Five awarded Cultural Medallion

By CORRIE TAN

THEATRE practitioner Thirunalan Sasitharan, 55, still has no idea who nominated him for Singapore's highest arts honour, the Cultural Medallion.

After receiving the award from President Tony Tan Keng Yam at a presentation ceremony held at the Istana yesterday, Sasitharan told The Straits Times: "I feel honoured. I don't think I've done so much that I deserve such an award. But I think what convinced me was that it was remarkable to know that this was recognition also from the arts community. This award really is about them."

Drawing from an iconic monologue in William Shakespeare's Macbeth, he said during his thank-you speech: "What can I possibly say? I am but a poor player who has strutted and fretted this hour upon the stage, and will one day be heard no more."

It was the arts educator's first time at the Istana, with his wife and two daughters. The theatre practitioner and former Straits Times journalist is one of the co-founders of the Theatre Training and Research Programme in Singapore, now named the Intercultural Theatre Institute.

Four other key individuals in the arts received the Cultural Medallion yesterday. They are artist and critic Ho Ho Ying, 77; writer Jamaludeen Mohamed Sali, 73; artist Milenko Prvacki, 61; and choral conductor Jennifer Tham, 50.

This year, the National Arts



Cultural Medallion recipients Jennifer Tham and Milenko Prvacki speaking with President Tony Tan before the presentation ceremony at the Istana yesterday. ST PHOTO: NURIA LING

Council, which administers the awards, will introduce the Cultural Medallion Speaker Series, where the public can meet the Cultural Medallion recipients, hear their stories and discuss issues about Singapore art. This will be held at the National Library on

Oct 28 and Nov 4. Admission is free, but registration is required.

To date, including the five this year, the Cultural Medallion has been presented to 109 artists since it was instituted in 1979. It is given to those who have achieved artistic excellence in

their fields. Former recipients include musician Iskandar Ismail, writer Ho Minfong and the late theatre practitioner Kuo Pao Kun.

Cultural Medallion recipients are eligible for an \$80,000 grant, which can be used to fund a new arts project or multiple projects over the recipient's lifetime.

At the ceremony last night, nine Young Artist Awards were handed out by Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts. This is the most number of Young Artist Award recipients in a single year since the award's inception.

These are for those aged 35 or below who have shown promise in artistic excellence. Recipients can apply for study or project grants of up to \$20,000, up from the \$10,000 in previous years.

This year's recipients are: visual artist Genevieve Chua, 28; film-maker Liao Jiekai, 28; film-maker Looi Wan Ping, 35; sound artist and composer Darren Ng, 33; writer O Thiam Chin, 35; film-maker and multimedia artist Brian Gothong Tan, 32; visual artist Tan Wee Lit, 34; dancer Zhuo Zihao, 31; and playwright and director Zizi Azah Abdul Majid, 32.

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Cultural Medallion Award (Visual Arts)

Senior Fellow / Former Dean of Fine Arts)

GENEVIEVE CHUA Young Artist Award (Visual Arts)

Alumna, Fine Arts, Class of 2004

Young Artist Award (Visual Arts)
Alumnus, Fine Arts, Class of 2003 TAN WEE LIT

OUR LATEST AWARD WINNERS ARE ANOTHER REFLECTION OF OUR EXCELLENCE IN THE ARTS

Our winning streak continues with Milenko Prvacki, Senior Fellow and former Dean of Fine Arts, being awarded Singapore's most prestigious arts honour - the Cultural Medallion Award for Visual Arts. Tan Wee Lit and Genevieve Chua, two of our illustrious alumni, clinched the Young Artist Award for Visual Arts. Zizi Azah Abdul Majid, our part-time lecturer, received the Young Artist Award for Theatre. This unprecedented series of achievements, from faculty to alumni, is a clear testament of how excellence is truly the defining factor for LASALLE College of the Arts.

These wins bolster our track record of distinction that includes the internationally-acclaimed Design & Art Direction (D&AD) Awards, regionally-celebrated Crowbar Awards where LASALLE was the top institution two years in a row, Singapore International Film Festival's Silver Screen Awards, and more.

To Milenko, Wee Lit, Genevieve, and Zizi, our warmest congratulations.

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THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18 2012



Conducting choirs for love

Jennifer Tham, 50, choral conductor and instructor

Music and singing in choirs has always ment. "I thought it was fate. Something been part of Jennifer Tham's life, but it just clicked. The timing was right, and took her several administrative jobs and didn't want to live with any regrets." an aborted master's degree in business

most established players in the local choteer director of the amateur group Singapore Youth Choir since 1986. Now 40-singer choir changed its direction to a

Her bread-and-butter work comes rary music from being a conductor at several school choirs, including Singapore Management University, Temasek Junior College and from the model of "a handful of strong River Valley High School.

Singing in choirs since she was a stupassionate advocate of choirs and choral hide their voices, they think it's ugly. But singing. She met her husband, Albert I believe everybody in the choir is equal, Yeo, 50, who is general manager of the everyone as valuable as everyone else." non-profit Young Musicians' Society, in the choir. They have no children

"The human voice is pretty much tional choral festivals. Awards include naked. It is a representation of all that we second place in the Youth Choirs categoare, physically, emotionally and mental- ry at the Llangollen International Music ly. It is very beautiful. It is a gift," she Eisteddfod in 1998, an annual Welsh says. "The beautiful thing about choral ac- music festival; and the Festival Grand tivity is that it is mostly an amateur Prix last year at the International Choir activity. Nobody is paid to do it. People Festival Mundus Cantat Sopot, a multiculdo it out of love. People come together tural music festival in Poland.

The Cultural Medallion came as a combecause they want to sing." The eldest of three children of an Eng- plete shock. "I sat in silence for a long lish teacher father and school principal time, after screaming for a few minutes. mother, Tham read philosophy and sociol- she says with a laugh. "It was really ogy at the National University of Singa- unexpected. Historically and worldwide pore. After graduating in 1985, she choral activity is seen to be amateur, and worked as an administrator in Anglo- not put on the same level as professiona Chinese School (Independent) and later musicians." as a programmer at the then Singapore She hopes to use the \$80,000 project

grant that comes with the award to pur-Broadcasting Corporation. She followed her husband to Vancou- sue her studies in music. "It's been 17 ver when he was there to read biology at years since I was in school. It's close to the Simon Fraser University. She was time for me to get some new materials meant to do her master's in business and fresh insights."

administration, but gave that up to pursue a bachelor of fine arts, training as a composer, in the university's new music depart-

In 1995, she returned to Singapore and administration before she decided to pur- to conducting the SYC Ensemble Singers. She introduced a new direction for the Now, the 50-year-old is one of the choir, to concentrate on new music from

Before that, the group sang songs from the Renaissance and Romantic eras. Her reasoning for the change was that there renamed the SYC Ensemble Singers, the would always be other groups that can contemporary repertoire under Tham's would be easier for the ensemble to have an edge if it concentrates on contempo-

> Besides, new music was more egalitarian. She wanted to move choral singing singers and everyone else a shadow".

"At first, I made everyone sing one by

travelled and excelled at several interna-

"I feel very humbled and honoured and privileged," he said. it means to get a Cultural Medallion. The

the community that I work with." The first of two children of a postmaster and a housewife, he had been involved in theatre since his Victoria Secondary

of Singapore graduate in philosophy time," he said

Artistic freedom fighter

Thirunalan Sasitharan, 55, actor, art critic, arts educator and activist

. Sasitharan, or Sasi as he is better known in the arts community, has worn many hats in his wide-ranging 30-year

He has been an actor, artistic director of the experimental arts venue The Substation in Armenian Street, art critic at The Straits Times and founder and director of the Theatre Training and Research Programme, now known as Intercultural

Theatre Institute. Informally, he is also one of the leaders of the local arts community, being a passionate anti-censorship advocate and speaking often on the place of the arts in

local and international arts conferences. This may make the 55-year-old artistactivist-educator with the distinctive shock of white hair an obvious candidate for one of the highest cultural honours in

But receiving the Cultural Medallion still came as a "surprise" to the man him-

"I've been thinking about what exactly most important thing for me was the realisation that this is the recognition from

School days.

became one of his generation's more prominent actors, performing in seminal writer productions such as the late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun's groundbreaking multilingual play, Mama Looking For Her Cat

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2012

From 1988 to 1995, he was an arts journalist and assistant editor in the Life! section of The Straits Times, while still act-

After that, he took over from Kuo as the artistic director of The Substation for His deep artistic partnership with Kuo

them to start the Theatre Training and Research Programme. It was a threetaught participants traditional art forms such as Japanese Noh, Beijing opera and Indian Kutiyattam. After going through some financial dif-

ficulties, the course received an injection of \$1.4 million from the National Arts Council in 2010 to help the institute over the next three years. It was renamed the Intercultural Theatre Institute.

Asked for his plans for the \$80,000 grant that comes with the Cultural Medallion, he says it will probably go to supporting some of the work in the institute. Meanwhile, his family is thrilled. His wife Kavita Kumari Ratty, 47, is an associ-

ate director at a university research institute and they have two daughters, aged 13 and 11.

"My two daughters are just looking for-In the 1980s, the National University ward to going to the Istana for the first

Storyteller par

Mr Jamaludeen Mohamed Sali, 73,

those who are inexhaustible troves of sto-(1988), and the lead role in No Parking On ries - having written more than 400 fictional short stories, 80 plays and 200 articles in a career spanning more than 50

> His output is eclectic, spanning the highbrow, such as award-winning novels and serialised stories in magazines, to the lowbrow, such as biographies of popular figures such as Bruce Lee and Muhammad Ali. All his works are in Tamil.

His extensive contributions to Tamil writing have won him numerous honours both locally and abroad, such as the Singapore Book Award for Fiction in Tamil for his short story collection Nonbu (Fasting) from the National Book Developmen Council Of Singapore in 1996, and the Tamizhavel Literary Award from the Association of Singapore Tamil Writers in 2001

The Madras-born writer published his first book in 1961, a children's book called Two Eyes, about the friendship between a Hindu, a Muslim and a Christian boy. His father was a betel leaf seller and

his mother a housewife. He had two brothers and sisters who have all died. A popular writer who contributed to several magazines in India, he was invited to join Tamil Murasu, Singapore's Tamil language newspaper, in 1964. So he

sailed to Singapore at age 25 to work as

an assistant editor at the paper. He went back to India in 1971, where he worked for several other magazines before returning to Singapore in 1983 to work as a senior broadcast journalist at the then Singapore Broadcast Corpora-

excellence

tion. He wrote and translated news bulletins for both radio and televisio Being in close contact with the news of

the day gave him lots of information to spin out books on popular personalities, such as five books on the late actor Bruce Lee, an icon of martial arts cinema, and three on Muhammad Ali.

He said: "As a news editor, we had more information in those days. Now, of course, you can get the information for free off the Internet. But back then, it was different. These books were very popular and the sales were very helpful to

One of his books, Alaikal Pesukinrana (The Sound Of The Waves, 1975), has been reprinted and is being taught at SIM University as a text for students studying Tamil. The novel is about a married man in India who moves to Singapore and is forced by circumstance to marry another woman, and explores the themes of love and sacrifice.

Sali retired from journalism in 2000 and has become a full-time writer, in addition to doing Tamil language translation for the National Archives and the National Heritage Board. He has one son, 26, who is studying

business management at SIM University. His wife, 60, is a housewife. The Cultural Medallion is a great honour on top of the numerous awards he has

helping him re-publish his serialised fic- looking for new directions in art." would still like to continue to publish and I would like to gather them all in one movement in the 1960s as one.

received, he says.

Defender of abstract art

Ho Ho Ying, 77, artist and Chinese

In Singapore in the late 1950s, amid an art environment dominated by realism and sceptical of abstract art, a young art- tion, spontaneous expression and experiist dashed off a strident essay in the now mentation underpinned his own practice defunct Chinese newspaper Nanyang as an artist - blending Chinese calligraphy Siang Pau in defence of modern art.

piece arguing that abstract art was a valid called Kalang-guni Art Exhibition (1998). form of artistic expression, calling Western masters Picasso and Matisse brilliant innovators of the form. He was a student

striking back in Sin Chew Jit Poh. He pore visual art groups. depicted the every day but uplifted the subject matter to a higher, aesthetic reality. the late 1950s, many artists felt that art appreciates my efforts."

that had no social message, anti-colonial "Abstract art was looked down upon dren of a cook and a housewife.

as something done by painters who can't The \$80,000 grant would be useful in realist, there's no reason to attack those and abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky

He has written prolifically across Chi- a record of my creations."

nese newspapers, providing commentary on the state of the arts in Singapore, as well as writing introductory and critical essays for exhibition catalogues and books. His forward-looking belief in abstrac-

Meet the five who received the Cultural

Medallion, which recognises excellence in the arts and film,

with Jackson Pollock-like drips and mak-Ho Ho Ying penned the controversial ing artworks with found objects in a show He is also one of the leaders of the Sin-

gapore art scene for more than 50 years. He founded two art societies, the now reading Chinese language and literature defunct Nanyang University Art Associaat the former Nanyang University then. tion in 1959 and the still-going Modern This sparked off a "bi zhan" (literally Art Society in 1964. He was also the presi-"pen war" in Chinese) across two newspa- dent of the Federation of Art Societies in pers, with another critic called Chen Fan the 1990s, an umbrella body of 18 Singa-

The grandfather of six says: "I've been organising art societies and promoting art for half a century. I've fought for so long, Ho, now 77, recalls of that time: "In and I'm very happy that the Government Hainan-born Ho studied art at the Chi-

feelings or socialist meaning was seen as nese High School in the 1950s under piofrivolous because it had no effect on neer artists such as Chen Wen Hsi and Liu Kang. He was the eldest of five chil-Later, he went to Nantah, where he

really paint. But to me, there are exciting read voraciously on art theory and Westinnovations in this field. And artists ern modern art as practised by postshould respect one another. If you are a Impressionists such as Vincent Van Gogh He wants to do a solo retrospective tion. "Although I have written 55 books, I That essay kicked off Ho's lifelong exhibition with the \$80,000 grant that career as an arts critic and he became one comes with his Cultural Medallion. "I more. A lot of my work is in magazines of the driving forces of the modern art also want a beautiful catalogue of all my works. It has always been a wish to have

Milenko Prvacki, 61, artist and

Larger-than-life fine arts dean

chio-ed Milenko Prvacki was a fixture of with a genial, wisecracking personality the visual arts department in Lasalle College Of The Arts for many years, where former Yugoslavia, Prvacki moved to Sinhe served as dean of the faculty of fine arts from 1994 to 2010. He is now a sen- the now-defunct Maritime Museum

His contributions to arts education in ingapore are significant - introducing group critiques and tutorials, encouragnumber of teaching hours in classrooms.

man has said in a previous interview that United States. the forward-thinking Prvacki's influence

Besides teaching, the 61-year-old is 2002. also a prolific artist in his own right. He fact that he had to flee his native country, invited him to teach there.

the former Yugoslavia, because of war. Drawing Triennial in Nuremberg, Germa-

He was in the thick of planning his own retrospective exhibition happening next month at the Institute Of Contemponews that he had been awarded the Cul- creating a new series of paintings tural Medallion.

"I was so surprised. I thought the caller forgot when April 1 was and was playing a joke on me," he quips.

"Then I thought, now that I have a retrospective show and a Cultural Medallion, I can pass away now. Giving me a Cultural Medallion makes me seem so old," he

says, before bursting into laughter. His eccentric appearance - with a well-maintained silver handlebar mous-The striking presence of the mousta- tache that takes up half his face - goes

ST PHOTOS: KUA CHEE SIONO

Born in a village called Ferdin in the gapore in 1991 to work on artistic sets at Sentosa. He is the only child of an

He studied art at the Institute Of Fine Arts in Bucharest, where he met his ing hands-on learning, and cutting the Romanian-born wife Delia, who was a student there. The couple have one daugh-Lasalle's provost Venka Purushotha- ter, Ana, 36, who is an artist based in the

His two-year contract in Singapore turned out to be a permanent move - he with fine art in Lasalle". He was the one ended up living in Singapore with Delia, who nominated Prvacki for the Cultural who followed him here, for more than 20 years. They became Singapore citizens in

Both of them already practising arthas won international honours for his ists, they did a joint exhibition in Lasalle paintings that explore ideas of dislocation that caught the eye of the school's foundand displacement, which is tied to the er, the late Brother Joseph McNally, who

Thus started his career as a teacher, His awards include the Museum Of and generations of Lasalle students since Contemporary Drawing Award and Faber have experienced his tutelage, include art-Castel Award given by the International ists Ye Shufang and Tan Wee Lit, the head of the faculty of fine arts in the School Of The Arts.

Currently, he has a few ideas for the \$80,000 project grant that comes with the Cultural Medallion, including commis rary Art at Lasalle when he received the sioning a monograph of his work and

Asked if his daughter and threeyear-old granddaughter will be flying in from the US to go to the Istana for the award ceremony, he said: "It's very difficult. My granddaughter is like a small bomb," he says, bursting into laughter again. "But Delia will be there." Chiahta@sph.com.sg

Huang Lijie

Nine young talents from a range of fields in the arts will receive the Young

Artist Award this year. The annual prize introduced by the National Arts Council in 1992 honours artists aged 35 and below who have shown exceptional promise in the fields of literary arts, performing arts, visual arts and film.

From this year, recipients are eligible for a grant of up to \$20,000, twice the amount awarded previously. The grant can be used for projects or further studies in the arts, within two years of receiving the award. lijie@sph.com.sg





Name: Darren Ng, sound artist and composer, 33

Most significant work: Installation performance, Quiesce (2009), that



explored liminal spaces through sound, movement and light. The work marked a milestone in the artist's oeuvre and a

fresh approach in his music performance Spending the grant on: "Realisin ideas that I have had for a few years such as a sound installation inspired by (a natural together and form

critical yet an artist and proficient in

murmuration of starlings birds flock patterns in flight) and an installation on the acoustics of

director of Teater Ekamatra, 32 Most significant work: Performance of the play, Charged, in 2010, which centres on tragedy in an army camp and highlights racial tension. It set the benchmark for Teater Ekamatra with its solid production values and ability to convey social issues in a

Name: Zizi Azah Abdul Majid, artistic

heartfelt way. Spending the grant on: "I am exploring option in training and education to push myself as become more what I do."

Name: Looi Wan Ping, film-maker, 35 Most significant work: Debut feature film, White Days, on the dreams, hopes and fears of three young Singaporeans. Shot in black and white, and directed and produced on a \$500 budget, it won second prize at the Asian Hot Shots Berlin festival in 2010.

- " -

Spending the grant on: "I would like to start on new film projects, possibly small-scale essay films because they express my philosophy on filmmaking." Centre."

Name: Brian Gothong Tan, multimedia artist, film-maker and director, 32 Most significant work: Directorial debut, Decimal Points: 4.44, an experimental theatre production that blurred the lines between the genres of film and theatre. The performance received four nominations at this year's Life! Theatre Awards and won Best Ensemble and Best

Multimedia Design. Spending the grant on: "I won this award because of support from the arts want to do something to give back to community I would also like to film, a book previous works installation at my studio in Goodman Arts

Name: Tan Wee Lit, visual artist, 34 Most significant work: The release of a limited-edition action figure of the artist every five years, which began in 2008. Each edition of the figurine, based on an original sculpted by the artist documents his artistic evolution and



Name: O Thiam Chin, author and editor at a publishing firm, 35

Most significant work: Fourth and latest collection of stories, The Rest Of Your Life And Everything That Comes With It (2011). It was longlisted this year for the Frank O'Connor Short Story Award by the Cork City Council in

exploration on the theme of uncultivated spaces in Singapore, which figures prominently in stories. The her body of work. novel is about th Spending the grant on: "I Asian tsunam considering releasing a series of books on my perspecprocess drawings, which reveal how I go about resolving a finished piece of work. I might also buy photography. related equipment for

Name: Genevieve Chua, visual artist, 28 Most significant work: Solo exhibition next month at gallery Valentine Willie Fine Art in Keppel Road, which will feature a series of screen prints and paintings on canvas with a narrative built around shopping atriums and reservoirs here. It highlights her latest

my practice.'

Name: Zhuo Zihao, dancer with T.H.E. Dance Company, 31 Most important work: Solo performance, Lonesome, in 2004 at the

Singapore Art Museum, where he had the rare opportunity to dance his own choreography. Spending the grant on: "Projects such technology and dance, as well as



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