

Art in America

The background of the cover is a large, abstract geometric composition. It features a large, irregular white shape that dominates the center, set against a black background. The white shape has several sharp, angular protrusions and indentations, creating a dynamic, non-representational form. The overall effect is minimalist and high-contrast, characteristic of Ellsworth Kelly's style.

\$10 MAY 2013 100 YEARS COVER BY ELLSWORTH KELLY

WOVEN INTO HISTORY

Sopheap Pich:
Compound, 2011,
bamboo, rattan,
plywood and metal
wire, dimensions
variable; in the
Singapore Biennale.
Courtesy Singapore
Art Museum.

In elegant sculptures and grid reliefs made of bamboo and rattan, Cambodia's Sopheap Pich engages his homeland's perpetually conflicted condition.

by Gregory Galligan

**CURRENTLY
ON VIEW**
"Cambodian Rattan:
The Sculptures of
Sopheap Pich" at
the Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
New York, through
July 7. "Reliefs," a
solo show at Tyler
Rollins Fine Art,
New York, through
June 13.

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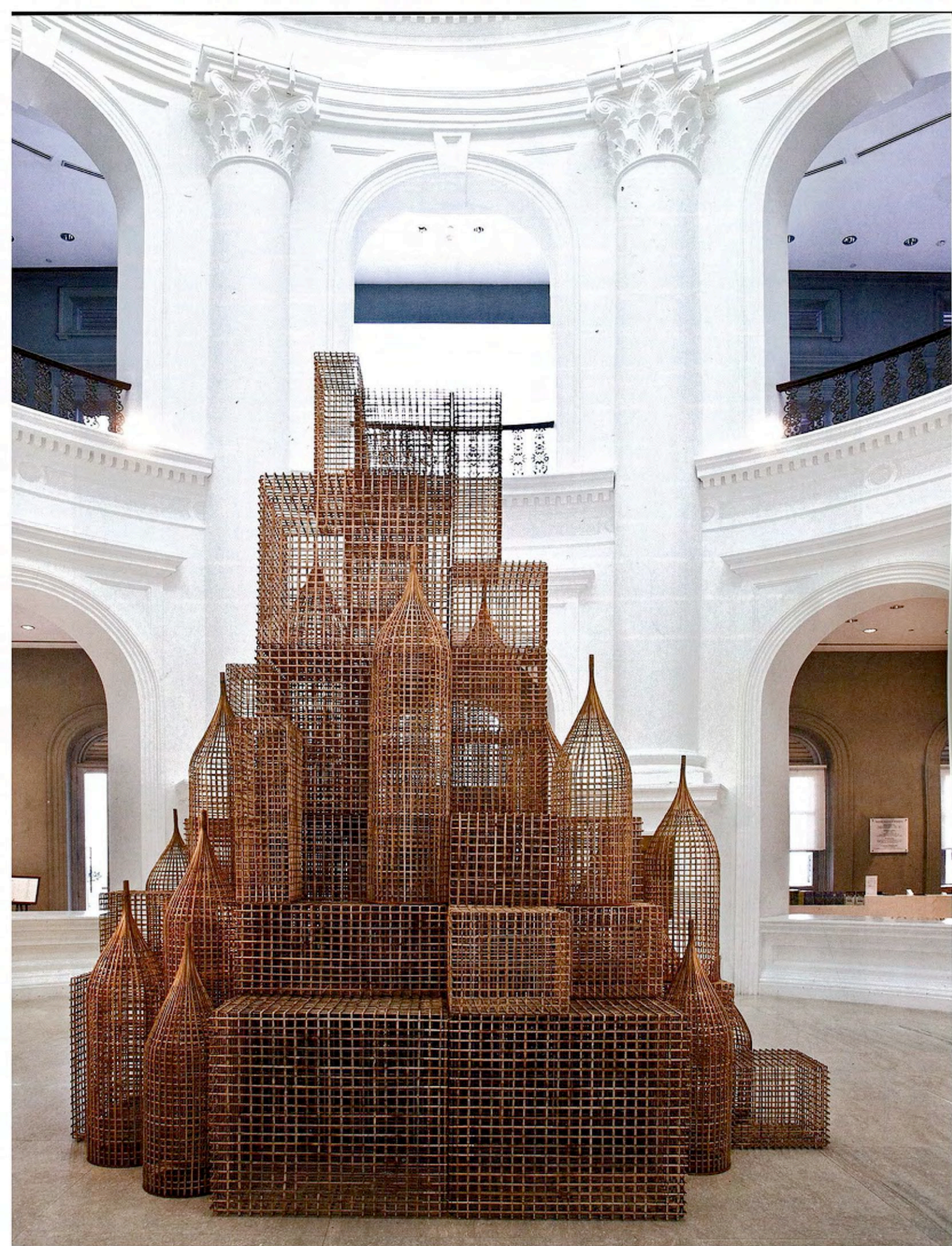
VISITORS TO THE South and Southeast Asian section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York this spring are in for an unusual sight. Amid a courtly installation of Angkor empire sculpture hangs *Buddha 2* (2009), a handwoven, rattan-and-bamboo sculpture by Sopheap Pich (pronounced *so'-pi-ap pitch*), arguably Cambodia's most progressive contemporary artist. Nine other intricately latticed Pich works, more abstract in nature, may be found in two adjoining galleries. "Cambodian Rattan: The Sculptures of Sopheap Pich," organized by the senior departmental curator John Guy, is the Met's contribution to the Season of Cambodia: A Living Arts Festival, a citywide event featuring numerous exhibitions, cultural programs, performances and artist residencies intended to introduce New York audiences to contemporary Khmer art and culture.¹

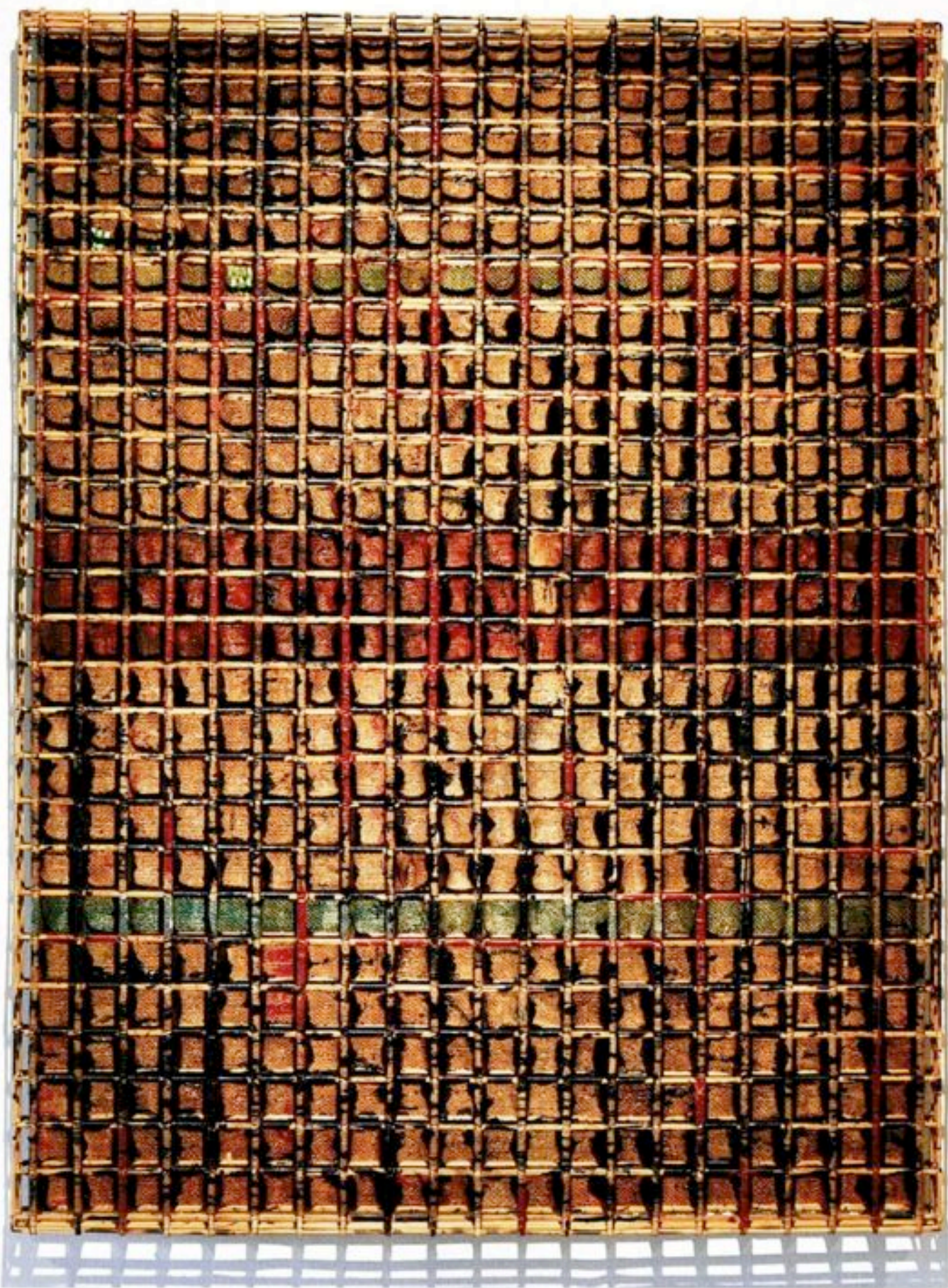
Only a few months ago, Cambodia itself solemnly marked the passing of King Norodom Sihanouk (1922-2012), long a symbol of political, economic and cultural struggles in the perpetually fractious nation of roughly 15 million people (a large percentage of whom live in chronic poverty) striving to catch up with the 21st century. The current Communist government, in a typical act of social callousness, recently evacuated villagers and other residents from the Boeung Kak Lake district of Phnom Penh,

in order to make way for a herculean landfill and luxury residential and tourist complex backed by Cambodian and Chinese speculators. Pich himself was among those forced to quit their homes in the intermittently violent upheaval, still simmering.

A part of this troubled picture and yet increasingly floating free of it, Pich (b. 1971) has made swift headway on the global art scene, as his handcrafted works have become a familiar sight at the world's major biennials and art fairs. Over the last three years alone, the artist has participated in six major international roundups—in Brisbane, Fukuoka, Kassel, Miami, Taichung and Singapore. Indeed, some viewers may find the Met show a rather belated, if inspired, acknowledgment of Pich's dizzying ascent.

"CAMBODIAN RATTAN" CAN be regarded as a cameo retrospective, since its 10 works accurately reflect the range of the artist's motifs from 2005 to late 2012. Guy refrains from suggesting any programmatic undercurrents, opting to simply hang the centerpiece, *Buddha 2* (recently purchased by the museum), among Angkor-era classics in hushed congress. Yet wall-label reminiscences by the artist, giving visitors in effect a personal walk through the show, occasionally evoke a dark national history. Pich coated the splayed tips of the Buddha figure's





free-hanging rattan in red pigment to symbolize the spilled blood of innocents gunned down in Phnom Penh during the desecration of a temple by the Khmer Rouge in the late 1970s—a temple where the artist used to play as a child.

Guy's approach is gently oblique compared to that of Documenta 13 artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, who last summer dedicated a large room in the Fridericianum to a selection of the artist's mixed-medium grid reliefs (two of which are included in "Cambodian Rattan"). These works were accompanied by a small easel painting, *Interrogation at the Kandal Pagoda* (2006), by the Cambodian realist Vann Nath (1946–2011). The painter enjoyed a certain macabre celebrity as one of only seven prisoners to survive incarceration at Pol Pot's notorious Tuol Sleng (Hill of Poisonous Trees) prison, ironically a former high school, where at least 14,000 "enemies of the state" were questioned and summarily executed between 1975 and early 1979.²

Today Vann Nath is regarded by younger Cambodian artists as a spiritual forebear. Selected by Christov-Bakargiev from Pich's private collection, *Interrogation* is a self-portrait based on Vann Nath's memory of his arrest in early 1978; he was spared execution at Tuol Sleng only because a prison guard found him useful for daubing official portraits of Pol Pot.³ Pich finds the picture almost too painful to look at, and generally keeps it tucked away in a house closet.⁴

Pich was close to Vann Nath and considers him Cambodia's "first real painter." The two artists are on the same side of a generational divide between those directly traumatized in the Khmer Rouge era (1975–1979) and those born in its aftermath, who process their country's recent nightmare with a combined sense of moral obligation and distance. Having inherited a scarred social, political and cultural landscape, young Cambodians today witness such surreal developments as former Khmer Rouge officials wielding influence over a gradually recovering economy, the swift rise of Western-style consumerism and, most recently, a breakneck modernization of Phnom Penh and its increasingly tourist-friendly infrastructure.

Pich tries to balance historical, social, biographical and even formalist readings of his work. In 2011, he wrote:

What sculpture has given me is the ability to quiet most of these issues. Everything is expressed in the lines. Lines in space. Work as a way of focus. Work as a way of moving forward in the midst of all the complication. Work leads to acceptance. Work leads to resistance.⁵

The most recent metamorphosis of Pich's wall grids may be seen at present in "Reliefs," his third solo exhibition at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York. Pich's regard for Abstract Expressionism and its aftermath—his favorite

Seven Parts Relief, 2012, bamboo, rattan, burlap, wire, beeswax, damar resin, dirt, plastics, charcoal and oil paint, 91½ by 63¾ by 3¾ inches. Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.



View of the exhibition "Cambodian Rattan," showing *Buddha 2*, 2009, rattan, wire and dye, 100 by 29 by 9 inches. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Vann Nath:
*Interrogation at
the Kandal Pagoda*,
2006, oil on canvas,
27½ by 39½ inches.
Courtesy Sopheap
Pich.



artists include Jackson Pollock, Milton Resnick, Ellsworth Kelly, Jasper Johns and Gerhard Richter—has prompted a growing emphasis on painterly gesture, with spatial instability and lively drip passages playing off against the omnipresent bamboo-and-rattan schema. The new works extend the dense, expressive potential of the slightly earlier grid reliefs Pich offered in a one-person show last winter at H Gallery, Bangkok. (They also hark back to the forays he made into abstract painting just after graduate school.) Contrasting darks and lights now invite viewers to peruse the beeswax-and-resin-laden surfaces, interspersed with coarse and torn burlap repurposed from common rice sacks.

Christov-Bakargiev sees in Pich's reliefs analogues to the scorched paintings of Alberto Burri and the stitched reliefs of Lee Bontecou, as well as the gritty stuffs of Arte Povera. Pich generally concurs with the references, though he says they were not on his mind while he was painting. The new grids, constituting very expressive essays in chiaroscuro, can also be seen as alluding to the painterly techniques of old masters. Refusing to define themselves as either painting or sculpture, they exude a visual and material seductiveness heightened by their indeterminacy.

THE PATH TO THIS FORMAT has been a circuitous one, as Pich periodically loops back to earlier experiments, then moves forward again with a richer formal and thematic understanding. He associates this process with his father's tireless determination to make something out of nothing and to find opportunities in even the grimmest circumstances, thereby sparing Pich the worst of the horrors that threatened his childhood.

Pich was only four years old when the Khmer Rouge marched into the capital in early 1975. His father, Hang—successively a medical aide, a rice farmer, a metalsmith and a factory worker—strove indefatigably to keep the family from perishing in the rice fields, where officials regularly brutalized a population they had forcibly evicted from the cities. On the example of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, leaders in Democratic Kampuchea (as the country was briefly renamed) planned to triple the aver-

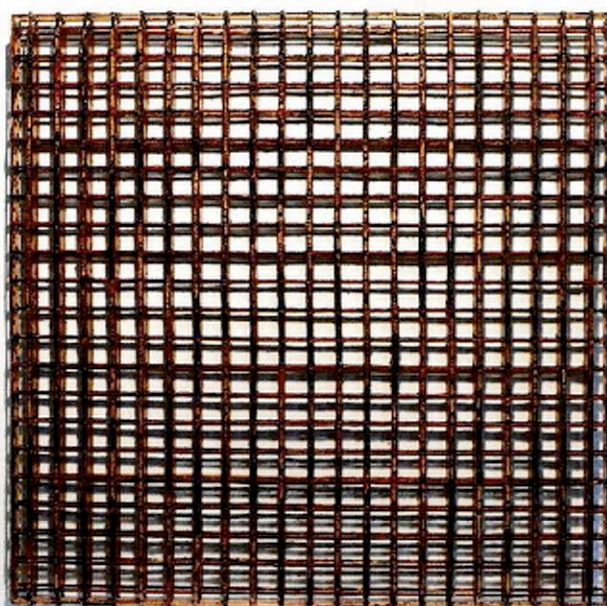
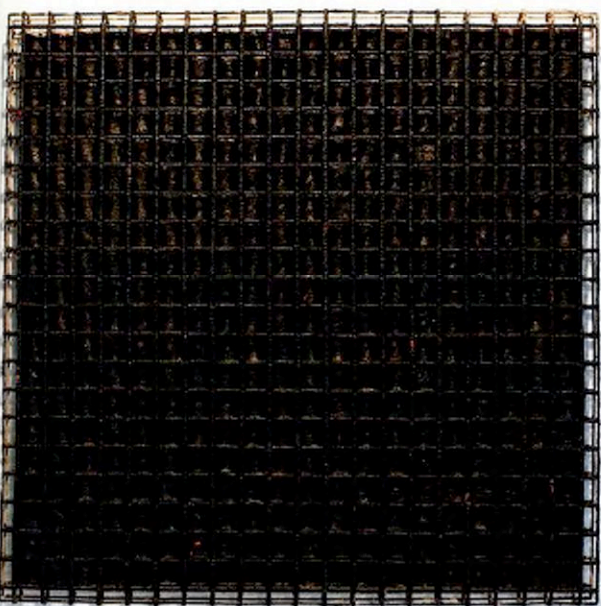
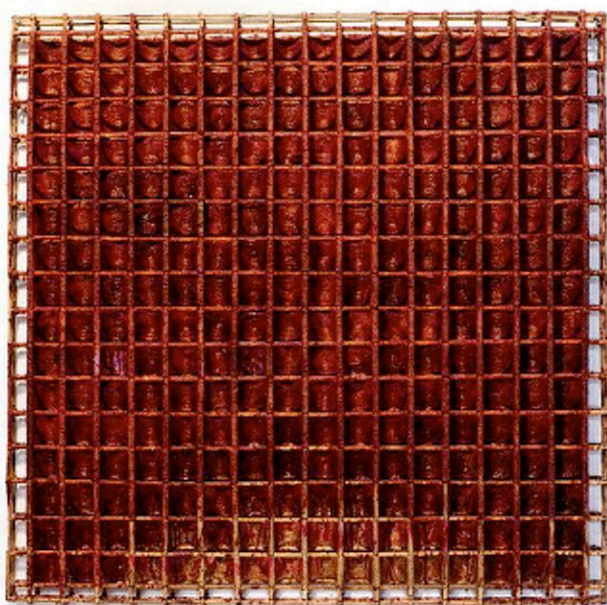
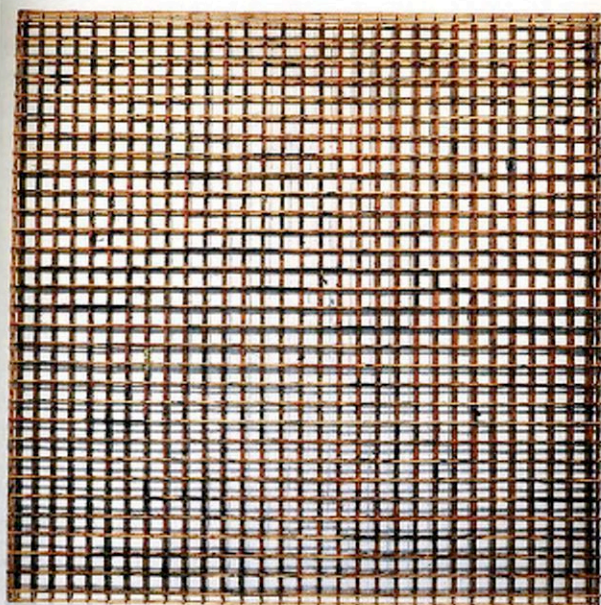
age rice crop within four years.⁶ After January 1979, when the Vietnamese liberated Phnom Penh, Pich's family (he is the eldest of five brothers) migrated to refugee camps in Thailand; five years later, they secured passage to the United States, where Pich attended high school before enrolling in pre-med studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. (Pich's father had once dreamt of becoming a doctor). Not long after taking up his undergraduate program, Pich found himself seeking out studio art classes and changing his major to suit new interests.

Graduate study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago introduced Pich to the quirky regional painter and collage artist Ray Yoshida (1930-2009), one of his most warmly acknowledged mentors. "A lot of what I am doing now," he says, "is what Ray was talking about." Yoshida was a widely influential teacher who helped shape the 1960s anti-Abstract Expressionist art of the Chicago Imagists. This might seem an unlikely lineage for Pich, given Yoshida's use of mass-media imagery and his "archival" practice of visually rhyming forms in nearly obsessive taxonomical compositions. Yet Pich's frequent nods to Yoshida make a certain sense, given the artists' shared penchant for organizing semiabstract or quasi-surreal components, as though taking an analogical inventory. In Pich's words:

[Yoshida] worked with images as explorations of form. He was interested in the things people make. He always suggested that there is more to something than what you can see, or what you can talk about, or what you know. There is always something that you don't know or are not aware of.

Often drawing a parallel with a child's invention of toys from everyday materials, Pich delights in making objects from common substances that partly resist him. The rattan must be cured in diesel fuel before it is ready for handweaving; the bamboo must be cleansed and tempered in boiling water. A sense of playful wonder informs Pich's porous abstractions evoking lungs, stomachs and other biomorphic motifs. "Morning Glory," his 2011 solo exhibition at Tyler Rollins, was rife with forms that recall this common plant, a ubiquitous foodstuff throughout Southeast Asia. Pich admires Martin Puryear, the meticulous furniture designers Poul Kjaerholm and George Nakashima, and such painstaking contemporaries as El Anatsui and Giuseppe Penone.

THIS ELEMENT OF CRAFT sets Pich apart from a host of younger Cambodian artists, some of whom initially clustered around him on his return to the country in 2003. The group, more recently formalized as the collective Stiev Selapak (Art Rebels), now centers on the Phnom Penh gallery and reading room SA SA BASSAC. The venue's artistic director, American curator Erin Gleeson, has brought several members to the Season of Cambodia artist residency program in New York this spring. Their mostly



Four reliefs, all 2012, bamboo, rattan, wire, burlap, beeswax and mixed mediums. Images this page, unless otherwise noted, courtesy H Gallery, Bangkok.

Clockwise from top left:

Fields of Ratanakiri No. 2, 2012, 79 by 79 by 3 inches. Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Untitled (Ochre Glow), 2012, 38 1/4 by 40 by 3 inches.

Untitled (Maroon Over Black Wall Relief), 47 1/2 by 48 by 3 inches.

Untitled (Night, Red Signals), 47 1/2 by 47 by 3 1/4 inches.

activist-style practices include photography, installation, film, performance and other time-based or site-specific modes.⁷ By contrast, Pich responds to social or political issues indirectly and poetically, as in his towering sculptural installation *Compound* (2011), a highlight of the Singapore Biennale in 2011. The work—resembling a cluster of skyscrapers or, in some passages, the shell casings of undetonated ordnance left over from Vietnam War-era carpet bombing—evokes the relentless development of Phnom Penh as a new regional business and tourism hub.

Speaking in his studio on the Mekong River in February, Pich seemed unusually reflective. He had just finished most of the work destined for the “Reliefs” show

at Tyler Rollins. Now, as nine assistants prepared to depart for the Lunar New Year holiday, he was looking forward to a six-week residency at the Civitella Ranieri Foundation in rural Umbria, where he would focus on drawing and self-portraiture.

Pich recalled the troubled period, beginning shortly after he completed his studies in Chicago in 1999, when he was desperately trying to become an artist. For several years he worked his way, sometimes feverishly, through poverty and intermittent progress. He was so poor during a brief period in Boston that he resorted to painting self-portraits on cotton bedsheets. Returning to Cambodia, he found himself newly frustrated. Short

Jayasurman VII,
2011, rattan,
plywood, burlap,
beeswax, charcoal
and spray paint,
66 by 36 by 22½
inches. Images this
spread courtesy
Tyler Rollins Fine
Art.



of proper working space and materials for the openwork sculptures he began making there, he even attempted to immolate the bulging quasi-circular *Cycle* (2004-08) to make room for others. (The work survived and belongs today to the Singapore Art Museum; two later versions are in "Cambodia Rattan.")

The shift to his signature technique came when Pich fashioned a bamboo armature for a three-dimensional painting of lungs, intending to cover it with Cambodian cigarette packs like a little dirigible. A visitor—Guy Issanjou, then director of the local French cultural center—pointed out that the artist was onto something. Motioning toward the armature on the floor, he suggested that Pich take time to contemplate it against the wall before masking it with the cigarette packs. (The artist admits sheepishly that he had originally intended a rather obvious comment on the hazards of smoking.) As he pondered it thus, Pich realized that the bamboo frame, eventually titled *Silence* (2004), resonated in space and "drew" multiple lyrical shadows, its sutured joints and sinuous contours speaking transparently of the artist's process.

Christov-Bakargiev recalls a similar experience during a visit to Pich's studio prior to Documenta. A bamboo-and-rattan base sat on the floor, apparently in anticipation of an imminent attachment. "But it's already there," she exclaimed to Pich, who was considering his next move.

Two years later, as Pich works his way back to painting through sculpture, one can only wonder what other surprises his grids hold in store. ○

1. "Cambodian Rattan" has no catalogue; for curatorial commentary, see John Guy, "Cambodian Rattan: Memory and Place in the Art of Sopheap Pich," *Orientations*, vol. 44, no. 4, May 2013.
2. Now home to the Tuol Sleng Memorial and Genocide Museum, the secret prison was once known by the code name S-21; its horrors have been chronicled in *The Killing Fields: Photographs from the S-21 Death Camp*, Douglas Niven and Chris Riley, eds., Santa Fe, Twin Palms, 1996, and Rithy Panh's 2003 documentary film *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*.
3. Vann Nath wrote a memoir, *A Cambodian Prison Portrait: One Year in the Khmer Rouge's S-21*, Bangkok, White Lotus, 1998; he also testified against his former jailer in 2009 at the start of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, still in session to this day.
4. Unless otherwise noted, all statements by Pich are from my conversations with the artist at his studio in Phnom Penh, Feb. 2-3, 2013.
5. E-mail to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "The Logbook," *DOCUMENTA* (13), p. 61.
6. See David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Chiang Mai, Silkwood Books, 4th ed., 2008, pp. 255-76.
7. These young artists—virtually all of whom were born in the 1980s—are vividly portrayed in the independent film *The Lotus That Went to the Sea*. Co-produced by Alta Buden and Francesca Sonara, and directed by Jeffrey Johnson, the documentary was awaiting official release at the time of this writing.

Pich's solo show "In Spite of Order" appeared at H Gallery, Bangkok, Dec. 6, 2012-Jan. 27, 2013. As part of the Season of Cambodia festival in New York, the artist exhibited his sculpture *Compound* at the Winter Garden of the Brookfield Place World Financial Center, Mar. 28-Apr. 18, and contributed life-size rattan puppets to the dance production *A Bend in the River*, by the Khmer Arts Ensemble, Phnom Penh, at the Joyce Theater, Apr. 9-14.



Morning Glory, 2011, rattan, bamboo, wire, plywood and steel bolts, 103 by 210 by 74 inches.