



GOING AWAY, COMING HOME

Chong Siew Ying

VALENTINE
WILLIE
fine ART

KUALA LUMPUR • BALI

Going Away, Coming Home tracks Chong Siew Ying's career over the past year, through the streets of New York, an autumn in Vermont, a short spell on the Côte d'Azur, and six months in Paris. As such, this collection of paintings appears at the outset a whirlwind tour of people and places; moments of exhilaration and laughter, of nostalgia and silence. It also sees significant developments in a number of different directions in her painting. Never before has her work seemed more difficult to pin down, yet it is perhaps in the very multiplicity of this 'travelogue' that we might identify the crux of her work.

Siew Ying is the classic itinerant, leaving to find the path of return, circumambulating the earth to locate herself. At the same time her access to place is always through people, and as a painter she is most attracted to the human form and the human face, the emotional nuances of posture and expression.

In her paintings, the compositional dynamic often relies heavily on the imagined stance of the artist/viewer, sometimes making us the most crucial element of the human relationships within the work. Where there is a crowd, whether in *Times Square* (2001) or on the *Côte d'Azur* (2001-2002) or at *Pasar Malam* (2002), the most critical question raised is, "Where do we stand?"

One of the earliest works in the exhibition, *Intersection* (2001), which might be said to lead us into what follows, is a crossing from one place to another. A man and a woman stand either side of a road leading towards the horizon, and the viewer, or the artist, stands facing that road. In the *Times Square* paintings (2001) we are clearly observers, closed off from an urban sea of anonymous faces, lost in the bustle of consumerism in the city of possibilities. Here and there, we pick out something we find sympathy with – the awe of a child looking up at the city skyline, the private smile of a woman walking through the crowd. Interestingly in this body of paintings, the artist explores a watercolour effect with oil paint, achieving a new form of transparency which merges her human subjects into the backdrop. *The Invisible Wall* (2001-2002) series succinctly rounds off the New York works, the artist's handprints marking the barrier (from either side of the picture plane) between herself/us and the others walking through.

Translucent effects have long been employed in Siew Ying's work to release the human subject from its gravity. From her early *Urban Life series* (1997), through works made during her residency at Rimbun Dahan and haunting pieces like *Grace* (2000) and *The girl who was frightened by the sea* (2000), to *Family Tree* (2002) shown here, they poignantly articulate through the figure a sense of human mystery and its revelation. In Vermont, the artist began experiments with painting heads and figures on vellum, later giving birth in Paris to the candid and powerful *Trace* (2002). A heightened boldness and freedom in her handling, and in her sense of scale seem to have taken root at this point, which can be seen as well in her new series of portraits. These up-close-and-personal works by the artist, again developed from earlier series, are held up to the artist/viewer as if a mirror, or in conversation.

This latest séjour in France seems also to have brought out a satirical streak in Siew Ying's work, perhaps last seen in *On the Beach* (1999). The crowds in Paris and the Côte d'Azur seem to enjoy a greater, earthier energy than their American counterparts. The artist is obviously more at home in this environment, comfortable enough to chuckle at pink sunbathers, or cast a wry glance at the shrill crowd at *The Party* (2002). The artist's palette is being used in quite a new way, forceful and specific, working in tandem with faster and looser brushwork.

In stark contrast to the freedom, lightness and sense of distance characteristic of most of the works here, is *Pasar Malam* (2002). Similar in theme and style to her previous exhibited series of work based on local, eating-related daily activities (*Feast*, 2000; *Waiting*, 2000), and in incubation since then, this piece is heavy with reality. The lovingly-outlined, magnified details of fish, crabs, bananas and even a kampling head, have the intensity of childhood memories, even while the figures seem distant and anonymous. The relationship between artist/viewer and the painted subject is particularly complex here – we grasp at the familiar but find ourselves estranged.

Beverly Yong

Chong Siew Ying was born in **Kuala Lumpur** in **1969**. After two years at PJ College of Art & Design, she travelled to Paris, and enrolled at l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Versailles, where she studied from 1991-1994. Deciding to stay on, she taught etching at l'Atelier 63 in Paris from 1996-1997. She exhibited widely in Europe (in France, Netherlands, Spain and Norway), holding three solo exhibitions (Gallery TCH'A, Paris 1996; Gallery Café Panique, Paris 1997; Atelier D Maraval, Bagnolet 1997). She participated in a number of group exhibitions, including Maastricht Biennale (Netherlands, 1993), Salon Contemporain, Paris (1995), SEN'ART '96, TRACE '96, 5th Biennale International Contemporary Prints (Paris, 1996), and 4th Triennale Mondiale d'Estampe Contemporain (Chamalieres, France, 1997) among others.

In 1998 she returned to Kuala Lumpur, where she held her first Malaysian solo exhibition at Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur. In 1999, she took part in 'Through Our Eyes' at Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur and FRANCASIA: 'Asian Artists in Paris in Tokyo'. She was invited to be the Malaysian Artist-in-Residence at Rimbun Dahan in 1999, where she exhibited in February 2000. Also in 2000, she exhibited jointly with sculptor Frederique Boumeester in 'Oil and Ink' at Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, and her work has been exhibited in several exhibitions here including 'Headlights: Leading Contemporary Malaysian Artists'.

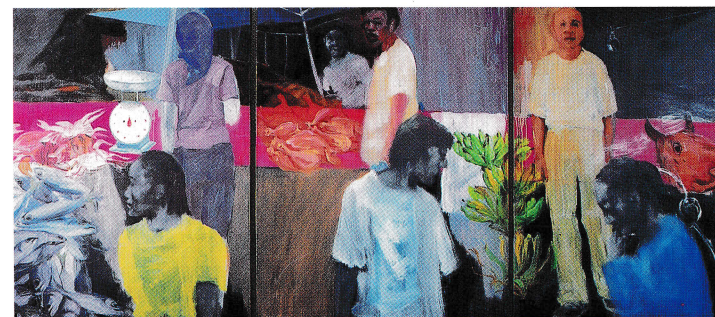
In 2000 she travelled to New York for six months, and in 2001 she gained the Freeman Asian Artist Fellowship Award to stay as a resident artist at the Vermont Studio Centre (USA), culminating in a solo exhibition at the studio. While in the USA, she also spent time in New York, and has been in Paris over the last six months.



The Concert
2001-2
Oil on canvas
120 x 131 cm



Times Square II
2001
Oil on canvas
114 x 146 cm



Pasar Malam
2002
Oil on canvas
130 x 97 cm (x3)

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cover
Trace (detail)
2002
Oil on vellum
200 x 80 cm (x8)