

# *Life Afloat*

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# Concept

*Thousands of families have been living afloat on the Tonle Sap for generations. As many have recently begun moving to land, others continue to hold onto their floating homes. Throughout the rest of the country, these people are most often seen as "The Other". Their lives are unique. Their culture has developed over time as riverdwellers. For them, this is their sense of place. This is their home. This is their Life Afloat.*

*Beyond any differences between 'us' or 'them', we can observe the everyday human lives above the Tonle Sap. Living in vibrant and resilient communities, many have never lived on land before, only knowing life on the water below them. They raise fish under their houses, paddle to their neighbours, buy rice, meat, and vegetables from floating sellers, and live their lives providing for their younger generation growing up in more uncertainty than ever. This is **Life Afloat**, in every sense of the term..*





*This exhibit takes the viewer into the life of a floating village on the mystical Tonle Sap. Through a community-based conceptual art practice, residents themselves learnt creative photography skills and documented their everyday lives through a camera lens. Their photos float around the display symbolically, almost like the fish that surround them, and sustain their lives. At the core of the exhibit is a boat that was once built by a resident himself to transport his family and friends throughout the river and lake system for over 20 years. Through a community storytelling process, the boat has been painted by international artist, Dona Park. Park brings expressionism and figurativism at a crossroads in this conceptual representation of a community's collective identity, individual narratives, and a memory in progress of a place that may soon cease to exist but in the minds and hearts of those who spent most of their lives there. Throughout the piece lay fragments of Park's own interpretations of outsider identity as a Korean-Canadian who lives between different worlds, languages, and cultures on a daily basis herself.*

# The Boat

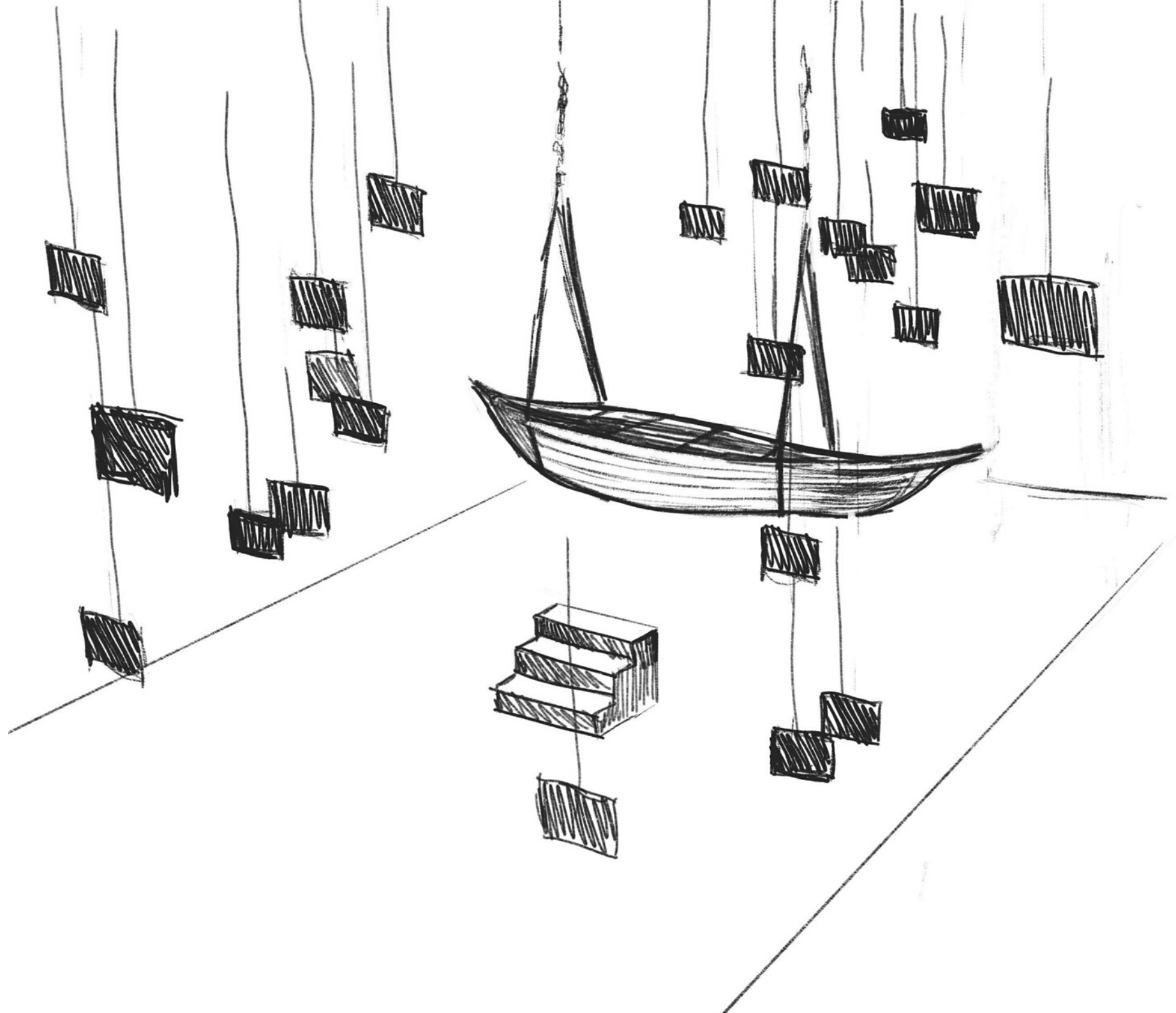
*The boat in this work of art was originally built in 2009 for a community resident from the floating village. It was passed down from a mother to her daughter and son-in-law when she decided to leave the community and emigrate from Cambodia. The owners are a fishing couple that needed a sturdy vessel that could help them feed their family and earn a living. The boat served the community for over a decade and was often used to take people out to on the Tonle Sap to catch fish. It was constantly repaired and kept in good condition to continue floating along the river and in the lake. Eventually, through the successful years of good fishing, the boat owners were able to purchase a bigger one and left this one on the river bank in 2019. The boat was eventually sold to Women Peace Makers to start its new journey as a narrative art canvas for the painting of stories told by the floating village residents themselves.*

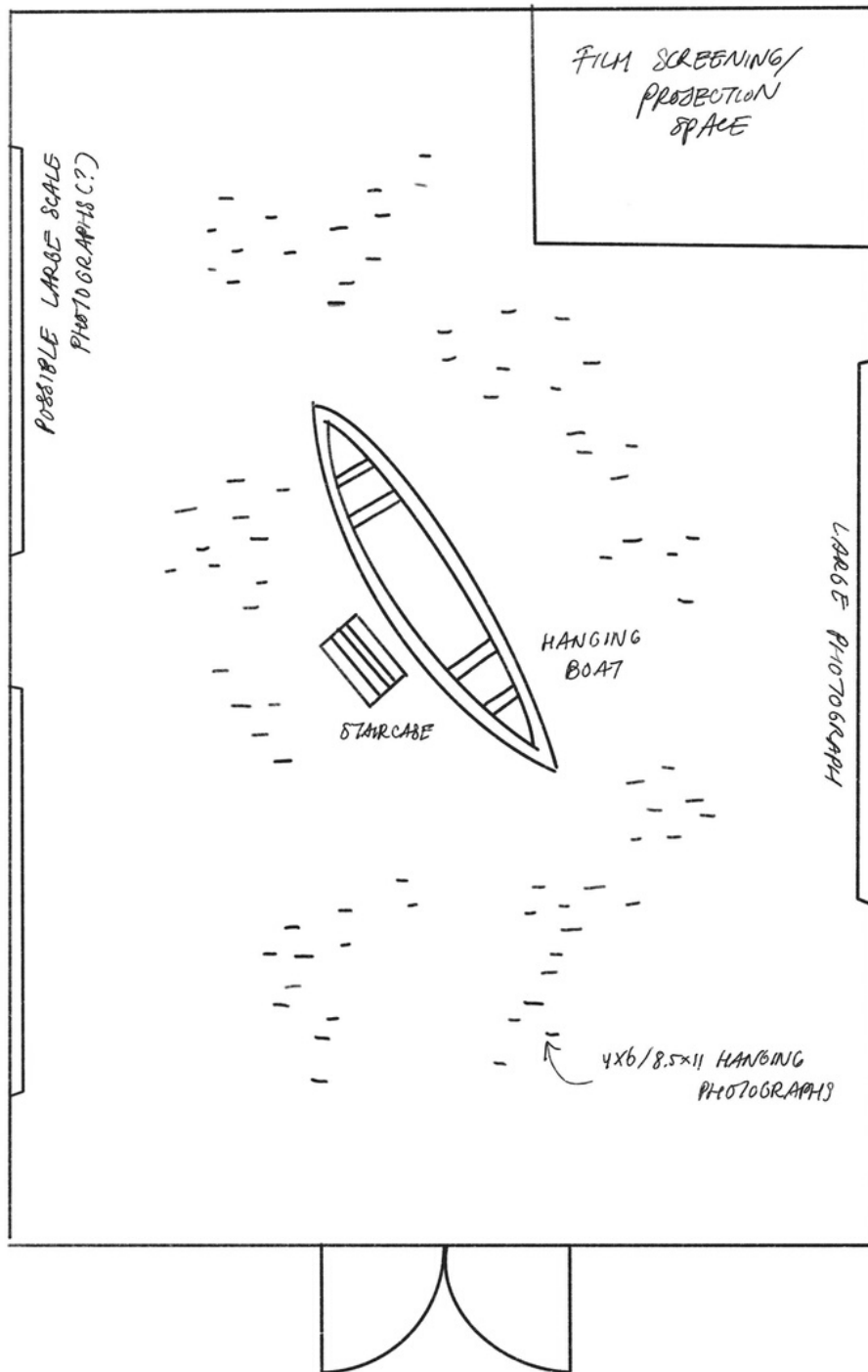


# Exhibit Structure & Layout

*At the entrance, three information posters provide some context. The first describes the conceptual art process and the community-led activities. The second is a description and dedication to Mr. Alain Fressanges, a foreign expatriate of Phnom Penh who was suddenly lost earlier this year due to a health condition. Fressanges was a long-time advocate for different minority groups in Cambodia and often highlighted the similar context of historical European and contemporary Mekong regional dynamics. The third is a profile of international artist, Dona Park, and a gift of her own interpretation for the viewer.*

*40 black and white photos, all taken by floating village residents themselves, hang throughout the exhibit on fishing line at different levels, allowing the viewer to walk around and see life through the eyes of those who live there.*





The boat is 4.5m (length) x 0.65m (width) with a weight of approximately 200kg. It is set within the exhibit as if it were still floating along the Tonle Sap. Climb up the staircase to view the inside of the boat as well, that is also fully painted.

On the screen you will may watch five short films produced by minority groups from across Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Some of the stories may feel familiar, others may seem completely foreign. Sit down, listen, and reflect on how you react to the short stories. Do you see them more like 'us' or like 'them'? Can you relate?















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*Life Afloat is a tribute to Alain Fressanges, a long-time German-French expatriate in Cambodia. We so suddenly lost Alain in July 2019. His memory lives on in all of us.*

*Alain worked intensely on issues of interethnic relations along the Cambodia-Vietnam border. His undying wish was to foster understanding and cultivate empathy amongst all peoples across any differences that seemed irrelevant in comparison to an overarching humanity.*

*Alain reminded us of conflicts in his homeland in Europe, and that peace is possible, giving example to himself as a French-German national, two former enemy nations.*

*In memory of*

*Alain Fressanges*

*Dona Park is a Korean Canadian illustrator and graphic designer living in Vancouver, Canada. She pulls inspiration from personal experience to her cross cultural experiences, travels, and living abroad, particularly interacting with nature and women from all over the world. Most of Park's illustrations reflect small bittersweet moments of her 20s, moments women around the world can perhaps empathize with and women just being themselves.*

*Whether it is heartbreak, unexpected periods, or self-evaluation of our stretch marks, Park enjoys exploring her own effervescent and ephemeral youth.*

*Dona Park*



# Artist Interpretation





# On Identity

*Over the past years, I had the privilege to travel around the world but it first started when I was involuntarily labelled as an immigrant, a 5 year old clinging to her parents moving from South Korea to the United States, and eventually, Canada. My own multicultural identity, as a Korean living in the US, and eventually Canada fostered some sort of flexibility amongst the two cultures. I wasn't quite "Korean" nor had I fully adopted to North American ways, whatever that insinuates.*

*When I pursued my undergraduate education in the United States, here, I was confronted with many power dynamics. As a history major, I became socially disillusioned and frustrated with the realities of gender, ethnicity, and especially race. Despite the exasperation, I also learned to analyze my own identity and the dynamics I experienced as an immigrant, as a woman, and most distinctive to my physical appearance, as an ethnically Korean person. Although I hyphenated Canadian and grew up in North America for most of my life, I was constantly branded as a perpetual foreigner. I used to dismiss their insensitivity as rudeness or just plain ignorance; now I realized that these microaggressions and just plain, blatant racist antics, weren't just personal attacks but a systemic one that rang through many communities of colour at large. When I learned to connect the dots, from reading about all of the "-isms" and linking it to my own life experience, I became extremely enraptured and passionate to speak out in support of ethnic minorities within the United States while advocating for students of colour, domestic and international. As I spoke impassioned speeches and protested as an advocate and ally for my friends, I realized that I also identified as marginalized therefore, giving purpose and cause for my actions.*

*I am thankful for this experience, even though I was still green around the edges- it opened my eyes in realizing that people who have been marginalized, of different cultures and countries, are more similar than different. Similar, disgruntling themes of poverty, disease, xenophobia, and so forth, all carry the same tune.*

*Renowned astronomer Carl Sagan said in his infamous Pale Blue Dot quote, "... There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known." Yes, we live in this small world filled with poverty, death, and injustice. In spite of our realities, I've learned that we must continue to preserve our humanity, to make efforts in building empathy, and God willing, the peace that comes after reconciliation.*

# On Storytelling

*The process of creating is like breathing. It is refreshing and vital, coming up from the water, close to drowning. It can also be very mundane and difficult, stuffy like polluted air that depletes energy. Artists are brave, I think. There's always a debate in my consciousness juggling money, recognition, comparison, self-worth. And yet, artists still continue to create, as we continue to breathe.*

*An artist is a storyteller. I am a storyteller the moment my pen hits the paper, brush on canvas, and in the most contemporary sense, my digital pencil to my tablet. I am sharing my fragment of my being through visual expression. My creativity is borne out of sensitivity, a word easily dismissed as a burdensome trait. Yet this sensitivity is what sustains my creativity. To notice the details, to feel the air from my fingers to my toes, to breathe in all the different scents that surround me. How do I understand the world, the natural world and the people within it, and the energetic buzz that we create, without this? Without it, how do I tell a different perspective?*

*For me, art is also a powerful tool for storytelling, a powerful medium that can be transformed into many things; a weapon, a bandaid, a love poem, a time capsule, or just maybe, just maybe, something decorative to brighten a dull wall. It is not a moving image— it allows the viewer to have an important, lasting impression and gives time for interpretation and that interpretation is in part, up to the creator and the viewer. When I create an art piece, I am fascinated and consider it a success when the viewer feels and offers their own interpretation. It is beautiful to see the viewer reflect on an artwork like a mirror; more often than not, their response is merely a reflection of their own worldviews. As an artist, are we not supposed to incite feelings? It is not always about happiness and butterflies, but through the art, we create a safe space for reaction: anger, frustration, resentment, melancholy, desperation, devastation, comfort, fondness, laughter, joy, to list a few of our complicated emotions.*

## On the Process

*When I was invited to the floating village community in Cambodia to participate in the peacebuilding project, I was placed outside of a setting where I could practice my so-called radical artistic mantra of pushing boundaries and challenging the world with unconventional ideas. This was an invitation where I was a guest, where I was encouraged to listen and learn about this particular community. Community artwork, as defined by Tate Modern, is not artwork solely defined by the individual artist, but rather engages people and communities, who may or may not have artistic experience, through dialogue and relationships.*

*Community art was the perfect concoction. It was a combination of my personal identity, undergraduate education, involvement in social work, with the artistic skills I've nurtured over the years. It required a different mindset, where I am less concerned about my own message and intention, but figuring out the best way to respectfully tell the stories of others. Frankly, it is not an easy task. It requires communication and flexibility for both parties—artists can be particular about their own style and practice, and vice versa, the community may not understand the artist's methods or vision. It was important to have a mediator figure with the organization I worked with, as to communicate my needs and for the community to communicate theirs. In this setting, I was invited, encouraged to listen, and interpret visually, the community and the community's stories into an art piece. Here in this peacemaking activity, I was a guest but also a vessel for this community; a medium for their stories to be told. I had my artistic voice and style, and I could offer my artistic skills but my purpose was to translate their words on to the boat.*

*I considered the different dynamics when I entered the community. I was a foreigner and I did not speak the language fluently, and I recognized that foreigners were rarely, if ever, invited to this space. I was overwhelmed with the scope of the project, I was out of my own comfort zone, or more likely an artist studio, thinking of ways to produce art, engage with the community, and above all, to be an ethical story teller, giving agency and representation to the community as much as possible while preserving my own style.*

*One of the most meaningful memories of my time painting the boat, was when one of the boys came over on his own boat with other children surrounding the spectacle. He wanted to paint and pointed out how my fish weren't Cambodian fish. Shrugging my shoulders, I asked if he wanted to paint. I said it without thinking and watched him in trepidation as he placed the dipped paintbrush onto the white boat. Voilà, he produced a Cambodian fish.*

*By the end of the project, I heard exclamation from some of the people; exclamation of recognition – their homes, the boats, the hats, the ice cream seller on her boat, people swimming, the flowers in the corners of their homes. The boat elicited response– a success to my own artistic integrity – but in retrospect, I wished for a second step, with more time, more relationship building, more engagement between the community and myself and perhaps more Cambodian fish on the boat.*



# *The Community*

*The photos in this exhibit are entirely the work of art of community residents themselves, who live in this floating village on a tributary of the Tonle Sap. Residents were taught how to use cameras, take different types of shots, and provided with the skills and equipment to explore their own photographic styles.*

*Their goal was simple: to look at their community they have lived in their whole lives through a camera lens.*

*The shots show a sense of place. They are typical scenes for floating residents but provide a sense of foreignness to the viewer. They capture moments in a community that may soon cease to exist but in the minds of the once floating village river dwellers.*



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# Life Afloat

*Life Afloat takes the viewer into a nearby but unfamiliar world, pushing a deeper understanding of what sense of place really means at a certain point in time. Like those living in the community, it allows the viewer a place to float and contemplate what home is and what is floating around us.*

This work is generously supported by

