

CULTURAL
MEDALLION
2014

CHONG FAH CHEONG



Born in Singapore in 1946, Chong Fah Cheong is a sculptor most recognised for his iconic public art works that profoundly embody the human condition and connections with communities. A graduate of social sciences from the University of Singapore (now National University of Singapore, NUS) and an art educator by profession, Chong undertook a Diploma in Curriculum Studies in Art and Design from the City of Birmingham Polytechnic, UK in 1973 and returned to teach art at St. Patrick's School. There he associated closely with school principal and sculptor, the late-Brother Joseph McNally, who would come to ignite his passion for sculpture. Later Chong became one of the first lecturers at LASALLE College of the Arts, which was founded by Brother McNally.

Working with wood, stone and bronze mediums over a span of 40 years, Chong's works range from the figurative to the abstract, demonstrating strong techniques and an acute understanding of materiality. These have culminated in a unique visual language that was considered ahead of its time even in the 1980s. Chong's works are distinctive for their subject matter that evoke shared memory and identity of childhood past. This can be seen in works like *Mama's Precious One* (1989) at Toa Payoh Central, *The Way We Are* (1998) in a private collection, *First Generation* (2000) on Cavenagh Bridge, *Once Upon a Time* (2005) at the National Library and *Chang Kuda* (2011) at Botanic Gardens. Working with materials and craft studios in the Southeast Asian region also enhances the technical, material and cultural dimensions of Chong's practice, which exudes a cultural playfulness and humour that speak to children and adults alike.



First Generation (2000)
Photo courtesy of Chong Fah Cheong

Besides significant public and private commissions, 18 of Chong's works are in the permanent collection of the Singapore Art Museum. Chong has held solo exhibitions and participated in group exhibitions such as the 2nd and 3rd Asian Art Show (1985, 1989) at Fukuoka Art Museum in Japan, Contemporary Asian Art Show (1986) at the National Museum of Modern Art in South Korea. In Singapore, Chong participated in the National Museum Centenary Art Exhibition (1987) at the National Museum, *Dreamcatcher* (1994) and *Recent Works* (1996) at The Substation, *Hand Made: Shifting Paradigms* (1999) at Singapore Art Museum and *Textures, Tones and Timbres* (2013) at the NUS Museum. Chong has also won numerous local and international awards for his work including the Merit

Award in the IBM Art Award Exhibition in Singapore (1990, 1988). Chong's artistic voice endures in his public and private pieces that mediate between art and the larger public, both locally and overseas.

With an unstinting passion to educate and inspire young people through the arts, Chong coordinated a Faculty Sculptures project at his alma mater, NUS in 2008. He brought together staff, students and the alumni of various faculties to design and build sculptures, which are symbols of camaraderie in each faculty. Chong also continues to participate in workshops and seminars around the world such as the Okanagan Thompson International Sculpture Symposium in British Columbia, Canada (2002) and 2nd International Sculpture Symposium in Vietnam (2005).



Chong Fah Cheong Locating Form in Material

By Foo Su Ling

At the Singapore River, a band of happy boys leaping gleefully into the waterway is captured in bronze. Representing the *First Generation* (2000) born in Singapore, this sculptural composition catches the eye of innumerable locals and visitors daily. In the neighbourhood of Toa Payoh Central, a voluminous marble figure of a grandma with a child in her loving embrace, *Mama's Precious One* (1989), draws us to the warmth and comfort of home and familial support. These sculptures that enliven Singapore's public spaces are the works of Chong Fah Cheong, who has been described as 'Singapore's Most Famous Unknown Artist'¹. Chong is unperturbed that his artworks are more well known than he is. He says that the two are inseparable.

"I think it is hard for me even to see myself apart from the working of my hand. My credibility is in my carving, almost to the extent that I realise myself in the forms that I am able to carve out or model into. ...I continue to seek the process of carving as almost equating with the process of me being alive..."².

Born in 1946, Chong's contributions to Singapore's public art include sculptures inspired by his memories of growing up in the city state. Collectively, the works form a series of tableaux that narrates aspects of the nation's social history. *First Generation* (2000), *Once Upon a Time* (2005), *Chang Kuda* (2011) and a recent piece titled *Good Fun!* (2013) are alluring compositions; the carefree and exuberant spirit they exude keep us connected to the lighthearted side of human nature. Chong says, "...I delight in remembering the simple joys and rowdy shouts and laughter of children at play. This for me is the Singapore I grew up in and I want this mood to pervade our city"³.

It was an act of serendipity that initiated Chong, originally a self-taught artist, into formal sculpture making. Teaching at St. Patrick's School in 1975, there was wood aplenty in the school yard from felled Angsana trees. The principal, Brother Joseph McNally, prompted Chong to use these for instructing students in three-dimensional art-making. It marked the start of Chong's

¹ Akshita Nanda. "Legacy carved in stone." The Straits Times 8 April 2013: C1.

² Pang Guek Cheng. *Fahcheong The Art Book*. Singapore : Chong Fah Cheong, 2013: 26.

³ Chong Fah Cheong. Personal communication. September 2014.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- 2013 *Textures, Tones and Timbres*, solo exhibition at the NUS Museum, Singapore
- 2011 Commissioned for *Chang Kuda*, a bronze sculpture for Botanic Gardens, Singapore
- 2000 Commissioned for the iconic *First Generation* bronze sculpture along the Singapore River for The Fullerton Hotel
- 1999 Selected to exhibit in *Sculpture in Singapore* curated by T. K. Sabapathy that surveyed sculptural practices in Singapore through examination of the practices of key local artists
- 1975 Taught at St. Patrick's School where he was first inspired to explore sculpture by then-principal, Brother Joseph McNally

intensive engagement with carving. The absence of prior knowledge in wood carving made the teaching experience an exercise in "keeping three strokes of the mallet ahead of the students"⁴. Persevering at processes of trial and error, Chong also consulted reference books and taught both himself and his students the skills of chipping and carving to transform wood into varied figures and forms. This mode of self-learning continued throughout Chong's career as his practice expanded to include marble, granite, metal and jade.

Chong is interested in the physical characteristics of the materials he employs in art-making. He is tireless in expanding his knowledge of their origin and constituent properties, and refining the technique for working each medium. In Chong's hands, raw material is not merely an inert mass to be shaped at will. The material's inherent character, its natural shape and formation, inform the sculptor of the ideal outcome into which it may be made manifest. This respect for the innate vitality of the medium is sustained as Chong continually explores carving with diverse types of wood and stone.

Chong's works have been presented at solo and group exhibitions across Asia and are held in private and institutional collections. His commissioned pieces are displayed around Singapore and in British Columbia, Canada, where he has lived and practiced. He shares his knowledge on sculpture making at public symposiums and workshops. Chong taught art at St. Patrick's School till 1978 at which point he left to give his artistic pursuits full attention. As a professional sculptor, he continues to introduce his audience to the joy of making things with their hands. In 2008, Chong worked with groups of undergraduates, staff and alumni at the National University of Singapore, tutoring them in the design and carving of marble sculptural pieces for their schools. He is patient as he guides the hands that are using tools to shape stone for the very first time. Chong recalls, "Our very



Mama's Precious One (1989), Marble
Photo Credit: Christopher Chong



Chang Kuda (2011), Bronze
Photo Credit: Christopher Chong

⁴ Pang Guek Cheng. *Fahcheong The Art Book*. Singapore : Chong Fah Cheong, 2013: 26.



Studio at Emily Hill, Singapore (2013), Photo Credit: NUS Museum



Photo courtesy of Chong Fah Cheong



‘processed’ world presents confusion when students are faced with handling raw materials, like rough rock and green wood... It is truly satisfying to see students tapping into their sense of play and imagination once they get the hang of things and begin to enjoy their time and exertion that they put into their art”⁵.

Chong delights in wandering around, going into the spaces that people inhabit and taking walks in the natural landscape. His interests are wide. In urban areas, he observes the cultures of people, the action on the street, social enclaves, and the random events that come to pass amongst city folks. In the natural environment, he enjoys rambling in vast fields, highlands and forests, collecting materials that nature scatters in his path. Observations and perspectives from these excursions are the starting points for Chong’s creative productions. Ideas and themes are developed over the course of years. At crucial points they are translated into tangible forms and again put aside to germinate till the next burst of inspiration. Sculptures made in over three decades of his career may be grouped into a number of coherent series, which offer frames for the artist’s myriad interests and concerns.

The human body is significantly represented in Chong’s oeuvre, but his non-figurative forms cannot be overlooked if we are to apprehend the witty and philosophical turns of his mind. Thoughtful narratives are embodied in simple, naturalistic representations. *Bao* (2010), a mixed media sculpture, draws us to the notion of individuality. Cast in bronze and sitting side by side on a large wooden block, each dumpling resembles the other but no two are identical. Chong gives his sculptures descriptive titles but does not insist on particular narratives. He encourages viewers to look at the artworks on their own terms, to read the narrative content according to their personal experience, and make sense of the forms by drawing upon one’s own familiarity with the world. He dissuades us from being overly reliant on titles and once even decided to call a piece *It Really Doesn’t Matter II* (2012) so that “whatever it seems like, it is”⁶.

The practice of three dimensional sculpture making into which Chong has chosen to be immersed has a long tradition and is varied in precedence. He was introduced to the works of the Italian masters, Michelangelo, Romanian Constantin Brancusi, and English icons, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth while training for an art teaching diploma in Birmingham, United Kingdom. Returning to Singapore in 1975, he came to know local artist Ng Eng Teng, whose accomplished figurative works and

⁵ Chong Fah Cheong. Personal communication. September 2014.

⁶ Chong Fah Cheong. Personal communication. January 2013.

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

“I wish to thank the Cultural Medallion Specialist Panel for recognising my contribution to the development of the arts and culture of Singapore and awarding me the Cultural Medallion. I am grateful and highly appreciative of this honour. It is reflective of the support that I have felt from individual and corporate art patrons, and Singaporeans in general who have loved many of my public works.

In particular, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Ms Juliana Lim for nominating me for this award and to the following people who supported this nomination – Ms Constance Sheares, Mr Kanaga Sabapathy, Ms Christine Khor, Mr K.C. Chew and Ms Han Sai Por. They have over the years believed in my integrity as a sculptor and encouraged me in the pursuit of my art.

I am indebted to my son, Christopher, and daughter, Kim-Ee, who have helped me in my endeavours and especially my wife, Guek Cheng, for her care and concern in coordinating this Cultural Medallion nomination, and for her devoted attention to my life and art.

Chong Fah Cheong

sculptural techniques he was privy to and held in high regard. Sculptural art is not, however, exclusive to artists of national or global renown. Chong resides in Canada but regularly returns to work in Singapore and the neighbouring countries of Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, where he also finds the raw materials for his practice. At these locales, he works closely with artisans who are skilled in working with stone and carving wood. Such networks and connections across geographically distributed locations provide an avenue for the active exchange and absorption of ideas, ultimately introducing a rich cross cultural dimension to Chong’s art practice.

About the writer

Foo Su Ling is a curator at the National University of Singapore Museum.

*Bao* (2010), Bronze and Wood, Photo Credit: NUS Museum*It Really Doesn't Matter II* (2012), Wood, Photo Credit: NUS Museum