

Ivan Lam: The Art of Polarities – Chaos, Control, and the In-Between

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Sartre once said, *“It is not the will that gives value to the possibility. Valuation depends on me, that’s true, but not on my will. It depends on my project, that is to say, on how I perceive the world, how I experience it”* (Sartre, as cited in Malinge, 2021). I believe that, in essence, all artists produce works based on this ideology, whether knowingly or unknowingly; especially Ivan Lam. It was Sartre’s belief that value arises from an individual’s project; not from will alone and this parallels Ivan’s approach to art. His work is not just about creating for the sake of creation but about engaging with the world in a way that reflects his perceptions, experiences, and artistic philosophy. Like Sartre, Ivan understands that meaning is not given — it is made.

Ivan Lam Wai Hoe, a third-generation Chinese-Malaysian contemporary artist in Malaysia began 2025 with a show that embodies what it truly means to be human. To many who know him, be it personally or by reputation, see him as an established artist who has overcome the initial hardships of becoming an artist. The notion that art must be second nature to him now; that creation is as natural as breathing. He reveals that the truth is far from the preconceived notions others have of him. A life littered with moments of doubts, uncertainty, introspection, and impulsiveness. *“In 30 years of making art, I had never experienced a mental block – until now. It was the first time I felt completely uncertain about what to do. It was a bit scary,”* says Ivan during his interview with a journalist from The Star (Johan, 2025, para. 10). Laying it bare in this exhibition, he faced his insecurities and the chaos it brings by documenting the ebbs and flows of his creative journey. Given that he feels compelled to constantly create works, Ivan has mentioned that the future is a concept as there is no certainty in existence — tomorrow isn’t guaranteed — as such, he makes the most of each passing hour. Having barely scratched the surface of the inner workings of his mind, it can be said that he is an existentialist. Ivan’s approach to life is akin to Sartre’s lecture, *‘Existentialism is Humanism’*, to which he states, *“Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world — and defines himself afterwards”* (Sartre, as cited in Malinge, 2021).

In his quest for clarity, he documented his struggles, confronting himself in order to navigate his way out of his slump. He showcased works that were quote unquote unrefined and unfinished; presenting audiences with works that would normally never have seen the light of day. These moments of uncertainties are confined within the bluish-grey flooring and white walls of Wei-Ling Contemporary, where Ivan’s stencils and spray-painted works consisting of vibrant hues of red, orange, turquoise, and yellow are a sharp contrast to the drab surroundings. Rock music fills the space, reinforcing the idea that these pieces exist as a distinct entity from his later works in the main gallery, further cementing his exhibition title, *‘The Dichotomy of Opposites’*. Here, scattered

purposefully around are his small works spray-painted in all capital letters with the words “HESITANCE”, “CACOPHONY”, “QUESTIONS”, “AMBIUGOUS” (ambiguous), and “DOUBTFULL” (doubtful). The intentional misspelling of certain words isn’t noticeable at first till you take the time to read and ruminate. These “mistakes” are there for a reason. It drives the point home that during the entire artmaking process before the final works are exhibited, that journey is filled with trials and errors. Mistakes make us human, as does curiosity, which leads to experimentation. These small pieces are coated in resin, sealing the moments as if to memorialise them forever — a reminder of the uphill battle before reaching the peak. If these words stenciled onto plywood were the visual manifestation of his inner turmoil of being in a rut, then the repetitive nature of *‘Revisions’* and *‘Indecisions’* can be seen as meditative. In his work *‘Revisions’*, the seemingly simple yellow underpainting with dark blue letters is more than what meets the eye. Integrated within the dark blue letters are black ones that subtly spell out his name; so subtle that, without closer inspection, it simply appears as a mantra. The coherency of the sentence in Ivan’s *‘Indecisions’* slowly ceases to exist as letters are layered relentlessly, one over the other, until they merge into an impenetrable density of strokes and curves. The original form dissolves, swallowed by the accumulation, transforming language into texture. As each letter is added, the negative space disappears, leaving behind an intricate mass where meaning is buried beneath sheer repetition; leaving only a fragment of the sentence legible. Such is the nature of Ivan’s aimless drifting, lost in a fog of stagnation before gradually finding his way out of it.

The transition from being lost to gaining some sense of direction is his work, *‘The dichotomy of the opposites’* (an archival print diptych), where it is a liminal space, serving as a bridge between the two contrasting sets of works. It carries elements from both styles, creating a transition that softens their stark differences while maintaining its own distinct presence. As if playing a game ‘Spot the Difference’, the most noticeable difference in his archival prints is the colour of the word ‘opposites’. Upon closer inspection, the resolution of the images is different as well, with the left side being more pixelated compared to the right. Control is another key aspect evident in the juxtaposition of this diptych piece. His deliberate placement of two seemingly identical yet slightly different prints side by side highlights the shift from the unpredictability of spray paint — a medium that is challenging to control — to a more refined, controlled outcome with his use of colour pencils and markers. This contrast raises a deeper question: how much control does one truly have in life? Just as an artist navigates between chaos and precision, so too does one grapple with the balance between fate and agency in their own existence.

Crossing over from Wei-Ling Contemporary to Wei-Ling Gallery, the atmosphere feels worlds apart. Soft lo-fi music plays, creating a more refined and formal ambiance that is closer to that of a traditional art gallery. After working through his slump through relentless production, Ivan emerged with a clearer vision, resulting in *‘Catto’*, *‘Hanako’*, and *‘990’*. These three works displayed

in the main gallery space serves as a testament to Ivan's prowess in pushing the boundaries of materiality through his conscious layering of each stroke to create depth and richness. All created solely with colour markers and colour pencils, they appear softer, almost comforting, with their slightly muted tones resembling colours we see in real life. The familiarity of the scenes in his works makes it easy for people to relate and connect with them. 'Catto' shows a quiet, cozy moment in a cat café that he frequents with his daughters. With warm orbs of light, a lone cat lounging on the table, and the absence of human figures, the scene exudes a sense of peace and intimacy. He captured this peacefulness and warmth with his use of warm tones of yellow, orange, and greens. And behind the 'Catto' piece, there's a crude drawing of a fish. When asked about it, Ivan simply said, "*It's to feed the cat when it's hungry*". A cute little sentiment that reveals Ivan's gentle nature behind his stern exterior. Meanwhile, facing 'Catto' is 'Hanako', which at first glance looked like a tuft of grass but is actually a slice of matcha cake — a treat Ivan enjoys after coffee, a small ritual he indulges in. And these brief moments of respite bring him joy before he heads back to the backbreaking process of painting each stroke; both literally and metaphorically, as he sits on the floor, bent over his canvas. '990' is a piece that is dear to his heart, depicting a pair of weathered yet well-preserved New Balance shoes that Ivan has worn for years. Ivan didn't grow up with much. As a kid, he couldn't afford markers or coloured pencils, so he went without them. Now, he's making up for lost time — healing his inner child by finally using the materials he once longed for. By using them, perhaps he's reminiscing and enjoying the little things.

Front and centre in all three pieces are the artwork details that would typically be found on a label next to the work. Ivan chose to include them directly in his go-to Futura font because he was often asked about the specifics of his work and would have to refer back to the label. To avoid the hassle, he incorporated them into the artwork itself, ensuring that everyone viewing the piece would have the information at hand. Not to mention, artists are often advised against placing their signatures on the front of their work, believing that it would 'distract' or take attention away from the work itself. Although Ivan's signature remains on the side of his canvases, he incorporated the artwork details, including his name and birth year, into his work in an act of reclaiming autonomy over it. The attention to detail that he puts into all three pieces is what makes them such a joy to behold that you can spend hours poring over the works, discovering new details with each passing minute.

Diving deeper, beyond the surface level beauty of these three pieces resides the uncertainty and rawness of his psyche, woven into layers of meaning that encourage reflection and discourse. Earlier in the year, Ivan participated in S.E.A Focus 2025, which had the theme '*Disconnected Contemporaries*', debuting two new pieces, '*Lament of the Fallen: A Crimson Ballet on the Battlefield of Bodies*' and '*Emerald requiem: Murmurs of Lost Tears, Veiled in the Conflict's Silence*'. Though complete opposites, these twin pieces exist in perfect harmony, with their grand titles forming a single poem and the diptych itself split between the striking contrast of Crimson and Emerald

(Chodzko, 2024). Why mention these works? Well, these two are subconsciously tied to his solo exhibition pieces, serving as a kind of precursor and working in tandem with them. Ivan (as cited in Chodzko, 2024) stated, “*It was my way of processing what is happening in the world today. What does war mean to me? I’ve been bombarded with news and images of warfare to the point of becoming densitised. And yet it is difficult to walk away from it. So, I decided to confront the horror head on, only to meet the same fate in my own work. The more time I spend making it, the less its meaning had impact on me. So, maybe subconsciously I am trying to dumb and numb myself to the horrors of war?*”. The contrast between discussions of war and genocide and the privilege of experiencing peace is striking. This shift highlights the stark dichotomies that exist between different parts of the world — where some endure chaos and devastation, others enjoy stability and serenity. The juxtaposition is further emphasised within the exhibition itself, as the disorientation and turmoil depicted in certain works stand in sharp contrast to the calm, comforting atmosphere of the works in the main gallery space. Is this perchance a commentary on the complacency of the rest of the world that is not embroiled in conflict? The apathy of the bourgeoisie. It also raises the question: Are those of us who aren’t actively engaged in global and sociopolitical issues justified in feeling comfortable while others are suffering? Visiting cat cafés, enjoying cake, owning a pair of well-crafted shoes — these are things that are considered luxuries for some but everyday comfort for others. Though Ivan is now able to occasionally enjoy these simple pleasures, he has also experienced the lack of them firsthand, making him deeply aware of their value. Through this ongoing dichotomy of opposites, Ivan’s work lives in the push and pull of opposites — chaos and calm, excess and restraint, privilege and struggle. Instead of giving us answers, he invites us to sit with these contradictions, to see how they shape our lives, and to find meaning in the in-between.

References

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