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Gallery in tune with the times

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WAIKRAH Marzuki had been known to think aloud of the need for a separate museum of contemporary art even before the new National Art Gallery (NAG) landmark in Kuala Lumpur got its official blessing in September 2000.

Her vision runs true today. The gallery has an endless flow of multifarious programmes combining various art disciplines and "friendly" outreach programmes involving the public. All the five galleries are fully booked for more than a year, while the intervening spaces (used recently for the Italian Architecture show) and foyer have also been discreetly turned into exhibition areas or showcased events/activities. Even the circular ramp has not been spared, and is used for site-specific installations or as part of an "artwork".

The NAG director has shown that with creativity, a little enterprise and commitment, financial and manpower constraints can be overcome.

With the gallery celebrating its 45th anniversary this year, programmes have become more creative and grander. The thematic celebration is the "45@45" where Malaysian luminaries get to choose their favourite art pieces - all totalling 45, from the gallery's collection of nearly 3,000 works.

And the exhibition, "One Thousand Faces of Dr Mahathir. A Tribute to A Statesmen", a photographic capsule of the life and times of one of the most outstanding world leaders, is attracting visitors in droves - reminiscent of the busloads who visited the "Dialogue With Nature" photographic odyssey (2003) of the humanist Daisaku Ikeda a.k.a. Mr Soka Gakkai, and China portrait artist Li Zijian (2001).

These days, the purpose-built gallery is bustling with an endless stream of visitors, young and old, local and foreign - something unthinkable as recent as four years ago when it was housed in what was formerly the Majestic Hotel and its ghostly claustrophobic chambers.

The most spectacular of shows, the "Nyonya Kebaya" show, was held last February-April to mark the 13th Non-Aligned Movement Conference in Kuala Lumpur. It featured exquisitely gorgeous pieces from the collection of Datin Paduka Seri Endon Mahmood, wife of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

It was a world-class presentation, complete with accessories and jewellery and had a nostalgic ambience as Peranakan music wafted in the air. In addition there was a symposium and fashion-show contest to boot.

But for the 10th Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit in Kuala Lumpur, the NAG has unveiled a spectrum of Islamic arts programmes - "Water: The First Element" photography show; "Islamic Inspired Music Fest with Ghazal, Nasyid and Dikir Barat" performances; "Words of Faith" by the foremost contemporary Islamic art exponent A.D. Pirous; and "Art For All2", adapted by Wairah from Thailand's hugely successful innovative art camp for the disabled, will have its third edition on Dec 6.

Such programmes have taken art beyond its crusty, rarefied confines into the different aspects of daily life, such as the ongoing "Sonneratia II" exhibition (being held until Nov 16) and the "Alami Puncak" show.

"Sonneratia II" features works of student artists who took part in the April art camp in Kuala Selangor under "major domo" Hasnul Jamal Saidon. It attests to their imagination and skills. Alami is based on the art and science camp, where 28 artists took to Mount Kinabalu last year.

Then there was the "Paya Indah Wetlands" photography excursion-show by

children, the forerunner of the "Through The Eyes Of A Child" project, now at Galeri Petronas.

The gallery has also hosted innumerable activities which have included art bazaars, demonstrations (like the recent Seni Silat where a group of artists under Amron Omar sketched silat exponents from the Persatuan Seni Gayung Patani), children's painting competitions and art competitions. Other events included street painting and workshops, one of which was conducted by Achmad Supandi Hassan, the natural-colour maker, symposiums and talks (e.g. Celoteh Seni held on Sept 21).

Wairah is wise to continue with the broad-visioned approach of her predecessor Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal (director, 1983-89) by incorporating all forms of arts disciplines. The gallery recently hosted the eighth Malaysian Video Awards and staged "Nahdah: Islamic Impulses in Malaysian Architecture".

The best part of it all is that admission is FREE.

The gallery has also initiated various exhibitions overseas like the "Gema (Resonance) Malaysian" contemporary art show in Czechoslovakia in 1998; "Rupa 1987-1997" (SOAS, University of London); the "Contemporary Paintings and Traditional Adornments" (New York) in 1996, and the "Of Shadows and Images" (held in Malmo, Sweden from May to August, and Barcelona, Seville and Madrid this month). It is helping to sponsor overseas exhibitions like the Malaysian Watercolour Painting expedition/exhibition in Sweden (1997) and India (2001) as well.

Publications such as Malaysian Masterpieces in Art also help augment scholarship and critical debate.

Malaysian artists are also getting recognition abroad: Ramlan Abdullah won the Oita Sculpture Grand Prize and both Abdul Muthalib Musa and Idris Awang won second prizes; Kow Leong Kiang won the Asean Art Awards Grand Prize, and Wong Hoy Cheong and Zulkifli Yusoff were invited for the prestigious Venice Biennale.

Clearly the NAG is responding sensitively to a rapidly changing environment, within and without and coping with all the inherent constraints and bugbears.

And for that, the NAG under the stewardship of Wairah and her able team deserves praise. Happy 45th birthday, NAG!

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