



Recent Gifts Lim Mu Hue &
Works and Documents of Jimmy Ong



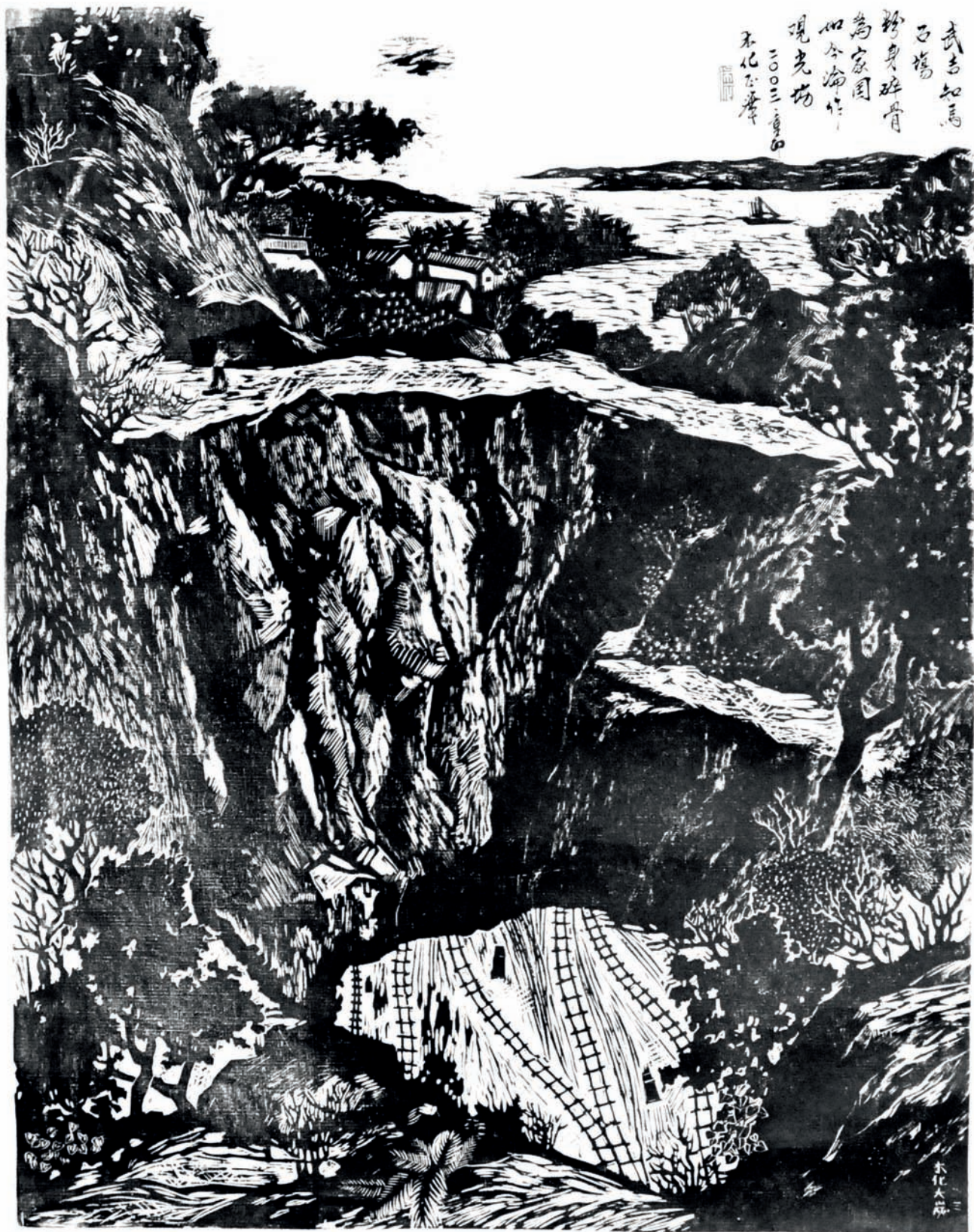
Recent Gifts: Works and Documents of Lim Mu Hue and Jimmy Ong

Recent Gifts: Works and Documents of Lim Mu Hue and Jimmy Ong features works newly acquired by the NUS Museum, respectively from the estate of the late Lim Mu Hue, and from the artist Jimmy Ong. These were two artists from successive generations (Lim Mu Hue from the late 50s to the 90s and beyond, Jimmy Ong from the 80s and ongoing), and different cultural backgrounds (Lim Mu Hue is better known and celebrated by the Chinese-speaking community, and Jimmy Ong more renowned among English-educated followers.) The Museum is grateful to the family and estate of Lim Mu Hue for the generous donation of the artist's body of works, as well as to Miss Ann Mui Ling, whose cash donation has enabled the Museum to acquire drawings by Jimmy Ong, collectively grouped as the "Chinatown Suite".

The donation of Lim Mu Hue's art works comprise around 234 objects (30 woodblock prints; 27 woodblocks; 14 paintings in acrylic or oils, 2 watercolours; 149 drawings of which 95 are figures; 11 Chinese ink works; 1 sculpture in relief.) Jimmy Ong's Chinatown Suite comprises 116 drawings. Along with the artworks, Jimmy Ong has also given a personal archive of postcards and photographs numbering over 800 items. There are also personal effects that belonged to Lim Mu Hue that were given to the museum (paint brush, photo slides, and a *ye hu*) that cast a glimpse on the artist's interests.

The works featured in the exhibition are modest in number, belying the extent and significance of both collections. The display may surprise the viewer, for it showcases works that followers of both artists might not have expected of their output. For example, Lim Mu Hue is better-remembered as an artist of woodblock prints, and while the donation includes a good number of the genre made by the artist around 2003, the exhibition highlights his drawings, particularly of landscapes, made between the 1950s to the 70s. Likewise, Jimmy Ong is better known for his large scale charcoal drawings, particularly of human figures; the works contained in the Chinatown Suites reveal the detailed observation recorded by Ong, his regard, on which his life and his important works of the 1980s and 90s were based. Far from being lesser in artistic value, the two acquisitions, supplemented by both artists' photographs and personal effects, are important resources that facilitate research into the artists and their practices, Singapore art, and their contexts.

武吉知馬
子場
珍身碎骨
為家園
而今論作
魂先切
二〇〇三
木化正澤



木化大正

Lim Mu Hue (1936 – 2008)

In what might be considered the first landmark attempt to document the art history and then-contemporary practitioners in Singapore and Malaya, Marco Hsu's Brief History of Malayan Art reads as a 'who's who' among young practitioners, and Lim Mu Hue had been one of the artists cited. Born in 1936 and adopted immediately at birth, the artist once considered his life to be full of challenges and setbacks before he reached the age of 50¹. He graduated from Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1955, an accomplished artist in Western media including pastels and oils.



Beside the mosque (Dec 27 1955)

Pastel on paper



Thai Dancer (undated)

Oil on canvas



Woman making Kueh Belanda (1957)

Pastel on paper

¹Recounted in Chun Yu Fen's column in Lianhe Zaobao, 6 May 1990.



Recycled Art (2004)
Woodblock print

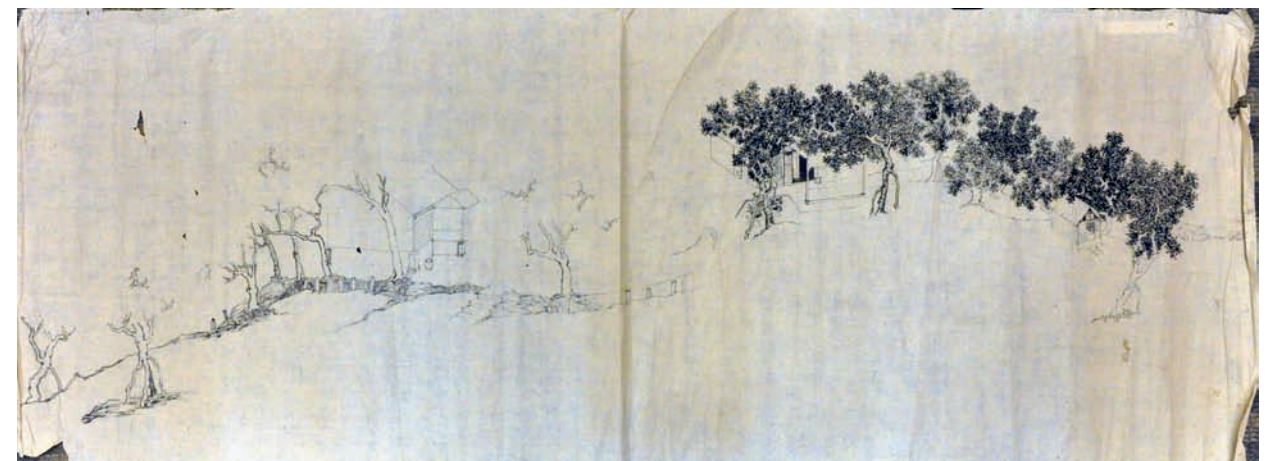
In 1966, he participated in the Six-Man Woodcut Exhibition, along with Choo Keng Kwang, Foo Chee San, Lim Yew Kuan, See Cheen Tee and Tan Tee Chie; showing prints based on landscapes and scenes from daily lives. The success (and legacy) of this exhibition, as well as the continued interest in the woodcut movement in Singapore Art History, ensured Lim Mu Hue's renown in the genre. As important, at least, was the artist's first solo exhibition held in 1970, which brought together the wider range of his output, a collection of works made in the artist's youth as he was emerging as an artist to look out for.



Bukit Timah Quarry
(Original print 1966, reprinted in 2003)
Woodblock print



Puppet workshop in China (2007)
Woodblock print



Above: **Sketch of Rambutan Garden I and II (undated)**
Chinese ink on paper



Panoramic view of Jurong Industrial Estate (undated)

Pastel on paper





Bee on lotus
(finger painting, undated)
 Chinese ink and colour on paper.

Of note from this solo debut were the panoramic landscape works that the artist had innovated both in his personal practice, and possibly in the genre among local artists. Quite a few of the works exhibited in 1970 had been retained by the artist until the time of his death, and are included in the donation by the artist's estate.

Although he trained at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Western methods, Lim Mu Hue remained versatile and skilled with Chinese ink and brush, and the donation comprises several ink works.

In addition, Lim Mu Hue often leaves colophonic inscriptions on his artworks (including his woodblock prints and pastels), which are important traces and records of the artist's inner thoughts and personality. The inscriptions reveal an erudite and well-versed scholar-gentleman, hidden beneath the artists' oft-projected mischievous and irreverent persona. A copy of Jiaofeng Magazine (April 1974) found among the artist's collection of books and periodicals (given with the artworks) contains three short essays penned by the artist, giving further credence to his deep literary cultivation.



There was also a conceptual artist in Lim Mu Hue. At the 1970 exhibition, one of the 'innovations' presented by the artist was 4 blank canvases, titled "The Four States of Formlessness" ("四大皆空"). This was the artist's depiction of the Buddhist concept, and from it the artist developed a series of paintings which relied on the use of negative space, in which objects such as trees or fish were seemingly only 'hints' that referred back to the main object: Emptiness, or, Formlessness. An extension of this idea was created by the artist in a 3-volume graphic book set, Heavenly Scriptures without Text (无字天书) printed and published in 1972), expanded the artist's oeuvre beyond conventional artistic materials.

Above: **Just a lonely tree (undated)**
 Oil on canvas

Left: **One peach fish (undated)**
 Oil on canvas

Lim Mu Hue: Essays 林木化：小品

When going through the personal collection of Lim Mu Hue's books given to the museum, the curators discovered a copy of the Chinese-language Jiaofeng (Chao Foon) Monthly, in which Lim Mu Hue had contributed a few short essays. Jiaofeng was established in 1955 to be a journal of Malayan culture, and a medium of promoting Malayan-Chinese literature. By the 1960s and 70s, it had established

itself as a reputable periodical providing a platform for local Chinese language writing beyond that afforded by school publications. It is not clear if Lim Mu Hue's paragraphs were meant to be autobiographical, but they reveal a reflective, literary and humorous side to the artist, an extension to his artistic creation.

自白

一 捏死蚂蚁打了蚊子后

我是被誉为大善士，谁又知道我晨上捏死蚂蚁和打死蚊子多寡？

好生之德，是我用钱买来的，反正那是所得税，这些可怜虫！

又怎晓得我是万物之灵？而用钱更灵哩。一笑！

七三年三月廿九晚段生后感而作。酒后。
木化大炭小品 之（二）
《蕉风月刊》253期，1974年4月号

Monologue

– After killing ants and slapping mosquitoes

They call me a philanthropist: who knows how many ants I kill with my fingers and how many mosquitoes I kill every morning?

The virtue of benevolence, I have purchased with money. Anyway, it's tax-deductible. These poor insects! How should they know if I am master of all creation? Using money is even more masterful! (Laughs!)

29 March 1973, inspired to pen this after evening reflection.
After a beer.
Essays by Lim Mu Hue (2)
From Jiaofeng Monthly, Vol.253, April 1974

渡日

酒会上，有人问我，将来去天堂或地狱？我毫不考虑的答他：地狱。对方竟惊讶的再问，为什么？我说：大家都竞往天堂去，难免有人满之患，可怜阎罗兄处谁陪他下棋？

七三、五、廿晚酒酣时
林木化
木化大炭小品 之（三）
《蕉风月刊》253期，1974年4月号

Passing the days

At a party, someone asked me: will I go to heaven or hell? Without hesitation I replied: hell. Surprised, he asked: Why? I said: if everyone were to go to heaven, it would be overcrowded. Besides, who would the King of Hell have for company to play chess with?

20.5.73, evening, under intoxication.
Essays by Lim Mu Hue (3)
From Jiaofeng Monthly, Vol.253, April 1974

想改变的结果

绘画固然要动手去浪费笔墨和伤脑筋，用文字去编织故事，又何尝不是要花纸笔和消耗精力。

然而，他，似乎觉悟到，在有限的画面上，很难畅所欲言，为了冲破这局限性，只好改用文字，更能一抒胸中块垒。

并须注意：唱高调，正是赔本生意。

就这样，他成了名作家，也变成了出版上的奴隶，充其量，一家吃角子机。

时间飞快，一如诡云。他头上已花白，牙齿换了假。虽然美女裸裎当前，也只能心有余而力不足的瞪眼了。

当然后悔出卖了青春时，正好便看到「土公」的鸦片脸的笑容可掬。

历史，就是地球的绕日自转。

名士之死，报馆赚钱。好名者亮相机会已到。

又是循环。

七三年三月廿九晚预视将来的下场。酒后。
木化大炭小品 之（一）
《蕉风月刊》253期，1974年4月号

The Outcome that One Would Like to Change

Certainly one would have to waste ink and be in a bother in painting. When one uses words to tell a story, doesn't that also use pen and paper, and expend a lot of effort?

Still, he seems to have sensed, on a limited canvas, it is difficult to express his feelings fully. To break out of the limitation, he made the switch to using words, in order that he can relieve the knot in his heart.

Caution: if one aims for the high notes, there is also a loss to be made.

Thus: he became a famous author, and also a slave to publishing. At best, the entire family tries their luck together at the slot machines.

Time flies like a changing cloud. His head has turned white, false teeth in place of originals. Even if there were a naked beauty before him, the spirit might be more than willing, but he can only stare out of his weakened flesh.

Of course, when he regrets selling his youth out, he sees the welcoming face of the "opium den" of the Earth.

History, turns daily just as the earth does.

When great people die, the newspapers make money. The moment for those who would be famous has arrived.

And the cycle goes on.

29 March 1973, night. Predicting the end. After a beer.
Essays by Lim Mu Hue (1)
From *Jiaofeng Monthly*, Vol.253, April 1974



Jimmy Ong (b. 1964)

Best known for his powerful, large scale figurative charcoal drawings, Jimmy Ong began drawing as a child, growing up in Chinatown. The Suite is named after his formative years, both in his personal life in his grandmother's house, and in his emerging studio-based practice at the same address.

Chinatown Suite contains sketches that traces the artist's geographical footsteps in the 1980s – 1990s, and is accompanied by postcards and photographs from the artist's hands, collected in a 'memory box', which form footnotes to the artist's formative practice. In 1984 he was awarded the ***Alliance of Independent Colleges of Art Scholarship*** to study at the Centre for Creative Studies, Detroit, USA, and postcards and photographs to friends and family from this period (and from other overseas sojourns in France and Italy later) have been collected. Interestingly, as Ong becomes more familiar with photography, snapshots were used as another 'sketching' method to capture ideas and scenes in real time. The culmination of the sketches and the materials in the box are some of Ong's best known works in charcoal from the 90s, such as Venus Rising with the Moon (Collection of NUS Museum). What the Chinatown Suite reveals to the viewer is Ong's process of seeing: his works are informed by intimate observations of his surroundings, underpinned by early familial relationships and a continual examination of issues of gender and sexuality.

The artist now resides in Vermont, USA.



Venus
ascending with
the
Moon

The May
ONLY

Unsent Postcards

Jimmy Ong in conversation with Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

Donated to the NUS Museum in 2011, Jimmy Ong's Chinatown Suite is a cluster of sketches predominantly from the period 1985-87, compiled by the artist. Consisting of 121 works, the Suite allows a critical glimpse into Ong's formative years as a painter operating from his shophouse in Chinatown, Singapore, his formal art training having been at the Centre for Creative Art Studies, Detroit and his subsequent return to Singapore in 1987. In an attempt at understanding the artistic process and considerations that Ong had during this period, the conversation ranges through recollections of the sketches, photographs and postcards – the latter contained within a metaphorical “Shoebox” that Ong shared with the Museum and the current writer as part of the research process. To be read as notes and a broader evolving conversation, the following exchange oscillates between these different traces – at once biographical, concerned with formalism, at times commonplace – amidst snippet references to the patchwork of individuals, publics and institutions that made Singapore and its art during the time.

Shabbir Hussein Mustafa (SHM): Amongst the hundreds of photographs and numerous postcards that you generously allowed me access to, there is one particular image that depicts you in a state of steady contemplation. Originally printed in black and white and later painted over with watercolour, on the top right corner, the words “1982 Crucial” have been etched in pen. On the back, a caption reigns: “Artist at Chinatown in 1984”. In the image, you sit pensive behind metal rims, forehead partially covered by an overhanging towel, emphasized by an intense gaze and furrowed brow. What had happened?

Jimmy Ong (JO): I think the photo is taken in 1984 and not 1982. “1982 Crucial” is a reminder inked in marker over a copy of a Roy Lichtenstein artwork on the wall. It was a reminder to myself pre-1982...the year of my A-level exam. How these words appear on the photo is misleading, the message was for a past event, and the scribbling at the back was made in haste recently, before I gave the shoebox of photos and postcards to NUS Museum. Anyway, I was doing very badly during A-level because in Junior College (JC) when I decided to take up competitive swimming and was training twice a day. Naturally I was sleeping in class. Your reading of this image amuses me, in that you thought it was something crucially art related. It was “crucial” because I could not imagine what to do if I had failed to continue my education after JC and become job-worthy; and I moved on to National Service like everyone else because my aggregate was not good enough to get into the National University of Singapore. The habit of relying on the school streaming system had worked until then. After ROD (or ‘Run Out Date’ in NS lingo) I basically resorted to what I had been doing well outside the academic curriculum: I got a scholarship and went to art school abroad.

SHM: Dwelling on “Artist in Chinatown in 1982[84]” a little more, I cannot help but sense that it was an almost spontaneous moment where an attempt was registered to erase the frontiers between culture, the personal and community/public – returning aesthetic production to its humble place within art practice that seemingly separates the artist studio-home (and its recurrence within the sketches, photographs and postcards) and what appears to be unfolding ‘outside’ – that time, your friends, how you perceived Singapore at-large, what were the pre-occupations, fixations, debates...etc. This reading rests somewhat uneasily alongside existing readings about your work that emphasize on your practice as a rigorous interrogation of the Self. But it is also my contention that notions of the Self are constituted in contrast to ‘something’...and what was metaphorically unfolding outside the artist’ window must have also acted as a catalyst? ‘Chinatown’ and art intermingle; both understood non-territorially.

JO: I grew up in Chinatown, it was humble, but I never felt underprivileged. On the contrary, growing up on a street with gangsters and towkays² for neighbours, one felt anything was possible....it was not a slum. Also. I don’t understand what you mean about the ‘something unfolding outside’...unless you mean like going abroad for studies, which at that time was top options amongst my peers in the arts. However, it’s true if you mean to say the Self in contrast to something like a desire to stand out of the crowd. Interrogation of Self was a thing with my generation, the Pioneer artists saved for Georgette Chen were not into Self. It was the time of MTVs, and identity was a universal preoccupation for the youth.



SHM: By ‘something unfolding outside’ I refer to the broader contexts of culture in Singapore during the 1980s...National Service, for instance also features within this matrix.

JO: My time in NS (National Service) was actually fun. I spent two years in CMPB (Central Manpower Base) with a motley of artists and writers who were viewed as “white horses”³ because we were not required to wear uniforms when we interviewed the top brasses⁴. My colleagues were seemingly fearless about life around them and their confident individuality was infectious. It was somewhat liberating as my academic expectations had lifted and I had been thrown into the unknown. It was also a time of coming-out as some of my colleagues were openly gay. I would hang out with Ivan Heng and [Nec] Swee Lin after NS who were already “making it” as actors, while they finished law school and performing at varsity stage. My roommate Najip [Ali] was already making money as a sought after choreographer. Rehearsals and postproduction parties connected me to the theatre scene that was bursting forth.

²Hokkien dialect for well-to-do businessmen

³Nickname for scions of important people who were thought to have been privileged and given an easier time during national service.

⁴Jimmy Ong was working on the army’s in-house publication, Pioneer magazine.



SHM: How about the visual arts scene?

JO: I would have liked to hang out with artists of my age but there was only Henri Chen, whose bohemian salon was a magnet for my impressionable self as an artist. I met Henri at a talk given at the United States Embassy by Carol Duran. Carol was a visiting curator and spoke of not being able to find any young Singapore artists at that time. A lot happened within a short time, I was searching within different social circles that did not often include each other. For example, besides Henri's circle, there was a young gay group and there was a middle-aged Church group. I was also experimenting performance with a group of German language students who called themselves OSAMA, which stands for One Saturday A Month Activity. With the OSAMA group I conceived a performance titled "Composition: School", inspired by absurdist plays I had read of but not seen. A catharsis of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) after A-level examinations; I later adapted this version of a dysfunctional classroom into a video that I shared at the Artist General Assembly and Ray Langenbach in 1993.

The only young artists group I knew then were Chandra[sekar], Salleh [Jappar] and [Goh] Ee Choo when I exhibited at Arbour Fine Art. [Lim] Jen Howe had just held a show for them as Trimurti group after he opened the controversial show "Not The Singapore River". But I was also spending most of the time coming out as a gay man rather than being an artist. So perhaps the bravura of being seen and heard as an artist in the 1980s was in proportion to my testosterone levels.

SHM: In one of the earliest newspaper articles to appear about your art, i.e. in 1985, the writer begins by vividly describing her walk up to your shophouse in Chinatown as being a little bewildering and exciting, having been made to navigate through "wet washing, a ginger cat guarding her litter" and finally into an "untidy little room". The room, it seems, appears to have been in a state of critical mess, as site of constant activity, and even before the interview begins, she clarifies further, "Jimmy finds me a space to sit among the art books and jars of paint. He produces a hand fan to keep the heat at bay, delicately. We talk".⁵ Your studio and by extension the architectural feature that is the 'shophouse', seems to have been a crucial site for thinking, reflection and work... Do you want to comment on the artist studio and shophouse and what it meant to you in the mid-1980s?

JO: The shophouse that the interviewer visited was less a studio than a domain I grew up in, but there was already critical mess, mostly of memories of family who had been there before me. This emotional material was too close to home for me to unravel as a subject there and then. I think the interviewer was a bit awed about meeting a young artist in a shophouse in the 80s... her interview was apparently more coloured and eventful than it meant to me. The shophouse was just "lived in", the way Alecia Neo's photos of Queenstown show HDBs as being naturally cluttered and soaked with human lives, but I suppose it must have been fascinating for her as a visitor.



⁵K. Malathy, "Life colours his art", *The Straits Times*, 5 July 1985.



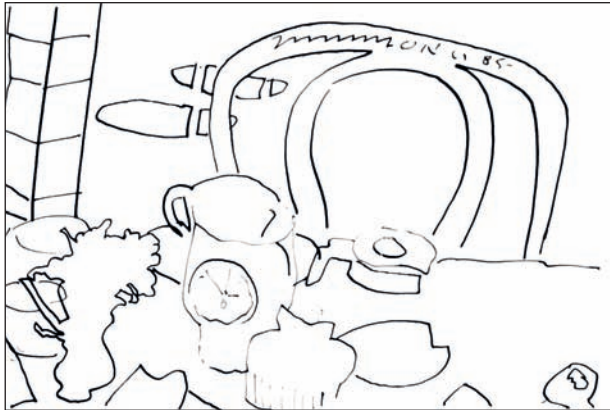
Having a studio at that time was indulging my being different, amongst my peers – I already had a whole floor of the attic, my only problem was not being able to have my friends hang out and talk all night as my grandmother lived under the same roof. Instead, I spent a lot of time at Henri Chen's studio talking or hanging out with my friends till late, coming home to work at two in the morning for an hour or so. It is also important to take note that a good deal of the drawings of shophouse interiors contained in Chinatown Suite were made on visits when I had already moved out.

SHM: I have thought intensely about how to differentiate between the Shoebox of photos and postcards you gladly shared with the Museum and the drawings that form the critical components of the Chinatown Suite. Whilst formalistically they are differentiated by medium, they nonetheless exist as part of a broader set of sketches, as unsent postcards (a title you offered for this conversation piece), which have now somehow found a home, at the Museum...?

JO: I had not been able to see that the Shoebox of postcards as part and parcel of the sketches, which consists of numerous postcard size drawings; an old mindset that only conventional drawings are valid as handmade artworks, though I know they inform each other. The contents of the Shoebox may be seen as bits of assemblage that gathered on a studio wall, when in fact the drawings in Chinatown Suite in the same way operate as first-thoughts and half-starts as the drawings to a larger oeuvre of "finished" artworks took shape in the years that followed. Furthermore, the Chinatown Suite and the Shoebox were both homeless for the longest time, and when I saw Ng Eng Teng's collection at NUS Museum, I felt they would make good company. The way I see the collection of ceramics and early drawings as sketches to Eng Teng's large sculptures, it dawned on me that the Chinatown Suite would make good fodder for students of museum and art studies.

SHM: What about your studio after you returned from Detroit?

JO: After a year abroad, I was determined to live out on my own beginning with a shared apartment with Najip, and then three other addresses in Singapore. The working part is always very sporadic, between meals and domesticities and always late at night when it is cooler and quiet. Perhaps that's why sketching and drawings suited those days of running around town. I would, however, stop often and ponder at my drawings in progress on the wall between the kitchen and the bedroom.



SHM: Could you elaborate on the images titled Chinatown Suite 1 in shorthand⁶? I also believe these were done prior to your departure for art studies in Detroit in 1985.

JO: Take “Mew Mew 出来”⁷ for example. It is a drawing that surprises me in retrospect. My young cousin Pauli was framed as an outline by the window of a balcony that looks into the air well. It was a quick drawing and the title came out effortlessly. The air well is a place I spent a lot of time as a child, exploring the moss and cracks on the walls, staring at clouds behind [beyond?] the wire grid, playing with home grown herbs in tin can pots. There were two huge balcony windows looking into this sky-lighted “playground”, and I am surprised to see my cousin in it the way I would have appeared to other adults in the house. I now understand why I have had this lot of drawings stored away for thirty years. Besides being not too remarkable to warrant a public showing, or too sayang⁸ to shred, they were unresolved momentos for me.

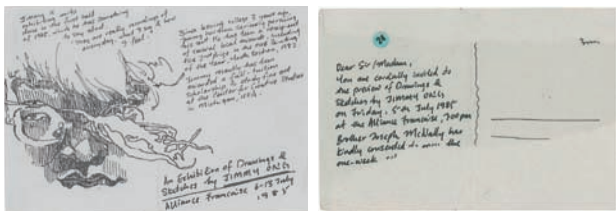
In 1994 I returned to Chinatown out of nostalgia by renting an entire building in Amoy Street. By this time I had acquired from art school the notion of studio practice. It had also become a social extension, between cooking and entertaining, most of the time spent looking at the works on the wall. With friends dropping in all day, execution was only possible at small hours of the night. I suppose a studio was less as a place of work than a room for social interaction that fed my art.

SHM: In that 1985 newspaper article you are quoted as saying, “I had nothing else to do but paint.” An expression that I would like revisit and seek your thoughts on, with the hope of locating it alongside how the poetry of the everyday and introspective potentials of the mundane are treated in the Chinatown Suite, both as process and inspiration...?

⁶Artist's drawings made at the Alliance Francaise.

⁷“Mew Mew 出来(Mew Mew Come Out)”; this drawing is actually in the set framed as ‘Chinatown Suite XV’

⁸Dear; precious.



JO: On the contrary, I was doing everything but paint, as evidenced by the diversity of places and company in the sketches. I now recall why I said that; it was in the context of growing up in Chinatown, where I had no toys or distractions nor allowed to roam the streets after school. Living with my grandparents, entailed a certain amount of permissiveness to anything seemingly “educational” (books, art materials) vs. “frivolous” (Nike shoes, board games). My grandmother worried that I might get into drugs, which was the epitome of the campaign climate of the day, together with long hair. I did not know Orchard Road existed until I had to pass it in a bus going to Catholic Junior College.

Having decided to become an artist after NS, I took to carrying a pen and paper around. This too was in affection to Henri’s stories of his time in Paris. I imagined that real artists sketched all the time.

I doubt I was consciously being introspective. Each vantage point before me, wherever I sat, was an opportunity to record that moment indiscriminately. The drawings were made after a meal, or coffee and cake or a smoke; between dips in the pool, next phone call, next date, next meal. The sketches were (and are) like reminders that one is clever with the pen, and is witnessed by one’s peers and admirers.

SHM: Amongst the numerous portraits that form part of the Chinatown Suite, two self-portraits exhibit striking formal and conceptual similarities; one used for the postcard announcement of your solo show at Alliance Francaise in 1985 and the other titled “30 mins”. Executed with pen on paper (and light gouache in the case of “30 mins”), both works with varying degrees to present a slightly angled face with asymmetrically placed eyes, features of the face partially transfigured and even disintegrating – a kafka-esque metamorphosis – inviting an exploration into the notion of the Self and its remoteness...

JO: I think I was looking at German expressionists like Egon Schiele and Hans Bellmer. The first one has the outline of a dead lily, and the second was made specifically within 30 minutes as was required by the portfolio submission for the Detroit scholarship. Both are kind of narcissistic if not auto-erotic. Sex and decay was on my mind.

SHM: In the sketches, there are cultural or social conventions that are observed too. For instance, the notes “tea treat – 18.7.85” or “Amidst near nudity, locals dressed in safari and black suits”. Writers and critics at the time described this as the adoption of ‘graffiti like gestures’. You described the drawing as being “the closest thing to recording an encounter, which could be lost forever and which would otherwise mean less”. Why is there this need to capture an exact encounter or moment? Does it have something to do with how you regard memory?

JO: The scribbles, if not in recording time and place, was in aping the Chinese Literati I have read about. I was impressed with how Chinese scrolls not only unfold in time and space, but have add-ons in colophons that tell you what occasion it was, or how one felt, etc. I was doing it with more mundane things like what I ate or heard. The one I recall was “Mew mew 出来” which was what my little cousin said to the cat while I was drawing him. Most are labels of things and places, a few of coded intimacy. At a time when we do not have much platform for commentary or open discussion, this diaristic device was habit making if not self-satisfying. Or perhaps it was the predecessor to the advent of Instagrams on Facebook today.



I was also conscious of how brief my time would be in Singapore, most of the postcards drawings were made months before I left for Detroit. A good number of postcards drawings testify to that, of coffee shop scenes with partial sketch of my friends who were present. They are like long goodbyes with friends.

SHM: What about the art-scene of the period and its key figures? Your early motivations to paint seriously...

JO: The arts scene that I knew of at that time was mostly around the English speaking theatre. I was a familiar friend to everyone when KenSen (Ong Keng Seng) asked me to design the stage for Lao Jiu⁹ later in 1993. I was interested in absurdist plays and did a performance at the Goethe Institut with a group of German language students in 1984. There was much excitement when Goh Poh Seng revealed his plan (the Bu Yet Tian (不夜天) proposal) for the Singapore River¹⁰. That's when I was aware of the authority's interest in the arts, as I would hang out with Ivan [Heng] and Swee Lin while they performed Desmond Sim's (also an NS friend) dinner theatre at Le Bistro*. My first solo exhibition was held there at the bistro's corridor.

⁹The Ninth-born, play written by Kuo Pao-Kun, 1990.

¹⁰This was a plan by architects William Lim Seiw Wai and Dr. Goh Poh Seng in 1982 pertaining to the conservation of shophouses along the Boat Quay development. The proposal suggested the preservation of heritage by re-using the shophouses for traditional types of commercial and craft activities, such things as ethnic food sellers, craftsmen, medicine shops, fortunetellers, geomancers, and clan associations, as well as an outdoor Chinese opera performance space, which were disappearing trades. The proposals were never adopted. See <http://web.mit.edu/akpia/www/AKPsite/4.239/singa/singa.html> for a detailed study of the Boat Quay development plans (last retrieved 6 November 2013.)

Before NS, I was a frequent visitor of the National Museum Art Gallery, conveniently after going to the National Library. The official art scene that I knew was by being to the Art Gallery's permanent collection; as it featured the familiar Pioneer and Second-generation artists. I was cocky enough to make an oil work after Liu Kang's painting just to prove that I could do a better job. I also recall that I liked Lu Kuo Shiang [ed: also known as Lo Kok-Siong] paintings, and being bowled over by a Rothko painting in a travelling show from the US. And the Kim Lim and Turnbull show impressed me so much so to take up sculpture. A sculpture workshop at St Patrick School in 1984 was well attended, the highlight being Choy Weng Yang and Teo Eng Seng sparring out at the end of each workshop critique sessions. At the workshop, I admired Tan Teng Kee as a teacher of few words; and Ng Eng Teng was kind enough to invite his class for a tour of his home and studio at Joo Chiat Place. There was a scene of master-disciple relationship amongst the Second Generation artists that I did not get into. Goh Poh Seng, the poet and writer also ran Le Bistro Toulouse Lautrec, invited young artists to perform/ exhibit.



One year I was using Henri Chen's servants' quarter as a studio and we were sort of groupie with Pan Shou only because he was so old and venerable. I was interested in seeing Henri's calligraphy collection and listening to Pan Shou's erudition.

SHM: Your references to the Chinese Literati has not emerged in discussions about your work in the past, can you elaborate further on the influence this has had on your own work?

JO: I'd rather not...First I am not completely Chinese language proficient, which means everything I read or heard was already lost in translation. The Chinese Literati have many words to describe brushwork like sweet, bland, elegant, divine, etc.; where bland, for instance, is more desirable than elegant. This became a constant game for us to try to guess which is what. Henri took pride and care to also translate the content of the couplets and hand scrolls to me while he showed them to Pan Shou. Beyond the apparent brushworks, the prose and poetry allude to obscure classical texts if not literary quotes, puns and innuendoes that only Pan Shou could comment and elaborate on. I think I was only skimming the surface, but also aspiring towards that attitude in my common thoughts and gross feelings. The sensibility reminds one of the connectedness with nature and past lives, the voice of the poet often of longing. I continued to seek out Chinese calligraphy later, like those in the Metropolitan Museum [of Art], and reading poems on my own...in English.

SHM: What were the other avenues for engagement with the art community a self-taught artist could tap into during the period?

JO: I think the most attractive avenues were the various exhibitions at the Alliance Francaise and Goethe Institut, but they tended to be cultural showcases or of photography. Once Goethe brought a speaker who gave a talk and slide show on outdoor sculptures in Germany that was more critical than usual. The Singapore Film Society was also great as informal film education. Toh Hai Leong would give a subjective synopsis and long commentary that was at time annoying but outspoken. There was no art community I was aware of; saved for the people one met at National Art Gallery openings and film screenings. The theatre groups were more community oriented but perhaps they were more dependent on each other in production. There were art clubs and societies at community centers, but I think they were more art guilds than community. I also missed out on the Artists' Village later, as I was already going in and out of the country.

SHM: What were the years in Detroit like? You would constantly send back postcards to 41A Hokien Street with photographic collages of particular moments and moods – indicating that a sort of surrealist ethnography was unfolding. Characterized as a totality of fragments, a montage of incidents sent home, brought home through the postcard. What was the experience of being away from Hokien Street like?

JO: It was cold but everything was new and fascinating. I was on long letters with my friends in Singapore to report my excitement, but mostly because I missed them. The postcards I sent to Hokien Street were sort of pictorial newsletters to assure everyone I was well. They are not addressed to anyone in particular, and as they accumulated on the fridge door, they probably formed that fragmented collage together. The message was I am OK, you are OK.

I was ready to leave the house I grew up in, but it really took me another decade of back and forth to pick up the pieces, when I moved my grandmother to a HDB flat. It was of course painful, as I did not really have a chance to come out to my grandmother, and the guilt is always there.



The best part of Detroit was being next to the Institute of Art. A side trip to museums in New York confirmed for me that I needed to see the actual works that I read about. This was attained with two summers abroad in France and Italy, where besides seeing the old masters' works; I took fun classes like poetry, photography and film.

SHM: What about friendships in the art world during the period? There is, for instance, this image from your first solo-exhibition at the Alliance Française in 1984 with Henri Chen and Carol Doran.

JO: Henri Chen was a mentor to me in those days. He had just got back from various exhibitions in Paris with a wealth of experience on exhibiting. He was also the connection to an array of curators, collectors and dealers later. But mostly our discussion about art centered on Chinese culture through music and antiquities. I listened in fascination to his stories about the Hong Kong auction scene for Chinese calligraphy and painting that he patronized. I think I owe it to Henri for advising me on my early exhibiting and being wary of the art market.

SHM: The 1980s is also a marked decade in the rise of the art institution and curated exhibitions were becoming increasingly familiar to the art landscape in Singapore, especially at the National Museum Art Gallery (which you have already mentioned), also acquired your works. Likewise, public and private institutions were also commissioning artists, a feature that allowed in some part for art to be considered as a serious career. You also participated in the Shell Discovery Art Exhibition Scheme that was initiated in 1986. As a young artist, entry (or if I may even use the term 'initiation') into these institutions and even the art market must have been interesting to negotiate through?



JO: At the Shell Discovery. I had the opportunity to show the sculptures made at St Patrick Art Centre, and a couple of drawings of portraits of friends that was intended for Arbour Fine Art. The climate was one of selling and validating careers, at least as it was reflected in the media. I recall an article in the Straits Times featuring a Pioneer artist headlined "The \$100 a minute Artist", because Chen Wen Hsi took five minutes to produce a \$500 painting.

In those days I was always raising money to go back to art schools in quarterly segments. This was the time of no scholarship in the arts without having to teach or work in a statutory board in return. I was inflated with glee to be courted by dealers and collectors, even as there were only a handful of young artists. It was always tempting to compromise for a quick sale and I regret having made some under-developed paintings on commission. I decided quickly that it was easier to make bodies of works for solo shows and let the artworks sell or not sell. I recall an institution rejecting my work because of nudity, so I missed out on public art. On another occasion, a gallery rejected a proposed show, which I subsequently exhibited and sold on my own. I can only say my experience with institutions and the art market was mostly luck.

SHM: In the drawings and sketches you adopt clean lines to outline silhouettes, as a distinct artistic currency that is expressive, with some lines becoming worn, whereas others more pronounced and bold. The sketches from the period that makes up Chinatown Suite are distinct (in 1985, you had even described yourself as a 'self-taught artist'), as you are discovering the myriad mechanisms and potentials of 'drawing'; there is this suggestive delight and excitement of an early expression into a technique marking a much longer and imminent journey...

SHM: In most of the sketches, there is careful labeling of objects, figures and sites, often you would provide detailed captions on the back...the descriptions are mostly of commonplace and everyday objects, and although the figures are familiar...you would persist with the labeling. Something similar unfolds in your photographs from the period too. Coupling the text alongside the images, I want to read this gesture towards the textual and the manner in which the sketches are executed, as a form of social research into everyday life (as ethnography, documentary, sociology, cultural studies etc.); to observe the sketches, not as works of 'art' but as documents of this social research. In this way, the compositions of the sketches, the form and content, steady renditions of post-dinner tables to the things that unfold outside the window of the shophouse or artist studio in 1985 Chinatown and 1986 Detroit, a methodology is being generated...a mode of working that looks inwards but also outside?

JO: In retrospect I think the obsessive labeling is more primal as a manner of accumulation. The way a child with new reading skill reads aloud every signboard on a drive into town. To draw it, is to own it, not the physical thing but the perceptual experience of it, like being trigger-happy as a tourist with a camera. The scribble also becomes categorical titles, such that the artist validates each picture for a life of its own, knowing it will leave him soon after he signs it. Of course some of the labeling at the back of the drawings are made years after, and during recent transition from storage to the Museum for inventory purpose, and to differentiate the year or place it was made.

JO: Three decades later, it is impossible for me to invoke the same enthusiasm now, but I continue to journal in notebooks, mostly in long hand. The drawing now stems more from thinking, less from seeing.



SHM: What kind of concentration is required for line drawings?

JO: The trick is to be aware of the whole, while looking at the details...everything is in relation spatially to each other. One leaves out information that the pen or paper cannot render, like facial features. And take liberty to keep blank spaces where it is compositionally more interesting. Meanwhile, it is about being relaxed, letting whatever arises guide you, becoming playful like varying the line-works, responding to the visual texture one picks out. The eye-hand meditation becomes a dance.

SHM: In terms of form, what were the considerations you had? I am also hoping you will comment on your treatment of lines, executed more often with pen or charcoal with a relatively thin nib on white paper, perforated sketching pads and even postcards; the lines present delicate and tentative curves, but also appear spontaneous; with particular moments and moods being experienced and captured. As one of the few painters using drawing as a primary medium during the period, what was it like...?

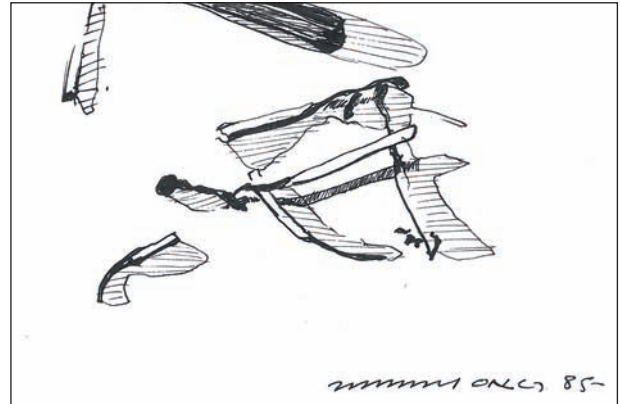
JO: One just responds to the tasks at hand, like the problem of suggesting one object nearer than the other, etc. and thus form comes into being. Translating visual perception into tactile marks on paper, keeping decipherable what is positive and negative spaces, objects and ground on the same flat plane dictates the form. The apparent moods and moment you speak of arises all by itself as long as one is connected to the subject. I was not planning to be an artist whose primary medium is drawing. I think the nomadic early years, my temperament and whatever I had to say at that time just suited the portable and simple medium.

SHM: Let's unravel the subtleties between your approach to figures and still life. In the former, some gestures are natural, suggestive and exaggerated, whilst there is also this "talking gesture", with notes and accompanying captions, especially for postures and positionalities where meanings are somewhat obscure. In the latter, the approach almost exploits a temporal sequence, and momentarily suspended only to be captured as forever abstract. Both genres maintain and extend the viewer's engagement differently but emerge from similar inspirations from the everyday. I wonder if we could look at your figures and still life drawings in a comparative context? I think, perhaps, there is also a much larger discussion we will need to have someday about your approach to the 'everyday'.

JO: Still-life objects do not talk back, whereas an encounter with a living sitter presents gossips and undertones of life. I liberally employed these feelings as captions and thought bubbles in comic strips. Some coded obscurity was intentional to hide intimate details, like initials for names. The early drawings also helped me identify and derive direction for still life works later. For example, a show of watercolour revealed the loneliness of the table after the meal; and a later show of still life of centralised composition in black and white were like memorials of mourning.

I must say that the early figures were of friends and family. I stopped making life drawings altogether except for nude studies every now and then as hand-eye practice. The thing is that the figures took on the potential of representing psychological states that were more interesting on imaginary realms. So the everydayness of the figure has left me since. Until recently when I made video interviews of my social subject, I began to take in as much of the everyday ordinariness as possible. Perhaps it is a midlife crisis; I have come full circle... or perhaps I am rousing from a very long obsession with imagined narratives.

SHM: Fast forward a couple of years to 1987, TK Sabapathy in a review of your exhibition at Arbor Fine Arts, began by discussing the conventional likeness of portraiture as a genre in painting. Portraiture being an attempt by the artist to capture his subjects beliefs and character as a momentary and 'moody' instance; only to be made permanent by the indelible craft of the painter having applied oil on canvas – a sort of an immemorial-temporal facial likeness. "But Jimmy Ong, is not interested in these values", Sabapathy notes, "He is interested in the subject, but not as a means to create a clearly defined, permanent image. Ong places his subjects in pure space; they float on the surface, free from any material associations. His images are made up of fragments, with the emphasis on heads and hand; in between, there is space and emptiness."¹¹ Had the 'Chinatown Suite' (a period that had given voice to the everyday from a shophouse in Singapore) come to an end?



JO: Everything being temporal, I would not want to relive a time past. But I continue on to manifest my creativity with whatever is around me. It has been painful and difficult recalling the time when I did Chinatown Suite, especially as I am presently at an age to wonder why I did those drawings and in Sabapathy's note, it is symptomatic of how I was afraid to get close to another person as a subject. Perhaps I am now more at ease about this phenomenon with time and distance.



¹¹TK. Sabapathy, "Means of expressing the self in terms of others", *The Straits Times*, 29 May 1987.

Postscript: Bungalow and Postcard.

In looking for more strayed photos that I have taken out of the "Shoebox" over the years, I found a drawing of a postcard I have made of used matches that contain another drawing of a house and inscription by Henri Chen on the other side. These were bundled together with letters from Henri at a time when I was going to school in Detroit. I now recall why I did those postcards. I had just met Henri and he impressed me with a Mont Blanc fountain pen, I immediately acquired one too. I think those postcards were made on those occasions where we spent many a late night at hotel coffee shops in Singapore; a midnight supper ritual that was popular in the 80s where every hotel had a 24 hour café that was air-conditioned and quiet. At a time when there was a dearth of young artists, Henri stood out as a shiny example of a success story. He was tirelessly encouraging of my being an artist and going to art school. Twice on my short returns to Singapore between schools, he put me up at his servant quarters of a black and white bungalow. A view of the house in pastel is amongst the Chinatown Suite.

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