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Tajuddin's elusive art

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TRYING to link a story pattern from the litter of symbols in Tajuddin Ismail's works would be like a cat chasing its tail.

While his works in various media do strive towards certain meanings, they also conspire towards its negation.

Things are never what they are, nothing is permanent.

And if all you see are just symbols and colours, you probably miss the picture. The blobs and pigments are just a means to an end - the interiorscapes of the mind, the realm of the senses.

Elusive, ambiguous and multi-layered - these are the hallmarks of Tajuddin's works. They are never allowed to set in your mind like jelly, despite their transparency.

There are his stocks-in-trade like the crosses and the fish-shaped object (or is it a keyhole, a tootie, a man's bust perhaps?)

The juxtapositioning of the images is often awkward with rough-hewn impastos - sometimes even with thinly-veiled overlays.

These shifting meanings, which could change even at a moment's lapse, could mean a visual rollercoaster but that is, thankfully, not the case.

Somehow, through odd arrangements of images, colours, lines and "invisible" grids, his works exude a mood that is ponderous and contemplative, quiet and in most instances, even bone-dry and Minimalist.

A plethora of dark greys envelops his works, which are sometimes given an opaque veneer of shoe-polish "blanco", the shimmers of background colours visible here and there amidst a jumble of geometric shapes with architectural forms.

Layer after layer, with uneven thickness and in various hues, giving off different nuances. Layers of surfaces, experiences, feelings and meanings.

What it all amounts to is the feeling, that which is nascent and that which is evoked.

His works are deliberately abstruse with oblique references, a rambling dialogue with his canvas, his immediate surroundings and what's on his mind - without any defined parameters.

Sometimes, they are sketchy; quick spontaneous strokes or even tentative lines. Sometimes, they are given full brush treatment. They move easily from drawings to paintings, and back and forth. The "drawings" part is also the finishing touches instead of the preamble.

In Tajuddin's current exhibition at Art Salon, his third there since 1992, the palette covers several phases of his development starting with the Arus acrylics of 1994, where the inspiration was much, much more than of a landscapist space - the wilder, even freer natural environs with a confusing network of lines.

They are basically intuitive, with spontaneous direct strokes.

Still in the same vein, Tajuddin's later works become more inward-looking, more introspective and cloistered within man-made interiors with the occasional architectonic designs.

The Windrift series of post-'94 shows that the mind's windows are not locked permanently, while the Metamorphosis arrays of shapes are like signposts of our memories - of time, places or strange composites.

Also included are 10 works from his Gateway series in acrylic (1997), some figurative studies (watercolour and ink) and a few other watercolour-and-ink on paper works marked by Flying Fishes Over Oriental Garden.

The exhibition, which ends at Art Salon in Jalan Telawi Dua in Bangsar,

Kuala Lumpur today, is to mark the gallery's participation in the Bangsar Carnival held to mark Malaysia's hosting of the XVI Commonwealth Games on Sept 11-21.

Tajuddin's special work for the occasion entitled The Winning Spirit was sold at the launch on Aug 15 after the finishing touches were given by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It fetched RM30,000 and the full proceeds were donated towards the purchase of Games tickets for the less fortunate to watch this once-in-a-lifetime sporting extravaganza.

"I approach my works like music, too, with the same balance, rhythm and structure," says Tajuddin, a 48-year-old associate professor of interior architecture at Institut Teknologi Mara. Tajuddin is slated for a solo exhibition at the Jenkins Johnson Gallery in San Francisco in the United States next February.

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