A Welcome Reunion: Cambodian Heritage, Diaspora, and the Ethics of Return in the Art of Phung Huynh

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Abstract—This article examines how Cambodian American artist Phung Huynh's *Return Home* series reframes debates on Khmer antiquities, repatriation, and cultural healing through the lens of diaspora. Drawing on the author's experience as a museum curator and on conversations with the artist, it explores how Huynh juxtaposes portraits of presumably looted Khmer sculptural heads in Western museums with photographs of headless statues that remain in Cambodia. The installation foregrounds the enduring consequences of war, colonialism, modern looting, and displacement while emphasizing Cambodian understandings of sacred sculpture as an ancestral presence. Ultimately, the article argues that contemporary art can foster dialogue on ethical museum practice, strengthen community engagement, and contribute to processes of cultural restoration.

Keywords: Contemporary Art; Cultural Healing; Diaspora; Khmer Sculpture; Phung Huynh; Repatriation

Introduction

In recent years, news stories and publications have drawn considerable attention to Khmer masterpieces held in major U.S. museums that have become the focus of repatriation efforts to Cambodia and Thailand.[2] Yet many objects that remain in regional museums and private collections across North America receive far less attention, including broken and damaged sculptures removed from their source countries under a variety of circumstances. These minor, fragmented sculptures might contain hidden visual clues about their origins, but more often than not they remain mysterious and without information about their sites of origin or chains of ownership. These sculptures have spent decades locked away in museum or private storage areas awaiting attention from interested staff or researchers. How can museum curators, collections managers, scholars, and community members reconcile the gap between the larger repatriated masterpieces gaining international attention and these small and often unnoticed objects?

The problem of sprawling collections of fragments and what to do about unprovenienced and orphaned objects

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[2] See, for example, the many articles published by the New York Times since the 2010s, including Mashberg & Blumenthal 2014, Mashberg 2021, Mashberg & Bowley 2022, Bowley & Mashberg 2023, Mashberg 2024, 2025, Ives 2025, Mashberg 2026.

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from Southeast Asia now housed in U.S. museum collections is large. A delicate hand with no arm, peaceful buddha heads with no bodies, and elegant torsos with no arms or legs are difficult to ignore because they point, literally, to a severed connection with a grand past. They also make tangible the once common desire of dealers, collectors, and museums to add historic Southeast Asian objects to their collections.[3] Often considered not worthy of display, these broken items sit ignored, passed over for more easily identifiable objects that are perhaps less viscerally detached from their original homes. Museum professionals and scholars have a responsibility to acknowledge the meanings of these objects, however small, for source communities. In so doing, precedent can be established for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges the complex histories associated with these fragments. Institutions working with members of the Cambodian diaspora, for instance, can create opportunities for learning, cultural pride, and healing; these collaborations establish pathways for more complex understanding of the larger issues of trauma, theft, and displacement.

During my tenure at the University of Southern California Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California (USC PAM) between 2018 to 2025, I saw first hand how Los Angeles-based Cambodian American female artist Phung Huynh (b. 1977) merged community and personal perspectives concerning broken images, loss, and provenience. Huynh creates artworks that unite reverence for the past, a love of community, and a drive for community healing. In what follows, I share her words and her work in the broader context of restitution and repatriation to add new perspectives and suggest new pathways for connections as part of these important discussions.

Artist Phung Huynh and the Visibility of Loss

Longstanding effects of colonization, war, genocide, and diaspora continue to shape Cambodian people around the world. In Cambodia, recovery comes in many forms as communities confront the enduring impact of U.S. bombings, the lasting devastation of the Khmer Rouge, and the poverty produced by decades of conflict between the 1960s and the 1990s. Healing from such trauma remains essential for communities to thrive. Cambodian refugee communities in the United States confront many of these challenges, striving to maintain connections to their heritage and pursuing paths to recovery while navigating complexities of distance from the land and ancestors that ground their identities. For Cambodian communities, healing takes multiple forms, including the return of stolen or looted Khmer antiquities—most notably the figural Hindu and Buddhist sculptures once part of monumental temples of the Khmer Empire, centered at Angkor (9th–15th centuries). These carved images are recognized by Cambodian people as

[3] Not every separated head and body were broken as a result of modern looting or illicit trafficking. Some were broken long before removal. Some were documented and removed during the French colonial period, as seen in the case of the pre-Angkorian Harihara head from the Musée Guimet in Paris, which was returned to Cambodia in 2016 in exchange for another piece. See Vachon 2016.

ancestors, violently removed from a fractured homeland.

The removal of stone sculptures from their religious and political structures has transpired for centuries in the regions once part of the Khmer Empire.[4] The motives varied, from warring neighbors who ransacked royal buildings as a means of undermining Khmer power to collectors whose demand for ancient sculptures enabled looters to plunder temples with little regard for local communities or the significance of these sites. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, French colonial officials, scholars, and collectors sought Khmer sculptures and architectural fragments for collections in Paris and elsewhere. Some removals were undertaken with the authorization or acquiescence of Cambodian authorities, including King Norodom I (r. 1860–1904); these situations were complicated because Angkor and Siem Reap province remained officially under Siamese control until 1907. Following Cambodia's independence from France in 1953, the plundering that began as colonial acquisition became an even larger-scale assault on temples hidden in the country's dense forests (Crosbie-Jones 2021). The issue was further complicated by the widespread looting of Khmer temples after 1975, when Cambodia was engulfed in war and the systematic destruction of the country's infrastructure and cultural heritage was widespread. The subsequent dispersal of these sculptures into international collections created tangible opportunities for governments and communities to seek their return. Yet despite the vastly different circumstances and actors involved, these episodes produced a similar result: the removal of sculptures that hold deep personal and spiritual meaning for people across Southeast Asia and their relocation to private and public collections around the world.

In a postcolonial world that prioritizes historical facts and the legal circumstances of an object's removal, the emotional weight of cultural heritage removed from its original context can be challenging to convey. For the communities from which these objects come, the distinctions between colonial acquisition, wartime looting, and illicit trafficking may do little to diminish the sense of loss. As the repatriation of ancient sculptures creates an international language of restoration and repair, communities, scholars, and curators must confront the full scope of this history and imagine new pathways forward. Contemporary artists engage with these concerns, demonstrating that enduring problems sometimes require creative and unconventional approaches. The work of Phung Huynh offers a powerful example of how art can help foster empathy and create a tangible understanding of the losses experienced across Southeast Asia.[5]

[4] Throughout much of this article, I focus on Cambodia as a means of anchoring the discussion of Huynh's work. Contemporary classifications, however, do not fully capture the complexity of the Khmer Empire, whose territories extended across parts of present-day Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.

[5] Artists both in Southeast Asia and its diaspora are creating works of art confronting these concerns. See, for example, the work of Leang Seckon (b. 1974), whose mixed-media practice frequently draws on Cambodia's histories, memories, and cultural heritage. Among his works is a piece celebrating the return to Cambodia of a Harihara head, taken to Paris in



Figure 1: Installation view of *Return Home* exhibition at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles, June–Aug. 2024 © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

As invested parties work towards righting the theft of religious sculptures and other objects from vulnerable Southeast Asian communities, Huynh's artwork—specifically her *Return Home* series, exhibited at the contemporary art gallery Luis De Jesus Los Angeles from 22 June to 17 August 2024[6] —reminds viewers of institutional roles in the illegal art market and the outsized impact of broken and looted art on traumatized communities. Through a discussion of Huynh's corpus, this article incorporates excerpts from a conversation with the artist; these excerpts provide a means for gaining insight into the continued trauma of a partially destroyed and widely dispersed cultural heritage and its impacts on the Cambodian diaspora. Huynh's work focuses attention on the dispersal of broken Khmer sculptures across museums in the West. By juxtaposing thoughtful, compassionate portraits of broken heads from museum collections with diaphanous, floating headless bodies, Huynh gives viewers a glimpse into the scale of the problem and invites the public to become an active part of the solution. She further enables an exploration of the conditions necessary for inclusive dialogue and community empowerment,

1889 and its reunion with its surviving body in 2016. See: https://www.rossirossi.com/works/s4755-dead-and-reborn-again; also note 3.

[6] See: https://www.luisdejesus.com/artists/phung-huynh/series/return-home.

underscoring that engaging directly with these recent histories is vital to addressing the ruptures that transpired throughout the 20th century **[Figure 1]**.

The trauma experienced by Cambodian people is reflected in the destruction of temples and theft of many Khmer statues and antiquities.[7] Artworks from sites built during Cambodia's monumental and historic kingdoms, most notably the Khmer Empire, were gradually sought after by collectors living outside the country. As wars, genocide, and poverty became on-the-ground realities for Cambodian communities, temples and archeological sites throughout the country were vulnerable to destruction and theft. Stories abound of high-ranking generals, soldiers, and local groups plundering temples and historic sites, with sculptures disappearing from temple façades and interiors (Hauser-Schäublin 2016; Miura 2015, 2016). Indiscriminate pillaging became widespread in the post-Khmer Rouge years, continuing into the early 21st century (Aglionby 2003). Villagers cognizant of the thefts had little power or ability to stop them from happening. Accounts from villagers around Siem Reap and the larger Angkor region tell of the overnight disappearance of local images and locals' inability to prevent such losses from occurring (Miura 2016).

[7] The long history of looting of Khmer Empire temple sites has changed over time. Because the temple mountains built by kings were the literal and symbolic centers of power, they were often damaged in the many battles between the Khmer and neighboring kingdoms, with central images stolen or destroyed by conquering armies.

The Donut Shop Series: Picturing the Refugee Experience

Artist Phung Huynh knows the impact of the Khmer Rouge genocide well. Born in Vietnam to a Cambodian father and Vietnamese mother, she grew up within a family shaped by multiple histories of displacement. Her father escaped the war from southern Cambodia into Vietnam where he met Huynh's mother, whose own family had already endured the trauma of escaping political instability in southern China. Huynh's parents then fled political turmoil in Vietnam, reaching a refugee camp in Thailand before eventually resettling in Los Angeles by way of Michigan, arriving in the United States in late 1978. Huynh is now firmly rooted in southern California, dividing her time as an artist, educator, and mother. Fully committed to her love of art and passion for drawing, Huynh pursued studio art as both an undergraduate and a graduate student, finding her way through a system not always ready to encourage diverse voices and perspectives. Undeterred, Huynh, with empathy and compassion as her driving forces, built her name as an artist creating visibility for underrepresented communities. Given her multidisciplinary practice, Huynh divides her attention between creating large scale public murals and installations and more intimate pieces displayed in gallery settings. Her research-based projects empowering unseen voices inevitably led her back to her refugee community.

Huynh's understanding of cultural perception, the pressures of hegemony, the dangers of stereotypes, and a need for open discussions about immigrant communities in the United States have

informed her artistic output. Huynh is deeply involved in asserting visibility for her community, creating an expansive body of work around Southeast Asian refugee families and their experiences and influence in southern California.

In 2019, Huynh began her *Pink Donut Box* series, a testament to the strength and resilience of Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees. A key concern for Huynh in creating this work was to foreground the significant contributions of Cambodian Americans to southern California communities, using ownership of donut shops as a lens through which to examine their economic and cultural impact.[8] By drawing detailed portraits of engaged and activist Cambodian and Vietnamese Americans on pink donut boxes, Huynh's initial steps in developing this series focused her attention towards Cambodian-owned donut shops as she sought to reclaim the power of storytelling for the community itself. For each portrait, Huynh had long conversational interviews with the subject and incorporated the goal of capturing not just their visual likeliness but also the essence of their experiences. Through this work, Huynh shows Cambodian refugees created new stories about what it meant to be American **[Figure 2]**.

Expanding further in her pursuit of Cambodian American donut shops as a cornerstone to understanding Southeast Asian refugee communities in California, Huynh created a second portrait series on pink donut boxes, *Donut W(h)ole*. This series focuses specifically on the stories of first and second generation "Khmerican" kids who were raised in donut shops. *Donut W(h)ole* features bold portraits of those children, now adults, with expressions of power and joy. Employing serigraph printing as her image-making technique, Huynh tenderly juxtaposes one or more historic photos of the subject as a kid, either with their family or in their family's donut shop, with a contemporary portrait **[Figure 3]**. *Donut W(h)ole* further exemplifies Huynh's role as an artist giving power and presence to her community, with the series gaining local and national media attention (Li 2022; Quijano 2022; Ulaby 2022).

I spoke at length with the artist for insight into her artwork, her artmaking process, and her vision for its reception.[9] Her sensitivity and purpose resonate most clearly in her own words, interspersed in the text below. Pairing detailed research with concern for being true to the subject is a central priority for Huynh, evidenced by the warmth and wonder of the *Pink Donut Box* and *Donut W(h)ole* series. Huynh's detailed methodological approach continues to inform her work as she moves into new subjects. Reflecting on her research and its central role in connecting with her areas of focus, Huynh states:

[8] The connection between Cambodian refugees and donut shops began with self-proclaimed "donut king" Ted Ngoy, whose interest in donuts began when he first arrived as a refugee in California in 1975. After Ngoy completed the training program for the popular American donut chain Winchell's, he worked as a Winchell's donut shop manager. Once financially stable, he began purchasing independent donut shops in southern California and leasing them to other Cambodian refugees, helping innumerable families establish themselves in communities across southern California. See *The Donut King*, directed by Alice Gu (Logan Industry, 2020): https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10214496/.

[9] A recorded phone conversation between the author and Phung Huynh took place in Los Angeles on 11 August 2025.



Figure 2: ***Chef T*****, graphite on pink donut box, 63.5 x 77.47 cm, 2019–2020. From the Pink Donut Box series © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**

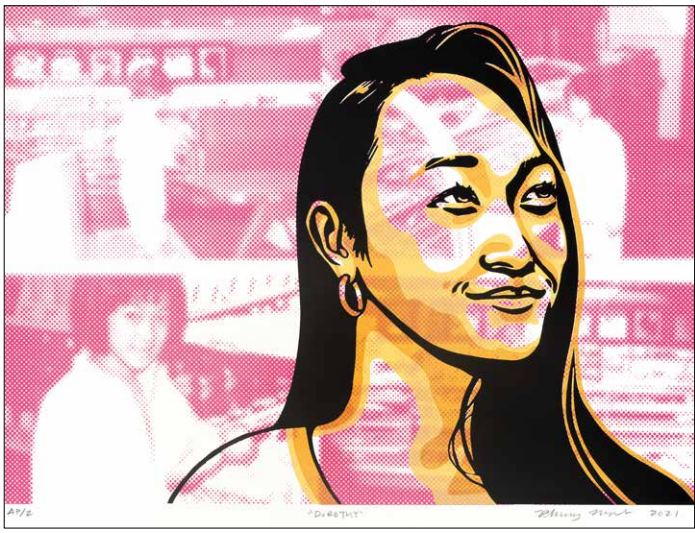


Figure 3: ***Dorothy Chow*****, silkscreen print on paper, 51 x 66 cm, 2021. From the** ***Donut W(h)ole*** **series © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**

I approach my research with an open mind and without arrogance; my goal is to learn from others and grow my work from that process. My first phase is always listening, gathering information, then asking questions, responding, and finally probing. In the case of the donut kids, making portraits of kids who are second, third generation Cambodian American with Cambodian refugee parents who survived the genocide, I came across the work of Dr Jaspal Sandhu, a professor of public health at University of California, Berkeley, whose interest in donut shops and the Cambodian American experience came from a student who grew up in a donut shop. Dr Sandhu and his students began collecting stories and finding more "donut kids". Dr Sandhu connected me with many of the people he's been engaging with. I asked them questions, and then we connected, finding out, oh, you also speak Teochew! Or, oh! Your mom went to one of the two associations that I grew up in, in [L.A.] Chinatown. And that's the beauty of collaboration, how we intersect and make a project grow. This is at the heart of my projects. They continue to grow bigger than I could ever imagine or expect. And I really believe that we do better when we work together, as opposed to gatekeeping, because this work is not about me. I'm an artist who's a conduit to highlight these stories while I'm learning too. And that's how I approach research. It's a gift.

Huynh rarely loses sight of her personal connections to the stories she pursues. She also ensures that her collaborators are credited as part of her process. She recognizes that her focus on community and diaspora requires her to be humble and open minded while maintaining a relentless focus on her end goals and what she wants to achieve through each series she creates.

Return Home: Searching for Answers

With the tangible satisfaction of generating work that empowers her community, Huynh then shifted her attention to an issue that has been on her mind for years, since a visit to the Angkor Archeological Park in 2012: the destruction of Cambodia's artistic heritage in the form of Angkor's headless bodies **[Figure 4]** and the connected issue of body-less heads from Cambodia found in museum collections across the Western world. Huynh explains the initial thoughts behind this new body of work:

> It was always something that bothered me that I would see mass-produced images of buddha heads that were used as everyday objects to decorate homes. And I remember years ago having a Japanese exchange student saying that these displays appalled her. That was one of the things that stood out to her when she came to United States. She said that it's just not normal, that Buddha has to be in his entire body. And then going back to Cambodia since 2012 with my sons and going to Angkor Wat and the temples and seeing headless statues of the Buddha was really disturbing. I made a connection with the fact that there are heads in museums and these buddha statues from Cambodia in museums perpetuate the normalcy, the norm that we can just see Buddha decapitated. That's what started the series.



Figure 4: Headless buddha image in the Angkor Archeological Park, 2006
© Rebecca Hall

In explaining the impetus for her series, Huynh again begins from personal experience. Her distinct memory of discussing the display of buddha heads as decoration with a Japanese exchange student became a key moment for her to understand and contextualize her discomfort with the display of many broken Khmer religious sculptures in museum galleries. Huynh pushed further into this uneasiness to find the complex histories behind the global circulation of Khmer antiquities. Bringing the personal and the universal together again, she set out to create her new series, *Return Home*. The intention behind *Return Home* is to initiate critical dialogues on the pressing issues of provenance research and repatriation within the collections of American institutions through the close examination of Cambodian sculptures believed to have been looted.

While many Khmer sculptures have suffered damage or loss over centuries through warfare, iconoclasm, abandonment, and other historical processes, a significant number of objects were also removed from temples and archeological sites during the late 20th century. Fragments and sculptures were smuggled out of Cambodia and entered the international art market or private collections. The exquisite beauty of Khmer art, combined with decades of conflict, instability, and poverty, created conditions exploited by dealers and collectors, most notably Douglas A.J. Latchford, also known as Pakpong Kriangsak (ภัคพงษ์ เกรียงศักดิ์, 1931–2020; Crosby-Jones 2021; Chea et al. 2021; Bowley & Mashberg 2023). As U.S. museums increasingly sought to acquire and display exceptional works of Khmer art, collections of Angkorian sculpture expanded rapidly in North America during the second half of the 20th century and the early 2000s. Meanwhile the impact of this recent looting created further trauma for Southeast Asian communities for whom the temples and their sacred icons were important manifestations of their ancestors. Huynh wanted to capture this stark dichotomy in her work.

To initiate this new series, Huynh sought out examples of Khmer buddha, deva, and bodhisattva heads in U.S. museum collections. Her first steps focused on detailed research that led her to expand her understanding of the theft and lucrative market for stolen Khmer sculptures. Huynh found details about Latchford particularly chilling, inspiring her to dedicate more time learning about the intricate web of theft that involved dealers, scholars, curators, and looters. She followed this research by investigating museums whose Khmer art collections repeatedly appeared in web searches and published articles. Finally, she identified specific buddha, deva or bodhisattva heads for further research, examining not only objects directly connected to Latchford but also the broader networks of looting, collecting, and removal that have dispersed Khmer sculptures around the world. In her initial collection of drawings for the series, Huynh selected heads from collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Norton Simon Museum (NSM), Asian Art Museum of San Francisco (AAMSF), and USC PAM.



Figure 5: ***The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco Head of a female deity B60S100*** **from the** ***Return Home*** **series, 2024; 104 x 84 cm © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**

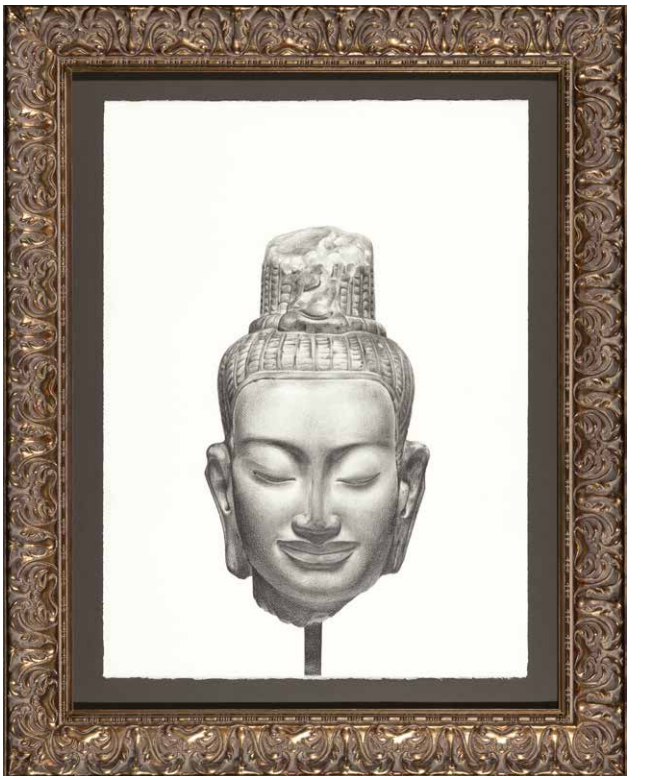


Figure 6: ***Cleveland Museum of Art Head of Lokeshvara 1955.47*** **from the** ***Return Home*** **series, 2024; graphite on paper, 104 x 84 cm © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**

Once she selected a particular head for study, Huynh contacted the corresponding curator, explaining in her communications that she was an artist with Khmer heritage interested in looting and repatriation. In this way Huynh continued to seek engagement and conversation with experts before beginning each drawing.

Throughout the process of creating this series, Huynh made a great effort to travel to museums and talk with curators, with varying degrees of success; some curators chose to not respond while others made a point to engage with Huynh for greater transparency and as an opportunity for both parties to learn. Huynh upholds the work of Dr Sonya Rhie Mace of the CMA as exemplary (Mace 2018; Mace & Porte 2021). Dr Mace provided a model for collaborative cultural repair and stewardship that has gone far beyond expectations. She acknowledged the harm inherent in collections of Khmer art and created conversations, training, and shared knowledge with her Cambodian counterparts, described in detail by Edelstein & Morasco's article in this Special Edition. Dr Mace, employing the same collaborative approach with Huynh, took time with her to have long conversations on Zoom and gave Huynh the opportunity to spend time at the CMA during a visit by staff members from the National

Museum of Cambodia. This opportunity facilitated knowledge and connection between different groups invested in the future of Cambodian antiquities.

In executing *Return Home*, Huynh set out to create an installation that gave viewers a sense of loss and beauty, drawing them into discussions about the irreversible damage sustained by the art, heritage, culture, and people of Cambodia. Turning again to the power of portraiture, the artist focused on creating detailed, naturalistic graphite drawings of individual broken heads of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Hindu deities **[e.g., Figure 5]**. Once completed, the drawings were mounted in ornate gold frames, chosen specifically because of the similarity to common methods for displaying Western paintings in museums and galleries. For months Huynh drew these portraits of the Hindu and Buddhist deity heads in elaborate detail, executed in a manner equivalent to her graphite portraits of Southeast Asian refugees for the *Donut Box* series. As a result, she has become familiar with every detail of each head's surface and feels a close personal connection to each one. Such a connection is essential to Huynh's achievement in this work, lying at the heart of efforts by many Khmer people, both within Cambodia and in the diaspora, to see Khmer works believed to have been illicitly removed returned home.

The detailed depiction of each individual head makes tangible the loving care that Huynh puts into her portraits. The artist does not shy away from showing the damage that the sculpture has endured, as evidenced on each head's surface and in its broken edges. For example, in her portrait of the CMA head of the Bodhisattva Lokeśvara (acc. no. 1955.47), Huynh captures the extraordinary peacefulness embodied by the downcast eyes and ever so slightly upturned mouth of the Bodhisattva of Compassion **[Figure 6]**. The head's physical features integrate seamlessly with the sculpture's smooth surface, inviting viewers to imagine the scale and power of the work when it was whole. But Huynh never lets us forget that this is a fragment: at the top and the bottom of the head, the surface changes. The figure's broken topknot of hair includes a headless miniature buddha effigy and the neck has a raw, uneven edge that gives clear evidence to the violent removal of the head from its body, either through a deliberate or accidental break.

In another portrait, Huynh chose to give viewers a better understanding of the uneven, broken edges of these heads by depicting the USC PAM Avalokiteśvara (acc. no. 1996.1.3) at an angle from the bottom **[Figure 7]**. The viewers see the rippled and raw surface of the broken stone, in stark contrast with the smoothly sculpted exterior. A long dark rod sticks out from the center of the severed neck, a physical reminder of a head's journey in the world of dealers and collectors, where the focus was on treating the head as an aesthetic object displayed upright far from its original home.

When installed in a gallery, the drawings are paired with Huynh's photographs of isolated headless Khmer statues, both Buddhist and Hindu, dating to the Khmer Empire period in Cambodia or its neighboring countries. The photographs are printed on a trans-



Figure 7: ***USC Pacific Asia Museum Avalokitesvara 1996.1.3*** **from the** ***Return Home*** **series, 2023; graphite on paper 104 x 84 cm © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**



Figure 8: ***Angkor Wat Naga Buddha Statue with Jasmines*****, 2023, from the** ***Return Home*** **series; print on poly sheer fabric, 244 x 91 cm © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**

lucent white organza fabric designed to float in the space of the gallery **[Figure 8]**, reminiscent of the long white banners known as *tung aphithoam* (ទង់អភិធម្ម) commonly displayed during funeral ceremonies throughout Cambodia (Hall 2019).

Huynh sees violence, pain, and loss in these broken images—those in storage far from home and the others, *in situ*, missing the essential elements that would make them whole again. In her words:

> I think the juxtaposition is very important. It is symbolic of the diaspora, the head in one place, the body in another. The work is about bringing everything together; the dismembering is being healed. The banners were inspired by Khmer funerary banners. I decided to make banners as part of this installation because what we see is a death. These images are not stone or mud. They are a vessel for divine and our ancestors. As a lot of Cambodians have said, when you decapitate a divine image, you've killed our ancestor.
>
> And as I began learning about Cambodian funeral banners, I'm like, yes that makes sense. That's what this work

> is about. I wanted to emulate, through those sheer translucent banners, this idea of the spirit, that we're not just looking at stone statues, and to create an experience. I didn't want just hanging pieces of art objects, like drawings or photographic banners, but an experience. Luis, from the gallery, had this beautiful idea to arrange the work in the specific gallery that had windows at the top, so it feels like you're walking into a temple. I felt like that installation achieved that effect. When you walk into a temple at Angkor, you *feel* it (her emphasis).

By bringing portraits of dislocated buddha, bodhisattva and other deity heads into dialogue with photographs of headless bodies, Huynh stages a meditation on loss that is at once personal, communal, and transnational.

Huynh brings forward an often intangible but essential understanding held within Cambodian communities: Khmer Empire stone sculptures are not mere historical objects but living ancestors whose well-being is inseparable from that of the land and its people. These ancestral spirits, known as *neak ta* (អ្នកតា), or "ancient ones", inhabit carved images, natural features, and village shrines and are regarded as the true owners of the territory and protectors of community life (Work 2019). Their presence shapes daily rituals, offerings, and ceremonies, while scholars have noted that *neak ta* have long been deeply entangled with political authority and cultural vitality in Cambodia (Kent 2020). This worldview helps explain why the restitution of looted Khmer sculptures is so urgent for Cambodian communities: repatriation is not merely a legal or cultural matter, but an act of restoring ancestral power, spiritual and communal well-being after the violent ruptures of the 20th century.[10]

The significance of *neak ta* becomes especially clear through the example of Ta Reach, among the most revered ancestral figures in contemporary Cambodia **[Figure 9]**. His nearly five-meter-tall image at Angkor Wat receives a regular stream of offerings and requests for protection, good fortune, and healing—not only from residents of Siem Reap but also from members of the Cambodian diaspora worldwide (Warrack 2011). The conservation project led by Simon Warrack in the early 2000s demonstrates the depth of communal attachment to such images: when the original head of Ta Reach, long separated from the body, was returned from Phnom Penh, nearly one hundred community members gathered overnight to prepare offerings, music, and a full ritual welcome for the ancestor's reconstitution (Ibid., 47–48).

This episode makes visible the broader Cambodian understanding that sculptures are not inert objects but powerful embodiments of *neak ta* whose integrity affects collective well-being. Broken fragments, especially heads, carry spiritual potency and their return can renew community strength and healing. In this context, efforts to reclaim looted or stolen Khmer sculp-

[10] For a discussion along similar lines, see Carter & Chhay, this Special Edition—*Editor's note*.



Figure 9: Statue of Ta Reach ("King of the Ancestors") in the south shrine at the western entrance to Angkor Wat, Siem Reap, Cambodia © Rebecca Hall

tures are inseparable from the spiritual ties that bind Cambodian people to their ancestors, their land, and their ongoing recovery from historical trauma. And thus, to Cambodians, repatriation is not simply about the physical return of objects. When these images return to their home, the larger story is about returning narratives, restoring dignity, and reasserting the spiritual, ancestral presence embedded in Khmer sculpture. These sensibilities are collectively inherent components of Huynh's work.

Return Home: Activation, Reception, and Next Steps

Once the drawings and banners of *Return Home* were fully installed at the Luis de Jesus gallery, the final component in mounting the exhibition was extending an invitation to classically trained Cambodian dancers to activate the gallery space **[Figure 10]**. Huynh sees incorporating dancers as an essential part of the work. With this music performance, visitors can hear the sounds and understand that the dancers are manifestations of *apsara*s or celestial dancers. As each element falls into place at the opening of *Return Home*, Huynh acknowledges the emotional result:

> It felt like a ritual of appreciating and honoring my ancestors. It was healing for our community. And I collaborated with Mea Lath, a renowned classical Cambodian dancer who grew up in Long Beach. She's a refugee as well. Before the dance began, she explained the importance of classical Cambodian dance. And she also said the purpose is to bless the space and to offer blessings to the audience. A large part of my practice is community and connecting. The opening was meaningful and beautiful for everyone who attended, including my mom who was there and made the entire experience even more special.
>
> This kind of work is about activating the spiritual and the transcendental, because



Figure 10: Classical Cambodian dancers from the Modern Apsara Company, at opening of *Return Home*, exhibition at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles, 22 June 2024
© Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

when the statues are looted and dismembered and decapitated, the spirit is killed. The cultural context is completely murdered too. By bringing the dancers in, we remind people about the cultural context of this work, along with temples and how we as a people honor our ancestors and celebrate each other and connect through our culture and our divine and through the Buddha and so on and so forth. And so that's one piece that pushes it beyond being just an art installation. It's a spiritual, cultural installation experience. As you know, the genocide wiped out 90% of artists, musicians, architects, sculptors, painters, and the majority of monks were also killed between 1975 and 1979. In that context, for me, it's an honor that I am even an artist.

Being a Cambodian American artist, I'm not only trying to preserve where we come from in our past but simultaneously exploring the question of how we move forward. I learned Cambodian dance later, in my 40s, whereas a lot of these dancers learn from the age of four. The movements are very difficult. Classical Cambodian dance has over 4,500 movements that function as both movement and prayer, meaning it's not just a performative spectacle for people to look at. It has a function, and dancers become messengers from heaven. And I love that so much. In the body, in the hands, in the dance are not only prayers, but our stories,

> stories about love, stories of our mythology, of Hanuman, of Sita. Dance carries so much power. Without it, the work wouldn't have that impact.

Because of her focus on honoring her ancestors and healing for her community, Huynh understands the essential role that dancers play in activating the space and facilitating meaning not just for Cambodian Americans but also for visitors to the exhibition. Her goal is to work collaboratively with institutions where this series is installed to always incorporate classical Cambodian dancers at the opening to bless the space. These dancers add layers to Huynh's work because of the rich histories they bring, the beauty of their movements, and their roles in connecting art and visitors with their homeland. The artist invested herself in this endeavor; she spent years working with dancer Mea Lath, taking dance classes and experiencing firsthand the complexities and stories involved in performing classical Cambodian dance.

Huynh pays close attention to the meanings of this body of work, both on a personal level and as a form of healing for her community. The central role of the ancient Khmer sculptures as ancestors to Khmer people and the clear need for healing for Khmer people after so many years of stress and trauma has informed her decisions about the series. But she has not forgotten the wonder and inspiration of these Khmer images for anyone who sees them. Huynh envisions all these objects working together to highlight the beauty and magic of this work and its cultural impact **[Figure 11]**. She wants to give viewers the chance to appreciate and enjoy the brilliance of her ancestors, recalling the way she was awestruck on her first visit to the Angkor Archeological Park, feeling it on both corporeal and spiritual levels.

> I want the work to draw attention to the harm and to injustice tied to the legacy of colonialism and I want people to think about how museums are implicated in the looting—the taking out of cultural context when these objects are no longer in temples but are now in Western museums. I hope my work helps bring awareness to the looting and theft and helps bring justice. We need to have deep and meaningful conversations about what repatriation looks like. It's not always about returning the artwork but giving Cambodia a say in where the host museum is and how they're managing the works, how they are displayed and received and so on and so forth. My role as an artist is about creating a cultural experience, establishing cultural awareness, and having connection. When the works are returned to Cambodia, monks are there to bless, dancers are there to welcome the statues back. For me, that kind of experience is what I'm interested in: that engagement and the ideal space for display.

Huynh recognizes that this work holds meaning beyond her personal experience. As with the *Pink Donut Box*



Figure 11: Installation view of *Return Home* exhibition at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles, June–Aug. 2024 © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

and "donut kids" series before *Return Home*, Huynh's artwork functions as a love letter to her community. Simultaneously, she works to communicate the issues and histories of her community to non-Cambodian allies and to people unfamiliar with the historic artworks and the contexts of their removal from their home. If her work can serve a multitude of purposes including teaching others about Cambodia and its diaspora, advocating for restitution and greater cultural sensitivity in the dispersal of looted or stolen Khmer art, and honoring the connection between this work and her ancestors, then she will consider it a success.

> I hold firm that it is great for anyone to be interested in this work. For me, the center of the work is the celebration of Cambodian culture, especially with what Cambodians have been through, from French colonialism, American wars fought in Southeast Asia, the genocide, and now fighting Thailand about border disputes. Cambodia's been through so much, so the work celebrates Cambodian people throughout the diaspora and in Cambodia, and how we love to share our heritage and our culture with the world. That's the thing about Cambodian people. They love to welcome anybody. They love to share; when we go to Cambodia, everyone's so warm and welcoming. My ideal audience is somebody who appreciates and connects with the Cambodian story and experience. I am interested in how it resonates with them. In the context of everything that's going on right now in

> the U.S., visibility for refugees is important. Let's say someone coming from Central America sees this work and connects with it, or it could be folks who survive genocide. It could be people who just love art, it could be people who love justice and want to see justice, but no matter who the audience is, if they're willing just to be open and experience what I'm trying to do with my community, I welcome that.

Huynh reiterates that her *Return Home* series is for everyone to view and learn from. She is cognizant that in creating this work she has a responsibility to help the public see the complexity of museums and their collections. Her goals are to acquire more visibility for Cambodian American refugees, to expand people's understanding of war and its longstanding impacts on the affected communities, and to facilitate more conversations around museums' collecting practices and responsibilities in the 21st century.

Huynh has spent many years working through the traumas experienced by her community, her family, and herself. She has a firm understanding of the role of diaspora in shaping the Cambodian experience, both in Cambodia and globally. As she engages with her Cambodian heritage and brings concerns about representation and community into her work, she shows how issues of trauma and healing can be manifested in contemporary art in a way that is poignant for all viewers. Through her *Return Home* series, Huynh demonstrates how, given the right context, broken and difficult objects in museum collections can take on new lives. Her sensitivity to the subject of fragmented Khmer Empire images highlights the loss that the destruction and looting of art and heritage has not only within the country of Cambodia, and its neighboring countries, but in its global diaspora.

Concluding Remarks

The story of Khmer art in the wake of war, genocide, and global dispersal is ultimately a story about the endurance of cultural memory and the ongoing work of repair. The broken sculptures, including heads separated from bodies and ancestors dispersed across continents, remain vivid reminders of the ruptures of the 20th century and the violence enacted upon Cambodia's people, land, and heritage. As contemporary efforts at repatriation gain momentum and as communities across Cambodia and its diaspora reaffirm their ties to these sacred images, new possibilities for healing continue to emerge.

Phung Huynh's *Return Home* series exemplifies how contemporary art can enter this space of historical fracture and offer new forms of witnessing, mourning, and restoration. Her artistic practice expands the role of the artist to become a facilitator of cultural renewal. In so doing, Huynh demonstrates that broken objects need not remain inert symbols of past harm, but can become catalysts for conversation, empathy, and agency. Huynh's work calls upon museums to acknowledge their complicity in dispossession, to strengthen collaborative relationships with Cambodian communities, and to imagine

ethical futures for the care and display of Khmer art. She also empowers viewers and visitors—no matter their heritage—to understand the stakes of these conversations, giving physical connection to abstract debates about ownership while asking urgent questions about survival, heritage, and belonging.

In foregrounding the experiences of displacement and resilience across generations, Huynh opens a path toward collective healing that extends far beyond the gallery. Her work invites viewers to reckon with the afterlives of colonialism and internal conflicts while also celebrating the creativity, strength, and generosity of Cambodian communities worldwide. Ultimately, *Return Home* looks toward a future in which fractured histories can be acknowledged, ancestors honored, and the sacred made whole again, not solely through restitution, but through art that insists on connection, compassion, and the possibility of return.

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