

Graham Kuo

Essay by Joe Eisenberg OAM

Twombly hits his stride, and it is already a limber gait; the line off on a fantastic dance, whirling and looping, pulling the artist's hand behind it; the colours travelling through each other, still playfully eroticised... bolts of energy shoot through the scribbly mass...

Simon Schama on Cy Twombly

I read the above five years ago and filed it not knowing that one day I might recall it and employ it for my own means. Very recently I had the opportunity to look at current drawings by Graham Kuo and Schama's quote came immediately to mind. Schama writing on Twombly could be Schama penning words on Kuo's latest outpourings. Schama also adds that Twombly should be a noun and defined as: *A line with a mind of its own*. Once again this definition could be ascribed to Kuo.

What makes his art special is that it is informative, it adds to our body of knowledge and it always makes visual sense. Despite the apparent messiness of the image it has beauty and is sufficiently compelling to make us pause and ask ourselves how he achieves such a harmonious vision with what looks like irreverent ease. To know art however is to realise that the easier it looks the harder it was to formulate, let alone create.

Kuo's passionate and mystical understanding of what he wants to achieve is beyond question and his expertise verges on the thrilling. The greatest revelation is his sensibility and humble quality. When he is praised for his art he is almost bashful and reserved, in the best sense of the word. Born in China in 1948 he came to Australia in 1963 and graduated from the National Art School in 1972. Thus his inheritance is embedded in the abstract manner but it is influenced by the intricacies of Chinese calligraphy. Thankfully both rely on physical movements, control, and of course a sense of freedom, an element that Kuo has in abundance. His art is informed by his formal and informal life learning, and varied experiences particularly, for a while, as a

stranger in a new world.

Kuo's work is an example of how imagination can be given free rein when skill and adaptability are intertwined in an art form. Luckily for us Kuo chose art as a way of expression. This is evidenced in the current body of work, which demands to be inspected very carefully and slowly. Like meditation it may be hard at first to focus on any one aspect but, with care, the breathing becomes rhythmic and the paintings flow forward and surround us in a dream like atmosphere. Lines meander and scrawl their way across the canvas intersecting with vivid, painterly explosions of colour— it is not planned, but a perspective has been injected to assist us with our exploring. As William Blake once wrote, "The eye sees more than the heart knows".

Like rhythm and atmosphere, enlightenment springs to mind when describing a Kuo painting. It is probably the relationship with his brush strokes and calligraphy and the Eastern quality that is so evident that leads to such a ready conclusion. And yet it's more than just the obvious: it's in the hidden spirit behind the intent. Despite the apparent randomness of the artist's mark making one has the distinct feeling that there is order and planning. This may not be conscious, and is perhaps brought about by years of creating, but nonetheless, is so perfect and resonates with sensibility, emotion and comprehension.

I believe that it is these qualities which Kuo has in abundance. His art stands apart from those of many of his contemporaries and, although it is hard to categorise him, it is not a bad thing as it allows him the peace to continue to head

where he is going. No Kuo exhibition is like another: in this exhibition, Kuo's canvases are not totally covered by paint although he seems to be encouraged these days to colour more of the surface than he has at times in the past. While devoting time to his usual palette such as green, orange, mauve and pink, he is moving away from the more limited selections of the past. His gestures in paint are, nevertheless, confined to and contained by the hidden artist within. He knows when at times what seems too little is actually enough. The square canvases sing with an inner rhythm that readily comes to Kuo.

The essence and inner expression of Kuo's painting, perhaps not its outer manifestation with its Pollock-like 'swash-buckling' bold gestures and splashes of colour, is a metaphor for his personality: The work is a projection of his innermost thoughts and emotions. Quiet and reserved in person, Kuo speaks more easily through his art. The artist makes little distinction between drawing and painting. It is all about mark making and the ability to release his memories in paint. Process is a factor for him but it comes naturally: he responds to his inner voices and this he does with meticulous effect.

In *Might Have Danced* Kuo demonstrates that art in its essence is simply shape, colour and tone. When it comes from the heart via a skilled and experienced hand, it can elevate us all to another place – a place which once belonged to the artist but is one that we each, who look enquiringly, can now call our own.

Joseph Eisenberg OAM

Cultural Director, Maitland City Council

Graham Kuo

Green Lights #3

Oil and acrylic on canvas

152 x 152cm

Photograph: Berry Mak