

One Artist's Journey From Executive Suites to Galleries

By FARA WARNER
SINGAPORE

Giving up a corporate job and turning a part-time passion into full-time obsession is an old story in some Western countries. In Asia, it's still something of a novelty. But for Greg Burns, 40, a former marketing and communications executive with U.S. soft-drinks and snack giant PepsiCo based in Singapore, the transition from corporate suit to full-time painter seems to make sense—especially now, he says. People in the region are questioning their rush to make money and acquire status symbols, he believes, as the economic crisis continues in Asia.

"It's easy to get distracted by all the superficial things," Mr. Burns says. "But in the end your soul is going to be there when the Mercedes-Benzes and the Guccis go away."

Mr. Burns is holding his first exhibit since he quit his job, and the show is very much about change, transformation and moving on. "Portals: Gateways to Sanctuaries" is Mr. Burns's fifth exhibit in Singapore and runs through Feb. 22 at Notices The Gallery, which ironically is tucked away behind the posh Four Seasons Hotel and side by side with some of the world's most expensive fashion brands. The paintings, while not on display after Feb. 22, can be viewed at the gallery through March.

While leaving the security of a job isn't easy, Mr. Burns says this exhibit has been successful in a monetary sense as well. He's sold 20 paintings so far. His prices range for S\$800 (\$486) for square 21-centimeter paintings to the signature 152-centimeter by 122-centimeter canvas "Gateway to Sanctuaries" priced at S\$68,000.

The paintings were inspired by sketches Mr. Burns made during his travels throughout Asia and Northern California. On a trip to Sri Lanka he developed the idea of how transitions—whether physical, spiritual or emotional—can be illustrated using doors and gateways. The paintings tend to be abstract although it's generally easy to discern the realistic images that inspired the paintings.

The Himalayas are framed by waving flags and Sri Lankan temple doors frame

an outdoor scene. Mr. Burns also makes full use of some of Asia's most beautiful facades. In paintings inspired by trips throughout Singapore and Malaysia, the countries' ornate, brightly colored shop-houses with their shutters thrown wide open make portals as well.

Gold leaf, often used in temples and on doorways in Asia, makes an appearance in several of the paintings. In some instances, it appears that the gold leaf, often in the shape of a square, is what viewers are looking toward or might attain if they step through doorways or portals to new lives. In one painting of a Chinese portal, a gold-leaf box is positioned in the middle center of the doorway. In another, a seated Buddha has a gold box in the center of his chest.

The bright, often jewel-colored paintings—with their message about stepping into new places and new lives to gain awareness—are all the more interesting because Mr. Burns is a paraplegic. He contracted polio when he was a year old and now walks with the aid of metallic fuschia-colored crutches, which he calls sticks. In spite of that, he's trekked throughout Asia to gain inspiration for his art. Indeed, not having the use of his legs seems to have speeded him up instead of slowed him down. In addition to his painting, he has won gold and silver medals for swimming in the 1992 and 1996 Paralympics.

After college, he backpacked overland through China, Tibet, Nepal, India and Pakistan. He finally ended up in Taiwan where he started studying Chinese brush painting, calligraphy and seal-carving, some of which shows up in this recent exhibit.

Mr. Burns isn't shy about talking about his disability, although recently he's more interested in talking about changing careers than a disability that's been with him almost his whole life. He does spend time educating people on the difficulties of being disabled. He's also donating a portion of this exhibit's proceeds to Very Special Arts Singapore, a group that provides artists with disabilities places to exhibit and perform their work.

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