

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Looking to the Future Through the Traumas of the Past

by [Bansie Vasvani](#) on November 3, 2015



Leang Seckon, "Indochina War" (2015), mixed media on canvas, 78.7 x 157.5 inches (all photos courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

The curator Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani's penchant for combining artists by geographical proximity is convincing in her second group exhibition [Rev/Action: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia](#) at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York. Works from Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam are also linked by their use of tactile objects to illuminate the terrors of political exigencies and trauma from martial law.

The most effective pieces stand out for the ways in which they rise beyond what is visible, such as Kim Hak's photographs of remnants from the oppressive Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, which are placed against stark black backgrounds. In *Karma and Barbed Wire, Alive* series (2014), a scarf entangled in barbed wire radiates like a talisman giving off negative vibes. Captured in such a way that the ebony background provides neither depth nor perspective, these objects — a scarf, a battered cooking vessel filled with chicken feet, rice grains — appear frozen in time. Hak's commodities embody painful memories that defy forgetting, becoming abstract crucibles of these recollections. In this series, the images literally pop out of the flat bare setting to become embedded in one's visual memory.



Kim Hak, "Karma and Barbed Wire" (2014), c-print on Dibond, 23.6 x 35.4 inches

The tangible effect of the show is better realized in Leang Seckon's "Indochina War" (2015). Portraits of religious statues stolen during the Cambodian-Vietnam War — which were given to the Metropolitan Museum and later returned to Cambodia — feature in this mixed-media work. Mutilated images of Hanuman, the immensely strong monkey-faced Hindu mythological figure that guarded temples, loom large. Using a traditional shadow-puppetry technique, Seckon has intricately cut out red leather silhouettes and fixed them onto batik cotton fabric dyed in shades of grey and yellow ochre. Several red Hanumans strut about the canvas, ensconced in a decaying environment of grey bomb dust and debris, giving potency to the power of mythology and cultural identity amid the destruction of combat.

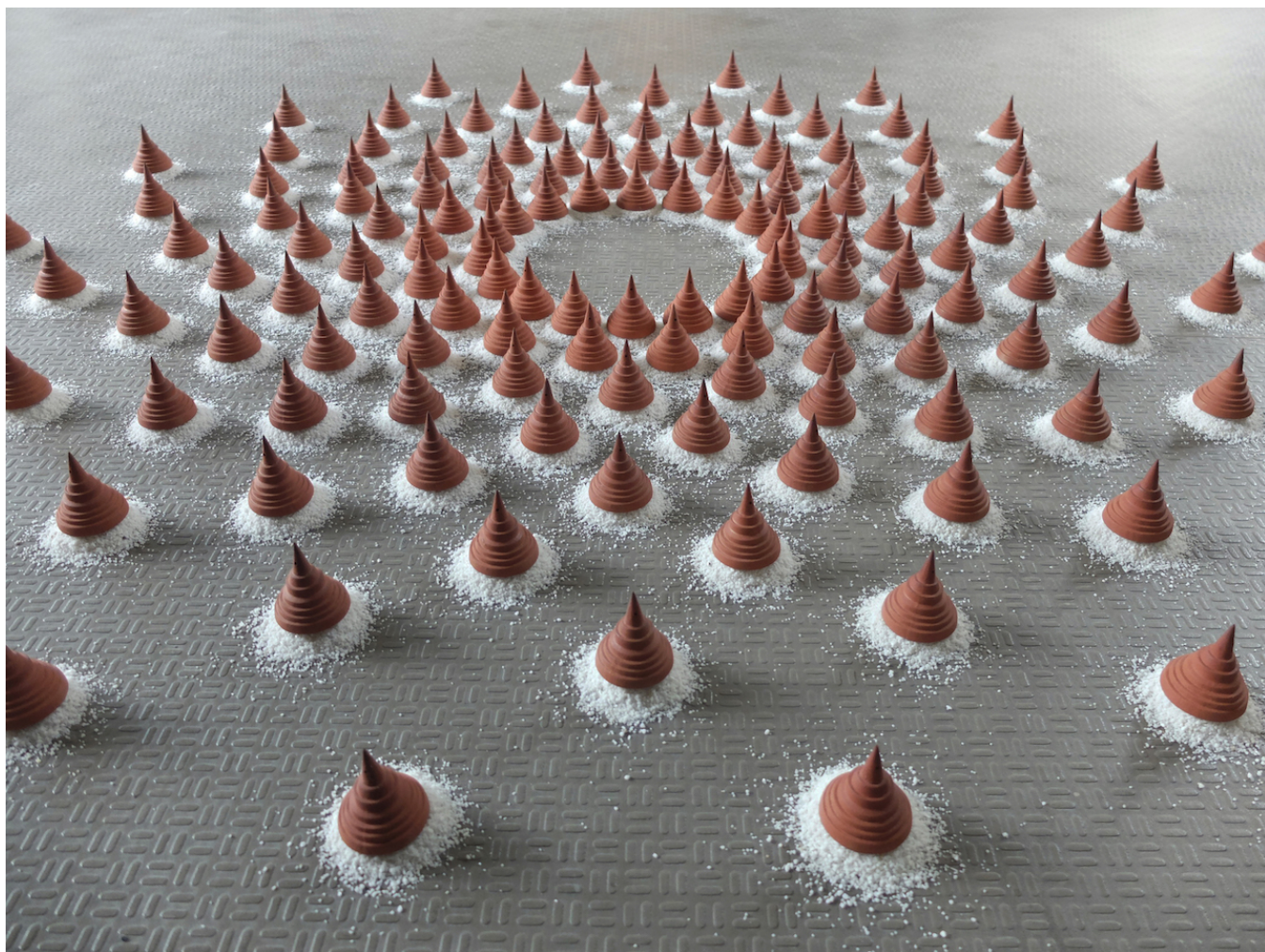
Cultural icons also become highly explosive signifiers in Norberto Roldan's "Crusade" (2015), in which found wooden crosses from demolished homes in the Philippines are attached to old discarded Persian rugs. Although the piece is not straightforward in its implication, it appears that the cross, once removed from its place of worship, is both vilified as the agent of radical theology and revered as the protector against decades of Spanish and American colonization. One neon red cross amid the others dangling on the withered surface seems at once to incriminate the church for its failure to protect the country against the Marcos rule, and to suggest supplication and suppression from consecrating the revered symbol.



Norberto Roldan, "Crusade" (2015), wooden crosses salvaged from demolished old houses on beeswax-drenched panels, neon lights, diptych, 66 x 174 inches

Similarly, in *Mandala Study # 5* (2015), Albert Yonathan Setyawan's conical terracotta *stupas*, beautifully arranged in mandala forms on a marble slab, imply Indonesia's past suffering even as the work initiates a meditative stance.

The turmoil of history for these artists is not a theme as much as an imperative that dictates the way art is made. Again and again, whether it is Montri Toemsombat's black granite series *Bangkok Art and Coup Centre* (2015), which references the ongoing political unrest in Thailand, or Muhammad "UCUP" Yusuf's woodblock prints on canvas, *Who's Next* (2015), which condemns the illegal usurping of land for coal mines in Indonesia, the palpability of these artists' materials bring an immediacy to the impact of the past on posterity.



Albert Yonathan Setyawan, "Mandala Study #5" (2015), terracotta and white marble sand installation, 118.1 x 118.1 x 3.9 inches

Much like the well-known German painter Anselm Kiefer's oeuvre of beauty and horror, the works in this show are all centered around highlighting their individual histories. Only with a tight grasp on the past, this show seems to suggest, can one look forward to the future.

Rev/Action: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia continues at Sundaram Tagore Gallery (547 West 27th Street, New York) through November 14.

Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani Sundaram Tagore Gallery