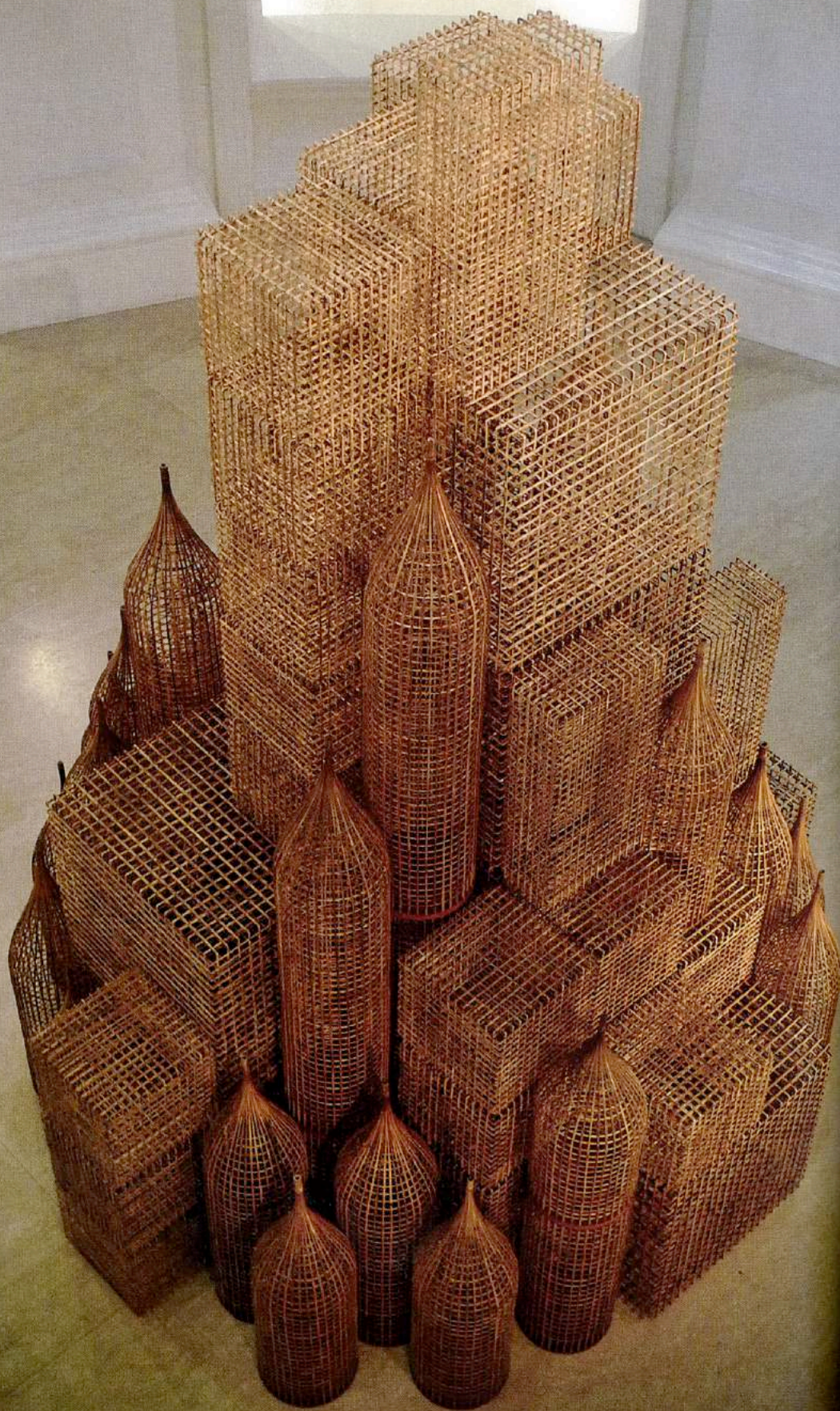


ART
Contemporary
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Woven Narrative

CAMBODIAN ARTIST **SOPHEAP PICH** USES BAMBOO AND RATTAN
IN ART OF SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL COMPLEXITY. HIS WORK

**URBAN
BLIGHT**
Compound
(2011) at the
Museum of
Singapore,



FIRST-TIME VIEWERS frequently experience an unusual sense of silence upon encountering Sopheap Pich's artwork. It is not just the scale of his woven rattan and bamboo sculptures, some of which are large enough to take over entire rooms, but his primitive pieces naturally seem to invite solemn contemplation.

Startlingly simple in their construction, Pich's sculptures evoke prehistoric skeletons, and are reminiscent of the traditional baskets and bird-nests indigenous to his homeland. But there is also modernism at work that echoes the scaffolding of urban landscapes – something that resonates with anyone who has lived in Asia's rapidly changing cities. Ultimately, Pich attempts to reconcile past and present in order to make sense of a country at odds with its identity and place in the world.

Few Cambodian artists are as prolific or internationally successful as Pich. His work touches a raw nerve, concerning itself with the catastrophic and



bloody rule of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, as well as with the absolute devastation and decades of traumatic economic and social transition that the Khmer Rouge left in their wake.

Pich was a child when his family left Cambodia in 1979, the year of Pol Pot's retreat. After four years in refugee camps in Thailand, they emigrated to the United States when Pich was 13. The youngster went on to graduate in painting at the University of Massachusetts, and earn a masters degree in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Pich returned to Cambodia for the first time since fleeing in 2002. "Identifying with my past took some time and persistence," he says.

GUT FEELING

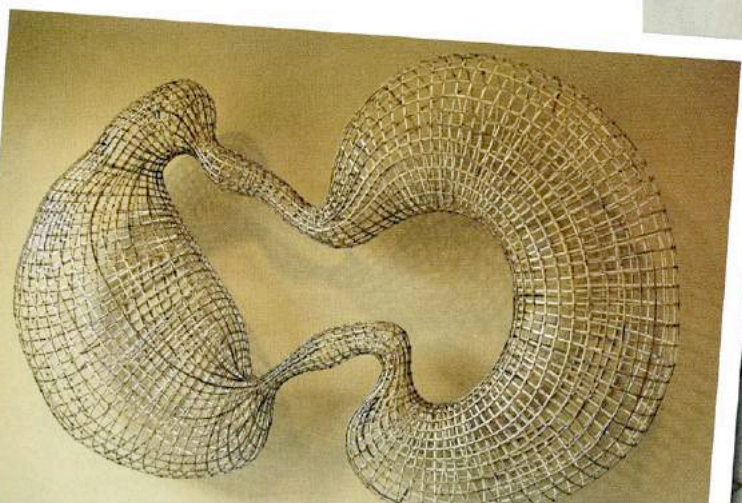
FROM TOP
Sopheap Pich pictured with *Cycle* (2009); three letters from the *Khmer Alphabets* series (2011)

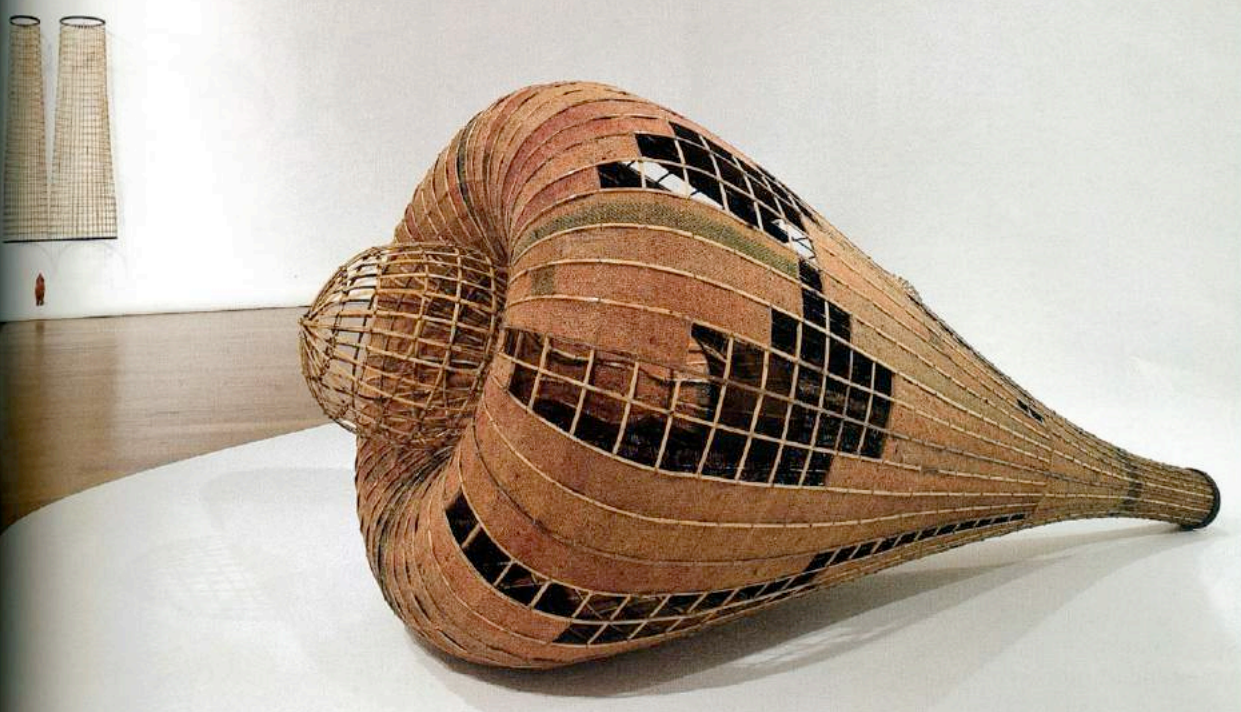
*Buddhist statues, as well
as human organs like
lungs and stomachs,
inspired his early work*

Originally the artist worked in paint. Believing his work was not connecting with his people, soon he sought a new direction, drawing upon memories of growing up in the Cambodian countryside. Pich began to sculpt, first using rattan and cigarette packets, and later rattan and bamboo, which are easily accessible and commonly used to create baskets, shelter and other essentials in rural Cambodia.

"As a young child whose job was to tend to buffalos in the fields, I would make tools and toys out of these very same materials," Pich says, adding that a natural ingredient's appeal "lies in its ability to resonate with its environment, and the stories it tells of its past journey and its process of coming into being." Pich's creative process is deliberate, and draws upon traditions that most Cambodians understand. It also involves manual labour. "I still go to the countryside to cut my own bamboo," the artist says.

Pich's art skips between abstraction and representation, creating a language based on memory and experience, and reflecting an upbringing in both East and West. "My travels and my return to the country of my birth have all been informed by constant physical, mental and emotional resistance, adjustment and surrender," the artist says. Figuratively, Buddhist statues, as well as





human organs like lungs and stomachs, inspired his early work. “Cambodians have a lot of health problems, particularly stomach problems [due to] poor nutrition resulting from Pol Pot’s repression. A major issue has always been the stomach. It was everyone’s concern either to fill it, or to cure its diseases.”

Indeed, poverty is a thread that is woven throughout the narrative of Pich’s work. Poverty is also the dark shadow cast over so many lives in Cambodia. Many of his installations, however, including *Compound*, reflect the artist’s concern over Cambodia’s rapid development. The piece, which until recently occupied the main foyer of the National Museum of Singapore during the Singapore Biennale, measures 400cm by 250cm by 250cm. It comprises a group of repetitive cylindrical and rectangular shapes in bamboo and rattan that took eight months to create. Misleadingly, the earthy smell of rattan and bamboo draws the viewer in. One expects to encounter an agrarian idyll but is rocked by an installation that conveys devastation and the loss of innocence through shapes that recall landmines and explosives.

The piece questions modernity’s endless cycle of building and demolition, and the dizzying rate of development as high-rise buildings rise over Phnom Penh and its environs. Where there is rapid development; there is also envi-

ronmental destruction and degradation (the bamboo and rattan that Pich uses are sustained by the country’s wetlands and lakes, which are being drained for development). The artist has also woven Cambodia’s violent history into the narrative. “Cambodia was one of the most heavily mined countries in the late 1960s,” says Pich. “Many bombs were dropped but did not explode. We often heard news of people who were maimed or died while trying to disassemble them. For many people along the borders, it was a way to make a living.”

Pich’s knack for conveying the “angst of both personal history and the communal sympathies of a nation” through twisted bamboo has attracted the interest of Hong Kong gallery director Katie de Tilly. “I was happy to discover Sopheap among the emerging art scene of Cambodia, where the birth of contemporary art is being written as we speak,” de Tilly says, adding that a solo exhibition is slated for the artist at Central’s 10 Chancery Lane Gallery next year. Meanwhile, Pich is drawing international attention. As well as in Singapore, his works have been placed in museums in Brisbane and San Francisco, and two US exhibitions are lined up for 2012. Though Cambodian contemporary art has not enjoyed great exposure in recent years, Pich may be leading the charge. ■

TRADEMARKS

FROM FAR LEFT

Buddha (2009);
Cycle (2009);
1979 installation
(2009)