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Portrait of Muslim life

By Ooi Kok Chuen

'COMMON Ground', a photography-based exhibition of works by Muslims and non-Muslims, attempts to present the human face of Islam. OOI KOK CHUEN writes.

COMMON GROUND takes an approach to looking at and presenting Muslim life. In a post-9/11 scenario, where radical elements of Muslims have been demonised as human firebombs bent on unspeakable mayhem, Common Ground is a balanced, truthful portrait which lifts the jaundiced veil.

The works are based on views and experiences by both Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain, Indonesia and Malaysia.

But it's no public relations exercise in showing the human face of Islam as opposed to the militant stereotype or the description by V.S. Naipaul in *Among The Believers: An Islamic Journey*, about Muslims being "crazed by their confused faith".

It takes a look at humdrum everyday life at home or at work and Muslims' interactions in different social-cultural milieu, with a defined code of behaviour and tradition based on the Quran.

It focuses on issues, family systems, new technology, ideology and cultural practices, alienation and displacement.

Muslim societies are not homogenous, monolithic entities. They have diversity in languages, cultures, class, history, race, ethnicity and geography.

The exhibition is photography-based but it also documents and explores issues and people in various media - black-and-white/colour photographs;text-stencilled or handscrawled photographs, for example, and digital montage printed on canvas with a video installation.

Malaysia is represented by Soraya Yusof Talismail, Syed Rashid Zainal and Yee I-Lann.

Soraya, noted for her insights into family systems and heritage, presents installations of how Muslim converts by marriage are coping with the proverbial culture shock.

Juxtaposed on a large banner scroll, the pictorial essays zoom into Canadian Abdullah Mantin and Nik Azni and their Janda Baik "farming" home and Indian Muslim Shahnawaz Farouk Zahir and his Chinese childhood sweetheart Nurfahana Tan.

The works show generational and cross-cultural relationships, and shared beliefs and concerns despite different backgrounds.

Businessman Syed Rashid extols in a simple montage with brief explanatory texts on the pioneering social work and spirit of four women - Sisters In Islam executive director Zainah Anwar, Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, Muslim Women's Welfare Board director Azizah Din, and Human Treatment Home CEO Zaiton Zainal Abidin.

More than just a tribute, it reveals the prominent roles that Muslim women take on for the greater good.

In recent months, Syed Rashid has re-emerged strongly with works that are more telling than his subtle, subliminal play of light in secluded building interiors nearly two decades ago.

I-Lann, a non-Muslim, profiles some Malaysian personalities as they are, such as street philosopher-poet Salleh Ben Joned, social commentator and activist Dr Farish Noor and prodigious novelist Datuk A. Samad Said.

Aspects of the richly-textured British Muslim experience, identity and change, with their social tension, dislocation and dilemmas, are provided

by Clement Cooper, Sam Piyasena, Suki Dhanda, Rehan Jamil, The Belle Vue Studio, Jagtar Semplay, Anthony Lam, Tim Smith and Amyandtanveer, who opts for a small portfolio of British Muslim entertainers.

Cooper's portraits of girls garbed in the hijab with a stark background contrast with Suki's work of three teenagers in cool poses against a graffiti-scrawled wall.

Reprints from the photo studio, Belle Vue, a popular Bollywood-type make-over factory show the make-believe world of studio photos among the struggling immigrant communities of Bradford, England.

Lam's look into asylum and immigration with pointed text displays strike the same note as David Hurn's shot of an empty weaving shed in the Manningham Mills in Bradford.

Rehan highlights mosques that have been converted from former cinemas, council flats, even a synagogue

The Indonesian displays are by Angky Purbandono, Arizona Sudrio, Bodi Chandra and Ray Bachtiar Drajat.

Bodi presents his case of people in Central Java in a giant photo album measuring 30x75cm, and Arizona's dossier of sex workers in Bandung, West Java, reveals the inherent tensions in Muslim societies.

The Malaysian component of the exhibition is curated by artist and social activist Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri.

Common Ground ends at the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur on July 18. The gallery is located at 2, Jalan Temerloh, off Jalan Tun Razak.

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