

# Strength in Numbers

In Cambodia, artists are banding together to bring the country's thriving creative scene to a wider audience. **By Laurel Delp**

LAUREN IIDA'S love affair with Cambodia began by accident. In 2008, the Japanese-American artist was on her way to Bangkok when political unrest rerouted her flight to Phnom Penh. She immediately felt at home. Soon she began dividing her time between her hometown, Seattle, and various parts of the country—drawn in part, she says, to “the resilience of the people.”

While the majority of Cambodians were not alive at the time of the Khmer Rouge genocide of 1975–79, the country remains haunted by its memory. Among the first to be executed were intellectuals, teachers, and artists. The cultural landscape has been slow to recover. “In the early days,” Iida says, “there wasn't much of an art scene at all.” She did eventually

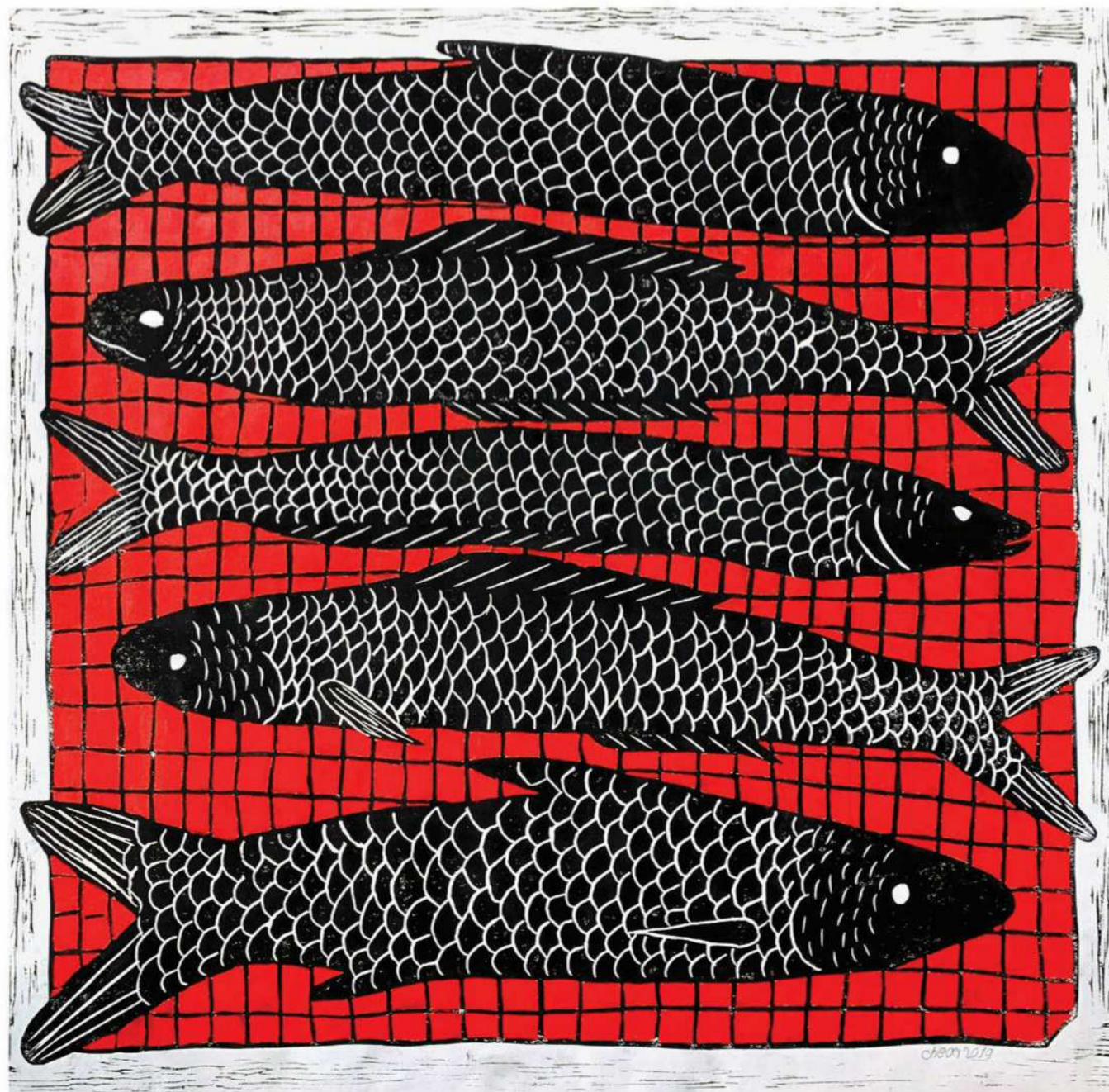
find a creative community, though many of those she met couldn't afford materials or studio space, and they had no training in how to market their finished pieces.

In 2018, Iida founded the artists' collective **Open Studio Cambodia** ([openstudiocambodia.com](http://openstudiocambodia.com)) to support and promote their work. Each of the members has a story. The wood sculptor and painter Van Chhovorn was born in a Thai refugee camp and was enslaved on a fishing vessel before studying at Phare Ponleu Selpak, a tuition-free arts school in the northeastern city of Battambang. Morn Chear lost his hands in an electrical accident when he was in his early 20s; after the injury, the only work he was able to find was tending ducks, which appear often in his block



prints. Oil painter Kim San fled the Khmer Rouge as a teenager, only to be confined for years in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp on the Thai border. He was taught to paint by an artist who had survived the Killing Fields, and the starkness of life in the camp is an ongoing theme in his work.

In 2019, Open Studio relocated operations from Kampot, on the country's southeastern coast, to Siem Reap, the gateway to Angkor Wat. During the subsequent COVID shutdown, the artists hung on through online sales. But with Cambodia back open for tourism, the Open Studio work space and showroom are once again welcoming visitors, and Iida continues to support the endeavor by leading workshops and tours of local galleries. “The pandemic has been hard,” Iida says, “but I no longer worry about my colleagues' futures because they're still artists, and always will be.”



Clockwise from left: *Grilled Fish Study: Red* (2021) by the block-print artist Morn Chear; Lauren Iida, known for her cut-paper pieces, at work on the 2018 installation *Memory Net* in Seattle; Kim San's painting *Waiting for Rice* (2020), a scene from the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp.