

TSANG KIN WAH WINS SOVEREIGN AWARD

By Jeffrey du Vallier d'Aragon Aranita

Tsang Kin Wah stood quietly at the edge of the large crowd gathered for the announcement of the winner of the 2005 Sovereign Asian Art Prize. When his name was called, the barest trace of a smile registered on his face as he stepped forward to receive the USD25,000 acquisition award in a competition that brought in over 550 paintings, from artists across Asia.

The entries were pared down to 30 works for a public exhibition and a final round of judging by a panel that included Christina Chu, chief curator of the Hong Kong Museum of Art; Claire Hsu-Vuchot, executive director of the Asia Art Archive; Chan Yuk-keung, a professor in the department of fine arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and one of the two Hong Kong artists selected to represent Hong Kong this year at the 51st Venice Biennale; as well as myself, the recipient of last year's Sovereign Award.

The prestigious Turner Prize for contemporary art held annually at Tate Britain since 1984 and its Asian corollary, the bi-annual ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) Art Awards, founded and sponsored in large part by Philip Morris since 1994, are the ostensible progenitors of the annual Sovereign Asian Art Prize, now in its second year of competition and sponsored this year by Bulgari. The Sovereign Art Foundation (SAF) and its acquisition prize was formed by The Sovereign Group, an international trust and tax planning firm based in Hong Kong, whose chairman, Howard Bilton, has been a strong supporter of Asian artists and an advocate for raising public awareness of contemporary Asian art.

The high-profile nature of large art award competitions is often surrounded by controversy. The artwork being considered for the Turner Prize was once denounced by British culture minister Kim Howells as "cold, mechanical, conceptual bullshit." The ASEAN Art Awards has been dogged over the years by anti-tobacco advocates for its association with tobacco giant Philip Morris.

Thus it may be fitting that the 2005 Sovereign Asian Art Prize was awarded to a Hong Kong artist and recent MA Graduate (2003, Camberwell College of Arts) for his silk-screened work, *I Love You*, a juxtaposition of classical 19th-century William Morris-like floral wallpaper patterns formed of delicate lines of

profanities and vulgar English and Chinese textual expressions. Offering his work as a challenge to conceptions about the familiar and the assumptions we make about what is truth, Tsang evokes one of the central tenets of critical art theory, that the value of art in conveying subjectivity has been superseded by the newer task of interrogating the nature of representation.

Artists from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines, Myanmar, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam submitted work as they did last year. Artists from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Korea, Inner Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan contributed work for the first time.

The competition also raises the questioning of "painting" as both a category and a set of practices. Coupled with a concern about the globalization of contemporary art, this pan-Asian competition may offer fresh fodder for scholars examining artists in the "developing world" and their compliance with or resistance to a global culture dominated by American and European influences.

