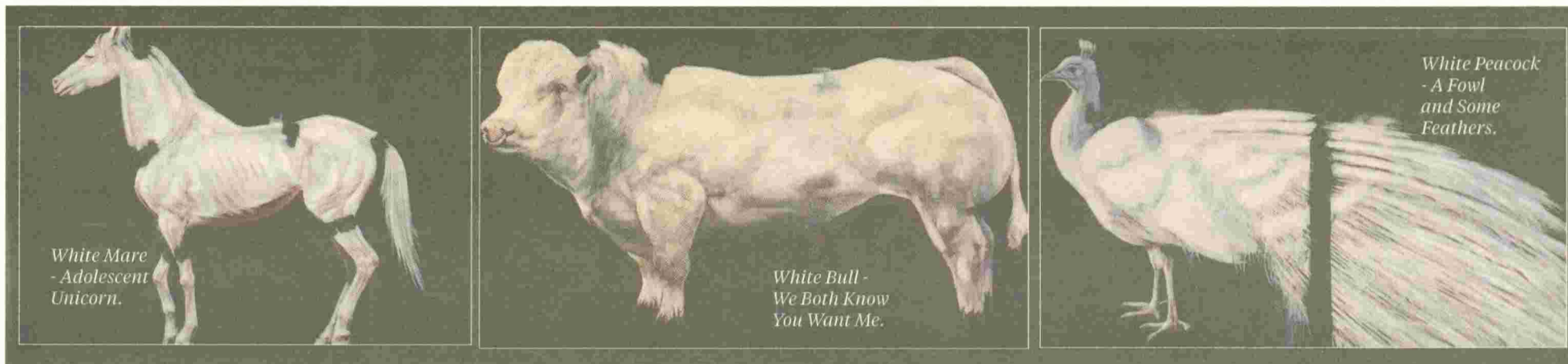


## LIFE &amp; TIMES ART



# Black and white worlds

Sean Lean explains to **Aneeta Sundararaj** why white and black, for him, covers a whole spectrum of hues

HAVING his first solo exhibition is something Sean Lean Tze Lee, 32, had been fantasising about for the last 12 years. "I'm ready for it," he says, fresh from his recently concluded exhibition called *Flesh: Blacks & Whites*, held at Wei-Ling Contemporary Gallery.

## THE ARTIST

Standing at the entrance of the gallery in The Gardens, Mid Valley City, Lean says that he's been a full-time artist for the last six months. Although he still has a hand in the graphic design business that his brothers run, he quietly adds: "Actually, being a lawyer or engineer sounds more interesting." Shrugging, this graduate from Lim Kok Wing International University says: "I just want to paint."

The easy manner Lean projects belies the journey he's taken to reach this stage. "I didn't want to draw much when I was young. I was not naturally attracted to it. And there's no defining moment when I realised I wanted to paint."

That said, he's at pains to add: "I don't want to feed the romantic perception that an artist has to be poor." He does, however, admit that he is used to the kind of emotional artist who paints when he feels inspired. "You know, the kind who stares at a blank canvas for hours, puts a single stroke then calls it a day. It's like expecting magic to happen."

Once comfortably seated, Lean explains that what helped make the change in his attitude was watching his former lecturer and friend, Ivan Lam, at work. "He's the opposite of how an artist is perceived. He's very consistent and disciplined in his work." Lean emulated Lam, and shares: "I got it. I got the formula — I put in the hours and sometimes painted even when I didn't feel like it."

Completely relaxed, he sits cross-legged on a wide bench in the middle of the gallery and adds: "It's good to get my hands dirty on a daily basis."

## SENSE OF DISCIPLINE

Delving into his past reveals that Lean's sense of discipline was cultivated very early in life. "I went to a Chinese school and most of us still speak only in Chinese. I learnt English because my uncle bought us an old computer and I wanted to play the games on it. To understand how to do this, I needed to learn English. I learnt it the old way — by looking up words in the dictionary and jotting down definitions from the newspaper."

The one character trait that Lean has had to work through is his desire to be competitive. "I think that's because I'm the youngest and art was something I could do better than others. I mean, if you get 100 per cent in maths, someone else can get that too. But, if two people get good grades in art, you can tell whose work is better. Now as an artist, shedding the desire to win and the need to be competitive allows me to paint. When I stopped trying to impress others, I truly started to paint."

Lean makes a point of saying that he doesn't hang out with local artists. He says: "I'm oblivious to what other local artists do." Unwilling to dwell on this, he turns the focus onto his work and says: "My subject matter is introspective. I look into myself. I paint on four or five canvases at the same time."

## BLACKS AND WHITES

Naturally, the first question is about why he uses only white and black.

"Actually," he says, "there are hints of other colours but they're faint. I chose white because white covers the range of hues and I wanted to paint how light reflects on the flesh. How light bounces off the

flesh. Black is, of course, the opposite of white. The negation of colour altogether. If I paint in both black and white, I've covered the whole spectrum. All of them are oils on canvas. That is also why the title of the exhibition uses the plural — blacks and whites."

Lean finds the animals he chooses to draw curious things. "Gathering his thoughts, he adds, "And they represent who I am."

After making such a curious statement, he elaborates with, "Notice how the title of the exhibition and all the titles of the works are split into two? It's to show how, sometimes, one half is disconnected from the other."

To illustrate, he refers to *White Peacock: A Fowl And Some Feathers*. "Look at how ridiculously it's put together. A peacock's a bird that can't fly because of this huge bunch of feathers. So much of its existence depends on these feathers. By stripping away colours and chopping off the feathers, how much of its essence has been removed?"

ego-boosting exercise."

## INSPIRATIONS

The fun piece in the series is *Black Goldfish: I Have 11 Brilliant Ideas*. "It was based on a happy-go-lucky guy. He always talks about things but never really executes his plans. So, I created these 11 bubbles for his 11 ideas."

"The bull in *White Bull: We Both Know You Want Me* is a commentary on a stud bull. I've even accentuated some bits. I mean, it doesn't really do very much. It doesn't plough the

field and people even pay the owner of this bull so that it can be 'used' for a night or two."

In a rather presumptuous statement, Lean adds: "Sometimes against the bull's own will."

Since American politics and in particular, what the Republicans do amuses and entertains Lean enormously, he chose to paint a pit bull in *Black America Bulldog: Red, Black And Blue*. "They harp on about family values, then you'll find them spending taxpayers' money doing things they shouldn't be doing. And a pit bull." Shaking his head, he says: "Why would you keep something that is designed to claw people's face off, as a pet?"

Having revealed so much of his persona and psyche, it is with regret that the discussion ends. Still, a sweeping glance at his remaining work does make one curious to discover what Lean's other idiosyncrasies might be.



**Black Dragon: Black Lizard** is, at its most basic, a painting of a Komodo dragon. "There is a perception that the Komodo dragon is special. Then, you look at it and it looks like a lizard." For Lean, this painting reflects the people he once admired. "I used to put them up on a pedestal. After spending time with them, I see their flaws and they usually have an agenda that is far from noble, and what they do is often no more than an