

No buts about it...Aser's Macau's ceramic expert

By Kimberly Johans

The year 2009 will be a special one for local ceramic designer Aser But.

Not because he will have turned 60, an admirable achievement for most.

It's the year he plans to retire from full time work and focus solely on his art.

"So I won't take up any full time jobs and I will travel more, enjoy the rest of my life and the planning of my exhibitions," he says.

He refers to his work as "useable art" because its function isn't simply to look attractive.

His "spaceships" are often used to hold incense or candles, while you could no doubt use his female butts as paperweights.

The past 30-odd years have been a revelation for the artist; his life has led him on a number of memorable journeys, from his brush with royalty to his eventual stamp on Hong Kong's artistic landscape.

Having met Queen Elizabeth in 1986 during her visit to Hong Kong, Aser recalls, "I was chosen to be one of the staff to entertain the Queen. Explaining to her what the students were doing, what art is about.

"She smiled throughout the whole trip. She's normally so solemn, so elegant, so graceful, she doesn't smile. Except the time when she met the students," he says.

Born in Macau, Aser's family took him to Hong Kong at the age of three. He remembers those times as being very free. Particularly where journeys between Hong Kong and Macau were concerned.

"At that time, people would come and go without a very distinctive border. So people just took a ferry and were allowed to go to Hong Kong.

"That happened a lot so Macau was losing the young people. So the British, Portuguese and Chinese found this a problem and decided we couldn't go unless we applied for permission," he says.

Educated in Hong Kong as a teacher, he eventually specialised in art.

He started drawing in 1973, immediately after his teacher's training, which meant he learnt as a 20-year-old adult, rather than a child, as there wasn't any art training during his high school years.

There was no hesitation on Aser's part when it came to his vocation.

"The main reason is, I couldn't do anything else.

"That is the absolute reason that people can be an artist; they cannot do anything else. Which means that I am not bored. I can spend hours and hours on my drawings or painting. That really gratifies me.

"I could not speak well, act well or play music well," he says.

His first representations of art were the banyan trees.



"Banyan tree represents the tree of the south. The north is Pine.

"The tree represents the cross of Jesus Christ. It's also the symbol of a gentleman. So I decided to paint lots of trees in my past 30 years and that's put me in the history of art in Hong Kong," he says.

Adding to his popularity in that city, Aser, along with some of his colleagues, created an art group in 1973, called the Hong Kong Visual Arts Society.

"That art group became the symbol of the art group of the decade, the 1970s.

"When people mention the 70s, they must mention that art group," he says.

To Aser, becoming an artist is his greatest achievement.

"That's all. From an ordinary person to a true artist. That is the biggest achievement, although I have a lot of prizes," he says.

Included in those prizes are those won as a result of his involvement with Macau Post to create several sets of stamps.

His stamps, with the central theme of ceramics, are considered the Post's most famous, having won international awards from France and Italy.

"Simply because this is the treasure of Macau. Because 400 years ago, Macau was the place for exporting ceramics to the west. In the west they call ceramics China. Ceramic skills were brought to the west by Portu-

guese, by French, by Italian through Macau. Not just tea, silk, spices," he says.

"I spent a lot of time researching. I didn't want to produce any other design; a variation of my first ideas.

"Every time it's tough for me. I went to libraries, I studied history books. I love to read things by other artists first.

"I compare, I analyse and when I know a style that nobody has done, I try to do it," he says.

A for his awards as a means of recognition of his hard work, Aser says, "When you get prizes you know why. When you don't get prizes you don't know why."

His current passion is his ongoing project, an interesting account of the cities he's seen on his travels.

"I sketch in China, in Tasmania, in New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan. The next place probably will be Korea. I hope I will go to Sydney one more time, to do more.

"I don't sketch in my sketchbook, I sketch on letterheads.

"Once I arrive at a hotel, I take the letterhead from the hotel and I just sketch on the streets.

"It's a record of my work and my itinerary, moving around the world.

"Finally, it's to show the young people that art must be a part of your life in order to be an artist," he says.

He believes that art can never be achieved when an artists paints or works specifically for an exhibition.

"So if you receive an invitation for an exhibition and you start painting, then your painting concept must be influenced by the invitation.

"To be an artist you have to be yourself from the inside, from your feelings," he says.

This attitude has helped him greatly with recollecting memories for his artwork, what Macau used to be like.

"The outlook of Macau has changed from town to a city. Terrible. It's not truly a great event.

"Once it becomes a city you have more people, you have more modern people, more neon lights. It becomes an entertainment centre.

"Everything is entertainment, going to hotels, eating, gambling. All entertainment, nothing cultural," he says.

With culture, and specifically, Macau heritage culture, foremost on his mind, Aser agreed to join other artists in showcasing some of his work as part of Macau Appa Week's 'Historic Centre of Macau' World Heritage Products Fashion Show this weekend.

For him, the concept is simple; "If I did love my art, I wouldn't produce it."