

# THE PULSE WITHIN SOPHEAP PICH



## FORWARD

### TYLER ROLLINS

It is with great pleasure that Tyler Rollins Fine Art presents Sopheap Pich's first New York solo exhibition. Pich has been very active on the international stage in recent years, and he is now considered to be Cambodia's most prominent contemporary artist. But although his works are now exhibited around the world, he remains firmly rooted in Cambodia. Its vibrant culture and often tragic history continue to inspire his work. His exhibition for our gallery is a particularly personal one, as it is inspired by his childhood recollections of life during the Khmer Rouge period (1975-79). The physical and psychological hardships of this traumatic period were seared into the artist's memory. With *The Pulse Within*, Pich has looked deep into himself – and also into the psyche of Cambodia – to investigate the troubling currents swirling beneath the surface of daily life.

Issues of time, memory, and the body are integral to Pich's work. For this exhibition, he has created a dynamic group of sculptural forms derived from the internal organs of the human body, such as the heart, lungs, and intestines. These function as visceral reminders of the past and of the intimate, physical connections between human beings. Referring to *Cycle*, one of the works in the exhibition, Pich explained: "A major issue in Cambodia, as I knew it, has always been the stomach. It was either that everyone's concern was to fill it or to cure its diseases. *Cycle* took the shape of a stomach as a starting point to symbolize society in general. Connecting two stomachs together then suggested ideas of strong family ties or a society held together by simple means. It was also about fragility, controlled chaos, movement, and the ambiguity of the interior and the exterior."

In a time when Cambodia and its people are focused on the realities of daily life and the challenges of economic development, Pich carves out a space of reflection upon the deeper issues that underlie Cambodian society. He returns to the fundamental physical basics of the human body, which he relates to the social body of the nation. Its internal scars and painfully raw wounds are exposed to view, and yet through this process some hope of healing is suggested.

This year has been an exciting one for Pich. In addition to completing a major outdoor sculptural installation at the King Abdullah University in Saudi Arabia, he is being featured in two of Asia's most prestigious art events: the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in Fukuoka, Japan; and the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, Australia. We are very proud to introduce him to New York.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

SOPHEAP PICH

At the end of 2002, I decided to return to Cambodia for the first time since fleeing the country with my family in 1979. I was born in Koh Kralaw, a rice-farming town in Battambang Province, in northwestern Cambodia, but during the Khmer Rouge regime, my family and I were moved to different towns and villages in the province. We ended up in refugee camps in Thailand before settling in the United States. It was there that I began my studies, going on to receive a BFA in Painting at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and an MFA in Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Back in Cambodia, I had several exhibitions of paintings over the next couple of years. Then in 2004, I made my first rattan sculpture of a pair of lungs, which I had intended to cover with cigarette packages. But, after having taken advice from the director of the French Cultural Center at the time, I decided against it. That piece opened a totally new approach to my art practice, and I have continued to make works using rattan, bamboo, and metal wire ever since. At the end of 2005, I stopped painting completely. I felt at that point that painting was not enough, that I was too concerned with making an image on a limited space. To create a three-dimensional object from the beginning to the end is to take a journey, to discover something new without erasing the footsteps, the evidence. It was not very practical, as my objects tended to be large, and there are other issues that come with working with natural materials – but characteristically, each successful work has a life in it that is somehow a reflection of where it comes from.

Most of the forms I started using were of human organs: the liver, lungs, stomach, etc. I was not interested so much in copying the form but rather in finding something else in it or something else it could become – or rather some meaning it could suggest. *Hive*, for example, started out as a liver but became a kind of corridor and stood vertically on the floor. One could walk in and out of it. For *Cycle*, I connected two stomachs together to suggest a kind of movement or family ties, old to young again. Many other works, such as *Stalk* and *Upstream*, were not inspired by the body but by nature and culture. *Ripple* was born out of the process of making sculpture itself – of wanting to “see what happens.” In the end, all the works had the thread of common meaning: that of poverty, inside/outside ambiguity, fragility, monumentality, lightness, of strength by way of holding on to each other with simple means.

The whole process is completely hand-made, so there were imperfections, from the cutting of the rattan strands to the distance of the grids. I still go to the countryside to cut my own bamboo. I rarely use rulers or measuring tape – only at the end in order to know the size of the work. Although I have a particular idea before I start, I rely more on instinct than a specific plan as a way to work.

In 2003, I formed a small artist group called Saklapel (a play on the Khmer word *Sel'pak*, which means “arts”). Two years later, the group organized a big exhibition in the capital, Phnom Penh, called *Visual Art Open*. Many people considered this an important event because it brought a lot of press, and we had a fairly comprehensive website which opened doors for many of the artists involved. The year after, I started a small art center, Sala Art Space, with Dana Langlois, who owns the well-known Java Café (where I had my first solo show in 2003). I guided a kind of theoretical class for a group of ten young artists. Most are still showing their works today. After about one year, the center folded, and as my work was beginning to attract different shows and residencies, I retreated from the art scene and dedicated my time fully to my work.

In the past year I have been working on two different bodies of work for two exhibitions: one at the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, Australia; and the other at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York City. For Australia, I have done an installation, entitled *1979*, that contains eleven sculptural objects made predominantly with bamboo, rattan, and burlap, along with five carved wooden buffaloes. In this work, I wanted to tell a story of a time in my childhood just at the end of the Khmer Rouge period. My memory is very strong about growing up in that time, so I have many stories based on factual events. But as I get older, they have become more and more allegorical, or I am finding in them meanings and ideas that inform my understanding and my relationship to present-day Cambodia. So this group of sculptures is an attempt to visually describe what I, as a child on that particular journey, had experienced.

The second body of work, for the New York exhibition, is more of a continuation with what has been my preoccupation since I started making sculptures – the attempt to reveal certain aspects of the socio-political condition of Cambodia. In this respect, my feelings in the past five years have not changed much, so some of the works still bear similarities to the early works. At the same time, new questions began to appear, and so new steps or experiments were taken: I began to use other materials – burlaps, farm tools, wood, plastic, paints, etc. There was a need to put a more distinct “subject matter” in the objects.

In and around Phnom Penh at the moment, there is much development – new high rises are going up, bridges are being built, land is being sold at unimaginable prices, traffic is getting impossible on the main boulevards as cars are getting bigger, and car dealers are popping up on every major junction.

How did these things get here? What have we produced that is so profitable? The last time I heard, we are still one of those countries in the world where the vast majority of the population still survives on about one dollar a day. What do we consume on a dollar a day? What do those products with the label “For Export Only” mean? It was recently in the news that some chopstick makers were found to be using a certain anti-fungus chemical to keep their chopsticks from attracting molds. Since everything has to be cheap, nothing can be wasted. How do we know if what we are consuming is real since most of it is not even made here? And are those shiny cars really new cars?

In the countryside, along the national borders, people collect old military remnants to sell as scrap metal. Everyday people push huge carts of junk materials across the borders to be recycled. Cambodia was one of the most heavily mined countries during the late 1960s, and many bombs were dropped but did not explode. We often heard news of people who got maimed or died while trying to disassemble these objects. For many people along the borders, this is one way to make a living. On the Thai-Cambodian border, carts and tricycles filled with all kinds of scrap materials are pushed and pulled by handicapped people every day to sell to Thai factories.

Now, when I see the new high rises and shiny buildings being constructed, I can't help but think about what the materials were. And when I see the workers building the buildings, it is as though I'm looking at the same people who scavenge for metals.

Cambodia is a complex place, a hard place – and for me also an inspiring place. It informs my work. It gives it a sense of place. I call this latest group of works *The Pulse Within* to indicate that it is my exploration of the underlying aspects of the country. It is also a continuation of my search for new forms and new meanings, testing the limit of what I know as a person and as an artist.

It has been a long struggle for Sopheap Pich to find his voice and the right medium of artistic expression. This struggle to find his sense of self, an individual and cultural identity, can be attributed in part to the trauma of displacement. Pich was born in Koh Kralaw, a rice-farming town of Battambang, Cambodia on May 9, 1971. He and his family left Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge period (1975 to 1979) under which 1.7 million Cambodians were killed by the regime headed by Pol Pot. Thus, they left Cambodia as political refugees and finally settled in the United States in 1984. Like many political and economic refugees who were compelled to leave their homes, Pich seemed to suffer from the trauma of linguistic, cultural, physical and geographical displacement. This displacement was eventually made manifest in his work and shaped the specific media of his artistic expression.

Looking back, Pich recalls: "In 1993, I took school trips to photograph Mayan ruins in Mexico and Guatemala. It was during this time that I first realized that I had to return to Cambodia one day. It was the sound and smell of the forest and the temples at Tikal that conjured up so much childhood memories." He started making sculpture using rattan, bamboo, and metal wire in 2004. These materials are embedded in his childhood memories of growing up in the rice-farming community where he observed his relatives making fish traps, baskets and other utilitarian objects out of these very same materials.

Pich enrolled at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1990 as a pre-med student. At the end of the second year, against his father's wishes, he changed his major to art, concentrating in painting. Subsequently, he received his MFA in Painting and Drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999. Like many transnational and global contemporary artists of Southeast Asian descent, Sopheap Pich now has a kind of flexible citizenship, moving and working around the world. His sculptures and drawings have gained great visibility internationally and have been exhibited in museums and galleries on four continents. Institutions such as the Singapore Art Museum and the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia now own large pieces by him, while the King Abdullah University in Saudi Arabia has commissioned two major works, *Moon Bearer* and *Upstream*, that were recently installed there in a spectacular outdoor setting. He is also featured this year at both the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in Japan and the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Australia. *The Pulse Within*, now on display at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, marks his first solo exhibition in New York. Pich is, in short, not only one of Cambodia's leading artists, but clearly one of the rising stars in the global art world.

## OF TEXTURE AND TACTILE MEMORY: SITUATING SOPHEAP PICH'S WORK IN A GLOBAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

BORETH LY

The tactile memory of the weight and texture of rattan and bamboo began to materialize in Pich's art and creativity in 2004, when he made his first rattan sculpture of a pair of lungs. Metaphorically, the artist's first sculpture signifies his moment of artistic break-through, when he finally found his formal language of artistic expression by using natural materials that harken back to his childhood working and playing on the farm. In retrospect, he was waiting to exhale, and he finally released his potent pulse of creativity and sense of self and cultural identity — a liberating moment for Pich.

Interestingly, his initial longing to return "home" was provoked by "the sound and smell of the forest and the temple at Tikal." One tends to think of memory as an experience that is purely visual and intangible. However, smell, hearing, and touch are also senses that register our experiences and thus create memory. I would like to single out touch and tactile memory as a particularly apt way to understand Pich's works. Not surprisingly, the title for his first solo exhibition is *The Pulse Within*. To take a pulse, one has to touch the body in order to make an assessment of the heartbeat. More important, Pich is interested in assessing the pulse of the Cambodian nation. In one of our exchanges, he related how he patiently accepted the current pulse of Cambodia, and that it has its natural momentum. One of the great challenges for him is how to expose what is underneath this surface, something he refers to as the "the pulse within."

One of the poignant pieces included in *The Pulse Within* is *Caged Heart*. We see a sculptural form shaped like a heart. The artist has covered parts of it with dyed burlap and imprisoned the heart in a cage-like structure. Moreover, we see lots of wear and tear, suggesting that this is not a young heart, but an old one. Placed inside the small cage are tools used by farmers and other manual laborers. Clearly, Pich intended it to have multiple layers of meanings. We can interpret this old heart as that of a good-hearted farmer or any blue-collar worker, but it could also be the heart of a wealthy, greedy, and ungenerous man whose heart is damaged and thus corrupt. Moreover, the metaphorical and linguistic reference to a good versus a bad heart (as a way to characterize a person's ethical and moral standing in society) is a common assessment in Cambodian culture. *Caged Heart* critiques and captures this specific cultural value. For instance, there is a saying in the Khmer language that "it is alright if a house guest feels that your house is small and claustrophobic as long as he/she does not feel that his heart is small and claustrophobic." In other words, a small space provides an opportunity for kinship, intimacy, friendship, but a suffocatingly small and claustrophobic space is not good.

### **Drawing from Traditions, Tensions, and Innovations**

I visited Pich's studio, located in Beng Kok, one of the poorest parts of Phnom Penh, on August 11, 2009. During our conversation, I asked him why he wants to be an artist, and he replied: "I want to be independent and to have the freedom to make something out of nothing." When asked to name some of the artists whose work he admires, he mentioned Van Gogh and Brancusi, then went on to add: "I never know how to read colors. For example, 'red equals sadness' — all foreign to me. I prefer drawing and lines because they are far more expressive and energetic to me. Moreover, drawing is a Zen Buddhist process that required meditative focus and concentration."

Indeed, his sketchbooks are filled with drawings that serve as initial ideas and inspirations for his large-scale sculptures and installations. We also see traces of his drawings on the walls of his studio, where he plays with different dimensions, depth, and shadow. One sees this expressive energy in his hand-drawn lines in schematic sketches of ideas that are eventually transformed and materialized into sculptures made of rattan and bamboo joined together by metal wire. The result is a display of light and shadow that creates the effect of a volumetric space. A case in point is a huge installation piece, entitled *Raft*, that is now on display at the exhibition at Tyler Rollins Fine Art.



In the artist's studio.



Making bamboo strips in the studio.

### Ways and Means: Making Visible the Politically Invisible

*Raft* is a critique of the displacement resulting from global investment and real estate development in the Beng Kok area of Phnom Penh, where his studio is located. *Beng Kok* means “Reed Lake” in the Khmer language (*beng* means lake and *kok* is a type of reed). Herbs and aquatic vegetables are grown and harvested by the local people. In addition, they fish in the lake, but this it will soon be completely filled in to make room for redevelopment. Each family living in the neighborhood has been given \$8,000 US dollars by an “unknown” real estate investment company to move elsewhere so that a futuristic and global city can be built there. Most of the houses located around the lake are built on stilts over the water. Pich’s studio is situated around the edge of the lake. All these houses, including Pich’s studio, will soon be demolished. *Raft* is composed of what looks like a tall building supported by what look like elongated boats or bombs. The artist has intentionally couched his formal language ambiguously so it lends itself to multiple readings. Naturally, the two boats supporting the tall edifice remind us of the soon-to-be filled in lake behind the artist’s studio, where Pich and his two assistants, Sophai and Toma, watch their neighbors paddling their boats to fish and to harvest vegetables. Moreover, the water from the lake generates cool breezes on a hot and humid day while Pich creates his works. On the other hand, the two objects supporting the skyscraper in *Raft* could also refer to the bombs that were dropped during the American bombing of Cambodia and Laos. In fact, the metal wire that Pich uses to join and stitch rattan and bamboo strips together is made from melted-down shelf casings and unexploded bombs.



Pich with *Cycle 2, Version 3*.



View of Beng Kok Lake from the studio.

Pich informed me in one of our conversations that in his earlier body of works, he was very interested in achieving a perfection of form, texture, and surface – and so he rarely left his works unfinished or exposed. However, now that he lives in Cambodia full time, he has a different political and social perspective on the country. There seems to be a shift from the younger artist concerned with formal questions to that of an artistically mature and potent artist who is now able to detect and to assess the pulse of this nation. More significantly, he wants to expose what is underneath – “the pulse within.”

Like the wear and tear found in *Caged Heart*, *Junk Nutrients* makes visible what is underneath the tourist and investment-friendly image that Cambodia projects to the world. This piece is shaped like twisted intestines and coated with burlap. The intestines are left exposed, with junk spilling out of them. The junk consists of such items as plastic tubes, bottles, and other discarded materials that Pich gathers from Beng Kok Lake. The nutrients that one is supposed to find in the soil of Phnom Penh or below the surface of the lake are clearly not organic or natural but simply plastic waste. A conceptual parallel can be drawn between Pich’s desire “to make something out of nothing” and that of the poor folks living in the slums of Phnom Penh whose livelihood is sustained by collecting and selling this junk to recycling companies. In brief, Pich’s sculpture exposes the unhealthy pulse underneath the seemingly normal and tourist-friendly Cambodia that is increasingly displaced and destroyed by global investment.

One of Pich’s worries is that he has failed to live up to his father’s expectations because he has chosen to pursue his dream of becoming an artist rather than entering the more lucrative profession of a medical doctor. Clearly, he has never left behind what he learned when he was a pre-med student, but has simply integrated his knowledge of the human body and medical science into his art and creative process. The integration of these disciplines and professions is evident in *Suture*, which is composed of what looks like a pair of kidneys joined by a tube of some sort that has perhaps been sutured into place. Once again, as in much of the work in *The Pulse Within*, Pich has us look simultaneously at what happens within and what can be detected through surfaces.

Boreth Ly is Assistant Professor of Southeast Asian Art History and Visual Culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He was born in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and was educated in Paris and the United States. He is currently writing a book on trauma and the contemporary arts of Southeast Asia and its diaspora.



CAGED HEART

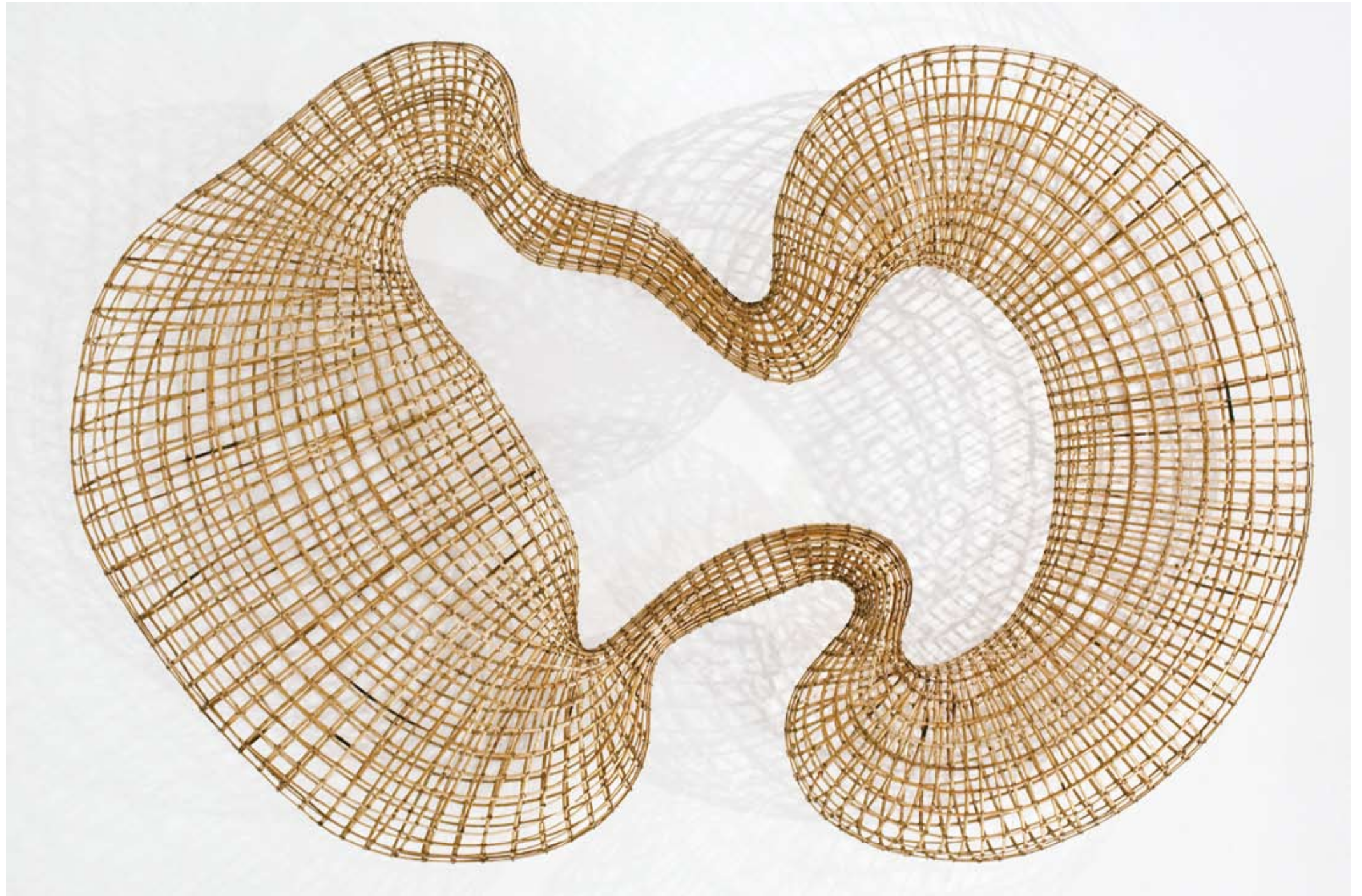
2009  
WOOD, BAMBOO, RATTAN, BURLAP, WIRE, DYE, METAL, FARM TOOLS  
51 X 46 X 47 IN.





**RAFT**

2009  
BAMBOO, RATTAN, WOOD, WIRE, METAL BOLTS  
89 X 177 X 52 IN.



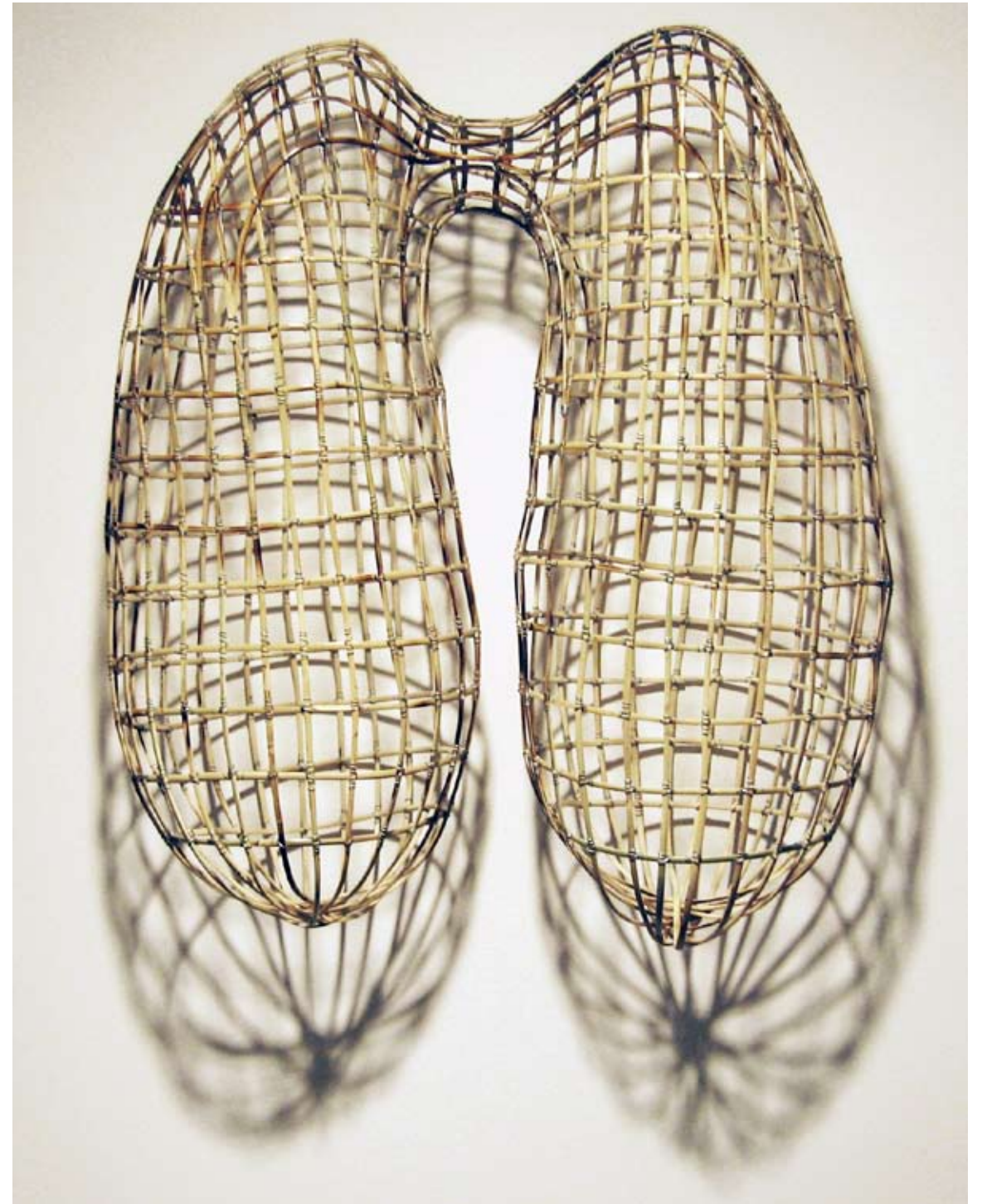
CYCLE 2, VERSION 3

2008  
RATTAN AND WIRE  
80 X 53 X 12 IN.



## JUNK NUTRIENTS

2009  
BAMBOO, RATTAN, WIRE, PLASTIC, RUBBER, METAL, CLOTH, RESIN  
65 X 49 X 29 IN.

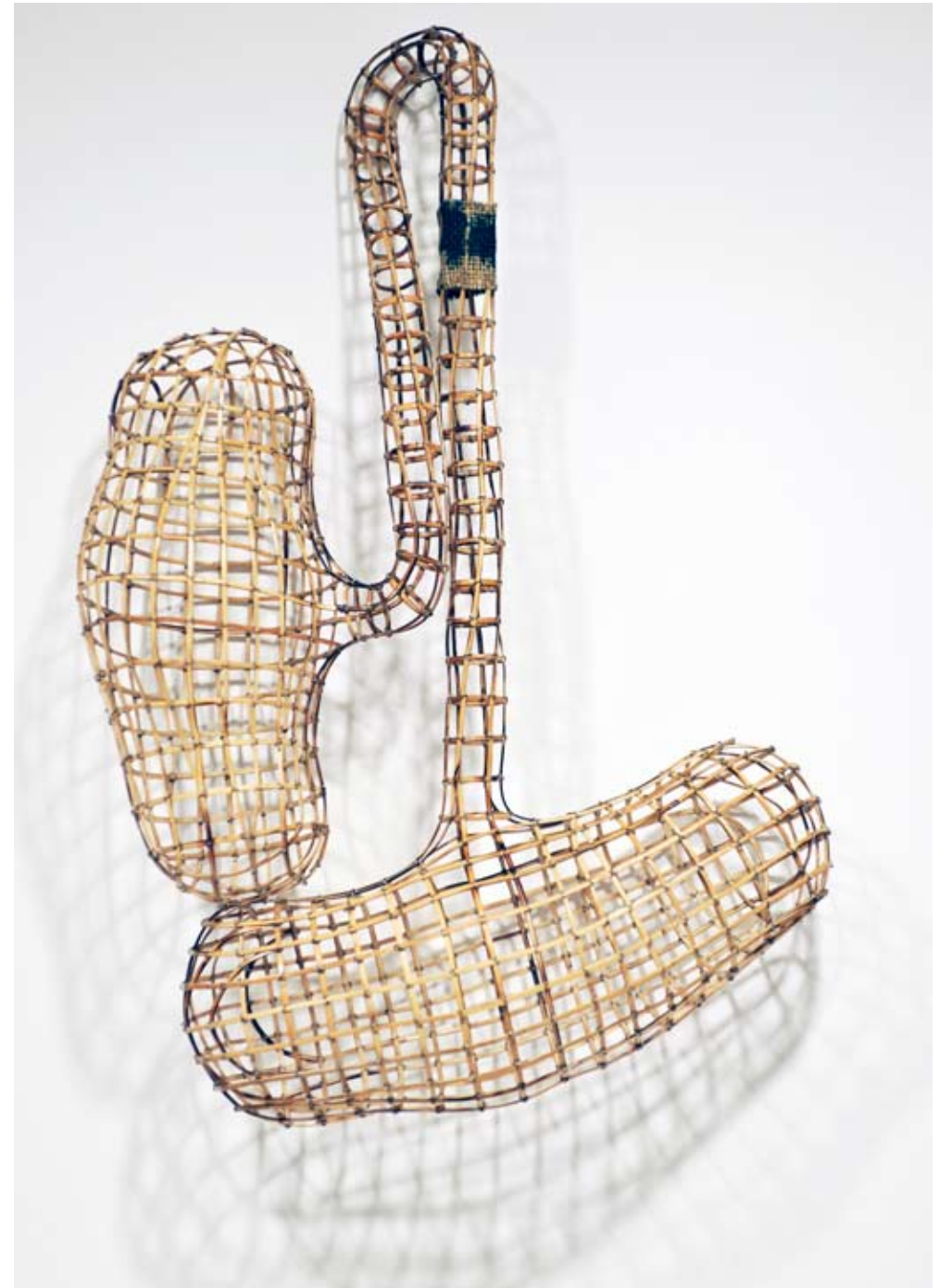


SILENCE, VERSION 4

2009  
RATTAN AND WIRE  
24 X 22 X 8 IN.

SUTURE

2009  
RATTAN, WIRE, BURLAP  
28 X 19 X 7 IN.





*"BINOCULARS" FOR THE INSTALLATION "1979" S. PICH 2009*

**BINOCULARS: FROM THE INSTALLATION "1979"**

2009  
WATERCOLOR, INK, GOUACHE ON PAPER  
36 1/2 X 30 1/4 IN.



BUDDHA: FROM THE INSTALLATION "1979"

2009  
WATERCOLOR, INK, GOUACHE ON PAPER  
44 3/4 X 39 IN.



## SOPHEAP PICH

### SELECTED BIOGRAPHY

### EDUCATION

1999  
MFA in Painting: The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL.

1995  
BFA in Painting: The University of Massachusetts at Amherst, MA.

1993-94  
Ecole National d'Art, Cergy Pontoise, France.

1993 (January)  
Photographic exploration of Mayan ruins in Mexico and Guatemala.

1991 (Summer)  
Painting workshop in Cannes, France; traveled to Italy.

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2008  
*Strands*, The Esplanade, Singapore.

2007  
*Recent Works From Kunming*, TCG/Nordica, Kunming, China.

*Tidal*, H Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand.

*Flow*, Sala Artspace, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

2006  
*Moha Saen Anett*, Gallery Dong Xi, Vestfossen, Norway.

2005  
*Chomlak, Sculptures and Drawings*, The Arts Lounge of Hotel de la Paix, Siem Reap, Cambodia.

*Sculptures and Drawings*, Amansara Resort, Siem Reap, Cambodia.

2004  
*Pdao*, French Cultural Center Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

2003  
*Excavating the Vessels*, Java Café and Gallery, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

2002  
*Recent Works*, The Brewery Studio, Boston, MA.

1997  
*Empty Wooden Cigarette Boxes From Cambodia*, The Augusta Savage Gallery, Amherst, MA.

### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2009  
*Forever Until Now: Contemporary Art from Cambodia*, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong.

Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, Fukuoka, Japan.

Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane, Australia.

2008  
Sh Contemporary: *Best of Discovery*, Shanghai, China.

*Strategies from Within*, Ke Center for the Contemporary Arts, Shanghai, China.

*The Mekong Project*, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos.

*The Drawing Room*, Rubies, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

2006  
*Paint Around the Dog*, with Jack Bauer, Lake Studio, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

*2+3+4 Cambodian/Vietnamese Exchange*, Java Cafe and Gallery, Phnom Penh.

2005  
*Visual Arts Open*, Elsewhere and New Art Gallery, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

*Transit*, with Michèle Vanvlasselaer, Java Café & Gallery, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

*Première Vue*, Passage de Retz, Paris, France.

*Je/Jeu*, French Cultural Center, Yangon, Myanmar.

2004  
*Guide*, French Cultural Center, Siem Reap, Cambodia.

*Continuity*, Shinta Mani, Siem Reap, Cambodia.

*Guide*, French Cultural Center, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

*Meik Sratum*, Silapak Khmer Amatak, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

2001  
*Subject Picture*, The Optimistic, Chicago, IL.

2000  
*Just Good Art 2000*, Hyde Park Arts Center, Chicago, IL.

*Memory: Personal and Social Testimonies*, the Augusta Savage Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.



1999

*Altered Object*, Hyde Park Arts Center, Chicago, IL.

*Young Talents II*, Contemporary Arts Workshop, Chicago, IL.

*MFA Thesis Exhibition*, G2, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

*Yellow/Face*, Gallery Pilson East, Chicago, IL.

*Cows on Parade*, a collaborative project with J. Zakin and S. Biggers for The Chicago Park District, exhibited at the Field Museum Campus, Chicago, IL.

1998

*Presidential Dinner Exhibition*, The Art Institute of Chicago.

1997

*Empty Wooden Cigarette Boxes From Cambodia*, The Augusta Savage Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

1995

*Recent Paintings*, Gallery Del Sol, Miami, FL.

*BFA Thesis Show*, The Augusta Savage Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

## RESIDENCIES

2007 (November-January)  
TCG/Nordica, Kunming, China. Two months partial fellowship.

2006 (June-August)  
Galleri Dong Xi, Vestfossen, Norway. Two months full fellowship.

2005  
Hotel De la Paix, Siem Reap, Cambodia. One month full fellowship.

2001 (October)  
The Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, Vermont. One month full fellowship.

## AWARDS

1999

The Ryerson Painting Award, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

1990-94

The Wilbur Ward Scholarship, University of Massachusetts.

1993

Junior & Senior Show, Exposition d'Arts Européens.

1992

Foundation show, University of Massachusetts.

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2007

Art Teacher: Interdisciplinary Art Appreciation, Sala Artspace, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Co-curator: Reinventing the Spirit House, Khmer Arts Academy, Takhmao, Cambodia.

2005

Co-curator of Visual Arts Open, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

2000

Art Teacher / Counselor: Gateway Crafts of VINFEN Corporation, Boston, MA.

1999

Instructor: Drawing: Materials and Techniques, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Instructor: Drawing 102, College Excel, Robert Morris College, Chicago, IL.

Teaching Assistant: 3D Design, Robert Morris College.

1998

Teaching Assistant: Abstract Drawing, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Teaching Assistant: Beginning Drawing, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Teaching Assistant: Multi-Level Painting, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Teaching Assistant: Beginning Painting, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.