

artcommune
gallery

Cheong Soo Pieng: 100th Anniversary Exhibition

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artcommune gallery is pleased to present *Cheong Soo Pieng: 100th Anniversary Exhibition* in honour of the artist's centennial. Widely revered as a pioneer of Nanyang art style and a leading figure in early Singapore art scene, Soo Pieng's varied output centers on the bold pursuit of Modern aesthetics and innovative amalgamation of forms and techniques derived from both Western and Chinese art traditions. The exhibition encompasses four decades of Soo Pieng's creative journey and features over 20 artworks in different media, providing a quick survey of his wide-ranging repertoire.



Cheong Soo Pieng (1917 – 1983) was born in Xiamen, China. He studied at Xiamen Academy of Fine Arts and furthered his education in Shanghai at Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts. After the 2nd World War, Soo Pieng relocated to Singapore in 1946 to take up a teaching post at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) before becoming a full-time artist in 1961.

The works on view reflect Soo Pieng's relentless search for new, dynamic modes of expressions throughout his career. This undeterred curiosity and ambition led to several overseas painting trips (Bali in 1952 and 1977; Sabah and Sarawak in 1959 and 1961; Europe from 1961 - 1963; and China in the 1970s) which resulted in remarkable stylistic transitions and a prolific body of work rich in figurative, abstract and mixed-media experimentations.



Cow with a Boy, 1956,
Mixed media on board,
51 x 64 cm

Cow with a Boy is an extremely unique mixed-media work dating from 1956. It reflects Soo Pieng's iconic Malayan pastoral theme in a tactile, mosaic style.

The only known work from the 1950s executed in this method, it comprises an assemblage of small, geometrically-shaped pieces derived from an unknown material. The composition is almost identical to an earlier oil painting completed by Soo Pieng in 1949, *Indian Men with Two Cows*.

The composition, though executed as a mosaic layout on board, embodies characteristics of the Nanyang pictorial scheme in its engagement of cubism and primary colours, as well as deliberate outlining of objects in black.



Indian Men with Two Cows, 1949,
Oil on canvas laid on masonite
Collection of National Gallery Singapore



Untitled, 1966, Oil on canvas, 102.5 x 82 cm

Soo Pieng's unbridled drive for pictorial innovation resulted in a wide array of visual styles and motifs in the late 1960s.

Featuring interwoven planes of lines and chequered squares, *Untitled* (1966) is perhaps a more stylised variation of Soo Pieng's earlier mosaic motif, impressing with its dynamically-crafted interplay of geometric forms. This composition was the first of its kind in Soo Pieng's oeuvre in the 1960s. Its formulation was later developed into an iconic motif in his abstract work of the 1970s.

Untitled (1972) stems from one of Soo Pieng's most avant-garde abstract series in the 1970s. Comprising two distinct yet complementary canvas supports, the composition is expressed through an elaborate arrangement of small painted canvas cut-outs, strings and enigmatic crayon drawings. The artist's combination of grid-like, staggered and chequered patterns rooted in black, white, ochre and raw sienna contained within an expanse of contemplative space makes an image rich in visual contrasts and fascinating dynamics between elements.



Untitled, 1972, Mixed media on board, 61 x 46 cm each



Untitled (Landscape), 1965, Oil on canvas, 80.5 x 60.5 cm



Goats, 1974, Mixed media, 66 x 91 cm

From late 1961 – 63, Soo Pieng embarked on a two-year sojourn in Europe where he travelled around and held solo exhibitions in different cities, including London and Germany. During this period, Soo Pieng delved fervently into a lyrical abstract language through which he perfected the atmospheric treatment of thin oil on canvas to articulate effects akin to ink wash gesture on paper.

Expressed in spirited brushwork and subtle yet complex variations of vermilion and black, *Untitled (Landscape)* is an evocative semi-abstract scene rendered in Soo Pieng's lyrical abstract technique in 1965.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Soo Pieng adopted found objects such as scrap metal pieces, rivets, screws, strings and wires as creative elements in his metalwork compositions. These non-painting materials elevate the physical and visual capacity of his composition by providing a tactile metal relief effect. With the incorporation of metal objects, the artwork colour significantly changes with any adjustment in direction of viewing or lighting. As the oxidation (of metal objects) sets in with time, the artwork takes on an additional dimension of an aged, weathered artifact.

Goats is an enchanting composition created from an unconventional assembly of corrugated metal sheets, rivets and gravel-like particles. The stunning contrasts in forms and materials are achieved through the artist's clever juxtaposition of the fluid, curvilinear shapes of the goats against a coarse grainy background mimicking the texture of natural earth, giving the work a tranquil, dream-like simplicity.







Fan Kuan
(c. 990 – c. 1020),
*Travellers among
Mountains and Streams*

Soo Pieng visited China at least twice during the 1970s, after having left his birth country since 1946. He was at this point working toward a touring exhibition in China, a project which unfortunately did not materialise due to his sudden passing in 1983.

Nonetheless, Soo Pieng's preparation for the China exhibition gave rise to a new series of work which dramatically eschews his previous styles. Perhaps an attempt to project more relational artistic and cultural themes, this series specifically emulates the pictorial styles of Sung dynasty paintings, which are typically monochrome and imbued with Taoist philosophy of simplicity and 'to be one with nature'.

A fine example is *Farming*, an oil canvas work expressed in a technique reminiscent of Sung dynasty Chinese ink painting. While it features a repeated subject matter in Soo Pieng's oeuvre, the ingenious use of thin oil technique on an unprimed canvas to develop poetic effects similar to those of Chinese dry ink wash is a testament to his clever improvisation of the medium and its expressive potential.



Farming, 1982, Oil on canvas, 82 x 96 cm