



JOLLY @ 83

JOLLY @ 83

An exhibition of recent paintings by Jolly Koh at KEN GALLERY, Menara KEN TTDI
organised by Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers

Exhibition dates:

1st November to 21st November 2024

HENRY BUTCHER
ART AUCTIONEERS

HENRY BUTCHER
ART AUCTIONEERS

Copyright © Jolly Koh 2024

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior consent from the copyright owner.

Published in November 2024
by Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers

25, Jalan Yap Ah Shak
50300 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia
info@hbart.com.my
www.hbart.com.my

Photographs of paintings
Puah Chin Kok

Photographs of the artist at work
Angela Liu Jing

Book design
Tan Rei Chei

Printed in Malaysia
Emulate Digital Technology

Front Cover: *Flowers in the Sky*, page 26
Back Cover: *Blue Rhapsody*, page 85



Detail from *Blue Movement*, page 86, 87.



Detail from *The River*, page 54

CONTENTS

6

Foreword

Jolly Koh, Painter and Friend

Ann Massing

8

Introduction

Beholding Beauty: The Odyssey of a Romanticist

Céline Hongyi Yang

24

Recent Paintings

114

Jolly Koh: Biodata

116

Artist At Work

120

Acknowledgement

FOREWORD

Jolly Koh, Painter and Friend

Jolly and I met at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana in the autumn of 1970. I had returned from my study year abroad in Strasbourg, France (and travels beyond) to finish the final year for my BA in Art History and Fine Art. Jolly was a grad student. He had studied at Hornsey College of Art, London, receiving his National Diploma in Design in 1962. At Indiana University he would go on to obtain his M.Sc. (Master of Science) majoring in Art Education in 1972, and his Ed.D (Doctor of Education), majoring in Philosophy of Education in 1975.

The campus of Indiana University in Midwest America is one of the most beautiful of the 'Big 10'. In the centre is the Fine Arts building and what was then the Indiana University Museum of Art, founded in 1941 as a 'centre of cultural crossroads'. It has now become the Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art, housed in a new building designed by I. M. Pei and Partners, dedicated in 1982. Today the collection is one of the largest of any American university art museum with objects from all over the world. Even in the 1970s the art department was an exciting place to be, especially in autumn when a new academic year begins and the trees are gloriously colourful – but temperatures can be unstable and may plummet unexpectedly. On our first meeting outside the back entrance to the art department, at some point during our first chat, Jolly mentioned that he hadn't brought enough warm clothing with him. The next day I offered him an old but warm jumper. Years later Jolly told me this story of how we had met. I had forgotten! But he had not.

After classes had finished for the year, Jean Michel – my French husband-to-be – came to visit me. I introduced him to Jolly and we played ping-pong in Jolly's Hall of Residence.

After my graduation, I returned to Strasbourg, then went to Stuttgart, Germany where I began my studies in the restoration of paintings at the Institut für Technologie der Malerei – which would lead me to a teaching post in painting conservation at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge. Jean Michel continued his studies at the University of Strasbourg, and then we moved to London because he had received a British Council Higher Education Fellowship at the Warburg Institute. Meanwhile Jolly was in Australia where he found a teaching job. He went on to spend nearly three decades living and working in Australia before returning home to Malaysia to become a full-time artist. During these years we were all much too busy to think of holidays! But once Jolly had the opportunity, he began yearly trips to Europe to visit its major museums, to attend operas and concerts, eat good food and enjoy what life has to offer. He also renewed old friendships.

He had always remembered to send to Jean Michel and me a copy of the catalogue of his exhibitions and sometimes he would telephone me with a technical query about his painting technique, but from about the year 2000, when our schedules permitted, we would meet in London or Cambridge for lunch – and critical discussions about art and philosophy. The verbal exchanges between Jolly and Jean Michel – about the definition of beauty and quality and much more – were often passionate as each was convinced his own approach was better!

Jean Michel was by then in Cambridge, Head of the Department of History of Art and a Fellow of King's College. When we met in Cambridge, Jean Michel and I would go with Jolly and his lovely wife Angela to visit the Fitzwilliam Museum, to Jean Michel's rooms in College and then to see the Rubens in King's College Chapel, or weather permitting, for a walk along the Cam. But Jolly was to confess that his 'personal buzz' was to be able to walk across the lawn of King's College with Jean Michel!

Our friendship has lasted for over half a century and it has been inspiring to witness the development of Jolly's splendid paintings and his successful career.

Ann Massing
Hamilton Kerr Institute, Emeritus
University of Cambridge
June 2024



Detail from *Flowers in the Sky, III*, page 30

INTRODUCTION

Beholding Beauty: The Odyssey of a Romanticist

Céline Hongyi Yang

'I am a painter. My name is Jolly Koh.' Jolly introduced himself when we first met in person, by chance, during a Christie's preview in London.

There he was, glistening with an air of assurance, making the beautiful Chinese ceramic bowl in front of us pale. Even his silver hair was full of expression and vitality, I thought to myself.

'You are Jolly Koh!' I exclaimed, astonished that it was *Him*.

My personal encounter with Jolly has been that of a wonder and could be described as a journey. During a cultural trip to Southeast Asia in 2016, I stepped into an auction house in Kuala Lumpur to have a glimpse of the local art scene. My eyes were immediately caught by a painting that very much reminded me of British and American Modernism. It stood out amongst the other works on view. The bidding battle followed over this piece of work proved my idea that this was something special. It turned out to be a painting by Jolly Koh of the 60s. As my journey continued, visits to the National Gallery, Singapore and the National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia where Jolly's works are collected and exhibited gave me further opportunities to learn about the artist. I came to understand and appreciate even more the visual appeal of his oeuvre. And not just the visual appeal.

I was surprised to learn that Jolly Koh is one of the very few national artists in the world with a doctorate degree. By a national artist I mean someone who is highly recognised by one's country of origin and whose works are collected and represented by major local art institutions. Cultivated and well-read not just in the practice of art but also in art theories and education, Jolly received his Doctorate in Philosophy of Education from Indiana University in the United States in 1975. His scholarly contributions are outstanding, with six papers published in scholarly journals, the most notable being 'The Drawing Lesson' published by *The British Journal of Aesthetics* in 1980. Two other articles - 'Paula has Learned' and 'Jones is Teaching' - published consecutively at *The Annual Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education* in 1975 and 1976 paved the way for a great career in academia and teaching. Jolly has simply too many talents - but he eventually decided that he is more of an artist at heart than a teacher or scholar, and he chose to focus on making art instead.

The Making of a Modern Painter

Jolly arrived at the Hornsey College of Art, London in 1959. An intelligent and handsome young man at the threshold of adulthood, he was full of curiosity, a thirst to learn, and the conviction that the world was his oyster. It was a critical time when modern art was flourishing in the European cultural capital and artists such as Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, and Frank Auerbach were making their debuts and challenging the conventional notion of art. These painters had a profound influence on the young man. He was at the right place at the right time.

Modernism in art is a concept originating in Western society in the early twentieth century, with cubism and abstraction. It should be differentiated from the concept of the modern era in history which refers to the period from around 1500 AD after the Middle Ages in Europe until the present day. Charles Baudelaire's essay 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863) designated the artist's responsibility to capture the 'fleeting, ephemeral experience of life in an urban metropolis'. Artists departed from the late nineteenth-century realistic and impressionist style and used materials and techniques to create images that better reflected the modern world and its ideals, culminating in abstraction. Depending on the perspective, modernism could be a concept, period, or style. For Jolly, modern art is a style.

When artists from the East arrived in Europe to study in the first decades of the previous century, they were bewildered as well as thrilled by the transformative experiments going on there. The early generations of émigré artists such as Zao Wou-Ki and Chu Teh-Chun absorbed and adopted the new style, integrating Western modern art with their own artistic practices learned in the East. Others, meanwhile, rejected or disavowed the movement, focusing on realism.

It is always interesting to see what happens when different cultures confront each other. If one culture is much more sophisticated, usually the stronger side dominates and the weaker party merely accepts what is imposed upon it, imitating at most and often losing oneself. On the other hand, if both cultures are equally advanced and adaptive, they could blossom in the embrace of each other to bear ever more delicious fruit. One of the best examples can be found in Chinese export ceramics and their influences in Southeast Asia and Europe, spawning the developments of local ceramic industries in disparate directions.

Now in Europe, Jolly welcomed modern art whole-heartedly and selected the elements that he found resonance with. His early artistic experience as a child prodigy back in Malaysia offered favourable preconditions for him to adapt the new style. Introduced to modern art and design at Hornsey College of Art, Jolly was constantly inspired and ignited by the many exciting avant-garde exhibitions including those of Francis Bacon and Mark Rothko held at the London galleries, especially the Marlborough Gallery and the Beaux Arts Gallery that he frequented. '... I was influenced by modern paintings as well as modernity as a concept. I was able to absorb and transform everything in my

surroundings into the development of my own modernist style.' Jolly confessed during our conversations, 'it was the educational and life experiences in London that turned me into a modern painter.' He was keen and getting ready to become part of the movement, and to carry it forth in his own way. Abstraction became his language.

Understanding Modernity

Perhaps the most well-known adaptation of the Modernist movement in popular culture is Woody Allen's film *Midnight in Paris*, in which the protagonist Gil Pender, a nostalgic screenwriter on a Paris trip, was mysteriously carried back to the 1920s and met literary giants including Ernest Hemmingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein, as well as avant-garde artists such as Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Henri Matisse, and Man Ray among others. Whimsical and historical, Woody Allen's movie sketched for the viewers a time and space when the most exciting revolutions in art were taking place. Hemmingway also recounted in *A Moveable Feast* (1964) how he would go to the Musée du Luxembourg nearly every day for the Cézannes, Manets and Monets, and how he learned enormously from Cézanne but was not articulate enough to explain it to others. Modernism was unprecedented in the Western history of art in that international artists gathered in Paris, challenged the canon, and strove for new artistic expressions and self-identities. Revolutions in art had never occurred in such scale and radicality before.

Art of the twentieth century was no longer bound by the rigid rules and hierarchies of painting categories defined by the *académie*. Artists experienced new approaches and delved into their own creativity, individuality, and exploration of modern art. The English art critic Roger Fry notably coined the term 'Post-Impressionism' to define more recent traditional naturalistic developments and championed the movement as he did of Renaissance before, believing that the 'constructive design' of art from both periods interrogated truth and represented a renewal of art in the Western world. Modern art, however, is diverse, bold and unpredictable, with movements and styles competing against one another: it became fauvism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism and of course abstraction. Modern art survived and flourished during the twentieth century.

Referring to Baudelaire's definition, modernism in art is an ever-changing and evolving

concept; it is temporal, capturing the *Zeitgeist*. Jolly has rightfully stated that the modern spirit of a Théodore Géricault or Eugène Delacroix is different from that of a Piet Mondrian. For a Géricault or Delacroix, modernity is the Romanticist movement which is theatrical and passionate; one can feel the post-revolution enthusiasm in *The Raft of the Medusa* and *Liberty Leading the People*. Whereas for Mondrian, modernity is a utopian search for universal values and aesthetics, embedded in the intellectual conceiving and visual balancing of geometric forms and prime colours - modernism is a spiritual abstraction beyond reality. Jolly's modernism too bears the signature of his time and individual circumstances: it is an abstract natural flow of the brush, bringing together the lyricism of Peter Lanyon and the tradition of English romantic landscape paintings, with the chance happenings and unexpectedness of Francis Bacon. Jolly encountered these artists and found resonance with elements of their works during his study in London from 1959 to 1963. He adopted and adapted the elements to formulate his own artistic language.

Examining Jolly's works before and after London, the leap is tremendous. Not only did he depart from his earlier realist style, but the whole expression of his canvases became 'European'. There were many poor-quality narrative paintings, or 'illustrations' as Jolly calls them, circulating in Malaysia even today, examples of what Jolly's countrymen have been accustomed to. They captured none of modern life's *Zeitgeist* nor used a modern painter's methods or manners of expression and should be distinguished from the modern art that Jolly's paintings represent.

Beholding Beauty and Pleasure

Jolly remarks that most Old Master paintings are beautiful whereas many modern and contemporary pictures are not. A Romanticist at heart, he believes that his paintings must be beautiful. With beauty as his primary concern, he takes it as his task to portray and convey it in his works. 'Beauty is what my painting is all about,' he says.

Beauty in art has been a topic of debate since classical antiquity, whose definition of it was centred around ideal proportions among others. The question as to what beauty is and whether it is subjective or objective became unimportant by the beginning of the twentieth century, when beauty was altogether abandoned as the primary goal of

the arts. Besides negative political and social economical associations with beauty, the philosophical inquiry into the topic was also in decline, leading artists to believe that there should be more urgent and serious issues to be sought after in the arts other than beauty. The discrediting of beauty in the twentieth century is adequately explored in Arthur Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (2003), in which he shows how beauty, the supreme purpose of art a hundred years ago, came to be regarded as an aesthetic aberration.¹ This explains why many modern paintings ceased to be beautiful in a traditional sense, justifying Jolly's observations.

In his essay 'Painting towards an Aesthetic End', Jolly explains what he considers to be beautiful – a painting is beautiful when it has a good organisation of sensory structure, when 'every tone, colour and shape all form together into an organic whole', and the artist must use his or her aesthetic sensibility to make that judgement.² The quality of the painting, therefore, is a manifestation of the artist's aesthetic sensibility.

Jolly's conception of beauty seems disinterested. He regards the aesthetic judgment of art to be objective or inter-subjective, following the Kantian belief in universal subjectivity. Most philosophical inquiries of beauty treated it as an objective quality until the eighteenth century, when Pleasure became associated not with the effect but the origin of beauty. For Jolly, it is not a hedonist sensual pleasure that is of concern here, but a disinterested one derived from the quality of the artwork.

David Hume's 'Of the Standard of Taste' (1757) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) attempt to find an 'antinomy of taste': that taste is both subjective and objective. Both philosophers acknowledge that aesthetic judgment is fundamentally subjective and there is no standard of taste, but some views are better than others – just as we would describe somebody's taste as refined or vulgar – and beauty could be validated through universal good taste. Although there would be no beauty if people did not experience certain kinds of pleasure, the judgment that something is beautiful, Kant argues, is a disinterested one. This inter-subjective view of beauty is what Jolly adheres to.

¹ For details on the debate of beauty in the history of Western philosophy, see 'Beauty', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (website), 4 September 2012, revised on 22 March 2022.

² See *JOLLY @ 80*, exhibition catalogue, G13 Gallery, Petaling Jaya, 2021.

Jolly considers himself as an art lover who sees beauty, not as a philosopher who merely ponders upon it; and yet the nature of beauty and aesthetics is part of his artistic creations. Since absolute beauty and freedom are found in the design, namely form and colour of the artwork following Kantian reasonings, the formalist approach that focuses on the representation of the object for its own sake is adopted in aesthetic judgements, and Pleasure is derived from the disinterested experience of beauty.

The Pleasurable experience, therefore, is not of a subjective nature which amuses, entertains, or distracts. Instead, it results from the formalist quality of the object, and the ability to experience that Pleasure is dependent upon the aesthetic sensibility of the viewer. This notion of Beauty or Pleasure elevated its status to be on the same pedestal as Goodness and Truth, that altogether form the Platonic 'Greek Trinity' that Jolly subscribes to. 'Beauty includes that of nature and that of our being, as manifested in art. For me, my art is about pure beauty,' the artist claims, '... there is no knowledge to be gained from my paintings, except for beauty.'

And quality. To judge whether an artwork is good or not is to measure the quality of its sensory structure. From the perspective of the artist, a painting is thus finished when its sensory structure looks good to the creator. The ability and the aesthetic judgments of the artist determine the quality of the painting. Whereas from the perspective of the connoisseur, whose aesthetic sensibility comes into play when judging the quality of an artwork, Pleasure is obtained when the quality of a picture presents itself and when the viewer recognises it. This method is also used in judging whether a modern artwork is good or bad.

Lyrical Abstraction and Romantic Beauty

Jolly refuses being called an Expressionist, as his paintings are not externalisations of his subjective feelings or ideas about the world, but rather balanced juxtapositions of forms and colours resulting from his aesthetic sensibility. Jolly prefers to be known as a Romanticist, in the tradition of luminaries such as Caspar David Friedrich and J. M. W. Turner.

Deeply moved by the lyricism of Peter Lanyon's landscape paintings during his time in London, Jolly was to adopt a similar artistic language later. These two artists have many things in common. A major figure of British Modernism, Lanyon's style varied significantly from the 1930s to the 60s. He was profoundly influenced by American art both in terms of technique and in forms of presentation after a 1957 visit to New York, where his encounters with Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, and other artists and art critics led him to expand his canvases and to paint in a more open and looser style. He succeeded in painting in this manner without compromising the experience of the senses that he considered vital in art. Following the English landscape tradition in the lineage of John Constable and Turner, Lanyon created landscape paintings in a Modernist way and was identified by Lawrence Alloway in 1959 as 'our last landscape painter', since most modern artists chose against landscape painting.³ Lanyon was creating his major landscape paintings in the style that he is most known for when Jolly came to London. Jolly visited Lanyon at his studio in Cornwall in 1962, an encounter that was more significant than the young man was able to appreciate during those formative years. Lanyon's use of colour and preference for landscapes as a painting category had a lasting and profound impact on Jolly.⁴ The very first picture that Jolly painted upon returning to Malaysia from the UK is *The Blue Gift* (1964), a tribute paid to Lanyon. Jolly also made a studio visit to Bernard Leach, the most influential British potter of his time. Leach's practice of uniting Eastern and Western art in his pottery creations was applauded by Jolly, whose catholic tastes expanded his horizons into various arts – music, theatre, literature, etc.

Nature is of paramount importance in the Romanticist movement. Jolly's nature has an intimate and homey quality. Just as Lanyon was deeply obsessed with scenes of his hometown of St Ives – strictly speaking, Lanyon is a Cornwall painter – Jolly has chosen nature of his homeland as the main subject matter of his landscape pictures. This choice is closely related to his early experiences when he was growing up in Malacca. Jolly captures the colours, light, and atmosphere of the places filled with his childhood memories in a Modernist manner. Before being a modern painter, Jolly is first and foremost a Malaysian artist. His early watercolours display his basic training and deep

³ For studies of Peter Lanyon and his landscape paintings, see A. Causey, *Peter Lanyon: Modernism and the Land*, London, 1991; C. Stevens, *Peter Lanyon: At the Edge of Landscape*, London, 2000; and T. Treves, *Peter Lanyon, Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings and Three-Dimensional Works*, London, 2018.

⁴ Jolly was also influenced by R. Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, Boulder, Col, 1977.

connection to his motherland, a tie that is further manifested in his paintings after his studies abroad.

As the American art historian Meyer Schapiro noted, contemporary artists no longer believed in such doctrines of nature; their focus shifted due to societal changes, scientific and technological developments and the emphasis laid on awareness and self-exploration. This is also reflected by the move in aesthetic theories away from beauty in the twentieth century, as discussed earlier. The luxury of being a Romanticist lies in the mental escape from the contemporary industrial world back to the nineteenth century, when artists, poets, and philosophers looked upon Nature as a model for man and his life, the practice that Jolly carried out – holding onto the nineteenth-century trust in Nature and Beauty, he is the ultimate Romanticist.

Jolly speaks of the joyful exuberance that his paintings evoke in the viewer, which is the effect of Beauty in his art. As Edmund Burke writes, 'by beauty I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies, by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it'. The correlate of Jolly's beauty is love and joy. An avid collector of Chinese ceramics and works of art, Jolly is enchanted by the sheer beauty of the objects, especially by Song ceramics whose moulding and shape are most endearing to him. These objects are beautiful, and the experience of that beauty is filled with love and longing. It is the same Beauty in Chinese art and the Beauty embodied in the aforementioned Greek Trinity comprising of Truth, Goodness and Beauty that Jolly transports to his paintings, and to experience that Beauty borders rhapsody and ecstasy.

The experience of Beauty is thus important not only because of the Pleasure derived from aesthetic sensations, but because it equates with spiritual elevation as well. Hegel associates Beauty in art with mind and spirit, considering the Beauty of art higher than the beauty of nature, as 'the beauty of art is born of the spirit and born again'. The elevation of spirit calls out emotions such as love or adoration, explaining why although Jolly does not aim to express romantic feelings with his brushstrokes, the viewers still arrive at a certain emotional state of mind resembling joy and exuberance. By portraying landscapes in art, the artist also lifts nature to the spiritual sphere. The Beauty of paintings exceeds that of the scenery.

Accidental Beauty

Another key character of Jolly's Beauty is randomness or chance happening in art, a practice similar to that of the British modernist Francis Bacon whose many London exhibitions excited as well as stimulated Jolly. Bacon was initially inspired by Pablo Picasso's works of the late twenties to use natural forms even when portraying human figures. One notices that under close observation, a nose is not a nose and eyes are not really eyes in Bacon's pictures, and yet these elements form a complete and recognisable entity whose visual, psychological, and emotional effects are outstanding. These natural forms result from the organic flow of the paint, while the painter only intervenes scantily to model the forms so that they come nearer and nearer to what he wants, according to Bacon. This is when the aesthetic sensibility of the artist is at play. When asked about the painting process by David Silvester, Bacon commented that some of the pictures came to him as an accident:

'... suddenly the lines that I'd drawn suggested something totally different, and out of this suggestion arose this picture. I had no intention to do this picture; I never thought of it in that way. It was like one continuous accident mounting on top of another... I want to do very, very specific objects, though made out of something which is completely irrational from the point of view of being an illustration... And this is why in a way it is very wearing, because it is really a complete accident.'⁵

Jolly found the idea of accident alluring. The eloquent use of the paint medium involves taking chances and trusting the paint itself to develop random forms. The pouring method Jolly deploys is ideal for achieving this effect via appropriating and exhausting the accidental developments of the paint material. When asked about the conception before painting, Jolly admits that he has no clear idea what a picture will look like when he starts, and the liquid paint flows naturally to form organic shapes that may eventually suggest something more concrete, onto which Jolly might add some enhancements.

⁵ For interviews of Francis Bacon by David Silvester, see D. Silvester, *Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, London, 1987; see also D. Silvester and M. Harrison, *Francis Bacon: Studying Form*, London, 2005; and D. Silvester, *Looking Back at Francis Bacon*, London, 2000.

Jolly's pouring method is, however, very different from Jackson Pollock's which let the paint drip from a brush or stick, resulting in a linear spider web of abstract images – Jolly's paint is water-based and flows more effortlessly on to the canvases that often have figurative motifs. Some other American modern artists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Paul Jenkins whose paints are more fluid used methods more similar to Jolly's than Pollock did.

A vital difference between Jolly and Bacon lies in their perceptions of the artist's role. The latter thinks of himself not so much as a painter but as a medium of accident and chance, believing that movements of the brush on canvas are aimed at altering the shapes and implications, so that the application or rather de-application of the paint always brings something unexpected into being; the artist only acts as an intermediary. Jolly, however, trusts the artist's ability in proactively directing the paint: he takes advantage of what happens by chance when the paint is poured or brush applied, and he manipulates the paint into an image that he does not yet know of but is surely there, working continuously towards it till he deems the 'sensory structure' of the painting to be beautiful. Then he stops in time.

These two discrepant mindsets about the role of the artist bring us to an interesting debate: does the randomness occur utterly by accident and is artist only there to suggest, at most to direct and modify what is formed by nature, or is a chance happening not completely accidental but something brought forth using the artistic sensibility and judgment in a controlled and yet unpredictable manner? In the latter scenario, the artist relies on his talent, skills, and past experiences to lead the paint into a randomness that is free and structured at the same time. Bacon considers himself receptive rather than gifted and his randomness should belong to the first category. Jolly, on the other hand, believes in the talent of the artist. The artist transports the potential onto the brush and then the canvas, creating structures of form and arrangements of colour that are beautiful. It is a gift bestowed upon the artist, or as Jolly would say, thanks to pure luck.

This is comparable to the practice of Chinese calligraphy. Cursive script, seemingly wild and unpredictable, is in fact written in a controlled manner, following existing fixed forms. Tales about calligraphy Masters who always got drunk to enter a state of ecstasy before applying the brush are somehow misleading. The wine only serves to relax the practitioner so that he is not inhibited by immediate circumstances from reaching

his full potential: almost never were masterpieces produced when the Master was completely intoxicated. Insofar as Jolly's brushstrokes are strongly influenced by Chinese calligraphy, as he acknowledges, combining the frenzies with the stupendous calm of Zen Buddhism, the randomness in his paintings is a result of accidents manoeuvred through his aesthetic judgements.

Jolly's obsession with accidents in painting is in a way related to his conviction that 'much of life is luck', or 'sheer chance'. 'More and more,' he continues, 'I now realize how lucky I was to have studied abroad early in my life and for that luck I have my grandparents to thank for as they supported me during my years in London.' Jolly is modest and humble in that he does not take his talent and circumstances for granted, as he was just being 'lucky'.

The Odyssey

The recent paintings of Jolly Koh demonstrate the delicious fruit harvested after a long journey, the path of which is trodden not by a fatigued traveler, but with the wandering heart of a Romanticist. The artist's canvases have become ever more eloquent – their colours are bolder and brushstrokes more confident. Jolly feels nothing but gratitude: 'I am extremely privileged to be able to pursue a career as an artist ... it is nothing but luck.' Jolly believes that 'life is all about chances: the genes that one is born with determine one's character and genes are accidental; the cultural environment decided by the family that one is born into is chance; the fact that we met, how we met, and that we are having this conversation are also chances.' I disagree with the last point, preferring to believe that it is destiny that we met, not to say that we turned out to have common dear friends. After knowing Jolly as an artist and more and more as a friend, I would regret if I had never met him; pure luck seems too precarious.

This attitude towards life corresponds with his way of painting; Jolly embraces chance happenings in art as in life, while his pouring method not only allows for 'accidents' and 'surprises' but also produces a great sense of freedom. Jolly is an ultimate Romanticist whose love for his homeland is manifested in the many landscape paintings depicting nature around Malacca, an influence stemming from his childhood experiences. The

paintings are to a certain extent records of himself, his memories and states of mind. A lover of poetry and classical music – his painting *Beethoven's Garden* (2016) shows how music inspires his artistic creations – Jolly creates 'wonderfully beautiful' pictures that evoke in their viewers joy, adoration, a certain emotional state named 'love' – a longing for nature, home, and life itself.

Beauty is what one associates with Jolly's works. Ancient and medieval accounts located Beauty as outside the individual experience, as something objective. Despite the opposing view that Beauty is subjective, it was not until the eighteenth century when philosophers such as Hume and Kant reached an 'antinomy of taste': Beauty is both subjective and objective, or inter-subjective. Elaborating on the theories of Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer went on further to assume that aesthetic experience not only provides a temporary liberation from suffering, from our will, but that art provides a profound and essential knowledge of the world as well. Although Jolly would disagree with Schopenhauer that knowledge is to be obtained from his paintings, the theoretical frameworks help us better understand Jolly's art and practices.

Jolly takes a formalist approach to the topic: Beauty is objective or inter-subjective and lies in the object therein; it is a balanced arrangement of form and colour based on the aesthetic sensibility of the artist, which determines the painting's quality. The viewer, equipped with adequate talent, knowledge and training, experiences sensations of Pleasure when the quality of the artwork presents itself, and thus the aesthetic experience is rendered possible.

Quality, Beauty, and Pleasure in art are intertwined, impossible to define with language as they must be seen, felt and experienced in a phenomenological sense. The best examples are perhaps museum visits where one looks at major masterpieces. Jolly would visit the National Gallery multiple times while in London to see a dozen or maximum twenty paintings for the duration of an hour, saying that that is the most he can handle for each visit. He did this extensively for the last twenty years during his annual visits to Europe and learned a lot from the Old Masters, especially seventeenth-century Dutch paintings that he hugely admires. Condemning the lack of beauty in many modern and contemporary paintings, Jolly added that with a few exceptions beautiful paintings seem to have ended with the Impressionists and the Post-Impressionists.

Taste and fashion in art change as well. Throughout art history, we often see rebels against the established return to the conventional after reaching the extreme. Jolly's insistence on Beauty as his priority finds correspondence: a revival of interest in beauty in art and philosophy started in the early 1990s, to such an extent that the art critic Dave Hickey declared that 'the issue of the 90s will be beauty'. Jolly would have followed the same path no matter how contemporary fashion has changed and developed.

The energy and vividness of Jolly's recent works recall an artist at work whose acuteness of mind and enduring physicality see no boundary. Alerted and conscious of the limited time to do what he enjoys the most, which is to create 'wonderfully beautiful' paintings, Jolly appreciates and lives in every present day. Don't we all live in a presence that is forever passing and never to be held? Fleeting as it is, the presence envelops memories of the past and unfolds the debris into the future, a future that we call home. The odyssey back home. ■

June 2024
London

About The Author

Céline Hongyi Yang holds an MPhil Distinction degree in History of Art and Architecture from Clare College, the University of Cambridge. She was Deputy Director and Specialist for European Old Master Paintings at Sotheby's, London. She trained with Christie's, London where she was awarded her MLitt in Arts of China (University of Glasgow) and gained her dual bachelor's degrees in English literature and in Economics from Tsinghua University, Beijing.

Céline Hongyi Yang is an art curator and writer. Her recent book *Roger Fry, Arthur Waley and Goldsworthy Dickinson: The Cambridge Trio and the Discussion of the Modernity of Chinese Art in England* (2023) deals with the three King's College figures who together initiated art-historical debate about traditional Chinese art in the early twentieth century, reaching congruent and corroborating conclusions that Chinese art was modern, embodied the classic spirit, and was accessible to Western audiences. 'The book fills a void by examining in depth the writings of the Trio on Chinese art, during a transitional period that led to further (re-)assessment of Chinese art and its history.' (*Preface* by Prof Jean Michel Massing, King's College, University of Cambridge)

A well-versed art historian who speaks Mandarin, English, German and French, she acts as an educator as well as cultural ambassador. Her continuous effort in fostering cultural exchange between East and West has led to the publication of many articles, and she has been featured in the *Financial Times*, the *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, *Ming Pao*, etc.

An abstract painting featuring a vibrant yellow upper section that transitions into a complex, layered composition of colors including blue, red, purple, and brown. The lower portion shows thick, textured brushstrokes and blended colors, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall style is expressive and gestural.

RECENT
PAINTINGS

Flowers in the Sky

2022
oil and acrylic on canvas
305 cm x 244 cm





Flowers in the Sky, II 2024 oil and acrylic on canvas 81 cm x 173 cm



Flowers in the Sky, III

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 170 cm



Flowers in the Sky, IV

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
118 cm x 170 cm



Detail from *Flowers in the Sky, V*, page 33



Flowers in the Sky, V

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
170 cm x 122 cm



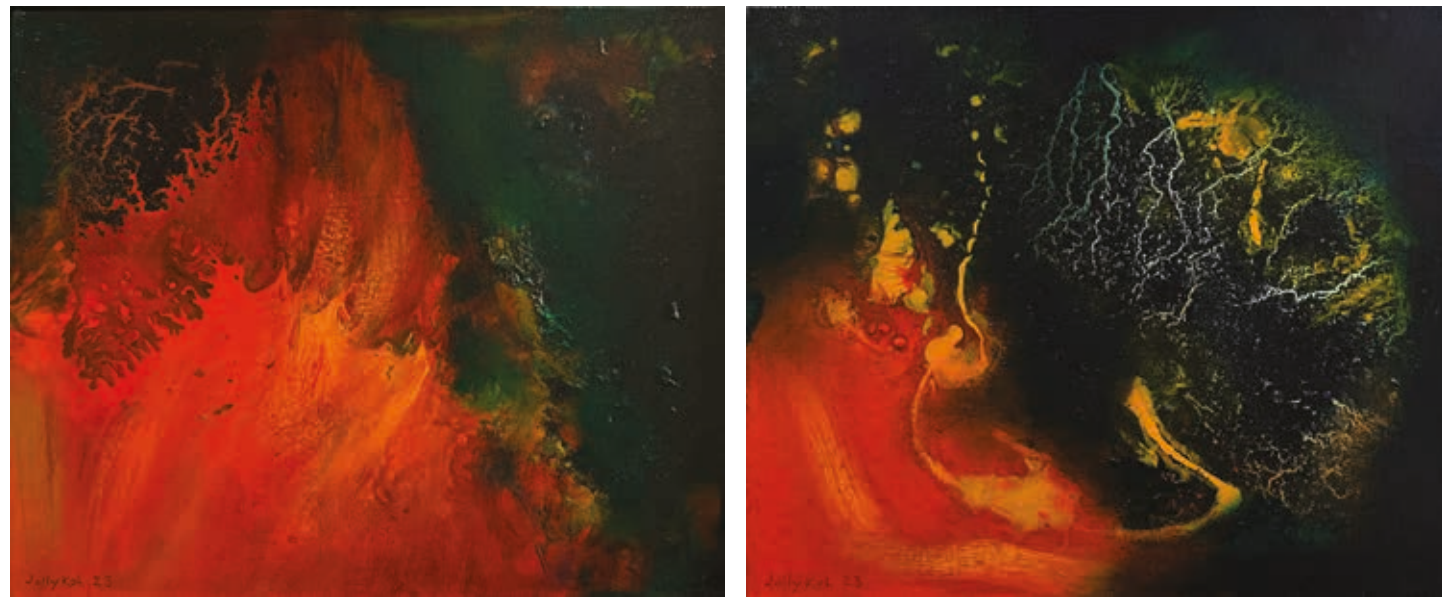
Blossoms

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
74 cm x 59 cm



Blossoms, II

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
59 cm x 66 cm



Red Coral / Yellow Light, II

2023
oil and acrylic on board
29 cm x 34 cm each



Friends / Yellow Light

2023
oil and acrylic on board
29 cm x 34 cm each



Jungle Plant, II / Night Breeze

2023
oil and acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm each



Night Breeze, II

2024
oil and acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Nightscape

2022
acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Nightscape, II

2022
acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Nightscape, III

2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
43 cm x 31 cm



Moon Reflection

2019
oil and acrylic on canvas
37 cm x 27 cm



Moon Landscape

2024
oil and acrylic on board
29 cm x 34 cm



Day

2018
oil and acrylic on board
40 cm x 30 cm



Night

2018
oil and acrylic on board
40 cm x 30 cm



The Moon & Sun

2022
oil and acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Pink Nebula
2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
74 cm x 92 cm



Pink Nebula, II
2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
74 cm x 92 cm



Red Movement

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
84 cm x 104 cm



Red Movement, II

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
81 cm x 46 cm



Yellow Surprise

2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
54 cm x 125 cm



Splash

2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
69 cm x 84 cm



Detail from *"The force that through the green fuse drives the flower drives my green age..."*, page 53



"The force that through the green fuse drives the flower drives my green age..."

2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
183 cm x 132 cm



The River

2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
137 cm x 152 cm



Tanjong Bidara

2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
130 cm x 173 cm

Thoughts of a Landscape

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
183 cm x 118 cm



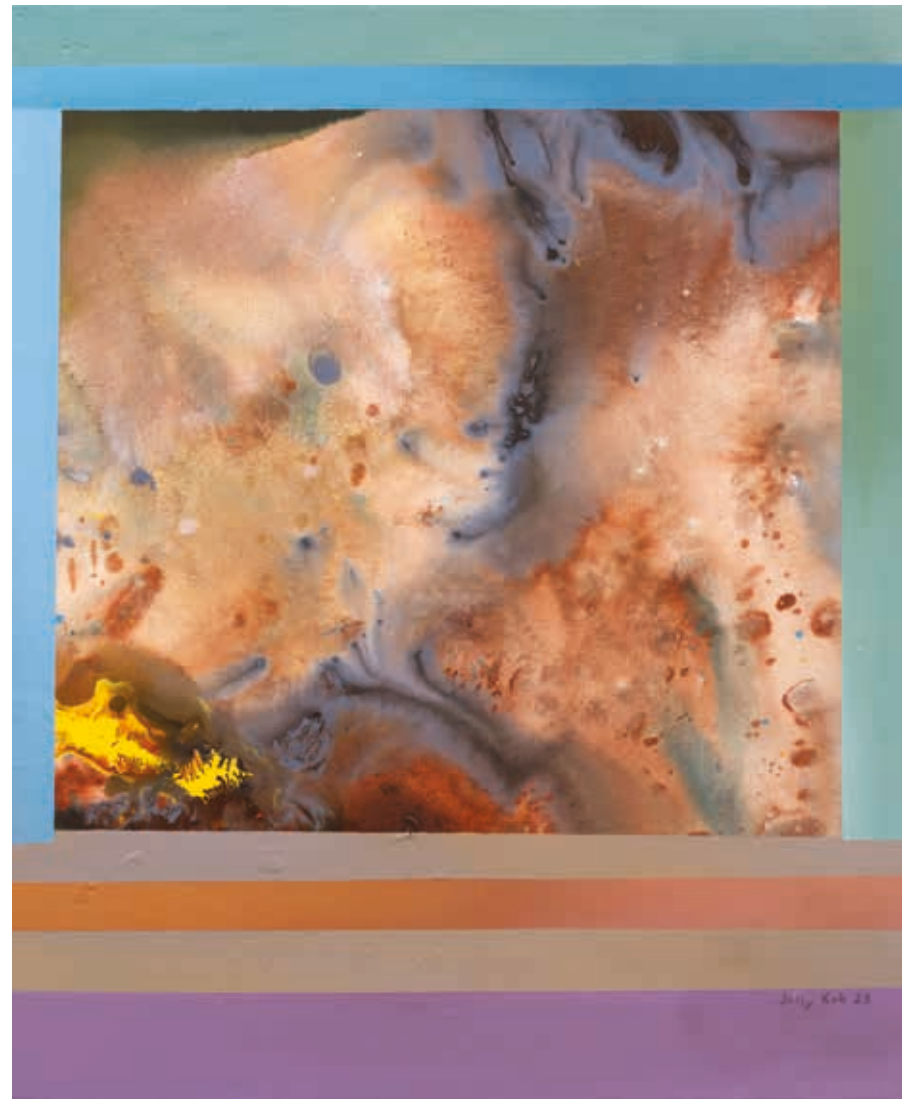


Hills in Qiandao Lake

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 170 cm



Detail from *Hills in Qiandao Lake*, page 58



Rock Surface
2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
69 cm x 58 cm



Falls
2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
89 cm x 97 cm



Sun Shower

2024
oil and acrylic on board
29 cm x 34 cm



Golden Mountain

2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
135 cm x 152 cm



Noon Light

2022
oil and acrylic on canvas
155 cm x 201 cm



A Floating Rose

2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
153 cm x 97 cm



Growth

2022
oil and acrylic on canvas
50 cm x 55 cm

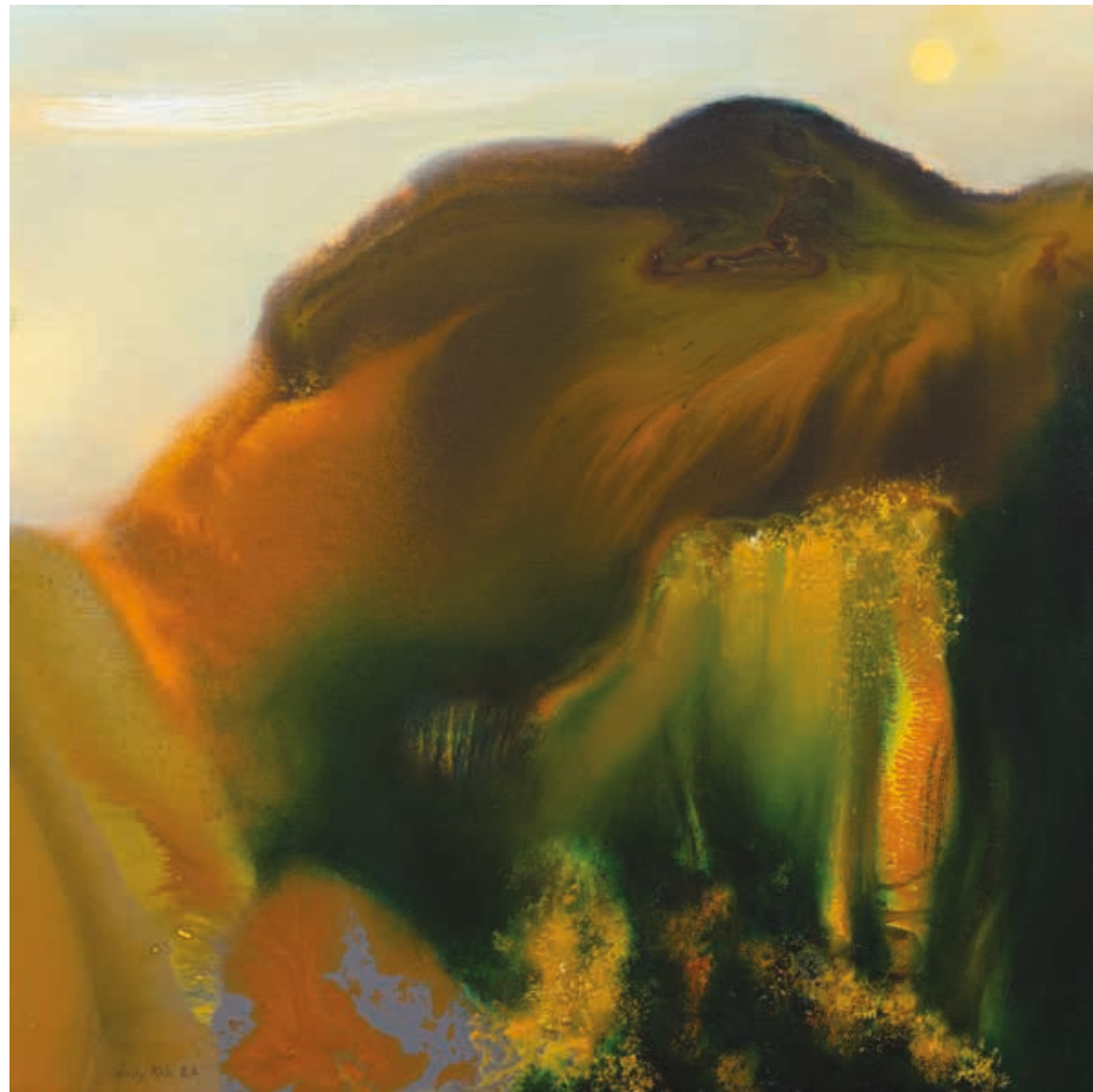


Cotswolds in Autumn

2020
oil on canvas
41 cm x 61 cm



Early Sun 2022 oil and acrylic on canvas 51 cm x 173 cm



Early Moon, II
2022
oil and acrylic on canvas
71 cm x 71 cm



The Surge
2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
84 cm x 46 cm



Morning, Day & Night, V 2023 oil and acrylic on canvas 61 cm x 244 cm



Detail from *Moon Rise*, page 75



Moon Rise

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
59 cm x 118 cm



"In the moon that is always rising..."

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 64 cm



Moonglow

2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
86 cm x 39 cm



"In the sun born over and over..."

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 92 cm



Sunrise

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 64 cm



Aurora, II
2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 170 cm



Detail from *Aurora, II*, page 80



Violet
2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
82 cm x 164 cm



Evening Walk
2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
92 cm x 82 cm



Wave
2018
oil and acrylic on canvas
56 cm x 84 cm



Blue Rhapsody
2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 183 cm



Blue Movement 2022 oil and acrylic on canvas 118 cm x 244 cm



Blue Movement, II 2022 oil and acrylic on canvas 64 cm x 244 cm



Blue Wave
2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
31 cm x 50 cm



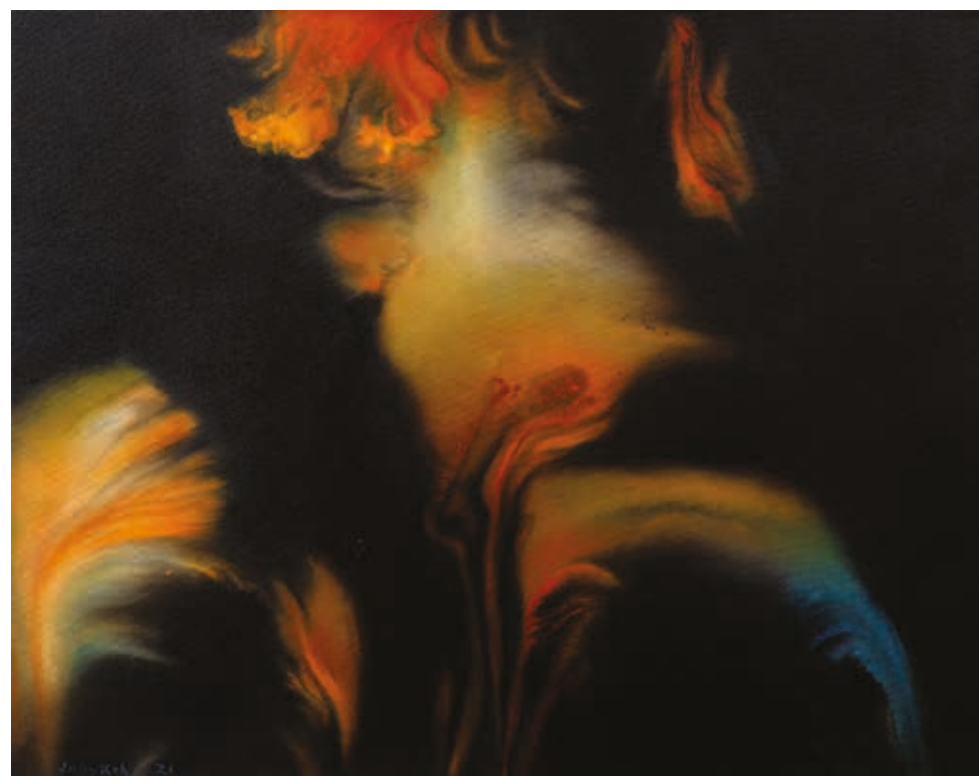
Green Wave
2022
oil and acrylic on canvas
46 cm x 97 cm



Visiting Wanda, II
2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
137 cm x 152 cm



Visiting Wanda, III
2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
137 cm x 152 cm



Movement
2021
oil and acrylic on canvas
67 cm x 81 cm



Kupu-kupu Biru
2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
112 cm x 160 cm



Romance of Ink Painting

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 56 cm



Romance of Ink Painting, II

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 56 cm

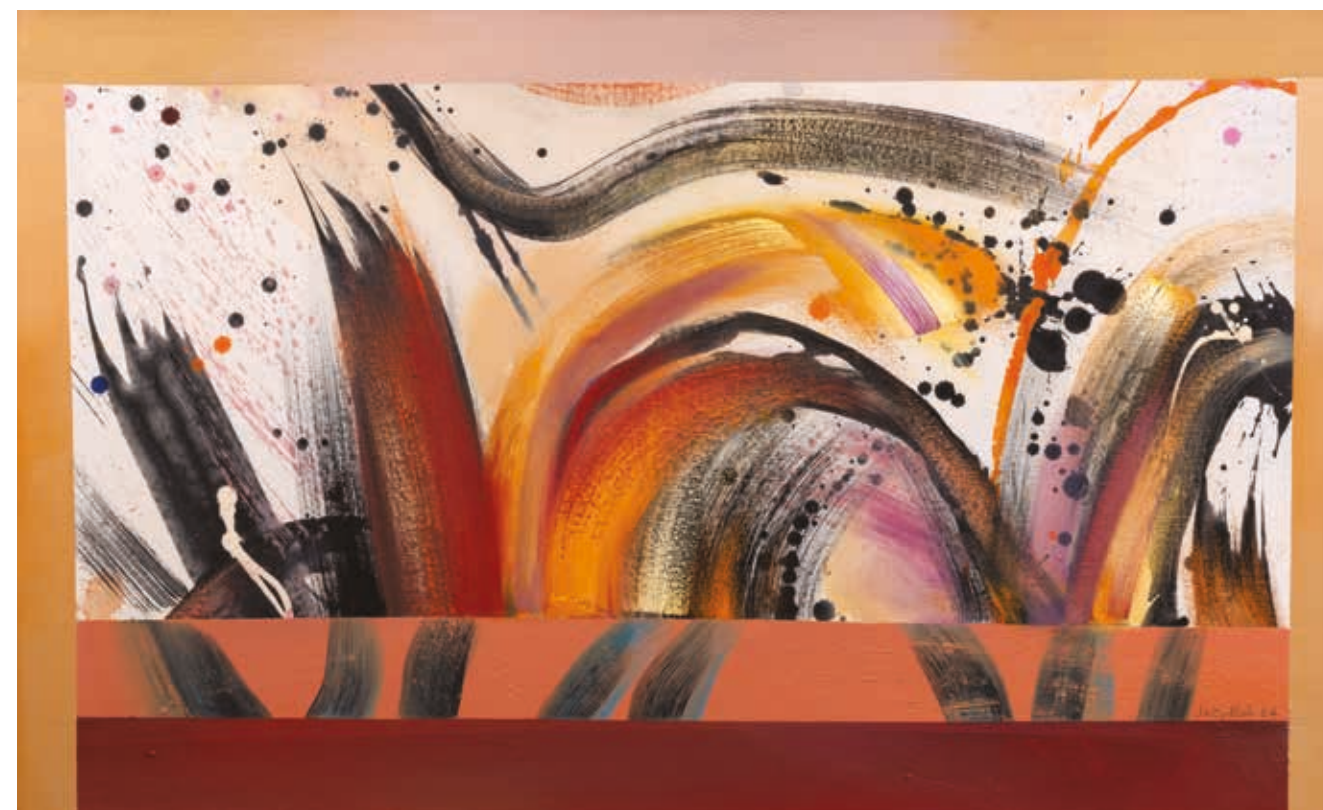


Modern Calligraphy 2024 oil and acrylic on canvas 122 cm x 427 cm



Modern Calligraphy, II

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
70 cm x 117 cm



Modern Calligraphy, III

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
70 cm x 117 cm



Flora
2022
acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Flora, II
2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
37 cm x 27 cm



Jungle Plant
2022
acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Two Friends
2024
acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Magic, II

2022
oil and acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Magic, VI

2022
oil and acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Magic, IV

2022
oil and acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Magic, V

2022
oil and acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Magic, VII

2022
oil and acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Nebula

2022
acrylic on board
34 cm x 29 cm



Zen
2024
oil and acrylic on board
29 cm x 34 cm



Eggplant
2024
oil and acrylic on board
29 cm x 34 cm



Abstract Thoughts
2006
acrylic on paper
22 cm x 50 cm



Red Droppings

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
41 cm x 51 cm



"Now as I was young and easy..."

2024
oil and acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 183 cm



Detail from "Now as I was young and easy...", page 111

JOLLY KOH

BIODATA

1941	Born in Singapore
1959 – 1962	Hornsey College of Art, London, UK N.D.D (National Diploma in Design)
1962 – 1963	London University, UK A.T.C (Art Teachers Certificate)
1970 – 1972	Indiana University, U.S.A. M. Sc (Master of Science)
1972 – 1975	Indiana University, U.S.A. Ed. D (Doctor of Education)

SOLO EXHIBITION

1958	British Council, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1959	Odeon, Singapore
1967	Samat Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1968	Samat Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1971	Indiana University, U.S.A.
1978	Raya Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
1980	Raya Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
1982	Raya Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
1983	Tynte Gallery, Adelaide, Australia
1985	Raya Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
1987	Raya Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
1989	Raya Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
1992	Galeriwan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1994	Galeriwan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1996	Shenn's Fine Art, Singapore
1997	NN Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1999	Valentine Willie Fine Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2003	Valentine Willie Fine Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2004	Art Salon & XOAS Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2006	Art Salon & XOAS Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2007	Gallery Archana, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2008	Art Salon & XOAS Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2008	Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in conjunction with the book launch of Jolly Koh, Maya Press
2011	SENI Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2013	The Edge Galerie, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2017	Curate Henry Butcher, White Box, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2019	PINKGUY Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2022	G13 Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2024	KEN Gallery, Henry Butcher Auctioneers, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

GROUP EXHIBITION

1962	Young Contemporaries, RBA Galleries, London, U.K.
1967	The GRUP, AIA Building, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1967	Malaysia Art Touring Europe
1968	Malaysia Art Touring Europe
1969	X Biennial in Sao Paolo, Brazil
1969	The New Scene, Galeri 11, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1974	ASEAN Mobile Exhibition, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Jakarta, Manila, Bangkok
1975	Third Indian Triennale, New Delhi, India
1978	Fourth Indian Triennale, New Delhi, India
1978	Malaysia Art 65 – 78, Commonwealth Institute, London, U.K.
1981	Fifth Indian Triennale, New Delhi, India
1995	Tresor '95, Suntec City, Singapore
1997	ReGRUP, Valentine Willie Fine Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2000	NN Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2005	Art Salon & XOAS Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2005	Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2006	Art Salon & XOAS Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2007	Art Salon @ SENI Galley, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2008	Wei-Ling Galley, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2010	Sunjin Galleries, Singapore
2017	Museum and Art Gallery Bank Negara Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2017	Ilham Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2019	La Galerie du Monde, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2021	G13 Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

PUBLIC & CORPORATE COLLECTIONS

National Gallery, Singapore
National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia
National Art Gallery, Victoria, Australia
Bank Negara, Malaysia
Galeri Petronas, Malaysia
EON Bank, Malaysia
J.D. Rockefeller III Collection, New York, U.S.A.
ESSO, Malaysia
Telecom, Australia
Footscray Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Australia
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, U.S.A.
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia
The Kasama Nichido Museum of Art, Japan
RHB Bank, Malaysia
Public bank, Malaysia
Fullerton Hotel, Singapore
Westin Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Securities Commission, Malaysia
Siemens, Malaysia
CIMB, Malaysia
Bandar Raya Developments Bhd, Malaysia
Ireka Corporation Bhd, Malaysia
Juta Asia Corporation Sdn Bhd, Malaysia
DiGi Telecommunications Sdn Bhd, Malaysia
CapitaLand, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

PUBLICATIONS

1. "Paula has Learned", Philosophy of Education 1975, (Annual Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society, U.S.A)
2. "Jones is Teaching", Philosophy of Education 1976, U.S.A. (Annual Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society, U.S.A.)
3. "On the Creative Process and One Aspect of Learning Art", Educational Philosophy and Theory, Vol 9-No 2, 1977, Australasia
4. "A Preface for Inquiries into Art Education", Studies in Art Education, Vol 20-No 2, Dec 1978, U.S.A.
5. "Philosophy and Some of Its Influences on Art Educators", Arts in Cultural Diversity (Selected Papers from the 23rd World Congress of the International Society for Education through Art), 1978, Adelaide, South Australia
6. "The Drawing Lesson". The British Journal of Aesthetics, Vol 20-No 3, Summer 1980, U.K.
7. "The Teaching of Drawing", published by National Art Gallery, Malaysia, 2002
8. "Artistic Imperative: Selected Writings and Paintings", published by Maya Press, 2004
9. "Jolly Koh", published by Maya Press, 2008
10. "Jolly Koh @ 76", published by Maya Press, 2017
11. "Jolly @ 80", published by G13 Gallery, Malaysia, 2021
12. "Jolly @ 83", published by Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers, Malaysia, 2024



ARTIST AT WORK



from top to bottom

Working on *Aurora, II*
Working on *Modern Calligraphy*



from left to right

Working on *Blue Rhapsody*
Working on *Flowers in the Sky*





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Lim Eng Chong and Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers for organising this exhibition. My thanks must also be extended to the team in Henry Butcher, particularly to Sim Polenn, Tan Rei Chei and Chang Chee Siong who bring this exhibition to fruition. My very special thanks to Angela Liu Jing who patiently took all the photographs that show the home of the artist and the artist at work.



HENRY BUTCHER
ART AUCTIONEERS