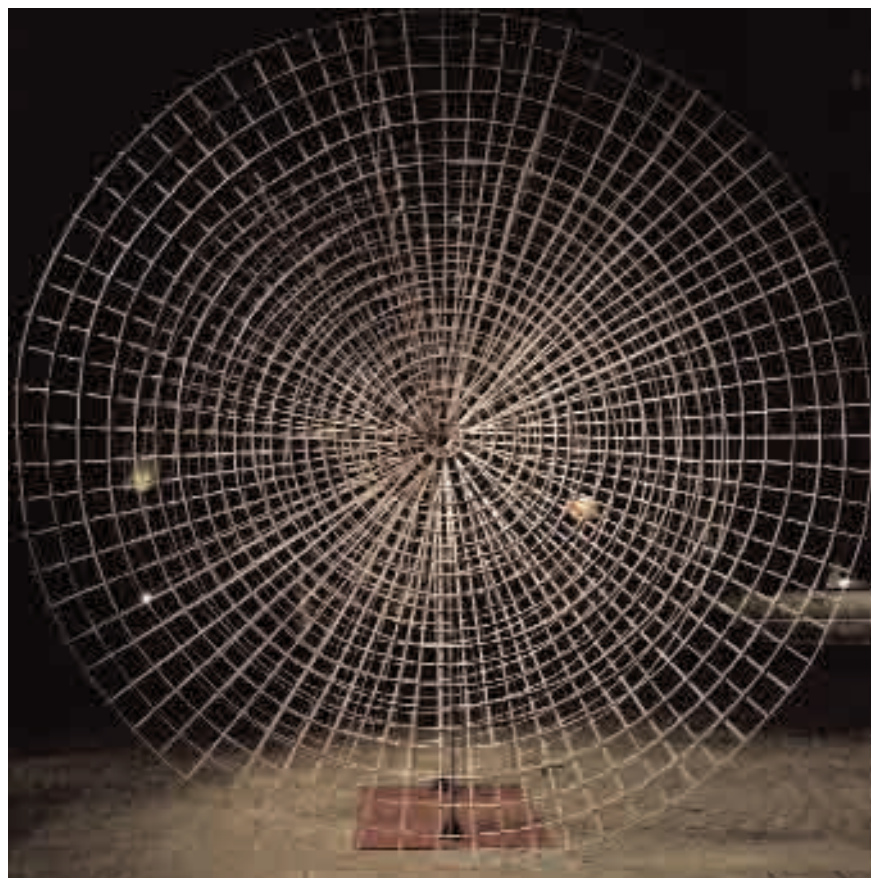




Sopheap Pich



RETURN TO CAMBODIA

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN

Opposite: *Compound*, 2011. Bamboo, rattan, plywood, and wire, 450 x 340 x 320 cm. Above: *Double Funnel*, 2008. Bamboo, metal, and wire, 163 x 163 x 89 cm.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Sopheap Pich, now living and working in Phnom Penh, returned to his native country at the end of 2002, after living and studying in America for close to 20 years. Born in 1971 in Koh Kralaw, a small rice-farming town in northwestern Cambodia, he spent his early childhood moving among towns and villages in his province during the regime of the Khmer Rouge (from 1975 to 1979). Then, in 1979, he and his family fled the country, staying in Thai refugee camps before immigrating to America. His family settled in central Massachusetts in 1984, and Pich received his BFA in painting from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1995 (before that, in 1993, he traveled to Mexico and Guatemala to photograph Mayan ruins, and he spent 1993–94 at the École Nationale d'Art in France). In 1999, Pich earned an MFA in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Although Pich was trained as a painter and continued to paint during his first two years in Cambodia, he began making sculptures there in 2004. Since then, his rise as an artist has been meteoric, with shows in Singapore, Kunming (China), Bangkok, Norway, and New York. In 2009, he had his first New York solo exhibition at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, which received critical acclaim. That same year, he was featured in two of Asia's most prestigious art events: the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, in Fukuoka, Japan; and the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, Australia. Additionally, Pich completed a major outdoor sculptural installation at King Abdullah University in Saudi Arabia. He is now considered one of Cambodia's leading artists.

Making use of bamboo and rattan, Pich demonstrates a remarkable ability to synthesize abstract and representational approaches in woven, transparent sculptures. When he first turned to sculpture, he felt that he needed to make something more substantial; he has said that his discovery of simple materials felt intuitively correct—as though he had worked with bamboo and rattan while a child in the countryside. As a result, the

Caged Heart, 2009. Wood, bamboo, rattan, burlap, wire, dye, and metal farm tools, 51 x 46 x 47 in.

creation of woven sculptures seems eminently real to him. Pich, whose work clearly references folk art, explores the transparency of his chosen materials not only as a means of truth in art, but also as a visual metaphor for candor and sincerity in government. The idea of a *transparent* democracy looms large in his mind: as a young child, he experienced the grief of totalitarian rule at the hands of the Khmer Rouge; now that he has returned to Cambodia, he sees his



country slowly healing from the depredations of the 1970s. His work stands in alignment with traditional Cambodian arts, but at the same time, it offers a complex metaphorical resilience that speaks to contemporary art training outside Southeast Asia, as well as survival and endurance in a country taken over by ideology.

One of the more powerful liberations that Pich has occasioned is personal in nature. His family ran a gas station and amenities store while they lived in Amherst (his parents have since moved to North Carolina), and Pich was expected to help in the business. Instead, he studied art and, even more independently, established a studio back in his home country. By his own account, he developed by working against expectations. It wasn't until he had been in Phnom Penh for a year and a half that he became involved in the art scene there. Serving as a tutor for a small group of students, he hoped to help young artists by contributing his knowledge and skills (he remains interested in helping artists gain knowledge and experience). Increasingly, Pich is making work that stands for a new generation of Southeast Asian artists. Phnom Penh is the center of his life because

***Raft*, 2009. Bamboo, rattan, wood, wire, and metal bolts, 89 x 177 x 52 in.**

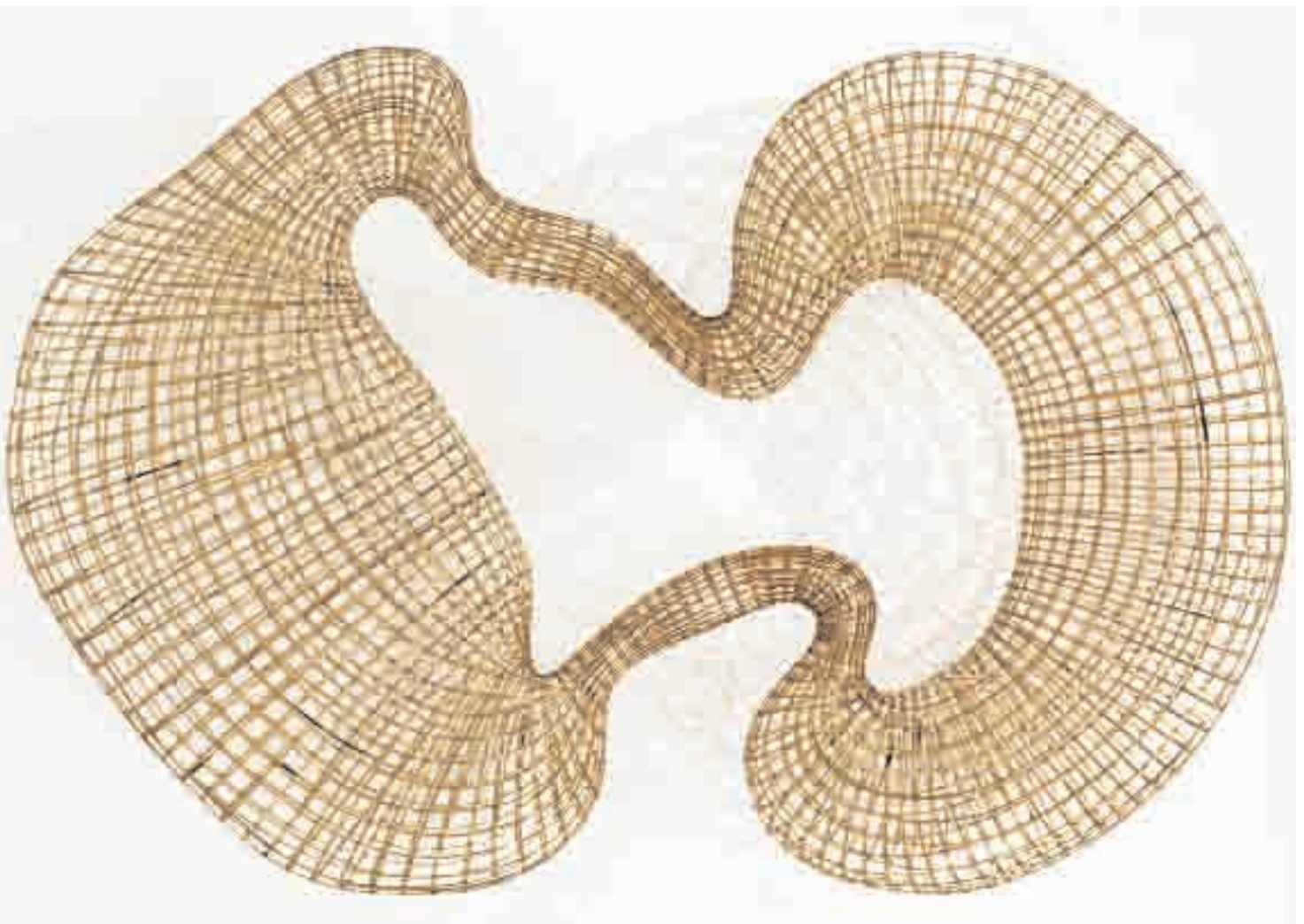
his studio is located there, but he travels often to oversee his shows, which take place all over the world. His career exemplifies an art world that has become more or less global. His participation in events worldwide suggests a different path for today's artists, who contribute to a growing number of venues and events in places previously unknown to the world of new art.

As for Pich's sculpture, he has created a marvelous body of work, both beautiful



to look at and meaningful to consider. *Caged Heart* (2009), one of his most powerful pieces, offers an oversized heart in a transparent basket. Made with wood, bamboo, burlap, and rattan, the heart in this case is slightly monstrous in its excessive size — perhaps its large volume suggests a disease brought on by its imprisonment. While the craft of the work is stunning, the implications are troubling, possibly speaking to the genocidal fervor of Pol Pot's followers. Pich's work, which often includes bodily organs — his first rattan sculpture (2004) was a pair of lungs — embraces both satisfaction and disturbance, a combination

Left: *Upstream*, 2009. Stainless steel, 870 x 240 x 240 cm. Below: *Cycle 2, Version 3*, 2008. Rattan and wire, 80 x 53 x 12 in.



TOP: UAP / BOTTOM: COURTESY TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART

that gives it beauty and edge. Sometimes the poverty of the materials adds to the somber sublimity. In the case of *Raft* (2009), a large sculpture of a building resting on bomb-like pontoons, one feels that Cambodia's recent history has been condensed into a single image: an architectural structure, signifying rebuilding, rises from missiles alluding to the country's painful past, which includes the bombardment by American forces during the Vietnam War. Despite the beauty of the open, skillfully articulated structure, Pich appears to be saying that we cannot forget what happened.

The fragility of Pich's materials also extends to his choice of organ imagery.

Junk Nutrients, 2009. Bamboo, rattan, wire, plastic, rubber, metal, cloth, and resin, 65 x 49 x 29 in.

For *Cycle 2, Version 3* (2008), he created two connected and transparent stomachs, composed solely of rattan and wire. According to Pich, the stomach has been a "major issue in Cambodia" because of its need to be fed and because of the diseases that can ravish it. The work's large size gives it a public quality, extending the metaphor to include the notion of what Pich sees as "strong family ties or a society held together by simple means." He says, "When displayed correctly, *Cycle* has...suggestive tendencies. But it remains a sculpture; it doesn't try to tell a story. It appears both strong and tragic...It's monumental yet is easily shaken by a slight gust of wind."

That mixture of strength and vulnerability is key to Pich's aesthetic. At the same time, his references to the body can be beautiful or gross or both. All manner of plastic junk spills out from an opening in *Junk Nutrients* (2009), a tubular sculpture resembling the large intestine. Pich found the materials, which include bicycle tubes, beads, and rope, along the edge of the lake near his studio. By will and by choice, Pich transforms his country's history and urban detritus, finding in the cast-offs a metaphor for a society that has endured incredible suffering. His transformations of bodily organs and simple weaving techniques allude to the possibility of intimacy and honest exchange, even as he refuses to deny a sense of violence. The combination makes for memorable sculpture.

Jonathan Goodman is a writer based in New York.

