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GAJAH GALLERY SINGAPORE PRESENTS  
**THINKING INK: IMPROVISATIONS ON CULTURAL  
CRITERIA**

**AN EXHIBITION OF SINGAPOREAN AND CHINESE INK ARTISTS  
FEATURING CHUA EK KAY, HONG SEK CHERN, GU GAN, GU WENDA  
& WEI LIGANG**

**OPEN TO PUBLIC 29 JULY – 20 AUGUST 2017**

**Tanjong Pagar, Singapore** – From 29 July to 20 August 2017, *Thinking Ink: Improvisations on Cultural Criteria* will be on view at Gajah Gallery, exhibiting a rare collection of over 20 paintings by 5 celebrated ink artists from Singapore and China. The exhibition aims to provide a concise overview of the artists' methods and motives, contextualizing the distinct trajectories of their work within the larger narrative of the ink painting tradition. The exhibition will include several previously unseen works from the estate of the late Singaporean artist Chua Ek Kay, shown in public for the first time. In addition, Hong Sek Chern (SG) has created two new paintings depicting the Singaporean cityscape which will debut at the opening.

Surpassing any other medium, ink painting has embodied ideas of the Chinese culture and its arc of identity throughout the millennia. In Southeast Asia, with ink artists from the Chinese diaspora predominantly based in Singapore, the pioneer-generation artists continued with the literati ink tradition in the Nanyang. The avant-garde amongst them started their collective search for a local artistic identity, which signified the beginning of the regional modernist movement now referred to as the "Nanyang Style".

Through works of two Singaporean artists and three Chinese artists, *Thinking Ink: Improvisations on Cultural Criteria* examines the varied ink practices with an aim to develop an appreciation for how ink artists, despite their different contexts and use of strategies, communicate contemporary narratives by striking a dialogue with the past. These artists innovate through their technique, subject matter, aesthetic, conceptual approach, or a combination of these, while at the same time maintaining references to the tradition and the culture.

Iconic Singaporean artist **Chua Ek Kay** (1947 - 2008), was a second-generation artist trained in traditional ink painting, whose monumental journey to push the boundaries and renew the relevance of the traditional art form began in the 1980s. Third-generation artist **Hong Sek Chern** (b. 1967), was nurtured and enriched by the ink tradition but unfettered by it. In her

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work, she expands interpretations and re-contextualizes contemporary ink painting within Singapore. Inspired by their Nanyang Style predecessors' search for local identity, both artists employ the blending of East-West techniques and the localized subject matter to rejuvenate the literati ink tradition with relevance for Singapore and the region.

In addition, prominent Chinese ink artists **Gu Gan** (b. 1942), **Gu Wenda** (b. 1955) and **Wei Ligang** (b. 1964) are highlighted for their similar interest in engaging with their cultural heritage using ink as a medium. Through referencing the art of Chinese calligraphy and Chinese characters, they have sought to critically explore the artistic possibility of abstract aesthetic while retaining proximity to the Chinese scripts.

Collectively, these 5 important contemporary ink artists from Singapore and mainland China represent significant tangents, if not points of departure, in the ink art's contemporary discourse.

***'Thinking Ink: Improvisations On Cultural Criteria' will be on view at Gajah Gallery, 39 Keppel Road #03-04, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, 089065 Singapore. 29 July to 20 August, 2017***

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## ARTIST PROFILES

**CHUA EK-KAY** (1947 - 2008), born and raised in China before his family moved to Singapore in the 1950s, trained in traditional Chinese painting under the tutelage of the pioneer ink master Fan Chang-Tien (1907 – 1987). His work represents a generation of local ink artists of similar background and training who struggled to break from the confines of ink tradition in an attempt to renew the art form. Chua had notably grappled with issues of identity as an artist in his early years before he eventually found his breakthrough by straddling his practice between the different approaches of East and West.

**HONG SEK-CHERN** (b. 1967- ), born and raised in Singapore, represents a new generation of local ink artists. She embraces her Singaporean identity while experimenting with ink in an effort to strike a dialogue with tradition. As demonstrated by her free, often deconstructed ink works, she uninhibitedly transverses between Eastern and Western techniques, aiming to subvert the binary divide. Her iconic depictions of Singapore's HDB flats and skyscrapers brim with both contemporary spirit and an unmistakable ink aesthetic.

**GU GAN** (b. 1942- ), born and raised in China, is a pioneer in the modernist calligraphy movement in mainland China. Trained in traditional Chinese painting, Gan was inspired by Chinese calligraphy, which he picked up in his spare time as a forced labourer during the Cultural Revolution. Thus, traditional calligraphy forms the underpinning of Gan's ink practice. Gan's ink practice fuses the formal abstraction of traditional calligraphy with that of abstract expressionism.

**GU WENDA** (b. 1955- ), born and raised in China, is considered to be the first artist to engage in conceptual ink art in China in the 1980s with his invented and deliberately miswritten Chinese

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characters and calligraphy. Trained in classical Chinese ink painting, Gu has moved beyond the confines of the traditional art form and leveraged instead the cultural reference to Chinese calligraphy and ink painting in experimentation with conceptual ideas. The “pseudo-languages” he forms are intended to evoke the limitations of knowledge and explore the mystical realm of the mind. Since moving to the USA in 1987, Gu’s ink art practice has continued to be highly original and intelligent examination of culture and identity.

**WEI LIGANG** (b. 1964- ), was born and raised in China, and trained as a mathematician at university, but his deep interest in Chinese calligraphy led him to an illustrious career as a contemporary ink artist. Wei’s calligraphic painting visually manifests the poetics embedded in Chinese scripts and transforms the lyrical quality in the ancient art of writing into a sensorial experience. At the forefront of China’s contemporary ink development since the 1990s, the artist’s ink practice aims at extending the richness of the calligraphic tradition into the world of today.

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Upcoming Exhibitions in Singapore:

**The New Now** – Young Artists in Singapore: 28 August to 18 September 2017

**Jason Lim (SG)** – Solo Exhibition: 22 September to 15 October 2017

**Semsar Siahaan (ID)** – Solo Exhibition: 20 October to 20 November 2017

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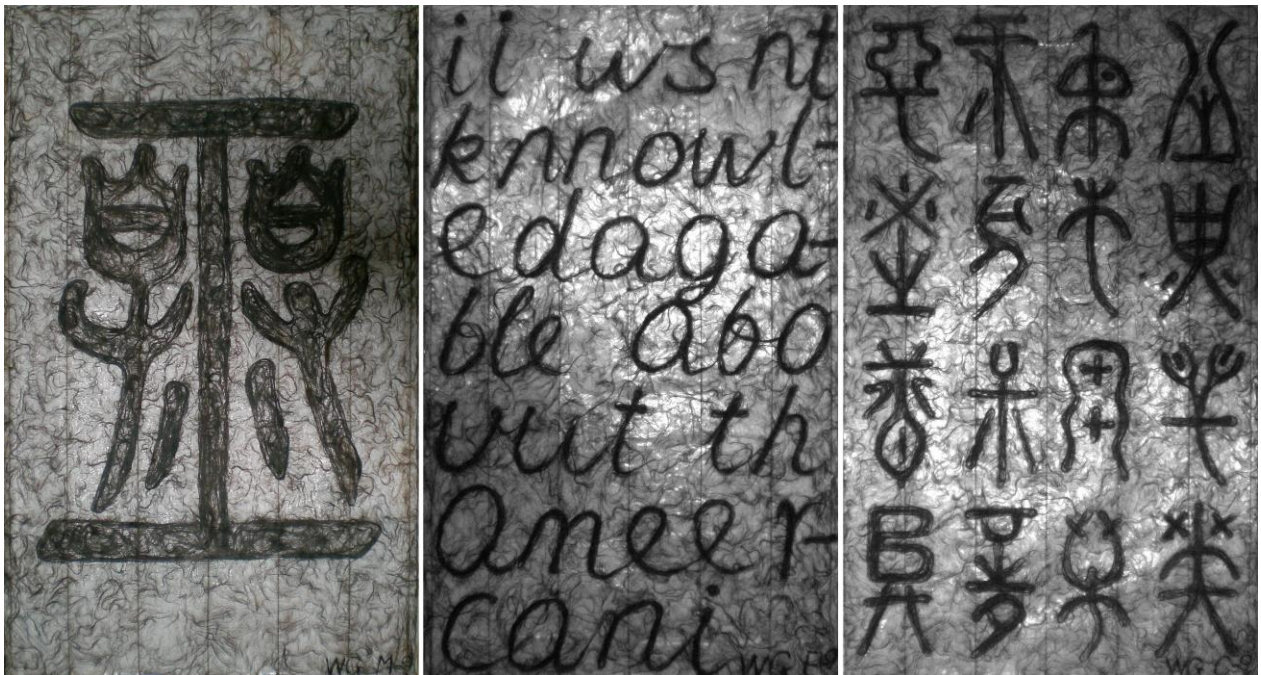
**Chua Ek Kay, *Chinatown*, 2000**  
Ink on rice paper, 97 x 90cm



**Hong Sek Chern, *City Landscape (Toh Yi Drive)*, 2015**  
Chinese ink on rice paper, 140 x 210cm



**Gu Gan**, *Life Always Exists Even in Freezing Forest*, 2000  
Ink and color on rice paper, 107 x 107cm



**Gu Wenda**, *Metamorphosis - Chinese Series A7, C4 & E11*, 2005  
human hair, glue and rope, 197 x 122cm (triptych)



**Wei Ligang**, 水芦藏艇玉簪螺髻断鸿声里 (*little boat hidden in the bush of reeds*), 2010  
Ink and acrylic on paper, 253 x 193cm