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Malaysian artist Hock Aun Teh makes art, paints farms, survives a plane crash

BY TERENCE TOH

The acclaimed Glasgow-based artist shares stories of a truly colourful life.

He's painted Bengal tigers in the forests of India, and walked across the scorching sands of the Gobi desert by himself.

His sculpture has been exhibited during the Beijing Olympics 2008, and his paintings purchased by Hollywood glitterati such as Sean Connery and Richard Griffiths. To add to all that, he is one of the few people today who can claim to have survived a plane crash.



A New Day (2012), at Cui Hu Park, Tongling City.

The life of Glasgow-based artist Hock Aun Teh, fittingly, can best be summed up as “colourful”. And while his voice may now be coloured by a Scottish brogue, Teh, 65, is very much Malaysian, a man in love with the town of Taiping, where he spent most of his youth.

“No matter where I go around the world, I have to go back there. Just like a religious pilgrimage, I have to go to Taiping. It’s a very romantic place. Walking there is like walking through old history,” says Teh with a laugh during a recent interview in Kuala Lumpur.

To call Teh accomplished would be a bit of an understatement. The artist has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions over the years, in places as disparate as Germany, Bulgaria, China and Britain. His public collections include the National Visual Arts Gallery in Kuala Lumpur, National Art Museum of China, Beijing and The Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow.

One of his sculptures, *Friendship Gate*, a 17.3m high sculpture in Shandong, is the tallest ever sculpture in China to have been designed and built by an artist from outside the country.

Many of Teh's works reference Chinese myths and stories: this can be seen from paintings such as *The Monkey King*, *The Fairy In The Moon*, *The Seven Fairies*, and *The Nightingale And The Midnight Stars*.

"I am always fascinated by the drama, romance, and mysterious elements of myths and legends," he adds.

"I went to Langkawi in 1992, and it was then that I came to know and be enchanted by the legend of Princess Mahsuri. I was moved by the story and I subsequently painted a work dedicated to her dignified spirit. This painting was sold to the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art after it had been shown at my Retrospective Exhibition in Malaysia and China in 1993."

The prolific nature of his work, Teh said, meant it was very prone to imitation, with many other artists attempting to copy his style and pass it off as theirs. This, however, did not bother Teh: rather, it encouraged him.

"Being a creative artist, it is the greatest compliment to me when someone imitates my work, and I thank those who do it, because they give me a timely reminder not to make the same mistakes as they have done," maintains Teh.

Where did he get his artistic inspirations from? Certainly not from school: the artist professed to be a bit of a hellion, having been expelled from FIVE secondary schools during his childhood in Sungai Gedong, Perak

"As far as I was concerned, I was a very good boy," says Teh with a laugh. "The only thing was that I could not sit still! I was very free spirited. And in the eyes of the teachers, anything that involved moving and jumping about was a bad boy."

Teh's life changed, however, after he passed by a market one day on the way to visit a friend in Taiping.

"I passed by an art exhibition, and there was a drawing of a bridge on display. And I said to myself, 'That's fantastic!' How could anyone draw a bridge so real?"

That painting, fittingly, proved to be a bridge to higher aspirations. Now determined to become an artist, Teh went on a two year break after finishing school.

"I have to thank my parents, who were very understanding. During those two solid years, I painted every day, and polishing my English, so I could get an A-Level." Teh's hard work paid off.

In 1970, he was accepted into the prestigious Glasgow School of Art, where he excelled and eventually graduated. But the road to success was still long. After spending some time lecturing, Teh found himself feeling unfulfilled, and decided to trade in a secure job to risk it all as a starving artist.



Two Drunken Irishmen Trying To Find Their Way Home (2013).

“It wasn’t easy. In the early days, I even went out to the countryside, and knocked on the doors of farmers, asking if they wanted me to draw their farms!” recalls Teh. “And they’d feel sorry for me, and go, ‘would you like to paint my dog instead?’”

“I told myself, ‘I spent four years in Glasgow School of Art, and you want me to draw a dog?’”

Teh’s breakthrough came in 1984, when his paintings were exhibited in the Chicago International Art Exhibition, and were all sold out by the second day. From there, Teh was able to live a comfortable life, which he seemed determined to make as colourful as possible.

In 1997, he was selected by the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art to go to India to paint Bengal tigers in their natural habitat, while in 2000, he travelled alone across the Chinese part of the ancient Silk Road.

One of his most celebrated achievements, however, has to be *The Energy Of Life*, a four metre high sculpture selected by the Chinese Government and built at the Olympic Park on the occasion of China’s hosting the Olympic Games.

“I was always interested in making sculptures, but had never done so before. And in 2006, my friend encouraged me to join the competition. It was my first time. So I entered, and I was one of the 30 people whose work was selected!” says Teh.

"The inspiration for it was the movement of runners. And I like everything which is colourful. I noticed very few sculptures around the world had colours, and I thought to myself, surely the lives of runners would be colourful? They would have all the energy of the nation in them."

A brush with death would follow this success. In 2008, on the way home from Beijing, Teh was a passenger on British Airways Flight 038, which crashed upon landing at Heathrow Airport. All 136 passengers and 16 crew escaped unharmed.



The artist taking a break in his studio.

But Teh was haunted by the memory.

"I was thrown in the air. Everyone was screaming and crying. There was smoke everywhere, and I could smell the fumes," says Teh.

"I had to see a psychologist after that. And the psychologist referred me to a doctor, who diagnosed me as suffering from depression. I couldn't sleep, with all the images of people screaming in my head!

"With all the recent air tragedies, I haven't been sleeping well. I kept thinking those people could have been me," he adds.

Mentally and emotionally, his world had collapsed. Yet Teh was determined to recover. For a year, he struggled to readjust, turning to his art, which had always been there for him. Even picking up a brush was difficult. But Teh persevered, making himself paint a few strokes every day until he was better.

Six months later, *Sparks Of New Life*, the first painting created since the accident, was exhibited in Germany. It sold almost immediately.

"I think art saved my life," says Teh. Now, the artist has put the past behind him, and continues to do what he loves most: creating art. He has a major art project and an exhibition in China to look forward to, and believe it or not, is planning a trip to the North Pole in June.

“If you want to be an artist, you need to go out and make things happen,” says Teh, before ending this interview on a positive high,

“You were given a life, and you want to live it to the fullest. Am I just going to sit around, paint and go to exhibitions? No way! Before I go, I want to pack my life with all sorts of experiences.”