

A GRAND DESIGN

TEXTILE ARTIST BENNY ONG WEAVES AN INTRICATE NOD TO SINGAPORE'S PIONEERING SPIRIT

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Somewhere in Benny Ong's house lies a pile of "mistakes", artworks that did not pass muster because they were either made in the wrong colours or were different from what the renowned fashion designer-turned-textile artist had envisioned.

Ong, who was well-known from the 1970s to 1990s for his upmarket designer cocktail and evening wear, and for dressing royalty such as the late Princess Diana and Queen Noor of Jordan, said these are part of his journey as a textile artist and bear testament to lessons he has learned along the way.

Those that made the grade have found their way into exhibitions such as the one held in partnership with Raffles Hotel Singapore. Titled *The Pioneering Spirit*, the exhibition is open to the public today from 9am to 3pm at the hotel's East India Rooms.

Still, look closely and you may see some gaps in the weaves of some of the works. But Ong says these add to the flavour of the piece. "It's important to realise that this is handmade, and we are not trying to make things conform. You and I have made mistakes in life ... and I want that honesty in my work."

Ong, 67, said he made the switch to contemporary textile art in the early 2000s, after he realised the impermanence of fashion. "Fashion itself is very transient. All that time and work you put into it is gone after a season. It was a shame, there was so much value in the craft that we don't see nowadays. It's just pushed away ... forgotten," he said.

So he decided to "pay homage to people who are very skilful", and at the same time marry both fashion and art.

Ong, who has been travelling to and from Laos for a decade now (he currently makes around three to four trips a year), said that he had cultivated an interest in the Laotian's weaving techniques, one that has placed him on his current journey. The recipient of the 2015 Singapore Design Golden Jubilee Award found that people usually think of these woven pieces as crafts, and would buy them as souvenirs. And that led him to contemplate how he might be able to make "these weavers, who



are so rich in culture", relevant in the contemporary world, and "to bring the value of the past, the richness of the past, into the contemporary world, so it is not lost".

He has since displayed several of his woven works, including a 2007 exhibition titled *Re-woven*, which contained 46 pieces of silk textiles based on the art of Lao weaving at the Singapore Arts Museum.

For *The Pioneering Spirit*, he collaborated with a family of master Laotian weavers, whom he claims are one of the top weavers in the country, after he had "bumped into them" while trying to find craftsmen for his design and art work.



This collection captures and celebrates the values of pioneers — perseverance, strength, diligence and not least of all, patience.

Benny Ong

Given his background in fashion, Ong said he chose to approach his artworks from that perspective, by focusing on textiles and accessories and "styling" each piece. Three of his pieces, for example, feature weaves of Laotian women wearing actual silver earrings. One of them also sports an ethnic silk scarf.

For each artwork, Ong would take a couple of months to conceptualise and draw out the piece. The weavers would then take about two months to complete the exquisite handwoven silk tapestries according to his brief.

The Pioneering Spirit, which comprises 21 pieces, took about a year to come to fruition, with the help of between 20 and 50 weavers, depending on what was needed. To be sure, these are detailed works of art evident in the fact that each thread is individually dyed, said Ong.

It would also explain their hefty price tags, ranging from S\$4,000 to S\$12,000 for a piece. "In many ways, I'm keeping a very couture approach to this," he added.

This showcase, said Ong, also commemorates Singapore's Jubilee year. "This collection captures and celebrates the values of pioneers — perseverance, strength, diligence and not least of all, patience," he explained.

One of his more interesting pieces shows Singapore's late founding father Lee Kuan Yew wearing a white shirt in the shape of the island, which he has aptly named *The Shirt* (S\$10,000), simply because he felt Lee was known for his white shirt.

"That is his brand. And I also think it's important to realise that we often forget that we should enjoy art, we should have humour. People take art too seriously," he added.

The Pioneering Spirit also kick starts a series of art activities the Raffles Hotel Singapore has planned to complement Singapore Art Week. Following the exhibition, the hotel will be launching the Raffles Art Walk, which precedes this year's Singapore Biennale.

Organised in partnership with Singapore Art Museum, it will feature 15 posters of artworks by South-east Asian artists from the 2013 edition of the Singapore Biennale, which will be displayed around the Raffles Hotel Arcade (facing the Raffles Courtyard) and at Cad's Alley.



Ong's styled artworks showcase the artist's fashion background. PHOTOS: JOY FANG

S'pore films heading to Berlin Film Fest

Eric Khoo's *Wanton Mee* and the first Singapore-Philippine co-production *A Lullaby To The Sorrowful Mystery* selected

SINGAPORE – The first film co-production between the Philippines and Singapore, *A Lullaby To The Sorrowful Mystery* (Hele sa Hiwagang Hapis), by Filipino director Lav Diaz has been chosen to compete in the main competition section of this year's Berlin International Film Festival or Berlinale, which will run from Feb 11 to 21.

This is first time that Singapore is represented in the main competition section of the festival, where feature-length films compete for the top prize of the Golden Bear (for best film) and the Silver Bears awards for acting, writing and production.

The 482-minute film will also make its world premiere at the 66th edition of the Berlinale on Feb 18. Set during the Philippine Revolution of 1896 against the Spanish colonials, *A Lullaby To The Sorrowful Mystery* interconnects four narrative threads revolving around this historic event. It stars a bevy of Filipino stars, including Piolo Pascual, John Lloyd Cruz and Hazel Orencio.

Epicmedia and Ten17P from the Philippines is producing the film alongside Singaporean partners POTOLOC and Akanga Film Asia, with support from executive producers Henry Wee



and Empyreal.

Akanga and POTOLOC previously collaborated to produce K Rajagopal's *The Flame* (one of the short films in *7 Letters*) and will soon release Rajagopal's first feature film, *A Yellow Bird*, together with French co-producer Acrobates Films.

A Lullaby To The Sorrowful Mystery will be competing against productions from Canada, Germany, France, Iran, Italy, Sweden, United Kingdom and the United States. American actress and three-time Academy Award-winner Meryl Streep will be serving as the International Jury President.

Meanwhile, the 10th Culinary Cin-

ema will also be held during the 2016 Berlinale, with local auteur Eric Khoo's telemovie *Wanton Mee* (pictured) flying the Singapore flag. Held between Feb 14 and 19, the programme will present 11 topical feature-length films from various countries on the relationship between food, culture and politics, all revolving around this year's motto: "Make Food Not War".

To drive the message home, following the screenings of the films in the main programme, star chefs will take turns serving a menu inspired by the films. Khoo's docu-fiction *Wanton Mee*, for example, which is a look at the transformation of Singapore's versatile street food scene, will see one Michelin star Chef Alexander Dressel and some of the "Jeunes Restaurateurs" serving up the night's themed menu.

"I was at the Berlin Film Fest 20 years ago for *Mee Pok Man* and am hungry to go back," Khoo told TODAY. "I am thrilled to share our local food to an international audience and the celebrated Michelin star chefs attending the festival. It's great to be able to wave the Singapore flag proudly for our beloved hawkers."

Wanton Mee was first shown on Mediacorp's Okto channel in March last year and is also showing on Singapore Airlines' inflight entertainment programming. It was also featured in the Culinary Zinema section of the 63rd San Sebastian Film Festival last September. **GENEVIEVE LOH**

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