



An exhibition proposed by **Christian Caujolle**
From August 3rd to October 19th, 2019

For its third exhibition, Batia Sarem Gallery is pleased to present the works of photographer **Sovan Philong**, who has become known worldwide for his series *In the City by Night*. The series has been shown in many countries (notably in Landskrona in Sweden in 2017 and then in Paris in 2018 at the Galerie Lee) and has also been acquired for in museum collections. These nocturnal urban scenes, taken in Phnom Penh or Siem Reap, are characterised by the significance given to light. In effect, the only lighting used is from the headlights of Philong's motorbike. The exhibition we are organising in 2019, in Siem Reap, brings together several more rarely shown works. The *Computer Light Portraits* are at the heart of this small retrospective. The exhibition includes 15 portraits of women, children or men, artificially lit by a computer, the only light projected onto these individuals set against a plain background.

Philong revisits the traditional portrait format. The white light, so characteristic of our contemporary societies, modifies our perception of faces and bodies. The strange shift brought about by using the light from the computer confounds the expectations of the subject being looked at but also of the person looking. Which is why we have called this exhibition *HOW DO I LOOK?* A question that translates (roughly) into French as «Comment tu me trouves?» or «A quoi je ressemble?». A question that has to be asked, because each of Philong's photos is itself a question, a mystery...

«How do I look?» has a double meaning. Philong uses the portrait as a means of revealing a person's innermost being. The photographer's intervention delves into, goes beyond or even transcends the appearance of the individual. The question everyone seems to ask when looking at Philong's lens is «Who am I really, beyond what my face and body say?» At the same time as questioning his subjects, Philong is also asking himself about the photographic medium. «How do I look» can mean «How am I going to look?» How can photography change our view of what is in front of us? Light is thus the photographer's essential device.

Artificial light makes it possible to distance oneself from naturalism and photojournalism (which Philong has practiced) and to reveal interiority and even spirituality. Here, the harsh white light transforms the subjects into enigmatic characters. The light thus reveals a less carnal self than the self of appearances but one that is more durable, that survives beyond the body. Quasi-religious, Philong's photography is primarily concerned with the soul. The group scenes in *In the City by Night* with the soft lights and complex compositions allude to the «Adorations of the Magi» of the Italian Renaissance. They are bathed in an atmosphere of spirituality that is radically different from street photography, from the seized moment. Philong's topic is duration. The *Computer Light Portraits* can be compared with representations of the saints or martyrs of classical painting.

In addition, there is something that softens the overly formal character that could make the work appear «thought

out in advance»: the gaze. Empty or defiant glances in the *Computer Light Portraits*. Sad or joyous looks in another work we are showing at Batia Sarem: three masterful pieces, presented in back-lit boxes and composed of numerous passport photos of the same individual. The proliferated gaze of a child offers us the whole spectrum of his emotions. In this work, as in all of Philong's photography, the look or gaze is key. It not only brings to each photo an intense emotion and therefore allows each of us to identify with the subject, but the gaze is also part of the same quest that guides the photographer. To grasp the truth of a being, the work becomes an exhaustive catalogue of all his personalities, all his affects, all the variations of his moods and this «totality» can be apprehended only in the eyes.

Philong meticulously conceives the formal approach for each of his series with exemplary determination. Each of his portraits, although intensely «individualised», takes us back to ourselves. This exhibition that we are showing at Batia Sarem is a panorama of the quest of a deeply human artist, highly sensitive but also methodical, who constantly questions this particular art of photography and its complex relationship to the truth.

Yves Zlotowski, Lyvann Loeuk and Martin Phéline.

Born 1986 in Prek Dach (Kandal Province in Cambodia), Philong graduated in Information technologies at the National University of Management of Phnom Penh in 2005. He discovered photography while working for a Catholic association as a manager of the video department and met the photographer Mak Remissa who helped him understanding photography. He began, in 2009, as a press photographer for The Phnom Penh Post then with the Xinhua News Agency in 2011-2012. Besides covering the news, Philong developed several personal projects, especially those with «Studio Images» of the French Cultural Center that were exhibited during the festival Photo Phnom Penh. After participating as an intern in two workshops proposed by the Angkor Photo Festival in Siem Reap in 2008, he studied one year in France with the support of a grant of French government in 2012 at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure Louis Lumiere.

His works have been published in *GLOBE magazine* (Cambodia), *Le Monde Magazine* (France), *Internazionale* (Italy), *Missions Étrangères* (Canada), *Report Without Border* (France), *De L'air* (France), *L'Express Styles* (France), *L'Oeil* (France), *Revue Noire* (France), *IMAGES Magazine* (France), *PUNCTUM* (India), *AZART* (France). Sovan Philong has been a member of Asia Motion since 2011 and he is an active stakeholder of the Photo Phnom Penh Festival.

His work has been exhibited in Cambodia (Phnom Penh Photo festival in 2009, 2010 and 2013), in France (Biennale Photoquai of Musée du quai Branly in 2011, Friche la Belle de Mai in Marseille, 2019), United Kingdom, Singapore, Japan, Thailand, Italy, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. He is working with Galerie Lee in Paris, where he had a solo exhibition in 2018. In 2019, he was awarded the Grand Prize of Wonder Foto Day, a photography fair taking place once a year in Taipei. Sovan Philong is currently working and living in Phnom Penh.



Sovan Philong, 2019.

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