

Meditation as Artistic Expression in Chin Wan Kee Contemporary Sculpture

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ABSTRACT

Meditation has long served as a source of artistic inspiration, enabling artists to express spiritual, philosophical, and contemplative ideas through visual forms. This study examines the articulation of meditation in selected sculptures by the Malaysian contemporary sculptor Chin Wan Kee. It explores the expression of meditation through the formalistic elements of sculpture and interprets the intrinsic meanings of the artworks from the artist's perspective using native exegesis. A qualitative research approach was employed, guided by Edmund Burke Feldman's model of art criticism, encompassing the stages of description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment. Data were collected through the visual analysis of four selected sculptures and an in-depth interview with the artist. The findings reveal that meditation is expressed through the integration of formalistic elements, including movement, balance, texture, and spatial relationships, while symbolic forms communicate themes of self-awareness, spiritual transcendence, and the interconnectedness of the physical and metaphysical. The study further demonstrates that Chin Wan Kee's lived experiences and contemplative practice significantly shape the intrinsic meanings embedded within his sculptures. By integrating formal analysis with native exegesis, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of meditation as both a creative process and a mode of artistic expression in contemporary Malaysian sculpture.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by examining meditation in contemporary Malaysian sculpture through the integration of Edmund Burke Feldman's model of art criticism and native exegesis. It is among the few studies to demonstrate the articulation of meditation through formalistic elements and the artist's lived experiences in sculptural practice.

1. Introduction

Meditation has long been a subject of artistic expression, serving as both a source of inspiration and a means of exploring spiritual and philosophical concepts across cultures and historical periods. Tan (2017) further notes that sculpture provides a visual medium through which these contemplative ideas can be materially expressed. Guerrero and Chavez (2023) highlighted that recent studies have explored the relationship between visual art making and meditative processes, demonstrating artistic that practice can foster contemplation, self-reflection, and inner awareness. As experiential forms of visual expression, meditation sculptures extend beyond their aesthetic qualities by encouraging reflective engagement and meaning-making, allowing viewers to experience artworks as environments for contemplation and aesthetic interpretation (Dolese, 2026). This understanding is particularly relevant to contemporary sculpture, where materiality, spatial arrangement, and symbolic forms create immersive experiences that encourage contemplation and spiritual reflection. Meditation sculptures, in particular, embody the intersection of material form and spiritual practice. These works are found across various cultural and religious traditions, often portraying serene figures that embody contemplation, introspection, and transcendence through their posture, gesture, and symbolic form. Through their formal and symbolic qualities, such sculptures encourage viewers to slow down, reflect, and connect with their inner consciousness, aligning with contemporary discussions of art as a contemplative and affective experience (Dewey, 1934; Shusterman, 2018). Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that meditation sculpture functions not only as an artistic form but also as a medium for contemplation, spiritual engagement, and meaningful viewer experience.

Within this broader context, this study focuses on the meditation-themed sculptural works of the visual artist Chin Wan Kee. The research examines the ideas, content, and artistic processes transformed into sculptural form, with particular emphasis on the artist's perspective. To examine these works systematically, the study adopts Edmund Burke Feldman's (1994) framework of art criticism, encompassing the stages of description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment. Furthermore, the concept of intrinsic interpretation is explored through native exegesis, highlighting the relationship between the artwork and the artist's lived experience. Through this integrated approach, the study investigates how meditation is communicated through sculptural form, symbolism, and artistic expression, contributing to a deeper understanding of meditation as both an aesthetic and contemplative experience in contemporary sculpture.

1.1. Research Objectives

Research objectives provide a clear focus and direction for the study. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research objectives:

- i. To describe and analyse a selected meditation related sculpture by Chin Wan Kee.

- ii. To interpret the intrinsic meaning of the selected sculpture by Chin Wan Kee through native exegesis.
- iii. To evaluate Chin Wan Kee's lived experiences are reflected in the selected meditation-themed sculpture.

2. Literature Review

Within the visual arts, meditation has long been recognised as both a contemplative practice and a source of artistic expression. Across different cultural and artistic traditions, meditation has informed creative practices, inspired symbolic representations, and encouraged reflection on spiritual, philosophical, and human experiences. As artistic practices have evolved, meditation has continued to influence contemporary visual art through its relationship with artistic creation, material expression, identity, memory, and lived experience. Consequently, existing scholarship provides important theoretical perspectives for understanding the articulation of meditation in contemporary sculptural practice.

In contemporary practice, meditation is not only depicted visually but is also embedded within artistic processes. Artistic creation itself may function as a form of contemplative practice, aligning with Eastern philosophical traditions such as Zen and Taoism, which emphasise stillness, impermanence, and balance (Kasulis, 2002). Within Buddhist traditions, meditation centres on present-moment awareness, often expressed through still bodily postures and controlled breathing. The seated figure, frequently accompanied by symbolic gestures such as the Dhyana Mudra, has become a dominant visual representation of calmness and inner equilibrium. Rooted in diverse spiritual and philosophical traditions, meditation has long been recognised as a practice that promotes mental clarity, emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, and physiological well-being (Dakwar & Levin, 2009; Kaur et al., 2025). This conceptualisation frames meditation as a form of disciplined mental training, reinforcing its significance as both a contemplative practice and a source of artistic expression.

As a three-dimensional art form, sculpture communicates meaning through its materiality, form, volume, and spatial presence, enabling viewers to engage with artworks both visually and physically. Through its occupation of space and three-dimensional form, sculpture creates an experiential relationship between the artwork and the viewer, allowing meaning to emerge through visual perception and spatial interaction (Wang, 2022). Within this broader context, Buddhist sculpture demonstrates how spiritual concepts are expressed through the interaction of religious beliefs, cultural values, and artistic traditions. Symbolic representations, facial expressions, gestures, and iconographic forms communicate spiritual meanings while reflecting both Buddhist teachings and the cultural contexts in which the sculptures were created (Zhang & Abdullah, 2025). Collectively, these characteristics illustrate the capacity of sculpture to communicate contemplative and spiritual ideas through both formalistic elements and symbolic representation, providing a useful context for examining the articulation of meditation in contemporary Malaysian sculpture.

Meditation sculptures, as a distinct artistic form, serve as visual and symbolic mediators of contemplative experience, expanding the understanding of meditation within both artistic and experiential frameworks. Beyond their aesthetic qualities, these sculptures function as experiential objects that invite reflection and mindfulness, positioning viewers as active participants in the construction of meaning. The relationship between

artistic practice and contemplative experience can also be understood through Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) concept of flow, a state of complete absorption in which attention is fully focused, self-consciousness diminishes, and the activity becomes intrinsically rewarding. Within artistic practice, this state reflects a meditative condition where the creative process itself becomes an experience of mindfulness, reinforcing the close relationship between artistic creation and contemplative engagement.

This perspective reinforces the notion that meditation is not only represented in art but can also be embodied through artistic practice. From a scientific and psychological standpoint, meditation has been increasingly examined for its cognitive and emotional benefits. Yang and Yang (2021) conceptualise meditation as a practical method for enhancing holistic well-being, emphasising its role in fostering neural development, emotional regulation, and self-awareness. This perspective reinforces meditation as both a transformative mental practice and a foundation for contemplative creativity. Kakembo (2024) argues that mindfulness-based practices cultivate present-moment awareness, creativity, and self-awareness, while integrating art into mindfulness interventions transforms artistic creation into a therapeutic and contemplative practice that promotes emotional regulation, reflective engagement, and stress reduction. In *A Path with Heart*, Kornfield (1993) emphasises the integration of mindfulness into everyday life as a means of cultivating compassion, emotional healing, and inner peace. Expanding this perspective, *The Wise Heart* (Kornfield, 2008) integrates Buddhist psychology with contemporary psychological insights, highlighting meditation's role in fostering emotional regulation, resilience, and self-awareness. Together, these perspectives bridge traditional contemplative practices with contemporary psychological discourse, positioning meditation as both an experiential and therapeutic practice. Aguila (2023) argues that visual art facilitates processes of negotiation, recognition, and belonging, while Crisan (2021) emphasises that artistic identity is inseparable from ideological and cultural frameworks. This suggests that artistic production is inherently situated within broader socio-cultural contexts, where meaning is constructed through both individual expression and collective understanding.

Since early human history, people have expressed a conscious desire to represent their observations of the world through visual forms such as carving, painting, chiselling, and other symbolic artistic practices (Tan, 2017). These visual expressions not only document human experience but also serve as vehicles for preserving and communicating memory across time. Memory operates at both individual and societal levels, reflecting a dynamic relationship between personal experience and shared cultural understanding. While individual memory is grounded in lived experience, collective memory is produced and maintained through cultural practices, traditions, institutions, and social interactions that enable communities to transmit knowledge and identity across generations (Assmann, 2010). Likewise, Orianne and Eustache (2023) contend that collective memory is not an abstract social construct but emerges through individuals' participation in social groups, where personal experiences are continuously negotiated and integrated into shared understandings. From this perspective, memory should be understood as a socially embedded process rather than merely an individual cognitive function. Consequently, artworks can be interpreted as cultural mediators that transform personal experiences into forms of collective remembrance, allowing individual narratives to contribute to the construction, preservation, and reinterpretation of cultural identity over time.

Furthermore, practice-led research demonstrates that lived experience can be transformed into artistic output. Budiawan and Martyastiadi (2020) argue that artistic

practice enables emotional and experiential knowledge to be critically reflected upon and communicated through creative forms. This highlights the role of art as both a reflective process and a mode of knowledge production. Despite the breadth of scholarship on meditation, art, culture, and identity (Aguila, 2023; Crisan, 2021; Kasulis, 2002), there remains limited research on meditation translated into sculptural form within Malaysian contemporary art, particularly in relation to individual artistic practice. Existing studies primarily examine meditation as a spiritual concept or a general aesthetic theme, with less attention given to its formalistic transformation and intrinsic meaning within specific sculptural artworks. Furthermore, limited research has integrated formal analysis with the artist's personal and cultural context to interpret meditation in contemporary sculpture.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by examining a selected meditation-themed sculpture by Chin Wan Kee through Edmund Burke Feldman's Model of Art Criticism. The study describes and analyses the sculpture's formalistic elements, interprets its intrinsic meaning through native exegesis, and evaluates the artist's lived experiences as reflected in the artwork. Through this approach, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of meditation as expressed in contemporary sculptural practice.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the meanings embedded in Malaysian contemporary sculpture, with particular focus on meditation as artistic expression. Qualitative inquiry emphasises the interpretation of meanings, symbols, and lived experiences within specific contexts. As noted by Tracy (2024), qualitative research is an open and flexible process that facilitates an in-depth understanding of meaning-making beyond the scope of quantitative data. The methodological approach is guided by Creswell and Creswell (2023), incorporating systematic procedures for data collection and analysis. Based on these perspectives, a qualitative approach is considered appropriate for this study, as it enables an in-depth examination of the formalistic elements, intrinsic meaning, and artistic expression of the selected meditation-themed sculpture while facilitating an understanding of the artist's lived experiences within its cultural and contemporary context.

In addition, this study employs Edmund Burke Feldman's Model of Art Criticism, which comprises four stages: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment (Liang & Mokhtar, 2024). The model provides a systematic framework for examining the selected sculpture through the identification and analysis of its formalistic elements, the interpretation of its intrinsic meaning, and the evaluation of its relationship to the artist's lived experiences. According to Feldman (1994), analysing and discussing an artwork enhances viewers' appreciation and understanding of its artistic qualities. Building on this framework, the application of Feldman's model offers a coherent and structured approach to examining the relationship between formalistic elements, intrinsic meaning, and artistic intention in contemporary sculptural practice.

4. Results

This study examines four selected meditation-themed sculptures by Chin Wan Kee, namely *The Host of Soul* (2015), *Dancing with Birds* (2019), *Beyond His Mind* (2020), and *Returning* (2021) which the artist identifies as representative of his exploration of meditation, self-reflection, and human existence. According to Chin Wan Kee, sculpting is

not merely a technical process but a meditative practice that enables deeper engagement with human nature and personal identity (personal communication, November, 14, 2024). Guided by Edmund Burke Feldman's framework of art criticism (Liang & Mokhtar, 2024), this study analyses the articulation of meditation in selected meditation-themed sculptures by Chin Wan Kee through formalistic elements, symbolic representation, and the artist's lived experiences. Across the four selected meditation-themed sculptures, a consistent visual language is established through elongated human forms, textured bronze surfaces, asymmetrical compositions, and recurring symbolic representations of birds and fragmented human figures. These characteristics collectively communicate contemplation, spiritual transformation, and the pursuit of inner balance.

4.1. The Host of Soul

Host of Soul, 2015 (Figure 1) presents a contemplative human bust punctuated by irregular openings and crowned by a small seated figure. The fragmented form immediately suggests a dialogue between physical existence and spiritual transcendence. The closed eyes, hollow interior, and weathered bronze surface collectively establish an atmosphere of silence and introspection. The sculpture employs form, texture, positive and negative space, contrast, proportion, and emphasis to communicate its conceptual meaning. The fragmented bust dominates the composition, while the smaller seated figure positioned above the head becomes the visual focal point. The extensive use of negative space through the irregular openings symbolises incompleteness and impermanence, whereas the rough bronze texture reinforces the vulnerability of the physical body. The contrast between the solid monumentality of the bust and the delicate seated figure further emphasises the relationship between body and soul. The upward visual movement created by the composition encourages viewers to perceive the soul as transcending material existence.

Figure 1: The Host of Soul, 57cm (H) x 32cm x 20cm, Bronze, 2015



These formal characteristics are reinforced through the artist's own explanation. Chin Wan Kee described the *"body as merely a shell"* and explained that *"dying is not something to fear because the soul continues its journey beyond physical existence"* (personal communication, November, 14, 2024). The seated figure therefore represents the soul departing from the body, while the fragmented bust symbolises the imperfection and temporary nature of human existence. The sculpture draws upon both Eastern philosophy

and Western existential thought, particularly questions concerning identity, mortality, and the continuity of consciousness. The work demonstrates the translation of Chin Wan Kee's reflections on mortality and spirituality into sculptural form. Rather than portraying death as an ending, *The Host of Soul* visualises it as a meditative transition, inviting viewers to contemplate the relationship between body, soul, and the enduring search for existential meaning.

4.2. Dancing with Birds

The Dancing with Birds, 2019 (Figure 2) depicts an elongated human figure balancing gracefully on one leg while extending both arms towards several birds. The sculpture immediately conveys a sense of movement and interaction between the human figure and nature through its expressive posture and stylised anatomical proportions. Rather than representing the human body realistically, the sculpture adopts an abstract and organic visual language that encourages symbolic interpretation. From a formalistic perspective, the sculpture demonstrates the effective integration of the elements and principles of art. The elongated form and flowing curvilinear lines create continuous movement throughout the composition, while the rough texture of the bronze surface reinforces its organic character. The figure is organised through asymmetrical balance, with the placement of the birds creating visual equilibrium despite the dynamic posture. The repeated gestures of the limbs and birds establish rhythm, leading the viewer's gaze upward and strengthening the visual dialogue between humanity and nature. The bronze medium further contributes to the sculpture's expressive quality by providing both permanence and tactile richness, allowing formalistic elements to reinforce the contemplative character of the work.

Figure 2: Dancing with Birds, 80cm (H) x 30cm x 18cm, Bronze, 2019



The artist's interpretation provides further insight into the sculpture's intrinsic meaning. Chin Wan Kee explained that "*you go with nature, you go with the inner side of yourself together in a harmonious way*" (personal communication, November, 14, 2024). He further described dancing as an experience of "*letting go*", where meditation is achieved through complete immersion in the present moment rather than through physical stillness. Within this context, the birds symbolise freedom, self-awareness, and harmony with nature, while the dancing figure represents the process of releasing worldly attachment to attain inner balance. Rather than depicting meditation as passive contemplation, *Dancing with Birds* suggests that movement itself can become a meditative

practice. The sculpture also reflects Chin Wan Kee's lived experiences and personal philosophy. His emphasis on balance, self-discovery, and harmony with nature demonstrates how meditation functions not only as the subject matter of the artwork but also as the conceptual foundation of its creation. Consequently, *Dancing with Birds* illustrates the integration of formalistic elements and symbolic imagery in transforming personal contemplative experiences into sculptural expression.

4.3. Beyond His Mind

Unlike the previous sculptures, *Beyond His Mind*, 2020 (Figure 3) presents three expressive human figures engaged in dynamic interaction. Their varied postures suggest movement, dialogue, and transformation, expanding the artist's interpretation of meditation beyond silence into everyday human experience. The sculpture demonstrates the effective use of form, repetition, rhythm, movement, unity, and proportion. The repetition of the human figures establishes visual rhythm, while their varied gestures create dynamic movement throughout the composition. Despite the different poses, the consistent bronze material and simplified anatomical forms maintain compositional unity. The absence of detailed facial features shifts attention from individual identity towards universal human consciousness, allowing viewers to interpret the figures as symbolic representations of different psychological states.

Figure 3: *Beyond His Mind*, 28cm (H) x 37cm x 13cm, Bronze, 2020

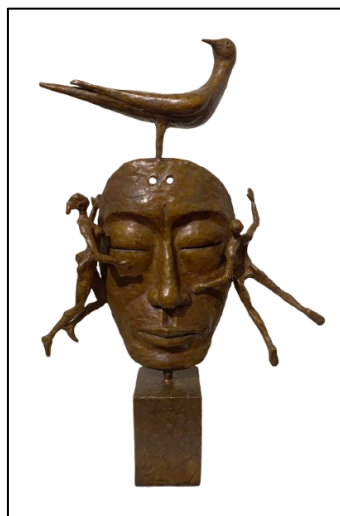


Chin Wan Kee explained that "*when the dancer has fun, it is forgetting themselves for a moment*" (personal communication, November, 14, 2024). This understanding extends meditation beyond traditional stillness to include dance, artistic creation, and complete immersion in lived experience. The bird form again functions as a symbol of self-awareness, while the interaction between the figures reflects the complexity of human thought, emotion, and spiritual growth. The sculpture illustrates meditation as an embodied experience expressed through movement, performance, and creative practice. It demonstrates the artist's belief that contemplative awareness may emerge through ordinary activities, thereby expanding conventional understandings of meditation within contemporary sculpture.

4.4. Returning

Returning, 2021 (Figure 4) continues the artist's exploration of meditation through a serene human head accompanied by two smaller figures and a bird. The composition conveys stillness while simultaneously suggesting movement through the positioning of the subsidiary figures, creating a visual tension between inner calm and external experience. The sculpture effectively integrates composition, balance, texture, rhythm, movement, and emphasis. The symmetrical human head provides structural stability, whereas the asymmetrical placement of the smaller figures introduces movement and visual rhythm. The contrast between the smooth facial surface and the textured subsidiary figures symbolises the relationship between inner tranquillity and external challenges. The bird positioned at the top functions as the primary focal point, directing the viewer's attention upward and reinforcing the theme of spiritual transcendence.

Figure 4: *Returning*, 59cm (H) x 36cm x 9cm, Bronze, 2021



According to Chin Wan Kee, "*turning back to the depth of the heart and having a dialogue with another self is an exploration of the wisdom of life*" (personal communication, November, 14, 2024). This philosophy is embodied in the sculpture through the closed eyes, symbolic bird, and fragmented figures, which together represent the process of self-reflection, emotional reconciliation, and spiritual renewal. Influenced by Buddhist and Taoist concepts of cyclical existence, the sculpture suggests that returning is not simply a physical act but an ongoing journey towards inner clarity. Through the integration of formalistic elements and symbolic representation, *Returning* demonstrates the transformation of Chin Wan Kee's personal contemplation into a universal reflection on identity, wisdom, and self-realisation.

4.5. Overall Findings

Collectively, the four sculptures demonstrate that meditation in Chin Wan Kee's sculptural practice extends beyond religious iconography or static contemplation. Through the systematic application of Feldman's framework, the findings reveal that formalistic elements including form, line, texture, balance, rhythm, movement, space, and proportion function as visual strategies that communicate symbolic meanings related to freedom, mortality, self-reflection, and spiritual transcendence. Native exegesis further reveals that these symbolic meanings are deeply rooted in the artist's lived experiences, philosophical reflections, and contemplative practice.

The findings address the research objectives by demonstrating that meditation is articulated through formalistic elements, interpreted through the artist's own perspectives, and understood as an expression of lived experience. Rather than functioning solely as aesthetic objects, Chin Wan Kee's sculptures become visual manifestations of contemplation, transforming abstract philosophical concepts into tangible artistic experiences. This study contributes to contemporary Malaysian sculpture by demonstrating that meditation can be materially constructed through the integration of formalistic elements, symbolic representation, and personal philosophy, thereby positioning sculpture as both an artistic practice and a medium for contemplative inquiry.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the articulation of meditation in selected contemporary Malaysian sculptures by Chin Wan Kee. Guided by Edmund Burke Feldman's model of art criticism and informed by native exegesis, the study examined the formalistic elements through which meditation is articulated, interpreted the intrinsic meanings of the selected sculptures from the artist's own perspectives, and evaluated the influence of Chin Wan Kee's lived experiences on his sculptural practice. The findings reveal that meditation is not merely represented but materially expressed through movement, balance, texture, and spatial relationships. Symbolic forms, particularly fragmented bodies and avian imagery, further communicate themes of self-awareness, transcendence, and the interconnectedness of the physical and metaphysical. By integrating Eastern and Western philosophical perspectives, the study positions Chin Wan Kee's sculptures within contemporary artistic discourse and contributes to a broader understanding of the material and symbolic articulation of meditation within Malaysian contemporary sculpture.

In conclusion, Chin Wan Kee's sculptural practice demonstrates that artistic creation can embody a meditative process in which awareness and creative expression converge. His sculptures function as visual manifestations of meditation, reflecting the integration of body, mind, and inner consciousness while transforming personal experience into artistic expression. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Chin sculptures extend beyond aesthetic representation to become contemplative visual narratives that invite reflection on identity, spirituality, and the human condition. Through the integration of formalistic elements, symbolic representation, and lived experience, Chin Wan Kee establishes meditation as both a creative process and a meaningful mode of artistic expression within contemporary Malaysian sculpture.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The Faculty of Communication and Creative Industries, Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TAR UMT), Research Ethics Committee provided ethical approval for this study. All procedures involving the participant were conducted in accordance with the committee's ethical guidelines, and informed consent was obtained from the participant.

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Conflict of Interest

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