

Life!

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Artefacts Shipwrecked

Tang exhibition won't go to Smithsonian for now

E3



Jay Talking

Is \$9.50 wanton mee at Night Safari about conservation?

E10



Bohemian Tiong Bahru

Young couples spruce up pre-war flats

E12-15



It's not scaffolding, it's not a kite. It is Turner Prize-winning artist Richard Deacon's installation at a store in Singapore. **DEEPIKA SHETTY reports. E4&5**



The undulating wooden sculpture is inspired by the nautical theme at Louis Vuitton's store-pavilion at Marina Bay Sands. PHOTOS: LOUIS VUITTON

Richard Deacon: His life

- 1949:** Born in Bangor, Wales
- 1950s:** Spent his early years in Sri Lanka. His mother was an army doctor and his father an airforce pilot. His first sculptural experience was when he was seven in Sri Lanka where he saw rock-carved sculptures of the reclining Buddha in the cliff face at the ancient city of Polonnaruwa.
- 1966-1976:** Studied at Somerset College of Arts and Technology, Central Saint Martin's, the Royal College of Art, and Chelsea School of Art and Design. Has a diploma in Art and Design.
- 1978:** First one-man show at The Gallery, Brixton
- 1979:** Went to live in New York for a year with his wife, ceramicist Jacqueline Poncelet
- 1984:** Nominated for the Turner Prize
- 1987:** Won the Turner Prize. The prize is awarded for activity over the year and the Turner Prize jury was particularly impressed by his travelling solo exhibition titled *For Those Who Have Eyes*.
- 1992 to 1997:** Trustee of the Tate Gallery
- 1997:** The French Ministry of Culture awarded him the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres
- 1998:** Elected to the Royal Academy
- 1999:** Recognised in the New Year's Honours list and awarded the CBE (Commander of the British Empire) for his contribution to the arts in Britain
- 1999:** New World Order, a Tate Liverpool show, was his first major British exhibition in 11 years
- 2007:** Represented Wales at the Venice Biennale



Suspended in style

Richard Deacon's sculpture of impossible curves which is hanging in Louis Vuitton's new store symbolises the fluidity of water



deepika shetty

Here is a suggestion for all you label-lovers drooling over the luxe goods on offer at Louis Vuitton's glass-and-steel island at Marina Bay Sands that opened last Saturday.

Look up. Yes, tear your eyes away from the leather goods, those monogrammed bags and all the other products that the high-end French label is famous for.

You are in the presence of art – and it is not just to do with hand-stitched trims and the serif look of those LV initials.

The ceiling of the nautical-themed store-pavilion – or as LV calls it, "Maison", French for house – features a work of art by Richard Deacon, a winner of

Britain's famous Turner prize, among other honours.

He has used wood that twists and curves to emerge as one free floating form. Titled *Upper Strut*, the 8m by 15m piece continues a theme that is a feature of Deacon's work, which involves questioning perceptions about materials and their forms.

He has spent years turning material such as wood-panels into impossible curves and this fascination with form-defying sculptural works is in ample evidence here.

The Welsh-born 62-year-old artist was in town recently to install *Upper Strut*, and *Life!* called by to meet the man behind what is bound to be a talking point of the LV Maison.

The huge artwork – roughly the size of a badminton court – was constructed in London and was shipped to Singapore.

Dressed in shorts and an old T-shirt, he was working with his team and construction workers to put the massive installation together on a hot and humid day, well before the air-conditioning was in place at the luxury store.

The idea for it, he said, was inspired by this building standing alone on a glass pavilion sticking out into the bay. Wiping off the sweat from his bald crown, he said: "I swim a lot and the first thing I thought of was this borderline between two states when you put your head into water and bring it up for air."

"Water is visible all around the Maison. To me, the piece and its resulting shapes with their undulations and crossovers were intended to convey an apparent fluidity, which recalls the restlessness of the surface of water."

He has no issues with his art being displayed in what is essentially a boutique.

"This is the first time I have created an installation for this kind of space and it has been exciting," he said.

The main challenge in putting the work together was its size. He worked with his long-time collaborator and artist friend Matthew Perry. One of the key considerations was the size of Perry's London workshop.

"It was too big to be assembled in the studio and too big to be transported in a block," Deacon said. "We had to separate it into three overlapping and interlocking parts."

"The final challenge was to fit it inside the space. The work is suspended and we had to collaborate with the architect Peter Marino to make sure the suspension points were in the correct place."

Selecting the wood was also key. Deacon and Perry decided on ash wood, as it does not expand easily in the tropics. Suspended to create a floating surface inside the store, it can be viewed from the store's two levels: the ground floor and the mezzanine.

"If looking at it from underneath, it is as if you are within its world, while from the mezzanine, you appear to be sailing along the surface on which it appears," he said.

Such experiments are not new to Deacon. In the early 1980s, he was among a generation of British sculptors who achieved international acclaim. Rather than carving or modelling, he started shaping his pieces from a variety of materials not traditionally used for sculpture. These materials ranged from galvanised steel and laminated wood to corrugated iron and leather. Bits, and ways of putting them together, have been central to his practice, from his early laminated wood-and-vinyl constructions to his more recent steamed-plank sculptures.

He prefers to call himself a "fabricator" rather than a sculptor, as he likes to use materials from man-made sources. Representing Wales at the 2007 Venice Biennale, he attached ceramics shaped like cookie cutters to the walls of an old brewery.

Despite the monumental scale of much of his work, he is more fascinated by the process involved in making a sculpture rather than the end. One of

his works, *Moor 1990*, for instance, is 247m long. Installed at Victoria Park in Plymouth in Britain, it sits high next to a bridge.

While he may not have any of his finished pieces with him due to their sheer size, he has never thrown away any of his notes, drawings or models, he tells *Life!*. Indeed, he pulls out an early sketch of *Upper Strut*, which puts the work in context during the installation process.

Apart from the process of creation, he enjoys teaching and has taught part-time at various art schools. Ask him why he chose to teach and a smile lights up his face: "It's because students are interested in a famous artist for all of five minutes. After that, they want to know what you can give them."

Of the awards he has won for his work, it is the controversial fixture and Britain's top contemporary art award, the Turner Prize, which stands out. The £25,000 (\$350,100) prize, which was set up in 1984, is given annually to a British artist under the age of 50.

Nominated for the prize in 1984, he won it in 1987 for his touring show titled *For Those Who Have Eyes*. His Turner Prize-winning body of work merged the dividing line between natural and man-made materials and between organic and inorganic shapes.

In 1995, British art critics questioned the merits of the prize that went to Damien Hirst for what the jury called "extraordinary"

works, which included pickling dead sheep and sharks, and sticking freshly hatched butterflies onto a surface of wet paint. The prize has been routinely panned by traditionalists, eggs have been hurled at artworks and protests have been staged.

But Deacon cleverly avoids the stirring sensations the prize generates.

He says: "There is a tendency for old fogies like me to say things were better when they were younger. That is not necessarily the case. There have been several interesting artists, greater experimentation and the nature of art practice itself has changed. For the public, it is an opportunity to look at a serious body of work."

He also acknowledges the difference the award made to his career.

"What changed things for me was being on the shortlist rather than winning the award in 1987. I was kind of an anticipated winner. It made a big difference with collectors, with curators and museums who started looking at my work seriously. So yes, awards do matter."

The award and the works he has created draw him to some of his earliest artistic memories. These take him back to Sri Lanka, where he spent time as a boy with his parents. It was here that he encountered rock-carved sculptures of Lord Buddha in cliff faces. As a child, he recalls making his father very angry by taking his best saw, and in his first creative attempt, tried to saw a brick with it in a failed bid to create his first sculpture.

This year, in addition to his work at Louis Vuitton, he has spent time at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute working on a solo show which will open in October next year.

During his residency at the institute, he wants to go beyond his usual practice by translating his ideas onto print and paper. His print works, which are still being developed, he says, will explore the visual paradox of forms and symbols, while his 3-D reliefs made with handmade paper will look at the subtle relationships between volume and space.

Apart from the art, he is happy he has finally got a chance to be in Singapore.

"This city has always had a curious place in my mind as my mother spent six months here in 1945," he reveals. "She was an army doctor and I have always wanted to know about that period in her life. The only time I was here previously was in 2001 when I was on my way to Siem Reap. I was so tired, I ended up sleeping in the Botanic Gardens."

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A view of *Upper Strut* from below.

Perfect marriage of luxury brands and art: Facing page



Luxury Italian label Fendi invited Singaporean artist Donna Ong (left) to create art on its renowned leather, while BMW collaborated with artist Jeff Koons to produce a multicoloured racing car (right). PHOTOS: ST FILE

Perfect marriage of luxury brands and art

In Singapore, Louis Vuitton is not the only brand giving a push to the arts.

Luxury products retailer Hermes has a gallery space, Third Floor - Hermes, at its store in Liat Towers in Orchard Road.

Ms Madeleine Ho, 40, marketing director of Hermes Singapore, tells Life!: "In Singapore, we have a long-term commitment towards showcasing original site-specific works by young contemporary artists."

Since 2006, the brand has been investing a six-figure sum in its visual arts programme annually and has held 12 exhibitions so far.

Among its most successful exhibits has been video artist Ming Wong's work titled *Life And Death In Venice*, which was inspired by his time there during the 2009 Venice Biennale. Commissioned, produced and presented by Third Floor - Hermes, Wong's work travelled to several places including the Museum der Moderne Salzburg in Austria this year and the Sydney Biennale last year.

Similarly, luxury Italian leather goods label Fendi, loved by Singaporean shoppers for its beautifully crafted handbags, collab-

orated with Singaporean visual and installation artist Donna Ong in May this year.

The remarkable collaboration was a perfect marriage of fashion, design and art. Over five days, working live at the Fendi store in Takashimaya Shopping Centre, Ong, together with Selleria craftsman Stefano Dalla Gassa, worked on a darkish-silver block of Fendi's renowned Selleria leather, reinterpreting the natural textures of the skin.

In July this year, Munich Automobiles, the world's first dedicated BMW M Showroom, and which is located in Singapore at 30 Teban Gardens Crescent, flew in a one-of-a-kind BMW racing car weighing about 1,200kg. It turned out to be a metal canvas for American pop artist Jeff Koons. His multicoloured artwork is the latest addition to the BMW Art Car collection which started in 1975.

The BMW group has supported arts programmes for almost 40 years. In Singapore, it sponsors the BMW Young Asian Artists Series with the Singapore Tyler Print Institute. Into its third year, the programme picks promising young artists under the age of 35. They get to work with

the institute's print-makers for two weeks and the works are exhibited.

Such creative collaborations between international brands and artists may sound new but they date back to the 1930s. That was when Italian fashion house Ferragamo got its first advertising campaign done by futurist painter Lucio Venna.

Among more recent artist-brand collaborations which have made international news was one by French fashion house Christian Dior.

In 2008, it invited 22 contemporary Chinese artists to respond to the fashion brand's heritage. The result, shown at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, made a splash both in the fashion world and art circles.

In 2009, Italian luxury sportscar maker Ferrari commissioned Chinese artist Lu Hao to work on a Ferrari which he decorated with ancient pottery patterns. It sold for US\$2 million at a charity auction the same year.

Who says corporate investment in the arts does not pay off?

Deepika Shetty