

Creative of the month

The anatomy of nudity

Kelvin Lim's intimate take on the female form is an expression of the beauty of that person, the face and the body, without the distraction

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Photos by Kelvin Lim
Words by Jill Wong

A nude woman in bare flesh can trigger a range of emotions. Love, lust, desire, seduction, disgust, scorn, shame, guilt, jealousy, beauty, pleasure; the list goes on.

A naked woman can be a goddess to some, and a whore to others.

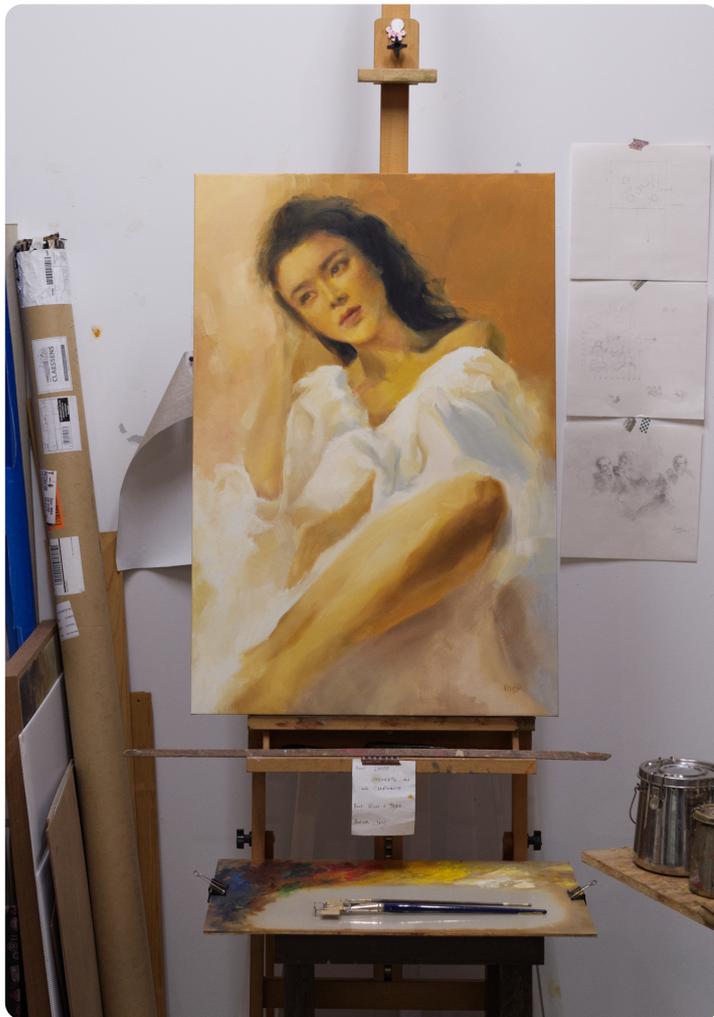
Tempress, femme fatale or damsel in distress?

Whichever way we choose to describe it, Kelvin Lim's work will extend our vocabulary beyond the common synonyms for 'naked'.

Lim's intimate take on the female form is an unencumbered expression of the plurality of emotions that inspired artists over centuries to capture in their Mona Lisas.

In its barest form, art is an expression of human emotions. In its more advanced format, it should inspire intellectual exchange and critical thinking.

To Lim, a woman's body, with its lines, curves, bumps and crevices, is a source of fascination, adoration and inspiration. Whether plump and robust, or bony and frail, they are capable of generating an impermanence that he seeks to capture through his paintings, sketches and photographs.



Nudity as an art form is not something that sits well with a conservative Asian society that equates nudity and sex with obscenity.

But it is the basis for Lim's existence as an artist. His works include the darkly erotic scenes of stark-naked Asian women with taut bodies and luminous skin radiating in darkness.

Some clients have drapes covering the vital parts, which reflects the struggle between Asian conservatism and a sense of freedom from breaking barriers.

Nipples and vulvas populate his works.

These are clients who commissioned the works. Lim once worked with a sexologist on a project for vulva portraits, but the book was banned from public release, and its publication allowed only for strictly clinical purposes.

'But I do not wish to simply photograph a vulva as a static, clinical subject. I wish to represent the vulva as part of the human form.'

Lim quit his full-time job 20 years ago to become a photographer. After an early stint as a wedding photographer, he started to experiment with the subject of the female body by convincing the couples to go naked.

'I was focused on how to express the beauty of that person, the face and the body, without the distraction,' he said.

Many of his clients insisted on drapes.

Subsequently, many came to him with requests, not about what they don't want, but for him to do whatever it takes to make the photographs 'beautiful', 'romantic', 'sexy'.

One can only imagine the sufferance of an artist in Singapore who makes a living from art - not design, commercial photography or non-fungible tokens - but art in the real sense of the word; art that cannot be shown to the public.

He is known amongst friends as a 'nude' or 'boudoir' photographer but he concedes he hasn't quite nailed the word to describe what he does, because 'boudoir' is used commercially to describe a 'product'; pictures of women in sexy poses, dressed minimally or in sexy costumes.

'But I don't consider people as products. We're human with feelings, not a set of poses, and certainly not about a room and what we do within.'

'When I paint a live portrait, I can ask the subject to hold a pose and achieve an ideal vision.'

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'But I can also have the person relax - anywhere, in any form, as long as she's comfortable and feels within her own elements. And we can talk, and understand each other as real people, and in the process the body is alive, the movements are transient, and the body language means something.'

'I find this experience infinitely inspiring, and a mere commercial term does this no justice at all.'

'The fact that there's no word for it kind of shows how society sees it.'

'When I look at the entire journey of being an artist, the overwhelming feeling that I get is one of loneliness,' he said.

'The white-washed walls of Lim's studio in Sembawang are adorned with his works, unframed and tidily taped together; a showcase of the evolution of his artistic process over 20 years.

In recent years, he has focused on developing his skills as a painter. The abstract brushed images of female bodies are without faces, but they speak through Lim's play on shadows and contrasts between lightness, darkness and shades.

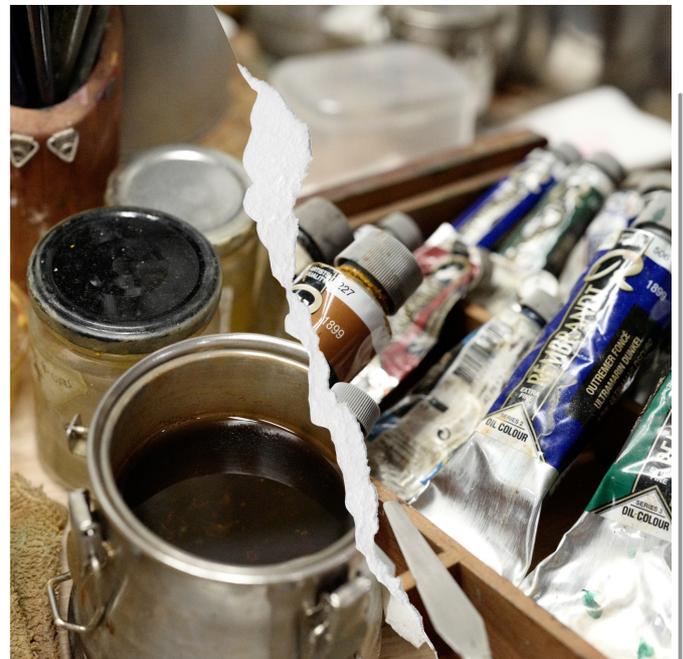
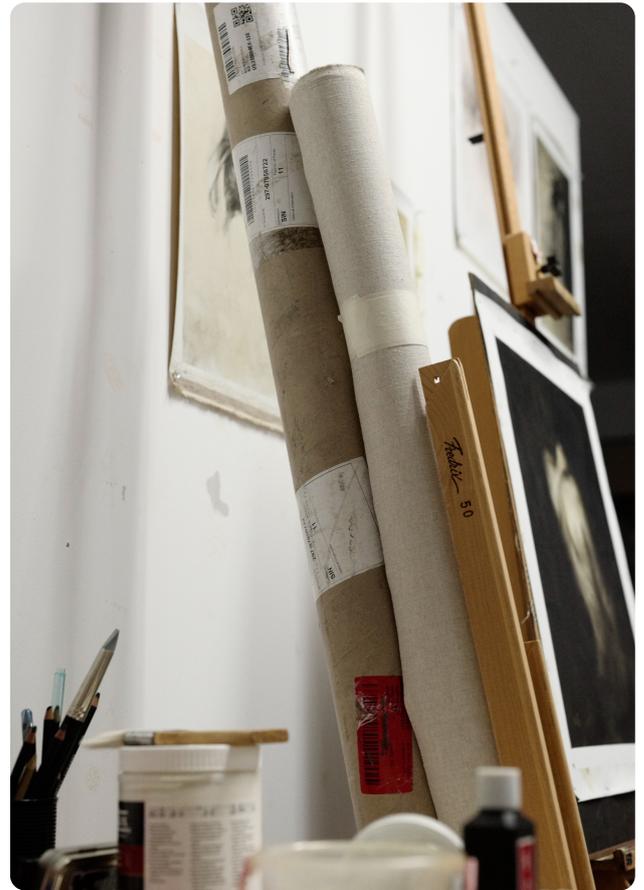
He hopes to expand his painting techniques, build up a larger body of works and get the participation of a broader audience.



'I feel even more restless than I've ever remembered myself to be.'

He would not have done it without the support of his wife Elaine who takes care of the office administration, makes coffee, chats with clients and helps with shoots.

'The biggest reason why we make art is because we have something to say, not just to ourselves, but to show it to the world.'



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