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SOPHEAP PICH in his studio in Prek Leap village, 2012.

WHERE I WORK SOPHEAP PICH

PROJECTS BY ELAINE W. NG FROM MAY/JUN 2012

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“This is my studio,” Sopheap Pich declares as we approach an empty 20th-century Buddhist temple on the rural outskirts of Phnom Penh. But he drives right past the temple and laughs at my incredulous expression. In an age when almost everything, sacred and profane, has a price tag, this seemed entirely plausible to me.

In fact, driving through the grounds of this modern temple, which is used daily by the villagers of Prek Leap, is simply a shortcut to his actual studio, which sits on the bank of the Mekong River. His building, although not ostentatious, stands apart from the other nearby homes and small buildings simply because of the elegant bamboo sliding gate. The other gates along the dirt path are made of either rusty metal or chain-link fencing.

The 41-year-old Pich, who fled to the United States from Cambodia with his family in 1984, has moved his studio twice since he returned to Phnom Penh in 2003. His first, longtime workplace overlooked Boeung Kak Lake, where fellow Cambodian artists such as Seckon Leang lived among the local fishing community for nearly a decade. Yet, since 2008, around 90 percent of the lake has been filled in and some 3,000 families have been forcibly evicted to make way for a controversial government-backed real-estate development project.

Pich then moved to the village of Prek Leap—though he never intended to remain there for long—and began using a studio that he found too cramped for making sculpture and installations. His face lights up when he recalls, “Fortunately, a restaurant down the road went out of business. It was a terrible place with loud music. The landlord told me that the other half of the building, a storage unit for a bottled water company, was also available. I thought about it for a couple weeks, and decided to take the entire building. I hope I can afford the rent!”

In the three weeks before my visit, Pich, perhaps Cambodia’s most internationally recognized artist, and his seven studio assistants, had been clearing out kitchen equipment, cheap furniture and old plastic bottle containers to make way for his home, which occupies one half of the building. And while Pich has only just moved in, it’s likely that it will always remain minimalist in style, much like his spare sculptures of the Buddha and of organ-like forms that have drawn the attention of curators and collectors around the world.

The other half of the building, as big as two tennis courts, is his work place. The slender-framed Pich, casually dressed in a plaid shirt and khaki trousers, walks proudly into the studio, turns to me and says, “This is my dream space.” All the doors and windows are open, letting in sunlight and the warm breeze of the river. A handsome Rottweiler and a small, mixed-breed weave between us as they chase two wild kittens from the village throughout his

atelier.

Over the last year, Pich has been working on a new series of rattan and bamboo works that recalls his original training as a painter. He unveils his latest finished piece, a three-dimensional geometric grid made from locally farmed dried rattan and bamboo; it brings to mind an enlarged, empty chocolate box or an egg carton. The work also evokes a series of monastic cells in miniature. In other works, Pich has wrapped sections of the grid in old burlap; he has titled them either *Floor Relief* or *Wall Relief*, depending on how they are hung. He drips colored beeswax, also locally harvested, over the burlap to create earthy tones such as burnt sienna and dark brown.

Several large “Relief” series works are stacked in a small side room. Pich explains that they will be included in the forthcoming Documenta 13 in Kassel this June, where he will have an exhibition space as large as his studio. I ask if he feels daunted by the prospect of filling such a large room with these cool, less referential works. “Actually,” he says, “I feel liberated because they are not identifiable. Since my first class with [the late painter] Ray Yoshida in Chicago, I’ve been looking for the ‘noise’ in painting. It’s something you can’t see, you can only sense. I think I finally found it.” In a quiet village outside Cambodia’s bustling capital, Pich’s noise is the loudest sound you cannot hear.

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