

OF TEXTURE AND TACTILE MEMORY:
SITUATING SOPHEAP PICH'S WORK IN A GLOBAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

BORETH LY

It has been a long struggle for Sopheap Pich to find his voice and the right medium of artistic expression. This struggle to find his sense of self, an individual and cultural identity, can be attributed in part to the trauma of displacement. Pich was born in Koh Kralaw, a rice-farming town of Battambang, Cambodia on May 9, 1971. He and his family left Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge period (1975 to 1979) under which 1.7 million Cambodians were killed by the regime headed by Pol Pot. Thus, they left Cambodia as political refugees and finally settled in the United States in 1984. Like many political and economic refugees who were compelled to leave their homes, Pich seemed to suffer from the trauma of linguistic, cultural, physical and geographical displacement. This displacement was eventually made manifest in his work and shaped the specific media of his artistic expression.

Looking back, Pich recalls: "In 1993, I took school trips to photograph Mayan ruins in Mexico and Guatemala. It was during this time that I first realized that I had to return to Cambodia one day. It was the sound and smell of the forest and the temples at Tikal that conjured up so much childhood memories." He started making sculpture using rattan, bamboo, and metal wire in 2004. These materials are embedded in his childhood memories of growing up in the rice-farming community where he observed his relatives making fish traps, baskets and other utilitarian objects out of these very same materials.

Pich enrolled at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1990 as a pre-med student. At the end of the second year, against his father's wishes, he changed his major to art, concentrating in painting. Subsequently, he received his MFA in Painting and Drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999. Like many transnational and global contemporary artists of Southeast Asian descent, Sopheap Pich now has a kind of flexible citizenship, moving and working around the world. His sculptures and drawings have gained great visibility internationally and have been exhibited in museums and galleries on four continents. Institutions such as the Singapore Art Museum and the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia now own large pieces by him, while the King Abdullah University in Saudi Arabia has commissioned two major works, *Moon Bearer* and *Upstream*, that were recently installed there in a spectacular outdoor setting. He is also featured this year at both the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in Japan and the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Australia. *The Pulse Within*, now on display at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, marks his first solo exhibition in New York. Pich is, in short, not only one of Cambodia's leading artists, but clearly one of the rising stars in the global art world.

The tactile memory of the weight and texture of rattan and bamboo began to materialize in Pich's art and creativity in 2004, when he made his first rattan sculpture of a pair of lungs. Metaphorically, the artist's first sculpture signifies his moment of artistic break-through, when he finally found his formal language of artistic expression by using natural materials that harken back to his childhood working and playing on the farm. In retrospect, he was waiting to exhale, and he finally released his potent pulse of creativity and sense of self and cultural identity — a liberating moment for Pich.

Interestingly, his initial longing to return "home" was provoked by "the sound and smell of the forest and the temple at Tikal." One tends to think of memory as an experience that is purely visual and intangible. However, smell, hearing, and touch are also senses that register our experiences and thus create memory. I would like to single out touch and tactile memory as a particularly apt way to understand Pich's works. Not surprisingly, the title for his first solo exhibition is *The Pulse Within*. To take a pulse, one has to touch the body in order to make an assessment of the heartbeat. More important, Pich is interested in assessing the pulse of the Cambodian nation. In one of our exchanges, he related how he patiently accepted the current pulse of Cambodia, and that it has its natural momentum. One of the great challenges for him is how to expose what is underneath this surface, something he refers to as the "the pulse within."

One of the poignant pieces included in *The Pulse Within* is *Caged Heart*. We see a sculptural form shaped like a heart. The artist has covered parts of it with dyed burlap and imprisoned the heart in a cage-like structure. Moreover, we see lots of wear and tear, suggesting that this is not a young heart, but an old one. Placed inside the small cage are tools used by farmers and other manual laborers. Clearly, Pich intended it to have multiple layers of meanings. We can interpret this old heart as that of a good-hearted farmer or any blue-collar worker, but it could also be the heart of a wealthy, greedy, and ungenerous man whose heart is damaged and thus corrupt. Moreover, the metaphorical and linguistic reference to a good versus a bad heart (as a way to characterize a person's ethical and moral standing in society) is a common assessment in Cambodian culture. *Caged Heart* critiques and captures this specific cultural value. For instance, there is a saying in the Khmer language that "it is alright if a house guest feels that your house is small and claustrophobic as long as he/she does not feel that his heart is small and claustrophobic." In other words, a small space provides an opportunity for kinship, intimacy, friendship, but a suffocatingly small and claustrophobic space is not good.

Drawing from Traditions, Tensions, and Innovations

I visited Pich's studio, located in Beng Kok, one of the poorest parts of Phnom Penh, on August 11, 2009. During our conversation, I asked him why he wants to be an artist, and he replied: "I want to be independent and to have the freedom to make something out of nothing." When asked to name some of the artists whose work he admires, he mentioned Van Gogh and Brancusi, then went on to add: "I never know how to read colors. For example, 'red equals sadness' — all foreign to me. I prefer drawing and lines because they are far more expressive and energetic to me. Moreover, drawing is a Zen Buddhist process that required meditative focus and concentration."

Indeed, his sketchbooks are filled with drawings that serve as initial ideas and inspirations for his large-scale sculptures and installations. We also see traces of his drawings on the walls of his studio, where he plays with different dimensions, depth, and shadow. One sees this expressive energy in his hand-drawn lines in schematic sketches of ideas that are eventually transformed and materialized into sculptures made of rattan and bamboo joined together by metal wire. The result is a display of light and shadow that creates the effect of a volumetric space. A case in point is a huge installation piece, entitled *Raft*, that is now on display at the exhibition at Tyler Rollins Fine Art.



In the artist's studio.



Making bamboo strips in the studio.

Ways and Means: Making Visible the Politically Invisible

Raft is a critique of the displacement resulting from global investment and real estate development in the Beng Kok area of Phnom Penh, where his studio is located. *Beng Kok* means "Reed Lake" in the Khmer language (*beng* means lake and *kok* is a type of reed). Herbs and aquatic vegetables are grown and harvested by the local people. In addition, they fish in the lake, but this it will soon be completely filled in to make room for redevelopment. Each family living in the neighborhood has been given \$8,000 US dollars by an "unknown" real estate investment company to move elsewhere so that a futuristic and global city can be built there. Most of the houses located around the lake are built on stilts over the water. Pich's studio is situated around the edge of the lake. All these houses, including Pich's studio, will soon be demolished. *Raft* is composed of what looks like a tall building supported by what look like elongated boats or bombs. The artist has intentionally couched his formal language ambiguously so it lends itself to multiple readings. Naturally, the two boats supporting the tall edifice remind us of the soon-to-be filled in lake behind the artist's studio, where Pich and his two assistants, Sophai and Toma, watch their neighbors paddling their boats to fish and to harvest vegetables. Moreover, the water from the lake generates cool breezes on a hot and humid day while Pich creates his works. On the other hand, the two objects supporting the skyscraper in *Raft* could also refer to the bombs that were dropped during the American bombing of Cambodia and Laos. In fact, the metal wire that Pich uses to join and stitch rattan and bamboo strips together is made from melted-down shelf casings and unexploded bombs.



Pich with *Cycle 2, Version 3*.



View of Beng Kok Lake from the studio.

Pich informed me in one of our conversations that in his earlier body of works, he was very interested in achieving a perfection of form, texture, and surface – and so he rarely left his works unfinished or exposed. However, now that he lives in Cambodia full time, he has a different political and social perspective on the country. There seems to be a shift from the younger artist concerned with formal questions to that of an artistically mature and potent artist who is now able to detect and to assess the pulse of this nation. More significantly, he wants to expose what is underneath – “the pulse within.”

Like the wear and tear found in *Caged Heart*, *Junk Nutrients* makes visible what is underneath the tourist and investment-friendly image that Cambodia projects to the world. This piece is shaped like twisted intestines and coated with burlap. The intestines are left exposed, with junk spilling out of them. The junk consists of such items as plastic tubes, bottles, and other discarded materials that Pich gathers from Beng Kok Lake. The nutrients that one is supposed to find in the soil of Phnom Penh or below the surface of the lake are clearly not organic or natural but simply plastic waste. A conceptual parallel can be drawn between Pich’s desire “to make something out of nothing” and that of the poor folks living in the slums of Phnom Penh whose livelihood is sustained by collecting and selling this junk to recycling companies. In brief, Pich’s sculpture exposes the unhealthy pulse underneath the seemingly normal and tourist-friendly Cambodia that is increasingly displaced and destroyed by global investment.

One of Pich’s worries is that he has failed to live up to his father’s expectations because he has chosen to pursue his dream of becoming an artist rather than entering the more lucrative profession of a medical doctor. Clearly, he has never left behind what he learned when he was a pre-med student, but has simply integrated his knowledge of the human body and medical science into his art and creative process. The integration of these disciplines and professions is evident in *Suture*, which is composed of what looks like a pair of kidneys joined by a tube of some sort that has perhaps been sutured into place. Once again, as in much of the work in *The Pulse Within*, Pich has us look simultaneously at what happens within and what can be detected through surfaces.

Boreth Ly is Assistant Professor of Southeast Asian Art History and Visual Culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He was born in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and was educated in Paris and the United States. He is currently writing a book on trauma and the contemporary arts of Southeast Asia and its diaspora.