

## ARTS



**Recital (2022), by Daphné Mandel.** The artist says she is most drawn to humble buildings with design details that are classically Hong Kong. Photos: Handouts

## Run-down buildings inspire an artistic makeover

Daphné Mandel's photo collages of ruins she has visited are pieced together digitally and painted on

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On a bright spring morning in 2021, Daphné Mandel discovered a door to an abandoned mansion in Hong Kong's Mid-Levels area left open. The French artist had planned only to take photos of the crumbling facade of the house but, curious, she ventured inside. There was no sign of life.

All that remained was a crystal chandelier, an overpowering smell of mould and, standing alone in the living room, an old music player with a cassette tape of *The Merry Widow Waltz* on top. "I didn't find it creepy, I found it poetic," Mandel says. "The juxtaposition of a Hong Kong house and a piece of European Belle Époque music is the kind of mash-up that brings a smile to my face."

That experience is among Mandel's first memories of urban exploration, a hobby in which people visit – and often photograph – abandoned buildings.

She has now visited more than 150 abandoned sites around Hong Kong and created dozens of artworks inspired by her adventures. A collection of 16 will be exhibited at Gallery Exit in Aberdeen from April 30 to May 28. Mandel, who has lived in Hong Kong since 2008, has long been interested in the abandoned Hakka villages that dot the New Territories. But when the pandemic hit and travelling abroad became difficult, she began exploring other ruins in the city.

"There is a whole world of abandoned buildings in Hong



**Cabinet of Memories: Sham Shui Po 2021 - Abandoned Shophouse 2022 (left); Botany Lesson 2021.**

Kong: Hakka villages, big mansions, shophouses, even cinemas and industrial buildings," says Mandel, who worked as a landscape architect and urban planner in France before becoming an artist.

"Each place takes you to a different planet: exploring a subdivided flat in Sham Shui Po and then visiting an abandoned private mansion in Mid-Levels is like visiting two different worlds."

Mandel finds suitable buildings to explore through research, by chance during her long, regular hikes around the city, or via friends she has made in urban exploration groups on social media.

A recent tip led her to an abandoned love hotel in Kowloon

Tong, where each room was decorated in a different style. One had a copy of a baroque oil painting hanging behind an ornate powder-pink bed.

Another had garish waves of lilac, blue, pink and lime green painted on the walls surrounding a circular leather bed. Yet another was dominated by a huge portrait of a pouting Marilyn Monroe.

As interesting as the love hotel was, Mandel says she is most drawn to more humble buildings that feature classically Hong Kong design details, such as metal window frames with distinctive kinks in the security bars, or buildings packed with vintage local furniture, such as folding wooden screens.

Hakka village houses, in par-

ticular, attract her because she is interested in the many that were designed for communal living. Then there are the shophouses in Sham Shui Po and Mong Kok, some of which date back to the late 19th century.

Mandel is also intrigued by abandoned schools.

"There's something about places where children were and that are now abandoned that feels sad," she says.

These three types of buildings appear most prominently in her new artworks. Two of Mandel's recent series, "Hong Kong Time Rift" (also the title of her exhibition) and "Chimerical Villages", feature photo collages of the ruins she has visited that she has pieced together digitally on Photoshop,

before printing and painting on top of them.

The photographs are of both the buildings themselves and items that Mandel found abandoned inside the ruins: blackboards, notebooks, family photos, letters and more.

Many of the hand-painted details are of plants reclaiming the ruins, something that can happen within a matter of weeks in Hong Kong's subtropical climate.

"One school had no roof left and there was sort of a forest growing in the centre," Mandel says.

Each piece in Mandel's third and final series, "Cabinet of Memories", is dedicated to a ruin that Mandel has explored.

Most of these works are collages she has created by hand, using photographs of items left behind in each place. But none of the works are exact copies: because she often plays with scale and colour, a textbook, for example, can sometimes appear as large as a piano.

"At first I was really torn about whether to make art about these places because I thought there must be a photographer or history researcher who can do a better job," she says.

"But then I thought, 'That is not what I do. What I do is create some kind of magic through my own eyes – at least for myself, but hopefully for other people too.'

"My art is not really about exactly describing a place, but more about creating an impression of these places in Hong Kong that are vanishing."

"Hong Kong Time Rift", by Daphné Mandel, Gallery Exit, 3/F, 25 Hing Wo Street, Tin Wan, Aberdeen, tel: 2541 1299. From April 30 to May 28

## WELLNESS

## THE RISE OF DRINKS THAT BOOST THE BRAIN

Backed by celebrities, the nootropics market is expected to reach at least US\$5 billion by 2026. But there are doubts they can do what they claim

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Before he launched Arepa, founder and CEO Angus Brown experienced two life events that influenced his future.

In high school, Brown lost a close personal friend who had mental health issues.

After he graduated from the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand with a degree in commerce, accounting and finance, Brown got a job with Japanese drinks company Frucor Suntory, maker and distributor of the "V" energy drink brand in New Zealand.

In his first year working for the company, Brown lost two grandparents to brain-related illnesses. Soon after, he had an epiphany.

"I remember being in a store and watching a very young girl walking out with a giant can of energy drink and I asked myself: 'What am I doing?'" Brown said. "Selling caffeine and sugar to the masses ... I realised I was adding no benefit."

The idea for Arepa came from this. It is a caffeine-free, natural drink that Brown and his team have been developing for nearly a decade.

Brown likes to call his product "brain food" but it would more typically be categorised as a nootropic – any drug, supplement or substance that claims to boost cognitive function and energy.

According to a United Nations report, one in six people suffer from neurological concerns – which could be anything from epilepsy to a headache to dementia – making it the No 1 cause of disability worldwide.

The global nootropics market is expected to reach more than US\$5 billion by 2026, and the pandemic and poor mental health are increasing demand.

Nootropics have gained significant traction over the past four years as they transition from pill form to more welcoming, consumer-focused products such as drinks. Many brands have popped up, and some are winning celebrity endorsement.

Brown supplies his products to people in all walks of life, from the Google offices in Sydney and Auckland to the set of the new Thor film (which was recently shot in Australia), and the locker rooms of the New Zealand All Blacks national rugby team.

He believes that, one day, brands like his could sponsor and endorse public events such as music festivals and inspire people to indulge in a mentally stimulating substance as opposed to a depressant like alcohol.

Arepa has three patented formulas that use ingredients such as blackcurrant, pine bark extract and L-theanine, substances that are said to help with mental function.

The company's mission: to develop a science-backed natural formula that can optimise brain function on a day-to-day basis while reducing the risk of future neuro-disorders.

Arepa is sold worldwide, including in Hong Kong, where it can be found at zero-waste grocer Slowood in Sai Wan.

The industry is attracting some big names. That includes international model Bella Hadid, who is now a co-founder of New York-based nootropic drinks brand Kin Euphorics.

"[Bella] actually found us!" said Jen Batchelor, the CEO and founder. "She is passionate and

genuine about sharing her challenges with mental health with the world, and more importantly, the tools that have helped her live a vibrant, healthy, happy life."

Batchelor markets Kin Euphorics as a substitute for alcoholic beverages. Its nootropic products offer a way to relax, unwind and socialise while also consuming something that will improve your brain functioning.

"We learned early in our research that the common thread between drinkers of all walks was they a) drank to relax and b) loathed the dreaded hangover, so we set out to solve for both, only better."

Batchelor says that nootropics have been used in high doses for professional performance for years. Her company's method is to raise people's awareness of nootropics – and to make them a bit more personal.

"We found that with a more approachable dose, [nootropic drinks] could be enjoyed in social situations to enhance presence, joy, creativity, and empathy – which is way more than what alcohol can deliver in a night."

A nootropics bar recently opened in the Standard Hotel in London's King's Cross area. Its cocktails feature ingredients from reishi mushrooms to ashwagandha, designed to improve cognitive function and mental well-being.



AREPA FOUNDER AND CEO ANGUS BROWN, ON WHY HE DECIDED TO DEVELOP A NOOTROPICS DRINK

But Michael Bowen, an associate professor and team leader at the Brain and Mind Centre at the University of Sydney, says the products should be taken with a grain of salt.

"There are very few non-prescription substances with established evidence supporting their ability to improve cognitive performance," he said. "One substance that does have support is caffeine. But it's important to note that caffeine's effects are generally mild and involve its ability to cause small increases in wakefulness and alertness."

As a psychopharmacologist and behavioural neuroscientist with more than 13 years of experience, Bowen is not convinced of nootropics' purported benefits.

"There's insufficient evidence to say whether any drug helps prevent cognitive decline in healthy individuals," he said. "The best advice for healthy brain ageing is to keep your mind active, exercise, get enough sleep, stay on top of any vascular risks [like high blood pressure] and maintain a healthy diet and lifestyle."



Kin Euphorics is a US-based nootropic drinks brand. Photo: Handout

## DESIGN

## It's a shore thing – the world's first 'aerial beach'

Bloomberg

You've heard of overwater villas ... but a beach on stilts? Dan Behm, owner of the new adults-only Bocas Bali resort in Bocas del Toro, Panama, is betting you've never come across one of those before.

The former tech exec turned hotelier says that his "aerial beach" is the first of its kind anywhere in the world. "I had heard of projects in the Netherlands where people were building beaches on floating pontoons," Behm says. This isn't that.

The wide, dock-like structure is filled with sand and supported by 12-metre-tall concrete-filled PVC pilings that have been bored into the ocean floor using high-pressure water jets. On its edge, a series of steps descend into the nine-metre-deep waters, sort of like walking right into the deep end of the pool.

Above ground, the beach is meant to feel just like the real deal almost anywhere else, complete with lounge service and a food truck; a sophisticated (and invisible) drainage system prevents water-polluting run-off.

Behm comes across as a classic competitive professional – the kind of entrepreneurial



A view of the dock-like "aerial beach" at the Bocas Bali resort in Bocas del Toro, Panama. Photo: Handout

problem-solver who left his tech company, Open Systems Technologies, after building it up from a US\$5 million hardware reseller to a US\$160 million IT business in 2015. He is drawn by the idea of "firsts".

He was interested in opening a hotel in Bocas del Toro not out of some long-held connection to the place, but because he saw opportunity to build overwater bungalows – the kind you find in the Maldives or Tahiti – within an easy flying radius of the US.

The property, which opened in September 2021, comprises 16 solar-powered villas built from teak wood, all flanking a tiny outlying island that's ringed with mangroves and coral. Rates start at around US\$1,000 a night, and getting there requires a one-hour flight from Panama City, plus a 15-minute boat ride.

"In tech I could always use my creativity to create things, but you could never see them. This time I wanted to create something you could see, with features you could

not find anywhere else," he says, as a way of explaining why he would buy a 3.6-hectare parcel of land with 36 hectares of mangrove and 5km of Caribbean Sea-facing shoreline lacking that one key amenity for an island resort: a stretch of sand.

"But you can build one," he says he was told.

The design process for Behm's beach was a years-long process, with sustainability as a goal.

"To introduce sand in areas where it does not occur naturally,

we feared it would disturb the coral and the mangroves," he says. And building a floating option on pontoons was prohibitively expensive.

Not to discount the carbon footprint of having to import all the materials – the sand and palm trees came from other parts of Panama, the green quartz steps were flown in from India – Daniel Cáceres, an environmental auditor who has either assessed or helped create 300 eco-friendly projects in Panama, provided guidance on the least invasive way to approach the project.

With the beach done, Behm is looking ahead to his next projects for Bocas Bali, which include elaborate tree houses designed by Balinese bamboo architect Elora Hardy and a string of botanical gardens, a dozen or so "secret" ones and a "massive" showpiece.

The five-year garden project is a somewhat unconventional choice – that is, introducing non-native species to a pristine place – when you consider the unglamorous but sustainability-oriented investments already made to the island resort, such as rainwater catchment systems and grey-water treatment facilities.

But Behm is undeterred. "We truly believe we are giving more back than we are taking."