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Keen Variations

The Different Sides of Wong Keen's Art

Exhibition Reading Material
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An Introduction

"Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue."

Henry James

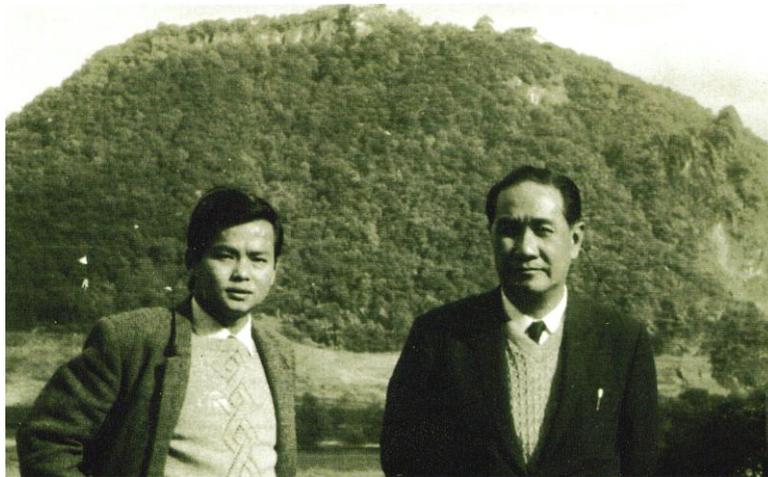
The creative impulse of an artist is never limiting; yet it is not in every artist that we observe a relentless spirit in expanding the boundaries for expressions. Viewed in this light, it is all the more impressive that the artistic practice of Wong Keen never ceases to carry us through a pulsating journey of technical virtuosity and visual possibilities.

Recognised by most as the first Singaporean artist to have forayed into the field of Abstract Expressionism, Wong Keen's works, with their unique and enthralling visual poetics, have captured the hearts and imaginations of critics and collectors both locally and abroad. 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. Having exhibited internationally since his youth, the artist has amassed dozens of solo and group shows under his belt. In addition to private patronage from around the world, his works are also being collected by the Singapore Art Museum, Resorts World Sentosa and the Fullerton Hotel.

Wong Keen: Early Life in Singapore and New York

Born in Singapore in 1942, Wong Keen's prodigious talent in art was recognised at an early age. In his teenage years, while still studying at the Chinese High School (where his parents also taught as teachers), he began painting under the personal tutelage of

Liu Kang and subsequently Chen Wen Hsi, two of Singapore's most distinguished first-generation artists. At the tender age of sixteen, his painting was selected for the annual open exhibition by the Singapore Art Society, cementing his position as a talent to reckon with amongst a number of artists who far surpassed him in seniority. Three years later, Wong Keen held his first solo exhibition at the National Library of Singapore where most of his artworks were sold. Carrying all but two hundred dollars in his wallet, the young, aspiring artist departed on a freighter to America in 1961 to enroll in the prestigious Art Students League of New York, an institution renowned for having fostered era-defining artists such as Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg.



In 1965, Wong Keen travelled to London for his studies after being awarded the Edward G. McDowell Travelling Scholarship by the League. While venturing around Europe, he also met up with his former art teacher, Chen Wen Hsi. This photo was shot in Bern, Germany.

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 progressive environment in which Wong Keen was developing his practice as a young art student in the 1960s. During his time at the Art Students League, he was also afforded the opportunities to learn under influential Abstract Expressionist artists including Morris Kantor, Sidney Gross and Vaclav Vytlacil. 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 won the Ford Foundation Tuition Scholarship in 1964.

During his time in New York, Wong Keen spent considerable time learning and interacting with several art luminaries of the period including William de Kooning, Dong Kingman and Theodoros Stamos. Within a span of a few years, he also scored a number of solo and group exhibitions in New York and London. Unfortunately, even with the acclaims he garnered from teachers and fellow peers at the league and in the Abstract Expressionist circle, it proved to be years of struggle for the young artist with his Asian-Singaporean background to break into the American “jungle” art scene. For over twenty years, Wong Keen sidelined his ambition for a full-time art career in order to make ends meet. He taught art in school and was at one point, an art director at the Police Athlete League. He eventually devoted himself to a picture framing business that grew so successful that the *TIME* Magazine organisation and several Hollywood celebrities were counted among his clientele.

Just as success bustled at his doorstep, Wong Keen converted his framing business into an art gallery, utilising it as a platform to showcase a wide range of artworks by other young, struggling artists looking for opportunities in New York. After more than two decades of painting on the side, and with the strong support of his wife, Wong Keen finally took the chance to delve into full-time art practice, thereby realising a dream that was all along held dear to his heart since the day he left Singapore for America as a hopeful doe-eyed youth.

Although Wong Keen has lived and worked in the States for over fifty years of his life, the Chinese art traditions picked up during his earlier formative years in Singapore still constitute some of the fundamentals in his stylistic practice. Wong Keen’s mother was a veteran practitioner in Chinese calligraphy and the artist grew up with a deep appreciation for the Chinese brushwork. In Wong Keen’s view, the Chinese calligraphic ideograms may be considered some of the oldest and most stylised forms of abstractions in art. In fact, his familiarity with the fluid and expressive quality of Chinese calligraphic brushwork proved to be an advantage, and a convergent point for his subsequent immersion in Abstract Expressionism, which to a degree also harnesses the quality of strong, gestural strokes, and the masterly balance between control and spontaneity; harmony and tension.

As elucidated by Roy Moyer, the former director of the American Federation of Arts:

Wong Keen is an artist who spans two worlds and two philosophies – Asian tradition and American individualism. The welding of these elements into distinctive images makes his works stimulating to Asians and adds an intriguing mystery for Western viewers.

Indeed, Wong Keen's creative approach is marked by a remarkable synthesis of the East-West artistic and cultural traditions that have come to shape his identity. He cites Willem de Kooning, Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach and Bada Shanren among some of the important figures that inspire his aesthetic philosophy. Among his dynamic oeuvre are notable series of works that draw upon the distinct interplay between Asian and Western compositional styles and motifs.

Since returning to extend his art practice in Singapore, Wong Keen has lit up the local art scene with his enigmatic executions of lotuses, nudes and landscapes in the oil and acrylic medium. He has also been featured in several group and one-man shows, including a major solo exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum in March 2007.

Keen Variations: An Artist's Resolve to Break Anew

Keen Variations casts light on some of the different sides and lesser-known aspects of Wong Keen's artistic career. The exhibition, which focuses on works completed in the 1990s and early 2000s, showcases the varied styles and subjects explored by the artist, including several one-off series of mixed-media works, street scenes of Vietnam and self-portraiture. Together, they capture an earlier trajectory of Wong Keen's artistic practice and facilitate an entry point into his innovative and multi-faceted visual poetics.

In particular, the 90s was a period of bold and exhilarating experimentations for Wong Keen. Having finally earned his freedom to devote himself entirely to painting, his artistic practice was imbued with an uncircumscribed impetus to rapidly expand and refine his repertoire, culminating to a wide array of thematic explorations and painting techniques.

There can be no doubt that Wong Keen's art is a dynamic pursuit that is rich in flair and visual drama. For instance, the female nude – a valorised subject in the Western art

tradition –is one recurring motif that he has constructed and deconstructed across varying styles and mediums.

Fig. 1 is an example that shows how the artist often appropriates the Colour-Field theory to explore the 'push-and-pull' interactions between different shades and hues to give rise to forms, and create sensual space and atmosphere in his paintings. Whether one looks at it as "a painting about painting" or "paintings within a painting", this particular work is certainly a witty play on the materiality and self-reflexivity of the painted canvas as a work of art borne out of the artist's desire to create and manipulate. While the blue nude claims the centre stage, the immediacy and importance of her presence is heavily mitigated by the fact that she is yet another canvas on an easel, not just thrice, but four times removed from our processed reality.



Fig. 1 Untitled, Oil on Canvas, 68 x 76cm, 1985

Fig. 2 belongs to a one-off series of 6 paintings created by Wong Keen after a field trip to the volcanic region in Java, Indonesia in the mid-90s. For those familiar with Wong Keen's stylistic discourse, this is a piece that may come across as "unusually" realist by the artist's standards. While the objects in the painting are derived from real scenes that were captured in separate photographs, the placement of the slender and

bewitchingly tranquil native woman in front of the breathtaking mountainscape is an entirely fictional arrangement. Unabashed, Wong Keen recounts the intentionality behind the piece:

At that time, I felt that to capture the feeling of these mountains and fields were not sufficient. Therefore, out of curiosity, I inserted a beautiful native woman. This final image is one that evokes with a sensuality and timelessness that resonate with the landscape I experienced.

This explanation recalls one of the famous lines uttered by Paul Cézanne, "I am a consciousness. The landscape thinks itself through me." Similarly, Wong Keen expresses an insistence on not wanting "to be captured by the scene, but to capture the scene." Although often inspired by nature, he conveys a particular distaste for direct plein-air painting. According to the artist, even with landscape paintings, his preferred approach is always to "experience, digest, reinterpret and reconstruct." Therefore, each time Wong Keen ventures to a new place or country, he takes photographs or paints quick sketches of interesting scenes or forms that capture him. Upon returning to his studio, he engages with those materials and subsequently remodels them to suit his imagination, and expand on his whims and fancies.



Fig. 2 Java, Oil on Canvas, 84 x 69cm, 2006

In the 1990s, Wong Keen also created a bold and hypnotic series of mixed-media works that testify to his tireless resolve to break free from the cultural moulds, and redefine the very traditions that have inspired his aesthetic approach. Titled "Caesura", the body of work is executed in a collage assembly of paperworks, often complete with ink wash and acrylic paint (e.g. Fig. 3). Combining pieces of calligraphy (some of which were taken from his mother's writings) with prints or fragments ripped from old Chinese manuscripts, the process itself signals the destruction and rebirth of traditions, resulting in new and arresting forms that both intrigue and confront the viewer.



Fig. 3 Caesura 4, Mixed Media on Paper, 42 x 54cm, 1995

For Wong Keen, being dubbed Singapore's first Abstract Expressionist perhaps comes with a weight that is not always easy to bear. While his works may be fascinating and groundbreaking to some, they can turn out baffling and inaccessible to others. The reality remains that majority of the Singaporean public often find it daunting to process paintings that veer away from the figurative, or extend too much beyond the normalised perspectives.

Nonetheless, Wong Keen is not one to be restricted by boundaries and categories, and the collection of paintings featured in this exhibition certainly points to a diverse practice that is not always immediately apparent to the public. In his constant attempt to

explore and break anew, Wong Keen has created several one-off series of works that enable him to toy with forms and colours, and devise new modes of expressions. Ultimately, whether these works can please the crowd is of least concern to the artist. As his aesthetic oeuvre continues to evolve, we can expect Wong Keen to persevere with the same unwavering passion in building a stylistic discourse that is unapologetically ingenious and distinctive of his roots and elements.

References

Interview with Wong Keen, June 2013

Wong Keen: A Singapore Chapter to Abstract Expressionism. Singapore Art Museum Catalogue, Singapore: 2007.

After Thirty-five Years in New York. Shenn's Fine Art Catalogue. Singapore: 1996

Wong Keen's Biography

- 1942 Born in Singapore
- 1961 -1965 The Art Students League, New York
- 1966 Art Instructor at Fair Lawn Adult School, Swarthmore, New Jersey
- 1967 Art Director at Police Athlete Leagues, New York

Selected Solo & Group Exhibitions

- 2001 Moon Eclipse: Williamsburg Lunar Base Gallery, New York
- 2002 Williamsburg Art & Historical Centre, New York
- 2003 The Pioneers 4, Singapore
- 2006 People of the Mind, William Whipple Gallery, Southwest State University, Minnesota
- 2007 A Singapore Abstract Expressionist, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- 2007 Expressions by Wong Keen, Galerie Belvedere, Singapore
- 2009 Exploring the Boundary, Singapore & Malaysia
- 2010 The 6th National Artists Traveling, Phattalung, Thailand
- 2011 Ink Expressions, Singapore
- 2011 Exchange 2011, Singapore-China Art Showcase
- 2011 Grand Masters of Art Exhibition, ION Art Gallery, Singapore
- 2012 Artist in Residency in Gallerie URS Meile 2012, Beijing, China
- 2012 Contemporary Chinese Ceramic Paintings Exhibition, The National Art Museum of China, China

Awards

- 1963 Ford Foundation Grant, The Art Students League, New York
- 1965 Edward G. McDowell Traveling Scholarship, The Art Students League, New York
- 1967 Consul General of Japan Award, The Suni-E Society