

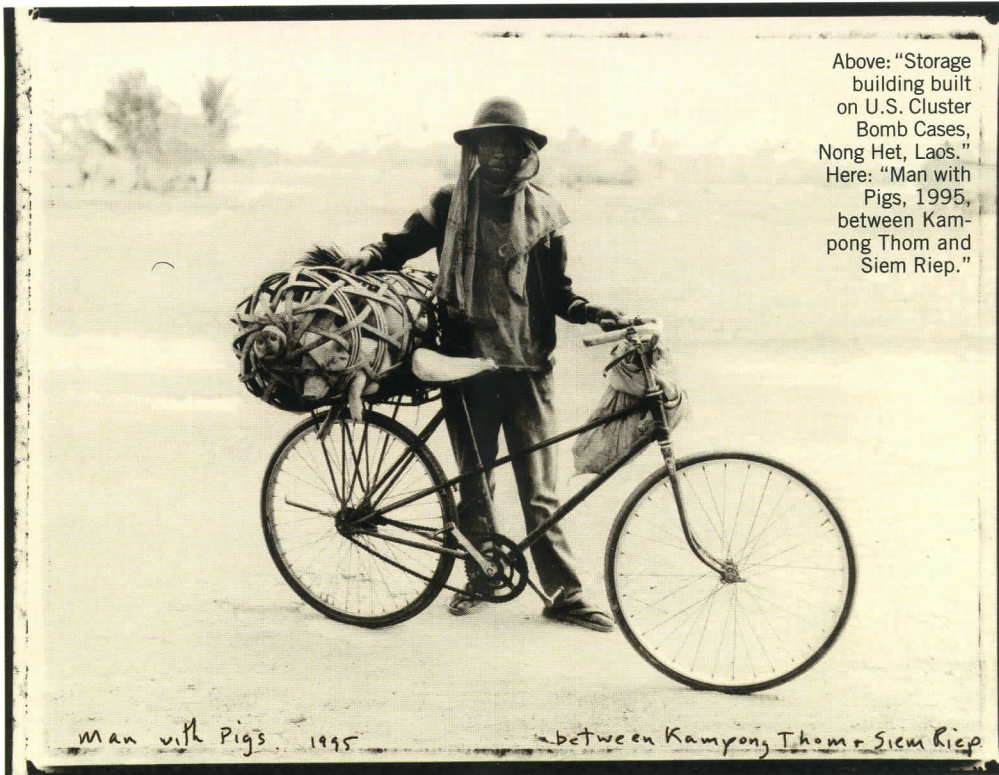
storage building built on U.S. Cluster Bomb Cases
Nong Het LAOS



MENTOR

Bill Burke

For this much-admired
photographer and
educator, Southeast Asia
has been a subject
rich in history and ripe
for personal exploration.
by **Russell Hart**



Above: "Storage
building built
on U.S. Cluster
Bomb Cases,
Nong Het, Laos."
Here: "Man with
Pigs, 1995,
between Kam-
pong Thom and
Siem Riep."

man with Pigs 1995

between Kampong Thom & Siem Riep

"Hoi Vu Street,
Hanoi, 1998."

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Hoi Vu St Hanoi

1998

Bill Burke is not a war photographer, but since 1982 his pictures have focused mainly on Southeast Asia, a region worn down by decades of organized violence. In exhibitions and books such as *Mine Fields* and *I Want to Take Picture*, he has portrayed the struggling peoples of Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, from gun-wielding soldiers to weary rice farmers, street urchins in crumbling cities to war-maimed amputees in ramshackle military hospitals. Documentary on its surface, his black-and-white work is the antithesis of traditional photojournalism: involved and diaristic rather than detached and polemical, at times as much about his own experience and feelings as it is about its nominal subjects. The distressed quality of the prints—the deceptively accidental ways in which Burke makes his working process manifest itself in them—is a visual metaphor for the suffering of their subjects and the turmoil that surrounds them. This gives the photographs an emotional power that the most meticulous photojournalism often can't achieve.

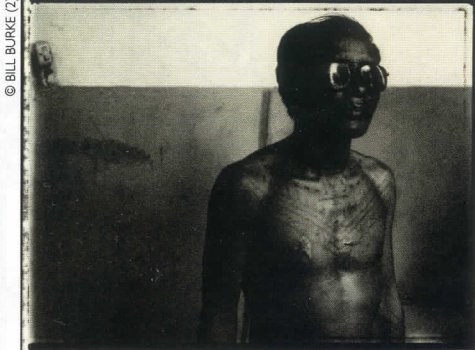
"In the seventies, I learned to use photog-

raphy as an excuse to go where I had no business and to make pictures in places where I was uncomfortable," Burke writes in 1987's *I Want to Take Picture*, a self-produced, limited-edition book that has become a collectible classic. "I saw and was greatly moved by *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*. I began to feel in some way sorry to have missed the Southeast Asia experience my government had set up for my generation. [So] in 1982, years after Viet Nam, I decided to give myself my own Southeast Asia experience. I wanted to make pictures in a place where I didn't know the rules, where I'd be off balance."

That photographic jeopardy nearly cost Burke his life. In 1984 he was photographing the Khmer Rouge in camps along the Thai border, the area to which the infamous proprietors of the killing fields had fled after being forced out of Cambodia by the Vietnamese. A pickup in which he was hitching a ride on a perilous two-lane highway collided with an open wagon, killing several people and breaking Burke's neck. The photographer was carted from one police station to another,

along bumpy rural roads without a neck brace, before landing in a Bangkok hospital. Months of recuperation there and in the United States didn't deter Burke from returning. Almost every year for the better part of two decades, when he wasn't teaching at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston—a position he has held for over 30 years—he was taking pictures in Southeast Asia, often with the support of an NEA grant (he has won several) or a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Though he was known for his affecting portraits before his fascination with Southeast Asia, to call Burke a portraitist oversimplifies the quirky, atmospheric, and richly layered quality of his images. So it doesn't seem a stretch that the ostensible subject of his new book, *Autrefois, Maison Privée* (powerHouse, \$75), is the area's historic architecture. Chipped and eaten away by cyclical war and a wet climate, suspended in time by an economically indifferent communism, and in many cases demolished since Burke took their pictures, these mainly French colo-



© BILL BURKE (2)

nial buildings have the region's sad, complicated history written all over them. The book's title means "formerly a private house," and captions scrawled at the bottom of each image often explain how the buildings have been "repurposed" by different regimes.

For example, a French Catholic school in Hue, Vietnam's capital before its division after France's occupation, is now a sports club for

Communist Youth. A movie theater in Pailin, Cambodia, once a Khmer Rouge enclave, has a facade that clings to a decorative past despite its current use as the Department of Taxation. The former American embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, is now the Ministry of Fisheries, while in the same city, streets are retarred with a ladle made from an old U.S. Army helmet. Inside the compound walls of Vietnam's ignominious "Hanoi Hilton," a former French prison used by the Vietcong to hold American airmen, a high-rise hotel is under construction. A thatched storage building along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos is raised high and dry on the empty shell casings of American cluster bombs.

The distressed quality of Burke's prints is as effective with these images as it is in his portraits, a number of which are interspersed with the book's architectural photographs. Repro-



BOOK GIVEAWAY

American Photo On Campus is giving away Bill Burke's **Autrefois: Maison Privée**, which documents the architectural and cultural changes that recent upheavals have brought to Southeast Asia. To win a copy, send a postcard with your name, address, phone number, and school affiliation to *American Photo On Campus*, 1633 Broadway, 43rd floor, New York, NY 10019. Be sure to write "Burke book" on the card. The deadline is May 31.



Top: "Patient, military hospital, Phnom Penh, 1995." Here: "Dentist-Photographer, Nong Het, Laos."

duced in tritone, the images' muted values and creamy highlights are oddly reminiscent of albumen prints by the 19th-century photographer Eduard Baldus, who was commissioned to document crumbling, often ancient French buildings slated for destruction and replacement by more useful modern edifices. "I was moved by buildings that ranged from municipal offices built by the French in the 1860s to Michelin rubber plantation buildings from the turn of the century and the art-deco fantasy cinemas of the 1960s," says Burke. "I found consulates—built then abandoned by the Americans, and later reclaimed by local governments—still containing the typewriters and office furniture our foreign service left behind in its flight.

"The explosion of capitalism in the region has already begun to devastate [this] architectural heritage. What was not destroyed during decades of war, developers from the West and neighboring countries are busily replacing and defacing with postmodern shrines to commerce and corporate profit."

Since its beginning, photography has helped preserve a semblance of cultures that human beings, either in hatred or a haste for progress, have destroyed. In its eccentric and highly personal way, *Autrefois, Maison Privée* carries on in that sad but honorable tradition. ■