

## **Linda Sok's Corporeal/Spiritual**

### **By William Ngiam**

Cambodia's modern history continues to be influenced by the Khmer Rouge genocide that occurred in 1975-1979 – over 40 years ago. As the country awaits justice, an ongoing controversial issue is the treatment of the countless human remains. Human remains are displayed in public memorials as a constant reminder of those horrific events, with others held as evidence of the crimes committed. This is in direct opposition to those who believed that all the remains should be cremated as per the Buddhist belief that their souls will only find peace and achieve reincarnation after undergoing the process of cremation. With the unending forensic investigation making cremation impossible, a referendum for the appropriate treatment of the remains has yet to be conducted. For Khmer people, these times amplify a complex tension between the scientific analysis of the physical (the *corporeal*) and the religious handling of the remains (the *spiritual*).

Linda Sok's exhibition, *Corporeal/Spiritual*, focuses on the relationship of the material to the sacred – how the past experiences and history of one's body, or one's soul, is treated even beyond death and its impacts upon those viewing it. The physical remains of the victims of the Khmer Rouge genocide are displayed in many memorial sites for public viewing – despite the majority of the Khmer population being Buddhist and holding the belief that bodies should be cremated after death. It is this physical display that Linda explores in her work. By filling the space with pieces that are reminiscent of those bodies, Linda draws attention to the memorial's role in acting as evidence of the genocide, but simultaneously highlights their existence as a direct denial of peace, desired by the individual's soul.

What impact may this have on the viewer? Linda's work provokes interesting thoughts for myself specifically as a scientist. The forensic scientists probe the trauma that has remained in the physical bodies of the individuals – such as the selection of the skulls to document their traumatic wounds and the biological analysis to determine age and sex – in an apolitical and secular manner. In fact, the pursuit of the truths almost necessitate that no thought is given to the individual's lived experience prior to the event or even the possibility of the denial of peace to one's spirits. I conduct research in this same way – I analyse the electric currents of the brain with little consideration of the individual's spirituality and whether it is the seat to their soul. I would even deny its existence despite the individual's own belief in their being. I think about how my own physical body will be treated following my death – will the hacking of my body for organs to be donated prevent the possibility of my soul never experiencing peace? In this way, I undertake a consideration of my own mortality and how it is anchored in my physical being.

It may seem strange for a scientist to ponder spirituality but it's evident that there are some commonalities that we all will experience in viewing this physical memorialisation of the Khmer Rouge. And perhaps those commonalities are the most human and important of any.

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