

10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WINSTON OH TRAVEL AWARD



LASALLE College of the Arts celebrated 10 years of generous support from Dr Winston Oh with a commemorative "Travel Award" exhibition, 2 to 22 September 2009. Dr Oh initiated the award to help young artists travel abroad to expand their artistic experience. A cardiologist by profession, Dr Oh has been a painter for over 20 years, using the watercolour medium. Most of his inspiration is drawn from the English countryside where he lived for many years as a student and practitioner. Fine Arts lecturer Hazel Lim met with Dr Oh to find out more about his passion for art and what he hopes to impart to students through the award.

(Hazel) How did the idea of the Travel Award start 10 years ago?

(Dr Oh) I had a lengthy conversation with the late Brother McNally more than 10 years ago at a dinner. We were casually talking about artists travelling and how to support young talents in LASALLE, and so we decided to marry the two ideas and the Travel Award was conceived. The intentions were simple: to give support to students in the formative years of their art education by giving

them the opportunity to be exposed to and immersed in a different environment and culture. Their observational skills will be tested, they will learn to assimilate new sensations and experiences, and ultimately to express their feelings using their preferred art medium.

(Hazel) How do you think that travelling contributes to the development of an artist's creative processes?

(Dr Oh) Travelling takes the artist out of his/her natural environment, free from familiar routines and responsibilities. This enables them to totally immerse themselves in an unfamiliar environment. They are given the chance to find a pocket of space and time to reflect and to apply his/her acquired skills. I realise that every time I travel, my antennae just pop up! The unfamiliar culture, architecture, language, food and people induce a level of excitement and a heightened awareness and receptivity.

(Hazel) This 10th year anniversary show has been aptly titled "The Longest Distance". It pays tribute to the 10 years of support you have generously shown us and is also significant as an exhibition based on travelling. With this title, I would like to ask if you think one needs to wander farthest away from home in order to gain a better perspective of oneself?

(Dr Oh) Oh no, definitely not. Distance should not matter. In fact, sometimes destinations a stone's throw away like outlying villages in Batam or Johor could offer as much of an alternative cultural experience as some locales far away. It is really a matter of the mindset – if one brings with him/her a spirit of adventure and travel, a quest for reflection and a desire to seek out new experiences, distance is not a factor. Incidentally, there are two categories of the Travel Award – one for diploma students and the other for BA students. Diploma students may choose to travel anywhere in Asia. BA students, on the other hand, are sent to Central European cities (such as Belgrade, Prague, etc.) for an exposure to European contemporary art.

(Hazel) Your support for these students from LASALLE has certainly aided them in their artistic careers and helped to shape their vision and honed their practices. What do you have to say about the works that have been produced throughout the years?

(Dr Oh) A decade ago, it started as an award that required students to draw and sketch in water-based media. However, we soon realised that this was too restricting and the young travellers may now explore any media and language they deem suitable and relevant. And this had been the essence of the "Travelogue" exhibitions. The "Travelogue" exhibitions are quite distinctive in a way. Exhibitors are required to display their work processes alongside their finished work. They present their sketchbooks, notes and photographs documenting their thoughts and reflections in a logical fashion in order to explain the creative process leading up to the finished work. This exercise is of value to the student. It is even more valuable to the lay viewer, which includes family and friends, myself included, who are thus able to make sense of and appreciate what they are expressing in their artwork. I shall never forget several parents who came up to me after the first exhibition to thank me. Why? Because they finally understood and were proud of what their children were learning at art college!



I have to confess that I am privileged to have each exhibitor walk me through his or her work at the exhibition. This enables me to fully comprehend and appreciate the artwork. Nothing frustrates me more than walking through a contemporary art exhibition and feeling I could have enjoyed 90 per cent more of it if someone could have explained each exhibit to me. If only each artist would simply state in one sentence what he or she is trying to say and why, rather than the label "Untitled" or "Image No 3"!

(Hazel) This year's celebration of 10 years of the Travel Award is certainly a milestone. How do you foresee the future of this award? And what would you like to say to these award-winning students?

(Dr Oh) These 10 years have been an exceptional journey for the students and also for myself. I have learnt a great deal about contemporary art. As long as the awards are of value to LASALLE students, I will continue to support them. Just as I learned and progressed rapidly in my own artistic endeavours through travel, I wish to share this experience with artists in training. It must be quite

rewarding for highly trained students to finally put into practice the skills they have acquired, outside of the institution, and dropped in at the deep end of a foreign environment. The works that I have seen year after year have reaffirmed in my eyes, in the public's eyes, and I am sure even more so in their own eyes, that here was proof that they have arrived – that the skills imparted by the College have worked, and they will have the confidence to go forth and build on this solid foundation. The award is just some icing on a cake for the deserving few.

Finally, top of my wish list is for all "Traveloggers" to keep in touch, perhaps through a website through LASALLE for everyone to update once a year so that we can follow their careers. Through this, we can hopefully create a small network where every past and future award-winner can update their latest contact information and also send me or the College notices of their exhibitions. For a start, they can contact me at painting@winstonoh.com.