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AFTER THE RAIN CHUA EK KAY

REVIEWS BY MARYBETH STOCK FROM MAR/APR 2016

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CHUA EK KAY, *Noon at a City Corner*, 2001, Ink on paper, 98 × 90 cm. Collection of John and Cheryl Chia. Courtesy National Gallery Singapore.

The recently opened National Gallery Singapore (NGS) organized “After the Rain,” the first major historical survey by a national museum of Singaporean artist Chua Ek Kay (1947–2008). This exhibition is part a series focusing on the traditions and divergent aesthetics of ink painting and calligraphy in Southeast Asia. Chua had a classical education grounded in seal-carving, poetry, ink painting and calligraphy. In 1975, he became a student of Fan Chang Tien, a pioneering Chinese–Singaporean ink artist and proponent of the *xieyi* style, which expresses the artist’s character and spiritual essence through loose brushwork and exaggerated form. Later in his life, Chua also integrated Western styles and mediums into his practice. The ink paintings in “After the Rain” articulate his idiosyncratic spirit of *xieyi* as consonant with the spontaneity of modernism.

Chua appropriated impressionist and abstractive elements in his ink-play, which he combined with dimensions of tone and color, as seen in *Kakadu* (1998), a work conceived after the artist observed Australian aboriginal cave paintings. In the painting, complicated, vaguely figurative gestures are layered in milky and sandy ochre tones, while inked “incisions” of line force the work into a flowing rhythm. With *Portrait of a Woman* (1993), the artist balanced discreet fields of white space, pigment and wash, on which he injected jittery and insistent calligraphic shards. Meanwhile, an elusive cubist perspective is insinuated in *Monsoon: Wind Blows Over the Indian Ocean* (1998), an ink and color painting of an ancient Buddhist stupa. The artist created dozens of individual sketches of graceful bas-relief stone sculptures and reassembled them as a singular “collage,” wherein the stupa is depicted from multiple viewpoints.

As Singapore underwent modernization in the 1970s and ’80s, Chua painted the streetscapes where he grew up, chronicling the loss of his heritage as architectural fragments of memory. Some images are straightforward—construction hoardings around old buildings, for example—while others are more allusive, such as *Chinatown – Zen Mountain* (1992). The latter is a reference to the craggy landscapes often depicted in classical Chinese ink paintings, which are conceived in Chua’s work as rough, cliff-like shop-house facades balanced upon a heavy mass of negative white space. These streetscapes are inspired by the environment of Chua’s youth, which perhaps explains the childlike perspective of many of the paintings, in which observers gaze upward at shadowed windows and looming walls. Chua claimed his intention was to capture a “history of sights” informed by feeling, rather than literal rendering. His thick, overwhelming brushwork in *Noon at a City Corner* (2001) suggests congestion, exasperation and thwarted memory. Chua consistently applied similarly solid, angular brushstrokes in his paintings, which were countered only by the mobility of the ink itself. Occasionally an abstract, saturated ink wash resolves unexpectedly into realistic sunlight on old wood grain. Still, the

anatomy of architecture remains at the forefront of Chua's streetscapes, as seen in *Blue Window* (1989)—a Mondrian-esque study with flat, strong planes of ink and color—and the awkward bird's-eye view of rooftops in *A Composition of Angular Forms* (1989).

Chua remarked that, rather than break completely with tradition, he aimed to “create new space and new meaning” and, in so doing, he relied often on skewed perspective to redirect ambiguous pictorial space into abstraction. His dizzying *View from a Cliff* (2000) scans upward into a pane of blue sky (or is it down into blue water?) flanked by the textural contours of rocks; and many of Chua's paintings of lotus ponds look down directly into the water's depths. In *First Light Lotus Pond* (2007) Chua asks viewers to interpret reflection and undulating shadow in the negative space and the fluid, transparent pigments of his canvas.

The NGS exhibition takes its name from Chua's large-scale painting *After the Rain* (2004), featuring an ancient Chinese “water village.” Here, Chua nearly obscures the village's picturesque, narrow canal and uneven walls in blurry sweeps of dynamic, watery ink. Their impatient, opaque vigor could imply drenched shadow, or sun-lit reflection—or some other more personal space—whose meaning may only be inferred as Chua's modern *xieyi* spirit.

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