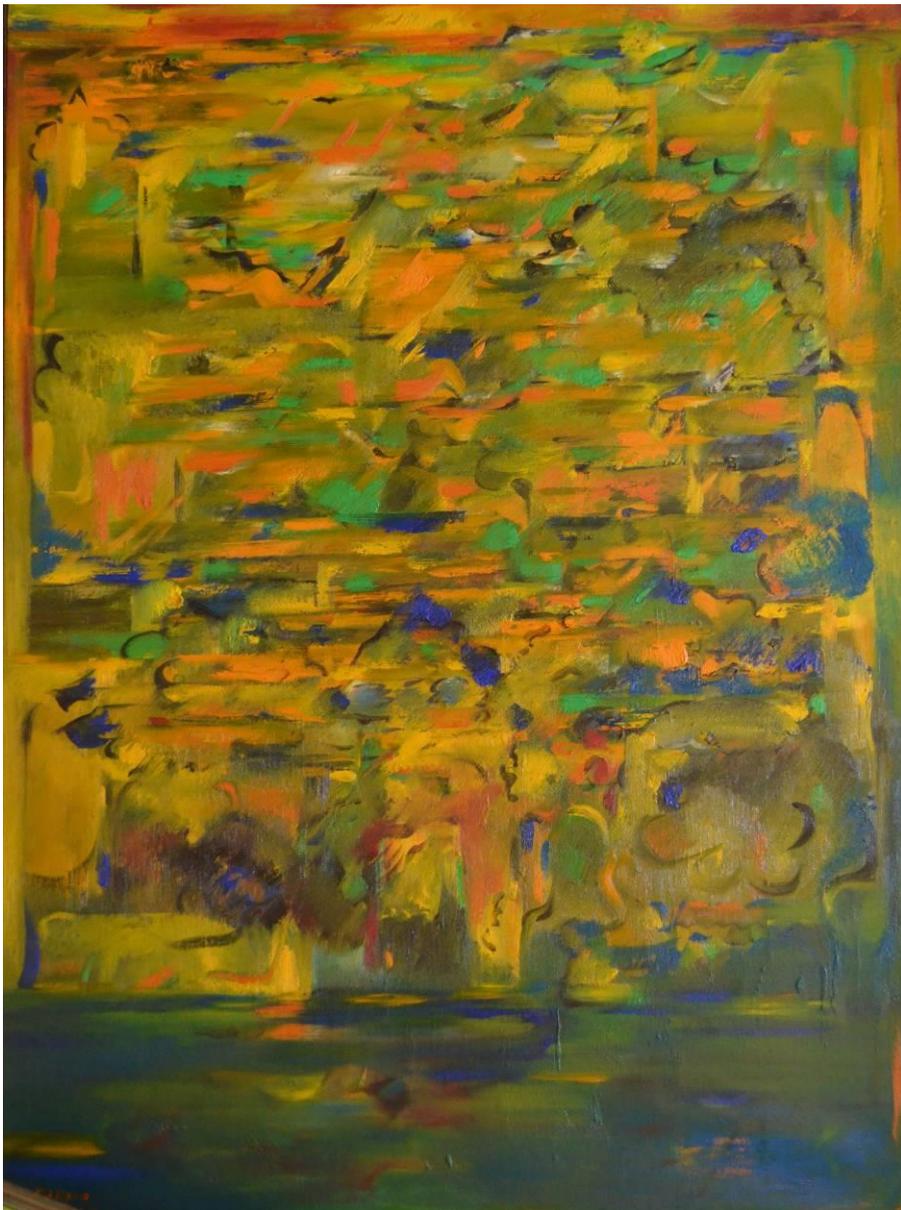


## Spirit of Abstraction

Paintings by 3 Local Artists

Mohammad Din Mohammad, Wong Keen & Yeo Hoe Koon



## *Spirit of Abstraction*

### **Paintings by 3 Local Artists: Mohammad Din Mohammad, Wong Keen & Yeo Hoe Koon**

Between the East and the West, formal artistic discourses in abstraction commenced at vastly different periods, amounting to different impacts and spheres of influences.

Abstract expression was significantly present throughout the ancient Chinese culture and was highly valorised as a formal writing system evolved. The Chinese calligraphic ideograms, for instance, could be considered one of the oldest and earliest forms of artistic abstraction. Additionally, the tradition of Chinese ink painting has for centuries refined the art of abstraction with its progressive focus on spiritual reflection, gesture of form and value of negative spaces; evoking presence through minimal content, and at times, absence. In the Islamic world, abstract expression took roots since ancient time when the contentious prohibition of figurative representation as a doctrine against idolatry fuelled an early functional and emotional need for an abstract visual language that also translated to an elaborate artistic culture.

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when Western artists such as Paul Cezanne, Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin endeavoured to reflect on a two-dimensional surface, the intensity of human emotions and ideals applied to the visual impression of the natural world, the Western art world confronted a tremendous paradigm shift in the discourse of subject matter and representation; generations of artists engaged in the struggle against centuries-old foundations upon which the European art traditions laid. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century the resounding progression toward pictorial abstraction was fruitfully realized in the Western art world.

Singapore, as a migrant society standing at the juncture between the East and the West, has naturally fostered artists who are keen to engage the dialectics of abstraction within a localised consciousness. With *Spirit of Abstraction*, we present three distinctive styles of abstract painting by Singapore artists Mohammad Din Mohammad, Wong Keen and Yeo Hoe Koon; and illuminates how the reconciliation of an East-West identity as well as East-West art traditions plays an integral role to the respective oeuvres of these local artists.

### **Mohammad Din Mohammad**

Born in Malaysia in 1955 (d. 2007), Mohammad Din Mohammad moved to Singapore as a 2-year-old and began immersing in art and craft at the tender age of 5. He harboured the ambition of becoming an artist since young, and his artistic inclination was strongly encouraged by his art teacher in secondary school, Lai Foong Moi. In his youth, Mohammad Din performed music in a band at commercial venues to earn money for financing his art studies at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts where he majored in Western Painting.

While Mohammad Din's early paintings are steeped in the tradition and spirit of Nanyang art style - comprising mainly oil compositions of romanticised Malayan landscapes and idyllic pastoral sceneries - his later work demonstrates a strong preoccupation with spiritual inquiry and the mystical dimension of Islam. In addition to his Sufism-inspired paintings, Mohammad Din was a multi-disciplinary artist well known for his sculptures and Malay theatre performances.

In addition to being a multi-disciplinary artist, Mohammad Din attained the title of a Silat master in his youth, and later trained to become a traditional Malay healer well-versed in ancient acupuncture massage and the medicinal world of Malay herbs and minerals. His unique artistic expressions exemplify his observations of both spiritual and natural laws. For instance, the warm, exuberant colours applied in his acrylic paintings serve more than just aesthetic purposes; they relate to the "therapeutic value of colour" and are capable of generating positive chemical and spiritual energies in the viewer.

Mohammad Din explained that, "A commitment to understanding myself through submission to Almighty God and his divine laws is the inspiration for my art." In his later years, the metaphysical transcendence in his painting evolved into a meditative practice that dispensed the need for paint brushes altogether. Instead, acrylic paint colours were squeezed directly from their tubes; and, with enlightened vision and deft hands, his abstract composition emerged under the guidance of the Almighty God, conveying the simplicity and beauty of the natural order. As seen in the work below, the urgency and virility of Mohammad Din's abstract expression clearly demonstrates the artist's inspired state of mind as he sailed along the passage of spiritual inquiry.



Mohammad Din Mohammad, Ritual Feasting, 2000, 90 x 90 cm

## **Wong Keen**

Born in Singapore in 1942, Wong Keen's prodigious talent in painting was evident in his early years. Shortly after his first solo exhibition at the then National Library of Singapore at age 19, he departed for America to study at the prestigious Art Students League of New York. Widely acknowledged as the first Singaporean to have forayed into the field of Abstract Expressionism, Wong Keen's works, with their unique and enthralling visual poetics, have captured the hearts and imaginations of critics and collectors both locally and abroad.

Having lived and worked in America for over fifty years, Wong Keen's artistic style is an embodiment of cross-cultural confluences: inspired by the elegance and expressiveness of Chinese ink painting and calligraphy, as well as his fascination with Abstract Expressionism.

During his years at the Art Students League of New York, Wong Keen gained first-hand insights into the essentials of Colour Field theory from seminal figures such as Hans Hoffman; he also observed the compositions of Ad Reinhardt, whose exuberant paintings utilise low-key contrast between colours to emanate form and detail.

In *Desire*, Wong Keen masterfully synchronises a vivid range of overlapping colours to create a palpitating composition in which various juxtaposing tones appear to suffuse within yet bounce off each other at the same time.



Wong Keen, *Desire*, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 199 x 122 cm

Nothing defines Wong Keen's visual language more fundamentally than the element of gesture. In whichever medium or subject matter, his visual poetics are realised through solid, gestural brushwork that is deft and expressive enough to be read in its own terms. This approach is, perhaps, unsurprising since Wong Keen readily cites *Bada Shanren*, Willem de Kooning, Francis Bacon and Richard Diebenkorn among the creative figures whose oeuvres have profoundly influenced his lifelong practice.

*At the Edge of Dawn II* borrows the elegant shape of the lotus to express an evocative play of colours and amorphous forms. Layers of thin oil colours have been built up subtly to generate spontaneous currents of overlapping hues; and black is utilized to varying intensity to balance against the unbounded warmth of yellow.

The eloquence of Wong Keen's bold, gestural strokes and the fluidity of space and movement underline his brilliant crystallization of the expressive prowess that defines Chinese calligraphic brushwork as well as the idiosyncratic yet emotive spirit so often witnessed in the Abstract Expressionist mode of execution.



Wong Keen, *At the Edge of Dawn II*, 1998, Acrylic on canvas, 124 x 187 cm

## Yeo Hoe Koon

Born in 1935 in Hainan, China, Yeo Hoe Koon relocated to Singapore at a young age and studied at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1957. Following in the footsteps of NAFA's seminal art figures such as Georgette Chen, Liu Kang and Lai Foong Moi, Hoe Koon attended the prestigious École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris between 1959 and 1961, where he immersed in an advanced European art scene. To further enrich his artistic experiences, he boldly embarked on a 3-year art study tour to Europe in 1965. Upon his return to Singapore, he began a career as an art teacher while continuing to explore and develop his art practice.

Hoe Koon's abstract and semi-abstract paintings of landscape and still life compositions in Western oil and Chinese ink mediums impress with dynamic brushwork and adroit palette knife sculpting. This 1985 composition of *Kampong House* – a planar exposition informed by western cubist abstraction and rhythmic impasto effects – reflects to a degree, the spirit of Nanyang art style, which advocates an amalgam of East-West art traditions characterised by a distinct Southeast Asian socio-cultural experience.



Yeo Hoe Koon, *Kampong House*, 1985, Oil on canvas, 61 x 82 cm



Paul Cezanne, *Garden at Les Lauves*, 1906

In the 19th Century, French artist Paul Cezanne famously reflected on the art of painting nature: "The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness." His philosophy went on to inspire generations of painters to examine nature with fresh eyes; and to focus on conveying her rich forms and myriad sensations rather than reproducing landscapes through formulaic traditions. This had in turn led to the Modernist artists' preoccupation with the deconstruction and reconstruction of nature and reality.

Similarly, this lyrical landscape below – characterised by intersecting planar perspectives – marks Hoe Koon's artistic endeavour at deconstructing and reconstructing nature. The palette is dominated by tones of greys, blues and greens, generating a serene and contemplative mood that draws the viewer into the ebb and flow of the composition.



Yeo Hoe Koon, *Autumn Mood*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 153 x 211.5 cm



Georges Braque, *Houses at l'Estaque*, 1908