

Chua Ek Kay - Then and Now

by Marjorie Chu

Chua Ek Kay began his career as a Chinese brush and ink painter. Having received a long and thorough formal training from his teacher Fan Chang Tien, Ek Kay can expertly demonstrate the major techniques in manipulating brush and ink: decisive strokes for bamboo; twists and turns of the brush for old, gnarled plum trees; fluid and gentle strokes for the leaves of orchid plants; dry “flying white” brush strokes for rocks; and random “expressive ink” strokes for chrysanthemum.

To be able to understand and paint like one’s master is only the beginning. When Ek Kay first learnt to paint, he practised the techniques that he learnt from his master and painted the classical subjects such as still life and landscapes. However, the ultimate goal is to digest what one has learnt, and to then develop one’s own personal style and philosophy as an artist.

After thirty years of study in Chinese brush painting, Ek Kay’s technique, without question, flows with confidence, but he felt he needed to expand his horizon to think beyond the limitations of a Chinese Scholar.

The Chinatown series and beyond

In the early 1990s, Ek Kay spent several years studying painting in the visual arts departments of the University of Tasmania and the University of Western Sydney in Australia for the much needed comparative study of eastern and western concepts in painting. When he returned from Australia he went through a very painful period of adjustment. After a long period of search, he realised that his thinking had broadened and that the brush will always remain as his tool of universal art language. What he wishes to express in his painting is more important than whatever medium he uses. He admires the Zen style of painting of the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.) and admits that his model for good brushwork is to be found in the calligraphy carved onto stone plaques of the Wei Dynasty (219-580 A.D.). He likes brushwork to be powerful and expressive: the stroke must give the feeling of being carved into stone.

Of all his training in the use of Chinese brush, “expressive ink” is the most important to Ek Kay. Fan Chang Tien taught Ek Kay to be expressive in whatever subject matter he chose, be it a vase, trees, flowers or a rock. There must be rhythm within each stroke and each dot. There must be a gradation of black within black. Chua Ek Kay uses the technique of expressive ink for more than the simple depiction of subject matter.

The scenes of old shop-houses and crowded, bustling side streets of Chinatown in Singapore remind Ek Kay of the calligraphic strokes carved into stone of the Wei Dynasty. Such scenes thus conceived became the signature style of Ek Kay’s Chinatown paintings. He uses powerful ink for the structures in the foreground and lively dots for the modern buildings in the background. There are other “silk like” strokes pulled across the painting to soften the bold and dark strokes. Ek Kay also pointed out to me that his Chinatown paintings often include dark doorways for which he uses only a few strokes of very dark ink. These black patches are purposeful and deliberate, suggesting activity beyond the doorway.

In 1991, Chua Ek Kay won the United Overseas Bank Painting of the Year Grand Prize with his painting of a Chinatown street scene. When this painting was singled out by the foreign judges, I realised that a Chinese painting using ink, paper and brush could transcend China to be recognised as part of the Southeast Asian language of art. In the following years, Chinatown continued to be a source of inspiration for Ek Kay. Its disorganised, rambling and chaotic setting inspires him to be more and more expressive with his brush. Ek Kay finds character and history in Chinatown, and he tries to express the confusion and sounds in abstract terms.

Chua Ek Kay’s *Other Yellow Door* is one of the experiments of abstract style extracted from his Chinatown paintings. He saw a yellow banner over a shop-house doorway. He was fascinated by the colour of the banner

so he decided to paint only the yellow using the “pouring ink” technique. As he pushed the liquid from the bowl onto the paper, he simultaneously used the brush to drive the colour around the paper in the shape of a door.

Rice paper never lies. To pour colour onto the paper is only halfway through the process of creating a painting. The other half of the process is the use of the brush to spread the colour within the shape, and it is this movement of the brush that gives the yellow door its form and its vitality. *Other Yellow Door* has a feeling of solidity and Chua Ek Kay has perfectly positioned the door in relation to the rest of the white space.

Beyond Chinese Landscape Painting

Chinese brush painters consider landscape to be the most important subject in their painting repertoire. It is a Chinese scholarly pastime to paint, write poetry and enjoy music, wine and tea. They imagine themselves to be dwelling in the mountains, close to the clouds and the heavens. The rule of thumb for composing a scholar’s landscape painting is: “ten foot for mountains, one foot for trees, one inch for house and one-tenth of an inch for man.”

Scholars, especially during the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, considered themselves the elite of society and indulged in the reclusive pastime of painting. Numerous calligraphic disciplines and techniques evolved during these periods.

The format of a Chinese landscape painting is often dictated by the size and shape of the paper used, which is most often long and rectangular, or higher than it is wide. Examples of a vertical format landscape can be found in Chua Ek Kay’s paintings entitled *Homage to Shi Tao*, *Islandscape* and *Island and Beyond* and he uses a horizontal format in *Return from Shanghai*.

A classical Chinese landscape painting incorporates numerous styles of brush work to describe the various elements of water, mountains, trees and figures. These different brush strokes include “hemp lines”, “axe-cuts”, “hook and nail”, “flying white” and “moss like dots”. In Chua Ek Kay’s painting entitled *Homage to Shi Tao* the spaces indicate void or distance.

Ek Kay has a favourite brush made of mountain goat hair which has been with him through thick and thin and, in time, the hairs have shed, with only a few strands remaining. Ek Kay has not succeeded in his numerous attempts at trimming down other brushes in order to recreate another trusty brush, nor has he found a ready-made replacement for it, even in China. This brush swings, bends and curls at Ek Kay’s every whim and fancy. All the soft lines of the Chinatown scenes and the cracks and veins of rocks were painted with that balding brush. Such lines are known as “silkworm spinning silk” lines; the lines are soft but they don’t break, they are strong but not rigid.

Ek Kay has another favourite brush which is fat-bellied. The fat belly holds water like a reservoir. His fat brush performs two functions. When he bends it like a horn he uses the heel of the brush to give a dry rubbed treatment to his paper, and he uses the point of the brush for lines. *Lotus Horizon* is an example of dry and expressive brush work. In his Chinatown paintings, the walls are done by the heel of the brush and the outlines of the roofs and structures of the building are done by the tip of the same brush.

When Ek Kay paints, he selects his subject and then goes through long periods of searching to find the approach which best expresses his feelings through the subject. He always recognises a build-up of emotion when he has the urge to paint. Ek Kay told me, “To prepare myself, I clear my mind as far as possible and I pretend that nothing extraordinary is going to happen. I do not even attempt to think about painting. At about 10 o’clock in the evening, I drive to my studio, take up paper, brush and ink, turn on some music and then I paint non-stop as if in a trance. By 4 o’clock in the morning when I stop painting, I am too tense and terrified to even look at my finished work.”

The scroll moulder is then instructed to go to his studio to pick up the work that Ek Kay had done the night before. Sometimes it might be in three pieces: rice paper tears easily when the brush is very wet or when Ek

Kay applies too much pressure. If one sees a newly-completed piece of brushwork done on rice paper before it has been mounted, one would think it was a piece of an old handkerchief.

That was how Ek Kay's *Vivaldi's Four Seasons* series was painted. He created them while listening to a recording of Vivaldi's music. These works rate very highly amongst Ek Kay's most memorable works to date. As he painted and the music changed, Ek Kay's tempo and rhythm changed. *Spring* was light, dancing and casual. *Summer* was more intense. The most dramatic was *Autumn*: in anticipation of winter, the feeling of this work was very sombre. Finally, the rhythm of *Winter* was melancholy and forlorn. I have two smaller versions from the same series done after the large suite of *Vivaldi's Four Seasons*, namely, *Vivaldi's Autumn* and *Vivaldi's Winter*.

Chua Ek Kay and I have discussed these paintings and his source of inspiration. He explained that his travels to the Northern Territory of Australia and the desert towns of Shekhavati in Rajasthan made him more conscious of space. He wanted to embrace the space so as to seek new direction in his paintings, to interpret the limitless void. Ek Kay tried to "put himself" into the emptiness with dots or fine brush strokes to fill the silence. The sounds of silence of the Northern Territory and sometimes a flight of birds in the evening suggested to him a method of expressing the emptiness, by filling it with light fleeting gestures and dots such as the *Vivaldi's Seasons* series.

Travels throughout Asia

I have organised several field trips with artists. In 1997 I took a group of artists to the Northern Territory, Australia. Different aspects of the Northern Territory gave differing inspiration to the artists. Chua Ek Kay was very thoughtful throughout the trip. He made sketches of trees, shrubs and earth formations, elements that were foreign to him and interesting enough to be documented. He was absorbed by the tranquillity, vast open spaces and the timelessness of the ancient rocks. Upon his return he began to work on a series of landscapes that were minimal in concept, often just dots or rocks judiciously placed on white rice paper. Examples of this style can be found in the paintings entitled *Lotus Pond*, *A Space of Self-Reflection* and *Season of Harvest*.

Chua Ek Kay also joined me on the field trip with artists to Shekhavati, Rajasthan, India in 1999. Our travel guide was accustomed to tourists who were content to travel to a site, get down for sightseeing and souvenir shopping, then fall asleep in the bus until the next stop. He had never encountered a group of people like us. Members of our group would continually ask the driver to make the most "unexpected" stops. The Indian guides were totally captivated by our enthusiasm and they felt more relaxed after the first few days, knowing that we enjoyed everything we saw. Our most memorable stop was at a mud-brick pyramid "installation". It was an ingenious way of baking bricks by piling them into a mound to the height of ten men. Chua Ek Kay's photograph captured this construction very vividly.

India has something for every artist. Chua Ek Kay compares the colours of Rajasthan to that of Nepal and the Himalayas. He says, "Even now I haven't really digested the Indian trip artistically because I think I have to deal with it very carefully. The experience reinforces previous visits to Nepal. It takes time to transfer the experience into practice. I want to allow myself a longer time to digest and also to look at the richness of the experiences that I have gained from these trips."

On the field trip with artists that I organised to Bali in 1996, Chua Ek Kay sketched at the lotus pond in Ubud. He summed up his experience in Bali as follows: "Bali is a unification of man and nature. I was helplessly attracted by the rhythm of the marketplace, the shore. I was aware of the music and colours of the costumes. I see them and hear them even in my dreams."

The Lotus Pond series and beyond

The paintings of Chua Ek Kay's lotus series are poignant and poetic. Artists portray the lotus from the time young buds and leaves first unfold. They are then challenged by the shape of full-grown leaves defiantly facing

the sun. When the leaves wither and crumble, lotus seed pods emerge. Beneath the leaves and flowers, the stems also change from succulent green to brown. Finally all that remains of the lotus are the withered stems and the reflection in the pond. Ek Kay's soft strokes in the paintings entitled *Reflection with a Melody*, *Reflection - a Misty Morning* and *Weaving A Season of Dreams*, vertical for the stems and horizontal for the reflection, tell a most moving story of a lotus pond.

Sometimes Chua Ek Kay fragments his landscape, lotus pond and waterlily paintings, allowing spaces between the disconnected shapes, resulting in the disconnected shapes seemingly floating in space. The paintings entitled *Soliloquy* and *Of Change and Indulgence* are perfect examples. This new direction is very exciting. It is a break from Ek Kay's previous styles such as the tight compositions of urban Chinatown.

In Ek Kay's early training in Chinese painting, he was taught that colours should be minimally and economically applied. Chinese scholars consider the use of too much colour to be vulgar. Although Ek Kay is very much tempted to use colours in his work, he is still afraid to attempt it. His fascination with colour began after his trips to Nepal and India, especially the trip he made with fellow artists that I organised in 1999. Ek Kay's sketch book included dashes of colour that he wished to recall. His aim was to absorb the atmosphere and the essence and, upon his return, to conceptualise what he had experienced.

Ek Kay's travels to India and Nepal have influenced him more profoundly than simply in the use of bright colours. Spirituality and the silence of vast landscapes are important elements in Ek Kay's philosophy of painting. Like the Zen painters of the Sung Dynasty, he places great importance on the principle of "less is more". This is most apparent in his landscapes and he is very careful and selective when deciding on how best to express a feeling of vastness and timelessness. He realises that he has to remove all unnecessary details from his landscape paintings.

Although many images and experiences of India flash into Ek Kay's mind, he is determined to explore them slowly. He will take his time to unravel these moments, so that he does not lose himself in the process. Whenever he feels that he has gone too far into the realm of spirituality, he goes back to the familiarity of his Chinatown. Ek Kay can wield his brush freely again when he paints the strength and vitality of the old shop-houses, and he gains the necessary confidence to embark on further experiments in a more abstract and conceptual style.

When one looks at the wonderful paintings such as *Light in the Jungle*, one can understand how Ek Kay has gone a long way beyond the confines of the Chinese edict of painting a perfect stone, a perfect bird, a perfect tree or a perfect flower. His technically perfect brush strokes have now moved on to an abstract and conceptual painting style.

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