

14/07/1998

Fulfilment of a vision

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"WHEN I see the building coming up, I cry inside."

Datuk Ibrahim Hussein's inner tears of joy and near disbelief run deeper.

In the nine years since his unique museum-in-the-rainforest project was mooted, Ib, as the artist is more popularly known, has overcome red tape and single-handedly raised funds and pledges of works from internationally-recognised artists.

The museum precincts are to be carved from the northwestern fringe of Pulau Langkawi on what was formerly a pirate hideout (Pantai Pasir Tengkorak or the Beach of Skulls), with the promontory overlooking the Thai village of Teratao.

Many had thought Ib had given up on the Ibrahim Hussein Museum and Cultural Foundation project, which is non-profit and non-governmental and with tax-exempt status but no endowment.

The intervening years have been a test of will (legal as well as political) and bills (fund-raising).

Since the foundation's launching by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in (Dec 11) 1992, it got bogged down by land-alienation problems.

But Ib continued raising funds and awareness at home and abroad. The momentum accelerated last September when the land was cleared and piling commenced.

Ib had decided to start with half of the original RM9 million estimate funds raised.

So every Thursday for the last few months, he has been making pilgrimages to Pulau Langkawi to see, shape and midwife the birth of his cultural complex.

The "first phase" core museum building is scheduled to be completed in September. The galleries on two floors will take up 3,060 square metres on the 12x12-metre module with the walls as high as 4.2 metres.

Other proposed amenities such as studio/workshops, staff quarters, a restaurant and research huts will have to wait until more funds are forthcoming.

"In spite of all the agony and a bit of ecstasy (which he and his wife Sim have endured), I feel that this one is the country's gift to the people," says Ib.

The museum is to be a cultural centre for painters, sculptors, designers, dancers, writers, dramatists, film-makers and musicians from all over the world.

It will have in its permanent collection a largesse of 25 of Ib's most important paintings which he had donated to the museum, and there will also be those of artists like Danish designer Pers Arnoldi, French multimedia artist Thierry Vide, and (the late) Spanish sculptor Cesar Manrique, who have all pledged their works to the foundation.

But at the moment, Ib does not have the funds yet to bring these works over nor does he have the operational expenses.

To him, the structure must come up first if only to prove to sceptics and the more cautious of would-be donors that this is for real and not a pipe-dream.

Yet with the museum coming up nicely, Ib feels humbled by it all.

"It was a strange emotion. When (Datuk Lim) Chong Keat (the museum's

architect) and I first chose that land in the tropical rainforest (in late-December 1989), I felt so insignificant, like nothing, compared to this.

"Then, at this stage now, when I went there and looked at this man-made structure, because of the concept and design and inside the gallery space, I felt so insignificant.

"It was like a rebirth of a very exciting beginning, like that of the legendary island Langkawi itself," recalls Ib, hinting at the lifting of the curse of Mahsuri, the princess who some 170 years and seven generations ago was wrongly condemned to death for alleged infidelity.

So every Thursday, Ib is at the project site, sometimes staying overnight, to look into the nitty-gritty like wall finishing, lighting and also construction technicalities.

Ib is also there to ensure that the site is left as natural as possible, with the museum well-hidden by the forest thickets and foliage.

"Until now, with the roof up, you can't see the museum from the road. Chong Keat designed it that way with the column like the trunk of a tree," says Ib.

"I identified only 13 trees to be cut down instead of more than 40 trees (for the road to the museum)."

The project has been energy-sapping for the 62-year-old artist extraordinaire. Every waking hour, he and Sim have to look into every aspect of the project, via phone, mail, fax and sometimes, also personally.

Yet, all these have also been a tremendous inspiration to his painting.

An astonishing repertoire of powerful works straddling three series leaves one in little doubt about his gift, discipline and vision.

So frenzied were these creative splurges that it even got Sim worried.

Continuing his Asian mixed media series including a chilling one on Pol Pot, Ib has also created three mantra-like tomes to mythology. In another strand, he pays tribute to creative friends such as American pop art icon Andy Warhol and German writer Ernst Jurgens.

Confides Ib of this strange elixir: "The project has been a tremendous balance. The building itself gives me the passion, the strength, to continue whatever I want to do.

"Each time I go there, I have to come back to paint."

For one who dared to dream, he concedes to having sleepless nights at first.

"Initially, it was a period of anxiety, fear also, because you are dealing with ambiguity.

"In a way, I am dealing with a blank canvas. Just like my paintings, the moment you touch, you have to continue searching and scribbling, drawing this and that.

"Yet, this one took more effort because you are not only involved with yourself. In painting, you don't care about the rest of the world. You just do your own thing and express yourself, regardless of what people think.

"But in the project, you are dealing with people. It is more physical."

For Ib, whose life off-and-on the canvas reads like a fairy tale and who is well-known all over the world, there is something about the project that made him go beyond his personal life, beyond the canvas.

The foundation will be an enduring legacy of his faith and ingenuity, a starting point of a global village of the arts for future generations.

"To me, it's my whole lifetime commitment. It is a big responsibility in creating this. At this stage, I feel very satisfied to see that it's a reality," says Ib.

\* The museum project will have a soft opening in September with an

exhibition of Ib's works, some of which have not been seen since his 1986 Retrospective at the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur.

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