



## Snapshot

Just like how Van Cleef & Arpels once designed Prince Rainier's wedding present for Princess Grace, the French jeweller is reliving tradition with a stunning jewellery set from Prince Albert to his new bride, Princess Charlene. Called Ocean, this stunning tiara is set with a total of 893 diamonds and 359 sapphires of three different hues, centred by a mouth-watering four-carat pear-shaped diamond. The former South African Olympic swimmer turned Monegasque

princess can opt to turn the tiara into a necklace. This stunning piece of art will be on display at a special exhibition in Monaco until the end of August. The gossip surrounding this royal wedding sent the tabloids into a tailspin recently, what with Albert's children born out of wedlock and rumours of Charlene's attempts to leave him and Monaco. Any existing animosity was palpable during the ceremony last weekend. As they slipped on the 18-carat white gold Cartier rings onto each other's fingers, Albert shot his blushing bride a wink and she replied with a broad, sincere smile.

# People & Places

newsmakers, trends & hotspots BY Anandhi Gopinath



## Protecting our children

Voice of the Children is dedicated to solving the root problems behind the abuse of children's rights. The organisation is pushing for new ways to work with the government and wider community to tackle the issue.

There is a saying quoted on the website of local advocacy group Voice of the Children (VOC) that eloquently alludes to what they do – 'child service providers are so busy saving drowning babies that they cannot turn around to see who is throwing the babies into the river and why.' It is a powerful and poignant statement, and reminds us that while we are indeed correct to feed neglected children and rehabilitate wayward youth, there is a growing need to locate the problem at the source and somehow break the destructive cycle some children are trapped in.

VOC was created, like many other worthy things, by complete accident when a group of lawyers were having a conversation with a representative from Yayasan Salam, an NGO that does work with underprivileged children in Chow Kit. The biggest issues that were brought up were of a much bigger scope than the provision of food or shelter, and indicated a gap between what law and policies provided for and what was actually happening on the ground.

"Someone from Nur Salam said 'I wish there was someone to look at law and policy' and the penny just dropped. Some of us realised the gap right there and then, so VOC was formed," recalls



Two of the five founding members of VOC, Sharmila (left) and Quek

Quek Sue Yian, who is VOC's honorary treasurer.

Together with three other lawyers, Quek and Sharmila Sekaran, who is president, set up VOC with the objective of bridging this gap by advocating for and promoting law and policy reforms to ensure that every child in Malaysia is protected and no longer at risk of violation.

VOC does not tackle the inadequacy of existing childcare, but the need for a different kind of support for children. The good work being done by children's service providers cannot bring about long-term improvements in children's lives without a change in the policies and laws that affect children. However, many service organisations do not have the time to address policy issues when most of their time is spent trying to meet children's immediate needs.

"A lot of people are doing really great work on the ground but they've not been able to take it to the next level," Sharmila says. "VOC is not just about changing the laws, although that is a key aim for us, but also about raising awareness of what happens to children who get lost in the system. You're always going to get kids coming into the system, so to speak, because the reason why they keep falling in is not addressed. So what we thought is how we can stop this from happening. The first step is finding out why and how this occurs, and then addressing it at the source so we need to build less shelters, rehabilitate fewer children and so on."

VOC's advocacy work addresses the root causes of problems, leading to longer-term, more sustainable benefits for children and their communities. Since its founding in 2008, VOC's focus has been to understand the issues and work out the scope of their work. This involves a lot of discussions with grassroots groups who deal with children's affairs and are well versed with the tough problems children face everyday.

"For example, I never knew that so many children in KL and PJ are fully eligible to be registered, and yet they are not. And these aren't refugees or children of migrant workers; these are kids who are Malaysian and born to Malaysians who just never got around to registering them. They are often poor children, then they don't go to school, and they are stuck in a poverty cycle with no way out," says Sharmila.

Advocacy may not receive the same public attention as organisations dealing directly with children or the associated photo opportunities, but it serves an important role when it comes to bridging gaps within the law and policies based on information that is available. One example of this is the review of laws within the juvenile justice system, which Sharmila feels can be hugely improved. Research has proven that a child's first interaction with the police determines whether he becomes a repeat offender or not, so working with the police means being able to advocate for a positive change in their roles and the way they are viewed by the general public.

According to Quek, VOC's biggest achievement to date is that they have managed to make successful inroads into various government departments in communicating their stand and the ways in which they can help. "We've started dialogues with them and they have shown interest, especially in the way this new research positions police as part of the community instead of the enemy," she says.

VOC is also pushing for a specialised ministry for children, separate from the one currently

## New York through China's eyes

A photography exhibition in New York City about New York City isn't particularly noteworthy. However, the ongoing exhibition at the city's Asia Society Museum is attracting millions of viewers because its photographer is recently detained Chinese activist and artist Ai Weiwei.

The 227 black-and-white images in *New York Photographs* were taken from 1983 to 1993 when Ai was living in New York's East Village section. They document the area's flourishing avant-garde scenes, including poetry readings and political riots in several parts of the city, and feature self-portraits of the artist and other renowned figures.

The photographs document a distinct era in New York, as seen through Ai's eyes, tracing the beginnings of his conceptual art practice. They depict East Village poetry readings, riots in Tompkins Square Park, drag queens at Wigstock and well-known artists and intellectuals from China, such as filmmaker Chen Kaige, composer Tan Dun and artist Xu Bing. It is the first time that the exhibition is being shown outside of China.

"Ai Weiwei is one of the most provocative and influential conceptual artists from China today, and has become an increasingly iconic figure in recent years," says Asia Society Museum director Melissa Chiu. "As an artist, his work has stood for individual expression and we hope his recent release, following nearly three months in detention in China, has delivered a new promise of creative potential for him and other artists there. These photographs are a poignant and powerful chronicle of Ai's artistic vision and emerging political consciousness during his time in New York."

One of the world's foremost conceptual artists, Ai attended New York's Parsons School of Design and has earned millions with his work well before his April 3 arrest.

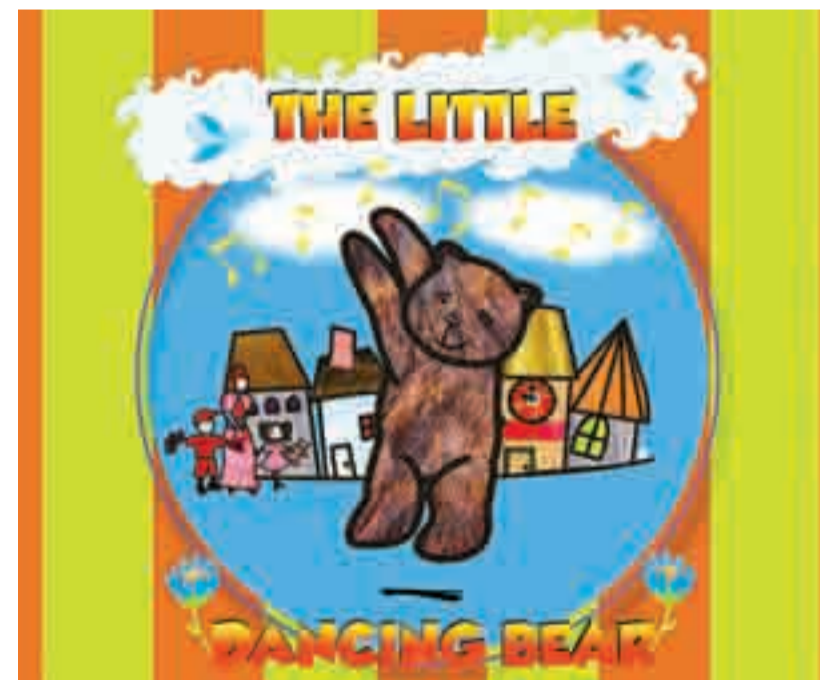


Above: Some of Ai's image portrayal everyday characters of 1980s and 1990s New York

Left: A much younger Ai in the Lower East Side

In February, a 100kg pile of handmade porcelain sunflower seeds he commissioned for a show in London sold for more than US\$550,000 (RM1.6 million) at a Sotheby's auction. In early May, his *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* of 12 animals heads rising from the Pulitzer Fountain in Manhattan – his first public sculpture installation – was unveiled by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who said Ai's courage to speak out demonstrated "the indomitable desire for freedom that is inside every human being."

*New York Photographs* is on display until Aug 14 at the Asia Society Museum, 725 Park Avenue, 70th Street, New York. Visit [asiasociety.org](http://asiasociety.org) for more information.



established for women, family and community development. "This will cover health, educational and welfare of all children, and geared specifically towards their needs so that they get the attention they deserve," Sharmila explains. "There is an economic need for reform at this level as well – the more money we spend on helping them now, the less we need to spend on rehabilitation later, which is much more costly. Children's affairs have to be looked into on a bigger scale; they are society's responsibility and we cannot do this in silos anymore."

Apart from its advocacy work, VOC has also published two children's books aimed at teaching both young and old about child protection, safety and rights. Each book deals with a particular child protection issue and aims to create an interactive experience between children and adults.

*The Little Dancing Bear* is about child labour,

**The Little Dancing Bear is one of two books on children's rights that VOC has published, with another one scheduled for an end-July release**

*Cats in the Rubbish* is about street children and a new book entitled *Kailash the little Zebra* is about refugees, scheduled for an end-July launch. All three books tell their stories through animal characters easily understood by children and are filled with beautiful illustrations. For those specialising in educating children about their rights, teaching aids will soon be available for download on VOC's website.

The website also hosts interesting articles and links to information on human rights and children-related matters, like a Refugees International report on the life of refugees in Malaysia, a documentary by *The Guardian* on female genital mutilation in Kenya and global progress towards prohibiting corporal punishment. Not easy reading, but necessary and relevant for anyone interested in the worldwide movement towards proper ratification of human rights codes.

As far as human rights are concerned, Malaysia doesn't have the best of reputations. Although the government has in fact ratified the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) there are still individual cases and children who slip through the cracks. Sharmila and Quek hope that with the VOC, that reputation is somehow salvaged as together with the authorities, they find more and more ways to protect children and their rights.

An important first step is acknowledging the problem, and it seems that we have done that. "A lot of activists have said that human rights in Malaysia is worse today than it has been in the longest time," Sharmila says. "On the flipside, for a minister to say we deserve to be on tier two for trafficking and that is our rightful place although we have the procedures in place and we're not there yet – is amazing. Previously, it was all denial. A minister admitting our problems is a sign of maturity, and we want to work with the government to come up with a solution together."

She also says that through VOC, she is now more aware of the issues facing the government as well, and the perception that it is clueless about what is actually going on is incorrect. "We have to be fair," she says. "The government has taken steps to recognise some of the issues affecting children and is addressing them. To say that it doesn't care would be an unfair statement."

"It has taken notice of the registration issue, for example, by organising the mass registration of stateless children," Quek adds, adding that "something is seeping in and there is a cognisance of the fact that we have a problem. All said, finding a solution is not easy."

So what can the public do to help VOC? "Buy our books," Quek says with a wry smile. "It's the only way we are able to make money right now, and the books also help us to create a society that's more aware of the issues facing children, and that will in turn make our work easier."

Corporations eager to bring their CSR programmes up a notch or evolve existing programmes can also approach VOC, which will be only too glad to extend their reach into more meaningful activities. "Companies have the resources to assist underprivileged homes in ways they never thought possible – helping them comply with ministry regulations, helping them establish proper accounting systems and so on," Quek outlines.

As clichéd as it may sound, children are our future and represent the next generation of leaders and thinkers. It is definitely society's responsibility to ensure that their needs are met, and that all children no matter colour or creed are given the same chances to excel. ■

For more information on Voice of the Children, visit [voc.org.my](http://voc.org.my). To become a member of VOC or to explore other partnerships, contact [sharmila@voc.org.my](mailto:sharmila@voc.org.my).