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Bliss in a secret garden

Ooi Kok Chuen

THERE'S a divine and blissful spirit of "aliveness" celebrated in "The Painted Garden", an exhibition featuring the works of six artists in different media.

The "garden" here is just a metaphor of a natural paradise, an emotional safety valve, or an earthy expression based on man's symbiotic relationship with nature.

Curator Syed Nabil Syed Nahar reveals a philosophical bent in his selection of artists and works for the exhibition at his gallery NN Gallery, in Taman Ampang Hilir, Selangor.

The exhibits include: Newcomer Datin Rafiah Eusoff's effervescent silhouette of lotuses blooming in her lush garden; Norleen Nosri's intriguing textures on her pots with short truncated spouts; Michael Tan's Botero-like figures in pre-independence rustic kampung settings; Azman Hilmi's interiors of kaleidoscopic colours; Gerald Takawira's sculpture marquettes that seem to reinvent animistic traditions; and Margaret Fredrickson's wiry lines of Suzhou gardens and dessicated Italian landscapes.

Zimbabwean Takawira, who had just finished a sculpture in honour of former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad at Galeri Perdana in Langkawi, hones angular shapes on black spring stone which are millions of years old and on opal, with contrasting sleek burnished surfaces and regimented ribbed formations.

Takawira's Shona stone art is meticulously worked by hand for hours on end, with Cubist-like profiles in *United The World In Stone*, while *Humility* is reminiscent of the "Queen's Head" Yeliu, a sandstone marvel, in Taiwan.

In *Guardian*, the penetration of space and form ala Henry Moore gets full play, while *Creation of Love* is the only work in opal.

The other foreigner, Australian Fredrickson, simulates a windy veneer on blotchy rice-paper which lends a mystical quality and makes the works look decidedly calligraphic.

Rafiah revels in stunning light, which enhances the radiance and innate exoskeletal beauty of the lotus buds, whether clasped hermetically in womb-like cosiness or unfurled in majestic glory.

Her sense of form, design and eye for contrasting elements are what make her lotuses so pure in beauty, and imbued even with a certain religiosity.

Her works trace the gradual blooming, and by extension, triumph, of the lotus amidst its sullied backwaters, and the transient burst of joy.

Norleen, who is pursuing her studies in Colombia, Missouri, in the United States, plays on musical analogy in her *Opera* series ceramics (terrasigilatta) named after notes like Alto and Tenor.

Her contrasting glazes of metallic and earthy matte evoke something contemplative, while the small spouts seem to suggest a gentle choir. Tan, like Harris Ribut, goes for supple, rounded gravity-defying shapes in his stylised oil-on-canvas figuratives, mainly of womenfolk, so reminiscent of the Matryoshka Russian dolls.

The setting is invariably idyllic, with a buffalo, a cat or a chicken or two for good measure, which evokes a carefree life far from the madding crowd.

A self-taught artist, Tan has a standout work in *Any Request*, with its

unusual grey veneer.

Azman, the best known among the local artists, has since his caricatures of work tools, plumbed for garish colours in his "tropical" interiors.

Using a palette knife and wall scrapers to apply the colours, he also "throws" them in unbridled streaks Action Painting style as a final flourish.

The 36-year-old first made his mark 12 years ago when he won the coveted Major Award in the Young Contemporary Artists competition for his installation work from his Tetukang series, a panoply of work tools symbolising specific tasks as well as the interdependence of human characteristics.

While the resemblance in subject, colours and technique to Rafiee Abdul Ghani's more Fauvist renditions is unnerving, Azman has more Expressionistic fervour.

"The Painted Garden", officiated by Rimbun Dahan's residential artist programme director Angela Hijjas, is on show at NN Gallery until March 31. The gallery is at 53A & 56 Jalan Sulaiman 1, Taman Ampang Hilir (the commercial area opposite the D'Palma Hotel).