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“My World is Modern”:

Deprovincialising Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin, Artists from Southeast Asia Who Traversed the Global South

ROGER NELSON

Abstract

Should paintings made in Sudan, or depicting scenes in Kenya, be considered “Southeast Asian” art? This essay considers this and related questions, in dialogue with the works of artists Chen Cheng Mei (b. 1927, Singapore; d. 2020, Singapore) and You Khin (b. 1947, Cambodia; d. 2009, Thailand). Chen was based in Singapore but travelled extensively on short study trips that she initiated between the 1960s and 2000s, while You Khin lived and worked in Sudan, Ivory Coast, Qatar and elsewhere during his three decades in exile from Cambodia, from the 1970s to the 2000s. The essay argues that their work reflects the divergent histories of Southeast Asian nations during the period of decolonisation, while also necessitating new critical approaches to artworks that depict unfamiliar people and places, going beyond concepts of primitivism. Drawing on primary research in both artists’ archives as well as on discourses derived from the locations depicted in their work, the essay argues that Chen’s and You’s works enable a deprovincialising of Southeast Asia’s modern art, and exemplify a postcolonial cosmopolitanism that traverses the Global South.

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How is the world—including Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and beyond—imagined and encountered in Southeast Asia’s modern art? In dialogue with works by two artists who traversed these and other geographies and portrayed the people they met, this essay proposes that this art has value not only for its explication of “Southeast Asia” and its sensibilities as a region. The modern art of Southeast Asia can also be an exemplar of a distinctly modern and postcolonial cosmopolitanism that demands deprovincialising, as it criss-crosses the Global South. The two artists in question are Chen Cheng Mei (b. 1927, Singapore; d. 2020, Singapore) and You Khin (b. 1947, Cambodia; d. 2009, Thailand).¹ Chen lived and worked in Singapore but travelled extensively on short study trips that informed her paintings, prints and sketches. She took over 200 trips to dozens of different destinations during more than six decades of artistic practice, returning most often to places in South and Southeast Asia and Africa, and also visiting the Americas, Europe and Oceania. From the 1970s until the 2000s, most of Chen’s trips were self-organised journeys in search of artistic inspiration. During the same period, between the 1970s and 2000s You Khin lived and worked in exile from conflict-ravaged Cambodia: first as a student in France, then as a refugee in Sudan and Ivory Coast, then in Qatar for almost two decades, followed by a briefer period in London, before finally returning to Cambodia. He exhibited actively throughout this period, presenting solo shows of his paintings in Khartoum, Doha, Dubai, London, Phnom Penh and elsewhere. By contrast, Chen’s first major solo exhibition in Singapore was held in 2004, when she was already 77 years old.

Let us begin by sketching some of the ideas that animate Chen’s and You’s artworks depicting people and scenes across Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and beyond, drawing not only on statements made by artists themselves, but also from their counterparts in these diverse geographies, in a polemical attempt to deprovincialise these figures. That is, I aim to place these artists from Southeast Asia in conversation with their peers elsewhere in the Global South: an impulse that is guided by the artists themselves, with You Khin having proclaimed that “My world is modern”,² while Chen proposed that “Everyone is an artist in this world.”³ Central to my understanding of Chen’s and You’s approach to depicting unfamiliar people in far-flung places is my sense that both artists respected the “right to opacity” (as Caribbean scholar Édouard Glissant describes it) that inheres with people and cultures.⁴ With this phrase, which I will discuss in more detail below, Glissant insists that people retain the liberty to remain unknowable to outsiders looking in. At the same time, I propose that Chen’s and You’s artworks make manifest the “internal unity to the world” while “recogni[sing] the aggressiveness and

fierceness of the encounter [with] heritage": as invoked in a significant 1969 manifesto written by six celebrated Iraqi modern artists, including Ismail Fattah, whom You Khin met and sketched while living in Qatar in 1988.⁵ Chen's and You's works instantiate the notion—as articulated in 1969 by a prominent group of pan-African intellectuals, whose ideas had currency while Chen made repeated study trips to African nations including Kenya and Zambia, and You Khin lived, worked and exhibited in Sudan and Ivory Coast—that "culture is the essential cement of every social group, its primary means of intercommunication and of coming to grips with the outside world".⁶ This belief unknowingly echoes the claim made in 1965 by S. Rajaratnam, then Singapore's Minister for Culture, that works by Chen and her peers "bring about international good will and understanding...preserv[ing] cordial relations with our neighbours and strengthening of cultural bonds of mutual help and benefit".⁷

In this essay, I consider these and related ideas in relation to artworks made chiefly between the 1970s and 2000s by Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin, artists who have been outliers in most accounts of the art of Singapore, Cambodia and Southeast Asia. Attention to the visual qualities of their artworks will be central to what follows, yet I also aim to propel these works into an enlarged terrain of thought. As we've seen, some of these ideas come from the artists themselves—and for glimpses of their thoughts, I have been very fortunate to have access to the extensive archives left by both artists,⁸ but other ideas extend beyond their practice, traversing the diverse territories in which they worked and from which they drew their inspiration.

This attempt at deprovincialising is inspired, in part, by Achille Mbembe's call for a "planetary library" that "rests on the assumption of the inseparability of the different archives of the world" and strives to "draw upon each of them while drawing them together".⁹ Noting Dipesh Chakrabarty's widely-cited efforts to "provincialise" European thought and history by challenging its claims to be universal, Mbembe and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni call for African thinking and experience to be "deprovincialised", that is, to be recognised as offering tools for thinking through questions that emerge far from and extend far beyond the African continent.¹⁰ As Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues, "Provincializing and deprovincialising are strategies of decolonizing in general.... Deprovincialising is meant to address the problem of marginalization, decentredness and dismemberment in the knowledge domain", which he also describes as a process of Africa having been "peripherised".¹¹ In a similar vein, when the six Iraqi modern artists including Ismail Fattah wrote the manifesto cited above, the "new vision" they called for was a "new vision of the *world*".¹² But where is Southeast Asia in this artistic vision of the world, and where is the world in Southeast Asia's artistic visions?

My sense is that, in discussions of Southeast Asia's modern and contemporary art, we rarely think or speak in terms of "the world", largely confining ourselves to considerations of "the region" (and, in earlier narratives, its constituent nations). Despite the popularity of "worlding" as a concept in recent approaches to the modern and contemporary art of Southeast Asia, and notwithstanding the fact that studies of this region's art have burgeoned in recent years, Southeast Asia's art-related discourses have remain largely bounded to (or perhaps even confined by) the limits of the region itself. And insofar as the region's geographical limits have been challenged by attention to diasporic artists and communities, these diasporas have mostly been affiliated with territories across the Global North, chiefly Europe and North America, as well as to a lesser degree with Australasia. Perhaps by focusing on Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin—artists whose ties were to people and places in the Global South—this essay may offer some modest contribution to the forging of new affiliations between Southeast Asia and other regions across the decolonising planet.

I will begin by considering some concerns that are common to both artists' practices, and will then argue that Chen's and You's works share an approach I will call *encounterism*, in contradistinction to primitivism, a Western-derived concept which I contend is ill-suited to understanding artworks made by these two non-Western artists encountering non-Western people and places, with a deep respect for their anonymity, unknowability and "opacity". After this, I briefly discuss the artists' depictions of scenes closer to home, before focusing on Chen and You Khin in turn, and considering their relationships to national and regional art historical narratives. Throughout, I adopt a speculative methodology proposing some intersections between Chen's and You's works and artistic and intellectual concerns and claims on modernity as they have been voiced far from Southeast Asia. This effort is driven by a conviction that cultural discourses emerging from other regions across the Global South might perhaps enable an expanded understanding of modernity in art in Southeast Asia.

Shared Concerns, Divergent Trajectories

Let us begin again, this time by looking at a painting (Figure 1). In it, oil paint, although dull in hue and mostly muted in tone, has been applied with a passion forged from fascination, to capture the relish, thrill and puzzled bewilderment of the artist's encounters in a place far from "home". This quickly daubed and unevenly mixed pigment has been made to evocatively depict cascading swathes of fabric, as well as strong, sinuously muscle-bound

FIGURE 1: You Khin. *Untitled (The Tailors and the Mannequins)*. 1981. Oil on canvas, 83 × 61 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

human figures who are keenly engrossed in their humble daily work. The stylised silhouette of a white dove rendered against a small plane of pale blue offers us, perhaps, a view out onto nature, or maybe a glimpse into the artist's idiosyncratic imagination: hinting at a preoccupation with philosophical freedom and cosmopolitan movement, and also with their constraint. (We will return to this painting shortly.)

With these lines, I am describing You Khin's *The Tailors and the Mannequins*, a painting made in 1981 in Abidjan, the seaside capital city of Ivory Coast (officially the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire), a mid-sized nation on the southern coast of West Africa, where the artist lived and worked from 1979 to 1981. But these sentences could also describe many other works by You Khin, including those he made in other cities in Africa, as well as in the Middle East and elsewhere. Moreover, much of this description could also apply to many works by Chen Cheng Mei, including those depicting sundry locations scattered across Africa and South Asia, Latin America and Southeast Asia, visited by the artist on her dozens of study trips across these and other parts of the world, as well as closer to the artist's home in Singapore. By juxtaposing works by Chen and You Khin, this essay aims to illuminate some

of their shared concerns, and by extension, to suggest some ways in which their transcontinental artistic practices make manifest not only Singapore's and Cambodia's emplacement within Southeast Asia, but also the region's interconnection with the world¹³—and in particular, with other decolonising zones within the Global South.

Although they were born two decades apart, never knew each other, and tended to paint and draw in very different styles, Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin had in common several important qualities. Both artists were educated at the preeminent institutions of artistic instruction in their respective countries—Chen at Singapore's Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, and You Khin at Phnom Penh's (Royal) University of Fine Arts—then furthered their studies in France.¹⁴ Yet both went on to live highly unusual lives, spent a good deal of time far from home, and adopted rather individual styles. Both artists resisted the conventional expectations of their gender: Chen set an uncommon example for women with her adventurous, outgoing nature, while You Khin allowed his wife's career as a professor of French to play a role of equal and sometimes greater importance than his own in his family's life. Both artists took an early interest in ancient Khmer “heritage”, as evidenced by Chen's *Angkor Wat Detail II*, made in 1962 before her visit to Cambodia's celebrated premodern temples (Figure 2), and by the photographic documentation of You's early works depicting similar subject matter, made in Phnom Penh a few years later (Figure 3). It seems that they shared a belief that “The past is not a dead object that we study; rather it is a stance that goes beyond time”:¹⁵ a notion with currency across the Global South, and articulated here by the six Iraqi modern artists including Ismail Fattah, as cited above.

Even more striking than the commonalities mentioned above are the shared concerns that underpin both artists' works done between the 1970s and the 2000s, which are the focus of this essay. These foundational fascinations (as seen in You's *The Tailors and the Mannequins*, described above) include a recurrent compulsion to record ordinary, quotidian people and scenes, as well as a special enthrallment with the portrayal of cloth and other tactile surfaces, and a deep and abiding attraction to picturing their encounters with places and cultures that are unfamiliar and far from home.

For both artists, everyday subject matter offered an opportunity for compositional experimentation and the development and articulation of their own idiosyncratic styles. This set them apart from their peers (such as the left-leaning “social realists” affiliated with Singapore's Equator Art Society, or their counterparts affiliated with Phnom Penh's *Samagam Silpa Vicitrakar Khmaer* or Association of Modern Khmer Painters), who during the 1950s and 1960s approached everyday subject matter with a primary interest in its

FIGURE 2: Chen Cheng Mei. *Angkor Wat Detail II*. 1962. Oil on canvas, 65.5 × 73.5 cm. Gift of Chen Cheng Mei. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

FIGURE 3: Photographs depicting You Khin's student works made in Phnom Penh. Circa early 1970s. Collection of National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive. Gift of You Muoy, wife of the artist.

ideological associations, rather than its possibilities for facilitating aesthetic innovations or playfulness. Perhaps above all, both artists' works make evident the great significance of their travels—especially through locations in the Global South—as wellsprings of inspiration. As Chen exclaimed in an interview, “The world is so big. See the world and learn from the world! Learn from the world! Learn from the people there.”¹⁶ Rendering visible their imaginings of and encounters with the world—including the world beyond Southeast Asia—is at the heart of both Chen's and You's work.

Yet the nature of their travels differed greatly, and these differences stemmed not only from each artist's individual biography and circumstances (for example, that Chen was the daughter of an affluent businessperson who grew prized fruits and orchids, and You Khin the son of rural farmers who grew rice¹⁷), but importantly also from the diverging histories and disparate fortunes of their respective homelands.

Throughout her long life, Chen always lived and worked in Singapore, which enjoyed increasing stability and rising prosperity during the decades that followed decolonisation, setting the new nation apart from many of its Southeast Asian neighbours, which were beset by various conflicts. From her comfortable and peaceful base in a charming, gardened house in one of the city's leafier areas (on a property not too far from where the family's abundant fruit orchard had been located¹⁸), Chen took dozens of short study trips across many continents—first in Southeast Asia, then in South and East Asia, then in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Africa, Oceania, and many other places besides¹⁹—bringing back with her many sketches, snapshots, souvenirs and memories which then animated her work in her studio. As the artist and writer Choy Weng Yang describes it, on her travels, Chen enjoyed “subjecting herself to demanding, intensive sessions of sketching on the spot, supported by tantalizing moments of visual surprises. These precious visual discoveries would later be examined and stretched to their full potential in the privacy of the artist's studio.”²⁰ While this peripatetic and transcontinental approach to artistic practice set her apart from her peers, Chen did also join several groups and associations of artists in Singapore;²¹ as a cosmopolitan artist in this globally-connected port city, she was certainly not an isolated figure.

You Khin, by contrast, left the civil war in Cambodia to study in France in 1973, and would not resettle in his homeland for three decades. In the intervening years, Cambodia suffered mass violence as well as economic and political upheavals, and You Khin lived as a refugee and worked as an artist and architect in both Sudan and Ivory Coast, before spending almost 20 years in Qatar and finally a short period in the United Kingdom. Like most

Cambodians of his generation, his family was tragically decimated by the Khmer Rouge genocide during the 1970s; these atrocities were described by the artist and scholar Chheng Phon as a "heavy rock [that] will weigh down on us for many hundreds of years to come".²² Most artists active in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge took power died during the genocide; as many as 80 to 90 per cent of all artists perished, according to Chheng Phon.²³ You Khin's extensive archive, which documents the solo exhibitions he held in Abidjan, Khartoum, Doha, London and Phnom Penh, comprises perhaps the only such record of continuous professional practice during this period by any Cambodian visual artist of his generation.²⁴ His sketches and notes made between the 1970s and 2000s shift between English, French and Khmer, making palpable his cosmopolitan sensibility as a Cambodian who was awarded a French passport after a period of statelessness.²⁵ Yet You's work is not held in any public collections in Cambodia or France. A small private museum is being constructed by his widow You Muoy by the banks of the Tonle Bati lake, about 30 kilometres south of Phnom Penh, to share his work with Cambodian publics. Most of the museum's visitors will be seeing the artist's work for the very first time.

Encounterism, Opacity and Modernity: Works Inspired by Travels

Having established their shared reliance on experiences far from home, we now turn to exploring the specific qualities of Chen's and You's picturing of the peoples and places they met during their travels. Should artworks by Southeast Asian artists working in the wake of decolonisation be approached with the same critical vocabulary developed in critiques applied to those artworks made by Western artists during the colonial period? More specifically, should Chen's and You's depictions of modern African, South Asian and other peoples be considered examples of "primitivism", a term used to describe (and censure) Western artists like Paul Gauguin, who portrayed people whom he regarded as "un-civilised" in Tahiti nearly a century prior? Perhaps efforts at decolonising or deimperialising methods for approaching art may also encompass attempts to coin new terms for understanding art.

While both artists were drawn to the portrayal of people from cultures other than their own, their works consistently shy away from pretending to make any claim to a special, totalising insight into those cultures, nor do they valorise those cultures as being more "exotic", "pure" or "noble" than their own. Thus, I argue that the Western-derived and Western-centric discourse of primitivism is an ineffective means to understand works by Chen and You Khin. Primitivism is a concept typically used to describe works by

Western artists that depict non-Western peoples, and Western primitivism has been roundly critiqued for reproducing racist perceptions and perpetuating colonial dynamics in which dominant social groups speak on behalf of Others that they judge to be “un-civilised”.²⁶

More recent, revisionist approaches to primitivism have sought to complicate the colonised/coloniser dichotomy, and to consider how primitivism could also be an empowering tool for colonised people, including artists. Partha Mitter has emphasised the “contradictions” and “ambiguities of primitivism” within Western discourse—including that primitivism is both modern and anti-modern—while also arguing that the “ambivalent relationship between modernity, modernism and the primitive allowed Indian artists to put forward anti-colonial strategies and thus fashion their national identity, which they would not have been able to do with academic naturalism”.²⁷ Drawing in part on Mitter’s ideas, Ruth B. Phillips has drawn attention to a “common field of reference that artistic engagements with ‘primitive art’ could create among artists from communities distinguished by radical differentials of social status and political power”, also noting that “Appreciation for the Indigenous arts of Africa, the Pacific and the Americas came to constitute what sociologist Herbert Gans has termed a ‘taste culture’ that linked members of art worlds in imperial, settler and colonized societies.”²⁸ Clearly, there is room for the discourse of primitivism to continue to shift beyond either celebrations or critiques of Western artists such as Gauguin, to instead consider how the concept has been selectively adapted and even completely transformed in diverse contexts.

Yet Mitter’s and Phillips’ revisionist repositioning of primitivism is chiefly concerned with reconsidering individual artists’ relationships to a broader society or nation, and for this reason, their methods are of limited value in approaching works by Chen and You Khin, who were idiosyncratic outliers. While recognising Mitter’s astute insistence that “primitivism is a complex umbrella term whose meaning changes as the context changes”,²⁹ I suggest that a new term be adopted in our discussion of Chen’s and You’s artworks, which were largely unconcerned with national or other collective contexts, and instead dramatise a highly personal moment of engagement between the artists and the unfamiliar contexts.

In contradistinction to primitivism, I propose that Chen’s and You’s paintings, prints and drawings portraying people and scenes in diverse locations across the Global South may instead be considered *encounterist*, because these works aim to dramatise and restage the artists’ own subjective experience of the moment of encounter, instead of attempting to characterise and judge the people, place or culture being encountered.

Chen's and You's encounterism relies on several shared strategies. These include: first, the tendency to depict figures with their gaze averted from the artist, and by extension from us as viewers; second, a stylisation and simplification in the depictions of figures, which resists naturalistic representation; third, the compositional distancing of the figures from the space occupied by the artist, and by extension by us as viewers; and fourth, the tendency to accentuate the clothing worn by the figures, rather than their bodies, thereby emphasising their exterior qualities rather than attempting or pretending to offer insight into their interior lives.

These encounterist strategies work in tandem to enforce what Édouard Glissant terms the "right to *opacity*"³⁰ that inheres with the people Chen and You encountered and depicted in their works; following Ho Ho Ying, we may also regard the acceptance that these people will always remain beyond total comprehension as an essentially *modern* mode of thought. Glissant argues that people have the right to remain unknown and unknowable—opaque, not transparent—to outsiders looking in. He notes that the erosion of opacity also necessitates a negation of complexity: "In order to understand and thus accept you...I have to reduce," a process that also provides "grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements".³¹ Ho Ho Ying (a Singapore artist and writer) argues that the nature of the modern is essentially and inherently always opaque and out of reach: "When you manage to grasp the modern, it has ceased to be modern. The modern is the 'shadow of a bird in flight', always moving forward; the 'shadow of a bird in flight' you see is the vanishing of the old and the new coming forth to take its place."³² According to Ho, to be able to truly see the modern, an artist must be always slightly out of step with it.³³ To perceive something—or someone—as being somehow ungraspable is to recognise that thing or person as being modern. Chen's and You's artworks offer a way beyond primitivism; their works also offer a view of the non-Western people they encountered throughout the Global South as essentially and inherently modern.

To begin to elucidate what I am calling the encounterism in Chen's and You's work—which enshrines the opacity of the people they met, and implicitly recognises that those people are modern—let us return to *The Tailors and the Mannequins* (Figure 1), one of many artworks in which the dramatic depiction of fabrics and humble professions takes centre stage. Considering this painting carefully will reveal the relationship between this notion of encounterism, and the artists' cosmopolitan movements through the Global South.

Each of the four encounterist strategies outlined above can be seen at work in this painting. First, we note that the two figures are hunched over their

work: their gaze is averted from the artist's (and thus from ours), as these tailors instead diligently concentrate on their tasks of sewing and cutting cloth. By avoiding depicting their faces, the artist is preserving their opacity, and denying a sense of access to their interior lives. Second, we may note the figures' elongated limbs and the visible brushstrokes and angular lines that define the cubistic style of the decidedly non-naturalistic composition. We understand that we are seeing two tailors at work, but we also understand that the appearance of this scene has been substantially altered and stylised by the artist, a decision which enforces a detachment between us as viewers and the tailors as represented subjects. Third, the figures are physically distanced from the artist (and thus from us) within the picture plane. They are set back in an area made spatially ambiguous by the distorted depiction of the black and white floor tiles, which refuses to obey the familiar conventions of Western linear perspective. Obstructing our view of these figures are the cascading rolls of beige, emerald and umber-coloured cloth, shown falling forward from the tailors into the pictorial space between them and us, which is also crowded with the machines, tools, and furniture of their trade that fill the tailors' workshop. Fourth, both figures are draped in clothing which is accentuated through the use of brushwork, and also through its overlapping with the other fabrics they are sewing, which together form a diagonal mass dividing the image, from the top left to the lower right corner. The presence of bare mannequins in the upper right of the painting emphasises through contrast the voluminous extent of this cloth, which both covers the figures and forms a barrier between them and the artist, as if to remind us that You Khin was only looking in on these tailors from outside, but he had no special insight into their inner thoughts or character. Perhaps the spatial distance between the tailors and the mannequins is analogous to the symbolic distance between the artist and these people. (The artist's emphasis on depicting fabric rather than flesh places his work at odds with widely-cited examples of Western primitivist art, such as Gauguin's *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (*Manao Tupapau*), a celebrated 1892 painting in which nude, brown flesh is the principal subject.)

Taken together, these four elements in You Khin's painting work compositionally to enshrine the opacity of the people it depicts. We know, of course, that these men are tailors, and we can deduce that they are probably in Abidjan (although even this is kept in some doubt: You Khin had a tendency to revisit scenes from places he had lived in the past, which means it is possible the scene is in fact one remembered from either Bouake in Ivory Coast or else Khartoum in Sudan, both cities in which the itinerant artist had lived

and worked before his move to Abidjan). But beyond this, we know very little else about these tailors.

The artist has not attempted to offer any special insight into their character, either as individuals or as members of a society that was foreign to him. Moreover, by veiling the entire painting in a pale brownish wash that mutes its colours and subdues its mood, the artist redoubles the opacity of the work: the figures within it are both symbolically obscure, and literally obscured.³⁴

Recalling Ho Ho Ying's insight, we may view this distance between the artist and the people he depicts as not only a product of cultural difference for You Khin as a newly-arrived Cambodian migrant in Ivory Coast; the distance made palpable in the painting may also be a sign of You's apprehension that the people he was encountering were distinctly modern, and that he could never (in Ho's words) "manage to grasp the modern". You Khin, who in 2009 said "My world is modern",³⁵ was also certainly very interested in the sense of things being out of reach, as well as in slippages of perception, and in its always fleeting and uncertain nature, which (as Ho also intuited) is often only able to be hinted at through poetic turns of phrase and literary images. In a notebook he used after his return to Cambodia, You Khin wrote: "The eye tells you it's white, but the ear hears the sound of black."³⁶ It is perhaps worth noting that the mannequins in the painting are rendered confidently in black and white, imbuing them with a clarity and definition which eludes the human figures.

The Tailors and the Mannequins is one of several drawings and paintings You Khin made on the subject of sewing. In addition to several sketches of people sewing that are included in his archives is a record that another painting titled *The Tailor* was included in his 1979 solo exhibition at the Hilton Hotel in Khartoum, held when the artist lived and worked in Sudan.³⁷ Whereas in Cambodia many tailors are women, in Africa, You was intrigued to find men dominating this profession.³⁸ In paintings such as *Untitled (Coffee Hawker)*, done in Sudan in 1979 (Figure 4), and *Untitled (Doha Scene: Pakistani Bakers)*, done in Qatar in 1990 (Figure 5), we again see people working in humble jobs and dressed in flowing attire.

Depictions of cloth and people working in simple trades are abiding passions in You's practice, and also in Chen's. Although she is not known to have made works depicting tailors, Chen did on several occasions take laundry as her subject matter. One instance is *Laundry (India)*, a complex polychrome etching made in 2008 which depicts no fewer than 20 people busily washing garments by a riverside and hanging them out to dry (Figure 6); another example is *Laundry (Kalash Women)*, an etching made in 1994 (Figure 7).

FIGURE 4: You Khin. *Untitled (Coffee Hawker)*. 1979. Oil on canvas, 81.8 x 61.6 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

FIGURE 5: You Khin. *Untitled (Doha Scene: Pakistani Bakers)*. 1990. Oil on canvas, 64 x 99.3 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

FIGURE 6: Chen Cheng Mei. *Laundry (India)*. Etching and aquatint on paper, 47.5 × 60.5 cm. Collection of the artist's family, Singapore.

FIGURE 7: Chen Cheng Mei. *Laundry (Kalash Women)*. 1994. Etching on paper, 56.5 × 72.2 cm. Gift of anonymous donor. Collection of Singapore Art Museum.

The latter work appears to be inspired by her travels in Pakistan and her encounters with the Kalasha people, a small minority group who typically reside in the northwest of the country, along the border with Afghanistan. The print centres on two simply rendered figures, clad in matching robes of black adorned with vermillion and gold. They are working in tandem to wring out an indistinct garment that they have presumably just finished washing. Their profiles are dramatically set against a variegated background field of sandy brown tones that dominates the composition, within which cross-hatched outlines evoke woven surfaces and other details of vernacular architecture. The figures face each other, and thus their gaze is averted from Chen's, and from ours. By capturing them while they are in the middle of wringing out their laundry, Chen emphasises the fleeting nature of her encounter with these women. By compositionally placing these figures against a large and complexly rendered background, the artist allows the viewers' gaze to dwell as much on this sandy-coloured area as on the women themselves. Taken together, these various stylistic features in the etching function to preserve the unknowability and opacity that (following Glissant) we may understand as being the right of these Kalash women, as people who were culturally different from the artist. Following Ho, we may note that this also works to register these people as fundamentally modern subjects, despite their remote place of residency, and the manual nature of their labour. In this image, Chen makes a horizontal band of pale blue ink serve not as sky, but instead as the ground on which the figures stand: it is as if even in this quiet, everyday moment, Chen perceives the world as always ungraspable and in flux.³⁹

Laundry (Kalash Women) and *Laundry (India)* make plain Chen's delight in depicting fabric, as well as other everyday surfaces, while also typifying her interest in portraying her encounter with people engaged in simple forms of mundane daily labour. After all, wherever she went in the world, Chen still encountered people going about the same everyday tasks such as doing laundry, buying and selling food, and eating. Similarly, in *Market* (1980) (Figure 8) and *Selling Salted Eggs* (1977) (Figure 9)—both of which depict scenes from Singapore's Chinatown⁴⁰—the human figures engaged in the familiar everyday trade in groceries are compositionally overshadowed by the complex and attractively dishevelled array of overlapping tarpaulins, cloths, scaffolds and hooks above them. Photographs (Figure 10) and sketches (Figure 11) from the artist's archives reinforce this interest in the informal structures of marketplaces. In the paintings, these makeshift coverings dominate the compositions as a mass of carmine and ruby reds (in *Market*) and ambers and oranges (in *Selling Salted Eggs*). Similar subject matter

FIGURE 8: Chen Cheng Mei. *Market*. 1980. Oil on canvas, 83.5 × 76.5 cm. Gift of anonymous donor. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

FIGURE 9: Chen Cheng Mei. *Selling Salted Eggs*. 1977. Oil on canvas, 89 × 96.5 cm. Gift of Chen Cheng Mei. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

FIGURE 10: Photographs by Chen Cheng Mei depicting market scenes, circa 1960s–70s. Collection of the artist's family, Singapore.

FIGURE 11: Sketch by Chen Cheng Mei depicting a market scene in Malaysia. 1960. Collection of the artist's family, Singapore.

FIGURE 12: Chen Cheng Mei. *Street Stalls*. 1983. Oil on canvas, 61 × 80.2 cm. Gift of the artist. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

FIGURE 13: Chen Cheng Mei. *Kenyan Chieftains*. 1991. Oil on canvas, 91 × 112 cm. Private collection, Singapore.

and compositional concerns recur in *Market Scene, Sri Lanka*, done in 1975 (Figure 14), in which the lilac stripes on the cloth worn by the central figure echo the cross-hatched lines that depict the woven baskets that the men carry, as well as the indistinct structures that comprise the background. Very similar baskets are pictured in a very similar way in many other works depicting many other locations, including in *Selling Salted Eggs*, as well as *Street Stalls* (1983) (Figure 12), another Singapore scene. In *Kenyan Chieftains* (1991) (Figure 13), a comparable cross-hatching technique is used to evoke the thatched hut in which the men are standing: men who remain utterly opaque, about whom we know almost nothing, other than that the encounter with their flowing crimson robes has caught the artist's eye and captured her imagination.

Chen's peer and friend, the artist and writer Chng Seok Tin, affirms that "Chen Cheng Mei's colour sense is exceptional. She very rarely uses a colour straight from the tube, but would add a bit of this and a touch of that from other pigments to create a rich and engaging hue"; Chng goes on to claim that she "learned how to mix colours" while working with Chen.⁴¹ Curator Tan Szan, who is Chen's niece, affirms that the artist's "keen sense of colour" was a "gift enhanced through early interactions with nature as nurtured by [her] grandfather, an orchid cultivator and horticulturalist".⁴² The precision of Chen's palette is evident in her repetition of the same shade of lilac from *Market Scene, Sri Lanka*—the 1975 painting mentioned above (Figure 14)—in a 1981 work of the same title (Figure 15).⁴³ This also indicates that the artist revisited her memories (and perhaps also her sketches and photographs) from earlier trips over a period of several years.

It is striking that in her portrayal of markets and hawkers encountered during her travels across Africa, South Asia and beyond, and in her depictions of similar scenes in Singapore, we find little difference in tone or compositional methods; as a result of this consistency, Chen's encounterism implies commonalities that connect her home in Singapore to the region and the rest of the world. This registering of commonalities shared among different peoples echoes the assertion of the Organisation of African Unity in their "Pan-African Cultural Manifest", cited above, that "culture" transcends "tribal or ethnic divisions". In the manifesto, perhaps as in Chen's work, "culture" is understood very broadly as "the totality of tangible and intangible tools, works of art and science, knowledge and know-how, languages, modes of thought, patterns of behaviour and experience"; moreover "Culture, in its widest and most complete sense, enables men [and women] to give shape to their lives."⁴⁴ Similar thinking, expanded from the national and continental to the planetary, appears in Achille Mbembe's insistence, a half-century later,

FIGURE 14: Chen Cheng Mei. *Market Scene, Sri Lanka*. 1975. Oil on canvas, 61 × 80 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

FIGURE 15: Chen Cheng Mei. *Market Scene, Sri Lanka*. 1981. Oil on canvas, 61 × 80 cm. Private collection, Singapore.

that “‘desegregating’ and disenclaving theory must become a constitutive part of the new agenda”.⁴⁵ Mbembe contends that ideas from decolonising zones across the Global South can enrich our understanding of the world at large.

Chen’s encounterism celebrates the moment of her setting eyes on unfamiliar people and places, but it does not attempt to disclose special insight into cultures different from her own, or suggest that those cultures should be judged as superior or inferior to (nor as more or less “civilised” than) her own; rather, Chen drew on her encounters (both at home and abroad) to continually expand the *compositional* possibilities of her works. As Choy Weng Yang observes of her works depicting Singapore’s Chinatown, Chen always sought “fresh inspiration, new interpretations, unexplored possibilities and untried strategies”.⁴⁶ These aspirations were widely shared throughout the Global South; in their “Manifesto: Towards a New Vision”, the six Iraqi artists cited above affirmed that “Art is every new innovation. It is incompatible with stagnation; it is continuous creation.”⁴⁷

Despite the very dissimilar nature of their travels and their very distinct styles, artworks by Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin inspired by their experiences in Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, as well as in Southeast Asia and beyond, share an approach that celebrates the moment of encounter. We now turn to consider two works depicting very similar scenes in Cambodia and Singapore, in very different contexts.

Eating and Eating: Two Works Inspired by “Home”

In the decades following decolonisation, as I have noted above, Singapore prospered peacefully while Cambodia suffered nightmarish violence and upheaval. These deviating national histories are reflected in the divergent nature of Chen’s and You’s lives and artistic practices. These differences—at the level of painterly style, personal and professional biography, and socio-political context—may be rendered poignantly apparent through a comparison of two paintings with a similar subject, and a strikingly coincidental composition.

Chen’s *Eating Rice*, painted in 1977 (Figure 16), and You’s *Untitled (The Chinese Man Eats the Cambodian Soup)*, painted in 1975 (Figure 17), both depict figures engrossed in the act of eating. In both paintings, the figures are seen sitting low to the ground. Both figures are raising a small bowl towards their mouths using their left hands; as a result of this simple action, the bare left forearm of both figures forms a diagonal line running from the lower right towards the upper left of each picture, and in both paintings

FIGURE 16: Chen Cheng Mei. *Eating Rice*. 1977. Oil on canvas, 60.5 × 106 cm. Collection of Dr Lucy Tan-Ooi, Singapore.

FIGURE 17: You Khin. *Untitled (The Chinese Man Eats the Cambodian Soup)*. 1975. Oil on canvas, 46 × 38 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

this diagonal line is compositionally emphasised by its departure from the vertically oriented architectural features that are rendered indistinctly in the background of both paintings. The person portrayed in the act of eating is the principal element in both pictures, decisively highlighted by the white garments both figures are wearing and the white bowls both are holding aloft, which together stand out as the lightest and brightest areas in the paintings. Both figures cast their eyes off to one side; perhaps this averting of their gaze preserves their opacity in this moment of encounter with the artist, but it seems also to imbue the scenes with an ambiguous feeling, a kind of emotional ambivalence: in short, we do not know what either person depicted may be thinking, while they eat.

If the two paintings share all these compositional attributes in common, then in what ways do they differ? We can begin by studying the disparities at the level of composition. Most obviously, Chen's work is larger than You's, and despite it being a portrait, the canvas is in landscape orientation. The size and format serve to dignify the sitter, an anonymous woman who is identified as an *amah* (nursemaid) by her attire of loose, grey trousers and round-necked white tunic. The scale and orientation of the painting also function to invite the viewer into the space she occupies, and by extension into her world. By contrast, You's work is smaller, and the picture is more crowded, since it includes two figures: a Chinese man, who is eating, and a Cambodian woman, who is the hawker who has sold the food to him. The compositional space does not invite the viewer in, since the area between the two figures is blocked by a large clay pot, covered with banana leaves, which occupies most of the central third of the canvas. You Khin seems to have painted this work quickly: the brushstrokes are opaquely visible, some of the colours appear to have been mixed directly on the canvas, and most tellingly of all, the exact date of the work's creation is inscribed on the top left of the picture. By contrast, Chen's work appears to have been painted more slowly and carefully. Not-quite-complementary colours have been overlaid in semi-transparent planes that add visual interest, without diminishing the approximation of representation. This is seen in the indistinct triangular shape at the left of the canvas, comprised of greyish bone-coloured brushstrokes through which the blueish tan-coloured horizontal lines of the doorstep remain visible, and also in the areas of lucent mint, aqua and taupe which are delicately yet haphazardly interspersed with white on the woman's blouse. Chen's recurrent interest in filmy planes of colour in her paintings relates to her concurrent practice of printmaking. The artist wrote that the "primary advantage of etching over painting is that the interpretation of transparent surfaces can be realized a lot more easily".⁴⁸ While her prints, like her

paintings, often have a seemingly childlike quality, this apparent simplicity belies a deceptively complex set of compositional and colouristic techniques.

The compositional differences between Chen's *Eating Rice* and You's *Untitled (The Chinese Man Eats the Cambodian Soup)* are underpinned by more significant distinctions between the otherwise similar paintings: that is, the disparate historical contexts in which the works were made. Chen's slowly and carefully painted work, like almost all her oil paintings, would have been made in her large and comfortably appointed Singapore studio. The painting is without doubt based closely on a photograph taken by the artist: a colour snapshot, commercially developed, which the artist kept within an album of photographs depicting scenes around Singapore's Chinatown. Only a few small details in the painting's composition have been changed from the photograph, most strikingly the woman's facial expression. In the snapshot, she peers down into her rice bowl; in the painting, she gazes off to one side. Perhaps by focusing her attention on an aging and solitary *amah* perched on a doorstep to eat, Chen was musing on "history, culture, traditions, nostalgia and the sheer hazards of everyday life" as Choy Weng Yang wrote of her Chinatown works. It is worth bearing in mind that artists throughout the Global South, including in Africa and the Middle East, have taken the transformations of modern urban environments as their theme.⁴⁹ Yet the fact that Chen (like many of her peers) was able to consistently, over several decades, made artworks in her studio that engaged with "the enthralling phenomenon of Chinatown's perpetual transformation"⁵⁰ makes apparent Singapore's relative stability and prosperity during this period, as well as the artist's comfortable position within this increasingly affluent society.

The historical context in which You's *Untitled (The Chinese Man Eats the Cambodian Soup)* was made is radically different. As is recorded in the inscription in the painting's upper left corner, the work was made on 17 April 1975, a date which is indelibly inked in every Cambodian's consciousness, as the date on which Pol Pot seized power in Phnom Penh, marking the beginning of the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror. The artist, who was in France at the time, read about these events and foretold their significance with a rare prescience. The painting—the only one in his entire oeuvre on which the specific date appears—must be understood in relation to these political events. The Chinese man who is eating (and who, as art historian Boreth Ly notes, appears to be "insatiable" since two empty bowls lie next to him, suggesting that he is gobbling up his third helping⁵¹) may be understood as a synecdoche of the Chinese nation, which had been offering material and ideological support to the Khmer Rouge. The Cambodian woman, whose black shirt and red *krama* chequered scarf may further mark her as a communist

or perhaps even as a member of the Khmer Rouge, may also be understood to symbolise her nation at that historical juncture. While the red *krama* was adopted by the Khmer Rouge as a kind of uniform, Ly points out that before and after this particular political association, *krama* of all colours have often been used more generally to symbolise Cambodian identity, as have palm sugar and palm fruit (and the trees that produce it).⁵² Sugar palms appear often as nationalist symbols in artworks by You Khin's peers, such as the communist-affiliated Sam Yoeun (b. 1933, Cambodia; d. circa 1970, Cambodia), a member of the leftist *Samagam Silpa Vicitrakar Khmaer* or Association of Modern Khmer Painters, and Nhek Dim (b. 1934, Cambodia; d. 1978, Cambodia).⁵³ According to You Khin's widow, the dish being eaten by the Chinese man is a sweet rice pudding made with sugar palm fruit; Ly notes that an alternative title for the painting is *Cheun See Babor Thnot*, which Ly translates as *Chinese Eating Sweet Palm Fruit Rice Pudding*. With the dish itself understood to symbolise Cambodia, the meaning implied by its being voraciously devoured by the Chinese man is clear. Similarly, with the woman's *krama* also understood to connote the nation, her subordination to her greedy customer also becomes resonant with symbolic meaning. As Ly argues, You Khin "intended the painting to be read as a political allegory of how China, which backed the Khmer Rouge regime, had literally consumed Cambodia on that day in 1975", with the Cambodians becoming like servants of the Chinese.⁵⁴

Although You Khin made many paintings that depict everyday scenes such as markets and hawkers, his *Untitled (The Chinese Man Eats the Cambodian Soup)*, also known as *Chinese Eating Sweet Palm Fruit Rice Pudding*, may be his only example of an allegorical treatment of this quotidian subject matter. It cannot be understood as encounterist, since the work depicts not the artist's encounter with an ordinary moment of daily life, but rather his allegorically inclined imagination of a scene from daily life far away, which he pictured happening in Cambodia while he himself was in France. The work's precious value lies not only in its singular status within the artist's oeuvre, but also in its being one of very few Cambodian visual records of the events of 17 April 1975, a day which marked the beginning of the already troubled nation's lowest point in history.

Chen's 1977 depiction of a woman eating rice and You's 1975 portrayal of a man eating rice pudding share many compositional similarities, which make the stark historical differences between these two works all the more striking and salient. With the dissimilarities in these two artists' lives in mind, as well as the divergences in the histories of Singapore and Cambodia, we now turn to discuss Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin in relation to the national art historical discourses of their respective birthplaces.

Chen Cheng Mei: "A Significant Female Singaporean Artist"

Understandings of and discourse about Chen's work have been consistently constrained by three interpretive frames. First, she has been considered as a *Singaporean* artist, rather than an artist of Southeast Asia or of the world at large. Second, a disproportionately heavy emphasis has been placed on her works realised when she was affiliated with the Ten Men Art Group, a loose collective of Singapore-based artists (most—but not all—of whom were men) who embarked on a series of travels around Southeast Asia, during the 1960s, and South and East Asia, during the 1970s. Third, Chen's gender has figured prominently in many approaches to her work. We will briefly consider each of these interpretive frames in turn. It is one of the aims of this essay to enable Chen's work to be understood in other ways, and on other terms; that is, for Chen to be recognised as not only a Singaporean artist, as having made important work not only when part of the (male-dominated) Ten Men Art Group, and as not only a "woman artist".

A press release issued by Singapore's National Heritage Board in 2010 to announce the Patron of Heritage Awards for 2009 offers a telling description of the artist: "*Singapore* artist Chen Cheng Mei is a significant female *Singaporean* artist."⁵⁵ The superfluous repetition of the artist's nationality is indicative not only of a particular tendency to define Chen by the place in which she was born and lived, but also of a larger and more general propensity for Singapore authorities to celebrate Singapore artists for their contributions to Singapore, as much, if not more than, for their contributions to the arts. Some Singapore artists become known elsewhere in Southeast Asia and further afield, but many—including Chen—have been largely unknown beyond the island. This is despite Chen having met some of the leading figures in other art worlds through the region, such as the artists Khien Yimsiri in Bangkok and Lee Man Fong in Jakarta, and the photographer K.F. Wong in Sarawak.⁵⁶

Chen's important position within the Ten Men Art Group has contributed to her framing as a "Singapore artist", because of the significance of this collective of artists to the nation's art historical narrative, especially the place of the so-called Nanyang artists of Chinese heritage within that history. Chen was in fact the founder of the Ten Men Art Group: in December 1960 she initiated a road trip to peninsular Malaysia with three fellow artists, including Chen's youngest brother, Tan Teo Kwang (b. 1941, Singapore), because, she said, she "wanted to search for new subject matter and themes for painting outside of Singapore".⁵⁷ On their travels, Chen recalled that she had "sketched the old architecture of Malacca, salted fish nets in Trengganu, and the markets in Kota Bahru... There was no exhibition resulting from this

trip, but many artist friends were enthralled by what we experienced as well as the paintings we produced.”⁵⁸ The following year, ten artists in two cars travelled again to peninsular Malaysia, and held an exhibition at Singapore’s Victoria Memorial Hall upon their return. It was then that the group was dubbed the Ten Men Art Group. Chen recalled that in advance of this excursion, the participants “wanted me to lead the next trip but I proposed Yeh instead”,⁵⁹ referring to Yeh Chi Wei (b. 1913, China; d. 1981, Singapore), a male artist who has since enjoyed much greater visibility for his role in the Ten Men Art Group.

Although the Ten Men Art Group was certainly not the first collective of Singapore-based artists of Chinese heritage to travel in Southeast Asia in search of inspiration, it nevertheless marked a significant turning point towards a regional sensibility in artistic practice, with artists demonstrating their curiosity about and exploring affinities shared across diverse cultures and geographies. Before the Ten Men Art Group, when Singapore-based artists such as the China-born Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng took their famed trip to Bali in 1952 (or before them, the Russian-born Singapore-based artist Anatole Shister, who visited Bali in 1934, 1937 and 1939, exhibiting the resulting artworks at Singapore’s Robinson and Co. in 1947⁶⁰), these trips tended to focus on a single destination, or else to be one-off or solitary excursions. By contrast, the Ten Men Art Group travelled all around Southeast Asia, as a group (with some changes in the composition of the participants), year in and year out through the entire decade. Their frequent habit of exhibiting the resulting artworks upon the group’s return to Singapore prefigured today’s frequent display of projects arising from Southeast Asian contemporary artists’ residencies throughout the region.⁶¹

The Ten Men Art Group’s shift in focus from Southeast Asia to South and East Asia, during the 1970s, and the decline in the frequency of the group’s trips, coincided exactly with a sharp increase in Chen Cheng Mei’s self-initiated excursions, within the region as well as further afield. Chen resigned from her job as a French translator at Singapore’s Bank of China in 1971, after two decades of service. This allowed her to become a full-time artist. She immersed herself in this new freedom, taking classes in Chinese calligraphy three times a week and practising daily, as a means to improve her linework which she recalled had been criticised for being “shallow” during her Ten Men trips.⁶² From the 1970s until the 2000s, Chen travelled—usually alone, and sometimes with a family member—to dozens of destinations across most of the world’s continents, with a particular focus on places in the

Global South, returning again and again to tour Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Latin America and Oceania. Each trip was recorded not only in one of the 13 passports preserved in the artist's archive, but also in sketches and photographs. Chen proudly claimed that she often gave away or sold her works while abroad;⁶³ she also held a solo exhibition at the Oaxaca Museum in Mexico.⁶⁴ More research can be done on the reception of Chen's work abroad; this is beyond the scope of this essay. There are tantalising suggestions, including Chng Seok Tin's claim that Chen "was drawn towards the native culture and primitive [sic] art that she saw"⁶⁵ as well as Tan Szan's contention that Chen's "study of colour was gained not just through observing nature and light of the different places she had travelled to but also a voracious appetite for knowledge about the lives and techniques of artists and foreign cultures".⁶⁶ Chen herself asserted that "[if] you want to learn something from another good artist's work, you have to see the original work. That's why when I first arrive [anywhere] I have to go to a museum and see the original work. Maybe can learn something from there *lah!*"⁶⁷

But during most of the period of her independent travels after the Ten Men Art Group, between the 1970s and the 2000s—the most prolific in the artist's life—Chen held no solo exhibitions in Singapore. Her first solo exhibitions in Singapore were held in 2004 (at a small commercial gallery), 2008 (at the National Library), and 2014 (at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts); the accompanying publications were also the first monographs to be published on her work. That the artist would wait until she was 77 years of age before marking these milestones reflects her unusual socioeconomic position, as well as her unusual priorities regarding professional artistic practice. Not only was her father a prosperous businessperson, as mentioned above, but her mother too was well-connected. As the artist recalled, "My mother was the niece of Teo Eng Hock, Sun Yat Sen's main confidante in Singapore and owner of the villa where the Sun Yat Sen museum is now. My mother's aunt emphasized the importance of education and, with family encouragement, I took up private tutoring with Prof. Liu Qiang, studying Chinese and English."⁶⁸ With a privileged upbringing supported by success stories of different kinds on both sides of her family, Chen went on to marry an accomplished businessperson, and to take up employment herself as a translator, making use of her fluency in French as well as English and Mandarin. Chen explained that "With the money from the bank job, I could travel and continue doing my art, without having to worry about selling it."⁶⁹ The economic security that came from her employment at the bank was bolstered by her father's business acumen, her mother's connections, and her husband's

successes. Indeed, some members of her family recall that as well as having no need “to worry about selling” her paintings, Chen was also discouraged from doing so by her husband.

If during her lifetime Chen largely failed to achieve the same level of public recognition that her male peers enjoyed (including those from the Ten Men Art Group), this was not due solely to her being overlooked or undervalued because she was a “woman artist”, but was also due to her own deliberate and considered choices, and her own privileged position to be able to make those choices. As such, as Yvonne Low argues, Chen “viewed her role and purpose in the art world, as neither a vocation nor a profession, but a way of rendering life meaningful”.⁷⁰ Far from being a failing, Low implies, this was in fact a mark of the artist’s accomplishment in forging a new path for herself, one that resisted the masculinist and capitalist conventions of “the art world” and instead was centred on her own joy and the joy she shared with others through her encounters around the world. As Chen herself would say, speaking of the elation she felt when making art: “I’m trying to transfer this happiness, and put it up through the lines and the colours, to the viewer... That’s my success.”⁷¹

You Khin: “My World is Modern”

In 2009, at the age of 62, You Khin held his first ever solo exhibition in Cambodia, at the French Cultural Centre in Phnom Penh. Preparing for the exhibition, he wrote prolifically in his notebooks, in English, French and Khmer. In advance of an interview with a journalist, and in answer to a question about his plans for the future, You Khin wrote: “I have in mind a [clear] vision of my work in the future. After [my] exhibition I will continue to work on sculpture and painting... I wish in the future we could have a museum of modern art in Cambodia.”⁷² Around the same time, he also said: “My world is modern, and I don’t think many Cambodians understand my art. But this is the beginning.”⁷³ Tragically, the artist died two months later from a sudden illness. His visions for the future went unrealised, and what he felt as a beginning was also an end.

While You Khin felt that his “world is modern”, he also felt the shortcomings in Cambodia’s institutions for modern art. A frustration with art infrastructures is common throughout much of the Global South, including among modern artists in the Middle East.⁷⁴ Yet for half of his life, and a much greater proportion of his professional life, You Khin had lived abroad, presenting solo exhibitions in venues ranging from the Hilton Hotel in Khartoum, Sudan to the Salon des Indépendants in Paris, France, and many

others in between, and maintaining very little direct contact with Cambodia. During his three decades of exile from his homeland, You Khin's work rarely dealt with Cambodian subject matter (at least, not in any direct or explicit manner). Why, then, does a tribute to the artist published in an American newspaper mention the Khmer Rouge no fewer than seven times, including in its opening paragraph?⁷⁵ Such is the omnipresence of Cambodia's violent history in shaping accounts of the nation's art.

Like almost all Cambodians, You Khin was catastrophically affected by the genocide. Many of his family members and friends died. Yet unlike a large majority of the Cambodian artists of his generation, he survived, and moreover, with some notable exceptions—including the painting done on 17 April 1975 when Pol Pot's troops took power, discussed above—his work largely avoided dealing directly with the Khmer Rouge. It remains to be seen how this most singular of artists might be positioned within a national art historical narrative; he has been set aside from the few accounts that have been written thus far. This essay is the first attempt to find a place for You Khin in a Southeast Asian regional context.

Perhaps a more natural fit for You Khin, rather than within national or regional settings, might be within the transcontinental intellectual networks centred in the African continent and the Middle East. I have already mentioned You's meeting with Ismail Fattah, one of the most celebrated Iraqi modern artists, and the co-author of the "Manifesto: Towards a New Vision" signed by six artists in Baghdad. You's portrait of Ismail Fattah, dated 1988, shows the artist looking casually off to one side (Figure 18). His shirt collar is open, his hair is ruffled, and his lips are curled towards the beginnings of a smile: the portrait appears to record a moment of cordial exchange between these two artists, who shared a peripatetic biography as well as an affinity for architecture as well as paint. Although You's archives record no further details of their encounter, and his widow You Muoy cannot recall the exchange, it is likely that the meeting was facilitated by Usam Ghaidan, an Iraqi architect and scholar who had been You's employer first in Ivory Coast and then again in Qatar, where the artist's "day job" had been to work as an architect for both state and private offices.

Usam Ghaidan had previously written several books on vernacular architectural style and conservation in Kenya and neighbouring Swahili-speaking areas, including one book published in 1975, just two years before You's arrival in Africa.⁷⁶ As well as being You's employer, the two were close friends, bringing the artist into contact with a prominent figure bridging the intellectual foment in the Middle East with pan-African discourses. Ghaidan graduated from the University of Nairobi in 1974 with a master's degree in

FIGURE 18: Sketch by You Khin depicting Iraqi modern artist Ismail Fattah. 1988. Collection of National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive. Gift of You Muoy, wife of the artist.

Architecture, having previously conducted fieldwork in the coastal Kenyan town of Lamu between 1969 and 1973.⁷⁷ In his study of the Swahili town of Lamu, he observes that the East African littoral “has occupied a fairly prominent place in the trade of the Indian Ocean since the early centuries of our era”, also noting that the 12th-century Arab geographer Al-Idrisi made a map recording this coastal region of modern-day Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania and Mozambique, while earlier Arab historians including Al-Mas’udi wrote of their first-hand experiences in the area.⁷⁸ Ghaidan also contends that urbanisation in East Africa can be linked directly to the spread of Islam, noting that there is “no clear evidence of pre-Islamic urbanisation” and arguing that “the history of Muslim expansion and the resulting acceleration of urban growth shows that the religion embodies a strong urban message”.⁷⁹

With more research on Usam Ghaidan and his peers (for surely he was not the only migrant to graduate from the University of Nairobi in the 1970s), what other connections with You Khin and his work might emerge? What other ties to Southeast Asia might materialise, triangulating the African-Middle Eastern connection? These questions remain unanswered for now, but they resonate with the concerns of many artists and curators working in Southeast Asia at present.⁸⁰ Perhaps these inquiries together can form some small part of the “planetary library” that Achille Mbembe envisions; perhaps in telling these stories we may “draw upon each of them while drawing them together”.⁸¹

FIGURE 19: Chen Cheng Mei. *Trading Room*. 1974. Oil on canvas, 66 x 101.5 cm. Gift of anonymous donor. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

FIGURE 20: You Khin. *Untitled (People Awaiting Cargo Ship)*. 2000. Oil on canvas, 83 x 61 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Deprovincialising: Chen Cheng Mei, You Khin, and Southeast Asia in the World

As this essay is largely about Chen's and You's place within the world, it is fitting to end by briefly considering two paintings that make visible aspects of planetary movement that are rarely seen first-hand. These works enable another kind of deprovincialising.

Chen's *Trading Room*, painted in 1974 (Figure 19), depicts the trading floor of one of Singapore's stock exchange member companies. The dark green band across the top half of the canvas represents the blackboard on which the names of stocks being traded are written by the brokers; the ribbons of black winding their way across the tawny-coloured floor area depict the ticker tape on which quotes and trades were recorded using the technology of the time.⁸² This is a Singapore engine room of speculative global capitalism.

You's *Untitled (People Awaiting Cargo Ship)*, painted in 2000 (Figure 20), depicts a crowd of people greeting the arrival of a merchant ship with eagerly outstretched arms. Although done while the artist lived in London, the scene is recalled from his decades in Qatar, where You Khin and his family would often visit the dockyards.⁸³ Many sketches of related scenes survive in the artist's archive; in one, You's caption records that the people awaiting the cargo ship's arriving were there to receive food aid that the ship was delivering. Despite advances in aviation, sea freight remains essential to the mechanics of global trade, a fact that would have been readily apparent to You Khin while living in the busy port city of Doha.

If much of Chen's and You's work records their encounters with people and places far from home, and enshrines the opacity of those people, then these two paintings may instead be described as dramatising their intersections with the planetary circulation of goods, people and capital. The works lay bare aspects of the world economic system which are usually opaque: familiar to almost everyone, but seen first-hand by almost no one. In doing so, Chen renders the obscure world of finance comic and cute, while You Khin casts the vast network of freight in poignant and human terms.

In these works, as in many others, Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin make manifest the ties that bind the world together.

BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

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- ¹ Chen Cheng Mei was also known as Tan Seah Boey, and she signed under this latter name in most works made before the 1970s. In addition to the sources cited herein, I have had the pleasure of many conversations on both artists. For generously sharing insights on Chen Cheng Mei (and in many cases, graciously allowing me to view her works in private collections), I thank Tan Teo Kwang, Tan Meow Cheng, Ho E-Moi, Wang Jinn, Wang Yee, Janet Fung, Tan Szan, Koh Seow Chuan, Goh Eck Kheng, Peter Lee, Ken Chua, Lai Chee Kien, Yvonne Low and several others. For generously sharing their insights on You Khin, I thank You Muoy, Pierrette Van Cleve, Pen Sereypagna, Khvay Samnang and several others.
- ² Quoted in Lucy Kinder, "Exhibitions Show Different Aspects of Cambodian Art", *The Phnom Penh Post*, 12 June 2009.
- ³ Chen Cheng Mei, interviewed in November 2008. National Archives of Singapore (NAS), Visual Arts, Accession Number 003370. Available online at https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/83188299-1161-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad [accessed May 2021]. A transcript of this interview, prepared by Katya Narendratanaya, is available in the Library & Archive at National Gallery Singapore.
- ⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), esp. pp. 189–90.
- ⁵ Dia al-Azzawi, Ismail Fattah, Saleh al-Jumaie, Muhammad Muhraddin, Rafa al-Nasiri and Hashem Samarji, "Manifesto: Towards a New Vision (1969)", trans. Anneke Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, Nada Shabout, in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, ed. Anneke Lenssen, Sarah Rogers and Nada Shabout (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), pp. 306–9.
- ⁶ The Organisation of African Unity, "Pan-African Cultural Manifesto (1969)", in *Why Are We 'Artists'? 100 World Art Manifestoes*, ed. Jessica Lack (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 2017), pp. 128–40.

- ⁷ S. Rajaratnam wrote this in the Foreword to an exhibition catalogue, *Ten-Men Art Exhibition: Tour of Sarawak* (Singapore, 1965); quoted in: Yvonne Low, "Women Artists: Becoming Professional in Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney, Australia, 2014, p. 254.
- ⁸ As noted above, You Khin's entire archive has been generously donated by the artist's widow, You Muoy, to the Library & Archive at National Gallery Singapore, where it is being digitised. Chen's archive is in the collection of the artist's family, and I thank Wang Jinn and Wang Yee for their generosity and hospitality in granting me access, with thanks also to Szan Tan.
- ⁹ Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), p. 39.
- ¹⁰ Mbembe's comments on "deprovincialising" are précised in Paul Gilroy, "Transcript: In conversation with Achille Mbembe", Sarah Parker Remond Centre, University College London, 17 June 2020, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/racism-racialisation/transcript-conversation-achille-mbembe> [accessed May 2021]. See also: Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (New Edition)* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- ¹¹ Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Provincializing Europe and Deprovincialising Africa: Prospects for Decolonizing the Humanities", *Présence Africaine* 197 (2018): 342, 347.
- ¹² Al-Azzawi, Fattah, et al., "Manifesto: Towards a New Vision", p. 308. Emphasis added.
- ¹³ This last point is adapted from my obituary for Chen Cheng Mei, published in the "Passages" column of *Artforum* on 27 February 2021: <https://www.artforum.com/passages/chen-cheng-mei-1927-2020-85151> [accessed April 2021].
- ¹⁴ You Khin graduated with a degree in Interior Architecture from the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh in 1973; when he enrolled, prior to the 1970 coup that deposed the monarchy, this had been the Royal University of Fine Arts. He subsequently studied Three Dimensional Decorative Arts in Marseilles at the Luminy School of Fine Arts, between 1973 and 1977.

Chen Cheng Mei studied printmaking under the artist Stanley William Hayter (b. 1901, United Kingdom; d. 1988, France) at Atelier 17 in Paris in 1969. Although her studies there were brief, they appear to have had a lasting impact on her work. The studio was known for its unconventional approach, in particular to the application of ink to the plate, and in recent research has been celebrated as an important site for women artists, including for proto-feminist activities. See: Christina Weyl, *The Women of Atelier 17: Modernist Printmaking in Midcentury New York* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019). Chen Cheng Mei's friend and peer, Chng Seok Tin studied with Hayter in Paris in 1980–81

(according to Koh Nguang How, “Chng Seok Tin”, *Singapore Infopedia*, September 2019, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1385_2008-10-29.html [accessed May 2021]). In a 2014 interview, Chen told Bridget Tracy Tan that “Hayter encouraged her to produce prints, in order to enrich her painting. It was a process that would allow her to explore textures, colours and effects.” Bridget Tracy Tan, “That Without Which – Chen Cheng Mei”, in *Joie de Vivre: Chen Cheng Mei*, exh. cat., ed. Alicia Lin and Bridget Tracy Tan (Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 2014), p. 12.

¹⁵ Al-Azzawi, Fattah, et al., “Manifesto: Towards a New Vision”, p. 309.

¹⁶ Chen, NAS interview.

¹⁷ On Chen’s family history, see Chen, NAS interview; see also Tan, “That Without Which”, p. 5. On You’s family history, I rely on conversations and also an interview with You Muoy, conducted by online call in April 2021. A transcript of this interview, prepared by Katya Narendranaya, is in the Library & Archive at National Gallery Singapore. See also the chronologies of both artists’ lives, appended in the aforementioned catalogue, at <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/southeastasia-dalam-tailors-mannequins> [accessed October 2021].

¹⁸ Tan, “That Without Which”, p. 5.

¹⁹ Thirteen passports are included in the artist’s archives. From these, a partial list of places visited, with dates, has been produced; this list is in the Library & Archive at National Gallery Singapore.

²⁰ Choy Weng Yang, “An Odyssey of Passion and Courage: Chen Cheng Mei’s Artistic Journey”, in Chen Cheng Mei, *Odyssey: Oil Works* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2008), p. 10.

²¹ These included the Chinese Art Society, from 1956 to 1995, the Singapore Art Society, from 1961 to 1995, the Printmaking Society (Singapore), from 1988, among others. See CV in *Joie de Vivre*.

²² Chheng Phon, 1983, cited in Roger Nelson, “An Introduction”, in Suon Sorin, *A New Sun Rises Over the Old Land: A Novel of Sihanouk’s Cambodia*, trans. Roger Nelson (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019), p. xix. A prominent figure, Chheng Phon had taught at the Royal University of Fine Arts during the 1960s; it is likely that You Khin knew him.

²³ Chheng Phon, 1983, cited in Nelson, “Introduction”, p. xviii.

²⁴ The archive comprises sketches and works on paper, as well as notebooks, photographs, media clippings and exhibition ephemera.

²⁵ Interview with You Muoy, April 2021.

²⁶ Critiques of Western primitivism are numerous and include: Stephen F. Eisenman, *Gauguin’s Skirt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

²⁷ Partha Mitter [with Kobena Mercer], “Reflections on Modern Art and National Identity in Colonial India: An Interview”, in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena

Mercer (Cambridge, MA and London: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 2005), p. 42. See also: Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-garde 1922–1947* (London: Reaktion, 2007).

- ²⁸ Ruth B. Phillips, "Aesthetic Primitivism Revisited: The Global Diaspora of 'Primitive Art' and the Rise of Indigenous Modernisms", *Journal of Art Historiography* 12 (June 2015): 5.
- ²⁹ Mitter, "Reflections", p. 42.
- ³⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, esp. pp. 189–90. Emphasis added. I am indebted to Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol for his insights on this subject, during conversations in May 2021.
- ³¹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 190.
- ³² Ho Ho Ying, "My Paintings", [trans. Tan Jong Yun, ed. Lynda Tay] first published 1978, republished 20 January 2021, *Insights: Ho Ho Ying*, Esplanade website: <https://www.esplanade.com/offstage/arts/insights-ho-ho-ying> [accessed May 2021]. With thanks to Lynda Tay.
- ³³ Ho's 1978 claim anticipates a strikingly similar characterisation of the contemporary by Giorgio Agamben, first published in Italian in 2006. In this widely cited account, Agamben describes "contemporariness" as "a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, *keeps a distance from it*." Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?", in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 41. Emphasis added.
- ³⁴ A similar claim is made for the scumbled, murky surfaces created by Frank Bowling (b. 1934, Guyana), a British artist whose paintings (like those of Chen Cheng Mei) often incorporate unconventional mediums to modulate the paint, as well as other non-art materials. See: Elena Crippa, *Frank Bowling* (London: Tate, 2019), p. 16. I am indebted to Guo-Liang Tan for his insights on this subject, during conversations in May 2021.
- ³⁵ Quoted in Kinder, "Exhibitions Show Different Aspects of Cambodian Art".
- ³⁶ You Khin, undated notebook, Cambodia, circa 2004–09. Collection of National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive, gift of You Muoy, wife of the artist.
- ³⁷ The painting is now lost. The exhibition checklist, as well as the invitation and brochure (hand-drawn by the artist), are among the archival items displayed in the exhibition.
- ³⁸ Interview with You Muoy, April 2021.
- ³⁹ Unexpected, and non-naturalistic use of colours recurs in Chen's work. The asphalted urban street in *Street Stalls* (1983) is mauve and lilac, for example, and many of the artist's depictions of the Singapore river cast the surface of the water in red, gold and other surprising shades of not-blue.
- ⁴⁰ Conversation with Tan Teo Kwang, April 2021.

- 41 Chng Seok Tin, "Artist, Printmaker, Friend", in Chen Cheng Mei, *Lasting Impressions* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2004), p. xvi.
- 42 Tan Szan, "Journeying Through the Art of Chen Cheng Mei", in *Artists Inspire a Nation: Art Heroes of 20th Century*, ed. Michelle Loh (Singapore: Composition, 2020), p. 8. The text was written prior to Tan joining National Gallery Singapore as Head, Library & Archives.
- 43 The work is reproduced in: Chen, *Odyssey*, plate 42.
- 44 Organisation of African Unity, "Pan-African Cultural Manifesto", pp. 129–31.
- 45 Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, p. 39.
- 46 Choy, "An Odyssey", p. 11.
- 47 Al-Azzawi Fattah, et al., "Manifesto: Towards a New Vision", p. 308.
- 48 Chen Cheng Mei, "Expressing Life", in Wang-Chen Cheng Mei, *Lasting Impressions* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2004), p. ix.
- 49 See: Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art*, new edition (London: Thames and Hudson, 2020), esp. pp. 158–201. See also: Nada M. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007), esp. pp. 35–60 and 145–54.
- 50 Choy, "An Odyssey", p. 11.
- 51 Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), p. 89.
- 52 Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, p. 89.
- 53 On Nhek Dim's use of sugar palms and *krama* as national symbols, see: Roger Nelson, "'The Work the Nation Depends On': Landscapes and Women in the Paintings of Nhek Dim", in *Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art, 1945–1990*, ed. Stephen H. Whiteman, Sarena Abdullah, Yvonne Low and Phoebe Scott (Sydney and Singapore: Power Publications and National Gallery Singapore, 2018), pp. 19–48.
- 54 Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, pp. 89–90.
- 55 National Heritage Board, "Press Release: Embargoed Until 23 April 2010", undated [2010], available online from the National Archives of Singapore at https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20100430006/patron_of_heritage_awards_2009_press_release_and_factsheet_final.pdf [accessed May 2021], p. 8. Emphasis added.
- 56 Included in Chen's archives is an autograph album signed by Khien Yimsiri (b. 1922, Thailand; d. 1971, Thailand), a leading modern sculptor at Bangkok's Silpakorn University, whom the artist would have met during her 1963 trip with the Ten Men Art Group. She speaks about Lee Man Fong (b. 1913, China; d. 1988, Indonesia) and K.F. Wong (b. 1916, Malaysia; d. 1998, Malaysia) in Lai Chee Kien, "Southeast Asian Journeys and the Ten-Man Art Group: An Interview with Tan Seah Boey [Chen Cheng Mei]", in Chen Cheng Mei, *Odyssey: Oil Works* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2008), p. 19, and in Chen, NAS interview.

- 57 Lai, "Interview with Tan Seah Boey", p. 19.
- 58 Lai, "Interview with Tan Seah Boey", p. 19. A compilation of articles on the Ten Men Art Group from Singapore newspapers has been compiled for this exhibition by intern Katya Narendranaya, and is held in the Gallery's Library & Archive.
- 59 Chen, quoted in Lai, "Interview", p. 19.
- 60 David Low Kok Kiat, "The Russian Connection in Singapore's Local Art Identity", *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 4, 2 (October 2020): 123–4.
- 61 I have previously advanced this argument in my obituary of Chen in *Artforum*.
- 62 Chen, NAS interview.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 This is listed as having taken place in 1980 in the artist's CV as published in Chen, *Odyssey*; the exhibition is listed as having been held in 1990 in Lin and Tan, *Joie de Vivre* and Wang-Chen [Chen], *Lasting Impressions*. According to passports in the artist's archive, Chen's first trip to Mexico was in 1984. Inquiries sent to the Oaxaca Museum during 2020 and 2021 have unfortunately been unanswered.
- 65 Chng, "Artist, Printmaker, Friend", p. xvi.
- 66 Tan Szan, "Journeying", p. 79.
- 67 Chen, NAS interview.
- 68 Lai, "Interview with Tan Seah Boey", p. 15.
- 69 Chen Cheng Mei, interviewed by the *Straits Times* in 2008, quoted in Yvonne Low, "Women Artists: Becoming Professional in Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney, Australia, 2014, p. 238.
- 70 Low, "Women Artists", p. 240.
- 71 Chen, NAS interview.
- 72 You Khin, undated notebook, Cambodia, circa 2009. Collection of National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive, gift of You Muoy, wife of the artist. Some parts of the interview were published in: Buth Reaksmey Kongkea, "Veteran Painter You Khin Describes His Experience", *reaksmey* weblog, <http://reaksmeyinaction-reaksmeykongkea.blogspot.com/2009/06/veteran-painter-you-khin-describes-his.html> [accessed May 2021].
- 73 You Khin, quoted in Boreth Ly, "Of Trans(National) Subjects and Translation: The Art and Body Language of Sopheap Pich", in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, ed. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, New York: SEAP, 2012), p. 126. The quote, although uncited in Ly's essay, is from: Lucy Kinder, "Exhibitions Show Different Aspects of Cambodian Art", *The Phnom Penh Post*, 12 June 2009. A copy is available online at http://www.vcfineart.com/images/youkhin/press_june1209.jpg [accessed May 2021].
- 74 Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, pp. 35–60.

- ⁷⁵ James Scarborough, “Cambodian Artist Khin You (1947–2009)”, *The Huffington Post*, 2 August 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/cambodian-artist-khin-you_b_1260436#s643290 [accessed May 2021].
- ⁷⁶ Usam Ghaidan, *Lamu: A Study of the Swahili Town* (Nairobi, Kampala, Dar es Salaam: The East African Literature Bureau, 1975).
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., p. xvi.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 1–3.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 82.
- ⁸⁰ Artists whose works have explored links between Southeast Asia and Africa include Pacita Abad (b. 1946, Philippines; d. 2004, Singapore), whose peripatetic movements saw her reside in Sudan and Mali, among many other places, as well as Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam (b. 1941, Malaysia; d. 2016, Malaysia), whose paintings done with newspaper collages convey the artist’s interest in global political affairs, including in Africa, and also Tuan Andrew Nguyen (b. 1967, Vietnam) and filmmaker Rithy Panh (b. 1964, Cambodia), who have both made works exploring the colonial ties between former French Indochina and the African continent.
- Curators who have explored these transcontinental links include Kathleen Ditzig and Carlos Quijón Jr., who co-curated *In Our Best Interests: Afro-Southeast Asian Affinities during a Cold War* (2021–22), and Zoe Butt, who curated *Journey Beyond the Arrow* at the 14th Sharjah Biennial (2019).
- Also of note is the research project, *Modern Art Histories in and across Africa, South and Southeast Asia*, organised by Dhaka Art Summit, Institute for Comparative Modernities (ICM) at Cornell University, and Asia Art Archive, with support from the Getty Foundation’s Connecting Art Histories initiative (2019–20).
- ⁸¹ Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, p. 39.
- ⁸² I am grateful to Judd Kinne for his insights into the mechanics of stockbroking in Singapore during the period, in personal communications, April 2021. Kinne worked for one of Singapore’s stock exchange member companies at the time Chen’s painting was made.

One can speculate that perhaps Chen’s familiarity with these details may have been drawn from her two decades working as a translator at the Bank of China in Singapore, a position she retired from in 1971, just three years before making this painting.

- ⁸³ Interview with You Muoy, April 2021.

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