



SMS to Song

Chen Wei Meng

25th April - 27th May 2023

Wei-LingGallery

Brushing Harmony: The Alluring Syncretism Between Man and Nature

Written by Amanda Ariawan | Edited by Valencia Winata

One of the oldest forms of paintings, known as Shan Shui, has its roots in China dating back to the 5th century. Derived from the Taoist philosophy that leans towards nature, Shan Shui usually centres around the landscape of mountains as the highest and therefore most sacred and honoured places in China. Chen Wei Meng, a contemporary Malaysian painter of Chinese descent, looks into his motherland's tradition through a new lens. Through his recent works, he explores implications of old Chinese ink techniques in abstract forms that take inspiration from nature.

It is believed that Shan Shui painters do not seek to imitate nature based on what they have witnessed, but rather attempt to address its connectedness to human beings. The wisdom evoked by the paintings – harmony, balance, amongst others – are principles that underlie human's life. The dynamic gestures performed by Shan Shui painters to attain the landscapes also define the essence of the paintings. Wei Meng upholds this principle when developing his recent series of monochromatic paintings '*Musang's Words*' (2019-2020) and '*SMS to Song*' (2022-2023). In these bodies of work, bold strokes executed with a certain force evoke strength, while subtler lines resulted by gentler movements illustrate serenity. Existing harmoniously on the surface of a delicate Xuan paper, these contrasting natures represent the "Yin and Yang" (equilibrium) in the flow of "Qi" (energy).

As a young man in the 1970s, Wei Meng was exposed to the boom of television pop culture filled with Hong Kong-American films. A quote from his all-time favourite martial art star Bruce Lee has always stayed true in his heart and resurfaced throughout the process of making these two recent series. "*Be water, my friend*," Lee said. Indeed, water is a suitable metaphor for how Wei Meng views the act of painting; a gesture of constantly flowing and adapting to space. Interestingly, Wei Meng's affinity with this element has been established since his early stages of life. Back in his hometown Dungun, located in the East Coast of Malaysia, the waves of the sea were his daily muse. They later became the main focus of his paintings in his third solo exhibition '*Silent Monsoon*' (2012). Sitting at the beach, he was fascinated by the dynamic orchestra between the sea and the ever-changing weather and environment that surrounds it.

Despite the consistency of depicting various natural landscapes that have moved him – mostly encountered and experienced during his solo travels – evolution has been a vital aspect to Wei Meng's artistic journey. Since childhood, art quickly became Wei Meng's passion. Upon receiving an academic training in painting, Wei Meng has spent over three decades as a professional painter. After various explorations that mostly had centred around realism, it was in the early 2000s that he started travelling to unbeaten tracks to paint landscapes. Combined with a twist of contemporaneity such as adopting a panoramic angle, he established a signature style appreciated amongst art critics and collectors in the region. One might even attach the term "hyperrealistic" to these paintings, considering the meticulous manner in which he imitated the details – from the water ripples in '*Silent Monsoon*' to the rice plants in '*Sekinchan: Land of Fertility*' (2016). Moving from one series to another, a certain progression always appears – be it a twist in the hue or the position of the viewer in relation to the landscape.

In 2019, an artistic experimentation using Chinese ink and Xuan paper has produced a significant leap for the artist. As Wei Meng observed, "*My works have moved on to a new stage. Instead of depicting landscapes in a clear and defined manner, I sought to capture the mysterious shapes that result from the flow of my subconscious when painting these landscapes.*" (personal

communication, 28 March 2023). Wei Meng also added that this change in technique was more of an intuitive decision rather than a result of a careful consideration.

Leaning towards the same visual and technique direction as *'Musang's Words'*, *'SMS to Song'* serves as an extension of the artist's renewed relationship with landscapes. The title of this solo exhibition at Wei-Ling Gallery is an acronym for "Shan Met Shui to Song Dynasty". On one hand, this underlines the main subject matters of the paintings – mountain and water – and the meaning of their coexistence. In real-life landscapes and within Wei Meng's paintings, these separate entities can be seen as one, blending together harmoniously without conflict. Through the artworks, the artist ponders upon the teaching and natural tendency of all living things to thrive without harming each other – their paths running parallel without necessarily having to oppose each other.

Within each vertical-oriented painting in *'SMS to Song'*, we may observe a combination of bold and thin lines forming an arch oriented in an upright position and creating a sense of enormity. Beneath this depiction of a mountain is a lighter and muted body of visuals that conveys something fluid and flowing. Here, the body of water is depicted without contour lines, but rather through the use of real water as a medium when painting – giving it a sense of existence. The artist's accidental discovery of this method has successfully captured the essence of water in the works. Below this experimental effect is a form that is almost symmetrical to the above arch, oriented upside down, as if evoking the idea of reflection or mirage.

On the other hand, *'SMS to Song'* also highlights the artist's attempt to relive the painting style originated from the Song Dynasty of China. The powerful dynasty ruled China for over three centuries from 960-1279, and is known to have produced some skillful landscape painters. *Come closer and you can see* (2023) stands out in this series as a triptych work which references three representative landscape paintings from the Song Dynasty: "Fan Kuan's *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (ca. 1000), Guo Xi's *Early Spring* (1072), and Li Tang's *Wind in the Pines Among a Myriad Valleys* (1124)"¹. These monumental landscape paintings were important to the Song dynasty particularly for the way they captured the painters' personal voices and worldviews. Wei Meng appreciates the unconventional angles, multiple focus points, and personal touch of these masters. They freed themselves from formal constraints, resulting in deeply personal and expressive works.

The phenomenon also reminds Wei Meng of a quote from the Chinese film director and actor King Hu, stating that while Western art "imitates" nature, Chinese art "experiences" nature – expressing what is in the painter's heart through painting. The title that was chosen for the triptych, *"Come closer and you can see"*, reflects the artist's personal journey of understanding the spiritual meaning of landscape painting, which has taken time and experience for him to fully appreciate. On a personal level, the artist's transitioning from hyperrealistic to Shan Shui-inspired abstract styles has served as a poignant reminder of the diverse paths that his artistic endeavour has taken. Traversing across different periods – drawing inspiration from the Song dynasty and interpreting landscapes through contemporary forms – Wei Meng exemplifies how artistic exploration knows no boundaries. His recent artistic endeavour has further underscored the endless possibilities that may be resulted from the confluence between traditional and contemporary elements, breaking down preconceptions and separations between them.

1 National Palace Museum (ed.), "An Introduction to Landscapes of Northern Song," Google Arts and Culture.

Rooted in the rich tradition of Shan Shui philosophy, Wei Meng's recent paintings have also served as a powerful testament to the invaluable lessons that nature can convey to humanity. '*SMS to Song*' eloquently captures the connection between man's life and nature through a minimalist yet skillful technique using Chinese ink – reminding us of the profound teachings that can be gleaned from the natural world. Through his intuitive and evocative brushwork, Wei Meng also emphasises the status of painters as interpreters, as they take the role of amplifying nature's wisdom through their artistic viewpoints. All in all, this series is a poignant reminder of the enduring wisdom and inspiration that nature offers to mankind, and the vital role of artists in illuminating them.

Amanda Ariawan
April 2023

Amanda Ariawan (B. 1993 Sydney, Lives in Jakarta) is an art curator, writer, and cultural worker. She obtained her Master's in Contemporary Art Exhibition Production from Université de Lille 3, France, with a research that examined the local, global, and identity issues within Asian contemporary art. Her roles in the arts have varied from working as a gallery associate, developing digital art platforms, curating exhibitions and residency programs.



Come closer and you can see
Chinese ink and acrylic on canvas
200cm x 225cm (Triptych), 200cm x 75cm (each)
2023



Come closer and you can see
Left panel

Come closer and you can see
Middle panel

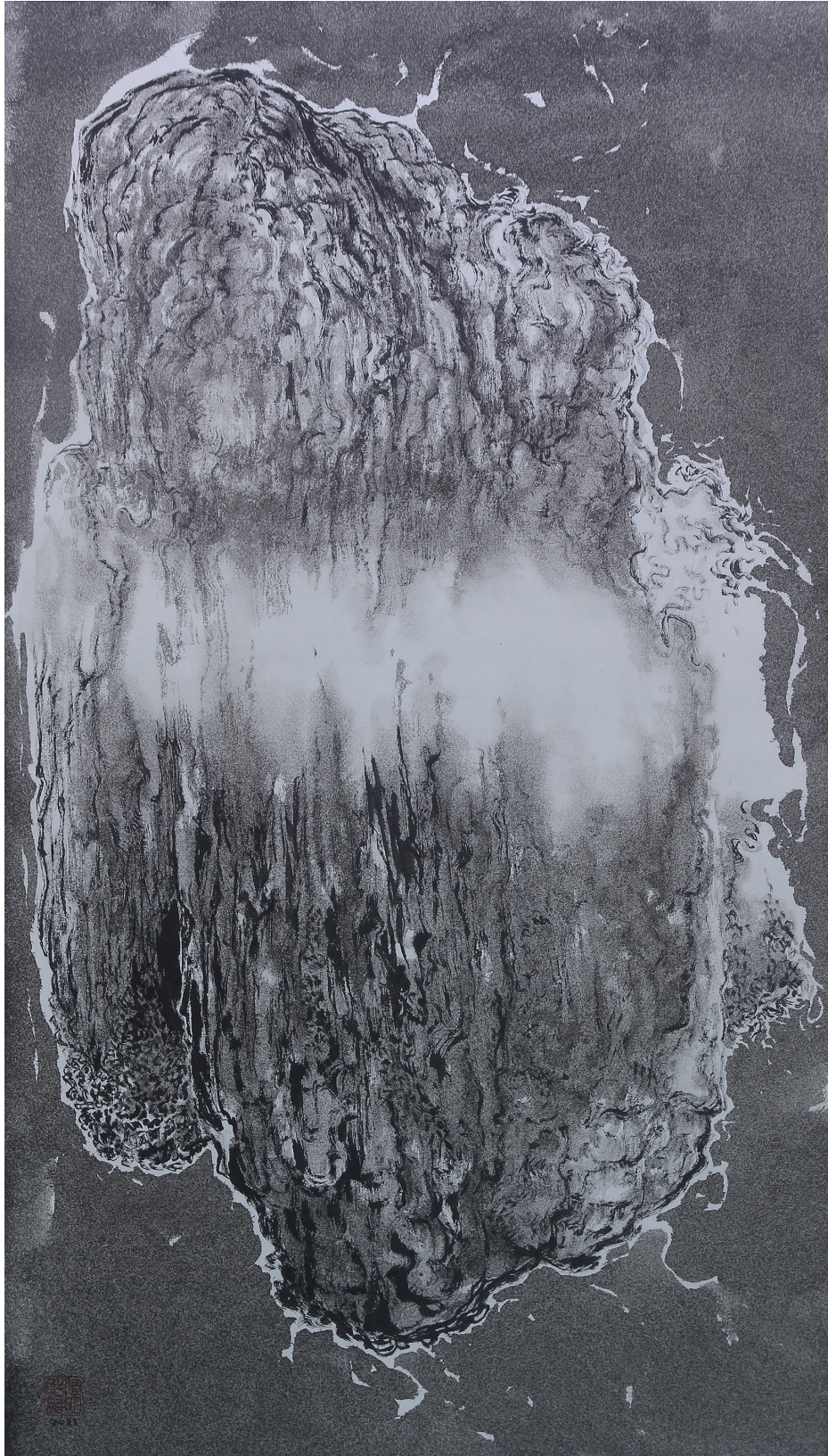




*Come closer and you can see
Right panel*



*Come closer and you can see
Insitu for scale*



SMS 1
Chinese ink on xuan paper
120cm x 69cm
2022



SMS 2
Chinese ink on xuan paper
120cm x 69cm
2022



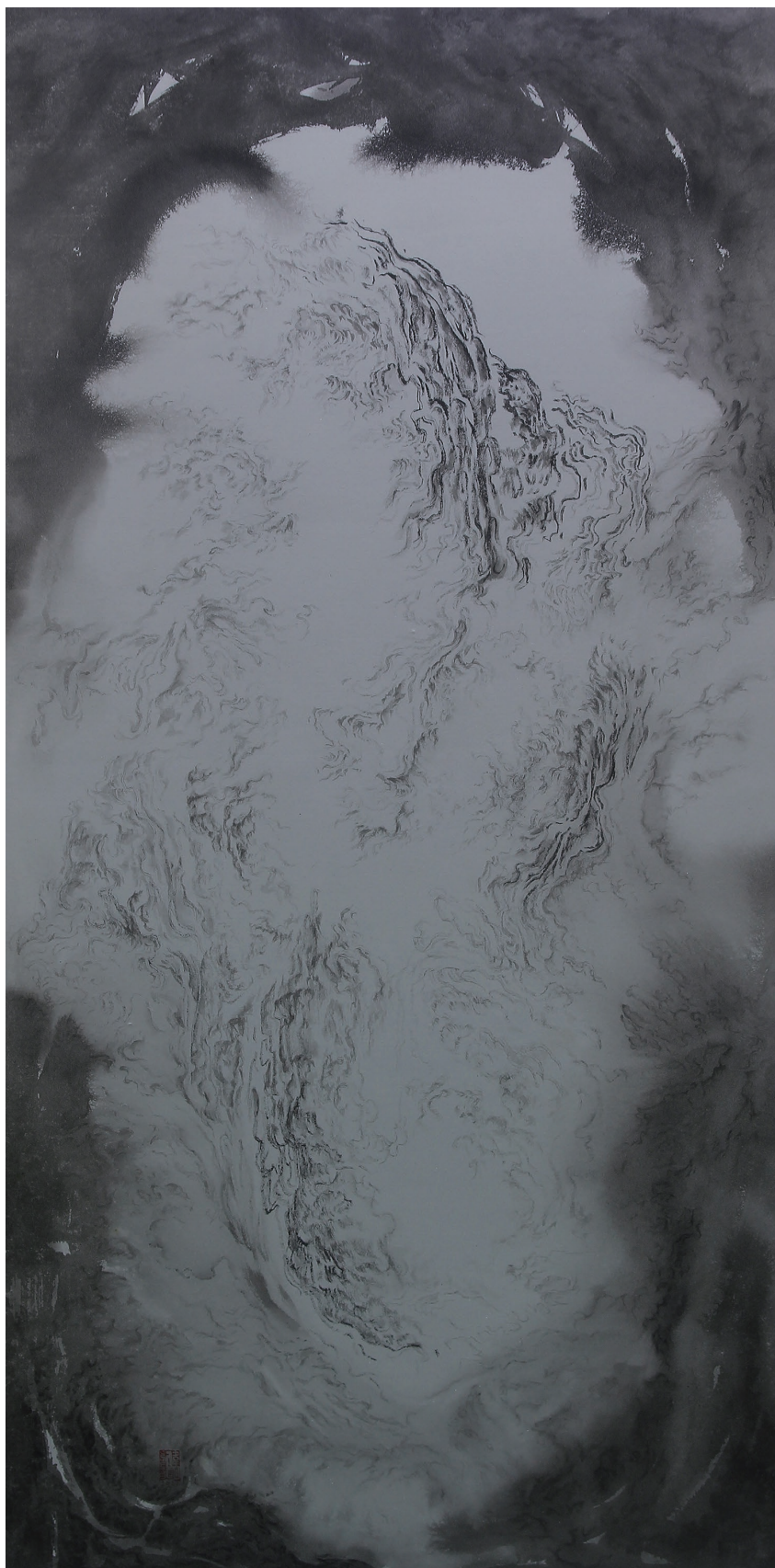
SMS 3
Chinese ink on xuan paper
120cm x 69cm
2022



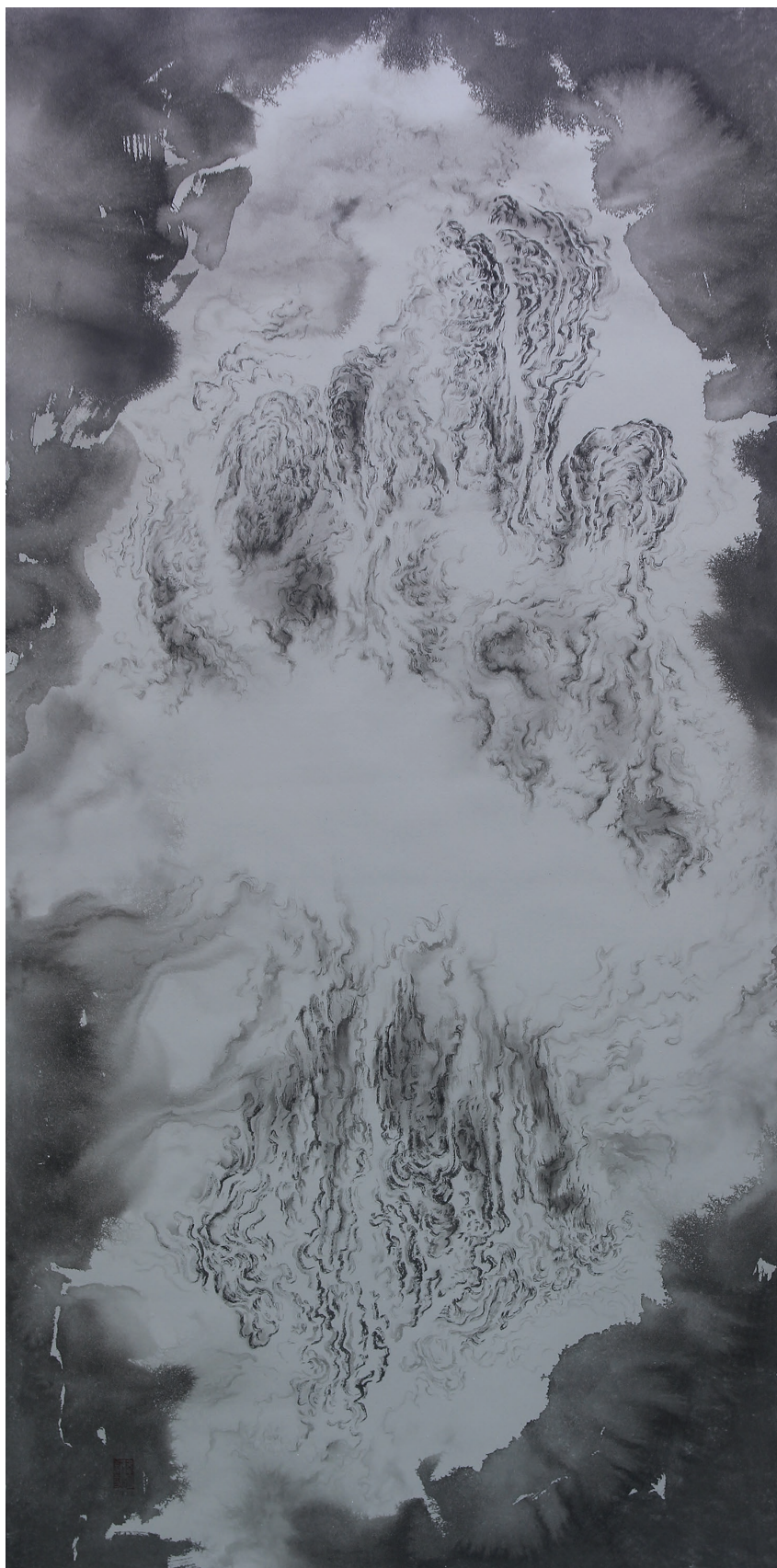
SMS 4
Chinese ink on xuan paper
120cm x 69cm
2022



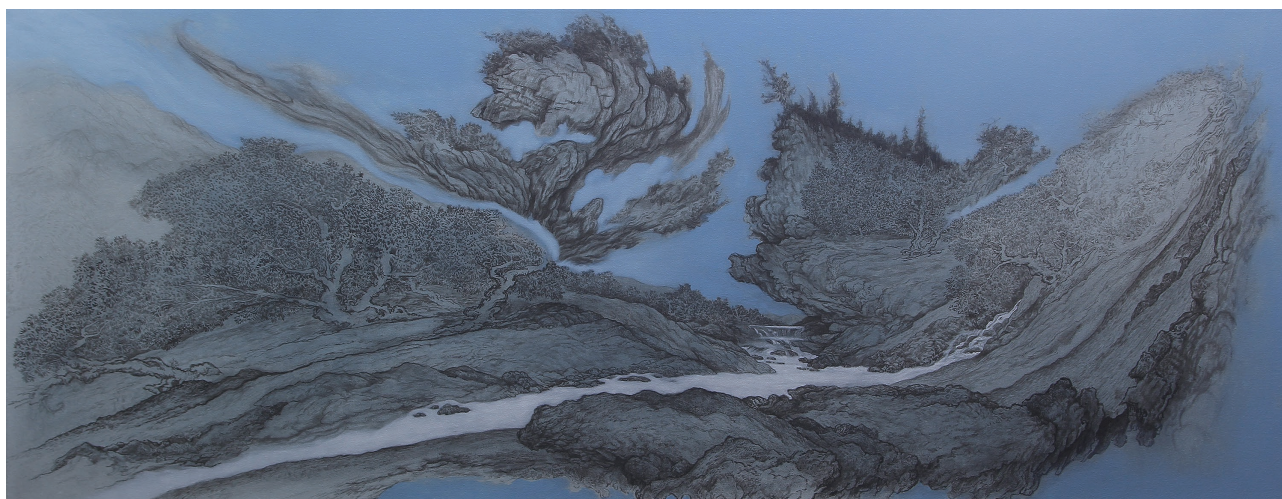
SMS 5
Chinese ink on xuan paper
120cm x 69cm
2022



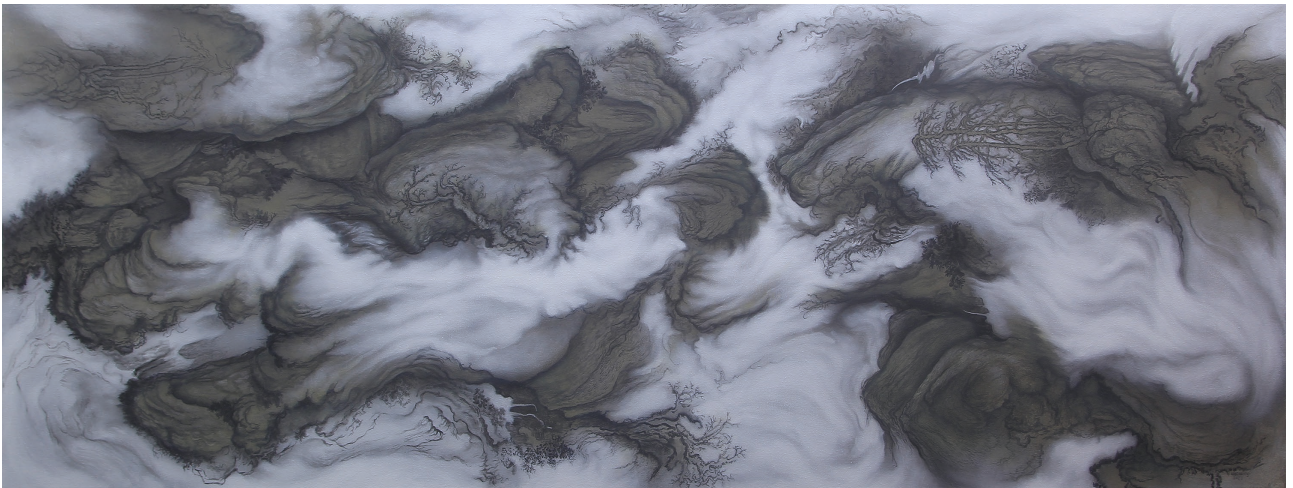
SMS 6
Chinese ink on xuan paper
136cm x 68cm
2022



SMS 7
Chinese ink on xuan paper
136cm x 68cm
2022



Come closer and you can see 2
Chinese ink and Acrylic on canvas
75cm x 200cm
2023



Come closer and you can see 3
Chinese ink and Acrylic on canvas
75cm x 200cm
2023



Installation view at Wei-Ling Gallery, Brickfields



Installation view at Wei-Ling Gallery, Brickfields



Charisma of Terengganu Morning
Acrylic on canvas
60cm x 135cm
2022

Chen Wei Meng (1965)



Having grown up in Dungun, Terengganu Chen Wei Meng's muse is the landscape. This obsession is reflected deeply in the hyper-realistic paintings that he painstakingly creates.

The works are meditative in their execution as he strives to transcend merely a depiction of the landscape, but endeavors to capture a spirituality and soul that far supersedes humanity, and within this, an all encompassing energy and power. It is in this space that he finds comfort and inspiration. His journey and investigations have seen him spending months travelling - living and sleeping in a car, in order to be as close as possible to what moves him.

Having spent his childhood on the East Coast small town of Dungun in the state of Terengganu, the spectacle of the ocean was a daily performance to Chen Wei Meng. He would depict the surreal, evocative delineations of cloudbursts and deluges in the landscape, so as to illustrate the weather and season. As he said, the landscape is like "a friend" that he has found again. The wide lens effect that he applies to his paintings brings the bare foreground close to the viewer, while opening a panorama where stories would develop.

Wei Meng enthuses, "*I lean towards a more instructed method of studying landscapes. I want to look at the physical forms of the land itself and by focusing on this aspect, I observe exquisite contours and arrangements, and the results are thrilling! I can see how these geographical elements can be adapted onto a canvas. I can see the processes involved; of how a knowledge of geology augments my landscapes in the artistic sense.*"

His '*Sekinchan: Land of Fertility*' (2016) series saw him revisiting the same place over and over again, as each visit presented him with a different nuance of the same paddy fields, as they morphed through the different seasons of harvest. Each painting is a form of 'imprisonment', as the image draws its audience tenderly in; while all the while, conceivable existences become impenetrable barriers; and there is no way of leaving.



As time has evolved, so to has his practice which has seen him leave behind colour and move into a monochromatic palette which serves to help him In his quest for a satisfactory representation of the forms he was seeking, trying to express, in the purest way, the elusive contours which he felt had always existed in his work. Chasing this abstract concept of 'flow', he began his experiments first with acrylic, then charcoal, before finding his preference for Chinese ink on Xuan paper.

His latest series '*Musang's Words*' (2020) is therefore a celebration of this very idea, a meditative and dedicated exploration into his perpetual quest for 'flow'. The approach is reminiscent of the emotive gestures and mark-making seen in abstract expressionism, where it is the movement of the line which inspires emotion.

This idea of 'flow' which Chen has long felt in the landscapes in much of his previous work, can most aptly be described as lines and shapes which seem to have a "vivid and rhythmic" quality in its contours, something which forms a "mysterious shape" that Chen cannot quite put into words. Instead, he expresses his findings by pushing the limitations of the landscape in its abstraction, into an almost pure representation of said 'flow'; distilling the forms and shapes of Gua Musang mountain into a raw, symbolic state, and allowing the push and pull of its lines to guide his hand.

While it may be instinctive to draw a comparison to more traditional forms of Chinese landscape painting, a closer look immediately reveals the vast difference between the two; where one is figurative, Chen's works are instead gestural and abstracted, and his choice in material is a more formal rather than historical decision.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 SMS to Song, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2020 Musang's Words, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2016 Sekinchan: Land of Fertility, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2014 20 days in Northwest China (part 1), Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2012 Silent Monsoon, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2009 Two three six, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2008 Within 30 km, Reka Art Space, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 A Paradigm Shift - Reflecting on Twenty Years of The Malaysian Art Scene, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
WLG IGNITE, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Art Expo Malaysia 2022, GMBB, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2021 100 Pieces: Art for All, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
SEA Focus Curated: hyper-horizon, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, Singapore
- 2018 Patriots: By Malaysians for Malaysians, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Tanah Air, Art Expo Malaysia 2018 - Project Room, MATRADE Exhibition and Convention Centre (MECC), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2017 Sotheby's Auction (Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Paintings), 3rd April 2017, Hong Kong Convention Centre, Hong Kong
- 2016 Art Stage Singapore 2016, Marina Bay Sands, Singapore
- 2015 18@8 Heirlooms, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
The Space Between, curated by Anurendra Jegadeva & Rahel Joseph, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2014 The PEAK Group Show- HO MIA, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2012 18@8: KUL-SIN, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
18@8: KUL-SIN, Ion Art, Singapore
Timeless, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2011 What's Your Porn? Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Malaysian Rice-Plates Project, KL Convention Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2010 Heartland, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2006 Asia Pacific Ocean International Art Exhibition, Mu Gung Hwa Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1st Art Exhibition, Mu Gung Hwa Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2005 Ulek Rasa (Exhibition of Terengganu Artists), National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2004 Seoul International Star Exhibition, Gyeongju Annex Building of Seoul Museum of Art, Korea
Second Annual Reka Free Show 2004, Reka Art Space, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2001 Malaysian Open Show 2001, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
'Manusia, The Human Being' Exhibition, NN Gallery, Kuala Lumpur (Charity Exhibition in Aid of the International Movement for a Just World)
- 2000 Buncho National Water Colour Award 2000, S.I.T Klang
Philip Morris Malaysia Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 1999 Aspiration Work 2000 Exhibition, Hotel Helang, Pulau Langkawi, Malaysia
- 1991 Figurative & Drawing Exhibition, Westminster Institute, London

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- OCBC Bank
- HSBC Bank



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IMAGE COURTESY | Wei-Ling Gallery

COVER IMAGE | *Come closer and you can see* (2023) (Close-up)

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