

Old tales, modern strokes

Calvin Yang

TAKING apart the mythical beings from ancient tales and depicting them in a modern-day context, a new exhibition at Sa Sa Bassac Gallery brings a fresh perspective to the diminishing art of Reamker painting, the Cambodian reinterpretation of the Hindu Ramayana epic poem.

Retaining the qualities of Reamker characters of the past, *If They Were With Us Today*, by Phnom Penh-based artist Chan Dany, reimagines the heroes and villains in a storyline that is relevant in present-day Cambodia.

The characters, capable of magic in the old stories, now live in a world where their powers are useless and everyone must earn money in order to survive.

This translates to several light-hearted amusements such as the great monkey warrior Hanuman being reduced to selling balloons for a living and Thabanaso, a demon who ate up countless monkey soldiers in past battles, resorting to bingeing on slices of pizza to satisfy his hunger.

Even Pipaet, once a respected fortune-teller and King of Langka, is now a teacher of the English language, touted as the language of the future in a tourist-driven economy.

Each character is part of a larger whole, but has its own specific qualities and moral characteristics depicted in the present. This collection of monoscenes convey a subtle message about modernity in our society.

"In the past, there was magic in these characters and today, even though we have lost this magic, people still find ways to imitate it," Chan says.

Despite growing up in a new and changing society, Chan, who spent years studying traditional painting at Reyum Art School, maintains a deep connection to the ancient fables.

He likens the inspiration behind his work to the fusion that exists in the temple walls that he studied – for example, the Wat Roka in Kratie and Wat Bakong in Siem Reap – where bicycles and modern buildings are some of the local influences those painters included.

"Chan cares about the old stories and wishes the young generation would continue to know them like he does," Erin Gleeson, co-founder and curator of Sa Sa Bassac Gallery, says. "By continuing to make the stories relevant, he honours these characters and doesn't want the young to forget them."

While the Reamker remains an integral part of local culture, as can be seen on the wall murals of monasteries and royal courts throughout Cambodia, the painted form has faded over the years.

Today, Chan is one of a handful of artists employing traditional rendering, costuming and style in contemporary works, which is gradually becoming lost to the use of stencils and low-grade materials.

Due to the details of the scenes and the different layers to be painted, each piece is time-consuming and has to be treated separately. "Some take longer because they are less geometrical than others and have no traditional code on how to treat the backgrounds," Chan adds.

Taken together, the series of 20 paintings took him approximately eight months to complete.

Despite the long process, the



Chan Dany's exhibit reimagines the lives of ancient mythological characters as if they lived today. PHOTO SUPPLIED

28-year-old is happy that his work has granted him a solo exhibition. "It is an honour to be able to express and share a large body of work which is different from having a few pieces in a group exhibition," he says.

Chan is currently preparing new work on the Khmer sampot for his second solo exhibition to be open later this year at InterContinental Hotel's Insider Gallery.

If They Were With Us Today by Chan Dany runs at Sa Sa Bassac Gallery, #18 Sothearc Blvd, Phnom Penh, until Jun 3 and is open to the public Thurs-Fri from 2pm-6pm and Sat-Sun from 10am-6pm. |