

# Art goes green in answer to call of the wild

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THE thousands of motorists who use Jalan Lembah Perdana as a morning shortcut will have noticed something new as they sit in their tree-lined traffic jam: public art. Or perhaps they might not have noticed it. After all, these two granite sculptures blend so harmoniously with their surroundings, they seem almost part of the scenery.

So far there have been no letters to the newspapers. Contrast this with the famed pitcher plant in nearby Dataran Merdeka. This provoked an avalanche of unfavourable correspondence when it was unveiled to the public. The size of the unfortunate sculpture was as frightening as the cost.

Whenever a sculpture goes up in a public place, the first thought seems to be that it must look at home in Jurassic Park. Monster-sized *labu* exist on Jalan Parlimen, and then there is a keris that is twice the height of an average adult despite being half submerged in the ground.

The other way of making a sculpture stand out is to put some advertising on it. The Jalan Universiti roundabout in Petaling Jaya had a steel contraption masquerading as a sculpture, enhanced by a dangling Panasonic sign. Best of all, this was attached by a simple hook, so if a new corporate sponsor came along, then no doubt it could have become the Pensonic bequest instead.

This monument didn't last long anyway. There is now no sculpture and no roundabout. A flyover has taken its place, a magnificent piece of engineering without any sponsor's



name on it.

Back on Jalan Lembah Perdana, the sculptures are not likely to be permanent either. Although they have been there for a couple of months, they are part of an exhibition that opens next week at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. Jointly presented by the museum and the Perdana Leadership Foundation, this is the biggest show of its kind in Malaysia — but not the longest. *Merdeka 50: A Celebration of Malaysian Art* continues until mid-September, which means sculpture lovers, motorists and pedestrians have had a lot more time to examine two of the works at least.

The commemorative independence exhibitions are now piling up fast. *Merdeka 50* is even bigger than it sounds. Initially it was anticipated that there would be 50 artists, but such is the enthusiasm from the art community, the show now features 67 painters and sculptors. Some are famous and some are not. All have made a statement about how they see Merdeka, and it is here that Malaysia's diversity becomes truly apparent. Of course there are lots of flags and a few *bunga raya*.

Most of all there is a mood of cautious optimism. Visitors to many con-



Art and the urban environment come together organically. — Picture by Erna Dyanty

temporary-art shows will be weighed down by the level of angst that affects young artists in particular. It seems that as soon as Merdeka is mentioned, the cloud of discontent disappears and a happy nation emerges. All this joy, without a single shopping mall in sight.

Fifty years of independence seems to have brought out a self-assured approach. Nature features prominently. This is obviously something that Malaysia takes pleasure in; no one more so than Yusof Gajah, who at this exhibition gives us a huge canvas of rainforest as well as elephants. More bizarrely, the Eye on KL turns up frequently, although not in Yusof

Gajah's earthly paradise.

There are plenty of artists who show anxiety about the future. "Things can still go wrong" is their message, expressed in many ways. One of the more surprising is a sunken galleon, the *Flor de la Mar*, which rests at the bottom of a serene and strangely empty blue ocean. The artist is Ajis Mohamad, well known for his turtles and coral reefs. This time, the subject of the painting is the threat rather than the threatened. Could there be the equivalent of the *Flor de la Mar*, ready to steal Malaysia's hard-won glory? If this threat exists, it will probably not come from Portugal. The best it could

manage these days would be beating the Malaysian football team in a qualifying round of the next World Cup.

The natural world is so important at this exhibition, it seems as if the subliminal colour is green. Malaysia may see itself as a nation of shoppers, but the call of the wild is still strong. The two massive sculptures on the street outside the exhibition are highly abstract, non-figural images.

Mad Anuar Ismail shows Azhar Mansor's boat being pummelled by the ocean. Mohd Fauzi Mohd Tahir is inspired by a chicken protecting its young. Both represent nature "red in tooth and claw", not the country-club version inhabited by Al Gore. While the ancient Greeks would have painted those teeth and claws red, these artists have left the stone looking weathered and monochromatic.

One or two of the other artists hit the street for their inspiration. It's unusual for a society to get sentimental about dusty, treeless cityscapes, but even more exceptional is the attention given to government leaders. Malaysia leads the world in honouring its prime ministers. This national attachment is so well represented at *Merdeka 50*, it could end up as Malaysia's Mount Rushmore. And just like America's tribute to its greatest presidents, this exhibition has free admission. *Merdeka 50: A Celebration of Malaysian Art* runs from Aug 2 to Sept 16.

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