

**SINGAPORE
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OPEN HOUSE**

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SOPHEAP PICH

Literary and artistic portrayals of the realities of modern Southeast Asia sometimes turn toward the notion of ‘lands of charm and cruelty’. This narrative might come a little too easily to a casual observer or outsider, but when handled judiciously can be compelling.

The seductive yet heart-wrenching sculptural oeuvre of Sopheap Pich — created over the past seven years — traces a Cambodian version of this narrative of paradox. A former refugee who fled the Pol Pot regime at the age of seven, Sopheap spent decades in the United States, where he completed an MFA in drawing and painting at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999. He returned home in 2003 and shifted his practice into three-dimensional work. Inspired by memories of farm tools used in the rice-growing village of his childhood, he chose to weave his sculptures from strips of rattan and bamboo, sometimes adding other simple materials like wire and burlap. Some of his works are autobiographical, drawing on his experience of displacement: others reflect broadly on Cambodia’s troubled history, its cycles of destruction and rebuilding.

As for allure, Sopheap’s elegantly, economically constructed works abound in flowing lines and biomorphic shapes. Often they represent the body; organs like the heart, stomach or phallus. He constructs other forms that are architectural in inspiration, or represent war material (for instance, binoculars and bomb casings). One recent commission — monumental in scale — is a permanent installation in cast bronze and steel at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia.

Sopheap’s commission for the Singapore Biennale, an installation in the Rotunda of the National Museum of Singapore, is constructed of bamboo, rattan, wood, metal and other materials. Titled *Compound*, it is one of a few recent works critiquing Cambodia’s ongoing spate of property development. Mega-projects in and around Phnom Penh will create jobs and infrastructure, but, critics charge, pose a new menace to the nation’s perennially threatened architectural heritage, while undermining human rights and sustainable development. The infill of Phnom Penh’s iconic Boeung Kak Lake for a real estate project is transmogrifying the cityscape and uprooting thousands of low-income residents — many of whom lived in houses built over the water on stilts. Among the displaced was Sopheap himself: in December he was forced to move his waterfront studio to the outskirts of town. Another plan will construct the world’s second-tallest skyscraper. Sopheap commemorates the real estate boom in sculptural metaphors, quietly scorning the dreams of wealthy, politically-connected businessmen.