

QUINCY JONES SPOTS RISING GUITARIST SHUN NG

CASH OR CRASH IN BRICKS AND MORTAR?

MASTER CHEFS COOK UP A STORM

WHO SHOULD BE YOUR BOSS?

DIVING INTO DATA DELUGE

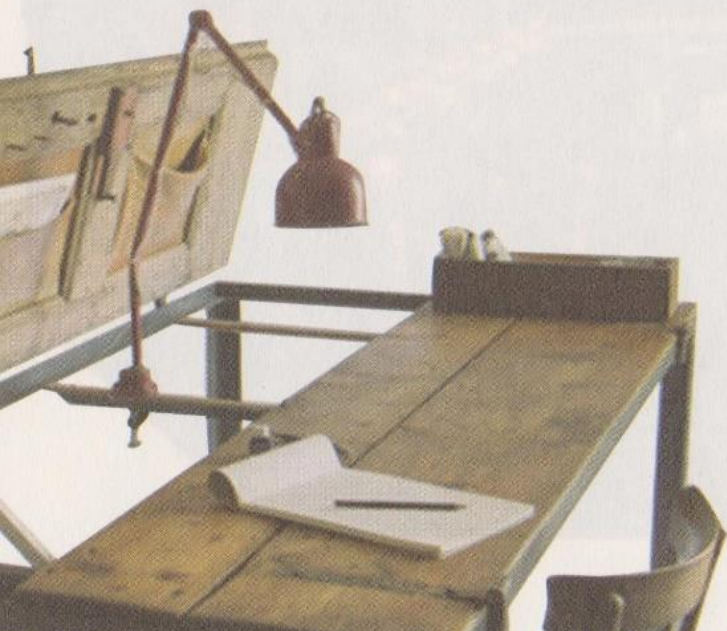


A LIFE OF HOBBIES

When you can successfully turn your hobbies into business ventures it blurs the line between work and play. For Dominic Khoo, the hobbies continue to pay.

By Kannan Chandran

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It took him two years of research before he decided on a graduation present, a \$150,000 Glashütte Original tourbillon. That led to a life of time as Dominic Khoo plumbed into watches as an investment, leading to The Watch Fund. His reputation as a watch expert has seen this 35-year-old recently don the mantle of Watch Specialist for auction house SPINK. Along the way, he wound up with a camera in his hand and started snapping images of celebrities like footballer Zinedine Zidane, singer Tom Jones, actor Tony Leung, actress Cate Blanchett and the Dalai Lama, among several others. As a celebrity photographer, his prints fetched six-figure sums. He's since "retired" from a life behind the lens. But that just gives him more time to indulge in the arts, where his gallery, 28th Février — opened with



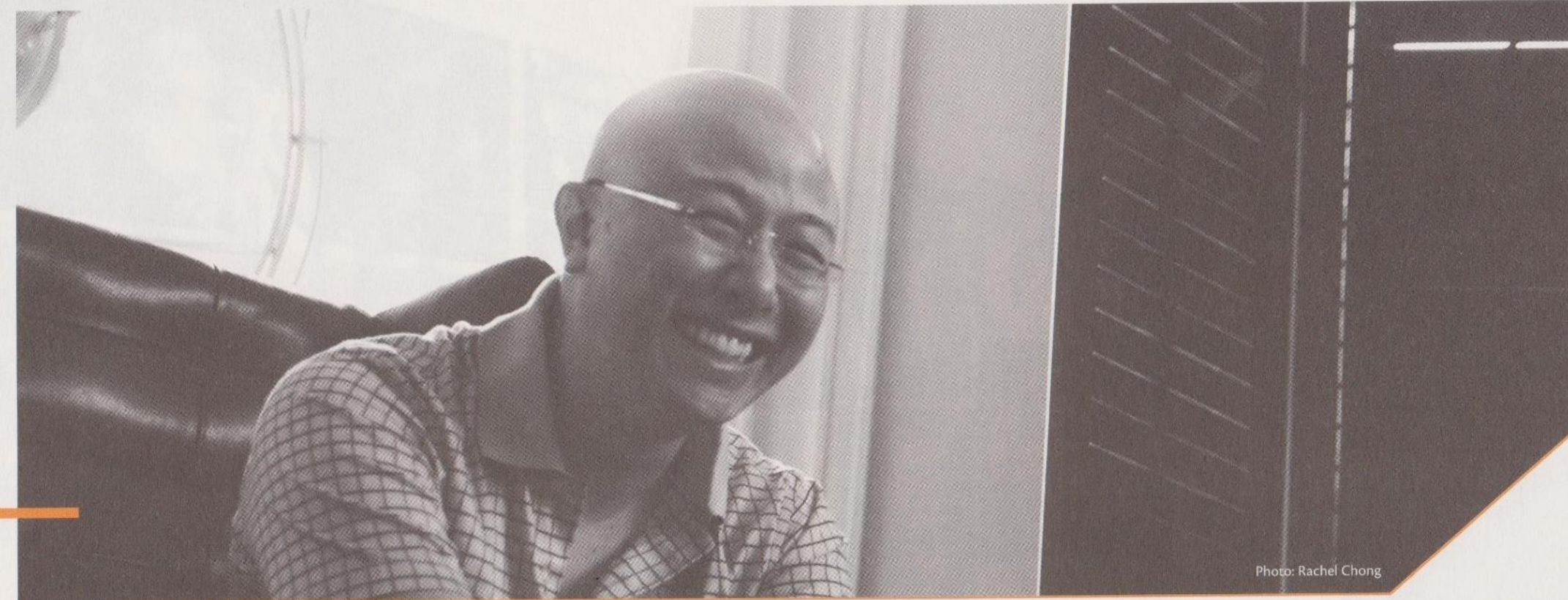


Photo: Rachel Chong



his partners, Welfred Woo and Simon Poon — presents art with attitude and feeling: From graffiti art to layered Chinese paintings; the works of sticker artist, Samantha Lo to Khoo's own prints along with pieces of sculpture.

For his various contributions to culture, Khoo was bestowed the National Heritage Board's Patron of Heritage award, its youngest recipient yet.

One of the first things you see as you take off your shoes and enter his gallery cum home located in a restored black-and-white on Kay Siang Road is *Bliss*. That's the image that millions would have seen as they powered up their PCs. The default Windows XP wallpaper was shot by former *National Geographic* photographer, Charles O'Rear, and

Khoo bought up all the fine art prints of it.

Behind the affable, easy-going demeanour, there clearly ticks a sharp mind that is quick to spot an angle and reel in the returns. But Khoo stands by a firm belief and commitment to deliver art that will help shape the nation's self-confidence.

He talks to **STORM** about why hobbies should drive you to your limits.

STORM: What is the art scene from your perspective as the artist and the gallery owner?

DOMINIC KHOO: The art scene? Herd mentality is way

too prevalent. Even in rebellion we see rebellion in a conformist way. Let's think more!

STORM : How do you select your pieces for the gallery? What criteria do you set for your gallery that sets it apart from the rest?

KHOO: I think an art gallery should be in the business of educating in the long run. If art is a language then the last thing you want to do is to teach paying students vulgarities. I believe friendships and business should be long term or not at all; so making sure your clients get the right mentalities in art collecting should be central to this. They can then make their own minds up about what really good art is.

STORM : As an artist and a gallery owner would your tastes and preferences influence the business end of what you do?

KHOO: Art should stem from yourself as a person. You need to be true to yourself to the last fibre — and when you are an artist you will be then producing work in which people can see what you are really like and what you really think. For that matter, I believe curating a gallery should be the same — I will not bring in work that I feel is not true to the nature of the artist.

Also, I will not curate work I will not want to keep for myself. Otherwise it feels like you are just trying to cheat people's money.

STORM : You offer a variety of art styles. Do you allocate a certain amount of space to developing new talent?

KHOO: Many of our artists are “relatively young” but have shown amazing abilities to do things that much older artists have failed to achieve. As a buyer, you give them important feedback along the way and are involved in their development. I am very good at grandfather stories!

STORM : What are your thoughts on the evolution of local artists?

KHOO: I think local artists have just started to become confident of their identity and therefore artwork; just take for example “Sticker Lady” and her painting *Limpeh*, the stickers, the spraying My Grandfather Road and her Sentosa project. I think she is Singapore's all-time most famous artist!

STORM : Is there an over-arching theme that you are sensing about the art scene that will influence its future directions?

KHOO: Singapore, as the most urbanised country in the world should automatically and organically give rise to the





best urban artists in the world. We have already seen our street dancers, video game players, CG developers, beatbox artists and even yo-yo stars achieve underground “godly status”. Yes, underground — that is why few people have heard about it. We should all go attend a street dance battle together and you will see what I mean! When my company organised South East Asia’s biggest street dance battle “Juste Debout” not only my friends but the Minister of Law and Foreign Affairs, K Shanmugam, were surprised just how good they were.

STORM: How has technology influenced your industry?

KHOO: Technology has actually improved the high-end arts and crafts a lot — even if it is by showing people that



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there are certain levels of arts and crafts that technology can never touch. However, I think Photoshop has ruined much of the purist photographers’ lives out there. I have therefore sworn never to use or instal Photoshop.

STORM: How do the various art fairs influence your business?

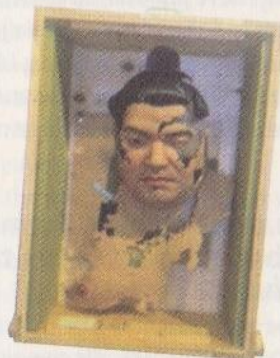
KHOO: We have not taken part in any art fairs yet. We actually have a lot of overseas galleries and curators coming to Singapore and leaving art fairs to come to our gallery.

STORM: As a photographer you do get a lot of profile on both sides of the lens. How has this influenced your *raison d’être*?

KHOO: Strangely enough it is actually backfired on my first and actual career — as a watch expert. I had my first camera when I was 28 years old, and that was merely to take pictures of watches. My OCD carried it through for six years, shooting watches, then watches on models, then watches on celebrities, then celebrities and royalty and no watches. I became an accidental photographer, and everyone decided to pigeonhole me that way, ignoring my actual career (Maybe being a watch expert is just far too nerdy!).

STORM: Is there a shot or a series of shots that you feel helped establish your celebrity?

KHOO: My photo *Tony Leung in Beijing*, which was sold for \$150,000 in 2012, had a lot of people commenting “That’s your shot”. Additionally, I showed a few hundred behind-the-scenes black-and-white images of celebrities’ candid captured moments in the *Access All Areas* exhibition. I guess that “celebrity photographer” title will stick for a while.





STORM : How has The Watch Fund been progressing since its inception?

KHOO: Everyone is really excited and saying it is about time that something like this started. In an ideal world, a car fund for guys would be perfect but there was no way someone could get a car, drive it for years, and sell it for a profit later when he does not like it anymore. The Watch Fund can do this though; and it is a great pleasure for the involved parties. All of our investors are happily wearing their investment-grade watches and know that they earn money at the same time. Today we had more people who become investors for very different reasons other than money making!

STORM : With your various businesses in play, how is the balance between Dominic Khoo, the artist and businessman affected?

KHOO: My formula is "Extreme behaviour = extreme results". Therefore balance pulls an artist down. Hobbies should be brought too far. ■

