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The Question of Form

Featuring works by Cheong Soo Pieng**Wong Keen & Boo Sze Yang****21 March - 3 April 2020**

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 interrogate, internalise and transform the values of form in the process of image-making. In art the term form 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. From the late 19th to early 20th century developments in Western modern art successfully eroded the conventional notions of form in painting, which previously depended on the illusion of three-dimensionality. This led to the dissolution of solid form against the picture plane with modern artists like Picasso and Matisse constructing with simplified form and flat colour to create new compositional styles, eventually providing the basis that saw the flowering of abstract art.

For artists the pursuit of pictorial aesthetics is undoubtedly bound up with the question of form, which carries not just artistic but cultural baggage; an artwork conveys itself as both an object and an objective, capable of transforming ways of seeing, feeling and understanding. By foregrounding the distinct practices of 3 important Singapore 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.

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. Soo Pieng studied at Xiamen Academy of Fine Arts and furthered his art education at Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts in Shanghai. Schooled in a Beaux-Arts type of curriculum at both academies, he was exposed in this early formative period to both Chinese painting and Western modern art (in particular the school of Paris - Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism). 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.

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.

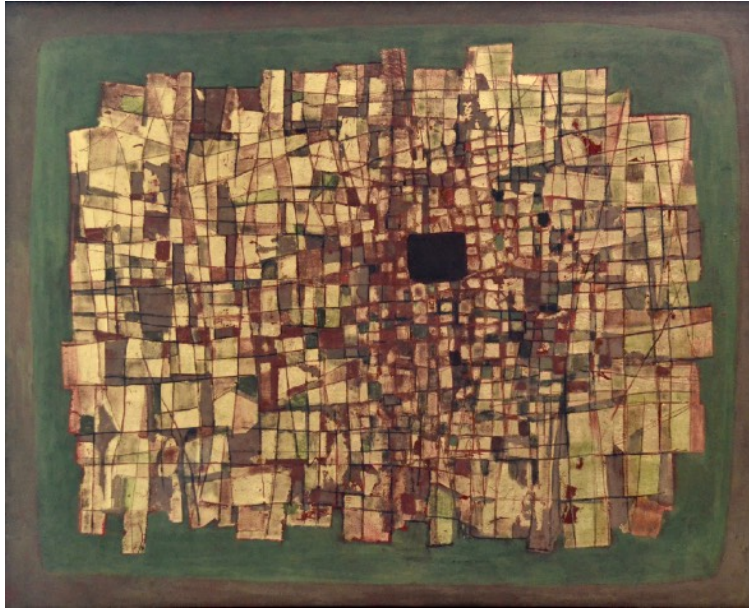


Cheong Soo Pieng, *Malay Lady*, c. 1950s
 Chinese ink and colour on paper, 68.5 x 68.5 cm

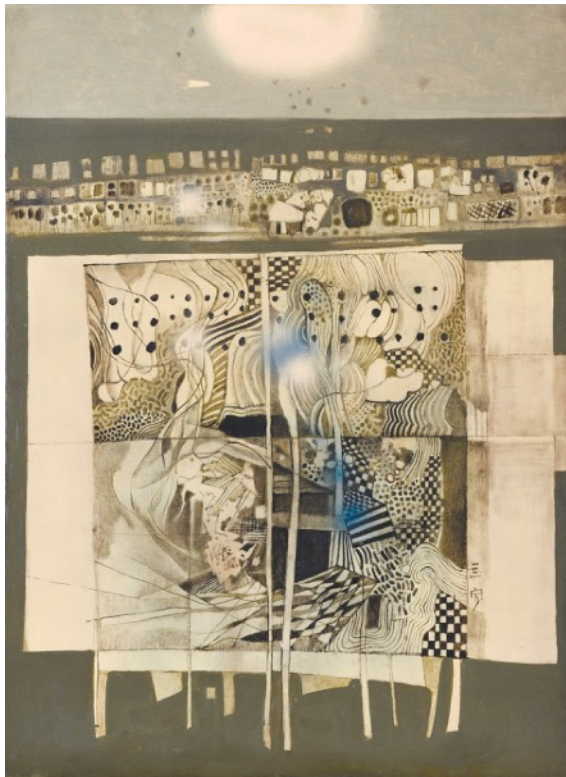
In 1959, Soo Pieng travelled to Borneo where he spent weeks in close interaction with the native *Dayak* tribes and created a large volume of drawing materials amid their longhouses in the jungles. *A Dayak Family and House* is an ink painting laboured from this meaningful cultural experience of 1959. 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 a 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 of landscapes and figures as we know it. 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, *Green and Gold Abstract*, 1972
Oil and gold leaf on canvas, 61 x 76 cm



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

Wong Keen (b. 1942, Singapore -) grew up in a Chinese literati environment 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 - then the most avant-garde art centre in the world. 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.

Over the years Wong Keen has created a highly stylised and enigmatic body of work that veers between the abstract and the figurative, often playing on visual forms such as the lotus, the nude, the burger, and the flesh. 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, as can be seen in his 2019 work *The Evolution of Forms*. Under his treatment the lotus forms have been abstracted into amorphous shapes of colours engaged in acts of interacting and becoming; 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 the form of the painting.



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



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

Brought up in a Chinese scholar-artist environment, a deep reverence for Chinese ink and brush aesthetics was instilled in Wong Keen at 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 culture as an art form.

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.



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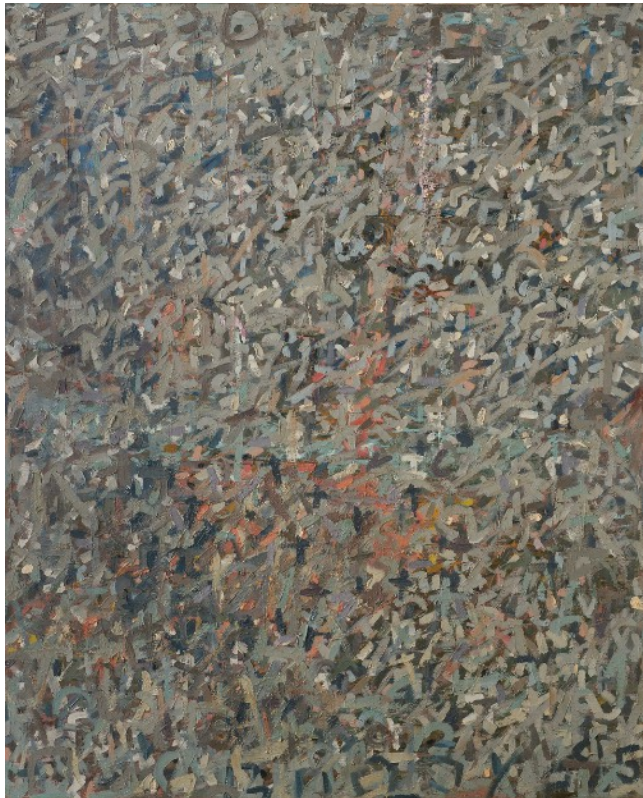
Wong Keen, *Happening*, 2019
Mixed media on paper, 115 x 108 cm



Wong Keen, *Caesura*, 1994
Ink and collage on paper, 53 x 36 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 to emphasise the materiality of paint.

Untitled II emerged from the series Being, which Sze Yang produced in 1995 as an exploratory search for an identity in his work. His formal interrogation into the notion of artistic identity first began 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. For the series, he focussed on the manifestation of instinctive brushstrokes because the brushstroke "is what a painter begins with before anything else". *Untitled II* is one of the paintings in which brushstrokes were specifically deployed in a more uniform manner across the entire surface, giving rise to an allover composition that breathes 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



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, the work stretches the tonal values of black and grey to create an illusory image that sits on the edge of recognition and abstraction, where meaning is constantly shifting and reading multifaceted.



Boo Sze Yang, *Boom #21*, 2009

Oil on canvas, 46 x 46 cm



Boo Sze Yang, *Boom #25*, 2009

Oil on canvas, 41 x 51 cm



Boo Sze Yang, *Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York, USA, 2011*
 Oil on linen, 7.6 x 91.5 cm

artcommune gallery was founded in 2009 by Singapore artist Ho Sou Ping, with a particular focus on Singapore Modern art. The gallery represents the finest and most important artists in the Singapore visual art canon, from revered pioneer masters Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi, to current leading painters of varying fortes including Lim Tze Peng, Ong Kim Seng, Tan Choh Tee and Wong Keen.

Over the years, the gallery has organised several high-profile academic exhibitions with a mission to promote a vibrant artistic landscape in Singapore and foster strong public awareness for local artists and art history. Some notable showcases include: *137km North of the Equator: A Story of the Equator Art Society and Realists Artists in Singapore* (2013); *The Story of Cheong Soo Pieng* (2015); *Exotic Sunlight: Paintings by Ong Kim Seng* (2016); *Cheong Soo Pieng: 100th Anniversary Exhibition* (2017); *Wong Keen: Flesh Matters* (2018); *Redefining the Archaic: The Art of Lim Tze Peng* (2018); *New Traditions: Cheong Soo Pieng and the Pioneering of Singapore Modern Art* (2019); and *Homecoming: Chen Wen Hsi Exhibition @ Kingsmead* (2019).

Exhibition Period

Date: 21 March - 3 April 2020

Time: 12pm – 7pm daily

Venue: artcommune gallery (Pls refer to address below)

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