

Artists' Encounters

Artists are like other talented professionals. They share their unique creative perspectives with the rest of the world so that we can enjoy them, and enrich our own experiences in this world. But how much value should we appropriate for art works? And what does this mean for artists in Singapore who continue to struggle for survival, not to mention, recognition for their work?

Our government has been promoting Arts & Culture for many years, and more actively in the past few years. Since then, there are more and more young people taking this profession seriously. Surely, the public must be more receptive to young budding artists? In a recent art exhibition, I overheard people complain about the prices of art pieces ranging from S\$800 to S\$3000, saying that they are overpriced. Those people even suggested that those pieces should be no more than S\$300 and S\$800 respectively. Why should we pay more? After all, it is only a painting done in leisure, with a few strokes here and there -- Or is it ...?

We've heard about Singaporeans' mentality of buying items that are 'cheap and good.' Should this include art? The problem here is that 'cheap and good art' is almost an oxymoron, 'cheap art' being the exact opposite of 'good art.' Let this not be another instance of the 'ugly Singaporean.'

We may choose to be unappreciative of particular artworks, but let us at least be educated of their value. The first question is, how much would you pay for an original one-of-a-kind art piece? Since an original painting by a local artist is not mass produced, is it fair to ask for same price as print? I urge art buyers to compare apple with apple. Rather than reducing their work to that of the machine operator's, let us understand what goes into a piece of artwork, and why they are "priced so highly" before we judge them.

It is inappropriate, unfair, and even illogical to reduce the value of artworks to that of a technician's level. I will share with you my view here. Creating an artwork involves the following: incubation of concept, designing stage (e.g. composition), aesthetic experience, costly art materials, and talent to execute the work. It is much more than what is required to perform any tasks by a factory operator. If the buyers are not willing to pay for a fine artwork more than paying for the work of a technician, then I urge them to consider buying multi-production works instead.

In addition, we should be considered very fortunate to have free admission to many local art galleries. Imagine being able to step into a private place to view something you like for free! Have we ever thought of the gallery owners or retailers paying the rent for part of our enjoyment? Shouldn't we be more appreciative on our trip to art galleries next time?

It is no surprise that many artists do not survive in Singapore, and many of them switch to other fields after a few years of graduation. Though I do not think these artists who left for other fields are quitters, I understand their need for survival, bearing in mind that art appreciating groups belong to the minority, and lovers of fine artwork are even fewer.

Normally, artists do not receive satisfactory monetary reward in the first 10 to 20 years. Despite seeing many artists struggling to survive, yet many people are flocking into this field of profession recently. Is it for the name, fashion, fame or passion? For true artists who follow their hearts and continue to strive in creating their artworks despite the current plight, we see the picture of passion overcoming physical and mental sufferings. Even though some lucky ones will reap their rewards in the later part of their lives, most of them would suffer till their last day. Unlike some other professionals who mostly enjoy their hard work and success while they are alive, artists tend only to become valued after they die.

Sad as it may be, perhaps it is time to acknowledge that there is simply no market or demand for their production. Or perhaps it is time for the government to step in and introduce art appreciation classes in the school curriculum. Supporting the arts industry is obviously lopsided and futile if the only ones that are educated are those promising-young artists.

It is not the writer's intent to portray a negative picture, but it is the real scenario. For those of you who wish to remain true to your calling, I hope this will help you be more prepared before entering this field. Yes, it is true that artists are a rare species in Singapore. Yes, it is true that they show a tremendous amount of commitment to their passion and talent. But living in this pragmatic society, one needs to think of bread and butter first. Artists are no exception. Will our local artists survive in future? It all depends on the public's perception of the value of artworks.

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