

6-12-2013

Kompha Seth interview about the Cambodian Association of Illinois

Matthew Mrozinski

DePaul University, mmrozinski13@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Mrozinski, Matthew, "Kompha Seth interview about the Cambodian Association of Illinois" (2013). *Asian American Art Oral History Project*. Paper 64.

http://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/64

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Interviewer: Matthew Mrozinski

Organization: Cambodian Association of Illinois

Interview with: Kompha Seth, co-Founder and Executive Director.

In-Person Interview: 2831 W Lawrence Ave, Chicago, IL

Date: May 11, 2012, 3:20 PM

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2012 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.

About the Organization:

“Founded in 1976, the Cambodian Association of Illinois (CAI) serves some 5,000 Cambodians in Illinois via senior health intervention; child and youth services; family health, citizenship and employment. CAI enables refugees and immigrants from Cambodia residing in Illinois, especially those in metropolitan Chicago, to become self-sufficient, productive participants in American society while preserving and enhancing their cultural heritage and community.”

About the co-Founder:

“Kompha Seth, co-Founder and Executive Director of CAI since 1981. He was a Buddhist monk in Cambodia for 23 years before emigrating to the U.S. in 1975. He has received numerous national, state and local awards for over the years for his dedicated service to the Cambodian American community.”

Taken from www.cambodian-association.org
[visit their new website: <http://cai.maailinois.org/>]

Interview Transcript:

Matthew Mrozinski: When was the memorial designed and installed?

Kompha Seth: We began in the year 2000, and then we opened to the public in 2004.

MM: 2004?

KS: Yes, then we opened to the public.

MM: I read that the Cambodian Association started in DeKalb?

KS: No, the Cambodian Association began on May 30, 1976 in a suburb area that way, and then the museum is part of the Cambodian Association. It began in 1976; the Cambodian Association of Illinois, and the museum and memorial is a part of the Cambodian Association.

MM: The museum started up here in Chicago in 2004?

KS: Yes, 2004.

MM: Can you tell me more about the March 29 Day of Remembrance?

KS: The Day of Remembrance has three goals: number one is to honor those who already had died there in the Killing Field; and number two, we want to have the public understand the suffering of the families who survived; and number three, we also have the gathering and evening to celebrate, for those who are survivors of the Killing Field. They can meet, they can talk, they can express and they can share. Those are the three major goals of the day of remembrance.

MM: How many refugees and survivors are there in Chicago?

KS: I think, you see the census is pretty low; we [Illinois] are ranked number 10 among the nation. So look at California [he points at a map on the wall with state-by-state Cambodian populations], they have the most, and Massachusetts is number two, and then number three, New York, Minnesota, the state of Washington. But, we are number 10. About, I think roughly 4,000-5,000, the state of Illinois. But the census, it is lower, because it's an under-count, I believe.

MM: How many Cambodians do you estimate are in the whole country?

KS: The whole country? You see this, the U.S., [he points to a separate, world map, showing Census 2000 data] is from ten years ago. Right now, I think about, 200,000 to 300,000 in the whole United States. But we have also in Canada, France, also New Zealand and Australia, so everywhere; so this is just one of the Cambodian League, the survivors.

MM: So, who designed the memorial and stone carvings?

KS: The stone carving—the artist is one of survivors, who designed the art in the front of the building, he is one of the refugees and Killing Field survivors themselves

MM: How many artifacts do you have in the museum?

KS: The goal of the museum and the Wall of Remembrance is the core, central of the [museum], and the most of anything that we put in the display is about the Killing Field, is about the memorial, and we have pretty little about art. The main purpose is to highlight the genocide and for education, not the artistic. We have from the last two years displayed art, but it's the number three [goal], that we focus on the past genocide.

MM: What can you tell me about some of the programs provided by the Cambodian Association?

KS: We provide—upstairs, we have social service, we have the youth program, we have the senior program, also we have the art and the culture program; we have the job education program. And this is the component of social service. And some client who needs service, they need the healing, and then they use the memorial as a piece, to heal. Some people, they have so much suffering they cannot be productive. Let's say they have so many mental health problems

and they use the memorial as a place to heal their past, help them to feel better and then to move on for the better, that we connect. This museum is different from the Field Museum and from other museums, because the Field Museum is a place to put the artistic, the art, or whatever for educational purposes. But this is about the healing, like you know the survivor came with suffering and we hope to heal and that why the social, and the memorial is linked together.

MM: Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

KS: Yes, I think what probably the unique thing of this group right now, we have so many, well the problem still exists after thirty years. There still is a problem, because of the differences between the refugees, and a lot of people have not fully differentiated amongst or between the refugees. Like the people, the refugees that came from China, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and some people think it's the same, you know? But the people from Cambodia, and genocide, Killing Field survivors, they came here with no I.D., no birth certificate, no diploma, no money, nothing, and all because when they came they were dying and they had say goodbye, they had to destroy everything. When they came here, they had nothing. Like, if they had a PhD in education and came here, they had to go to a [indecipherable [...]] class to begin.

MM: To start over...

KS: Yes, to start over. That's why you can't see Cambodian restaurant, Cambodian clinic, nothing. People do not understand it is not all the same. People [came] from Vietnam, from Laos, that came at the same time, but they came here with birth certificates, with diplomas, with everything.

MM: So it's a lot easier to start anew.

KS: Yes, that's how people don't understand it's not the same, and some people say, "all Asian are successes," in school, and all Asian are successes in business, but the Cambodian is not.

MM: And those are all stereotypes, too.

KS: That's what we wanted people to understand. That they are pretty unique, you know? They are unique because they had no ID, birth certificate, no diploma, nothing. And the people still confuse Cambodia and Columbia. Sometimes, you say where you are from, "I am from Cambodia," and they said "are you from Columbia?" [laughs] and they're close, you know "Columbia" and "Cam-bod-ia," pretty close.

The Killing Field survivors, they have had so much suffering and most of the people that came here, they lost almost everything. They came here; you know they still cry at night. A lot of that is still haunting them. [The] younger generations who were born here in this country they still do not understand the pattern. Because now when at night, they, like all the screaming, the nightmares everyday. And the kid who was born here observes the pattern and says, "what problem, Mom?" or "what happened?"

MM: And she says, "nothing."

KS: Yeah, they say, “No, I’m fine.” And the kid in this country they want to know, they’re curious, they said, “No, you’re not fine, because you are having nightmares everyday.” But, some people, they don’t want to talk. Like, when we began the memorial we had so much e-mail to protest. Most of the people they have suffered so much they want to forget. They don’t want to talk but they want to forget everything. But this suffering is part of human being, you cannot forget, it still haunting you. That’s why I think only thing you can do is to acknowledge, to understand. Then the healing process begins. But when you try to deny, it keeps coming back. Because even you go to see the movie [in the Museum exhibit], or theater, anything, it can come back.

Those are the things that were pretty controversial thinking but now we see people beginning to appreciate all we’ve done. This is the only place in the country or in the world. They do not have the memorials, so i think its good to have one. Thank you for your interest and helping to convey the message to the people. That’s why I think that we still have so much need in the community. We want to see the people understand; and we try to help we need to work with the different institutions that have the skill to help overcome the suffering, like, they have so much pain, anger and hatred inside them. So hopefully, when the time comes, I think we can help to heal.

END.