

Sopheap Pich:

Inspirations and Reflections

Phnom Penh-based artist Sopheap Pich (b. 1971) is recognized today as Cambodia's most internationally prominent contemporary artist. He is known for working with local materials such as bamboo, rattan, burlap from rice bags, beeswax and earth pigments gathered from around Cambodia, and for creating sculptures inspired by bodily organs, vegetal forms and abstract geometric structures. Currently featured at the Crow Collection of Asian Art is his large-scale sculpture *Rang Phnom Flower* (2015). The sculpture, which depicts a cannonball tree (L. *Couroupita guianensis*; Kh. *rang phnom*), is his most ambitious single-form sculptural work to date. Measuring 27 feet (8.25 metres) in length, its complex construction is composed of hundreds of strands of rattan and bamboo. In Southeast Asia, the cannonball tree is revered for its physical resemblance to the *sal* tree (L. *Shorea robusta*), under which the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, was born. In fact, the cannonball tree originated in Central and South America and was introduced by Europeans to Sri Lanka. Sri Lankans then introduced it to Southeast Asia in their revitalization of Buddhism in that region. The oversized scale of Pich's sculpture conveys the power of nature and serves as a material and philosophical mediation between representation and abstraction. In this interview, Jacqueline Chao, curator of Asian art at the Crow Collection, talks to Sopheap Pich about his inspirations, his working process and the role of art in today's society.



Sopheap Pich
(Image courtesy of the artist)

Jacqueline Chao Tell us about your sculpture *Rang Phnom Flower*. What inspired you to create such an enormous sculpture of this particular plant?

Sopheap Pich Several years ago I took a trip to Ratanakiri, a northeastern province of Cambodia that borders Vietnam. One of the things that left a strong impression on me was the many big trees with bright flowers and intertwining vines that were all over the landscape. I was told that people don't cut these trees down because they are not considered luxury wood and are therefore not desirable, and also because they believe they have spirits living in them. Few other trees have such a relationship with the Cambodian people.

The *rang phnom* tree is normally planted in temple grounds because it bears a resemblance to the *sal* tree, under which the Buddha is said to have been born. There is also a giant *rang phnom* tree in the grounds of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh that is really impressive. When I held one of the flowers in my hands for the first time, I could see why the tree



Rang Phnom Flower
By Sopheap Pich (b. 1971), 2015
Bamboo, rattan, metal wire, plywood,
steel and metal bolts, length 8.25 m
'Hidden Nature: Sopheap Pich',
Crow Collection of Asian Art
(Image courtesy of the Crow Collection of Asian Art)

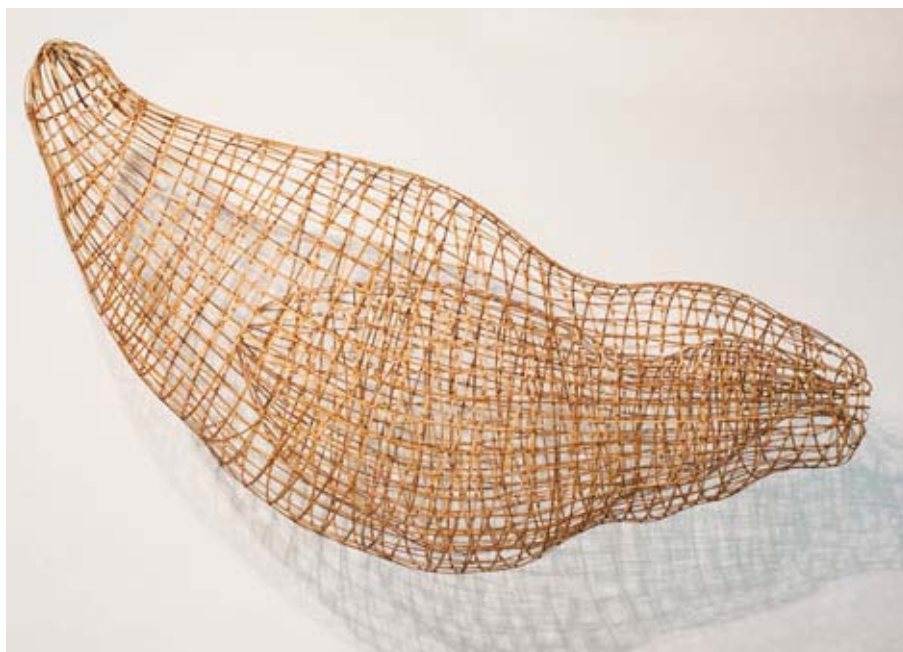
and its flowers would give rise to such reverence. It was a combination of all these ideas that led to my decision to make this sculpture.

JC Can you tell us more about how it was actually made? For example, how are the bamboo and rattan harvested and treated, and how long did the weaving take?

SP We buy whole rattan from a furniture shop a few times a year. Several of my assistants spend a couple of days selecting about a thousand of the most mature trees from each batch. These trees are about 4 metres long, and we split them lengthwise into four



Rang Phnom Flower (detail)

*Echo*

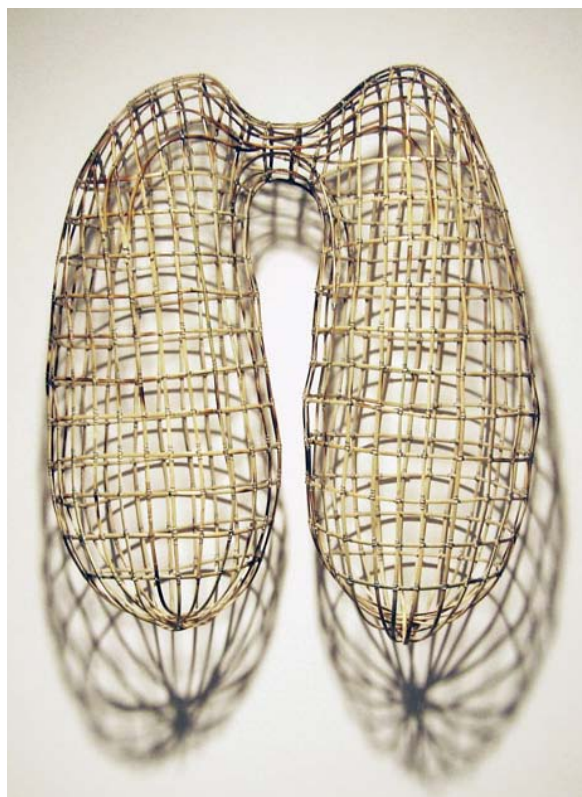
By Sopheap Pich (b. 1971), 2004
Rattan and copper wire,
420 x 84 x 65 cm
(Image courtesy of the artist and
Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York)

strands with a large knife. These are boiled in diesel gasoline in a custom-made tank to cure the rattan, a process that removes the water and sugar inside and kills any insects. After this we shave each strand with a sharp blade, which takes about 20 minutes per length.

The preparation of bamboo follows a similar process, but we boil it in water instead of gasoline. We still go to different villages to cut the bamboo from groves if we require parts that we are not able to get from depots, but in general, we select the bamboo in the same way as the rattan. *Rang Phnom Flower* took us about 6 months to make, with a seven-strong team of people.

JC What strikes me most about this sculpture is the way that it is simultaneously representational and abstract. Many of your works play with this duality—could you tell us more about the role of abstraction in your work?

SP I was more preoccupied with the relationship between the figurative and abstract previously when I was painting, which is what I was trained in at art school. However, from the very first sculpture I made in 2004, *Silence*, the question of realism and abstraction was never really something I thought about. I suppose this arises from a certain kind of

*Silence, Version 4*

By Sopheap Pich (b. 1971), 2009
Rattan and wire, 61 x 56 x 20 cm
(Image courtesy of the artist and
Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York)

trust I have in the way I see my objects. Many of my works emerge from something tangible as a starting point, but the slow process of making them and the nature of the materials I use allow me to see possibilities, and a work might often take a turn that is not in my planning. I want every work to have an opportunity to arrive somewhere independently from what I already know. Perhaps this can be seen in some of my recent sculptures which deal with abstraction directly, but all the while in my mind I think I am making real objects.

JC How do you see the role of art and artists in today's society?

SP That's a good question, and a complicated one to answer. We are now living in a very strange world, where communication is lightning-fast and all kinds of information we might or might not need are at our fingertips. Everyone has an opinion, and in such a world, truth does not rely on knowledge but depends

on what one chooses to believe. The least educated and unenlightened person can rule the world if he or she is popular enough, and it seems that greed and ego are the rules of the game, with the sheer act of winning an end in itself. It is hard to believe we are living in the 21st century.

I was born in one of the darkest and cruelest times of Cambodia's history. My parents risked their lives to get my brothers and I to a place that values freedom and knowledge. I always felt that these qualities were the highest aspirations of being human. My father used to tell me that if you have knowledge, it can't be taken away from you, even if everything else is. The way I was brought up and educated gave me some notion of how to live and be and how to contribute meaningfully to the world. So for me it has never really been an issue of choice. Rather, it is something that I live to do.

Going back to your question of what role art and artists play in today's society, I like the [neon] piece that Bruce Nauman [b. 1941] made in the late 1960s,

*Monument 2*

By Sopheap Pich (b. 1971), 2016
Rattan, copper wire, Pursat yellow sandstone and wood, 182.5 x 98.5 x 40 cm
(Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York)



Big Beng

By Sopheap Pich (b. 1971), 2017

Bamboo and wire, 590 x 270 x 140 cm

(Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York)

The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (Window or Wall Sign). This work says to me that there is more to what we do than meets the eye. In some small way, there is something essential that artists do for humankind itself that might go back to when we first recognized ourselves as different from other species. Nauman might have made this work to pose a question or raise a thought, but I am not cynical about it.

JC What currently inspires you? And what messages do you hope that people ultimately take away from seeing your work?

SP What inspires me is the notion of work itself. I don't claim to be very clever, and certainly do not always know what my work is ultimately about. I also question the notion that I make art to 'express' myself. I am a student of art. I know what I know from other people who have done it before me, and

in the same way, I am learning to do the next work from the work that I am doing now. I am inspired by my surroundings, by nature and by my travels. I have a studio and a group of dedicated assistants. We work, and we hope that our work gives people positive energy and hope. Our work should inspire people to slow down, value time and labour, and have a sense of freedom and possibility.

Sopheap Pich was born in Battambang, Cambodia. He moved with his family to the US in 1984 and received his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999. In 2002, he returned to Phnom Penh, where he continues to be based. His work has been featured in numerous international museum exhibitions and biennials, and can be found in museum collections throughout the world.

'Hidden Nature: Sopheap Pich' is on view at the Crow Collection of Asian Art in Dallas until 7 January 2018.