

“Life Series” by Shirley Poh

By Pan Huiting

She sits at the bottom-right corner of the painting, right foot delicately balanced along the edge of the canvas; we do not see the left hand, which has all but disappeared through the bottom. Her eyes are closed, contemplating. The room of her mind is a gloaming blue. In the corner delineated by the pattern of the checkerboard floor, the daimons of her mind manifest themselves in opposing hues of mauve and orange. They wrestle, the cords in their necks stick out. There are echoes of Jacob’s crepuscular wrestle, who struggled with God and with men and prevailed. The painting, entitled “Internal Voices,” encapsulates the moment in which the artist struggles with her internal voices and prevails. All is fluid. Even the rigidity of the checkerboard floor is in flux. Her bathrobe clings to her like a second skin, like folds of flesh. The narrow strip of indigo along her back is her shadow and her cape. There is no clear stratagem in this chess match.

Shirley Poh, a sales manager by day, is a local artist with a zest for life. Bright colours dominate her palette, and her mannequin-like figures with their *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* sunglasses and coiffed hair look like they have just stepped out from the pages of a fashion magazine. Indeed, advertisement visuals inspire her artistic practice, providing her with an endless source of characters to populate her canvases. Shirley’s job and her love for travel often allow her to meet people, and her interactions with them supply her with valuable material for the creation of her artworks. In fact, another of the most striking characteristics of her paintings is that her figures always come in groups of three – the lowest plurality beyond a couple – reflecting her fascination with human relationships on a social level.

In *Internal Voices*, one is prevented from moving forward in life because he or she is stymied by antithetical viewpoints that may be equally valid. In this case, having “two sides of the story” can be just as crippling as knowing only one side. Having to “make a choice between the two” is a preoccupation of the artist and this concern resurfaces in her other works such as *Money Versus Passion* and *Can You Have It All?* in which the characters are confronted with the choice of doing what is apparently more needful as opposed to other pursuits such as basketball and baking. As such, the stuck, irresolute figure is a frequent presence in the series. In *Crossroads*, two women clad in complementary shades of viridian and vermilion stand behind a third seated woman – a configuration reminiscent of *Internal Voices*. As the title suggests, *Crossroads* also depicts a moment in which one is unsure of which path to take, resulting in stasis. The deliberating, uncertain figure makes her appearance once more in *Moving on With Velocity* and she stands, or rather sits in contrast to the spirited man with the boxing gloves and the woman who is cruising through life on a motorcycle. Indeed, stagnation is something that needs to be overcome for the artist and emotions such as rage, ennui and pessimism that sap one’s drive (note the recurring images of bicycles, motorcycles and scooters as metaphors of how fast the characters are progressing in life) must constantly be wrestled with; incidentally the theme of *Bye ABC.... (Anger, Boredom, Cynism....)*.

Motivated by questions on how to live a happy and fulfilling life, *Life Series* invites viewers to review what life means for them and to take the wheel through the choices that we all have to make at certain points in our lives. It crystallizes these

moments of significance, always affirming that life is colourful and precious in spite of all that we face.