

Boy, uninterrupted

Only 16, this year's UOB Painting of the Year winner comes across as an earnest teenager

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WHEN one first meets Alvin Ong Liang Jie in his mother's kitchen, he shakes your hand and tells you he is "honoured" to meet you.

So warm and sincere is he that, even if you're a cynical struggling artist (which I'm not), it'd be hard to begrudge Ong for being \$20,000 richer for winning an established art award.

The 16-year-old became the youngest winner of the UOB Painting of the Year last Saturday for his acrylic painting entitled *The Window*.

The work, inspired by George Orwell's dystopic novel 1984, was meant as a comment on dictatorship.

The 73cm x 93cm canvas is deliberately tinted in grey-greens, showing a view of grim, cramped housing blocks. The cold empty scene could be Belgrade or Bishan.

But the painting also had another resonance for the artist: He had been frantically studying for his school's common tests when he painted it earlier this year.

"I felt oppressed by time," he reveals, shedding more light on the painting's bleak vision.

Incidentally, if you're doing the math, you'll realise that Ong was born in 1988 — four years after the setting in Orwell's watershed title.

Still, despite his youth, the budding artist is not about to let early success get to his head.

Says Ong, a first-year student at National Junior College: "My teachers have spoken to me about the award. They told me to continue to work hard and not become complacent."

In person, he is bespectacled and lanky-limbed, with a ready grin and a knack for giving earnest and articulate answers.

He adds: "My classmates are more ecstatic about the win than me. They tease me about how \$20,000 means I can treat them to many meals."

Nice try, folks. But for now, says Ong, the prize money is going into his bank account to help pay for his university fees in future.

Kicking back in the dining room, clad in a Great Wall of China T-shirt and bermudas, Ong exudes the easy confidence of a teenager who has been

nurtured with love by his family.

His parents, Mr Ong Tuck Soon, 54, a financial consultant, and Madam Jessica Peck, 45, a senior engineer, sit beside him during the interview in their three-storey terrace house in Boon Lay, offering quiet support for their only child. In turn, he has an easy camaraderie with his parents.

The couple are not quite sure where their son's artistic talents come from.

But, says his father, it could be due in some part to the annual holidays to Europe and America they take him on.

This exposure to different landscapes and architectural styles probably helps inspire him.

Concurring, Ong speaks about the colourful Mexican architecture and places of worship he is fascinated by. During his secondary school days in St Joseph's Institution, he copied the works of masters Georgia O'Keefe and Vincent Van Gogh for his art classes.

With a cheeky grin, he says: "I was a beginner. I didn't want to try too hard. So I chose paintings that were easier to copy."

The win is all the more surprising when he tells you that he has only completed one other original painting apart from *The Window*: a self-portrait in acrylic, after the style of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, that he had submitted as part of his GCE O-level art examination.

He is full of admiration for Kahlo: "Her life was quite tragic, yet she managed to convey what happened to her in a powerful visual form."

Now in the arts elective programme in junior college, he jokes that his art teachers put him through "sadistic" exercises such as drawing portraits with markers attached to long poles.

But he is also excited at the prospect of taking up a sculpture module soon.

Nor are his talents limited to visual arts. The enthusiastic teenager has also fenced for four years and plays the organ, violin and piano.

In time, he hopes to become an architect, while still painting in his spare time.

He explains: "Architecture is also a form of art, just that it deals with 3D structures."

He readily admits that his life thus far has been smooth-sailing "for an artist". This is especially in comparison to Kahlo's, who was bedridden with pain after a bus accident and had to put up with her husband's serial infidelity.

But, he adds: "I feel that I don't have to suffer to create great art. As long as I'm inspired by the people around me."

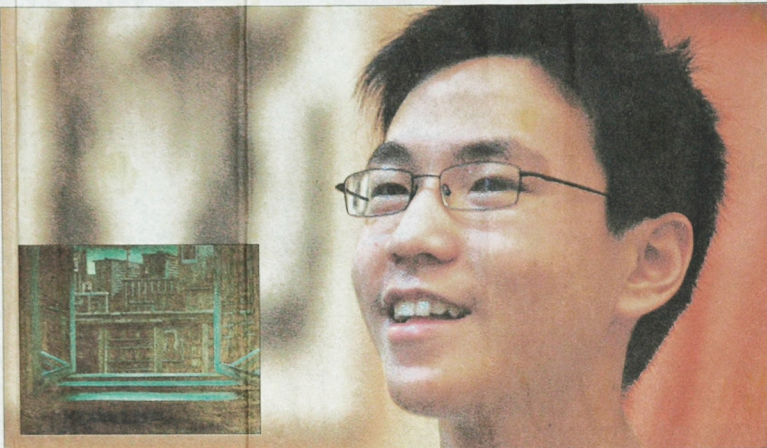


PHOTO: STEVEN LEE

The youngest winner of the UOB Painting of the Year award, Alvin Ong Liang Jie, 16, depicts dystopia in his painting, *The Window* (inset).