

YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2019

TAN WEI KEONG

Tan Wei Keong (b. 1984) is an animation filmmaker. He has received international and local recognition with his acclaimed body of work which explores his identity through personal storytelling and fantasy worlds.

He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) (2009) under the then Media Development Authority's Media Education Scholarship.

His latest film, 'Kingdom' (2018), has been selected to compete at the Berlin International Film Festival and was the opening short film at the Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF) last year. His films have achieved recognition on numerous occasions at SGIFF, including the Best Singapore Short Film Award for 'Between Us Two' (2017), Special Mention for 'Hush Baby' (2009) and the Special Achievement Award for 'White' (2007). Wei Keong is the first director from Singapore to be selected in competition at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival (for 'The Great Escape' in 2015) and at Animafest Zagreb (for 'Pifuskin' in 2014).

Wei Keong is a strong champion and advocate for Singapore animation, introducing and showcasing Singapore animation and its creators to the world. With an invitation from the Japan Foundation Asia Center in 2016, he presented a series of lectures, workshops and screenings on Singapore's independent animation in Singapore and Japan. Since 2014, he has helped showcase Singapore animation artists through his work as Film Programme Director at Cartoons Underground, Southeast Asia's first and largest underground animation festival.

Beyond independent animation, Wei Keong has a strong interest in merging his field of animation with new media art projects. 'Foundin' is one of the several installations he created to connect people in ways of seeing, hearing and finding one another. It was exhibited twice to positive reception: in Singapore at the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival (2014) and in France at the Made in Asia Festival (2015).

Other installations include 'Paper Wall' (2017), which was created during his residency at the Djerassi Resident Artists Program in Woodside; 'Notes of the Lighthouse Keepers' (2016), which was shown at the Headlands Center for the Arts in the Marin Headlands; and 'Space for Strangers' (2016), which was exhibited at the Southern Exposure gallery in San Francisco. All these installations were exhibited in California, USA.



Tan Wei Keong at the Singaporean filmmakers network session during the Singapore International Film Festival, 2018.

Photo courtesy of Singapore International Film Festival



A CONVERSATION WITH TAN WEI KEONG

Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts. Who or what were your key influences in animation?

My elder brother and I read a lot of comic books together when we were young. I was influenced by his interest in illustration and we would draw and mail comic strips to newspapers. My mother also signed me up for drawing and colouring competitions and I had so much fun at these events. This attraction to drawing and storytelling has never gone away and is the main reason why I became enchanted by this fascinating medium.

I was introduced to animated short films at NTU where I studied animation, and that was where I had the opportunity to watch works by Michèle Cournoyer and Norman McLaren. There was also Animation Nation, an animation film festival in Singapore where 'Mind Game' by Masaaki Yuasa was screened, and that quickly expanded my understanding of animation as an art form. I have watched so many animated

shorts at international film festivals and there are many contemporary directors whom I love, like Dahee Jeong and Chen Xi. I also like horror films like '28 Days Later' and 'Let the Right One In'.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced when creating new works? What motivated you to continue in spite of these challenges?

Sometimes an idea or image takes time for me to realise the weight of its meaning, and to fully understand the significance and reason behind it before starting the project – that is my responsibility.

It is extremely important for me to work on films that have themes I believe in and issues that need addressing, because this strong connection will be my motivation throughout the production. I am also constantly questioning what animation should be. I mix a lot more media in my work now, like drawing directly onto printed photographs before scanning them back in. I care less about what proper animation is, and care more about what shows up on the film, which results in an experimental and primitive approach in my process.

What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

Animation is an amazing medium to tap into the bizarre unconsciousness, and I enjoy writing stories about characters with complex personalities. I like the act of manipulating narratives and exploring history and time. It has been an absolute joy to work with my long-time collaborators, Loo Zihan (editor) and Darren Ng (sound and music) since my first short film; I want them to have absolute creative freedom and expression as they shape as much of the films as my direction. It is also rewarding to talk to audiences at international film festivals because of the different perspectives they bring from their cultures and backgrounds.

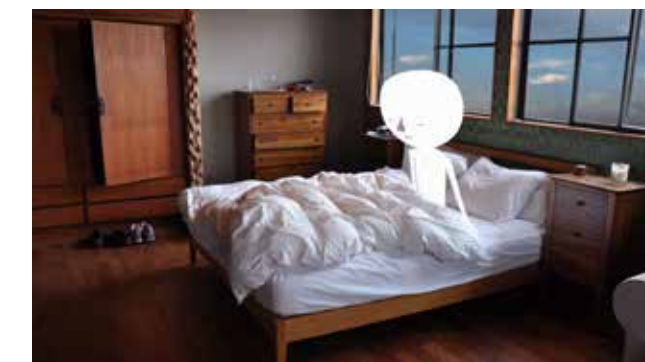
What do you want the audience to experience through your works?

Even though many of my animations are autobiographical, they are actually not meant to be about me. They are more of a vehicle for the audience to open up, feel, think and talk about difficult topics at their own pace, be it right after the screening or many years after. They reflect important events like marriage and death, as well as sentiments of loss and identity that can be shared and empathised with.

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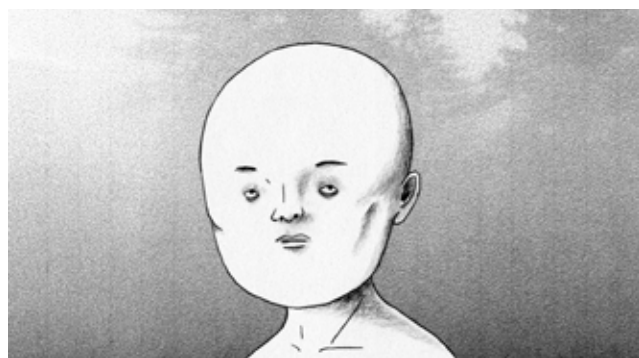


'Between Us Two', film still, 2017.
Photo courtesy of Tan Wei Keong



'The Great Escape', film still, 2015.
Photo courtesy of Tan Wei Keong

“Keep making what you enjoy doing. Find your community, stick with it and grow together. Say ‘yes’ more to people and things you believe in. Ultimately, only you can make it happen.”



‘Kingdom’, film still, 2018.
Photo courtesy of Tan Wei Keong



Tan Wei Keong with the director of ‘Cities of Last Things’, Ho Wi Ding, and cast members Stone, Huang Lu, and Ding Ning at the Singapore International Film Festival, 2018.
Photo courtesy of Singapore International Film Festival

What are your vision and hopes for Singapore’s animation scene?

I hope to see more diversity and variation in Singapore animation in terms of representation and technique. Animation is a medium, not a genre. There is a lot of room for experimentation in animation as it is a form that permeates realism and fantasy, and filmmakers should be more daring to work on original ideas. Be bold and unconventional. We can capture emotions that are personal yet universal, and we too can captivate audiences with depth and address complex issues within our stories.

What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in your field?

Graduation films are a great opportunity to experiment, make bold decisions and express yourselves. Too many local student animations fall into clichés about love and life, and miss the bigger picture. I believe everyone has something important to say besides the default. So, find that voice and opinion and say it. There are many wonderful ways a story can be told and the only limit is your imagination.

Keep making what you enjoy doing. Find your community, stick with it and grow together. Say ‘yes’ more to people and things you believe in. Ultimately, only you can make it happen.

How does receiving the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council change things for you? Tell us more about how you intend to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.

Receiving this award is more than an affirmation of my work. We are elevating the visibility of animation as an art form and shining a light on the wider animation community in Asia. I am thankful and hope that this becomes an important statement of acknowledgement, support and inspiration for our future generations of animation artists in Singapore.

I will continue to write and make more animation films, both short and long forms, as well as develop animation as a new media art form. I will also continue to work to expand the local audience and creators through Cartoons Underground, currently in our eighth year, as the Film Festival Programme Director.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I am here only because of these people. Thank you from the bottom of my heart:

Zihan and Darren for your trust;

Puiyee, Sanchai, Zhi Wei, Royston, Juan and Kristin for selecting my animations;

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