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Neo-Traditional Art of Post-Socialist Laos:

The Entangled Temporality of the Mother-Land

ANNA KOSHCHEEVA

Abstract

This article analyses tradition, temporality and an image of the nation in the neo-traditional art of post-socialist Laos. Looking at modern Lao art in the long 20th century, the article highlights that the references to tradition were continuously used in imagining Lao modernity. Colonial, aspiring capitalist, socialist and post-social modernities were subsequently naturalised as Lao through their application to local cultural heritage and Buddhist conceptions. Post-social condition in Laos, in turn, has an additional engagement with temporality. The socialist party is in need of re-legitimising its rule since its promise of building the socialist future is no longer viable. The re-legitimising motivation of the party also precludes its critical engagement with the countries' modern history. In this context, neo-traditional art promoted at the state-sponsored exhibitions allows for imagining the Lao nation as out of time. Rendering the nation as a festive multi-ethnic village in perpetual celebration of cultural tradition, the neo-traditional art of post-socialist Laos removes both the future and the historical part of the nation from sight. Furthermore, using the allegory of woman and vista for the nation, the neo-traditional art constructs the image of the Mother-Land as gendered and passive, justifying the masculine rule over it.

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Once Time is recognized as a dimension, not just a measure, of human activity, any attempt to eliminate it from interpretive discourse can only result in distorted and largely meaningless representations.

Johannes Fabian¹

It's my private mountain. It belongs to me. God told me if I painted it enough, I could have it.

Georgia O'Keeffe²

This victory [...] opens a new epoch of rapid and energetic process of the beloved motherland towards sovereignty, independence, unity, prosperity and wellbeing of all ethnicities in the country, freedom and happiness forever.

Kaysone Phomvihane, Former Prime Minister of Lao PDR³

Introduction

The thoughts announced in the three epigraphs above outline the framework and the flow of my analysis of neo-traditional art in post-socialist Laos. These thoughts are respectively about the entangled temporality of Lao modernity, the idea of possessing a land through possessing its symbol, and the dream of a Mother-Land happy forever in a delayed future. Contemporary visual production in Laos could underwhelm the international audience, which typically seeks artworks in new media, with underlying messages of social engagement or a critique of authoritarian rule. The dominant mode of expression in Lao art,⁴ however, remains an oil painting in a modernist style with a neo-traditional agenda to romanticise Lao cultural heritage. In global art circuits, this type of artworks is often deemed passé, reinforcing a perception of Laos as backward, in a temporal sense. This might be a partial explanation for why the art of post-socialist Laos is generally overlooked in the field of Asian art history. Given the paucity of scholarly interest in the subject, this article gestures as an initiation. It offers fieldwork-based observations, preliminary thoughts and provisional conclusions. Being far from exhaustive in the scope of both the visual materials and practicing artists covered, the article seeks to propose the visual culture from Laos for further study and debate.

One of the arguments this article will advance is that pastiche as a key motivation in Lao art could be understood with attention to anachronism⁵ in the layered and unsettled quality of Lao modernity. Lao modernity was

moulded by a rapid introduction of colonial, Cold War, socialist and post-socialist visions of the world order in the long 20th century, which were further refracted by decolonising and nationalist inspirations. These visions were contextualised within the vernacular culture and Buddhist spatial-temporal conceptions. As an understanding of vernacular culture in Laos, as in many other places, is often conceived alongside such problematic constructs as ‘tradition’ and ‘legitimacy’, any version of Lao modernity was imagined to some extent as neo-traditional. To unpack the oxymoron of neo-traditionalism in Lao art, in this article I will analyse who has been advancing the imagining of modernity in Laos, what their agendas have been, and how ‘tradition’ has been constructed and utilised by these agents.

To decode the meanings inscribed by the iconography of ‘tradition’ in Lao post-socialist art, in particular, I will bracket the romanticising and glorifying function of this visual production. Instead, I will analyse how the image of the nation was constructed vis-à-vis state power. My suggestion will be that underneath neo-traditional subject matter, the nation is framed as a passive body of a female-cum-land, implicitly justifying its subjugation. A section of this article named “A Mountain is a Woman is a Nation” will outline this analysis.

After that, I will address the conundrum of post-socialist imagery in Laos, that is, the impossibility of the socialist state proposing a non-socialist future. This impasse is coupled with left nostalgia in Lao art—a longing for the phantasm of the “empire of justice”,⁶ disavowed with the end of the Cold War, but resisting detachment.

This article will examine the dynamics and politics underpinning Lao art since the early 1990s. It will trace artists’ debates on the bankruptcy of a socialist future, a critique of global capitalism, and a resulting withdrawal into ‘timeless’ Laos. It will further delineate continuous manipulation of time in the neo-traditional art and power discourses that seek to foreclose the imagining of both the future and the historical past of a nation. With the removal of iconography related to a modern pre-socialist past, the public gaze could be maintained on the safe ahistorical space of the “golden age of Lao Lane Xang culture”,⁷ away from unsettled scores and contested narratives. The state’s conjured image of a protector comes to mean the protection of the nation from any kind of time.

To sum up three streams of thoughts—on temporality, gendered articulation of the nation and precluded futurity in the art of post-socialist Laos—I will propose to read this art as a product of the alignment between artists and the authoritarian state. This alignment allows for the imagining of the nation as a feminised and disempowered phantasm of ‘timeless Mother-Land’.

Part 1. The Entangled Lao Temporality

In 2018 three Laotian artists, Souliya Phoumivong (1983–), Bounpaul Phothyzan (1979–) and Tcheu Siong (1947–) were invited to participate in one of the most prestigious shows of contemporary art in Asia—the 9th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT9) in Brisbane, Australia.⁸ Their participation was widely publicised in international as well as the Lao press, celebrating the recognition of contemporary art from Laos. Notwithstanding, it was not the first participation of Lao artists in high-profile international shows, including APT. In fact, each of these artists had been exhibited at reputable Asian art platforms before. Yet, despite being favoured by international curators, these artists do not frequent domestic art shows supported by the state-affiliated institutions. Local official platforms privilege artworks executed within an established vocabulary of French and American modernism, socialist realism and local cultural forms. This art continues to imagine Lao modernity as an anachronism—simultaneously contemporaneous and situated within the cultural tradition and Buddhist ritual calendar. A shorthand of neo-traditional art is, perhaps, the most intuitive way to describe this visual production.

‘Time travel’ is a trope often applied to Laos. The tourist industry romanticises Laos as an escape from today to the past, somewhere between the charms of French Indochina and the pre-modern authenticity of ethnic crafts and rituals. This narrative stresses that one will feel how *time flows differently* in Laos. The paradox of perception that Laos seems to be simultaneously in the present and in the past further victimises it as incapable of coping with global economic competition. Laos’ peculiar temporal disposition relates to the phenomenon debated in academia. This debate, operating with a gamut of terms from alternative modernities and the Southern Question to non-contemporaneous contemporaneity,⁹ is bound by the motivation to appreciate non-Western modernity on the premise of the local historical specificity. Also, “[a] potent mixture of modernity and archaism” that emerged after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in those regions of the world that had remained peripheral to the industrializing West–Euro–America” was noted by Harry Harootunian.¹⁰ I will return to his writing on the perception of time and what he calls a “historical present” in post-socialism later in this article.

At this point, it is necessary to review how modernity was imagined (and reimagined) in Laos till the advent of post-socialism. This analysis will guide us towards an understanding of what sorts of traditions the neo-traditional art in post-socialism is trying to invoke and what constitutes these traditions visually and symbolically?

Multiple Agents of Lao Modernity

In *A Short History of Laos*, Grant Evans stresses two factors important for the reading of the emergence of Lao modernity. First, that French colonialism had a distinct character, underlined by its *mission civilisatrice*. Second, that this French civilising effort, in turn, was distributed unevenly across Indochina.¹¹ It was considerably less pronounced in Laos compared to other territories. Historian Kathryn Sweet contextualises it for the sphere of medicine: “While subaltern historians in other regions of the world criticize colonial regimes for displacing indigenous systems of health and wellbeing, Lao historians criticize the French colonial administration for what they consider to be a neglect of the development of a modern health sector.”¹² A similar sentiment is often pronounced for the system of modern education and art education in particular. Indeed, the first state-sponsored art school was opened in Vientiane only in 1959.¹³ Yet the scarcity of colonial initiatives, limited scholarship or absence of state-sponsored institutions should not be mistaken for lack of modernising desire. It rather means that multiple, and more often, local agents played a more critical role in imagining modern Laos.

For instance, modern representations of Laos appeared simultaneously as a photographic practice of the royal court and the Sangha¹⁴ in Luang Prabang and photography and travelogue illustrations advanced by French explorers in the second half of the 18th century. It is illuminating to compare the use of photography in colonial and vernacular narratives.

A French invention¹⁵ and a sign of technological superiority, a photograph became an essential element of visualising the *mission civilisatrice* in Indochina. Diethard Ande notes the frequency of the following subject matter in his analysis of images taken by travelling photographers commissioned by the French colonial administration: portraits of officials and the military, schools, orphanages and tax offices, steamboats on the Mekong River, scenes of hunting and trophies of wild animals (big cats and elephants in particular), and portraits of ethnic tribes or women in traditional costumes (Figure 1).¹⁶ This imagery implies a conquering and civilising effort of modern and masculine administration over a wild and uncultivated body-cum-land of the natives.

Maurizio Peleggi argues that recognising the potential of photography, the Siamese monarchy promptly deployed it to fashion itself as modern.¹⁷ Somewhat ironically, a French technology was appropriated by Siamese royalty to advance its stand against French colonial power. Furthermore, close ties between Thai and Lao elites and the Sangha most probably facilitated an introduction of photography to Luang Prabang. Research of the Buddhist Archive of Photography indicates that Lao monks started to take photos in the

FIGURE 1: Photo of Ms Si from the Raquez collection, c. 1900.

Lao Northern capital as early as the 1870s—before it became a protectorate of the French. Photos taken by monks were used not only to record and represent their world, but also to facilitate religious education, and aid communication and relationships with monastic communities in Thailand, Cambodia and Burma.¹⁸ Images taken by the Lao royal family and monks were concerned with an insider view of monastic life, rituals and pilgrimage, as well as cultural life, royal ceremonies and modern historical events. These images constructed an alternative and complementary photographic

narrative to the one proposed by colonial photography. This narrative undid the monopoly of colonial masculinity and reclaimed an agency of Buddhist monks and local elites as modernising forces in Laos. The presence of plural visual narratives confirms that the becoming of Lao modernity was a collaborative enterprise of multiple agents (even if they were not aware of it or had disparate agendas).

Imagining Cultural Tradition to Imagine a Nation

In histories of Laos, the 1930s and 1940s are singled out as formative for the Lao cultural nationalist movement.¹⁹ The geographical entity of modern Laos emerged as a result of armed negotiations between France and Siam in 1893. The treaty between two powers split Lao territories along the Mekong river—its historical central artery—with the right bank falling under French control and the left bank becoming what is today the Isaan region or Northeast Thailand. Consequently, more ethnic Lao remained in the area under the Siamese control than in French Laos.²⁰ The 1930s were marked by the growth of anti-colonial sentiment in Vietnam and aggressive Thai propaganda of pan-Thai reunification with Laos. In the same decade, initiatives promoting cultural nationalism emerged in Laos. The synchronicity of these events gave some historians grounds to argue that the project of building Lao cultural consciousness was a French-sponsored defence manoeuvre.²¹ Perhaps, partially, it was so, but very soon a viceroy of Laos, Prince Phetsarath (a future leader of the *Lao Issara* anti-colonial group) became the movement's driving force. He engaged Lao elites and scholars as well as French researchers and influential figures to participate in his projects. For instance, he invited experts from the École française d'Extrême-Orient in Vietnam (EFEO) and Suzanne Karpelès from the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Phnom Penh to advise on restorations of the That Luang Stupa and Vat Phra Keow (Temple of the Emerald Buddha) and to support research in Lao culture, art and architecture. Under the aegis of Phetsarath, Vat Chan became a place where many notable Lao scholars, including Maha Sila Viravong, worked on Lao historiography, literature, linguistics and law.²²

In 1943, a School of Religious Arts (École des arts religieux) was opened at Vat Chan²³ with an assignment to assist in the restoration of Vat Phra Keow. It is plausible that the broader mission of this art school was related to the study, preservation and advancement of artistic heritage in Laos. In that sense, the school was one of the institutions that advanced development of such modern notions as 'national culture', 'national heritage' and 'cultural traditions' in Laos.²⁴

FIGURE 2: Venerable Maha Thera Khamfan Silasangvaro, Abbot of Vat Khili in Luang Prabang, 1935. Image: Buddhist Archive of Photography.

Simultaneously, notable Lao monks were also promoting ideas of cultural preservation and modern representation. For example, a photo taken in 1935 features Venerable Maha Thera Khamfan Silasangvaro (1901–87), Abbot of Vat Khili in Luang Prabang, drawing a watercolour picture (Figure 2).²⁵

Maha Thera Khamfan is known as a distinguished monk and a patron of arts and Buddhist photography. He received training in Dhamma and fine art in Bangkok c. 1921–30.²⁶ In 1931, he returned to Laos and became an abbot

of Vat Khili in Luang Prabang. The artistic practice of Maha Thera Khamfan ranged from paintings, applied arts and restoration of monasteries to the sculpting of Buddha statues. He also opened an art workshop on the temple grounds, where novices were trained in sculpting, woodcarving, applied arts and restoration of Buddhist arts and architecture.²⁷ Furthermore, Maha Thera Khamfan practised and collected photography, amassing a historically valuable collection.

As noted earlier, French intellectuals and cultural producers who, in a strict sense, were outside of the French colonial administration, were also involved in a project of Lao modernity. Namely, the French painter and educator Marc Leguay (1910–2001) had a major impact on the development of oil painting and graphic design. He arrived in Laos in 1936 and settled on the Khong Island. According to researcher Francis Benteux, he opened a school of applied arts there, although little is known about its curriculum. After World War II, Leguay moved to Vientiane and in 1948, he opened his second school, École des Arts Laotiens (School of Laotian Arts). However, it ceased operations shortly thereafter due to inadequate funding.²⁸ Leguay eventually became an art teacher at the Lycée de Pavie, where he taught generations of future Lao elites until 1975. Over the four decades he spent in Laos, Leguay designed national banknotes and stamps (of the Royal Lao Government) and produced publications on traditional Lao patterns, while his art was collected by the nation's most powerful families. Eventually, his oeuvre became inseparable from the visual identity of modern Laos and shaped a tradition in Lao art pedagogy for decades to come.

Leguay's representations of Laos fused Western ideas of linear perspective, the Impressionist commitment to plein air and close observation of real life, the modern mediums of oil painting or graphic design with local subject matter. The work *La Fête du That Luang de Vientiane* is a good example of Leguay's art (Figure 3). It has a distinctly modernist aesthetic with its off-centred triangular composition and bright palette. Its subject matter, on the contrary, proposes an iconography of Lao-ness. The That Luang Stupa, the main religious site of Laos, is placed here at the pinnacle. At another vertex of the composition is an elephant with an iconic Lao carriage *howdah*. Elephants are emblematic of Laos: the name of the old Lao kingdom is Lane Xang, the Land of a Million Elephants. Also, important annual rites in Laos involve elephants as key elements in the performances of social order and cultural tradition. The third focal point in Leguay's painting is a woman. In a modern blouse yet with traditional hair bun and belt, she is a stand-in for the nation, placed somewhere between performing the ritual (*La Fête du That Luang*) and going about her daily business.

FIGURE 3: Marc Leguay, *La Fête du That Luang de Vientiane*, 1948–49, oil on plywood. Private collection. Image: Author.

Canonised by local artists, Leguay's depiction of Laos is, nonetheless, problematic. On the one hand, it is driven by an ethnographic impulse and an affection for the local culture. On the other, his artworks curate a corpus of exoticised and gendered imagery. Subjects common in his works are women in traditional costumes, ethnic minorities and objects of traditional culture. Leguay's female sitters are often enveloped in domesticity, performing the roles

of caregivers and mothers. Occasionally, they are also depicted in intimate acts of self-adorning, being objectified for the pleasure of Leguay's foreign masculine gaze. Rendered in the modern technique of oil painting, these sitters are relegated to traditional domains. On the contrary, sights of an urban landscape, modern lifestyle or social change are absent in Leguay's work. This problem of latent modernity imbued with fetishised exotic tradition would be taken forward by his students and become chronic in Lao art until now.

Imagining Post-colonial, Nation-building, Cold War Laos

Historian Simon Creak notes that Lao independence was "granted in stages between 1949 and 1953–1954".²⁹ The emergence of the Independent Kingdom of Laos and the brewing of the Cold War became contemporaneous developments with the latter bearing on the former. Prasenjit Duara stresses that to interpret the condition of the Cold War in Asia, such concepts as imperialism, nationalism and decolonisation should be considered simultaneously.³⁰ In the 1950s, decolonisation and imagining the nation-state produced a great sense of optimism in Laos, notes Evans.³¹ He writes that new national institutions were formed, including those dealing with culture and national identity: "a national police force was created, a national treasury, a post office issuing its own stamps and various cultural institutions dealing with Buddhism, national monuments, and language and literature".³² One of these newly founded institutions was a state-sponsored art school, the School of Lao Fine Arts (*École des Beaux-Arts Lao*). It was established by the adviser to the Minister of National Education, Fine Arts, Sport and Youth, Southan Sichan Blanchard de la Brosse in 1959.³³

The scholarship on Lao art and culture was energised during that time as well. The Vientiane office of EFEO opened in 1951 spearheading research in anthropology, archaeology and philology. Lao intellectuals who served at various departments of the Royal Lao Government published on art, literature and music. Prince Souvanna Phouma, Phouvong Phimmason, Boun Souk and Khanthong Thammavong contributed to the field with multiple entries.³⁴

Urban development in Vientiane was another manifestation of this nation-building. The 1950s architecture of independent Laos experimented with the aesthetics for the new era of the country. Perhaps the most ambitious secular structure of that decade is the Anousavali monument³⁵ inaugurated in 1957.³⁶ Another major project of that period is the enlargement of Lane Xang Avenue in 1961–62.³⁷ It turned former Lane Xang road into a modern boulevard and a symbolic axis of the Lao capital. The early 1960s saw a construction of city

FIGURE 4: Photo of Lane Xang hotel, 1970. Image: Joel M. Halpern Laotian Slide Collection, library of University Wisconsin-Madison.

landmarks such as the city market, National Assembly, Ministry of Interior and Lane Xang Hotel (Figure 4).³⁸ Stylistic choices in the architecture of that period represented a debate along the vector of tradition–modernism. If Anousavali amalgamated references to French modernism, traditional Lao motives and Buddhist architecture, Lane Xang Hotel, on the contrary, introduced the international style to the Vientiane landscape.

The growing influence of the Cold War in Indochina also started to affect the new state and its art. Truong Vu argues that for the first few decades of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was reluctant to align with communist leaders in Indochina.³⁹ In Laos, the scale of American efforts was larger than that of the USSR.⁴⁰

The superpowers' Cold War strategies of global influence encompassed the cultural sphere alongside the political and the military ones. Revisionist studies of travelling exhibitions “have criticised the export of American art during the 1950s and 1960s as US Cold War propaganda”, notes Kathleen Ditzig.⁴¹ One of the instruments of such export was the International Program of The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), with its operations supported by the United States Information Agency. MoMA's exhibition of photography *The Family of Man*, for example, was brought to 38 countries and seen by an estimated 7.5 million people outside of the US. It centred around the message

FIGURE 5: Photo of Soukhaseum Chanthapanya's exhibition in the *Friendship* magazine published by the Lao-American Association, 1970.

of universal humanism and effectively presented the US as its promoter. In recent evaluations, *The Family of Man* is often critiqued as an oppressive tool of American imperialism.⁴²

The Family of Man was brought to Vientiane and shown at That Luang in 1959. The timing of the show strategically coincided with the That Luang festival when big crowds visit the site. Little is known about the exhibition's reception, or if any other MoMA shows were brought to Laos. Yet it is evident that the US programmes supported modern art in the country. An issue of the magazine *Friendship* in 1970, published by the Lao-American Association (LAA), contains a feature on the solo exhibition of artist Soukhaseum Chanthapanya (Figure 5). In the interview with the magazine, Soukhaseum recounts that he participated annually in art shows and prizes sponsored by Lao officials and American associations since his graduation in 1964.⁴³

Often, art exhibitions were held at Lane Xang hotel. Inspired by American modernist artworks at one of these shows, Anoulom Souvanduan (1948–) produced an oil painting in 1974 (Figure 6).⁴⁴ This painting is interesting to analyse, for it puts forward a new vision of modern Laos.

Landmarks of religious architecture, traditional dance and music are the main subjects of this artwork. The embodiment and performance of authentic culture are presented here in the modern visual syntax of cubism. An assemblage of statues, stupas and temple stands for the unity of the Lao Kingdom and includes the Phivat Buddha of Xieng Khouang province, the temple on Phu Si Mountain in Luang Prabang, and That Luang and Vat Ong Teu of Vientiane. It must be noted that, in reality, these sites are geographically distant from one another. Ashley Thompson, in her study of Cambodian temple

FIGURE 6: Anoulom Souvanduan, *Untitled*, c. 1974, oil on canvas. Image: Author.

murals, observes that they may feature the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh and Angkor Wat in Siem Reap province within the same image. She argues that the placement of remote sites within a singular pictorial plane indicates that the space in the mural should be read not as a geographical but a cosmological one, designating the Khmer civilization.⁴⁵ Similarly, Anoulom's canvas frames a cosmological space for imagining the nation. Expressed in cubist aesthetics, the work is a modern sight of the Mother-Land as a spiritual body, rather than a geopolitical formation. The painting also proposes a set of national iconography, featuring ubiquitous mountain ranges, *dock champa* (a frangipani flower, the national flower of Laos), Naga (a prominent element in Lao Buddhist art) and an iconic Lao musical instrument *khene*. Thus, cultural heritage, national iconography and modernist expressions come together within cosmological space to imagine modern Laos.

Imagining Lao Socialist Modernity

Two years after Anoulom produced the painting discussed above, he authored a drastically different representation of the world order in Laos—a national emblem of the Lao PDR (Figure 7).

One afternoon in 1976, Anoulom was invited to the art school to receive an urgent task: develop the national emblem of the newly established Lao People's Democratic Republic. The deadline given to him was one night. He came home, had an early dinner with his family, then locked himself in a

FIGURE 7: Anoulom Souvanduan, Lao PDR emblem, 1976. Image: Artist.

workshop. The next day one of his designs was approved.⁴⁶ The iconography of the emblem that he proposed referenced the principles that the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) had approved at the National Congress in 1975. It spoke of progress and modernisation and celebrated the sources of economic potential—hydro energy, forestry and agriculture. The socialist symbology was borrowed from emblems of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China in a pledge of new ideological alignment. In a radical impulse to reimagine Lao modernity as socialist, Anoulom rejected the previous iconography he had created during the Royal Lao Government period. None of the signs of Lao traditional culture are present in the emblem and only the potential of the Lao *land* is taken forward to imagine a Lao socialist future.

For the next two decades, Anoulom was employed as a designer of Lao national banknotes and propaganda posters. Once he started to elaborate on the visual identity of socialist Laos, some of the symbols and motives that he had developed earlier found their way back—Lao decorative patterns, architectural landmarks and females in traditional costumes came to animate Anoulom's visual production once again. This iconography of cultural tradition situated revolutionary imagery of marching soldiers, machine guns and

party flags as naturalised Lao. Without this iconography, the floating signifiers of socialism could not be grounded to become the Lao socialist world order.

Architecture and urban planning offered some other modes of imagining socialist modernity in the Second World. Christina Schwenkel studies utopian designs of Eastern Germany and their transference to Vietnam. According to her, “The dissemination of ideas about socialist modernity through the circulation of planning practices was as much about the techno-architectural engineering of urban space as it was about the social engineering of a global humanity.”⁴⁷

“Soviet-style” architecture, however, is marginal in the landscape of Vientiane. Despite being a focal point of the American Cold War map until the mid-1970s, Laos assumed a peripheral position on the map of the Eastern Bloc. Consequently, Soviet financial help to Laos was limited. Moreover, it was mainly directed to building infrastructure rather than monumental urban spaces: bridges, roads, a radio station, electricity lines, geological stations, etc.⁴⁸ The Soviet Union, East Germany, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Mongolia and Hungary provided aid to Laos. Yet the scale of this help remained modest. For example, one Soviet report reads: “GDR is assisting LPDR in education, establishing construction companies, bicycle repair workshops and other objects [...] HPR (Hungarian People’s Republic) is assisting Laos in irrigation and building a broiler chicken farm.”⁴⁹

In the absence of grand architectural projects, other means of manifesting a socialist world order were necessary. As if following the advice of Benedict Anderson,⁵⁰ the Monument of the Unknown Soldier was built in the early 1980s. Its architecture became a striking mix of Buddhist cosmological conceptions, modern historical narratives and socialist iconography (Figure 8).

Conceptually, communist doctrine positioned itself as antagonistic to religious beliefs and promoted an atheist state. A more complex relationship evolved between the communist party and Sangha in Lao PDR. Some monks contributed to the revolutionary struggle of the communist Pathet Lao organisation in the pre-socialist years. Yet Buddhist philosophy was not aligned with economic reforms and the programme of “building a new socialist man” proclaimed by the party.⁵¹ So, at first, the new government attempted an anti-Buddhist campaign but soon realised that it was counterproductive to maintaining power.⁵² With the Buddhist worldview central to Lao society, the socialist regime was better off operating within it, rather than trying to surpass it. Likewise, an architectural embodiment of Lao socialist cosmology was envisioned as a stupa-like structure, as paradoxical as that may seem from a purely Marxist perspective. At the pinnacle of this structure and, by analogy, at the apex of the Lao cosmology was a communist star. It announced

FIGURE 8: The Monument of the Unknown Soldier (reconstructed at the new location), 2018.
Image: Author.

socialism as the highest human attainment. The base of the monument presented the visual storytelling of Lao history in a realist style and with a linear chronological flow from the glorious days of the past to the celebration of the current regime.

Conceptually, both a stupa and a monument of the unknown soldier are symbolic burial sites. A stupa is also a site of channelling merit upon its vicinity and congregation. By this logic, the commemoration of the Monument of the Unknown Soldier in Vientiane can be translated as an act of promoting a meritorious socialist nation. Furthermore, the architectural formula of the monument is reproduced in multiple statues erected across provincial centers in Lao PDR. The network of these statues references the system of kinship in traditional Lao *meuang*.⁵³ In that regard, a project of imagining socialist modernity in Laos creatively utilised communist symbology, historical narrative of continuity, Buddhist visualisation of cosmic order and traditional spatial concepts of the legitimacy of power.

Neo-traditional Art as a Method of Naturalising Modernity

Thus far, my analysis has followed the imagining of Lao modernity from its onset and through the subsequent emergence of Lao cultural nationalism and

the independent state, firstly leaning to the right and later to the left side of the Cold War. This analysis has aimed to highlight the continuous presence of the iconography of Lao 'tradition', specifically its cultural heritage. This presence of tradition, as stated in the introduction, effectively made any image of Lao modernity to be neo-traditional. But why is neo-traditionalism so persistent in Laos, and how does it relate to neo-traditionalism in the visual production in Southeast Asia?

According to eminent art historian John Clark, a phenomenon of neo-traditionalism "has frequently recurred in other Asian discourses, so the debate has something of an a-temporal potential to premanifest itself in very different contexts".⁵⁴ Clark studies neo-traditional art from Japan in the 1880s and India in the 1890s to Thailand in the 1980s and 1990s, concluding that each wave of neo-traditionalism is specific and informed by unique historical dynamics. He stresses that "there can be no singular analytical model for grasping what 'neotraditional' might mean across all cultures".⁵⁵ At the same time, Clark underlines a persistent political motivation of neo-traditionalism as a method. He writes:

If we acknowledge the constructed quality of all modern 'traditions', [...] we could sign this historical contingency and artificiality by the term 'neotraditional'. What would a neotraditional art be? It would be a rough compromise between accepting the legitimacy of past forms and techniques and an attempt to reinvent the context from which that legitimacy is drawn. The definition of neo-traditional art involves a reinterpretation of the formal value system that govern art, ones usually denoted by a set of style markers, or by technique or content. But it also involves the legitimising of a claim to authority over the future by those who interpret the values of the past.⁵⁶

Clark's analysis of neo-traditional art is particularly helpful as it points away from focusing on the content of the artwork and toward agendas behind reinterpreting this content. He writes, "anything that might be termed 'traditional' is an invention whose ideological motivation must be questioned or debated, [...] The use of 'traditional' has, in other words, confused a formal content with a social modality."⁵⁷

Following Clark's line of argument, a look at Lao neo-traditional art as a *method* of reinterpretation is urgent. Besides making a point about the continuous presence of references to tradition, the analysis of Lao modern art presented above also underlines the turbulent, somewhat fast-forward developments in Lao modernity. Multiple local, colonial and neo-colonial agents of

various ideological affiliations collaborated on or contested the imagining of Lao modernity in the long 20th century. Buddhist monks, Lao elites, French photographers, American agencies and socialist engineers promoted their visions of a desired world order. Imaging these desires in the realm of Lao cultural tradition was a method to naturalise them as fitting and legitimate. Consequently all ideological variations of Lao modernity were imagined as neo-traditional. In this light, it becomes only logical that post-socialist art in Laos follows the same trajectory. In fact, it never had an alternative.

Part 2. Imagining the Mother-Land: A Woman is a Mountain is a Nation

Eric Hobsbawm cautions us to treat tradition critically, as a manipulated category.⁵⁸ For a critical approach towards the iconography of Lao tradition, I propose two complementary analytical frameworks. The first one will help us to keep track of what sorts of ‘traditions’ are included or excluded from the state-sponsored visual production. This framework is based on the centres of cultural production in pre-modern Laos, namely, *ban* (village and folk), *vat* (temple and Theravadin Buddhist spirituality), *court* (royal and high culture), *ethnicities* (culture of ethnic minorities) and *ritual* (performance of tradition, memory and social order). Second, it is important to understand how the references to tradition operate on the allegorical level to imply a nation. John Clark emphasises the theme of the liberating struggle and the image of a woman as a symbol of national identity.⁵⁹ Simon Soon takes this topic further, arguing that a female body, as well as a vista, were mobilised by artists for nationalist and ideological discourses.⁶⁰ In the analysis of the art of the Cold War, Christine Lindey touches upon the subject of a female as a site of promoting socialist values in the Eastern Bloc.⁶¹ The works of these art historians suggest that the nexus “*woman–vista–nation*” will be productive to interpret the implicit qualities that a nation came to bear.

Modern art in Laos has been historically preoccupied with a female figure. In socialist propaganda, the proximity between images of the female body and the nation became especially noticeable. Lao posters treated the female body as a proxy for the nation or the revolution in explicit ways. A poster produced in 1967 in Hoaphan province, the home base of the communist Pathet Lao, offers a good example (Figure 9).

The poster is a direct reference to Eugène Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), which commemorated the French Revolution of 1830. Borrowing *Liberty*’s composition and allegoric device, the poster seeks to repeat its call to mobilise the people to follow a female-cum-revolution. At the same time,

FIGURE 9: Hoaphan poster, 1967. Image: KPL archive, reproduced by Michèle-Baj Strobel.⁶²

the context of the painting is reinterpreted to align with the Lao communist struggle: the French flag of the Delacroix painting is appropriately replaced with that of Lao PDR, Liberty's breasts are covered in accordance with communist morale, and the props of male characters are adjusted to AK 47s and communist soldiers' uniforms. The text of the poster reads: "For the liberty and equality of the nation".⁶³

Ironically, it seems that after 1975, the figure of a singular female leading a struggle was replaced with a collective female body re-ordered as a follower. Militarised and disciplined, this collective female body became a recurring motif in official imagery. A photograph of a parade taken by Grant Evans and a stamp commemorating 30 years of the establishment of LPRP, both produced in 1985, deploy women as metaphoric devices (Figures 10 and 11). Individual females in these images perform distinct identities as members of ethnic groups or social classes who come together as a nation in unity, under ideological subscription and command.

FIGURE 10: Ethnic minorities female armed groups at the parade of 1985. Image: Grant Evans.⁶⁴

FIGURE 11: Lao stamp commemorating 30 years of LPRP, 1985. Photo: NA.

A ubiquitous image of a collective female body in Laos is a troika of females that represent three ethnic groups: *Lao Loum* (ລາວລຸ່ມ), *Lao Theung* (ລາວເທິງ) and *Lao Soung* (ລາວສູງ). For instance, this image is featured on the Lao PDR banknotes designed by Anoulom. Interestingly, this design traces its genealogy to an earlier image of a collective body of Vietnamese, Lao and Cambodian women printed on piastres of French Indochina. As with many colonial imaginations, it was later appropriated by local players for their own discourses of legitimacy and control.

In recent years, images of women at state-sponsored group exhibitions are interspersed with vistas of mountainous landscapes. Unlike Leguay's women immersed in homemaking activities or revolutionary female bodies in socialist art, contemporary portraiture often suspends women against empty backdrops or essentialised landscapes. This imagery associates the female with tradition and cultural revival. Women in post-socialist neo-traditional art are aestheticised, desexualised and impersonalised. Embodying national culture, they are burdened by puritanism—nudes are not allowed at official exhibitions, and body politics and female subjectivity are considered taboo (Figures 12, 13, 14, 15).

FIGURE 12: May Chandavong, *Procession in Luang Prabang*, 2004, oil on canvas. Private collection. Image reproduced from *Contemporary Lao Art*.⁶⁵

FIGURE 13: Chaleunphone Phommabouth, *Untitled*, 2013, oil on canvas. Image: Author.

FIGURE 14: Hongsa Khotsouvanh, *Untitled*, 2018, watercolour. Image: Artist.

FIGURE 15: Noy Xayatham, *Untitled*, 2018, oil on canvas. Image: Author.

The women in these artworks are depicted in traditional dresses and are performing various rituals. Besides the female body being a site of imagined and enacted tradition, there is also an implicit connection between a woman and the land in Laos. Marriage in lowland Lao-Tai ethnic communities is matrilineal, and inheritance is matrilineal, meaning that the ownership of land is tied to the female and the female is tied to a land.⁶⁶ “Woman is food” is a metaphor that is found in Lao songs.⁶⁷ It underlines women’s roles in cooking and feeding the family, her connection to home, nature and nurture. The land’s topography, in turn, relates to the ethnic question. Like a layered cake, lowlands in Laos are populated by Lao-Tai people or *Lao Loum* (lowland group in official categorisation); mid-hills by ethnicities that came to Laos in pre-historic times, *Lao Theung*; and mountain tops by *Lao Soung* including the Hmong-Mien people of relatively recent migration. To inscribe control over the whole nation, from the bottom of the Mekong valley to the top, women of these three ethnic categories should be represented. A triangulation of these women becomes a mountain and its peoples. Thus, the image of the Mother-Land is conceived in the formula “A woman is a mountain is a nation.”

Aestheticised, flattened to the ground and objectified, female portraiture in contemporary Laos attaches a gamut of meanings to the Mother-Land. This gendered assemblage connotes cultural authenticity, soothing beauty, retrospectivity, passivity, submission and disempowerment. It calls for the binary opposition of masculinity, superiority and authority. Legitimising the possession of the Mother-Land, neo-traditional art is a mode of power discourse. Ironically, one can see an uncanny resemblance of its logic with colonial photographic projects discussed earlier in this essay. There the 'native body' was also conceived as imagery of a female-cum-land to justify colonial rule.

The second line of inquiry in neo-traditional art proposed here deals with iconography. It seeks to deconstruct the references to 'tradition', in order to analyse the legacies that are included or excluded from visual production within certain historical periods.

It could be suggested that the modern art of pre-socialist Laos adopted a sort of self-ethnographic gaze. This gaze recycled a broad scope of subjects from daily life, Buddhist rites and Phra Lak Phra Lam⁶⁸ performances, to various means of transportation, material culture and the lifestyles of ethnic minorities, to represent them in a modern medium. Cultural production of all nodes of *ban-vat-court-ritual-ethnicity* was included as subject matter of modern art. However, greater attention was paid to heritage and less so to social change. For example, the transformation of the urban landscape, which was mentioned earlier in this essay, found little reflection in paintings. The narrative of the Pathet Lao victory brought a new emphasis on ethnic minorities and the peasant population in modern socialist art. Advancing from the mountainous border with Vietnam, Pathet Lao indeed relied on the livelihoods of rural ethnic people in those areas. In socialist historiography, this fact was interpreted as a struggle of the disenfranchised population against corrupted Lao elites and their French and American overloads. Consequently, the construct of 'national tradition' has been visually adjusted since 1975, with an emphasis on the node of *ethnicity* and exclusion of iconography of high and religious cultures or *vat-court* visuality from socialist art. Until now, the framework for neo-traditionalist art remains *ban-ritual-ethnicity*. Consequently, the notion of the national in post-socialist Laos is anchored in lay rather than learned culture.

Part 3. Mother-Land Happy Forever: Delayed Future, Left Nostalgia and Mythic Time

Post-socialism is an ambiguous term as it might refer to a condition of the former Second World countries or only to those states that remained formally

socialist after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Even within these groups, the conditions in, for example, Eastern Europe and Russia, or China, Vietnam and Laos vary significantly. Considering this fact, it is beyond the scope of this essay to apprehend the phenomenon of post-socialism per se. Instead, I will focus exclusively on post-socialism in Laos. Similarly, my attention to post-socialist art will be confined to Laos exclusively.

Martin Stuart-Fox defines Lao post-socialism as “the condition of socio-political reality established by the 1990s, with a one-party authoritarian government and a free market economic system”.⁶⁹ Grant Evans stresses “the political continuity between the revolutionary and post-socialist phases”.⁷⁰ Norihiko Yamada underscores and further contextualises this idea of continuity. Studying authoritarianism in Laos, Yamada makes two observations that are illuminating for the interpretation of Lao visual production in post-socialism. One is related to the legitimacy of the party, while the other concerns the idea of a delayed future.

Analysing LPRP rhetoric, Yamada concludes that: “Having come to power through socialist revolution, socialism has always provided the LPRP regime with the most fundamental source of political legitimacy. By abandoning socialist ideology, the party would itself lose legitimacy.”⁷¹ He further elaborates that “the building of a socialist state shifted from a real objective to an ideal one as early as 1979. Since then, socialism has remained an ideal in that the party is not sure whether it can be achieved. [...] In other words, Laos [is] in an ultra-long transition.”⁷²

I would also argue that parallel rhetoric of the legitimacy of LPRP is under construction since post-socialism. It is anchored in messages of protecting “Lao multi-ethnic people” (*pasason lao banda phao*) and their culture—another lifelong promise of the party. This position is advantageous in post-socialism as it is ideology-free and nationalist in flavour. It also allows the party to assume the role of a patron of Buddhism and hence, leverage Buddhist conceptions of power and time. Yves Goudineau presents a similar argument, writing that “[an] official exhibition of ethnic diversity” is emphasised in government programmes. He notes that it has become standardised, institutionalised and thus increasingly problematic.⁷³ How is the state impulse to ‘re-traditionalise’ Laos addressed in the domain of visual production?

Imagining Post-socialist Laos as a Timeless, Festive, Multi-ethnic Village

The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall were enthusiastically celebrated by both the West and the former East. But for socialist Laos, this came with the end of economic and cultural support from the Eastern Bloc.

FIGURE 16: Kanha Sikounnavong, *Rocket Festival of That Luang*, 1991, oil on canvas. Fukuoka Asian Art Museum collection.

As the global world order started to gravitate towards emerging Asian powerhouses, so did Laos. The 1990s became a decade of Laos' reintegration into Asian networks of economic and cultural exchange. The partnership with the Asian Development Bank intensified from the 1990s and in 1997 Lao PDR joined ASEAN. Mirroring these developments, art from Laos started to feature in platforms of regional cultural diplomacy.

Reviewing Lao entries to Japanese art shows and ASEAN Art Awards in the 1990s, it becomes apparent that Laos curated a peculiar vision of the self—that of a timeless, festive, multi-ethnic village. The work of Kanha Sikounnavong (1958–), *Rocket Festival of That Luang*, is illustrative (Figure 16).

With pleasing colours, soft brushstrokes and patches of light, *Rocket Festival of That Luang* is filled with a cheerful and somewhat whimsical atmosphere. Working in a theatre at the time of making the painting, Kanha borrows the logic of stage decorations to set up his composition in parallel planes. His version of realism looks constructed for the spectacle, not quite real and certainly not socialist. As if painting an introduction to the culture of Laos, Kanha parades before us all things Lao. We see a woman in a traditional dress, her hair in a Lao bun. Next to her is a man playing the Lao windpipe, *khane*. To their right is a group of men enjoying a drink in a local manner from a common jar with long straws, beside women selling sticky rice, a Lao staple and signifier of a difference from the long-grain rice of lowland Southeast Asia. On further planes, there is a woman and a child from an ethnic minority, a house on stilts and an oxcart. The composition is crowned

with the That Luang stupa. That Luang is located in Vientiane—the capital and an urban site—yet the setting of the artwork does not look urban. The painting’s title, in turn, is an amalgamation of two events on the Lao calendar: the Rocket Festival, which takes place at some point between April and June, and the That Luang festival held in November.⁷⁴ It is not an accurate depiction of the country’s condition or events that the artwork presents but rather a dream of rural romance—happy people with a rich and authentic culture, immersed in the perpetual performance of tradition. In Kanha’s work, the annual festivals on a loop and the absence of modernity withdraw the dimension of time from the image of the Mother-Land.

Around the same time, the theoretical grounding of neo-traditional art in post-socialism was developed by Nousay Phoummachanh in the essay “Modern Art in Laos”.⁷⁵ Nousay begins his argument by asserting the ancient and multi-ethnic cultural heritage of Laos. He then suggests a vernacular impulse in the ascent of Lao modernity, including the move from traditional to modern art.⁷⁶

Nousay underlines the necessity for modern Asian art to embrace sensibilities that “correspond to the individuality of the race”,⁷⁷ and claims that Asian art, which does not abide by this “individuality”, is either distracted by fashion or is a conscious fallacy. These arguments not only justified that modern Lao art has to be neo-traditional but also flirted with an idea of pan-Asianism, a popular notion across the region at that time. The next step of Nousay’s chronology announced the establishment of the Lao School of Fine Arts in 1958⁷⁸ as the beginning of modern art in Laos. It effectively erased earlier achievements of the Sangha as well as Lao and French cultural producers, considered inconvenient for post-socialist (art) historiography.

Left Nostalgia and the Spectre of “The Empire of Justice”

Socialist ideology may be unappealing in today’s former Eastern Bloc, disenchanted with communist experiments and the realities of the Cold War, yet a sentiment of left nostalgia is commonly felt in Laos. The captivating power of a socialist dream is aptly captured in Westad’s analysis of the Cold War as a contest between “the empire of liberty” and “the empire of justice”.⁷⁹ Prasenjit Duara contextualises the attractiveness of socialism for nation-building in Asia. According to him, unlike a subaltern position in the colonial system, membership in socialist alignments rendered all socialist countries as brothers. The network of solidarity and mutual development further boosted modernising projects of nation-states. Projecting a promise of a better future to the poor and disempowered, socialist ideology enjoyed a moral superiority

FIGURE 17: Kongphat Luangrath, *Starvation*, 1994, oil on canvas. Fukuoka Asian Art Museum collection.

over the capitalist camp. What is also relevant to multi-ethnic Laos, is that socialist countries developed a powerful idea of granting nationality rights to ethnic minorities of the state, while simultaneously absorbing them within the quasi-national unity.⁸⁰ These ideas of justice and empowerment were, perhaps, a phantasm, yet one that impacted the reality in Indochina. Hajimu Masuda proposes to review the cultural history of the Cold War as a “history of a *fantasy* of the Cold War, focusing on its imagined and constructed nature as well as the social need for such an imagined reality”.⁸¹ He believes that the popular imagination of Cold War “reality” affected cultures and national identities on both sides of the divide.

With these theoretical considerations in mind, the collapse of the socialist bloc could have been felt in Laos like a betrayal of fraternity and a righteous dream. It triggered reflexivity and nostalgic tonality in artists’ works in the 1990s.

A spectre of “the empire of justice” haunts the art of Kongphat Luangrath (1951–). Some of the themes that animate his work in the 1990s are human suffering, inequality and responsibility. *Starvation* (Figure 17) was produced during Kongphat’s residency at the 4th Asian Art Show in Fukuoka in 1994. The work was situated within an exhibition that aimed to present Japan as a promoter of pan-Asian cultural development. Speaking to an ambition

FIGURE 18: Kongphat Luangrath, *Gift to Young*, 1994. Limited edition print. Ed 5/7. Collection of the artist. Image: Author.

of patronage, *Starvation* pleads to continue to pursue the ideal of global social justice.

Dream-like and almost surrealist, the artwork attracts viewers with its vibrant colours and shocks with its images of starved human bodies and ghostly faces. Kongphat's signature style of juxtaposing forms, scales and contrasting hues serves to puzzle and unsettle onlookers. Playful on the surface, the work unveils its dark humour the more we engage with it. "It is about poverty and hunger in many countries of the world," says Kongphat. "We should aim for common prosperity. Not fight for power when others are poor and hungry. We should aim for getting richer all of us in the world together."⁸²

Another work that Kongphat produced in Japan in the same year extends his thoughts into the subject of responsibility towards future generations (Figure 18). The limited-edition print *Gift to Young* features an hourglass shape with a human head at its centre. The head gazes simultaneously in three directions—back, straight and forward. The earth at the bottom of the hourglass is lifeless, polluted with debris and tires, while the environment

above the head is an abundance of growth, life and beauty. The key to the meaning of this artwork is in its title, hints Kongphat. It tells us that if our generation fails to take care of the living environment today, we will pass this problem to our children.

How does left nostalgia that is present in Lao art and exemplified in Kongphat's work operate vis-à-vis the Buddhist faith? Buddhist doctrine teaches detachment as a way to prevent the pain of loss. In that sense, the Buddhist perspective should negate a production of nostalgia in a Buddhist society. Nonetheless, a trope of ghostly returns is common in the lore of Buddhist countries. In her studies of cinematic production in Thailand, Arnika Fuhrmann pays attention to spectral bodies and non-doctrinal possibilities of Buddhist interpretation. According to Fuhrmann, the instances of refused detachment are precisely the ones that engender ghostly imaginations.⁸³ Perhaps the only possibility for "the empire of justice" anywhere in the world has always been a phantasm. Yet it is in Laos that this phantasm gained spectral powers to persist in the present.

The phenomena of left nostalgia and retrospective gaze are common among post-socialist nations, argues Harootunian. Writing on (global) post-socialist temporality, he singles out the neo-traditional turn as a response to foreclosed socialist future:

Once socialism collapsed, forfeiting the promise of a better future, new fundamentalism and nativism driven by an adherence to mixed messages turned to ambiguous traditions in order to respond to the misfortunes of the present and acknowledge the bankruptcy of a future that had once offered it the perspective of anticipation.⁸⁴

Thus, Harootunian argues that the imagery of tradition displaces the imagery of the future that became unattainable. However, the image of the timeless Mother-Land happy forever has one more dimension of time that is altered. Not only the future but also the historical past should be obstructed from view: the former because of its impossibility in post-socialism and the latter because of its undesirability.⁸⁵

In *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*, Grant Evans attends to the relationship between time, history and tradition in post-socialist Laos. He notices that a "slippage between legend and the modern idea of history is pervasive". At first, he attributes it to a weak Lao state and its historiography but later backtracks.⁸⁶ Evans knows that the production of national mythical time is not accidental. He admits that "state-scripted histories can be sustained ultimately only by force".⁸⁷ He also alludes that rational linear histories

might be unsatisfying to societies that live in what he calls “differential temporalities”.⁸⁸ A production of the alternative temporal dimension, that of the sacred and mythical, becomes a resolution between the state and the people, he concludes. “This, no doubt, partly explains the vigour with which the Lao have thrown themselves into reviving ‘tradition’.”⁸⁹ This temporality of the sacred and mythical could be titled the “the Golden age of Lane Xang”. My analysis has shown how the idea of “the Golden age of Lane Xang” inspired decades of neo-traditional art. Yet, its purchase takes on a broader scope. Evans explains the revival of annual rituals and festivals as sites that produce this mythical time,⁹⁰ whereas Oliver Tappe interprets the erection of statues of pre-modern “hero-kings” as the production of national ancestry.⁹¹ Neo-traditional art that is promoted as state-sponsored art shows, I argue, is noteworthy for the fact that it visually displaces the Mother-Land from historical time to mythical temporality. Thus, the Mother-Land is locked out of time, happy for ever.

Coda. Timeless Laos Safe from the Past and the Future

I opened this article with an introduction to three artists who show their artworks at prestigious international shows. This introduction alluded to the existence of contemporary art from post-socialist Laos. Yet, its main point was to stress that this type of art is excluded from public view within Laos. Instead, neo-traditional art is promoted by the state as a mode of its power discourse. This visual production is worth exploring for the creative strategies it developed. One of them is a construction of an image of a nation as a gendered and passive category of the Mother-Land. The other is conjuring a time of tradition—an appealing romantic myth of a cultural golden age. The post-socialist condition in Laos is problematic in the sense that it does not allow the power to propose a viable future for the nation; neither does it welcome a preoccupation with the historical past. In this conundrum of temporality, neo-traditional art offers a resolution: a projection of the Mother-Land onto an alternative time. As a result, the Mother-Land is imagined as out-of-time, happy forever, and saved from both the past and the future.

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BIOGRAPHY

Anna Koshcheeva researches the visual culture of Laos. Her focus stems from a fascination with the image, global history of the Cold War and the production of modernity on the margin. She engages with cultural theories, ideas of temporality and Buddhist studies. Anna holds an MA in Asian Art Histories from Goldsmiths' College, University of London and an MA in World Economics from Udmurt State University, Russia. Currently, she is a PhD student at the Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University.

NOTES

- ¹ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 24.
- ² Laurie Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist: A Bibliography of Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Seaview Books, 1980), p. 235.
- ³ Kaysone Phomvihane Кейсон Фонвихан, *Revolitsiia v Laose: Nekotorye osnovnye uroki i glavnye zadachi* Революция в Лаосе: Некоторые основные уроки и главные задачи (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1980), p. 4, my translation from Russian. This text was published in Lao in 1977, in Russian in 1980 and in English in 1981 as *Revolution in Laos: Practice and Progress*.
- ⁴ By 'Lao' in this essay, I refer to the nationality and not the ethnicity, if not specified otherwise. I acknowledge the multi-ethnic profile of Lao PDR and use 'Lao', and not 'Laotian', as this term is preferred in vernacular discourse. In that sense, I use 'Lao' as a shorthand for 'of the country of Laos'. I exclude the analysis of diasporic art in this essay but include the one of influential foreign artists resident in Laos, e.g., Marc Leguay.
- ⁵ Here I borrow the term "anachronism" from Arnika Fuhrmann as "a comprehensive, nonevaluative term that designates the coexistence of two or more divergent temporal elements in a given moment or period of time". See Arnika Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 7.
- ⁶ As coined by Odd Arne Westad, who proposes to read the Cold War, for instance, as a war between the "Empire of Liberty" and the "Empire of Justice". See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- ⁷ Commonly understood as the culture of the Lane Xang Kingdom in the 16th–17th centuries CE. Here and after, I adhere to the French-spelling romanisation of the Kingdom's name.
- ⁸ See the list of artists at the 9th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT9) on the website of Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art: <https://www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/the-9th-asia-pacific-triennial-of-contemporary-art-apt9> [accessed 28 Feb. 2019].
- ⁹ Dilip Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).
- ¹⁰ Harry Harootunian, "Remembering the Historical Present", *Critical Inquiry* 33, 3 (2007): 473.
- ¹¹ Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2012), pp. 39–42.
- ¹² Kathryn Sweet, "Nurse Khamphanh and His Dead Horse. The Practice of Biomedical Medicine in Early 20th Century Laos", in *Engaging Asia*, ed. Desley Golston (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018), p. 126.

- ¹³ Bounthieng Siripaphanh and Bernard Gay, *La Peinture Contemporaine Lao = Lao Contemporary Art* (Singapore: Treasures of Asia, 2007), p. 12.
- ¹⁴ *Sangha*: Buddhist monastic order.
- ¹⁵ Invention of a daguerreotype by Louis Daguerre in the late 1830s.
- ¹⁶ Diethard Ande and Philippe Drillien, *Lao Postcards by Alfred Raquez: A Collection of His 166 Postcards from 1906* (Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus, 2015), p. 61.
- ¹⁷ Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), p. 16.
- ¹⁸ Hans Georg Berger, “Photographs of Laos: The Buddhist Archive of Photography”, in *The Lao Sangha and Modernity: Research at the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang, 2005–2015*, ed. Volker Grabowsky and Hans Georg Berger (New York and Luang Prabang: Anantha Publishing, 2015), pp. 95–101.
- ¹⁹ See Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 45 and Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, pp. 70–4.
- ²⁰ Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 15.
- ²¹ Søren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860–1945* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2012), p. 8.
- ²² See Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 45 and Gregory Kourilsky, “The Institute Buddhique in Laos: Ambivalent dynamics of a colonial project”, in *Theravada Buddhism in Colonial Context*, ed. Thomas Borchett (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 162–86.
- ²³ *Cahiers de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* [Notes of the French Institute of the Far East], 1943, p. 6.
- ²⁴ It is noteworthy that Vat Phra Keow, which was restored with the assistance of the School of Religious Arts, now functions as a national art museum. It hosts “the finest national collection of Buddhist sculptures and artifacts”, according to the Lao Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. See http://www.tourismlaos.org/show_province.php?Cont_ID=783 [accessed 15 Oct. 2019].
- ²⁵ The images of some Maha Thera Khamfan Silasangvaro artworks are available in the Buddhist Archive of Photography, see <http://www.buddhist-archive.org/>.
- ²⁶ One of the places where Maha Thera Khamfan Silasangvaro studied in Bangkok is Wat Phra Chetuphon. See Pha One Keo Sithivong and Khamvone Boulyaphonh, *Great Monks of Luang Prabang from 1840 to 2007* (New York and Luang Prabang: Anantha Publishing, 2011), pp. 65–6.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Francis Benteux, *Marc Leguay: le peintre du Laos* [Marc Leguay: The painter of Laos] (Paris: Éditions de l'Amateur, 2009), p. 8.
- ²⁹ Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity and the Making of Modern Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), p. 7.
- ³⁰ Prasenjit Duara, “The Cold War as a Historical Period: An Interpretive Essay”, *Journal of Global History* 6, 3 (2011): 458.

- 31 Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 94.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Kongphat Lunagrath. ສິລະປະຮ່ວມສະໄຫມ ຂອງລາວ [Contemporary Art in Laos]. Unpublished. Translation summary by Chairat Polmuk, email correspondence from 12 Jan. 2019.
- 34 See Pierre-Bernard Lafont, *Bibliographie du Laos* [Bibliography of Laos] T. I (1666–1961) (Paris: EFEO, 1978), pp. 51–3.
- 35 Anousavali (ອະນຸສາວະລີ)—“a monument” in Lao, it is now renamed as the Patuxai Monument or the Victory Gate.
- 36 Although it would not be completed till 1968. See Roger Nelson, “Phnom Penh’s Independence Monument and Vientiane’s Patuxai: Complex Symbols of Postcolonial Nationhood in Cold War-Era Southeast Asia”, in *Monument Culture: International Perspectives on the Future of Monuments in a Changing World*, ed. Laura A. Macaluso (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), pp. 35–48.
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