



## Kok Yew Puah

Portrait of a Malaysian Artist

### Who was Kok Yew Puah?

Kok Yew Puah (1947–1999) was born in Klang, Selangor. He was first introduced to art by his teacher at SJK Pin Hwa before going on to study painting and printmaking at National Gallery of Victoria Art School, Melbourne. While his earlier works from the 70s consisted primarily of silkscreen prints, Puah is known for his figurative works showcasing the landscape of Klang and its people. His works in the late 80s and 90s centred on topics like urbanisation, environmental impact, and modernisation.

**1. Why do you think the artist titled the painting “Urban Playground”?**

If you could envision an ideal neighbourhood playground, what would it be like? Imagine that you are writing a proposal to your city council (e.g. DBKL, MBSJ) to create a park or playground in your neighbourhood. Think about other parks around Malaysia or in other cities (e.g. Central Park in New York City) to figure out what elements you would want to include.

- a. How big would it be? Would pets and animals be allowed to roam around? Would it include a lake? What activities could you do there?

When the toll highways were built in the 1990s linking Klang with Kuala Lumpur, it was seen as a sign of progress.

**2. Can you think of any significant landmarks specific to your home city or town? What do you think they signify?**

Kok Yew Puah illustrated a group of five friends rollerblading under a highway flyover in the city of Klang in Selangor.



Kok Yew Puah painted the friends rollerblading. Look at the way the young boy on the left of the painting is crouching. He looks like he is ready to skate off in a minute! Look at the arrows on the road behind them pointing upwards. This draws the viewer’s eyes upwards too. This also helps to give a sense of movement to the whole painting.

Kok Yew Puah often painted members of his own family or their friends. He often captured multicultural Malaysia by illustrating its people, who despite their differences, all call Malaysia home. Now look closely at the group of friends depicted in the painting.

**3. Do they remind you of your family or friends? If you were painting your group of friends, where would you paint them? And what would they be doing?**

**Urban Playground**  
1994, acrylic on canvas, 139 × 185 cm  
Collection of artist’s family



**Untitled (Two Friends)**  
1998, acrylic on canvas, 127 × 152 cm  
Collection of Charles Lok

**The term composition refers to the overall arrangement of the visual elements of a painting, and how they relate to each other. Think about the artistic composition of this painting entitled “Two Friends” that features two young girls seated on chairs upon a wooden floor. Look closely at the painting and notice where your eyes are drawn to first.**

**1. Was it the patterned floor, the girls or the brightly coloured cushions?**

**2. How does the artist illustrate the wooden floor? Why do you think he chose to paint it so that it takes up half of the composition? Does the wooden floor look endless? (Think about the perspective)**

The two girls are depicted at the bottom of the painting, but their gaze looks straight at the viewer. Figure out where you are in relation to them. (Are they looking up at you?)

**3. How did you come to your answer? What did you look at to figure out where you are in relation to them? (tips: chairs, gaze)**

- a. Why do you think the artist painted them at this angle? How does the artist depict the different textures within the painting? Do you notice any patterns that represent the different material textures? (look closely at the wood floors, the girls’ clothes).

- b. Do you think the vibrant colours used here match up to how they are in real life?

**4. Now go back to looking at these two girls in the painting. Try to compare and contrast them.**

- a. How old do you think they are? Why are they holding similar pillows? Do you think they are friends? What are they wearing? Are they from different families or do you think they are related? Who is more confident? Who is more shy?
- b. Using your comparisons, think about their personalities and create a story about their friendship.

This painting is a self-portrait of the artist against the backdrop of the sea. A self-portrait is when an artist represents themselves in a painting or a photograph.

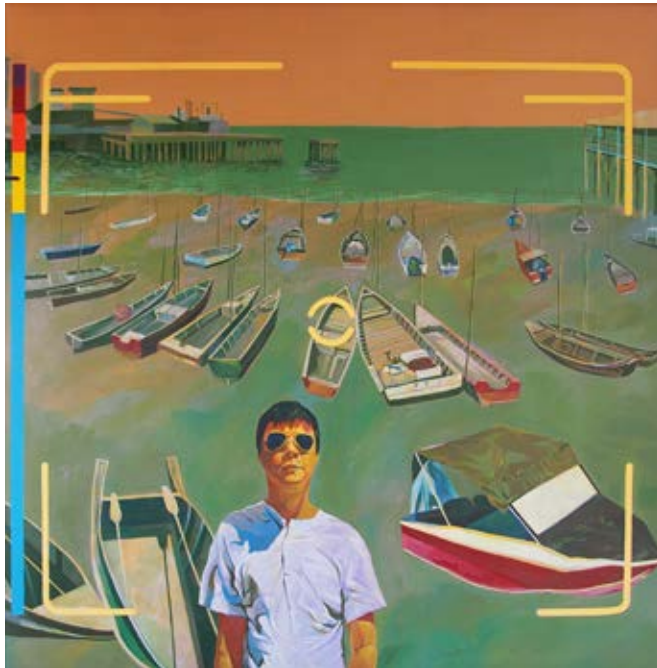
1. Looking at this self-portrait, what does it tell you about the artist?

- Does the landscape look familiar to you? Where do you think it could be? Does it hint to the sort of person the artist was?

In a way, self-portraits like these are similar to the modern day 'selfie'. Although the mediums differ they both represent how you perceive yourself or how you want others to perceive you. Therefore, you can learn a lot about someone's personality by searching for the visual clues in their digital 'selfie' or, in this case, in their painted self-portraits.

## ACTIVITY

Draw your own self-portrait and include the objects/elements you mentioned in Question 2



Camera View of the Artist  
1993, acrylic on canvas, 141 × 141 cm  
Collection of Kenneth Tan

### FUN FACT!

Look back at your past 'selfies', do you tend to favour one side of your face? If you are biased towards your left side, not only are you in the majority of 'selfie-takers', but professional portrait painters across art historical periods tended to paint their sitter's left side. Just look at Davinci's Mona Lisa (1503-19), Vermeer's Girl with a Pearl Earring (1665) or Hoessein Enas' self-portraits!

2. If you could take a selfie right now, what would you choose to include in it so that viewers can learn more about you? Think about sentimental objects, as well as your pose and location.

Artists have the creative license to capture things that can't be replicated in our reality. So it might be that Kok Yew Puah didn't really look like that if you compare this painting to a photograph of himself. However, these days there are many technological devices you can use (Photoshop, filters) to creatively enhance your 'selfie'.

3. With this in mind do you think that 'selfies' are an accurate representation of a person?

- Regardless of whether they are accurate, do you see 'selfies' as an important form of visual/historical documentation? (hint: societal standards)
- Pick your favourite 'selfie' and predict what people in the future will say about it. Do you think they will be able to know what you are like? Why or why not?

Kok Yew Puah often included the camera viewfinder as a framing device.

4. Considering this artistic device, where is the 'point of focus' in the painting? Is it the artist himself? The boats? or the skies and jetty in the background?

- Why do you think he chose to focus on that specifically?
- The camera viewfinder makes the artwork appear as a literal snapshot. If there was a place you could revisit and capture in a snapshot right now, where would it be and why?



Untitled (Seated Woman)  
1988, acrylic on canvas, 132 × 170.2 cm  
Collection of Charles Lok

1. What geometric shapes, lines and angles does he use to represent them?

- Can you spot a rectangle? (hint: look at the window and the door)
- Where can you see the most lines? (hint: look at the trunk of the palm tree and the pattern behind the woman).

What do you first notice in this painting? Is it the tree in the background, the woman in the midground or some other element?

2. How does he emphasize the presence of the woman? Think about the patterns and colours he used to contrast her with her surroundings. Why do you think he used that backdrop?

- The chair almost seems like a throne and she stares straight at the viewer. Who do you think she may be? Do you think she is a strong person? Why?
- Think about the angles within the painting. Does she follow that same type of form or is she an exception?

3. How does the artist split up the composition? Look at the lines within the painting that represent the foreground, midground and background.

The British artist, David Hockney had a big artistic influence on Kok Yew Puah. This is especially apparent in some of Kok Yew Puah's paintings, where one can notice striking similarities in both composition and colour. Both artists used bold, vibrant colours in their paintings. Like David Hockney, Kok Yew Puah also did not want to make his paintings life-like. In this painting, for example, he wanted the sky, the grass and the window to look flat.

- Look at the different elements in the painting. Are they realistic or proportionate? (hint: look at how tall the tree is!)
- Now look at how the artist has used colour in the painting. The sky is such a bright blue! Do you think the colours he used make the composition look more flat?
- If so, what would you do differently to create more depth in the painting?

### USEFUL ART TERMS

**Composition:** the overall arrangement of the visual elements of a painting, and how they relate to each other. **Perspective:** the art of arranging objects in space on a flat surface and making them look as if they have depth or distance. **Self-Portrait:** Portrait of an artist created by themselves. **Medium:** The material used to create the artwork (e.g. oil painting on canvas). **Viewfinder:** A camera device that shows the field of view of the lens, used to frame and focus the picture.

1. Look closely at the insurance salesman. The artist has painted him standing against the rural backdrop of Pulau Ketam. Look at the way he is dressed. Compare that with the boats and houses which occupy the middle ground and background. What do each of these elements represent and signify? (e.g. Tradition v.s. Modernity)
  - a. Considering all these details, how does this painting make you feel? Observe the colours in the painting and the pictorial composition. Does it make you feel hopeful?
2. Can you imagine his aspirations and dreams? Write a story about the salesman with all the information you have gathered so far.
  - a. The dreams of many Malaysians back then focused around their economic and social conditions: the desire to achieve a better way of life. Do you think the dream is still the same now? Why?
  - b. What are your dreams and hopes? Would you portray them in a similar way as the artist?

The mid-80s to the 90s was an important time for Malaysia as the nation experienced rapid industrialisation. The growing economy allowed people from rural areas to move to the cities to find jobs. They were able to undergo upward mobility, that is, the ability to rise to a higher economic or social standing.



**Portrait of an Insurance Salesman in Pulau Ketam**  
1993, acrylic on canvas, 164 × 162.5 cm  
Collection of Khazanah Nasional Berhad

#### FUN FACT ABOUT PULAU KETAM

Pulau Ketam (Crab Island) is not your typical island! The entire island sits on wooden stilts which stand 10 metres above sea level. So even their roads and footpaths are fully supported by wooden stilts, which means that there are no cars on the island and the only mode of transportation is by bicycle or on foot.

Look closely at these two paintings. The painting on the right is *Masks and the Modern Man* (1995), and the painting at the bottom is *Tradition and Change* (1996).

1. What do you notice about the three figures? Which one is the odd one out? (hint: wearing modern attire, no mask, holding a handphone). What makes them noticeably different?
2. In some cultures, masks are a symbol of identity and tradition.
  - a. What do you think these masks portray? Do you think these masks represent tradition?
  - b. In *Tradition and Change* (1996), why do you think one of the men is hiding behind their hands?
3. Look at the background of these two paintings. Between the course of a year, the artist decided to paint these similar three figures in different locations.
  - a. What do you think this background change represents in the context of Malaysia?
  - b. Where do you think these two locations are? (hint: look for certain geographical clues)
4. Looking at these two paintings, what do you think Kok Yew Puah's thoughts on modernisation were? (optimistic/ pessimistic?)



**Masks and the Modern Man**  
1995, acrylic on canvas, 162 × 223 cm  
Collection of National Art Gallery of Malaysia



**Tradition and Change**  
1996, acrylic on canvas, 170.5 × 170.5 cm  
Collection of Kenneth Tan



**Untitled (Two Men & A Racing Car)**

1996, mixed media on paper, 79 × 108.5 cm  
Collection of Charles Lok

1. Since the pandemic, another sort of mask is gaining more importance: the face mask. What does this mask mean to you now? How would you depict this period of the Covid-19 pandemic and the use of face masks?

## ACTIVITY

Design a facemask that represents your ideas.

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Cover Image

**(Title unknown)**

c.1970s, silkscreen on paper, 90.8 × 116.7 cm  
Collection of artist's family