

# Sanskrit epic given a cartoon twist

## Dany Chan's latest exhibition challenges the line between tradition and modernity

BY HANNAH SENDER

T.S. Eliot wrote that to have individual talent, one must have historical sense. This historical sense is what makes a writer traditional, and simultaneously "most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity". Dany Chan embodies Eliot's philosophy: his next exhibition places ancient tradition in the context of a post-millennial Cambodia.

This is not the first time the artist has evinced understanding of traditional forms. In 2009, Dany exhibited a number of Khmer decorative forms – patterns which have featured in Khmer art and design over hundreds of years – using pencil sharpening as his material. The project took shape when he was asked to make art from recycled material. Recycling and renewing the old remains a relevant theme in his current project. The delicacy and patience required to create such pieces is also evident in his new work, soon to adorn the walls of the Sa Sa Bassac Gallery. Now, his medium is paint and the traditional form the Reamker characters which feature in the ancient Sanskrit epic, the Ramayana.

But in Dany's paintings the Reamker characters are found on the streets of Phnom Penh and in the fields of the provinces: tiled pavements and boulevards, parks and

pizza parlours are more reminiscent of contemporary Cambodia than the traditional settings of the Reamker characters' stories.

Dany says that he based these landscapes on a general picture he has of Cambodia today. "My paintings serve to remind people of the relevance of the Reamker figures today," Dany explains. That these figures remain unaltered by Dany in their appearance alone means that the text they embody – the Ramayana – is brought to the fore of our minds, whilst the landscape is immediately recognisable as our home city or town.

There is some playful alteration in the stories of the Reamker figures, which can be accounted for by the objects Dany uses as indicators of the Reamker characters' new function in contemporary society; such as a pizza, a remote control and a bunch of balloons. They are subtle indications of a change in attitude and ideas. The artist himself implies that these objects occur in his paintings as if by accident.

"I was intending to paint a roast pork", Dany says, "but a pizza took its place". Dany sees himself as part of a new age of Cambodians, whose tastes are altered almost unconsciously by a global economy. The young artist embraces the new alongside his deliberate inclusion of the traditional. He asks his audience to envision



the two together simultaneously.

The objects Dany includes indicate the changed roles of the Reamker characters in their contemporary lives. "The Reamker characters were capable of magic in the old stories, but now in their contemporary setting they have lost their magic". The Reamker characters in Dany's series have been sapped

of their powers, so now they have a different, everyday function. "They are small business men," Dany smiles. Even Hanuman, the great warrior, must sell balloons to make a living. "Now, we cannot believe in magic."

Dany's paintings are not simply amusing cartoons featuring traditional figures in contemporary settings; they remark upon contemporary beliefs and their altered status in relation to the traditional story. By placing such objects as a pizza in their hands or a one dollar note within their grasp, Dany considers the difficulties contemporary audiences have in envisioning the possibility of magic. He documents a change in beliefs as well as making assertions of the continued relevance of these characters' stories.

Though two-dimensional in a literal sense, these paintings look to the past, to the contemporary and to the condition of the present-day mindset in relation to myth and magic. Dany Chan's unique talent emerges between the lines of the traditional and the modern.

**WHO:** Dany Chan

**WHAT:** A Sanskrit epic with a cartoonist's twist

**WHEN:** April 26 to June 3

**WHERE:** Sa Sa Bassac Gallery, #18 Sothearos Blvd

**WHY:** Characters from Hindu mythology find themselves in modern-day Cambodia