

A Closer Look at 'The Flower'

Essay by Rachel Jenagaratnam

There are a couple of facets to the enjoyment of Chin Kong Yee's works. First, and the most evident, is the visual pleasure that his paintings bring. Saccharine yellows flirt with lush cobalt blues on the canvas, and swirling landscapes send the eyes on a kaleidoscopic viewing journey that has become the artist's signature offering. Less obvious, though, are the subtle nuances that make up each work. There are the personal tales and precise moments in time when the scene was captured, and philosophical musings that simmer beneath the surfaces. So, despite their seemingly benign facades, Kong Yee's works are complex creatures. And the artist, a critical filter of life.

The artist's latest body of work comprises ten paintings, and understanding them means to trace aspects of Kong Yee's career. For one, we need to note how his painterly style hinges greatly on European painting legacies, and how his use of photographic tools throws his practice into more recent times. *Duomo Florence* is a vivid expression of this marriage. In the work, the great Florentine cathedral takes centre stage and is flanked by two gravity-defying buildings that threaten to topple upon it. Such fish-eye twists to perspective have come to define Kong Yee's works. And, the irony in this particular composition lies in the fact that Florence is the reputed birthplace of linear perspective; Masaccio's early Renaissance painting, *Holy Trinity*, can be found at the city's Santa Maria Novella church, and it takes podium place for its use of this spatial rule – the very one that Kong Yee flouts in his art.

But it's not just Occidental traditions that we can reference in Kong Yee's latest works. A relatively new addition to the artist's opus is the use of traditional xuan paper and Chinese calligraphy, as seen in *Tia Garden & Chinese Calligraphy*. Based on his own experiences in Berlin's sprawling inner-city park, Tiergarten, the work features an autumnal-coloured patch with thousands of Chinese characters written in ink. This specific element pays homage to the complexities of Chinese script and how repetitions in the thousands are necessary to achieve levels of mastery. Musing on this, Kong Yee pokes fun at life's challenges and confesses to his own unique brand of coping. "*Life is 3D, written (forms) are 2D, but once read, it becomes 4D. So, I make it unreadable,*" he says, referring to the work's bed of Chinese characters and his own struggles learning German during his one-month stint in the capital city

It's this errant humour that characterizes the artist's approach. And, during the course of our discussion on *The Flower*, the artist makes a joke about the socially-demanded linearity of thoughts and how manmade environments are all crafted along straight lines. Funny, he observes, pointing out rightly that the earth is round. This could explain why Kong Yee's horizontal panoramas of yore now reappear within more compact formats and circular guises, and how increasingly, the artist has shifted from atmospheric portrayals to detailed inspections. Indeed, there are introspective, zen-like qualities to works like the verdant *Forest*, or the eponymous painting *The Flower*. "*Everything only happens in the present,*" says Kong Yee, drawing not-so-subtle hints to Buddhist teachings, and how the entire exhibition symbolizes the fact that the blooming of a flower is contained within a single moment and cannot be recaptured or repeated in its exactness. Could we not say the same of the ephemeral moments of life that Kong Yee captures in his works?

The two *Dresden in Blue* paintings illustrate this point, with both works showcasing rich blue light that could only have resulted from specific temperatures and other atmospheric conditions. Or, in *U Turn*, where a small group of people seem to march their bicycles out of one side of the painting and where a moving bicycle seems to spring forth from the opposite side. This decisive, unrepeatable moment –

the photographic punctum or punctuation, as described by Henri Cartier-Bresson – is exactly what Kong Yee captures in his works, and like a flower that blooms, each scene is a compression of thousands of moments, stories, and elements rolled into one. Kong Yee's compositions are anything but linear.

There's some logic then, in Kong Yee's adoption of the Golden Ratio. A mathematical principle that constitutes two rectangular shapes and a golden spiral, Kong Yee uses its principles to lay out the formal properties of all the works in this series. *The Flower* displays the golden spiral clearly, and so does *Orange Flower*, a portrayal of a vaulted church ceiling that curls upon itself and which seems to be doused in a glowing, golden-orange bath of light. These two accompanying works are regal and beatific, and the level of accuracy in the architectural detail is only accentuated by the artist's investment in every other aspect of the subject matter; Kong Yee wasn't just concerned with the physical spaces of the churches in these two works, but also researched other ecclesiastical aspects, such as the type of music they play in churches and how it affects people's moods.

Kong Yee's works lack aural properties, of course, but the artist certainly aims to encapsulate as many sensorial experiences into his works as he can. Indeed, Kong Yee presents a very keen and observant view of the world. He always has, and as an artist, plays the role of a 'fly on the wall' and a secret eye on the streets. With years of experience charting life unravelling before him, he has developed highly-tuned sensitivities to the temperaments of the weather, how these may have an effect on people's moods, and even considers real-world developments like the fluctuating oil prices, headlines that inevitably seep beneath the conscious human skin. In many ways, he ruminates all of this to try to bring us back to the very moment when the flower first 'bloomed' before his eyes.

Kong Yee's painting of *Busan* is his favourite in the series. It's where the sky is at its most evocative, spreading steel-grey swathes across the sky, and where Kong Yee channels his artistic language through the waves swirling in curly lines across the canvas and the plays of ink that pay homage to classic Chinese ink paintings. The work seems to hint that our possibilities are endless, and maybe they are. The elasticity of time is mentioned several times by the artist in descriptions of his work, and he hints that the warmer shades of his palette play a role in his past, while the cooler blues are a reference to the future. Perhaps Kong Yee's own words sum it up best. *"I have been a practising artist for 16 years now. From Undulating Spaces to this latest solo exhibition, I have been on a continuous exploration of space and time, and I have finally figured out that time is not linear. The past, present, and future are all happening simultaneously. The past continues to change as our state of mind changes, in turn affecting how our future plays out."*

There's hope and promise in those words, and a palpable belief that nothing is permanent. After all, flowers continue to bloom and though each one only blooms once, there is nothing more beautiful and wondrous than pausing to enjoy a single, irretrievable moment. Thank you for reminding us to do just that, Kong Yee.

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