

Reminiscing Tay Bak Koi

“My aim is to give people something beautiful to remember and cherish; something that they are familiar with but have forgotten. My subjects may look ordinary enough, but each has its own meaning. I paint from what I see, from my memory, and then use my artistic license to beautify them.”

-Tay Bak Koi

About Tay Bak Koi

Tay Bak Koi (b. 1939 – d. 2005) is an eminent second-generation artist in Singapore. A graduate of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), Tay is most well known for his oil and watercolour portrayals of fishing villages, kampung scenes and urban landscapes. During a career that spanned almost five decades, the late artist won over critics and collectors with his increasingly progressive techniques and stylised images. To date, his works have been featured in numerous exhibitions around the world, including in Hong Kong, Australia, Germany, Japan and the United States.

Born on 13 May 1939, Tay displayed evident talent in art as a youth. Under the recommendation of his father’s friend, who was also the younger brother of Lim Hak Tai (the founder of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts), he subsequently enrolled in the Academy to pursue a formal art education.

For Tay, the path to becoming an artist was one that was fraught with hardships and struggles. Coming from a modest family with limited finances, Tay’s father made a living as a hawker selling crabs in the market, and was expecting his son to help out in the business and eventually take over it. As a result, Tay’s decision to enrol in NAFA was against his father’s wishes, and his ambition to carve a career as a full-time artist gained neither the approval nor support of his parents. Despite the obstacles and isolation, Tay remained resolute in his pursuit and was determined to succeed as an artist with an unique personal style.

During his time at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Tay was also a student of Cheong Soo Pieng, an influential pioneer artist widely revered for his experiments in brush techniques and the amalgamation of East-West elements in painting. In fact, many works that Tay produced at the infancy stage of his artistic career in the 1960s still bore the mark of his former teacher’s style. While it would take Tay several years, the artist, known for his dedication to perfecting pictorial techniques and developing his own range of stylised images, eventually broke from the mould and found his own voice.

In particular, the body of work that emerged during the late 1970s and onwards strongly reflects his quest towards an increasingly distinct and sophisticated handling of forms and essences. This period also saw Tay arrive at some of his most compelling recurring motifs –the stylised images of landscapes and buffaloes which both fascinate and endear with their dream-like quality and simplicity of forms.

Persisting on despite the tremendous difficulty for the first and second-generation artists to make a living in Singapore, Tay gained his first commercial breakthrough in the late '70s when the prestigious Hilton Hotel recognised his talent and commissioned him to create 300 paintings to line the walls of the hotel. This would mark the beginning of an illustrious art career for Tay.

Stylistic transformations over the decades

While Tay is more renowned for his oil and watercolour landscapes, his oeuvre was certainly not limited to those. An inquisitive and motivated artist, Tay also experimented widely with other mediums including the collage, as well as subject matters like the female nude. For instance, Fig. 1 is one of his watercolour works that deal with abstraction. Synergising a blend of cold and warm colours, this 1964 composition relies on a colour scheme that is bold and vibrant, and also reflects the Nanyang-Cubist style that was widely practiced by several pioneer artists such as Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng.



Fig. 1 Abstract 6 ('64 series), 76x56cm, Watercolour

Although it has been noted that Tay's earlier works come across as reminiscent of Cheong Soo Pieng's, many already began to exhibit certain recognisable features that would subsequently grow and shape his stylistic discourse. For instance, Fig. 2 and 3 thrive on a palette dominated by cool colours –notably blue and green. Such an execution is significant of a vast number of works produced by Tay, which usually depict village scenes and ordinary folk activities, and the effect achieved is a sense of tranquillity, and even timelessness.

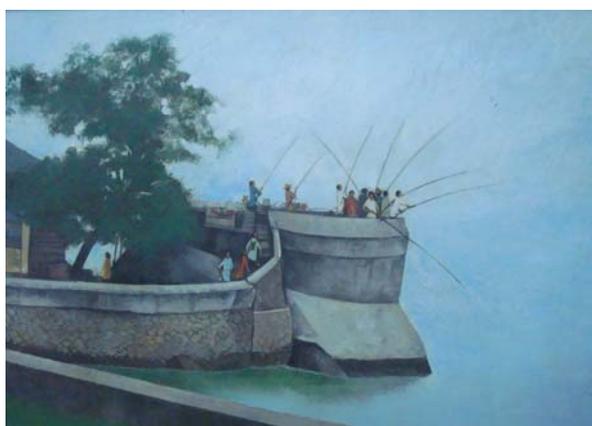


Fig. 2 Fishing Point, 98x70cm, Oil



Fig. 3 Boats and warehouses by the Singapore River, 44x39cm, Watercolour

Retaining his lyrical rendition of landscapes and folk subject matter, Tay continued to experiment with realising forms and shapes through his unique interpretive lens and the efficiency of details. Some time around late 1970s, an intriguing series of work depicting buffaloes styled in an askew geometrical form underlined another stylistic breakthrough that would quickly become a distinctive trademark in his oeuvre (see fig. 4 & 5). As elucidated by Mr. Chia Wai Hon in *Reminiscences of the South Seas*:

“Tay’s early paintings were strongly influenced by Cheong Soo Pieng. As he matured as an artist, he looked inwards searching for his own identity. This he found when he created his own image of a buffalo. The highly stylised creature with a massive body supported on two pairs of inverted V-shaped legs, a small head and a sharp hump, has remained with him to this day.”



Fig. 4 Herding Buffaloes, 31x27cm, Oil



Fig. 5 Gathering with Buffaloes, 70x54cm, Watercolour

Apart from the stylisation of buffaloes, Tay's portrayals of natural landscapes from the late 1970s onwards also begin to carry an idyllic and dream-like quality, often blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. This was a huge departure from his landscapes in the '60s and early '70s, which were generally more realist in conception and placid in mood. As compared to his later landscapes, the pictorial language in those earlier ones lacked complexity and richness in terms of both texture and form.

Despite this remarkable transition, even his compositions in the '80s were still largely restricted to a limited range of palette —a signature preference of Tay, which was to set a base colour and have a few other colours relate to it, such as Fig. 6.



Fig. 6 Kumpong Life, 34x91cm, Watercolour

In the 1990s, Tay began incorporating more warm colours in his palette, and his works also became much more realist and ornamental. During this period, he completed a series of urban landscapes that include the Singapore river as well as brightly decorated scenes of Chinatown markets bustling with vendors and street activities (Fig. 7). As of many other second-generation artists who sought to document the changing face of an increasingly modernised Singapore, these works represent Tay's personal longings and nostalgic reminiscences of familiar landmarks and favourite haunts.

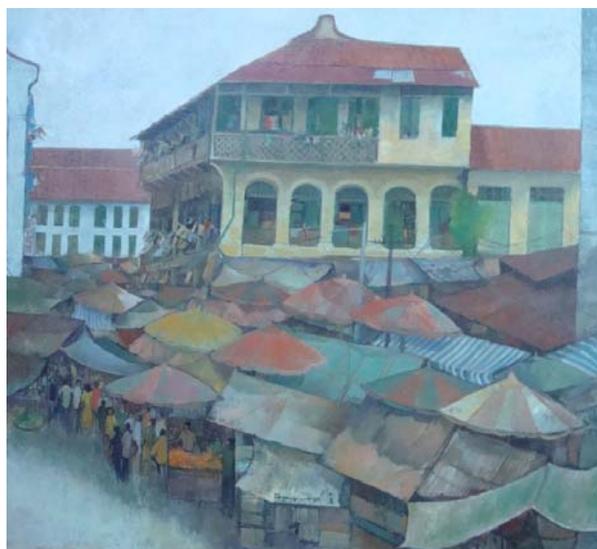


Fig. 7 Chinatown, 106x99cm, Oil

In addition, Tay also created a highly memorable series of oil images on the subject of fighting cocks in Kelantan (Fig. 8). Spotting warm, intense hues of red and orange, the use of swift, forceful one-directional brush strokes are instrumental in establishing the fast, swirling movements as the cocks engage in an adrenaline-pumping battle; their wings flag in frantic motions and their feathers split off from their plumages.

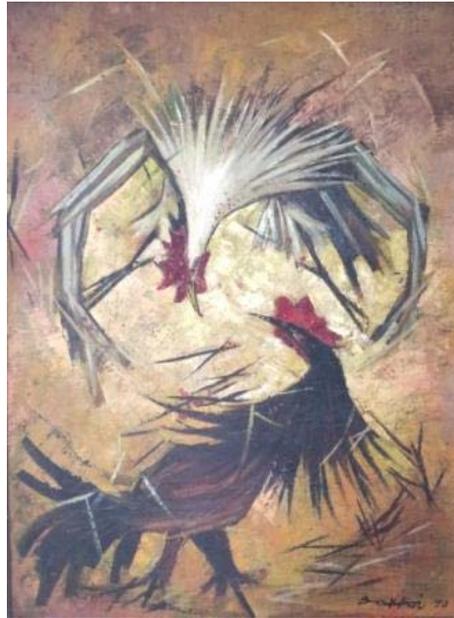


Fig. 8 Cockfight, 100x170cm, Oil

Walking through the exhibition, one would be struck by the distinguished visions and stylistic refinements that characterise the artist's progress as he matured from a graduate fresh from the art school in the 1960s, to a confident master who was essentially able to command his own visual poetry by the 1980s. Even when Tay's paintings only depict life's most ordinary moments, they are still always exquisite and lyrical to the eye.

References

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