

# ASIAN ART

THE NEWSPAPER FOR COLLECTORS, DEALERS, MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES • APRIL 2013 • £5.00/US\$10/€10

## Sopheap Pich

By OLIVIA SAND

With the continued interest in contemporary art from Asia over the past 20 years, there has been no lack of solo shows, or group exhibitions, presenting new generations of artists from the region. Despite these exhibitions and various biennales, Cambodia has somehow been left out. After a period of great political turmoil, it is only now that a contemporary art scene is slowly building locally. One artist who has gained international attention in recent years is Sopheap Pich (b. 1971 in Cambodia). Since returning to Cambodia after finishing his art curriculum in the United States, he has developed his own language primarily using local materials – rattan and bamboo – to create sculptures that are like drawings in space.

His participation at *Documenta 13* in the summer of 2012, as well as his current solo show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, are giving him the visibility to be seen and appreciated by a much broader audience. On the opening of his museum exhibition in New York, the *Asian Art Newspaper* spoke with Sopheap Pich about his trajectory and his latest works.



Sopheap Pich with *Cycle 2* in Cambodia. Image courtesy of the artist

### ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER:

Because of the political situation in Cambodia, you left the country for Thailand, then went to The Philippines, and subsequently to the US. A long journey.

**SOPHEAP PICH:** I will try to make it as short as possible! In 1979, we left Cambodia on foot to the refugee camps on the border of Thailand, and then we were fortunate enough to catch a refugee United Nations bus from one of those camps to a proper refugee camp in Thailand. We were there from 1979 until 1983. Since we had some sponsorship from somebody we knew in Amherst, Massachusetts, we got interviewed in 1983 and passed the interview. On our way to the US, we went through The Philippines where we stayed for approximately eight months, until it was time again for us to move on. We finally ended up in Massachusetts in July 1984.

The experience of the camp for a young child like myself was difficult. However, I had a chance to learn some English and also Khmer language. That was also where I went to school for the first time and had some freedom to play. In The Philippines, I had a childhood like I had in Cambodia before we had to leave, playing in the mountains, shooting birds, things like that. So I had my first real experience of freedom in The Philippines before

Continued on page 4



Sopheap Pich started using bamboo and rattan in 2004, two years after he returned to his native Cambodia

reaching the US, where there was a completely different accumulation of experiences.

AAN: As you mentioned, you started school rather late. As you had to catch up with the other students, how did you slowly drift towards art classes and subsequently art school?

SP: Actually, I always wanted to be an artist, but it was impossible, I was under pressure mainly from my father who wanted me to become a doctor, a scientist, or a pharmacist. Therefore, I pursued mathematics and science at school. I did not get to study art until my second year in college. It was kind of an accident: I had to declare a major. Once I had decided I was going to be a scientist, or whatever, I was not going to be able to take any art classes, so I took a painting class. My teacher said that if I wanted to take painting, I would have to declare it as a major. Then I told her I was simply going to change my major to art and that was it. I changed my major overnight.

AAN: While you were there, did you mainly focus on painting, or did you explore other media, too?

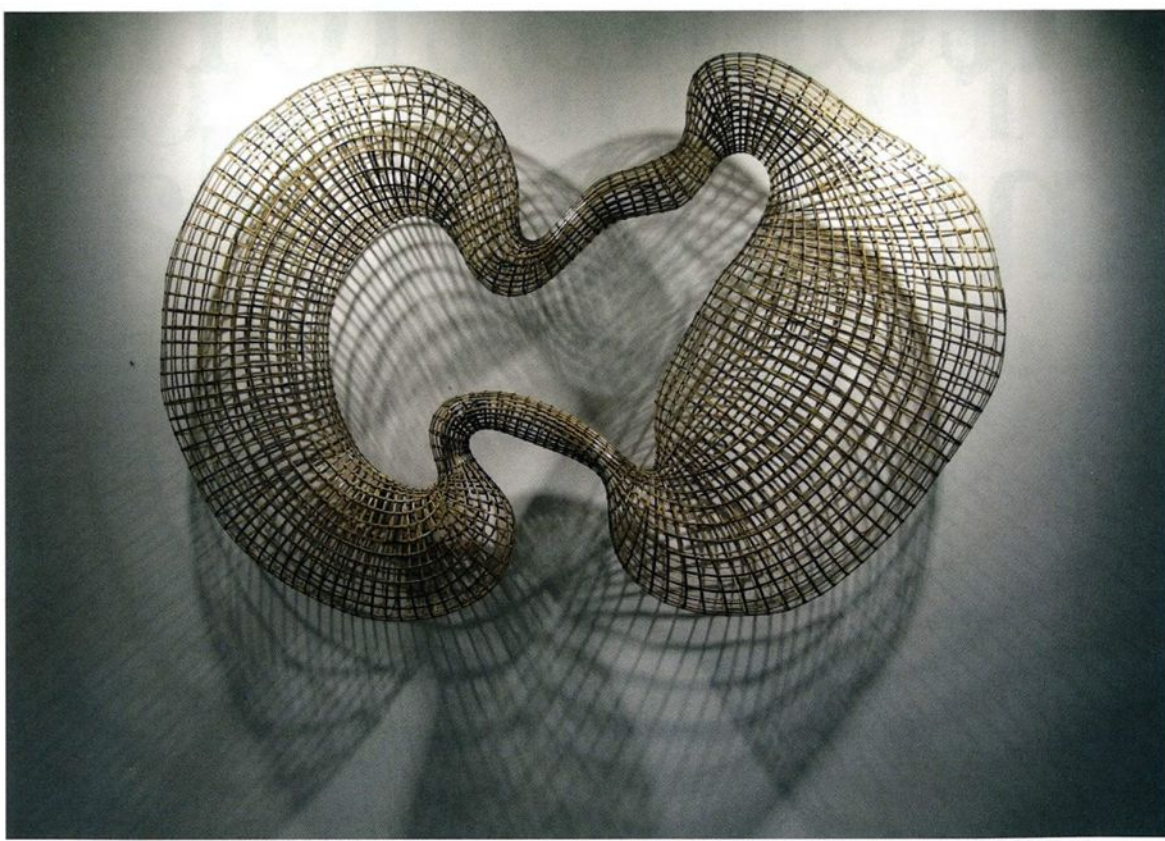
SP: No. I always wanted to be a painter. I loved painting all the way from the time I first saw painting when I was very young. When I took the painting class, I pretty much stopped thinking about everything else – I started failing my other classes. I painted all the time – at night, in class, out of class, I would paint in the summer. The one class I never took was sculpture.

AAN: While at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, your teacher, Ray Yoshida (1930–2009), was a great influence. Was it mainly the person, or his work, that had such a strong impact?

SP: Actually, his influence on me was through his teaching, more specifically his teaching style – he had a very Zen attitude towards everything. He was not a loud person, or a dictator. He did not tell you what to do, rather he would listen and look. He was just very



Morning Glory (2011), Cambodia, rattan, bamboo, wire, plywood, steel bolts, 533.4 x 261.6 x 188 cm, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Lent by Tyler Rollins Fine Art © The Artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art



Cycle 2m Version 3, (2008) Cambodia, rattan and wire, 203.2 x 134.6 x 30.5 cm. Lent by a private collection, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art © The Artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art

good at talking less, but whenever he would say something, it would always be something very pointed and relevant to your work. I still remember what he taught me 10, or 15, years ago. In addition, I think he was a great painter. I love his work, especially his later work. It is so full of energy, full of vibrancy. In a certain way, what I see in his work are the qualities that he pointed out in my work; I now see all this in his work.

AAN: Did he help you find a direction in your painting?

SP: Not necessarily. For some reason, I was always lost with painting. I consider myself a really terrible painter. This goes back to the time when I was in school, as I never really had time to learn how to draw and never really had a chance to dedicate myself to the task. I only did that after graduate school, after I came back home. Nevertheless, I was lucky because I had a residency at the Vermont Studio Center. I went there for a month and all I did was draw. I was drawing portraits, landscapes, and I learned how to draw at night in the dark. Being at school, you feel pressured because there are a lot of people there, and you are always behind. As a consequence, you always try to do more and experiment. I mainly just painted what I thought was painting for me. What Ray Yoshida taught me was that he would look at these paintings and say things like 'do you hear sound from your painting?', or 'when you look at that area, what do you feel, what do you

see, what do you sense?'. These phrases he used are the ones that still stick in my mind.

AAN: At this stage of your career, do you continue to paint at all?

SP: This relief work that I am doing now is in a way a return to painting. It is a combination of sculpture and painting, maybe now closer to painting than to sculpture. It is kind of a turn around. Maybe I understand something now that I never did before.

AAN: Could you envisage pursuing this course?

SP: I never know where I am going to go. I simply do the things that I need to do and then shift and move as things are called for. Who knows?

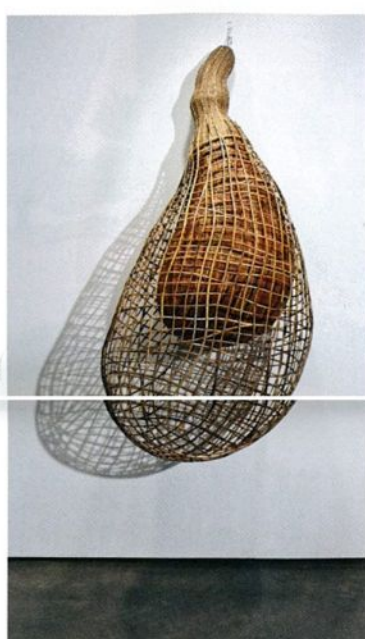
AAN: Back in 2002, what prompted you to leave the US and go back to Cambodia? In order to get their career started, most artists do it the other way around.

SP: I never thought I was ready to make it anywhere. I never thought that if I went to a better place, I was going to have a gallery. I never thought of showing in a gallery. I always knew that I was approximately five years behind. What I needed was time to just find my way in my own art. I was not thinking about a career. I was just thinking that if I knew what to do, then I would be all right at some point, but I was not thinking about exposure.

AAN: Once you got back to Cambodia, how did you decide to use rattan and bamboo. Had you been exploring this idea while in the US?

SP: In 2004, two years after I got back, I started using bamboo and rattan. It was really just an accident, I was not trying to make a sculpture. I actually only wanted to make one single sculpture, and I was not sure what to use, because I did not have with any tools or material. So the easiest thing was to get some rattan and just form something. My first sculpture was an accident.

AAN: As often is the case in an artist's career, one person was instrumental in orienting your work. In your case, was it the person affiliated with the French Cultural Center that was key in giving a new



Cocoon 2 (2011), rattan, wire, burlap, beeswax, earth pigment, 191 x 85 x 75 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art



Close-up of Cocoon 2. Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art

direction to your work.

SP: Yes. His name was Guy Issanjou, and he was the Director of the French Cultural Center in Phnom Penh. He was the one who in a way saved my life, and saved my career. He is actually one of those people who just came around at the right time at the right moment. He pointed out to me that one sculpture which was half done, which I thought was half done, was actually already finished. He is the one who pointed it out. Looking at it, he said he had never seen anything like it in Cambodia. I am forever grateful to him.

AAN: Is the rattan and bamboo treated before you use it?

SP: Initially, I used it as it came, but now I get it treated. Over the years, I did some research, and I found out the properties of the material. One needs to protect the material because if you do not, it may snap, break, or it may get eaten by insects. I boil it in oil, water and other things. So yes, you need to prepare it.

AAN: Does the material offer you the flexibility you are looking for?

SP: Rattan is very flexible, whereas bamboo has certain limitations. They work together well, because if you need it to be more flexible, you use rattan, and if you need it to be more rigid, you use bamboo. For the most part, I use them seamlessly together – combining them for whatever structure I might need.

AAN: For your sculptures, do you follow any kind of preparatory drawing?

SP: I start with an idea – and I may doodle some sketches. I never work with a plan because otherwise I get bored. Once I have an idea that I walk around with for a few weeks, or sometimes years, however, once I start with it, I let it take its own life. It is better that way because there are all these elements of surprise that happen along the way.

AAN: Do you feel you have gone as far with the medium as one can go? Would you consider combining the elements of bamboo and rattan with something else?

SP: Why not? I love marble, rocks, and stones. I am mainly interested in natural material, and I am always looking for things that excite me. I have some ideas where I will use another material, but I think it may have more to do with what kind of material is true to me. Also, you cannot do too much every year. You just move slowly. I am combining other things with it, but it is slow to make sense. I am not one of these people who can just throw things together, and it works. It really takes me a lot of time and thinking with just one small thing. I just do my work day after day, I work all the time, but very slowly.

AAN: What do you consider the main challenges working with these materials?

SP: I am so used to it now! Perhaps finding the right age of the bamboo. When you cut 10 trees, seven of them only may be usable. That can be challenging.

AAN: Within your sculptures, as due to the size of the grid, one element that is always present is the element of transparency. It allows the sculpture to play with light and shade, to make it visually more interesting.

SP: It is what the structure calls for. If you do too much, it does not look right. It is like a compositional language. I do not use rulers or other guides to measure my grids. I just use my fingers (two fingers or three fingers to divide the space). It is what the sculpture calls for, how strong should be, the materials, the space is quite instinctive.

AAN: We always envisage sculpture as something heavy standing on the floor. Your sculptures can be standing, laid on the floor, hung from the ceiling ... You have a lot of options.

SP: It is better that way. I think it is good to be adaptable and maybe that is a metaphor for life.

AAN: You frequently, whether directly or indirectly, seem to refer to 'destruction', which seems a serious parameter throughout your work. Is it very challenging to address that topic in an aesthetic manner without shocking people with something too drastic or over the top?

SP: You need to let certain things inside you come through. I also

Continued on page 5





Seated Buddha (2011), rattan, bamboo, wire, plywood, 256 x 220 x 110 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art

realise that I am here now, that I am living here, and that I am fairly happy here. I accept that my condition and that my country's condition is as it is. It is very hard to have any power to change in an idealistic kind of way. You can only change the things around you if you become a politician otherwise it is very difficult for you. What is important for me is to live here and make my work. I now have nine assistants and a cook. They all depend on me and we all depend on each other. We work together and we get things done. It seems to me that in life and in my lifetime, it is more important to get something done, and to leave something behind rather than be a politician. Sometimes people choose to focus on certain elements. I think my work is very comprehensive in terms of what goes on around me, whether it addresses the idea of destruction, rebuilding, sadness, beauty, struggle or resiliency.

AAN: How did the move towards the three dimensional paintings occur?  
SP: By accident as well. At the end in 2010 while working on my solo show in New York called *Morning Glory*, I had spent six months creating the big flower, *Seated Buddha*, and some other pieces that are all related and are all organic, I realised that I had been using the grid from the very first time I had made my first sculpture. I needed to ask myself about this grid – what it was. People always refer to my work as a grid. I had started by making a grid structure, but again this was very intuitive. It was a 60 x 20 metres – that is roughly as far as my arm can reach, so I could make this work by myself without having to rely on other people to help me flipping it around or turning it upside down. I wanted to empty all these subjects I had been thinking about as a starting point. So instead of thinking of a shape, like a stomach or a lung, I just wanted to make an anonymous grid shape. Obviously, it references painting right away because of that flatness. What is interesting is that while I was building them (we started with three), my assistants were tying the wire and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the artistic director of Documenta 13, came to

see me in my studio. She noticed right away, because we were working on it outside of the house (we were living in a house back then), and for about half an hour, she talked to me just about that one piece. This got me thinking about it and I think she played an important role in encouraging me.

AAN: As for the grid paintings, are you exploring them further?  
SP: The New York show at Tyler Rollins is a continuation of the Documenta show. I also had a show in Bangkok for the wall relief. For New York, there will be no free standing sculpture, but a concentration of these pieces.

AAN: Are the paintings included in the Tyler Rollins show taking the Documenta pieces one step further?  
SP: I guess there are some steps forward. One of the things is that there are a few works that are totally black where I just use charcoal, mix it with bees wax and resin. It is a solid black painting and it is almost monochrome. Underneath, there is the same structure, burlap, resin, bees' wax, dirt, etc. It is of course reminiscent of the Documenta pieces, but at the same time, it is pushing it a little bit further. Most of them are square – they are not rectangular anymore.

AAN: In a way, you seem to be moving more and more towards minimalism.  
SP: I think I have always been a minimalist in a certain way. My earlier sculpture had a minimalist kind of attitude, or minimalist tendency, but I am not able to get rid of subjectivity all together. There are still some kinds of stories behind the work. However, I think especially now, with the black relief works, they are getting very close to minimalism.

AAN: How do you relate to the show at the Metropolitan Museum. Is it a small retrospective?  
SP: Yes, sort of. I have 10 pieces on show, some of them I sent from Cambodia, some of them have never been seen outside of Cambodia, and some pieces are on loan from various collections in the US. These 10 pieces

When you see my work, you do not want to feel that it is heavy, even if it is completely black

speak of the journey from beginning to end.

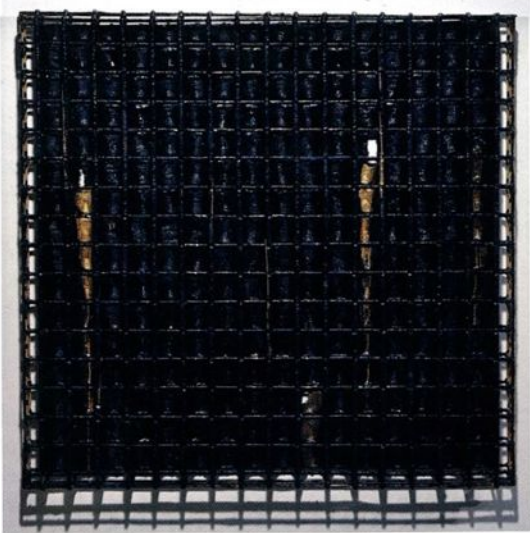
AAN: Since you have been back in Cambodia, how do you view the development of the art scene?  
SP: I think for the market to suddenly take off is like a pipe dream. In order to have an art scene, one needs to have a lot of good artists, and I think we are just beginning to mature. Right now, there are just a handful of people who are full-time artists and are mature enough to be shown. The number is increasing, but we are still a very young scene. I have been making sculpture since 2004 and there are only a few artists that are on the same level in terms of being known, the rest are very young. However, they are developing but they need time, and I do not think the market is going to catch up, at least not any time soon. For now, we will continue to show our work abroad, and we will continue to be making a living by selling our work outside the country.

AAN: Have you seen some improvements in the contemporary

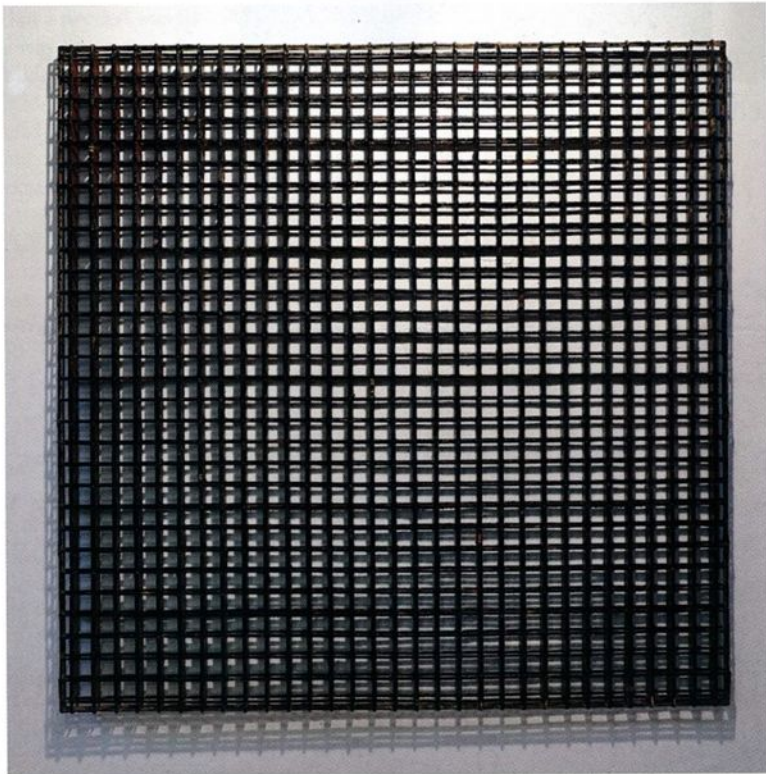
art scene in Cambodia?  
SP: The art scene is changing and it is not the same as it used to be. There are more locals attending openings now than there used to be. Before, there used to be only expats. There are also more people from the schools coming and, in general, more energy from the general public. I do not think that anybody is buying any art yet, but they are beginning to get interested, especially the young.

AAN: Following your shows at The Met and your New York gallery show, are you preparing other projects?  
SP: I am actually going to take a break and go to Italy on a residency at Civitella Ranieri in Perugia from the end of June to the end of July, and I am very excited about that. I mainly want to make some drawings, some observational drawings, some portraits, and things like that. I want to take a break from art, and get back to the basics a little bit, draw and read. When you are away and you travel, you leave your troubles at home, so hopefully I can be there and have a peaceful time.

AAN: One of the things driving your work is playfulness.  
SP: What I mean by playfulness, is not being like a child, it is about energy. When you see my work, you do not want to feel that it is heavy, even if it is completely black. What I want to do is to be uplifting. My work aims to get people really energized. I want to get their blood flowing. In a way, that is being playful. It is serious, but also energetic.



Luminous Falls (Four Falls), 2012, bamboo, rattan, wire, burlap, plastics, damar resin, beeswax, charcoal, copper dust, 100 x 100 x 8 cm. Courtesy Lim Sokchan Lina, the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art



Embers and Dust No. 1 (2012), bamboo, rattan, wire, burlap, plastics, damar resin, beeswax, charcoal, dirt, 200 x 200 x 7 cm. Courtesy Lim Sokchan Lina, the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art

AAN: What were the decisive moments of your still young career as an artist?  
SP: Finding sculpture was the biggest one of all. I do not think anything else can match that. I am really blessed that somehow it found me. I attract people who want to do things that are good for me, people who help me (dealers, assistants, friends). I do not know how this came about, or what I have done right in my past life, but I have been very fortunate to know a lot of good people.

Years ago, people kept asking me whether I was tired of doing the same thing. I answered that I was probably going to go on doing this until I died and that I certainly had not grown tired of it. I feel that I somehow own it and claim it. I am enjoying it, I still a struggle in a number of ways, but it is all my own. I am struggling with a painting right now, you have got to wrestle with the medium. It is not something that you wake up with in the morning. However, sometimes you wake up and you know exactly what you want to do and it works – that is part of the pleasure, too. With my first black painting, I was scared! I had all these questions around my head, a black painting, non-objective, abstract, minimalist, kind of Frank Stella like, where is this going to go? And a black painting .... Who looks at a black paintings anymore? When I actually decided to make it, it really showed me something else, and I could not believe that it worked! You hit these high points sometimes that open the world to you, but then it closes in again and you move on to the next thing, the next struggle. So you get to enjoy it for about a week!

AAN: Is collaboration important as your pieces are very time consuming?  
SP: There is a strong collaborative spirit with the team I work with. Often, they do not get the recognition they deserve – and they probably will not get it. I would be able to do the kind of work that I do if I did not have the help from my team.

AAN: Are these people that you have trained?  
SP: None of them came from an school background. Most of them never had any education past a few grades at schools. Most of them are from poor families, they are people who had run into bad luck. They are not criminals, or anything like that but they did not have the parents support them. I do not go around looking for people, they come and look for me. They are untrained in the same way I am untrained in many ways. We just try to figure things out together. They are able to put these structures together. It is a staggering amount of work from beginning to the end. A lot of help and a lot of work. It also takes a lot of patience to do this kind of art, which is something people do not discuss. I still do the work, although I do do all of it myself.

Cambodian Rattan:  
The Sculptures of Sopheap Pich can be seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, until July 17 and Sopheap Pich: Relief runs at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, from 18 April to 14 June. From April through May, New York is hosting major celebrations of Cambodian arts and culture, more information at <http://seasonofcambodia.org>.