

Cambodian youth tries to affect others through art

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — In the melting pot that is Edison Technical High School, Sathya Mey might not stand out in a crowd.

The Cambodian youth blends in easily with the mix of Asian, Hispanic, black and white students that make up the school's population.

When one views Mey's artwork, however, he clearly stands apart.



Illustration by Sathya Mey

Nature scenes, animals, portraits and cartoon characters decorate sketchbooks, posters, T-shirts, school publications, and even his friends' blue jeans. In addition to earning him recognition and awards both locally and statewide, Mey's art has helped him gain admission to the State University of New York College at Buffalo in the fall of 1992.

Although the Edison senior's work has a peaceful quality throughout, it belies the violence of his background.

Mey was born June 5, 1974, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. By the time he was 5-years-old, he had witnessed the horrors that swept over Cambodia as millions of people were slaughtered or died in "the killing fields."

His own parents and sister were among the dead and he nearly died from starvation, surviving only because his uncle, North Mey, smuggled him across the border into Thailand.

"I have a good memory of those days," Mey said. "I am the last of my family line."

After Mey paused, he added, "I learned to let it go. If I try to hold on to the memories of what happened to my family, it's too much to deal with — the stress and sorrow. I still see images, but I have to go on with my life."

In the fall of 1981, after spending more than a year in refugee camps, Mey, his uncle and what was left of his uncle's family found a new home in Rochester.

He was thrust into second grade when he first came to Rochester, knowing little English and unable to read or write.

"When I first went into second grade, the teacher gave me books, writing utensils," he recalled. "I had seen them before, but I never actually used them. You feel so stupid because you don't know what to do."

Mey has adapted quite well



Sathya Mey, a student at Edison Technical High School, relaxes amid selections from his varied art portfolio. In addition to earning local and statewide recognition, his art work helped Mey gain acceptance this fall at the State University of New York College at Buffalo.

to school life. He mastered his new language enough to be named to the National Honor Society at Edison, and he'll be attending college this fall.

"I don't think it's hard to get (good) grades," Mey observed modestly. "You just have to apply yourself."

Art is one area where he clearly applies himself.

In fact, art was one of the ways he overcame some of his linguistic limitations and achieved success.

"I find that even when I didn't do well in school, art is something I can excel at," Mey said.

He drew cartoon characters just for fun long before entering the Rochester City School District's School of the Arts in the seventh grade, where he began to pursue art more seriously.

"Art is something that has to be used and has to be given back," he commented. "Being an artist is being able to draw and present your ideas to people."

"When you have a picture hung in a gallery," Mey continued, "hundreds of people are going to see it. (You are) able to express to people your feelings about the world and what's going on in your mind."

The fact that hundreds of people can see and be affected by the work is a big responsibility for the artist, Mey said.

He explained that illustrators of children's books — something he would enjoy doing — "can create new images for the young people. If you shape their minds, you have to make the best images (you can), because it is their first impres-

sions."

Mey acknowledged that he has not been able to express all of his feelings as an artist because he has been studying graphic arts at Edison rather than fine art. "I have not expressed my feelings, my deep inner thoughts yet, in art," he said.

Yet some of the feelings about his homeland come through in his art.

Many of his drawings show a great love of nature. In explaining why so many of his works focus on natural settings, he noted, "Cambodia is beautiful. I enjoyed growing up on a farm, working, helping my grandfather in the fields."

Mey said that he follows events in Cambodia now, but that he rarely discusses his experiences with fellow students.

"It's something they cannot understand, the horror that come there," he explained. "Somebody my age doesn't even know where Cambodia is."

But he clearly understands it in a way that many of his contemporaries cannot. As part of his signature on many of his works, he includes two small circles showing the Chinese symbol for *yin* and *yang* — the two opposites of dark and light.

"This represents good and evil, the opposites," he said. "I like to balance things out, especially in my art work."

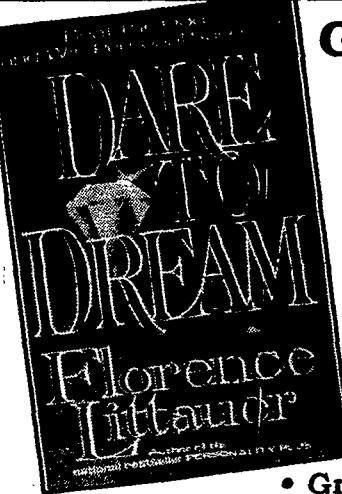
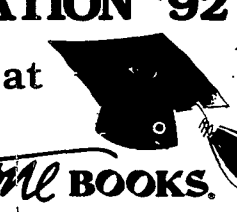
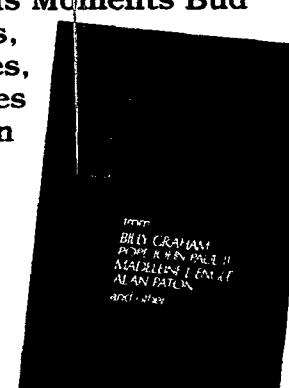
"I'm aware of the evil in the world," Mey continued, concluding, "Even though I'm a small fish in the world, I can still do something to help. The little things you can do can affect people, especially as an artist."

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