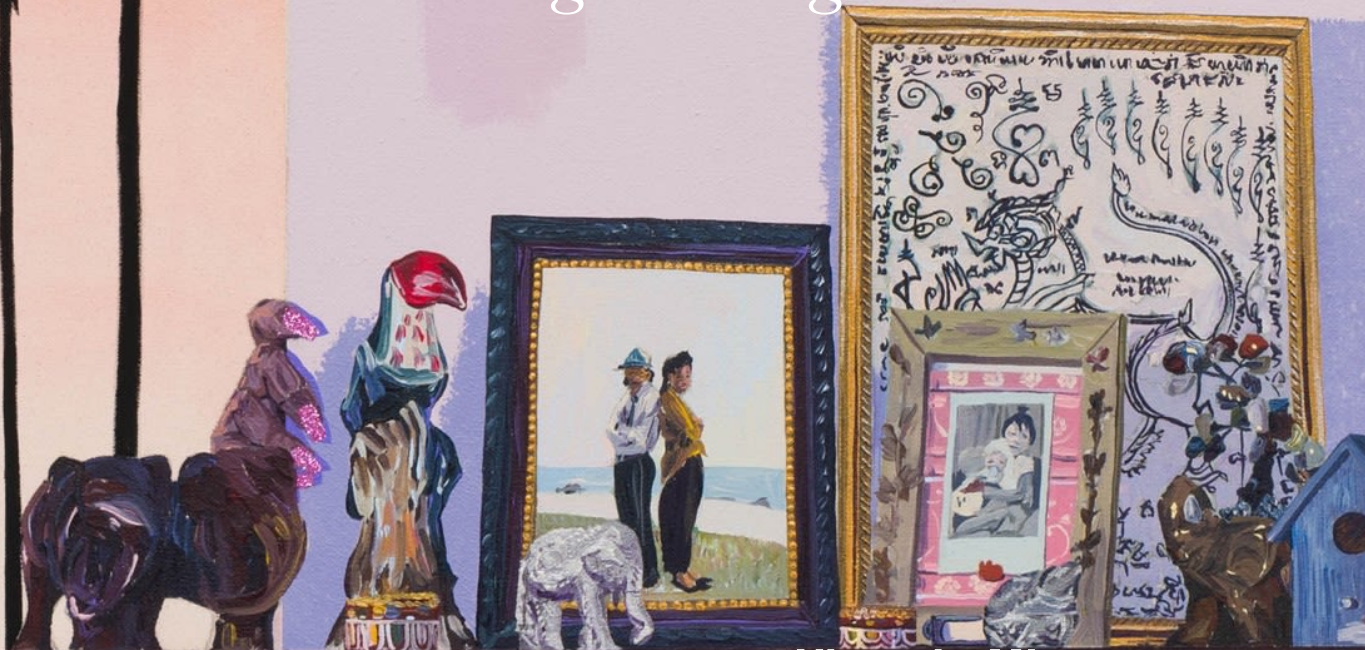




# Tidawhitney Lek:

*Marooned on Foreign Feelings*



Victoria Miro PROJECTS

‘I don’t find life simple when it comes to owning my identities. Growing up it was a bag of mixed feelings. From all the role models in my life, I thought I could figure out who I should be, but that belief eventually felt uncertain and untrue. Family stories were in pieces, scattered across a history that seemed out of reach, leaving me to wonder if I truly understood the essence of one’s roots. I suppose there was always a disconnect, that it was only the surface that I witnessed in others and myself, and what I could not see was the whole that had been. Identity seems like an endless journey of unravelling and reckoning across generational timelines and personal histories. The notion of deconstructing and reshaping the self feels like a constant tug-of-war between being in the present and understanding one’s past. In the end, I’ve been marooned, left to face the definite yet unfamiliar landscape of assimilation – another day in the life of the Cambodian-American experience.

‘The source materials are taken from real-life photos captured on my iPhone in combination with some composite images. My settings are inspired by landscapes ranging from the beach and local markets to domestic homes and distant lands of my mother and father. I use acrylic paints with watercolour techniques on raw canvas, creating a push-and-pull dialogue between spaces that recede and soften. This is contrasted by opaque glitter, pastel, acrylic, and oil paints in the foreground. There is an interaction between mediums in which the deliberate mark-making complements the articulation of gesture. While my palette incorporates sunset tones, emphasising value and hue, it also introduces drama through light and shadow.’

**- Tidawhitney Lek, 2025.**





*Solace Sisters*, 2024. Glitter, acrylic, and oil on canvas. 182.9 x 121.9 cm, 72 x 48 in.

‘I was thinking about how much I still need my mom to hold me and how important that is to me. I will never let that go – this care between one woman and another. When I’m at my lowest, overwhelmed by uncontrollable feelings, my mother, her lap and arms, are among the few places that can calm me down. Then I thought about my sisters. I have three (older) *Bong Srey*. I thought it would be nice for them to hold each other, like how my mom does for me. To note, my mother rarely gave her loving affection to all of us. Her struggles kept her from spending that kind of time with us. There was a lot of miscommunication growing up, but we all understood she was our caring mother. So with that said, between us sisters, showing affection was also rare.

‘I had asked my sisters and my mom to pose for my work, that I would like to paint a composition in relation to mom, but in the end what I captured was the relationship between my sisters. I had them wear the Khmer garment that our mother had gotten tailored for us and used my parents’ backyard as the setting. I had each sister, one at a time, rest her head on our mother’s lap, sitting on the straw mat while mother sat upright on a bench. Each one exhaled in comfort, eyes closing, and energy humming as I took all the photo references I needed. One sister even said, ‘This feels so nice.’ Once that was done, I had them do the same with each other. My sisters used to be so close, but as we got older, it became harder for some reason. I blame miscommunication. No doubt that these two love each other, the ones in the painting. They’ve never left each other’s side for their entire lives. And what I painted was how it was, the relationship still between the two. *Bong Vann*, in the blue, is the elder, and she is very much like my mom, while *Bong Dah* sits in consolation, a need we all share. I have another *Bong Srey* I would have loved to capture with the others, but the tension between them remains, and I could not convince her to join this experience of solace.’ – **Tidawhitney Lek, 2025.**



*Freeman St*, 2024. Glitter, acrylic, and oil on canvas. 243.8 x 121.9 cm, 96 x 48 in.

‘Freeman Street is where my first home was. It’s where it all began for me and my siblings. Home wasn’t far from the coastline, just a 10-minute drive to the bluffs. When my elders talk about those days, they remind me what it really was like. Our neighbourhood was notorious for gangs during the 80s and 90s. I didn’t know, I was little then. Not too long ago, my parents met my partner’s parents for the first time, and they chatted. My mom mentioned that we lived on Freeman Street and they responded, ‘That was a dangerous block.’ When I heard my partner’s mom say that, it was another affirmation for me. I grew up on Freeman Street in the ghettos of Long Beach, California. Painting stickered signs is a motif or trope that I use often in my work. It’s a nod towards a subculture that thrives off of taking up space in this particular way. It points to a rebellious act with a play of notoriety in public spaces, like graffiti tagging. This particular ‘No Left Turn’ sign is located in the Arts District of Downtown Los Angeles. I was walking back to my car after finishing lunch when I saw it. *Another nice one to paint, I thought. Won’t be the same tomorrow.*’ – **Tidawhitney Lek, 2025.**





*By the Bluffs*, 2024. Glitter, acrylic and oil on canvas. 274.3 x 213.4 cm, 108 x 84 in.

‘Within the picture plane, this portal suggests the dimension of space on a flat surface. This painting began with a composite image of a temple from Cambodia. The doorway acts as a threshold bringing together different perspectives of places and times of the day. I merged the temple’s facade into the coastal sidewalks of Long Beach, using the sky, domesticated plants, and the surrounding man-made structures to bring the settings together. Ascending, a woman emerges into view, her attention focused on something out of sight from the viewer. Another figure is depicted outside the frame made present through a casted shadow which contrasts with the lighting. In the foreground, there’s a plate of fruit along with a bowl of rice grains with three sticks of incense in it – a gesture to a practice my mom continues to exercise from her religion of Buddhism.’ – **Tidawhitney Lek, 2025.**



*Deja Vu at Riverside Market*, 2024. Acrylic, pastel and oil on canvas. 182.9 x 365.8 cm, 72 x 144 in.

‘This is a triptych painting of a local Asian market out in Cambodia Town, Long Beach where I’m from. I was processing the events of civil unrest that took place in my community during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was Spring 2020 and the virus had abruptly halted much of the world. The unrest grew in America and soon it took hold of neighbourhoods and cities across the country. The awareness of such occurrences triggered and sparked conversations about historical past events that had swallowed societies into chaos. This painting was another look into a profound understanding of that truth.

‘I referenced one facade of a store front and juxtaposed it with other interior spaces. I selected a few photos I had taken on my phone to build this composition. I was pondering the idea of civil unrest, drawing parallel between the historical events of a past generation and the recent events of 2020.’

– **Tidawhitney Lek, 2025.**



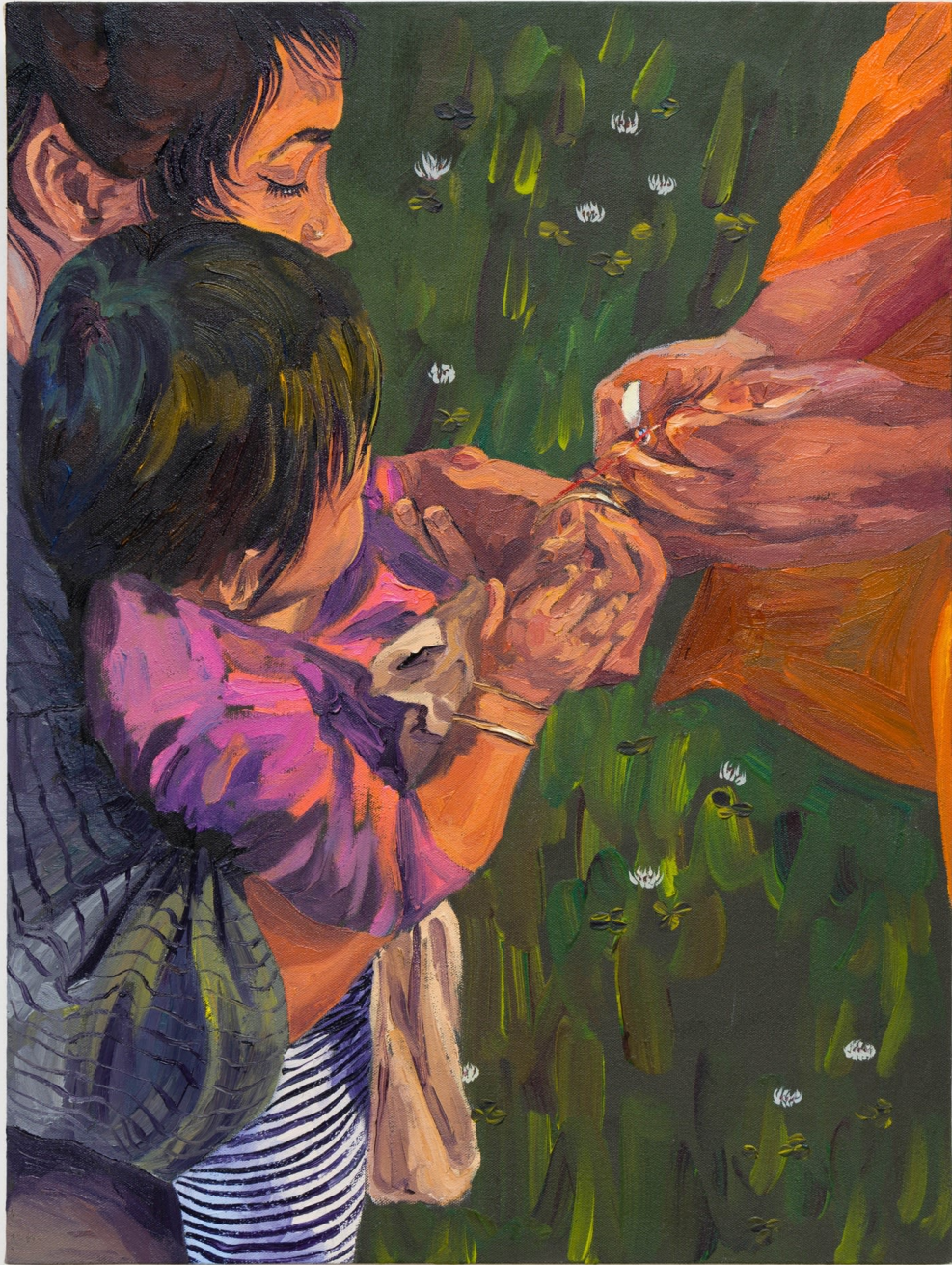


*Made in Cambodia*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas. 121.9 x 91.4 cm, 48 x 36 in.

‘This circuit breaker panel caught my attention when I was getting a tour of a new studio space at Munzón Gallery. Elizabeth Munzón, the founder of the gallery and a peer of mine from college, had just renovated a new spot out in Cambodia Town. The panel was covered in stickers, its edges layered in coated paint. These words stood out boldly: *‘MADE IN CAMBODIA’*. I quickly took a photo of it.

‘I incorporated that image into a domestic setting, creating a scene set between exterior and interior spaces. I painted my mother’s mantel shelf and the trinkets on it. I’ve been wanting to paint these objects for a while now and saw a collection of items that I found fitting with the phrase *‘MADE IN CAMBODIA’* – a culmination of ideas and thoughts projected into these objects.’ – **Tidawhitney Lek, 2025.**





*Bless the Young*, 2024. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 61 x 45.7 cm, 24 x 28 in.

‘It was Cambodian New Year, and my mom had requested a monk to come bless our family. It’s not often I see all my siblings gathered in one place at once. We all pay our respects, taking cue from our mother and auntie while they chant along and bow several times throughout the hymn. When all is done, everyone is sprinkled with blessed water and the monk ties a red string around each of the family member’s wrists, enchanted with protection and good fortune. In this painting, one of my elder sisters is holding her youngest. She’s holding her daughter firmly, cupping her hand into her palm as the monk uses a lighter to burn off the ends of the string.’ – **Tidawhitney Lek, 2025.**





*Ceremony*, 2025. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 20.3 x 25.4 cm, 8 x 10 in.

‘My family has been asking me lately if I plan to get married to my partner. My parents have seven kids and we’re all in our 30s and 40s now. None of us have wed in a traditional Khmer ceremony. Our mother has told us indirectly that she would like to see at least one of us celebrate it before she passes. I didn’t really care growing up in America, though. The idea of marriage just seemed like a play on commitment followed by divorce. For my mother, marriage was a sense of security for a woman. She was constantly pressing my older siblings to have an arranged marriage with someone back in her home country. All her plans failed, even when one sibling said yes. I wanted to wait until I truly found the one. She hated boyfriends – she thought of it as a tainted act. It hurt to know she felt that way, but I think she gets it now. I grew up with the liberty to choose who could be my forever partner, and I think I finally found him.’ – **Tidawhitney Lek, 2025.**





*What is that?*, 2025. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 25.4 x 20.3 cm, 8 x 10 in.

‘This is a family photograph of my eldest brother and sister as children. I was thinking about how much time has passed and how tiny they used to be. Now there’s a second generation here – my sister’s babies are fully grown and are young adults attending college now. My sister and brother can hardly remember these childhood days.’ – **Tidawhitney Lek, 2025.**





*Kids*, 2025. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 20.3 x 25.4 cm, 8 x 10 in.

‘Sometimes when I think of the past, I like to look back at old family photo albums. I have lots of siblings and we don’t really spend much time together. I have three older sisters and tend to call me and my little brother the second batch. I watched my sisters grow through adolescence and into young women, then young mothers. I wanted so badly to join in on whatever they were doing. I watched them try on new clothes my mother bought for them, put on makeup, do their hair, use cell phones and so on. I could never join them – I was always too young. Too young to join in on the conversations, too young to come along, too young to play with. I wonder often, what were they like, really? Now that we are older, I can ask them.’ – **Tidawhitney Lek, 2025.**





Victoria Miro

16 WHARF ROAD LONDON N1 7RW + 44 (0) 20 7336 8109