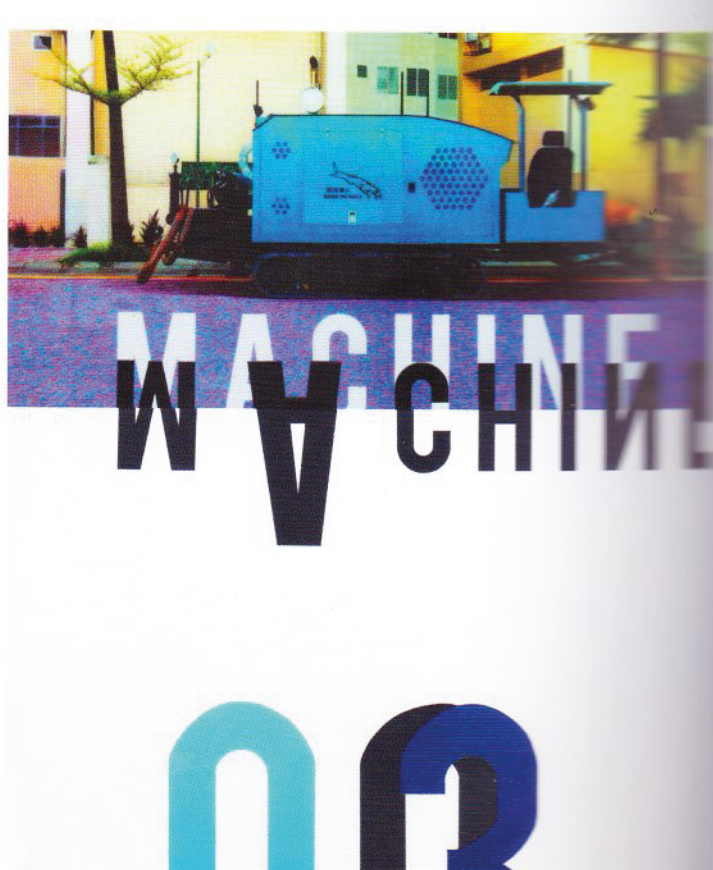


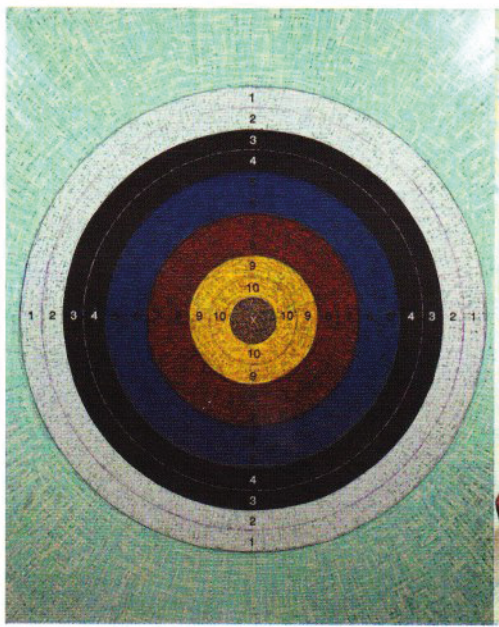
If The World Ends Tomorrow (I Want To Spend It With You)



The Blue Machine

A picture paints a thousand words

IVAN LAM does not believe that art should be elitist; in fact, the artist is happiest when his work 'speaks' to the audience on many different levels. BY HELEN ANN PETERS



You Are Missed Dear

Ivan Lam possesses a wisdom beyond his thirty-something years. Whilst most artists seem to exhibit a rather *laissez faire* approach to life, Lam appears to know exactly what his next move will be. It is not so much that he has mapped out his entire journey in the art world; instead, his unerring adherence to certain principles have helped him achieve stardom as one of Malaysia's stellar contemporary artists. His painting *3 Buses* sold for RM150,000 at a Hong Kong art auction two years ago, and that clearly indicated that the artist was one to look out for.

Lam, however, is still somewhat perplexed that collectors are willing to pay a huge sum for something that he derives untold pleasure in crafting. Lam's works are of the highest quality, and he spends a crazy amount of time on each piece, but there is an air of authenticity that permeates his work, breathing a special something into it and lifting it up above the fray.

"My art is no longer bound by the shackles of consumer culture," says Lam. "I am very fortunate to be at this point in my life...but I never take anything for granted. All I was once concerned about was making a name for myself. Now, I worry more about giving my 150 percent to each painting...my preoccupation is with doing honest, earnest work and not short changing my clients."

While Lam believes that money is an important part of the equation, he feels it should not be the only motivating force. For an artist to be successful, he definitely needs to be driven by passion. To Lam, the creative process is all about the thought behind a piece of work. He shares Sol LeWitt's belief that 'the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea is the machine that makes art.'

Consequently, Lam is not interested in merely painting pretty pictures. He says that his work is not to seek answers but to ask questions. "I never believe that art should be elitist. I want my work to speak on many levels – for instance, if some viewers are happy to appreciate the familiar details present in the Chinese coffee shop portrayed in *The urgency inside looking out*, and leave it at that,

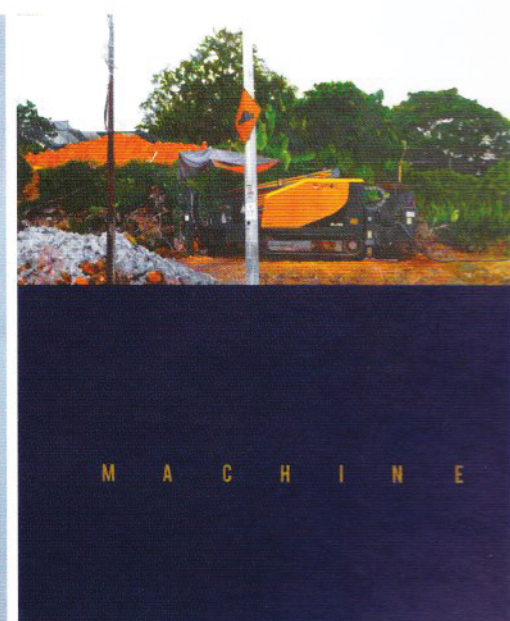
that's fine....If others want to analyse the painting to death, that's fine, too....and if other critics want to argue about the painterly aspects of the work, that's okay too," concludes Lam.

One thing that you will never see Lam engage in is shock tactics. No blood and gore for this artist as he prefers to seduce you, draw you into his web, engage in subterfuge rather than launch a blatant assault on your senses. Lam wants the viewer to use his intellect and interact with the painting. "If I told you what you were supposed to see, then you would not exercise that thinking muscle...my painting should have a life of its own...it must be aesthetically pleasing, so that it will 'hook' the viewer and allow for a dialogue (between the work and the viewer)," says Lam.

A case in point is *There is no Certainty Within the Wheel of Life*. The ferris wheel takes centre stage, but rather than it symbolising fun and gaiety at a funfair, it is the stark silhouette of the wheel that arrests our attention. Where are the children sucking on cotton candy, the lovers out for a day of fun? Indeed, their very absence adds to the bleak nature of the fairground and is suggestive of the utter helplessness that the artist felt during the Israeli occupation of Gaza.

"The work I do reflects my surroundings and the state of mind that I am in," states Lam. Indeed, he fully seconds the notion put forth by art writer David Loy who says that the artist's job is to be a witness to his time in history. Whilst other artists may document the present as a means of arresting the passage of time, Lam's tractors and waiting rooms stand as an indictment of the sorry situation in which the human race now finds itself. The machine that walks this earth assumes mythical proportions as it becomes the protagonist of

ARTIST



The Yellow Machine



Surgery (Sorry Sir But We Did Our Best)

the picture, displacing man and relegating him to the sidelines, waiting for a better future, hoping for a better life portrays a passenger terminal at an airport. There are many people in the room, but everyone is silent, preoccupied with his own thoughts and dreams. Is this the alienation that Lam so often portrays in his contemporary scenes – the human condition of being alone, even when seemingly surrounded by people?



Flower (You Never Forget My Birthday)

In his body of work *After all these years...*, Lam's photo-realist style of juxtaposing silhouettes and blocks of colour comes to the fore. The nine paintings are akin to scenes in a movie, connected by a storyline, while remaining rich and robust in their own way. Part autobiographical, it details the fate of two lovers who court, enjoy beautiful moments together, conceive a child, only to have the mother and child die in childbirth. We notice the stark contrast between the vivid visual imagery the artist employs and the tinge of sadness that always seems to hover at the periphery. The titles of these works are definite clues to the true subject matter; for instance, in *Flower (You Never Forget My Birthdays)*, we are met by a profusion of blooms in gay abandon but it is the statement in parentheses that clearly moves the narrative forward. Similarly, in *Parenthesis (Sorry Sir But We Did Our Best)*, the finality of the statement tends to shock the otherwise colourful operating theatre.

For Lam, being an artist is no different than being an office worker. "I am a punch in, punch out kind of guy. I have a schedule and try to work within this structure. I have two chapters aged 6 and 4, so I strive to maintain a balance between my art and my family," he says. When asked if he finds this compartmentalisation difficult, Lam says, "An artist should always be professional. I do not believe that he should be treated like a demigod, or someone who walks on water....he should be someone who works hard and delivers, someone who strives for perfection and takes his work seriously."

Lam is also of the opinion that artists should take a more holistic view towards their chosen role. "I believe it is not enough just to paint in silo; an artist needs to be out there, getting involved in the publicity machine, working closely with the gallery and communicating to viewers what you are all about. You are, after all, your best advertisement."

When asked if he had a favourite painting, Lam answers, "My favourite painting is the one I am going to paint....if I felt I had done my best painting, then everything would be an anti-climax from here on. When something is not fun anymore, I will move on to something else."

Lam has always exhibited the courage to break barriers and take the road less travelled. His desire to leave hearth and home to study in Maine, USA was indeed symptomatic of wanting to do things his way. "I was the youngest and the only boy...my mum was an accountant, my dad an engineer and my sisters lawyers. I needed desperately to carve out my own path," asserts the award-winning artist who has won top prizes at the Philip Morris Art Awards, amongst others. After obtaining his BA in Fine Arts from Maine College of Art, he went on to do his MA in International Contemporary Art and Design Practice at the University of East London. In between, he taught for 12 years at the Limkokwing University College of Technology.

"The choices you make early on in life set the framework for how you live your entire life," he says. For someone who was thrown into the deep end in America – juggling the weather, tuition fees, odd jobs, loneliness – it is certainly a testament to his strength of character and resolve that he has weathered the storm so that we can enjoy his inimitable take on life.

HELEN ANN PETERS ENJOYS WRITING ON ART, TRAVEL, FOOD AND GOLF.

IVAN LAM'S WORKS CAN BE VIEWED AT WEI-LING GALLERY, 8 JALAN SCOTT, BRICKFIELDS, KUALA LUMPUR: WWW.WEILING-GALLERY.COM