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 South China Morning Post

Lifestyle / Travel & Leisure

Street art in Singapore: the best spots for Instagram photos, and the artists who have learned how to subvert with subtlety

Street art in Singapore tends towards the nostalgic, telling stories of the country's past and people – a puppet seller, a book stand operator, Chinese opera

This form of public art has gained wider acceptance, but some is still too controversial, such as a mural about a historical murder spree that was painted over

Topic | Asia travel



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Published: 10:30am, 11 Jan, 2020 ▾



Despite Singapore's reputation for sanitised streets and strict laws, street art thrives in the city state, where large-scale murals have become a colourful, integral part of the urban landscape.

Most of the street art that you see in [Singapore](#) [1] is commissioned artwork done with permission from building owners or government bodies. You are unlikely to find the controversial murals with critical political messaging that you may see elsewhere – anyone caught creating such street art is prosecuted under the country’s Vandalism Act of 1966, and may be fined, jailed or sentenced to caning, and the offending works are quickly removed.

“We have to follow the rules, it is Singapore after all,” says Slacsatu, the founder of street art crew ZNC and one of the owners of The Black Book, Singapore’s first physical graffiti store.

“Of course, there will always be limitations to what we can paint in Singapore, but I feel it makes us more creative,” says Singaporean [street art](#) [2] pioneer Zul Othman, who goes by the handle Zero. “Instead of being confrontational, we learn how to subvert certain issues through subtleties.”

We set out to find the most popular spots for street art in Singapore’s old neighbourhoods, and the stories behind the art.

Chinatown: a window into old Singapore

[Cantonese opera](#) [3] performances were common in Chinatown in the 1970s and 80s. There would be a rickety wooden stage filled with actors adorned in bright costumes and garish make-up, performed to crowds in the middle of the street. It’s a tradition that’s been lost to changing tastes and modernisation, but it’s been immortalised by Singaporean artist Yip Yew Chong in a large mural at the junction of South Bridge Road and Temple Street.



Yip Yew Chong's mural Cantonese Opera is on Temple Street.

The self-taught artist has, since 2015, created more than 70 murals across Singapore. Chinatown was his childhood home, and you can see a cross-section of his old home on the side wall of an old shophouse along Smith Street.

“People often come up to chat with me while I’m painting the murals and add to the story of the mural,” says Yip, pointing to his *Paper Mask and Puppet Seller* mural along Mohamed Ali Lane, based on a man called Yeo Ban Kok who plied his trade in the 1980s. Yip’s original mural did not include the puppets – these were added only after a passer-by shared his stories and some old photos of the puppet seller.

Nostalgia is a theme common to many of the murals in Singapore’s Chinatown. *Colouring Banda Street*, a collaboration between multinational corporation PwC and the Kreta Ayer Residents Committee, depicts scenes of Singapore past and present around Banda Street. These include a red-hatted Samsui woman, a symbol of the Chinese women labourers who helped build Singapore.

Finnish artist’s nature-themed murals brighten Hong Kong walls

19 Oct 2019



[4]

Kampong Glam: pushing the boundaries

Street artists consider the Arab and Malay heritage quarter of [Kampong Glam](#) [5] as something of a home. “The area wasn’t as busy as it is now,” says Othman, founder of urban art collective RSCLS. “Kampong Glam was especially quiet at night, which allowed street artists to be more clandestine in making their works on the streets then.”

Kampong Glam’s most photographed murals are along Haji Lane, a narrow road lined with a hodgepodge of shops and places to eat. The bold, Aztec-inspired murals along the side walls of Mexican restaurant Piedra Negra and Blu Jaz, painted by Didier Jaba Mathieu, were commissioned in 2010 and have recently been refreshed, drawing a steady stream of photographers.



Chong's Paper Puppet and Mask Seller mural is located on Mohamed Ali Lane.

Gelam Gallery, in two back alleys near the majestic Sultan Mosque, is another Instagram magnet. In early 2019, artists and students were invited to paint the alley walls with colourful murals.

The same year, Othman was one of three artists commissioned by the Malay Heritage Centre to create a mural highlighting the precinct's diversity and lesser known stories for the Singapore Heritage Festival.

His mural *Obscure Tales From The Past: Wak Cantuk* comprised scenes inspired by 1950s and 60s Indonesian comics that depicted the grisly story of a man named Wak Cantuk who went on a murder spree around the Kampong Glam area after his marriage proposal was rejected.

“This was an actual event that took place in Kampong Glam. I did not want to portray the same old narratives and visuals seen predominantly around the area,” says Othman. “It was a conscious effort to create a work that would create conversation.”

Death by Instagram: how one mural killed Penang's art scene

23 Oct 2019



[6]

Not long after the mural was completed, it was criticised by a member of the public in a letter to newspaper *The Straits Times* for being disturbing and insensitive. While the organisers defended the work, the mural was the only one out of three works for the festival that was whitewashed – the other two murals can still be seen today.

“Art should not only address the beautiful, but also the ugly, uncomfortable part of history and life,” says Othman. “It would be a disservice to society if art were consumed on the merits of pleasantry.”



Singaporean artist Song creating A Scent of Lights for Artwalk in Little India. Photo: LaSalle College of the Arts

Little India: local connections

In recent years, the South Asian enclave of Little India has accumulated a collection of wall murals, most of which are a result of Artwalk Little India, a collaboration between LaSalle College of the Arts and the Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association. This annual art festival was started in 2015 to showcase the rich heritage of the Little India through art installations and activities.

LaSalle graduate and visual artist Eunice Lim’s mural *Book-a-meeting* along Serangoon Road is designed to look like an extension of the existing racks of magazines and newspapers against the wall. The mural extends to the left of the racks of the long-standing Siyamala Book Store along Upper Dickson Road.



Eunice Lim and M. Govindasamy posing at his bookstore. Photo: Eunice Lim

Sharp-eyed visitors might realise that one of the painted faces in her mural is actually the friendly bookstore owner, M. Govindasamy, who sits just a few metres away. The Siyamala Book Store carries magazines and newspapers from India.

“With the help of some friends who spoke Tamil, Govindasamy told me about how his is one of the last few remaining traditional book stands around, and how he wanted to keep print alive to share with the community,” says Lim.

“Many of the artists involved in Artwalk Little India are LaSalle students and alumni and have personal ties with Little India,” says Milenko Prvacki, a senior fellow at LaSalle. “Being so close to the school, it is a place they frequent for lunch, art supplies and inspiration, and they find it meaningful to be part of this project and want to contribute back to the neighbourhood in some way.”

Zero and Didier Jaba Mathieu have also contributed murals in past editions. The sixth edition of Artwalk (which runs until January 18) is themed “Journey Through the Passage of Time”, and is a look at how the festival has withstood the test of time and how the neighbourhood has evolved through the years.

'Hong Kong has too much city': villagers protest with rural murals

6 May 2018



[7]

In a seemingly-nondescript alleyway off Rowell Road, overlooking the motorcycles parked along this pathway, is a striking portrait of a man, a mural that is mostly forgotten today, produced by American artist Miles MacGregor (or El Mac) for the Singapore Night Festival 2010. In a candid blog post after the festival, MacGregor remarked then that he found it very strange painting a mural in Singapore, where “any kind of public art whatsoever is a rare sight”.



El Mac's work Light in Little India. It was done on the side of the now-defunct Post Museum as a part of the Singapore Night Festival 2010.

A decade later, his mural is still there – and now alongside lots of other public artwork in Singapore. Still, while attitudes towards street art have become more positive, the laws have yet to catch up.

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[1] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/singapore>

[2] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/2187333/hong-kongs-old-neighbourhoods-get-new-look-street>

[3] <https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/culture/article/3036661/cantonese-opera/index.html>

[4] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3033643/i-want-make-people-smile-says-finnish-artist-behind-hong>

[5] <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/article/2153591/how-singapore-can-renew-ethnic-neighbourhoods-without-losing-their>

[6] <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/3033519/how-penangs-art-scene-was-killed-instagram-tourists-and>

[7] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/community/article/2144874/mural-village-last-stand-against-hong-kongs-rapid>