

# AN ALPHABET OF RITUALS AND BELIEFS

Each person he talked to had a different take on a single topic. Unable to find one absolute truth, he immersed himself in a mix of shades and beliefs that made Buddhism more personally fascinating.

There Mr. Than, a native of Takao province who studied at Reyum Art School, learned the traditional techniques that infuse his artistic language.

“When he came back home from his residency, he had like 50 objects sitting around and he made a project about them,” Ms. Gleeson said, referring to Mr. Than’s 2013 show “Promotion”. “He painted a portrait for each one of them and then he set up an exhibition.”

That exhibit was also based on objects collected from political parties vying for seats during the election.

### An Artful Move

Mr. Than appears to be at home in a counter-narrative way of life. When he was invited to New York for two weeks in 2013, he decided to become a monk there. His artistic residency was at a pagoda in the Big Apple.

As a New York monk he learned about the different lifestyle associated with American temples, where monks are more confined to their pagodas than they are here.

At the beginning of his monkhood, he was given a robe as well as daily necessities like soap, toothpaste and towels.

### Gifts that Bind

Caps, kramas and an endless assortment of advertorial items became part of an artistic project that questioned the act of giving.

“He realized that giving is also a gesture to receive,” said Ms. Gleeson.

“So political parties give you objects related to their propaganda to get your votes and, in a similar way, the pagoda gives you robes because they want you to show and serve their ideology. And then for the laypeople, it’s the draw of their Buddhist beliefs to give, in order for them to have good Karma, she added.

Political parties, “religious parties” and common people are all connected to a form of promotion – they all give with the expectation of receiving.

What is giving? What is receiving? The artist, in his incessant research, keeps on questioning, digging into what drives us as humans, both in our everyday life and in our search for the divine. He does not look for final answers. Instead, he invites us to participate in an activity that is uniquely human – the art of questioning. ■



Photos: Prum Ero

Artist Than Sok at his exhibit at the Insider Gallery.



By Marina Shafik  
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**PHNOM PENH (Khmer Times)** – Small paintings hung in succession on the walls of the Insider Gallery are like windows to a secret language. Each one depicts a single object, but like the letters of a sacred alphabet they combine to form a delicate yet vibrant vocabulary about Buddhist rituals.

The ever-changing objects that characterize these rituals are the core of “Objects of Beliefs”, an exhibit by Than Sok that runs at the gallery in the InterContinental Hotel until July 12.

“The exhibition is about rituals, the objects that people produce, which are just floating in space, out of their context,” said curator Erin Gleeson. “Than Sok isolated the objects and started questioning, why do we use these objects, what is their history, how are they made, how did they change over time?”

### Engaging with the Process

The paintings may not jump out immediately, but they do have a subtle, gradual effect, slowly engaging visitors in a singular journey through the eyes of the artist. Mr. Than has an eye for the peculiar details of each object, as well as the changes they have undergone over time. Over the years, banana leaves have been replaced by golden paper and

lotus flowers are now intertwined with perfumed jasmine.

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The traditional rice pots used by monks to collect food offerings have been replaced by bags, which are handier for carrying the money they now receive instead of rice.

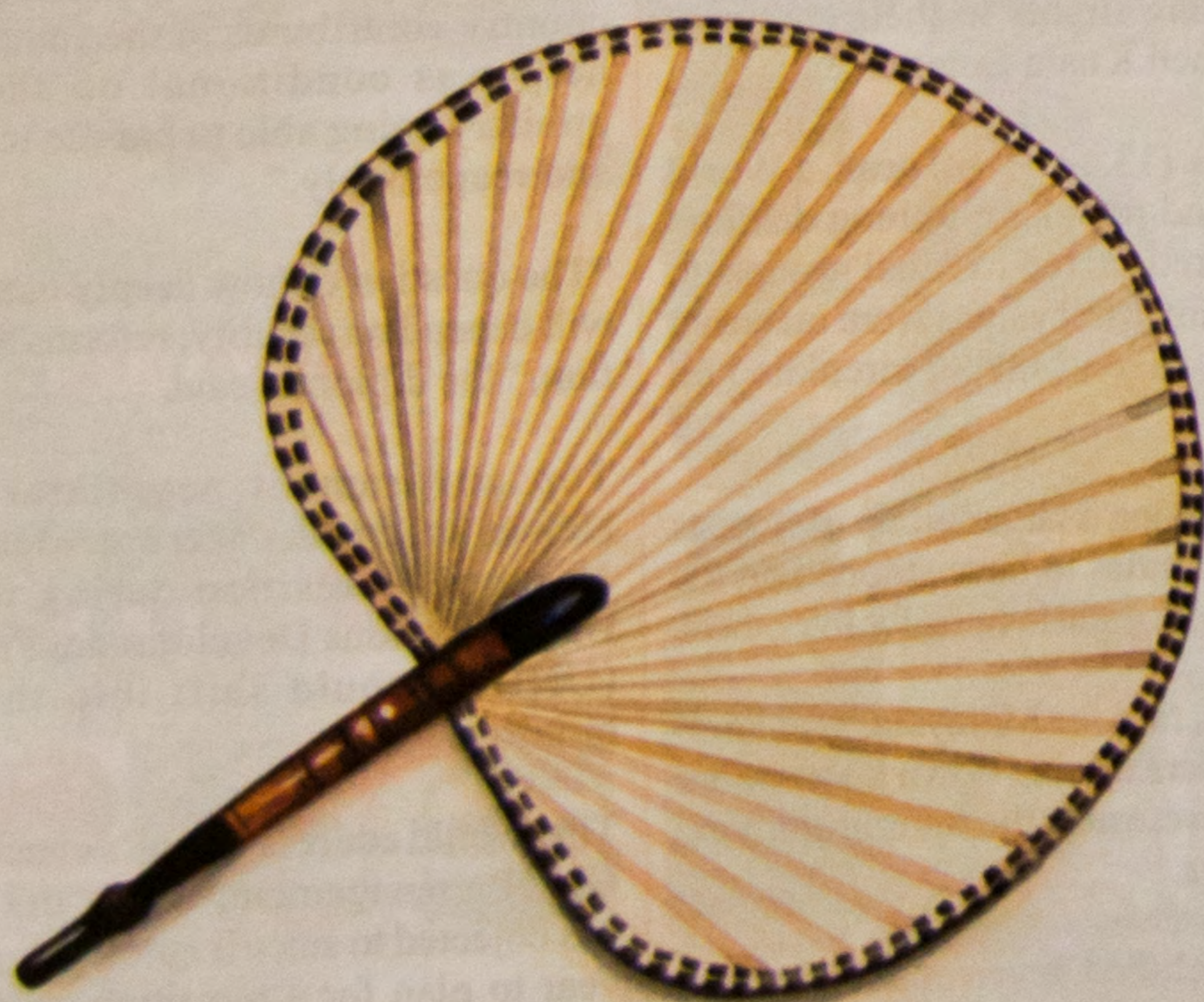
Like language, rituals are in constant evolution. Changes can be painful, others positive. Whatever they might bring, Mr. Than’s aim is raise questions rather than criticize.

“Some objects do not change while others evolved, becoming more beautiful,” he explained. “Some of these objects do not even connect to the present anymore, but we still use them.”

### No Solo Truth

Mr. Than’s latest work is the result of a two-month residency at Sa Sa Bassac gallery. During this time, he also visited pagodas to observe their environments and speak with those living in them.

The pagodas were all over Phnom Penh as well as rural areas, and the conversations Mr. Than had during his visits deepened his understanding of traditional stories and myths.



Traditional fan.



A monk's robe.