



If They Were With Us Today

Mythical figures enter the realm of artist Chan Dany's modern-day Cambodia

By COLIN MEYN • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

In a mural at Kompong Thom's Wat Praset Andet, King father Norodom Sihanouk, dressed in gray military garb with soviet-style buildings in the background, stands among a group of historical figures and dignitaries from around the world in a traditional ceremony called the spreading of ashes. Above him, Buddhist figures and Hindu idols hover over the courtyard, watching over the gathering.

Twenty seven-year-old artist Chan Dany's exhibition "If They Were With Us Today," now showing at the Sa Sa Basaac Gallery in Phnom Penh, continues in this tradition of placing the ancient characters of the Reamker - a Cambodian myth adapted from the Indian tale Ramayana - in modern-day settings and, in doing so, offers an insightful and often humorous critique of the current state of Cambodia.

In one of the dozens of scenes depicted in small acrylic paintings on paper, each displayed individually on podiums, Preah Ream, a mythical king, is portrayed as a street performer.

Decked out in a regal suit of gold, purple and bright green robes, he is shown standing on a tire with a mighty bow without its arrow. He still looks the part of the king, but has neither the power nor the weaponry to make anyone notice. Even the children kicking around a wicker ball in the park nearby are too busy to remark his presence.

As an ensemble, Mr. Dany's paintings portray an acute understanding of how power and every day life is carried in today's Cambodian society.

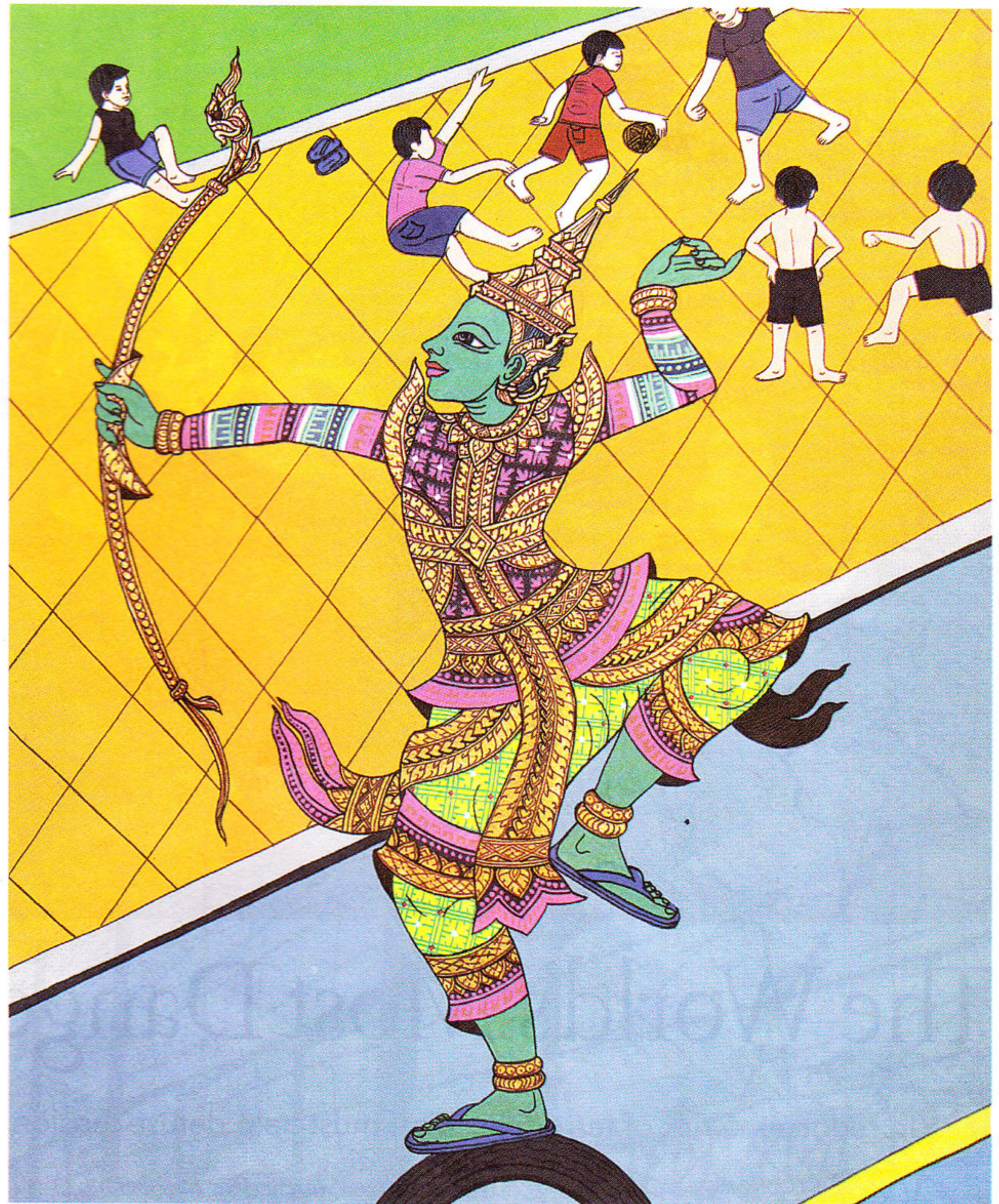
Keang Payakay, who in the tale of Reamker is a female adversary who tried to trick Preah Ream by posing as the corpse of his wife and was later captured and impregnated by Hanuman, the mighty general of the monkey army, is depicted in the modern day as a real estate broker in Phnom Penh whose half-monkey son is shown in another painting watching a Barclay's Premier League match on the family's flat-screen television.

Thabannaso, the great warrior yeak, translated as giant or demon, who had the power to expand himself so large that he blocked out the sun, brought blackness to the battlefield and devoured his monkey enemies, chooses today to consume copious amounts of pizza and Pepsi in his apartment.

Likewise, in the painting entitled "Neang Saya at leisure," the wife of Preah Ream, and the woman at the center of the battles that ensued in the Reamker, is reincarnated and enjoys the peace and quiet of her spacious house, where she sits in front of a television with a bowl of fruit and ice-cold drink at her side.

While one may be tempted to treat these scenes as a satire of the lives of Cambodia's nouveau riche, Mr. Dany insists that his work is not social satire but rather his best efforts to imagine how characters from the Reamker would adapt to living in Phnom Penh today.

Mr. Dany gained an intimate knowledge of



Sa Sa Basaac

Left page: "Neang Saya at Leisure," by Chan Dany. Above, "Preah Ream the Entertainer," by Chan Dany.

this epic tale during his time studying classical drawing and painting at the former Reyum Institute Art School under the tutelage of master painters Duong Saree and Kun Sovanarith, as is evident in the delicate touch in his depictions of each character.

Talking about the cast of characters in the Reamker as if they were living individuals, he explains that Neang Saya was exhausted from years of being chased and charmed by men, monkeys and yeaks and prefers to relax in the safety of her home rather than risk confronting the dangers that lurk outside her front door.

Other characters "only knew how to fight," he said. "They don't know how to do other work, so they have to work for the company or do other small jobs to get by."

The sensation of being thrown into an unfamiliar place, and having to find one's way around like the opponents in the Reamker is not unfamiliar to Mr. Dany and his family. At the age of 17, he joined his mother and older sister when they moved to Phnom Penh and, with a small amount of money the family had made selling farmland at their home in Prey Veng province,

set up a small shop selling cake, nuts and other snacks to support themselves.

This pragmatic entrepreneurship is reflected in a number of Mr. Dany's paintings.

Hanuman, one of the mightiest monkey warriors in the land in the Reamker, is no longer able to rely on his strength to feed his family, and instead has taken to selling balloons. Trei Say, the six-armed giant warrior who was killed in a battle by Preah Ream, has come back to life as a "very resourceful baggage courier at Kandal market."

Though Mr. Dany evokes with classical style some of the most important historical figures in Cambodian art in his exhibition, he has stripped them of their mythical powers, forcing them to deal with the same everyday dilemmas and drudgery as their fellow city dwellers.

In doing so, he not only moves an ancient tale into the modern day, he shows how the struggles faced by working-class Cambodians today would be harrowing even for the epic characters of the Reamker.

The exhibition "If They Were With Us Today" runs at the Sa Sa Basaac gallery through June 3.