

## Meditative Musings: The Inner World of Cheong Kiet Cheng

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Exhibition view, 'The Last Star Before Dawn' (2023), Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 2023. Credit: Wei-Ling Gallery

Surrealist at heart, Cheong Kiet Cheng creates scenes that reside on the threshold between the conscious and the unconscious, delving into the enigmatic corners of her imagination. Incorporating whimsical elements in her canvas, her paintings transcend the boundaries of reality – inviting viewers to embark on a journey in their own minds. Each line drawn on her canvas accumulates into forms that evoke a sense of mystery and wonder. The otherworldly visuals unfold glimpses of the artist's personal narratives that revolve around the themes of family, womanhood, and the interconnectedness of living things.

Cheong's works have continuously grown more multi-layered over time, with a distinct narrative and technique for each exhibition. Her first solo '*Sing to the land of my heart*' (2015) explored the laws of the universe through acrylic painting. This debut was followed by '*Behind Two Hills - The Chorus of Life*' (2017) in which she delved into oil painting and the theme of self-exploration. In 2018, Cheong received a residency programme in Fukuoka, an experience that influenced the development of a new artistic style and advanced her technique. This significant shift can be observed through '*Dust and the Silence in the Sun*' (2019) as she delved into the technique of line drawing using ink, which resulted in monochromatic works that talk about family and spirituality. The themes in that monochromatic series recurred in '*We Are Dreaming and Awake in the Air*' (2021) – only with a twist of surprise as she combined ink drawing with watercolour.



Cheong Kiet Cheng during the UOB-Fukuoka Asian Art Museum's Artists Residency Programme, 2018. Credit: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

### **Converging Spirituality and Art**

In *'The Last Star Before Dawn'* (2023), Cheong becomes more aware of her visceral emotions and contemplations – encouraging viewers to reflect in their own lives, beliefs, and experiences. Surrealism stays evident in the visual language that she adopts. Yet, with each fictional creature and environment, she offers a portal for the viewers to delve into the hidden chambers of her heart – only to find similarities to their own. The works in this fifth solo exhibition by the artist tap into the human psyche as they speak about feelings, well-being, and self-awareness beyond what her words can express.

Cheong's journey into meditation and spirituality has had a significant impact on her emotional and mental well-being. Growing up in a Buddhist family and being exposed to Zen Buddhism through books laid the foundation for her interest in spiritual practices. However, it was in the past year that her meditation practice intensified, driven by the desire to find solace and silence amidst the responsibilities of motherhood and being a wife. Through consistent meditation, Cheong has found herself becoming more attuned to her emotions and feelings, developing a stronger connection with her inner self. This heightened sensitivity has allowed her to be fully present in the moment, free from the burden of past and future.



By letting go of distractions and focusing solely on the present, Cheong has also discovered the beauty in the things often unseen, including lights, what she feels, her true voice, and the energies that imbue her surroundings. Her artistic expression has become a reflection of these meditative experiences. The result is a bewitching series of 9 works that delves beyond the surface, attempting to convey the spiritual and emotional depth she encounters during these moments of profound self-awareness.

### Metaphorical Experience



Cheong Kiet Cheng, *Cosmic wanderings* (2023), Watercolour and acrylic on canvas, 144cm x 160cm. Credit: Cheong Kiet Cheng & Wei-Ling Gallery

*Cosmic Wanderings* (2023) is an ode to tai chi – a lifelong devotion of the artist. Being a full-time artist and a mother of two, Cheong's life revolves around domestic routines. However, within the gentle movements of tai chi, her mind would wander beyond her day-to-day confines. As she recounts, *"My body, seemingly weightless, feels that it is soaring amongst a myriad of stars."*

Cheong added that her imagination of being in a vast sea of lights comes from the silence that she is able to attain through tai chi. In this state, the external world and the people within it appear ephemeral and insignificant, underscoring the artist's deep connection with the present moment.

The central figure in the painting, seemingly inspired by the artist herself, symbolises not just her personal journey but also represents anyone undergoing a transformative moment. Despite the face of a human, the subject's body resembles that of a mermaid - embodying a sense of fluidity. The wild bush of hair atop the subject's head becomes a world of its own, revealing multiple creatures and faces, hinting at the complexity and diversity within every transformation.

*Cosmic Wanderings* (2023) serves as an invitation to explore the unity of mind and body, transcending the physical constraints of the world and embracing the notion of a vast and timeless cosmos. It testifies to the transformative power of mindfulness and movement, where the act of practicing tai chi becomes a gateway to profound inner change.

### **A Mother and More**



Cheong Kiet Cheng, *Morning Meeting* (2022), Oil on canvas 152cm x 116cm. Credit: Cheong Kiet Cheng & Wei-Ling Gallery

Through *Morning Meeting* (2022), the artist dons the mantle of motherhood as she reflects on maintaining between taking care of her children and herself. Her role as a woman in the

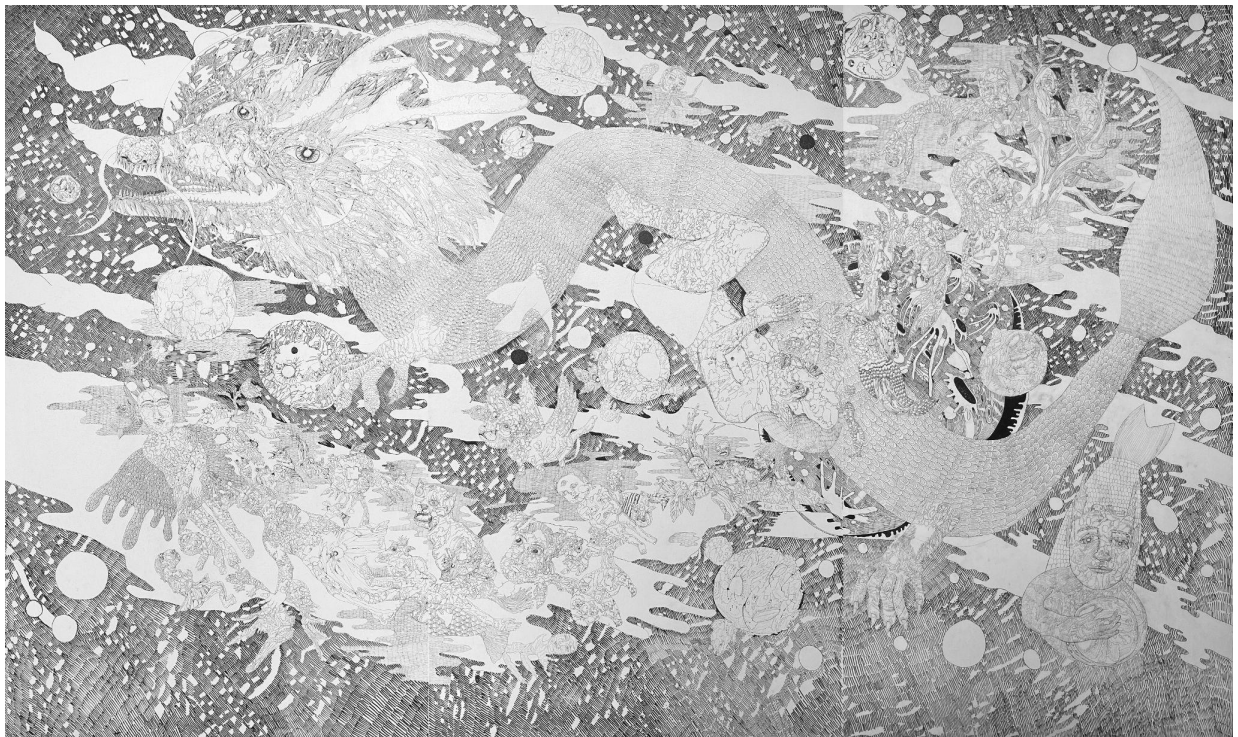


household has always been the support system for her family members. Through this painting, however, she aims to give herself the voice to recount the experience from a personal perspective – putting herself as the main character. As she recounts, *“Every morning, I wake up at 5 AM to get my daughter ready for school. Once she’s off, I would turn on the music and spend an hour meditating, while witnessing the sky change from dawn to daylight.”*

Cheong appreciates the charm attached to her day-to-day rhythm; the stillness of the morning, the beauty of nature’s daily renewal, and the peace that comes with solitude. This balance between the struggle of a mother and the positive emotions that come with it, is painted through a playful black-and-white composition that reveals different styles, pressures, and sizes of brushstrokes. This expressive work highlights a self-portrait surrounded by elements that represent the life that surrounds and uplift her; the sun, trees, and other living creatures.

In the midst of pondering her present life, Cheong could not help but interweave her emotions with her childhood memories. *“Until I was thirteen, I lived in a village in which I would wake up to the sound of the birds every single morning. This is the reason why even up to this day, I always feel rejoiced in the morning time. It is the best time to talk to the world,”* continued Cheong. Believing in the interconnectedness between living things, Cheong’s works tend to feature fictional creatures that intersect human and animal features – combining human anatomy with that of cats, birds, fish, and many more.

### Life Lessons



Cheong Kiet Cheng, *Reunion. Come Together* (2022), Ink on canvas. 168cm x 274cm (Triptych). Credit: Cheong Kiet Cheng & Wei-Ling Gallery

*Morning Meeting* (2022) is not the only work in which the artist's reflections intersect with memories of the past. With *Reunion. Come together* (2022) Cheong, rather than reminiscing or mourning the past, treats it as the foundation of the present. This work simultaneously conveys the beginning of light and the end of darkness through the symbol of a dragon. The pen drawing on canvas, which depicts a dragon heading towards a certain direction, heralds a new chapter after the dark days of the pandemic. The dragon, often associated with wisdom and protection in Chinese culture, is depicted here with tenderness, signifying our newfound awareness. Surrounding this dragon are figures that are being led into a new era. Their presence portrays our collective power to heal and not just ourselves, but also nurturing the world around us. The painting is a testament to the resilience of nature and its beings – evoking a sense of power to rise again and shape its destiny. It is a spirit that the artist holds dear in facing what is yet to come.



Cheong Kiet Cheng, *Twins Flowers* (2023), Oil on canvas 168cm x 154cm. Credit: Cheong Kiet Cheng & Wei-Ling Gallery

The concept of *yin* and *yang* which encapsulates the balance between masculine and feminine, darkness and light, is a recurring theme in Cheong's body of work. In *Twins Flowers* (2023), the topic resurfaces as the artist tries to illustrate the dance between these opposing energies. Just as valleys are made possible by mountains, and day finds its presence in the existence of the night, this painting acknowledges life's dualities that form symphonies. In this monochromatic oil painting, two otherworldly figures that are symbolic of the opposing forces, are positioned to

occupy the canvas in a harmonic composition, exemplifying their balance but also interdependence. To the artist, life is a continuous dance of change and equilibrium.

In essence, *'The Last Star Before Dawn'* by Cheong Kiet Cheng unfolds as a profound exploration of the artist's inner world, while seamlessly beckoning viewers to embark on an introspective journey. Highlighting mindfulness through a perspective of a woman, the exhibition delicately balances themes of motherhood and self-awareness – putting forward the importance of acknowledging one's roles and feelings. From mermaids to dragons, Cheong's fantastical creatures also serve here as symbolic elements that further emphasise life's dualities and perpetual evolution. In this immersive experience, each visitor discovers the dawn of a brighter, more conscious awakening within themselves.

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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.