

Lifestyle

Bugging around: artist's creature crawls into town

Rosa Ellen

ATUK-TUK is consumed by a giant orange fabric tube, a cross between an earthworm and a giant Slinky. at its head pops out a female face, looking searchingly ahead, at the tail end are her bare feet.

The oddly humorous image, created by performance artist Anida Yoeu Ali, 39, is taken from a series of adventures embarked upon by the artist's larger-than-life insect character, the Buddhist Bug.

Instinctive and curious, with a penchant for wrapping her metres-long coil over and around staircases, restaurant tables and forest floors, the Buddhist Bug also harbours a deeper quest: a place among two different religions.

Like her Diaspora creator, the oversized bug is navigating dual Cambodian Muslim-Buddhist worlds, in a very public way. With the saffron-orange body of a Buddhist monk and the wrapped head reminiscent of an Islamic hijab, the Buddhist Bug turns up at pre-arranged spots in streets, villages and eating venues, to move, interact and delight with everyday audiences.

For years, the performances have been captured on film by Ali's spouse and Studio Revolt collaborator Masahiro Sugano. Tomorrow, a film will be

on show, with eight photographs, as part of the Buddhist Bug Project, a new exhibition at Java Café and Art gallery. The Bug itself will also unfurl for a one-off opening night performance.

"When I was growing up [in the United States] we were very different from Cambodian Buddhists," says Ali, "My parents were interested in being around Pakistani [and other] Muslim communities."

When she returned to Cambodia to live permanently in 2011, the spoken word and performance artist was struck by what she calls the "diasporic dilemma" experienced by many returned and second generation Cambodians. On top of these identity issues Ali also struggled with an all-encompassing religion and culture which she was not a part of.

With a multi-ethnic background including ethnic Cham, Cambodian and Malaysian, Ali's Muslim family arrived in the US during the Khmer Rouge period as one of "an extremely small community".

"I am not [a practising Muslim], but I feel that Islam to me is a very important cultural identifier. Because my father, like so many other Cham, was almost annihilated during the Khmer Rouge. It's also because the Islam presented [in the media] after 9/11 is so different



Performance artist as her slinky creation, the Buddhist Bug. She has performed as the character since her undergraduate years. PHOTO SUPPLIED

to what I have known ... I want to debunk that ... Whether or not I practise Islam - I carry it in my heart regardless ... It transcends."

Ali has explored identity and disjuncture in her work for many years, but it was buying her children a piece of tube-like play equipment that gave her the inspiration for the spiraling bug costume, which she had made in a hoop-like concentric circle and "lugged around" for two years.

"She is so many things - a hybrid, a creature that exists.

She can be a tunnel, she can be a bridge."

Her role - if she has one - is also more literal. She bugs. She bugs her creator, at least, with annoying questions.

"She's working on her Buddhism: that moment of trying to be in the present moment but maybe transcend - but at the same time she's such a quirky character."

When the project went to a Cham fishing village in Phnom Penh displaced by a development the resulting work did transcend performance - reaching

out to community members, who were fascinated by the slow-moving costumed character.

Did they understand what the performance was about?

"I never have an answer to that," Ali says. "All I know is that they had an experience. I don't know if we should evaluate it with 'understanding'. Like all performance art, it is the experience. It takes the work out outside of the white cube [of the art gallery]."

An artist talk by Ania will also take place this Sunday, March 3, at 6pm at Java Café. ■

In brief

Music sales post first small rise since 1999



ALONG with fellow Brit act Adele and the continuing growth of digital sales, the boy band One Direction's worldwide success helped boost global music revenues for the first time in 13 years in 2012. The music industry has declared itself on the road to recovery after reporting that 2012 was the first year of global revenue growth since the height of the CD era in 1999, when Britney Spears and Boyzone topped the charts. Recorded music revenues rose 0.3 per cent year-on-year to \$16.5 billion in 2012. AFP

Seth MacFarlane says 'no way' to Oscars

COMEDIAN Seth MacFarlane said on Tuesday that he would not host the star-studded Academy Awards ceremony again, after TV critics panned Sunday's show. *Family Guy* creator and star MacFarlane was asked on Twitter whether he would host the Oscars a second time after making his debut in Sunday's show, and replied: "No way. Lotta fun to have done it, though." MacFarlane's response came after TV critics slammed the telecast. REUTERS

Batman to lose son and sidekick Robin

BATMAN may be able to save the world, but he will lose his sidekick Robin - who in his current incarnation is his son - in the upcoming Batman Incorporated comic book series. DC Comics said the caped crusader's acrobatic young assistant, Batman alter ego Bruce Wayne's son Damian, dies in issue number eight, released yesterday. AFP

Ang Lee under fire from effects artists

OSCAR-WINNING director Ang Lee has been attacked by members of the VFX [visual effects] industry for his failure to recognise their contribution to the success of his film *Life of Pi*. Lee won the Academy Award for best director for *Life of Pi* on Sunday but has been criticised for omitting to acknowledge in his acceptance speech the VFX team who worked on the effects-heavy adaptation of Yann Martel's novel. THE GUARDIAN

The do's and don'ts of dating in the Kingdom



Soma Norodom

WE ARE at the tail end of the wedding season in Cambodia, which runs from December through February, because the weather is nice and it doesn't rain.

Many young Cambodian women look for a mate or husband at events such as the Water Festival or at religious ceremonies. Another option that is still common is being set up by their parents. Marriage is an economic arrangement and financial status is important when the parents select a husband for their daughter.

Cambodia is a conservative and Buddhist country. Showing affection between a man and a woman is rare, and so is kissing and touching in public,

also known as PDA (public displays of affection). In Western culture, dating is the first step in starting a relationship.

Many Cambodian girls are not interested in a relationship until she is married. Dating is new to their vocabulary, and preserving their virginity until they get married plays an important role in the Cambodian culture.

"Cambodian mates [male or female] are categorised as either traditional or modern, and are bound by strong cultural Khmer practices in terms of relationship to the opposite sex. Their religion, Theravada Buddhism, has much to do in shaping this relationship so that in most instances deviant sexual behaviour is always considered to be sweetest," says Dr Fil Tabayoyong, Jr, a social and holistic health development professional and an international medical doctor. "This means that what is forbidden is sweetest but has to be performed and done clandestinely."



Dr Fil Tabayoyong, a social and holistic health professional, runs the Condom Bar in Phnom Penh. PHOTO SUPPLIED

For some Cambodians, online dating sites are a tool for finding a mate. Dating sites such as badoo, dating.It, and mingle2.com are popular.

If you are interested in someone, ask them out for coffee. Sometimes the first step is to take the courage to ask, but don't specify that it is a date. Women can ask men out too. If the answer is no, OK, so it's not

the end of the world, and it's better to know now than later.

An anonymous dater suggested, "People just want to meet for the first time in a safe, relaxed atmosphere. This will take a lot of pressure off your date for he or she will know that there is little chance that there could be some monkey business going on with basically a stranger you are meet-

ing for the first time. Cambodian women can be very shy and have a lot of fear about meeting. So tell them that if they would like to bring a friend, that it's OK."

A friend of mine had the courage to ask me out for dinner via Facebook. I gladly accepted his invitation. That's a date!

If you do find yourself in a relationship and decide to become sexually active, remember it's always important to be safe, from unwanted pregnancies and diseases.

Dr Fil also manages the Condom Bar, a place where people can meet and interact, enjoy bar drinks and exotic food, and its corporate social responsibility is to educate customers on safe sexual behaviour with the ABCs of HIV/AIDS prevention. The Condom Bar, located in Phnom Penh, is the only condom bar in the country and supplies free luxury condoms to customers.

For more information about the Condom Bar, please email: docfil@yahoo.com. ■