

The Artist's Choice

artcommune gallery proudly presents

Picture Writing: Sensuous Abstractions

Exhibition Reading Material

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Picture Writing – Sensuous Abstractions

“To be enlightened and to create something extraordinary, the artist must first learn to free himself from the tyranny of logic and traditions”

- Wong Keen

US-based artist Wong Keen’s prodigious talent in painting was evident in his early years as he held his first solo exhibition in Singapore at the mere age of 19. The aspiring young artist subsequently migrated to America in 1961 and enrolled in the prestigious Art Students League of New York, the same institution that had fostered renowned Abstract Expressionist artists like Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Ai Wei Wei.

After the 2nd World War, New York flourished as the world centre for arts and by the 1950s, the American school of Abstract Expressionism was already taking the world by storm. Such was the environment in which Wong Keen was able to immerse himself, as a young man pursuing his formal art education in New York in the 60’s. During his time at the Art Students League, he was also afforded the opportunities to learn under influential Abstract Expressionist artists such as Morris Kantor, Sidney Gross and Vaclav Vytlačil. In 1965, Wong Keen became the first Chinese and Singaporean to be awarded the highly coveted Edward G. McDowell Travelling Scholarship by the League. The scholarship, which allowed him to embark on a year-long trip to Europe for his studies, came just a year after he had won the Ford Foundation Tuition Scholarship in 1964.

Recognised by most as the first Singaporean artist to have forayed into the field of Abstract Expressionism, Wong Keen has lived and worked in New York for fifty years of his life. Nonetheless, the Chinese art traditions picked up during his earlier formative years in Singapore remain close to his heart, and he never gave up on the Chinese ink medium throughout the course of his artistic development. In fact, for Wong Keen, the Chinese Calligraphic ideograms might be considered some of the oldest and most stylised forms of abstractions in art, and his familiarity with the Chinese brushwork would continue to influence his aesthetic experiments over the years.

Having exhibited internationally, Wong Keen’s works have been lauded for their unique visual poetics by critics and collectors alike. His artistic style is an embodiment of cross-cultural confluences, inspired by the elegance and expressiveness of Chinese ink painting and calligraphy, as well as his fascination with the Abstract Expressionist mode of representation.

For this exhibition, we have put together a highly accomplished body of work that captures the artist’s bold synthesis and solid reinterpretations of East-West art traditions – the calligraphic expressions of female nudes.

A valorised subject in the Western art tradition, the female nude has also been adopted as a recurring motif in Wong Keen’s oeuvre. In these ink expressions, the female nude that flows into form through his dynamic and fluid brushstrokes moves through light, sensual space; is devoid of identification yet concrete in her evocative gesture. Even when he has chosen for the figure to be submerged within an abstracted landscape, the lines and contours relate sensuously to each other, resulting in an arresting composition.

Wong Keen is certainly not an artist who operates within the conventional boundaries, and the paintings in this exhibition yet again testify to his resolve to break free from the cultural moulds and redefine the very traditions that have inspired his aesthetic approach.