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Artworks take on new forms

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SOILED hotel towels, black sand, burnt rice, custom-made tent, Tongkat Ali, plastic chopping blocks, running coloured light bulbs, wooden planks, tree stumps, even an abandoned house.

Such strange cornucopia of Found Objects, throwaways or common household utensils are integral sources for artworks for the mostly young local artists selected for the Langkawi International Festival of Arts. With their "spin", these works assume new forms, values, contexts and thus, messages.

Lifa is organised by the Ibrahim Hussein Museum and Cultural Foundation to celebrate creative excellence in the arts in the new millennium.

Rome-based H.H. Lim, Juhari Said, Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Ahmad Fuad Osman and Mohd Faizal Ramli are all busy working in the spaces within and without the IHMCF museum building proper off Jalan Datai.

Ho Say Yong and the Taiping duo, Chuah Chong Yong and Wong Chee Meng, take their places at Laman Padi, a repository of the heritage and development of padi in Pantai Chenang.

Kungyu Liew has no real working station, while Susylawati Sulaiman opts for a spooky dilapidated house earmarked for redevelopment in downtown Kuah.

Most of these works-in-progress touch on the rapid development in Langkawi, or its natural beauty or legends, like that of the wronged chaste Princess Mahsuri.

A photography exhibition entitled a "Malaysian Portfolio" arrays some of the finest exponents behind the lens, led by Eric Peris, with the Silver Gelatin coterie. The works are displayed at the concourse of the Lada complex at Persiaran Putra.

There is an obvious bias in Lifa for artists doing installation art, a kind of anything-goes art which skirts conventional art-making instruments, and which tends to usurp and territorise space the way a flat two-dimensional painting can't.

Lim, Hasnul, Chuah, Wong, Liew and Susylawati are standard bearers of this irreverent media which have been appropriated by their young as virtually their own.

While they have all represented Malaysia in several art events abroad, the revelation - thanks to Lifa 2000 - is Lim, a 46-year-old Kedah-born who in his 26 years in Rome has become a fixture in the art scene there.

A Post-Conceptualist, Lim has two works for Lifa. One, a chained-up epoxy suitcase that questions what we should treasure most in life, and the other a requiem of natural cycle using two extant moribund trees outside the museum building.

For Hasnul, whose art is at home in cyberspace as it is in a network of electronic gizmos, he is scouring the backdrop Gunung Macincang said to be overrun with Tongkat Ali.

It's not to turbo-charge his physical libido, though who is to know, but really the aphrodisiac will prove handy to his work questioning the entrenched masochistic posturing among men.

For Chuah, tired of using conventional paint, what with its higher cost nowadays, the black sand found in abundance in Langkawi which has become part of its folklore, is used with fixative for a series of works that are combined with burnt rice for a tactile "macadamised surface" quality.

Comments by local artists for their versions of the phenomenon are

scribbled on the improvised paint before it dried, repeating the process of layering until he gets the right miasma of a surface. One work is left in stark minimalist black.

A recent installation by the 28-year-old is a powerful statement of redevelopment with scant regard to architectural conservation. Flimsy paper columns with relevant textual imprints rise above a panoply of Chinese roof tiles in the work done at the Shimaya Art Centre, a reconverted courthouse in Malacca.

This exhibition was curated by Susylawati, another artist working outside the entrenched museum system.

Recently, Chuah also took part in the Transformations show at the Sculpture Square in Singapore, but lest one gets the impression that he is doing financially well, it must be pointed out that installation art is not an easy saleable commodity because of its ephemeral nature, materials and site-specificity. It takes up space and is often too much of a hassle to dismantle and assemble again for a show.

Like most young artists, to supplement his income, Chuah works on commission jobs like murals or display showcases for shopping complexes and discotheques.

Chuah also helps run an artists co-operative at the Setapak Hot Springs (Lorong Air Leleh 1) in Kuala Lumpur, which has nine studio rooms, and which has been in operation for three years.

He also links up with another group who is launching an alternative art space in a pre-war building called Spacekraft near Masjid Jamek.

A graduate of the Malaysian Institute of Art in 1993, Chuah was a Minor Award winner of the Young Contemporary Artists competition in 1995, and one of the winners of the Philip Morris Asean Art Awards-Malaysia 1996.

Wong, three years his junior, shares many things in common with Chuah besides both originating from Taiping.

He is also from MIA (1996) and also had a brief fling performing buto dance. He got his big break when he was selected to take part in the Gema Malaysian art exhibition in Prague in Czechoslovakia in 1998.

His work for Lifa entitled "First Impression" comprises a custom-made tent, on which he depicts luxuriant vegetation to give an impression of a hilly mound.

The "surprise" is inside the lighted canopy, where he places the flipside of linoneum painted to simulate the sea, with a cluster of green polystyrene mounds studded with emerald sequins.

Susylawati will be giving the abandoned shoplot, one of the first buildings to come up in Langkawi, a new whitewash coat which will be her "canvas" for her textual message that museums are not buildings, but are collections in themselves.

"The place, in a row of shophouses, where Langkawi's first hotel was located, is on State land, and it is to be demolished to make way for a road-widening project.

"I have got permission from the owner, who is staying in Australia, to do my art to highlight the issue," said Susylawati, 27, who burst into the art scene when she won the Major Award in the Young Contemporary Artists competition in 1997.

Liew's work, which is slippery in meanings, deals with shrine-like monuments. He proposes to install his work in Galeria Perdana, which houses souvenirs and gifts to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his tenure as Prime Minister.

The work, which will comprise planks, chopping blocks and running lights, is the seventh from his Wadah Untuk Pemimpin series inspired by what he saw in the gallery.

Fuad, who is emerging from the shadows of his two better known brethren

from their Matahati grouping, will tackle installation with a work using hotel towels which he would paint images on and stiffen with glue and arrange with bars of soap as protective or cleansing borders.

"The towels are a metaphor, for they have been used by all kinds of people like Chinese or Mat Salleh (Caucasians). They have their own history," said Fuad, who is one of the five Malaysian-level winners of the Philip Morris Asean Art Awards for the finals in Singapore next month.

Photographs of generations of villagers will also be incorporated into the work, which tries to reconstruct the history of Langkawi from its more idyllic past to its present rapid development.

Juhari, a virtuoso printmaker fortified by stints under the best printmaking traditions of Japan and France, is known for his meticulous handling and sharp social commentary.

He has set up a printmaking sanctuary in his new home which will enable such practitioners space, equipment and opportunity.

For Batu Pahat-born Ho, his works are a continuation of his shadowy reflection series in acrylic of 11 years.

He also runs the 2,000-square-foot ArtFolio gallery in City Square in Kuala Lumpur which celebrated its 10th anniversary this year.

Besides Peris, the others featured in the photography exhibition are Soraya Yusof Talismail, H.S. Lim, Herman Foo, Alex Moh, Joseph Tan, Chan Kin Wah and Cheah Sin Leng.

Lifa, which is to alternate with the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition, is organised by the IHMCF with the support of the Langkawi Development Authority and the New Straits Times group of newspapers.

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