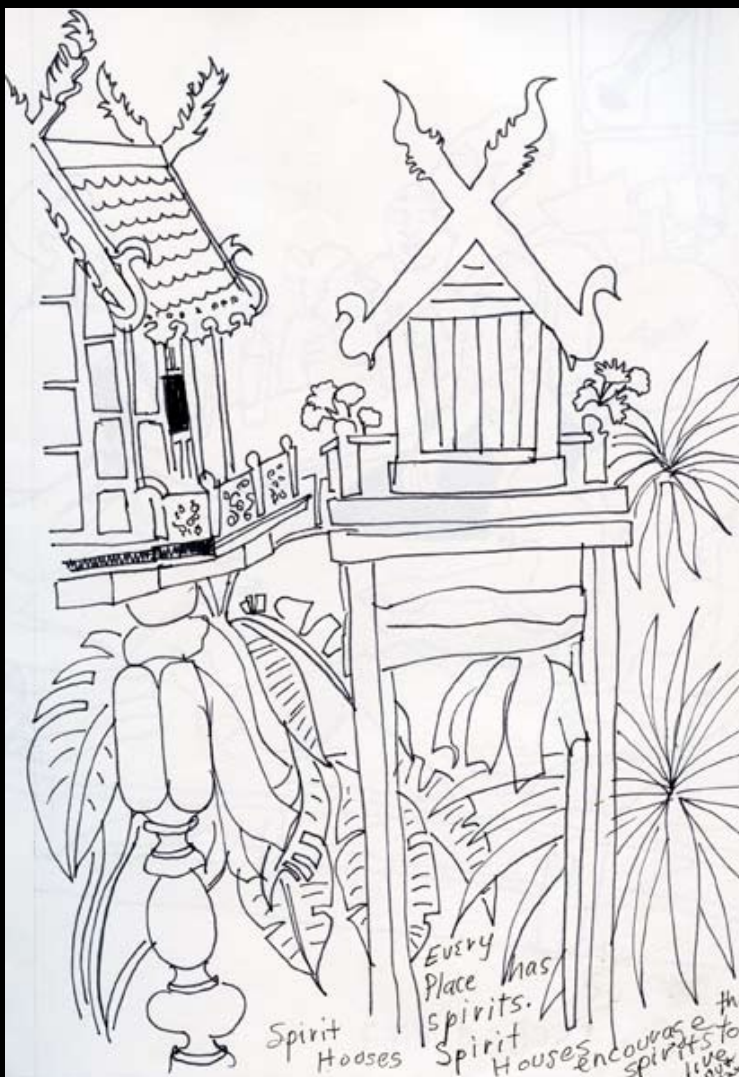


Ken Yarbrough

Spirit Houses

Project Space • Luang Prabang 2011



Ken Yarbrough *and his friends*



Ken Yarbrough is a familiar figure to residents of Luang Prabang, where he is often seen cycling energetically around the peninsula, relaxing with friends over a coffee here and there, and carrying odd bits of wood and strange dried leaves and seed pods in his bicycle basket. Through this exhibition we discover what else he has been doing and why he collects these odd materials.

Born in Arkansas, Ken spent his teenage years in Bangkok, where he developed a lifelong interest in the study of Buddhism. Later he lived in Arizona in the US, where work with native American groups in the Southwest USA, led to further interest in contemplative religions. When health problems arose he decided to find a more tranquil life to help address these problems. Having visited Laos on several occasions during the 60's connected with his father's work, he felt that this was the place to experience that sense of peace. *"I like the way they are here, the way they treat their kids and their old people"*

So he approached the abbot of Wat Phou Kwai and, after lengthy discussion, entered the monastery as a novice in mid-2006 at the age of 55. Every day for 10 months Ken

prayed, meditated, worked and walked barefoot in his orange robes to receive alms alongside the other monks. No special consideration was given for his 'farang' status. The abbot gave permission for him to coach basketball at the Luang Prabang Orphanage, but not to wear a baseball cap when he did so. On a trip back to the USA, he stayed in his robes and followed his vows throughout. *"I was the only guy in LA Airport in orange robes, but that was the deal, so I did it."*

He says his feet never got hardened to the stones and ruts of the roads, but his heart was softened to the rhythm of Lao life and he decided to try life in Luang Prabang after leaving the temple. But there were the practical problems of what to do and how to support himself. Inspiration came when he sent a small, fragile spirit house through the mail to a friend in the USA and it arrived in pieces. Undaunted, his friend managed to painstakingly rebuild the house from the pieces, and the idea of a small business making wooden spirit houses in kit form was born. After spending considerable time working out designs, finding the right tools, researching materials and thinking about how to set up a workshop employing local people to produce the houses,

Ken found his fascination with the little structures was growing, but the practical issues of setting up a business were also mounting.

Then the US government gave him a medical pension, removing the most immediate difficulty, and the project turned into a hobby.

No longer constrained by the idea of turning out a uniform product, the houses became a creative outlet and Ken turned to using found materials, driftwood from the dry season sandbanks in the Mekong, pieces of bamboo, metal and glass that he finds on his daily cycling trips. Animal shapes began to emerge in the structures and the sizes changed.

This was the result of research into spirits, Theravada Buddhism and Hinduism where he found the theme of spirits as guardians, often in the form of animals.

*"Just to make them safe for spirits."
"I want to build a house that any spirit or person would be happy to live in. But not just happy, these houses have an 'attitude'."*

Besides making the houses, sometimes for friends, sometimes just to see how it would turn out, Ken has also become the Luang Prabang Spirit House Doctor. When he sees spirit houses that have fallen into disrepair or literally fallen on the

ground, battered by the sun and the rain, he rescues them.

"In Thailand they seem to have a process for disposing of them, but here, they seem to be more casual, so I take them home and I either adopt them or fix them up and re-mount them. Keeps those spirits happy."

And of the 60 houses he has made so far, 35 have been given away and taken all over the world. *"I aim to have a spirit house on every continent and now I'm only missing Antarctica, but I'm working on that one."*

Looking at the pieces, it is easy to see how the mystical nature of the practices of animism have crept into Ken's psyche. But it's not a subject he is likely to expound on verbally. *"Making a spirit house is not something I can talk about at any length,"* he observes.

"I guess it's a spiritual thing."

A practical, well-educated and thoughtful person, Ken nonetheless believes in the spirits, feels their presence, but offers no intellectual analysis of this belief. Spirits, he suggests, are mysterious little beings and mysteries are meant to mystify us.

"The spirit houses are just there to protect the spirits, that's all."

Suzy Young

Luang Prabang, August 2011

Catalogue



































Joanne Mitchel

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