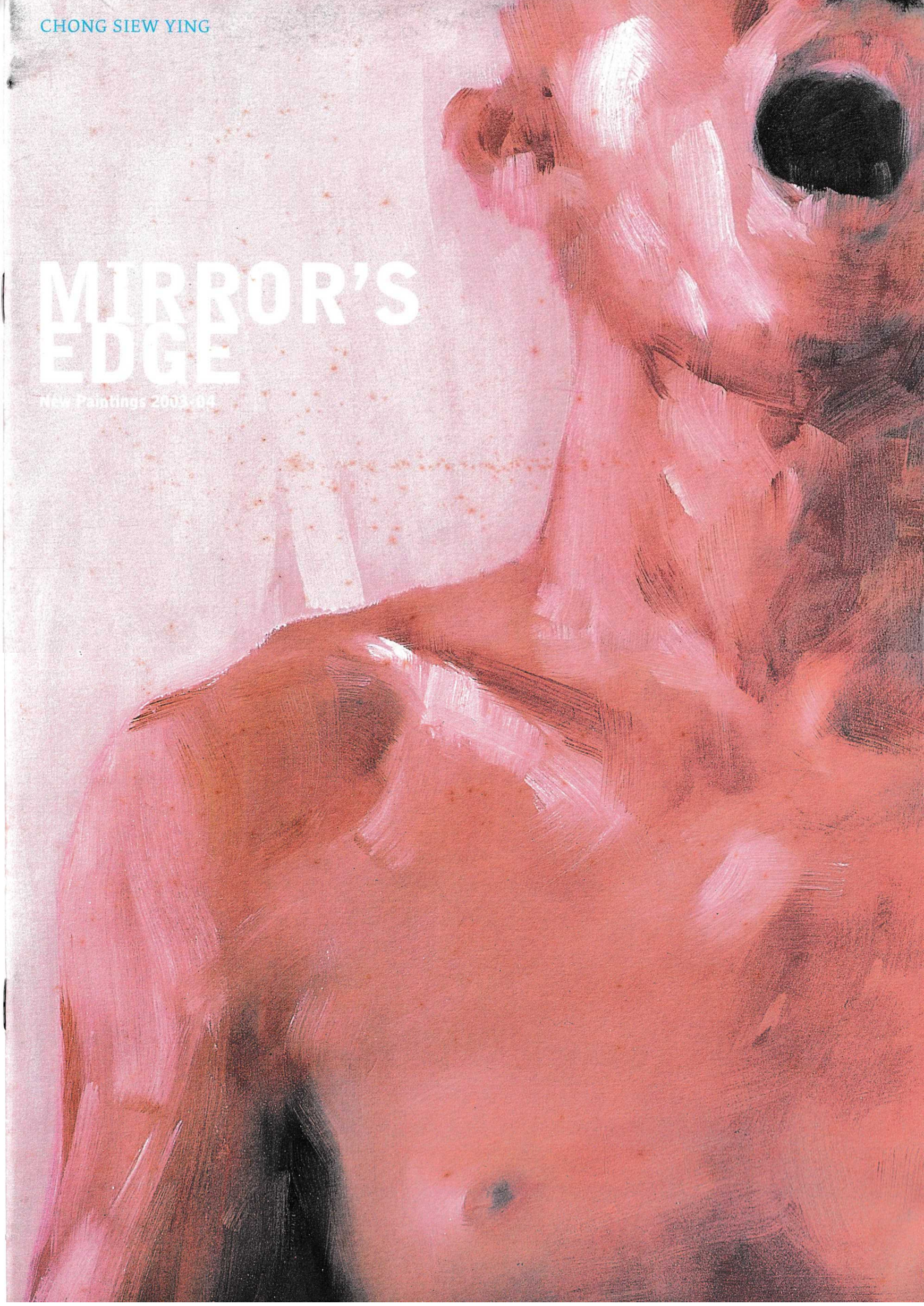


CHONG SIEW YING

# MIRROR'S EDGE

New Paintings 2003-04





# EDGE MIRROR'S





## CHONG SIEW YING: SILENT PROVOCATEUR

Human figures in "placelessness" and timelessness; enigmatic as always. Austerity of bareness and baldness, punctuated by occasional smiles and softened by soft impressionistic hues and tone, gives rise to pleasurable aesthetic sensation. The blurring and merging of male and female, scream and laughter, contemplation and observation, set up an immediate investigation of duality. However, should one invest in a longer pause, the images may take the viewer past the surface to engage in the artist's exploration into identity and displacement, tradition and belief, hope and experience. Following that, or simultaneously, these may reflect on the viewer and instigate him or her to question him- or herself on similar concerns.

Critically, the universality achieved by Siew Ying in the treatment of the subject/object and their environment together with her personal struggle enables just such a spontaneous engagement by the viewer.

Tracing back the path of Siew Ying's works, spanning a decade, their subject matter – the human figure, their disposition and their intensity remain constant. However, the narrative has been evolving, I dare say truly reflecting the development of the artist, within and without: through her displacement and orientation in France, her travels, reorientation upon her return to Malaysia, success and acknowledgement, more travels with interludes of recollection, introspection and consolidation. Meanwhile, Siew Ying's technical explorations with various media, and with perspective in painting and drawing, and even recent experiments with film, have produced surprisingly delightful results.

In the midst of increasing dominance of commercialism in art, the pervasive "Surface over Content" and art becoming a mere ornament of society (albeit an ornament of high fashion and technical brilliance), it is rejuvenating to witness such resistance and consistency, skillful empathy and reflection in dealing with humanity and the human condition.

These qualities may be attributed to her formative years in France. With no moral and financial assistance, Siew Ying managed to support her entire education in Paris – a challenge few local secondary school graduates would contemplate taking on. Such guts and determination, focus and stamina had to be driven by an unyielding passion in the first place.

MIRROR'S EDGE is the latest interpreted "diary" of Siew Ying's journey of self-discovery, sparking more questions than answers as before and, at the same time, inducing answers to questions yet to be defined.



## STRIPPING DOWN: IN CONVERSATION WITH CHONG SIEW YING

**Would you give us a brief introduction to the coming show, for example, the theme, the types of artwork, the number of paintings, etc.?**

The exhibition is set for August, and I have yet to decide on how many pieces will be chosen for the show. In this show, I explore the theme of the human body, as an expression of human relationships, and the bond between the human being and space. Here, I mean not simply physical space but also emotional and spiritual space.

The word 'nude' in the Western art context means being naked or bare. I have no intention of simply repeating the convention of glorifying the beauty of the human body, but rather seek to express the spiritual side of it. Metaphorically speaking, all humans are born naked, and we faced the world naked. Gender is of little significance here. The figures in my paintings often carry a sense of loneliness, perhaps in some way or another reflecting my state of mind – he/she can be described as the reflection of my inner self, or even my reincarnation.

Really, my paintings are more inclined towards the spiritual or psychological aspects of expression, which are tied to aesthetic concerns.

**Do you think it is true that female artists tend to be better at or have a preference towards the theme of the human body – of "love & sex" – especially when nudity can easily trigger sexual thoughts?**

Looking back through art history, the real masters in this area mostly come from our male counterparts. For centuries, woman was only a model for male artists....

**... Male artists tend to have a different viewpoint....**

... Of course, this is because women and men have different ways of interpreting things, and hence differ in emotion and expression. However, women in comparison to men tend to be more sensitive, more meticulous and work in depth.... I'm not sure if this applies to me, though.

Recently, I've asked myself: does my work explore the male-female relationship? In some of my drawings, I draw men and women superimposed over each other – the two seem to be as one, yet apart. But I think these began as works about the idea of loneliness. Art-making to me is a solitary process and it has always been somewhat meditative. I am a loner. When I am alone, I don't feel lonely, I am not lonely, spiritually.

**Looking at the progress of today's art, a number of prominent female artists on the international art scene use their own naked bodies for expression, and I would like to hear your thoughts on this.**

Yes! There are quite a number of women artists who not only paint themselves as the subject, but also paint the male body. On top of that, their works often have sexual connotations, or even bluntly illustrate a sex scene, or exaggerate the sex organs, as though they are shouting: "We can do it too!"

Although I have nothing against this, such a provocative approach is the least of my intentions. The human body as a subject has many possibilities, and this will never come to an end, as long as artists keep having different things to say.

**Society says that we should wear clothes to cover our body; this is also the symbol of a civilized society. However, most figures drawn by artists are in the nude. Can you share with us your views pertaining to this topic? Some people believe that a naked body represents pure nature. Does your work share the same implication?**

First of all, I would like to clarify that the nudity in my paintings makes no reference to social issues. Nudity has a different, transcendental significance in my work, and a personal significance also.

When you refer to the naked body "representing pure nature", do you mean it is "closer to nature"? The practice of wearing clothes has had a few thousand years of history and I am a person living in the 21st century. I do not deny that my paintings do to a certain extent portray the beauty of the human body. In life, though, I have always believed that a clothed body is far more attractive than a naked one. I would feel more insecure without clothes on – the body is far safer with clothes on.

**The human body has been perceived differently in different ages and cultures – for example, when Edouard Manet (1832-1883) depicted a naked woman in the painting *Olympia*, he was scrutinized by the society as being inappropriate, and was refused permission for exhibition. As a modern female artist, how do you view your own paintings of the female body?**

The image of a naked woman lying down can be purely aesthetic, but in the mind of someone else it can seem pornographic. Every art work can be ambiguous, and this may even stimulate the viewer's perceptive and emotional response. To me, this is a positive thing.

In my paintings, the nudes, if not standing, are mostly sitting. There are no seductive or teasing postures. The first point of departure in my work is often a simple 'smile' – the smile is always intriguing. I find it challenging to create a piece of work that carries a sense of well being, that can leave a lasting impression in the viewer, as compared to something that is simply provocative.

**In some of the paintings, the bald figures make it difficult for us to tell their gender, this isn't merely an attempt to create ambiguity, is it?**

I use baldness in order to emphasise facial expression. I believe that when a person is rid of hair, his/her appearance is changed dramatically, and the expression of the body, which is my theme here, is as a result augmented.



**You mentioned that you are going to place some flowers over the male subjects. Do the flowers carry any feminine connotation?**

In fact, I imagine that placing another layer of shapes on the human figures can enhance the dimensionality of the painting. I want to create another space and time and this is about memory, and not about the male-female relationship.

Memory plays a strong role in my work. When we recollect things, fragments of our memories flash through our minds like film footage. I see these images as transparent. They are there, yet they are not quite there. I choose flowers because I adore them, and they also create a strong visual impact. Moreover, flowers have a symbolic relation to time. The time between blooming and withering is very short, fleeting.

**I can't really explain why, but whenever I look at the smiling faces in your paintings, there is often a feeling that they are only smiling on the surface but underneath, there is a sense of melancholy...**

Just now I mentioned how interesting it is to have different reactions from different viewers, who might interpret the facial expression in the paintings in various ways – some may see a face as 'crying', and yet some see it as 'screaming'.

**My point is, sometimes, we experience emotions that we ourselves do not comprehend, I wonder if you have had such experiences before?**

I am very conscious about how I feel. When I am happy, I am truly happy; when I am sad, I really do feel sadness. It is only when someone is in touch with his or her true emotions of happiness and sadness, that he/she is truly alive!

I won't deny our subconscious can play tricks on us, but this is out of our control. I have paintings completed during hard times – for example, the year when I had just returned from Paris, I was doubtful about my future,

feeling alone and helpless – now when I look at those works, I am puzzled with the sense of peace and calmness that prevails in the works. The subjects neither laugh nor cry.

**With regards to composition, your paintings are often void of the obvious signs of time and space. The paintings are often images of the human figure with a distant background. They are minimal, yet they are rich in visual effect. Is that intentional?**

I've travelled through deserts, mountains and beaches, and that feeling of space always finds its way subconsciously into the paintings. I intend to reduce space and time to the level of nothingness – so that a place could be anywhere, located in any time, a space for the imagination.

Certain postures in my painting are recurring: a little girl on her toes or a man looking up at the sky. As a child, I always dreamt of exploring the world, to experience different things. I enjoy travelling, meeting people, and from their faces probe into human emotions. This is why I choose the human being as my subject.

**You go to your studio everyday, you seem to be very disciplined. When you are not painting, you travel, staying for a short period of time from one place to another. Your life seems to be in a constant flux between "stopping and moving". Does your art show the same feeling about tension of life?**

Yes! I continue to experience what life has to offer, earnestly experiencing every moment of it. Imagine if one person shifted house seven times in ten years, and lived in several countries – each time he/she has to make a choice between what to let go and what to keep, both emotionally and materially.... Change has become a way of life, and it is in these changes that the passion for life is ignited, as well as the passion for creation.



## 张秀英油画展 2003-04: 镜缘

我对秀英说，跟她在一块儿有一种终极性的感觉。她没听懂，这不能怪她。那时我们坐在孟沙一露天马来小食摊上，油烟熏天，这种鬼话有些离谱，任谁也难以听懂，更甭说本来就这样活着的她。

所谓终极性，跟爱、恨、生、死有关，听来深沉，实则是人生在世根本不过的事儿。说白些，秀英她活得简单。她爱得彻底，曾一度想过自杀，有着孩子般的直觉，时而说出一些不合场合的话儿，偏偏起着揭穿皇帝新衣之效。

秀英的作品同样“简单”。当中一或俩个人儿，背后均是平铺的颜色。除了脸上表情和异性的器官，人像们几乎是难辨难分的。

作品里没有日常生活的痕迹。没有苹果、牙刷，没有报纸、圆珠笔，甚而没有叫人安心的尘埃、墙角上的蛛网。现实环境被剥去了，干剩一、俩个人儿，周遭一片飘渺无垠之境，或穹苍、或荒原、或汪洋、或深岭，处处加剧了人存在的孤独与悲凉。

人像的头发均被削去，甚而身上的一丝一缕也没留下。

去了人像的身外物，秀英得以聚焦，只把心神投注笔划跟色调中，一心一意塑造一个人像。

站在二米高的画布前，秀英跟等高的人像，通过一支画笔而相连。精力与时间，欲望与抑郁，从作画者这一边流转到画的那一边。这边手一挥动，那边肢体随之成形。

画面无异于一面池水。秀英向水面贴近，映象渐次清晰，却在伸手碰触时，忽而幻化了。波光水影中，骤然窥见自己破碎的影子、时间的痕迹，一时虚实莫分、悲欢参半。

长时间的沉默相对，言语尽埋心窝中、笔端上、颜色里。无声言语自有它的分量，如今凝聚人像上，只会让后者有不胜重负之感，不安之色不觉流露于表了。

对此，秀英有极具体描绘：绷紧的腮边绿筋，起伏跳动的胸肌，鼓胀微翘的乳头，甚而隔着肚皮翻滚的笑浪。

脸上表情更是丰富多意。有的嘴角轻挑，眉毛微扬，有的张着嘴仰着脖子，朝天呐喊似的。

表情不只赋予人像其独特身份，同时也牵动肉体，定下永恒姿态。

表情牵动了肉体，自然也可以牵动另一端那画家的笔，要它迅速游移，要它一撇一捺只为捕捉那瞬间的表情。

诸多表情之中，要数张口呼喊状为最显著。激情，由嘴角伸延开去，从头顶盖直至脚趾尖，牵动全身肌理，简单的构图霎时布满张力。然而，身处飘渺虚幻之境，这激情何来？

坐在小食摊边，也有激情可言。爱恨生死本无时无刻存在着。秀英明白这点，这一再剥削，似乎为还原人的本性而起。

然而这场宽衣解带何其缓慢，秀英足足花上八年光景！

时间却是恰好不过。自回国首个个展至今，约莫八年悠转，秀英有了更强的自信。新作中，人像跟背景的比例大了，神情也奔放豁达了，站姿颇有一种顶天立地的凛然，那似乎是克服环境后的姿态。环境少了压迫感，退居为清朗的颜色，人像与环境渐趋融合。新作保留了那份独特的孤独感，不过不仅仅是限于个人的。那孤独似乎人与生俱来，碰上就无须回避，坦然相对自有其积极的一面。

削掉人像的头发，秀英随即除去带有文化符码的衣服，裸像身份模糊了，可以是画家化身，亦可以是芸芸众生的你我，达到普释性的艺术效果。

站在群画环绕的画室中，观者如置身一间镶满镜片的屋子，四周反映着既熟悉又陌生的形象，千姿百态尽入眼帘，一时发人深思。人像看久了，竟又焕发几分庄严，象是供奉在庙宇神殿的塑像，撩起观者敬畏之情。

那天，秀英指着画像的小腿说：“你看，这象什么？”小腿呈红色，如剥去表皮的那种血肉红，经她一指，不难看出其中类似骨头的形状。人像已裸，如今几乎要露出骨来，秀英的意图不能再说隐晦了。而人像的呐喊，此时此刻，尽管我们耳朵听不见，心里自有回响：那似乎有关活着的一些终极性的什么吧。

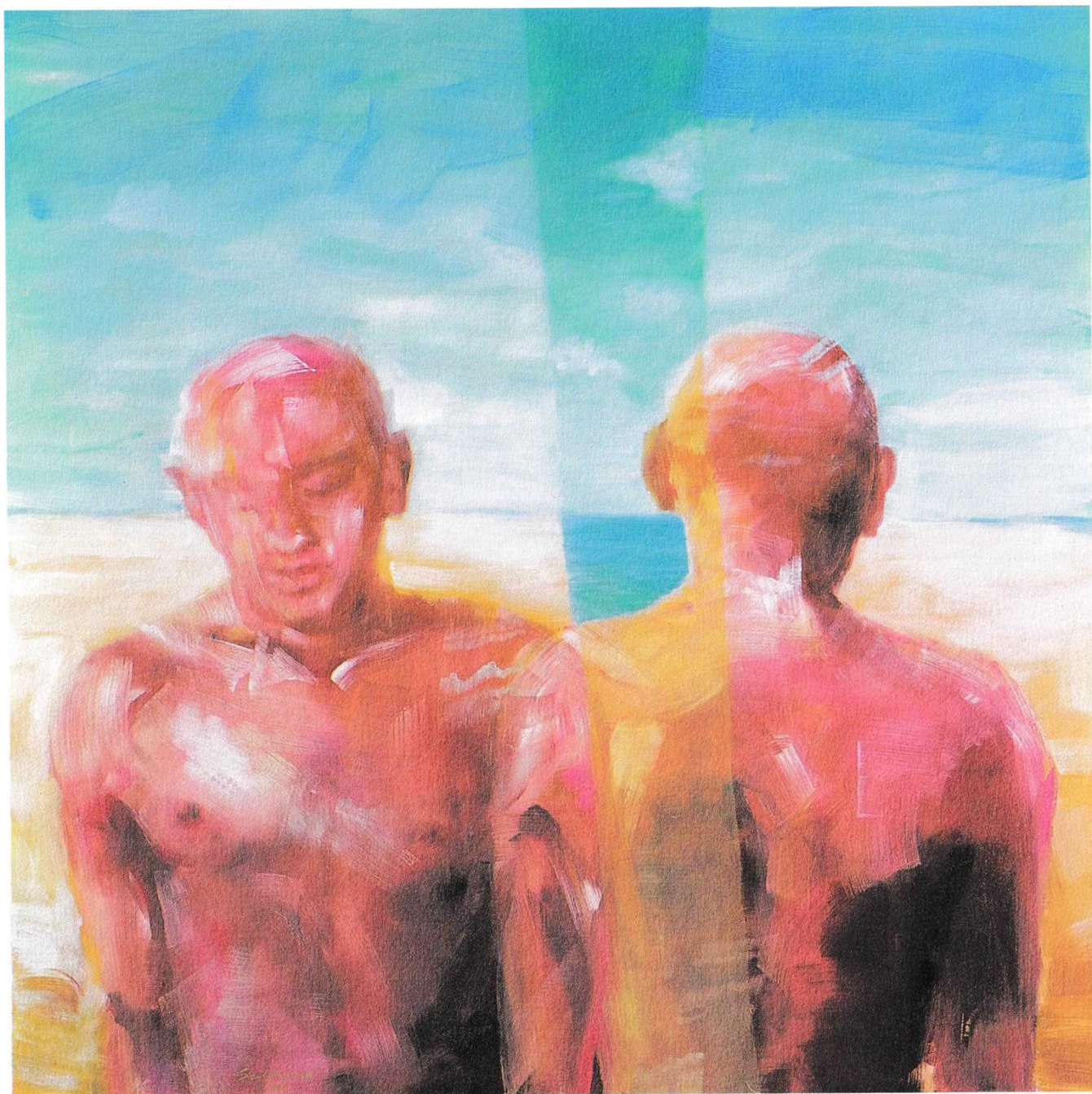




THE WOMAN WITH THE RED SCARF

2003, oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm





THE SHADOW LINE

2004, oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm





THE MAN WHO LISTENS TO THE WIND

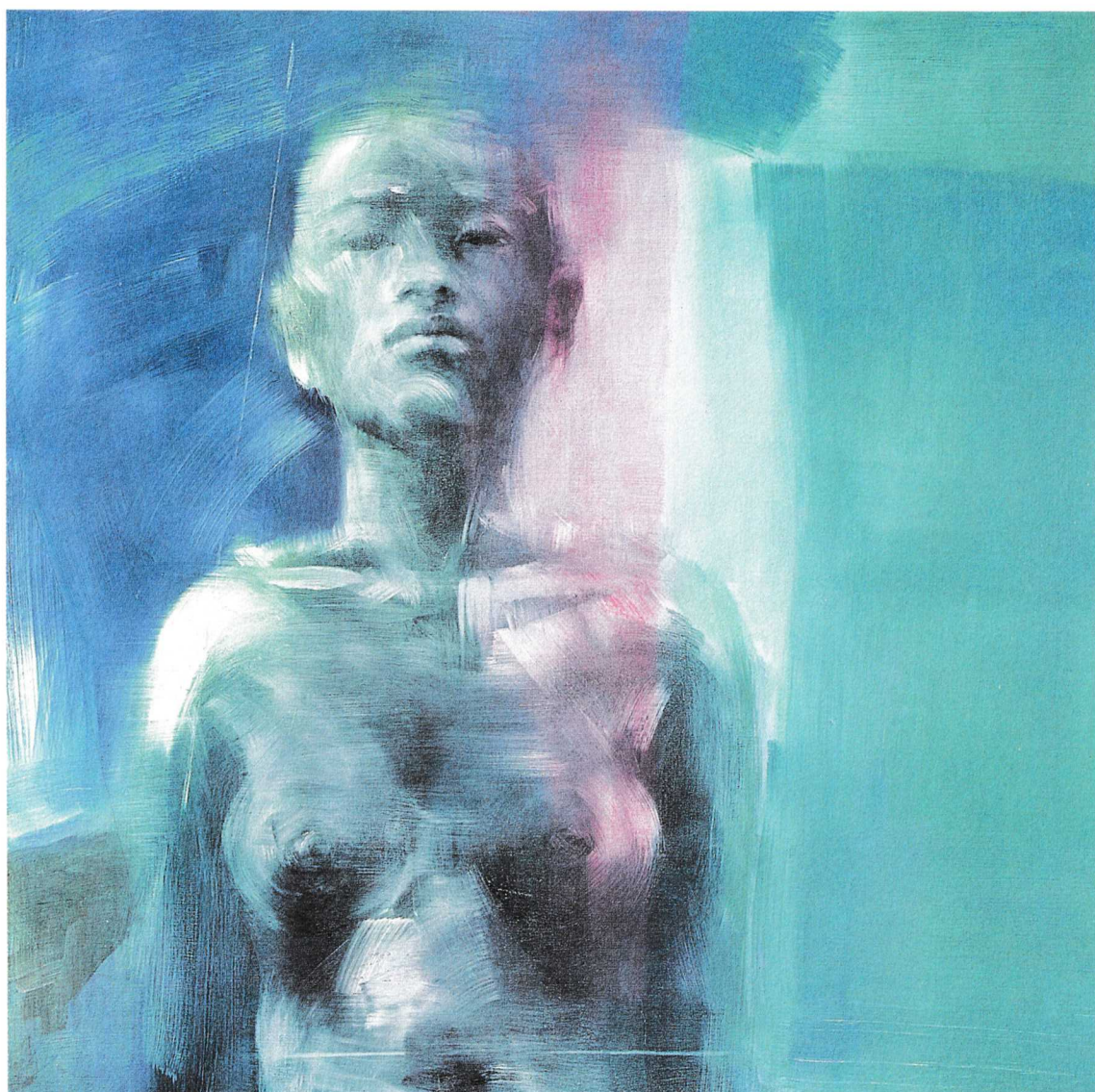
2003, oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



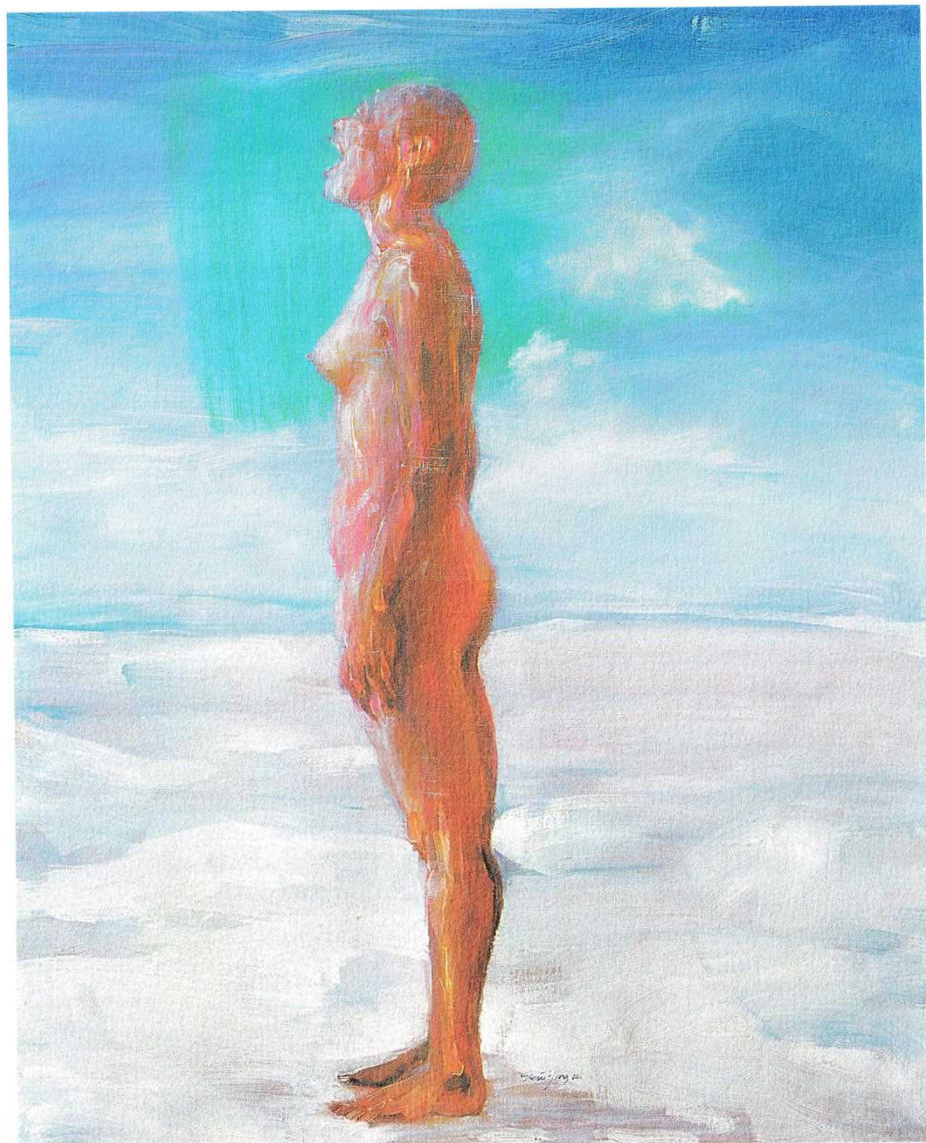
WITHIN THE THIN LINE

2003, oil on linen  
100 x 100 cm





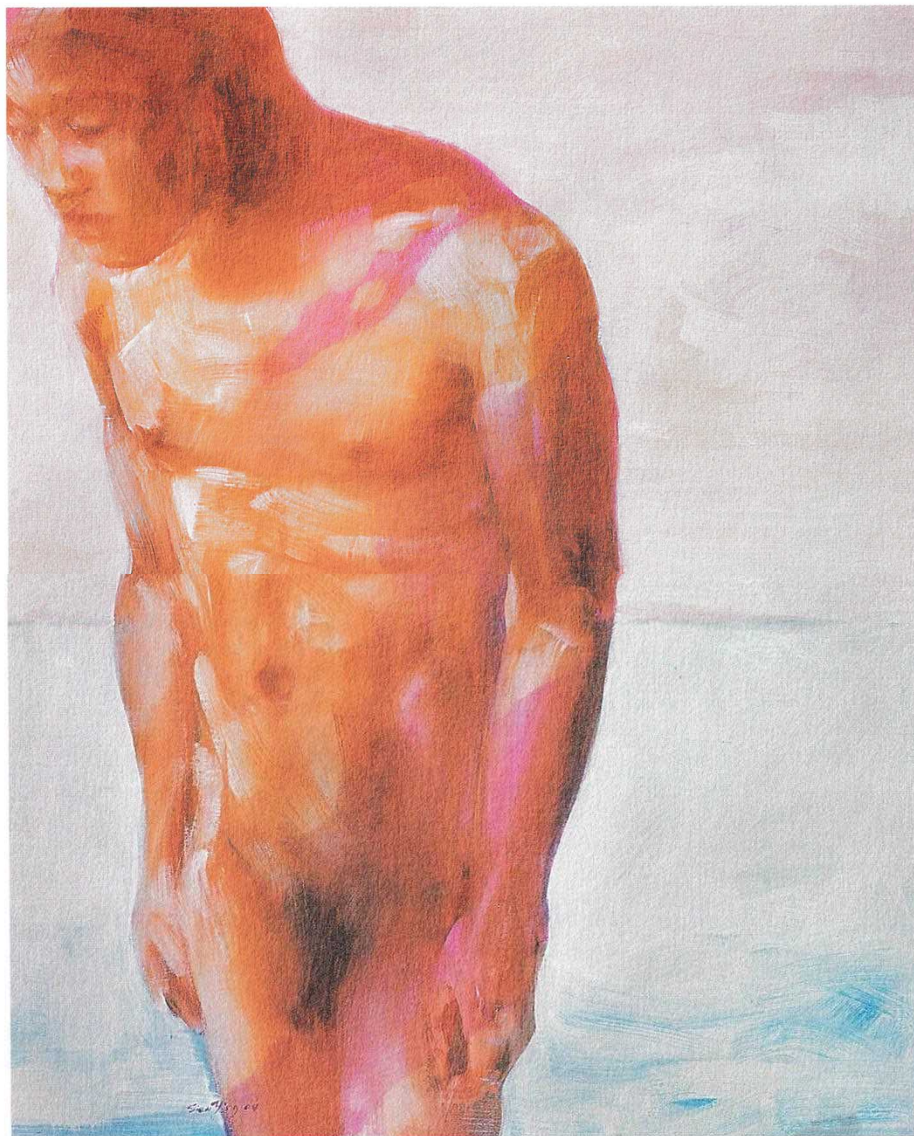




KHUNJERAB IMPRESSION

2004, oil on canvas  
100 x 80 cm





FIRST TASTE OF MILLET

2004, oil on canvas  
100 x 80 cm

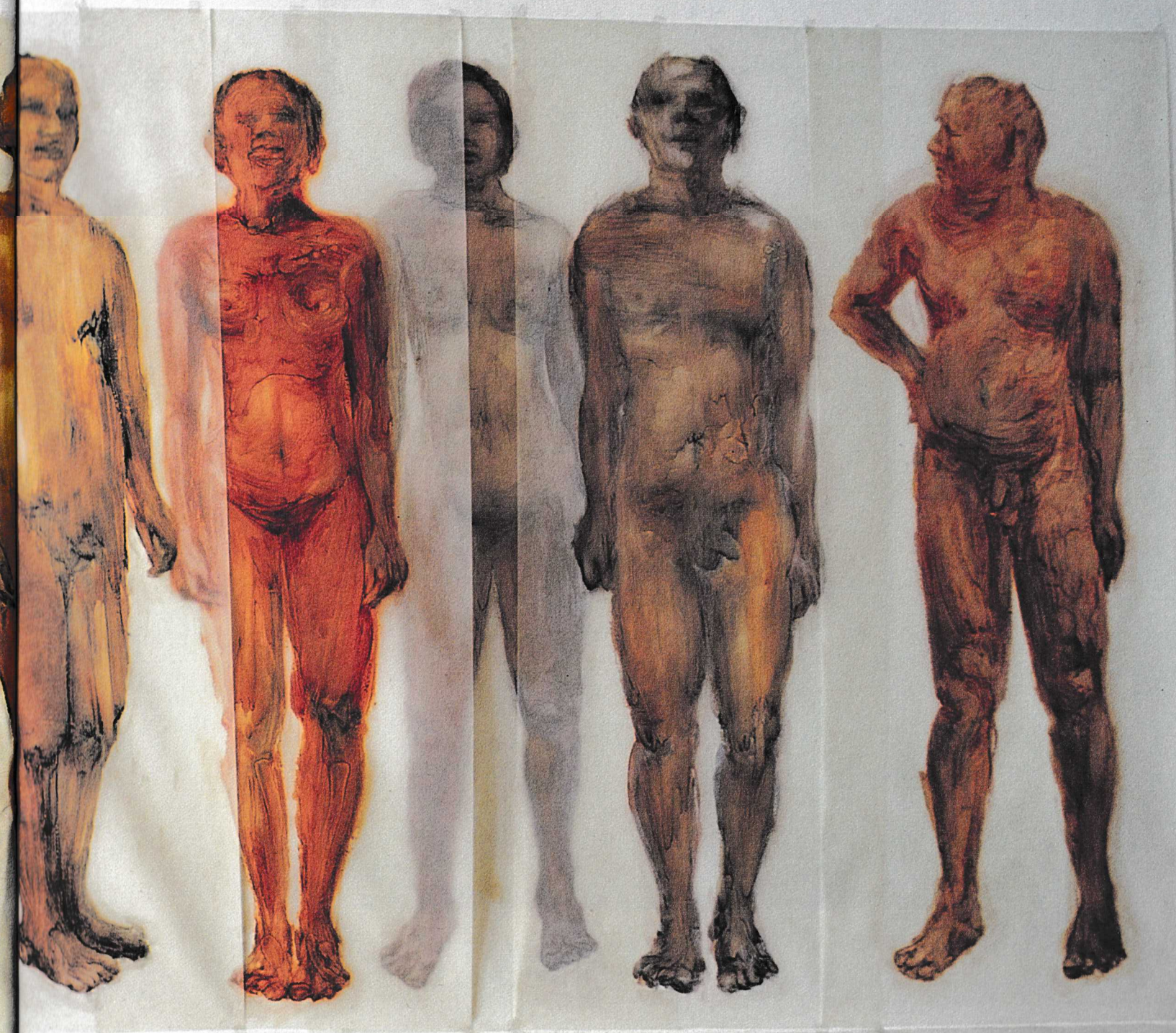




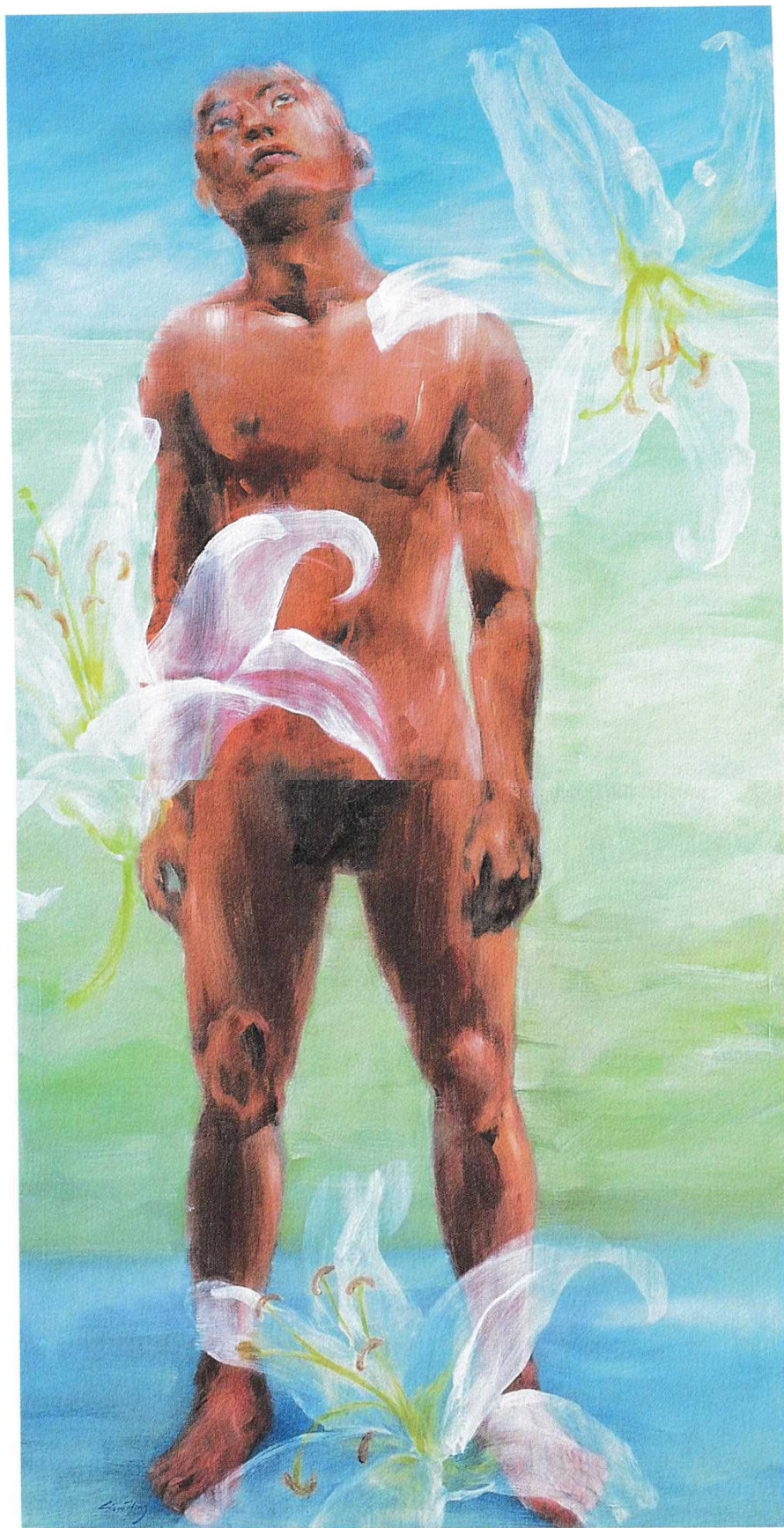
TRACE

2002, oil on vellum  
200 x 450 cm





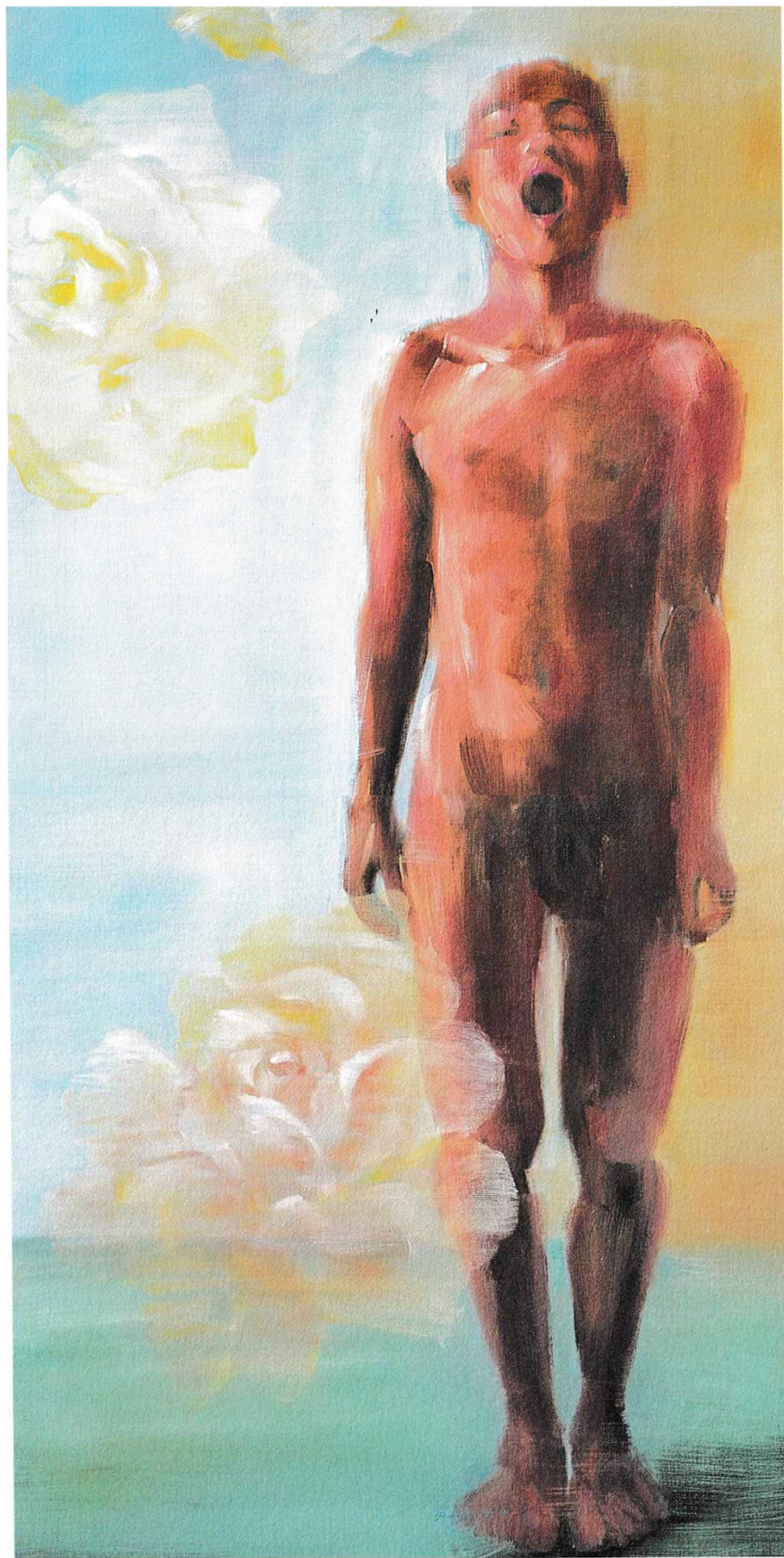




THE PROPHET

2004, oil on canvas  
200 x 100 cm

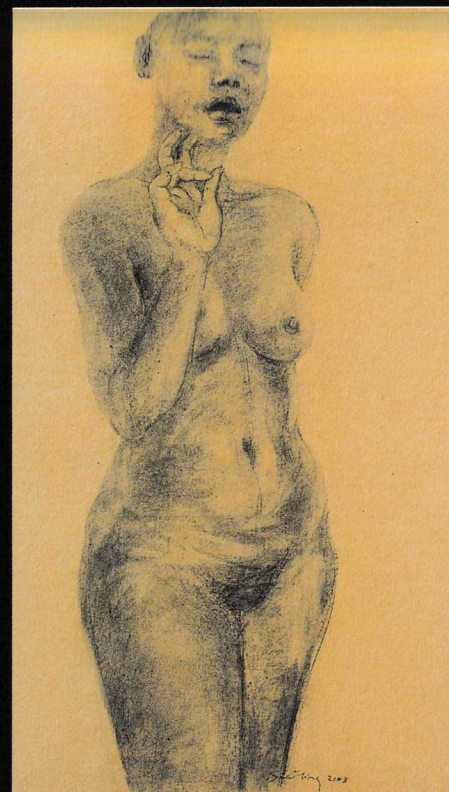
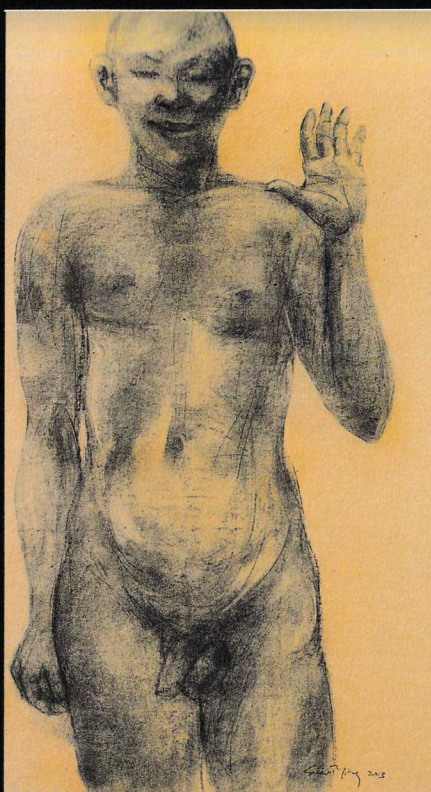




THE HERMIT

2003-04, oil on canvas  
200 x 100 cm





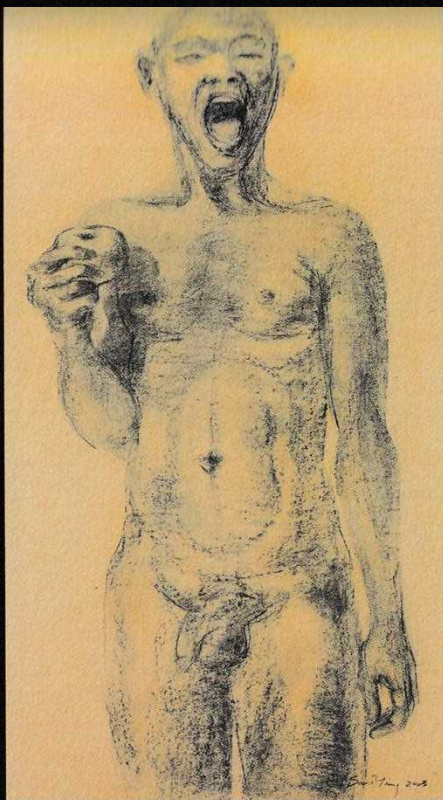
# ATTITUDE I

2003, charcoal on paper  
120 x 65.5 cm

# ATTITUDE II

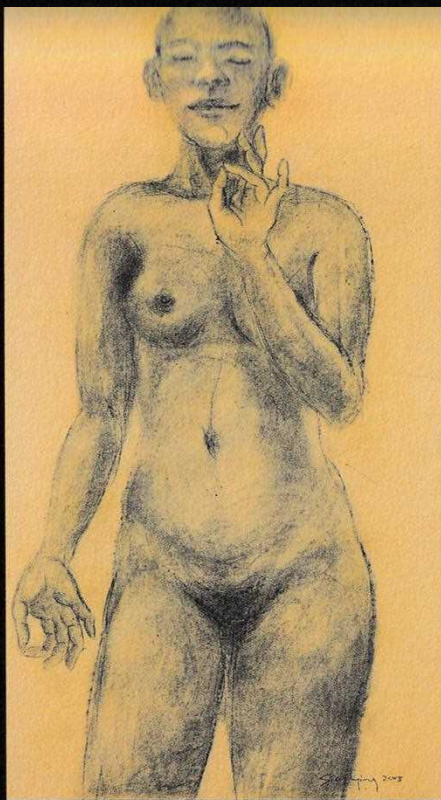
2003, charcoal on paper  
120 x 65.5 cm





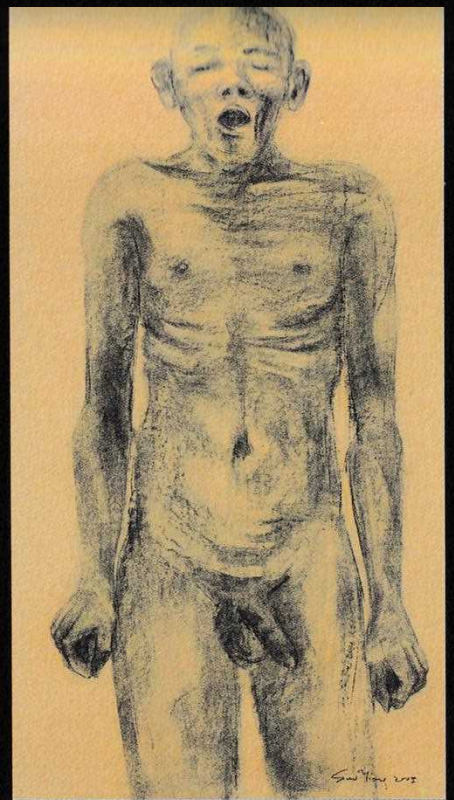
ATTITUDE III

2003, charcoal on paper  
120 x 65.5 cm



ATTITUDE IV

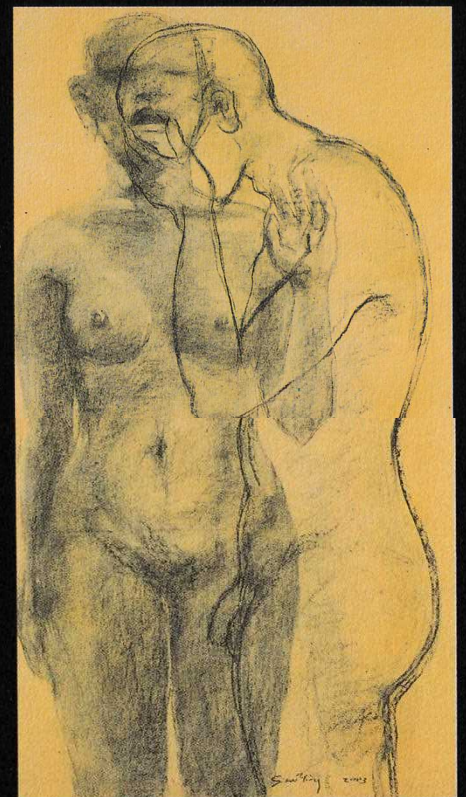
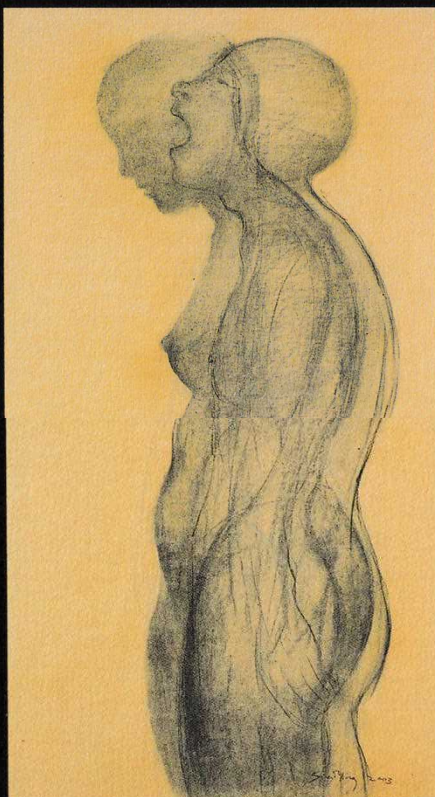
2003, charcoal on paper  
120 x 65.5 cm



ATTITUDE V

2003, charcoal on paper  
120 x 65.5 cm





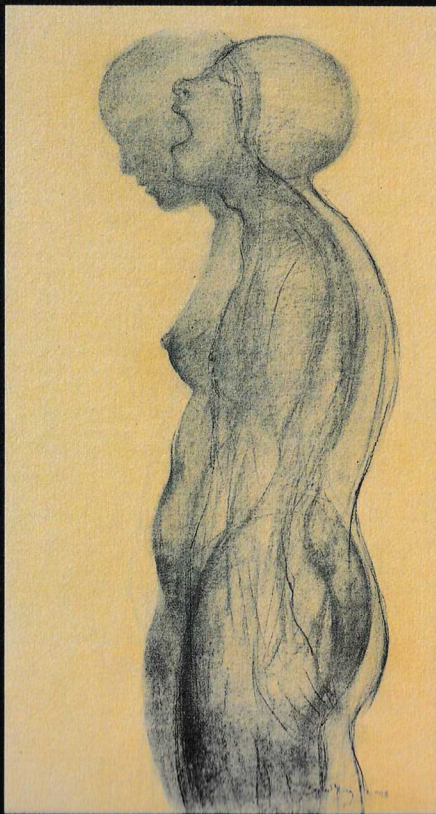
# THE LOVE STORIES I

2003, charcoal on paper  
120 x 65.5 cm

# THE LOVE STORIES II

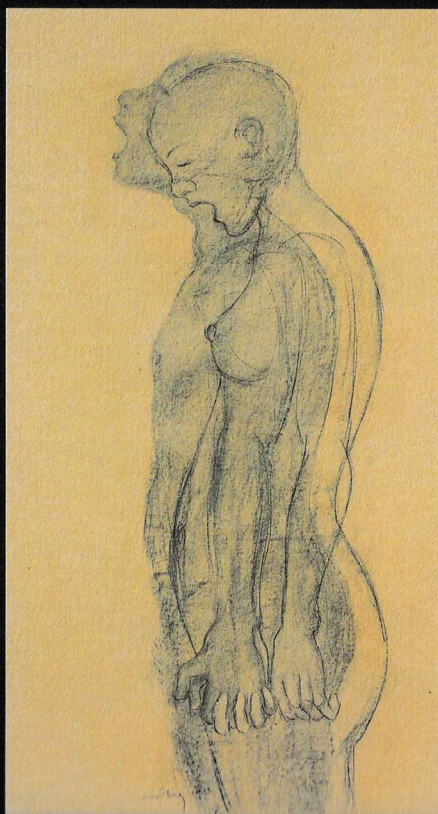
2003, charcoal on paper  
120 x 65.5 cm





THE LOVE STORIES III

2003, charcoal on paper  
120 x 65.5 cm



THE LOVE STORIES IV

2003, charcoal on paper  
120 x 65.5 cm





**Born in Kuala Lumpur, 1969**

**Currently lives and works in Kuala Lumpur and Paris**

**1988-1990** P.J. College of Art & Design, Malaysia

**1991-1994** L'Ecole Des Beaux-Arts, Versailles, France

**1994-1996** L'Atelier 63 (Etching School), Paris, France

**1996-1997** Part-time teacher at L'Atelier 63, Paris, France

#### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

**2002** GOING AWAY COMING HOME, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**2001** FREEMAN ASIAN ARTIST FELLOWSHIP EXHIBITION, Red Mile Gallery, Vermont Studio Center, Vermont, USA

**1998** 96/97, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**1997** Atelier D. Maraval, Bagnolet, France

**1997** Gallery Café Panique, Paris, France

**1996** Maison TCH'A, Paris, France

#### SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

**2004** FOOTSTEPS, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**2003** URBAN ART 2003, Melbourne Connection Asia, Melbourne, Australia

**2003** OF SHADOWS AND IMAGES, Kunst Museum, Malmo, Sweden; Mercat de les Flors, Barcelona, Spain; Circulo de Bellas Artes, Madrid, Spain

**2002** THE YOUNG CONTEMPORARIES, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**2002** LAUGHTER: Works by Chong Siew Ying and Noor Mahnun Mohd, iPreciation Gallery, Singapore

**2001** SPRING DIALOGUE, Lorimer Station Studio, Brooklyn, NY, USA

**2001** HEADLIGHTS: Leading Contemporary Malaysian Artists, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**2000** OIL AND INK: Chong Siew Ying and Frederique Boumeester, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**2000** GENERATIONS: Malaysian Artists, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**2000** 5th RIMBUN DAHAN ARTIST IN RESIDENCE EXHIBITION: Chong Siew Ying & Helen Crawford, Rimbun Dahan, Kuang, Malaysia

**2000** WATER FOR LIFE, in aid of World Wildlife Fund, Islamic Art Museum, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**1999** THROUGH OUR EYES, Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**1999** 9th INTERNATIONAL BIENNALE OF PRINT AND DRAWING EXHIBITION, Taipei Fine Art Museum, Taiwan

**1999** FRANCIASIA: Encounter of Asian Artists in Paris, Ariake Frontier Building, Tokyo, Japan

**1997** 4th TRIENNALE MONDIALE D'ESTAMPES CONTEMPORAIN, Chamalieres, France

**1997** EURO-ESTAMPE 97, Biennial Prints of Europe, Lorient, France

**1997** WORKS ON PAPER, Gallery K. Trythall, Hvasser, Norway

**1996** TRACE 96, 5th Biennale International Contemporary Prints, Paris, France

**1996** SEN'ART 96, Savigny, France

**1995** MINI PRINT INTERNATIONAL, Cadaques, Spain

**1995** SALON CONTEMPORAIN, Paris, France

**1994** 11th SALON DE VERNON, Museum of Vernon, Vernon, France

**1993** BIENALLE DE MAASTRICHT, Maastricht, Holland

**1993** Galerie De La Geole, Versailles, France

**1993** ARTISTE DANS LA RUE, by Youth Association of Versailles, Versailles, France

#### AWARDS & RESIDENCIES

**2002** Special Mention Award, The Young Contemporaries, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**2001** Freeman Asian Artist Fellowship Award, Artist In Residence at The Vermont Studio Center, Vermont, USA

**1999-2000** The Rimbun Dahan Residency Programme, Artist In Residence at Rimbun Dahan, Kuang, Selangor, Malaysia

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

**2003** Li Xiu Ling, "Visible Memories", *Humanistik*, April

**2003** Tan Li Li, "Chong Siew Ying", *Yishu Zoulang*, April

**2002** Laura Fan, "The Unbearable Lightness of Life", *The Edge*, June  
**2000** Jenny Daniels, "Chong Siew Ying, The Next Grand Artist in Malaysia?" *KakiSeni.com*

**2000** Laura Fan, "Capturing the Body", *The Edge*, October

**2000** Caroline Parke, "Chong Siew Ying", *Odyssey*, September

**2000** Laurie Kizik, "A Road Well Travelled", *Resource Magazine*, December

**2000** Ooi Kok Chuen, "Lips say it for Chong", *The New Straits Time*, October

**1998** Sharifah Hamzah, "Thinking Aloud", *The Sun*, October



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