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Chua Ek Kay: Singapore's Second-Generation Chinese Ink Artist

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Revisiting the renowned 'Street Scene' and 'Lotus Pond' Series

By Chua Chingyi

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Chua Ek Kay, 'Dream of the Lotus Pond', ink and colour on paper, 65 x 179cm. Image courtesy of Art Agenda, S.E.A.

Born in 1947, Chua Ek Kay was part of a large cohort of 20th century diaspora of Chinese artists who spent their formative years in China, but emigrated later on. Chua's family arrived in Singapore in 1953, and settled into their new home in Chinatown's Teochew Street. Like the others, his diasporic identity allowed external ideologies and inspiration to influence personal progression. The artist was taught calligraphy by his father from the age of seven, and subsequently went under the tutelage of Fan Chang Tien, a first-generation ink painter of the literati painting tradition. He also gained interest and trained in



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Western art techniques, through his studies at Singapore's LASALLE College of the Arts and later on in Australia.

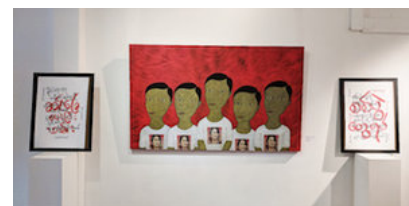
Considering his exposure to various cultures, Chua's practice did not cater to, or insist on a mono-cultural lineage. Perhaps maintaining his main medium of choice in ink painting had to do with his "cultural genes", but he actively extended his oeuvre, taking into consideration the ideas of Western modernist aesthetics in his practice.

Chua's artistic trajectory progressed in multiple different courses because of three individuals whom he looked up to as points of references and inspiration. They are Shitao (1642-1707), Huang Binhong (1865-1955) and Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010). Using traditional aesthetics as building blocks for the innovation of modern ink painting, Chua's study of their artistic practices led him to pursue both a minimalist and a maximalist direction, toy with sentiments of the traditional and the modern, and incorporate various brushworks and aesthetic theories into the creations of his prolific career.

In the 'Chua Ek Kay: After the Rain' exhibition catalogue for the show that took place at the National Gallery Singapore in 2016, it was noted that the artist was of the notion that tradition and innovation continuously alternated and interacted with each other during the course of his artistic practice, either standing in opposition to each other or being integrated as one. His resistance towards the expectation or obligation to produce paintings that were governed by conventions led him to advance certain aspects of Chinese ink painting towards fresh frontiers.

Ideological and pictorial complexities are observed in the artist's 'Street Scenes' series of Singapore subjects. The series, which began in 1985, suggests Chua's personal interest in recording Singapore's history, representing both a celebration of the scenes of the present and simultaneously signaling its impending demise. His pictorial interests were not shaped by the classical aesthetics of the picturesque, but focused on textured facades and walls, presenting fresh angles and viewpoints.

Chua's careful selection of mundane, ordinary scenes from the streets of Singapore were closely linked to his personal life and emotional experiences. He then exerted himself on formal grounds, painting freely



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with fluid motions unencumbered by the burdens of any tradition, finally completing them in a manner almost similar to abstraction.



Chua Ek Kay, 'Old Shophouse on North Canal Road', 2003, ink and colour on paper, 45 x 45cm. Image courtesy of the Estate of Chua Ek Kay.

In 'Old Shophouse Along North Canal Road' (2003), Chua's fascination with the urban landscape is conveyed. The most tantalising aspect of his paintings is the ink play, by capturing the element of light, for example. Traditional Chinese ink paintings never had a clear light source, and Chua boldly discarded traditions by using the unpainted paper surface to suggest light, and black ink to suggest shadows, heightening the sense of contrast and theatricality within his scenes. These visual considerations were all made with an intention of conveying the artist's personal responses towards his environment, rather than the rendering of the existing physical architecture.

With Chua's purpose to "capture the lapse of time which represents, for (him), a history of sights, of (his) visual experiences", small segments of Singapore's evolution, from a remote island to one of the world's busiest maritime cities, were captured in his ink paintings.



Chua Ek Kay, 'Lotus Pond' Series, 2006, ink on paper, 99 x 146 cm. Image courtesy of Art Agenda, S.E.A.

Chua's poetic sentiments also led him to favour the subject of the lotus, culminating in his 'Lotus Pond' series. Through the lotus, Chua strove to "to depict its world of fragrance, flawlessness and clear transparency, to express a sacred space of happiness and sadness." Again, the integrated relationship between tradition and innovation is reflected within this series, with Chua painting the lotuses in two iconic styles.

The first is the *xieyi* (painting the idea) style, which is semi-abstract and often used to portray a close-up view of the blossoms, stems and leaves. The other style shows a view from a distance, painted in an almost impressionistic manner. The two variations of his 'Lotus Pond' series reiterate the understanding governing Chua's working ideology: that intercultural exchanges are natural phenomena and that there is no singularity in the course of influences.

In 'Lotus Series' (2006), his selective strokes that connote lotus stems and impressions of light abbreviate the scene of the lotus pond in a minimalist configuration. Dry and wet brush marks project varied

textures and density of the lotus pond. Chua's lightness in the pressure of the painted strokes and the variations of tonality subjects the imagery of the lotus pond to increasing levels of simplification and abstraction, conveying a lively pond-scape.

Chua's art springs from recording sensory impressions of his physical environment from his lived experiences. The co-existence of Eastern traditionalism and Western modernism is the hallmark of Chua's ink paintings, and his practice is tinted with an urgency to preserve fleeting sights and memories of the distant past. The artist's reflection of his own ink practice and its relevance in a globalised, contemporary context places Chua at the forefront of Singapore's artistic identity and the country's ink painting tradition.

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