



Sinking World #2 (acrylic on canvas, 2019).



No Man's Land (acrylic on canvas, 2019).



Lim's Aquaria #2 (acrylic on canvas, screenprint on plexiglass and wooden frame, 2019). — Photos: RK Fine Art

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IMAGINARY worlds can also have gravity holding them together. In Justin Lim's continued exploration of the concept of Utopia, he looks at how as fantasy, it serves a great conceptual mirror to reflect contemporary society and the issues that plague it.

Utopia is a central destination in *Planet Shangri-La*, his latest exhibition at Richard Koh Fine Art in Kuala Lumpur.

In this show, the world is washed in blue, the same kind of blue you get in traditional porcelain pieces. It is a place where opposites co-exist in the same space, where light comes out to play even as shadows refuse to be banished. It is a study in contrasts that shines the spotlight on beauty as it does on destruction and decay.

"When I make art, I want to create something that is emotionally tangible. I would like it to generate a feeling, a particular mood, but at the same time address all my conceptual concerns. In my works, there is always this combination of yin and yang, light and dark, beauty and decay, because one does not exist without the other when all is in balance," says Lim.

This KL-born artist, who once had flowing dreadlocks, has spent a good part of the last decade exploring narratives that revolve around the human condition and the state of the world.

In *Planet Shangri-La*, his interest in depictions of Utopia has expanded into a conversation that spans 15 works.

"Whilst researching about interpretations of Utopia for my last solo exhibition, *Honey Trap Arcadia* (2017), I realised that this concept transpires mostly through Western history and interpretations. I then became interested in the idea of the Shangri-La, which is also described as a fictional and mythical Utopia," says Lim, 36.

He references James Hilton's 1933 novel, *The Lost Horizon*, where the author describes the fictional Shangri-La as a place located at the western end of the Kunlun Mountains, one of the longest mountain ranges in Asia. In this earthly paradise, the inhabitants of this mystical, mysterious valley live for hundreds of years.

"I wanted to evoke my own version of this imagery, in a way presenting my own take on this Eastern concept of Utopia and at the same time, observing contemporary concerns in today's world. Being influenced by Western pop culture and yet being very much a South-East Asian artist, I wanted to evoke some kind of meeting between the East and West," explains Lim.

# The grand scheme of things

Justin Lim reflects on Utopia as a conceptual mirror to modern society in his *Planet Shangri-La* exhibition.

The days of Pink Floyd references, diamond rings and the Finas mascot tiger in his previous works have been replaced with calmer blue details.

In his *Shangri-La*, the only piece in this body of work to have figures, Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker* meets Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, in a fictional world where mountains float and giant eyes weep.

"*The Thinker*, as symbol of philosophy, intellect, poetry; Guan Yin, representing divinity, mysticism, spirituality; and *Shangri-La* representing myth and illusion: I thought these three concepts would make an interesting entry point into this exhibition and what it sets out to present," he says.

Last year, Lim's works were shown at Volta14 in Basel, Switzerland and Contemporary Chaos in Norway. In 2016, he showed at Asia Young 36 / Asia Contemporary in South Korea.

In this current exhibition, Lim juxtaposes the romantic ideals of Utopia against the stark reality of modern day concerns such as climate change. In hands that are less capable, this could easily be jarring – at least aesthetically. In *Planet Shangri-La*, however, the viewing experience feels almost hypnotic, particularly in his *Stargazers* and *Sinking World* pieces.

It matters not whether his world of corals and flowers, suspended in an endless sea of blue, is sinking or floating. And as jellyfish tendrils unfurl in a stunning display of flowers and leaves, should we wonder if there is danger or damnation lurking behind the beautiful?

"Creating this body of work depicting surreal underwater landscapes with corals and flowers existing together in one habitat represents a Utopian illusion. Maybe it will only exist when there are no humans left. My faith in humanity is only as clear as the waters of our oceans, some parts devastatingly tainted and destroyed but other parts still untouched and should be left alone, devoid of human presence," he says.

Mankind's depiction of Utopia comes in many different forms, and of all references that have intrigued us over the centuries, Lim shares that he is rather taken with Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden*

*Of Earthly Delights*, a triptych oil painting from sometime between 1490 and 1510.

Heavy on symbolism, the enigmatic work brings us through the world's descent into madness and chaos.

The structures in the *Sinking World* series are inspired by "scholar rocks", which were appreciated by rulers and intellectuals throughout Chinese history for their ability to capture the "essence" of nature.

Among other things, Lim's *Shangri-La* might just be hinting at this: Mankind places itself at the centre of the universe, but does the universe gaze back upon us with such fondness?

In the grand scheme of things, humanity is but a mere blip on the radar.

"Life, death, decay and rebirth are cycles that continue and will go on long after we are gone in different variations. Our perception of reality is so limited, there is so little we know: At some point we were all sperm fighting to reach the egg but we have no recollection of this life cycle. Isn't that a whole other lifespan in our existence that we don't remember? We are all consciousness floating in a vacuum so large and magnificent that we cannot even begin to comprehend it," says Lim.

He shares that in some way, his seascape paintings also represent the inevitability of the planet eventually resetting itself, wiping out species after species and creating new ones.

"Everything that we deem great about our species, what we have built and achieved, will eventually turn to dust and its significance will be etched only in our own consciousness," he says.

When all has been said and done, the next cycle starts anew – with or without us.

"Art does not change the world, but it gives you that space to reflect, to ponder, to dream a little," says Lim.

Just like the Utopia that is always just out of reach. And yet, we continue to dream of all that it could be.

**Planet Shangri-La is on at Richard Koh Fine Art, 229, Jalan Maarof in KL, till Oct 26. Open Tuesday to Saturday (10am to 7pm). More info: [www.rkfineart.com](http://www.rkfineart.com).**



Lost Horizon #1 (acrylic on canvas, 2019).



'Art does not change the world, but it gives you that space to reflect, to ponder, to dream a little,' says Lim. — RAJA FAISAL HISHAN/The Star