The M and The SEAD Project Announce

1.5: A Southeast Asian Diaspora Remix

September 1, 2020—St. Paul, MN—Minnesota Museum of American Art (the M), in partnership with The Southeast Asian Diaspora Project (SEAD), is proud to present 1.5: A Southeast Asian Diaspora Remix. The exhibition showcases work by Southeast Asian diaspora artists. As part of reimagining the 45th anniversary of the diaspora, SEAD has gathered stories from the community and worked with artists to respond to stories with visual artworks.

Exhibition: 1.5: A Southeast Asian Diaspora Remix
Dates: September 24—January 3, 2021
Location: Exterior windows of the M, 4th and Robert Streets

Featured artists are based in the Twin Cities, nationally, and internationally, and include Kat Eng, Van Hai, Chantala Kommanivanh, and Sisavanh Phouthavong, with additional works by Xee Reiter, Leyen Trang, and Christina Sayaovong Vang. The exhibition includes a number of artworks commissioned by SEAD and the M, as well as works created in collaboration between the featured artists and SEAD.

1.5 is a feeling, concept, truth, and tunnel. It’s a reflection of the unspoken boundaries in the past, present, and future for the Southeast Asian diaspora. 1.5 describes those who arrived on American soil as children, their complex and complicated
displacement, and the fragments of their memories and dreams by a selection of artists who are either 1.5 or their descendants.

Presented in the M’s window and skyway facing spaces, this exhibition reflects on the Southeast Asian diaspora experience. It is curated by SEAD Founder and Executive Director Chanida Phaengdara Potter in collaboration with the M’s Curator of Exhibitions Laura Joseph and Curatorial Assistant Mia Laufer and includes art across media, including painting, sculpture, video, and installation. A zine written by SEAD will accompany the exhibition.

“We’re in an era of dual pandemics that have surfaced lessons about the dangers and remnants of war and violence on our bodies, and what history begs us to remember and what not to repeat,” said Chandia Phaengdara Potter about the significance of this historic moment for presenting this exhibition. “The 1.5 show is more than a 45th commemoration, it’s our past, present, and future.”

Chanida Phaengdara Potter is a Lao American mother, storyteller, and cultural strategist. She is founder of The SEAD Project (Southeast Asian Diaspora), an organization based in Minneapolis growing social empowerment ecosystems through cultural organizing, critical language, and just storytelling.

RELATED PROGRAMS

Thursday, September 24 / 6:00 p.m. / virtual  
1.5: A Southeast Asian Diaspora Remix Virtual Exhibition Kick-Off

Join a Facebook Live event for welcome remarks from Chanida Phaengdara Potter, Executive Director of the Southeast Asian Diaspora Project (SEAD) and curator of 1.5: A Southeast Asian Diaspora Remix, a new art experience at the Minnesota Museum of American Art. Remarks will be followed by a virtual tour created by Hlee Lee-Kron.

Saturday, September 26 / 1:00–3:00 p.m. / 350 Robert Street, St. Paul  
1.5: Drive-thru 1.5 Zine Giveaway

Grab your mask and meet us outside the M’s entrance at 350 Robert Street in downtown St. Paul to pick up your free copy of an original zine created for 1.5: A Southeast Asian Diaspora Remix, an exhibition that can be experienced entirely from public space.

Thursday, October 8 / 6:30–8:00 p.m. / virtual  
1.5 Reimaginings: A Collision Course in Time + Dual Pandemics

Tune in on Zoom or Facebook Live to join Chanida Phaengdara Potter, Executive Director of the Southeast Asian Diaspora Project, in conversation with Kat Eng, Van Hai, Chantala Kommanivanh, Sisavanh Phouthavong, and Xee Reiter, artists showcased in 1.5: A Southeast Asian Diaspora Remix.

The conversation will be moderated by Renee Ya, a multimedia Hmong American artist, co-founder of the technology and gaming company Tiger Byte Studios, and mother to the next generation of feisty women warriors.

Together, they will move through time to reflect on the 45th commemoration of diasporas from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, racism against Asian Americans that has flared since COVID-19, the relationship between the cyclical violence of American imperialism and white supremacy, and community-centered pathways to healing and thriving.

Sunday, October 25 / 1:00–3:00 p.m. / 350 Robert Street, St. Paul  
1.5: Pause & Pa Kwan Art Kit Pick-Up

Grab your mask and drive by the M’s entrance at 350 Robert Street in downtown St. Paul to pick up your free 1.5: Pause & Pa Kwan Art Kit, which includes art supplies and activities for you to engage with 1.5: A Southeast Asian Diaspora Remix from the comfort of your home.

Thursday, December 3 / 6:30–8:00 p.m. / virtual  
1.5: Scattered Diasporas and The Critical Renewal
Reimagining and thriving in a pandemic world is something African, Asian, Latinx and other diasporas have been doing for as long as they can remember. This robust multicultural conversation will be moderated by Amanda Cortes with award-winning poet Bryan Thao Worra and other artists.

FEATURED ARTISTS

Pictured above, left to right:

Chantala Kommanivanh, *River Park Boy*, 2020, acrylic, oil, and spray paint on canvas, courtesy of the artist.


About the SEAD Project

The SEAD Project (Southeast Asian Diaspora) is an organization on a mission to be an accessible creative community hub that provides streamlined workshops, tools, and knowledge to engage, empower and mobilize across Khmer, Hmong, Lao and Việt diaspora communities. Through literary and visual storytelling, language justice, and cultural organizing, we plant the seeds of hope and possibility, locally and globally. Learn more: [www.theseadproject.org](http://www.theseadproject.org)

About the Minnesota Museum of American Art

Minnesota Museum of American Art is one of the oldest visual arts organizations in Minnesota, with roots stretching back to the 19th century. Based in St. Paul, the M’s work is guided by the belief that art should reflect and explore the complexity of the American experience. The M opened its new museum facility in the Historic Pioneer Endicott in December 2018.

* Out of care and concern for our staff and community, the M is currently closed due to COVID-19.

1.5 REMIXING THE NARRATIVE

by Bryan Thao Worra

We want to tell you a story of love and wars, dinged-up dreams and unexpected bridges. Families and communities caught between cultures who did the best we could with what we had, remixing and reimagining our shared tomorrows.

Forty-five years ago in 1975, decades of conflicts in Southeast Asia came to a definitive conclusion, affecting the fates of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Our exhibit takes a groundbreaking look at the 1.5 generation of refugees who fell between the cracks of history and art. It celebrates and explores a vital perspective we need to understand cultures in transition: How we navigated tradition and modernity, ambition and trauma, in an America also searching for itself.

This generation arrived just before the internet age. It was a chaotic time of rock and roll and emerging hip-hop, punk and Rambo, Valley Girls, MTV and Miami Vice, Generation X and Star Wars, yet no one had heard of our secret wars.

Southeast Asians often referred to the conflicts as the American War. Millions scattered across the globe to avoid retaliation and execution for assisting the United States. At least 2,506,303 are rebuilding their lives in the US. More than 114,819 of us are in Minnesota. Others resettled in Europe, Australia, Canada, Japan, Thailand, South America and elsewhere.

In the US, most called it the Vietnam War. Only a few understood the distinctions regarding the Secret War for Laos, or the rise of the Khmer Rouge and Killing Fields in Cambodia, or the distinction between refugees and immigrants.

Immigrants don’t come to the US until they feel prepared. Facing death, refugees don’t have the luxury of orderly arrival or a familiarity with US traditions that ensure they’ll thrive until their homelands stabilize. Some never get to go back.
In the refugee camps, basic efforts at orientation were imperfect, especially for those still navigating fear, trauma, and loss. Community conversations 45 years later show multiple generations still suffer nightmares, depression, and untreated post-traumatic stress disorder. Southeast Asian education was often interrupted by bombings, firefights and a need to evacuate their villages rapidly. Most of Cambodia’s intellectuals, educators and artists perished in the Killing Fields among the estimated 2.2 million victims of the Khmer Rouge. For perspective, remember the population of St. Paul and Minneapolis is 3.28 million alone.

For any refugee community, what emerges is the 1.5 Generation: Children of adult refugees who become the critical element in rebuilding their communities, serving as interpreters, translators and system navigators. They help their parents and elders access state, federal, and local services, often resolving education, medical and employment issues. This generation’s adolescence is sacrificed for the greater good of the community and the family, but their perspective and ambitions are often woefully unheard.

Cambodians, Chams, Hmong, Lao, Tai Dam, Iu Mien, Khmu, Lue, Montagnards, Vietnamese and others come from very different traditions, but their teenagers share the commonality of being thrown into a social Hunger Games, a Darwinian fight to keep their households together upon arrival in America. Not everyone made it, but others had wild success. This generation was faced with demands to understand not just our languages, but our cultures and recent, often secret histories of our elders, even as families had to grapple with fears of spies, infiltrators, assassins and collaborators who’d also made it to America. There were almost no resources to understand who we were, even as families relied on them to explain various American policies and documents with almost no training. If the 1.5 generation failed, not only their own families but their communities could face catastrophic setbacks. By necessity the 1.5 generation became babysitters for their younger siblings, and like other Generation X latchkey kids were demonized by the media and community leaders who did not understand this journey.

We were caught in the middle of a perfect storm of dysfunction and disparity, often left to our own devices to improvise solutions, some more socially acceptable than others. Even as we tried to hold things together, this generation was criticized for everything from low grades to gang involvement, teen pregnancies and early marriage, drug and alcohol abuse, theft, vandalism, and losing touch with their culture, or not coping with culture shock properly. We were far from a model minority, but we often found a way to draw on the best of both cultures.

The 1.5 generation arrived during major anti-Asian sentiment. Most Americans didn’t want Southeast Asians resettled here, seeing us as the enemy, even as many of us came from families who’d saved US soldiers and civilians during the wars. Few Americans saw any difference from the Japanese blamed for destroying American industries, as seen in the tragic murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 by two laid-off autoworkers. American newspapers compared us to the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan, while movies like Full Metal Jacket and Apocalypse Now dehumanized us, depicting Southeast Asians only as faceless enemies or sleazy hookers. In the 1990s gang strike forces were established to deal with Southeast Asian refugees even as tensions rose between Asians and the African American community during the LA riots.

Ultimately the 1.5 generation played a key role helping communities stabilize and neighborhoods like Frogtown revitalize. Today, Minnesota has produced some of the first Southeast Asian American legislators, doctors, educators, and world-famous artists. It is home to the largest Cambodian temple outside of Cambodia. Groundbreaking Hmong literature emerged here, and Lao artists from all disciplines have flourished here. Southeast Asian American small businesses now have a history stretching decades in Minnesota even as many from the 1.5 generation play key roles in the corporate sector.

But this was never a guaranteed journey. In our late 30s to 50s, we are about to become elders ourselves, first-hand witnesses to the unheard struggles and persistent dreams of both our elders and younger relatives, many who are no longer with us. The 1.5 generation has been given few opportunities to share those stories as our people make a transition from monarchies to democracies. This exhibit helps us reevaluate the way we view our traditions and our shared journey, to recover our missing stories, and reconsider what futures we imagine for our community.

This exhibit is intended as a seed to rethink that approach and to value the lessons the 1.5 Generation has to share, and the often radical way we approached complex bicultural problem solving, strengthening all of us for it.
FURTHER READING LIST:

Phaengdara Potter, Chanida, ed., Planting the SEADS, The SEAD Project, Minneapolis, MN, 2018
Lim, Shirley Geok-Lin, Tilting the Continent, New Rivers Press, Moorhead, MN, 2000

Cambodian
Oeur, U Sam, Sacred Vows, Coffee House Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1998
Tuong, Bunkong, And So I Was Blessed, NYQ Books, New York, New York, 2017

Hmong
Moua, Pos, Karst Mountains Will Bloom, Blue Oak Press, Rocklin, CA, 2019
Vang, Mai Der, Afterland, Graywolf Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2017
Yang, Kao Kalia, the Latehomecomer, Coffee House Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2008

Lao
Thammavongsa, Souvankham, How To Pronounce Knife, Little, Brown and Co., New York, New York, 2020
Vongsay, Saymoukda Duangphouxay, When Everything Was Everything, Full Circle Publishing, 2018

Vietnamese
Le, Jenna, A History of the Cetacean American Diaspora, Indolent Books, New York, New York, 2018
Phi, Bao, Thousand Star Hotel, Coffee House Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2017

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