

Sim Chan: The Undying Passion of an Artist
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Inside the swanky bar of Hotel Sav, surrounded by businessmen in suits and women in cocktail dresses, Sim Chan looked oddly out of place. He had on a plain black hoodie, zipped all the way up to the neck as if protecting himself from the swimming pink lights, a pair of worn-out jeans and yellowing sneakers. His black backpack, splattered with blue paint, drooped beside his casual choice of footwear.

He didn't seem to be the kind of confident artist who could pull off having a whole room in a high-class hotel to exhibit his work. But he certainly did look like someone who painted for a living. Most distinctively telling was his hair; long and pulled back into a ponytail, with a black headband camouflaged on his head to keep the baby hairs in place. Yet despite the efforts to tame his hair, it wasn't sleek; uncontrolled wisps still stuck out from every angle, with a few white strands to complete the look. Oblivious to the fact that his hair was misbehaving in the humid Hong Kong weather, Chan pushed his thick black-framed glasses back up the bridge of his nose and managed a nervous smile.

"I don't really know what to say," his voice was a quiet mumble.

Chan was unable to make eye contact as he sat down and rubbed his hands together nervously. With his current status in the art world, one would expect full-blown confidence, perhaps even a little arrogance. Yet Chan carried none of the self-

assurance many well-established artists had nowadays. In fact, he appeared to be the polar opposite of confident.

“This is a nice place.” He seemed unable to take the silence.

Chan had been specially selected by Hotel Sav in a rare collaboration between a corporation and the local art scene, where 22 artists of various genres were brought together to create works inspired by the theme of ‘love’ in rooms on the hotel’s 22nd floor, known as the Floor of Love. However, not all of the artists had a full room they could dedicate themselves to as only 19 rooms were used for the project. Those without their own room either shared or displayed singular pieces along the corridor. Local artist Chan, though, was one of the luckier ones to receive a whole space to work creatively.

In Room 2222, which he had full charge of, spanned *TwinklingCity*, an oil painting that reached to the very edges of the white walls. Depicted was the clustered city scene of Hong Kong with a clear blue sky that took up two-thirds of the upper half of the painting. A physical kite in the shape of a heart extended out from the sky to hang in mid-air above the bed. The only written explanation was printed on a small white sign next to the light switch by the door: the words “subtheme: love the planet”.

Perhaps the honour of giving him a full exhibition space to be seen by tourists from all over the world was due to his impressive achievements. The artist had a prominent impact on Hong Kong’s art scene with many public shows, exhibitions and awards, including being one of Perspective magazine’s “40 Under 40” creative talent. Having previously exhibited in many different social scenes ranging from classy art galleries to primary schools, one would expect Chan to be fluent with promoting himself and his works by now.

Yet as the interview went on, it was apparent that Chan was a different person from his professional titles. As a young artist struggling to make ends meet on a day-to-day basis, he required a little more pushing than expected as he recounted the concept behind the room he designed in Hotel Sav and his passion for the arts that has kept him creating for eight years.

“I love architecture and the city,” he began. “Yet I dislike how we live as though we are bound by rules in Hong Kong – but I have learned to accept the city for what it is by looking at it through a different emotional standpoint.”

Although *TwinklingCity* was not focused on a typical subject that one would relate ‘nature’ to, Chan explained that ‘nature’ did not simply have to be limited to trees and mountains. To him, Hong Kong’s natural environment was exactly what was painted along the bottom of his painting – labyrinths of high-rises. The artist constantly found beauty in the rushed urban pace of the city, something he was surprised to meet at first when he graduated from secondary school having grown up in the suburbs of pre-development Ma On Shan.

“It’s not been easy as an artist here,” he said. “I’ve loved art since I was young, but I don’t have much confidence in myself. Creating art as a full-time job scares me and I’m always living in fear – when will I finally break and fail?”

Growing up poor, he'd never had the financial support of his parents. When asked why he decided to be an artist, he admitted that he'd never been strong academically and worked part-time in a 7Eleven after high school. He'd always had an interest in studying art, but never thought he had the ability to pursue it seriously. He said he would still be moving boxes for a living 10 years on if his art teacher had not noticed his talent and pushed him to apply for art school. And throughout his life, it seemed like he needed a lot of pushing.

"He's a very shy person and he can't express himself well verbally, so I have to do the talking for him sometimes," Gabriel Cheung, his best friend, said. "But I don't mind helping him with that. In return, he's a great brother. He's a classic handyman, and he repairs whatever's broken in my house, helps around with little renovations and he even did the spray-paint job for my car."

It took a painfully long time for Chan to warm up to talking. Yet, as suspected, it was not the worst of it – at least the interview was not being conducted on-air on television. It was soon revealed that that situation *had* indeed happened before. While still at art school, Chan had been invited for a live interview with TVB. Although he had his friends supporting him from the sidelines, the whole session turned out to be a disaster. Listening to the story, one could imagine it unfolding in a painfully excruciating way. The TV host started off normally but became more and more desperate as each of her guiding questions were met with a moment of silence, followed by two single vowels of mumbled Cantonese. Cheung laughed as he described the unravelling drama from backstage.

"I could smell the awkwardness and desperation from both sides. The TV host kept glancing at her crew for support and Sim kept giving us pleading looks as if to say, "please save me"! If it wasn't live, I don't think the recording would've ever seen the light of day."

The root of Chan's lack of courage was intriguing. When probed further, the artist shrugged as if he had accepted it a long time ago. In fact, he unexpectedly showed the first slither of pride when he admitted that he actually embraced his personality.

"I've been like this as far as I can remember. It's just me. In some ways I'm actually grateful because my shyness has allowed me to become an artist. The visual is my only voice. If I wasn't shy, my art may be completely different. They may not speak as loud as they do now."

Additionally to a lack of confidence in himself, Chan found it difficult to earn money. He'd expected this when he first set out on this career path, but reality was harsh beyond words. Yet despite the daily heart attacks of not being able to pay the rent for his studio or sell any art pieces, he ploughed on, as art was his only voice in a world where everything and everyone intimidated him vocally.

"My money earned from selling a piece of work is all used to pay the rent for my studio in Fo Tan, which I need to continue creating. There was one year where I would just eat one piece of bread a day because I could not afford food."

Against all odds – the daily emotional distress, physical living difficulties, the list goes on – Chan has had the drive to carry on for eight years now. When asked why he did not take on side jobs like teaching drawing classes, he was stubborn in his reply. Just a physical millimetre off his art pieces was never acceptable, and it seemed that his plans for the future followed this rule too. After a few initial responses of incomprehensible uttered vowels, Chan finally replied that he did not want to put his focus on other projects. He just wanted to paint.

“This passion – it will burn out otherwise. I’ve seen it happen with many artists,” he said.

Image source: SimChan.com