



Sopheap Pich

TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART

Sopheap Pich is one of very few Cambodian artists exhibiting internationally at present, having appeared in exhibitions in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Norway, and in triennials in Japan and Australia. At the end of Pol Pot's devastating rule, an eight-year-old Pich together with his family ended up in relocation camps in Thailand, where they lived for several years before making their way to the United States. Pich received an American university education and attended graduate



Sopheap Pich,
Junk Nutrients, 2009,
bamboo, rattan,
wire, plastic, rubber,
metal, cloth, resin,
65 x 49 x 29"

school at the Art Institute of Chicago. He returned to Cambodia, at age thirty-two, in 2002.

Though Pich had studied to be a painter, in 2004 he started making sculptures from rattan, bamboo, and wire; he abandoned painting altogether the following year. His earliest sculptures were abstract installations or replicated forms of internal organs. He has occasionally returned to these works, as with the lung sculpture *Silence, Version 4*, 2009, which was included in this exhibition along with several other sculptures based on organ shapes, including a semiabstract double stomach-shaped sculpture made of rattan and wire (*Cycle 2, Version 3*, 2008).

While aspects of these two works are reminiscent of the refined contours of ancient Khmer statues, they also owe a debt to the penchant for carefully realized, idiosyncratic forms of his influential teacher Ray Yoshida at the Art Institute. Pich identifies the bamboo and rattan materials with the fishing culture of his boyhood in the Battambang province (the bamboo is harvested locally with the help of assistants). He also comments, however, that the see-through cross-ribbing that makes up both the armature and the surface of these objects is symbolic of the desire for a transparent political system.

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, titled "The Pulse Within," Pich states that it is his intention to explore "the underlying aspects of the country." In the context of the history of Cambodia, Pich's materials are common, even utilitarian, although it seems pertinent that rattan furniture was a staple of the colonial household, too. He is seemingly following the implicit instruction for artists expressed in the philosopher Hubert Damisch's observation that "one must have perfectly assimilated the past before going forward."

Junk Nutrients, 2009, one of two sculptures that have a solid, opaque surface, is a long, curling, tubelike object that has the approximate circumference of a soccer ball and is made of bamboo, rattan, wire, and burlap that has been dyed the color of dried blood. From one end of it spills a thick mass of nylon rope, fishing line, long necklaces of plastic pipe, stuffed bicycle inner tubes, and stringed lengths of various plastic caps. These are discarded items found on the shores of Boeung Kak, a large lake in Phnom Penh, where the artist has a studio. These objects, partially strung or woven into long strands, resemble semiabstracted versions of bricolage, which is the primary quotidian art form among the populace of the city, who improvise shoes, bicycle baskets, rice scoops, etc., from oilcans, old tires, plastic caps, and found ammunition.

The largest piece in the exhibition, *Raft*, 2009, collects long, box-shaped, vaguely architectural forms into a kind of spectral cityscape resting upon a pair of pontoons that also resemble large shell casings. This is an allusion to the huge number of bombs dropped on eastern Cambodia by the US during the Vietnam War, some of which were retrieved from the countryside for their steel to be used in rebuilding Phnom Penh. In another sense it is the rising city floating toward the artist as the lake in front of his studio is filled in to receive new urban development. *Raft* thus has a more satiric edge than the other works and seems to move beyond the dichotomy of abjection and quiet opulence to something at once humorous and monstrous.

—Joe Fyfe