

Annex 2 – Biographies of selected artists

Deng Qichang

Deng Qichang was born in 1992 in Shantou, China. He graduated from NAFA majoring in Chinese ink painting in 2013. He has participated in several exhibitions in Singapore and currently resides and works in Singapore.

Dreamland Series is a fusion of modern and traditional landscapes, featuring city life as a central element amid floating rock formations. While Deng's earlier works within the series made use of dull and cool colour tones, his latest creations offer greater colour variation and contrast between the shades of black, grey and white. Rocks are painted with a diluted ink or grey wash 淡墨 to create a sense of light reflecting from the surface. Trees are added to give a lush quality to the craggy and precipitous cliff façades that seem to emerge out of thin air, from fantasy and imagination.

Deng is continually evolving his art practice. With future plans to research on tree species native to Southeast Asia and to experiment with the blue and green colours found in Song Dynasty landscape paintings, Deng's process of creation is multi-directional and compelling.

Ho Seok Kee

Born in 1963 in Singapore, Ho Seok Kee graduated with a Diploma in Fine Art from NAFA in 2016. She was under the tutelage of respected master ink painters Wee Beng Chong and Tan Kee Sek, and is currently pursuing a Fine Art degree with Loughborough University, UK/Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore. Her latest work goes beyond flat painted surfaces to site specific installation.

Critical Mass delves into social issues such as immigration and its effects on the collective consciousness of communities in Singapore. Ho employed coir, a naturally intertwining fibre from coconut husk, to represent the interconnectedness between people and societal systems. A buoyant and resilient fruit, the coconut is capable of floating to distant shores. Similarly, immigrants of various ethnic backgrounds migrated to Singapore and set roots in a new land.

The installation consists of three layers of silk, hung from the ceiling in an overlapping manner to exploit the translucency of the fabric. This creates a physical "white space", akin to the concept of blank space in traditional Chinese painting. The centrepiece features a map of Singapore on one side and the word "home" in Chinese seal script on the reverse. Concealed stitches hold the work in place to signify undercurrents of unhappiness due to perceived loss of job opportunities resulting from the influx of foreigners. Ho's work is thought-provoking and relevant to our times, yet grounded in Chinese ink practices from an ancient tradition.

Hong Sek Chern

Hong Sek Chern was born in 1967 in Singapore. She graduated with a Diploma in Fine Art from NAFA in 1995 and an MA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths College, University of London in 1998. Hong has held 9 solo exhibitions and participated in various group exhibitions both locally and overseas. In 2000, she was a recipient of the prestigious Young Artist Award

from the National Arts Council. She is well-known for her portrayal of urban settings and cityscapes in Chinese ink, which frequently employ drawing techniques such as linear, non-linear and multi-points perspective.

Hong's latest experimentation in Chinese ink goes beyond traditional applications of ink on rice paper and into the realm of two and three-dimensional existence. The Untitled series of paintings make use of materials to carve a sense of space on an otherwise flat surface. The papers are folded to create thickness and to mimic the effect of bas-relief. By reconstructing and manipulating surface textures, the viewer's experience of an ink painting becomes more than just brushwork or imagery, but a negotiation of space and forms that hint at the sculptural. No longer confined to pictorial subject matter, Hong's reinvention of the medium is based on a strongly conceptual and visual language that subverts traditional Chinese ink aesthetics.

Lee Ju-Lyn

Born in Singapore in 1982, Lee Ju-Lyn is currently pursuing a Diploma in Fine Art at NAFA. Motivated by ideas and making connections, especially between Western and Chinese ones, she approaches existential and wenren 文人 reflections through combinations of writing and visual art.

The Way is Not in the Sky 《借周易自勉》 is a convergence of two seemingly distinct poles in Chinese and Western art: calligraphy and conceptual art. The title of the work is part of an anonymous quote, commonly misattributed to the Buddha, "The way is not in the sky. The way is in the heart." The installation includes a written piece, "天道酬勤" which literally means "the way of the Heavens is reward for diligence", a trait highly valued in Chinese ink arts. The paper sculptures are made from the artist's practice papers accumulated over the past six years of calligraphy training, and are folded in the same manner as paper offerings to the Daoist Jade Emperor. Drawing an allusion between calligraphy and religious practice, both acts are repetitive, meditative, devotional and self-cultivating. Buddhist and Daoist ideas on impermanence and letting go are also implied as the papers are intended for burning.

Nocturne 《水与月》 features lotuses, a typical subject in Chinese ink, but rendered here in a cubist-influenced abstract form. The inscription is extracted from Red Cliff Poetic Prose 《赤壁赋》 by Song dynasty literati Su Shi. It roughly translates to mean: "Do you know what is it about the water and moon? One is ever flowing, but will never be exhausted; the other waxes and wanes, but will never disappear." This work expresses sentiments about the changeability and impermanence of life, as part of the natural cycle of life. Though a lotus may wilt, new buds shall also form.

Cut for whom to see? 《借“See”瓜 自勉》 was completed in the course of Lee's studies and reflects upon the relevance of Chinese ink paintings and its waning popularity in modern times. The inscriptions on the painting "切给谁看" literally means "Cut for whom to see?" The irony is implied in the way the verb "see" is used instead of "eat" which would have been obviously referring only to the subject of the painting. The artist's resolution of the inquiries is suggested by a small "idle seal" on the left side of the painting that says, "自强不息" meaning, "self-improvement without rest", which concludes that the practice of painting, is after all for the sake of self-cultivation.

Nur Hikmah Binte Mohamed Tahir

Nur Hikmah Binte Mohamed Tahir, also known as Emma, was born in Singapore in 1995. She graduated from NAFA in 2017 with a Diploma in Fine Art, majoring in Chinese ink painting. She was a recipient of the Hokkien Huay Kuan Arts and Cultural Award in 2015 and 2016. As a Malay practitioner of Chinese ink painting, Hikmah encourages cross-cultural exchange to explore racial attitudes, beliefs and sentiments through the blending of two seemingly incompatible cultures.

We are More Than Our Veil is a self-portrait that addresses the controversy of the hijab, through the eyes of the artist. After enduring rejection from companies, curious questions from innocent children and insensitive reactions by others, the artist's work is a cathartic representation of her experiences. The seated figure appears to stare at the viewer stoically, as if inviting us to clarify any doubts we may have. The Arabic inscription translates to "You belong to your veil", a reminder that Muslim women possess the right to wear a hijab in this country, where the rhetoric against discrimination can be exemplified by the much touted phrase "Regardless of race, language or religion". The result is confronting, arresting and visually engaging.

In an era that is becoming increasingly secular, Hikmah's work is an example of how we may turn to art to transcend beliefs, to address stereotypes that may cloud public perceptions, and ultimately, to reach a higher level of mutual understanding.

Ernest Seah Chien Soon

Singapore born Seah has been in the art and design field for over 2 decades. He has also performed on Broadway, television and movie screens, and was lead interior designer for Ethan Allen in New York, and Art Director for high fashion brands and magazines before deciding to pursue formal art training at NAFA. Seah is currently a 2nd year student majoring in Chinese ink.

The work depicts a congested cityscape that is a metaphor of the artist's life and his emotional and psychological state of mind. The twist and turns of roads in a labyrinth of entrances and exits are analogous to the options available – to carry on with the obvious, or to step back and look at the bigger picture that may perhaps, lead to the discovery of new destinations.

Inspired by Mondrian, the earthy shades of red, blue and yellow represent the human traits of inquisitiveness and discovery. The deep black and greys in the Chinese ink strokes reduces the landscape into simple rectilinear forms, one that expresses the artist's uneasiness amidst the underlying urban structure of reality.