

UNCAGED

Wei-Ling Gallery

Gallery Message

One of the main things we set out to do when we opened Wei-Ling Contemporary at The Gardens Mall was to ensure the exhibitions we held would reach out and resonate with the general public; the mall provided the audience we were keen to introduce to the joys of contemporary Malaysian art, and our role as a gallery was to assure we could assist in providing mediums and messages that were relevant to our audience.

So, it gives me great pleasure to introduce *Art Caged/Uncaged*. Inspired by old bird singing competitions, the exhibition adopts the path less traveled and features a unique display, where all the artworks come together to form an installation that resembles an actual field where these competitions are held.

The exhibition sees the amalgamation of our regional heritage and our contemporary culture, and we hope the joining of these two elements will be of interest to viewers. The 10 participating artists in the show have responded to the theme in various ways, from sound art to hanging objects, and even a performance held on the day of the opening.

The gallery extends its deepest gratitude to the businesses that have helped this exhibition come to life.

Despite being based in Penang, Savanna-Grass responded positively to the idea of the exhibition and we thank Mr. Hans of Savanna-Grass for the generous loan of their artificial grass for the recreation of the 'padang' in Wei-Ling Contemporary.

Thanks also goes to Geraldine Liew of Machines, who facilitated the loan of the iPods, which play Yap Sau Bin's sound work, *Of Garden and Artifice*.

And not least, we'd also like to say thank you to Alvin and Jason Chen of CzipLee, who kindly sponsored prizes for the public portion of this exhibition, a competition where you can choose your favourite 'birdsong'.

It is so important for the art industry to receive support from businesses to see unorthodox exhibitions come to life and we couldn't have done this without your contributions.

And to the 10 exhibiting artists in *Art Caged/Uncaged*, thank you. Your artworks show both resilience and innovation, and we know that they will inspire others, offer a sense of nostalgia, and give audiences new memories to take away.

Lim Wei-Ling
Gallery Director

Wei-Ling Gallery & Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur
July 2011



Curator's Statement

The idea for this exhibition stemmed – quite selfishly – from an experience of my own. As a child, I often used to see a group of men that gathered at a small padang in Ipoh, and I used to gaze intently as they sat around listening to their birds, which were in cages mounted at the very top of poles scattered around the field.

Regretfully, I enjoyed the scenery from across the street. A little too frightened and aware of my age and gender, I felt like an outsider and never plucked up the courage to enter the padang to enquire about the goings-on. But still, the image of tall poles with delicate birdcages balanced atop them, and singing birds inside, dug a deep imprint in my mind. I love the spectacle of it all, the imagery it created, and the romanticism of the whole affair – that people could be so engrossed in the sounds emitted by a tiny animal and how a small group of individuals could create their own little world, a little microcosm within society.

Recreating that atmosphere was the first thing I sought to do with *Art Caged/Un-caged*, and the idea developed into something altogether different when I began to draw parallels with the art world. I noted how both entailed small groups of enthusiasts, and observed how there seemed to be an impenetrable force field around both communities; you were either in the group or not.

Little exchange exists between these two groups, and I imagined that if I didn't know very much about art, I would be reluctant to walk into a gallery today – a throwback to the days when I watched a bird singing competitions from the safety of a row of shop lots. However, with contemporary art growing and there being a silent rally for art being more public and accessible here in Malaysia, I wondered if it would be possible to create an exhibition that straddled both sides – populist and intellectual - at the same time.

A return to the experience

It could be achieved with a little tweaking, I felt. I write about art, and in that process, often rely on the methodology of analyzing the art object as one would a text: decoding it, deciphering it, and interpreting each line or element like a word in a sentence. Like a puzzle, there is a deep, silent sense of fulfillment when one piece locks onto another, but in this private and consuming task, what is sometimes compromised is the very nature of the experience. In writing for the mass media, I've also become incredibly aware of my audience; I am not just writing for readers in the know.

People ultimately respond to art – and all things really - on very intrinsic levels: I love it because it's colourful, I hate it because I find it ugly, I prefer paintings to sculptures,

I don't like the taste of it, or that sound annoys me. Secondary analysis – where artworks are read as texts or as a system of signs (as loosely described above) - is usually reserved for those with some basic knowledge of the subject matter; someone could easily state they loved Cindy Sherman's photographs, but only someone with a reserve of knowledge on postmodernism or some critical theory could bring forth coded arguments from one of the artist's images.

And so, this exhibition comes from a desire to reframe the art object and to liberate it – even if only temporarily - from its semiotic guise and to bring it back into the realms of the experience and the sheer spectacle of what an exhibition is. And, much of this has been a response to Wei-Ling Contemporary's setting within a shopping mall. This highly public context entails generous foot traffic and attracts an audience that largely consists of Joe Public. Would they be able to read a Cindy Sherman or a Latiff Mohidin? How do they respond to art altogether?

These questions remain very relevant in our local art context, where the small community of art practitioners and lovers maintain a solidarity that is at once admirable and a little intimidating to the outsider. And, whilst this is in no way a remark that experience alone is enough in an art exhibition, surely it can be reframed so there is a non-threatening entryway for the viewer?

The competition in *Art Caged/Un-caged*, where audiences get to vote for their favourite artwork does this. Not only does it draw a parallel to the format of the bird singing competition, but it also engages the viewer on a participatory level and helps us uncover what the usually-silent viewer has to say about their favourite artwork: Why did they like it? And, what do people respond to best? It is a small survey, but by privileging the viewer, this hopefully bridges the gap between artists / artworks and their audience.

What is an exhibition if not a spectacle?

In the gallery, we have attempted to recreate a little bird singing competition at a padang by hanging artworks at eye-level and relatively close to each other. There is no particular vantage point for any artwork or artist (bar Yap Sau Bin's sound piece, *Of Garden and Artifice*, which by its intrinsic nature requires you to carry around a device with you as you view the physical objects in the gallery) and this display permits a level playing field, where the artist's identity as author is leveled in a group setting; the artworks come together to form one complete installation and all play a crucial part in the exhibition. Arguably, none could exist as strongly if decontextualised and viewed independently.

And so, the hanging objects and sound works evoke a real bird singing competition in a field. The artists play the role of bird owners and they have brought their birds to battle, so to speak.

With this adopted role in mind, the artists have presented nurtured traces of their craft. Umibaizurah Mahir showcases her skill in blending industrial and fine art techniques in her ceramic birdcage titled *Paradise*; Shia Yih Yiing amalgamates two eponymous elements from her oeuvre; emerging artist, Tiong Chai Heing, explores materiality and comments on contemporaneous society in *Predicament*; Kojek's birdcage contains a ghostly remnant of a bird that has taken its own life to set its soul free; Hasnul Jamal Saidon has brought two cultural items from Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah's collection of gifts and cultural items from its museum origins into the context of a private art gallery; Meme's *Attachment* narrates the story of an actual encounter between the caged figure in the artwork and a real bird; and Wong Chee Meng has created a little baroque palace for a soon-to-be-hatched bird, which for now is a little golden egg resting inside a white cradle.

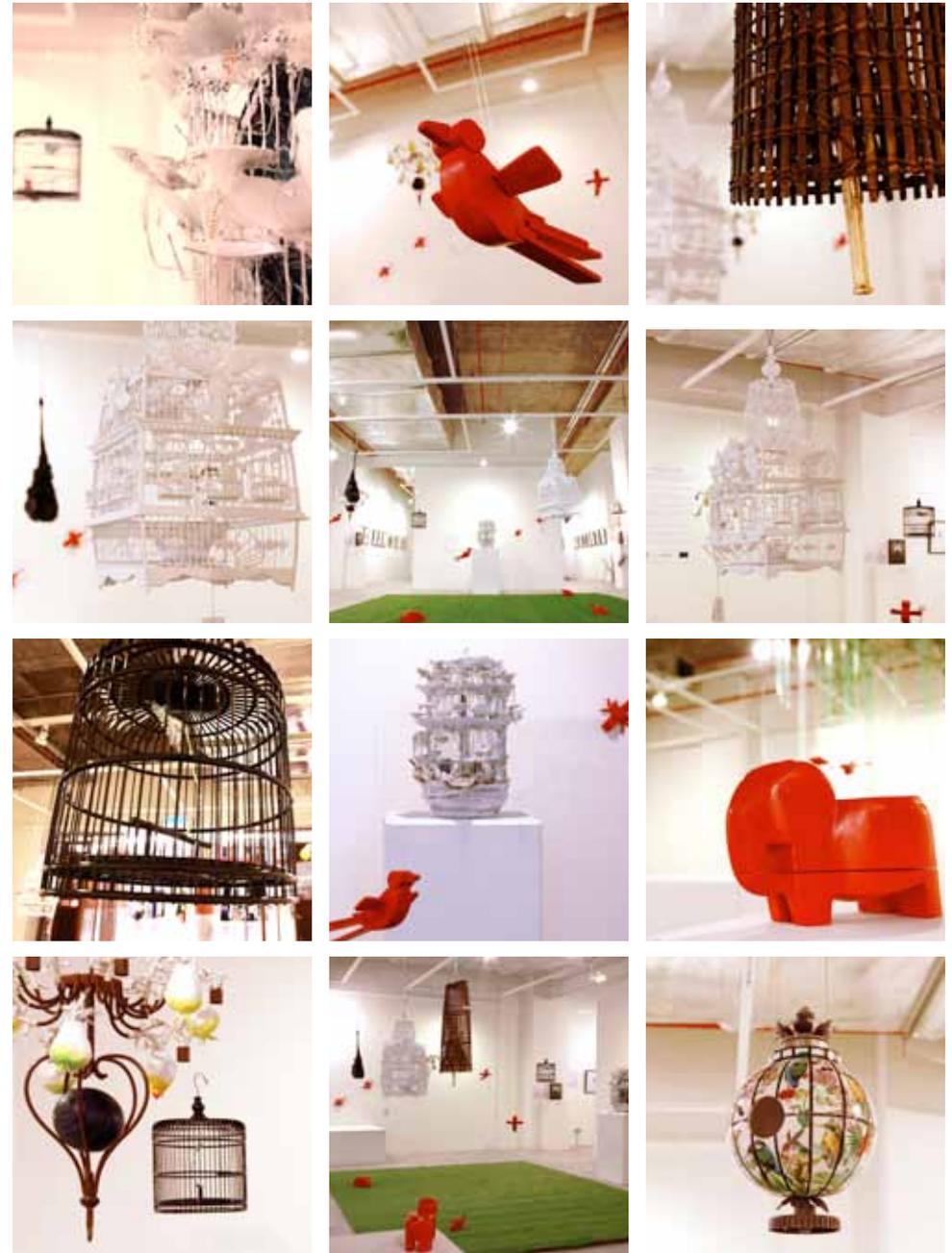
Jeganathan Ramachandran lends his wooden birds, insects, and animals to the exhibition, where they function as observers and mingle with audiences; Lim Kok Yoong's sound installation (inspired by the mockingbird) draws audiences in with its high-frequency synthetic bird calls; and Yap Sau Bin's work, recordings of himself set against nature in green areas of Kuala Lumpur, is offered on a portable device, so audiences can engage in a more physical spectatorship – one that is heightened by the artist's performance (July 13), where audience members are invited to be part of the work.

Let me tell you a story

In Malaysia, telling stories is a commonly used device in art. Narrative plays a strong component in contemporary Malaysian art and what all the artworks in *Art Caged/ Uncaged* combine to do is weave a tale about artists, artworks, and what an exhibition is by showcasing contemporary art vis-à-vis one of our region's cultural activities in a playful installation. It will proffer a sense of nostalgia for some viewers, as well as an element of discovery, and we hope it is a story that engages audiences in such a way that they may never feel afraid of leaving the comforts of familiarity to venture into a padang or gallery.

Complimenting *Art Caged/Uncaged* is the story of a real bird owner, Boy (found in this catalogue), where he tells us what really happens at bird singing competitions and what this activity entails.

May you enjoy and learn a little bit more about both.



Hasnul Jamal Saidon

entrapment . variable dimensions . metal dagger (keris) & bamboo fish trap . 2011

True 'self' is the 'witness' beyond form, beyond identification,
beyond ego, beyond any form of entrapment.



Hasnul Jamal Saidon "is a self-proclaimed seeker of light beyond form". Coincidentally, he is also the Director of Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.

Jeganathan Ramachandram

observers . variable dimensions . wood installations . 2011

The impetus behind my participation in this show stems from my love of nature. Pets that my family has kept have always been treated like real family members, and I have a deep and profound respect for animals and our natural world.

Every day, a significant number of birds flock to my home, where I feed them breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The injured birds usually keep their distance as they are wary of human interaction, but mostly, they are curious and friendly.

Humans and animals share a strong bond and I do not believe in cages at all.

Animals have always been a part of my work, whether I have used them as symbols or as subject matter. The animals in my installation are observers of the competition, guests who have come to see the show. They fly around to peer into the cages on display, and they are scattered across the space, mingling with human guests.

These sculptures have been shown before, but I have decided to unveil them again as I feel they haven't been understood properly before.



Jeganathan Ramachandran is a multi-talented artist, author, poet, sound analyst, and more. He studied traditional Indian painting (Tanjore Art) under the wise guidance of Babu Surender in Chennai, India in the early eighties, and went on to gain additional skills in granite sculpturing, Indian classical music, and Tantric Art too. He's also founder of Symbols House of Natural Art and Symbols Art Club.

Khairul Amir Shoib alias Meme

attachment . variable dimensions . fabric, metal, wood, plastic, photo, paper . 2011

Attachment describes a number of things for me. It tells the story of brief encounters, fleeting relationships or friendships, and even forbidden meetings between two beings.

I have seen this work progress through time and space, and its 'life' has been coloured by the chance encounter with a curious bird, which visited my studio. During this brief meeting, there was a sense of stillness and motion, life and lifelessness, and the contrast between freedom and entrapment was strong.

There's also a sense of melancholy in *Attachment*, as the winged figure in the work is confined to a cage, and it will forever be trapped behind a structure that contains its emotions and that keeps it silent and flightless.



Khairul Azmir Shoib is better known by his moniker, Meme, and he gained his MA in Fine Art and Technology from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in 2004, where he also completed his undergraduate studies. He has been exhibiting since the nineties, and his artworks predominantly showcase strong roots to fantasy and the world of imagination. Working across mediums, the artist recently mounted his third solo exhibition titled *Strange Women and Their Macabre Stories*.

Kojek

requiem . 32cm x 32cm x 48cm . mixed media . 2011

The skeletal bird is a ghost that stays within the birdcage. His physical body is still caged, but his soul is free. He is utilizing his rights by death in his own cage, in front of his owner. How drastic can we become when we are pushed to a corner, choices are limited but choices are there, still.



Hailing from Pasir Mas, Kojek graduated from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UITM) Shah Alam with a BA in Fine Arts in 2003. Between 2010 and 2011, he was the 16th Artist in Residence at Rimbun Dahan, Kuang. Most of his works deal with contemporary issues in an absurd/surrealistic setting with delicate figure collages. He is married to Azliza Ayob, an artist, and the couple are blessed with 3 children.

Lim Kok Yoong

when birds dont fly . variable dimensions . mixed media . 2011

This work is inspired by the peculiar ability of the mockingbird. The mockingbird is the unsung hero in the story of evolution. It played a pivotal role by making Charles Darwin realize that species were not stable units, but changing entities subject to the vagaries of competition. The mocking bird has the ability to imitate not only birds, but also other animals and the most bizarre thing is that the bird is adapting to our urban environment by imitating mechanical and electronic sounds such as car alarms, cell phone ring tone, chainsaws, camera shutter, etc.

The mocking bird alerts us to the possibility that species might change, and they are adapting to changes based on their survival instinct. On the other hand, in our technologically complex environment, technology is designed to imitate nature as closely as possible. Computers are programmed with the intelligence to be human-like.

In this project, I used Obiwannabe's Puredata sketch (a real-time graphical dataflow programming environment for audio, video, and graphical processing) to synthesize bird sounds, highlighting a phenomenon in urban ecology which is that we are trapped in a universe of simulacra where it is no longer possible to distinguish between real and surreal or between real and artificial. We seem to prefer fantasy over reality.



Lim Kok Yoong – or Wing as he also goes by – is a multimedia artist whose body of work encompasses objects, installations, conceptual works, video, and sound. He held his first solo exhibition, *When You Are Not Your Body*, in 2008 and has participated in various exhibitions, such as Notthatbalai Art Festival, Norwich Fringe Festival, Bangun – Abandoned Project, and Contemporary Art in School (CAIS). The artist has been on residencies in Norwich, England and Tokyo, Japan, and he has been a lecturer in the Faculty of Creative Multimedia, Multimedia University, Malaysia since 2006.



Shia Yih Yiing

enchanted superegg . 56cm x 52cm x 52cm . acrylic on ostrich egg
& papier mache . 2011

A superegg (me) is contemplating how to live well among the 'beauty' and the 'beast' of the contemporary world, to break the enchantment (limitation), and to venture far.

Shia Yih Yiing's career as a visual artist has seen her works travel as far as Bangladesh, Japan, Czech Republic, and Taiwan alongside her many exhibitions in Malaysia. The artist has 6 solo exhibitions to her name, and her works have delved into themes like femininity and motherhood, often imbued with a sense of playfulness and metaphor. The artist also imparts her knowledge and skill through the art classes that she conducts.

Tiong Chai Heing

predicament . 42cm x 42cm x 70cm . mixed media . 2011

My works largely portray my opinions towards the world at large; they contain the complicated inner psyche.

In my opinion, our world has been influenced and impacted by material worth or substance value. Humans do not know why they exist or know the purpose of life, and they put all their value on material satisfaction. Our hearts and souls have been corroded by materialism for a long time, and although there are some people who are starting to discover the meaning of life, there is still a lack of direction and aim. The nightmare of materialism is still at large and it continues to pollute the souls of human beings.

My work is titled *Predicament*, and it functions like an incense burner. I wanted to create a tower with shells, beads and lace all coming together to burn in a never-ending cycle. The shells and beads stand for our desire; the mirror symbolizes utopia as it also stands for narcissism; and the lace and beads give off a certain sense of temptation with their softness and fragility.

I enjoy exploring the complexities and contrasting nature of materials in my work. I feel they are in fact interconnected with our daily life, and inspiration for *Predicament* came from temple structures, and how devotees throw paper into burners as offerings to God. To me, this traditional act is like utopia, and like the mirrors in my work, stands for falsity and an unfulfillable goal.

The lack of direction and aim in society is one of our biggest shortcomings. And like a bird singing competition where owners wait patiently for their birds to sing, most of our acts stem from the desire to just satisfy ourselves.

A native of Yong Peng in Johor, Tiong Chai Heing gained her Diploma in Fine Art from Dasein Academy of Art, Kuala Lumpur in 2008. Now based in Malaysia's capital, she has participated in various group exhibitions and in 2011, was an artist-in-residence at House of MATAHATI (HOM).



Umibaizurah Mahir

paradise . 33cm x 32cm . porcelain, metal flower, car component



I didn't feel I needed to get a cage from the shop, so I made my own cage and used lines to create the illusion of an actual cage. My work, *Paradise*, plays on the specific notion of the bird locked inside a cage; birds are locked inside a small area and the only thing that surrounds them is empty space. I decided to change this predicament and transform the empty space or void in a cage into an area filled with food, flowers, and greenery – a colourful paradise for the birds.

As keeping birds is a hobby and we can't stop people from caging birds, the best thing we can do is to recreate the best possible environment for the birds as possible.

Umibaizurah Mahir has been a full-time artist since 2004, and is recognized as one of the first artists in Malaysia to develop the medium of ceramics within a contemporary framework. The artist utilizes industrial and fine art techniques to create her works, and her works are imbued with a strong sense of playfulness, femininity, and personal identity. Umi, as she's better known, also helms patisatustudio, which she co-founded with her husband, artist Ahmad Shukri Mohamed.

Wong Chee Meng

hatching . 40.6cm x 40.6cm x 111.8cm . mixed media . 2011

'I'm waiting for you. I keep checking on the temperature every day and night.
It's time to wake up, don't cover yourself under the shell
It's time to wake up, open your throat to sing
It's time to wake up, to see the sunrise
You'll make me proud...'

By juxtaposing the miniature sculptures with the traditional birdcage into one, I've created a scene that is multifaceted with subjects in layered forms, startling and engaging yet also momentary. I suggest the 'accidental composition' that allows unpredictability in 3D works and this reflects the experience that results from my unusual cross-disciplinary approach to visual-making. My birdcage represents anticipation.



Best known for his abstract paintings that adopt techniques of illusion, Wong Chee Meng has maintained an active presence in our local art scene since the mid-nineties. The artist has two solo exhibitions to his name and in 2007, he was artist-in-residence in the ABN AMRO-Malihon Residency Program in Balik Pulau, Penang. The artist is currently pursuing his MA in International Contemporary Art and Practices at Limkokwing University of Creative Technology, where he is also a lecturer.





Yap Sau Bin

of garden & artifice . variable dimensions . sound installation . 2011

While lecturing in the garden, Plato repeatedly reminded his students that a work of art is nothing but mimesis, a second-degree removal from truth, that it is just a copy of a copy of the Ideal Form.

But his student Aristotle contested that art is a mimesis in the sense that it is an imitation of nature, that it is a copy of an idea which originated from the mind of the artist.

As I imitate the sound of a bird, calling out, singing, I wonder in what manner art imitates life, nature or truth. I am imitating an imaginary bird sound, as in my recollection of what birds might sound like with my limited skill of imitating them. So what do I really copy, in the manners as the two philosophers above have suggested?

Or am I just imagining my attempt of communicating with birds, using what limited whistling technique I have?

Do I trick myself, or the birds and others?

This life is indeed a garden-full of artifices.

| | Title | Duration |
|---|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | Melawati in the morning I | 4 min 37 sec |
| 2 | Melawati in the morning II | 2 min 59 sec |
| 3 | Kampung Kuala Ampang in the morning | 3 min 6 sec |
| 4 | Wangsamaju in the morning | 14 min 52 sec |
| 5 | Wangsamaju in the evening | 4 min 38 sec |
| 6 | Edge of forest and street | 37 sec |
| 7 | Of Garden and Artifice | 4 min 54 sec |

A founding member of Rumah Air Panas Art Society (RAP), Yap Sau Bin has donned various hats in the local art scene. He participated in the 52nd Venice Biennale, has had works shown as far as Cuba and Shanghai, and in 2008, the artist traveled to Japan as part of the JENESYS Residency. His art practice encompasses conceptual work, installations, mapping projects, collaborations, and performance works. He has also undertaken various curatorial projects with his colleagues at RAP. The artist currently lectures on Humanities subjects at the Faculty of Creative Multimedia, Multimedia University, Malaysia.

Boy, Bird Owner
Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur

I have a lot of birds, but only three or four real talents. For training, I bring them to fields to compete, so my novice birds can train with the older more experienced ones.

The age of people involved in this sport varies. There are some in their twenties and even those in their sixties. Men without sight still take part in competitions, and even people without limbs turn up.

There are no fixed prices for birds. There's no government restriction, so prices can vary from RM10 to RM200,000 and above depending on the bloodline. The price of cages varies too. Those with carvings and embellishments can cost RM500, and just last Ramadhan, I sold three cages for RM4,000.

Bird owners are just as varied. You get police officers, ex-police officers, Indonesians residing here, lawyers, and even those in the lower-income bracket. There are cliques too. Some only buy the best birds available, and the most fanatic bird owners in our region are the Thais.

We have competitions twice a month: one in KL and another one in Shah Alam. You can get the annual competition calendar at any local competition site, but real *kaki burung* will know when everything is. Local competitions also take place as far as Muar and Kulai, and in Kelantan, there's the Piala Raja, where winners have to dress up in formal attire to receive their trophy from the Sultan. There used to be even more competitions around. People don't rear birds much anymore because it's an inconvenient hobby. Most people live in flats now, whereas people were based in kampungs before. Competitions go on for four hours, and there are four rounds. There are three categories for the birds: A, B, and C and each pole or entry costs about RM35. At these competitions, there are some people that sit and watch their birds throughout those four hours. I prefer to chat with my friends.

Judges take everything into account: melody, volume, tone... I've won a few times. My bird has come second runner up twice in categories B and C.

Do I think it's cruel to keep birds in cages? To an extent, yes, but I also don't think it is if you take good care of your birds.

Once a month, I give my birds a bath, and if I feed them mung beans, I hand-feed them each bean individually. It's not like you can control these birds with a battery. Anything can affect your bird, even the smallest bump that your car goes over on the way to the competition. It's nature, so it isn't all in your hands.

The bird becomes royalty in your home. *Tuan puteri*, as we say, because if you don't take care of them properly, they won't sing well.

I don't name my birds, but some people do. They give them warrior names like Jebat. I've only ever named one bird. I called it Anak Belalang.

Rearing *merbok* (zebra doves) for bird singing competitions is part of our heritage and I do it because I have a natural inclination for it. If you like and understand birds, you will too.





Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the participating artists in Art Caged/Uncaged for bringing your artworks to the field for this competition

The sponsors – Savanna-Grass and Machines - who've made this padang come alive

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Patrons and friends of the gallery

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Art Caged / Uncaged

an art installation curated by Rachel Jenagaratnam
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Produced and published by Wei-Ling Gallery
8 Jalan Scott
50470 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

Wei-Ling Contemporary
Ground Floor Lot G213 & 213A
The Gardens Mall
Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

T: +603 2260 1106

E: weiling@weiling-gallery.com

www.weiling-gallery.com

Project Director Lim Wei-Ling

Edited By Rachel Jenagaratnam

Design By Nur Khalisah Ahmad

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