



Art

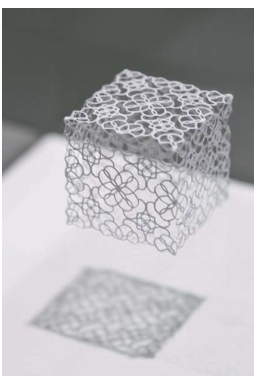
Meditative art

Sunita Sue Leng 18/06/2018, 7:56am

SINGAPORE (June 11): Ashley Yeo, the first Singaporean to be shortlisted for the LOEWE Craft Prize, has an unhurried, contemplative approach to art that she hopes will nudge people to slow down amid their dizzy, digital-driven lives

It seems suspended in space, this alabaster cube of fine filigree. Its gossamer geometrics, infinitely linked, appear to defy ocular belief that something so ethereal was carved out of acid-free paper with a mere blade and a steady hand. In its entirety, it is miniscule, measuring just 3.5 by 3.5 by 3.5cm.

This paper-cut sculpture is the work of Ashley Yeo, one of 30 artists worldwide shortlisted for the 2018 edition of the LOEWE Craft Prize. It is currently being displayed at the Design Museum in London until June 17 and is a part of Yeo's Arbitrary Metrics II, a series of finely detailed sculptures that she hopes will engender a sensation of slowness and serenity among viewers.



Yeo's cube paper-cut sculpture from Arbitrary Metrics II, which is on display in London

At a time of immediate gratification and dizzy digital developments, when attention spans are dictated by screen swipes and multiple devices, this 27-year-old Singaporean artist is singularly working with the idea of slowness. By taking the long and unhurried road to craft intricate work infused with deliberation, she seeks to promote a sense of quietness and lightness, experiences that she values amid “the epidemics of visual culture and the alienation caused by technology”.

Yeo’s largely monochrome drawings and paper sculptures are also a reaction to the prevailing flow in the contemporary art world towards big and bold. “What you see in the art market currently is lots of visually shocking or explosive work,” the soft-spoken Yeo tells Options. “I wanted to make a very small form and I wanted a quality of fragility,” she says of her Arbitrary Metrics series.

That ethos resonated with the panel of experts who selected her work from nearly 1,900 submissions by artisans from 86 countries. “Made only from exquisitely engraved paper, these small works confound the viewer, appearing faint and translucent, yet maintaining a totally distinct sense of spatial mass,” The LOEWE Foundation said in a press release. “The rhythms of their intricately detailed surface are breathlike in their repetition, with these works seeming to take on a spiritually magnificent scale despite their true size.”

The LOEWE Foundation, a private cultural non-profit organisation started in 1988 by Enrique Loewe, a fourth-generation member of LOEWE’s founding family, launched the prize in 2016 to acknowledge the importance of craft and recognise working artisans with talent, vision and a will to innovate. The idea for the prize is rooted in LOEWE’s beginnings as a collective craft workshop in 1846. Today, the Madrid-based fashion house is owned by the LVMH Group. It can take Yeo up to six weeks to craft a single paper sculpture. She starts by conceptualising a form and then a pattern. The geometry is fine-tuned with the help of software and a test print is done. More often than not, adjustments have to be made when the image does not translate into the multi-dimensional structure that she envisioned.



I am not fond of flamboyant works – Yeo

Only after that does the painstaking process of hand carving start. Using a small scalpel blade, Yeo cuts a lattice out of archival paper. “It’s a very long and slow process,” she says. “I can work for a whole day and have only a small piece done.” Clearly, it calls for patience – immense reservoirs of it. And, as Yeo puts it, “a calm heart”. “It becomes meditative and I hope the viewer can experience at least a momentary slowness,” she says.

Drawing from a young age

Yeo’s art is an extension of her persona and physicality. Delicate in build, there is a quietness

about her, from her voice to her dressing. The most eye-catching element about her is a large tattoo of a red chrysanthemum. Her workspace is similarly unadorned. In a classroom on the fourth floor of an old school that has found new life as Telok Kurau Studios, she relies on a few instruments, natural light from louvre windows and ventilation from ceiling fans. There is a sense that she treads lightly wherever she goes. Drawing has been her lifeblood from a tender age. It was also a talent that she shared with several of her immediate and extended family members. She recalls drawing from the age of five or six, alongside her twin sister and cousins. Her father is also skilful with a pencil as well as the Chinese brush, and once won a national prize in a Chinese calligraphy contest.

Growing up, she devoured graphic novels, particularly manga (Japanese comic books). She was taken by the hand-drawn animation that came out of the early days of Studio Ghibli, the Japanese film and animation studio that has won awards and fans worldwide for its anime. Yeo also found inspiration in the works of Hiroshi Yoshida, a Japanese painter and woodblock printmaker noted for his landscape prints.



Salarymen by Yeo, graphite on paper, 2015

There was never any question in her mind that she would pursue anything but art. Her mother, an insurance agent, was openly supportive. Her father, who heads sports education at Nan Chiau High School, harboured doubts but did not dissuade her. At around the age of 15, she began veering towards a career in fashion design. After she enrolled at LASALLE College of the Arts, however, she found her calling in the fine arts and graduated with first class honours in fine art in 2011. Her twin sister has a master's in illustration and is studying for a doctorate in social policy. Her other sibling, a younger brother, is set to embark on a degree in engineering at the National University of Singapore.

Yeo went on to complete a master's in fine art at Chelsea College of Art & Design in London. Living at the doorstep to Europe gave her the opportunity to immerse herself in the art history of Europe as well as the museums, galleries and biennales of cities with a rich creative vibe such as Berlin and Paris. "It was eye-opening for me," says Yeo, who counts the Impressionists Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh and Gustave Caillebotte among her favourite painters

She has also had several stints at cultural establishments and institutes outside Singapore. These include residencies at the China Academy of Art in Beijing, the School of Visual Arts in New York and the Arctic Circle Residency in Svalbard, an international territory just 10 degrees from the North Pole. The Arctic Circle Residency was particularly special for her.

An annual expeditionary programme, it brings together artists of all disciplines, as well as

scientists, architects and educators, and gives them a chance to collectively explore the world's northernmost inhabited area via a specially outfitted boat. That experience, which took place in 2014, gave Yeo first-hand exposure to a remote, rugged terrain known for its glaciers and frozen tundra – a landscape so vastly different from the equatorial environment she calls home.

In June 2015, she held her first solo show *You Must Imagine Sisyphus Happy* at Fost Gallery at Gillman Barracks. Her black-and-white illustrations, described as an exploration between longing and post-grieving, showcase her remarkable finesse with graphite on paper. The elegiac undertone portrays the decaying state of social relations in our technology-swamped world while the beauty of her artistry is offered as a palliative for society's modern ills. Her work has since been displayed on numerous occasions locally, including at the Singapore Art Museum.

Not fond of flamboyance

Yeo's creative endeavours are now receiving international attention. She says she feels honoured to be the first Singaporean artist to have a shot at the LOEWE prize, worth 50,000 (\$78,262). She graciously adds, however, that as this is only second year the prize is being given out, she expects other Singapore artists to eventually make the cut. All artists in the running were flown to London for the awards ceremony, which took place on May 3, an opportunity she relished, as she got to interact with the other artists and view their work.

"All the artists had high-quality works and all of our works were very different," she says. She was particularly impressed with a very thin copper bowl made by Laurenz Stockner of Italy. "It was almost like rubber," she recalls. Described by the judges as a perfectly proportioned copper bowl that is so thin it bends and dances under breath, it was commended for its "understated sophistication and its playful yet masterful approach to material". Stockner trained as a metalworker and then went on to jewellery school in Florence. He also studied alongside goldsmiths in Tuscany.



Bowl made of copper by Stockner

The winning entry was a classically styled vessel from Scottish ceramist Jennifer Lee. The jury praised it for its timelessness as well as for its liveliness and unpredictability within its delicately poised proportions. Yeo was similarly appreciative of Lee's work, noting that it was very elegant and simple yet very strong in form. Lee, who received the prize from actress Helen Mirren, lauded the luxury company for creating an award that "pays such attention to the man-made and craft when so much is digital".



Ceramicist Lee (right) receiving the LOEWE Craft Prize from Mirren