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## The art of the opening

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THE Klang Valley seems to be abuzz with art exhibition openings of late. After a quiet summer, there has been a steady flow of invitations in the post. Artist Laureate Syed Ahmad Jamal's Antara Bumi dan Langit opened at Galeri Petronas at the beginning of the month, along with Badan Warisan's excellent Sprit of Wood exhibition, now sadly over.

12 ASEAN Artists was celebrated twice at the National Art Gallery, Rimbun Dahan opened its doors for a mid-year viewing of its projects, and there have been openings for Hijau - The Rhythm of Nature from painter Yusof Ghani at Art Case Galleries, Sukothai A Meditation in Stone from photographer Eric Peris at Sutra House, Sarawak textiles at Woven Dreams organised by Society Atelier Sarawak at the Australian High Commission, In Black and White with photographs from 13 Malaysian photographers at Valentine Willie Fine Art.

Coming up soon are abstract expressionists Anthony Chan at the Eastin Hotel, Jolly Koh, Cheong Laitong and Chung Chen Sun at NN Gallery, a drawings show at Gallerie Taksu, and Chong Siew Ying and Frederique Bomeester at Valentine Willie.

Further afield, Ipoh held its extensive art festival earlier this month. Langkawi's International Festival of Art seems to have been postponed, but we can look forward to this shaking up the West Coast late next month. The main event of the season, or indeed the year, of course, has been BSLN's official opening, which took place on Wednesday.

All this activity should inspire great and positive thoughts about the diversity and energy of the Malaysian art scene in any faithful member of its community. In fact, I have been more preoccupied with the state of my wardrobe and its ability to cope with this surge of social events. Who will I be seeing, what will I wear, would it be easier to go to X before Z or vice versa, could I bring a friend, should I try to catch the speeches?

What is the significance of an art opening? Why the fuss and the buzz? Who goes to these things? Why do galleries spend all this money giving parties, and what do their openings say about them?

There is a reason why the art world borrows the terms "show" and "opening night" from theatre parlance. A new exhibition is a revelation, an unveiling of a fresh vision or perspective, with months, and sometimes years (also, sometimes, weeks), of preparation behind it.

Although works of art are not generally as ephemeral as a theatre production, their particular impact and context when seen together for the first time can only be caught through the short duration of an exhibition. An opening is a celebration of the effort that has gone into an exhibition, and also the first invitation to public response, and therefore often a measure of the success, commercial or critical, of a show.

In sale shows, it usually presents the first opportunity to buy new or unseen works, and can take on a frenzied and competitive aspect if successful. Openings are also an ideal gathering site for the arts community and culturally-minded society in general, for catching up with gossip in the art world and beyond, to spot new faces, and to size up the mood of the institutional scene or the market.

All sorts of people attend art openings but, outside a core of industry people and keen supporters, the character of an opening crowd can vary greatly between events. The art scene is a cosy one, often crossed with

other arts communities and with glamour society, to make for colourful gatherings.

Institutional events attract patrons, academics, industry people and artists, but also serious collectors keeping their eye in training and up-to-date, and on the lookout for talented young artists. In private galleries, collectors rub elbows or clink glasses with artists, dealers, critics and other art community pillars; as well as with society pillars, architects, interior designers, the diplomatic corps, young professionals and their elders, enlightened members of the corporate sector, interested members of the expatriate community, various people working in fascinating-sounding fields, and the occasional celebrity.

Openings come in different flavours, according to their venue as much as on the content of a show. Hospitality being of some import here, memorable events help build the character of an organisation or venue, and keep guests coming back. The slick and professional Galeri Petronas offers ample space for viewing and helpful assistance, and great laksas, bringing a diaspora of guests from the art community, steadily making its presence felt as an impressive and wide-reaching institution.

KL's private galleries have quite a range of "house" styles, from Galerie Taksus glamorous retreat, and its well-choreographed, relaxed events in a lovely home-setting drawing in all who love art and the beautiful life, to the urban contemporary neutral ground of Valentine Willie Fine Art in the heart of throbbing Bangsar, and its occasionally high-octane parties.

In a small and thriving scene, the private galleries each make efforts to cultivate their own special role and image as well as a range of collectors. Perhaps the most beloved art venue of all is Rimbun Dahan in far-off Kuang. Hijjas and Angela Kasturi's estate houses a unique arts residency programme which aims to encourage cultural exchange between Malaysia and Australia, by inviting an artist from each of these countries to work and live there for a year, among other projects.

Their rare but extremely popular events are an expression of the graciousness of their patronage, inspiring us and showing us what it is to live with and love art.

For sheer spectacle, Wednesday night's grand official opening of the Balai Seni Lukis Negara by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has seen no parallel. There were costumes, speeches, balloons, a light and sound show, and fireworks for distinguished guests from home and abroad, patrons, supporters, artists and academics.

Redza Piyadasa's comprehensive Rupa Malaysia exhibition was put together as a fitting celebration of the occasion. All of us in the art world must be greatly pleased for the generous attention given to the event, and hope that it augurs well for the continued support of an institution central to the healthy development of the visual arts in this country.