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With the rise in art prizes in Asia, we take a look at what happens after an artist wins and the impact it has on the artist.

TEXT: Nicholas Stephens

IMAGES: Courtesy of various

Artists emerging in their disciplines and striving for recognition have long sought after the title and award that comes with art prizes. Often, the awards are monetary or provide support of some kind to a future project. Such prizes have in recent years become increasingly prominent in Asia, one of the most well known being the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award hosted by Shanghai's Rockbund Art Museum. The latest addition to the party is the [Sigg Prize hosted by M+](#) in Hong Kong. But what role do Asian art prizes play in the future success of the artists who win them? We spoke to sculptor Halima Cassell (winner of the Sovereign Asian Art Prize in 2018) and visual artist Halley Cheng (winner of the Hong Kong Young Artist 2012 Grand Prize), about what impact their awards had on their career and ensuing artistic development.

What of artists who win Asian art prizes but are based in the outside of the region? Is the impact of an Asian art prize global? Artist Halima Cassell is a sculptor whose rhythmic creations echo the mathematical contours and patterns of the natural world. An artist with Pakistani heritage, her home is in England's rural county of Shropshire. Her *Acapella* sculpture won the 14th annual Sovereign Asian Art Prize in 2018—but what happened next?



Halima Cassell, *Acapella*, 2016, bronze, 41 × 30 × 30 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Cassell's response is characteristically upbeat, "It was great to be nominated, and I was honoured to actually win! In my case, it made my work more recognizable in Asia, and I received congratulations from fellow artists in Sri Lanka and from people all over the region... As a sculptor, it was particularly meaningful, as sculptors have not often won the prize before."

Her winning sculpture, *Acapella*, is in its fifth and sixth edition this year. Cassell accompanies her remarks about winning the prize with an insight into what brings her the most pleasure as an artist. She has recently completed an 11 month solo exhibition entitled “Eclectica” at Manchester Art Gallery, UK, which inspired dance groups, poets and musicians to interpret her sculptures in their own medium. “I had people who had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s and cancer telling me that the exhibition had given them an emotional and much needed lift... There’s pleasure in creating my work, but it would be meaningless if it didn’t touch people.”



Installation view of “Halima Cassell: Eclectica–global inspirations” at Manchester Art Gallery, 7 February 2019 – 5 January 2020. Photo courtesy of the artist and Manchester Art Gallery.

Prizes play their role in creating more connections, and this has led to tangible benefits for Cassell. The artist is discussing a forthcoming show at New York's Aicon Gallery, born partly from the press coverage she received in Hong Kong and the US as a result of winning the Sovereign Asian Art Prize. She continues to be very active in the UK; she will be the celebrated summer opera festival Glyndebourne's 2020 lead artist, and will be publishing a book of five essays on her career to date, with an introduction by the former arts correspondent of the Spectator, Andrew Lambirth.

For a busy artist, time is not infinite. What role does time and effort play in deciding which art awards to apply for? "I would apply for more competitions if I had time. You need to give them lots of time and consideration as they can be very competitive. I once applied to an art prize where I was the 4,600th entrant. Some awards incur cost or risk to the artwork, and I would be cautious there. You have to weigh up the risk, the cost and the time."

Having help can be useful when time is a factor, but no agency can prepare well enough. "If I don't write or get heavily involved in the application myself, it has to be done by somebody with a deep knowledge of my work." Ultimately however, some works are resistant to lengthy explanation, which may make too much description redundant or self-defeating. "When I walk through a city, I don't need a lengthy explanation about every building to enjoy it. When I listen to a song, I don't need subtitles."

Is there a special mindset that is important, both at the stage of applying and in the later stages—the rejection, or the short-listing and ultimately even winning? The artist believes in "being present" and allowing things to happen rather than forcing them. When Cassell doesn't win, she believes that it wasn't meant to be. Like Cheng, she is an artist of conviction, who seeks connections and development opportunities. This is hard to distil into the win/lose dynamic of an art prize. However, recognition of some kind is always affirming, "I don't think about winning. Just to be shortlisted is enough."

## **About the artists**

**Halima Cassell** was born in 1975 in Pakistan, brought up in Lancashire and is now living in Shropshire. Cassell's varied, multi-cultural background is tangibly present in her work. A natural creativity presented itself at an early age and was nurtured to fruition through an art-based education: an undergraduate degree in 1997 and an MA in 2002.

Fusing her Asian roots with a fascination for African pattern work and her deep passion for architectural geometry, Cassell's work is intense yet playful, structured yet creative; substantial yet dynamic and invariably compelling in its originality. Combining strong geometric elements with recurrent patterns and architectural principles, her work utilizes definite lines and dramatic angles in an attempt to manifest the universal language of number and create an unsettling sense of movement.

To achieve these effects she uses relatively thick surfaces or solid forms to carve to the desired depth. She concentrates on simple forms as the basis of her work in order to maximize the impact of the complex surface patterns in combination with heavily contrasting contours. This approach provides her with the tools to create the compelling drama and playful dynamism that characterizes her work.

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metaphors about political dynamics in Hong Kong, China and beyond. Eight years ago, he won the Hong Kong Young Artist Grand Prize. What impact can an award have at the beginning of an artist's career?



Halley Cheng, *Woman in the Coffin*, 2017, acrylic on linen, 30.0 x 40.0 cm. Exhibited at Art Basel Hong Kong 2017. Photo courtesy of the artist and Galerie Ora-Ora.

“The effect of winning an art award varies according to different stages and circumstances of the artist's life. When I first won the Philippe Charriol Art Prize (2006) in my second year at university, it was really recognition from outside of what I had been working on in school. It gave me confidence to continue the things I had been doing at that time. Undoubtedly, official recognition does help artists who are in the early stage of their development. A little later, winning two prizes in succession—the Jakarta Award (2011) and the Young Artist Award (2012)—helped me to develop in a new direction.”

So, if art prizes are a boost to the starving young artist, do awards for established artists cause them to get too comfortable? Cheng is clear, “When earning an award

leads to you continuing to produce more of the same works, heading only on the same path, this is dangerous. You should go on to explore something else. Art is the pursuit of the unknown. That is the reason behind my own varied art form.



Halley Cheng, *Untitled*, 2019. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Of course, the art industry is not just a seductive tango of artist and collector. Galleries, consultants and curators all have a role to play. In the case of art prizes, committees, corporations and benefactors, add to the melee. Do art prizes exist just to benefit the artist or to benefit others? “I think my knowledge about the whole art ecosystem is far from comprehensive... But I am sure artists do benefit from it. Sometimes the award earns recognition for the giver of the award as well, so the benefits come to both sides.”

Prizes often bring significant financial awards in their wake, thus is an important stimulus in expensive cities like Hong Kong, which is both a creative hub and global financial powerhouse. However, not all awards offer payment, and there is scope for prizes to offer tangible benefit without financial recompense. Cheng is an artist who

challenges himself and the perceptions of his audience. Education, exposure and personal development are key drivers too. “I believe the meaning of an art prize is not only about financial support. There are many more opportunities it could give to an art practitioner such as winning a residency, which would help artists with their international exposure. This year I have been invited to act as a mentor for a Thai artist in the upcoming Asian Review Tournament. The winner will get the chance to turn his or her proposal into a reality within selected cities of Asia, which I think is very meaningful.”

What of artists who win Asian art prizes but are based in the outside of the region? Is the impact of an Asian art prize global? Artist Halima Cassell is a sculptor whose rhythmic creations echo the mathematical contours and patterns of the natural world. An artist with Pakistani heritage, her home is in England’s rural county of Shropshire. Her *Acapella* sculpture won the 14th annual Sovereign Asian Art Prize in 2018—but what happened next?



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**Halley Cheng** is born in 1986, Halley Cheng received his bachelor’s degree in Fine Arts from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2008 and four years later obtained

his master's degree in Visual Arts, Studio and Extended Media from the Hong Kong Baptist University.

During his professional career, Halley Cheng has had his works exhibited internationally in group shows and art fairs including *Art15 London*, *Art Basel Hong Kong* as well as when it was formerly *Art HK*, *Art Asia Miami* and *Fine Art Asia*. His works have won numerous awards including the Hong Kong Young Artist 2012 Grand Prize. His works are held in various collections including The Philippe Charriol Foundation and Bank of China.

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