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# Memoirs of Our Island: Oil Paintings by Tong Chin Sye

Exhibition Reading Material

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# Memoirs of Our Island

## Oil Paintings by Tong Chin Sye

“The artwork of Tong Chin Sye captures and records for the current and future generations the scenes of an earlier Singapore that have otherwise been overshadowed by steel and concrete giants.”

- Professor Bertil Andersson, President of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

### **About the Artist**

Born in 1939, **Tong Chin Sye** is a prolific multimedia artist who was trained in both Western and Chinese art. His dynamic oeuvre spans from watercolour, oil, acrylic, Chinese ink painting to calligraphy. Earlier in his career, Tong was also a part-time lecturer in Western Art at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore.

In his quest for inspirations and cultural knowledge, Tong has embarked on painting trips across Asia, Europe and Latin America. The refreshing and insightful visual experiences embedded in his paintings stem from decades of relentless practice and extensive sojourns around the globe. The artist has also participated in a number of exhibitions both locally and abroad, and was a representative for Singapore at the 1998 Flemish Watercolour Days held at Zaventem, Europe.

With *Memoirs of Our Island*, Tong presents an enthralling series of nostalgic scenes and iconic streets that once made up the vibrant landscape of old Singapore. These oil paintings, which comprise scenes from the 1960s to the early 2000s, constitute the artist's memoirs of an island in transition as the face of Singapore became increasingly redefined following the onslaught of rapid urban development in the 1980s.

### **Memoirs of Our Island**

This is the first oil-only exhibition ever held by Tong. In many ways, it may also be considered a sequel to *Reminiscences*, the artist's watercolour exhibition in 2012. For one, both exhibitions focus on vanished scenes that were once common sights in Singapore before the landscape evolved tremendously in line with the country's stupendous economic development. As underlined by Mr. Jeffrey Nadison in the publication to *Reminiscences*:

“Witness to a rapidly evolving Singapore landscape, Tong, an attentive and keen observer, has meticulously documented the rapidly changing cityscape of Singapore of the time shortly after the formation of the Housing Development Board in 1960 through to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

Whether in sketches, watercolour or oil paintings, this particular series of old Singapore scenes by Tong stands as a vivid documentation of a bygone era before much of its existing landscape was reshaped by modern developments and functions. To name a few, the “kampong life before its disappearance, the images of the Singapore River before and after its major clean-up in the 1970s and the old shipyards of Tanjong Rhu before this industrial area gave way to the development of high-end condominium and a recreational park in the 1990s.”

As with many of his artistic contemporaries, Tong reserves a particular fondness for painting familiar landmarks such as the Singapore River and Chinatown. The colourful and vibrant scenery as well as the socio-cultural significance afforded by these locations make them some of the most visited subject matters among many 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Singaporean artists. For Tong, some of his most nostalgic childhood memories revolve around these two locations. The artist grew up frequenting Chinatown with his family, and would often take a dip at the Singapore River since he was as young as eight years old.

Having been a centre of trade for more than a century, since 1819 when Singapore was utilised as a port city by the British colonialists, the Singapore River underwent a dramatic transformation in the 1980s after a major clean-up operation by the government, and the area was injected with a new lease of life as a commercial precinct and attractive tourist haunt.

Tong’s depiction of the Singapore River in 1988 (Fig. 1) captures this particular aspect of the river scene and shows how old traditions and new functions co-exist to facilitate the country’s progress. The rows of colourful shophouses in the foreground juxtapose against shimmering towers of skyscrapers that become increasingly visible as the focal point transits along to the end of the river. The bumboats, although reduced in number and function by the 1980s, continue to be a staple feature that adds to the bustling activities along the river.

While most of the objects have been deliberately rendered indistinct, the composition boasts a remarkable accuracy in the grasp of perspectives and details. The palette employed is also exceptionally bold and eye-catching –shades of vermillion red, cad orange, emerald green, and other bright colours are skillfully deployed to accentuate the structures and details, effectively drawing our focal point to the different objects within the paintings.



Fig. 1 Singapore River, 1988. 88 x 62cm, Oil on Canvas, 1988.

Known for its bustling crowds and mixture of Baroque and Victorian-styled shophouses, Chinatown has long been a picturesque locale that affords artists a variety of vibrant scenes, and a reprieve from the skyscrapers and shopping malls that dominate the modern landscape of Singapore. While Tong has been painting the various streets of Chinatown for over half a century, the execution for every piece varies. For instance, Fig. 2 is the artist's depiction of a street in Chinatown in 1960, while Fig. 3 was accomplished later in 1989.

Apart from the unusual angle, both compositions spot the thick application of paint in swift and vigorous brush strokes. It is also interesting to note that when viewed at a close proximity, the details to the objects appear to be particularly indistinct, their forms meticulously constructed through blotches and dabs of colours. This, coupled with the understanding that Tong is an artist who usually composes his oil landscapes plein air and without any preparatory sketches, highlights the extraordinary vision and skill that the artist is capable of transposing onto the canvas.



Fig. 2 Chinatown Street. 36 x 46cm, Oil on Canvas, 1960



Fig. 3 Chinatown. 36 x 46cm, Oil on Canvas, 1989





Fig. 4 Sungei Pond Area. 102 x 86cm, Oil on Canvas, 1980.

For several decades, Tong has also been documenting tirelessly through his art, other distinct areas that contribute to the multi-faceted culture of Singapore. The Sungei Road area, once renowned for its Thieves' Market (an extensive and long-standing flea market in Singapore), makes another of his favourite location for painting.

Fig. 4 is a large oil painting of the Sungei pond area. The composition comprises a variety of elegant brushwork executed in an exciting blend of hues. The artist is not afraid to go against the laws of nature, and is bold and masterly in designating areas of pure, striking colours such as vermillion red and emerald green, to emphasise details and engage our senses. Although composed with oil, the painting thrives on a delicate suffusion of tones and a harmonious contrast between warm and cold; light and dark, thus also providing us a glimpse into Tong' excellent ability as a watercolorist.



One of the areas where Tong employs a mixture of emerald green and perm green light to accentuate the details around the shophouse window.

Dabs of vermillion red are strewn across certain areas to highlight forms and details. The bright colours also help to enliven the atmosphere of the scene, giving the composition a sense of noise and vibrancy.

Compositions of Little India and old Kampongs also feature prominently in Tong's records of vanished Singapore scenes. In particular, Tong's paintings of Kampong Bulok (Fig. 5) and Kampong Silat, once part of a common sight formed by enclaves of communities in old Singapore, now exist as reminiscences of a bygone chapter in the country's social heritage.

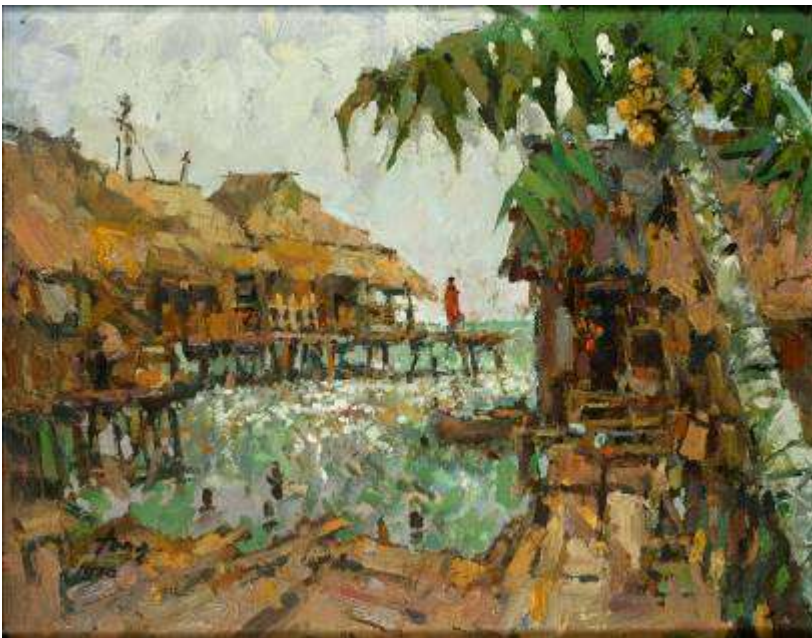


Fig. 5 Bulok Kampong. 36 x 46cm, Oil on Canvas, 1970.

Through *Memoirs of Our Island*, Tong walks us through a rare and interesting body of work that would become increasingly antiquated as time progresses and the country's identity continues to evolve. These paintings are also a testament to Tong's strong fundamentals in art and highly versatile oeuvre, ranking him alongside some of the most noteworthy 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Singaporean artists such as Tan Choh Tee, Lee Boon Wang and Eng Siak Loy.

## **References**

Bertil Anderssons, Jeffrey Nadison, Chris Yap. Tong Chin Sye – Reminiscenes. Singapore: Petrified Arts LLP, 2012

## **BIOGRAPHY OF TONG CHIN SYE**

Born in 1939, Singapore

Member of Singapore Watercolour Society

Member of Singapore Arts Society

### **Education**

1960: Graduated from Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA)

### **Exhibitions/Activities**

1998: Flemish Watercolour Days - Zaventem, Europe.

2009: Incheon Global Cities Arts Grand Festival - Korea

2009: 7th World Watercolor Exhibition of the International Watercolor League – Taiwan

1995-2009: NAFA part-time western art lecturer

2012: Tong Chin Sye – Reminiscenes, NTU

2013: Memoirs of Our Island: Oil Paintings by Tong Chin Sye, artcommune gallery

### **Awards**

1987: 1st Prize, *Port of Singapore Authority Open Art Competition*, Singapore

1988: International Art Awards (Watercolours), SAS Joint Art Exhibition with Japan Art Association

1992: Tan Tsze Chor Art Award, Singapore Arts Society