

# Hala Jaber: Hotel Design at its Finest

Art consultant Hala Jaber travels all the way from Ghana to Manila to work on the prestigious Raffles, Makati

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(far left top) Jaber's first project in the Philippines, Raffles, Makati. (far left bottom) Artwork by Van Tuico. (main photo) The lobby of Raffles, Makati. (above) Another artwork by Van Tuico.

No, she doesn't just simply choose the artworks and hang them on the wall. This we learned from Hala Jaber, an art consultant commissioned by Kingdom Holding Investment, a company owned by Saudi prince Alwaleed Bin Talal. They brought her to Manila to work on the newest luxury hotel, the Raffles Makati as well as the Raffles Residences.

"First you have to see the hotel," Jaber explains. "What is the hotel image? What does the hotel want to show? The story of the hotel dictates to you what kind of concepts you have to use for that project. So every hotel I conceptualize for them a different story, a different image. It depends on the brand of the hotel and what is good for that property."

She works closely with the owners as well as the interior designer and the artists. "I am the only link between them. Raffles is a certain brand which has a certain image," Jaber remarks. "We went for a lot of history, the history of the Philippines. Raffles (Singapore) was there in the 30s, so we went for Manila during that time."

The Raffles project took her one year to finish. She came in January 2012 when the hotel was still under construction. "I was here all the time," she relates. "I followed the progress. I followed the details. I like to give my time. I see the end so I better follow it from the beginning."

She noticed that music was very much a part of the local culture. "When I came, I kept seeing the people singing; people with women," she shares. "I was asking, why all



(top to bottom) An elegant and classy chandelier inside Raffles Hotel; On the wall across the elevator hangs "The Explorer" by Gerry Joquico.



of them; why all the time, we have the music, the women. This is a typical cultural thing. So I understood. I went to visit galleries. It's my job. But not everyone who comes for 24 hours or 48 hours will know about this."

She saw the work of Anthony Paloma at the St. Lukes Hospital at Bonifacio Global City. "He is very good with musicians," Jaber remarks. "I was really impressed with his musicians. I like the style of his figures, so that's how it starts. And the colors he used really matched Raffles. Together, we developed the 'harana' concept." [Ed note: Harana is a traditional form of courtship in

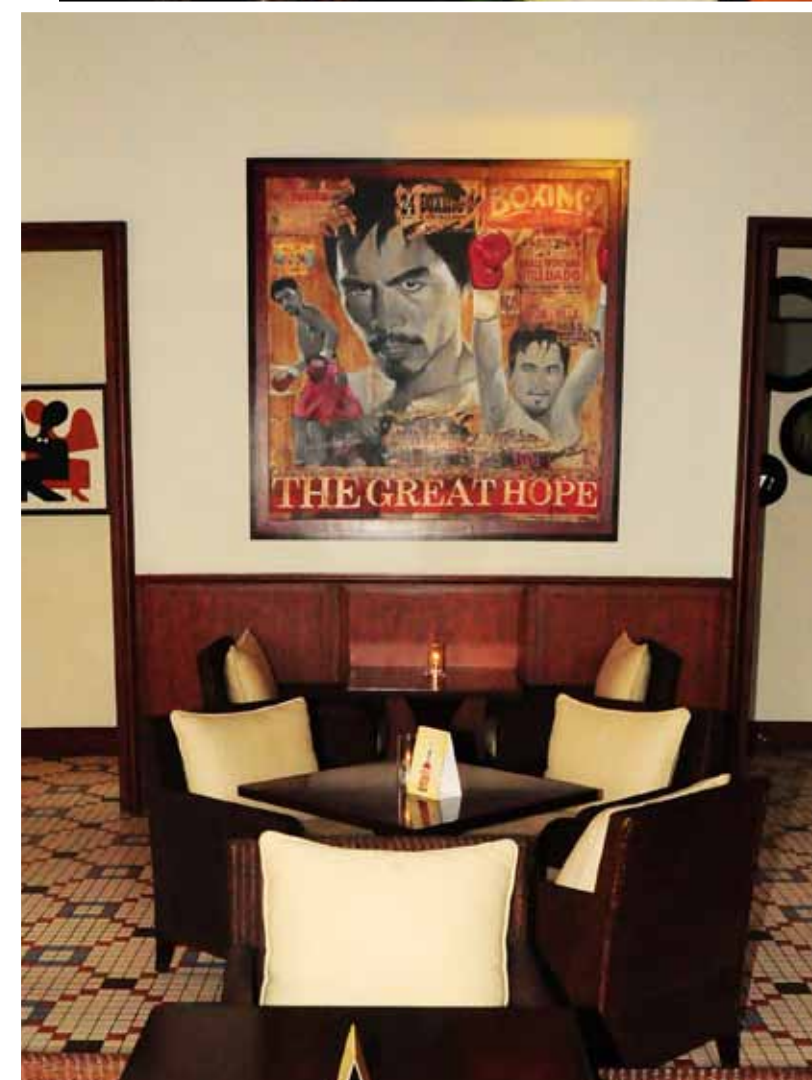
which a man serenades a woman.]

Since the hotel was still under construction, "we all worked on the plans. The artist used to come here and it was just cement, and I used to tell him, 'that's the wall,'" Jaber relates. "The *Harana* was originally meant to be placed between the cabinets, but when the piece was finished, I looked at it and said, I want the *Harana* somewhere else. The piano was there, this one we move it to here, the whole thing changed." There were many last minute changes.

"Doing the corridors wasn't easy. There are

20 floors and we were doing one corridor every two weeks. Each floor has a concept by itself, all Filipino concepts, all Filipino artists. So each floor is like an exhibition for the artist," Jaber relates. "I found the art scenery here very rich and diverse."

Jaber, who is Lebanese, is married with two sons, 16 and 13 years old. They live in Ghana. She studied at the American University in Lebanon, where she majored in Sociology and Anthropology. "I am a sociologist, that's why I think I conceptualize in a historic way," she remarks. "I want to include the culture of the country and the



(top to bottom) A very unique sculpture, "Magnifico" by Daniel de la Cruz, in front of the bookshelf in the lobby; A collage on Filipino boxing icon Manny Pacquiao by artist Delphine Delorme

artwork because I believe that the artwork of the country reflects the values, the culture, and it's beautiful to put in a hotel. Because when they come to the hotel, this is how they learn the culture of the country. For example, when you go to the Philippines, you don't know that the 'harana' is something cultural. A foreigner will not know. So the artwork will instigate them to know."

She has been doing this type of work for the last four years. Her favorite part is the element of surprise. "When the idea comes, I can see the details, the painting in my mind, and I get so excited to see the artist and to discuss it," she says. "Sometimes I help the artist with ideas, with the concepts and follow up with them personally. I work together with the artist. We meet, we discuss, it is a work in progress. I follow up until the pieces are changed. You have to love the work of the artist. You have to believe in the capacity of that artist when you commission him."

"People rarely go to museums. People are more interested in shopping. I find putting artworks in hotels quite interesting because it shows the culture of the country. It is nice for the artist, it is beautiful for the hotel," Jaber shares. "For me the driving force is, I like the art. I love it. I love what I do." □