



LEADING THE WAY ... 'Sirih Pinang' (left) by Syed Ahmad Jamal, who pioneered abstract expressionist readings of landscape, colour and motif. The current brand of expressionism finds its relevance in a South-East Asian sensibility, like Jalaini Abu Hassan's 'Tiga Dara Di Pinang.'

## Giving a face to modern Malaysian art

By J. ANU

**R**upa Malaysia, A Decade of Art 1987-1997, a substantial showing of recent Malaysian art, is currently on exhibition at London's Brunei Gallery.

Curated by artist-academic Redza Piyadasa, the show successfully and intelligently suggests the entire trek of the Malaysian Modern Art movement despite the limitations of its 10-year - 1987-97 - curatorial time frame.

The variety of works on exhibition may hold little appeal to regular Malaysian art lovers.

The majority of the exhibits are the creations of long-time Malaysian stalwarts and most have been seen regularly on the local circuit.

However, Rupa does succeed in showcasing the latest edition of Malaysian art and more importantly, it introduces a version of that art movement to foreign audiences.

Like a continuation of the two previous Malaysian art events in England - the exhibition taken to London by Frank Sullivan in 1966, followed by Syed Ahmad Jamal's exhibition of Malaysian art in 1978 - Rupa reintroduces Malaysian art to one of the world's art capitals.

And what the exhibition really fulfills is a concise and enjoyable analysis of the history of modern Malaysian art.

This is achieved largely through the curator's clear rationale and extensive writings that accompany the exhibition.

In an age when the importance



PIYADASA ... curated an eloquent reading of modern Malaysian art.

of documentation has been acknowledged but seldom realised, Piyadasa's forward and essays are a rare intellectual analysis of Malaysia's modern art history.

It is a reading that comes complete with all the subtle nuances and deep implications of our very complex social and political make-up.

Best of all, Piyadasa tells us his version without all the complicated semantics most writers love to indulge in. Extremely complex ideas become immediately enjoyable.

Drawing from opinions and ideas developed in the writer's previous *Vision and Idea* collaboration, the essays in this catalogue - *Assertions of the Modern, Defining Nationalism, Discovering Identities* - give us a much clearer picture.

Piyadasa has also divided the exhibition physically into these three sections.

*Assertions of the Modern* explores the earliest developments in the Malaysian aesthetic, from the turn-of-the-century Colonial indifference to the earliest sparks of creativity.

These were the English and Chinese educated segments of society, local-born or recent migrants who painted part-time.

Piyadasa's return to the beginnings of a Malaysian art movement is aimed at reflecting the earliest interest in Western-derived idioms.

It would be an interest that would eventually lead to the more individualised and self-expressive modes of creativity that is Modernism.

With the formation of institutions like the Nanyang Academy and the modernising influence of the School of Paris, artists like Lim Hak Tai, Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi introduced the seeds of modernist thought "almost overnight."

By the 1950s, local artists were already going to England and Paris.

Malaysia's favourite art movement returned, bringing with them an abstract expressionism that would eventually embrace their own Malaysian and South-East Asian psyches and evolve into a formidable and sophisticated language that exists till this very day.

Artists like Latif Mohidin, Ibrahim Hussein, Yeoh Jin Leng and Syed Ahmad Jamal continue to play a crucial role in Malaysian art, not only as practitioners but also influencing consequent generations of artists like Awang Damit Ahmad, Fauzan Omar, Sharifah Fatimah and Yusof Ghani.

This first segment of the exhibition successfully leads us through



SENSE OF IDENTITY ... Kung Yu Liew's 'Hungry Ghost Festival, Penang 1995' (left). In an attempt to question their place in the scheme of things, many artists draw inspiration from their own ethnic background.

the development of an art philosophy and looks at the current players with a clarity that is almost too simple.

*Defining Nationalism* follows in the footsteps, describing the subsequent chain of events in what the writer describes as perhaps the most significant area of the Malaysian art movement.

Beginning with the general euphoria of Independence, the writer boldly spells out the complex socio-cultural problems that faced a pluralistic and multi-cultural Malaysia.

With an ease born of a deep understanding of our histories, Piyadasa lays out the political and social makeup of the young nation and links it to the effects on the youthful modern art scene.

The post-Merdeka works celebrated various symbols from the land and its peoples to express the overwhelming sense of content-

ment and hope, never guessing at the fragility of the situation which eventually erupted in May 13, 1969.

"This led to a period of painful soul-searching within the nation," he explains.

Piyadasa recounts the formation of the National Operations Council and the effects of the subsequent National Cultural Congress that, among other issues like language, economy, education, culture and values, also influenced the re-discovery of Malay roots within the art scene.

Malay artists, spearheaded by Mara Institute's School of Art and Design began to appropriate techniques, decorative influences, motifs and colour sensibilities derived from the Malay as well as the simultaneous larger international Islamic revivalist developments.

It would be movements that, by

and large, moulded a distinct identity for Malaysian art and gave us a context that is fundamentally Malaysian and ultimately South-East Asian.

Among the artists at the centre of this movement were Syed Ahmad Jamal, Ahmad Khalid Yusof, Sulaiman Esa, Ismail Zain, Amron Omar, Mad Anuar, Fatimah Chik, Syed Tajudeen and Raja Shariman.

Piyadasa stresses the point that much more than mere exercises in decorative symbols, the Malay-Islamic impulses in art reflected, though not absolutely directly, a commentary and a response to the times and environment.

*Discovering Identities* examines the emergence of a political and social commentary in art which was generally lacking in the movement's earliest trysts with a sentimentalised and romanticised vision of Malaya.

Piyadasa identifies pockets of artists influenced by socialist realism, artists like Lee Boon Wang, Chia Yu Chian and Mazeli Matsom.

Once again, the writer explores the implications of the National Cultural Congress, the delineations of the populace and the subsequent influence of societal issues on artistic thinking.

As a result some of the earliest strains of commentary in art have evolved from non-Malay artists who began to "re-question their own roles in the new scheme of things."

Issues of ethnicity also arose, each ethnic group, especially the Chinese, drawing from their own motifs and symbols to reassert themselves.

According to Piyadasa, these artists also relied on representational and figurative modes which made their messages more obvi-



CELEBRATION ... Syed Tajudeen's 'Merdeka' (left) captures the atmosphere of the Independence fervour, while Hamdzun Haron's clay sculpture, 'Siri Tamu' (below) uses Islamic motif for a wonderfully resolved interpretation.



cover our shared regional commonalities and identities.

In turn, this has affected Malaysian artists and art practices. He uses Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim's work as a reference point, whose works like *Pandir Daik* derives its primitivist qualities from the older tribal sculptures of South-East Asia.

Bayu addressess social displacement in the face of progress, Ismail Hashim deals with pollution and the environment and our most recent hero, Ahmad Shukri with his famous *Insect Diskette II*, begins to address an emerging global culture.

*Rupa Malaysia* is a comprehensive introduction to Malaysian art. Piyadasa's strength and ability in visualising the entire scope of the sequence of events and where and how all the works connect with each other gives the movement a context seldom achieved beyond cursory examination.

Redza Piyadasa answers many questions about our art movement without us knowing what questions to ask.

He gives us the beginnings of a complete picture. And despite the exhibition's ten-year time frame, the writer succeeds in mapping an entire chronology of events that have led to the art movement's final destination today.

And he makes it an absolutely enjoyable endeavour.

The essays are compulsory reading.

■ *Rupa Malaysia, A Decade of Malaysian Art*, features works by 43 Malaysian artists and will run until May 30 at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, London.

Details: ☎ 03-274 0157 (National Gallery).

ous and clearer.

And Piyadasa has chosen the most obvious examples to represent these artistic responses - Wong Hoy Cheong, Kung Yu Liew and Kelvin Chan. The feminist issue is represented with elo-

quence by the works of Eng Hwee

Chu. Piyadasa then goes on to describe the boom of the 1990s, the new sense of pragmatism and how the evolution of Asean has encouraged Malaysians to redis-