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## Art in the dark

Mediocre works, obscure art awards, what does it take to raise the profile of local visual art?

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ARE art awards in Singapore as bleak as this year's winning UOB Painting of the Year?

Although this year's competition attracted about 940 entries from local artists — one of the highest number of entries since the competition started 24 years ago — the general feel, noted the judges, was that the artists this year "had not tried hard enough".

On the other hand, so obscure are art awards in Singapore that the \$20,000 prize-winner, 16-year-old Alvin Ong, admitted he had not heard of the UOB award before his National Junior College teacher submitted the work on his behalf this year.

Safe and politically correct, not reflective of the international visual arts scene and "ill-managed" are just some of the criticisms artists and curators have of the art awards in Singapore.

And then there is the question of what winners of these awards go on to do.

When asked what career he wanted to pursue, Alvin said: "Architecture".

Little wonder that Dr Eugene Tan, director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) Singapore, is worried about the credibility of local arts awards. He is also the curator for the Singa-

pore pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale.

"What happens after artists win an award is as important as winning it, if not more so," he noted.

### No big deal

There have been numerous art awards in Singapore since the late 70s, many of which have been discontinued.

The two major prizes still around today are the UOB Painting of the Year and the Philip Morris Singapore Art Award.

It is almost a certainty that any established local artist worth his easel and paintbrush would have a UOB or Philip Morris award (or both) under his cap.

But truth be told, winning the award has marginal benefits, the artists say.

Visual artist Tang Ling Nah — who has won a Philip Morris award, two commendations in the UOB contest, a Della Butcher award (a smaller award from the Rotary Club Singapore) and a Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council — said life didn't change much after her wins.

"I wish more people would buy my paintings, that I could sell them at a higher price, but no," she laughed.

"Winning the awards gets you perhaps that five minutes of media spotlight, the financial

support, but that's it."

Very few artists who have won local awards have gone on to regional or international fame and recognition, said ICA's Dr Tan. A notable exception to this, he said, was perhaps Francis Ng, a winner of the Philip Morris prize, who represented Singapore in the 2003 Venice Biennale.

### The Turn-ing point

Compare this to the British Turner Prize, an annual award given by the Tate Art Gallery.

It is arguably one of the world's most talked about and established art awards. The overall cash prize is £20,000 (\$59,000) and past winners have caused so much controversy that it has become a part of the award's reputation.

The British Culture Minister in 2002, for example, tacked a note on the visitor's comments board describing that year's works as "cold mechanical, conceptual bullshit".

But the Turner award has also made artists, including Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, household names in Britain.

Started in 1984, the Turner Prize — named after the English 18th century painter — had been criticised of being safe and politically correct, too, partly due to funding problems.

This changed in 1991, when independent television station Channel 4 doubled the cash award and gave the Turner Prize media exposure. Today, it is a coveted art award.

### Something to talk about

"If anything, we should have more controversy like the Turner Prize," said Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts lecturer Michael Lee, whose work received a commendation from the UOB Painting-of-the-Year judges in 2001.

"Not for the sake of controversy, not only to evolve these awards, but to engage the layperson in Singapore.

"I think the mark of any coun-

try reaching a certain level in the arts isn't just quality or quantity of artists, but the discussion of art by lay people," added Lee.

Noted Vijay Krishna, the chairman of the Della Butcher award: "There is an audience for these art awards," he noted. "Cultivating these audiences is more important, certainly!"

And there is a place in Singapore for an award that generates talk like the Turner does, noted one of the judges of this year's UOB award, Parvathi Nayar.

"There is a real need to have something that pushes the boundaries of two-dimensional art and generate discussion," she noted.

Certainly, if art awards in Singapore are to gain recognition from the artists and public alike, something has to be done to generate interest in them, boosting their credibility and helping them to evolve into something greater.

### THE YEAR THE PAINTING GOT SMALLER

The \$20,000 UOB Painting-of-the-Year prize is usually awarded to a larger-than-life work by a relatively established artist. On Saturday, the judges of this year's competition broke with tradition by recognising a 73cm by 93cm work by 16-year old student Alvin Ong (left). It was the first time a junior artist had won the prize.

Alvin said his winning work, named Window (right), was based on George Orwell's classic novel 1984. It depicts dictatorship as seen through what is normally a symbol of freedom, a window.

