

## **Belinda Low**

*The impressionist murals of this heritage muralist recall Singapore's nostalgic landscapes.*

Since 2011, the 61-year-old hobbyist has painted impressionist murals in enclaves such as Chinatown, Clarke Quay and Holland Village, as well as Pulau Ubin and heartland areas such as Bishan. Her vivid artwork dresses 14 walls at Kreta Ayer People's Theatre and Chinatown Square.

### **The Accidental Painter**

An administrator at an accounting firm, Low received no formal art training and never expected to develop her passion for art so late in life. The devoted mother dedicated her youth and middle age to bringing up her two sons, now aged 28 and 30.

"I have always been interested in creating things, in art. But I never pursued it from young, despite coming from a family of musicians and artists. Art was not practical and (my family) never supported it," said Low.

However, as her two sons grew up, she suddenly found herself returning to an empty home, which filled her with a deep sense of loneliness. She later realised this empty nest syndrome was common among many mothers.

In 2007, when a close friend of hers fell into depression after losing a son in a dragon boating accident in Cambodia, Low suggested taking a fine art class together. Exploring the world of post-impressionist artists, Low found herself greatly inspired by the art of Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh. Immersing herself in art also eased her sense of loneliness.

### **From Painter To Muralist**

Today, many large and small paintings adorn the walls of her five-room flat in Paris Ris. Low, however, admits that she did not expect to paint many murals, which she is best known for. She noted that the local sun, weather and height made murals particularly challenging. That said, Low has since painted some 40 murals across the island, making her one of the most prolific local muralists.

The artist shared that she finds herself gravitating towards strong female characters such as samsui women – female immigrants from the Sanshui district of Canton (Guangdong), China who worked as labourers and domestic servants and were known for their distinct red headscarves. Chinese coolies also frequently feature in her murals.

### **Chinatown Murals**

From September 2014 to March 2015, Low embarked on her Colouring Banda project in Chinatown, covering 14 walls at Kreta Ayer People's Theatre and Chinatown Square with heritage murals.

This was done with the help of 600 volunteers from PriceWaterHouse Coopers, a consulting network. PriceWaterHouse Coopers had adopted Banda Street, rendering assistance to residents who live alone in one-room flats.

Her signature wall was inspired by a samsui woman Low calls Po Po (婆婆), mandarin for grandmother. "She lives alone and is very independent. She is in her nineties. If you are lucky, you can see her walking around especially during lunchtime," she wrote in her blog.

“She would talk to anyone who approached her but she would not take photos as it's considered taboo from a superstition of her time. I admire such women as I identify with them for their strength and courage to move on in bad and hard times and face challenges along the way,” she said.

The two orchids, Aranda Lee Kuan Yew and Vanda Kwa Geok Choo in the mural were added after the death of Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and dedicated to the memory of the founding father and his wife.

Another of her most striking murals depicts a Chinese New Year scene at a back alley inspired by a photograph of Singapore in the 1960s. This mural is so vivid because it is also coloured by the artist's own childhood memories.

“As kids, we would wear our new pyjamas the night before – it symbolised the new clothes [we would] wear the whole year when we wake up with these new jammies. The man on the right represents my grandpa...I liked my grandpa to play some music while grandma did the work of pasting auspicious messages on our house wall as we looked on. The other children are my cousins whom I lived with,” she wrote on her website.

Perpendicular to this mural is another painting of an elderly couple believed to be of Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his wife on a bridge. “Now the loving couple can be together forever in a heavenly quiet place. I leave it to you the viewer to decipher who they are. As it's the Chinese New Year period, I added nine koi fishes,” she explained.

Low also painted chess players, Chinese martial arts masters, as well as coolies on some of the other walls. “[Coolies were] our other national builders back then. [We have got to] also give credit to these hardworking men who came from China aside from the women from Samsui,” she said.

### **Art As Therapy**

Many of Low's projects, including the one in Chinatown, took as long as six months to complete. “Because it's quite a long time, you get people just walking by, offering to buy you drinks. You make friends for life. And I decided to put them into the wall in the senior citizens corner,” she shared.

Low's murals are so popular that she has even begun to receive commissions for businesses and other public spaces. She even attracted the admiration of Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing, who commissioned her to paint several walls in Holland Village, which falls under his Tanjong Pagar Group Representation Constituency.

Low shared that she is grateful for the positive attention her art has received, as well as the friends she has met along the way. However, beyond that, art has been an important outlet to express her emotions, ease her loneliness and find new purpose in her life.

“I can handle being alone, working on an art piece for hours on end. Art is therapeutic and it allows women to unleash their creative energies. I feel very blessed for what's happening in my life and art journey now,” she said.

Since August 2019, Low has added more murals at Happy Villa, located at the Singapore

Buddhist Welfare Services in Tanjong Pagar. The shelter for women was recently renovated, and Low's murals grace the dining area of the home.

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