Prum Vannak Anan says, staring down at his hands and aimlessly twisting a piece of red string around his slender wrist. A scorpion tattoo, with his name written in Khmer along its tail, runs up the length of his arm. “All I wanted was to find work,” he says, glancing up. “But that is not what happened. What happened was not something I ever thought.”

A victim of human trafficking who spent years enslaved on a Thai fishing boat, Mr. Vannak Anan displays almost no emotion as he describes some of his experiences. Most were small, approximately 28x40 cm, but they were detailed and recreating scenes, and that those who had previously rejected his story finally began to believe it. “When I saw those drawings, I truly understood for the first time what those men experienced.”

Mr. Vannak Anan has created a series of 58 paintings for Licadho, telling the full story of his time in captivity. He has also done a shorter version of his story for Radio Free Asia in a series of 12 paintings, as well as a number of private orders for various individuals and non-profit organizations. Last year, 40 of Mr. Vannak Anan’s paintings were put on display by World Vision Cambodia at an anti-trafficking exhibit in Singapore. Most recently, he was one of 10 homeowners to receive the U.S. State Department’s “Heroes Working to End Modern-Day Slavery” award, in recognition of his art and activism.

Mr. Vannak Anan says that having to relive his captivity each time he picks up his brush is not difficult. “The images are always the same. I can remember all the scenes and so on, it is not painful for me. It’s my pleasure, actually,” he says.

If he had the resources, Mr. Vannak Anan says he would create large signs or billboards of his painted scenes to place on major roads and in other public places.

“Even if they can’t read, they can look at my paintings and understand what I am telling them,” he says.

Mr. Vannak Anan says he believes his art is not only a good way to spread his message, but also a way to appeal to the government and other local authorities to arrest the middlemen involved in the human trafficking trade, and not the victims themselves.

“I really just want to tell people to be cautious and to make sure they have the right permissions and information before they try to work abroad,” he says, adding that it does not matter if people judge his paintings as good or bad. “All that matters is that my message spreads to them.”

Looking toward the future, Mr. Vannak Anan says he is not sure what in store for him. “I hope to continue painting, but sometimes I think I must go back to Battambang [where his ordeal began] to earn money,” he says. “I want to keep painting but I don’t have the resources. And I don’t have the education to find good work.”

This lack of work is often one of the biggest struggles for repatriated human trafficking victims, Mr. Hornung said. He hopes that Mr. Vannak Anan’s art can be used as a means of supporting himself and his family.

“Mr. Vannak has the ability to transmit the information [about human trafficking] in a painting and to share his story in a telling and poetic way,” he said. “I hope he can use that talent, along with the current momentum of being in the limelight, to promote his art and his better life.”

Mr. Vannak Anan, who has never had any formal training, says he would be interested in a career in the arts, but still needs more time and skills to be comfortable as a professional.

“I never took one class,” he says, turning to the mural on the wall behind him. “But I enjoy art. Painting is something I was born to do.”

“We have to prepare them to enter the labor force, and to make sure they have the right permissions,” he said. “I hope he can use that talent, along with the current momentum of being in the limelight, to promote his art and better his life.”

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