





STORY XINYI HONG ILLUSTRATION CRAIG STEPHENS

# GOOD OLD DAYS

WHETHER AS FOND MEMORIES OF THE PAST OR A REFLECTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY, THE YOUNGER GENERATIONS OF EVER-CHANGING SINGAPORE ARE SEARCHING FOR HISTORY

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odernity has always been the cornerstone of Singapore's self-perception; it is not a coincidence that the title of the national anthem

translates into English as *Onward Singapore*. Today, the city state markets itself to the world as a forward-looking metropolis.

Note the recently remoulded skyline, starring the futuristic forms of the Marina Bay Sands casino, ArtScience museum and Gardens By The Bay – million-dollar attractions that pivot on the allure of new, cutting-edge spectacles.

Look a little closer, however, and it is not difficult to observe a strain of nostalgia that is growing stronger and more pervasive. It is also not surprising that the seeds of this love affair with history were planted around the same time the scaffolding for Singapore's glamorous new attractions were going up.

*A classic item from The Damn Good Shop, which sells vintage items ranging from telephones to biscuit tins. Photo: Nudge Photography by Noel Yeo*

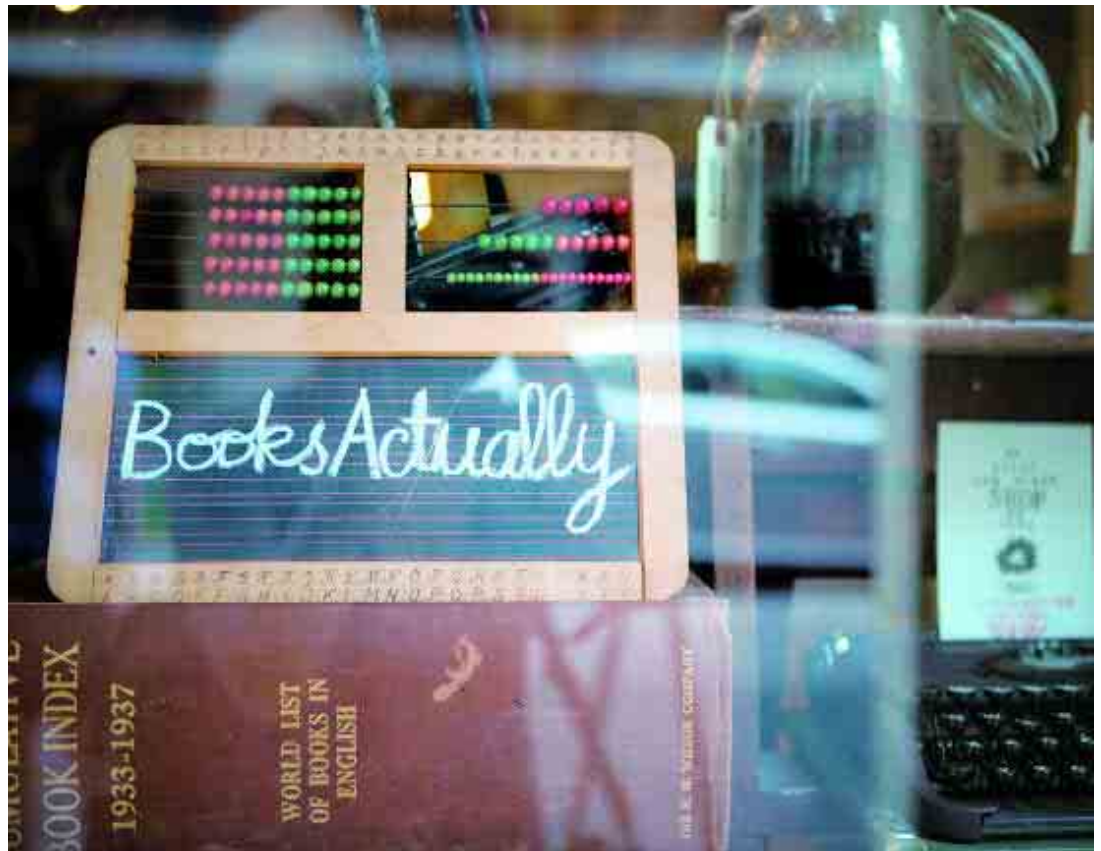


The transformation into a sleek and shiny playground for the world's wealthiest people has had an unexpected side effect of making old-fashioned ways unbearably cool.

Some might trace Singapore's nostalgia movement back to a small literary fiction bookshop that opened in Telok Ayer Street in 2005.

Housed in a conserved shophouse and one of the first notable indie stores on the scene, BooksActually pioneered a vintage aesthetic whose influence can be seen in many of Singapore's boutiques and cafes. Think artfully displayed samples of obsolete technology, such as typewriters, film cameras and other mementos from bygone eras, presented in whimsical bohemian spaces that are slightly – ➔

MANY OF THE VINTAGE ITEMS WERE PASSED DOWN FROM FAMILY MEMBERS **KENNY LECK, BOOKSACTUALLY CO-FOUNDER**



*BooksActually is one of the first notable indie stores whose vintage influence can be seen in many of Singapore's boutiques and cafes.*

deliberately – rough around the edges. Co-founder Kenny Leck, 34, says many of the vintage decorative items in BooksActually were passed down from family members, “and I can’t bear to throw them away”. These include cassette tapes (Leslie Cheung albums from his brother and Black Sabbath ones from his father) and old editions of Penguin paperbacks from his personal collection. He does buy items such as vintage glass tumblers specifically for retail purposes however, and concedes that these yield great profits.

The bookstore recently hosted an exhibition, “Once Upon Singapore”, which showcased vintage records and stationery, all from the personal collections of creative types like Kelley Cheng, who heads publishing and design consultancy The Press Room.

“We revere nostalgia, and revel in collecting old objects that are of sentimental value,” the exhibition’s curatorial text proclaims.

“Perhaps Books Actually became a magnifying glass for this trend,” Leck speculates. “People liked what they saw in our shop, and this turned into a consumerist desire to buy these types of things.”

Nostalgia today is not just manifested in the display of an Olivetti typewriter in a Haji Lane boutique, or a Polaroid camera in a Tiong Bahru cafe – to name two hipster havens where it always seems to be yesterday once more.

Consumerist desire for a romanticised past has spiked so

considerably that nostalgia is a significant source of artistic inspiration. Filmmaker Royston Tan’s last two releases were *Old Places* (2010) and *Old Romances* (2012), documentaries that aimed to “preserve” – on film at least – places in Singapore that will soon disappear or be redeveloped.

Director Kelvin Tong’s 2011 release, *It’s A Great, Great World*, was set in a 1940s amusement park, while director Eric Khoo has been prepping a film about 1950s striptease queen Rose Chan.

Retro snacks Ice Gems and old-fashioned animal-themed mosaic playgrounds built in the 1970s and ‘80s (a key piece of childhood nostalgia for today’s twenty-something and thirty-something Singaporeans) can be found on the knickknacks created by design firms FARM and whenwasfour.

In the up-and-coming bohemian enclave of Jalan Besar, Tyrwhitt General Company bills itself as a “purveyor of the traditional artisan movement”, as well as coffee bar Chye Seng Huat Hardware, which veils its hipster interiors behind the old-school façade of a former hardware store.

Over in Chinatown, The Gentleman's Press makes letter-pressed cards and posters using hundred-year-old machinery, and The Damn Good Shop, "an emporium of childhood memories", sells vintage items ranging from telephones to biscuit tins.

The woman behind The Damn Good Shop is Pat Law, 31, who also heads social influence marketing agency Goodstufh.

"At the risk of sounding whimsical, when I look at a piece of nostalgia, say, a beautiful Bakelite Viewmaster, I think of what the story behind this item could have been – the child whose happiness was found in slides and not 100 channels on cable TV; or how bakelite, an early plastic material, was replaced with a cheaper version as a result of capitalism," she says.

"Or perhaps a memory buried in me awakens. Sometimes, it's nice to remember the carefree [and tax-free!] childhood one used to have.

Mentally, it sets me in the right place to take on the corporate world."

Nostalgia, essentially, is emotional comfort food, particularly for her generation, Law believes. "People now in their late 20s to 30s are what I call the 'half-and-half' generation," she says. "They had an innocent analogue childhood, entered an angsty digital teenhood, and are probably drowning now in the overwhelming noise of the internet. If you look at it that way, the pursuit of nostalgia could be them seeking solace in the peace they once had."

This thirst for solace means that nostalgia is also good for business – not just for indie stores and creative collectives in Singapore, but also for multinational corporations targeting a global customer base.

The now-defunct Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, an art-deco building which stands out in a relentlessly redeveloped Singapore, has found new life as an event space, used by brands such as Hermès to build buzz for new campaigns.

Another heritage site comprising conserved buildings Stamford House, Capitol Building and Capitol Theatre will soon become Singapore's first integrated luxury lifestyle precinct, encompassing a six-star hotel and a luxury mall.

This strategic use of heritage is now a common ↻

**RIGHT**  
The FARM mooncake paperweight available at [jooix.com](http://jooix.com). The design firm features knickknacks from the '70s and '80s.

**BELOW**  
Many nostalgic items, with Chinese characters engraved on them, are available at The Damn Good Shop.





SOMETIMES, IT'S NICE TO REMEMBER THE CAREFREE CHILDHOOD ONE USED TO HAVE PAT LAW, THE DAMN GOOD SHOP FOUNDER



*This typewriter from the good old days can be found at Tyrwhitt General Company, which bills itself as a 'purveyor of the traditional artisan movement'.*

branding exercise for premium brands that are trying to cultivate loyalty among young customers in new emerging markets. Ruth Marshall-Johnson, custom research director of global trend forecaster WGSN, says: "The brands who performed the best after the 2008 global financial crisis tightened their focus on their heritage. It's like buying gold during uncertain times – brands with long histories can present their products as lifetime investments."

The recession is just one of the many traumatising events that have shaped the tumultuous first years of the 21st century. The attacks on 9/11 kicked off a decade of hyper-vigilance about terrorism, Sars sparked a panic about viral epidemics, and environmental catastrophes continue to cause alarm all over the world. Perhaps reflective of this turmoil, there has been an extraordinarily long-lived vogue for nostalgia in popular culture.

Pop stars Amy Winehouse and Adele rose to fame on the back of their soul-soaked heartbreak anthems and 1960s-inflected style; Justin Timberlake's recent comeback album leans heavily on the old-school

big-band sound and look. In the West, TV shows that have dominated the zeitgeist are period pieces such as *Mad Men* and *Downton Abbey*, while time-travel TV shows are all the rage in China and South Korea.

But the power of nostalgia, while potent, has its limitations. For one thing, wallowing in the past may well mean a lack of engagement with the present, and a myopic approach towards the future. In Singapore, there are signs that the tide is starting to turn, with some adopting a more reflective, critical way of considering the past.

In October, for example, Sculpture Square will unveil "Ghost", an exhibition held in conjunction with the Singapore Biennale that will examine how the body acts as a site of resistance against cultural hegemony. Among other things, the exhibition ➔

NOSTALGIA IS ALSO A WAY OF TRYING TO TAKE BACK AND  
 DEFINE OUR OWN CULTURAL IDENTITY CURATOR ALAN OEI



*An artwork by Kenneth Lee, The Grass is Greener on the Inside, was among the recent group show 'Displacements'. The show took a shot at redefining what it means to look backwards.*

will include independent films, performance art and underground bands from the 1990s. “The exhibition looks at some disparate things from the late 1990s that are not usually considered in relation to one another, like heavy metal and performance art,” says curator Alan Oei. “These were expressions of the counter-culture, and they happened because there were very few channels for expression then as the state controlled most of our culture.”

These fringe genres seem potentially more resistant to the often twee, kitschy slant taken by nostalgia buffs. Ultimately, however, Oei believes that all forms of nostalgia are a critique of the present. “When you are unhappy, you look back to the past. Our national identity is very much in flux, which is why this nostalgic bent in popular culture is very well-received,” he says. “People are willing to buy into a notion of cultural authenticity when we recycle past imagery and icons. Nostalgia is also a way of trying to take back and define our own cultural identity.”

Last month, a group show titled “Displacements” took a shot at

redefining what it means to look backwards. The show was held in a 77-year-bungalow in the Selegie area, which was built by artist Yen Phang’s grandfather, and will soon make way for a new condominium. Phang came up with the idea of bidding farewell to this family home by inviting 16 artists to interpret the theme of displacement. “There has been a wave of consciousness about things we have lost, or are about to lose, like Bukit Brown,” he notes, referring to a campaign to save Singapore’s oldest cemetery from being erased through redevelopment.

“We’ve been bombarded with new things, and ... we become more aware of the things we are losing. We’ve gone past that focus on being world-class and turned inwards to find our identity.” ✕