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A fine display of art diplomacy

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THERE is an unmistakable "Europeanness" latent in the works of 12 artists in the Argentine Artists in Malaysia exhibition at the Regent Gallery in the Kuala Lumpur Regent Hotel.

This is by choice as much as it is a tradition which the Argentinians have drawn succour and inspiration from - even after they won independence from the Spanish conquistadors 181 years ago.

The "choice" part is the seemingly political (and economically) correct move of the organisers in avoiding sensitive subjects such as nudes, and going for subjects of more universal appeal - hyper-realist landscapes, still-lives of fruits and musical instruments, Optical Art permutations and Constructivist abstractions.

The Argentine Embassy's Dr Carlos Chiappe Solozabal, in acting as interpreter for curator Jorge H. Giovanelli, felt that most people in Malaysia would not relate to paintings of Argentinian city scenes.

So don't expect pictures of interesting architectural facades of Buenos Aires, or portraits of ordinary life such as a street Gardel doing the tango or a wayside cobbler.

Some of the works were purportedly painted for this exhibition on these injunctions. That's art diplomacy for you.

But that does not detract from the redoubtable quality of the works - the artists' maturity and skills in playing with colours, lines, forms, space, image.

This exhibition brings together a more serious collection of Argentinian art in recent times - there was an Argentinian Art exhibition of works of seven artists (also at Regent Hotel) in May 1992, the Amsterdam-based Carlos Re in the Belum Malaysian Experience workshop/exhibition in 1994, and the Minetti-Andino show at Galeri Maybank in May 1995.

This time, Giovanelli, who has put together several prestigious travelling shows including some on Salvador Dali, Antonio Tapies, Leonardo da Vinci and the Argentinian Raul Soldi, has brought together a diverse group from the cultural spectrum.

They are Leopoldo Torres Aguerro, Mario Agatiello, Magdalena Beccarini, Manuel Blasco, Diana Doweck, Jorge Duarte, Eduardo Guisano, Jesus Marcos, Tito Perez, Hugo Sbernini, Patricia Sicardi and Ines Vega.

Their works were done in the Post-Guerra Suchias (Dirty War in 1976-83) scenario, where there was purportedly freer self-expression.

Heading the group is Aguerro, the diplomat and only deceased artist, who died three years ago and who lived the last 30 years of his life in Paris.

"He was given a posthumous exhibition at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes last August when 100 of his works were shown," said his widow Monica, who represented him at the Kuala Lumpur show.

Aguero, who was in charge of the Argentine Embassy to Unesco in Paris, studied at the Prilidiano Pueyrredon School of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires and also the sumi-e in Kyoto, Japan.

Using an intricate panoply of thin-coloured sticks with bulbous ends that create rhythmic patterns when they overlap or even by themselves, Aguerro's works follow the Generative Art Group's Optical illusions of vibrations and gyrations like those of the works of Eduardo McEntyre.

Also playing with geometric shapes, but more on the illusion of space, is Agatiello, whose training was basically in architecture. His acrylic on canvas relies on gradated accentuations to soften the dynamic sharp-edged

thrusts of his shapes.

Beccarini plays on a push-and-pull vertiginous perspective, with her subjects often dementedly cavorting here and there but the distortion and contortion suggest something more sinister. The scenes are reminiscent of Chagall's fantasy approach.

The Buenos Aires-born Beccarini also studied at the Prilidiano Pueyrredon.

Another whose works have unsettling undercurrents is Dowek, with her deserted landscapes of sterile modern contraptions in acrylic on canvas - something not unlike our Kok Yew Puah's works, but in much less detail.

Dowek won the Gunther Award gold medal in the National Association of Art Critics in 1993 and also the Artist of the Year 1994-95 award presented by the Argentine Associations of Art Critics.

Duarte's renditions of boats anchored in placid waters with shimmering reflections are subtle contemplations, while Perez's river scenes of the Rio de la Plata are reflections of the passing of time and changing light.

Duarte, the director-general of museums and historical sites in Buenos Aires in 1972-75, splits his time between Cadaques in Gerano in Spain and Buenos Aires.

It may be interesting to contrast the delicately-rendered background of Blasco's violin against the fragmented "body" parts of Marcos. Both work in oil on canvas.

Blasco is an architect by profession, while Marcos was the only one among this group of artists born in Spain (Salamanca).

Sbernini's still-lives of fruits force visual disjunctions with their sliced-up pictorialism.

He won the first prize in the M. Chandon Biennale in 1987, six years after winning first prize in the national Salon.

Sicardi, the youngest in the group at 41, works her subjects such as an oil lamp against a palette of subdued overlapping colours while Vega plumps for deep colours with delicate tinges in her portraits.

Guisano's figuratives are reminiscent of the styles of the Italian Trans-Avant-garde.

Chiappe said this exhibition, held in conjunction with the Group of Seven Summit in Kuala Lumpur, was a sort of reciprocation to the Malaysian Contemporary Art exhibition organised jointly by the (Malaysian) National Art Gallery at the Museo de Arte Espanol (Museum of Spanish Art) Enrique Laretta in Buenos Aires in November 1995.

Then, Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in Buenos Aires, also to attend the G-7 Summit. It was Dr Mahathir's second official visit there, his first being in 1991 after which air links were established between the two countries.

* The Argentine Artists in Malaysia exhibition ends at the Regent Kuala Lumpur tomorrow.

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