Kow Leong Kiang
Silent Conversations



Front Cover:
Sea breeze do you remember your promise?
2005
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 120 cm

Silent Conversations

In almost ten years of painting professionally, Kow Leong Kiang's principal subjects have been Malaysian youths or Balinese girls set in idyllic landscapes. Many artists who touch on these themes only manage to produce pictures trapped in nostalgia and exoticism. Kow Leong Kiang's paintings speak through this cacophony of Malaysian kitsch and Balinese clichés with a soft and subtle voice reminiscent of Hoessein Enas' works from the 60s. Besides possessing this charm, the shifting surface and signs in his paintings promises viewers the chance for an intimate and inexhaustible exchange.

This new series springs from Kow Leong Kiang's travels to the East Coast, and the islands of Perhentian and Tioman towards the end of 2004 and beginning of 2005. These tropical locations have never ceased to be a source of inspiration for the artist. Back at his studio, the artist filters through a mountain of digital shots of the land and recomposes them into photo-collages that meet his ideal. The other image the artist reshapes extensively is that of the 17 year-old Malay girl from the East Coast who modeled for him for a day. She too acquires an unimaginable perfection. Pencil sketches are then made to polish the composition some more before painting finally begins. Work is initially slow as he experiments with new ways of hiding realities and revealing illusions. As time goes by, a flow is found and images emerge from layers and layers of finely laid paint. Stripped of their original context and identity, both the land and the girl eventually find a new home and meaning in Kow Leong Kiang's painting.

The sole and central figure of over a dozen finished paintings is "she", gadis Melayu. Who is she now if she is no longer that anonymous island native? Has she transformed into a legendary maiden like Puteri Gunung Ledang? Perhaps. Is she like Intan, the modern cinematic heroine of Yasmin Ahmad's Sepet? Maybe To really know her, one need only to remember that she is a painting — a two-dimensional surface covered in paint. An object though she may be, simple she is not. The artist gives each of his 'object' of obsession a surface that holds layers of beauty and rich symbolism. The work entitled Promise is a good introduction to this subtle language that Kow Leong Kiang's paintings speak. On the left of the diptych, a silhouette of a face is trapped beneath a layer of translucent ochre. She is here more paint than person. Yet we recognize her delicate profile and draw her into existence. A promise fulfilled? On her right, a few simple lines and wash of colours are enough to symbolise the sea, the land, and the sky. Look closer and this illusion sinks unrecognisably back into the picture surface as paint. A promise broken? Here, surface and signs rock back and forth fiercely. In the rest of the series, the movement settles into the gentle sway of drawns.

There is only one painting in which her gaze seems to meet ours. We expect that it will reveal the most about our protagonist. Yet as wide-open as her eyes may be, it still seems impossible to penetrate her thoughts and emotions. An invisible curtain covers these windows. If we relent and seek out the title of the painting, a little shock is in store. 'You never really cared' it declares. Then the specks of light under her eyes change into teardrops while the sensual lips tighten into a stern pout. Everything around her takes on a more sombre tone. The once calm sea hardens into cold amber.

The titles that so strongly affect the mood of the paintings originated from song lyrics of two Chinese rock bands familiar to the artist. The Taiwanese band sang about love while the one from China spoke of politics. Listening to the two albums, Kow Leong Kiang found all the words necessary to describe his then already completed works. Besides serving as a clue to her sentiments, the titles also add new dimensions to the paintings as well. Take for example the piece named 'I won't think of you anymore'. Who is the 'I'? Who is the 'you'? And why was it said? What is offered to us is actually an unfinished dialog with no specified speaker. Adding to this ambiguity is the timeless and nameless setting.

Returning our attention to the paintings, we see "her" looking to the left, to the right, and everywhere except at the viewer. She avoids us to such an extent that it can no longer be explained by shyness or modesty. Is she contemplating a bitter sweet memory or experiencing guilt? Such projections cast her down as a vulnerable girl-child but in turn make us succumb to feelings of friendly sympathy or familial support for her. Now, what if her evasiveness is in fact a show of defiance or indifference? This perspective lends her greater depth and maturity, and allows for tales of more romantic or serious nature to develop. Is she a sweet innocent child, a confused teenage girl, or a sensual and confident young woman? We are thus now left with an open interpretation to what defines the gadis Melayu of our time.

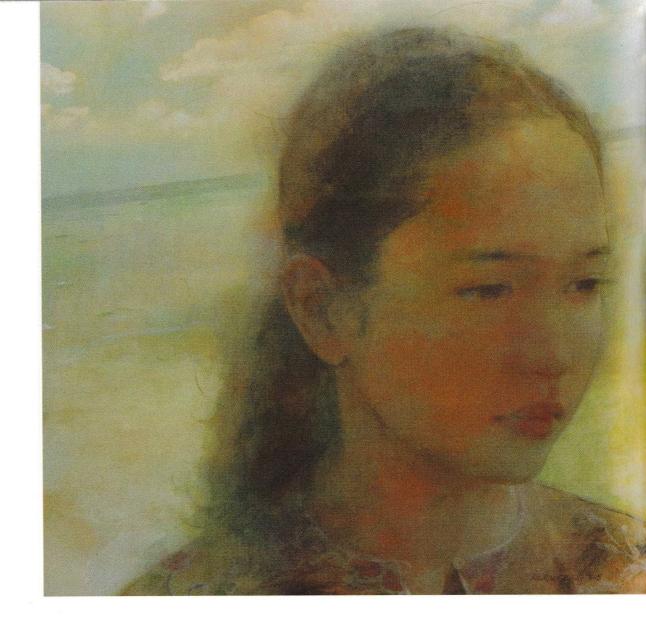
The way our heroine continuously draws questions and rouses sentiments might well frustrate us, yet her closeness to the canvas invites intimacy and her harmony with the colours around her contributes to an awesome serenity. In 'You were lying to me all along', her eyes are downcast but the other magnified features of her face and body, or even the environment can provide alternative routes to her soul. Looking at the resolution in her firm brows and feeling the soothing colours of the still water, one can easily imagine her saving 'You were lying all along? Well, so be it'. And we let her be.

One Afternoon presents the closest portrait we have of her but we are no longer alone. Locked tightly in the bottom right corner is a man leading his two coconut-picking monkeys. They walk into a narrowing path decorated by political flags and banners of Party Islam SeMalaysia (PAS). The East Coast is the last remaining bastion of this Muslim opposition party. The banner calls for support for PAS and trust in the Ulamak as leaders. If this was a propaganda or a social-realist painting, the position of the subject vis-à-vis the party would be clear. Here, it is hard to tell. Nonetheless, just this small dose of the social and political here tips the reading of the rest of the paintings. Private conversations between individuals could now lead into discussions about sensitive issues of race, religion and gender. Ideas about love and relationships can suddenly cross tangentially into issues of social accountability between the people and the state. And why not? This is a free and open conversation. We merely need to be as thoughtful as our heroine, and remember as well that she is still just a painting.

Tre heard these promises before' shows her turning her back to the sea. She has the air of someone too frustrated and tired to hear anymore what the world has to say. Her mood hangs as low as the horizon while the bruised purplish water weaves into her heart. She has had one too many hopes dashed perhaps Then again, we could also be jaded with her. How much more of her can we see? What more can she say that we have not heard before? Her face avoids us while the red-pinkish cloud strewn above is laden with embarrassment. The breeze has died and the air around her is thick and circulates with distrust. Either way, one can never pour too much emotion into paintings that lift the sentimental into the sublime. Just when you think she has said all that she can say, something in the signs may stir, or the surface may whisper, calling out for another silent conversation.

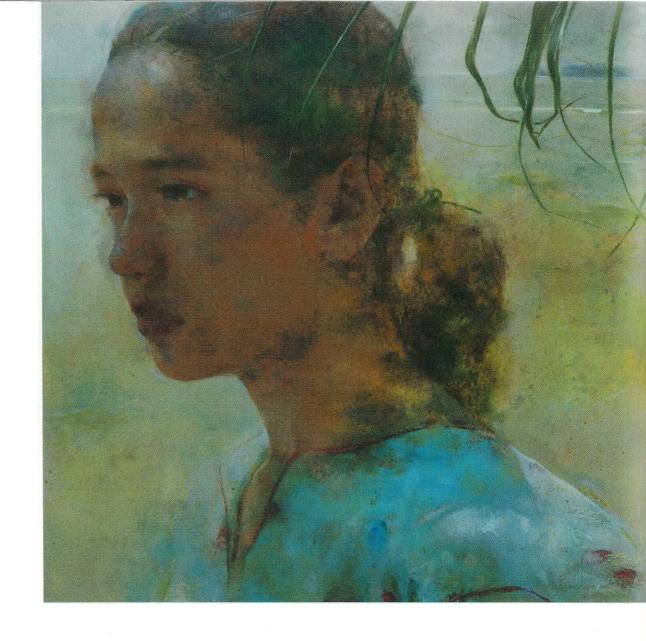
Daniel Chons

你已忘记你曾经许下的诺言 2005 Oil on canvas 120 x 120 cm

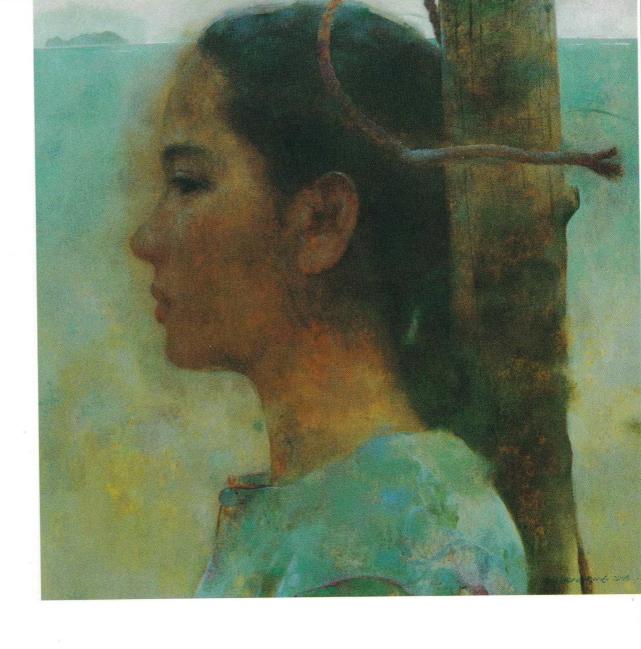


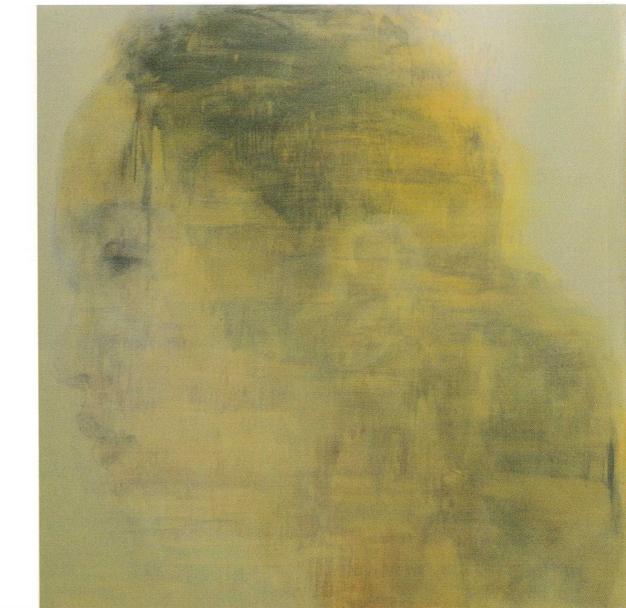
I won't think of you anymore 2005 Oil on canvas 120 x 138 cm



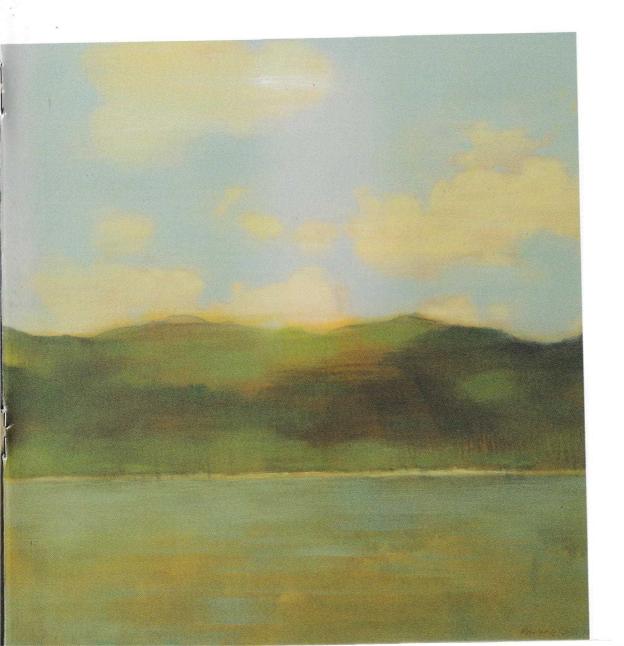








Promise 2005 Oil on canvas 120 x 240 cm

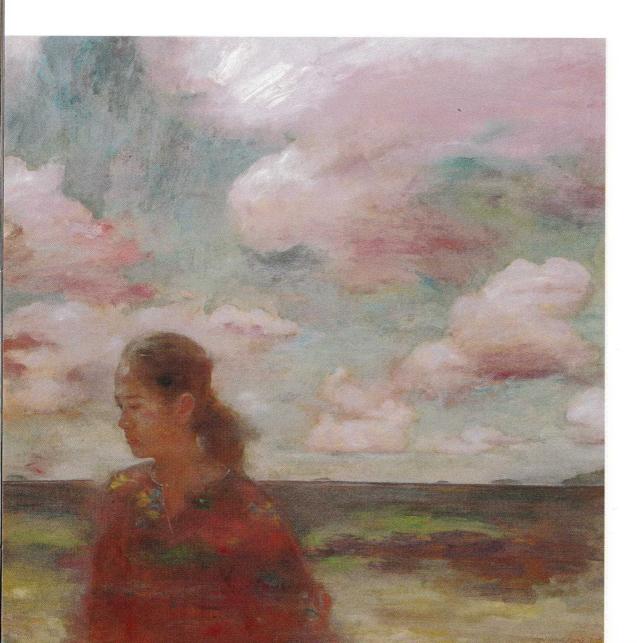




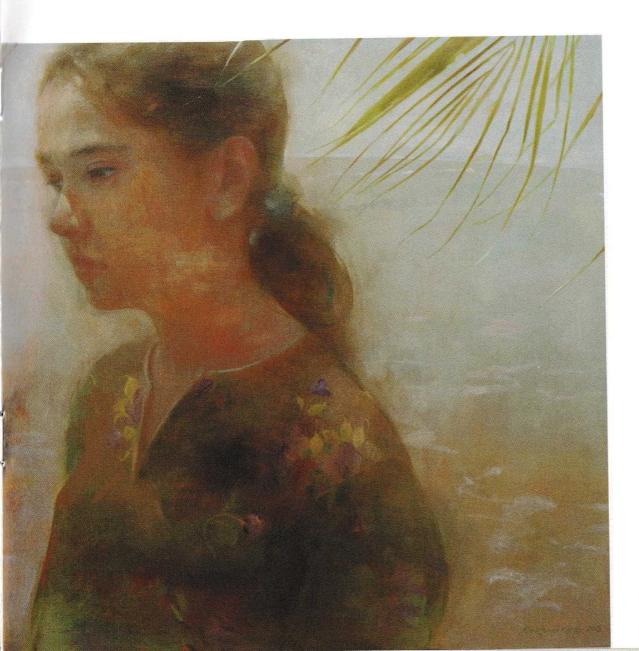
You never cared really 2005 Oil on canvas 89 x 89 cm

夏日午后

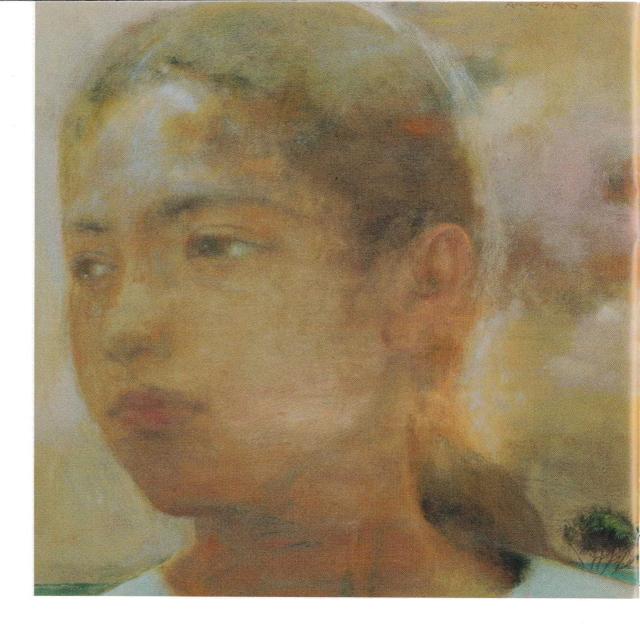
One afternoon 2005 Oil on canvas 89 x 89 cm



你的承诺是那么熟悉 2005 Oil on canvas 152 x 152 cm



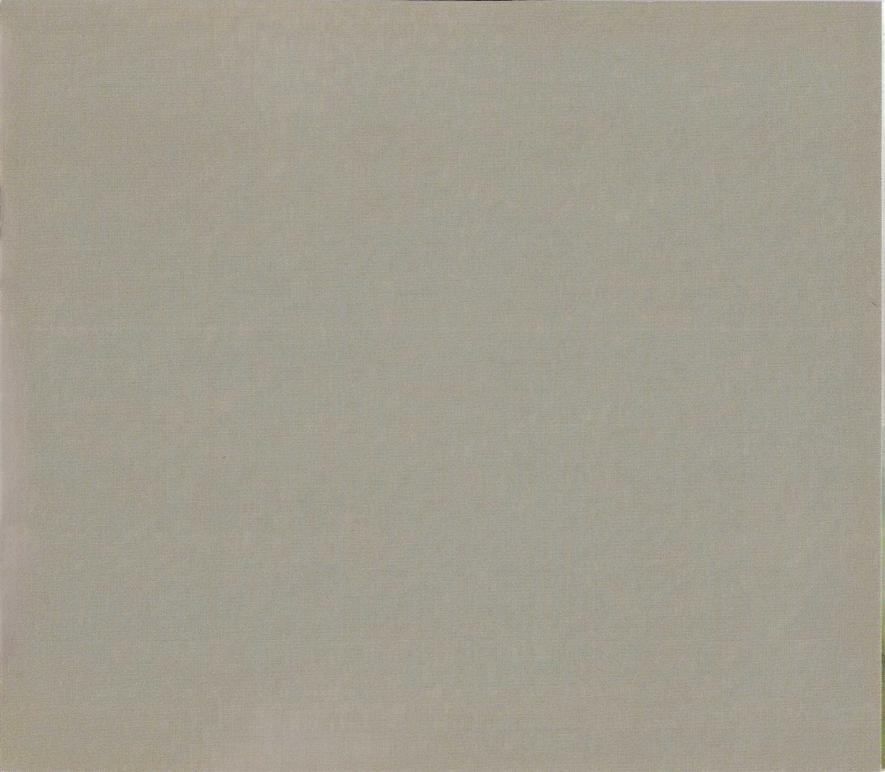
你一直在骗我 2005 Oil on canvas 120 x 120 cm



1 think I will leave 2005 Oil on canvas 229 x 76 cm



KOW LEONG KIANG Born 1970 in Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.			The Philip Morris Malaysia Art Aware National Art Gallery, KL. Reflective Kaleidoscope KLCA 30th A
Education			
	Diploma In Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur College Of Art, Malaysia.		The Philip Morris Malaysia Art Award National Art Gallery, KL. Pameran Karya Seni Kreatif Kebangsa.
Awards			Theatrette Menara PNB, KL.
			Philip Morris Asean Art Awards, Hand Artistic Endeavours, Valentine Willie 1
	Minor Award – Young Contemporaries, National Art		Painting Shadow, Valentine Willie Fir
			The Contemporary Asean Art Fair, Sui Three Man Show, Bali, Indonesia
			Aku, National Art Gallery, KL.
			The Dharma Protectors, Shian's Art G
			Jaya, Malaysia. <i>Bare</i> , Town House Gallary, KL.
			Lyrics of Drawing, Metro Fine Art, K
	Award, Hanoi, Vietnam.		
	One of 5 Winners (Jurors Choice) Philip Morris Malaysia Art Awards.		
			18@8 Contemporary Artist from Mala Wei-Ling Gallery, KL.
			Art Cased by Jaguar, Jaguar Art Case,
Solo Exl	hibitions		
	Floating World, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala	Collection	
2004	Inner Line, Metro Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur,		
	Malaysia.		
		KETENGAH (Lembaga Kemajuan Terenggan Hotel Istana, Malaysia	
Selected	Group Exhibitions		
	Art Gallery, KL.		
	Art Gallery, KL.		
	Salon Malaysia 3, National Art Gallery, KL.		
	Young Contemporaries, National Art Gallery, KL.		
	Cetusan Rasa, Pameran Amal Bosnia-Somalia Shah		
	Alam Gallery.		
	Imbanan Ledana Marbard Art Callany VI		



Exhibition dates: 9th November - 20th November 2005



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