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Expressing a show of solidarity

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IT'S chilling but it's not so much because of the political slant of the artworks displayed in the "Apa? Siapa? Kenapa?" exhibition.

For one, the venue - an empty office lot in an obscure newly-completed building in Taman Setiawangsa, near Wangsa Maju in Kuala Lumpur, was not easy to find, to say the least.

Once there, access to the fourth floor, where the makeshift low-ceilinged "gallery" is located, is through only one lift, with many of the side exits locked.

Inside, the dim lighting makes it look like a dingy lounge though one suspects the areas are darkened to enhance the shadowy effect of certain installations.

Most lots are still vacant and the whole place is virtually deserted except for the odd workman or two putting the finishing touches here and there.

That this was no ordinary art exhibition is obvious from the recurring images of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and his wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail plastered on a few artworks.

Another glaring feature in the artworks which were in response to the "current upheavals in the country" were the anti-ISA logos used as political clarion calls.

The mood in the exhibition organised by a group calling themselves APA (Artis Pro Activ) was such that even visitors are viewed with a mixed feeling of relief and suspicion.

In such a scenario, it was small wonder that established galleries had hummed and hawed before deciding to give this exhibition a wide berth.

Co-ordinator Wong Hoy Cheong, who put up the exhibition in three weeks with neither infrastructure nor funds, said one gallery owner even neatly sidestepped the proposal, citing "renovations" of its space. Deja vu!

And so this exhibition had to be held at this gulag of a venue, which was not as inaccessible as it seemed for Wong reported a daily visitor turnout of 15.

Not all works are connected with the present dilemma. Some artists, like Nirmala Shanmughalingam, sent old works, on the ravages of war on children - more as a show of solidarity.

There are the inevitable few neophytes, however noble their intentions, whose literal approaches leave little to the imagination and much to be desired.

Here, the Message is the Medium, and so what if the finer points do tend to get subsumed in the Politics of Art, never mind that Lucy Lippard contends that all art exists in a political situation, anyway?

In his essay, Wong pre-empted criticisms of such perceived shortcomings as something irrelevant as "this exhibition functions as a sketch, like notations, an exhibition-in-progress if you will."

He also sets out the premise of the exhibition.

"The past two months has been a period of great divisiveness. For many people, the basic and assumed principles of truth, justice and freedom have been reduced to an entangled mess. It has become a crisis of faith; and in such a crisis, the act of creation for artists resonates with a deep urgency. To create becomes an affirmation of our existence of faith.

"It attempts to reclaim some form of meaning for ourselves, however fragmented it might be. It attempts to overcome the fear to ask questions

and seek answers."

Since the roller-coaster spasms of currency exchange, the sobering Malaysian psyche has been under siege.

Other events followed in quick succession - the "barricading" of the economy and Anwar's dramatic sacking in the wake of sensational allegations.

While Malaysian artists may have rallied to the cause of the Palestinians and the Bosnians, never before have they come together single-mindedly to express themselves politically on issues permeating every strata of society and spanning the racial divide.

However, the climate of confusion was reflected in most works.

Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal's oil on canvas with the self-explanatory title ? drives home this ambivalence.

With the absence of visual clues, the "hooked" question mark looming over a beautiful Malaysian landscape could have been (mis) read more as an ecological statement.

Anthonie Chong's Good Morning of a nubile half-naked girl awakening to a new dawn, on the contrary, when exhibited in the context of this politically-loaded exhibition suggests an impending sense of danger and a loss of innocence.

A subtle sinister vein was detected in J. Anurendra's multiple mini-portrait acrylic on canvas, Happy Malaysians, which used faceted cuts to underscore the psychological shadows of doubt and tension behind the deliriously happy facade.

This device was somewhat reminiscent of the mock-caricatures used by "Mao-Pop" artists like Yu Youhan and Li Wei.

Under a regimented array of 12 portraits of ordinary Malaysians of various descent are three red-helmeted personnel, set apart by bold red lines from the 12 on top and from a baby represented the future generation below.

For the first time in a long time, maybe since his Waiting for Godot, Dr Sulaiman Esa sidetracked from his works of deep religiosity and supplications of architectonic patterning and Islamic cosmogony, to reflect on more down-to-earth matters.

His Kebengongan suggested a scenario that outrival the Beckettian Theatre of the Absurd, inspired by Dinsman's poem of the same title.

His other work, Last Supper at Bukit Aman, was self-explanatory.

His wife, Khatijah Sanusi, emphathised with the fortitude and courage of Wan Azizah, in her mixed media, Di Bawah Naungan Ka'abah.

Only Sulaiman's and Khatijah's works come with price tags.

Redza Piyadasa elevated the Asiaweek cover of Sept 30, showing Anwar with the prominent black-eye, in a painting frame with pointed stencilled letterings, Malaysia Boleh!, below.

Ruzaika Omar Basaree suggested a transgression of the sacred epitomised by the condominium of Islamic architecture in Belenggu, where a "Silence" sign attached to chains "cordons off" the work, with symbolic white ribbons all over.

Wong turned his art into a processual act, a vehicle for change, in his campaign to get thumbprints commitment to petition Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to abolish the ISA.

In a bed installation Malaysian Dilemma, Ahmad Fuad Osman raised the question of the REAL enemy or pengkhianat (traitor) but the odd ensemble of shoes, ladder, pillow, white gloves, mosquito net cover, and a skeletal "pelvic girdle" leaves one in a dilemma.

Nadiyah Bamadhaj's 5.7-metre light box with choice words scratched on the lens of a series of sun spectacles was dedicated to a friend, Julian, who had experienced detentions under the ISA.

The tenets of the Rukun Negara printed on the back of school exercise books seem to sound hollow as Tengku Sabri showed in his installation.

Another work played on devaluation with an enlarged Lima Puloh Ringgit in negative in a cutout in the middle of a hanging table, which is reflected on a bigger sagging plate below.

Other installations included Nur Hanim Khairuddin's pithy thoughts of freedom from slot cards in a cage frame; and Hasnol J. Saidon's 30-minute video on issues of identity and ethnicity.

Norizan Muslim saw the "laws" of the jungle in the human world where the fittest survives, as in his sculpture of a giant spider closing in on an entrapped ant.

Significantly, the opening on Oct 27 marked the 11th anniversary of Operasi Lalang where several dissident elements and dissenting voices were put behind bars under the ISA in the wake of escalating tension.

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