

ANIDA YOEU ALI



Portrait of Anida Yoeu Ali. Photo by Masahiro Sugano. Courtesy the artist.

ANIDA YOEU ALI, "The Buddhist Bug," 2009—live performance at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum on September 27, 2014. Photo by Studio Revolt, Chicago/Phnom Penh. Courtesy the artist.

Artist Provocateur

BY ANNIE JAEK KWAN

April in Paris—the air is still crisp in the late afternoon. People mill around the Trocadéro with its view of the Eiffel Tower. A woman, wearing a floor-length red chador covered with sequins, shimmers with each step as she moves near an assembly protesting Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen. At first the demonstrators do not notice her, but as she passes them, a few of them suddenly break away to approach her. They talk excitedly at her and take photos. She bows deeply.

The next day, the red-chador woman sits in the elegant hall of the Palais de Tokyo, with a basketful of baguettes. Holding a piece aloft, she announces the imminent beheading of the bread in one hour. She states her demand for its ransom, and repeats this ritual every hour. The demands range from the immediately impossible (introduce Halal meat in schools) to the amusing (“find me 99 virgins”). After the initial stunned silence, the audience becomes invested, and groups of people plot how to rescue the baguettes and negotiate with the artist. This is a new 12-hour participatory performance, *Beheadings* (2015), by multidisciplinary artist, educator and political provocateur, Anida Yoeu Ali. When asked about her decision to bring these performances to Paris, which saw the massacre by religious extremists at the offices of satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo* earlier this year, Ali replies, “I conceived *The Red Chador* and *Beheadings* before the killings . . . I felt even more of an urgency to have the work witnessed and engaged by people in the French public sphere . . . The whole point of the work is for the Muslim woman and body to be seen and acknowledged.”

Ali is a first generation Cambodian-born woman of mixed Khmer and Cham-Muslim heritage, who left with her family for the United States as refugees in 1979. In person, Ali is slight, warm and speaks perfect American English. She engages in rigorous discussions regarding the Khmer diaspora experience and political activism, peppered with humorous street-inflected exclamations. At the end of her Parisian promenade as the red-chador lady, Ali whips off the garment to reveal a close-fitting T-shirt with bold letters spelling out “Studio Revolt,” a production company she runs with her filmmaker husband, Masahiro Sugano, and whose latest projects feature American-exile Khmer hip-hop troubadour, Kosal Khiev.

The performances, *The Red Chador* and *Beheadings*, present the red-chador lady as

an alluring and paradoxical persona. They bear many of the driving characteristics of Ali's work, and continue lines of inquiry and activism regarding critical dialogue with race, conflict and the global crisis of religion.

Her better known work is “The Buddhist Bug” series (2009–), which has manifested in different forms—video, photography, installation and live performance—all of which are stand-alone works and form, as a whole, an artistic investigation. At its center, the Buddhist Bug is a tubular structure with regularly interspersed circular hoops, not unlike a Chinese paper lantern. Reams of orange fabric form the skin of the Bug. When inhabiting the Bug, which is a sort of alter ego that Ali refers to as “s/he,” the artist wears an orange top with a hood pulled forward, framing her face to resemble the top of a hijab. The Bug's “legs,” performed by an assistant, whose upper half is hidden within the voluminous coils, takes position in various whimsical poses.

Though the Bug was first realized during her graduate studies, Ali continued to develop the work when she moved from the US to Phnom Penh, in 2011, as part of her Fulbright scholarship. The Bug grew both conceptually and materially in her homeland, exploring the urban landscape of Phnom Penh, coiling up staircases, riding *cyclos* (three-wheeled vehicles), visiting campuses, embarking on a river journey and expanding to 40 meters as an installation in Siem Reap as well as in Phnom Penh. These excursions of mapping across Cambodian landscapes and within its communities extend the urge and the desire of the artist—similar to others of the diasporic generation of conflict and cultural rupture—to rediscover and reconnect with her past. While the work attracts attention with its picturesque light-heartedness, on closer inspection, the Bug is understood as an “other,” whose very presence confronts the common with the unfamiliar, and embodies within its isolated being the paradoxical fantasies of anxiety and fascination. Ali describes it thus: “For me, the Bug is created from a sense of play and curiosity. S/he is a displaced creature destined to travel and wander amidst the ‘in-between.’ This space, which exists between who s/he is and where s/he is, is in fact a powerful place for encounter, habitation and reinvention.”

Earlier this year, the Bug was performed at the Malay Heritage Centre in the historic Kampong Glam district of Singapore. At sunset, the Bug coiled around itself in front

of the Sultan Mosque, swaying gently. Slowly, an audience grew around the Bug, composed mostly of tourists and curious locals. As the day's Maghrib prayer (a daily ritual of Islam) faded and the congregation dispersed, various members of the Muslim community stopped to stare. An older man in a *songkok* and *sarong* approached the Bug, muttering agitatedly before escalating to shout “*Haram!*” at the Bug. “This is not Muslim,” he decried angrily, confronting the double mimicry of the Bug's hijab-like facade and its bulging form against the mosque's gleaming golden bulb.

In a way he is right, the Bug is not Muslim—or, not *just* Muslim. It is also an allusion to the saffron hue of Buddhist robes. For even as Ali self-identifies as Khmer-Muslim, she has long professed a fascination with Buddhism, having spent her early years in Cambodia where 96 percent of the population are Buddhists. It is the Bug's ability to manifest such dichotomous cultural inclinations that triggers similar anxieties of Muslim identity in this aggravated viewer who exists within the Chinese-dominated Singaporean landscape.

Here we observe how Ali's Bug performance succeeds on several levels. First, it activates the agency of the artist by manifesting vividly a deeply personal and creative inquiry that extends from the US to the rapidly changing socioeconomic landscape of post-conflict Cambodia. Second, the work's strong imagery encapsulates its performative energy in cinematically framed photographic and video content, forcing viewers to calibrate—and recalibrate—its visual narrative, creating a shift in the gaze. Finally, as a public installation that is inhabited by live performance, the Bug precipitates an irresolvable cipher and a catalyst that provokes visceral response and critical engagement.

Back in Phnom Penh, Ali and her husband have recently finished shooting the final Bug series, exploring the city's seedier neon-lit areas. The Bug, ever the intrepid explorer, is seen coiled around a *tuk-tuk* pattering around town. Not long after, Ali announces she will be returning to the US to assume a new fellowship at Trinity College in Connecticut. But Ali is adamant that she is not leaving Cambodia. “I have always known that my destiny is to travel back and forth and truly inhabit that space in-between and at both ends,” she says. “I don't think it's fair for me to try and choose between the US and Cambodia when my life, culture and work are both here and there.”