

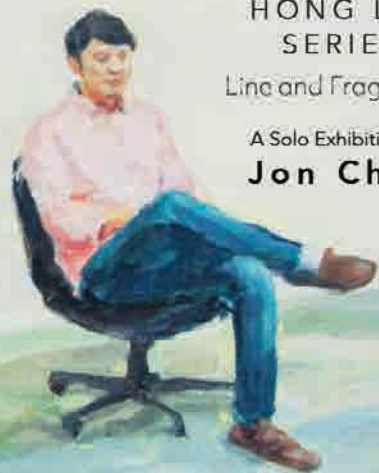


THE  
HONG LIM  
SERIES:

Line and Fragments

A Solo Exhibition by

**Jon Chan**



E-Published specially for

**The Hong Lim Series: Line and Fragments** – Recent Works of Jon Chan

Organised by iPRECATION

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Artworks Featured on Cover and Back Pages:

**Jon Chan** - Platforms and Archetypes, 2021, 56.5 x 132 cm, Oil on Linen

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**The Hong Lim Series: Line and Fragments** by Singapore artist **Jon Chan** marks a new and ongoing series that Chan has embarked on as he surveys the connection, or rather disconnection, between the physical manifestation of the site and the symbolic presence of the person the park is named after.

The exhibition brings forth a two-fold exploration as Chan manoeuvres through Hong Lim Park, a site full of storytelling and political narratives and his ancestral relations with Cheang Hong Lim. Driving from an alienated perspective, Chan also integrates notions of time as a medium, often realised through fragmented imageries.

The act of naming forms an emotional and directive bond between Hong Lim the person and Hong Lim the Park. This orchestrated form of a binding power when displaced and resurfaced in conversations and research, often draws on a singular political

association. Here, Chan takes on a different stance. He deliberately segregates the usual connotations attached to the park and seeks to study the facades of Hong Lim Park as a historical and functional space that has served not just the politicians (as many would assume), but also the arts, the sportsmen and the passerby.

Drawing inspiration from Sequential Art and Film, Chan paints 'present-day' Hong Lim Park and weaves in slices of reality that has been taken out from their respective timelines and social-political context. The juxtapositions of these fragments of space ruffle the linear presentation of the site and create tension as the space and agents of space attempt to establish their presence. When viewers are pulled into the scale of his works, they are yet clearly detached from the spacetime, witnessing the confrontation of time and its evolving development on the canvas.

As a continuation of his previous investigative viewpoints, a naturally recurring motif of dichotomic narratives and dialectical pulls are present in the zone that Chan has carefully contrived. Overlaying individuals of people at Hong Lim Park in a reconstructed image of Hong Lim Park, Chan has presented the possibility of reconfiguring elements that reflect on time and space. He has also subtly conveyed an inclination to reconcile conflicting units of time in an entirely different plane through the act of painting.

Between the moving lines (literally or figuratively) and fragments of existence lingering in Chan's work, we invite you to contemplate the various dimensions that exist between perception and conception.

### **About Hong Lim Park**

Most known as Singapore's only designated Speaker's Corner, Hong Lim Park has rich

storytelling and political history. Originally named after the first Superintendent of Police, Thomas Dunman, it was later renamed Hong Lim Green, in honour of Cheang Hong Lim, a wealthy and influential Chinese businessman who bought the land and donated it to the government in 1876. It has served as an important space for many political rallies, performances and activities.

### **About the Artist**

**Jon Chan Weiwen** (*b. 1982, Singapore*) graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (First Class Honours) in 2007, and a Masters of Fine Arts in 2008, from LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. Chan is the winner of the Winston Oh Travel Award for the years 2003 and 2007. He was also awarded the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry Arts award in 2007. Chan has participated extensively in numerous group exhibitions since 2002 and has held various solo exhibitions in Singapore.

## Artist's Statement

Jon Chan

This new body of works marks a new and ongoing series that focuses on a two-fold exploration of both the physical site that is Hong Lim Park and the person in which that same park is named after, Cheang Hong Lim of whom I share an ancestry.

Instead of approaching the project simply from the perspective of a descendent of Hong Lim, I'm approaching it from an alienated one. More specifically a perspective that projects a sense of the divided-self. This sense of a divided-self is rooted in the very way I paint which at certain moments may seem like doubtful gestures, however paradoxically, these doubtful gestures are also propelled by lively ones, the overall effect are paintings that look assertive yet restrained. This way of painting works as a metaphor for approaching and choosing subject matter. Both Hong Lim the person and Hong

Lim the Park are likewise 'divided', estranged from one another, making it an ideal terrain for my work.

The subtitle 'Line and Fragments' refers to another main aspect of this show, that of notions of time. In these paintings, there are several aspects of time that I will be exploring. The word 'line' calls to mind the sense that actual time is 'open', continuous and never subject to division the way space is, as the theoretician Henri Bergson has explained.

The use of the word 'fragments' is used to describe the way I see time in my paintings as discontinuous and made up of different segments, reminiscent of panels in a comic book. These comic book like panels create a sense that the viewer is cast outside time, hence it gives an illusion of time travel and also an abstracted sense of time.

On the other hand, the way I paint, which never holds entirely to given forms, are made as 'real movements', as the theoretician Gilles Deleuze would put it. These painted gestures are always subject to change making them the gestures of a self-determining agency. Hence these paintings are both 'abstract' and have 'real movements' simultaneously. My work folds together these contradictory notions of time, equivocating them into painting, creating a tense reality, between spatial limitations and a sense of agency that persists.

Hong Lim Park or 'Speakers' Corner' is and has been much more than a site for political activism, simply as a park, it can be a site where one can

find a moment to pause from what are otherwise busy surroundings, at the heart of the city. Also, through its history, it was more than just a park, having been a site for sports associations and for storytelling traditions such as Chinese Opera. Similarly, Cheang Hong Lim too is complicated, having traded opium (which is considered to have disastrous effects on the working-class Chinese community in early Singapore), he also became one of the most philanthropic persons in the establishment of Singapore in the late 19th century. Through the ideas in my work that relate to time and also through the metaphor of my painting, I aim to challenge the common ways in which we might observe the themes inherent in the park and the person that is Cheang Hong Lim.

## Painting Politics - Jon Chan in conversation with Jonathan Nichols

**Jonathan Nichols (JN):** Last week in Singapore I went to the National Gallery looking for Wu Guanzhong. Every time the curators give the exhibition a new spin. I actually prefer the way I saw it first in the early days after the gallery opened, when there was a huge number of his works upstairs and I could unpack that. Now it's more mediated and split up. I went next door as well to the Chua Mia Tee exhibition – I don't think he is well known outside Singapore. Did you see the Chua Mia Tee?

**Jon Chan (JC):** I haven't seen the new exhibition. I've been too busy painting I think, but I've seen the paintings before, the collection.

**JN:** Do you connect with someone like him? Perhaps I'm thinking particularly about one or two of the paintings. There are a few that stand out – one is the Malaya poem [*Epic Poem of Malaya*, 1955].

**JC:** It's always these paintings that are at the back of your head. In my time they were something that you saw first in textbooks because that's the way, more or less, art first comes into view – all of the Nanyang painters. They come first as a cultural thing. In the beginning it has a kind of iconic status that you register as an image before you realise it's a painting. I know I've always felt these are important works and there is a certain kind of gravitas or weight to them. There is the one that you talk about, the guy doing the protest, standing up and giving a speech. The other, much more famous, is the one in a class setting [*National Language Class*, 1959].

**JN:** It was as though he was trying to paint the future. That he saw his role as something that could be about the future, but there was a sort of radicalisation in there too.

**JC:** The history is quite complicated. Initially these

were connected to Singapore being part of Malaya. We were all wrapped up in that idea at one point. But there were a lot of shifting positions. In the end we got what we got, but I see what you mean. Which other countries get to create their own identity in such a specific way? It's a poem though, it's alive in that way.

JN: That's right, these were painted very early. You don't see the future of history so to speak in paintings much. You have something about this in your new works. The dialogue with Singapore is at the forefront of each – with its expectations. Chua Mia Tee connects just there in this earlier time. Hong Lim [Cheang Hong Lim, 1825–1893], he was your grandfather, was that it?

JC: I think he is like 3rd great grandfather, a few generations down. He's an ancestor.

JN: In each of your paintings – you don't call them landscapes – the ground is fractured slightly. The flat grassy park is quite uneven. And the very little green you use, where does that come from? I'm thinking of the slightly yellow green that is in a lot of the paintings.

JC: The green is a little bit strange, isn't it, but I let that come into the work – that it's not quite right. I actually noticed this green kind of colour before in Lois Dodd, she's an American painter. It's a kind of slightly hyped-up quality. The scenes are familiar but it's a back and forward in knowing that it's not quite 'true' what you are painting. I like that because there is a kind of space between you and the canvas.

JN: The figures in your paintings are very recognisable, as though they were there [at Hong Lim Park], but in fact you get them from different

media. Is that right? You are not literally in the park painting the scenes. Can you explain how you actually make the paintings in the studio, the physical circumstances and the media you use? In my mind if you nest in a space long enough in painting, it all tends to show; analogue sure, but it does show.

JC: In the studio I always stand while painting, I don't allow myself to sit and paint. I like to face the canvas and have an iPad in my left hand, painting from that, relying on that for different details, but it's quite open. And I'm always taking off excess paint. I paint quite thinly – too much is not my thing. It's definitely using media. I have my own photographs but have not really used them. Mostly with the lockdown<sup>1</sup> I didn't get to go to Hong Lim Park often so images are taken from the media. I don't see a difference really. I don't get stuck on the initial thinking I might have started with.

JN: Are all these figures in the same park?

JC: They are all in the park. What makes it different is actually that the ground they are on is broken and cut. The space or – as I like to refer to it – the terrain. Sky/grass, it's all terrain for me. These are from being there myself and then I insert details. It's a Frankenstein thing the way I piece it all together.

JN: I'm vaguely remembering there is a theorist who uses 'terrain'. Have you got someone in mind?

JC: I got it from [American art critic] Barry Schwabsky. It was his take on Rosalind Krauss' expanded field [of sculpture]. He unpicks the origins of 'the medium' in art making – where he makes the case that, rather than thinking of medium as materiality, painting is not simply something medium-specific, but a kind of terrain itself. Krauss' argument leans a lot on the legacy of Clement Greenberg, where painting should be about the formal properties of painting.

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1 During the COVID-19 circuit breaker period in Singapore

Whereas Schwabsky is saying terrain encompasses the painterly field more broadly as something the artist passes through. The artist leaves a mark on this terrain, but the artist had to also respond to the terrain, it's an exchange of agencies. Something like that. I'm thinking terrain is not just the ground, it's the sky as well – the whole thing is terrain. It's not just limited to painting.

JN: Hong Lim was a businessman and civic figure supporting Singapore in many ways. Last time we talked though you also commented how part of this was where he made money trading opium and was a man of a different era in that way. Can you explain that story again?

JC: He didn't just trade opium, he traded other things. He traded many things in general. He's part of the whole Peranakan culture and the Peranakans were known as intermediaries between the Chinese and the colonialists. He's kind of a middleman, fluent not just in English or Chinese but Malay as well. He was obviously clever and very intelligent.

I read for instance that he was just very good at picking the right person for the right job. Things like that and expanding his business. With Hong Lim I was just thinking about this idea of hierarchy in Chinese culture, just the way I see it really, where the one who is really on top is the intellectual and that includes someone like a poet. The intellectual is at the top whereas Hong Lim is much lower on that ladder, he is just a merchant. But in Singapore, when the Chinese came in, there were very few intellectuals or poets, they were all mostly or mainly merchants. Because that's the thing that kept the whole thing going. So, the reason I'm interested now is because it's almost endemic in our culture. We have always struggled with this identity of being a service-orientated society. We put art in a box in a corner.

JN: This is the terrain you mean.

JC: Yes. I don't think these politicians or protesters or the other figures would see it my way. Because really it would be about what gets done. What's the

next thing. This is the rhetoric: we don't have time to look at the clouds.

JN: You can sense the indeterminacy between the different groups and solo figures. It takes some kind of belief to step up on a box in a park and speak, and we know Singapore has a history of problems in this. Whereas other figures [in your paintings] are seemingly just unaffected by any of that.

JC: Many of the figures are not protesting. They are not speakers, they are just bystanders. It's not just a place for politics. It's a place where you can have a picnic. It's kind of haphazard like that. I think we often automatically attune to the political. It's hard to tie it back otherwise.

JN: The paintings change in the way you have undertaken them, from the earlier ones to later perhaps, but it would be too ordinary to make comparisons this way. Some are quick or familiar in the way you have painted them, whereas some others are much more layered and more closely

worked. But this doesn't disentangle what is going on in the painting. Do particular paintings stand out for you? The figures are people so recognisable and ordinary, even the guy sitting in the lounge chair [in *Platforms and Archetypes*, 2022] feels this way and he's obviously not really in the park. In the same painting there is another, there is an older guy, putting his hand to his head, pointing or gesturing.

JC: I do look out for these little gestures, mannerisms. Things like that. It's like an uncle I know or something. This guy's crazy you know [referring to the man pointing with his hand in *Platforms and Archetypes*]. He's probably talking about the government. He's probably saying: Think about it, think about it, have you considered this? Use your brains.

I'm really trying to hone in. It's the first time I have been doing these multiple panels. But really, I'm still waiting for the paintings to tell me what they are about. There is a part of it where I'm still trying to understand. It's harder to piece down [unpack

everything] in words. I'm still more familiar with the first ones I made. I'm still more familiar with thinking about the painting when there is less going on. There is the one called *Tochi's Ghost* [2022]. It's one of the tighter paintings in a sense, with the woman sitting on a small mat in the centre. It's not the sort of painting where you see [what's going on] immediately. They are a bit like Edward Hopper paintings in this way, where certain things just linger in your mind. I'm realising it's a bit difficult to kind of explain [everything at once].

JN: I'm not surprised you mention Hopper. The blues and greens in his pictures are such a surprise, they're quite unnatural. It's not realism, it's very strange. But I interrupted. You were talking about *Tochi's Ghost*.

JC: Yes, *Tochi's Ghost* speaks to me like a Hopper. It's the sort of painting that is easy for me to pick

out, to say that it lingers. In some ways one of my goals, or what I like, is this idea that with painting sometimes you don't forget them. Even years later you can kind of recall them. They can have a second life, even if they are never seen or shown again.

JN: I'm remembering the story you told me about this work [*Tochi's Ghost*] where there are only these four forlorn people who have come and are protesting at this moment. It's a kind of dislocated thing.

JC: It's a ticking clock and Tochi himself is about to be executed<sup>2</sup>. And, well, this is kind of the worst controversy of all the works I've done here. Well, it's not any more controversial than what actually happened.

JN: The painting is representing something you can't see. And it questions the veracity of painting

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2 Iwuchukwu Amara Tochi was a 21-year-old Nigerian that was hanged in 2007 for drug smuggling in Singapore. His execution sparked protests regarding the death penalty in Singapore.

in this too. There is a kind of emptiness in what a painter can really do, which bleeds into all of these works. Here there is the overt politic or gesture of some figures, but as well with others it's the opposite. That's the sense in all of these paintings to a point. Is this what painting does? Gerhard Richter's *Baader Meinhof* paintings were so small and innocuous really. Nothing is really happening in them either. They're history paintings though.

JC: It's more for me too, in that it's painting about the park itself. You remove all the figures and there is this thing where it is just a park, a space. I realise it's the opposite of someone like Chua Mia Tee [in *Epic Poem of Malaya*], where mostly I've taken out the dominant figure, you just have the others. I think about Dostoevsky a lot. I like his underground man. All of these things are intermingling. It's not about one thing, or one sense, only. That's what makes it active for me. So, can you accept that there is just this emptiness? – and that if there is any

controversy, it is only that things are left unfinished. It's still here in these works whereas, mostly, in the media or wherever, it's passed over and done with. In the news, time just keeps flowing. It's why it's tough to talk about what the work is doing, without the context of painting. The work is in the painting.

JN: You mean that the arena of painting allows this kind of commingling and equivocating sense of things that are nonetheless still present. The aperture in painting is more open-ended.

JC: I want to be clear because I've thought about this a great deal. I can't say the works are not political. But the problem in the way someone like [French philosopher] Jacques Rancière has it, is that you remove the subject so as to preserve it from rhetoric. But in all of our discussions we are very much talking about the subject: my ghosts are very important. So obviously they come attached with my viewpoints. I definitely have my own thoughts,

politically or it could even be quasi-metaphysical or whatever. But I don't need to disclose, I don't need to make it solipsistic and all about me. What you get is the way I look at this thing, the way I organise the paint. Further than this it's not something that can be put into words.

JN: At one point some time back we spoke of the sense of being in two minds, I think that was the expression we used, and that this was part of the particular Singaporean experience. The need to hold two or more positions, which could even be conflicted, and make them relative – to the point where you don't get convinced of anything. Is this a thing?

JC: There is a sadness as well. That is my general feeling or my point. It's why I bring up Dostoevsky. It was kind of late when I started to become a painter.

My mum would ask me, and my mum is quite a jovial person, 'Why are your paintings always so dark?' It is really a thing that we live in a kind of paradise in Singapore. It's a kind of utopian setting. I draw in Dostoevsky because he rebels in front of that perfection. Maybe it's [the response of] an alienated type, but my structure has always been between rebelling and obeying. There are good things that Hong Lim is remembered for, to bring it back to him. But there are also the negatives. [French philosopher] Jean-Luc Nancy uses the Christian metaphor of scarring, or I think it's 'shattered love'. This is what connects the two. Rancière also speaks of scarring, while at the same time treating objects as consecrated objects. Paintings are not like normal objects, there is this process of scarring and consecrating. People are the same and that is why protesters, or whoever, need to be respected.



## Jon Chan Weiwen

1982 | Born in Singapore

### Education

2008 | Graduated with Masters of Fine Arts from Lasalle College of the Arts 2007 | Graduated with Bachelor of Arts from Lasalle College of the Arts 2003 | Graduated with Diploma of Fine Art (Painting) from Lasalle College of the Arts

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

2022 | "The Hong Lim Series: Line and Fragments", iPreciation, Singapore 2019 | "Gaze and Gloss", Grey Projects, Singapore 2016 "Paraphernalia", Grey Projects, Singapore

### Selected Group Exhibitions

2021 | "This Time: Contemporary Watercolour", A+ WORKS of ART, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 2020 | "Time Passes", National Gallery Singapore, Singapore / "It's Complicated Somehow", Substation, Singapore 2019 | "Raw Forms", Coda Culture, Singapore 2017 | "Afterimage...", iPreciation, Singapore / "Teachings from His Majesty the King", Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, Bangkok / "Portable Art Week", iPreciation, Singapore 2016 | "Portable Art Week", iPreciation, Singapore / "Departure 2",

iPreciation, Singapore 2014 | "Modern Love", LASALLE College of the Arts 2013 | "Finding Humor", Merely Ice Cream, Sunshine Plaza, Singapore 2009 | "An Assault Against Affection", tickleart, CityLink Mall 2008 | Viza, Viza, Vizualize, LASALLE College of the Arts, Praxis Space, Singapore 2007 | LASALLE Degree Show 07, LASALLE College of the Arts / "Visual Rage", Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Singapore / "Feast", Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Singapore/ LASALLE-SIA Project Space, Singapore / "The Stone Soup Story", tickleart, CityLink Mall / "Black Is Not the Darkest Colour", La Libreria, Singapore 2006 | "Miniature", LASALLE-SIA Project Space, Singapore 2003 | "Travelogue" (Winston Oh Travel Award) Earl Lu Gallery II, Singapore / "Honey Mercury", LASALLE-SIA Gallery, Singapore / "Bilateral Bonds", Taksu Gallery, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur 2002 | "Tourist", Earl Lu Gallery II, Singapore

### Awards

2007 | Winston Oh Travel Award / Recipient of the JCCI Arts Award / Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2003 | Winston Oh Travel Award





## **Artwork Details**

2022

34x60.5cm

Oil on Linen



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