

Media release March 2022

LIVING ON WATER by Steff Gruber at FOTO WIEN 2022

Exhibition from 9 to 27 March 2022
Café Prückel, Stubenring 24, 1010 Vienna
Daily from 8.30 am to 10 pm



Exhibition LIVING ON WATER

Swiss filmmaker and photographer Steff Gruber visited the floating villages on Cambodia's Tonle Sap lake for the first time in 2012. He was there to do research for his film *Fire Fire Desire*. On the occasion of FOTO WIEN, at Café Prückel, he is showing photos taken during two trips to Tonle Sap in 2019 and 2022. In his new show, rather than displaying his photos the traditional way, Gruber is using digital signage technology common in today's advertising to create a "Screen View" of his work.

Tonle Sap in Cambodia is the biggest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. It is one of the world's richest inland fishing grounds and home to over one million people. Until just a few years ago, many thousands of people lived on the water in houseboats, which formed floating villages all across the lake.

Gruber was so fascinated by the simple but arduous life of the lake dwellers, a life characterized by hardship and constant danger, that he decided to return to Tonle Sap in 2019. He had also heard of the government's plans to close down the villages in the foreseeable future.

In 2019, Cambodian, Vietnamese and some Chinese, as well as Cham families, who made a living primarily from fishing, still lived on the crowded, self-built boats and rafts. The villages also have their own floating stores, schools, an ice factory, a Buddhist pagoda and even a Catholic church.

Deeply dependent on the lake, the livelihoods of the people are under acute threat. Dams, overfishing, illegal logging, the exploitation of all kinds of resources and pollution threaten the stability of Tonle Sap's socio-ecological system. The economic interests of the government and Chinese investors are the main reasons for this development.

In the eyes of the authorities, the lake dwellers are also living there illegally. As "sans-papiers", they are neither registered or have access to state education and the health system, nor do they have any other rights.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cambodian authorities already began to evacuate the floating villages, largely unchallenged by the general public: according to the government, this was mainly for hygiene reasons. Families who have lived here for generations, most of them ethnic Vietnamese, are particularly hard hit. Without papers, it is impossible for them to start a new life in Cambodia, and at the same time, the Vietnamese state is refusing to take them in. In early 2022, at the time of Steff Gruber's last visit, about one hundred remaining Cambodian families were awaiting eviction from their houseboats, which are now moored on the shore. All of the houses have to be vacated by the end of the year. By then at the latest, life on the water in Cambodia will have disappeared altogether.

About Steff Gruber

Steff Gruber (1953) is a Swiss photographer and filmmaker. He worked as a press photographer for Keystone Press and was one of the first filmmakers to explore the docudrama genre. He became internationally known with his documentary LOCATION AFRICA about the filming of COBRA VERDE, the last collaboration between Werner Herzog and Klaus Kinski. His award-winning films have been shown at various international film festivals.

Based on his interest in documentaries, Steff Gruber began shooting photo stories in various countries, focusing, in particular, on human interest subjects and humanist concerns. Visiting places and people on repeated occasions, many of his photo series were produced over a period of several years.

Steff Gruber is a member of the Swiss Association of Journalists and Photographers IMPRESSUM.

Contact

media.ch AG Diana Bärman Hafnerstrasse 60 CH 8005 Zürich +41 44 270 80 90 photo@alive.ch

Steff Gruber will be in Vienna from March 7 to 11, 2022 and can be reached for personal information at +41 78 873 43 79.

Photos can be provided on request.

Links

www.living-on-water.org www.lumiere.gallery www.steffgruber.com www.kino.net

