

## IN THE MIND'S EYE: THINKING ABOUT ABSTRACTION (1)

by Dr. Charles Merewether

"Pictures that don't remind us of things and places, that don't go well with the furniture.... Pictures that are merely meant to be seen and enjoyed in their own right. Every time we really look at a good picture we enter into one of the most exciting adventures available in our world." (2)

'Thinking about Abstraction' is an exhibition of contemporary Singaporean artists. The exhibition has been developed out of a recognition that there continues to be a vibrant and broadly-based tradition of abstraction in Singapore. This exhibition is presented in two parts, representing three generations of Singaporean artists actively practicing today.

Over the course of this time, Singapore has itself changed substantially, most importantly in 1965, the year it gained independent sovereignty. Until this time, Chinese culture had significantly influenced the country. Chinese immigrants had brought with them their calligraphic tradition and what became known as the Nanyang style. (3) Predominant from the late 1940s-1960s, the Nanyang school drew upon both Chinese ink traditions and techniques as well as Western watercolor and oil painting, to depict local Southeast Asian subject matter. (4)

In October 1964, the Modern Art Society was founded in Singapore by Ho Ho Ying (1936), together with Tay Chee Toh, Tong Siang Eng and Wee Beng Chong. Their expressed aim was nurturing Singaporean modern art. As noted by commentators, the spontaneity and freedom of Ho Ho Ying's gestural abstraction drew inspiration from Chinese culture, calligraphy and philosophy as much as the spontaneity of abstract expressionism. (5) Another three artists from Ho Ho Ying's generation who took up abstraction were Goh Beng Kwan (1937), Teo Eng Seng (1938) and Kim Lim

---

1 My sincere thanks to Milenko Prvacki,, Ian Woo, Jeremy Sharma and Joon Kiat for their advice, recommendations and support. I also wish to express my deepest appreciation to the galleries who have supported this project through their collaboration with Gallery 39+.

2 This quotation by the Philippine artist Fernando Zobel is made by Chikiamco, Clarissa, in *'Fernando Zóbel: The World of Abstraction, and the World Within,'* 2019, published online.

3 The term *Nanyang* is a transliteration of 'the South Seas' of mainland China and refers mainly to Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

4 Sze Wee, Low, offers a brief but insightful definition of Nanyang and post-nanyang style in 'What is Nanyang art?' in ThinkChina magazine 22 Jul, 2022.

5 See Barnes, Rachel, 'To Let off steam, throw paint, splash and dribble paint on canvas. Paintings by Ho Ho Ying,' Alpha Gallery, Singapore: The Straits Times, 28 May 1980, p.3.

# 39<sup>+</sup> ART SPACE

(1936-1997). Having moved from Sumatra to Singapore after World War Two, Goh studied under Chen Wen Hsi, who was associated with the Nanyang style of painting. Goh then traveled to North America to study in Massachusetts and at the Art Students League in New York. Eng Seng who was born in Singapore, first studied art locally and then traveled to England in 1960 for 10 years where he lived, studying at the Birmingham College of Art and Design and Birmingham University. (6) Kim Lim moved to London as a young student in 1954 and studied at St. Martin's School of Art and the Slade. She remained in England while both Goh and Eng Seng returned to Singapore, and became central figures in expanding and redefining abstraction in Singapore.

Similarly, two younger artists Han Sai Por (1943) and Eng Tow (1947) who both belong to what has been called the Second Generation, played an important role in fostering the growth of abstraction in Singapore. Han had first attended part-time courses at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts from 1975 to 1977. She then went to England to study fine arts at the East Ham College of Art (1979–1980) and the Wolverhampton College of Art (1980–1983). In 1983, Han returned to Singapore and had considerable influence through her teaching at NAFA and LASALLE (both 1987–1993), and then Nanyang Technological University (1994–1996). Subsequently, she pursued further studies in landscape architecture at Lincoln University in Lincoln, Canterbury in New Zealand.

Eng Tow began her career as a tapestry artist working with different textiles. She studied art at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in Singapore and then went to Coventry College of Art, Winchester School of Art in Hampshire and the Royal College of Art. After her studies, she worked in London as a freelance textile designer selling her works to companies such as Courtaulds and Designers Guild. She set up a workshop with fellow artists and craftsmen in 1977, teaching, exhibiting and designing in various parts of England. In 1981, Eng returned back to Singapore to work with interior designers and designing endpapers, book covers, tapestries, furniture and accessories, as well as theatre props and sets. Her continuing artistic exploration manifest in her cloth reliefs and work on paper, plus her singular distinguished bronze sculpture *Rim of Infinity* (2005) now at Changi Airport, set the stage for the spirit of abstraction to take firm hold in the world of contemporary art in Singapore.

After independence, the situation for art practice and training in Singapore slowly begun to change. In the 1980's art and music became part of Singapore's everyday school curriculum and there were greater possibilities for students to study in local art schools. There was also an increase in opportunities for Singaporeans to obtain

---

6 T.K.Sabapathy, *Teo Eng Seng: Art and Thoughts*, Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011.

scholarships or residencies to study in art schools in Western Europe, England or the US.

Significant changes today from this time have affected Singapore and the artworld in general. Nowadays, art can be viewed from virtually anywhere, not only through the global proliferation of Biennales and Art Fairs but, access to the ubiquitous web. However, while this access to the web has been undoubtedly influential, a reproduction lacks any sense of dimensionality, depth or scale. A case in point would be the experience of seeing a painting by the North American artist, Barnett Newman. To stand in front of one of his paintings, it is impossible to see the whole work, unless from a distance which means not seeing it closely. The sheer lateral width of one of Newman's paintings became a method whereby the artist, albeit the painting, controlled its viewing.

### **The modernist tradition of abstraction:**

Any analysis of abstraction over much of the 20th century will show two antagonistic tendencies: the aesthetic and expressive. We can trace the first tendency back to Kazimir Malevich and his Black Square of 1915. This work, as other Suprematist paintings made by him at the time, escape symbolism, utilitarian function or individual expression. Each work seeks an absolute autonomy.

Such issues as the idea of absolute anonymity set the stage for what became a long-standing debate between artists throughout 20th century modernism. This can be found most notably in the Russian Constructivist movement (Rodchenko, Tatlin, El Lissitzky, Popova, Stepanova et al.) from 1915-1934; New Plasticism (Mondrian and De Stijl) from 1917 on, Cercle et Carré (Mondrian, Michel Seuphor and Torres-García) founded in 1929 and the French Art concret (van Doesburg et al.) established in 1930. For instance, Van Doesburg wrote in 1930:

The work of art should be entirely conceived and formulated in the mind before its execution. It should retain nothing of the formal observations from nature, nor any sensuality, nor any sentimentality. We want to exclude the lyricism, the dramatism, the symbolism...The technical means should be mechanical, in other words exact, anti-impressionistic (7)

Definitions of the aesthetic contra the expressive, continued with the group Universalismo Constructivo developed by Joaquín Torres-García in Paris and Montevideo, the Abstraction-Création, an association of artists that formed in 1931 in Paris, bringing together artists with a program centred around abstraction, création

---

7 See *De Stijl 1917-1931: The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art*, Belknap Press, 1986.

## 39<sup>+</sup> ART SPACE

and non-figurative art and the Argentine-based group MADI (Movement, Abstraction, Dimension, Invention) of the 1940's, dedicated to developing a non-figurative concrete art. (8) For these artists, non-figuration represented a purely plastic culture which excluded every element of explication, anecdote, literature, naturalism, etc...erased either by a progressive abstraction of forms from nature or directly, purely via geometry, or by the exclusive use of elements commonly called abstract, such as circles, planes, bars, lines, etc. (9).

The second tendency is captured by the work of the North American artist Jackson Pollock amongst others artists in the post-World War 11 period. How do we capture the sensate experience of seeing a work of Pollock or, identify plastic signs that are either imprecise and circumstantial. Such works challenge the viewer to recognise things which are not clearly there but which might be there. As an act of abstraction, the effort to recognise the unrecognisable takes place at the expression side of a phenomenon that oscillates between signification and brute materiality. This phenomenon occurs as a result of the confrontation between the abstract pattern and the individual spectator. With the paintings of Pollock, the central issue is to do with the physicality of his work. It is not only their scale but, the visceral marks that characterize Pollock's gestural abstraction. With its chirographic traces, every sensory-motoric impulse of the artist is evident. Perhaps, we might say, the viewing of his work becomes something like a transactional encounter between the senses, or more specifically, a visual experience that seems as much a physical sensation of mere matter. The art work before us is declaratory, almost brutally abrupt, confronting the viewer with its gestures, colour and form.

Other artists might offer a beguiling simplicity through the artwork's line and form, its sparseness of detail and subtle coloration or, alternatively, its saturation of color and fullness of form. Such characteristics beckon the viewer's curiosity. The seductive understatement can prompt the viewer to explore and seek out signs or cues that will help unlock ways of understand the complete work. Or we may be drawn by more immersive experience of viewing the art work. The work envelopes its viewers in its textures, layers, forms and saturated colour. How we view a painting by Mark Rothko, Newman's contemporary, is a case in point. His paintings for the Rothko chapel in Houston appear utterly still as if the paint hovers over the surface. To appreciate the work, the viewer must allow herself to be immersed by it. As Dominique de Menil, the benefactor and patron of the chapel, quoted Rothko as saying 'A picture lives by

---

8 Members of both Cercle et Carré and the Art concret groups joined the Abstraction-Création group. See also a fundamental source for artists manifestos etc. *Art in Theory 1990-1990*, edited by Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992.

9 Ibid., Harrison and Wood Paul, pp. 357-58.

companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token.'

## **Abstraction and the international:**

There are, of course, many traditions of abstraction internationally today and the particularity of its development shifts from one country to the next. This has to do not only with the received artistic and aesthetic traditions out of which an artist has developed but, the significance given art nationally. Is it recognized as part of the specific cultural discourse of a country or as a foreign import, belonging to an international discourse that has no place within or in relation with the national. Clarissa Chikiamco addresses this issue in her important essay 'Manifesting the Nation: Abstraction and the Inter-national':

The new modern nation needed an appropriate new modern art form and abstraction was deemed by many artists to be fitting. Abstract art offered a new visual language which could express this spirit of modernisation and independence – a sharp distinction from the reductive and essentialising beautiful and exotic depictions of before. Even though the spectre of colonial (Western) influence would persist in casting a shadow over abstraction itself, many artists in the region continued to engage with it and to see it as a medium of expression they could make their own. (10)

While only written 8 years ago, this specter of colonial influence and its post-colonial response, has diminished considerably. Western influence may be present but, it does not necessarily cast a shadow. While there is strong and well recognized tradition of abstraction dating back to the 1950's and 1960's, especially in China, Taiwan, Japan and Korea, the struggle for de-colonialism in SE Asia was matched by a movement of cosmopolitanism internationally. This included such artists as Lee Aguinaldo, Arturo Luz and Robert Chabet amongst others from the Philippines. Or elsewhere, Latiff Mohidin, born in Malaysia, who after studying for some time in Berlin and New York during the 1960's, returned to SE Asia to shape a specific form of local cosmopolitanism. While their travel enabled them to see modernist art collections/exhibitions in European or US museums and develop close friendships and exchanges with contemporary artists living there; their work was shaped by the experience of living and working in SE Asia.

The range of approaches that characterize abstraction has to do with their formal visual elements: shape, surface, texture, colour, line, composition and scale. While

---

10 See Chikiamco, Clarissa, 'Manifesting the Nation: Abstraction and the Inter-national' in *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia Since the 19th Century*, Edited by Low Sze Wee, National Gallery Singapore. 2015, pp. 44-55.

# 39<sup>+</sup> ART SPACE

artists are recognized for the manual skill of the hand and the acuity of the ‘eye;’ the title of this exhibition ‘Thinking about Abstraction,’ is intended to provoke the viewer to recognize the participation of the mind in thinking about the process of abstraction. This is both for the viewer and the artist. Using their hand and eye, artists work in dialogue with the process of thinking, that is a process that entails the additions, shifts and changes reached over the course of making a work of art. This process implicitly involves a tacit recognition on the part of the artist of when to stop. Sometimes, the decision can be made swiftly or at other times, it may take a length of time with the artist returning time and again to a particular work up to a point when it appears sufficient to them. There is no outside determining reference to help make the decision as to when to stop, seeing the work is complete.

As a viewer, we tend to read, ‘unpack’ or deconstruct a work of art as a series of steps taken and decisions reached by the artist in the course of making and completing a work. Visiting an artist’s studio, it is not always automatically clear to us, (the viewer), as to whether a particular artwork is finished or not. With each work, an artist takes the viewer on a journey that begins with its end and then leads us back and forth in a process of appreciating the making and completion of the particular work.

## **Abstraction and Singapore now:**

The work presented in this exhibiton ‘Thinking about Abstraction’, contests objective representation, giving priority to a subjective expression. With some artists, the work is structured around a series of calligraphic gestures or, in others, semi-transparent layers, imperceptible details, ambiguous forms or use of incongruent (non-traditional) materials. In other cases, the character of the art has been informed by the use of media technologies, most notably digital media. Or, to the contrary, it is the potentiality of subjective expression that allows an artist to use the process of making art as correspondent to meditation, that may be associated with a religious sentiment or beliefs. A powerful example of this is the work of Tang Chang from Thailand who wrote of his practice:

*I place a stretched canvas in front of me and begin meditating not through mindful breathing, but through the act of mixing paint. This activity cultivates mindfulness, cultivates wisdom, and cultivates concentration. In this mindfulness, I forget everything . . . I let everything go, reaching a point of ekaggata (single-minded concentration). This point is the culmination, oneness... (11)*

---

11 Cited in Cacchione , Orianna, ‘Tang Chang: Abstracting the line, Retrieving the image,’ in *Tang Chang, The Painting that is Painted with Poetry is profoundly beautiful*. Chicago: Smart Gallery, May 8- August 5, 2018.

# 39<sup>+</sup> ART SPACE

The radically distinct ways the artists in this exhibition 'Thinking about Abstraction' engage with abstraction, represents a discursive framework that celebrates the individuality of expression over and above the national, regional or international. For many of the artists, there will always be the challenge of the representational, a point of reference external to the work at hand, as if hovering with the intent to dislodge any claims made by the presence of abstraction. Some use the claim of the representational as a provocation – a referential device, an active counterpoint or device of dissociation to develop an autonomy or non-referential form.

The majority of the artists here challenge or ignore the residual authority of the representational. Rather, the work manifests a visual tactility to create volumetric form, at times palpable in its blatant physicality, almost obdurate in its unfolding materiality. Alternatively, we are caught in viewing an architecture of planes that may appear as layers defined by clear boundaries, if only then to see that each layer or plane is denied any singular authority. Breathless in pursuit of some temporary resolve, we are instead faced with overlapping planes, shifting ground as they unfold, taking the viewer deeper into its substrata. Viewing the artwork now becomes almost an archaeological endeavour, as we view these planes as comparable to sediments built over time.

As suggested earlier, the work of these contemporary artists resonate with their European and SE Asia forebears. The boundaries of abstraction are limitless and these artists offer material evidence of the potential. This ability to articulate such an autonomy is the power of abstraction as much as the work of these artists is an expression of the significance of contemporary art in Singapore today.

# 39<sup>+</sup> ART SPACE

#03-01 39 Keppel Road  
Tanjong Pagar Distripark  
Singapore 089065

Tuesday - Friday: 11–7pm  
Saturday & Sunday: 12–6pm

Closed on Monday & Public Holidays

Email: [info@39-plus.com](mailto:info@39-plus.com)  
Telephone/WhatsApp: +65 97760403