



**Joe Bun Keo**

*bitter melons / bitter pills*  
SEPT. 15, 2022 – JAN. 15, 2023

## About the Exhibit

Real Art Ways presents a solo exhibition of recent work by 2021 Real Art Award recipient Joe Bun Keo.

Using found and altered objects, Joe Bun Keo creates poetic installations and assemblages. His recent work is informed by personal experiences with mental health, debt and Khmer (Cambodian) – American identity.

In *bitter melons / bitter pills*, the artist presents a new body of work that focuses on sentimental, cultural and utilitarian values within the discussion of materiality and identity.

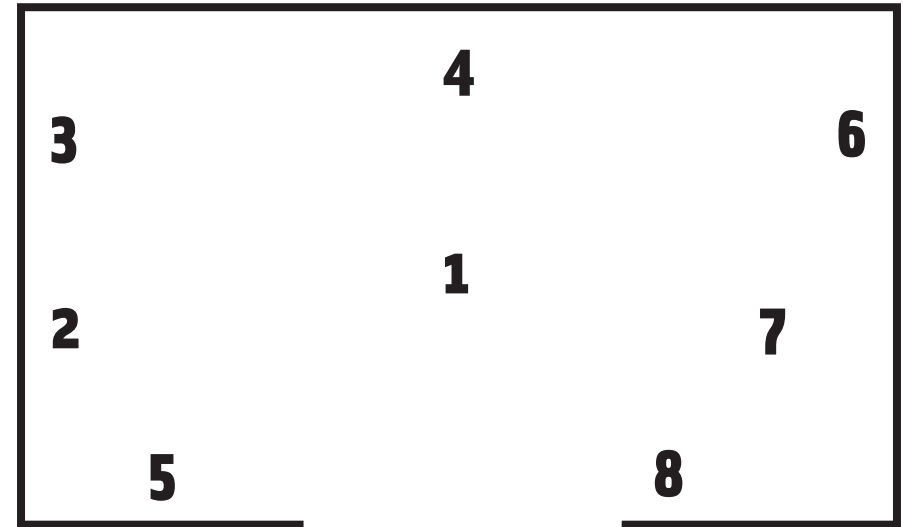
## About the Artist

Joe Bun Keo (b. 1987) is a Khmer (Cambodian) – American artist living and working in Connecticut. His work “unpacks intergenerational trauma through the scope of ‘neomaterialism’ and the concept of ‘power objects.’”

## About the Real Art Awards

Joe Bun Keo is a recipient of a 2021 Real Art Award. The Real Art Awards are a juried competition open at no cost to emerging artists from the six New England states, New York and New Jersey. The 2021 Real Art Awards were juried by artist and writer Kameelah Janan Rasheed; Hasan Elahi, artist and Director of the School of Art at George Mason University; and Real Art Ways Executive Director Will K. Wilkins. In addition to a cash prize and a solo exhibition, each artist receives logistical and curatorial support throughout the exhibition process. This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

## Gallery Map



**1** *DOES THIS SHIRT MAKE YOU FLY!?* (Ann & Hope) (Replacement Version), 2022

Replacement replica authentic NBA Hardwood Classics Vintage Mitchell & Ness Chicago Bulls Michael Jordan no. 23 basketball jersey, used Tiger© rice cooker/warmer that belonged to my late grandmother Prom Thang Kolab, original box of Tiger© rice cooker/warmer, grease, grime. L/33 x W/30 x H/30 in.

**2** *saw (it's white in cambodian)* (Replacement Version), 2022

Customized white LED neon flex light fixture, replacement power adaptor, LED controller, mounting hardware. L/51 x W/8 x H/2 in.

**3** *model minority (brown on the outside, white on the inside)*, 2022

Coconut scrapers, coconut shells, organic desiccated coconut, sweetened coconut flakes, coconut scraper blade, electro-galvanized roofing nails. L/25 x W/18 x H/60 in.

**4** *Discomforter*, 2022

Kwan Loong© pain relieving oil, Eagle Brand© medicated oil, White Monkey Holding Peach Balm®, faux mink fleece blankets, walnut carpet hangers, mounting hardware. L/176 x W/144 x H/2 in.

**5** *Intergenerational Trauma*, 2022

Vintage glass fire cupping set (28 cups, and handmade ignition rod) that belonged to my late grandmother Prom Thang Kolab, Lim Mong Heng Bee Brand vintage aluminum silver tiffin food carrier that belongs to mother Chhleat Bun Keo, dust, soot. L/94 x W/11 x H/6 in.

**6** *noodles for breakfast*, 2022

Artificial shrimp flavor from Nissin© Cup Noodles®, artificial chicken flavor from Maruchan© Instant Lunch™ instant ramen packet, Golden Mountain© seasoning soy sauce, Huy Fong Foods© sriracha hot chili sauce, Huy Fong Foods© sambal oelek chili garlic paste, Thunder Group© Longevity melamine bowls, enamelware zinc tray, epoxy, aluminum cleat, mounting hardware. L/20 x W/20 x H/5 in.

**7** *crips and bloods*, 2022

Blue plastic table food cover, red plastic table food cover, white hook and loop ribbon strap, dust, tension, gravity. L/44 x W/24 x H/11 in.

**8** *got rice bitch?* (AZN Pride), 2022

Vintage EASTPAK© backpack, black permanent marker ink, electro-galvanized roofing nails. L/20 x W/12 x H/2 in.





# Unfinished Rooms: An Essay in Two Parts

Sokunthary Svay

Objects ground us. And for what Joe Bun Keo does, they're an anchor for what is invisible; a non-verbal way of expressing Khmerness reminiscent of an upbringing, where words (and language) have failed and continue to do so. Where those we love live outside of our experience and we wonder how we can bring them in closer to us. Perhaps our parents will see them as things, but that's where this issue stems from, how to differentiate what "things" have meaning and what things don't. In some ways, they're a substitute for what is lost over time or to death, finding softness against the blows of harshness in resettlement, and its inevitable cultural and linguistic clashes.

Although bitterness makes me recall the feeling on the tongue after tasting tannins, it also has the quality of lingering, like the bitter melons that we as Khmers know, hollowed out and filled with minced pork and glass noodles then simmered in a broth of its own making. My mother once said that Cambodians could make a soup out of anything (she once used melon rind cut into chunks and braised it with pork). I had a hard time with that stuffed bitter melon soup as a child, suffering through the bitterness that my childhood tongue wasn't ready for, but knowing the reward



*DOES THIS SHIRT  
MAKE YOU FLY!?*  
(Ann & Hope), 2022  
(detail)

*model minority  
(brown on the  
outside, white on  
the inside), 2022  
(detail)*



that would come with perseverance in the tongue as I awaited the pork. The soup was simply spiced with salt and pepper. It wasn't dressed lavishly like our curries and stews, but its simplicity felt comforting along with spoonfuls of rice.

Now I've stopped eating pork but I wonder how I would enjoy the bitter melon with my adult palate. Will it be as bitter now or will I have adjusted to life's own bitterness, preferring the one I'm prepared for, the one hollowed out and filled with my own tenderness? As an adult, bitterness sometimes feels like the dominant flavor. I love sauteed choy sum or kale; I seek the darkest and most bitter of vegetables to cook, balanced with oyster or fish sauce and garlic, then some kind of chili condiment to activate and offset the bitter. Bitterness in middle age, as a parent, as an adult with never-ending bills to pay is no longer an acquired taste, but one accustomed to over years of reluctance. In living with this taste, resoluteness requires a balance of other flavors and factors so that it is palatable. Otherwise, we risk losing ourselves to a hollowed-out bitterness within ourselves.

One of my favorite poets, the late Agha Shahid Ali, wrote a book entitled *Rooms Are Never Finished*. I like to think this title applies to what is being done and felt in *bitter melons / bitter pills*.



*bitter melons / bitter pills, 2022*  
installation view



## Scenes in Residence: A Score for *bitter melons* / *bitter pills*

Walking into *bitter melons* / *bitter pills* is a multi-faceted experience. It's like walking into a room, so one gets the sense of space, of shape, and an unintended order to the "assemblage" or "installation" as it is referred to. In some ways, it's like walking into an abbreviated home. Immediately to the right one hangs up an "Eastpak" backpack with the "e", "p" and "k" blacked out so that one only sees "Asia" spelled out. Dated around the time of late 1990s, this found object alludes to a time of personal discovery of "Asianness" in a predominately white-populated upbringing.

Next is a connected blue and red food cover titled *crisps and bloods*, a reference to the gang troubles and disconnection within the Khmer community that he witnessed. These covers also act as facades, protection for the sustenance, to keep insects off food. Whether pesky mosquitoes, hungry flies, or some other annoyance, these bright colors protect. They enclose.

Then we happen upon a tray of two melamine bowls, ubiquitous at a typical Asian market, the kind that is cheap and pretending to be something more expensive, because



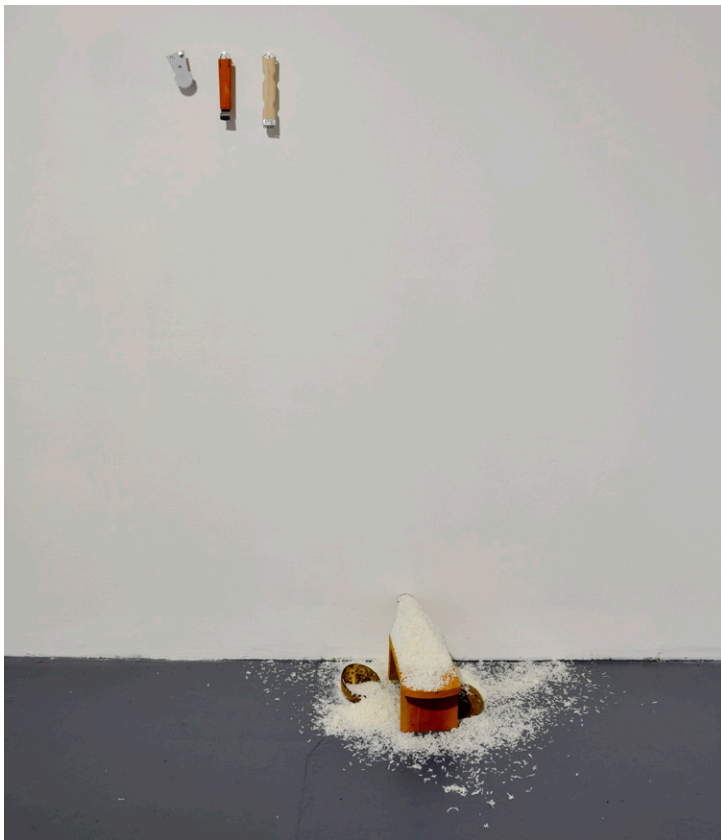
*crisps and bloods*, 2022

*Discomforter*, 2022  
(detail)



even poor folks deserve to aspire. What stands out are their stains, the leftover salt and broth flavor from an instant ramen packet after the primary parts that fill the bowl disappear into the bowl of the stomach. Tiny red chili flakes dot the inside of the bowl, a remnant of the spicy broth that has disappeared down a throat. If you lean close enough, perhaps you can smell it, perhaps make it into an imagined memory of your own.

I suggest you squat down at the next set of found objects, a triple threat of analgesic commonly found in a Khmer refugee home: Eagle Brand medicated oil, White Monkey Holding Peach Balm, and Kwan Loong pain relieving oil. There's a specific smell of menthol and camphor that comes to mind and once you get close enough to the floor, you are immersed in a memory and cultural experience. Above it hangs one of the cheap, faux luxury blankets that costs about sixty dollars yet lasts in a household for decades. It is a signal of the change in seasons, of a time to cozy up, something that the climate of Cambodia does not allow. Cambodian refugees in the United States discover a proper winter and this is one of the few persistent and consistent ways to survive in it. Sit atop it and it feels like fur all over your body. Tuck yourself underneath and it becomes a weighted blanket reconnecting you to the experience of being in the womb. Oftentimes there are flowers decorating



*model minority  
(brown on the  
outside, white on  
the inside), 2022*

it, colors within the family of reds, burgundy and such. Hanging beside the first red blanket is yet another, as the layers of memory coincide one after the other on the wall, on display. As difficult and undesirable as it may be, pull yourself out from under the blanket and head toward the kitchen, which is where our next objects reside.

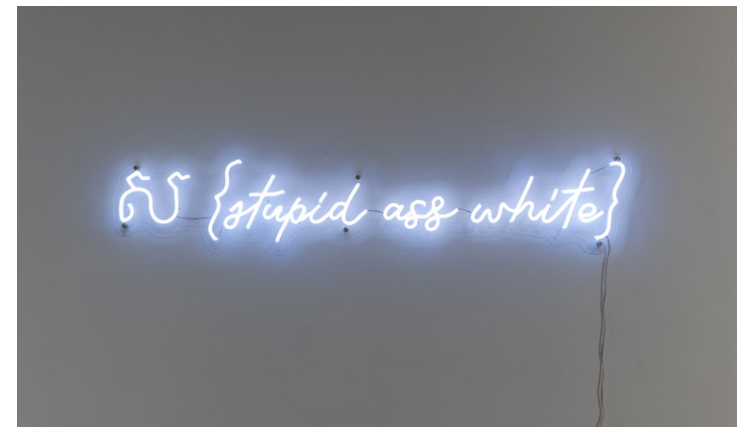
The coconut scraper looks like a miniature wooden bench for a child. There are scrapers made of a strip of corrugated metal that is curved and attached to a wooden stick; it's as though the roof of a countryside Cambodian house has gifted a half-inch strip of itself in part to this tool. Coconut halves are cut and then its insides scraped hollow, with the shape of the corrugated lines leaving traces on the inside, like a hairline, like fine Cambodian hair made wet and combed. Like instruments of torture, the separate scrapers hang in line on the wall, whereas the wooden bench is overflowing in coconut, from dried coconut flakes to desiccated coconut. These are its products at different stages of dehydration, as though a coconut forethought,

only to then be staged. One scrapes out the insides only for it to be left out to the elements, often to air dry. How many other insides have been left to the nature, spread out as display, as evidence of past action? What of the corpse? Corpus. Body. Standing back with the instruments in display, it's difficult not to be reminded of Tuol Sleng (a former secondary school in Phnom Penh that became a prison and torture center during the Khmer Rouge regime, now a museum) the platform where the body would be laid out (the seat for sitting / a bed for impending torture) laid on the floor before us.

But who watches, who witnesses this work? This can be illuminated in the light display of the Khmer letter “ស,” pronounced “saw,” more specifically used as an acronym for “stupid ass white” though also plays with the actual meaning of “saw” which is literally “white.” Sometimes what we define or translate of the shapes in these languages come out re-shaped in meaning. Even so, to witness this process is a kind of seeing, something we “saw” then purposed and packaged for those who are “saw.” (Ah, capitalism. Ah, wordplay.)

And then the wounds we wear, that tension listed as a material or ingredient in some of these pieces, these are tools to address the tense refugee body. When Western medicine rationale does not sit well with us, the suctioning of our skin through centuries-old Chinese medicine makes more sense. Or that of coin-rubbing, where a coin is used to rub some analgesic balm into the skin until the blood vessels burst red, at which point when the body is no longer red, it is considered healed.

*saw (it's white  
in cambodian),  
2022*





*Intergenerational  
Trauma, 2022*

What about the inner healing that comes with going to the temple? The tiffin carrier beside the cupping set makes one think of capacity, of what we can hold whether it is tension, intention, offerings (to monks), nourishment, and hunger. It's an object of ceremony, of bringing together those who are still alive in this foreign place that has become home (the United States). There is still something to celebrate in the ornate carvings on the tiffin carrier. And never let it be seen dirty. Its existence is meant to be immaculate, for even if everything else in our lives is starving, let these offerings be godly.

What might a basketball jersey draped over a rice cooker atop its original box have to do with a Cambodian experience or bitterness? At the center of it all are two objects layered upon each other. One covers and gives a kind of expressed meaning and identity to the body, the other feeds and nourishes it. Let us ponder the juxtaposition between the tagged items of the basketball jersey draped above the aged rice cooker, which has seen years of meals evidenced in layers of stains. There are stories in those stains, years in the glaze over the plastic veneer. Or take, for instance, the box it is placed upon which stands (quite literally) in place of the podium upon which an art piece (or art object) is exalted for us, the viewer. The age of the tape can be seen in its folds, its loss of adhesive. In the case of this tape, like great writing, it's all in the lines. Or that the crisp price tags still attached tell of stories yet to be made, or make us wonder why it's not yet been removed — what keeps the owner from

removing it? Why buy something that is not to be used? How does it relate to the object below it, which is used multiple times a day to feed and nourish?

I write this score to say that we are entering Joe Bun Keo's room but what hangs in the air? If the objects are what ground us, (think of "gravity" listed in the description of some of the works in this exhibit), then what are the non-objects, the non-things that we cannot see that are crying out to us? Is it silence that we hear or a different language with which to speak to us? As a choral composer once said in a rehearsal, "listen loudly."

**Sokunthary Svay** was born in a refugee camp in Thailand shortly after her parents fled Cambodia after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime. Her family was sponsored to come to the United States and resettled in the Bronx where she grew up. A founding member of the Cambodian American Literary Arts Association (CALAA), she has received fellowships from the American Opera Project, Poets House, Willow Books, and CUNY, as well as commissions from Washington National Opera, the Asian American Writers' Workshop, the Chautauqua Institution, and ISSUE Project Room. In addition to publishing a poetry collection, *Apsara in New York* (Willow Books, 2017), Svay has had her writing anthologized and performed by actors and singers. Svay's first opera, *Woman of Letters*, set by composer Liliya Ugay, received its world premiere at the Kennedy Center in January 2020 as part of the American Opera Initiative. A recent recipient of the OPERA America IDEA grant, her second opera with Ugay, *Chhlong Tonle*, received its premiere in March 2022. She is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the CUNY Graduate Center and a Lecturer at CCNY.





**Real Art Ways** is a contemporary arts organization with a record of linking artists, innovation and community. Programs include visual arts, with exhibitions, public art projects, and artist presentations; cinema, with independent and international films; music; performance; literary events; community and educational programming.



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