

Writing with pictures

Artist Wong Keen's abstract nudes are painted in calligraphic strokes

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Artist Wong Keen, 70, known for his evocative, colour-rich canvases, is back with a series of abstract paintings in black.

Seventeen of the 20 works in his latest exhibition, *Picture Writing: Sensuous Abstractions* at artcommune gallery in Bras Basah Complex, are painted in black acrylic on paper.

The abstract paintings of female nudes display quick, expressive brushwork that capture the sinuous female form in sparing, calligraphic strokes. The paintings are for sale at prices ranging between \$5,000 and \$6,000.

The Singapore-born painter, who splits his time between the United States and here, says: "There is a spiritedness in the black-and-white painting that, to me, expresses colour."

The dominance of black in the artist's latest series of paintings also underscores the nature of the works, which are meant to convey both writing in the form of pictures and painting in a calligraphic way.

Wong, who was trained in traditional Chinese art in his youth, refers to these paintings as picture writing. Picture writing, or pictography, is a way of communicating through pictorial symbols and it traces its roots to primitive human civilisations. Some of the earliest Chinese characters, for example, are pictograms.

Wong says picture writing has informed his style of painting since the 1960s when he studied at the Art Students League of New York and began marrying influences from Chinese calligraphy and Abstract Expressionism in his works.

Abstract Expressionism emerged in New York in the 1940s and works belonging to this artistic movement are characterised by dynamic gestures in painting and open fields of colour that express a painter's psy-



che. At the heart of Wong's picture writing style, therefore, is an intuitiveness, which he believes gives rise to pure, honest and uninhibited expression.

These qualities resonate with his art-making mantra: For an artist to be enlightened and create something extraordinary, he must first free himself from the tyranny of logic and traditions.

The works in this exhibition stay true to his style. They were painted without overthinking, in a manner he likens to "scribbling", and they were usually completed in minutes. This lack of restraint liberated him from his previous works and allowed his paintings of the female nude to evolve.

The pictorial compositions in this series, for example, are varied with some of the pieces capturing only parts of the body and torso instead of the whole body. The works are also painted in acrylic on paper instead of ink or oil, resulting in a flatter image that pushes the limits of conjuring a bodily form without a third dimension.

What remains unchanged, however, is the subject of the female nude in his paintings. Wong, who is married with four children and two young granddaughters, says: "I find beauty in the female form. I see in it the landscape of nature, it is full of expression."

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Paintings by Wong Keen (above left) include *Picture Writing 17* (above), *Picture Writing 6* (below) and *Picture Writing 19* (right). PHOTOS: ASHLEIGH SIM, ARTCOMMUNE GALLERY

