

# Media Release

19 November 2018

Niagara Galleries Melbourne, in association with Santy Saptari Art Consulting and John Cruthers present

## Works by Savanhdary Vongpoothorn



It is fitting that the work of Savanhdary Vongpoothorn is being presented at S.E.A. Focus: A Spotlight on Southeast Asia. Her art has been shaped by one of the defining elements of recent southeast Asian history – the waves of people fleeing from repression as refugees, who must find a new land and build a new life, while not losing touch with their history and traditions. The unique expression of these experiences led curator Patrick D. Flores to include Savanhdary as one of 10 artists in the major exhibition *Ties of History: Art in Southeast Asia*, to accompany the ASEAN meeting in the Philippines in late 2018.

After arriving in Sydney from her native Laos as a refugee in 1979, Savanhdy was one of the first young Asian artists to rise to prominence in Australia. Her work was the subject of the exhibition *Holy Threads - Lao Tradition and Inspiration* at Campbelltown City Art Gallery, Sydney in 1998, and later she was commissioned to create a major work for *Zones of Contact*, the 15<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney. In 2019 she will have a mid career survey at the Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra. Her work is represented in the National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Queensland Art Gallery.

Savanhdy's practice draws on Lao culture through the patterning of traditional textiles, which she re-interprets through contemporary abstract painting. For 8 years she lived at the artists' colony of Wedderburn on Sydney's outskirts, about which she said:

*In a symbolic way, living in Wedderburn was my way of planting my feet in the Australian soil – this is home, I am trying to fit in, trying to make sense of where I am. For several years my work was a synthesis of the Australian landscape and Lao traditional textiles.*

More recently she's turned to other cultural influences – Scottish tartans, Indian miniatures and Japanese Buddhism. Besides using their motifs, she has applied a technique of perforation to her artworks in a direct reference to the act of weaving. Much of the work of piercing is carried out by her father, Mungsumai Vongpoothorn, a Buddhist monk.

Savanhdy's recent work was made after returning to Laos, which she left as a child:

*My children are Australian, I feel more at home here now than I ever did before. Feeling at home in Australia is an anchor, it allows me the freedom to go back to the place of my birth in my mother's village in Champassak and research for my current work.*

*I feel obligated as a Lao person to speak out about the ecological destruction of the Mekong mainstream and its tributaries from dam constructions. "Me" in Lao is mother, "Kong" is ruler, and the river is the mother ruler, mother protector. We forget, the location for the Naga Cities of Laos: Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champassak were selected for the spiritual connection to the mythical Naga, the Naga revered in the sacred text of the Rama Jataka.*

While Savanhdy is the first to admit she has her feet planted in Australian soil, her roots are in Laos, and its history and traditions have a continuing pull on her:

*No one else in my family has yet shown any interest in acquiring knowledge about our past history. My mother and father are experienced and knowledgeable elders. Watching the way they live their lives, how devotional they are, I don't want to lose that sense of devotion and faith. Also I am not a Lao person living in Laos, I am this other. When you are living outside your place of origin you tend to feel more intense about the need to have and to acquire knowledge about your place of origin. I don't want my parents to die not knowing who is going to continue with our tradition; I will be the one to continue with our culture and religious tradition.*

So it is that Savanhdy's life experiences are typical of many people in southeast Asia. Hers is the archetypal migrant's story, and with so many ruptures in her family's history it's not surprising that healing is central to Savanhdy's art:

*The more knowledge you have the more healing power you have, and understanding of your past, your history, the people in your life. Their memories become your memories, personal histories and connection with other people. So I guess it's an expansive gesture as well. When you say a healing quality ... my way of saying is I am learning all the time. That process is healing.*

[Quotes from 'Savanhdary Vongpoothorn', by Kon Gouriotsis, *Artist Profile*, 25 September 2017]

### **Niagara Galleries**

Established in 1978, Niagara Galleries is one of Australia's leading commercial galleries. Based in Melbourne, it represents major Australian artists including Ken Whisson, Helen Maudsley, Rick Amor, Jan Senbergs, Richard Larter and Angela Brennan, and several senior Aboriginal artists such as Lena Nyadbi and Angelina Pwerle. International artists represented include Star Gossage (New Zealand), Tony Bevan and Martin Parr (United Kingdom), Michelle Grabner (United States of America), Andreas Ruthi (Switzerland) and Liu Zhuoquan and Hu Qinwu (China).

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### **Press Enquiries**

William Nuttall – Niagara Galleries, [director@niagaragalleries.com.au](mailto:director@niagaragalleries.com.au), + 61 3 94 29 3666

Santy Saptari – Santy Saptari Art Consulting, [art@santysaptari.com.au](mailto:art@santysaptari.com.au), + 61 451 929 741

John Cruthers, [john@johncruthers.com.au](mailto:john@johncruthers.com.au), + 61 433 020 237