

Portrait of a body and soul artist

Asia is his inspiration, a backpack his studio, and being disabled has only served to heighten Greg Burns' awareness of himself and nature

JANET HO

GREG BURNS fills the walls of his East Coast flat with paintings that reveal his drawing skill and imagination.

His nudes show forceful brushstrokes that outline and probe the human form relentlessly, the way a pen might have sketched them, if less lyrically.

They are realistic enough to appeal to the viewer, without being slavish representations. His abstracts, on the other hand, have bold colours and a symmetry that pleases the eye.

The marketing and public relations manager of Pepsico Restaurants International said he is juxtaposing figure paintings and abstracts in his first solo exhibition here, to show the progress of art from realism to abstraction.

It is also to show "the opposites, or yin and yang, of art" in one exhibition.

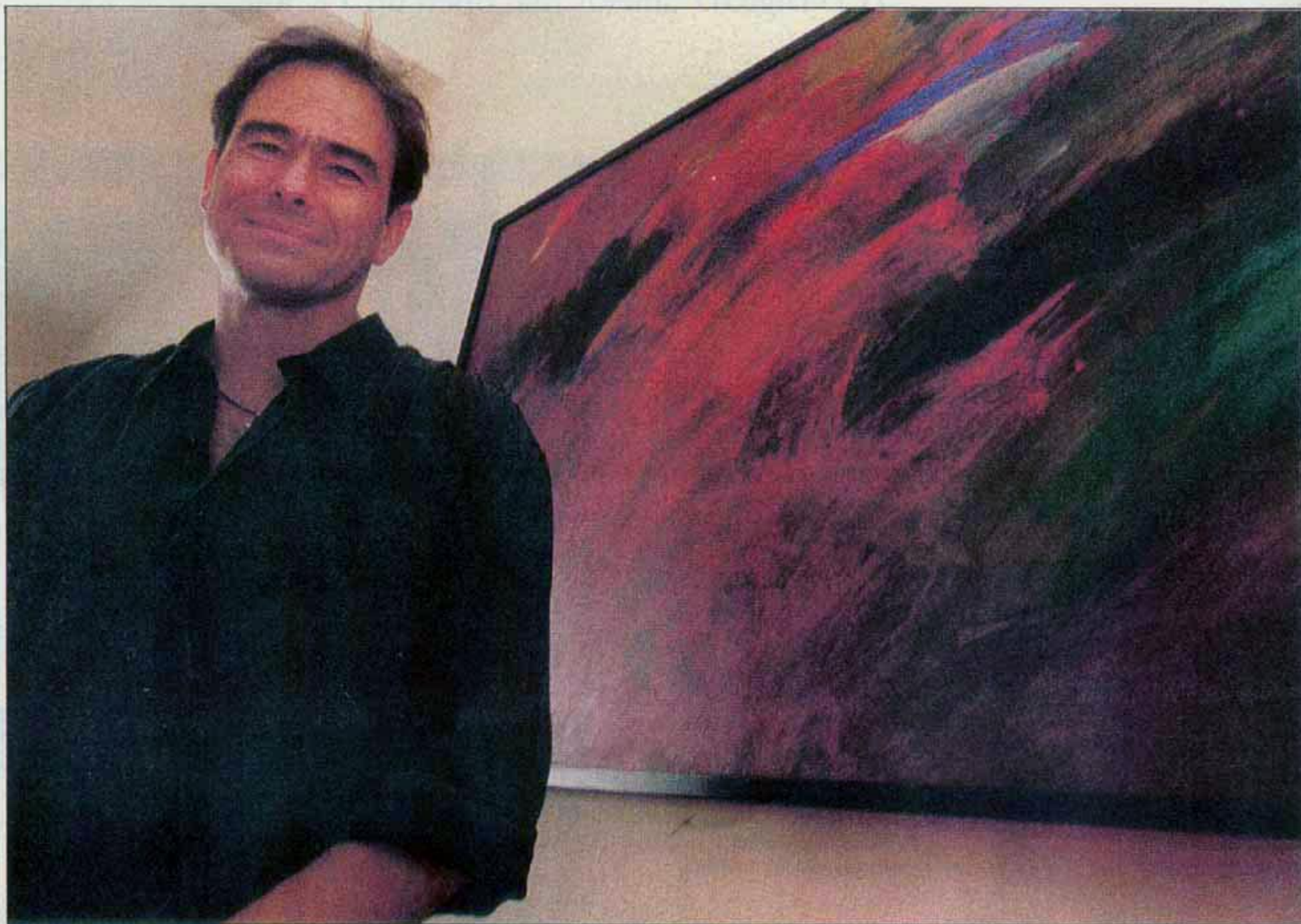
The American's fascination with the human body is another reason he could not omit the subject from the exhibition, which is on until Sunday at The Substation. He attributes this fascination to an intimate relationship with his own body.

The 39-year-old uses his hands to walk. He lifts his polio-disabled legs on two crutches, and sometimes hand-pedals a tricycle to work.

Early this year, he trained his body under Singapore coach Ang Peng Siong for the 1996 Atlanta Paralympics, swimming away with a silver and two gold medals, all of which broke world records.

Despite his handicap, he also backpacked from China to Nepal for 18 months, several years before he joined Pepsico, and was transferred to Singapore last year.

The communications graduate from the United States has travelled in Asia for 12 years, working, painting, photographing and filming.



■ LILLIAN FOO

Vividly colourful brushstrokes ... Greg Burns with his favourite abstract painting, *Flight*, at his first Singapore exhibition.

"I think I am unique in being able to feel the lines I draw going over the relevant parts of my body when I draw parts of the human figure, especially when I draw my hands," he said. "I think that is because I do everything with my hands."

He could not say whether he would have achieved as much if he had not been disabled. That is because he could not imagine life otherwise: The artist, who even went to Taiwan to learn Chi-

nese painting, calligraphy and seal carving, and made a video while sailing from Tahiti to Hongkong, was struck by poliomyelitis as a baby.

But painting would have been something he would still have done. The son of a political counsellor with the US government, who also speaks French and Mandarin, said he asked to join art classes as a five-year-old in Paris.

He wanted to stage the exhibition simply because

"it was time, and I have painted a good collection of 40 works" in oil and mixed media.

He sat with his legs folded on a mat to paint on a canvas propped against the wall. But his real studio, he said, has been his backpack and the outside world of Asia.

The gold dashes of oils and squares of gold-leaf prints on many of his paintings show the Eastern influence from his travels.

His love of such golden

accents arose from visits to the Dunhuang caves in China and his brushes with Buddhist art. "I add them on as I would say a prayer," he said of his reverential relationship with his artworks.

In Spring Thaw, he shows a well-balanced fusion of colours in a calligraphic depiction of the melting of snow — another inspiration from nature and his travels.

But the work he most likes is *Flight*, an abstract perhaps best understood by

the man himself, who said that he invests a lot of feeling in his painting.

Flight is intensely dark and grim, but out of the vividly colourful brushstrokes on one side, Burns said he sees an eagle.

Nudes & Abstracts is on at The Substation on Armenian Street till Sunday, from 11 am to 9 pm. Most paintings are priced between \$1,000 and \$2,000. Admission is free.