

New Landscapes (2010) – Chin Kong Yee

In the few pages I have, I am less interested in reading Chin Kong Yee's individual works or his artistic intent and explanation, but rather want to engage his strategies that are in operation in the ways he constructs 'landscape' and 'cityscape'. Throughout his career over the last decade, Kong Yee has demonstrated a continuous interest in ways of representing places, which show a tension and oscillation between engagement and detachment. This partly entails the ways in which he evokes the individual experience of the landscape and the city, and of making a picture that refers to a specific moment in time, while also being open enough to other individual experiences related to it. At once, the artist arrests the living world, making it into a still world of objects under the artist's control, while also making the appearance of a world in topsy-turvy motion. He does this by constructing his landscapes and cityscapes out of collaged, photographed moments, memories. His works are the artist's attempts to represent and embody the simultaneity of past, present, future times in one space.

In terms of 'landscape' as a form of mediation, Chin Kong Yee taps into a tradition of painting that in Malaysia combined both Western and Chinese conceptions of 'landscape', in which modern Malaysian painters depicted the so-called 'local' environs, the peaceful villages, the vast fields, mountains, seaside, and city life. Such landscapes tended toward the idyllic, as desired through an exoticizing gaze of the urban artist. While this combined modern and ancient tradition of landscape painting is present in his work as possible legacy, Kong Yee's works present a different kind of engagement with the 'landscape' and 'cityscape'; one that is made possible through technologies of reproduction and digital manipulation, translated into paint on canvas.

By suturing together a sequence of images of a place taken from a number of angles, Kong Yee attempts to visually convert time into space, to capture in paint the passage of time and the simultaneity of past, present and future time. Inasmuch as this suggests continuity and the endless unfolding of time in space, it carries a kind of visual discord and disorientation as

well. The eye is forced to move all the time due to the many viewpoints. As the perspective moves, so too does the eye, and, in the words of David Hockney in discussing what he calls 'reverse perspective', "as the eye moves through time you begin to convert time into space." As one moves, the forms and lines in Chin Kong Yee's work also move. This is particularly the case in those works for which he has reproduced the perspective of the fish-eye lens in paint. Not only does such a view distort the appearance of reality but creates a kind of claustrophobic space through which the viewing eye is constantly in motion, yet has few areas through which to escape the centrifugal force of the artist's spatial framing.

Such an effect of visual discord and disorientation, particularly in his cityscapes, is enhanced by his use of colour and multiple viewpoints. His palette is bright, made of high key primary and complimentary colours, producing a visual energy, a movement, a highly charged vibration that in a way seems to reflect the energies of the city, of its sights and sounds. Again, perhaps, taking a page from one of his inspirations, the work of David Hockney, Chin Kong Yee emphasizes his own reflexivity as artist by signalling his necessary presence by including his feet (the artist's 'footprint, visible trace) or his shadow in the photographed and then painted image. Rather than seen as accidents of the amateur 'snapshot', Kong Yee emphasizes these moments and devices of presence, thus deliberately making his role in constructing the landscape apparent, often providing the most obvious temporal element. He is both participant and observer.

In his work, Kong Yee combines the 'snapshot' device with the panoramic view as a medium in constructing 'landscape'. The photographic and painted panorama was historically a vehicle of personal and social fantasy, an escape from the spatial, temporal, and social limitations of people's lives. They were the canvases upon which people projected their hopes and fantasies of an era. The history of the panoramic view itself is part of the history and ideologies of the Western landscape. Inherent in the panoramic image are notions of virtual travel, immersion, and the imagination of foreign places that are then made exotic through mediation, through representation. Chin Kong Yee seems to tap directly into such operative strategies inherent in the historical panorama, as well as its exotic content. The artist, much like the panorama

photographers of the late 19th century, reconstructs the landscape of 'exotic' places, and in the artist's case, this could include his cityscapes photographed during his travels in Europe and Asia. For example, his Taiping Lake Gardens series suggests a degree of exoticization of the landscape, constructed through high key greens, rich and deep blues used to construct depopulated, pristine shores, the delicacy of the leaning palm, and breeze-swept bamboo.

The sense of nostalgia is of course often a key element in landscape and the panoramic view. Nostalgia is a way of seeing and interpreting the world when that 'world' is on the verge of disappearing and irretrievable except through memory. Nostalgia carries with it notions of historical change and is predicated on a rupture in remembered experience, an experience that can only be revisited in images. Nostalgia, while taking the past as its lost subject, also keeps that which has been lost at arm's distance. Chin Kong Yee emphasizes this element of arm's distance in the nostalgic view of a place by way of the fractured and collaged image, the varied angles brought into one slightly off-kilter, surreal space, the rearrangement of reality as recorded in a photograph or moment remembered. His structured landscapes seem to speak of nostalgia as it constitutes what it cannot possess, and defines itself by the inability to approach its subject. It is premised on a fundamental break with the past; a past that can be recorded as memory in the (now digital) image, but the image can never be the real thing. Perhaps the series that best demonstrates the nostalgic view is his Taiping Lake Gardens. The images in this series are based on a specific place that itself was constructed out of a nostalgic view to the past.

In "New Landscapes" Kong Yee continues to use the panoramic image and breaks its surface into diptychs or two panel works. He does this in such a way that further plays with the artifice of the image and his role in producing it. In his *Lagos - Golden Path / Sea, Sunset in Tanahlot / Green Rocks and Spring in La Forge / Spring*, the components (panels) of the landscape can be moved and rearranged sideways, and in the case of *Taiping Lake Gardens*, from top to bottom as well. Thus, according to the artist, with every re-arrangement a new landscape is possible and gives over a certain level, albeit rather limited, of control to the collector in choosing the arrangement.

The above operative strategies at work and play in Chin Kong Yee's work, and particularly this new body of work, give the notion of 'landscape' and 'cityscape' a critical edge in contemporary painting in Malaysia.

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