

YOUNG ARTIST
AWARD
— 2015 —

KIRSTEN TAN



Kirsten Tan (b. 1981) is a filmmaker. Considered to be one of the most promising filmmakers to have emerged from amongst her generation in Asia, Kirsten has created a rich body of highly acclaimed works that are recognised for their humanity, sensitivity and deadpan humour. Kirsten completed the Advance Diploma in Film Production at Ngee Ann Polytechnic under Media Development Authority's Media Education Scholarship. She also undertook a Master of Fine Arts at New York University's Graduate Film Program, where she received the prestigious Tisch School of the Arts Fellowship. Prior to that, Kirsten spent a year in South Korea at Jeonbuk Independent Film Association's Residency Programme and resided in Thailand before establishing herself in New York.

A prolific writer/director, Kirsten's works exhibit nuanced observations of life and are emotionally evocative cinematic experiences. Her highly original personal voice and visually stylistic approach are distinctive in her short films, *Sink* (2009) and *Dahdi* (2014). *Sink* was a poetic parable about the loss of innocence while *Dahdi* was inspired by a real event in Singapore. Her upcoming feature film, *Popeye*, is a Singapore-Thailand road movie that centres on a disenchanted architect who goes on a journey across Thailand with his long-lost elephant.

Kirsten's works have been screened in over fifty international film festivals including Rotterdam International Film Festival for *Dahdi* (2015), Busan International Film Festival for *Cold Noodles* (2010) and Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, for *Play Your Part* (2012) and *Ella* (2015). *Ella*, a fashion film directed for Giorgio Armani, was selected for MoMA's permanent film collection and screened at the Toronto International Film Festival (2014).

Featured in CNN's international feature "Ones To Watch" and described by *The Straits Times* as "a director to look out for", Kirsten's recent accolades include the L'Atelier Showcase at the Cannes Film Festival for *Popeye*. In 2014, *Popeye* participated in Berlinale Talent's Script Station. In the same year, *Popeye* went on to win the Top Prize at the Torino Film Lab while *Dahdi* was awarded Best Southeast Asian Short Film at the 2014 Singapore International Film Festival.

Kirsten remains very active in Singapore's film scene and was part of the pre-selection jury for the Singapore Short Film Awards 2015. She was also the co-founder of the Asian Film Archive and a founding member of nu(STUDIOS) within the National University of Singapore.



Dahdi (2015).
Photo courtesy of Kirsten Tan

A CONVERSATION WITH KIRSTEN TAN



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

I grew up in a conservative background and many things at home and school were not talked about, so it was always a joy for me to discover films and witness difficult (or sometimes taboo) subjects being enacted on screen. Films were my first portal to a larger world. Beyond entertainment, it helped me understand life.

I love many filmmakers but oddly enough, I think one of my key influences comes from the literary world (I used to read English Literature at NUS). In terms of tone, Kurt Vonnegut is my shining light. I admire the way he bridges comedy with tragedy. I've always found it fascinating that through his work, one can sense his kindness – a certain warmth emanates from his work, a warmth that isn't cheesy or overly-sentimental.

What are some of the biggest challenges you face as a director and cinematographer and how do you overcome them?

The biggest challenge is perhaps the making of a film itself. Independent filmmaking is notoriously difficult – it is physically, emotionally and financially draining. I guess the scary thing is that after you've poured every drop of yourself into a film, there's still no guarantee it's going to be good since there is no matrix that can predict a film's success. Still, I have to fully commit to my craft because if I don't, it will never be good. I'm certain there are easier things out there but it's also a privilege to be given a chance to shoot for the moon.

Another challenge pertains to my own life – like having to sustain myself financially and finding time for loved ones while I pursue this demanding path.

What do you want the viewer to take away from your works?

The relationship between the audience and the filmmaker is an intimate one. In that darkened theatre, you are basically bringing the audience into your world. I feel a lot of responsibility to make sure I'm not wasting anyone's time. My role as a storyteller is to give pause and take stock of life. In my films, I hope to heighten the experience of daily life and to place it in sharper relief. More specifically, when people watch my films, I hope they feel the inescapable forward motion of time and the bleak humour of existence.

With over 10 international awards under your belt, what more do you hope to achieve in years to come?

Personally, awards are not about fame or glory but getting them means it makes it just slightly easier to fund your next film. That's no easy task since films are expensive. With a good track record, it makes it less impossible. I hope I continue to find enough resources to make the films I want to make and in my long journey ahead, hope to stay true and inspired to all the future works I will be creating.

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

Fundamentally, it is crucial to have a genuine love for cinema. I hope I don't sound too extreme but filmmaking isn't a career to me - it is my life. At the early stages, filmmakers often even have to earn their keep via other careers to support this 'life'. It is not going to be easy and there is hardly any instant success but if you love it, there is nothing else that compares to it.

What are your vision and hopes for Singapore's film scene?

I hope local filmmakers continue to aspire towards making quality films. While we ask audiences to support local films, it's also a two-way street where we as filmmakers have to ensure that our craft hits a certain standard so we leave our audiences wanting more.

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

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