

Creating artistic space

An artist by training and now gallery owner, Lim Wei-Ling spends an afternoon talking about what she loves best, art.

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It wasn't her dream to start a gallery, but now it seems like that was what she was meant to do.

"When I look back at my life and how it has been shaped, everything has just sort of led up to this," said Lim Wei-Ling, of the reputable Wei-Ling Gallery in Brickfields and the Wei-Ling Contemporary in the Gardens shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur.

She didn't think she was born to be an artist either, but that was what she started out doing.

"I went to art school and studied jewellery design. Art and creativity have always been in my blood. It's about wanting to express myself and saying something through what I create.

"In any artistic person, whether an artist, musician or actor, you will find that the greatest of these creative sorts are the people who can make their art an extension of themselves.

"Art should be all encompassing in one's life, if you choose that path," says Lim.

Providing a platform

Lim has 12 local artists under her stable – Anurendra Jegadeva, Azril Ismail, Chen Wei Meng, Chin Kong Yee, Choy Chun Wei, Hamidi Hadi, Ivan Lam, Juhari Said, Kim Peow Ng, Yau Bee Ling, Zulkifli Yusof and Noor Azizah Rahman Paiman. She also represents Michal Macku from the Czech Republic and Amin Gulgee from Pakistan.

"I know my artists inside out. I believe in them. I make studio visits every month, and each time we chat for hours about their artwork. These are artists who are true to their art," says Lim.

She is also working to take her artists to a global and international audience. She has participated in shows in Pakistan, China and Singapore. She wants to make people aware what there are great artists in Malaysia.

On the local front, she opened Wei-Ling Contemporary in Gardens in April this year, to put good art in people's consciousness. To make art as accessible as possible, the gallery puts up are short write-ups to accompany each painting, so viewers can glean something from the viewing.

There are also catalogues about past and current exhibitions.

Lim hopes to create excitement and involvement with art through various projects.

Her gallery recently held an exhibition called *The Garden of Hidden Desires*, where emerging artists collaborated with fashion designers.

"Fashion and art was one way of reaching out. Everyone can relate to fashion. We are saying, look at this dress

and see how it is inspired by that painting. We always want to encourage people to look at things differently.

Retaining artistic integrity

Lim admits Malaysia is not an easy place to live and survive as an artist. She knows there are artists who produce art commercially, to make a living.

"They're just doing it to cater to the market, or to be what the collectors want, as opposed to really expressing themselves. I'm always struggling with that because I feel that that is no longer art."

Lim believes strongly that artists need to retain their purity and integrity. She doesn't deny that the journey is a long and arduous one. She has seen good artists giving in to commercialism, even though they used to make statements through their pure and provocative work.

"I have stepped in and asked what was going on. People tell me I am mad!" she quips. "They say, just let them be. People buy their work! But when I see an artist selling out, it goes against every grain of what I believe in. I want to promote artists who are saying something, making a contribution.

"I go to artists' studios to be excited about their work and to see that they are also excited about it. "Every artist can tell you that to put their work out there is a struggle. I went through that when I was painting. You need to sit comfortably with your body of work. It's never easy."

Documenting works

As a gallery owner, Lim meticulously documents the artists under her stable. She keeps thick folders of each artist's shows, works and media clippings. Sit her down any day and she can take you through every detail of the artist's progress and evolution, spouting details she knows like the back of her hand.

"Cataloguing and archiving are paramount. A reputable gallery should document an artist's body of work religiously. From the time our artists work with us, we catalogue everything," she says.

She is also one of the few galleries that publish extensively. "We publish catalogues and publications every month. Exhibitions are for a period of time, so when they're over, the catalogues are our archives," she says.

"It is important for the artists, the gallery and the collectors as it's about provenance. You need to know when and where you got the paintings from. In Malaysia, there is a serious lack of publications about local art. On our part, we're doing what we can to document what has happened over the years through our gallery and our shows," she says.

On whether she would take up painting again, Lim is hesitant. "In the two years that I was painting, it was the most peaceful time in my life. I had no business to run and was not answerable to anyone. I got a lot of fulfilment from that.

"Now, at this point, it's hard for me to detach from everything to go and paint. I've made a commitment to my artists and my gallery. My name is on it!

The start of a gallery

AFTER graduating from art school, Lim worked for nine months at a jewellery company, but was soon disillusioned.

"I was told to copy designs that were popular, and make jewellery from aluminium and rubber!" she said in mock horror. She decided she needed to look elsewhere.

In 1993, she was introduced to stockbroking and thought it would be a good reality check.

"It was like the school of life! You soon learn that everything is interconnected. Something someone says on the other side of the world will impact the market in Malaysia. An earthquake could derail the entire index, so can a hostile takeover.

"You also learn that people are not what they seem, that when money comes into the picture, people change," she says.

For six years, she immersed herself in that world.

In 2000, she decided to take a break. She picked up the paintbrush and started to reconnect with her creative side.

For two years, she did nothing but paint. She produced around 30 paintings in that time – it was her Botanica series, a body of work showcasing her love for flowers.

Around the time she started painting, a space came up for rent. It was to become her first gallery, but she didn't know it then. She actually rented the space as her studio. So when her collection was completed, her husband told her to hold a show.

Though nervous, she went ahead with it, and in 2002, held her first exhibition at her studio, Townhouse. She sold her first painting for RM2,000, and subsequently sold her entire collection.



Art enthusiasts milling around Wei-Ling Gallery and appreciating the artworks on show.

Artists started approaching her to show their work at Townhouse, and so she tentatively stepped onto the art scene.

"It was as if it was meant to be," says Lim. "I started representing artists. In 2004, my father's (architect Jimmy Lim) office in

Brickfields burnt down. We were devastated. We started to rebuild. My father has always been very supportive, so he rebuilt it into a gallery for me. We moved from Townhouse to Jalan Scott in 2005."

She renamed it Wei-Ling Gallery. "It was a struggle for me (to do that) at the time. I mean, how does one name a gallery after

oneself?

But it really made sense, because in order to show commitment to my artists and to stand up for what the gallery believes in, it is only natural that I lend my name to it. It shows that I believe in who I represent, and that's why I believe people should collect them!"

Appreciating art

IN THE six years since she has opened her gallery, Lim Wei Ling has seen the value of Malaysian artwork going up between 300% and 600%.

"There's growing interest. I liken it to the share market. We're at the pre-IPO stage. "There's lots of interest coming in and we're definitely emerging. Once it hits IPO, everyone will jump on the bandwagon. Interestingly, a lot of our collectors are Malaysians who've left Malaysia and now live overseas. They look at the work of Malaysia artists and think wow!"

"When my artists started six to eight years ago, they sold for between RM4,000 to RM8,000. Now we're looking at RM20,000 to 100,000. These artists are not prolific – they don't produce 300 paintings a year. They do maybe six in a year, and eight to 12 in two years. These are masterpieces. This is why great works of art can sell for hundreds of millions of dollars," she says.

Most people who are only beginning to collect art would probably be looking at the price range of between RM1000 and RM10,000. Lim's advice would be to look at emerging and young artists, and look for works that appeal to the buyer.

If you are buying art that costs more than that, always ask for an artist's CV.

"Look at what they've done over a period of 10 years. See whether they've evolved. An artist's work should evolve organically with his life. If you see repetitions, that's a warning sign. Is he just producing work to sell?"

Lim says that's because the value of an artwork would not appreciate

if the artist's portfolio remains the same year after year.

Apart from checking out an artist's archive of work, she also suggests looking at an artist's participation in shows. Artists usually show between eight to 25 pieces of work. If it's any more than that you need to ask if the artist is putting up his very best work, or everything that he did.

Lim says that one of the indications that an artist is producing work commercially is that they take commissions.

"If they can take a commission like that, there's really no value in what you have," she says.

With her artists, all of whom have been working for 10 years or more, she never asks about commissions.

"The only exception to the rule is if a corporate or a big museum wanted something of a particular size or dimension. If the commissioned work is good for the artist, for example, it lends prestige and credibility to his body of work, then we'll do it.

"If they want him to reproduce what he has done before, no! If someone wants to match the colour of the painting to his carpets, no!" says Lim.

The rule even applies to young artists. "Collectors should respect the artists enough to follow the artist's work. If you like the artist, buy something that he's already made. If you don't like it, don't buy it. When you start commissioning, it becomes commercial, and that kills the creative spirit," says Lim.

She collects the works of the artists she represents. "Any dealer that does not collect the artists they represent is not putting their money where their mouth is."



Gallery owner Lim Wei-Ling believes that artists need to retain their integrity and not get caught up in commercialism.