

The *Era Mahathir* exhibition conjures up an interesting — but by no means a definitive — interpretation of a period in Malaysian history and how it “impacts” the arts

“All the exhibitions at Ilham are decided by the curatorial team, and while the owners are consulted on our overall programmes, they have never interfered in curatorial decisions,” says Ilham gallery creative director Valentine Willie.

He dismissed the notion that Ilham Gallery owners, Tun Daim Zainuddin and his wife Naimah Khalid, had influenced the way the current exhibition, *Era Mahathir*, was put together. The finance minister in Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad’s Cabinet, Daim, 78, was perceived by certain quarters as having had a hand in how Dr Mahathir was to be portrayed or even “glorified” in the exhibition.

Housed in Ilham Baru Tower in Jalan Binjai, Kuala Lumpur, the exhibition brings together 48 artworks by 28 Malaysian artists, including an art centre, to illustrate the political and social climate during the administration of Malaysia’s fourth prime minister between 1981 and 2003, who is now 91 years of age. The artworks on display are mostly loaned by institutions, private collectors and artists.

The works are by such artists as Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal (1929-2011); Ismail Zain (1930-1991); Kok Yew Pua (1947-1999); Nirmala Dutt, 75; Datuk Mohd Nor Khalid (Lat), 65; Juhari Said, 55; Zulkifli Yusoff, 54; Anurendra Jegadeva, 52; Tan Chin Kuan, 50; Bayu Utomo Radjikin, 47; Ahmad Fuad Osman, 47; Nur Hanim Khairuddin, 47; Kow Leong Kiang, 46; Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, 46; Yee I-Lann, 45; Chuah Chong Yong, 44; Roslisham Ismail (Ise), 44; Chang Yoong Chia, 41; Mohd Azlan Mohd Latib, 42; Phuan Thai Meng, 42; Abdul Multhalib Musa, 40; Vincent Leong, 37; Rahman Roslan, 31. Other artists are Jo Kukathas, Hamidah Abdul Rahman, Kenneth Chan, Liew Kung Yu and Five Arts Centre.

Since Ilham Gallery’s inception last year, *Era Mahathir* is the third exhibition and, according to the gallery’s website, it relates to “a transformative period for the visual arts in Malaysia, a period that saw the re-emergence of the figurative in producing socially relevant art”.

Visitors are greeted with a biographical documentary on the former prime minister, produced by A&E Networks and aired on History Channel in 2009. A series of caricatures, first published from the 1980s to the 2000s by cartoonist Datuk Mohd Nor Khalid, popularly known

Jo Kukathas’ *YBeeee* of the Ministry of Ribbon Cutting Celebrates 2.6 Decades of ICT



## The indelible Mahathir factor

With a provocative exhibition title like *Era Mahathir*, given the present political climate, the curators at Ilham Gallery have a tall order to fill. The verdict is open as to whether they have succeeded. **By Sarah Abu Bakar**

as Lat, is displayed opposite the television screen.

“The show, which was planned about two years ago, is intended to showcase the artistic responses to the policies and politics of *Era Mahathir*, primarily contemporaneous artworks, and some in hindsight,” Willie says.

“Because the premise of the show is artistic responses to the policies and politics of Dr Mahathir, we felt that this title would be an accurate reflection of what the show is trying to showcase.”

### Superstructures

An indelible mark left by Dr Mahathir are the soaring twin skyscrapers — the Petronas Twin Towers — completed in 1996. The building is named after

Petroleum Nasional Bhd, which was established in 1974. The towers symbolise Malaysia’s economic transformation.

An obvious choice for subject matter, among the artists who have reflected on the architectural landmark in the exhibition are Liew Kung Yu, Yee I-Lann, Chang Yoong Chia and Vincent Leong.

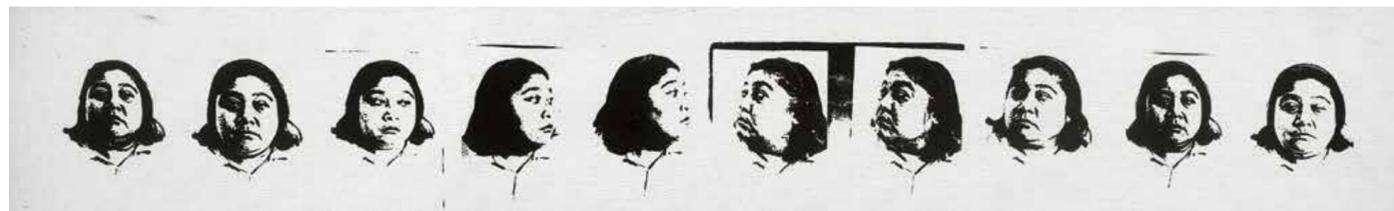
“As an internationally recognised landmark, the Petronas Twin Towers symbolise the courage, ingenuity, initiative, determination, energy, confidence, optimism, advancement and zest of a nation,” says the towers’ website, with the statement attributed to Dr Mahathir.

In *Era Mahathir*, various interpretations of the theme are represented, from Liew’s kitsch interactive installation titled *Pasti Boleh* (*Sure Can One*), created in 1997, to Chang’s elaborate collage made entirely of postage and revenue stamps, titled *The Dollar Sign* (2014), measuring 211cm by 134cm.

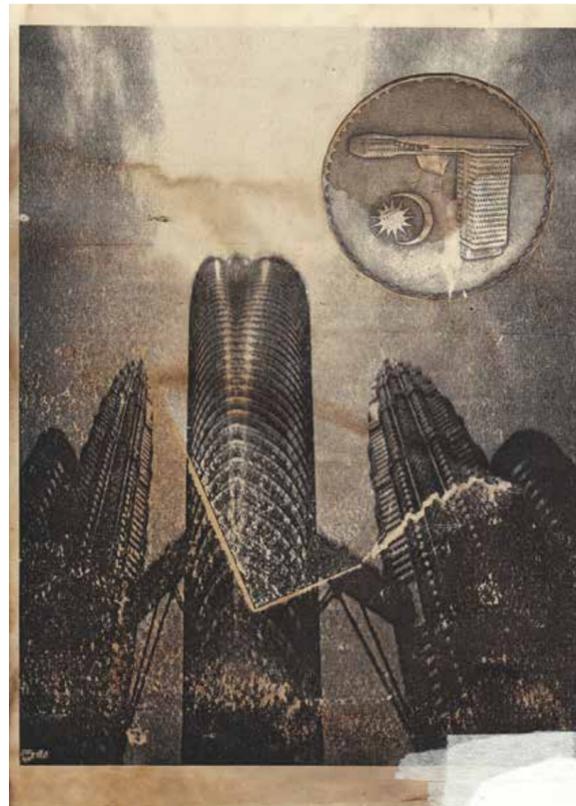
It is also worth noting that the artworks showcased “extend” the period of Dr Mahathir’s “supremacy” even until 2016.

“For better or worse, the policies and politics of Dr Mahathir continue to have an impact on Malaysia today. The man himself remains in the news and continues to loom large. We have always tried to use our small galleries on level three to commission new works as we did in our inaugural show, *Picturing the Nation*. The three new works on level three of Ilham, commissioned for *Era Mahathir*, show how the man and his policies continue to seize our collective imagination,” Willie says.

The works comprise Mohd Azlan Mohd Latib’s



A self-portrait of Hamidah Abdul Rahman replicating Anwar’s infamous black eye incident in 1998



One of 55 photo-collage works by Mohd Azlan Mohd Latib, titled *Wayang Proparism* (2010–2016)

series of 55 photo-collages and installation titled *Wayang: Proparism* (2010-2016), Kenneth Chan’s 91 post-card-sized digital prints titled *#DrMLovesU* (2014-2016) and a commissioned piece of video art by Rahman Roslan titled *Testimonial* (2016).

### Fashioning corsages

In the main gallery on level five, a section displaying video works by the Five Arts Centre, titled *Skin Trilogy* (1995), and Jo Kukathas’ — co-founder and artistic director of The Instant Café Theatre Company — work titled *Ybeeee* (2013) are screened side by side.

Kukathas’ work, a satirical play about a Malaysian politician dressed in a bush jacket with a name tag that reads “YB”, acronym for Yang Berhormat (The Honourable) and an elaborate corsage — the standard get-up for politicians during Dr Mahathir’s time — presents a sardonic take on what usually appears on the national news, like a ribbon-cutting ceremony or a public speech.

Hung on the wall opposite is a woodcut on paper by Juhari Said, titled *Bertuanan Beruk* (*Portrait with Corsage*) created in 1999. Measuring 120cm by 84cm, the monochromatic work depicts the profile of a gorilla that dominates the picture, leaving little white space. The printmaker marks the portrait with a splash of colour, which accentuates the corsage attached to the primate’s left chest.

Another artist came to mind when I saw the significance of the corsage. Yee I-Lann has also produced a series of photographic images depicting the corsage in a variety of arrangements, titled *The Orang Besar Series: YB#1-10* (2010). These corsages were



Liew Kung Yu’s installation, titled *Pasti Boleh* (*Sure Can One*) (1997), was featured at a traveling exhibition *Cities on the Move* by curators Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist

worn by Malaysian politicians and dignitaries when they attended official functions held in their honour.

Last year, Prime Minister Najib Razak and his Singapore counterpart Lee Hsien Loong were seen viewing this work during the launch of *Titian Budaya* exhibition, where it was displayed in celebration of 50 years of friendship between Singapore and Malaysia at White Box @ Publika in Kuala Lumpur.

### Social and political landscape

The Reformasi movement and its demonstrations marked the start of Dr Mahathir’s eventual decision to give up power.

Among the artworks that reflect this divided period are Hamidah Abdul Rahman’s *Self-Portrait* and one of four larger-than-life portraits by Ahmad Fuad Osman.

Created in 1999 by Fuad, the painting titled *Syhhh...! Dok Diam-Diam, Jangan Bantah. Mulut Hang Hanya Boleh Guna Untuk Cakap Yaaa Saja. Baghu Hang Boleh Join Depa... Senang La Jadi Kaya*, conveys his feelings about the sociopolitical climate. That period was marked by increasing polarisation among the people — those who agreed with the views of the government regarding Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim’s arrest and those who opposed it.

“Hamidah’s work is the only one that deals directly with Anwar’s black eye. If you look closely, the work seems to suggest that it wasn’t just Anwar who suffered the black eye but, as Malaysians, we all did. Rather than just a single blow, the work also suggests that the black eye was a culmination of a series of soft blows. That a long series of Mahathir policies led to that infamous injury,” Willie explains.

Incidentally, Syed Ahmad Jamal’s 1999 painting — 2.9.98 — of a single eye actually documents the date of the incident.

Also featured are documentation and newspaper clippings of the installation, performance and sculptures, titled *Warbox, Lalang and Killing Tools* (1994), by Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Wong Hoy Cheong and Raja Shahriman as well as music performances by punk rock band Carbutoretor Dung at the Creative Centre, National Art Gallery, which is now the Majestic Hotel.

“Primarily, we were looking for artworks made during the Mahathir years, which addressed some of the policies and politics of the time. Frankly, there was no shortage although a number of key artworks were originally selected were not included as the artists did not wish for them to be included. And we respect their decision,” Willie says.

*Lalang* was presented by Wong over the course of nine days — *Spraying of Weed Killer, Cutting and Burning of Lalang and Re-turfing of Lawn* — in conjunction with the seventh anniversary of Operation Lalang, which

occurred in 1987 as a result of internal political and institutional instability.

The performance was documented by Ray Langenbach, 68, who also conducted interviews with the audience regarding the art and sociopolitical situation in Malaysia during the exhibition opening.

Langenbach declined to feature this important recording at the exhibition. He published on social media his response to the gallery upon receiving an invitation to showcase the *Killing Fields-Lalang* video stating that “the exhibition seems to tacitly support the notion that the Reformasi artists have now all decided to realign themselves with the Mahathir-Daim camp, despite the fact that much of their art was explicitly (or obliquely) birthed in opposition to Dr Mahathir’s corruption and draconian policies. And this supposed U-turn implies that the artists now support the continuity of non-democratic, race-based ideology that BN [Barisan Nasional] and Umno have consistently deployed in order to remain in power...”

Langenbach has lived and worked in Malaysia and has been a keen observer and participant of social realism in Southeast Asia since 1988. He is now a professor of Performance Art and Theory specialising in Live Art and Performance Studies at the Theatre Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland.

### Themes of resistance

Due to the connotations associated with a title like *Era Mahathir*, it is understandable that some artists who felt strongly about the policies of Dr Mahathir may not want to participate for fear of being made use of and deifying his governance.

For instance, in 1999, Wong Hoy Cheong created an installation of objects found in demonstrations, titled *Vitrine of Contemporary Events*. It includes judges’ wigs and police batons made of cow dung, videos showing women singing a patriotic song and a copy of the Malaysian Constitution printed on paper made from vacuum-cleaner refuse. The work was created in response to the arrest of Anwar.

So, is *Era Mahathir* a celebration of the golden years of Malaysia and the glorification of a former prime minister, or a gathering of certain artists who at the time rebelled for a cause and have now changed their principles as they mature?

*Era Mahathir* runs until Nov 20 at Ilham Gallery. Log on to our website theedgegalerie.com for more on Malaysian and Southeast Asian art.

Sarah Abu Bakar is the assistant manager of The Edge Galerie