



HANGING ABOVE THE SOFA ARE ESPAÑA ROMANTICA ON THE LEFT AND ¡CELEBRE ESPAÑA! ON THE RIGHT

BASHFUL FIRST FIRE OF DAWN

AN UNEXPECTEDLY SHY AND SENSIBLE DEMEANOUR - COULD THIS REALLY BE DAWN KWAN, THE 11-YEAR-OLD ART PRODIGY WHOSE PAINTINGS HAVE BEEN SELLING FOR THOUSANDS SINCE SHE WAS FIVE?

TEXT HUANG NICKMATUL PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF JONATHAN SIM LOCATION THANKS TO FRASER PLACE



DAWN KWAN POSING WITH *BELLEZA ANDALUZA*, HER FAVOURITE PAINTING

“WHEN I FEEL LIKE PAINTING,
IT’S VERY NICE...
I DON’T KNOW WHAT MAKES ME FEEL
LIKE DRAWING OR PAINTING
— I JUST NEED TO DRAW”

IN THIS WORLD OF HYPERBOLE, a writer hesitates to use superlatives.

Nowadays, saying something is the best, ingenious, fabulous, fantastic and so on seems to automatically heighten people’s scepticism. Yet ‘prodigy’ is the first word that comes to mind when one wants to speak of Dawn Kwan.

Looking at Dawn’s paintings, you get a sense of passion and a huge joy for life in the large brushstrokes and bright colours, but there is also a sense of control in the sophisticated choices and the obvious restraint evident in the strokes that form the shapes and most importantly, the textures that are fast becoming one of her trademarks.

Yet upon meeting her, there is nary a hint of the fine painter that Dawn is becoming. Instead of the laughing, animated girl one might expect, Dawn is surprisingly reserved. Dressed in black leggings and a loose white tunic, she hovers in the background behind her mother, Swee Lin.

Under Swee Lin’s encouragement, Dawn begins the interview shyly, speaking in monosyllables before gradually opening up, though never quite making it to the pages and pages of chatter that an obviously mistaken writer expected while glancing through the prolific number of paintings by the young artist. Yet there is something restful and charming in her hesitant smile and quicksilver laugh, gone in a flash; something touching about the way the unassuming and polite young girl shoots occasional fleeting glances at her mother who has retreated a short distance away to give her a measure of space and independence.

The story of Dawn Kwan Ning Yu the artist prodigy – Dawn for the first strength of the sun and Ning Yu for peaceful treasure – began at age five. Swee Lin notes that Dawn began drawing and sketching and was unable to stop. Dawn confirms this when she reveals that she draws and paints as a form of relaxation, even during the examination period. At that young age, her paintings were already drawing attention and Swee Lin decided that this was a gift from God to be used to help those less fortunate. Dawn’s first three paintings were auctioned off at \$15,000 and all the proceeds were donated to a charity that helps Vietnamese children with harelip and clubfoot problems get the proper treatment.

Dawn knows of this, but it seems to matter little to her except that she was able to help the poor and needy. She says, “It was my mum’s idea but I think it’s a good idea because I have an opportunity to make a difference. I can donate money and help some people to get the operations they need.”

For Dawn, painting is a form of pleasure and a fulfilment of a creative urge, “When I relax, I just paint.” When asked about what makes her feel like painting, she shrugs, “I don’t know. When I feel like painting, it’s very nice; when I don’t feel like painting, it’s very ugly. I don’t know what makes me feel

THE BULLRUN SERIES:
TOP BULLRUN 2
BOTTOM BULLRUN 1



like drawing or painting – I just need to draw. When I see something I like, my first feeling is to draw it.”

And in truth, there’s no pressure on her from her parents. Swee Lin cheerfully informs us that Dawn may be a prolific painter but she really only has one full-on painting session a week at Studio Haroobee. Whatever else Dawn does outside of that session is whatever Dawn feels like painting, and if she doesn’t, then she does something else. Dawn calls the weekly sessions “very fun!” and adds that she’s very comfortable with her teacher, June.

Any pressure that Dawn feels appears to come from within. The young girl admits, “Sometimes I come out of the studio crying because I cannot get the effect I want. This happened with *Hot Chocolate*.” *Hot Chocolate* is a painting Dawn did a while ago of her favourite beverage – she always buys a cup of hot chocolate after her weekly painting sessions in Studio Haroobee where she studies under the founder. She had failed to achieve a swirly effect in the painting. “But my mum encouraged me and next week I painted it. I told mum that we can sell any painting except this one. It’s hanging at home, near the staircase.”

But this doesn’t diminish Dawn’s joy in painting or her carefree approach. She notes, wisely, “I think a lot of people are scared to draw because they’re afraid their painting will turn out ugly. I try to experiment and if it goes wrong,

WHEN DAWN OVERTAKES NIGHT – DAWN WON THE ‘UOB HIGHLY
COMMENDED’ AWARD IN THE ABSTRACT CATEGORY FOR THIS PIECE



I’ll just redo it. If I see a painting and I like the effect, I will try to remember and experiment to see how the artist does it... One time I did this really ugly painting and I was not satisfied at all and I just did it again. I covered it with another painting.”

Asked about her favourite way to paint, Dawn muses for a while before replying, “I like to use the palette knife. You can achieve a lot of texture. I find texture in a painting interesting – a lot of people paint flat but I don’t want to be like a lot of people.”

Her Bullrun series was achieved with a palette knife and was her first set of paintings to feature this technique. Swee Lin laughs when she later remembers how Dawn had been torn between going out with her friends on that day and completing the pieces.

TOP
FLAMENCO RED
BOTTOM
FLAMENCO ON LEFT AND LA GAVIOTA
ON RIGHT

Dawn herself recalls, "When I was in Spain, I heard of bullfights but I didn't really want to see one because I did research on the web and I know it's quite violent, so I decided to paint the bulls instead of watching. But to get the figure correct is quite hard. It's quite hard to get the proportions right, like sometimes the head is too big or the legs are too long."

Like any young person, Dawn prefers doing what she knows will be successful. "I'm not good at painting realistic stuff. I don't like to do things like that because I already know it'll be ugly. Maybe when I'm older..."

But she is already tentatively venturing out of her comfort zone. Right now, if she could paint anything in the world, she would paint a dancer. "Recently, I've painted a lot of dancers and I found that they're very fun and very easy to draw. The poses and stuff... But I still haven't learnt facial expressions yet, so I never draw any on my dancers."

Dawn further confesses that for her, the most difficult thing is painting the faces. "I'm not very good at detail. I like to use big strokes and a very free hand. The expression, the proportion... they're all difficult."

And her interest in drawing and painting dancers is how she came to paint a nude. "I was researching dancers on the Internet and this picture of a naked lady came up. I liked it, so I painted it. I did feel a bit shy when I was drawing the naked lady but it was very easy." But this isn't as eyebrow-raising as it sounds; Dawn's naked lady is an evocative piece, with lush flesh tones and richly coloured, almost abstract-looking outlines that suggest form and motion, leaving the rest to the viewer's imagination.

Is painting everything she does, then? Her mum reveals that the accomplished painter is also turning into an accomplished drummer, and Dawn herself is enthusiastic about her new creative outlet. "I took up drums this year. I felt other instruments were quite boring and not many people were learning drums... especially girls! I play in the worship team every Sunday at my church, St Andrew's Cathedral, and it's very fun. I love bible study. I want to worship God through my music... I love to listen to music, especially when I'm doing my homework."

She ponders for a while, and adds, "I also do a lot of photography. My dad bought me a camera... and I take lots of pictures when I go on holiday. And I'm starting glass art sculptures this year."

The St Margaret's Primary School student also reveals that she loves





HOT CHOCOLATE – THE ONLY PAINTING DAWN WILL NEVER SELL OR GIVE AWAY

to go to school, especially because she gets to see her friends and that she really enjoys going out shopping with her friends. But this might be because Dawn feels her status as an only child rather acutely. “I find it quite lonely at home even though I can paint. I envy a lot of my friends with bigger brothers...”

Despite her words, Dawn accepts her lot with equanimity and childlike directness. “I want a bigger brother. I asked my mum to adopt one but she says it’s too much to handle. My dad says he’ll get me a dog.”

Her calm, accepting attitude in this is mirrored as much in her attitude towards her art. Dawn may be a shy young girl but she is also an assured artist who simply knows if her painting is complete. “I just know it’s done. Sometimes I do three paintings at once. While waiting for one painting to dry, I do another one. Sometimes I don’t like one painting and I leave it in one corner for a while until I think of a way I can do it better. If I’m not sure, I’ll ask Teacher June. But for those paintings that I know are

finished, I won’t touch them anymore, even if someone else asks me to do them again.”

And in Dawn’s case, the assuredness is only a fascinating hint of independence. She shrugs off any suggestion that she is on her way to becoming a professional artist. “I feel I can learn more. I want to go to School of the Arts, and I know when I go there, there will be a lot of people better than me. If I can go anywhere in the world, maybe I’ll go to Paris. I heard there are a lot of artists there.”

Dawn is also happy now to explore other options. “I know I can be anything I want to be when I grow up. If I don’t paint, I want to be a fashion designer or an interior designer.” **hc**

HOME CONCEPTS AND DAWN KWAN ARE SUPPORTING HABITAT FOR HUMANITY, WHERE A PORTION OF THE PROCEEDS FROM SALE OF THE PAINTINGS GOES TO HELP IN THEIR RESTORATION AND REBUILDING EFFORTS. DAWN’S PAINTINGS ARE ON EXHIBIT AT THE GF+A SHOWROOM. YOU CAN ALSO VIEW AND ORDER THE PAINTINGS AT WWW.DAWNKWANGALLERY.COM/SITE/EVENTS.HTML