

His art show is expression of hope despite pain

Nafa grad, 23, prepares for exhibition even as he battles Stage 4 colorectal cancer

Rachel Chia

The nightmare began with a ringing in Mr Muhammad Khairul Ikwan's ears last July.

Then he developed a migraine so severe he could barely stand and had to crawl to the toilet.

Doctors discovered he had Stage 4 colorectal cancer, which had spread from his intestines to his brain.

At age 23, the young man has lost much of his vision, hearing and hair, and no longer parties as he once did with friends.

But the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) graduate is not wallowing in despair. Instead, he is launching an exhibition of 87 art

pieces at the school on Thursday.

Titled Hope, the works represent his experience battling his illness.

He said: "I want people to see that hope can be anything – even negative things, like illness, can become positive things as well."

"I don't want people to see pain as a hindrance to stop them from what they want to do in life."

Jointly organised by Nafa and HCA Hospice Care, the exhibition fulfils one of Mr Khairul's greatest wishes under the Star Pals palliative care programme for youth with life-limiting illnesses.

Mr Khairul is the second of four children. His mother is a secretary in a law firm, while his father is a safety supervisor in a shipping company.

Ms Nur Alwiyah, 25, a customer

service officer at a call centre, said her brother is expected to live about nine more months.

Said Mr Khairul: "It's shocking to go from healthy to seriously ill, but anger won't make the illness go away."

He now has chemotherapy fortnightly and wears a stoma bag to collect his waste, which goes out of his body through a hole in his abdomen.

In the four months he spent on art, he had to battle the side effects of chemotherapy, such as fatigue and

vomiting but he soldiered on.

He used to listen to music while painting, but having lost most of his hearing. He now reads song lyrics or poetry for inspiration.

His favourite work in the exhibition is a series titled Spirits & I (Eye), a set of six watercolour paintings.

Three are in red and have an eye motif, which he describes as "surgical, with veins", while three in blue are "water spirits rising up".

"Because of my affected vision, I

am going through so much pain. But at the same time, there are so many people lifting my spirits," he said.

Apart from paintings, he is also exhibiting mixed media works with synthetic hair, photographs, a video and a fabric piece.

Calling art a therapeutic outlet, Mr Khairul said his role model is Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, who uses her artwork as a way to express her mental illness.

The exhibition, which is free, will be at the Nafa on-air gallery from

April 21 to 25.

And he is already dreaming of his next project, a photography exhibition with himself as the subject.

He said: "What's the point of giving up when you're still living? The only moment you give up is when you're dead."

"If I can recover, it will be a miracle, but if I can't, I will just keep on fighting, make more works of art and leave a legacy."

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In the four months Mr Khairul spent doing his works of art, he had to battle the side effects of chemotherapy, such as fatigue and vomiting. He used to listen to music while painting, but has lost most of his hearing. He now reads song lyrics or poetry for inspiration. PHOTO: GIN TAY FOR THE STRAITS TIMES