

The background is a vibrant blue with white, wavy, concentric lines that resemble ripples or topographical contours. In the corners, there are stylized pink faces with large, expressive eyes, each with a small white cloud-like shape near its mouth. A vertical blue line runs down the center of the page, and a horizontal blue line crosses it in the middle. In the top center, there is a small blue icon consisting of three horizontal bars. In the bottom right corner, there is a small blue icon consisting of three vertical bars.

Beyond the Future

The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial
of Contemporary Art

multifaceted artistic manifestations arising from the pluralistic nature of Malaysia's cultural realities.¹

Malaysian artists selected for previous Asia-Pacific Triennial exhibitions in 1987 and 1996 reflected the multicultural dynamic of contemporary Malaysian art and all its tensions. So too do the artists selected for the Third APT – Fatimah Chin Kuan and I-Lann Yee – who add a third dimension to the vibrant art scene so far. The formative experiences of these artists and their work also serve to remind Australian audiences that while there are clearly many parallels in the development of Australia and Malaysia's contemporary art, there are also parallels and points of connection: a shared colonial heritage, deference to Western academies, the influence of the British art education system, and exhibition infrastructure.

To select artists for APT3, the curatorial team was presented with a particular challenge. How best to identify only three artists whose work would convey the complexity of the present dynamic, while grappling with questions relating to racial, ethnic and ethnic identities, sociopolitical realities, personal histories and religious concerns, and the connections between traditional and modern values? How best to take proper account of a situation where recent events have been impacted by globalisation, a decline in the performance economies, and political unrest in the region? The challenge has been drawing on longstanding friendships and networks, and through the iterative selection process which has proved to be an invaluable mechanism. Malaysia/Malaysia connections in the field of contemporary art are strong. Connections have been developing over the past three decades through exchange work initiated by government agencies and institutions: visiting programs, curatorial visits, exhibition exchange and various collaborations in art gallery and art school infrastructures.² The Queensland Art Gallery's experience of collaborating with local curators in the selection of artists has been well received, and has become a major factor in cementing ties, confidence and goodwill in the region.

In the last week of April 1998 the team met with Wairah B. T. Marzuki, Director of the National Art Gallery, Malaysia. The National Art Gallery hosted two days (in May and in June) during which over twenty artists met the curatorial team to present their work for consideration. Artists interviewed were from diverse backgrounds, age groups and training, and included several younger artists whose work will be watched with interest. Visits were made to artists' studios and other galleries. Discussions were held with several artists and curators from previous APTs, with critics and writers, and with the High Commissioner of the Australian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, giving a valuable comprehensive overview of the current art scene.

Following the meeting, team members visited Sarawak Art Museum and were welcomed by the Ministry of Applied and Creative Art at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Consultations and discussions with staff at UNIMAS, the team members gained an overview of developments in Sarawak, particularly in relation to art and new technology. Selected multimedia artists from UNIMAS were invited to participate in the Virtual Triennial and Screen Culture components of the exhibition. Following a follow-up visit to Kuala Lumpur in early June, David Williams conducted further interviews and visits to artists' studios and, with co-curator Neil Manton, finalised the shortlist of recommendations.

The individual approaches and aesthetics of the three artists chosen convey a sense of the current scene borne out of present circumstances while indicating future directions for contemporary art in their area. The selection of these artists addresses the 'Past, Present and the Future' and contributes to a greater understanding of Malaysia's cultural milieu. Their work is not a survey of current practice: it deals with the complexity of reality realised through cross-disciplinary practice, traditional processes

and contemporary as a contemporary artist. Her approach embraces the use of traditional printing blocks which include her specially designed cultural motifs. Although her *batik* and *batik* collages can be interpreted as printed textiles, it is her involvement with the more traditional processes that makes her work unique. The authority of her textiles is derived from a delicate balance between pure abstraction and traditional symbols, colours and geometric shapes and border designs. The scale and strong composition of the work selected for APT3, *Prosperity* 1997/1998, is impressive – verticals are anchored geometrically by the triangular *gunungan* (mountain) shapes and *mandala* configurations. The artist uses contrasting colours integrated with subtle colour gradations to celebrate life cycles, the tree of life and the mystery of the mountains – all symbolic in many parts of Southeast Asia.

Malaysia: A third dimension

Tan Chin Kuan describes his outlook and his inner self as two different qualities. He states that 'the conflict between these two qualities, rational and expressive, evokes confusion and struggle. Under such circumstances, I can only search for quality between the two'.³ The artist works to express this quality through a range of mixed media, painting, sculpture, relief and installation. Critical of the commodification of art in Malaysia, Tan Chin Kuan has described his work as 'experimental and conceptual'. The works are highly emotive, reflecting personal dilemmas of identity and place, and relating to the sociopolitical reality of the country's multicultural, multi-religious society. His recent work contains social commentary – heightened statements about racial inequality, censorship and economic management. *Soul under midnight* 1997 reinforces the artist's sombre and cynical commentary on Malaysian society.

Cross-media and cross-discipline typify the work of Sabah-born I-Lann Yee. She works as a painter, still photographer, film director, art director, and television commercial maker. Through a collaborative process, she also coordinates and stages site-specific community-based projects, designed to engage and challenge audiences. A strong believer in the semiotic and semantic power of popular culture, she targets an urban youth audience. I-Lann Yee explores alternative themes in creating her large-scale works, often utilising commercial advertising production techniques. Her work 'Malaysian vintage' 1997 interrogates and explores what constitutes a 'Malaysian identity' and the tensions bound in this investigation.

The work of each artist offers an insight into how contemporary artists are tackling current complexities of life in Malaysia. They represent three critical views on the range of social, political and cultural conditions surrounding their lives now and, potentially, in the future.

1 Redza Pidadza, preface to *Rupa Malaysia – A Decade of Art 1987 to 1997* (exhibition catalogue), National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 1998.

2 Neil Manton at the Australian High Commission 1986–88 initiated cultural exchange projects, and records that Australian art exhibitions toured Malaysia in 1962 and 1969; Malaysia sent a large art collection to Australia in 1969; and a 1988 Australian cultural delegation report identified art museum, art school and artist networks successfully used by Asialink and others in the 1990s.

3 Tan Chin Kuan, artist statement, 1999.

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respective subjects: Malay, Chinese, and Indian obviously denote the country's major ethnic groupings, while *Alien*, besides being a catch-all metaphor for otherness, foreignness and (by implicit extension) inhumanity, also encompasses those many hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, both legal and illegal, who are part of Malaysia's economic and social landscape.

By using found photographs and illustrations and recontextualising them, Yee multiplies the number of times that this phenomenon of the charged Malaysian gaze comes into play. We are thus presented with several layers of perspective, each with its attendant prejudices and psychological filters: that of the original subject of the photograph, that of the original photographer, that of the artist who manipulates the image and captions it with text, and that of the viewer confronting the finished piece. The demands of each of these four successive instances of seeing ensure that Yee's work is far from didactic: neither a straightforward liberal indictment of racism nor a chauvinistic reinforcement of government-imposed divisions, each piece instead requires that the Malaysian viewers examine their own feelings about identity in order to complete the experience of the work.

Malay, the first in the series, makes this clear. The words 'devil's advocate' caution the viewer against assuming that the artist has any particular axe to grind. This even-handedness is reflected elsewhere. For example, juxtaposing the image of a jaunty, sunglasses-wearing Malay youth with the words 'the wearing of rose coloured glasses' implies the young man finds life terribly easy. This constitutes a critique of the New Economic Policy's aggressive affirmative action, which confers on Malays considerable economic privileges; and yet the rose-coloured duplicate image of that same youth suggests that it is the viewer who imagines the Malay's life to be easy, and that his reality is otherwise. With the subject's eyes unreadable and obscured by the lenses, and his body language defensive, the work as a whole has a tension that befits the political sensitivity of the issue. The 'A 7298275' that appears on the youth's chest is, presumably, his National Registration Identity Card number (or I/C number). Every Malaysian is assigned one by the National Registration Office, and they are an inescapable component of a Malaysian's identity in all his or her dealings with bureaucracy or officialdom – the same officialdom that imposes and maintains distinctions of ethnicity.

The subjects of *Indian* are an ethnic Tamil man and (we can guess) his two sons. Yee repeats the practice of captioning the individuals with their I/C numbers, and further appends the words 'get on with it'. In the Malaysian socio-economic context this may be understood as a (somewhat harsh) directive to the subjects and, by

extension, to the Indian community as a whole, to overcome their history of poverty and marginalisation. Yet when paired with the belligerence in the eyes of the central figure and the self-assuredness in the expression of the figure on the right, the words are perhaps more correctly interpreted as urging other Malaysians to simply get on with life without stopping to process the connotations of the ethnicity of the three men – in other words, to break free of the national mania for categorisation.

The structure of *Chinese* suggests a similar treatment of the theme. Four hand-tinted studio portraits of ethnic Chinese, possibly dating from the 1950s, are provided with I/C numbers and the words 'get over it'. There are a number of reasonable interpretations for this, none of which are mutually exclusive. Malaysian Chinese have historically been (unfairly) accused of having a greater loyalty to their Chinese-ness than to the nation; 'get over it' tells the Chinese to pledge their allegiance wholeheartedly to Malaysia, while simultaneously telling their accusers to relent and to accept. Similarly, while there is considerable resentment within the Chinese community against the economic privileges of the Malays, short of a dramatic political upheaval the only practical approach for the Chinese is to get over it and, as we see in *Indian*, get on with it.

By using an illustration of a childlike and inhuman figure for *Alien*, Yee highlights the unfortunate Malaysian perception of migrant workers as somehow inferior, an attitude most commonly evinced by the government's cavalier treatment of foreign labourers. Below the image is the word 'dollis', arguably a further reference to both depersonalisation and idealisation. This is curiously complemented by the omnipresent I/C number, which suggests that even the most outlandish visitors will be assimilated into the classification and registration schema. But it is the quote from the *New Straits Times*, the government-aligned English-language daily, that most intriguingly rounds off Yee's examination of the racially charged gaze. Paralleling the unreal nature of rose-coloured glasses, as a perfect bookend for the 'Malaysian vintage' Yee gives us 'Alien vessel spotted refuelling off mothership' – in its very absurdity exemplifying the Malaysian way of seeing. What happened? A vessel was seen. What kind of vessel? An alien vessel. The Malaysian, Yee is saying, is obsessed with knowing whose vessel it was. This concern for identity is the set of eyes that follow us around the room; the gaze is our heritage and, like it or not, it will be our legacy.

Huzir Sulaiman

Writer

Above
Alien (from 'Malaysian vintage' series) 1997
Manipulated UWe coated paper print
122 x 122cm
Collection: The artist

Below, left to right
Malay (from 'Malaysian vintage' series) 1997
Manipulated UWe coated paper print
122 x 122cm
Collection: The artist

Indian (from 'Malaysian vintage' series) 1997
Manipulated UWe coated paper print
122 x 122cm



Dorsey

