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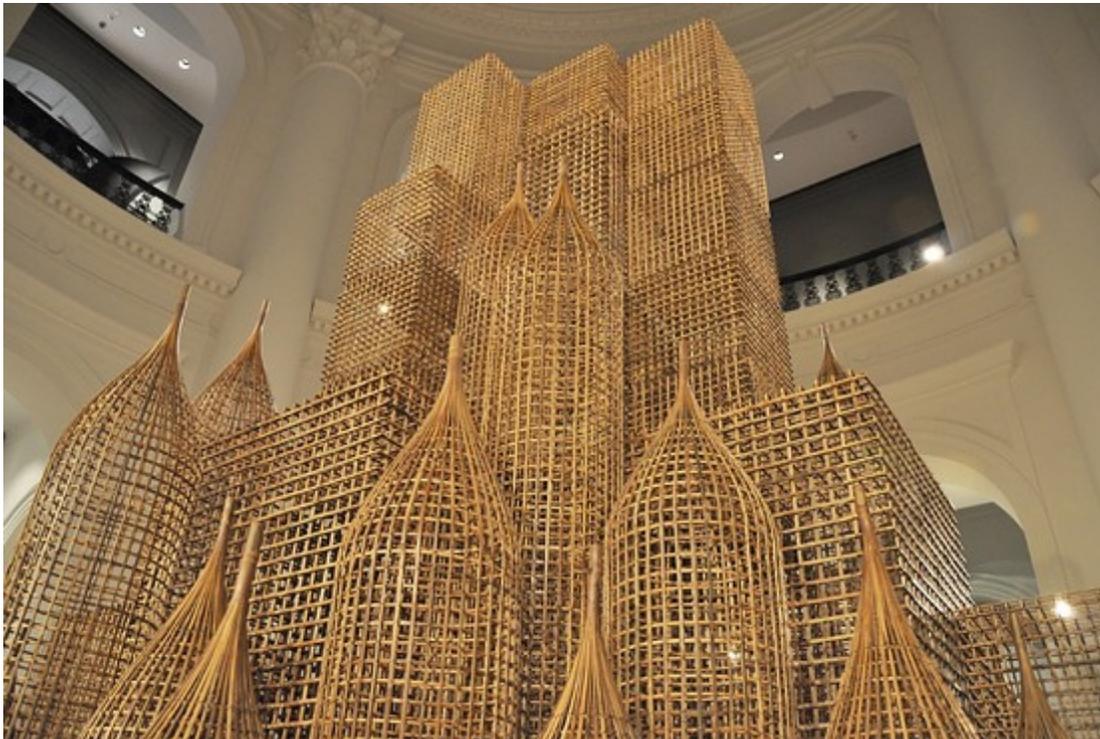
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A Dream Weaver Goes Global



Sopheap
Pich,

Sopheap Pich/10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong

Sopheap Pich's work at the Singapore Biennale this year, installed at the main entrance call of the Singapore National Museum. "Compound" is made of bamboo, rattan, plywood, metal wire (400cm x 250cm x 250cm)



10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong

Artist Sopheap Pich in front of one of his bamboo structures



Sopheap Pich/10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong
'Compound'

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and human organs. But “Compound” — a 400 centimeter x 250 centimeter x 250 centimeter-group of cylindrical and rectangular shapes made of bamboo strips — marks a shift, he says. “It is about something outside now. Before I was more preoccupied with the human interior,” he says.

“Compound,” which took eight months to create, currently takes pride of place in the main foyer of the National Museum of Singapore.

Elsewhere, Mr. Pich’s work is gaining international renown. In San Francisco, his work is on display as part of a group show that continues until October at the Asian Art Museum. He will have a solo museum show at the University of Washington in Seattle in the autumn.

“He has amazing technique and uses these unusual materials,” says Tyler Rollins, a New York dealer specializing in contemporary Southeast Asian art. “The works speak for themselves with a solemnity that people pick up on. His career is moving in a steady forward-trajectory because his work has a universality. He has a unique way of working yet is familiar with the international vocabulary and dialog but is not copying.”

Mr. Rollins’ eponymous gallery in the Chelsea district will feature Mr. Pich’s art later this year. Except for a large piece best suited for a museum, everything sold at the sculptor’s first American show, held by Mr. Rollins in 2009. Next year, the artist will also have a solo exhibit at Hong Kong’s 10 Chancery Lane Gallery.

Cambodia’s leading contemporary artist, says his woven bamboo-and-rattan installation at this year’s Singapore Biennale “references the cycle of building and destroying,” something he sees every day from his studio on the Mekong River, where the banks on one side are collapsing opposite massive new real estate projects on the other.

The 39-year old artist, who lives outside Phnom Penh, says his early works were inspired by Buddhist sculptures

As a boy in 1979, Mr. Pich and his family fled their home in Cambodia, which had just been invaded by Vietnam. They became refugees in a camp in Thailand, until 1984 when they were resettled in America, where they became citizens. Attending the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, he switched from pre-med to painting. In 1999, he graduated from the prestigious Art Institute of Chicago with a fine arts master's degree.

He explains that he left America, where his parents and siblings still live, because he missed Cambodia and "was just tired of doing meaningless things to stay alive in the U.S. The idea of being an artist in that environment made less and less sense."

As a struggling artist he had jobs ranging from real-estate agent to counselor to interpreter. He recalls: "I was driving all the time to different parts of Massachusetts. All the time was lost."

In 2002, as he was on the road again trying to make a living, a friend happened to call, asking: "Are you lost?" Mr. Pich replied: "Yes." Two days later he went to buy an air ticket to return to Cambodia for the first time. He says it is a total coincidence that he landed in Phnom Penh on Nov. 9, Cambodian independence day.

Mr. Pich is currently working on a five-meter-high sculpture inspired by the Morning Glory plant, a staple food in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. Those who lived through that era "remember this very cheap and abundant plant because we owe our survival to Morning Glory," he says.

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