក្មេងកង, Thai: งูเค็งทอง), 1970. Directed by Tea Lim Koun.

**សំសុក្រីក្រ Sopheak Sam** (b.Thai-Cambodia border) is a Fulbright U.S. Research Fellow who traces cultural hybridity, queer alterity, and the historicization of the Khmer experience through a research-driven practice comprising drawings, paintings, printmaking, and video installations. They've been exploring ornamentalism, religious iconography, postwar mythologies, and film/media archives as source materials across Cambodia and Cambodian diasporas to arrive at sites of memory, affect, pain, pleasure, and spirituality. Sam graduated with their BFA in Studio for Interrelated Media at Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

**Melissa Q. Teng** is a social practice artist and writer. Currently she is the Participatory Action Research Artist-In-Residence at the Mayor's Office of Arts & Culture, City of Boston, and a student in the Data + Feminism Lab in MIT's School of Architecture + Planning.



ຍຄຕຶມກ (Goodnight Hiss), 45" x 60", 2022, Acrylic and oil on vinyl.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## THANK YOU TO THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE FOR THEIR INDIVIDUAL DONATIONS:

Autumn Ahn  
 Alex Baskin  
 Alison Beaudette  
 Ryan Boun  
 Sienna Bucu  
 Joel Carela  
 Liz Cheung  
 Joyce Dostale  
 Kat Eng  
 Ariel Freiberg  
 Joe Garrison  
 Alfredo Gisholt  
 Pov Grunberg  
 Amy Holland  
 Kaitlin Hollinger  
 Christopher Hoodlet  
 Alejandro Jaramillo  
 James Johnson  
 Kathleen Keefe  
 Oona Kernan  
 Michael Khuth  
 Sarah and Salina Kim  
 Malisa Kuch and Liam Tarpey  
 Justin Kwan  
 Lisa Lee  
 Hai-Wen Lin  
 Gina Lindner  
 Anju Madhok  
 Tsugumi Maki  
 Jonathan Mildenberg  
 Laura H. Misumi  
 Emily Mitamura  
 Emily Mogavero  
 Judy Mom  
 Gina Mom  
 Miriam Morgenstern

Elizabeth Morlock  
 Leah Nashel  
 Chau Ngo  
 Amy Ortega  
 Abigail Parsons  
 Stephanie Rosario  
 Jason Rouse  
 Srey Saing  
 Lenny Schnier  
 Yiwei Serrato  
 Sophea Sok  
 Leakana Sok  
 Elizabeth Song  
 Chaya Sophon  
 Sovanchan Sorn  
 Courtney Stock  
 Nita Sturiale  
 Steph Van Riet  
 Trent Walker and Chenxing Han  
 Madeline Weikel  
 Phann White  
 Lilian Xie  
 Kai Ye  
 Bourin You

I'd like to first extend my deepest gratitude to Melissa Teng for listening to my ramblings over the past year and somehow synthesizing my scattered musings on queer snakes and vernacular Buddhism into a critical, sensitive, humorous, and loving piece of writing. Thank you, bestie. Having dumped my art materials after moving studios into their home, I am undeserving of my hilarious and tolerant parents Yean Mom and Proeun Sam. I love you. I am indebted to my brother Sophat for his quiet support along with the rest of my siblings (there are literally too many to name). I'm especially grateful for my one-year-old nephew Winston for bringing so much joy to our family's life and kudos to his parents Phoeun and Champa for raising him.

Thank you to the Distillery Gallery for setting this stage for me, and to Shane Levi, Lisa Purdy, Kiki, and Savanna Nelson for your heartfelt love and support. To the Distillery community: Pat Falco, Kate Ostreicher, Kenji Nakayama, and Kaiju for your friendship. This exhibition, and my art practice at large, are made possible by the unwavering encouragement of my chosen family and dearest friends: Princess Moon, Lena Sarunn, Ricky Orng, Tarik Bartel, Marissa Cote, Ailin Lu, Celina Fernando, Dylan Soulard, Jamieson Edson, Miru Song, Chummeng Suon, Chase Buckley, Phann White, Srey Saing, Sophea Sok, and so many others.

To my Miranda's: Lenny, Jason, and Chris, thank you for making me feel young and beautiful.

To all my advisors, mentors, and teachers at MassArt and Brandeis – thank you for putting up with me. And to my post-baccalaureate cohort, I'm so lucky to be in the presence of your immense creativity and drive: Abigail Parsons, Steph Van Riet, Yiwei Serrato, James Johnson, Liam Coughlin, Leah Nashel, Kate Flake, Will Lawler, and Kyle Slevira.

Lastly, as I prepare to set out for Thailand in fall of 2022, I am eternally grateful to those who empowered me to imagine my Fulbright research project as a possibility, and continue to offer their guidance: Alexandra Dalferro, Kathaleeya Liamdee, Ger Xiong, Anida Yeou Ali, Nhi Le, Toni Shapiro-Phim, and Alexandra Denes. Moreover, Kris Wilton and Joan Chun, who recommended my application, I can't thank you enough. I am honored to be guided by the Department of Media Arts and Design at Chiang Mai University with professors Sorayut Aiemueayut and Thatchatham Silsupan. And finally, thank you to the Khmer Surin Association and Cheymongkol Chalermasukjitsri for welcoming me into your community.

I look forward to new journeys with you all. – សំសុភ័ក្រ្ត Sopheak

THE DISTILLERY GALLERY

516 E. 2ND STREET, SOUTH BOSTON

JUNE 1 - JULY 9, 2022