

AN INTERVIEW

Tan Swie Hian:
An Interview

By Low Sze Wee

Low Sze Wee (LSW): You were born in Indonesia in 1943. In your most recent monograph *Tan Swie Hian* published in 2001, featuring 610 works, the earliest work in the book is a study of Zhao Shaoang's *Egrets* painted in 1956, when you were 13 years old. You also mentioned a study of Xu Beihong's *Horses*, done in 1955. How did this interest in art develop at such a young age?

Tan Swie Hian (TSH): Chagall observed, "There are always people born with a strong sense of colours and lines. These people may be born far apart in time, but once they are there, they form the die-hard core of the artistic milieu of a particular time and space, learning and creating, rain or shine, all the time. It is a passion that burns their lives into light. And some may become, following Time's decision to enshrine certain of them, the punctuation marks of an era in the history of time. All children are born artists. I was no exception. Edgar Degas said, "Everybody has talent at 25. The difficult thing is to have it at 50." The die-hard core has talent till their last moments, as in the case of Picasso. When asked during his old age whom he thought was the newcomer in the milieu, Picasso calmly replied, "But I am."

LSW: You had learnt *gongbi hua* from a folk painter She Hong in your teens. How did that come about?

TSH: In 1959, I once wandered into a temple of the God of the Earth (*Tua Peh Kong Keng*) in a village and bumped into She Hong, an old folk painter who was painting episodes from classics like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin* and others, on the temple wall. I was overwhelmed. I stood for a long time, as I did each time I visited the temple, watching him work on the scaffolding. He was a Michaelangelo in his own right. I made his acquaintance first by stealing his tiny porcelain cups of pigments on the scaffolding when he was away for opium and then by following him to wherever he moved, first to a clan association and then to an opium den. I realised he also did ink paintings of fish on cooked rice-paper in a highly detailed style. I could hardly converse with him because of the dialect barrier as he spoke only Teochew. I gave him all my pocket money. I learnt from him by watching him create, from afar, for about a year.

LSW: Apart from She Hong, it is evident you are a self-taught artist. Given your interest in art, why did you not choose to go for formal training?

TSH: Francis Bacon would have scoffed, Thank goodness, formal training! But Picasso and a good many others had all gone through formal training. It is certainly not a bad thing. It was because I could not afford it in my teens when I was a wanderer, far away from home and my beloved ones, lonely, downhearted, rebellious and bordering on juvenile delinquency. I almost dropped out of the Chinese High School in 1962.

LSW: By the 1950s, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) was already established. At that time, Cheong Soo Pieng was teaching there and he was considered by many artists who had studied under him, to be a very influential figure. You also mentioned Cheong in your book. What was your level of interaction with him and what was your impression of him or his works then?

TSH: I once said, Cheong Soo Pieng was the first sunlight through the long night of artistic infancy of the then Malaya (which included Singapore). Cheong is, to me, not only the greatest Singapore painter, but also a mentor whose works were for me a gateway to the world of modern art. I did not have the good fortune to be under his tutelage. I could only learn from him by attending his exhibitions, and by studying his techniques and approach from publications and reproductions of his works. In the 1960s, each time I went to Shenton Way, I must stop in front of a big building near Change Alley where a Cheong Soo Pieng oil depicting a *kampung* scene was niched in the main wall: the typical polyhedral distortion of figures of *kampung* folk, animals, caged birds, the mottled surface of layered paint achieved by the palette knife, the stylised squarish sun or moon, clouds over icy turquoise blue. I had not met him until the late 1970s when I paid a visit to his studio with his student Hoe Koon, a few years before Cheong's passing. He was frail and quiet. He autographed his catalogue very slowly. I felt the same wind that was blowing through the window of the chateau where Rainer Maria Rilke was lying with his eyes closed under so many lids of roses, was coming again from afar. I was lucky to have met him, albeit only once.

LSW: What propelled your choice to study modern languages at the Nanyang University?

TSH: As a writer and linguist, I make languages, not just because we die as theorised by Toni Morrison. It is more because I love different peoples and am always eager to understand the different tongues they use. In 1964, nearing my graduation from the Chinese High School, I contributed a poem and a precis in Chinese of the Homeric Epics to the school's souvenir publication. Whilst writing the precis, I had to refer to the English rendering of *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It had not been easy on the path to cross-cultural understanding. And that definitely lured me to the choice of reading foreign languages. The Department of Modern Languages and Literature of Nanyang University was reputed to be the most difficult department within the Faculty of Arts. So, I decided to sit for its entrance examinations. Luckily, I passed. It was actually an English language and literature major, with other foreign languages as selective subjects. I am quadrilingual.

LSW: You held your first solo show in 1973 at the age of 30. The subject of the paintings was largely adapted from Buddhist scriptures. You had mentioned it was also the same year when you experienced religious illumination. Could you elaborate a little on this spiritual experience and how it has affected your work as an artist?

TSH: It is a state of mind where there is a total silence of thoughts and the whole being is immersed in a great white light and is one with the whole universe. In the words of Zhuangzi, one of the greatest Taoist philosopher-meditators, My connection with the body and its parts is dissolved. My perceptive organs are discarded. Thus leaving behind my physical form and bidding farewell to my knowledge. I am one with the Great Pervader. This is what I call sitting and forgetting all things. When the mind is free, all dogmas, rules and conventions break down. The whole universe reflects itself in the clarity of a gigantic mirror. In the case of an artist, the word inspiration becomes meaningless as his mind is a window through which the universe manifests itself with myriad of forms, lines, colours and significance. He is always inspired, like a hummingbird capable of flying in all directions. An artist whose mind is free, is naturally multi-disciplinary.

LSW: You have collaborated on a number of occasions with choreographers, composers and dramatists. The range of media of your practice is also very wide straddling painting, poetry, writing, costume design, sculpture, printmaking, seal-carving and others. As a result, you have often been described as a multi-disciplinary artist. What are your feelings about that and what does multi-disciplinary mean to you?

TSH: It is sheer joy for Proteus to be where he would like to be at one time and thereafter, changes his whereabouts for the next time. The free mind as reflected in the use of medium, is a choice which is naturally multiple. Being multi-disciplinary is just its manifestation. Come this May, in a gala performance of the Singapore Arts Festival 2003, *Instant is a Millennium: A Musical Conversation with Tan Swie Hian*, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra will create, under the baton of Yeh Tsung, a musical dialogue with my poetry, both avant-garde and classical, sculpture, paintings of different media, fables, stage designs and calligraphy demonstration. This mutual nourishing between artistic products of different media helps artists to leap forward and after many a cycle of artistic reincarnations, the artist will eventually be able to liberate himself from the obsession with his own genre and become a hummingbird.

LSW: The concept of free mind is central in your views on art and creation. You have drawn parallels between a free mind and the hummingbird that is able to fly in all directions. What does freedom mean to you?

TSH: When the mind is silenced, it is free. It is the blossoming of long hours of meditation. A free mind unfolds, following the absence of the meditator, and it is no longer a prisoner in a match box as described by Giacometti. It is free from

all pigeonholes. A hummingbird flies forwards, backwards, sideways or suspends itself like a helicopter as it soars, swoops and plays all forms of artistic acrobatics in mid-air.

LSW: You have also been described as an artist who works within a multi-cultural mode. The idea of multi-culturalism, cross-culturalism or even the clash of cultures seems to be one of the defining features of globalisation. What are your views on the phenomenon of globalisation?

TSH: Globalisation is a reality brought about by the advance of technology and communication tools, the Internet and the global consumer markets. It is such a global village that, in M. Featherstone's words, 'We are in each other's backyard.' And Professor K. Schwab pointed out that it is creating an unprecedented opportunity for each of us, whether as organisations or as individuals, to engage, integrate and collaborate with one another to improve the state of the world. However, fears also arise from its process: a homogeneous, singular 'McWorld' might be brought about by McDonald's, Motorola, Disneyland and the English language spoken by one-fifth of the world's population. In the field of art, the whole world is aping the West: same subjects, same modes of expression, same concepts, the same installation and the same performance. By 2100, it is estimated that of the 6,000 existing languages, 3,000 will be extinct because the ecosystems in which these linguistic groups live, will have been destroyed. The decrease of cultural diversity and the respect for biodiversity is interconnected. Anxieties aside, there are, at the same time, arguments for hope and optimism. Professor Schwab pointed out, 'Globalisation creates a true global neighbourhood with important new social and cultural opportunities. I strongly believe first of all, in being deeply rooted in one's own traditional upbringing and then reaching out for the framework of a greater cultural diversity. Only under such circumstances, can one digest thoroughly all he has absorbed from the quintessence of different cultures and turn it into one's own blood, thereby contributing a unique mosaic to the global cultural *mandala*. One has to be sure of his own musical instrument before joining the planetary orchestra. The World Economic Forum Crystal Award 2003 was conferred on me, partly for my contributions to this cross-cultural understanding.'

LSW: Looking at the seven works that will be shown at the Venice Biennale, could you describe each of them and how they came into being and what they mean to you?-

The Birth of the Green and White Taras, 1990

Oil on canvas, 153 x 206cm

TSH: The discipline of my daily practice is initially that of the Goddess of Mercy (Avalokiteshvara). Tara is a name adopted by Tibetan Buddhism for certain *devis* of the Tantric School. The Green Tara (Syamatara) was born from a teardrop of the right eye of Avalokiteshvara, and the White Tara (Sitatara) from one of her left and both are incarnations of the Goddess' compassion. The canvas

depicts a vision in my mind of how they were coming into being, beaming with white light and bathing in orange and crimson red lights. Positioned with the structure reversed as in a mirror, they seem to be coming into being from the eyes of the viewer.

Holy Spring, 1997

Oil on canvas, 153 x 206cm

TSH: Quiet flows the water. It is Chinese calligraphic brushwork executed with an oil brush on canvas. The glassy surface of a holy spring in Bali reflects the clear sky and the green vegetation around the pond and the blue underwater growth in it. A sacred rock in the centre marks the silent flow of timelessness and the mute mumbling of the mouth of the spring in its bed. Stillness and movement are one in the composition of lights and shadows. The canvas is all about the inner clarity of a purified mind gazing into the perfection Nature shows, to indicate that it is the image of an existence of a higher plane.

Ganges, 2002

Oil on canvas, 153 x 206cm

TSH: Mother and baby, ailing bathers, widow scattering ashes, *sanyasis*, a monk, ferries and ferrymen, the miniaturised peacock perched on the umbrella, the cow. Life and death is cycling on the Ganges, the sacred river of India, especially the section by Varanasi where the Hindu God Shiva is dwelling. It flows into the mortal world where Da Vinci muses that you touch the end of what has passed and the beginning of what is coming and it is true also with the present. You can't step twice into the same Ganges. It stops flowing in the holy world where St Augustine advises one shouldn't get too carried away by the height of mountains and the depth of oceans. There is a Ganges in everybody's heart that is bathed in yellow gold light. A topless Caucasian girl at the right bottom corner of the canvas indicates the Ganges started flowing westwards in the 1960s.

The Bodhi Tree, 2002

Oil on canvas, 153 x 206cm

TSH: In 1966, I sat twice under the famous Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya, India. It was where Prince Siddhartha was enlightened 2547 years ago. The spot is a super-powerful magnetic field where one feels as if there is a Bodhi tree growing in each and every pore of the whole existence. I started to tackle the canvas in 1996 and completed it in 2002, spanning a period of six years. I have stopped painting the Buddha's image out of my respect for the Enlightened One and have returned to the Sanci period when the Buddha was only symbolised by the images of lotus, *Dharma* wheel, footprint and deer. *The Bodhi Tree* was done in this spirit. In the dark blue colour field of the upper part of the big tree trunk, was implanted with gold lines, the *Mudra* of No Fear in a lotus shape. To rid a soul of fears is the rarest alms on the human plane. The canvas is bathed in lights of the colour scheme of the Buddhist flag.

Sunrise, Mount Huangshan, 2000
Ink and acrylic on paper, 118 x 243cm

Pines, Mount Huangshan I, 2000
Ink and acrylic on paper, 118 x 243cm

Pines, Mount Huangshan II, 2000
Ink and acrylic on paper, 118 x 243cm

TSH: Sunrise, Mount Huangshan, Pines, Mount Huangshan I and Pines, Mount Huangshan II are a series, all Chinese ink and acrylic on large-scale (118x243cm) rice-paper. The two Pines were the outcome of an on-the-spot demonstration for a TV documentary on me by Channel News Asia, Singapore's TV station for the region. According to the time record kept by the cameraman, the two large format paintings were completed within three minutes, that is, only one and a half minutes were spent on each of the two works. This is a method I have developed over the years. I've termed it 'lightning creating method', the rapidity of which produces never-before-seen brushstrokes of sky-rocking drunkenness. The possession of such speed and precision is liberation into a trance-like state of mind and liberation is an explosive cosmic dance. By going so speedily, the painter makes visible the hitherto latent and undiscovered power of the brush, ink and colours, which in the spiritual part of the painter's being, he shares with the Divine Ground. I am going to use this technique to create a four-storey high calligraphy piece specially planned for the Biennale. The most beautiful mountain in China, Huangshan is the mecca for all Chinese painters. It has been inspiring countless painters to create paintings of all sorts. I'm happy to have found a way to capture its elusive sunrise in an instant.

LSW: Your work includes Chinese painting and calligraphy, often with themes relating to Asian religions and philosophies. How do you feel about your works being seen as reflecting your identity as a Chinese or Asian artist?

TSH: When I was in Davos to receive the World Economic Forum Crystal Award 2003, the Forum President Klaus Schwab, in his citation, likened me to a 'global citizen'. In 1987, when the Academy of Fine Arts of the Institute of France elected me as a correspondent-member, I was considered, again in the citation, as the 'first Southeast Asian artist' to be admitted into the Institute. Then, for the renowned painter of China, Wu Guanzhong, I am 'an outstanding son of the Yellow Emperor'. And for the renowned author, Yu Qiuyu, I am 'the real miracle in the Asian artistic arena'. So, you see, there are numerous labels of identity on me. I am fine with all of them. Singapore is where I reach out to the world and as my art goes places, I am seen by different peoples from different standpoints. Nationality, blood lineage, geopolitics, linguistic groups, themes, media, concepts and other factors, combine to create different labels and you just have to live with them. Mario Vargas Llosa is Peruvian and is one of the most outstanding writers of the Spanish language.

LSW: How do you hope audiences may approach your works?

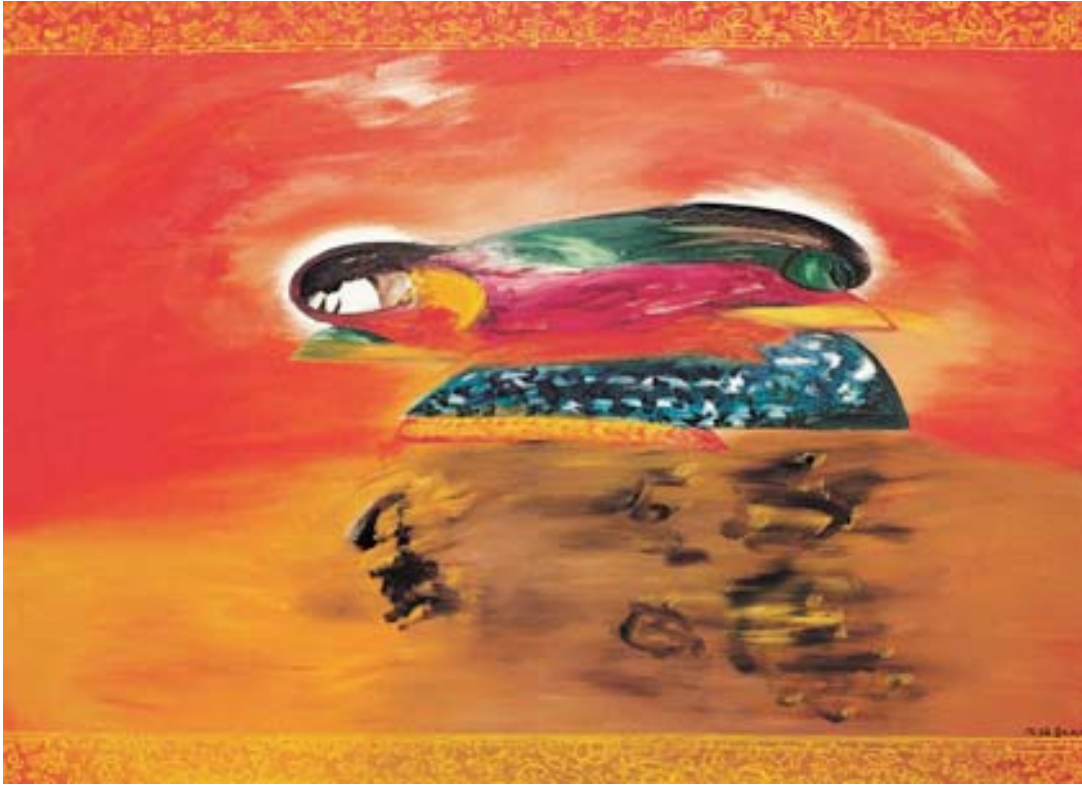
TSH: A good artwork is able to adjust itself to interact with the different psychological make-ups, educational backgrounds, experiences in life, imagination, thoughts and feelings of different viewers. A landscape painting showing shafts of light filtering through the foliage of a tree in a garden, with a

bed of daffodils, may be perceived as a prelude to the pastoral charm of Wordsworth. It can also be read as the teachings by Buddha Vairocana, through light patterns, song of streams and birds, and floral fragrance. A viewer should just come to an artwork with an open mind and the chemistry will then start to work.

LSW: How do you think your works will create a dialogue with those of Francis Ng and Heman Chong, the two other artists at the Singapore Pavilion? How will your works relate to the larger theme of the Biennale, 'Dreams and Conflicts: The Viewer's Dictatorship'?

TSH: Figuratively, the Ganges of India and the Holy Spring of Bali depicted in my paintings, have been flowing westwards since the 1960s. They are certainly flowing through the Grand Canal in Venice and Francis' proposed work. And spiritually, the rainbow and white light coming out from my works will flash even clearer through Heman's multiple screens. I hardly paint from objects in front of me. Instead, I paint from within, from a window in my mind, through which flows a stream of visions not lacking in dreamscapes captured by a waking observation. As an inner viewer, I take dreams as they are and have found the larger theme of the Biennale relevant to what I have been creating. I dictate the realisation of my dreams. And in line with it, I have composed a text to be executed in cursive Chinese calligraphy script on a huge canvas, measuring four-storey high, to be hung on the facade of the Singapore Pavilion. It reads, *If dream and wake were the two wings of a butterfly, neither is unreal. If one could attend a birthday party in a dream and attend a funeral immediately after coming back into the waking state as the party ends or, like Zhuangzi and the butterfly appearing in each other's dreaming and waking states simultaneously, then one realises both realms are real. Hence, dream is not only the storytelling by the nightingale of Eve in the misty Eden, but also a part of nature, which is as real as the growth of a willow tree or a bear hunting for food. Based on this perception and checking the two realms against the ultimate reality of arising from conditional causation and of having no separate and independent nature, like the awakening of Zen master Gaofeng when his sleeping pillow was accidentally knocked off and fell to the ground, one can realise here and now, the voidness of the two realms.*

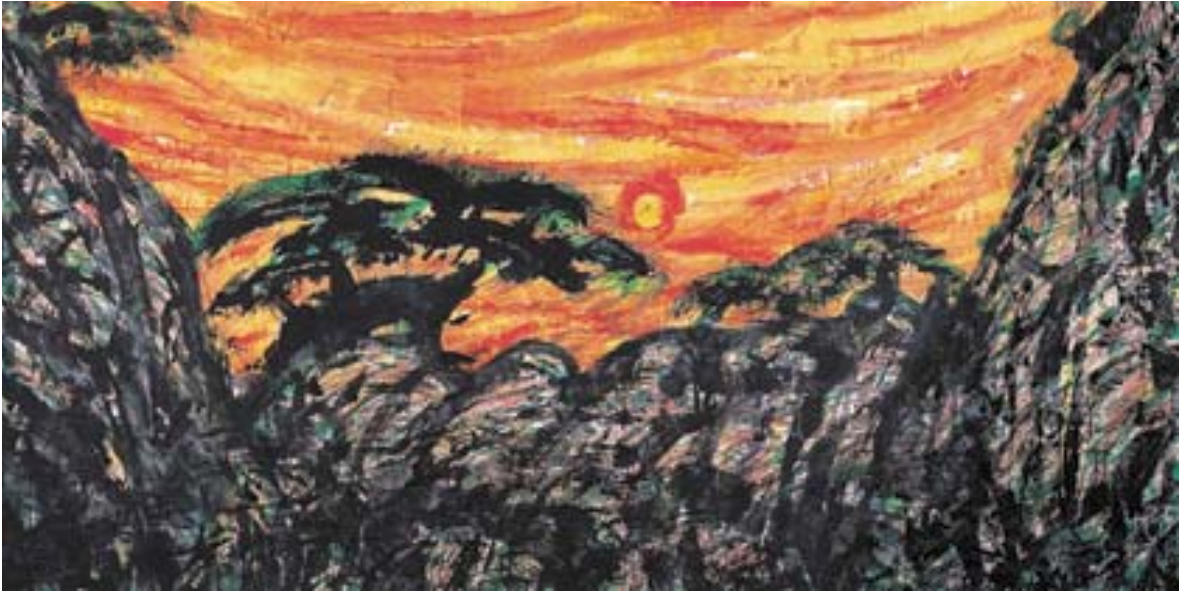
Note: The interview first appeared in *Singapore - 50th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia 2003*, published by the National Arts Council and National Heritage Board in 2003. The interviewer Low Sze Wee is the curator of the exhibition and the Chief Editor of the exhibition publication.



The Birth of the Green and White Taras



The Bodhi Tree



Sunrise, Mount Huangshan



Pines, Mount Huangshan I