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`Young' artists, then and now

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FROM 1974 to 1997, the Young Contemporary Artists (YCA) competition has seen 83 different individual winners. Though not held for a few years in between, the competition has produced successive generations of leading artists.

Zulkifli Yusoff (1988) and Tan Chin Kuan (1990) had won the Major Award twice, once jointly in 1989. Chin Kuan also won two Minor Awards in 1988 and 1991. Minor Awards were won thrice by Kungyu Liew (1987-89) and Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman (1992, 1994, 1997).

There were also the double winners - Ahmad Shukri Mohamed (1991 and 1997), Pang Ngiap Kang (1992 and 1994), Din Omar (1989 and 1991), Ruzaiqa Omar Basaree (1974 and 1981), Nasir Baharuddin (1984 and 1986), Rafiee Abdul Ghani (1984 and 1985), Romli Mahmud (1986 and 1987) and Nurhanim Khairuddin (Major in 1996, Minor in 1994).

But while some winners keep pushing the limits, there are others who just stagnated or even faded into oblivion.

Until the Philip Morris Asean Art Awards and Nokia Art Award competitions, the YCA was the sole playing field for the young under 30 and a big opportunity for the next `Ibrahim Hussein'.

With the millennium rollover, an exhibition like the Imbasan Bakat Muda Sezaman which brings together the YCA winners since 1974 with a "then-and-now" comparison, is timely for most of these are expected to play important roles in this new century and millennium.

That most have risen to the occasion reaffirms one's faith in our artists, especially after a year noted more for mediocre, yawn-inspiring fare.

For the last 1 1/2 decades, the young artists have moved more into mixed media and (multi-dimensional) installations and more recently, electronic multimedia - at least those who won prizes.

Zulkifli Yusoff's early scaffolding-like contraption, bandaged with painted/drawn cloth, to his recent magnum opus, "Don't Play During Magrib"; Paiman's social satires with his cutboard caricatures, mobile wailing machines and dangdut cubicle; Chin Kuan's "Hollow Men" in a mock Baroque scenario; Kungyu Liew's new work, "Wadah Untuk Pemimpin", in homage to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Works by Wong Hoy Cheong (Minor, 1987) are consistent for their scathing political barbs like his "Detention 1987" on the Operation Lalang mop-up of dissident elements.

Works done in paintings can have just as much impact. The works of Haron Mokhtar (1987, Major Award) and Mastura Abdul Rahman (1986, Major Award) dig into our cultural past, signalling a Back-to-the-Roots frenzy. While Haron explores early ethnic wear and architecture, Mastura delves into Malay textile tradition in a homey interior setting.

Or Amron Omar's (Minor, 1982) silat pugilistic manoeuvres.

Yet, from early on, the conventional painting format tradition has already been dispensed with.

Even before the term "installation" became vogue, Lee Kian Seng was already and consistently challenging perceptions, paraphernalia and parameters of art in the 1970s like his 1975 winning effort, "Process in Poker Game".

His career path since then has been marked by works that are the most avant garde and conceptually extraordinary imaginable.

Or Ruzaika, with her bold window assemblage, that won in 1981, with Islamic-looking designs revivifying the innate simplicity of Malay woodcraft traditions.

But some like Mat Zali Ismail, who won in 1983, or Baharuddin Bador and Zulkeply Maulana, the 1976 winners, are never heard of since, which in a way is a sad reflection of the high rate of casualties among art-college students.

Others like Normah Nordin eventually found niche in other fields, in her case in theatre and multimedia productions.

The inaugural competition, which was "invitational", involving seven artists out of 13 invited, proved stunning with the tragically short-lived "wonder boy" Zulkifli Dahalan's winning work showing a nether world of "bare-forked" emaciated people.

Zulkifli won a travel grant of RM2,000.

Also against the grain somewhat was the 1991 winning work of Bayu Utomo Radjikin, whose primeval cry from his Bujang Berani bust, went against the pressure among young Malay artists in shunning figuratives.

Gender is not a discriminatory thing, as besides Normah and Ruzaika in the 1974 competition, there was also Siti Zainon Ismail. Others who have won since included Major Awardees Mastura, Nurhanim and Susyilawati Sulaiman (1997) and others like Sharifah Fatimah Zubir (1981), Eng Hwee Chu (1992), Shia Yin Yiing (1994) and Sharmiza Abu Hassan (1996).

There has been a lull since Kungyu's video installation in 1988. However, in 1994 Hasnul Jamal Saidon led the charge of e-artists: Syed Alwi Syed Abu Bakar and Faizal Mohd Zulkifli (1996) and Mohd Suhaimi Tohid (1997).

Faizal's Floating Womb installation explores the properties of the material world as a spatial relationships in real-time space using projected images of under-privileged children.

Mention should also be made of Chuah Chong Yong's installation of floating limewashed soft pillars with images of colonial building facades.

The exhibition, officiated by fellow artist Datuk Ibrahim Hussein, on Dec 20, ends at the National Art Gallery at Jalan Temerloh, off Jalan Tun Razak, Kuala Lumpur, on Jan 31.

For details, call 03-40254989/4990.

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