



Passion MAISON

Art gallerist and collector, Lim Wei-Ling, opens up her personal space. By Sunitha Thayaparan. Photographed by Chuan Looi.



Wei-Ling in the lounge where she entertains, works by contemporary artist Zulkifli Yusoff in the background

In the split-

level postmodernist home that gallerist Lim Wei-Ling shares with husband Yohan Rajan, the imagination is quite simply, staggered.

Here, a three-dimensional collage by Choy Chun Wei titled *Architecture of Desire* melds tiny finite pieces of modern simulacra from designer brand names to mixed typology and literally fixates you on the landing that leads past the warm study with neatly-lined bookcases. There, a Zulkifli Yusoff silkscreen montage that depicts photographic vignettes from our young nation's past. Of course, the sociopolitical, mytho-religious artworks of Anurendra Jegadeva as well as Ivan Lam's subtle visual semiotics pepper the sprawling art house.

Though this steel magnolia will never admit it, these last two hold a soft spot in her heart; there is a certain camaraderie born of years of working through the blood, sweat and tears of the art world.

"Did I ever, once, think we'd be celebrating a decade?" she asks, of the 10th-year anniversary of Wei-Ling Gallery. "God no! Well, not in this sense, not how we have evolved as a space." She laughs, reminiscing. "When I started Townhouse Gallery back in 2002, it was meant to be a little space where I could create, do my own thing ... be, I don't know ... be an artist, I guess. But then things started to change, I got enquiries from other artists wanting to show their work, and then in 2005 we virtually inherited the amazing place in Brickfields."

The 'place' being an old rambling townhouse that lumbers up a few stories and houses a smart modern gallery as well as musty antiques on the ground. It whispers of illicit love stories and sweet ghosts as you

enter but make your way up the flight of stairs and a contemporary space of wood, angularity and muted light unfolds.

Running her hands through her long almost waist-length hair, a cool little Pucci dress skimming every curve, Wei-Ling says she started to have this idea. “You know it started pretty small. I thought, hey, a space for contemporary Malaysian artists to show. But not just show, to grow as artists, of course, but also as individuals, as people. Well, it informs the work, doesn’t it? I really was not interested in a commercial gallery where an artist produced the same sale-able work, because what does it say, really? Art has to be about evolution because that’s the human experience, isn’t it? I mean, we are constantly changing, evolving, ageing” – we both laugh – “we aren’t the same, what more the work we produce, or the art, for that matter. For me, it is the only gauge. The one thing that tips me off as to whether a work has integrity: has the art evolved?”

NEW SPACES

This humanistic approach has led her to cultivate a core group of artists – think J. Anurendra, Ivan Lam, and Chin Kong Yee – she works closely with, both locally and abroad. “It’s pretty thrilling,” she admits, “dropping by the studio when a new collection is being birthed. Often there is angst, punctuated with coffee and talk about life, the universe and everything. I look at the whole process and think, what is my job here? My role?” The answer, she says, was once revealed to her by an older artist who said to her, “You just need to be there when it counts.

Artists are like coal miners. They mine the depths of dark,

terrifying spaces where there is no light, no hope. But they are expected, and expect of themselves, to return with gold. They need to know there’s someone on the other side who cares, who’s waiting for them to come home, who gives a damn, basically.”

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Behind Wei-Ling, Ivan Lam’s seminal, *Everything I have ever known, I’m giving back to you*



Duomo Florence, oil on canvas, 170cm x 190cm, 2008, Chin Kong Yee



Architecture of Desire, mixed media and collage on wood, 108cm x 181cm, 2011, Choy Chun Wei



Metropolis II, copper, 107cm x 107cm x 107cm, 2006, Amin Gulgee

“When we started,” says Wei-Ling, “I didn’t expect to be showing overseas, working with artists like Amin Gulgee via ‘18@8, Kuala Lumpur – Karachi’, which saw the Pakistani sculptor exhibiting in our city for the first time and an exchange of Malaysian contemporary art shown in his gallery space, the Amin Gulgee Gallery in Karachi.” But born without the capacity to say no to a great idea, or concept, she just let the gallery keep snowballing in its enterprises. So much so that in 2011 she launched Wei-Ling Contemporary at the city’s chicest urban retail haven The Gardens Mall. “I just felt it was worth doing,” she says, of the idea that

had its beginnings in a charity art auction co-sponsored by The Gardens Mall and Absolut vodka. “It made me realise just how ready the public was for a space like this.

Sometimes you need to take logical evolutionary steps,” she says of the 3,800-square-metre space that houses new exhibitions as well as ones from her original gallery.

No one is more pleased with the addition to the mall than its marketing director Gabrielle Tan, who actively championed the first charity art auction, and then the next one that heralded the launch of Wei-Ling Contemporary.

“The truth is a mall may not be the purist’s choice for a gallery space but times are changing, and art and commerce are becoming serious bed partners,” says Tan. “With luxury brands like Louis Vuitton doing amazing collaborations with artists like Stephen Sprouse, Takashi Murakami, and now Yayoi Kusama, or Prada Fondazione’s serious commitment to the arts with permanent installations, it is clear that commercial art patronage is the way of the future. Personally, I think it is real progress to have forward-thinking Malaysian artists housed within The Gardens Mall. The best part? Wei-Ling has cultivated an international flavour, by opening up to local patrons artists like Ahmad Osnei-Peii and Amin Gulgee, of Indonesia and Pakistan.”

ART OBJECTIVES

It’s a blistering Friday afternoon when the *BAZAAR* team rocks up to Wei-Ling Gallery to do the opening shot with five of her principal artists. We walk in to find some mildly apprehensive individuals.

A question is cast: “Why make art in this touch-screen age?” Like a slow-starting romance, each artist warms to it. The stoical and seemingly taciturn Chin Kong Yee whom Wei-Ling discovered making art in his mother’s kitchen in between graphic design stints to feed his desire to create says he has no choice in the matter, it is not so much what he ‘does’ but who he is. Umibaizurah Mahir talks about art as the highest level of creative thinking. The prolific Ivan Lam who, with the seminal work *Everything I have ever known, I’m giving back to you* destroyed every single silkscreen he had ever made, says: “The answer is in the question itself. As the world advances there is a need to regress. To reach back to what makes us human and to communicate to real human touch, not digital, and smell real, not virtual. To make paintings with fingers and not a swipe on a tablet.” He muses about that epic destruction saying, “Yes, I destroyed every one of them. Left my studio. Went on to build a new one. I guess there are some things that are better left behind.”

Quietly, Choy Chun Wei reveals his reasons for continuing the good fight in this era of voracious, unforgiving consumerism. “I just need to work hard, dig deep, and discover myself – it’s a life-long journey. At the same time, if I’m lucky, my work lets me discharge emotional toxins as I engage with the ordinary to make it all new and unexpected. I suppose that’s why I continue, it’s my own personal brand of therapy.”

Finally, Anurendra weighs in. “I think we make art today because in the age of the impersonal and the mass-produced what we make – when it is good and truthful and meaningful – is authentic. Does it have a role? If it makes you think, if it irritates and bothers you, and when it comes from an aesthetic sensibility, then it has played its role. But in the end, it’s as simple as this. I make art because it is the only thing I am happy being good at.” ■

WEI-LING'S Style Essentials

Brooch, Chanel

Vertebrae necklace, Tsura by Tara Thadani

Dress, Pucci

Candle, Voluspa

Art Lover: A Biography of Peggy Guggenheim by Anton Gill

Birkin tote, Hermès

Childhood piggy bank

Bath oil, Jo Malone

Fringed sandals, Gucci

