



A toast to Malaysia - 5

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POLES APART



ABOVE: Syed Tajuddin's 'Negeraku', illustrating the concept of motherland. TOP, RIGHT: Victor Chin's 'Ideal Citizens' in embryonic form, inspired by the OSA debate. Picture by DAVID YEONG.

Story by DELIA PAUL



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REFLECTIONS OF MERDEKA



FROM PAGE ONE

In it he depicts Malaysia as a woman against a background of the flag, a reflection of his seeing the land as mother. So that she can be placed immediately, the figure wears a sarung and has a hibiscus flower in her hair.

He uses commonly understood symbols: the green of the background, the blue of the flag and its stripes stand for the land, sea and waves that are all part of our home.

The artist's bent for illustration of our background has been taken further in his *Melaka* triptych.

In it, the first panel depicts the founding of Malacca, with Parameswara under the tree and the unmistakable mousedeer kicking the dog.

It is followed by *The Golden Age of Melaka*, which depicts the fishing, dancing and festivity along the coast that shaped the lives of its inhabitants. The third piece shows the coming of Islam to Malacca, with a missionary showing the Quran to a Malacca princess.

He has consciously set out to create icons of our own, drawing figures that would be instantly recognisable from our own history — not necessarily the substantiated, dry facts of the school history book, but rather stories, which have become so charged with meaning that they contain far more than the simple narrative which is its vehicle.

"It's visual history," says the artist — something most important for an understanding of who we are.

His style of pictorial narrative is a direct descendant within the tradition of South-East Asian art — one of its most notable instances being the depiction of the military might of Suryavarman II on the southern walls of Angkor Wat.

At present he is working on something quite different — a series on the stages of being in love, encompassing the moment of meeting, communication, union, departure and longing.

For Institut Teknologi Mara lecturer and artist Choong Kam Kow, 53, nationalism as a theme in itself doesn't even rate a mention as subject matter in his paintings, though he recalls the initial euphoria that followed independence in 1957, which he joined in, even making a special

trip to Kuala Lumpur to witness the celebrations.

However, the fact of his being Malaysian is very important to his work: "I think we have realised that we artists have a lot to tap in this country, culturally, socially, et cetera," he says.

For Choong, who has spent 19 years in service at ITM, this "tapping" takes the form of incorporating aesthetic motifs culled from the local scene.

The piece he is working on at present is the third in his *Beautiful Malaysia* series: workings of sun, sea, and fishing boat motifs that were inspired by his trips to the East Coast.

This piece is built around the form of the decoration on the prow of the fishing boat, known as *bangu*. He makes the imprint by pressing a rubber stencil of the *bangu* design against the wet pulp that is his medium.

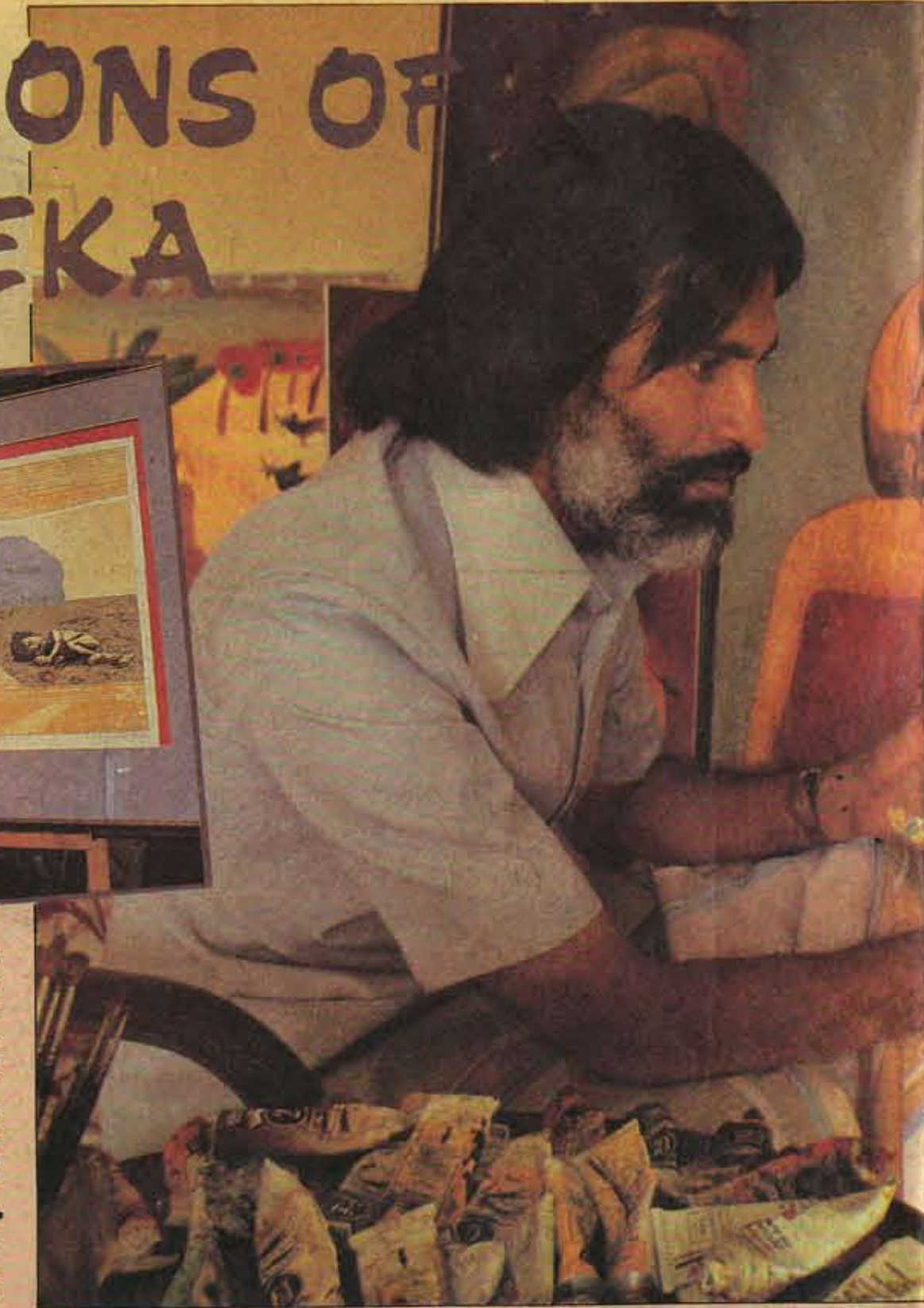
The background is textured like *tikar*, achieved by pressing an actual piece of *tikar* onto the pulp.

Choong's work has undergone several changes that stem from the way he perceives the country.

On his return from studies in the United States, his geometric, hard-edged works reflected the way he saw Malaysia's industrial beauty and economic advances.

In the mid-70s, his works began to reflect more of the cultural and social scene, and it was at this time that he began his *Festival* series, which incorporates the forms of local *kulit* against a painted background of *mengkuang* mats.

The elegance of the finished product is very much itself, unaligned to traditional effects. But it could not be anything but Malaysian, especially if you take the *kulit* forms as a manifestation of the existence of a common, perhaps centrally important, food culture in Malaysia.



ABOVE: Romli Mahmud's *Hari Ini Kita Merdeka?*... a reference to his view that Merdeka must be seen in the wider context of humanity — Picture by Andrew Chong

RIGHT: Syed Tajuddin at work in his studio at home with a work that is part of a series depicting the stages of love.

BELOW: RIGHT: Syed Tajuddin's pictorial narrative shows the founding of Melaka, telling in visual form the tale of the mousedeer kicking the dog, watched by Parameswara and his men.



Wong Hoy Cheong, at 27, is rediscovering Malaysia after an eight-year sojourn in New York.

National identity, for him, is not confined to the petty boundaries of nation states, nor defined by institutions.

The land is a mysterious entity that is made up of a composite of animism, superstition, and beliefs which are religious in nature but

not institutionalised; climatic conditions, social circumstances, costume, and an undefinable something...

He calls it "the myth of the land" — those qualities of the land that give birth to ourselves.

In New York, for instance, he could put an apple outside and it would stay there for weeks,

whole. Here it would rot very quickly.

"There's a very fast sense of growth and decay, unlike the feeling there of permanence and stability. Everything here feels volatile, politically and socially, like the vegetation which grows and also rots fast."

And the immediacy. "When you walk in the *pasar malam*, you feel

the sweat of people rubbing against your body."

It was this mysterious quality also that he tried to capture in the piece that he executed for the Tasi Cini exhibition, depicting two orang asli women — "a quality of the light, a strangeness to the place."

As part of this search, Wong has been travelling in the Riau islands — a region that fascinates him because of its history as the old seat of power and cultural influence in the Malay Archipelago.

The paintings depicted here, *Kada Kepang* and *Pemakan Rumpit*, are instances of his cultural awareness that draws from local subject matter to create what are also strong social statements.

"Of course one has to be sensitive to the quality of life — whether others are without food or freedom," he says. "I feel it's my obligation to speak what I see."

His work consciously and deliberately seeks to capture elements of our heritage — a connection he also seeks to establish in his day-to-day living, wearing *baju Melayu* to work at Kole Damansara Utama, where he teaches art.

"People ask me if I am a Muslim when they see me wearing it," he says, with the characteristic bubble of amusement that overflows his seriousness.

"I say to them, *ini baju Melayu, bukan baju Islam*."

Romli Mahmud, a 24-year-old ITM student, believes that the concept of freedom and independence must always be considered within the wider context of humanity as a whole.

We can't be considered to be truly "merdeka" until we are free

of the ills that plague humanity as a whole, because it is something that must transcend merely national boundaries.

It is this statement which he makes in a work exhibited in the National Gallery's Open Show in February, entitled *Hari Ini Kita Merdeka?*

The reference to Ethiopia is his statement on the concept of freedom.

The words *Perutusan Dari Thomas Malthus* (Message from Thomas Malthus) which are incorporated in the painting, make reference to Thomas Malthus, who theorised in the 18th Century that history went in cycles, from high to low points.

Artists as a class, he feels, have a role and obligation to society to highlight social ills and to work positively at repairing them.

It isn't just politicians who play political roles," he says. "Artists must bring issues to the public eye to make the public aware."

The clean, well-ordered style of Romli's works is instantly recognisable, as is the flavour of the sharp-edged commentary it represents.

The quizzical, almost reluctant comment must be eked out of the work with some reference to its sources. While much of his work employs elements derived from folk traditions particularly the wayang kulit, the effect sometimes borders on Pop Art.

A piece which was awarded a minor prize in the Young Contemporaries Exhibition last year, *Akhirnya Ke Kamar Jua*, employs the dialectical opposites of Sri Rama (the good) and Ravana (the evil) facing each other; the work's title refers to their return to the box as mere puppets after the wayang is played.



LEFT: ITM lecturer and artist Choong Kam Kow with his painting which is part of the *Beautiful Malaysia* series, depicting sun, sea and fishing boat motifs — Picture by S. C. Shaker

TOP: Picture: Artist Wong Hoy Cheong... part of a continuing search for myth of the land.