

By J. ANU

# Fighting the stereotype of Islamic art

There is a problem that runs through group exhibitions. Because the viewer is barraged by an endless range of styles, colours and concepts, he will generally end up ill from too much of a good thing.

Because of this, a central theme is crucial in the execution of such shows, which are growing in popularity in the city.

Prior to the *Open Show* being held at the Gallery Shah Alam, Petronas Gallery organised *The Bosnian Issue*, and the International Islamic University offered *God, Environment and Man*.

What the IIU exhibition last week lacked in organisation and presentation, it made up with the sincerity and enthusiasm of the art works.

Some of these were by heavyweights of the local art fraternity: Abdul Ghani Ahmad, Syed Thajudeen and Ibrahim Hussein.

Organised by the university's Creative Club, the exhibition featured 100 works by 40 Malaysian artists and also consisted of a *Khat* demonstration, a photography contest and an art convention.

IIU Student Affairs dean Dr Muhammed Nur Manuty said: "One of the objectives of the exhibition was to portray the expanse of Islamic art on the relationship between God, the environment and mankind."

He had also hoped to allay some misconceptions about the link between Islam and art.

Rather than stress the kind of calligraphy that has come to be associated with Islamic art, the exhibition emphasised a wider scope of religious creativity by interpreting its philosophy through imagery.

And it succeeded.

Although the range of subject matter was wide, the exhibition as a whole was an eloquent statement about man completing a spiral turn and about to commence on a religious one.

Mohd Aris Atan and Hussin Ahmad's *Ar Rahim* explore and extend the boundaries of traditional Islamic art with their cultivated understanding of calligraphy.

Works by Tuan Haji Hashim



Selvaratnam adopts a realist approach in 'Contemplation' to achieve the same effect as 'Submission.'

Hassan, Imanordin Mohd Shah and Rohaizad Shaari take the themes of landscapes and nature while retaining suitable references to God's uniqueness and perfection.

Tuan Haji Hashim Hassan's *Pulau Tioman I* was a colourful marine rendition of the inspiration na-

ture has always been to the artist.

He uses his own brand of humour and irony (ie the submarine), expertise and approach to state his philosophy on the relation between man, the environment and God.

Further exploration of the divine merging with nature was seen in



'Submission' by Syed Thajudeen uses a figure to depict spirituality

remains the visual genius of our times.

Then, there was the figure-based work of Syed Thajuddin.

He paints the portrait of a bent figure in *Submission*. Listen to the silence. Feel the stillness. Let the colours draw you into the serpentine world. The painting is of this world, but more so.

It radiates energy which is luminous, translucent, moving... an offering to all men experiencing emotional or spiritual change.

Compare it with the realist treatment of *Contemplation* by T. Selvaratnam. His skilful reference to religion is obvious in its subtlety. It depicts a Muslim girl gazing across the canvas, staring into light filled space. This sets her environment.

Her prone figure stretches across the painting, strong and clear. The strong colours are earthy and command us to look and pay attention.

While the treatment of *Submission* is different in theory, technique and philosophy from that of *Contemplation*, they both succeed in making the invisible aura of divinity visible.

This coming together of diverse styles and interpretations gave for some interesting viewing at the exhibition.

It made viewers realise that ideas in Islamic art are as far-reaching as the artists' interpretations and observations of the relationship between God, the environment and man.

More important, on an art-for-art's-sake level, the paintings expressed a spiritual resolution that comes from the transfer of energy — from the celestial to colour, shape and form.

Abdul Ghani Muhammad's *Ciptaan Tuhan*. Here, the artist seems to imply the presence of a higher being through the pure cosmic intensity of water, rock and flora.

The natural use of political satire in Ibrahim Hussein's handling of the theme helps us realise why he