

Chua Ek Kay and the spirit of Singapore's streets



Local artist Chua Ek Kay did not fit neatly into convenient categories of Chinese or Western, traditional or contemporary. PHOTO: NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD

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His journey as artist shows that creativity comes not in neat boxes but through the embrace of messiness

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Innovation does not arise in a vacuum. Rather, creative ideas or insights are often borne by making connections across unrelated subjects or disciplines.

Management consultants like Roger Martin call this integrative thinking - the capacity to consider two opposing ideas at once, and creatively resolve the tension between them to generate a new idea that contains elements of

both but is superior to each. This is more difficult than it sounds. As Martin highlighted, "most of us avoid complexity and ambiguity and seek out the comfort of simplicity and clarity... We crave the certainty of choosing between well-defined alternatives and the closure that comes when a decision has been made. For those reasons, we often don't know what to do with fundamentally opposing and seemingly incommensurable models".

Such tensions are often felt by individuals in the creative fields. The late Singapore ink painter Chua Ek Kay (1947-2008) once remarked: "For the past few decades, whenever I work on an art piece, tradition and innovation often play alternating or intermingling roles. Sometimes they would take opposing stands, and at times they would be integrated as one. This complicated relationship and its complexity is hard for me to understand."

Chua's foundation in Chinese art and culture began very early. From the age of seven, he was taught calligraphy by his father. This grounding was reinforced later in school, and through informal lessons with local calligraphers.

Among his mentors in the 1970s and 1980s, Chua considered first-generation ink artist Fan Chang Tien as the most influential. Fan was trained in the literati painting tradition, where brushwork, like handwriting, was believed to express a person's moral character. Effortless skill was valued over laborious creation. And above all, capturing the spirit was more important than achieving likeness of form.

Chua also had a good understanding of Western art. Through his studies in Lasalle College of the Arts and later in Australia, he learnt the use of media like oil, acrylic and pastel. He also became very interested in artists such as Willem de Kooning and Anselm Kiefer, and movements like Surrealism, American Abstract Expressionism and European Figurative Expressionism.

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One of Chua's works, titled Queen Street 1988.
PHOTO: NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD

One of Chua's most enduring themes was Singapore streets. In the mid-1980s, he experienced an epiphany, whilst painting various scenic spots in China. During those trips, he met local artists who often spent months, rather than days, at a particular location to fully grasp the landscape they

were painting. Profoundly struck by what they said, Chua began to consider what and why he was painting. If he continued to paint Chinese landscapes, he could observe them only from a distance, by referring to photographs and books in Singapore. At the same time, he was also keen to create works that were "beyond tradition" and more "innovative". Eventually, he found a subject which had personal resonance for him and his audience. This would be the city in which he grew up in. In the 1950s, his family had lived in a shophouse along Upper Serangoon Road. In the 1960s, he studied at Catholic High School, which was located then in Queen Street. Chua later remarked: "There are no mountains and rivers in contemporary Singapore. I painted the landscape of our Singapore city, which for me, held truer meaning and significance rather than imaginary mountainscapes."

By focusing on local streets and their shophouses, Chua was excited by the possibilities of creating a "localised shanshui" (mountain-and-water) painting. He treated high-rise buildings as mountains, and shophouses as gentle hills. Parked cars, lamp posts and electric cables were used as compositional elements, similar to how trees and rocks were added to traditional landscape paintings. Chua also kept the xieyi ideals in mind, by concentrating on capturing the spirit rather than form. He made close observations of the streets, and ascertained their distinctive characteristics by making occasional quick sketches or taking photographs. Having digested what he saw, heard, felt and even smelt, he then sought to distil his impressions in his studio. The challenge was in deciding what to delete and retain, and which areas to emphasise over others.

For the next 20 years, Chua used the novel subject matter to explore alternative ways of composition. Ink was traditionally used to depict tangible static elements like mountains and trees, whilst the unpainted paper surfaces suggested fluid transient elements like rivers and clouds. There was no fixed light source in a Chinese landscape painting, and hence, no clear sense of light and shade. However, Chua often discarded convention, by using the unpainted white paper surface to suggest reflected light on walls, and black ink to convey cast shadows or darkened interiors beyond windows and doors. In this way, the sense of drama and ambiguity in such scenes was heightened. Above all, Chua wanted to capture a "sense of history". In the 1980s, after re-visiting his childhood haunts in various states of disrepair or transformation, Chua sought to convey the "passing of

time, and a sense of melancholy" in his paintings. As he had seen how the city had grown, thrived and waned over time, his impressions of these streets were "tinged with regret, sadness, nostalgia and uncertainty".

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Old Shop House (2001) by Chua Ek Kay. He treated shophouses as gentle hills and high-rise buildings as mountains.

PHOTO: NANYANG ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS

In his paintings, Chua often used sombre ink with occasional washes of faint colour. People were seldom depicted in those monochromatic paintings. Hence, a sense of alienation and ambivalence was palpable. Those were the spirit of the times in which Chua found himself at the turn of the millennium. He had developed a love for Chinese poetry and calligraphy since he was young. Yet, he grew up in Singapore where English was the main working language. This meant that he did not fit neatly into convenient categories of Chinese or Western, traditional or contemporary.

In fact, Chua's dilemma was reflective of the general alienation felt by the Chinese-educated in Singapore from the 1960s onwards, as government language and education policies veered towards the English-medium.

Inevitably, Chua's artistic journey was a lonely one. He had consciously sought to bridge or transcend Chinese and Western art, but this meant that he belonged to neither world. His works are shot through with suggestions of fragmentation and distortion, alienation and ambiguity. This is perhaps understandable, given the socio- historical context of the period of Chua's practice. Art historian T. K. Sabapathy had observed that the state's post-independence modernising policies in the 1970s and 1980s, such as public housing, had disrupted subtle networks of extended relationships based on social and familial connections. This was replaced by "a sense of separateness, anonymity and estrangement" which paradoxically led young artists then to create works that examined "questions regarding the self in relation to social, cultural and environmental conditions". In a similar vein, Chua's works lay bare the complexities and tensions which confronted artists who had to choose between the "two extremes of contemporary expression and traditional aesthetics".

Chua's artistic journey exemplifies the best of integrative thinking. Conventional thinkers tend to adopt an "either-or" approach, and would have made an unattractive trade-off between East or West, or tradition versus contemporary. In contrast, integrative thinkers like Chua embrace life's messiness and ambiguities, trusting that the process of working through these complexities would generate new perspectives and solutions.

- **The writer is Director, Curatorial, Collections and Education at the National Gallery Singapore.**

- **The exhibition Chua Ek Kay: After The Rain is on display at the National Gallery Singapore until Oct 30. The paintings mentioned in this essay are from the National Collection.**