

# Pouring her all into dancing with stone

While she finds painting more relaxing, artist Han Sai Por respects the demands of sculpting, channelling her physical energy into her works

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Cataract surgery two months ago did not slow down sculptor Han Sai Por. Despite the doctor's advice to avoid heavy lifting, she was deep into preparations for her new solo exhibition.

Dance With The Wind, which opens at iPreciation on July 5, does not have the monumental stone works Han is known for. But it does have more than 10 sculptures and 12 acrylic on canvas works. Prices start at \$30,000.

The 76-year-old Cultural Medallion recipient says she avoided using machines after her surgery, which meant she had to manually polish the sculptures, a more time-consuming process.

Still, she was heaving the pieces, which weigh between 12kg and 15kg each. It is hard to believe that the petite artist has enough strength to wrestle such weights.

The new works are hewn from a type of white stone called han bai yu, which is harder than marble and costs about \$5,933 for one cubic metre. In comparison, the best Carrara marble from Italy can cost up to \$30,000 per cubic metre.

Han discovered the material about 10 years ago in China when she saw young Chinese artists working in the medium.

The soft-spoken artist adds wryly that when she found out then that one cubic metre cost US\$2,000 to US\$3,000 (S\$2,700 to S\$4,000), "I said, 'Wah, so expensive.'"

But she fell in love with the purity of the stone.

She adds that crystals in it also lend it an iridescent shimmer.

The elegant, organic whorls of her new works, inspired by palm fronds, glisten with an ethereal sparkle, thanks to these crystals.

There are also several stainless steel works which are "much lighter", she adds.

Steel pieces, she muses, interact differently with the spaces they are displayed in. "I like the reflection. It captures the environment."

The sculptural works in pristine white and polished metal are a contrast to the dynamic black-and-white canvases.

"I feel that black is a very strong, very powerful colour. You can see the energy in it. I paint with black and white so I can focus on the energy and movement without the

distraction of colour."

The paintings, fluid with movement, were inspired by her observations of the effect of wind in forests and the power of typhoon storms in southern China, where she often travels to for work.

"When the wind blows, you can see the movement of the wind in the trees. It creates energy and movement and gives life to the forest."

She enjoys the process of painting much more than sculpting. "With sculpting, there is the cutting, noise, dust and sweat. With painting, you can sit with a fan, sit back on a sofa. Your brain calms down, it's more quiet."

The artist admits regretfully that age is taking a toll on her and she might do more painting in the future. "I feel like I have no energy, especially in the past two years."

She relies on factories now for her large-scale commissioned work as she is not confident of handling the heavy machinery needed to cut huge slabs of rock.

But she will supervise the work closely and, for smaller works, she still makes everything by hand. "The work is an expression of my imagination."

Decades of using brute force to battle stone has left marks on her tiny frame. She turns around to show how her right shoulder blade juts out, giving her back a distinct hump, compared with her left shoulder. "I use my right arm to hammer the stone and my left hand to hold the chisel. Granite is very hard. When you hit it, it rings out like metal and your hand bounces back."

She is matter of fact about the physical toll her work has taken on her. Her elfin face, half hidden behind owlsh, Harry Potter round spectacle frames, is often serious, but softens when she talks about art.

She is self-deprecating despite her status as a pioneering Singapore sculptor.

But even a pioneer artist has concerns on her mind. She worries that her application to renew the lease on her studio at Goodman Arts Centre might not be accepted. She lives with her sister in a flat, so she needs a studio space to work.

But she also frets that she might be taking space away from younger artists: "I also feel paiseh (embarrassed) to occupy a space."

As the founder of Sculpture Soci-

ety (Singapore), Han often mentors younger artists. In fact, her exhibition was slightly delayed because she took a group of 11 younger artists to China on a week-long work trip. "A sculptor really needs physical experience, the hands-on thing," she says.

A smile crosses her face as she adds: "The younger artists are very good. Each one did one or two pieces. They have a lot of energy."

Despite a career filled with prizes and accolades, she confesses to worrying when she has to fulfil big commissions.

She demurs when asked why she chose sculpting: "It's very hard to give an answer. I myself don't know."

She recalls that when she was studying fine art in England, she was told her teachers were good at three-dimensional works, so she took up sculpting. And there was a stoneyard, so there was a lot of material to practise on.

When it is suggested that she fell into sculpting by accident, she says with a smile: "Exactly."

After a lifetime's practice, she con-



Han Sai Por fell in love with the purity of a type of white stone called han bai yu, which she discovered about 10 years ago in China and uses it to create some of her new works. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

## VIEW IT / DANCE WITH THE WIND – A SOLO EXHIBITION BY HAN SAI POR

**WHERE:** iPreciation, 01-01 HPL House, 50 Cuscaden Road

**WHEN:** July 5 to 20, 10am – 7pm (weekdays); 11am – 6pm (Saturdays); Sundays and public holidays by appointment only

**ADMISSION:** Free

**INFO:** Go to [www.ipreciation.com/dance-with-the-wind-a-solo-exhibition-by-han-sai-por](http://www.ipreciation.com/dance-with-the-wind-a-solo-exhibition-by-han-sai-por) or call 6339-0678

veys a deep respect of the demands of her craft. "Sculpture is physical. You can touch and walk around it. After you feel the sweat, the hard work, you feel that making a piece of art is not easy. This is not my choice, but when I have to do it, I put all my energy into it," she says.

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## The 'accidental' artist

- Born on July 19, 1943, in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation, Han Sai Por was one of six children. Her uneducated mother scavenged at Changi Beach to support the family and her father was often ill. But Han remembers a "happy and free" childhood, building sand figurines at Changi. She first encountered the works of Michelangelo when she was 10, in a book her mother bought for her.

- Graduated from Teachers' Training College in 1968 and worked as a full-time teacher. She took part-time courses at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) from 1975 to 1977. Left Singapore in 1979 to study at the East Ham College of Art and Wolverhampton College of Art, where she earned her BA (Hon) in Fine Art. She worked as a waitress, hotel maid and cook to support herself during her studies. She also earned money

- sketching tourists outside Paris' Pompidou Centre.
- Returned to Singapore in 1983 and was one of two teachers who kicked off the Art Elective Programme at Nanyang Girls' High School.
- Took up part-time teaching at Nafa and LaSalle-SIA College of Art to devote more time to her art. She also lectured part-time at the National Institute of Education and Nanyang Technological University from 1994 to 1995.
- Held her first solo exhibition at the National Museum Art Gallery in 1993.
- Awarded the Cultural Medallion in 1995. Since then she has collected a slew of other awards, including the top prize at the 11th Triennale India in 2005, the Outstanding City Sculpture Award in China in 2006 and the Leonardo Award for Sculpture at Italy's Chianciano Art Biennale in 2015.