

LIVEWIRE:

Victor Tan (right), whose sculptures can be found across Singapore, prefers to sculpt human forms because of the warmth and energy he finds in them.



ALAN LIM

He finds the spark of life in wires

*Using hands and imagination,
artist Victor Tan twists mangles
of wires into a curious menagerie
of metal mannequins*

SIX PM on a Thursday. Artist Victor Tan, 34, grants you an interview and tour of his Telok Kurau Lorong J studio.

You are wearing a blue dress, but he sees something else: "Many, many colours; you cannot imagine. But I see mainly yellow, with a few specks of pink."

Tan, 34, lives the life of heightened senses as an artist.

Close your eyes for a few seconds, concentrate on his words, and you will have entered the private universe of his mind. In the real space of his workshop, a mangle of wires transforms into a curious menagerie of metal mannequins borne of his hands and imagination.

These works can also be found across Singapore in public and private collections, the most recent installations being a sculpture display in the Botanic Gardens and an exhibition at the Esplanade.

In one showcase, miniature babies meshed from wire crawl around a suspended web like chubby aunts feasting on a sugar spill.

Another series captures freeze-frame 3D wire "shots" of a man getting up from lying down on the floor.

Each sculpture has an urgent, organic zeal; it is action stopped in flight.

"I want to capture moments; or the beauty of particular, spontaneous moments," he says.

"These days, people are so busy *doing* things, they don't stop to realise how special one instant, or one small pocket of *being* is."

Each "moment" takes him anything from a few hours to a few months to create.

MASCULINE WORKS

THE bachelor sculpts in an unorthodox manner: He gropes and feels for the sinews and tendons of real-life models — often himself. He burns these touch-images into the back of his consciousness, before turning them, via twisted wires, into lifelike sculptures.

Padding up wires into lifelike forms is easy, he says, but getting the whole body to balance is another. He prefers to sculpt human forms because "there is warmth and an organic flow of energy".

"People say my works are masculine," he says. "They may have a point because I can only feel up the male models — it would be uncomfortable to ask such requests of female models."

There is a simple explanation to his methodology. Tan suffers from a condition called optic neurosis. He sees — not the sharp images most people do, but flashes of beautiful, bright light. He negotiates Singapore almost always with a white cane.

At the age of 24, he started seeing sparks of light at the back of his head. These became jagged flashes of colour, turning his "normal" existence literally haywire.

He could not draw again. By then, the once fully-sighted polytechnic student and draughtsman had quit both school and his job and moved on to selling insurance. But out of curiosity and desperation, he enrolled for a ceramics and art diploma at the Lasalle-SIA College.

"People think it's a paradox that someone like me should be an artist at all," he says.

"But when I finished my first work, it was 'Yaaaah!' I was in my own world, I felt normal again. How could I give up on art?"

SCULPTING TO SOUNDS

AT THE onset of his career, hungry media milked his struggle for all the sob-story glut it was worth, resulting in a riotous circus. Tan recoiled from



fear of over-exposure, but also resented ascending but well-meaning friends telling

him to stop harping on his visual impairment.

"People made assumptions on my behalf, telling me I could do this and therefore couldn't do that. Others told me to become a musician.

"But I make up my own mind for myself. I don't want to be a hero and say it's okay for all blind artists to be sculptors now. I just want to say that everyone is an individual and has the right to choose his own life."

He sculpts to music, radio broadcasts, as well as the sound of birds and traffic riding the evening breeze into his fourth-floor studio.

"Sometimes, the sound is too much for me to bear," he admits.

He talks about a spry octogenarian who stumbled into the Telok Kurau complex a few years ago and wandered to his door, curious about his sculptures. The man became a good friend and eventually became the model for one of Tan's favourite pieces, a seated figure just about to leap forward, holding a picture frame (see picture).

By this time, the sun has set and the studio lights have not been switched on. The room is a deep blue — you can barely see the hand in front of your face, much less the one taking notes.

But the view in Tan's private, inner horizon is a different one: "There is a row of pink lights; there are circles with blue spots hovering around them. I cannot describe to you how beautiful it is."

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