

Sopheap Pich: ROTIN/PDOW

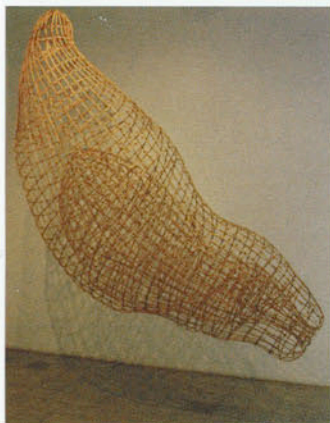
Centre Culturel Français

“**R**otin/Pdow,” an exhibition of sculptural works by Sopheap Pich, marked his welcomed emergence as a sculptor in Cambodia. The exhibition caused a significant re-evaluation of visual expression in Cambodia and extended previous explorations between tradition and a developing modern cultural identity.

Four large *pdow* (rattan) forms commanded the space. The *pdow* stems, fastened with silver or copper wire, form human organs of digestion and reproduction. *Hive* (2004), the liver, is a tall grid-like corridor that invites viewers to enter its arched opening to walk knowingly down to its closed, bulbous end. *Cycle* (2004), the stomach, is made of 120 overlapping stems hovering inches above the floor and creating a sense of peristaltic motion. *Ripple* (2004) integrates multiple oval and circular shapes in a nearly four-meter phallic shell. Pich’s most sophisticated work is *Echo* (2004), the womb. It defies the viewer’s perception of two separate forms as one; an outer cocoon reaches from high above toward the ground, then gently folds in on itself to create and encase its smaller imitation, leaving an intimate and visceral opening.

This is Cambodian art at its boldest. Pich aspired to “create a symbolic language about communal experience,” and by the transposition of traditional materials into sculpture, he speaks to an emerging audience in a country where the notion of contemporary art is largely unknown. Comforted by familiar forms and material, viewers are able to recall fishing traps and mosquito nets. A trio of excited students expressed themselves on opening night: “It is strange for me, but important because it shows new creativity. It is made from a daily-life material,” and “This is a first for all of Cambodia,” and “This work is the best because it is from his heart to his head to his hands to us.”

“Rotin/Pdow” supersedes the monotonous imagery common in Cambodian cultural representation. Avoiding an overt allegiance to Cambodia’s official pledge “Nation-Religion-King” and the lingering colonial practice of copying the already known, Pich says, “It may be more helpful for Khmer contemporary artists to



Sopheap Pich ■ *Echo* ■ 2004
 ■ Rattan and copper wire ■
 432 x 104 x 214 cm. ■ Photo by
 Erin Gleeson.

