



**ARTS NEXT GEN**  
Painter Ruben Pang

# Taking a hands-on approach

Ruben Pang eschews canvas for aluminium, and prefers using his hands over brushes

deepika shetty

He may be just 21, but painter Ruben Pang is already a rising star. He has held a solo gallery exhibition, been short-listed for prestigious arts awards, and has three works at The Singapore Show: Future Proof, the museum art show now on that highlights works by up-and-coming Singapore artists.

Yet, this is not a painter in a hurry. He creates no more than eight abstract paintings a year using oils on aluminium instead of canvas, and prefers to use more of his hands rather than brushes.

This process of creation has slowed down considerably as he is doing his national service. As a result, he has called off a second gallery solo that was slated for next year. His debut solo, *Angels*, was at Chan Hampe Galleries last year.

When Life! meets Pang at his parents' HDB maisonette in Canberra Road in Sembawang last Saturday, the meticulous approach behind his art becomes apparent.

He has clearly spent much time preparing for the interview. He had asked for questions in advance, and has a folder full of notes, including a page with points he must not miss out. Disarmingly, one is also reminded of his youth: His skinny jeans hang loose on him, and he hints at "being nervous" ahead of his first full-length media interview.

And while his parents – father Pang Che Rong is a sculptor and mother Irene Ong teaches fashion and retail management at Temasek Polytechnic – have decided to let him have a go at this alone, their support for him is still palpable.

Their living space is set up to accommodate his art. Instead of neat seating arrangements, the living room is filled with large aluminium pieces which serve as the base for Pang's paintings.

Oil paints are scattered around a table near the door. Paint can be seen on the floor. Several finished and unfinished works take up what remains of the room.

It is in this space that he has made the transition from doodles on paper to canvas, and then to aluminium, a base he started experimenting with around 2007.

His parents also supported him when he made the unconventional decision to leave Catholic Junior College in 2007 to do a diploma in the arts at the Lasalle College of the Arts. Indeed, several times during the interview, he says that without their support, he could not have pursued his love for art and music.

**book it**

**THE SINGAPORE SHOW: FUTURE PROOF**

**Where:** SAM at 8Q, 8 Queen Street  
**When:** Till April 15, 10am to 7pm (Saturday to Thursday), 10am to 9pm (Friday)  
**Admission:** \$10 for adults, \$5 for students and senior citizens, free admission on Fridays from 6 to 9pm

**Ruben Pang works out of his parents' HDB maisonette in Canberra Road. PHOTO: TERENCE LIM FOR THE STRAITS TIMES**

They backed him as he made the academic transition, and then again in his transition from canvas to aluminium.

"I avoid canvas as it is too fragile and I find its texture inhibits the movement of paint," he says. "Oil paint is a disobedient material. It dries unevenly and often deteriorates unexpectedly if it is not properly layered. An overworked canvas surface cannot be repaired. However, aluminium can take a lot of abuse and is in a sense a more forgiving surface."

He says his paintings are "projections of (his) psyche", and he never knows where a painting will lead him or what the finished work will look like. The process of creation is as abstract as the result. He likes to test the boundaries of colour, its shape and its effects, and he does it often without relying on brushes.

"I do not really mix colours as much as I affiliate them with one another through layering. What I am trying to do is create the illusion of depth, and brush strokes do not always work as their individual marks tend to acknowledge a two dimensional surface.

"I mostly use brushes to apply base coats to the aluminium, to blur images or sometimes to clean up things. For paint application, removal and adding surfaces, I use my hands, palette knives and sandpaper."

He credits his development to his teachers at Lasalle and to artists whose styles have influenced him, including contemporary artists Gerhard Richter and David Reed, and surrealist Salvador Dali.

"I learn through imitation and have tried to emulate their technique as a student. I love the impenetrable surface of their work; no matter how much they reveal, their painting process is self-concealing. Influence is intimately adopted but only recognised superficially on the painting surface."

The Singapore Show co-curator Khairuddin Hori calls Pang's approach to painting "unorthodox and unconventional".

"In Future Proof, Ruben is the only artist who keeps his practice strictly to the medium of painting," he notes. "His paintings are painted, erased, scratched

and sand-papered to reveal layers of colours that translate the myriad of emotions that the artist was experiencing while working on them."

Abstract painter Ian Woo, who teaches at Lasalle and has mentored Pang at the art school, calls his paintings "dark, electrifying and soulful".

Woo tells Life!: "Here is someone who is not afraid to make paintings that are larger than life. He is not afraid to make paintings about things we are unsure of. He loves big abstract ideas concerning life and death, peppered with his passion for loud industrial rock music. I think it comes across in his works. His paintings are a trip. Of course, it helps that he is hard-working, almost intense. Always."

These are some of the qualities which appealed to gallerist Benjamin Hampe of Chan Hampe Galleries, who offered Pang his first solo show after seeing his paintings at Lasalle's graduation in 2010.

Says Mr Hampe, 32: "He was the only student standing next to his painting. I was impressed by the quality and his commitment to his career. When he was talking about his art, it was clear he loved



**PANG IN SHORT**

■ **2007:** Leaves Catholic Junior College after about a month there on the advice of the then principal, Brother Paul Rogers, and with the support of his parents, and enrolls in the Lasalle College of the Arts.

■ **2009:** Receives the National Arts Council's Georgette Chen Arts Scholarship for his diploma studies at Lasalle.

■ **2010:** Receives the Winston Oh Travelogue Award, which he uses to travel for two weeks in Yunnan, China. Initiated by Dr Winston Oh, this annual grant is given to promising young local artists, allowing them to travel abroad to broaden their artistic experience. Prominent local art collector Jackson See nominates his painting *First Born* for the 2010 Sovereign Asian Art Prize, and it is among the finalists. Pang also teams up with friends to present the musical gig *Strobe Like A Butterfly* at The Substation.

■ **2011:** Presents his solo show titled *Angels* at Chan Hampe Galleries. He is named Sovereign Asian Art Prize Finalist for the second time for the painting *Across The Universe*.

■ **2012:** The painting sells for US\$7,500 (S\$9,460) at the art prize's charity auction held in Hong Kong last month. Three paintings by Pang are part of The Singapore Show: *Future Proof*, now on at SAM at 8Q.

painting, but he also understood the importance of marketing and PR."

The solo show, titled *Angels*, featured about 12 paintings priced between \$1,000 and \$3,000, of which more than half sold.

Among the buyers was prominent collector Jackson See, who bought two paintings. Mr See, 52, recalls being stunned by the work he saw by an artist so young.

"It was quite unlike anything I had seen in the Singapore art scene. There was nothing predictable about them. He was not even working on canvas. With aluminium, he was already trying something different. I have seen a lot of art but I have not seen anyone who blends colours as well as he does."

Mr See went on to nominate Pang's work twice for the Sovereign Asian Art Prize; both times, his painting emerged as a finalist. Last month, one of the paintings, *Across The Universe*, sold for US\$7,500 (S\$9,460) at the Sovereign Asian Art Prize charity auction in Hong Kong.

Despite such successes, Pang does not believe in rushing into things. He decided to call off his second solo show, offered to him by Chan Hampe Galleries, as he is serving his national service and only has weekends free to do his art right now.

"My definition of success is producing the best work I can be proud of. Over a year, I can do only seven or eight paintings. I work on them one at a time. Every day, I focus on the current painting as if it is the last."

On his decision to call off the solo show, Mr Hampe says: "I perfectly understand his situation and I'd rather he takes his time to present his works. I have full faith in him."

It is a move even collectors applaud. Says Mr See: "Making good art is about patience. I feel he has made the right move. In time to come, if Ruben stays just as disciplined and focused, he will be a big boy in the art world."

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Next week: Genevieve Chua, 27, who straddles the worlds of drawing, photography and installation through her art.