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Enthralling Landscapes: Recent Works of Ong Kim Seng

Exhibition Reading Material

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“He is versatile in his use of colour, rhythm, and imagination; and there is freshness and vitality in his composition and technique, whether depicting the soaring clouds of the Himalayas, or the steaming tropics of the Bay of Singapore.”

-Dong Kingman, in *Ong Kim Seng, The Artist*

About Ong Kim Seng

Born in Singapore in 1945, Ong Kim Seng, *BBM. A.W.S. DF. N.W.S* stands today as one of the most highly acclaimed contemporary watercolour artists in Southeast Asia. A self-taught artist, Ong has been practising full-time art since 1985 and his paintings have been featured in numerous exhibitions around the world. To date, the Cultural Medallion holder has been a recipient of 7 awards from the prestigious American Watercolour Society. In 1990, he became the first Asian outside of the U.S. to be awarded its membership and in 2000, he was conferred the distinguished Dolphin Fellowship by the AWS.

Not only can Ong’s paintings be seen on exhibit in foreign missions and embassies representing Singapore, the watercolour maestro also counts Queen Elizabeth II, Mr. Koizumi (former Prime Minister of Japan) and Mr. H.E. Kofi Anan (former Secretary-General of the UN) amongst the long list of royal figures and diplomats who have come to be collectors of his artworks.

Despite having established himself as the foremost watercolour artist in Singapore, the multi-award winning artist is hardly resting on his laurels. The robust elder, who recently turned 67 remains fully dedicated to his art practice, and is still constantly foraging for inspirations and breakthroughs in his experimentation with the watercolour medium.

Early Formation as an Artist

Ong’s artistic talent was already evident in his childhood when he began winning prizes for art as a schoolboy. His path to becoming an artist, however, was one that was fraught with turns and obstacles. As a young boy, he could never afford formal art lessons due to his family’s poor financial conditions, and his artistic inclinations could only be developed on the sideline throughout his growing years.

Before finally becoming a full-time artist in 1985, Ong had worked as a signboard painter for a Chinese advertising firm, a policeman at the British Naval Base, a welder, a line technician at an electronics firm, a National Semiconductor, and a graphic art technician at the Colombo Plan Staff College for Technician Education.

Nonetheless, Ong’s formation as an artist was already in progress throughout these earlier years and he never gave up on his artistic aspirations. Apart from devouring art books, he often observed other artists and studied their works in order to constantly improve and improvise on his own painting techniques.

In the 1950s, while still a teenager, Ong became a regular participant of the Sunday Group. Principally led by Lim Cheng Hoe, a 1st generation pioneer artist most famed for his watercolour works, the Sunday Group comprised artists and amateurs from diverse backgrounds who would gather on Sundays to embark on plein-air painting. Being part of the Sunday Group was crucial for Ong as it was during this period that he began acquiring tremendous exposure to the watercolour medium.

It would be interesting to note that throughout the 1950s, Ong dabbled in several mediums and was still largely painting in oil and acrylic. He subsequently made the switch to watercolour in the early 60s as the materials were the cheapest. Apart from that, he was also deeply fascinated by the potential of the aqua-medium and its fluidity and malleability in depicting the shifting conditions of light and other atmospheric conditions.

Ong's focus on watercolours turned out to be a pivotal move in his artistic endeavour. By the 1970s, after years of practice and experimentation with the medium, his watercolour paintings went on to achieve various awards and critical acclaims. Since then, Ong has risen to become one of the most established and sought-after contemporary artists in Singapore.

Watercolours as Poems

Enter the watercolour world of Ong Kim Seng and one will certainly identify with the artist's own revelation that, "Oils are like the novels of visual art, while watercolours are the poems."

Indeed, watercolour should be judged according to its own terms. It would be a mistake to assume that watercolour makes an easier or less superior medium simply because it does not achieve the same effects or require as long a process as oil painting. In reality, many challenges can abound in the process of relying on water as a medium. Even the selection of paper materials (e.g. with a flat or grainy surface) can directly affect the interactions between the water and colours, as well as the overall presentation of the piece. More importantly, watercolour is essentially capable of evoking a sense of poetic grandeur and expressiveness that is peculiar to itself as a medium.

A journey through the watercolour works of Ong Kim Seng no doubt demonstrates the point. Ong's paintings are remarkable for their lyrical expressiveness and poetic charms. Although the fluid strokes and efficiency of details in his paintings may come across as effortless, the ability to control and wield such intricate brushwork; and the creative handling of colours in a medium known for its transparency and unpredictability all reflect the sound focus and mastery of techniques on the artist's part.

As an artist, Ong adopts a highly disciplined approach towards painting. Holding tight to the mantra that a well-conceived focal point makes the lifeline of a

painting, every composition is meticulously devised and executed. As elucidated by Ong, “When I observe a scene I imagine the finished painting before I begin the actual process of sketching and painting. This is the moment I identify the darkest and lightest points of the scene in order to establish the contrasts. Once contrast placement has been decided I start to sketch with a pencil...while sketching the scene I eliminate elements that obstruct the focal point to achieve the scene that I want to see.”

Drawing the viewer’s eye to the artist’s intended focal point certainly boils down to a crucial selection of angles, colours and details. Ong’s exceptional ability to censor and minimise unnecessary details to concentrate on his focal point allows him to lead the viewer into his personal interpretation of the scene. For instance, in Fig. 2, Ong deliberately plays down the colours of various objects surrounding the focal point (the space spotting the female figure in a flowing, burnt sienna outfit), hence using the contrast in colours to lead the eye. To establish the effects of light and shade, a shadow is cast on the front left of the painting; this juxtaposes against the almost white stone façade on the front right which appears to have light reflected against it.



Village Well, Nepal, 2010

In Fig. 3, the focal point is where the angles converge in the middle of the composition (where the couple can be seen strolling). The original whiteness of the paper is also strategically utilised to indicate the light conditions and accentuate the focal point.



Corner of Mohamed Sultan Road, 2012

In addition, Ong usually delineates his sketch with a 'light and shadow' plan to be used for his painting. This is to ensure that any changes in weather conditions or even a sudden shift in light will not disrupt his original vision and affect his placements of colours within the composition.



Fig. 4 Flower Market, Paris



Fig. 5 Flower Market, Paris (A simple sketch with a shadow plan)

Ong possesses an incredible talent when it comes to organising complex scenery with pin-point accuracy. Fig. 6 for example, is a complex depiction of South Bridge Road. Apart from the unique angle, the accuracy in compositional planes and details all help to create an arresting panoramic view of a cityscape visualised from an unusual position. The focal point remains effectively maintained amidst the explosion of details. This is accomplished by having the buildings in the distance toned down through the employment of looser forms and muted palettes. In contrast, the focal point is emphasised through warm colours and illuminated by areas of white. At the same time, the white areas are punctured by shades of grey to reflect the effects of light and shadow.



South Bridge Road, 2010

Last but not least, colours are crucial in establishing mood and atmosphere in Ong's paintings. As proclaimed by the artist, "The ability to use colours effectively to reveal the emotional message of a painting contributes much to its success. I place importance on colours to achieve the clarity and transparency that I believe are only possible in this medium."

The rich affective quality and splendour that emerge from Ong's exquisite blends of colours are by no means accidental. From the mixing of colours to their strategic deployments, to achieve a fine balance involved years of experience and extensive experimentation. It is important to note that Ong rarely uses pure primary colours in his paintings except when he wishes to draw attention to a specific area or figure in the composition. He also prefers to set a base colour and have all other colours relate to it.

In Fig. 7, the contrast in light and shade is brilliantly laid out in this composition. Broad and indistinct shadows are cast upon a street shaded by buildings on the

left and an assortment of plants on the right. A large part of the composition is framed by leaves and flowers comprising a blend of warm and cold colours in different intensities. This helps to capture the viewer's eye and evoke an atmosphere of warmth and noise. The walking figures dominating the central of the composition also add to a sense of activity along a seemingly quiet and empty street.



Balinese Village Road, 2011

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that Ong Kim Seng demonstrates phenomenal talent and creativity as a watercolourist. Although a self-taught artist, he has set himself apart as one of the most outstanding and widely-acclaimed contemporary artists in Singapore today. Through his watercolour paintings, we encounter a world of spellbinding verses and a choral blend of colours and emotions.

References

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