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## Artists find a home in Conlay colony

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AHMAD Shukri Elias has found his ideal home at last after drifting for years without a place to paint and show his works.

The open-sided wakaf hutment which he shares with another artist is everything he has ever dreamed about - a studio cum gallery in a sprawling natural setting amidst an artist's community.

That's the Artist Colony in the Crafts Cultural Complex at Jalan Conlay - Kuala Lumpur's increasingly popular cultural hub where one can get a sampling of contemporary art practices, various craft traditions, traditional performances and music, and with good Malay food to boot - at its own cafeteria or the nearby Restoran Sri Melayu.

The hutment is one of nine in three distinct clusters, with its quaint three-tiered roof and overhanging foliated wooden eaves. It is rented out to artists at a nominal rate, for them to use as studio space and gallery.

The brainchild of Second Finance Minister and Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, the project is showing signs of success two years after its soft opening in July 1996.

In time and with better accessibility and well-orchestrated promotions, it should get as popular as Kuala Lumpur's Central Market, with its happy mix of commerce and culture.

The hutments, in clusters of three, are named after flowers. Shukri shares his lot with Mohammed Zaki Zakaria at Galeri Melor.

The others have Yusof `Gajah' Ismail and Adi Patra at Galeri Tanjung, and Shamsuddin and Sit Eng Sim, the only non-Malay artist there, at Galeri Melati.

In nearby clusters are Galeri Anggerik (Maamor Jantan and Nizar), Galeri Kenanga (Kamaruddin Talib and Johari Alias), and Galeri Dahlia, with the highly versatile Zainurin `Ajis' Mohamad and Harris Ribut, whose matronly Botero-like figures have become his instant signatures.

Separated by a long fountain trough and linked by cobblestone pathways is the other cluster which is nearer the road and the four main buildings housing export-quality craft materials and fashion wear.

They are Galeri Mawar (Baharuddin and Amir), Galeri Teratai (Zuzila Zain and Norhashima), and Galeri Cempaka (Sabri Salleh and Kamal).

Nestled in Kuala Lumpur's Golden Triangle of posh hotels and entertainment belt and with the imposing Petronas Twin Towers like a grand sentinel, the complex is suitably poised as a must-go, must-see tourist stop, what more with its oasis ambience of fountains, palm trees, well-manicured lawns and shrubbery.

For Shukri, the place is Godsend. When he gets fed up of painting, he goes back into the groove of wood-carving.

"Sabri's not doing it so often now, so I might as well," he says, referring to the highly-accomplished wood sculptor Tengku Sabri Ibrahim, who is now more into installation art.

Shukri's painting repertoire is made up of drab-looking, primitive, morphological images - now less angst-ridden and less ghoulish somewhat than, say, a decade ago.

There are also his Found-and-Fabricated hanging plants with natural or artificial stumps as support, which he sells to help defray the overheads.

It's hard to imagine that this former fine arts graduate (1986) with the then Mara Institute of Technology is still painting and painting though his art is not selling well... partly because of the seamier psychological

depths of human deprivations that he likes to go into.

Shukri, once with the Centrestage artistic group, had even run a gallery in Taman Tun Dr Ismail and taught for a while (at ITM and Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology) until two years ago.

Obviously, he couldn't have been happier. Though, with his long frizzy hair snaking down to his chest, he could well be mistaken for a Mat Rocker of a heavy-metal band. Good thing Datuk Mohamed Rahmat is not in charge anymore, otherwise Shukri would be `gam'-med for sure.

You can see that the resident artists are enjoying themselves thoroughly. When no visitors are in sight and weather permitting, the artists would get together for a game of sepak raga or tidy up their allotted 18x18-feet premises and the immediate surroundings.

They will also help look after one another's place when the occupants have to go somewhere else for a while, or lend a tube of paint or two during creative upsurges. What is most binding is the sharing of experiences and techniques among one another.

Such is the spirit of co-operation recalling that of the now defunct artist's commune, Anak Alam, of the 1970s.

Still, Ajis once had his hutment broken into, but he had the consolation, if at all, that the thief was a `cultured' one, ignoring his cassette-recorder and stealing a 20x30ins painting which had tremendous sentimental value for him.

The painting, part of his marine life series, was done during a traumatic period when he had to nip over to Tawakal Hospital occasionally to check on his father who was warded there. His father eventually died of lung cancer and the family faced a double tragedy with the death of his younger brother later.

While the subject was on corals, Emperor angelfish, damsel fish, batfish and shoals of jackfish, it proved therapeutic to him, as he recalled the creatures, the mood, the textures, and the numbing silence when diving some 80 to 100 metres below the water surface.

Ajis, 34, is a qualified and experienced diver who takes his own underwater photography. When he paints barracudas or leatherback giant turtles, he has seen them upclose, and it's not purely from imagination or glossy photographs.

He could get close approximations of certain unique colours, partly because of his patience and glazing skills and instincts. His work stands for fine details, straining his eyes and concentration from triple-zero brushes to even the micro-minute 10-zero brushes!

His reputation as a portrait artist is also well known, having done commissions by businessmen on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

But his most memorable `portraits' are those monochromatic `silver-gelatin-like' paintings of rural children with their nenek or tok, sometimes enjoying some traditional pastimes.

Once spurned by ITM, Ajis is proof of gift and grit. His father was at first sceptical that he could make a lucrative living from art as the first few years were those of tremendous hardship.

Equally talented is his hutment mate, Harris Ribut - a self-taught artist who has switched with effortless ease and just as great success from graphic designer/art director to sub-editor (with a Bahasa daily), before he decided, virtually out of the blue, to go into painting.

At 48, Harris Ribut would have been regarded as a late starter. Already good in portraiture (as attested by his Self-Portrait shown in the Aku '99 exhibition at Galeri Petronas recently), he makes well-endowed women look nimble and charming, with their rumbling voluminous forms defying the laws of gravity and art.