

# Taking local designs global

BT Weekend talks to some local makers who get international exposure for their products and designs through online retail platforms such as Etsy and Naiise

IT IS no secret that Singaporeans love making things with their hands – from jams to key-chains, jewellery and even bamboo bicycles. While they enjoy a following from local shoppers, many of them are finding popularity with international buyers

too.

One website where Singaporeans have been selling their homemade wares is on Etsy, which has a strong international following.

Over at Singapore-based online design retailer Naiise, local sellers have had their wares sold to overseas customers from the United States, Australia, Malaysia, and even as far as Russia and Brazil. The website was founded on the belief that design adds value to everyday life, and it strives to make good design accessible and relevant to more in Singapore and the region.

“We want to help local designers and crafters gain an audience – both locally and internationally – so that they are able to sustain their craft as a sustainable livelihood,” says Amanda Eng, marketing director for Naiise.

While overseas shoppers can pick up Singapore-designed products on the Naiise website, local shoppers can physically get their hands on Naiise products, at The Design Supermarket now on till Aug 20, at Level 1, Orchard Central.

## A greener ride

### Bamboobee

[naiise.com/collections/bamboobee](http://naiise.com/collections/bamboobee)  
[www.bamboobee.com.sg/](http://www.bamboobee.com.sg/)

GETTING around on a bicycle made of bamboo? It sounds like a wacky idea, but Sunny Chuah has done it. Mr Chuah, 29, started Bamboobee in 2011, and today he has sold close to 400 bamboo bicycles.

Mr Chuah's story began in 2009 when he went on a motorcycle adventure from India to Russia. This expedition inspired him to take on the “The Circle of Life expedition” adventure in which he cycled 5,103km around Central Asia on his self-crafted bamboo bike. After nine months cycling in Central Asia and back to Singapore on a self-made bamboo bicycle, Bamboobee was born to promote the usage of bamboo.

According to Mr Chuah, bamboo is as strong as steel but much lighter, and only takes three years to mature.

He designs the bicycle out of a studio in Eunos. To keep costs low, Mr Chuah uses bamboo harvested in a village in the mountainous region of Hunan province, rather than sourcing from a local supplier.

The bamboo is then crafted into bicycle parts by skilled craftsmen in the Caohe village in Guangzhou, before being sent to Singapore, for assembly, and then shipped worldwide for sale. Compared



### STRONG AS STEEL BUT LIGHTER

Mr Chuah (above) says the dampening effects of natural materials in a bamboo bicycle compliment a rider's riding style for a glide-like feeling with maximum comfort.

PHOTO: BAMBOOBEE

with steel, production processes are greener and have a much smaller carbon footprint.

“About 80 per cent of Bamboobee's clients are from overseas,” says Mr Chuah, a Singapore Management University business graduate. The collection of eight bicycles, which weigh between 10.5kg and 15kg, are sold on Naiise, starting from S\$1,624. Mr Chuah also sells his bicycles on his Bamboobee website. His customers come from the United States, Europe, Middle East and Asia. “Most of the orders are from the US,” he says, adding that a retail store in Singapore or in the US is in the works.

Those who wonder about the comfort and safety of a bamboo bicycle have little to worry about. Mr Chuah assures that the nature-based joints and bamboo framework promote the smoothest ride possible. “No matter how you ride, the natural dampening effects of our natural materials complement your riding style for a glide-like feeling with maximum comfort,” he says. In addition, the quality of the workmanship has been tested under the International Safety Standard for bicycle frames.

“Bamboobee bicycle is more than a designer bicycle,” says Mr Chuah. “The intrinsic value is that it allows the cyclist to be a partner with Mother Earth.”

By Tay Suan Chiang

## Kitschy Singaporean designs

### Happy Rabbit Co

[naiise.com/collections/happy-rabbit-co](http://naiise.com/collections/happy-rabbit-co)

AS A child, contemporary artist Jahan Loh spent a large part of his childhood sipping coffee with his late grandfather in old kopitiam (coffeeshops) in Chinatown. Armed with that memory, he now creates kitschy products, which is his way of creating a personal Singaporean gift.

He sells his products – ceramic cups with red saucers, no less, and enamel mugs under the label Happy Rabbit Co. The collection is available from Naiise for S\$30 each.

Mr Loh, who does an amalgamation of street and contemporary art, designed the company logo. It features a pair of rabbits looking happy while having their coffee, with the year 1976 underneath them. “My late grandfather was born in the year of the Rabbit, and he told me that he is very happy when drinking coffee. This conversation stuck to me so much that I named the company Happy Rabbit,” says Mr Loh. “I was born in 1976, so that is the starting point of my collective memories.”

The cups and mugs are printed in China, “but the design is very Singaporean”, says Mr Loh.

Besides being sold at Naiise, Happy Rabbit Co products are also available in Taipei and Hong Kong. “Happy Rabbit Co is a brand started out to revive past memories of my youth, and a platform for me to create unique retro Singaporean products,” says Mr Loh.

By Tay Suan Chiang



**SINGAPOREAN GIFT**  
Mr Loh (above) sells his products – ceramic coffee cups with red saucers, no less, and enamel mugs - under the label Happy Rabbit Co.

PHOTOS: HAPPY RABBIT CO



### Drawing on rich history

#### Nostalgic Illustrations of Singapore

[naiise.com/collections/lee-xin-li](http://naiise.com/collections/lee-xin-li)

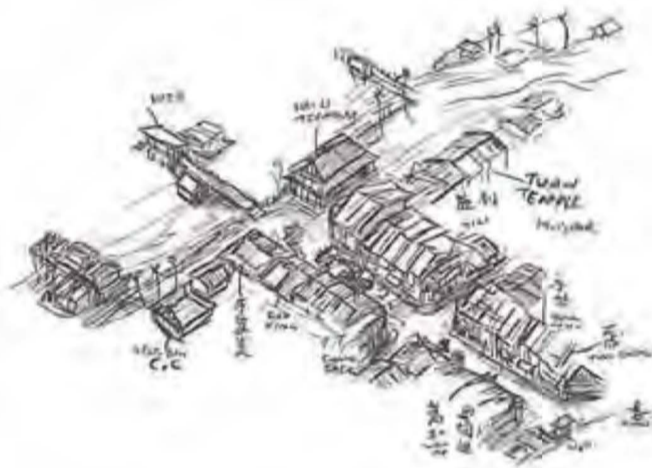
ARCHITECTURE student Lee Xin Li has a talent for drawing scenes of Singapore, but not the modern ones that we know. Instead he draws nostalgic illustrations of the country.

Mr Lee, 26, who is currently doing his masters at National University of Singapore, says that he has a longing for the old days, as "it is part of growing up in a rapidly changing Singapore. Revisiting Singapore's past gives me a kind of reassurance and a chance to document lost or changed landscapes such as Marina South, once littered with numerous steamboat joints, or the former National Library before the memories fade away."

He says that while the focus on old Singapore is a personal one, he hopes that Singaporeans and foreigners alike would look at the illustrations and realise that "this young nation has a rich history with much more to discover if one looks deeper into what seems like a sterile, boring country".

One series of pictures that he has drawn is of Neo Tiew estate in Lim Chu Kang. Mr Lee spent much of his childhood playing in its circular playgrounds, roaming the brick-laden square and having fun in a coffeshop where his mother used to sell noodles.

"It was startling to return to an abandoned Neo Tiew years later during National Service," says Mr Lee. "It was so familiar yet alien at the same time. The Neo Tiew I knew as a child was a military facility and



a subject of ghost stories. Such encounters are disorientating, it makes me wonder if this is the Singapore I grew up in?"

His pictures are subsequently printed as posters. Mr Lee says they were not meant as prints when he first started drawing. "It was only upon receiving some requests that I made them available as prints and that is heartening," he says.

His pictures are sold on Naiise, from S\$20.



#### NOSTALGIC MOMENTS

Mr Lee hopes (above) that Singaporeans and foreigners alike will realise that 'this young nation has a rich history and much more to discover if one looks deeper into what seemed like a sterile, boring country' through his illustrations. PHOTOS: LEE XIN LI

In some of them, he has drawn the comic character Tin Tin and his dog Snowy into Singapore. "It made me wonder, what if Tin Tin visited Singapore," says Mr Lee, who is a fan of the artist Herge. He hasn't had any Tin Tin fans from overseas buying these pieces, but says, "I was surprised when a few of them approached to compliment me on the pictures."

By Tay Suan Chiang

### Fun with fonts

#### Sibei Authentic

[naiise.com/collections/sibei-authentic](http://naiise.com/collections/sibei-authentic)  
[sibeiauthentic.bigcartel.com](http://sibeiauthentic.bigcartel.com)

MOST 20-year-olds would be literally having fun and games at their age, but for army recruit Chen Zhi Liang, fun is creating his own typography. "It is something unique," says Mr Chen, who was also inspired by the different fonts created by other designers, on Instagram.

He draws his own fonts, adding little tails and curls to the letters. Sometimes, he works on an existing font to "make it look more refined", says Mr Chen, who has a diploma in digital media from Singapore Polytechnic.

His fonts are not limited to the English alphabet, as he now has an interest in Chinese typefaces.

Mr Chen's fonts come to life in the form of posters and on tote bags which retail for S\$15 each, under his label Sibei Authentic, which he retails on Naiise, and on the BigCartel website, which is for crafters to sell their products. Sibei is a Hokkien slang for "super".

"I like stuff that is handmade, as I find them more authentic. With the name Sibei Authentic, I want to emphasise that each item is authentically handcrafted and unique."

Mr Chen prints his typography on various items using the linocut technique, which is a kind of hand printing method commonly used by designers. "The design is transferred to a linoleum board, and I cut it manually using lino knives," he explains. The posters and totebags are then printed from the linoleum board with a brayer.

The designs that Mr Chen creates are a mix of English and Chinese typefaces. "This mimics the way we use English, Chinese, Malay and Singlish in our daily conversations, making it a trait that is truly unique to Singaporeans."

Mr Chen plans to create more designs, and "eventually, turn typography and linocut making into a full-time business".

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#### HANDMADE AUTHENTICITY

The designs that Mr Chen (left) creates are a mix of English and Chinese typefaces to mimic 'the way we use English, Chinese, Malay and Singlish in our daily conversations, making it a trait that is truly unique to Singaporeans'.

PHOTOS: SIBEI AUTHENTIC





### Case in point

**SVNTY**  
[www.etsy.com/shop/SVNTY](http://www.etsy.com/shop/SVNTY)

SVNTY owner Marcus Lim did not start his Etsy store with the idea of selling the engraved phone covers that his shop is now famous for. The 23-year-old only did so after noticing how a few photographers that he followed on Flickr were selling their prints on Etsy. "The number of them (selling) increased and curiosity got the better of me. Soon after checking out Etsy, I opened a shop myself."

His store, SVNTY, set up last August, was initially a platform for him to sell photographic prints from his travels. Although sales of the prints were picking up, he did not see it as a sustainable source of income – especially with the growth of Instagram.

"I was exploring the use of various materials to create designs, as well as experimenting with my signature art style," he says. The idea of putting his designs on wooden phone cases came about after he purchased a plain phone case online, and his friends encouraged him to take the plunge. "I liked the idea of putting my designs on something more organic," says Mr Lim, a Temasek Polytechnic School of Design graduate.

The engravings on his cases are based on his original artworks. He scans them into a computer before heading to a local workshop to have the designs engraved on the cases.

Overseas retailers have expressed interest in carrying his cases in their stores. Mr Lim's current customers are from the United States and Europe, but recently he found himself delivering products to places such as Saudi Arabia, Nigeria and South Korea.

The quality of handmade goods has also been on the rise, and Mr Lim attributes it to the ease and availability of information on the Internet which he believes allows crafters to work more efficiently.

"Unlike mass manufactured items, there's a more evident human touch that graces 'handmade' products. I would think that one would feel more intimate with his purchase knowing that in his hand is the direct result of someone's creation," says Mr Lim.

SVNTY phone cases are priced from S\$42.77 for a single case to S\$146.49 for a set of four cases. Photographs are priced at S\$39.99 each.

By Georgine Verano



**HUMAN TOUCH**  
The engravings on Mr Lim's (far left) cases are based on original artworks that he draws out using ink on paper; he then scans them into a computer before heading to a local workshop to have the designs engraved on.  
PHOTOS: JERALD LIM



### Naturally clean

**Rough Beauty**  
[roughbeautys.etsy.com](http://roughbeautys.etsy.com)

WHEN 24-year-old Chew Jia Tian started experimenting with handmade soaps back in 2012, she did it just as a hobby. But while mucking around with common kitchen ingredients such as baking soda and apple cider vinegar, she noticed that she had an unusual interest in making soaps.

After reading up on the topic and making a few soaps for her family and friends, she started Rough Beauty – an online business selling handcrafted soap made with natural ingredients.

"It started out as an interest to use natu-



### HANDCRAFTED

Ms Chew discovered that she had an unusual interest in making soap, and started Rough Beauty, whose soaps are all made with natural and plant-based ingredients, and are scented with essential oils instead of synthetic fragrances.  
PHOTOS: ROUGHBEAUTY

ral and sustainable lifestyle products," says Ms Chew, who worked as a nurse at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital but is now waiting to enter university to pursue a nursing degree.

"I was aware of the negative effects of synthetic chemicals and started avoiding makeup and switching some bath products to more sustainable ones. Then I wanted to introduce natural handcrafted soaps to more people, and some friends told me they were interested and willing to pay for them," she says.

Rough Beauty's soaps are all made with natural and plant-based ingredients, and are scented with essential oils instead of synthetic fragrances.

Most of them are made with what she describes as a "melt and pour" method – she melts down a soap base before

adding natural ingredients such as herbs, spices and fruit zest, and then pours them into a mould.

The soaps then take between three to six weeks to cure and dry up before they are ready to be sold either at flea markets, through social media accounts, or via the online marketplace Etsy.

So far, her most popular soaps include White Neroli (S\$9.50), Tea Tree (S\$7), Lemon Cloud (S\$7) and Lavender Fair (S\$8).

And though she is training to be a full time nurse, Ms Chew hopes to eventually be able to sell her soaps for a living.

"There wasn't any particular reason that I started making soap, but I'm glad I did. They are fun to make and at the end of it, you can get a beautiful and useful product," she says.

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## Too beautiful to break

**Owithdoubledots**  
[www.etsy.com/shop/owithdoubledots](http://www.etsy.com/shop/owithdoubledots)

FOR local freelance art director and designer Evonne Ng, appreciation, not money, is what she hopes for when creating handmade piñatas for her clients. "I have always loved creating, from graphic design to handmaking things, so it's a natural progression," she says. Her Etsy store, Owithdoubledots, sells hand-crafted piñatas in the shape of astronauts and unicorns, among other designs.

Ms Ng, 35, began selling her handmade piñatas out of curiosity. "Would people appreciate what I made? I was greatly encouraged when orders started coming in."

She originally sold her piñatas on BigCartel, another online shopping site, but switched to Etsy, which specifically curates handmade or vintage products, as she felt the strong community would increase her chances of being discovered.

Why piñatas? A friend had asked her to make one for her daughter's birthday. Ms Ng

did some research online, made one, and it turned out "pretty good. It was also fun to make. Most of the ready-made ones are awful and impossible to break", she says.

"A piñata is something people buy for special occasions, so I'm not crazily packed with orders all the time, but there are times when my studio looks like a mad house," she laughs. "People's faces light up when they see my piñatas; they ask to take pictures, tell me it's too beautiful to break and so on," she says with pride.

She is not worried about competition from party shops that sell mass produced piñatas. "The quality of the mass produced piñatas are way lower," she says. "Unlike mass suppliers, I can make customised ones."

Each piñata is painstakingly hand-made, using paper mache technique or boards for angular shaped piñatas, which requires a lot of measuring and pasting and cutting. "The construction requires a lot of planning. It can take a ridiculous amount of time, perhaps that's why I have yet to have much competition here," quips Ms Ng.



**PARTY ON**  
 Ms Ng is not worried about competition from party shops that sell mass produced piñatas because 'the quality of the mass produced piñatas are way lower'. PHOTOS: OWITHDOUBLEDOTS

"With the growing demand for handmade goods and easy access to references, customers are more demanding and savvy. You need to have better designs and quality to stand out," she says, adding, "As part of the Etsy community, I'm competing against artisans of the world. That drives the standards up, which is excellent for both the creators and buyers."

Ms Ng says that her piñatas are mainly targeted at local buyers at the moment, due to high shipping costs. But she is working on other products that can be easily shipped worldwide. Her future plans include "a wider range of products, services and workshops, and to do this full-time".

Owithdoubledots piñatas cost from S\$85 to S\$258.

**By Georgine Verano**



## Based on strings

**Bassstringsbracelets**  
[www.etsy.com/uk/shop/BassStringsBracelet](http://www.etsy.com/uk/shop/BassStringsBracelet)

ZULKIFLE Mahmud, 39, puts his love for music into his work, literally. His Etsy store, Bassstringsbracelets, retails accessories he created from bass strings.

The full time artist who specialises in sound art, started his Etsy store last February as a part-time business to fund his sound project.

"I have always liked the idea of DIY projects, and I love creating my own sound instruments. I was building one of my instruments using bass strings and thought it would be interesting to create accessories from them," he says.

His store currently features a series of bass string bracelets, with neon or metal accents which Mr Zulkifle says are a way to incorporate music into everyday outfits.

### WRIST ESSENTIALS

Mr Zulkifle says the bracelets are a way to incorporate music into everyday outfits; each has to be custom made, as he has to create them to fit each customer's wrists.

PHOTOS: ZULKIFLE MAHMUD

as Mr Zulkifle has to be sure they fit each customer's wrists.

"I guess when things are handmade, you add a personal touch to it, it also makes the product unique and personal," he says of his works. "People are also more appreciative of them."

The satisfaction of completing each piece is what keeps him going and that although he loves crafting in general, this has been his most successful endeavour in the DIY world.

it had, and he felt the community was strong, and there is already a strong customer base.

The response to his works has been good. Mr Zulkifle attributes his sales – about 70 per cent to overseas customers – to Etsy's global popularity. "My customers vary from students to fashionistas, housewives, musicians and so on."

It is not all smooth sailing however, as Mr Zulkifle travels frequently, which sometimes makes it hard to deliver the prod-

ucts, and so far they have been understanding.

At the moment, Mr Zulkifle is not rushing to expand his business, as he says he has other projects in the works, but he says he plans to expand the range of colours and bracelet designs soon.

Bassstringsbracelets accessories range from S\$15 to S\$30.

**By Georgine Verano**