

# Of flags, photographs and penitence

LONG before August, the *Jalur Gemilang* is flying proudly in some unexpected places. In many other parts of the world, members of the art community are least prone to waving flags. They are more likely to burn them. In Malaysia, however, the vein of patriotism pulsates with vigour.

Art galleries are as much a part of Merdeka festivities as taxi antennae.

The first gallery from the starting grid was Galeri Petronas, with the exhibition "Photojournalism and the Imaging of Modern Malaysia".

The invitation featured Tunku Abdul Rahman with the famous clenched-fist salute, confirming the point that it's photojournalism and not the fine-art side of photography that has been making much progress in recent years.

Last February, a photograph by a living photographer made a record price of more than RM10 million. He was German, rather than Malaysian, and his massive photos are unlikely ever to travel over here. They don't often make it to galleries in Europe either, unless there is a large lorry and a lot of space available. The photos are about six metres wide.

Photography is not just the medium of the moment. It has been around for more than 150 years, and the debate over whether it is really art has been raging for almost as long. In the past, photos were small items. Like the photojournalism at Galeri Petronas, they were intended to be seen at close range, usually in a



ART AND ABOUT

By Lucien De Guise

newspaper. Contemporary photographs can be viewed comfortably at a distance of 50 metres through the windows of a rich neighbour's house.

As a reminder that this art was not always the billboard size that it has become, it is possible to see images from a century ago at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. The current exhibition also provides a useful reminder that Merdeka did not happen overnight. Entitled "Neither East Nor West: Asia in the Age of Monochrome", this is a collaborative effort with the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

The centre of the British Empire was where the photos were taken, but the sitters came from much further afield: As far as the lands that are now Malaysia.

Among the many non-British subjects taken at the Lafayette Studio in London's Bond Street were two rulers from Kedah and one from Perak. None of them was an enthusiastic member of the British Empire. Still, they went to have their portraits taken and the results are more like penetrating studies than happy snaps.

These are men in the depths of po-

litical crises, or in the case of Sultan Abdul Hamid of Kedah, worries about the future of his 45 children. He need not have been concerned about son number 14.

Tunku Abdul Rahman was back in London several decades later to settle independence for the Federation of Malaya. As the father of "Bapa Malaysia", Sultan Abdul Hamid should perhaps be considered for the title "Grandfather of Malaysia".

The Lafayette Studio also photographed dignitaries from other parts of Asia. The countries that are represented include Japan, China and Thailand. Most of all, there was India. The subcontinent's elite had an advanced appreciation of the good life. Accompanying them to the best portrait photographers were the most sumptuous clothes and dazzling jewels. Anyone interested in learning more should not miss a talk entitled "Asia's Taste for Luxury" by Dr Amin Jaffer of the Victoria & Albert Museum, to be held at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia at 10am this Saturday (admission is free).

The whiff of freedom in the air this year is not all about Malaysia's 50th anniversary of independence.

Britain's abolition of the slave trade two centuries ago is also being celebrated in 2007, which presents more of a challenge for the art world. In the UK, there are some desperate solutions to the problem. Malaysia, on the other hand, is not really participating in this global extravaganza.

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A photograph of Sultan Abdul Hamid of Kedah, 'Bapa kepada Bapa Malaysia', currently on view at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

The British, instead of patting themselves on the back for being among the first countries to end slavery, are thrashing themselves with a rotan. The spirit of penitence is rife.

All around are Britons apologising for the abominations of their distant forebears. Every city in England is getting in on the act. Being a bit short of actual slave art, galleries have found ingenious solutions such as the "slavery trail" at the Manchester Art Gallery. In Liverpool, there will be a whole new museum dedicated to the subject. Opening a week before Merdeka Day, the International Slavery Museum might divert much of world media attention from Malaysia's celebrations.

Locally, nothing will get in the way of the independence festivities. Almost every gallery has something

planned. Of the independent galleries, one of the most intriguing is at Valentine Willie Fine Art in Bangsar. Neatly combining Merdeka fever with Visit Malaysia Year, there is the exhibition "Selamat Jalan ke Malaysia". With artists as acclaimed and politically attuned as Wong Hoy Cheong, this is something worth waiting for. August is when it happens, after a month in Sydney.

Malaysia's art lovers are in for a rich year, unless they happen to be planning a post-school days nostalgia visit to Muzium Negara. Renovations in 2007 mean that they can expect a superb new showcase of national treasures — next year.

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