



SUTURES

Curated by—Michael Khuth

SUTURES



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SUTURES



KHUTH

1. John Berger, *Another Way of Telling*, (Vintage, 1995).

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An instance photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future.

—John Berger, *Another Way of Telling*¹



As an artist, I've always been drawn to collage in its refusal of simplicity—the denial of time as a linear line or the notion that realities exist and evolve in complete isolation of one another. Within the context of collage, a wrinkled photograph of my mother taken before I was born and an image captured just minutes ago can exist on the same plane. However, what excites me most about collage is its natural impulse to reach out and grab hold of something it sees itself in. Collage has become a way for me to understand how I stitch together a clearer sense of self, the people around me, and the layered contexts I exist in from disparate personal memories, family histories, sources of media, and so on.

In curating this exhibition, I gravitated towards artists and practices that echoed the act of collaging. The desire to meet other artists working in a similar vein led me to the works of Cheryl Mukherji, Daniella Thach, Prune Phi, and Sopheak Sam. Within their works lies the desire to challenge straightforward ways of looking at and understanding a photograph, a video, a loved one, a collective history, a memory, or oneself.

In our conversations, I was particularly struck by the ability of these artists to see a new life—a potentiality—in an image beyond itself. There is an unmatched satisfaction when we look at

photographs or videos, partially due to their ability to capture details of their referents—the embroidered golden flowers on a sari, the wrinkles in a grandmother’s smile, the shape of smoke, the roar of applause at an award ceremony. While images wield this sort of indexical power, this exhibition is far more concerned with how images acquire new meanings and interpretations beyond their conception. As leading memory studies scholar Marianne Hirsch suggests, it is the fragmentariness of images—as a result of their ability to only capture a single instant—that leaves them open to narrative elaboration and embroidery.²

I couldn’t quite articulate why these artists’ practices resonated with me so deeply until I came across Okwui Enwezor’s essay, *Archive Fever: Between History and the Monument*. In his essay, Enwezor examines the works of numerous visual artists and the ways their works engage with the notion of the archive—a collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people. In the conclusion of his essay, Enwezor claims that, “...yet against the tendency of contemporary forms of amnesia whereby the archive becomes a site of lost origins and memory is dispossessed, it is also within the archive that acts of remembering and regeneration occur, where a suture between the past and present is performed...”³

I was particularly struck by Enwezor’s use of the word *suture*—deriving from the Latin word *sutura* meaning “a sewing together.”⁴ While the medical term may conjure up images of wounds or silver operating tables, I was more drawn to the act of suturing as an intimate gesture of care. To make something whole again, one requires both patience and precision. The exhibition’s title, *Sutures*, draws loosely from Enwezor’s essay with

2. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, (Duke University Press, 2008).

3. Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, (International Center of Photography, 2008).

4. “Suture.” Online Etymology Dictionary. 2021. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/suture> (29 September, 2021).

hopes of drawing awareness to the attentive eyes and hands of the artists in threading images—and the histories, people, and memories they carry—together as one.

As I sat with the word, I began to break a suture down to its most fundamental parts: the needle, the opening, the suture, and the mark that’s left behind. I theorize the artist as the needle—one who passes through visual and personal histories to find new entry points of exploration. The questions that prompted these artists presented themselves to be like openings or gaps: *Am I becoming my mother? How do I speak across languages? What was it like to leave your homeland? What has shaped who I’ve become?* With a steady hand, these artists use screen printing, projection, neon, and collage as sutures to bridge and lend new possibilities for experiencing seemingly “fixed” images. In doing so, these artists remind us that no image is set in stone, but can always be set free. Time here does not collapse; it is pulled apart and re sewn together not into a single neat line, but a constellation. In bringing these artists together, I ask, what does the act of suturing lend to each of their practices? What happens when you reach out and hold together pasts and presents, collective and individually fabricated memories, fragments and reflections?



Fig. A. Photograph of Cheryl Mukherji’s mother, Prabhati Mukherji, c. 1990-94.



Fig. B. Photograph of Cheryl Mukherji’s mother, Prabhati Mukherji, c. 1990-94.

In Cheryl Mukherji’s *The Last Time and I Held My Mother* (2020) Mukherji merges together photographs of her mother, Prabhati (Figs. A, B), and her own writings to explore notions of inheritance and healing. Through a series of 17 vellum screen prints and embroidered tapestry/towel cloths, Mukherji brings to light her mother’s history of mental illness and the complexities

of their mother-daughter relationship among photographs of weddings and smiling family portraits. Through acts of mark-making—screen printing, embroidery, and writing—Mukherji intervenes within her family’s album by revisiting and reconciling with her mother’s attempt at self-harm. In her MFA Thesis book, *Shape of an Answer*, Mukherji writes, “...Maa, if you read this: through every day of making this work, I have only learned more about who you are, beyond what I have articulated in it. Through you, I have learned who I am.”⁵ By altering and stitching together various images and memories of her mother, Mukherji creates a body of work where remembering is synonymous with becoming, and where wounds can begin to heal.

Daniella Thach’s *As an Apsara* (2020) blurs together scenes from found family videos (Fig. C) and King Norodom Sihanouk’s film, *Apsara* (Fig. D; 1966), in order to form a new language—one that Thach can bend and shape to articulate her fragmented relationship with her Cambodian heritage. Drawing from childhood memories of wooden statues and tableaux, the Apsara—a celestial dancer found in Hindu mythology—has become a powerful symbol of tradition and femininity within Thach’s practice. Thach uses artificial intelligence technology to reappropriate an excerpt of Princess Norodom Bopha Devi performing the Apsara Dance—a well known scene among many Cambodians within the diaspora. As Devi’s hands bend into the shapes of snakes and flowers, the video begins to fade into family recordings of Thach’s *Yeay* (grandmother) smiling back at the camera and her *Ta’s* (grandfather) hands. Although Thach is unable to speak Khmer among her family, Thach has found a language that glows and honors her family’s heritage in ways they can begin to understand.

In *Long Distance Call* (2019), Prune Phi grapples

5. Cheryl Mukherji, *Shape of an Answer*, (International Center of Photography Bard Program, 2020).



Fig. C. Still of Daniella Thach’s *yeay* (grandmother), Kim Eap, from a family video taken in 2020.



Fig. D. Still of Princess Norodom Bopha Devi performing the Apsara Dance from King Norodom Sihanouk’s film, *Apsara* (1966).



Fig. E Clippings from various magazines found in Grand Century Shopping Mall on Story road, Little Saigon, San Jose, CA.



Fig. F. Still of an explosion cloud from *Vietnam* (2017) directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick.



Fig. G. Still from the karaoke music video ចាំសំដ្បី (Cham Songsa), translation: Remember Your Lover by Sokun Nisa. © Ramsey Hang Meas, 2011.



Fig. H. Still from the 57th Annual Academy Awards® television broadcast: Haing S. Ngor winning Best Supporting Actor, 1985. © Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

with familial silence and fragmented answers in order to piece together her family’s history. After a phone call with a distant uncle in 2017, Prune decided to visit her family in San Jose, California. In her attempts to better understand her family’s displacement in the aftermath of the Vietnam or American War, Phi was met with silence upon her arrival. Resorting to magazine clippings found on the streets of Little Saigon (Fig. E), documentary stills (Fig. F), and family portraits, Phi rips and tapes together pieces of a puzzle even though none of the pieces seem to fit. The negative spaces within Phi’s photo-collages begin to form a question: what visual, oral, written histories do we inherit, and what memories are ultimately left to fade into oblivion? Phi’s *Long Distance Call* asks us to listen a little longer for we might begin to hear who is on the other line—the hum of the dial tone, the clink of plates at a crowded dinner table, or waves crashing to the sides of a boat searching for a new home.

Sopheak Sam’s sculptural video installation, បាត់សាសនាខ្ញុំ *Losing My Religion* (2021) forms a space where multiple diasporic Cambodian visual cultures collide. បាត់សាសនាខ្ញុំ *Losing My Religion* is an iteration of Sam’s previous work, *Holiday in Cambodia* (2018) but differs in its source material and altar-like structure. Drawing inspiration from Theravada Buddhism’s notions of animism—the belief that objects have a spiritual essence—Sam assembles an altar that references popular media from the post-Khmer Rouge era (Figs. G, H): 80s and 90s karaoke music videos, Haing S. Ngor’s iconic Oscar speech, movie and documentary clips, and other videos sourced from Youtube. From afar, the work appears as if someone has left all the living room TVs turned on; as if they were flipping through the channels trying to find themselves reflected on the screen. A closer look reveals a collection of videos that Sam has woven into

objects found in everyday Cambodian households—*kahteils* (leisure mats), ornate silk pillows, *pooheiy*s (blankets), temple trays. By embedding popular imagery directly onto quotidian objects, Sam begins to reflect on the ways in which entertainment media becomes a point of departure for cultural transmission and the construction of diasporic identities.

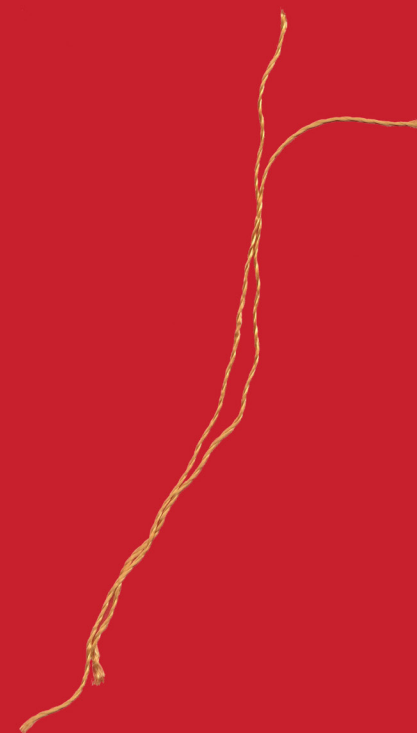


A continuous suture, the most common and simple method of repair, comprises a single uninterrupted thread. Unlike other techniques that often involve a series of abrupt knots and endpoints, a continuous suture travels in a spiral. It moves both inward and outward; it reflects and it reaches out.

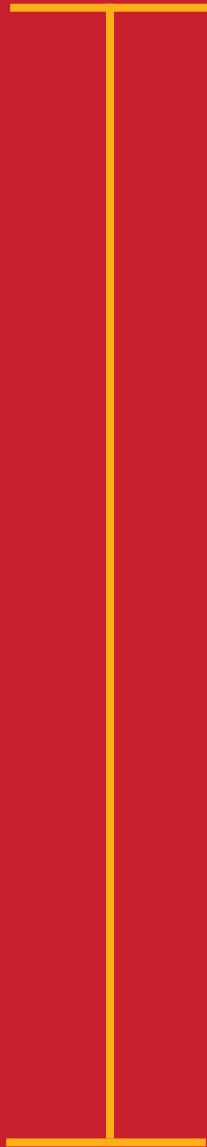
I'm reminded of Ocean Vuong's writings on the flow of time and history. In his novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong writes that, "Some people say history moves in a spiral, not the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed."⁶ Therefore the past is never dormant, but something we return to in order to move forward again.

The artists gathered here do not solely concern themselves with closing an opening, but rather with studying its shape, how deep it runs, whether it can be felt by others or why it exists at all. Through the process of suturing, these artists move towards creating and understanding their own personal cosmologies and origins. They remind us that if we look closely enough, we may begin to glimpse the threads and seams that hold our own lives together. Through spiraling, we might find a center.

6. Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, (Penguin Press, 2019).



BIOS



WORKS

CHERYL



MUKHERJI

Cheryl Mukherji (b. 1995, India) is a visual artist and writer currently living and working in Brooklyn, New York. She graduated with an MFA in Advanced Photographic Studies from the International Center of Photography, Bard College, New York in 2020. Cheryl has been a recipient of the ICP Director's Fellowship for the years 2018-2020.

In her current work, Cheryl explores the idea of origin and inheritance, which is embedded in the figure of her mother and her presence in the family album. It deals with memory, personal history, transgenerational trauma, and how they inform identity. Cheryl primarily works with photography, text, and video. Cheryl has been the recent recipient of Capture Photography Festival's Writing Prize, Brooklyn Museum's #Your2020Portrait award, South Asian Arts Resiliency Fund (SAARF), Firecracker Photography Grant, and was nominated for the inaugural Next Step Award by Aperture Foundation and Baxter St at the Camera Club of New York. Her work has been exhibited at the Format Photo Festival (UK), Brooklyn Museum (US) Museum of Moving Image (US) International Center of Photography (US) Serendipity Arts Festival (IN).



The last time I saw my mother

The last time I saw my mother—tried to begin 25 times now, for a clearer reference since I last saw my mother—426 x days, reaching out for a better verb: saw held my mother— a white hand towel against my mother's forehead as it softened its freshly laundered firmness and stained in a deep red spreading from fiber to fiber.

It happened very quickly: the self-harm—accident—self harm. I was sitting at the dining table when she started getting upset about how no one really loved her. I did not pay attention because she said it too often. I did not pay attention because she said it too often and went on with her day normally except that, after declaring her loneliness like this: no one really loves me, she grabbed the candlestand that had been on the tv console for years unnoticed and hit it against her forehead three before a stream of blood stained her yellow sweater red.

It has been 426 days since I held a white hand towel against my mother's bloody forehead. It has been 14 months, 30 days since I held a white hand towel against my mother's forehead. It has been one year, one month, 30 days since I last held my mother.

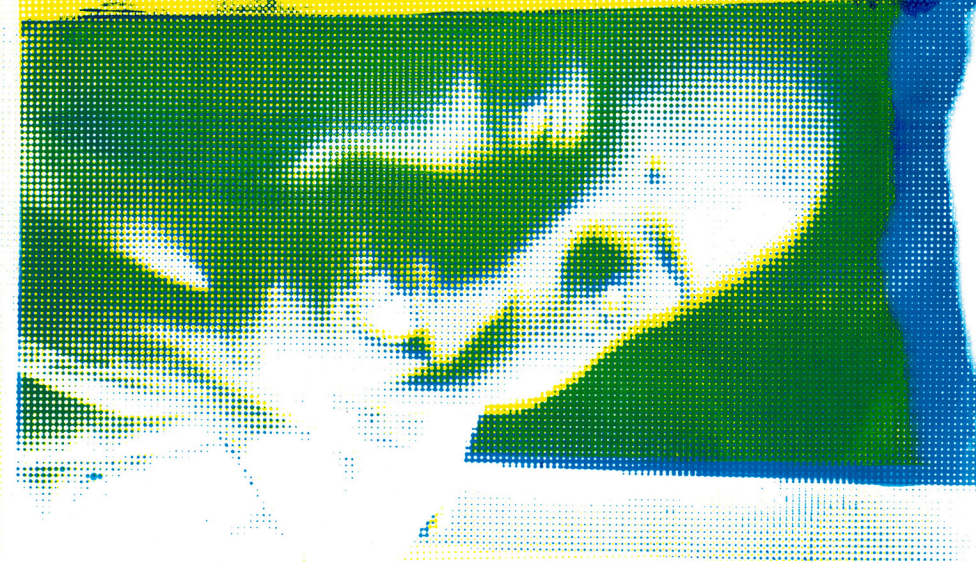
The last time I saw a mother— my mother
The last time I held her
The last time I saw— held my mother, she bled.

427 days since I held my mother as she bled.
I held a white hand towel against her forehead as it softened its fleshly laundered firmness and stained in a deep deep deep red.

I have begun this sentence 28 times now.

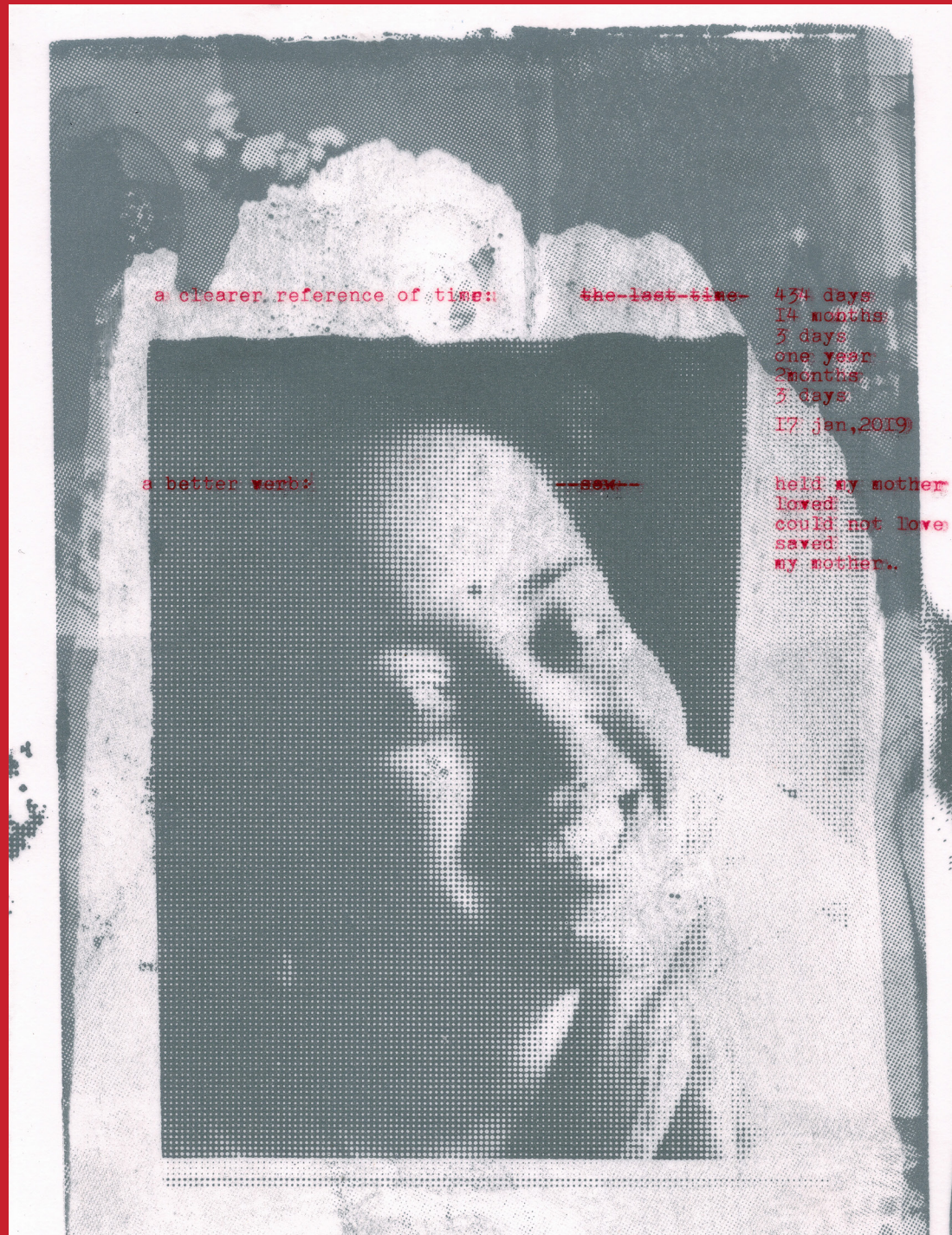
I was sitting at the table when she started getting upset about how no one really loved her. I did not pay attention because she would get over it one day. Except that day, after declaring her loneliness like this: no one really loves me, she grabbed the brass candlestand that had sat on our tv console for years unnoticed— rusted at the edges and the wax on it cold and covered in dust—and hit it against her forehead three before a stream of blood ran down her face and neck, staining her yellow sweater

427 days since I held my mother as she bled through the towel.
14 months since I held a white hand towel against my mother's bloody forehead. one year, 30 days 2 months since I last saw my mother



The Last Time (2020), series of 17 prints, text on vellum, text with screen print on matte paper, 8.5 x 11 in.

The Last Time (2020), series of 17 prints, text on vellum, text with screen print on matte paper, 8.5 x 11 in.



The Last Time (2020), series of 17 prints, text on vellum, text with screen print on matte paper, 8.5 x 11 in.



I Held My Mother (2020) Inkjet printed Cotton Lawn, 30 x 40 inches.

PRUNE



PHI

Prune Phi (b.1991, Paris, France) is a French-Vietnamese artist. Phi creates installations made from photographs, drawings, collages, collected documents, texts, and videos. Her research involves collecting materials from the Vietnamese diasporas in France, the USA, or from Vietnam to explore collective histories and reconstitute the missing parts often distorted by fiction. Phi is particularly drawn towards how identity and memory are expressed through the body and how physical traits can be passed on over several generations, or on the contrary, disappear over time. Often veiled by hidden memories, silences caused by traumas and therefore unsaid, her projects evoke the missing parts of identities and give shape to lost heritages.

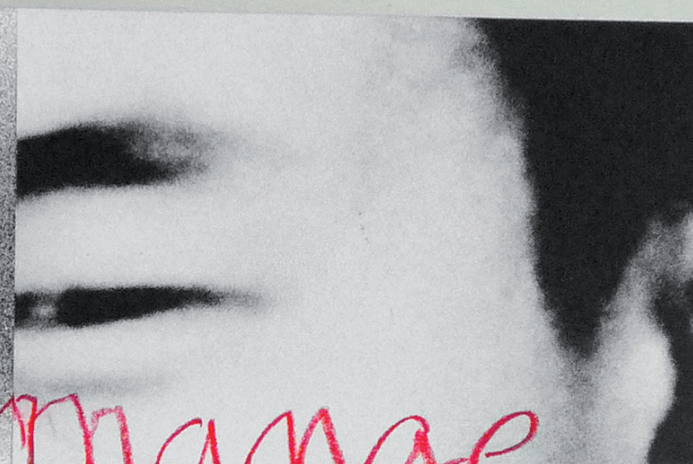
After pursuing her Masters in Artistic Creation, Theory and Mediation, as well as a one-year residency at the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design in England, she graduated from l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie d'Arles (France) in 2018. Her work has been exhibited in France, Europe and Internationally at the Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie d'Arles, France (2018), at Festival Circulation(s) at Le 104, Paris, France (2019), at La Villette in Paris, France (2021) and at the Vincom Contemporary Center for Art (VCCA) in Hanoi, Vietnam (2021).



Installation of *Long Distance Call* (2019) [and following spreads] at the Festival Circulation(s), 104 Paris, France, photography, tape, crayon, text, video.



SILENCE



Mange



Hello
my name is

SOPHEAK



SAM

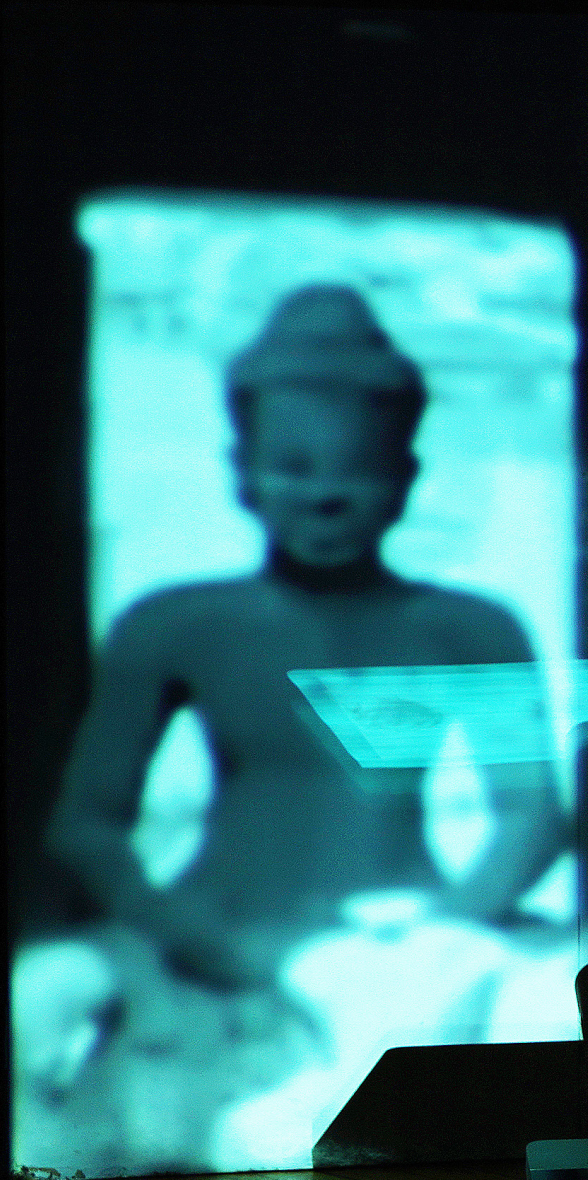
Sopheak Sam (b. 1989, Khao-I-Dang, Thailand) is a United States-based artist who draws from disparate sources of theory, history, and popular media to arrive at sites of power and pleasure. Combining research, imagination, and their lived experience, Sam's artistic impulse works through an entanglement of ideas exploring desire, memory, alienation, belonging, and spirituality. This often manifests in counter-narratives, queer revisionism, and/or unnerving—sometimes humorous—depictions of intimacy. Sam often works intuitively with an interdisciplinary practice rooted in painting and drawing. Currently, their studio practice is informed by the complexities of queer representation on film in Southeast Asia, and how that influences SEA geopolitics and the diversity of queer expression.

Sam is of Khmer descent, and was born on the Thai-Cambodian border to refugee parents. They are currently a graduate post-baccalaureate candidate in Studio Art at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Sam holds a BFA in Painting and Interrelated Media from Massachusetts College of Art and Design where they graduated with honors.

They identify as non-binary queer, and use both he/him and they/them pronouns.



Holiday in Cambodia (2018) [and
next spread] multichannel video
installation with projection,
dimensions variable, duration 5
min.



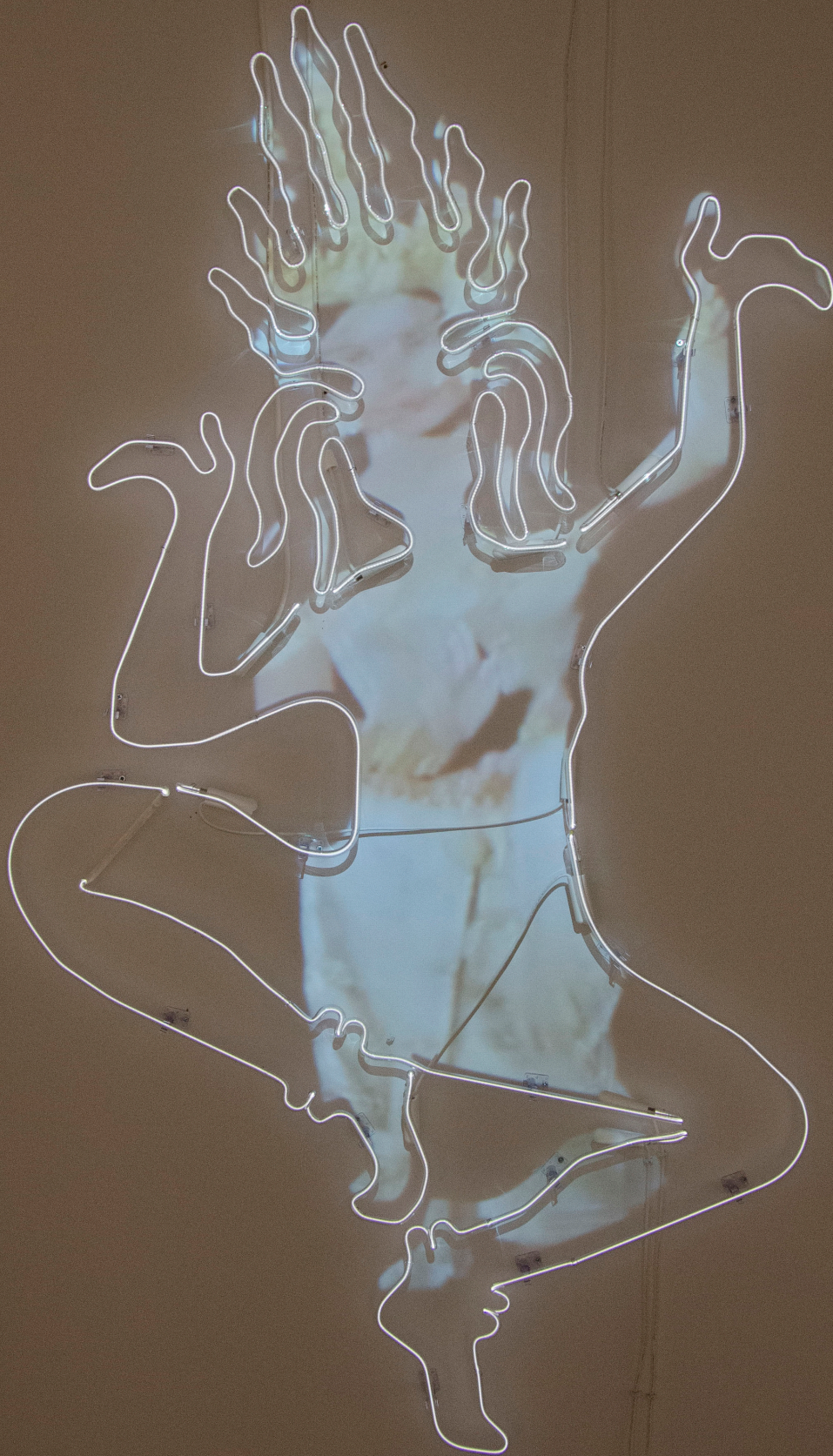


DANIELLA

THACH

Daniella Thach (b.1998, Chicago, IL) is a multimedia light artist living and working in Northern Illinois. As a response to a mother tongue they never inherited, Thach creates a new visual language by drawing from old and new forms of light. Experimenting with harmonizing digital and analog lighting allows Thach to translate her desire, and inability, to preserve familial and cultural traditions in the midst of assimilation. In combining nearly obsolete sources of light with new technological advances, Thach uses neon, digital projection, and artificial intelligence to reflect on generational loss and the formation of a new identity.

Thach is of Khmer and Vietnamese descent. They graduated from The School of Art Institute of Chicago in 2021. Thach identifies as non-binary queer and uses they/them and she/her pronouns.



As an Apsara (2020) Krypton, transformer, projection, & artificial intelligence, dimensions variable, 1 minute duration.

Acknowledgments

I would like to start by thanking and acknowledging the Dakhóta land this exhibition takes place on.

Thank you Cheryl Mukherji, Prune Phi, Daniella Thach, and Sopheak Sam for entrusting and inviting me into their practices, discoveries, and hearts. I am endlessly inspired by you all and I cannot wait to see what else you bring into this world.

Thanks to everyone I have had the pleasure to meet and work with at The Minnesota Museum of American Art: Ann Benrud, Nancy Ariza, Curtis Bjerke, Meredith Heneghan, Hanna Stoehr, Ben Reed, and Krista Anderson-Larson. I extend my deepest gratitude to Laura Joseph and Mia Laufer for their trust, warmth, and generosity. You all have been the threads that kept my very first exhibition together.

I'm deeply grateful for my mentor, Tricia Heuring, who reminds me to always trust my gut and to never forget to bring my authentic self/selves to whatever I curate. Thank you for growing this exhibition with me, and for showing me the kind of spaces I want to create.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the guidance, patience, and wisdom of the Emerging Curators Institute staff, cohort, and mentors: Nicole Thomas, Jehra Patrick, Kehayr Brown-Ransaw, Juleana Enright, Starasea Nidiala Camara, Esther Callahan, Michelle Westmark Wingard, Casey Riley, Tim Peterson, Sally Frater, and Daniel Atkinson. Thank you Sally for keeping me grounded and hopeful as this exhibition took shape. I have the utmost reverence for Daniel who—since the very beginning—has believed in my growth and ways of thinking/seeing as an artist, intellect, and curator. Thank you Daniel for piecing together this catalog into something real. You all continue to show me that curating is truly an act of care.

Thank you to my dearest friends who dream and build with me.

Finally, I would like to thank my family—with whom I am simply Michael before I am ever a curator. Thank you Yeay and Ta for teaching me how to soar with what has been sacrificed and with whatever is given. Thank you Dad for reminding me to celebrate every triumph. Mom, you are the architect of my ability to dream things bigger than myself—this exhibition was purely a manifestation made into a reality.

Thank you all.

—Michael Khuth

Michael Khuth (b. 1998, Rochester, MN—he/him, they/ them) is a queer, Khmer-American lens-based artist and independent curator. Khuth approaches collage as a visual language to articulate, explore, complicate, and reflect on queer identity and the process of becoming. Their practice understands photographs as constantly evolving objects with the potential to acquire new and queer meanings; no image is set in stone, but set free. Khuth is the founder and curator of *Generation Magazine*, a publication that gathers the visions of artists throughout the Cambodian diaspora. Khuth graduated with a BA in Media and Cultural Studies from Macalester College in 2020. Upon graduating, they are thankful to have been awarded grants, fellowships, and a residency from the Chautauqua School of Art, the Thomas J. Watson Foundation, the Southeast Asian Diaspora Project, the Southeastern Minnesota Arts Council, and the Emerging Curators Institute.

