

GUGGENHEIM UBS MAP GLOBAL ART INITIATIVE  
*No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia*  
**Vandy Rattana's Bomb Ponds Photographs and Video**

**Vandy Rattana:** I have a very strict principle when I make pictures: I don't really touch reality, I don't arrange, I just let life have its own life.

**June Yap:** Vandy Rattana was working on a project titled *Walking Through*, for which he was photographing rubber plantations in Cambodia. These rubber plantations were introduced during French colonization.

**Vandy Rattana:** One day, when I was making pictures in the plantations, I saw a big, perfect crater, and I didn't know what it was. I didn't know. And suddenly there was a young farmer, who turned around and said, "That's a bomb pond." And I was like, "What's happening here?!"

**June Yap:** These are physical remains of military operations by the United States during the Vietnam War. They were made by bombs that were dropped between 1964 and 1973. They are craters, essentially, filled with water—water that was toxic for a very long time. There aren't very many other traces of the bombing.

There is a certain level of exoticism here that the artist is playing with, too. When you look at the images, you do not see military operations. You do not see the development of Cambodia. And you do not see the history of the Khmer Rouge, for example. And that, I think, is quite interesting, because it requires looking further into that history, trying to understand what is it about these very perfect ponds—they're perfectly circular—that appears so natural and yet so artificial at the same time.

**Vandy Rattana:** That kind of image haunted me for about a year, until late 2009, when I decided to try filmmaking. My friend used to work at a journalism school—they decided to give us a very old HD camera with a small tape—you know, that kind of camera. But it was nice. And we just went around the country for about a month.

**June Yap:** He had managed to find information about where some of these bomb ponds were located. This information was made available publicly by the U.S. government only in 2000—

information about the approximately 2.7 million tons of bombs that were dropped in Cambodia. In a way, Rattana is documenting a portion of history that was forgotten.

**Vandy Rattana:** Of course, I didn't really know about my own history until I started the *Bomb Ponds* work. So, I started to do research. I found a Cambodian scholar [Vandy Kaonn] who lives in exile in France. Now we are very good friends, and he tried to explain everything to me.

*Video clip from Bomb Ponds, beginning with archival footage of bombs being dropped, then on-camera interviews with two survivors from Takeo Province:*

**Heng Ty:** I don't know who dropped the bombs. I only saw the planes.

**Noun Veoun:** In Cambodia, there is no airport for these kinds of planes. By the time we heard the sound of the planes, they were already upon us. I didn't know where the airport was.

**Heng Ty:** It was around midday that the planes usually came, and once we heard the sound, my husband and I would rush to collect our children, and we would hide underground.

**Noun Veoun:** I was so scared because the bombs were so big, and they dropped a countless number on Cambodia. As well as the B-52, local fighter jets were also used during the Lon Nol regime. Local people usually named the planes after the birds they looked like, because they did not know the names of the planes.

**June Yap:** In the video, Rattana speaks to a couple of villagers who live near the bomb ponds, who remember the bomb ponds, and who were there when the bombs were dropped. Their stories are quite harrowing. It is an experience that they cannot forget.

*Video clip from Bomb Ponds, beginning with a shot of someone riding a motorcycle, then an on-location interview with a survivor in Rattanakin Province, showing the spot where his grandmother was killed:*

**Mi Mul:** This is where my grandmother was killed by the bombs. This bomb pond is the evidence. Look, everyone! It's the Americans. Here! When I got here, the planes followed us and dropped bombs here. Look how far it is from the pond where the bomb was dropped to this tree, where I was with my grandmother. How far? Four bombs were dropped here. My grandmother was bleeding from her ears, nose, and eyes because of the bombs. I ran with grandmother and lay her down here, like this. "Grandmother," I kept saying, "grandmother." My arm was around my grandmother like this. "Grandmother, don't move." But she had passed away.

**Vandy Rattana:** Knowing that causes us pain, because we have to accept the truth, and we have to accept that our heroes are also our enemies.

**June Yap:** I think it's perhaps necessary, almost cathartic, to look at this history, not simply to place blame but to understand the context of why this occurred—this was during the Vietnam War. And it's a long history, as to why the Americans were bombing Cambodia—they were trying to flush out the Vietcong, who were basically scattering.

**Vandy Rattana:** I don't pretend to be changing the world, but I am trying to understand. I don't know if you really want to understand. I just want, you know, to try to heal myself. Yeah.