

Artist featured: Justin Lee (Singapore)

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Art plays a part in decor

It has gone from filling up blank walls to defining space and being integrated into the look of a place, reports CHEAH UI-HOON

ART is changing the way buildings here look, inside and out. It's also changing how artists make a living these days, given the growing worldwide appeal of customised art, ie, murals, graffiti and site-specific artwork, which are now the design focus for commercial and residential spaces.

If you're an art fan - especially of contemporary, cutting edge or urban art - then the good news is that art appreciation in Singapore is now going beyond just collecting expensive paintings or sculpture. Art's not just there to fill up wall space anymore, but is actually defining space and being integrated into the décor of a place as more artists are being commissioned to do site-specific work. And most of it is happening in commercial spaces like restaurants and clubs, spas and hotels.

New Majestic Hotel's soon-to-be-unveiled bar will see even more *in situ* art work customised to the three-storey space, crowned by the installation of an eight-metre high sculpture by London-based artist Zadok Ben David. The bar is the final realisation of the hotel's extensive art scheme that was part of its design DNA right from the start.

The Ministry of Sound (MOS), in turn, commissioned several graffiti artists to spray-paint its walls when the nightclub celebrated its 1.5 million visitor milestone in June.

Indie club Home recently got a customised mural for its facade, when it opened just a few months ago - a collaborative design effort between design house Phunk Studio and architects Annex A.

Self-taught artist Chua Koon Beng was part of Spa Esprit's interior design team right from the start when they conceptualised how his paintings would be integrated into the décor.

A big part of identity

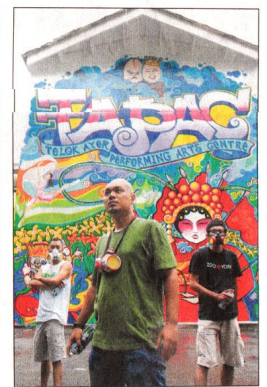
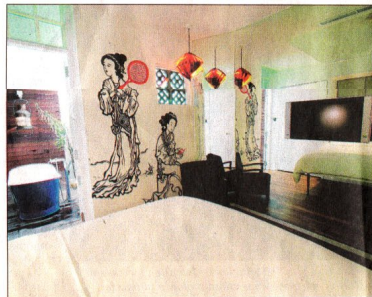
"For commercial entities, art is certainly becoming a big part of their identity and personality which becomes part of their branding," says Audrey Phng, co-director of art consultancy Asian Art Options. She provided the art consultancy for the hotel, and notes that the New Majestic Hotel's identity comes largely from its art and design, which differentiate it from other boutique hotels.

"We were fortunate because we were roped in to work on this project from day one," says Ms Phng. "Most of the time, owners tend to wait till the design is practically done to engage an art consultant. So there's little opportunity to shape the identity of the space."

The hotel's art scheme included commissioning nine Singapore artists to draw murals for its rooms and acquiring Chinese contemporary art works for its lobby and restaurant, made with New Majestic Hotel's space, heritage and location in mind.

She attributes this to the progressive vision of New Majestic Hotel's owner, Loh Lik Peng, whom she says is the prototype of young, well-travelled Singaporeans today who are more willing to be adventurous, take risks and are more confident of what kind of art they like. "Entrepreneurs like him are more open to creating artwork that's specific to their space now. They see what's happening elsewhere in the world, and are quick to catch on," notes Ms Phng.

Another entrepreneur who's been on the same artistic wavelength is Cynthia Chua of Spa Esprit, whose creative vision also saw the commissioning of site-specific art right from the time they conceptualised House - a venue that includes corporate meeting rooms for hire, a restaurant, a bar and spa treatment rooms. In this case, the artist is also her brother, Koon Beng, whose signature style is



Picture this: (Clockwise from above left) Asian Art Options, in providing art consultancy for the New Majestic Hotel, selected Singaporean pop artist Justin Lee as his signature style was uniquely Singaporean and captured the Chinese heritage and 'pop' identity of the hotel; MOS celebrated its 1.5 million visitor milestone with a specially commissioned graffiti wall; artist Kamal Dollah (centre) spray painted a huge mural on three of Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre's walls when it underwent a facelift; Chua Koon Beng's signature charcoal-drawn semi-abstract figures on the left of a treatment room at Spa Esprit's House

human-sized charcoal-drawn semi-abstract figures.

"It so happened that my subject matter and style matches with the overall design and decor the creative director wanted to achieve," says Mr Chua, adding that he didn't get the commission just because he's "family". Three of his charcoal sketches of human figures add a dramatic tone to the yoga studio, for instance, but more than that, it's also the abstract paintings that he created specifically for the treatment rooms - some of which can be "swivelled" to face in or out - that give the spa a personalised, aesthetic touch. Mr Chua's own favourite is an eight-by-four-foot Chinese ink drawing of a male nude, which is framed so that the front and back of the painting can be seen, and installed like a free-standing artwork which confronts the visitor before they walk into the spa space.

This was his second time doing site-specific paintings - his first being panel drawings for another spa, Qi Mantra in Chinatown (in which Ms Chua also has a share) which separate treatment spaces. "The challenge is to maintain your artistic integrity while working within premises presented to you. It gets you to think out of the norm," he says, in describing the artistic process.

If he had the whole building as a "blank

canvas" in which to work, graffiti artists like Antz, Killer Gerbil, Zero and Schmezzo had a whole blank wall when they were engaged by MOS to spray-paint its exterior that faces Illy or Valley Road in late June. Graffiti art was the style chosen "because we wanted something fresh and fun that spoke of what MOS is about," says Calvin Sio, MOS's assistant vice-president for marketing. In this case, the brief given to the artists was to illustrate the long queue of clubbers waiting to go into the nightclub. Graffiti also adorns the club's interior, which includes a commissioned work by an Italian street artist.

Target audience

Although graffiti might seem youthful, it doesn't just speak to teens, thinks Mr Sio, given the rise of urban art and "street" brands that also appeal to young working professionals - "which is the target audience for our club," he says.

The graffiti stayed for a month, but has since been painted over. It worked so well, however, that MOS will be engaging artists to spraypaint another outdoor mural to celebrate this month's National Day.

"In Singapore, mural art wasn't so popular before but the perception is changing," says Kamal Dollah, a graffiti artist. His commissions this year are from schools as well as pub-

lic spaces like the Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre.

Anthony Chong, who goes by the moniker Antz, ventured into graffiti art about a year ago. Employed by MOS as a graphic designer, he's even had a few commissions to draw murals for homes.

One request came from an ex-schoolmate, who asked for a whole wall of graffiti in his bedroom. "Mostly, I've gotten requests for commercial projects," he says, adding that he's done one or two a month this year.

Architect Mark Wee, of Annex A, notes that some clients who engaged him to do up their residences had looked through his portfolio (which includes Le Papillon and New Majestic Hotel) and liked how art is integrated into the space. "Some really like it, so we're looking at how to do it in their homes," he says.

The main drawback, he thinks, is that it's time-consuming. "It just takes more time to customise an art work," he notes, adding that the consideration isn't even so much the cost as that depends on the complexity of the artwork.

Copyright could be potentially be an issue though. "When you commission a piece of art, the rules are a bit different than when you just buy a painting and walk off with it," says Asian Art Options' Ms Phng. "There is a

shared contract between artists and the commissioners, but ultimately it depends on the contract that's signed."

The dismantling of an art installation at Singapore Power's headquarters in April hit the headlines when the corporation did so without the artist's knowledge or consent. Singapore-based Della Prucki was highly upset when she found out that four of her six artworks done in 2001 were destroyed.

"The authorities might not have seen the value of the artworks and thought that they were just fixtures," reckons Ms Phng. On the other hand, the Land Transport Authority, after commissioning artworks for the North-east Line, had donated and auctioned their prototypes - which was a great thing to do, she says.

"In time, people will begin to value site-specific works, I think. Murals aren't just paintings on a wall - they're living and dynamic, and change over time."

"A commissioned work is a bigger commitment in a way, because it has a sense of permanence and adds value to a space or a building," adds Ms Phng.

With art being used to transform the aesthetics of a place, this current trend is a win-win situation for all: artists get challenged to work in a different mode, while the public gets to think of art in non-traditional ways. Not to mention that it's jazzing up the Singapore scene.