

First Solo by Quek Kiat Sing

21 FEBRUARY TILL 6 MARCH 2002

TEXT Tang Ling Nah

The Gallery Evasion
76 Robertson Quay

'Moodscape Drawings', which consists of a series of works made by Chinese ink on xuanzhi¹, is Quek Kiat Sing's visual diary of the transformation and the transformability of feelings. The broad strokes and energetic splashes of ink, with areas of empty spaces, are almost Zen-like and reminds one of the abstract landscapes of Singapore artist Choong Chee Pang and the Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian, as well as the more representational ones by Jia 'Youfu from China'.

When asked about her knowledge of Chinese painting and Eastern philosophy, Quek replied honestly and modestly,

"I have little knowledge of Chinese painting theories and 'Yijing'³ to employ them in my painting. I was simply enchanted by the symbols of 'qian' and 'kun' which is earth and heaven or 'yin' and 'yang' of the 'Yijing' in the form of a straight line and a broken line. My knowledge do not extend too far beyond these..."

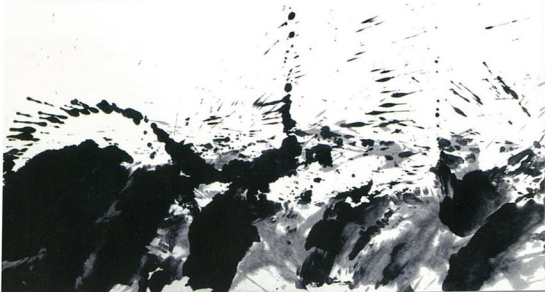
She added that her works are not conceived as traditional Chinese literati paintings. However, she also understands that there are historical and cultural burdens associated with the medium she uses and that critics would inevitably compare her work with traditional Chinese painting. She, nonetheless, welcomes such comparison and is, in fact, intrigued by the

1. This is the paper used for Chinese ink painting.

2. Teo Han Wue, *Ink Journeys*, Preface II, *Moodscape Drawings Exhibition Catalogue*, 2002.

3. Also known as *I-Ching*, or *Book of Changes*. It is an ancient Chinese system of divination. An oracle is cast by flipping coins or more traditionally, by manipulating yarrow stalks. The oracle is one of 64 different hexagrams. The hexagram itself is composed of two trigrams, each consisting of three lines. Those lines are either straight (or Yang) or broken (Yin). (<http://littlescat.com/iching/>)

moodscape drawings (shouting)
Chinese ink, 70 x 160 cm, 2001 Dec



review

similar outcome and resemblance to more established artists, which she had not intended or expected in her own, when she first began exploring the medium⁴.

Quek prefers to see herself as a contemporary painter who happens to use Chinese ink on paper as a medium to record her diary of emotions and thoughts which she terms moodscape. To fully appreciate her works, she hopes that the audience would regard her work as 'abstract, contemporary ink paintings'. However, Quek welcomes different perspectives of reading her works as they are open to interpretation.

As Mr Chua Ek Kay wrote in the exhibition catalogue⁵, 'with Kiat Sing's academic background in art, it is not difficult to understand that the platform she sets might not be necessarily based on Taoist philosophy alone, but rather of a contemporary approach of the current post-modern practice which encompasses the territories both in the East and West.'

Quek began her exploration of Chinese ink on paper only one-and-half years ago. In her school days, she painted mainly in acrylic. She also did installations, exploring the idea of painting, at her Curtin University study. However, she has always been curious about the 'elusive, layered nuances of the art of ink on paper⁶' and decided to explore Chinese ink as a possible medium to present her ideas. She found other mediums like acrylics to be too colorful, while Chinese ink is more suited to the solemn and contemplative moods she would like to portray. It also provides the fluidity necessary for her expression.

When asked about how her knowledge of Western art concepts has influenced her exploration of Chinese ink, she remarked,

"My Western art theory training enables me to use terms like abstract expressionism, action painting and documentation of the sub-consciousness to refer to my painting style. I feel that painting is very much an instinct. Terms and concepts offer categorizations to explain and elaborate on this urge to create and (achieving) the final creation. They are useful tools for me to analyse my own creation in reference to the multitude of discourses that has taken place before me and around me."

4. Teo Han Wue, *Ink Journeys*, Preface II, *Moodscape Drawings Exhibition Catalogue*, 2002.

5. Chua Ek Kay, *A Splash of Truth-Moodscape Drawings by Quek Kiat Sing*, Preface I (English), *Moodscape Drawings Exhibition Catalogue*, 2002.

6. Teo Han Wue, *Ink Journeys*, Preface II, *Moodscape Drawings Exhibition Catalogue*, 2002.

moodscape drawings (shouting)
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Quek's works are not pre-meditated, although they have an inbuilt sense of narrativity. In fact, they can be described as a documentation of a journey through her subconscious feelings and responses to a particular scene she encounters in her daily life. These feelings are translated into strokes and washes, resulting in images that may relate to universal emotions such as anger, sadness, happiness, contemplation, etc. She hopes that the audience will have fun in deciphering how these moods are visually evoked by the works. She also believes that there may be something she is not consciously aware of but which the audience can nevertheless relate to.

Once inspired, Quek would paint continuously on the same theme for days and weeks, the variation of the images being dependent on her mood and the environment. Her zeal for working would very often exhaust all the paper supplies available to her. With such great productivity, she sometimes has to discard the less successful outcomes⁷. To help her identify the works within a series, each piece is labeled with a number to differentiate the order of her execution.

Series 1-4 are done after a storm and narrate the vastness of space and 'absolute emptiness' between heaven (represented by the upper stroke) and earth (lower stroke). An intermingling of physical and mental states fuse to form these pictures. As one proceeds through the series, one could observe that the earth starts to erupt and slowly, 'it begins to bleed' and evolve into light red valleys and skies - when the pigment red is added into the works. In fact, red is the only color that Quek uses to mark 'the various moods passionately, be it lingering happiness or severe sadness'.

The story continues with the *Pondering Series* - a contemplative piece of work that arises from her observation of the night sky while she was waiting for a taxi. She realized that the night sky was not monotonously black. Instead, rays of moonlight sipping through the dark clouds created the effect of a subtle tonal variation in the night sky. This is reflected by the tonal qualities of the ink as it interacts with the paper.

The *Shouting Series* provides a contrasting mood to the other more sedate and contemplative works. It is almost Pollock-like with the energetic, unreserved throwing of ink on the paper. It makes one wonder if Quek is being 'swept away by some new waves of moods!'

It is noted that her presentation of works are 'westernized' (not hanging scrolls) but yet 'traditional' in a way as the works are first mounted by the Chinese painting mounting technique called tuodi and then specially mounted again by glue on the panels by experts. A self-curated show, Quek feels that it is limited by a lack of resources, such as panels. She was also unable to show the series adequately in a sequential manner due to a lack of wall space.

Quek sees herself continuing her exploration in Chinese ink. As Mr Chua remarks⁸, 'it is also likely that the artists who started to use Chinese ink as only a medium, when faced with the critical aesthetic requirements or issues relating to Chinese cultural discourse, might see the need to further develop their mastery of the technical elements of Chinese ink painting. This path of development may eventually connect with the path taken by the traditional Chinese ink painters', it is therefore interesting to see how Quek's works develop in future. □

7. Wu Qiji, *Moodscaapes*, zōNow Section, Culture, pg 6, Lianhe Zaobao, Singapore Press Holdings, 25 February 2002.

8. Chua Ek Kay, *Chinese Ink Painting in Singapore: the Challenges in the 21st Century*, Histories,Identities,Technologies,Spaces Singapore Art Today, Noka Singapore Art 2001, National Arts Council and Singapore Art Museum, 2001

