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BURDEN OF STYLE

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Rather than a holy grail, the pursuit of a defining style can hinder artistic development. So says Singapore artist Boo Sze Yang, whose solo exhibition entitled "29.03.15" is currently on show at iPreciation. We chat with the artist at his studio at the Goodman Arts Centre

Making the final touches for his upcoming exhibition at iPreciation, Boo Sze Yang has been hard at work on this project for the last three months. Despite the pressure, 50-year-old Sze Yang sportingly poses for photos and is relaxed and chatty during our interview.

His latest solo exhibition, entitled 29.03.15, pays tribute to Singapore's minister mentor Lee Kuan Yew on his passing. Unlike most tributes to LKY, there are no direct visual references to the man. Instead the works capture the impact, the immediate aftermath his passing has created on the man on the street.

"On that day, ordinary people did quite extraordinary things," Sze Yang explains. "Strangers came together to queue in the rain for hours to pay their respects. There was a kind of solidarity you only see in a disaster. I thought it was a good subject to paint."

The artist has never shied away from painting the unconventional and quirky – from crash-scenes to shopping malls. This time around, his fluid brushwork, turpentine washes, and watercolour-like treatment of oil paint, combine to create a series of work that is strikingly sombre yet compelling.

"I wanted to try something new; that's what being an artist is about, isn't it?" adds Sze Yang. "But I don't

know if I would call it a tribute. I respect this man a lot. But there are a lot of things I'm not 100 per cent sure. But if you look around, you would say, 'Okay, he must have done something good'."

For Sze Yang, the latest work is a return to a more abstract style of painting. And while the medium is oil, the manner is looser and fluid, the paintwork is thinner, it is a distinctive style that has almost become a trademark for the artist.

On the matter of personal style, the chatty artist becomes even more vocal. This is clearly something the artist has spent some time thinking about. "Yes, I've always had an issue with that word called 'style'. It can be a burden. A lot of artists have a style that they keep for a long time. I believe that style is something that comes naturally. Something you develop. And style can change. Because your thinking changes. Ten years from now, I will have changed. There is no need to retain the same style. The trick is how to constantly renew myself, say every five years, so that people see something different. And even if they don't recognise me, it is still me," he says.

A look at Sze Yang's earlier work underscores the issue of artistic identity he has had to grapple with, especially as a fine arts undergraduate in the UK. He

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relates how his lecturers were always expecting to see work that was Asian. Much of his earlier training and work, was in essence an attempt to find a middle ground between East and West. Something he did by creating work that figured recognisable elements and icon figures of both cultures.

On another level, the way he thought, as an artist, was also being fundamentally shaped by the thinking of the time. As an art student in the UK in the 1990s, there was a lot of focus on identity. Yet this was no longer the case, when he returned ten years later for his masters. "In the new millennia, they didn't talk about identity anymore. People wanted to see artists reinventing and reinterpreted things," explains Sze Yang.

Changes in the artistic landscape mirrored the changes taking place internally within the artist as well. "At NAEA (Nanyang Academy of Fine Art), we spent a lot of time making but not thinking. But during and after university, I would start to think more about my work. There would be a lot more internal dialogue. But the painting process was not very enjoyable," he adds. "The spontaneity of painting, the movement of your hand and your body was not there. There was no spontaneity. Everything had been planned to precision and calculated to bring out a certain message."

Art had gone from something spontaneous and expressive to something academic, which could have led to Sze Yang feeling the constant compulsion to "experiment" – which for him meant "throwing everything away and starting over". It was only much later, in his series of work called Shopping Mall that the artists finally ran out of things to throw out.

When, in his own words, "technique and thought finally came together".

Like it or not, his work possesses a distinctive style – the dripping paint and loose brush strokes – that has won the artist many followers. Unlike traditional oil painting, which covers the entire canvas in oil, Sze Yang uses a technique based on watercolour painting, where the white of the canvas is left untouched. The passage of time has also seen him acquire a preference for painting big, and painting fast.

"It's all about body movement and speed so I don't like to work too small," he explains. Most of the paintings in 29.03.15 were completed at one go, with each taking from between two to six hours to complete. "I keep everything wet and when done, it is done. I don't add to it," he says.

All in, it has taken Sze Yang some three months to complete the series of approximately 18 paintings, and that includes many other works that failed to make the grade. For such a prolific artists, producing in numbers is less about working fast but about knowing when to stop. "Sometimes, when I finish a work, I'm not so sure if I like it. It takes a while to like certain things," he says.

Looking back on his career, 50-year-old Sze Yang credits his growth as an artist to learning not to over-think things. In many respects, that is like coming full circle, and unlearning everything he was taught as a student. "In the beginning, I spent a lot of time making, not thinking. Then a lot of time thinking, not making," he says of his time at NAEA and university. "Now I am trying to let the thinking just come out of the making. After a certain stage, you let things evolve."



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