

Annex 3 – Exhibition Essay

Poon Lian: 50 years

“I believe we should not only take care in elements of Western painting. If there are good points in Indian painting, Egyptian painting, Persian painting, or the masterpieces of other countries ancient or modern, we should absorb all of them as well, as nourishment for our national painting....In the twentieth century, with science progressing and communications developing...I hope this new national painting becomes world painting.”

Gao Jianfu, 高剑父 (1879 – 1951)¹

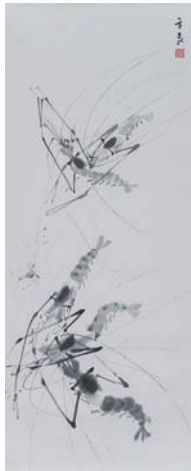
In the early part of the 20th century, a development in painting that became known as the Lingnan School 岭南画派 had begun to assert its influences across an increasingly modernising China of the first republic. The artists, poets, calligraphers Ju Chao 居巢 and Ju Lian 居廉 were the early pioneers who established the evolving style of this Lingnan School, in the spirit of an early Qing painter, Yun Shouping 恽寿平 who himself innovated a more vibrant, loose interpretation of the established *mogu* 没骨 or ‘boneless’ style in ink painting. The Lingnan painters eschewed the rigidity of the more academic traditions in painting, and instead turned, in a Renaissance fashion, to studies from life, reviewing at close proximity, nature and its detailed splendour. This deep interest in a life of plants, flowers, birds and nature in general, allowed for a new infusion of freedom and liveliness in the ‘new’ art of their times. For the Ju cousins, it meant a reflection of their native surroundings of the Pearl River Delta (Panyu 番禺), where they lived and created work, offering a vitality and authenticity that was counterpoint to the slavish if scholarly imitations of prime artforms in the earlier, much venerated generations of poets and painters.² Later, Gao Jianfu 高剑父 became the key proponent of the Lingnan tradition, through his art but also through his writings. Like several artists of his generation, he travelled to Japan where he was exposed to the modern trajectories of fine art within Japanese art but also that which had flowed in from the West, particularly Europe. The Lingnan school dominated the early 20th century in Chinese artistic development for many reasons, though not without contest. The search for a new expression in art to reflect the modern age of China and its ‘national’ logic demanded an equivalent worldliness, liberty and new knowledge. For the artists of Gao’s generation, this idea of assimilation and experimentation allowed for portals of discovery to fuel artistic innovation, but also concretise the uncertainties of the modern age and the future as being met with fearlessness and an open spirit.

Between 1911 and 1935, the throes of the first republic in China invigorated the discourse for national identity as threaded through the cultural domain. The first few art academies established in the South but also the centres of international influences such as Shanghai and Hangzhou provided a platform of rigorous debate on modernity in art practices as found in reviewing the large and deep heritage of China and understanding the new concepts from western modernism. Academic Chinese painting in

¹ Chan, Kwok-bun (ed), *Hybrid Hong Kong*, Routledge 2012, p.129

² It has been noted variously that the Ju cousins were avid students of nature, observing and studying the biological diversity of flowers, plants and avian species of Panyu, from where they hailed, the heart of the Pearl River Delta. This kind of daily observation and experience were brought to bear on the established genres of ‘bird flower’ 花鸟 paintings. It is said the Ju cousins reinvigorated this genre of bird flower painting by drawing directly from the uniqueness of their native ecology.

its various formalities came under scrutiny with frames of realism, post-modern abstract and expressionist art genres. Several artists who trained and began their practices during this catalytic era felt pressed to search for new influences and inspirations. Many of them found themselves on a journey out of China, towards Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, then jointly known with modern Malaysia as Malaya. These artists who arrived in the Straits came via Penang, Malacca and Johor. Among them were the pioneer generation of Singapore artists we know today, such as Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Liu Kang and Cheong Soo Pieng. They carried with them the weight of their own artistic legacies, including the more recent upheavals concerning modern Chinese art among other things, and certainly, the influences of the Lingnan School.

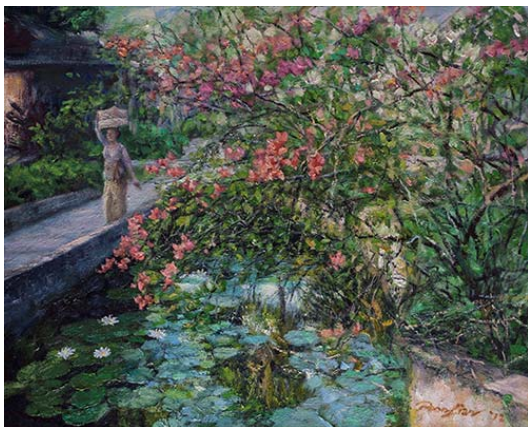


Shrimps, c.1960

The artist Poon Lian was born in Singapore and studied at Chinese High School where he also took up art classes. Many artists who had arrived from China taught art in mainstream schools, especially in those schools that had been set up by the various merchant and dialect communities to cater to the education of the children of those merchants and businessmen who had themselves arrived in this region for economic reasons. Poon Lian studied under Chen Wen Hsi while at Chinese High, but also went on to study Western painting at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, where he was exposed to the tutelage of works by Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Chong Swee, among others.

The Nanyang Academy of Fine Art, founded in 1938, was staffed by Chinese artists who were themselves trained in both Chinese and Western traditions of fine art. Art was a matter of life and living, and the formal setting of an academy was in part to draw from the legacies of historical practices, and in part to seek new inspirations from the local environment and its existing indigenous culture. The émigré literati and painters arrived in Singapore and thus established their presence through cultural expressions and exchange in proliferation of their common bonds. They also sought to amalgamate their local experiences and invariably, discover a new aesthetic and perhaps a new artistic style that reflected their presence and habitation of this region. The prevailing aesthetic that Poon Lian was perhaps exposed to through this, was one of newness and experimentation – that the way forward was not simply about individuality but about seeking the new from the old, and bringing attention to traditions by reinvention and relevance. Simply put, to accept the rudiments of traditional art, and attempt to slowly stretch the accepted parameters to create lifelines of discovery and the unexpected.

Through his decades of artmaking, Poon Lian has touched on different styles as well as mediums. He is adept at drawing and sketching; and has the formal capacity of an academic realist, in the way he creates portraits and still life works from oil. His landscapes are occasionally large and demonstrate the acute technicalities of composition and colour fields. His brushwork is able to present the gauges of light and shadow, scale and texture. Equally, he is adept in ink painting, parlaying a variety of traditional genres and experimental techniques. He understands the depth of monochrome and the facility of negative and positive spaces. His coloured ink works create life observations but also assimilate a thought process propelled by the imagination. In the last twenty years, he has travelled regularly, to cities, towns and familiar locales in China, Taiwan, Nepal, Cambodia, Thailand, Bali and Malaysia. Many of his works are landscapes, but he also features people in his painting. The summary of his experiences cannot be relegated to a single theme as such, but to how he elects to imbibe the daily rhythms of what he observes and reflect that with the specific choices he makes as he creates his art.



Flower Pond (Bali), 2012



Temple of Bayon, 2012

Some of the recent large pieces featuring locals of Lijiang and landscapes of Nepal are good examples. The market going ladies of Lijiang are pressed into a horizontal space, physically heaving as the briskness of the moment would dictate. Lijiang sits Northwest in Yunnan, an historical town at the passage of the early Silk Road. Geographically, the plateaus that extend outward from Qinghai and Tibet, and southward from Yunnan and Guizhou converge in Lijiang. The sensibility of Lijiang is crucible, small-town quaintness, but also on the cusp of mighty expanses and the aerial perspective over the region. A community of farmers and labourers, Lijiang depends on agriculture and mining for its economy, while its heritage status creates healthy tourism to bolster their economy. Poon Lian's large painting of the market goers seems to gesture to the humble and fertile bounty of Lijiang, its people unchanged by modern frills and technology. A second piece in monochrome creates greater insight: somewhat nostalgic in its use of the black ink, dictating scale and depth through intensity and lighter shades. The white of the paper is both the background and time passing or that which has passed. There is movement, but also stillness in this work. More so than the coloured versions, this piece reflects Lijiang as both vibrant here and now, but historically significant, a vestige of the ancient world and the Chinese common ancestries.



Going to the Market (Lijiang), 2013

If the Lijiang work features people to structure the composition, then the large Nepal landscape does the opposite. The view from the Southwest yields the magnificent range of Annapurna, centering on Mount Machhapuchchhre, whose clear 'fishtail' like profile reveals itself through the gentle illumination from the East. The location of this peak toward a lower level at the South allows for a steep vertical face at a short distance. In prime position for both breadth and depth, at sunrise, Poon Lian captures the last moments of darkness, where light bearing dwellings across the landscape create a sensation of peppered blinks in the inky blackness. The scatter of light draws the eye to the bronzed glow of the peaks, where the sky has begun to transform into a shadowy cusp of dawn. This landscape is not a matter of traditional foreground, middle ground and background, where the light and shade determines scale and perspective. Instead, Poon Lian measures his light and dark by the changing sensation created by time. The peaks are immortal – but time stands still for no one. Time moves, and compels the ink to flow over rocky faces, deepened valleys and striations of the waterways. Inhabitants of the land become somewhat incidental, cast in a universal blend of changing light that opens up the earth and sky to become one. The Nepal sunrise is a stunning blend of Eastern life of light determining pigmentation, and Western composition determining the spatial extent.



Sunrise (Nepal), 2012

The concept of 'Nanyang' is often misunderstood as embodying the fusion of Chinese culture and local experiences found in Southeast Asia. 'Nanyang' 南洋 so named for the geographical relationship of Southeast Asia to the South of China, is literally the 'south seas'. Academically, it is a straightforward reference to the physical region, while intellectually and philosophically, it provides a subtext of meaning that invokes the southward migration of Chinese merchants, literati and artists as well as the historical premise of the maritime industry within Southeast Asia. The region is defined by communities as well as ethnicities. For several thousand years however, even with abeyance to sovereignties of various Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms, the region's cultural profile has remained somewhat fluid and evolving, literally fusing indigenous and pagan practices with religious philosophies that have circulated over those thousands of years. The employment of the term

'Nanyang' can be traced back to the late Qing dynasty when an understanding had been established regarding the existence of Chinese communities outside of China – referring primarily to the phenomenon of overseas Chinese migration for economic and other reasons. In some literature, Nanyang is synonymous with modern day Singapore. But broadly speaking, when we say 'Nanyang' we are really discussing the region of Southeast Asia, and all the nations and kingdoms of this region.

That said, the concept of 'Nanyang' style is slightly more problematic in its transparency. Recent literature associates this stylistic definition with a 1952 trip made by pioneer Chinese artists Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang. Bali is often cited as the locale of this art making journey. However, it was not the only destination for these artists. The 1952 sojourn included coastal and other areas east of Malaysia, bound by the South China sea. Bali is highlighted perhaps because the artists derived the greatest inspiration from its idyllic charisma, hitherto unexplored even in the wake of colonialism and the Asian diaspora in general. This style of art is often defined as a mix of east and west; incorporating Chinese influences and the rudiments of Parisian modernism seen through the eyes of the Chinese pioneers, who themselves were trained in both Western and Chinese traditions. The mix was intensified by invoking the tropical colours and unique experiences of the region's indigenous cultures and communities.

Poon Lian's paintings provide indicators and hallmarks of 'Nanyang' style, and the phrase defines his identity as an artist more so than simply the physical characteristics of his artwork. If we extrapolate the concept of 'Nanyang' to refer to the Southward journey of discovery and a search for an artistic practice or formality reflective of this region, then we are better able to appreciate Poon Lian's art in the context of Singapore, Chinese and regional art history. Nanyang cannot be construed as a conscious effort, but an imbibing that is innate, constant and evolving. Poon Lian did not set out to create Nanyang style artworks, but his practice has led him along various paths that have at various junctions, coalesced the possibilities of how Nanyang is embodied in art.

Two 2014 works offer some insight here, a painting of the kampong in Buangkok and a still life work with several items. Buangkok, loosely translated as 'united' after the company name of the rubber plantation in the area, is home to the last surviving kampong or village in Singapore. Established in the 1950s, Kampong Buangkok was home to a handful of Chinese labourers and farmers, as well as Malay fishermen who plied the Punggol coast facing the Straits of Johor. The Sungei Punggol ran through marshland and mangrove swamps, past the estuary toward the northeastern coast of Singapore. Today, Buangkok is hemmed in by reclaimed land and modern housing estates, alongside a canalised Punggol waterway. The kampong is still home to old wooden houses, painted vivid colours surrounded by lush flowering plants and greenery. A dirt track connects the various homes from the main modern roads. Historically susceptible to floods, Kampong Buangkok still holds its own against such risks in the modern day. Poon Lian's painting captures this apparently isolated rural setting, a grove of tropical greenery with single storey dwellings. Several tall coconut trees poke skyward into a blue yonder, the soft blue touched with white wisps of cloud. It is a unique sensation of a modern sky unsullied by the darkened masts of tall buildings or a heady metropolitan atmosphere. Hidden away, Poon Lian's kampong Buangkok is like an oasis not simply of the village alone, but of a tropical palette brought to life in the richness of its cleansed and still vibrant idyll. If there is a quality of Nanyang light, it is this, found in this painting. A blue and green and luminosity that is freshly wrought, understood and captured only by those who stand inside this temporary, erstwhile paradise. The softness of the brush reflects the sensation of vintage memory, while every facet of green, brown and

blue seeps through leaves, foliage, rock and sky. The painting is both a representation and a feeling, a tribute and a truth.



Kampong Buangkok, 2014

Second to this is the still life work that comprises a selection of a ceramic horse, a reproduction of Auguste Rodin's the Thinker, a smiling auspicious figurine of portly status and his wish-granting fan, a closed manual as well as an open manual revealing stone rubbings of calligraphy lines.

A still life work is an academic exercise but also a largely overlooked genre of somewhat unknown origin. There is an assembly of objects that is presented and dutifully copied from real life to canvas and surface. The practice of still life dates back to ancient Greek and Roman civilisations, where objects of flowers in vases, food and other items were painted onto the walls of rooms as part of murals.³ Still life as we know today takes its cue from the revival of this genre in Northern Europe around the 17th century, when religious fervour was in decline during the time of the Reformation. As such, religious depictions in paintings were superseded by choices of more secular, domestic objects. From this articulation, there also developed a semantic culture of symbolism derived from the presentation and arrangement of objects, the more famous of which is known today as 'vanitas'. The works of 'vanitas' often show the arrangement of objects that remind one of the brevity of life (skulls and dying flowers or the passing of time like an hour glass). Regardless of symbolic value or other hidden narratives in the arrangement of simple objects, still life works allow for the artist to exercise direct representation from life, the resemblance of these objects grouped together under a certain light. Shapes, light and dark bring form to life; what is seen stimulates the memory and imagination.

Poon Lian's still life provides this life giving articulation, in his assembly of somewhat unrelated objects which are in concert, the sum of the artist's experiences. Modern art and technique reside in Rodin's thinker; historical legacy and stylisation reside in the horse. The manuals are a reference to the erudite, and also refer to depth (of life, of thought, of history, of identity). The figurine is a token of popular culture but also the present time; a direct reference to the role of objects and symbols in our lives, but also the life of a Chinese gentleman in the present day. The beauty of this painting is that still life can be read in a variety of ways, depending on the meaning behind certain objects, our recognition of those objects and what they represent in various cultures. The artist paints a medley of these items in part as an academic exercise but also to summarise how our consumption of life experiences can be traced in the things we choose to own and live with, the things we place in our view within our living environment, the things we like to put on our shelves as small tokens or

³ Norman Bryson, Looking at the overlooked: Four essays on still life painting, Reaktion Books London 1990, p.17

souvenirs of the different milestones in our own journeys. It goes without saying that Poon Lian's technique is harnessed to its best in creating this picture perfect still life. As a still life it still retains the clarity of its own mimesis, without attempting to falsify reality as a photographic style might. As a trained painter draws and paints the objects before him, every brushstroke becomes both a part of who he was and is, as well as a part of the newly created work.

The breadth of Poon Lian's repertoire is unmistakable. He has through two decades, focussed on the richness of ink painting. Between 1970s and the 1990s, his ink work has tracked both studies of the Lingnan school, drawing from the briskness of life and nature as well as his local environment. Sparrows, chickens, fish, shrimps, mountains and rivers capture the versatility of his brush, the variant textures of his ink washes and finer lines. His life studies are vibrant and carry the lightness of touch, clearly an artist intent of practicing his discipline yet making anew, from the archives of time and culture. His more traditional pieces such as wandering monks (1970) and the shore in the evening (1994) show how the gap in time has intensified his ability to imbue layers of his technique with new narrative and new ambience. Space and composition are guided carefully by visual acuity, but also with the mind; the imagination of some collective of historical landscapes near and far, becoming a place of contemporary reflection for the modern painter.



Wandering Monks, c.1970



The Shore in the Evening, 1994

He is the first to admit also his desire to experiment with and pursue his oil paintings and acrylic pigments side by side with his ink endeavours. Many of his landscape pieces in oil bear the same creative process. Two recent paintings of the picturesque Li river in Guangxi allow for both technique and composition to develop his personal experiences. The View of the elephant trunk hill at the turn starts with a lone fisherman at foreground, building up a jewel like transparency of the water toward the magnificent rock face topped with the lush greenery. The sky is but a token in the corner; the entire space is pressed into this expanse of glass like water holding us captive in this view. Our line of sight is drawn left with a line of white birds the scale of which cannot be fully determined. In this ambiguous state, Poon Lian is able to share with us that this is not simply a picture of a landscape, but a moment in time, heaven under heaven, here on this clearly distinctive part of earth in Guilin. The second Li river work is more direct; again, a stacking of the famous Guilin rock faces undulated by the waterway, the sky here, a mere sliver and backdrop for the misty layers of mountains we know Guilin as being famous for. The frame is again close and dramatic. The sensation is one of being brought into the threshold of time and nature, imbibing nothing but all of its beauty that is beyond man.



Poetic Li River, 2014

The dramatic quality of many of Poon Lian's works is a testament to the timeless elements he seeks to concisely reflect in his practice and art making. He is keen to utilise his dexterous abilities for varying mediums to parlay the precise qualities of his experiences, wherever they might be. A mountain might be in ink or oil; people could be in ink or oil; in full colour or monochrome. He might layer his ink and pigments with deep striations or create smooth, translucent layers of responsive light and colour. He might paint and repaint; wet or rewet his paper to change the textures of the previous direction in his brushwork. He may employ perspective or invoke the compositional elements of typical scholarly and historical paintings from Western or Chinese culture. Ultimately, his idea is to find the most appropriate rendering for not only what he sees for the first time, but remembering much of what he has seen and experienced in his many journeys through his life.

Places and people continue to be inspirations for Poon Lian. He persists on reinventing the traditional paradigms of specific mediums, but also always mindful of the rules that propose aesthetic awareness, balance and enlightenment. Working constantly is his best elixir; even through the last five decades, where he has only painted full time in the last 15 years or so. Gainfully employed otherwise at a newspaper and printing press, he never left off painting, sketching and drawing at odd hours, and painting in his free time and weekends. His works are an avid nod to his training, but also the older traditions he inherited from modern masters and pioneers he deeply respected such as Chen Wen Hsi and Chen Chong Swee, themselves great innovators of the ink and watercolour mediums in this region. But innovation is never sufficient; the purpose of reinvention is also to discover self awareness and a sense of refinement, that artistic language that speaks only and of the singular experiences one artist has imbibed over time. He is the vessel for the different stories and visual fields he has ever set eyes on, to transform and transmit not simply representational memory, but the enduring beauty of life at its most inspired.

Even at the dawn of the new republic and criticism held for the traditions of history painting in China, the assertions of scholarly (or more rigid, imitations of) painting were not merely a rejection of Western realism and forms of naturalism seeping their way into the new Chinese art of the first republic. One of the leading members of the Research Society of Chinese Painting, Jin Cheng 金城 (1878 – 1926) had said, "In painting, there is no difference between the old and the new. Without the old, there is not the new. The new evolves from the old. The old, when evolved, becomes new. In sticking to the new, the new thus becomes old. If you bear in mind that there exist both the old and

the new, you will find it difficult to follow any rules when you paint.”⁴ At the root of all practice is the search for something inside, while still holding on to the basics or the compass that steers us forward (backwards, sideways and onward). The modern master Qi Bashi is one quintessential example of the former rural dweller who found himself in maturity, living in the cities he one eschewed. While in Beijing, he still yearned for the charms and lifestyle of a village ambience. He imbued his work with a sense of nostalgia not as a token, but often as a reflection of his increasing self awareness. “Fed up with the experience of worldly affairs, I love more than ever the savour of fresh vegetables,” he once wrote in a poem. In yet another colophon inscribed beside his painting, he ends off, “Everything seems peaceful when observed with a calm mind. The lush greenery of palms makes you feel cool and cosy after a good rain.”⁵



Cooking, 2014



Still Life II, 2014

Poon Lian is able, after 50 years, to bring his mind to the place of peaceful reflection, while still pursuing a deeper perception of the colour experiences he has enjoyed and continues to enjoy, on his many sojourns and in his studio as he practices his painting. His works cannot be defined by a single masterful style or stroke; or a blend that successfully marks a unique signature to call his own. Yet he is the sum of all his paintings, black, white, colour, light and dark, ink or oil. At heart he is the true Nanyang painter seeking his fortunes of the old times. Making paintings that speak to the natives as much as his generation and those closer in his community. Nanyang is not the style of painting, but the experience that has evolved, close to a hundred years since the modern migrations of Chinese artists into this region. As an artist, Poon Lian steps side by side along this path, that threads the brilliant tapestry of who we are in this region.

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⁴ Yang Xin, Richard Barnhart, Nie Chongzheng, James Cahill, Lang Shaojun and Wu Hung; *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Yale University Press 1997, p.308

⁵ Yang Xin, Richard Barnhart, Nie Chongzheng, James Cahill, Lang Shaojun and Wu Hung; *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Yale University Press 1997, p. 309