



Skin Deep



It's all about enlightenment and true happiness with these three light installations.



Pussy Galore: the hedonistic side of Bangkok.

PHOTOS: PAWATI LAOPASARITAKSIN

# Midlife ART ATTACK

## ART INTERVIEW

■ PARISA PICHITMARN

Richard Skene didn't let a lack of training stop him from expressing his creative flair



Getting up to create a collection of art pieces despite a lack of any skill or training may sound like a symptom of a midlife crisis, but if it's going to give you something pretty to look at, why not?

This is exactly what late-blooming artist Richard Skene, 45 and a long-time resident of Bangkok, decided to do — not that he's giving up his main career in real estate.

"I had all these ideas, and I was compelled to make them," says the Scot. "If I made them, I wanted to exhibit them and if I wanted to exhibit them, I might as well sell them."

His current exhibition at Eat Me is called "The Road of Excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom". The collection of pop art influenced photography, graphic screen prints and light installations has a Thai flavour while focusing on the sleek face of symmetry and geometry.

The exhibition is a fun one to browse, with many different shapes and forms. On having no training at all, Skene says, "I'm not a traditional, skilled artist so I was free to explore any medium that represented my idea. In a way, that gave me the freedom so I looked at all the options and what medium best represented my concept."

Not having the ability to bend neon lights into the desired shapes with his own hands, Skene worked closely with local experts to make sure his work looked exactly as he envisioned.

The pieces are varied, from an X-ray photograph of a woman, bright lights that look like some sort of chemical symbol and a graphic of an American flag in gold. The main concept that laces all the different pieces together revolves around the fact Thailand is a hub

that holds polar opposites, where monks and temples flourish in the same city prostitutes and drug joints do. It is the ultimate destination for those wanting a hedonistic lifestyle, which is, ironically, not necessarily the true path to happiness you might think it is. Skene reached the same conclusion as William Blake's book *The Road Of Excess Leads To The Palace Of Wisdom*, which the exhibition is named after.

"It's mildly autobiographical. I first came to Thailand when I was a young guy of 25. I had a great time and of course all the attractions were there. But I've gotten older and I've changed and matured."

The three neon light installations on the ground floor bring a playful glow to and animate the darker corners of the restaurant/gallery and offer clues to the true grains of happiness that can be obtained. Whether it's Thailand's equivalent of LOL in the piece *The Best Medicine or The Magic Formula (for the Meaning of Life)*, which is the chemical symbol of a rather trippy compound, Skene believes they can lead to greater satisfaction and fulfilment.

"If you're in rock 'n' roll or are a film star, you've got fame and money and people will just do whatever you want so everything comes very easily," he says. "Lots of people get tempted and many in rock and roll die young because of their excessive lifestyles. I like to read biographies and these people eventually become alcoholics or develop problems related to drugs and sex. You know alcohol makes you happy but you'll soon realise that drinking more of it doesn't make you any happier. Hedonists come to change when they've reached rock bottom — where going any further would mean death. You

need an extreme event in your life to make you want to change for the better."

Nevertheless, happiness can be pursued from both ends of the spectrum and more traces of Buddhism, Skene's interest, can be seen in the screened graphics on the second floor, most very pop art and worthy of a spot in a hip studio. It's easy to guess that the rainbows seen in the foil in *The City Of Angels* is meant to reflect the chameleon-like quality of Bangkok — an ever-changing city with countless shades. Less obvious but much more intriguing is *Divine States Of Buddhism*, where the iconic American flag is revamped with colours associated with Buddhism and dharma wheels replace the stars. It is fascinating to note that both nations have opposing forces, capitalism and religion, yet share the same outlook — the pursuit of happiness is an unalienable right in the Declaration of Independence and also a key principle in Buddhism. The road to obtaining that is clearly different, nevertheless both intend on reaching the same destination.

From the direction that suggests spirituality and health is the way to go, it may seem that Americans' way of materialism and wealth is in fact, an empty dream. But as Skene says, "It's good that they're free to pursue happiness. You can't really knock the American way of life because they are after all the only superpower. They've got a lifestyle most people in the world aspire to and it's material happiness they have. But if you look at these people,

would you say they're happy? Maybe not, but at least they are doing what they want."

In the end, the all roads lead back to "being a good person" and "living a good life". "If you look at the richest people in the US, such as Warren Buffet and Bill Gates, they are giving 90% of their wealth away to good causes. They're living their dreams and are successful and wealthy, but what they do with their wealth is significant. After a while, people just don't need that much money."

Maslow would have been proud to see his ideas about the hierarchy of needs manifested in these fun and contemporary pieces that can really add quirkiness to any wall. "Karma is an obvious concept that I think makes sense and it's the same with Christianity — how Jesus would say 'Do unto others as you would want unto you'. It's a good philosophy and as you grow older with more experience, you realise it's all true. No one's ever gotten physical or emotional problems from meditating too much, all with common sense, of course. It's like saying you can't overdose in vegetables — you can't have too much of a good thing."

**The Road of Excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom**  
On display at Eat Me Restaurant, Soi Pipat 2, Convent Road until Friday. Open 3pm to 1am daily.