

# **Wong Keen: Calligraphic Interactions**

Student name: Ho Sou Ping

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the  
Master of Arts in Art History  
Lasalle College of the Arts  
Academic year: 2010/11

Name : Ho Sou Ping

Program : MA in Art History

School : Lasalle College of the Arts

Thesis Title : Wong Keen: Calligraphic Influences

Supervisor : Jeffery Say

### **Abstract**

Wong Keen is about the earliest artist in Singapore to paint in the abstract expressionist's style. He is one very important 2<sup>nd</sup> generation artist, unfortunately very few scholarly texts discussed about his life or his art.

This thesis will serve as an introduction to Wong Keen as an artist, investigate his artistic view points and critically analyze his works. Besides a short biography on the life of the artist, the main thrust of the effort will be discussing his art in relation with Chinese calligraphy.

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank my supervisor Mr. Jeffery Say who has given me so much support in the last semester. Also, Mr. Wong Keen has also allowed me to interview him and give me access to his collection of documents that recorded his career thus far. The renowned art historian and director of Singapore National Art Gallery Mr. Kwok Kian Chow gave me his invaluable insights on the Eastern and Western interactions in art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with respect to the abstract expressionist movement. Last but not least, Mr. Koh Seow Chuan, chairman of the National Art Gallery and a vivid collector of Wong Keen, has given his valuable opinions on Wong Keen's art and his place in Singapore art development.

## **Table of Contents**

Abstract	2
Acknowledgement	3
Table of Contents	5
Chapter 1: Introduction	8
1.1 Background of Study	
1.2 Research objectives and questions	
1.3 Significance and limitations of this thesis	
1.4 Definitions	
1.5 Existing literature on Wong Keen	
1.6 Date and methodology	
Chapter 2: Biography of Wong Keen	23
2.1 Formative years in Singapore	
2.2 The New York Student League	
2.3 Graduating into New York's society	
2.4 Return to Singapore	
Chapter 3: Oriental Calligraphy and abstract expressionism	35

3.1 Influence of Chinese Calligraphy and the broader Eastern thinking towards abstract expressionism	
3.2 Critical comparisons between calligraphy and abstract expressionism	
The pursuit of abstraction	
Form vs. Content	
All Over Painting	
Direct, spontaneous and the subconscious	
The notion of flatness	
3.3 Conclusion	
Chapter 4 Manifestation of calligraphy in Wong Keen's art	55
4.1 Wong Keen's world view	
4.2 Bringing a new medium into the practice of abstract expressionism	
4.3 Brushworks in calligraphy	
4.4 Brushworks in the works of representative artists from the New York School	
4.5 Constructing representational objects using brushworks	
4.6 Wong Keen's pictorial language	
4.7 Conclusion	
Chapter 5 Wong Keen's place in Singapore art history and conclusions	77
5.1 Wong Keen's place in Singapore art history	
5.2 Conclusions of the thesis	

## Bibliography

## Appendices

Interview transcripts of Wong Keen, 14th Dec 2010

Interview notes of Kwok Kian Chow, 18th March 2011

Interview with Mr. Koh, 22nd March 2011

## **Chapter 1 : Introduction**

### 1.1 Background of study

Through the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the epicenter of art in the world had shifted from Europe to America; in particular attention was New York. One of the most prominent art movements in America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was abstract expressionism.

According to some scholars, the first abstract expressionists during the pre war<sup>1</sup> periods were influenced by Oriental art, in particular Chinese calligraphy<sup>2</sup>. The abstract expressionists were made known to the concepts of calligraphy and Oriental philosophies by translations of Chinese texts, western scholars who preached Oriental culture, and actual immersions into the culture by the artists themselves. We will look into this point in more details in chapter three.

After the war, there were actually a group of practicing artists in New York who were of Asian lineage, and this group of artists formed a distinct category under the larger umbrella of abstract expressionist. Their art views differed from mainstream abstract expressionists<sup>3</sup>. Many of them employed their natural advantage of knowledge in Asian art and applied them to their abstract expressionist art. This mix of cultural background was interesting because as modern art moved towards a direction similar to Oriental art, it seemed that artist with an Asian lineage would be more advantages.

---

<sup>1</sup> World War II.

<sup>2</sup> Kwok and Ong, 13

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 12

Wong Keen was one such artist. Having travelled and took roots in New York in the early 1960s, Wong returned to Singapore and took a progressively active role in the local art scene in the 1990s, more than 30 years after his departure. It was in New York that he made acquaintance with the artists there and practiced in the styles and methods of the New York School.

Wong Keen's art has been associated with calligraphy since a very early stage in his career. The Art students League News in 1966 reported him exhibiting calligraphy works at the league, and 'although his art is more western and eastern in basic direction, a number suggest both the influence of the modern Chinese painter Chi Pai Shi and Ching dynasty painter Chu Ta.'<sup>4</sup> Both these artists quoted by the newspaper were reputed to have used calligraphic strokes into their artworks. In fact for most parts of Chinese painting history, calligraphy and painting were said to share the same roots, and this concept has become a fundamental concept in Chinese art tradition. Later in his career, many exhibition catalogue explicitly stated Wong Keen's influences from Chinese calligraphy<sup>5</sup>.

"..Calligraphy is the foundation of most modern art, from cubism to Abstract Expressionism."<sup>6</sup> This was Wong Keen's artistic proclamation. Not only did Wong acknowledge the influences from calligraphy to abstract expressionism, he pushed the

---

<sup>4</sup> "Wong Keen Exhibits At the League", *Art Students League News*, Dec 1966

<sup>5</sup> One such example can be found in: Usha M. Nathan, 'About the artist and his works', in *Expressions by Wong Keen*, exh. cat. Singapore: Galerie Belvedere, 2007, pp 6. In fact the entire essay made many references to calligraphy

<sup>6</sup> Quotation of Wong Keen from Kwok and Ong, pp13

See also quotation of Wong Keen: "I try to look at Abstract Expressionism from a Chinese calligraphic point of view". Usha M. Nathan, 'About the artist and his works', in *Expressions by Wong Keen*, exh. cat. Singapore: Galerie Belvedere, 2007, pp 6

frontier of the influences of calligraphy to a wider scope of modern art. But there lacked scholastic studies into this proclamation.

Bizarre as this proclamation seemed, calligraphy actually shared many common traits with modern art. There are some other similar traits when we compare calligraphy with the characteristics of modern art as defined by Greenberg and we will look further into this in chapter three.

### 1.2 Research Objective and Questions

The research objective for this thesis is to provide a ground breaking research on the study, in particular his associations with calligraphy.

The research questions that will be answered are:

1. What were Wong Keen's formative years like? How the idea of amalgamating calligraphy into his art did come about, and what were the end results of this development? Against the backdrop of the Singapore art scene, what influences did the environment imposed on Wong?
2. What were the similarities between calligraphy and modern art that makes Wong Keen proclaim that calligraphy was a model for modern art?
3. What were the objective evidences that showed East Asian art, in particular calligraphy, influenced the abstract expressionist movement?
4. Exactly how did Wong Keen's art show influences from calligraphy? Although this is a widely accepted view, this topic was not studied in more details in the

past. Calligraphy in its own right is a complex system, having its own sets of specialized concepts and contradictions. To simply link Wong Keen with calligraphy is too superficial. These will be discussed later in chapter four.

5. In the context of the evolvement of Singapore art history, what is Wong Keen's current position?

### 1.3 Significance and limitations of this thesis

This thesis brings together information that dwells deeper into the artistic philosophies of Wong Keen, thus contributing to the literature about the artist. At the moment, scholastic papers on the artist were few and short. As this paper is written during the life time of the artist, thus with more primary data, it is hoped that the paper can be a useful reference for future generations of historians when they study about the artist.

Many of the existing literature on Wong Keen mentioned about the artist's connection with calligraphy, and the artist being a manifestation and bridge over the East West polarity. Unfortunately this aspect was not discussed in more details than what could be potentially possible. This thesis aims to explain in what ways did these connections took place.

Thus far literature on Wong Keen is few in quantity and quality. This poses a problem as there is a general lacking of information. Information on his early life, in terms of his personal life, career developments and art works were especially lacking. Wong Keen documented well a period of his life from 1959 to 1968, through newspaper cuttings,

school documents, exhibition catalogues and etc, but information on the period from 1969 to 1988 were almost non-existent. At the same time, this period corresponded to the artist from about age 30 to 50, which is normally an important consolidation period in an artist's artistic practice. After 1988 the written records started to appear again.

The lack of scholastic texts on Wong Keen also meant that systematic study of the artist had not began, coupled with the author's limitations in expertise and knowledge at only the MA level, bound this thesis to be touching on superficial and entry level issues on the artist.

In another respect, this thesis dissects Wong Keen's art mainly from the perspective of calligraphy. As we know, art encompasses a wider scope and hence there is an inherent biasness and room for blind spots in this essay.

Finally, perhaps the biggest limitation of all is that the story of Wong Keen is still evolving, as the artist is still very much active in the art scene and his art is constantly evolving. The research findings here may be overturned by the artist himself in the future.

#### 1.4 Definitions

Eastern and Oriental – In the context of this essay, Eastern and Oriental would refer mainly to Chinese culture and its derivatives, including Malaysia and Singapore.

Calligraphy - Most western texts regarded Chinese, Japanese and Korean calligraphy as different entities. In this essay, Japanese and Korean calligraphy would be regarded as a derivative of Chinese calligraphy. They are not distinctively differentiated in this essay.

Moreover, in the Chinese art tradition, sometimes it may be difficult to differentiate between calligraphy and painting. It had long been accepted in Chinese art history that 'painting and calligraphy shared the same roots'. The two art forms shared almost the same set of philosophies and aesthetic rules. Thus in the subsequent discussions, the idea of calligraphy may also include Chinese painting in a wider context.

First and second generation artists – The term 'first generation artists' generally refers to the 'big four' artists 90 (Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang and Chen Chong Swee) who were attributed to have started the *Nanyang Style*. Thus second generation refers to the students of the first generation artists. In this case, Wong Keen was a student of Liu Kang, then Chen Wen His, thus Wong Keen should be classified as a second generation artist.

Modern Art<sup>7</sup> - According to Eric Fernie, 'Modern Art' refers to a series of art developments from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century till the period before 1970 in the west when the concept of post-modernism emerged. The first art movement that has a spirit of modernism was the impressionist. The end of modernism is difficult to define, as we are still effectively within the period of this modern movement. In the context of this thesis

---

<sup>7</sup> Eric Fernie. *A critical anthology: Art History and its Methods*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1995, 348-9

post modernism provides a rough watershed to mark the end of modern Art, where the last masters of Modern art were Picasso and Matisse. Modernism can be thought of a shift in direction from re-depicting nature to a purer form of painting that is devoid of content. We can roughly say that abstraction contributes to almost the entirety of modernism. Most of the characteristics of Modern art employed in this thesis can be derived from Greenberg's works.

Shanghai School – Shanghai school generally refers to a loose group of artists who congregated in Shanghai in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The leader of the group was Wu Chang Shuo (1844-1927). One important characteristics of the group's art relevant to our context was their application of calligraphic strokes, in particular the strokes of the seal carving script, into painting. These brushworks were often bold, striking and confident, usually carrying the property '*flying white*', which the Chinese described as 'flavors of the bronze and stone'.

### 1.5 Existing literature of Wong Keen

The following lists and summaries all the significant published literature of the artist up till the point of this thesis. This section aims to allow the reader understand the extend to what had been published on the artist.

### **Wong Keen: A Singapore Chapter to Abstract Expressionism<sup>8</sup>**

---

<sup>8</sup> Kwok and Ong

To date, the most scholarly and comprehensive text on the artist is perhaps found in the 2007 Singapore Art Museum exhibition of the artist. This was a mini essay written by Singapore art historian Kwok Kian Chow and Ong Zhen Min.

The essay was aimed at general audiences who did not know Wong Keen, or understand the Abstract Expressionist movement, as it did only touch the surface on most of the issues it raised. The entire essay can be subdivided into three sections. It started with a section introducing the readers to this art movement, at the same time bringing in the core theme of the essay – Asian artist’s participation in this movement in metropolitan New York. The authors then went on to talk about the artist’s early formative years in Singapore, and his studies in the Arts Student league in New York. Finally, Wong Keen’s works were discussed and analysed by dividing his works into a few genres<sup>9</sup>.

This essay brought forth a few interesting points, listed as follow:

- a. There was a group of Asian artists in New York who participated and shaped the abstract expressionist movement;
- b. There was a close affiliation between traditional Chinese ink practices and Modern Art<sup>10</sup>;
- c. The aesthetic ideas of the Shanghai School, having passed from Chen Wen Hsi (Wong Keen’s early mentor) to Wong Keen, had exerted an influence over Wong Keen’s art. This might imply that the Shanghai school was a significant source of inspiration for the abstract expressionist movement,

---

<sup>9</sup> The subtitles are “Expression and construction of Autobiographical space” which the artist’s early years, “The nude”, “The lotus”, and “Return to Singapore”.

<sup>10</sup> Kwok and Ong, 15

Due to the short length of this essay (it occupied 8 pages of the book), the authors were only able to touch superficially on each of the issues and questions on the artist's life, his art, and the linkage between Chinese art practices and abstract expressionism. These important issues surrounding the artist were raised but left unanswered.

### **About the Artist and His Works<sup>11</sup>**

The next essay that can barely be classified as a scholarly text is found in the 2007 exhibition catalogue by Galerie Belvedere. This was an even shorter essay than Kwok and Ong's work. The first part of this essay was about the artist's life, while the second part was a discussion on the artist's works. The essay did not provide any fresh views or knowledge over Kwok and Ong's work, except for a few aesthetic perspectives from the artist, recorded over interviews with the artist. These points re-iterate the importance of calligraphy in the artist's works, and also the artist's choice of clinging on to figurative instead of going totally abstract.

### **After Thirty-Five years in New York : An Introduction<sup>12</sup>**

This short essay was written by Edward Evans, Professor of Art in SouthWest State University, USA. This was the shortest essay among the three. The short work discussed

---

<sup>11</sup> Usha M. Nathan, 'About the artist and his works', in *Expressions by Wong Keen*, exh. cat. Singapore: **Galerie Belvedere, 2007**

<sup>12</sup> Edward Evans, 'After Thirty-Five Years in New York – An Introduction', in *Wong Keen :After Thirty Five Years in New York*, exh. cat. Singapore: Shenn's Fine Art Gallery, 1996

mainly about the technical and aesthetic qualities in Wong Keen's works. Prof Evans did not attempt to categorise the artist's work like what Kwok and Ong did, instead he discussed a few chosen works from the catalogue. Perhaps this was due to the specificity of the context this essay was written, i.e. for a small scale exhibition. Moreover, Prof Evans described Wong Keen's works with a pool of vocabulary that was primarily from the western painting tradition – unlike the other writers who stressed the east-west convergence in Wong Keen's art.

It is almost impossible to determine for sure why did Prof Evans take such a stand, but this gives us an idea that Wong Keen's art is still Western in character so much so it can be treated independently of the Eastern context. It could well have been because Prof Evans was not of Oriental origins and were thus unfamiliar with Oriental artistic traditions.

The above three essays were the only known published scholastic works on Wong Keen as an artist. All three were introductions in exhibition catalogues, and hence lacking in breadth and depth.

### **The Enlightened Vision – Robert Motherwell's Prints in Singapore<sup>13</sup>**

---

<sup>13</sup> Cao Yi Qiang, 'The Enlightened Vision: Robert Motherwell's Prints in Singapore', in *The Enlightened Vision: Robert Motherwell's prints in Singapore*, exh.cat. Singapore: Singapore Taylor's Print Institute, 2005.

This piece of work, written by Prof Cao YiQiang, was a renowned Chinese scholar who was also trained with Western academic system, giving him a good foundation with both cultures. This was an important work, because Wong Keen specifically quoted this essay, claiming that the essay explained his views on calligraphy and the abstract expressionist movement.

Unlike essays found in most exhibition catalogues, Prof Cao spent little time in telling Motherwell's life stories or characteristics of the artist's art. Instead he tried to let the readers understand Motherwell from a Eastern perspective. Even at the beginning Prof Cao told the readers that Motherwell's powerful composition *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, were based on Chinese calligraphy characters<sup>14</sup>.

Some of the most relevant points brought up by Prof Cao in this essay can be summarized as follow:

- a. At the technical front, Motherwell realized from ancient Chinese texts that calligraphy allowed spontaneity; giving opportunities for the artists to freely incorporate his personalities to the work, and that the brush could be used as an expressive tool<sup>15</sup> (This was not the case in classical painting). The spontaneity element was similar to Surrealist's principles.
- b. Motherwell's favourite colours were black and white. And when colours were used, they appear flat and linear. These bore the characteristics of calligraphy<sup>16</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 7

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 9

- c. The forms found in Motherwell's painting were bold and simple. This again was similar to calligraphy<sup>17</sup>.
- d. On a philosophical front, the automatism as mentioned above linked Motherwell with Zen painting, where no fixed objective was set before the start of a painting. Similarly, feelings came before thoughts or content<sup>18</sup>. As one becomes emerged in the act of producing art, the whole mental and physical being became engrossed and attained a transcend state. All these thoughts and theories had been advocated by ancient Chinese, for e.g. Su DongPo<sup>19</sup>.

These points will be elaborated further in Chapter 3.

### 1.6 Data and Methodology

In this thesis, the research data and methods used will comprise of the followings:

1. Interviews.

For this essay, the artist himself and Mr. Koh Seow Chuan will be interviewed. The need to interview the artist was because of the lack of both primary and secondary sources. A central part of the argument on the artist's views on the subject of calligraphy and his art, and about his life, can be best answered by the artist himself. Mr. Koh Seow Chuan, being a long time avid collector of Singapore artists including Wong Keen, will provide his views on Wong Keen's place in Singapore art history.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 10

The interview with the artist will take place in two phases. The artists had provided me with a set of documents he has kept with him and gathered over the years; this set of documents comprises of exhibition invitation cards, catalogues, school transcripts and letters, newspaper cuttings, photos of works etc. A study of the documents will first be made to help draw up a framework for the interview. The first interview will primarily be focused on general aspects of his life. After the first interview, a clearer broad picture will have surfaced the next set of interview questions will be targeted at specific issues relevant to this thesis. In this way it is hoped that more primary sources outside the scope of this thesis will have been retained and can help future scholars in their study.

The interview with Mr. Koh Seow Chuan will take place in one session, where he will be asked to provide his views on Wong Keen's art and his place in Singapore art history.

Both interviews will be of a semi-structured format<sup>20</sup>, where a few open ended questions will be worked out to provide the 'boundaries' of the interview, at the same time allowing flexibilities for additional information to surface. In both cases, the interviewees are considered as elitists in their areas of specialization, thus it is important to keep a two way communication channel. Because both interviewees are interviewed on exclusive topics and there are no other respondents in this study, no categorization of data will be done. The interviews

---

<sup>20</sup> Bill GillHam, *The Research Interview*. Continuum: London, 2004. 6

will be video recorded, then transcribed. Due to the limited resources available, there will be no proof reading of the transcribed texts.

The main reason for choosing only two interviewees was because of the lack of other quality candidates. Wong Keen left Singapore for most parts of his life, so there is no one in Singapore who is both close to him and knowledgeable enough to analyse his art, other than Mr. Koh Seow Chuan. At this stage, Wong Keen's art remained to be not well known to most of the art community in Singapore.

2. Primary documents provided by the artist

As mentioned earlier, the artist had provided a set of documents (newspaper cuttings, school transcripts, etc) mentioned previously. This set of documents will form part of the appendix attached to this thesis.

3. Other traditional sources like books and journals, whose details can be found in the bibliography section at the end of the thesis. Important literature will be included in the literature review where each source will be elaborated.

These data can generally be categorized into a few broad headings:

- a. Art exhibition catalogues of Wong Keen
- b. Materials that describe Chinese art aesthetics and history
- c. Materials that describes the abstract expressionist movement and modern art

- d. Materials that dealt with Singapore art history, in particular pertaining to the formation of the *Nanyang Style* and artist Chen Wen Hsi.
- e. Private and public collections of Wong Keen's works

## Chapter 2: Biography of Wong Keen

### 2.1 Formative years in Singapore

Wong Keen was born in Singapore in 1942. His father and mother taught in Chinese High School and NanYang Girl's School respectively<sup>21</sup>. His father was Hainanese while his mother was Hokkien. Like most families during that time, Wong had many brothers and sisters, and managing such a big family was financially difficult for the parents.

Wong Keen grew up in a Chinese speaking environment, and Chinese culture was ingrained deep within him. He recalled a trip when he was about seven or eight years old, when his mother brought the kids back to her hometown in *Fu Jian* province, and Wong stayed at the countryside for about a year<sup>22</sup>. This trip probably strengthened his Chinese roots in his subconscious.

Wong's mother was a trained calligrapher who participated in group exhibitions in Singapore<sup>23</sup> and thus he was exposed to Chinese calligraphy at a very young age. For a long time Wong's parents insisted on using the traditional brush to mark their student's essays, and as a boy he would admire those calligraphic words<sup>24</sup>. Therefore Wong Keen grew up having the awareness of what calligraphy was all about, and this passion was to stay with him for the rest of his life.

---

<sup>21</sup> “QingNianHuaJiaWangJinChiYuMeiGuoYiTan 青年画家王瑾驰誉美国艺坛”, *SinChew Jit Po*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1965

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Wong Keen, 14<sup>th</sup> Dec 10.

<sup>23</sup> Roy Moyer, in Wong Keen: Formation Series. 1998-99, exh.cat. Singapore: Shenn's Fine Art International

Wong Keen also mentioned that her mother often participated in group shows, interview with Wong Keen, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2010

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Wong Keen, 14<sup>th</sup> Dec 10.

Wong Keen started drawing at a young age, probably at around age ten. One day, he was sketching the portraits of US presidents from the magazine *LIFE*, his mother saw the work and thought he was quite good in drawing. Since at that time they were living at Chinese High, and Liu Kang was teaching at the school, his mother asked him to take drawing lessons from Liu Kang. After two years, Chen Wen Hsi came to teach at the school, and soon Wong Keen became very close to Chen Wen Hsi, spending significant hours in Chen's home. Wong Keen would run errands for Chen, up to the extent that Chen commented that Wong spent more time in his house than his son did. Part of the things that Wong Keen helped Chen Wen Hsi to do was to interpret for Chen when foreigners came to visit Chen, as Wong studied in an English school. Many of these conversations were on art. Through these conversations and Chen's collection of Western art books, the young Wong Keen absorbed knowledge at a very fast speed. It was in Chen's house that Wong Keen came into contact with western painting. We know that Chen painted in both Western and Eastern mediums, and was deeply influenced by the Shanghai School<sup>25</sup>, thus the young Wong Keen would have understood the importance of calligraphy in Chinese painting.

During his school days he practiced calligraphy as part of the school curriculum<sup>26</sup>, which was a normal practice at that time. However, Wong Keen declined to label himself as a calligrapher. He never practiced calligraphy seriously like what a traditionalist would.

---

<sup>25</sup> Chen Wen Hsi, *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition, volume II*, exh. cat. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006. Pg 102. Chen stated in his oral interview that during his very early stage he learned the methods of Shanghai School master Wu Chang Shuo, which was prevalent in his art school at that time. Wu Chang Shuo was an artist well known for using his calligraphic *Zhuan* styled calligraphy brushstrokes into his paintings.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Wong Keen, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2010

Just like his western counterparts of the abstract expressionist movement, he admired calligraphy rather than practicing it. As an admirer, he could understand the beauty within this art form, but was unable to execute it. At the same time, he was able to apply this understanding into his art.

During his secondary school years, Wong Keen studied in Chinese High School in the morning, then Pasir Panjang English School in the afternoon<sup>27</sup>. In the end he gave up the Chinese High school classes as the schedule were too taxing for him to bear.

Wong Keen enjoyed a certain degree of success during this early stage. In 1956, he participated in Shell art competition and won the Champion prize for the ‘C’ category<sup>28</sup>. By 1956 he was already participating in the Singapore Art Society’s annual exhibition. Wong Keen participated in this annual event from 1956 to 1961<sup>29</sup>. In the exhibition catalogue of the “9<sup>th</sup> Exhibition of Works by Local artists”, it showed 3 entries of Wong Keen, and one of them, *Off Duty*, had its picture printed in the catalogue. In 1959 Wong Keen again participated in the Tenth Exhibition of Works by Local Artists, and his work *Two Woman*, given serial number 188, had its picture printed in the catalogue<sup>30</sup>. In 1960 his work was included in the Malay Annual<sup>31</sup>. In the same year, he was commissioned to do a mural for Lido Theatre<sup>32</sup>.

---

<sup>27</sup> “QingNianHuaJiaWangJinJuXingGeZhanHui 青年画家王瑾举行个展会”, *Nanyang Siang Po*, 1961(exact date not traceable, but it is before his 1961 solo exhibition held 1<sup>st</sup> Jul till 5<sup>th</sup> Jul 1961). Also from interview with Wong Keen, 14<sup>th</sup> Dec 10.

<sup>28</sup> “QingNianHuaJiaWangJinChiYuMeiGuoYiTan 青年画家王瑾驰誉美国艺坛”, *SinChew Jit Po*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1965

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Wong Keen, 14 Dec 2010

<sup>30</sup> “Tenth Exhibition of Work by Local Artists”, exh. cat., Singapore Art Society, Singapore, 1959

<sup>31</sup> “Wong Shows Art”, *Chinese American Times*, May 1963

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

These early successes climaxed in 1961, when Wong Keen opened his first solo exhibition at the National library. The exhibition was organized by The Singapore Art Society, The Society of Chinese Artists and the Chinese High School old boy's Association. The first two societies were prominent art societies in Singapore, and it showed that Wong Keen as a young teenager was quite well networked with the art circle. Wong Keen's own explanation was because he had frequently participated in the Singapore Art Society's annual show.

The exhibition included seventy over pieces of Chinese paintings, oil, water colours, sketches and even sculpture<sup>33</sup>. These showed that the young artists tried different mediums and had a good blend of the East and West. This character would be to follow him for the rest of his life.

The exhibition was set to open on 1<sup>st</sup> July and exhibit for 3 days from 4<sup>th</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup>. However, the response was over-whelming, and the exhibition was extended for another day to the 6<sup>th</sup><sup>34</sup>. Wong Keen won high acclamation from the media. One Chinese paper labeled the artist as a prodigy, and included a positive critique by Ho Ho Ying<sup>35</sup>. Ho commented that Wong Keen was primarily practicing cubism. Wong Keen sold 70 pieces of works out of a total of 76 on display<sup>36</sup>. Even by today's standards, the sale was

---

<sup>33</sup> “QingNianHuaJiaWangJinJuXingGeZhanHui 青年画家王瑾举行个展会”, *Nanyang Siang Po*, 1961 (exact date not traceable, but it is before his 1961 solo exhibition held 1<sup>st</sup> Jul till 5<sup>th</sup> Jul 1961)

<sup>34</sup> “WangJinGeRenHuaZhanJinRiYanChangYiTian 王瑾个人画展今日延长一天”, *NangYang Sang Po*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 1961

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Frank Farrel, “A New Brush in Art World”, *New York World Telegram*, 7<sup>th</sup> Sept 1962

astonishing. Wong Keen attributed the good sales to him pricing the art works cheaply, and his plea that the show was to fund his art education overseas. Many of the buyers were foreign consulates.

All these activities showed that even as a teenager, Wong Keen had already been actively involved in the local art scene, and received fairly good response. It was his departure for the United States that put an abrupt stop to these activities.

## 2.2 The New York Student League

New York was a place very much different from Singapore. After World War II, New York had replaced Paris as the centre of art for the entire world. The New York Student league was also very prominent, as it had produced several successful artists – e.g. Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. The league, being based in New York, the base camp for the Abstract Expressionist Movement, strongly impacted the young Wong Keen on new artistic ideas and methods very different from what he had known in Singapore.

Wong Keen started class on 9<sup>th</sup> Oct 1961 and studied under Morris Kantor briefly for little more than a month. In 1962 Wong Keen spent half a year with Vaclav Vytlacil, then attended Sidney Gross's class for the rest of the time in the league. (He attended both Gross and Vytlacil's classes in the first half of 1965)<sup>37</sup> Both Vytlacil and Gross were practicing abstract expressionist's techniques. Wong Keen quickly immersed himself into this new environment. By 1962, he had already shaken off the cubist influences from Chen Wen Hsi and began producing works using the abstract expressionist methods. Two

---

<sup>37</sup> Data taken from Wong Keen's school transcript from the league, dated 29<sup>th</sup> March 1967.

surviving published works from 1962 *Spring* and *Empty* (Plates 1 and 2) witnessed this transformation<sup>38</sup>. At the same time, these paintings exhibited the calligraphic strokes found in both Chinese and Abstract expressionist paintings.



Plate 1 *Spring*, 132X157.5cm, 1962

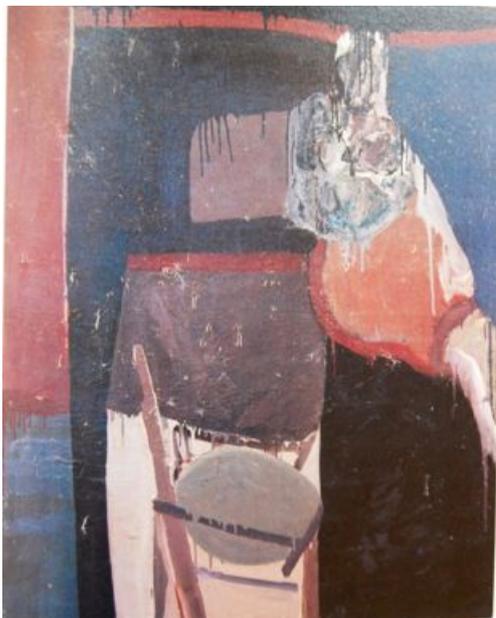


Plate 2 *Empty*, 153 X 123cm, 1962

---

<sup>38</sup> Wong Keen. "After Thirty Five Years in New York", exh. cat. Singapore: Shenn's Fine Art Gallery, 1996.

In school Wong Keen was very active, assuming the role of class monitor from 1962 to 1964. He held yearly solo exhibitions in various places in New York from 1963 to 1967, numbering 6 exhibitions in the 4 year span. This suggested a high volume of works produced. In addition, during this period, he painted in various mediums. The Art Student League News reported that Wong Keen exhibited “paintings, ink-wash drawings and scrolls with Chinese calligraphy...”<sup>39</sup>. Another newspaper article reported that he won the first prize for “Alamac Week-End Show” with a water colour painting entitled *Night City*. We can imagine the young artist working furiously, trying out many mediums and styles, and absorbing all the new, avant-garde ideas around him, yet preserving the traditions of many Nanyang artist – producing works in both western and eastern mediums.

Wong Keen’s early years in New York was met with successes. In 1964 he won the Ford Foundation tuition scholarship<sup>40</sup>, and in 1965 he won the prestigious Edward G. McDowell Travelling scholarship through a competition. Valued at USD\$3000 for a year, this scholarship allowed Wong Keen to travel to Europe for studies for a year. Wong Keen chose the Saint Martin’s School of Art as the institution to study. So in mid 1965 Wong Keen travelled to London.

In London Wong Keen did not attend many classes, but rather travelled around Europe to see new things around him. During this period Wong Keen shared a room with Chen

---

<sup>39</sup> “Wong Keen Exhibits in the League”, *Art Student League News*, Dec 1966

<sup>40</sup> Letter from the Student’s League dated 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1964

Wen Hsi when Chen came to UK for his exhibition. Chen brought along some Chinese painting materials and Wong Keen used them to experiment abstract painting, producing a body of Chinese ink abstract work. For the art scene of Singapore this body of work was very avant-garde at that time. A few surviving paintings from this period can be found in his 1999 catalogue<sup>41</sup>. (Fig 3 to 5) These paintings were composed of strong and confident calligraphic strokes; the *zen* like composition reminded us of *Ming* dynasty painter *Zhu Da*, who had also influenced profoundly Chen Wen Hsi<sup>42</sup>.

Although Wong Keen was successful in school, having won awards and hosted numerous exhibitions, life in New York was tough. He did not pay tuition fees through the class monitor grants and scholarships; on the other hand he had to take up numerous odd jobs, working day and night to pay for his living expenses<sup>43</sup>.

### 2.3 Graduating into New York's society

After graduation from the student's league, Wong Keen took up various jobs to keep himself alive in New York. Immediately after graduation, he taught art for a while at Fair Lawn Adult school, then took up the post of art director in the Police Athlete league (PAL)<sup>44</sup>. The PAL was sort of a charitable body that organized art related activities for poor young people. Wong Keen was the person who managed and executed the activities and projects that the PAL organized. These were art related job, unfortunately they didn't pay well and Wong had to seek greener pastures to keep him alive. Wong ended up

---

<sup>41</sup> Wong Keen, *Formation Series. 1998-99, exh. cat.* Singapore: Sheen's Fine Art International, 1999

<sup>42</sup> Low Sze Wee, "Introduction to Exhibition", in *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition, volume I*, exh. cat. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006

<sup>43</sup> Kwok and Ong, 6

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Wong Keen, 14 Dec 2010

working in the framing department of an art supply shop. Previously in Singapore Wong had the opportunity to learn framing skills, and polished this skill during his working life in New York. In a year's time he saved enough capital to start his own framing shop 'Keen Gallery', albeit a very small business. The year was 1979 as reported by a newspaper article.<sup>45</sup>

The framing business venture lasted for about ten years. During this period Wong Keen became one of the best framer in New York; many of his clients were either from museums or celebrities. The profit was good; within a year he moved to a larger place and had a few employees; he managed to build up his financial status, buying a house and saved some money. Unfortunately for him, despite the good business, he had little time to do his painting and Wong Keen kept on wondering when he was going back to his painting, almost everyday. After about ten years, he decided that he did not come to the US to be a business man, so he gradually reduced his framing business and changed the business into an art gallery. Wong Keen operated his gallery business in another location.

It was difficult to define when this transition took place. In 1986, a newspaper reported about Keen Gallery's framing services<sup>46</sup>. At that time, the address for Keen gallery was at 206 East 38<sup>th</sup> Street, New York. By 1993 the address of Keen Gallery had been changed to 373 Broadway, Suite E-11, New York, and Keen Gallery was putting up a show of avant-garde art of young, mainland Chinese artists<sup>47</sup>. This exhibition showed installation,

---

<sup>45</sup> "WangJinZhanChuhuaZuoBeiShouHaoPing 王瑾展出画作备受好评", *NiuYueHuabuXinWen*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1995

<sup>46</sup> "WangJinHuangLangChuShouBuFan 王瑾画廊出手不凡", *HuaQiaoRiBao*, 24<sup>th</sup> Jan 1986

<sup>47</sup> *Red Star Over China: Tenuous Peace, exh Cat.* New York: Keen Gallery, 1993

video art and conventional paintings. At the same time, Wong Keen started to do his own solo shows in Museum of Costa Rica and a gallery in Taipei, capital of Taiwan in 1988 and 1989 respectively, after a break of twenty years. Thus it can be deduced that the transition took place in the late 1980s.

Wong Keen was amongst the first batch of gallery owners in New York with a Chinese origin. He gave new young artist opportunities to exhibit their works, like the *Red Star Over China* show. He also exhibited some of his own paintings in his gallery.

Despite his efforts to move his business into a gallery, he was still unable to paint full swing. The gallery business did not perform as well as the framing business. Finally in the 1996<sup>48</sup> Wong Keen ended his gallery business and moved into full time painting, with the support of his wife. His wife was a professional accountant and very understanding person, plus the fact that over the twenty over years of working life he had built a strong financial base.

After about thirty years away from painting, Wong Keen was finally able to focus on what he was destined to do. Starting from 1994, he began to repeat what he had done in his youth – opening at least a show every year from 1994 to 2000. This explosion of shows mirrored his painting activities – Wong Keen again began to produce a large body of works, many of which are huge pieces measuring more than 2 meters.

---

<sup>48</sup> Constance Shears, “Asian Journeys: Recent Works by Wong Keen”, in *Recent Works by Wong Keen: Lotus. Figures*, exh cat. Singapore: Shenn’s Fine Art, 1997. Pg 5

## 2.4 Return to Singapore

With more time to spend on art, Wong Keen also increased his visits to Singapore. He began to participate more actively in the art scenes of Singapore.

Wong Keen's initial art appearance in Singapore was through Shenn's Fine Art, a gallery at Blair Road. Wong Keen's first exhibition upon return is at Takashimaya Gallery, organized by Shenn's Fine Art<sup>49</sup> in 1996. During this exhibition Wong Keen met one of his most important collectors, Mr. Koh Seow Chuan. Koh was an avid art collector. His collection specialized in South East Asian artists, in particular Singapore artists. Koh was attracted to Wong Keen's works and immediately bought some pieces during the exhibition. Their relationship is still continuing at the time this essay was written.

During the 1996 to 1998 period, Wong Keen just turned to full time painting for a short while. It was very likely that he was wondering whether there was any market at all for his works. During this period, besides the patronage from Koh Seow Chuan, some private collectors, and a few institutions like the Singapore Art museum acquired some works from him<sup>50</sup>. These successes would have been very encouraging and important, especially in reinforcing the artist's decision in continuing his art practice in Singapore.

During the years since the 1990s Koh Seow Chuan championed Wong Keen's art career in Singapore, giving him constant patronage and providing in kind the artist a studio space till 2008.

---

<sup>49</sup> Wong Keen (1996)

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Mr. Koh Seow Chuan, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2011.

2007 was an important year in the artist's career. In March/April 2007, Wong Keen's works was displayed at Singapore Art Museum, in a show to commemorate Mr. and Mrs Koh's donation of 63 pieces of the artist's works. This collection included works that spanned most of Wong Keen's artistic career, from 1962 to 1965. In August Galerie Belvedere staged another big show at the Arts house Singapore. Finally in Oct Wong Keen, Goh Beng Kuan and Chen Wen Hsi's works were displayed in the National Art Museum of China, Beijing in a landmark exhibition "Encounters and Journeys". These high profiled exhibitions back to back increased Wong Keen's fame in Singapore boosted the artist's fame in Singapore, and more people came to know about the artist.

### **Chapter 3: Oriental Calligraphy and Abstract Expressionism**

It is widely known that Wong Keen's art is closely related to Chinese calligraphy. This part of the thesis will look into associated issues related to this theme.

The first section of this chapter is to give specific objective evidences to show that abstract expressionism indeed received influences from Chinese art, in particular calligraphy.

The second part of this chapter is to make a critical comparison between the characteristics of calligraphy and abstract expressionism, so that a deeper understanding of the term 'influence of calligraphy' can be achieved.

#### 3.1 Influence of Chinese Calligraphy and the broader Eastern thinking towards Abstract expressionism

There were apparent waves of Oriental influences in the New York art circles in the 1940s and 50s, as described by painter John Ferren<sup>51</sup>.

Although abstract expressionism encompasses many artists with a wide range of seemingly different techniques and styles, a significant number of important artists attributed calligraphy and Oriental thinking as an important source of inspiration. Examples include

---

<sup>51</sup> David Clarke, 'The All-Over Image: Meaning in Abstract Art', in *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 27, no. 3, American Art and Music (Dec. 1993), pp 355-375. Cambridge University Press, 373

Mark Tobey, Ibram Lassaw, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock and Frank Kline. The sources of influence will be discussed below.

One such source was from a scholar by the name of Daisetz Suzuki, who taught in the Columbia University for a period<sup>52</sup>. He was a friend of many of the avant-garde artists in New York. Clarke listed a number of such artists, who included Tobey, Lassaw and composer John Cage. Suzuki not only published books and papers which introduced Buddhist thoughts to these artists, but these artists attended his lectures as well.

The effect of these influences from Buddhism was a paradigm shift on the world view of nature. Lassaw described that the Judeo-Christian world viewed man as conquering nature, on the other hand the Oriental saw man as part of nature. Tobey echoed the same thinking, citing the example of zoos being a reflection of Western thinking whereby “nature’s ferocious animals were conquered<sup>53</sup>”; whereas in Japanese spirit “the vision is of nature in a cosmic aspect...”. The Buddhist thinking by Suzuki had helped Lassaw and Tobey to formulated an idea of ‘all over painting’, where there were no focal point in the canvas but every part of the canvas were important. This was opposed to classical Western thinking of a need to have a focal point in the picture composition. Clarke also listed Alan Watts as another writer who wrote about Buddhism and Lassaw knew about his books<sup>54</sup>.

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 360

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 363-364

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 360

Tobey studied Chinese calligraphy under the tutorship of a Chinese friend Teng Gui in New York<sup>55</sup>. At first he did not think that he would ever apply Chinese calligraphy into his art, but the encounter shifted his artistic paradigm to think from the perspective of lines instead of mass. He made a trip to China and Japan in 1934<sup>56</sup> and during the trip, his Oriental ideas got more developed and resulted a clear shift of styles. Not only did Tobey travel to the Far East, he went to the extent of converting his faith to the Baha'i World Faith<sup>57</sup>.

Another source of influence was from Motherwell. In Prof Cao's essay, Motherwell was described as a well learned artist who 'deserve to be called scholarly painters'<sup>58</sup>, unlike most other artists from the New York school<sup>59</sup>. His scholarly identity exerted influences in the art community. This quality gave him the unique authoritarian position to become a eloquent spokesperson for American art after World War II<sup>60</sup>. This position was also shared by Seitz<sup>61</sup>.

Motherwell had consistently enriched himself with elements from Asian art, in particular Chinese calligraphy<sup>62</sup>. He came across a couple of ancient Chinese and Japanese text dealing with the principles of calligraphy, in particular a text by Zhao Yi (late 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 367

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 364

<sup>57</sup> Matthew Sansom. 'Imaging Music: Abstract Expressionism and Free Improvisation', in *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol 11, not Necessarily "English Music": Britain's Second Golden Age (2001), pp 29-34. MIT Press, 32

<sup>58</sup> Cao, 5

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>61</sup> William C. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983, p 7

<sup>62</sup> Cao, 4

century Chinese writer), and he became the bridge between Chinese art and abstract expressionist artists like Pollock<sup>63</sup>. Prof. Cao quoted us an instance when Motherwell created his first collage in Pollock's studio, giving us objective evidences of their close relationship and hence possibility of transfer of ideas.

Calligraphy's influences on Motherwell manifested in many ways. Besides the issues explored above, an unique style of Motherwell was his dominant choice of black and white in his works, which Prof Cao attributed the source of inspiration was from Chinese calligraphy<sup>64</sup>. Prof Cao even maintained that Motherwell's work *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*<sup>65</sup> was actually a composition of a Chinese character *Zhou*, its original form was created by Tang Dynasty calligrapher Yan Zhenqing.

Oriental influences were not only found in the visual arts, but also in music making. For example, starting from the 1950s, John Cage began to apply Zen principles in his music, to rid off intention and present music by themselves<sup>66</sup>. Eddie Prevost also explicitly acknowledges Oriental influences on AMM (A 'free-improvisation' group in American music)<sup>67</sup>. We can deduce that Orientalism was a fashionable trend in the art circle in the 1930s and 40s.

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 7. Take note that Cao did not specify where this source of information came from.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>65</sup> Robert Motherwell, *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, 1958. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Collection of the National Gallery of Australia. Reproduced in *The Enlightened Vision: Robert Motherwell's prints in Singapore*, exh.cat. Singapore: Singapore Taylor's Print Institute, 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Sansom, 29

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 32

From the large number of evidences, we can conclude that the Abstract Expressionist movement was indeed influenced by Oriental elements, but thus far the evidences surrounded only a few artists like Jackson Pollock, Tobey and Motherwell. Conversely, among all the references inquired thus far, no references were made to link Chinese calligraphy or Oriental thoughts with DeKooning, for example, although his works displayed bold calligraphic strokes. It could be a case that as the Oriental ideas permeated into the movement through few of these pioneer artists, the ideas became internalized into the movement itself during a later stage with the other artists starting to use similar techniques. Hence the Aisan originated ideas can no longer be differentiated as a foreign influence.

There were also objective evidences that Oriental philosophies like Buddhism and Taoist thinking, together with calligraphy, had exerted considerable amounts of influences on the development of abstract expressionist art. The evidences showed that the influences came about from a few pioneer artists who were in contact with the Far Eastern culture, then probably penetrated through the network of artists and became internalized qualities. At the same time, there were also evidences that some of the artistic views came from other sources, for example the chance, spontaneous and sub-conscious elements came from Surrealism. This was not to mention the artist's own cultural identity's linkage with the entire Western painting tradition. As Greenberg put it, no art can be separated from the art of the past, otherwise "...Modernist art would lack both substance and justification"<sup>68</sup>. The Eastern influences were present but not in totality.

---

<sup>68</sup> Greenberg

### 3.2 Critical comparisons between calligraphy and abstract expressionism

The course of western art history, and in particular abstract expressionism, showed the trajectory moving towards the direction that shared many parallels with Chinese calligraphy. For example, calligraphy was an art devoid of connection with nature, because calligraphy did not represent nature as in most classical western art did, and therefore it is abstract. Also, both emphasized the quick, spontaneous nature of their art. Following this technique of automatism it implied that the resulting work was a direct translation of the state of mind of the artist and his/her character, without external influences.

In the following section, critical comparisons will be made between Chinese calligraphy and abstract expressionism, to explain exactly in what ways did the two art forms shared in common. This is to set a theoretical base for chapter 5.

#### The pursuit of abstraction

Chinese character started as a form of logograph, where the characters were essentially based on pictorial foundations. Chinese characters begun with an aim to satisfy a practical functional need: it was a form of recording system. It was not invented as a form of art.

The first of the Chinese words, the oracle scripts and later the seal scripts , were pictorial representations of the objects in nature. One could interpret these words as ‘mini painting’. The example below shows the seal carving script character for ‘fish’, and one

can recognise this is the side view of a fish, complete with scales and the various fins on its body. Such way of representation is analogous to ‘abstraction’ in the modern sense.



Fig 1 The character ‘fish’ found in *MaoGongDing*, a bronze ware circa 800 BC

As time involved, the functionality of writing compelled the logogram to be simplified further for ease and speed of writing, to a point where it had little linkage with the original pictorial representation, to become a pure symbol. Although the reference to nature had been lost, the increased in speed of writing allowed more room for expression and injecting emotions. As such, the walking and cursive script allowed many characteristics that modern abstract expressionists would be familiar with, e.g. the bold, emotionally charged strokes; spontaneity, painting in the sub-conscious state, etc. Thus the abstraction of Chinese characters intensifies; in parallel some abstract expressionists’ works were totally devoid of connection with nature and purely an aesthetic expression.

Chinese writing, at the same time as it evolved, became being appreciated as a form of art independent from its functional purpose, and this did not happen until after the Three Kingdoms period (approx. 3<sup>th</sup> century AD). It may be true that Chinese calligraphy evolved towards abstraction, albeit this transformation was not based on an aesthetic need.

In the discourse of Western art history, one of the most significant artistic developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was abstraction. “The goal of all art forms is to move towards abstraction”<sup>69</sup>, said Wong Keen. He felt that modernism was a manifestation of this artistic principle. In this respect Motherwell also said “...abstraction is the most powerful weapon”<sup>70</sup>. Modernism of the Western art world brought forth a wave that rejected past techniques and searched for new ideas (although not in totality)<sup>71</sup>. During Motherwell’s time, the key solution was abstraction<sup>72</sup>.

Classical western art was an enterprise to reproduce nature. Traditionally artists tried to mimic nature through mediums like painting or sculpture. We say that paintings of such kind contained a subject matter, and we will refer to them as content or figurative.

Abstract painting, on the other hand, does not seem to have a clear subject matter. The figurative elements had been reduced or eliminated. Kandinsky stated the route to abstraction, to find a ‘pure’ form of art that need not depend on the subject matter. The value of abstract painting rest on the painting itself and the expressive methods of its own medium (this will become clearer later). We name this the form or expression. Therefore abstraction is a process by which art moves from content to form or figurative to expression.

The next question that followed would be, to what extent should this transformation go? Should the painting be devoid of all worldly representation to present only pure ideas like

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Cao, 6

<sup>71</sup> Seitz, 9

<sup>72</sup>

what music does<sup>73</sup>? Purist like Mondrain was at one extreme and artists who still followed the traditional master's path of realism form the other extreme. The purists would have no concerns for things in life, and confined art within elements like lines and shapes.

The abstract expressionist took a position somewhere in between the extremes. It is immediately recognizable that the abstract expressionist artists did not follow the realist's approach of the old masters, neither did they cut themselves off from life. The abstract expressionists looked for something broader. Motherwell argued, "It would be difficult, to formulate a position in which there were no external relations. I cannot imagine any structure being defined as though it only has internal meaning"<sup>74</sup>.

It is worthwhile to pause now to look at Greenberg's view on abstraction. In Greenberg's essay 'Modernist Painting'<sup>75</sup>, he stated that "Modernist painting in its latest phase has not abandoned the representation of recognizable objects in principle", and followed to say that abstraction is not a necessity in the evolvement of art to reach its pure form.

Greenberg's pure form of art was actually founded on the two dimensionality of a painting, instead of the purist's version of art. Perhaps his position gave us a theoretical basis why the Abstract Expressionists still clung on to certain degree of content and figuration in their art.

---

<sup>73</sup> Malorny, 7

<sup>74</sup> Seitz, 40

<sup>75</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", [www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html](http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html). Accessed 9th Apr 2010

It was without doubt that in modern art, there was a shift from realism towards abstraction, albeit different artists having different degrees of abstraction in the realism-abstraction scale. For the case of Western painting development, there were conscious efforts to move towards purist forms of art. On the other hand, calligraphy became a purist form of art due to an ‘accident’, because it was a form of writing rather than a picture.

### Form vs. Content

A related subject with abstraction is the problem of form vs. content, which was one difficult issue the artist’s during the 30s to 60s had to solve.

Greenberg described modern art as a process where painting moved towards entrenching itself in its area of competence, which in this case was “the shape of the support, the properties of pigment... and the flat surface”<sup>76</sup>. In other words, modern art was moving towards the direction whereby the emphasis is on the medium itself, for example in painting it would most likely to be oil, acrylic and canvas, and what could be done within this system of mediums. Some of the ‘elements’ that can be muddled within this system were “art’s own intrinsic formal language of line, tone, colour, surface texture and composition”<sup>77</sup>. Most classical art have contents, which will obscure the original purpose of art, which should be presented in its purest form. In this case it would infer that a type of painting exists whereby it can still be significantly important by itself, without having to refer to external elements like an ideology or a subject. Therefore abstract

---

<sup>76</sup> Clarke, 355

<sup>77</sup> Sanson, 31

expressionism was moving in a direction to devoid itself of the content, or what we usually referred to as subject matter, which was more central in classical art of realism. In another word, art is moving towards pure forms.

Chinese calligraphy, by virtue of the fact that it is a system of symbols, need not have a subject like what we would normally experience in classical paintings. Nobody will expect calligraphy works to have a 'subject' in the sense of a classical painting. Chinese calligraphy is an art that is almost purely based on its form. Its beauty comes from the basic elements such as the character of the strokes, the relationship among the strokes and the pictorial composition. The contents/meanings of the words being written are considered secondary as calligraphy do not depend on that to derive its aesthetic value. These are analogous to Greenberg's notion of 'entrenching itself in its area of competence'.

Abstract expressionist took an in-between strategy, and some artists like Motherwell developed methods to work around the problem, like using lines as a form of writing, making it a 'calligraphy' which needed no contents, and thus opening up new fronts of possibilities<sup>78</sup>. In the interview with Wong Keen, the artist said the elements in calligraphy can be used as a basis to develop fresh ideas from<sup>79</sup>. This is an example how calligraphy can serve as artistic models to break new grounds.

### Brushworks and lines : The spirit and soul of calligraphy

---

<sup>78</sup> Cao, 6

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Wong Keen, 14<sup>th</sup> Dec 2010

A piece of Chinese calligraphy is made up primarily of lines. To a large extent, (as much as 80%), the aesthetic value of calligraphy came from the characters and quality of the brushstrokes. Therefore if there is one aspect of calligraphy that will dominate over the rest, it will be lines or brushstrokes. The function of these lines is to construct the Chinese characters, which forms a system of symbols that constructs meanings to those who understand the language.

In the case for abstract expressionist art, calligraphic strokes were commonplace. Earlier we had discussed the case for Tobey who actually received formal trainings in calligraphy and made the switch from depicting mass to lines, and Motherwell who read translated text on Chinese classics on calligraphy. However, for the abstract expressionist, the methods of creating the line were many fold, creating a wide variety of effects; whereas in calligraphy the lines were produced by the brush only in a limited context (i.e. to write) and thus its effects were relatively limited. For example, Seitz noted that the abstract expressionists were able to use variations in quality, which could either be free handed or ruler drawn; and they possess different variations in terms of “edging, tone value, speed and attack, infinite possibilities are opened up”<sup>80</sup>. Most important of all, these lines can generate “multiple meanings”, as they can “describe contours or the axes of bulks and volumes and the edges or intersection of planes”. Ultimately, a painting has the more potential to derive meanings than what calligraphy on its own can do.

Nevertheless, despite these wider possibilities of meanings, the lines employed by abstract expressionist artists often carried the characteristics of calligraphic strokes when

---

<sup>80</sup> Seitz, 12

examined in isolation. Of course, different artists used these techniques to various degrees, for example Rothko abandoned lines and calligraphic strokes in the later part of his career, but the same were in Tobey's top agenda of artistic concerns<sup>81</sup>. Both calligraphy and abstract expressionist art exploited the expressive characteristics that lines or brushworks can offer. Never in the history of western art was this potential of brushworks so vividly used to such a great extent.

A more detailed analysis of Chinese brushworks will be presented in Chapter 4.

#### All Over painting

In Chinese calligraphy, there is typically no focal point. Every character in the work is important. Even the empty spaces are important, because the Chinese tradition considers the positioning of the empty spaces as part of the composition, and the empty spaces are carefully planned and managed. Even in special situations, e.g. if there was only a single character, the other elements on the work like calligrapher's signature, the seals, the empty spaces will still be given equal weight as compared with the main character.

In the Western tradition, there was usually a focal point in the picture composition. Clarke gave an account how Oriental influences drove some Western Artists such as Lassaw and Tobey to produce art in what he described as 'all over painting'. In such a painting, there were no background, no focal point, everywhere on the canvas was

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 11

important<sup>82</sup>. Oriental philosophy such as the Dharmadhatu preached that creation was continuous, everywhere was a centre<sup>83</sup>. Another view exerted that man should be in synchronization with nature instead of seeing ourselves separated from nature. Lassaw was reported to say ‘The Judeo-Christian world sees nature as the enemy to be conquered...’<sup>84</sup>. On the other hand, the Oriental view was to be in a state of harmony with the cosmos. The all over painting was seen as a reflection of such an attitude.

Being influenced by Oriental world views, especially after his trip to the Far East in 1934, Tobey began to produce works like *Broadway Norm* in 1935 which was largely composed of lines and no clear indication of mass<sup>85</sup>. Another work in 1959 *Written over the Plains*<sup>86</sup> had recognisable calligraphic strokes. Clarke explained that Tobey did not model his art after calligraphy, but took the idea of lines, and this work also had the all over, continuum scheme. Previously Tobey was more concerned with the cubist’s idea of mass, which was an idea that was ‘specifically a Western concern’<sup>87</sup>.

#### Direct, spontaneous, random and the subconscious

Chinese calligraphy and painting had a long history of spontaneous and random expressions. Lachman gave us the example of Tang dynasty (approx eighth century AD) Wang P’o-mo (Wang P’o-mo is his nick name, his Chinese name is Wang Qia or Wang

---

<sup>82</sup> Clarke, David Clarke, ‘The All-Over Image: Meaning in Abstract Art’, in *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 27, no. 3, American Art and Music (Dec. 1993), pp 355-375. Cambridge University Press. 362

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 361

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 363

<sup>85</sup> Mark Tobey, *Broadway Norm*, 1935. Tempera, Collection of Carol Ely Harper. Reproduces in Clarke, 370

<sup>86</sup> Mark Tobey, *Written Over the Plains, No 2*, 1959. Tempera. Seattle Art Museum. Reproduced in Clarke, 365

<sup>87</sup> Clarke, 366

Mo). Wang would usually get himself drunk and then he would splash some ink using random techniques and then a landscape painting would emerge<sup>88</sup>. Lachman gave a few more examples of Tang dynasty painters like Mr. Ku and Mountain Man of Fan Yang<sup>89</sup>. For the case of calligraphy, a calligrapher by name the of Zhang Xu would start writing on papers and on walls of restaurants in Chang'An, the then capital of China, after being drunk from the effects of alcohol, grumbling unrecognizable words and laughing at the same time. Zhang Xu invented the 'Crazy Cursive Script', which was calligraphy made up of a network of violently twisting and swirling lines that distorted Chinese character for the sake of exaggeration, flow and spontaneity. Even a literate man of the Chinese writing system could hardly recognize these characters<sup>90</sup>.

Lachman spoke about substituting the time and space for the descriptions of Wang P'o-mo's artistic methods and then we would be able to fit them nicely into Jackson Pollock's art<sup>91</sup>. Pollock was not aware of what he was doing while he was painting; he was inspired and driven by the subconscious<sup>92</sup>. Again, the subject of Oriental philosophical influences was brought up, and Lachman suggested that it may be possible that Pollock was influenced by Taoist thinking<sup>93</sup>.

One of the aesthetic qualities of Zhang Xu's 'Crazy Cursive' was its grandeur and power shown by the bold calligraphic strokes that preserved the speed, energy and motion of the

---

<sup>88</sup> Charles Lachman, "The Image Made by Chance" in China and the West: Ink Wang Meets Jackson Pollock's Mother', in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 74, no. 3 (Sep., 1992), pp. 499-510. College Art Association, 501

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 501

<sup>90</sup> Toh Lam Huat, *Mei De Zu Ji: Zhong Guo Suo Jian Gu Shu Hua Ji*. Singapore: Ji Ya Xuan, 1996, pp 56

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 506

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 509

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 508

brush. Harold Rosenberg's famous quotation "...what was to go on canvas was not a picture but an event" summed up the reason why abstract expressionists were also known as 'American Action Painters'<sup>94</sup>, at the same time echoed Zhang Xu's calligraphic style. David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro described abstract expressionism as such "... the need to explore the subconscious, the value of the exploitation of chance...., the capacity of paint to serve as a vehicle for emotional expression...."<sup>95</sup> Accidents, improvisations and spontaneity (i.e. automatic painting) were manifestations of these characteristics of abstract expressionist art. Movement was preserved in the final product for the abstract expressionists, e.g. dripping paints and quick brushstrokes. This was one of the two fundamental principles of abstract expressionist art: expressive use of medium or gesture; and the concept of the picture plane<sup>96</sup>. (i.e. flatness, which will be covered in a later section)

In another example, Motherwell practiced Zen art, which was spontaneous as Zen encouraged a non-objective lifestyle, leaving the flow of life to nature and chance<sup>97</sup>.

Besides influences like Oriental ideas, improvisations and chance in abstract expressionism had its roots from the Surrealist movement<sup>98</sup>. Immigration of Surrealist artists before World World II from Europe to US helped the spreading of Surrealist ideas to the US<sup>99</sup>. The notion of the unconsciousness led to automatic painting. In a state of automatic painting, he was no longer held back by the conscious, which was a hindrance

---

<sup>94</sup> David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp 19

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 2

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 11

<sup>97</sup> Cao, 8

towards imagination. The resulting work would be one which is in synchronization with the cosmos, the highest order of spiritual attainment.

In conclusion, evidences showed that there were at least two sources for automatic painting – Oriental influence and Surrealism.

### The notion of flatness

One quality of modern art that Greenberg proposed was flatness. This is quite straightforward in the case of calligraphy – calligraphy is strictly a flat art. It did not, and still does not, contain any three dimensional forms of expression. Calligraphy is essentially a matrix of fairly uniform black lines, thus the medium on its own was not able to produce chiaroscuro effects or any reference to depth. Calligraphy started out as a flat art, and continues to be flat as far as it can be logically envisioned.

On the other hand, Western art started on a very different note. According to Greenberg, modernism was about the process of entrenching painting deeper into a two dimensional, flat form. In his essay “Modernist Painting”<sup>100</sup>. He said that art evolves through a process of self-initiated criticism, and through each round of criticisms emerge a form of art that would be more deeply rooted on its ‘area of competence’. The reason was because if art were based on some other foundations then art will degrade to another form. Therefore art must find something that was only unique to itself and find means that exhibit that quality as much as possible. Greenberg used religion as an example, because if religion

---

<sup>98</sup> Sansom, 31

<sup>99</sup> Seitz, 158

<sup>100</sup> Greenberg.

was denied of enlightenment (its unique competence) then religion would be like entertainment and therefore degrade itself to become therapy instead. For the case of painting, the unique property was the two dimensional property of the canvas.

The old masters looked negatively on painting's flat properties, and tried to create a sense of depth. Modernist did not aim to resolve this conflict of flat vs. space, but they painted in such a way that the viewer is aware of the property of the painting (flatness and enclosed by a frame) first before engaging with what is within the enclosure of the frame. The old masters painted in the reverse emphasis, e.g. subject before flatness. Greenberg showed that Western painting started with borrowing concepts from sculpture (three-dimensional), and even during the period before modernism Western painting had already begun its route to flatness, so much so that by mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the dawn on modernism, all paintings in Western tradition had become 'anti-sculptural'. Each movement in the period after that created art forms that were even flatter than before.

However, Greenberg went on to state that there would never be absolute flatness. Instead modernist painters were still dealing with three dimensional; however this three-dimensional notion was an optical illusion more than a real life experience. Modernist artists never created a sense of depth like the way the old masters did it – the old masters tried to create an experience that the viewer is inside the picture, while for modern painting the viewer was outside and fully aware that the picture was enclosed in a two dimensional support like the canvas and its frame. Hofmann also stated that painting must observe two fundamental laws – Paintings must preserve its two dimensionality; and the

picture must also achieve a three dimensional effect at the same time, albeit different from traditional representation techniques<sup>101</sup>.

This transformation of attitude towards flatness was a result of practice. The artists themselves worked with his/her mind first rather than follow a pre-determined trajectory. We note that this essay was published in 1960 (the developmental stages were in the 30s and 40s), when abstract expressionist was already a recognized and established movement. Greenberg hinted that his theory was empirical, deriving his theories from results of practicing artists.

The notion of flatness as a theory appeared much earlier than Greenberg. Maurice Denis, as early as 1890, said “painting... is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order...”<sup>102</sup>As history revealed, just like what Greenberg described, artist produced flatter and flatter art.

In any case, there was no evidence to show that the trend towards flatness in the West was due to influence from calligraphy or Eastern thinking, although both converge towards the same point.

### 3.3 Conclusion

Now if we consider both the objective evidences of Chinese calligraphy influencing the abstract expressionist, and the similarities between the two forms of art, then it follows

---

<sup>101</sup> Seitz, 42

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 10

that practicing abstract expressionist style is by itself, at least to a significant degree and at a superficial level, being calligraphic. If this logic is to be true, then Wong Keen's art, by nature of the abstract expressionist techniques he is using, will be by default calligraphic. If Wong Keen's art is to be labeled as 'calligraphic', then his art must incorporate elements that are more deeply rooted in Chinese calligraphy than the rest of the Western abstract expressionist.

Art historian Kwok Kian Chow gave us a clue to this issue. According to Kwok, although the Eastern and Western artists, in the modern era, may seem to exhibit similar characteristics in their art, they tend to differ from the point of departure. Generally speaking, traditionally Eastern art was a negotiation between philosophical, consciousness and form; whereas Western art was to re-create nature<sup>103</sup>. It will take another research to study this claim in detail, but at this point of time it is quite safe to make this assumption. Cultural identity is so deeply rooted in a person's subconscious that it will take unreasonable amounts of energy to switch to another culture.

Thus Wong Keen would have approached painting from an Eastern perspective, even though he was primarily involved in a Western medium and using Western (i.e. abstract expressionist's) techniques. In the next chapter this statement will be qualified.

---

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Kwok Kian Chow, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2011

## Chapter 4: Manifestations of Calligraphy in Wong Keen's Art

In the previous chapter, it has been shown that the abstract expressionist style is by itself rather calligraphic in terms of the characteristics it exhibits. There is little doubt that Wong Keen paints using the abstract expressionist's techniques. Thus applying this logic, his art is calligraphic. But as an artist with an Chinese heritage, are there any traits from the artist that will differentiate him from the rest of the Western abstract expressionists? With his Chinese cultural background, did he push the calligraphic elements to another level in the practice of abstract expressionism? Otherwise it would be of no significance to label Wong Keen's art as calligraphic, more than the rest of the abstract expressionists. This chapter will attempt to answer these questions.

### 4.1 Wong Keen's world view

Wong Keen, although he spent a substantial part of his productive life in a Western society, is still Eastern in his heart. He admitted this himself<sup>104</sup>. This situation will hardly surprise anyone who is familiar with the artist's life. From his life story we know that Wong Keen was from a family with strong Chinese influences; both his parents were Chinese teachers and more than just staying in Singapore, he spent a year in *Fujian*, China during his adolescence years. Chen Wen Hsi, his most important teacher in his foundation years, was a strong Chinese ink painter. One should also take into consideration that the Chinese (perhaps with the exception of Peranakan Chinese) in Singapore in the 50s were still emotionally attached to China, and culturally they would associate themselves with China.

---

<sup>104</sup>Interview with Wong Keen, 3<sup>rd</sup> Mar 2011

Whilst enrolled in a Western art school, Wong Keen was still practicing Chinese ink. A few surviving ink paintings (plates 3 to 5) showed influences in terms of composition and artistic philosophies, e.g. the abstraction, from *ZhuDa* (See fig 2). When Wong Keen arrived in UK, he also showed a series of Chinese ink works to his teacher in Saint Martin's school of art<sup>105</sup>, telling us that he was still practicing with the Chinese medium at that time.



Plate 3 *Coming to it*, Chinese ink on paper, 1965

---

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Wong Keen, 14<sup>th</sup> Dec 2010



Plate 4 *Lotus*, Chinese ink on paper, 1965



Plate 5 *Untitled*, Chinese ink on paper, 1965



Fig 2 Example of *Zhu Da's* painting

When all these add up, one would expect the young Wong Keen, when he arrived in New York at the age of 19, to have already formed a strong Chinese based world view and look at American art from his Chinese perspective. Not only was his thinking Chinese, he was technically adept enough execute works in the Chinese medium. As such, Wong Keen would be painting from a different departure point from his western counterparts. This is the root why Wong Keen's art always exhibit an Asian flavor beneath their western appearance, and this is what differentiated him from the rest of the abstract expressionists.

To Wong Keen, Chinese calligraphy formed a model of an advanced, if not final superstructure of art that all forms of art shall eventually converge towards through its evolvement. This idea was so important to him that he was inspired to write an article on

Chinese calligraphy at one point of his life to explain the details of this argument but unfortunately the article was lost<sup>106</sup>.

Wong Keen, in his interview, used Picasso's *Bull* sketches to show the potential of calligraphy. The simplification of the bull from a realist to an abstract, simplified manner is similar to how the oracle form of the Chinese character was devised. This was also how he approached art using calligraphy as his model.

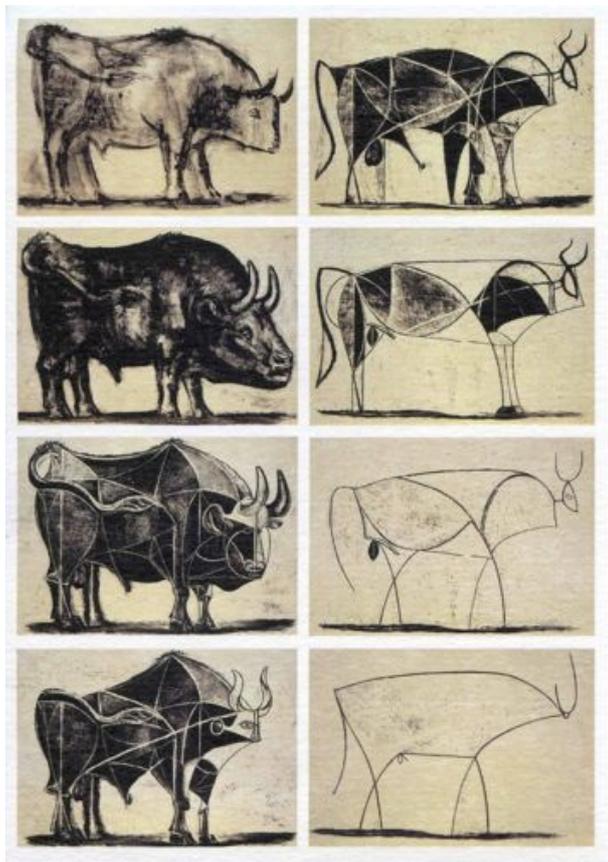


Fig 3 *Bull*, Pablo Picasso, 1945

Wong Keen, just like Picasso, is always thinking of evolving new art using calligraphy as a form of inspiration.

---

<sup>106</sup>Interview with Wong Keen, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2010

Although Wong Keen is always looking at calligraphy, trying to draw inspirations from it, he does not practice calligraphy like a regular calligrapher, as mentioned in chapter 2. Despite of this, his works are filled with brush strokes executed by master calligraphers. This point will be discussed in more details slightly later.

#### 4.2 Bringing a new medium into the practice of abstract expressionism

One very obvious characteristic about Wong Keen's art is that Wong Keen literally paints the abstract expressionist's way using a Chinese medium: on rice paper and using Chinese ink. An example is shown in plate 6. The significance of doing so is that Wong Keen enriched the vocabulary and scope of both Western and Chinese painting expressions.



Plate 6 *Purple lotus*, Chinese Ink and colour on Paper, 1997

From the Western perspective, the Chinese ink and rice paper medium provides fresh opportunities to create visual effects which are otherwise impossible to achieve using traditional Western mediums. In the work *Pink Lotus* (Plate 7), the appearance certainly looked abstract expressionist at the onset, at the same time on closer inspection the background was filled with light shades of ink and smudged across the paper. The smudging effect is typical of Chinese ink medium, but not achievable on a canvas medium.



Plate 7 *Pink Lotus*, Chinese ink and colour on paper, 1997

From the Chinese perspective, Wong Keen brought to the ink and rice paper medium a whole new set of aesthetic system, i.e. the abstract expressionist's style of painting. But generally speaking, there were more attempts of borrowing Western ideas into Chinese paintings than vice versa. As such contributions by Wong Keen in this aspect are not as significant as the former.

#### 4.3 Brushworks in Calligraphy

The Chinese has a long tradition of studying brushworks. A huge volume of theory was accumulated through history, establishing a complex system of required for the qualities of good brush strokes. An example is the 4<sup>th</sup> century text *Battle Formations of the*

*Brush*<sup>107</sup>. The text explained about the ways to hold the brush and the qualities of good brushworks.

A modern text, *Excerpts of Calligraphy*<sup>108</sup>, also talked about the same thing, however in very much more details. For example, in the section on the control of the brush, it said the method *ZhongFeng* (Centre Tip) was most commonly used in calligraphy. Strokes made by the centre tip method will be strong and gives a cylindrical look<sup>109</sup>. In the section on the walking script, the author showed complex methods of twisting and turning the brush to achieve a varied array of brushworks, which combined lines, dots and turns.<sup>110</sup>

Generally, when discussing about the use of brush, a typical text will include topics like the body's posture during writing; the method of holding the brush with the hand; the various characteristics of the different types of bristles; and the various elements that affects the movements of the brush, e.g. the speed, the amount of ink and the twisting of the brush.

These experiences with the use of brush allowed the Chinese calligraphers to execute long, continuous strokes that are full of variations and hence producing a wide variety of aesthetic beauty. Fig 4 is an example of the cursive script, where the calligrapher Zhang Xu exhibits his control of his brush: varying in the speed, the width of the strokes and

---

<sup>107</sup> Yue Shuo, "BiZhenTu (Battle Formation of the Brush), in *LiDaiShuFaLunWenXuan* (Collections of scholarly texts on calligraphy through history). Shanghai: ShangHaiShuHuaChuBanShe(Shanghai publisher of paintings and calligraphy), 1981

<sup>108</sup> Wang Xue Zhong, *ShuFaJuYao* (Excerpts of Calligraphy). Beijing: New World Press, 2007

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*,31

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 106-119

multiple twisting of the brush over long distances, often reaching more than 5 twists and turns in a single stroke, to create an abstract matrix of brushworks that were charged with emotions and energy. The ability to execute such expressive strokes of multiple tonalities and textures is vital to the Chinese painting expression, which will be discussed shortly.



Fig 4 Details from *GuShuSiTie*, Zhang Xu, 7<sup>th</sup> century.

The calligraphy executed in the seal carving script in Fig 5 shows the beauty derived from an aged look where some parts of the brushworks are broken to show white jagged edges. The strokes are also bold and round, looking cylindrical, derived from the centre tip method. The lines were said to possess internal beauty and could be appreciated in their own right.

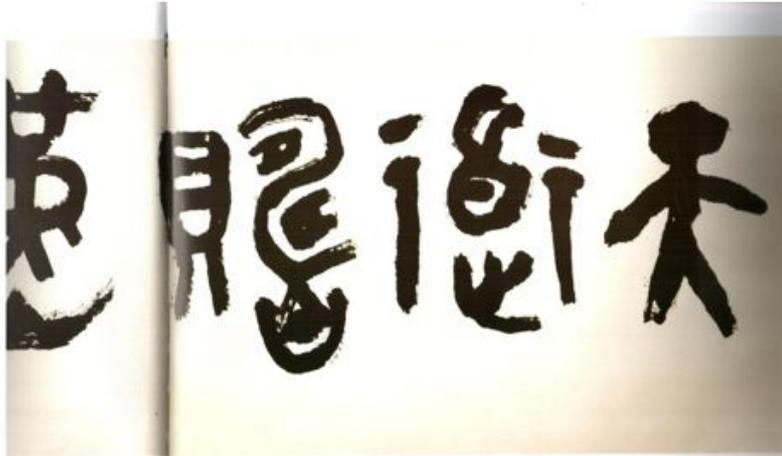


Fig 5 , Calligraphy, Zhong Tian Duo, contemporary

Wong Keen, having trained in a Chinese environment, is highly sensitive to the mechanics of using the brush. In his work *Purple Lotus* (Plate 6), the stems of the lotus were executed with the same flexibility like the cursive script, yet with a boldness and aged appearance found in the seal carving script.

The work *The Stretch* (Plate 8) exhibits the same bold strokes as Fig 5. The strokes at the shoulder, the torso, highlights of the left breasts and the face are all similar types of the cylindrical, aged look and bold strokes when compared to those seen in Fig. 5.



Plate 8 *The Stretch*, acrylic on canvas, 2009

Finally, the figure in the work *Nude* (plate 9) was constructed with elongated brushworks with various twists, turns and textures, which have the same characteristics of calligraphy strokes exhibited in the cursive script, as shown in fig. 4. The brushworks on their own, due to their very varied characteristics, lend a lot of meanings to the overall work.



Plate 9 *Nude*, acrylic on paper, 2010

The brushworks in the above three examples all conform to traditional aesthetic tastes of Chinese calligraphy, e.g. in the cylindrical, aged look of the seal carving scripts and the flexibility attained in the cursive script.

#### 4.4 Brushworks in the works of representative artists from the New York School

In the previous section, we have seen Wong Keen's ability to manipulate the brush to create various effects that were common in the realm of Chinese calligraphy.

In contrast, although the western abstract expressionists were often also labeled as 'calligraphic', in terms of the technicalities of their brushworks, they tend to pale in the light of a higher degree of variations achieved by Chinese calligraphers.

For a start, although Jackson Pollock's works (see Fig. 6 for an example) are made up of bold, expressive 'strokes', they can be described better as paint drips rather than brushworks. From the perspective of non-brushwork characteristics of calligraphy, e.g. all over painting, flatness and abstraction, Pollock's works are still calligraphic, but from the perspective of brushworks it is difficult to draw parallels between Pollock's paint drips with Chinese calligraphy's definitive brushworks.

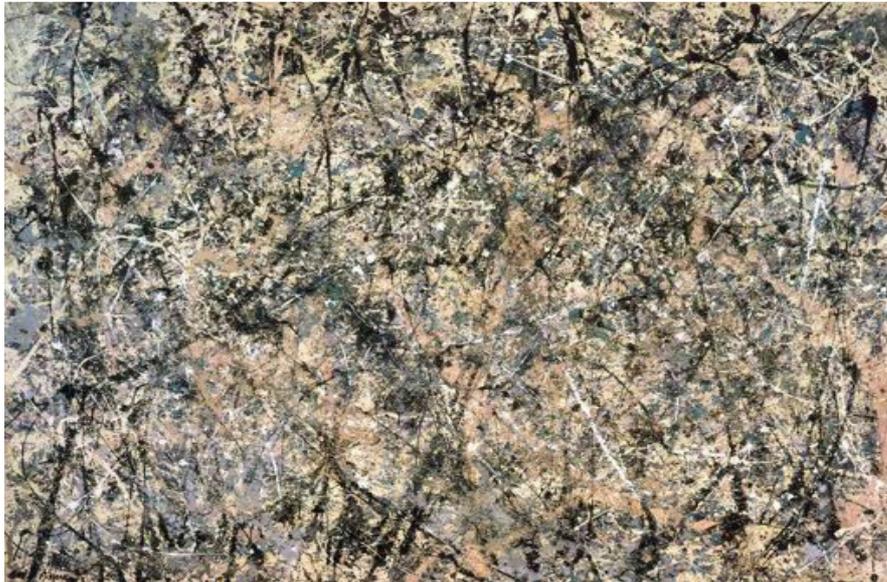


Fig 6 *Lavender Mist*, Jackson Pollock, 1950

In fig 7, Willem De Kooning's *Marilyn Monroe* exhibits quick, bold and expressive brushstrokes. It suffices to say that this work is calligraphic, due to the presence of large

number of expressive strokes, but when compared to Wong Keen's *The Stretch* (Plate 8), De Kooning's strokes are flatter, more dispersed and lacked twisting/turning.



Fig 7 *Marilyn Monroe*, Willem De Kooning , 1954

Franz Klein was an artist whose works were often associated with the term 'calligraphic'. The example in Fig 8 *Painting No 2* exhibits almost all the characteristic one would expect from a calligraphy work – it has black lines over white backgrounds, and is abstract. However, upon closer inspection, the calligraphic brushworks were mostly flat, broad and straight, just like De Kooning's example in Fig. 7. Imagine if Klein were to use a more varied vocabulary of brushworks, his works would have a potential to achieve a deeper dimension of expressiveness.



Fig 8 *Painting No 2*, Franz Klein, 1954

Generally, when Western artists employ 'calligraphic' brushstrokes, their strokes were generally flat, broad and straight. Twisting and sharp turnings were usually lacking. On the other hand, Wong Keen's works exhibit a high degree of flexibility and freedom very much on par with what a matured Chinese calligrapher can achieve as stated before.

Because of the more varied techniques Wong Keen was able to employ, Wong Keen's work seemed to carry more meanings and hence more expressive.

It is worthwhile to emphasize at this point that the above are not intended to mean that Wong Keen's art or his brushworks had reached a higher aesthetic level than his Western counterparts. The Western artists work within a framework that has different requirements and philosophy as the Eastern perspective. What is argued here is that

Wong Keen's works exhibit a higher degree of variations in the brushwork techniques used.

#### 4.5 Constructing representational objects using brushworks

When encountered with the problem of expressing an object, what a Chinese artist would usually do is to draw the outline, whereas a Western artist generally would consider expressing the object in terms of colour fields.



Fig 8 *Fish*, Zhu Da

Fig 8 shows a painting of a fish by Zhu Da. The fish was constructed by outlining its form. Other elements like the background, the details of the fish, the direction of light etc. are considered unnecessary as these will interfere with the focus on the subject, which is the fish. The highest aim of Chinese painting is to capture the essence or spirit of the painted subject. As such these pictorial elements are suppressed and large areas of the painting are just bare paper. Because there are very few pictorial elements left for

expression, the success of this type of method depends very much on the quality of the expressive lines. The key differentiating characteristic for this type of painting is that the painting was constructed primarily of lines and few other pictorial elements.

The non-representational works of the abstract expressionists like Kline and Motherwell were also simple and similar to the painting shown in Fig 8. However the fundamental difference is that they did not have a subject from nature. Thus these groups of artworks are excluded in this discussion.

In contrast with Fig 8, Fig. 9 shows a typical abstract expressionist painting. The blocks of colour fields were used to express the objects being painted. The expressive brush strokes were used to construct each blocks of colour field but not to define the objects itself. It was also obvious that many other pictorial elements, e.g. background, contrasts of light etc. were used.



Fig 9 *City Scape no. 1*, Richard Diebenkorn, 1963

#### 4.6 Wong Keen's pictorial language

Wong Keen's work often showed the concept of Chinese painting. Although many of his works used Western mediums, having western themes like the nude, western composition schemes e.g. employing cubist techniques, and even obvious abstract expressionist techniques like retaining paint splashes and drips, the shadows of Chinese painting

philosophy often lurks beneath the surface of the painting. This argument will be proven in the next 3 examples.

Plate 9 is a very direct adaptation of Chinese painting techniques that requires very little explanation. The nude figure is simply outlined using an array of expressive strokes of different tonalities and textures.

Plates 10 and 11 are works that exhibit strong Chinese painting characteristics. In both examples, the background has been reduced to almost monotonous patches of colours over large areas, so much so they resemble the bare white areas found in Chinese painting. The objects represented in these works are outlined. The colour fields within the outlined areas served as a background colour of the painted medium, in this case canvas, rather than representing actual objects. All the objects in the painting were kept to a minimum number of strokes possible. In essence the two works were a re-adaptation of Chinese painting techniques over a Western medium, in a more subtle manner as compared to plate 8. Very few, if none, Western abstract expressionist artists used such a pictorial language in their works. We need to be reminded that this technique requires very expressive and varied brushworks to be successful.



Plate 10 *Rocks by the sea II*, oil on canvas, 1996



Plate 11 *Chinese Garden*, oil on canvas, 1996

#### 4.7 Conclusion

By comparing Wong Keen's works with the Western New York School artists' works, it can be seen that Wong Keen made use of his calligraphic knowledge to uplift the variety of the brushworks in his paintings. As a comparison, Western painters usually used flat, broad brushstrokes that were straight and relatively short. Moreover, they often do not use lines as a key element in their paintings, especially in representational paintings.

Because Wong Keen possesses more agile abilities to deal with brushstrokes, he is able to construct objects in a western medium (e.g. oil on canvas) just like the Chinese did in a typical ink painting. The result was that he was able to produce a body of work which were much in the same spirit as Chinese ink painting, i.e. abstract, simple and primarily consists of lines. As such, we can describe Wong Keen's works as having a Western external look but an Eastern internal core. This is what differentiates Wong Keen from the rest of the Western abstract expressionists and his contribution to the movement.

With a better control of the brush, and hence more varieties of possible brushstrokes, an artist of Chinese heritage like Wong Keen could take advantage of the vast knowledge in Chinese calligraphy traditions to evolve newer and better art, armed with these new arsenal of possibilities. These are experiments that Wong Keen and his contemporaries are working on.

## Chapter 5 Wong Keen's place in Singapore art history and conclusions

### 5.1 Wong Keen's place in Singapore art history

Wong Keen is a significant second generation artist. Firstly, he has achieved a high artistic standard, and could be comparable to local masters like Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi. His works had been widely recognized by local and overseas institutions<sup>111</sup>. Last but not least, he is the first local artist to be working primarily in the abstract expressionist style, also implying that he had transformed into a new style very much unlike the *Nanyang Style* that many artists of his generation were practicing. In the context of the Singapore art scene, Wong Keen had brought Singapore forward to be up to date with one of the most important art movements in the world at that time. This research also found that Wong Keen had contributed to enriching the abstract expressionist artistic expressions. All these made him very unique and important in the Singapore arts context.

On the other hand, Wong Keen emigrated out of Singapore into the United States in 1961, only to renew his artistic endeavors in Singapore after 1996. Therefore his presence in the Singapore art scene was not strongly felt.

Art historian Kwok Kian Chow felt that Wong Keen's contributions to the Singapore art scene is still largely coming from his individual efforts as a practicing artist, rather than a

---

<sup>111</sup> E.g. Wong Keen had held solo shows in (Museum of Costa Rica) in 1988 and Singapore Art Museum in 2007. His works had been collected by these institutions.

leader or teacher of the art community<sup>112</sup>. However, the scope of this research did not investigate this point to a satisfactory degree, and further research may be needed to validate this point.

## 5.2 Conclusions of the thesis

The research had made known more information on Wong Keen's formative years in Singapore, and also other episodes in his life. From the knowledge of his early life, it was found that Wong Keen was exposed to calligraphy and Chinese culture in general from a very young age, so much so that by the time he arrived in the United States the Chinese heritage had been strongly imprinted in his world view.

The few years Wong Keen had spent with Chen Wen Hsi gave him a very good opportunity of learning art from the master and hence a good foundation education in art. Chen's artistic practice that spanned both the East and West also provided the young Wong Keen with a broad view. Finally, his early successes helped him make a decision to embark on a career as an artist.

Objective evidences showed that the abstract expressionism was influenced by Oriental philosophies and art forms in the 30s through the 40s, then the ideas probably permeated through the initial group of artist who came into contact with the Oriental ideas to others in the movement, to a state whereby Oriental ideas (hence calligraphic ideas) became inherent in the movement itself. Of course, Oriental ideas were just one source among others that shaped the abstract expressionist movement. More to these, it has been shown

---

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Kwok Kian Chow, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2011

that from a technical front, calligraphy and abstract expressionism exhibit many similarities, for example the pursuit of abstraction; no need for figurative form and content, all over painting and the notion of flatness. In this sense abstract expressionist is inherently 'calligraphic' on its own, and thus in a way all abstract expressionist painters are already calligraphic. To be able to label Wong Keen as 'calligraphic', there is a need to show that Wong Keen has something more calligraphic than his Western counterparts.

In this respect, the thesis showed that Wong Keen's art exhibited a higher level of calligraphic characteristics than his Western counterparts. The differentiation can be broadly classified into these categories, namely the point of departure of his artistic ideas; the new medium (Chinese ink on rice paper) he brought to the practice of abstract expressionism; and the more varied calligraphic strokes that Chinese calligraphers were familiar with but not exhibited by Western painters. It has been shown that by doing so, Wong Keen expanded the scope of abstract expressionist artistic expression; by producing a body of work that has a Western exterior look but a deeper Eastern roots beneath the surface, which few, if not none of his Western counterparts had been able to achieve.

## Bibliography

Bill GillHam, *The Research Interview*. London: Continuum, 2004.

Cao Yi Qiang, 'The Enlightened Vision: Robert Motherwell's Prints in Singapore', in *The Enlightened Vision: Robert Motherwell's prints in Singapore*, exh.cat. Singapore: Singapore Taylor's Print Institute, 2005.

Charles Lachman, 'The Image Made by Chance' in China and the West: Ink Wang Meets Jackson Pollock's Mother', in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 74, no. 3 (Sep., 1992), pp. 499-510. College Art Association,

Chen Wen Hsi, *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition, volume II*, exh. cat. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006

Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", [www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html](http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html). Accessed 9th Apr 2010

Constance Shears, "Asian Journeys: Recent Works by Wong Keen", in *Recent Works by Wong Keen: Lotus. Figures*, exh cat. Singapore: Shenn's Fine Art, 1997.

David Clarke, 'The All-Over Image: Meaning in Abstract Art', in *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 27, no. 3, American Art and Music (Dec. 1993), pp 355-375. Cambridge University Press.

David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992

Eric Fernie. *A critical anthology: Art History and its Methods*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1995

Edward Evans, 'After Thirty-Five Years in New York – An Introduction', in *Wong Keen :After Thirty Five Years in New York*, exh. cat. Singapore: Shenn's Fine Art Gallery, 1996

Kwok Kian Chow and Ong Zhen Min, 'Wong Keen : A Singapore Chapter to Abstract Expressionism', in *Wong Keen: A Singapore Abstract Expressionist*, exh. cat. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2007

Low Sze Wee, "Introduction to Exhibition", in *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition, volume I*, exh. cat. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006

Matthew Sansom. 'Imaging Music: Abstract Expressionism and Free Improvisation', in *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol 11, not Necessarily "English Music": Britian's Second Golden Age (2001), pp 29-34. MIT Press

Roy Moyer, in *Wong Keen: Formation Series. 1998-99*, exh.cat. Singapore: Shenn's Fine Art International

Toh Lam Huat, *Mei De Zu Ji: Zhong Guo Suo Jian Gu Shu Hua Ji*. Singapore: Ji Ya Xuan, 1996,

Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Wassily Kandinsky 1866-1944: The journey to abstraction*. Los Angeles: Taschen, 2007

Usha M. Nathan, 'About the artist and his works', in *Expressions by Wong Keen*, exh. cat. Singapore: Galerie Belvedere, 2007

Wang Xue Zhong, *ShuFaJuYao* (Excerpts of Calligraphy). Beijing: New World Press, 2007

William C. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983

Yue Shuo, "BiZhenTu (Battle Formation of the Brush), in *LiDaiShuFaLunWenXuan* (Collections of scholarly texts on calligraphy through history). Shanghai: ShangHaiShuHuaChuBanShe(Shanghai publisher of paintings and calligraphy), 1981

### Exhibition Catalogues

*Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition, volume II*, exh. cat. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006

*Red Star Over China: Tenuous Peace*, exh. cat. New York: Keen Gallery, 1993

Wong Keen, *After Thirty Five Years in New York*, exh. cat. Singapore: Shenn's Fine Art Gallery, 1996

Wong Keen, *Recent Works by Wong Keen: Lotus. Figures*, exh. cat. Singapore: Shenn's Fine Art, 1997.

Wong Keen, *Formation Series. 1998-99*, exh. cat. Singapore: Sheen's Fine Art International, 1999

Wong Keen, *Wong Keen: A Singapore Abstract Expressionist*, exh. cat. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2007

Wong Keen, *Expressions by Wong Keen*, exh. cat. Singapore: Galerie Belvedere, 2007

## List of Appendixes

1. Interview transcripts of Wong Keen, 14th Dec 2010.
2. Interview notes of Kwok Kian Chow, 18th March 2011.
3. Interview with Mr. Koh, 22nd March 2011
4. Set of newspaper cuttings, school transcripts, exhibition invitations etc provided  
by Wong Keen