



天工
INGENUITY

郑木彰 TAYBAKCHIANG



ingenuity 天工

Nature has been a constant source of inspiration to me. Whether in its most complex or simplest forms, Nature, in my view, embodies perfection, harmony and balance. The title of this exhibition is Ingenuity. This expresses the awe I have for Nature's ingenious creations. It also articulates my wish to always learn from Nature.

Throughout the history of Chinese ink painting, literati artists have used motifs in Nature, such as birds, trees and flowers, to objectify their emotions, thoughts and spirit. Like these painters, I have done so too, in many of my works.

For now, however, I have returned to the essence – painting lotuses and stones in their barest forms. I have abandoned motifs that would bear my feelings, points of view and intentions. The outcomes, I hope, are vistas that invite viewers to imagine and discover Nature's ingenuity for themselves, just as Nature intends for us to do.

Tay Bak Chiang, April 2011



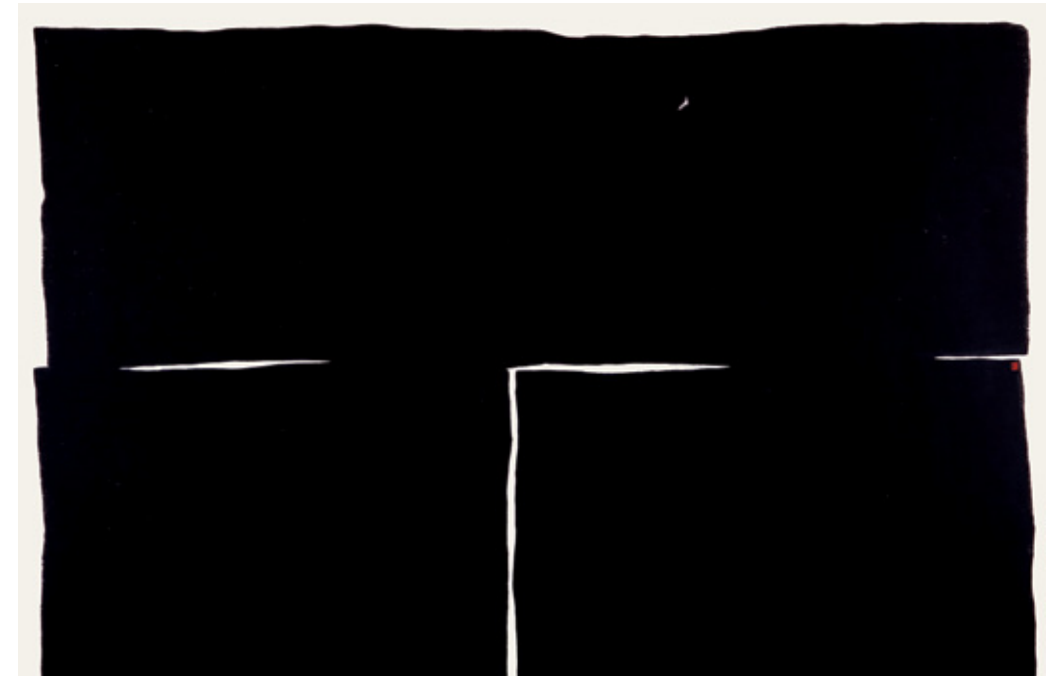
stoneseries



These stones may be plain and simple looking on the outside but I imagine they hold much strength within. This is how I believe we should live—with wisdom but be low-key about it; with strength but show restraint.

This title is from one of 360 sayings espousing life principles from Cai Gen Tan ("Vegetable Root Discourses" or Tending the Roots of Wisdom), a book for Confucian self-cultivation imbued with Buddhist and Taoist quests for the simple life. Written by Hong Ying Ming in the Wanli reign (1573-1620), when Ming China was reeling economically.

藏巧于拙 It is wisdom sometimes to seem a fool
123 x 188 cm
Ink and pigments on rice paper 2010





I imagine this to be the fin of a sleeping dragon, and we do not know when the sleeping dragon will wake. Traditionally, the Chinese term "wo long" refers to an outstanding talent in recluse.

Zhuge Liang (181-234 AD), nicknamed "Wo Long Xian Sheng" ("Crouching Dragon, Sir") is one of Bak Chiang's heroes. Famed in China's Battle of Red Cliffs (Bak Chiang pays homage in maroon) in 208-9 AD, Zhuge helped the Shu Kingdom overcome the numerically superior forces of Cao Cao. But prior to public service, Zhuge lived secluded to focus on philosophy, although he already became renowned amongst the learned community for his analysis of current political and military problems; they saw his great potential in strategy.

卧龙
Crouching dragon
123 x 200 cm
Ink and pigments on rice paper 2011





Two stones meet as one. I imagine a door that opens onto the sky.

Bak Chiang mentions the Great Wall of China. This refers to the frontier pass of Jade Gate (built 121 BC) at the wall bordering the Han Empire. A checkpoint for caravans delivering goods from non-Chinese states beyond, it was to the Chinese the exit to the netherworld, culturally. Bak Chiang's lining in the clouds is a portal to the heavens.

云关
Cloud gate
123 x 180 cm
Ink and pigments on rice paper 2011

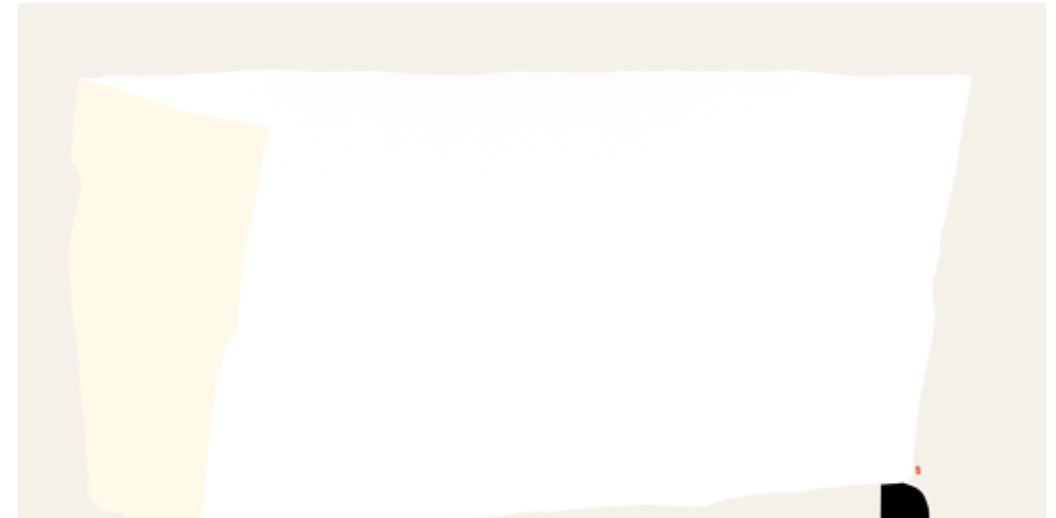




The Chinese title Qi Bai Shi literally means “strange white stone”. I have not seen a white rock. If I do come across it in real life some day, I am sure it will be an intriguing sight.

Bak Chiang playfully titles in homage, through homonym, the painter Qi Baishi (1864-1957), famous for his whimsical watercolours (Chinese-style) of commonplace animals and plants—depicted “between likeness and unlikeness”, as Bak Chiang’s stones.

奇白石 White stone
100 x 200 cm
Ink and pigments on rice paper 2010





The stone looks like a piece of jade. Traditionally, Chinese people wear jade to ward off evil and injury. Yi in the Chinese title Ru Yi sounds like yu, which is the Mandarin term for jade. Ru Yi means that things are going smoothly, as one wishes.

Use of ruyi evolved with time. Scholars hypothesized their introduction into China as sceptres in Buddhist rituals in the Han period (206 BC-220 AD); they were then carried by nobles as fashionable, conversation batons, most in vogue during the Six Dynasties (220-589 AD). Henceforth, ruyi were elevated to court symbols of authority and were the Emperor's to give—to scholars and foreign ambassadors (Qianlong Emperor to Lord Macartney in 1793 during Britain's first diplomatic mission to China). In folklore, ruyi were regarded by commoners as talismans, whereas artists have aestheticized their motifs as otherworldly clouds and mushrooms bestowing immortality, made of luxury materials like jade, ivory, coral, horn, lacquer, and precious metals and stones.

Today, Ji Xiang Ru Yi ("felicitations as one wishes") and Wan Shi Ru Yi ("ten thousand endeavours as one wishes") are auspicious greetings at Chinese New Year.

如意
As one wishes
180 x 85 cm
Ink and pigments on rice paper 2011





Nature's ingenuity is revealed in the colours, forms and textures of stones.

Taoist philosophy sees the order of the universe, its natural forces balancing the world in harmony, manifested in nature. All things are microcosms for the universe. These ideas come from the book, Tao Te Ching (circa 6th century BC, attributed to Lao Tzu). Stone metaphors, one of which: "Dignity... they do not wish to show themselves elegant as jade, but prefer to be coarse-looking as an ordinary stone."

天工 Nature's ingenuity
123 x 123 cm
Ink and pigments on rice paper 2011





The small white stone looks like a floating cloud, taking a rest on the big rock.

Bak Chiang is inspired by the idea that the wind carried the stone onto the cliff. Unlike western ideas where living by the wind suggests capriciousness, Taoists highly regard stones with their crevices shaped by the elements—the natural forces. Likewise, man that lives by feng liu (“at the mercy of winds”) lives in harmony with nature.

浮云
Floating cloud
123 x 123 cm
Ink and pigments on rice paper 2011





lotus pondseries

This floral series uses contemporary, everyday expressions; yet, they are loaded with cultural meaning. Lotuses in Chinese culture, influenced by Buddhism, are aquatic plants emerging pristine from muddy banks, a symbol of the ideal man rising high above his murky, earthly existence, to unsullied, nobility of spirit. Aesthetically, lotuses bloom all summer long, to fruit by harvest time; loved by gardeners, painters and poets.

Chinese culture was profoundly influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, so the colours of lotuses, more than decorative, symbolised different qualities.

Red lotus meant the pure heart, its ability to love, be compassionate and passionate; held in the left hand by Avalokiteshvara ("lord who gazes down at the world"), the Bodhisattva of Compassion; whereas only the Buddha held the pink lotus. Gold lotuses are thrones. White was the spiritually pure state where perfection attained. Blue signified the victory of wisdom, the mind over the body (that succumbs easily to the senses); the blue lotus held by Manjusri ("Gentle Glory"), the Bodhisattva of Transcendent Wisdom.

In Chinese painting tradition, colours of lotuses were carefully chosen by the artist.



Bosom friends are hard to come by. Here is my tribute to them.

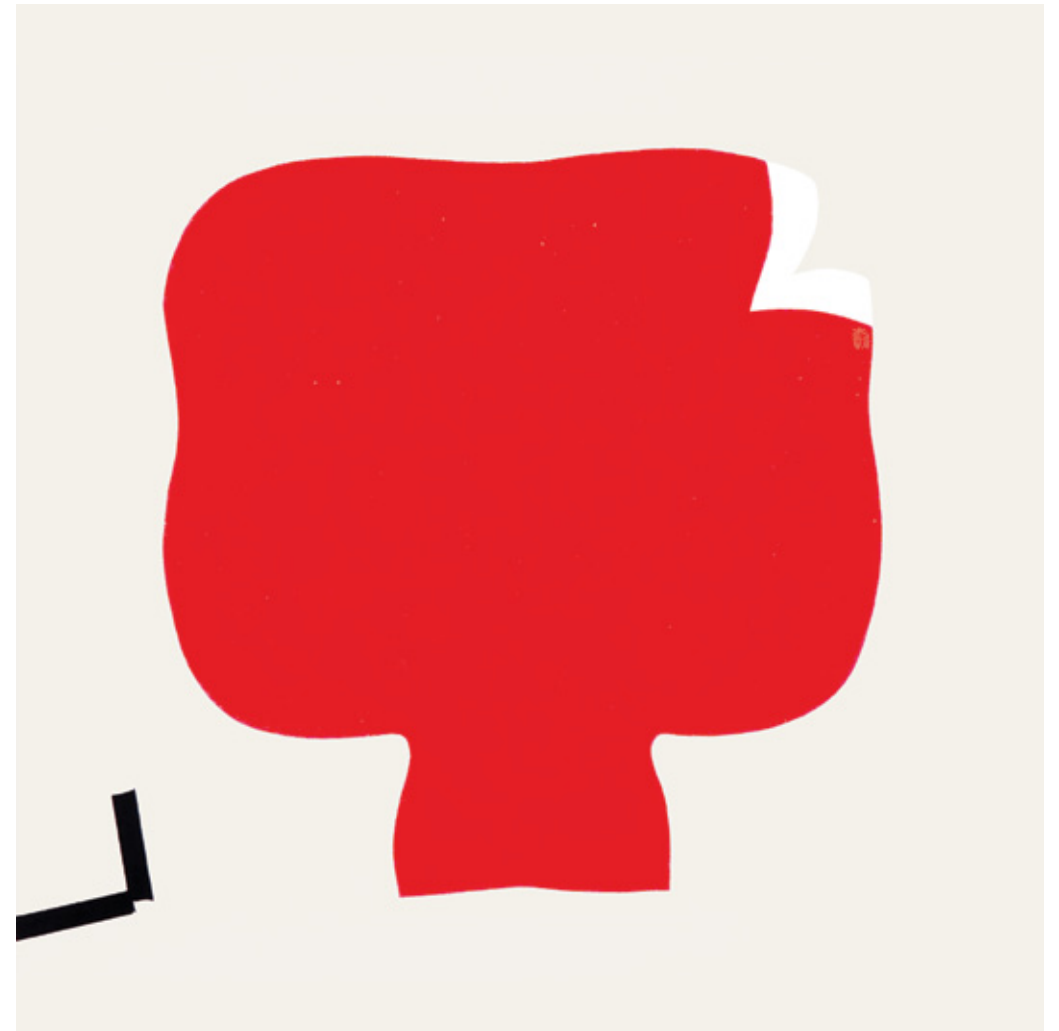
Bak Chiang appreciates trusted confidantes; many are women, as this term hong yan ("red hue") connotes.

红颜

Bosom friend

97 x 97 cm

Ink and pigments on rice paper 2011

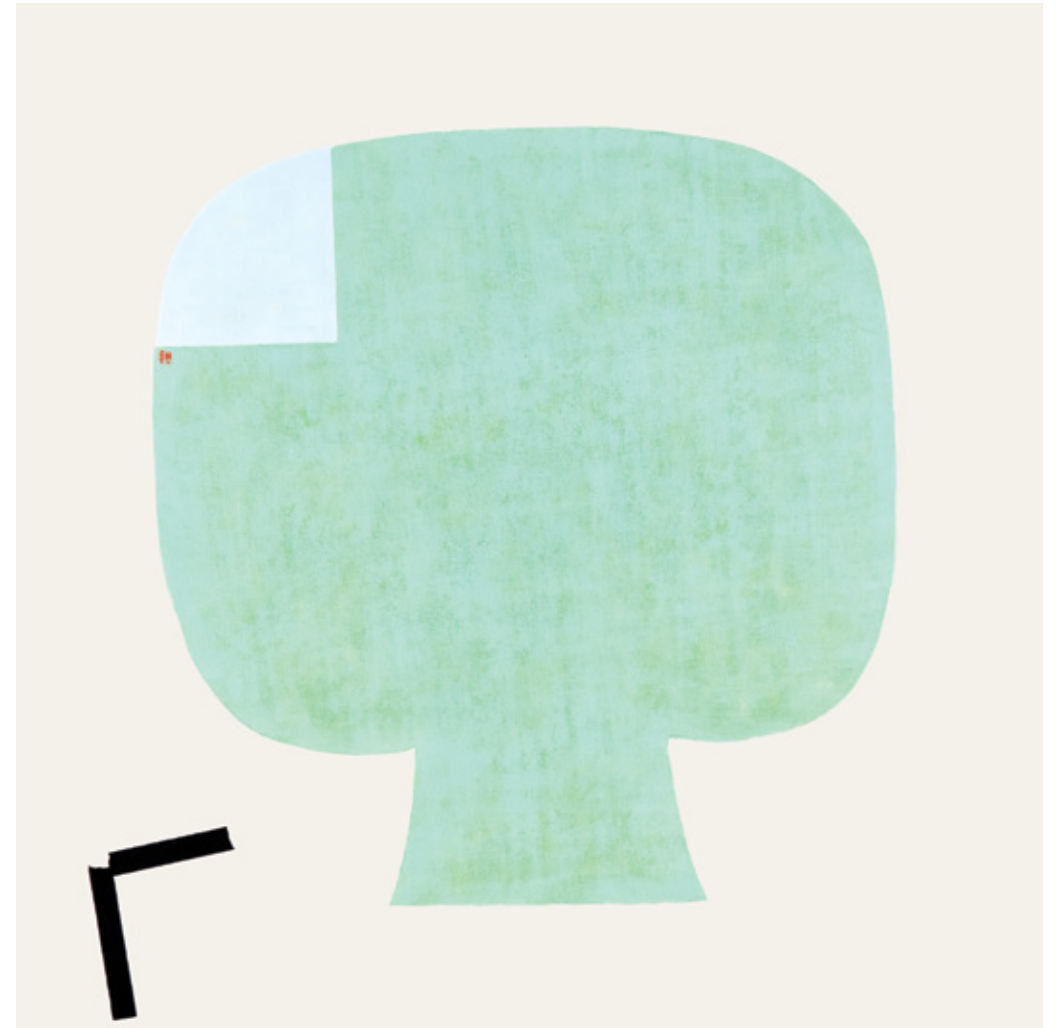




I am inspired by memories of friends from younger, more innocent days.

Qing (light green) is associated with one's salad days of springtime youth. The qing character alongside the water radical is purity, a virtue of the innocent. Lotuses, especially paling to white, are symbols of spiritual perfection and mental purity.

青涩的你 Innocence
97 x 97 cm
Ink and pigments on rice paper 2011





I wonder if lotuses are like some of us—for them the night gets younger as it passes...my observation that people in modern society seem to keep long nights.

Bak Chiang is inspired by things nocturnal, when nature comes alive. Ye Mao is also the cat, most active at night.

夜猫子 Night owl
97 x 97 cm
Ink and pigments on rice paper 2011





Sometimes I get absent minded when I am lost in thought.

The chaotic direction of strokes expresses how Bak Chiang feels during his "artist block". His work is titled Shi Shen ("losing one's spirit") in Pian Ke ("a short time").

失神的片刻 Absence of mind
97 x 97 cm
Ink and pigments on rice paper 2010





Like an Oriental girl with deep dark brows in a red dress.

The calyx eyebrow is in the top right corner. Women with jet black eyebrows (hei mei), who wore vermillion garments (hong shan) with sleeves that sashayed, captivated Chinese men in the past, perhaps even Bak Chiang?

黑眉红衫 Her eyebrow
97 x 97 cm
Ink and pigments on rice paper 2010





I imagine flowers are like us. They can be flawed and imperfect. But flaws make them real and complete.

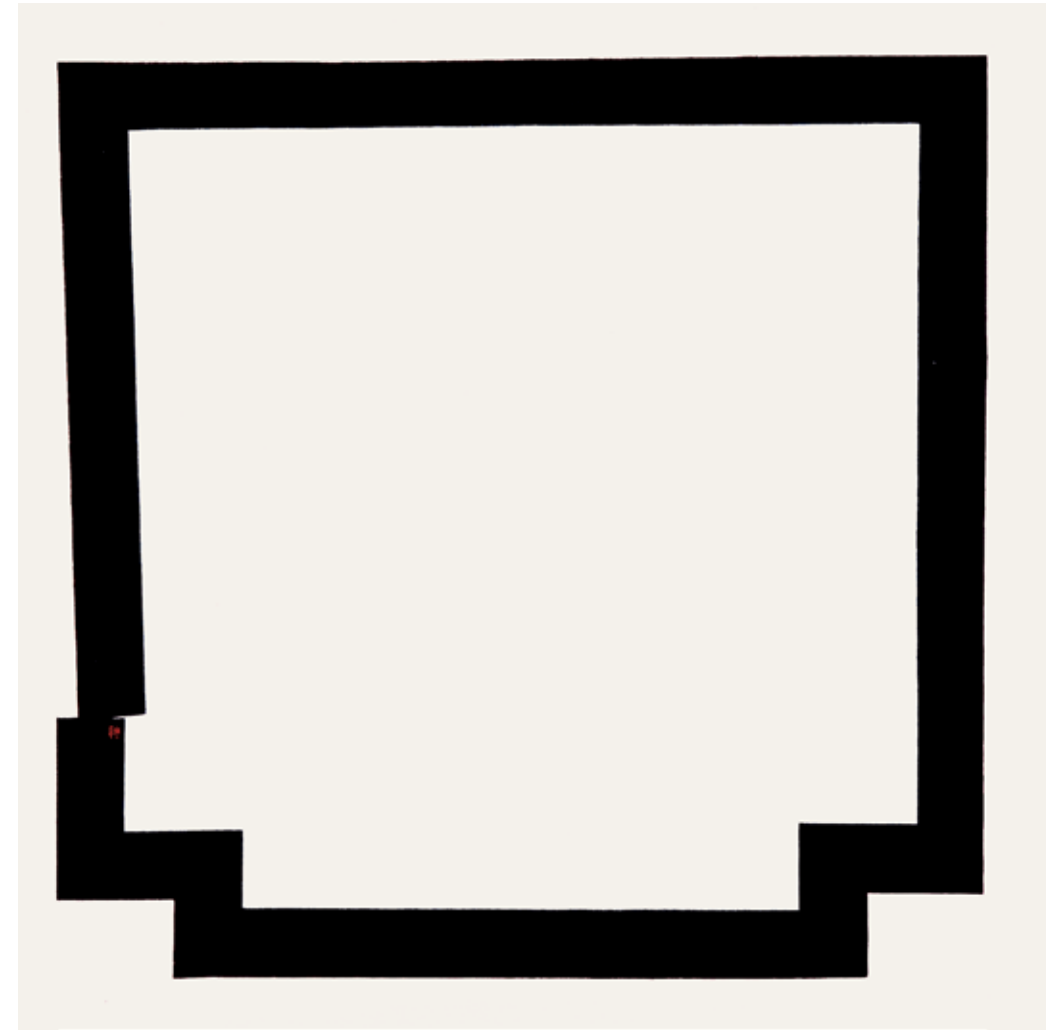
Bak Chiang's lotus is angular and irregular (si you si fen zhi yi, quadrilateral with extra). This is how he shows the imperfections of life, so unsmooth sailing, as in the course of all our lives. Yet, his journey of strokes meets eventually; going through life's imperfections makes one complete and whole.

四又四分之一

Four and one fourth

97 x 97 cm

Ink and pigments on rice paper 2010





Education

- 1997–1998 China Academy of Fine Art (People's Republic of China)
1992–1995 Diploma in Fine Art, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore

Solo exhibitions

- 2011 天工 Ingenuity, Chan Hampe Galleries, Singapore
2010 呼吸之间 Between Breaths, Artfolio Gallery, Singapore
2003 法自画生 Fa Zi Hua Sheng, Plum Blossoms Gallery, Singapore

Selected group exhibitions

- 2010 Now and Next – Modern Arts of Korea, Japan, Singapore, National Museum of Gwang-Ju, Korea
2010 Space + Imagination, Korea Singapore Contemporary Art Exchange Exhibition, Jeollanamdo Okgwa Art Museum, Korea
2010 Celebrating Asian Art, Artfolio Gallery, Singapore
2010 Live Our Dreams Community Paintings, The Arts House, Singapore
2009 Nanyang in Paris, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Gallery, Singapore
2009 Nanyang – 70 Years After, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Gallery, Singapore
2005 Singapore Art Show, Singapore Management University, Singapore
2005 Singapore Art Fair, Suntec City Convention Hall, Singapore
2005 The Sixth Face, MICA Building Artrium, Singapore
2004 Internationale Cite des Arts, Paris, France
2004 SingArt – A Brush with Lions – public art exhibition, Singapore
2004 Siaw-Tao Chinese Seal-Carving Calligraphy and Painting Society Exhibition, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2003 Singapore Creative Calligraphy and Painting Exhibition, Chengdu and Shanghai, China
2003–2009 International Chinese Ink Painting Exhibition, Tokyo, Japan (2003–2009) and Hangzhou, China (2009)
2002–2008 Teochew Art Exhibition, Ngee Ann Cultural Centre, Singapore
2002 Urban Artists 2002, MICA Building Artrium, Singapore
2001 Nokia Singapore Art, Singapore
2001 Ten Contemporary Singapore Artists Joint Exhibition, MICA Building Artrium, Singapore
2000 AD2000 Kaohsiung 14th International Art Interchange Exhibition, Taiwan
1999 Nokia Singapore Art, Singapore
1997–2000 Singapore Art Society Annual Art Exhibition, Singapore
1997–2000 NAFA Alumni Association Annual Art Exhibition, Singapore
1995–2009 Siaw-Tao Chinese Seal-Carving Calligraphy and Painting Society Annual Exhibition, Singapore

Awards

- 2003 First Prize (Traditional Chinese Medium Category) 22nd UOB Painting of the Year Competition, Singapore
2002 Young Artist Award for Visual Arts (Awarded by National Arts Council, Singapore)
2000 First Prize (Traditional Chinese Medium Category) 19th UOB Painting of the Year Competition, Singapore
1999, 2002 Distinction, Chinese Painting Category Dr Tan Tsze Chor Art Award, Singapore
1999 First Prize, Singapore Turf Club Art Competition
1995 16th Shell Discovery Art Award, Singapore

Special thanks to Andrew Y G Tan for his artwork interpretation



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