



ST PHOTO: TED CHEN

Indonesia's Y. Indra Wahyu is the grand regional prize winner for his work, School Hymns, depicting a school choir singing.

Teen's dynamic self-portrait wins UOB art contest

Esmond Loh wanted to show how stressful it is to move from secondary school to JC

Huang Lijie

A self-portrait of a teenager in turmoil is this year's United Overseas Bank (UOB) Painting Of The Year.

The oil and acrylic work by Hwa Chong Institution student Esmond Loh, 17, done for a school assignment, beat more than 500 entries to win the \$30,000 prize.

It is the third time in the 31-year history of the contest that it has gone to someone 18 or younger.

In his self-portrait, uninhibited, dynamic brush strokes render Esmond's facial features a blur but reveal his tumultuous state of mind.

He said that it was inspired by his painful transition from secondary school at St Joseph's Institution to junior college level at Hwa Chong Institution.

"Life in junior college is stressful, competitive and tiring and I wanted to unleash all those emotions in my painting," the Art Elective student told The Sunday Times at the award ceremony yesterday.

He called it Just Let Me Sleep. He received the cash award and a trophy from Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts at the ceremony held at the Singapore Art Museum. Esmond said he will save the money for his tertiary education.

Though he had a gift for drawing as a child, it was when he was picked for an art talent development programme in secondary school that he began painting in earnest.

This is his first time participating in the UOB competition, which is open to professional and

amateur artists in Singapore.

Chief judge Choo Thiam Siew, 61, president of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, praised Esmond's work, saying its concept of an exhausting, high-pressure life resonates with urban dwellers in a city like Singapore, and the execution of the painting was skilful.

He added: "The artist produced a powerful painting that is real, raw, experimental, fluid and yet truthful."

Esmond, however, was so stunned when a UOB staff member called with the news of his win last week that his legs gave way and he sank to the floor to "let it sink in".

"I didn't expect to win because the piece was an experiment. It was my first time using oil paint and a more spontaneous way of painting," he said. He started on it in late April and took about three weeks to complete the work.

He added that his family members, none of whom share his artistic interest, were equally surprised.

"They know that I am talented but they didn't expect me to win such a big prize," said the son of a science researcher and insurance executive. He has a younger brother aged 15.

He said that the award would encourage and motivate him to continue developing his art and perhaps pursue it as a career.

As for school life, he said that though it is still stressful, he is coping well.

The competition is also held in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand and among the Painting Of The Year winners from the four countries, Indonesia's Y. Indra Wahyu, 35, took the grand regional prize. He won a cash award of \$5,000 for his work, School Hymns, depicting a school choir singing.

The award-winning pieces will be exhibited at the museum until Aug 1.

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ST PHOTO: TED CHEN

Hwa Chong Institution's Esmond Loh with his winning work Just Let Me Sleep, a self-portrait inspired by the stress of school life. Although it is still stressful, he says, he is coping well these days.



PHOTO: UOB

Two young winners choose art for life

Esmond Loh is the third winner of the UOB Painting of the Year who is 18 years old or under. The Sunday Times catches up with the previous young winners.

MR ALVIN ONG, 23

Then: A 16-year-old art student at National Junior College who won the award in 2005 with his surrealist painting The Window.

Now: A full-time artist and a winner of the Highly Commended Award in this year's UOB Painting of the Year competition.

He was halfway through a bachelor's degree in architecture at the National University of Singapore when he quit in January to become a full-time artist.

He has no regrets. He said: "I enjoy design but after studying architecture, I decided that what I really wanted to do was fine arts."

Winning the UOB prize gave him the confidence to make the switch. He has been painting commissioned works such as portraits and is thinking about pursuing a fine arts education in Britain.



ST PHOTOS: TED CHEN

Above left: Faith, by Mr Imrom Yunu (left), the competition's regional winner from Thailand.

Above: Most Promising Young Artist Sherilyn Shaan Veera, 16, with her painting Alone And Unwanted.

Below: Mr Alvin Ong with his painting Still Life, which made him one of the winners of the Highly Commended Award.



MISS BAI TIAN YUAN, 20

Then: An 18-year-old art student at Raffles Institution who won the award in 2010 with a self-portrait titled What.

Now: She will start a bachelor's degree in fine arts at New York City's Pratt Institute next month on a National Arts Council scholarship.

Until she won the UOB Painting of the Year in 2010, she was not sure what she wanted to do

with her life. But a month-long arts residency at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan, which came with her win, exposed her to the art world and sealed her decision to pursue a career in the arts.

"Art used to be a subject I studied in school but after my experience at the museum in December 2010, it became a part of my life," she said.

Huang Lijie