



WHEN
I SEE YOU
AGAIN

BY
CHONG AI LEI

FOREWORD

Sentimental and nostalgic

UNABASHEDLY SENTIMENTAL and nostalgic, the latest works of contemporary artist Chong Ai Lei, 33, mark her first solo show in Malaysia.

Despite having participated in many group shows locally and three solo shows overseas, this is the first time the fine art graduate is staging a solo exhibition in her home country.

Entitled *When I See You Again* by Chong Ai Lei, the show will be held at The Edge Galerie and will feature eight large oil paintings. The format of the self-portraits is either 230cm by 170cm or 170cm by 230cm.

The paintings convey a nostalgic yet melancholic mood as Chong revisits her childhood home in Segamat, Johor, where she was raised. The various rooms of the house serve as the backdrop for her paintings.

Chong depicts herself wearing clothes that were owned or passed down



by her mother, alongside a myriad of personal belongings and furniture. All the spaces and items tend to relate to a specific memory.

In a work entitled *Jackfruit*, the artist is in a green dress, one that her mother had worn in her younger days. Chong grips a *nangka* by the stem as she walks past the front door of the house.

The artist recalls how the jackfruit seemed always to be in season and how its smell reminded her of her childhood.

A dressing table at which Chong and her sisters readied themselves for school and a money box, the first-ever present given by the artist's father, are both seen in *Rabbit Money Box*.

Indeed, Chong's compositions are filled with a sentimentality that documents her growing years in an ordinary Chinese household.

When I See You Again by Chong Ai Lei is The Edge Galerie's first exhibition for 2018 and it is being held with the support of leading property development company, Matrix Concepts.

HO KAY TAT

*Publisher and group CEO
The Edge Media Group*

The Past, the Memory and the Transference

I HAVE ALWAYS been curious about Chong Ai Lei's work, finding it unpredictable, and simultaneously fascinated by what is actually hidden beneath and the underlying meaning of those female figures painted by her.

I met Chong in 2003 when I was teaching at Dasein Academy of Art. She was in my installation art and printmaking class. After graduated in fine art in 2005, Chong carried on painting and took part in different group shows regularly. Among them is *Blank Page* in 2009 where she presented a series of finely painted female body forms. It was the most significant group show she took part in that left an incisive impression on me. Her soft, pale and pastel-like painting effect using oil was new and dissimilar to others. She stood out, manifesting a clear feminine visual language on the male-dominated art scene in Malaysia. After a number of successful group shows, Chong's distinctive painting style captured the attention of galleries and art collectors. In 2011, she committed herself to a full-time artistic career that she had always wanted since childhood.

Chong was born in the mid-1980s in a small town called Segamat in Johor. Like many others, her childhood memories are strongly associated with the environment she lived in, particularly the kampung house that her father built and the vast terrain of plantations situated not far from her home. In the dark and gloomy estate, Chong was intrigued by such life forms as squirrels, snakes and owls that appeared and vanished into the plantation. This was just like how she played with her siblings in the old kampong house when she was little — shuttling between rooms, in and out, appearing and receding from view. Those unanticipated but frequent experiences made a strong impression on the young Chong, becoming the source of inspiration for her recent works.

“Memory is the faculty of the mind by which information is encoded, stored and retrieved. Memory is vital to experiences and related to limbic systems; it is the retention of information over time for the purpose of influencing future action.”¹ For her debut solo exhibition in Kuala Lumpur, Chong presented a whole new series of figure paintings associated with her past, her childhood memories and impressions of the precious things she adored as a child but which were

ESSAY

gradually fading away. Indeed, she had been thinking about using her memories as a theme for her works in the past two years, about depicting the spaces of her old kampung house and objects of the past in a thoughtful and realistic manner to reflect her long disappeared childhood experience.

Chong wanted to invite her viewers to engage with her past and have a glimpse of the environment where she spent her childhood when she was six. She revisited the old kampung house in search of the familiar and memories about the spaces and objects in it. She walked from room to room, looking for long lost memories of the living room and bedrooms, and the residuals of the past lingering in her mind in order to project an experience of fact rather than an illusion in her paintings. The experience was uncertain yet real. Awakened by scenes that were reminiscent of her childhood, Chong felt the need to unlock and express her inner emotions, so as to translate her encoded and stored childhood experiences into visual information.

Painting, in a regular format, always draws a relationship between the subject and the ground to characterise certain perceptions of the depicted story. The configuration of various elements of a subject/object, foreground/background and icon/image determined by the artist's emotional preference gives rise to the ideology of a work of art. Chong's recent painting, *Lying on the Floor*, depicts a girl lying face down on the tiled floor of an empty and spatial room. Her gaze is frozen in a direction to nowhere — something Chong used to do when she was a child. By doing so, she put herself close to the ground, to recollect and recapture the feelings through the senses of the place that nurtured her when she was young. The feeling of being close to earth provides Chong with a physical and emotional sensation. The depicted living room might look empty to the viewers but it is actually bursting with memories of Chong's childhood.

The piece *Standing behind the Curtain* shows Chong half-concealed behind the curtains in her parents' bedroom — a space where she used to play hide and seek with

her siblings when she was little. Tucked between the curtain and the wall, she looks bewildered, like she is trapped between the past and the present, her childhood and the present.

What is particularly eye-catching in the series is perhaps the *Girl Jumping on a Red Sofa*. It depicts the mischievous act of a child playfully jumping up and down on a sofa — something most children like to do. The contrasting use of red and green in this painting against a subtle background prompts a vibrant visual stimulation that makes the painting stand out from the rest.

The actions or scenarios depicted in these three paintings are familiar to us. The intention of the artist is to trigger the viewers' childhood memories.

Through observations and her sensitivity towards the space that she was once familiar with, Chong has restored her childhood memories in a seemingly perceptible atmosphere in the painting, as if she has registered her feelings and transmuted them through a series of visual-making that intensifies her memory. Her childhood memories have left her with a firm and indelible affection for the past. The dialectic elements of the different rooms in the old kampung house, the ornamental objects of implication and her play-acting are no less noticeable in her paintings.

On a symbolic and metaphorical level, Chong delves into her subconscious mind and personal experiences, making use of the spaces and objects of the past ingeniously to intellectualise her memories. Her works urge the viewers to engage and immerse

¹ Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memory>

themselves in the scene and space that she has set up and imprison themselves in her memories.

Unlike her previous paintings, this new series of work premeditates and emphasises the interaction of the artist and the physical space of the past, which Chong has modestly executed on a considerably large format painting. She projects herself as an object within the space of her bygone childhood with various actions and the dress she used to wear. Thus, the image of herself in the painting is considered as a thing — an entity that transposes the reality of the past to the present. Her body, as a symbolic icon, becomes an object that evokes an aesthetic emotion and conveys information and the idea of existence.

Chong's new series is dissimilar to her previous work — the imagery of mundane objects and the complexity of the vivid colours that she used to employ in her previous paintings having been omitted. In this series, she emphasises space and herself as symbolic icons of her memories instead. The references for the paintings were taken from the old kampung house as Chong posed at the exact spots, capturing the domestic scene and actions reminiscent of her past. Unlike her previous work, her new paintings of body figures do not just focus on the subject itself but also her meticulous painting skill and different ways to depict the subject matter. The limited use of colour and simple backgrounds set the illusory atmosphere free of the past and yet bring a fresh vision and essential pictorial quality to the current work.

During our two-hour interview at Chong's studio in Puchong, Selangor, many of the questions discussed were about the consciousness behind the painted figures. I was delighted by the transcendence of the figures expressed in a dialectic and representational manner, surpassing what we had seen in her previous figure paintings and the current series. Moreover, I admire Chong's artistic sensibility and exact rationalism that bring together various descriptive elements in her paintings to evoke our aesthetic emotions.

Kim Ng
*Head of Fine Art Department
Dasein Academy of Art*

BIODATA

CHONG AI LEI

Born: 1985, Johor, Malaysia



EDUCATION

2002 - 2005 Diploma in Fine Art, Dasein Academy Of Art,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2018 *When I See You Again*, The Edge Galerie, Malaysia
2017 *Intertwine*, Art Projects Gallery, Hong Kong
2016 *In The Room*, Galeri Canna, Jakarta, Indonesia
2013 *P!nk*, Sangkring Art Space, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2017 *(Im)Possibilities*, Galeri Chandan, Publika, Kuala Lumpur
101 Dimana Young, National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
2016 *ArtAid16 Love For Sale*, White Box, Publika, Kuala Lumpur
Transit A2, HOM Art Trans, Kuala Lumpur
Paper Trails, Sangkring Art Space, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
2015 *5th Anniversary Show*, G13 Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
ArtAid15, Segaris Art Center, Kuala Lumpur
The Beginning, Maritime Silk Road Art Festival, Shanghai, China
Being Human - Figuratism of Sixteen Malaysian Painters, White Box, Publika,
Kuala Lumpur
2014 *Diversity - Malaysia Arts*, La Galleria Pall Mall, London, United Kingdom
Catalysis, HOM Art Trans, Kuala Lumpur
Prudential Malaysian Eye (Contemporary Malaysian Art), White Box Publika,
Kuala Lumpur
Young Guns, Chan Hampe Galleries, Singapore
Flesh, The F Klub, Pipal Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur
Concurrence, West Gallery, Manila, Philipines
2013 *Young Guns*, White Box Publika, Kuala Lumpur & The Whiteaways Arcade, Penang
For the Love of..., Jada Art Gallery, ION Orchard, Singapore
Scent of Bali, The F Klub, G13 Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
Seated, HOM Art Trans, Kuala Lumpur

- 2012 *Transit A4*, HOM Art Trans, Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia Emerging Artist Award (MEAA) Winners Showcase, White Box Publika, Kuala Lumpur
Kembara Jiwa, Selasar Sunaryo, Bandung, Indonesia
Kembara Jiwa, Taman Budaya, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Equility in Art, ASEAN Secretariat Building, Jakarta, Indonesia
Skin, House of Matahati (HOM), Kuala Lumpur
- 2011 *Deceifful Truth*, Galeri Chandan, Kuala Lumpur
Arouse, House of Matahati (HOM), Kuala Lumpur
Private Affairs: Figures, Nudes and Secret Desires, Galeri Chandan, Kuala Lumpur
Locals Only, Taksu, Kuala Lumpur
- 2010 *Merapi Eruption Art Exhibition*, House of Matahati (HOM), Kuala Lumpur
Self Conflict, Social Cohesion, Malaysia Tourism Centre (Matic), Kuala Lumpur
Young Malaysian Artists - New object (ion), Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur
ArTriangle 3, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
Boleh!, Taksu, Singapore
- 2009 *Blank Page*, Wei Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
Young & New Part III, House of Matahati (HOM), Kuala Lumpur
Iskandar Malaysia Comtemporary Art Show (IMCAS), Johor Bahru

AWARDS

- 2011 Winner of Malaysia Emerging Artist Award (MEAA 2011), Kuala Lumpur
Honorable Mention Artist, Freeman Fellowship Asian Artists Program, Vermont Studio Center, USA
Visual Art Award (VAA) Finalist, Starhill Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
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Visual Art Award (VAA) Finalist, Starhill Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
- 2009 Malaysia Emerging Artist Award (MEAA 2009) Finalist, Kuala Lumpur

ART FAIRS

- 2017 Young Art Taipei, Sheraton Grand Taipei, Taiwan
- 2016 Art Taipei, World Trade Center, Taipei, Taiwan
Art Expo Plus, MATRADE Exhibition and Convention Centre, Kuala Lumpur
ArtStage Jakarta, Sheraton Grand Jakarta, Indonesia
Art Busan, BEXCO, Busan, Korea
- 2015 Art Kaoshiung, The Pier-2 Art Center, Kaoshiung, Taiwan
Gwangju International Art Fair, Gwangju Kimdaejung Convention Center, Korea
ArtStage Singapore, Sands Expo & Convention Center, Singapore
- 2014 Start Art Fair, Staachi Gallery, London, United Kingdom
- 2013 Affordable Art Fair, Singapore

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Oil on canvas



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ORGANISED BY

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