

Painting with old cloth

Artist Ho Chee Lick uses old pillowcases to apply ink to rice paper

By corrie tan

When his wife throws out old pillowcases, this artist tells her not to.

That is because Dr Ho Chee Lick, 60, has turned to using pieces of cloth to apply ink to rice paper in his Chinese ink paintings, and those pillowcases have come in handy.

Dr Ho, who is a senior lecturer in the National University of Singapore's Department of Chinese Studies, says: 'I'm a bit naughty. I don't want to stick to the same methods. There are 10,000 ways to use a piece of cloth. Every picture I did, I asked myself, how can I do it differently the next time?'

His 26 large, abstract ink works can be seen at Art Retreat Museum till Aug 13 in an exhibition titled Sequenza, named after an Italian musical term for a collection of virtuoso pieces. Prices start at \$10,000.

Art Retreat executive director Teo Han Wue, 65, who co-curated the show, says: 'In this exhibition, Dr Ho is doing a sort of sequenza in painting. His medium is like a solo instrument.'

One of Ho's four-panel works reflects the four movements of a symphony, inspired by Chinese composer Xian Xinghai's Yellow River Cantata (1939).

Layers of Chinese ink bleed into rice paper, leaving feathery strokes and delicate monochromatic hues in their wake.

To create this effect, squares of discarded cardboard and scraps of cloth have become as indispensable to Dr Ho as paints and a palette knife. He squeezes, wrings, presses and drapes pieces of cloth and cardboard on rice paper, saying: 'Before they are dry, anything can happen. I do not know if this ink drop will become messy or stain in a certain way.'

If he is not satisfied with his paintings, he transforms them into new ones. An ink stain that seemed out of place to him before can form the backdrop of a new painting. As such, he hardly discards any of his works.

He says: 'I'm enjoying the accidents. I can't plan anything with these pieces. It's like giving kids some art materials - they'll just play. I'm a 60-year-old kid. Give me a piece of paper and I'll try to erase all the traditional learning and just play.'

He studied under Singapore pioneer artists Chen Chong Swee and Chen Wen Hsi. His older works are more representational - oil paintings capturing scenes from Pulau Ubin and his former neighbourhood, Tiong Bahru.

In 2006, he and his family moved to the more wooded and tranquil Hillview area, which partly prompted his change in artistic direction.

He said: 'I don't want to be an artist who is known for one style and one topic with people putting pressure on me, saying, 'You should keep painting this because this sells.' I want to always go on with different things.

'So I took that move from Tiong Bahru to Hillview as a good chance to put down what I've been doing and move on to something new.'

Nature is one of the broad ideas in his works. He is fascinated by rainwater stains on walls and in drains, and has taken to observing them when he goes on walks. These rippling patterns have worked their way into his art.

He says: 'I always look at the drains and think, wow, who can paint this? Can Picasso paint this? No, only nature can do this.'

corriet@sph.com.sg