Different strokes, in one direction

Two artists in separate fields share a singular passion for advancing art in Singapore

CHUA EK KAY

Artist, painter, writer and art critic, Ek Kay is a long-time exponent of batik art. In him, two personalities seem to echo their respective art forms.

Ek Kay, 60, is an intense, soft-spoken man who chooses his words carefully much like the restrained, sparse strokes of his ink paintings. Sarkasi, 67, is a grizzled fellow whose unamused manner of speech re-echoes the vivid splashes of colour found in his batik works.

What binds them in their passion for the arts – even if this passion manifests itself in different ways.

In his quest to better his craft, Ek Kay took up a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the University of Tasmania in Australia in the early 1970s – when he was already in his late 30s. Sarkasi, meanwhile, has been painting to raise batik art’s profile with activities including working for five straight days in May 2003 on a 102-square metre silk piece that was cited in the Guinness World Records book as the largest batik painting.

Both have ongoing shows at the Singapore Management University (SMU), Cultural Mediation winner Chua is exhibiting 20 paintings from his famous Singapore Street Scenes collection, which he has dedicated to the university. A monograph of his works has also been recently published. Sarkasi, a newly-appointed National Arts Council member, is spearheading World Of Batik – a bank initiative that includes exhibits and workshops at SMU’s Campus Green area.

What do you get interested in art?

SARKASI: I’ve been interested in art since I was very young. When I was only seven years old, my father taught me calligraphy. I only took my first lessons in Chinese ink painting in 1970, before that I was focusing on art calligraphy and poetry writing. Later on, I developed an interest in Western art and went to Australia for my formal art training in 1994.

CHUA: I was interested in art when I was very young. I went into making clay models, making replicas. Then I started collecting magazines, photographs and eventually making collages.

2 How long have you known each other?

SARKASI: We’ve been together in the scene for a long time, but even so we do not meet up all the time, we are aware of what the other is doing. We’re interested in the same things – Japan and Korea – while touring our shows.

CHUA: Sarkasi is very senior in terms of years of practice. I only became a full-time artist in 1985. Subsequently, I began meeting him at art events. More importantly, we’ve been the same frequency in terms of the direction we want our art to go.

3 When you say “fingerprint”, is it easier or harder because you work with batik and forest art forms?

SARKASI: It is much easier because we have focus. I know Ek Kay’s background. And he knows mine.

CHUA: What is similar between us is that we’ve learned from the very basics – from our own cultural contexts – to give us our foundation.

4 Can you comment on each other’s works?

CHUA: I’ve seen Ek Kay’s development and I’ve liked it right from the very beginning. When he paints a scene of Middle Road, it’s not something that just any camera can capture. His works today are more symbolic, but there’s continuity from the first works he did. I can appreciate Chinese ink painting, but none of it is stagnant. With Ek Kay, there’s a journey of sorts.

SARKASI: Sarkasi’s approach to batik is very different. He’s not satisfied with just repeating the tradition. He brings batik to the contemporary arena for it to be seen as a piece of fine art, rather than just a sarong. Everything is changing and the art of batik – as with Chinese ink painting – should change as well. He understands this.

5 Do you have an interest in the other person’s practice?

SARKASI: I feel Chinese ink painters have this longer strength that they express. For example, a certain emphasis is seen if you peak down an ink brush on paper, and then lift it up gently. There is a certain knowledge contained in that single line or stroke produced.

CHUA: Batik is an artform that attracts me a lot. The design and indigenous identity are very strong, not only in Singapore but also extensively in Malaysia, Indonesia and in the Pacific countries. I’ve done a series of works on Bocodour, as well as Borneo landscapes, so yes, I’ve included both elements in my art.

6 As masters of traditional art genre, how do you stay relevant in today’s modern art scene?

SARKASI: Sarkasi’s ideas and philosophy to make his art interact with the general public. This approach is very similar to the practice of contemporary art. To make his art site-specific is no different from an installation piece in a biannual. The significant and concept behind both are similar.

CHUA: Style-wise, one can be very good but if the works produced are stagnant, that person is not relevant to the world he represents. Ek Kay aims to develop art for any audience – and his art represents who he is.

7 Do you have any comments on today’s generation of artists?

SARKASI: As far as every artist, there’s no point trying to create something that is accepted in London, New York or Beijing when no one knows you here. We need a local identity before going into a global arena. Without that, your work will be lost and you won’t find your way back.

CHUA: In the local scene, we differentiate between Western art and Chinese art. I want this barrier to disappear. I also hope we can create something that can be recognized and accepted internationally and locally. There’s no point trying to create something that is accepted in London, New York or Beijing when no one knows you.

8 What are your thoughts on the general idea of having trends in art?

SARKASI: Whether it’s contemporary or traditional, art needs to be judged by audience and history. I’ve seen a lot of ink painters who may hang a painting upside down and say that is contemporary. It may be attractive, but how long can you do that? Where trends are concerned, like life span is very short. Art must be eternal.

CHUA: In other words, if you “do” without a foundation, how far can you go? Every work is an achievement but artists should know that there is a lot more to understand and express in your next work.

9 What would you like to see in the future of the local art scene?

SARKASI: I hope more artists will accept art as a medium of expression – whether it is a traditional or contemporary way – and not just as a finished product. My other personal hope is that people will appreciate artform as a way of appreciating the inner beauty of Mother Nature.

CHUA: In the local scene, we differentiate between Western art and Chinese art. I want this barrier to disappear. I also hope we can create something that can be recognized and accepted internationally and locally. There’s no point trying to create something that is accepted in London, New York or Beijing when no one knows you.

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10 Describe your fellow artist in one word.

SARKASI: Chua is very personal, intuitive and sensitive. He would comment on today’s generation of artists – in a way that I can’t say. He has an approach – in a way that is unique.

CHUA: Sarkasi shares my view that we need a local identity before going into a global arena. Without that, your work will be lost and you won’t find your way back.