

Ismail Zain's legacy

In reinterpreting the late Ismail Zain's works, *Al-Kesah: Homage to Ismail Zain* aims to encourage the exploration of new ideas and critical thinking through artistic engagement. **BY Sarah Abu Bakar**

Organised by Galeri Petronas, the tribute exhibition *Al-Kesah: Homage to Ismail Zain* features the works of 22 local artists from different generations and disciplines showcasing their interpretations of Ismail Zain's visionary thoughts and ideas on globalised visual culture.

Ismail Zain (1930-1991) was an artist, thinker, writer and academician. He was also a civil servant, holding posts such as director of the National Art Gallery Malaysia, the first local to succeed the last British administrator Frank Sullivan, director-general of culture at the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports and director-general of National Film Development Corporation (Finas).

Petronas chairman Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan said at the launch of the exhibition on June 2: "*Al-Kesah: Homage to Ismail Zain* derives from one of Ismail Zain's significant works, *Al-Kesah*, which was featured in his solo exhibition *Digital Collage* in 1988. The masterpiece expresses his critical response to the penetration of global mass media into our local culture. I am pleased that Galeri Petronas has played a vital role to reposition Ismail Zain and his works.

"The objective of this exhibition is to create an ideal ecosystem for Malaysian artists to flourish while producing groundbreaking art and, at the same time, enhance the public's appreciation of Malaysian contemporary art. Petronas' long-standing commitment in promoting local talents through the cultivation of creativity, innovative ideas and critical thinking is evident in this collection, an impressive artistic reinterpretation of Ismail Zain's work."

The participating artists are Abdul Razak Abdul Jabbar, Ariffin Mohd Ismail, Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, Mohd Nasir Baharuddin, Fadzil Idris, Bibi Chew, Mohd Fadli Yusoff, Raja Shahrizan Raja Aziddin, Hamir Soib, Haron Mokhtar, Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Sharmiza Abu Hassan, Mohd Azhar Abdul Manan, Mohd Azlan Mohd Latib, Nirmala Shanmughalingam, Ramlan Abdullah, Redza Piyadasa, Saiful Razman, Yee I-Lann, Zainon Abdullah, Izaddin Matrahah and Umibaizurah Mahir @ Ismail.

"The artists were selected through a rigorous process," said exhibition curator Badrolhisham Mohamad Tahir. "A list of acclaimed artists was presented to Galeri Petronas' selection panel. The panel has played a vital role in creating a diverse assembly of artworks from different approaches to reflect Ismail Zain's aesthetic hegemony."

Educated at Ravensbourne College of Art (1961-1964) and Slade School of Fine Art, University College London (1964-1966) in London, the UK, Ismail Zain was influenced by semantic symbolism — the study of meaning in language, programming languages, formal logic and semiotics through representations.

He expressed the significance of symbols and icons that represent meanings in many of his writings and instilled in his students the notion of relevance in art-making when he taught at the Mara Institute of Technology in the late 1980s. He often referred to works by such philosophers as Leo Strauss and Marshall McLuhan, art critic John Berger and writer Susan Sontag.

Badrolhisham added: "At Petronas, we encourage wholesome leadership. Ismail Zain was a highly influential artist — the thought leader who took bold steps in changing the present convention of art. After 25 years of his demise, his contribution in the field of aesthetic and cultural history needs to be revisited and reinterpreted in order to stimulate further research, publication, discourse and engagement."

"Galeri Petronas will be organising a symposium in conjunction with the exhibition on Aug 13. There will also be six curatorial walk-throughs between July 15 and Aug 19," said Roshaniza Ilmi Mohd Ali, director of Galeri Petronas.

The 30 works on exhibit were sourced from the



From left: Galeri Petronas director Roshaniza Ilmi Mohd Ali, National Visual Arts Gallery former chairman Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin Mohamed Yassin, Petronas chairman Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan, Petronas brand management head Rizan Ismail and Ismail Zain's widow Wairah Marzuki at the launch



Ismail Zain's *Al-Kesah*, from which the title of the exhibition is derived



Mohd Nasir Baharuddin's reaction to Ismail Zain's work on contrapuntal relationships

collections of Petronas, National Visual Arts Gallery, Tuanku Fauziah Museum and Gallery as well as private collectors and artists.

The exhibition offers a renewed focus on the legacy of an artist who was ahead of his time and who embraced technology during the nascent era of technological advancement.

The highly significant work *Al-Kesah* (meaning "once upon a time") was created in 1988 through the innovative use of Apple Macintosh. The monochromatic digital collage has the Ewing family of the *Dallas* television series in the foreground, with a traditional Malay kampung house in the background. The composition can be considered as his interpretation of globalisation.

Such juxtaposition of cultural elements —

popular and traditional, East and West, reality and fiction, black and white — are the basis of Ismail's semiotic endeavours.

An assemblage and video projection by conceptual artist Mohd Nasir Baharuddin, 56, entitled *Pada Suatu Ketika...Tersebut Alhesah*, depicts a typewriter mounted on a black wall with a series of sentences and alphabets projected intermittently above in a single line.

According to the artist's statement, the display is "an attempt to express the appearance of intertextual adaptation of the 'sacred' texts and writings of Ismail Zain".

On a similar note, *Random Access Memory* by Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, 46, also incorporates an excerpt of Ismail Zain's speech, titled *Ucapan Nada Idea*, delivered at Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1986 in his installation and videography work.

Also on display is a sculpture by ceramic artist Umibaizurah Mahir @ Ismail, 41, titled *Secret Toys*. The "porcelain on cast concrete" work depicts a rocking horse with floral motif decal that is mounted on wheels.

Explained Badrolhisham, "The audience can draw a relationship between Umibaizurah's artwork and Ismail Zain's idea of semantic symbolism through her use of toys as a metaphor. As a metaphor, the audience encounters Umi's response to everyday objects as a symbol of life.

"Thus, the metaphor is an image or an object regarded as representative to artists' abstract idea. It is a kind of visual strategy introduced and developed by Ismail Zain in the 1980s."

Another thought-provoking work is Saiful Razman's *Selepas 7.pm*, using non-art materials of toilet paper, medical gauze and crepe paper mounted on acrylic perspex with polyvinyl acetate adhesive.

Mohd Azlan Mohd Latib's *Wayang Unfair: After Ismail Zain* consists of a set of 48 photographs treated with coffee for an aged effect, archival cartridge ink, and collage and hand-tinting technique.

Bibi Chew's *Itu Malaysia — Biasa, O, Kaw Kaw, Kosong, Cam & Kurang* installation explores the issue of identity. It depicts a variety of used coffee strainers categorised according to the respective palate of Malaysian coffee drinkers.

The exhibition aims to live up to Galeri Petronas' promise of "breaking away from conventions, exploring innovative ways and meaningful solutions to deliver essential energy to the people", and in this case, making art accessible to everyone.

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