

life

D **DESPICABLE ME?**
Aaron Kwok happy to
play the antagonist
D3

'SINGAPORE IS SO GREAT'
Actor James Wen would
be happy to live here
D4



Digging deep for inspiration

The five artists in this year's President's Young Talents exhibition look at soil and scars, among other things, and push the boundaries of contemporary art



Melissa Sim
Senior Arts Correspondent

Soil, scars and swathes of latex are on display at the Singapore Art Museum at 8Q as part of an exhibition – the President's Young Talents 2018 – that features promising young artists in Singapore.

Prominent names in the local arts scene have emerged from previous editions of this exhibition, including film-maker Boo Junfeng and visual artist Donna Ong.

This year, five artists – Yanyun Chen, 31, Weixin Quek Chong, 30, Debbie Ding, 34, Hilmi Johandi, 31, and Zarina Muhammad, 36 – will showcase newly commissioned works that span painting, sculpture, photography, video and performance.

The exhibition opened last Thursday and will run until Jan 27 next year.

While there is no common theme, the artists, under the guidance of mentors, have attempted to push the boundaries of contemporary art.

Chong, for example, wants viewers to disengage from their instinct to rationalise when they step

into her gallery. Ding hopes visitors will take a closer look at something as ubiquitous as soil.

This is the seventh edition of the exhibition, which culminates, this year, in a Grand Prize – a cash prize of \$20,000 – and a People's Choice Award, a cash prize of \$5,000.

For many of the artists, this is their biggest project yet.

"Usually, my practice is so nomadic and fragmented. We just set up, execute and go," says Chong.

"It's quite special to have a venue and be able to test ideas in the space."

The artists had more than six months to work on the commissions and were able to work in the gallery space since mid-September.

Their mentors were artists Grace Tan, David Chan, Jason Wee and Zaki Razak, and art historian and curator Roger Nelson.

Dr June Yap, director of curatorial, programmes and publication at the Singapore Art Museum, says: "It is a nice snapshot of where young artists are today.

"There is the experimental aspect and the works speak to personal interests, which can be expanded to more global concerns."

The artists took The Straits Times around their individual galleries and shared the inspiration behind their works.

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VIEW IT / PRESIDENT'S YOUNG TALENTS 2018

WHERE: Singapore Art Museum at 8Q, 8 Queen Street

WHEN: Till Jan 27, Saturdays to Thursdays, 10am to 7pm; Fridays, 10am to 9pm

ADMISSION: Free for Singaporeans and permanent residents

Soil interesting

Soil plays a pivotal role in artist Debbie Ding's Soil Works. "You see it transported everywhere, used in buildings, it's ubiquitous," says the 34-year-old.

Yet, once it is used, people often pay very little attention to soil. "I wanted to explore the visibility and invisibility of it," she adds.

Her five-part installation is an artistic investigation into the soil she has collected from more than 20 locations all over Singapore.

"I've gone under bridges, to road triangles, all those in-between spaces that are rarely used for anything commercial," says Ding, who teaches interaction design at the School of Interactive & Digital Media at Nanyang Polytechnic.

Almost like a laboratory with different stations, each installation invites the visitor to observe the soil through different means.

For example, the Sand Weight section is a projection of the movement of sand on the gallery wall, while the Soil Column installation features samples of soil in Winogradsky Columns – used to study soil health and the organisms in it.

Ding says: "When we put the soil there, we can see how it changes over four months and get a better understanding of the bacteria that live in the soil."

Another section, Home Without A Shelter, will feature Gillie suits – a type of camouflage clothing – which are soil-coloured and covered in handmade fake grass.

"I've always been interested in what is private and public land and the spaces which are halfway in-between," she says. "If the public walk into a space, they can stay for a short while, but if people are concealed in the environment, they can remain in that area."

The artist says this current show follows through from her earlier one at The Substation about six years ago, where she had a room full of rocks and encouraged visitors to trade rocks with one another and talk about rocks.

"This time, I wanted to work with something even more broken down," says Ding, who will also be giving a tour of the civic area around the museum as part of her exhibit.

"What I am making is about the environment, so I will be looking at the environment and the micro-climates in the area, caused by the greenery and even the soil."

MORE STORIES on D2

FROM D1

Guardians revisited

At the doorway of Zarina Muhammad's exhibition - Pragmatic Prayers For The Kala At The Threshold - stands a 30cm-tall wooden figurine on a pedestal.

This is the Mandor (overseer in Malay) of Government House, a replica of a wooden figure found in the storeroom of the Istana, which was possibly made by Indian convict labourers to act as their spiritual protector.

"I like the idea that there is a protector guarding the space," she says.

Behind it, on another pedestal, sits a wooden tiger, which the 36-year-old says is featured prominently in folklore as a guardian of Singapore and other countries in the region.

Zarina, who is also a fine arts lecturer at Lasalle College of the Arts, says these are two visual departure points for the Kala - both a Hindu demi-god often depicted as a gate guardian, who embodies the concepts of time and death; and a Javanese wayang character which is invoked during purification ceremonies.

The gallery itself is divided into three sections - the hills (Bukit Larangan or Fort Canning Hill), land (Bras Basah) and sea (Kallang and coastal areas of Singapore). This is a representation of the upper, middle and lower worlds found in Austronesian belief systems, she says.

Austronesia is a geographic area where the Austronesian family of languages is spoken. This includes eth-

nic groups in Indonesia, the Philippines and the Malays in Singapore.

By mapping those worlds onto Singapore, Zarina explores the figures, both spiritual and physical, that have moved through these spaces. She says: "Magico-religious systems are symptomatic of the communities and their anxieties and I am interested in how faith and belief are sustained and religions adapted."

There is also a performative aspect to her exhibit, which she refers to as interventions.

In the first performance, she will be making an offering to "open up the space" and ensure the "well-being of the people in the space and those who are part of the show".

The closing performance will involve a number of collaborators, friends and family members who contributed to making the clay effigies that line a wall of the gallery.

"I told them to make representation of a figure that they think of as a guardian," she says. They will participate in destroying the effigies, which symbolises the "temporality of these figures".

"This is a shape-shifting space and things will be moving in and out over the next four months. The space is a map, it's a book, it's a ritual, the space is performing as well," says Zarina. "The different worlds overlap and the thresholds may be imagined, but at the end of the day, we all need to find a place of belonging - whatever it is."



Artist Zarina Muhammad maps the different worlds in Austronesian belief systems onto Singapore. ST PHOTOS: TIMOTHY DAVID



An Exposition, Hilmi Johandi's installation, draws from amusement parks of old.

Enter an old world of fun

Stepping into Hilmi Johandi's An Exposition is like stepping back in time, as far back as the 1920s, when the old amusement parks - New World, Great World and Gay World (formerly Happy World) - still existed.

"I was extracting from that and constructing something suggestive of these places," says the 31-year-old.

While he usually paints, he took this opportunity to experiment with a more immersive installation.

"With paintings, we use different components to direct the eye, but here, it is more physical. We have to navigate the audience from one point to another," says the fine arts lecturer at Lasalle.

He went through old photos at the National Archives of Singapore and reinterpreted actual structures as sculptures for the space. Video footage is also used to re-create the feel of a thrilling amusement park.

Hilmi says after encountering photos of the different amusement parks, the names of the different "worlds" really drew him in. "It was rather utopian and felt like a place for escape in a pre-television era," he notes.

But his aim is not to re-create these amusement parks, but to use the nostalgia for them to explore other ideas. "I like the idea of spectacle - what you see is an illusion and I also

want to reveal what is behind it all."

This is why he has exposed the sandbags and raw wood behind the structures in the space and built a platform in the gallery to elevate audiences and give them a different view of the pieces. "The platform is also a sculptural piece. It is like going on a ride," says Hilmi.

The painting of an open stage on the wall suggests that "the entire place is a stage as well".

He says he left the stage open to show that while something can be theatrical, it can also be "very mutable". "In a way, the work is also a response to the quickly changing landscape in Singapore."

Scars of healing

Artist Yanyun Chen, 31, has a keloid scar in the middle of her chest, which she does not bother to hide anymore.

"It started off as a pimple," she says. "And I remember being very conscious and upset when it continued to grow."

She was in her early teens at the time.

Keloids are smooth, raised scars that can form when scar tissue grows excessively.

"When cousins and aunts saw it, they started talking about it, as if it was the only thing they saw when they interacted with me and I was very angry," she adds.

When fabric aggravated it, she decided to stop covering up. Then she met a stranger who commented on her appearance.

"She was an auntie, who just said to me, 'Is that a keloid? So nice that you are showing it, my son is very self-conscious about it.' That was when I resolved to accept it," she says.

Not only has she accepted her scar, but she has also made it a central part of her artwork, titled The Scars That Write Us, at the President's Young Talents exhibition.

For the show, she asked family members to sketch their keloids and then used those drawings to produce representations out of mild steel.

"I like the raw state of the steel because it will rust and change over time, which is just like skin."

While she used to be upset when her family discussed her scar, she now realises that her family members telling her what to do about her scar and talking about their scars was their way of sharing and "affiliating themselves with me".



The keloid scar in the middle of artist Yanyun Chen's chest is a central part of her artwork.

Another part of the exhibition shows these same keloids placed on six drawings - made from charcoal and chalk on steel - of various parts of Chen's own body.

For example, the representation of her cousin's keloid, formed after a caesarean section, is placed on a drawing of Chen's own abdomen.

"I like the idea of fragmenting certain aspects of the body and I wanted to explore what happens if I carry my family's scars with me," she says.

The lecturer at Yale-NUS College and a PhD candidate at the European Graduate School in the division of Philosophy, Art & Critical Thought in Switzerland says this work grew from her research on nudity in Singapore in the arts and legal context.

"I'm exploring how to depict and use the body in a way that is fair, caring and non-judgmental," says Chen. "I'm also excited to see if people are mature enough to think about things beyond just sexualising a body and if they can associate the work with their own bodies."



Artist Weixin Quek Chong, who uses materials such as latex, wants artgoers to see the different objects and materials in a new light.

Silk meets rubber in show

Trying to make sense of Weixin Quek Chong's installation - sft crsh ctrl - sort of defeats the purpose.

"People want to find points of entry into the art and want to be told a particular outcome. It is cultural and I understand that," says the 30-year-old. "But I think art can help us to expand and curve so that there doesn't have to be a direct path."

When visitors enter her gallery, she wants them to discover for themselves what the different objects and materials might mean and not "what they have been told".

"I want them to be disoriented in their own way and figure out how they relate" to the work and space, says Chong. "I want to achieve a feeling before a particular rationale."

She hopes to achieve this by inviting the visitors to engage with a range of videos, photos and installations made of various materials.

For example, three long silk prints billow from the ceiling, while large pieces of latex - in black, beige and white - are stretched and draped over frames.

The latex in her work is a material she was thrilled to be working with.

"My grandma (who worked in rubber tapping in Malaysia) used to tell me about making large latex sheets. I wanted it to have a deconstructed feel and to show off the material," she adds, while polishing the draped material.

Visitors will get a chance to touch the fabric and react to it during guided events.

She consciously made many decisions based on her instincts for this commission.

"I tried very hard to bypass thinking about whether this would be seen in a certain light," she says.

As a part-time lecturer at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts for the fine arts diploma programme, and an adjunct lecturer in art at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, she sees students trying to demonstrate value in their work all the time.

"It's a pity they try to apply the same kind of pressure that they have in other studies to art," says Chong, who also works with art therapy students at Lasalle.

"The whole point is to be free. I want people to visit a free space, to let them create their own value."