



**Art plays a strong role in influencing how a society develops, but who shapes the direction the country's artistic movement takes? Cambodian Living Arts (CLA) has developed a Living Arts Fellow Program aimed at developing the Kingdom's next generation of artistic leaders. Editor Marissa Carruthers profiles several Fellows who have benefitted from the scheme.**

"Not many people realise arts and culture play an important role in the development of society," says So Phina. "Many people take it for granted; they enjoy it but don't think deeper than that."

So is one of a handful of graduates from Cambodian Living Arts' (CLA) Living Arts Fellow Program, which aims to equip the country's artistic leaders, whether they be artists, curators or managers, with the skills to push and shape the future of the arts scene and realise the role it plays in society.

"They don't see the value it has in community development or highlighting changes in society," she adds. "The arts can be used to address environmental issues, for social justice, education and peace building."

Launched in 2013 as pilot programme Creative Leaders, the scheme shifted to its current format in 2015, with a strong focus placed on cultural exchange and forging networks with other artists and art leaders across the region. Each year, four to six creative Cambodians who are already leaders in their field are selected for the 12-month course.

As CLA unveils its latest batch of Fellows, who are listed below, we throw the spotlight on some of the movers and shakers, from artists and writers to creative directors and managers, who are shaping Cambodia's contemporary arts and culture space, and steering it into a new and exciting chapter.



## Onn Sokny

### Co-director of Epic Arts

Onn Sokny may not be an artist herself, but she is a huge driving force behind inclusive arts organisation Epic Arts, which works with people with disabilities. And it is her passion, strength and leadership skills that are helping the organisation spread its message.

Born into a poor family in a village in Kampong Cham, at the age of two Onn contracted polio, leaving her without the use of her right leg. While she acknowledges she was lucky to survive – she was unable to move her entire body at one point – she recalls a lifetime of being shunned by society.

"I remember hearing people around me, even my own family, saying things," she recalls. "Not because they're mean but because of a lack of understanding about disabilities. There were a lot of negative voices growing up. When it comes from your family, community and society, you lose yourself. I lost myself for a long time."

As a teenager, she moved from Kampong Cham to the capital, where she worked as a tailor and craft maker for low pay and no passion.

In 2006, she stumbled across an Epic Arts creative movement workshop and signed up.

“The workshop was 2.5 hours, but it changed my life,” she says, recalling how for the first time she was given the space to move freely and express herself through movement. “I felt like at the age of 24, I had finally woken up. I’d always thought if you have a disability, it ruins your life and you can’t have any dreams for the future.”

In 2007, she applied for a job at Epic Arts as an accountant assistant, shifting roles until stepping into the shoes of co-director, organising Asia’s first inclusive arts festival, countless events and performances, carrying out placements in the UK and US along the way.

In 2015, she became a Fellow. “The idea of managers or leaders in the arts in Cambodia is quite new and can be quite lonely,” she says.

“I wanted to build up my professional network and challenge myself by finding out more about the power the arts has. The key work Epic Arts does is change attitudes through the arts and that shows its strength.”

Onn says this highlights the many facets of art, with Epic Arts using it to educate and address social issues.

“Art is very powerful,” she says. “It has many uses. The beauty of art is that it can carry a very strong message in a silent and subtle way.”

## Chhan Dina

### Painter and sculpture

By the age of 12, Chhan Dina was already discovering her creative streak. “Phnom Penh was very different then to what it is today,” she recalls of the capital in the mid-1990s. “There were no proper roads, just dirt tracks. When it rained, the mud turned to clay.”

A young Chhan would scoop clumps of earth from the ground and spend her time carefully crafting it into buffalos, pots and figurines, before watching them dry in the sun. American artist and teacher Ron Rieman, who worked at an NGO teaching visual art, was so impressed by a cow she gave him, that he asked her parents if he could teach her art.

“I became really engaged with art,” she says, adding she studied with him until the age of 17, learning for the first time about abstract and contemporary art. “I thought he was crazy, I didn’t get it at first. He taught me to really use my imagination.”

At the age of 20, Chhan had her first solo exhibition and quickly made a name for herself as one of the Kingdom’s leading female artists, using her work to tackle topics such as the landmines that litter parts of the country and environmental issues. She has also worked with a swathe of NGOs, including teaching visual arts for fun to 70 children at Friends International.

“My heart was really with those children,” she says. “Art was very therapeutic for them because not only was it fun and a way for them to forget, but they could also use it to communicate.”



Chhan proved the healing and therapeutic role art can play when she worked as an art counsellor, using art therapy with vulnerable children at another NGO. “As a Cambodian, I felt it was my duty to help others in whatever way I could, and for me that was using art,” she says. “I was very inspired and started to understand the other uses for art and how I can use it to help my country.”

In 2016, Chhan became a Fellow, taking part in a cultural exchange to Vietnam and exploring the endless forms art can take on through the four labs.

And while she acknowledges that Cambodia has some way to go when it comes to recognising the importance of the arts, she says the country is on the right track.

“Many people think art is just something to look at or watch; something fun,” she adds. “They often don’t realise the role it plays in educating, healing, politics and social issues. Being a Fellow taught me that, and people in Cambodia are starting to see this too.”

## **Menh Chanvanda**

**Fashion designer**

Menh Chanvanda – more commonly known as glamorous female celebrity Romdoul Lich Tek – is using art to break down barriers held against the transgender community, while putting a creative modern spin on traditional Cambodian costumes and accessories.

Since launching his Facebook page in 2015, showcasing for the first time his delicately designed Apsara crowns fashioned from fruit and flowers, accessories crafted from Cambodia’s swathe of natural resources and elaborate gowns created from waste, he has gathered a firm following of more than 10,000 social media fans.

In his mission to preserve ancient Cambodian crafts while injecting his own contemporary style, Menh works with local craftsmen and women across the country. He researches and then promotes each artisanal skill he discovers along the way to his network of fans, helping to keep heritage alive.

“These skilled people help me stay in keeping with Cambodian tradition. It is important that I remain sensitive to this while making these items relevant to modern Cambodia,” he says, adding it is essential this generation carves its own signature style that sets it apart from its predecessors.



“We have to build something creative, not throw away the old concept, but make it relevant by fusing together the traditional and modern.”

Menh, who was selected for the 2017 Fellow scheme, also uses his bold designs to raise awareness of environmental issues. His series of dresses made from recycled materials and plastic bags aims to encourage recycling and cut the use of plastic, which scars Cambodia.

“Being a Fellow allowed me to know myself and my work more,” he says. “Before, I just knew I loved arts and culture, but I didn’t know what I could do to promote this or the importance of it. Now I have a clear understanding.”

Menh is also using his art to challenge prejudice by performing at cultural events and festivals across the country in character as glamorous Romdoul, sporting his own designs.

He is regularly asked to perform at Angkor Sangkran in Siem Reap, which takes place during this month to celebrate Khmer New Year.   

“There is still a lot of discrimination against the transgender community in Cambodia and I use my work to challenge that,” he says. “I want to inspire the next generation and act as a role model to show

people that they can be brave enough to do what they want and be who they are.”

## So Phina

**Author and head of the Women Writers’ Committee at PEN Cambodia**

So Phina returned from Australia in 2013 where she gained a master’s in social work, inspired to play her part in breaking down gender barriers. Her weapon of choice was the written word.

Having penned short stories and poetry as a child and started a blog about her experiences in Australia, she decided to write a series of stories tackling issues close to her heart.

“I came back from Australia with this new knowledge about gender equality and realised I had to do something that related to women, equality and social justice, so I started to write short stories,” she says.



However, working then as a full-time researcher, finding the time to complete her anthology was tough, so So invited fellow female writers to contribute. In March 2015, she published *Crush Collection*, a series of short stories aimed at inspiring women about positive relationships and self-esteem.

“I saw many examples of women who were so hurt when they broke up,” she recalls. “It took me back to the *Chbab Srey* [a code of conduct on how women should behave, which was included in school curriculums until 2007] and how women lose value when a relationship is broken; they feel guilty or dirty. I wanted to write short stories where relationships break, and the woman is OK.”

In the same year, So applied for the Fellowship scheme, keen to learn more about how to use the art of the written word to educate, inspire and bring about change in Cambodia.

“I learned a lot because I came into the arts accidentally and immediately applied for this,” she says. “I learned about the role arts and culture has in shaping the development of our society, which I didn’t acknowledge before, and I understood the role we have to play.”

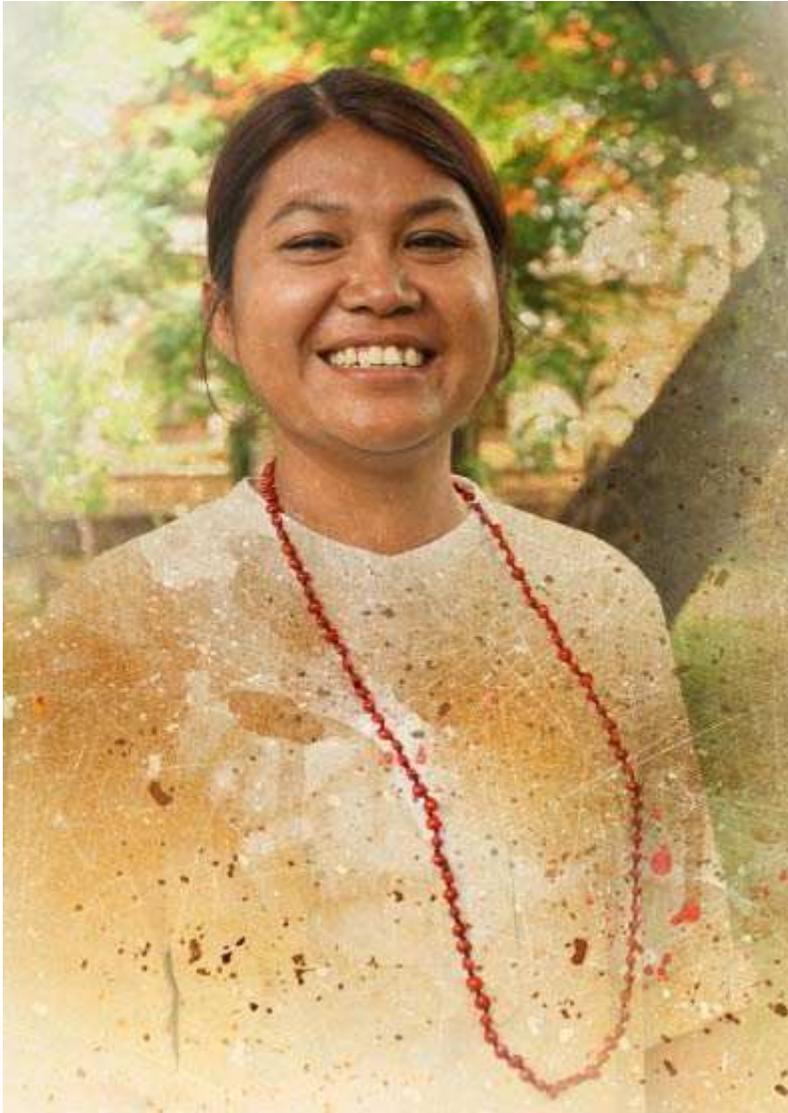
Since then, So has published a further two anthologies, organised the first Khmer literature festival, which took place across three days in Siem Reap in October, and played an instrumental role in nurturing the country’s nascent writing scene. “It inspired me to do more for the writing community. Now I dare to call myself a leader in this field.”

In 2016, she was recruited by CLA stepping into the role of knowledge, networks and policy programme manager, with part of her work being to oversee the Fellowship programme. “This has been really exciting for me, and the Fellowship programme really helped me realise my potential and gave me confidence in what I do.”

“I can see the literature scene is growing,” she adds.

## Sous Sinath

**Director of human resources and community engagement at Phare Performing Social Enterprise**



Sous Sinath is a shining example of how you don't have to be an artist to play a major part in pushing the scene.

Having graduated with a bachelor's degree in business administration, management and accountancy, and a master's degree in law, Sous started working with Phare Performing Social Enterprise (PPSE), which provides arts training, education and social support to young people, as an accounting assistant 10 years ago at the organisation's Battambang home.

After nine years, she relocated to Siem Reap after being promoted to a senior management role, and has worked as director of human resources and community engagement at PPSE for the last three years.

Under her title, she works with Phare's wide-ranging troupe of artists, as well as developing educational art programmes within local communities and organising festivals both home and abroad.

"At first, I didn't think I fitted the programme because I'm not an artist," she says. "But I was encouraged by my director, who said I'd been working for Phare for more than 10 years and my job is related to the arts, I'm involved with many arts festivals in Cambodia and Europe, so I applied."

Sous is one of the latest Fellow graduates, having taken part in the 2017 programme, travelling to Laos to meet fellow arts leaders and artists, as well as attending a series of workshops and organising February's festival in Kampong Thom, which used the arts to raise awareness about environmental issues in Cambodia.

"I really learned the true value of arts and what it can do for my community and my country," she says. "I believe art can change the world and bring about social change. Many Cambodians, not just those working in performing arts, are understanding more about the role the arts have to play, but there is still a long way to go in Cambodia for people to fully recognise this."

Now Sous is using her newly found skills with aplomb and is already putting them into practice by sharing her knowledge and expanding PPSE's range of programmes that use art as a tool to educate.

"I truly believe that we can do something for our country, and I believe that art can help to change things," she says.



## Chea Sopheap

### Director of Bophana Center

Chea Sopheap's passion, vision and drive is helping to shape a promising future for Cambodia's film industry.

Having studied history to master's level at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, graduating in 2008, Chea started working as an archivist at the Bophana Center, which acquires film, television, photography and sound archives

on Cambodia. He was later promoted to project manager and three years ago became Bophana's director.

"I love history and wanted to know more about Cambodia's history, especially the Pol Pot regime," he says, recalling his love of films, which stemmed from staying up all night as a child watching movies on a special outdoor screen in his village.

"Bophana is the only centre in Cambodia using moving images as a tool for education and archiving historical documentaries. I fell in love with my job."

Enrolling on the Fellowship scheme in 2015, Chea says the workshops and trip to Myanmar equipped

him with valuable knowledge on how the arts – in his case still and moving pictures – can contribute to society.

Tapping into the educational side of the arts, Bophana Center last year released mobile app, Khmer Rouge History, which allows users to learn about the regime by exploring timelines, listening to audio files, watching film clips and viewing artwork.

"Every country needs to have an arts scene," says the 2015 Fellow. "Art is not only beautiful, it's education. It's for the good of society. Every country has to have a strong arts scene. Cambodia is not at that level yet, so we need to work together and train more people in the different areas of the arts, understanding art, making art and also managing art."

While preserving Cambodia's heritage within its archives, Chea says Bophana Center is also playing its part in stimulating the country's contemporary film industry. He was involved in last month's Cambodia International Film Festival, which has grown from 700 visitors to more than 20,000 in eight years.

“The arts scene is getting better but we’re still a long way off,” he says, adding for the film industry to truly bloom a dedicated film school is essential.

“People are starting to understand the creative and contemporary arts scene more, and this will only continue in the future. I am very hopeful.”

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