

Eternally beautiful blooms

Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts alumnus Tang Juey Lee can claim the rare honour of being taught by distinguished Singapore artist Georgette Chen, but his painting style is quite distinct from his late teacher's. After 40 years of painting, Tang's rare solo show in Kuala Lumpur encapsulates all that he has learnt and more. **BY Sarah Abu Bakar**



Called "Singapore's Orchid Artist", 63-year-old Malaysian painter Tang Juey Lee is better known in the city state — where he graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in the 1970s — than he is at home. Since the 1970s, Tang has been more active exhibiting in Singapore, where his meticulous style of painting has earned him many accolades. He took a 23-year hiatus in the 1990s to establish his own art school and only resumed exhibiting in 2014. Collectors welcomed him back by buying up all of his works.

His exquisite paintings of orchid blooms — typically matched with parrots, geese, roosters and ducks — can be categorised under the flower-and-bird genre of Chinese paintings combined with a Western sense of realism. These works have a following among collectors who, in particular, favour the *gongbi* style of Chinese art that focuses on a realist technique.

Initially working with watercolours on rice paper, Tang has progressed to using acrylic paint diluted with water to achieve a more vibrant and colourful composition. In only his second one-man show in Kuala Lumpur since 1986, Tang will showcase about a dozen paintings at The Edge Galerie. Prices range from RM5,000 to RM21,000 for each painting.

"I paint what I see," says Tang in an interview with *The Edge* at the gallery in Kuala Lumpur, dismissing the notion of downloading images from the internet, a common practice among today's artists.

The veteran artist says he prefers to observe flowers in full bloom, particularly at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, where he practises life sketching to hone his skills in creating liveliness in his compositions.

Tang's body of work comprises a variety of orchids, such as *Dendrobium*, *Cymbidium* or boat orchid, *Oncidium* (commonly known as golden shower orchid or dancing-lady orchid) *Renantanda*, *Phalaenopsis Blume* or moth orchid and more.

"I have painted over 300 different orchid species in the past 40 years," says Tang.

In addition to the blossoms, he incorporates creatures like carp, squirrels, kittens, chicks as well as insects, including bees and butterflies, in his artworks. "I recently included animals in my paintings to complement the orchids," says Tang, who began pairing his works of flora with fauna in his in 2013 and using acrylic in 2015.

In *Blooms by Tang Juey Lee*, the artist is showcasing 20 paintings on rice paper, created in 2016 and 2017.

Breaking Dawn, 2017, 68cm by 90cm, acrylic on rice paper



Fluttering Grace, 2017, 68cm by 106cm, acrylic on rice paper



(Left) Joyful Bliss, 2017, 90cm by 68cm, acrylic on rice paper



(Right) Prosperity Koi, 2017, 90cm by 68cm, acrylic on rice paper

Technique

Employing the traditional bird-and-flower theme, Tang enhances his approach to his subject matter by using acrylic paint on rice paper instead of the conventional ink or watercolours. "I use high quality acrylic paints by Daler-Rowney and imported rice paper dusted with gold flecks from China," says Tang.

"I choose acrylic over watercolour because of its lasting quality. Its fast-drying effect, which is similar to watercolours, allows me to work on several paintings at a time. The vibrancy of acrylic paint works best for my subject matter."

Tang's expressions convey a sense of enjoyment to his viewers. He creates pleasant compositions by carefully placing his choice of flowers with the selected animals.

In *Lazy Afternoon* (86cm by 96cm), created this year for this show, the red *Renantanda* orchid is dispersed across the picture plane in harmony with kittens playing with chicks in the foreground. One of the kittens, near a strawberry plant, is depicted in the act of catching a fish in a net. A snail is seen slithering on the ground.

These unique details distinguish Tang as an imaginative and meticulous painter, who does not just focus on portraying orchids in their truest form but adds simple touches to exude happiness and positive vibes. The yellow-green leaves that frame the deep red blooms, which dominate the picture, offer a balanced configuration.

"One of the important elements in my work — besides colour — is composition. My aim is to create harmonious paintings that make people happy," says Tang.

Prosperity Koi illustrates a school of nine carp, which in Chinese culture is of symbolic significance. The offering of nine koi to new parents is considered one of the best wishes and most meaningful gifts one can give. It signifies success for your children because they possess the two secrets of achievement — determination and flexibility — which are traits believed to be found in koi. The meaning of nine koi extends beyond the story of success and harmony to include luck, wealth and protection. The number nine represents completeness and eternity in Chinese culture.

Fluttering Grace depicts an intriguing combination of the Vanda "Miss Joaquim" orchid with banana trees and a flock of macaws perched on tree branches. Measuring 68cm by 106cm, the artwork, which features Singapore's national flower, illustrates the landscape of Southeast Asia.

Apparent in Tang's body of work are visually stimulating lines and shapes. Illustrated in *Joyful Bliss* is the alluring *Phalaenopsis Blume* orchid with a company of budgerigars either fluttering in the air or perched on a tree branch. In the 90cm by 68cm work, the common pet parakeets are illustrated in pastel blue and green.

Traditionally, owning or giving such paintings reflects a cultured mind or a person schooled in Chinese aesthetics and customs. It goes beyond displaying something that is symbolic of prosperity or merely wishing good luck.

Education

Born in Johor Baru, Tang was enrolled in the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore, from 1974 to 1976 and graduated with a diploma in Western Art. Under the tutelage of renowned pioneer Singapore artist, Georgette Chen (1906-1993), Tang learnt to incorporate Eastern sentiments with Western techniques in his paintings.

Paris-trained Chen, a post-Impressionist painter, taught Tang the fundamentals of Western composition. A former educator himself, Tang taught at the college he founded, Raphael Academy of Art, in Johor Baru from 1991 to 1998.

"I was the principal of the now-defunct college and taught watercolours to diploma students for seven years. At the same time, I was creating artworks to sell to collectors in Singapore and Australia," says Tang. Although his passion for producing orchid paintings is immeasurable, he says he does not have any emotional attachment to his artworks.

"All of my paintings are sold upon completion. I do not keep any of my old works," he says, when asked if he has an inventory of artworks created over the years.

This is in contrast with Chen, who kept most of her paintings until her death in 1993. Her collection was under the custodianship of the Lee Foundation after her death. Most of her paintings were donated to the Singapore Art Museum in 1994.

Global presence

According to Tang, his artworks are well received in Singapore, Australia and Taiwan and he has exhibited internationally since 1977.

"My first and only exhibition in Kuala Lumpur was in 1986. Now, 30 years later, I have returned to show my new works," says Tang. Held at Shangri-La hotel, the artist says the 1986 exhibition was supported by Joyce Kuok, the then wife of business tycoon Robert Kuok. Titled *The Dream Landscape Series*, Tang's first one-man show in Kuala Lumpur, which showcased over 30 watercolour orchid paintings, was opened by the then Urban Development Authority chairman Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor.

Tang has produced commissioned works for hotels and restaurants in Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia. His artworks are in the collections of public institutions and corporations, including the Singapore Art Museum, Singapore Changi Airport, Citibank, Gulf International Bank, the Shangri-La Group and Royal Holiday Inn in Singapore as well as various private collections abroad.

Supported by Matrix Concepts,
Blooms by Tang Juey Lee will be held from
April 20 to May 5 at The Edge Galerie in Mont'Kiara.
Log on to www.theedgegalerie.com for details.