

life

D CHINESE CULTURAL CENTRE
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Singapore talent
D2

SCO CONCERT
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host and sing at
Mother's Day special
D4



A LIFETIME IN PAIN

**Cultural Medallion recipient
Thomas Yeo, who has been
an artist for almost 60 years,
still manages to find
excitement in his work**



Akshita Nanda
Arts Correspondent

At 82, artist Thomas Yeo still spends most of the week in his Telok Kurau studio, alternating between rice-paper landscapes on a tabletop easel and large abstract canvases on the floor. Working on different paintings at the same time keeps the Cultural Medallion recipient from getting bored.

"I'm schizophrenic," jokes Yeo at the opening of his solo exhibition at the **Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts** The Ngee Ann Kongsi Galleries.

The artist, an alumnus of the academy, has 56 works on display. The showcase, titled *Now & Then*, includes new work painted last year alongside older paintings from the start of his 58-year career. *Winter Landscape*, the view from a window in London painted in curvaceous abstract shapes in 1965 and 1966, hangs alongside *Yangshuo Revisited*, a bird's-eye view of mountains in China repurposed into angular geometric forms. The colour palette of green and blue is similar, but the approach is different.

Next to the *Yangshuo Revisited* abstract is a realistic depiction of the same landscape, done in gouache on rice paper.

Yeo often segues from realistic watercolours to abstract acrylic reimaginings of the same landscape. "I get excited when I travel," says the artist, who heads to China and Thailand every year. "I come back with all these images haunting me. Sometimes, I want to go back to the area to see if it's really what I wanted to put down."

Yeo's solo at Nafa is his second at the academy, after a 2005 showcase. "It is probably my last major exhibition," says the artist, who was diagnosed last month with glaucoma, an eye disease known to lead to irreversible loss of vision.

Yeo is stoic. "You can't run away from 82. As you age, your body breaks down. Your eyes will give you a problem."

Eight years ago, this correspondent interviewed him for a solo at the now-closed Artfolio Gallery at Raffles Hotel Arcade. Then, Yeo visited the gym three times a week to stay fit and could put in 10-hour days at his studio.

Now, he says, his fitness regimen is down to half an hour of stretching in the morning and walks in the

Botanic Gardens. He lives in a condominium in Devonshire Road not too far away.

Studio visits are shorter and no longer a daily affair. "I go according to my body and whether I have this tremendous urge to paint," he says, adding: "I still work on the floor. It finds it easier. I work around the canvas. I move around until I'm tired."

He likes large canvases. "When you do big work, you're not so much looking at the painting. You're in the painting, swimming in it," he says. Most works displayed at Now & Then are at least 1m tall and more than 1m wide.

He can spend years working on the same canvas – painting over older paintings or destroying and re-creating areas of colour. If dissatisfied, he destroys the whole work.

"Every painting that is bad should be destroyed. That isn't difficult at all," he says. "I cut up the canvas and throw it in the dustbin."

His no-nonsense approach to work shows in his advice to younger artists. "If you want to be an artist, you must be prepared to receive no salary for months on end," says Yeo, who has gone for 18 months without selling a single painting.

Married without children – his wife, Margaret, 62, manages his affairs – he lives off savings and careful budgeting.

"Artists everywhere have to be careful with their budget. Nobody forces you to paint. It's your choice. You choose this path."

Yeo was one of 12 children born to an optician father and housewife mother. One of his brothers, and earliest models, is former Cabinet minister Yeo Cheow Tong.

Thomas Yeo enrolled in Nafa from 1958 to 1960, studying under pioneer painters such as Georgette Chen, Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi. His first solo in 1960 sold enough work to fund his education at the Chelsea School of Art in London.

He continued his education there at the Hammersmith College of Art & Architecture and found gallery representation. He returned to Singapore in 1967, deciding there would be more support for his work here.

For a year, he lived and painted in a garage in River Valley Road. "I stayed and painted there. Clients asked if I really lived there. But I was absolutely penniless. All I could do was rent the room and paint."

By the 1970s, he had gallery representation in Singapore and Australia and used to work 14-hour days in order to hold simultaneous shows every year in both countries. In 1984, he received the Cultural Medallion.

His resume has an almost unbroken chain of group showings since 1962, but in the last two decades, he started holding solo exhibitions only every five years.

In fact, he turned down an offer from Nafa to hold this exhibition last year. His last solo was a fundraiser for The Substation arts space in 2013.

He says the "five-year plan" allows him to create enough work



that he can pick and choose at leisure.

His paintings take time, after all. "I find starting a new canvas challenging," he says. "Only after you work on it for three weeks, four weeks, or a month or two, you begin to feel more comfortable in your relationship with the canvas."

He adds: "Sometimes, at a certain point, when you're about to finish, but you have to re-create or destroy a certain area, that's challenging. You can destroy two years' work in 10 minutes."

"But that's part and parcel of being a creative artist. If that troubles you, find another job."

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BOOK IT / NOW & THEN: NEW PAINTINGS AND WORKS FROM HIS COLLECTION

WHERE: Ngee Ann Kongsi Galleries 1 & 2, Nafa Campus 1, 80 Bencoolen Street

WHEN: Until May 13, 11am to 7pm daily

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: tinyurl.com/y9tjypp

Milestones: a life in art

1958: Thomas Yeo enrolled in the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and studied under pioneer painters such as Georgette Chen, Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi.

1960: He held his first solo exhibition at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Singapore, selling enough of his watercolour, oil and Chinese ink paintings to fund 1½ years of further education in England.

1960 to 1964: He trained at the Chelsea School of Art and the Hammersmith College of Art & Architecture in London. His first solo show overseas was in 1963, at the Cathay Gallery in London.

1967: He returned to Singapore, finding greater support for his work in the region.

1973 to 1977: He held at least two solo exhibitions every year, one in Singapore and one in Australia, where he was represented by the Raya Gallery in Melbourne.

1983: He won second prize in the UOB Painting of the Year

competition in Singapore, an annual art prize to recognise top talent in the region. He was part of the jury in later years.

1984: He received the Cultural Medallion from the National Arts Council of Singapore, an honour which recognises individuals whose artistic contributions have enriched and distinguished the country's arts and cultural landscape.

1990 to 2000: He added "publisher" to his resume, helming books about Singaporean artists under his imprint.

1997: The Singapore Art Museum held a retrospective of his works and he continued to hold solo exhibitions in Europe and Asia, in places such as Austria, Germany, Laos, Cambodia and Macau. His works, priced at about \$50,000, are in major corporate and private collections, including those of UOB, Singapore Press Holdings and the Sultan of Brunei.

Artist Thomas Yeo received the Cultural Medallion in 1984.

PHOTO: DIGS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

STORIES BEHIND THE PAINTINGS on D2

Stories behind the paintings

1. JIGSAW

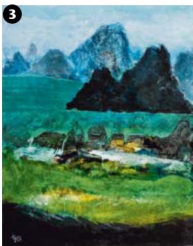
Acrylic on canvas, painted in 1976

Artist Thomas Yeo says: "This is one of the paintings I have in my home. I like it a lot, but I ask myself, 'Can I do something like that today?'"

"The answer is, 'No and I wouldn't want to.' Painting is... you're painting your brain. Your brain changes every week and 20, 30 years is a long time. Your feelings change about things. I'm quite comfortable with what I'm doing now."



PHOTOS:
NANYANG ACADEMY
OF FINE ARTS



2. DOORS TO MY HEART

Acrylic on canvas, painted in 1992

"The name Doors To My Heart was given by a university lecturer, Dr Nirmala PuruShotam. She composed a poem for it.

"In the 1990s, I worked with pale colours. It's like somebody eating the same food for a while – meat, meat, meat – and then saying, 'I'll try being a vegetarian for a while.'"

"Colours vibrate against one another. White doesn't make the vibration. It makes you see the textures better. I was experimenting with different ways of looking at things."

3. YANGSHUO REVISITED

Gouache on rice paper

4. YANGSHUO REVISITED

Acrylic on canvas, both painted in 2017

"When I travel, I like to capture something more pictorial. Then, I do something more abstract. The



landscape is the beginning of the process of summarising my tours.

"The acrylic takes more time, of course. It looks simple, but takes more time. With the landscapes, I have an end product in mind. With the acrylics, I can keep on going, keep on changing."

5. DISRUPTION

Acrylic on canvas, painted in 2017

"This is what we're experiencing a lot of today – disruption. If I could be known only by five or six works, I would like this to be one of them. It's got several viewpoints. Earlier works had just one focus.

"This painting took a long time. There are four or five canvases beneath it. Sometimes, I destroy some of my work. Sometimes, I paint on top of it."

Akshita Nanda

