

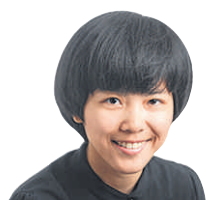
life



Printers and papermakers at STPI, which was set up in 2002 by American master printer Kenneth Tyler. PHOTO: TIFFANY GOH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Artists in their own right

Singapore's pioneering art printers and papermakers have pushed boundaries to create new possibilities in art



Huang Lijie
Arts Correspondent

When one speaks of pioneers in Singapore's visual arts scene, the names of artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng and Georgette Chen invariably come up and their emergence on the scene is usually traced to the early to mid-20th century.

The start of this millennium, however, has seen the rise of a

group of pioneers in Singapore's fine art scene – printers and papermakers who collaborate with artists.

Printmaking in fine art is a process where artists collaborate with printers to create original works of art.

Singapore's fine art printers and papermakers have restlessly pushed the boundaries of their fields to create new possibilities in art and their efforts have attracted the attention of the art world.

This development is inextricably linked to the setting up of the Singapore Tyler Print Institute in 2002 by American master printer Kenneth Tyler. Widely regarded as one of the most innovative printers of the 20th century, he is closely

associated with the resurgence of print as an art in the United States.

While artists in Singapore have been practising printmaking since the 1900s, there were, for a long time, no fine art printers and papermakers to assist them in this medium, which is commonly done on paper.

Cultural Medallion recipient and artist Chng Seok Tin, 70, who specialises in printmaking and sculpture, says: "There wasn't a great demand for prints, so we would print our works ourselves."

The opening of the print institute in a restored 19th-century warehouse in Robertson Quay in 2002, however, birthed Singapore's first generation of fine art printers and papermakers.

The \$16-million institute was established with the support of the then Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, National Heritage Board, Singapore Tourism Board and Singapore Totalisator Board. Its development at the turn of the century came as the Govern-

ment had its sights set on building Singapore into a Renaissance City.

To raise a team of Singapore printers and papermakers, an open call for apprentices was held and a handful of applicants – mostly students from art schools – were picked to train with Tyler in New York before he relocated his print studio here.

Of the six Singapore printers and papermakers who were with the institute when it opened, only one, papermaker Gordon Koh (see story on Page D3), remains at the centre, now known as STPI. It is part of the visual arts cluster under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, which includes the National Gallery Singapore and the Singapore Art Museum.

Other Singaporeans in the founding workshop team have left the profession, except for Lina Adam, who is a print technician with Lasalle College of the Arts (see story on Page D2).

On the small circle of Singapore printers and papermakers, STPI's

chief printer and project leader Eitaro Ogawa, 42, says not everyone with the requisite skills has the mindset needed to become one. He is from Osaka, Japan, and a Singapore permanent resident who has been with STPI since the start.

He says: "The skills you have are used to establish someone else's work – it requires knowing and serving others, but with a sense of ownership of the work. You become an opportunity-maker for the artist."

STPI's printers and papermakers work with leading international and Singapore artists, who do not necessarily specialise in printmaking, to experiment with printmaking possibilities in all types of visual art. Artists are invited to collaborate with STPI through its artist residency programme and past participants include Singapore sculptor Han Sai Por and well-known Japanese video artist Tabaimo.

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What is a print?

In fine art, a print is generally defined as a work of art where an image is transferred from one surface to another by making an impression. The surface of the image varies depending on the printmaking technique used.

What are the main printmaking techniques?

An intaglio print is produced by incising an image on a printing plate, typically made of metal, and allowing ink to pass through the recessed areas. The plate can be incised using different methods such as engraving and etching, which uses acid.

A relief print produces an image from a raised surface created by carving a plate made of wood or linoleum.

A lithograph is made by drawing on a smooth stone surface with a greasy crayon or liquid before layers of chemicals, solvent, water and oil-based ink are applied consecutively. The ink clings to the greasy marks, but not to the damp parts, allowing the image to be transferred.

A screen print is a stencilled image produced by passing ink through a screen mesh.

What is an edition of print?

It is possible to produce multiple impressions of a print work. The edition is the total number of impressions made of a work; each impression is considered an original work.

With limited-edition prints, only the edition stated by the artist is printed.

'We never say no'

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Another reason for the relatively small pool of Singapore printers and papermakers, says printmaking artist April Ng, is the limited demand for fine art prints. This makes it difficult for the field here to support more talent.

Ms Ng, 53, a part-time lecturer at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, says: "There has been greater appreciation for printmaking here since STPI opened, but people still ask me why I do print and not art in other mediums."

The development of printers and papermakers in Singapore, which has centred on STPI, has nonetheless seen growth.

Its chairman Ong Yew Huat, 60, says its team of senior printers and papermakers, who learnt their skills from foreign master printers and papermakers who helped set up STPI, "are on their way to becoming masters in their own right and have started to impart their knowledge to a second generation".

Almost all of the 13 printers and papermakers at STPI are Singaporeans and permanent residents and they include papermakers Edmund Chan, 27, and Nehru Ganesh, 29, who joined in the last two years.

The reputation of STPI's team has been on the rise. The works they make with artists have been regularly featured at major international art fairs, including Art Basel, and are collected by renowned museums such as New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo.

Print- and papermaking workshops overseas, such as in the US, have also been looking to STPI and adopting its approach of producing works that experiment boldly with print- and papermaking techniques.

STPI's senior printer-at-large Oh Thiam Guan, 41, sees this as a validation of how far it has come and does not view the competition as a threat because he believes STPI's unique culture of openness to research and development cannot be copied.

He says: "When an artist challenges us with an idea, we never say 'No'. It is always, 'Let me think about it.'"

This way of doing things, Ogawa says, stems from the fact that many in STPI's team were not originally skilled printers and papermakers.

He says: "If everybody were experienced printers, I imagine everything we did would be contained to the things we know because we don't want to fail. But because we didn't know very much, doing something we didn't know became very normalous."

"So if an artist challenges us to do what we don't know, we are confident that even if we don't know how to do it today, we will tomorrow."

ljiie@sph.com.sg

Pioneer imparting skills

LINA ADAM, 44
Print technician in the faculty of fine arts at Lasalle College of the Arts

As an artist, Lina Adam works primarily in the medium of performance, partial to its spontaneous quality and ability to immediately impact the audience.

As a member of Singapore's pioneer generation of printers, however, she has spent more than a decade helping others to create works of art in print.

She was among a handful of Singaporeans picked to train under master printer Kenneth Tyler in 2001 at his workshop in Mount Kisco, New York. She then became a member of STPI's opening team in 2002, which saw her work on the prints of famous artists such as Americans Frank Stella and Helen Frankenthaler.

For the last 10 years, Adam has been running the print workshop at Lasalle College of the Arts, imparting her skills to artists-in-the-making.

Her dedication to print grew out of social-cultural consciousness as she came of age in the 1990s.

She says: "I was interested in pop culture and the DIY movement of that time and print was dominant in many aspects. People would print their own zines and T-shirts and posters were also a big part of it."

Drawn to the powerful way in which print communicates with the masses, she chose to major in it for her diploma in fine arts at Lasalle.

Around the time that she was about to graduate, STPI was recruiting staff for its opening and she applied because "it was too big an opportunity to pass up".

She says: "Singapore was setting up a world-class printmaking workshop with talent from New York and everyone around me gave me the impression that it was prestigious to be a printer."

"But we know how humbling our job is. We provide a service to the artists that come."

The collaborative role of a printer appeals to her. She left STPI after three years to pursue a bachelor's degree in printmaking at Lasalle and, after she graduated, she returned to being a printer, this time at the school because where there was an opening.

The mother of two young children says: "You can read all the books there are about printmaking, but to learn and master it, you need somebody with experience to pass on the skill."

Lina Adam, a print technician at Lasalle College of the Arts, trained under master printer Kenneth Tyler. ST PHOTO: MARCUS TAN



Printmaker pushing limits

CHONG LI SZE, 37
Senior printer at STPI

Chong Li Sze beams when she speaks about how works of art that bear her touch are seen by top collectors and curators at glamorous art fairs around the world.

"To have the stuff that I help make get into international art fairs and reach an international audience is very rewarding," she says.

It does not bother her that she is not recognised by name for having helped to realise the works of art.

She says: "I actually feel good that nobody knows I am behind the works, helping to make them. I am just happy to be able to support."

The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) alumna, who holds a diploma in printmaking, was introduced to the medium in secondary school, when she took art as an O-level subject. Its novelty appealed to her and she chose to specialise in the practice at Nafa.

After graduating, she worked freelance on various art projects for more than a year before she applied for a printer's job at STPI at the urging of her former art teacher Eng Joo Heng, who is now STPI's



STPI senior printer Chong Li Sze says being a printer, instead of an artist, allows her to make the most of her creative flair and artistic skills. PHOTO: TIFFANY GOH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

workshop manager.

She says: "I thought, 'Why not?', but I was totally clueless."

She honed her printmaking skills at STPI and specialises in etching, where the image to be printed is incised on a metal plate using acid.

She realised that being a printer, rather than an artist, allows her to make the most of her creative flair and artistic skills.

Chong, who is single, says: "As a printer here, I get to collaborate

with artists of different backgrounds, learn from their experiences and exchange knowledge. If I became an artist working alone, I might end up hating what I do."

The motivation she gets from working with others has spurred her to push the limits of printmaking.

She recalls how renowned Buenos Aires-born Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, a visiting artist at STPI in 2012, wanted to make metal

plates that appeared mirror-smooth, but were actually etched with text.

The challenge was so daunting, she says, that "there was a moment when I didn't want to try any more". But she persisted and they achieved the desired result after a year of experiments and tedious labour.

She says: "When artists say we are the best collaboration they have had, I am on cloud nine. It is an honour."

Gordon Koh wanted to quit on his first day, but stayed on because of a promise he made. PHOTO: TIFFANY GOH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES



Once reluctant papermaker now wants to master the craft

GORDON KOH, 40
Senior papermaker at STPI

Gordon Koh was not impressed with papermaking when he was introduced to it. "In school, all we did was tear toilet paper and pour glue over it," he says.

Neither was he thrilled about being a papermaker when he began working at STPI in 2002.

He says: "The paper room needs to be 100 per cent clean for papermaking, so I had to wash the floor three times a day, wipe the place with alcohol four times a day and wash my hands about 20 times a day."

"It felt like I was a better paid cleaner. I wanted to give up on my first day."

But he stayed because of his

promise to the late Brother Joseph McNally, his mentor at Lasalle College of the Arts, who encouraged him to join STPI.

The Lasalle graduate, who holds a master's in fine arts, says: "Brother McNally's vision was for Singapore to be immersed in the arts and he wanted a new batch of papermakers and printers to come from Singapore."

"I didn't care about being a pioneer papermaker in Singapore, but the vision was important to him."

The weight of his promise grew when Brother McNally died shortly after he joined STPI.

He says: "I felt that all the more I had to keep my promise and make something out of myself here."

Working as a papermaker means

toiling in a constantly wet and cold environment – the paper room is kept at 17 deg C to ensure the organic paper pulp does not spoil – and losing his fingerprints frequently because of persistent contact with water. But his sense of purpose as a papermaker helped him press on.

"I used to think, 'We can buy paper, why make paper?' But working with the artists, I came to understand the need for custom-made paper and my responsibility as a papermaker."

More than a passive surface, the paper – which can be made from various materials with fibrous content although cotton is typically used – interacts with the ink and critically affects the way the work looks.

The challenge of customising

paper to meet the diverse needs of the artists whom STPI works with has also been rewarding. He cites a request made last year by well-known South Korean artist Do Ho Suh for paper that was much larger than the maximum industry size.

To overcome the physical limitations of the equipment, Koh, who is married with a young child, and STPI's four other papermakers came up with new methods and devices for making paper.

The once reluctant papermaker now has his sights set on becoming a master papermaker.

He says: "It is a title that comes from the industry's acknowledgement. All I can do is to keep on producing good work and offering innovative techniques to artists."

Addicted to fun job

POH KWEE CHOO, 39
Assistant project leader and senior printer at STPI

Poh Kwee Choo originally intended to spend no more than four years at STPI.

The Lasalle College of the Arts alumna, who holds a fine arts diploma in printmaking, says: "My plan was to learn something at STPI then do a bachelor's degree and become an artist."

Fourteen years on, she is still at STPI.

"I became addicted. I am having too much fun," she says, laughing.

She has, however, exhibited as an artist, showing drawings and installation art under the name KC Poh, which she is better known by. The moniker comes from her signature on plastic moulding designs that she drew when she worked in manufacturing engineering for three years after graduating with a diploma in the discipline. She did it to placate her parents who did not initially support her wish to go to art school.

Her solo art exhibition, With Love, showed at the Esplanade Tunnel in 2010 and last year, she was featured in the group exhibition These Sacred Things, held at the Esplanade's Jendela visual arts space. The bachelorette pursues her art practice outside of work.

A specialist in screen prints at STPI, she says: "When I came in, there were a lot of technical skills to learn. But the more you learn, you realise that there is more you don't know."

"The artists who visit STPI come with different working methods, concepts, ways of using material and views on art and they challenge us in different ways. After so many years here, I am still growing."

More than the demand on technical artistry, the fine art of working with artists is what stretches her and gives her much satisfaction.

Describing the relationship between the STPI workshop and the artist as being like that which is shared by dancers and a choreographer, she says it is vital for her as a printer to grasp the mind of the



Although she is a specialist at STPI, Poh Kwee Choo says she is still "growing". PHOTO: TIFFANY GOH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

artist whom the workshop collaborates with.

"When we execute the work on behalf of the artist, we have to be able to think the way the artist

thinks, to know what he means and what is acceptable to him," she says. This understanding is built through conversations about art both in the studio and over meals.

She says: "To be able to spend time with artists who are initially strangers but later become like close friends, that interaction is something magical."