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MEMOIRS OF AN INDIECOMIC ARTIST

Chong Chin Yew uses his work to tell his story, fulfil his dreams and make a living, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

IT'S one of the haziest days and after climbing a flight of stairs to arrive at Findars Art Gallery, I'm grateful to be offered a seat. Once I've caught my breath, host Chong Chin Yew prepares a pot of Chinese tea while I take a look around.

On the wall, there's an enormous black and white mural depicting Chin Yew. Next to this is a series of cartoons. Together, they form part of artist Chin Yew's exhibition called Ink Crisis.

"All the work is on acid-free Bristol boards and I use water-proof ink," shares Chin Yew, pointing to the wall. Handing me a cup of tea, he confesses that he needed courage to exhibit these works because the medium he's used shows all the markings, thereby, making any mistakes visible. Also, he's used blu-tack to attach his work onto the wall. Some fall off in the intense tropical heat and Chin Yew has no desire to put them back up.

This means that the exhibition has a short life-span and he hopes that people will come to view before they're all gone. As the interview progresses, it becomes clear how he developed this sense of urgency and need to record what's happening in and around him.

LOVE FOR COMICS

Born and brought up in Kuala Lumpur, Chin Yew studied in what he calls the "semi-international" Sri Garden International School. In retrospect, this was a good option since it was cheaper than other international schools and he was spared the scourge of gangsterism prevalent in other schools.

"Look at this one," Chin Yew says and leads me to one of his cartoons. "Remember those calendars where every day we'd tear one sheet off? I asked my aunt to give those to me so that I could draw on the back of them."

In the cartoon, his aunt is scolding

the happy little boy. Grinning, Chin Yew admits: "I couldn't wait. I'd torn off all the sheets. She was furious." Shaking his head, he adds: "I've always loved comics."

Once he completed school, Chin Yew's options were to pursue a course in business or join the family's clothing business. After all, his holidays were spent working at the factory or at his parents' boutiques in Sungei Wang Plaza.

Before he made a decision, though, Chin Yew undertook a number of odd jobs, from selling VCDs to being involved in multi-level marketing. He learnt some important lessons and says: "One time, I had to go to the top floor in a building. It was really dark and all I could see was the light at the top. I was frightened, but I knew that I should just march on through the darkness. I can't remember what happened at the top or whether or not I sold anything. But that was a lesson for me. I should just go through the darkness."

FINANCIAL FREEDOM

In college, he focused on 2D artwork and joined the television industry soon after his graduation. But, by 24, he knew he wanted to do something more. He shares: "Thank God Dad had taught me how to save money. So, I planned my finances and left."

Inspired by Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way*, he rented a room and bought 40 canvases. For 30 days, he painted at least one canvas a day and blogged about his experiences.

Scrunching his nose, Chin Yew still has mixed feelings about this period in his life. On the one hand, he developed the discipline to work daily. On the other hand, he felt ashamed for lying to his mother. He confides: "I'd wake up each day, dress as though I was going to the office, and go to my rented room down the road to paint."

The last painting was completed



"All the work is on acid-free Bristol boards and I use water-proof ink."

Chong Chin Yew

on Aug 30. Inspired by the Merdeka Day celebrations and the spirit of independence, he knew that from that moment on, he could do whatever he wanted in life.

In spite of his growing disenchantment with the commercial and capitalist aspect of the television industry, when one of his romantic relationships came to an abrupt end, Chin Yew decided that it was time to take up a position in Indonesia to "use his talents to make money."

ACHIEVING DREAMS

This capitalistic sojourn was interrupted when he won a scholarship to go to New York, US for three months. Giving a one-sided, idealistic smile, he says: "Many were over 40 and still hoping to make it. There was no need to buy into that 'one-car-one-house' ideal. It was all about being there to achieve dreams."

Once again, inspired by the circumstances he found himself in, Chin Yew decided to extend his stay by another eight months. If it had not been for the threat of legal action by the company he was bonded to, the artist would probably have stayed longer in the US. Upon his return, he worked on several local projects before taking off again, this time for an adventure to various countries, including some in Africa.

Then, MH370 happened. "You know," he says, "just the day before it happened,

someone asked me 'Where's Malaysia?' After that, everyone knew Malaysia and I decided it was time to return." Other than the sense of patriotism, he acknowledged that "anything's possible" now in Malaysia.

Also, with the establishment of Pinewood Iskandar Malaysia Studios, Chin Yew believes that he's closer than ever to his dream of making quality movies. Such movies, he says, must move people, much like Majid Majidi's *Song Of Sparrows*.

"There were all these college students seated at the back of me," he shares. "They were very noisy. I guessed they were there because they were told by their teacher to come." Still, when there was a poignant part to the tale, the audience became quiet and that's the moment he realised the amazing power that a good movie can have.

Hoping to win the first Oscar for Malaysia, he says: "My movie will be in the Foreign Film category and it'll be about the humanity of reality. I want to tell our story."

COMIC PATRON

Until that dream materialises though, Chin Yew aspires to pursue life as a comic artist. He's swift to add that his work is not the "superhero or fan-based stuff".

Instead, describing his latest series of comics as autobiographical in nature,



Artist Crisis

BY CHIN YEW

ANOTHER JOB I HAD TO DO BEFORE ART COLLEGE WAS A SALESMAN FOR A MLM COMPANY. I REMEMBER THOSE SELF-HYPNOSIS CHANTS WE HAD TO DO EVERY MORNING AT THE ROOFTOP.

ONE OF THE ITEMS THAT I HAD TO SELL WAS KEY CHAINS AND A MAN AGREED TO BUY THEM IF I REPLACE ALL HIS KEYS INTO THEM. I REMEMBER THRELESSLY DOING THAT AS HE EATS HIS FOOD IN FRONT OF ME. HE PAID ME 3 BUCKS LATER FOR THE KEY CHAINS.

"I WILL NOT GIVE UP!"



ALTHOUGH I DIDN'T LAST VERY LONG IN THIS JOB, BUT I DID LEARN A LOT, ESPECIALLY THIS ONE TIME WHEN I HAD THE CHOICE OF WHETHER TO CLIMB UP THESE DARK STAIRS TO LOOK FOR CUSTOMERS.



I CAN'T REMEMBER WHETHER I SOLD ANY, BUT I DO REMEMBER HOW I HAD PUSHED MYSELF FOR STRENGTH AND COURAGE TO MARCH THROUGH THOSE DARK PATHS HOPING FOR LIGHT AHEAD OF ME.



Artist Crisis

BY CHIN YEW

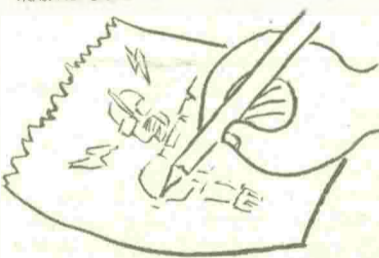
I REMEMBER THOSE OLD CALENDARS WHERE MY BIG AUNT USED TO TEAR OFF EACH DAY.

I BEGGED HER TO LET ME TEAR THEM.



THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT THE PAPER'S TEXTURE OF THE CALENDAR THAT I REALLY LOVED DRAWING ON...

—THAT I COULDN'T RESIST



Chin Yew's early fascination with calendars and how it got him in trouble.

he's working on obtaining funding. This involves the relatively new method of crowd-funding — when people visit his webpage (www.patreon.com/chinyew) they'll be inspired by and support Chin Yew's dream.

Sighing, he confides that even with over 1,000 friends on Facebook, very few have shown support for his project. The first person who pledged was actually a stranger from Belarus. Waving one hand, he says: "And none came for my show."

Having made the decision to avoid Facebook merely to keep in contact with

friends from school, Chin Yew adds: "As you grow older, you consciously realise that your school friends are not what they seem to be."

Not wanting to dwell on this, he chooses, instead, to discuss his new project. In essence, the work will be a graphic novel called *I See So Many Butterflies*.

As our chat comes to a close, there's a hopeful note in his voice when he speaks about his ultimate plan — to complete this novel and launch it together with an exhibition that showcases some of the works extracted from the said novel.

Artist Crisis

BY CHIN YEW

JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE WAS A WRITER WHOSE BOOK "A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES" WAS REJECTED BY MANY PUBLISHERS.

HE CONTINUED TO WORK ON REVISIONS OF THE BOOK CATERING TO WHAT PUBLISHERS WANT YET IT WAS STILL REJECTED. FINALLY FILLED WITH DISAPPOINTMENT AND DEPRESSION, HE COMMITTED SUICIDE AT THE AGE OF 31.

It must be strong and meaningful all the way, not merely episodic, and then wittily pulled together to make everything look as if it's come out right. In other words, there must be a point to everything. It's a brilliant exercise in invention, but it isn't really about anything!



YEARS LATER WITH MUCH PERSISTENCE AND HARDSHIP HIS MOTHER FINALLY GOT HIS BOOK PUBLISHED AND IT WAS TOOLE'S FIRST DRAFT THAT WON HIM A PULITZER THE FOLLOWING YEAR.



THIS IS TO ASPIRING PEOPLE OUT THERE. CONTINUE TO BELIEVE IN YOURSELF EVEN WHEN THE WORLD DOESN'T.



Top: Chin Yew while working in MLM. Above: Chin Yew's advice for aspiring writers.