

Chang Yoong Chia: BODY OF WATER

Feb.5 – 28, 2016 at Art-U room, Tokyo

■ Working Statement:

This series is my return to oil painting after a five-year hiatus. During these five years, I worked in different materials and the choice of materials itself have become a very important aspect of my work. But during these five years I was also parched and thirsty for oil.

Oil paint began to be used in art in 15th century Europe, a time when institutionalized religion was loosening its grip and science began to flourish. It was a time where logic and magic co-existed together, a time of proto-science and alchemy. Oil paint is a byproduct of alchemy. It comprised of pigments from the earth and the metals and oil from plants. Now oil is being substituted by acrylic, a byproduct of the petro-chemical industry. We live in a world without magic, we live in a world where dinosaur juice are pumped into our cars so that we can go to the office.

To my surprise, the image of water began to emerge in my oil painting. At first, the water acts only as backgrounds but gradually becoming more prominent as the series progresses. The human is about 70% water, the tropics is dense with humidity. Malaysia's average relative humidity is 70% to 90%, immigrant ancestors all arrived by water. Water vapors in the air gets into everything, gives life, refreshes, suffocates, grow moldy, dissolves, disappears, forgotten, rearranged, live again, fresh, stagnant, dead, revived again, layers and layers of history and stories.

Oil and water does not mix, oil floats above water. Therefore for me, painting in oil is like allowing the unconscious to float onto the surface. When I paint my brain remembers the times, the dates, the names, the events, the reasons and the purposes but my fingers remember the touches, textures, tastes, smells, sounds and emotions. Painting is a way for me to re-experience back sensations, and in this series in particular, of growing up in a humid country full of life and evergreen but at the same time full of forgetfulness and failure in sustaining what we have built...

....and lastly, perhaps I'm painting for hope like a frog croaking for the rain. Hoping for a heavy rainfall that will wash all the stink away, and start afresh again.

Nov.30, 2015 Chang Yoong Chia

■ List of the works:



Title: The Memory is Humid 記憶是潮濕的

Date: 2015

Medium: Oil on canvas

Size: 92 x 45.5cm

Trying to be Caucasian, a naked girl is clothed in a western style gown made of rice stalks. Even her hair is made of rice stalks. Beyond the horizon is Queen Elizabeth II, whose gown is made of ocean waves.



Title: Crossing the Sea 跨越海洋

Date: 2015

Medium: Oil on canvas

Size: 45 x 30.5cm

The coconut floats in the sea and finds land. Upon where it lands, it takes up roots. My ancestors floated on boats and found land. Upon where they landed they took up roots. But until now I still feel like I am in a floating state. The land welcomes me yet the country does not welcome me fully. The coconut trees' fronds make up the words in Chinese : Love. Without you, where would I be?



Title: The Moment 此时此刻

Date: 2015

Medium: Oil on canvas

Size: 75 x 150.5cm

When a live chicken was sold at the wet market it will be wrapped in newspaper so the buyer could easily carry the chicken back home, to be slaughtered and cook, or rear for a few months, then slaughtered and cooked. A chicken wrapped in newspaper used to be a very common sight but no longer. It is only when this is no longer practiced that I realized the act of forcing a chicken into a cylinder of strings and newspaper most unnatural.

The writings on the newspaper in this painting are some events that continue to circulate in Malaysia's mass media that we have taken to be normal but in fact it is as unnatural as a chicken wrapped up in newspaper.



Title: An Artist's Life 藝術生涯

Date: 2015
Medium: Oil on canvas
Size: 66 x 85cm

This is my rendition of a painting described in the novel *Rosshalde*, by Herman Hesse. It is of a fisherman on his small skiff with two fishes he caught. I read this book 20 years ago, and the image of the fisherman stayed with me all these years but it is until now that I felt I'd gain enough maturity and experience to paint this image. I attempted to paint the work as faithfully as described in the novel, but there are some things that escape this 'translation': What was the weather like, the ethnicity of the fisherman, his cloths, the type of fish, the kind of wood in which the boat is made of, etc.

I lived far from the land inhabited by this fictional fisherman. Although I felt his existential angst, I could only depict his surroundings in the way I understand my surrounding and how this influence my thoughts and feelings. Like the fisherman, I am surrounded by my circumstances, my yield dependent on what my environment bestow upon me.



Title: Moonlight 月光
Date: 2015
Medium: Oil on canvas
Size: 85 x 66cm

The rabbit has become my totem animal, which is my Chinese zodiac sign and were once pets which became overpopulated and inbreeding made them violent. This was when I was still a child. Finally, we ate them all up. So the rabbit stayed inside me.

I remember stroking a rabbit, combing my fingers down its back to make it calm, imaging it like water running down a soothing waterfall.



Title: Aquarium 魚缸
Date: 2015
Medium: Oil on canvas
Size: 75 x 150.5cm

Every morning when I open the door, my dog Tangsanchai greets me with a yawn while he stretches his body. Then we will go out for a walk. Every morning I would see my neighbours who will greet us. The people you see in the painting are some of my neighbours.

During the time this work was being painted, the whole of Malaysia is bracing for its biggest street protest for fair election and demanding the Prime Minister to step down. For us in Malaysia, this is all we are taking about, all we are thinking about for a few months now.

After the demonstration, Tangsanchai will still greet me the same way, blissfully oblivious of what had happened. My neighbours will still greet us when they see us, but maybe they have changed, maybe I have changed, and changing still, but in the painting, Tangsanchai stays inside an aquarium looking through the glass into the real world.



Title: Tears : Tanah Tumpahnya Darahku 涙

Date: 2015

Medium: Oil on canvas

Size: 120 x 18cm

This painting resembles a Chinese painting. If you look carefully, you will notice all the leaves are also roman alphabets which spells: TANAH TUMPAHNYA DARAHKU. These are Malay words and they are taken from the second line of Malaysia's national anthem (Negaraku). The words mean: LAND UPON WHICH MY BLOOD IS SPILLED.



Title: Mining Pond 礦湖

Date: 2015

Medium: Oil on canvas

Size: 92 x 61cm (diptych: 46 x 61cm x 2pcs)

This painting is a diptych that could either be seen 'combined together vertically' or as an artwork with two separate parts horizontally.

This painting is inspired by my trips on the trains as they pass through duck farms in the state of Perak. These farms were originally tin mines which were abandoned. The heavy rainfall quickly filled up these mines and transformed them into ponds and later enterprising businessmen rear ducks on these ponds to sell their meat and eggs.



Title: Man in the Rain I 雨中人一

Date: 2015

Medium: Oil on canvas

Size: 55 x 25.5cm

The painting is image of an orangutan in heavy rain. Orangutan is a Malay word. It means Man of the Jungle. Orang = Man/People. Utan (or Hutan) = Jungle.

The orangutans are gentle and shy creatures. The male orangutan looks like a monk in deep meditation in the jungle.



Title: Man in the Rain II 雨中人二

Date: 2015

Medium: Oil on canvas

Size: 65 x 45cm



Title: Man of Driftwood 漂流木人

Date: 2015

Medium: carved driftwood, found concrete fragment with ceramic tiles

Size: 33 (height) x 15 x 12cm

This is made from a driftwood found by the riverside in the former tin mining town of Sungai Lembing, in the state of Pahang. Sungai Lembing had the largest subterranean tin mine in the world, which belonged to the British Empire. The whole of Sungai Lembing depended and thrived because of this tin mine. Now tin mining is abandoned and so are the tin miners who stayed behind. Old and almost forgotten, they keep hanging on to the memories of their youth.



Title: How are You? I am Well. 井

Date: 2015

Medium: Oil on canvas

Size: 65 x 45cm

During year-end school holidays, my family would bring us to my grandparent's house in Penang. Those were long drives from Kuala Lumpur and we made pit stops at any one of my relative's houses along the way. One such house was my uncle's in Tanjung Tualang, a small town in the state of Perak. He had running water though he still used the water from his well. Usually, we would arrive at his house around noon, when it's very hot. The water from the well was always cool, rejuvenating, the smell of fresh earth. When I peered into the well, I saw my reflection: a little boy in the depths of the well. I called to him in there...and he echoes back.



Title: Body of Water 水象

Date: 2015

Medium: Oil on canvas

Size: 85 x 66cm

The coconut was impressed upon us in school as a very useful plant. You can use the trunk to build steps that leads up your house, the leaves could be weaved together to make roofs. The stems of the leaves to be collected and bunched together to make brooms. The many parts of the fruit served many functions: the fibrous husks burns well and good for firewood, they make excellent support for planting orchids too, the hard nut also burns well, can be used as a cup or a bowl, or even as a piggy bank. The water inside is delicious and good for cooling down fever, the meat can be eaten raw and when shredded and strained, produces excellent "santan" which is an important ingredient for beef or chicken curry stew.

The coconut is multifunctional and adapted well to its environment. People here are like coconuts, we are very hardy, adaptable, speak many languages and able to creatively perform a variety tasks. As the once important coconut is being displaced by development, so is our spirit substituted by so-called progress.



Title: Tales of the Mouse Deer 鼠鹿的故事

Date: 2015

Medium: Oil on canvas

Size: 18 x 55cm

This painting illustrates a segment an old folktale called “Hikayat Sang Kancil” (Tales of the Mouse Deer) from the state of Malacca.

In this part of the story, the wise mouse deer’s leg was caught in the mouth of the crocodile when he was drinking from the river. Cleverly, the mouse deer tricked the crocodile into believing he only caught a tree branch instead of his leg, and that he should try again. The dull-witted crocodile opened his mouth for another attempt, and immediately the mouse deer sprung loose and kept his distance...



Title: Come back to Mama 回到媽媽家

Date: 2015

Medium: Oil on canvas

Size: 66 x 85cm

My father tells me about his encounter with a leatherback turtle during his youth. They waited quietly for it to crawl up the beach to lay eggs. Once it started laying, everybody approaches noisily with their torch-lights. As big as a round dinner table, they touched it, climbed up it's back, taking photographs with flashes. The turtle tolerates them as it could do nothing while it lays about a hundred eggs, physically exhausting, with tears running down his eyes and saliva from his mouth. The leatherback turtle is now classified as extinct on the shores of Malaysia

I have never seen a leatherback, but it was such an icon that I have seen it on school murals, documentary films, books and tourism pamphlets. I have seen its image so many times I feel like it's a part of me, an ancient creature from my father's past, so abused that it decided to leave us forever.



Title: Vapour 汽
Date: 2015
Medium: Oil on canvas
Size: 85 x 66cm

Ming Wah (*Artist's partner) did not know she grew up in a former concentration camp. For her, her "New Village" was a happy place where she was free to wander around and adored by the adults. Only much later did she realize the history of her environment and she gradually finds out about her people's past. This, increasingly, becomes her identity.

In the painting, Ming Wah's relaxes as if after a spa treatment and her hair being washed. Her hair becomes a waterfall, a waterfall ridiculously barricaded by barbed-wire fences. How can something so natural as a waterfall be barricaded?



Title: An Elephant never forgets 不會遺忘的大象
Date: 2015
Medium: Oil on canvas
Size: 45 x 65cm

This is the last painting in the series. It is like a farewell to this journey. An elephant's back is facing us, it looks towards the distant Petronas Twin Towers on the other side of the bank. This used to be the tallest building in the world, now displaced, much like the optimism I felt when I first started my life as an artist. What does the future looks like? I don't know, but an elephant never forgets.