

SOCIETY**THIS IS Life**
BRIAN KENT

Artistic drive

Events organiser Benjawan Wisootsat takes a unique approach to the arts in her work and in her life

She does the recognised artistic things like painting and taking photographs, but her drive as an artist extends to all the elements grouped into the work she does as a creator of events, from designing sets and costumes to table setting and the arrangement of flowers. It could be said that these are the gifts that don't merit the definition of art. Individually, that may be true, but the art of Benjawan Wisootsat is to bring them all together and make them part of her desired concept.

Did you have the ambition to be a star when you were a child?

Not at all. Whenever we did shows at school I was happier painting the scenery. My aspirations were always towards art. That was my passion. And I was very independent. For instance, when I was 12, I decided I wanted to make some money for the holidays. I was good at cooking, so I used to make cakes and sell them in the market. My father wasn't too pleased, though. He thought I shouldn't be out there selling things when we had quite enough money at home.

Where did you go to art school?

I didn't. My family thought it was an insecure way to earn a living. And it was — still is — so they did not encourage me in that direction.

But my life revolved around art and I knew that somehow I'd find a career that would allow me to work in some kind of artistic way while making a living.

And you found it?

Quite soon. I'd intended to continue studying and found a part time job in the holidays. I enjoyed it so much I wanted to stay on full-time. Luckily, the firm wanted me to stay on, too. It was an event management company, and as a production assistant and later project manager I could see the possibilities it would open to me to use my imagination and whatever artistic skill I had. This would be about 1990; event management was a new trend and they were beginning to get a lot of interest from overseas corporations wanting to stage events in Thailand. The company thought that I could handle that. My English was an advantage, too. I'd never studied abroad, but I went to Holy Infant Jesus School where we were taught entirely in English. So the company opened a Special Events branch for me.

They were putting their trust in someone who was still very young. Did you justify their confidence?

I think so. I know I managed to build a reputation for getting the job done on time and at short notice. There was one marketing manager with a big French group who knew how I worked and wanted to organise a five-day event in Thailand. He asked the company for me to handle it. That was Jan Ganser, who's now my business partner. But when he called them, they told him I'd left.



Benjawan Wisootsat: "My work allows me to follow my passion for art."

You'd left?

They wanted to put someone in to oversee my work. I would have to relate to him as well as to the client and I didn't want to work like that. I don't think they saw the potential of the idea as clearly as I did. But eventually Jan found me and asked me to take on the job. It was a big one: five different companies in five days with a new theme and a new set every day. I told him, I didn't have a company to work with and no factory to build sets, so how could I? He gave me a very simple answer: form a company yourself. So that's what I did.

And that was Optimum?

That was Optimum. I called it that because I wanted clients to know we would deliver the best event with the best components in every aspect. For international companies it was still quite an adventure to come to Thailand and we had to convince them we could deliver what they wanted, without their having to go to the expense of bringing over their own crew

and equipment. Which was what they usually did.

Wasn't that difficult in the early days?

There was a lot of anxiety about coming here during the events of 1992. Jan called me from Europe saying he'd seen footage of the violence on CNN and asked if it was safe for his people to hold their exhibition here. I told him they should come. We wouldn't let them down.

And how did the 1997 economic downturn affect you?

We managed to get by because there are always compensations. If things were tight for us here, coming to Thailand had an added value for overseas clients. And at times when they are reluctant to come, we have many good domestic clients. We'd promised to keep our staff on full pay through the bad days, and we were able to do that. I've always operated on trust — deliver on time, I pay on time, and people treat me the same way. Unfortunately, though, it doesn't always work out

like that.

I get irritated when people try to bargain down the price as if the whole point is to get something as cheap as possible. What we do cannot be done cheaply; and to put everything you've got into a project then hear them tell you they haven't got the budget and can we cut the price — it demeans the work you've done and the imagination and creativity you've put into it.

What project has Optimum worked on recently?

There was one in in Phuket in March that I'm proud of. I'd met the director general of TCEB, the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Board, when we did a show in Melbourne. The Board was planning to put on an exhibition for overseas travel agents and media to show them that the Andaman resorts had recovered from the devastation of the tsunami and were ready to welcome visitors.

It was to be held in Phuket FantaSea which is a bit like a fun park, so we transformed the interior to give it a suitably classical look with atmospheric lighting. We took out the coloured lights and brought in 6,000 glasses to hold candles, long white tablecloths for table settings for 1,000 dinner guests and loads of orchids. The guests approached the scene walking along a deep carpet of flowers, millions of yellow petals with a pattern of red and yellow.

But the events you do aren't always so spectacular, are they?

No, right now we're doing something very different, much smaller and more exclusive. We're doing this with Fin, the offshoot of Optimum I founded with Jan Ganser in 2003. I've always been fascinated by wine and the way it can add style to an occasion. Fin wines are a limited collection from boutique wineries whose first concern is quality and whose owners want them to be displayed only in the most prestigious places.

Every wine has its own unique qualities and these will reflect the qualities our clients seek to portray, with carefully chosen food, design and atmosphere. The project we're working on today is a dinner with only 14 guests, with the German Ambassador as guest of honour, to introduce the wines of Germany's most brilliant winemaker to Thailand. It's a contrast to, for example, the launch of a new five-star hotel, but with the exclusive, individually tailor-made expression that Fin has become known for.

There is one art you haven't mentioned so far, and that's music, so will you?

I'm glad you said that. Music is the area which is just now occupying my thoughts and you'll soon be seeing and hearing developments in a musical direction in Optimum and Fin. After all, we are still a young company. Fifteen years is not a long time and there is so much more to do. We still have a long and exciting journey before us.