



In Typical Fashion

Text / Duncan Forgan
Images / Michael Paul

Over the past three decades, Bill Bensley has carved sumptuous tented camps out of Cambodian jungle, applied colourful backstories to resorts around Asia and worked on private projects for luminaries ranging from Mick Jagger to a sultan. It's little surprise then that Baan Botanica — the prolific architect and designer's fantastical home in Bangkok — is alive with his trademark panache.

In the master bedroom, Bensley and his partner Jirachai Rengthong, a horticulturist, hotelier and business heir, sleep beneath a white crown guarded by two lions (formerly a five-metre-high archway inside the Dutch embassy in Yangon). In one of the guest rooms, meanwhile, pride of place goes to a suit of Samurai armour — a tribute to the designer's father. Elsewhere, rooms, hallways and public spaces are generously embellished with objets d'art, paintings and antiques, all testament to Bensley's voracious collecting habit.

Anyone familiar with the designer's work at stunning resorts and hotels like The Siam Hotel in Bangkok and The St. Regis Bali Resort will recognise in Baan Botanica his flair for carrying off the astonishing. But, while his paid work is always rewarding (he won't take a project on unless it promises to be fun), he says that the constant evolution of his home is more like a labour of love.

Bensley purchased Baan Botanica, which is tucked away in a leafy enclave down one of

the tendril-like side streets of busy Sukhumvit Road, from an American named Billy Bones. 'At first, I was more intrigued by the name of the owner than the house itself,' he recalls.

He has well and truly bonded with the space in the ensuing years. Indeed, since taking ownership, the designer has used it as a place of retreat to relax amid a whirlwind schedule that often has him and his studio working on between 40 and 50 projects at any one time. He also treats it as something of a laboratory for his restless creative instincts. 'Madness has always been a driving factor both at work and at home,' he chuckles as he outlines the various tweaks he's applied to the place over the years.

Though Bensley claims that he overhauls the property every time he returns from a trip, there are several constants: he's a keen painter, and his love of art is evident in a collection that includes work by Swedish painter and sculptor Richard Winkler, Australian architect and artist Robert Powell and Indonesian contemporary artist Nyoman Masriadi.

The designer's passion for art also informs his nomination of the veranda as his favourite part of Baan Botanica. Here, he can set up his easel overlooking the bright gardens, swimming pool and gazebo with its copper clawfoot tub. 'The veranda is the sweet spot,' he says. 'From there I can see every coming and going. But I love everything about the house. It's my sounding board, my refuge, my touchstone.'

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Beyond the facade of famed architect and designer Bill Bensley's Bangkok home — fondly known as Baan Botanica — lies a veritable treasure trove

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Bensley shares Baan Botanica with Jirachai Rengthong, his husband of three decades, and their five Jack Russell terriers





A large-scale painting by British artist James Mortimer takes centre stage in one of the sitting rooms, where pops of bold red and cerise come in the form of a painting by Bensley himself on the left wall, a pair of wooden horses bought from an antique warehouse in Kochi's Jewish quarter, and cushions on locally made wicker furniture. The 1970s Italian Brutalist three-piece coffee table was a surprising find during a trip to the Cotswolds



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In the foyer between the two sitting rooms, an early 20th-century Anglo-Indian table and striking flower arrangement reflect the home's larger-than-life personality, while the French Art Deco ceiling lamp contrasts with the pair of Burmese angel sculptures — a birthday present for Rengthong — standing guard outside one of the living areas

Facing page
Bensley's father lived in the ground-floor apartment for 17 years, and Bensley still refers to this as 'Dad's room'. The Samurai armour is a tribute to his late father's formidable character





The garden kitchen is flooded with natural light from all sides, with an imposing 1950s Thai teak cabinet taking pride of place



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The separate ground-floor apartment is well-appointed, with its own pantry and outdoor bathroom

Facing page
The sunny master bedroom sports a Burmese carved teak arch from the Dutch embassy in Yangon. A pair of 19th-century Burmese tigers flank two plaster busts of a French bulldog and giraffe — meant to represent Rengthong and Bensley — atop a 1920s Louis Vuitton steamer trunk



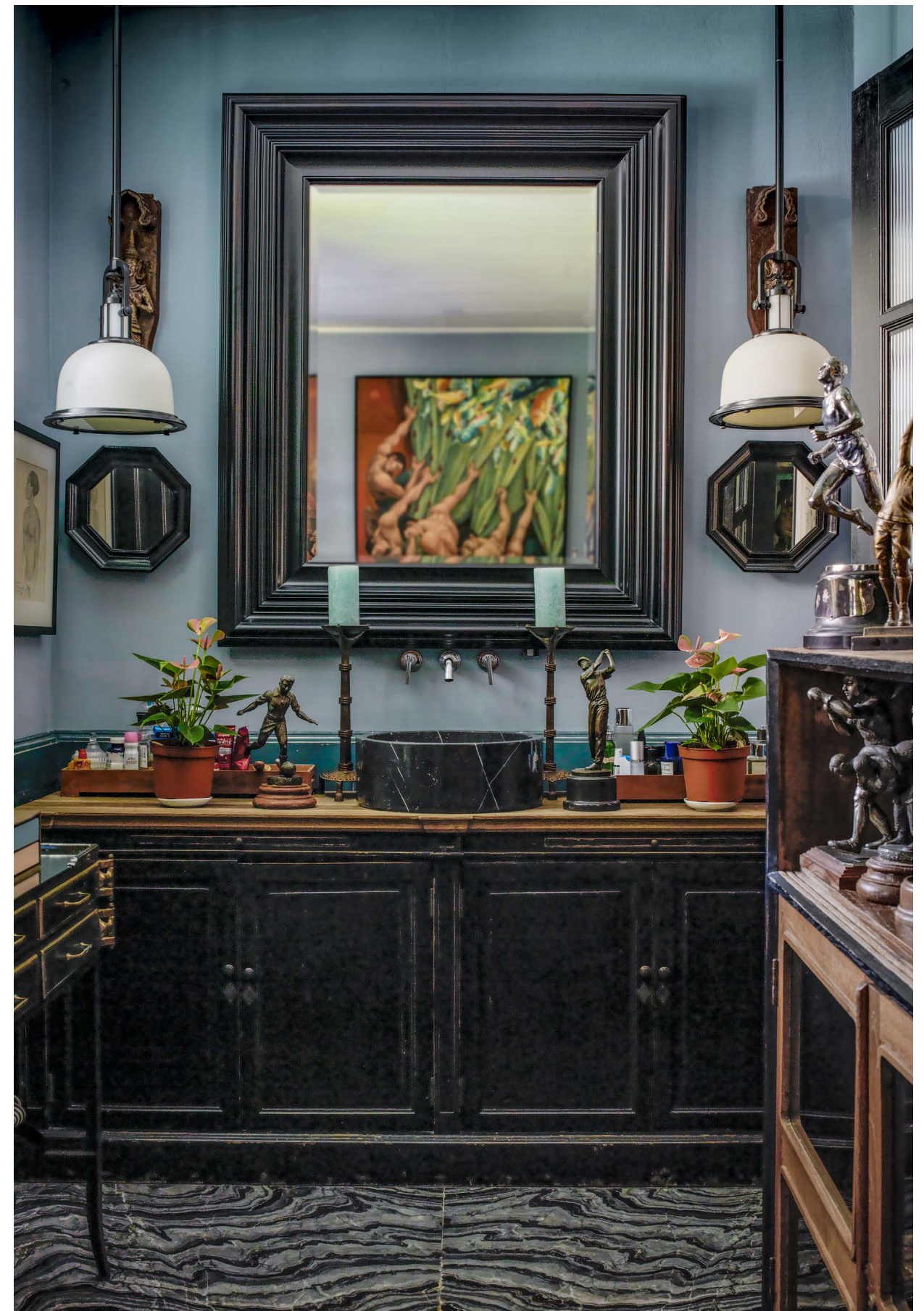


The guest room is dubbed the Bonnet Suite after Rudolf Bonnet, the Dutch artist who spent much of his life in Bali and is known for his influence on the island's art. The black cabinet is a contemporary Burmese piece, while the bed is a repurposed billiards table. A 1960s Italian chandelier hangs over a stack of refurbished silver suitcases from France



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Another dramatic painting by Mortimer hangs above a 19-century Danish chest of drawers in the foyer of the master bedroom

Facing page
The master bedroom en suite is peppered with athletic trophies from Burma. Reflected in the mirror is a painting by Filipino artist Bernard Vista





In one of the garden's numerous follies, a copper bathtub filled with purple moon orchids is surrounded by 200-year-old Indian columns



The wraparound veranda is filled with picturesque vignettes such as this one, though in typical Bensely fashion the scenes are rearranged and updated weekly