

Cube Gallery

AN INTERVIEW WITH TAY BAK CHIANG

Tay Bak Chiang is a painter who blends traditional Chinese ink with contemporary techniques and vibrant pigments. Based in Singapore, here he shares his influences from Taoist philosophy, and using elements from Southeast Asian nature to explore spiritual themes.

CG What first attracted you to traditional Chinese philosophies, Taoist thought, and nature through minimalist forms and abstract compositions?

TBC As someone of Chinese ethnicity, I have more exposure to various aspects of traditional Chinese culture. Eastern traditional culture is profound and extensive. In terms of exploring and pursuing the spiritual and wisdom aspects of life, there is much that can be learned and referenced from it.

The unique culture and colours of Southeast Asia, along with China's long and rich traditions and history, have allowed me to find my own artistic language through a process of exposure and absorption that is distinct from purely Eastern or Western styles.

CG What initially drew you to the traditional medium of Chinese ink on paper? How does this differ to using other mediums such as acrylic and pigments on canvas?

TBC The charm of ink and xuan paper lies in its sensitive nature – you want to control it but can't fully control it, and unexpected effects often bring pleasant surprises. How to master the brush and freely wield



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ink and water on sensitive xuan paper is something every ink painter needs long-term practice and spiritual insight to achieve. It is more than just technique.

New opportunities and breakthroughs in my work are dependent on a shift in my personal thought as well as my materials. The use of pigments and canvas brings me richness in expressive means, layers distinct from traditional paints, while also breaking through the size limitations of my works.

CG What inspires your choice of natural elements to depict in your paintings, and how are they reinterpreted in your artwork, specifically your rock formations?

TBC Living in a city-state with limited contact with nature has led to a longing for nature in my works, which is why I developed themes around rocks, birds, and flowers. I hope that the structure of rocks in my works can add more natural elements and a sense of humour to life.

CG Could you elaborate on the symbolism of the Chinese birds in your works, such as 'Friendly Skies', 'Rebirth', and 'Hiding, Seeking'?

TBC The birds I paint are red-whiskered



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bulbuls, common in Southeast Asia and are a symbol of my origins. This is why I chose it as the protagonist in my visual stories. I convey delicate emotions through the birds, they allow the audience to enter my inner world. This makes the birds an important bridge between the viewer and I.

The colours of the rocks and the interactive postures of the birds often inspire me when choosing titles.

CG How do you push the boundaries of traditional Chinese painting through your use of vibrant and gold pigments, and Chinese ink, as seen in 'Spirited Forest'?

TBC At this stage in my work, I no longer consider myself balancing a contemporary style with traditional Chinese cultural elements. I freely present the images I want, and each present moment is the true self.

Although I initially studied traditional Chinese painting, I live in the tropics and colourful Southeast Asia. The core of my artistic pursuit is developing a unique regional characteristic that is different from my predecessors.

I like to try different colours, to use them in a beautiful and surprising way is my challenge,

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I am led by my intuition and present mood. My use of colour comes from a natural response to life, which precisely prevents me from being easily constrained by traditional concepts, techniques, and colours like Chinese ink artists.

CG You have exhibited your work internationally at major art fairs. Do different cultural contexts influence the audience reception or interpretation of your work?

TBC I always believe that good art will resonate with the audience's soul, transcending different cultural backgrounds and regions. Therefore, the works I exhibit often come from my own heart, and I never deliberately cater to a specific group.

CG How do you envision the evolution of your artistic practice?

TBC I do not intentionally plan my development. We draw and feel from the joys and sorrows of life every day, and all of this will naturally be reflected in my works.



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