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Soul/Experimental: Oil & Acrylic Works of Chuan Keng Boon

Exhibition Reading Material

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Soul/Experimental: Oil & Acrylic Works of Chuan Keng Boon

Chuan Boon Keng (1953 – 2010)

This exhibition takes you on the experimental journey of the late Singaporean artist, Chuan Keng Boon (b. 1953 – d. 2010). On showcase are over 30 pieces of paintings that are characterised by an amalgamation of modern influences, fresh subjects and East-West techniques. Although Chuan is better known for his mastery in Chinese ink painting, the show celebrates the late artist's stylistic achievements in the Western oil/acrylic medium, bringing you a series of works imbued with soul, ambition and unique perspectives.

Artistic Beginnings: Early Life (1950s – 1970s)

Born to a Hainanese family in 1953, Chuan Keng Boon was the second youngest of six children. At the tender age of five, he already displayed a remarkable interest in drawing, cultivating what would eventually become a lifelong passion for painting.

Growing up in a poor family with modest means, Chuan's talent in art went unnoticed for several years and as a young boy, he was contented with creating sketches of martial arts characters or merely doodling from imagination. Despite his immense passion and increasingly evident talent, Chuan never had the privilege of receiving any adequate support from his family to nurture his artistic inclination.

While studying at the Anglican High School, Chuan received his first formal guidance in art from the eminent artist, Mr. Chen Wuchi, who was then a teacher for the art curriculum in his secondary school. Although those lessons were important to his foundation, they were fairly brief and basic, and Chuan mostly had to rely on his own resources to further his art practice. As a teenage boy constrained by financial limitations, he frequently scrimped and saved from his pocket money in order to purchase a wide array of art books that could enrich his understanding of art and help

develop his painting techniques. As a result, he picked up painting in both the Western oil and Chinese ink mediums in his youth.

Although heavily absorbed in his artistic endeavours, the young Chuan was never confident that he could make a living in the field of art. Embarking on the “safer route”, he subsequently enrolled in Nanyang University to pursue a degree in Public Administration and Politics, which he felt was another area of interest that could offer more practical career routes.

At the Nanyang University, Chuan remained devoted to developing his art practice and presence in the local art scene. Between 1976 and 1977, he was the President of the Art Society at the university and participated in various overseas painting expeditions organised by the society. Shortly upon graduation, he also signed up for a basic course in Western painting at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), where he would encounter influential pioneer artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng and Georgette Chen.



Fig. 1 An early composition of a boy, 1975

While Chuan’s ambition was to eventually become a full-time artist, this could only remain a distant dream. In 1977, he began a full-time career as an Immigration Officer at the Singapore Immigration Department and was at the job till 2003, when his declining health compelled for an early retirement. Although Chuan could not base his career in art, his passion for painting was never sidelined. In between his hectic work

shifts, he continued to sketch and paint with ferocious vigour, often at the expense of his personal rest time. The proof of this intensive labour is evident in the vast and prolific body of work he produced in both the Chinese ink and Western oil/acrylic mediums between the late 1970s and early 2000s. Over the years, he also managed to hold 4 solo exhibitions as well as participate in various local and overseas group exhibitions.

Artistic Engagement and Maturation: 1980s -1990s

Although Chuan was known for his unwavering passion and remarkable tenacity, his desire to pursue a full-time art career was constantly plagued by doubts of success and worries over the loss of a stable income. The subsequent suicide of his good friend, Chen You Yong in the 1980s was also a significant event that might have reinforced his concerns.

At the age of thirty-five, Chen was a brilliant artist who quit his journalistic post at the Chinese press to become a full-time artist. The move was met with very little success and the aspiring young man consequently struggled to make ends meet. The entire episode of his downward spiral was witnessed closely by Chuan, who was further convinced against turning full-time at the expense of risking the financial security necessary to provide for his family.

Nonetheless, Chuan's dedication to painting was never a question and he was an active participant in the local art scene from the beginning till the end. In the 1980s, he befriended a group of artists from the Hua Han Art Society and would later serve as the President to the Society during the 1980s and the 1990s. For many years, he regularly took part in painting trips and gatherings that were organised by members of the Society, and was at one point acquainted with the famous artist, Mr. Fan Changqian, under whom he had received brief artistic guidance.

During this period, Chuan also taught at the Punggol Community Centre Art Club and was nurturing younger generations of art enthusiasts for as long as fifteen years. In fact, several students would continue to paint and maintain close ties with him even after they passed on into adulthood and entered the workforce.

For Chuan, the late 1970s to early 1980s marked an important phase of extensive experimentation in the Western oil and acrylic medium. Many of these earlier works were heavily influenced by the aesthetic appeals of Post-Impressionism and at times, Fauvism. For instance, the strong contrast in bright colours and the rapid application of forceful, divisionist brush strokes in Fig. 2 and 3 are reminiscent of the style usually associated with the likes of André Derain and Vincent van Gogh.

Although Chuan's works from this period still lacked a deft touch of maturity, they already began to display the young artist's remarkable sensibility in garnering fine colour combinations and strong, consistent brushwork.

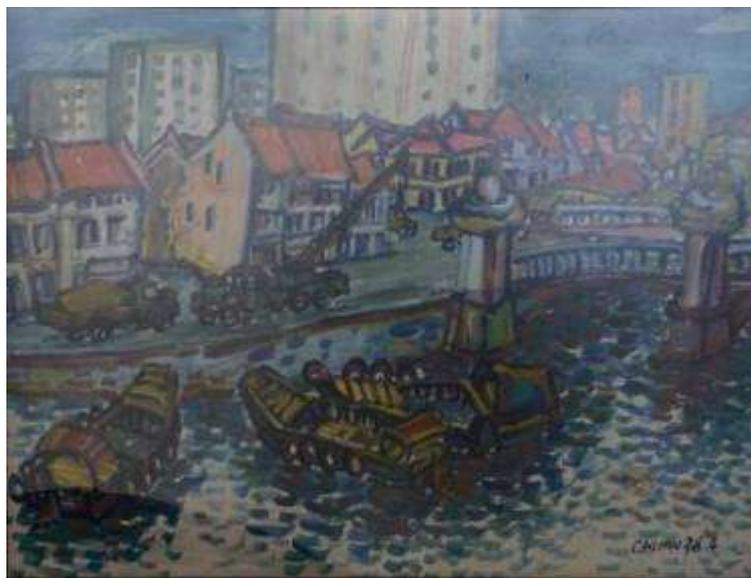


Fig. 2 Singapore River, 1975

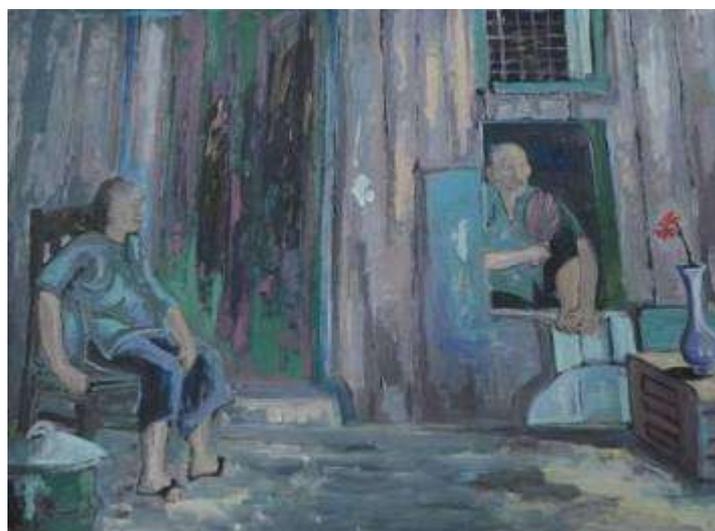


Fig. 3 Oil Women, 1970s

A striking personal style emerged in the late 1980s as Chuan matured as an artist. While the oil and acrylic works produced during this period continue to carry influences from Modernist masters like Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse and Vincent van Gogh, the compositions appear more solid in form and would often feature the incorporation of well-grounded Chinese ink techniques (ref. Fig. 4). For example, on exhibit are several paintings of Western subject matters that display vivid, gestural and furious brush strokes expressed through the “Flying White” (“飞白”: fei bai) technique –a style of brush work that is commonly seen in traditional Chinese ink paintings. To employ this method, the artist must first have mastered the application of varying speed and pressure to the brush, which causes the hair to separate and leave streaks of white spaces within the stroke.



Fig. 4 Naked Woman, 1980s

Apart from his foundation in traditional Chinese ink painting, many have attributed Chuan’s exceptionally deft and solid brush techniques to his regular practice of martial arts since young. Having picked up Taekwondo as a child, he was subsequently trained in the “Five Masters Style” (“五祖拳”: wu zu quan), “Qi Gong” (“气功”: qi gong) and other martial art forms that required him to discipline his breathing techniques as well as the channelling of ‘qi’ (“气功”: qi, inner circulation of energy). As a result, Chuan was able to wield an impressive control over the application of speed and vigour in his

brushwork, irregardless of the medium. This extraordinary ability would become further defined when the artist arrived at another stylistic breakthrough in the mid-90s.

It is noteworthy to mention that Chuan was a staunch practitioner of Buddhism and Chinese philosophies, and would abide by a disciplined routine of meditations on a daily basis. By the 1990s, the modernist influences in his works have mostly subsided and his paintings would also become increasingly inward-looking, often reflecting a heightened sense of spirituality and philosophical dwelling (ref. Fig. 5). The canvas works produced during this period were mostly executed in a distinctly bold and spontaneous fashion, with strong and solid brushwork underpinning the compositions.

Both Fig. 5 and 6 were accomplished around the mid-90s. While the subject matters are markedly different, they are similar in the artist's use of a bold and vibrant palette, as well as the application of fast, forceful and arresting brushstrokes. The "flying white" technique would also continue to be a recurring feature in many of the paintings that emerged during this later phase.



Fig. 5 Chuan's depiction of a bull ring, 1990s



Fig. 6 Meditations, 1990s

Since 2000, Chuan focussed mainly on the Chinese ink medium and his productions of oil and acrylic paintings were relatively sparse. This shift in his oeuvre was largely due to his declining health as well as the lack of storage space in his new home to keep the canvas works. In fact, his health degenerated dramatically after a serious fall in 2003. During this time, the overexertion sustained in his youth was also beginning to take its toll. Compelled by ill health, he retired early from his post at the Singapore Immigration Department at the age of fifty and briefly contemplated delving into full-time art. Unfortunately, by then, his zeal and productivity were already severely impeded by the frequent pains that ravaged his body.

On 29 December 2011, the artist passed away peacefully in his sleep. According to family and friends, Chuan had been upbeat and optimistic amidst his rapidly ailing health, and could still be seen drawing or painting whenever he could afford the energy and focus. Regretful as it is, turning to full-time art would remain a lifelong ambition that was never fulfilled for Chuan despite the promising talent and unwavering devotion he had displayed over decades of artistic pursuit.