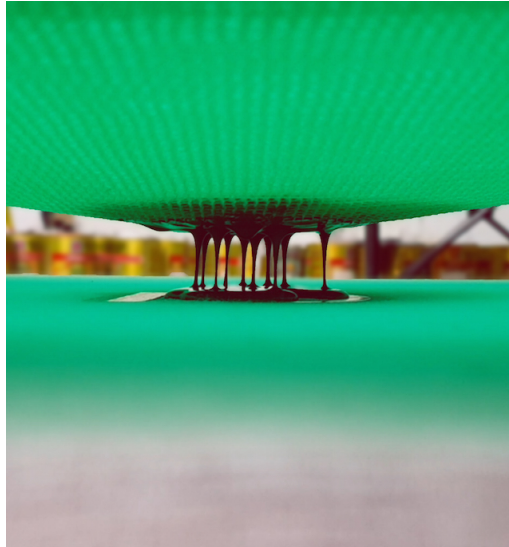


Male artist explores journey to womanhood through taboo subject of female bleeding in Malaysia.

Art Radar catches up with Ivan Lam to delve into his controversial show at Wei-Ling Contemporary in Kuala Lumpur, and how his use of unusual materials merge with his message.



Ivan Lam, 'Hymen' (detail), 2018, plastic green netting and synthetic polymer paint, 52 x 52 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery.

Much like a sociologist, **Ivan Lam** takes an intimate look at social, cultural and political norms. Of particular interest are those aspects universal in scope, cutting across genders and borders. Initially working as a printmaker, Lam transitioned into painting and eventually became a full-fledged multidisciplinary artist, working with a wide variety of materials such as honey, construction netting, diapers and insects.

Ivan Lam was born in Kuala Lumpur in 1975. Looking back, his earliest work was a pencil drawing in kindergarten class. From there, the artist graduated from the Limkokwing Institute of Technology in 1994, attended the Maine College of Art (1998) and concluded his studies at the University of East London (2006).



Ivan Lam, 'Hymen' (detail), 2018, plastic green netting and synthetic polymer paint, 52 x 52 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery.

The artist's work is currently being exhibited until 29 April 2018 at Wei-Ling Contemporary in Kuala Lumpur. His work has been shown throughout the world, including **Art Stage Singapore** (2017), the **Karachi Biennale** (2017), Volta NY (2016) and **Art Basel Hong Kong** (2013), and was commissioned for Louis Vuitton's flagship store in Kuala Lumpur.

Lam, whose work offers an unapologetic view of contemporary life, has ratcheted it up a notch with his latest solo show "Hymen", examining women's transition from childhood to adulthood. The membrane partially closing the vagina, the hymen, was traditionally believed to remain intact until a woman lost her virginity through sexual intercourse and in some cultures, still remains a test of a young girl's purity. Through the use of **green construction netting and a stream of red paint**, the artist examines the intimate biological transition that a girl travels to become a woman. The result, as noted in the exhibition press release, is an abstract riff on **"fertility, sexual desire and ultimate detachment from childhood"**.

According to gallerist Wei-Ling Lim, the reactions about the show, launched at a time when the **#MeToo movement** and **Handmaid's Tale** are in the public consciousness, is "inextricably influenced by each viewer's gender":

Each female visitor I've encountered has engaged with the work on a deep and emotional level. Many saw the work as a passage

through the different stages of womanhood, sort of like an act of remembrance to defining moments that have forever altered their identities. Other women have also noted how thoughtful the artist's approach has been to this topic. Specifically, they noted how the "de-skilling" approach that the artist has imposed on his technique and choice of materials allowed them, as viewers, the freedom to interpret and view the work according to their personal experiences and memories.

One woman visitor noted how puberty marks the stage when a girl's body ceases to belong solely to her and becomes an entity that is heavily shaped to fit various religious, cultural, and social constructs. Discussions with female visitors regarding this work almost always extended to what it means to be a woman and to have agency over one's body. Each visitor touched on this issue and many shared their own struggles with claiming ownership over their bodies in a world where women bodies are censored, policed, and their blood is stigmatized.



Ivan Lam, 'Hymen' (performance), 2018, plastic green netting and synthetic polymer paint, 52 x 52 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery.

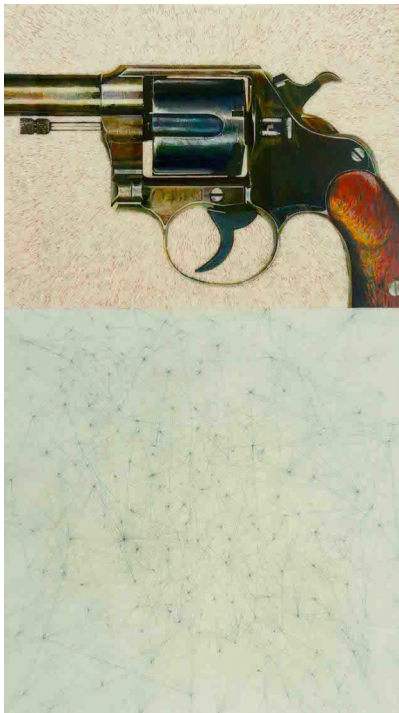
In the same missive from Ms Lim, the gallerist spoke of how male visitors experienced the show:

Male visitors have had mixed interactions with the work. Interestingly, male visitors who happen to be fathers to girls

have related to the struggle between wanting to protect their daughters from a society that feeds off dismantling their womanhood, and the need to let them go and grow, reminding them that they have full agency over their decisions when it comes to their lives and their bodies.

Yet, many male visitors have been dismissive of the work, citing that this topic is not apt for discussion and it is deemed 'taboo' because it is personal to women and should remain hidden from public discussion. Many have even denied the topic being 'taboo', and when venturing from the main point of the work to discussing the social, cultural, and religious codes that strip women of their agency over their bodies, many men continued to deny and note that this is not the case nowadays.

Art Radar spoke with Ivan Lam to learn more about the use of duality in his work and how his work has evolved during his two decades as an artist.



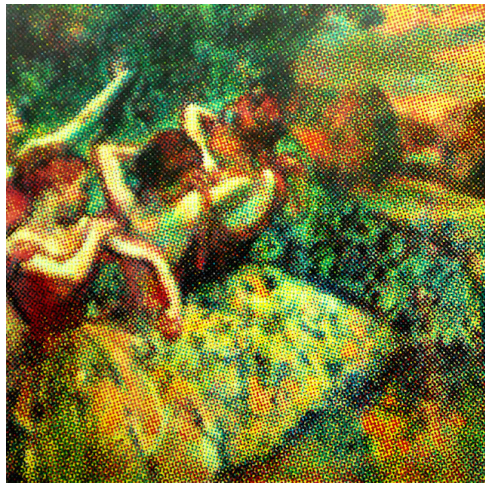
Ivan Lam, 'They Can't Kill Us All', from the "Vanity Project X" series, 2016, synthetic house paint, pencil and resin on canvas, on board, 210 x 120 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery.

In a recent article on the Red Bull website, you are described as being “hungry and loud” but also introspective. Are you able to bring these disparate parts of your personality together in your artwork? How?

There is a constant pull and push in me, a dichotomy between the opposites, and in my work I can be in unison. I strive towards uniting both in one given space.

Is there a tension between what is in style or trendy in modern day Malaysian society and your evolution as an artist? If so, how has this evolution of yourself had an impact on your artwork during the two decades that you have been working as a contemporary artist?

There is always tension, but that doesn't mean fight and war! Tension when applied positively can yield tremendous results and growth. I have been in this scene for a better part of 20 years now. The more I am in it, the more I feel I am connected to a larger world. The boundaries that were once present are slowly but surely crumbling. Be it physically, metaphorically or inherently.



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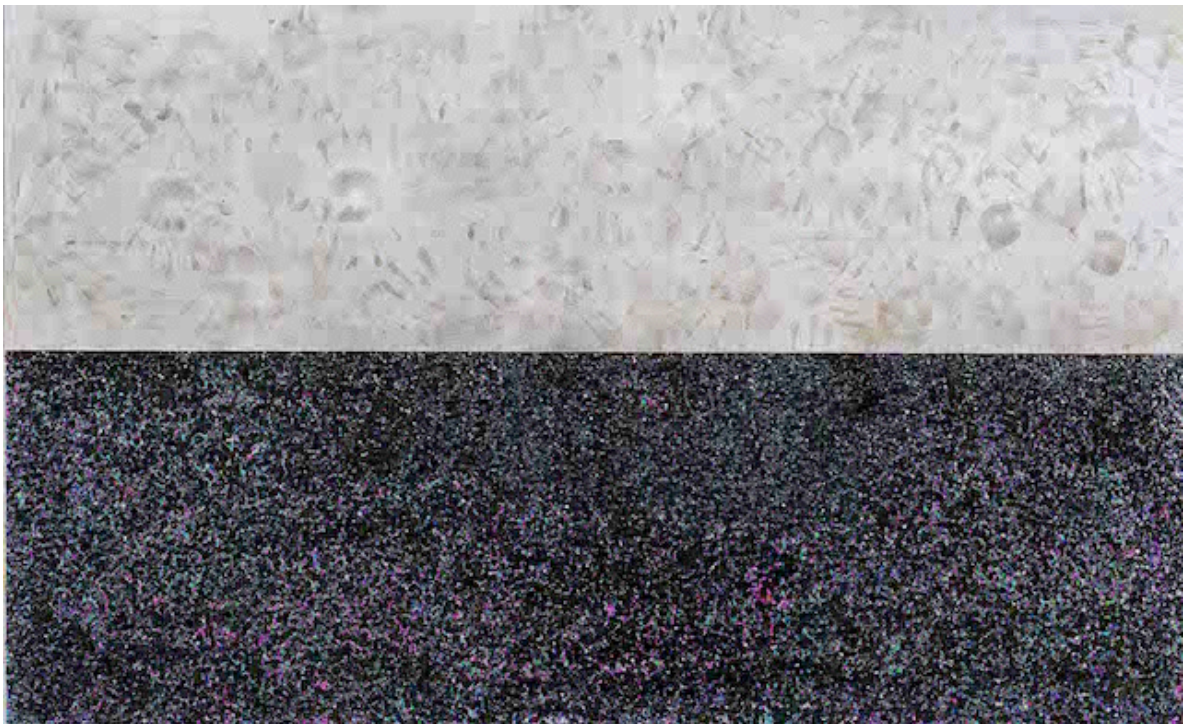
Ivan Lam, 'CMYK Series-Tribute to old masters work -Degas', 2005, silkscreen on canvas, 96.5 x 76 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery.

One of the trademarks of your work is the use of a wide variety of media. Please touch on some of the media that you have used which may be unfamiliar or unusual.

The reason for this is I get bored, the different media provide different stimuli. It is important for me to always learn to be a novice again and again. It's a humbling experience. Honey, safety netting, diapers, insects are some of the unusual materials I have used.

In an article for the *Malaysian Tatler*, you stated that you admired Edgar Degas. Please tell us more about your interest in the French Impressionist. Is there one particular piece of his that resonates with you?

There isn't a particular piece. I do love his overall oeuvre, his sense of negative space and also the way he crops his figures. It's bold, it's compositional, it's Degas!



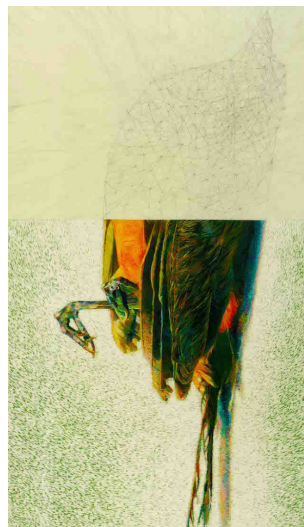
Ivan Lam, 'beLieVe', 2013, sequins, inked handprint and synthetic resin on aluminium panel on board, 110 x 180 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery.

Please tell us more about your commission for the **Louis Vuitton Flagship Store in Kuala Lumpur.**

It was for their flagship store in downtown Kuala Lumpur. It was a long process. Paper work and emails and meetings before even laying a finger on the actual work itself. But it was also educational for me to work with LV. Once you are onboard, you are onboard. It's precise, it's spot on, it's fashion melting with art.

Your work often explores contrasting aspects and a sense of duality. Please tell us more about the "Vanity Project X**" and what you learned about yourself through this body of work.**

I learnt that there is only so much you can push in terms of the boundaries that are set by yourself. It's like inhalation and exhalation. After the tenth and last painting, I can finally exhale. I can finally move on. I can finally look back in order to move forward. It's akin to a huge mansion with many rooms. I want to open as many rooms as possible. VPX is like one of those rooms, I spent a good two years in that room, I left... but now I look at it forlornly.



Ivan Lam, 'Dead Bird', from the "Vanity Project X" series, 2016, synthetic house paint, pencil and resin on canvas, on board, 210 x 120 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery.

I am interested in learning more about your work “You Said You’ll Never Leave” at the 2017 edition of the Karachi Biennale. Can you tell us more about the “hidden footage” found in the video installation?

It was my first biennale and it had three parts. I never intended it, but as the whole process of working with people on the other side of the world, we progressed, we altered paths, but the destination was always the same. The journey somehow was embedded in the destination. Obviously, this only occurred when you reached your destination.

The first part was being there in Karachi and having a workshop with underprivileged kids. The second part was making a physical work for the kids that also served as an artwork for the biennale. The third was the video installation. The last part was the accumulation of all three parts. Those who committed themselves throughout the video were rewarded with hidden footage. Like Easter eggs.



Ivan Lam, 'You Said You’ll Never Leave', 2017, single channel video, 100m:00s (looped). Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery.

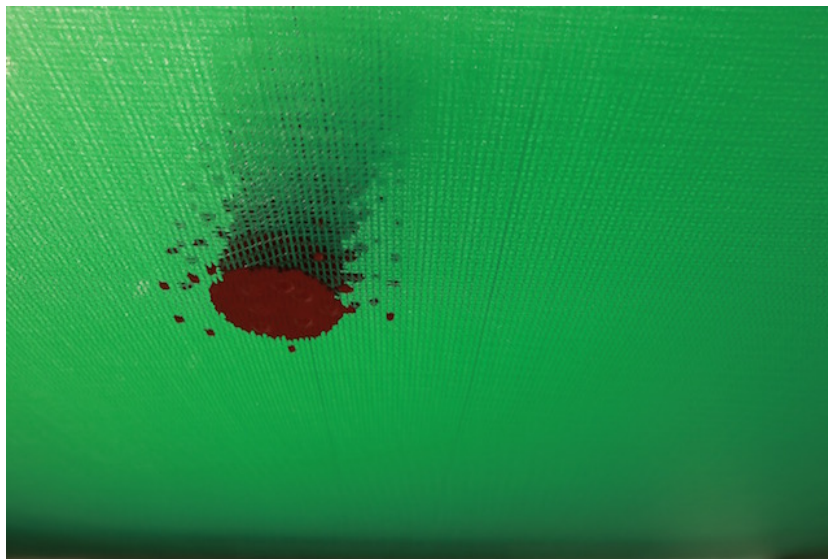
Your work is currently on display at Wei-Ling Contemporary in the solo show called "Hymen". What was the impetus behind "questioning the constructed body politics around female bleeding"?

This started off as an investigation into the female's change of physique and growth. I have two young daughters that will be going through puberty and I didn't want to be left out of this phase of their lives.

Do you think it is important that a male artist explore this particular subject – one that is considered by some to be shameful and taboo? If so, why?

I don't know if it's important for a male artist, but I know it's important for me. We should just drop the stereotypes and see the work for what it is. If I serve you a cake, could anyone tell if it's from a female or male baker?

Taboo is called *taboo* for a reason and for it not to be a taboo, discourse needs to happen and take place. We have advanced so much in the last 100 years. Human civilization has never been more progressive but yet there are still many more polemic and poignant issues that we have to deal with.



Ivan Lam, 'Hymen' (detail), 2018, plastic green netting and synthetic polymer paint, 52 x 52cm. Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery.

Please tell us more about the materials that you employ for this body of work. Why did you choose them (such as the construction netting) and what surprised you most about using them?

When I choose the message, the medium follows the message. When I don't start with paint, I normally don't end up making a painting. So it was a deliberate choice to be subtractive and not additive. The most surprising part of it was how much the material led me throughout the entire process, gently guiding me through and through. It wasn't forceful, it can't be brutal. It is what it is.

I have read that your favourite work is the one that you will be working on next. What is next for you?

More collaborative projects, more surrendering of my ego kind of projects, projects that meaningfully explore the inner-self and the resultant subservient artworks are byproducts of that exploration and not the other way round.

Lisa Pollman