

Penang Perambulations : Poetic Paeans of Paradise by OOI KOK CHUEN

POH SIEW WAH'S *Island In The Sun* represents a sea-change of palette, stylistic metiers and strokes in his twin repertoire of evocative abstract acrylic on canvas and a vivacious ink reality on Chinese rice paper.

For one who has manifested a cavalcade of abstractions about life and of its intimations, and of places, emotions and expressions, in all its mercurial forms, shapes and vibrant colours, Siew Wah (b. 1948) has arguably found his voice, exuding an emotional shimmers and registers from the muted shades of yellow, cobalt blue, light grey, emerald and rose cadmium. A luminous composition couched in time and consistent with his life journey. Mysterious, achingly soft and sedate hues permeating from a panoply of organic and biomorphic forms, loosely juxtaposed and with unusually wily feminine touches.

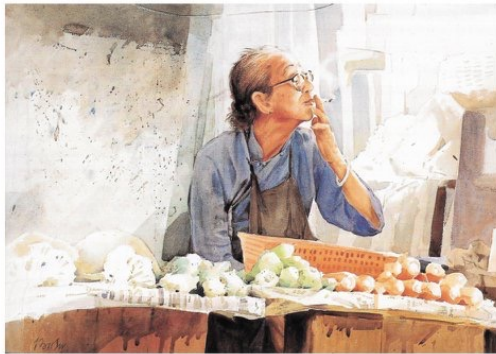


Earlier, his abstracts are more likely a robust combustion of broad strokes, flat vistas of overlapping colour flanges, with splatters and drips; while his spontaneous brush ink paintings of scenic splendour or the hustle and bustle of urbanity reveal stanchions of blotched strokes like a Motherwell, with wiry tendrils oozing at the sides like caterpillar legs.



Goa Gajah Bali 55 x 75 cm watercolour on paper 1985

Whether realist or abstract, Siew Wah has gone through stages of development and creative stations with an invigorating take. His set of materials comprises acrylic and/or collage and/or sand on canvas; acrylic marble paper on paper; acrylic on canvas; oil on canvas; calligraphy/collage; watercolours on paper; Chinese ink on Sa / Chinese rice paper; acrylic, gouache on watercolour paper. He also had a stint of rolled images on Jindezhen ceramic panels and porcelain vases.



The Forbidden Puff, 52 x 72 cm, watercolour, 1987, collection of Singapore Art Museum.



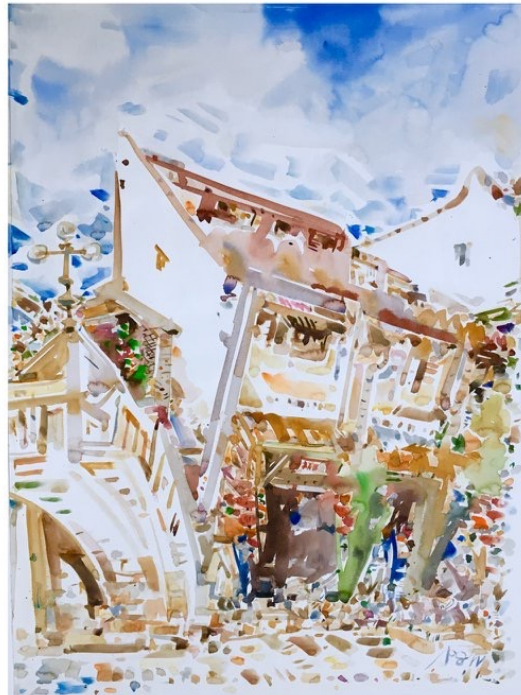
The Bridge, oils, 1983, collection of Singapore Art Museum



Light of Way, acrylic mixed media on canvas, 1995



Eternal Foliage, 122 x 183 cm, oil on canvas, 2017



The Bridge, Melaka, watercolour, 2008

For Siew Wah, a second-generation Singapore artist painting seriously for nearly half a century and an art educator from 1967-1999, *Island In The Sun* is his first Malaysian solo and only second solo outside Singapore, the first being in Flensburg (Court of Justice Hall) in Germany in 1995.

Significantly, it spells a bifurcating congealment and maturity of works with a pedigree and identity that can be construed as distinctively Siew Wah.

It is also unusual for Siew Wah to have a body of works specific to, and inspired by, place, in this case the Unesco-inscribed world heritage conurbation of Penang and its famed salubrious natural landscapes. But such evocations could well crystallize with just as much relevance and poignancy in another place with different climes but presumably from the same states of mind, and with the same wellspring of mood.

Here, too, Siew Wah's thematic thrust of Equilibrium, with all its philosophical nuances of order or re-ordering from the landmark solo of the same name in 1992, prevails like an over-arching compass, bearing new manifestations of the principle. Island in the Sun also exudes a positively ruminative lyricism reminiscent of his Order & Reason solo in 2001.

'Equilibrium' has its mantra as "an expression to resonate the inner feeling for perfection, harmony, balance and unity. It is a universal truth embodying a spiritual endeavor between Man and Nature and between Man and mankind." Equilibrium also equates to the Chinese I-Ching (Book of Changes) divination.

In another instance, Siew Wah had intoned: "Equilibrium is a buried truth, a perfect interrelation of a supposedly paradisiacal state of utopia."



Contemporary ceramic art creation at Jingdezhen, world renowned ancient ceramic city in China, 2015



Equilibrium. 200 x 140 cm, acrylic on panels, 1990



River View, oil on canvas, 2018

A breathless departure from his more studied and technical concerns and the splatters and qi of brushwork of the past since visiting the art citadels of Europe in 1987 and 1989. But much has changed, and changed, since his first abstract painting, *Pink, Yellow and White* (acrylic, gesso on board, 1989).



Pink, Yellow and White, 122 x 183 cm, acrylic, gesso on board, 1989. Exhibited in Singapore Artists Speak exhibition, 1990, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore.



The Way of Qi, 260 x 360 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2017.

syndrome, and one can also find the accidental '+' (crosses) like activation points rather than perhaps any religious connotations, or is it?

Siew Wah comes from a pioneering abstract tradition in Singapore that has the likes of Goh Beng Kwan, Wee Beng Chong, Choy Weng Yang, Wong Keen and the late Anthony Poon.

An exploration of various styles and permutations, with revelatory glimpses of the stain overlays of Helen Frankenthaler, the line hieroglyphics of Paul Klee, the introspective exteriorization of Mark Rothko, the biomorphic strange blobs of Joan Miro, the brush splotches of Antoni Tapies and Hans Hoffman, the incandescent splatters of Sam Francis, the gestural lines of Cy Twombly, the Colour Field permutations of Clyfford Still, the musical 'equivalents' of Wassily Kandinsky, the modulated recklessness of Franz Kline, the broad-girth mock-calligraphy of Robert Motherwell, the pictograph of Adolph Gottlieb, the raw imago of Willem de Kooning, and the broody immutability of Richard Diebinkorn.

But by no means is Siew Wah a copycat; it's inevitable as a rites of passage that he would have savoured the technical imperatives of the abstract nomenclature, sometimes with collage, but intriguingly in all these, he has managed to stamp a distinctive stance and power consistent with the moods and subjects of the time. Sometimes, it's multiple spasms of focal points, sometimes it's geometric and hard-edged and with sharp ends, sometimes it's drips and splatters for the flourish and finish.

There was a time when he dallied with subdued colours but padded with rough-hewn surfaces with blobs, stains and needle scratches.

For all the equilibrium purportedly driving his works, Siew Wah likes to use a cleft dichotomy that sometimes cuts out the composition, creating an awkward 'jutting nail'

E N C O U N T E R S

We invite readers to send us photographs to be considered for publication in this feature. Your photos should show a pairing, a sculpture, piece of architecture or any other subject which seems to be an example of cross-fertilisation between cultures. Alternatively, you could send us pictures of two works from different cultural backgrounds in which you see some striking connection or resemblance. Please add a short caption to all photographs.



EQ-WAH-001
1990, acrylic on wood (200 by 140 cm)
by Poh Siew Wah

In this diptych, the Singaporean painter Poh Siew Wah has sought to depict the human endeavour to achieve what he calls "equilibrium", an ideal of harmony uniting humankind and nature as well as linking human beings themselves. Poh has written that his work is "much inspired by Italian Renaissance architecture, the idea of orderliness of Piet Mondrian, and Kandinsky's call for spirituality in art."

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"The Governments of the States parties to this Constitution on behalf of their peoples declare that since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defence of peace must be established; that a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments is precarious, lasting and knows support of the peoples of the world, and that the peace upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind; for these reasons, the States parties... are agreed and determined to develop and to in their peoples and to employ these means for the purposes of mutual understanding and other's lives..."

EXTRACT FROM THE PREAMBLE TO THE CONSTITUTION

UNESCO COURIER featured Poh Siew Wah's artwork, EQ-WAH-001, October 1992



About Mr. Ooi Kok Chuen

Ooi Kok Chuen was awarded the Australian Cultural Award (1991), the Goethe Institute Fellowship (Murnau, 1989) and the National Art Gallery of Malaysia Art Writer Award (2003, 2008). He was National Visual Arts Gallery Malaysia board member and also the author of the novel, *Mahsuri—A Legend Reborn*.