

The slow satisfaction of making a picture come alive, bead by bead

By Shilpa Madan

The Straits Times, Page 16,17, Section: VIEWS

Sunday 9 November 2025

1088 words, 1426cm² in size

386,100 circulation

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In a year of turbulence, from geopolitics to the relentless churn of innovation, I've learnt to piece together small pockets of peace, the analogue way.

FINDING Joy

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The night is quiet, my phone finally set aside. My 10-year-old son is sleeping.

Outside, the hum of the city has softened. The urgent rumble of buses on the ECP has fallen away.

On the horizon, the lights of container ships glitter at sea – just as I hope the canvas in front of me will, when I have finished sticking on thousands of tiny rhinestones.

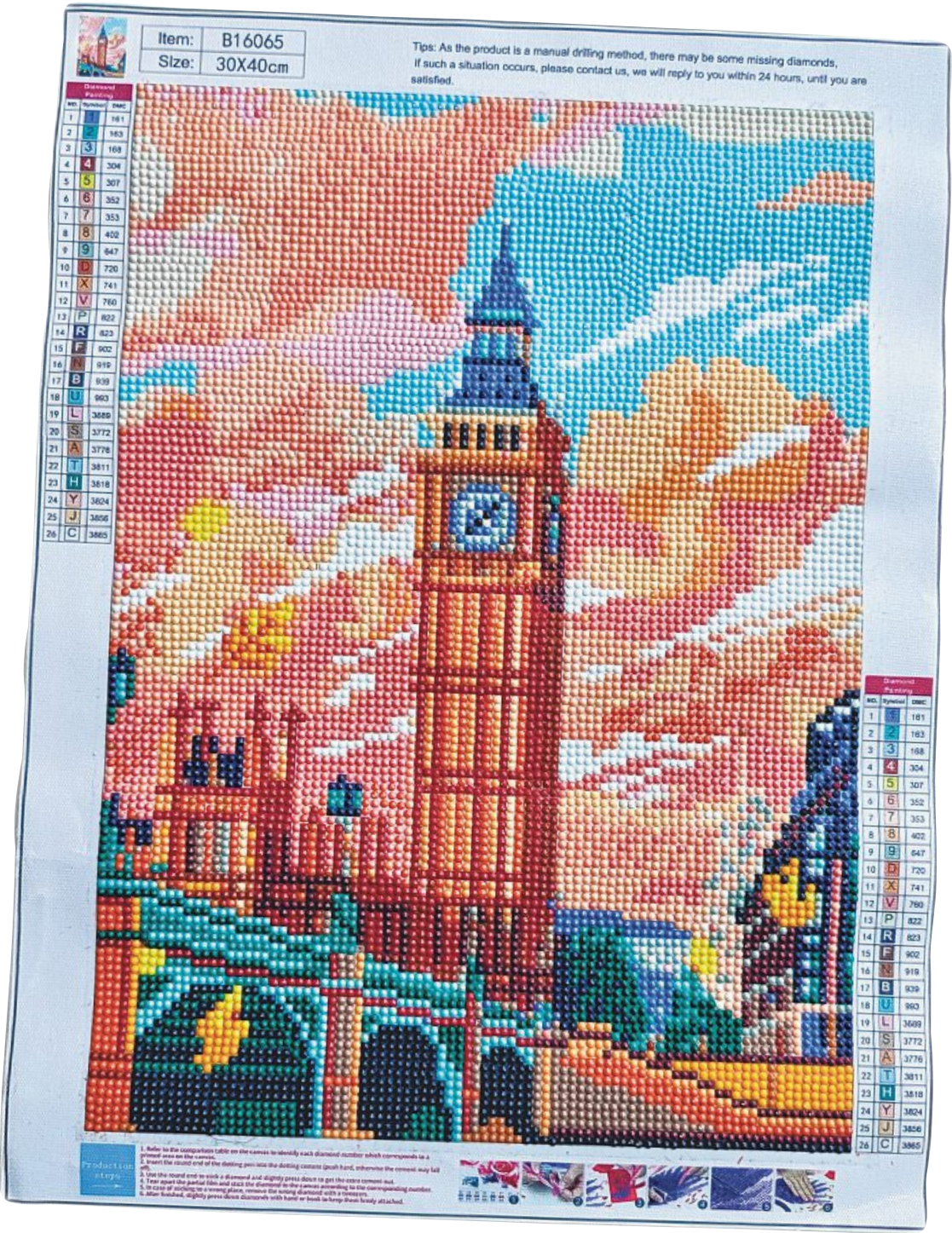
One by one, I pick them up with a narrow pen-like tool, dip each piece into wax and press it into place. Slowly, colour by colour, the image begins to emerge – a flower, a butterfly, a starburst.

What began as a way to avoid doomscrolling before sleeping has

become my most reliable source of calm in an unusually intense and fast-changing year.

Headlines of war, climate emergencies and relentless technological change have defined the backdrop – even in my own world of marketing and consumer psychology where artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming how we think, create, learn and teach.

The possibilities are equal parts exhilarating and humbling, yet



also unrelenting. Diamond art, by contrast, is deliberate, slow and reassuringly analogue.

Part paint-by-numbers, part mosaic, part meditative puzzle – diamond art has become a nightly ritual I look forward to. No diamonds are involved, though, in this relaxing craft hobby that, on the face of it, simply involves applying rhinestones to a pre-printed image on canvas.

This simplicity is the point.

Unlike conventional art, diamond painting carries no pressure to be original or perfect. I do not need to be “talented” or chase inspiration. I simply follow the pattern, bead by bead, until the image reveals itself.

There is something liberating about creating without pressure, about making something with my hands that is tangible and real in a world where so much of my time is spent producing digital

A partially filled-in Big Ben (left) and completed (above) in all its beaded colourful glory. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SHILPA MADAN

documents, slides and spreadsheets that vanish into folders.

And in an era of instant gratification, there is unexpected delight in the slowness of it all: watching a picture come alive, not in seconds, but over days and weeks, bead by bead. There's harmony built into the process: each bead snaps into a tiny space on a grid, row meeting row, until the surface looks orderly and calm.

This tactile, screen-free hobby stands in stark contrast with my professional world. In my day job, I spend hours thinking, discussing and writing about how digital technologies are reshaping the way we live and learn. Algorithms increasingly predict our choices; AI now drafts the e-mails and presentations we once wrote ourselves.

But here, at my table, no algorithm can speed up the process. No machine can replace the slow, human satisfaction of placing a bead with my own hands. In its slowness, it reminds me of something deeply human: that joy is not found in efficiency or scale, but in touch, patience and presence.

As a consumer psychologist, I can't help but connect this experience to what research tells us about the concept of joy.

Studies show that joy intensifies when it is shared, whether in grand celebrations or small, everyday rituals. Diamond art has given me an unexpected way to bond with my son. We sit together in companionable silence, sometimes chatting, sometimes laughing, sometimes simply absorbed in the sparkle of our tiny stones.

This simplicity is the point. Unlike conventional art, diamond painting carries no pressure to be original or perfect. I do not need to be “talented” or chase inspiration. I simply follow the pattern, bead by bead, until the image reveals itself. There is something liberating about creating without pressure, about making something with my hands that is tangible and real in a world where so much of my time is spent producing digital documents, slides and spreadsheets that vanish into folders.



It is not about the final picture, but about the time spent side by side, stringing together moments of closeness. My son often sits beside me on the weekends, teasing me when a bead goes crooked, laughing when his own slips out of line, before proudly filling in a patch of colour.

Another aspect of my pleasure in this hobby is that it is creation without pressure. Creativity brings joy, but it is often tied up with perfectionism and comparison.

Diamond art removes that weight. It requires no special skill, no originality, only participation. Instead, it offers the pure pleasure of making something, of watching your own hands transform scattered beads into an image. Psychologists call this “flow”, that immersive state where time slips away and effort becomes effortless.

And in a year dominated by turbulence and uncertainty – geopolitical, economic and personal – this small nightly act has become my way of reclaiming calm and agency.

Part of the delight is sheer abundance: trays heaped with hundreds of tiny beads waiting to find their place, a confetti-like pleasure that deepens as each section fills in. Every bead placed is progress I can see. The picture builds predictably and reliably under my control.

Research shows that even brief moments of agency can buffer us against stress and uncertainty – and perhaps that is why, in a world that feels increasingly complex, the rhythm of bead by bead feels so restorative.

More importantly, each bead may be small, almost insignificant. But together, the beads create something dazzling.

I have come to realise that joy works in a similar way. It is not found only in sweeping escapes or rare occasions, but in the slow accumulation of small, everyday acts. A cup of coffee savoured in silence. A laugh shared with a child. A picture blooming bead by bead.

In a year when headlines often felt heavy, this humble craft has given me a nightly reminder that joy is not something we stumble upon, but something we piece together – patiently, quietly, one bead at a time. It echoes writer Jonathan Clements' reminder that a good life is crafted by participating, not merely observing.

• Shilpa Madan is assistant professor of marketing at Singapore Management University.

• Finding Joy is a new Opinion series about the things that bring us satisfaction, fulfilment and meaning. If you have a submission, e-mail us at stopinion@sph.com.sg