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32 NIGHT OUT

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This watering hole has harbour allure

Majestic Bar is built to resemble a tree house, complete with faux leaves, deck and LED-lit sky of stars, reports **CHRISTOPHER LIM**

LOOKING for somewhere new to go for a drink? Pleased with the constantly increasing variety at the Dempsey Road area, but growing weary of the throng at those joints and the equally crowded places at Holland Village and Clarke Quay? In that case, a conservation area in Bukit Pasoh has a treat for you.

Majestic Bar adjoins the boutique New Majestic Hotel, and although it's not new, it's already open for business, and is worth a trip if you're looking not just for a watering hole, but someplace well designed.

You're probably wondering whether a bar can be meaningfully unique in Singapore, where being too different can mean zero customers, and where most bar concepts seem to have been tried already. Majestic Bar is the brainchild of Loh Lik Peng, who owns New Majestic Hotel and is also behind Hotel 1929. He is never shy about pursuing a concept he believes in, and Majestic Bar visibly benefits from this tenacity.

Spread out over three floors, the bar's decor is unique, and wouldn't have been out of place in the cyberpunk movie *Blade Runner*. Bronze-tinted mirrors meet walls populated with creatures spawned from the guts of antique wall clocks, making you wonder if a robot will lurch out from the kitchen to serve you. You'll probably be relieved, then, when affable operations manager Aron Goh comes around with one of his cocktail creations.

Speaking of which, the drinks at Majestic Bar are very good. The cocktails are definitely the highlights – the presentation, inventiveness and attention to detail remind one of the martini at Superfamous and Morton's Bar. "Whenever we can use fresh ingredients in our drinks, we do that because we believe it makes a difference," Mr Goh says as he churns out a startlingly refreshing mocktail of green apple juice shaken with mint, cucumber and ice.

Although the menu's still being fi-



Bottoms up: The ground floor bar is darker than the other levels so as to resemble the base of a tree

associate director of Asian Art Options and the art consultant for Majestic Bar, explains. "But when you move to the second floor, it's brighter and you'll notice that the corners of the tables are unevenly shaped so they resemble tree trunks," she adds.

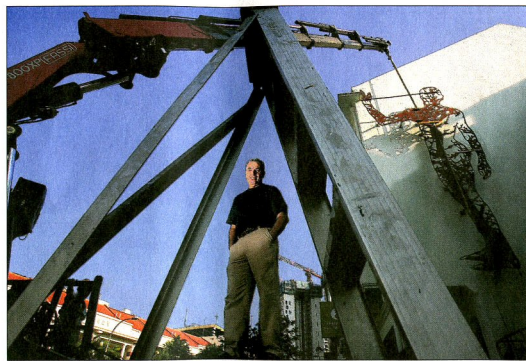
You really do feel like you're nestled amid foliage on the second floor with faux leaves on the wall, and access to an alfresco deck. Beyond the concept, though, it's obvious that no expense has been spared on the construction materials. Almost everything's bespoke, with obsessive attention to detail, down to specific figuring on the black Italian marble flooring on the ground floor.

Majestic Bar's third floor, however, is arguably the most unique level. The ground floor was put together by more than one designer, but the third floor, still unfinished, is the work of a single artist, Sandra Lee. Goodness knows how she managed to paint the high walls in such detail but it looks stunning. Scores of light-emitting diodes (LEDs) set into the ceiling imitate a star-filled night sky. "I see this floor being a hit with couples who want a bit more intimacy and privacy," Mr Goh says, and he's probably right. Romance, without the heat and humidity.

If only the music were as adventurous as the decor. Currently, all three floors of the bar feature a mix of chill-out electronics, that ramps up to more spirited house music later in the night, but something more sonically adventurous like experimental ambient music and alternative folk music would suit the decor more. Goodness knows if it would scare away customers, though.

"I've been thinking that suspending a DJ in the air on the third level to spin once a week would be a cool idea, and maybe we could get people to dance," Mr Goh muses. "We'll see how it goes," he adds. The space would probably be a bit cramped for dancing, but some kind of live musical act should work quite nicely.

Wait for the official launch if you want the full experience, or swing by tonight if the prospect of crocodile paw makes you painfully curious.



Valuable entity: Ben David with his 7.6-metre tall work, *All Open*, which has been put up on the wall just outside New Majestic Hotel's new bar

Beauty in ambiguity

By **CHEAH UI-HOON**

HIS "trees" are composed of hundreds of tiny human figures, and his "human figures" could well be branches of a tree reaching out. Then there's the interplay of outlines and solid shadows to his other 2D-looking sculptures, with common use of everyday animals, like birds, cats and monkeys. Just one glance, and you immediately see how eminently suited London-based Israeli artist Zadok Ben David's sculptures are to the outdoor space. His clients certainly agree, making him one of the most sought-after artists for outdoor commissioned works – but given the choice, the 58-year-old would much rather create his own work for display indoors, like art galleries or museums.

"With commissioned work, there are always compromises," he says. "There are always factors to think about, like the setting for the work, safety, whether there are visual obstructions and so on." While the money from commissions may be good, "My main aim is to develop new work ... to be as free as I can while at it," he adds.

Ben David works on a couple of commissions a year, while devoting most of his time to developing his own new works. This makes the award-winning artist's work here a valuable entity, the crowning glory of the art-led decor at New Majestic Hotel's new bar. This is, in fact, his second commissioned work in Singapore, although the first, at the Jacob Ballas Children's Park at the Botanic Gardens, has not been unveiled.

So, New Majestic Hotel owner Loh Lik Peng's privately commissioned *All Open* will be seen first, now that the large 7.6-metre tall work has been put up on the wall just outside the new bar. The sculpture features a human silhouette with artery-like tree branches "growing" from within.

Ben David's art, says Audrey Phng of Asian Art Options, can be read as highlighting the need for conservation and restoration within our urban landscape. "A theme that has been successfully carried on throughout the New Majestic Hotel and Bar," she adds.

All Open is made from Corten Steel, a special metal which "self-rusts" from a lighter yellowish hue to a deep shade of copper-orange. Being stronger than normal steel, it does not deteriorate further after it has rusted. Describing himself as being part of the "old school" of artists, Ben David doesn't just conceptualise his artworks and gets them made at the foundry in Portugal. He is still very much a hands-on artist, often cutting and shaping his metal sculptures himself. His works involve more cutting out of shapes rather than soldering, he says.

Born to a father who made jewellery, the young Ben David spent a year learning to make jewellery, more as a way of earning pocket money than out of any greater interest, he confesses. Later, in art school, he gravitated towards sculpture, even though his first interest was in painting. Ben David got noticed for his met-

work in the 80s, in England. "Being from a different country and culture, I guess my work was seen as more 'exotic'," he says. "But it could still be read by contemporary art fans and followers."

His use of all kinds of animals have a link to fantasy and fables, although he uses them as a metaphor for human attitudes, he asserts. "I had an imaginative childhood," he says. "It was the easiest way to escape somewhere, to be far away from where you are. And it's the biggest privilege that anybody has." In the 90s, Ben David's work morphed towards the creation of "shadow images", and he also moved into "inner spaces", which sees bodies in trees, and "body scapes" – which sees trees or arched landscapes within human bodies. "This ambiguity is what makes it so attractive," he reckons.

All Open is in that vein, and it's a rather significant piece of sculpture for Singapore, given the increasingly feted nature of Ben David's works in the global art market. His work recently won the top prize in the ongoing Corviera Biennale in Portugal, and he is one of the 20 sculptors invited by the Olympics Organising Committee to create a work for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Another one of his tree sculptures, four metres high, is included in Sotheby's second private sale at Chatsworth in the English Midlands. The work, which just started a week or so ago, features sculptures by artists such as Auguste Rodin, Damien Hirst, Anish Kapoor, and Ju Ming.