

## Q&A with Sovanchan Sorn 4/1/18

### ***Could you tell us about yourself, your background?***

I am a first generation Cambodian American. My family emigrated from Cambodia to the US in the early 80s, after the Cambodian genocide. The country wanted to start at year 0; everything was wiped out: the culture, the traditions, the teachers, artists, and musicians...anyone who was an intellect or looked like one.

In art school, I was always asked where my inspiration came from. At the time I didn't know, but I found myself always going back to my family's roots. I had often asked my family about their history but they never wanted to talk about their past or their experiences living in concentration camps.

We didn't learn about this history in school – in my history book, there was one section on the Cambodian Genocide which had three sentences and an image of an S-21 – and that was it. It made me wonder, 'where would I get the history lesson on my own culture?' It's so important that these stories are shared, but there are so many variables which can get in the way. What is so difficult about discussing the Cambodian genocide is that there is a lot of undocumented history, so how do we know what's accurate?

### ***Can you tell us how you came up with the concept for your show at CSULB?***

The personal interviews and documentation of these stories are so important in order to understand our culture and to move forward.

For my senior show at CSULB, I interviewed the four main members of my family who survived the Cambodian genocide: my grandma, my two oldest aunts, and my mom. The audio interviews, conducted in our native language were held individually in a closed room and later transcribed into English. During my show, the audio interviews were accompanied by two large projections on the walls and hanging pieces. The speakers I used for the audio interviews projected sound down, meaning unless the viewer was standing directly underneath, they could not hear anything.

Part of the reason why I wanted to interview my family in their native language was so that viewers could feel what it's like to jog through someone's memory. The projections were cast shadows of a smaller monofilament/copper piece (larger version currently on display in the Ralston Family Learning Center), which also hung in a dark room, and spun with spotlights on it. The woven piece has so many layers that when paired with the hanging works and the audio interviews, it created a type of daze, where the viewer might have felt displaced, uncomfortable, and not being able to understand the language –perhaps they were able to relate to how my family had felt when they first came to the US.

In the interviews you can hear the shift in my family's voices, and some of them were cut off because it was too hard to discuss and relive those events. The only person who was okay with talking about the events was my grandma – but I know she didn't give her all. Towards the end of the interview, my grandma said in our native language, 'that's it – that's all I remember,' and that became the title of my

show. Throughout the interviews, they say ‘that’s all they remember,’ but they remember more, it’s just too difficult to relive.

During the show, it was the first time my family had heard each other’s stories, and of course it was incredibly emotional. When they saw people listening to and reading their stories, it broke down a barrier for them, although sadly, I think there was also a sense of shame in letting other people know that they had once lived this way. It’s this feeling of ‘I want that part of my life erased, and I never wish to revisit it.’ The response from my family and community members afterwards solidified that there is something more here, and that dialogue indeed creates healing.

***What can you tell us about your practice?***

My background is in sculpture, and I was interested in the challenge of pushing two-dimensional pieces into three-dimensional pieces. By suspending works from the ceiling the viewer is able to walk around and see how the scale of the work affects how their body relates to the work.

I want my work to be large and in the viewer’s face. There’s something about working large-scale, specifically on the loom. There is something meditative about the repetition and being able to use my entire body to work. Initially I was drawn to the complexity of the loom and how technical it is. I’m always up for a challenge and think which materials may be the most difficult to weave– that is how I ended up working with monofilament.

***What type of medium do you often work with?***

I mainly use cotton, silk, monofilament, and copper. What I enjoy most about copper is how much control you have over it. There’s a contrast with monofilament where you can’t control it, although it’s forced to follow the copper wherever it goes. There’s also something to be said about silk, the idea surrounding the lifecycle of a silkworm, and how although it appears soft and fragile, it’s actually very strong. I also love how translucent and ghostly it is. People in the past have described my work as cocoon-like, ghostly, beautiful, and dark, which I think does represent my family and the atrocities they’ve been through. My family and community have persevered through so much and although they may look broken, they are the strongest people I know.

I’m constantly thinking of how I can use my art as a platform for my family members and other genocide survivors. I’m hoping that during my time here as Artist in Residence, I can invite my community members to come and experience what viewers and my family experienced during my senior show.