

Artist Features: Zadok Ben-David (Israeli, London-based)
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Singapore drinkers lap up concept

Clara Chow

Toetailers are generally bored in a bar. Conversations degenerate into drunken incoherence. Other pub-crawlers look awful unless seen through beer-coloured spectacles. And, worst of all, there's nothing nice to look at decor-wise, except faded prints and kitschy ornaments.

In recent months in Singapore, however, even non-drinkers have been sitting up with interest at the opening of some new watering holes. The reason? Good art on the walls.

Some of the island state's bar owners are hanging up art to reel in the customers. On one recent Wednesday evening, the media clutched their drinks and mingled at a launch party for the Majestic Bar, housed in a three-storey shophouse annex to an art-laden boutique hotel in Chinatown.

The bar's designers, Annex A Architects, were inspired by a giant magical tree straight out of books by children's writer Enid Blyton. The firm then worked with art

consultancy Asian Art Options to commission artworks by local up-and-coming artists to fit the theme.

The ceiling of the first level is adorned with glittering green and tan boxes, an installation by Yuki Chong that brings to mind stained glass windows and dappled sunlight through foliage. On the walls, artist Donna Ong has created a three-dimensional dreamscape of hollowed-out grandfather clocks from which bugs emerge.

Elsewhere, there is a chandelier with 200 ceramic lotus buds by Jason Lim, a 7.6-metre-tall steel figure by British-Israeli sculptor Zadok Ben-David on a wall outside, and a whimsical mural by Sandra Lee. Local sound artist George Chua was roped in to create suitably arboreal soundscapes for each level of the bar.

The idea to weave architecture and art, says Annex A's co-founder Mark Wee, 32, stemmed from the desire to create "an interesting bargaining experience". Besides, he says, it serves the purpose of promoting homegrown talents.

Like the Majestic Bar, art features prominently in new Asian-fusion bar Lunar. Opening its doors during last month's Mid-Autumn Festival, the 15,000-sq-ft club in Clarke Quay boasts about 300 pieces of art by young Chinese artists; many of the works are hung on the ceiling for neck-ache-inducing gawking.

Clement Lee, chief executive of Le Monde, the club's operator, played a part in selecting the paintings on display. "None of them are by big names, and a lot were bought at hicc from the street and in shops," says the art collector who owns works by Chen Wen Hsi and Yue Minjun.

Meanwhile, in a pristinely preserved 1960s shophouse on the fringe of Little India, a bar-cum-gallery devoted to graphic arts sprung up three months ago. The brainchild of architect Ransly Chan and Kelley Cheng, an editorial director of a publishing firm, Night & Day is where you can chill out in raw, retro surroundings and admire artworks by illustrators and designers hand-picked by Cheng.

35. After all, says Cheng, there is a certain mass appeal to graphic art, with its commercial sensibilities, but there are no galleries in Singapore devoted to the genre.

Showing now is the second of six exhibitions, collectively known as *Le Monde Est A Nous* ("the world is ours" in French) — a phrase inspired by graffiti in the French movie *La Haine*. Featuring artists Sokkuan and Kuanth, the show is a melange of doe-eyed girls and cutely menacing animals. Prices range from S\$150 to S\$3,000 (HK\$790–\$15,850) at the fourth-floor gallery.

Chan and Cheng will only say they have invested a "six-figure sum" into the venture, but jokingly add that they are "eating porridge and drinking tap water every day" now. Says Cheng: "It was tempting actually to call this place *Le Monde Est A Nous*, because we are setting up this establishment with a decade of our savings. Whether make or break, for one moment in life, the world is ours."

So why are bars incorporating art now? Some bars put it down to



Pub crawling: Donna Ong's wall installation *Bugs* (above) at the three-storey Majestic Bar, which also features Yuki Chong's glittering green and tan boxes set into the ceiling (left)

customers' tastes becoming more sophisticated. "It's going to be a big trend as consumers get more affluent and demand a better partying environment," Lunar's Lee says.

With nightspots popping up like daisies in the city-state, art may be yet another way for a bar to find its niche. "If playing a specific genre of music will attract a certain

crowd, why not the same with art?" says Cheng.

Damage inflicted by drunken mobs, however, is a concern. Wee of the Majestic Bar says: "Art in Singapore has always been exhibited at a distance, with a velvet rope around it. We want to make art accessible and close to the public. It's a risk that has to be taken. It'll be sad if people don't take care of it."

Night & Day places only a minimal number of artworks in the bar. The gallery usually shuts at 7pm and is open by request only to sober-looking patrons.

Then again, perhaps art in a bar would look better after a few pints. And with an alcohol-lubricated imagination and tongue, who knows what scintillating discussion on culture would ensue?