

A space

Singapore's high property prices have made artists rethink their methods and scale of their work, writes Clara Chow

Singaporean artist Frayn Yong's recent work can fit into a few plastic containers, no bigger than a standard document box. It's not that he's a laggard. It's because his works – painstakingly fashioned out of pencil lead – are small and delicate.

Assembled in his room in the five-room public housing flat Yong shares with his parents, the lead sculptures look nerve-rackingly fragile: one clumsy move and whole cities – essentially slim scaffolding glued together from this stationery-store staple – are crushed.

Exhibited at an art walkabout, named OH! (short for "Open House!"), in the skyscraper-bound Marina Bay district earlier this year, the architecturally inspired sculptures are a delicate echo of the soaring Singapore skyline, hinting at the impermanence of all that is man-made in the face of eternity.

Yong, 29, had been sketching with a mechanical pencil when he realised the thin graphite lead could itself be the artwork. "I was experimenting with the material itself, dealing with the concept of death and materialism," he says. "After all, carbon – of which graphite is a form – is the primary material of life. It is in our bones."

The artist, who also runs the UNDR interior design firm, adds: "I would love to do bigger work, but they would be a problem to store in Singapore." Still, he dreams about one day redoing his sculptures in a different, larger format. Perhaps "a whole landscape" of these works, if he can find suitable studio space to work in.

In Singapore, where soaring property prices over the past few years have made it tough for young people to buy their own homes, the lack of affordable residential and commercial space is also being felt by artists. This is a familiar story in Hong Kong, where space is equally precious and expensive. But in Hong Kong, artists can still find and share space in the numerous industrial buildings (thanks to the city's past as a manufacturing powerhouse) scattered in the more remote, and less costly, areas such as Fo Tan, Chai Wan and Kwun Tong,

In Singapore, old warehouses and industrial buildings tend to be turned into hipster enclaves of bars, restaurants and creative industry offices – which earn landlords more money than artist studios.

So artists such as Yong are dealing with the limitations of their physical and financial environment: they have been experimenting with methods that are compact in footprint, but not in creativity.

The results are all the more interesting in that they avoid the obvious – and the kitsch – associated with straightforward miniaturised products.

Although not a response directly to the space issue in his home country, artist Michael Lee, who splits his time between Singapore and Berlin, has been working since 2005 on a series of paintings that depict floor plans of solitary spaces, abandoned, awaiting demolition or partially collapsed. These include the New Jersey State Prison, the Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo, and the homes of individuals, including a "one-legged woman". The acrylic-on-canvas paintings are ironic two-dimensional monuments

to endangered three-dimensional spaces, while rendering real rooms flat and metaphorically compressing an area.

"There are so many empty industrial units in Singapore but their prices are not getting lower despite being empty," says Lee, 41, on the mystery of where all the cheap loft spaces coveted by artists have gone.

According to figures from Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority, sale prices of multiple-user factory space increased 24.5 per cent last year, while rents went up 9.7 per cent. Average asking prices for residential rents – for artists who want a place to live and work in – range from S\$600 (HK\$3,700) to S\$8,000 per month, according to property website rentinsingapore.com.

Subsidised rent for artists and creative professionals are available, in the Goodman Arts Centre near the east coast (where Lee has a



I've known artists who've had to work to be able to pay rent then found themselves unable to find the time or energy to use the space productively

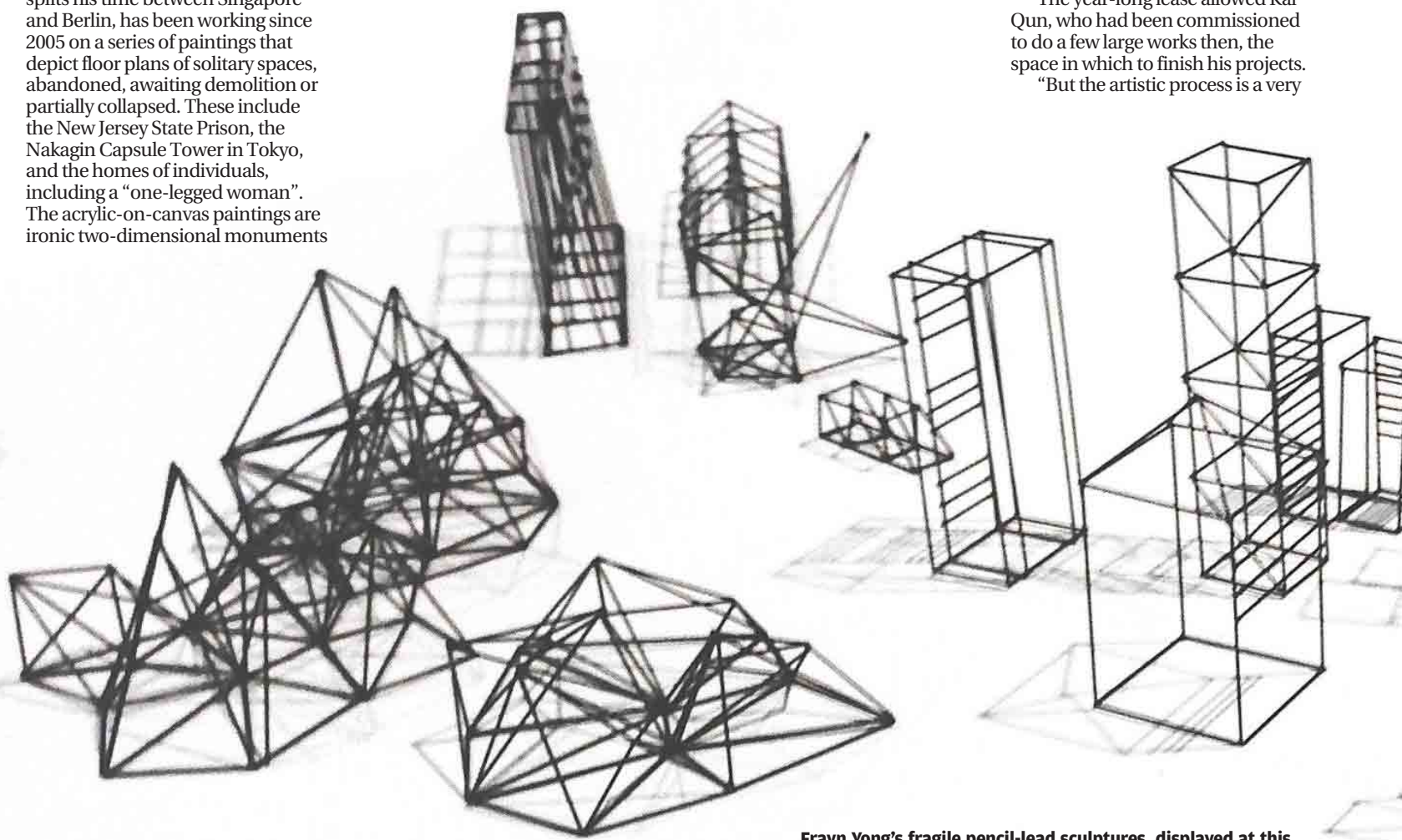
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studio), and the government-owned industrial landlord JTC runs Wessex Estate, a cluster of colonial-era bungalows which serve as homes and studios for a number of artists. But supply is limited.

Artists and twin brothers Chun Kai Feng and Chun Kai Qun, 31, used to work out of their parents' housing board flat, making table-top sculptures, prints and other works that could be completed in the 15-square-metre room that used to be their sister's until she married and moved out. "For an artist, property prices are always high," says Kai Qun. "But it has got worse during the past three years."

Still, the siblings managed to find a way around the situation: around Lunar New Year one year, they successfully bid for and rented a government-owned semi-detached unit with a backyard in the central Potong Pasir area, splitting the relatively affordable S\$2,300 monthly rental with two friends.

The year-long lease allowed Kai Qun, who had been commissioned to do a few large works then, the space in which to finish his projects. "But the artistic process is a very



Frayn Yong's fragile pencil-lead sculptures, displayed at this year's Open House! art walk at Marina Bay. Photo: heykumo.org