

Arts

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Artist likes to look at the bright side

Alex Fong brings light with his uplifting and whimsical view of the world

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In Alex Fong's world, quails dance among purple-laden vines and chickadees sing atop wine glasses.

The artist, known to imbibe occasionally from the fruits of his labour, has used the brush strokes of his ancestry to capture the Okanagan in his vivid, colourful and often whimsical style.

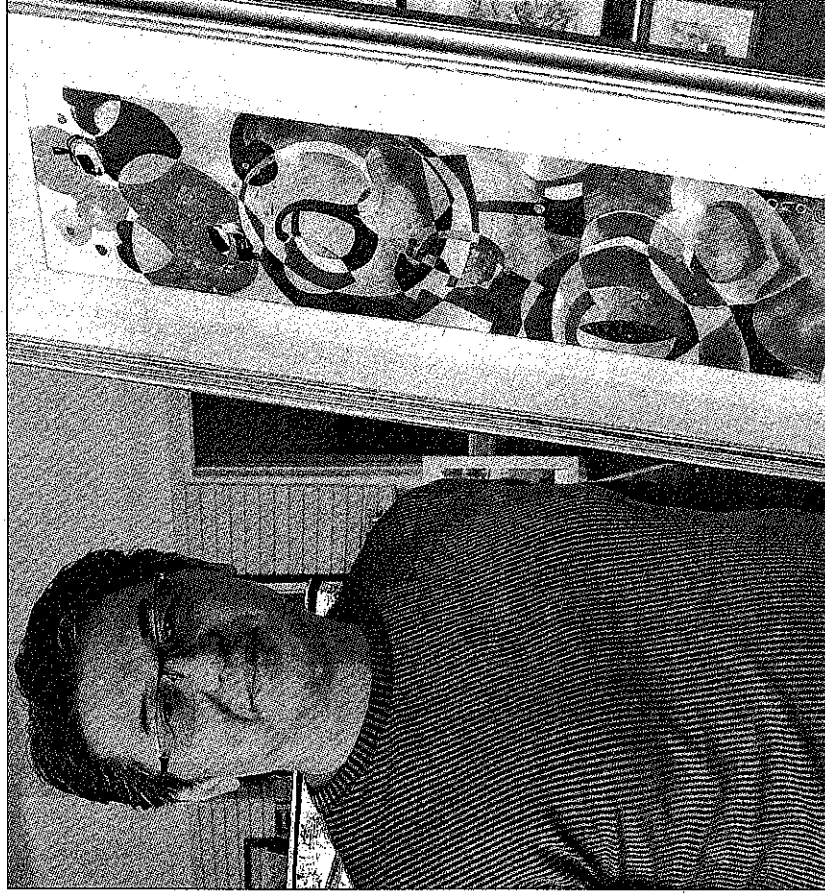
His work is meant to uplift, and that's why even in dark times, Fong has managed to overcome through positive thinking and enjoying a glass of local wine at his Quail Ridge home while contemplating his next move.

"This year, all everyone has been talking about is the economy. It affects the mind set," said Fong. "In the down times, you consciously make an effort not to paint darkly. You have to be your own therapist."

Currently showing his watercolours at the Chimo Gallery in Vernon, the Kelowna painter has kept up a high profile since moving to the valley 19 years ago. And although sales may be down for many visual artists, he says there is always an upside.

"I have had times when I've thought about quitting, but you can't compare this to previous years. I'm not going to do something else. You just sometimes need a kick in the pants. You need to keep on going, but do it better," said Fong.

A regular at the B.C. Interior's largest juried art show, the Lake Country ArtWalk, Fong has often been selected in the top three



KRISTIN FRONEMAN/MORNING STAR

Alex Fong with his piece, *Love at First Sight*, gives a painting demonstration at the Chimo Gallery Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

of the People's Choice best in show. He did not enter ArtWalk this year, although one of his paintings was among the collection shown by Oyama's Barn Gallery, and instead, has been using the time to be proactive.

"I've been upgrading my website, and recently had a successful show (at the Stephen

Lowie Gallery) in Calgary," he said.

"The desire to be creative comes out all the time in spite of the difficulties. Life is like that."

Born in Vancouver, Fong, now 52, moved to the small community of Youbou on Vancouver Island when he was 11.

"We were the only Chinese family there. My parents had brought a grocery store," he said. "My mom was a traditionalist and wanted me to be a dentist or doctor, but I told her that wasn't my path."

Fong had always liked art, but wasn't sure what he wanted to do. Then one day, while visiting the Pacific National Exhibition, he watched an 80-year-old Asian man painted.

"He painted a horse in one single brush stroke, no mistakes," said Fong. "I thought 'this is so fascinating.' I went back every day to watch him. I didn't have the guts to speak to him as I don't speak Chinese, and I didn't know what to say."

Instead, Fong decided to take "the easiest way out," and to his mother's chagrin, he enrolled in an interior design course at Nanaimo's Malaspina College.

"It was all girls," he laughed. "I liked it. I took a watercolour rendering class, where you show clients what a space is going to look like. You visualize it and watercolour is the first medium you use to do your sketches."

Thirty years later, Fong has spent the time showing his work, teaching workshops and growing and changing, and he says he has also seen the art world change.

"Those touches on realism lost favour for a while, and people were going for the big, bold abstracts. But like anything, it's cyclical," he said. "Once when I sold big and bold, people now go for small and subtle. There is always a group that will love your work, and a group that won't. You have to take baby steps to develop."

And a glass of wine never hurts either. Fong's work will be shown, along with the digitally-enhanced photographs of Okanagan Centre artist Ted Archibald, at the Chimo Gallery, 3011-28th St., now until Saturday. A reception for the artists is Thursday from 4 to 8 p.m. Fong will also give a demonstration at the gallery Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.