

# Staying in touch with the times

By J. ANU

And before the paint has even dried on the Malaysian art scene, 1998 has ended. It was a year which the arts fraternity was extremely weary of.

Artists, gallery owners, art administrators, all braced themselves for a year which - after the blackest September in an entire decade - promised to be disastrous for the survival of artists and the continuing prosperity of our art movement.

After all, in an economic climate where onions have become one of the most precious commodities of all, who really cares about a picture on the wall? Collectors, on the other hand, looked as if they would be coming away laden with paintings bought for a song.

Some gallery owners even predicted that this be a good time to acquire that much sought after Buyong or long-awaited Latiff - the secondary market would be rife with rare finds being sold off by "burned-by-the-stockmarket" ex-collectors.

It hasn't seemed to have been the case. Most artists are holding their prices, at the very least in public. If anything, there has been a settling down of the tendency for sky-rocketing prices which seemed to have been the norm in the last decade.

Many seem to have responded to the out-of-pocket collectors base by readjusting their sizes rather than the prices of their works. Whilst mammoth canvases were the rage in the glorious past, artists seem to have scaled down their works and aspirations as well as broadened their range of techniques.

More drawing shows were in attendance this year, for example. And so the market seems to have survived.

Not that the market hasn't slowed; certainly these are hard times for artists and dealers and gallery operators, but not in the dire sense that was expected. The private gallery circuit, while not thriving indiscriminately as in the pre-slowdown days, continues to give support to both established and younger talent, albeit in a much more discriminating fashion... which is certainly healthy.

And while the auction houses have recorded a drop in the prices of works by Malaysian stalwarts, perhaps this development can be looked at as a more realistic evaluation of the art movement's greatest hits.

And on the positive side, the quality of Malaysian art work seems to have actually improved; the mad bazaar-type "anything

sells" anxiety of the good years created a fraternity which doled out work with the hard sell in mind, tailor-made for whatever trend had captured buyers.

Now artists are forced, at least to some extent, to reevaluate their role as artists and embrace a more art-for-arts-sake sensibility. If the work is not good, it simply isn't going to find a following. Hence, artists are beginning to now boast the beginnings of more considered bodies of work, slowly finding a noble balance between the business of art and the pure aesthetics of it all.

Best of all, dreaded 1998 has sped by with an astonishing haste, perhaps due to the fact that the year has been marked by so many seminal events.

First on the list must be the completion and unofficial opening of the National Art Gallery, preceded and, sadly, somewhat thwarted by the opening of the state-of-the-art Petronas Gallery.

The reputed RM44mil purpose-built national gallery - as a space - is less impressive than we had hoped. It possesses various architectural flaws and features mediocre detailing that, considering its national monument status, is not only embarrassing to the fraternity, but also the developer that built it.

Still, it is a new beginning for the Malaysian art movement, considering it is the first building - not makeshift - which we can truly call our own and, for that reason, especially in the context of these meager times, the movement rejoices.

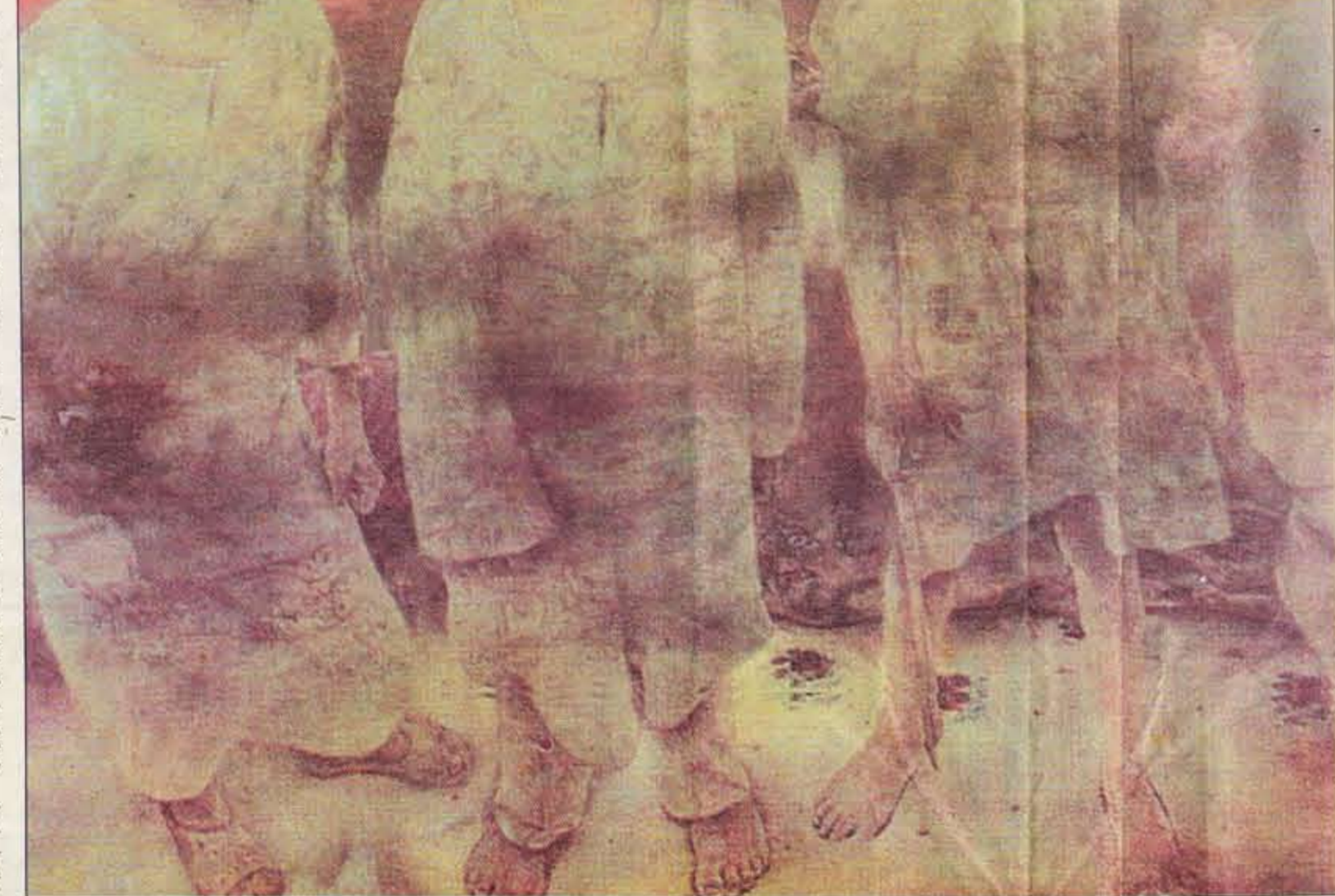
The Petronas Gallery, which opened with great fanfare earlier this year, is much more resolved in the issue of space and detailing.

Built rather awkwardly around the central core of one of the KLCC Towers, the expansive space is beautifully designed, and boasts the most advanced facilities: lighting, temperature control, storage, exhibition panels, resource centre, artists directory, work areas as well as a comprehensive arts and educational programme.

Both organisations, in the light of the current economic problems, will play a crucial role in supporting the arts and giving the artists a platform from which they can show their work and express their ideas - a role which, during the boom, seemed better served by the private gallery circuit.

The Galeri Shah Alam promises a new lease of life since its appointment of Rahime Harun, art-entrepreneur extraordinaire as its director.

And other art venues outside Kuala Lumpur continue to flourish. Penang continues to reestablish itself as an alternative to Kuala Lumpur. Perak's Pesta Seni Iph



**MALAYSIA BOLEH ... the painting that made Malaysia proud, Kow Leong Kiang's 'Mr Foreign Speculator, Stop Damaging Our Country', which came first in the Asean Arts Award in Hanoi. 'Night Fire' (below), part of Latiff Mohideen's long-awaited 'Rimba' series.**

has become a much anticipated annual arts event; Kedah, the seat of the *Utara* group artists, was not only active in Alor Setar but, this year, with the opening of entrepreneur Tai Keik Hock's *Galeri Seni Lukis Moden Datichi* in Sungai Petani!

Johor also offers up its own art activities and its fraternity of artists.

All of which seems to disprove the frequent assumption that the Malaysian art scene begins and ends in the capital Kuala Lumpur. Of course, Penang still boasts the most vibrant scene.

Through the joint cooperation of the State Art Gallery, the Penang Water Colour Society, the Penang State Cultural Council and private establishments like The Art Gallery, Penang artists have found a new relevance within and without their state.

This year, the state gallery organised three exhibitions of works of prominent artists Kuo Ju Ping, Khaw Sia and Tan Guan Hin. Penang also plays host to its own *Bakat Muda* competition albeit little known.



**MALAYSIA BOLEH ... the painting that made Malaysia proud, Kow Leong Kiang's 'Mr Foreign Speculator, Stop Damaging Our Country', which came first in the Asean Arts Award in Hanoi. 'Night Fire' (below), part of Latiff Mohideen's long-awaited 'Rimba' series.**



datas of 114 Penang artists - the first comprehensive listing of its kind in Malaysia. Also out of Penang this year was another tome, *Social Responsibility in Art Criticism (Or Why Yong Mun Sen is the Father of*

*Idea* National Art Gallery publication, the book rings petty although it is extremely enjoyable for onlookers. In the 1994 publication, Piyadasa questions the validity of Dr Tan's statement that Yong Mun Sen is the father of Malaysian art; he also accuses Dr Tan of having done more harm than good to the chronology and documentation of Malaysian art.

Dr Tan's reply is poorly put together, but extensively researched with a wealth of detail - little of which comes together in a cohesive manner, but is, nevertheless, an enjoyable read.

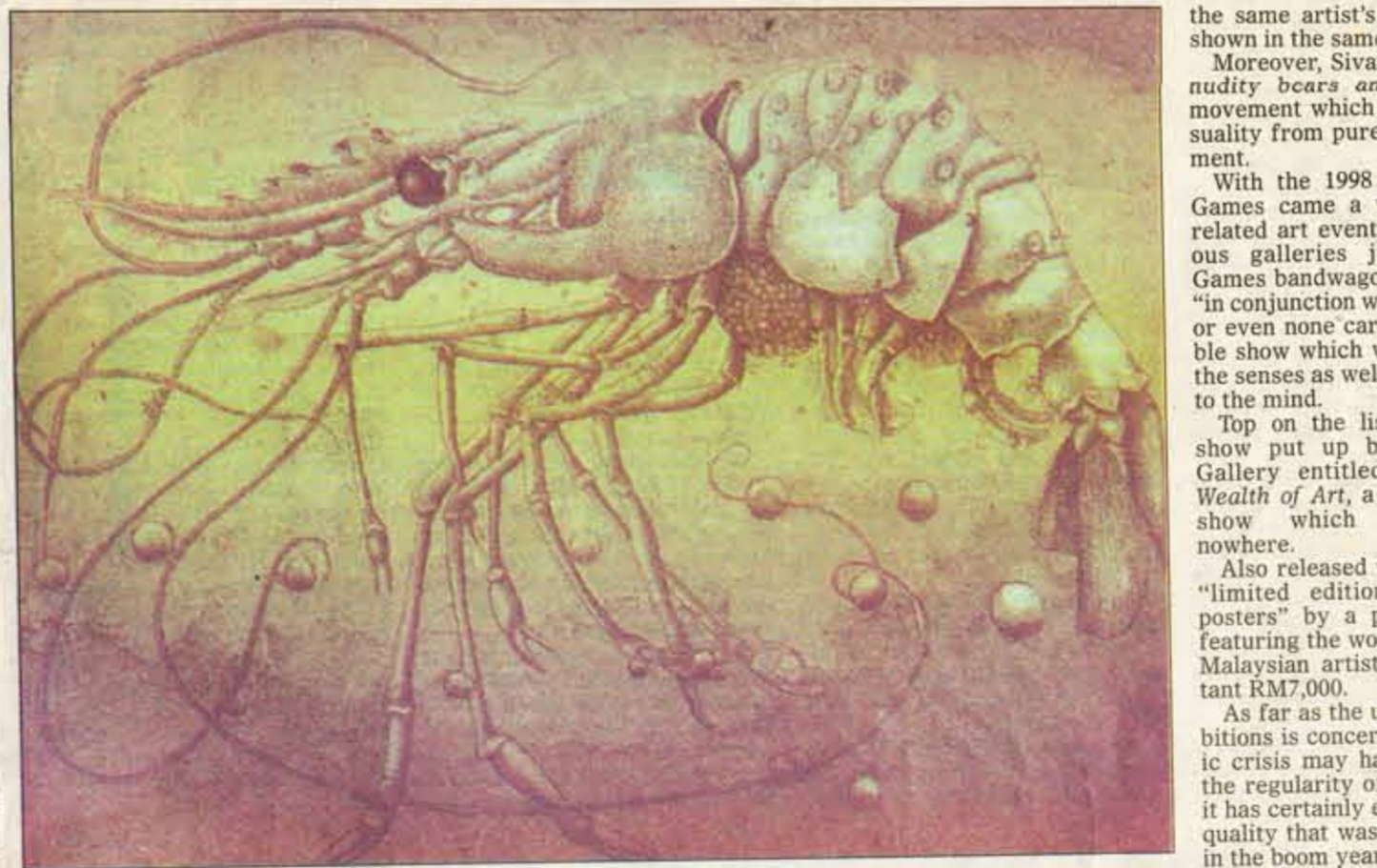
Controversy seems to have been rife this year. In October, the Artists Pro Active (APA) exhibition, *Apa Apa*, a reaction by the visual arts fraternity to the current event that most concerns Malaysians of late, was held in an anonymous location in Ampang.

Organised by Wong Hoy Cheong, it was an impressive showing by more than 30 artists including important names like Redza Piyadasa, Suleiman Esa and Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal.

Not all the work came together convincingly; most of them were immediate responses to current political developments, but others



**FIRST TIME ... May saw the first ever comprehensive showing of Sylvia Lee Goh's works, including 'If Dreams Came True' (left). Highlight of November was Ilse Noor's Prawn Series, a hilarious yet poignant takes on the endearing absurdities that make Malaysia.**



were simply there for the sake of participation.

Which seemed to be the point of the show: for the first time in our art history, artists banded together and made a statement about an important issue *during* and not after the fact and in a consolidated manner.

This platform for discourse within the art movement, controversial or not, is certainly a healthy step in the development of an art movement in which artists have the option to freely express their dissenting opinion. In November, Malaysia's Kow

Leong Kiang won the grand prize at this year's Philip Morris Asean Art Awards with his fabulous painting with a trite title.

*Mr Foreign Speculators, Stop Damaging Our Country* may have been the best painting at the awards, but it was poorly considered as far as its sentiments were concerned, at least as far as the artist was expressed.

The artist was forced to face an inquisitorial barrage of questions from a gleeful foreign press that did little for his confidence nor his standing as a thinking artist. Still, in spite of its title, Kow's

painting was a beautiful work of art that not only garnered, for the first time, the grand prize for Malaysia, but did reflect the sentiments of many Malaysians and South-East Asians.

Then, in the first few days of December, a figurative exhibition by five Malaysian artists at the Maybank Gallery was cancelled after the artists pulled out from the show.

A protest at the seemingly arbitrary rejection of 13 of 16 Sivarajah Natarajan's paintings for reasons of nudity, the ruling made little sense in light of the fact that

the same artist's work has been shown in the same gallery before. Moreover, Sivarajah's brand of nudity bears an ambiguity of movement which derives its sensuality from pure line and movement. With the 1998 Commonwealth Games came a whole string of related art events. While numerous galleries jumped on the Games bandwagon to play on the "in conjunction with" novelty, few or even none carried off a credible show which was enjoyable to the senses as well as enlightening to the mind. Top on the list was a paltry show put up by the National Gallery entitled *The Common Wealth of Art*, a well-intentioned show which simply went nowhere.

Also released was an appalling "limited edition" set of "art posters" by a private company featuring the works of prominent Malaysian artists for an exorbitant RM7,000.

As far as the usual run of exhibitions is concerned, the economic crisis may have slowed down the regularity of exhibitions, but it has certainly ensured a level of quality that was fast diminishing in the boom years.

The *Asean Masterworks* exhibition in January was enjoyable in parts; Dzulkipli Buyong's *Hantu* alone was well worth the trip.

In February, there was a less than impressive exhibition at Pelita Hati Gallery of Art entitled *Coming Together*, which deserves mention simply because it brought to light the work of young artist Hamidi Abd Hadi. His work, *Mitos Agung Sang pahlawan Gemilang*, is not only accomplished but extremely enjoyable. Since then, Pelita Hati

SEE PAGE 15

# Eventful and exhausting year for art

FROM PAGE 13

has moved its gallery space to Bangsar, and while they were an important gallery in the city before, the move seems to have sadly taken the wind out of their sails.

March witnessed one of Malaysia's earliest social commentators, Nirmala Dutt's, first ever comprehensive showing at Valentine Willie Fine Art. A retrospective of sorts, the show wasn't terribly enjoyable simply because of its dire intensity and its mire of black, white, grey and sienna, but it was certainly one of the more important shows of the year.

In March, GaleriWan put together an unexpected show, *Footprints - Lines of Continuity*. Curated by noted watercolourist Chin Kon Yi, this was a group show that returns to the rationale of societies like the Wednesday Art Group which encouraged young artists next to established practitioners, the show is aimed at encouraging the development of young talent and it was tremendously successful.

Lim Kok Hong's drawings, watercolours by Lee Tui Yaw and Lim Wei Seong already ensure that our next generation of talented artists are already beginning to be realised.

In May, the much-loved Ahmad Zakli Anwar had an exhibition across the causeway, *Distant Gamelan* sees the artist in fine dramatic form, even if, on the mainland, there seems to be too much of his work at various exhibitions and galleries. Over exposure is a frightening prospect.

Yet the artist seems to have a firm grip on the quality which has always dictated his work.

May was a busy month in Malaysian art. Victor Chin gave Malaysian audiences his first comprehensive showing of his flowers in the *Garden Pleasures* exhibition at the Creative Centre.

The flowers are a difficult departure for the artist since the shopfronts have been loved so dearly by all Malaysians, but the artist perseveres. May also marked the opening of Sylvia Lee Goh's solo exhibition at the Creative Centre. A self-taught artist of rare ability, the extensive range of largely autobiographical works in this "retrospective" showing revealed an artist of committed sensibility, even though the quality of the work sometimes tended to be erratic.

July witnessed the impressive intellect of Hayati Mokhtar who, in her *Back to School* installation, immediately establishes herself as one of the more important Malaysian artists even if she never creates a work of that stature again.

Sadly ignored was a smallish show entitled *A.R.T.* at the Maybank Gallery by recent ITM graduates Khairul Azmir, Rini Fauzan Zuhairi, Roslihsam Ismail and Mat Ali Mat Som. The show boasted some impressive sculptures and tremendous drawings despite its rather ordinary and usual themes of social ills and *bohsia*.

September was another busy month. The long-awaited Latiff Mohidin exhibition of the *Rimba* works was opened in conjunction with the opening of the new Galeri Petronas.

An impressive body of work, one cannot help feeling that the artist and exhibition may have

been better served if there wasn't such a barrage of other - some less impressive than others - on display. All three founder *Matahatis*, Bayu Utomo, Ahmad Fuad and Ahmad Shukri, held their respective exhibitions concurrently at Valentine Willie Fine Art, NN Gallery and Art Salon. And November has to go to Ilse Noor's *Prawn Series*, hilarious yet poignant takes on the endearing absurdities that make Malaysia. Told in the most intricate detail and sienna hues, these are some of Ilse's best work seen in the longest time. As far as curatorial efforts concerned, Redza Piyadasa features prominently this year. He curated the *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987-1997* exhibition which travelled to London in March, the first comprehensive



**ON TOUR ... Syed Thajudeen's 'Merdeka' (1989) was part of the Redza Piyadasa-curated 'Rupa Malaysia' exhibition in London - the first showing of Malaysian art overseas since 1978.**

showing of Malaysian art overseas since Syed Ahmad Jamal's 1978 London show. Piyadasa and co-curator, Penang photographer Ismail Hashim, was also responsible for telling a fabulous version of Malaysian art in their show *Art and Nationalism - 40 Years of Malaysian Art*.

Most of all, 1998 culminated with grand accolades for Piyadasa. On Dec 15, he was awarded the Prince Claus Award from the Netherlands for his contributions to the development of the Malaysian art movement and the crucial rationale of it all.

All in, it has been an exhausting year for Malaysian art and a tremendously eventful one. It seems that 1998 is definitely a time when Malaysian *boleh* - for Malaysian art and other things as well.

These five winning entries will then be forwarded to London for judging in the world-wide competition for judging and placed on public exhibitions in London, Brussels, Stockholm and New York. Purchase prizes will be awarded to the 12 grand finalists, with the overall first prize winner receiving £10,000.

Limkokwing Institute will hold an exhibition entitled *Creativity 98*, showcasing innovative, creative and award-winning students' works on design, architecture, multimedia and communications until Jan 22, 1999, at the Loke Mansion, 273A Jalan Medan Tunku, off Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Kuala Lumpur.

**DANCE** The River Grass Dance Theatre, led by dancer Mew Tsang Tsing, is conducting classes in several forms of dance including Contemporary, Chinese, Children's Creative, Ballroom, 3R Workout, Malay, Indian Classical, Line, Jazz and Special Dance Training, at its premises in Petaling Jaya. Details and enquiries: 03-777-8706/016-221 0562.

Bharat Dance Centre is holding registration for its Indian Classical Dance classes to start next month. Details: 03-350 3410.

**DRAMA** Helen O'Grady Children's Drama Academy is conducting drama classes for children aged five to 16 in Taman Tun Dr Ismail and Bangsar. Details: 03-716 9558.

### Sundiary

If you have an arts-related event and want it to be listed in this column, write to:

Sundiary c/o Sunday Star Publications (M) Bhd 13 Jalan 13/6 46200 Petaling Jaya



**ART** Around *The Body*, an exhibition featuring the works of Ais Mohammad, Harris Ribut, Sivarajah Natarajan (above), Yau Bee Ling and Anurendra Jegadeva, will be on display at Surra House, Titivangsa. Details: 03-421 1092.

Galeri Petronas is hosting an exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art entitled *Utopia: Ancient Cultures/New Forms* until Jan 14, 1999. The exhibition will consist of works from the Holmes a Court Collection and the Gallery of Western Australia. Among the works displayed are those by artist Emily Kange Kngwarreye.

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## Contest to commemorate the millennium

THE Winsor & Newton brand of art materials is staging a world-wide painting competition to commemorate the millennium. The theme for the competition is *My Country in the year 2000*.

Artists are free to interpret this theme in a way which suits their specific painting technique, be it landscape, seascape, abstract, still life or figurative.

The closing date for entries has been extended to Jan 30, 1999, due to the poor response

from the artists fraternity.

Another clarification as to the rules has been made: while the organisers originally specified that entries must be submitted in the form of slides, the panel of judges, led by prominent artist and academic Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal, have indicated that they would prefer the original art works to be submitted.

The competition offers some impressive prizes. All participating countries will award five top

winning entries £300 worth of Winsor & Newton art material per winner. These five winning entries will then be forwarded to London for judging in the world-wide competition for judging and placed on public exhibitions in London, Brussels, Stockholm and New York.

Second prize is £5,000 while third place is £2,500. The remaining nine runners-up will win £1,000 each. The winning entries will be published in a special edition Millennium Winsor & Newton calendar. Entry forms and a complete list of the rules are available at Nanyang Art Supplies, Jalan Petaling, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Jalan Pahang; & WS Art & Frames Centre, Jalan Dang Wangi. Details: 03-238 7066.