

The Importance of Craft: Sopheap Pich at Venice Biennale 2017 | COBO Social

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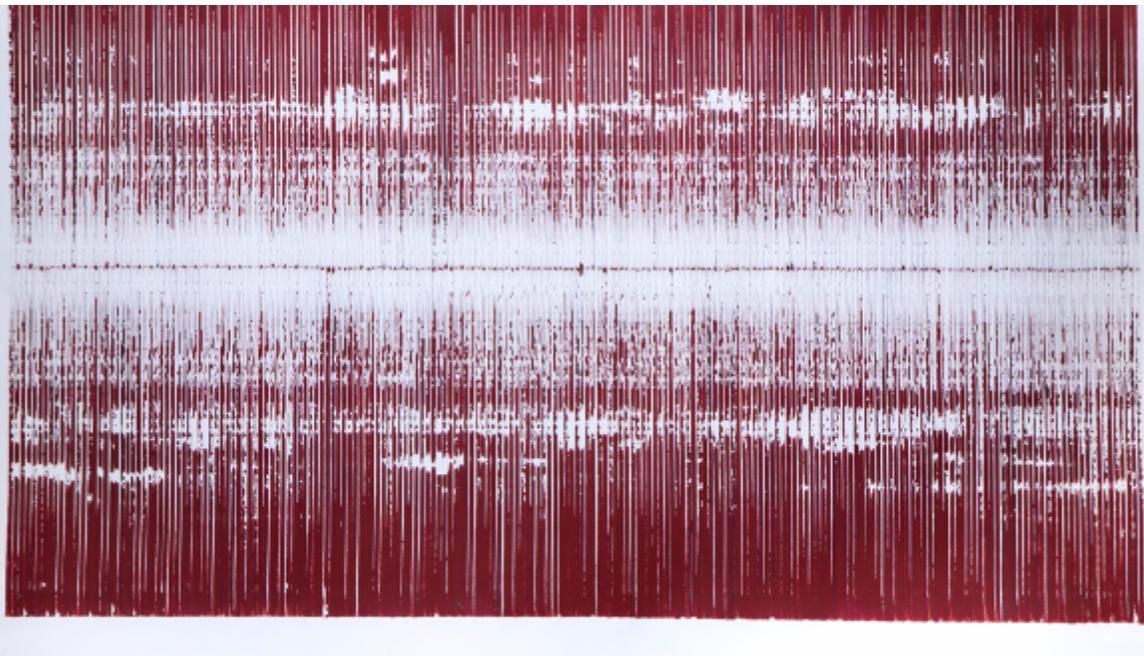


Installation view of Monument 2 (2016) from “VIVA ARTE VIVA” at the 57th Venice Biennale, 2017 ©Sopheap Pich

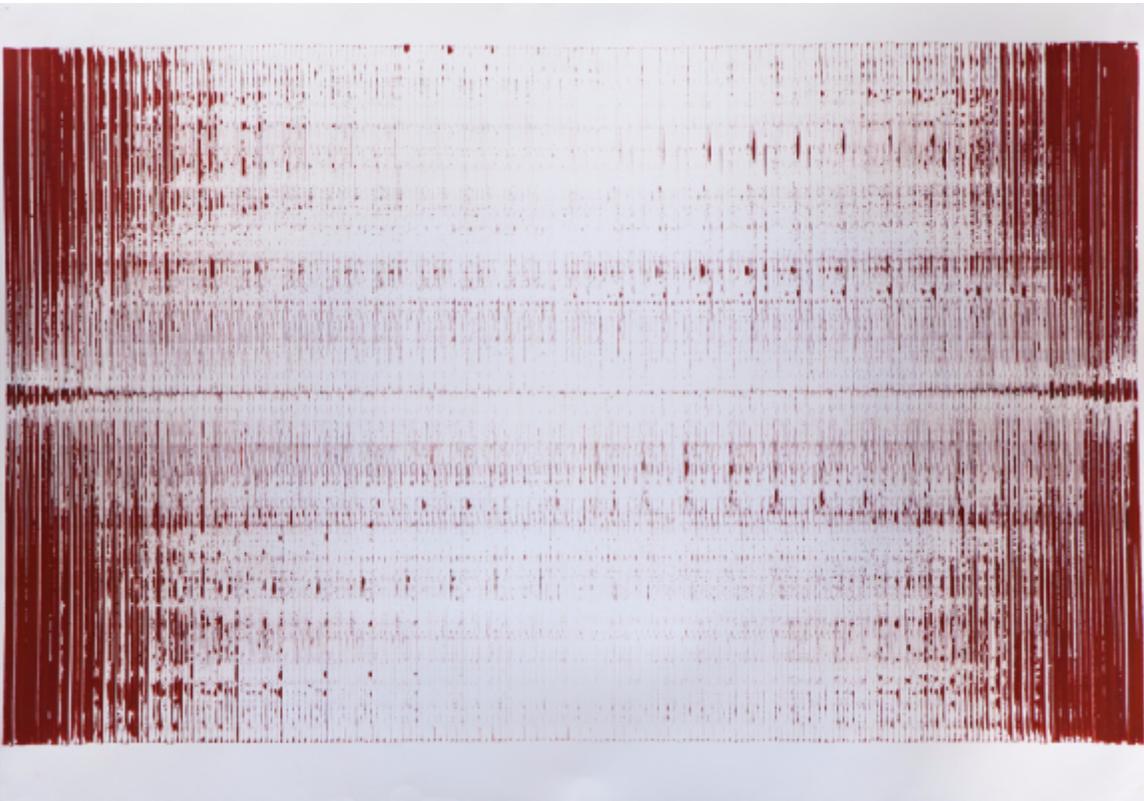


Installation view of Pich's work at Viva Arte Viva, Arsenale





Sopheap Pich, Pulse No. 3



Sopheap Pich, Expanses No. 4





Rang Phnom Flower 2, Rattan.



Installation view of 1979





Installation view of Sopheap Pich: Rang Phnom Flower



Sopheap Pich

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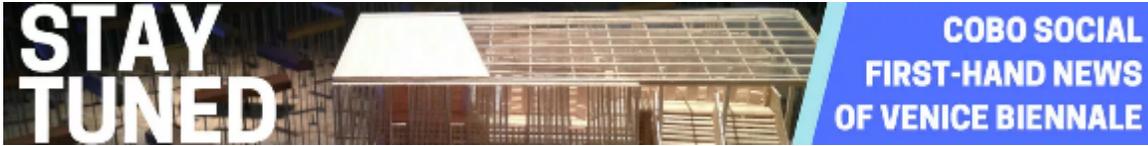
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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written

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Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich is part of the show “Viva Arte Viva” by Christine Macel at the Venice Biennale. We retrace the artistic vision of Pich to better understand how to look at his work in this international avenue.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist and 57th Venice Biennale



Installation view of Monument 2 (2016) from “VIVA ARTE VIVA” at the 57th Venice Biennale, 2017 ©Sopheap Pich

When artists from countries with a recent history of turbulence end up making formal work, there are only two possible reactions. The first is trying to ascribe their work to their country’s recent past at all costs. After all, it is formal art and it is contemporary, therefore we follow the law of the open work, namely, we can read any meaning or motivation in it anyways. The second reaction is to presume that precisely because the artist is coming from that country, he is taking a step back from the expected.

So what to make of Sopheap Pich, who is often referred to as “Cambodia’s most international artist”? Cambodia has seen so much happening, in terms of recent and less recent history. Is it ever possible that this Battambang-born artist growing up in the rural town of Amherst and Northampton, Massachusetts, a return-kid to Phnom Penh, won’t have anything to say about the Khmer Rouge period, the traditional spirit of his country or the societal changes of such a rich and complex human landscape?

With this in mind, one of the things Biennales – which notoriously divide artists by countries – should do for us is to clarify the relationship artists have with their nationality. They should position artists and their work into a conceptual framework which helps us understanding the spirit of the times. This is why I sought for such reflections in the dark corridors of the Venice Biennale’s Arsenale. Here I skimmed through the artworks scattered around the main exhibition of the show *Viva Arte Viva*, which Christine Macel put on in a mindless and disengaged celebration of art.

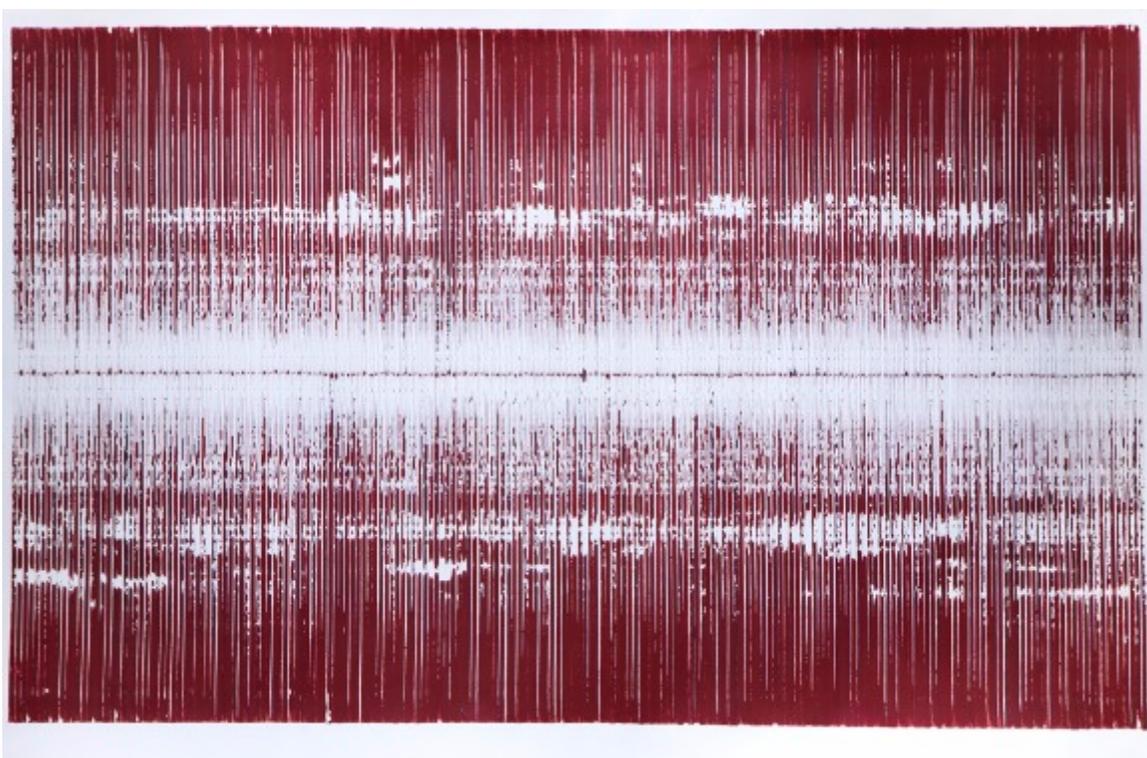


Installation view of Pich's work at Viva Arte Viva, Arsenale

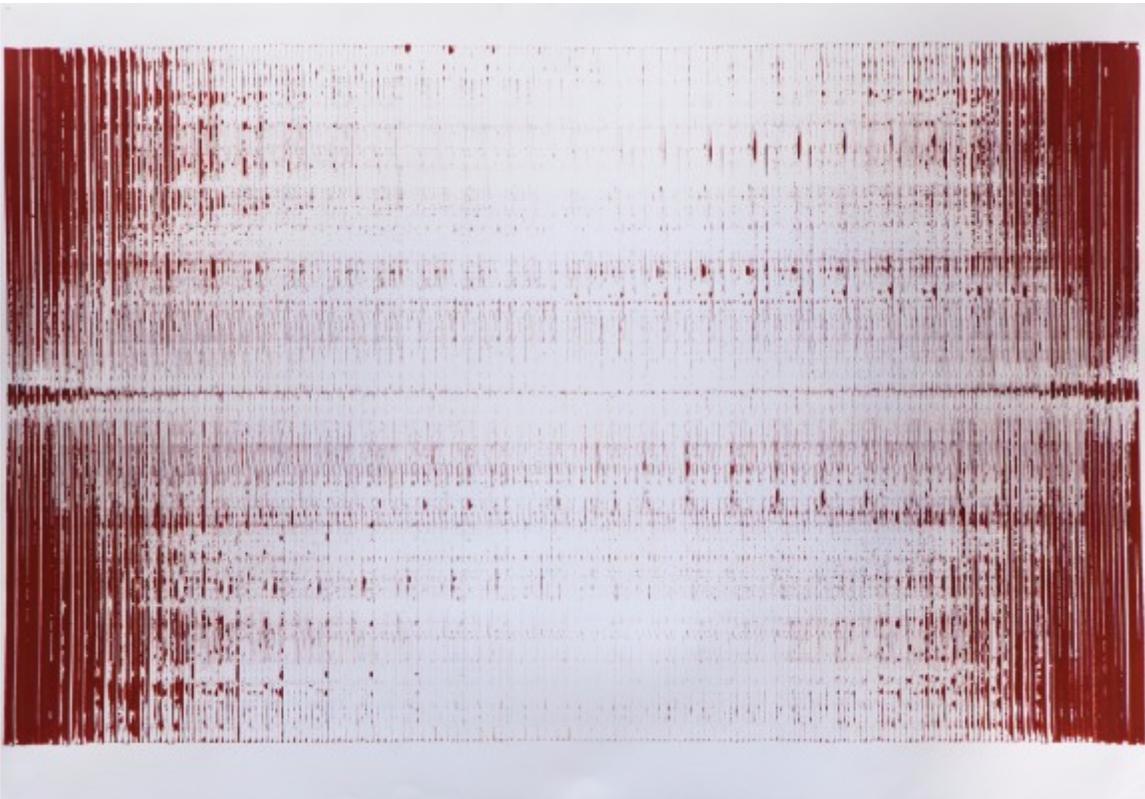
Faintly swimming in what felt to me like a big, messy cauldron, I looked for some Pich-solace. I was familiar with his huge sculptures made of bamboo and rattan, so I was expecting to encounter the artist's typical light monumentality. What I found instead was a series of drawings of formal nature called *Pulse* and *Expanse*.

Pich's drawings belonged to a series begun in 2012. The works were created by pressing a stick of bamboo previously immersed in a mixture of natural pigment and gum Arabic on a sheet of watercolour paper. The process was for the artist quite meditative and somewhat complementary to this work with sculpture.

"I find that making sculptures, while utilizing various ways and techniques that are different from drawing, are in many ways - meditative," says Pich. "Slicing rattan and bamboo strands with blades and tying wires for making sculptures is very meditative as well. You can also see that in the end, my work tends to have a kind of complete look to them, a kind of clarity in the forms; and this also requires a kind of meditation to arrive at."



Sopheap Pich, Pulse No. 3



Sopheap Pich, Expanses No. 4

The artist declares that “to make something was, at one point in my life, both therapeutic and necessary”. In the beginning he was informed by his medical training, so most of the forms he realized as sculpture were human organs, not really concerned with anatomical precision but rather used as a catalyst for reflection. To Pich, a liver can become a corridor. Two stomachs could be connected to suggest the notion of family ties. All the works have common themes: poverty, relationships between inside and out, fragility and monumentality, a sense of lightness, and metaphors of mutual dependence.

At the Biennale, the only sculpture the artist presented looked quite different from the bare structures Pich has used to. *Monument 2* – a 2016 work – is composed of sandstone, wood and rattan, and seems to be a pure experiment with materials. Indeed, while often Pich suggests a preferential reading of the work through titles, the series at the Biennale don't give us any hint of that.

The focus here seems to be the craft element, one that has always been close and dear to the artist's heart – a vision of craft which is not individual, but rather collective. This is not surprising, considering that one of the formative texts for the artist was *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight Into Beauty*. The text came at a time that the artist was trying to recuperate an Eastern ethos of making art, away from his American upbringing.





Rang Phnom Flower 2, Rattan.

The book contains the teachings of Yanagi Sōetsu, founder of the Mingei – a philosophy from the 1920s embodied in everyday objects and practices. Craft, according to Sōetsu, is beyond beauty and ugliness, and focuses on the spiritual dimension of everyday objects. Yanagi saw folk art as a manifestation of the essential world from which art, philosophy, and religion arise and in which the barriers between them disappear.

This is something to find also in Pich's approach to art, who is currently based on playing around with materials, freeing himself from the idea of what a sculpture needs to look like. Using "poor materials" like rattan, bamboo and metal wire the artist felt unburdened from art history: "Working slowly, I gave up notions of what the final work should be like and what the forms meant. I was concentrating on learning how to build a sculpture and testing my ability to bring something to the finished work."

To the artist, it is not through concept, but through materials that he gets to express himself more sincerely: "I'm just working through stuff. I'm trying to make something beautiful, something substantial. Whatever comes my way that I feel is sincere, that is mine—I keep it."





Installation view of 1979

When asked about the socio-political element in his work, Pich always say he's not sure if it is ever a conscious decision to revisit the past with painting and sculpture. "I've always thought that my medium has its own history, laws, and rules and is in me - these factors influence what and how I make my work. As a Cambodian-born artist, having lived through the Khmer Rouge and as a refugee afterwards, I think it is obvious to me that those experiences would find their way into my work."

In the past, for example for the 2010 Asia Pacific Triennial, the artist decided to address the issue directly with an installation titled *1979*. This contained eleven sculptural objects made with bamboo, rattan and burlap, along with five carved wooden buffaloes: "I wanted to tell a story from my childhood at the end of the Khmer Rouge period. My memory is very strong, so I have many stories based on factual events. But, as I get older, these stories become more allegorical or I find significance that informs my relationship to contemporary Cambodia. So *1979* is an attempt to visually describe what I, as a child, experienced."



Installation view of Sopheap Pich: Rang Phnom Flower

Far from being disengaged in his artistic ethos, Pich deals with socio-political themes subtly. In his recent solo at Tyler Rollins in New York, *Sopheap Pich: Rang Phnom Flower*, which closed this February, he was inspired to create rattan sculptures by the vine-like flower clusters of the cannonball tree ("rang phnom" in Khmer), which have a strong cultural resonance within

Cambodian culture and a personal significance for the artist.

As Biennale viewers we can decide to take or not to take into consideration Pich's "Cambodianess" when we face his most formal work not address nationality directly. Taking into account that not all the Biennales can help us think about the work of artists in a stimulating framework, we have to remind ourselves that reading art is no different from reading a person you have in front of you. Our interactions can be based on clues we draw from the person's look or personality. The important part is letting these observations being starting points, never conclusions.



Sopheap Pich

About Sopheap Pich

b. 1971, Battambang, Cambodia
Lives and works in Phnom Penh

Sopheap Pich was born in Cambodia and left the country with his family as a

refugee at the end of the Khmer Rouge's reign, subsequently settling in the U.S. Memories of his childhood experiences in Cambodia and a desire to reconnect drew the artist back to the country in 2002. Pich draws his materials, primarily rattan and bamboo, from indigenous sources and uses a traditional weaving technique. In [Morning Glory](#) (2011), acquired by the Guggenheim, the ubiquitous plant, often considered a weed, is rendered at monumental scale with rattan and bamboo. Pich has had solo exhibitions at Henry Art Gallery, Seattle (2011–12); and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2013). Notable group exhibitions include the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia (2009); Singapore Biennial (2011); and Documenta 13 (2012).

The 57th Venice Biennale “VIVA ARTE VIVA”
May 13 – November 26, 2017

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

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