

After Global Success, Sopheap Pich Opens Local Exhibition

by Michelle Vachon | February 16, 2017

The golden artwork that nearly fills the back wall of the Institut Francais' gallery is a vast abstract spread over a fine bamboo grid, creating a landscape with a thousand facets.

"It's called 'The Crater,' like a volcano crater. I just like that word," said artist Sopheap Pich, who produced the piece for the exhibition opening tonight in Phnom Penh, his first in Cambodia since 2010.



Artist Sopheap Pich describes the artistry behind 'The Crater' on Wednesday at the Institut Francais gallery. (Siv Channa/The Cambodia Daily)

Over the past few years, Mr. Pich's work has received international acclaim. It has been featured in a solo show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, included in the collections of the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia, and will be part of the 57th Venice Biennale in May.

Mr. Pich—who grinds charcoal to produce the black color he uses in his artworks, which he creates at his studio on the outskirts of Phnom Penh—achieved the magical quality of "The Crater" by using mended burlap fabric he discovered at markets.

Using found items or creating them himself rather than buying ready-made products is a habit he developed in childhood. Growing up in a poor farming family in Battambang province, he recalls putting big nails he found onto railroad tracks. Once they had been flattened by trains' wheels, he would sharpen the nails to turn them into knives.

"I'm thinking from that kind of direction," he said. "Find a way to make it. Don't always rely on the market or the factory."

Born in 1971, Mr. Pich lived through the Khmer Rouge regime. Fleeing the country in 1979 with his family, he spent five years in refugee camps in Thailand before immigrating to the U.S. After obtaining a master's degree in fine arts in the U.S. and studying in France for a year, he returned to Cambodia in the early 2000s.



Artist Sopheap Pich and his art tools. (Siv Channa/The Cambodia Daily)

Arriving as a painter, Mr. Pich soon turned to sculpture, using a natural element ever-present in Cambodia's landscape: bamboo. He has also traveled to Ratanakkiri province to collect red earth to use as a color and explored wooded areas in search of bamboo of the right quality.

Mr. Pich's approach is more that of a philosopher or a scientist rather than an artisan.

"Along with rattan and bamboo and burlap and beeswax, and oil paint, every single material I use is sort of accounted for," he said in an interview on Tuesday. "I don't just use things haphazardly."

"If I make 100 paintings, 100 sculptures with rattan, it's only because I'm continually fascinated by rattan," he said. "Stone represents a new challenge. It's heavy; it's expensive; it's difficult to work with. You need different tools. So it's a challenge," he said, as he now also works with stone.

The exhibition, which will include one of Mr. Pich's large rattan sculptures, at 6-by-3 meters, also features objects from his studio ranging from small sculptures and a movie poster to pans he uses to melt the translucent pine tree resin he collects.

Bernard Millet, the French Embassy's cultural attache and a career museum and arts curator, insisted on recreating Mr. Pich's studio in the show, so that the public would get a sense of his artistic approach.

"What strikes me in him is the perspective with which he looks at what surrounds him, on his environment, and which can absolutely be shared," he said last week.

"If his work is shown in Buenos Aires, Europe or Africa, people might not necessarily see Cambodia in the bamboo. But something in its form or 'zen' will resonate for them."

And that, he said, is what makes Mr. Pich an artist of international stature.

Exhibition:

***When:** Opens tonight at 6:30 p.m. Runs through March 18*

***Where:** Institut Francais #218 Street 184, Phnom Penh*

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