

PORTRAIT / EARL WAN

TIME AND SPACE

An architect by trade, CHI WING LO explores the unstructured via an ongoing series of sculptures that marry precision and boundlessness, writes PAYAL UTTAM

T

UCKED AWAY IN a corner of Ice House Street is a glass door leading into Kwai Fung Hin Art Gallery. Step inside the dimly lit entranceway and you are whisked into a world filled with fantastical spaceships, submarines and vessels plucked out of a Hayao Miyazaki movie. At least, this is what I imagine when I walk into the space on a Friday afternoon. Scattered across the room are small wooden sculptures with tiny portals and bulbous silhouettes. At once both ancient and modern, they evoke faraway fortresses and flying contraptions.

"These objects are full of optimism, full of visions, full of delight," says the Athens-based architect Chi Wing Lo, his eyes beaming with excitement. "They are from an imaginary civilisation, a society that has so much love for what they do. That's what I want art to be." Dressed simply in a white shirt and trousers, Lo has a monkish manner and child-like sense of wonder. He speaks in a soft, slow cadence and his sentences are punctuated with quiet laughter.

A protégé of the celebrated architect Massimo Scolari, Lo made a name for himself in architecture and design circles before venturing into the art world. He was for years a major force in Italy, creating furniture for the brand Giorgetti. Gaining recognition for his minimalist approach, he became one of the only Chinese architects to break into the impenetrable Italian design community. In 1991, his designs were exhibited at the Venice Biennale. In 2009, his eight-storey residence in Athens, Tower House, was shortlisted for the prestigious Mies van der Rohe Award.

Lo's exhibition, *Vision of a Civilization*, arrives in Hong Kong following an impressive show at the Museo dell'Alto Tavoliere in San Severo, Italy last year and the Salone del

Mobile in Milan in 2011. As he's a Hong Kong native, his local debut hits a soft spot. "These sculptures make me feel like, after 30 years, I never left," says Lo, his eyes softening. "It's a little gift I bring back to Hong Kong after all my travels and studies."

Articulate and highly cultured now, Lo barely made it through high school when he was growing up in Hong Kong in the '70s. "I was a terribly bad student. I was wandering on the streets falling in love, that kind of thing, not really focused on studies," he recalls with a grin. "By 18 I was doing nothing for a few years, working as a construction worker." Hired by a larger developer, Lo soon started spending time in the office working as a draftsman. "I guess I found my calling [there]," he says. "But somehow I couldn't go further so I decided to move on."

Trading his hard hat for a second chance at school, Lo enrolled in the University of Toronto to study architecture and went on to do his Master's at Harvard University. When he graduated, he was offered a highly coveted tenure-track position as a professor but turned it down, as he longed to get back to practice. By then he had married one of his classmates, a young Greek woman, and they decided to take root in Athens.

The young architect's first breakthrough came in 1990 when he placed in a competition to design the New Acropolis Museum with his wife. Although they were up against large architectural firms, the fresh graduates came in fourth out of the 443 entries. So powerful was their design that the minister of culture, Melina Mercouri, wanted to void the competition and declare them winners. Though their design was never realised, Lo says their work became something like "the Phantom of the Opera" – a legend that





“EVERYTHING SHOULD BE WELL DONE BECAUSE THERE WILL BE A MOMENT OF COLLAPSE AND IT HAS TO BE BEAUTIFUL WHEN IT FALLS”

continues to be talked about today.

The following year, Lo received a fellowship to Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany. It was here that the seed for his sculptures was planted. “Every morning at 6 o’clock, with a white piece of paper, I would ask myself ‘What do I want?’ It was more like an exercise...Sometimes I drew for three to four hours. After that I took a walk in the forest,” he says with a smile. Over a period of 30 days, Lo produced 30 drawings. Emerging from the reaches of his prodigious imagination was a series of chimeric forms. He describes the process as something akin to an archaeologist unearthing artefacts. He gave each object that he excavated inventive titles suggesting journeys to imaginary lands with names such as Ebela, Hax, Bydon and Jui.

Impressed by the drawings, the director of the academy gave Lo a solo exhibition on the spot. “When people saw [the forms] they asked ‘Can you make them sculptures?’” says Lo. “They thought they were meant to be very big because of the amount of detail. ‘I said, ‘No, it’s just a drawing. They are just this size,’” he says scrunching his hands together in a small circle. “I didn’t have the resources,

I didn’t have the knowledge, so I left it. But in the back of my mind the thought of making these sculptures was always alive.”

When Lo left Germany in 1993 his mentor, Massimo Scolari, recommended him for a role at Giorgetti, and Lo embarked on his career in furniture design, travelling regularly to Italy from Greece. Over time, working with maple wood and bronze, Lo grew confident enough to revisit his drawings. Using these materials, he began translating his drawings into sculptures. He spent four years experimenting before perfecting his first piece. “The final artist proof of *To Ebela* was realised in the late autumn of 2010,” he remembers fondly. “I cried.” That year Lo established a small workshop in Italy devoted solely to the production of his sculptures. He completed four more pieces in the following months.

Composed of curved blocks of maple wood with delicate oxidised bronze detailing, the sculptures display the kind of craftsmanship that is almost non-existent in contemporary art galleries these days. They look like precious relics from another time. “The power of these sculptures is the



precision,” explains Lo, who was deeply inspired by ancient Greek architecture. He was particularly fascinated by remains of the Acropolis and the way in which the ruins betrayed the human intelligence behind the structure. “Of course that made me feel that everything should be well done,” he muses. “Because there will be a moment of collapse and it has to be beautiful when it falls.”

Coming from an architecture background, Lo confesses it wasn’t easy to transition into art. Accustomed to solving problems, he found the open-ended nature of art a challenge. “Architecture is easier, [a building] has to stay, it has to have function. Sculpture doesn’t have that. A sculpture can be anything. But to be anything can be a big problem,” he laughs. “So you have to invent your own problem to solve.” My idea was timelessness as the parameter. But how do you make something that can encompass the three domains of past, present, future? It was very difficult.”

The idea of timelessness is something that Lo has been striving to achieve in his work since his days as a furniture designer in the mid ’90s. “Last night someone showed me a photo of my furniture which was designed in 1995. They said, ‘Chi Wing I have this at home, I understand what you mean about timelessness,’” he tells me. In the design world, having a shelf life of three to four years is common, he explains. “A good piece maybe 10 years, but more than 15 to 16 years?” he pauses, “I feel very encouraged.”

Asked what has been his proudest accomplishment, he replies, “How I believe any idea is possible – there is not a good idea



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: LO’S TOWER HOUSE IN ATHENS; *BY IOH*; *TO KEO*; A GALLERY DISPLAY; AND THE MODEL FOR THE NEW ACROPOLIS MUSEUM

or bad idea. You just have to focus on one and develop it over time. You have to be consistent and persistent, believe it long enough that it really comes out and lasts. Like these sculptures, they wouldn’t be convincing if I didn’t invest for a long time in the idea of timelessness and precision.”

Lo hopes that like his furniture, his sculptures will remain relevant years down the line. For him, the sculptures are much more than pieces of art. They have become a resounding source of inspiration for his entire oeuvre: “I think subtly or directly they

continue to influence my architecture. I guess they set me a career direction since Stuttgart. I call it a kind of march because of the kind of certainty it gave me.”

While continuing with his architecture and furniture design, Lo plans to nourish this vision. He will spend the next five years bringing to life the remaining 21 sculptures from his 30 drawings. Turning philosophical, he says, “I think the dream is very clearly set. It’s about the kind of belief in perfection of things and thoughts. Hopefully I’ll move forward this way in life as well.”