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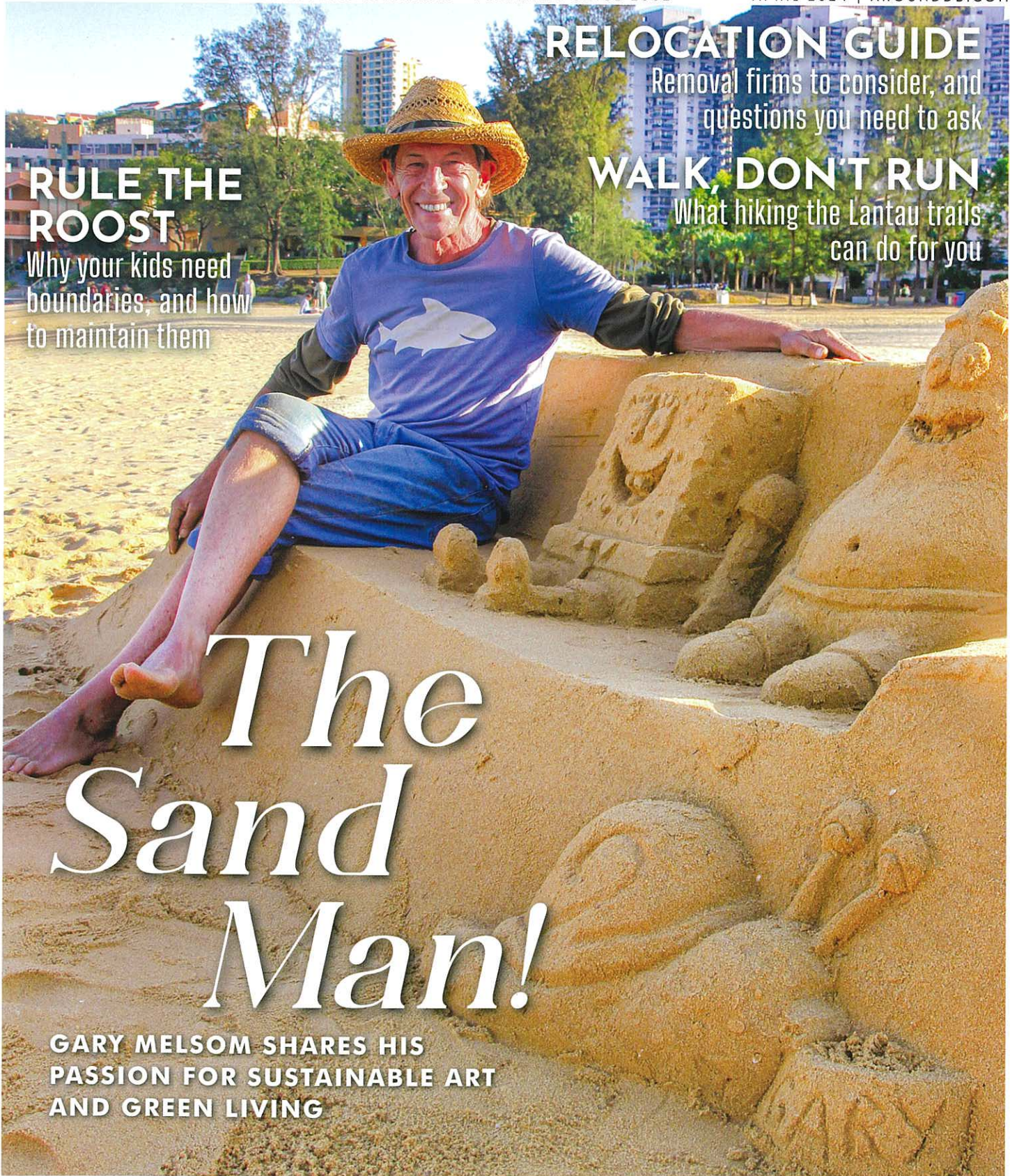
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The Sand Man!

GARY MELSOM SHARES HIS PASSION FOR SUSTAINABLE ART AND GREEN LIVING



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THE SAND MAN

You won't be able to look at artist Gary Melsom's latest work for very long, but that's OK by him. *Elizabeth Kerr reports*

PHOTOS BY Sarin Ale

Gary Melsom is one of those guys with a story for every passing comment. A long, rambling conversation outside at Moojoo on a balmy March afternoon unearths all manner of nuggets that indicate a life well lived. The UK native and artistic autodidact tried to study art formally in Harrogate but couldn't get funding. He's a qualified teacher; he holds certification in vegetarian catering and nutrition. Mention the film that just hit cinemas, *One Love*, and Gary drops a casual, "I saw Bob Marley in 1980, at the Rainbow in London. You never know what the future is going to be."

More tales from the life vault? Gary once shared art studio space with sculptor John Somerville, known for his life-sized busts of David Bowie, Jimi Hendrix and The Rolling Stones. He's clearly a rock 'n' roll guy, but has never heard of Living Colour and boggles at the notion that circuits in the 1980s couldn't get past the fact the band was black. He was in *Gigolo of Chinese Hollywood*, starring Eric Tsang in 1999, and worked as voice talent in Hong Kong for 12 years. He taught in a Guizhou village school that averaged 100 students per class. He's passionate about planting trees, and is known to give away his homemade cookies.

A slight guy with shaggy brown hair that puts you in mind of singular character actor Julian Richings, Gary is so top heavy with stories he gets off track easily. And he's clearly well-known in the community, with or without his signature straw hat. As we speak, he raises a hand twice to greet passersby, and gets his Café en Français tutor, Alexandre, to stop for a minute. "He's amazing. He knows everybody. And you're hearing about me through him really, because he's how your editor came to hear about me."

A native of Watford, about 25 kilometres west of London, Gary has been living in Hong Kong for 30 years; the last four of those in Discovery Bay with his wife of 25 years, Bonita. It's a familiar story. Gary stopped in Hong Kong to see friends on his way home from a trip through Asia in 1993 and never left. In fairness, he was fleeing the cold and damp of the UK following a bout of rheumatic fever in 1990.

"I lost about 15 kilogrammes. I used to be really," he puffs his chest to indicate being buff. "If people touched me in the pub or something, they'd be really apologetic. But I'm not like that," he says with a chuckle. He went to Bangkok first with an old girlfriend, then on to Kolkata where she had family. That's where he cemented a commitment to art.

"Her uncle knew a guy who ran an operation called Silence, mostly blind or deaf people, a few with polio, making stuff for Oxfam. I had to be somewhere warm, so I thought well, I'll work there

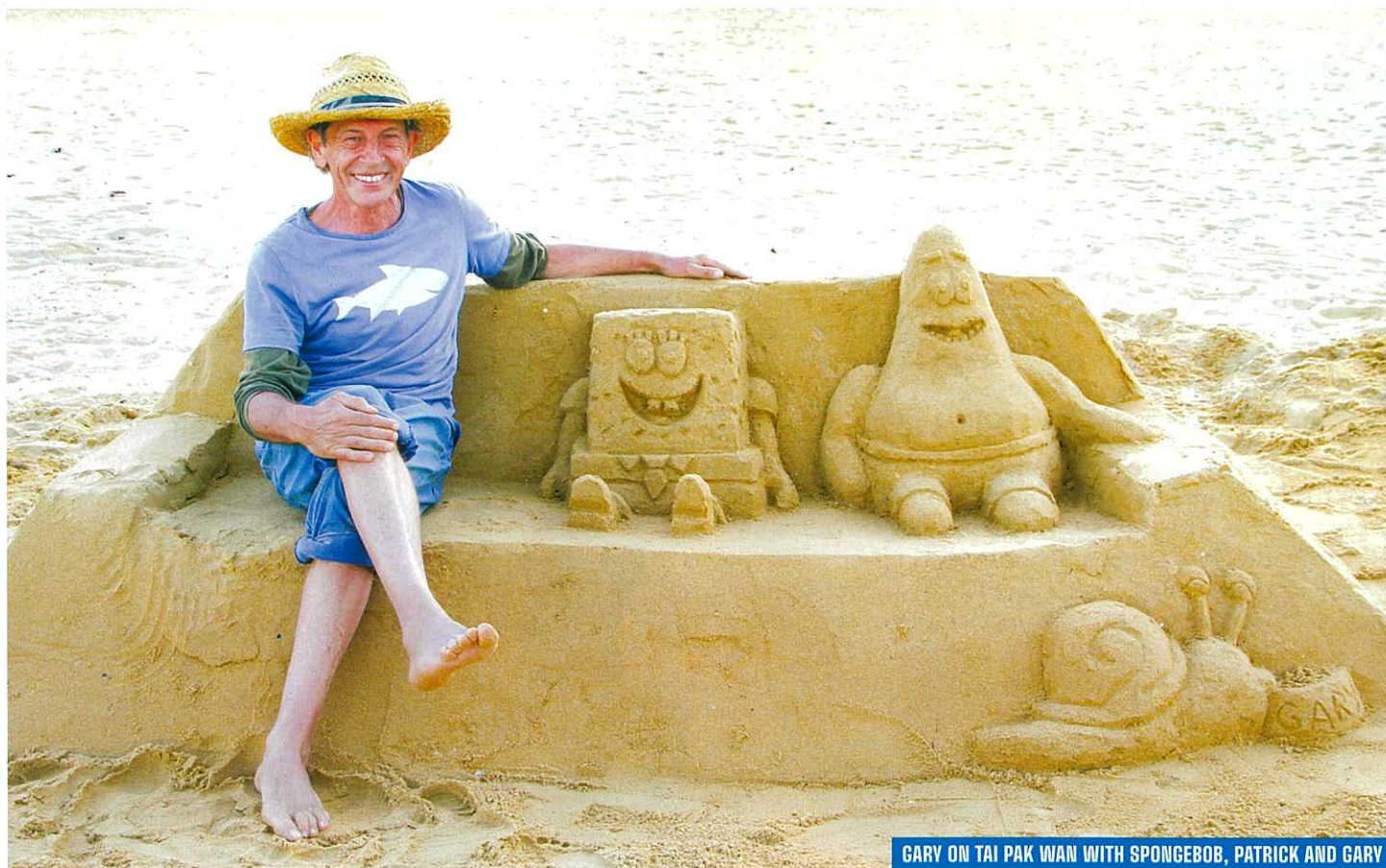


AN IMPROMPTU SAND SCULPTURE LESSON

and actually do something." It was at Silence that Gary perfected making the moulds that would eventually become the foundation of his earliest sculpture work.

By the time he landed in Hong Kong, Gary had honed his sculpting – model-making to be more accurate – and was making a living as an artist. His mirrors framed with Western and Chinese zodiac and Aztec-influenced icons, made from a home-made dental plaster and papier mâché combination, were a particular hit. He took a concession in the old Seibu loft, and a maker stall at the Gold Coast – where he met Bonita, also a teacher by trade. "She teaches belly dancing, yoga; she plays the piano; and she plays in a band," Gary says with undeniably goo-goo eyes. He got an exhibition at the Fringe (*What's Going On?*) in 1995, yet he still hesitates to call himself an artist.

"I feel embarrassed when somebody comes along and asks 'Are you an artist?' Well, I'm an artist, but I feel like, you know, kind of not really? I really like [fellow DBer] Richard Crosbie. I respect guys like that, who do proper art. I must get one of his paintings."



GARY ON TAI PAK WAN WITH SPONGEBOB, PATRICK AND GARY

Perhaps not surprisingly, being an artist didn't reliably pay the bills, so Gary decided to find something more stable to do, heading back to the UK for a stint to get CELTA accreditation. Since then, he's taught in more than 100 schools in Hong Kong. Teaching took up a lot of time – he made his own textbooks too – and put sculpting on hold for nearly 20 years, with the exception of the occasional dinosaur, Sponge Bob or Star Wars character for nephews' birthday cakes.

Gary took his last teaching job after COVID, but found that the rules, regulations and Zoom classes took the joy out of the job. "I did it for a year but it didn't feel the same. I just felt like I shouldn't be doing this anymore. It was time to retire."

Now as a semi-retired man of mostly leisure, Gary has decided to spin his sand sculpting into a business. His office is the DB beachfront, his workshop of four years. Most of us will conjure kids making sand castles with a spade and a bucket, but Gary's game is extremely elevated. He parks on the beach and after several dozen buckets of water and a great deal of compacting he has a plain sand block, to which he takes a cement trowel. Think of Michelangelo's marble blocks before they became *David*. The sand can be fussy, but he makes it work.

He's done installation sized sculptures – a five-metre train, a snooker table, a sports car for Valentine's Day, a replica of the Angkor Wat Apsara dancers –

and fan-favourites Snoopy and Woodstock, Hello Kitty, Pikachu and Minions (check them out at www.sandae.online). The best part about the public sculptures is how social and interactive they are.

"I think there's more potential here than there was just making little artefacts for people, just moulding them and selling them in the shops. There's no connection there," says Gary. He's already earned commissions for community events like DB's dragon boat gala, and birthday parties are regular requests. "The sculptures work even better when they're interactive. If you make, I don't know, a sofa that people can sit on, it can also be for team-building. I think there's quite a bit that can come from this ... It's nice to come down here and make something."

"DB is really international, and the sand sculpting helps me connect to people," Gary adds, giving the story of a Croatian neighbour who stopped to watch him at the weekend as an example. "She found it very therapeutic when I gave her the job of smoothing an area. This is one of the reasons I'm giving sand sculpture lessons. Like anything, it's easier and more fun, when you know how. And what could be more sustainable?"

And therein lies the rub. For all of Gary's creativity, if you're not there to see it, you never will. "People ask if I'm sad that it just gets washed away?" He finishes, answering with a little shrug. There's always more sand.