

MAY 2013

US\$15.50/€12/£9.50/HK\$95

ORIENTATIONS

THE MAGAZINE FOR COLLECTORS AND CONNOISSEURS OF ASIAN ART



Tipu Sultan's Murals

Comprehending Indian Composite Paintings

'Dunhuang: Buddhist Art at the Gateway of the Silk Road' at China Institute Gallery

Pure Land: Inside the Mogao Grottoes – ALiVE's Digital Recreation of Cave 220

The Art of Sopheap Pich at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

East Asian Galleries at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Chinese Export Paintings of Tartary at the National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden

CAMBODIAN RATTAN:

Memory and Place in the Art of Sopheap Pich

John Guy

The American-trained contemporary Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich lives and works in Phnom Penh (Fig. 1). Born in Battambang province in Cambodia's northwest in 1971, Pich was nine years old when his family escaped a country traumatized by five years of Khmer Rouge rule, first to refugee camps along the Thai border in 1979, then resettling in the US in 1984. He completed his formal education with a Master of Fine Arts in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2002, he made the decision to return permanently to Cambodia, where he was able to re-invent his art through the exploration of indigenous materials, the rattan and bamboo that are ubiquitous to the countryside in which he was born and which form part of his earliest memories.

In his native Cambodia Pich found a means of expression that was not only resonant of place, but which broke with conventional categories of fine art making, employing the materials of the villager to express his engagement with formal conceptual ideas. Almost subconsciously at first, Pich was positioning his art in a post-colonial critique of notions of traditional art, symbolized in Cambodia by a veneration of the monumental arts of the Angkorian period as the apogee of Khmer culture. The French legacy of Beaux-Arts remained strong in both Cambodia and Vietnam post-independence, and it remained for a new generation of artists to challenge this vision. Pich's international training positioned him to be in the vanguard of this movement. His concerns are formal, metaphorical and often ironic, and they singly fail to conform to inherited

concepts of fine art in Cambodian society. His shift away from painting and print making after 2002 was a part of this realignment, re-thinking the appropriateness of Western categories of art to address issues in Cambodia today. Indeed, by employing the skills, tools and materials of village life, Pich's works actively subvert traditional notions of art making, and assert in its place a subaltern vision of art

in contemporary society. Grafted to this is a growing socio-political dimension, as Pich engages in dialogue with issues at the heart of Cambodian society, as witnessed in many of the works discussed in this article.

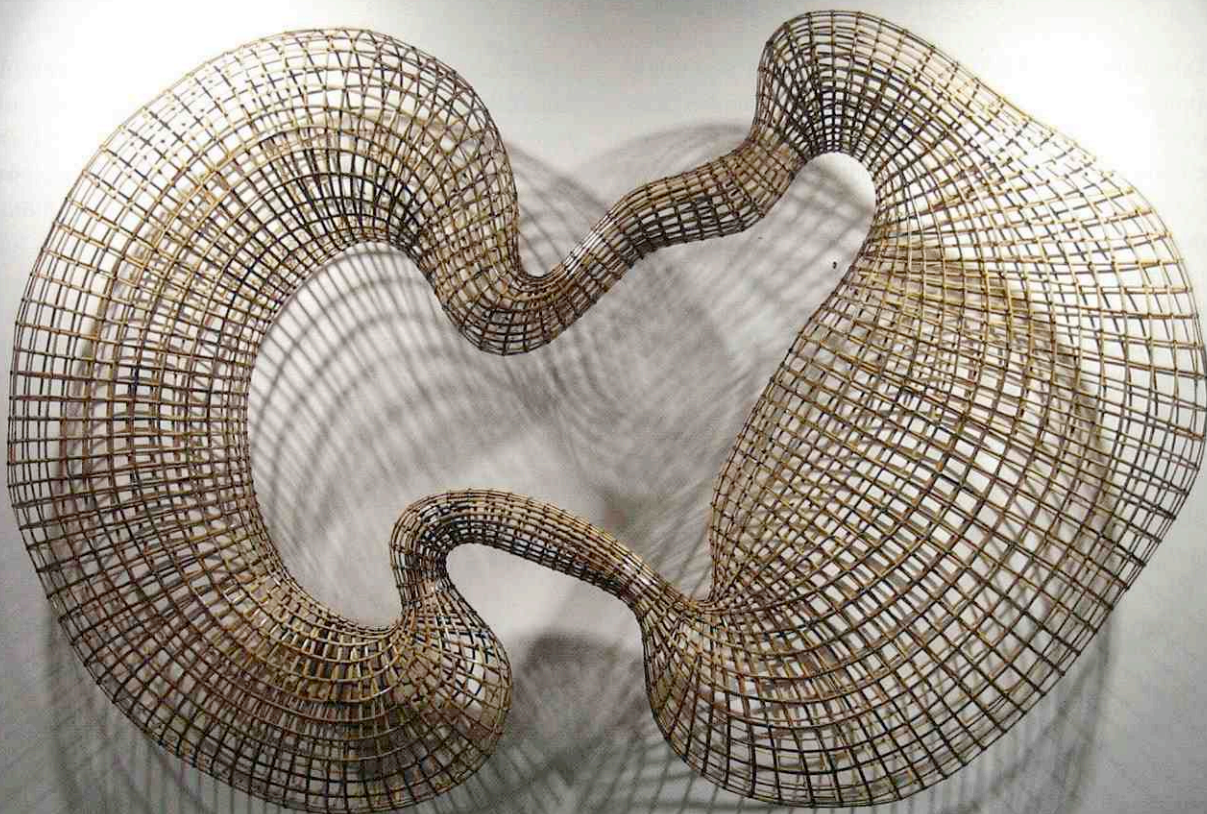
The return to Cambodia was pivotal in Pich's discovery of his current media of choice: rattan and bamboo. Within two years of his return to Cambodia, Pich's first solo exhibition working in these media, *Rotin/Pdao* (French and Khmer for rattan) (Gleeson,

2005), was held in Phnom Penh, at the Centre Cultural Français. This exhibition showcased a major new theme Pich was to continue to explore over the following decade: the imagery of human anatomy, exterior and internal. The *Cycle* series was born here, as were *Ripple* and *Echo*, all bold, large-scale works that draw their inspiration from body parts.

Since 2004, Pich has worked exclusively in rattan and bamboo, adding variously fibres (recycled burlap), earth pigments, wax and resin, and found objects. He selects his bamboo from great stands in the countryside, chosen for their maturity and size, from as far away as Kampong Cham province. The finest quality rattan thrives in the wild



(Fig. 1) Sopheap Pich, Phnom Penh, 2009
(Photograph courtesy of the artist)



(Fig. 2) *Cycle 2, Version 3*
By Sopheap Pich (b. 1971), 2008
Rattan and wire
203.2 cm x 134.6 cm x 30.5 cm

mountains where harvesting it is both hard and dangerous, and this he purchases from rattan merchants. He gathers his earth pigments on trips to different provinces of the country, each with its distinctive colouration.

Bamboo and rattan are integral to everyday life in rural Cambodia, used for all manner of construction, from housing and baskets to fish traps and waterwheels. Pich constructs and weaves long ribbons of bamboo and rattan, secured with tight twists of wire at their intersections. The manner in which he employs these materials – splitting and shaving them with axes and knives until they are of a quality to serve as the graphic lines of his sculpture – combines his training as a painter with the spatial conceptualization of a sculptor. Pich ‘draws’ in space with these materials, creating three-dimensional objects, which are largely defined by their graphic character. The fluidity of the parallel lines of rattan, rippling like waves radiating in a pond, trigger sets of dynamic interplays in these sculptures which would be hard to achieve working in a more solid medium. The enveloped spaces of these sculptures, and the voids, are at the heart of their success as works that breathe. His sculptures move between abstraction and representation, the open form

construction, simultaneously solid and ethereal, allowing the free circulation of air through their forms. The presence of these works is extended beyond their physical form by the play of the shadows they cast.

Much of Pich’s inspiration comes from human anatomy, including organs – lungs, stomach, intestine, heart – a set of imagery which draws much from his first year of higher education in the US, as a pre-med student. These themes are most fully explored in the *Cycle* series (2004-11), formal abstract linear constructions that allude to human anatomy. *Cycle 2, Version 3* (2008) is one of the most refined of the series juxtaposing two life forms, one perfectly formed, the other distended and irregular, the two united by intestinal conduits (Fig. 2). It is a metaphorical essay on the generational passing of life from the old to the young, and of irrevocable bonding. As with all of Pich’s sculptures, the viewer’s first response is to the form itself; only then do memories of the familiar start to crystalize in the mind. Pich’s other agendas are not overt, but rather advanced as if by stealth, insinuating themselves into the viewer’s mind.

An early theme in his work, the human heart, recurs in *Caged Heart* (2009) and in the series titled *Jayavarman VII*

(Fig. 3), titled after a 12th century Khmer king seemingly motivated by Buddhist compassion, fondly remembered as the builder of hospitals, rest houses, reservoirs, and roads for the benefit of his people. The symbolic heart-shaped form has a more immediate inspiration – the clay investiture casing around the void of lost-wax moulds, which the artist saw in foundries in the countryside casting tourist-market portraits of Jayavarman VII. The glass cups integrated into this sculpture are used in traditional Khmer medicine – still practised today – for drawing out poisons from the body. Popular memories of the Angkorian healing king and contemporary medical practices meet in this conceptual portrait.

Today Pich speaks movingly of his life experiences, many as a child in Khmer Rouge-governed Kampuchea

in the later 1970s. Much of the imagery he employs is culturally specific and infused with his memories of those years. Most poignant perhaps is *Buddha 2* (2009), Pich's first venture into a figurative representation of his experiences (Fig. 4). The reference is specific and his description of the work's genesis haunting:

Buddha 2 was born out of a short journey my family took on foot from a Khmer Rouge village to the centre of Battambang, the province of my birth. The Buddha was to symbolize a temple called Wat Ta Mim. My family built a hut across the street. I used to go past the temple ground every day with a buffalo to the rice field several hundred metres away. I would occasionally walk inside the temple hall to see bloodstains on the floor, ceiling and walls, bloodstains that looked like it had been sprayed with a toy gun.

Where there used to be the normal Buddha sculptures, there were just piles of broken things I couldn't see. I was afraid to look in the dark.

This and other works quickly move from personal memory rooted in place and time to becoming universal statements about the intersections of life and art. Pich recalls that as a child he saw for the first time incongruous collections of objects – things left over from the war, scattered over the roads and fields. The remains of war emerges only subtly in his work, as in *Raft* (2009) where the pontoon platform resembles bomb casings, and led to a study of another form of destruction: pollution of the environment. *Junk Nutrients* (2009) (Fig. 5) is a statement on pollution – the war on nature. Its constricted intestinal form excreting contaminants onto the floor at the feet of the viewer is a statement made all the more potent by the symbolism of the materials employed – the litter ('junk') the artist collected from the shore of Beng Kok (Reed Lake), near Phnom Penh. One of the city's poorest neighbourhoods, it was also the location of the artist's studio until 2008, when developers forcibly backfilled the lake and requisitioned the land for skyscraper development, displacing some 3,000 families (Ng, 2012; Ly, 2012, p. 212). The traditional houses, raised high on stilts to accommodate seasonal fluctuations in water levels, were swept away to be replaced by modern high-rises on pylons, as memorialized in *Raft*.

Another seam Pich explores is the



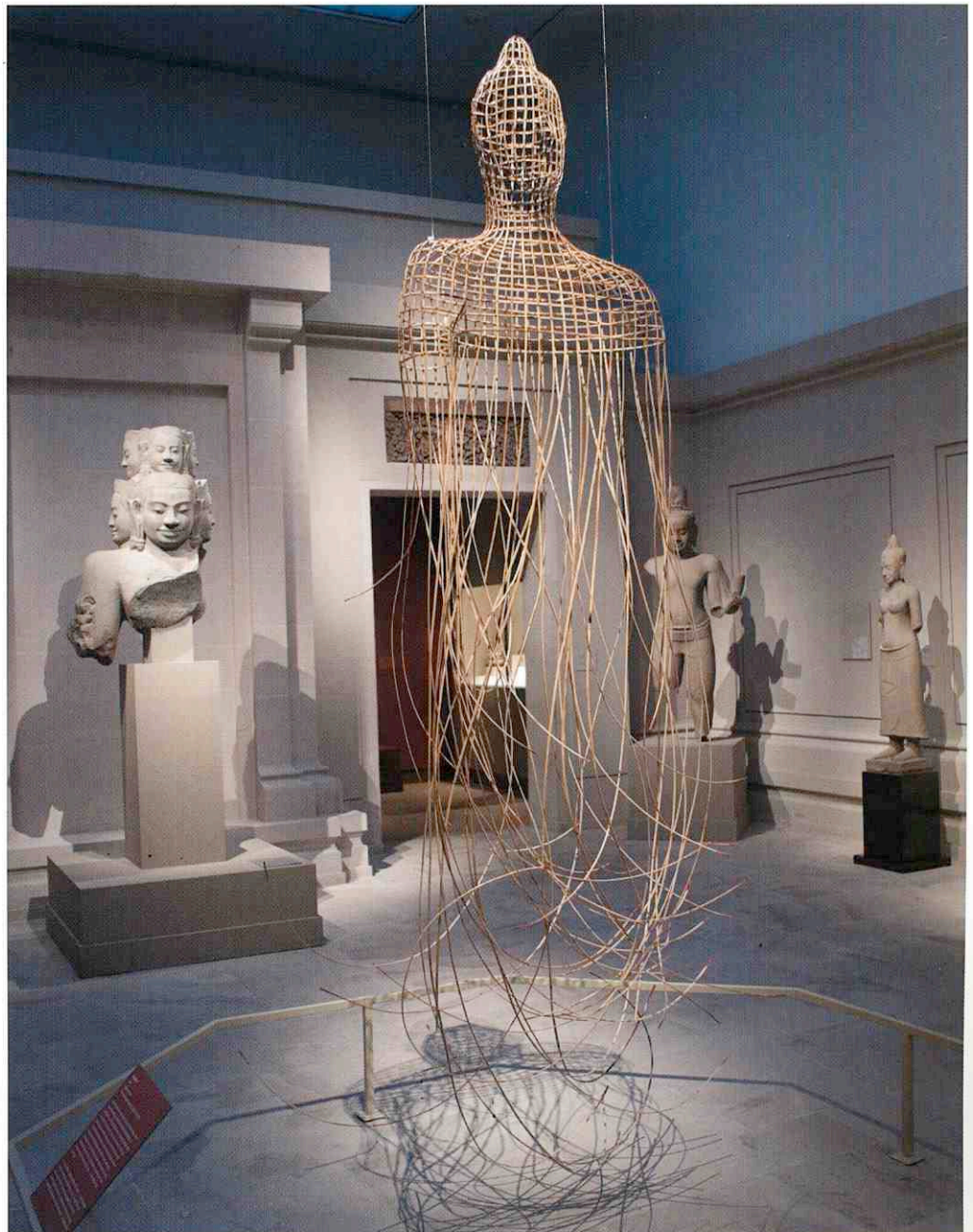
(Fig. 3) *Jayavarman VII*
By Sopheap Pich (b. 1971), 2011
Rattan, plywood, burlap, glass, beeswax, charcoal and spray paint
Height 167.6 cm, width 92.7 cm, depth 57.2 cm
Museum of Art and Design, New York

organic nature of plant life, as witnessed by the *Stalk* series, based on the self-replicating nature of bamboo, and most spectacularly expressed in the menacingly serpentine form of *Morning Glory* (2011) (Fig 6). The twisted vegetal forms of the ubiquitous aquatic plant give little promise of the beautiful form of the flower's trumpet. Beyond the beauty of form are the experiences that inform and inspire them, here his childhood memories of Khmer families surviving near-famine conditions by boiling morning glory for nourishment. Thus, *Morning Glory* embodies both celebratory and bitter memories of a family's survival, whilst being a transcendent homage to nature.

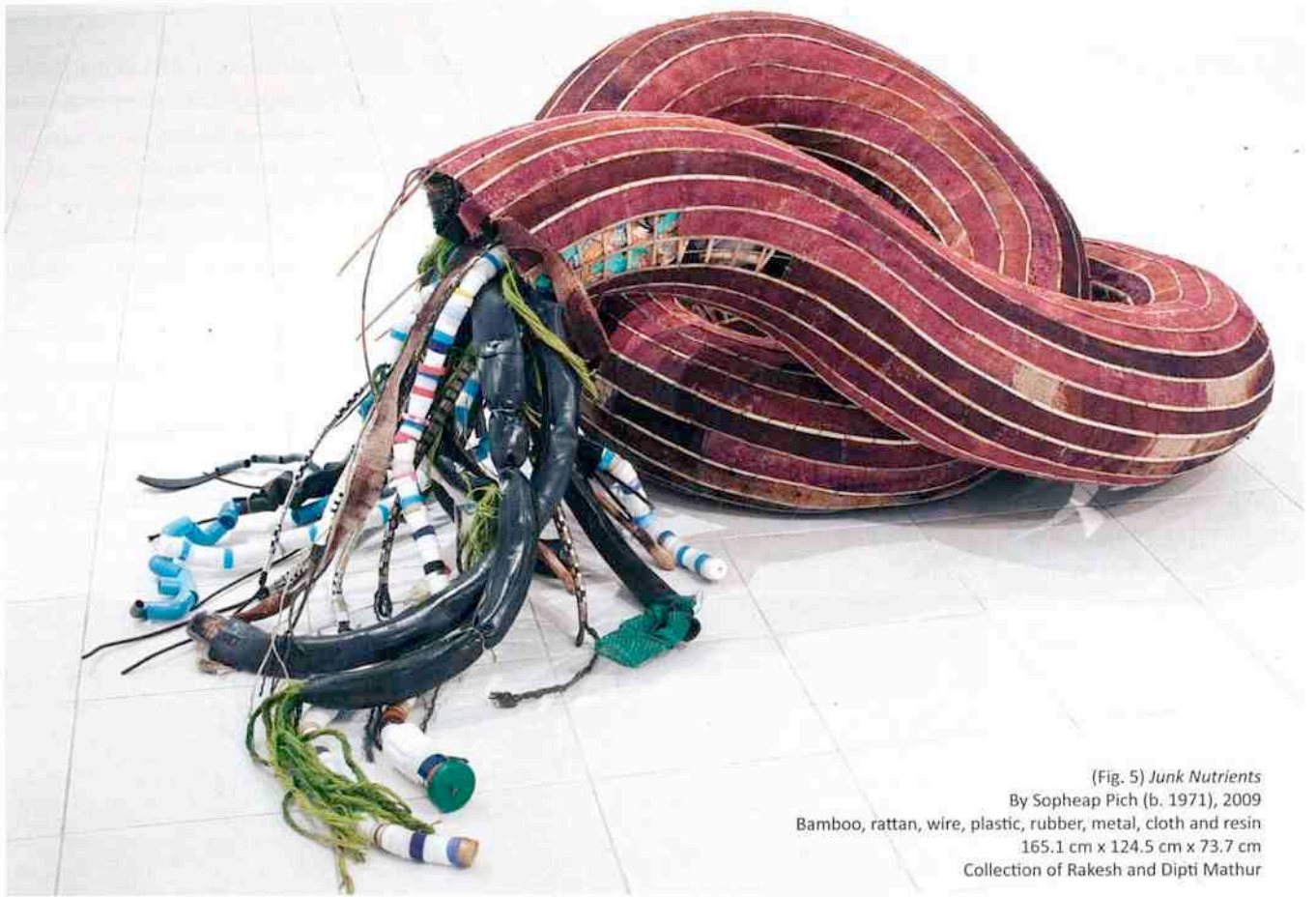
Both in medium and form Pich's art consciously embodies the artist's memories to evoke the spirit of place. The integration of material elements of the Cambodian

landscape – bamboo, rattan, earth pigments, damar resin, wax, charcoal – add to the poignancy of this imagery, most explicitly in his recent series of landscape paintings, the grid frame contours of the *Relief* and *Ratanakiri* series (Fig. 7). The earth pigments Pich sources on his travels in rural Cambodia are blended with warmed wax and resins and applied to the bamboo grid, so creating a three-dimensional landscape. The result is an evocation of rural Cambodia – variously beautiful, stark and sometimes scorched. The openwork grids that form the foundation for both of these series are deceptively simple structures, displaying the reductionist approach to form of the American minimalists exemplified by Carl Andre (b. 1935), an artist with whom Pich shares many core values, and whose work he admires.

Pich and his studio assistants now work at a large



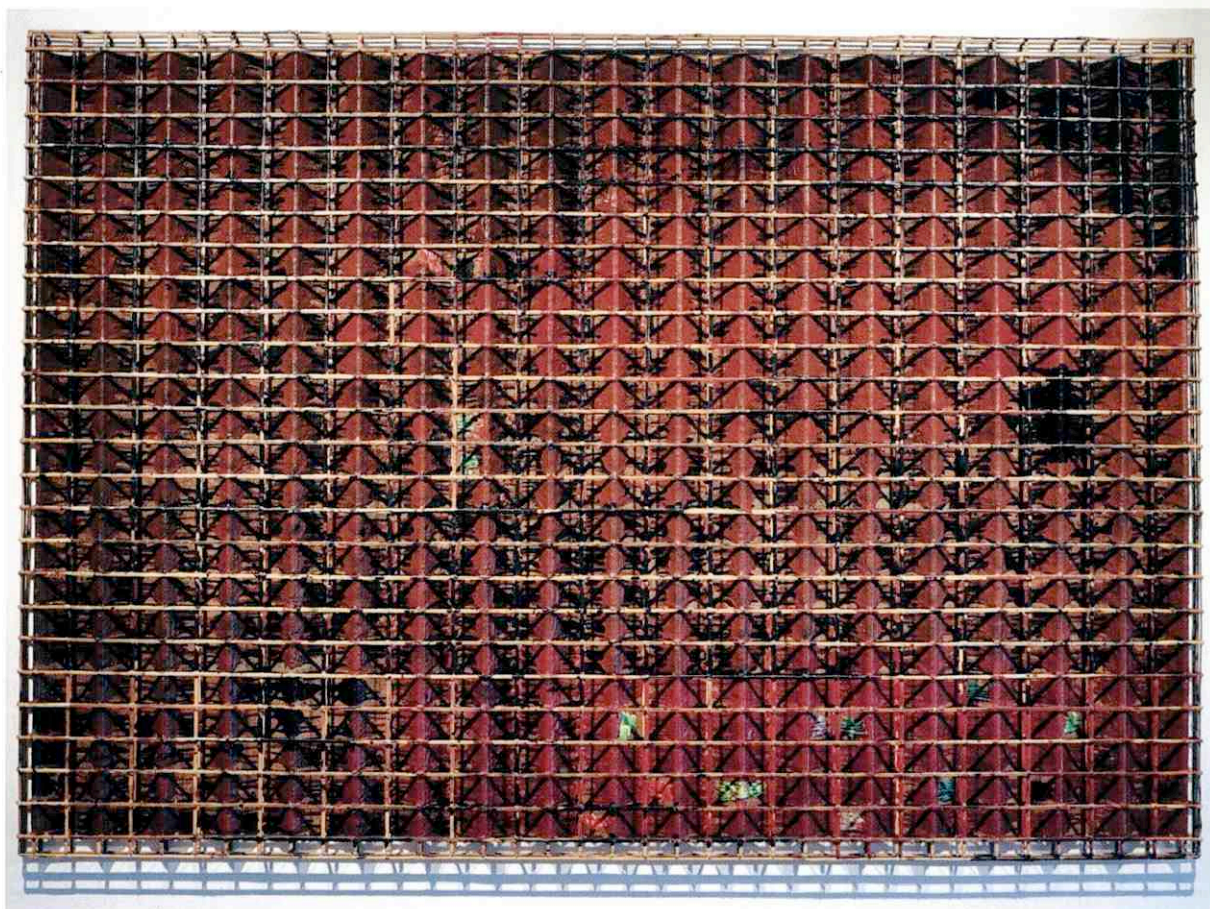
(Fig. 4) *Buddha 2*
By Sopheap Pich (b. 1971), 2009
Rattan, wire and dye
Height 254 cm, width 73.7 cm,
depth 22.9 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Purchase, Friends of Asian Art, 2012
(2012.349)



(Fig. 5) *Junk Nutrients*
 By Sopheap Pich (b. 1971), 2009
 Bamboo, rattan, wire, plastic, rubber, metal, cloth and resin
 165.1 cm x 124.5 cm x 73.7 cm
 Collection of Rakesh and Dipti Mathur



(Fig. 6) *Morning Glory*
 By Sopheap Pich (b. 1971), 2011
 Rattan, bamboo, wire, plywood and steel bolts
 533.4 cm x 261.6 cm x 188 cm
 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
 Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund, 2013



(Fig. 7) *Ratanakiri Valley Drip*

By Sopheap Pich (b. 1971), 2012

Bamboo, rattan, wire, burlap, beeswax, damar resin,
earth pigment, charcoal, plastics and oil paint

Height 160 cm, width 231.1 cm, depth 7.6 cm

factory-like building at Prek Leap, a village on the rural outskirts of Phnom Penh on the banks of the Mekong. His chosen media, techniques of construction, and the cultural resonances of the forms he creates have made Pich's art accessible to a new generation of Cambodian viewers. The marriage of traditional materials with new forms represents a major advance in contemporary art thinking in Cambodia, transcending conventional idioms. Nor has Pich been shy to explore the literal and the historical, themes descriptive of his – and by extension the people of modern Cambodia's – own life experiences and shared memories. As the artist says: 'It is good if these sculptures make [the Cambodian] people aware that there are shapes in their environment. It encourages them to use their memory.' That his work is acquiring international recognition is a mark of its maturity and universality, extending categories of thinking about art in contemporary Southeast Asia and beyond.

John Guy is The Florence and Herbert Irving Curator of The Arts of South and Southeast Asia at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Sopheap Pich has exhibited widely in Asia, Europe and the US since the late 1990s, most recently at Documenta13 in Kassel, Germany

The exhibition *Cambodian Rattan: The Sculptures of Sopheap Pich*, on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York until 6 July 2013, has been made possible by the support of Cynthia Hazen Polsky and Leon B. Polsky. All works in the exhibition are displayed on The Metropolitan Museum of Art website at www.metmuseum.org, with text by John Guy and label statements by the artist.

Unless otherwise stated, photographs are courtesy of Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Selected bibliography

Gregory Galligan, 'Woven into History', *Art in America*, vol. 101, no. 5 (May 2013): 134-41.

Erin Gleeson, 'Sopheap Pich: Rotin/Pdow', *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 44, 2005.

Boreth Ly, 'Of Trans(national) Subjects and Translation: The Art and Body Language of Sopheap Pich', in Nora Taylor and Boreth Ly, eds, *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*, New York, 2012: 117-29.

Elaine Ng, 'Where I Work. Sopheap Pich' (interview), *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 78, 2012: 181.

Nora Taylor, 'The Sublime Grows in Muddy Ponds', in Tyler Rollins Fine Art, *Morning Glory: Sopheap Pich*, New York, 2011.

Tyler Rollins Fine Art, *The Pulse Within. Sopheap Pich*, exhibition catalogue, New York, 2009.

—, *Morning Glory: Sopheap Pich*, exhibition catalogue, New York, 2011.