

‘Good quality – ten minutes’ – Dee Gibney takes the wraps off a booming back alley industry which is minting money

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Even the chickens look torpid in the heavy afternoon heat.

All day the mouldy concrete of Tai Hang Tung Resettlement Estate has shimmered in the steamy haze, and by mid afternoon, endless rows of box-like cubicles have absorbed the relentless sun.

The stench of stale urine stings the nostrils as we pass the open communal lavatories. The walls drip humidity, droplets sliding down a layer of imbedded slime.

Battered pots and pans and a single gas cooking ring sit outside each cramped unit along the narrow exterior corridor which runs the full length of the building. It's too early for the bustle of evening meal preparations.

People are dozing behind barred windows in the dim stuffiness of their cubicles, home to entire families. Little gullies trickle everywhere. The stale lavatory stench permeates into every corner.

We reach the third floor of Block One and make our way down another exterior corridor. A new odour wafts towards us. It's unmistakable. The penetrating odour of paint – fresh oil paint.

We round the corner and come across a cubicle with no kitchen paraphernalia in the hallway outside the door. This is unusual. Jazzy Chinese pop music is playing inside.

Stepping into the tiny space, we meet a young man, bottle of beer in one hand, paintbrush in the other. He's wearing a sleeveless undershirt and jeans.

He is a painter, specializing in junks. When he's in the "right frame of mind" he can churn out more than a 100 in a day.

Kenneth C.W. Fong, owner of Kenneth Art Gallery, one of the many "galleries" that inundate Tsimshatsui, introduces me to his brother, "artist" Frank Fong, a.k.a. Fong Chin-Yick, K.S. Fong, Y. Fong and, unexpectedly, Rising.

"Why Rising?" I ask.

"Well if you do a style, you know, a little bit abstract, you need a name a little bit abstract too," Kenneth explains, ever smiling.

Frank of the many aliases is one of a small coterie of “instant art” painters, an enormously successful million dollar Hong Kong business. The product is “manufactured” in the warren of backstreets and teeming tenements in the city.

Kenneth’s three most important “artists” are his father-in-law, J.K. Ching who specialises in portraits and landscapes copied from postcards; his brother Frank Fong who is the “junk” master, and an old school friend, who goes by the name Kingsley and whose forte is fluorescent blue landscapes.

Frank was just finishing off one of his “Risings” when we arrived – a stylised semi-abstract bamboo hut in bright orange blending into a fiery background.

He pins an 18 inch by 24 inch piece of canvas to the wall and starts on a the next junk. A few methodical whacks and the blazing yellow-orange background is done. Half a dozen flicks with a palette knife dipped in rich brown paint define the sails and a sweep and a tuck complete the body of the boat.

Drawing the point of the knife through the sails quickly creates the effect of the rigging while a few blotches of strategically placed white produces instant clouds.

A dab or two of dark paint underneath the junk create a shadowy reflection – and presto! A painting is created in less than 10 minutes.

“You get what you pay for,” Kenneth explains with a broad smile. “A good junk takes 10 minutes so of course the higher quality costs more. But we have something to suit the customer’s price so a cheaper painting will not take as much time.”

The “high quality” junks run to about HK \$40 (US \$8) and are signed by Frank Fong. The cheaper works (Kenneth never ever says lesser quality, always carefully emphasizing “cheaper”) take only five minutes and are signed K.S. Fong. These may sell for as little as HK \$15 (US \$3).

When Frank undertakes a “Rising” however he may spend as much as an hour on the painting which will probably sell for about HK \$180 (US \$36). Of this Frank nets HK \$120 (US \$24).

The “Risings” almost always consist of what appear to be bamboo huts on fire which Kenneth describes as “Contemporary” or “Impressionistic.” He has carefully engraved the name “Rising” in block letters on Frank’s easel. It’s a recent name, he explains, and difficult for Frank to remember.

I ask Frank, with his brother acting as translator, if he ever grows weary of churning out junks in this tiny seven by nine foot space.

“No, he likes it,” Kenneth assures me, still grinning.

Frank, 36, escaped from China by boat with 22 other people in 1968, two years after Chairman Mao's "Cultural Revolution" introduced enforced communism, full state control and the persecution, imprisonment and torture of millions. Property was seized, and historical, cultural and religious artifacts ordered destroyed.

In China, Frank's work consisted of painting ceremonial portraits of Chairman Mao and backdrops for revolutionary plays and operas.

The rapid junk technique takes about a year to learn according to Kenneth. Most people, he says, learn from a tutor, but Frank picked it up from a couple of paintings he bought in the Ocean Terminal mall. Frank refuses to take apprentices.

"Frank paints fast. In fact he's the fastest junk painter around – but still not fast enough for customer demand," Kenneth says with a chuckle.

Frank knows this only too well. He would prefer to paint flowers and birds for his own pleasure but as Kenneth reminds us, this is not so popular with the customers. So Frank churns out paintings to fit the demand.

To break the numbing monotony he challenges himself by painting from different angles. He demonstrates how he can paint a junk right-handed as well as left-handed giving the ancient boat a slightly different look depending on the angle.

"You see how fluent he is!" Kenneth gushes.

But Frank has his moments. Sometimes he's out of commission for a two or three days, Kenneth admits.

"If he doesn't feel like painting, he sleeps and drinks beer for a few days. And he doesn't have a girlfriend either," Kenneth happily volunteers as we leave the building.

He is anxious for me to meet his father-in-law. He once owned a gallery in partnership with him – J. K. Ching, the portrait expert who is now in semi-retirement. He still paints – one "piece" a day, sometimes a portrait, but more often than not a landscape copied from a postcard.

Mr. Ching used to do two or three landscapes a day and at one time three portraits a day – "guaranteed 24 hour service, like the shirt tailors," Kenneth says with a grin.

We enter a small flat, every square inch of available wall space hung with Mr. Ching's paintings.

He has a few of which he is especially proud. One still life of a fish took him a week to paint 17 years ago. He has retouched it over the years and values it so highly that he is reluctant to have it photographed for the story lest the idea be imitated.

Another painting is a self portrait he painted 25 years ago and another of a fisherwoman “actually painted outdoors”.

There is a big distinction, Mr. Ching notes, between an “indoor” painting copied from an image and an “outdoor” painting done from the actual subject or setting.

His best works he says, pointing to a group of paintings on the wall in his family’s miniscule flat, are those done in an impressionistic style, painted from memory of his boyhood in China.

Mr. Ching who came to Hong Kong in 1945, is self taught in the classical style of Chinese painting. He took up oil painting after arriving in the colony and once tutored others but no longer does so because he says, it gets too competitive.

His 13-year-old son sits in a corner laboriously copying tiny Van Gogh prints from an art magazine, ignoring the superb seas views and pure quality of light outside the window. He’s an amazingly good imitator and believes he must learn to be a perfect imitator before branching out on his own. He doesn’t appear very happy.

Kenneth decides that I must meet his friend Kingsley. As our taxi negotiates the cacophonous traffic, Kenneth continues to expound on the size and type criteria for pricing the paintings he sells. The size, subject and price are inextricably interwoven and by now the figures are beginning to blur in my mind as little rivulets of perspiration trickle down my spine. The stifling afternoon build-up of heat radiates from the concrete canyons creating distorted little mirages in the traffic jammed as far as the eye can see.

“We guarantee customer satisfaction or your money is refunded,” Kenneth is saying as I turn my focus back to the monologue. “The price is very reasonable and we have paintings for everyone. For those who like quality, we have it, and for those who want something a little cheaper, we have that too.”

Kenneth chooses his words carefully qualifying “customer satisfaction” with “for that price.”

But if you are in business, then the whole picture, so to speak, changes again.

“You get special rates if you order in certain quantities,” Kenneth continues. As the bombardment of logistics of “large quantities” and the accompanying math continue in minute detail, and the heat presses in, I’m barely paying attention, when the words “paintings with no signatures” suddenly catch my attention.

“Oh, yes many customers, especially our Japanese customers like to sign the paintings with their own names,” Kenneth is saying.

This is a new twist. The customer can sign the painting themselves? Or have a customized signature created?

“Definitely, yes, we do a lot of these for export – Japan, Australia. We can sign anything you like – or leave it without a signature, or even do your own for you.”

Nothing is too much trouble. If a customer can't make up his mind on the spot, he or she may shoot a roll of film in the shop then order any number of paintings from the prints. All C.O.D. of course.

Many customers buy up large quantities of paintings from dealers like Kenneth for sale at tremendous mark-up in the U.S. and Japan.

As I ponder the many revelations about the business, we arrive to find Kingsley working on an order of 20 fluorescent blue landscapes. His name is actually Ko Chung-wah but Kenneth, decided Kingsley had a better ring. He prides himself on his school certificate and knowledge of English names.

But like, Frank, Kingsley, despite his mastery of mass blue scenic marvels, can't imitate the Roman letters his “brush” signature requires. So Kenneth sings all the “Kingsleys” with the required flourish.

Kingsley admits to being tired and suffering from a cramp in his painting arm as he works the many shades of blue across the canvas. The intense smell of oil paint weighs heavy in the oppressive air. I catch Kenneth muttering something about Kingsley finding it “damn dull” but he cheerily adds that “dull” and “cramp” are difficult to translate.

Kingsley's landscapes sell for HK \$90 (US \$18). He gets about HK \$60 (US \$12). It takes him about an hour to complete a landscape. He paints out of his small flat where he lives with his mother, his wife Lee who helps out with the painting work and their baby.

From this work the couple must support 12 people (Kingsley's mother, father, sister and five brothers still trapped in China's grim economic conditions) as well as themselves and their child and Lee's mother.

Kenneth and his wife have their own flat and business is booming. Along with brother Frank, they both contribute to their mother's support. She lives in the same block as Frank who remains tied to the resettlement estate because she doesn't want to move. All her friends and mah-jong partners are there and she worries life elsewhere would be too quiet.

The mass-produced flamboyantly hued paintings are quickly transported from their humble origins to Kenneth's back street gallery from where they are snapped up to hang over sofas from Tokyo to the Tulsa, from the Bronx to Berlin and from Canberra to Calgary, their new owners forever oblivious to the lives of the assembly line artists who painted them.

(*Resettlement estates were seven storey blocks of concrete slab buildings constructed in a H formation – two wings of cubicles arranged back to back along an outside communal corridor. The wings were connected with a bridge or cross bar which contained rudimentary and often unsafe (especially for unaccompanied women) public sanitary facilities. The “estates” were the result of a government public housing program launched after a Christmas Eve fire in 1953 destroyed a massive hillside tin and tar paper shanty town leaving over 50,000 homeless. The squatters were refugees fleeing the chaotic terror of Chairman Mao’s brutal regime as well as people who had returned to Hong Kong after the World War II occupation. The government allotted 24 square feet per adult and half that for a child. Each cubicle was about 120 square feet. In reality a dozen or more people live in spaces no larger than four double sized mattresses laid side by side.)