
In 1986 and again in 1989, Cheng-Khee Chee painted the boats and landscape and shoreline of the River Li in China in a 30” x 40” fairly standard-size watercolor on paper. In 2003, Mr. Chee came back to this subject, but in a very dramatic increase in size, almost twice the size of the earlier works. He paints a craggy mountain rock background with areas of cascading waterfalls pouring over the rocks into a serene drifting river current and harbor. This is a subject that gives Cheng-Khee Chee the freedom to improvise and invite us into his very physical act of painting. He lists his Chinese Brush Painting technique as the basis for the picture where calligraphy and wide brush strokes indicate the forces of nature at work in the scene. The heroic scale and abstract shapes remind me of American Abstract Expressionism, but also in contrast we see human activity and red flags flying atop the mast of anchored fishing boats.

As a boy growing up in China in the 1930’s, Chee’s first experience of painting with ink and a brush on paper came from practicing Chinese calligraphy - an art activity and a learning tool combined. Early experiences like that stay with us, but Cheng-Khee Chee also had art teachers who encouraged him especially when he moved from China to Penang, Malaysia in 1948 where he exhibited work in the Penang Art Society annual shows. In 1953, Mr. Chee saw a watercolor demonstration by the Chinese-American watercolor artist Dong Kingman (who is also represented in the Tweed Museum permanent collection) in his high school in Penang, and this too was a powerful influence on Mr. Chee’s eventual career.

“Beginning with abstraction and ending in realism” is one of Cheng-Khee Chee’s art-making principles as it allows the painting to develop in the very process of improvisation and experimentation with water media in a variety of landscape settings. A hallmark of Mr. Chee’s work is his constant invention of new methods of building an image based on but not an exact representation of the natural world.

I recently met a man who has traveled extensively in China, and he told me when he saw the rivers of China he felt that he had first seen them in the historic paintings of Chinese masters of painting and calligraphy. I imagine this River Li painting captures the essential elements of that very location.