

'Every Day is the Event'

So says Benjawan Wisootsat: event organiser, applied-art patroness... and art photographer in her own right.



Benjawan Wisootsat, the daughter of a painter, has always been a great believer in harnessing art to commerce. Fourteen years ago, she established her own event company, Optimum – essentially a specialist MICE operation involved in the organisation of high-society parties, product launches, exhibitions and the like. Optimum's niche, differentiating it from the standardised services of the big players, has always been bespoke theming for top-end clients – realising unique event 'concepts' in terms of original decor, costumes, artwork, catering and so on. A little over a year ago, Benjawan teamed up with specialist wine importer Jan Genser, and a new company FIN ('Fabulous is Necessary') was born, where wine naturally plays a more prominent role. Several of the exclusive boutique wines served by FIN at its functions now carry art labels specially commissioned and applied in Thailand – symptomatic of the creative detail on which Benjawan has always insisted in all her operations.

She is not merely an event impresario, harnessing the creative

abilities of others. Her own talent is for art photography, which she doesn't hesitate to deploy as appropriate in her commercial activities. What also distinguishes her pictures from those of most other photographers is that they are most certainly not allowed to speak for themselves.

"Every day is the event," is Benjawan's motto. This is the underlying theme of her photographs, to which she adds hand-written captions which often upset the obvious impression to be gained from the images. Some captions are more incongruous than others – it all rather depends on the mood of both the creator and the viewer. However, the intention is to surprise, to open the mind to a different perspective. It's not unlike reading a short story with a twist ending – indeed Benjawan also enjoys writing short stories.

One example of the short-story concept applied to photography: a perfect picture-postcard scene, of a windmill on a Greek island on a beautiful day, is exploded by a caption about the need to be prepared to manage a sudden crisis (such as a terrific storm). Benjawan wants her captions to stretch the imagination beyond the usual

ABOVE

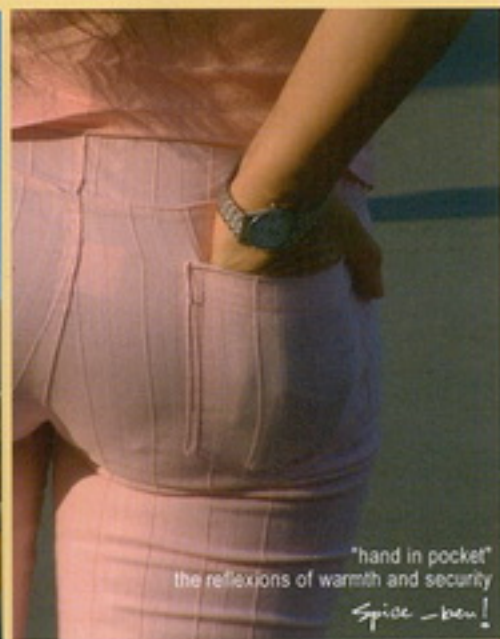
Art photographer Benjawan: self-portrait in Greece.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Visions of the Mediterranean: 'The Power', 'Hand in Pocket' and 'Fighting'.

horizon. Of course, she could have called the composition 'Silence before the Storm' or something equally bland and predictable, but that would have had little impact. Instead, the viewer is now more likely to interpret the picture-plus-caption as a variant of 'never rest on your laurels' – a very visual version of an old truth with particular resonance for Benjawan's fellow business people.

"I want to share my experiences and ideas," she says. So far, her audience has been limited largely to business contacts and those who attend her functions. However, by the time you read this, the first edition of her website (www.take-fin.com) should be ready for general viewing.



"hand in pocket"
the reflexions of warmth and security
Spice - ben!



"Fighting"
The reflection of stupidity
Spice - ben!

Benjawan conceived the idea of conveying a deeper meaning to pictures a few years ago, during business trips to Europe. It was the scenic beauty of certain places, especially Italy and Greece, which gave her the inspiration. She has been working for barely two years on her current *oeuvre*, giving it a stronger and more personal shape as she explores new ideas and their effect on her rapport with her environment. Of course, that environment embraces the people who live in it, whether in Bangkok, upcountry or in the foreign countries she visits frequently. One product of her recent endeavours is the 2005 calendar she keeps on a small wooden stand on her desk. It has a selection of 12 photographs,

including the one of the Greek windmill scene

Benjawan uses a professional digital camera. Unlike the more affordable and popular pocket models, this captures the scene the very instant the shutter is released, not a fraction of a second later. On a recent visit to Italy, she witnessed two canines in the middle of a typically short dogfight. It was all over in a few seconds, giving her only one opportunity to capture the flying action – which she did. With a 'delay' camera, she'd have been unlikely to capture more than the dogs' departing backsides – if that. The caption, as you might expect once you get to know this photographer's angle, is not about dogs but about people – a comment on the stupidity intrinsic in solving

conflict through violence. "See the people looking on?" she asks. "They are laughing at those dogs." The meaning Benjawan conveys from this tableau is that humans make fools of themselves if they behave like this.

"When I see something that interests me," says Benjawan, "I shoot it instinctively. Nevertheless, when there is a chance, I try to improve on my first shot while I'm in the process of working out what the essence of the scene in front of me actually is." As it becomes clear what she wants to photograph, and why, Benjawan frames her next shot in such a way that cropping will not be necessary.

Also in Italy, while walking in Lucca, her eye was caught by the striking posture of a woman who had one hand stuck in the back pocket of her cream-coloured, body-hugging slacks. "She was casually talking on her mobile phone," says Benjawan. The caption for the picture she selected says, 'hand in pocket – the reflexions of warmth and security'. It belongs to a particular series of photographs (under the general moniker of 'Spice - ben') which adorn the covers of menus her company has produced for high-society dinner parties. This time, the caption is not a shocker, just an added dimension to the lens which heightens the photograph's intended function as a conversation piece.

Though aesthetically pleasing structures – such as picturesque churches, houses and gateways – make up a substantial part of Benjawan's current work, people are her ultimate focus. "I love people," she says. However, she will not bother her subjects in any way; a denial which helps to keep self-awareness at bay. She prefers candid photography – and while this makes it harder to capture what she's after, the end-result when she succeeds comes across as entirely natural; precisely the effect she is seeking.

When it comes to the evaluation of her work, Benjawan welcomes feedback from her audience. She wants to know what other people think and feel about each piece she makes. Through her website, her work will soon become available to a wider audience, and the logical next step – eventually – must be to exhibit publicly. In the meantime, anyone looking at Benjawan's pictures has the option of figuring out a catchy caption before checking what the author herself wrote. In fact she recommends just that – "people are quite likely to discover traits that were hitherto hidden in their subconscious," she says. ■