



'By looking at the past, I am reflecting on what we have lost. These days, you are what you buy, what you wear... Our entire life is driven by consumerism'

Chong Fah Cheong (left), with his sculpture Chang Kuda, on what his works mean

ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

## Ride back in time

Childhood memories inspire sculptor Chong Fah Cheong's new work, Chang Kuda

deepika shetty

Canada-based pioneer Singapore sculptor Chong Fah Cheong looks back at the 1950s through his new work at the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

Chang Kuda, a bronze sculpture near the Swan Lake, features six boys riding piggy-back and racing against one another. In Malay, "chang" means to carry and "kuda" means horse.

The artist says it is meant to be a reminder of carefree childhood days of the past. The \$200,000 piece was commissioned and sponsored by Asia Pacific Breweries to mark its 80th anniversary.

Mr Roland Pirmez, chief executive officer of Asia Pacific Breweries, says it decided on a family-centred theme for the sculpture as a tribute to the many generations of Singaporeans who have played in the gardens and bonded with their families.

Looking wistfully at his creation, the 65-year-old artist tells Life: "This was a time without TV, computers and cellphones. When I was growing up, as soon as school was over, you headed outdoors. The games we played were simple yet fun."

Simple they have been, but even in those days, the competitive streak was there. This is evident in the delightfully playful sculpture which shows two boys whose excited facial expressions look like an anticipation of victory. The pair in the second spot have not given up hope and their body language shows they are trying hard to overtake the first pair. They hit a little snag as the third pair tug on a singlet in a desperate attempt to slow them down.

"No one liked to end last and things were not always fair," says the artist with a laugh. "So you would get real-life situations such as these even though there were no medals at stake."

The self-taught artist, who has been a resident of Merritt in British Columbia since 1989, is famous for another simple yet engaging public sculpture titled First Generation.

Created in 2000, this sculpture near the Fullerton Hotel depicts a group of boys jumping into the Singapore River. Like his most recent work, it is a reflection of the past.

His seemingly straightforward works, though, are a comment on deeper social issues and explore the current-day pursuit of position, wealth and power.

"By looking at the past, I am reflecting on what we have lost. These days, you are what you buy, what you wear, what bag you carry, what car you drive, maybe even your postal code. Our entire life is driven by consumerism," he says.

Chong is one of Singapore's pioneer sculptors, along with Ng Eng Teng and Brother Joseph McNally.

With potter Iskandar Jali, Chong and a handful of artists and art teachers started St Patrick's Arts

Centre, which later became Lasalle College of the Arts.

Living in Canada, he says, has given him peace of mind. Talking of his idyllic life in Merritt, he says: "If someone honks in Merritt, we know they do not belong to the town. It is the kind of place where people stop and chat and know one another by their first names. It is the best place for reflection."

deepikas@sph.com.sg

To mark Asia Pacific Breweries 80th anniversary and the launch of Chang Kuda, APB will be giving free breakfast sets to the first 300 families (four breakfast sets for each family) who visit the Singapore Botanic Gardens on April 30 from 9am.