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Headline: A Gift of Light and Shadows; His winning strokes



ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

A GIFT OF LIGHT AND SHADOWS

It is the largest painting of his career, and Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian

donated it to the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) last night.

Day And Night, a 1.9m by 4.7m Chinese ink on paper work, will go into the museum's permanent collection. It is now on show at the ongoing The Big Picture Show exhibition.

China-born Gao, 67, now based in Paris, said yesterday: "I hope that in Asia, artists and art lovers can see my work often."

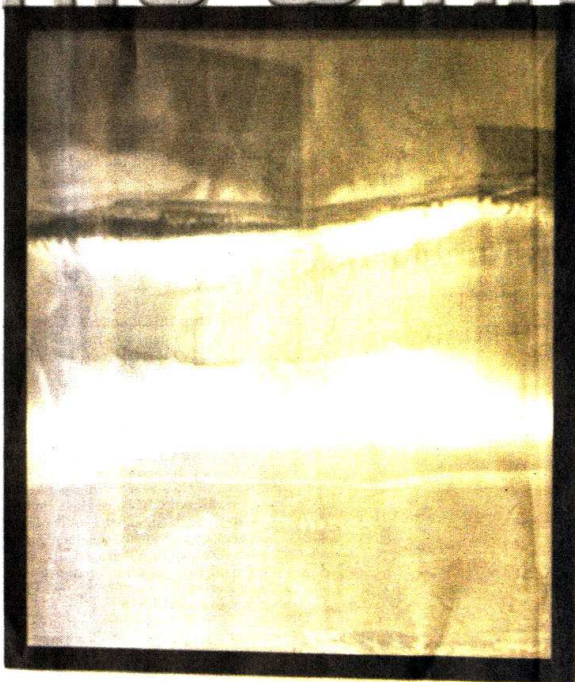
The painting shows a few black figures on an ethereal, monochrome background of black, grey and luminous white. It has not been valued yet.

Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, who was guest of honour at the ceremony, said: "(Night And Day) seems to speak of solitude and companionship, of worldliness and nothingness, and of the sub-consciousness of human existence."

ADELINE CHIA

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His winning strokes



Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian is creating art with a vengeance after recovering from a near-fatal heart condition. The Paris-based writer-painter-film director, who is here for an ink-works exhibition, tells **ADELINE CHIA** that he is making up for lost time.

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ART IN HIS SOUL

Writer-painter Gao Xingjian has thrown himself into his work after recovering from a serious heart condition. The peace he feels now has translated into softer paintings, which are on show here



BIG PICTURE: Gao Xingjian has donated his largest painting, Day And Night, to the Singapore Art Museum. It is featured at an ongoing exhibition called The Big Picture Show. PHOTOS: SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM; ILLUSTRATION: PHOTOPREGATION



Adeline Chia
ARTS REPORTER

NOBEL laureate Gao Xingjian has been working with a vengeance the past year. He takes no holidays, does not rest on weekends and burns the midnight oil. He says it is to make up for time lost in 2002 when he took two years to recover from a near-fatal condition which caused his major arteries to harden. It resulted in a creative dry spell.

The Paris-based writer-painter-film-maker, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 2000, is in Singapore until Monday for a packed schedule of speaking engagements. Gao, 67, also greeted a customary last night to mark the donation of one of his paintings to the Singapore Art Museum (SAM).

This is his first trip out of Europe since he fell ill in 2002. He is accompanied by his wife, Chinese writer Xi Ling, 44. The couple have no children.

In an interview with *Life!* on Thursday, he says he is also pushing himself hard to make up for what he calls his "wasted youth" in his native land. Censorship and political oppression limited his output then, he says.

He was thrown into a re-education camp during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s and was persecuted by the Chinese government for his "anti-Party" plays. He eventually moved to Paris in 1987 and became a French citizen in 1998.

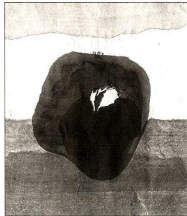
Now, every waking hour is a race against the clock. He says: "I spend most of my time creating works now. I have no holidays, not five weekends. Looking a little drawn but alert during the interview at the Fullerton Hotel, he recounts softly in Mandarin that the last time he set foot in Singapore was in 1988, when he was invited here by the late theatre doyenne Bao Puo Kun. He says wistfully: "It feels like yesterday."

His interior universe
ANOTHER reason for his visit is to open his solo exhibition at the Precinct gallery at the Fullerton. It features 22 works he created between 2005 and last year.

Most of the monochrome Chinese ink on paper works are on loan from private collectors in Europe and Asia, with five for sale. Most of the works have abstract landscapes represented by washes of black and grey, and large areas of luminous white. Gao says he is calmer and more peaceful now, so these works are in lighter, softer and more harmonious shades than his previous ones, which had more contrasting tones.

With titles such as Interior Universe and Black Thoughts, they are windows into his

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A NEW LIFE: Gao painted Heart's Landscape this year. The 67-year-old says he treasures life after his illness. PHOTO: PHOTOPREGATION

Risen from the shadows of the past

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inner life. "I rubbed shoulders with death and survived," he says. "God is merciful." Better health has also allowed him to paint larger works.

In fact, his donation to SAM is the largest painting he has ever done. Day And Night measures 1.5m by 4.7m and is on show at the museum's ongoing exhibition called The Big Picture Show.

He donated the painting to thank the museum for putting up an exhibition of his works in 2005 - his first retrospective in Asia - and to give scholars and arts lovers a chance to see his work without going to Europe.

The painting, which shows solitary and grouped figures in a balanced background of black and translucent grey - was completed in 10 days in a flash of inspiration. Gao, with a wide grin, calls it "a miracle".

Six years of hard labour
THIS new-found serenity seems a long way from the political claustrophobia in China he endured in his younger days.

He was encouraged to write, paint and play the violin by his actress mother and his father, a senior bank officer. A French language and literature student in the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages, he let or worked as a translator.

He is tight-lipped about his personal life, but he is known to have been married twice before. It has also been reported that his first wife denounced him to the authorities during the Cultural Revolution.

He had to bury "kisses and kisses" of essays, plays and novels to avoid arrest. Nonetheless he was made to attend re-education camps and did hard labour in the fields for six years.

In 1980, he was resident playwright at Beijing People's Art Theatre, but his satirical plays such as *Red Snow* (Chezhan) caused him to be blacklisted by the Chinese government.

Frustrated with censorship and political oppression, he left China in 1987 to settle in Paris, where he published a steady stream of short stories, novels and plays.

His seminal work, *Soul Mountain* (Lingshan), was completed in 1989, and is a meandering 81 chapter epic portraying an individual's search for roots, inner peace and liberty. The Chinese government denounced it as "very, very average" but it received warm reviews abroad.

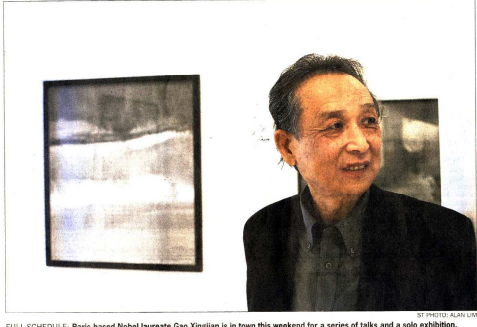


PHOTO: ALAN HO

FULL SCHEDULE: Paris-based Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian is in town this weekend for a series of talks and a solo exhibition.

After the suppression of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in June 1989, he renounced his membership in the Chinese Communist Party. His books were then banned in China.



PHOTO: PHOTOPREGATION

INNER LIFE: Gao painted Black Thoughts after recovering from a near-fatal illness.

On what drives his creative impulse through the ups and downs, he says: "I faced a lot of oppression in China, but the only way to determine your own value as an artist is to create. Not through speeches or political action, but to say something using art."

But he takes pains to distance himself from his experiences in China.

He says: "The past seems so far away. I consider myself having three lives. The first is in China, where I encountered difficulties at every turn. The second life is in the West, where I consider myself a global citizen. That ended after winning the Nobel Prize, when I faced a lot of stress and fell sick."

"The third life is now, after I've risen from the shadow of death. That's why I treasure it. China seems like a completely different realm from now."

"I don't think about the past. I don't want to."

Besides, the workshops has more urgent things to think about.

Since June, he has been working relentlessly on a book of essays, *On Creating*, which tackles the themes of his works and "the relationship between the intellectual and society in the 21st century".

He figures that "if anyone were to do a summation of my work I might as well do it myself".

Other issues keep him busy. He says: "We are in the 21st century. We are facing new questions and crises, such as environment issues and global warming. Those old questions of the 20th century, of revolution and aesthetics, they are over."

After the interview, he gamely autographs a catalogue and poses for pictures before doing another interview, one of many during his packed schedule.

He says: "With so much to do, what is there to reminisce about? People ask why I don't write my own memoirs. I never even think of it."

> chaitail@sp.com.sg