

KL: MyUtopia

Chin Kong Yee
Gan Sze Hooi
Khabir Roslan
Kim Ng
Wong Chee Meng

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ARTIST'S NOTE | CHIN KONG YEE

Written alongside the oil painting Kuala Lumpur in Ultramarine.

These three texts are not explanations of the work,
but the atmosphere from which it emerged.
Ultramarine speaks of the time of material;
KL Street speaks of the memory of place;
The World After Oil Painting speaks of the fate of medium.

Painting is not a representation,
but a new appearance.

Ultramarine – A Chronometry of Pigment

Most of what I use is modern ultramarine—synthetic.
Affordable. Stable.

The ancient kind is too expensive, too legendary.
I've never understood why a pigment needs a story
to be valid.

Modern ultramarine is strange enough on its own—
when applied, it feels like a sedative:
it draws the eye in, yet never sticks to the hand.

Sometimes it carries a faint trace of violet,
as if daylight were breathing through oil.
Ultramarine seems to come alive only in oil paint;
in other media, it turns sluggish.
Perhaps its oil absorption is simply ideal—
it glazes without suffocating the underlayer.
The entire logic of oil painting
is written in the curve of a pigment's oil absorption
rate.

And ultramarine sits perfectly in the middle:
structure, transparency, stability, absorption—
everything in balance.

Astronomers say
blue belongs to light that is leaving,
red to light that is approaching.
A receding star glows blue;
an oncoming one burns red.
When sunlight strikes the Earth directly, the world
turns red.
Only when light begins to leave
does space become blue.
Between dawn and dusk,
blue awakens the world—and lets it go again.

I once lived in Hong Kong for a few months.
What I miss most is not the harbor or the night
markets,
but the blue of early morning.
Europe has its blue nights—
in summer, the daylight lingers,
and the sky seems thinly glazed with oil,
a film of ultramarine.

In Kuala Lumpur, blue light fades too soon.
Before the sun has fully set, the street lamps are
already on.
That instant of blue—brief enough to be overlooked—
hurts with its beauty.

Whenever that light appears,
my palette fills with ultramarine.
It feels like trying to keep
the warmth of a departing world.

Ultramarine is not a color.
It is a memory of light.
Some blues are the shadow of time itself.
The painter's hand only holds it for a moment.

KL Street

I once had a classmate who lived on this street.
His family ran a coffin shop.
Few people at school knew about it;
he made us promise to keep it secret before inviting
us in.

The shop wasn't eerie, but it carried a kind of
weight.
The air mixed with the scent of wood and lacquer—
what people called “coffin fragrance.”
It didn't smell of death, but of craftsmanship, of
time itself.

That was in the late 1980s.
The building hadn't been renovated since it was
built.
The wooden stairs groaned under our feet, nearly
splitting,
and we walked lightly, holding our breath.
When we reached his room, my new shirt brushed the
wall,
leaving a trace of white lime.
Old walls were like that—fragile, powdery, yet
warm.
My grandmother's house was the same.

Around five in the evening,
the scent of porridge would sweep down the street.
The stall below began setting up for business.
That smell still lingers today—
they later moved in with the Sung Kee Beef Noodle
shop,
selling noodles by day and porridge by night.

Every dusk, the same fragrance floats out again.
That classmate became an actor and moved away.
The coffin shop closed.
He must have been one of the last original residents
of KL.
Such shops vanished long ago—
even their “clients” have disappeared.

Now, the RHB Bank at the corner looks almost
futuristic
among the old shophouses.
Its clock still ticks precisely at the entrance—
I’ve always felt it was built to counter the “Big
Ben” tower nearby,
a kind of urban charm or defense.
Now it sounds more like a hymn to the 1980s.

The old quarters of KL never fall out of view.
I’ve painted them for two, maybe three decades,
and they’re still compelling—
not because they are grand,
but because their space and time overlap like old
glass—
scratched, clouded, yet clear.
Several eras are fixed at this single street corner.

The World After Oil Painting

The history of oil painting, to be honest, is not long.

It was merely an accidental success within the Western craft system:

a few pigments, some linseed oil, and a piece of linen.

Early oil painters could barely prime a canvas without apprentices.

Knowledge was scarce, techniques guarded.

Whoever held the formula, held the authority.

For centuries, oil painting sat at the top of the fine arts hierarchy.

Almost every other form—fresco, tempera, watercolor—eventually converged toward it.

It became both the destination of visual art and a symbol of institution.

The real turning point came with the Industrial Revolution.

From then on, creation no longer required a studio—a visit to the art shop was enough.

Pigments came in tubes, canvases were pre-stretched, mediums standardized into commodities.

The mystery of oil painting was decoded by factories.

Artists multiplied. Studios turned into academies.

Craft gave way to knowledge;

the secret became a curriculum.

From conservatism to competition,

and from competition to marketing,

oil painting completed its institutional cycle.

It ceased to be a secret and became a discipline.
The threshold dropped, and its sanctity dissolved.
Impressionists were branded as rebels;
oil paint became the emblem of an old world.

Then came photography.
People said it killed painting,
but its true revolution was not invention—it was
replication.
Photography followed the same fate as oil painting.
When Kodak appeared, everyone could take pictures.
Photographers multiplied overnight.
It was another “art shop moment”:
art no longer required privilege, only products.

AI stands at the opposite end.
It was born Kodak, yet sealed inside an imperial
black box.
The age of oil painting was the age of secret craft;
the age of photography, the liberation of technique;
the age of AI, the enclosure of systems.

AI is not a revolution—it is a counterrevolution.
It doesn't challenge the system; it absorbs it.

Everyone thinks AI is taking over,
but it is civilization itself that is collapsing.
People simply need a visible form of collapse to
condemn,
so that their resistance still looks meaningful.
Like environmentalists accusing each other of
hypocrisy—
both sides performing opposition,
neither solving the problem.

After its “popularization,” oil painting stopped evolving.

The real pigment revolution came with petroleum: acrylic.

A universal adhesive that could imitate any medium. More transparent, safer, more convenient—but stripped of the complexity that once fused materials, methods, and thought.

Acrylic enclosed oil painting, just as AI encloses knowledge.

I reject no medium.

I only think it’s a pity that acrylic ends in imitation,

and a waste that oil painting has gone dormant.

The “resistance” of oil lies in time—

in its transparency lives a delayed magic.

The “universality” of acrylic lies in flow—it clings to everything.

In recent years I’ve returned to mixing pigments, oils, and mediums by hand.

Tedious work. Slow work.

I used to finish five or six large series a year; now a single one drains a year’s patience.

All that I learned from ink, digital painting, acrylic, and lacquer

I’ve folded back into oil.

Not to hybridize, but to recover.

It may no longer be “creation.”

It feels more like a ritual—

a ritual of calling back to the body

what the system has forgotten: the craft itself.

ARTIST'S NOTE | GAN SZE HOOI

In Utopia, where everything's under public ownership, no one has any fear of going short, as long as the public storehouse are full.

Nobody owns anything, but everyone is rich for what greater wealth can there be than cheerfulness, peace of mind, and freedom from anxiety.

[Thomas More, *Utopia*, Book 2, Penguin Classics, p.128]

My Urban Utopia

I was born and raised in Kuala Lumpur, a city whose spirit of freedom runs deep in my heart. With a touch of nostalgia, I cherish and record the passionate years of growing up here. My childhood was filled with the warmth and colours of the city. Among all the places that shaped me, **Jalan Petaling**, **Kenanga**, and **Pudu** hold the most beautiful memories. These were the neighbourhoods where I played, dreamed, and learned about the world.

I spent my primary school years at **Kuen Cheng (1) Primary School**, and later continued my journey at **Tsun Jin High School**. Both schools were more than just places of study—they were second homes, where laughter echoed in the corridors and friendships blossomed under the bright tropical sun. Those days were simple, yet full of meaning. The streets, the old shops, and the familiar sounds of Kuala Lumpur became part of who I am. Looking back, I realise how deeply those early years shaped my heart and my sense of belonging.

When I was ten, I used to walk alone after school to my father's shop in Kenanga. Along the way, I would pass an old abandoned railway track—now part of the MRT route—where I often spent the day catching Thiania, the small jumping spiders I kept as pets for play fights.

In Pudu, there was a street famous for its goldfish shops. I often went there to buy Siamese fighting fish, and my friends and I would hold “fighting fish championships.” The winner would earn a bottle of 7UP or Pepsi from the loser—a sweet victory shared under the afternoon sun.

During secondary school, I was a scout for six years, where I met some of my closest friends. There was one big tree in the schoolyard, and we used to climb it, build a small treehouse, and even cook red bean soup up there. It was our secret world, a place where we shared stories and dreams. We also built a bamboo watchtower, learning teamwork and practical skills that strengthened our friendship. After a hard day's work, we would celebrate at the evening street food stalls in Kenanga, enjoying our sense of freedom and companionship.

All those lovely memories became the foundation of my urban utopia. To me, utopia is not merely a distant paradise, but a reflection of the world we live in—a search for balance between freedom and equality, tradition and progress.

In 2025, I lost a close friend to suicide, a tragedy that changed my world. We used to talk about everything, but somehow, our connection faded. His passing made me question myself and the fragile nature of human bonds. My utopia was no longer the same.

My idea of utopia has always been shaped by the contrast between the **Old World** and the **New World**—two realms with different dreams, histories, and social structures. I often wonder: Which kind of society can truly make people happier? That question has become the foundation of my artistic imagination.

In my visual art painting, I depict the real world as I imagine it today:

Kuala Lumpur is changing. The climate is harsher—

floods, droughts, and storms come more often. Buildings rise endlessly, yet many stand empty, reflecting greed and neglect. Gentrification replaces authenticity; traditional foods and old tastes fade away. Skyscrapers feel like mega cages, trees are torn down for highways and tolls, and the 5G towers grow like weeds, while smartphones quietly control our daily lives.

This new world feels like a **maze**—beautiful yet suffocating. Friendships fade, people grow distant, and everyone is too busy chasing wealth. The familiar becomes strange. I fear that one day, this imbalance will collapse, like a domino effect that sweeps through everything we know.

Utopia, I have come to realise, is born from dissatisfaction with reality. It grows from our longing for a world that could be better, fairer, and purer. Yet it is not a paradise of endless pleasure, nor a fantasy of indulgence. It seeks a life of simplicity—where people respect boundaries, reduce desires, and live with quiet dignity.

For me, utopia is a spiritual sanctuary, a private inner realm that words can never fully describe. In this new century, it exists in a surreal way—everywhere and nowhere at once—flowing through time and space like an eternal echo.

Utopia is not a destination, but a ruin of eternal memory, reminding us that the pursuit of perfection is what makes us human, even when perfection can never be reached.

ARTIST'S NOTE | KHABIR ROSLAN

Kuala Lumpur, the city that once rose from mud, now gleams in vertical light. Yet beneath the shimmer, the ground still breathes as a pulse of soil remembering what the skyline forgets. Between demolition and renewal, between the rhetoric of progress and the silence of loss, *Tanggam* finds its form:

“an act of listening to what the land still murmurs beneath our feet”

Created entirely of compost and medical bandages, *Tanggam* stands as both wound and remedy. The materials are humble, intimate which I imagine soil as memory, bandage as gesture that together embodying the slow rhythm of care and compassion. The work takes inspiration from *tanggam*, the traditional Nusantara method of interlocking joinery that binds without nails. This ancestral design principle, where strength emerges through balance rather than

force, becomes both structure and philosophy. The modular form, interlocked and breathing, reimagines architecture as empathy that I see as a relational system rather than an imposition.

In this work, compost is not residue but revelation. It speaks the cosmological language of return, the humility of all things dissolving into the same earth that once bore them. The bandage, fragile yet persistent, signifies the act of tending, the refusal to let wounds be erased. Together, they form a porous body, absorbing the city's quiet dissonance where its soil displaced and its textures polished into silence.

Within *Tanggam*, the idea of '*tanah air*', land and water as the continuum of self now becomes central. Not as geography or possession, but as a metaphysical inheritance. '*Tanah air*' is where the seen and unseen meet, where memory is not held by monuments but by ground, breath, and the scent of decay. The work invites the viewer to return to that origin, to a form of belonging that resists ownership, development, investment, capital, asset, commodity and instead recognizes participation in the cycles of becoming and undoing.

Philosophically, the work draws from Islamic metaphysics, Nusantara cosmology, and wabi-sabi aesthetics. Through tawhid, the oneness of all existence, compost becomes a devotional material means the convergence of matter and spirit. Through fana, the dissolution of form, its slow drying and darkening become acts of remembrance. The *tanggam*

form reflects Nusantara's relational worldview, a structure that breathes with reciprocity, echoing the organic intelligence of forests and communities.

From wabi-sabi, the work inherits a reverence for impermanence. The irregular textures, quiet hues, and mutable surface reject the city's obsession with perfection. Here, beauty is not found in control, but in surrender, in allowing time to leave its trace, in accepting erosion as a kind of truth.

Tanggap thus becomes a contemplative architecture, a meditation on how cities, like bodies, heal unevenly. It observes, without naming, the slow replacement of soil with concrete, the quiet transformation of communal memory into curated progress. Its critique is whispered, not declared as an insistence that even as the surface gleams, the ground still feels.

Eventually, *Tanggap* is an invocation, a call to reimagine how '*tanah air*' not as territory but as compassion. Between compost and bandage, fragility and resilience, it proposes an ethics of care rooted in the humility of materials. What endures is not the structure, but the act of solidarity to earth, to impermanence, to one another.

In its slow decay, *Tanggap* reminds us that the most radical form of renewal may not be to build higher, but to listen deeper, to the soil that still remembers our names.

ARTIST'S NOTE | KIM NG

Dissolving Boundary reflects the shifting emotional and physical contours of Kuala Lumpur – a city perpetually negotiating between memory and transformation. Through abstract gestures, layered textures, and carved effects, the work explores the blurred spaces where personal and collective experiences converge.

Rather than portraying Kuala Lumpur as a recognizable skyline, the piece envisions the city as a living organism – complex in form, structure, and rhythm; fluid, fragmented, and continuously reshaped by the people who inhabit it. The interlacing of printed colours and carved surfaces serves as a metaphor for the city's porous boundaries, where histories, languages, and cultures merge, overlap, and dissolve into one another.

In its quiet diffusion of form and colour, *Dissolving Boundary* seeks to reclaim a sense of belonging within the city's ambiguity. It invites viewers to pause within that in-between space – where separation becomes connection – and to imagine a more compassionate, open, and shared urban future.

ARTIST'S NOTE | WONG CHEE MENG

True leadership begins with a promise. This painting reflects on that moment of commitment—the kind we make not just with words, but with intention. It speaks to the promises we owe to Kuala Lumpur, a city that continues to grow and change, yet still holds its roots in memory, culture, and the rhythm of nature.

At the heart of the work stands a podium. It isn't a symbol of power, but of responsibility—a reminder that every word spoken in front of others carries weight. A promise should never be made lightly; it's not a formality or a show, but a quiet act of honesty in a world that often hides behind appearances.

Malaysian elements flow through the piece—the hibiscus, traditional motifs, and the outline of city towers—each one showing how the old and the new live side by side. Horses and birds move gently through the scene, watching over it all, reminding us of purity, freedom, and the balance we share with the natural world.

Leadership isn't about control or power—it's about care. It's about keeping your word and protecting what gives life to the city. Kuala Lumpur's true strength doesn't come from concrete or glass, but from the harmony between its people, their culture, and the land they stand on.