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While the arts are still conventionally dismissed with nonchalance, it would be parochial of us to neglect its gaining favour and relevance with . . . the public, says Tan Jia Hui

PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

Making the arts a national asset

By Tan Jia Hui
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"POETRY is a luxury we cannot afford", said Lee Kuan Yew in the late 60s, but it's a mantra that strikes a chord with me, even today.

Poetry, perhaps a synecdoche for the arts in general, has long been deemed the impractical, lofty subject; it is the "softer", romanticised alternative to its "harder", more realistic academic cousins such as mathematics, the sciences, finance, law and the like.

In other words, leave poetry to the celebrated patrons of the arts to create; the harder, more pragmatic subjects are where reality is truly grounded.

But even as I have spoken in praise of the arts, I'm abashed to say that these mantras have taken root in my mind, tinting my cheerful optimism with hesitation and sombre ambivalence.

Two years ago, I struggled with this exact dilemma when I had to pick the field of study I was to enter: would it be law, business, media or the liberal arts? Would pursuing the last option be akin to dealing a fatal blow to the rational mind? Would I be scorned for choosing a path so seemingly adversarial to one's *compos mentis*?

Yet, despite Lee Kuan Yew's ostensible advocacy of a prosaic ideology, I've always thought that his mantra was, ironically, rather the stuff of poesy. To me, the statement "Poetry is a luxury we cannot afford" suggests, not the harsh denouncement of the arts as an abominable blight upon society, but rather, a note of hopeless yearning, coloured with a tinge of regret. It is, quite simply, what the heart wants, but is resigned never to get.

While the arts are still conventionally dismissed with nonchalance, it would be parochial of us to neglect its gaining favour, and its growing relevance with a previously unreceptive public.

Avant-garde artist Yayoi Kusama has sparked an almost unprecedented amount of fanfare and public viewership with her ongoing exhibition, *Life Is The Heart Of A Rainbow*, at the National Gallery Singapore.

Even taking into account the exhibition's tremendous potential as a photogenic backdrop for posts on social media, we should not be so hasty about discounting proof of the growing popularity of the arts with Singaporeans of all ages.

In May, it was reported that more than 70 per cent of the graduates of the School of the Arts Singapore (SOTA) go on to pursue non-arts university courses. In 2012, the figure was 60 per cent, and in 2015, 83 per cent. The school at first provided ammunition for opponents of the arts, who decried the usefulness and real-world relevance of the subjects taught there, but alumni of the school have come out with a barrage of loving, grateful testimonies of their time at SOTA.

And Sonny Liew has made the news with his book, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, the first graphic novel to win the Singapore Literature Prize for fiction in 2016. This year, it bagged three Eisner awards.

Rosy future

Much debate ensued over the National Arts Council's decision in 2015 to revoke the graphic novelist's S$8,000 publishing grant, followed by its offer of congratulations to the author last month. Regardless of the arguments advanced over this, the graphic novel has nonetheless catalysed important dialogues about art in Singapore, and fostered discussions about the developing cultural and visual identity of this nation.

Truly then, the arts have come a long way since its previous censure, growing in relevancy, accessibility, and significance in today's dynamic landscape. Our city-state's annual National Day celebration is as much a recognition of today's triumphs, as it is a promising augury of the progressive change that tomorrow heralds.

If the arts can indeed be commoditised, then I venture to recommend investing in this long-term, high-yielding asset instead.

The writer is a third-year student at Yale-NUS College, and will be doing a semester-long exchange programme at Amherst College from August 2017

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