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November 15, 2011

VISUAL ART

# A Weightless Series of Cages

How Cambodia's Best-Known Artist Makes Peace

by JEN GRAVES

## Sopheap Pich: Compound

### **Henry Art Gallery**

Wed–Sun. Through April 17.

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Rising up in the heart of the Henry Art Gallery is a two-story imaginary city—made of woven bamboo strips fixed together with twisted wire. Like a crowded skyline, it's a jumble of box forms punctuated by the occasional dome-topped cylinder. The wide lattice of the weaving gives the impression that the city is a weightless series of cages, ready to be lifted onto shoulders and carried into the world.

And in fact it traveled a long way to be here. It was made by a small team of workers seven kilometers outside Phnom Penh, Cambodia, led by today's best-known Cambodian artist, Sopheap Pich, who was born in 1971 during the horror and famine of the Khmer Rouge. The light city—not so lightly called *Compound*—was first seen at the Singapore Biennial in spring. There, it was installed in the round. Here, the skyline presses up against a wall, casting shadows that imply its infinite regress. Domed cylinders rest on the floor at each side. Pich mentions: They're shaped like bombs.

You probably wouldn't make the connection unless you are used to looking at bombs. In 1979, Pich's family fled Cambodia and lived in refugee camps before coming to the United States, where Pich went to art school to become a painter. Returning to Cambodia turned him into a sculptor. Now he goes into the countryside—his family are farmers—to buy bamboo. In the studio, they cut it, split it, boil it, and shape it. At first he used it to make body parts: lattice lungs, stomachs. He's filling bellies now—a solo show at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York features woven morning glories; the plant was a main food source in Khmer Rouge days.

In Seattle, Pich is showing photographs for the first time. Like his sculptures, they are mostly calm surfaces concealing devastating deeps. They show the landscape around his studio outside Phnom Penh, where the giant lake in a photo taken six months ago has since been filled with sand on which

a city will rise up.

The calm surfaces are acts of peace. When I ask Pich what it's like showing sculptures that make references to bombs internationally, in places where people might miss those references entirely, this is how he answers: "I'm 40 now and I don't want to suffer. I try to balance my life. The people in my shop, they don't read, they can barely write their names. They have a really rough life. I say to them, 'In this shop, there's no violence, there's no distress. I can't help you with your family. I can't help you with your personal life. But we can work like this in the shop. When you do this eight or nine hours a day, this is peaceful.'" 