

Creating enormous bronze apples for Farrer Park hotel

CHEAH UI-HOON goes behind the scenes of a monumental sculpture-in-the-making

HERE are Buddha figurines everywhere, in various stages of being made including a gigantic one where the lower half of the body is touching the roof of the foundry warehouse. In the midst of funds and limbs being added waiting to be soldered together, two giant apples are in the final stage of completion.

Just of all kinds – metal, ceramic and fine sand – swirls in the air as work at the bronze foundry is in full swing. In a hot but very air-conditioned space, two artists are polishing and smoothening the surface in a process called “chasing”, filling up and welding tiny holes to create a flawless finish. Kimarn – in face mask and gloves – is closely overseeing the work to make sure it's done correctly.

Ever so quietly, in her characteristically gentle voice, Kimarn is getting the pressure on the Thai workers of Asia Fine Art (AFA) as the deadline to deliver the apple draws nearer. “They are not used to what they do, but this sculpture is also very different from the work they normally do, so I have to be here to supervise every step because it's more difficult and much more costly to correct something gone wrong,” she explains. In two weeks, the monumental sculptures will be shipped from the foundry in Ayutthaya, Thailand, to Singapore.

The giant apples will be gracing the entrance to the first five-star hotel, Farrer Park – One Farrer Hotel & Spa – and the adjoining Farrer Park Hospital, both of which are housed in a multi-use complex, Connaught.

The monumental sculptures are the very first art commission that One Farrer Park Company made. Says Richard Heller, member of the company's board and chairman of One Farrer The Ltd who is driving the company's art collection.

“We knew that we wanted to work with Kimarn, but we left it to her to propose the idea,” he explains. After months of discussion and thought, Kimarn proposed the apples, which was a departure from her iconic tropical fruit such as peppers and tomatoes.

“In this case, I thought that there'd be much more acceptance for the apples – which I'd named *Apple and Arteevee* – given the nature of the buildings,” she says.

The green ‘apple of life’ was named after Arteevee, the Greek goddess known for her affiliation with the wind and the pursuit of lifestyle. While the red apple is named after her twin, Apple, who's the god of medicine and healing.

“I think the colours will be quite scenic because that's what people will remember as well, which helps make that visual connection,” says Dr Heller.

The initial inspiration will come from the Washington Granty Smith apples. AFA's workers are experimenting with the shades now, using acid and fire to prepare the bronze surface before dabbing pigment on it so that the metal is able to hold the colour. The apples aren't going to be painted but given the right paints, which is an art in itself, explains Kimarn.

It's not every day that she gets commission for her monumental sculptures, and in fact, Kimarn's art usually finds only one or two such time-consuming projects like this in one year.

The giant peppers burst into Singapore's sculpture scene about a decade ago, and since then, her iconic works have made a monumental mark on the landscape – there is the bronze chili pepper. *Peño Peño* (2006) commissioned by the National Museum of Singapore, while her giant *Spice* (2007) can be seen at Changi Airport and the *Navyree* (2009) inside



Almost ready: Dr Heller and artist Kimarn Nahapong pass by in front of the pair of 2.65-metre high apples in a foundry in Ayutthaya, Thailand.

ION Orchard. *Peribonago* (2011) is another monumental bronze mural of over 45m in length at One Bayfront.

“I couldn't do more than two projects like this a year,” she says, and a first-hand look at the arduous process of making bronze sculptures helps one understand why. Besides the lengthy process, the complexity is further added up with monumental sculptures.

For a small sculpture using the lost wax method, the artist makes the mould, after which a negative wax imprint is made of it. Then it has to be dipped in several layers of ceramic glaze, then fine sand and coarse sand (to resin its structure) over the course of a few days to a week. “When everything has dried fully, molten bronze is poured into the mould, cooled, and then the ceramic structure around it is broken, after which the bronze object has to be treated and given its final finish. All this takes weeks, much more so when it's a new, one-off creation.

For Kimarn's gigantic works, the sculpture is made in parts and then soldered together. Because they're so large, the parts are put in a sand mould rather than a ceramic mould. “And because it's made with a sand mould, the surface is much less perfect than when it's made with a ceramic mould,” she explains.

The foundry's main income is from the Buddhist statues and also statues of Thai kings, present and past. “So you can understand that they are working out of the norm when they have to work on the sculptures,” she notes. But Kimarn's works also gets up the workers' otherwise quite predictable routine, pushes the limit of their expertise, and her ideas are inspiring, says Thawan Manangcham, the owner of AFA, beaming at us as he peeps by to

chat. “She really has unusual and good ideas... we like working with her,” he adds in halting English. He has assigned a few staff who speak English well enough to work with Kimarn.

The foundry also works with other artists. Sometimes, however, commissions can fall through – we were shown a huge sculpture, almost three metres tall, of a muscular man standing on top of a globe. Instead of joining the almost-finished work together though, workers were taking it apart as the order was cancelled at the last minute.

It's a heart-breaking to see all the man hours go down the drain, and even if the bronze can be melted down to be used again, its quality is compromised.

At least, though, there's the *foundry*'s satisfaction of knowing that Kimarn's sculptures will get their final destination in Singapore, where they'll stand as a testimony to one artist's concept and a foundry's craftsmanship.

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500 original artworks for new hotel and hospital

It will be the single largest art commission of its kind in Singapore, the Farrer Park Company has commissioned more than 500 original artworks for its 250-room hotel and 145-room hospital. The iconic commissions will be the monumental *Apple and Arteevee* apple sculptures by Kimarn Nahapong, but visitors can expect to encounter art in practically every corner of the complex which will also show three hotel concepts in one, medical clinics and a hospital.

Kimarn was the first artist the Farrer Park Company commissioned, soon before a space had been found for her works, says Richard Heller, a board member and the man steering the hotel project. From there, the company went on to commission a number of artists from Singapore – to build up a corporate collection.

“As an owner-operated, independent hotel, we just saw the opportunity to build an art collection into the hotel at its design stage rather than as an after-thought,” says Dr Heller. “It's also a chance for us to support the art community in Singapore and the region, and work with them directly.”

Sculpture Square (SSQ) was the company's advisor and curator, as it commissioned over 500 established artists in 3D and modern art. The main guidelines for artists were that the works had to be modern and abstract art, not touch on religious or political topics, and titled and signed by the artists.

“Where our art collection will be different from other corporate collections is that the base will be Singapore and greater Asian artists, and the sheer amount of commissions,” says Dr Heller, who has his own strategic tourism/hospital consultancy. He was formerly the founding chairman/chief executive officer of Raffles International and president and CEO of Raffles Holdings.

Art in hotel guest rooms aren't usually commissioned works, but they will be at One Farrer Hotel & Spa. Only a few were bought in the market, such as a large piece by a Myanmar artist that was obtained in London. “And that's only because the artist would have taken something like eight months to complete the work – which is made up of any print dust injected from hydromedical needles,” elaborates Dr Heller. “So the good thing is that we liked

the three-metre painting on sale in London.”

But otherwise, art such as Cultural Medallion winners Goh Beng Kwan and Mianka Pracki have created original works for the hotel, as have Singapore artists such as Tay Bak Ching, Chris Yap, Jeremy Sharma, Adeline Yeo and Yeo Chew Kiong.

Besides the 2.65-metre-high apple sculptures by Kimarn, other 3D art that visitors can expect to see include an exact model of a 427 Box Kite plane that made Singapore's first manned flight in 1913 that took place at the old Raso Cross on Farrer Park, and an installation art piece featuring clouds with gold droplets by Yeo Chew Kiong.

“The art community and practice has grown tremendously in the last 10 years. I'd say now is the right time to commission the number of works that we have. It's a sweet spot at the moment as we can find enough multidisciplinary artists whose works have quality, and their market values are coming up,” says Dr Heller.

“We don't expect this to be a one-off art collection, and will be looking to add to it yearly.”

By CHEAH UI-HOON