

Understanding the Malay world view

Tucked away in the Piyadasa Gallery at Universiti Malaya is an exhibition that reflects the 'internal struggles' of artists Amron Omar and Raja Shahrman. **BY Sarah Abu Bakar**

“It all started when Dr Emelia Ong WhatsApped me a few months ago with a proposal to do a small show with selected artworks from our collection, to be held at the Piyadasa Gallery,” says prominent art collector Pakhrudin Sulaiman. Ong is the programme coordinator of Universiti Malaya's (UM) visual art department.

The result is 19 pieces currently on show at the gallery at UM in Kuala Lumpur. They are from the private collection of art enthusiasts Pakhrudin and his wife, Datuk Fatimah Sulaiman.*

Entitled *Combative Form*, the exhibition encompasses sculptures, paintings, drawings and sketches by figurative artist Amron Omar, 59, and sculptor Raja Shahrman Raja Aziddin, 49. The works were assembled to showcase thematic parallels, and to allow the public to view the couple's collection.

“I look at it as an opportunity to share with the public, albeit on a small scale, our collection of works by both artists. We also hope this show will serve as a stepping stone and catalyst for deeper appreciation and further exploration of their work, specifically in Malaysian art,” says Pakha, as he is known within the local fraternity.

“It has always been my dream to do a joint show of these two artists. Fatimah and I have collected quite a sizeable number of their works in the last 20 years.”

Pakha, a lawyer by profession, and Fatimah, a lawyer by training, have been collecting art since the early 1990s and possess over a hundred of Amron's works and about 30 of Shahrman's from various series.

Selecting the artworks

“For this show, I chose works that best represent their artistic development and contributions to Malaysian art over the years,” says Pakha.

He selected two pieces from Amron's *Pertarungan* series, which portrays the theme of inner struggle, manifested in two male figures locked in the act of silat. The paintings are 1.5m by 1.7m each.

“The first piece, produced in the early 1980s, depicts the figures in a graceful and dance-like posture, while the second depicts a more aggressive and combative posture denoting the intensity of an inner struggle,” Pakha says.

Amron's preoccupation with this theme also alludes to the struggle “between the forces of good and evil”. For the show, there are also several oil pastels and gouache drawings on paper, as well as studies for the two main pieces.

Shahrman's metal sculptures from his early *Gerak Tempur* series capture the dynamic movements of silat interpreted in anthropomorphic forms. A trained blacksmith, he constructed the robust sculptures using metallic found objects.

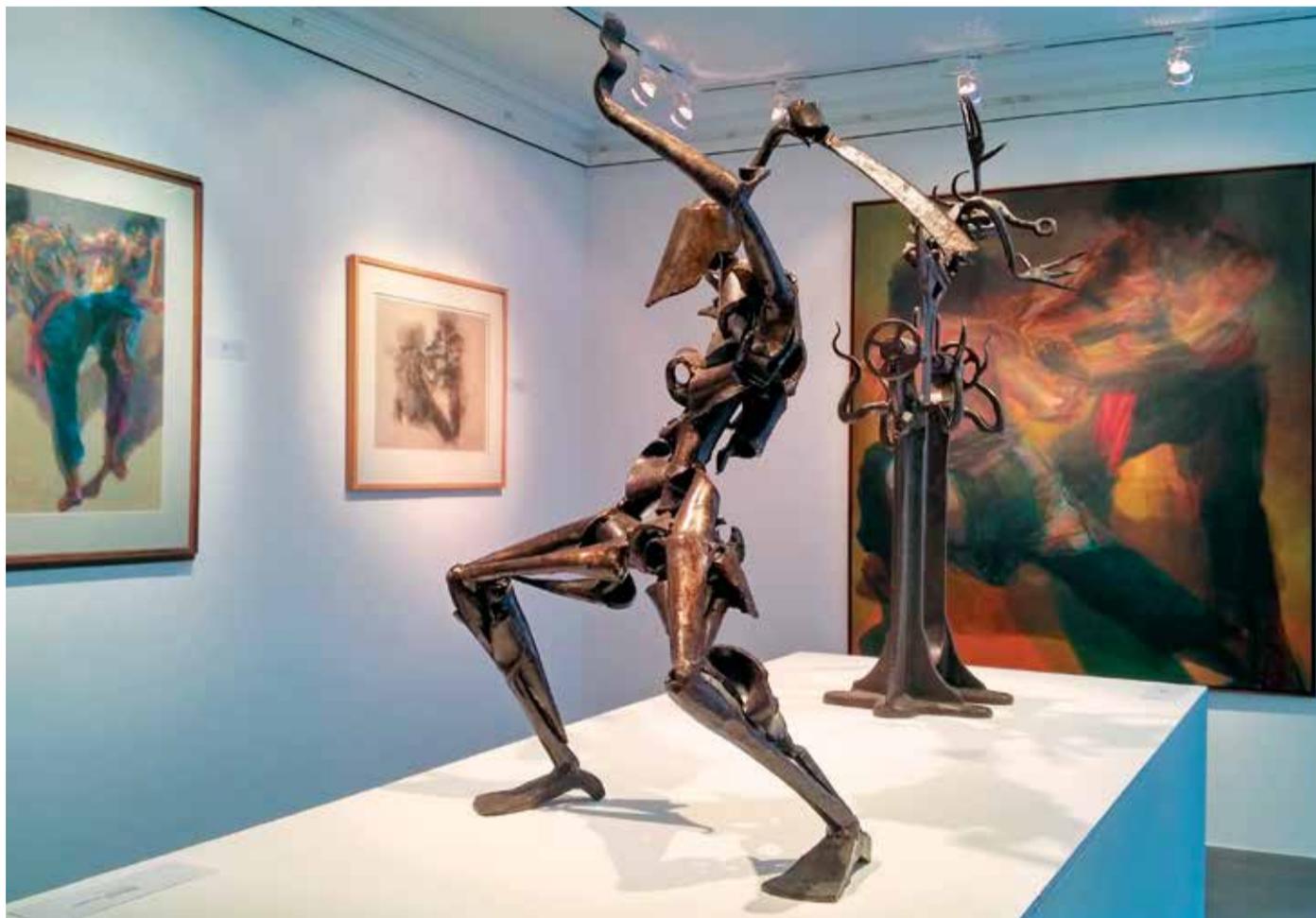
His works selected for the display comprise five sculptures, two oil paintings on board and three sketches on paper.

“I chose sculptures from *Gerak Tempur* and the subsequent *Semangat Besi*, *Nafas* and *Rentak Abad Ke 21* series, and these are augmented by several of the artist's study drawings. These series best represent and manifest his struggle with the idea of the 'forbidden' in Islam, specifically depicting the human figure in 3D form,” Pakha points out.

Combative Form is an acknowledgement of “bodily impulses” that “acquire a kind of metaphysical charge” in Amron's works, and shows understanding of the “mystical process that accompanies the transformation of metal through blacksmithing” in Shahrman's artistic practice.

Academia and art

On how the exhibition came about, Ong, a senior lecturer in Malaysian art studies at UM, says, “The idea to present Pakhrudin's and Fatimah's collection at Piyadasa Gallery occurred when I took my master's



The show focuses on the thematic parallels of the two artists



Ong has been organising exhibitions at the gallery as part of UM's academic syllabus



The Piyadasa Gallery at UM

degree students on an educational visit to the couple's home in 2015.”

Ong, together with *Combative Form* curator Dr Simon Soon, who teaches Southeast Asian modern art at UM, have been organising exhibitions at the 65 sq m gallery as part of the academic syllabus. Set up in 2014, this third art space at the university also facilitates research work by students.

“Dr Ong said I was free to conceive the show and propose the artworks to be displayed. At that time, I had not heard of the gallery and had no idea of its size and what it looked like,” recalls Pakha. “It is named after the late Redza Piyadasa, founder of the post-graduate art course at UM.”

“When the offer came, it was like the Malay proverb, ‘orang mengantuk disorong bantal’ (slipping a pillow under a sleepy person). I am looking at this as a sort of a pilot project, in order to expand it later to an exhibition at a larger space with proper documentation, to do justice to both artists' extensive works in our collection,” says Pakha.

When asked if there will be more collaborations to showcase their collection at UM, he adds, “I am certainly open to that.”

The Pakharuddin and Datuk Fatimah Sulaiman collection, regarded by serious art collectors, curators and scholars as one of the most important in the country, is unrivalled for its depth and relevance to the study of Malaysian contemporary art.

It has some 3,000 books, monographs and catalogues on art and photography housed in their private art space, Ruang Pemula (RuPé), located below Pakha's law firm in Ampang. **E**

*Datuk Fatimah Sulaiman passed away on Sept 27 after an illness. Our condolences to the family

Combative Form runs until Oct 7 at Piyadasa Gallery, Visual Art Department, Cultural Centre (next to Dewan Tunku Canselor), Universiti Malaya. For details, visit www.theedgegalerie.com.