

Making sense of the world through art

Clement Yong
Correspondent

Informed that he is to receive the Cultural Medallion, pioneer portraitist Siew Hock Meng's instinctive reaction is a bland shrug.

At 82 years old, the self-professed "arrogant man" thinks it is only natural that he should be conferred the highest cultural award in the land. After painting for more than four decades, "I deserve it", he says in Mandarin.

"Frankly, I am already very old, so there were no surprises there."

On an occasion that many artists would consider the most significant in their lifetime, Siew, self-assured and plain-speaking, is matter-of-fact about his skill.

Yet, he is also candid about the limited impact his art has managed to have on society, a pragmatism which might have to do with the eclecticism of his life experience. Unlike many of his generation, he came to painting late, almost as a last resort at the age of 37.

Before that, Siew led a bohemian life.

He first sought answers to his questions on individual purpose and society in a Johor rubber plantation as a rubber tapper, a months-long stint that was followed by a brief foray into the Labour Party of Malaya.

Then, for some years in his 20s and 30s, he dreamt of wealth, joining several ventures in unrelated fields – from the wholesale of eggs and mining and prospecting to painting posters and breeding tropical fish.

For a man who was coached by the esteemed Cheong Soo Pieng for a year at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) in his schooling years, this circuitous journey seems almost wilful.

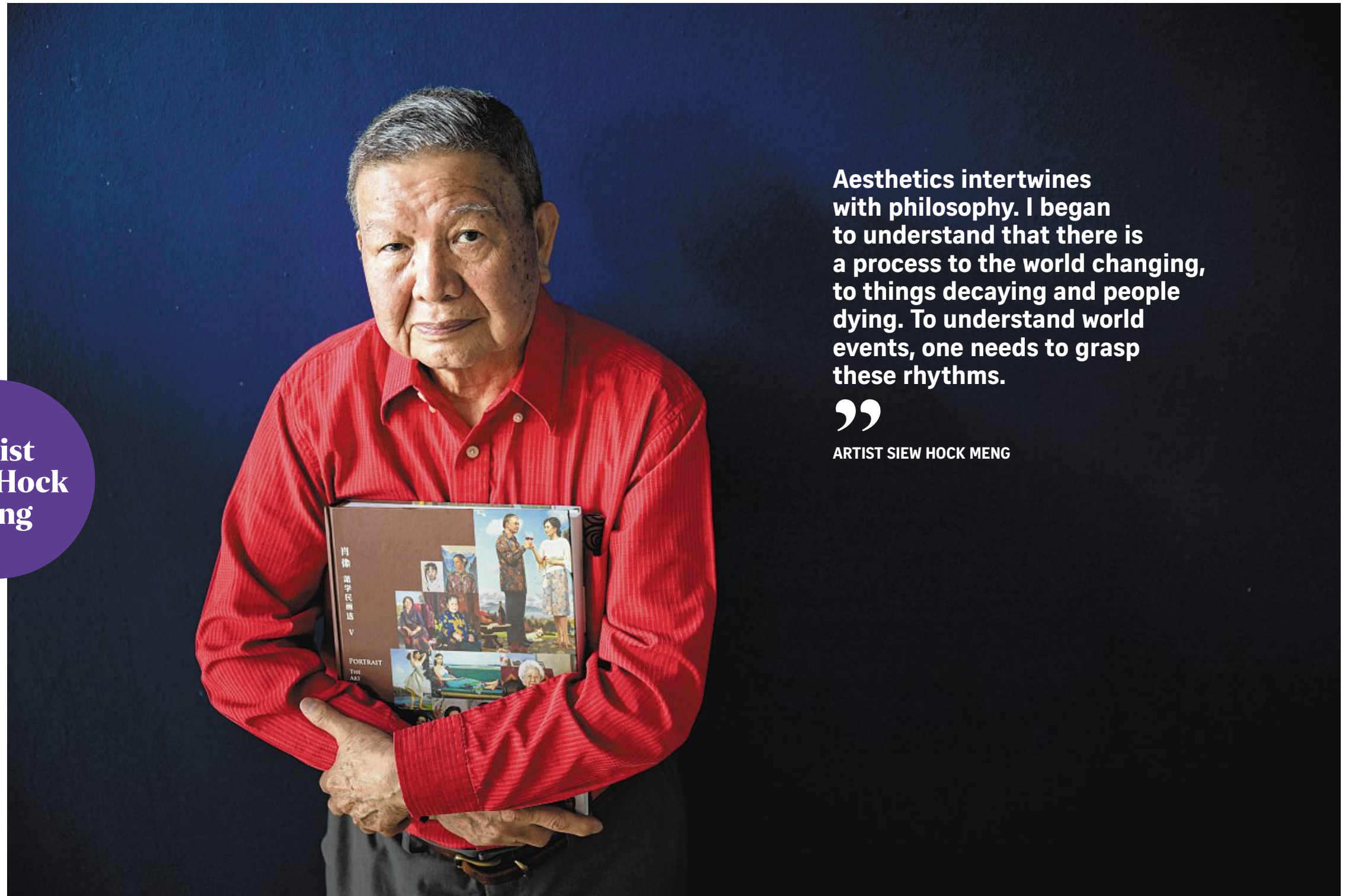
But Siew says he was frustrated at the lack of "philosophical basis" in his art education.

For him, the basic question any artist has to resolve before picking up the brush was: Why paint?

"I liked to pose problems. I was a problematic person," he says. "When I asked Cheong why he was painting in a certain style, all he said in reply was (in Hokkien), 'This is good. This is correct. This makes sense.'"

Thus stymied, Siew marched

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ARTIST SIEW HOCK MENG

off, toting a bag of second-hand books with titles by Aristotle and others in the philosophical school of Idealism. A worker at the rubber plantation was a guru to him, gifting him a hand-scribbled copy of a Marxist-Leninist text.

Later back in Singapore, friends recommended he read former Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong's writings, which he credits with transforming his world view.

"Aesthetics intertwines with philosophy. I began to understand that there is a process to the world changing, to things decaying and people dying. To understand world events, one needs to grasp these rhythms," Siew says.

"You ask yourself: How can I be of use to myself and society? In my view, being a painter and painting are still not enough."

Yet, in 1975, he returned to art, opening Grace Art Gallery in Lien Towers. Unimpressed with the work of his contemporaries, he began taking commissions for portraits, which he could turn around in an hour for \$100.

There is no teleology or romance to this decision, he says. It was simply a way for him to make a few cents and he painted for anyone who could afford it.

His pastel portraits struck a chord, and sitters from around Singapore and the region came.

At one point, he was even invited to the United States to work on a more semi-permanent basis, but turned it down because he thought "portraits can only be hung in people's houses and ultimately mean very little".

Asked how he acquired his keen

eye, Siew traces it back once more to the rubber plantations, where, not having models, he looked in the mirror and sketched his own features in crayon whenever he was bored.

"I realised later that that was also a type of practice," Siew, who did this hundreds of times, says.

"Most people look in the mirror every day, but are still unclear about what makes up their face. It is only by slowly pencilling in the details of your eyes, nose and mouth that you know how distinctive they are."

What makes a good portrait – and painting – is its ability to immediately capture a passer-by's attention, he says. Its quality then lies in how long it can compel a viewer to examine its details.

His knowledge of these "basics of art" gave him a leg-up among his

peers, he says with some flippancy, as if it is the easiest thing in the world.

His iconic self-portrait – a flower in his ear, dilated eyes looking down at the viewer with a crazed expression – was one such masterpiece of self-promotion.

Outside of portraiture, Siew's oeuvre also extends to landscapes and South-east Asia pastoral scenes, informed by a realist language. The siren song of abstraction always left him cold – "painting is a pictorial language and should be comprehensible to everyone".

Siew, whose most important painting is probably *The Dawn Of An Era* (2000) – a 3m by 2m oil painting that shows three collaborators of Sir Stamford Raffles, a Chinese carpenter, a keris-clutching Malay man and an Indian

sepo – has more recently been interested in nudes.

"I can't pretend to be a 'gentleman'. It's an expression of sexuality, which we as humans have needed from the beginning of time. Society continues to be coy about it. But we need it."

Though he still does commissioned portraits for \$15,000 a pop, the pressures of money no longer feature as strongly in his mind today. In assessing his own legacy, he exhibits a rare humility.

"I haven't managed to be at the forefront of my time. I am not a visionary," he confesses.

"I simply focused on art that can contribute to society. As long as it can guide people towards the correct values, art is useful."

clementy@sph.com.sg