Guy Ngan: His Art, Life and Pacific-Chinese Aesthetics

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Abstract
This article is a study of the art of Guy Ngan 顏國鍇 (1926–2017). A Chinese-New Zealander, Ngan's work and aesthetic considerations are yet to be adequately understood. I will introduce his background, discuss his major works and elaborate on his approach to art practice. I will also discuss Ngan's identity, his self-identification and the reception of his art in the context of New Zealand art history. What are the characteristics of Ngan's work? How has Ngan's Chinese cultural background informed his art practice? And what constitutes his "Pacific-Chinese aesthetics"? I will argue for a positive case of a Pacific-Chinese aesthetics in New Zealand as proposed and practised by Ngan. The article concludes with a discussion of recent changes in the reception of his oeuvre.

Guy Ngan (1926–2017) was the first New Zealand artist with Chinese heritage to rise to national and international prominence. He lived a long life and had an extensive career. Although known primarily as a sculptor, Ngan was an artist of remarkable versatility. In addition to making small, big and monumental sculptures using a variety of materials, he also excelled at drawing, painting, carving, designing and making Chinese seals. His legacy is the extraordinary number of works he created across different genres and media. Despite the increased attention paid to him by art critics and museums over the past decade or so, there is no comprehensive appraisal of his contribution to the visual culture of New Zealand. His works and approach still require to be better understood and appreciated.[1]

The Pacific-Chinese in the World

Guy Ngan was born in Wellington to Chinese parents. His father, Ngan Gee Choy (顏梓材, 1872–1959), known as Ngan Gee in New Zealand, was the first significant figure in Guy's life. Ngan Gee was from a farmer's family but managed to become literate in both Chinese and English, and became a schoolteacher. The Ngan family was from Guangzhou (Canton) and had houses in the city and in the country nearby. Ngan Gee came to New Zealand around 1895. He first taught English in the Chinese community but later ran a fruit shop in Newtown, Wellington. He was naturalised as a New Zealand citizen in 1907. In 1928, resenting being treated as a second-class citizen by the New Zealand government after Parliament passed legislation excluding Chinese-New Zealanders from receiving the old-age pension, Ngan Gee uprooted the family and returned to Guangzhou. Guy was not quite two years old and would spend his childhood and receive his primary education there.

To be bilingual with literacy in both Chinese and English at the turn of the twentieth century meant Ngan Gee was an educated man, in the top 5% of the Chinese population at the time. Guy recalled that his father used to read Confucian classics and taught him to be philosophical about life and the world.[2] It is also significant that the family home was in Guangzhou, which, between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, was the only Chinese urban centre and port city open to European missionaries, traders and diplomats. At the time, Guangzhou prospered from the export of goods and the rise and flourishing of the European fever for Chinoiserie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was also the city where ideas and goods from Europe first arrived in China. In other words, Guangzhou was the point of contact between China and Europe. As a result, many Chinese intellectual leaders at the turn of the

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century were Cantonese, playing key roles in overthrowing the Qing dynasty and founding the Republic of China in 1912. Ngan Gee himself financially contributed to China's Republican Movement led by Sun Yat-sen. The hope for a better, modern China was also part of the reason that Ngan Gee chose to return to Guangzhou.

Guangzhou had conditioned Ngan Gee to be open-minded to and curious about European cultures. In turn, from a young age, Guy learnt from his father that one should appreciate the achievements of European civilisation. This, of course, would be accompanied by a deep, foundational understanding and appreciation of Chinese cultural traditions. He would develop the habit of learning and a cosmopolitan approach to European and other cultures throughout his life. His sense of self would also in time evolve through his learning of and interaction with other cultures.

Ngan produced a succinct one-page autobiography in his *Scrapbook Number One* (fig. 1).[3] This is an important document that explains his personal cultural identification and what he considered significant landmarks for his creative life. Information is conveyed both visually and verbally: more than half the page is taken up by images of wooden anchors, that extend from top to bottom, surrounding the text in a semi-circle. At the very top is Ngan's name in English and Chinese, and the latter appear in different seal styles as in Chinese cultural traditions. Next to his names is the tiki hands image that he created, and in between the red tiki hands and the red seal of his name is a small green patch showing a path forking into three directions. My interpretation of this fork is of Ngan signifying his artistic persona as three in one: his Chinese heritage, his status as a New Zealander and his Pacific-Chinese geo-cultural connection. Ngan developed a fixation with the tiki hand motif, which he associated with the shape of the feet of migrating birds and with which he located self-identification and artistic aspirations.

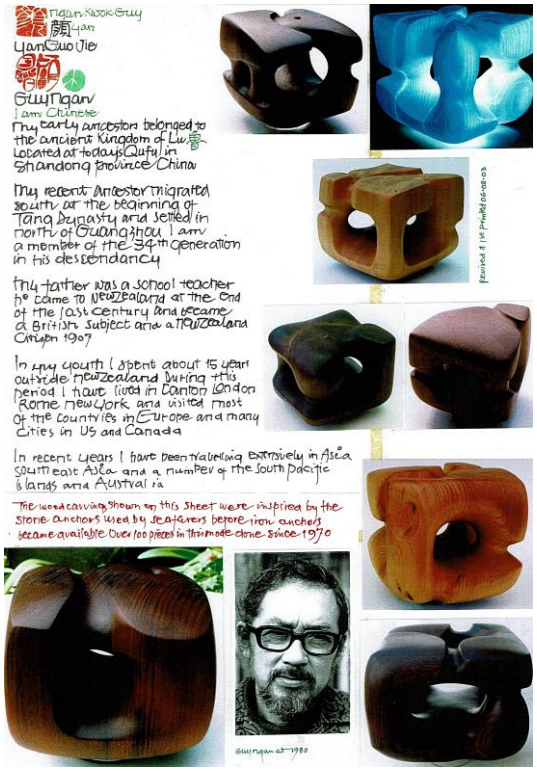

Figure 1. Guy Ngan, short autobiography, 2003. In *Guy Ngan: Scrapbook Number One*. Photo: Guy Ngan.

The narrative of Ngan's autobiography begins with a declaration, "I am Chinese," followed by the summary of his life in five blocks of time: his early ancestors'; his recent ancestors'; his father's; his own youth; and his recent years. Each of these blocks locates his personal connections within a specific cultural space.

First, the Ngan family ancestors: "My early ancestors belonged to the ancient kingdom of Lu 魯, located at today's Qufu in Shandong province, China." Qufu city is the birthplace of Confucius, and Shandong province was part of the heartland of the central kingdom where Chinese civilisation began. The Ngan (Yan 顏) family can be traced back to Yan Hui (顏回 521–481 BCE), historically known as the best among the 72 students of Confucius. Confucius was very proud of Yan Hui, praising him as the most academically talented and morally virtuous of them.[4] That Ngan specifically marks out this ancestral link accentuates his cultural identification with the Confucian tradition. The link also means that the Ngan family were descendants of the Chinese educated elite.

The second landmark for Ngan reads: "My recent ancestor migrated south at the beginning of Tang Dynasty and settled in north of Guangzhou. I am a member of the 34th generation in this descendancy." The family's migration to Guangzhou changed them from being northerners to southerners, and from being Mandarin speakers to Cantonese. Of course, any changes in cultural and linguistic habits would take place over a long period of time. However, as discussed above, being from Guangzhou had considerable ramifications for the family and for Ngan in time to come.

In this document, Ngan introduces his father as a teacher, acknowledging the family's tradition of learning. As a teacher's son, Ngan continued the physical and intellectual travel started by his father to and from New Zealand and beyond. Naturally, in his youth, Ngan was a traveller and a travelling learner, from China to New Zealand, from the United Kingdom to Europe to North America. Not only did he study at art institutions, more importantly he also studied as he travelled and observed. His intellectual travel never stopped. In his later years, he became a keen student traveller in Asia, southeast Asia, the South Pacific and Australia. His art continued to be nourished by the places he visited and his portfolio kept changing. In the process, he discovered the Chinese connection with the Pacific people, which led to his self-identification as Pacific-Chinese. At the bottom of this autobiographical page, Ngan inserted a portrait photo of himself taken in 1980, aged 54, wearing a beard and thick glasses, in between the wooden anchors as if he was part of them. The visual configuration of the page certainly highlights his self-identification with the peoples of the Pacific. However, this is only the point of departure he set for himself for his artistic journey. In view of his career oeuvre and his open-minded absorption of artistic and cultural traditions all over the world, Ngan, the artist, is a man of the world. His art, using the language of the Pacific-Chinese with many variants of vocabulary he acquired and invented along the way, potentially speaks to all people.

Art and Life

Guy Ngan liked art from a young age. His father encouraged him and bought him the tools and materials he needed. However, the Japanese invasion of China and the bombing of Guangzhou rudely interrupted his childhood. On the day when a bomb dropped near his school, his father immediately sent him and his brother to Hong Kong and put them on a ship back to New Zealand. That was 1938, when Ngan was 12 years old, and he was never to see his father again. Returning to New Zealand abruptly during the war meant the loss of both his father's guidance and financial support. Very soon, at the age of 14, Ngan started supporting himself by becoming a carpentry apprentice under Billy Gee (1884–1954), a Wellington-based Chinese carver and

furniture maker, from whom he learnt how to handle wood. At the age of 18, he received his first commission and produced his first piece of public art, a chapel lectern for Chilton Saint James School in Lower Hutt.

From 1943 to 1946 Ngan studied at Wellington Technical College, specialising in modelling and sculpture under Alexander R. Fraser (1877–1953). He attended evening classes, as he had to work during the day. In 1951, encouraged by Fraser, he saved enough money for the fare and travelled to London to pursue studies at Goldsmiths College, part of the University of London. Ngan paid tribute to Gee and Fraser as teachers who taught him the foundational skills as a woodworker and sculptor respectively.[5]

After Goldsmiths, Ngan continued his studies in London at the Royal College of Art, where Fraser had also gone. He preferred the system there: freedom from formal teaching but a strict examination system. He studied at the College's School of Wood, Metal and Plastics for three years and graduated in 1954, followed by a further year's study as the recipient of prestigious scholarships from his alma mater the Royal College of Art and the British Council. Those scholarships were recognitions of his artistic talent and academic excellence, and they enabled him to travel widely in Europe and North America to locations where he was keen to observe and to study art from diverse traditions and times. In his later life, he also travelled to Japan, Taiwan, southeast Asia and made many trips back to China, making wider cultural connections and discovering new artistic expressions. Ngan was undoubtedly one of the best travelled, most open-minded and diligent explorers of his generation of artists in New Zealand, differing significantly here from more insular contemporaries such as Colin McCahon and Milan Mrkusich.

Ngan was a cultural cosmopolitan and his career was an artistic, cultural and intellectual journey across many boundaries. His fluency in both Chinese and English enabled him to draw on their related cultural resources and find inspiration in varied cultural channels. He was also an extraordinarily prolific artist, not only because he lived a long life and kept up his art until the very end, but also because art making was a way of life; indeed, art *was* life. Importantly, this art and life integration rendered Ngan's attitude towards a career as an artist very different from most Pākehā artists. This may well explain why he did not care too much about what art critics said about his works or even whether art museums acquired or displayed them. For him, as long as he was able to make art and it was appreciated by like-minded people, he was satisfied. Intellectually, he opted out of the system, just like many scholarly Chinese artists in past history. He reminded himself of this in a classical Chinese expression:

> 吾唯知足
> I am truly content.[6]

To be independent in pursuing an artistic ideal was essential for Ngan, evidenced by a line from the Tang dynasty poet, Li Bai (Li Po, 701–762), which Ngan cherished and copied in Chinese calligraphy:

> 黃河之水天上來奔流人海不復回。
> The water of the Yellow River came from heaven then it rushed into the sea and never to return.[7]

To reiterate this spirit of independence and courage, he reproduced this calligraphy at the very beginning of *Scrapbook Number One*.

Ngan produced more than 40 major sculptures for different institutions and locations in New Zealand, Australia and internationally. Most of these were commissions, many won through open competitions. In turn, many are monumental in scale and were created for specific buildings or locations. In the course of his career, Ngan made over 200 sculptures on a more domestic scale, most of which are in private collections. There is also a large body of paintings employing a variety of media. Ngan continued to paint throughout his life but unfortunately, to date, no comprehensive list of his paintings has been compiled. He also carved creatively and was particularly innovative in Chinese seal carving. Last but not least, he designed the large wall hanging for weaver Joan Calvert, *Forest in the Sun,* for the staircase of the Parliament building of New Zealand in 1977. The hanging was removed in 2003 but was refreshed and restored back in its original location on 10 July 2023 (fig. 2).

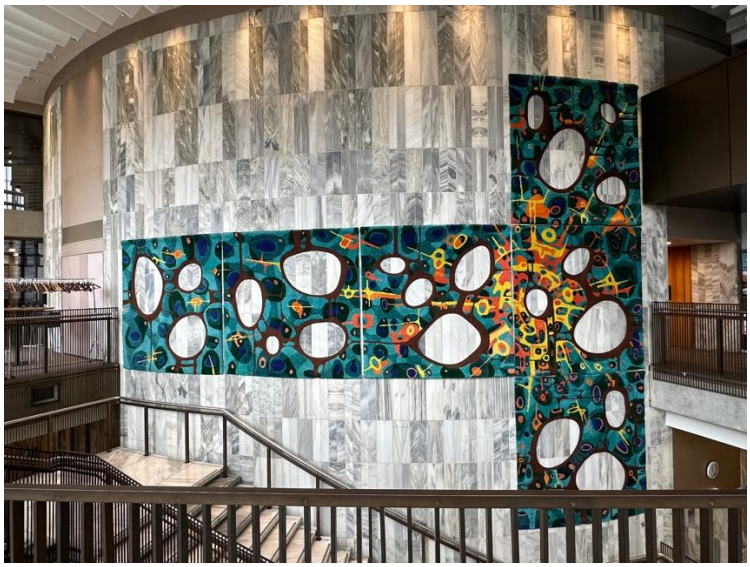

Figure 2. Joan Calvert, *Forest in the Sun*, 1977, designed by Guy Ngan. Wool and canvas, six panels, each 2400 x 2400 mm. Parliament Buildings, Wellington. Photo: Yiyan Wang.

It is difficult to periodise Ngan's art practice, although there is a clear demarcation before and after he returned from London. When at the Wellington Technical College, and even during his early days at the Royal College of Art, Ngan's sculptures and paintings were realist and figurative. After he settled back in New Zealand, his sculptures, murals and paintings were largely modernist, thanks to his London training. He seemed to move from one phase to another seamlessly and he continued to apply his modernist vocabulary to different subject matter. His most productive years were between the 1950s and the 1990s, although he continued to create art until the very end of his life.

From the 1960s, Ngan's works attracted publicity in the news media and he was quite a public figure when he won commissions. Between 1974 and 1979, a number of art galleries held solo exhibitions and he was recognised as a prominent artist nationally and internationally.[8] After 1979, however, little attention was paid to his work by art critics or curators, until 2006 when City Gallery Wellington staged *Guy Ngan: Journey: Aluminium Panel, Tiki Hands, and Anchor Stones* and produced a small but informative catalogue. Then, in 2019, two years after Ngan passed away, two solo retrospective exhibitions were mounted. The Dowse Art Museum staged *Guy Ngan: Habitation* from May to September 2019, which travelled to the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2021, while Artspace Aotearoa in Auckland held the exhibition *Guy Ngan: Either Possible or Necessary* in June to August 2019.

Pacific-Chinese Aesthetics

In 1983, at the age of 57, Ngan gave a speech as Director of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts with the title "Visual Arts and Daily Bread."[9] Like his autobiography, "Visual Arts and Daily Bread" is succinct, concise and straight to the point. It is Ngan's open declaration to the artist community of his art and its relationship to humanity, and of his Pacific-Chinese aesthetics. Critics and commentators have referred to the poignancy of this speech, but there has been no systematic discussion of the details of Ngan's considered positions on art and their direct relevance to his artistic language.

"Visual Arts and Daily Bread" starts with the fundamental issue of patronage. For Ngan, the quality of the relationship between the artist and their patron is reflected in the quality of the art, as in the Renaissance when the wealthy demanded good art for the living environment and artists responded with works that lived up to the expectations of their society. Ngan's explicit acknowledgement of the importance of patronage to art clearly indicates that he did not believe in art for art's sake. He insists: "many art forms have been produced since the dawn of history, but only items with purposeful intent have survived the trials of time."[10] For him, art should be created for a better life, as an integral part of the environment. Here lies Ngan's second message: art and life need and should enhance one another: "if we did not have art, it would not have been either possible or necessary to have a recorded history."[11] Ngan believed that "Art should be part of our everyday living; in our homes, our offices, our factories; in our towns and cities, and on our buildings as an integral part of the structure."[12] He carried out this belief throughout his career and many of his works were created purposefully for the specific environments in the hope that they could both stand out and blend in, ultimately becoming part of the community fabric. Ngan's open opposition to art created only for appreciation as a museum piece would have set him directly at odds with anyone who believed in the separation of art from the quotidian. Between the Pacific-Chinese and art institutions there was, and there probably still is, a cultural and psychological distance.

Ngan called for learning, as has been the Chinese cultural tradition. But unlike the orthodox Confucian, for the Pacific-Chinese, sources of inspiration were many, including history itself in addition to ancient civilisations such as Greek culture, China's Han and Tang dynasties, the Renaissance in Europe and Georgian England. It is significant that for Ngan the focus of learning was not on a particular style, art form or fashionable school of thought. Rather, learning should concentrate on how cultural and social environments generated creative energy that benefitted both the artists and the societies for which the art works were created. Moreover, learning was not necessarily just to be undertaken by individual artists. New Zealand society in its entirety should improve its ability to produce and appreciate art. Ngan's vision of the future for art development in New Zealand is ultimately cosmopolitan, wide in geo-cultural scope and deep in human history. This urge to learn also directly echoes back to his upbringing when his father sowed the seeds of the Confucian respect for history and knowledge in Guy's young mind.

Nevertheless, a further point still needs to be made about Ngan's Pacific-Chinese aesthetics. That is the absence of politics, whether national, international, ideological or racial. As an artist of Chinese descent born in 1926 in New Zealand, he must have experienced his share of social and racial prejudice. Throughout his career, however, he never engaged in any direct conversation about social injustice or politics. Nor did he or his art take up any activism or indulge in victimhood. In a 2007 interview with Gurunathan Krishnasamy from *The Asian Magazine*, he was asked whether his work was political. He simply answered: "You can keep art out of politics but perhaps not politics out of art. I am only interested in the truth as it affects

everybody."[13] This universal concern was the key point of his Pacific-Chinese aesthetics and remained the cornerstone of Ngan's art and life.

Artistic creativity for Ngan was not about voicing specific political opinions or asserting the presence and rights of a particular group. Ngan's art, as he once claimed, tends to "reach for the sky, [to] elevate upwards because there's more room up there."[14] He wanted his art to be aspirational and inspirational for all in the community. His artistic concerns transcend the politics of the day, focusing primarily on aesthetics, including those of the living environment for the local community. This ideal of philosophical aesthetics, articulated in the 1980s by a Chinese-New Zealander, was far ahead of its time and too far removed from the political, social and artistic tides of mainstream society when many artists were preoccupied with a sense of historical mission in finding their own voices, or rectifying social injustice. His participation in the national narrative of Aotearoa New Zealand was arguably subtler: through articulations of Pacific-Chinese aesthetics via images harmonious to the environment.

Contextual Sculptures and Their Right to be There

Ngan's Pacific-Chinese aesthetics includes a theory of sculpture in which sculpture needs to earn its right to be in the environment. Indeed, it should be created to enhance the environment, and in turn the environment will enhance the art. This theory was developed with an understanding of the historical evolution of the art form from its original architectural functionality in ancient civilisations into a more modern independent form of fine art. In 1972 in a co-authored essay titled "The Right to Be There: Guy Ngan's Sculpture," Mary Mountier, editor of the magazine *Designscape*, and fellow artist Geoffrey Nees elaborated Ngan's thesis. They also demonstrated the perfect compatibility of Ngan's works with their environments as a result of his artistic sensitivity towards lines and shapes. Nearly half a century later in 2019, fully appreciative of the case for Ngan's excellence presented by Mountier and Nees, the editors of the Dowse exhibition catalogue reprinted the essay in full.[15]

Ngan's major sculptural works were created for institutions and public venues, where he certainly put his contextual sculpture theory into practice. The Public Art Heritage Aotearoa New Zealand website lists 35 Ngan sculptures, each accompanied by detailed descriptions.[16] However, as the site limits its coverage to the twentieth century, more recent works are not present. Ngan made another three major works after 2000: *The Millennium Tree* (2000, Auckland Domain), *Lucky Dragon* for the Beijing Olympic Games (2008, replica at Auckland City Library) and *Elevating Worms* (2011, Stokes Valley Shopping Centre).

Ngan's earlier sculptures tend to be two-dimensional as they were conceptualised as part of architectural facades. His vocabulary at that stage consisted of primarily lines and geometric shapes, and his sculptures were moulded into forms by the movement of the lines in connection with the shapes. As part of the global modernist movement, Ngan stood out with his localised articulations. His wall sculpture for the Reserve Bank of New Zealand building in Wellington, *Taiaha* (1968, fig. 3), is a most eloquent example. *Taiaha* consists of two interlocked taiaha (customary Māori weapons). Ngan chose to adapt the image of the weapon with the intention of employing them as symbols of strength and protection. The modernist stylisation of an indigenous object resulted in a dignified expression of what the Reserve Bank stands for as a state institution. Stylistically, *Taiaha* is original, elegant, a highly expressive symbol derived from the synergy of distant artistic and cultural traditions, radiating dignity and aspiration. And yet, never for a moment does Ngan seek to compete with or upstage the architecture. We can also read *Taiaha* as an embodiment of Ngan's Pacific-Chinese aesthetics, with the cultural traditions of the Pacific coming together to form new symbolism for a young nation.

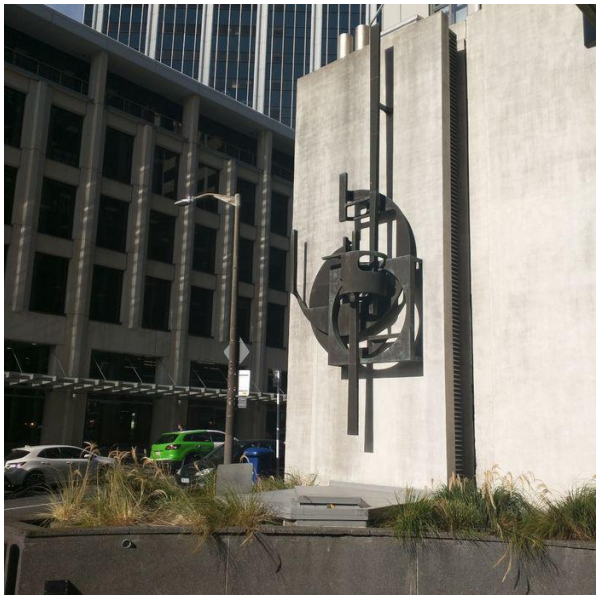

Figure 3. Guy Ngan, *Taiaha*, 1968. Bronze, approx. 9140 x 2730 x 1070 mm. Reserve Bank Building, Wellington. Photo: Bronwyn Holloway-Smith.

Figure 4. Guy Ngan, *Newton Post Office Mural*, 1973. Aluminium, 2900 x 7500 mm. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Photo: Bronwyn Holloway-Smith.

Another exquisite example of Ngan's earlier works is the aluminium mural for Newton Post Office in Auckland (1973, fig. 4). Again, the work was conceptualised as part of the architectural plan. The design motifs are directly linked with the function of the Post Office and its defining role as the centre for communication in the life of the community at the time: the postmark with its date and location, wiring for telecommunication, the scattering of small, irregular rectangular shapes signalling the conveyance of information and the absorption of the information signals at the end of an enlightened wheel. The image accentuates the fluency of information transmission and exemplifies Ngan's "fluent style," complimented (perhaps a little backhandedly) by Michael Dunn in his 2008 monograph on the history of New Zealand

sculpture.[17] The aluminium mural is not only original in its adoption of a new material for art, but also an outstanding application of the modernist vocabulary of lines and geometric shapes to form a refined and dynamic image.[18] Furthermore, this purposefully constructed object nicely illustrates Ngan's theory of contextual sculpture. His intention and ability to transform quotidian objects into art are fully realised, creating something that is both eminently intelligible and very much of its time.

The environment, of which the sculptures are created to be part, and the community, for whom the art works are made, were the two essential elements in Ngan's creative process, and he always carefully factored them into the final articulation. Two sister sculptures he made for the Stokes Valley community in outer Wellington—where he himself long resided—again show Ngan putting his contextual sculpture philosophy into practice. Again, they are modernist in style, with bold, simple lines stretching out and upwards to form elegant, geometric shapes. And again, "fluency" characterises the smooth curves of sinuous lines. The first sculpture, *Worms Mating* (1976), consists of solid, white rectangular lines comfortably nestled in the middle of the roundabout to greet traffic coming and going. Over the decades, *Worms Mating* has been part of local community life, and photographs frequently appear on Facebook pages. Given the nature of the worms' activity, this is surely a relatively rare instance where an uncompromisingly modernist sculpture in formal terms can also convey humour and charm. The sister sculpture, *Elevating Worms* (2011), which was gifted to the Stokes Valley community by the artist at the age of 85, has now become a focal point of the local shopping centre.

In the new millennium, Ngan was commissioned to make two more public works in conjunction with the Chinese Association of New Zealand. One was a present to the city of Auckland to celebrate the advent of the new millennium and the other was a gift to Beijing from the New Zealand team participating in the 2008 Olympic Games there (fig. 5g). Ngan delivered two monumental sculptures, both of which are modernist interpretations of Chinese mythology. For Beijing, he created a dragon with geometric shapes using stainless steel, which, to date, might be the only modernist dragon on this scale in the world. Dragons are the foremost mythological animal in Chinese cultural traditions and most Chinese people regard them as a national symbol. Ngan experimented with ways of representing dragons: his *Scrapbook Number One* displays several fascinating trial images (figs. 5a–f). With his cultural knowledge, modernist language and artistic imagination, Ngan produced some highly original dragon images, despite and because of their countless reincarnations over the centuries.

Figure 5a (left). Guy Ngan, *Seal design for the character* 龍 (*dragon*), c. 1980s. Ink on paper, in *Guy Ngan: Scrapbook Number One.* Photo: Guy Ngan.

Figure 5b (centre). Guy Ngan, *Dragon face*, c. 1990s. Ink on paper, in *Guy Ngan: Scrapbook Number One.* Photo: Guy Ngan.

Figure 5c (right). Guy Ngan, *Dragon Egg*, 2005. Painted wood, 540 x 540 mm. Private Collection. Photo: Guy Ngan.

Figures 5d–e. *Dragon Five*, 1996. Ink and watercolour, in *Guy Ngan: Scrapbook Number One.* Photo: Guy Ngan.

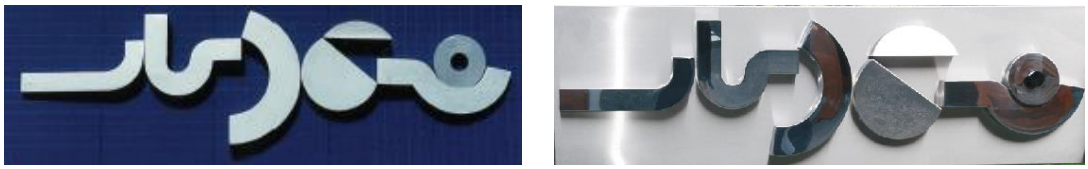

Figure 5f (left). Guy Ngan, *Design for 2008 Beijing Olympic Dragon Sculpture*, c. 2007. Ink and watercolour, in *Guy Ngan: Scrapbook Number One*. Photo: Guy Ngan.

Figure 5g (right). *Beijing Olympic Dragon Sculpture*, 2008. Stainless steel, 1800 x 2400 x 300 mm. Olympic Village, Beijing. Photo: Ron Sang

Ngan's creation for Auckland, *The Millennium Tree* (2005, fig. 6), initially had trouble finding a location, since no fewer than eight sites proposed by Auckland Council were rejected by local residents, perhaps mistrustful of Ngan's sleek yet spiky modernism. It now has a permanent home in Auckland Domain, thanks to the generosity of local Māori (Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei), who offered a location on their ancient pā site Pukekawa/Pukekaroa within the Domain.[19]

Figure 6. Guy Ngan, *Millennium Tree* 千禧樹, 2005. Stainless steel, 6500 mm high. Pukekawa/Auckland Domain, Auckland.

The central motif for the tree is the magic rod or *jingubang* 金箍棒 (the rod with golden rings) used by the legendary Monkey King, a fictional character in the classical Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. The Monkey King is a popular hero in Chinese cultural traditions and is the prototype of warriors in martial art fiction and films. He fights against evil and injustice, invariably winning his battles in the end. The magic rod is the Monkey's only weapon but he is able to resize and multiply it as he wishes. By strategically manipulating it into the appropriate size and weight, and spinning and angling it at will, the Monkey King defeats enemies of all sorts: a warrior second to none! Ngan's modernist formal translation of the magic rod into *the Millennium Tree* offers entirely new imagery of an age-old object in Chinese popular culture. At the same time, it also magically symbolises and empowers the active presence of the Chinese community in New Zealand's largest city. In the legend, the Monkey King is the most loyal companion and capable bodyguard for the devout Buddhist monk on the journey to India, that is, China's west, to obtain Buddhist scripts. The Monkey King loves travelling to new places and adapts quickly to new experiences. When Ngan chose the magic rod as the motif for the sculpture, he must have had those characteristics in mind. Did he hope to associate the Chinese communities in New Zealand with the Monkey King's extraordinary courage and capacity?

Paintings, Drawings and Other Dimensions of Ngan's Creativity

Ngan was equally productive and adventurous as a painter, and produced as many interesting and expressive images as we find in his sculptures. To date, there has been little critical assessment and no comprehensive record made of them. It is perhaps sweeping but reasonable to regard them as analogous to the sculptures in that they are modernist, abstract and playful in their use of lines and geometric shapes. The media he used were familiar: oil or acrylic on canvas or board, or ink and watercolour on paper. He experimented a great deal and probably felt freer with painting than with making sculptures, as the production process is rapid and cheap, with fewer procedures or environmental constraints. Perhaps inevitably, because of the less public nature of the audience for painting, these works are more inclined to have personal connections, if not linking back directly to China or the Pacific.

Ngan's earliest recorded paintings date from his time as a student in London, where he also made many drawings. His portraits were always competent, perhaps reflecting his studio training, and his drawings more adventurous. He would quickly abandon figurative painting for modernist abstraction, although decades later in the 2000s he painted a couple of Wellington landscapes in the realist idiom again. Clearly, Ngan was a master of all the foundational skills and he was able to call upon them when the need or desire arose.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Ngan was interested in exploring regular, round and curved shapes and dramatically utilised their expressive power by enabling them to interact with light and colour. *Sunbottle* (1969, fig. 7) and *Procreation No.2* (fig. 8) are "hard-edged," impeccably executed and fiercely—perhaps joyfully—coloured, the former work verging on the psychedelic.

In the same period, Ngan also experimented with irregular shapes, making them playfully free flowing but teasing them into well-balanced compositions. Here, he surely seems aware of the biomorphic Surrealism of 40 years earlier. He did not name but numbered this series, to which he also added his red "Chinese" seal signature, accentuating his heritage (fig. 9).

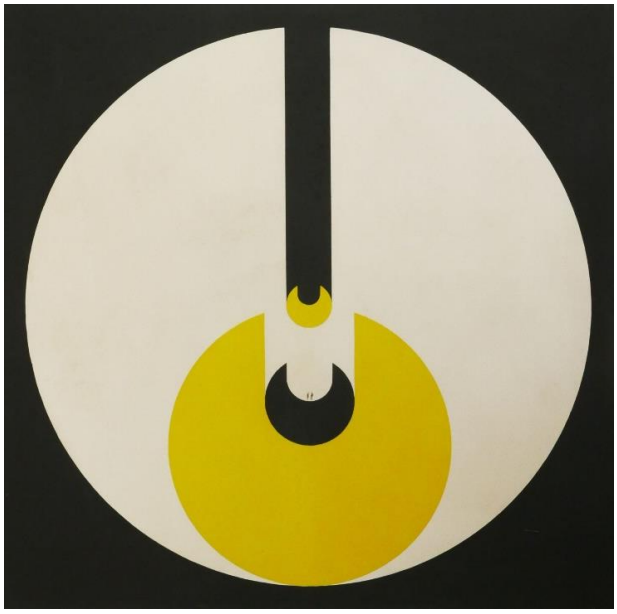

Figure 7 (left). Guy Ngan, *Sun Bottle*, 1976. Oil on board, 1230 x 830 mm. The Dowse Art Museum.
Figure 8 (right). Guy Ngan, *Recreation No. 2*. Acrylic on board, 1215 x 1215 mm. Private Collection.

Figure 9. Guy Ngan, *Series Eight*, 1973. Serigraph, 445 x 590 mm. Private Collection. Photo: John Lake.

Ngan produced several abstract modernist landscape series based on his readings of associations between natural environments and human societies. These paintings shared with his sculptures expressions of movement via intersections of sinuous lines and irregular geometric shapes. He made his landscape paintings appear three-dimensional when he creatively applied colour and light to show the depth of mysterious, primeval forms. The *Waoku* series (fig. 10) consisted of oil paintings developed from imagery of the deep forest of Aotearoa and was complemented by many similarly processed landscapes depicting the colours and shapes of Australia's outback (fig. 11). In the very act of creating such parallel series, Ngan shows himself to be considerably more original—and indeed less parochial—than most of his New Zealand contemporaries.

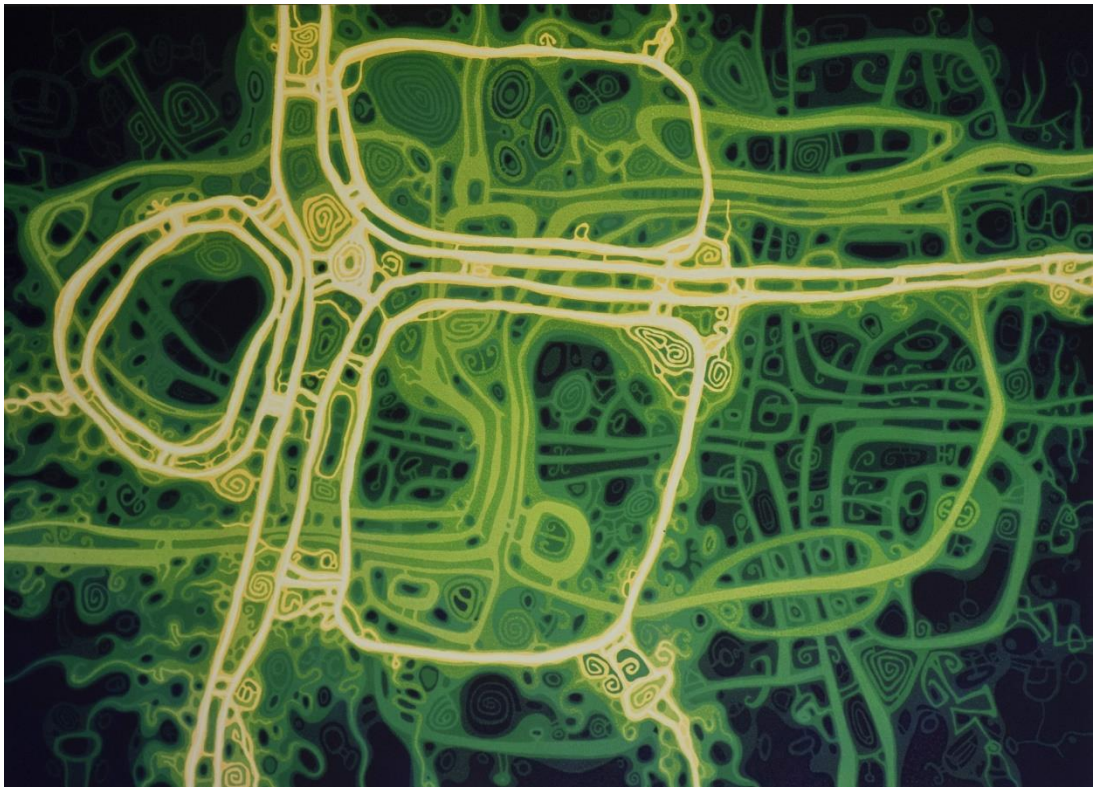

Figure 10. Guy Ngan, *Waoku No. 2*, 1973, oil on board, 1235 x 1715 mm. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Photo: Guy Ngan.

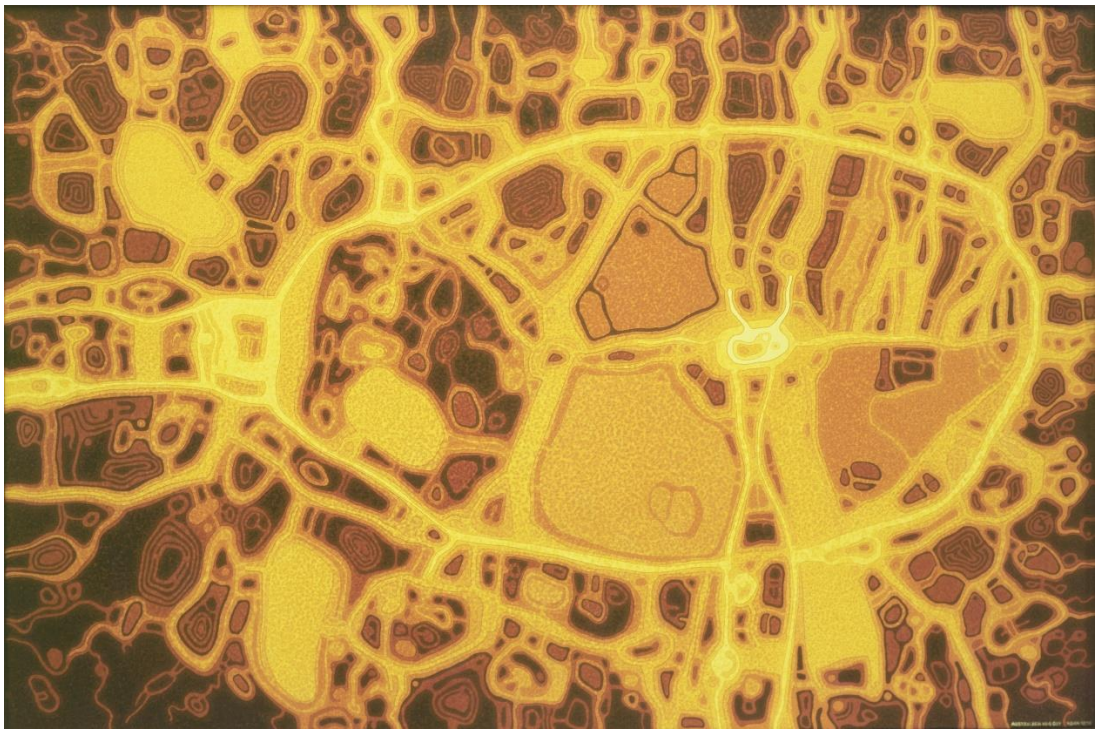

Figure 11 Guy Ngan, *Australasia No. 4*, 1976, acrylic on board, 810 x 1012 mm. Private Collection. Photo: Guy Ngan.

Ngan continued to invent new visual vocabularies when he encountered new territories and cultures. In 1979, he made drastic changes in technique and style with two series of landscapes using ink and watercolour on paper—the *Wilderness* (fig. 12) and *Blue Habitation* series (fig. 13). Using the same medium as traditional Chinese ink-brush painting, he also adopted similar techniques, such as ink-spreading, utilising the texture of the paper for ink absorption and leaving areas blank without applying any colour or ink. He also found his way in the expressiveness of ink by varying its thickness with the brush. The resulting images, however, are drastic departures from traditional Chinese landscapes. They are thoroughly modernist in their simplification and in the dominance of vertical lines. With *Wilderness*, spiky line drawing is dominant, the effect being edgy yet exhilarating; but with *Blue Habitation*, the impact is mysterious, haunting, even tragic—no other colour would have suited it. Like some of the best abstract art, these works make the viewer think of their own experiences, and feel compelled to connect their thoughts, feelings and perceptions of tangible objects to what they see before them.

Figure 12. Guy Ngan, *Wilderness 6*, 1979. Ink and watercolour, 595 x 890 mm. Private Collection.

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Figure 13. Guy Ngan, *Blue Habitation 9*, 1979. Ink and watercolour, 890 x 595 mm. Private Collection.

Ngan did not cease his intellectual quest until the very end of his long life. And, when he could, he translated his discoveries into images. In the new millennium, he painted two groups of paintings with subject matter very close to his personal identity. One is *Tiki Hands*, in relation to people of the Pacific, and the other is a China-related series. According to Ngan, the imagery for *Tiki Hands* was inspired by Polynesian peoples' discovery of new land beyond horizons, when they imagined and followed the routes of the migrating birds. He first painted *Tiki Hands* in 1971 (fig. 14) but revived the motif years later. Ngan created the image by borrowing the lines and basic shape of a bird's feet, which look similar to a letter "E," often rotating the "E" to resemble a "W"' or an "M." He used bright red or shades of bright orange to red against a black background, making the shape stand out in sharp contrast. Intriguingly, an "E" can, when duplicated and rotated, form "WE" or "ME." *Tiki Hand*s is another set of Ngan's invented modernist vocabularies; an obvious comparison, yet one never made, is with Michael Parekowhai's similarly enigmatic but far more frequently discussed *The Indefinite Article* (1990).[20] If we connect the imagery of "WE" with the many anchor stones the artist carved at the same time, and recall Ngan's single page autobiography (fig. 1), where he places a tiki hand at the top of the page and juxtaposes his own face with the anchor stones, we can certainly appreciate Ngan's self-identification and self-expression.

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Figure 14. Guy Ngan, *Tiki Hands*, 1971. Oil on board, 1200 x 1200 mm.
Private Collection. Photo: Guy Ngan.

Art historian Rangihiroa Panoho links Ngan's *Tiki Hands* with jade carving in both ancient Chinese material culture and contemporary Māori sculpture.[21] The striking similarity between the three images from different sources and times is a pleasant surprise, and not mere serendipity. Panoho explains that in the 1980s Māori discovered their connections with China and Southeast Asia. This was particularly significant for artists with Māori and Chinese heritage, such as Dion Hitchens, Simon Kaan and Buck Nin. For Hitchens and Kaan, return visits to villages in Guangdong connected to their ancestry invoked deep emotional responses that have later come out in their works. Panoho also points out conscious affinities between the imagery in Nin's work and the Chinese bronze vessel *ding* (鼎) in the Shang Dynasty more than three thousand years ago.[22] Panoho's book, *Māori Art* (2015), includes a chapter, "Te Hokinga Mai" (the returning) discussing the meaning of "Hawaiki" (homeland) for Māori people when its concept is expanded temporally to include both the past and the present, and geographically to go beyond the South Pacific, underscoring the relevance of Pacific-Chinese aesthetics in New Zealand.

The period between the 1990s and the 2010s was the honeymoon period between China and New Zealand. China was on the rise internationally and its economy was growing rapidly. Like many countries in the world at the time, New Zealand was keen to trade with China and to develop a special relationship.[23] Happy to see a prosperous China, Ngan was in the mood for celebration. He made a series of paintings that take as their central motif the first character in the Chinese word 中國 for China, transformed into a figure dancing with colourful ribbons, then multiplied the figure into a cheerful crowd (fig. 15). Bright red, orange and green are used against a dark background to ensure that the dancing figures stand out and a celebratory atmosphere fills the entire canvas. It was surely aesthetic choice that made Ngan transform the character 中, rather than the second character of the word 國, favouring its simpler structure and accidental modernism.

Figure 15. Guy Ngan, *Celebration*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 800 x 1000 mm.
Private Collection. Photo: Liz Ngan.

Ngan also produced some very fine drawings, few of which, regrettably, have been publicly exhibited. An early career drawing, combined with watercolour, *Kensington Gardens* (1954, fig. 16), is particularly beautiful, and in the quaint, stylised birds, unknown to any ornithologist, we can detect the beginnings of a modernist abstraction.

Figure 16. Guy Ngan, *Kensington Gardens*, 1954. Ink and watercolour, 300 x 400 mm.
Private Collection. Photo: Guy Ngan.

Seal carving was a major art form in premodern China, and it remains a serious pursuit for artists with interests in traditional Chinese art forms, particularly calligraphy. Ngan was a committed seal carver and experimented with various styles. He carved different seals for himself and used them as signatures for paintings, just as many Chinese artists have done—and still do. His deep knowledge of Chinese cultural traditions and sense of humour come through admirably in his signature seal. In his Chinese name, Ngan Gwok Guy (Yan Guokai), the middle character 国 has a signifier for "jade" in the square. He dropped the dot in "jade" deliberately to play on the pun on the Chinese saying, "It is not jade without the dot," which can also be interpreted as "without doubt it is absolutely jade" or "the imperfect jade is the true jade" (fig. 17). Ngan's name seal thus brings an esoteric laugh to viewers blessed with Chinese cultural literacy. The ever-versatile Ngan contributed to the interior design of the Chinese restaurant Jasmin, on Lambton Quay in Wellington, a large wall panel displaying a full collection of Ngan's seals. Among them is his innovative carving of the restaurant name in both Chinese and English. The restaurant also reproduces Ngan's seals on its place mats (fig. 18).

Figure 17. Guy Ngan, *Name Seal of Guy Ngan*, 1970s. Ink on paper, approx. 200 x 230 mm. Private Collection. Photo: Guy Ngan.

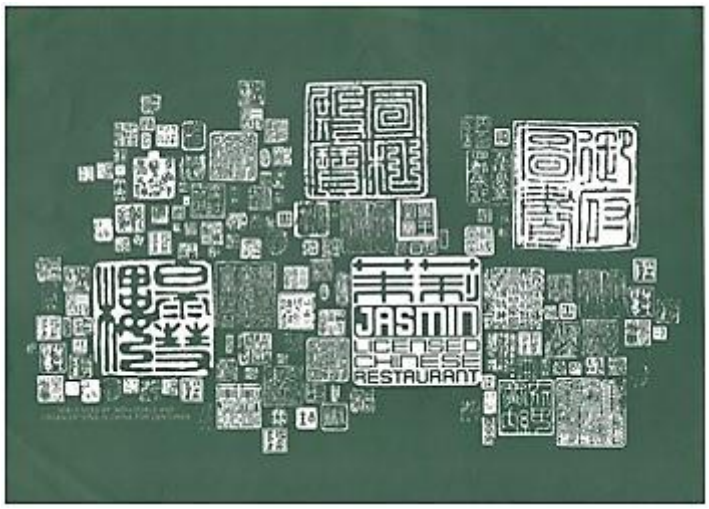

Figure 18. Guy Ngan, *Placemat design for Jasmin Chinese Restaurant*, Wellington. c. 1980. Colour print on paper, 210 x 300 mm. Photo: Guy Ngan.

Guy Ngan in the Context of New Zealand Art History

Given Ngan's formidable body of work, the ubiquity of his sculptures in major cities around the country and the extraordinary length of his career, one would think that his name and works would frequently appear in New Zealand's art historiography and journals. This is not the case. The reception of Ngan's work is rather intriguing, and opinions differ on whether he has been

unjustly overlooked and, if so, for what reasons. In recent decades, however, positive reviews have been on the rise and critics have at last started "Looking Afresh at Guy Ngan."[24]

As we know, Ngan began his career in the middle of the last century and worked until the 2010s. Art historically speaking, things were uneventful for him for a long time until 2006. That year was the turning point because Ngan's first—and as it proved only—solo exhibition in a major public gallery during his lifetime was held at the City Gallery Wellington. This was half a century after he began making public sculptures. Prior to this, Ngan's works, especially when he won public art commissions, attracted the attention of news media and generated plenty of headlines, though only a few considered analyses. Among the media reports and industry-related journal articles, two stand out for their insights into Ngan's work and philosophy. As mentioned previously, in 1972 Mountier and Nees recognised the importance of Ngan's theory of contextual sculpture for the public domain—"the right to be there"—in an article published in *Designscape*.[25] In 1982, Jenny Pattrick, in the *Craft Council News*, drew attention to Ngan's consistent promotion of art in the business sector and elaborated on his idea of educating the general public for better understanding and acceptance of art, stressing the difference between Ngan's approach to art and that of his colleagues.[26] It is interesting, and surely significant, that these two publications were in design and craft industry journals respectively, not ones that foregrounded art.

Indeed, Ngan's success with the industry and the media did not seem to endear him to the country's art critics and art historians in turn. Researching this article, I was unable to locate any studies or more than cursory mentions of him in art history books or art journals before the later 2000s. Jung Eun Lee, in her 2005 University of Canterbury MA thesis entitled "Tracing the Rise of Chinese New Zealand Artists: Guy Ngan, Denise Kum, Yuk King Tan,"[27] highlights the achievements of all three artists and the chapter on Ngan is the first academic study of his art practice. The irony, however, bespeaks itself in the title: Guy Ngan was still just "rising" after the creation of so many artworks in a career already more than half a century long.

City Gallery Wellington's 2006 exhibition, *Guy Ngan: Journey*, was a watershed event. It re-introduced Ngan as "a significant contributor to New Zealand's visual culture" and sparked wider, positive interest in him.[28] The catalogue offers not only information but in-depth analysis, with curator Heather Galbraith's essay, "Guy Ngan—Explorer," providing documenting Ngan's approach and achievements at each stage of his development.[29] Stella Brennan argues for the artistic merit of Ngan's sculptures, in particular the *Newton Post Office Mural*, explaining the motifs and emphasising how Ngan's work expresses the characteristics of its surroundings.[30] Significantly, Galbraith raised the question of why Ngan had remained an unsung hero of the art and design world, given his dazzling range of materials and the scale, and indeed proven track record, of production. She found answers in Ngan's working across disciplines and the shortness of our individual and civic memories. She also categorically challenged the view that "a 'jobbing' artist was somehow lower on an art hierarchy than one whose work appears within a museum and gallery context."[31] Galbraith is of course right; but this seems to have been Ngan's fate. Agreeing with Galbraith, Krishnasamy, writing in *The Asian Magazine*, thought, however, "a third reason why Ngan's contribution has largely flown under the public radar could be his Asian identity. A country bent on navel-gazing to come to terms with its bicultural identity may have had, until now, little inclination to complicate the task at hand."[32] To speak of unconscious racial bias would be provocative, but it cannot go unmentioned.

Nevertheless, City Gallery Wellington's exhibition effectively put Ngan on the artistic radar of the county. Apart from media reports and interviews, museum doors began to open for his works. The *Newton Post Office Mural*, which once lay forgotten in the basement when the building was remodelled, now became part of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki's permanent collection. *Cityscape* (1980), which had also spent time in storage, was purchased by the Palmerston North Sculpture Trust and erected on the wall of the city's library.[33] Art institutions would acquire other works in the aftermath of Ngan's City Gallery exhibition and following two further exhibitions in 2019.

In 2008, Guy Ngan's name for the first time entered New Zealand art historiography, in Michael Dunn's seminal *New Zealand Sculpture: A History*. Before that, as far as I am able to ascertain from my research, Ngan was not mentioned in any other books on New Zealand art history or the history of New Zealand sculpture. On the one hand, it must be said that in 2008 it was ground-breaking for Dunn to include Ngan in his book. But on the other hand, he also showed implicit reservations about Ngan. Dunn devoted a total of three sentences to a career that even then had spanned more than half a century:

> Ngan developed a fluent style of abstract bronze sculpture that won him important commissions for public buildings throughout the country. In the 1970s he completed wall sculptures for the Reserve Bank, Wellington, and the Newton Post Office, Auckland (now Artspace). Ngan's work is distinguished by strong two-dimensional design, reflecting his practice as a design consultant.[34]

Evidently Ngan's fluency in a visual language popular among people who gave out commissions had limited appeal or significance to the art historian. Neither, it seems, can success as a design consultant and winning commissions be linked to high artistic quality. This surely explains why Ngan is unrepresented in *New Zealand Sculpture*'s 99 plates.

The Dowse started working with Ngan on an exhibition after 2006, but his health was in decline, so the plan was put on hold until 2019, two years after he passed away. With the staging of the exhibition *Either Possible or Necessary* at Artspace Aotearoa the same year, Ngan now attracted the attention that many other artists would have coveted. Priscilla Pitts reviewed the two exhibitions for *Art New Zealand*, where she recognised Ngan's work as "art for every day" and appreciated his versatility and modernist visual language of cellular forms.[35] Pitts was indeed "looking afresh at Guy Ngan." Back in 1998, her monograph, *Contemporary New Zealand Sculpture: Themes and Issues*, did not mention him, although the book has a chapter on "Sculpture and Architecture" and another on "Cultural Identity," both covering themes and issues highly relevant to Ngan. Interestingly, Pitts disagreed with comments in the Dowse catalogue and elsewhere that Ngan "was a neglected artist, excluded from art institutions because he was Chinese, his sensibility unappreciated." More likely, she believed, it was because "his work, unlike that of Walters and Schoon, did not advance the idea of a homegrown New Zealand art history, a mainstream narrative of national becoming, something he has in common with a number of Pākehā artists."[36] According to Pitts, Ngan had considerable success in public commissions and his modernist visual language had an audience.

I agree with Pitts that Ngan's work does not fit comfortably into New Zealand's national narrative; and neither does his Pacific-Chinese aesthetics. This point, however, does not differ drastically from the observation by Krishnasamy that the Aotearoa New Zealand mainstream was only interested in its own bicultural stories. Emma Ng similarly argues that we should judge Guy Ngan on his own terms.[37] The difference I would like to underscore is that

Krishnasamy and Ng are Asian and both see racial issues in Ngan's situation, whereas Pākehā writers, such as Galbraith, Pitts and Sian van Dyk, highlight technical issues in their assessment.[38] Perhaps the element of truth lies in Asians' experiences of racism in life and hence they are more sensitive to oversight and omission.

One of my intentions in writing this article is to respond to Ng's call for an understanding and acceptance of Ngan on his own terms. I have tried to discover and articulate what these terms were and how his art practice developed alongside his philosophy of art. I have come to see that Ngan distanced himself from, and did not seek to gratify, the art establishment, so that he could be free to create works that fitted into his way of seeing.[39] In this sense, Pitts was correct to assert that Ngan had a different agenda from those artists creating works primarily for private collectors, museums and art galleries, and that he was reluctant to court their favour. However, Ngan's own choice or philosophy should not excuse ignoring or ignorance from New Zealand art historians. If we accept his identification as Pacific-Chinese and accept that Asian people are part of the New Zealand national community, why should we not also accept Ngan's Pacific-Chinese aesthetics and cherish the artistic heritage he left to us all in Aotearoa?

It would be inaccurate to attribute Ngan's independent artistic spirit simply to intellectual courage, for that would overlook his profound curiosity about humanity and his continuous exploration of various forms of visual expression in relation to the environment in which we live. It has been aptly said of him: "He was a Renaissance man in the full sense of that term."[40] Being Pacific-Chinese also meant that Ngan's mind was open and his vision was beyond the horizon. In practice this led to his continuous search for new visual forms and a cosmopolitan attitude towards cultural differences. If being an artist was his way of life, life then was but the ongoing discovery and creation of forms of beauty in all dimensions. Ngan was deeply and genuinely interested in the entirety of humanity and its artistic manifestations. In this sense, he was both Pacific-Chinese and a cosmopolitan artist. This duality in Guy Ngan's approach to art meant that he was ahead of his time and habitat, and the rest of us, belatedly, are catching up with him.

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[1] I wish to express my deep gratitude for the enormous generosity of Liz Ngan and Bronwyn Holloway-Smith, for sharing with me their knowledge and research materials on Guy Ngan. I am grateful for the anonymous reviewers of the draft of this essay, whose comments and criticism helped me improve and sharpen my arguments. I also thank the editors for their patience and kind help.
[2] Philippa J. Oldham, "Interview with Guy Ngan," National Library of New Zealand, Wellington, 2011, Take 3.
[3] Guy Ngan, *Guy Ngan: Scrapbook Number One* (Auckland: Ron Sang Publications, 2010).
[4] See Shan Chun, "Moral Happiness of Confucius and Yan Hui (kongyan lechu)," in *Major Aspects of Chinese Religion and Philosophy* (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), 16, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-29317-7.
[5] Ngan, *Guy Ngan*, 2010.
[6] Jung Eun Lee, "Tracing the Rise of Chinese New Zealand Artists: Guy Ngan, Denise Kum, Yuk King Tan," (MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 2005), Fig. 15.
[7] Ibid. English translation by Guy Ngan.
[8] Up to 1979 Ngan had the following solo exhibitions: Antipodes Gallery, Wellington, c. 1974; *An exhibition of works by Guy Ngan*, New Vision Gallery, 1976; *Guy Ngan,* Hastings City Cultural Centre, 1979; *Guy Ngan*, Southland Museum and Art Gallery, Invercargill, 1979.
[9] Guy Ngan, "Visual Art and Daily Bread," unpublished speech as Director, New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, Wellington, March 1983.
[10] Ibid, 1.

[11] The title of Artspace Aotearoa's exhibition, "Either Possible or Necessary" (2019), apparently derives from this quotation.
[12] Ngan, "Visual Art," 2.
[13] Gurunathan Krishnasamy, "Guy Ngan: The Pacific Chinese," *New Zealand AM: The Asian Magazine*, no. 1 (April/May 2007): 53.
[14] Quoted from the pamphlet for the Guy Ngan house tour organised by the Dowse Art Museum, 6 July 2019.
[15] Mary Mountier and Geoffey Nees, "The Right to be There: Guy Ngan's Sculpture," *Designscape* (1972), reprinted in Sian Van Dyk, ed., *Guy Ngan* (Lower Hutt, Wellington: The Dowse Art Museum, 2019), 101–107.
[16] "Artists: Ngā Ringatoi," Public Art Heritage Aotearoa New Zealand, accessed 27 December 2023, https://publicart.nz/artists#artist-index-n.
[17] Michael, Dunn, *New Zealand Sculpture: A History* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2008), 117.
[18] Ngan used aluminium from the Tiwai Point Smelter from its opening in 1971. His earliest aluminium mural is at the Invercargill City Council offices.
[19] Oldham, *Interview with Guy Ngan*, Take 6, 00:20.
[20] See Dunn, *New Zealand Sculpture*, 142.
[21] Rangihiroa Panoho, *Māori Art: History, Architecture, Landscape and Theory* (Auckland: Bateman, 2015), 260–261.
[22] Ibid., 264–265.
[23] See Chris Elder, ed., *New Zealand-China Relations, Then, Now and in the Years to Come: A Digest of the Proceedings of the 40th Anniversary Symposium Held in Wellington and Beijing, September and December 2012* (Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington, 2013).
[24] Priscilla Pitts, "Art for Every Day: Looking Afresh at Guy Ngan," *Art New Zealand*, no. 172 (Summer 2019–20): 66–69.
[25] Mountier and Nees, "The Right to be There."
[26] Jenny Pattrick, "Art Awards: The Pros and Cons of Competitions," *New Zealand Crafts: Crafts Council News* (May 1982): 13–15.
[27] Lee, "Tracing the Rise of Chinese New Zealand Artists," 84.
[28] Paula Savage, "Director's Foreword," *Guy Ngan: Journey: Aluminium Panel, Tiki Hands, and Anchor Stones* (Wellington: City Gallery Wellington, 2006), 3.
[29] Heather Galbraith, "Guy Ngan—Explorer," *Guy Ngan: Journey*, 5–20.
[30] Stella Brennan, "Mural for the Newton Post Office 1973," *Guy Ngan: Journey*, 21–25.
[31] Galbraith, "Guy Ngan—Explorer," 5–6.
[32] Krishnasamy, "Guy Ngan," 53.
[33] Carolyn Enting, "Guy" [interview], *No*, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 82–83.
[34] Dunn, *New Zealand Sculpture*, 117.
[35] Pitts, "Art for Everyday," 66–69.
[36] Ibid. Pitts' note 4 cites instances where Ngan was said to have suffered from discrimination and was ignored by art institutions.
[37] Emma Ng, "Guy Ngan, on his terms," in Van Dyk, ed., *Guy Ngan*, 65–75.
[38] Van Dyk, "The Many Places He Stood," *Guy Ngan*, 5–6.
[39] At times, Ngan was also part of the art establishment, as when he was on the council of the National Art Gallery and Director of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts. He made efforts to bring changes to the institutions but ultimately opted out.
[40] Kingsley Baird, in conversation with the author, 15 November 2023. Baird is Professor of Fine Art at Massey University and a former colleague of Ngan and a friend of the family.