



NG WOON LAM



The Pulse of Life

This Singapore artist uses color, composition, and lively brushwork to capture the energy of urban landscapes.

BY KELLY KANE

A master in both oil and watercolor, Ng Woon Lam recently had two of his miniature plein air paintings selected to hang in the Prime Minister of Japan's office. In a recent conversation, the artist shared his approaches to color and design, the benefits he finds in working outdoors, and his idea of the perfect painting day.

Kelly Kane: Congratulations on having two of your paintings chosen for the Prime Minister of Japan. How did that opportunity come about?

Ng Woon Lam: Thank you! My wife runs a gallery I started called Li Fine Art Gallery, and we have regular support from the public sector, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They purchase artworks to present to

visitors from foreign countries or to be taken by government officials to foreign countries as gifts. This was one of those occasions.

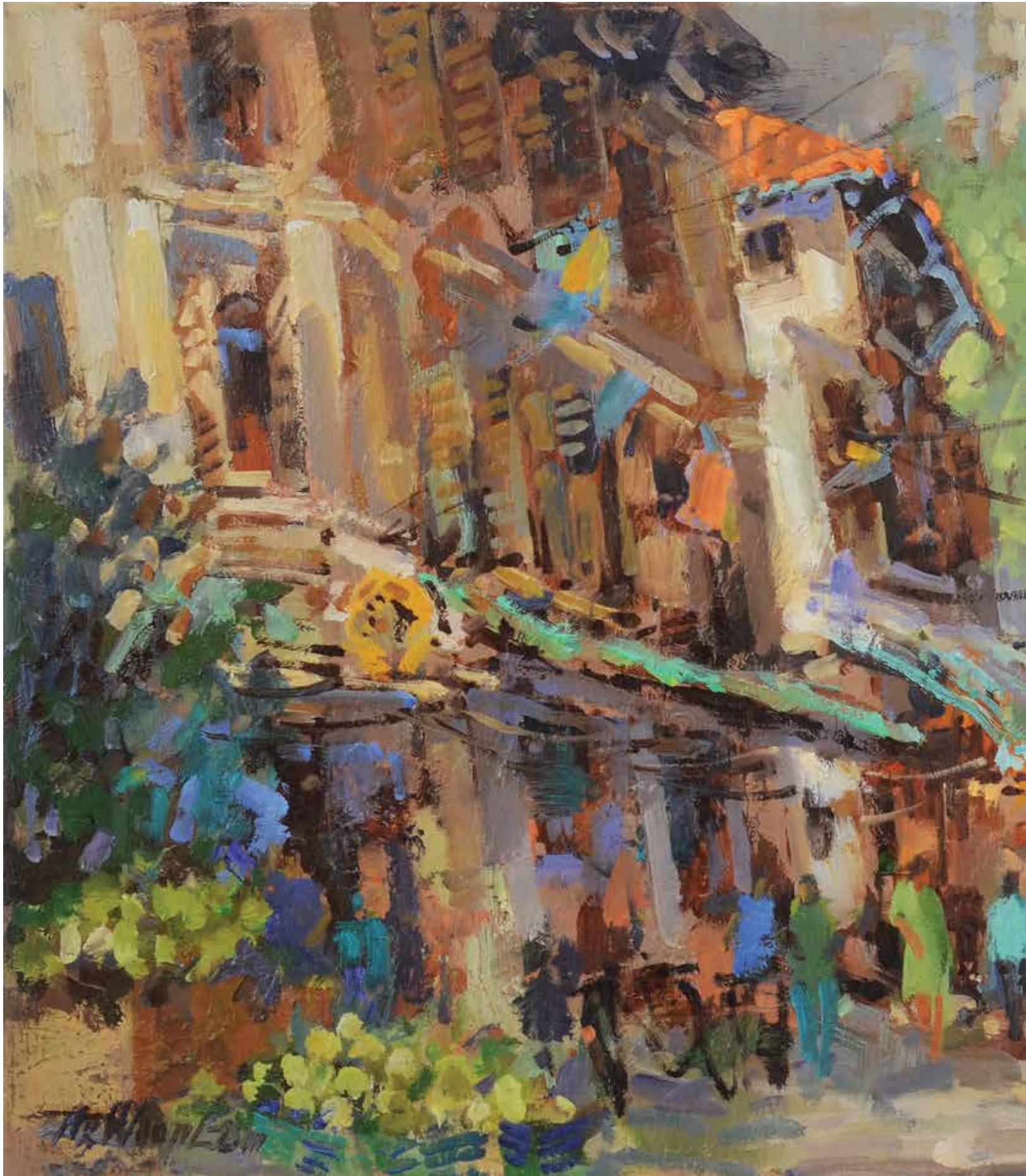
Kane: Both of the pieces that were selected were painted en plein air. Do you primarily work outdoors?

Ng: Plein air painting became part of my training model 30 years ago when I joined the Singapore Watercolour Society, which has a tradition of painting outdoors every weekend. I learned a lot from this group of artists, especially their founding president, Mr. Gog Sing Hooi.

Although I don't consider plein air my primary approach, painting outdoors has helped me develop a stronger sensitivity to subtle tonal and hue transitions. Today, I work 50 percent of the time en plein air and

(ABOVE) *Evening Walk at Shantou, China, 2019*, watercolor, 11 x 15 in., available from Li Fine Art Gallery, Singapore, plein air ●
(OPPOSITE PAGE) *Caught in the Rain at Chinatown, 2021*, oil, 18 x 14 in., available from Li Fine Art Gallery, Singapore, plein air







(LEFT) *Smith Street, Chinatown, 2022*, oil, 16 x 20 in., available from Li Fine Art Gallery, Singapore, plein air ● (ABOVE) *Keong Saik Street Singapore, 2022*, oil, 8 x 10 in., private collection, plein air

50 percent in the studio with image references; personal, inventive ideas; and artistic concepts I learned from Old Masters. When I research and teach color theory, I always advise students to use plein air painting as their practical training.

Kane: What are some of the other benefits of painting directly from nature?

Ng: Sometimes, we run out of ideas. But when we're plein air painting, we're immersed in a dynamic environment, with people moving, weather changing, and lots of things happening, which can help us generate new ideas and enrich our visual vocabulary.

Then there are the social and mood-lifting benefits. Working en plein air is a good excuse to get out of the office or studio, enjoy the ambience outside, or to meet with good friends, paint, and then have lunch together.

Kane: Do you have favorite places to paint en plein air, or do you like to challenge yourself with new subject matter?

Ng: Singapore is truly small. I'm forced to go back to a few of the same places to paint, but I take it as an opportunity to reinvent my compositions by exploring new color schemes to achieve different moods in my paintings. It's great practical experience for my color theory research.

In general, there aren't many places to paint en plein air in Singapore; a few of the popular spots are along the banks of the Singapore River and the heritage shophouses. I like to travel to other countries to paint when I can. Malaysia is the best choice nearby.

Kane: What kinds of subjects most appeal to you — at home or when you're traveling?

Ng: I like architectural subjects because the shapes allow me to play with design ideas. But when I travel, I like to challenge myself with less familiar subjects. They drive new design ideas and color schemes.

Kane: How would you describe a perfect day painting en plein air?

Ng: You don't want to be outside in Singapore between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m., because the temperature is scorching during that time. I like to go out in the early morning, before it gets too unbearably hot or humid.

If it rains, it cools things down a bit. On those days, I can start a little later and paint some rainy scenes. I lived for short periods of time in Chicago and New York City, and loved the cold weather there. People may think I'm crazy, but I went out painting in Chicago when the snow was two feet deep and it was freezing outside. Of course, I was working fast and in oil. Watercolor won't dry under those conditions.

DEMONSTRATION: INTERPRETING A COMPLEX SCENE



VIEW OF THE SCENE

The artist sets up along the river.



STEP 1

I coated the canvas with a neutral color that was low in chroma. I kept the tone in a middle key, which helped me better see the chroma and extreme ends of the value scale as I worked.



STEP 2

This demo painting was quite small, so I only did a very quick sketch on the canvas.



STEP 3

I blocked in the first layer of color.

ARTIST'S PALETTE

Clockwise from bottom left: dioxazine purple, French ultramarine, cerulean blue, cobalt teal pure, Prussian green, cinnabar green medium, cinnabar green light, raw sienna, yellow ochre, cadmium yellow light,

cadmium yellow deep, cadmium orange, cadmium red medium, alizarin crimson, Stil de grain brown, asphaltum extra, Van Dyck brown, ivory black (added later), plus titanium white





FINAL STEP

I filled in just enough detail to say what I wanted to about the scene.

CLARKE QUAY, SINGAPORE RIVER
2022, oil, 10 x 12 in.
Available from Li Fine Art Gallery
Plein air



Kane: Do you travel with your sketching supplies so you're prepared for whenever inspiration strikes, or are your outings more planned and purposeful?

Ng: I prepare everything before I go. For example, if I'm traveling to a city in Malaysia, say Georgetown in Penang, and I know I'm going to want to paint a large-scale oil (28 x 36 inches or larger) on location, I'll roll the canvases and bring stretcher bars. I pack all the tools I'll need to stretch the canvases when I reach the hotel. I don't paint very thick layers in oil, so I only need one day for the surface to dry, and then I can work on it again the next day.

I normally work on one painting in the morning, rest during the hot midday, then start another one about 4:30 p.m. The next day, I can work on the second layer of both paintings. Large plein air paintings (I did one that was 3 x 4 feet) may take four or five visits to the location. I try to take these pieces to about 80 or 90 percent completion in the field, but for very small paintings I can complete just about everything on site.

When I'm finished painting, I'll stay a day or two longer to let the surface paint dry before I remove the canvases from the stretchers and bring them home. Sometimes I may not get back to finish the last 10 to 20 percent of the work until months after I return, as my schedule is quite packed.

Kane: In addition to managing a successful painting career, you work as an associate professor at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), School of Art, Design & Media. Tell me a little about what your position entails.

Ng: In university, my main area of research is color theory. I explore the practical issues of using the popular symmetrical color wheel based on the Itten Color System, and try to resolve those issues with the help of the Munsell Color System, which is three-dimensional and asymmetrical. I experiment with all kinds of color possibilities outdoors, but my theoretical framework is based on the Munsell Color System.

Kane: What is the biggest challenge you see your NTU students face, and how do you help them overcome it?

Ng: As applied art students, they find color application and design concepts especially challenging, as do most beginners. They often don't have sufficient time to learn these two fundamental concepts before they go on to their focused areas of study, such as animation, filmmaking, or visual communication.

To help, I started a Watermedia Landscape Painting class to teach them color theory based on the Munsell Color System. In this course, they have the opportunity to explore the benefits of plein air painting, using transparent watercolor, gouache, or acrylic. I give the students exercises that introduce them to important concepts of color theory, especially the less chromatic colors (browns and grays) and their relationships with chromatic parent colors.

Kane: We've talked quite a bit about your plein air oil paintings, but I first got to know you as a watercolor painter. Are there certain subjects or occasions when you prefer one over the other?

Ng: The advantage of oil is it's not afraid of water. I can work in any weather condition, even rain. The advantage of watercolor is that it dries fast, and I can complete a painting quicker on site with multiple layers. I think both can be used for any subject matter. 🎨

A distinguished artist and academic, **NG WOON LAM** moved from his birthplace in Malaysia to Singapore 30 years ago. ngwoonlam.com



(THIS PAGE, TOP) *Boat Quay, Singapore River, 2021*, oil, 10 x 8 in., Japan Prime Minister's Office Collection, presented by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, plein air ● (THIS PAGE, BOTTOM) *Boon Tat Street, 2021*, oil, 8 x 10 in., available from Li Fine Art Gallery, Singapore, plein air ● (OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) *Backyard, 2021*, oil, 8 x 10 in., private collection, plein air ● *Little India Market, 2021*, oil, 8 x 10 in., available from Li Fine Art Gallery, Singapore, plein air ● *Morning Shoppers, Chinatown, Singapore, 2022*, oil, 28 x 36 in., available from Li Fine Art Gallery, Singapore, plein air ● *Cavenagh Bridge and Fullerton Hotel, 2021*, oil, 8 x 10 in., Japan Prime Minister's Office Collection, presented by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, plein air ● *Duxton Hill, 2021*, oil, 14 x 18 in., available from Li Fine Art Gallery, Singapore, plein air ● *South Bridge Road, 2021*, oil, 8 x 10 in., available from Li Fine Art Gallery, Singapore, plein air