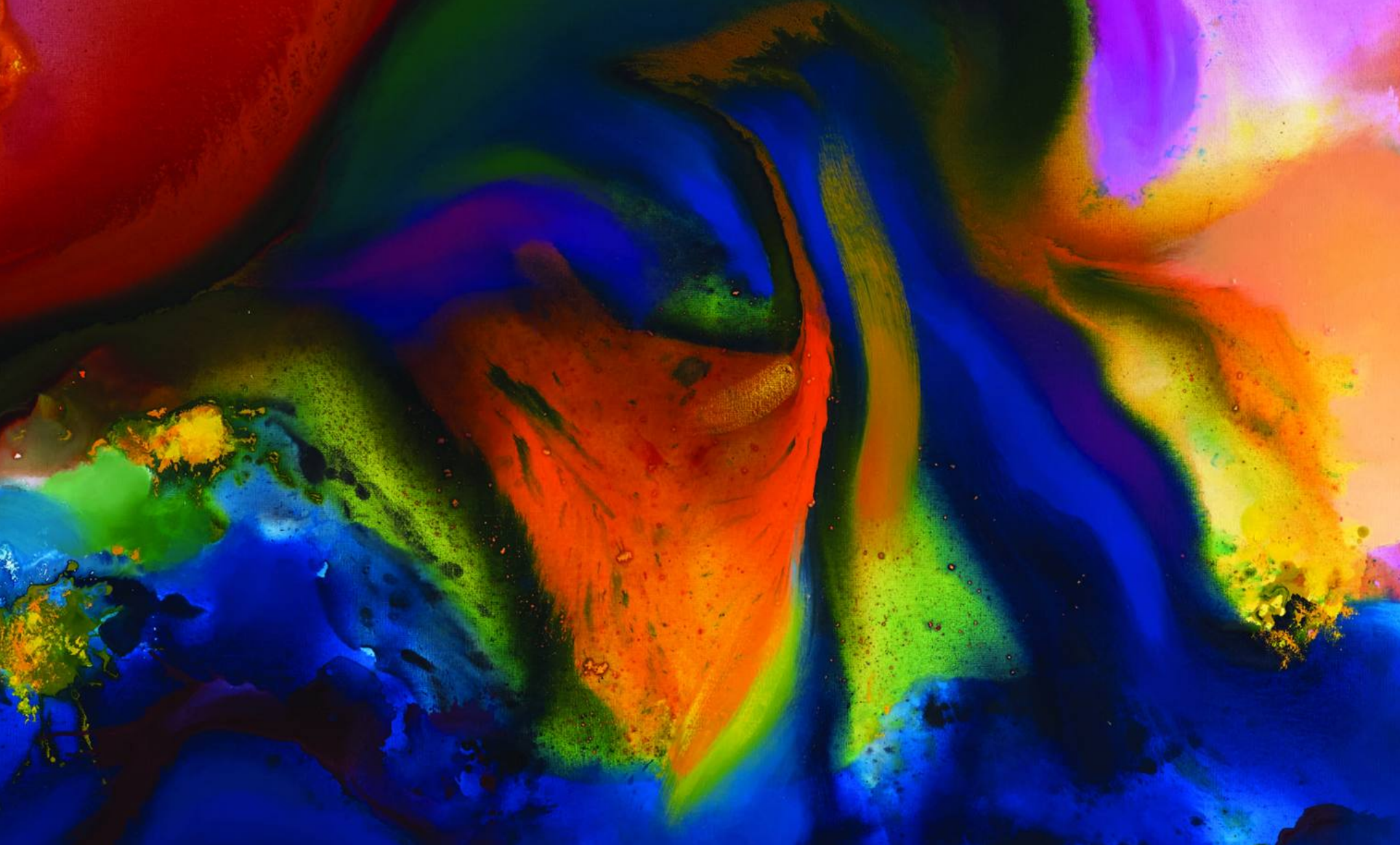
JOLLY @ 83





The artist in front of *Pergerakan D'Kayangan* (pp.88-89)

JOLLY @ 83

An exhibition of recent paintings by Jolly Koh at KEN GALLERY, Menara KEN TTDI
organised by Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers

Exhibition dates: 1st November to 21st November 2024

This catalogue/book includes documentation
of some earlier and undocumented paintings

HENRY BUTCHER
ART AUCTIONEERS

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Photographs of paintings
Puah Chin Kok

Portrait photographs of the artist
Angela Liu Jing (p.2) & *Puah Chin Kok* (pp.6-7)

Photographs of the artist at work
Angela Liu Jing

Photographs of the artist's home/studio
Angela Liu Jing

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Detail from *Violet* (p.136)

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INTRODUCTION

Detail from *Modern Calligraphy, III* (p.173)

Beholding Beauty: The Odyssey of a Romanticist

Céline Hongyi Yang

'I am a painter. My name is Jolly Koh.' Jolly introduced himself when we first met in person, by chance, during a Christie's preview in London.

There he was, glistening with an air of assurance, making the beautiful Chinese ceramic bowl in front of us pale. Even his silver hair was full of expression and vitality, I thought to myself.

'You are Jolly Koh!' I exclaimed, astonished that it was *Him*.

My personal encounter with Jolly has been that of a wonder and could be described as a journey. During a cultural trip to Southeast Asia in 2016, I stepped into an auction house in Kuala Lumpur to have a glimpse of the local art scene. My eyes were immediately caught by a painting that very much reminded me of British and American Modernism. It stood out amongst the other works on view. The bidding battle followed over this piece of work proved my idea that this was something special. It turned out to be a painting by Jolly Koh of the 60s. As my journey continued, visits to the National Gallery, Singapore and the National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia where Jolly's works are collected and exhibited gave me further opportunities to learn about the artist. I came to understand and appreciate even more the visual appeal of his oeuvre. And not just the visual appeal.

I was surprised to learn that Jolly Koh is one of the very few national artists in the world with a doctorate degree. By a national artist I mean someone who is highly recognised by one's country of origin and whose works are collected and represented by major local art institutions. Cultivated and well-read not just in the practice of art but also in art theories and education, Jolly received his Doctorate in Philosophy of Education from Indiana University in the United Sates in 1975. His scholarly contributions are outstanding, with six papers published in scholarly journals, the most notable being 'The Drawing Lesson' published by *The British Journal of Aesthetics* in 1980. Two other articles – 'Paula has Learned' and 'Jones is Teaching' – published consecutively at *The Annual Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education* in 1975 and 1976 paved the way for a great career in academia and teaching. Jolly has simply too many talents – but he eventually decided that he is more of an artist at heart than a teacher or scholar, and he chose to focus on making art instead.

The Making of a Modern Painter

Jolly arrived at the Hornsey College of Art, London in 1959. An intelligent and handsome young man at the threshold of adulthood, he was full of curiosity, a thirst to learn, and the conviction that the world was his oyster. It was a critical time when modern art was flourishing in the European cultural capital and artists such as Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, and Frank Auerbach were making their debuts and challenging the conventional notion of art. These painters had a profound influence on the young man. He was at the right place at the right time.

Modernism in art is a concept originating in Western society in the early twentieth century, with cubism and abstraction. It should be differentiated from the concept of the modern era in history which refers to the period from around 1500 AD after the Middle Ages in Europe until the present day. Charles Baudelaire's essay 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863) designated the artist's responsibility to capture the 'fleeting, ephemeral experience of life in an urban metropolis'. Artists departed from the late nineteenth-century realistic and impressionist style and used materials and techniques to create images that better reflected the modern world and its ideals, culminating in abstraction. Depending on the perspective, modernism could be a concept, period, or style. For Jolly, modern art is a style.

When artists from the East arrived in Europe to study in the first decades of the previous century, they were bewildered as well as thrilled by the transformative experiments going on there. The early generations of émigré artists such as Zao Wou-Ki and Chu Teh-Chun absorbed and adopted the new style, integrating Western modern art with their own artistic practices learned in the East. Others, meanwhile, rejected or disavowed the movement, focusing on realism.

It is always interesting to see what happens when different cultures confront each other. If one culture is much more sophisticated, usually the stronger side dominates and the weaker party merely accepts what is imposed upon it, imitating at most and often losing oneself. On the other hand, if both cultures are equally advanced and adaptive, they could blossom in the embrace of each other to bear ever more delicious fruit. One of the best examples can be found in Chinese export ceramics and their influences in Southeast Asia and Europe, spawning the developments of local ceramic industries in disparate directions.

Now in Europe, Jolly welcomed modern art whole-heartedly and selected the elements that he found resonance with. His early artistic experience as a child prodigy back in Malaysia offered favourable preconditions for him to adapt the new style. Introduced to modern art and design at Hornsey College of Art, Jolly was constantly inspired and ignited by the many exciting avant-garde exhibitions including those of Francis Bacon and Mark Rothko held at the London galleries, especially the Marlborough Gallery and the Beaux Arts Gallery that he frequented. '… I was influenced by modern paintings as well as modernity as a concept. I was able to absorb and transform everything in my surroundings into the development of my own modernist style.' Jolly confessed during our conversations, 'it was the educational and life experiences in London that turned me into a modern painter.' He was keen and getting ready to become part of the movement, and to carry it forth in his own way. Abstraction became his language.

Understanding Modernity

Perhaps the most well-known adaptation of the Modernist movement in popular culture is Woody Allen's film *Midnight in Paris*, in which the protagonist Gil Pender, a nostalgic screenwriter on a Paris trip, was mysteriously carried back to the 1920s and met literary giants including Ernest Hemmingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein, as well as avant-garde artists such as Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Henri Matisse, and Man Ray among others. Whimsical and historical, Woody Allen's movie sketched for the viewers a time and space when the most exciting revolutions in art were taking place. Hemmingway also recounted in *A Moveable Feast* (1964) how he would go to the Musée du Luxembourg nearly every day for the Cézannes, Manets and Monets, and how he learned enormously from Cézanne but was not articulate enough to explain it to others. Modernism was unprecedented in the Western history of art in that international artists gathered in Paris, challenged the canon, and strove for new artistic expressions and self-identities. Revolutions in art had never occurred in such scale and radicality before.

Art of the twentieth century was no longer bound by the rigid rules and hierarchies of painting categories defined by the *académie*. Artists experienced new approaches and delved into their own creativity, individuality, and exploration of modern art. The English art critic Roger Fry notably coined the term 'Post-Impressionism' to define more recent traditional naturalistic developments and championed the movement as he did of Renaissance before, believing that the 'constructive design' of art from both periods interrogated truth and represented a renewal of art in the Western world. Modern art, however, is diverse, bold and unpredictable, with movements and styles competing against one another: it became fauvism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism and of course abstraction. Modern art survived and flourished during the twentieth century.

Referring to Baudelaire's definition, modernism in art is an ever-changing and evolving concept; it is temporal, capturing the *Zeitgeist*. Jolly has rightfully stated that the modern spirit of a Théodore Géricault or Eugène Delacroix is different from that of a Piet Mondrian. For a Géricault or Delacroix, modernity is the Romanticist movement which is theatrical and passionate; one can feel the post-revolution enthusiasm in *The Raft of the Medusa* and *Liberty Leading the People*. Whereas for Mondrian, modernity is a utopian search for universal values and aesthetics, embedded in the intellectual conceiving and visual balancing of geometric forms and prime colours – modernism is a spiritual abstraction beyond reality. Jolly's modernism too bears the signature of his time and individual circumstances: it is an abstract natural flow of the brush, bringing together the lyricism of Peter Lanyon and the tradition of English romantic landscape paintings, with the chance happenings and unexpectedness of Francis Bacon. Jolly encountered these artists and found resonance with elements of their works during his study in London from 1959 to 1963. He adopted and adapted the elements to formulate his own artistic language.

Examining Jolly's works before and after London, the leap is tremendous. Not only did he depart from his earlier realist style, but the whole expression of his canvases became 'European'. There were many poor-quality narrative paintings, or 'illustrations' as Jolly calls them, circulating in Malaysia even today, examples of what Jolly's countrymen have been accustomed to. They captured none of modern life's *Zeitgeist* nor used a modern painter's methods or manners of expression and should be distinguished from the modern art that Jolly's paintings represent.

Beholding Beauty and Pleasure

Jolly remarks that most Old Master paintings are beautiful whereas many modern and contemporary pictures are not. A Romanticist at heart, he believes that his paintings must be beautiful. With beauty as his primary concern, he takes it as his task to portray and convey it in his works. 'Beauty is what my painting is all about,' he says.

Beauty in art has been a topic of debate since classical antiquity, whose definition of it was centred around ideal proportions among others. The question as to what beauty is and whether it is subjective or objective became unimportant by the beginning of the twentieth century, when beauty was altogether abandoned as the primary goal of the arts. Besides negative political and social economical associations with beauty, the philosophical inquiry into the topic was also in decline, leading artists to believe that there should be more urgent and serious issues to be sought after in the arts other than beauty. The discrediting of beauty in the twentieth century is adequately explored in Arthur Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (2003), in which he shows how beauty, the supreme purpose of art a hundred years ago, came to be regarded as an aesthetic aberration.[1] This explains why many modern paintings ceased to be beautiful in a traditional sense, justifying Jolly's observations.

In his essay 'Painting towards an Aesthetic End', Jolly explains what he considers to be beautiful – a painting is beautiful when it has a good organisation of sensory structure, when 'every tone, colour and shape all form together into an organic whole', and the artist must use his or her aesthetic sensibility to make that judgement.[2] The quality of the painting, therefore, is a manifestation of the artist's aesthetic sensibility.

Jolly's conception of beauty seems disinterested. He regards the aesthetic judgment of art to be objective or inter-subjective, following the Kantian belief in universal subjectivity. Most philosophical inquiries of beauty treated it as an objective quality until the eighteenth century, when Pleasure became associated not with the effect but the origin of beauty. For Jolly, it is not a hedonist sensual pleasure that is of concern here, but a disinterested one derived from the quality of the artwork.

David Hume's 'Of the Standard of Taste' (1757) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) attempt to find an 'antinomy of taste': that taste is both subjective and objective. Both philosophers acknowledge that aesthetic judgment is fundamentally subjective and there is no standard of taste, but some views are better than others – just as we would describe somebody's taste as refined or vulgar – and beauty could be validated through universal good taste. Although there would be no beauty if people did not experience certain kinds of pleasure, the judgment that something is beautiful, Kant argues, is a disinterested one. This inter-subjective view of beauty is what Jolly adheres to.

[1] For details on the debate of beauty in the history of Western philosophy, see 'Beauty', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (website), 4 September 2012, revised on 22 March 2022.

[2] See *JOLLY @ 80*, exhibition catalogue, G13 Gallery, Malaysia, 2021.

Jolly considers himself as an art lover who *sees* beauty, not as a philosopher who merely ponders upon it; and yet the nature of beauty and aesthetics is part of his artistic creations. Since absolute beauty and freedom are found in the design, namely form and colour of the artwork following Kantian reasonings, the formalist approach that focuses on the representation of the object for its own sake is adopted in aesthetic judgements, and Pleasure is derived from the disinterested experience of beauty.

The Pleasurable experience, therefore, is not of a subjective nature which amuses, entertains, or distracts. Instead, it results from the formalist quality of the object, and the ability to experience that Pleasure is dependent upon the aesthetic sensibility of the viewer. This notion of Beauty or Pleasure elevated its status to be on the same pedestal as Goodness and Truth, that altogether form the Platonic 'Greek Trinity' that Jolly subscribes to. 'Beauty includes that of nature and that of our being, as manifested in art. For me, my art is about pure beauty,' the artist claims, '… there is no knowledge to be gained from my paintings, except for beauty.'

And quality. To judge whether an artwork is good or not is to measure the quality of its sensory structure. From the perspective of the artist, a painting is thus finished when its sensory structure looks good to the creator. The ability and the aesthetic judgments of the artist determine the quality of the painting. Whereas from the perspective of the connoisseur, whose aesthetic sensibility comes into play when judging the quality of an artwork, Pleasure is obtained when the quality of a picture presents itself and when the viewer recognises it. This method is also used in judging whether a modern artwork is good or bad.

Lyrical Abstraction and Romantic Beauty

Jolly refuses being called an Expressionist, as his paintings are not externalisations of his subjective feelings or ideas about the world, but rather balanced juxtapositions of forms and colours resulting from his aesthetic sensibility. Jolly prefers to be known as a Romanticist, in the tradition of luminaries such as Caspar David Friedrich and J. M. W. Turner.

Deeply moved by the lyricism of Peter Lanyon's landscape paintings during his time in London, Jolly was to adopt a similar artistic language later. These two artists have many things in common. A major figure of British Modernism, Lanyon's style varied

significantly from the 1930s to the 60s. He was profoundly influenced by American art both in terms of technique and in forms of presentation after a 1957 visit to New York, where his encounters with Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, and other artists and art critics led him to expand his canvases and to paint in a more open and looser style. He succeeded in painting in this manner without compromising the experience of the senses that he considered vital in art. Following the English landscape tradition in the lineage of John Constable and Turner, Lanyon created landscape paintings in a Modernist way and was identified by Lawrence Alloway in 1959 as 'our last landscape painter', since most modern artists chose against landscape painting.[3] Lanyon was creating his major landscape paintings in the style that he is most known for when Jolly came to London. Jolly visited Lanyon at his studio in Cornwall in 1962, an encounter that was more significant than the young man was able to appreciate during those formative years. Lanyon's use of colour and preference for landscapes as a painting category had a lasting and profound impact on Jolly.[4] The very first picture that Jolly painted upon returning to Malaysia from the UK is *The Blue Gift* (1964) (see p.29), a tribute paid to Lanyon. Jolly also made a studio visit to Bernard Leach, the most influential British potter of his time. Leach's practice of uniting Eastern and Western art in his pottery creations was applauded by Jolly, whose catholic tastes expanded his horizons into various arts – music, theatre, literature, etc.

Nature is of paramount importance in the Romanticist movement. Jolly's nature has an intimate and homey quality. Just as Lanyon was deeply obsessed with scenes of his hometown of St Ives – strictly speaking, Lanyon is a Cornwall painter – Jolly has chosen nature of his homeland as the main subject matter of his landscape pictures. This choice is closely related to his early experiences when he was growing up in Malacca. Jolly captures the colours, light, and atmosphere of the places filled with his childhood memories in a Modernist manner. Before being a modern painter, Jolly is first and foremost a Malaysian artist. His early watercolours display his basic training and deep connection to his motherland, a tie that is further manifested in his paintings after his studies abroad.

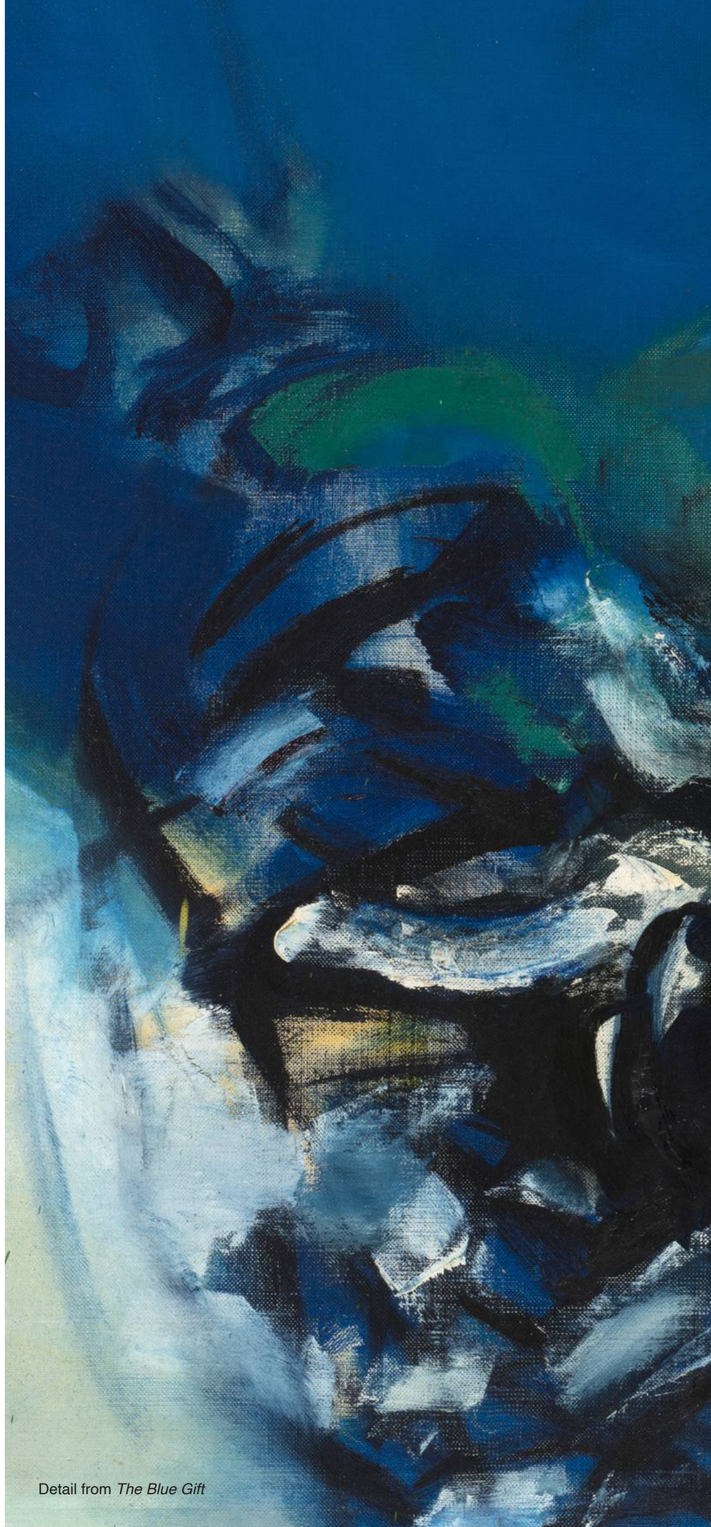
As the American art historian Meyer Schapiro noted, contemporary artists no longer believed in such doctrines of nature; their focus shifted due to societal changes, scientific and technological developments and the emphasis laid on awareness and self-exploration. This is also reflected by the move in aesthetic theories away from beauty in the twentieth century, as discussed earlier. The luxury of being a

[3] For studies of Peter Lanyon and his landscape paintings, see A. Causey, *Peter Lanyon: Modernism and the Land*, London, 1991; C. Stevens, *Peter Lanyon: At the Edge of Landscape*, London, 2000; and T. Treves, *Peter Lanyon, Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings and Three-Dimensional Works*, London, 2018.

[4] Jolly was also influenced by R. Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, Boulder, Col, 1977.



The Blue Gift, 1964, Oil on Canvas, 101cm x 127cm



Detail from *The Blue Gift*

Romanticist lies in the mental escape from the contemporary industrial world back to the nineteenth century, when artists, poets, and philosophers looked upon Nature as a model for man and his life, the practice that Jolly carried out: holding onto the nineteenth-century trust in Nature and Beauty, he is the ultimate Romanticist.

Jolly speaks of the joyful exuberance that his paintings evoke in the viewer, which is the effect of Beauty in his art. As Edmund Burke writes, 'by beauty I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies, by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it'. The correlate of Jolly's beauty is love and joy. An avid collector of Chinese ceramics and works of art, Jolly is enchanted by the sheer beauty of the objects, especially by Song ceramics whose moulding and shape are most endearing to him. These objects are beautiful, and the experience of that beauty is filled with love and longing. It is the same Beauty in Chinese art and the Beauty embodied in the aforementioned Greek Trinity comprising of Truth, Goodness and Beauty that Jolly transports to his paintings, and to experience that Beauty borders rhapsody and ecstasy.

The experience of Beauty is thus important not only because of the Pleasure derived from aesthetic sensations, but because it equates with spiritual elevation as well. Hegel associates Beauty in art with mind and spirit, considering the Beauty of art higher than the beauty of nature, as 'the beauty of art is born of the spirit and born again'. The elevation of spirit calls out emotions such as love or adoration, explaining why although Jolly does not aim to express romantic feelings with his brushstrokes, the viewers still arrive at a certain emotional state of mind resembling joy and exuberance. By portraying landscapes in art, the artist also lifts nature to the spiritual sphere. The Beauty of paintings exceeds that of the scenery.

Accidental Beauty

Another key character of Jolly's Beauty is randomness or chance happening in art, a practice similar to that of the British modernist Francis Bacon whose many London exhibitions excited as well as stimulated Jolly. Bacon was initially inspired by Pablo Picasso's works of the late twenties to use natural forms even when portraying human figures. One notices that under close observation, a nose is not a nose and eyes are not really eyes in Bacon's pictures, and yet these elements form a complete and recognisable entity whose visual, psychological, and emotional effects are outstanding. These natural forms result from the organic flow of the paint, while the painter only intervenes scantly to model the forms so that they come nearer and nearer to what he wants, according to Bacon. This is when the aesthetic sensibility of the artist is at play. When asked about the painting process by David Silvester, Bacon commented that some of the pictures came to him as an accident:

'… suddenly the lines that I'd drawn suggested something totally different, and out of this suggestion arose this picture. I had no intention to do this picture; I never thought of it in that way. It was like one continuous accident mounting on top of another… I want to do very, very specific objects, though made out of something which is completely irrational from the point of view of being an illustration… And this is why in a way it is very wearing, because it is really a complete accident.'[5]

Jolly found the idea of accident alluring. The eloquent use of the paint medium involves taking chances and trusting the paint itself to develop random forms. The pouring method Jolly deploys is ideal for achieving this effect via appropriating and exhausting the accidental developments of the paint material. When asked about the conception before painting, Jolly admits that he has no clear idea what a picture will look like when he starts, and the liquid paint flows naturally to form organic shapes that may eventually suggest something more concrete, onto which Jolly might add some enhancements.

Jolly's pouring method is, however, very different from Jackson Pollock's which let the paint drip from a brush or stick, resulting in a linear spider web of abstract images – Jolly's paint is water-based and flows more effortlessly on to the canvases that often have figurative motifs. Some other American modern artists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Paul Jenkins whose paints are more fluid used methods more similar to Jolly's than Pollock did.

A vital difference between Jolly and Bacon lies in their perceptions of the artist's role. The latter thinks of himself not so much as a painter but as a medium of accident and chance, believing that movements of the brush on canvas are aimed at altering the shapes and implications, so that the application or rather de-application of the paint always brings something unexpected into being; the artist only acts as an intermediary. Jolly, however, trusts the artist's ability in proactively directing the paint: he takes advantage of what happens by chance when the paint is poured or brush applied, and he manipulates the paint into an image that he does not yet know of but is surely there, working continuously towards it till he deems the 'sensory structure' of the painting to be beautiful. Then he stops in time.

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[5] For interviews of Francis Bacon by David Silvester, see D. Silvester, *Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, London, 1987; see also D. Silvester and M. Harrison, *Francis Bacon: Studying Form*, London, 2005; and D. Silvester, *Looking Back at Francis Bacon*, London, 2000.

These two discrepant mindsets about the role of the artist bring us to an interesting debate: does the randomness occur utterly by accident and is artist only there to suggest, at most to direct and modify what is formed by nature, or is a chance happening not completely accidental but something brought forth using the artistic sensibility and judgment in a controlled and yet unpredictable manner? In the latter scenario, the artist relies on his talent, skills, and past experiences to lead the paint into a randomness that is free and structured at the same time. Bacon considers himself receptive rather than gifted and his randomness should belong to the first category. Jolly, on the other hand, believes in the talent of the artist. The artist transports the potential onto the brush and then the canvas, creating structures of form and arrangements of colour that are beautiful. It is a gift bestowed upon the artist, or as Jolly would say, thanks to pure luck.

This is comparable to the practice of Chinese calligraphy. Cursive script, seemingly wild and unpredictable, is in fact written in a controlled manner, following existing fixed forms. Tales about calligraphy Masters who always got drunk to enter a state of ecstasy before applying the brush are somehow misleading. The wine only serves to relax the practitioner so that he is not inhibited by immediate circumstances from reaching his full potential: almost never were masterpieces produced when the Master was completely intoxicated. Insofar as Jolly's brushstrokes are strongly influenced by Chinese calligraphy, as he acknowledges, combining the frenzies with the stupendous calm of *Zen* Buddhism, the randomness in his paintings is a result of accidents manoeuvred through his aesthetic judgements.

Jolly's obsession with accidents in painting is in a way related to his conviction that 'much of life is luck', or 'sheer chance'. 'More and more,' he continues, 'I now realize how lucky I was to have studied abroad early in my life and for that luck I have my grandparents to thank for as they supported me during my years in London.' Jolly is modest and humble in that he does not take his talent and circumstances for granted, as he was just being 'lucky'.

The Odyssey

The recent paintings of Jolly Koh demonstrate the delicious fruit harvested after a long journey, the path of which is trodden not by a fatigued traveler, but with the wandering heart of a Romanticist. The artist's canvases have become ever more eloquent – their colours are bolder and brushstrokes more confident. Jolly feels nothing but gratitude: 'I am extremely privileged to be able to pursue a career as an artist … it is nothing but luck.' Jolly believes that 'life is all about chances: the genes that one is born with determine one's character and genes are accidental; the cultural environment decided by the family that one is born into is chance; the fact that we met, how we met, and that we are having this conversation are also chances.' I disagree with the last point, preferring to believe that it is destiny that we met, not to say that we turned out to have common dear friends. After knowing Jolly as an artist and more and more as a friend, I would regret if I had never met him; pure luck seems too precarious.

This attitude towards life corresponds with his way of painting; Jolly embraces chance happenings in art as in life, while his pouring method not only allows for 'accidents' and 'surprises' but also produces a great sense of freedom. Jolly is an ultimate Romanticist whose love for his homeland is manifested in the many landscape paintings depicting nature around Malacca, an influence stemming from his childhood experiences. The paintings are to a certain extent records of himself, his memories and states of mind. A lover of poetry and classical music – his painting *Beethoven's Garden* (2016) (see p.34) shows how music inspires his artistic creations – Jolly creates 'wonderfully beautiful' pictures that evoke in their viewers joy, adoration, a certain emotional state named 'love' – a longing for nature, home, and life itself.

Beauty is what one associates with Jolly's works. Ancient and medieval accounts located Beauty as outside the individual experience, as something objective. Despite the opposing view that Beauty is subjective, it was not until the eighteenth century when philosophers such as Hume and Kant reached an 'antinomy of taste': Beauty is both subjective and objective, or inter-subjective. Elaborating on the theories of Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer went on further to assume that aesthetic experience not only provides a temporary liberation from suffering, from our will, but that art provides a profound and essential knowledge of the world as well. Although Jolly would disagree with Schopenhauer that knowledge is to be obtained from his paintings, the theoretical frameworks help us better understand Jolly's art and practices.



Detail from *Beethoven's Garden*



Beethoven's Garden, 2016, Oil & Acrylic on Canvas, 183cm x 150cm

Jolly takes a formalist approach to the topic: Beauty is objective or inter-subjective and lies in the object therein; it is a balanced arrangement of form and colour based on the aesthetic sensibility of the artist, which determines the painting's quality. The viewer, equipped with adequate talent, knowledge and training, experiences sensations of Pleasure when the quality of the artwork presents itself, and thus the aesthetic experience is rendered possible.

Quality, Beauty, and Pleasure in art are intertwined, impossible to define with language as they must be seen, felt and experienced in a phenomenological sense. The best examples are perhaps museum visits where one looks at major masterpieces. Jolly would visit the National Gallery multiple times while in London to see a dozen or maximum twenty paintings for the duration of an hour, saying that that is the most he can handle for each visit. He did this extensively for the last twenty years during his annual visits to Europe and learned a lot from the Old Masters, especially seventeenth-century Dutch paintings that he hugely admires. Condemning the lack of beauty in many modern and contemporary paintings, Jolly added that with a few exceptions beautiful paintings seem to have ended with the Impressionists and the Post-Impressionists.

Taste and fashion in art change as well. Throughout art history, we often see rebels against the established return to the conventional after reaching the extreme. Jolly's insistence on Beauty as his priority finds correspondence: a revival of interest in beauty in art and philosophy started in the early 1990s, to such an extent that the art critic Dave Hickey declared that 'the issue of the 90s will be beauty'. Jolly would have followed the same path no matter how contemporary fashion has changed and developed.

The energy and vividness of Jolly's recent works recall an artist at work whose acuteness of mind and enduring physicality see no boundary. Alerted and conscious of the limited time to do what he enjoys the most, which is to create 'wonderfully beautiful' paintings, Jolly appreciates and lives in every present day. Don't we all live in a presence that is forever passing and never to be held? Fleeting as it is, the presence envelops memories of the past and unfolds the debris into the future, a future that we call home. The odyssey back home. ■

June 2024
London

Detail from *Noon Light* (pp.108-109)

About the Writer

Céline Hongyi Yang holds an MPhil Distinction degree in History of Art and Architecture from Clare College, the University of Cambridge. She was Deputy Director and Specialist for European Old Master Paintings at Sotheby's, London. She trained with Christie's, London where she was awarded her MLitt in Arts of China (University of Glasgow) and gained her dual bachelor's degrees in English literature and in Economics from Tsinghua University, Beijing.

Céline Hongyi Yang is an art curator and writer. Her recent book *Roger Fry, Arthur Waley and Goldsworthy Dickinson: The Cambridge Trio and the Discussion of the Modernity of Chinese Art in England* (2023) deals with the three King's College figures who together initiated art-historical debate about traditional Chinese art in the early twentieth century, reaching congruent and corroborating conclusions that Chinese art was modern, embodied the classic spirit, and was accessible to Western audiences. 'The book fills a void by examining in depth the writings of the Trio on Chinese art, during a transitional period that led to further (re-)assessment of Chinese art and its history.' (*Preface* by Prof Jean Michel Massing, King's College, University of Cambridge)

A well-versed art historian who speaks Mandarin, English, German and French, she acts as an educator as well as cultural ambassador. Her continuous effort in fostering cultural exchange between East and West has led to the publication of many articles, and she has been featured in the *Financial Times*, the *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, *Ming Pao*, etc.

Detail from *Blossoms* (p.156)

An Interview with Jolly Koh

Céline Hongyi Yang

C.Y. A number of Malaysian artists also came to Europe to study art at that time. Some of them, however, continued to paint the way they had done before, rather oblivious to the whole Modernist art movement happening then. They ended up learning the academic style instead. Why do you think that was the case? What made you so much more open-minded compared with many of your contemporaries?

J.K. I think there are two factors. Firstly, being open-minded is in my character, and character is something one is born with. Secondly, I am highly talented artistically, and was therefore able to absorb what was happening in the modern art scene at the time. Some Malaysian artists were calcified and rather anti-Western in their approach to making art. I am, however, just lucky to be born with those character traits so that I am equipped with both the personality and the intelligence to make the right decisions. I have always believed that mere chance and luck made me who I am today.

C.Y. Could you please tell us a bit more about your creative process? Do you usually already have an idea in mind when you start painting, or does the idea develop as you paint? I suppose you give the title to the painting after it is finished, not before? For example, regarding the paintings 'A Floating Rose' and 'Rose & Persimmon', *would you say that these are abstract paintings or that they portray the figurative subjects as their names suggest? In* 'Flowers in the Sky', *the biggest painting in this exhibition, the title has even a surrealist feel. How do the titles affect a viewer's perception and understanding of the paintings?*

J.K. I don't really have anything specific in mind when I start painting. I usually leave it to the accidental developments and chances of the flow of the paint. Of course not all accidents are good – in fact some accidents look horrible. So it requires a long process of 'improvements' to finally make the painting beautiful.

In the case of *Flowers in the Sky*, even the idea was accidental – somehow the flowers, rooster and the sun just appeared. It is magic. The size of *Flowers in the Sky* is 10ft x 8ft, making it the biggest painting in the exhibition and it took many months of painting, fine-tuning before it was eventually finished. Like the tortoise-shell ceramic bowls and the root wood brush pots in my Chinese art collection, my paintings embody natural beauty. My brushstrokes follow the natural flow of Laozi's *Dao*. Nor do I think that there are meanings to be derived from my paintings – their *raison d'être* is the joyful exuberance carried within themselves.

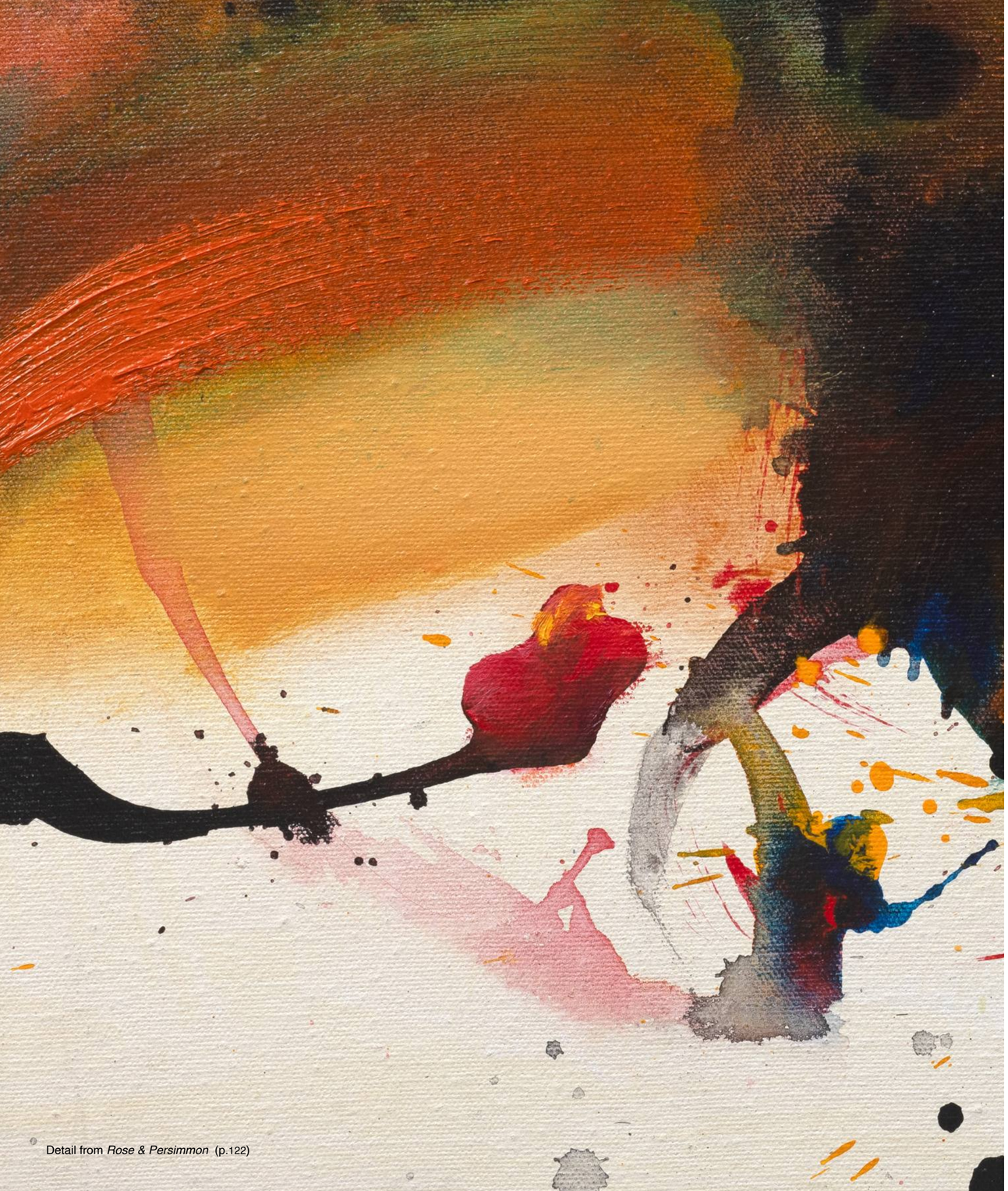
I give the titles to my paintings after they're finished, but I think the least about titles. In *A Floating Rose* and *Rose & Persimmon*, the flowers and fruit are completely accidental – I did not even notice them until my wife Angela pointed out the rose to me. The same goes for *Flowers in the Sky* – the result was by chance. I like the idea of flowers in the sky so much that I'm going to paint more versions of it. The titles may provide some direction to look but experienced viewers should not be limited by the names.

C.Y. When I saw your pouring methods, the artist that immediately came to mind was Jackson Pollock. Whereas Pollock's canvases are completely abstract, your subject matter is usually figurative. How do your paintings distinguish from Pollock's and what contributes to the differences? Is there any difference in the painting methods as well?

J.K. I think that is something to correct here. My painting methods and Jackson Pollock's are totally different. Whereas I pour a water-based material – acrylic paint which is fluid and flows effortlessly, Pollock used a brush or stick which let the paint drip, with a result that is very linear, forming a spider web of lines. Therefore, both our methods and results vary. The artists whose painting techniques are more similar to mine are Helen Frankenthaler and Paul Jenkins. Their colours and forms are more fluid than Pollock's.

C.Y. Quality and Beauty in art are two aspects of your prime concerns. How do they relate to each other and how do they differ? Could we say that a beautiful painting, by your definition, is a high-quality painting, but a high-quality painting is not necessarily beautiful? Could we also use them to judge what is and what is not art, as well as what is good and bad art?

J.K. Beauty and Quality could be used interchangeably – it depends on what one wants to say. As for what is or what is not *Art* – that is a tedious question for those dreary philosophers who have been debating the question since that silly man called Duchamp did something equally stupid.



Detail from *Rose & Persimmon* (p.122)

I have been visiting the National Gallery in London twice a year for the last twenty years to appreciate the beautiful paintings that are there, and the question whether those paintings are art or not is simply irrelevant. Those paintings embody Beauty to be rhapsodised and enjoyed.

C.Y. Many of your recent paintings are reflections of Nature, be it landscapes or elements of nature. Why is Nature so important for your creations? What kind of emotions towards Nature do you want to evoke with your paintings?

J.K. Nature is less important for my paintings as a subject matter than as a formal inspiration. I enjoy scenic beauty and the picturesque, whose natural and organic shapes are reflected in my paintings. I can't say that I am enamoured of Nature itself. Nature for me, strictly speaking, means earthquake, volcanic eruption, tsunami and cancer (part of our biological nature). Wild nature is brutal, where animals also feed upon one another in the food chain. I think it would be wonderful if all animals, including humans of course, were vegetarians!

*C.Y. I associate the piece '*Blue Movement*' with the cosmos and the origin of things. Many other works from the recent series also remind me of birth and the vitality of life. It seems that your brushstrokes are bringing forth life's forces, something coming into being. Would you like to comment on this?*

J.K. The forms that come out of my brushstrokes are natural and organic as opposed to being artificial. Additionally, my brushstrokes are influenced by Chinese calligraphy, especially by Masters from the Song and Ming dynasties such as Liang Kai, Xu Wei, and Bada Shanren (Zhu Da). The *Qi Yun* that Chinese brushstrokes encompass is a natural transposing and bringing forth of life's energies. The *Zen* represented in *Six Persimmons* by the thirteenth century Buddhist painter Muqi Fachang also finds resonance in my persimmon in the painting *Rose & Persimmon*.

As much as I appreciate Chinese ink paintings, I find the material – ink on paper – extremely limiting. The Western method of oil or acrylic on canvas presents more potential and possibilities. Just like with music, the sound is constrained by the instrument, the painting is defined by the material. I refuse to become calcified or limited by the material; I am all for development and adventure.

Here I must re-state my core belief, which is the Greek Trinity composed of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty. The highest and intrinsic Goodness falls into the

domain of morality, Truth is represented by knowledge as opposed to conspiracy theories which are prevalent today, and Beauty is what art is all about. The Greek Trinity is what I subscribe to. Beauty in art has become a rarity today. We tend to forget that art was meant to decorate from early on – the Sistine Chapel was supposed to be beautifully decorated by art. To decorate was a function of art, but 'decorative' has become a negative term.

C.Y. Although you are of the opinion that most philosophers only talk about art abstractly without revealing its quality to the viewers, as an educator, your own philosophical approach to aesthetics and the 'function' of art obviously follows the Kant - Schopenhauer tradition. Richard Wagner, one of your favourite composers, was also hugely influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer's aesthetic theories. Schopenhauer speaks about the two main varieties of aesthetic experience – the Beautiful and the Sublime. We have looked at Beauty quite thoroughly; let's take a look at the Sublime here. Sublime is usually related to a human experience before things that are vast or powerful, that threaten to overwhelm the individual. Because of this, the Beautiful is almost wholly Pleasurable, but the Sublime is sometimes mixed with pain. It seems to me that despite the vastness and power portrayed in many of your pictures, the viewer is never confronted with pain, but pure Pleasure. Would you say that your art utilises elements which are often associated with the Sublime and twists them into something ultimately Beautiful? What about the Sublime in Wagner's music then? Or the mood cultivated in modern poetry such as 'The Waste Land' *by T. S. Eliot, who is amongst your favourite poets?*

J.K. Different art forms have their own *raison d'être*. For me, art is solely and purely about Beauty. To derive meaning, one should go for poetry, while emotion finds its best outlet in music. I would agree with Schopenhauer that aesthetic contemplation of art provides a temporary liberation from the burden of the 'will', allowing the subject to enter a realm of pure mental enjoyment, and yet I do not agree that art could provide essential knowledge, or any knowledge at all, about the world.

I also disagree with his view that the aesthetic experience of the Sublime could be obtained in art. For me, the Sublime is a direct experience of Nature; it is not something that can be experienced in any art form. The artist that came closest to portray the Sublime in painting is Caspar David Friedrich. Art is about joy, exuberance, excitement, and pleasure. This is clear when you look at paintings by Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Turner – their paintings are simply

beautiful. Most philosophers are thinkers, not art lovers. I am an art lover. I prefer the direct experience of art through looking, not thinking.

C.Y. That brings us to the vital discussion of 'Modernity'. Modern art could be a period or style, depending on the definition. What is Modernity in art for you? Would you define your recent paintings as modern or contemporary art?

J.K. Modern art started in Europe after the Post-Impressionists. In my view, Modernity in art is more of a style rather than a period. I am sympathetic to the idea that I am a modern painter. A modern artist could be anything, but to be a painter requires skill, talent, and artistic sensibility. I am a modern painter, and my recent creations are modern paintings.

C.Y. You also spoke of artists besides the British Modernists who became a source of inspiration for you, such as Claude Monet, Pierre Bonnard, Georges Braque, and certain Asian artists including Zao Wou-ki, Chu Teh-Chun, Chang Dai-chien, and Katsushika Hokusai. What do these artists have in common that speaks to you?

J.K. The one thing that all these artists have in common is that they are modern artists, with the exception of Hokusai of course. These artists produced beautiful paintings. Not all modern artists produce beautiful paintings. For a twentieth-century artist to be significant, he or she must be a modern artist, and the creations must be significant for the history of modern art. Otherwise it is unimportant. It is the modern spirit, the *Zeitgeis*t, and the concept their works embody that speak to me. I see myself as one of them.

C.Y. Compared with the earlier works that are careful juxtapositions of colours and forms, your recent works are much more fluid, free, expressive, and colourful. There is also more playfulness in them. Similar things happen to many great artists when they mature – Titian, Turner, Monet, to name just a few. The artist gets more confident in his or her skills and expressions as time goes by. Your recent works are the best examples. In this journey of finding yourself as a painter, what characteristics from your early years have you retained in your works? What is the 'trademark' of Jolly Koh from the early years till now?

J.K. Back in the 60s, when I had my exhibitions in Malaysia after returning from the UK, some critics described me as a 'colourist'. I think that is something that has remained today – I am a colourist, even though my approach has become

much more mature and confident. It depends on the sensibility of the artist for the colours and forms to have the right relationships. The artist needs to use his or her excellent taste and good eye to balance the painted elements. I excel at using colours so that my canvases are never dull or garish. I understand the intricacy of colour both in practice and in theory. As a matter of fact, I have my own theories on colour which question the widely accepted colour wheel theory. But that is another topic.

*C.Y. I'm curious about the texture in '*Rock Surface'*, where you used stripes of solid colours to demarcate the natural and the artificial. These stripes also occur in '*Textured Landscape'. *Do they resemble memories captured by camera and set in frame? What are the ideas behind?*

J.K. In the late 1960s, I was influenced by the hard-edge paintings. For two years I was very much attracted by the visual effect of this school of painting, represented by artists such as Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella. The Abstract Expressionist painter Robert Motherwell, whom I appreciate a lot, was similarly influenced by this school. Since then, the hard-edge visual effect has become part of my repertoire. I find the contrast between the hard edges and the soft areas exciting. It is more the visual effect rather than hard-edge painters' impersonal approach that I seek with this technique. When you take away the solid colour stripes, my paintings are still complete. Of course, how the viewers interpret it and how the visual affects the interpretation are full of possibilities.

C.Y. In the 'Visiting Wanda' *series, this technique is used again. The paint surface looks like photo montage, as if various impressions and remembrances of Wanda are collaged together in a parallel time and space. Compared with* 'Wanda' *from 1969, the freely expressive part is enlarged while the solid colours shrank. What contributed to the evolvement?*

J.K. There is a personal story behind this. It is a story of friendship and love. Twenty years ago, a friend and art lover wanted to purchase my *Wanda* (1969) but couldn't afford it. Many years later, this friend became a very successful businessman. He came back to me recently to commission me to revisit the subject since the 1969 *Wanda* had already found a home. As a result, I painted a few versions for him to choose from, and he was very happy to finally be able to have his *Wanda*.

I think my recent paintings of this theme are much more exciting and beautiful than the earlier version. The expressive, wild and free brushstroke is typical of my recent style, as you have noticed and commented on. This is obvious when you compare the various versions made more than half a century apart. The title in the paintings, *Wanda*, is not a place but the name of my first wife. I think it's a beautiful name and a romantic idea to use a person's name for paintings.

C.Y. You sometimes use Malaysian titles such as 'Bunga D'Kayangan', 'Kupu-Kupu Biru', *and* 'Pergerakan D'Kayangan' *for your paintings, which often portray local landscapes as well. This reminds me of your remark that you are a 'Malaysian painter'. Here we see a very interesting cross-cultural dialogue – after early artistic exposure as a gifted teenager in Malaysia, you welcomingly absorbed European and American Modern art in London, before finally returning to Malaysia where you would continue to paint in a Modernist manner with a personal as well as Malaysian touch. Despite all that has been going on in the international art scene since the 1960s, you have stuck to your practices and carved out a path of your own. How do you feel about all this?*

J.K. I am a Modern artist. Since I live in Malaysia, I think it is natural for me to title some of my paintings with Malay names. I feel very lucky to have been born into my family and to have had the opportunity to pursue an artistic career, and to go abroad to study. I feel tremendously grateful for my good luck.

Someone asked me once what my plans are for the future, and my reply was that this is a question by the young and for the young. At my age, I am happy to have a good life with a lovely and caring wife, to have a few good friends, and most importantly, to still be able to create beautiful paintings. I do not look much towards the future. I concentrate on the *Here* and *Now*.

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