

Sopheap Pich's 'Rang Phnom Flower' Flourishes at the Crow Collection of Asian Art

By Kimberly Richard



Courtesy of the Crow Collection of Asian Art

Sopheap Pich with Rang Phnom Flower

Sopheap Pich, Cambodia's premier contemporary artist, has managed to create a large-scale single-form sculpture big enough to impress Texans. *Rang Phnom Flower* is on display at the Crow Collection of Art through January 7, 2018.

"I was really attracted to the size. Everything is bigger in Texas. The way our architecture of museum is, I could see what an impact statement it would be in that space," Jacqueline Chao, curator of Asian Art at the Crow Collection of Asian Art, said.

Rang Phnom Flower represents the ambitious fulfillment of a Cambodian-born artist who entered college intending to study medicine. As the eldest of five brothers, Pich's father expected him to set a good example and become a doctor. He took a poetry class and felt a need to investigate his artistic side.

"Something unlocked. Another world unlocked inside of me and I thought, 'There's a lot of possibility here while I'm still in school to explore. Let's just take a painting class to explore.' So I walked into a painting class and before I knew it, I needed to be a major, an art major," Pich said. Pich earned a Master of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999.



Rang Phnom Flower, 2015, Bamboo, rattan, metal wire, plywood, steel, metal bolts - compressed.

Photo credit: Tyler Rollins Fine Art

Born in Battambang, Cambodia in 1971, Pich and his family survived the Khmer Rouge regime before moving to the United States in 1984. The harsh circumstances of his childhood taught him resilience and has left him a joyful artistic perspective.

"Have fun with your life," Pich said. "I'm 47 years old but I still feel like I'm a little kid because for me, art is about play. It's about trying things out."

He returned to Cambodia to establish a studio and pursue an art career in 2002. Painting was his initial focus, but the medium proved to be unfulfilling.

"I needed to do something that required less thinking but more doing so that's where sculpture came in. The natural materials happened because I didn't really know how to make sculpture. The easiest and cheapest material to work with is rattan because people make chairs and all sorts of furniture with rattan. So I thought, 'Let's get a few trees of rattan and see if I can make something out of it,'" Pich said.

Pich continued to use rattan, bamboo, burlap from rice bags, beeswax and earth pigments to create sculptures based on organs and vegetal forms inspired by his college medical studies.

"I love forms and I love the medical form. I love the aesthetics of medicine. I love the aesthetics of the human body rather than actually the science of it. I love botany. I love how the tree grows and how the flower becomes a flower," Pich said.

The beauty of the cannonball flower, revered in Buddhist culture because of its resemblance to the sal tree under which Buddha was born, inspired *Rang Phnom Flower*. Pich wanted the sculpture's size to reflect the elemental power of this natural beauty. "The real flower is beautiful so I wanted it to make it 1000 times bigger," Pich said.

The piece is 25 feet long and made of a complex geometric web of rattan and bamboo. Even with a team of five people assisting Pich, crafting one flower bulb

could take a week. Getting the smallest details right on a large project is important to Pich.

"It's not like painting with a huge brushstroke. Make a giant painting with little brushstrokes. Every little step matters. Every little detail counts. You just slow down, slow down, slow down," Pich said. "Labor brings you ideas. Labor brings you joy. Labor brings you affirmation."

The exhibition includes a shadow box of rattan and bamboo for patrons to touch Pich's favorite materials and an original French 19th century, hand-painted botanical dictionary featuring the cannonball flower on loan from the Botanical Research Institute of Texas.

Pich's father, who once dreamed his son would become a doctor, visited Pich's studio and marveled at his son guiding his artistic team. He relishes seeing his son's work featured in world's most prominent museums including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Centre Georges Pompidou, M+ Museum for Visual Culture in Hong Kong, Singapore Art Museum, and Queensland Art Gallery.

"He feels good about me being a successful artist," Pich said. "I see more smiles on his face than ever before and that's a good thing."

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Kimberly Richard is a North Texan with a passion for the arts. She's worked with Theatre Three, Inc. and interned for the English National Opera and Royal Shakespeare Company. She graduated from Austin College and currently lives in Garland with her very pampered cocker spaniel, Tessa.

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