



CHRISTOPH BENDICK



Courtesy Norm Phanith/Somrith Creative Studio, Phnom Penh.
Portrait of Christoph Bendick.

LEANG SECKON, *Elephant in the Pond of Blood*, 2013, oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm.
Courtesy Rossi & Rossi, London/Hong Kong.

From Seed to Bloom

BY REAKSMEY YEAN

Since arriving in Cambodia in 1994, Christoph Bendick has, in a number of ways, helped nourish the fledgling arts scene, whether through acquisitions or direct financial aid to artists. As a collector of Western and Asian contemporary art and Asian antiques, Bendick has a rather intuitive and eclectic approach. There are no ideologies involved, no theoretical framework or philosophy, and no art advisers. Rather, it is chance encounters and frequent visits to galleries that, more often than not, lead to purchases. “I do not have a strict concept when acquiring art,” he said to me during our interview in Phnom Penh, where he is based. “My first thought is: what appeals to me, what touches my heart; to what do I feel a strong attachment?”

This attachment to the arts began at a very young age. Born in Brilon, Germany, he was introduced to visual culture through his mathematics tutor, who later became a mentor. “He turned out to be not only a good mathematician but also an artist,” Bendick recalled, mentioning that he often watched the artist-mathematician paint in his studio. “He would take me to exhibitions and openings, and that was my introduction to the art world.” With this budding interest in art, Bendick purchased his first art piece when he was 15.

A medical doctor by profession—he lectures on dermatology and venereology at the University of Health Sciences, and is a consultant in dermatology at Raffles Medical Phnom Penh—Bendick moved to Cambodia at a time when the cultural scene was recovering from the civil war as well as grappling with the memory of the Khmer Rouge regime and genocide (1975–79) and the Vietnamese occupations. It was a world away from the milieu of Cologne, the city he lived in prior to the move, which had exposed Bendick to “a multitude of artists, styles, auctions and vernissages . . . beautiful, interesting, but also confusing.” He equated the regeneration of Cambodian arts and culture to “a little tree, the branches of which go in every direction after some time. I found it very fascinating and I am grateful that I had the possibility to be a witness to that development.”

After watching the blossoming of the Cambodian arts scene, Bendick himself decided to branch out in his collection, which, prior to his move, had a strong focus on Euro-American artists and reflected the styles and taste of a much different collector. “When I was younger, I was very strict: I only accepted art of the highest abstract

caliber,” he explained. “Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* from 1915 was my adored model.” However, Bendick admitted, at the time he had little resources to acquire such artworks. “Thus the works I collected were beautiful but did not really fulfil my [desired] standards.” Cambodia introduced Bendick to an alternative view of seeing art. “I began to see how art develops in its context and how it reflects society and its surrounding condition,” he said. “I believe I understand better now how art is dependent upon the people who make it and the conditions under which it comes into being. Therefore, now I can fully appreciate artists such as Leang Seckon, someone I might not have even looked at 30 years ago.”

Currently, Bendick has around 50 contemporary pieces by Cambodian artists in his collection. He first came into contact with Cambodian art in 1996 through the work of the late, self-taught artist Svay Ken (1933–2008), widely regarded as the grandfather of contemporary art in the country. “I was truly impressed by him as a person because he was very humble and genuine, and his art, I had the feeling that he did not care about anyone’s opinion or conventional artistic criteria,” Bendick said. Svay Ken’s stylistic merit belongs to the naive art tradition; *Boy and Oxen* (1997), Bendick’s first purchase of Cambodian modern art, is an exceptionally fine example of that genre. Though Bendick bought the work, in his words, purely “for fun,” he has since purchased 12 additional pieces by Ken.

Between 2002 and 2004, work took Bendick away from Cambodia. Upon his return, he became more seriously engaged in the contemporary Cambodian art scene and was introduced to many artists by Dana Langlois, curator and founder of Phnom Penh’s Java Creative Café. One of these artists was Battambang-based Chea Sereyroth, from whom he purchased the oil painting *Autoportrait with Skull* (2008), which depicts a figure, kneeling in front of a skull, surrounded by abstract strokes of red dirt in reference to Cambodia’s violent history. This exploration of post-memory and the transmission of historical trauma resonated with Bendick: “We [Germans] have a very strong culture of dealing with our past, with memory, conjuring and feeling guilty for the crimes committed. Even though I was born in postwar Germany, I was brought up with this responsibility. Chea’s work carries an extremely strong and moving statement.”

Other Cambodian artists in his collection include Khvay Samnang, Leang Seckon and Sopheap Pich. Bendick became extremely animated when talking about Pich, whom he met in 2007. “I feel that he is very intellectual, not driven by emotions but instead thinking a lot about what he does and why he does it. Mostly I prefer art which is conceptual and strict in form and content.” He also mentioned that he was drawn to the artist’s use of material and references to his heritage. “To me, he also shows his personal history in a very abstract and uncaged way: by using materials from nature and local markets and by creating Buddha images, and sculptures that emulate beng seeds, pointing to the culture he lives in and where he comes from,” he said, speaking on the motif of the endangered tree species that is being illegally logged for trade in Cambodia. To date, Bendick has eight pieces by Pich, although he lamented a missed opportunity to purchase *Buddha* (2009)—a rattan effigy dipped in red dye to evoke bloodstains, and the work he “would do almost anything to own”—which was acquired instead by Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art for the sixth Asia Pacific Triennial. In 2010, Bendick purchased a woodblock print of *Buddha* as a stand-in for the sculpture.

Bendick does not restrict himself to any genre or form—he has bought sculptures, drawings, paintings and photographs. The latter, he said, he did not want “to engage in buying” at first because of conservation issues—photography is prone to deterioration in more humid, tropical climates—but nevertheless he purchased a still from the three-channel video installation *Preah Kunlong* (2017) by Khvay Samnang, after watching the artist’s work at Documenta 14 in 2017. Bendick also mentioned that he would love to own works by Lim Sokchanlina and Vandy Rattana but can’t afford them at the present moment.

Recently, Bendick has decided to return to Germany after more than 20 years of living in Cambodia. He will bring his vast collection with him, and hinted that he may donate the works to a museum there, in order to share the same narratives that altered his perspective on art so many years ago. He observed: “While art certainly has to reflect the conditions and history of a society, Cambodian artists were not overwhelmed by the atrocities many of their families had gone through—they developed new and individual ways to express themselves.”