

Outcry over mural of samsui woman with cigarette

URA requests delay in changes as it reviews stance

Many say the URA's initial order to erase cigarette amounts to historical revisionism

Shawn Hoo

The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has asked the artist behind a controversial mural of a cigarette-holding samsui woman to delay any changes to his work while the authority reviews its stance on amending the mural.

On June 21, The Straits Times reported on an online outcry over the URA's order to erase a smoking cigarette from the mural, located at 297 South Bridge Road, opposite Maxwell MRT station. The URA also cited an anonymous complainant who compared the depicted woman to a "prostitute" and called the mural "offensive".

Singapore-based American artist Sean Dunston was scrambling to modify his work as the URA issued a July 3 deadline for a new proposal, and cited the potential loss of the temporary permit of the business operating there, Ya Kun Kaya Toast, which expires on July 27.

On Instagram, Dunston had then suggested drawing over the cigarette with a kitten, a taco or an opium pipe.

But the URA has temporarily asked for the mural of the smoking samsui woman – which was defended on a Reddit thread citing archival sources as being historically accurate – to stay on the walls of the historic area where the pioneering migrant labourers once lived.

Many online commenters said the mural was a recognition of



Singapore-based American artist Sean Dunston's mural of a young samsui woman with a cigarette in South Bridge Road drew controversy after the Urban Redevelopment Authority ordered it to be amended as "the depiction of smoking on the unauthorised mural is not aligned with Singapore's anti-smoking policy". ST PHOTO: BRIAN TEO

SPRINGBOARD FOR CONVERSATION

This particular work speaks to the migrant worker experience in Singapore, which is very much a contemporary concern. I can see value in it being presented in such an unvarnished way as it prompts reflection and conversation about how we view and interact with migrant workers in our society today.



ARTS NOMINATED MP USHA CHANDRADAS

samsui women's labour and lives, and erasing the cigarette in the mural amounted to historical revisionism. One Reddit user questioned: "Why are we trying to change his-

tory?" Indie Singapore Tours, which runs tours in Chinatown, commented on Dunston's Instagram post that the samsui women "do

back-breaking work, with their only respite their laced ciggies". The mural is one of their guests' favourites, the group commented.

In an e-mail update to the landlord, who is represented by Shepherd Asset Management, dated June 21 and seen by ST, the URA said it had "taken note of additional feedback regarding the mural".

In the e-mail, the URA asked the landlord "to delay any works to the mural until the review is completed". The e-mail did not provide a timeline for the review.

In response to ST's queries, the URA emphasised that while the mural was "completed without prior approval", the authorities are re-evaluating its stance in the light of recent public feedback.

Shepherd's spokesperson previously told ST it had not applied for prior approval for the mural, which was completed in early April, but made a submission on April 19. The URA responded on May 8 identifying smoking as an issue and requested that Shepherd resubmit a proposal by May 22. Shepherd did not meet the latter deadline.

Prior to this re-evaluation, the URA had determined that "the depiction of smoking on the unauthorised mural is not aligned with Singapore's anti-smoking policy" after consultation with stakeholders and relevant agencies.

Arts Nominated MP Usha Chandradas told ST that the mural has value as a talking point for important social topics and welcomes the URA's move to re-evaluate its stance.

She said: "This particular work speaks to the migrant worker experience in Singapore, which is very much a contemporary concern. I can see value in it being presented in such an unvarnished way as it prompts reflection and conversation about how we view and interact with migrant workers in our society today."

Ms Chandradas urged the authorities to conduct a more "holistic assessment" by factoring in the artist's intention and historical context, and not make decisions "based on comments or feedback from the public which may be made on less considered terms".

She added, however, that applications and approval processes for public murals need to be respected.

Speaking to ST, Dunston said of the URA's decision-making process: "It's good to have boundaries, but a generic template for enforcing rules on art is damaging. The policy stance on cigarettes is well founded if it's an advertisement, endorsement or advocacy. This mural is not any of those."

The artist said he had received even more positive feedback from the public since the controversy with the URA. On the authority's decision to re-evaluate its stance on the mural, he said: "I'm hopeful that they'll take the context and history into consideration."

He added that he will not be modifying the mural for now and will await more information from the authorities.

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Elections Department calls tender for 10 mobile workstations

The Elections Department (ELD) has called for quotations for the supply and delivery of 10 mobile workstations.

The tender listing on the GeBiz platform asked for submissions by 1pm on July 5.

The tender comes after the recent updating of Singapore's voter rolls, as well as speculation that the next general election, which must be held by November 2025, may be called as early as September 2024.

The revised register of electors is currently open until July 2 for public inspection. Singaporeans can check their particulars in the registers on the ELD website or via the Singpass application.

GeBiz, or Government Electronic Business, is the Singapore Government's one-stop e-procurement portal. All the public sector's invitations for quotations and tenders are posted on GeBiz.

ELD's listing calls for mobile workstations with specifications including 64GB of random access memory, 1TB primary solid state drive (SSD) and 512GB secondary SSD, as well as no internal webcam, or a removed integrated webcam.

The listing also states that the contractor who gets the tender has four weeks or earlier from the issuing of the Letter of Acceptance or Purchase Order to deliver the items.

It added that while price competitiveness, including the assessment to the overall value of the proposal, is among the critical criteria for deciding the awardee, ELD "shall be under no obligation to accept the lowest or any quotation".

The Sunday Times has contacted ELD for comment.

Anjali Raguraman

Decisive moments: Portrait of S'pore through the eyes of Instagrammers

Anjali Raguraman
Correspondent

Amateur photographer and International Baccalaureate student Nathan Chong, 18, got his first professional camera only at the start of 2024.

Just six months later, he has already bagged a photography prize and a feature in an islandwide exhibition, and scored himself a new camera too.

Nathan's moody black-and-white shot of the side profile of the ArtScience Museum on an overcast day beat out 5,600 entries for the top prize in the Mad About Singapore 2024 campaign, organised by InstaSG – a local community of Instagrammers – and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), which celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2024.

The campaign, which started in 2014, portrays Singapore through Instagram posts by the community to chronicle the ways the country lives, works, plays and learns.

The St Joseph's Institution student, who goes by @nat_graphy on Instagram, took home the grand prize of a Nikon camera with a lens and accessories during an event on June 22 at the URA Centre.

"I really liked the reflection of the sky on the small window on the side (of the structure)... and I wanted to capture the ArtScience Museum in a different way," he said. "After I took the photo, I knew it was my best photo of the day."

His winning photo will be among a showcase of 130 images from the campaign capturing Singapore's greenery, heritage, distinctive architecture and charming neighbourhoods, in a roving exhibition from June 22 to Aug 18. A hundred of the photographs are arranged to form the island of Singapore.

To offer a glimpse of what is to come in the URA's Draft Master Plan 2025, which maps out the land use plans for Singapore over the next 10 to 15 years, another 32 photographs selected by the statutory board will also be on show.

Currently at the URA Centre atrium in Maxwell Road, the exhibition will subsequently travel



Guests at the launch of the Mad About Singapore 2024 campaign, co-organised by URA and InstaSG under the theme Space For Our Dreams, at URA Centre on June 22. The exhibition will later travel to malls around the island, including Funan and Tiong Bahru Plaza. ST PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM



Student Nathan Chong took first prize for his moody black-and-white shot of the side profile of the ArtScience Museum on an overcast day. The 18-year-old got his first professional camera only at the start of 2024.



Second prize went to Ian Kwan, 21, whose entry shows a man taking a photograph with his mobile phone from the jetty at Marina Barrage, juxtaposing the thermometer-shaped jetty against the blue waters of Marina Reservoir.

to malls around the island, namely Funan, Kallang Wave Mall, Tiong Bahru Plaza, Westgate and Waterway Point.

The photographs from the exhibition have also been published as a book and copies will be donated to the National Library Board for distribution.

Another person whose Instagram capture will be featured is Mad About Singapore campaign runner-up Ian Kwan, a 21-year-old polytechnic student known as @13thflickes on Instagram.

His image shows a man taking a photograph with his mobile phone from the jetty at Marina Barrage, juxtaposing the thermometer-shaped jetty against the blue waters of Marina Reservoir.

"It reminded me of an album cover by (American R&B singer) SZA," said Mr Kwan, who has been into military aviation and street photography since he was 13 and constantly carries a camera with him in case something catches his eye.

Mr Kwan, as well as two others who were named Instagrammers of the Year – Mr Andy Lum (@AndyLum) and Mr Joshua Ng (@suspendtime) – each took home a Nikon camera with a lens and accessories.

The prizes were presented by Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Finance and National Development Indraneel Rajah, who noted in a speech that Singapore's urban landscape has been transformed significantly over the years.

"It is fitting that this edition of Mad About Singapore embraces the Space For Our Dreams theme, showcasing our journey to becoming a liveable, inclusive, and endearing city, as we remake it for this generation and beyond," she said.

"That's actually a very important endeavour, because there are other cities and places which are struggling with the journey to a sustainable future... here in Singapore, we're not only trying to make that happen, but through your Instagram shots, (we are) journaling and capturing each step as we move towards a sustainable future (for) Singapore."

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