

OPENING SPEECH BY
GUEST OF HONOUR, JEFFREY SAY

Good evening Aaron, friends, ladies and gentlemen.

First of all, let me say that I am very honoured to have been invited by Aaron to be the Guest of Honour for his exhibition 'Reflections'.

In the ten to fifteen minutes that I have for my speech, I am not going to dwell on things that many of you would already know about Aaron, his style or his practice, as much have already been said on websites and in exhibition catalogue essays. We know that Aaron is a self-taught artist who decided to become full-time only about five years ago, in 2012. It is well known that he was the winner of the UOB Painting, Gold Category in 2015 which was all the more impressive given that it was won by a watercolourist and that it was achieved only three years after he turned full-time. Art commentators have remarked about the uniqueness of Aaron's watercolour style, how he had injected new freshness into the medium and created a new vocabulary that blends a primarily Western medium with a Chinese ink tradition.

But I would like to talk about a couple of things that arose out of my conversation with Aaron recently. This has to do with the place of watercolour artists in Singapore and in Singapore's art history, about commercial vs critical success and about the recognition of watercolourist artists as contemporary.

Watercolour has a long history in Singapore. Watercolour was the medium that was taught in schools during the British colonial administration. Richard Walker, who became the Art Master in Government English Schools and later was one of the founders of the Singapore Art Society, was a watercolourist. He also taught at Raffles Institution and his most famous pupil was Lim Cheng Hoe, whom some consider to be Singapore's greatest watercolourist. But that is debatable. In 1969, the Singapore Watercolour Society was founded. Among its founders was the prominent Nanyang artist Chen Chong Swee. The 1960s and 1970s were probably the height of watercolour in Singapore, when it grew in popularity.

But history has not been kind to watercolour artists. If you were to flip through the pages of art history books, you would find only a rare or passing mention of a watercolour artist even though watercolour has been widely practiced. This is similarly the case in Singapore's art history. And one may ask why. We don't have definite answers. It could be due to

the intrinsic quality of the medium. Oil and even acrylic are somehow seen as superior mediums to watercolour, even though watercolour is an extremely difficult medium to master and could achieve effects that other mediums cannot. There is also the perception that watercolour is used for preparatory drawings or sketches. And it is a medium that seems to suit smaller, more spontaneous works than monumental works. It is also perhaps not regarded as durable as other mediums.

Which brings me to Aaron's practice. There is no doubt that Aaron has achieved tremendous commercial success in the past five years. He has also received favourable coverage in the press and has participated in overseas shows. Yet Aaron's work has not been displayed in contemporary art shows or in the museums. We could say that he's been on the scene for only five years, But the reason is probably that contemporary art is biased towards certain cutting-edge forms like installation, performance art, video art, film and photography. As such, you would have noticed that young, emerging artists who enjoy national recognition and have their works exhibited in museums and biennales are artists who deal with such art forms.

However, I think it would be a serious oversight for the institutional art world to ignore what Aaron has achieved with the medium of watercolour. He is definitely contemporary in his approach to a medium that has often fallen into the danger of being sterile and ossified. He has not only invented a new vocabulary for the medium but he has redefined it, testing and teasing out new possibilities for the medium. It is this spirit of experimentation that defines the contemporary. The aesthetics of his work is not merely an illustrative one, but one that is informed by theory and philosophy. He speaks of understanding the self, emptying the mind and losing control. These are derived from Zen and Taoist concepts. And this willingness to engage with his Asian roots and heritage set him apart from other young contemporary artists, who tend to be more influenced by global aesthetics. Also, the subjects of Aaron's work are not entirely literal but find their meaning through symbolism and metaphor, which link back to the search for life's questions. As such, Aaron has contemporarised a traditional medium.

I believe that the Aaron will achieve even more in the next five years. I could see and sense the passion in this young man. When all is said and done, it would be difficult for art history to overlook what Aaron has contributed to the art of watercolour and to Singapore art.

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