

墨 An exhibition by ink painters Oh Chai Ho, Quek Kiat Sing, Tak Bak Chiang & Yeo Shih Yun

At Jendela Visual Arts Space, Esplanade Singapore

Co-curated by INSTINC

Reflecting on 墨 (Mo) in the Moment

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All images courtesy of the respective artists

Featuring individual artworks by four artists Yeo Shih Yun, Quek Kiat Sing, Tay Bak Chiang and Oh Chai Hoo, as well as a collaborative site-specific installation, the exhibition 墨 (Mo) is a tribute to the age-old medium of Chinese ink in a contemporary age, as well as a celebration of the theme of courage.

The artists were asked to step out of the familiarity of their individual studio spaces to work together over a period of six consecutive days, to create an installation specifically for and within the actual exhibition space. With a videographer at hand throughout the entire duration to document their working processes, it almost feels like a local, toned down, one-episode version of the American reality TV show called Work of Art, only without the competitive element.

Aside from the main collaborative installation, the rest of the exhibition consists of smaller, individual artworks by each artist and which provide a brief introduction to their artistic styles and ideas. It offers a preview of their diverse ways of using Chinese ink in contemporary art, hints at potential obstacles for the collaborative installation, and allows an opportunity to compare and contrast the artistic expressions of each artist when they work individually and when collaboratively, in their own studio spaces and at the exhibition site.

Amongst the artists, Quek paints human figures with Chinese ink while the other three artists draw inspiration from elements of nature, namely trees and cacti, rocks and waterfalls.

Playing on the pun of mo qi, which in the Chinese language refers to a tacit mutual understanding between parties, Turbulence is the highlight of the exhibition Mo. The collaborative installation that was created on-site just days before the exhibition opening not only shows the artists' skill in handling the medium of ink, but also captures a screenshot of their rapport with each other.

With walls that reach up to six metres in height, and taking up at least a good one third or half of the total exhibition space, it is possible to walk into Turbulence and literally feel immersed in the installation work.

A write-up on a side panel explains: “乱流, or ‘turbulence’, is a description of our phenomenal epoch. It represents an era of chaos where the traditional and the contemporary search for a unifying language. ‘Diversity’ has become the rule; and it is an unsettling undercurrent that results from the greater postmodern societal identity.”

Enveloping the viewer on three sides, Turbulence comprises alternating sections of work by Yeo, Tay, and Oh, and a last section set aside solely for Quek's ink drawings or paintings of passengers on buses and Mass Rapid Transit trains, based on photographs or sketches originally drawn with ballpoint pens, pencils and markers. Her candid portraits depict travellers from all walks of life - a young lady listening to music through her earphones, seated next to an old man who seems to have nodded off and with his head tilted to one side, seated next to a Sikh with his distinctively wrapped turban... until at last, we are presented with an image in a much larger format and with a jump in subject matter, depicting the four artists at work during the collaboration, together with the videographer who documented their processes.

It almost feels like suddenly seeing the NG scenes after a film, as though we were presented with a film strip and had reached the end of the narrative, and afterwards given a peek into the processes behind the scenes.

On the opposite and adjacent walls, Oh's varied textures of trees are interspersed with Tay's odd-shaped rocks, interspersed with Yeo's layers of scrolls that cascade downwards like a waterfall. Using a blower implement to cast ink, Oh's marks are fluid, rhythmic and organic, forming dense patterns that showcase an unexpectedly extensive assortment of mark-making possibilities from the use of a single non-ink-brush implement.

Painted directly on the walls of Jendela, with layers of rich black ink applied in washes over a textured wall, Tay's rocks are personally reminiscent of rock formations in ancient limestone caves. With areas brought into focus by soft spotlights, the semi-glossy sheen and quality of the black ink used becomes subtly more apparent and rather mesmerising. The rocks drip and flow downwards into small pools, forming strange but interesting shapes that blend into the grey of the cement floor. At the back of the installation, Tay painted two massive rocks, one on each of two separate partition walls. Due to the shapes of the two rocks forming a sort of inverted archway, and with one partition wall placed some distance in front of the other, the two large rocks

beckon and draw me closer. As I turn ninety degrees to look behind the partition wall positioned closer in front than the other, I am stopped short and momentarily, comically disappointed by a cordon rope that prevents me from entering further.

Flanking one side of the rocks are Yeo's layers of scrolls forming waterfalls, which consist of rippling ink marks in various tones and densities of black, and with a consistent undulating graduality. Influenced by the subject matter of Oh and Tay, and having bought the long hand scrolls in anticipation of the height of the Jendela walls, Yeo had a sudden flash of inspiration at the start of the collaborative six days to create the effect of waterfalls by using the technique of dipping, also abandoning the use of the Chinese ink brush. By experimenting with various angles of dipping, different containers of various densities of ink, and six to seven different ink brands, she aimed to achieve a different visual effect for each scroll.

With the combination of Oh, Tay and Yeo's respective trees, rocks and waterfalls juxtaposed against Quek's portraits of people on trains and buses, it is in fact also possible to read the installation work as being descriptive of the gap between nature and modern man, even though this may not have been consciously intended by the artists. Caught up in their own individual journeys, the human figures depicted by Quek remain oblivious and indifferent to the remaining nature that surrounds them.

The resulting effect of the combined artworks of the four artists and their concerted efforts to create as much as possible a coherent and collaborative installation in six days, is a beautiful display of the boundless potential and possibilities that still surround the age old medium of Mo. On the whole, the featured artists agree that if given the chance to create the installation all over again, after this experience of getting to know each other better and deeper, or if they had had two months instead of six days to create the installation, the artwork would have been quite different, and possibly in a better way.

Yet, while the above may be true, what strikes me is the beauty of imperfection in the context of Mo. What is memorable about the exhibition is precisely its 'imperfections' - the somewhat serendipitous coming together of four artists with disparate styles, backgrounds, ideas and approaches towards ink, four artists who barely knew each other at the start, if at all. Here, Mo's 'weakness' is also its 'strength'.

As Oh explains, he was quite happy with the outcome of the exhibition and the presentation of different ink techniques, the giving and receiving of various feedback and advice from each other, which is important to growth and development. Quek and Yeo were also glad that they got to know the rest of the artists better, and Tay agrees that the six days were a happy experience, and that artists should occasionally engage in such experiences of interaction and experimentation, where the collaboration does not have to be perfect. Due to this shared learning experience of taking on the risk and challenge of creating Mo together, seeds of friendship and potential future collaborations were planted.

Yeo observes that one year later from the end of the exhibition people may not remember Mo, but the friendships forged between the artists is an intangible reward that will remain. In addition, due to a common goal of creating a cohesive installation and good exhibition, "you are forced to be more truthful when you have a personal stake in the artwork", "you have to discuss and you cannot be shy if you don't like something, you have to say why you don't like something; it forces you to be frank with each other."

Reflecting upon the moment of Mo, and given a chance to speak with the four featured artists, I was inadvertently led to expand my own knowledge, through other sources, of past traditions involving Chinese ink; and the eventual re-examination of my own past assumptions and apathy towards my own cultural lineage. With a glimmer of insight into the underlying values and philosophies which facilitated such a development of art, the evolved and changing role of Chinese ink and techniques became ever more apparent.

Without needing to try, the exhibition Mo is naturally and in fact a mirror reflecting some of the facets of the circumstances that surround these artists in this age and place. Even though some of the artists are still aware of the heritage of traditional ink techniques, it appears that the influence of Western modern art history has become so inescapable and undeniable that many younger artists, viewers, art students, and consequently art teachers belonging to the Chinese diaspora mistakenly judge the worth and value of traditional Chinese ink paintings and techniques by the same standards with which we measure and view Western art. As a consequence, we unwittingly give up any further understanding and appreciation of our own rich heritage before we even begin to try, blind to the immense worth of the guiding values and philosophies upon which our ancestral legacy was based, ideas that open the door to a very different world.

In the moment of Mo, I am presented with a link to my past, through the artworks of four artists who continue to use the age old medium of Chinese ink in new ways and forms influenced by changes in the world. A celebration of the versatility and enduring quality of Chinese ink, a call for courage in the face of uncertainty and the risk of failure, and a catalyst that facilitated the otherwise unlikely coming together and collaboration between four artists, the exhibition 墨 (Mo) encapsulates a sense of perfection even in imperfection, a candid capture of Mo in the very moment.

Oh Chai Hoo

More than three decades of art-making experience has not stopped Oh Chai Hoo's innate curiosity and openness to trying new things, which led to his acceptance of the invitation to become part of Mo. He also decided to explore a new technique which he had not tried before, to cast ink through a blower, which is used as a tool for glazing ceramics. The idea stems from the technique of zhi hua or finger painting with Chinese ink, which Oh says dates back to the Qing dynasty or even earlier, and has been around for at least a few hundred years.

An avid gardener in addition to being a multidisciplinary artist, Oh's *Unification for Survival*, 2011, is an abstract depiction of a cactus, a symbol of resilience in less than ideal conditions. Reduced to a close-up view, with clusters of black lines in a cropped composition, it is hard to decipher the subject matter, and the title offers no clues either. During my mandarin interview with the artist, Oh observed with an accepting and light-hearted humour that "It doesn't quite look like cactus, does it?"

Emanating a carefree aura and with a kind twinkle in his eye, it is hard to imagine or perhaps ironically not surprising that once, Oh went through an "introspective period of mourning" that had been triggered by a family death. "The positive result of this ... was a remarkable reawakening to life, which saw Oh unafraid to explore uncharted (sic) territory, keen to tackle new challenges, and brimming with a fresh hunger to know more about his heritage." He began learning seal carving, calligraphy and Chinese painting, and his prolific and varied oeuvre of artworks ranging from ink on rice paper, mixed media on canvas to sculptural works in the past thirty years exude a vibrant sense of life and energy, based on a deep and underlying personal choice of living in the present moment.

Oh explains that while traditions and values, techniques and subject matter change, what remains is the temporal and momentary, honest and sincere quality of working with ink, a medium which best conveys the present moment because when you lay your brush on paper, the ink takes on a life of its own which is beyond your control and sometimes unpredictable. In the use of ink, there is also no room for change or correction - it is thus a very honest and truthful medium which naturally reveals the mood, personality and character of each artist who uses it, and the amount of practice and training the artist received.

Tay Bak Chiang

Nature has been relegated to specific zones in this crowded city, but it is still there, thankfully. Lines of trees alongside roads, potted plants along corridor walkways, miniature gardens in terrariums. And at the back of Bukit Timah Hill, Tay came across rocks which intrigued him. Rocks which were much smaller and less impressive as compared to some of their counterparts overseas, but which he was drawn to simply because of their local context.

Reflecting on the unassuming and humble façade of those rocks and stones, their quiet sense of inner strength, Tay began to paint a series of artworks based on rocks over the past few years. *Silent No More*, 2011, his individual artwork for Mo, is one of them. It is an image of a clearly delineated, largely oblong-shaped rock with a thin crack line on its left side, an image formed by thin layers of ink and brown pigments built up over twenty times on rice paper.

Choosing to continue with his subject matter of rocks, Tay's personal challenge for the collaborative aspect of Mo was to give up ink painting on rice paper to paint directly on the walls. When he tried it the first time on a smaller portion of his studio's wall, Tay felt that it had a dead and flat effect, especially because he was initially more cautious and careful, and didn't want it to drip and flow all over.

Yeo Shih Yun

"In horam vivere"='to live for the moment', the title of a catalogue or artist's book of early artworks by Yeo Shih Yun, has been the guiding philosophy for both Yeo's art practice as well as life, an outlook which has shaped spontaneous solutions in the face of obstacles, as well as an instinctive approach to the application of Chinese ink in new and imaginative ways, unfettered by the confines of art theory and history.

In a previous exhibition at Jendela in 2011, Yeo presented a series of artworks inspired by the idea of tying Chinese ink brushes to tree branches swaying in the wind. She has also created artworks on various occasions using a wide array of non-traditional painting tools such as watering cans filled with ink, rollerblades and household brooms, water-guns, toy robots and even remote-control cars. Such is the premise for Yeo's art-making - the last few lines of her quick handwritten scribble in response to the question "What is your style of painting?" reads: "what u see is what u see. does not hide error, Why hide? Life is imperfect anyway."

In the context of Mo, Yeo's individual artwork *White*, 2012, comprising ink on three hanging scrolls of Japanese sumi paper, is an intriguing response to one of the main ideas for the exhibition. Broad black strokes suggestive of unsettled haste have been painted with little dilution of water, to form a frame of ink marks across the three scrolls, leaving the centre portion blank.

The first interpretation that instinctively jumps to mind is that it is a visual echo of the question "What happens when four contemporary artists who use Chinese ink in various ways are placed in a fixed space for six consecutive days and invited to work on a collaborative site-specific installation together?"

Another is to read the three scrolls as signifying past, present, and future, and the frame of black ink marks as representing a surrounding hectic environment or outer world. Placed into such an analogy, what is the state of our inner being?

However, a quick clarification with Yeo reveals that there is no definite answer. In *White*, viewers are free to interpret it however we wish, if we wish to. *White* was made as a spontaneous response to the medium of mo in the moment of making, with no specific intended meaning in mind during the painting process, constrained only by the form of the three sumi scrolls that were selected for use based on aesthetic considerations.

Quek Kiat Sing

In stark contrast, Quek Kiat Sing paints human figures with Chinese ink. Her past artworks have depicted family members, musicians, young ballerinas in Saturday dance classes, as well as other scenes from the everyday, capturing the environments and objects immediately around her. In the case of *Mo, Arrangement Fantastique 1 and 2*, 2010 are playful departures from Quek's previous subject matter.

Viewers well-versed in Western modern art history and who are familiar with Impressionism and Post-Impressionism may recognise *Olympia* by Édouard Manet juxtaposed with Paul Gauguin's *The Vision After the Sermon (Jacob wrestling with the Angel)*, and *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* by Édouard Manet juxtaposed with Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *The Theater Box*.

Fragments from these paintings have been intuitively pieced together in new compositions based on Quek's aesthetic sensibilities, hence the title *Arrangement Fantastique 1 and 2*. From a conceptual standpoint, these two ink paintings can be seen as an exploration of the possible links between the arts and cultures of the East and West, in particular, traditional Chinese 写意画 - xie yi hua and French Impressionism. Xie yi hua, an element or genre of traditional Chinese ink painting which aims to capture the spirit or essence of the subject matter rather than its actual physical appearance in full realistic detail, has been translated in some sources as "impressionistic drawing" or "impressionistic painting".

However, whether this is a comfortable comparison is a story for another day, given the differences between the ideological motivations of the French impressionists and those of the traditional Chinese ink artists, and the nuances of meaning and significance that are sometimes lost in translation between different languages.

With such a varied display of diverse working methodologies, reflections and approaches to the same medium of Chinese ink, it comes as little surprise that among the four artists, Quek was especially stressed by the idea of collaboration, to the extent that she lost her appetite on one of the days and couldn't sleep very well. Yet, in the face of fear, she carried bravely on.