

# THE QUESTION OF FORM

FEATURING WORKS BY

THREE IMPORTANT SINGAPORE ARTISTS

CHEONG SOO PIENG WONG KEEN BOO SZE YANG

---

Featuring a selection of 25 artworks by **Cheong Soo Pieng**, **Wong Keen** and **Boo Sze Yang**, artcommune's latest exhibition takes a close look at how artists internalise, interrogate and transform the values of form in the process of image-making. By foregrounding the distinct practices of these three local artists whose varied backgrounds and outputs of styles provide insightful points of entry and comparison, we examine how each artist's exploration and stylisation of form necessarily reveals an ongoing dialogue between self and environment, tradition and forwardness.

In art the term form usually refers to the overall physical form of a work, or an element within a work that is three-dimensional and encloses space such as the rendering of a human figure through light and shadow effects. Prior to the advent of Western modern art beginning from the late 19th to early 20th century in Paris, notions of form in painting had, since the 15th century, focussed and depended heavily on the illusion of three-dimensionality as a means of representing reality on a two-dimensional pictorial surface. First scrutinised and destabilised by artists like Cezanne and Kandinsky, and later eroded and completely dismantled by the likes of Picasso and Matisse, the declining value of three-dimensionality as fundamental to pictorial substance saw the dissolution of solid form against the picture plane in the early 20th century. New compositional styles facilitated by simplified form and flat colour informed the underpinning theory of Western modern art movement, providing seeds for the mainstream flowering of abstract painting.

For artists the pursuit of pictorial aesthetics is undoubtedly bound up with the question of form, which carries not just artistic but cultural baggages; an artwork is both an object and an objective, capable of transforming ways of seeing, feeling and understanding. Though every successive art movement must necessarily be comprehended in relation, and more often than not, as a reaction to preceding movements, Clement Greenberg's observation of Paris as being "the fountainhead of modern art", with every move accomplished there as being "decisive for advanced art elsewhere"<sup>1</sup> is not so much an exaggerated claim when we reflect on the significance of the School of Paris (Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism) in having influenced the 20th century modern art scenes in some other parts of

---

1 Clement Greenberg, "School of Paris: 1946", *Art and Culture*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, pp.120 - 123.

the world. Artistic traditions and values relating to the School of Paris figured prominently as well in the Singapore modern art movement, enriching a discourse that included multiple strands of simultaneous developments.

A pioneer of the nanyang art style and one of the most creative Chinese artists of the 20th century, **Cheong Soo Pieng (b. 1917, Xiamen, China - d. 1983, Singapore)** established a wide-ranging output steeped in the bold pursuit of Modern aesthetics and innovative amalgamation of forms and techniques derived from both Western and Chinese art traditions. The School of Paris (Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism) in particular informed much of his early art training in China and later framed many of his experimentations towards the stylisation of forms as a mature artist in Singapore. From subject matters to techniques to materials, the different series that evolved across his career are revealing of the shaping of his journey as a post-war diasporic Chinese artist exploring and settling in the new environments of Southeast Asia, and his urgency in reassessing and modernising Chinese art from a different vantage point.

Between the 1920s and 30s, Soo Pieng studied at the Xiamen Academy of Fine Arts and furthered his art training at the Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts in Shanghai. Schooled in the Beaux-Arts type of curriculum at both academies, he was well exposed to both Chinese and Western modern art. After the 2nd World War, Soo Pieng relocated to Singapore in 1946 to escape the civil war between the Communists and Kuomintang forces. He took up a teaching position at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and thereon began his fervent synthesis of Western and Chinese pictorial styles, drawing often from themes and subject matters relating to his new, immediate environment in Malaya.



Cheong Soo Pieng, *Malay Lady*, c. 1950s  
Chinese ink and colour on paper, 68.5 x 68.5 cm

*Malay Lady*, from the 1950s, is one of those works that lay bare Soo Pieng's early effort in negotiating the acquired vocabularies of different traditions. Composed in crisp and delicate brush lines and bright colours that are relatively pure and flat, the seated subject appears relaxed and poised as she gazes at the viewer. Through the simplification of form and colour, the figure, foreground and background share an almost flattened, unified image plane. Soo Pieng's handling of form here recalls Matisse's stylised images of female figures and interiors from the "Nice Period" (1917-30). Whether or not a coincidence, the decorative floral motif of the Malay batik lends itself conveniently - and organically - as a localised substitute to the ornamental Arabesque motif characterising the type of Matisse's imagery that Soo Pieng had evidently styled his Malayan subject after.

Though striking in its appropriation of a French master's recognisable idiom, Soo Pieng's impulse to delineate and shade the figure and object to an extent remains apparent, resulting in the image not being wholly flat. Interestingly, the accents of muddled hues help pull the image closer to the more subdued palette and measured spirit of traditional Chinese ink. The composition is at once a straightforward portraiture that straddles across varying notions of form and culture.

In 1959, Soo Pieng travelled to Borneo where he spent weeks in close interaction with the native *Dayak* tribes and created a large volume of drawing materials amid their longhouses in the jungles. *A Dayak Family and House* is an ink painting laboured from this meaningful cultural experience of 1959. The composition is framed by several quintessential traits of Chinese ink painting: crisp calligraphic brushstrokes, delicate ink wash smudges, and a monochromatic scheme executed on a traditional Chinese brown paper of the vertical hanging scroll format. All these elements together naturally compels audience to locate the work in the wider schema of traditional Chinese ink. Yet observers of the period would note that such a form of painting simply did not exist in the traditional Chinese ink genres of landscapes and figures. In fact, Soo Pieng also employs Western formal techniques that are usually associated with three-dimensional drawing and watercolour painting to effect a naturalistic representation of the *Dayak* figures and their environment. His synthesis of East-West techniques in such instances reflects a conscious attempt at organising internalised modes of picture making from varying forms into a personal coherent expression, while at the same time imbuing Chinese ink painting with a more localised identity to reflect a broader contemporary experience of his generation.



Cheong Soo Pieng, *A Dayak Family and House*, 1959  
Chinese ink and colour on paper, 89 x 43 cm



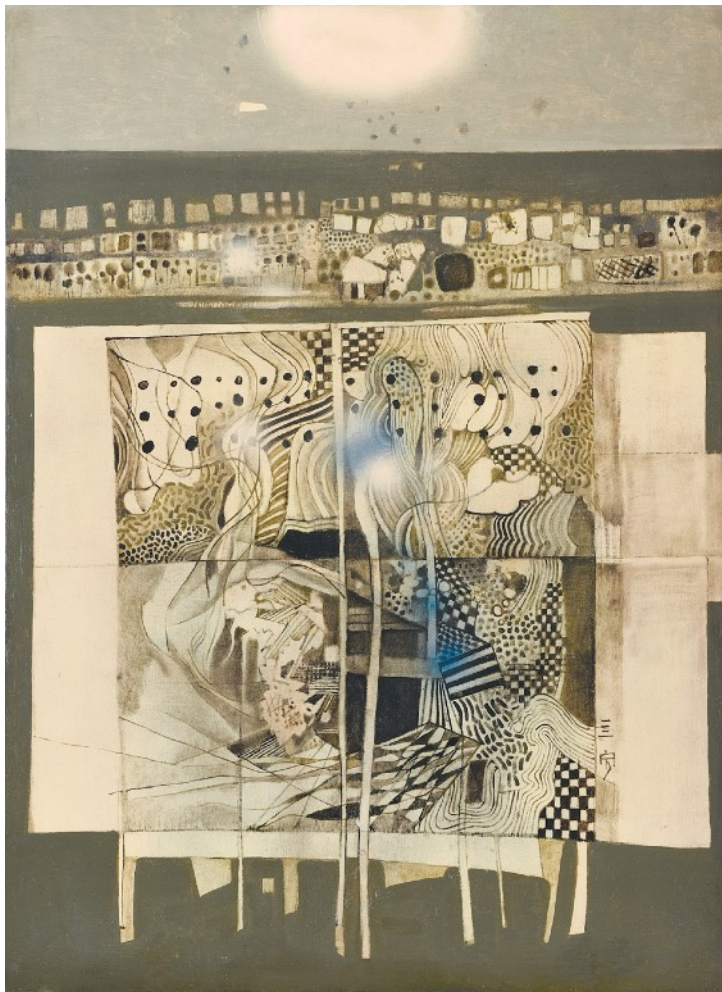


Cheong Soo Pieng, *Kelong*, 1961  
Chinese ink and colour on paper, 90 x 44 cm

Soo Pieng also produced a highly stylised ink series of Malayan kampong and kelong scenes in the period of mid-1950s and early 1960s. A number of works from this ink series, such as *Kelong* from 1961, feature the unmistakable influence of cubism. Yet Soo Pieng was hardly a passive imitator. While the image space has been partially fragmented into geometric planes by a strategic matrix of bold, angular brush lines, his approach differs ostensibly from the original Western cubist technique in its conscious lack of flatness and retaining of positive and negative distinctions for spaces and objects in the composition. By adopting a cubist structuring device yet subsuming it under a three-dimensional compositional framework that maintains the outlining and shading of figures and objects, he somehow created a new and original ink scroll format that defies categorisation.

A life-changing sojourn in Europe from late 1961 to 1963 broadened Soo Pieng's perspectives and gravitated his practice towards abstract and mixed media work. Between the 1960s and 70s, his unbridled drive for pictorial innovation gave rise to a wide array of stylised abstract series. The exact pictorial motivations and meanings behind most of his abstract series remain elusive to date, but the works often present recurring visual themes and motifs. The imagery normally consists of an intriguing interplay of geometric shapes, lines and contours.

An example is *Abstract Landscape* from 1967. The composition features his recurring imagery of the horizon as well as geometric arrangement of interwoven shapes and lines. At a closer look, the elements near the top of the composition seem to be loose suggestions of landscapes and trees, much like the demarcated field of "squares" that one might capture from an aerial view through the window of an airplane. Their minute and simplified forms create an interesting contrast against the four clustered squares in the middle, which are filled with juxtaposing elements of hard and soft edges that appear to revolve in an odd, continuous sequence. Within this relatively monochromatic composition, there exists a mind-bending illusion of depth where some elements can be seen hanging over a foreground or flowing in continuity from one square to the next, while others recede or break in jarring disjunctures.



Cheong Soo Pieng, *Abstract Landscape*, 1967  
Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 71.3 cm



*Green and Gold Abstract* similarly adopts the geometric arrangement of interwoven shapes and lines, this time in a much bolder colour scheme dominated by gold and green. There is order amid chaos in its pattern of irregularity; the intersecting shapes and movements sum up to a harmonious and self-containing order of its own. The unity of its design is playfully broken up by a stark black rectangle in the middle-right, which seems to hover at the front of everything else in the composition. This clever incision particularly draws our attention to the artist's play of three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional surface.

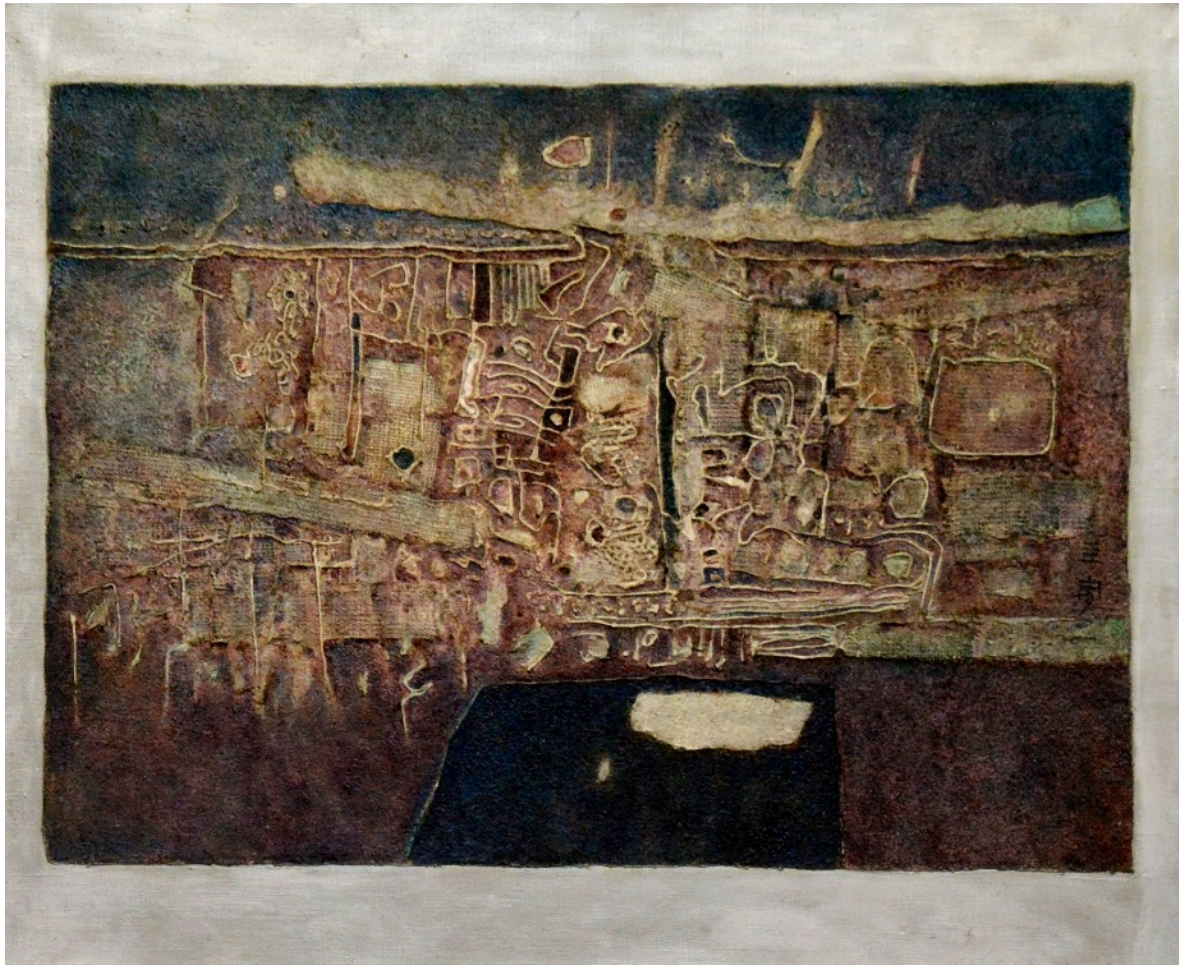


Cheong Soo Pieng, *Green and Gold Abstract*, 1972  
Oil and gold leaf on canvas, 61 x 76 cm



Cheong Soo Pieng, *Kampong Scene*, 1965  
Chinese ink and colour on paper, 67 x 90 cm





Cheong Soo Pieng, *Scene*, 1973  
Mixed media, 88 x 92 cm

**Wong Keen (b. 1942, Singapore - )** grew up in a Chinese literati environment in Singapore and as a child studied drawing and painting under pioneer artists Liu Kang and Chen Wen Hsi. He was an acclaimed teenage painter in the early Singapore art scene and in 1961 held his first solo exhibition at age 19. Having enrolled at the Art Students League of New York, he moved to America for his formal art education that same year, making him the first Singaporean and among the earliest of Chinese artists to venture into the flourished post-war American art scene. Having spent over 50 years in the US, Wong Keen registered a plethora of artistic influences that melded the fast-paced American art scene. His prolific oeuvre, which encompasses oil, ink, acrylic, collage, and mixed media since the 1960s to the present, is a powerful embodiment of the delicate expressivity of Chinese ink wash aesthetics and Western inventive approach towards form and colour.

As can be seen in his early oil paintings such as *Bicycle* from 1959 and *Title Unknown (Malay Women and Salted Fish)* from 1961, Wong Keen's work as a young artist prior to his move to the US was still largely framed by the formal conventions of nanyang art style in its fervent synthesis of Chinese and Western modern pictorial techniques to express subject matters relating to the environment and everyday scenes of Malaya. When we compare these early paintings with the work he produced as a student in New York in the early 60s, it is evident that his departure from the nanyang style was as immediate as it was dramatic. This sharp turn in his practice was perhaps not that dissimilar to the experiences of some of our first-generation migrant artists from China whose artistic identities transitioned in response to the new environments of Malaya. In Wong Keen's case, being immersed in what was considered at the time the most avant-garde art centre in the world naturally reoriented his bearings and shaped his pictorial struggle differently.



From Left to Right:

*Bicycle*, 1959

*Title Unknown (Malay Women and Salted Fish)*, 1961

*Broome Street, NY*, 1962



Being educated in the concepts of Colour Field Painting - an influential pictorial style that emerged from Abstract Expressionism - during his years at the Art Students League of New York (1961-64) fostered in Wong Keen a lifelong interest in structuring pictorial space and elements through complex colour relations. With its bold, scintillating colour play, *The Evolution of Forms* from 2019 clearly reflects the essence of his New York School training.

Under his treatment the lotus forms have been abstracted into amorphous shapes of colours. They palpitate rhythmically as if in a polyphonic symphony - merging, resisting or seeping into surrounding forms, yet are harmoniously contained within the picture frame. The resulting image is one where colours essentially become both the form and the content of the painting.



Wong Keen, *The Evolution of Forms*, 2019  
Acrylic on canvas, 153 x 208 cm

Wong Keen's parents were born in China and educated in Shanghai. They were both well-versed in Chinese literati values and were among the artists and scholars who became secondary school teachers after migrating to Singapore from China. In addition, his mother's daily devotion to writing calligraphy fostered an organic literati environment that enabled him to cultivate a deep reverence for Chinese ink and brush aesthetics from a young age.

Some might expect his Chinese cultural roots to have been demolished after a life-changing education and 50 years in the US, but these experiences had in fact heightened his sensitivity towards his Chinese heritage. Wong Keen cited his encounters with the works of Franz Klein, Robert Motherwell, Mark Tobey and Philip Guston in the 1960s as a major turning point in his Chinese ink approach. These Western artists borrowed significantly from Asian calligraphy and pushed the expressivity and viscosity of brushwork to its limit in both paper and canvas formats, awakening in him the urgent need, particularly as a young Chinese artist then, to re-evaluate the sublime nature of abstraction that long defined Chinese ink as an art form.



Wong Keen, *Misty Morning*, 2015  
Acrylic on paper, 69 x 136 cm





Wong Keen, *Break Through*, 2018  
Acrylic on paper, 87 x 106.5 cm

*Break Through* from 2018 articulates not only his preoccupation with the spirit and gesture of Chinese ink expression but also his topical concern in renewing its formalistic conventions. His revolt against orthodoxy is encapsulated in the deliberate use of black acrylic and bold bright colours on rice paper, displacing the Chinese ink yet retaining its discourse on poetic evocation by conveying effects of ink wash subtleties through the acrylic medium.

Bearing in mind that the artist's use of Western black acrylic in place of Chinese ink is a deliberate conceptual strategy, how do we then categorise such a work? Having expunged the physical element of Chinese ink, is the painting irrevocably banished from the discourse of *shuimo* 水墨? Do we consider this a Western painting influenced by Chinese ink aesthetics, or a Chinese painting influenced by Western abstraction?

Wong Keen's collage work is an extension of his painting language; form and gesture remains an abiding concern even if the mode of execution pursues a more tactile manipulation of material and form. *Caesura* is a series of conceptual collages created in the 1990s. The term *caesura*, which means a pause or a rhetorical break in a line of poetry, is a metaphor for the concept and form in the work.

The series plays on the juxtapositions of non-related images and ideas to draw new associative meanings. The compositions often feature prints from Western magazines or fragments from Chinese manuscripts, complete with his own painted cutouts and scribbblings. There is also the recurring motif of his mother's Chinese calligraphy - whole, dissected or folded - in a number of the works. On one level, the interruption and destabilisation of different cultural forms and contexts in a single image construes a poetry of its own and evokes a sense of lyrical arbitrariness. On another, the process points to a conscious cycle of erasure, deconstruction and rebirth of cultural roots and significations.



From Left to Right:

Wong Keen, *Caesura Series*, 1994, Chinese ink and colour on paper (Collage), 53 x 36 cm

Wong Keen, *Caesura Series*, 1994, Chinese ink and colour on paper (Collage), 53 x 38.5 cm



Wong Keen, *Happening*, 2019  
Mixed media on paper, 115 x 108 cm

"For *Happening* I envisioned a sensuous painting playing with the ideas of 'figure on figure' and 'black on black'. There should be a lot of atmosphere in such a composition so you shouldn't try to control too much when you paint. But there are moments when you're conscious of trying to let loose and be sloppy, so it's not easy. I would say that most of the time the brushstrokes have a life of their own; every mark has the potential to assert itself and surprise you, so you just have to let it run and react to it accordingly. You'll always find a way to tackle or predict to a degree because of experience, which is built up over the years. The only way is to work hard and keep painting, that's how you build on your experiences in shaping compositions. These experiences become the sum of your organic presence in the work. The final picture is not always within your expectations, but it is always better than the one you began in your mind."

Interview with Wong Keen, 5 February 2020.





Wong Keen, *Disappointing*, 2018  
Mixed media, 93 x 63 cm

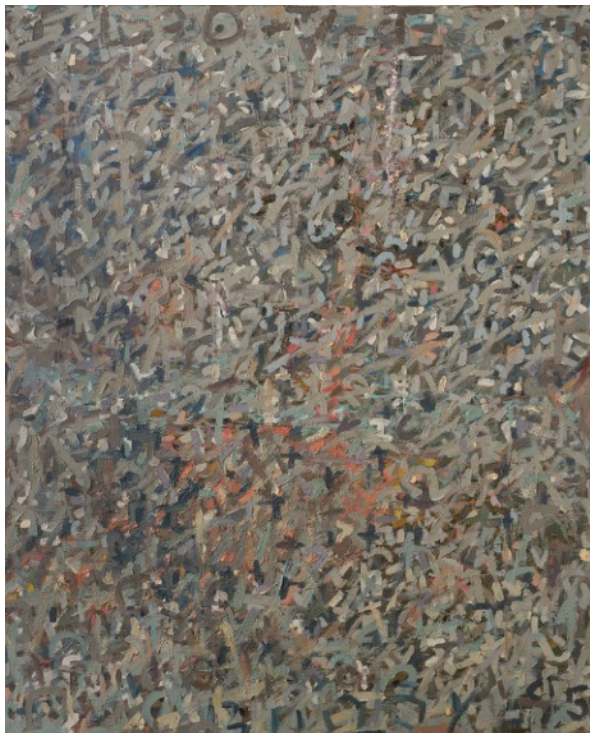




Wong Keen, *Run*, 2020  
Acrylic on canvas, 175.5 x 115 cm

**Boo Sze Yang (b. 1965, Singapore - )** graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1991 and completed his Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Art at the University of Reading, UK in 1995. He also obtained a Master in Arts Degree from Chelsea College of Art & Design, the University of the Arts, London in 2004. Sze Yang's paintings deal with a broad range of subject matters, including mundane domestic objects, images of car and airplane crash-scenes, derelict interiors of cathedrals, and unpeopled chambers of shopping malls. He treats banal objects, modern architectural interiors, and destructive scenes as metaphors for the human condition, transforming these into a symbol of contemporary life through gestural techniques and a restrained palette that emphasises the materiality of paint.

*Untitled II* from 1995 emerged from Sze Yang's early series titled *Being*, which was produced as an exploratory response to the question of identity. He first dug deep into notions of identity through pictorial engagement in the UK in 1995, when the professor in his postgraduate class commented on the absence of a unique Asian, Chinese or Singaporean identity in his painting. The series saw him focus on the manifestation of primal, instinctive brushstrokes because the brushstroke "is what a painter begins with before anything else".<sup>2</sup> The brushstrokes in *Untitled II* were specifically deployed in a more uniform manner across the entire surface, giving rise to an allover composition that pulses with energy and pure gestures of brushmarks. According to the artist, his repetition of brushstrokes in the painting also evokes an image of stacked origami cranes, hence creating another layer of engagement with Asian symbolism.



Boo Sze Yang, *Untitled II*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, 150 x 119 cm

---

<sup>2</sup> Wong Shu Yun in "Boo Sze Yang: Forever at the Crossroads", *Boo Sze Yang: Forever at the Crossroads*, Singapore: Sunda Press, 2015, pp.15 - 27.



Created between 2008 and 2009, *Boom!* is a series comprising studied scenes of air wrecks, car crashes, collapsed bridges and buildings. Its visual discourse relates the extreme tension between antithetic values such as harmony and disharmony, construction and destruction, life and death, lightness and gravity; these are often present in road or air accidents when bodies of velocity are impacted and forced to a standstill, leaving varying sights of deformity that envelope objects and environments.

His tactile handling of paint, with robust pulls and smears, and thin yet vigorously etched tracks (from the use of a small ceramic sculpting comb) across the canvas conveys an energy that is intense but suspended; as if the impact of a crash right after the moment of accident is being imagined through the colliding physical paint bodies. At the same time the image reflects an inherent state of in-between: the moment between the leaving of life and the coming of death, and the invention that has served and now destroyed life.



Boo Sze Yang, *Boom #10*, 2009  
Oil on canvas, 61 x 30 cm



Boo Sze Yang, *Boom #21*, 2009  
Oil on canvas, 46 x 46 cm



Boo Sze Yang, *Boom #2*, 2008  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 46 cm





Boo Sze Yang, *Boom #25*, 2009  
Oil on canvas, 41 x 61 cm



Boo Sze Yang, *Boom #3*, 2008  
Oil on canvas, 40.5 x 67 cm





Boo Sze Yang, *Church of Pisa, Italy IV*, 2010  
Oil on linen, 150 x 112.5 cm



Both *Church of Pisa, Italy IV* and *Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, New York, USA* are works from Sze Yang's *House of God* series, which he started in 2004 while completing his Master in Arts Degree at the Chelsea College of Art & Design in London. Relying on formal techniques that both build and peel away layers of paint to depict monumental spaces of grand cathedral interiors, the series expresses his fascination in exploring architectural spaces through the materiality of paint. As succinctly captured by Wong Shu Yun in her opening essay for the artist's monograph, *Boo Sze Yang: Forever at the Crossroads*:

"Boo's impressions here are of the greatness and opulence in sacred structures, where he seems to be always looking up...On his canvas are painted sketches of deep-set interiors. Boo observed how lines, shapes, colours and textures were embedded in the walls, arches, windows, doors and pathways of cathedral architecture. That architectural elements could structure the sacred struck him as a formidable idea - in painting them, Boo revealed his understand of spaces as containers of power."<sup>3</sup>

Sze Yang's construction of the image combines bold brushwork and evocative smears and drips with techniques of sketching and drawing. By creating loose demarcation of elements through lyrical gesture and that are proportionately accurate and sufficiently detailed, he allows the viewer to "step into" the three-dimensional space of the interiors without forgetting the "constructedness" of the image.



Boo Sze Yang, *Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, New York, USA*, 2011  
Oil on linen, 76 x 91.5 cm

---

<sup>3</sup> Wong Shu Yun, "Boo Sze Yang: Forever at the Crossroads", *Boo Sze Yang: Forever at the Crossroads*, Singapore: Sunda Press, 2015, pp.15 - 27.





Boo Sze Yang, *The Forum Shops at Caesars, Las Vegas, USA*, 2012  
Oil on canvas, 150 x 120 cm

'The mall, however, filled with escalators and activity on all levels, offers a dizzying sense of effortlessness. Boo describes "House of God" as evoking an appreciation of "what may be gained", suggesting contemplation and cultivation, while "The Mall" is about "what may be lost." The ease with which "Gothic" architectural elements in the mall may be conquered provides intoxicating empowerment, egging on hedonistic worship of the self at the "altar of consumption".'<sup>4</sup>

Kwok Kian Chow, "The Escalator to the Rib Vault, Not Quite the Stairway to Heaven" in *Boo Sze Yang: Forever at the Crossroads*.

---

<sup>4</sup> Kwok Kian Chow, "The Escalator to the Rib Vault, Not Quite the Stairway to Heaven", *Boo Sze Yang: Forever at the Crossroads*, Singapore: Sunda Press, 2015, pp.139 - 141.





Boo Sze Yang, *A Place Between Other Places*, 2018  
Oil on linen, 100 x 135 cm

*A Place Between Other Places* from 2018 is among Sze Yang's more recent repertoire of paintings. Motivated by his observation of the recurrent web of construction sites scattered across Singapore, he employs linear perspective prominent in Renaissance art to suggest space and structure within an imaginary landscape. The artist's incisive handling of linear structures resembling scaffoldings, partitions and platforms are created through the delicate process of pulling and pushing wet paints across the canvas with a squeegee. Drawing inspiration from the monochromatic grandeur of Chinese landscape painting, the work stretches the tonal values of black and grey and utilises effects akin to the Chinese notion of *liubai* 留白. The result is an illusory image that sits on the edge of recognition and abstraction, where meaning is constantly shifting and reading multifaceted.

Newer works from 2019 such as *In-Between Places* #7 and #8 are similar in technique and concept to works like *A Place Between Other Places*. The paint handling in the newer works, however, is a lot more thin and translucent, and it evokes a light, airy atmosphere reminiscent of watercolour. He also chooses for the structuring of the composition to be dictated by the instinctive process of paint application itself, allowing pictorial elements to surface on their own rather than beginning the painting with an image in mind.



Boo Sze Yang, *In-Between Places #8*, 2019  
Oil on linen, 140 x 80 cm





Boo Sze Yang, *In-Between Places #7*, 2019  
Oil on linen, 140 x 80 cm





Boo Sze Yang, *The Mirage #20*, 2018  
Oil on linen, 122 x 122 cm