

# THE SUBLIME GROWS IN MUDDY PONDS

Nora Taylor

As vegetables go – if one can call them that – morning glories are pretty low on the gastronomical scale. They are blander than bland unless they are combined with spices, fish stew, boiled or sautéed in garlic. They are wild weeds that grow in muddy ponds, harvested by scavengers, not farmed. But, in Southeast Asia, they are still a regular feature of daily meals and have long been a source of nutrition during times of hunger and strife. Sometimes the commonest of plants becomes the origin, not only of meals, but also of the most vivid memories, like Proust's *Madeleines*. The challenge of transforming one of the most basic sources of sustenance, indeed of survival, in Cambodian life into a work of sculpture is what drives Sopheap Pich to make art. The work in question, *Morning Glory*, is merely a continuation of Pich's quest to make visible the invisible forces of life. From the "organs" or body parts that made up his repertoire some years ago to the more monumentally scaled works that have regularly appeared at recent world biennales and triennials, such as *Compound* at the Singapore Biennale and *Delta* at the Fukuoka Triennial of Asian Art, his work has evolved out of the body and into larger "bodies" of matter and material. Regardless of their size, his works have steadfastly continued to surprise and surpass their modest origins.

Pich's alma mater, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has built a reputation on encouraging students to explore and value the artistic process to its fullest. It is no accident that artists whose work is based almost entirely on process count among the school's most illustrious graduates. One such example is the Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, the iconic figure in the movement known as relational aesthetics, who, incidentally, drew his own artistic practice from making meals. As a graduate of the school, Sopheap Pich bears traces of these pedagogical directives, but of course, as it happens, not only in direct and obvious ways. His work is a beautiful example of the marriage of materials to process or of how process informs materials and vice-versa. Yet, the relationship of process to the finished work in Pich's work is not as straightforward as it may appear. What Pich makes visible and evident to the naked eye is his medium, the bamboo and rattan from his native Cambodia. But, his is not a case where medium merely becomes form. What he has accomplished is to craft a delicate balance between the visible and invisible components of his work, between the form of a sculpture and its transformation, its voyage from the start of an idea to its finished shape, from the presence of materials to the absence of their trace.

Pich treats bamboo like a pencil line. Or so it seems. One imagines him manipulating the pliable rattan reeds like they were soft rubber and then drawing in space with them. But, bamboo does not bend without a lot of hard work. The repetitive labor of bending and tying knots of metal wire around the joints can also be likened to knitting. It requires manual dexterity and patience. Unlike drawing or writing, it doesn't just flow from the wrists. The gesture necessitates your fingers to twist and turn. His limbs have to become as flexible and hard as the bamboo that he shapes into lines, both stiff and disjointed, hard and soft at the same time. It is difficult to say whether Pich chose bamboo or if bamboo chose him, he is so skilled at working it. Pich was not born weaving strips of bamboo. He trained as a painter so the question is how does a painter go from applying paint on canvases to sculpting rattan? He will tell you that it grew out of a desire for working with natural materials, materials indigenous to his native Cambodia. Rattan seemed to him the most versatile and also the one that could accommodate his omnipresent need to draw. He began with simple shapes that spoke of the body: lungs, kidneys, intestines. The goal wasn't to turn an actual object or a body part into a three dimensional sculpture but rather to transform an idea into a work of art. It still does not explain how he manages to sculpt like drawing. He probably drew in a manner akin to sculpture. Building lines upon lines. At the source is likely the genesis of an idea and then the quest for how to realize the idea. Sculpture appears to be the most fruitful method of applying idea to form.

Because of the nature of working with strips of rattan that need to be tied together step by step, like knitting a scarf or weaving a basket, or any monotonous exercise, the focus is on the repetitive gesture, a meditative process that tests your energy and ability to concentrate. It is a gradual process, little steps that add up. For

Pich, the process begins with an idea and a question: how to make it? How to turn something found in nature, something basic into a sculpture? How does it reveal itself? What can it become? It then gains a kind of hypnotic rhythm, a momentum of its own. It becomes a manifestation of endurance. The origin of a work as rooted in an idea comes from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy when Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) the Florentine artist and writer, said that *disegno* was the father and foundation of all visual arts, the animating principle of all creative processes. *Disegno* can mean design or drawing, but it can also mean idea. In modern times this translates into a concept, but in Pich's works, the source is both a drawing and an idea. Not an actual drawing, but a drawing in Vasari's sense, an outline, a schema. The shape of which comes later. The works are born out of a process of making. When you look at one of Pich's pieces, what you see is the unfolding of an idea that has been crafted out of a material that is organic, living and whole, whose shape is literally open to the elements.

The end result is, unsurprisingly, a work of art. Sublime and magnificent sculptures that seem to mysteriously come into being. Recently, in addition to rattan, he has added burlap, crushed dirt, and beeswax to the rattan frames. And while it may appear that he is filling his sculptures with matter, he is in fact emptying them, emptying them of subject matter, emptying them of reference, freeing them of content, making them more abstract. Or as he has said: "constructing while deconstructing." Another change to his work over the past few years, since his previous exhibition at Tyler Rollins, is the element of scale. *Morning Glory* is the largest piece that he has made so far. Although the piece that he made for the Singapore Biennale this past March, *Compound*, was taller, this one is not only longer but also more complex. The stems of the aquatic plant seem to grow on sight like the tentacles of an octopus, pulsating with life, giving birth to buds and flowers. Morning glories are weeds that grow in muddy ponds.

Like other contemporary artists from around the world who use wood, recycled material, or bendable wire such as Martin Puryear, Anthony Gormley and El Anatsui, Pich is interested in breathing new life into common materials by drawing outlines around the spaces they occupy. As Darian Leader has written about Gormley: "tracing lines mentally around the form of some object... a space bounded by unbroken lines."<sup>1</sup> While Rosalind Kraus has dismissed the grid as mere repetition, Puryear, Anatsui, Pich and Gormley's uses of the grid as a matrix or armature to outline bodies is anything but repetitive. Nor are they really grids. Their intersecting lines might share affinity with grid masters such as Agnes Martin or Piet Mondrian, but Puryear, Anatsui, Pich and Gormley's grids are organic bodies that don't break up space but rather build it from scratch. Another distinctive trait that Pich's sculptures possess is a relation to the uncanny. Incidentally, this is one of Rosalind Kraus' standards of originality,<sup>2</sup> but in my opinion the uncanny qualities of Pich's works are to be found in his sense of humor, or, like Anatsui's large hangings, his keen sense of the impossibility or paradox of transforming the mundane into the sublime.

As it often happens, Pich's first forays into rattan were experimental in nature. When he first began exploring the medium in 2004, he had not intended to make a sculpture out of the reeds. He had planned to use them as a skeleton for a kind of three dimensional collage painting. He had fashioned a lung with the idea of covering it with cigarette packages. Guy Issanjou, the director of the French Cultural Center in Phnom Penh from 2004-2006, saw it and suggested that he exhibit it as is, without the cigarette packages. To Pich, the work looked undone, crooked and uneven; the rattan reeds were tied together with wire that was too big. And then he thought of Giacometti and his childhood, the value of the unfinished and leaving a trace or evidence of what you are making. He titled the work *Silence*, which suggests the quiet breathing of the lung. Issanjou's suggestion of leaving the work naked, so to speak, inspired him to continue. Since he had no real training in working with bamboo and rattan, he needed to recruit workers who knew how to work with the material. He found a man in a rattan shop who knew how to split and shave rattan trees very well. He also grew more ambitious as his subsequent piece, *Cycle*, took on larger proportions. In the making of it, he worked outside in the sun and late into the night bitten by mosquitoes. The piece consists of two stomachs fused together. He did not plan on merging the two organs, it just happened, no pun intended, organically.

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<sup>1</sup> Darian Leader, "Making Space," Baltic, Center for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Kraus, "Introduction," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986

That flexibility to create something that literally grows organically, breathes and shapes itself, is what motivated him to continue. The lines of bamboo are like nerves, and he loves to get lost in them.

Crafting these organs, and for his latest work, a morning glory, out of rattan is no small feat. It required six months of manual work and weeks of assembly, some 20 strands of rattan a day per person. One tree makes four strands and it takes 20 minutes to shave one strand. The whole piece then needs to be taken apart and reassembled on site in New York. Its relocation in New York is part of its identity. Like a little bit of Cambodia in the Atlantic. It is the condition of the contemporary work of art, to travel to international exhibitions. Disassembled in the studio on the Mekong River, only to be reassembled in Dubai, Brisbane or New York. Traveling is not merely a technical concern, however. These works carry with them a multitude of histories and geographies that extend beyond mere cultural references. All works of sculpture behave differently depending on the space that they occupy. Pich's works are not site-specific per se, but they do influence and impact the spaces that they occupy. Site specificity has changed over the years. As Miwon Kwon notes "Site specificity used to imply something grounded, bound to the law of physics. Often playing with gravity, site-specific works used to be obstinate about "presence," even if they were materially ephemeral, and adamant about immobility."<sup>3</sup> Now, we speak about mobility of site-specific works, especially in the context of curatorial practices that require large works of sculpture to travel great distance and adapt themselves to new environments. What is less discussed, however, is the transformation of a work to these new environments. The assumption is that, in the case of large traveling exhibitions, the environment changes but the work does not. Unless the work was made specifically for a specific place. Perhaps because of their seemingly porous quality, the air that breathes in and out of Pich's works, one forgets to consider them to have "gravity." They possess this unique quality of having tremendous presence and yet, they suggest also an absence.

It is not simply a matter of translation either. The idea of transplanting the morning glory from the Mekong to New York could be simple enough as a concept. It could conjure metaphors of displacement, exile, memories of a distant place eerily making its way into the white cube setting of a gallery in Chelsea. However, such an interpretation might overlook what else is going on. Pich's sculptures evoke presence by their materiality and transcendent qualities. As the work travels from one place to another, it adapts itself to its milieu by sucking in air, absorbing the light and architecture of its new environment. It retains a trace of its identity because the artist drew a line around it, but once it arrives on site, those lines disappear and the air in between the lines takes over. Recently, the artist sent me a picture of the Buddha that he made for the exhibition. He transported the Buddha to different places and took pictures of it, as it sat majestically in the landscape, in one photograph, and in a field with stone Buddhas surrounding it, in another. These images, to me, capture exactly what his work is about. The Buddha appears almost transparent, even translucent, in one. Sitting next to the stone sculpture, he nearly disappears and yet, he is, in many ways, more present than the others. Buddhist followers believe in the presence of the Buddha. He manifests himself invisibly, and yet he is omnipresent. In other words, he does not appear, his presence is simply known or felt. In these images Pich has played a trick on the viewer, for we see the Buddha, he is not completely absent. In using rattan and in juxtaposing his sculpture next to the weightier, more massive stone carvings, he is saying something about presence.

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<sup>3</sup> Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October*, vol. 80, 1997, p. 85