

Rattan to Revolutionary: "Collection+ Sopheap Pich" at SCAF Sydney

Language

English, Southeast Asia



Photo: Brett Boardman 2013

Collection+ Sopheap Pich 2013 (installation view) Photo: Brett Boardman 2013

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WHAT: "Collection+ Sopheap Pich"

WHEN: October 4 to January 14, 2013

WHERE: The Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 16 to 20 Goodhope Street, Paddington, Sydney.

WHY THIS SHOW MATTERS:

The "Collection+ Sopheap Pich" exhibition that is currently on show at the [Sherman Contemporary Art](#)

Foundation (SCAF) in Sydney might be small in size, but the carefully selected group of works on display provide an extremely informative insight into the celebrated Cambodian artist's unique and engaging oeuvre.

By exhibiting such a concise and beautifully presented survey of Pich's work, the "Collection+ Sopheap Pich" curators – a curatorium consisting of **Erin Gleeson**, Artistic director and co-founder of **SA SA Bassac**, Phnom Penh; **Dolla Merrillees**, SCAF's Associate director; and Dr Gene Sherman – have enhanced the nature of his practice and unveiled him as the progenitor of an exciting aesthetic language.

One of the main reasons that the exhibition is so successful and so insightful is the way in which it is curated. The SCAF Collection+ program is a series of focused presentations based around the work of an artist from **The Gene & Brian Sherman Collection**. For each presentation a curator is invited to work in partnership with SCAF's curatorial team to source works from national and international collections that are related to the one chosen from Gene & Brian's collection.

The "Collection+ Sopheap Pich" exhibition features ten pieces sourced from private and public collections in Australia as well as London, Cambodia, and France. The selected works range from the large-scale rattan and bamboo sculptures, for which Pich is best known, to a smaller abstract piece that alludes to a conceptual shift in his practice.

Although all the sculptures in the exhibition differ in size, shape, and subject, they all share the same grid structure that is a defining characteristic of Pich's oeuvre. The common features create a sense of harmony while the paradox of the organic shapes, natural materials, and architectural geometric grid construction initiates a fascinating dialogue between the traditional and the avant-garde.

Initial impression of the SCAF Collection+ show are dominated by the overwhelming presence commanded by Pich's works – a presence that echoes way beyond the mere physicality of each piece. The shadows cast on the wall by the superb lighting installation endow the sculptures with an awe-inspiring ethereality.

Much of Pich's practice is influenced by his connection with his homeland of Cambodia as well as his own personal history. In 2002 Pich moved back to Cambodia from the U.S. where his family resettled after fleeing the tyranny of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1984. The call of his country of origin was just too strong to resist.

Although he studied painting at university during his time in the U.S., Pich ended up feeling disconnected from the medium. "What was important at that time (after living in Cambodia for two years) was that I felt the act of painting itself didn't make sense to me anymore," Pich recalls. "I needed to find a way to work that could quiet my mind, something that was more physical in labour. When I was making that first group of sculptures, I felt I was accomplishing something."

His first three dimensional work, the lung-like "Silence," 2004, was the beginning of a series of sculptures that use the body organs as a starting point. "Silence" was also the work that essentially launched his international career. During a visit to his studio in Cambodia, the director of the **French Cultural Centre** in Phnom Penh at the time, **Guy Issanjou**, was immediately drawn to "Silence."

"He (Guy Issanjou) told me that my first three dimensional work, 'Silence,' from 2004, was the first modern sculpture he'd seen in Cambodia," says Pich. "His description of what it meant to him was something I was not expecting, but it was something I tried to understand for the weeks and months after. Through process and labor, I managed to resolve a lot of issues that I couldn't describe in words."

The body organ works led to the larger pieces such as his incredible 2 metre tall "Buddha." Pich jokes that he continues to make larger and more impressive sculptures to mask the lack of ideas underpinning his

practice. “If they look for ideas, they won’t find any,” he quips. Contrary to Pich’s remark, it is one of the smallest works in the show, “Untitled (Shadows and Light),” 2012, that is arguably the most exciting.

Measuring a comparatively tiny 30cm by 30cm by 6 cm, “Untitled (Shadows and Light)” is small in size but conceptually laden. What makes this work so remarkable is the harmonious confluence of contemporary aesthetic concepts with traditional methods and materials. The geometric pattern and monochrome tinted surface resonate with the pictorial language of Western geometric abstraction, while the organic materials and traditional methods of construction echo the traditions of Oriental folk art.

“Untitled (Shadows and Light),” 2012 and another work from Pich’s “Wall Reliefs” series entitled “Five Unequal Parts,” 2012 are two works in “Collection+ Sopheap Pich” that could be used as evidence to argue that Pich is the progenitor of a unique and exciting hybrid Pacific Rim aesthetic that links the legacy of Western geometric abstraction with the more “outsider” oriental folk art tradition of Cambodia.

Pich explains that he has been drawn to geometric abstraction since he was in school but until now hasn’t been able to find its place in his practice. “It comes from realizing that I’ve been using the grid as structure since my very first sculpture and this is an extension of that grid into another place that I am exploring,” says Pich.

Since he began the “Wall Reliefs” in 2011 for his presentation at **Documenta (13)** in 2012, Pich has continued to experiment with the canvas-like constructions. “I am experimenting with other colours such as, for the moment, blues and greens,” he reveals. “It is true that I am learning more and more about the potential of abstraction and the handmade.”

“Collection+ Sopheap Pich” is at Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation in Sydney until December 14. For more information visit the SCAF website [here](#)