



Dust and the Silence in the Sun
Cheong Kiet Cheng

Wei-LingGallery

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2018 UOB Painting of the Year (Malaysia) winner

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Supported by



Dust and the Silence in the Sun

A Solo Exhibition of Cheong Kiet Cheng

2018 UOB Painting of the Year (Malaysia) winner

“I’m into meditation these days because it helps me delve into a state of emptiness and mindfulness, which enables me to enjoy the present with a pure heart. I feel blessed when the universe is in harmony with us. With something as simple as my gaze into the sun’s morning rays, I see glittering dust floating in the air and beaming at the balcony. I treasure these lucid moments where, in silence, I wake with the universe.”

Above was Cheong’s statement when I was visiting her studio home in early July 2019. She gave me an insight on why the exhibition was titled as it was. Further along in our conversation, she continued to clarify her daily challenges of art-making:

“My daily routine is centred around my two young daughters. As my husband (also an artist, Hoo Kew Hang) works a steady job, I have to manage domestic duties independently and try my best to pursue my passions at the same time. In balancing between reality and dreams, I find time after sending my two toddlers off to nursery every weekday morning. After this task, I would spread out my canvases on the floor near the windows, letting the sun rays lay on the empty white space, and slowly but surely fill them all effortlessly with my ArtLine pen. My drawing process mimics embroidery – its continuous thread sews together different elements of nature. I keep moving, drawing one line and another without a pause. My visions flow and flourish on my canvas. My process is meditative and my outcome is magical. I could do it eternally.”

I remember my last encounter with Cheong in 2017 when I curated the 101 women artists show at the National Art Gallery. Cheong sent in a painting

entitled *Here I Am* (2017), which was a full-scale self-portrait. The painting showed Cheong barefoot, standing still in an unconventional yet relaxed and confident position, the front of her bare-skinned body facing the audience. She appeared like an angel spreading her wings, her breasts covered with feathers, her enchanting fiery aura complemented by her spiky hair, and her two smiley eyes looking far above eye level, sparkling and flawless. Below, her tummy is covered with mystical clouds, anonymous faces, flora and fauna, and a baby lying near her left foot. The demigoddess portrait exuded strength and self-empowerment, contrasting the background’s dry and rocky landscape. The way Cheong dignifies her body and forcefully confronts the viewer through her painting is tremendously mesmerising, like a phoenix rising from ashes, manifesting a refreshing new energy of her life.

The following year, Cheong’s large scale work entitled *Through the Eye of Flower* (2018) won the UOB Painting of the Year (Malaysia). This piece was a result of her new artistic approach of ink drawing on canvas. Shortly after, she was selected for the prestigious UOB-Fukuoka Asian Art Museum Artists Residency Programme in 2018. ‘*Dust and The Silence in the Sun*’ exhibition aims to display her new series of drawings produced both during and after her month-long residency in Fukuoka. Cheong uses her consciousness of the universe to employ her distinctive and subtle approach, shifting away from colours impelled by ink drawing that she had previously been drawn to. In this black and white series, the artist focuses on stories that are reminiscent of the life journey of her daughters and herself. Before drawing, she roughly marks the new composition based just on memory. Once she begins drawing her central subject, the other images would grow around it like a mind-map, each

line marked like the chain of a story and so, the imageries in each painting are both interconnected and infinite.

Throughout Cheong's art journey, she reveals her great love towards nature and her family. Through her artworks, every piece of land she has explored or adventured is turned into a utopia, where she tries to retrieve old memories of the earth beyond any existing reference. Cheong uses modern myths and symbols as analogies in her work. Therefore, her works speak loudly despite her simple objective, that is, to portray pure happiness. It is great to witness Cheong's courage in art making despite the challenges of maternity. The themes surrounding womanhood ought to be reviewed from the perspective of women artists, and through a historical narrative. These themes should not be excluded from central discourses, as they show the real conditions of women in a politically, economically and socially systemised structure.

Tan Hui Koon

Curator of the National Visual Arts Development Board
Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia
August 2019

Dust and the Silence in the Sun

"I believe that everyone has their own path towards reaching a peaceful state of mind. Mine is achieved through the meditative process of drawing."

When interviewed, "zen" was the first quality that Cheong Kiet Cheng brought up to characterise her new series and exhibition, *'Dust and the Silence in the Sun'*. Whereas her previous works consisted mostly of colourful acrylic painting, this latest body of work introduces a technique of ink drawing on canvas and is predominantly monochromatic. The earliest piece to which she applied this technique, *Through the Eye of Flower* (2018) won the 2018 UOB Painting of the Year (Malaysia). Despite the new approach, her work is still centralised around the themes of family and nature.

Cheong admits that lately, she has spent a lot of her time focusing on meditation, which, according to the Cambridge Dictionary is a process of "giving your attention to only one thing, as a way of becoming more calm and relaxed." When drawing, her mind would flow automatically like a river, and so does the tip of her pen as it dances mindfully on her canvas – a process that feels endless yet relieving. It is believed that the word Zen itself came from the Chinese word "Chán", which literally translates as "quietude". Juggling between her role as an artist and a mother, Cheong cherishes the tranquil moment that she would spend alone making her work, after taking care of her two daughters.

Over many decades, writers and philosophers have also sought to comprehend the purpose of art. In *What is Art?* (1897), Russian thinker Leo Tolstoy describes how art making provides "a bridge of empathy between us and

others”, whereas French essayist Anaïs Nin views art as a way to “exorcise our emotional excess,” as described in *The Diary of Anaïs Nin 1931 – 1934* (1977). However, the way Cheong views her practise is closest to how American writer Susan Sontag considers art as “a form of consciousness”, which was suggested in her 2012 collection of essays *Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980*.

Later on, Sontag affirms in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969) that “every era has to reinvent the project of “spirituality” for itself” and that “in the modern era, one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project is ‘art.’ ” To Cheong, finding a moment to disconnect from her daily routine by immersing herself in her creation is a therapeutic experience; it is a form of mystification.

Through the first essay of the book, entitled ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’, Sontag elaborates how artists use the power of silence – an experience attained through the process of art making – to become more conscious of their own state of emotion. As she stated, “Silence is the artist’s ultimate other-worldly gesture.” In accomplishing our daily life tasks, it is not rare that we get caught up in the mundane. This is where art would serve as a way to detach, reflect and remind ourselves of the happiness life brings – a moment of being grateful.

To Sontag, silence also serves as vehicle of communication for certain artists: “Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech.” The absence of colours in Cheong’s drawings imbue an aura of silence, at the same time serves as a tool to convey her true feelings to the audience. Silence becomes a tool of

coveying emotion, flowing from the artist’s heart to the tip of her pen, and all the way until it reaches the audience’s sight. It is, as Cheong describes, a meditative experience. Sontag states:

“To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling — this is the activity of art.”

As part of Cheong’s new series are five round canvases. The choice of this format is not merely aesthetic, rather serves as a symbol of the cycle of life. Cheong questions what actually shapes the world we live in. By interrelating various living creatures in one frame, she came to realise that the universe constitutes of different elements that co-exist. Everything runs in circles, turning together in the same direction and at the same time.

Where and how do we human beings place ourselves in the cycle? To Cheong, the difference between humans and the rest of the creatures in the planet, is our ability to create. As the Irish poet Oscar Wilde points out in his philosophical novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), “the artist is the creator of beautiful things,” and that is simply what Cheong intends to achieve, as a form of expression of her great love towards nature and family.

Through the piece *Tree of Life* (2019), Cheong illustrates a tree as a whole; its wild roots allow the growth of a solid trunk that supports an ecosystem. Akin to the role of a mother, a tree is life giving. *A Song for You and Me* (2019) and

Encounter of the Islands I (2019) are portraits of the artist's elder daughter, whereas *Encounter of the Islands II* (2019) is of her younger daughter; two very important figures in her life.

Chasing the Sun (2019) is an auto portrait of the artist. Staring at the sky, there is a sense of positivity that is projected from her eyes, as if looking forward to a bright future. Looking closer into the details of this work, one would notice her technique of personification. What seemed to be merely rocks are actually mythical creatures in disguise. The piece *Origin* (2019) is another example of how she adopts myths and symbols in her work. It was accomplished as her attempt of learning and discovering Japanese culture, prior to her 2018 UOB-Fukuoka Asian Art Museum Artists Residency Programme. The drawing features the different gods and goddesses in Japan's ancient mythology, and highlights the divine couple Izanami (In Japanese: she who invites) and Izunagi (In Japanese: he who invites), who, in this illustration can be seen holding a spear. According to the Kojiki mythology, the couple had a principal role in creating the islands of Japan and are parents to the gods and goddesses of the sun, the moon, the wave, and all others.

Another major work, *Train to Neptune* (2019) features her daughter in the center of the piece, with rabbits as creatures that she loves dearly, floating above her head. On the left side of the canvas is the artist herself. A colorful smoky substance flows from her mouth across the canvas, embracing her daughter and all the way to planet Neptune. The illustration is metaphor to the artist's infinite and enjoyable journey of raising her daughter. Enriched by the presence of other fauna surrounding them and completed with

alluring details, Cheong regards motherhood as a challenging yet marvelous experience.

The title '*Dust and the Silence in the Sun*' sums it all: more than ever, through the pensive process of drawing, the artist has learnt to be conscious of the little things that life offers. As she draws, the world suddenly becomes silent, as if offering an exclusive moment only for her and her art. As the sun peeks through her windows and on to her canvas, dust is seen floating in the air, and all of a sudden, a peaceful aura fills up the room. All of the slightest details in her surrounding contribute in shaping an introspective moment that leads her to comprehend the beauty of life. As the British philosophers Alain de Botton and John Armstrong suggest in *Art As Therapy* (2013), "art is a tool that can variously help to inspire, console, redeem, guide, comfort, expand and reawaken us." All of these facets of art seem to be manifested in Cheong's practise, but most importantly, this series has served as her means of reawakening. Through portrayals of family members, depictions of flora and fauna, and representations using myths and symbols, the realities of life are metamorphosed into imagined worlds, and transformed into exquisite works of art.

"In realising this series, I have found joy and inner peace. Like all other things that matter, art became inseparable to my life."

Amanda Ariawan

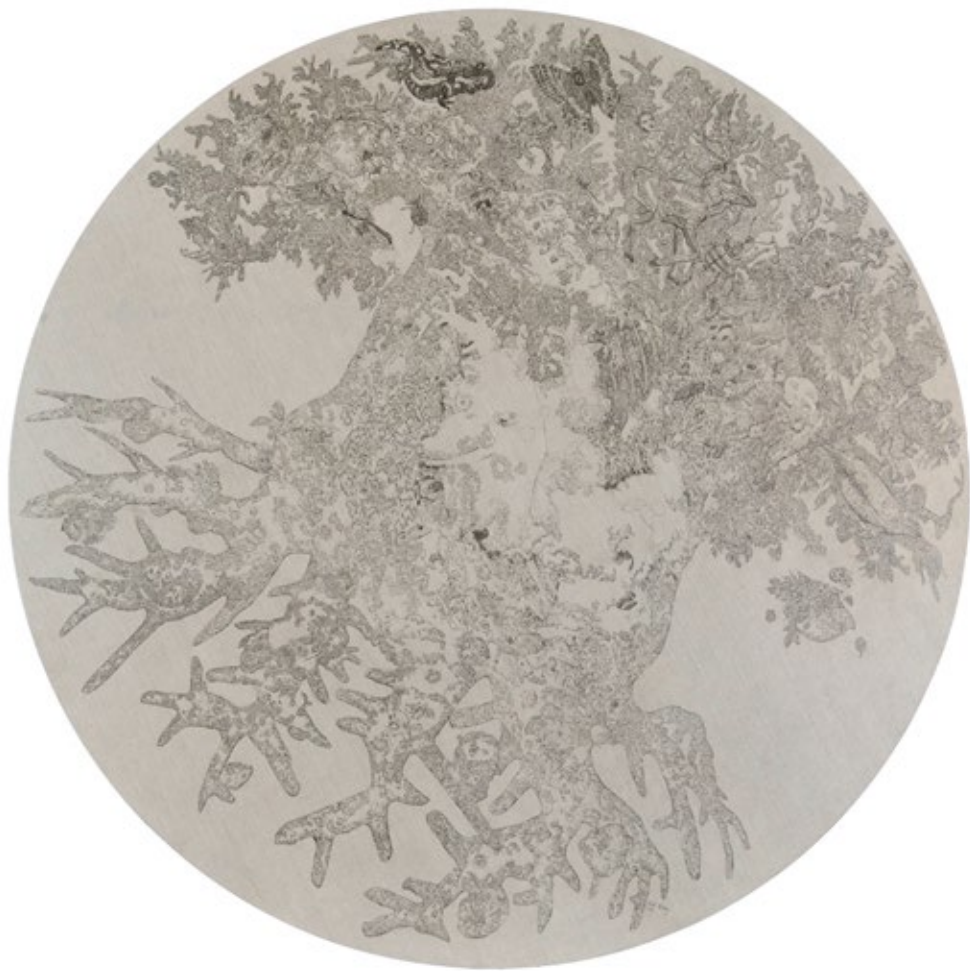
Writer

August 2019

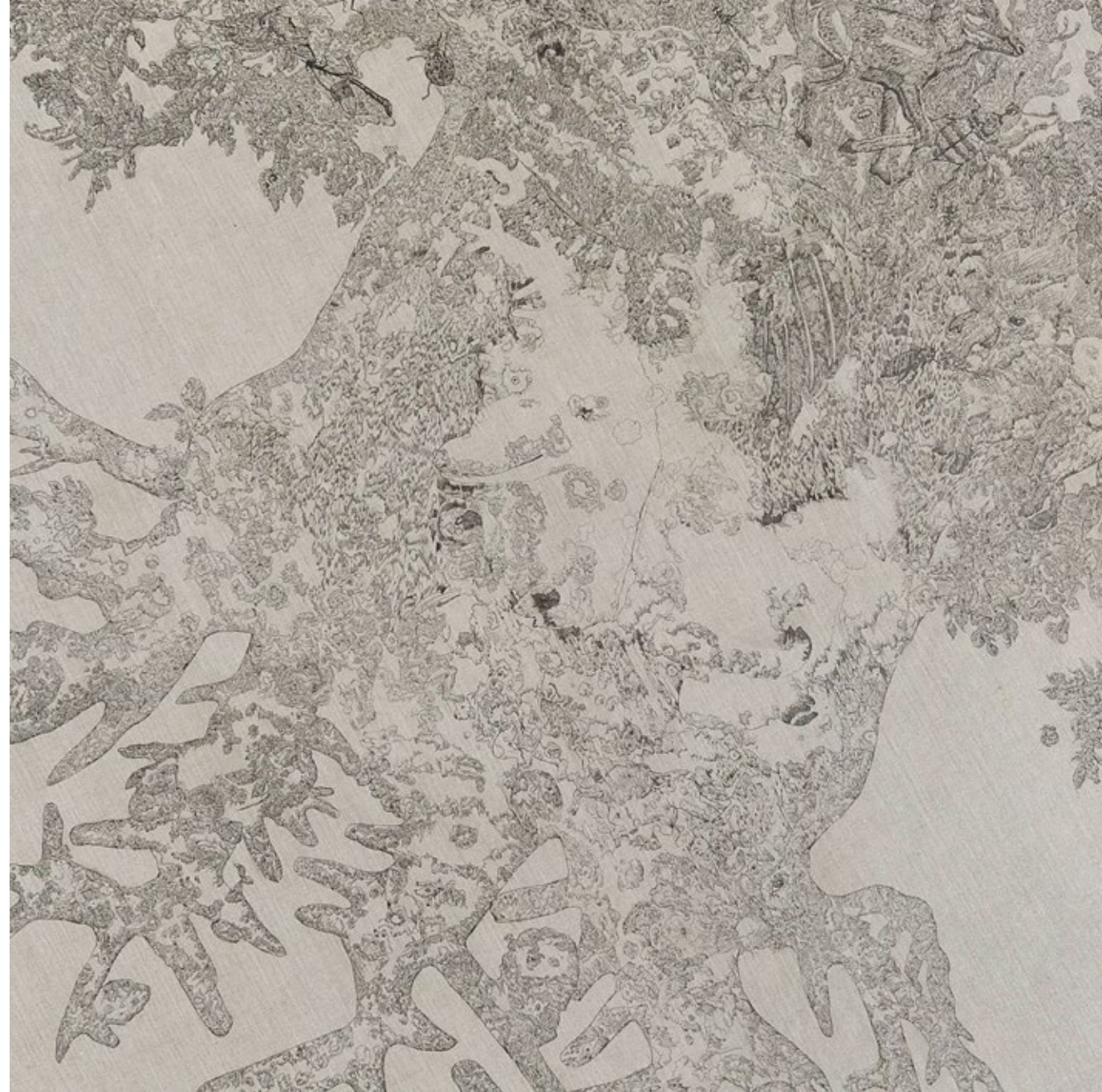


Chasing The Sun (2019) | Ink on canvas; 150cm diameter





Tree of Life (2019) | Ink on canvas; 150cm diameter





A song for you and me (2019) | Ink on canvas; 150cm diameter





Encounter of the Islands I (2019) | Ink on canvas; 90cm diameter



Encounter of the Islands II (2019) | Ink on canvas; 90cm diameter



Train to Neptune (2019) | Mixed media on canvas; 140cm x 158cm



Train to Neptune (Close up)



Origin (2019) | Ink of canvas; 86cm x 155cm



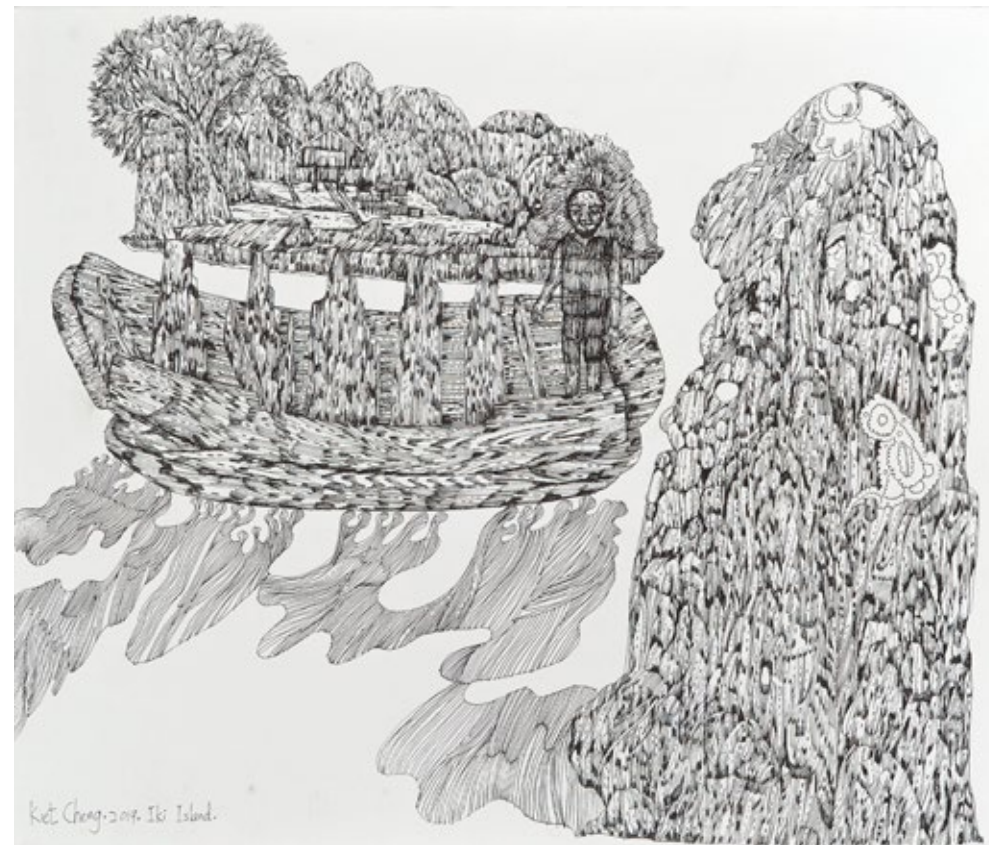
Origin (Close up)



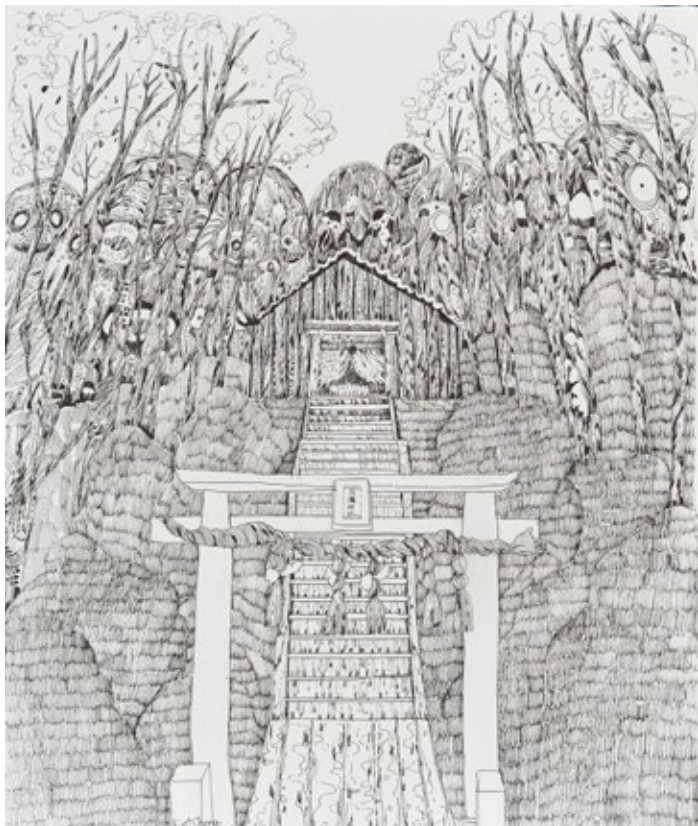
Origin (Close up)



Encounter of the Islands III (2019) | Ink on canvas; 24cm x 33cm



The Creation of Sailing (2019) | Ink on canvas; 38cm x 45cm



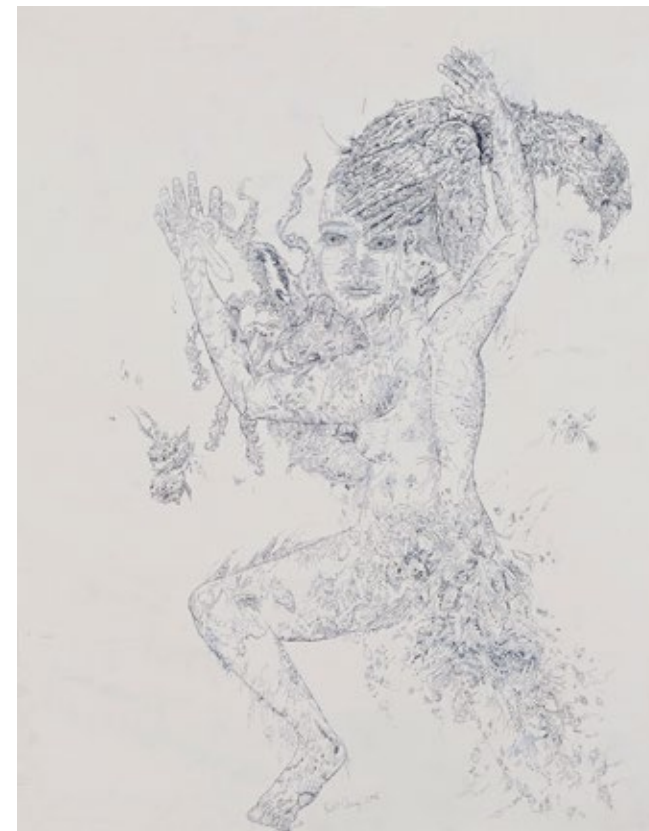
The Gods (2019) | Ink on canvas; 45cm x 38cm



Wild Flower (2019) | Ink on canvas; 41cm x 32cm



The Island (2019) | Ink on canvas; 24cm x 33cm



The octopus encompasses (2018) | Ink on canvas; 110cm x 85cm



Riverstones (2018) | Ink on canvas; 110cm x 85cm



As I watched the dawn (2018) | Ink on canvas; 110cm x 85cm



The Bird Squeaked Today (2018) | Ink on canvas; 110cm x 85cm

UOB and Art

United Overseas Bank Limited (UOB) is a leading bank in Asia with a global network of more than 500 branches and offices in 19 countries and territories in Asia Pacific, Europe and North America. The Bank has had a presence in Malaysia since 1951 and incorporated United Overseas Bank (Malaysia) Bhd (UOB Malaysia) in 1993.

Just as the Bank is dedicated to helping its customers manage their finances wisely and to grow their businesses, UOB is steadfast in its support of the social and economic development of local communities. Guided by its values, UOB contributes to local communities holistically through philanthropy, partnerships and employee participation, and by being inclusive. Its programmes connect people, strengthen bonds and enrich lives through art, children and education.

The UOB Painting of the Year (POY) Competition underscores UOB's commitment to support the development of art across Southeast Asia, including in Malaysia. Started in Singapore in 1982 and launched in Malaysia in 2011, the POY Competition is one of the most recognised art competitions in the region. It is held annually in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

For more information on the UOB Painting of the Year Competition, visit www.UOBPOY.com. For further information on UOB Malaysia, visit www.UOB.com.my.

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CHEONG KIET CHENG (B.1981)

EDUCATION

- 2006 Diploma in Fine Art, Dasein Academy of Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2002 Certificate in Journalism, Hang Xing Academy of Journalism, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Certificate in Basic Photography Course, PCP Art of Photography, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2003 Certificate in Drama Acting Course (Pin Stage)

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 Dust and the Silence in the Sun, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2017 Between two hills- the chorus of life, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2015 Sing to the land of my heart, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2013 Jojo in the Wonderland, MAP – White Box, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
With Two Solo, Paradise of Gods by Hoo Kiew Hang

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 Art Jakarta, JCC Senayan, Indonesia
- 2018 Art Jakarta 2018, The Ritz-Carlton Jakarta, Pacific Place, Jakarta, Indonesia
Art Stage Singapore 2018, Marina Bay Sands, Singapore
- 2017 Through Rose-Tinted Glasses, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
The 101 Women Show, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
Group Show Art Expo Matrade, A2 Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- 2016 Intellectual, 3rd Nanjing International Art Festival, Baijia Lake Museum, Nanjing, China

- Shanghai M50 Emerging Artist Exhibition 2016, Shanghai, China
- 2016 Malaysia Art Expo 2016, Matrade, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2015 Nanjing International Art Festival 2015, China
- 2013 Young and New Part IV, HOM Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Malaysian Philippines Contemporary Art Exhibition, Mutiara Gallery, Penang, Malaysia
Measuring love, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2011 VAA – Visual Art Award, Starhill Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2010 ‘Self Conflict, Social Cohesion’, Malaysia Tourism Centre (MaTiC), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Malaysian Vietnamese Contemporary Art Exhibition, Mutiara Gallery, Penang
Asia Art Link, Phillipines
- 2009 Iskandar Malaysia Contemporary Art Show, Johor Bahru, Malaysia
Global Warning-e11even, a2 Gallery, Penang, Malaysia
Reborn group exhibition, a2 Gallery, Penang, Malaysia
Art Expo group show, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2008 Global Warming Group Exhibition, a2 Gallery, Penang, Malaysia
No Big Size Group Exhibition, Findars Space, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2005 Upstart 05: The NOKIA Creative Arts Awards Exhibition, ARTrageously Ramsay Ong-The Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Pameran Terbuka Malaysia, National Art Visual Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2004 Upstart 04: The NOKIA Creative Arts Awards Exhibition, ARTrageously Ramsay Ong-The Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ART RESIDENCY

- 2018 UOB-Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (FAAM) Artists Residency Programme, Fukuoka, Japan
- 2012 Art-Residency in Sasaran Art Foundation, Selangor, Malaysia

AWARDS

- 2018 UOB Painting of the Year (Malaysia)
- 2016 Creative M50 Awards, Shanghai, China
- 2015 Nanjing International Art Festival Competition bronze prize, China
- 2013 Finalist of Bakat Muda Sezaman, The Young Contemporaries '13, National Art Visual Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2011 Finalist VAA – Visual Art Award, Starhill Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2006 2nd Prize, Water Color Category, Tanjong Public Limited Company
- 2005 Finalist Upstart 05: The NOKIA Creative Arts Adwards Exhibition, ARTrageously Ramsay Ong-The Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2004 Finalist Upstart 04: The NOKIA Creative Arts Adwards Exhibition, ARTrageously Ramsay Ong-The Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



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Cover image



A song for you and me (2019)

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