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Angkor Photo Festival opens

Nicky McGavin
Monday, 21 November 2011

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It was packed on the front lawn of the FCC Angkor on Saturday night for the launch of the seventh Angkor Photo Festival.

A series of slide shows curated by festival program director François Callier marked the beginning of a busy week of shows, exhibitions, workshops and special events in venues all over Siem Reap town.

Now in its seventh year, the festival has grown enormously from the week of workshops for young Asian photographers, accompanied by five or six exhibitions, that took place in 2005.

“This is a nice size we have now”, co-founder and director Jean-Yves Navel said, looking slightly spooked at the idea of it getting any bigger now that this year’s first night had finally come off without a hitch.

“This is a festival especially for photographers, and we are very happy to see them come back, to say: ‘This festival is special, this is my home place.’ ”

Of the 110 photographers whose work can be seen for free this week, co-ordinator Jessica Lim said: “We don’t have more photographers than last year, but we do have more Asian photographers, which we’re very happy about.

“I think there are more photographers coming up now in Asia, and their confidence is growing. We’ve worked hard to reach out to them.”

More than 70 of the photographers from this year’s crop come from the region.

Callier says the slide shows are about more than just the images. “I have to be moved by the story the photographer is telling – and the quality of the images, of course,” he says.

“Anyone can do a single image, but to tell a story is really difficult.”

The evening’s show told stories from around the globe, including devastating images of UNICEF’s work during the Niger food crisis; philosophical treatments of the concept of mercy; a personal vision of Cambodia; the story of a lost woman’s return to her family in Indonesia; and questions about all the magical moments that have been lost as a result of gender discrimination and female infanticide in India.

“I wanted to focus on young photographers for this show,” says Callier, “although there are some more established shooters in there too, like Tewfic El-Sawy.



THE OPENING NIGHT OF THE ANGKOR PHOTO FESTIVAL KICKED OFF A BUSY WEEK OF EVENTS IN SIEM REAP TOWN. TENZING DAKPA

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"I hope we are seeing the stars of the future here tonight."

One of those young stars is Vong Pech, a 16-year-old student who is registered at Anjali House, a local NGO that was founded by the Angkor Photo Festival in 2005.

Pech's images look at the flooding that hit Siem Reap in September and October this year. "When I looked at them for the first time, I thought: 'They have to go in.' He didn't miss a thing.

"He beamed from ear to ear when I told him I was going to show his work at the FCC."

Behind all the shows and parties this week, the core work of the festival will go on mostly unseen by the public.

Thirty young Asian photographers will take part in a series of workshops, led by professional photographers, showing them how to explore their talents and perfect their art.

As part of Saturday's slide show, a graduate of the 2007 workshops, Rahman Roslan from Malaysia, told the story of Nur, a young Indonesian woman who returned home after suffering five years of abuse as a domestic worker in Malaysia.

The 26-year-old said the workshops hadn't just improved his style, they had changed his entire life.

"In Malaysia, they teach you all about the technical stuff. Here, they didn't do that at all. I met people who are kind, loving and open-hearted, who taught me how to be honest with myself and the story, and how to respect the subject. It changed everything for me."

More than a quarter of the photographers on show are graduates of the workshops held so far, a testament to the festival and its ongoing relationships with photographers.

"I feel so compelled to come back", says Roslan. "It's just like a family."

Festival organisers are especially proud of membership with the Asia-Pacific Photo Forum, a consortium of seven photo festivals in China, Australia, New Zealand and now Cambodia.

"It makes a huge difference to the photographers, especially those who have no agency yet," Callier says. "It helps them to get known."

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