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HIV/AIDS victims paint their emotions

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THERE is a naive, child-like element to the tentative, unhurried marks in varying designs, shapes and colours on paper. A few of the paintings look positively devotional/inspirational-like as if as a document of self-affirmation, rediscovery.

The treatment and message can be simplistic, literal even, like the one of the half-sunken vessel under a moonlit night (a bit of a romance here).

Had it not been foretold, the unsuspecting viewer would think that the paintings were the handiwork of children. With fair justifications too, for a few works are childhood reminiscences with dollops of innocence, touching on the beauty of nature and the beauty and sanctity of life around it.

These works are the result of art-therapy sessions for adults in the 20s to mid-40s age range, of people living with HIV and AIDS (PWA).

Such expressiveness, though controlled and restrained because of an initial coyness to reveal one's naked emotions, are cathartic as well as communicative - with the "them" world, and more importantly, with themselves - a dialogue that can be self-revelatory, self-fulfilling and deeply satisfying.

Obviously, Positive Living, a support group of the Pink Triangle AIDS crusaders, has done a good job on these "clients" as its manager Zash Zainal refers to those in such distress, for there is an inordinate number of the universal Love symbols. This, too, could be the clients' silent way of showing their appreciation for the care invested, and hope instilled, in them.

A pilot project by Positive Living with the help of Canadian therapist Pamela Whitaker, the art-therapy sessions started last year in groups of 10 to 15 each time.

Said Whitaker: "The participants are given paint, collage and recyclable materials. They are free to do anything they want based on the intuitive and instinctive process. They tend to portray experiences of life, feelings and issues in both a realistic and abstract way.

"Participants in this process require no previous exposure to art but rather an openness to explore inner terrain and risk outward representation. Verbal associations to art-therapy works are narrative explanations relating to a subjective theme.

"The imagery is produced in a non-judgemental and confidential environment, which protects against vulnerabilities of exposure."

Whitaker brought into the sessions her vast experience of her two-year post-graduate training in art-therapy in Vancouver and another three years at the Jung Institute in Ireland, besides hands-on work with disenfranchised groups.

Some 39 works from these sessions will go on show at GaleriWan Bangsar at 16 Jalan Telawi, Kuala Lumpur, until May 11 to mark the 14th International AIDS Memorial Day yesterday (gallery hours: Monday to Saturday, 10am-7pm).

The opening will be officiated by Malaysian AIDS Foundation chairperson Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, who is also the Malaysian AIDS Council president.

* Positive Living can be reached at 7C-1, 1st Floor, Lorong Ipoh Kechil, off Jalan Raja Laut, Kuala Lumpur, or Tel: 03-4444611, or Fax: 03-4444622. Its counselling and AIDS info hotlines are 03-4445455/4445466.

The Malaysian AIDS Foundation is based at 3 Jalan Cempedak, off Jalan
Kovil Hilir, Sentul, Kuala Lumpur. It can be reached at Tel: 03-4451033;
Fax: 03-4426133, or e-mail: aidsfund@popmail.asiaconnect.com.my.

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