

Publication: ST Life!
Date: 7 December 2006
Headline: Conversations in the twilight

Life!Arts



TWIN PEAKS: Srihadi's (left) and Chua's paintings of Indonesia's Mount Merapi are hung side by side, reflecting their contrasting styles.

Conversations in the twilight

Despite having different backgrounds, artists Srihadi Soedarsono and Chua Ek Kay display similarities in their work

> art

SRIHADI SOEDARSONO AND CHUA EK KAY - DRAWING GROUND

Singapore Art Museum

Clara Chow

ARTS CORRESPONDENT

STEPPING into a room full of recent paintings by well-known Indonesian painter Srihadi Soedarsono and Singaporean Chinese-ink painter Chua Ek Kay is like eavesdropping on a leisurely twilight conversation between the two men.

In pairing the two artists of different backgrounds, the exhibition of 28 works teases out the broad differences and subtle similarities in their work.

Javanese dancers, brilliantly blue beach scenes and Chinese villages are some topics that the artists dwell on.

Srihadi, 75, who began his trademark series on Borobudur in 1983 after witnessing a solar eclipse from the 8th-century Buddhist temple ruins in Java, is all about smooth, saturated shades and horizontal planes.

His oil paintings are soaked in rich plums, mid-

night blues and other jewel shades, with the eye drawn to a "horizon" - a swiftly drawn central line.

Meanwhile, Chua, 59, who first visited Borobudur in 1991, has revisited the ruins this year and come up with works that are raw and gripping. Largely deserving of his reputation as one of Singapore's leading painters, his paintings - like his person - exude a quiet serenity.

Usually working in traditional Chinese ink, he has broken out of his preferred medium to produce oil canvases that evoke the heft and solid physicality of the monuments.

Unlike Srihadi's Borobudur, which is viewed from a distance and seems almost a heavenly concept to be reached for, Chua's version is firmly of this earth - a reminder of Man's blood, sweat and toil.

Most intriguing of all is a pair of paintings, hung side by side, depicting Indonesia's Mount Merapi, a conical volcano in Central Java. In Srihadi's version, the volcano is a velvet black mass, with a red gash of lava running ribbon-like from its lips. A pure white moon observes, detached.

In studying Merapi for much of his life, Srihadi has distilled it into a semi-abstract ideal; the perfect meeting point of hot and cool, life and death.

In contrast, Chua's Dawn Visit To Merapi is made up of craggy, scratchy brushstrokes. Looking at it, one is confronted with the immovable immensity of the volcano. It is an in-your-face portrait of rugged nature, by an inquisitive outsider.

Fortified by these two views of timeless majesty, the silent visitor bows out of the masters' dialogue.

> Drawing Ground is on at the Singapore Art Museum until Jan 21 next year.

> clarac@sph.com.sg