Chua Ek Kay's legacy lives on

REFLECTIONS OF THE RIVER:
Chua Ek Kay's murals (left and bottom left) in the Clarke Quay MRT station depict life along the Singapore River in the past.

ABSTRACT WORK:
Bicycles Rest At The Backlane can be seen at the NUS Museum.
The late artist's works are enjoyed every day by MRT commuters and visitors to NUS

Eddino Abdul Hadi

WHEN artist Chua Ek Kay died last Friday after battling nasal cancer, he left behind a legacy of art works that have made their mark on the Singapore art scene — and which thousands of Singaporeans can still enjoy every day.

There are the two pieces at the Clarke Quay station on the North East Line called The Reflections, and two others displayed at the National University of Singapore.

At the train station, the main work is a 60m-long mural which showcases life along the Singapore River. The other 20m abstract brass panel which portrays the river's currents and moods in warm colours and bold brush strokes.

The Singapore River runs above the artwork, and in his inimitable style, Chua had interpreted the evolution of the river in all its moods and historical significance.

On display in the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Kent Ridge campus are two other paintings: Bicycles Rest At The Backlane at the NUS Museum and Narration Of Nontemporality Amidst The Sea, at the second floor of the University Hall in the Lee Kong Chian tower.

Chua died suddenly at age 61, after suffering a nosebleed at home. He had been diagnosed with nasal cancer in 2004 but had been able to keep the disease at bay with radiation treatments.

Art aficionados say his death was a big loss to the local art world.

The 1999 Cultural Medallion recipient was a renowned Chinese brush painter. While he trained in the formal style of the Shanghai School, he did not stick to painting birds, flowers and mountain landscapes.

Instead he forged his own way, drawing inspiration for his paintings from Chinatown street scenes, lotuses and Aboriginal cave paintings.

He created art sought after by collectors, who paid five-figure sums for them.

The 30 paintings from his Singapore Street Scenes series that he donated to the Singapore Management University (SMU) in 2006 trace the evolution of his style over 20 years.

The collection, worth $300,000, includes earlier works that are awash with black shapes and outlines of walls and windows. Later ones are pared down to heavy brush strokes and patches of black and grey.

His work has often been described as revolutionary.

Singapore Art Museum director Kwok Kian Chow says: “For his generation of artists, there was often a tension between tradition and modernity.

“He resolved that tension by drawing from the strengths of both styles.”

Ms Christine Khor, director of the NUS Centre For the Arts, calls his work cutting-edge.

She says: “His works have many layers of meanings. And he was prolific, he went beyond his comfort zone even when he was in poor health and was always innovative.”

She cites his recent exhibition at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute late last year, where he stretched his abilities and came up with an innovative way to reproduce his art on handmade paper.

A steady stream of family, friends and fellow artists have paid their last respects at Chua’s wake over the past two days, including Kwok and fellow Cultural Medallion winner Chng Seok Tin. It is being held at his home at 30 Chinatown View until Thursday afternoon.

The Singapore Art Museum is helping to set up one of his artworks, Song Of Cicada, at his wake.

Ms Khor, who was Chua’s friend and neighbour, says the innovative painter was also a kind and generous person.

She says: “He was also a proactive leader in the arts world, always volunteering his time and expertise to help develop the arts scene.”

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> The NUS Museum is open every day except Mondays, when viewing is by appointment only. Call 6516-4508 for details.

> The Singapore Art Museum’s collection of the artist’s works can be viewed online at www.sgamool.sg

> For a private viewing of SMU’s collection of Chua’s art, call Jillian Ang on 6829-0173.