

# What is this thing called love?

Love is celebrated in all its guises and splendour on the canvases of great artists, writes Sarah NH Vogeler

**T**HE dust has yet to settle on "that" time of the year, where billions were spent on this "lost side of Paradise" — on cards, flowers, chocolates and gifts. In the world of art, the celebration of love is oh, so rich.

From the master of gestures Caravaggio's *The Sacrifice of Isaac* to Francis Bacon's stunningly intense the "screaming Pope", and to the most analytical of Pop artists, Roy Lichtenstein's entrancing *Mirrors* series, themes of love, or attempts at the telling of it, have never been more affecting.

Russian artist Marc Chagall's 1950 *La Mariee* (The Bride) is a spectacular allegory of the world which reveals the painter's philosophies. The artist, enthused by Belarusian folk life and veneration for his own Jewish heritage, places Mariee centre stage.

Illustrating the fusion of reality and the make-believe, the sensual and statuesque Mariee in her self-styled crimson wedding gown, sweeping veil, clutching a hand bouquet, glides blissfully amidst unseen clouds, unaware of the cavernous cerulean sky.

Yet the air shimmers with light, the church bells ringing softly as the beginnings of a smile curve at the edges of her lips, spellbound by the whispered promises of eternities. Stare at the painting for one solid hour, and you'd feel you're marrying Mariee.

Rene Magritte, this virtuoso of mystifying paintings and a "God of Shock" continues to enthrall long after his death in 1967.

As art critic Robert Hughes wryly observed in *Nothing if Not Critical*, "He lived in Brussels not Paris, he



Rene Magritte *The Lovers*.



Latiff Mohidin *Voyage I and II*.

stayed married to the same woman, Georgette Berger, all his life; by the standards of Surrealist bohemia and Surrealist chic, he might as well have been a grocer". But 1928's *The Lovers* is a disquieting reading of estrangement and terror. The two unidentified heads kissing through

their muddled accoutrements is an unnerving portrait of unfulfilled sexual desires, and at the same time, fetishism, of the burning-knifed-murdering kind.

Picasso's muse of his later years — his final love, second wife Jacqueline Roque — was a constant subject of much of his works. Married for two decades, she was the only woman he drew, sketched and painted for 17 of those years. She was extremely private, preferring the solitary existence which Chateau de Vauvenargue in the shades of Mont Sainte-Victoire in Aix en Provence more than amply provided. "You do not cast a shadow over the sun" she said of him. Jacqueline referred to him as God, and after her Monsignor's demise, collapsed into a spiral of self-destruction, into her own version of sati. Sequestered in darkened rooms in grief absolute, she conversed with his photographs, and died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound in 1986.

Picasso's paintings of her were intense love letters; fervent, penetrating, powerful. John Richardson described her in his memoir in *The*

*Sorcerer's Apprentice* as slight and possessing a bronzed complexion; Picasso in 1954 drew her as a quintessential Mediterranean deity, his ethereal odalisque, coquettish Sphinx, Egyptian Goddess — affirmations of his enduring devotion.

Love in its swarm of forms, illuminated in such awe-inspiring ways, and one such love is for our pets.

Ismail Hashim's 1983 *Tidur punya ralit, bom meletup pun tak sedar*, is just perfect. The feline languored on her throne, in this instance a television set, his owner fast asleep on the floor. And that mosquito coil, that alone jolts me back into a past of dotting grandparents in that wooden house on stilts, my Opa's *tepak sireh*, the *pangkin* she took naps on, and odder still, of my cousin Akir gazing raptly at our grandfather's menagerie of ducks.

Cats, such mystical souls behind those luminescent spheres, the philosophical animal of impeccable grace, killer talons and perfect loveliness, whom if you can win over, what better thing is there? In that one photograph, the artist seized delightful-



Marc Chagall *La Mariee*.

ly-indolent long days, the wonderful scent of plain, elementary things.

Latiff Mohidin's 2005 *Voyage I & II* is what ultimately happens to the mind in love; the flights we take inside our heads, a maelstrom of frenetic azure swirls, cobalt snakes, heated twists and sun-bleached streams. Latiff the fearless traveller, fuelled by poets Baudelaire and Rimbaud, these works as a metaphor for yearning, to see, taste, feel, touch, hear everything in ways unimaginable. It's a strange, yet needed lostness. In his own words,

*Kalau kau mahu*

*Ada langit biru yang lain birunya  
Ada awan putih yang lain putihnya  
Ada cara lain merenung purnama  
Matahari ungu di musim kelima  
Pagi yang lain sinarnya  
Malam yang lebih pekat hitamnya*

In Syed Thajudeen's 2001 *The Embrace* and 2004 *The Joy of Being Together*, he cheekily likens to one of his favourite writers, Diderot. In *Sur les femmes* (On Women) — "When one writes about Woman, one must steep one's pen in the colours of the rainbow, and scatter the dust from butterflies' wings on the page. With every movement of one's hand a pearl must fall".

And Syed certainly loves his women; divine effigies with skin of polished copper, deep deep eyes, voluptuous mouths and cat-like limbs, "spirits of the clouds", vulnerable yet possessing a quiet strength — that with a mere flick of an elegant finger, she guts the Universe, tears it in half, and watches, bemused, as it scrambles to stitch itself back together.

Just before the eve of his death in April 1973, Picasso had visited his physician. The artist inquired if the doctor was wed. He wasn't. "You've made a mistake; it's useful. You should." The volatile lover capable of inflicting incredible hurt and love all in a solitary breath glanced at Jacqueline, and then murmured: "My wife, it's marvellous."

Such madness — love; insane like the moon, it is magic which stirs the blood until it cries out. A wondrous thing, the unattainable and inestimably beautiful. It is always about the reaching, of deepest longings, and of coveting lifetimes.



Ismail Hashim's *Tidur punya ralit bom meletup pun tak sedar*.