

THIS ARTIST PAINTS USING WHEELS, YES REALLY

AUGUST 15, 2016 [ARTS](#), [CULTURE](#)

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The Star

How many hours does an artist spend with his paintbrush when preparing for his first solo show? For Hings Lim, the answer is zero.

For starters, there is no brush involved, only modified bicycle wheels dipped in paint and dragged over canvas laid out on the street.

Interestingly, Lim hardly did any of the “painting” himself, instead offering the wheel to curious bystanders, mostly foreign workers and migrants, who wielded them and added colours onto the blank slate with varying degrees of hesitation, self-consciousness, curiosity and eagerness, not really knowing where it all fit in the bigger scheme of things.

Little did they know that these works, now stretched over a frame and hung on the wall, would collectively make up an art exhibition at Richard Koh Fine Art in Kuala Lumpur.

This is *Reciprocity*, Lim’s first solo show, which will feature these works created over the course of three months worth of weekends. The exhibition will have 15 artworks, of which three will be shown at Bazaar Art Jakarta (Aug 25-28), and one in a group show at Richard Koh Fine Art later this year.



Hings Lim uses the utilitarian bicycle wheel as the paintbrush to create the works in his first solo exhibition, *Reciprocity*.

“I have always been interested in blurring the distinction between life and art. This project brings art directly to the community, with its creation relying on their participation. When social interactions serve as a form of art, it destroys the barrier between art and audience,” says Lim, 27.

Reciprocity demonstrates his multi-dimensional art practice that uses the framework of a participatory project in the process of making an artwork.

With the setup installed in public spaces where foreign workers congregate (in this case, Pasar Borong Selayang and Lebu Pudu in Kuala Lumpur), the participants were given freedom to express and experiment in their role as part of the art dialogue.

It feels like a social experiment of sorts, involving recruitment of members from an unlikely artistic crowd, to create art.

It also begs the question of authorship: is the artist the one who paints, or the one who conceptualises?

“To me, it is the idea of the artwork that makes it art. It is about concept, intention and execution, that is why daily objects and everyday occurrences can be art,” says Lim, who is a Universiti Malaysia Sarawak Fine Art graduate, who majored in photography.

In 2012, he was awarded the Petronas-P.Ramlee Chair's Award, which supports various forms of research work.

The KL-born Lim is no stranger to community art. In a series of earlier group projects, which started in 2011, he and his team brought their ideas and tools to school children from small towns, inviting them to make art with readymades like toys and miscellaneous industrial objects that had been transformed into paint tools.

“*Reciprocity* is an extension of these earlier projects. Like the children we met then, the people who participated in *Reciprocity* are not trained in art, many don't know what art is, or even what a painting is. So it is quite interesting to put them in this situation,” he says.



At the beginning of each session, Lim would demonstrate painting with a bicycle wheel, before letting interested bystanders take over.

Lim points out that it is intriguing to note that in embarking on this participatory project, he is taking on the role of foreigner in their world.

“To them, I am a foreigner who is introducing art, which is a foreign concept to them,” he explains. “It feels like a role reversal of sorts, where I am the labourer and they the onlookers. It was an interesting experience.”

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More often than not, the finished product would end up looking like Abstract Expressionists works. Lim concurs that although they look like abstract art, he observes that they are, at their core, more conceptual art than anything else.

“However, the artmaking process is, to me, more important than the result or outcome,” he says, adding that on top of the paintings, *Reciprocity* includes the documentation of the art-making process, presented in the form of videos and photographs, as well.

When social interactions come into play, one would expect a certain element of unpredictability, often to the chagrin of Lim, who considers himself an introvert at heart.

“Over the years I realise that I somehow end up gravitating towards projects that have a participatory element to them. But I am kind of an introvert, so dealing with such situations is a challenge to me. I think the hardest part is always the beginning. But once I get the momentum going, I feel more comfortable,” he says.



Jalan Hang Lekiu, Kuala Lumpur, 160626 (6 Painters; 3 Wheels)⁹, (acrylic on canvas tarpaulin, 2016).



'Lebuh Pudu, Kuala Lumpur, 160626 (10 Painters; 3 Wheels)', (acrylic on canvas tarpaulin, 2016). Photos: Richard Koh Fine Art and Hings Lim.

In the making of *Reciprocity*, Lim has several anecdotes to share, including the one time where a man, who did not take part in the painting, gave instructions to another as to how to paint with the bicycle wheel.

In another incident, a woman walked by a finished work, hurriedly made a wish, and flipped two coins onto the canvas (which Lim stuck onto the work). "I had people get angry at me for blocking the walkway, I have been harassed, and even had a man who demanded for me to pay him after he was done painting!" shares Lim.

"But I also met nice and kind people, who recognise me when I return to the area the next weekend, and take time to smile and wave. So whether it is good or bad, it is all part of the experience," he says.

The use of the utilitarian wheel in this project is inspired by Marcel Duchamp's iconic *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), a mounted wheel on a wooden stool.

In its everyday incarnation, the wheel reduces our need for manual labour; it moves objects or people from one place to another in a more effective manner. Lim draws parallels to how our society relies heavily on foreign labour to get certain things done, just like the wheel that keeps things moving.

“*Reciprocity* is a good introduction to encourage people to ponder on what is it exactly that makes art,” he says.

Is it the visual aspect that makes or breaks it? Or is it the idea or driving force behind an artwork?

Or could it be something else entirely?