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AWARD-WINNING MIXED-MEDIA ARTIST Ketna Patel has just spent the last eight hours singing along to 80's pop songs while hand-mixing resin, which will coat the last of the Asia Pop collaged canvases ready for her latest solo exhibition. Tomorrow the canvases will be taken from her studio (the heart of the double fronted, two-storey 4,000 sq. ft. terraced home-cum-gallery that she shares with her husband, artist, musician and entrepreneur John Reading) to Lau Pa Sat, a former Victorian wet market and now one of the busiest food courts in downtown Singapore.

"My first impressions of Singapore were awful," she says, recalling the long road that has led her from an architect's firm in London to life as a professional artist in the Far East.

"I spent my first week lying ill in bed, in a \$5400-a-month rented room in suburbia, staring out of the window at endless grey point blocks - the equivalent of a British council estate. I was 26 and it felt like I had made the worst mistake of my life."

Born in Uganda, Ketna lived in Nairobi until she was fourteen, when, due to the political unrest, her parents sent her to live in England with her grandparents, to finish her schooling. She wanted to become an artist, but completed degrees in interior design and architecture in order to have a trade. After graduation in 1993, she was invited to work in Singapore by London-based architects

Painting her future

Ketna Patel was stifling in a safe job in London, until the urge to escape took her to Singapore. Now she's built a life as an artist. By **Carolyn Locher** Pictures **Lisa Young**

Michael Wilford and Partners who were building a new 'arts' complex, the Esplanade Theatres on Singapore Bay.

She says, "While I was happy being part of a large Indian family in London, I felt I was playing roles for other people. I wanted to start afresh in a place where nobody knew me." Her employers organized her two-year employment pass. She packed a

Ketna works in mixed media to create her art, inspired by the photos she takes of people around Singapore



bag, booked a flight and landed in Singapore with no expectations other than that it would be humid.

After her initial illness, Ketna began exploring Singapore's Colonial architecture, the pristine parks full of exotic trees and manicured jungle shrubs, the riverfront and the vibrant street markets.

"I moved downtown to be closer to my work and lived among families of Malaysians, Indians, Chinese and Europeans. These neighbours became friends and for a while I felt completely free."

"The work ethic in Singapore is paramount. I spent two years working from 9am to 10pm proving my worth to my superiors. In my third year, I was working seven days a week. My creativity had been straight-jacketed into administration and I was playing roles all over again." Ketna resigned in

"I lived among families of Chinese, Malaysians, Indians, and Europeans - I felt completely free"

1997. With no work or permanent residency permit, she had four weeks to leave the country and planned to move to Bali to paint. As fate would have it, she received her permanent residency permit the week before she was due to leave.

"Singapore has no natural resources. The Ministry of Manpower realise that innovation is very important for the next wave of commerce, and, as policies change, they invite specialists to live and work here to develop the industries of the future. I was granted a permit because they were inviting creative individuals to settle in Singapore."

Ketna moved to Holland Village, a locale of Singapore that international travellers have always flocked to. "This area was a revelation to me, there was such a sense of community. I was suddenly ➤



Top: the daytime view from the Grand Copthorne Waterfront hotel. Above: a Chinese opera street performer in Little India



"I feel safe here. It allows me the freedom to be creative - something I never felt in London"



surrounded by writers, actors and musicians, who sat on their porches strumming guitars."

Work started to come in steadily for Ketna, and she met John soon after. They were married in Kenya, having each taken a two-year sabbatical to see the world and collect inspiration for their work.

"Living in Singapore is inexpensive compared to the UK. Aside from running a car, the biggest expenditure is housing," says John. Happily, two friends moved out of adjacent houses just as Ketna and John arrived back in Singapore from their travels. Wanting a workspace at home, they rented both houses at a cost of S\$4,500.00 a month and knocked them together. Their three bedrooms, living area, studios and additional workrooms meet in the middle in a 2,000 sq.ft. covered gallery space, in what used to be the garden that divided both houses.

John employed an accountant to register their business partnership with the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority and turned their home-cum-gallery into a viable income-generating concern. The Michi Gallery was launched in March 2005 in a blaze of fire-eaters and flamenco. As well as selling paintings, they rent space to corporate clients like Intel, who hired the entire house for a four-day press launch. Three creative companies permanently rent workrooms. The gallery hosts regular exhibitions and they screen films, hold Balinese Gamelan orchestra rehearsals and host monthly flamenco performances.

Now 39, with four exhibitions in 2007 alone, Ketna says, "Living in Singapore is easy. You can eat in the food markets for a dollar. Public transport, taxis and consumables are cheap, as is the relative cost of employing a housekeeper."

"Everything we need is ten minutes away and



Orchids growing beside a stone Buddha at the Botanical Gardens, Singapore, above



it is easy to be spontaneous. We can take the train to Malaysia or fly from Changi airport to Bali for the weekend. If I need inspiration, I can go to Mustafa's supermarket at 3am and watch tourists stock up on clothes, cameras or spices. If I am homesick, I can go to our local food market and stock up on international wines and cheeses. The city is clean and organized. I can go out and photograph life in all its diversity in Little India or Chinatown for my work, and no one will bother me. I feel safe here. It allows me the freedom to be creative - something I never felt in London."

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