



Singular & Passionate

From a jewellery designer to a stockbroker to a painter who eventually became a gallery owner, Lim Wei-Ling is determined to bring Malaysian art to the world.

PHOTO SOO PHYE

Tell us a bit about yourself. How were you exposed to art?

Long story short, a lot of my influence or exposure to art came from when I was a child because both my parents were working in areas that are very art-inspired or they were working in the art field. My mother's a classical violinist and my father's an architect. From a young age, both parents used to take us to art galleries and museums or my mother would play music within the confines of a gallery, and we'd go as children. The exposure was very subconscious. I've always had respect and love for art, as a result.

Has the Malaysian contemporary art scene changed much over the last 10 years?

Malaysia is a culturally diverse country with a very short history of art; what has been seen has largely been influenced by external forces and colonisation. But over the years, it has developed into a much more professional one. There are now collectors, and artists who have been able to find patronage to continue their work. A lot of the artists we work with, they teach or do part-time jobs, so that they don't need to compromise on their work because it's not about making things to sell, it's about making something meaningful for yourself. There is an archiving and cataloguing in place and art books are being published. There is a growing respect and interest in art.

What should be done next to develop the local scene?

For starters, education is very important. It'd be great if more Malaysians took an interest in visiting galleries to learn a bit more about why artists make what they do, or to just come and see, to get an interest in our Malaysian artists. I feel, really sadly in some ways, that when Malaysian artists start making waves internationally, that's when everyone is going to start taking note. In the meantime when they're still trying to make it here, people have got no confidence. Somehow when other people recognise it, then it goes.

Despite the development, we are still not on par with our Southeast Asian neighbours. Why is that?

Singapore is definitely the leader in this area. In a very short time, they have managed to put themselves on the map as an art hub, from participation in the Venice Biennale to grants for Singaporean artists and galleries. I think in terms of the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and our other Southeast Asian neighbours, I would say that they maybe have more support from private collectors and galleries. Malaysia is lagging in terms of visibility. We have a presence but not enough of a voice.

Is it possible too that they are more artistic than us?

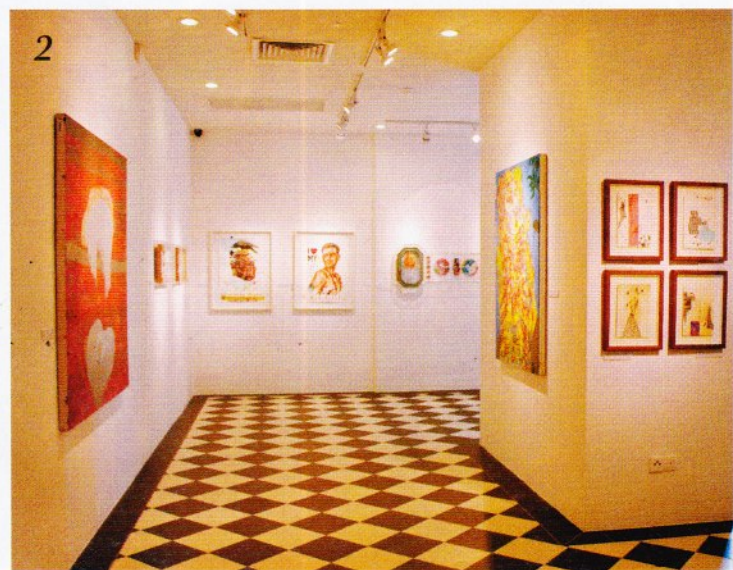
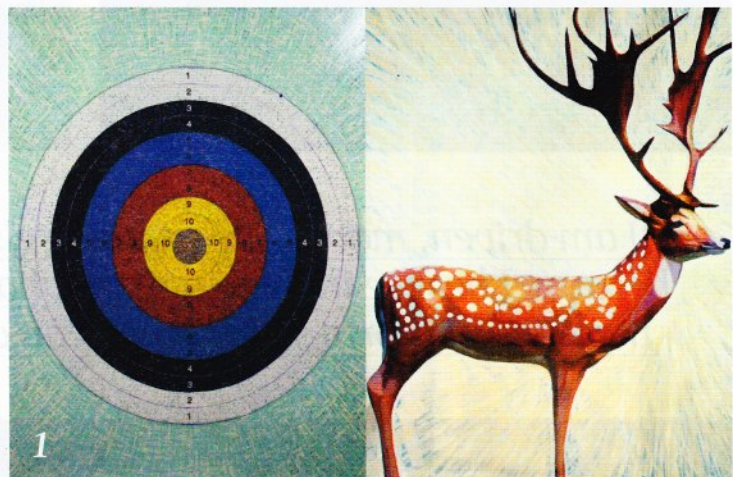
I think it's difficult to generalise like that. We have a group of very interesting artists here who are not just able to render, or to paint technically well, or to make work which is technically beautiful or strong, but can also apply intellectual content to their work. You need to have both in

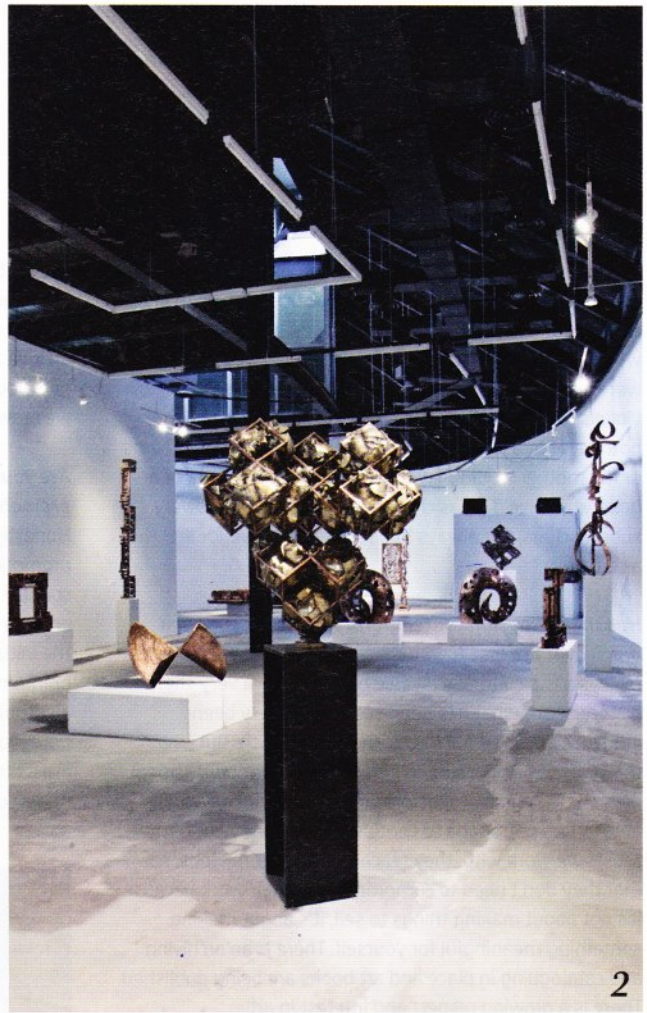
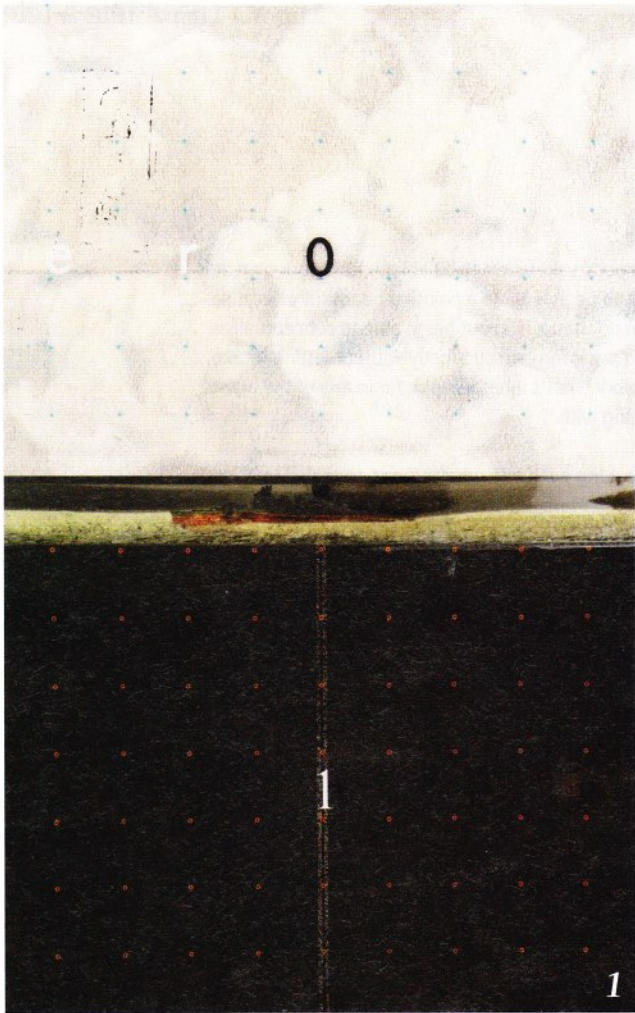
the contemporary art world to be able to hold your own. It is not enough to be able to do a painting beautifully because anyone can do that. It is about being able to conceptualise an idea and put it forward succinctly without letting it take over your work. That's what we look for in any of the artists we're working with.

Are you working with any government agencies to promote art in Malaysia?

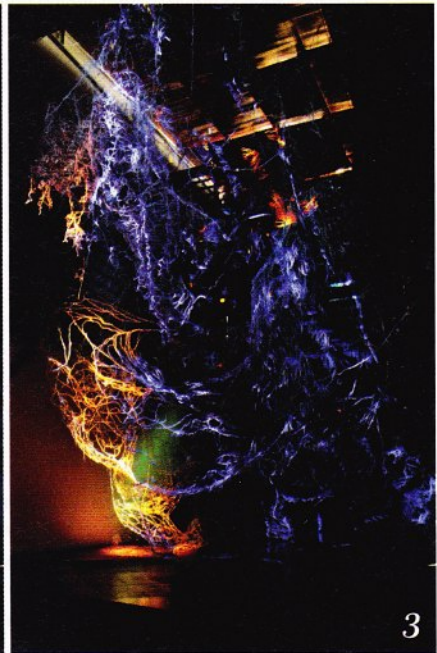
Honestly, Malaysia has not placed an emphasis on promoting contemporary Malaysian art both within the country and in the region. We have some support but not enough to develop the industry to the next level. A lot of the initiatives for developing the arts scene, be it locally or internationally, come from private galleries rather than institutions. Currently, I'm working with WOLO, the boutique hotel, to do an artist residency programme, where we invite artists from around the world to come live and work in Kuala Lumpur for two months to realise a project.

- 1. Ivan Lam's *Target And Deer - You Are Being Missed, Dear* (2010)
- 2. The interior of Wei-Ling Gallery at the E&O Hotel in Penang





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1. Ivan Lam's *Zero Hero* (2013)
2. Pakistani sculptor Amin Gulgee's *Walking on the Moon* installation features bronze and copper sculptures
3. Venezuelan light artist Claudia Bueno's *Fiberspace* installation took up three levels of Wei-Ling Gallery in Brickfields
4. Anurendra Jegadeva's *Yesterday in a Padded Room* installation

The Malaysian public is generally uninterested in contemporary art. Do you agree?

One of the reasons we opened the gallery in a mall is to make it more accessible for the public. They don't need to feel intimidated. They just need to come in and be exposed to it. You need to be educated by looking at it. You don't need to understand the artist. You can look at the wall and say, "well, do I like it or do I hate it?" That in itself is a conversation. I think in Malaysia, it is the lack of education, and great artworks that transcend ages and how much one knows about art that are causing the disinterest. A couple of years ago, we worked with a light artist from Venezuela, who did a huge installation made out of string and resin. She then filmed elements like water, fire, and wind, and fed it into the computer, which she then projected onto the sculpture. That was so well received by everybody from children to the old folks, to people who didn't know anything about art. Everyone was touched by it in one way or another. I think if you make things that people can relate to, then maybe they'll be interested.

Do you think Malaysians view owning artworks as only for people with money? Maybe we could bring art to the people.

We have done projects, where for example, we collaborated with Absolut Vodka because they've got a very keen collaboration with arts. We gave the artists Absolut bottles to create an artwork out of the bottle. When you exhibit something like that in a concourse of a mall, people will be interested, because it's a bottle and it's an artwork. We did one with Furla. Each artist got a Furla bag and they made it into their own work of art. People can relate to handbags and by bridging it, you allow people access. Of course it's not enough. I think it's a fallacy to say that art is only for the very privileged or people who can

afford it. If you're passionate enough about art, you can collect artworks for not a lot of money.

You are obviously very passionate about art.

Are you driven by altruistic or commercial reasons?

I am driven, more than anything else, by the artists I work with because I believe in them and in what they are doing. I am giving them the platform so that they can achieve something great, you can think back, "oh my gosh, so and so was one of our artists. Look at where he is today! We're so proud!" I just would like to see them all achieving greatness in their careers because they deserve it. To have our Malaysian artists represented in big museums for example like Ai Wei Wei, you see him in Tate Modern, the Royal Academy of Arts, at the Guggenheim. I believe that our artists can get there and it's all about timing. If there's a time to choose to be a Malaysian artist, it's now. Because the platform, the way the world order is right now, it's prime. For the first time in history, Asia is being taken note of. Asian artists have got the world stage. They have got the platform; 40, 50 years ago, I don't think there was much hope, really, we never heard of any Asian artist really making waves internationally, whereas today it's commonplace.

When do you think a Malaysian artist would show their work at Tate Modern? Do you think it will happen in the next five years?

[Laughs]. I won't give it a time frame, you just never know. It's going to happen, it will happen. For us, for my artists, it's just making sure that they continue to stay true to what they're doing, and I will push them as far as I can.

What are the three top tips that you can give to an artist who wants to make a living through art?

Talent alone would not suffice in the long term. We are looking for artists who will be able to stand the test of time. I would say they need to have integrity and not stray off course by the lure of money. Secondly, commitment to themselves and their art. Is the artist willing to take risks with painting subjects that may not sell? Thirdly, honesty, making works for themselves and not for anyone else.

It's a huge achievement for Wei-Ling Gallery to be the only gallery to represent Malaysia in Art Basel Hong Kong in 2013 and 2014. What's next?

Platforms like Art Basel give us access to the most important curators and museum directors in the world. It puts us and our artists on the map, which is really overwhelming, because people don't have access elsewhere. We are thrilled to announce that we have been selected as the only gallery from Malaysia to be accepted into VOLTA New York, a by-invitation only art fair taking place on 2-6 March, where we will be presenting a solo exhibition by Ivan Lam. We will continue to pursue these platforms because we have had a lot of interest from overseas collectors for some of our local artists.