

Newcomer makes a splash with novel idea

Henry Lee is one of the best-performing local artists at Art Stage with works laced with texts from fantasy novels

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Barely a year after leaving art school, former freelance writer and engineering graduate Henry Lee made a splash at Art Stage Singapore, becoming one of the best-performing home-grown artists at the premier contemporary art fair.

The interest by collectors in his work began last year, at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts graduation show, when Lee sold one of his evocative charcoal drawings for \$6,000.

Then at Art Stage from Jan 21 to 25, all five works of his – four large pieces and one triptych – priced between \$4,200 and \$7,500 found ready buyers among local as well as regional collectors. The skinny, soft-spoken full-time artist was represented by local gallery Galerie Sogan & Art.

In comparison, the other home-grown artists whose works did well at the fair were established names. Sundaram Tagore Gallery sold painter Jane Lee's untitled mixed media work for US\$38,000 (S\$51,000) to a Singapore collector, while STPI sold several paper works by artist Suzann Victor and sculptor Han Sai Por for prices ranging between \$4,000 and \$25,000.

It was Henry Lee's debut outing at Art Stage and he was clearly overwhelmed by the response. His monochromatic, cleverly layered drawings – which are a comment on how anything and everything can become a product for sale – were laced with texts from several fantasy novels.

He tells Life!: “I was pleasantly surprised and at the same time encouraged that viewers picked up on the texts embedded in the works and took the time to read them in detail.

“Since these pages were taken from books I enjoy reading, it brought a smile to my face whenever I saw someone excited about recognising a particular quote or page.”

In creating these works, he was “very much inspired” by French writer Jean Baudrillard's critique of consumer society.

“Also, because economic prosperity and political power are closely intertwined, ensuring a steady stream of this ‘magically abundant’ proliferation of consumer objects, in Baudrillard's words, has a direct impact on governance.”

To create the pieces, Lee used pages from several of his old fantasy novels as the background. The Death Of The Author, an essay by French writer Roland Barthes, was something he fell back on while creating the pieces for the fair. In the essay, Barthes talks about text being “a multi-dimensional space, a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture”, and this was something the artist was drawn to.

“I thought my old fantasy novels could serve as a physical bridge that connects the fictional realm my work is based on with the contemporary real-life issues we encounter.”

Interestingly enough, Lee never set out wanting to be an artist.

A trained chemical engineer, the 33-year-old bachelor says that while he has always been interested in drawing, “being a pragmatic Singaporean, I did not think art was a viable career option and chose to pursue the sciences in my academic trajectory”.

He graduated from the National University of Singapore with an honours degree in chemical engineering, but soon decided this was not the field



Henry Lee at his debut outing at Art Stage Singapore with works that have sold out, including the Triptych piece in the centre. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

for him. Instead of pursuing a career in engineering, he did freelance feature writing for a technical magazine before taking up full-time positions in publishing for about three years.

“I did not find office work fulfilling and I was not motivated to advance my career in the industry. That got me thinking seriously about pursuing something I am interested in for a change.”

That shift happened when he enrolled at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts for a diploma in fine art. He majored in oil painting and picked the school because it has “a long artistic tradition and places an emphasis on technical proficiency in its curriculum. I wanted to get a strong foundation in drawing and painting”.

He recently completed his honours degree in fine art, conferred by the academy's overseas university partner, Loughborough University.

In the wake of his recent success at Art Stage, he is developing a series of works which revolves around 10 fictional cities.

He explains: “I want to explore the relationship between the individual and the society, especially when the individual is raised to a position of power. I will be drawing inspiration from existing and historical figures that have shaped every major aspect of our society, including diplomacy and governance, education, science and development and the conservation of natural resources.”

Gallerist Vera Wijaya of Galerie Sogan & Art was introduced to Lee through local collectors two years ago. As she focuses on promoting works by emerging local artists, she was keen to see his work after hearing good things about him.

Her initial plan was to hold a solo exhibition of his works at her gallery at 16 Mohamed Sultan Road in October last year. However, she decided Art Stage would be a better platform for him.

She says: “When he showed me his proposal for the solo, I was taken in by his many fresh and bold ideas. I felt Art Stage Singapore would be a much better platform for the artist to challenge, as well as

contain his ideas in a more focused yet commercial setting.” Ms Wijaya noted that Lee has not shied away from using charcoal, a difficult medium, “but refined it with his own style and artistic narrative”.

She added: “He is not only technically proficient, his risk-taking abilities and desire to reinvent himself also show his desire to make it as an artist.”

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