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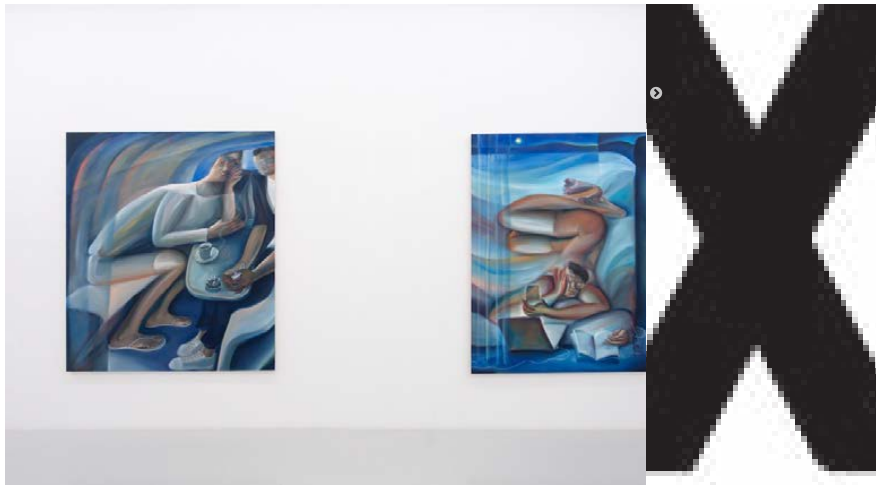
Alvin Ong

PRESS KIT

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[Binge Watch: Alvin Ong @ Yavuz Gallery](#), Sasha Bogojev, Juxtapoz Magazine, 26 January, 2022



It's been over a year since [we last featured](#) the increasingly awesome works by Alvin Ong, and almost two years after his [last solo show with Yavuz gallery](#) in Sydney, he is now showing at their space in Singapore. Continuing the process of self-reflection and introspection through his painterly practice, "Binge Watch (is) reflecting Alvin Ong's continued interest in the physicality of the body, and how human experiences of inhabitation are being reshaped in the current moment."

In order to depict the everpresent moods of anxiety, boredom, insecurities, and longing, Ong has developed a visual language and technique which transforms most mundane, insignificant moments into evocative dreamy compositions. Reducing the figure to an amalgamation of provisional anatomical forms outlined by the glow of electronic gadgets or other objects that define our being, the Singapore-born artist is particularly interested in the moments when time seems to stand still. Placing them in spaces that are either isolated and safe or crowded and somewhat hectic, his autobiographical visual diary encapsulates the familiar and relatable sentiment of present-day life. "I enjoy this play between domesticity and the ambiguous spaces these figures seemingly inhabit. They reflect my inner journeys and solitude as a painter, but at the same time they also remind me of the communal experiences which make me feel alive and human," Ong told Juxtapoz about how the surrounding influences the mood of the works.

In an effort to capture the frail ambience that is surrounding us and influencing our mental state, Ong managed to sharpen up a great sense for playing with light and transparency. Exaggeratedly bent and captured in declining postures, his protagonists are often blending into their surroundings or are reflecting it on their clothes or skin. Influenced by tropical light of his native Singapore as well as European history painting and Catholic imagery, he devised an effective blend through which everyday moments are transformed into often epochal scenes. "The paintings also function as sonic abstractions, choreographed as an ensemble of contrasting tracks and tempo," the artist explained his work structure and process while making an analogy with another big passion of his - music. "I attribute this quality to my restlessness and a highly improvisational process, often resulting in multiple ideas layered over one another simultaneously on a single canvas like musical ideas in a fugue. The numerous pentimenti, or ideas semi-scrubbed off, scattered here and there also bear witness to my fraught journeys shapeshifting between figuration and abstraction."

His daily cycle which includes playing the piano, listening to music, drawing, cooking, doom scrolling, and binge watching, are some of the main sources of inspiration for this particular body of work. Influencing everything from the title of the show, appearing as obvious elements (Studio, Desktop, Rempah, all 2021), or becoming metaphors for larger problems (Earworm, 2021), these everyday routines sometimes extend into the technical aspect of his practice. "The works on paper are made using turmeric, chilli powder and ink, which are an extension of the culinary and earthy themes running through the other works on canvas, especially when seen alongside Rempah (a Malay word for a base spice mix from which different types of curries are made)," Ong tells us about the body of work on paper that he also introduced in this showcase. Developed as (likely) accidental innovation, they conceptually match the portrayed atmosphere of boredom and solitude while allowing for his interest in experimentation and improvisation to roam beyond customary boundaries. —Sasha Bogojev

[The 10 Best Booths at The Armory Show 2021](#), Benjamin Sutton, Artsy, 10 September, 2021



The 10 Best Booths at The Armory Show 2021

Benjamin Sutton

Sep 10, 2021 8:21PM

Yavuz Gallery.

Main Sector, Booth 405

With works by Alvin Ong



Alvin Ong, installation view in Yavuz Gallery's booth at The Armory Show, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery.

Most galleries used the new, spacious layout of The Armory Show to let their wares breathe. Not so for Singapore- and Sydney-based Yavuz Gallery, which filled all three walls of its booth with 108 paintings by Alvin Ong. The artist created the works, all self-portraits of sorts, over the course of five months when he was largely confined to his home and studio amid COVID lockdowns in Singapore. The images, especially packed into the booth's tight grid, have a slightly claustrophobic edge that may provoke a familiar twinge for most visitors. The tight framing and often distorted, glowing expressions reflect on the long stretches of living in isolation, glued to screens of one sort or another.

"A lot of the paintings capture the very solitary life and inner world of being in lockdown," said gallery manager Caryn Quek. "We wanted to present the works in a grid to evoke Instagram and the experience of scrolling endlessly." Collectors were apparently happy to doom-scroll around the booth; by the end of the first day,

[Skip to Main Content](#) intings had sold.

[“The ‘Night Shift’ – Alvin Ong in Hong Kong”](#), Sasha Bogojev, Juxtapoz Magazine, 5 November, 2020



Photography
Studio Art
The "Night Shift": Alvin Ong in Hong Kong

For [Alvin Ong](#), it's physical. The Singapore-born artist whose painterly practice presents the human body in all its shame and glory, finds self-isolation and the lockdown setting an opportunity for new exploration. Limitations of the surrounding elements and the complete absence of physical social interaction are some aspects Ong explores in the body of work that comprises *Night Shift*, his solo exhibition currently on view at the [Mine Project in Hong Kong](#).

"Like everyone else, it's the human touch and interactions I miss the most during the lockdown, even as I try to convince myself otherwise," Ong tells Juxtapoz about the most difficult aspect of pandemic protocols. "I have noticed that the figures and settings in my recent work have also become much more solitary." This sudden shift towards portraying longing and loneliness in the current exhibition contrasts [with his May 2020 solo show in Sydney](#) where characters enjoyed the outdoors in the company of friends and partners. Paralyzed in a space between imminent deadlines and "the rest" of his life put on hold, Ong's work quickly shifted to introspection and the depiction of a barren, numb and stagnant indoors, condemned to routine. Furniture, potted plants on window sills and floor tiles indicate the interior, while the artist's mind often drifts outward, dreaming of a luminescent moon shining in the sky or wave-lapping ocean. "I experimented with methods of toying with space in my paintings, alongside conscious decisions to subtract and move towards solutions that were much more minimal," the artist relates to us about how surroundings are used to complement the scenes. "The screens and windows have become even more abstracted, and objects began blurring into one another. It's harder to distinguish between the inside and outside. Perhaps it's a result of me spending much more time indoors, even as I'm continuously fed images from the external world through my screens and devices."

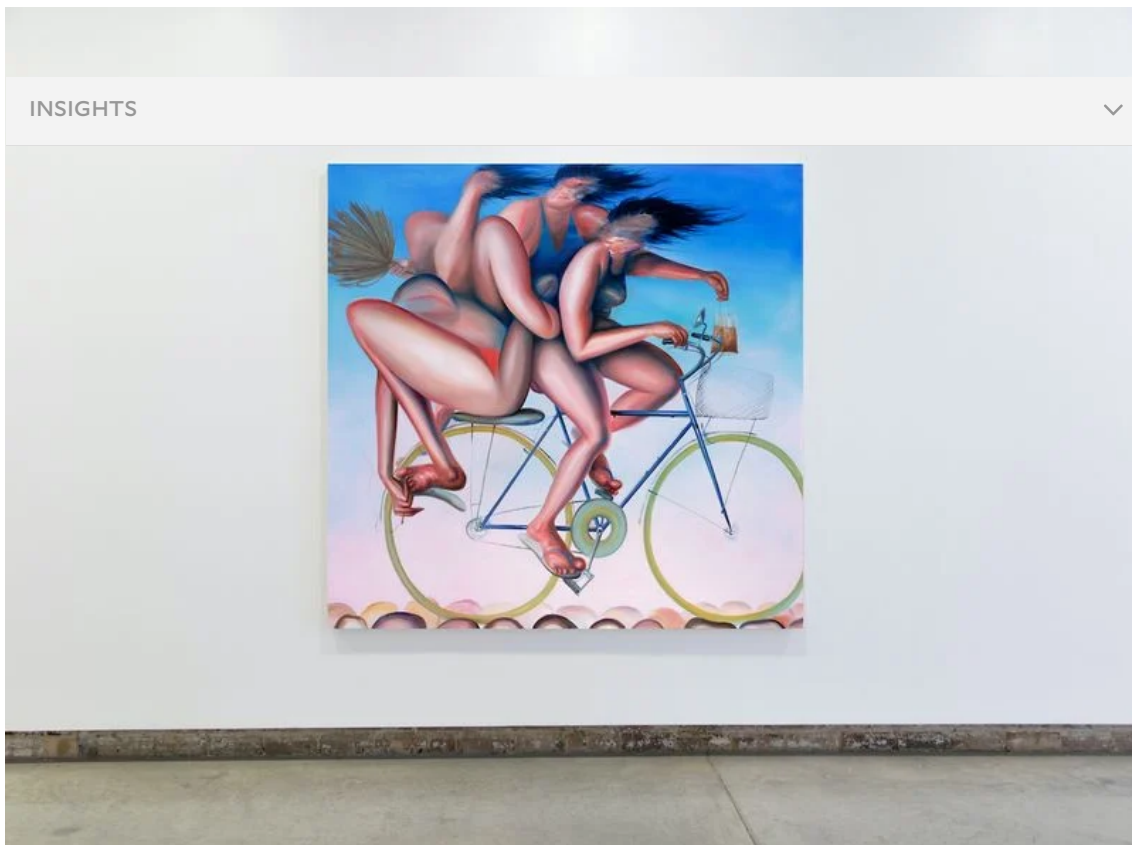
This entire body of work is a result of the artist's own experience prolonging his stay in Singapore and converting a room in his parents' house into a home studio. Coffee breaks, trying on outfits, and endless hours spent behind the blue-light screen while searching for connectivity with others, are some personal snapshots Ong. With postures succumbing to boredom, emptiness, contemplation, or restlessness, the subjects are reduced to physical presences reduced to a blur. Notable in the series are small portraits where the artist chose to alternate and change gears of the presentation. "The small works are like a breath. I would revisit them between bouts of working on the larger pieces. They are like intervals in my studio routine," the artist explains about translating his studio dynamic for the gallery experience. Created as a counterbalance to the larger works, these pieces are prompt introspection about subject and mood. Rendered with expressive brushwork employing a spare spectrum of colors, these portraits movingly depict the body's volume, movement, or time passage, while completely removing the context or the atmosphere. "Sometimes, swapping their positions yields surprising results and they get worked on further. The result is a compression of time and multiple states of being. Time is the key ingredient here I suppose," the artist concludes, suggesting how the weight of time defines our current reality. —Sasha Bogojev

[Alvin Ong's paintings close the \(social\) distance](#), Tessa Moldan, Ocula Magazine, 5 June 2020

Alvin Ong's Paintings Close the (Social) Distance

By [Tessa Moldan](#)
Sydney
5 June 2020

With human connections reduced to a minimum due to the coronavirus pandemic, Alvin Ong's latest paintings of interlinking bodies, on view in his solo exhibition *Long Distance* (14 May–6 June 2020) at [Yavuz Gallery](#) in [Sydney](#), are visceral depictions of intimacy.

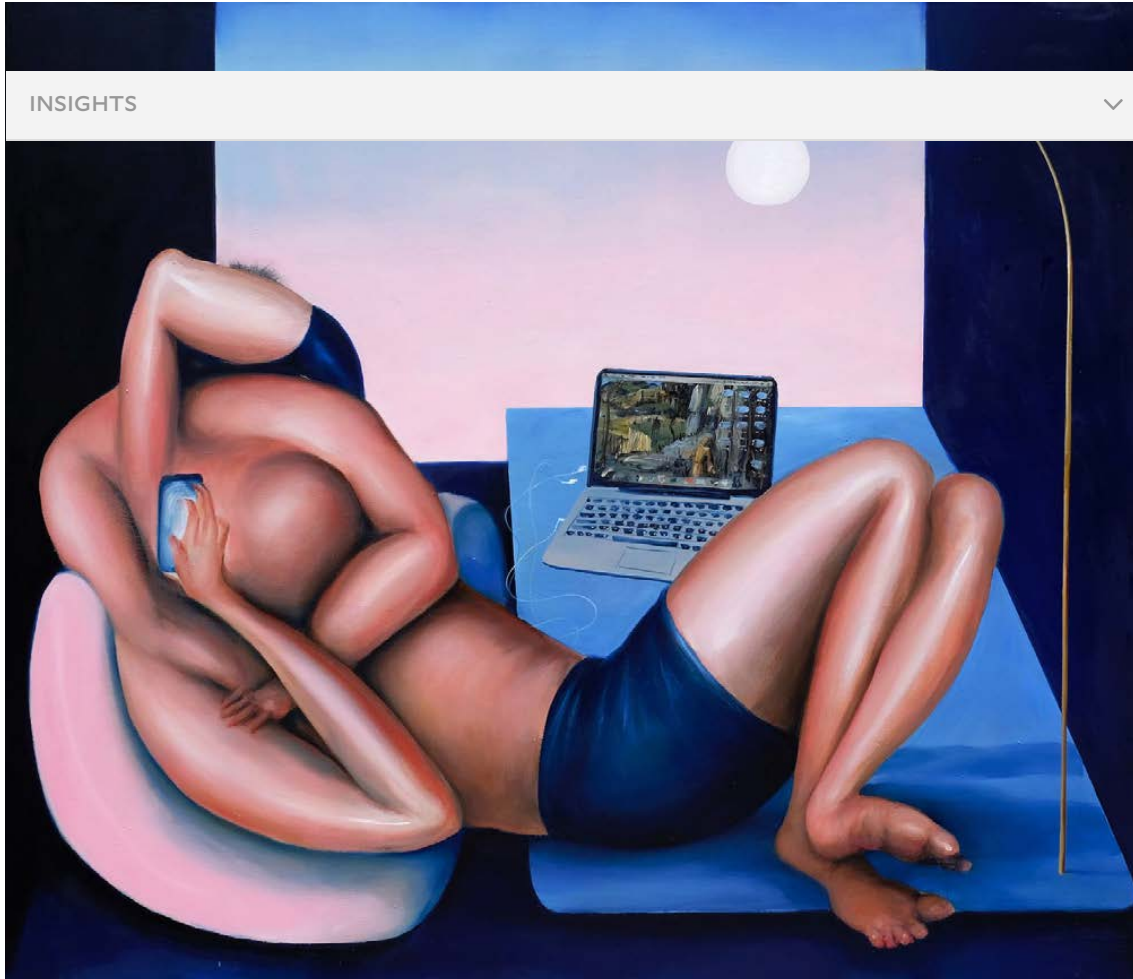


Alvin Ong, *Old Town* (2020). Oil on canvas. 175 x 200 cm. Exhibition view: *Long Distance*, Yavuz Gallery, Sydney (14 May–6 June 2020). Courtesy Yavuz Gallery.

These new works were generated from the artist's experience living between two cities, [Singapore](#) and [London](#): an overarching narrative that has naturally intensified in recent months, resulting in some of his most recent works linking to current conditions. In *Quarantine* (2020), anonymous bodies blend and twist around one another against a cool blue and light pink background, one figure scrolling through a phone while a laptop sits open to the right.

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Alvin Ong, *Quarantine* (2020). Oil on canvas. 175 x 200 cm. Courtesy Yavuz Gallery.

A palette of blues and pinks reigns throughout this new series, stirring a cool sense of detachment despite the binding bodies. The tone contrasts with Ong's earlier works shown in *Supper Club* also at Yavuz Gallery (23 January–24 February 2019), which took place during peak durian season in the region, inspiring the artist to use the rich yellow colour of the fruit's flesh to evoke bombastic displays of desire and eroticism: what he calls 'food made carnal'.

But while the figures in *Supper Club* grasp one another, the anonymous characters in Ong's latest paintings idly reach for mobile and computer devices, headphones strung to their ears. Elements that appear in these compositions—including bubble tea held close to the chest of a multi-limbed, reclining character in *Milk Lover* (2020), and a figure grinding *rempah*, a spice paste prepared in cooking across the Malay archipelago, in *Rempah* (2020)—point to an array of specificities and references. 'The more narratives I can write into a single painting, the more interesting it becomes,' explains Ong. His influences, after all, are far-reaching: spanning Italian mannerist painting to batik and Japanese woodblock, with some pieces like *Mutual Comfort* (2020) interrogating art history, depicting angular

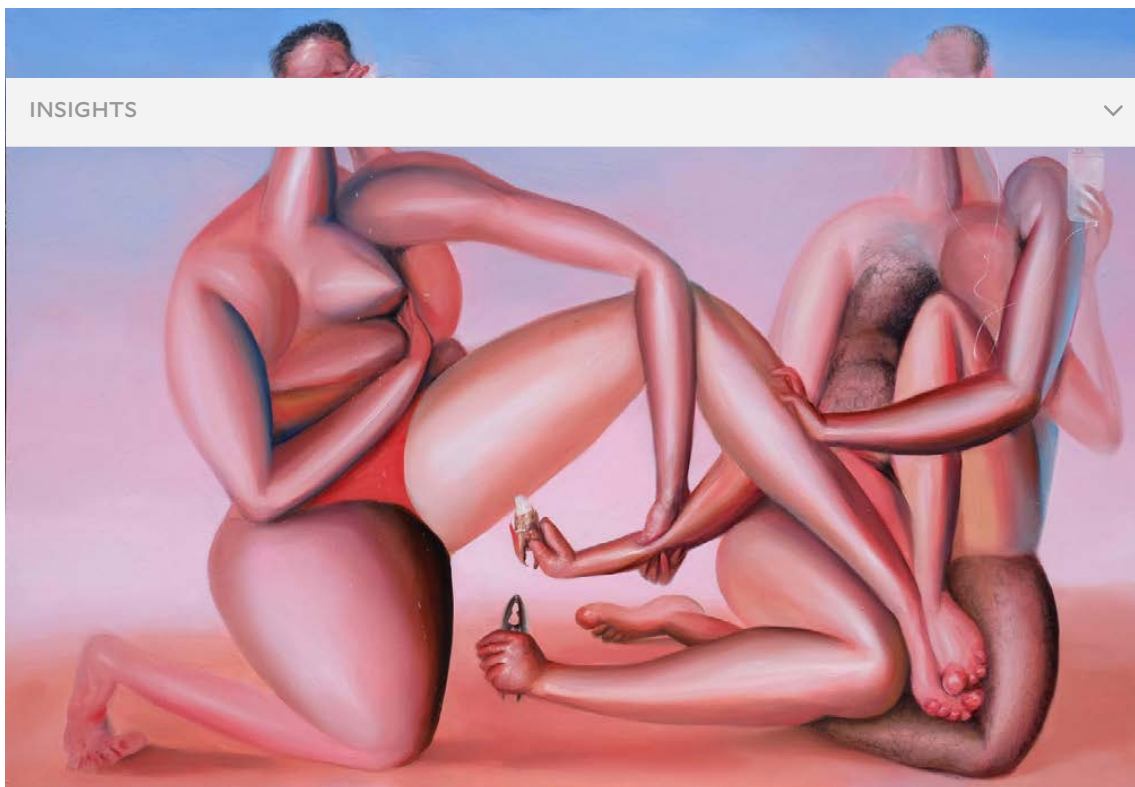
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Alvin Ong, *Supper Club* (2018). Oil on canvas. 165 x 240 cm. Courtesy Yavuz Gallery.

figures recalling Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Al* (O).



Alvin Ong, *Mutual Comfort* (2020). Oil on canvas. 165 x 240 cm. Courtesy Yavuz Gallery.

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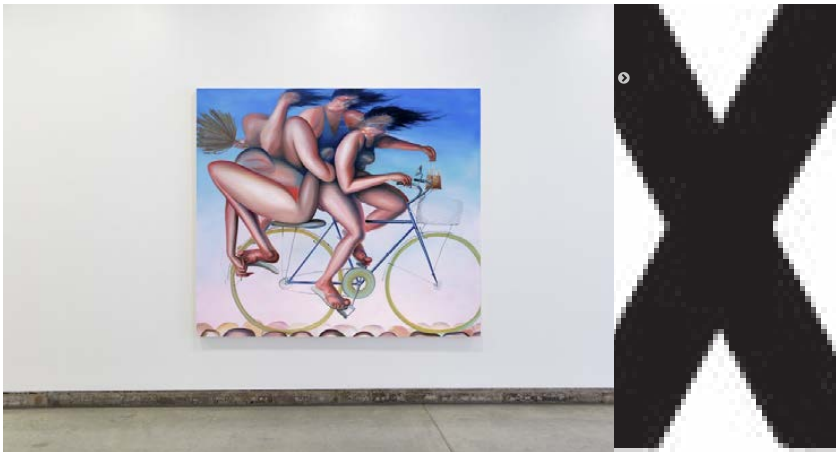
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Ong keeps an open mind throughout the painting process, moving in directions that shift as he goes along. But while the painting process is fluid, the point of departure is more planned. Ong drafts his composition on the canvas: 'designs' that he calls 'architectural structures', harking back to the artist's formative training as an architect, which he abandoned to embark on a BA at the Ruskin in Oxford followed by an MFA from the Royal College of Art. Once painting begins, new directions arise. The moment, Ong says, when the paintings 'become staged, and I think about the colours, props, and various narratives.' In *Old Town* (2020), a thin, blue mount of a bicycle supports three figures, their black hair blowing forwards as if the bicycle is moving backwards at full speed, three free hands brandishing a fan, milk tea, and a cigarette. Dynamic layers of paint are formed from an accumulation of ghost traces; their final forms the result of changes in direction.

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[He's going the "Long Distance"](#), Sasha Bogojev, Juxtapoz Magazine, 26 May, 2020



[Alvin Ong](#) resides both in his birthplace of Singapore, as well as London, where he studied at the Royal College of Art, Perhaps both these locales inspired the title of his new show, *Long Distance*, at the Sydney branch of the [Yavuz Gallery](#). While this current body of work explores the very timely emotions connected to isolation, distance and displacement, the themes stem from Ong's own experiences in two continents, growing up in the suburbs in Southeast Asia and graduating from art school in Oxford in 2016.



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Over the years, Ong has been slowly deconstructing his works and figures, reducing a previously teeming narrative to more gestural interaction, suffused with the use of familiar items. For this latest series, he created a series of oil on canvas works that converge on abstracted, amorphous, nude figures. In unidentified, and thus, identifiable subjects, floating in similarly unspecific, yet familiar elements, the artist creates an atmosphere of fragility and changeability.

"Perhaps they could be a reflection of a sense of otherness stemming from my experiences of distance and displacement living between Singapore and London over the last few years," Ong told *Juxtapoz* about the background of his deconstructed, featureless figures. "These periodic returns have made me see each 'home' in a different light. I think also, that this also has to do with our natural tendencies to shape-shift and code-switch as we move from one place to another. I am really interested in moments and modes of encounter when one culture meets another. Perhaps that is why the subjects are so hybridized and syncretized that one can't really tell where one ends and another begins."



Incorporating everyday items and technical gadgets, Ong creates constructs a larger narrative told through these surreal, borderline grotesque snapshots. "As I was working on this show I knew that they would all be seen together so I might have seen them as sculptures co-existing on the same stage, illuminated by the same stage lighting. I've also noticed how the food references, smartphones and screens keep recurring as the series unfolded. Perhaps it has something to do with connectivity, since both the food and our screens, ever more so, have become the objects through which we relate to one another and create communal experiences, at this moment in time. Looking back on the milk teas and other objects scattered throughout, I realize also how the objects also function as physical projections and manifestations of their interior lives and desires. They are both satisfied and dissatisfied. There's a lot of restlessness going on here."

While not directly inspired by the global pandemic and lockdown scenario that ensnared him in Singapore, many of the works perfectly portray the solitary life most of us have been forced to embrace, and the situation has imbued these paintings with a whole new, albeit unplanned, resonance. "I think that because viewing these images on a screen creates a certain physical and emotional distance, it also feels like I have also become a member of the audience too," Ong explains about how his inability to experience the exhibition in person changed the way the works are experienced. "I don't see it as a negative thing though. I could be that detachment is something we have to get used to, even more so now, as we work remotely in the new normal."

Aside from being a debut show on a new continent, *Long Distance* marks a major move in the young painter's aesthetic, which he plans to pursue. After breaking up his figures and reassembling them, he plans to experiment with deconstructed environments, as well as a broader skin color palette. Ong observes, "Boundaries are blurring. Planes are shifting. I'm playing with vocabulary. It's almost as though I'm continually learning and re-learning my own language." —*Sasha Bogojev*

[Hopper prize artist interview](#), 16 April 2020

The Hopper Prize

Alvin Ong

Alvin Ong on drawing as an anchor through which to navigate other worlds, working at varying scales & locating the local within the global.

How did you get into making art?

I grew up in the suburbs in Singapore, which I found rather banal, so drawing became an anchor through which I could navigate other worlds.

What are you currently working on?

I am finishing up my work for a solo at [Yavuz Gallery](#) in Sydney, which might open end May if the epidemic situation improves. But having made quite a few large works for that show, I've recently decided to switch channels and go back into making works on a smaller scale. Small pieces are like interval training, while the big ones are like long distance running. I like to keep alternating and changing gears. It keeps the studio air from going stale. Very much like a breath; with contraction comes expansion.



The Sydney show is titled "Long distance", which stems from my experiences moving between London and Singapore, and the accompanying emotional longings which accentuated prolonged periods of distance. Many of my figurations are motivated by the idea of locating the local within the global, a reality of

The Hopper Prize

APPLY



What inspired you to get started on this body of work?

reattachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance; a habitation that is complex and multiple but does not cease to be a mode of belonging. “Quarantine”, for example, was made just when I was supposed to fly back to the UK, and countries started locking down. I suppose its also about isolation. From the frame of my desktop to my window looking out into the world, the world suddenly felt really small.

Do you work on distinct projects or do you take a broader approach to your practice?

I’d say that although I work in figuration, I like to see my work as abstractions. They can stem from an idea, a mood, or a piece of music, or a drawing. The process is quite improvisatory. I like to keep things open, and also allow myself to be surprised. Painting a work is very much like having a conversation with a friend.



The Hopper Prize

APPLY



What's a typical day like in your studio?

In the morning I will have my yogurt with fruits before heading in. And I often end up painting for hours. On days when I'm in a hardworking mood but not feeling it I will just stretch and prime canvases. But there are also days where I don't go in at all. I catch an exhibition, swim, hike, or hang out with friends, and quite often these activities bleed into the work. There's a work I made called, "Rempah", which was inspired by my memories of preparing ayam buah beluak with my family. I wanted to make a work about an old fashioned dish but also see if I could also add my own voice into it. My social activities are all shelved now due to Co-vid. But it will be interesting to see what material this



The Hopper Prize

APPLY



lockdown will bring into the studio. Some of my characters have already started donning face masks and isolating themselves in their canvas frames.

Who are your favorite artists?

Off the top of my head, Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Christina Quarles and Dana Schutz. I also admire the work of my peers, Tay XiuChing, Antonia Showering, Francisco Rodriguez, Emma Fineman, Sofia Mitsola and Kostas Sklavenitis, amongst many others. We visit each others studios, hang out, like each other's

posts on instagram, gossip and exchange painting tips.

Where do you go to discover new artists?

Instagram (of course!) and sometimes through an exhibition or word of mouth.

[*Alvin Ong Excels On Extravagant And Hedonistic Painting Narratives In His Work*](#), by Yannis Kostarias, ArtVerge, 24 January 2019

Alvin Ong Excels On Extravagant And Hedonistic Painting Narratives In His Work

Alvin Ong (b. 1988) succulently explores the methodological structure of vision encompassing figurative as well as abstract features on his canvases. Actually, the young artist examines simultaneously the creative comparison between these two expressions of representation. **Sticking with figurative forms, Ong mainly concentrates his approach on human curvaceous figures that comfortably flow on his canvases. At the same time, abstraction is surrounding his work blurring the painting lines, disorientating the eye and confusing the perspectives of clarity.** The colour palette is concentrated on specific hues, such as yellow, black, white and dark blue. Furthermore, the depictions reveal an artistic coherence beholding common-based features: dynamic movement, vivid colours and grotesque scenes. Uncanny bodily silhouettes, mainly rendered in chubby and flabby shapes, evidently dominate his work suggesting the presence of excessiveness. While viewing Ong's work, these body formations play a major role in the provocative portrayal of extravagant visualisations and immoderate narratives.

Words: Yannis Kostarias

Ong seems to make paintings that challenge gender fluidity within his surreal compositions manipulating the gaze with aesthetic details that uplifts the general depiction. The artist notes himself that he tries "to keep a light touch, and I try not to make them overworked. This involves a lot of looking, and allowing the image to come into its own, in its own time". Although the viewer deals with remarkably detailed scenes, the Ong leaves his fantasy to form spontaneous creations where the characters are being slowly developed on the surface of his canvas. **The painting style can be dramatic, yet its outcome is not overworked. Paintings, such as *Insomniacs*, 2018, or *Monsoon Pop*, 2018, illustrate a brutal portrayal of intermingled bodies tangled into gauche and uncoordinated positions.** Characteristically, *Insomniacs'* highlight is the hand of one character fisting the other's mouth, while the latter one's forefinger menacingly moves towards the other figure's eye. Given this environment of fight, this revengefully awkward depiction is centered on the surface establishing it as one of the most aggressive and energetic Ong recently executed. Thus, expressions of agony and torture are thoroughly captured on the characters' swollen faces.

The underlined lack of conventional limits leads the painting outcome into imaginative stories of affluence and hedonism. **The voluptuous body forms do not rest on the overweight and inflexible external appearances, but invest on constructing substantial stories, which successfully fulfill the eye as well as the mind.** Loads of hand movements, freely and illogically choreographed, seem to rule Ong's canvases gradually developing an over-elaborate environment. Clumsy gestures with pointed fingers in uncomfortable positions present an ongoing abnormal body language. Bare hands and legs in summery

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Alvin Ong, Yavuz gallery, solo show, installation view, 2019

also create an additional recurrent motif in his work. Moreover, deformed and irritated facial expressions are emphasised completing the painting framework with grotesque sensations.

Born in Singapore in 1988, Alvin Ong lives and works sharing his time between Singapore and London.

The artist received a BFA from the Ruskin School of Art at the University of Oxford in 2016 and an MA at the Royal College of Art in 2018 supported by the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation. Among his awards is the residency with the Royal Drawing School in 2017, while he has also been the recipient of the 2018 Chadwell Award. His work has been presented in the United Kingdom, Singapore, Australia and Italy in art galleries and museums, such as the Singapore Art Museum, the Rizzuto Gallery, the Carriageworks, the Northampton Contemporary and the National Portrait Gallery.

Art Verge: Can you tell us about the process of making your work? How do you know when painting is finished?

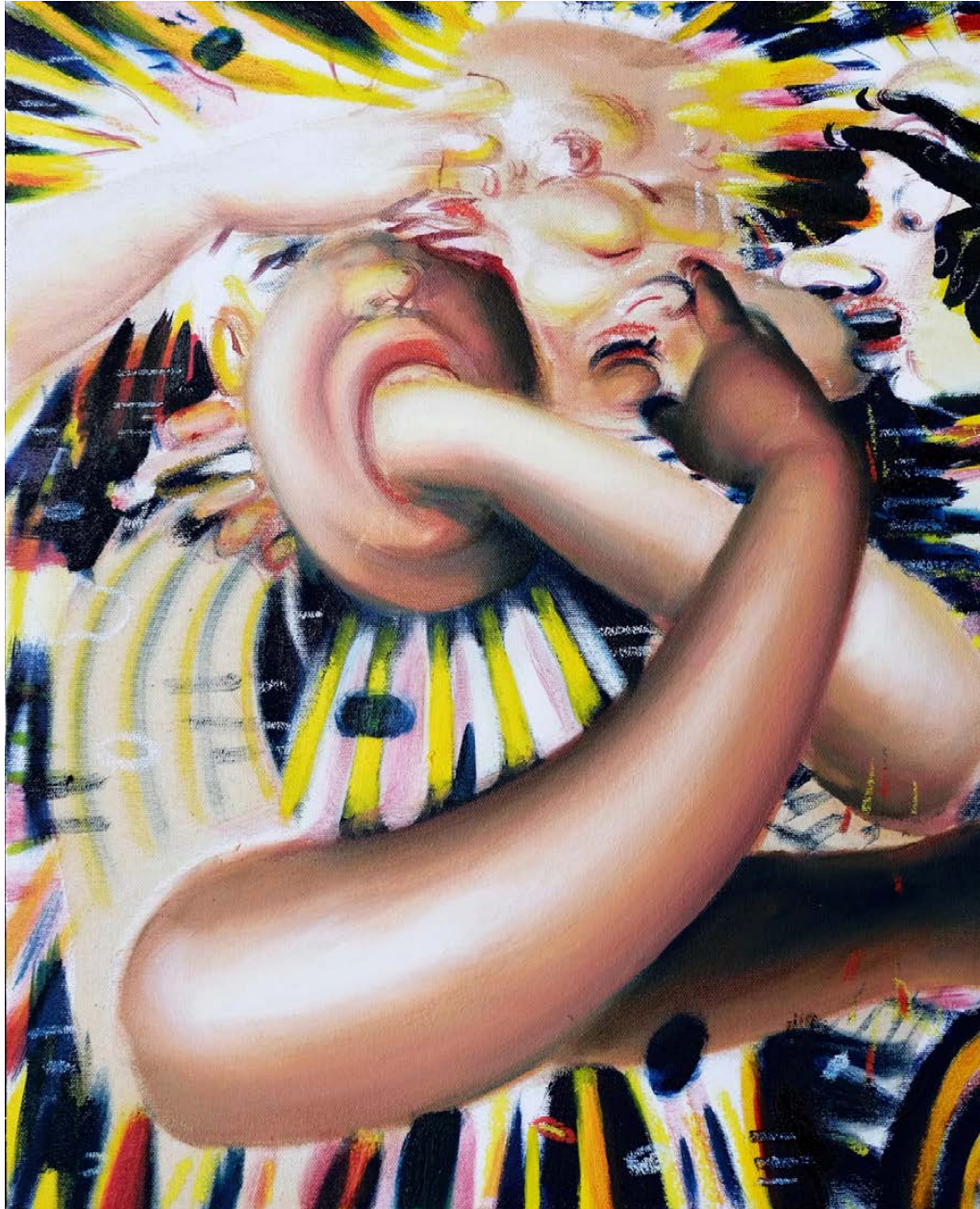
Alvin Ong: I don't really work with a blueprint. I prefer to allow the figures to be borne out of themselves; Parasitic at times, informed by design and accident, wrestling between a mark and an image. At the moment, I find myself using a rather particular palette, and pairing these intense colors against one another – whites, cadmiums and ochres, against umbers, Prussian blues and crimsons. I try to keep a light touch, and I try not to make them overworked. This involves a lot of looking, and allowing the image to come into its own, in its own time. Timing is quite important. Its like deep-frying, where the oil has to be just the right temperature for a quick dip, to give a satisfying and juicy tempura bite.

AV: How would you define your work in a few words (ideally in 3 words)?

AO: Liminal, fecund, grotesque.

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Alvin Ong, *Insomniacs*, 2018, 41 x 52 cm

AV: Can you name any artists you, lately or generally, take inspiration from?

AO: I often find myself drawn to the space of the in-between, where multiple cultures intersect, coalesce and influence one another. Some of the artists I look at include Qi Baishi, Christina Quarles, Dale Lewis, Utagawa Kuniyoshi and Hendra Gunawan.

AV: What do you hope audiences will take from your work?

AO: I don't really dictate how my paintings should be read. As a painter I am often reminded that paint has a life of its own, and I am just the medium.

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Alvin Ong, *Monsoon Pop*, 2018, 175 x 155 cm

AV: What about the place where you work? What's your studio space like, and how does it affect your process?

AO: I work from a spare room in my parent's house when I'm in Singapore, and from a studio in Bow in London. But I increasingly think of the studio as a kind of headspace, so it's quite mobile. In my physical spaces I try to keep an open plan, so that I can move my canvases around. It's important that the canvases have conversations with one another, to allow ideas to germinate for new work to happen.

The larger canvases are often produced in very quick succession. The smaller ones however, take much longer to mature. This has to do with scale, and finding ways to do more with less. I suppose it's similar to how writers talk about the relationship between a short story and a novel.

AV: Creating a new painting can be a solitary process. If this applies to you, when you concentrate on a new artwork does it affect your social life at all?

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AO: I generally like to work in short intensive spurts. And then I leave the studio. I don't come in for weeks, even months. I check out what's on, socialise, travel, get ideas. And then dive back in.

AV: Which exhibition did you visit last?

AO: The most memorable one I saw recently was Elmgreen and Dragset at the Whitechapel in Oct last year. The magic in that show lies in the details. And also perhaps because of how its all quite theatrically staged and curated, what's real and what's not really begins to blur. There was also an element of surprise in some bits too. Really quite an exciting show.

AV: What does your mum think about your art?

AO: According to her, when I was a child, the first thing I drew were circles. And these soon mushroomed like graffiti around the entire flat, even on the toilet paper! Thankfully I have my own studio now, so this is no longer an issue.



Alvin Ong, Eating Air, 2018, 175 x 285 cm

AV: Are you a morning person or a night owl?

AO: Night owl definitely.

AV: Is the glass half empty or half full?

AO: Sometimes half empty, other times full. I use different glass sizes each time.

AV: Which are your plans for the near future?

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AO: I'm currently opening my **solo show at Yavuz Gallery** during Singapore Art Week. Then in mid February, I will be showing with a group of UK-based Singaporeans in London. Concurrently, my gallery will be bringing my work to Art Fair Philippines and Art Basel HK. When I'm back in London I will work on an edition of prints to be shown at the RA in April, then a solo in London in October.



Alvin Ong, Yavuz gallery, solo show, installation view II, 2019



Alvin Ong, Mountain Cat Kings, 2018, 165 x 178 cm

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Alvin Ong, Daydreamer, 2019, 30 x 40 cm



Alvin Ong, Night Swim, 2018, 175 x 145 cm

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Floorr magazine interview, 2 October 2018

Floorr



“I find myself drawn to the spirit of human encounter, when one being encounters another human presence.”

Interview by: Natalia Gonzalez Martin

Could you tell us a bit about yourself and your background? Where did you study?

I was born in Singapore, and did my BA at the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford. I recently graduated from the Royal

My figures seem to be having a good time. They gesture frantically, consuming one another, and also themselves. They gorge and expel. They are very much satisfied and dissatisfied.

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tell us a bit about how you spend your day/studio routine? What is your studio like?

My current work-in-progress will lie waiting, supported by a pair of improvised primer tubs. There's my palette, enamel trays lined with foil, laden with prussian blues, alazarin crimsons, cadmium yellows, whites, and fleshtones. I douse and wake my brushes in white spirit. They are exhausted, still hung over from last night. There's my thinking chair, where I sit to look, and look hard, with my biscuit and a cup of tea.



Black Sesame, 2018

The idea of the myth has been explored by different artists throughout time, what is it about it that inspires you? How would

quick succession. And then I leave them. I don't come in for weeks, or months. I check out what's on, socialize, travel, jot down ideas. And then I dive back in.

In October, I will move into a new studio space in London, and then in November I'm back in Singapore to prepare for my solo show in January. Its a very mobile arrangement.



Mountain Cat King, 2018

You are based between London and Singapore, how does having two main locations (and sources and inspiration)

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I am less interested in specific myths and characters, but rather, I find myself drawn to the spirit of human encounter, when one being encounters another human presence.

The arms and faces in my work do not belong to a specific individual, but they are made active by holding something, pushing, touching, resting, shoving, grasping and groping. I hope to translate what I see as a sensation that I have experienced in my own body; how an arm feels when it meets another piece of flesh, when skin meets skin; how it feels like to be pricked, or when hair meets spike; to flit between pleasure and pain; to have a finger, fingers or mouths and orifices voraciously digging into one another.

In this sense, this engagement in the act of making a painting is a very visceral one. At the same time, it is both highly exhausting, and immensely rewarding. In a digital age, it keeps me alive and human.

Fitting between worlds and cultures makes me look at each with a foreign eye. When I'm in London, I immerse myself amongst the wealth of visual and material culture available here. Back home in Singapore I gorge on its amazing food. These things all eventually find their way back into my practice, like "Mountain Cat King", which I've named after a type of durian.

With the Internet, I find that it matters much less now where one is physically sited. In fact, as I'm typing these answers now I'm in a café in Berlin!

What artwork have you seen recently that has resonated with you?

Seeing Dale Lewis's work in the flesh at the Saatchi Gallery was a definitive moment for me. And in his last solo at Edel Assanti early this year it seemed like he's simply exploded and taken it to the next level.

How do you go about naming your work?

It's a form of translation. A way of groping in the dark for words and teasing them into an arrangement, which offers just enough info without sounding too didactic.

Is there anything new and exciting in the pipeline you would like to tell us about?

Currently working towards my solo show at Yavuz Gallery for Singapore Art Week! Opens in Jan next year.

www.alvin-ong.com

Publish date: 02/10/2018

All Images are courtesy of the artist

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Youngspace interview, 27 July 2018

Alvin Ong

IN DRAWING, PAINTING ON 27/07/18



Alvin Ong just completed an MA at the Royal College of Art in London, following a path of study that started in architecture and took him through the Ruskin College of Art at Oxford. He chats about forging his own path, the influence of music on his practice, and upcoming projects in Singapore. More at the links!

Can you tell me a little bit about you?

I'm currently based in London but I was born and grew up in the suburbs of Singapore, which I found to be rather banal, so drawing became a window into another world. After doing mandatory national service in the army, I went to architecture school, but left to do my BA at the Ruskin in Oxford. At the moment, I've just completed my MA at the RCA.

Music is a huge part of my life here in London. I also enjoy watching masterclasses at the music schools here. I find them hugely illuminating. The music-making process to me is so visceral, it helps me connect the dots to articulate difficulties I have in my own work. Back in Singapore, I mostly gorge myself on its amazing food – like durian, which I used as material for a recent work.

When did you first discover art, or realize you wanted to make it yourself?

My mum would tell me that when I first picked up the pencil, the first thing I drew were circles, which soon mushroomed like algae across our tiny flat, rudely appearing on toilet paper, tabletops, dictionaries, and anything I could lay my paws on.

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Much later, as a young adult, through painting commissions, I managed to save up enough to partially self-fund my education here in the UK. And it was only at the Ruskin that I started to break away from this rather transactional relationship. An act of paring back and diving back in. Today, painting has become, for me, a very visceral thing, a portal through which I lose myself – amidst blurry memories of pushing paint around, breathing fumes, wiping, jabbing and tussling. Most days are shit. But you get that one day when the canvas acquires a life of its own, and that's enough to get you going again.

What ideas are you exploring in your practice?

Sometimes, as a figurative painter, I feel as though I am but a witness, a vessel through which figuration is poured into and offered a space to come into being. In this space, the figures jostle for rank and influence amongst one another, seeking (but not always finding) their place in the world.

Surrounded by atmosphere and energy of a school such as the RCA, and working alongside so many talented painters, my work has changed rather dramatically, particularly during the last 2 years here, no doubt also egged on by tutors like Emma Talbot and Phil Allen.

Most recently, I've been making these rather abstract pieces in Chinese ink – interrogations of my obsessions with a particular family of marks and motifs. hairy and spiky stuff.

What is your process like?

I've found that when I begin my paintings with a particular idea or narrative or a drawing, the resultant paintings often end up looking like illustration. So I enter with a blank canvas, where the propensity to fail is very high, but I find this trill immensely gratifying.

At the moment, I use a rather particular palette – whites, cadmiums, and ochres, set against prussian blues and alazarin crimsons. These color limitations allow space for the development of a visual language. In my application of paint, I try to keep a light touch. I try not to overwork my canvases, so most of my time in studio is spent looking, and looking hard. When I'm stuck, I try to work it out on my doodle app. Most times, a good night's sleep helps resolve everything.

I am most productive in short, intensive bouts, so work is often produced in very quick succession. Its like harvest season where the fruits are all ripe and juicy.

Do you have a mentor, or a piece of advice (or both), which has influenced your practice?

Back in the Ruskin, I had a tutor who told me to stop painting, just because he was a successful video artist. Those were really hard times, but I'm glad I ignored his advice. On the other hand, coming to the RCA, and discussing and witnessing painting and its myriad of process with fellow painters makes me feel very alive.

Ryan Mosley and Dale Lewis were also game changers to me. Encountering their works in the flesh made me feel really excited to be a figurative painter today. But also, I felt the need to assimilate all these influences into my bloodstream and forge my own path into the jungle.

What is your studio like?

I'm currently in between studios at the moment, having left the RCA and moving to one in Bow. When I'm back in Singapore, I use the spare room as a studio. Its a very mobile arrangement. Here is a picture of my space when I was on residency at the Royal Drawing School last year, and this one, when I was at the RCA.

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What do you find most daunting, challenging, or frustrating about pursuing art?

It's a little like going on a long trek, a deep plunge into the unknown. I pack what I think I will come handy, and I leave the rest to the journey and the road. I don't want to be a CV artist. I try to stay as honest to myself as I can. When the work is done, I allow myself to spend some time with them before they leave the studio, and forge their own lives. I find myself requiring some level of distance before I can talk about my own work.

What are three words you would use to describe your work?

Liminal. Grotesque. Fecund.

What are you working on right now?

I'm now planning and making work for a solo show at Yavuz Gallery in Singapore which opens during Art Week in January next year. Really looking forward to that!

Find more at alvin-ong.com and on Instagram [@alvinonglj](https://www.instagram.com/alvinonglj/)!

[BP Portrait Award 2018 review](#), in Timeout London, 13 June 2018

BP Portrait Award 2018 review

Art ★★★★★

ADVERTISING

Time Out says

★★★★★

Immediately on entry to the 39th year of the Portrait Award, you're faced with a photorealistic painting – it's amazingly impressive, and a bit dull. Exactly what you'd expect from the Portrait Award. But this year's prize isn't entirely filled with the usual same-y works, the ones we all gawp at for their makers' ability to use paint like a camera. It feels like this time the judges have loosened up a bit and thrown in some wildcards in an attempt to give us a broader view of what a portrait can be.

'Time Traveller, Matthew Napping' by Felicia Forte is a scene-stealer. It's personal and provocative, a portrait of a figure, faceless and laid up in bed with the red light of his room shining on our faces. The bigger works like this understandably demand attention, but it's in the smaller ones that you'll see some of the most experimental stuff. 'Ako' by Nikita Sacha is about video-calling and replaces a face with a frustrated abstract blur. 'Charlie Masson' by Alvin Ong feels like a trippy take on Van Gogh's post-impressionist aesthetic. 'Dad's Last Day' by Nathan Ford is a heartbreaking part-sketched, part-painted scene of the artist's dying father. Upstairs, Caspar White uses scrap envelopes, record sleeves and brushed steel to capture the moods of the Berlin and Mallorca club scene. His works move between nights raving and days hanging – an unlikely but welcome narrative in the NPG.

Forte's painting took second place to Miriam Escofet's 'An Angel At My Table'. Featuring Escofet's elderly mother enjoying a pristine high tea, the work seems pretty normal at first, until you notice parts of the old lady's tea set are blurred in motion. It makes you view the whole thing over again as about the passing of time, rather than the capture of one single, perfectly rendered moment. It's also a clue that the portrait award might be shifting (albeit slowly) in a more interesting direction

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[Walking the pilgrim's way](#), Cherwell, 30 January, 2017



The artist in his studio at the Ruskin in 2015, photo courtesy of Amy Thellusson.

30th January 2017

Singaporean-born painter and Ruskin alumnus Alvin Ong spends his life in-between continents, unsettled and unsettling. As he travels through countries, he moves lightly across art and forms of representation, depicting scenes stuck between internal, near-fictive visions and the everyday world.

He studied architecture for two years before choosing painting as his primary medium, for its versatility and the flexibility it offers. “In architecture school, my drawings acquired the camouflage of the designer, dedicated to the ceaseless production of preliminary ideas, false starts—lines that suggested wall, floor, concrete, garden, bush.” This brings him to his years at the Ruskin School of Art, which ended with the highlight of the 2016 Ruskin show put on by the year’s graduating students. “I think because of the linear instruction I received in my previous education, I found it initially difficult to adjust to life at the Ruskin. So I continued accepting commissions, doing one for Chelmsford priory, and a few for the Oxford Oratory down the road from my college, St Anne’s.

“Gradually, I began to devote my energies away from commissions and toward the rhythm of a self-driven practice. At the same time, I also found through the presence of my neighbours a creative energy in the studio, as we spurred one another on to take bigger risks. The school became a safe space for experimentation.”

‘We will meet’, Alvin Ong’s second solo exhibition was shown last year in the Chan Hampe galleries, set inside the prestigious white walls of Singapore’s Raffles Hotel Arcade. The initial idea for the exhibition came to the

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artist and poet friend Theophilus Kwek during their years in Oxford, leading to similar experimentation which took three years to finalise. The result is a collection of large canvases and short, free verse poems each with the same titles providing them with a common starting point from which they then build their own atmospheres.

“In my painting titles, I find myself often drawing from poetry and song, mediums which give voice to that which can be felt, but not necessarily understood. One of my personal favorites, for example, is the painting, ‘A Shadow and a dream’. I took the title from Tavener’s choral work, ‘Song for Athene’, which I felt vacillated between the feelings of arrival and departure. In very much the same way, I also see the function of the text, alongside Theo’s poems, as given to suggestion, as opposed to illustration.”

Working with newly-assembled words on ‘We will meet’ was not an exception for Alvin Ong. Theophilus and him share an interest in travel, in the way history is presented today and in all the possible consequences of this on a rather unstable notion of identity, which had already led them to work together on the writer’s poetry collection *Giving Ground*, where roles were switched as Alvin’s art completed the text.

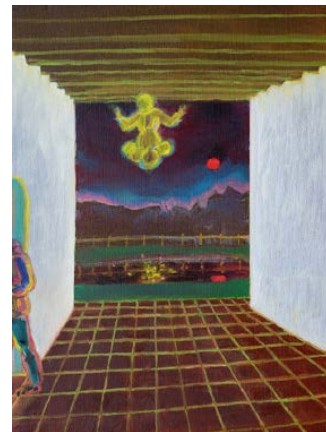
“‘We will meet’ came out of an ancient pilgrim route I undertook on foot over Easter last year, traversing around 800 kilometers of the Spanish northern coast from Irun to Santiago de Compostela, and then to the cape of Finisterra, the ‘end of the Earth’. Each day, I found myself in a different town, sleeping under a different roof. ‘Home’ became a place to rest my aching feet, to share a meal, to sleep and to clean oneself. Some of these pilgrim inns were ran by volunteers, while others were convents, monasteries or farms.”



Alvin Ong, 'The Miracle'.



Alvin Ong, 'A shadow and a dream'.



Alvin Ong, 'Into great silence'.



Alvin Ong, 'We will meet', the triptych which gave its name to the exhibition.

These foreign images became the basis of Alvin’s next paintings, mixing in the various atmospheres and by then slightly blurred faces he met during his travels.

“Along the way, I also met and walked with other people. We would trade stories, share our food and our lives with one another. I am left with the memories of these encounters, no matter how fleeting, and these are the

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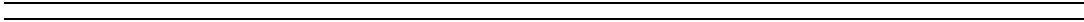
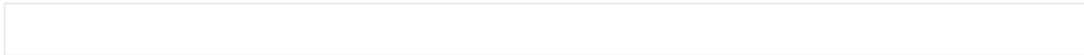
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starting points for each of my paintings in this series.”

Alvin’s paintings are lit by fuzzy back and sidelights, making his journey companions into silhouettes whose outlines are reinforced by startling colours. The grain of the canvas and the thick lines of painting bring a confusing sense of materiality in his images of monks and ritual processions.

“The wee hours past midnight on Good Friday in Seville were the most dramatic of the Easter processions, against miraculous icons and objects surrounded by flowers, incense, and candlelight. These were the memories that inspired ‘The miracle’.

“Like them, the convents and monasteries that sheltered me in Spain always seemed to belong to another place and time. There was one night in Ziortza when after the evening prayers, the monks switched off all the lights and just sat in silence. I sat with them, in that stillness; it was such a memory of indescribable simplicity and beauty. These are the places I return to in painting. Fictional places I found myself revisiting, all mixed up in wonder, fascination, and alienation.”



A Young Painter's Promise, the Peranakan, Issue 01/15, p. 40-1



promise

BABA BRYAN TAN SITS DOWN WITH ALVIN ONG TO DISCUSS HIS INFLUENCES AND ASPIRATIONS AS A PAINTER

When I heard I was to interview Alvin Ong, a prodigious local painter and youngest winner of the UOB Painting of the Year award in 2005 at the age of 16, I immediately imagined someone who had been cooped up for too long in a room without showering. Someone who always had smudges of paint pigments on his fingers and clothes. But the person who turned up at my doorstep was quite something else.

As a fellow contemporary aged 27, Alvin is the perfect depiction of the boy next door. Affable and unassuming, he smiles seriously as he recounts his humble beginnings growing up.

"I'm not Peranakan by descent, but I spent a lot of time with my godparents and their extended family who are Peranakan. I assimilated a lot of aspects of the culture growing up with them," he recalls. "My paintings are a record of social memory, stories that I think are worth preserving."

One of his earlier sketches featured the living room

of his godparents' house. "This place has a special place in my heart, because it holds many memories of family events. It was very organic and eclectic. Antique furniture and photos sat casually next to their modern counterparts. For me it is a way in which memories are layered on top of one another."

Fast-forward to the present, and Alvin describes a recent privately commissioned piece, *The Holy Family* for a Peranakan home. Looking past the religious subject matter, one discovers the painting to be a stunning visual compendium of cultural references: the *poh kia ee*, the Virgin's *kasot manek*, her *udang galah* tinted *sarong kebaya*, Joseph's *sarong*, a mother-of-pearl chair, the *belimbing* tree and the potted plants. All of these combine to conjure a world perhaps only familiar to an older generation.

Alvin talks about the Bukit Brown cemetery; witnessing its subsequent redevelopment prompted him to interrogate his roots and the price we pay for development. *In Search of Tanah Airku* is a recent work in which many of these thoughts come together. This work features what seems to be an exhumation amongst a gathering of figures.

I probe into its slightly dark and morbid elements and he nods wryly in acknowledgement. "My paintings may seem a bit melancholic and nostalgic, but sometimes I think death and loss isn't something to be *pantang* (superstitious) about, because they are part and parcel of life."

When asked about the parallels to Peranakan culture, whether discovering what is past and forgotten is a way to move forward, Alvin wholeheartedly agrees. "Culture and

In Search of Tanah Airku (125 x 180cm). Painted in oil on canvas in 2015, it features what seems to be an exhumation amongst a gathering of figures.

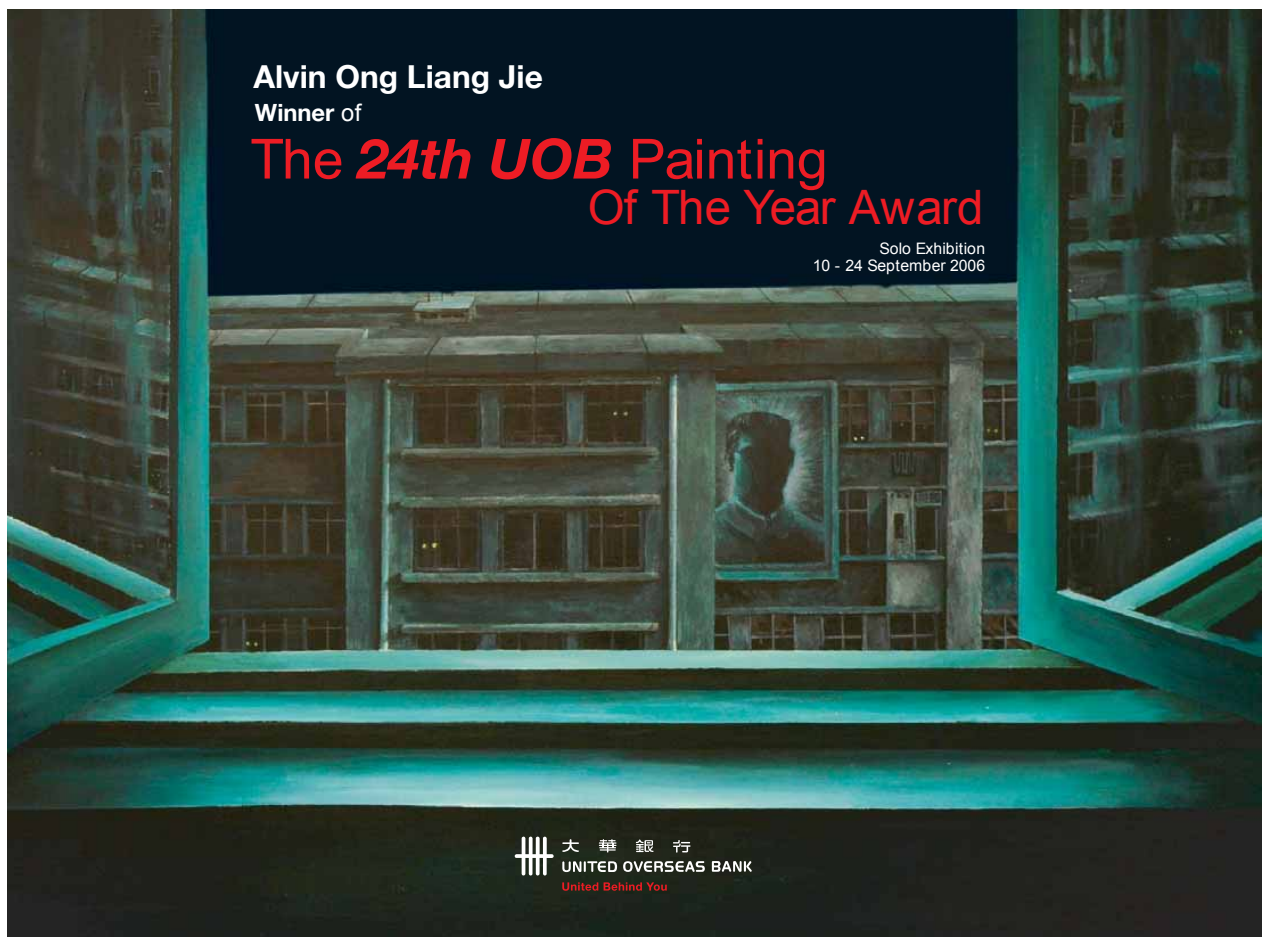
tradition are our anchors in a changing world," he muses. "But at the same time not static, because of the people who inherit it and continue to sustain it." Alvin is now reading fine art in Oxford. ●



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The Artist's Window – Interview with Alvin Ong, exhibition catalogue, 2006



Alvin Ong Liang Jie

Winner, The 24th UOB Painting Of The Year Competition

The first surrealist painting I remember seeing was de Chirico's "The Soothsayer's Recompense". I was struck by his surrealistic configuration - in particular, the presence of intense, vibrant colours and hallucinatory forms set in a weird and silent landscape. The overall effect was timeless and dreamlike.

At the end of Secondary Four, moving on to Junior College. I experienced an intense reluctance to leave behind all the faces, places and spaces of my secondary school, Saint Joseph's Institution (SJI). Having spent four years of my life there, it was only fitting that I should dedicate a work to it. Whilst looking back, I felt an intense desire to resist the changes around me; that I may return to the past instead. It was my first intense experience of nostalgia, and it was surreal, reminding me of the works of Dali, de Chirico, Kahlo and Rene Magritte.

In this exhibition, each painting functions as a part that make up a whole. Though I have infused specific symbolism and messages in my works, you are welcome to draw your own conclusions and immerse yourself in a world of infinite space, fantasy and hallucination.

Do enjoy the paintings.

Alvin Ong

Alvin Ong
December 2005

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Title | Preludes Medium | Acrylic Size | 61 x 92 cm

Serving as a preface to the series, the artist reconstructed architectural motifs of his school into an entirely new structure, reflecting his interpretations of his personal experiences. There is a recurrent architectural motif throughout the series that frames a staircase leading to a platform; a dreamlike world within another world. In addition, there is also an apparition of a distorted clothed figure transfixed in space, legless, engaged in an act of self-strangulation. The allusion to the elusive and suffocating nature of nostalgia is a kind of fantasy that has no bearing at all on reality.



Title | The Lighting of the Lamps Medium | Acrylic Size | 120 x 180 cm

Time past and time future. What might have been and what has been. The earliest of the series, this work explores feelings of uncertainty for what the future holds. Here is a vision that gives one the strength to face the future with confidence. In the words of T.S. Eliot, "If all time is eternally present, all time is unredeemable."



Title | Signs of Evening Medium | Acrylic Size | 92 x 61 cm

Places evoke reality. They do not embody it. A place is nothing without a person. Places on their own, however beautiful, have no human significance. They may astound you with their natural significance, touch you with their uniqueness, even remind you of other places you have been to, bringing into play a dance of memories, a whirling dream of suggestions. But, any place is memorable because of what it suggests and means to us, what it contains, or for the memories evoked of friends or enemies, of lovers, siblings or people who in some way or other have helped to shape our lives.



Title | The Hours Medium | Acrylic Size | 153 x 76 cm

A never-ending, almost deserted avenue, "a place of disaffection". In dim light: neither daylight, investing form with lucid stillness. Two roads or one? This is uncertain, but if the latter holds true, then are these parallel worlds in which we live? Intense melancholy prevails. The scale and proportion of the objects defy logic. The boy appears to "resist the flow" of the street - the passage of time. Like memories, the curving colonnade in the foreground appears more distinct, while the receding ones are distant, locked in the obscure recesses of the unconscious mind. One can also make out people in the structures, who turn their backs to us, thus creating a sense of anonymity. They nevertheless strongly resemble monks, who in their monasteries, practice a routine lifestyle unchanged throughout the ages. One question remains unanswered. Should we always move on in life? Did the artist move on?



The Artist's Window Interview with Alvin Ong

By Jonathan Ko
National Junior College



Title | The Window **Medium** | Acrylic **Size** | 73 x 93 cm

In this painting, the artist explores the issue of dictatorship. Traditionally, the window is a symbol of freedom, but one is instead confronted by foreboding; bleak and cold buildings that leave one feeling oppressed, stifling any hope of escape. One also senses that he or she is being watched, or are we watching them instead?

Q: Your award-winning painting "The Window" is a thought-provoking blend of historical and political ideas. We also understand that you were top student in History for the Term 3 Common Test. Do history and politics have a strong effect on the way you look at things?

(Laughs) I guess that I am very much influenced by history and politics. Often, considering the historical and political aspects of issues do make them more interesting to me. I find it fascinating to see how lifestyles, outlooks and trends have changed as time passes, and the many sudden twist and turns in previous centuries have made me realise that the only concern is **change**.

Q: What, in your opinion, is the significance of your depiction of Orwell's dystopia in today's world?

I feel that many of us in Singapore, myself included, do not experience the "Nineteen Eighty-Four" depicted in his book. It is a world entirely different from **ours** and I felt inspired to do something that at least faintly recreates the feelings the characters in the book experienced. **Orwell's** "Nineteen Eighty-Four" **was** to me, very heavy material, in the sense that it managed to explore so many humongous issues in just one book. Orwell created an oppressive atmosphere in his surreal, bleak, sinister world. **His** description was so powerful that I could literally form images and visions of that world in my head. I had originally set out to create a surreal painting, but in the end, I guess political issues unconsciously seeped in.

I believe that although "Nineteen Eighty-Four" is set 21 years in the past, such a world of complete control still remains a relevant concern for us today. Orwell probably wrote this book to pen down **his** disillusionment **with** the failure of his realisation of an ideal world. What he explores gains relevance today in the absence of a utopia in our **time**; where the future remains uncertain.

It's often said that "Art is the window to man's soul". In Alvin Ong's case however, it was his soulful **work**: a thought-provoking rendition of a window, which opened up a whole new world of possibilities for this budding artist. Ong's work, "The Window" provides new perspectives on dictatorship, and was inspired by political novelist George Orwell's famous work, "Nineteen Eighty-Four". This painting beat some 940 entries to clinch the prestigious title of "The UOB Painting of the Year" in 2005. Initially an entry for the Junior section, "The Window" impressed the competition judges to the extent that it was awarded the competition's highest honour, besting even the entries from participants in the open category. At 16 years old, Alvin is the competition's youngest winner.

In an interview, I met up with this hardworking, unassuming NJCian (National Junior College), ex-Josephian (St. Joseph's Institution), aspiring architect and student in the NJC Art Elective Programme (AEP) and had the chance to discuss his aspirations, academics, and his art.

Q: You've received quite a lot of attention since being given the award. Care to share your feelings on being recognised for your work?

Winning the award came as a surprise to me, and I am indeed honoured to have my work recognised. The publicity has certainly elicited a lot of feedback on my painting and these have been invaluable in pointing out areas I should work on. This has certainly been a learning experience and has also injected a lot of encouragement in pursuing my passion for art. However, I also feel the pressure to perform as many people will be watching me from now on. Nevertheless, I will still strive to do my best.

Q: Your talent and interest in art has certainly brought you where you are today. How did you discover this flair for art?

I don't think art came to me purely through divine illumination. It was a long process where I slowly grew to learn art, and my teachers were the ones who gave me a good foundation in it. One of them is Mrs Tan Lai Kuen, my secondary school art teacher. I grew a lot under her guidance, and she made me realise my potential. I personally feel that she is a very motivated teacher who inspires her classes to do their best. Mr Chia Wei Hou, my art teacher here in NJC, went a step further, and encouraged us students to stretch ourselves to the limit. He also inspired me to paint this particular work. My parents were also very encouraging and provided the moral support, without which, I probably would have given up art. My friends also helped sustain my interest. Taking Art as an examination subject means having to endure long grueling hours of art classes, and my friends livened up these classes and made art-making less painful. Personally I feel that my formal training in my secondary school was very useful in stoking my passion. It was the firm foundation I had there, coupled with what I have been taught here in **NJC**, that **gave** me the confidence to express what I wanted to say with paint on paper.

Q: We understand that you plan to become an architect. How will your accomplishments in art affect your aspirations for the future?

I don't think that such an award will change my outlook. Personally, I still feel that it is very hard to make it as an artist here, and I feel that publicity doesn't change public perception of your artwork much. I see architecture as a form of art, and you can also call me an artist in that way. **I am** fascinated by structures **as they** deal with space, composition and practicality, while at the same **time**, **require** a certain sensitivity to the aesthetics. I also feel that architecture is very reflective of a society's culture, lifestyle, and mindful of this, I try to express it in my work.

Q: Can you describe the type of fulfillment you find in art/drawing?

The greatest fulfillment I get from creating works of art is the sense of accomplishment I get after I complete them. Art has also made me more observant and sensitive to the things I see around me. Looking back on previous works is also a very pleasant experience, as I am able to recall the thoughts and feelings which I had at the time. Looking back also shows me how I have developed over time and is the closest I can get to "stepping back in time". The award has definitely encouraged me to put more effort into my art as I feel that the solo exhibition is a rare opportunity and I do not want to let the school, my parents, teachers, friends and sponsors down.

Q: What would you attribute your success to: talent or inspiration and hard work?

I must admit that the entire process right from conceptualising to completing the painting was very difficult and painful. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the entire process deals with ideas in the subconscious mind, but the end product deals with something logical and **tangible**. Hence, I would attribute my success mostly to inspiration, and hard work. Of course, talent helps along the way by making this process of art-making less painful. I would be nowhere without inspiration, which is why I give Orwell so much credit this time round.



"Boy, Uninterrupted", The Straits Times, 18 July, 2005

Life:People

The Straits Times Monday, July 18, 2005

7

Boy, uninterrupted

Only 16, this year's UOB Painting of the Year winner comes across as an earnest teenager

Clara Chow
ARTS REPORTER

WHEN one first meets Alvin Ong Liang Jie in his mother's kitchen, he shakes your hand and tells you he is "honoured" to meet you.

So warm and sincere is he that, even if you're a cynical struggling artist (which I'm not), it'd be hard to begrudge Ong for being \$20,000 richer for winning an established art award.

The 16-year-old became the youngest winner of the UOB Painting of the Year last Saturday for his acrylic painting entitled *The Window*.

The work, inspired by George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984, was meant as a comment on dictatorship.

The 73cm x 93cm canvas is deliberately tinted in grey-greens, showing a view of grim, cramped housing blocks. The cold empty scene could be Belgrade or Bushan.

But the painting also had another resonance for the artist. He had been frantically studying for his school's common tests when he painted it earlier this year.

"I felt oppressed by time," he reveals, shedding more light on the painting's bleak vision.

Incidentally, if you're doing the math, you'll realise that Ong was born in 1988 — four years after the setting in Orwell's watershed title.

Still, despite his youth, the budding artist is not about to let early success get to his head.

Says Ong, a first-year student at National Junior College: "My teachers have spoken to me about the award. They told me to continue to work hard and not become complacent."

In person, he is bespectacled and lanky-limbed, with a ready grin and a knack for giving earnest and articulate answers.

He adds: "My classmates are more ecstatic about the win than me. They tease me about how \$20,000 means I can treat them to many meals."

Nice try, folks. But for now, says Ong, the prize money is going into his bank account to help pay for his university fees in future.

Kicking back in the dining room, clad in a Great Wall of China T-shirt and bermudas, Ong exudes the easy confidence of a teenager who has been

nurtured with love by his family.

His parents, Mr Ong Tuck Soon, 54, a financial consultant, and Madam Jessica Peck, 45, a senior engineer, sit beside him during the interview in their three-storey terrace house in Boon Lay, offering quiet support for their only child. In turn, he has an easy camaraderie with his parents.

The couple are not quite sure where their son's artistic talents come from.

But, says his father, it could be due in some part to the annual holidays to Europe and America they take him on.

This exposure to different landscapes and architectural styles probably helps inspire him.

Concurring, Ong speaks about the colourful Mexican architecture and places of worship he is fascinated by.

During his secondary school days in St Joseph's Institution, he copied the works of masters Georgia O'Keefe and Vincent Van Gogh for his art classes.

With a cheeky grin, he says: "I was a beginner. I didn't want to try too hard. So I chose paintings that were easier to copy."

The win is all the more surprising when he tells you that he has only completed one other original painting apart from *The Window*: a self-portrait in acrylic, after the style of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, that he had submitted as part of his GCE O-level art examination.

He is full of admiration for Kahlo: "Her life was quite tragic, yet she managed to convey what happened to her in a powerful visual form."

Now in the arts elective programme in junior college, he jokes that his art teachers put him through "sadistic" exercises such as drawing portraits with markers attached to long poles.

But he is also excited at the prospect of taking up a sculpture module soon.

Nor are his talents limited to visual arts. The enthusiastic teenager has also fenced for four years and plays the organ, violin and piano.

In time, he hopes to become an architect, while still painting in his spare time.

He explains: "Architecture is also a form of art, just that it deals with 3D structures."

He readily admits that his life thus far has been smooth-sailing "for an artist". This is especially in comparison to Kahlo's, who was bedridden with pain after a bus accident and had to put up with her husband's serial infidelity.

But, he adds: "I feel that I don't have to suffer to create great art. As long as I'm inspired by the people around me."

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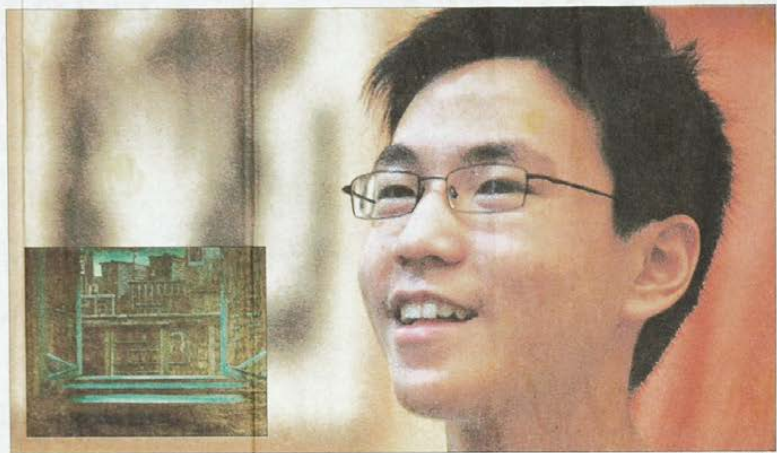


PHOTO: STEVEN LEE

The youngest winner of the UOB Painting of the Year award, Alvin Ong Liang Jie, 16, depicts dystopia in his painting, *The Window* (inset).