



Master of ILLUSION

INVENTOR OF 3D STREET ART KURT WENNER TAKES A ROAD LESS TRAVELED IN BRINGING ARTISTIC EXPLORATION TO THE PEOPLE, INCLUDING CREATING A STIR AMONG JAKARTA'S NOW.

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PHOTOS RICKY YUDHISTIRA

Kurt Wenner is famed for rendering optical illusions of mythical creatures, literary characters and even Spiderman emerging from chasms in the pavement using homemade pastels.

A yawning abyss in the floor reveals the Bosphorus Bridge, bird's-eye-view, seagulls wheeling a few feet above it. Another chalk drawing, *The Money Pit*, depicts a giant circular safe slightly ajar from which bank notes spew onto the ground, a piece commissioned by an insurance company to advertise the dangers of online credit card fraud.

Street pedestrians not only stop to gawk but assimilate themselves into the artwork, sitting, standing and lying on it, snapping photographs, all the while marveling at its believability.

Brands love the engagement: a laundry list of multinationals from Lexus to Dunkin' Donuts counts themselves among the American's satisfied clients.

On the streets, gone are the preconceptions of art as non-utilitarian, elitist and look-but-don't-touch.

"The artist needs to be inserted into society, have a

productive partnership and be able to change society," he said at "Artphoria 2013", an exhibition running until Jan. 26 at Lotte Shopping Avenue, where Wenner is exhibiting 11 of his artworks.

"So pavement art is actually [where] you can combine your vision with where you are. And the price you pay is that you don't express yourself; you express your relationship with reality, which you have in common with other people."

In other words, the artist defers to the viewer.

Spectators easily forget that Wenner's art is inspired by the classical Renaissance murals of Rome's churches and museums; he believes the only way to pique modern audiences' interest is to make classicism larger-than-life using anamorphic perspective, technical-speak for geometric 3D rendering. The arches, concrete balustrades and Corinthian pillars of Italian architecture feature prevalently, while Wenner's stylized storytelling speaks to Mannerism.

Hitting the Streets

Street painting was dwindling when Wenner hightailed to Rome in 1981, resigning from his job at NASA as an advanced scientific illustrator.

"Original street painting was just copies of masterpieces, so the artists weren't considered capable of doing original work."

But he envisioned transforming it into a "virtuoso performance".



"So I sat down in the Corso Italia and just created consistently more complicated pictures. So I could paint infinitely longer in that one corner," he explains, adding that street artists had to roam constantly to keep onlookers interested and because of the cat-and-mouse relationship with law enforcement.

Grazie di Curtatone in Mantua, where Wener shared living quarters with other street painters, already held a yearly festival, but the turn-out was modest. Wener expanded the art by taking it home.

"I went to California and I taught probably 100,000 schoolchildren and 1,000 artists or so and we created festivals in California from scratch – a little bit based on the look and feel of the Grazie festival, but more impressive."

US artists began to visit Italy in hopes of earning the hard-won title of "Master" in the festival – which Wener was conferred after three first-prize wins.

His response when asked of any plans to paint on the streets of Jakarta: "You have to fix [the pavements] first."

The 3D pavement artist's recent visit may seem a trifle baffling, given the city's scant sidewalks, but Wener believes that familiarizing the public with 3D art paves the way to the artist-viewer-society engagement he dreams of manifesting.

"What if a young artist was able to do a beautiful job of that?" Wener says, pointing at a sign in front of the shop across from the restaurant where we're talking.

"What if those graphics were replaced by a beautiful

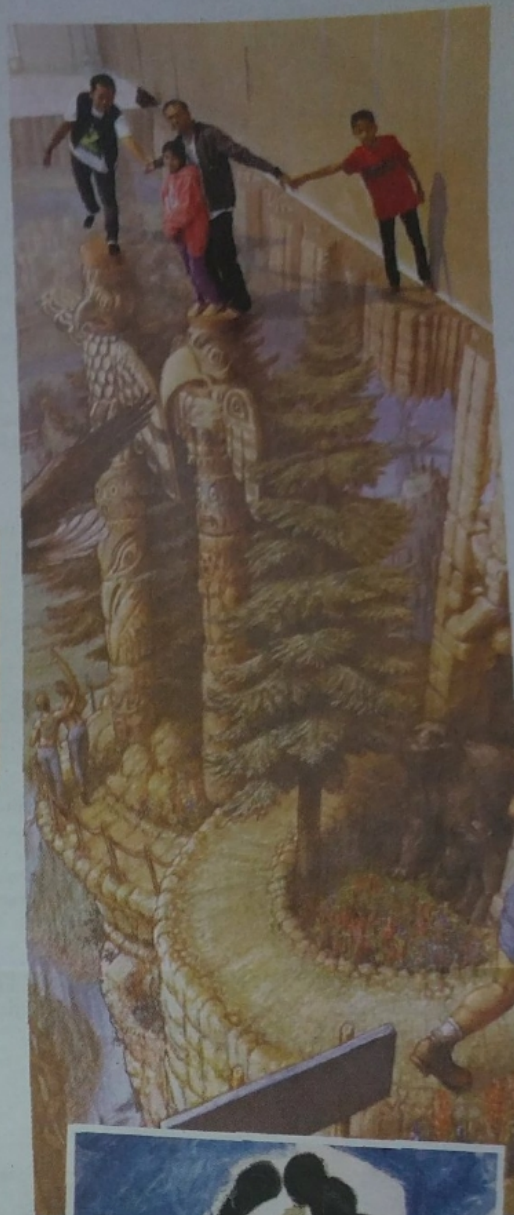
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mural? What if all the graphics in this mall were works of art that served as graphics? We'd have a completely different society."

Its organic lure makes pavement art an effective social soundboard: Wener's largest oeuvre, a mural for Greenpeace appended with one million signatures to petition against GMOs, presented to EU representatives in 2010.

This is the kind art Wener most identifies with: his proudest pieces are a trilogy he refers to as the "modern hells": *Gluttony*, *Ghetto* and *Office Stress*.

"So it's the outward projection of the imagination rather than the passive reception of the information," Wener says of his concept.



Masterpieces in the House

RENOWNED AUCTIONEER SOTHEBY'S HONG KONG GALLERY IS KICK-STARTING THE YEAR WITH TWO MAJOR EXHIBITIONS.

ART CONNOISSEURS are in for a treat over the next two weeks as rare European masterpieces make their way to Hong Kong from Jan. 6-16.

The two selling exhibitions, namely "Modern Masters: From Rembrandt to Picasso – Representation of the Figure in Western Art" and "Age of Elegance: European Paintings, Furniture and Works of Art from the 19th Century", follow on the success of previous showings on the themes.

While the 2010 and 2012 editions of Modern Masters focused on Impressionist and Modern art from the 1890s to the 1960s, the 2014 Modern Masters will showcase 18 works from a broader art historical context. Depictions of the figure are a central theme to the 18 pieces, representing one of the most significant genre in Western art.

Among the standouts is a rare Rembrandt piece titled

Portrait of a Man with Arms Akimbo. It features soft brushstrokes and more atmospheric, painterly qualities which were revolutionary at the time. It is believed to be one of only three known works signed and dated 1658 by the Dutch artist.

Pablo Picasso's *Le Peintre*, a Rembrandt-inspired painting (picture at right), depicts a musketeer and is dated 1967. Another highlight is an expressive bronze sculpture by Auguste Rodin, dated 1908.

Meanwhile, *Age of Elegance* will feature paintings, furniture and works of art representative of the pinnacle of the era's European achievements. A selection of the 45 pieces from this collection was previously exhibited at Sotheby's Beijing Art Week.

Featured in the latest edition of *Age of Elegance* are paintings by Adrien Moreau and Federico Del Campo, a

sculpture titled *Nymph at the Fountain* from circa 1850 by Giuseppe Croff and an early 20th century gilt and patinated bronze mounted Burr Amboyna center table from Zwiener Jansen Successor.

Highlights from the London February Evening Sale of Modern and Impressionist Art, which include works by Vincent Van Gogh, Marc Chagall and Léonard Foujita, will also be on display from Jan. 6-9.

The gallery is located at One Pacific Place, 88 Queensway.