

The Process of an Artist: Wei Meng in Dialogue



Rantau Abang II • 2008 • 129.5cm x 162.5cm • Acrylic on Canvas



Rantau Abang • 2008 • 129.5cm x 162.5cm • Acrylic on Canvas



Gong Balai • 2008 • 129.5cm x 162.5cm • Acrylic on Canvas

On a hot Wednesday afternoon, I had the privilege to talk to Chen Wei Meng. This soft-spoken and somewhat shy artist is unassuming and down-to-earth. The 44 year old asserted himself as a painter, proclaiming at the same time that he is not a philosopher. During the course of the dialogue, his passion and dedication to painting was clearly evident. What makes this artist stand out is his dedication to the craft of art making. Strongly focused in his direction and objective as an artist, one can feel his intensity in confabulation. In his embarkation on the journey to depict naturalism in the paintings, his aim went beyond the intention to create photo realist images. Viewers who see Wei Meng's actual art works would undoubtedly be drawn into the landscape depictions. Canvases of different sizes portray highly detailed natural landscapes, which ooze with a definite sense of peace and serenity. Yet, there is something more. Enraptured as I was, the question that came to mind was the artist's choice of subject matter and concept. The works being aesthetically beautiful was in no doubt due to his competency in executing this genre of art. His painstaking process results in the low production of art works, averaging not more than a dozen pieces a year. Wei Meng is meticulous in creating perfection on every inch of the canvas. Yet, these are just the technical aspects of his work. How did his artistic journey begin and what prompted him to embark on this arduous mode of art making?

Wei Meng has a strong passion for travelling. Domestically, this avid traveller's destinations include the less trodden paths in the states of Perak, Selangor and Terengganu. Departing from the comforts and accessibility of big cities, he chose instead to delve into the unbeaten tracks of towns and villages. My initial thoughts of the artist getting away from the hustle and bustle of city life, in attempts to find peace and solitude in the serenity of the villages or outskirts for his artistic practice was incorrect. He wanted to fulfill his interest in exploring different places, whilst capturing the essence of the natural terrain. This interest to backpack in search of the unknown stemmed from his younger days in Europe. Currently based in Kuala Lumpur, Wei Meng is especially fond of Terengganu, his birth place. Reminiscing about the serenity and beauty of the place not found elsewhere, he spent a decade travelling around the state. It should be noted that the artist initially garnered interest and motivation for his paintings from his (at times wanton) travels. The ramification is an encyclopaedic knowledge of the natural terrain filled with many details overlooked by other people. Wei Meng also recalls about his childhood in this state. The atmosphere, feeling and understanding being very much different then, when compared to the visits he has made as an adult. Intensive studies and analysis resulted in the discovery and appreciation for the beatific sceneries transferred onto the paintings. In his own words, the artist says that,

*"At times i would drive around. Of course, I am sourcing for material to paint. However, I am primarily enjoying the view and the scenery. It is not as if I must get images for painting. It all depends on the mood and feeling."*¹

Sometimes he would drive and stay at a spot for hours, or the whole day. This has resulted in many 'favoured spots'



Rhu Tapai • 2008 • 45.5cm x 96.5cm • Acrylic on Canvas

in different locations. Looking at the vast and panoramic canvases in front of us during the course of dialogue, one would be hard pressed to pinpoint the localities within the paintings. It should be remembered that Wei Meng made a study of the entire state, which included touristic and not so popular sites. Many of these obscure places thus feature in the art works. He has in fact received feedback that many of these landscapes or seascapes could not possibly be found in Malaysia.

During his excursions in Terengganu, Wei Meng would sketch voraciously in his 'Visual Diary' and take a huge number of photographs. The artist has accumulated a significant number of sketches throughout the course of time and many of these sketches and photographs are not yet developed. Incidentally, the snapshots were taken in his trusty 38mm film camera, which is manually adjustable. Many panoramic images were created by then joining multiple photos together. In this digital age, the artist prefers to adhere to the older method of photo taking. By doing so, he has the liberty of getting new feelings and emotions by looking at the freshly developed images. This experiential process was crucial to the perception and visual development of the artist. Such is his attachment and affinity to the land, that Wei Meng wanted to capture the essence of the land by painting from his heart and mind. He would not consider the *plein-air* method of painting. By doing that, he would have resembled the Impressionist painters. Monet painted a similar subject matter at different periods of the day. It is not Wei Meng's intention to do that. He is not interested in capturing depictions as it is, his paintings reflect much more than the study of paint and light.

When he paints, Wei Meng's mind is in an absolute blank state. The painterly experience and process encapsulates him entirely.

Indeed, the artist has infused the paintings with strong feelings, emotions and memories of the place (Terengganu). This process involves the artist's eyes and instinctive nature in the navigation of paint, space and planar surface. The completed works are charged with sentimental attachments transcending the simple images of landscape featured in the photographs. Wei Meng is ensconced in this portrayal deep from his heart, without being influenced by other sources. The artist is well aware of political, economical, social and cultural issues embraced by other artists. He does not discard the importance of such pertinent issues. Rather, he prefers to concentrate on the enjoyment of painting. Wei Meng says that,

*"I'm painting a subject matter that excites me. Before I show anyone else my work, the piece should first and foremost satisfy me."*²

Perhaps it would be insightful to look into the process of his painting methodology. Wei Meng has 3 stages in which he views his process. Firstly, he would acquaint himself with the environment on-site. It is in fact many hours of intense study of the natural surroundings. This is followed by the photo taking. Secondly, he would compare the developed photos to the feelings he felt in the earlier stage. Thirdly, he would use the photographs only as a reference. The crux of his paintings lies in his audacity not to copy the photograph apple for apple. Wei Meng was adamant that the photographic images become a starting point. However, certain elements would be integrated into the paintings where he deemed fit. Some of these elements, be it bushes, clouds or stones were due to his excessive study of form, from his younger days. This says the artist, is his style.

The development of Wei Meng's paintings is worth analysing, albeit it's few short years. His development and maturity has resulted in less 'graphical' depictions of form and details. He is at this moment more concerned with the overall projection of the art work. The subject matter is treated with more consideration to details and space. Responding to the question of how he wants viewers to perceive his artworks, Wei Meng looks at me nonchalantly and says that,

*"It is up to the viewers to make their own interpretations. I do not want to influence them with my opinions."*³

two three six is the inaugural participation of Chen Wei Meng at Wei-Ling Gallery. This solo exhibition is an exciting documentation of his vigorous travels, memories and attachment to the land. Nature, in Wei Meng's paintings is highly complex and lyrical.

Kelvin Chuah

two three six (236 kilometers) is the coastal line of the state of Terengganu from the North to the South of Peninsula Malaysia.

Footnotes

¹Personal interview with Wei Meng on 6 May 2009

²Ibid

³Ibid



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