

Seeing Singapore

Paintings of two graphic artists

Mulan Gallery

Late last year, four recognised illustrators in town put together a show at the Black Earth Art Museum in Joo Chiat. The paintings of Koh Hong Teng and Sonny Liew were among those seen at this exhibition, a fairly uncommon occurrence of graphic artists exhibiting their fine art works in Singapore. This year, the artists will be exhibiting their latest works at, 'Lucky Plazas', at Mulan Gallery, exploring their homeland, albeit examining different themes. We met with the artists to find out more about their experiments and the upcoming exhibition.

Sonny lives in the heart of the Eastern part of Singapore, near Katong, in a house where the front end of the hall has been converted into his ad-hoc painting studio. In a small room upstairs, the young graphic artist has a work space. The sides of the narrow room are filled with books, cramped beyond capacity, that are visibly dominated by his select collection of comics. These are haphazardly organised, but Sonny picks them out effortlessly and they don't need dusting. Illustration began at a somewhat early age, we find out. He had started work on his first comic strip on a semester break from Cambridge where he was studying philosophy. Speaking about his first comic strip, *Frankie and Poo*, that ran in The New Paper for a year back in 1992, Sonny explains, "At that time I was reading a lot of Calvin and Hobbes and I was quite concerned about politics - typical for a person that age."

There has been no looking back since. Subsequently, he equipped himself with a degree in illustration from the Rhode Island School of Design. Seven years from then, today, Sonny has already received a prestigious Eisner nomination in the best pencilling/ inking category for his well-known work, *Wonderland*, and is working on two book-length graphic novels, while also putting together the second volume of a successful anthology, *Liquid City*, that features the works of many Southeast Asian illustrators.

His new series of paintings, *Eric Khoo is a Hotel Magnate*, continues his interest in politics perhaps, as seen in his early comic strip. The triptych, which shows Singaporean politicians and important social figures at a hawker centre, is filled with subtle references. This particular work is closest in its satirical content to the traditions of editorial cartoons seen in American newspapers. In his graphic work, too, one can find efficient lines reminiscent of classic American cartoons like *Peanuts*. Significantly, this work for Sonny deviates in its subject from his earlier fantastical subjects



Blk 2



Eric Khoo is a Hotel Magnate part 2a-2b.

in painting while remaining close to his drawing style. The palette used is subdued and keeps the focus on the elements of the composition.

Hong Teng's paintings, on the other hand, have a much stronger graphical element, admitting a strong use of colour. An unassuming and reserved person, he brings to his work the benefits of meticulous observation. Particularly, his acrylic works for the upcoming show delight with details, those which he brings forth and also those which he selectively effaces. They belong to the series, *Blks & Nos*, a continuation of his interest in the landscape of Singapore, particularly in the disappearing elements of the heartlands, glimpses of which can now only be had in old HDB estates such as Tao Payoh. He describes his journeys to these places, where he spends time conversing and gathering knowledge of their histories: "I usually take pictures with my phone and use them when I sit down to paint these scenes." But, beyond their significance as archival material, it is the rich visual quality and metaphoric elements of these pictures that are most striking.

The refined quality of draughtsmanship that marks Hong Teng's works is also a result of extensive experience and persistence in his artistic practice as an illustrator, which includes many commercial graphic assignments, a journalistic graphic artist stint and a graphic novel titled *01321*. His foundations were laid early through a degree acquired from the London Institute. And his work was also recognised with the gold award at the Siggraph Asia Pacific Animation and Digital Art Competition in 2001. Painting, however, has a special place for Hong Teng, and in working on a canvas he says he finds a "strange sense of peace." Besides the exhibition, the artist tells us that he is working on his next graphic novel as well as his work for the next *Liquid City* anthology.

'Lucky Plazas' will leave surely a mark on the casual observer, but, even beyond that, we have reason to hope for more such artwork from these two gifted artists.