

DINA CHIHAN: THE ARTIST'S TOUCH



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Dina is an absolute joy to be around, her warmth and enthusiasm are positively contagious and her laugh seems to put everyone around her at ease. She is the kind of person that you want to know more about, not just because she produces great art, but because it is so evident that behind that smile of hers there is a huge amount of lust for life that just pours out into the canvas. When working in front of others, she will stare at her canvas, her head tilted to the left, brush in her right hand side; pause for a few moments and strike the canvas with an incredible amount of certainty and faith in what she is doing. The end product is always intriguing and beautiful, with meanings as plentiful as the layers of paint that have gone into the intricate image. It is our utmost pleasure to have been able to interview one of Cambodia's top female artists this month. Here is what she had to say:

Which province were you born in and how many brothers and sisters do you have?
I was born in Phnom Penh, I have two younger sisters and three youger brothers; this makes me the oldest in my family.

Where did you get your artistic genes from, are there any other artists in your family?
I learned to paint from a teacher that came from the United States by the name of Rorn, I have had the pleasure of knowing him for about 20 years. He has always liked helping Cambodians who wish to become professional painters.

At what age did you find that you had a passion for art and how did it happen?

I started learning to paint since the age of 13, I first drew what I could see plainly with my eyes and little by little I started using my imagination as well. I learned a lot, including creative skills and I was taught to express my thoughts through my paintings.

How did your parents respond to your wish to be an artist?

Actually, at the beginning they didn't even understand what paintings were, especially when I drew abstract pictures. It took my parents a long time to understand what my paintings were about, but they understood that it was my passion and so I finally got their full support.

What was your degree?

I got my degree from Mr. Rorn, he bestowed both myself and the other artists we worked with our degrees; I am qualified in both painting and sculpting.

Can you name any other artists that you admire and tell us why?

I really admire people that can draw very abstract paintings, it shows that they have a great amount of creativity and it is something that I have a lot of respect for.

How would you describe your style as an artist?

I have a very varied style as an artist, I am very flexible with my techniques. I use colors to express my feelings, which is a technique inspired by Van Gogh; I also love drawing real pictures with movement.

Where does your inspiration for paintings come from?

My biggest inspiration is Angkor Wat, I can't believe it was made by hand such a very long time ago, it is truly an incredible work of art.

You have a very friendly, warm and cheerful personality; do you think that an artist's personality is always reflected in the paintings?

Sometimes, I feel very happy when I draw and I do feel like my pictures are better when that happens, they almost don't need any retouching at all. When I feel unhappy or negative then the feeling will almost certainly be reflected in the painting as well. If I know that I have to paint but I am not in a good mood, then I usually listen to some music in

order to get into a better mood and feel better about myself, the better the mood, the more beautiful the painting.

Please tell us about your upcoming exhibition.

I have an upcoming exhibition featuring my paintings and sculptures that will be held at Meta House on May 23rd.

What is it like to see all your work hanging in a gallery?

It was the most amazing feeling ever, I felt great about myself and I could finally show my talent to a lot of people. As a Cambodian person, we can only do little things that will exist in foreign countries. However, artwork in Cambodia is certainly improving tremendously.

Do you think that, in Cambodia, an artist's gender plays a role in their success? (Are male artists usually more successful than female ones?)

I think that it really depends. It is extremely rare to have female artists in Cambodia, but, at least personally, I do feel a lot of support from people. If we work hard and put a lot of imagination into it our work will be successful.

Do you ever feel insecure about your work? How do you deal with self-doubt?

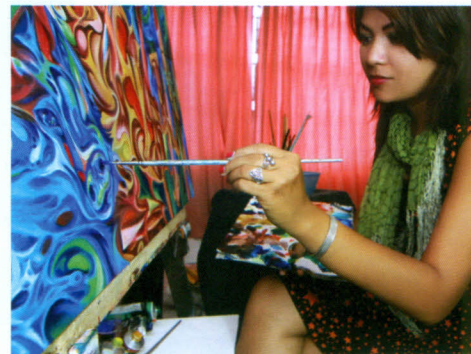
I don't feel like I have reached the height of my success yet, but I really enjoy learning from new experiences and growing day by day, that is a wonderful thing for me. I really do love what I do and hope that someday I will achieve great success.

What do you do if you have to work yet feel totally blocked or uninspired? Do you have any advice for other artists?

I used to feel blocked or uninspired when I drew abstract paintings. When this happens to me, I simply stop drawing and wait until I feel a lot more positive. Our imagination is a critical component to a good painting, and getting it where you want it to be takes a lot of time. While art is not everything, it is a very personal expression of the artists inner world, a sort of view into their soul.

What kind of art would you like to see more of in Cambodia?

I would like to see more sculptures in our country. I want to see more art galleries and museums in our country that encourage Khmer's work. I would also like local Cambodians to come and see our work and be a part of the artistic community.



Where was your very first exhibition and how did you obtain it?

I have had more than 10 exhibitions. I felt really great with my first show as many people came to see my exhibition and I got a lot of encouragement; I felt like they liked and admired my work every time I sold one of my paintings.

If there is a young Khmer woman out there who wants to become a painter, what advice would you give her?

You have to learn about artistic techniques at school. In order to be a true artist you have to learn to be relaxed and happy in order to produce a good painting; it will be really difficult for your imagination to produce amazing things if you feel tense and full of constraint.

What would you like the future to hold for the artist community in Cambodia?

I would like to open an organization for children in rural areas, this would mean moving to the province and it is something that I would do quite happily. I would not only like to teach them to paint, but I would also like to teach them English because I really feel passionate about helping children. I have volunteered for the same organization for four years in order to help teach children how to paint. It is my deepest wish that they will become successful painters in the near future.

Have you found that having a supportive partner has been an important factor to your success?

Yes, it is really important for an artist to have a supportive partner, someone who can act as your teammate when it comes to organizing an exhibition; we really have learned to help and support each other with our respective skills.

What is your next big project?

I want to make a studio where there can be both paintings and sculptures. I would like to hang all my works of art in a gallery in the province. Thank you!