



## ARTS ABROAD

The American Ballet Theatre kick-starts its calendar for the year with a magnificent production of Kevin McKenzie's new staging of *Swan Lake*. The romantic tale of ill-fated passion, mistaken identity and ultimate forgiveness will begin showing on Jan 25 at the John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington DC. *Swan Lake* will feature breathtaking choreography by McKenzie, set to Tchaikovsky's glorious score, and costumes by Zack Brown, all of which will transport viewers to a Renaissance court at a lakeside castle. For more information, visit [www.abt.org](http://www.abt.org).

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The arts at a glance

BY SHALINI YEAP



Artist Cheong Kiet Cheng's *A Poem of A Big Bang Existence* greets visitors to her latest solo exhibition, *Behind Two Hills – The Chorus of Life*, at Wei-Ling Gallery. It is a large, elaborate piece that makes me stop and stare.

This is the Malaysian contemporary artist's second solo exhibition with the gallery and the third of her career, but she has already chalked up a long list of group exhibitions in Malaysia, China and the Philippines. Similar to her last exhibition, *Sing to the land of my heart*, whimsical portrayals of people, animals and nature feature prominently in this one.

While Mother Nature still takes centre stage, Cheong says this time around, she also explores the laws of the universe where all beings go through the impermanent process of birth, ageing, sickness and death. The exhibition expounds the idea that although beauty is not forever, decay is not necessarily ugly and we must come to terms with transience and imperfection.

"*Sing to the land of my heart* concentrated more on my love for the environment and animals," says Cheong, who likes trekking, camping and other activities that involve being in a jungle. She and her husband Hoo Kiew Han, an artist himself, embark on these outdoor activities together around Kuala Lumpur, Sabah and Lombok in Indonesia.

*Behind Two Hills – The Chorus of Life* can be seen as the next chapter, conveying messages of creation, birthing and coming to life while recognising the role that one plays in the said processes. Almost all her paintings in this exhibition are set in a jungle or even an enchanted forest of sorts. Perhaps Cheong's love for nature stems from the environment of her childhood. She fondly recalls the kampung she grew up in, somewhere near Jalan Ampang that is now no more, having given way to development.

"I get my ideas from my jungle," says Cheong. This is almost immediately apparent in her work. "Each time I step into the forest, I am amazed at the wholeness of nature that God has given us. From there, I obtain the inspiration, ideas and love to create each work. Though we exist as creations of God, we also play a part in the creation of this world."

Fuelled by her drive to create, the artist is inspired by human interaction, the environment and daily life in general, which she describes as "bittersweet". According to her, this includes the most mundane of chores such as washing the dishes. "I make it a point to be present at all times and fully immerse myself in all



## The song in her soul

A Malaysian contemporary artist's reflections on life, her love for nature and motherhood

the moments of life. The deeper I go, the more inner peace I get."

But Cheong admits that this can be difficult, especially in this day and age where there is an almost obsessive need to remain connected through technology at all times. What then does she do when day-to-day living is filled with too many distractions? "I take some time – about an hour – to meditate. After that, I am ready to continue what I am doing and be present in terms of my mind and soul."

She comes across as a person who is deeply connected to her surroundings and this certainly translates into her paintings. I notice that many of her characters have wide eyes that portray a sense of innocence. She tells me that this was done deliberately to convey spirituality. "After all, the eyes are the windows to the soul."

Developing the theme of nature further, *Cecil the Lion* is Cheong's attempt to explore issues that affect the inhabitants of the jungle. It is a tribute to the lion that was shot dead by an

American dentist in 2015, an incident that caused worldwide outrage. "Cecil is now in paradise. This is how I tell the story," she says, demonstrating that through their craft, artists are story tellers in their own way.

*Springhead* is another painting that is close to her heart. Part of the painting features breasts on a tree trunk. According to the artist, the painting depicts her experience as a mother. "I think every source of our life comes from nature, including breast milk."

Eight out of the 10 paintings that make up the exhibition have a common theme. The remaining two, however, stand out from the rest. One of them is *Solitude Is A Person's Carnival*, a portrait of her daughter when she was three days old. "We may be surrounded by family and friends but in actual fact, we come to the world alone and we leave alone. Whatever



When I Was Here

A Poem of A Big Bang Existence

time we have here is, nevertheless, a celebration," says Cheong.

Her two-year-old daughter, Charlotte Hoo, is in many ways the muse behind her artworks. In fact, the idea for the exhibition came to her about two months after Hoo was born, and Cheong found herself wanting to capture the baby's moments in life through her paintings. "Maybe when she is slightly older, I can bring her along with me on my trekking and camping trips too!" she says excitedly.

The second painting is *When I Was Here*, a collage of family portraits that evokes a strong sense of nostalgia – more so because it was drawn based on old family photographs, featuring people and things that are near and dear to the artist. "The clock at the top of the painting was a gift from my uncle when my parents bought a house in KL. At the bottom of the painting is a watch my father used to wear," she explains. "He passed away last year and this is my way of immortalising him," she says, referring to the image of her father in the centre of the painting. Here, he is pictured taking her on a bicycle ride, one of the best memories from her childhood.

Describing motherhood as having substantially altered her perspective on life, the artist – who is deeply moved by the experience – looks forward to the endless surprises that will continue to unfold. Already working on her next collection, Cheong is eager to showcase the encounters in her daily life that continue to astonish her.

Cheong: I make it a point to be present at all times and fully immerse myself in all the moments of life. The deeper I go, the more inner peace I get.

HARIS HASSAN/THE EDGE



*Behind Two Hills – The Chorus of Life* will be showing until Feb 28 at Wei-Ling Gallery, 8 Jalah Scott, Brickfields, KL. Opening hours are from 10am to 6pm (Mon-Fri) and 10am to 5pm (Sat). Visit [www.weiling-gallery.com](http://www.weiling-gallery.com) for more.