

Star Lifestyle

Culture

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lifestyle@thestar.com.my

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Shade, rhythm and balance

By **ROUWEN LIN**

lifestyle@thestar.com.my

BEFORE he made his detour into artistic expression and painting, French painter Jonathan Vaultman was deep in the world of science. He has a PhD in veterinary medicine and other degrees in osteopathy and acupuncture. His is an unorthodox path, but what is a journey if not an adventure?

If you believe that everything is connected, then Vaultman lives it and breathes it. His search for connections and links is all-consuming and persistent. It is present in how he paints and how he thinks, and in his first solo art exhibition in Malaysia, he is going back to the beginning to retrace, reexamine and respond.

Black Work - L'oeuvre au Noir at The Godown in Kuala Lumpur comprises 14 large paintings that are black, but also white and everything in between. Drawing on alchemy as a metaphor for painting, Vaultman's work references the alchemical concept of nigredo, or the black stage, which is the first step in an alchemy process.

"While I am by no means an expert in alchemy, I wanted to evoke this principle in a poetic and metaphorical manner in this exhibition. By simplifying the colour palette, I sought to emphasise the contrast and interaction between light and shadow, symbolising the alchemical journey from darkness to light," says Vaultman.

"Through this alchemic process, one can attain a renewed sense of clarity, enlightenment and transformation. Through the exploration of these symbolic themes, I invite viewers to reflect on their own transformative journeys and the potential for inner growth and evolution. By immersing themselves in the visual and metaphorical language of *Black Work*, I hope to evoke a sense of introspection, contemplation and profound self-discovery," he adds.

He adds that as in painting, alchemy involves blending basic elements to achieve an outcome that surpasses the mere sum of its components. Additionally, both painting and alchemy possess an inherent quest for deeper knowledge, allowing those who engage with them to experience personal growth.

"This profound meaning encapsulates my paintings and art in general, an ongoing pursuit that fuels my artistic exploration," he says.

Black Work also refers to Belgian-born French novelist

Marguerite Yourcenar's novel, first published in 1968, which holds a special place in his heart.

Vaultman currently splits his time between Kuala Lumpur and Paris, as it is essential for him to regularly move from one place to another, because this provides the necessary fuel for his artistic work.

"Change forces you to question yourself, to remain true to yourself and to find meaning in your approach. By constantly experiencing new environments and perspectives, I find inspiration and continue to evolve as an artist. It keeps my creativity alive and allows me to explore different facets of my art."

"In Kuala Lumpur, the kindness of its people, the gentle way of life, and the indolent lightness that comes with the harmonious coexistence of diverse cultures showed me a unique and inspiring atmosphere. It is a welcomed break from the fast-paced, hectic nature of modern life in some European cities," he says.

Finding the core

His *Black Work* series is a journey back to the roots of his creative expression, a reminder of the driving forces behind his passion for art.

When he first ventured into art in 2015, it was an exciting time of exploring different directions and expressions. The differences between science and art might appear stark, but he notes that they share a fundamental commonality in their pursuit of understanding the complexity of reality.

"While science and art may employ different approaches and methodologies, both disciplines are driven by a curiosity to explore and unravel the mysteries of our existence. Science seeks to uncover empirical truths and formulate explanations based on evidence and logical reasoning."

"Art, on the other hand, delves into subjective experiences, emotions, and interpretations, often pushing boundaries and challenging conventional perspectives. My scientific background has escorted me during my artistic journey. By bridging the gap between science and art, I aim to create a fruitful exchange that can lead to new insights and synthesis of different perspectives," he says.

After several years of going with the flow, he now feels the need to return to the core of his artistic practice in *Black Work* to reflect on what drew him to painting in the first place.

"To achieve this, I consciously

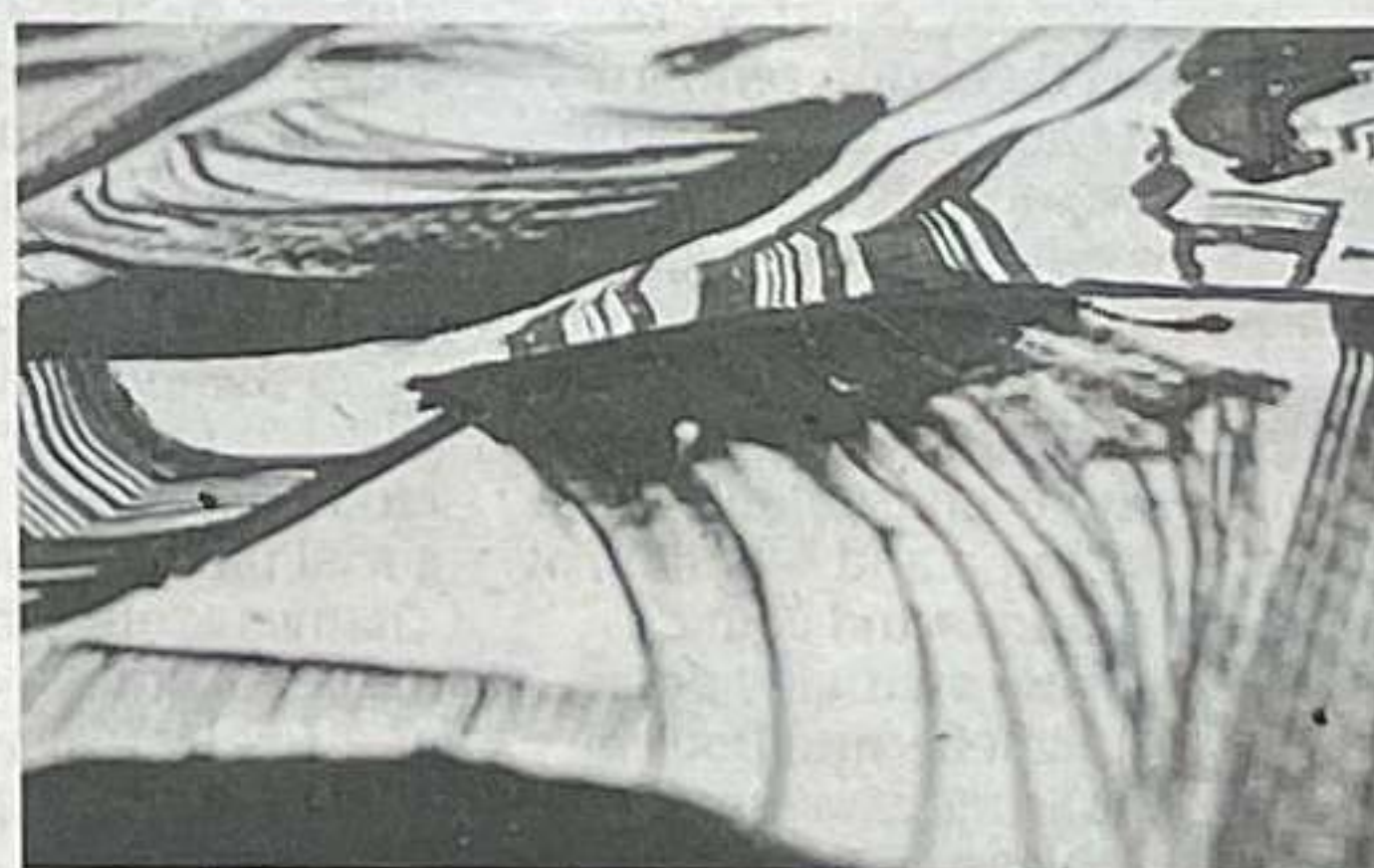


Vaultman's 'Cosmik Dice' (acrylic and china ink on canvas, 2023), which is part of his 'Black Work - L'oeuvre au Noir' exhibition in KL. - Photos: @bytianxing



"This physical proximity allows me to feel the marks I make, contributing to my exploration of a new variety of textures, gestures and movement," says Vaultman.

Vaultman often crafts his own brushes and tools, as tailoring them to his specific needs establishes a more intimate connection with the canvas.



chose to limit myself to just two colours and employ the simplest technique possible. This deliberate simplification became my way of reconnecting with the fundamental aspects of my art," he says.

To exhibition curator (and architect) Huat Lim, these works in black and white demonstrate that there is just as much colour here, than in what we usually perceive as more conventionally colourful.

"I think we are always subconsciously seeing shapes and forms besides colours. In taking out the colour element, the work

becomes more aggressive or direct – the colour is now shades of grey and the energy comes from a sort of absence or an emptiness," says Lim.

"Colour often hides the honesty of a certain work. It is like looking at the world without light, like early in the day or just before darkness. This is not an easy show to engage with but I believe it will awaken something different among the visitors," he adds.

Vaultman is also connecting with other art forms and other creative folk in this project: on the opening night of *Black Work* (June 2), there will be a performance by

Vaultman and Malaysian musicians Mei Lin Hui and John Thomas.

Armed with a brush, he will be creating a painting while Hui, a classical pianist, and Thomas, a jazz drummer, will be soundtracking this "art performance".

This is an exercise not just in creating, but also exploring the connection between movement, the body and mind, dance, music and art.

"Miles Davis used to pick up his trumpet and play a full score without any preliminary preparation. I suppose this surprise element is what makes Jonathan continue in his search for something 'risky'. He travels often to look for that adventure and the coming together of three artists gives him that edginess and risk or experimentation he likes to take in his paintings," says Lim.

Vaultman describes the collaboration with Hui and Thomas as "a deep and effortless understanding".

"We use the same language to describe our art – shade, rhythm, balance – and the connection is strong. The performance is an experiment to find that vortex, that common point, the essence between painting and music. Moreover, by bridging the gap between the East and the West, classical and jazz, it serves as an example of blending different aspects. It is about building bridges and discovering where they can lead us," says Vaultman.

The painting will be integrated with the other artworks at the exhibition.

Jonathan Vaultman's *Black Work - L'oeuvre au Noir* exhibition is part of month-long *Le French Festival 2023*, organised by the Alliance Française de Kuala Lumpur and the French embassy. It will be held at The Godown in KL from June 2-17. Free admission.