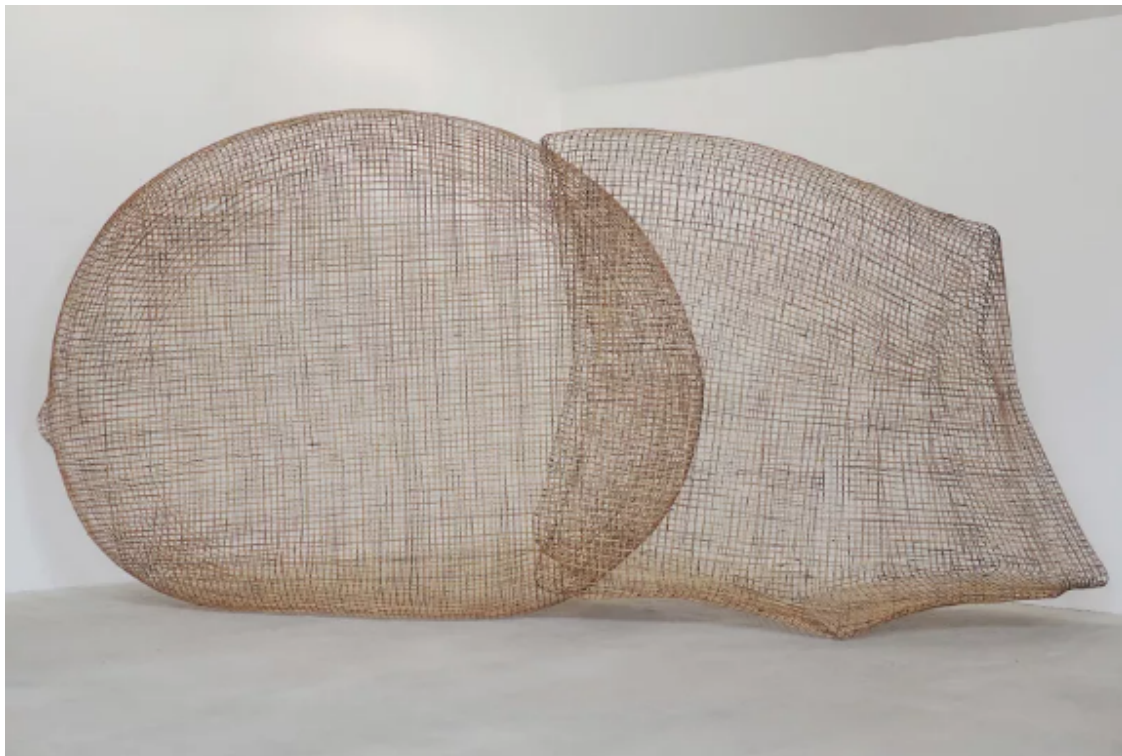


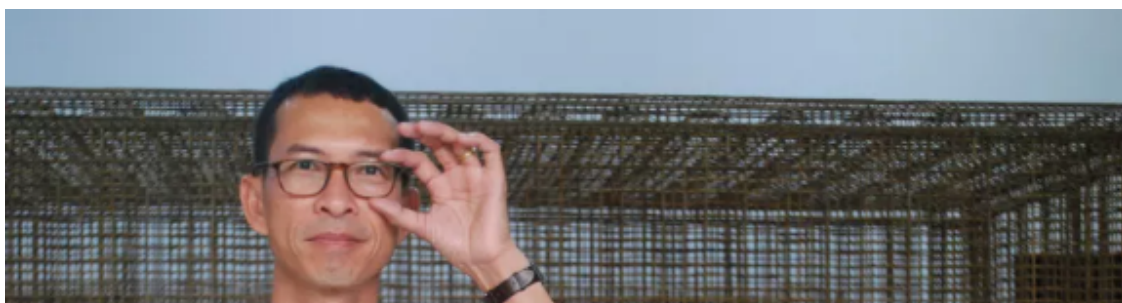
Sopheap Pich's Reflections on the Cambodian Art System

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Sopheap Pich, Big Beng, 2017, bamboo, wire, 590 x 270 x 140



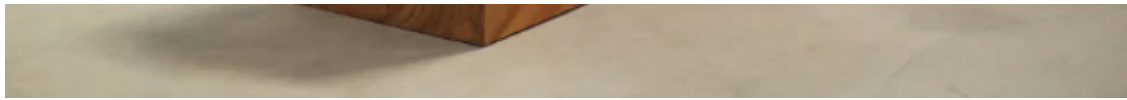


Portrait of Sopheap Pich

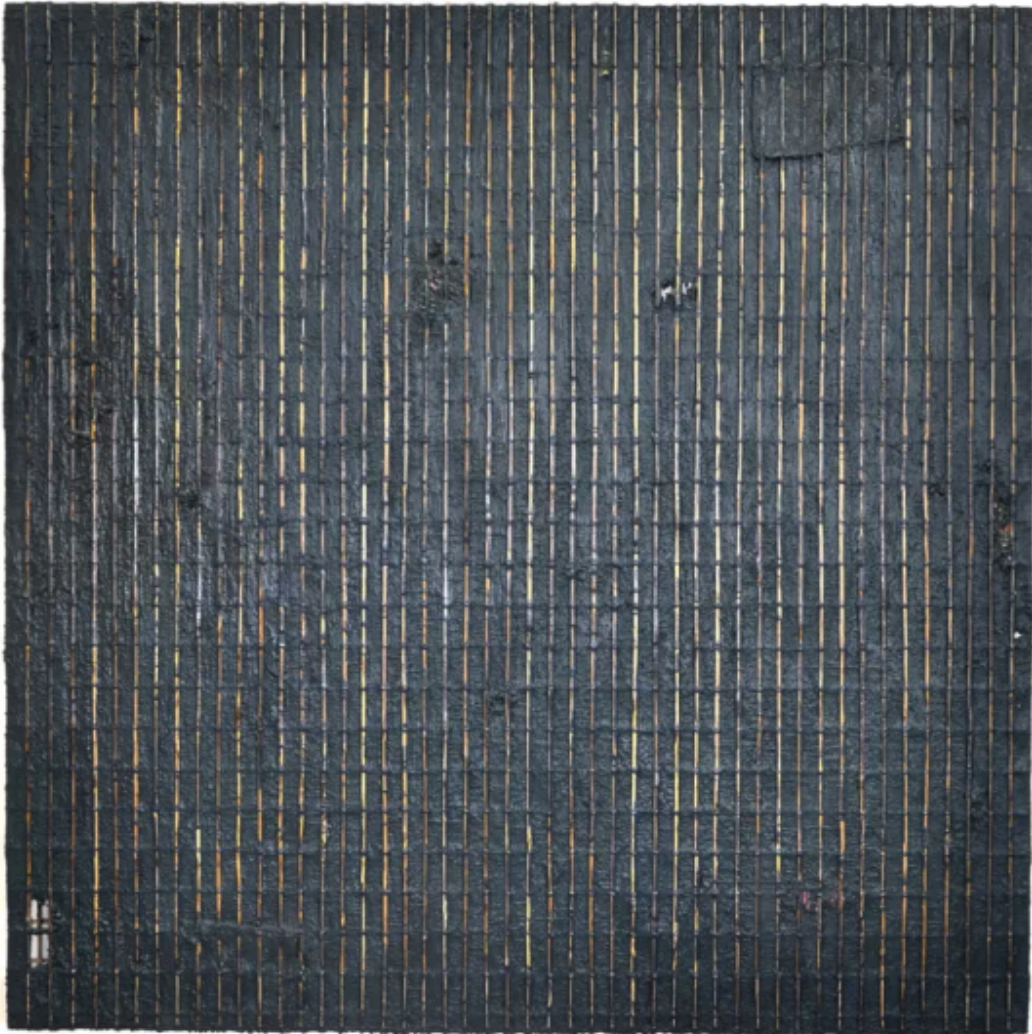


Vann Nat's work in 2005





Sopheap Pich, Monument 2, side view left.



Sopheap Pich, Lines in the Moss, 2017, Bamboo, rattan, wire, burlap, plastics, damar resin, synthetic resin, beeswax, oil paint, 201x201x10 cm

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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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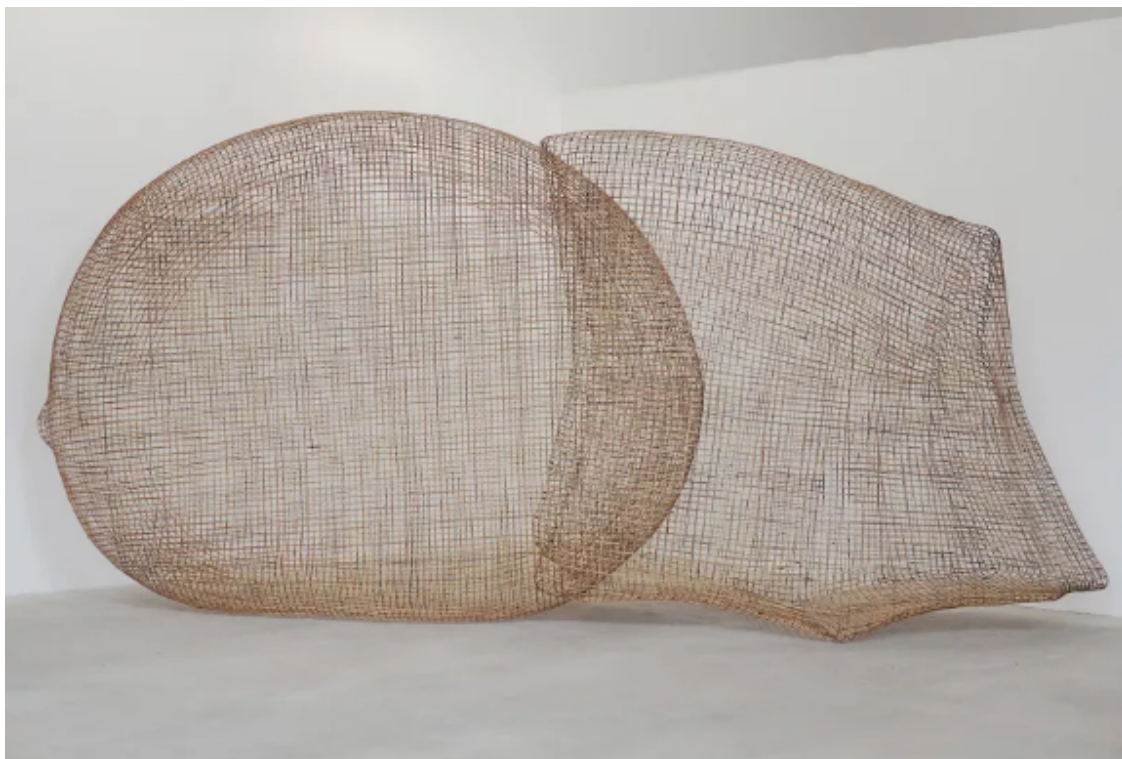
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Naima Morelli visited Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich in his Phnom Penh studio. He explained his view of contemporary art in Cambodia and what young artists need in order to grow the local art scene.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist



Sopheap Pich, Big Beng, 2017, bamboo, wire, 590 x 270 x 140

“You keep talking about the system. Now tell me, what is the system?” asked the artist Sopheap Pich with an inquisitorial tone. I was sitting in the artist’s office just outside Phnom Penh, next to his warehouse-studio where his giant rattan sculptures are situated. After he had given me a tour of his artworks, both old and new, we sat and drank a cup of green tea. ([We talked about his art and life story here](#)) Little did I know that I was about to be put in the hot seat, which was a pleasant surprise, considering the fact I had been in Cambodia researching the local art scene and meeting artists for a month by then, and my convictions hadn’t been challenged so far.

“Well, an art system to me consists of the relations and interactions between artists, curators, critics, galleries, the art market and all the other players,” I answered off the top of my head. Sopheap replied by mentioning the only three main art spaces in Cambodia and highlighting the almost total lack of figures such as curators and critics, which I

and highlighting the almost total lack of figures such as curators and critics, which I reckoned was true. I had come to Cambodia knowing that it had an emerging art system and being aware that the media sometimes gave a slanted, magnified vision of the contemporary art scene. However, I couldn't help but take a sociological look at the system – however small it was – and its dynamics.

As far as I could understand from our chat, the only art system that Pich considered to be worthy of the name was the international one, the one he has tapped into. This makes sense, looking at his education and background. The artist was born in Cambodia and left the country as a refugee with his family at the end of the Khmer Rouge's reign and subsequently settled in the US. After receiving a BFA from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and MFA at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he returned to Cambodia in 2002. He kept on expanding his relationship with the global art system, and today looks at local art through the lens of “quality”, in the Western sense of the word.



Portrait of Sopheap Pich

“Unfortunately, the rules of the game have been set,” says the artist when I propose opening up to different modes of quality to aim for. “We live in a world that does not accept that anybody can just put paint on a canvas and call it art, no matter how passionate or committed or misunderstood one feels about the work. This is not the case and never should be. If artists know about art history, they would not do that. They should also be aware that what is understood as art history is always being written and contextualised.”

When I suggest that Asia has a different kind of art history, so we should perhaps try to evaluate it using different parameters, he finds the notion of difference too simplistic. He does, however, acknowledge that we have to respect the specificity of different art

histories that arise from individual regions and contexts: “For example, Japanese artists have created and understood what the West calls “minimalism” quite differently. And, in some ways, these forms did evolve in their art history before it became a full-blown movement in the so-called West. What we now call Southeast Asia also has its own art history that is still being developed.”

Where do you think Cambodian contemporary art started from?

Some critics and writers have already touched on this. Ten years ago, there was Vann Nath and Svay Ken. Before that, it was Nhek Dim and others. There are also artists like Hen Sophal, Chhim Sothy, and teachers from the Royal University of Phnom Penh, but for various reasons, it is the current generation of artists that are considered to be “contemporary”. People associate this term with a handful of young people who work in the international scene now. But then we could also say it’s superficial to just call the work produced in the last ten years “contemporary”. The idea of contemporary art goes back a long way, for instance, to the pre-Khmer Rouge era in the ‘60s and ‘70s, where artists were crossing disciplines. They made album covers, posters, and popular illustrations, as well as paintings, sculptures and what we now call new media, including films and videos.

So you are saying that art was part of visual culture at large?

Vann Nath, for example, survived because of his skill as a painter. He was spared by the Khmer Rouge because of it. He learned from the Social Realist movement in Russia and Europe because it suited his purpose. But he’s not often considered a contemporary painter because of his subject matter and approach. However, I would say that he is. You would need to research more deeply to understand what his practice meant in its specific context and redefine conventionally understood terms. Academics like Ashley Thompson, for example, have written on this topic, but even she admits to having a hard time dealing with contemporary art because there seems to be a disconnect between contemporary art and more traditional or ancient forms that has to be reconciled.





Vann Nat's work in 2005

Do you also acknowledge this disconnection exists?

People sometimes bring a presentism into the way they look at work, and their governing criteria becomes taste instead of context. People can't seem to agree on what is kitsch and what is art. But we must look at how art connects to the past and understand its connection to the time when it was made, even if we are looking at it in the present day. In this sense, art history is critical. I'm not saying that all artists must know about art history to be good artists but there's a lot you can learn from it in ways that can help you. Many artists end up staying in the exact same place and don't make progress because they never learn or know what they are looking at. Seeking knowledge is what all artists should do and invest time in.

I agree but not many of the artists I have spoken to here have that awareness – let alone knowledge – of art history. However, don't you think we must take into consideration the fact that Cambodian artists are underprivileged in their art education, compared to art students in the West?

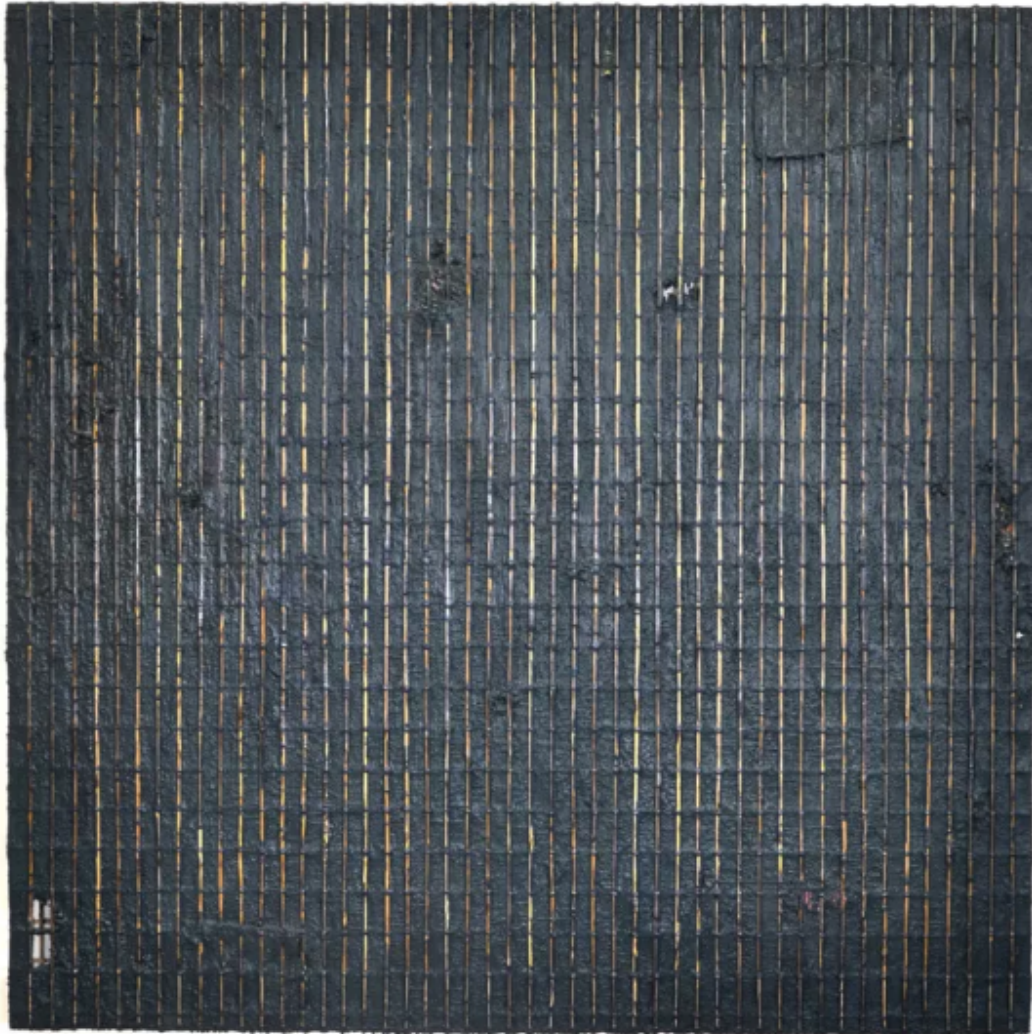
There are many issues that relate to a lack of something. I know this. When I first arrived in Cambodia, I had discussions about whether artists should or should not learn English. I was told by some people, both foreign and local, that Cambodian artists don't need to learn English and that the English should come to them. But then, I would say that Cambodia isn't like other countries where people just come to us. Knowing the English language gives you the chance to read books that are outside of your immediate surroundings, and it means you can communicate with others when you do eventually travel. So knowing another language doesn't take away your original identity, it enriches you.

Part of the process of being an artist is being a student of art. This will always be the case, no matter how in control you are of your work or your direction. I often compare myself to a racing car driver in a long, ongoing race. You don't stop driving and just push forward. Working is like that: you plough on. I try to absorb everything as much as possible. It's a practice.





Sopheap Pich, Monument 2, side view left.



Sopheap Pich, Lines in the Moss, 2017, Bamboo, rattan, wire, burlap, plastics, damar resin, synthetic resin, beeswax, oil paint, 201x201x10 cm

When you were just starting out as an artist, was art history something that you kept in mind or did art start in a more spontaneous way for you?

Well, I found something and I kept on going with it. That's the short answer. You just find something and you have to keep developing it. I knew a little bit about painting because I had studied painting, as well as drawing. Even though I am a sculptor now, drawing is still very much part of my practice. I think a lot of young artists never give themselves the opportunity to draw because it can be a frightening thing to actually admit that you

can't draw. Instead of dealing with that issue head-on, they muddy up their paintings with what they might call strong subject matters or concepts. But then, to what end? Of course, I am generalising, but I would argue that any exceptions to this norm are exceptions. Or to put it simply, one must learn to the point of mastery before you can say you want to throw that skill away or unlearn it in order to do something totally new. For the rest of us, we actually need to know something. It usually starts with drawing. And, of course, learning about art, art history, is just part of the process. For me, art has never been about trying to express myself. I don't try to express myself, but try to make an object. If there is expression, then it is through that object, not through me. But each to their own.

About the artist

Sopheap Pich was born in 1971 in Battambang, Cambodia. After studying painting and earning a BFA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (1995), and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1999), he established the artist group Saklapel and launched the acclaimed exhibition Visual Art Open (2005) in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh. Pich exhibited at the Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York (2009 and 2011), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2013), at the Ke Center for the Contemporary Arts, Shanghai (2008) and in many other places around Asia, Europe, Australia, and the United States. He currently lives and works in Phnom Penh.

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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