



2

**CHRIS KELLY  
THE CAUSE OF  
PROGRESS**

**MELANIE  
GRITZKA  
DEL VILLAR**

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# Melanie Gritzka del Villar

*“I have always loved drawing since I was little and I loved art class in school...”*

I think the event that really had an impact on me and was somehow a turning-point was meeting the Swiss-German artist Yargo de Lucca when moving to Javea, Spain when I was about 15. I remember passing his gate a few times and peeking through the fence to look at the sculptures in his garden.

**One day I decided to visit him and I was immediately in awe of his persona,** his paintings, the atmosphere of his house. He became like a mentor to me. He taught me to believe in myself and was the first “real artist” I had met. I saw that making art was a form of “being” in this world. I was at High School then and the idea of becoming an artist became stronger and stronger. I figured that art was the best way for me to engage with the world around me, to address issues I was interested in and that affected me.

**By choice, my favourite place to relax is by the sea.** I love nature and being outdoors. The environment I find myself in affects the way I find inspiration. I get inspiration from many places: it can be nature, but also the craziness of a colorful city such as Bangkok. I love collecting objects, materials, newspaper images. In my studio in Bangkok, for example, I have piles of found material and images on which I draw for collages. But recently



I have been interested in the unconscious, in dreams, archaic symbols, folklore and fairytales from different cultures, so through research I am inspired with the material I find.

**My friend Perry Kasulhay Argel, a Filipino artist, taught me how to re-use rubbish on the beach to make sculptures with.** He also reinforced the idea in me that art is a way of life, meditation and contribution to the environment. Rirkrit Tiravanija influenced me also by his way of making his lifestyle his art. I liked the way he made cooking a meal an art event and his site- and culture-specific way of working.

**In Thailand I have been influenced by my street artist friends.** People like Chip7 have had an impact on me in terms of color-combinations. Regarding painting I am pretty old-school. When I paint I deal mainly with the human figure. I like Frida Kahlo, her self-portraits; Paul Gauguin and his Polynesian themes. I also like the cartoon-like style of Thai artist Yuree Kensaku. Her paintings have a dream-like feel, with a strong sense of narrative...something I have been exploring in the series

*“Art became this mysterious adventure, one that I felt I had to explore.”*

“Chronicles”. Another recent influence has been photographer Tiane Doan na Champassak, when it comes to editing and reducing the imagery I use. In my driftwood series “Traces” I have tried to minimize the amount of collage imagery I would use on top of the wood without losing the strength/impact of the composition and by giving the background surface more space and priority in the composition. I have also calmed down my color combinations in my driftwood works.

**Apart from artist friends, my environment has had a big influence on the way I work and the colours I use.** The neon-kitsch style of Bangkok has had a huge influence on the colour and material of my 2D work. For me it has been inevitable to work with bright colours, given the colourful character of Asia. Also, I choose to be a colourful person. My core is colourful.





**I am very pleased with my two latest series: "Traces" and "Chronicles".** "Traces" because I feel I have managed to really get somewhere with my driftwood collages, like I have crystallized my voice in those pieces: less chaos, more essence. And "Chronicles" because there was a point last year, 2012, where I felt like giving up painting, but the four paintings have given me faith again. They deal with very personal experiences and have been a catharsis in a way. Having finished these paintings and looking at them as a series I also felt like I had finally found the right balance between realism and fantasy.

**I started using driftwood as a material out of chance and appreciation of the material.** During long walks and creative exchanges with Perry Kasulhay Argel, on the island of Boracay, the Philippines. There the monsoon storms and typhoons would wash all kinds of rubbish onto the shore, including driftwood and wooden pieces of broken boats.

**I collected them, being fascinated by the worn surfaces and bright paint scattered over them.** I painted on them or made collages with images I used cut outs from local newspapers. Whenever I go back to the Philippines I try to bring some wood back with me and even ask my family to collect some and bring them with them when they'd visit me in Bangkok.

*"I like to give incomplete glimpses of events and allow one's imagination to complete the narrative"*



**I am interested in the cultural elements I am exposed to.** Even when I don't directly deal with my cultural background, I know my sense of aesthetics, imagery and color palette is always subconsciously influenced by my Asian roots and experience and by my interest in kitsch and used objects.

**Because of my own mixed background (my mother is Filipina, my father is German),** I have been exposed to different cultures through travel and living in several places (Germany, Spain, England, Thailand), issues of identity and hybridism have naturally confronted me. I have always been interested

in people's notion of belonging, their roots, traditions and have tried to work out my own through art, and by putting together all these disparate influences I had been exposed to. It comes down to curiosity in how we deal with culture clashes, understand globalisation and co-exist with multiple influences.

**In some of my paintings such as the "Roots" series, there was perhaps a deliberately "exotic/Polynesian" feel** to the work, given the subjects being portrayed. In the commissioned work for Preduce, I combined elements from



Bangkok which has an inherent mixture, the local and international, old and new. In "Chronicles" Western and Eastern influences are more subtle. But still easily distinguishable Eastern elements (such as the Vietnamese character included in each piece), combined with more Western/Modern components (skyscrapers, doves, roses).

**In "Viva" you get a similar mix of symbols and imagery.** Only in "Traces" I use specifically Thai and Filipino images: photos cut out from newspapers. The images as well as the wood are Eastern, but the aesthetic is more minimal, therefore more Western than in my previous works. However, the boundary between what is strictly "Eastern" and "Western" is blurred nowadays and those terms are too general for the hybridity of today - that is what fascinates me. I prefer to leave it to the viewer to recognise specific elements in my work, according to their understanding.

**I love to tell stories through my work.**

When using found material, those elements already give clues to a specific history of usage, cultural connotation, periods. When I reassemble them in collages, I want to present a new story, my own tale. In my paintings it works in a similar way. In "Chronicles" for example, I tend to use symbols that are mostly universally understood; I like to play with symbols, to re-arrange them. Even in more traditional paintings such as "Ati-Atihan" or "Midday March", there is a sense of something happening. One of the warriors pointing outside of the picture plane (Ati-Atihan); One of the dancers falling ill in the middle of the parade (Midday March). I like to give incomplete glimpses of events and allow one's imagination to complete the narrative.

*"The pieces look like fragments from another time... like relics that one has to decipher"*

**The overall focus in my Traces collection is to try to create poetry with found materials:** to combine materials and surfaces in such a way as to create a story. Seen together, the pieces look like fragments from another time... like relics that one has to decipher. The pieces deal with traditions, childhood, nostalgia, joy, life on the streets, by the river, by the sea all with hope, dreams, celebration and history.

**Two artist friends of mine - Daniela Yohannes and Tosha Albor and myself are planning to have a group show** in the near future. We are three artists of similar mixed backgrounds with very individual yet

complementary styles, and I am really looking forward to this collaboration. At the moment, the three of us are still working on finishing a solid body of new work, so let's see.

**Other than that I will be designing a deck series for Predis in my collage style this fall.** I am considering to make a few more paintings for the "Chronicles" series and start a new painting series from drawings I have developed during my stay in Provence, France, this summer.





# THE CAUSE OF PROGRESS

**Chris Kelly is a freelance documentary filmmaker and photographer currently based in Cambodia.**

**We catchup with Chris to talk about his background in film making and his latest production, 'The Cause of Progress' - a documentary film about the impact of development in a rapidly growing country.**



**Where are you from and what was it like growing up there?**

I am from Ireland. I grew up in Donegal, then moved to Derry (Norn Iron) when I was 14. Donegal was great as a child, lots of trees to climb, fields to play in, that sort of thing. Derry can be a bit of a shithole sometimes, but a nice shithole, there was not much to do in the town, so invariably most of us left and went to university, if only up the road to Belfast, a slightly bigger shithole.

**How did you get into film making?**

I went to university to study English Literature and Philosophy. I had a module in filmmaking and when I realised that it was taking me two weeks to read the course books, but two hours to watch a film, I switched to a filmmaking degree. I have always been interested in filmmaking, I have had a film camera since I was a child. I used my student loan to buy a mac, 'borrowed' a copy of what was then Final Cut Pro v1 from the university

and taught myself how to use it. The course was more theoretical and historical than practical, so we kind of taught ourselves how to use whatever equipment they had available. I preferred it that way, as that theoretical framework helps you to come up with good ideas, and ideas are your best commodity as a filmmaker.

**Tell us about the film you are making now: The Cause of Progress.**

"The Cause of Progress" tells the story of the lives of three Cambodians caught up in the country's chaotic and often violent economic progress. Set against the backdrop of the shifting political, religious and familial landscapes of modern-day Cambodia." That is the official logline for the film. I could talk for hours about the film and what it is about, but maybe for those interested they can check out the blog to read more, there is lots of information on there.

**"CAMBODIA'S LANDSCAPE IS CHANGING RAPIDLY, AND SO ARE THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLE, AND THIS IS DOWN TO THE IDEA OF PROGRESS..."**

**[www.blog.thecauseofprogress.com](http://www.blog.thecauseofprogress.com)**

I have been based here in Cambodia for more than four years now to make this film. And we will soon be starting the post production stage. We hope to release the film next year some time, but that depends on funding.

**What instigated the project?**

When I first came here in 2006 I knew that I wanted to get out of Ireland and come back here to make a film, but at that time I was not sure what it should be about. It took me three years to find the right idea and to get the funding

together, then my brother and me came over and started filming. I was not so much drawn to the particular issue of forced evictions, but more to Cambodia as a place, and so I wanted to try and create a portrait of modern Cambodia, the family, religion, politics and development, all of this is tied into ideas about progress.

**As a documentary film maker is it difficult to keep an observational distance with the subjects and the tragedies they face?**

Well they are not necessarily facing tragedy all of the time. A lot of the time they are just going about their daily lives, with not much happening, and that of course is very interesting to observe as well as it is important to have balance. But then there were these traumatic events, such as being evicted, or being arrested and thrown in jail, or being beaten by police, and I was there and able to film all of these things as they were happening, so it does have a profound effect on you, yes.





*The Venerable Loun Sovath poses for a picture at a safehouse in Phnom Penh. He has been evicted from his pagoda and refused stay in any pagoda in Phnom Penh, because of his activities as a human rights defender. © Chris Kelly 2011.*

But I never intervened because that would mean changing what was happening in front of the camera, becoming involved in the event rather than recording it as an observer. I know that sounds cold, but I feel intervening would be a disservice to those I was filming, and in fact I know they never wanted me to intervene or get involved, only to document and record. Why? Because if I change the event and stop something from happening that one time, then what about every other time when someone is not there to intervene? The perpetrators get off the hook because the one chance you had to document what they were doing you chose to intervene instead of document, and that is a huge mistake I think. So while it is personally very hard to watch the suffering of people

you care deeply about, it would be a real disservice to them and the nameless thousands of other Cambodian's and other people suffering the same fate around the world.

**Are the issues covered in this documentary something you feel strongly about?**

I am not an activist, I am a filmmaker, and I am interested in trying to understand people, and ideas. Of course I care about the issues raised in the film, but I did not come to the project thinking that I was going to make a film that was going to either change the world or really change anything in Cambodia for that matter. I think that a filmmaker who believes that they are really going to make a change needs to seriously question their motives, and their ethics.

I want the film to contribute towards the whole debate about the issues raised in the film that is ongoing, be that in academic circles, within the development world, or more generally among the members of the public who wish to engage with them. My primary concern is to have the film shown to as many Cambodian's as possible, because many people in Cambodia are not aware exactly what the government are doing, I think that could certainly contribute towards a meaningful debate inside Cambodia.

I also want to show those with influence the human cost of such a reckless development model, and to show Cambodia as it is now, at a possible turning point in its history. Cambodia's landscape is changing rapidly, and so are the lives of the people, and this is down to idea of progress, so I want to see what impact 'progress' is having on Cambodian people, because these stories are true for everyone really. I think we are slaves to this idea that progress is accumulative and impervious to change once it has been achieved.

**“CAMBODIA IS INTERESTING BECAUSE HERE WHILE THERE APPEARS TO BE PROGRESS ON PAPER, THE REALITY IS VERY DIFFERENT.”**

**“I WANT TO SHOW THOSE WITH INFLUENCE THE HUMAN COST OF SUCH A RECKLESS DEVELOPMENT MODEL, AND TO SHOW CAMBODIA AS IT IS NOW, AT A POSSIBLE TURNING POINT IN ITS HISTORY.”**

*Srey Pov is currently serving a two and a half year prison sentence for 'disputing authority' and illegally occupying land, arrested during a peaceful protest on the 22nd of May this year.  
© Chris Kelly 2011.*





Given the right (or wrong) social conditions, all the progress made under the tutelage of the development agencies in Cambodia could be eroded or even reversed. Cambodia is interesting because here while there appears to be progress on paper, the reality is very different. And this masquerade of progress that the ruling elite cynically maintains for the benefit of its western donors appears to now be crumbling under the pressure of growing civil unrest and the disenfranchisement of so many poor people who are suffering at the hands of their own government. This is a fascinating time to be here.

**When and where can we watch the documentary?**

The film is just finishing filming in the next few weeks, and we will be in post production for the rest of this year, it will be released next year [2014] at a major film festival and hopefully tour the festival circuit for a year or more. You can sign up to the blog [www.blog.thecauseofprogress.com](http://www.blog.thecauseofprogress.com) to get more updates. If people want to help out we have a donation button on the blog, we are still looking for funding to finish the film so every penny definitely helps!

**What are the challenges of making films in Asia and what do you find most rewarding?**

I am not sure that there are any challenges that are specific to Asia, apart from maybe the weather. My camera has a fine layer of red dust that seems to be what is holding it all together now, I am afraid to clean it in case it stops working! If anything filming in Asia is easier than anywhere else I have filmed. It is cheap to live here, you don't usually need anything more than an easily obtained press pass to film anywhere in Cambodia (with obvious exceptions like Angkor Wat, government buildings etc) and there is a wonderful combination of corruption and incompetence among the authorities that makes filming in almost any situation possible if you tread lightly.

**“MY PRIMARY CONCERN IS TO HAVE THE FILM SHOWN TO AS MANY CAMBODIAN'S AS POSSIBLE... MANY PEOPLE IN CAMBODIA ARE NOT AWARE EXACTLY WHAT THE GOVERNMENT ARE DOING.”**



© Chris Kelly 2011.



**What advice would you give to up coming film makers who are interested in working internationally?**

Do your research before you go, get to know the history of the place that you are going to, try to learn some of the language, be respectful towards the locals, and find a good translator. Your translator is the person who will make or break your film in many ways, they are your eyes and ears when you are filming in a language you don't understand, so the more insightful they are the better it is for you.

**What other projects are you working on now and what are your plans for the near future?**

I am working on another feature length documentary in the Nuba Mountains in Sudan, and lots of other short documentary films around Asia. You can see some recent work at my website [www.chriskellyfilm.com](http://www.chriskellyfilm.com)

For more information visit:  
[www.blog.thecauseofprogress.com](http://www.blog.thecauseofprogress.com)  
[www.chriskellyfilm.com](http://www.chriskellyfilm.com)

*Prak Sopheap stands outside her shop. She was forced to close the shop at the school as she could not leave her belongings unattended.*

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