

The Space Between: Group Show (2015)

As keen observers and commentators of life in contemporary Malaysia, Malaysian artists have never failed to take on important and challenging issues and subjects in their work.

In the last thirty years, rapid economic development, and the resulting socio-political developments – urban migration, the tension between tradition and modernity, the divisions formed between different communities and political parties, the rise of conservative and religious elements and certain pivotal events in the nation's political life - have given artists much to contemplate, to ponder on and discuss in their artistic practice.

In Malaysia, as in every other part of the world, we have often looked to our artists to help us understand the world around us. They have helped us locate our place in a constantly shifting society, and we have relied on their insights into the complexities and contradictions of contemporary Malaysian life.

How artists have chosen to explore these subjects, though, is very much centred on the way we act, think and function as Malaysians.

Vincent Leong has built a body of work that is conceptually driven and primarily concerned with how we come together as a people in Malaysia more than half a century since Independence.

Roundabout, a large wall hanging of an abstract roundel created by the front tyre of a motorcycle going round and round and round is the recent work Vincent has chosen for this exhibition. The work has been interpreted as referencing the racial and cultural stereotype of the 'mat rempit' phenomenon and its implications but quite simply, it speaks volumes about

the issues of race and identity and place and national unity that have only intensified over the last 50 years.

Uzumaki, his earlier miniatures of the burning mosquito coil and its effects on different surfaces reveal the beginnings of this idea of going round in circles... It is also – visually – a beautiful set of companions to the large Roundabout and in some distant memory recalls Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa's use of the coil in *Mystical Reality*.

In Malaysia, issues of censorship, both state sponsored and self-imposed, and a culture of ingrained “sensitivities” to what are perceived as taboo subjects in society – religion and race, among others – have meant that artists often do not confront these difficult subjects directly. Instead, they choose to address these issues through other more subtle ways. Humour and satire have often been ways to camouflage the more serious intention behind the work while autobiography and personal history are conduits to convey larger narrative truths.

Although not without its challenges, this prescribed mode of working has helped give rise to works which are not didactic but instead are multi-layered and unexpected. They challenge us to think for ourselves about ourselves, both as a nation and a people, in new and more complex ways than are allowed in official national narratives.

Along with prominent practitioners like Wong Hoy Cheong and Simryn Gill, Liew Kung Yu has always been at the forefront of conveying the most current of issues in Malaysia. Through an exciting body of works which boasts some of the most innovative, varied and painstaking use of material and modes of expression in Malaysian art, Kung Yu's art has always been a permanent resident of the space between.

His masterful use of photographic cut-outs to create deliciously detailed vistas – often layered monuments to excess, bad taste, greed, opportunism and of course, everyday disparities – have become synonymous with his practice.

For this exhibition, Kung Yu has chosen *Bandar Sri Tiang Kolom*, one of his *Cadangan – Cadangan untuk Negaraku* pieces that find inspiration in the evolution of local architecture - tacky monuments, Greek-columned public housing and other ephemera as symbols of many of the issues that concern the artist and many Malaysians as well.

Kung Yu's *Stoned*, an installation of a high-end jewelry display built around the story of the infamous RM24 million diamond ring once again displays Kung Yu's masterful attention to detail in a literally pointed paean to the excesses of greed, vulgarity and lust for power.

Like Kung Yu, Yee I-Lann's work has always combined the lyrical with a truthfulness that is basically rooted in the here and now. With a multi-disciplinary practice that finds its starting point in photography but straddles installation, video, painting and even batik, she has gained an international profile enjoyed by very few Malaysian artists.

Having always drawn inspiration from the written word, many of her works find their starting point in contemporary and classical regional and international Literature. So it seems quite obvious that the artist would make *The Writer's Portrait Series* made up specifically of Malaysian Muslim male writers. I-Lann herself describes these writers as having 'strong public voices that address various socio-political local and personal issues through their works in the form of poetry, lyrics, stories, articles, scripts.'

TABLED is an especially poignant work that addresses the myriad complex issues arising from our colonial pasts and our post-colonial mind sets.

Using photographs of everyday people from Indonesian and Malaysian streets, the artist has designed a traditional blue and white dinner service normally associated with the rich, powerful and privileged. Originally, a site specific work installed in the dining room of the Museum Van Loon in Amsterdam (still owned by the family of the founder of the East-India Company) the work places the public at large from across the world within the 'private place of the elite where their histories intersect'.

Often, the presentation of these themes and meanings are also enhanced by exciting use of mediums and innovative ways of making.

Best known for his innovative use of materials, large scale billboard-sized works as well as his highly finished art objects – from his earliest light boxes and silk-screened works to his resin-encased meticulous paintings – Ivan Lam has always been interested in the issues of the times in which his works are made.

With both the works he has chosen for this exhibition, the artist expresses his concerns for the future as far as our natural and social environments are concerned. With the earlier work *In Memory of the Man I Was Told Not to Be*, Ivan uses childhood motifs to explore the words empathy, apathy and sympathy and how we, as a society, straddle all three emotions at once in the manner with which we negotiate our futures daughters against a backdrop of brilliant yellow and green grass undaunted by the uncertainty of the future.

Kim Ng's works has been shaped as much by his use of medium as by the issues that he is concerned with.

Kim incorporates all manner of making from calligraphy and assemblage to drawing and mark-making to give us the most alluring picture cabinets that redress the usual misconceptions about the limits of printmaking.

Kim has always used the play of positive and negative spaces to compose his floating motifs from our diverse cultural and social contexts within a world rife with contradictions of place, time and identity. This is apparent in works like *Walking in the Same Direction as Others*, his early installment for this exhibition. With this work he creates picture planes where disparate things come together and repel each other in equal measure, an apt reflection of the times we live in....

The new work *I Found Something You Left Behind* returns to the organic compositions of before, presented in delightful picture cabinets that now appropriate three dimensional found objects. Along with the usual embellishments of line, colour and text (from A Samad Said's *Dead Crow*) Kim revels in the depictions and symbols of current political, economic, social crises ... which he describes as 'the little stories of our Land'.

Another artist who combines his innovative treatment of the picture plane with current issues is Wong Chee Meng.

Wong Chee Meng's vibrant picture planes, bursting with layered patterns, draw from the craft traditions of stencil art and paper-cutting that has become especially relevant in an age of graffiti and street art. Chee Meng's process however is less about the immediacy of the moment or the mark of the gesture but more so about a highly-considered and designed finish that evoke huge shiny billboards or small glossy magazine advertisements.

While Chee Meng himself refers to his works as imagined or fictional narratives that draw from random objects he has seen, they nevertheless intentionally inspire specific meanings for the viewer. Living in a politically and socially complex world as well as a Malaysia in transition, there can be no denying the implications and specific meanings inspired by works

like Reading between the Lines where the artist sees himself as an 'observer' and an 'interpreter'.

For the older work Chee Meng has chosen Adam & Eve, to depict a hopeful, if somewhat naïve, celebration about all that is good in the world around him.

Looking at Choy Chun Wei's earliest grid-inspired paintings, there can be no doubt that he is a painter's painter. In Construction Series, his layered surfaces of segmented colour and texture set in beautiful grids seem to refer to modern living, to harmonious concentrations of dwellings and people while always being mindful of the tensions of human interaction.

Chun Wei's paintings have evolved over the years to include collages and assemblages of found paraphernalia, text and other consumer ephemeral elements.

His art has begun to find a meeting place between the early layered grids and their later 3-D reinventions. The artist is obsessed with the issues of urban material consumption and draws directly from the well of his own urban landscape. With Unknown Landscape: Dust, Chun Wei describes his process as creating 'blankets of encrustation' that are as much 'aesthetic enhancement' as they are about his engagement with urban materiality and humanity.

In a multicultural, multireligious country, one of the key subjects that Malaysian artists address in their work time after time is identity and the constant search for one's place.

With the rise of conservative agendas championing cultural homogeneity, these issues are, sadly, still as relevant as they were 55 years ago at the birth of the nation.

As a founding member of the MATAHATI group, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, like the other members of the collective, has always been interested in pushing the boundaries of painting through alternative modes of expression while addressing many of the current issues of the day.

He is known for building his picture planes with rich layers of collaged textures embellished with over-painted iconic or popular images, abstract forms as well as text.

As with many Malaysian artists of his generation, Shukri's work continuously deals with issues of identity, place and his experience of the larger world beyond. Many of his works deal with the loss of that cultural identity and traditional values in the face of rapid change. He is also extremely conscious of eco-environmental issues ranging from the extinction of species like the Malaysian tapir and the preservation of our rainforests in the face of corporate greed and institutionalized corruption.

For his earlier work, Shukri has selected Cabinet Series "Unity", one of his early painted assemblages that use found cultural elements ranging from architectural features of a kampung house to the conical farmers' hat reconfigured in a twodimensional wall hanging and then exhibited within the 'avant-garde' context of an art gallery which is fundamentally a Western construct.

From his current chalkboard works, Shukri has included The Black Board Series: Malaysia Great Wall. The work uses the words from the Rukun Negara, the text repeated in black cut-outs. The Rukun Negara which was introduced in 1970 as a way to foster unity among the different races in Malaysia is taught to every student in schools all over the country and represents the ideals and principles that lie at the very heart of our nation.

Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman is one of the few Malaysian artists who has always avoided the 'space between' because he has been so glaringly visible and vocal as a commentator of the times.

His scary monsters which eventually grew into the 365 Days masterpiece were just the culmination of art activism that has been at the heart of his practice both conceptually and stylistically.

A trained sculptor, his often awkward and bizarre constructed objects have been his signature for decades. From ice-cream trolleys and naughty peepholes to the crisp and unadorned, humble little scraps of paper, with their exquisite, coloured drawings of the heroes and villains of contemporary Malaysian politics – Paiman's work possesses a confrontational rusticity that transcends the usual exploration of identity and place through the purely ethno-religious parameters that so many Malaysians invoke.

In both his older work and recent work, Pajak Gadai (Pawn Shop) and The Circus Elementary School (Between Two Positions I, II & III), the artist explores the intricate travails of the human condition within the real-politik, and in the process, on its implications on our rights and beliefs.

It is not surprising that in a multiracial and multi religious country, issues pertaining to "the self" and "the other" have continued to be at the core of many artistic practices through the years. Artists, through the different generations have continued to explore the very complex issue of race and ethnicity and to assert their identity within a multicultural society.

Sean Lean's Dear Gods deals with the issues of fragmented identities. The work boasts a much more dense picture plane when compared to his later works, both from the point of view of colour as well as composition. Philosophically the work deals with the contradictions between

our traditionally Eastern value systems - depicted by a Chinese altar still-life - and the lure of Western popular culture – conveyed in the curtain-like backdrop emblazoned with spectral American superheroes. The new work – as if in response to the older work – addresses many of these same issues albeit with a sophistication and subtlety that is mirrored in its very designed and finished aesthetic. Dear Gods II is reminiscent of a large paper offering, burnt at funerals conveyed in whites and golds and reds.

Yau Bee Ling's often autobiographical works also hinge on her Chineseness.

Known for her dense paintings woven with familial themes and the paraphernalia of family, Bee Ling is one of the most enjoyable contemporary artists working in Malaysia today.

From the beginning of her career, the artist has drawn from broadly autobiographical narratives from her own life to convey the issues of daily life that connect easily with her audience.

Her paintings have always hinged on a marriage of the figure to a background dominated by the domestic clutter of her distinctly Chinese heritage.

The much-loved family narratives seen here in Home Dinner (Family Series) that Bee Ling has chosen to represent her early practice have gradually evolved into a looser, more abstract treatment of portraits that rely less and less on the autobiographical. Departing from her very distinct jaundiced figure-types, Bee Ling's new portraiture finds its excitement in a dynamic mark-making where faces overlap in a deceptively random placement across large carefully designed picture planes.

The new work presented here Hands On marks another departure further into the artist's preoccupation with drawing. As interesting is the fact that her beloved subject - the human face - has now been replaced with 'hands'. Like the masters of old who dedicated years to the drawing and learning of hands – anatomically, conceptually and spiritually - the artist now embarks on as her new protagonist, the Hand.

Other artists draw from the autobiographical, their everyday lives to convey their concerns for the world around them.

Umibaizurah Mahir is one of Malaysia's foremost ceramic artists. Within a Malaysian art movement that is dominated by more conventional painting genres, Umi has consistently championed ceramic arts to raise it to the level of sculpture and installation, innovatively exploring new processes and forms while addressing the themes of community and family that are close to her heart.

Working from a studio in her home, Umi's life is largely centred around her family and many of the themes of her work draw from her constant interaction with her family.

For her early work, Umi has chosen Oh My Dear, There's No Place Like Home featuring totems circa her TAG exhibition in a 'lit' room installation. These jewel-like creations continue to find their inspiration from children's toys that the artist uses as metaphors for the human condition. Tourists, her current work made for this exhibition is a wall hanging bas relief, an interesting departure from her usual free standing forms.

For Eiffel Chong, the starting points for the themes in his works may begin with the autobiographical but they very quickly inform larger issues.

A relatively recent entity on the Malaysian contemporary art circuit, Eiffel has made impressive strides with his very slightly manipulated large format photographs. Many of his works deal with issues of decay and solitariness, life and death, love and loss in a seamless merge of somber interiors, intriguing dioramas and dramatic still-lives.

Eiffel's ability to get to the root of the deeper implications of the meanings in his works - with very little manipulation of the primary image - as well as the eloquence with which he engages with the issues of the day, is extremely impressive in an artist as young as he is.

His older work *Love from a Sister to a Sister* is from the series *A Matter of Life and Death* which is the artist's commentary "on the excesses of globalization, the deterioration of a society driven by materialism over community, economic prosperity over natural preservation".

His new work from the series *For Such Is The Wickedness Of The World That It Shalt Be Destroyed By A Great Flood* is another beautifully atmospheric work that seems to capture the precarious state of things at home – from a social as well as political point of view. Just beneath the façade of normality and tranquility dwells something somber – even dire.

One of the most prominent figures in contemporary painting today, Jalaini Abu Hassan or Jai is best known for his development of drawing as a legitimate art form and for his ability to experiment with alternative mediums.

On his return from America, Jai's penchant for large format drawing on paper as major works eventually found their resonance in his consequent works on canvas in a feast of expressive marks and layering that has certainly left its mark on our contemporary art scene. More recently he has been at the forefront of exploring alternative mediums to painting and has been experimenting with bitumen with impressively dramatic results.

As far as his subject matter is concerned, Jai has explored personal narratives with a strong cultural symbolism and social consciousness that have taken the work from a wonderfully decorative, organic still-life to vital statements about the times and issues of the world we live in.

For this showing, rather than show one of these earlier seminal works on paper, Jai has chosen to include two paintings that are not so removed in style or chronology from each other. *Raging Bull*, the earlier work is one of Jai's initial experiments with bitumen. This sepia and umber interior is dominated by a bull headed-man in a sarong standing tall within his sphere of influence... perhaps a precursor to his *Angry Malay Man* series.

Jai has also included one of his new factory interiors. In recent years Jai has become fascinated by interiors of old factories that evoke an impression of desolation and decay inhabited by the improbable theatre of endangered animals, large sea-faring vessels, little children or bathing princesses while really pushing the limits of his trademark bitumen medium. The work he has chosen, *Ombak* depicts a surf of waves within the vast and cavernous derelict factory and juxtaposes the grand beauty of our homeland within the haven of something that is in a state of terrible decay. It is a work that speaks volumes about the times we live in both domestically and all over the world.

For a landscape artist like Chen Wei Meng, the issues of how we connect with the Land is also important.

Aside from style and medium, Wei Meng's obsession with the landscape as his primary subject-matter within an art movement that is largely preoccupied with the human figure is extremely refreshing. Furthermore his celebration of the land is lovingly conveyed in a super-realist oeuvre that is unmatched within his painting fraternity.

For this showing, Wei Meng has bookended his practice with firstly, 7pm Kuala a really early example of his Terengganu painting, conveyed in a surprisingly expressionist looseness and 3739 km from his travels through Southern China which contains a subtle message about identity and place.

Larger global issues from American imperialism to the very real negotiations between Western and Asian value systems, of the environment and discussions about the nature of art itself are ongoing themes in the works of many artists.

A masterful painter, Ahmad Fuad Osman, like the other members of the art collective MATAHATI, is especially committed to pushing the boundaries of making beyond painting.

For the earlier example of his art practice, Fuad has selected An Eye For An Eye Will Make The Whole World Go Blind, winner of the Jurors Choice award in Phillip Morris Malaysia Art Awards of 2003.

More than a decade later, the work's potentially contrived reading of the world has stood the test of time. Today, more than ever in the history of Mankind, the issues of a clash of civilisations, of a clash of classes as well as a fundamental clash of values are more vital than ever before. It is also interesting that this particular work, starring the artist himself, in a parody of the most popular current affairs magazines in a pre-internet world, is printed on commercial tarp and simply hung like ordinary bunting.

This aspect as to what is contemporary and what is irrelevant – the debate about whether art in its most conventional forms or innovatively reinvented is alive or dead continues in Vesuvius, the new work that Fuad has made for this show. After the various deviations that Fuad has taken through the years – from installation and performance to assemblages and

video – it is a very considered decision to present us with a painting the scale of a mural with a mix of representation, abstraction and drawing. Vesuvius is the result of deep research that spans from Roman Mythologies to Hegel and culminating with Danto's American musings of the 1980's.

Based in Rome since the 1970's, H H Lim's thematic concerns are much more concerned with international issues even as he employs elements of everyday life in his works such as 'religious objects and images, linguistic images, cuisine recipes, objects of everyday use, arms of defense, political images' to represent 'the resistance of survival to everyday life'. An artist with a significant international profile for more than three decades, the earlier video work Lim has selected reveals the breadth of mediums he eloquently employs – from performance to painting. *60kg circa di sagrezza?*, a performance piece captured on film has the artist located within a gallery balancing on a basketball. This 'balancing act' seems to reference the numerous contradictions of everyday modern living and the different worlds – that the artist straddles – like the rest of us... culturally, economically, geographically and politically.

With *Hard Rain*, Lim returns to painting. The composition comprises of foliage in the foreground and an armoured car in mid ground with a hail of missiles right across the background. Rendered in a vibrant technicolour of pink, pastel blue and green rain-like marks, the meanings within the works contradict each other – purposely caught between the suffering in every conflict zone from Gaza to Kabul and a heightened sense of design and fashion expressed in their very slick and polished execution.

Then there are maverick artists like Chan Kok Hooi.

Kok Hooi successfully blends humour and current issues distinctly centered around ethnicity with a terrific painterly treatment to create his surreal narratives.

His densely theatrical picture planes, whether in large format or miniature, in full technicolour or monochromes of black and white, sepia and umber are peopled by a cast of hybrids...

His actors presented in a blend of organic and mechanical or of human and animal explore a range of contradictions - from love and loss, life and death to the predicaments of being included or excluded.

All the while, his random and intensely designed compositions are committed to a high degree of craft and finish as well as an innovation of the medium, a commitment that is largely absent within contemporary painting practices today.

For this exhibition Kok Hooi has selected two works that bookend his practice from the point of view of scale, sentiment and medium.

The earlier work *Love Chat with the Mirror* features his signature geometric/voluptuous protagonist. In this alternative reality, we enter into the world of Kok Hooi's "Microsoft Messenger" icon who stands in front of an almari which could be in any of our grandmothers' homes.

With Kok Hooi's recent work, *Bukan Tetek*, he plays with the idea of what is deemed acceptable to be displayed in the public arena. The miniatures are presented as objects in his signature blend of fun, frolic and discomfort with both roundels, framed in ornate, coiled antiquated frames contrasted by the rendition of the breasts with its improbable switch-like nipples.

This exhibition “The Space Between” features artists whose works communicate to the larger community an awareness and understanding of our complex realities, which in turn can help us draw conclusions about whether these realities need to change.

Whether borrowing from the autobiographical, grappling with contemporary socio-political issues or examining constructed national histories, our artists remind us that Malaysia cannot be reduced to one singular definition or narrative, but rather that there is more than one interpretation of the Malaysian story in all its complex, multi-layered variances.

Rahel Joseph & Anurendra Jegadeva