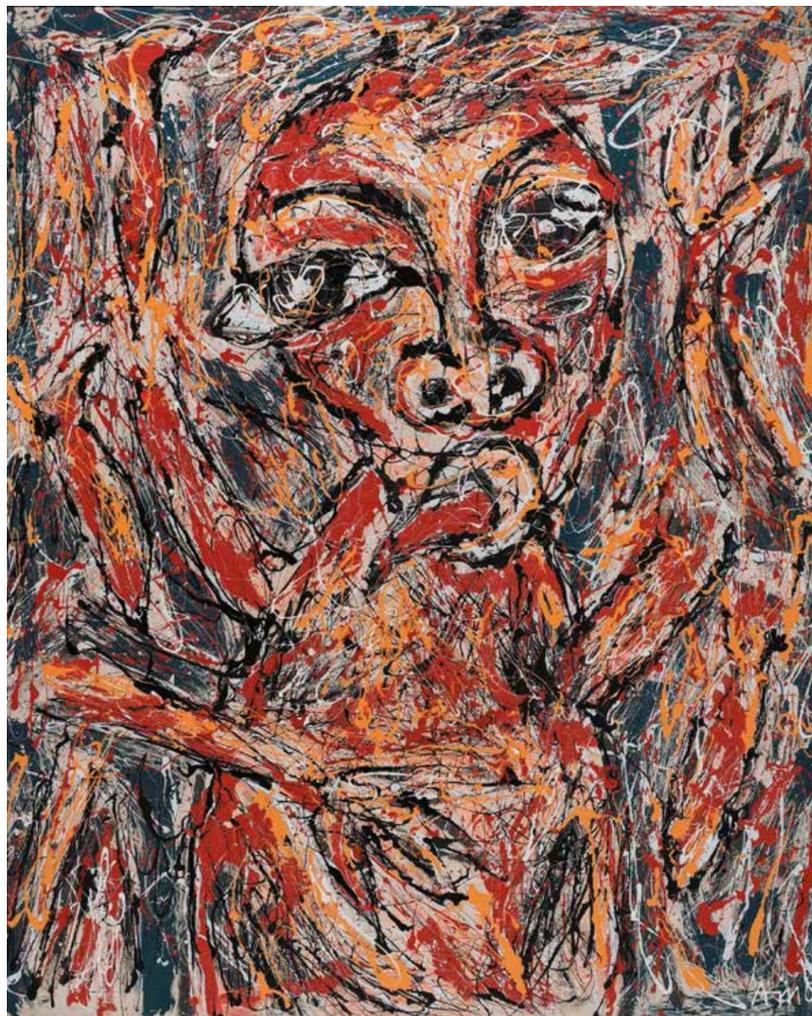


Cultural nomads

Galeri Petronas' exhibition, *Crossings: Pushing Boundaries*, offers an ambitious theme but glaring omissions are hard to explain away or be summarily dismissed. **by Sarah Abu Bakar**



Ali 'Mabuha' Rahamad's *Nightfall* (2002) reflects on the Gulf War

“It was by design that we produced the title visual of *Crossings: Pushing Boundaries* ... to provide visual emotions to visitors when they first see the uneven typography, different dimensions and the elevation of the planes, to give a sense of edginess before they enter the gallery space,” says Galeri Petronas art collection manager Ratna Siti Akbari.

“It is a kind of 'tactile visual' that challenges dimension itself to create visual curiosity, to arouse the viewers' senses and to encourage them to explore.”

The exterior of Galeri Petronas is covered with a two-dimensional sign with the title of the exhibition placed diagonally and geometric planes sculpted at various heights.

Curated by Shireen Naziree, *Crossings: Pushing Boundaries*, which runs until Oct 30, presents a selection of over 50 artworks by 15 Malaysian artists from three generations who have either lived abroad for a long time or are still residing outside Malaysia. The artworks were assembled from the collection of Galeri Petronas and borrowed from various private collectors, galleries and artists.

The artists, who “have embraced the changing pace of contemporary art practice within the global arena and articulated Malaysia's diversity through their scholastic and sophisticated art practices” include; Khoo Sui Hoe, who is 77 years old; Dolly Unithan, 76; Latiff Mohidin, 75;

Eng Tay, 69; Ali 'Mabuha' Rahamad, 64; Anuar Rashid, 58; Chang Fee Ming, 57; Nadiah Bamadhaj, 48; Bayu Utomo Radjikin, 47; Chong Siew Ying, 47; Ahmad Fuad Osman, 47; Sabri Idrus, 45; Roslisham 'Ise' Ismail, 44; Wong Perng Fey, 42; and Hayati Mokhtar, 47, in collaboration with filmmaker Dain Iskandar Said.

“Their works were selected for their opinions on either world or local events that have impacted our society,” says Shireen, who is a regular guest curator at the gallery.

PEACE AND UNITY

Upon entering the space, viewers are greeted with an installation by Unithan suspended from the ceiling, titled *Doves* and dated 1995. The cut-outs of white doves made with acid-free paper are assembled using bamboo, fibre-glass netting and nylon cord. The installation measures 45cm by 9m by 1.5m.

In her artist statement about the work, Unithan writes: “The installation comprises doves suspended from streams of netting. They are used metaphorically as symbols of universal peace. The repeated formations of the doves and dimensions of the work intensify and reinforce the projected message of peace.”

“In this art display ... my individual aspirations for peace, expressed metaphorically, are subsumed by a shared collective experience reflecting humanity's yearning for

universal peace and in turn engendering spiritual communion.”

Regarded as the first Malaysian woman artist to have embraced conceptual art practice as early as 1972, Unithan was educated at Hornsey College of Art, London, which was considered “avant-garde” in the 1960s within the conservative art environment of the UK.

“Her move to New York in 1976 was the start of a long international career that saw her art exhibited alongside that of Andy Warhol in a group exhibition in New York City in the late 1970s,” Shireen says.

“Her work was also selected for the Venice Biennale and she has exhibited in a number of prestigious museums in Europe and America. Her work is also in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. This is the first time her art has been shown in Malaysia.”

HUMAN DISPLACEMENT

“When we design an exhibition, we always look at the space as a theatre. The artworks are living characters that speak in dialogue. Visual dialogue has to be enacted here,” Ratna says.

A section of the gallery is dedicated to artworks that convey the human plight, comprising a series of paintings by Ali alongside an emotional work by Chong titled *The Woman in Red Scarf*, dated 2003.

For the past 40 years, Ali has travelled the globe and lived in far-flung places. In 1973, at the age of 21, he left for Europe. His wanderlust included stints in Southeast Asia, Asia-Pacific as well as the Americas. He visited Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece, Colombia, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Germany, Holland, England, Yugoslavia, France, Italy, Austria, Egypt, Luxembourg, Canada, Japan, Mexico and the US. From 1973 to 1975, he lived in Amsterdam, followed by Wasserburg in Germany from 1975 to 1984. His last base was Los Angeles, where he lived from 1986 until his return to Malaysia in 2013.

“Ali's works, titled *Nightfall* and *My Babies* and dated 2002, have a very strong visual intensity. They provoke the audience to see the colours and the tactility of the canvases, which are almost Jackson Pollock-like,” Ratna says.

“In terms of subject matter, he draws our attention to how [people] are suffering. A subject of cruelty screaming in agony, it reminds me of Edvard Munch's *Scream* with its contorted figures. [The colour scheme is] repulsive and revolting, yet they exude some form of aesthetic to me. When I look at the eyes, they are bulbous, but they are pleading. It is a visual experience, the agony of war. The artwork manifests this expression as Ali's comment on the Gulf War.”

The message that *Crossings: Pushing Boundaries* intends to convey is of humanity — and the global social, cultural, political and economic conditions that affect people. Modern human history between 1960 and the millennium is chronicled by the artists and fragmented by world events.

Khoo Sui Hoe's *The Red Landscape*, dated 1965, depicts a socio-political situation — the disengagement of Singapore from Malaysia. The piece also shares aesthetic similarity with Latiff's *Dawn Agave dan Pago-Pago*, dated 1964, with its abstract-constructivist genre. The artworks are from the collection of Galeri Petronas.

Both artists have also employed symbolism — Khoo's depiction of a lunar eclipse and Latiff's rendition of a solar eclipse — besides the treatment of tropical colour, shape and form that represent Southeast Asia.

“The language of art is softly spoken, in the form of semiotics. Based on Eastern philosophy, the eclipsed moon or sun spells catastrophe,” Ratna explains.

GLOBAL WARMING

An impressive appearance in this exhibition is a 45-minute video by Hayati, in collaboration with Dain Iskandar. Titled *Near Intervisible Lines* and dated 2006, the work was screened at *Zones of Contact*, during the 15th Biennale of Sydney at the city's Museum of Contemporary Art. It is being viewed in Malaysia for the first time.

Set in Setiu, Terengganu, Hayati highlights the rapidly changing coastline and its erosion due to global warming. It captures a panoramic view of the sandy coast that integrates almost seamlessly with the cloudy, blue sky.

Hayati studied fine art at Chelsea College of Art and Design (BA Hons) from 1995 to 1997 and obtained a master of fine arts degree from Goldsmiths College, University of London (1998/99). She utilises the moving image to examine landscapes, buildings and semi-abandoned towns. Aside



Near Intervisible Lines (2006) by Hayati Mokhtar and Dain Iskandar Said is a 45-minute video that highlights the rapid erosion of the coast of Setiu in Terengganu



Anuar Rashid's epic *Jin* (2011) narrates a chapter from the Quran



Dolly Unithan's *Doves* (1995) has been exhibited in Austria, Uzbekistan and the US, and is being shown in Malaysia for the first time

from creating awareness through her art, Hayati is also the founder of Lang Tengah Turtle Watch, an organisation that focuses on the conservation of sea turtles.

SPIRITUALITY

Anuar's epic oil painting, *Jin*, from his *Mihraj* series and dated 2011, measures 2.8m by 3.9m. At first glance, it depicts a dramatic seascape of turbulent waves in thunderous weather. But upon closer inspection, Arabic script reveals itself within the tempestuous surge of sea water.

His artistic career was spent mostly in Europe — in Yugoslavia, Montenegro, Slovakia, Italy and Southern France. During this period of “hiatus” in the 1980s, he

immersed himself in the compositions and techniques of the Old Masters.

“Each wave represents Arabic script. This painting narrates the artist's interpretation of Surah al-Jinn, the 72nd chapter of the Holy Quran, which contains 28 verses. There is a duality within our dimension,” Ratna says.

“Anuar produced great visionary epics in *Mihraj* — a series of paintings that took the artist seven years to complete — engrossed in reviewing his experiences ... and translating them into art. Defying explanation and meaning, his new discovery as revealed in *Mihraj* can be grasped, according to the artist, by means of ‘Iqraa’ or ‘reading’. He demonstrated his new understanding of

myths, science fiction and sciences, which could lead to an appreciation of divinity.

“*Jin* is a painting on an epic scale, non-figurative and non-representational. First and foremost, it emphasises the notion of parallel dimensional reality. Anuar applied the dynamics of religious histories intertwined with popular beliefs and myths. This painting contains both literal and imaginative ideas, as the artist stresses the importance of incorporating the hidden, and vaguely inscribing on his painting certain Quranic verses. With it are many assumptions — expectations or conventions — that can and may be regulated to the understanding and meanings of contemporary life.

“His extraordinary flair for painting, the rendering of light in such a dramatic way, was particularly interesting and remarkable. This painting — executed in oil pigment and using the technique of glaze painting — is a composition of high drama, magnanimous in scale and altruistic in its aesthetic sense. It is distinctive, with the operatic and opus style of the European classical art traditions. Proof of Anuar's virtuosity in conquering the grandeur of the European Old Masters' painting styles, the visual emphasis with ... grand narratives such as good against evil, light against dark,” Ratna explains.

POSITIVITY AND THE MISSING LINK

Overall, the exhibition's attempt to emotionally stimulate its audience by assembling a selection of visual expressions to emulate real events has proved positive. However, *Crossings: Pushing Boundaries* would be more impactful if the subject of migration, colonisation and identity was reflected.

To best exemplify this, Wong Hoy Cheong, whose works have been featured the world over — at the Asia-Pacific Triennial, Brisbane (1996); Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, Japan (1999 and 2009); Venice Biennale (2003); Liverpool Biennial (2004); Guangzhou Triennial, China (2005); Asian Contemporary Art in Print, Asia Society, New York (2006); Istanbul Biennial (2007); Taipei Biennial (2008); Lyon Biennial, France (2009) — was perplexingly unrepresented.

An entire floor of the Deutsche Bank Towers in Frankfurt is devoted to Wong's works, so the artist has certainly crossed many borders and pushed all boundaries in terms of creative output and global presence. Other artists who have practiced art abroad include Choong Kam Kow, 82, Khalil Ibrahim, 82, Jolly Koh, 75, Ahmad Zakii Anwar, 61, to name a few.

In response to this observation, Shireen remarks, “The criteria for the selection of the artists were very clear. While there are numerous artists working across a variety of genres who may have exhibited abroad, we chose artists whose practices and works in the exhibition originated from their stay abroad.

“And while some of them have returned to Malaysia, others have practices that cross geographic boundaries, and others continue to have their homes elsewhere.

“Another important point in the curation was to exhibit works from the early post-Merdeka years that run parallel to Malaysia's economic development and subsequent recognition on a global economic platform. As such, works were selected to represent three generations of post-Merdeka artists, who show a broad view of issues that have impacted not only our social thinking but also our cultural and economic and political environment.”

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