

ARTS OF THE TIMES



KIT LEE went to check out the National Art Gallery's *Space* exhibition and detected symptoms of agoraphobia — the fear of wide open spaces. He shares with us some thoughts on what he saw.

NO doubt about it: *Space* is a bold, brilliant theme.

It offers infinite scope to the artist. Perhaps too much — considering that so little time was allowed between the announcement of the exhibition and the deadline for entries; some received their entry forms only two weeks before the selection process began.

As a result, only a few of the hundred-odd works on display provoked excitement or shed new light on the idea of space.

But time spent looking at art is rarely time wasted — and there was enough evidence of aesthetic and technical excellence to justify the entire exercise.

The very broadness of the theme produced an interesting variety of styles, submitted by young hopefuls as well as old hands. Among the works that I found most stimulating were Yusof Ghani's *Tari (Dance)* series, one of which occupied an impressive amount of space: erupting forth from the canvas was an enormous festoon of painted celluloid swirls, a colourful translucent tendril of exuberant energy snaking across half the room and out into the corridor. Strictly an exhibition piece, though — not something you'd want to take home in a taxi.

Another work that perfectly embodied the spirit of the *Space* theme was a simple, untitled glass piece by Mohamed Yusoff Othman: it comprised four sets of hand-tinted monochrome transparencies sandwiched between clear glass sheets and propped upright on plain wooden stands in a row.

Backlit by window-light, the multiple images of eyes, fish, fishing boats, birds, trees, stones and clouds merged to form a hologram-like cube, creating a magical illusion of space and other-dimensionality. Strikingly effective.

Aku dan Ruang, a dodecahedral polystyrene construction by Ramlan Abdullah, struck me as

something that would work well in a children's playground — but it would have to be bigger and more durably built. Ramlan probably grew up with a Lego set.

Ponirin Amin's attempt at conceptual art came across as pompous and uninspired. He had arranged two antique china headrests and two rocks on a painted metal rack, installed a sort of clock mechanism on one of the headrests and given the contraption a disturbingly ungrammatical title: *These were items of particular — now an object of particularise*. I was not impressed. If anything, I felt annoyed.

Syed Thajudden's approach to the *Space* theme was more mystical in essence. In *Lightning, Journey to the Unknown* and *Meeting of Eyes*, he conjured up powerful images of veneration, generation and regeneration — executed with a confident, mature and appealingly Egyptian touch. *Space as Mystery*, perhaps.

Contributions

It would be enlightening, at this point, to take a quick look at Syed Ahmad Jamal's contributions. After all, the *Space* theme was his idea. And I believe he also wrote the programme notes wherein no fewer than 14 authorities on art are quoted in an heroic effort to define space.

One is tempted to dismiss this laborious preamble as a complete waste of time and space — but, then, the National Art Gallery's erudite director has always favoured the heavily academic approach.

His two contributions, *Puncak Persegi* (a neatly constructed plexiglass pyramid) and *Tawaf* (a hypnotic acrylic work showing pilgrims circumambulating the Kaabah — or spectral reality being sucked into a black hole) reflect this proclivity for impeccable, impersonal academicism. Or maybe he's really a mystic who's too cautious to come out of the

CAUTIOUS ATTEMPT AT BOLD CONCEPT

closet. That's why he conceals his thoughts with impenetrable intellectualisations.

Caution appeared to be the keynote of most of the works submitted by the more established artists. Sharifah Fatimah Zubir's *Flight*, for instance, was a continuation of her fascination with colour nuances: this one made intelligent, dynamic use of almost day-glo tones — while *Green Gold* was yet another low-key, sensitive study in the perceptual effects of subtle shifts in particular zones of the light spectrum.

One cannot help but admire her for the secret, introspective, even spiritual passion of her extended exercises in colour harmonics — but one also looks forward to seeing her make some kind of quantum leap into something else some day.

Tew Nai-tong played even safer. He applied bold strokes and daubs of inoffensive pastel tones on his canvasses and named the series *Space S-001/2/3*. Fortunately, he has attained such mastery of his impulses that each work stands as an eloquent, pleasing composition.

Likewise a batik mandala by Fatimah Chik was soothing to the soul and masterfully executed — yet it was just too straightforwardly adapted from rug-weaving traditions to warrant a strong response. It would look marvellous on any wall, though.

Abas Haji Baba also followed the beaten path with his mixed-media triptych, *Diprermukaan antara dua bulatan* — a skilfully contrived graphic composition that achieved, at best, a decorative effect.

Excellent colour sense

Syed Thajudeen's *Lightning* (right) and Long Thien Shih's *Earth, Water and Space* (below).



and choice of motifs were displayed in *Essence of Culture X & XI* by Awang Damit Ahmad and *Festival of the Laughing Soul* by Jailani Abu Hassan.

In their works, space is interpreted as the medium in which discrete forms interact. Which doesn't quite boggle the mind.

Masa dengan ruang, a collage by Leong Chee Siong, was remarkable for the effect he obtained with textured layers of Chinese newspapers crayoned over in brown, yellow and black; at first glance, it looked like fallen leaves on a forest floor, a delightfully lyrical metaphor of both time and space.

Soh Kerk Shing chose a mock-scientific approach to explaining space with his tongue-in-cheek stu-

dies of plane surfaces and supra-dimensional perspectives (*Unlimited Dimension I & II*).

Peacock

As superb examples of painstaking craftsmanship, Choong Kam Kow's elaborate paper-pulp and acrylic statements, both entitled *Space Continuum*, conveyed a sense of paradoxical humour — offsetting inorganic space with organic scabbiness.

I was also fascinated by a six-panel Japanese-screen-like contribution from Ismail Abdul Latiff called *Merak Emas Sakti*: a magnificent peacock leitmotif, highlighted in gold against a brooding mysterious expanse, transports the observer into a chimerical dimension of celestial



belief that style is secondary to substance; and that technique is no substitute for original thinking.

Feeling Space (or was it *Filling Space*?) — a Pollocksian patchwork of pretty squiggles and dribbles by Mohamed Nasir Baharuddin was among the more hopeful efforts.

But there were some that inspired only a sense of despair. Like the two Ibrahim Hussein disciples (both named Baharuddin) who submitted, without apology (but with perfect ingenuousness, I suppose), mindless imitations of Ib entitled *Pata* and *Pergolakan*.

Or like *Space Exploration* by P.H.S. Lim — almost offensive in its utter obtuseness and artlessness (and I am not easily offended). How did these entries make it to the National Art Gallery?

On my second visit to the *Space* exhibition, I learned that two works had been sold, both by newcomer Mohamed Akif Emir (*Manusia dan Budaya I & II*). This news pleased me greatly, for I had felt very enthusiastic about his efforts.

Apart from the fact that he's managed to pack a lot of ideas into very little space, his art reveals a complex, intuitive, spontaneous and childlike mind at work.

The inclusion of certain items in the *Space* exhibition puzzled me. For example, Mohamed Faizar Mohamed Idris and Noor'aishah Abdul Rahman contributed a series

of time-consuming works demonstrating their fabric design skills (*Fari-dah Hanom I/II/III* and *Perempuan I/II/III*) — but none of it seemed to fit the theme.

And Abdul Ghani Ahmad submitted a couple of competent ink illustrations, *Main Gasing* and *Kuda Kepang*, which I hope TDC will consider acquiring — but in the end, one is forced to wonder whether any special criteria were applied in the selection of exhibits.

I would like to have witnessed more experimentation with ways to reawaken our senses in relation to space; and, perhaps, more daring interpretations of the concept beyond the literal.

In retrospect, if any single image could summarise my general feelings about the *Space* exhibition, it would be Long Thien Shih's *Earth, Water & Space*. It's a surrealistic piece, depicting a *merbuk* or pigeon imprisoned by the shadow of a birdcage suspended in the sky. Within the cage, seemingly trapped, is a cloud turning into an orchid or vice versa.

What Long's image represents to me is simply this: given the scope and freedom of art, given all this incredible, ineffable space... do our artists have the courage and determination to express their imaginations to the fullest? Or are most of them still in school, still agoraphobic, still living in fear of the wide open spaces of the mind?