Beyond the Future
The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art
Malaysian artists selected for previous Asia-Pacific Triennial exhibitions in the 1990s reflected the multicultural dynamics of contemporary Malaysian art. The curatorial team for APT3, Fatimah Chint Kuan and I-Lann Yee, who add a third dimension to the vibrant scene, remind Australian audiences that while there are many parallels and points of connection, the influence of the British education system and exhibition infrastructure have shaped the landscape of contemporary art in Malaysia.

The selection process for APT3 was driven by a desire to showcase the diversity and complexity of contemporary Malaysian art. The curatorial team aimed to select artists whose work would convey the present dynamic, while grappling with questions related to identity, sociopolitical reality, personal history and the connections between traditional and modern values. The challenge was to find artists whose work would be relevant to the Australian context without compromising their identity.

The Queensland Art Gallery's last decade of collaborative curating has been well received, and has become a major factor in cementing the region's position on the international art scene. The team members visited Sarawak Art Museum and were welcomed by the Sarawak Museum of Art and Creative Art at the University of Malaysia Sarawak. Discussions with local curators and artists helped in understanding the current state of contemporary art in Sarawak, particularly in relation to the evolution of multimedia and screen culture.

Tan Chin Kuan describes his outlook on his inner self as two different qualities. He states that the conflict between these two qualities, rational and emotional, evokes confusion and struggle. Under such circumstances, I can only search for quality between the two. 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 works exhibit social commentary - heightened statements about racial inequality, censorship and economic management.

Cross-media and cross-disciplinary typify the work of Sabah-born I-Lann Yee. She works as a painter, still photographer, film director, artist 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.

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2. Neil Downer 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 museums, art school and artist networks successfully used by Malaysian artists.

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respective subjects: Malay, Chinese, and Indian obviously denote the country’s major ethnic groupings, while Allen, 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 contextualising 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, sunglass-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 belies the political sensitivity of the issue. The ‘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 evidenced by the government’s cavalier treatment of foreign labourers. Below the image is the word ‘dolls’, 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.

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Writer

Above
Alien (from ‘Malaysian vintage’ series) 1997
Manipulated U, We coated paper print
122 x 122cm
Collection: The artist

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

Indian (from ‘Malaysian vintage’ series) 1997
Manipulated U, We coated paper print
122 x 122cm