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Rare Chen Wen Hsi works on display



Merlin Gallery director Johnny Quek (left in white, with Mr David Chen, third son of painter Chen Wen Hsi) hopes to encourage people to let him help authenticate their Chen Wen Hsi paintings. ST PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG PUBLISHED

Merlin Gallery's showcase aims to give viewers a better idea of the breadth of the late master painter's works

[Olivia Ho](#)

Pioneer Singapore artist Chen Wen Hsi is renowned for his ink paintings of gibbons, but a new exhibition at Merlin Gallery will feature rarer works by the late master painter on less common subjects, such as prawns, nudes and landscapes in which coin-sized gibbons frolic.

Gallery director Johnny Quek, 70, hopes the series of exhibitions, of which this is the fifth, can encourage other owners of Chen's works to come forward and let him help verify their paintings.

His aim is to create a database of authentic pieces by Chen, who died in 1991 and whose works are frequently the subject of forgery.

Chen, who was born in Guangdong, China, and moved to Singapore in 1949, is recognised as one of the founding fathers of modern art in Singapore. His painting, *Two Gibbons Amidst Vines*, is featured on the \$50 banknote.

Mr Quek says he befriended Chen in 1983 and has collected more than 400 of his works.

He began hosting exhibitions from his private collection last year at Merlin, showing between 20 and 30 each time.

Having cycled through the most popular subjects such as the gibbons, herons and ducks, he is now exhibiting rarer pieces to give viewers a better idea of the breadth of Chen's oeuvre.

The current exhibition, which opened last Friday and will run until next month, includes landscapes in which one can glimpse minuscule gibbons playing, a series of blue and red abstract paintings from the 1980s and a selection of calligraphy in an obscure style that dates back to the Ming dynasty.

Mr Quek says he is concerned that the rise of fakes will damage the local art market.

"Today's artists record all their work, but back in those days, there were few good records outside of art books," he says.

"If it is hard to trace the provenance of the art, buyers are always suspicious of what they have."

He offers fellow collectors of Chen's art a free certification service and maintains an online repository of known works by Chen at www.chenwenhsi.com. He has so far issued certificates for about 150 works.

A painting by Chen can be valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars, he says, but forgeries are legion and often difficult for the average buyer to spot. He estimates that there are about 4,000 real works by Chen in the market today.

In 2015, the National Gallery Singapore stopped displaying an oil canvas painting by Chen titled Net Drying on its website, after doubts were cast on its authenticity and an investigation by a team of experts proved inconclusive.

There are ways to identify a forgery, says Mr Quek, such as examining strokes, colours and composition, but one can only recognise a painting if one is familiar with the artist's entire body of work.

"It is like asking a child how he recognises his father. He sees his father every day for years, so he can recognise him anywhere even if he cannot explain to you exactly how."

He does not plan to buy any of the paintings taken to him for authentication, nor will he sell any of his own.

"I do not wish for money. This is the last thing I want to do for Dr Chen while I am still around to do it."

Artcommune Gallery founder Ho Sou Ping, 45, who runs a class on authenticating Chen's work, says: "Mr Quek commands the market's respect and many of us take reference from him. The market has been chaotic in recent years because of the fakes and if buyers are not confident, it will impede the market."

Chen's third son, Mr David Chen, 73, an industrial design consultant, says it angers him to see fakes of his father's works on display.

"I am glad there is an effort to try to verify his works and I would like to encourage more people to come forward."