



ART

Transcending Sight

Ivan Lam says to 'Open Your Heart to See, Close Your Eyes to Read' in his promotional poster for his latest exhibition for the visually impaired
By Koyyi Chin

The text that you are currently reading is in black, a common colour for printer's ink. Fresh off the press, there's a faint whiff of chemicals, and the paper used to print this article has a subtle sheen on its surface and feels smooth to the touch. It has minimal texture save for the thin edges of the pages.

However, these descriptive words and the images that decorate these pages will mean nothing to you if the language of sensation and touch is how you communicate.

The clichéd adage is as follows: "What is out of sight is out of mind." But for the visually impaired, whether they live in a world devoid of colour or experience their surroundings through conjured images of taste, smell, touch, and hearing, this phrase is their literal reality.

Given that the arts is a highly visual experience, Ivan Lam posed a thought-provoking question that served as a catalyst for his latest exhibition. Titled *blind side*, he asked, "How do the blind perceive art?"

Lam's artistic endeavours have always delved into introspective explorations of the human condition, drawing inspiration from both personal experiences and the lives of those around him. His multisensory approach to art encourages viewers to interact with his work. An example of this was *Catharsis*, showcased in March 2022. Lam used electric switches that lit up five panels of anatomical paintings, each portraying a part of his body afflicted with debilitating pain. Colourful

circular resin moulds were strategically placed to direct visitors' attention to these specific problem areas. His latest work with the Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB) continues in the same vein.

As a meticulous artist who treats his diverse subject matters with considerable brevity, Lam sought to deepen his understanding of the lives of the blind, acknowledging his own limited perspective as a sighted individual. During his visit to the MAB headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, Lam's perspective quickly shifted when his guide, who led him around the building, revealed that she herself was visually impaired.

"That was the first of many humbling experiences I've had throughout this collaboration," Lam says. "Despite not needing sight, she was able to do everything—and I didn't even know that our phones had this feature where you can actually use an automated voice to read aloud your messages for you. And that's just a small part of it. As I was touring the place, it hit me then that we live in a world that is inequitable and inaccessible to many, including the disabled.

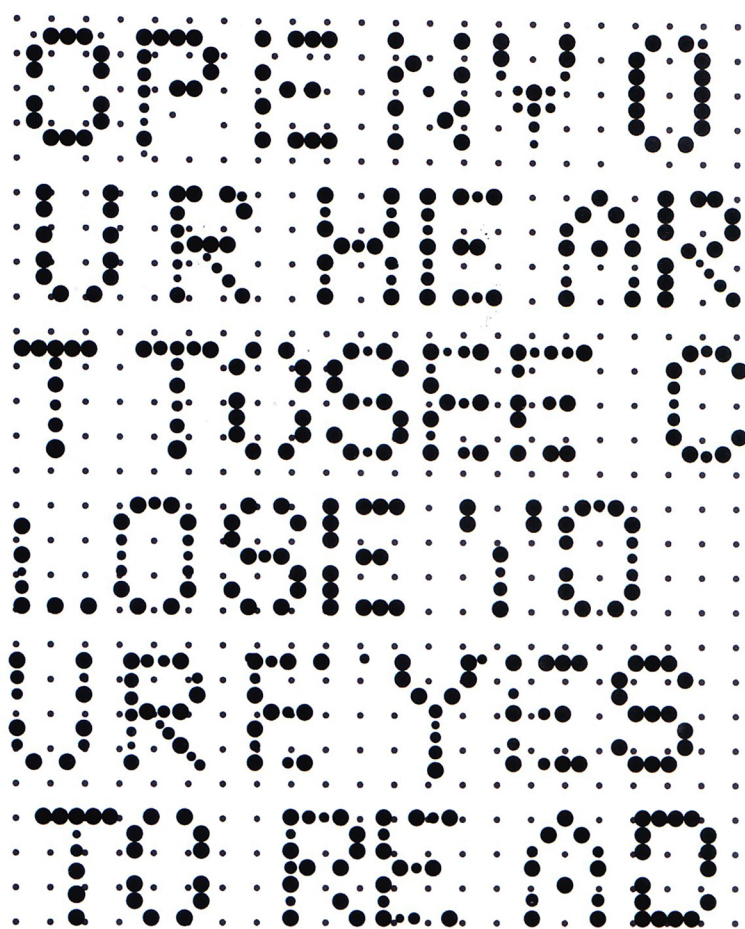
"People with disabilities work ten times harder than those without. For example, if you wanted to transcribe a book into braille, it's laborious, and the books end up as thick as old tomes because of how different the language is. It just made me realise how we've taken our sight for granted, and that we created a world that somehow [failed to understand] that we are all very different."

From top: The exhibition's promotional poster designed by Ivan Lam contains textural stickers on the letters for the blind to read; *Austere Yellow* and *Compass Green* are two of six paintings with braille inscriptions meant for the blind. **Opposite page:** Ivan Lam

And yet, despite being confronted with a world that never accounted for them, the cheerful optimism of the blind made Lam rethink how he lived and his own perspective on life itself. "I wondered, you know, about how they do it," says Lam. "Because if I were disabled, I might have taken another route. [The blind] overcome adversity because they had no choice but to do so, and even then, their energy and enthusiasm are so infectious that it surprises me."

The visit, as well as the conversations he had with the blind have clearly made an indelible mark on him, and it shows in his paintings for *blind side*. The artwork that lined the walls of Wei-Ling Gallery were large, with every square inch of the canvas covered with only one shade of colour: red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple. Neatly arranged on top of these paintings were small, transparent convex dots. Lam explains that they were braille inscriptions that detailed the colour of the canvas, and they were never intended for the sighted to read.

The following is a translation of one of the braille inscriptions dotted on Lam's paintings, though it bears



mentioning that the translation isn't readily available as it is an experiential detail that Lam included for sighted visitors: "Yellow colour is bright, happy, and warm. It's like sunshine in perfect weather, the sound of laughter from a baby, and the curved smile of a banana. Yellow tastes sweet and bright like Lemon Chiffon, and shades like *Austere Yellow* feels like a series of good things on a happy day."

"The point of this exhibition wasn't to recreate the experience of being blind, but to allow the blind feel seen and acknowledged," says Lam. "The average person would probably look at braille and not make heads or tails of what's being written. But for the blind, these 'dots' are a textural language that allows them to visualise a whole new world in their mind's eye, be it sounds, colours, smells, and more. I created this exhibition in collaboration with MAB, so without them, I wouldn't have been able to do it."

To illustrate how braille can be used in a creative context, Lam and MAB co-hosted a poster design competition for the blind. The resulting artworks can be presently viewed at Wei-Ling Gallery.

When asked about future projects, Lam teased that he wasn't at all done exploring this newfound method. However, he reveals that the main challenge lies in the collaborative aspect of his current work. "Previously, it's always been just [myself] and the studio, creating work that prompts internal and external discourse. But when you invite others in the creative process, it requires a kind of surrender that takes getting used to, and I find myself welcoming perspectives that are different from my own."

