

PREPARING TEENS FOR INDEPENDENCE

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NATIONAL MUSEUM TURNS 50

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Mum and heritage inspire Chef Audra Morrice

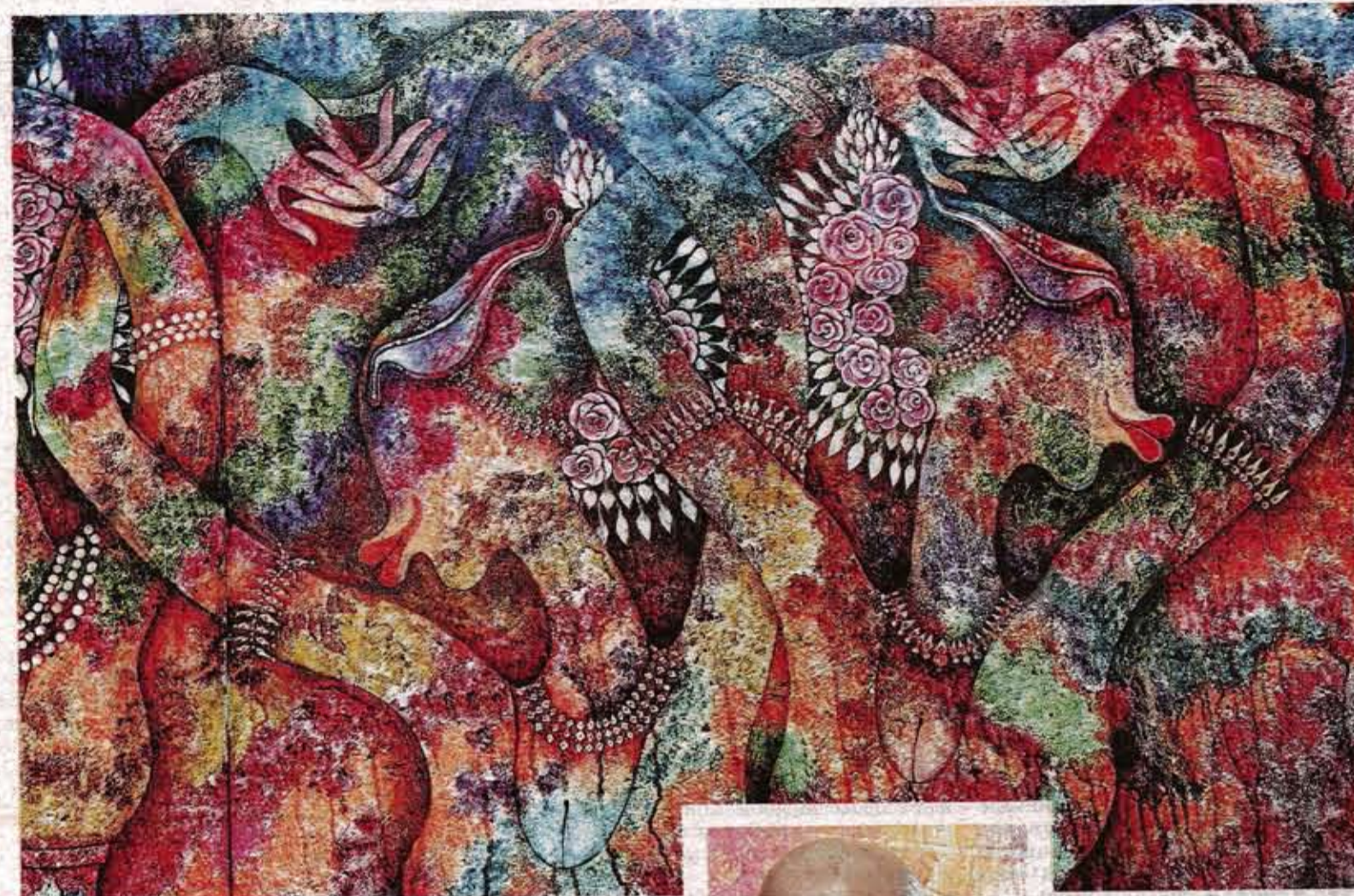
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Eternal love, unyielding hope

Painter Syed Thajudeen unfurls his lively and colourful works pages 8 & 9

Yearning and waiting in love



Springmood I, 2008.

As painter Syed Thajudeen turns 70, Sarah NH Vogeler takes a look at his works which depicts the turmoil of human emotions and desires

AN invitation to a Hari Raya open house by a prominent collector was one I accepted gladly. I had never been to the house and was curious about what works adorn its walls.

I was not disappointed. At the expansive ingress was a Syed Thajudeen painting, Maaf Zahir Dan Batin (1994). Forgetting the superb feast, I stood there for a few minutes, taking in at first, the artist's seemingly lawless yet palliative palette, then his elegant lines and how they merged distinctly and piercingly together. I have always deeply admired and wanted to write about Syed's enchanting métier of works.

We met on several occasions in the past decade, Seroja in 2002 and Love And Its Many Splendoured Images in 2004 immediately leapt to mind. The most recent was at an event at Twin Tower's Galeri Petronas, and we promised to stay in touch.

But as Byron lamented, "Time! On whose arbitrary wing the varying hours must flag or fly..." the days passed, until one morning I received a call from Syed, "Shall we have tea?" I quickly said yes.

His paintings, carefully stored in an annex studio, were brought to the living room. He conveyed piece by piece out, aligning each one gingerly, explaining which series they were from. He did not need to do that, for I am familiar with his works, having stared at them for hours to no end at galleries and the National Art Gal-



Longing For Love III, 2005.

lery, now called National Visual Arts Gallery. Listening to an artist elucidating his works however, never fails to quicken the senses.

Syed at that moment was overcome by a strange intensity only he can impart, and I listened to every word, rapt, as if hearing them for the first time.

celebrated temple city of Madurai, and Syed's love for painting was intensified by the myriad temple sculptures he saw growing up. He recalled scribbling batik motifs in his exercise book only to be chastised by his father who wanted his son to be a doctor. Syed acquiesced, and was enrolled in medical school in India.

But his love for painting was overwhelming, "an ecstasy that marks the summit of life, and this ecstasy, this forgetfulness of living, comes to the artist, caught up and out of himself in a sheet of flame." (from The Call Of The Wild by Jack London). After much soul searching, Syed's family relented and he registered at the Madras College Of Arts in 1968, graduating in 1974.

"Our field trips were spectacular. One, which changed me, was a trip to the Ajanta Caves in the Aurangabad district of Maharashtra. I looked at these paintings of Jataka tales and told myself, "These are the kind of figures I want to paint, grand in scale, the characters roaring with life and feeling, the rhapsody of colours rich, strong... alive, even after all this time".

In Madras, Syed was beguiled and much influenced by the works of D.P. Roy Chowdhury and K.C.S. Paniker, two of south India's most prominent artists. His own teachers, Shanmuga Sundram, Anthony Doss, Shanthana Raj, Krishna Rao, Alfonso Doss and Muniswami guided him in methods



Syed Thajudeen

and approaches. His own extensive travels, especially around India brought new wonders into his world, while Europe and America failed to significantly impress.

Syed returned to Malaysia and found employment with Institut Teknologi Mara, now Universiti Teknologi Mara, lecturing part-time. His teaching approach, paying particular emphasis on figure drawings was not met with enthusiasm. His own works, mainly figuratives were deemed too explicit by traditionalists, and Syed quietly left. He then worked for United Asian Bank (now CIMB) for the next 26 years, which in turn gave him the financial stability to follow his passion.

majority of works in Cinta Tercepta eloquently and poetically express love between man and woman. This 'love' can be classified into two main categories: Work depicting union (sambhoga) of the ideal couple, and those expressing 'love' during separation. Here, the heroine's poignant longing to be united with her lover (vipralambha) is emphasised. The theme of love in union is exemplified in works such as The Joy Of Being Together, Couch Of Love, The Embrace and Meeting Of Eyes. These paintings depict the ideal couple, either in embrace or affectionately reveling in each other's presence. The second series and one most prolific, is the portrayal of the lone maiden protagonist (nayika) or heroine waiting for her lover. This is also a favourite subject in traditional Indian paintings. Superbly attired in Malay dresses of baju kurung, kebaya pendek or labuh or baju Kedah, the maidens are also delicately repositioned in their Malay environment and context. One of the most poignant of this series, is Surat Cinta. The heroine, dressed in a superbly embroidered baju kebaya, languorously whose what is assumed to be a love letter. Placed in an arbour of flowers, as if in the midst of spring when love should blossom, our heroine is alone, dejected and suffering from the pangs of separation from her amour whose missive is apparent for all to see.

Love, yearning, waiting — central

themes to many of Syed's paintings. There is an underlying sensual eroticism in every one, and despite the artist's being unmoved by American and European art, the turmoil of human emotions and desires in his works evokes softly of Gustav Klimt's Danae (1902), of divine love, otherworldliness and beauty unparalleled, of Shakespeare's "My love is as a fever, longing still..." of Modigliani's lovely renditions of muse and wife Jeanne Herbert and Picasso's Rose Period paintings. Syed's women resonate haunting voices quietly humming Catullus, eyes in silent reverie as their lithe figures sway gently to music heard by them alone.

Legendary warrior Hang Tuah and his longing for Puteri Gunung Ledang (Princess of Ledang Mountain) is immortalised in Eternal Love (2012), one of Syed's most memorable paintings. The work, he said, was inspired after a series of articles published which debated the existence of the fabled hero of the Malacca Sultanate. For Syed, it was always about the nature of one's soul, the unseen yet palpably painful bond of two in love, and in this milieu, one that is forbidden, doomed, as Rilke wretchedly agonised:

"Break off my arms, I'll take hold of you with my heart as with a hand. Stop my heart, and my brain will



Merdeka, 2007.



Waiting For The Lover.

On The Cover
Merdeka by Syed Thajudeen

start to beat. And if you consume my brain with fire, I'll feel you burn in every drop of my blood." Syed's paintings are alluringly charming, his women forever young, beautiful, spirited and in love — this is the artist's gift for breathing life into each still life, their tinkling laughter carrying on late into the night, seductive sighs of longing fleeing from cerise lips as they stand waiting, and we wait patiently with them as they sing that immortal song.

Syed Thajudeen turned 70 on Aug 23. His retrospective, slated for 2015 in Penang, is one we greatly anticipate.

THE A-LIST COMPILED BY INTAN MAIZURA AHMAD KAMAL

Doodle for Unity
Where: Muzium Seni Asia @ Lingkungan Budi, Universiti Malaysia, Jalan Universiti, KL
When: Sept 2-28, 9am to 5pm
Admission: Free. Details at www.welling-gallery.com. This thematic group exhibition features some of the country's leading contemporary art artists, namely Chen Yen Pheng, Ruzzeqi Harris, Anisa Abdullah, Shahul Jamil, Sean Lean and Justin Lim.

Measuring Love
Where: Wei-Ling Contemporary, G212 & 213A, The Gardens Mall, Mid Valley City, Lingkaran Syed Putra, KL
When: Till Sept 30, 10am to 9pm.
Admission: Free. Details at www.welling-gallery.com. This thematic group exhibition features some of the country's leading contemporary art artists, namely Chen Yen Pheng, Ruzzeqi Harris, Anisa Abdullah, Shahul Jamil, Sean Lean and Justin Lim.

Figurative Trajectories
Where: G13 Gallery, GL13, Ground Floor, Block B, Kelana Square, Jalan SS7/26, Kelana Jaya, Selangor.
When: Daily till Sept 17, 11am to 5pm.
Details at www.g13gallery.com. An exhibition of figurative art in abstract and representational styles as well as other unconventional approaches. Features the works of Chong Kim Chiew, Siund Tan, Yeoh Choo Kuan, Seah Ze Lin, Sun Kang Jye, C.K. Koh and Gan Tee Seng.

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