

VODKA IN SWEDEN STARTED AS A DISTILLED SPIRIT CALLED BRÄNVIN IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY. ONE OF ITS ORIGINAL PURPOSES WAS FOR THE MAKING OF GUNPOWDER; THE OTHER PURPOSE WAS MEDICAL. BRÄNVIN LITERALLY MEANT 'BURNT WINE' MADE FROM GRAIN OR IMPORTED WINE. IN THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, VODKA HAD BEEN SOLD IN PHARMACIES AS MEDICINE TO CURE EVERYTHING FROM COLIC TO THE PLAGUE. THE ABSOLUT VODKA BOTTLE IS ACTUALLY SHAPED LIKE A TRADITIONAL MEDICINE BOTTLE WITHOUT EVEN A LABEL SO THE CLEAR CONTENTS COULD BE VISIBLE.

Absolut(e) ART

BY NGIOM



The vodka brand was introduced into the global market in 1979 and soon much of Absolut's fame is due to its long-running advertising campaign, created by advertising agency TBWA, based on the distinctive bottle shape. Having started around 1980 with photographer Steven Bronstein, and with more than 1500 ads, the ad campaign is the longest running ever. The ads frequently feature an

Absolut bottle-shaped object in the center and a title "ABSOLUT _____. By 2000 Absolut advertisements were recognized the world over for their stylish, humorous, and innovative attributes. As people began collecting the ads, analysts observed that the brand had become an advertising phenomenon. More importantly, sales of Absolut were increasing rapidly over the years.

In 2000, V&S reportedly sold 7.3 million cases world wide, an increase of 2.5 million cases since 1995. Its relationship with art began in a big way in 1985 and the famous association with the art world came about unplanned, although this seems unimaginable now. It was over a dinner with Michel Roux, the importer of the vodka in the US that Andy Warhol offered to paint his own



interpretation of the already famous Absolut bottle. The work of art was unveiled in 1985, accompanied by a great deal of attention and was disseminated to the public in a magazine advertisement. Warhol was to become Roux's link to the art world and handpicked new artists were to provide personal interpretations of the brand name and the bottle.

The relationship with art was to spread throughout the world and the link with Absolut Vodka became something of a prestige for both curators and artists. When the Wei-ling Gallery first opened

in 2005, its inaugurated exhibition was 18@18 and this became a constant theme of the gallery over the years. In 2010, it teamed up with Absolut Vodka to present 'Absolut 18@18'. The artists who were to work on the project were regarded by the gallery as those at the cutting-edge of Malaysian art, most of whom were relatively young. The artists featured represented a cross-section of the Malaysian community representing a variety of expressions, from installation of a kind of jukebox by Annabelle Ng to carpentry by Anurendra Jegadeva. There were themes that

tied the implications of alcohol with the body as depicted by Al Khuzairie in an installation and by Chen Yen Peng in a painting. There were social commentaries made by Yau Bee Ling and Gan Tee Shing. Chin Kong Yee used architecture as commentary and Wong Chee Meng captured layered space with a glass of spirit as centre of attention. Hamidi Hadi and Cheong Tuck Wai captured atmosphere in their paintings, with only grazing reference to the theme. Yim Yen Sum depicted integration using pieces of fabric and textiles from the walls of a historical building.

Choy Chun Wei created architectonic models which had strong urban characters, which assumed that the theme had an urban character. Chee Way showed an Absolut bottle in the context of an out of world hallucinating experience. Faizal Suhif commented on the kind of creature that would hold a bottle of spirit – one that is perhaps primordial. Che Eng Hong showed a series of transformation in a very skilful way of painting. Stephen Menon who was trained as a graphic designer had a graphic way of providing symbols in an interpretation of spiritual blindness. Ivan Lam's installation was a construction of a light box

that brings the audience to a cerebral state. They were the individual works of free minds working without boundaries and the variety of interpretation spoke volumes about the nature of creativity and collectively, it became an intriguing exhibition.

Above all that, each artist worked their art on the Absolut bottle and made the bottle into individual works of art. The variety and fecundity of the artists' minds brought the plain bottle into another dimension. The results of the work on the bottles reinforced

very obviously the bond between Absolut's intention with the art world and the gratitude that the art world has for the opportunity given to it. This had benefited both ways – while the brand got the promotion it craved, the artists got the opportunity to vent their creativity.

This was a message to industry as a whole - that magnanimity towards the world of art could have more than a direct benefit to the product. The way in which the brand had now etched into the psyche of the consumers is in itself an invaluable benefit of this symbiosis. ●

