



COLLECTION
RESEARCH
PROGRAMMES
LEARNING
FIELD NOTES
BEYOND AAA
HOME

ABOUT US
CONTACT US
SUPPORT US
AAA in A

繁體 | 简体 | 日本語 | 한국어 | ไทย

JOIN MAILING LIST

FOLLOW US ON:

[MORE SEARCH OPTIONS](#)

DIAAALOGUE

[Past Issue](#) [Subscribe Now](#)

[Home](#) > [Diaaalogue](#) > [Apr 2009](#) > [Interview](#)

In this issue ▾

INTERVIEW

[Interview with Sopheap Pich](#)

Erin Gleeson, Phnom Penh based curator spoke to Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich about his works, artistic practice and background as well as his country.

Erin Gleeson (EG): Your sculptures are made mostly with bamboo and rattan - two of Cambodia's most ubiquitous materials, so there are very obvious associations to your work in the natural environment. My first association to your work was the pig-transporting baskets at Orussey market. The baskets' lattice creates a lot of space between the pieces of rattan, like your first large scale sculpture *Cycle* in 2004. I've also been present when others connect to your work, for example when walking along the Mekong River in Laos when my friend suddenly said your name. At the riverbank there were three beautiful rattan fish traps that resembled your piece 2005 piece *Upstream*.

Sopheap Pich (SP): It is important for me that people connect to my work. It is good if sculptures make people aware that there are shapes in their environment. It encourages them to use their memory. I prefer that my work does this than rather that do something that is political or definitive.

EG: Why?

SP: I think Cambodia is complicated enough. I don't feel I need to add any more subjectivity. I feel art should be about something freer.

EG: While Cambodia's recent history remains in the spotlight through the Khmer Rouge trials, journalists and collectors are beginning to seek out artists and artworks that explicitly comment on the Khmer Rouge. Is this history a part of your work?

SP: In some way, yes, because I make things that relate to my memory. If I don't make something related to my memory then my memory cannot be resolved. I decide that something is successful if it reminds me of something that already exists. When I make something and I can remember the experience by looking at the form then I am satisfied. I need to create memory goose bumps. It needs to feel real to me, rather than being illustrative.

EG: When a group of Cambodian artists were invited to write essays about their personal experience of the Khmer Rouge for the Heinrich-Böll Foundation's *Occasional Papers* series, you were one of two artists who survived this period who didn't describe it as brutal. Instead, you described the life of an ordinary child in many ways, for example your memory of your father teaching you to stay busy and be resourceful, such as by making small toy-sculptures.

SP: We are all born into a certain condition. My experience was not all that terrible. Either that or I was so immune to everything around me. I actually value those



Cycle 2, 2006, bamboo and rattan, courtesy the artist.



Cycle 2, 2006, bamboo and rattan, courtesy the artist.



Upstream, 2005, bamboo and rattan, courtesy the artist.

experiences, I am not crying about those times. They are things that happened when I was a child. To recount a childhood has a lot to do with stories about relationships with ones family. I think a lot of things that happened in my early years during the Khmer Rouge years are important to me now; they influence me and make me realize what I love. Living in desperate times made me create things. My father engrained in me the value of hard work and resourcefulness; these are survival skills. He was preparing me in case one day he would not be there. Without knowing it, I bet other people's fathers in different conditions teach them the same things. It is important to talk about those things and to remember them.

EG: You spent your early adult life in Massachusetts, where you earned your undergraduate degree in painting from Amherst, then continued with painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. When and why did you shift to making sculpture?

SP: The way I make my work and the materials I choose to make it with are a reflection of the conditions I am living in. Paint was fine in Chicago, but it does not reflect my environment now, or at least it doesn't work for me here. My sculptures are about existing in a space. I economize the making of a visual object. Paint was too general and offered too many choices. In a way, it feels like I don't have many choices when I make a sculpture. It is clear, yet my steps are very small, they are close together; I walk very slowly.

EG: Having departed from sculpture, are there other things you have retained from your years at SAIC and do they transfer to your work in Cambodia?

SP: The shape and form of my sculptures take signals and vibrations from Cambodia. But how I decide they are sculptures is when they meet the other knowledge that was accumulated at school. Ray Yoshida was my most influential teacher at SAIC.

EG : How so?

SP : Ray was about looking and listening and sensing what was being made. He would ask questions about what the perspective may be like if we were an animal or other creature. Consider a duck – how does the duck feel near the painting? Ray was about being creative when approaching a work rather than throwing your way of thinking at the work.

The important thing is not to try to make someone see something from one perspective. When we hear music we say we hear music, but we cannot describe this, really. If we are always drawing with our eyes open we should draw with our eyes closed. There are personal ways of approaching work. Ray taught his students to break down cultural barriers around making work; he asked us to be considerate. Before deciding if it is this or it is that, we should be free, and try to stay there. He was free.

EG: You seem to have kept this sense of thoughtfulness or freedom in your process and I wonder if being in your peaceful studio helps you do this.

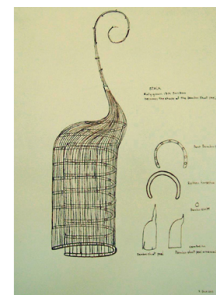
SP: I am on the lake and it makes me think that all artists should be on some kind of open water space. Its quiet, and I have no neighbours - at least on one side. I see the sunset, a kind of infinity. It is my saviour in the city. It might not be there soon [the Cambodian government sold it to a foreign company who has begun filling it with sand to make a satellite city], but lets not worry too much about it; nothing ever stays the same.

EG: What's your daily routine?

SP: I have two guys working with me. One has been with me for five years. Another one just started four months ago. On a typical day they show up before me to do their bit. I get to the studio at 9.30 or 10 and begin work. The new guy cooks; he buys whatever I feel like eating. I do ask them what they want but they never answer. We eat at twelve. After lunch I get more emotionally involved with my work. The guys leave around 5pm and I stay longer until 6pm. I work six days a week because I like to be there alone on Saturdays.



Stalk, 2005, bamboo, rattan and wire, courtesy the artist.




Sketch of *Stalk*, courtesy the artist.



Duel, 2008, bamboo, rattan and wire, courtesy the artist.



Sopheap (*middle*) and his assistants, courtesy the artist.

 Share this Page

 Print this Page

EG: This is your busiest year. You've been selected to show at the 4th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, the 6th Asia-Pacific Contemporary Art Triennial, and have your first US solo show at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York. What does your studio look like as you prepare for all of these shows?

SP : My studio is a complete mess! There's no room even to make a drawing; I have to clear a table. There is no free floor space. I always thought I had a pretty big studio but it seems really small now. We are preparing fresh rattan and working on three new sculptures. There are more materials than usual: burlap, plastics, utilitarian tools, etc.

One sculpture is a part of a bigger installation for APT. This one is about my memory when I was a child. I am recreating objects I saw in the landscape that were alien to me at the time. In 1979 in Battambang there were bomb parts, and artillery equipment. I didn't know where they came from. From the sky? From the war? They are weighted memories and they are also unclear. They are parts of engines and airplanes. They are bombs. Dead people. Burned people.

EG: Does this contradict your earlier idea that art shouldn't further complicate the environment in Cambodia?

SP: No, these are my memories. My memories are not a statement. My memories are vague.

EG: What about another sculpture?

SP: Another sculpture is the second version of *Jayavarman VII*.

EG: So far this is the only title of a work with explicit reference to Cambodia.

SP: Yes. When I first made the first sculpture I was excited that Jayavarman VII was recognized as the first king to come down from his god-like stature to the common people. Cambodians love this king; he is our favourite. He supposedly built canals and hospitals. Of course, we don't how much is true, but regardless, we like to think the good is true.

The shape of the sculpture is interesting. To make his 'likeness' I used rattan to replicate the mould shape that is used for casting his head. I used glass where the bronze would be poured. It is a symbol for early Cambodian medicine where suction was used with glass cups. Burlap covers the rattan frame because it signifies farm culture. We don't know what he looked like anyway. It is an anonymous likeness, so the only thing that is really Jayavarman about the sculpture is the title.

EG: I remember when you found the mould while searching for foundries to work with in Cambodia. Is your partnership with an Australian foundry proving to be successful?

SP: In fact I don't like the feel or sound of metal. I'm attached to the handmade and human character in my work. A stainless steel *Cycle* and a bronze *Upstream* are being cast now. What's nice is that the foundry I work with has the knowledge, technology and facility to cast my bamboo and rattan sculptures so that they resemble the original work as best as they can. You can see that it was once bamboo in the details in the metal. And amazingly the works retain their lightness. I want to make friendly work for the public. I want to see children awe inspired by the sculptures.

COLLECTION

Overview
Collection Online
Special Collections
Shortlists
New Arrivals
Visit the Library
Donate & Suggest Material
Ask the Librarian

RESEARCH

Overview
Archiving Projects
Research Grants
Residency Programme
Symposia
Publications

PROGRAMMES

LEARNING

Overview
Educators
Youth & Young Adults
Community

FIELD NOTES

Current
Past
DiAAlogue (2002-2012)

BEYOND AAA

World Events
Links

ABOUT US

Overview
People
Job Opportunities
Press Room

CONTACT US

SUPPORT US

Overview
Become a Patron
Endowment
Annual Fundraiser
AAA Patrons

JOIN MAILING LIST