

RETROSPECTIVE ART

When renowned Cambodian artist You Khin died, he left a priceless archive that remains the centrepiece of the nation's art scene



It was during Khin's time overseas that he discovered his personal style: one based on a firm, impressionistic brushstroke

Welcome to my art house' reads a wooden sign at the You Khin gallery. 'Please be gentle with my paintings – I have lived and died for them.'

Tucked away off a busy road in Phnom Penh, You Khin House pays homage to one of Cambodia's greatest impressionist artists. When Khin died in 2009, he left a legacy that has shaped the canon of contemporary art in the kingdom. And his work is now drawing critical acclaim on the other side of the world thanks to the "I Have the Right" exhibition, which runs until August at Picture Cultural Art in California.

"Khin knew his worth," says Muoy Khin, guardian of the You Khin gallery, champion of Khin's legacy and his wife of more than 30 years. "He knew the day would come when the world would see his work and hear his message."

Khin was a prodigy, a fact that's proved by the charcoal portrait of Khin's parents – painted when he was just nine – that hangs in Muoy's dining room. It's his only pre-1973 work to have survived the horrors of the Khmer Rouge era.

In what Muoy describes as the luck of "destiny and education", Khin was on an art scholarship in Marseilles when Pol Pot's regime seized control of the country and killed or imprisoned most of his family and friends. At the age of 28, he suddenly found himself a refugee. "Before 1975, his paintings were what one would expect of a Khmer artist: figurative and descriptive with a touch of glamour," says Muoy. "Then April 17, 1975 happened and everything changed."

Exiled from Cambodia, Khin, his wife and family led a rootless existence during which he began to capture on canvas the destruction of his homeland and his sense of desolation.

Figuring prominently in the roughly 130 works he painted while living abroad are chains, locks, cages and other symbols of the nation's sudden loss of freedom along with expressions of his dream of a world without discrimination, poverty, fear or hatred. "Even as he painted scenes of the life that surrounded him, the war and our exile brought him back to the reality of our country and our personal tragedy," Muoy says.

Khin continued to produce impressionist paintings until his death and his work thus forms an archive of works in a Cambodian artistic genre that was largely obliterated in the 1970s. As such,

Khin's artistic legacy forms an indispensable part of Cambodia's art history. "Khin's work stands as a testament to the Cambodian people of what can and will be done," Muoy says. "Khin painted for himself and for posterity. Now with this exhibition, he can rest in peace. His message has begun to spread. I hope it is just the beginning."

ART SCENE:

"I Have the Right" runs until late summer at Picture Cultural Art, California State University. For the next five to 10 years, exhibitions of You Khin's work are slated to be held in Singapore, Hong Kong, New York and Paris. A permanent exhibition is housed at You Khin House, 13 Street 830, Phnom Penh, youkhinhouse.com