

Beyond *Nanyang*: selected works of the artist, Lim Hak Tai

“Everything is ordained to the definite purpose of illustrating the significance of ideas and ideals rather than the patent potency of artistic arrangements complete in themselves.”

F.F. Sherman, American Art Historian

“...Nanyang is blessed with abundant economic resources, and is the communication hub between the East and the West. Its population is made up of many races, with different customs and practices as well as diverse interests, and generally speaking its residents are highly resilient and industrious.”

Lim Hak Tai, transcript essay of Malayan radio station broadcast, 1949

In 1938, the first art academy was established in Singapore through the collective efforts of businessmen and artists. Nanyang Fine Arts College, as it was then known, began classes in March of that year, with a handful of students under their founding principal, Lim Hak Tai. Prior to his arrival in *Nanyang*, upon the shores of Singapore in the heart of the Straits Settlements, Lim Hak Tai had graduated from art teachers training college and taught in prominent schools, even co-founding the Xiamen Academy of Fine Arts, where he was variously in charge of art theory, art education and discipline. The substance of his background was to play a crucial role in his vision for artistic evolution in *Nanyang*, or the Southern Sea, so named in relation to the Southern ports of coastal, mainland China. *Nanyang* had been the beacon of sojourning businessmen and artists since the turn of the century. Like many migrants that swept the century into the Straits, they came in search of their fortune and their future.

Born in Fujian Province, Lim Hak Tai's heritage was a forebear of the significance he brought with him into *Nanyang*. From the evidence of those who knew of him, had contact with him and what he had published, Lim was a well-read intellectual and academic, who trained in both Western and Chinese art. The oldest treatise on critical theory in painting in China can be traced back to the fifth century AD.¹ In it, we understand its author premised the importance of transmitting the 'spirit' and not simply the form of art. The treatise invoked the long honoured reverence for authority in antiquity. It held that paradigms of greatness symbolize consistency and continuity, to strengthen national identity through the transmission of values and spiritual resonance through time, though cycles of civilization come to pass, and men come and go, the spirit holds.

The quote above is taken from a radio broadcast transcript (reproduced in this volume) during which Lim proves himself a marvelous elocutionist, who is discoursing the importance of art in life and the relationship between art and life within the fledgling civilization found in the Straits Settlements. Even as early as the postwar period, the island of Singapore would have been emotionally and physically damaged with battle scars and drained resources. In recognizing the diverse population mix and its resilience, Lim drew attention to what was to become the essential spirit of *Nanyang*. The class of humanity who left their homeland of origin to find a future in *Nanyang* was the same as

¹ Xie He, (Hsieh-He) 5th century artist, critic of Southern Qi Dynasty. Wrote of Six Principles (Hiuhua Liufa) as preface to the publication The Record of the Classification of Old Painters (Guohua Pinlu). First of which was to contain 'spiritual resonance', transmission of the energy of one artist *behind* a painting to another.

those who withstood the challenges of an early economy and the onset of war. If they were to make some sense of how their lives have changed dramatically, they dig deep, to find once again, their survival instincts, but also their innovative and intrepid spirit that sustains and ennobles.

Lim takes time to lament that there has yet developed a sense of deep appreciation and education for the arts in *Nanyang*. His vision is not constrained by such a lack, but embraces an all-encompassing evolution that draws on social nurturing, the inventiveness of analytical and scientific minds as well as the compassion and empathy for humanity and its multifariousness. Through endeavours in art and discovery, we find the moral courage to become better human beings and improve the quality of life and living.

To explore Lim's art without the benefit of having known or spoken to him, it is important to refer then to Sherman's quote above, which completes the thrust of this summary on Lim Hak Tai. We look at the artworks with the benefit of exemplary history and the objects themselves. That the artworks exist, is a testament at the very least to the nuances in Lim Hak Tai's practice and the breadth of his own technical skills within the mediums characteristic of Western and Chinese painting, Western and Eastern art, as it were.

Too many have unconsciously dismissed *Nanyang's* style in art-making as simply a fusion of Western and Chinese art forms, or even if this essay suggests, the fusion of their 'spirit' under a tropical sky. Though we clearly see the work of Lim Hak Tai as being equally adept and prolific in Western oil painting as well as Chinese painting and calligraphy, the point is moot to conclude he embraced such a fusion. Deeper than this, we perhaps need to explore how the richness of his environmental and social experiences influenced both his art and the heritage of *Nanyang*.

The many versions of the Nanyang academy's campus at St Thomas Walk present a unique version of Lim's own symbolic memory. Prior to this, the academy had operated from Geylang and Serangoon road. St Thomas Walk was where the academy found itself, upon its reopening after the second world war. The bungalow is characteristic of period architecture, its locale nestled amid evidently verdant green and recognisable banana trees invite us into the 'kampong' environment of historical Singapore and its society. The 'kampong' has its own resonance, an idyll of closeness and harmonious living, not simply among many multiethnic inhabitants with neighbourly retreat, but also within a somewhat rural bliss. The early days of the academy have been described as such, of closeness amongst students and teachers drawn together by a common practice and goal within their artistic pursuits. By all accounts, Lim Hak Tai was a compassionate gentleman who strove to continuously improve and enrich the artistic education of both his community of students and his social environs as such. If we conclude that his fondness for both his art, its significance and retreat for humanity resemble the promise of St Thomas Walk amid its calculated wilderness, then we should not be far wrong.

In this respect, we can also place the two Malay weddings and the natural landscapes of hills and open green including the view at Fort Canning. This marks both the promise of social development, in an appreciation for the multicultural mix; but also what lies beyond the 'kampong'. The landscapes of the view from Sentosa and the shipyard and coastal paintings of Keppel, Singapore River and Tanjong Rhu offer us glimpses into the

anxiety of urbanization. In the years following the war, Singapore grappled with social and economic evolution. To rebuild much of the entrepreneurial flair that made it the apple of the British eye in the wake of East India trade expansions; but also to accommodate the living, breathing, burgeoning populations, whose demands were evolving beyond survival into one encompassing human grace and well being within a network of the culturally diverse. We do not presume these are evident in the paintings themselves. Instead, the paintings offer an insight into how an artist as erudite and socially aware as Lim Hak Tai, looked for representations in his environment. The shipyards are the pillars of socio-economic development, inasmuch as Lim's paintings are the indicators of artistic spirit and its discoveries.

Amid the oil paintings, we also find the residue of classical art traditions. Portraits of Huang Wan Cheng's Mother (1946) and that of student artist and fellow *Nanyang* pioneer, Tan Seah Boey; several vases and images of floral arrangements and an interior, invoke a distinct homage to the studio discipline of still life and figures. The evidence of these paintings is not so much testament to skills but a fervour for paint and art-making. In these works, we recognize more so, Lim as a pure artist, endeavouring to capture moments of beauty and rationale, from living things and the source of life itself. We are not far from the work of Modernists within the post-Impressionist period, who sought to bring greater resonance of soul inside their art, than mere slavish homage to nature from naturalistic and impressionist visions. Here are the capsules of vivid life, not as nature would have it, but who we see, what we see and how we see it.

The gestures of Lim Hak Tai's oil painting show a distinct reverence of richness in flat planes, carving out the details not as realism, but a response to his craft as a painter, an artist. He was evidently a sincere draughtsman that captured life upon his canvas like a diary of purpose, not simply events.

Side by side with these, we encounter some of the undated Chinese ink paintings and calligraphy works. The sheer number of bamboos presents perhaps Lim's loyalty to his heritage. Not simply exemplary of the rock and bamboo genre, we look at these monochromatic works as indices to the larger Chinese culture and civilization. The bamboo and rock genre is a meditative genre. It has symbolic resonance for the practice in both its objects (the rock and bamboo) as well as its monochrome (the shades of black and white as a wholistic colour spectrum). Bamboos are the Confucian idiom for righteousness, inwardly humble (internally hollow stalks) while externally virtuous (strong solid stalk). Here is a practice and genre with great affinity to Chinese calligraphy as well, in which demonstration of the script writing is as much about technique and material as it is mind and body. Lim's meditation on the spiritual and moral significance of the bamboo is not merely his discipline, but perhaps his philosophy as well.

The other ink paintings in evidence such as the plum blossoms, peony, chrysanthemums and sparrows, acknowledge Lim's artistry within his heritage once more. Here is the distinctive rigour of known Chinese painting motifs, many which bear symbolic consonance. The bird and flower (*hua niao*) motifs are part of the genre painting once more, the scholarly practice that again offers us insight into Lim as at once a student and imparter of his heritage across the seas.

Between administrating the academy's operations and teaching, time for practice may have been constrained. Today, there are fewer works in evidence of Lim's practice for several reasons. We know that many artworks were destroyed during the second world

war; but we are also aware that running an academy and maintaining a rigorous artistic practice would soon take its toll on Lim Hak Tai. While he was most certainly robust in the early days, filled with his dynamism to oversee academic operations and travel when opportunities arose as did many of the early pioneer painters in *Nanyang*, we understand that Lim Hak Tai was ailing in the latter part of the 50s with fragile health. While ill however, he was, as some verbal accounts recall, still administering from a day bed, lying in the academy's premises, giving instructions for work to be done even then. This offers the work we have from this period as perhaps some of the more interesting pieces – that in spite of poor health, Lim Hak Tai the artist, continued to thrive visually and emotionally in his work.

Lim Hak Tai passed away in 1963. To study his work today is not simply to look at or analyse his painting but to understand the context of his life and his art. He brought with him cascades of the literati from Fujian Province. Into the Straits, he found a naive threshold of invention and discovery. Inhabited already by local cultures, populated by a healthy mix of immigrants arriving from both China and India, the Straits Settlements rose to become the pearl in this orient, a crossroads for the dawn of *Nanyang's* imagination, its ideal and its spiritual home. The combination of both Western oil painting of the academic stream and Chinese ink painting of the scholarly traditions reveal how Lim translated the very notion of newness, rebirth, creating plausible, relevant art in *Nanyang*. To recognize art's place is not simply an homage to either polarity of Western imperialism or Chinese doctrines that may have proliferated a thousand and more years in civilization. It is to understand that the spirit of man thrives on the beauty and aesthetic he finds in living life with great joy and discovery, ennobling his society to bring greater depth and harmony to all aspects of living and the community.

The significance of *Nanyang* is in some sense beyond all of this. Today, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts boasts a full range of well over 20 diploma and degree programmes in artistic enterprise. The eight departments in visual and performing arts embrace the spectrum of creativity in practice and history from drawing and design to dance, drama, music and fashion. The promise of Lim Hak Tai's own contributions and his legacy is the artist who recognized the limits of his own lifetime, to set the milestones and merits far above what he knew he would live to see. In this sense, we view the art of Lim Hak Tai inevitably connected by a network of dreams: to venture to find his future by leaving his homeland, to build a school not of bricks and mortar but one of ideals and visionary spirit, to make art as he had never done before, all in the name of seeking, thence embodying the spirit of *Nanyang*.

Renowned art critic Clement Greenberg said in 1947, "We stand in need of a much greater infusion of consciousness than heretofore, what we call the creative. We need men of the world not too much amazed by experience, not too much at loss in the face of current events, not at all overpowered by their own feelings."² Born and raised in a time of conflict, bearing equally the burden of his intellect and heritage; having left his homeland to discover what future may lie in a distant settlement; having endured poverty, lack of support, a world war and the rigours of maintaining what seemed an arduous establishment for the arts, Lim Hak Tai can be represented by the sentiment in Greenberg's call to the reinvention of the artist and responsible human being in those parallel decades.

² Clement Greenberg, American critic primarily active during the 40s - 60s. Reference taken from Richard Schiff's publication, 'Doubt', Routledge, Taylor and Francis 2008

Beyond *Nanyang*, Lim Hak Tai's vision is very much alive today. It is embodied in the collective of his art practice and his profession as an art educator. It prevails as a gift reverently founded on the values bound by humanity and the desire to faithfully enrich its place in civilization.

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