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Arts reunion with a difference

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THERE is a tangy air of déjà vu among some artists in the Langkawi International Festival of Arts with events spread out all over the fabled island.

For them, it is a reunion of sorts, but with a difference, from the original get-together in the first and second Asian Arts Festival organised at Club Mediterranee's outlets in Nusa Dua, Bali, and in Cherating in Kuantan.

That was way back in 1987 and 1988, respectively, and the common denominator was Ibrahim Hussein, whose museum cultural foundation under his own name is hosting and organising this new millennium Langkawi mega arts celebration from Oct 26 culminating in the museum's official launch by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Nov 4.

India's Shri Shail Choyal and Indonesia's Made Wianta, from the "Class of 87", are back to share their experience and considerable progress in the intervening years.

Shail, whose works are inspired by Indian miniatures, still believes in the supremacy of the canvas, despite having had his dalliance with installations using greater space and less conventional art-media.

Wianta, who last dabbled with calligraphic strokes at the time of the '87 fest, though on a mock monumental scale, has gone headlong into mixed media and installations.

The 51-year-old has since Nusa Dua become a Balinese art icon in his own right.

Barely three days at Ib's salubrious museum environs, and he already has come up with his game plan, christening it "The Sound of Stone", and he will be performing around it on Tuesday.

"As I sat foot on Langkawi, one of the first things I noticed were the majestic rock hills standing tall on this island, and surrounded by the beautiful green landscape," he said, as he led a group of assistants carrying logs to his installation site at the pathway leading the the Cultural Centre on a rocky promontory.

"I saw rocks on the beachfront, with barely a few metres of white sand visible. "Because of the dominance of solid rocks, my creation is to draw out, and move the sound energy in the Langkawi rocks."

From the 1988 Cub Med festival, there are the flamboyant Thawan Duchanee; his more taciturn fellow-Thai, Thavorn Koudomvit, but whose (installation) works are no less evocative; Indian sculptor Ramesh Bisht; and Malaysia's own Kungyu Liew, an installation artist whose works are never dictated by media or stylistic posturings as is the case of most artists.

Such is the nature of Kungyu's works that one tends to think that this rare triple Minor Award winner of the Young Contemporary Artists (YCA) in 1988-90, has faded into obscurity since then.

Indeed, Kungyu has gone into formaldehyde in his photography-based works even before the British provocateur of macabre forms, Damien Hirst, made formaldehyde a de rigeur art material.

Thawan, a 61-year-old master artist in his Chiangrai sanctuary in the north of Thailand, this time brought his only son, Toy, who had just graduated from Silpakorn.

To an old pro like Thawan who has been to numerous arts festivals, several with Ib, such events have gone past an Olympian quest of creation.

Painting just comes naturally to him the moment he sets brush on canvas.

To him, the camaraderie counts, and such events are a chance to catch up on old times, and to expose his son to the art fraternity from various countries.

He was obviously pleased with having been invited by Ib, as Ibrahim is more fondly known, and plans to reciprocate with a similar arts festival he is planning at his home next year.

"I am close to Ib. "When we met, my son was only nine, and Alia (Ib's only daughter) was eight.

"I like his (Ib's) sense of humour."

Then he enthused: "Ib is more than an artist. "He's a man with a heart and a genius, an artist of an artist."

After setting up the museum on the north-western coastal rim of Langkawi, Ib has taken the next big step of his vision of turning it into a cultural global village of painters, sculptors, musicians, dancers, designers, poets and exponents of other creative disciplines.

Thawan said the Langkawi festival is truly more international with its expanded cast of creative people in other disciplines, citing the world-class, and only, barefoot flamenco dancer La Chunga accompanied by an equally ebullient Paco Prado on the toque (guitar), and Vietnam's world renowned Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre.

For Thavorn, he has also moved phenomenally since his Malaysian debut at Cherating, orchestrating minimalist-like installations touching on the soul with his Bucha (Worship) series reaffirming beliefs in core Asian, and human values, against all the Dolly-fied Phenomenon advances of genetic engineering advanced in the West.

Ramesh, 55, who had just completed a monumental sculpture in Changchung province in China, is opting for drawings in black acrylics for a change because of the "short" period of the festival.

His works, which reveal his fondness of animals, are a combination among the deliberate, intuitive and also the accidental.

Just barely two days upon arrival, all the artists were diligently working on creations all over the beautiful museum precincts, outside and inside, and even inside the secretariat centre.

Of the local artists, multimedia stalwart Hasnul Jamal Saidon plans an installation involving Tongkat Ali and other so-called aphrodisiacs to be scoured from the nearby Gunung Macincang; Juhari Muhammad Said is carving from a huge woodblock slab on the deck overlooking the Andaman Sea; Ahmad Fuad Osman is working on an installation with soiled hotel towels and soap of antique labels; and Susylawati Sulaiman is "redecorating" a dilapidated old shophouse in Kuah with an installation.

At night, the performers take over with the Balinese mask dance, Water Puppet Theatre, our own Aida Redza and Dancer, the Cebu Youth Symphony Woodwind Quintet, Ingrid Salo piano recital, flautist Andrea Grimminelli with Luigi Verrini on guitar (one night only last Saturday at Barn Thai), Thijs van Leer and Mike del Ferro. La Chunga will come on from Nov 1.

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