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The walking dead
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Peter Klashorst says it was just another regular day of heat, hawkers and honking in Cambodia's capital when his walking paintings caused a stir on the street.

Portraits more than six and a half feet high and nearly four feet wide floated by — the large canvases cloaking the men carrying them — leaving pedestrians befuddled and even distressed.

The Dutch artist thinks some people recognized the iconic faces he had rendered: Those of prisoners tortured in the Khmer Rouge's infamous S-21 prison. Memories of this death machine and its victims remain among the most indelible images of Cambodia's nightmare revolution in the late 1970s, in which an estimated 1.7 million people perished.

Klashorst himself was anxious to gain some distance from the paintings. Looking at the portraits one night in his Phnom Penh apartment, he said, he found the eyes of the victims had "taken on a life of their own." So he rented a nearby studio to store his paintings and hired a crew of idle motorbike taxi drivers to transport them there on foot.

The exodus was Klashorst's attempt to expunge the faces from his sleep. In the process, it appears that he introduced them back into the psyches of the unsuspecting denizens of Street No. 130, where people were chewing sugar cane or handing back change one minute, only to be caught by the stare of a tortured soul the next. By Klashorst's measure, the effect his portraits of Khmer Rouge victims created on the street should have been a sign of his project's success. "I wanted to paint their brainwaves, to bring them back to life," he told me.

Klashorst's work tends to elicit a strong response. He's been charged with indecency in Senegal and Gambia for painting nude prostitutes, and in Kenya, where he was charged with witchcraft, he narrowly evaded punishment by hiding in a forest.

Now, in Cambodia, the 54-year-old Klashorst has taken on a more intensely somber project, guided by the black-and-white photographs that the authorities at S-21 took of newly arrived prisoners.

These mug shots have been displayed on the grounds of the former prison since the 1980s, when it reopened as a museum, and they also appeared as court documents last year when a specially designed United Nations-backed war crimes court in Phnom Penh

sentenced the commandant of S-21, Kaing Guek Eav, to 30 years in prison. Better known as Comrade Duch, he was the first high official of the Khmer Rouge to be held to account. Four other senior leaders await trial this year.

Klashorst told me he wanted to add depth to images that had until now been used only for forensic purposes. “They were photographed as slaughterhouse animals, but I tried to paint them as human beings to restore their humanity.”

His technique was to combine an electric palette of spray paint over faces brush-painted in black. Klashorst said he was drawn to paint those prisoners who displayed defiance even on the eve of their annihilation. The beauty of the faces is perhaps the most prominent feature in Klashorst’s depictions, beauty that stands in stark contrast to their austere uniforms and crudely cropped hair.

The portraits were designed for an exhibit inside S-21 itself. But there was a last-minute hold-up when officials questioned whether the works’ unorthodox style qualified as art. Their objections were overcome and the paintings are currently on display in a building of S-21 that once housed shackled prisoners.

Klashorst said he saw no reason to apologize for his approach. Those imprisoned, he said, may have had aspirations as eclectic and colorful as the style in which he painted them. Pointing to a portrait of a young woman, he said: “Maybe she wanted to be a movie star or something like that.”

Cambodia’s war crimes court has focused on holding senior Khmer Rouge officials accountable for their crimes — an important endeavor in a country where rule of law is precarious and impunity rampant.

But with so many lives lost, a survivor of S-21 named Chum Mey told me, the stories of the victims are worth telling, even if imperfectly.

Sitting on a shaded bench on the grounds of the museum, Chum Mey told me how he managed to be among a handful of S-21’s estimated 14,000 prisoners to survive. Though he faced the same sadistic torture that other inmates suffered, his usefulness as a skilled car mechanic prevented his execution.

He says that the ghosts of his fellow prisoners still roam through his mind, and that it’s good for others to look at the portraits and share the experience, if only for a moment.