

the artful dodger

FINDING YOUR TRUE CALLING WHEN IT COMES TO SETTling INTO YOUR CAREER CAN BE ALL THE DIFFERENCE YOU NEED TO ENSURE THAT YOUR PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE SURPASSES ALL EXPECTATIONS – EVEN YOUR OWN. Story by ELLE BALRAJ



When you first clap eyes upon Audrey Phng, the first impression you get will be one of 'sweet young thing'; a short-lived impression that quickly evaporates as she effortlessly oozes professional confidence and a sense of centredness that has you hastily revising your initial impression to 'sweet young thing with backbone'.

Indeed, this thirty-something impresario who brings colourful bursts of art to the dry and dignified environs of the corporate world, has led a colourful life herself. The culmination of a career that has run the gamut from public relations, corporate communications, fashion and event management, Phng the Managing Director of Asian Art Options, credits her success to the school of hard knocks.

"From a very tender age, I had always wanted to study and live in the United States," she confesses. "The American lifestyle that was portrayed by television programmes were very appealing. To me, it seemed like they were always having so much fun – and that's what I wanted for myself too.

"I pestered my parents relentless, and mid-way through my A levels at Victoria Junior College, I left Singapore and went to study in Hawaii at Chaminade University and eventually University of Hawaii, Manoa. My interest at that time was very clear – I wanted to be in the hospitality field, as I felt it epitomised the romance of travel and would bring me in contact with people from all over the world.

"I was the cashier and restaurant hostess at the Hau Tree Lanai restaurant in Honolulu, a lovely beach-front restaurant in Kahala. It was a character-building experience, but fun too, as all the musicians who played at the Waikiki Shell concert venue stayed at the hotel, and I met Basia! The long hours, lack of holidays and real time off, the tedium of repetition, egos and more egos – showed me very clearly what I was good at, and what I sucked at," Phng remembers with a smile. "I knew then I had to stop and rethink what I wanted to do with myself. Thankfully, it wasn't too difficult, as I knew that options from the creative field were alluring... but what exactly?"

Phng returned to Singapore in 1992 and got a job at Club 21 in the corporate communications department, working on brands like Giorgio Armani and Bulgari. "There, it was part of my job to be involved in branding, creating concepts and marketing, which gave me an opportunity to flex my creative muscles. I found that I enjoyed it tremendously, and my time there laid the foundation stones for the next step in my career. I quit and went back to school!"

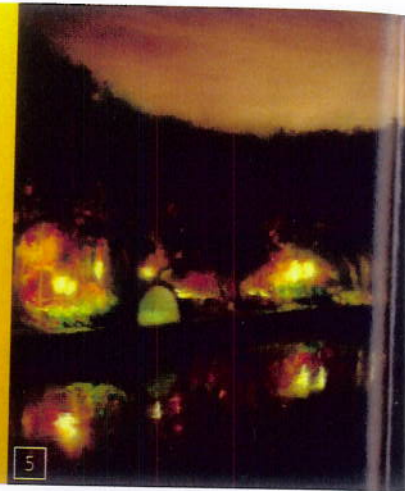
"This time, I went to the New York University to do my Masters. Living and working in New York was such an exhilarating experience – it was all part of the learning process. I worked at Hill & Knowlton and Burson Marsteller at the time, handling accounts like Gap and Banana Republic. The dynamism of creating ideas and the marketing platforms there was incredible and such an eye-opener to me, and pushed me out of the 'Singapore' shell I was in... The vibrancy of living and working in New York gave me the kind of confidence and insight I needed to hone my own skills and self-awareness."

Phng then decided it was time to return to Singapore.

"Yes, I had always wanted to live and work in the United States," she reiterates, "but as much as I was enamoured of the Western World, I also knew that I didn't want to stay there forever. It was a little like Disneyland ▶



1 & 2. Phng posing with her artwork in AAO.



Just as stepping into a home says a lot about the people who live there, stepping into an office says a lot about the company, what it stands for, and the people who make up the company.

► – great for a visit, but always with the idea of returning home when the fun is over. I guess it was a little of 'been there, done that'. I was ready to go home."

Phng candidly admits that if there had been a serious 'potential life partner' there, things may have turned out differently.

"I was and am still very much a Singaporean, and though there was no overt racism there to drive me away, there was still a sense of wanting to be back home, where I was completely comfortable to be myself."

When she returned home, she took up a job with local public relations consultancy, Directions, handling accounts of blue-chip luxury clients, including Yafriro, which retails high-end timepieces.

"Yafriro gave me the platform to combine arts and corporate branding; an area that had struck a chord with me when I was working the US. It got me thinking outside the box of how things had previously been done in Singapore, and I was very lucky in that the clients were very supportive and liked my ideas enough to go with them. That opened even more doors for me – not just physically, but mentally too, as I grappled with new ideas that were flooding in... There was such so much potential to put art and corporate branding together."

It was at that time that Claudia Cellini approached her to consider working at her boutique art consultancy – the first of its kind in Singapore then – Asian Art Options. Established in 1999, it is devoted to the development and collection of contemporary art, especially Asian art.

"We were actually friends, so there was some trepidation on my part," recalls Phng, who is now married and admits to having only canine children. "We decided to give it a go anyway, and had a trial period. Claudia and I are very different, but it worked, and I signed on in 2002."

"It was the perfect environment in which I could sharpen my experience, skills and interest in coupling art with corporate branding. Just as stepping

into a home says a lot about the people who live there, stepping into an office says a lot about the company, what it stands for, and the people who make up the company. Even a mere hanging on the wall is an embellishment of what the company is striving to achieve.

"I remember when SingTel was trying to buy into Australian and Indian telcos; it was such an important corporate step for them – a coup that they were eager to conclude. We proposed and installed art into their main offices and lobbies that reflected that acquisition strategy; showcasing Australian and Indian art at their best. Every time the bigwigs walked in with clients, the art posed as a talking point to focus discussion on the business strategies of SingTel at the time."

Another milestone achievement for Phng is the Marina Mandarin Artist-in-Residence programme.

"Marina Mandarin Singapore engaged Asian Art Options to further enhance its corporate branding as a Patron of the Arts. We worked closely with the hotel to develop its Artist-in-Residence programme, and facilitated the launch in 2006 with the introduction and selection of the artists. We also created special art events and exhibitions beginning with the festive *Partridge in a Pink Pear Tree* exhibition in December 2005, as well as the sell-out Pop art exhibition *(M)emories & (M)ementoes* in May 2007. It is the first programme of its kind in Asia."

"My background in public relations and corporate communications gave me the insights I needed to add my own touch to the projects and opportunities that came my way. I do take a step back to look and identify the relevance of the art to the company and its brand or corporate position. This involves considerable research and understanding of what the company is gearing up to achieve in the short, medium and long term. I have been fortunate to have clients who are prepared to go with my recommendations

– some of them very avant garde and pushing past the comfort zone – even if they have limited understanding of contemporary art.

Phng accepts that not all clients understand the finer details and nuances of art and their implications. "My role, then, is to help them identify their corporate objectives in a way that can be complemented by a range of art, which I eventually recommend to them.

"Sometimes we've had to walk away from some projects – especially when clients have a very set idea of what they want, and that conflicts with what I understand of the brand's position in relation to art."

Certainly, her job is never boring; offering her opportunities to meet with artists who constantly have fresh ideas and perspectives, which in turn keep her suggestions and recommendations to her clients new and sometimes, ground-breaking.

"There's always something new to learn. While we do need to make money to maintain profits, our financial goals are always taken into perspective – Asian Art Options provides us with a platform to gain something. Knowledge and the opportunity to meet new people in a dynamic setting.

"We are at a point now that we have to grow a little more to keep up with the projects that have come our way. Though we want to keep our position in the market, we also don't want to lose sight of the 'fun factor' by growing too large and unwieldy."

LITTLE CREAM BOOK

The multi-tasking Phng is also Singapore's contributor to the publishers of the Little Cream Book which features 26 artists, from A-Z, and all walks of life; living and working around the world. They will reflect on 26 destinations where each has found artistic inspiration. This project is not a 'best-of' compilation of the world's artists. Rather, it is a meditation on how inspiration arises. There will be a mix of recognisable as well as up-and-coming artists working in various mediums. The focus of the book is more on interesting insights into what the artist finds inspiring (whether it be a place, an activity, a neighborhood, a signboard...) in a particular destination.

"Whatever little free time I have is going into this project," says Phng, "I am really looking forward to seeing the completed product."

3. Xiao Jie painting by Justin Lee featured at the sell-out pop art exhibition (M)emories & (M)ementoes

4. Artwork entitled *End Transmission* by Safaruddin featured in the art exhibition (M)emories & (M)ementoes

5. Part of the *Little Guilin Night* series by Lin Bao Ling featured in Marina Mandarin's Artist-in-Residence programme

6. *Sakura and Virgin* by Lee Meiling featured at The Majestic Hotel

A MAJESTIC STUDY

New Majestic Hotel engaged Asian Art Option's (AAO) consultancy services to aid its transformation into the tastefully-conserved and hip boutique hotel it is today. It was assigned the mission of integrating site-specific artworks to reflect the hotel's historical significance and capture its unique position internationally. Drawing from its roster of artists, AAO reviewed more than 60 proposals after numerous briefings, site visits and scrutiny of floor plans. AAO conclusively commissioned nine emerging Singapore artists for the rooms and pool terrace to reflect Singapore's heritage whilst selecting contemporary Chinese art for the restaurant and lobby to capture the essence of the hotel's location in Chinatown. The art placement continues with the soon-to-be launched 7.75 m outdoor wall sculpture by internationally-acclaimed sculptor Zadok Ben-David to complement the theme of its restaurant/bar next, as well as the hotel's international position in the global hospitality and design industry.

