"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."
BURDEN OF STYLE

WORDS TIM MCINTYRE
PHOTOS ALBERT TAN, AND PRECEDING

Rather than a holy grail, the pursuit of a defining style can hinder artistic development. So says Singapore artist Neo Sze Yang, whose solo exhibition entitled "29.03.13" is currently on show at Precious. We chat with the artist at his studio at the Goodman Arts Centre.

Making the final touches for his upcoming exhibition at this venue, Neo Sze Yang has been hard at work on this project for the last three months. Despite the pressure, the pastel-hued Neo Sze Yang speaking gently for photos and is relaxed and cheerful during our interview.

His latest solo exhibition, entitled "29.03.13", pays tribute to Singapore's historical centre Lee Kong Chian on his painting. Unlike more tributes to LK, there is no direct visual reference to the man. Instead the works capture the impact he's had in Singapore's history.

"It's like having people walk into extraordinary things," Neo Sze Yang explains. "Workshops come together to express the idea of beauty in their respects. There was a kind of sudden you only see in a dream. I thought it was a good subject to paint."

The artist has never shied away from painting the unconventional and unique — from images of shopping malls. This time around, Neo Sze Yang briefly incorporated watercolour, and sometimes he incinerated the contents of the paper, confining me to create a series of work that is shocking enough on completing.

"It's fun playing with something, new, that's what being an artist is about, isn't it?" asks Neo Sze Yang. "But I don't know if I would call it a 'totally. I expect the 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 Neo Sze Yang, the latest work is a mixture of more abstract style of painting. And while the medium is oil, the essence is honest and fluid, the paintwork is dynamic; it is coherent style that has almost become a trademark for the artist.

On the matter of personal style, the artist says, "The artist becomes more vocal. This is clearly something the artist has spent some time finding about. 'Yes, this 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, pass over things changing. Ten years from now, I will have changed. There is no need tostrainthe same style. The tank is how long enough itself to grow, so every five years, so that people can something different. And even if they don't recognise me, it's still fine," he says.

A look at Neo Sze Yang's earlier work underscores the need of artists; whereas he has had to grow, especially as a fine arts undergraduate in the UK. He
"Sometimes, when I finish a work, I'm not so sure if I like it. It takes a while to like certain things."

When, in his own words, "techniques and thought finally come together," Lee says, he's at his best. His work possesses a distinctive style—rich in close-up and loose brush strokes—that has made him an artist of note. Unlike traditional oil painting, which covers the entire canvas in oil, Lee's technique involves watercolor painting, where the artist can control the degree of wetness on the canvas. This technique allows for a different approach to painting, with a focus on layering and blending colors.

"It is all about fluid movement and speed, so I know I have to work fast," he explains. "Most of the paintings I've done are not finished until the end. Each painting takes from three to six hours to complete. I keep considering new and when done, it is done."

Lee, like many artists, finds inspiration in the world around him. He says, "I want to try something new, that's what being an artist is about, isn't it?"