

# MAKING THE MARK: A REVIEW OF INK EXPRESSIONS (EXHIBITION)

Written by Ho Sou Ping



Last weekend in Singapore saw the opening of a groundbreaking event. A group of art collectors has come together to put up an interesting art exhibition, entitled *Ink Expressions*. The exhibition showcased over 70 pieces of ink works by eminent Singapore artists and many of these works featured are considerably important works that are shown in public for the first time.

The nine participating artists include Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng, Lim Tze Peng, Wong Keen, Chua Ek Kay, Henri Chen KeZhan, Zhuang Sheng Tao, Hong Sek Chern and Tang Da Wu. From the first generation artists to the contemporary ones, the nine artists represent three generations of artists who were active in their artistic careers during the latter half of the 20th century. In a certain way, this exhibition showcased the developments of the Chinese ink genre of painting in Singapore after WWII.

Curated by Mr. Teo Han Wue, Executive director of Art Retreat Museum, the exhibition aimed to evoke discussions on academic topics related to the ink painting. When the audiences first enter the 6000 sq ft exhibition hall at Helutrans@ Tanjong Pagar, they will be confronted by a set of thought — provoking questions laid out on the wall

1. Have Singapore artists contributed to art history in INK?
2. Have Singapore artists created an 'INK ARTISTS' identity?
3. What are the masterpieces in Singapore INK ART?
4. If the National Art Gallery Singapore were to have an 'INK GALLERY', which artists' work should be featured and why? And finally,
5. What comments can you make of this exhibition? If space is not a constraint, which other artists' work would you want to see and why?

Questions such as these immediately create a contemplative undertone to the exhibition. Perhaps such questions should only appear in a state museum setting instead of a commercial space. While Singapore is no stranger to large scale, high quality exhibitions staged by the private sector, most of these events are for commercial purposes. The occurrence of such an academic exhibition organized by private collectors marked a significant milestone in art collecting in Singapore. This may signal at a growing maturity, understanding and appreciation collectors have towards their personal collection and art in general that allows them to look at art from a less commercial perspective and to discuss more about the humanity and cultural values that art carries with them.

The exhibition starts with Singapore's legendary artists Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng. Chen's ink works, although not considered wholly traditional, exhibited more traditional elements. He was a good point of departure to prepare the audiences for the journey down history, to connect Singapore's Ink to her mainland Chinese roots. Chen's works incorporated elements from the Shanghai School and Ling-Nan School, both representative of the bulk of Chinese art movements in the first half of the 20th century.

On the other hand, Cheong Soo Pieng was already experimenting with abstraction and new techniques by the early 1960s. The irony is that in his late years, Cheong Soo Pieng seemed to have moved back to a more traditional style, in particular borrowing techniques from *Sung* dynasty paintings.

Lim Tze Peng was an 'in-between' among the first generation and second generation artists. A painting of Chinatown executed in 1980 showed Lim's connections with the first generation's linkage with traditions, while his works in the last decade displayed a burst of creativity that when coupled with his bold calligraphic strokes, pro-

duced a pictorial language that exerted a stunning impact on the audiences.

Wong Keen, Zhuang Sheng Tao, Henri Chen and Chua Ek Kay all manifest western influences in their painting. Especially evident are influences from the abstract expressionist movement; for example the bold, random and spontaneous brushworks and abstractions.

Wong Keen, having studied and settled down in New York since 1961, do not surprise us with his abstract expressionist appearance. What surprises us is despite his long stay in the West, his Chinese heritage never left him. Although Wong Keen never officially practiced calligraphy in the traditional sense, his brushworks displayed a stunning maturity that can only be found in works by master calligraphers. His brushworks sometimes displayed the fluidity and flexibility from the cursive script and yet sometimes showed the boldness and antiquity found in the seal carving and clerical scripts.

Zhuang Sheng Tao and Henri Chen form an interesting duo — both like to use brushworks to repeat a pattern throughout the painting, without definitive focus and forms. They employed not just brushstrokes, but also splashing and juxtaposition. In fact, each artist had one piece of their work displayed side by side, to show how in the course of the development of the ink painting genre artist confluence at the same point. The name Jackson Pollock comes to the mind of audiences when they saw the works of these two artists. But consider — Zhuang Sheng Tao's huge, traditional calligraphy works displays his knowledge in the traditional literati classics of Chinese culture. Many of Singapore's artists exhibit this character — a western outer coat with an Eastern core.

The exhibition featured only four pieces of works by Chua Ek Kay. His works in the 90s still showed affiliation with traditional paintings, whereas the 2006 work *A Pause for Silence* is a



representation of his matured style that showed strong western influences. Once again Chua is an example of the path many Singaporean artists took — to start off with traditions and to end in a matured style that is a mixture of the east and west.

But it was Tang Da Wu who breaks almost all the traditional rules – The works by Tang on display could not be easily classified into any of the known movements or schools. They are, well... Tang Da Wu, after all. Tang dislodged himself from contemporary concept art's debates with controversial issues; neither did he engage himself with aesthetic questions that the others had. He paints on Japanese paper, and in Ink – some begin to question whether his works can be classified as ink painting – but he probably cared no less. His monumental work *Hand in Hand* –



exhibited in the ShenZhen biennale, showed five boys in a simple yet emotionally charged picture, with an element of installation where the papers were arranged in a non-conventional way. One may debate about the validity of Tang's works, but the ultimate mission for artists is to break new grounds, and Tang is definitely successful in this aspect. As Dekooning puts it:

*"Just because you're getting older, doesn't mean you're doing it better. But you can't stop either, or you'll be lost. So you go ahead, even though you don't know where you're going, because you never know. You just know how to leave from where you've been."*

Hong Sek Chern stands out as an odd artist in this exhibition, because she is much younger than all the rest of the artists. She has one piece of work 1000 years ago on display. Hong's work had deviated entirely from the discourse of traditional aesthetics, in line with the conceptual art which is in vogue. Hong's works for the past few years had been an exploration of the architecture subject and her natural gentleness as a woman has added an unspeakable sensitivity and affection in the architectural spaces she had created in her paintings. One seems to be drawn into a surrealist environment where the old and new intertwined; one is lost; and so is the world and society we are living in.

The exhibition is an ambitious attempt in many ways. It created a space where the audiences can, within one space, view 50 years of development in the Singapore's ink movement, and spend time comparing and reflecting on the different periods and styles presented by the artists, and finally to contemplate and look towards the future and wonder where the next generation of Ink artists might take us. The questions posed by the organizers of

this exhibition may stimulate discourse, maybe in the near future, and perhaps even for years to come, as the question of Singapore's art identity can never be satisfactorily answered. Singapore, like any other country, is ever changing and evolution is always happening.

What we do know for certain, however, is that Singapore art can never become a force to be reckoned with, if it was to remain in the original forms of the native cultures. In the case of Chinese ink, Singapore artists can never paint better in the traditional ways than the mainland Chinese, for art that is separated from the socio-economic environment can never achieve great heights. Perhaps this was the hidden message that the organizers will like to send to young Singapore artists. ■

*Ink Expressions* took place at Gallery 3, Artspace @ Helixtrans, Level 2 Tangjong Pagar Distripark, 39 Keppel Road, 089065 and will be open to the public from 5th - 13th March 2011.

## WHEN BEING INDEPENDENT MEANT SOMETHING IN SINGAPORE THEATRE

Written by Richard Chua Image credit Courtesy of World-In-Theatre



What does it mean to be a truly independent theatre practitioner? It is perhaps an old question that warrants reflection, or, to most people, a dated one that is futile to discuss upon: every theatre practitioner is an independent individual anyway. To the critics holding the view of the latter, it is an attempt to evade the very question that might question their credibility, or to not provide a concrete answer to it in fear of losing to the criticism of subservient associations and affiliations that will undermine independent voices; the co-option of one's body by hegemony. This phenomenon is not uncommon in the Singapore theatre scene. There is soft power levied by larger, well-funded, monetary-resource endowed companies in terms of providing ready employment to theatre-practitioners, their abilities to provide a sense of artistic identity, their abilities to provide constant employment on a long-term basis, not to mention strong reassurance of longevity in regular income; as what the person who coined the term Joseph Nye referred to as primary currencies — the institutions' values, culture and policy practices that can repeal and attract theatre-practitioners to "want what they want" (Nye)'.

Hegemony created by well-endowed theatre companies influences theatre practitioners' want in determining what he/she should want is in need of serious critique in Singapore; For it diminishes the voices of the real independent artists. The definition of independent artists should not be restricted to those who have not been co-opted by state institutions, have established their own set-ups away from state funding support, have decided to work on a long-term basis with a few selected companies in the Singapore arts scene with the aim of claiming an unique artistic voice, but those who insisted on holding on to the belief that an independent voice is not an entity, but a spirit of honest expression. An independent artist is one that — on the contrary to conventional views of an idiosyncratic artist's obstinate-ness — insisted on his/her own way of looking and reacting to the world, on having their own spirit of expressing themselves, on having their own unique world positions. Being independent is to sustain one's own creative thought with self-respect and integrity.

There was a silent celebration of a truly independent voice in Singapore theatre last weekend — from 11 to 12 February 2011 — of the late Singapore theatre director William Teo. He lived and created during the time the development of independent theatre, independent music, independent bookstores, independent media, not forgetting independent intellectuals, was at its best. It was a beautiful time. It led to the founding of Asian-In-Theatre Research Circus (later Centre) in 1990 — with William Teo at its