



THE URBAN ABYSS

Wong Chee Meng

Wei-Ling Gallery

My interest lies in the investigation of image-making through additive transformation and subtractive transformation. These works are inspired by all forms of image-making, which magically weave random subjects into imbricate creations. Art has a strange presence in our daily lives. It happens anytime and anywhere, where some of us do not recognize it or are even aware of its presence. In this series of paintings, I have tried to respond to the current social events in fictional composition on board surface, deeper expanding on urban art and the character and quality of art in the local art panorama. Currently, my work is essentially image-play that is stimulated from paper cutting art and stencil art. Why did I become so passionate with these methods? Paper cutting and stencil art are interesting methods and could be a manner to present art today. The method is like an eyewitness from advertised design to urban art and it provides an aesthetic timeless piece to the audience. From time to time, these methods have been rediscovered after a period of inflexible art period and once again invited back into our homes. At the same time, these methods respond directly to my works capturing a result of the remodelling of paper cutting and stencil art images into my new series.

With the intention to explore and develop the possibilities of the 'remixed cultures' in my work, these paintings are composed with three visual surfaces through contemporary artistic execution. It crosses over two visual strategies of unconventional line cuts on a working surface. A mix of a hard-edged painting approach with dramatic figurative reinterpretation to show the complex meanings I wish to reflect. On top of that, the imbricate compositions with a mixture of urban-culture visual representations show the dense information/hidden message throughout this period.

I wish to provide a gift for people to witness this unexceptional combination through paper cut effects and I encourage the viewers to look beyond and decipher the material, techniques and message.

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An Visual Abyss to Uncover

Wong Chee Meng's preoccupation of late has been on technique. His latest works were born from methodical approaches in the studio, where he lay his focus on transformations born from additions and subtractions. Paint was systematically added along every step of the process, elements were removed, and new images were formed by his hand.

Looking back

This sort of approach isn't foreign to the artist, whose entire oeuvre can be characterized by a very structured form of painting. In his earliest works, grids and overlapping imagery played a strong role, and these qualities are clearly revisited in his latest output.

Despite there being a very obvious precedence to Chee Meng's current body of work, it has actually taken the artist quite some time to arrive at this point. The development for this series – its ideas, sketches, and research – began right after his second solo exhibition. That was almost five years ago. "If you compare my previous works, I would say it is now more complicated in terms of the process of development. I've been more conscious about everything this time," explains the artist.

The artist's sketches and studies backup this argument; elaborate mental processes and very precise points of inspiration are all indicative of Chee Meng's increasingly methodical approach to painting. (A close-up of Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* can be seen among the artist's preparatory studies, for example.) And, in some studies, you'll even note the grids that the artist used to map out his final works, and how every single hue or element is allocated its own spot in the final masterpiece. Nothing has been coincidental, to say the least.

Blending the past and the present

Still, Chee Meng's finished works are the real show-stealers in *The Urban Abyss*. In each horizontally-skewed painting, like a final performance born from months of rehearsals, paint finds its crescendo and all the paintings' elements seem suspended in time, like the final note played by an orchestra

that still lingers in an auditorium. These references aren't too far fetched, either, as Chee Meng's subject matter lie in history, myth, and allegory – themes predominantly found in paintings of yore. Indeed, the works of Caravaggio were the biggest influence this time around. "When I was thinking again and again on my keywords, some images seemed to pop-up suddenly in my mind, and most of them were Caravaggio's. I was also looking for the answer as to why his paintings? Why him? Then I realized that his tensions, gestalt, and vivid expressions were just too attractive to me, and most importantly, I stated to see the link with what I wanted to say. So, I revisited his paintings, and then I transformed them into my compositions. The new compositions thus consist of remixed and recomposed images," says Chee Meng.

The artist admits that Caravaggio's works do lend themselves to highly exaggerated and dramatic forms of storytelling. And, it was precisely these climatic instances or bouts of tension that Chee Meng required to tell his own stories. But what exactly are Chee Meng's stories about? Despite the antiquated references in his works, the artist's paint actually hides layers and layers of responses to our contemporaneous existence: social development, freedom, temptation, culture, and revolution are just some of the themes that the artist touches upon in this series, and every layer or mark made represents a reaction from the artist.

"Based on those 'keys', I composed and recomposed my layouts as I was responding to those issues. Those specific images were used because those subjects represent the issues, create the 'conversations', and explain my thoughts in visual form. In short, I tried to search for 'what I want to tell', then 'how I tell'" says Chee Meng.

Exploring within

Chee Meng's 'image-play' – what the artist refers to his paintings as – also stem from the techniques found in paper-cutting and stencil art. "Paper-cutting and stencil art are interesting methods and could be a manner in which to present art today," he notes, arguing that audiences are highly familiar with these techniques, as we've all been exposed to them in our visual environment through advertising or urban art. "And from time to time, these methods have been rediscovered after a times of inflexible art periods, and once again invited back into our homes," he observes.

But with so many overlapping techniques and references, the actual information in Chee Meng's paintings isn't very apparent, and what is required of viewers is to explore the hidden meanings in each painting for themselves. Like visual puzzles, the elements are jumbled, disjointed, and pieced together, and it is therefore our task to reveal the meanings for ourselves. "I wish to provide a gift for people to witness this unexceptional combination through paper-cutting effects and I encourage the viewers to look beyond and decipher the material, techniques, and message," says the artist.

Analyzing Chee Meng's paintings will be fun. Visually-pleasing, without a shadow of a doubt, colour is another strong point and it's also an area that the artist has really capitalized on in his art. Works like *The Candy Machine* and *Men From the Island* are cacophonies of colour, and like his previous works, demonstrate a natural proclivity on the artist's part, in this area.

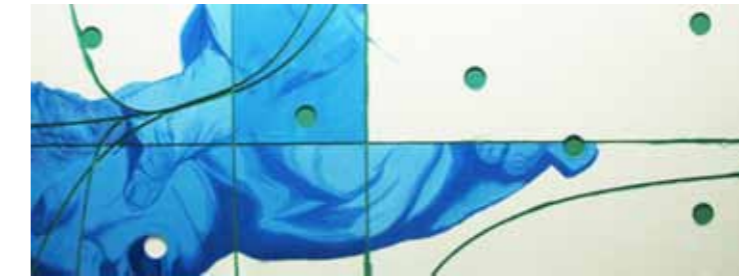
But focusing on this alone detracts from the power that Chee Meng's works have. If we had to take-away a lesson from *The Urban Abyss*, it would be in the references to the past. After all, allegorical paintings used to be regarded as lesson books for viewers. And, aren't the very lessons of themes like justice or freedom timeless? "I have heard people say that paintings are the representations of time and that works reveal its era. I do not know how accurate this saying is, but I have thought that some paintings created centuries ago or years ago are still very much like new pieces to me. I do believe that the new ones can be inspired by the old ones (past)," argues the artist. So, could Chee Meng's works be a lesson for us all, that we need to look back at the past in order to navigate the present? Perhaps.

With our country's sociopolitical side undergoing interesting transformations, the notion of examining myth and allegory – even those from Occidental history, and not necessarily our own – is paramount. May we understand the people that we are today, by gazing, as Chee Meng has done so well, at what once was.

Rachel Jenagaratnam
Kuala Lumpur
April, 2013

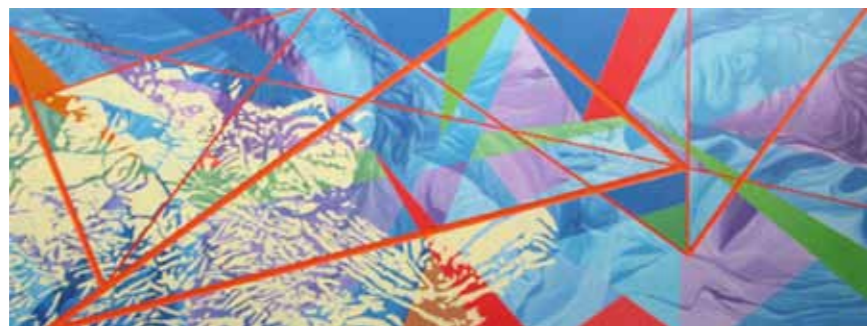
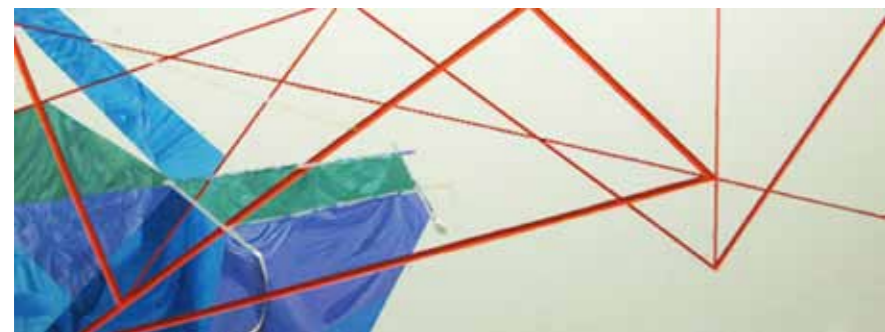
DEPRIVATION-OF-FREEDOM

Acrylic on MDF, 91 cm x 244 cm, 2013



MEN-FROM-THE-ISLAND

Acrylic on MDF, 91 cm x 244 cm, 2013



EMERGING

Acrylic on MDF, 91 cm x 244 cm, 2013



THE-BLUE-MELODY

Acrylic on MDF, 91 cm x 244 cm, 2013



Detail



SEQUENTIAL-FORCES

Acrylic on MDF, 91 cm x 244 cm, 2013



Detail



SPREADING-THE-FIELDS-OF-JUSTICE

Acrylic on MDF, 91 cm x 244 cm, 2013



THE-PEARL-DOLLS

Acrylic on MDF, 91 cm x 244 cm, 2013



ARTIST'S-BIOGRAPHY



Wong Chee Meng b. 1975

EDUCATION

- 2011 MA in International Contemporary Art and Design Practices, Limkokwing University of Creative Technology, Malaysia.
- 2006 Bachelor of Arts, Curtin University, Australia.
- 1996 Diploma in Fine Art, Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA), Malaysia

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 **THE URBAN ABYSS**, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 **18@8 KUL-SIN**, ION Art, Singapore
A DECADE OF COLLECTION FEATURING- BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS, Wei-Ling Gallery and Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
TRANSIT A4, HOM Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
SOUTHEAST ASIA ART GROUP EXCHANGED RESIDENCY (SAGER), Perahu art Connection Art Space, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
SOUTHEAST ASIA ART GROUP EXCHANGED RESIDENCY (SAGER), HOM Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2011 **ART CAGED**, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
WHAT'S YOUR PORN?, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
ABSOLUT 18@8, 'Safe the World' Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- 2010 **18@8, SAVE THE PLANET** Kuala Lumpur, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
A METER PERSPECTIVE, Matahati & Friends at HOM Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
MALAYSIA BOLEH, Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
ANNIVERSARY SHOW 2009/2010, Pace Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

- 2009 **ISKANDAR MALAYSIA CONTEMPORARY ART SHOW 2009 (IMCAS)**, Danga City Mall, Johor, Malaysia.
FAB 4, Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
ART SINGAPORE 2009, Singapore
- 2008 **INWARD**, Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
LOCALS ONLY, Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
PENINSULA & ISLAND, Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
EXHIBITION # 3, Artist in Residency Program Exhibition, One Menerung, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2007 **EXHIBITION # ONE**, Artist in Residency Program Exhibition at ABN AMRO Building, Penang, Malaysia
FORCE OF NATURE, Darling Muse, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
18@8 2007, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2006 **KATA DI KOTA: A Malaysia Exhibition of Contemporary Art in Cuba**: In conjunction with the 9th Havana Biennale 2006
MERDEKA SCULPTURE EXHIBITION, National Art Gallery, Malaysia.
FEED ME WWF Charity Show, Rimbun Dahan Art Gallery, Malaysia.
- 2005 **ANNIVERSARY SHOW**, Darling Muse, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- 2003 **THINKING SPACES**, Soka Gakai Tower, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
DO YOU NOTICE ME, Reka Art Space, Selangor, Malaysia
- 2002 **CHOW KIT FESTIVAL**, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- 2001 **MALAYSIA STILL LIFE**, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
OPEN SHOW 2001, National Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
CIVILIZATION DIALOGUE - INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION, Metro Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- 2000 **SAN**, a cash and carry art exhibition at Wan Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
LANGKAWI INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF ARTS (LIFA), Ibrahim, Hussien Museum, Langkawi, Malaysia.

- 1999 **HUMAN EXPRESSION**, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- 1998 **COMING TOGETHER**, Pelita Hati Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
GEMA: RESONANCE (MALAYSIA CONTEMPORARY ART EXHIBITION), Manes Gallery, Prague, Czech Republic
13th ASIAN INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION, National Art Gallery, Malaysia.
- 1997 **14 EXPRESSION**, Graduation Show, Malaysian Institute of Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
PEKAN SENI IPOH II, Town Hall, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia.
WU GROUP EXHIBITION, Wan Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
12th ASIAN INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION, Macau.
- 1996 **YOUNG TALENT 96**, Bank Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
CONSTRUCTION WORKSHOP, Malaysian Institute of Art, Kuala Lumpur.
MALAYSIAN YOUNG CONTEMPORARY 96, National Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

AWARDS

- 1997 Honorable Mention in "Philip Morris Malaysia Art Award"
- 1996 "Merit Award" in Malaysian Institute of Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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collectors and friends for all of your support to
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Thank you

-Chee Meng



Wei-Ling Gallery

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59200, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
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Cover Image : THE CANDY MACHINES Acrylic on medium-density fiberboard, 91.44 cm x 243.84 cm 2013
Back Image : THE CANDY MACHINES in progress..



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