

## Cover Essay

# A Bird's Eye View of Home

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At first glance, the shimmering abstraction on the cover of this issue of *EcoHealth* is like a memory of something we are not sure if we have seen—an aerial view of an alien landscape. Its ambiguity draws us in. Is it a close-up of an abalone shell or the head of a gilded Buddha? Is it the rough bark of a newly discovered species of tree, or the glittering cuticle of an Asian beetle? Our uncertain but engaged response is exactly what the artist Nok Chhun seeks. The mixed media work is Chhun's aerial depiction of Koh Kong, a small fishing village in southwest Cambodia where she was born. Once the viewer knows the context, suddenly the rippling waves lapping the shore above the receding depths become apparent. The patinated clumps of plaster are actually the tops of trees caught in the dawn's rays along the beach, shining golden and yellow plum, with huts and even villagers discernible if we concentrate.

Chhun's visceral but dream-like response to her native land was painted by memory on her return to the USA from Cambodia. This was her family's first return to their origins some three decades after fleeing from the Khmer Rouge regime and eventually settling in the USA. This outsider, bird's eye view of her homeland physically resembles Chhun's first view of Cambodia as her airplane came into land. It also resembles the emotional shock that an immigrant receives when they see the reality of their origins for the first time.

Chhun, officially a native Cambodian, is native nowhere. She has that unique immigrant *Weltanschauung*,



living briefly in Cambodia, then being considered foreign in the USA. She is both a resident of, and an outsider to both cultures and geographies. Chhun's "Homeland" is a reaction to seeing a subsistence culture for the first time—the striking dichotomy of her own life in New York against her relatives' in the mangrove fishing villages of Cambodia. More than that, it is also a reflection on her own ambiguity: by painting this aerial abstraction that is not just an outsider's view, but more of a disassociated memory, she raises questions of identity and belonging.

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

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Born in Koh Kong, Cambodia, in 1977, Nok Chhun and her family fled the Khmer Rouge regime and sought asylum in Thailand, the Philippines, and later the USA. When she was about 1, Chhun suffered a severe and prolonged illness. With western medicine seemingly unable to relieve her ailment and desperate to try anything to save their daughter, Chhun's parents followed local custom and renamed her "Nok" in Thai, which means "bird." Fortunately, her illness abated and the new name stayed. Chhun has been hale to this day and currently resides in New York City. Since she holds advanced degrees in both Public Health and the Biological Sciences, Chhun's artistic career parallels her

scientific one; Chhun's mixed media artwork reflects both her emotional interpretation of the world around her, but also filters this through her scientist's eye for detail and questions.

## ON THE COVER

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"Homeland" (2012) by Nok Chhun. Patinated cement, pumice, acrylic paint on canvas. 24 × 30 in. This artwork was the third place winner of the 2012 *EcoHealth* Journal Cover Art Competition.