WORLD EXCLUSIVE

AROUND THE WORLD WITH BILL BENSLEY

An illustrious name in the world of design, this architect and interiors expert forayed into the world of art with his trademark whimsy and vibrance. Ahead of his much-awaited exhibit in Bangkok, HELLO! gets the exclusive scoop on the artist's travel companions who inspired the showcase, his soft corner for animals and the philanthropic endeavours needed from the art industry

What crosses one's mind when they think of Bill Bensley? Besides his infectious smile, one could say his use of a plethora of colours, myriad patterns and a sense of whimsy that's entirely him. This world-renowned architect, interior designer, landscaper and hotelier is firm in the belief that there's art in all aspects of life. It's no wonder that he forayed into the artscape with his signature art-meets-humour style.

A passionate traveller through and through, Bensley's latest exhibition invites viewers to traverse the world with him and the 'Faroese Knitting Club' (FKC) — a convivial gang of excitable folk from the remote Faroe Islands that enchanted Bensley for decades. Aptly titled *'The Faroese Knitting Club Chronicles'*, the showcase of 36 vibrant pieces not only depicts the artist's worldwide adventures with the FKC, but also his ardent love for animals and the centre of his creative world, his Bangkok home, Baan Botanica.

As always with Bensley's work, be it artistic or in hospitality, this series has a meaningful purpose behind it: all the proceeds from their sale will be funnelled towards the varied outreach projects of the Shinta Mani Foundation in Cambodia, part of the charitable efforts of Bensley's Shinta Mani properties. Each artwork is associated with a specific project. For instance, nine of the paintings will fund full-board scholarships for 27 students; some will carry forward the foundation's work to provide safe water to local communities and also fund a series of micro-loans; others will support a variety of causes for families in abject poverty, such as procuring bicycles for schoolchildren, maintenance of schools and the construction of a new institute.

HELLO! brings you the first exclusive look at Bensley's latest exhibition, ready to be showcased for three months at MOCA, Four Seasons Bangkok, starting this April.

How did you first foray into art from interiors and architecture? Tell us about this transition.
I started my design life in landscape architecture, then architecture and interior design. I was a hotelier next, and now, am an artist — hopefully! You know, in the field of hotel design, these boxes for professionals should not exist. An understanding of design globally is the way to do better work. So to answer your question, 'art' is just another chapter of design.

Why is your show titled *'The Faroese Knitting Club Chronicles'*? What does it signify, and what can viewers expect from the exhibition?
I have been visiting the Faroe Islands for two decades

All the extensive trips to the Faroe Islands laid the basis for this exhibit by Bill Bensley (opposite page). Here we have two of his works, titled *'Faroe Island'* (above) and *'Faroe+Jane Fonda'* (below)

A number of Bensley's works for this showcase were painted at Baan Botanica, the artist's tropical paradise of a home in the heart of Bangkok

and have built some wonderful relationships there with some very unique friends. Quirky and wigged out is just the beginning. I've travelled with this small clique to a dozen countries or more, and each time, I'm blessed with the most peculiar stories to tell. Last year, Paster Bender Christensen of the Faroese Knitting Club (FKC) suggested that I paint the FKC Chronicles, which is exactly what I've done!

Like your work in interiors, all your artworks also feature your trademark bold colours and flavour of humour. Was it a conscious choice to play around the same theme? I enjoy art that makes me smile. And yes, colour is a big part of art. I think there's no bad colour. I love all colours. But in my art, I carefully select a limited colour palette as I think that restraint produces better work.

Some of the paintings are strongly reminiscent of the setup at your Bangkok home, Baan Botanica. Was that a coincidence? Good eye! Some of the works were directly painted at Baan Botanica!

Your latest exhibit embodies the concept of 'art meets philanthropy'. Do you think the influential art space around the world does enough for charity, or is there scope for improvement? No (there isn't enough being done)! Last month, I remember speaking with one of the organisers of Art SG, the art fair in Singapore. He told me how not one of the hundreds of galleries represented had any purpose other than making money for their space or artists.

"I'm a student of art. Every month, I select an artist as my muse, and without copying their work directly, I paint something with this artist's mindset and style. This process has been helping me craft my own style"

But each one of my paintings has a specific purpose. For example, the money raised for one painting might send four young Cambodians to school for a year, or buy 300 bicycles for schoolchildren. We have a foundation in Cambodia, the Shinta Mani Foundation, which has been carrying out this charitable work for nearly two decades. We have changed thousands of lives for the better.

You're known to dote on your Jack Russell Terriers. And every painting in this series appears to feature an animal. Foxes, French bulldogs, birds, fish, a gorilla, cat and zebra… Do they denote anything in particular? Absolutely. The fox appears in several paintings as an elusive spirit, which is central to the story at hand. The exhibit reads like a sitcom, where each painting is like an episode in a Netflix series. When I travelled with the FKC to Congo, our main goal was to see gorillas. When we travelled to Cape Town, we stayed in a hotel where a zebra head was sticking out of the wall, which solicited some great storytelling from the Faroese. The Faroese are a leader in the production of salmon and have fished for over 1,800 years. My friend Susanna raises bulldogs in the Faroe Islands and has one that has just one blue eye. Gorgeous! I have five Jack Russells at home, who are with us constantly. We've also demonstrated a herculean effort to conserve a huge portion of the Cardamon National Rainforest in Cambodia by way of Shinta Mani Wild, providing tens of thousands of animals with a safer environment, including gibbons and wild elephants. Long answer to a short question: I love animals!

'There's art in everything we see around us.' Your thoughts on this, please. Absolutely. It is all about how you *see* things.

What influences your artwork? Any particular creative process that you follow? I'm a student of art. Every month, I select an artist as my muse, and without copying their work directly, I paint something with this artist's mindset and style. This has been helping me craft my own style. I always start a painting in the field, sketching with pencil and then adding water colour on a small format that I can work with on a plane, for example. Then I use that 'cartoon' or initial sketch as the base for a much larger oil painting. It gets interesting after that, as the larger format allows me to add a plethora of details that wouldn't have been possible to paint in a smaller format.

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You've always been a voracious traveller. How much do your trips influence your work in design and art? Travel is everything for me. This year, we will visit as many as nine new countries — Georgia, Albania, Montenegro, Greenland and the Five Stans of Asia. I plan on painting my butt off!

What else do you have lined up for 2023, both in the art and interiors space? My calendar is full. I'm opening *'The Faroese Knitting Club Chronicles'* on April 21. It will be held at the MOCA art space at Four Seasons Bangkok. All your readers are welcome to join! It will be a fabulous party.

Clockwise from top: *'Helunar'*, *'Johan & Susanna Haraldsen'*, *'Gunung Kawi'* and *'Mexico'* are all part of Bensley's exhibition, *'The Faroese Knitting Club Chronicles'*, which opens in Bangkok on April 21

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