

M A N Y V O I C E S



An Exhibition of Paintings & Drawings by

JOLLY KOH

Sept 22 to Oct 16, 1999 at Valentine Willie Fine Art

ARTISTIC IMPERATIVES

JOLLY KOH

*"Life would be unbearable if we could never escape
to the consolations of great art."* E.H. Gombrich

There are many outstanding Malaysian paintings, but if I have to name only five, these would be the following:

1. "Spirit of Earth, Water and Air" by Patrick Ng Kah Onn,
2. "Kelambu" by Dzukifli Buyong,
3. "Pago-pago Landscape" by Abdul Latiff Mohidin,
4. "Calligraphy Is Elixir of Life" by Chung Chen Sun, and
5. "Payong-payong" by Syed Ahmad Jamal.

The obvious question is: On what grounds have I chosen the above five? The grounds, simply put, are the following:

1. They are very beautiful;
2. Their personal visions are fresh and emotionally-moving; and,
3. They are artistically significant in the context of the history of painting in Malaysia.

Of course, the above grounds for my choices could be put much more eloquently and with much greater elaboration, linking those paintings to the history of Malaysian art. But however elegantly those reasons might be put, they would be rejected or discounted by a school of thought that is currently fashionable. The current fashion is to view art in social and political terms, while the grounds for my choices are aesthetic and artistic. In other words, I'm looking at paintings for their inherent artistic qualities and within their own artistic tradition, in contrast to viewing paintings for their social and political dimensions. Related to this social-political approach to art is a more perverse one, where some artists and art curators see art as a tool for social transformation—where art can make a difference by improving the social and political conditions in the world. As an art writer has recently put it, artists should directly undertake "to force a change in societal values and perceptions". (Redza

Piyadasa, Rupa Malaysia, National Art Gallery catalogue, 1998, p. 34) I believe this imperative is a mistake. Notice that "to force a change in societal values and perceptions" is in fact a moral or social imperative, and not an artistic one. The mistake lies in the confusion between or conflation of morality and art.

At the heart of the social-political world lies morality, and in that area, it is common to discuss the nature of moral imperatives, of which an example might be "Thou shall not steal". Just as morality lies at the heart of the social-political world, artistic matters lie at the heart of the art world. However, while the topic of moral imperative is commonly discussed in moral philosophy, the concept of artistic imperative is rarely if ever discussed in the art world. Yet it is patent that artistic imperatives exist, even if they are assumed or implicit.

Artistic imperatives must arise from certain fundamental data concerning the nature of humans. In other words, artistic imperatives can only be based on the fact that humans have an aesthetic sense, that is, a sense of beauty. Without this foundation, then neither artistic imperatives nor art itself as a distinct human activity makes any sense. The following is a sample of some artistic imperatives:

1. Produce paintings that are beautiful.
2. Produce paintings that are visually exciting.
3. Appreciate and enjoy some works of art.

The above are very general artistic imperatives that parallel general moral imperatives, such as: "Be a moral person", and, to take an earlier example, "To force a change in societal values and perceptions". There are, of course, more specific and context-bound artistic

imperatives, as when an artist, in the process of painting, tells himself, "That red is too strong, so I must reduce its intensity."

Let us now consider moral imperatives, in contrast to artistic imperatives. A moral imperative, such as, "Contribute \$100 to the orphanage", could lead to that charitable action, thereby helping the operation of that orphanage. In other words, moral imperatives lead to action in the world that attempts to alleviate suffering or to prevent it.

Now it is obvious that an artistic imperative is radically different. An artist is not someone who analyses social situations in order to decide which action he should take to alter that situation for the better. An artist is a maker or creator of objects - he's a producer of objects for aesthetic contemplation, wherein that object and its contemplation is the end result of his activity. The outcome of a moral imperative, in contrast, is some action that would make the world a better place morally. Thus, the radical difference between the two kinds of imperatives is in the totally different kinds of outcomes that they seek to achieve. Thus also, the criteria for the evaluation of the success of those two domains are also different in kind.

A further difference between the two kinds of imperatives can be seen if one considers that the feelings and skills that an artist needs to produce his art are different from the kinds of feelings and skills that a moral person needs in order to take moral action to change the world. Take an obvious example - the moral imperative "Save that drowning man", requires a certain kind of feeling and skill to implement. In contrast, a parallel artistic imperative in the same situation would be: "Paint a picture of that drowning man" and to implement that artistic imperative requires a totally different set of feelings and skills. Furthermore, as explained earlier, the outcomes of those two actions are radically different: one of a drowning man being saved, and the other, a painting of a drowning man. (Of course, in this example, the moral imperative should override the aesthetic imperative. This example should help to clarify the issue of moral values versus

artistic values, as to when one should override the other.) Thus, the difference between the two kinds of imperatives could not be more obvious, and a confusion or a conflation of the two only leads to perversion or corruption of both.

No one would deny that much art embodies values, including moral values. Neither would I want to deny that the moral content in art enriches our encounter with it. It is obviously gratifying to have one's values manifested and reaffirmed in a work of art, but this is a far cry from that work of art having the ability to change the world. The social activist-critic demands something different from art - they see art as having the function of challenging social evils, where art, as an instrument of social change, should "force a change in societal values and perception".

There is also the artist or art critic who, even though he may not wish to change the world, would at least use art as an instrument to stir the viewer into some kind of moral outrage. One such example is when a celebrated American artist, Jenny Holzer, said of her art: "My hope was that the outrage would draw attention to the subject and that that sort of visceral revulsion could make people *feel* this wrong as opposed to just knowing news reports. I was trying to make people absolutely *feel* the crime as opposed to just duly note it." (The Australian, March, 1998) If this is the function of art, that is, to stir the viewer's moral outrage, then what it could achieve pales beside the emotional effect of real-life tragedies, or even a propaganda film. In such an encounter with art as desired by Jenny Holzer, one may well ask: "What has happened to the aesthetic experience?" To put it differently, in an art object where beauty is not a consideration, the question arises: "I got the message, but where is the music?"

A cursory glance at any current British or American Modern Art journal will reveal what most artists are producing today. Modern "official" art today consists of vacuous assemblages that pose as something profound and puerile objects that are designed to shock. Contemporary modern art is apparently about rebelliousness and iconoclasm with social-political intent. I have no wish to disparage

iconoclasm in art. It has its place, but in art, it is artistic iconoclasm of Impressionism, Cubism and Surrealism. These rebellions pertain to visual forms, and they provide extensions of artistic expressions without any intent to change the social-political world. It might be noted in passing that most art is not iconoclastic in nature.

Of course, those three modern art movements may also be expressions of the social-political turbulence of their times, but those social-political conditions are **causal** factors, and they are not the **effects** that works of art have in the social-political world. The primary significance and impact of those three art movements is artistic, and not social-political. They have no pretensions of attempting to promote a more moral world. In other words, the iconoclastic aspects of the art of Monet and Picasso represent artistic imperatives, and not moral imperatives.

Let us now return to the moral imperative mentioned earlier, namely, "to force a change in societal values and perceptions". The question might now be raised: "What is the equivalent artistic imperative?" Here is my proposal: rather than the artist attempting to act as a moral agent in this world, thereby assuming a different role, the artist should make this world a better place by filling it with as many beautiful objects as are within his power to produce, for the artistic contemplation and enjoyment by others. In support of this artistic imperative, art critics and curators can also contribute towards the enjoyment and understanding of art with artistic criticism, instead of acting as social-political pundits.

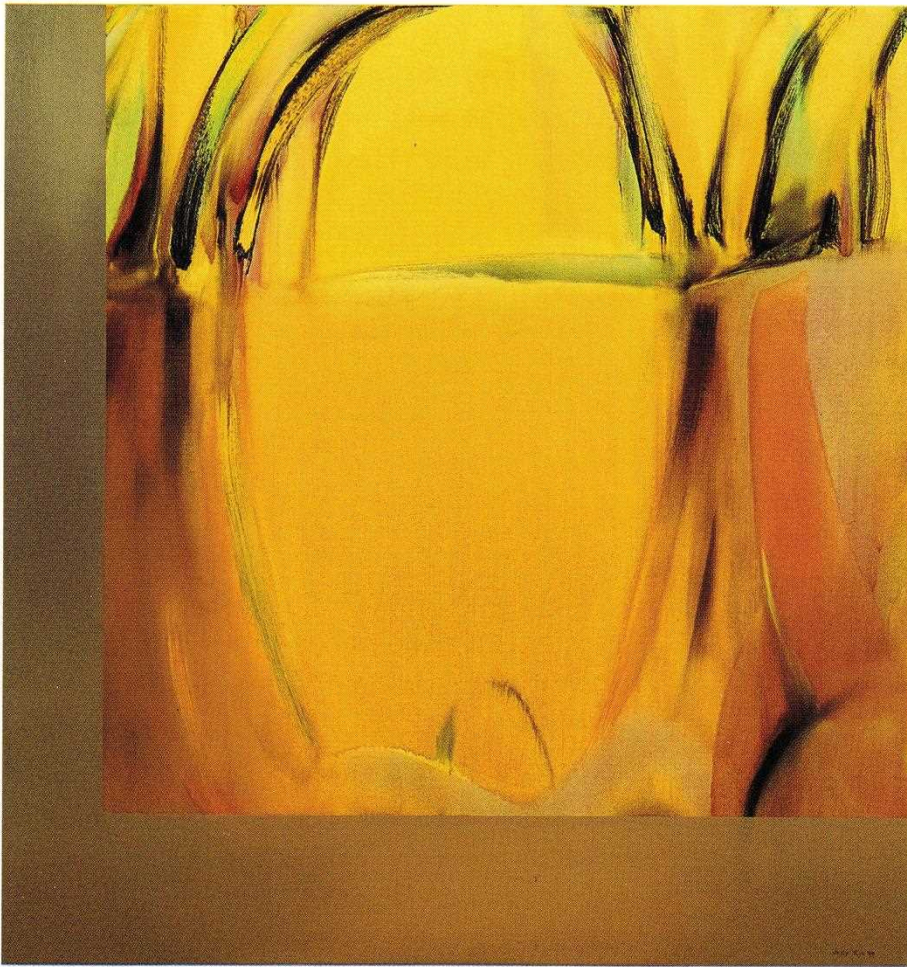
From all the preceding discussion, it is clear that art and morality are distinct, and ipso facto, artistic imperatives are totally different from moral-social imperatives. It is also clear that much of "official" or *avant garde* art has some social or moral imperatives as its *raison d'être*. Why this is the case with much of "official" contemporary art is an interesting question. Perhaps those of us who are interested in art and beauty are in a small minority, and far more of us are interested instead in more practical matters, such as the desire to bring about greater social justice. Perhaps it is more elevating to take a moral

posture and to occupy the high moral ground than to be a mere artist or an art lover. Or perhaps, it is just a good career move for some art officials to advocate social justice, using art as a mere instrument. Or perhaps it is just philistinism. Whatever it might be, morality need not override all the time. In addition to morality, there also exists artistic beauty in this world.

One unfortunate consequence of letting morality overrule all the time would be, for example, that one could never enjoy the great art of feudal times, because those works would then only symbolise human misery and oppression by the nobles. Along the same narrow path, neither Buddhists nor Hindus would be able to enjoy Renaissance art, which is all about Christianity. Or, consider another related example, that of a racist who patronises mostly the artworks produced by artists of his own race - a practice that is quite immoral. This particular example shows that when some other non-artistic value is allowed to override artistic value, immorality could result.

This is the vicious implication for those who advocate social/political imperatives in an artistic context, of which they are not aware. When one introduces the factor of power into the scenario, then whoever holds the power can then dictate the kind of social/political imperatives that they favour to override the artistic ones. Thus we saw in various totalitarian states, where the philistines decided upon patronage as well as the artistic content of their arts. Or yet another example, racists in power could decide on patronage based on racist imperatives, and favour works which reflect racist content.

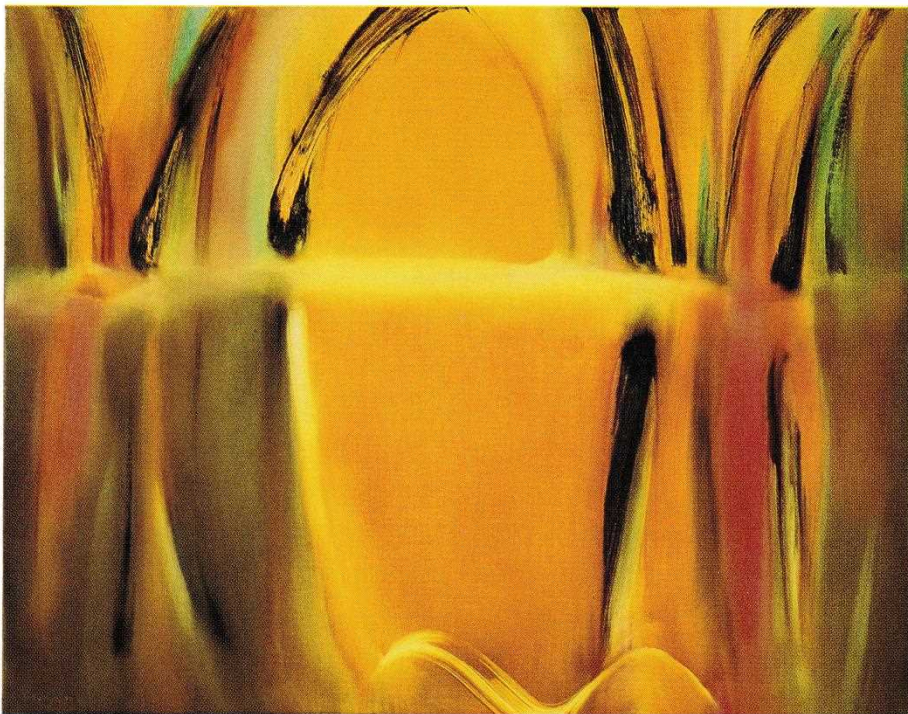
An enlightened position to adopt in the arts is to allow artistic imperatives and criteria to be paramount. In life, one should take the opportunity to enjoy art for its intrinsic beauty, and its celebration of human values. To deny this artistic enjoyment that enriches our lives, and to focus solely on matters social and political exclusively, is to deny an important part of our humanity, namely, our aesthetic nature.



Afternoon Reflection

Oil on canvas

107 cm x 101 cm



Morning Reflection

Oil on canvas

71 cm x 91 cm



Across the Waters

Oil on canvas

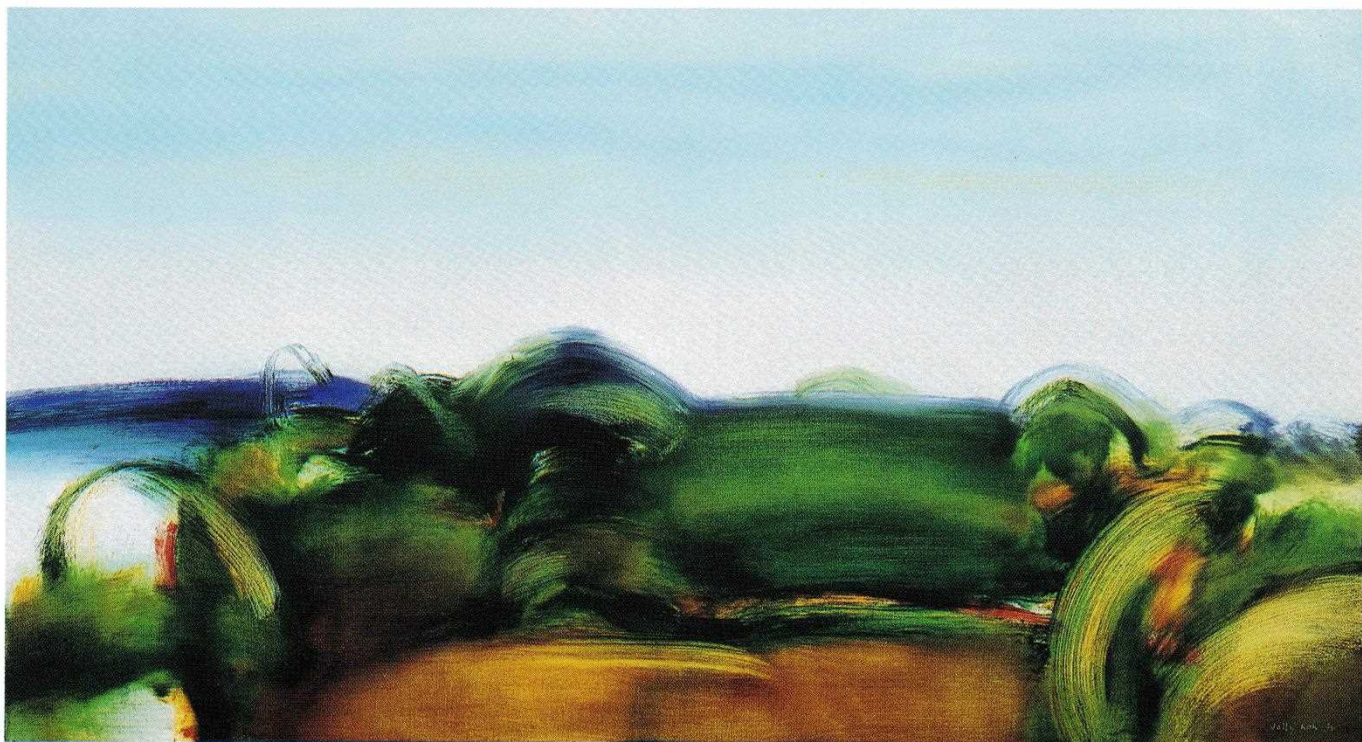
112 cm x 56 cm



Morning Light

Oil on canvas

112 cm x 56 cm



Road to Malacca

Oil on canvas

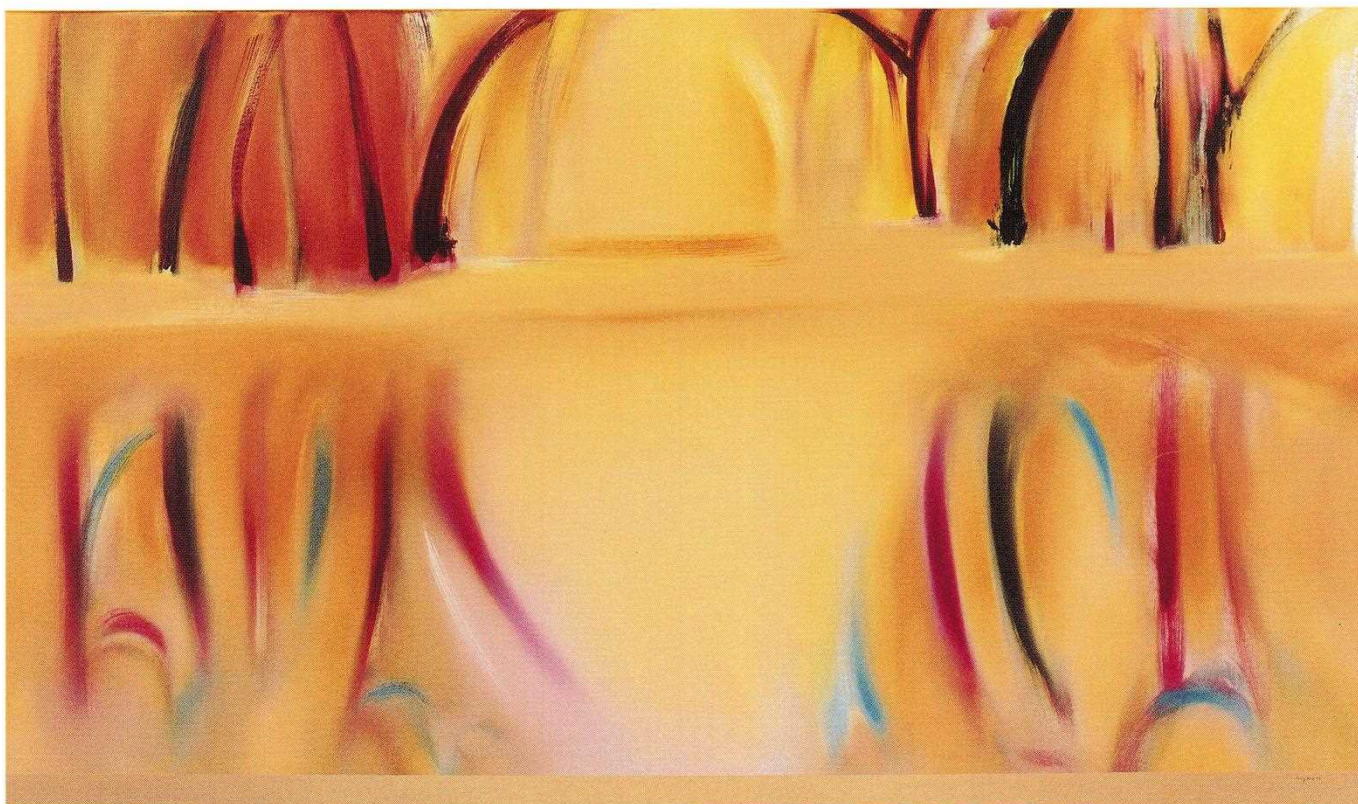
66 cm x 122 cm



Waterlilies III

Oil on canvas

55 cm x 100 cm



Reflections

Oil on canvas

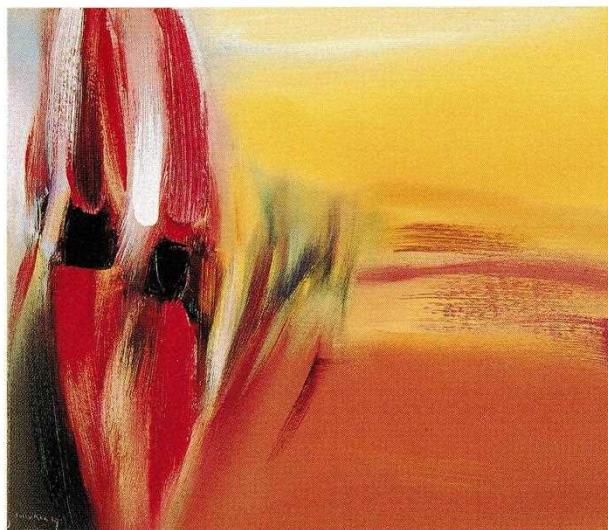
107 cm x 183 cm



Sturt's Desert Pea I

Oil on canvas

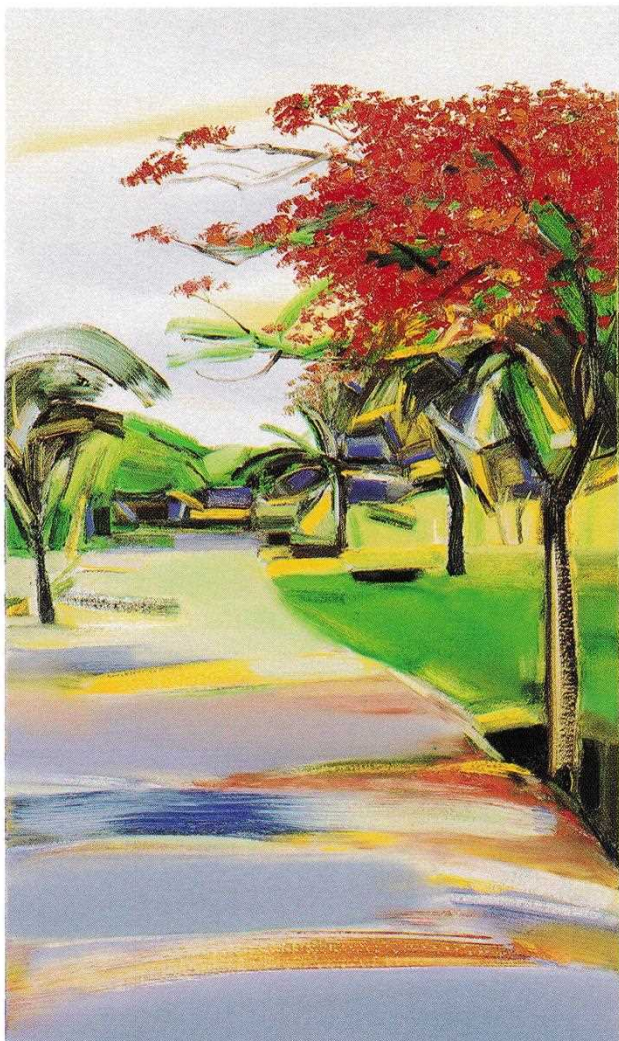
30 cm x 35 cm



Sturt's Desert Pea II

Oil on canvas

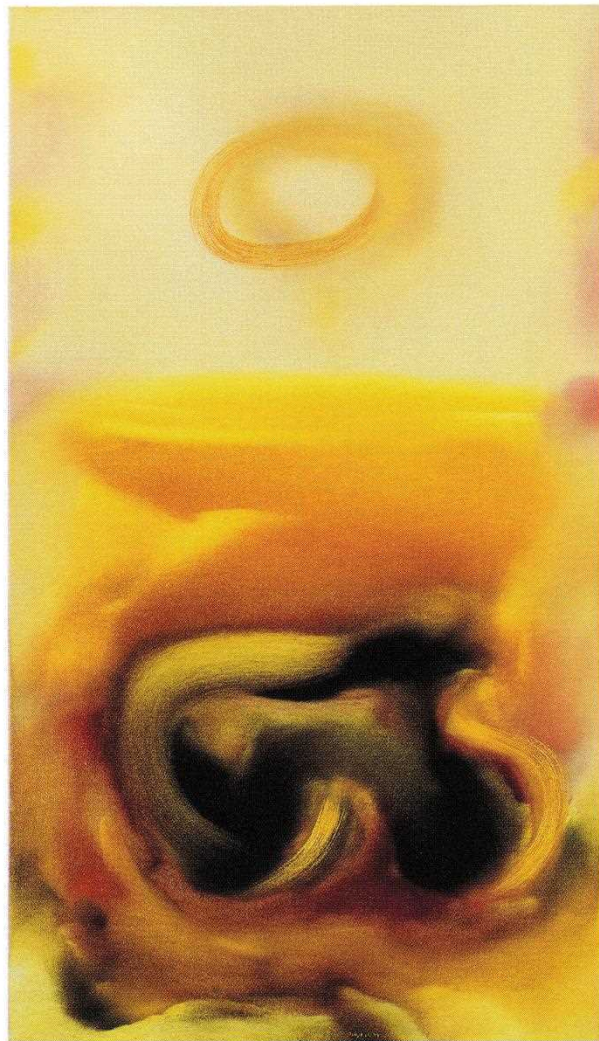
30 cm x 35 cm



Flame of the Forest II

Oil on canvas

97 cm x 56 cm



Burong Emas

Oil on canvas

97 cm x 56 cm



Spirit Stone
Oil on canvas
100 cm x 55 cm



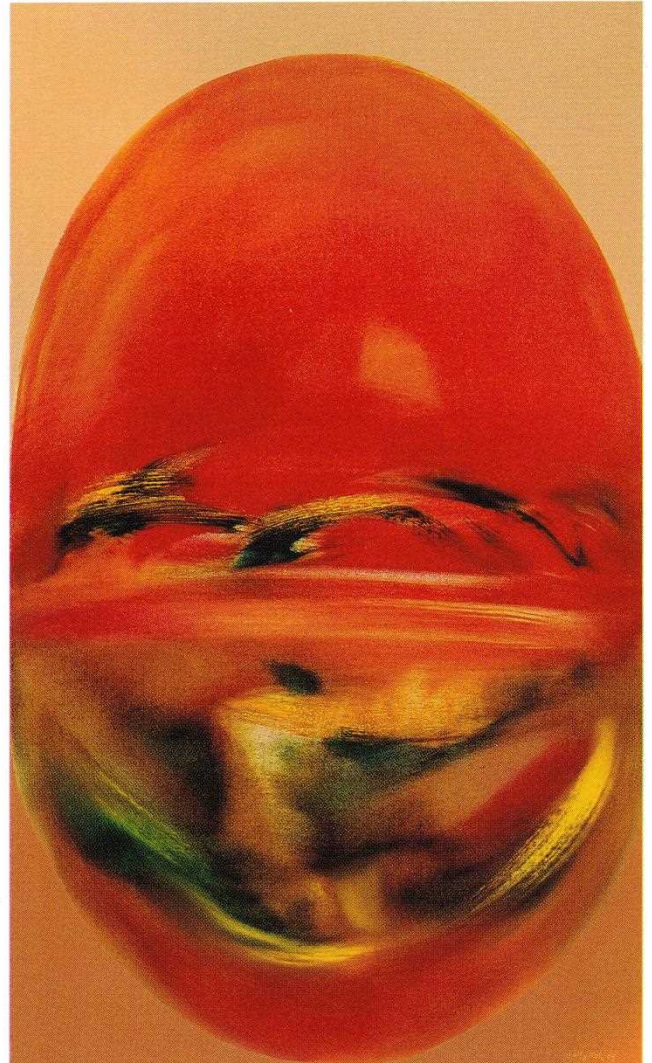
Lines to a Friend
Mixed media on paper
38 cm x 55 cm



Linga Landscape I

Oil on canvas

122 cm x 66 cm



Linga Landscape II

Oil on canvas

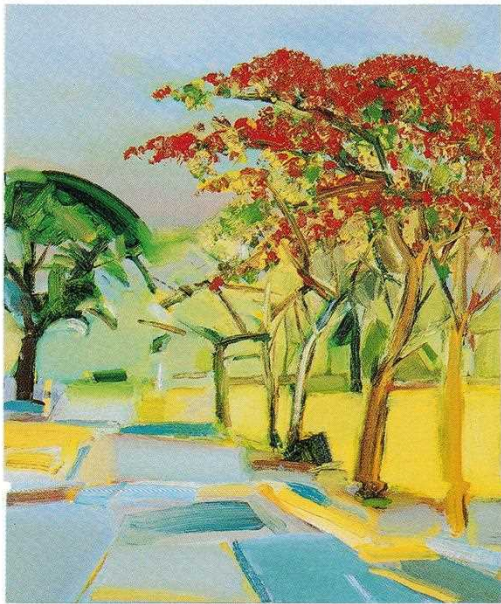
76 cm x 45.5 cm

Touch of Gold
Mixed media on paper
50.5 cm x 59 cm



Cleaning
Mixed media on paper
62.5 cm x 50.5 cm





Flame of the Forest

Oil on canvas
61 cm x 50 cm



Waterlilies I

Oil on canvas
61 cm x 50 cm

JOLLY KOH

Curriculum Vitae

- 1962 N.D.D. (National Diploma in Design),
Hornsey College of Art, London
- 1963 A.T.C. (Art Teachers Certificate), London University
- 1973 M.Sc. (Master of Science), Indiana University
- 1975 Ed. D. (Doctor of Education), Indiana University

One-Man Exhibitions

- 1957 British Council, Kuala Lumpur
- 1958 Odeon, Singapore
- 1967 Samat Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
- 1969 *Samat Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur*
- 1971 Indiana University, USA
- 1978 Raya Gallery, Melbourne
- 1980 Rya Gallery, Melbourne
- 1982 Raya Gallery, Melbourne
- 1985 Raya Gallery, Melbourne
- 1987 Raya Gallery, Melbourne
- 1989 Raya Gallery, Melbourne
- 1992 GaleriWan, Kuala Lumpur
- 1994 GaleriWan, Kuala Lumpur
- 1996 Shenn's Fine Art, Singapore
- 1997 NN Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

Representing Malaysia In

- 1967 - 68 Malaysia Art Touring, Europe
- 1969 X Biennial in Sao Paulo, Brazil
- 1974 Asean Mobile Exhibition, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore,
Jakarta, Manila, Bangkok
- 1975 Third Indian Triennale, New Delhi
- 1978 Fourth Indian Triennale, New Delhi
- 1978 Malaysian Art 65-78, Commonwealth Institute London
- 1981 Fifth Indian Triennale, New Delhi
- 1995 Tresor '95 Suntec City, Singapore

Public Collections

- Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- National Art Gallery, Malaysia
- National Art Gallery, Victoria, Australia
- Bank Negara, Malaysia
- Oriental Bank, Malaysia
- J.D. Rockefeller III Collection, New York
- ESSO, Malaysia
- Telecom, Australia
- Footscray Institute of Technology, Melbourne
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia
- The Kasama Nichido Museum of Art, Japan
- RHB Bank, Malaysia
- Public Bank, Malaysia

On the cover
Sung Landscape
Oil on canvas
107 cm x 101 cm



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