

Chang Yoong Chia

THE 2ND SEVEN YEARS:

*Quilt of the Dead,
Flora & Fauna IV,
Narratives*

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Artist-in-Residency Programmes: Charging Spacing and Time with Creative Energy

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The Japan Foundation has been administering the Invitation Programme for Creators under the JENESYS Programme since 2007. The programme offers opportunities to young 'creators' in the Asian and Pacific countries to stay in Japan for one to three months for cultural exchange. As such, we have designed this programme as a residency-based programme, where artists and creators are invited to Japan on the basis that they will be based in a specific community to create artworks, exchange ideas, and network with their Japanese and Asia-Pacific peers. We have also put efforts in locating hosting bodies outside Tokyo, so that our invitees can be immersed into the 'actual' Japanese community. Like the capitals or major cities around the world, Tokyo is cosmopolitan, and thus easily conceals the 'authentic' Japanese lifestyles and community values.

Our placement of invitees ranges from formal residency programmes to apprenticeship under craftsman in a traditional community. Whatever the environment may be, the artists are granted an opportunity to share the space and time with the community, and exert creative energy in response to the given framework.

Sapporo, the capital city of Hokkaido where Chang Yoong Chia was based during his JENESYS residency, is a city to which one would go to explore quality of life, but certainly not an active contemporary art scene. Having said this, Sapporo is home to Isamu Noguchi's posthumous but important landscape work, Moerunuma Park, and Hokkaido is home to the world renowned contemporary artists, such as Tadashi Kawamata and Kan Yasuda. It is also home to S-AIR, an artist-in-residence programme run by a non-profit organisation that operates like a micro-brewery for contemporary

art. Its scale is "micro," with small staffing and modest programming, but certainly, it brews the artists' creative bubble well.

Artists, in residency settings, have several options when approaching their out-of-their-own-studio, and therefore, out-of-the-box environment: reflecting on their past activities and experimenting on new ideas to break their mold, identifying and responding to the social context of the adopted community, opening up their minds as much as possible to push their boundaries and exploring a new horizon for artistic endeavour, and so on. Whatever their choice may be, their experiences are inevitably process-based and they are there to mold within the given time and space.

Residency programmes are neither museums nor a studio/workshop spaces that present/produce tangible outcomes; they are not a school where education/training is provided. It is where artists try out different formulas to see if they work. Furthermore, it is where the artist's goal would not be to get the formula right, but to work on as many formulas as possible. In doing so, they are encouraged to take advantage of their temporary and foreign environment, and question their existing knowledge and experiences.

Yoong Chia, having had some experiences in other residencies before S-AIR, brought himself to Sapporo with three main formulas in mind: *Flora & Fauna, Narratives*, and *Quilt of the Dead*. Each has already gone under some stages of experimentations but, in Sapporo, they were put through yet another set of stress tests.

Flora & Fauna, loaded with the most personal contents of the artist, was approached to familiarise himself with his new environment. By setting

a large-size canvas in his studio from the very first stage of his residency, he took to this painting to warm himself up. He then approached new neighbourhood to pick up objects for his ongoing series, *Narratives*. Discarded scallop shells were turned into crafted art objects, like a magician's trick in the eyes of the locals, who are used to seeing them simply as gastronomic delights or an attraction for the tourists. I perceived *Quilt of the Dead* as the most challenging, although the artist had already had some experiences carrying out the workshops, with some attracting a large number of participants. Whatever the scale of the event may be, this series of workshops impart a soul-searching experience among the artist's collaborators, or the participants who come to share their stories, as they embroider the portraits of their deceased loved ones. Since each collaborator gathers with different motives and personal histories, communication at personal level is crucial, but without the command of the Japanese language, the artist was to go through a translator, and also make an extra effort in explaining the essence of this activity. In the end, it was the artist who was able to understand his own activities much more clearly.

Finally, Yoong Chia's efforts were optimised with the assistance of the S-AIR staff, who navigated him through Sapporo and beyond, introducing him to exotic landscapes of the north and pointing him to the security-bound Hokkaido Toyako Summit 2008 conference hall. It is only when the receiving community is open and ready, that the visiting artists can effectively charge its space and time with the much needed creative energy.



Sleeping Buddha
2008

oil on seashell
7.5 x 14.5 x 9cm

Finding Magic in The Mundane

LAURA FAN

Living in vast seas of concrete and working in intangible electronic realms, it is easy to forget that our lives are subject to the universal cycle of birth, life and death. Only when dramatic events occur, such as a personal tragedy or the birth of a child, do we question the purpose of our lives and the nature of our responsibilities to those whom we love.

Sudden confrontation with this sort of questioning can be overwhelming, so much so that some never quite recover their equilibrium. Most face the experience and emerge with some parts of themselves changed, having integrated the lessons of the experience. Others bury their anxiety or suffering into their psyche, hurrying along in the ordinary way until something brings it to the fore, triggering the suppressed emotion later.

It takes a rare person to be able to experience grief and be willing to examine it repeatedly, and not let the weight of those feelings overwhelm daily life. Chang Yoong Chia is one such person and his ability to hold suffering and allow others people to experience and acknowledge their own emotional grief is a special and generous gift.

Death and the miracle of birth, Chang's work reminds us, surrounds us all the time. From the beauty of a dog's skull, part of a skeleton found in a peaceful sleeping pose in an abandoned car, to celebrations of emergence and life, Chang looks at life processes in many differing ways, allowing us to bring our own memories into his work. Fundamentally, he bases his art on experience and he examines his feelings with candour. Although his work is often metaphorical, its basis in lived experience anchors its intentions in reality and that truthfulness comes through.

Laura Fan is a writer and art historian. She has written about Southeast Asian art for the past fourteen years and is currently working on her doctorate on 20th-century Chinese painting.

Looking from Outside In

Part of Chang's ability to look at situations without filters comes from a recognition of living within a society with institutionalised unequal privileges. With racial preferences applied to university admissions, land issuance and civil-service job allocations, among other aspects, Chang, being Chinese and thereby excluded from these benefits, was aware from an early age that life was not fair. Paradoxically, that awareness led to him to look for the reality behind the appearance of things. The focus on reality helps him to strip away the inessential and acknowledge the events that really move people.

Notably, Chang came of age in a time when discussing race relations openly became possible. When Anwar Ibrahim, once Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, was ousted in 1998, the era witnessed an unprecedented opening up of political debate. Prior to 1998, a climate of fear led to self-censorship. This was caused by recent memories of crackdowns, such as Operation Lalang of 1987, that saw opposition politicians, non-governmental advocates and writers jailed or fleeing into self-exile.

Following the emergence of Reformasi, Anwar's call for political reform, and the renewed vigour that opposition parties overall experienced, there was a tremendous wave of debate about race-based policies and privileges. Moreover, the sheer scope of dissent, one that encompassed all sectors of society in every state, even famously including kindergartens, broke the grip of fear that citizens had about expressing their opinions about politics.

In 1998 visual artists Wong Hoy Cheong and Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal, amongst others, advocated the right of artists to explore different points of

view. Artist and art space organiser, Chee Sek Thim whom Chang worked with briefly, also encouraged the broadening of discussion on issues that influence Malaysian lives and he provided the space for artists to do just that. Collectively, the actions of many visual and performing artists and non-governmental organisations, greatly enlarged the scope for debate and discussion was then possible without fear of retribution.

This is not to say that Chang's work is overtly political. Rather, that his work was produced and received within the context of greater openness and awareness of race and national issues. Significantly, given the broadening and deepening of the Malaysian art market in the 1990's and early 2000's, Chang was able to develop an independent art career that did not depend upon government patronage. This also meant that he was freed from having to cohere to a national agenda and, from the very beginning, had to find his own artistic voice.

Seeing the World

Chang has not limited his exposure to the domestic art scene. A strong interest in German literature led to studies in German and eventually a language residency in Berlin, after which he traveled within Germany and to Prague. Residencies throughout Asia, including Korea, Taiwan and India, as well as exhibiting regularly in Singapore, broadened his understanding of the region and led to subjects that proved universal rather than anecdotal or supporting a national ideal.

Global prosperity allowed for a proliferation of international residencies in the 1990's and the early 2000's. This allowed Chang to apply for residencies

on his own merit, rather than relying on government assistance as previous generations of Malaysian artists had had to do. Moreover, his work for art galleries and from the sale of his art helped him to maintain an independent perspective, one that proved invaluable for developing a unique outlook.

Learning from Home

Perhaps the most influential residency for Chang's work was his time at Rimbun Dahan (2006-2007). The one-year residency at the expansive estate of Angela and Hijas Kasturi gave him not only his own studio space but also immersion in the natural world. Surrounded by daily evidence of the cycle of birth-life-death, in the collective termite deaths, battles for supremacy amongst the dogs and the amorous adventures of the resident monkeys, Chang rediscovered his childhood fascination with nature.

Plumbing his childhood memories and nurturing his natural curiosity has led to some magnificent paintings. Full of mystery and wonder, his *Flora & Fauna* series resulted from this reexamination of his life experience. From childhood, he was exposed to the realities of caring for animals only for his pets to end their lives as family food. To this day, he still finds some dishes impossible to eat because they remind him of his childhood pets. Yet at the same time, the intimacy of feeding and nurturing animals exposed him to the life-cycle in a natural way, as part of daily life.

The *Flora & Fauna* series from his residency at Rimbun Dahan also chronicle his unfurling relationship with Teoh Ming Wah, who is now his wife and artistic collaborator. In one painting, presented as a mythic archetype, the female figure emerges, escorted by white and black rabbits, clad in a dress

made up of shells. Both goddess and offering, her fantastical appearance infuses a palpable sense of passion and marvel into the series, amplified by the meticulous details found in them. Spider webs, minute figures, the flow of urban characters disgorging from the commuter train, juxtapose the mundane and the magical. In this way, Chang compels viewers into the double act of viewing the overall narrative as well as being drawn in to study the minutiae of nature, paralleling the ways in which he might also have seen the developments in his life and in the natural world around him.

This dualism of presenting an overall message while also providing engrossing details follows through in his newest works from the *Flora & Fauna IV* series. What he now examines are the factors that have shaped the person that he has become, namely the land and memory.

The marvelously unsettling *Self Portrait as a Landscape* presents Chang in the process of being born by the land. While his body and Teoh's body form parts of the land, so too does the land bring forth Chang. The ridges of the Main Range, tropical vegetation, sloping river banks and wrinkled tiers of clouds are all unmistakably Southeast Asian. At the same time, by making the whole a composite of parts, the composition brings to mind 17th-century Dutch still-life paintings in which fruits and vegetables form the shape of a man. The painting also echoes 20th-century Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's self-portrait of Kahlo giving birth to herself. In this way, Chang's work refers to art history while being recognisably Malaysian. He both acknowledges the influence of the land while identifying as an artist aware of and in the world.

Chang's black and white paintings about colour explore whether colour can be perceived through images alone. By identifying the objects he associates with red, yellow and blue, Chang composed lush and complex images of these colours. His fascination with the natural world comes through in his *Yellow*, the sensuous Burmese python winding around the central figures, exploding an egg yolk with the pressure of its body. Chang lying on Teoh's lap parallels the cheetah crouching in sheaves of wheat. All is fertile, languid and ebullient, much like the feelings of yellow itself.

Similarly, his *Blue* explodes with exotic complexity. The central Vishnu emerges on a peacock with a fully expanded tail. Behind, the beautifully detailed rippling water and the glimpses of sky evoke the dynamic clarity of tropical beaches. Even the minutely detailed shells and tiny monkeys and rabbits that fill the beach bring to mind the light grey-blue of bleached coral. Even the fantastical strand of pearls held in the mouth of a large rabbit, winding around Krishna and Chang and finally held in the mouth of a humpbacked whale also evoke the erotic sensuousness of a bluish purple life.

This take on colour is intriguing because most painters, when they explore the nature of painting, look at exploiting the physical characteristics of paint and of the two-dimensional surface. Chang, however, looks at what might make colour colour. Moving in the opposition direction from the Abstract Expressionists, Chang's work is exquisitely detailed and narrative.

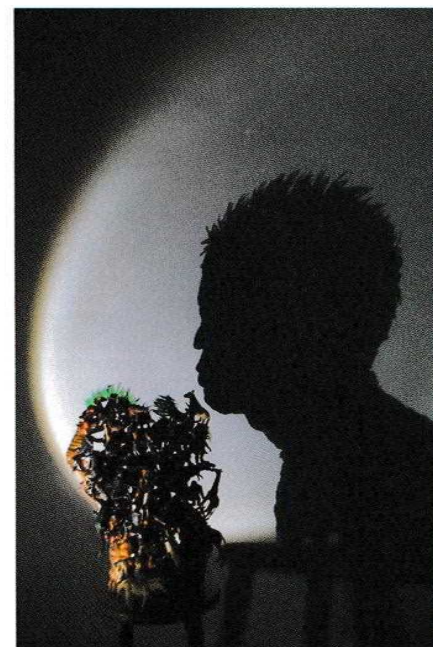
A rather playful work links Chang's fascination with the natural world with his childhood and that is his *Shadow of Flora & Fauna*. While the convention of creating a composite silhouette with objects has been done by others, Chang's work relates directly to his examination of his childhood for seminal realisations and his interest in nature. Just as with his *Self Portrait as a Landscape*, his past shapes the nature of his artistic interests and his adult personality.

Objects and their mutability form a large part of this exhibition. Much of it was composed of objects found during his residencies, especially during his time in Japan, and this has long been a feature of his artistic practice. His magical painted eggs, mounted on clock mechanisms that allow them to move in a circle, capture enigmatic vignettes. He depicts sleeping Buddhas on elegant spiraling shells and sees fearsome monsters on crab carapaces. In this way, Chang brings his delight in the natural world and his visions of what these forms evoke to us so that we can also enjoy their transformative possibilities. This capacity for wonder coupled with a fertile imagination characterises Chang's work as a whole.

Domestic objects, such as spoons, saucers and serving plates that make up Chang's *Narrative* series reveal the dark side of Asian families and history through subversive paintings on them. For example, his series of porcelain spoons depict the tale of a misguided mother who refuses to acknowledge the different paths her son has taken, instead insisting on his absence and bemoaning her loneliness. His kitschy European-styled cake plates depict a paradoxical and racist attitude towards Asian immigration, all the while placing the viewer as the person thinking the violent thoughts. Unsettling, invasive and pointed, this series forces viewers to confront their own racism, part of Asia's violent history, as well as unyielding cultural values. It is one of Chang's more critical works, all the more effective for being painted upon such banal and familiar objects.

Chang's most participatory work is his evolving *Quilt of the Dead*. Inspired by his sudden realization of his grief after the death of his grandmother, the work invites others to embroider images of those who have died and whom they miss. As Chang has said in other publications, when his grandmother died, he felt numb, a result of too many family members expressing their grief and the conflicting feelings that emerge around death. Only later did his feelings come out and he wanted to remember her in a special way. So he took that feeling and commemorated her and then started to embroider the likenesses of other people he saw in the obituary pages in the newspaper. In this way, he took his individual feeling and imagined many other people feeling as he did. This led to workshops around Asia to share in the exercise. The resulting work is generous and open-handed, allowing everyone to participate in acknowledging a collective humanity.

Chang's work represents a rich imagination and a sense of play combined with serious thinking. Examining his experiences and feelings, he draws his viewers out through his work and his engagement with a range of materials urges people to see the magical in the mundane. This generous and quirky sensibility compels people to embrace the passionate and marvelous qualities of life itself.



Shadow of Flora & Fauna

2009

plastic toys, adhesive, wooden stool and light

97 x 32 x 32cm

Collection of Mr. Reuel Armstrong

Jenesys Programmes: Artworks created during artist residency at S-Air, Sapporo, Japan

TEOH MING WAH

“I am not one easily bitten by the travel bug, for whom travel usually comes under compulsion. However, the artist-in-residence programme opened up a new vista for my life, impacting me with unthought-of intellectual stimuli.” Chang Yoong Chia smiles awkwardly when he professes to be a homebody type of artist.

For Chang, an alumnus of the Malaysian Institute of Art's Fine Art Department, class of 1996, participating in the two-week KHOJ International Artists Workshop in Mysore, India in 2002 marked the culmination of the first seven years of his artistic exploration since graduating.

Chang was invited subsequently by the Japan Foundation to take part in the JENESYS Programme last year and the two-and-a-half-month sojourn in Sapporo and Tokyo provided him with valuable

Teoh Ming Wah is a writer and cultural worker. She is currently working in Oriental Daily and documenting the cultural history of an old town in Malaysia.



S-Air Artist Open Studio, 2008



Sophie's World
2008
oil on canvas
121 x 242cm

opportunities for retrospectives and self-assessment, bringing to fruition the present exhibition, called *The 2nd Seven Years*.

Chang glows with excitement when he looks back upon these two stages of past creative life. He remarks, "The two seven-year periods are equally important to me. In the first seven years, I experimented in various media and themes with abandon and struggled to eke out a livelihood with youthful inventiveness. Only during the second period did I arrive at a mode of expression and a body of thematic material I feel comfortable with, and I felt I've found a creative fountainhead from which spout eternal the creative energy, renewing my very personal creative ideas."

In Chang's earlier works, one may find that, apart from the conventional medium of oil on canvas, he tried his hand on a wide variety of offbeat media such as ballpoint pen, monoprint, comics and various handicrafts: paper-cut, candle and papier maché sculpture, and patchwork embroidery. Since 2003, however, he gradually turned his attention to and focused on oil painting and embroidery, alternating between black and white figurative narrative painting and embroidery 'actions', constantly intensifying his aesthetic exploration.

The two series that have in recent years caught people's attention, *Flora & Fauna* series I to III and *Quilt of the Dead*, set the tone for two strains of



the artist's vision, hinting at the increasing clarity of his pictorial idiom. If, however, one had traced the artist's earlier development, one could deduce where the two strains stem from. For instance, the paintings in the *Grey Series* started in 2001 are the precursors to later oils in the introduction of the black and white tonal scheme. Moreover, *Baby Quilt of Death* shown at *Newton's Funfair* exhibition in 2003 initiated the use of embroidery as a form of artistic expression as well as the tendency towards the theme of death.

Chang Yoong Chia takes painting as an instrument for self discovery; painting in oil provides him with occasions to explore his personal memories, sentiments and inner-most consciousness. He also combines handicraft with 'actions' to facilitate interaction and communication with people from all walks of life.

The 2nd Seven Years showcases the latest works of the two main strains, *Flora & Fauna IV* and *Quilt of the Dead*. Apart from that, there is also *Narratives*, a derivative from the two, and finally works created and exhibited during *S-Air Open Studio* in Sapporo. As such, the exhibition comprises four distinct parts, their totality embodying the experiences in the second seven-year period of Chang Yoong Chia's artistic evolution.

Returning from Extreme North

A big white rabbit hops towards the viewer, only to be tamed in a little girl's hands, or is it being peeled away like stickers from the wall. A somber, grave-looking seascape, done in black and white, is also exfoliating in flakes, descending into the little girl's hands as crows. This is what one encounters in one of Chang's paintings, *Sophie's World*, completed during his two-month residency in Sapporo, Hokkaido.



Life in Seven Days
2008
dimensions variable

Chang endeavoured to utilize his highly personal *modus operandi*, adapting it to his new living environment, orientating himself to the 'culture shock' brought on by a foreign land. *Sophie's World* is inundated with the pictorial idioms of the *Flora & Fauna* series, those signs and symbols so common and frequently encountered in everyday Japan: Carp Streamers of boy's coming-of-age festival (Koinobori) and doe-eyed kids of girlie Manga. Needless to say, the young man carrying a cat in his mouth is evolved from the logo of a popular Japanese courier company.

What impressed and excited his Japanese audience even more was the way in which Chang collected leftover scraps of their favourite food and transformed them into miniature works of art, e.g. conches into Buddha's heads, crab shells into Eper, the bear totem of Hokkaido's indigenous Ainu minority, thus imparting mundane articles with transcendental values

attuned to Japanese traditional culture. Some of these transformations are imbued, however, with Chang's very personal brand of humour, as is attested by the work *The Torture Chamber*, which was formerly a lowly sea urchin.

During the two-month period, the artist, through the kind assistance of his host, S-Air, recruited volunteers from local community to participate in the *Quilt of the Dead* workshops. Participants were requested to embroider the portraits of their dearly departed. The subject of death being taboo in Japanese traditional life, Chang's forthright and earnest request was rewarded with enthusiastic response. After a workshop session, an elderly lady invited the artist home to pray at her late husband's altar, after which they celebrated her own birthday.



Buddha with Strong Desires
2008

*Oil on seashells mounted on wooden base,
adhesive*
17.5cm x 12 x 11cm



The Torture Chamber II
2009

Sea urchin, adhesive, plastic, acrylic box
9.5 x 11 x 6cm



Neko Barks at Night
2008

oil on crab shell
8.5 x 8.5 x 3.5cm

"It was the first time I was ever admitted into Japanese domestic life. Even though the ceremonies on that day were quite simple but the impact of the life-and-death symbiosis sentiment was nothing if not great. The gaps presented by different languages and cultural backgrounds seemed insignificant in comparison. The realisation induced a feeling of shock overwhelmed by a profound sense of peace." Thus related Chang, who added that the artist residency afforded him much-needed space in which to develop his art and fresh opportunities to explore and deepen the dual strains of his creative approach, so as to come to ever newer possibilities.

Within bounds of traditional medium

Chang Yoong Chia, in his second seven years, has not devoted his energy on breaking down the barrier of the two seemingly traditional mediums of oil painting and embroidery in order to try to transcend their inherent limitations. He has instead broadened and heightened the narrative and lyrical veins of his working style to extend over his subsequent series of oeuvre.

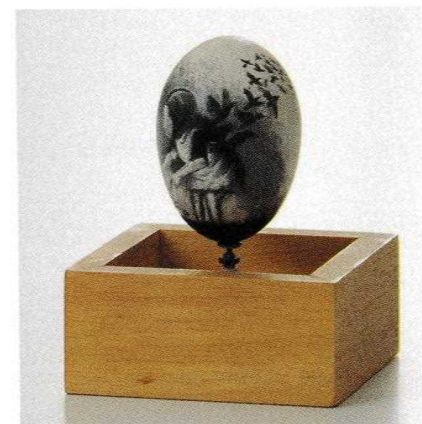
Having taken cognizance of the overbearingly electronic characteristic of our current cultural milieu, Chang elects to stay true to his intuition. He remarks, "I paint in oil, because the material feels like skin and flesh to me. A finished painting in oil even evokes the illusion of breathing,



The Corner Frog
2008
Oil on crab shell
3 x 11 x 11 cm



Seesaw
2008
Oil on eggshell, mounted on clockwork
with wooden base, adhesive
9.5 x 8 x 8 cm



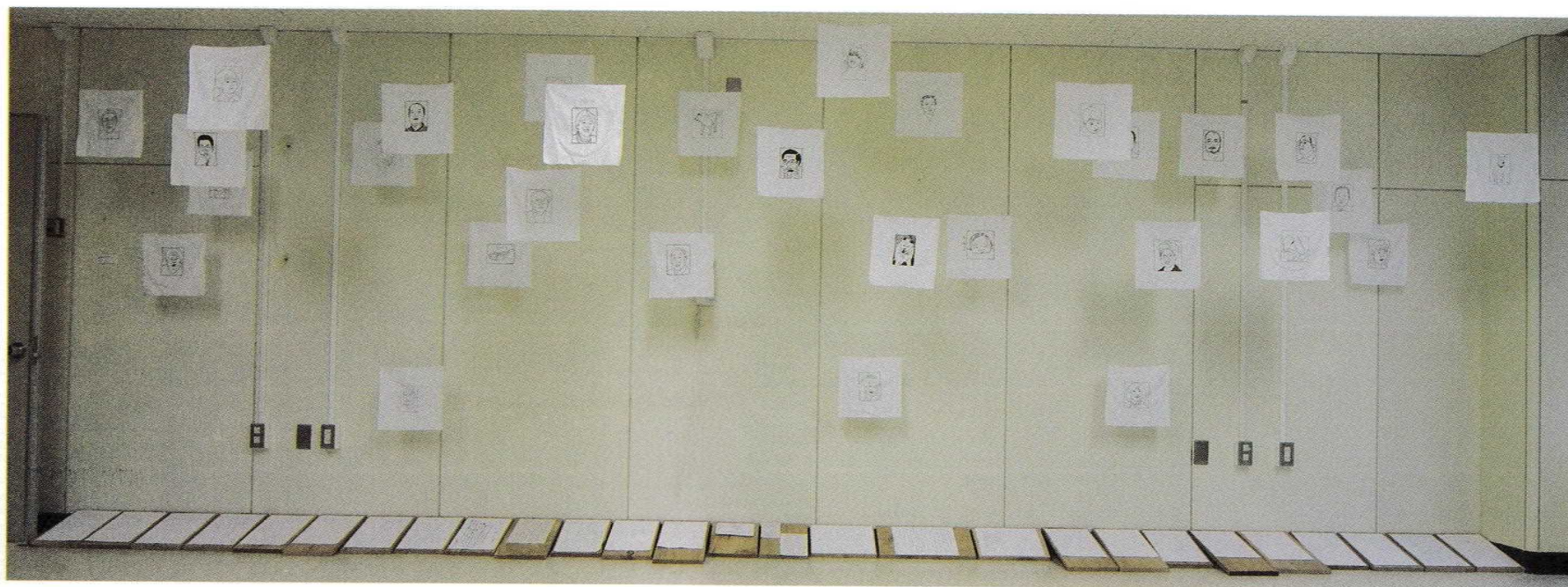
As the Crows Cry
2008
Oil on eggshell, mounted on clockwork
with wooden base, adhesive
10.5 x 8 x 8 cm

of being alive and animate in me. I read a book called *What Painting Is* by James Elkins. Basically, what the book describes is the similarity between painting and alchemy. For both, the most important thing is not the end result but the process and the usage of materials that leads to the result. The process is magical.”

What is the red thread of aesthetic idea running the works generated by the dual strands of his development, the *Flora & Fauna* series and the *Quilt of the Dead*? Chang seems to be unable to put his finger on a definite answer, but as his experiences precipitated in Sapporo, it dawned on him that he was regarding the issue of life and death in a totally personal and intuitive manner, and life and death not only of people, but of the natural world as well. In Sapporo, he metamorphosed into a storyteller and told story

after story using scallop shells and the likes discarded unthinkingly by the consuming public, struggling to bestow forms and figures to his innermost, as yet indeterminate feelings. The fruition of this inner exploration came about in the form of *Life in Seven Days*, a comics-like work which also gave life to a vital experiential idea, *Second Life*.

Does this idea of *Second Life* refer to the life forms plentifully consumed by humanity but transformed by the artist and presented as art? Does it ascribe to the living who embroider the likeness of their dear departed, or does it ascribe to the departed whose likeness are being embroidered? Or, perhaps it refers to none other than the artist himself whose love for people, animals and plants is given a spiritual renewal?



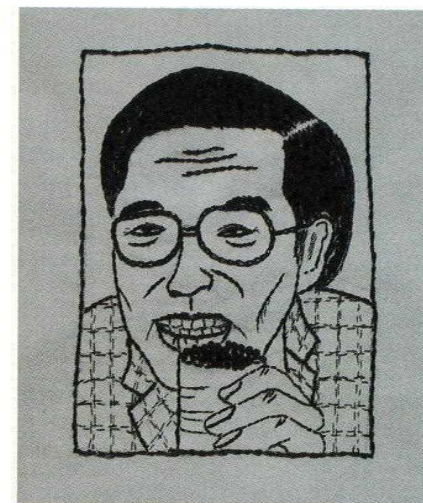
Quilt of the Dead workshop results, 2008

“You must be feeling good with a glass of your favourite beer! You wear your favourite blazer and the vest knitted by my hands. He passed away after two years of this photo. It took me for a long time to accept his death. Of course I have never forgotten him, but I could face you again. I had a great time to stitch you with remembering our memories for thirty eight years in you with. You have made my life. Thank you!”

Written statement from participant, translated from Japanese by Mari Hataya
Participant's name: Yoko
Stitch her husband



A workshop participant with her embroidery



Detail of the embroidery.

Flora & Fauna IV

TEOH MING WAH

Chang Yoong Chia is fond of animals and makes no difference whether they are adorable or not; he is attracted to crows and bats as much as to rabbits. His fascination with animals, while not being an obsession, seems to derive from a deeply felt romantic notion that all creatures, big and small, are equal to man. However, Chang never presumes to be an environmentalist or claims to espouse environmental causes through his works. What he aims to do is simply to tell you tales about his childhood with rabbits and possibly to share his fascination about the animal kingdom with whoever cares to listen.

Since *Flora & Fauna I* (exhibited in 2004), Chang has repeatedly returned to the figures of youthful couple with certain animals, juxtaposing realistic and fantastical elements in an environment reminiscent of a paradise lost. Chang's paradise, however, is not averse to confronting death, nor is it so simplistic as to merely depict the graphic scenario of the law of the jungle. What it is, is nothing less than the wordless essence of nature's constant rebirth and renewal. *Flora & Fauna II*, done in 2007, added more minute creatures in his world of animals and plants, such as insects and fungi, displaying a cosmos more intricate and perplex and an ecosystem more elaborate and complex. The minuscule depiction in this series is more reminiscent of the tropical greenery in which the artist was brought up than any imagined primitive wilderness. The different localities of the animals with their divergent behavior are drawn in by the artist to posit in a world truly his own.

In *Flora & Fauna IV*, it is evident that the animals depicted have been reduced in numbers but have become more variegated and diverse. The two dimensional world concretised by Chang now seems more expansive, far and deep; it is impossible to pinpoint the actual localities which evoke



Ne Zha, 2008, oil on crab shell, 16 x 15.5 x 5cm.

this imagined landscape. Suffice it to say that each and every blade of grass, bud and petal is really alive while the emotive link between these creatures is exactly as it should be. The earth under one's feet and the horizon in front seem to open up ad infinitum, evoking not the episodic montages of memory and impression but a narrative infinitely richer and more authentic.

Chang once admitted that he relies on free association in the painting process and was averse to working from photographic images and does not care to plot elaborate composition for his paintings. He said, "The greatest pleasure derives from the act of painting and the process of extricating images from the jumble of memories and arrange them extempore in a significant order."

The impetus behind the creation of the *Flora & Fauna* series is Chang's love for the animal world and the childhood memories associated with it; his visual exploration takes on ever-more distinct direction with each conscious working of these elements. However, beginning from 2003, distant travel, socio-political changes at home as well as falling in love started to encroach upon his consciousness and made serious demand, causing disquiet in him as well as fermenting renewed creative energy to channel the new experiences into his subsequent works. Characteristically, Chang avoided taking the straightforward approach of representation. After imbibing and slowly absorbing the essence of the new external stimuli, he turned this perception into the idioms of visual language.

Some works completed after his return from a two-month stay in Germany in 2007, such as *Safe House*, *Safe City* and *Safe Country* of *Flora & Fauna IV*, exude an ambience totally different from his earlier works. He explains, "The situation of my country at that juncture was causing worries and anxiety in many people, but I got to enjoy the unthought of freedom associated with personal safety in this foreign land; the wide disparity struck me sharply and with a sense of absurdity."

From Regurgitation of the Classics to Visual Experimentation

The difference between *Flora & Fauna IV* and the earlier series, as Chang sees it, was the experiments with various new artistic media and visual concepts. He even went so far as to challenge himself to take on some entirely new approaches. He remarks, "I still give priority to the impromptu and spontaneous style of working which generate intuitive forms and spatial relations, but nowadays before starting on a painting, more often than not, I would consciously set limits to my impulses, give a more concrete framework, so that even before the first brushstroke I would have a general idea as to what visual experiment I'm embarking upon and what pictorial effect I aim to achieve."

In the *Flora & Fauna* series, Chang cast aside the vividness, gloss and impasto qualities of oil painting and instead opted for black and white tonality with clear outlines to build up a visually textural picture plane. One may deduce from the oil paintings in the *Flora & Fauna I*, that Chang had yet to completely master the intricacy of the medium but had already begun to demonstrate his childlike and humourous traits. In the *Flora & Fauna II* oil paintings, however, his use of line became more intricate, precise, elaborate, fluid and spreading into the picture plane, becoming exuberant compositions, enabling the evolution of a personal aesthetic idiom through figurative narration.

In *Flora & Fauna IV*, Chang goes further by integrating planar elements with the imageries' continuous outlines, creating indefinite light and dark planes in the detail and texture of the paintings. Having realised the intrinsic quality of plane, he let loose creating solid effects and increase the interplay of planes and lines to achieve a dynamic whole.

One, therefore, could see flower petals, hair, clothing and snake scales composed of intricate lines and painterly expression to make the imageries gradually merged with the picture plane. In *The Nutcracker*, for example, the bamboo leaves gradually blend into the dark-hued, dusky foliage. What Chang aims to reveal is the tactile and kinetic experiences found in existence.



Nostalgia
2008
oil on canvas
130 x 200 cm

In *Self-Portrait as a Landscape*, lines and planes interact to produce the illusory effect of a human face. Upon careful examination, one realised that the face is actually a composite of images. For example, a bird and its reflection on the water's surface is also the human's mouth. Thus the painting provides a multiple visual stimuli.

Chang points out that these experimentations have a lot to do with his revisiting works of the Old Masters. "In the earlier stages of my career, I

was utterly impatient with the works of classical painters, being intent only on being creative and innovative. However, I've since re-examined the Old Masters intensively. When I was exploring narrative painting, I would refer back to Brueghel the Elder's works. Apart from that, I was lucky to be able to view Rembrandt's original paintings while in Germany, which impacted me greatly with his powerful use of chiaroscuro. I was inspired to break out of my tired old way of working."



Self Portrait as a Landscape, 2008, oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm

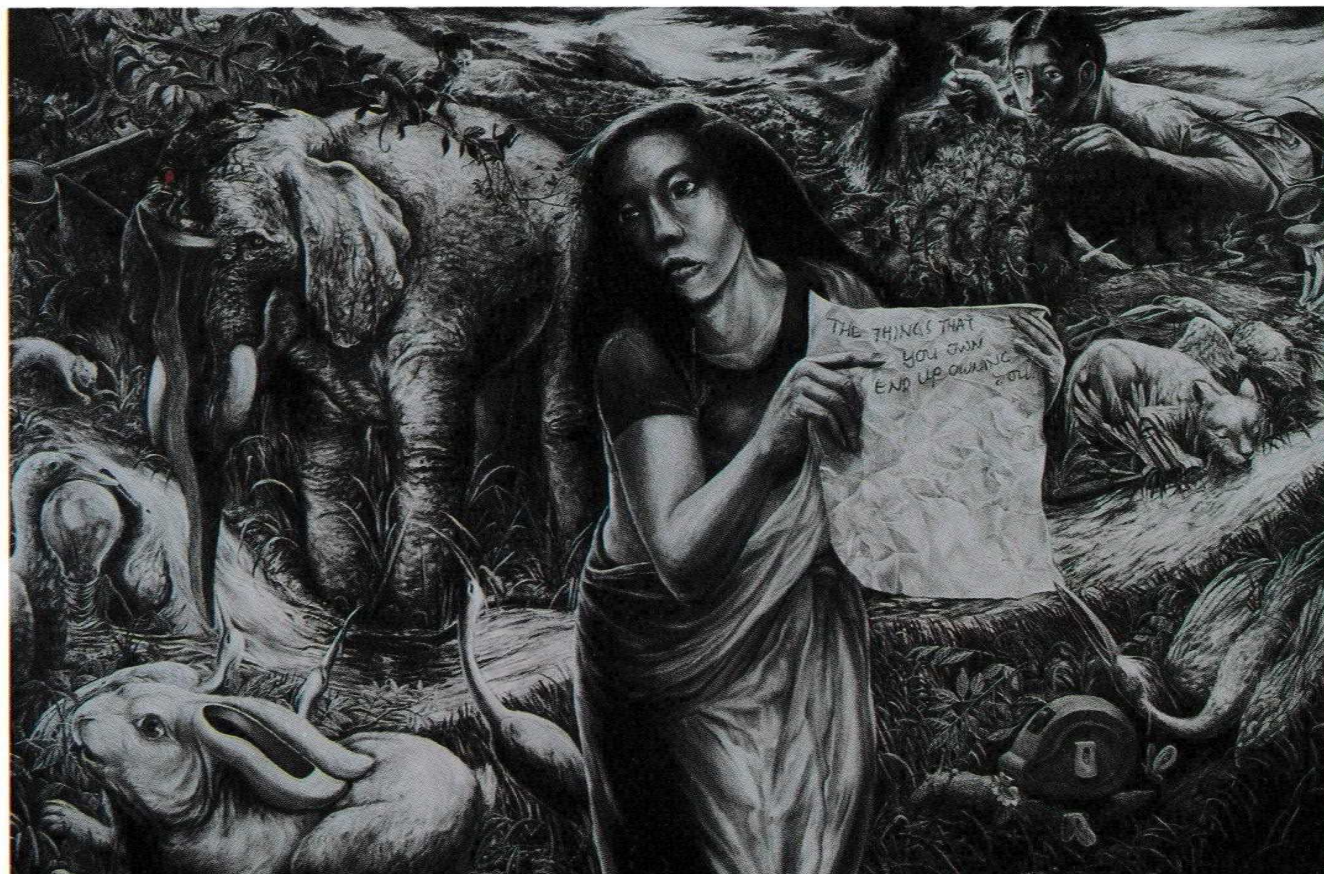
Of the modern artists apart from Salvador Dali, Chang was also immersed in the works of School of New York master, Mark Rothko, a colourist painter whose style was as dissimilar to Chang's as it could be conceived. So, does this mean Chang will begin to use colour in his paintings again?

This is, however, not the case. He not only did not revert to using colour, he actually became so passionately obsessed with painting in black and white that it took on the potency of colour, along with its intrinsic emotive values. *Red, Yellow and Blue* in *Flora & Fauna IV* are Chang's significant



Fearful Symmetry I
2009
charcoal on paper
dimensions variable

works that exceeded beyond his own limitation. Looking back on the painting process, Chang said, "When I started on *Red*, I mentally assembled every conceivable red image to cram into the composition. It was torturous to try to bring out the visibility of red, even furthermore its tactile sensation. When I proceed on to *Yellow*, I strengthen the overall impression of the background to bring out the sense of yellowness of the imageries in front and I realised that, by harmonising and contrasting the tonal values in the picture plane, the 'colour of the mind' will emerge naturally.



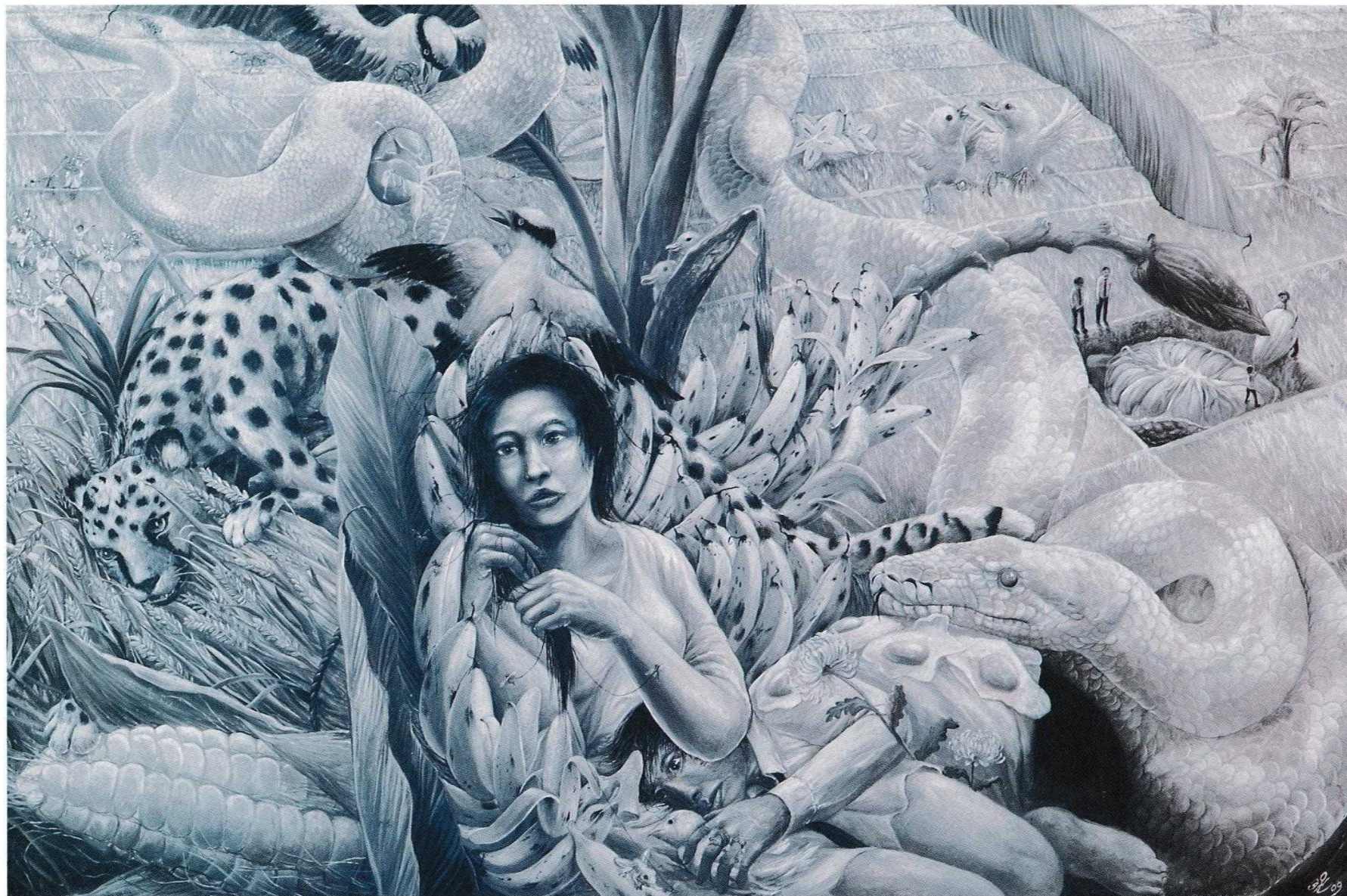
Ten Things I Love About You
2009
oil on canvas
137 x 210cm

After the sessions of feverish and tortuous hunt for the right and true colour tone, Chang's works have taken on the dazzling layered looks, bringing his black and white world to maturity.

However, from the imagery of the rabbit that appears incessantly in the *Flora & Fauna* series, what does one detect in Chang's psychic realm to be changing or constant?



Red, 2009, oil on canvas, 120 x 80 cm



Yellow, 2009, oil on canvas, 120 x 80 cm



Blue, 2009, oil on canvas, 120 x 80 cm



The Nutcracker, 2009, oil on canvas, 137 x 210 cm

Narratives

TEOH MING WAH

Examine a story intensively, and you are bound to discover another story awaiting discovery.

This is what Chang Yoong Chia's works unfailingly remind the viewer about. For him, the verity of the stories and narratives is something essential and indispensable. The narrative aspect in Chang's oil paintings is evident to the viewer to be seen as one sweep of vision that also induce further examination of each and every element in them to arrive at the overall narrative whole.

Chang not only chooses to work on canvas, but also look for other materials to explore his love for storytelling. In the *Narratives* series, the use of crockery and seashells function as 'panels' found in comic strips. Consisting of separate pieces, they are arranged sequentially to form an irreversible 'thesis'.

The first work in the *Narratives* series was done in 2006, called *One Day....* Adding to the decorative



One Day...
 2006
 oil on ceramic plates
 15.5 x 15.5 x 2cm
 (no. 2 of 5)



Himeyuri, 2009, oil on ceramic plates, 16.5 x 13 x 2cm (no. 1, 2, 3 of 5)

cottage scenes commonly found on Western style ceramics, Chang deftly painted some delicate strokes to bring out a bird in flight and a giant into the idyllic setting. Arranging the five plates together they form a 5-panel story. Brief captions were added on the rims of the plates, incorporating texts and pictures into a meaningful parable.

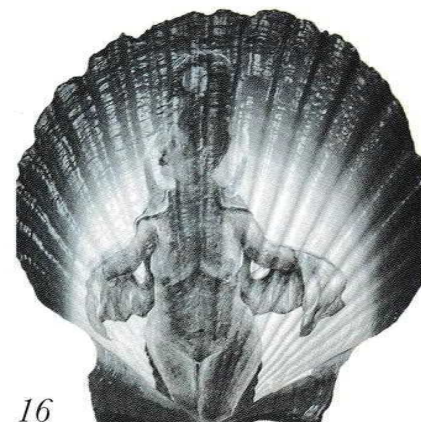
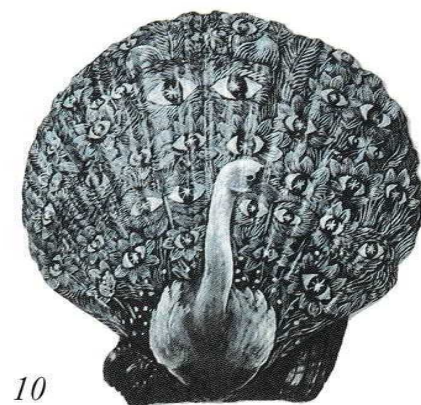
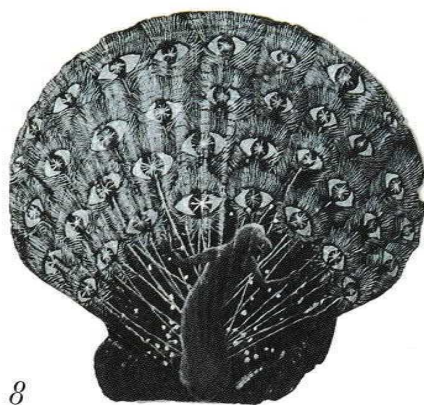
In *Maiden of the Ba Tree* of 2007, Chang Yoong Chia boldly utilizes thirty five white ceramic spoons with traditional Chinese motif of a lady resting under a banana tree. With the lady and banana tree providing the two focal images, Chang paints on them to compose, in smooth progression, a pictorial story of a mother and her child. His lines and colour scheme mirrors Chinese classical style found on the spoons while retaining his very personal technique and pictorial idioms such as the gathering of crows he painted on the spoons that gradually became a concrete blackness.

On one hand, Chang has created a mysterious realm that is both supernatural and illogical, while on the other hand, depicted Chinese classical characters of Confucian values. In this fabulous world, sprightly monkeys ride on cranes and a mountain range transforms into a deity; It is, however, as cordial and intimate as any common place myth, folklore or historical anecdote. Although stories may be determined by personal

inclination or choices, they also reflect a people's collective experience and wisdom. The narratives in Chang's *Narratives*, instead of emanating from any textual references, are derived from his personal exposure to, and ingestion of, elements of Eastern and Western cultures over the years; these elements bear out the fact that Chang hails from Southeast Asia, from Malaysia in particular, a crossroad between Eastern and Western cultures.

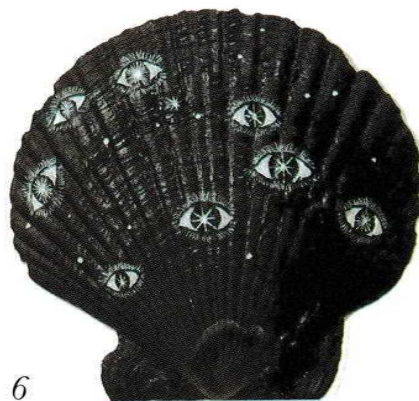
"During these few years on artist residencies, I was in several cities with strong sense of historical past. I came away with the awareness that yesterday's culture and history are inseparable to the lives of people today. So in the *Narratives* works, this sense of the relationship between man and history is given prominence", said Chang.

In *One Day*....., the gist of the storyline is the cultural misunderstanding and conflict between Asian immigrants and local residents of affluent Western countries. In *Himeyuri* 1, it retells a historical tragedy during World War II in Okinawa, Japan, that ruminates on the absurdity of war in the name of state and nation. The acquisition of historical and cultural literacy has broadened Chang's mind and lifted his works to a new spiritual height. However, it seems that only in an imaginary realm of his own making could Chang freely and truthfully express social ideas and commentaries.





5



6



11



12



17



18

Chang maintains, "Many are intrigued as to how and when I started to conceive the *Narratives* themes; actually this is derived partly from the two thematic strands of my earlier works. For instance, in the *Flora & Fauna* series, apart from oil paintings, I also experimented on animal bones, carapaces and discarded wings of termites to arrive at new forms and objects of my imagination. Contemplating on the connection between handicraft and culture-specific common items also influenced the choices of materials for *Narratives*. For example, I searched for materials *in situ*, gathering domestic items such as crockery to tell what I deemed to be the stories hidden in them."

He added as an afterthought, "Of course there is the influence of comics, which I was interested in for a time. Some unconscious circumstances must have led me thither."

Chang endeavoured to arrive at a point of balance between external reality and internal memory and to evolve an artistic vocabulary that breaks down the boundaries of local and international cultures. As an artist fervently concerned with exploring historical roots, Chang hopes his art, although stemming from subjective creativity, will find resonance in different cultures.

Just when we thought the works in *Narratives* have amalgamated the elements of visual symbol and linguistic logic, it came subsequently in Chang's works; struggling to eliminate all words and ideograms, freeing the eighteen scallop shells in *Illumination* to tell a story purely through the progressive morphing of pictorial images, of life-and-death cycle with great poetic beauty.

Illumination

2009

oil on scallop shells

dimensions variable





Maiden of the Ba Tree, 2007, oil on ceramic spoons, 13.5 x 4.5 x 4cm (x 35 pcs)

Quilt of the Dead

TEOH MING WAH

“When I was 17 my paternal grandmother passed away. She had 5 sons and 5 daughters. One of my uncle is a staunch Buddhist and one of my aunt is a staunch Christian. As my grandmother was nearing her death, both parties were arguing with each other about the way in which she should be buried. When she passed away, the wake was performed in a compromised Christian, Buddhist and Taoist custom.

Because all I sensed at the time were the verbal fights between my relatives and the ridiculous circumstances that surrounded the process of her death, as well as my lack of belief in the afterlife, I didn't get a chance to mourn for her properly. *Quilt of the Dead* is an attempt to mourn for her, or to negotiate my guilt for not being able to mourn for her,” stated Chang Yoong Chia.

Quilt of the Dead utilizes embroidery as a way to contemplate about life and death. A work-in-progress that started in 2003, it is a collection of



Quilt of the Dead, as of Sept 2009

embroidered obituary portraits by Chang that will eventually be combined together to form a 10 ft by 10 ft quilt.

Quilt of the Dead is also art action to communicate with other people about death and what it means to be living. This is done through a series of performances and workshops.

Performances

Quilt of the Dead started as performances that were usually 8 hours in duration in which Chang embroidered portraits taken from newspaper obituary photographs. This later expanded to include portraits of his deceased family members, portraits of the deceased that he collected from his friends and relatives as well as of specific portraits of the deceased. When curious onlookers approached and asked him what he was doing, Chang would direct their conversations to the subject of death. The best of these conversations were when onlookers told Chang of their personal experiences of the death of family members, friends and relatives and how these experiences influenced their lives.

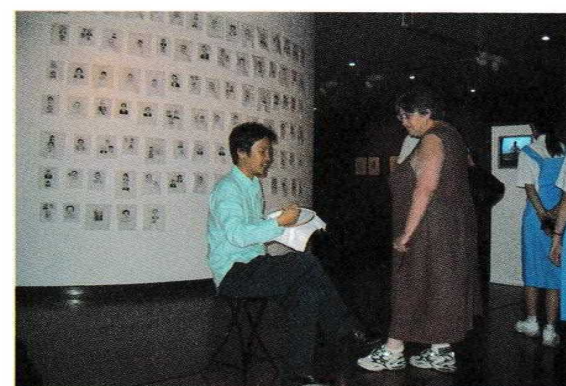
Although the performances were also held at art spaces like galleries and artist-run-spaces, it was at the public locations where the performances were held without permit or permission that Chang treasured the most, as the transient nature of these venues enabled encounters with a wider section of society and the conversation between Chang and his onlookers were stripped of decorum usually practiced at art venues.

Of special significance to him were the performances held at the bus stop in front of Hospital Kuala Lumpur. With its close proximity to a hospital, a place of healing and death, the conversations about death became even more pronounced. In contrast, the performances at Puduraya Bus Terminal, Kuala Lumpur, were less engaging. Perhaps nervous for their luggage, the people there did not engage in conversation with Chang but only looked on cautiously.

Although extremely gratifying when an honest dialogue about life and



(Left) A detail from *Quilt of the Dead* and
(Right) an image from the obituary section of
a newspaper.



From L to R: *Quilt of the Dead* performances at KLCC Park, 21 Nov 03; KL Hospital bus stop, 3 April 04; and *Malaysian Art Now* at the National Art Gallery KL, 31 July 04.

death is achieved, these conversations were actually few and far between. Chang wanted more personal interaction with his audience which he found in Fukuoka, Japan.

Workshops

The first *Quilt of the Dead* Workshop was held during the 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in 2005, which *Quilt of the Dead* was exhibited and Chang invited to conduct a workshop.

The workshop required each participant to embroider a portrait of their deceased loved one, be it a family member, friend, relative or pet onto pieces of cotton cloth. Because of the length of time required to carry out the task, the participants remembered the individual they were embroidering and other associated memories surfaced as well. The participants chatted amongst themselves and shared these memories, thus creating the opportunity to think and discuss about live and death in a group.

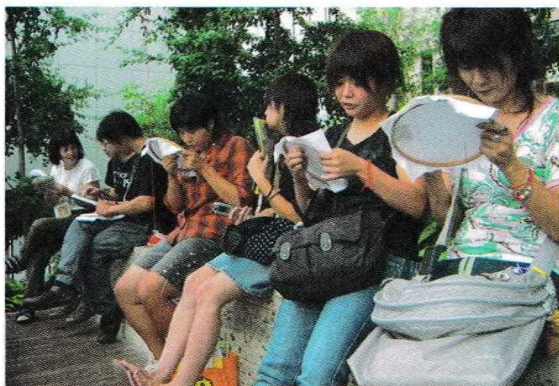
Chang remarked, "*Quilt of the Dead* is a ritual without religious backbone. Rituals are symbolic rites of passages. The act, the time it takes to complete

it, is in itself meaningful. Physical endurance and patience is needed to 'exorcize' the repressed emotional states-of-mind."

Chang was satisfied with the result that subsequent workshops were conducted back in Malaysia and, when the opportunity arose, in other countries like the UK, Korea and Taiwan.

It was in 2007, during the workshop held at May 18 Memorial Foundation in Gwangju, Korea, that Teoh Ming Wah, who had been documenting the *Quilt of the Dead Performances* from the beginning, became an active collaborator in the workshops. With her background in sociology and interest in history, *Quilt of the Dead* expanded into a work that did not only encapsulate individual memories but also provide a communal and historical context to these memories.

The workshop conducted in Gwangju, Korea, involved over 120 participants from the city of Gwangju embroidering portraits of victims perished during the 1980 Gwangju Democratic Uprising. The workshop became an opportunity for the participants to collectively remember an event that defined the fighting spirit of city. For the participants who were born after the event, it provided a more personal connection to the city they live in and its history.



From L to R: *Quilt of the Dead Workshops*, 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art, Triennale, 2005, Fukuoka, Japan; *Quilt of the Dead Workshops*, CAIS Project, Stella Maris Secondary School, Kuala Lumpur, 2008; and *Quilt of the Dead Workshops*, Intech College, Kuala Lumpur, 2006

In the small town of Hsing Kang, Taiwan, a series of *Quilt of the Dead Workshops* were conducted in 2007 and was participated by its inhabitants. In the course of a month, senior citizens, adults, university and high school students were divided into different workshop sessions where they embroidered portraits of their departed loves ones as well as personalities that had contributed to the development of their town.

The initial tepid reaction of the participants towards making an artwork about their dead gradually warmed up into a welcomed opportunity to remember their past. At the end of the workshop, an exhibition was held in which the individual embroideries were stitched together into a quilt and the participants were invited as special guests to the exhibition. It was a showcase of Hsing Kang's collective memory as well as its communal spirit.

"*Quilt of the Dead* began with the realisation that it will be a long journey eventually ending with the production of a 10ft by 10 ft quilt. What I didn't foresee were the places, people and stories that Ming Wah and I encountered, and the lives that this work has reached and touched", said Chang and he hopes to publish a book to chronicle this journey in the future.





Top Left: Around 120 people from Gwangju, Korea participated in this workshop where they embroidered portraits of the victim of the May 18 Democratic Uprising

Top Right: Result of Quilt of the Dead workshop in Hsing Kang, Taiwan, 2007

Chang Yoong Chia

b. 23 July 1975, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

WEBSITE

www.changyoongchia.com

EDUCATION

1996

Diploma in Fine Art,
Malaysian Institute of Art

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2009

The 2nd Seven Years: Quilt of the Dead,
Flora & Fauna IV, Narratives
The Annexe Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

2008

Safe House: Flora & Fauna III
Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

2004

Flora & Fauna
Reka Art Space, Kelana Jaya

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITION

2009

Personal Effects
Rogue Art, Kuala Lumpur

2008

Wanakio 2008
Maejima Art Center, Okinawa, Japan

JENESYS Artist Open Studio
NPO S-Air, Sapporo, Japan

Art Multiple 2008
Ke Center for Contemporary Arts,
Shanghai, China

2007

Between Generations: 50 years across
Modern Art in Malaysia
Asian Art Museum, University of
Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
& Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah,
University Sains Malaysia,
Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

Domestic Bliss

Sculpture Square, Singapore

Open Studio

former Jeollanam-do Provincial Office,
Gwangju, Korea

Discovery of May

5.18 Memorial Foundation, Gwangju,
Korea

12th Rimbin Dahan Artist Residency
Exhibition

Rimbin Dahan, Malaysia

2006

Parallel Realities –Asian Art Now
Blackburn, United Kingdom

3 Young Contemporaries: 1997-2006

Valentine Willie Fine Art,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Satu Kali 1st Performance Art Symposium
Malaysia

mfx & 67 Tempinis Satu, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

2005

3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale 2005
Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan

Borders

World Social Forum 2005, Porto Alegre,
Brazil

A Closer Look: Miniature Show

Galeri Seni Maya, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

Copy Move Transform

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2004

Homefronts

SENI, Singapore Art Museum,
Singapore

Regional Animalities

The Substation, Singapore

Seriously Beautiful

Reka Art Space, Kelana Jaya, Malaysia

Semangat: Artists for Theatre

Five Arts Centre Charity Fund
Exhibition, Valentine Willie Fine Art,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Art Under 1000

Valentine Willie Fine Art,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Malaysian Art Now

National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

2003

Games People Play

WWF Charity Show
Rimbin Dahan, Kuang, Malaysia

Newton's Funfair

Reka Art Space, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

2002

Young Contemporaries 2002

National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

Urbanscapes

Grappa Soho, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2001

Open Show

National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

Climbing the Wall

MIA Art and Design Centre,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Comics?

Artscape @ National Art Gallery,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Ctrl. Alt. Del.

Rumah Air Panas, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

1999

Aku' 99

Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

1998

Human Expressions

Valentine Willie Fine Art,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

1997

3 Young Contemporaries

Valentine Willie Fine Art,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

1996

Crates Classified

Galeri Wan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

FA 1696 Diploma Show

GaleriMIA, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

AWARDS, GRANTS & RESIDENCIES**2008***JENESYS Program*

Sapporo Artist in Residence &
Japan Foundation, Tokyo, Japan

2007

Goethe-Institut Scholarship to learn German
in Berlin

Art as Environment in Tropic of Cancer
artist-in-residence

Chiayi county, Taiwan

Ujiae Art Studio Artist Residency,
Gwangju, Korea

C21 Residency

Blackburn, United Kingdom

2006

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Rimbun Dahan, Kuang, Malaysia

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2007

Art as Environment, Hsing Kang, Taiwan

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Foundation

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Happy Home' by Laura Fan
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'Flourishing Love, Odd Blooms and
Peculiar Beasts' by Teoh Ming Wah
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Malaysia

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PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

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Gwangju, Korea

National Art Gallery
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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*Baby's Nightmare
2009
Oil on abalone shell
5 x 7.5 x 1 cm*

*Back cover:
Tea Time (detail)
2009
oil on canvas
137 x 208 cm*

