

A 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.

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