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Ib's dream finally fulfilled

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DATUK Ibrahim Hussein's dream museum amid lush greenery in Langkawi will be ready for a soft opening during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit this month.

The 62-year-old artist behind the museum foundation named after him said that when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made an unscheduled visit to his museum on Aug 9, he asked that the museum be part of the itinerary for Apec delegates in their visit to Langkawi.

"The first phase of the building is almost completed except for work on two more modules (where scaffolding could still be seen)," says Ibrahim, who has been making regular trips there from his Kuala Lumpur base to oversee the construction.

To mark the event, Ibrahim is holding a solo exhibition, *Once*, which will feature works done over the last 11 years.

This will be his first major exhibition in Malaysia since his 1986 "Retrospective at the National Art Gallery", which was preceded then by a smaller-scale exhibition at Universiti Utara Malaysia in Jitra.

Since then Ib, as the artist is more popularly known, has been feted across the world with solo exhibitions in Chile (Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago, 1991), Tokyo and Osaka (Takeshimaya Galleries, 1989), and Davos in Switzerland during the World Economic Forum summit in 1994.

The Langkawi show will feature 60 of Ib's big canvases together with 20 smaller ones, including his mixed media "Asian Series" which includes Myanmar Nobel Peace Prize dissident Aung San Suu Kyi, Indian "bandit queen" Phoolan Devi and Khmer Rouge despot Pol Pot.

Special containers have to be used to ferry his works there and the insurance is substantial.

"Although the transportation is sponsored, this is the first time we are dealing with the packing and the insurance," says his wife Sim.

To mark the occasion, Ib has also come up with a book, also entitled *Once*, which chronicled the shared vision of others in the museum project, and its development.

To raise funds for the museum, 500 copies in limited editions, all signed and numbered, will be sold at at RM1,000 each.

The museum is run by the Ibrahim Hussein Museum and Cultural Foundation, where the land for it was alienated by the Kedah State Government from forest reserve land for its non-profit, non-governmental enterprise.

To obtain more funds, there will be merchandising of postcards, T-shirts and posters with Ib's Ramayana '98 acrylic-on-canvas painting (244x244cm) as the centrepiece.

Admission fees will be charged at the impressive rotunda front gate.

The museum-in-the-forest complex lies on the northwestern fringe of Langkawi, in Pantai Pasir Tengkorak (Beach of Skulls), on an elevation overlooking the Thai fishing village of Teratao.

Several artists have pledged to contribute their works to the museum. These include French light-and-sound sculptor Thierry Vide, Danish graphic designer Per Arnoldi (who designed the museum's logo), Ramon Castellanos, Antonio Lopez, Arturo Luz and Spanish sculptor-architect Cesar Manrique.

Ib's museum, designed by architect Datuk Lim Chong Keat, will also have link-ups with other foundations, such as Manrique's museum in Lanzarotti as well as the Cebu foundation run by Filipina pianist Ingrid Sala.

However, the pledged works have yet to come as those who are still alive

would need to go there and assess the sites and specifications for their works.

But the East Asiatic Company had made good its promise a few years ago of a donation of a state-of-the-art printing press. The press is a 10-ton Heidelberg model which was installed by forklift in one of the galleries before the walls were erected and sealed around it.

The printing press brings back some fond memories.

"It's so funny. The first painting that won me a prize was that of the printing press which I did during my student days in London," he says, reminiscing how the suit of more than 20 paintings won approval from the board of the Byam Shaw School of Drawing and Painting, where he was studying.

Ib is also proud that the museum and its periphery were built with the least possible damage to their natural environment.

"We only cut down 13 trees," he says, while emphasising that certain trees in the museum complex are even allowed to blend with the architecture. While the museum is only a third of the original plans, Ib is ecstatic that they had come this far from "point zero."

"We have to think of everything to create a place like this," he says of the foundation, which has tax-exempt status but no endowment. "So many obstacles, so little money."

Its creation is a glowing tribute to Ib and his wife, who have persevered since the museum project was broached 11 years ago, and officially launched by Dr Mahathir in December 1992.

The husband-and-wife team not only has to look into details like finishing, lighting (Targetti), tracking, sprinklers alignment but also tackle secretarial, fundraising, legal and promotional work at home and abroad, besides sorting out the red-tape that threatened many times to derail the project.

When fully operational, the museum complex will be a virtual "global village" for painters, sculptors, designers, dancers, writers, dramatists, filmmakers and musicians.

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