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## Read the fine print

Since it opened last April, the Singapore Tyler Print Institute has had to battle some odds, including the departure of co-founding artist Ken Tyler. Recapping its performance and goals, chairman Liu Thai Ker shows it is no white elephant

By [Clara Chow](#)

THE going may be tough, but the Singapore Tyler Print Institute has no intention of becoming a white elephant.

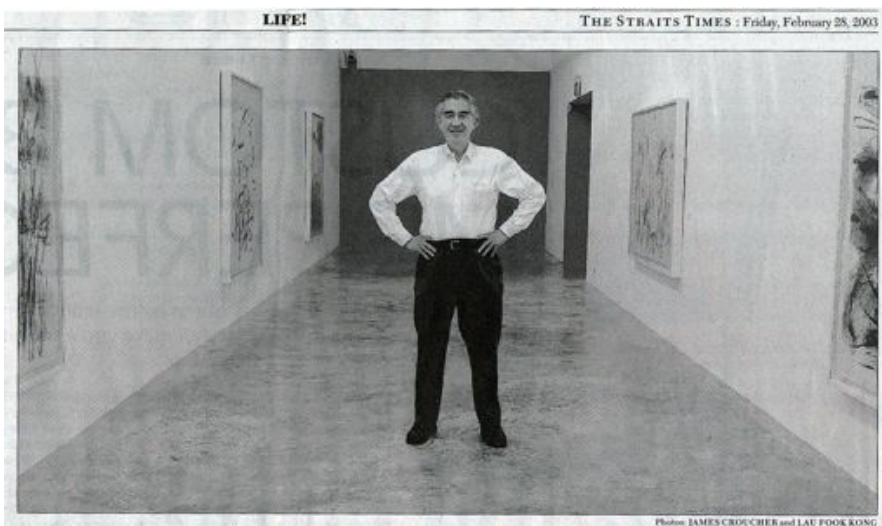
Almost a year after it opened its doors, it is in talks with galleries and art partners on future projects.

The fledgling institute faced a challenge last July when its full-time director, renowned American print-maker Ken Tyler, left abruptly.

It now employs about 18 staff members, including seven printers and two paper-mill workers.

Mr Liu Thai Ker, 65, chairman of the institute's board of directors, says it is now sorting through its operations and reworking the budget.

The institute at Robertson Quay is also holding its first exhibition of print works done by a local artist.



### PAINT TO PRINT

CULTURAL MEDALLION winner Chua Ek Kay's solo show, *Being And Becoming*, is on until March 23.

The 56-year-old Chinese ink painter, who worked with prints for the first time, says: 'I've got rid of my baggage on working in a foreign media.'

The exhibition shows 14 of his paper pulp paintings.

There are also seven different print images in editions of either nine or 30. Prices range from \$1,200 to \$30,000. So far, about 13 have been sold.

When the \$16.2-million, 4,000-sq-m institute opened in April last year, Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan said the printmaking institution could catalyse the growth of Singapore's creative industries like publishing, textile and graphic design.



**PRINTS INK-CORPORATED:** Cultural Medallion winner Chua Ek Kay, an ink painter, worked with prints for his current Being And Becoming exhibition.

Its visiting artists programme would also bring fresh ideas and cultural perspectives from all over the world.

He also said it had the potential to train a new breed of Singaporean master printers, papermakers and apprentices.

But with the economic downturn, the growth of creative industries has not taken off as quickly as hoped.

Mr Liu says some galleries and artists from the West have been impressed by the institute's facilities and are willing to come here to work on and exhibit their prints.

Declining to mention names, he says: 'They're serious enough for us to believe that this is something we would follow up.'

On when these partnerships are likely to be firmed up, he says they would take time.

The institute is also confident that international art contacts can be forged even without the connections of Tyler, who is credited with raising printmaking to sophisticated standards. He has worked with world-famous artists like David Hockney, Frank Stella and Roy Lichtenstein.

It also remains to be seen if the visiting artists programme would successfully inject foreign artists' creativity into the local art scene.

So far, two out of its three visiting artists are Singapore-based. It will have up to eight resident artists a year.

As for training printmakers, it has tied up with Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts to train students.

## **FOREIGN TALENT**

A GUEST workshop on its premises is able to meet the demands of about 10 students.

Mr Liu adds: 'If this education programme runs well, I'm also hoping that in five years we attract foreign talents here to join this school.'

The institute is funded by a government grant through the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (Mita), as well as by private sponsors. It was unable to provide figures on its operating costs at present.

One way in which it remains viable is through publishing and selling artists' original prints. Sales proceeds return to the institute, with the artist getting a case-by-case royalty.

Mr Leong Weng Kee, 49, the institute's acting general manager, is unfazed by the effect of the sluggish economy on the demand for prints.

He describes the interest and sales since the opening of Chua's exhibition on Feb 14 as 'very encouraging'.

The biggest hurdle now, says Mr Liu, is educating people that prints do not equate mass production.

He says: 'Ninety-eight per cent of the people I talk to don't understand that prints are similar yet unique.'

Freelance curator Lindy Poh, 34, says the institute may face tough times ahead.

'It has had to grapple with a grim economy and tense world politics, all of which have sobering effects on buying, sponsorship and patronage,' she says.

'Even in cheerful times, non-profit art bodies wage lifetime crusades to get and sustain funding and support.'

The reality, she adds, is that even people in the art field view basic printmaking as virgin territory.

## **TRIUMPH OVER ODDS**

BUT she feels the institute's facilities, dedicated staff and government funding will help it triumph over its odds.

What all this means is that the institute has to work harder to woo and engage the local art community.

But Ms Chng Seok Tin, 57, president of the 20-member Printmaking Society of Singapore, says: 'So far, they've not indicated any interest to work with us, so we feel our work might not be up to their standards.'

She feels the professional and sophisticated environment of the institute can be intimidating. 'They could invite us for collaboration and exchange. We're a little apprehensive to go to their doors and beg.'

In response, Mr Leong says the institute is 'still settling down' and consolidating its plans. 'In due course, we would like to explore how we can tie up with the society.'

Being And Becoming is on till March 23 at Singapore Tyler Print Institute (41 Robertson Quay). Opening hours: 9.30 am to 8 pm (Tue to Sat); 1 pm to 5 pm (Mon & Sun). Admission is free.

## **FUN WITH SEQUINS TOO**



OPEN the door to Pacita Abad's studio at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute and swirls of colour greet you.

The third and current visiting artist at the print institute started working on a new print series on Feb 4.

The visiting artist programme is a by-invitation scheme that allows artists to collaborate with the institute's printers.

American Donald Sultan and Singaporean Chua Ek Kay were previous visiting artists. Chua's works are now on show.

The institute covers all expenses related to the visiting artists' printing projects, which includes airfare, housing and materials. But they are not paid a fee for the stint.

Singapore-based Filipino artist Abad's stint ends on March 30. She has completed 15 drawings so far, about 10 of which will be made into editions.

The bubbly 56-year-old says: 'It's a happy series. I might call it Life Is A Merry-Go-Round.'

She reveals how she is using factory-reject mobile phone circuit boards as stencil boards in her 40 x 50-inch drawings on mylar film.

'It's more spontaneous working on prints. After all, it's on paper and not canvas, and one is less afraid of making mistakes,' she says.

Veering away from her trademark fabric collages, she is now experimenting with paper collages and silk cocoons from Yogyakarta. She even plans to stick sequins on her completed prints.

This is the fifth time she has worked on a print series. She produced lithographs, silk screen works and pulp prints while living in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore in the 1980s. At one point, her prints were selling for about US\$2,500 (S\$4,300) there.

She is optimistic about the possibilities of print-making. She talks enthusiastically about the high-tech facilities of the institute, and adds: 'With the economy so bad, it's a time when people will get creative to make the most of their resources.'

'Perhaps companies can commission big prints, rather than expensive paintings, for their lobbies. And young couples can buy prints to decorate their HDB flats.'

## **PRINCE OF PRINTS**

HOW do you tell your lithographs from your silkscreen prints? Here's a guide:

### **LITHOGRAPH**

A picture printed using a stone or metal block. An image is drawn on the block using a thick oily substance that attracts ink. This is then pressed on the paper.

### **SCREEN PRINTING**

A method of printing by forcing ink through a pattern cut into a piece of cloth stretched across a frame.

### **INTAGLIO**

The intaglio process requires the artist to etch a design onto a zinc plate. The plate is then placed in a tray of acid to solidify the design. It is then covered with ink. A printing press transfers the plate's design onto special paper.

### **RELIEF**

In contrast to intaglio printing, relief printing refers to processes where an image is printed from the raised parts of a plate. Relief printing techniques are woodcut, wood engraving and linocut.

Individual prints are similar yet unique as the process is begun from scratch for each print.

Be sure to look out for the quality of the printed marks, paper and colour intensity in a print. A good print might probably - but not always - combine several types of printing techniques, such as lithography with silkscreen techniques.

The size of the edition should also be considered. An edition of five means that there are only five of the same image, which makes it more rare than a print edition of 50.

Prints are often float-mounted, that is mounted slightly away from the backing board. This makes it easier for enthusiasts to check the edges of the print. The ragged appearance of the edges, known as a deckle edge, and fibre can indicate if it is handmade paper.

Information provided by Mr Matin Tran, head of marketing, communications and sales at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute.



