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Creating art from chaos

Ooi Kok Chuen

HE'S Malaysian, and he has exhibited with some of the biggest names in art, dead or alive. He is also featured in several art books by the Italian art historian/curator Achille Bonito Oliva.

At 45, Kedah-born H.H. (Hooi Hwa) Lim is a permanent fixture in the lively Italian art scene, renowned for his Conceptual installation art over the last 20 years.

His art deals with the quest of identity in the chaos of an ever-shrinking world, the tensions of culture and psyche between the East and the West.

"Everything is so insecure. You find that the world is not perfect. Of course it is not. Some things are perfect, some are not. I'm living with that," said Lim, whose 26 years in Rome showed in his heavy Italian accent.

Lim can also speak English, Mandarin and Hokkien, the "unofficial" lingua franca of Penang where he spent his early schooling days.

"Sometimes you are happy, sometimes depressed. You have to be spontaneous. When you are calm, you make calm things. In Langkawi, it's so peaceful, and things represent that. But I live in a big city and I represent the chaos. They are the living things. You can't ignore that. It's the reality."

"I am based in Rome but my bond is here (in Malaysia). It's difficult to understand what is left or right, up or down. I walk in the centre.

"Sometimes you find yourself lost in between the two, the temptations drawing you apart. That makes for a crisis, but it creates art. My art is not always about looking for beauty."

It's ironic that Lim will be making his art debut in his home country in the Langkawi International Festival of Arts (Lifa) despite having etched a name for himself in the tough international art world.

Consider this: his works have been shown alongside Beuys, Haring, Duchamp, Warhol, Basquiat, and amongst the living artists - A.R. Penck, and the Fluxus, dominated by a re-invented Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik and his wife Kubota, to name a few.

He is mentioned, and photographs of his installations used, in three art books written by Achille, better known as the founder of TransAvantgarde that grouped Paladino, and the three great C's - Cucchi, Clemente and Chia (Sandro).

Achille is also the director of the Venice Biennale, the closest to the art world's equivalent of the Olympics.

Lim himself had not been selected for the Venice Biennale proper, only taking part in the fringe events in 1984.

In Achille's art tomes, he is featured in Oggetti di Turno (The Turn of the Object), Propaganda Arte (Propaganda Art), and the latest, Gratis Abordo dell `Arte (Free To Go Into the World of Art), where two full pages were devoted to him.

"I am lucky to have met Achille. Sometimes, artists need opportunities to express themselves. He always put me among international artists in the exhibitions that he organised. And now, I am so glad to have met Datuk (Ibrahim Hussein)," he said with humility though his works reflect great maturity in terms of handling of materials, insight and concept.

After a purely academic grounding at the Kuala Lumpur College of Art in 1976, Lim immediately made a beeline for Rome, where his tutelage at the

Academy of Fine Arts prepared him for the catalytic changes of multi-pronged disciplines in art instead of the more monolithic adherence to media.

In God of Prosperity, a 5x4-metre mural on the walls of the Artico Gallery in Rome, Lim juxtaposes a small image of the Tua Peh Kong deity against the outlines of a Sherman tank, showing that the way of prosperity is through force and might.

Another installation, entitled For Heaven's Sake, has "model" aeroplanes which disintegrate into powder, while Totems exploits the common telephone directories which he rolled up and painted over with metallic paint and stacked up on a single wall shelf.

Who would have thought of making use of these directories, often taken for granted. Yet they are virtual repositories of life, of common people, some of whom might have died before the records are updated.

The aeroplanes symbolise a love of flying and also an instrument of death or even peace, as in self-protection or defence. The eponymous exclamation is one of surprise, or horror.

In one with the cryptic title, 60kg of Sages, he balanced himself for hours on a basketball, and this was recorded on video.

An "artillery" of dustpans has the pompous title Ceremony of the Prophet.

"Many people have ideas, good and bad. But in the consumerist world, everything is thrown away the next day, even if the philosophy is good," he explained.

For Lifa, organised by Datuk Ibrahim Hussein's museum foundation, Lim will be presenting two works that deal with the way we look at things, and how we look at things.

One with a shiny epox-made suitcase which is empty inside deals with the stereotype of a fool's paradise. Just because it looks like an expensive trunk, there must be some treasures inside.

"But Langkawi is an island of treasures. Everywhere you go, it is all gold ... the Nature, the sea, and inside these museum, Datuk's paintings. "Sometimes, we make mistakes with psychological impressions. We think this is the value," he said.

In the other work, he has chosen two trees outside this museum-in-the-rainforest in north-western Langkawi to draw attention to two dying trees by hanging up a samurai sword between them.

"One of the trees is already dead, and the other is dying with insects inside," he said.

It goes by the ironic name of Still-life.

After Lifa, Lim newly-married to a Taiwanese, has a major group exhibition at the Modern Art Gallery in Rome in December.

Lim's success in the West shows that in the newly globalised world where the "art centre" keeps shifting, the world is an oyster for the artist who dares to dream. Like Ibrahim, whose dreams of a "global village" museum became reality and made possible Lifa which brought back Lim.

Lifa is a creative celebration of excellence of artists, musicians, poets, designers, photographers, dancers and folk art performers like the unique and the absolutely not-to-be-missed Vietnamese Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre.

It includes open studios of artists scattered all over the fabled island, an ebullient one-off performance by virtuoso flautist Andrea Griminelli and the sultry barefoot flamenco dance of La Chunga; a photography exhibition entitled A Malaysian Portfolio, and the National Poetry Convention.

The events will culminate with the official opening of the museum on Saturday by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The festival

will alternate with the Langkawi Maritime and Aerospace show.

Organised by the IHMCF, it is supported by the Kedah State government and the Langkawi Development Authority (Lada), with the New Straits Times as one of its major sponsors.

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