

Soul OF A PEOPLE

Pickford photo project explores the Hmong experience.

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To narrow the scope of Joel **Pickford's** massive eight-year **Hmong photo project** titled "Soul Calling," let's consider two pigs.

In one photograph, shot in Fresno, the pig was purchased early that morning at a butcher shop for use in the hu plig ceremony, or "soul calling," an integral part of the **Hmong** belief system in which a person's missing soul is returned to its owner by bartering the soul of an animal. After killing the pig, the butcher drained the blood, dipped the carcass in boiling water and thoroughly scraped it, leaving its naked skin, as **Pickford** puts it, "the color of a newborn baby." Lying belly-down on a plastic sheet on the living-room carpet of an apartment with white walls and blue-cushioned couch, the pig is as sterile and as removed from the actual act of slaughter as a piece of packaged meat you buy at SaveMart.

In another photograph of the same ceremony, shot in Luang Prabang province in Laos, the pig is alive. Its legs and snout are bound as it lies, distraught, on the dirt floor of a village house with a hand-hewn shake roof. In a few minutes its throat will be cut, the blood spilling into a blue ceramic bowl and spattering the dirt beneath.

One people. Two countries.

In **Pickford's** remarkable **project**, which started as an in-depth ethnographic look at recent **Hmong** arrivals to the Central Valley and later expanded into repeated trips to Laos itself, you get a glimpse of profound generational changes as members of the **Hmong** Diaspora have settled into their adopted culture. And you get a feel for the fascinating and stalwart country they left behind.

Pickford estimates he took more than 50,000 images for the **project**.

Approximately 80 of them are featured in a vibrant exhibit in three galleries at the Fresno Art Museum through Jan. 6. Those museum images, plus about 120 more, are included in a handsome hardcover book, "Soul Calling," from Berkeley-based Heyday press.

Three parts

Pickford divides the book and exhibition into three parts. His immersion into **Hmong** culture started in 2004 when he connected with Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries to document the housing issues faced by newly arrived immigrants from the newly closed refugee camp at Wat Tham Krabok in Thailand, the largest remaining one in the country.

For a year, he focused exclusively on these recent arrivals, who were basically arriving unprepared for a new country years after earlier refugees had already made lives for themselves. He made memorable images: A young boy with no toys scrapes in the dirt in front of a tired, unlandscaped apartment complex. A man sits with his two wives on a couch as a relative watches TV in the background. A young pregnant woman stands in front of a mirror as she struggles into her too-tight **Hmong** New Year dress.

Through it all, **Pickford's** repeated visits to the families he met (with assistance from his translators, Chanthanome "Tout Tou" Lounbandith Bounthapanya, Kristie Lee and Paula Yang) helped him achieve an impressive intimacy in his **photos**. He describes in his spare but riveting text in the book when he took countless frames of 10-year-old Jong Xiong, one of three blind siblings in a family of nine children, who lost his sight after exposure to chemical weapons. Jong kept moving his powerfully expressive face, with "flame-blue cataracts" that gave his eyes a far-off light, as he sensed **Pickford's** camera, and in the low light, the photographer was desperate to get the perfect shot in focus.

"It feels as if we have been here for hours trying to make this picture," he writes. "There is nothing left but the shifting focus and the moving eye and the silent clicking of the shutter and Jong somehow seeing me better than I see him."

Pickford's focus on the new arrivals could have wrapped up the **project**. But he found himself drawn further into the culture. He started visiting more established **Hmong** families who had come to Fresno years earlier. In many ways, he says, these earlier arrivals have retained more of the ancient customs of **Hmong** people in Laos than the more recently arrived refugees who



had been stuck in the Thai camps for years. These **photos**, which include images of food, funerals, agriculture, **Hmong** New Year and more indelible portraits, make up the second part of the museum exhibition and book.

Still, **Pickford** pressed on. He learned to speak Laotian, studying it for two summers at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He earned an interdisciplinary master's degree in documentary studies and Southeast Asian studies at Fresno State, using his **photo project** as his thesis. And he made six trips to Laos, climbing ever higher in the mountains to reach remote **Hmong** villages. These striking **photos** make up the third part of the book and exhibition.

Deep immersion

Getting caught up in one of his subjects isn't new for **Pickford**. (He spent a decade working on "Le Monde Creole: Photographs of Southern Louisiana," which opened at the Fresno Art Museum in 2007.) But something about "Soul Calling" riveted him like nothing before.

"I guess you could call it a pretty deep immersion," he says of his plunge into the **Hmong experience**.

His trips to Laos opened a whole new area of exploration for him, from learning about the often conflicting history of the CIA's "Secret War" and the role of Gen. Vang Pao and observing firsthand the ubiquitous bomb craters left behind by American aircraft on the famed "Plain of Jars" region of Laos.

At one point he reached a Black **Hmong** village named Ban Long Ang, made up of 36 houses straggling down a steep slope, in which many of the inhabitants had never seen a falang, or Westerner, before.

His hardest photographic moment in Laos? Keeping up with a young mother with a baby strapped to her back cutting dry rice by hand on the steep, nearly inhospitable mountain slopes of the **Hmong** highlands near the village of Ban Pha Keo. At one point he slid more than a dozen yards down the hill, accompanied by the laughter of the villagers.

Pickford's whole-hearted embrace of the **Hmong** culture, and his insistent immersion in it -- not to mention his repeated visits to Laos -- pre-empts some of the inevitable criticisms that might be heard of a white person documenting and appropriating another culture. Still, when **Pickford** was teaching a class at Fresno State, he'd sometimes hear those criticisms from his students.

"I constantly had white kids from the suburbs saying I had no right to be doing this," he says.

But he is adamant that he's been more than an outsider looking in. His mission, he says, has been to combine photography, ethnography and journalism to document **Hmong** customs that are rapidly dying out as a younger generation becomes increasingly Americanized.

And he emphasizes that his journey has been a personal one, dependent on the people he met and the friends he made.

One of **Pickford's** proudest moments was when he was welcomed into the Fresno family of Wa Lor Lee and Yer Lor Lee. The Lees raised their seven children to excel in the American education system (one is a university professor) but also to learn the **Hmong** language and culture. One day Yer Lor Lee, a respected shaman, told him, "From now on I will always think of you as my son," and gave him a **Hmong** name: Pob Tsuas. **Pickford** calls himself "adopted."

David "Xue" Lee, an adult son, says the family is proud of "Soul Calling."

"We haven't had a lot in terms of books and movies to preserve the culture," he says. "He really captured the essence of what the **Hmong** people are going through at the moment. The thing about Joel we really appreciate is him getting to know us as people, versus him just coming in to get what he wants."

Many of the **Hmong** customs from Laos are being slowly diluted in the United States -- an obvious result of the assimilation process, **Pickford** says.

Yet there's an effort to keep those customs, if only with a modern twist.

Take those two pigs used for the hu plig ceremony, for example. The contrast isn't just the butcher-shop lack of blood vs. cutting a live pig's throat, or the carpeting vs. dirt floor. In the Fresno **photo**, the offerings next to the pig include the ever-present **Hmong** paper "spirit money" -- and an unopened 12-pack of Pepsi.

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INFOBOX

MORE INFO

"Soul Calling," through Jan. 6, Fresno Art Museum, 2233 N. First St. fresnoartmuseum.org, (559) 441-4221. \$5. Also on display: "Threads of Life: The Art of Houa Vang," an exhibition of story cloths and decorative clothing.

"Soul Calling" (Heyday, \$30) is available at online booksellers and at heydaybooks.com. An iPad app is available.

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