

Message

My Head is my only House unless it Rains; (song by Captain Beefheart)

As Chee Kiong's tutor at The Glasgow School of Art's Master of Fine Art programme, I could always make him smile, if not laugh, at my (made-up) description of his work as "romantic minimalism". I meant it in the best sense in that the work had none of the coolness, distance, even objectivity associated with early minimalism yet had its concentrated, pared down quality used with very different intentions.

He seemed to have a particularly close relationship with the physicality of our world, and these visceral experiences of the world were often reflected in his work. I remember two works from that period in particular, one a small cloud sculpture with an interior staircase which invited the viewer to imaginatively enter the space. (More recent works seem to have this same invitational quality but on a more human scale; we are closer to real clouds, buildings, forests in this newer, more majestic work). The other, larger work I remember had a smooth, dark surface one could imagine falling into and I was shocked to discover later that the liquid surface was only a few inches deep. The light and structure of his studio space was exactly reflected like a photograph into this surface, like a dark, night time version of itself, deeply mysterious. I am sure that Chee Kiong's work was affected by Scotland's climate; the long dark winters, the often gray daytime light, the constantly shifting cloud landscapes scurrying across the city, in our conversations, we would talk about that and his childhood memories of night times and flooding

so that subconsciously perhaps, water and blackness became interconnected. It is this sense of seeing both our real, recognisable world and its twin, a dark, dreamlike reflection; emptiness, insubstantiality, the void which permeates Chee Kiong's work.

Chee Kiong has developed a really exceptional engagement with modern western philosophical tradition, and in particular with the work and ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He has thus managed to articulate themes from eastern philosophy, such as openness and indeterminacy, in terms that situate his work more directly in relation to western practices. This confluence of eastern and western perspectives endows his work with unique and distinctive characteristics.

He worked harder than anyone I knew and with a great sense of joy in his work and that was a rare and wonderful pleasure for me to behold. Chee Kiong's struggles (emotional, technical and intellectual) to achieve his intentions in the work have paid off handsomely and he is able to make work that seduces and fascinates audiences without allowing us to settle on singular or simple meanings. He is an artist of real stature and I am proud to have met and worked with him, however briefly.

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