

The best of east meets west

Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle

I see beauty in a horse's torso when it's galloping and running. That picture composition always attracts me to study these subjects - it's pure poetry in motion when it gallops," discloses Malaysian painter Lim Ah Cheng. His love of horses is palpable as he describes their rhythmic movement. "Without rhythm, it looks and feels less artistic", he says. "Fluidity and rhythm show the beauty, balance of the art and harmony on canvas."

Movement is at the core of Lim's artworks, best represented in an abstract style, as he captures a sense of energy and motion in dramatic fashion, while exposing the horse's beauty, nobility and mystique. His horses are never still; instead they thunder down open plains at full speed in a show of pure power, endurance and grace - unbridled like the wind with a free and independent spirit. But Lim's skill lies in that fact that he is able to portray not only their physical being, but their spirituality and soul within.

Never tiring of depicting horses, the majestic beasts have been Lim's faithful companion for over 12 years, as he continually uncovers new and hidden facets of their beguiling personalities that never fail to intrigue him. Inspired by nature's beauty, he studies steeds on trips to the zoo or at horse riding clubs and competitions, watching them from the sidelines or capturing their movements on video for further examination. Having also diversified into painting musicians, dancers and street scenes, he nonetheless keeps returning time and again to his first love, as horses to him are the epitome of the beauty of movement. "Energy and movement are what I always express through this beautiful, intelligent and energetic animal", he says.

The Kuala Lumpur-based artist's passion for painting horses came about after immersing in the study of Chinese brush painting, expressive and liberating in nature, at the Malaysia Institute of Art under the tutelage of Chong Chen Chuan, a master calligrapher with almost five decades of experience in Chinese ink painting. "His bold, semi-abstract stroke inspired me", reveals Lim. From the depiction of his very first horse, he broke with the traditional style and combined an "Oriental identity and Western medium in harmony".

Photo: Courtesy Lim Ah Cheng.



Painter Lim Ah Cheng's contemporary artworks symbolise the best of East meets West by mixing Chinese ink painting techniques with Western oil paints to encapsulate the gracefulness of horses in motion.

Having participated in solo and group shows internationally, Lim's artworks appear in private and public collections worldwide. Collectors include Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and Mandarin Oriental Hotel and, last May, one of his horse paintings was auctioned for twice its estimated value. But not one to rest on his laurels, he is on a continuous mission to improve himself, divulging: "To deliver a unique composition with a contemporary feel and consistent execution of skills are always a challenge for me. I always look back at my art journey. When I feel that change is needed for my series, I will do some experimental works to evolve the development until it reaches a satisfying level. Then only will I produce works on canvas." And thus Lim's horses, an expression of his innermost feelings, are in constant evolution in his never-ending endeavour to forever capture their beauty on canvas.

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Adopting today an abstract expressionist approach, Lim paints with enthusiasm and daring, starting with a thin layer of acrylic on the canvas surface, before slowly layering oil on top. Then rapid strokes in oil, in the manner of big, bold Chinese brushstrokes, are added to convey momentum, while fine lines are expressed with intense control. Lim states, "Horses run fast and show movement just like Chinese ink brushstrokes express speed. Therefore, I am trying to combine these two identities in my artworks, follow my soul and feeling, and strong Chinese art foundation skills."

Considering the central role of horses in Chinese culture and mythology and the innate connection in China between man and horse for six millennia, Lim says, "That long-held high esteem for horses influenced me to create every single painting." At times he focuses his attention on a single horse gliding in mid-air to express enlightened leadership; at other times he chooses to depict a group of horses running in the same direction to demonstrate teamwork and aggressiveness - an unstoppable force as the viewer is left behind in a blurred whirlwind of movement.



showcase

Horses are the trademark of Lim Ah Cheng, who paints them with familiarity and passion. His Flying with the Wind series in oil on canvas, which required nine months to complete, depicts his signature style of bold brushstrokes and a vibrant palette that combines Oriental expression with a Western medium.

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