

# Pictures with a Past Askandar Unglehrt

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# Foreword

*An artist with rapier-sharp perception, a creative craftsman of surprising art pictures and sculptures, a philosopher with the brutality of a sledgehammer upon the inanities of mindless fashions and politics, a poet with the saving grace of making his spectators see beyond the quick and the shallow to the essential beauty of things and ideas - that artist is Askandar Unglehrt.*

*He first caught my attention with his classical collages depicting themes that speak of all times and places and all things that challenge the human spirit. One detects the dichotomy of Leonardo Da Vinci's everlasting pursuits with the passing fancies of Elvis Presley's rock 'n roll age. One always senses the teasing and taunting finger of Askandar writing his satirical message in his paintings and which having written, writes on. His sculptures are no less eccentric and scatological.*

*Now in his latest pursuit, the painting of his unorthodox visions on top of and metamorphosing torn-out magazine pages of printed commercials, Askandar is having a lot of fun (despite the angst of his feelings) producing artworks that are, first of all, veritable visual delights in the strictest art-graphic regime of line, brushstroke, colour and design.*

*Pictures and paintings flow out with unceasing ease and abandon yet each is a work of art albeit in different categories of depth and quality.*

*I get artistically traumatised by his Soutine-style showing of blood and guts and visceral configurations. He changes lipstick-drips into blood-drips and joins male and female models in his magazine cutouts into one thick and sticky mass of paint in ways rather reminiscent of the psychotic art of Francis Bacon. His Kabuki series in strong reds and blacks and yellow-greys show the flashing sword and the ninja perspectives and poses of the feared swordsman. Is Askandar trying to cut and slash away all pretensions of modern society with one-two swordstrokes of his calligraphic bush?*

*It is not all slash and anger. The artist is sardonic at times, allowing magazine models and mannequins to retain only their shapely legs which emerge from maelstroms of riotous colours obscuring their faces, busts, hips and fashions. He leaves a bit of dignity for his victims to cover their shame. At times, he enters the field of eroticism, hinting clearly at virginal and phallic images.*

*But best of all and which I like most, is his series of grey-white paintings presenting wide-open uncluttered fields blanketed by snow or mist, singing of eternity. And somewhere in such a field, a focus, a centre, a humble face or creature or symbol appears, saying, look at me, I am somebody, I am something significant, I am small and alone, but I am important.*

*And that is Askandar's philosophy, his poetry.*      **John Lee Joo-For, A.R.C.A. (London)**



# Pictures with a Past - Askandar Unglehrt

Askandar Unglehrt was born in Weingarten, Germany in 1943. Following several years of French literary studies at the Sorbonne in Paris, he emerged with a post-doctorate in 1972, having focussed on the surrealism of Jean Arp. Shortly after, he gained a post teaching French and German at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, and has remained in Malaysia since.

In the late 1970's, Askandar Unglehrt made his first forays into art. Rejecting the traditions of easel-painting, and without formal training, he has worked with different processes of making art, of manipulating images, using collage on original paintings and images, constructions made of found and collected objects, photomontage, and most recently, painting over magazine print. His working method is integral to the philosophy of his art, which for him is a process of transforming familiar and prosaic images into food for thought, to broaden the scope of our vision. *Pictures with a Past* explores the many ways in which the artist uses the history of images to create fresh perspectives. Through visual paradox and incongruity he opens up questions of cultural identity, moral ambiguity, the glamorisation of modern life, the myth of beauty and power, the objectives of art, life and death, the precariousness of history itself. In other cases, the isolation and repetition or magnification of certain images re-inforce an awareness of a relevant visual object. As an artist, he is armed with a handle on surrealism and its understanding of images as psychological keys, and with a personal history of living with change and difference, as well as peculiarly broad contemporary and historical frames of reference. In the context of Malaysian art, this makes him a little of a magpie-eclectic, but his contribution to the picturing of Malaysia and beyond should not go on unappreciated.

Much of his collage work is concerned with the potential comedy of "East Meets West" and other cultural variations, the improbability of expressing different cultures together. Askandar uses old landscapes of Malaysia (of the sort painted for tourists in the earlier decades of this century) and brings them alive with incongruous characters. So, for example, Europe's beauty queen Mona Lisa comes to the jungle with Leonardo in tow in *She Went out in Search of 1001 Smiles* (1989). The strangeness of this visit immediately distracts us from any preconception of Mona Lisa's beauty or the romantic savagery of the landscape because it is the meeting of the two which is most compelling. Mona Lisa is cut out from her original setting which hangs uncomfortably to the right,

and stares placidly out from under the palms as if posing for a photograph while her maker watches from behind his frame like a ghostly Banquo. Time and distance and civilisations are compressed to create a fascinating and subtly farcical scenario which, through bathos, throws our perspective and forces us to search into the histories suggested by the different images and their "meeting". All sorts of questions spring to mind - "How do we face ideas of civilised beauty (Renaissance) with those of savage beauty (Romanticism)?" "What do European cultural heroes and movements have to do with making art in Malaysia?" "What if Mona Lisa had been engendered in the East?"

Elsewhere, on a more contemporary level, *The Great Malaysian Sunset* (1989) offers a popularist alternative to Redza Piyadasa's seminal deconstruction of *The Great Malaysian Landscape* (1972). Here, a succession of identical postcards of a beach scene are depicted in a cardboard grid, fading with the sun as you read downwards. Anyone familiar with those much-loved ViewMaster toys of the 1970's will recognise this viewing technique from childhood. Anyone would recognise also the grim head of Darth Vader at the bottom issuing his little warning against servitude to the VIDEO. As amusing as this composition may seem, it strikes as much of a chord as the painting it refers back to, it is as strong and as true a critique of the way we and others picture Malaysia.

One of the great dilemmas of Malaysian art has been the nation's reluctance to recognise its visual history, of images recognised and loved or hated by all which can act as interpretative keys and links for the viewer. The way in which Askandar uses the same sort of idyllic Malaysian landscape in his collages is his way of expressing his despair at this apparent lack of imagination and his way of subverting it is to paste on images that are real and familiar. So characters from television and the movies as shown in Malaysia - Superman, Ultraman, King Kong, local 60's movie stars, and also beauty pageants and post-colonial tourists make up the cast against romantic peninsular coasts and jungles. These are all images with their own cultural history but which are also pertinent to the Malaysian experience - imported, appropriated and influential on generations of local youth. More so, perhaps, than our idyllic landscapes. The effect of these rude compositions is to make us laugh at the incongruity of the combination of images that we are familiar with, and also to depress us with their banality.



The collages are a revelatory aspect of Askandar's art. Because the artist is working with cut out and paste on images, made up of different textures and colour qualities, the different images are clearly defined and the viewer can clearly see the working process of the transformation. One can see the pieces coming together, their inconsistency, providing endless readings into each image and their relation to the whole picture. They have a crudeness and spontaneity to match their subject. Working with photomontage, the images are arranged and then photographed as a piece. The result is closer to a finished and whole integrated image, literally glossed over. It is with his photomontages and photo-collages that Askandar's more refined aesthetic sense comes across most clearly. These can be divided into two quite separate groups - photomontages made in and around 1983, which for convenience we may call his "Surreal" photomontages, and the *East Coast Kaleidoscope Series* (1988).

If Askandar's collages are spent debunking melodrama and cliché by probing its funny and ugly side to reveal a busy and bewildering world of displaced familiars, his "Surreal" photomontages mostly tend towards a more delicate sense of irony and the bizarre. I call these works "Surreal" because they follow to some extent the European Surrealist tradition, putting together random objects in a separate internal realm, a dreamlike landscape where the images are deeply codified. Indeed many of the pieces play with images from Surrealist paintings. With one or two exceptions, he veers away from contemporariness and localisation and chooses what may be regarded as more universal or more historic or more literary symbols. These works look closely at the workings of nature and science, ideas of History, ideas of Art, ideas of Beauty, the spiritual and psychological distances in landscape, death and the macabre. Figures from ancient and European history loom in empty landscapes, grand and irrelevant, lost; a pair of hands perform surgery on a pulsing heart at the foot of an ancient steps that lead up into a vanishing point in a map of the stars. Askandar also examines how random images may relate in formal, poetic terms in this landscape of the mind so that, for instance, an earlobe will appear against the length of a sand dune, the folds of the ear echoing the contours of sand, the hollow echoing a concavity in the dune. These photomontages are seldom seen but they show the artist at his most eerie and poetic, probing far, far into the world of remembered images.

In contrast, the *East Coast Kaleidoscope* series is the most well-known of Askandar's work but quite surprising in that context. It derives from a series of photographs taken by the artist in

1978 of Kelantanese *perahu* boats as part of a friend's project on the subject. Ten years later, he decided to create something new out of these photographs and the details of the boats. He began to reproduce details of the photographs and to paste them into symmetrical compositions, a sort of "photo-collage". It is worth quoting the artist's own description of the process at length:

"I started manipulating my original photographs by producing mirror images, a technique which not only gives emphasis to forms and colours through symmetrical repetition, but also confers to the new image a character of harmonious completeness whereby the part becomes the whole and the decorative element is changed into a substance."  
(*East Coast Kaleidoscopes*, Rupa Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 1988)

By isolating and manipulating the decorative work of the *perahu*, he magnifies our awareness of the beauty of this aspect of local aesthetics "which ironically does not seem to enjoy much popular appreciation anymore". While his collages and photo-montages work from a collection of images and the way they relate, here Askandar works and re-works a single image, distorting perspective through multiplication rather than diversification. It is a core phase in an artist's search for beauty in the image, and here, he finds it in an uniquely Malaysian image.

In Askandar's most recent work, where he paints in various media over commercials and text from magazines, the artist takes another approach again to transforming familiar images. The most impulsive of his methods, and thus most immediately expressive, he uses the spontaneity of the brushstroke to subvert and bring alive the object in the original image. Often the image is almost totally obscured, save for a vague outline, an inch of revealed text. These are acts of iconoclasm, destroying the complacent, glossy pictures of semi-clad females, the house and garden, ideal beach holidays, the edified perfect gift advertisements. And from the ashes rises something quite new, sometimes a commentary on the original subject, as in *A Perfect Dress for Evenings* where the faces of the models are pulled ugly by paint but the dress stays intact, but more often than not something altogether different appears. Quite abstract, poetic compositions suddenly swamp the page; landscapes are created from the blank space on the page; objects metamorphose into figures, figures into objects. Lee Joo-For, in his Foreword, has written eloquently and with detail on the striking effect of these works on the viewer. All the images are completely open to interpretation, just as



the artist himself liberally re-interprets the original form of the image. He is careful with his titles for these works, using this verbal ploy to nudge but not push the viewer into re-framing the work in a certain perspective.

These latest of his works go furthest in challenging our formal perception of images. They use the technique of abstraction in a new and questioning way. Even though seeming random, or because of this randomness, they challenge the stasis of pictures in their formal and conceptual aspect. The artist gives the picture a new history, sometimes so detracted from the original that the mind has to work very deeply to grasp the connection. Further than this, the viewer too is invited to bring meaning to what they see. This is neither abstract nor representational art. Like all of Askandar's work, this is a lesson in how to see.

*Beverly Yong*

1

**East Coast Kaleidoscope #42**

1988

Photo-collage

69 x 42 cm

2

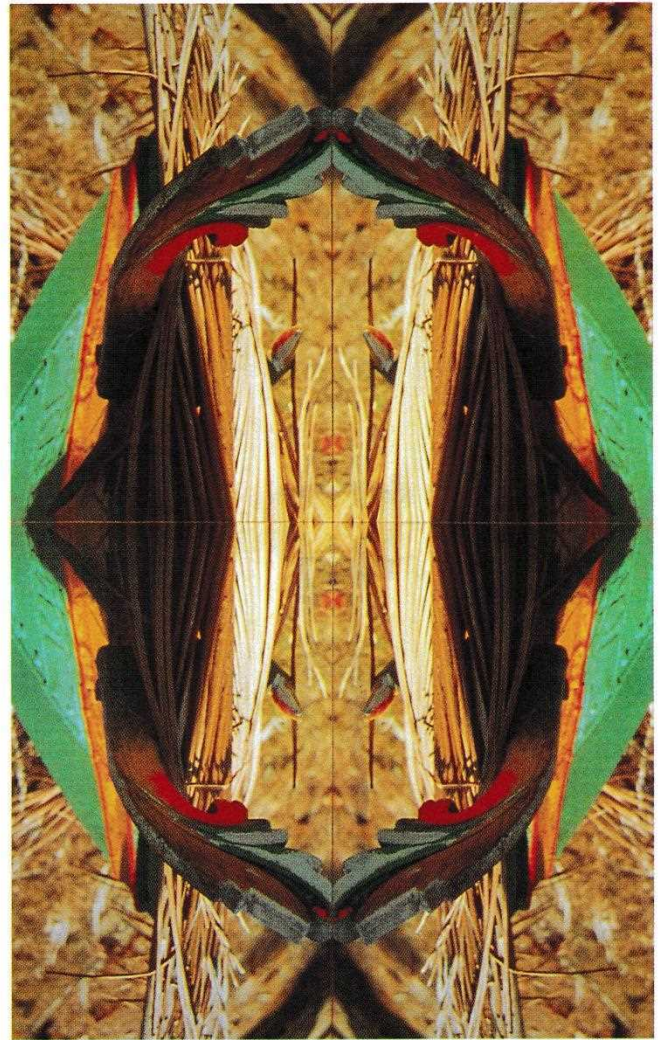
**East Coast Kaleidoscope #2**

1988

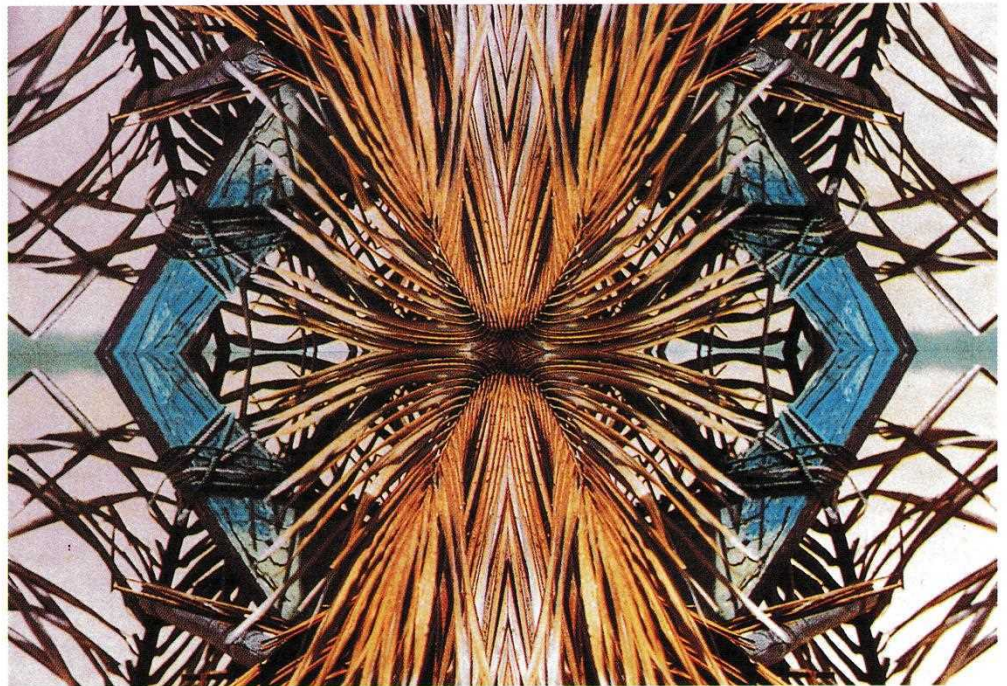
Photo-collage

38 x 54 cm

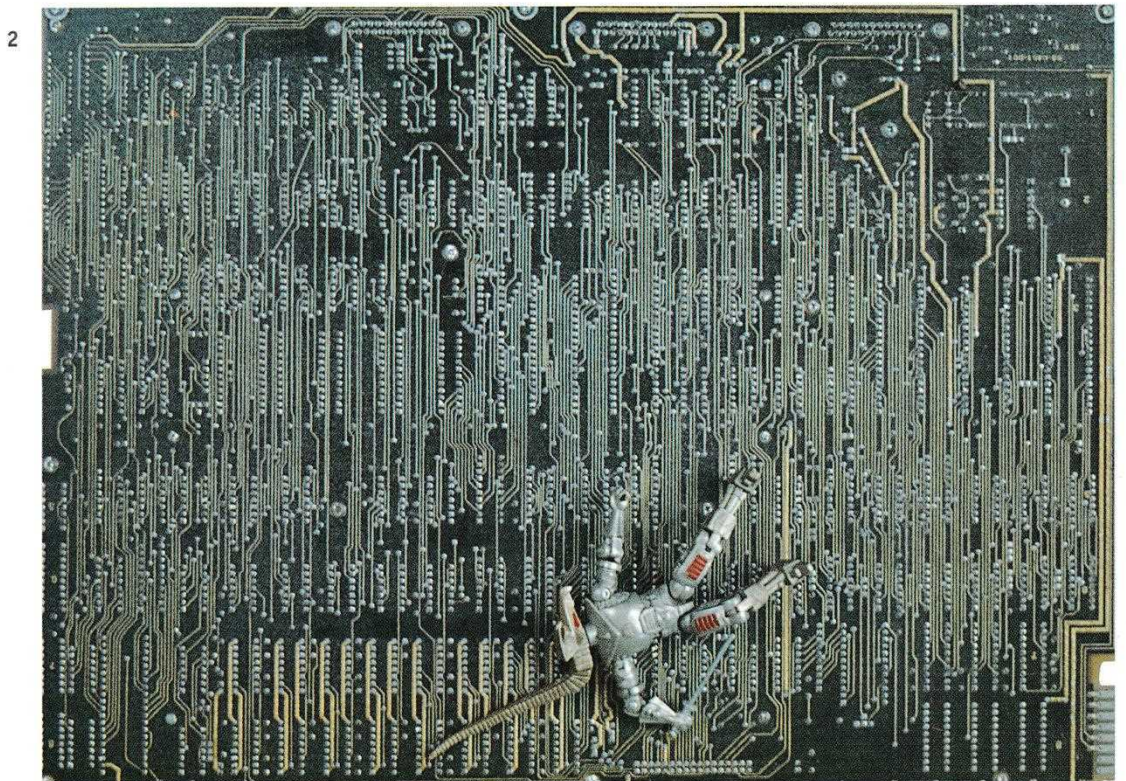
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2



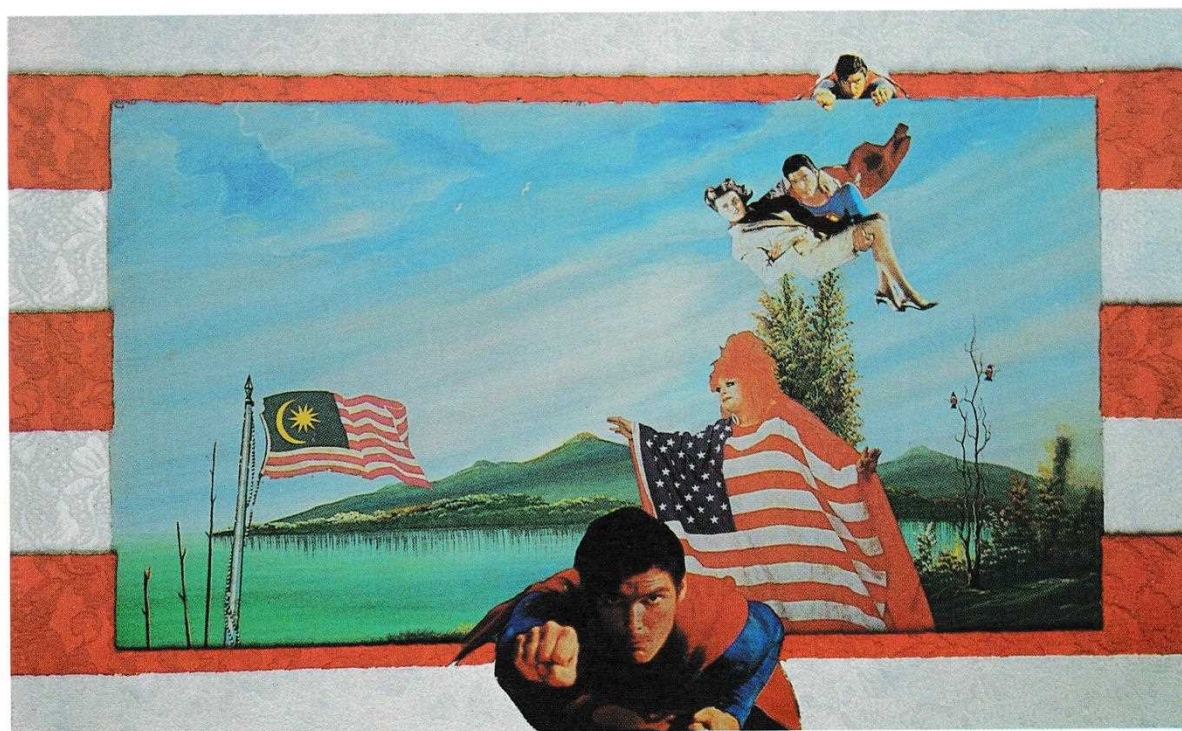








3



4

1  
**Malaysia/World -  
 The Great Rehearsal**  
 1990  
 Collage on anonymous  
 painting  
 46 x 66 cm

2  
**Icarus**  
 1994  
 Construction (mixed media)  
 30 x 40 cm

3  
**You're Not Alone in Malaysia**  
 1990  
 Collage on anonymous  
 painting  
 30 x 50 cm

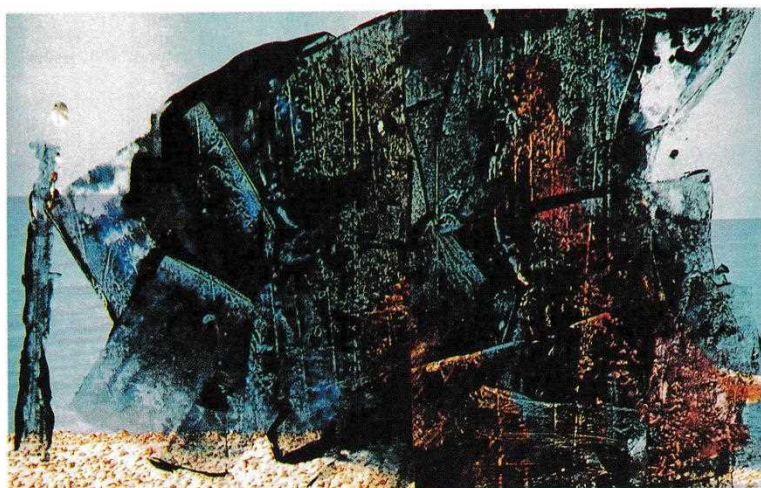
4  
**As I was Passing**  
 1992  
 Collage on anonymous  
 painting  
 46 x 66 cm



1



2



3

1

**Memorial**

1995

Acrylic on magazine print

19 x 30.5 cm

4

**Geomancers Consulting  
Each Other**

1995

Acrylic on magazine print

31 x 23 cm

2

**Aquarius**

1995

Mixed media on magazine print

30 x 40 cm

5

**The Last Confession**

1996

Acrylic on magazine print

28 x 23 cm

3

**The Phantom of Liberty**

1995

Acrylic on magazine print

28 x 42.5 cm

6

**Woman with a Past**

1996

Acrylic on magazine print

30 x 23 cm



7

**The Agony of Ecstasy**

1995

Acrylic on magazine print

25 x 23 cm

8

**Reflections**

1995

Acrylic on magazine print

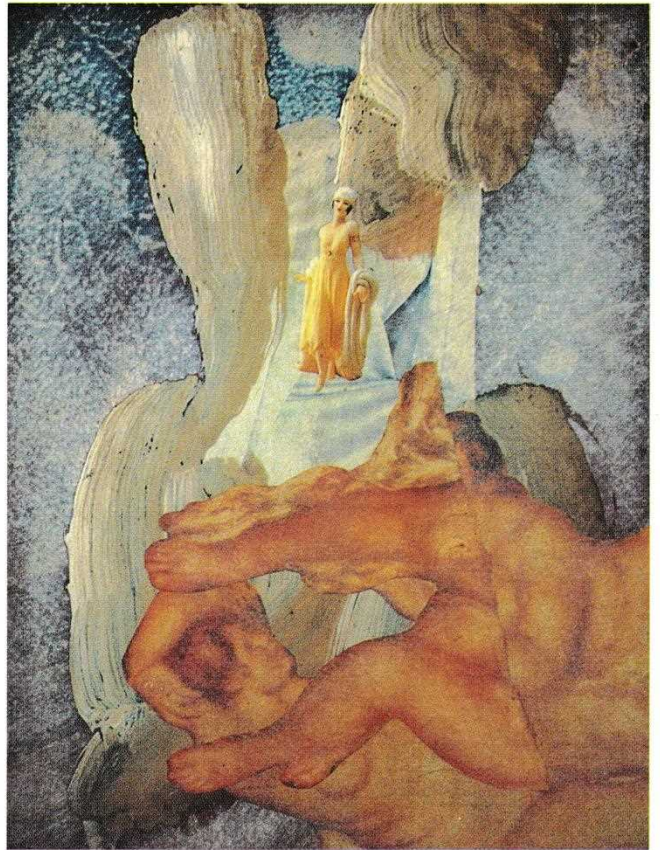
19 x 19 cm



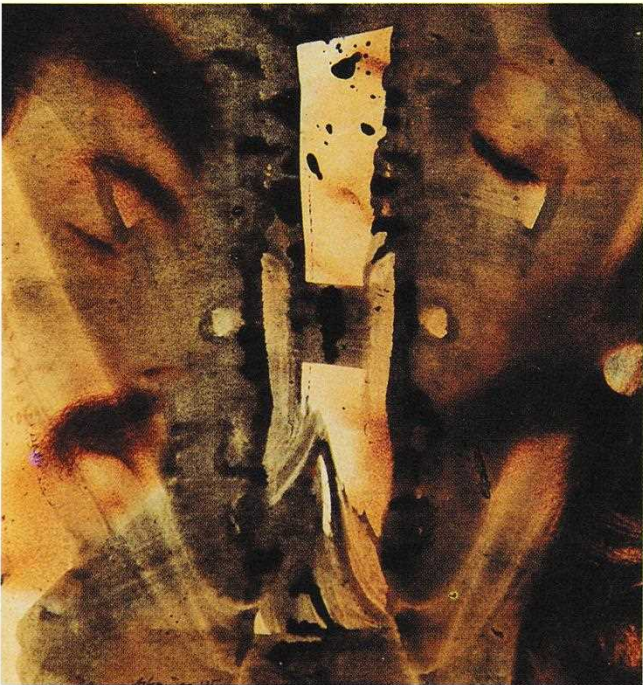
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6



7

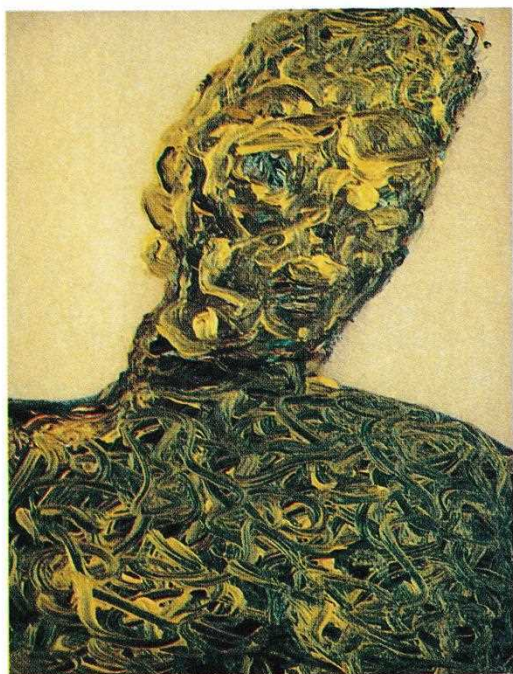


7



8





**The Artist as A Young Man**  
1996  
Acrylic on magazine print  
27 x 21cm

#### Born

1943 Weingarten, West Germany (permanently resident in Malaysia)

#### Education

1966-72 Studies in French Language and Literature, Paris

1972 Sorbonne University, Paris (Ph.D.)

Post-doctorate thesis: "The Poetic Works of Jean Arp in the French Language - a Contribution to the Study of Surrealism"

#### Exhibitions

1984 One-man show, Gallery Wochenblatt, Ravensburg, West Germany

1985 Lehrerseminar Solothurn, Switzerland  
Café am Markt, Bad Waldsee, West Germany  
Gallery Forum, Nürnberg, West Germany

1986 *Open Art Show*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
Retrospective art exhibition, Penang State Museum & Gallery  
*Space*, Group Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1987 *Inspirasi '87*, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang  
*Utara '87*, Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur

1988 Open Show, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*Utara '88*, Penang State Museum and Gallery  
*East Coast Kaleidoscope*, one-man show, Rupa Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
Open art exhibition, Balai Seni Lukis, Kota Bharu, Kelantan

1989 *Open Art Show*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*East Coast Kaleidoscope*, one-man show, USM Off-Centre Gallery, Penang  
*Utara '89*, Menara Maybank, Kuala Lumpur

1990 *Open Art Show*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
Group exhibition at 55, Beach Street, Penang  
*Utara '90*, Penang State Museum and Gallery  
*5th ASEAN International Art Exhibition*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1991 *Artiscamp International*, Penang State Museum and Gallery  
*Inspirasi 90/91*, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang  
*Open Art Show*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*Head and Skulls - the head in human culture*, Muzium Negara, Kuala Lumpur  
*Framing War*, Creative Centre, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1992 *2nd ASEAN Travelling Exhibition of Painting, Photography & Children's Art*, ASEAN countries  
*Bangawan Solo Sekali Sekala - An Unusual Art Exhibition by 9 Artists from Pusat Seni Art Communiti*, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Menara Maybank, Kuala Lumpur

1995 *Paint on Print*, Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

Dr. Askandar Unglehart has been a lecturer in French and German at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang since 1972. He is a self-taught artist.







**She Went Out in Search of 1001 Smiles**

1989

Collage on anonymous painting

69 x 42 cm



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***Southeast Asian Paintings & Works of Art***

This exhibition will be opened by

Antares *aka* Kit Lee, writer,

on 17th October 1997, and will end on 31st October 1997.

Curated by Beverly Yong.