



**Publication:** The Straits Times Life!

**Date:** Nov 19 2007

**Headline:** Weaving in his take on life



ST PHOTO: BRYAN VAN DER BEEK

**SILK ROUTE: Singaporean fashion designer Benny Ong has created 46 pieces of Buddhist-inspired tapestries, which are hand-woven with silk.**

## Weaving in his take on life

**Adeline Chia**  
ARTS REPORTER

SINGAPOREAN fashion designer Benny Ong's exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) is a milestone in many ways.

Re-Woven, featuring 46 Buddhist-inspired silk weavings, marks his return from Europe to Singapore, and his first crossover from fashion to visual art.

The philosophical collection of silk fabric works shows a series of standing and sitting Buddha images, meditative hands in various poses, and tranquil images of doves.

Calling the art show part of his "metamorphosis", the youthful-looking 58-year-old says the exhibition is a way to express himself creatively in different ways.

Ong was one of the first Singaporean designers to make a name for himself in London in the 1970s. His designs have been worn by the likes of the Queen of Jordan, the Duchess of Kent and the late Princess Diana.

Now, his clothes are sold in places like London's Harrods, Saks in New York and the Raffles Arcade in Singapore.

Re-Woven, he says, is a sign of how he has mellowed with age.

Ong says with a smile: "When I was younger, I did what I wanted, and I did it alone. But as I get older, I realise you can't do things without others. Without my machinists and my cutters, my designs won't get made.

"One's so-called success really depends on others."

His woven art pieces are made by traditional artisans from a hill tribe in Northern Laos, whose skills are passed on through the decades.

He draws the designs first, then takes them to Laos. There, each

thread is individually dyed and woven. The process can take up to three months for a piece.

He declines to say how much these pieces are worth, but plans to take them on tour in Asia and Europe.

The mellowing extends beyond his art. After more than 25 years abroad, he has come home to spend more time with his ageing parents, who are both in their 80s.

One of five children born to a publishing executive and a housewife, he left for London in 1968 to enter the prestigious St Martin's School of Art. He launched his own eponymous label in 1974.

Ong says: "It was great that my parents allowed me to travel when I was so young, to venture out and discover my own life, at a point when a career in fashion was unheard of, let alone for a man. It was the biggest gift they gave to me."

He now lives with his parents in a house in Spottiswoode Park. Apart from working in his atelier in Robertson Quay, he spends his time swimming, doing yoga and meditating for 15 minutes daily.

He sports a Buddhist bead bracelet and says he regularly attends Buddhist lessons in Poh Ern Shih Temple in Pasir Panjang.

While the exhibition is Buddhist-influenced, he says it draws on "our common humanity".

He says: "Walking through the show is a personal journey which can be shared by many people with no labels on what their faiths may be."

➤ Re-woven is on at the Singapore Art Museum, 71 Bras Basah Road, until Feb 22 next year. Opening hours are 10am to 7pm daily, with extended hours on Fridays to 9pm. Tickets cost \$8 for adults, \$4 for students and senior citizens.