

Linda Sok

Soft Monument

Linda Sok: Soft memorialisation for the victims of the Khmer Rouge

By Jack Poppert

In Cambodia, sites for the victims of the Khmer Rouge often mirror the brutality of the regime itself in hostile and confronting memorials. Stupas hold the stacked bones of victims; these serve both as a crude and visceral testament to human loss. They are displayed in a shocking way because they seek to convey shocking brutality, and they certainly achieve this aim. Bodies are displayed in awful nakedness and this is an undignified way of dealing with the departed, particularly when the circumstances of their passing are so terrible. Further, it is the belief of a majority of Cambodians - of Buddhist cultural and spiritual heritage - that the appropriate treatment of a person who has past, is cremation.

For artist Linda Sok, and no doubt many others, these memorials cannot be said to offer much to the many victims of the Khmer Rouge – particularly those who have survived - other than the echo of their suffering. In response to the perceived failings of Cambodian memorials, Sok seeks to deploy the 'soft' memorial as a place of respectful and peaceful remembrance. In choosing to address suffering with care and solicitude Sok does not reiterate the events that define a horror; she instead speaks to the human heart that is wounded. Sok prioritises a place for the victim, not for the crime. The primary objective is to move beyond trauma, to healing. For this reason, one does not feel the presence of horror when with Sok's work. The exhibition, *Soft Monument*, proposes a form of memorialisation that rebuts the mistreatment of the dead, and gives space to the survivors and descendants of the Khmer Rouge period.

In a way, her artworks are places for what life remains of those who have past; because it is not the facts of their mistreatment but the sanctity of their lives that Sok highlights; she speaks not of the Khmer Rouge itself, but more directly to the experience of its victims. The crimes of the Khmer Rouge are denied a prominence, in Sok's work, that so often results in an exacerbation of trauma. Instead, Sok turns her back on the cold facts, in doing so she looks directly at the victims, and therefore acknowledges what is really at stake in any crime: a violation of human dignity. Here there is a space also for people indirectly affected by the Khmer Rouge, namely survivors and descendants. This is intentional, Sok is a descendant; much of her family lived through the Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia. It is perhaps this experience of living with the trauma of genocide that makes Sok deal so gently with such violent history. Her artworks are thus memorials as places of healing.

Sok's soft forms of flowing nylon nets, gold leaf and her use of Joss paper, offer an appropriate and culturally salient memorialisation. The use of Joss paper references the Chinese tradition of burning Joss paper in offering and recognition of ones ancestors. Likewise, gold-leaf suggests the common use of gold as a colour and material for religious worship; particularly in Buddhism. Nylon netting can have many meanings in Sok works. The use of nylon netting, according to Sok, allows light to filter through her sculptural forms. It is also a relatively light material, that when hung can appear weightless and transparent. While the material is used frequently to suggest the presence of human-spiritual forms, it also seems to reference the use of netting for protection from bugs and mosquitos. As an image it provides an elegant reference to provincial life. Her use of this material has been ongoing, and is again deployed in *Soft Monument* to great effect.

At Sok's show at Wellington St Projects, *For my ancestors (ritual for the dead)* nylon netting was hung from golden chains. These works at times took on a human form. They seemed to signal the ongoing presence of those the Khmer Rouge sought to destroy; a strong rebuttal to the genocidal claim. In their position in the room, Sok was able to suggest movement which enlivened the figures. This was a positive presence of bodies, not a counting of corpses. Sok performed a ritual application of gold-leaf on the black nylon forms. The gold-leaf was held in a bowl that might traditionally have held food offerings, such as rice. Here Sok had devised her own ritual ceremony and offering to the ancestors.

During the performance she wore a dress with gold leaf pasted onto it. The gold leaf acted as an adoration and an offering, so that dressing the forms in gold-leaf was, in some sense dressing the victims; giving them form in order to give them the honour of remembrance. In wearing the offering Sok also offered and presenced herself, thus acknowledging her connection to the events and leveraging her presence as an act of survival and continuity. One might see the application of gold leaf in Sok's work as a plastering of spiritual wounds in holy colour. In dressing the imagined wound with gold-leaf Sok is honouring the wound, legitimising its existence as interior, as well as exterior.

A primary concern of *Soft Monument*, is to provide a place of recuperative and gentle memorialisation. It is the current iteration in an ongoing effort to honour survival and memorialise suffering, to challenge the visual terseness of memorials that look past the victims of the Khmer Rouge. It is another step toward a memorial that takes care and solicitude as guiding principles, and rejuvenation and spiritual recuperation as primary outcomes. *Soft Monument* is the expansion of previous work shown in *Subverting 'The Intolerable Narrative'*, a group show at Firstdraft Gallery. With a larger space Sok has the opportunity to broaden her investigation into the healing memorial. The exhibition takes its place as the newest development in Sok's intriguing approach to the memorialisation of the victims of the Khmer Rouge.

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