



Sopheap Pich in his studio, standing in front of Big Being, a sculpture made from bamboo and wire, which will be on display at the French Institute. © Eli Lillis

## In the studio with Sopheap Pich

Fri, 10 February 2017 Rinith Taing

*The acclaimed artist's new exhibition, which opens this Thursday, is an intimate look at the influences, processes and materials that shape his work, and a rare peak inside his studio.*

Sopheap Pich's studio sits on the eastern edge of a plot next to a fish pond, at the end of a road lined with bamboo trees and lush greenery. Located in Prek Anh Chanh village, about 30 kilometres northeast from Phnom Penh, the artist works in a 2-hectare compound filled with tropical trees and a blooming garden isolated from noise except for the chatter of his 10 employees, and the occasional barking of his two dogs.

The spacious concrete studio, from which the smell of dye and burlap is perceptible from the outside, is filled with Sopheap's hand-made sculptures, renowned for the artist's use of traditional, locally sourced material such as rattan, bamboo, and burlap.

On the wall of the back corner hang the tools he uses in his craft: knives, axes, saws, razors and so on. Meanwhile, the studio is decorated with his collection of paintings, statues and other works from different artists, which in turn influence his own works.

"I bought this property two years ago. It is quite far from town, as I could not afford a big plot of land in the city for my studio," Pich says. "But I also wanted somewhere peaceful and quiet to work on my artworks."

Phnom Penh residents will have the opportunity to get a glimpse of the work environment of Cambodia's most internationally recognised artist beginning next week, through an unusual exhibition opening at the French Institute on Thursday that will showcase Pich's influences and his working processes.

On display will be not only some of his finished sculptures but also his tools, materials, and his collection of artwork, among which are a collection of Buddha statues that inspired the creation of one of his famous sculptures, Buddha 2.



A piece by Sopheap Pich from burlap and dye. © Eli Lillis

"In Cambodia, we often see artist's exhibitions without much context," Pich explains. "We see only finished works on the walls or the floors. Oftentimes, we don't get to hear what the artists have to say about how or why the artworks become what they are."

The idea for the show emerged from a conversation with Bernard Millet, the Cultural Attaché to the French Institute. The two discussed putting his studio on display and the idea of displaying "items one could find in it that weren't directly linked to his works but could show the richness of his imagination".

"Starting from this, we decided to showcase his previously unseen work illustrating his artistic process, [and] the materials he uses bamboo, stone, soil, pigments that he transforms . . . giving meaning to the works he creates," Millet says.

Part of Pich's motivation for the show is to show his methods in a country where contemporary art has made slow progress. Maybe by opening the doors of his creative process, he speculates, the concepts of experimental art can be more fully embraced.

"My feeling is that modern art is still in its infantile stage here. Perhaps, it might be more meaningful to see not only the final products, but their sources and materials as well," Pich says.

Pich has long resisted speculation about the "meaning" of his art, preferring the viewer to come to his or her own conclusions. But he does give hints of his inspirations. Born in 1971 in Battambang province, he lived in a refugee camp along the Thai border before ending up in Massachusetts, on the east coast of the United States, at 13.



A rack of tools, which Pich uses to construct his art. © Eli Lillis

"What inspires my work is my childhood experience during the Khmer Rouge and in the refugee camp, mainly the way by which we used traditional materials to make weapons and traps to hunt animals [like] my dad had taught me," he says. "Meanwhile, utilising such materials built up my intimacy with the natural environment, through seeking, boiling, cutting, bending, burning and dyeing."

One of his pieces on display will be Big Being, a sculpture made from bamboo and wire that is about the size of a shipping container, made of rattan and steel wire and shaped like the seed of a being tree.

"People should interpret my work differently, according to their own perspectives," he says. "For example, some people may think that the Big Being represents the growth of a tiny thing to a very big thing, while another sees it in a different way. Real art should be subjective, and we artists are just the making agents."

Although Pich got his start in the US, his work is firmly rooted here in Cambodia. He obtained his BFA in painting from the University of Massachusetts and his MFA in painting from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He returned to Cambodia in 2002, and two years later turned to sculpture after he found painting work "insufficient", as he wanted to "produce rather than paint something".

Since then, the artist has had solo exhibitions in galleries around the world, such as at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Tyler Rollins Fine Art gallery and Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation in Australia, in addition to many other group exhibitions.]



A stove for boiling paint in the artist's studio. © Eli Lillis


"Sopheap Pich is among the most influential international artists," Millet says. "[He] is an artist who works with finesse, whose relationship to his environment is incredibly poetic. What strikes me in each and every one of his works is that they speak both of the world and of himself, and to anyone who looks at them."

In spite of his success, Pich does not encourage young people to be artists but "to follow their passions" while doing what they are obliged to do for themselves, their family, and their people.

"You do not expect big money from artist's work, and it is not fun either," he says. "Instead, you will have to give up a lot. What I am doing now is both my passion and responsibility."

*"Sopheap Pich, from studio to fine art" will open at the French Institute at 6:30pm on Thursday, February 16 and will be open to the public with free admission until March 18.*

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