

Yeoh Kean Thai's Metal Pieces

BY NGIOM

WHAT STRUCK ME ABOUT YEOH KEAN THAI'S WORK WAS HOW ARCHITECTURAL THEY WERE: SOME PIECES WERE LIKE BUILDINGS GROANING IN DECAY. I COULD ASSOCIATE THE WORKS WITH WESTERN COSMOPOLITAN ART BUT THEY ARE HARDLY TYPICAL OF ASIAN ART. THE CONVERSATION WITH SHALINI GANENDRA, WHO NOW EXHIBITS YEOH'S WORKS AT HER GALLERY WERE ALMOST TELEPATHIC IN THE WAY HIS WORK CAN BE APPRECIATED.



metal pieces twist about in the paintings, with an overwhelming sense of desolation on the onlooker. The later works were becoming even more surreal and existential, particularly with the introduction of Escher's passages to nowhere and where metal pieces were morphing into organic creatures. The paintings are not things that could be fitted comfortably in Asian homes, particularly with narratives that do not provide for psychological calm. In this sense, Yeoh's works are not particularly commercial, yet seemingly incredibly valuable for the mere risks that the paintings take, and for the sheer mastery of the execution.

The best of architectural works speak about light, form, composition and tactility and Yeoh's works speak about the same. Indeed the dynamic shapes and the use of light against shade within structured framework induce a late Renaissance and Baroque feel about them, reminiscent of Caravaggio, only that the narratives revolve around metal pieces rather than people, where the allegory revolve around metal parts rather than religious themes.



Equal with the way architecture is composed, the paintings seem to first designed from concept to detail, and each one has resulted in three dimensional representation, often with forms receding from layer to layer, with forms appearing in the foreground and others receding in the background.

There is also obsessiveness about the details. In case the observer decides to scrutinise in detail, it could be observed that every stroke is meticulously executed with constancy with pen or charcoal. The precision about the strokes is like traditional architectural drafting, before the advent of computers.



In an interview with Ganendra, Yeoh explained the genesis of his work in a neighbourhood in Kuala Lumpur, in a scrap yard "with a mountain of discarded metals which had such a magnetic draw for me. At times, I would visualise amazing forms from the unplanned gigantic structure of metals, like H. R. Gigers aliens. I visited the site and sketched obsessively. At the time, these images were not fully developed artistic language. One day, I was caught in a rain shower there – this junkyard, which was really my open studio. After the rain stopped, the sun

immediately appeared. With that sudden weather change, the discarded rusty emitted a foul smell that sickened me for a few days. This event revealed so much about what was lost and what impact these abandoned items could have – both on the person and on the environment, and in particular, a person with no voice. These ideas were overflowing. It was then a matter of selecting which of the stories I wanted to tell first" (ref. Asian Art, December 2008).

With this beginning, Yeoh described in the interview of bringing the conversation to include larger issues like environmental and cultural concerns, “with depicting the less attractive environmental issues – the negative impact of decay. So the challenge was to present an unpleasant topic and generally unattractive aesthetic in a way that would attract attention – to communicate messages, environmental and cultural” (ref. Asian Art, December 2008).

Good art is obviously beyond these cold explanations. Much of it is driven by pure emotion, and possibly inexplicable. It explains also the psychological background behind the works, and the decision not to have to compromise for a more commercial stance. Nevertheless the intentions are quite aligned with the explanations as represented by the art.

Yeoh is yet to become a household name in art in Malaysia but has garnered several international recognitions in recent years, including the Phillip Morris Art Award (Malaysia) and the Freeman Fellowship in 2008. This year, in 2009, Yeoh was awarded the Commonwealth Art – International Residency. He was also the first artist in Malaysia to have his work featured during the New York Asian Art week in 2008. ●

