

ART SMART



TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS, ARAGNA KER

Photo courtesy of Darrin Little

CONTEMPORARY KHMER-AMERICAN ART

WRITTEN BY **DARRIN LITTLE**

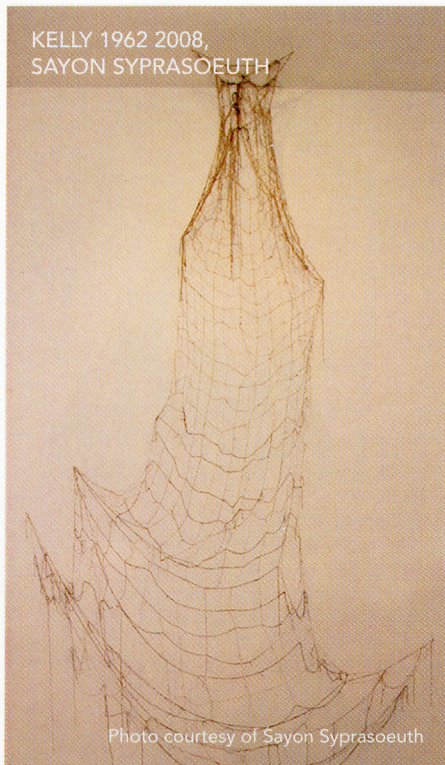
At the 2nd City Council Art Gallery and Performance Space, Cambodian-American artist Aragna Ker presented "Twilight of the Idols". This 8-foot-tall superhero (Buddha meets Superman) in plaster, wood, and wire, raised pointed identity questions underneath moments of pleasure and wonder that came by way of labor-intensive material craft and whimsical, viewer-interactive propositions. Readers may or may not know that Long Beach is home to the largest Cambodian population outside of Southeast Asia; this fact comes wrapped in a

complex flag of pride and culture shock that artists like Ker attempt to unfurl and fly atop our city's twin masts of civic pride and global consciousness.

It's a tall order to fill. Co-curated by artist Denise A. Scott and art manager Lydia Parusol of Meta House (Phnom Penh, Cambodia), this transnational show was mounted in April 2009 to coincide with the Khmer New Year, and stood in the shadow of Long Beach's newly designated Cambodian Town Business and Cultural District. To what

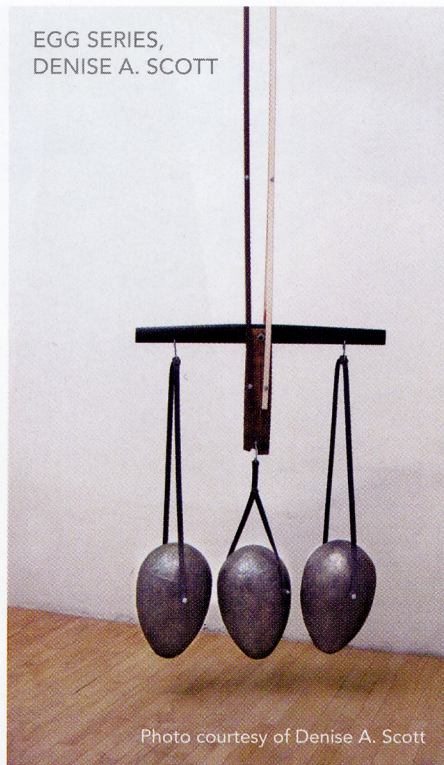
degree these newfound ethnic shareholders along the East Anaheim corridor heard this exhibition's sweet music is unclear. But in the many videos, paintings, photographs, and sculptures in Transformation II, a beautiful symphony of ideas harmonized with viewers and artists alike. We've finally, as the Beatles once demanded, "come together".

Throughout this show, one finds notions of staging (Installation Art), dramatic theatre (Performance Art) and consumer goods (Pop Art) oscillating between Eastern and Western



KELLY 1962 2008,
SAYON SYPRASOEUTH

Photo courtesy of Sayon Syprasoeuth



EGG SERIES,
DENISE A. SCOTT

Photo courtesy of Denise A. Scott

art practices in a crossbreeding frenzy that yields a fresh harvest of artistic commentary on the shopping experience. Yoshie Sakai's video "Come One, Eat All", for example, takes Hershey's and McDonald's tastiness to unsavory extremes. Tom Tor, probably the most commercially successful Cambodian-American artist in the show, demonstrates in both his video "Debli" (high-gloss computer animation) and his paintings from the "Friends of the World Series", a keen branding intuition that seems part and parcel to global ad agency gospel. To the artist's credit, the emulation of slick marketing language here is done with such technical skill and (what I imagine to be) creative enthusiasm as to completely mask the core intention: sophisticated consumer disparagement or artistic redirection sailing towards brighter days?

In either case, this side of the exhibition's coin is well-worn. The other side — defiant, hopeful — emits a rare luster that soothes historical tragedy (Khmer Rouge) and inspires fresh beginnings. Elaborating on the latter, Kong Sothy's video, "#1 Writing", a lowbrow tour de force, is particularly noteworthy. Sothy, a Cambodian artist (of the 22 artists listed in the exhibition, eleven are U.S.-based,

eleven are Cambodia-based) videotaped himself seated at a table with blank sheets of paper and a red marker, writing out successive phrases in spite of rude interruptions. "Everything will come true. But it's still a long way to go", and "Everybody wishes to be skillful, but it depends on how much you try" are simple statements that surprise, charm, and encourage artists and non-artists alike.

Chie Yamayoshi, a Japanese-born artist/filmmaker, offers "We Decided to Live in the Air", a 1-minute video of various pedestrians "floating" over sidewalks by way of a simple editing technique — another lesson in how much more can be done with less. In her artist's statement, Yamayoshi explains her piece as "a moment of generosity and humanity...[that] explores the notion of our desire to reverse gravity, mortality and destiny." Such artworks alleviate cross-cultural pain and world-weary materialistic imperatives like "build to sell" with welcomed doses of sublime humanity. ■

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