



## Cambodia:

# Caught Between an Alligator and a Tiger

2009, Acrylic on canvas, wood and Plexiglas

39" w x 31" h.

**Collaborative Team:** David Feinberg. Drawing contributions of genocide survivor Bunkhean Chhun and artists Ali Abdulkadir, Bonnie Brabson, Mary George, Jason Krumrai, Rachel Mosey, Rowan Pope, Ryan Rasmussen, Nicole Rodriguez, Adam Streeter, Stephanie Thomson.

This artwork reflects the experiences of Bunkhean Chhun, who was imprisoned and forced into labor by the Khmer Rouge, the brutal organization that ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. When the Vietnamese Communists invaded, the Khmer Rouge retreated and abandoned Bunkhean and his fellow prisoners. Since Bunkhean wasn't a native of the area of Cambodia in which he was found, the Vietnamese mistook him for a member of the Khmer Rouge, and he was tied to a tree, stabbed and tortured.

On the left hand side of the picture is a drawing made by Bunkhean of himself tied to the tree. When other prisoners revealed to the Vietnamese that Bunkhean was not involved with the Khmer Rouge, he was untied, temporarily, in order to be re-interrogated. When Bunkhean realized that the Vietnamese were unwilling to release him, he made his escape, eventually fleeing to Thailand. The curved white path extending off the canvas represents this journey.

Bunkhean started his painting by making a series of blue circles, which represent water. To begin the collaboration, the Voice to Vision art team selected a photograph of a drop of water and collaged it to upper right corner of the painting.

During his labor under the Khmer Rouge, Bunkhean was forced to drive an ox cart, and later used an ox cart to transport water to other workers. The broken wheel attached to the painting reminded Bunkhean of the ox cart he drove. Just as Bunkhean's life was "broken," so is the wheel broken and damaged. Bunkhean said that the broken wheel also represents the "broken" lives of Cambodian people.

In the center of the painting is Bunkhean's depiction of Tonle Sap Lake, a large body of fresh water that empties into the great Mekong River. Bunkhean painted the lake red because human corpses had been disposed of in the lake – the corpses are represented by Bunkhean's drawing of a skeleton at the bottom of the painting. The only blue remaining on the lake is its title, written in Cambodian.

Above the lake is a sign with Cambodian script in green and red. The original green letters denote a school; later, under the Khmer Rouge, the letters on the sign were simply written over with the new function of the facility: "interrogation center."

Near the top of the painting are American bombers, representing the secret air war the United States waged against the Communists and the Cambodian people. Trapped in the midst of the horrors caused by the Americans, the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists, for the Cambodian people it was, says Bunkhean, "like being trapped between an alligator and a tiger."

Watch the Video documentary on Youtube:

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZVGChTpc-LmgceAhw1\\_ifg/videos?disable\\_polymer=1](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZVGChTpc-LmgceAhw1_ifg/videos?disable_polymer=1)