

***“Women in Lao Contemporary Art & Culture from 1975 till Now”***  
***Research, Documentation, Conservation - June/November 2022***

**Final Report December 2022**

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*This Project Report is dedicated to a strong and beautiful woman,  
my mother who left to early, to continue her journey.*

*August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022*

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# Preface

## What is Contemporary Art?

*“In its most basic sense, the term contemporary art refers to art—namely, painting, sculpture, photography, installation, performance, and video art—produced today.”*

I would like to thank the Heinrich Boll Foundation who supported this six-months research project looking at the role and position of Women in Lao Art and Culture from 1975 until now. It celebrates the onset of an idea born three years ago; enabling it to grow into a tangible process of identifying artists of which little is documented, no publications available and few exhibitions and performances shown.

*Consider how women view their position in society, their work in culture and give them voices, that was the goal of this process.*

I worked for 30 years in the publishing and contemporary art world in the west before moving to Laos in 2008, and as a European man and not an artist myself, I needed a new pair of glasses to look at these women’s works with fresh eyes. I would like to thank the Heinrich Boll Foundation to have enabled this research, we started on a journey, without knowing where it would lead, and as a result, have encountered many gifted artists and creators.

I want to thank all the artists, performers, filmmakers, architects, designers, students and professionals from Laos and the diaspora who have taken the time to talk to us and welcome us in their homes and studios. Many thanks go to Xayprani Chanthalangsy and Catherine O’Brien who guided and opened doors and windows. And finally, I’d like to thank Souphaluck Phongsavath who worked side by side with me these months, while at the same time raising a family, organising events, exhibitions, and somewhere finding the time to do her own creative work as a painter.

I hope this signals the beginning of more support for many diverse activities, events, exhibitions, workshops, performance, publications, concerts and research to come over the coming years in the new Project Space we are building at the Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden in Luang Prabang.

**Rik Gadella**

## Introduction:

This report is the result of those six months of research, meeting and interviewing Lao Women working in the Arts and Culture in Laos and Diaspora. It attempts to paint a picture of artistic, cultural, social, and even environmental issues that they deal, or not deal with on daily basis.

It is not a study of aesthetics or a defining what is considered “*Contemporary*” from a western point of view, but merely a first collection of their stories, lives and creative work and in doing so hope to offer a framework and some recommendations as to how to continue this journey, with these creative women, actors of culture and change.

### Start Premises Situation:

Only one book has been published in 2007 on Laos contemporary Art, and of the 25 artists showcased there are only 5 women included. We have tried to conduct an independent study into what women artists have produced since 1975 and importantly what artistic issues, limitations, openings they have encountered in their lives that shaped their work practically, aesthetically as well as ideologically. We think it’s important to preserve historical information, as well as present their works, ideas and the forces and ideologies that drives them to continue creating. To broaden the cultural scope we included poets, writers, filmmakers, architects, designers, performing artists and the women behind the scenes managing, publishing, and producing to get a better sense of the cultural landscape. We contacted women in Laos as well from the diaspora, who might have left when they were still babies, but whose inputs have brought unique views to what it means to be a Woman, a Creator and a vital part of the Laos Arts and Culture, both here and there

*For this we conducted meetings, interviews and a survey with artists, historian’s and writers concentrating on three generations:*

1) The generation that grew up at the time of the revolution and who became the first teachers at the Lao Fine Arts School after the revolution in 1975. Very little, to nothing is known and almost no work of these artists is ever exhibited. We want to write their stories, while they and their memories still live on as they are all aging. We want to travel with them through their life as artist the ease and of difficulties they faced, look through their archives and bodies of work and to make sure they will be properly conserved. Our experience over the last years is that there is a body of

work that artists, are afraid to show publicly. It is often more interesting than their *'official works'* and some represent the political and cultural transition over time. We consider it very important that these works are not lost, and that the historical and artistic curatorial importance is not overlooked. We understand that some have already passed on and their survivors neither care nor understand the value of the artistic legacy. Sometimes their works and stories are lost, and everything discarded.

2) We included their students, the generation that came up end 80ties and 90ties and some of whom have found international recognition who have started to work in what we would consider *"contemporary international styles and media"*.

3) The New Generation, those just out of art school, or still studying, who are on the threshold of working with new media, have developed personal non-traditional styles and stories. These in particular, would benefit greatly from more openness and activities that expose them to news, and practical experience of what is happening in the Asian art world, and beyond.

#### **Description of Activity and Methodology:**

The following steps were not chronological because many things interacted when we started meeting the artists and got more and more information:

- 1) Preparation: we compiled a contact list of artists/writers/historians and other persons of interest to meet. Contacted them, introduced the project, what it aims to achieve, establish their agreement to participate, and set up interviews.
- 2) Conduct a survey and first meetings and interviews with a selected group of fifty women;
- 3) Meet historians, writers gather source material and prepare thematic texts about subject;
- 4) Revise/adjust concept and content with information acquired for the writing of this report. We anticipated this as an ongoing process and evaluation to ensure the information is comprehensive, cares for confidentiality and is of vital interest, as this will be an ongoing work in process.

This report is a first step with Art historical and Cultural information, as well as recommendations on Gender, History and Ecology for publications, events, exhibitions, and more research we hope to come over the coming years. We apologize to anyone we might have overlooked; this was not intentional, please get in touch and let us know so we can keep improving, expanding our work.

**Rik Gadella & Souphaluck Phongsavath**

## Report

### ***“Women in Lao Contemporary Art & Culture from 1975 till Now”***

#### **Featuring 120 women from Laos and Diaspora:**

When we started this research project, we decided to expand the scope to include film makers, architects, writers, designers, dance performers and choreographers because aesthetic changes have been more prevalent within these disciplines and have an important impact on change. The enthusiastic response overwhelmed us, as 120 women from Laos and Diaspora responded.

In this report we will individually present 37 women through in-depth portraits and thematic texts. The choice was very difficult to make, because so many we could not include, but we tried to cover all disciplines and age groups, so please forgive us if you are not included this time, we will keep updating and add women to our overview and to the online website we are creating.

The history of contemporary art in Laos is far from being written, but four forebearers, the first teachers from after the revolution will be presented here in solo portraits: Xayprani Chanthalangsy, Bancha Keomingmeuang, Buavone Phommabouth and Sengchanh Soukhaseum. In four thematic texts we look at subjects of interest, intersecting with arts and culture or from different disciplines of the art world and discuss thirty-four artists individually. *“Ecology and Art, or the Ecology of Art”*, *“Lao Women Redefining Film”*, *“Lao Women in Performing Arts since 1975”* and *“The history of the illustrious Dokked Publishing House”* a driving force in Lao Literature. In ten more individual portraits we try and cover different disciplines and age groups. There was only time to include one solo portrait from an artist from Diaspora, Boulomsouk Svadphaiphane. But in the thematic texts we were able to discuss several more such as Oudomphone Bounyavong, Chay Khamson and Thi-Von Muong-Hane. This subject warrants a large and deep study that can elaborate on subjects of identity, displacement and belonging in contemporary art.

First let us present background on the Education system for Arts and Culture in Laos, as well as the small private sector art market to make us understand the current situation for artists. Followed by the Survey Analysis of Recurrent themes and Issues and the Conclusions and Recommendations for next phase followed by the Thematic and Solo Portraits of *“Women at Work”*.

# Education for Arts and Culture in Laos – History to the Present

Written by: Rik Gadella & Melody Kemp, November 2022

*Artistic expression is not a luxury; it is a necessity – a defining element of our humanity and a fundamental human right enabling everyone to develop and express their humanity*  
*Fareeda Shahid, UN Special Rapporteur (2013).*

## **Introduction and Overview:**

Any review of arts education should be taken within the context of Lao education generally. During the colonial period the French established a secular education system patterned after schools in France, and French was the language of instruction after the second or third grade. This system was largely irrelevant to the needs of the vast majority of rural peoples, despite that schools were extended to district centres and a few villages, producing a small educated elite.

An important goal of the post-revolutionary Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) government was to establish a system of universal primary education by 1985; the goal was then postponed by logistics until 2000. The LPDR encountered the same problems that had confronted previous governments: cost and availability of trained teachers. The French system of education was replaced with a Lao curriculum, although lack of teaching materials has continued to impede effective instruction. Lao's numerous ethnic groups by reason of language, accessibility and culture were largely left out of broader education for many years. They are still under-represented.

The education system continues to evolve under severely constraining conditions of inadequately prepared and poorly paid teachers, insufficient funding, shortages of facilities, and often ineffective allocation of the limited resources available. There are significant geographic, ethnic, gender and wealth disparities in the distribution of educational services, and inequalities exist in every level of the system particularly so for the plastic arts.

In recent years, however, there has been a steady increase in the number of opportunities to be exposed to the works of Lao artists outside the country. Invitations to contribute to the Singapore Biennale and the Asia-Pacific Triennale in Brisbane Australia among them.

## **Learning: What and How?**

The following thoughts taken from some academic writings, are respectively about the entangled temporality of Lao modernity, the idea of possessing a land through possessing its symbol, and the dream of a Mother-Land happy forever in a delayed future. Some suggest that contemporary visual productions in Laos could underwhelm international audiences, which typically seeks artworks in new media, with underlying messages of social engagement or a critique of authoritarian rule. The dominant mode of expression in Lao art, however, remains an oil painting in a modernist style with a neo-traditional agenda to romanticise Lao cultural heritage. In global art circuits, this type of artwork is often deemed passé, reinforcing a perception of Laos as stuck or repressive. *This might be a partial explanation for why the art of post-socialist Laos is generally overlooked in the field of Asian art history.*

In 1969 a new direction signalled the emphasis on the training of professional artists and teachers of fine arts and upon the foundation of the Lao Democratic Republic in 1975, two levels of studies were introduced, with the first three focussing on traditional arts and the following three years on the arts in general. But girls continue to be less likely than boys to attend school and attend for fewer years, a discrepancy that began declining in the early 1990s. In 1969 only 37 percent of students in primary school were girls; by 1989, however, 44 percent of primary school students were girls. Because of cultural attitudes toward girls' and women's responsibilities, upland and ethnic minority born girls accounted for only 26 percent of all students. This perpetuated a self-fulfilling prophesy of structural, ethnic and gender discrimination.

Disappointingly, international researchers indicate that while education is poorly resourced in general, the budget and resources allocated to education have diminished in recent times.

Recent years have seen the recognition of these deficiencies resulting in international assistance in data management and the identification and rectification of weaknesses, which allows for instance UNICEF and MoES to compile data upon which to base education plans to implemented in Laos in 2022. It is to be noted that no specific mention of arts education is made in this data system.

## **Fine Arts Education**

There are currently four government run and funded fine arts schools serving budding artists of Laos. Recently Lao has seen the rise of alternative learning facilities teaching everything from dance (Fang Lao) to photography, conservation, art and choreography. Many of the artists

mentioned in this report are self-taught. Some like Fang Lao, and various soloist musicians, have achieved international recognition and sponsorship. But this diversity does not mean life is a choice between free expression and government strictures and tradition.



1959 Yearbook of NIFA, with director Sathiane Nachampa, when the first women teachers entered the school in the department of weaving: Anong Phuthasa and Phan Phongsisathanak.



## History

The Lao Fine Arts School, the sole arts-oriented government run educational facility in Lao, opened its doors in Vientiane in 1959, offering four-year degree courses in traditional art, painting, sculpture, silver and metal craft and weaving. Now a somewhat dusty classical timber building on the edge of the city, the Fine Arts School, (listed in Trip Adviser), retains its focus on what might be termed classical art. Visitors will detect a preference for oils, derivative cubism, impressionism and sculptural forms that some find lacking in modernity, much less being representative of the difficulties facing Laos in a changing world. French artist Marc Leguay was the first to conduct art education in Lao, following the nation's independence from France. Leguay was perhaps Lao's first art teacher, hired by the government to teach drawing and water-colour painting to junior and senior high students. He captured Lao traditional life in a way that attracted romantic interest.



*Maison de Culture in Ban Naxay or Mask Gallery, 2006-2016.*

NIFA grew from what was the National Faculty of Fine Arts that ran schools in Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Luang Prabang and continues to house the Lao Fine Arts Association (LFAA), run by the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. Interestingly, it's the promotion of art as a medium to support tourism and not self-expressions that dominates.



The current NIFA offers three levels of education: Undergraduate, Bachelor and Master studies with departments in: Painting, Sculpture, Graphic Art, Traditional Art, Wall Painting, Restoration and recently added Communication Graphic Design, Animation, and a PhD Level in Culture Management to its syllabus. At all levels, women and girls are under-represented accounting for approximately 25% of graduates in all three schools. The ethnic composition of the graduates remains unknown.

### **Luang Prabang Fine Arts School**

The Luang Prabang Fine Arts School (LPFAS) founded in 1974, offers a four-year program with courses in five departments: sculpture, painting, applied arts, art decoration, and moulding. Accepting twenty students from the six northern provinces and ten from the province of Luang Prabang the students return home, on graduation, to complete an 18-month internship. The school has played a major role in the revival of traditional culture in Luang Prabang and northern Laos. There has been international cooperation, as with the Université de Vincennes, collaborating with students from the LPFAS, offering workshops in photography, videography, and computer graphics. In exchange Luang Prabang students offered workshops in painting, sculpture, and lacquer making. Much of the equipment brought by the French students, was later donated to the LPFAS.

### **Southern Laos**

There are two schools in the south, one in Savannakhet and one in Pakse. The outcome of traditionalist education at the Southern art schools may be summarised by an interview with one of the graduates who exhibited at the French Embassy Vientiane, Souphaluck Phongsavath. Her aunt supported her studies at the Secondary Fine Arts school in Savannakhet Province and then the National Institute of Fine Arts, Vientiane. Her ongoing themes of femininity and the female form are inspired by women in mythology, Lao literature and daily life. *“My art education began in the South of Laos, Savannakhet. Further studies in Vientiane exposed me to traditional art methods taught in Laos, since the 1970s.”*

### **Overall View**

After a trip to Laos in 2015, as part of its review of the SE Asian arts scene, a SEA Project team concluded: *“Of the ten ASEAN countries, Laos’s art scene is the one most segregated from the rest of the region. This is changing with the increasing participation of Lao artists in exhibitions abroad*

*and cross-cultural collaboration programs. Other studies have shown that arts and physical education are thought to be time wasting and few teachers feel competent to teach these subjects at primary of high school level, thus influencing students' attitudes."*

Researchers [Galafa, B. And Ngoimanee](#), reviewed training for arts teachers at the Arts Education College and found number of factors that adversely affect teaching and learning at the institution. These range from insufficient human resource training, a loose quality assurance system to poor quality teaching and ineffective teaching methods. The study found that most of the lecturers do not use diverse teaching methods in class; they are overwhelmed by a high teacher-student ratio and limited classroom capacities, unavailability of resources and an overloaded curriculum among other challenges. The study noted that despite this, the Arts Education College is doing a great service to Laos as the only institution that trains teachers for the Arts in the country's primary and secondary schools.

## **Performing Arts**



*Dance festival Vientiane 2020*

The National School of Music and Dance was founded in 1975 with the merging of the School of Music and Dance and the School of Music of the National Front (Neolaohaksad). Its aim is to preserve and promote traditional Lao folk arts within the country and abroad. It is organised under the auspices of the Department of Fine Arts of the Ministry of Information and Culture and

provides music education for high school students aged 12-18 years. Attached to the National School are both a primary school (years 1 to 6) and a middle school (years 7 to 11) where students receive general schooling as well as training in both Lao traditional music and dance, and Western music. The music program at secondary school level (years 10 to 18) includes studies in performance (Lao instruments – *so douangh*, *so ou*, *so samsai* [fiddles], *khim* [cimbalom], *lanat ek*, *lanat thoum* [xylophones], *khong vong noi*, *khong vong ngai* [metal gongs], *khene* [upright bunch of bamboo flutes], *kong* [drum], with other elective Lao instruments also available; Western instruments – violin, piano, guitar, accordion, flute, saxophone, clarinet, drum kit), dance (Lao folk and classical dance, traditional and tribal dance, Western ballet), solfège, basic music theory, history of world music, instruments of the world, basic harmony and counterpoint, basic composition, analysis, aesthetics of music.

Currently lack of language skills amongst teaching staff and the lack of modern communication tools have seriously hindered its capacity to participate in international exchange activity.



*First year music students, 1999*



*Self-taught Lao jazz guitarist at Vientiane Jazz Festival, 2020.*

The newly returned Vientiane Jazz Festival gives musicians skilled in the varied western forms of jazz and opportunity to showcase their skills. Most have learned the genre in other countries, particularly Thailand and the US.

Interestingly there is an increasing demand for centres for international schools of performing arts created by Lao overseas refugees. As one writer dreamed: *“The instructors in the Lao American schools of performing arts work with the emerging artists to push themselves to embrace their heritage and to rethink what we will preserve for the next generation. They will not be content with mere repetition, but genuine experimentation and conversation with our arts, and what we can say to our fellow Lao around the world, and to those who are not Lao.”*

## Performing Arts Diploma Program

This certificate is awarded by the National Centre on completion of a three-year middle school program. There is also a four-year secondary program. Studies include performance (Western, Lao traditional, modern music, singing), dance, general education subjects. Entry is by audition, with all students having completed middle school (years 7 to 9).

## Literature

Lao literature is strongly influenced by classicism and tradition. In the past it was used as a way of promoting national resistance to Thai hegemony. Interestingly while literature, in particular poetry, has played an important part in Lao history there is little what could be termed contemporary /modern literature and as far as research goes, no arts course dedicated to writing and literature. A collection of modern short stories, focussing on environmental issues (Under the Clouds) showcased just how creative young Lao are, but it had limited distribution being only available in English.

There are informal writer's groups, as well as the Lao Writers Association, but they are constrained by politics. As one member said. *'We have to write nice and non-controversial.'*



*Shoes outside the Luang Prabang Library*

The importance of reading has been under-rated and only in the last ten years have initiatives like the Boat Library, @MyLibrary in Luang Prabang and the NGO's: ALC (Actions with Lao children) and Reading Room have international funding and support. Under the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Information over 38 CCC's Children Cultural Centres have been created.

Kongdeuane Nettavong, born in northern Laos, is a well-known Lao writer, storyteller, researcher and musician, who initiated a literacy program by setting up public and school libraries. In addition, she organises "book boxes" rural libraries, and the local publishing of textbooks and books for young readers with the aim of promoting reading.

It wasn't possible to find any clearly articulated references to tertiary courses in creative writing/literature. However, to see how much talent there is not being used, one can look at the works of overseas Lao fiction writers, many of them women. For instance, Souvankham Thammavongsa is the author of four poetry books. Her most recent, a short story collection *How to pronounce Knife*, was longlisted for the 2020 Scotiabank Giller Prize and a New York Times Editors' Choice. Dia Cha a Hmong woman living in the US published *Dia's Story Cloth* a book ostensibly about needlework while weaving a personal history of displacement.

### **Filmmaking**

Film making started in the 1920 's in Laos. The film *Chang* shows life in rural Lao in 1929 <https://youtu.be/2XQBMIOfMko> but little or no formal education in filmmaking surfaced.

Despite that many young Lao like Dorn Bouttasing are self-taught.

Until 1989, the Ministry of Culture's Cinema Department had a monopoly on film production. The first feature-length film produced after the monarchy was abolished was *"Gun Voice from the Plain of Jars"*, directed by Somchith Pholsena in 1983, but its release was prevented by censorship. After 1989, several state companies were allowed to operate. The success was limited. In fact, writing in 1995, Som Ock Southiponh asserted that *"Laotian cinema does not exist."*

In the 21st century, the government allowed co-productions with foreign companies, which effectively created modern Laotian cinema. Made by a Thai director in 2008, *"Sabaidee Luang Prabang"* was the first commercial film shot in Laos since 1975. The *Rocket* was produced by Australians but shot in Lao and starred new and existing actors. It won international acclaim and awards but was barely shown in Lao due to it casting a shadow on dam building.

However, the director who made Lao cinema notable beyond Laos, was Mattie Do, Laos' first female director. Born in the United States and trained in Italy, she returned to Laos as part of a relocation deal offered to her husband by a production company. She made her debut in 2012 with *"Chanthaly"*, which was the first horror film written and directed entirely in Laos.

The Luang Prabang Film Festival has done a lot to promote women film making. And offers financial support for projects (<https://www.lpfilmfest.org/lao-filmmakers-fund/>). In this years' festival (2022) at least five films made by women will be shown as well as those where women were script writers, sound technicians etc.

### **Department Communication University of Laos.**

In addition to the support to LNTV, ProCEED has worked together with young documentary film makers in Laos through summer film schools organized by DokLao in cooperation with the Department of Environment Quality Promotion of MoNRE and University of Laos In 2017. ProCEED has trained more than 20 students and teachers at the Mass Communication Department of the National University of Laos on the production for environmental TV programs. Participants learned about TV script writing, pre-production, props making and other TV production skills. They also practiced innovative video techniques and media formats such as shadow theatre, animation, stop motion, hand puppets and the like. The student productions were edited into five mini-series with 5-7 spots of three minutes duration each, which were broadcast by LNTV in the context of the environmental TV program "*Good Environment, Good Life*". [Bobo the Surfing Elephant](#) made by a Vientiane based Film studio won Gold at the Japanese sponsored ASEAN wide animation contest in 2021.

### **Department of Film in the Institute of Fine Arts.**

National donors continue to make specific contributions to arts education. For instance, the Franco-German-Lao project "*Animated Film Laos 2021*" consisted of an animation filmmaking workshop, allowed 11 students from the National Institute of Fine Arts to learn animation skills and to have a first-hand experience in directing/editing. Organizing the teaching and learning of the social sciences in order to train scholars, scientific researchers, the preservation and promotion of the fine arts and culture of the nation as well as the people.

Laos does not yet have a dedicated filmmaking school. However, filmmaking/video making is offered as part of mass media study. Schools that offer videomaking/filmmaking include: Souphanouvong University in Luang Prabang, National University of Laos (Dong Dok campus - Mass Media Division, Faculty of Letter), Soutsaka College (Vientiane), and National Institute of Fine Arts (Vientiane) Savannakhet University also offers the similar course - video making.

It's adjunct - not a main subject. That means it's just an alternative. They have curriculum but what they all lack is teachers/instructors. They often invite filmmakers/TV producers/camera persons to come and teach.

Many Lao filmmakers Lao students are self-taught (YouTube). Workshops are organized by filmmakers themselves or aid agencies, particularly those related to issues such as the health and environment. Young people wishing to learn filmmaking can attend one-off courses in Laos, apply for a scholarship to study or attend a workshop overseas. @My Library has been very active many years in Luang Prabang, educating young people about photography and video making. The Blue Chair Film Festival (formerly known as the Luang Prabang Film Festival) actively supports many activities during their December Festival, and all through the year with workshops, as well as their [Lao Filmmakers Fund](#). And we should not forget to mention the important role of [LNWC – Lao New Wave Cinema](#), created in Vientiane in 2011. ( For more information see the text from Yoxa Dahm, *“Lao Women Redefining Film”*.)

### **Architecture and Interior Design**

Three faculties teach Architecture and design: the National University in Vientiane and those in Luang Prabang and Champassak.

All three faculties practice the development of creative methods along with creative design. The Luang Prabang campus recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on academic cooperation between the Association of Architects and Lao Civil Engineers (S.A.S.) and Faculty of Architecture, Souphanouvong University (NCP) High school in order to foster wider involvement.

The Faculty of Architecture at the National University recently organised a product design competition with car tyres as the basic material in an attempt to link environmental conservation with good and radical design.



## Private Sector & CSO's - Art Education and Promotion in Laos

In Vientiane the classical wooden house from Marc Leguay, later known as the Maison de Culture in Ban Naxay and as the MASK Gallery (the name taken from the initials of four Lao well-known painters: May / Anoulom / Sorasinh / Kongpath), was a place for young artists to freely chat, learn, be encouraged, and share ideas and inspiration. Built in the 1930s, and surrounded by palm trees which slowly disappeared, it was situated on an important axis of the capital of Lane Xang, on Nongbone road, the traditional route between the Presidential Palace and That Luang. From 2006 to 2016 under the guidance of Xayprani Chanthalangsy it became an informal arts centre where painters and those in the plastic arts, could work and design independently. In the early 2000's, visiting was a joy, with resident artists offering winks and chuckles as they explained the symbolism of their works. After it was closed in 2017 to make way for a dominant multilevel commercial building, the classic elegant wooden house fell into disrepair and with it, one could conjecture, went one source of free artistic sharing and expression. Several Embassies have been organising cultural events, most notably the prolific French Institute has been organising exhibitions, concerts and events since 1994.

### **Curators and private sector art event organisers are a recent phenomenon:**

Misouda Heangsoukkhoun has been central to creating the Mekong Art Initiative in 2018: The aim was *"To foster appreciation of art and artists in society through high quality exhibitions, performances and trainings. Open the platform through collaborating with international art agencies and organizations and the community to encourage the creation, appreciation, and understanding of the arts."* Curating shows amongst others at Chulalongkorn University in collaboration with Chairat Polmuk (Lecturer Arts Faculty, Chulalongkorn University).

Chanmaly Panyaphone created her own company Sisanchai, collaborating with Helene Ouvrard, who provided consultancy services on various aspects of cultural management.

For their work with young people, it's important to include STELLA. In collaboration with Elevations Laos, they organised the 2018-2019 Exhibition "DEPTHS: OTHERS, LANDS, SELVES", curated by Erin Gleeson. Their continuous art initiatives aim to support and stimulate involvement, and exchange in Laos through annual programming with artists, students and the public.

And finally, 2022 the first "XYZ" show at Parkson drew over 50.000 visitors. To be continued ....



### **Commercial Art Galleries are far and between:**

Lao Gallery was founded in 1985 by Misouda's parents and it was the first art gallery open after the revolution in 1975. Several other private galleries and initiatives showing Lao artists over the years have come and gone to name a few: Treasure Gallery, Vientiane (2004 to 2011, afterwards called Cube Gallery); M Gallery with was established 2008; T'Shop Lai Gallery opened in 1997; the Five Arts Gallery; Eastern Art Gallery by Bounpaul Pothyzan; and Souliya Phoumivong who is a teacher at National Institute of Fine Arts founded the Clay House Studios. In 2008 Catherine O'Brien, an Australian artist and poet opened the I:Cat Gallery, showing many young artists and organising workshops and lectures. Works from Lao artists has been included in the Singapore Biennale; the Asian Art Biennale, Taipei; the Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery, Australia, and the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, to name but a few.

Outside the capital it gets quieter but in Luang Prabang from 2010 till 2014 Project Space organised 16 thematic exhibitions and workshops and is currently constructing a new gallery at the Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden. The LP Film Festival in December has been an fixture on the agenda in December for ten years now. @My Library is very active in organising workshops, exhibitions, and book publications, and MALAO Studios in Luang Prabang is a creative hub for professional artists, film makers and photographers, co-founded by Ka Xiong and Bill Kiphavong.

### **Conclusion.**

Things are changing albeit slowly but limited by staff funding staff training and skills base and conservative politics. This chapter concludes with the views of young people hoping for a creative education. Their words without their names are listed below.

*"Art school in Laos is great in mastering techniques but there is little room for creativity and stimulating practices for thoughts and expression. So, a Laos student can draw perfectly, but they may not know how to use those skills to create."*

*"The struggle for balance between the 'pursuit of a passionate career and making ends' meet (sic) is another factor that young people are contemplating. Moreover, there are the conflicting school of thoughts within the arts world regarding the 'pursuing the highest form of art mastery and expression is the true artist's practice, so disregard the making a living aspect' and the 'one needs*

*to make a living along the way, so merchandising or engaging in entertainment industries are means to the mastery as well'. The art school tends to lean heavily on the mastery side of the profession, which youths have to weigh against their increased responsibility and parents' expectation of their children being able to support themselves after higher studies."*

*"Lacking the full support from parents because it is not clear what jobs will be available after graduation."*

Similarly, most of the women interviewed for this report were not enthusiastic about the Lao teaching in particular the Fine Arts School, they would prefer to have access to arts education that reflects the modern world where they can have access to international artists, and the debate that spurs them to create. In addition to issues such as educational systems and forums for presentations, artistic expression is not guaranteed freedom in Laos and for instance depicting nudity and military personnel is still subject to censorship. Although there are restrictions on works that are perceived as government criticisms, some artists produce works reflecting their awareness of the environmental and social changes accompanying rapid economic growth in recent years.

Overall, several factors adversely affect teaching and learning at the various institutions. These range from insufficient human resource training, through a loose quality assurance system to teaching and learning methods-related challenges. The study found that most of the lecturers do not use diverse teaching methods; they are overwhelmed by a high teacher-student ratio, limited classroom capacities, unavailability of resources and an overloaded curriculum among other challenges. Despite all difficulties, the Arts Education College is doing a great service to Laos as the only institution that trains teachers for the Arts in the country's primary and secondary schools.

## Survey Analysis Recurrent Themes and Issues

As it became soon apparent, we succeeded in contacting many more than the original thirty artists we thought we would reach, and we put in place a survey to be able to get a more general overview of themes and issues women artists are grappling with. In Annex 2 you can find a point-by-point breakdown with percentages to the answers. As we had promised discretion to the surveyed, we keep it general, won't mention specific names. The following text sums up an overview of answers interspersed with comments obtained in direct interviews and meetings.

### **Here are some of the Themes and Issues that keep recurring:**

#### *Married status? (Questions 3 & 4):*

67% single is certainly due to the high percentage of students we surveyed (63%) but from the comments it has become clear that having to take care of a family is high impediment to have enough time to consecrate to your artwork. Especially the older generation mentions sacrificing their own careers to help their husbands or having to take care of families. The younger generations 45 and under seem to find ways to make more time available and organize their lives around their artwork or to choose to live single.

#### *Geography, Ethnicity, Family background? (Questions (5, 6, 7 & 8):*

Although only 38% of surveyed was born in Vientiane, 70% choose it now as their place of work and living, with 26% in Savannakhet. 5% live outside of Laos, but this low representation of the Diaspora is more because of lack of time to dig deeper, and certainly a very interesting subject to explore further and deeper in the future for social as well as aesthetic reasons.

Overall, they identified as Lao loum (88%), with 42% farmers background, 24% government staff, 15% business owners and professionals and only 5% coming from art and culture.

#### *Support of your choice? (Questions 9, 10 & 11):*

70% was supported in their choice by their families, and if they were not 50% cited financial concerns, and only 10% not fit for women. More parents became supportive when it became clear that their daughters could take care of themselves and have a good career.

*Archives? (Question 12):*

81% claims to keep archives of their works, but when we asked for photos of their works for documentation, they were not able to provide more than a few recent pictures.

*Education? (Questions (13 to 27):*

As to question 13 how they identified themselves, please look for details at annex 2. Interesting to notice is that 38% is self-taught or friends, and 50% notes art training at College, BSc or MSc level. 85% has attended workshops in Laos, underlined their importance 94%, and 96% would be interested in attending more. See annex for breakdown on details for questions 18, 19 & 20.

Question 21 concerning studying outside Laos: 20% answered yes, 29% in Asia, 71% in the west.

An overwhelming 97% thinks going to study outside of Laos, attend workshops is very important:

*“It can enhance creativity and imagination to learn abroad where have a good education system, new techniques, and knowledge to develop yourself. Exchange of ideas and acquire new horizons.”*

As to where abroad (Questions 26 & 27), Asia comes up 47% for reasons of accessibility and cost, the west with 53% - *“The Country does not matter but the inspiring people do: Good schools and teachers (17%), Interesting art ideas and styles (43%) Good for my future career (29%).”*

*Place of work? (Question 28):*

Only 33% has her own studio, 42% work wherever they can find place and 25% at the art school.

*Work and career? (Question 29):*

When did you start to produce your first works: as child (30%), high school (25%), art school (31%).

*Do you work on commission? (Question 30):*

Yes (32%), Sometimes (52%)

Why: to make extra money / meet new customers / to find a place to show my artworks.

*How has your art form changed, what initiated those changes? (Question 31, 32, 33, 34 & 35):*

Studies, workshops and natural progression were mentioned as primary reasons to advance, whereas problems holding development back, varied from family or teachers holding them back, to money problems (26%) and social and political issues (22%). Some reasons mentioned: *“high cost of living / covid / cultural differences / language barriers / Ethnic Group Differences / Style differences / social and political issues such as LGBTQ Discrimination”*.

Rarely was discrimination for being woman mentioned, but then again, the women interviewed who have come this far, have very strong personalities, made difficult personal choices to live their lives.

*How do you make your living? (Question 37):*

Only 9% makes their living totally with their artwork, and over 55% has to supplement their income with side jobs or as teachers.

*What is the price range of your work? (Question 38):*

Under 500\$ (57%); from 500\$ to 2.000\$ (27); the category from 5.000\$ to 20.000\$ (15%) is mostly relevant to dance or film producers and only 3 painters obtain these sums.

*How do you see your work progressing? (Questions 39, 40 & 41):*

Artistically 59% need more expertise and workshops; 35% would like more international exposure and travel. Only 28% can sustain themselves financially with their artwork and 19% thinks they will be able to support themselves with their artwork in the future. More workshops and interaction with Lao artists (male and female) as well as Asian and western artists seem important.

Many artists cited a lack of communication amongst each other, on a personal and well as an institutional level, every one in its own bubble.

Mentioned as especially important was the creation and stimulation of a professional local and international art market and exchange with international curators and journalists.

There are no local art critics and culturally even '*positive criticism*' is considered impolite and not as a discourse to a constructive way forward.

*Where and to whom do you sell your work? (Question 42 & 43):*

Professional art galleries scored only 15% ! At Home 38%; Night-market 15%; other Venues 23%.

To friends and family 21%; Lao general public 33%; Expats 11%; Tourists 15%.

Collectors: Lao 4%; Asian 5%; Western 10%; Institutional 1%.

*What do you think is needed to have more sales? (Question 44):*

- 1) Galleries in Laos to show and sell work 13%;
- 2) More serious private collectors 5%;
- 3) A public fund to buy and exhibit art 5%;

- 4) Art Exhibition spaces 9%;
- 5) Multipurpose space: performances / movies / lectures 10%;
- 6) Book publications about Lao art and culture 5%;
- 7) Press articles about Lao art and culture 6%;
- 8) International Press about Lao art culture 3%;
- 9) A national biennial with Lao artists 6%;
- 10) International biennial Lao & international artists 9%;
- 11) More interaction with other Lao artists 4%;
- 12) More interaction with Asian artists 5%;
- 13) More interaction with Western artists 4%;
- 14) More interaction with international curators 2%;
- 15) More international galleries sell outside Laos 6%;
- 16) Show International Biennials and group exhibitions 8%.

*Direct remarks from meetings:*

- *Local market is too small, no (serious) collectors;*
- *Improve art courses at NIFA and government institutions to meet international standards;*
- *Fix government regulations to actively support artists;*
- *Broader outreach campaigns to Lao public to interest them in art and culture;*
- *International outreach to inform curators, biennials, press and collectors of Lao art.*

*What's the position of you as woman in family, school, as teacher, fellow students? (Question 45):*

62% answered that they were supported and 18% said I don't care: "I know what I want".

*Who, what have been factors that have held you back? (Question 46):*

- 1) Family and friends 2%;
- 2) No money to buy materials, living expenses 29%;
- 3) Quality of educational system 15%;
- 4) In general art, culture in Laos not taken seriously 29%;
- 5) Discrimination because I'm a woman 4%;
- 6) Not enough time because have to take care family 12%;
- 7) Not enough time because have to work for income 9%.

*Who and what have been factors that have supported you? (Question 47):*

- 1) Family and friends 38%;
- 2) Enough financial freedom 10%;
- 3) Good educational system and teachers 14%;
- 4) Possibility to exchange with other Lao students and artists 10%;
- 5) Possibility travel, exchange with international students, artists 22%;
- 6) My Gallery 2%;
- 7) My Collectors 2%;
- 8) My Producers 2%.

*Is Lao political situation, system important for your art and themes? (Question 48):*

- 1) Yes 26%
- 2) Somewhat 36%
- 3) No 9%
- 4) Not interested/outside of my area of art 7%
- 5) Limits what I can do 4%
- 6) makes me careful 11%
- 7) Inspires me 7%

*Direct remarks from meetings:*

- *There are still limitations and no artistic freedom;*
- *I learned to use it and work around it to answer my objectives;*
- *We cannot show some realities like drugs, prostitution, child labour, corruption because we are afraid that will cause trouble.*

*Is being a woman advantage or disadvantage on your career? (Question 49):*

Yes 57%; Somewhat 23%; No 12%; I don't care, I know what I want 8%.

*Anything you would like to mention? (Question 50):*

- 1- Need to spread art and culture more widely in local communities in Laos
- 2- More funding to exchange internationally, artworks, dance and film productions
- 3- equal opportunities for women: teachers and students in art schools, women in art exhibitions still represented by less than 20%

- 4- Need to create more venues in Laos to show performances and artworks, that are accessible and free of charge
- 5- Need more art galleries that can support, show, and sell our work
- 6- Need more international press and publications
- 7- Artists need to learn English so they can participate in international events, workshops and communicate with artists from other countries
- 8- Need a national art magazine with good critical writing, exhibition reviews, news about scholarship programs in Laos and abroad
- 9 - Need more critical dialogue and communication between artists and different disciplines
- 10- We don't communicate with each other, everyone is in his own little corner, is this jealousy, fear of competition ?
- 11- Great to pay attention to the artists from the diaspora, because for most their Lao identity is important in their work as for artists from Lao, but they feel discouraged and discriminated



## Conclusions and recommendations for next phase:

1) Lao has shown itself to be a nation of great creativity, but that has been overlooked in favour of economic development, a quaint attachment to tradition in a rapidly changing world, and the perceived need to maintain political control. The following points were made repeatedly during the interviews. They indicate a powerful need for Lao to underwrite its artistic heritage and take its place in the world as a creative nation.

2) Lao could benefit from greater pride in its creative sector, encouraging donors to invest in this sector more than they do, and modelling what is needed, by sponsoring events and increasing budget allocation to arts education.

3) There is undoubtedly a great need for better and broader arts education. Including long and short-term courses, national as well as international exchange programs. Education in the creative arts, including writing, need to be unfettered by vested interests whether political or economic.

4) The participants in the survey expressed a need for venues and programs that enable them to meet other artists, while learning, using as a model western summer camps or festivals. In addition, short three-days workshops focussed on practical, theoretical, historical subjects would inform their art and their sense of belonging.

5) Another recurring theme is the lack of communication between artists themselves. While that is desirable, artists themselves have a responsibility to make it happen. To quote Xayprani Chanthalangsy from her interview: “.... artists must, and should also know how to take charge of themselves, because this dynamic can only come from themselves.”

6) As it's deemed culturally (or is it politically?) inappropriate to express opinions or positive criticism - how is one to grow and develop new ideas, style, and technique in an environment of fear or limitation? Copying is not Art - Art is informed by emotions, concerns, feelings of responsibility and initiative.

7) Creating a more dynamic art market is difficult, when affluent Lao only care about competitive conspicuous consumption and tourists are looking for traditional cultural products.

8) Until now there is no convenient publicly accessible Contemporary Art Centre. This reveals a lack of cohesion and pride in the art world, and a lack of understanding by the Government of the emotional/ instinctive nature of life and the progressive skills and foresight on artists. In the same way Lao and international tourists cannot visit one site to see historical and new developments in art or, where international curators can learn, see and select artists to participate in International Biennials and exhibitions.

9) Developing an international Biennial in Laos would be a great way to open the door and to truly open communication between artists, curators, collectors and museums. Festivals, small or big, local or international are a great way to develop tourism, and exchange ideas, but the myriad complications with government permits are mostly impossible to surmount, putting administrative quasi paranoid obstacles in the way of Laos being regarded as an important centre of Asian art. The loss in tourism, reputational and investment funds cannot be underestimated.

10) International collaboration and exchange programs are costly, but initiatives have already made an impression and provided the spark that might ignite a flame in young creative Lao. We hope they will continue, and more organisations will follow their example.

11) Many artists expressed that in an art world still largely dominated by men, they look for equal opportunities and want to collaborate with men on equal footing. They look for collaboration, equality, and exchange to mutually benefit and grow artistically.

12) Disappointingly few NGO's, Development Agencies, or international Governments, seem to consider art and culture as important for development. It is agreed that there are many urgent challenges Laos faces, many of which have been created by lack of foresight or generosity - but a country that cares not for its heritage, its art and culture, cares not for its soul.

# Ecology and Art or the Ecology of Art

*Written by: Melody Kemp, November 2022*

A friend arrived last week full of enthusiasm for an exhibition she had seen in Brisbane, Australia. The impressions poured from her like a water from a mountain stream after the rains. She showed me photos of red fibres hanging like spider's silk from the ceiling inviting people to get tangled in the morass or arguments about climate change, to submerge themselves in the dark and loud shouts of denial that rose from the floor like webs of despair. The female Asian artist, she told me, had mesmerised her, as well as injected fear and realism, as she both entered and surveyed the various exhibits. Art is confronting. For her, the focus on climate change, and the environment were revelations. Those of us who have lived in Asia for any time know that the environment is central to most women's work. The environment is what we live in. We experience day to day. The rains, the growling skies, the buzzing, gnawing insect infestations, the barren treeless fields. The empty fishing nets. The Mekong turning blue. So while this report is about women in the arts in Lao, it also highlights the need to consider centrality of ecology, and the broader environment, as the inspiration, foreground and background to their work.

## **GAIA**

Many years ago, Astro-chemist and philosopher James Lovelock saw past the trend towards scientific reductionism, and in doing so ignored the interconnectedness of all things on the planet. Named after the ancient Greek Goddess Gaia, the spirit of the earth, Lovelock concluded, maybe fruitlessly in light of today's continuing destruction of forests and wider ecosystems, that we need the Earth, but she doesn't need us. In short, Lovelock proposed that all living organisms interact with their surroundings on Earth to form a mutually supportive and self-regulating system that helps maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life.

That the spirit of the Earth was deigned to be female was an amazing ideational leap forward in the late sixties. The fact that Lovelock's work was eventually accepted, despite the inevitable cynics, speaks for emerging recognition of the Earth's ongoing nurturance in the face of greed and destruction. It is hardly surprising that the Lao women artists presented here, use nature and the Earth as their guiding light, their inspiration. The broad and somewhat simplistic definition of ecology is that 'everything is related everything else.' Rain feeds the trees that provides and home

for birds, that eat and control insects, that turn over the soil and introduce oxygen that feeds bacteria and enables soil porosity, absorption of water and nutrients to plants, which gives bountiful foods to eat and so it goes. And gives us silk, cotton, stone and metal for sculpture and construction, colour pigments as well as the intrinsic origins of design. Despite attempts to define us as dominant entities, we are part of and dependent on nature. The women interviewed for this report have long realised this. Their varied forms of art reflect our ecology, meditate on our place in nature, use materials taken from nature, or design of components like leaves or animals.

I recall a woman in southern Lao wearing a skirt with an intriguing design. What looked like giraffes were parading around the hem. In rural Laos? Not Africa? Intrigued, I asked her about it. She responded: *"I saw them on Thai TV program and loved them. So, I made them."*

So yes, African giraffes found their way to Lao, woven in silk. But more of that soon.

We're encouraged to fear nature, warned against tree climbing, spiders, snakes and sea creatures as children, but not traffic, airborne toxins or excessive heat. But is this fear of the environment warranted and should it be heftier than that directed at human activity? Artists think not!

Many consider nature to be a threat to material life or merely a commodity to be consumed.

Others, like the women in this report are more likely to be dismayed or sad at the tree's demise as it represents a loss of complex habitat and possible carbon sequestration.

Some artists and writers have taken up forest bathing, the Japanese led movement that's encourages lingering in the womb of nature, seeing it as a source of nurturance and freedom from the worries of urban life. Research had shown the complexity of trees and their ability to communicate, just as elephants can recognise themselves in mirrors and hear with their feet.

Incrementally nature has revealed herself to us, and increasingly, is warning us. But will we listen?

### **So, the questions:**

Is the artist central to ecology or peripheral - watching from the edges recording and reaching, realising that she herself is a product of a social ecology, with its learning, relationships, values, experiences and skills. Its giving and receiving, its growth and regressions.

In the case of arts, nature is communion of medium and spirit, a draft of joy and source of inspiration, or in the case of Lao, into what could be the original form of software to control the weaving of complex brocades. Maybe at this juncture we can introduce a heroine of nature.



### **Madame Kommaly Chantavong**

The US war on Vietnam and its fiery overflow into Laos, came close to destroying a lot of Lao's cultural heritage. Traumatic death followed repeated bombing and poisoning of the soil with defoliants. One of the areas most effected by bombing was the province of Xieng Khouang. *Home to Mulberries Silk.*

Kommaly rescued silk weaving from an ignominious end after war ended. The new male dominated government drafted a new direction away from royal hierarchies and into new industrial directions. Art and skilled crafts did not feature. They were in the government's eye, linked to bourgeoisie existence. This was about to change. After a 600 kms barefooted walk from her home village, whose proximity to the Vietnamese border eventually led to its destruction, 13-year-old Kommaly arrived in Vientiane. Other than badly infected feet, the only things she brought with her were a selection of heirloom silk articles woven by her family and neighbours.

After training, and then working as a nurse, Kommaly realised that her future was informed by history. That lay in the silk she had carried. She and her family turned to fostering organic silk and as a consequence, not only has she become one of the global leaders in silk innovation, founding an international enterprise dedicated to supporting both the life of women silk weavers, every step of the way, and to be dedicated to the organic process. The soft-spoken Kommaly Chantavong whose love for silk weaving revived and developed the ancient art of silk weaving, was able to support the lives and dignity for thousands of poor, traumatised Lao.

It all started in her home with a weaving group of ten women, whom she called the "*Phontong Weavers*" which grew to become *Phontong Handicraft Cooperative* - a network of Lao artisans now spanning thirty-five villages and connecting over 450 skilled weavers.

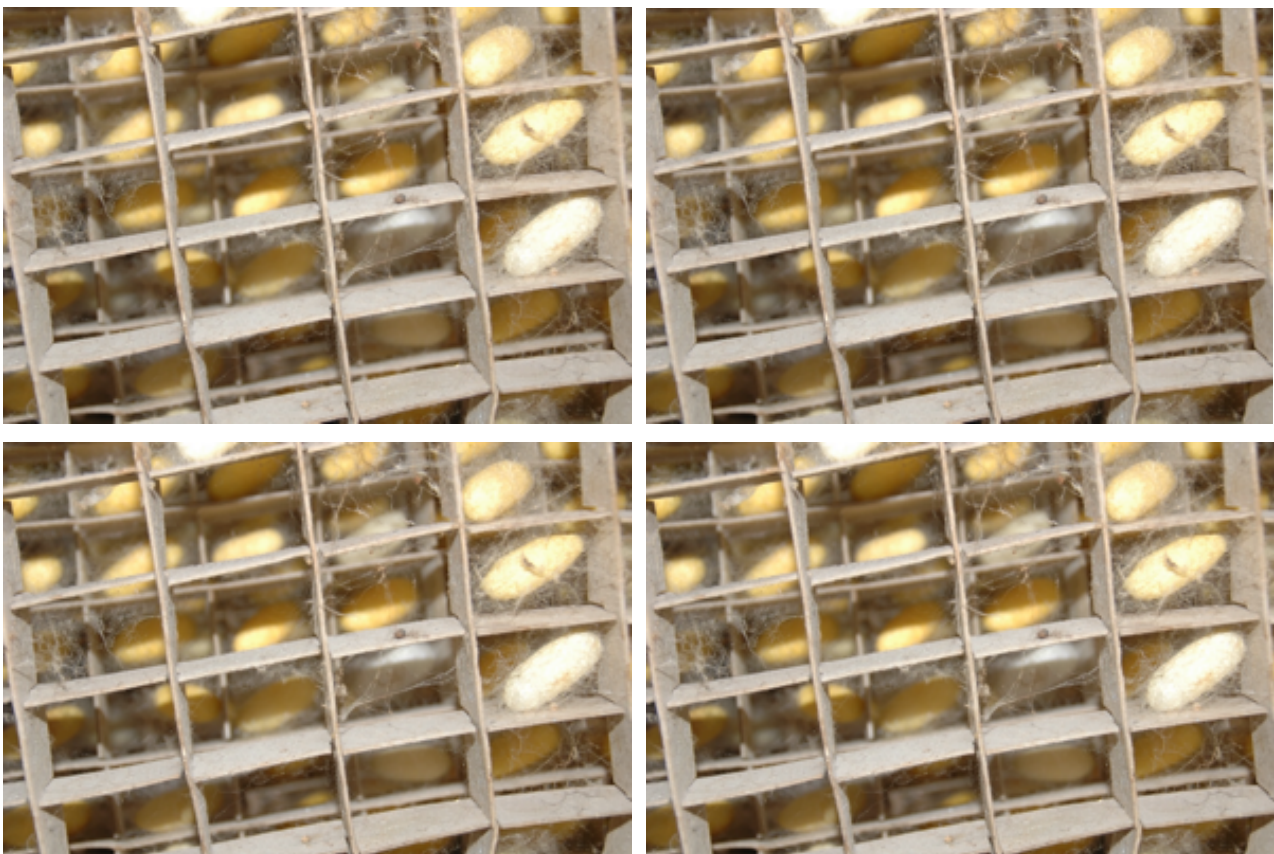
In cooperation with Japan and other silk producing nations she has bred silkworms that produce resilient and long fibres, established dye gardens and recorded the recipes for several hundred

shades of colour. While internationally silk brocade was traditionally the domain of the wealthy international elite, in Lao it continues to be both a marker of culture rather than wealth and status, but rather a determinant of equality, as well a source of pride and income.

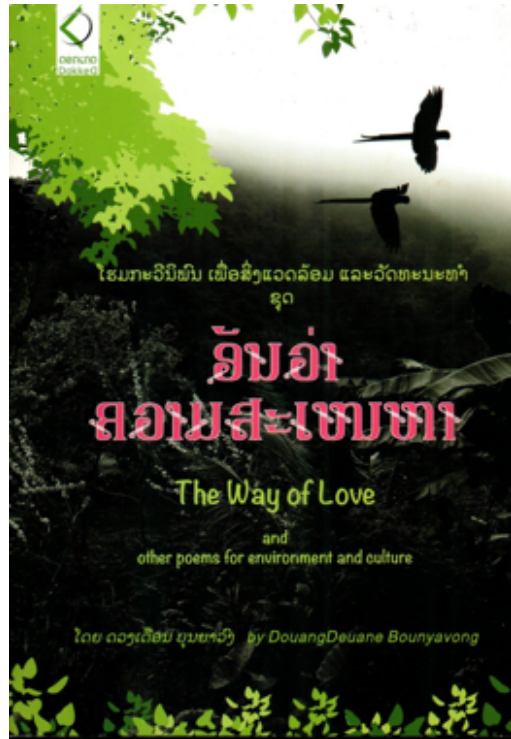
For her hard work and innovation to ensure the perpetuation of silk and its caregiving nature, Madame Kommaly was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2015. The RMAF board of trustees recognized her *“fearless, indomitable spirit to revive and develop the ancient Laotian (sic) art of silk weaving, creating livelihoods for thousands of poor, war-displaced Laotians (sic), and thus preserving the dignity of women and her nation’s priceless silken cultural treasure.”*

In 1990 she established Camacrafts, a non-profit project to promote and sell traditional Lao and ethnic Hmong handicrafts. Camacrafts works with hundreds of women in over twenty villages. Three years later, she created Mulberries, a social enterprise that initiates income-generating projects around traditional arts and crafts, including the production of mulberry tea, wine, and soap. An international enterprise she shares her knowledge and experience to all who seek it. That is intrinsic to her generosity.

The rest of this chapter is dedicated to an outline of those who were interviewed and responded.







### Oudomphone Bounyavong

Who's nickname is Phou, is a graphic and conceptual artist who along with working at the Art School produces works at home. Supported in her endeavours by her family, she admits that the political and social scene in Lao are not particularly favourable to non-traditional or non-conformist artists. Like many of the others interviewed for this report, she would like the Lao art scene to be open to global influences and ideas, and in particular to those who challenge current environmental risk. She ranks the environment as one of the major motivators in her creative life.



Photographs Oudomphone Bounyavong: 2005 / 2005 / 2007



### **Dorn Bouttasing**

If you entertain any doubts about the younger generation being active in furthering cultural and environmental concerns, spending time with Dorn will put those concerns to rest. Her innovative mud brick structures should inform anyone of her interests, passions, and aesthetics

A film maker, designer, educator and activist, Dorn's cultural background as Khmu places her focus on indigenous knowledge and culture as it relates to environmental integrity. Economic development has brought considerable habitat degradation and amalgamation of all the ethnic groups under the nationality *Lao* with scant recognition given to their beliefs, practices and culturally determined regard for nature and the environment that has sustained them.

Dorn is the founder and director of Green Community Volunteers, the only local group in Laos founded and run by Khmu women.

To ensure the relevance of her creative approach, Dorn has experience in research, surveys, training, film director and scriptwriter as well as documentary-making. She provides encouragement and coaching to the young in remote villages and those sharing her indigenous background, drawing upon cultural traditions and indigenous knowledge to formulate responses to concerns about environmental change and its consequences.



She created the Forum Theatre as a way for indigenous people to express concerns about the effects of environmental change in their lives, and to collaborate in finding creative solutions; She hosts camping and cultural activities in remaining forests in order to revive traditional cultural practices like story-telling, and to reinforce the value of indigenous ecological knowledge. On the practical side, she has founded community-managed food forests to counter food security losses in the areas where huge development projects have destroyed or subsumed nature and arable land. The lists of activities and achievements cannot easily be recreated here, a multi-talented woman, Dorn is a leading light in the youth for nature movement.



*Top photo: "Recall a memory"*

*Bottom photo: "Root of life"*

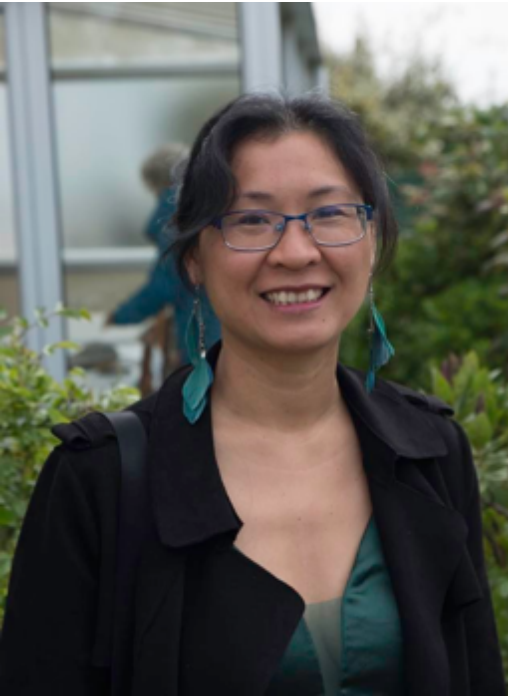


### **Chay Khamsonne**

Chay has the advantage of mixed parenthood, gaining her the privilege of access to external influences through art. While she learned weaving in Luang Prabang, she professes her real-life ambition is to be an accomplished artist, photographer, video recordist and graphic designer. She uses art as the medium by which to educate the young, being informed by her experience in arts immersion for high school students in Brisbane Australia. She leads activity-based program so practice skills and communication through imagery.

Chay concurs that the arts in Laos are still underdeveloped, and that arts education is shallow and inconsequential, while increasingly important. That leads to her to admit to wanting to learn more about ecology. At the same time, she admits that she cannot devote as much time to art as she would like, as she bears family and economic responsibilities.

She regrets that Laos does not pay more attention to the significance of arts and how it relates to culture and the modern dilemmas such as the destruction of nature and complex ecologies and the long terms consequences of short-term thinking.



### **Thi-Von Muong-Hane**

Thi-Von, was born and grew up in France and like many other women artists interviewed for this study, feels confined or constricted by the formal or accepted Lao arts scene, and longs to be able to widely collaborate and learn from others. She has that in common with some of the others interviewed, in fact the repetition should be taken as a call to action, to improve and increase arts education, to support galleries and provide opportunities for artists to network through subsidised travel. More importantly to lift any overt or covert ideational censorship and allow free artistic expression. Exploring Thi-Von's archives would be like a journey into wonder. She has made films, and videos, written articles about arts and cinema, followed the pathways of traditional art as well modern drawings and conceptual art.

Like others here she had mixed family response to her artistic ambitions, their concern based on the potentially poor economic outcomes. Which raised her awareness of how progressive arts education is lacking in Lao. She confesses to be self-taught, as she didn't have the money to enrol in classes, had little faith in the teachers, or simply didn't know classes were being held. She admits to having little or no faith in Lao based teaching. She also concedes being depressed by endless negative cycles of trying to work in a small market which yields insufficient income needed to travel and get a broader arts education. Thi-Von wants to make a difference in both art and writing as her commitment to improve the overall social and political picture in Lao. However, she admits that lack of money, racism in the wider arts community, along with what she defines as narrow-minded sexism in the arts community have held her back.





### **Selena Sourignosack**

Selena or Vieng, as she likes to be known, was educated, and worked as an architect in the USA for 24 years before returning to Laos. Starting her career at a male dominated building design and construction scene in Texas, this experience reinforced her impression that it is important to have experience outside Laos as for women in particular, the scene is constricting. After returning to live and work in Laos for nearly twenty years now, she is proud of having made contribution in the field of architecture and construction in her homeland. Growing up in a military family, Vieng received little encouragement to chase a career in creative industries. Her parents held on to the old stereotypes of what was suitable for women.

Having grown up abroad, she has never attended any courses in Lao but would like to see Laos take a more contemporary and professional approach to education. Her current objectives are to go to Japan and the US for additional training and, as she told me in a discussion several years ago, to make her mark on Lao architecture and underline the importance of ecological and environmental factors.

Having had the opportunity to work on some upscale projects in the US, she is ever more convinced that Laos needs to stay grounded and appreciate its nature and environment. When attending lectures about green or environmentally friendly architecture, she realized that it is not a new concept to her as most traditional homes in Laos were built out of materials from their immediate environment and they were built to suit the climate and lifestyle. While designs

dialogues and objectives have advanced greatly in the world, Vieng is concerned that in Laos, as illustrated by the huge homes for the rich amid the destruction of vital peri-urban wetlands, that is not the case.

Always self-sufficient, which shines through in her apparent self-confidence, she does not allow her gender to hold her back in a still male dominated industry, particularly in view of the progress made in design architecture and arts over the past 40 years.

Fortunately, she continues to inspire herself and is perpetually busy. She regrets that women's talents and role in the field of architecture is still not truly appreciated but the demands for her services as a western trained architect in this corner of the world and her design philosophy continue to ground and sustain her.



### **Vissa Chanthaphasouk**

One of the youngest in the women's and arts group interviewed for this project, and the product of mixed ethnic parentage, Vissa offers a contrast to the older participants, in that her family were supportive themselves being involved in arts and culture along with commercial business. She recounts they were both understanding and wanting to actively support her. Her example indicates that she is the product of generational change. That being said, she admits that being a woman in Laos is not advantageous despite progress internationally.

Learning from family friends and completing formal education, led Vissa to complete a Master's degree in art. To maintain her motivation, she tries to attend local workshops which she considers to be moderately important to her professional development. She noted that it's hard to access short courses: either they are not well advertised, or inaccessible in terms of location; or they concerned issues of fringe importance. Vissa suggested she would rather participate in activities that impart practical skills and techniques, teach history of arts and how we got to this place in the life of the planet, but she is also clear she would prefer the classes to be led by overseas teachers. Vissa has done some studies in Europe and from that concludes that it is very important for the Lao creative community to venture outside for inspiration, as in general, the international venues present tide turning ideas in themselves; the teaching style is non didactic, and the range of ideas presents creative challenges.

Vissa considers her personal life and beliefs inform her art. She is keen to represent social and political issues, and how they interact or effect the environment. The major issue is making a living, and how that holds back what and how she can represent her ideas. The necessity to be marketable outshining conceptual considerations.

Her final comments focussed on the need for greater activity, support and learning for artist. Government support and grants head the list of To Dos. Let's hope someone will listen.

### **Conclusion.**

This introductory report only skims the surface of what is an important facet of life usually overlooked by mainstream aid and development agencies. Lovelock would appreciate the concern and the spirit from which these women's ideas and motivation spring. It's clear that concern for the ecology and environment extends well into and inform artistic social ecology in Lao, in this case fostered and nurtured by women.

# Lao Women Redefining Film

Written by: Yoxa Dahm, October 2022

Laos has come a long way since its days of propaganda films of the 1970s. Only in the last decade has the sleepy, mild-mannered country dipped its toes into the vast and unexplored world of non-propaganda filmmaking in Laos. Something of a challenge for a country operated under strict communist rule which imposes political and cultural constraints that impact the country's national cinema offerings.

Before the revolution of 1975, there existed twelve cinemas in Vientiane, all equipped with 35 projectors and showing movies from Hong Kong, Beijing, Hollywood, Bollywood, etc. Today, there are two multiplexes in Vientiane showing big production films from China, Thailand, and the west. With relatively lavish ticket prices, movie-going hardly lends itself as a regular pastime to the impoverished population at large.

After more than thirty years of being non-existent, the film world in Laos was sparked by a privately funded film that was co-directed by Sakchai Deenand and Anousone Sirisackda, Thai and Lao, respectively. The script for *Good Morning, Luang Prabang* (2008) underwent considerable scrutiny and revisions by the Ministry of Culture before gaining the government's approval. Even then, the filming and editing of the movie was chaperoned by a government official to ensure Laos was being properly represented and no controversial content was included. As the first commercial feature film shot in Laos, it premiered in Vientiane Capital and was released in Thailand. The feel-good, romantic drama showcases scenic destinations, the natural beauty of Laos, and the kindness of its people, attracting Thai tourists to Luang Prabang. Recognizing this as a potential source of income for the country, the government gradually allowed the film industry in Laos to grow.

A key player to paving the way for commercial film production in Laos, Anousone Sirisackda had founded Lao Art Media in 2000, the country's first production company. The company is supported by non-governmental organizations and so able to produce films that are not endorsed by the state. It is his determined efforts that would eventually give the distinguished Mattie Do the support she needed to produce her films.

At a pivotal point, two film festivals were founded within about one year of each other. In 2009, the Vientiane International Film Festival (VIFF), a bi-annual event, was established by a group of

German film-buffs. The VIFF and its short film festival, the Mini Vientianale, screen a wide range of Lao and international films every year. The Luang Prabang Film Festival (LPFF) was launched in 2010. In a city where there are no functioning movie theatres, it is a highly anticipated annual event that showcases films of all genres from ASEAN member countries. The first screening of the LPFF drew a crowd of around 1400 people, far exceeding the organizers' expectations. In 2013, the LPFF created the Lao Filmmakers Fund and has since disbursed over \$250,000 USD to more than 27 projects. It is the only consistent initiative that grants funding to support film projects in Laos

Another ground-breaking initiative started brewing around 2010 by the non-profit learning centre, At My Library (founded in Luang Prabang in 2002). With the help of Dutch freelance photographer and filmmaker, Adri Berger, some highly curious staff and patrons of At My Library had their first introduction to the basics of filmmaking. After nearly a decade of trial and error, popular, free, and well-organized six-week basic filmmaking class is offered annually. Lao youth are given a voice and chance to share their story, educate others while learning perseverance and organizational skills.

All these initiatives have been fundamental in the revival of Lao cinema spurring a sudden boom of interest in movie making in Laos. Since then, films directed by Lao filmmakers include: *At The Horizon* (2011, Anysay Keola's crime thriller), *Chanthaly* (2012, Mattie Do's debut horror film), *Huk Aum Lum* (2013, Phanumad Disattha's musical comedy), *Vientiane In Love* (2015, co-directed by Keola, Disattha, Xaisongkham Induangchanthy, and Vannaphone Sitthirath), *Dearest Sister* (2016, Mattie Do), *The Long Walk* (2019, Mattie Do), *Goodbye Mr. Wong* (2020, Kiye Simon Luang). This list of directors has only two women: Mattie Do and Vannaphone Sitthirath.

For decades, the global film industry has been dominated by men. Since the Academy Awards were handed out in 1929, only three female directors have been awarded the coveted Best Director Oscar (Kathryn Bigelow in 2009, Chloé Zhao in 2021, and Jane Campion in 2022). Filmmaking, like other artistic endeavours, is not easy to make a living from, let alone become recognized in. The women acknowledged here are leading the way in art of Lao cinematography, whether they be directors, producers, screenwriters, actresses, editors, or make-up artists. Between the Lao diaspora dispersed across continents from a war-torn country and the sisters they left behind whose families also struggled to rebuild, Lao women have many diverse stories to tell and in their own creative ways.



## A Spotlight on Female Voices in Film

### *Boulom*

#### *souk Svadphaiphane*



Boulomsouk Svadphaiphane was born in Vientiane in 1974 and arrived in France when she was just two years old. She is an author, director, photographer, and painter. Since her debut into the art world, Boulomsouk has been a prolific presence and recognized as a jack-of-all trades artist who draws strength and inspiration from her personal story.

In 2004, Boulomsouk started up her own audiovisual company, Boulimik Productions, which produced and directed video clips, short films, and documentaries. With the production company, she was a producer, screenwriter, and director for several years. Feature films that followed include: “CHAIR” (2017), “Stockholm” (2016), “Ma Famille t’adore déjà” (in theaters 2016), “Chinese, premiere langue” (2013), “Hadès” (2021). Boulomsouk works on and has been recognized for an assortment of short films, documentaries, and television series.

### *Chansamai Phanouvong*



Chansamai Phanouvong was born in Xiengkhouang Province in Northeastern Laos. She currently resides in Vientiane and is an active photographer, videographer, documentary filmmaker, producer, and youth trainer. She is self-taught in the arts and has refined her knowledge through various workshops, seminars, and through jobs with organizations that valued and utilized her abilities as a filmmaker.

Chansamai began her film career in 2013 when she became technical staff at the Dok Lao Centre under the Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC) in Vientiane. Dok Lao promotes media production for education and sustainable development. Under their tutelage for more than four years, Chansamai was trained in filmmaking and production, while assisting with administrative work such as organizing workshops, film festivals, and training other young artists.

Chansamai makes films with a purpose, bringing to light social and political issues. These are important to the development of her work. Examples include documentation of the Lao Women's National Rugby Team on their journey to the Incheon Asian Games in 2014. A short film in 2019 (*I Felt Happy*) of a Lao mother discussing her son's autism and her fight for acceptance of the disorder in Laos, bringing awareness to the stigma of autistic individuals as being "stupid" or "possessed". Other notable documentary shorts by Chansamai include *The Mine Documentary* (2020) which highlights traditional Katu weavers and their use of natural raw materials and their harmonious and environmentally sustainable way of living. And "BoTen-BoPiad" produced for the anthology *Stories from the Train* (2020), is a tale of the salt factory in Boten that was founded in 1975 and is forced to relocate in order to make room for the new Laos-China Railway.

### ***Dorn (Namthipkesone) Bouttasing***



Dorn Bouttasing was born in Xieng Khouang Province in 1983. She is the founder and director of Green Community Volunteers, is a part time consultant for Running Reel, a media production services company, and works as a freelance consultant on community development and environmental projects.

She is a storyteller, photographer, and documentary filmmaker.

Dorn completed a bachelor's degree in Business Administration in 2006 in Vientiane. In 2016, she enrolled in an intensive English program at Temple University in Philadelphia, USA. As part of her humanitarian career, she participated in several human rights and environmental workshops and conferences over the years.

With funding from a modest Oxfam grant and an Indiegogo campaign, Dorn managed to write, direct, and produce the advocacy short film, *Let's Love* in 2019. The love story follows a young woman in a remote village in Laos as she struggles to come to terms with being LGBTQIA+.

It is the first film of its kind made in the Lao context. In 2020, *Let's Love* was selected for streaming on INDIEflix, a platform for independent films. Both this film and the Khmu-language film, *A Boat in the Road* (2021) received support from the Luang Prabang Film Festival which encourages works about ethnic minorities, women, and other underrepresented groups.

Dorn's passion for social issues propels her to share her knowledge and experiences through storytelling and film work, opening doors and inspiring those in marginalized groups to create their own initiatives and improve livelihoods.

## **Mattie Thi Do**



Recognized as the first and only Lao female feature film director, Mattie Do is a trailblazer in the world of cinema for the little-known country of Laos. Born in Los Angeles, USA in 1981 to immigrant parents, Mattie moved with her father back to Laos in 2010 when he retired. She currently resides in Vientiane and is a self-taught, multi-award-winning feature film director and producer.

Mattie was originally trained and is a skilled make-up artist. She worked on several European and American film productions. In

2006, she studied ballet for four years - first in Rome, then in Salt Lake City. Her former employment was as a ballet instructor, an experience which has seeped into her films.

In Vientiane, Mattie became a consultant to Lao Art Media. She worked with the Lao Ministry of Culture to create an infrastructure for film production and make a framework to manage the inflexible and tricky censorship imposed by the country. Initially a reluctant filmmaker, Mattie accidentally stumbled into the role when the ministry beseeched her to help attract attention to the Lao film industry. Two years later, Mattie made her directorial debut with the horror film *Chantaly* (2012). It was filmed, written, and directed all in Laos. It is the first Lao film to be screened at major film festivals such as the 2013 Fantastic Fest in Austin Texas, USA. As a result of the success of *Chanthaly* at film festivals, Mattie was selected for participation with the Cannes' La Fabrique des Cinémas du Monde, Toronto International Film Festival's Directors Talent Lab, Berlinale Talents, and Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival's Fantastic Film School. Riding the adrenaline of success, Mattie followed up *Chanthaly* with *Dearest Sister* (2016), which also premiered at Fantastic Fest and subsequently screened at the London Film Festival and the Sitges Festival in Spain, where it received a Special Jury mention. Remarkably, it was selected as Laos' first official submission ever to be considered for an Oscar in the category of the Best Foreign Language film at the 90th Academy Awards. In November of the same year, Mattie was listed in Fortune Magazine's column, "The World's Most Powerful Women".

Mattie's third feature film and most acclaimed work to date, *A Long Walk* (2019), is a supernatural, sci-fi, time traveling, thriller. It premiered at the Giornate degli Autori in Venice and was awarded Best Director at Sitges - Catalanian International Film Festival. Mattie also garnered the Best International Director award at Lusca Fantastic Film Fest in Puerto Rico.

Mattie has settled into the horror genre, finding it a successful approach to engage the Lao audience. Through her films, she cunningly weaves sharp social commentary on gender politics,

superstition, class divide, and family dynamics. Primarily casting women in the trilogy of her first films, Mattie focuses on the roles of women in their home lives, in their surrounding community, and in foreign society, respectively.

Making feature films in a third world country with minimal infrastructure, strict censorship, no resources, and a very limited budget could easily turn any filmmaker away. But Mattie persisted and allowed the challenges to fuel her creativity and innovation. Despite the constraints, she took advantage of the artistic freedom from preconceived notions that a country in its filmmaking infancy allowed. Mattie has been quoted saying, *“However, the benefits of working in a new environment like Laos without a pre-existing structure is that everything I make is new. Because there aren’t any locked expectations about what a Lao film should be, I have the freedom to create something completely unique that hasn’t existed before.”* In 2021, Mattie won the German Independence Honorary Tribute Award at the Oldenburg Film Festival. She is currently working on her next film, *Melody* and continues to define the cinematic style that is Laos.

### ***Mitpasa Sitthackpanya***



Born in Laos in 1995, Mitpasa Sitthackpanya is a freelance filmmaker, content creator, journalist, and radio DJ in Vientiane. She studied Mass Media at the National University of Laos and is currently the Media Production Coordinator at CRI-FM93, a media and news company. Very passionate about making short films since 2013, she has been recognized for her work which brings attention to socio-political issues in Lao culture. In 2015, Mitpasa published *The Conscious-Lao* on

YouTube, a short movie about everyday decisions and the fine line between right and wrong.

In 2017 Mitpasa was selected to participate in a film leaders incubator program (ASEAN-ROK Film Leaders Incubator: FLY) for aspiring filmmakers from ASEAN countries and South Korea. Since then, she has directed *Dancing Style* (2021), which was supported by the Luang Prabang Film Festival and VOICE for the LPFF’s short film program Many Voices, One Laos, as it gave representation to the LGBTI+ context in Laos. Mitpasa’s latest work, *The Blanket* (2022) won the runner-up prize of RWI ASIA PACIFIC AWARD 2022 at the Bali International Short Film Festival (Minikino) and was an award nominee of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute Asia Pacific at MRW. *The Blanket* is a short film conveying the upheaval caused by the migration of household members as a necessary measure to improve the family’s economic situation.

### ***Nini Phonesavanh Vilivong***



Nini Vilivong is a Vientiane-born entrepreneur and naturally talented actress known for *Goodbye Mr. Wong* (2020), a full feature film directed by Kiyé Simon Luang that was shot in Laos and France. Word on the street is that Nini has an upcoming role with Kiyé Simon Luang, as he has intentions to shoot another film in Laos.

### ***Thi-Von Muong-Hane***



Thi-Von Muong-Hane was born in 1978 in Avignon, France. She is a screenwriter, director, producer, director of art cinema, writer, and art critic. Her formative years in France brought out her love of art and was thus pursued with honours in 1996 (Literature High School Diploma with Fine Arts Option) and Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne in 2005 (Master Degree in Contemporary Art History). Continuing to enhance her artistic development, she completed courses in screenwriting, principally in 2014 and 2021 and continues to avail herself of workshops and seminars. In 2009, Thi-Von co-founded Morning Song Production, the first animation studio in Laos. As an active member of the Lao film community, she has curated the Short Film Program for the first and second editions of the Luang Prabang International Film Festival in 2011 and 2012. In 2013, she was a member of the jury of the 3rd edition of the Vientiane Film Festival. She is often invited to speak at film and art related events in Laos. When asked what the important issues for her work and artistic development are, the champion of the Lao arts replied, *“To make a difference in the world through art and writings to make life better.”* Though she resides just outside of Paris, Thi-Von can just as easily be found in Vientiane.

### ***Wravong Prachanh (Noknoy)***



Wravong Prachanh is a filmmaker, illustrator, and animator known for directing the short fiction love story, *A Friend’s Request* (2021) which was screened at Vientiane’s LanXang Shorts Film Festival and S-Express Laos 2022 in Vietnam. Also *49 Hours Left*, an animated short which was supported by the Lao Filmmaker’s Fund.



## **Vannaphone Sitthirath**



Vannaphone Sitthirath, was born and raised in Vientiane in 1978. She works in Vientiane as a filmmaker, media consultant, freelance journalist, and is co-founder of Lao New Wave Cinema Productions. Her formal education was completed in Australia. In 1999, she studied at the Queensland School of Film and TV Production in Brisbane, Australia. In 2008, she was awarded a scholarship to pursue a Master’s degree in Journalism and Mass Communication at Griffith University in Brisbane.

Vannaphone’s commitment to supporting filmmaking in Laos manifested with the founding of Lao New Wave Cinema Productions in 2011. It has been a driving force to developing socially responsible media in Laos with an “aim to change the face of the Lao movie industry” [LNWCP Facebook page]. With this new production company, Vannaphone produced her first feature film, *At the Horizon*. It came to be recognized as the first thriller drama of Laos and was screened at festivals worldwide. Vannaphone had her directorial debut in 2015 with an anthology film called *Vientiane in Love*. Other projects quickly followed including the short documentary, *Those Below* (producer 2015), and award-winning live-action film, *Raising a Beast* (producer 2018), *Expiration Date* (producer 2019), and *The Red Mekong*.

As part of an educational outreach program established by the Luang Prabang Film Festival in 2021, Vannaphone, along with Anysay Keola, were instructors for a workshop webinar that has been made public on Vimeo. In 2022 Vannaphone was one of the recipients of the Alumni Innovation Grants from the Laos Australia Institute for her project, ‘Sign for the Future’ which will produce interactive Lao sign language videos available online for deaf children in Laos. Over the years, she has demonstrated a strong commitment to the art of filmmaking in Laos and focuses on developing socially responsible media coverage in Laos. Vannaphone comments that her art form has changed “*through times, friends, society, studies, and issues that bother*” her.

## Lao Women in Performing Arts since 1975

Written by: Helene Ouvrard, November 2022

Goddesses, virtuous heroines or heavenly half-woman half-bird creatures known as *kinnaris*, have been impersonated by Lao women for centuries, bringing to life the richness of Lao legends and lore. In the 14th century, Chao Fa Gnum, first sovereign of the Lan Xang kingdom and considered as the founding father of Laos, played a key role in the development of performing arts. Through his marriage with the Khmer princess Nang Keokenya, Buddhism was introduced into the country alongside Khmer court dance and traditional Indian epics such as the *Ramayana*. At a time when only men were allowed to play female characters on stage in Japan or England, high-born female ballet dancers were performing alongside their male counterparts in *phralak phralam*, the Lao adaptation of the classic *Ramayana* epic, at Fa Gnum's court in Luang Prabang.

Since then, *phralak phralam* has permeated through popular art forms and is now ubiquitous, with some of its most famous segments performed at Lao traditional festivals or major events. Lao women also feature prominently as performers of traditional dance styles, such as *fon* or specific ethnic and folk dances. *Mor lam*, a unique combination of singing, improvised storytelling and dance, widely considered as Laos' popular entertainment by excellence, has also proved to be a terrain of predilection for women to showcase their wit while jousting with their male counterparts on stage.

Following the Pathet Lao's accession to power in 1975, the new regime attempted to revive traditional performing art forms as a tool to convey its values and vision of Lao cultural heritage. However, without new repertoires being developed, female performers kept portraying characters conveying traditional ideals of virtue and beauty.

The opening of Laos to the world, initiated at the turn of the 21st century, has been accelerating over the past decade, bringing about rapid and significant economic and social change. Although Lao women still bear the weight of social expectations and responsibility as homemakers, they are increasingly taking on new roles beyond those established by tradition. This evolution is reflected in the world of performing arts. The influence of cultural trends from neighbouring Asian countries and Western culture has seeped in, exposing Lao performers to new art forms and allowing them to explore new styles. The Lao art scene is becoming a terrain of experimentation where Eastern

and Western influences, as well as tradition and the contemporary intertwine, allowing performing art forms to become more diverse and complex.

In that context, female performers have been taking on more prominent creative roles that were until now dominated by men. Although still a minority, female artists are becoming playwrights, directors, choreographers, introducing new sensibilities and sense of aesthetics and therefore contributing to reformulate the traditional codes and norms of performance. By redefining the way in which the female body is presented and interacts on stage and by bringing different narratives in dance performances and plays, Lao female artists are spearheading change and new practices.

Establishing oneself as an artist remains a difficult path in Laos, as it is still not considered as a viable career and the arts still remain largely undervalued. For women, living as a performer implies facing additional hurdles, since practicing their art can put them at odds with the social conventions attached to their gender. In spite of these challenges, a new generation of female performers is making its mark and contributing to the dynamism of Laos' burgeoning art scene. The three female artists featured here are multihyphenates, performers, creators and cultural entrepreneurs, paving the way for the next generation of Lao female performers.

## **NOUTNAPHA SOYDALA**



*"DrawDanse 2021" Duet with Marie Do - Photo by Ole Khamchanla*



When she started learning Lao traditional dance at the tender age of six, it was the beginning of a lifelong infatuation with dance for Noutnapha Soydala. Honing her skills while attending school, she showed early promise, winning dance contests held at her college. While in high school, at a time when Laos was opening to new musical genres, she discovered hip hop and joined Lao Bang Fai, Laos' first dance group dedicated to the genre.

Her encounter with French-Lao dancer Olé Khamchanla was a revelation, as he introduced her to the world of contemporary dance during a series of workshops he held in Vientiane. Recognizing her talent, he invited her to tour with his dance company *A'Corps* in France following a four-month residency. Both have maintained a fruitful artistic collaboration ever since, notably as part of *Fan Mae Khong*, Laos' sole festival dedicated to contemporary dance.

In 2013, with already a solid experience under her belt and not yet 25 years old, she co-founded her own dance company, *Fanglao*, with fellow dancer Ounla Phaoudom, which to this day remains the sole contemporary dance company in Laos. In addition to the *Fang Mae Khong festival*, they run *Black Box*, a regular programme of dance performances throughout the year as well as dance classes at their own studio.

Eager to develop her knowledge of diverse dance genres, she has participated in numerous workshops in Southeast Asia and beyond over the years, learning new styles such as locking or contact improvisation. Her multiple collaborations with dancers from all horizons have also nourished her experience as a dancer and enabled her to constantly refine her art.

In 2017, she took her first steps as a choreographer with her first solo creation "*Kip*". The term refers to flower petals in the Lao language and is also the name of a hand gesture in traditional Lao dance. The piece, imbued with a contemporary feel, showcases her sensibility and deep attachment to her culture.

In the same year she choreographed "*Phuying*" (Woman), in which she performed with fellow female dancers, employing both traditional Lao and hip hop dance styles to convey the reality of women in Laos today. Experimenting with other art disciplines, she also co-produced the hybrid shows "*Toy*" with the Khao Niew Theater Company and "*DrawDance*" with French painter Marie-Do-Hyman Boneu. Through her creations and performances, she is pushing boundaries and presenting a contemporary image of Lao women by liberating the female body on stage, allowing it to be seen and interact with others, which would have been unthinkable in Laos a few years ago. In 2019, she took part in an art residency at the prestigious Cité Internationale des Arts in France, further establishing her as Laos' leading female contemporary dancer and choreographer. A

trailblazer in her field, she is paving the way for a new generation of young performers, inspiring them to pursue dance as a career. A few but determined promising young dancers are already following in her footsteps at *Fanglao*, performing her choreographies. Nout has also stepped into maybe her most important role yet, that of transmitting her art. In addition to teaching traditional and contemporary dance in Vientiane, she has also strived to reach out beyond the capital, offering workshops and classes as part of Fanglao's dance festivals held in Thakhek and Nakai in Khammouane province.

Although she acknowledges that life as a female dancer is not an easy path, her collaborations with fellow Lao performers contribute to develop a vibrant, albeit small, dance scene.

### THIANE KHAMVONGSA



*"Midmonsoon Night's Dream", 2016*

A scion of the Viravong family, a prominent lineage of Lao writers and artists, whose most famous member, her grandfather Maha Sila Viravong, is considered as the country's most significant modern writer, Thiane Khamvongsa is making her mark in the world of performing arts, perpetuating her family's cultural legacy.

Born and raised in France, she pursued her love for theater in parallel to her studies in marketing and social sciences. She learnt the ropes at the prestigious theater and drama schools *Cours Florent* and *Cours Simon* in Paris, which many prominent French actors have attended.

In 2010 she founded her own theater company, *Les Bêtes sur la Lune* (Beasts on the Moon), through which she expresses her multiple talents as a writer, director and scenographer. Her first theatrical creation, “*Au revoir Pays*”, established her talent as a playwright, earning her the Paris Young Talent Prize. That same year, she directed the play, in which she also starred as the mother of a Lao family forced into exile as their country is torn by civil war.

Following her move to Laos in 2013, she developed new plays in collaboration with young Lao dancers from *Fanglao Dance Company* and performers from the *Khao Niew Theater Company*. Strongly inspired by their approach to their art, at the crossroads of Lao culture and modernity, reflecting her own mixed influences between Western sensibility and Asian references, she started incorporating elements of their respective worlds into her shows. She invited them to perform in her creations, in which dance choreographies, shadow play, puppetry and theater of object accompanied her words. Resolutely playful, her shows also borrow from the world of circus and street performance. Nurturing her creativity through her artistic encounters, she has since invited numerous artists from various backgrounds and nationalities to perform, developing her own theatrical world organically.

Her 2016 play, “*A Midmonsoon’s Night’s Dream*,” pays homage to the beloved Shakespearian classic, transposing its fantasy world into an exotic jungle, as fairies and sprites are transformed into Lao spirits or phis. A compelling storyteller, she spirits away children and adults alike into a dreamworld inhabited by otherworldly creatures and mythical beings. She also reinterprets beloved European children classics, with *The Carnival of the animals*, followed by “*Pinok*”, freely adapted from *Pinnocchio*, and *Alice*, immersing the audience into a fantastical world where objects suddenly come alive and enigmatic creatures gracefully glide across the stage. All her plays sublimate human relations and everyday life by allowing the supernatural to permeate reality. Exploring her Lao heritage, she revisits the country’s rich folklore in a series of shows in collaboration with the *Khao Niew Theater Company*. Using shadow play and puppetry, she brings to life classic tales and beloved characters, such as *Phou Nyeu* and *Na Nyeu*, the mythical ancestral couple still revered in *Luang Prabang* today or the star-crossed lovers *Sithon* and *Manola*. Through her creations, she seeks to establish a genuine emotional connection with the audience and goes to great lengths to ensure her shows are accessible to all, children and adults alike. Her characters thus speak in Lao, English as well as in French, whether they declaim Shakespeare’s words or those of a young Lao prince. Her original theatrical creations and collaborations with fellow artists from various disciplines contribute to promote an art form that remains still largely underdeveloped and to the dynamism of performing arts in Laos.

## MAIKHAM LIVONG



*"Pinocchio", 2012*

Maikham Livong's path to becoming a performer is of the stuff fairytales are made of. Growing up in a remote area of Oudomxay province in Northern Laos, her neighbor's television, the only one available in her village, was her only window to the outside world. Mesmerized by an acrobatics show she watched at age seven, she began practicing in earnest and created impromptu performances for her family and friends. Noticing her passion and athletic abilities, her aunt offered to take her to the capital to audition at the National Circus. Armed with an unwavering dedication, she underwent a harsh training for three years until she became a full-fledged circus artist in 1997. Not shying away from danger and making use of her remarkable flexibility, she specialized in acrobatic acts, gracefully spinning on a trapeze or being held at arm's length while spiraling on roller skates. As full-time member of the circus, she embarked on tours, performing throughout Laos, as far as France.

Her encounter and marriage with fellow performer Latthakhone Insisiengmai were pivotal in her life, as he introduced her to the world of theater. In 2008, she joined his newly created troupe, the Khao Niew Theater Company, along with other circus artists. While still performing with the National Circus, she learnt the art of manipulating the unique puppets created by the troupe using found objects. In 2004, she starred in Khao Niew's first play, *"The Boar Family"*, in which she simultaneously impersonated the mother boar and performed as a puppeteer. In the 2011 play

*“Broken Dream”*, in which Lao elements and contemporary theater of object meet, she expertly gave life to strange creatures made of coconut husks and traditional Lao fabric.

Over the years, she has honed her acting chops and expanded her range, mirroring Khao Niew’s evolution, as the troupe keeps exploring various performing genres, creating a unique blend of theater of object, puppetry and contemporary theater, with references to circus and street performance. In the company’s successive shows, she easily switches between comedy and drama, showcasing her talent as a versatile performer. In Khao Niew’s unique take on Pinocchio in 2012, she plays an expressive and playful dog, her face brightly painted in reference to the world of clowns and sporting a mime costume. The next year she appears in *“Metamorfoz”*, a poetic contemporary theater play about a village confronted with strange rumors coming from the river announcing unavoidable transformations, a reflection of changes affecting Lao society. In the play, she stars as a stern mother to an exuberant son, delivering a composed performance.

With Khao Niew increasingly establishing itself as Laos’ most prominent and dynamic theater company, she has become increasingly involved in the troupe’s management, contributing to the development of new projects and initiatives, notably the Lao Performing Arts Festival, the only event of its kind in the country.





# Dokked Publishing House

*Written by Oudomphone Bounyavong, November 2022*



## **History and status of Dokked**

In 2002 Dokked design and publishing company limited was established. The company provided editing, graphic design, translation and publishing services under the same roof. The company had the business permission at the Provincial level that is under the guidance of the department of information and culture of the Vientiane office. At that time Douangduane Bounyavong was the director, Dara Viravong Kanlaya was the adviser, Oudomphone Bounyavong was the general manager and graphic designer and Douangkhe Bounyavong was the graphic designer and accountant. The office was in less than 10sqm2 situated in SCC building in Sihom district. In 2007 the company changes its name and the structure to Dokked Publishing house with the permission and working direct under the Publishing depart, Ministry of Information and Culture. It was the first private publishing house that provided the full service in Laos. Over 13 years the main work of Dokked remains same that is publishing, graphic design and layout work with private budgets as well as designing services, editing services and co-publishing with different organisations. Over the years Dokked focused on publishing literature for children and public interes more than 100 tittles, in Lao, English and French language. In 2007 the company, after Dokked became publishing house, it began publishing its own magazine “Lan Kham” the magazine for everyone in the family it was published 4 times years for about 6 consecutive years.

## **Responsibilities and duties of Dokked**

Dokked publishing house values and respects the laws and regulations concerning the publishing industry by the Ministry of Information and Culture. The most important issue for us is copyright. Dokked makes sure the copyright owner receive the recognition and fair payment. We support both writers and illustrators by not only copyright payment but also training. Over the years Dokked has organised numbers of trainings for young writers, young illustrator and even layout work for magazine. We hold a very high standard for our work, for both contents and the look and feel of our products. At Dokked our chef editor Douangdeuane Bounyavong with her over 50 years of writing, 20 years experience of teaching, honorary Phd in Art and Culture from You-Et University, Thailand 2010. SEA Write award 2006, Fukuoka Asian Prize 2005, etc... Douangdeuane who's pen name is "DOKKED" not only take editing work seriously, but the whole process such as the appropriate contents, illustrations and photos. She also gives opinions and guidance to all the writers that approach her at the Dokked office. Along Douangdeuane's side is our honorary editor Dara Viravong Kanlaya "Douangchampa" who is Douangdeuane's older sister. Douangchampa with over sixty years of writing and many awards gives Dokked deep insights of literature and culture work. Especially when the publishing house has a big project to publish important work, such as Maha Sila's work.

Oudomphone Bounyavong (bachelor degree in Fine Arts, Graphic Design major, University of Tasmania, Australia) the graphic designer and layout (2002- current), oldest daughter of Douangdeuane and the late Outhine Bounyavong (1942-2000). She has been working side by side her mother, her aunt Dara and younger sister Douangkhe (2002-2013) since the company was established and through out many life changing events for the last 20 years she remains working (distance) for Dokked with writing (Lankham magazine) translating literature, editing text, provide images and desktop publishing work. The late Douangkhe Bounyavong (1979-2013) the youngest daughter of Douangdeuane and Outhine. She graduated from Deakin University, Victoria, Australia; bachelor of Arts, Media Arts major. Since graduation Douangkhe worked both with publishing and video productions. She took visual narrative course at the University and had continued her project. As a product the book "Sompong and the Five Ducklings" written by Outhine Bounyavong. Douangkhe worked in many projects organised by Dokked publishing house, writers training, photography training, illustration training. She loved working with young talented writers and organised writing contest.

## **Dokked's achievements**

Since the beginning of Dokked establishment our main objective is produce quality books and provide good reads to public. By doing so it's not only published existing master works but also encourage new writers and illustrators by opened a small lending library side by side Dokked book shop. The library provided books after demand, expensive and rare books. The members could request and the library fulfil nearly every request. In the span of over 5 years with over 300 members, Dokked organised the first free training project called “ຂັ້ນໄດແກ້ວ” *the glass steps*, the training focused on writing short story, poem and documentary. Between 2012-13 Dokked had organised many training projects with international organisations to produce young adult literature the project “ຈິນຕະນາການສູ່ການສ້າງຜົນ” *from imagination to fulfilling dreams*. The outcome was a success, 30 stories were published in to two books. Apart from that a new group of young talented enthusiasts was born “ຂຽນໜັງສືລາວ” *Writing Lao scripts*. Many of Dokked's trainees won prizes in illustrated books for children contests nationally and internationally. Apart from that Dokked's books have also won prize such as: “Sompong and the Five Ducklings” won the 5th place in the Picture Book Contest 2004 of JOYO Town, FUKUOKA, Japan. “ອາຖິນ ແຫ່ງພົງໄພ” *The Forest's Charm*, SEA WRITE AWARD 2006. “ຮັກດອກຈິງບອກມາ” SEA WRITE AWARD 2010, “ທ້າວກໍາປ່” outstanding prize from Ministry of Information and Culture 2011, etc. Dokked was honoured to have to opportunity from Daido Foundation to published “The biography of Honda”. From 2007 Dokked received the rights to translate and publish the world's renown literature from Japan “Doraemon”. From 2004-2006 Dokked was the only Lao publisher/bookshop to attend the conference and Bangkok book fair, Thailand. In 2007 Dokked was at Frankfurt International Book Fair, attending workshop and presenting Lao books. In 2018 Dokked attended International Children's Content Rights Fair, ChiangMai, Thailand. Not only wide ranges of books at Dokked bookshop but for over 15 years Dokked provided printed materials for international libraries and university libraries abroad.

## **The inevitable changes**

By the of year 2013, there had been many changes in the company. After the great lost of not only the back bone of the company but the also the member of both Viravong and Bounyavong family, Douangkhe passed away so the did the magazine LanKham and the lending library and the bookshop. Between 2014-2015 the company was in dilemma whether to continue or not. Dokked was rescued by a family's friend/colleague/business partner, Ms. Daravanh Phonekeo. Once again Dokked office moved to a new location and have been down sized but of course not the work



itself. Currently Dokked publishing house is managed by Ms. Phonekeo and Douangdeuane is the chief editor, Oudomphone the graphic designer, Sakouna is office manager, and layout work.



## **Women at Work - Fourteen Solo Portraits:**

- *Pakornkam Bualek*
- *Somthida Chanthabouala*
- *Xayprani Chanthalangsy*
- *Bancha Keomingmeuang*
- *Sone Konphaserth*
- *Xaisavanh Ladbovone*
- *Viengkham Nanthavongdouangsy*
- *Buavone Phommabouth*
- *Phounsouk Samounty*
- *Ole Viravong Scovil*
- *Tcheu Siong*
- *Boulomsouk Svadphaiphane*
- *Nilaka Sisombath*
- *Sengchanh Soukhaseum*

## **Pakornkham Bualek**

*Written by: Misouda Heangsoukkhoun, November 2022*

Pakornkham Bualek (1998) or Nokyung, is a young talented female artist, who graduated with a Bachelor of Visual Communication Design from National Institute of Fine Arts in 2021.

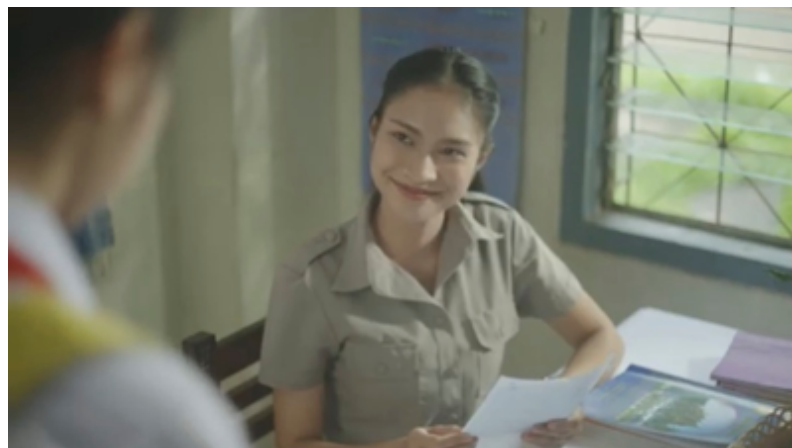
Pakornkham inherited the artistic skills from her mother, Mrs. Nout Phouthavongsa, who is a famous traditional performer. Pakornkham is the third child in the family, and she and her elder sister were able to pursue their artistic careers and follow their mothers' path. However, Pakornkham mentions that her father did not agree with her choice from the beginning, he wanted her to study administration and work with the government.



Pakornkham artistic journey started when she was five years old; as her mother brought her to perform at her school, Pakornkham learned all the performances with her mother. When she graduated from high school, she had two choices for entrances: one the National Institute of Fine Arts (NIFA) and one the administrative school as her father suggested, her final decision was NIFA as she wanted to work in the art and culture.

At that time, NIFA just opened their new department: *Multimedia design*, and Souliya Phoumivong suggested her to study in this department because he saw her hidden talents. Her animation won the best editing at the Vientiane International Film Festival in 2018 and Pakornkham also got many chances to participate in International Art Platforms, in amongst others Singapore, Japan and Thailand.

After graduation she works in the movie industries, as as an MC for the TV show *“Learn Together”*, produced by Clay House Studio; Assistant Director for *“Fly Sand Fly”*, a short movie by Phanumad Disattha; and her latest feature as the main actor in the film *“Shadow”* by Soulasath Saul.



## **Somthida (Seata) Chantabouala**

*Written by Anna Kocheeva, November 2022*

Seata is an artist and a passionate creative and cultural practitioner with a dream of fostering a thriving artist community in Laos and advancing policy-making, which will enhance creative production. She graduated from the National Institute of Fine Arts in Vientiane, majoring in painting. Prior to her graduation, she spent an exchange academic semester at the State University of California in Liberal Arts. Seata's graduation work titled "Life is a Journey" received high acclaim from her alma mater and peer artists alike. After graduating, Seata received a prestigious Fulbright scholarship and spent three years in the USA. During that time, she completed a Master's degree in Arts Management from SUNY Buffalo and interned at art galleries in Buffalo, New York, and Boston. In the course of her Master's study, Seata became aware of the importance of policy-making for supporting artistic communities. She became inspired to create platforms enabling artists to get together and thrive as a community in Laos. She is also interested in promoting policy-making and partnering with state agencies, NGOs, and artists in this process. "I simply want to be like a bridge or a puzzle helping to fill those missing gaps in our culture, it doesn't matter how, but I know that my drive and passion and the supports I have from the community are strong enough for me to pay back to the community" - says Seata.

Creativity was always part of Seata's life, and she imagines herself as both an artist and a cultural manager in the future. She wants to continue to pursue her artistic practice and apply the knowledge she received during her study and traveling to help other artists in Laos. She believes that her life will be an exciting journey shared with many other artists in Laos, a journey that benefits many. Another component of Seata's professional life is her partnership with cultural consultancy and NGOs, researchers, and educators on arts in Laos. For instance, she supports UNESCO projects in Laos and helps visiting researchers in their work. One of the initiatives that Seata is currently contemplating is her own research project on distinguished artists and art education in Laos.

In her free time, Seata likes traveling; she explores local communities on her bicycle, tasting coffee at local coffee shops. She also enjoys craftsmanship, embroidery, and upscaling fabrics. You can find her at various cultural venues across the country, helping her like-minded friends and colleagues with cultural events and initiatives.



## **Xayprani Chanthalangsy**

*Written by: Olivier Leduc Stein, November 2022*



*Portrait of Xayprani Chanthalangsy par Sompaseuth Chounlamany, 2019.*

Born in downtown Vientiane, in a wealthy family, Xayprani studied at the Vientiane High School and graduated in Biology in 1979 at Lao National University, after 10 years as head of French language department at KPL (Lao Press Agency), she was notably a French language teacher. Between 2000 and 2021, she is regularly absent from Laos to follow her husband in his diplomatic missions. However, she will not fail to remain active in Lao artistic life; during this same period, she was in charge of the artistic direction of La Maison de Ban Naxay. Sensitized to culture and art from childhood, despite some reluctance from her parents, she painted family portraits, then nourished by travel, art, became a growing part throughout her personal and professional life. In 2007 she was the co-publisher of "*Peinture Lao Contemporaine*" with NFAI, the only group publication thus far on Contemporary Lao Painting, including five women artists.

## **The adventure of the House of Ban Naxay**

In 2003, the house of the French painter Marc Leguay built in 1952 in Ban Naxay (Vientiane) was restored by a fund from the French Embassy in Laos. In 2006, the City of Vientiane, owner of the place, granted a 10-year lease to a collective of artists who called on Xayprani to ensure the promotion of this new artistic space. Its objective was mainly to promote the younger generation and in particular the emergence of female artists, many of whom come from the National Institute of Fine Arts. Without forgetting established artists and also to highlight a certain pictorial heritage, Xayprani set up a permanent collection of paintings, watercolors and drawings and organized more than thirty exhibitions between 2006 and 2016, as well as meetings and workshops for children. Interested in this place with its history, several embassies have also been at the origin of exhibitions, some of which have presented exclusively Lao or foreign women artists.

### **Lao women artists**

*“Women are aware of the place they can take in art and in particular painting, they can reflect daily life, traditions”.* These women artists were able to draw inspiration from the work of Marc Leguay, saying to themselves that if he had succeeded, that they could also express themselves through art, and why not make a living from it. They realized that this activity could be a real additional income to meet the needs of their families. However, being a woman and an artist remains complicated, because the two *“functions”* are very time-consuming. The Lao woman remains first and foremost, with a few rare exceptions, a mistress of the house: feeding the family comes before art. Thus, it is unfortunate to note that they do not yet know how to promote themselves, move on to the *“marketing phase, to the commercial phase”*, notes Xayprani. They need to find agents, gallery owners who can exhibit them and thus allow them to sell their works. In her measure, with all her heart, as she says, Xayprani strives to put them forward as much as possible. Today, she says, young Laos should be able to study these professions linked to the promotion of art, reach the art. However, in Laos, we have not yet reached this stage of art with a capital ‘A’, she says indignantly. It is difficult to change mentalities.

It is almost impossible to express oneself by going against tradition. Those who try to produce creative works that do not meet the standards, who is going to care? A small number of foreigners, a small part of a certain Lao society, who will buy? how to live? a painful but realistic observation.

So, the artists, out of genre, continue to paint what pleases, what sells, nature, village scenes, ignoring any specific artistic expression. In addition, it is also necessary to be able to provide income for daily life, so the choices are quickly made. So often, there remains the compromise of artistic education, at all levels of schooling, so artists resign themselves to painting to live, not to create or express themselves.



*Xayprani Chanthalangsy, Paintings on silk*

### **Towards a more creative future**

For several years now, we have seen the emergence of a certain number of artists among the young generation who are beginning to be able to make a living with their art, but this is not enough. Female artists need help more than male artists, Xayprani notes, but perhaps even more than help, it's encouragement they need most. The association of Fine Arts could play this role of promotion and mutual assistance of artists in order to encourage the emergence of "*professionalized*" art for women, and men. However, artists must, and should also know how to take charge of themselves, because this dynamic can only come from themselves, she concludes.



**Bancha Keomingmeuang. “An artist who renounces herself to promote her husband's work”.**

*Written by: By Patithin Phetmeuangphan, November 2022*

Bancha was born on May 1st, 1959, in Xebangfai, in Savannakhet, as daughter of Mr. Lin and Mrs. Boubpha. She came to Vientiane in 1970 when there were serious floods in the South, to continue her primary school and in 1974 she completed secondary school and then her uncle introduced her to study at the National Artist School which is today the National Institute of Fine Arts. Mrs. Bancha was one of the students who were in the school’s first quota of women.

In 1977 Bancha was still a student in year 4 when she met Mr. Khamsouk Keomingmeuang, who had just completed a bachelor’s degree from Vietnam, returned to Laos and who became her husband. Marriage between students and teachers was not normally allowed, but the school waived the rule and gave them permission to marry. The couple lived and studied together as artists of drawing and painting. Until today they would like to spend the rest of their lives as artists together.

After school, Bancha got a fund from the United National to study at a pottery household in the decorative painting sector. At the same time, she was pregnant with her second child and there were almost 10 other young mothers in her class so sometimes they called her class “classroom for mothers with a newborn child”. She said studying while pregnant is something very difficult, so she understands that it’s a reason that they don’t allow people to marry during study.

She had a budget of 20 kilos of rice per month and a small amount of money for food. This small fund could support their daily cost because at that time Don Chan beach was a vegetable farm where they could get all what they needed.



After she completed education, in 1982 she was appointed as the deputy of the decorative painting sector at the National Institute of Fine Artists. Her husband, Mr. Khamsouk was the director and the head of Fine Art division of Fine Arts Department under the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism until 1995 when he retired.

Both of them spent all working time serving their artist products in the government's important events in the country and abroad, presenting their products of her husband's imagination flowing through in circles, triangles, squares to waterfall, rivers, elephants, military personnel and also naked women. Bancha also loves painting the natural world and following copies of her favorite international artists, but she loves mostly painting people representing about culture and their traditional living.

Bancha's life has always revolved around art as her parents were pottery makers. Two of her three children have continued the tradition, with one teaching art and the other becoming a painter. But Bancha is not well known as an artist because she spends most of her time supporting her husband and has not been able to let her own artistic talents flourish.



## Sone Khounpasert

Written by: Olivier Leduc Stein, December 2022



*Monotype 2022*

Born in Luang Prabang province, Xieng Ngeun district, from farmer parents. After high school, she studied at the School of Fine Arts of Luang Prabang for 4 years, in the 'Advertising' department, then she joined the National Institute of Fine Arts, in the 'Printing' section for 5 years before she graduated.

### Discovering Art

When Sone joined the School of Fine Arts in Luang Prabang, she did not know yet what art was, nor what art means. This orientation was chosen by default. Coming from a poor family, the choice was made because this course was the cheapest of all offered in Luang Prabang University, and with almost free studies, enough money to eat, she says. During the first two years, "I still hadn't understood what art meant. It was only in the 3rd year that I understood the meaning and also realised that we could sell our drawings" explains Sone. It was also during this 3rd year that she made the decision to continue with these studies and to pass the entrance exam for the National Institute of Fine Arts (NIFA), in Vientiane, in the "Printing" section. Before discovering art

and understanding that it could be a means of personal expression, she had never thought of creating works and being exhibited.

### **Landmark studies**

After graduating from the NIFA, she did not yet feel capable enough to create artworks. Sone wishes to continue her training, to improve herself but also to have more insurance and confidence in herself in the creative process, she says. So, she seized the opportunities that presented, and she went on internships in Vietnam, Thailand, India, Japan, Indonesia and Malaysia to discover other techniques, meet other young artists. With these new skills, Sone feels her growing desire to create and realises the satisfaction and happiness that art gives her. So, she thought about what medium to use to express herself, remembering a process taught to her by a French female artist, Danièle Schiffmann, who had come to a residency at the NIFA.

### **Manage daily life**

If there are a certain number of female students in Laos on the benches of the three art schools in different provinces, few become artists; not because of a lack of skills or creativity, but because it's very often after their studies that women get married, says Sone. So, she continues, family life takes over: we have children, we must take care of them, cook for everyone and maintain the house. And after all that, there is very little time left to indulge in art. As a woman, you are disadvantaged compared to men, notes Sone. The time devoted to creation cannot therefore be the same for women as for men. When you're single, it's different, she says, it's easier to focus on your art. But Sone chose another option to stay in daily contact with art: teaching at the NIFA. However, she moderates, being an art teacher occupies a lot of hours during the week and at the end, we only allow ourselves a little time for our own creation. But Sone was lucky to have an understanding husband who understood the need for his wife to create, to live her art and therefore he took part in the domestic chores and took care of their daughter. He supported me in the process, and sometimes also helped me when I work for the press.

### **Promote artworks**

As other artists - beyond gender - Sone recognises the difficulty of visibility to his work. Few exhibitions are scheduled in Laos to allow a good display of local contemporary creation. What are called mass organisations, which despite all having a 'Women's' department, few of them help or support the promotion of female art, Sone says indignantly, even if rare exhibitions



during the year are organised under their patronage. There are also some embassies or private initiatives that promote young Lao artists. The problem, Sone points out, is that Lao buyers or even tourists want 'traditional' art, fortunately there are also learned Lao people and foreigners



*Monotypes, 2022*

who understand and appreciate contemporary Lao art. In the meantime, to sell, we produce, we re-produce what is be able to sell. If it may seem like a waste of time on detriment of creation, however these sales make it possible to buy materials for other artworks, she concludes.

*Three weeks after the interview with Sone, her husband died accidentally, December 2022.*

## Xaisavanh Ladbovone – A Woman fulfils her dream of success in the arts world

Written by: Patithin Phetmeuangphuan, November 2022



Xaisavanh Lathbovone, now aged 40, developed a love for drawing and painting when she was in primary school and was always the best in her class at painting. Known as Xai, she was born in Xaimongkhoun village in Savannakhet province, where her father taught English at a secondary school and her mother was a farmer. They had six children and three of them took up various types of craft.

Xai makes carvings in wood and marble while her two brothers create pottery Buddha statues. Like most people who work for the government, Xai's parents were keen for their children to also get government jobs, but Xai and her brothers wanted to take a different path in life and make a living from doing something they really enjoyed.

*"I'm not a good student, so I didn't think it made sense for me to do a teaching course like my father. But I felt I would be successful in the arts world because I liked this kind of work."*



In 2000, she attended an arts school in Savannakhet but because of their meagre earnings her parents were unable to support her for long, so she dropped out of school and went to work in Thailand.

After she had saved some money over the course of a few years, she returned home to pursue her passion for painting and in 2012 gained a Diploma in Painting from the Fine Arts School.

She followed this up with a Bachelor Degree in Wood Carving, which she completed in 2016 at the National Institute of Fine Arts in Vientiane. There were just six students in her class and she was the only woman. During her time at the institute, she was able to earn enough to pay her tuition fees because the teachers there often found jobs for her and other students.

After her father died, Xai returned to Savannakhet to live with her mother and worked alone at home, making carvings in wood and stone, which she continues to do today. *“I don’t do anything to promote my work but I have enough clients because people hear about me from their friends”* Her customers bring her wood, marble or stone to make the carving and explain the design they want. *“I don’t have a shop and the amount of work I do depends on the number of orders I get. I mostly make Buddha images. I work alone and my prices run from just 50,000 kip to 5 million kip.”*



The provincial capital of Savannakhet is a big town but is quite small compared to Vientiane, where there are far more people. But Xai says she enjoys working in Savannakhet because she can work and live with her mother. Sometimes she thinks it might be better to work in Vientiane because of what she could learn from other artisans there, who are the most skilled in the country. There are very few people in Savannakhet she can share ideas with or be inspired by.



Xai is talented in many ways and can paint, draw and make pottery, as well as being highly skilled at carving. She plans to open a shop one day or to set up a website to advertise her products, and of course will need people to help her if she is ever able to have a shop of her own. But for now she is content that she is able to spend her days engaged in work she finds deeply satisfying.



## Viengkham Nanthavongdouangsy, “Master Weaver, Fashion Designer”

*Written by: Yoxa Dahm, November 2022*



The beautiful works of Viengkham Nanthavongdouangsy originate from her heritage in Houaphan Province of Northern Laos.

Belonging to the Tai Daeng ethnic group, the art of weaving is deeply instilled in her culture and the animism religion. The different techniques, designs, and materials used can have profound meanings and are unique to different ethnic groups or special occasions in the cycle of life.

Viengkham was born in Bolikhamxay during a time of war. Sadly, war took Viengkham’s father before she was born. Eventually, her family migrated to Vientiane. She learned to weave when she was just six years old. The skill was passed down from her mother who

learned from her mother and as such for many generations. Weaving was a compulsory skill for women - culturally, it determined a woman’s suitability for marriage. But weaving was not enough for Viengkham, she wanted an education. She studied English Literature at Dong Dok University from 1987-1992. By 1999, she self-funded further education and studied business in Sydney, Australia. 2000, she studied fashion design at Kalawin Fashion School in Bangkok, Thailand.

Viengkham is co-owner of a well-known boutique silk shop in Vientiane with her sister, Kongthong. The shop, Phaeng Mai Gallery, is named after their mother, Phaeng, who wove silk fabrics in Sam Neua. It serves as a gallery for exhibiting and selling top quality Lao silk creations from scarves, to dresses, to pillow covers. It is also a workshop where visitors can observe staff producing silk, making natural dyes, and meticulously working at their traditional Lao looms, giving customers a better understanding of the focus and skill that goes into making each piece.

When Phaeng Mai Gallery opened in 1993, the business naturally focused on the domestic market. With their first successful international exhibit in Tokyo in 1993, they found a niche market in Japan. Though their Japanese market remains the strongest, this experience launched the expansion of an overseas market beyond Japan into the US, Korea, Italy, and Singapore. With the success of Phaeng Mai Gallery, Viengkham created her own fashion brand, KHANG, in 2015. The idea behind KHANG is to incorporate contemporary designs and colors into woven textiles that are more suitable for casual, daily wear.

Viengkham is a strong supporter and key mentor to many young people and especially to women. She encourages education amongst her staff, giving them flexibility to study at university while working part time at the shop. Weave and study, and after graduation, they will have more doors open to them. Weaving used to be regarded as a hobby or a skill for the undereducated. But Viengkham has changed this outlook, drawing attention and respect to the story and cultural representation of Laos through weaving - an integration of culture and economy. In the past several years, those who are university educated, even those from government families, have been setting up weaving studios, demonstrating a turning of the tides and giving weaving a boost to high society.

As a pioneer and prominent fashion designer in Laos, Viengkham exhibited designs of Phaeng Mai Gallery in the first annual Lao Fashion Week in 2014. This highly anticipated annual event in Vientiane Capital allows designers and models to showcase and share their favorite designs. Lao Fashion Week was founded by Ms. Pany Saignavongs. Viengkham became an honorary board member and Creative Advisor shortly after the success of the first annual event. With the second annual Lao Fashion Week, Viengkham announced her new brand, KHANG.

Lao Fashion Week is more than a platform for displaying extravagant and creative collections from over 50 designers, it is also a search for new, young talent. Born out of the annual event is a non-profit program called Lao Young Designers Project. With a mission to essentially produce human resources for the Lao fashion industry, Lao Fashion Week has made meaningful collaborations with partners for promotion of budding talent. Highly motivated and talented young men and women aspiring to a career in fashion are given an amazing opportunity. Winners are awarded scholarships to study fashion and design at various fashion academies. First place is generally a spot in an intensive 6-month course at ESMOD, a well-known private fashion school in Paris. Other partner academies include the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore, the London College of Fashion and Design in Vietnam, the Fashion Institute of The Philippines in Manila, and leading fashion houses in Bangkok such as Eggamon and Pitnapat. Subsequently, students return home with a wider view and knowledge of fashion, helping to expand the interest and market in Laos by creating their own fashion labels and becoming rising stars in the fashion industry.

Currently, Viengkham is mentor to students in textiles (Miss Usavady Saisnith) and fashion (Miss Livanna Meimei, Miss Manivone Vansavath, Mr. Phonepaserd Sengmanivong, Mr. William Chanthavee, and Mr. Khampoun Saengpakay). They too will pass on their knowledge and mentorship to the generations to come. As such, Viengkham believes that “This young generation will drive the Lao textile and Lao fashion industries to a higher level”.



2019





2018



2017



2019

**Buavone Phommabouth - Retired art teacher enjoys her life as a painter**

*Written by: Patithin Phetmeuangphuan, November 2022*



Fifty years ago when it was not so easy for people in Laos to attend school, many children didn't get a decent education because they left school at an early age. This was especially the case for girls, because schools were often a long distance away and many parents didn't see the value of giving their daughters a formal education. Before Laos achieved full independence in 1975, one of Laos' most talented artists, Mrs. Buavone, was lucky enough to attend a private secondary school but after she had been there only 18 months the school closed. However, she learnt that the Institute of Fine Arts was seeking students and also had funding available.



*"I wasn't very talented, but I enjoyed learning. I had to work harder than the other pupils to catch up and finally completed my secondary school education in 1979. In 1978 the government changed the system so that it took four years to earn a diploma," Ms. Buavone recalled.*

She then got a job at a finance school but a year later became an art teacher in the Department of Graphic Arts. After two years she became head of the department and continued teaching until 2002 when she embarked on studies for a bachelor degree in art. In 2007, she graduated with a bachelor degree in visual arts from the National Institute of Fine Arts in Vientiane.

*"My family wasn't keen on me taking a degree because I was earning a decent salary in my job, but at the time I enjoyed studying more than teaching,"*



*Painting with Lao-Thai pottery pattern of Xieng village*



After completing her bachelor's degree, she wanted to do a master's degree in Thailand to gain more experience as an artist, but the school asked her to continue teaching as there was only one woman teacher in the department and they maintained that she was too old to start another degree course. But she got her wish and in 2012 completed research in art and culture at the Department of Art and Design at Khon Kaen University in Thailand.

She was then inspired to go even further, and later graduated with a doctorate degree from the same department. She said Khon Kaen University was one of the top six universities in Thailand. When she completed her master's degree, it was ranked fourth best and had risen to second best by the time she finished her doctorate.

While she was taking the PhD programme, Ms. Buavone focused on answering four questions: *"What am I here for, who I am, what am I doing, and what should I concentrate on?"* During her studies, she was also careful to stay in good health by remaining active and eating a healthy diet.

Today she is busy and loves what she does, especially teaching. She acts as a parent to her students and tries to pass on to them everything she has learnt. *"The one thing I love more than teaching is painting. It makes me feel relaxed and I enjoy it so much because sometimes being a good teacher can be quite stressful. Like other people, sometimes the work is boring and sometimes it's fun,"* she says.

*"When I feel the pressure of work or have problems with colleagues or my family, painting calms me and I always feel better and able to think more clearly after I've been drawing or painting."*

She spends most of her time teaching because she is keen to help her students and give them as much support as possible to flourish and develop their talents. She achieved recognition for her artistic endeavours when she won an award in a Lao-Austrian painting competition in 2003.

Ms. Buavone also contributed to an HIV prevention campaign and volunteered to paint pictures to convey messages about ways to stay safe from AIDS and how to use condoms.

Today she continues to paint and sells her creations at the night market in Vientiane. One of her top selling paintings depicts a pregnant woman, who was Siddhartha Gautama's mother.

*"I'm happy with my life and enjoy the fact that I'm able to spend so much time painting. I feel relaxed and enjoy the creative life of an artist."*



## Phounsouk (Pik) Samounty

Written by: Olivier Leduc Stein, November 2022



Born in Vientiane, into a family of civil servants, after high school graduation, Pik entered the Institute of Fine Arts in the Design department. Now, she is 25 years and working as freelance drawing, and illustration artist.

### **A childhood expression**

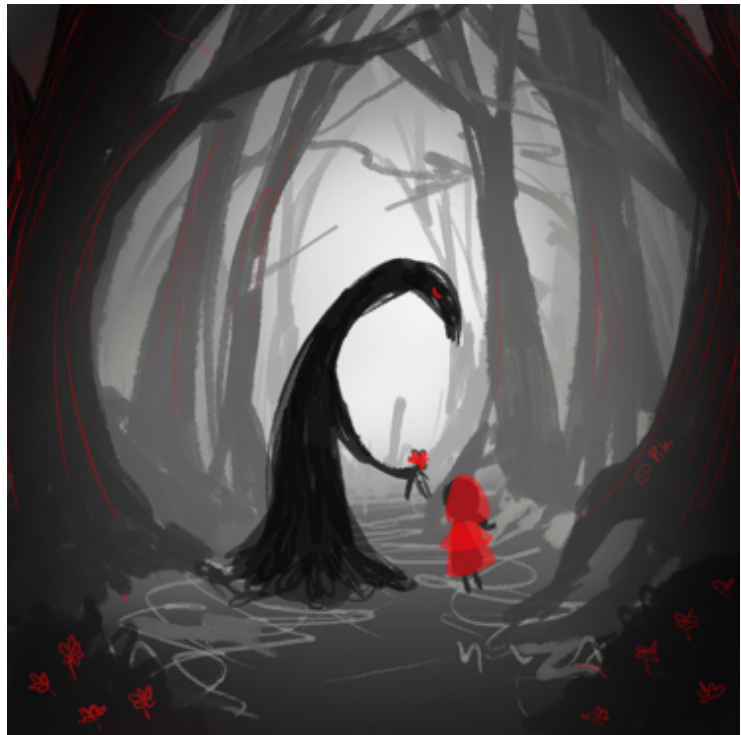
It was her primary school teacher who noticed Pik's underlying talent for drawing. When she was a little girl, she already liked to draw, but she was also very shy. Pik explains that she understood readily that drawing could be a way for her to express herself. And so, she began to observe her environment to put it down on paper. Finishing her high school years, like many teenagers, she didn't really know which direction to go to, then she *"remembered"* her aptitude for drawing, although she never really stopped drawing over these years. Thus, she made the decision to pass the competition to enter the National Institute of Fine Arts, Graphic Design department.

## Inspiration in daily live

To express herself, very quickly, Pik discovered the line of caricature. As a student, she pursued this direction, *“when I meet a person in the street who reminds me of something, then I am inspired by it for a drawing, an illustration... but always transcribed under a parodic or caricatural line”*, she specifies. And so, she found her very colorful style, between whimsical realism and manga, whether for her professional activity as a book illustrator for children or teenagers or for her own drawings to feed a universe that she created, and which feeds her projects.



*Drawing 'Joylada project against women harassment on the internet'*



*'Little Red Hood'*

## Beyond gender

To the question of gender, Pik responds clearly: for her, *“a designer is two eyes and a hand, every individual, man, woman, or other, must be able - everywhere - to express themselves through drawing”*. Nevertheless, she ponders and specifies: *“when I can, if the subject allows me, yes I integrate my drawings of 'feminist' messages, in my own way, in particular to show that: yes, this or that (whether positive or not), women can do it too !”* And her , or her points of view, have never disadvantaged her, neither favored her; nor did she ever felt discriminated against as a woman.

### Technician or artist

At the young age of 25 years, Pik does not yet consider herself an artist, *“for the moment she states - I see my work as a designer-illustrator more as a profession than an art”*, and continues: *“I still feel too young to claim myself an artist”*. Although she can make a living from her talent, she sais that she asks her clients often what type of drawing they want? what style they prefer? And to meet their needs, she makes a sketch or a storyboard on the computer. Only rarely does she use paper and pencil.

### Emancipating genders

If in the Lao countryside, a boy who weaves is looked at awkwardly, a woman cannot paint the frescoes in the temples, it's a pity, she sais, women also have their view of Lao culture, but traditions, religions and beliefs often prohibit access, she laments. So, *“we, women, we still have the non-sacred areas as a space for expression and creation, and this still gives us a large choice”* she concludes.



*Boy in black and white - Inspiration draft for a friend's story about ghosts and spirit world*

**Olé Viravong Scovill, Artist, painter, photographer, performance artist, installation artworks**

Written by: Yoxa Dahm, November 2022



One can find Olé Viravong Scovill dancing with brush in hand as she paints in her home studio in the Central Valley region of California. Driven by strong emotions and a yearning outlet to communicate to others a perspective on culture and environment, Olé manifests her happiness, aspirations, and life struggles through art expression. Art is her own personal therapy: *“Art is like meditation for me and helps me to process my thinking about life and people.”*

Born in 1977 in Vientiane Capital to a professional photographer father and an amateur artist mother, Olé loved to paint and draw at the age of six. She attended a Chinese primary school and Vientiane High School. Latent parental inspiration and her passion for art eventually led her to study at Mahasarakham University in Thailand, where she graduated in 2000 with a BA in Visual Arts. Though she managed to sell her earlier work to a handful of people, the art scene in Laos was an unsupported, slowly progressing arena.

Olé moved to Fresno, California in 2004. Very prolific in creating her art, the move opened up opportunities to showcase her work in several galleries in California and New York. In 2008, Olé started showcasing in group exhibitions in Fresno at the Chris Sorensen Studio: *“Pink”* and *“Nude”*; the Love Song Gallery: *“Hippy”*; and on Long Beach: *“By My Better Fly”*. One of her first solo exhibitions in Fresno was at the 2010 annual Rogue Performance Festival, where her artwork was also featured as the festival’s promotional poster. She also had some of her earliest solo shows at the gallery, Studio 74, where she is still a regular fixture. The painting which Olé is most proud of and her most widely viewed artwork is *“Shut Up, Bitch 2009”*. This piece was included in the *“A Book About Death”* project of MOMA in New York. She has since had many exhibitions - in several locations in California, in Florida, and overseas in Italy, Indonesia, Thailand, and of course, Laos. In 2013, Olé returned to her native country, bringing her passion for art back to Laos. There, she worked tirelessly for nearly five years to accelerate recognition and support of the arts in Laos,



and has been influential to budding artists. In Vientiane, Olé participated in a group exhibition at M Gallery: *“Mosaic: A Lao Art Collective”*, as well as holding a solo exhibition at Icat Gallery: *“My World My Style My Inspiration II”*.

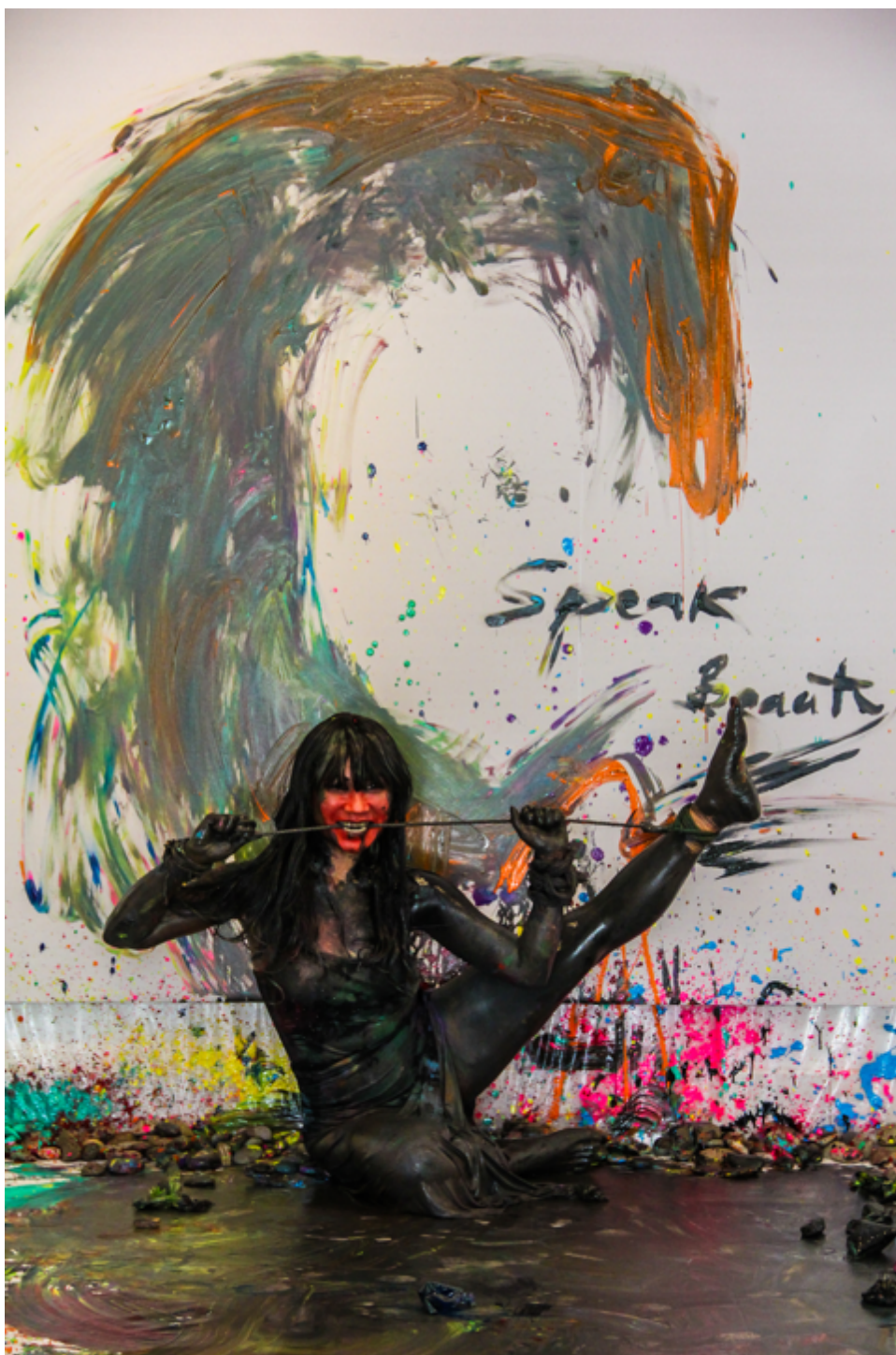
Olé’s biggest artistic influence is Frida Kahlo. After a visit to Kahlo’s home in Mexico City, Olé was immensely moved by the Mexican painter’s art. After a debilitating bus accident that caused her lifelong medical problems, Kahlo painted through her suffering. And seeing Kahlo’s art gave Olé the confidence to explore the dark side of her own art. Olé’s work is heavily impacted by her earlier life experiences in Laos. She found the suppression of expression stifling and conflicting with her own desire to speak out. Societal expectations and female cultural roles placing women in a box troubled Olé and is quite palpable in her art. And so, her work is very intense and expressive with many depictions of women in disfiguring and sometimes compromising images. Erotic, exotic, and perhaps uncomfortable for some, but these are her intentions. Olé wants to get people talking about uncomfortable topics and the “ugly parts” so they can better understand and work through them. Her work is very expressive, colorful, and focuses on female perspectives.



*“Shut Up Bitch #2”, 2014*



Olé's artwork is primarily acrylic paintings, but of late her style has naturally evolved to include new media, like photograph performance, installation, and live performance art. Through her creations, Olé is inspiring others to display their truth and voice their thoughts. In this way, she pushes the boundaries of tolerance. The goal for her art is to be useful to the next generation, especially to help women focus and be confident about what they want.



*"Speak Beauty", Performance*

***Tcheu Siong – “The Spirits Guide the Scissors”***

*Written by: Rik Gadella, Erin Gleeson, Michèle-Baj Strobel, August 2022*

Tcheu Siong (1968) widowed in 2022, was married to a shaman, Phasao Lao, and they have had ten children, of whom five still living. Among themselves, they always speak Hmong, around her area, everyone is White Hmong (Hmoob dawb). All her family came from a village, about two hours by bus north from Luang Prabang, but in 1996 they had to leave the mountains and come to live in town.

Tcheu is a self-taught artist with a prolific textile practice in hand stitched embroidery and reverse appliqué. While such techniques have been integral to Hmong culture for centuries, Tcheu’s compositions and iconography depart from Hmong traditions of geometric abstraction, favouring organic and bold figurative motifs. While differentiated, her works retain Hmong designs’ symbolic function to express identity and culture through a visual language within an oral culture. Tcheu’s process involves both receiving images in her dreams as well as creating her own designs in order to design and plot the infinite characters populating the Hmong spirit world. While at times her compositions narrate specific oral histories, at other times Tcheu welcomes multiple readings of her work. In the artist giving presence to the unseen, she in turn gives agency to the active and complex role of spirits in everyday life, such as those for fertility or good health, to those who invoke punishment for harming the land, to elder spirits who train adolescent ones how to govern fairly.



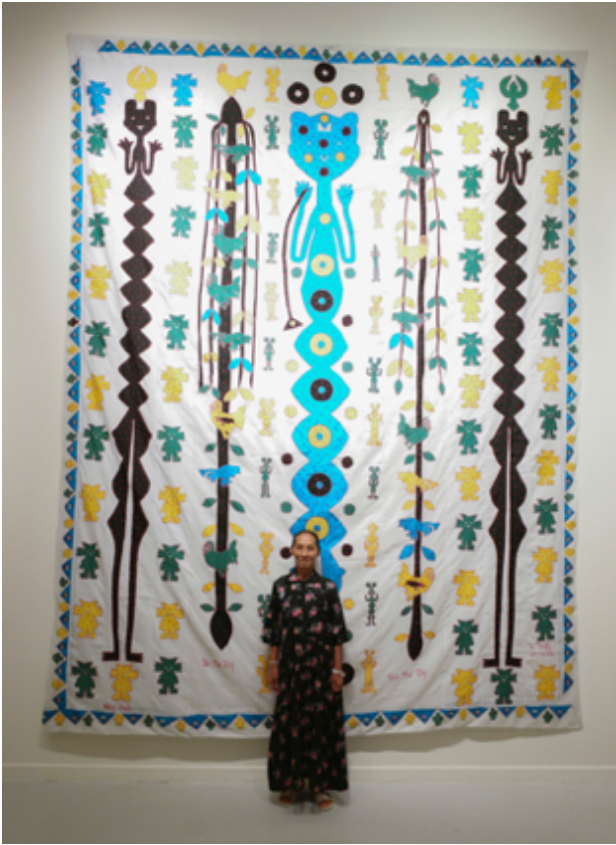
*Tcheu Siong, “3 Tug tiv thaiv Hmong 2 / Three Hmong Protectors 2”, 2017*

Favouring large scales works up to four by five meters Tcheu Siong says that the characters in her works come from dreams and visions, and it is these zones between consciousness and dreaming that these cut-out figures develop. Dreams are the path to this other world, a world which one obeys because it elucidates. What sort of metamorphosis occurs thus from the connections between a woman, her imagination, her world, her childhood, her demons and her aspirations. Isn't it the purpose of artistic creation to weave these connections ? One sees a constant back and forth between dreams, myths, and images. Among these three things operate constant exchange and creative association. The art of Tcheu Siong, steeped in these close relationships, which are also expressed in other ways, like Siong's, stories, mourning chants, sends one back to a world where the lines blur between the living and the spirits, and make an echo.

Is it possible that dream-stories, fragments of myth and Siong's can fuel the transformation of physical elements, the figures, the cut-out shapes, that are appliquéd onto the fabric? What sort of metamorphosis occurs thus from the connections between a woman, her imagination, her world, her childhood, her demons and her aspirations. She says: *"Now my husband has died I feel alone and would like to fly to another country to visit and discover more of the world"*.

In 2010 she had her first exhibition at Project Space Gallery in Luang Prabang and afterwards has been invited to important exhibitions such as amongst others: the Singapore Biennial (2016); APT9 at the Queensland Art Gallery (2018); "Elevations Laos", I:Cat Gallery, Vientiane (2018); the Asian Art Biennial, Taipei (2019); the 13th Gwangju Biennial South Korea (2021); and is currently part of a group show at the Dowse Art Museum in New Zealand: "Whetūrangitia / Made As Stars".





*Tcheu in front her work, Singapore Biennial, 2016*



*Niagara Gallery, Melbourne, February, 2020*



*Tcheu Siong in front of the works of her now late husband, Phasao Lao, Singapore Biennial, 2016*

## **Boulomsouk Svadphaiphane**

*Written by: Yoxa Dahm, November 2022*

Boulomsouk Svadphaiphane was born in Vientiane in 1974 and arrived in France as a political refugee when she was just two years old. She is an author, director, photographer, and painter. Since her debut into the art world, Boulomsouk has been a prolific presence and recognized as a jack-of-all trades artist who draws her strength and inspiration from her personal story. In another life, she may have been a lawyer. As fate would have it, or perhaps as her heart wasn't in it, Boulomsouk did not pass the law exam. Blessings can disguise themselves in disappointing ways, but from there blossomed the opportunity and manifestation of her passion in filmmaking. After seven years of studying law, Boulomsouk took a year off from university and applied for a Diploma of Advanced Studies (DEA: Diplôme D'études Approfondies) in cinema, TV, and media. While waiting for news of her application, she made her first short film for 500 francs using her mother's film camera. The set was her own home and a friend's apartment; and the players were also her friends.

With acceptance into the DEA program, Boulomsouk split her time between classes (which gave her a theoretical foundation of the arts), practical training, and internships. In 2001, she graduated from Panthéon Sorbonne University, Paris 1 with honours and with a whole new outlook on life. After completing her DEA, Boulomsouk was grateful to have the opportunity to work with/for French film director, Thomas Gilou for three years. She was the scriptwriter for two comedies: *"Gum Ball"* and *"Tunes"*. These were her first feature films. With Gilou's guidance, Boulomsouk successfully took her first steps in the cinema industry.

In 2004, Boulomsouk started up her own cinema/audio-visual company called Boulimik Productions which produced and directed video clips, short films, and documentaries. During this time, Boulomsouk was contracted by an outside company to direct a documentary that became the opening for the new season of the French regional television channel, Cap 24. In 2008, Boulomsouk partnered up with French journalist Ahmed El Keiy and founded another company called New Visual International (NVI). The purpose of the company was to produce his talk show, *"Toutes les France"* for France Ô (the diversity channel of France Télévisions).

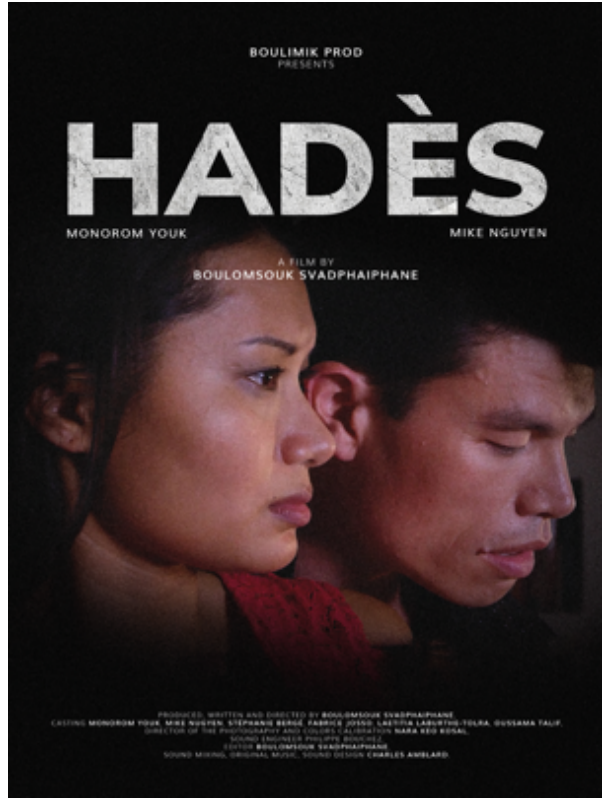
After working eight years in production, Boulomsouk had enough. Even though she continued to work as a screenwriter and director while being a producer, she felt that her love of writing and directing was out of proportion with her work. She has since been happier working for other companies as a scriptwriter or director.

Along the way, Boulomsouk found herself pursuing another love: photography. Having played with the camera since her youth, she delighted to be occupied with photography in between film projects. Her first photo exhibition was of random tattooed people at the swimming pool. *"Ta-Atua, Quand l'invisible devient visible"*, was displayed at the Exhibition at Myriam Bouagal Galerie 2016, Paris 3. In the photos, Boulomsouk contemplates, *"Has the marking of one's body become so innocuous that it has lost its primary meaning, that of the drawing which approaches God, which liberates or reveals a spirit (self)? Or is it always tied to a significant life event?"* Since then, Boulomsouk has had several exhibitions in Paris.

As of late, Boulomsouk has started experimenting with yet another form of art: painting. Her first exhibition, *"Migrations"*, is a series of 30 paintings displayed at the Vivienne Art Galerie in Paris in June 2022. Through her photos, she tells her own story as a refugee, the initial chaos of displacement of populations, people, and families. The integration of the past and the future in a new world, the hope of being accepted, being normal, yet remembering the life that was left behind.

When asked about the important themes of her work, Boulomsouk summarizes her work as an exploration of otherness. *"Through her work as an artist, she appeals to the perceptions, to the senses of people, to her own. Without necessarily being in a quest for accuracy but rather a search for impressions specific to each, each to build individual stories that reveal sums of truth. By this search for perceptions, sensations, it is the memory in the body, the transmission of its own history but also of the stories that cross us, those of a society, of a family, that it summons. These individual stories and its intimate watermark story, allow us to deconstruct dictates, clichés to make a move, a sidestep to find other realities and gestures, our gestures to ward off or sublimate what is said through us and goes beyond us to create a common history, that of humanity."*





Left: Boulomsouk Svadphaiphane. Portrait by Sonadie San.

Right: Feature film poster for “Hadès”, Boulimik Productions, September 2021. Boulomsouk was the scriptwriter/director/producer/editor for this psychological drama, guerrilla film.



“Calme”

from the series "Impressions", Mekong 2012  
Boulomsouk’s photos are her paintings.

“Contemplation”

From Contemplation series, Cape Verde 2012.

## **Nilaka Sisombath - Clay as her Link to Art**

*Written by: Olivier Leduc Stein, November 2022*



Born and raised in Vientiane, in a peri-urban area, in a middle-class family with five siblings, including four girls. Their parents worked as civil servant and administrative agent in a private company. Nilaka studied at the National Institute of Fine Arts in the painting department and then in the ceramics department. At 40, she still works as an art teacher in an international school in Vientiane.

Early on as a little girl, Nilaka liked to play with the clay of the rice fields that surrounded her house. She remembered this when she started teaching with young schoolchildren. So, she decided to introduce clay works to the children, and, like her at the same age, they loved playing, mixing clay. She remembered these pleasures of her childhood. It's very rewarding for them because quickly it's quite easy to model objects or animals.

During her first courses at the Institute of Fine Arts, she liked to glean from pottery workshops. Thus, Nilaka interrupted her teaching career to go back to art studies at the National Institute of Fine Arts, in the ceramics department. If the training prepares more pottery technicians, it revealed, and confirmed to Nilaka her attraction for creation and art.

Craftsmanship in pottery inspired the artist, assimilating her vision of women as a flower, she wanted to represent them in 3D, signify their beauty in a general sense, and as she almost doesn't dare to say, in a feminine sense.

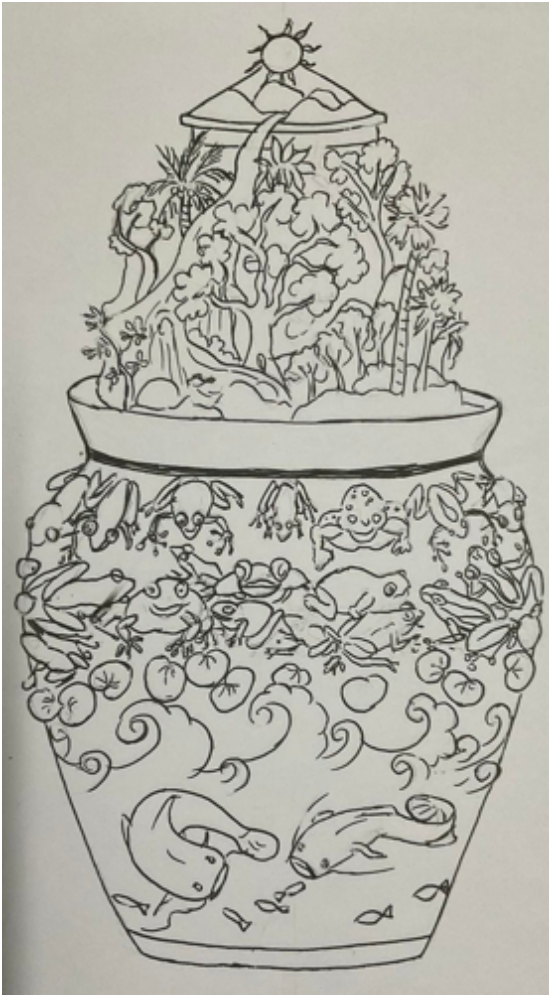


"Greedy man", 2022

### **Feminine freedom**

Nilaka grew up in a family where some of the traditional conventions had little influence. Thus, as a child, her parents left her free will, and in fact, as an adult, she could not resign herself to the social weight of the female gender. She learned to be free and continues to be so fully: *"I don't like being told do this, do that, like this, like that"* she insists. Thus, her education offered her a free-thinking scheme, for her - nature takes precedence - nature which moreover inspires her very feminine work, even if Nilaka refuses to think in terms of gender. *"I never think as a woman, but I think in terms of a human being"* she specifies. Even if sometimes her status as a woman bothers her, including her activity as a potter, as she cannot enter the kiln, it is a taboo that she cannot transgress. As taking part in monumental temple frescoes, climbing huge facade walls, abseiling, strapping in a harness - in general - it is men who do this type of work. What we need are skills, not genders ! she emphasizes.





### **Turning out to be an artist**

Nilaka begins to create a specific universe through her own works. She explains that she appreciates more to orient her work towards surrealist or caricatural lines and to let her inspiration fully express itself. And, despite producing inventive and expressive personal works, she does not, yet, claim to be an artist. To be an artist, she believes, one must be able to live fully from one's art, and this is unfortunately not the case. But when we tell her that her sculptures, her ceramics are art, with a capital 'A', she remains dumbfounded, perplexed, and so the very idea of presenting her work as part of an exhibition seems strange to her. So for the moment, she dedicates herself to specific commissions and only allows herself little time for her own creations, because only a limited public is interested and knows how to appreciate her art, she says. But faced with the reading and analysis of her works, Nilaka becomes aware of her status as an artist, a woman artist, even if she remains proud of her profession as an art teacher.

## ***Sengchanh Soukhaseum***

*Written by Souphaluck Phongsavath, September 2022*



*Sengchanh Soukhaseum in her studio in Vientiane, November 2022.*

Sengchanh Soukhaseum was born in 1946 in Ban Lakkham, Luang Prabang province, as her father joined the army, she lived with her mother in her aunt's house. At that time when she was eight years old a French soldier taught her how to draw, write and speak French, give her pencil and paper for drawing, his kindness left her with an everlasting impression.

She went to France with a group of Lao refugees and her sister, they would like to study there, but life is not like a dream, she could not live there and had to move to Moscow for two years. After that she took the train to Paris in 1963 after that she could get the scholarship from Lao National Democratic Revolution to go back Moscow, 1966 preparing to study in university find a job in Paris, but he could only small jobs for cleaning and life wasn't easy. After she had her first baby she was diagnosed with cancer and has to take medicine until now.





2006



2005

In 1977 she came back to Laos and worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As she could speak three languages, she was promoted and moved to work at the Lao Embassy in Manila, Philippines. 1997. At this time, she took up again her artwork and tried to collect money to buy art supplies, art books and start to learn by herself. She was fortunate to find a Japanese art teacher and these influences are still evident in her work. In 2001 she returned to Laos and continued her art practice all alone.

After her retirement in 2004 she had more time for herself, and to dedicate to her artwork. Sometimes she helped at the Mask Gallery and met other artists, and she kept trying in many ways to improve her work. She loves flowers and it's a strong ever recurring theme in her work, "her life is not as beautiful as flowers, but flowers are blooming in her soul, even though her health is not strong".





2002



2001



2022

**List of all 120 consulted, surveyed and interviewed artists in chronological order:**

<b><i>"Women in Lao Contemporary Art &amp; Culture from 1975 till Now"</i></b>			
<b>Name</b>	<b>Surname</b>	<b>occupation</b>	<b>address</b>
Thongsa	Baukham	Art Student	Savannakhet
Douangdeuane	Bounyavong	Author	vtn
Dorn	Bouttasing	Film maker	Vtn
Pakornkam	Bualek	Animator, film maker, Actress	Vtn
Somthida	Chanthaboula	Artist	vtn
Vissa	Chanthaphasouk	Architect	Vtn
Xayprani	Chanthalangsy	Director maison de Culture Ban Naxay	vtn
William	Chanthavee	Fashion Designer	vtn
Kommaly	Chantavong	Lao handicraft	Vtn
Manilla	Chounlamountri	Graphic designer	vtn
Phetnamnueng	Chutsavavang	Art Student	Savannakhet
Souphaphone	Dangmany	Co-founder Stella	Vtn
Marisa	Darasavath	Artist	vtn
Dawn	Dawn	Film maker	Vtn
Mattie	Do	Film maker	Vtn
Larounheuan	Douangsamphan	Art Student	Champasak
Misouda	Heangsoukkhoun	Owner at Lao Gallery	Vtn
Maykham	Insisiengmai	Performer	vtn
Phoukham	Inthaorlaphin	Art Student	Vtn
Ngeun	Inthavong	Artist/Administrator	Savannakhet
Kaisoulin	Inthavong	Art student	Vtn
Phavina	Inthilad	Student	Vtn

Amphaiphone	Keobounphanh	Art Student	Vtn
Chansy	Keomany	NIFA Librarian, Teacher	Vtn
Bancha	Keomingmeuang	Artist	vtn
Phonemany	Keomany	Art teacher	vtn
Kinnakone	Keomounin	Art teacher	Savannakhet
Dalin	Keonakhone	Architect	Vtn
Onhkong	Keopuangpet	Art teacher / print maker	vtn
Kienghom	Keovongxay	Student	Vtn
Thiane	Khamvongsa	Performance	vtn
Sounantha	Kanlaya	Author	vtn
Sone	Konphaserth	Art teacher / print maker	vtn
Sivanna	Koo	Student	vtn
Xaisavanh	Ladbovone	Artist	Savanakhet
Daomany	Lattनावong	Art teacher	Vtn
Youa	Lee	Film	vtn/lpb
Youn	Lee	Artstudent	Vtn
Tounisa	Lornanphim	Art Student	Vtn
Koundala	Manivong	Student	Vtn
Livanna	Meimei	Fashion Designer	vtn
Nuengluethay	Meungchanh	Art Student	Vientiane
Ketmany	Naenkham	Art Student	Vtn
Onkhong	Nakiengchan	Art Student	vtn
Viengkham	Nanthavongdouangsy	Fashion creator, Owner of Khang	Vtn
Kongdeuane	Nettavong	Author	vtn
Phan	Oudomxay	Student	Vtn
Dong	Paisoulin	Artist	vtn

Chansamai	Phanouvong	Film maker	Vtn
Khounmy	Phantavong	Art Student	Vtn
Alee	Philavong	Actress	Vtn
Vanida	Phimphachanh - Audenis	Jewelry Designer	Vtn
Anais	Phinith	Photographer	Vtn
Buavone	Phommabouth	Artist	vtn
Souphatsone	Phommathep	Art Student	Savannakhet
Nalee	Phonephom	Art Student	Savannakhet
Souphaluck	Phongsavath	Artist	vtn
Wravong	Phrachanh	Film maker	Vtn
Lotchana	Phuthavong	Interior designer	Vtn
Nilada	Rattनावong	Architect	Vtn
Thippakesone	Saylath	Photographer	Vtn
Kaieo	Saiyasane	Photographer, Journalist	Vtn
Phousouk	Samonty	Animator, illustrator	Vtn
Phonethavee	Sengsouly	Art Student	Vtn
Souphavady	Sengvixay	Art Student	Vtn
Tcheu	Siong	Artist	LPB
Pim	Siphanthong	Photographer	vtn
Savingkham	Sisouk	Art Student	Savannakhet
Nilaka	Sisombath	Clay Sculpture	Vtn
Phenmoukda	Sisouklom	Art Student	Savannakhet
Mitpasa	Sitthackpanya	Film maker	Vtn
Keomany	Souvanalath	Artist	vtn
Pany	Somvichit	Artist	vtn
Sengchanh	Soukhaseum	Artist	vtn

Soneolazone	Soukpathoumvath	Artist	vtn
Kingkanda	Souliya	Art student, animator, Illustrator	Vtn
Noutnapha	Soydala	Contemporary Dancer	vtn
Chanmaly	Panyaphone	LCCF culture managment	Vtn
Syvong	Phanthavilay	Student	Vtn
Chansamone	Phommalath	Art student	Vtn
Jib	Rattनावong	Illustrator, Graphic designer	Vtn
Khamla	Sabpaso	Architect	Vtn
Thavone	Sayyavong	Student	Vtn
Phonepaserd	Sengmanivong	Fashion Designer	vtn
Vannaphone	Sitthirath	Film maker, Co-founder LNWC	Vtn
Vieng	Sourignosack	Architect	Vtn
Lyta	Souvanlasy	Architect	Vtn
Vilayphone	Souvannavong	Artist	vtn
Judy	Souvannavong	Photographer	vtn
Intoula	Suksakoun	Artist	vtn
Binta	Thepvongsa	Art Student	Savannakhet
Chandalin	Thipmany	Art Teacher	Savannakhet
Baisy	Thongkilyatham	Art Student	Savannakhet
Viengphet	Thongmalith	Art student	Vtn
Jorvang	Tinglou	Art Student	Vtn
Manivone	Vansavath	Fashion Designer	vtn
Kongkham	Vantheuang	Art Teacher	Savannakhet
Pavina	Vilaphun	Contemporary Dancer	vtn
Champha	Vilayvong	Art Student	Champasak
Nini	Vilivong	Actress	Vtn



Dara	Viravong Kanlaya	Author	vtn
Natalie	Vongkhamsao	Photographer & Video Editor	Vtn
Sili Bangon	Vongsa	Contemporary Dancer	vtn
Saymoukda	Vongsay	Author	vtn
Kinnalon	Vongxaty	Art Student	Champasak
Noukham	Xayapaserd	Art Student	Vtn
Phanida	Xayavong	Illustrator	Vtn
<b>Diaspora</b>			
Oudomphone	Bounyavong	Graphic designer	Sweden
Phony	Davis	Artist	Australia
Pao	Houa Her	Artist	Minnesota, USA
Chay	Khamsone	Environmental education artist	Australia
Phet	Mahathongdy	Actress, filmmaker	Los Angeles, USA
Koua	Mai Yang	Artist	Minnesota, USA
Thi-Von	Muong-Hane	Film maker	France
Yang	Sao Yia	Art Researcher, hip hop dancer	Minnesota, USA
Chaypheth	Sayarath	Architect, Researcher	France
Boulomsouk	Svadphaiphane	Author, Director, Photographer, Painter	France
Ole	Viravong Scovill	Performance Artist	USA
Savanhdary	Vongpoothorn	Artist	Australia

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## Bibliography

*We have only mentioned publications that have been relevant for our research, or publications that might be interesting for those who want to go a bit deeper into Art and Culture in Laos, and Southeast Asia in general. Alas there are precious little relevant publications to list.*

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**Annex 1 - Press release “*Ministry outlines draft law on fine arts July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022*”**

**Annex 2 - Survey Interview Questions and Point by Point Breakdown**

**Annexes 3 – CV’s Rik Gadella & Souphaluck Phongsavath**