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Baubles of riotous colours

Ooi Kok Chuen

IF stones washed up on a beach could talk, they would sing arias about a journey through the aeons and across the seven seas... and probably of bursting into a rainbow of abstract colours, patterns and ambiguous shapes, of minutae landscapes and clasping shadowy figures, courtesy of Ib.

For the past two years, Datuk Ibrahim Hussein, popularly known as Ib, has given new life to these unheralded stones washed ashore near his Pasir Tengkorak museum in Langkawi, transforming them into gilt-edged "baubles".

A gifted artist with a Midas Touch, Ib has worked his signature magic onto the polished surfaces of the beached stones.

His slender acrylic-dipped brushes have glossed over the dull natural ochres with Versace-like gaiety, as if dressing them up for a Venetian masquerade ball. At times, he will add an inconspicuously thin layer of coloured paper, duly painted over and varnished, for added tactile quality.

These creations are paintings in their own right, but with the novelty of a medium only circumscribed by surface, size and shape. Otherwise, the same alacrity and expressionistic joy of working on larger canvases are there.

"The joy of creating designs on stones is different, but the approach is similar to the one I would adopt when painting on canvas... the aesthetics, the design, the composition.

"Only the concentration is on a smaller and more uneven surface. It's spontaneous, there's no preconceived notion, not even of colours," he adds, fingering each painted stone as if it were an exquisite gem, and reliving the joy and passion of the creative process.

"I was not working on any particular theme. I believe that a great work of art is not created by chance nor is it planned."

Round, distended, or oval and with subtle contours, the stones are the equivalent of a shaped canvas.

The stones could be as old as the sea, broken over time and attrition into tiny fragments and washed ashore, to be stranded on Langkawi's Datai seafront where Ib's alabaster-white museum stands.

They would have been submerged a metre deep until exposed by the receding tides, to be stringently selected by Sim, Ib's wife and muse, the way one would pick choice apples in an orchard.

Ib plans to sell his posse of "Rock Art", which contains nearly 200 pieces, en bloc in a media event to raise funds for the general maintenance of his museum. Excess funds will go towards organising activities and even a festival, on a scale of the museum sponsored and organised first Langkawi International Arts Festival (Lifa) in 2000, which also marked the museum's official opening by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Being based in the salubrious surrounds of his windswept museum precincts these past few years seems to have done Ib, virtually the "Peter Pan" of Malaysian Art, the world of good.

At 66, he cuts a cheerful figure, with a still-boyish grin and lusty laugh and a feel-good zest for life.

His is a truly beautiful life in more ways than one. A life that is an art itself - Sim, who has always been with him; his lovely daughter Alia, with her brilliant academic credentials; a dream architectural centrepiece

in affluent Bukit Pantai and a plush London pad in Portobello; his unique museum-in-the-rainforest in Langkawi, and fame and fortune beyond the dreams of many artists.

His lucky star has shone from the day he enrolled at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore, which led to a scholarship to Byam Shaw, England, then the tripartite show with Andy Warhol and Salvador Dali in Kuwait in 1977, and several other exhibitions around the world.

He was recently conferred his third datukship, unprecedented for an artist, this time by Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah of Selangor.

The truth is, Ib is more than just an extraordinary artist. He's a visionary. Off canvas, he can be remarkably organised, albeit with superlative support from Sim who can just be as creative with her hands as with her mind.

Besides Lifa, Ib has organised (with great success) two Club Mediterranee arts festivals - in Cherating (Pahang) and Nusa Dua (Bali, Indonesia). Stones are not his only alternative canvases. He has lavished his attention, with equal verve and vitality, on tree stumps, branches, giant papier mache "Easter eggs", T-shirts, clay urns, a surfboard, an empty tennis-ball container, and even a large dried-out pea-pod with seeds still inside.

Besides his "Rock Art," Ib has also been caught up in the clash of civilisations unleashed by the horrendous September 11, 2001, destruction of the New York World Trade Center.

Dubbed his "9-11" series, one painted on surfboard has US President George Bush Jr garbed in belligerent Rambo gear, reminiscent of the cinematic hero's one-man demolition of Afghanistan, ready with a "first strike" war against so-called terrorism.

In another work, the attack on the bastion of the American free world and enterprise is symbolised by the fall of Superman, with America's favourite comicbook hero depicted plummeting to earth in a tailspin. A group of children is shown in the bottom panel, sniggering fatuously, oblivious to the real TV tragedy that changed the world overnight.

"Throughout my life, when something like this (9-11) happens, I react first to record the event. This tragedy happened during my lifetime, but it doesn't mean that I am pro this or that, or am an activist.

"My works give different messages to different people without me having to work out the message myself," he says.

There is so much antagonism in the world today, and Ib, as an artist - a Muslim one at that - feels that he can play a role in healing the wounds, through his art.

His works are developed from the context of a tolerant multi-racial environment where the different ethnic groups celebrate their diversity as much as their commonality.

There is yet another slew of new works, 11 black-and-white 5x5ft canvases of coalescing human forms and tumbling figures in elegant callisthenics. The free strokes portend more than just human forms and hints of movements in everyday life.

"From just human forms, they get into the soul. With so many problems in the world, it's as if we are asking ourselves whether we are taking enough time to examine our own inner being."

Ib can do four or five such pieces at one go, first loosely defining the shapes and contours with his energetic and vibrant lines, and then going along with the flow.

In a way, it's his way of getting away from the human tragedy of epic proportions precipitated by 9-11, where his works celebrate once again the joy of living and the bounteous joy of Nature - the inimitable Ib way.