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Changes in new millennium

The use of digital and photonic sophistication in Next-Gen Art may not have caught on the way past stylistic Western-centric 'isms' electrified our shores.

But there's still enough sparks as e-exhibitions like Flow/Arus and Zoom show.

Flow/Arus brings together local techies-savvy Hasnul J. Saidon, Tengku Ibrahim, Ivan Lam and Kungyu Liew with some Australian "wired" artists like Emil Goh, Stephen Birch and Jan McCormack.

For a truly multimedia spectrum, perhaps, none could come close to Zoom with its seamless video art presentations from Malmo in Sweden.

More local artists are testing the new www marketplace, like Malaysia's own photography jewel Eric Peris, who launched his website, while Net-gazine kulture.com.my offers latest info on the Kuala Lumpur arts scene.

K-Art, notably CAA (computer-assisted art), could be the future art environment where click-on access to complexities of colours, geometry, shapes, patterns and images could bring artists closer to the Ultimate Art.

While it's good to celebrate the new and innovative, we are thank-fully spared the Sensations-flavoured (promoted by the Saatchis) drivel and dross using 'Shock of the New' media like soiled underwear, elephant dung and aargh! human excrement ad nauseum, all in the name of art.

Enough is enough when one ostensibly sick Danish artist had goldfish cut into ribbons in a blender. Whatever he calls it, it is plain murder.

Still on goldfish, but more palatable, I-Lann Yee's thought-provoking paintings based on the soporific peregrinations of goldfishes show why she was selected as one of three Malaysians to celebrate the third and last of the Asia-Pacific Art Triennial in Brisbane.

And yes, the Painting, which to some sounds Jurassic, is not yet an endangered species, but indeed, thriving.

They are all over hotel lobbies and annexes, shopping mall corridors (the latest is at the Plaza Pantai Park Mall in Kuala Lumpur, though not on the scale and spectacle as London's Selfridges'), and restaurants (like Cafe Kayu Manis and Bon Ton).

Cafe Kayu Manis, with its Friday cultural potpourri, and The Artist's Space at the Concorde Shah Alam, are paragons of how such spaces could be used with positive results and go beyond sheer lucre.

At the Artist's Space diplomat-entrepreneur Datuk N. Para-mesawaran, now the United Nations representative in East Timor, organised and collaborated with artist Haron Mokhtar in a unique exhibition entitled In Pursuit of Penang and Menjelang Ramadan.

Besides Param, the Malaysian art scene also misses writer/arts activist Eddin Khoo and writer/artist J. (Jegadeva) Anurendra.

Eddin, who has done much to help resuscitate traditional Malay performing arts like Mak Yong, is doing his Masters in Southeast Asian art (dissertation on wayang kulit) at the London University, while Anu is in Australia for a change of scene.

The strident call for change sees art institutions like the National Art Gallery (NAG) and Galeri Petronas working out outreach programmes such as workshops, bazaars, seminars and get-togethers to match the usual serious thematic explorations.

The day when the cognoscenti would line up to buy tickets for an art exhibition the way people splurge for pop concerts has yet to come. Here, where entrance is free, the response is still at best, a trickle.

Museums as cultural behemoths have gone the way of the 486 computer motherboard into the scrapheap of the last millennium.

The need to reinvent is there. Relevance is a game of staying alive in a world inundated with real and virtual distractions.

It's a busy schedule at Rimbun Dahan, the Australia-Malaysia artists-in-residency programme of 63-year-old architect Hijjas Kasturi and wife Angela in their Kuang sanctuary.

The programme this time yields superlative works from Helen Crawford and Chong Siew Yong, who are both excellent foils for each other while not exactly collaborating.

Rimbun Dahan also hosts the Sekali Lagi show which updates on the progress of eight Australian artists who had benefited from the programme since 1991.

As opposed to the inevitably strained relations on governmental level, the people-to-people network in the arts is strong. A collaboration between South Australia and East Malaysian artists has led to a two-way travelling show starting Down Under.

The Shah Alam Art Gallery, under Rahime Harun, reopens after a high-budget facelift with an expanded cultural agenda and the launch of the quarterly art newsletter entitled Untitled, cum eponymous exhibition.

Over at Malacca, two art spaces stump a community not overly known for its passion for art.

The Shiemaya ART-tria, reconverted from the old courthouse in Banda Kota, provides a rare platform for experimental art. It launches the Dagang Art Festival involving Chuah Chong Yong, Zailawati Mohd and Japanese Mizuho Ishii.

And artist Jehan Chan opens his second and main gallery along the same Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, spanning 275 feet - arguably one of the longest in the world.

In Perak, the Pekan Seni arts festival in its fourth edition last year has moved the then Menteri Besar Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib to earmark the old Ipoh Post-Office building with its Georgian facade as the State Art Gallery.

Credit goes to Raja Ahmad Amirullah Raja Abdullah, the prime-mover behind Pekan Seni. Last year's art centrepiece was the memorial exhibition of the wayang kulit watercolour doyen Nik Zainal Abidin.

In Penang, the Garage is the new arts-cultural happening place with its niche shops in ambient setting and a creative programme of performances, demonstrations and workshops.

Art Salon marks its eighth anniversary with a celebration of 10 artists, who are contractually bound for the first time to offer it their latest works for the Klang Valley market. With manager Celia Yap concentrating on God's work after her blessed recovery from cancer, the mantle now falls on her son, Chris.

Penang's The Art Gallery, located on Levels 2 and 4 of Bellisa Row in Burmah Road, is 10 years old. The event calls for another coffeetable book from the 52-year-old owner Dr Tan Chee Khuan - Treasury of Malaysian and International Art.

Rusli Hashim moves into new frontiers of promoting Eco-Art with the setting up of the Rainforest Gallery besides the fine arts gallery under his own name on the same floor space of KL Hilton.

And the art community is all abuzz about Juhari Muhammad Said's printmaking centre amidst natural environs.

In terms of feats, Zainurin `Ajis' Mohd, Malaysia's undisputed king of

marine-life painting, joins a small elite band of artists painting underwater, with his daring efforts at Pulau Tenggol.

Puan Sri Catherine Lee paints on the Four Seasons on 34.44 metres of rice-paper - the longest Chinese landscape work in Malaysia.

Topping the solos are the Tan Choon Ghee Retrospective at the Penang State Art Museum and Gallery celebrating Penang's legendary watercolourist who's 70; Khoo Sui-ho and Friends @ Bellevue - the Penang Hill resort of architect Datuk Lim Chong Keat, the individual collector reputedly with the most works of Sui-ho and thus the show of "vintage" (60s) and recent works; Reverend Paik Wan's astounding one-breath calligraphy (NAG).

Zulkifli Yusoff's Powerful Dialogue with his provocative caricature-like commentaries on the Reformasi rallies, the General Election, the Nipah virus and that profligate Ahmad; Koay Soo Kau's Metamorphosis II (NN Gallery) with his witty fruit-and-fabric themes and sensual feminine forms; Raja Azhar Idris's Impressionist textured glass inventions; Cheah Thien Soong's paintings on the famous Jingde porcelain; and Raphael Scott Ahbeng's Pictures From A Distant Land.

Other notable solos are Dr Chew Teng Beng's Penang-New York: A Lifetime Journey; Alex Ong Boon Hau's lyrical Seasons; Tang Tuck Kan's educational Starting Point; Tan Peng Hooi's From Realism to Abstraction; Yau Bee Ling's We Are Family; Kelvin Chap's Idea No. 9; Khoo Cheang Jin's watercolours; and Ahmad Zakii Anwar's Presence, which re-examines and restates the classicism of the Male Body.

Love is the theme of several artists and exhibitions. Heng Eow Lin's Lovers Embrace and Unveiled Beauties (a collection of artists painting the nudes) and Sivarajah Natarajan's Khajuraho.

The foreign solos worth mentioning are Wang He-dou (Art House), Professor Hermann-Josef Kuhna and Jo Schulteis (Space 2324, residence/gallery of Goethe-Institut director Gerhard Engelking).

Goethe-Institut, with the NAG, also organised a symposium on Constructing Cultural Identities in the context of Globalisation Age.

Nurhanim Md Khairuddin, Kelvin Chap and Bee Lin represented Malaysia at the Asian Art Biennale in Bangladesh with Victor Chin as curator.

The BIG event in photography is the setting up of Silver Gelatin Centre for Fine Art Photography and Gallery in SS2 in Petaling Jaya by Alex Moh, Lim Hock Seng and Herman Foo.

Its first foray, Malaysian Photography 1899-1999, was an instant hit when unveiled at the Bangsar Shopping Complex.

The other notable photo shows are Kudrat Bumi Abadi, Arthur Teng's Bali and Beyond, and German Commercial Photography. The Picture Library sets up at Phileo Damansara.

This is a year where the NAG seems to be blazing on all cylinders. Besides hosting the Malaysian component of the new Nokia Asia-Pacific Art Awards for art-students within the 18-25 age range and the Asean finals of the Philip Morris Asean Art Awards, it also brings together in a Then-and-Now format, all the winners of the Young Contemporary Artists (YCA) competitions, from 1974 to 1997.

Enthusiasts also get a rare glimpse of the "fragile" watercolours of Frank Swettenham and George Giles, albeit under extremely low light to protect the precious legacy.

There's the Paik Wan exhibition (too short), the Jolly Koh drawing classes, the arts cafe, Zoom, and the National Millennium Monument design competition (for Putrajaya), the Dragon 2000 show...

But our young artists' response in terms of numbers and quality to the Nokia Art awards is disappointing, to say the least. With a grand prize of US\$8,000 plus stints in art institutions in New York and Helsinki (worth another US\$15,000), can we expect more thought, if not better techniques,

this year?

In the Asean finals of the Philip Morris Art Award, Malaysian Wong Woan Lee emerges as one of top jurors awards winners.

Mohd Saharuddin Supar won the Expression of Beautiful Selangor contest organised by Galeri Shah Alam.

The British Time for Tea teapot exhibition, however, finds, again, the local component ill-planned and lacking.

Galeri Petronas' top four offerings are the Orang Asli sculptures, Landscape to Landscape, Matahati PL and Through Our Eyes (featuring 12 women artists).

Like a tired refrain from a Johnny Matthis record, the Orang Asli exhibition featuring 232 sculptures and 18 masks from the collection of Anthony Ratos again raises serious questions on the fate of this invaluable 40-year collection.

While Anthony Ratos, now with greater urgency because of his old age, has reiterated his wish to bequeath all his 600-odd works to anybody who can ensure its proper propagation in generations to come, none so far has shown such commitment.

Matahati PL shows the development of a matured band of former Young Turks comprising Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Ahmad Shukri Mohamad, Masnoor Ramli, Ahmad Fuad Osman and the less high-profiled Hamir Shoib.

But socio-politically charged art is not the only preserve of the Matahatians.

New faces Harpeet Trina Jiawn, Petrina Roach and Loojia Wen held an exhibition entitled I'm Going to Be PM One Day, inspired by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's much debated statement that the coveted hotseat is constitutionally within the reach of a non-Malay.

The venue is unusual, in the Green Warehouse in sleazy Chow Kit. Also, a bar called Gload in Desa Sri Hartamas also plays the unlikely host to an exhibition called Club Culture + Art = Infinite Possibilities.

Even the highway stops have been turned into an art haven, when Art-On-PLUS Art Gallery sets up business on the Ayer Keroh overhead bridge.

On a musical note, Karen Nunis comes back into the scene not with her paintings but with a music album entitled, Give Me Sanity.

And there is also a showcase at the KL Hilton Galleria of paintings by famous musicians-as-artists such as John Lennon and Miles Davis.

The gift of art is also used for charity notably the Angkatan Peluksi Kedah charity art for Yayasan Sultanah Bahiyah (NN Gallery) and the Art for Nature event (for Worldwide Fund for Nature) at the Islamic Arts Museum.

There is also a heart-rending exhibition called Dream Diary where Malaysian and Thai children with HIV and AIDS reveals their darkest fears and secret thoughts on canvas.

Malaysian art lost the versatile Chinese brush artist, Wong Nai Chin (1943-2000). Weeks later, his friend, the American watercolourist Don Kingman, who was to have held a joint exhibition with him at The Art Gallery, also died.

Curtains also rang down on the Peanuts cartoon strip when its creator, Charles M. Schultz, died at the age of 77. Requiem also for Bali's surrealist master, Antonio Blanco.

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