

Works which weave colourful narratives



BY OOI KOK CHUEN

LIFE is full of desires. And it's desires that make Syed Thajudeen's art world go round and round and round.

Human desires exist in many guises and levels. For Syed, this is the surrealist artery that courses through his works like a song. The sonorous strains are there in his *Ramayana* series or *Malacca Sultanate* series.

His rich textural works evoke emotional responses to the eternal questions of human origin, destiny and needs.

Syed, 44, weaves colourful narratives that are a quaint mixture of nationalism, romanticism, mysticism and sometimes, eroticism even.

His smaller works often have the veneer of sensualism, highlighted by the almond-shaped eyes of nubile women. The women would always look askance, their profiles showing only an eye; a coquettish double ploy.

"You must not reveal everything. You must cover something to arouse curiosity," he said.

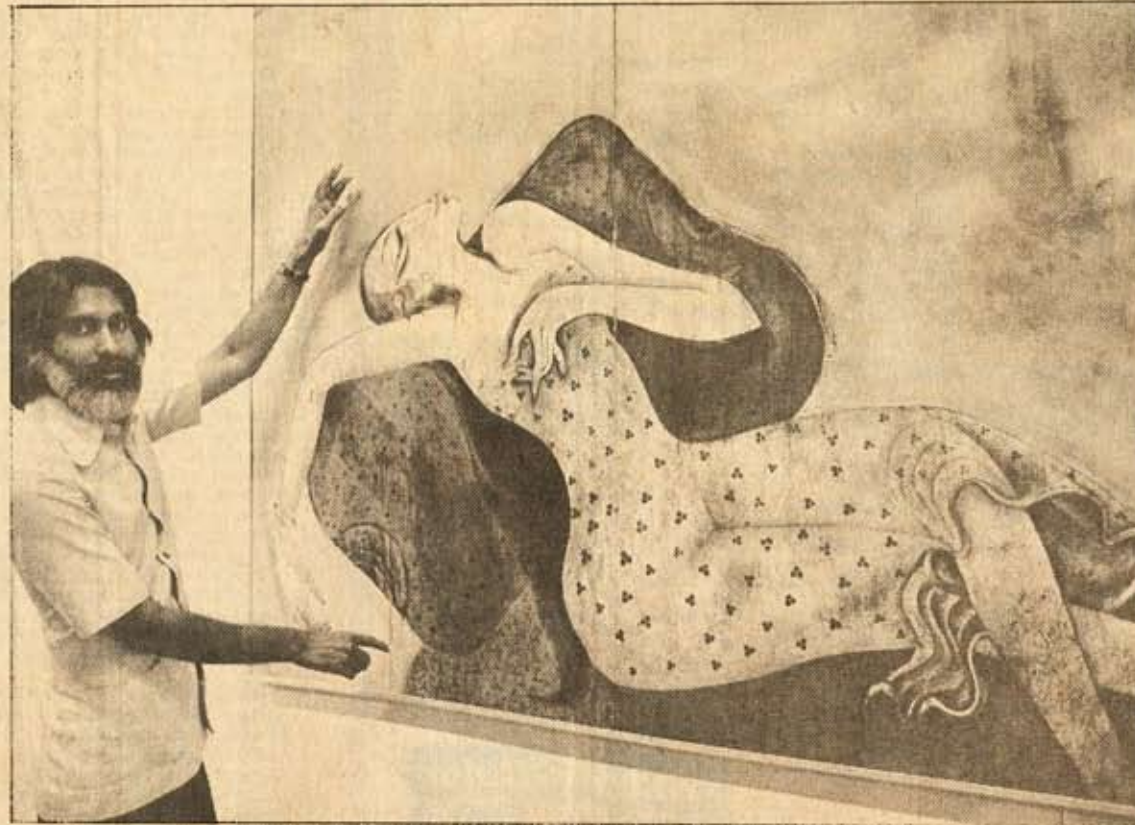
These works are usually laid back, dreamy and languorous — states of emotions veering erratically somewhere between stupor and awareness.

At times, they are so titillatingly erotic, with the thrust of phallic libido, making Syed out to be something like a D.H. Lawrence of Malaysian art.

No, frivolous these works are not. They are explorations of the range of human relationships, its emotive wavelengths.

His works have also strong stylistic overtones of Indian (Mogul) and Persian miniature paintings and are also influenced by other diverse sources like the Ajanta murals, the Majapahit empire, the Angkor Wat and Borobudur splendour.

It took him two years to complete his monumental



□ Syed Thajudeen and one of his works 'Longing For Love'

nine-panelled, three-part *Siri Ramayana* (1972-73), which is part of the National Art Gallery collection. It measures a total of 27 by five feet.

This time-immemorial battle between Good and Evil is rendered in three distinct sections — Rawana's attack on Sita, the exile of Sita, and the wrath of Hanuman, the Monkey God.

Syed's *Malacca Sultanate* series is more historical perspectives, something reminiscent of the court painter of bygone eras who recorded momen-

tous events with heroic flourish.

He has done three of the monumental pieces so far and is working on the fourth; on the leisurely life, like cock-fighting and wrestling.

The first, *The Beginning*, shows a small brave mousedeer chasing a big dog when Parameswara arrived in Malacca.

But the original, done in 1976, went up in smoke with the Bank Bumiputra (Kuala Lumpur) fire in 1980 and Syed felt compelled to give it a resurrection

of sorts a decade after the original was completed, with an improved version which has different movements and setting and also stylistic changes.

This time, Parameswara is seated surrounded by his standing retinue. The original had Parameswara standing.

The second of the series, *The Golden Era of the Malacca Sultanate*, depicts the riparian life, with people being entertained to dancing.

Then comes *The Advent of Islam*, which shows the peaceful transition of Islam into Malaya via marriage (like Parameswara's own) and business contacts.

It shows a scholar handing a symbolic crown to the princess.

In recreating history through his imagination, Syed did a lot of legwork on the cultural traditions of the day like "the people's headgear and costumes and their way of dressing".

If his works seem steeped in folklore and mythology, it is due in no small measure to his educational roots.

From 1966 to 1974, Syed Thajudeen was in India, studying and basking in the voluptuary of antiquity, visiting temples, monasteries, palaces and caves.

He was supposed to take up medicine or pursuits of more material value, but he chose fine art because it gave him greater satisfaction.

Though he studied at the College of Arts and Craft in Madras for six years, he has adapted and developed a style that is more indigenous to the region.

On his return from India, he lectured part-time at the ITM School of Art and Design in 1975-76 before joining the United Asian Bank as resident artist in 1977.

Syed believes there is a higher order of things, and he sees his works as a mission.

"Life is short. I have an assignment to do. I study art for some good reason. I have to do my duty whether I like it or not."

Born in Alagan Kulen, a hamlet 64km off Madurai in Tamil Nadu, Syed joined his family in Penang when he was 11.

His first exhibition was in the First Open show at the Penang Museum Art Gallery in 1965, where he also staged his first solo 10 years later.

His second solo was held at the now defunct Smart Gallery, also in 1975.

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