

The Blue
Lotus

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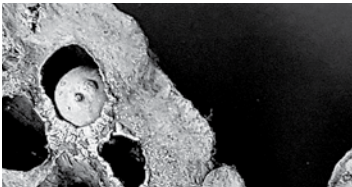
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christian develter



meeting Māra

Recently, I was in Cambodia. Siem Reap to be precise. Incidentally, the name Siem Reap literally means 'Siam defeated'. A reminder of an ages-old conflict between the Siamese (Thai) and the Khmer (Cambodians). In Siam (Thailand), that Khmer province and its capital were called Siemmarat, literally meaning 'Siam's territory'. To the Khmer it became known as Siem Reap, after the final showdown.

On my walkabout by the Siem Reap River, I had chanced upon the Develter Gallery. It's conveniently adjacent to the Royal Residence (the official royal residence for King Sihamoni and family when they travel to Siem Reap) and the FCC (Foreign Correspondents Club, built in 1917 as the French Governor's residence), on Pokambor Ave, Krong, Siem Reap. It was there that I first met the Mara Chin, or at least their images.

It was a characteristically hot, bright, Khmer day. The Siem Reap River which, incidentally, is part of South East Asia's Mekong River, took me through Siem Reap City on a conveniently shaded path, leading me surreptitiously to Christian Develter's gallery and exhibition. The meeting was, seemingly, fated. A co-joining of Khmer mystic and cosmic forces, perhaps.

Within that cool and brightly lit gallery, Develter's stylised portraits of Asians struck me. I became attracted to the Fauvist colour

approach, and with what might be misconceived as Warhol/Pop Art inspired flatness. Within that gallery Develter's chic, and frequently blue-skinned, Asian portraits, encouraged recollections Myanmar's past, it's symbolism of blue as peacefulness and steadiness. I had idly wondered if the artist was encouraging a re-looking at the Asian other through his somewhat graphically commercial imagery of the Myanmar Mara, Mara Chin (မရာလူမျိုး) and whether this had arisen from Develter's early studies in art at Ghent Art School, his subsequent training at the Antwerp Fashion Academy and his ever increasing fine art predilections. However, Anias Nin reminds us that...

"We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another; unevenly. We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made up of layers, cells, constellations."

In that Siem Reap Develter Gallery, modern, risqué, stylised and stylish women pouted. The images presented young woman at home in their skins. Much like the real Chin women back in the hills of Myanmar. Those pictures were evocative and strong in an imagery which recalled not just Western artistic trends but the 'modern' women depicted in Shanghai (China) 1930s posters,



Māra Chin, Christian Develter

too. There were visual art-historical linkages between a world-travelling Belgian artist and the place(s) he has made his home in Asia - Bangkok and Siem Reap, with interests in China and the various Chin peoples of Myanmar (Burma) too.

I was invited (by email) to visit the artist's domain.

I had travelled the scenic route out of Siem Reap city, bypassing 11th century and 12th century Wats (temples) where huge stones told of ages and stories past. The 'remork' (tuk tuk) driver and I travelled deep in rural area, bypassing

nascent rice paddy fields, all watery green with dogs chasing each other in the cooling damp, throwing up water as they ran.

Eventually, the gates to the artist's rural realm had opened. They led me into a manicured jungle, part gardens, part sculpture park, part architectural haven. The hosts and I walked into the evening accompanied by birdsong. Before long we encountered Develter's exquisite two meter high bust (statue). It was 'Mara Chin' (or 'māra' servant of the gods of love) again. This lady's head was constructed of local Anchorian grey/blue sandstone, and greeted us with a





Entering another world

friendly, but enigmatic, smile. That beautiful face, lined with Chin 'tattoo' marks, had been up-lit. I saw the light illuminate her form from below, just as the sky behind it began to lose its colour. Between earth and sky, she sat. Asia embodied.

In the artist's blurb it is mentioned that..

"Christian's 'Chin Series' is inspired by the beautiful iconic Asian tribal women of the South East Asian Sino Tibetan ethnic group found in the remote Chin State of Myanmar.

Their facial tattoos being a signature to their tribal identity and regional location. This work of art by Christian is a homage to Siem Reap, its cultural heritage and the local craftsmen where he fondly calls home."

According to BBC Travel; "Chin legend has it that when a Burmese king travelled to the region, he was so impressed by the women's beauty that he kidnapped one to take as a bride. Because of this, Chin families began to tattoo their daughters to ensure they would not be taken away.

Other Chin tales say that the tattooing was done for beauty, and perhaps more plausibly, to differentiate the different tribes in case one was kidnapped by another.

Another explanation may have to do with religion. Since the time of British colonisation, many Chin minorities have converted to Christianity or else accepted it alongside the animist beliefs. Some Chin remember being taught by their local pastors that only those who had tattoos would be deemed fit to go to heaven.....The tattoos are made using leaves, grass shoots and soot. The leaves





Māra



Christian Develter's studio



give colour, the soot acts as a disinfectant and the grass shoots are added at the end, acting as a bandage and natural healing cover. The concoction is applied to the face using sharp cane thorns, which prick the skin to create the pattern ”.

I met the Mara again, in Develter’s purpose-built studio. That studio was a revelation. An architectural delight. A clean-lined, expansive space which had been built with inspiration from Phnom Pen’s Art Deco Central Market (designed in 1936 by Jean Desbois), and the (German) Bauhaus inspired District 798, in Beijing, China. Inside that studio the functionality of concrete insisted that paintings and sculpture remained foremost in the artist’s mind (as well as the gaping visitors’ minds). Many commissioned works were in process. It was an exciting revelation to learn how each large piece would develop before encountering the commissioner’s adoring eyes.

The studio was but one of my surprises. In those equatorial grounds, Develter had recreated, and reconstructed, a rural, wooden house comprising of two former houses. The new abode heavily suggested the opening up of fresh vistas, thoughts and ideas into the minds and lives of its inhabitants.

Venturing into that copious house, with its romantically open lily pond vista and subtly moored, slim, blue boat, was as if entering an altogether different world of memories, signs, and symbols gleaned and gathered during nomadic travels. In wooden bookcases were books as diverse as Gregory David Roberts’ ‘Shantaram’ and Oscar Wilde’s ‘Plays, Prose Writings and Poems’. On the walls antique scrolls rubbed metaphorical shoulders with Asian statuettes, and a Tibetan ‘vajra’ (a legendary and ritualistic weapon, symbolising the properties of a diamond [indestructibility] and a thunderbolt [irresistible force] or so Wikipedia describes such an item). The whole, to me, presented two gentlemen of culture, education, and a sophistication tempered by a love of Asia, comfort, grace and relaxation.

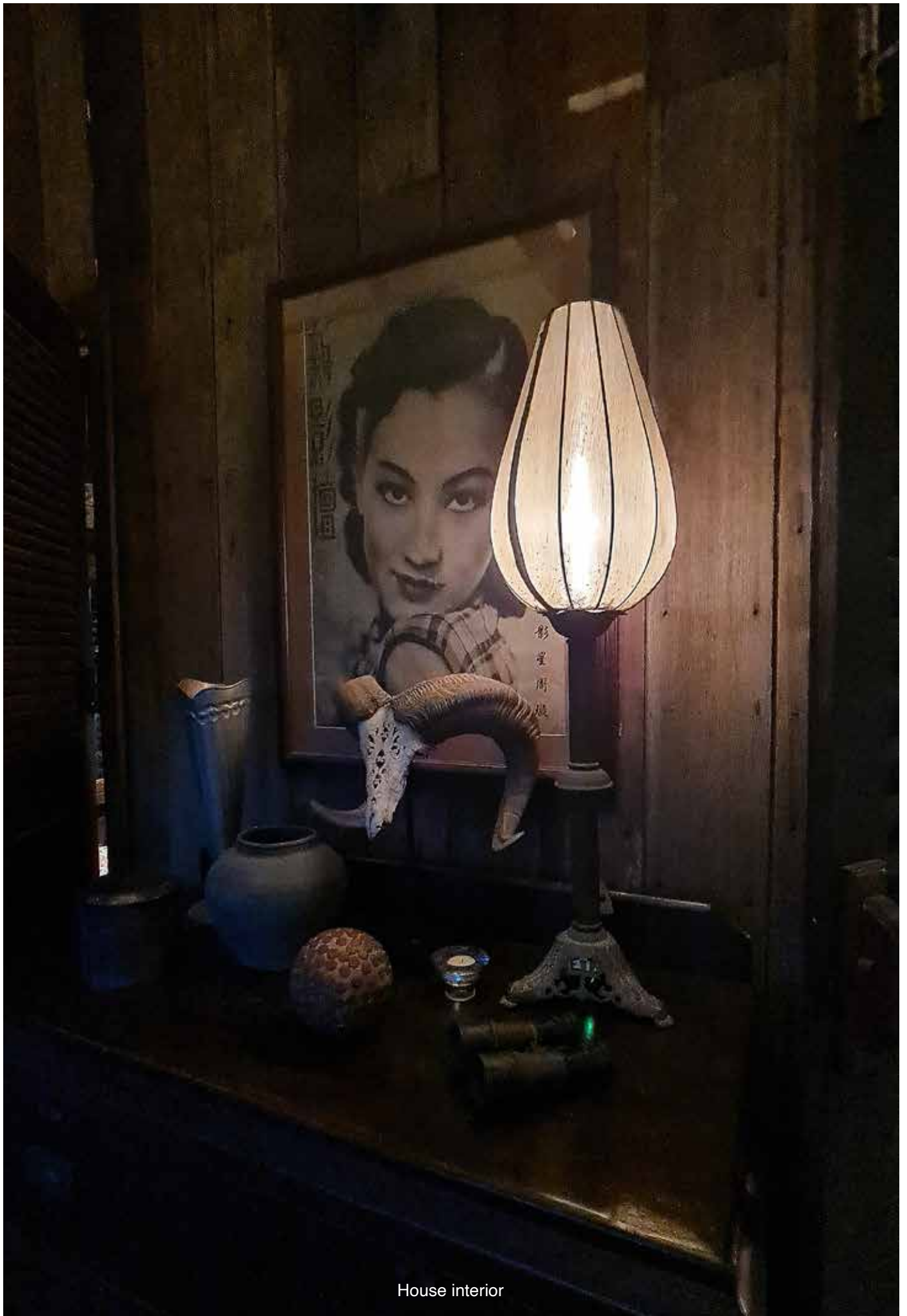
Conscious of Phineas T. Barnum’s dictum of “Always leave them wanting more” I left. The remark ride back into Siem Reap City had me reflective, thoughtful and grateful.

That was a studio visit I shall never forget.

Ed.



A place for spirits to reside



House interior



Opening up of fresh vistas, thoughts and ideas

