

Chai Chang Hwang

Chuah Chong Yong

Helen Guek Yee Mei



# 3 Young Contemporaries

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*sine* ART



On the front cover of this catalogue there is a reproduction of Chai Chang Hwang's powerful *Rukun Negara*. Here, Chairman Mao meets with Tun Razak, who towers over the Chinese politician. The *Rukun Negara* is written in Chinese. Both figures are presented in outline, as if in a broadsheet political cartoon. The painting seems to comment on political relations in Asia, a Malaysian Chinese artist's response to China and to his own nation here. It begs the question of how we see our national identity, in the international media, in the *Rukun Negara* recited during childhood in our national language. It is a striking, important work which deserves to be seen more often.

The exhibition "Three Young Contemporaries" has no theme. By bringing together the works of three young and as yet little recognized artists, such an exhibition aims merely to provide a space for artists who have begun to establish a distinctive vision to show their work in a substantial way. The work of Chai Chang Hwang, Chuah Chong Yong and Helen Guek Yee Mei is of particular interest because each artist has grown out of his or her formal training, gone past the period of disparate stylistic experimentation, taking with them only essential skills and the seeds of inspiration to pursue their individual visions. Because they have all trained locally, their visual and emotional stimuli remain by and large personal and local. As painters, their approach to the canvas and the subject is instinctive rather than studied, which only makes the aesthetic appeal and power of their work all the more remarkable.

Contemporary art in Malaysia has its champions and its followers but for the most part it remains hidden. There often appears to be a brick wall between younger artists and both collectors and the general public, though not for want of understanding. Young Malaysian art as it is represented here is not new-fangled and opaque or entangled with layers of meaning, although it is complex, passionate and sometimes disturbing.

There is ample accessible material for our visual digestion in the works on show. Helen Guek Yee Mei's lyrical compositions draw on the universal themes of romance and family on an intimate level. Chuah Chong Yong's magnificent portrayals of urban decay bring us somehow closer to the architecture, development and destruction we see on a daily basis. Chai Chang Hwang's superbly styled pastiches of Asian magazine visuals, signboarding, streetlife, religious and political icons and literary texts tries to make sense of our confusing cultural heritage and our society. These are images that might usually just flash before our eyes, things we take for granted, emotions we are unable to voice or are uncomfortable with voicing, and they are invested with new questions and new meanings by the artist.

Many of Malaysia's most promising young artists struggle for a response from the public. Some of them are uneasy with the commercial aspect of selling art which goes with exhibiting in the private sector. Such contradictions continue to trouble the state of Malaysian art. It is our hope that, in some modest way, this exhibition will be another step forward towards a resolution.

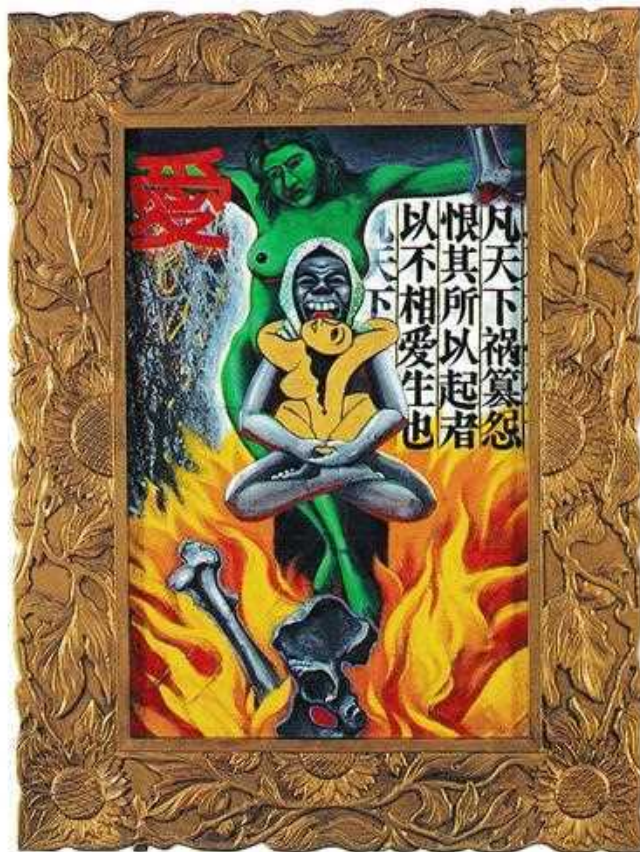


**Love**

1995

Oil on canvas

75 cm x 50 cm



Issues of race and national identity have been a perpetual feature of Malaysian art history. Few artists have addressed these issues and their effects on Asian society as directly and as successfully as Chai Chang Hwang.

Acknowledging the difficulties of verbal expression in a multi-lingual society, Chai Chang Hwang sees his painting as “visual language”. And visually articulate he is, channeling strong emotional responses to society using an impressive lexicon of images in stylish and imaginative compositions.

While studying at the Malaysian Institute of Art, he was tutored by the influential Wong Hoy Cheong, who has championed figurative and textual art as “more plebeian, accessible and not so caught up in the realm of rarefied aesthetics”<sup>1</sup> compared to other popular genres like abstraction in the country. Figurative painting as socially relevant art is raised to new levels of sophistication by Chai Chang Hwang. His versatile treatment of the human form explores the way we see ourselves. It appears as political caricature, as sculptures frozen in grey stone, in the pink sensuous flesh we see in glossy magazines. People are shown in states of conflict and desire and fear in bold configurations. Literary quotations from

Chinese philosophers and from Malaysian poet Samad Said are painted like banners over the images. Chai Chang Hwang’s art speaks loud and clear to the point of seeming to be propaganda, until we realise that the inherent contradictions in his paintings reveal only unanswered questions, not statements.

Although his larger works are his most striking, the artist’s ethos is best encapsulated in the smaller *Love* painting. Here, religious icons are thrown into the fire, flanked by the philosopher Me Tze’s invocation against war and hate. A last passionate embrace before the flames is loaded with ambiguity. Love is humanity’s last salvation, but love as mutual respect, not desire.

Upon meeting, Chai Chang Hwang is modest and unassuming, like many artists of his generation. His art, however, reveals an anger and confusion which demands attention.

<sup>1</sup> Wong Hoy Cheong in an interview with Krishen Jit, “What About Converging Extremes?”, a catalogue to the exhibition at Galeriwan, Kuala Lumpur, 1993.





Siri Pelukan II: Budaya tuan punya (Hugging Series II: Your Culture)

1992

Acrylic and collage on board  
171 cm x 122.5 cm

Anak Cemerlang Negara Gemilang (Outstanding Citizens, Prosperous Country)

1992

Oil on canvas  
220 cm x 110 cm

Rukun Negara

1993

Acrylic on canvas  
200 cm x 200 cm



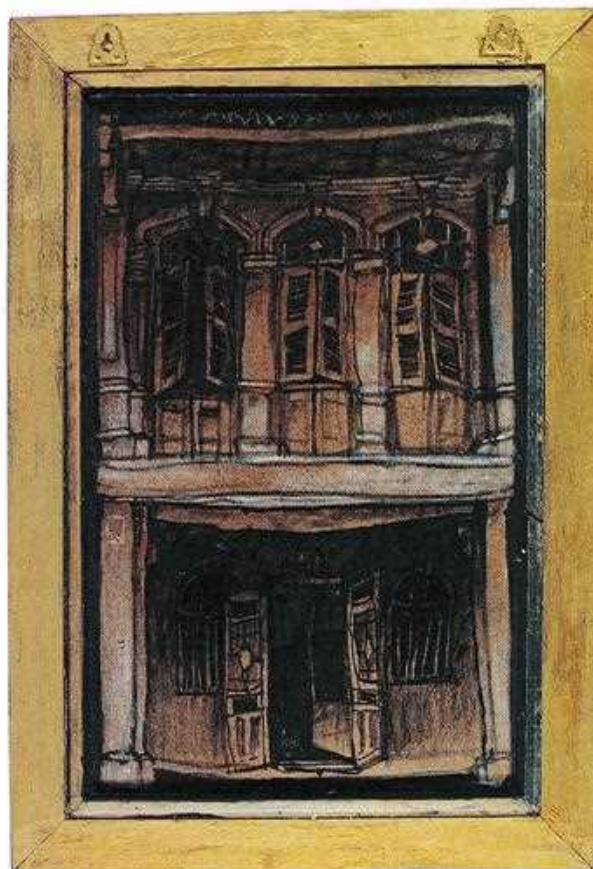


### Study for Pre-War Building for Sale

1996

Mixed media on masonite board

76 cm x 56 cm



Some of us will remember Chuah Chong Yong's prize-winning work, *Pre-War Building for Sale - The Gold Wash*, from the 1996 Philip Morris Awards. In this painting, the toppling neo-classical facade of a colonial building is flooded by liquid gold as if engulfed by flames. It spoke of the lucre of a booming economy overriding the heritage of Malaysia's past.

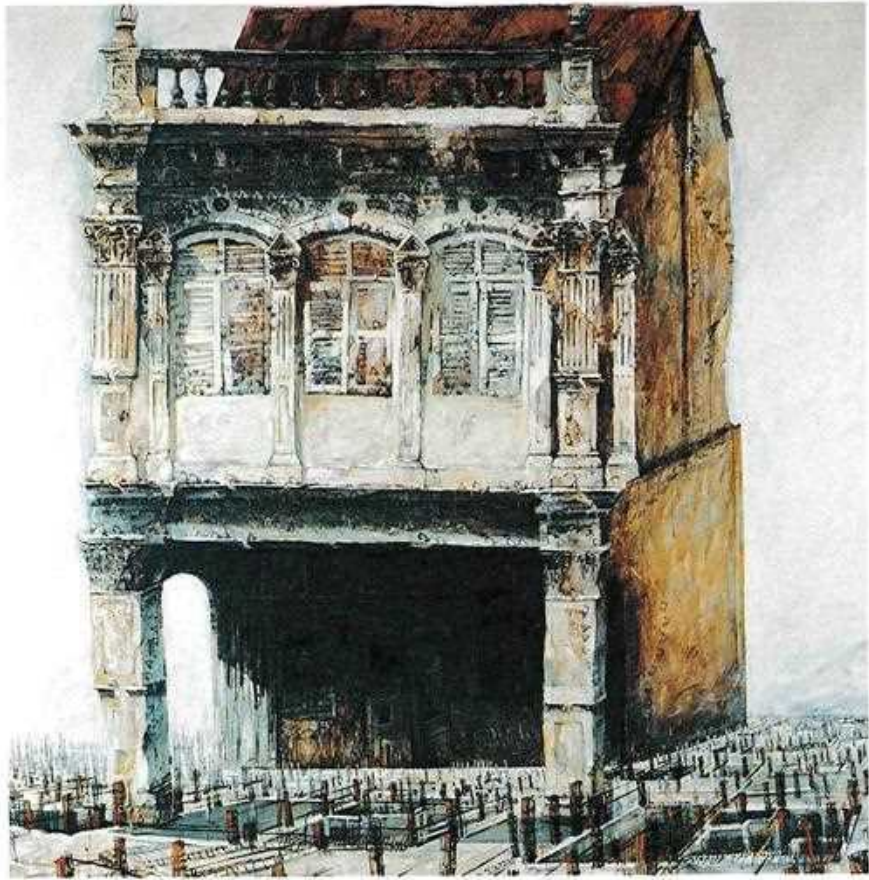
Since 1993, the artist has been working with the subject of old Malaysian buildings, drawing attention to the very real issue of modernisation's threat to our architectural heritage as well as to its consequences for our cultural past as a whole.

The new works on exhibition here tackle the subject from several different angles. *Anai-Anai* warns of the often-overlooked dangers of rapid development. An old colonial building in Kuala Lumpur is juxtaposed against the beginnings of a new construction, creeping insidiously through the foundations like termites. *Issue I: Houses Crack* is intended as a record of the problem in Penang, announced this February in the press.

The issue of houses cracking had been ignored for two years until it was discovered that over two hundred homes in the area were affected. One building in the foreground foreshadows a whole community - decay has a domino effect. In the studies for *Skin Trilogy*, our buildings are analogised as our skin and our identity, hitting the heart of the artist's current work.

Chuah Chong Yong paints the facade of our buildings, because the facade is all that we see. He paints them with the mastery of an accomplished easel-painter, using impasto texturing to bring out the real feel of the architecture. Yet his early training in watercolour shows through in the way he focuses on certain fine details while giving an impression of the whole. This, and his subject matter, link him to a strong tradition of watercolourists who celebrate the historical buildings of Malaysia, especially in Penang and Malacca, and the quiet way of life we associate with them. To all those who are familiar with these nostalgic images of Malaysian life, Chuah Chong Yong, in a poignant way, turns the ideal on its head.



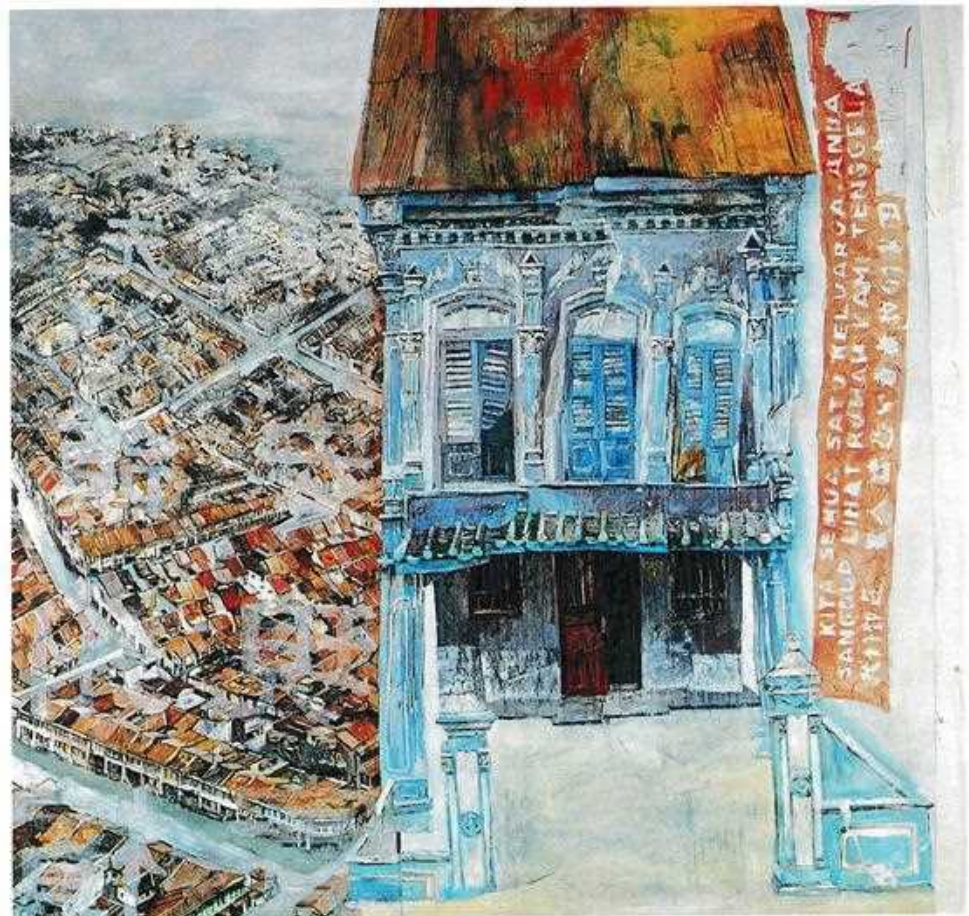


**Anai-anaiing**

1997

Acrylic on canvas

200 cm x 200 cm



**Issue I: Houses Crack**

1997

Acrylic on canvas

200 cm x 200 cm





**Flower Blooming in Silence VI**

1995

Oil on canvas

122cm x 134cm

The most recent graduate of the artists exhibiting in this show, Helen Guek Yee Mei's work differs from that of her male counterparts in that it is deeply concerned with a personal emotional reality.

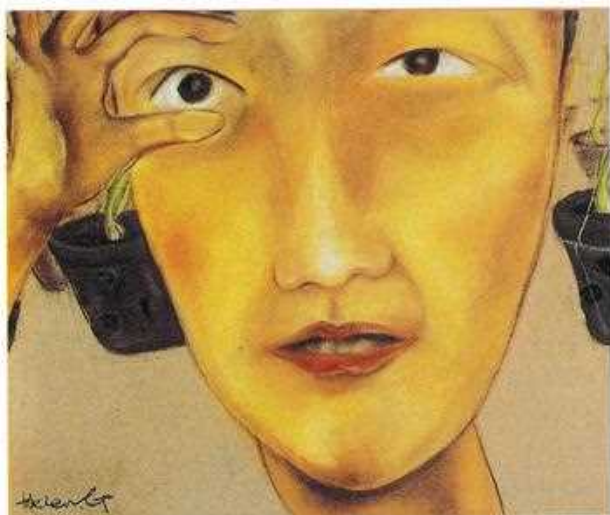
Away from questions of social identity and issues of heritage, her work is no less relevant to our human experience, taking as its subjects isolation and a yearning for love, the ways in which we relate to ourselves and those close to us. Her courage as an artist lies perhaps in her willingness to expose what is sacred and intimate.

Breaking out of her formal training in more conceptual or more "difficult" art, she has returned to the basic roots of figurative painting. From informal sketches of her family, the first of which was *Sister* of 1995, a distinctive figure type has evolved, as well as the use of leitmotifs as metaphors for character and emotion.

There is a literary quality to her painting, where plants and animals express feelings of loneliness, desire and fulfillment. The flower is a favourite motif, particularly the lotus and the more local *fu gua fa* (prosperity flower). In this way, a formal concept of traditional Chinese brush painting is translated onto the canvas in scenes of modern life. It also links her painting to the European medieval *roman* with its perpetual allegories. In *Waiting in the Night*, a girl anticipates the opening of the lotus, her own blossoming. In *Blooming in Hometown*, the artist watches her herself mature in the blooming of the prosperity flower with her family looking on. *Flower Blooming in Silence* is a popular line of Chinese verse and is epitomised by a lone tree cut off from our view by a wall.

In all her work a sense of timelessness and mystery prevails in the broad spaces and sensitive use of colour on the canvas, telling stories like the *ragamala* (garland of melodies) paintings of India which communicate the *raga* through lines and colours traditionally conveyed through sound. It is the universal aspect of her art which makes it so appealing.





**Sister**

1995

Soft pastel on paper

50 cm x 61 cm



**Waiting at Night**

1996

Oil on canvas

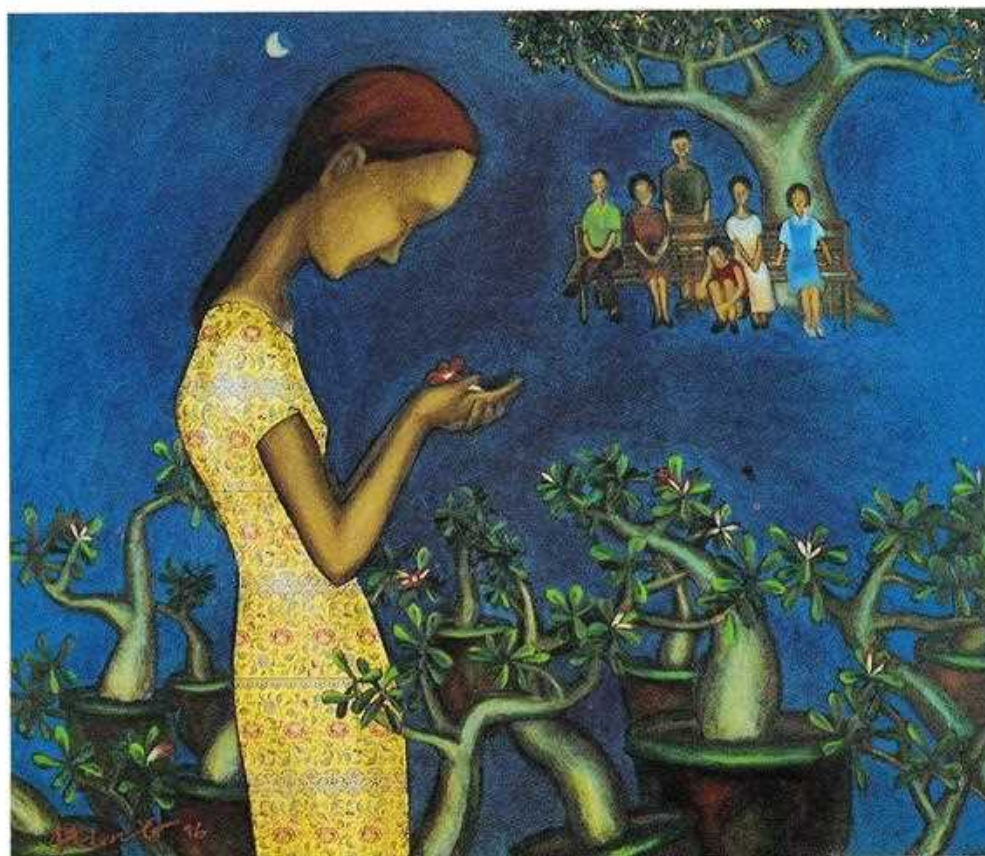
64cm x 76cm

**Blooming in Hometown**

1996

Oil on canvas

107cm x 122cm



## Chai Chang Hwang (b. 1969)

1990 Diploma in Fine Art, Malaysian Institute of Art, Kuala Lumpur

### Selected Exhibitions

1990 Malaysian Open Show, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1991 Young Contemporary Art Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

*One World, No War* Art Competition, DBKL, Kuala Lumpur

1992 Young Contemporary Art Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

*Keluarga Bahagia, Negara Sejahtera* Art Competition and Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

Salon Malaysia 91/92, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1993 Young Contemporary Art Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

*What About Converging Extremes?*, Galeriwan, Kuala Lumpur

*The Artist and Social Commitment*, 3rd ASEAN Travelling Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1994 *Life After MIA 84-94*, Creative Centre, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

*Vision and Idea: Re-Looking Modern Malaysian Art*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

## Chuah Chong Yong (b.1972)

1993 Diploma in Fine Art, Malaysian Institute of Art, Kuala Lumpur

### Selected Exhibitions

1991 Salon Malaysia 91/92, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1994 *Life After MIA 84-94*, Creative Centre, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

*7 Space* Group Exhibition, Gallery MIA, Kuala Lumpur

*Bakat Muda Sezaman '94*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

*Positively a Life* Exhibition, Galeriwan, Kuala Lumpur

1995 *Expression '95*, Nanyang Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1996 *Periphery* Group Exhibition, Galeriwan, Kuala Lumpur

Philip Morris Malaysia Art Awards, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards, National Gallery, Bangkok

### Awards

1993 Singapore National Chinese Calligraphy Competition, Consolation Prize

National Young Contemporary Ink Painting Competition, Merit Award

Merit Ward form Malaysian Institute of Art, Kuala Lumpur

1994 Singapore National Chinese Calligraphy Competition, Consolation Prize

*Bakat Muda Sezaman 94*, Minor Award

1996 Philip Morris Malaysia Art Awards, Winner

Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards, Honourable Mention

## Helen Guek Yee Mei (b. 1971)

1995 Diploma in Fine Art, Malaysian Institute of Art, Kuala Lumpur

### Selected Exhibitions

1996 *New Voices* Diploma Show, Gallery MIA, Kuala Lumpur

*Fresh Faces*, Pelita Hati Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

Open Exhibition, Shah Alam Gallery

*The Cornucopia of Malaysian Arts*, Metropolitan Gallery of Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

*Malaysian Art Exhibition*, Beijing

*Horse Exhibition*, Pelita Hati Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

### Awards

1996 Best Student Award, Malaysian Institute of Art







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*Southeast Asian Paintings & Works of Art*

This exhibition will be opened by  
Y Bhg. Mr. Yong Ming Sang on 25th May 1997, and  
will end on 10th June 1997.