



Circles of opportunity

Facing the realities of life with child-like optimism in *Have You Ever...?*



HARIS HASSAN/THE EDGE



Top: *Aim For The Best (2016)*

Bottom: *Every Second Counts (2017)*

Wong Chee Meng's latest series of works instantly captured me when I first saw them – the monochromatic blue tones vibrantly juxtaposed with an underlying hint of pop-art kitsch. Dominating each of the seven artworks are colourful beach balls that hark back to childhood.

Never one to shy away from colour, the artist's innate ability to maximise the effects of different hues is put to refreshing use this time as each work has a visually striking focal point.

"I saw children playing ball on the beach and was attracted to the primary colours, very simple and straightforward," says Wong, who presents the works in his fourth solo exhibition, *Have You Ever...?*

The description "simple and straightforward" antithetically carries significant weight for the artist, who says the theme of the series stems from a gradual personal transformation. "The show is like a report card," he quips.

During a particularly low period in his life, Wong found himself mentally and emotionally in a very negative space. But he realised that he wasn't alone. As the exhibition's description states, "To the artist, the title is a means of reflection on the

current lifestyles and cultures of the times we live in."

Wong expands on that statement: "We live in a very complicated environment. Most of my friends and I are used to a routine in our daily lives, and we live in a comfort zone. Yet, the things that happen around us, or what we see and hear on the news or social media, we react and comment very quickly, and negatively."

Pondering our instinctive habit to react to the same things over and over again, the artist willed himself to change. "I would think too much and would agonise over every small thing that happened, be it to me or sociopolitically or in our economy. I thought why did the world change so fast? Why did it not let us prepare for it?" he says.

Just as the question mark in the exhibition's title sets the tone, the self-confessed lover of questions began to ask a different question – "what if?" What if we tried to see from the other side of the coin? What if we could do something about it, or respond differently?

Wong took his own advice and decided to get himself out of his rut, both physically and figuratively. "If I kept putting myself in a corner, I would not mature and be able to stand

on my own two feet," he says. He then started travelling, and on one of those trips, he found himself on a beach.

"When I saw the children playing, a Bruce Lee quote came to mind. 'Be like water, my friend'," he laughs, recalling it. The ball's fluidity and energy struck a chord and he went home and began painting.

"It started with one piece," says Wong, referring to the diptych, *Who To Trust When Everyone's Out For Themselves (2016)*. The empty chair evokes a sense of waiting, with a ball left on the table untouched. Wong presents his initial insight of the need to be flexible, almost as he is willing himself to be prepared either way. The underlying layer hides another motif altogether, hitting home that life is a complex make-up of different factors and parts.

He then went on to create *The Juggler (2016)*, a fitting and evocative continuation of the narrative. "We are all juggling our lives. But there are so many techniques and ways to juggle, so how we do it is up to us," says Wong.

In this series, the artist's hallmark double-image style is kept simpler and more minimalist than usual, perhaps an indication of his yearning for the audience

to capture his intention. Still, he plays with strokes and colour tones to create visual depth, with each work finished with a signature glossy sheen.

"Every single piece represents opportunity and hope," Wong says earnestly, although, as each artwork follows the last, the symbols and message become increasingly layered. Some of the titles read like motivational quotes, with the image illustrating the message. In *Every Second Counts (2017)*, two shooters take aim at the multitude of colourful beach balls before them. In *Aim For The Best (2016)*, a coconut tree diptych presents a selection that conveys a perception that it is ripe for the picking.

"Ultimately, we have to make choices. It is up to us how we choose, but once you do, don't question if it is the best decision. For me, life is like that. Whichever you pick, just make the best of it," says Wong.

Have You Ever...? is on at Wei-Ling Gallery, 8 Jalan Scott, Brickfields, KL, until May 1. Opening hours are from 10am to 6pm (Mon-Fri) and 10am to 5pm (Sat). For more details, call (03) 2260 1106.