



Places Remembered

One Singaporean artist is taking it slow to memorialise the island city's oft-forgotten sights into poignant digital portraits.

By Sng Ler Jun

WHEN IT COMES to his digital masterpieces, Singaporean artist Jonathan Yong-Ern Lim isn't too fond of the adjective "nostalgic". "[Nostalgia] is probably the most common word that people use to describe my paintings," he says. "I think it's nice to remember the past fondly, but my works have always been painted with the present in mind. I don't think you can feel nostalgic for the present."

And so, in the spirit of immortalising the present, the 28-year-old Lim chronicles unassuming sights of the city into visceral digitalised paintings, which are posted onto his Instagram account (@whereartjon). There, he documents often neglected observations of Singapore in earnest, juxtaposing vibrant colours against a seemingly dreary backdrop.

In "Time's Arrow" (2017), two middle-aged men "face off" with each other in a game of chess over kopi (the colloquial term for 'coffee') at a void deck (the communal space on the ground floor of a block of public housing'); in another, a solitary figure sits on a park bench by a canal along Ubi Avenue with his head hung low and his gaze fixed on his phone on a quiet evening.

Subjects in his portraits are either seen hunched over or have their backs to the viewers. In a sense, it's as if the viewers are the intruders who have encroached into the subjects' personal space. But what makes Lim's works most enthralling isn't the way he "freezes" time, it's the sense of humanness and tenderness in his portraits that make viewers, particularly Singaporeans, reach an epiphany – that insignificant moments can be heart-warming, tender and precious too.



In other words, in a world fuelled by the constant hustle and bustle of everyday life, and being constantly plugged in, Lim's paintings, which veer towards the sphere of realism, implore viewers to slow down, embrace stillness and appreciate simplicity. "I've always been interested in simple things. There's this sentence from the fictional film "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty", which describes how beautiful things never ask for attention, and I think because quiet things don't ask for attention, they deserve every bit of spotlight."

While much of Lim's works are reminiscent of the masterpieces from celebrated realist painter Edward Hopper, whose works focused on the solitary realities of life in the 20th

century, Lim, whose foray into the arts began as early as 13 years of age, looks to Dutch post-impressionist painter Van Gogh, writer David Foster Wallace, and musician Chester Bennington from Linkin Park for inspiration. Elaborating on the latter, who passed away in 2017, he shares, "I grew up listening to Linkin Park. Chester came from a troubled childhood and still did his best to translate his suffering into art that people can find comfort in."

Lim is also forthcoming with his creative process. He is observant, intuitive, and often relies on his daily commute for inspiration. A scene that has been deemed worthy or bears the slightest potential to transform into a portrait is documented by his phone camera. "At times, I'd do it inconspicuously. Other times, I'd seek permission. But every now and then, I'd stop and take a snapshot of something that captures my eye," he says. "I guess a moment is worth capturing when it convinces me that it is something my viewers can relate to, too."

Born in Singapore in 1992, the artist belongs to the millennial generation, whose demographics are known to be tech-savvy, loquacious, and having unflinching conviction in life. It, therefore, makes sense that Lim adopts social media as his ideal medium of expression. To Lim, Instagram is a liberating playground; there is ample room to explore and plenty of opportunities to play around with. The digital medium, he explains, proffers both versatility and efficiency. "It's a whole lot faster to paint digitally. It's also quick to reproduce, re-adapt, and re-edit. You can make variants of the same thing, explore these variants, or use all the variants in your final delivery."

At present, Lim's works have been exhibited at local galleries and graced the covers of CD albums and vinyl album jackets, including those of Singaporean singer-songwriter Seah Weiwen, and London-based composer and producer Kin Leonn. It appears that 2020 is going to be a busy year for Lim: he will be hosting a small exhibition following the end of his artist residency with NPE (previously known as National Photo Engraver Print Communications), publishing his debut graphic novel, and working on plans for international collaborations with other musicians and fashion labels.

"It's a good time to be busy." ▣



Clockwise from top: Jonathan Yong-ern Lim photographed by Sadrina Shukor in a Singapore Housing Development Board estate; "Cathedral of the Good Shepherd", 2018; "Time's Arrow", 2017. Opposite clockwise from top left: "When Am I Going to Lose You", 2019; "Elgin Bridge", 2019; "Bus 54", 2017.



IMAGES COURTESY OF JONATHAN LIM (5) AND SADRINA SHUKOR (1).

