Master of his universe

Heman Chong's latest installation takes you into the future of Singapore

HEMAN Chong is grinning from ear to ear. His excitement is palpable.

"They say I don't do enough works about Singapore hui! Well then, bam!"

That "bam" is the sound of his latest solo exhibition hitting the viewer smack in the face. It's 1,001 photographs taken within a seven-year span, currently exhibited at the National University of Singapore Museum. Calendars (2020-2096), a thought-provoking installation comprising imaginary pages from calendars from the future, featuring an assortment of deserted interiors around the country.

Eerie images of seemingly abandoned yet familiar places — from coffeeshops to the National Stadium to a Louis Vuitton store — are all assembled into grids across the walls of the gallery to haunting effect. It's the 34-year-old artist's most ambitious project to date and serves as a firm rebuttal against critics who don't think his works speak to a Singapore audience.

A start in art

Born in Muar, Malaysia, Chong grew up in Singapore and got his first taste of the art world as a Secondary 4 student — contributing a series of drawings about his dying grandfather to a group show at the Substation in 1993, curated by the late Kuo Pao Kun.

The idea of being an artist came during his Temasek Polytechnic days, when he studied under ceramist Iskandar Jalil and sculptor Eslie Yu.

"These two artists were really important because it was during my first year in design school that it dawned upon me it was possible to be an artist," he recalled.

Interestingly, the 2005 Young Artist Awardee pointed out he's never actually studied art. "My entire life, I've always studied graphic design simply because I don't quite agree with art education," said Chong, who took up a Master's in Communication Art and Design at the Royal College of Art in London.

His early works consisted primarily of "video art" but he gave that up in 2003, with an artist residency at Berlin's Kunsterhaus Bethanien. "That was a kind of Ground Zero for me. I somehow knew at that point that I didn't want to make any more videos, simply because I was really bad at it," he said.

That same year, he was also chosen to be one of Singapore's representatives to the Venice Biennale, together with Francis Ng and Tan Swie Hian.

He's been on a roll ever since — despite certain perceptions of his artistic
practice. He joked that his parents still don't know what to think of him. "My mum's like: 'Why are you always travelling? Do you work for the CIA? They really don't understand what they did in their past lives to get two artists in the family!' (His younger sister, Eileen, is a Sydneys-based poet).

Love or hate
Despite being one of the country's most recognisable names in the international art world, his works have been described as too conceptual or too Western. When they're not "esoteric", "pretentious" or "nonsense", that is.

An article in ArtAsia Pacific magazine called his works "a kind of sideways art that you either get or you hate".

During the Singapore Biennale 2008, he put up a huge billboard with the words "One Hundred Years Of Solitude", in reference to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's classic novel.

That caused a heated online debate. Elsewhere in the Biennale grounds, he stuck stickers all over the walls of a room and covered the floor with black "name cards" — titled Monument To The People We've Conveniently Forgotten (I Hate You).

Last year, he did A Short Story About Geometry at TheatreWorks, a piece that entailed participants being in a room with Chong, unable to leave until they memorised by heart a short story he dictated to them. It was nominated for the recent APB Foundation Signature Art Prize. Elsewhere, he's done a radio play; co-written a sci-fi novel called Philip; curated shows such as the ongoing BMW Young Asian Artists Series at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute; and designed an artwork for the Labrador Park MRT station (with the enigmatic phrase "Without Which/Would Have Been/Impossible").

He also found time to found PLURAL, an informal "cooperative" of Singapore artists that includes notable names such as Michael Lee, Genevieve Chua, Charles Lim, Ming Wong and Ang Song Ming, among others. Three years ago, he also took up painting and now has an ongoing series on book covers.

Next year, he'll have a performance/installation at the Singapore Arts Festival. Called Advanced Studies In Ten Lessons For Life, it will have audiences going through an hour-long lesson based on a novel or a play's theme conducted by students from School Of The Arts.

Many things at once
That Chong's multi-faceted art practice is as hard to pin down as the works themselves is no skin off his back.

"I believe that one can be many things at any point of time," he said. And in a literal way, Calendars (2020-2026) is proof of that artistic ethos. From 2004 until last year, the business of taking photographs ran parallel to all his other projects, making it both a rigorous process and a labour of love.

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“This was kind of a mothership of sorts that I could somehow cradle in to feel safe,” Herman revealed.

Every time he was in Singapore, the well-travelled Chong would walk around and capture photographs of empty spaces — a difficult task considering many of these were not actually “abandoned” at all.

A picture of a section of a Popular Bookstore branch, for example, had to be re-taken many times as people would walk past, blocking the shot. An image of a cavernous section of a Singapore Expo Hall evoked a kind of loneliness — until Chong pointed out that, as he took the photo, there was a crazy book sale going on right behind him. Imagine someone capturing these empty spaces under those conditions — and having the project constantly at the back of your mind for seven years — and one gets a sense of the magnitude of it all.

Funneled into a fictional framework of a desolate Singapore of the future, *Calendars (2020-2096)* is at once universal and specific, experimental and traditional, cerebral and visceral, creating an impact that only an exhibition that deals with such big themes like time and space literally can have.

Bam! Indeed.

*Calendars (2020-2096)* runs until Feb 12, 10am to 7.30pm, at NUS Museum, University Cultural Centre, 50 Kent Ridge Crescent. Until 6pm on Sunday. Closed on Mondays and public holidays. Free admission. For our in-depth interview with Chong, visit For Art’s Sake! at http://blogs.todayonline.com/forartssake.

Above:
Herman Chong's A Short Story About Geometry performance, where participants were only allowed to leave after they'd memorised a short story read to them.

Five other personalities and institutions from the art scene that you can't quite pin down

**Josef Ng**

Now a curator based in Bangkok, Ng shot to fame (or notoriety) for his charged performances, including 1993's *Brother Cane* which kickstarted controversy that brought about a 10-year funding ban on performance art. The said performance is the subject of a re-enactment by Loo Zihan at next year's M1 Singapore Fringe Festival.

**Lim Tzyay Chuen**

The subject of a recent *Vertical Submarine* performance involving a “boxer” waiting in vain for him. He gave the Substation’s gallery an aquarium-like façade, planned to take the Merlion to the Venice Biennale, and unleashed dubious “pheromones” at the Singapore Biennale 2006. Now he’s mostly playing husband to hot-shot Chinese artist Cao Fei.

**Zai Kunning**

One of the most outspoken and unpredictable artists around, Zai is your certified out-of-the-box artist. Music, visual arts, performance art and literature — he’s done it all, evoking bafflement and admiration. At the latest Singapore Biennale, his “non-existent” contribution comprised a documentation of plans to revive the Substation garden. His latest work, *Immigrant*, was a collaboration that involved wax and ice.

**The Substation**

Respected, outdated, cutting-edge, has—been — this art centre’s reputation has swung back and forth so many times. But that hasn’t stopped it from being the go-to place for shows and exhibitions that confound as well as charm.

**TheatreWorks (version 2.0)**

It started out with more mainstream offerings, but the theatre company later became a place for the avant garde and experimental, not only in theatre but contemporary arts. Its three shows this year — *The Diary Of Alice, Fear Of Writing* and *Dust: A Recollection* — are proof that crossing disciplines is the way forward.