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# Perhaps artists just make lousy politicians?

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RECENTLY, an email reached me from a gallery with a powerful election message: "Vote to have a country in which the arts can flourish!"

The exclamation mark is dramatic but the message hardly sows the seeds of street protest. The art lobby is not much of a force anywhere in the world. In Malaysia, it has nothing like the influence of special-interest groups dedicated to, for example, the gratuitous cutting down of trees.

It's hard to imagine the different campaigns suddenly focusing on the price of paint or canvas. If Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton can't be roused by the subject of artists' rights, the odds are against the idea taking hold at Barisan Nasional or opposition headquarters. In the hierarchy of politicians' needs, support for the arts is not a promise worth making.

So if no political parties are going all out for a Malaysia as the hub of global art domination, maybe some of the leaders are making a personal contribution? Apparently not, unless they are doing it in secret. An artist gripping the rudder of state is hardly the same as finding they have *Hero* powers. It is probably more suitable for public attention than the news kept quiet during World War 2 that King George VI was an expert at needlepoint.

There must be some modern statesmen with an artistic streak. If we extend the criteria to karaoke prowess, Malaysia could almost match the Philippines. The Philippines had a film-star president, of course, which hasn't even come close to happening here. Several countries have had actors who acquired high office, including the United States, but I am struggling to think of the creative artists who have struck the po-



litical jackpot. If playwrights count, then Vaclav Havel was president of not one but two countries. He put in three years as president of Czechoslovakia and then 10 years in the Czech Republic.

Where are the painters and sculptors? Perhaps the artistic temperament doesn't suit the slippery world of politics, although there are plenty of contemporary artists who could rival any politician in a schmoozing contest.

Malaysian prime ministers have not overexerted themselves at the easel. At least they haven't passed off someone else's work as their own — an act which brought disgrace to New Zealand's Prime Minister Helen Clark.

Malaysia's premiers have been painted more often than they have done the painting. One of the rare occasions on which all five were depicted on a single canvas is an epic work by Wong Seng Tong, exhibited at last year's Merdeka 50 exhibition held by the Perdana Leadership Foundation and the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

Going back a bit further into the past, Frank Swettenham knew his way around a sketch pad well enough for his watercolours to get into an exhibition at the National Art Gallery a few years ago.

However, I can't think of a single professional artist who has made it to the top of what Benjamin Disraeli called the "greasy pole" of politics. Disraeli was prime minister three



Wong Seng Tong's painting is the closest thing to a prime minister's signature on canvas.

times but started out as a writer of romantic fiction. It's probably too late for Gordon Brown to soften his image by scribbling away like Barbara Cartland in a pink boudoir brimming with chihuahuas.

The only artists who get to the top of the political pole are amateurs. The one who stands out is Winston Churchill. His career went from the army to journalism to politics, but what he really enjoyed was painting. No other artist-statesman has achieved the success that he did. This was partly the novelty of being a prime minister with some artistic ability, and also the works themselves. When exhibited anonymously, people still liked them. He didn't enjoy painting people, though. He preferred the world of nature: "trees don't complain" was his explanation.

Churchill's course in life was unconventional for an aristocrat of his

era. He was an enthusiastic bricklayer, although nobody would pay much for his walls; it's his paintings that collectors want. Prices are regularly more than RM1 million and have gone beyond RM3 million.

The only artist-statesman who might rival Churchill is his greatest adversary. Adolf Hitler, unlike Churchill, started as a painter and was soon persuaded to seek other types of work. He always saw himself as an artist, despite the unenthusiastic response of the public.

In the battle of the bidders, Churchill is still way ahead of Hitler, whose works haven't topped much more than RM60,000. Hitler later channelled his creative energy into military fashion design and graphic art. His updated version of the ancient swastika symbol was achieved after endless agonising about colour, proportion and background.

Back here, it makes you wonder who created such enduring icons as the Barisan Nasional scales and the DAP rocket. I wouldn't even know how to describe the Parti Keadilan Rakyat symbol. Whoever the creators may be, they are the unsung street heroes of the moment. Their work is to be seen everywhere and yet the artists don't get much credit for it.

This is the political world's contribution to the visual aesthetics of the nation. It may not be quite what the gallery had in mind when it sent that email about voting for a country in which the arts can flourish. Whichever party you vote for, it is almost certain that this will remain a country in which small flags can flourish.

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