

Speaking To The Past And The Present

While there is always a great deal of interest in Cambodia's cultural heritage, very few of its contemporary artists are known beyond its borders. The sculptor and painter Sopheap Pich, who returned to his homeland in 2002, has taken steps to change this.

By Steven Pettifor

Almost three decades since the 1979 toppling of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot's genocidal totalitarian regime, Cambodia is enjoying a period of stability. Today the economy is moving forward positively and the tourist industry has blossomed, which in turn has opened up the country to new cultural influences. Despite a lack of government funding for the arts, the nascent contemporary Cambodian art scene has also seen a gradual but significant changes. This has meant more exhibitions for struggling artists and more spaces in which art can be shown. The emerging generation of artists can now look forward, far beyond the country's traditional arts and the stereotypical Angkor-style craftsmanship that currently saturates the tourist-driven art market.

While much interest is afforded Cambodia's cultural heritage, international art audiences are rarely exposed to contemporary art from Cambodia. This is changing, however, as galleries in Thailand, which has a shared border with Cambodia, are beginning to seek out Cambodian artists for exhibitions. This is certainly the case with Bangkok's H Gallery, which recently showed the work of 36-year-old Khmer sculptor Sopheap Pich, who had spent almost a month in residency at the gallery.

Sopheap Pich is

one of a number of Cambodian immigrant artists who have recently returned to their native country. Having spent much of his life in the United States, Pich's interest through his art now lies in Cambodia's current economic and social transitions and transformations.

For his first Thailand solo exhibition, Pich industriously molded, burned, twisted, and bound his unique rattan skeletal figures. Pich considers the exhibition, entitled *Tidal*, as a metaphor for the

submerging-emerging of Khmer society that witnessed and survived extreme trauma in its recent history.

Pich's family experienced the traumatic past firsthand. They fled Cambodia in 1979, after the Vietnamese army invaded the country and ousted Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. The oldest of five sons, Pich and his family sought shelter in refugee camps on the Thai border, where they spent a grueling four years before being moved to another camp in the Philippines.

When asked if those troubling times as a child has had any affect on his art, Pich says, "Even though I was very young, I still clearly remember every day—how could anyone forget? It was that period of my life that has had the most impact on me. I don't consciously try and put such memories into my art but it must influence my work on some level."

When Pich was 13 years old, his family was finally resettled in the United States, in Massachusetts. As a student Pich was supposed to follow the career path that his parents expected of their eldest son, enrolling as a student of medicine. Much to their chagrin, during his sophomore year Pich turned to the visual arts. He received his BFA at the University of Massachusetts and, in 1999, he received his MFA in painting at the Art Institute of Chicago.



Sopheap Pich, *Delta*, 2007, rattan and wire, 340 x 480 x 70 cm. All photographs by Steven Pettifor.



Sopheap Pich, *Flow*, 2007, rattan and wire, dimensions variable.

In 2002, Pich returned to Cambodia for a visit. He immediately felt that he had arrived home, and decided to stay indefinitely to pursue his art. Subsequently, he has held several solo exhibitions in Cambodia, the United States, and Norway. Pich has also participated in numerous group shows in Cambodia, Burma, and across the United States.

During his years of art training in the United States, Pich explored notions of identity and personal history from the standpoint of someone cut off from their homeland. However, since his return to Cambodia Pich has been greatly affected by his immediate environment with his art becoming increasingly concerned with the myriad issues surrounding his country's development.

"I look around witnessing the violence and desperation and that filters through to my art. That is why it is stripped down and devoid of color," says Pich. "My art has become more than the self, it is more meaningful if I can connect with a wider audience and try to bring people together."

Appropriating traditional labor-intensive craft techniques used in the weaving of baskets and fish traps, Pich shapes elaborate rattan and bamboo frames into sinuous sculptures. Incorporating the common implements used in day-to-day survival, Pich acknowledges the toil of ordinary Khmers.

Whereas many artists who use indigenous craft methods direct hired artisans to mold their work to specific require-

ments, Pich is a hands-on artist. While employing an assistant to help bind his frames, Pich immerses himself in the labor-intensive techniques he uses: by doing so he explores and tests the potential and the limits of his chosen medium.

However, Pich insists that his use of rattan and bamboo is derived more from the physical reality of his art than a deliberate attempt to reinvigorate the traditional. "I wanted to create large forms but for me it was about the grafting and the slow construction process that I considered a journey, just like painting," he says. "It's exciting to see where these shapes will take me with only a limited amount of control over their direction. It has a definite organic life of its own. It mutates rather than dictates."

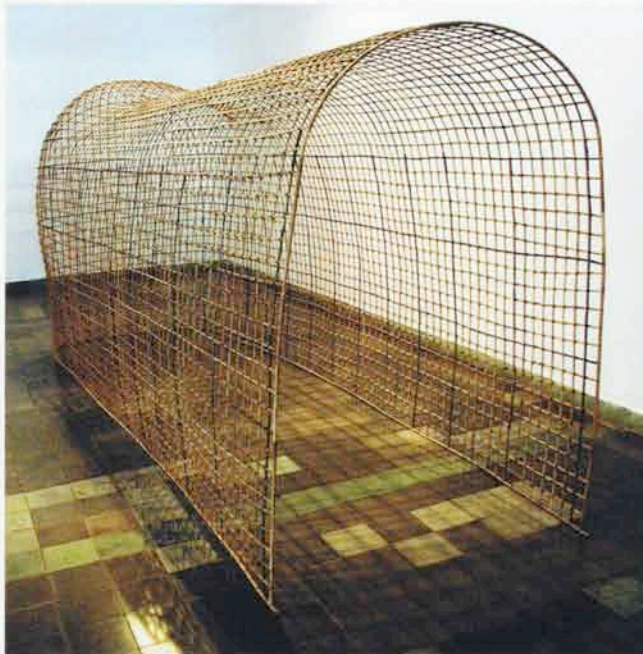
Despite rattan's flexibility and con-

venience as a cheap resource, Pich says that the material isn't very durable when displayed in outside environments where the elements quickly lead to the deterioration of the materials. This can be problematic as Pich enjoys constructing large-scale works, but which, at present, can only be accommodated in a few of Cambodia's limited number of galleries.

Pich's use of rattan and bamboo is a three-dimensional extension of the paintings that he executed after his return to Cambodia in 2002. In *Excavating the Vessels*, held at Phnom Penh's Java Café and Gallery, in 2003, Pich painted emblematic urns and vessels traditionally used in Khmer society. The process of making simple containers—used to hold water, pickled fish, and even human remains—gave Pich a sense of calm that he found difficult to achieve amidst the noise and congestion of Phnom Penh, the capital.

Increasingly though, Pich began to feel that his paintings, which were heading towards abstraction, were not connecting with a general audience. Wanting to instill his art with a more physical presence, but having never sculpted before, Pich, in 2003, sought assistance from a rattan furniture workshop to help him craft a pair of human lungs, for a group show at Phnom Penh's French Cultural Center. Originally, he wanted to cover the rattan frame with Cambodian cigarette packaging that is peppered with iconic Khmer imagery of the Angkor temples, whose aim is to lure new smokers.

"As I began covering the rattan, it looked increasingly



Sopheap Pich, *Hive*, 2004, rattan and wire, 432 x 107 x 214 cm.

cluttered and less and less like a sculpture. It looked too contrived as a political statement, so I tore away all the packaging on the day of exhibition," Pich recalls. The simple crisp forms for the 2004 respiratory work *Silence* evoke the mid-1990s recurrent lung imagery of the late Thai artist Montien Boonma. For Pich, however, they reminded him of a series of linear drawings that he had done while at graduate school in Chicago in the late 1990s.

For Pich it felt that he had come full circle, stripping down to the essential ingredients, more direct and accessible; shaping the rattan was like straightforward pencil line drawing. Perhaps the artist's affinity to the art of Alberto Giacometti has some bearing upon this linear approach.

The positive response to the piece encouraged Pich to concentrate on creating an entirely sculptural exhibition. With the aide of two assistants to help in the laborious shaping of the rattan and bamboo, an emboldened Pich tested himself with his second piece by working on a large rattan framework, entitled *Cycle* (2005). Organic in shape, this work was an example of his preoccupation with the visualization of human anatomy, and an analogy of our condition. The floor-based tubular work depicted two stomachs joined together, one old and worn, the other representing youth.

Initially the intestinal theme was symbolic of malaise as Pich observed that, whenever Khmers fell ill, symptoms would invariably first manifest in the gut. He attributed this to the poor nutritional habits that stemmed from the constant battle to stave off starvation under the Pol Pot's regime. The fusion of stomachs across generations is also a metaphor for the importance of familial dependency in Khmer society, without the reliance of a welfare system.

Suspended from the gallery ceiling in his recent exhibition *Tidal*, the stomach image resurfaces as the centerpiece *Delta* (2007). This time Pich entwined his stomach analogy with riverine imagery, conveying how the Mekong River—one of Asia's most significant waterways—is fundamental to Khmer existence. Cambodia is reliant on the Mekong to sustain much of its agriculture, but today this way of life is under serious threat from dominant China, which is damming the river upstream.

"It's a grave situation for a fragile and weak country like Cambodia. If the water dries up, I can't imagine what we'll do,"



Sopheap Pich, *Scarred Heart*, 2007, rattan and wire, 150 x 124 x 90 cm.

says Pich. "At present, the government is doing nothing to protect our precious water source. They are happy taking supposed cash handouts from the Chinese; the price of our silence."

The skeletal frames can also be tied to Pich's early training in medicine, as well as being a pertinent visual apparatus for his anatomical themed sculptures. Displayed on the floor of the gallery was *Scarred Heart* (2007), a bulbous heart with a subtle indentation across the shell. This work resembles a fruit with an artery protruding like a stalk, and the gouge in the surface of the work is, for Pich, a metaphor for the backbreaking toil Khmers suffered through courage and resilience.

"When I was a child, I had to walk everywhere carrying my baby brother on my hip. It caused me to walk with an impairment," says Pich. "To escape the Khmer Rouge, my father had to walk through minefields to get to the Thai border, seeing dead people all around. It's our hearts that keep us strong." Other body parts that have appeared in his art include the womb in the sculpture *Echo* (2004) and the liver in *Hive* (2004).

In *Delta*, Pich twisted and burned his rattan frame to give it a frail, worn, and withered veneer. Looking to Khmer temple paintings for classical depictions of water, the artist manipulated his undulating form to resemble a rippling pool. The sculpture utilizes the same method as the larger water-themed work *Flow* (2007) that Pich made in response to the news of the Cambodian government's plans to fill in a large lake beside the artist's house in the name of private enterprise. "We're talking about a government that is run like the mafia. Anything they can sell, they will," says Pich.

Using a blowtorch and copper wire to shape his ceiling-suspended, freestanding, and wall-mounted pieces, Pich also creates a dangling menagerie of street hounds for the composite installation, *Untitled (Dogs)* (2007). While the large empty stomach symbolizes many Khmers' daily preoccupation of getting a decent meal inside them, the youthful-looking mutts with their long necks



Sopheap Pich, *Silence*, 2004, rattan and wire, 46 x 26 x 53 cm.

reinforces basic notions of survival and instinctive behavior that Pich believes is at the core of the present Khmer psyche.

The canine imagery arose in response to Pich's pet dogs that have all disappeared, snatched from his home for food. For the artist the situation is symptomatic of the violence and desperation that continue to blight Khmer society. "Dogs are the lowest of the low to Khmers," says Pich, "so I use dogs to symbolize the animal instinct inside us all."

The aesthetic appeal of the rattan and bamboo frames is found in the spatial ambiguity that the forms generate, as well as the interesting shadows achieved through the strategic positioning of light sources. Experiencing the work from both inside and out is what interests Pich, so much so that the 2004 tunnel-shaped sculpture *Hive* was constructed specifically for audiences to enter. On a deeper level, Pich uses this as a metaphor for Khmer society today, and how the oppression of the Khmer Rouge regime instilled a society where people were deeply suspicious of one another, where trust was destroyed.

"You don't know who's who; who is your friend? who is playing you? The father kills the son, and the brother kills the grandfather," says Pich. "Who is a government spy? Who are the common people?" As a reaction to this mindset, Pich's sculptures are clearly visible and nothing is hidden, all traces of process are evident and nothing is erased.

While the magnificent ruined temples of Angkor are a legacy to an ancient thriving society, Pich's art is an attempt to convey the fundamentals of contemporary Khmer community. In a country where a generation of educators was systematically eradicated under Pol Pot, the majority of Khmers today have only a rudimentary educa-

tion and a limited artistic awareness. Pich's utilization then, of familiar everyday materials, gives Khmers a level of awareness and accessibility to new art forms beyond their traditions. It also encourages local artists to

reservoirs, and roads.

While Pich is reconnecting with his culture, he views Khmer life from dual perspectives. As much as he considers himself a Cambodian returning home, it is impossible to dismiss his time spent abroad. Pich and other returning Cambodian artists bring with them wide artistic experience gained internationally. Their enthusiasm and 'can-do' attitude has had immediate impact on the outlook of local artists.

Sopheap Pich and female artist Linda Saphan, another returnee, have played a vital role in galvanizing contemporary Khmer art by organizing an artists' collective. Pich still has great respect for veteran Cambodian artists such as Vann Nath, the artist who survived and then recounted through painting the horrific atrocities of the infamous Khmer Rouge Tuol Sleng detention center in Phnom Penh. Pich is also an admirer of senior self-taught artist Svay Ken, whom he believes to be the most sincere artist Cambodia has ever seen. Δ

Steven Pettifor is the Thailand contributing editor for World Sculpture News and Asian Art News.



Sopheap Pich, *Untitled (Dogs)*, 2007, rattan and wire, dimensions variable.



Sopheap Pich, *Jayavarman VII*, 2007, rattan, wire, and rice sack, 50 x 57 x 31 cm.