

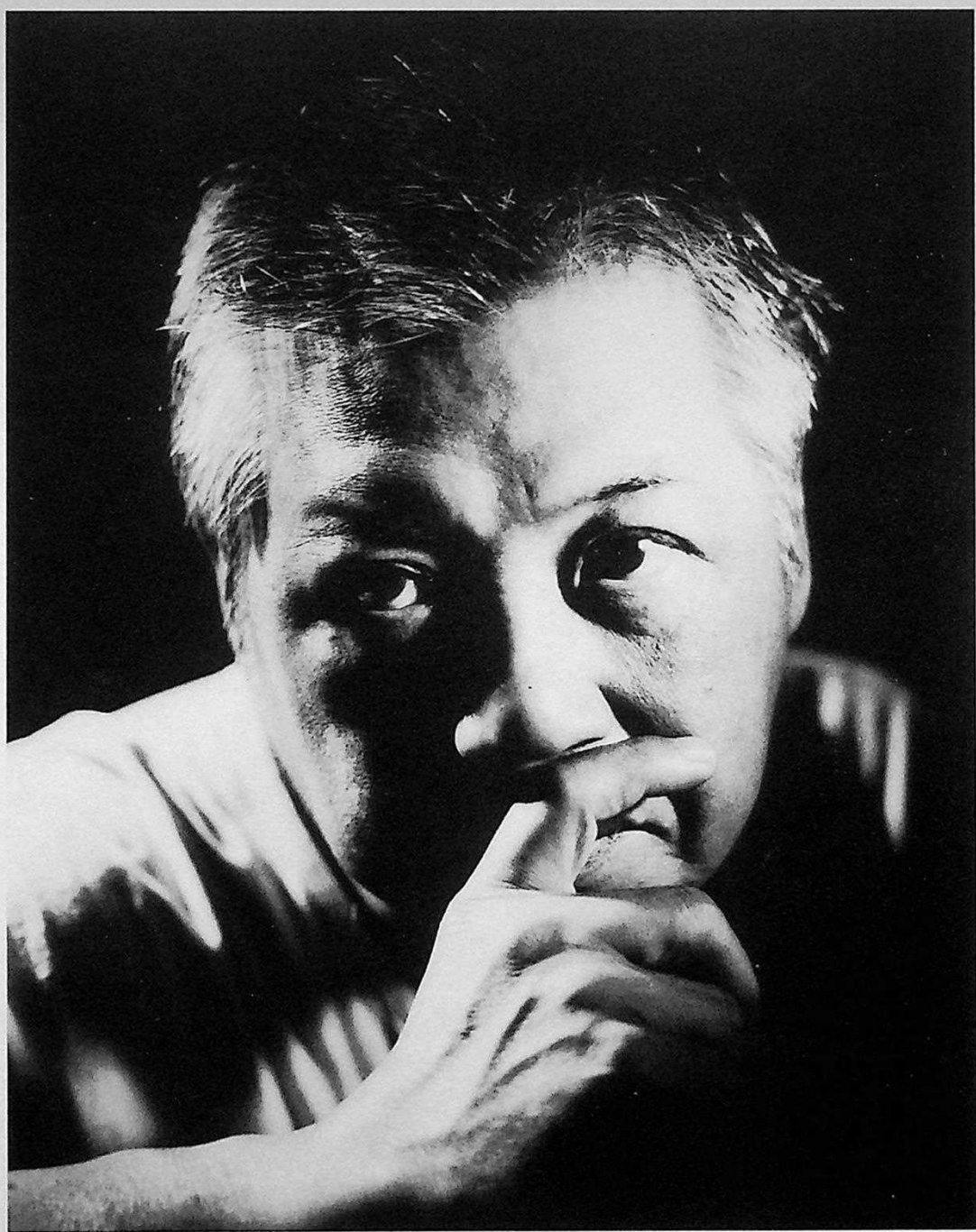


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KOK YEW PUAH: A TRIBUTE







I feel very privileged to have been invited to write this Foreword for the exhibition catalogue marking the late Mr. Kok Yew Puah's posthumous art exhibition, which is being organised by Valentine Willie Fine Art this December 2004. George Puah, as he was affectionately known to his close associates, was a very dear and personal friend of mine for nearly thirty years. I first met and befriended him after his return from his artistic studies in Melbourne, Australia, in early 1970. His initial appearance on the local art scene, during the early 1970s, was as an accomplished and innovative print-maker. His large, abstract, colourful, hard-edged, silk-screened prints impressed most of us at that time. He was clearly a young artist full of promise.

By the late 1970s, George Puah had disappeared from the active Malaysian art scene. He had become a businessman and had started to oversee a family-run factory for the production of tomato and chilli sauces. He stopped all artistic activities for nearly ten years but we would meet occasionally to catch up on our meaningful friendship. He would often tell me of his deep desire to be an artist again. By the mid-1980s, he had, happily, returned to producing art works once again, in the midst of his heavy business responsibilities. He had begun to turn his attention to painting and was now producing works in acrylic and watercolour. His new interest was in portraiture, figurative compositions and commentaries on the changing environment. Much of his environmental subject matter was centred around the Klang area, where he had been born and bred and lived for most of his life.

By the early 1990s, he had sold off his sauce factory and had decided to become a full-time painter. He was to remain a prolific painter until his untimely death in 1999, at the age of 52. He was able, at the time of his death, to leave behind a very respectable body of art works. What impresses me most about his artistic vision was his ability to comprehend and appreciate the rich, multicultural flavours of the complex Malaysian reality. This artistic vision of his certainly reflected the man himself. He was a humble, unassuming and always helpful man who was without any racial prejudices whatsoever and who counted among his closest friends, artists and otherwise, the diverse peoples drawn from this country's pluralistic, socio-cultural matrix. The best works that George Puah has left behind were indeed the products of a genuine artistic search for cultural context and meanings.

George Puah Kok Yew was a significant Malaysian artist whom I genuinely admired and respected. I hope that this posthumous exhibition of his will prove to be a highly successful one.

**Redza Piyadasa**

*Associate Professor of Art History  
The Cultural Centre, University of Malaya*



In 1993, Redza Piyadasa heralded "the re-emergence of a serious artist within the local art scene" in the catalogue to Kok Yew Puah's second one-man exhibition.

Kok Yew Puah's career was short-lived, encompassing at most fifteen years of work. He held four solo shows in his lifetime - his first in Brisbane in 1972, his second after his return from his studies to Malaysia at Samat Gallery in 1973, then much later in 1993 at the Creative Centre of the National Art Gallery and finally here at this gallery in 1997. He passed away at the age of 52, before he had had the time or the distance to take measure of his achievements.

This exhibition hopes in its humble way to impart something of Kok Yew Puah's legacy. Certainly this is the first time that such a number of his works, and from different stages in his life, drawn largely from his family's collection, will be considered together. This act of presenting the artist, and in some ways also his life, through his work, is a small act of "tribute". However, it may also be fair to describe Kok Yew Puah's work as an artist as a far greater and sustained act of tribute - to the place where he lived, to the people he loved, to the country in which he was born; to a reality which held him in awe.

Kok Yew Puah's most important contribution to art in this country, to art in this region, and as an artist working in our society, has been to find an accurate and powerful expression for the visual reality in which we live. He forged a particular brand of realism, in the last ten years of his work, with which he forged some of the most intelligent and authentic images of modern Malaysian life to date.

This authenticity was hard won, and born out of one artist's determination to find a way to relate his experience of life through his painting. The visual reality of life in our country is extremely difficult to render. Few artists have attempted this with any success. Our surrounding landscape changes at an alarming speed. We hold no preconceived ideas of how our environment should look. We seldom look at ourselves. Kok Yew Puah chose to confront and come to terms with his reality. It was, I think, his very rootedness, and his candid and unflinching gaze, both at himself and all that surrounded him, that proved the foundation of his success.

Kok Yew Puah was born in Klang in 1947, and spent almost all his years there. His family were leading suppliers of provisions in the area. He decided at an early stage that he wanted to become an artist. In 1966, he went to study at the Victorian College of Arts in Melbourne. In his first solo upon returning home, he exhibited large silk-screened prints which were clearly influenced by the work of his former teacher Alun Leach-Jones. However, it was only in the mid-1980s, after ten years in the foodstuffs business that he began to develop his artistic vision in earnest.

Leaving printmaking aside, he started to work in watercolour and acrylic, and in the figurative mode, although his interest in hard-edge effects, and especially flatness, from his printmaking experience, would continue to play a part in his approach. At a time when gestural abstraction was enjoying great popularity among local artists, Kok Yew Puah was singularly pushing the possibilities of figurative art. In art circles he straddled two generations, on the one hand fraternising with "post-modern"

figures like Redza Piyadasa and the late Joseph Tan, and on the other encouraging younger Mandarin-educated artists from Klang, working in a realist vein. His work begins with a post-modern impulse, but by its later stages is infused with a definite contemporary sensibility.

The earliest paintings in the exhibition are two self-portraits from his *Windows Series* (1983). From the outset, his work pivoted on portraiture, and issues of identity, treated with a gentle sense of parody. He was inspired by the work of American giants such as Chuck Close and James Rosenquist, the art of exaggeration and the appropriation of popular media imagery and form. The paintings of David Hockney were also to have some influence, with their comic flattening of the real, and their ironic take on middle-class living.

The style and look of these early works do belong very much to their time. The artist had already decided to concentrate on subjects within his immediate experience, flattening and stylizing his own everyday. An early portrait of his wife Sally Ann (1988), who would come to dominate much of his work, cuts a strong and solid figure in contrast to his own meek self-portrayals. In life too, once he had retired from business, he would play the role of the house-husband, doing the laundry and preparing their children for school.

He made a series of *Klangscapes* (late 1980s), in a bid to capture the changing Klang environment — starkly outlining new buildings and new roads. He de-personalized the familiar and the new as a means of understanding them, couching them in a particular language.

He moved away from this hard-edged approach towards a more realistic rendering, but throughout his career he experimented with different framing devices. He was interested in the influence of the blockbuster film, the powerful aesthetic of billboard advertisements, and in the role of the camera. His *Self Portrait in Deep Thought* (1993) is wonderfully tongue-in-cheek, using the machismo of the Terminator and Rambo to debunk his own inadequacies. His self-portraits are key in their explorations of de-personalisation. One of the finest examples is *Colour Guide for Self Portrait in Four Different Postures* (1993), which at once pokes fun at his own figure and conveys his sense of wonder at being alive.

By the early 90s his compositions had become much more complex. He reached a turning point with a series of large format canvases, depicting wasteland and detritus, which expressed his concern for the neglect of the environment. Then, in *Sisters* (1994), he brought his work in portraiture together with his investigations of the local environment. Fascinated by youth culture, he painted teenagers at play — in *Cyclists* (1995) and *Urban Playground* (1994). He began to use portraits of his wife, his friends, his children and their friends posing against different local backdrops. His exploration of identity now extended to considering the portrait of a people in the context of place.

In the *Camera View* paintings exhibited at his last solo in 1997, Kok Yew Puah discovered a brilliant conceptual and formal framing device — the camera viewfinder. He chose favourite familiar places — an Indian temple near his house, the Yacht Club



in Klang and nearby Pulau Ketam, for example, and made these the backdrop of various portraits of himself, friends and family. He made these special places iconic, representative of our cultural heritage or our modern aspirations. The scenes are painted in vivid colourful detail, layer upon layer built up lovingly, only to appear flattened ultimately. The figures likewise are brought out in intense detail — the psychological probity of Kok Yew Puah's portraits undercut the flatness of his painting, and the posturing of his subjects. The emotional texture and first impulses of his work can be seen clearly in his drawings and watercolours.

Kok Yew Puah was a nationalist, proud that his children were growing up part of a multicultural society, with all its hopes and pretensions and eccentricities. One of his favourite subjects was his own son's group of friends, bright teenagers of different races. He tested them against different scenes — in their jeans and t-shirts they lounge against a big Mercedes Benz, or stand in stark contrast to the colourful idols in *Temple Figures* (1997).

The viewfinder and colour guide devices in Kok Yew Puah's paintings impose a necessary distance between the onlooker and the subject, but they also make the viewer complicit in the artist's act of looking. It was important for him to underline the fact that his paintings were pictures, attempting to capture the real for posterity, but also embodying the hopes and desires of the picture-taker/picture-maker, and the sense of what is possible. Kok Yew Puah chose to play on the tension between reality and the pictured, between surface perception and stereotype and considered interpretation, between the personal and de-personalised. A sense of humour prevails in all of his work, but without malice. He understood also the tensions underlying Malaysian society, but he loved the possibilities it stood for.

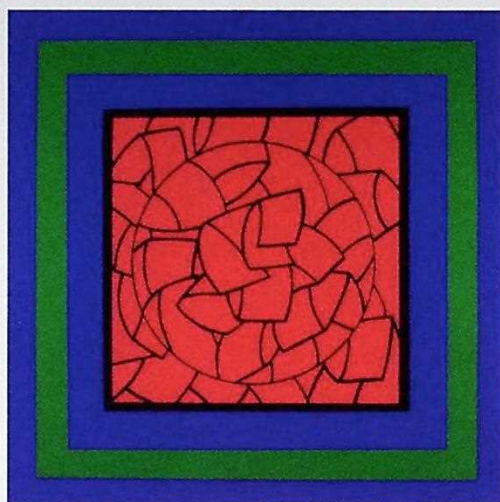
In the last few paintings he made, after the 1997 exhibition, he continued to work on the posed scene, using different backdrops — old shopfronts, and in one instance the interior of his own home. The viewfinder and the colour guide are abandoned, and there is perhaps a heightened intimacy with the subject. A stronger narrative impulse comes through, and at the same time there is a particular interest in rendering textures and rhythms of details like parquet flooring, the rooftops of shops. The artist's children and their friends are seen growing up, and they seem to look out more specifically at him, to make a connection with their interpreter.

I believe that Kok Yew Puah would wish to be remembered above all for his honesty. His relationship with his subject — his home in Klang, his family, his country, was intense, and he used his art to express this. This closeness to his subject, combined with the integrity of his artistic vision, lent his work a unique emotional intelligence and clarity. He has given us a way to see ourselves, with the privilege of his singular vision.

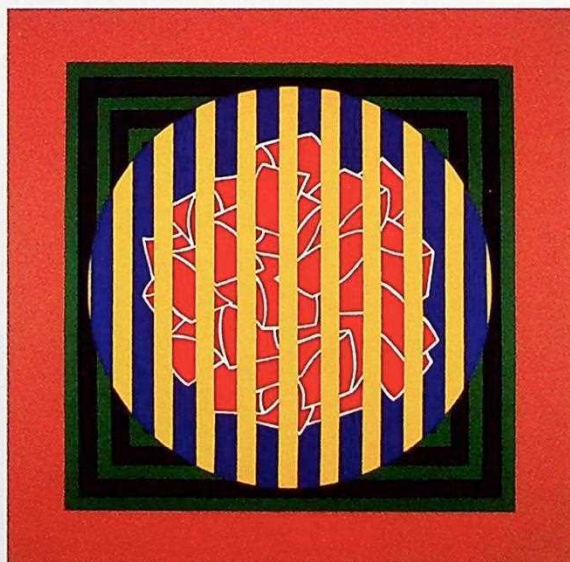
**Beverly Yong**  
Curator

selected works 1970—1999



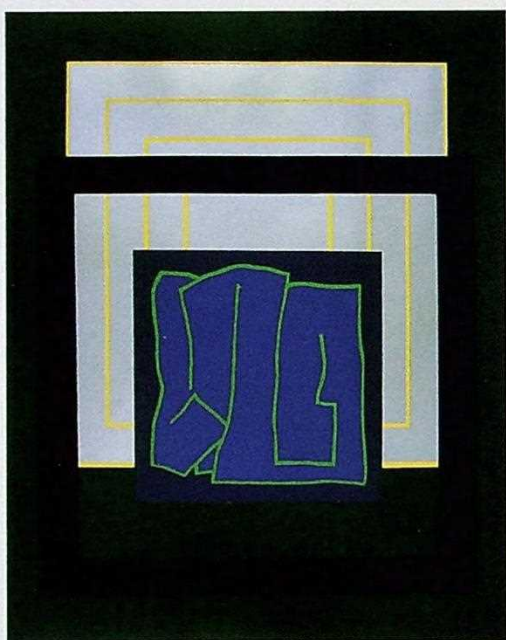


***Tao's Orbat Series One***  
1970, Silkscreen on paper, 76 x 102 cm

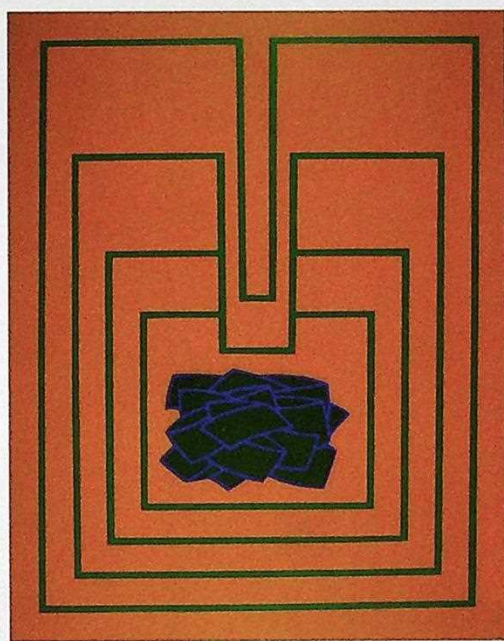


***Tao's Orbat Series Four***  
1971, Silkscreen on paper, 91 x 117 cm



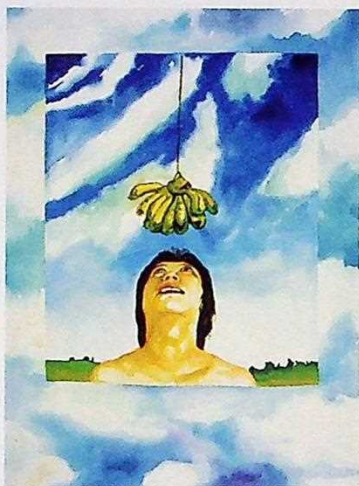


***One Plus One = One Series Four***  
 1971, Silkscreen on paper, 117 x 91.5 cm

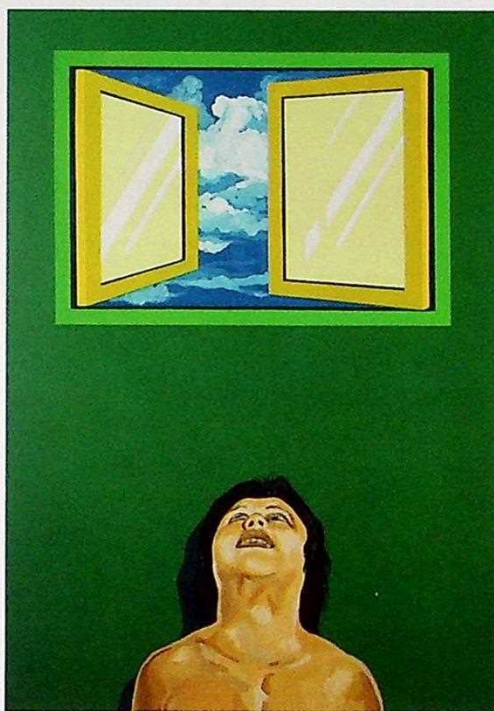


***Taoism Interlock***  
 1971, Silkscreen on paper, 117 x 91.5 cm





**Untitled (Window Series)**  
ca. 1980s, Watercolour on paper, 76 x 56 cm



**Window Series with Self Portrait**  
1983, Acrylic on canvas, 123 x 87 cm





**Untitled**

1988, Acrylic on canvas, 135 x 174 cm

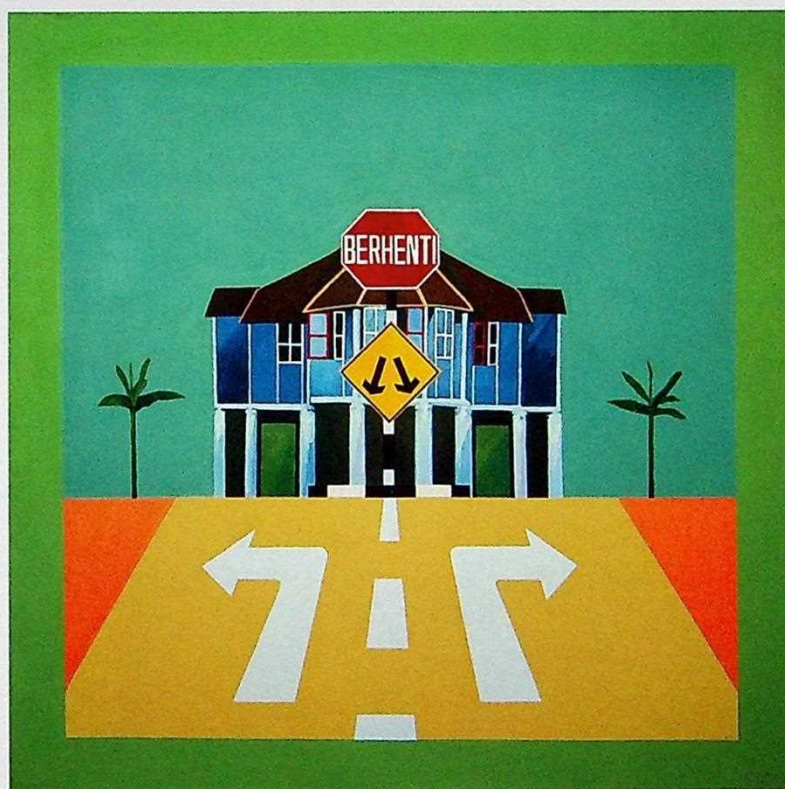




*Untitled (House)*

1987, Acrylic on canvas, 126.5 x 127.5 cm



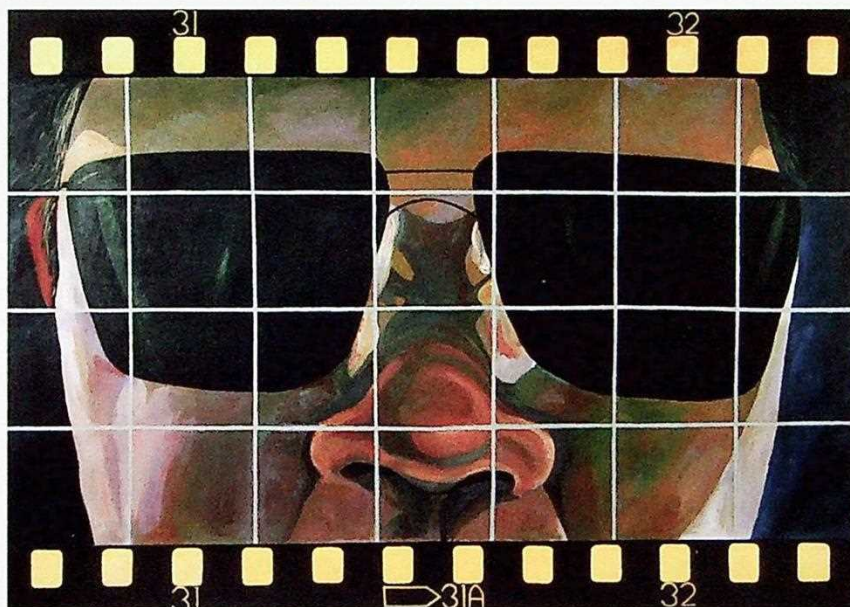


***Berhentil! (Klangscape Series)/The T-Junction***  
1988, Acrylic on canvas, 127 x 127 cm



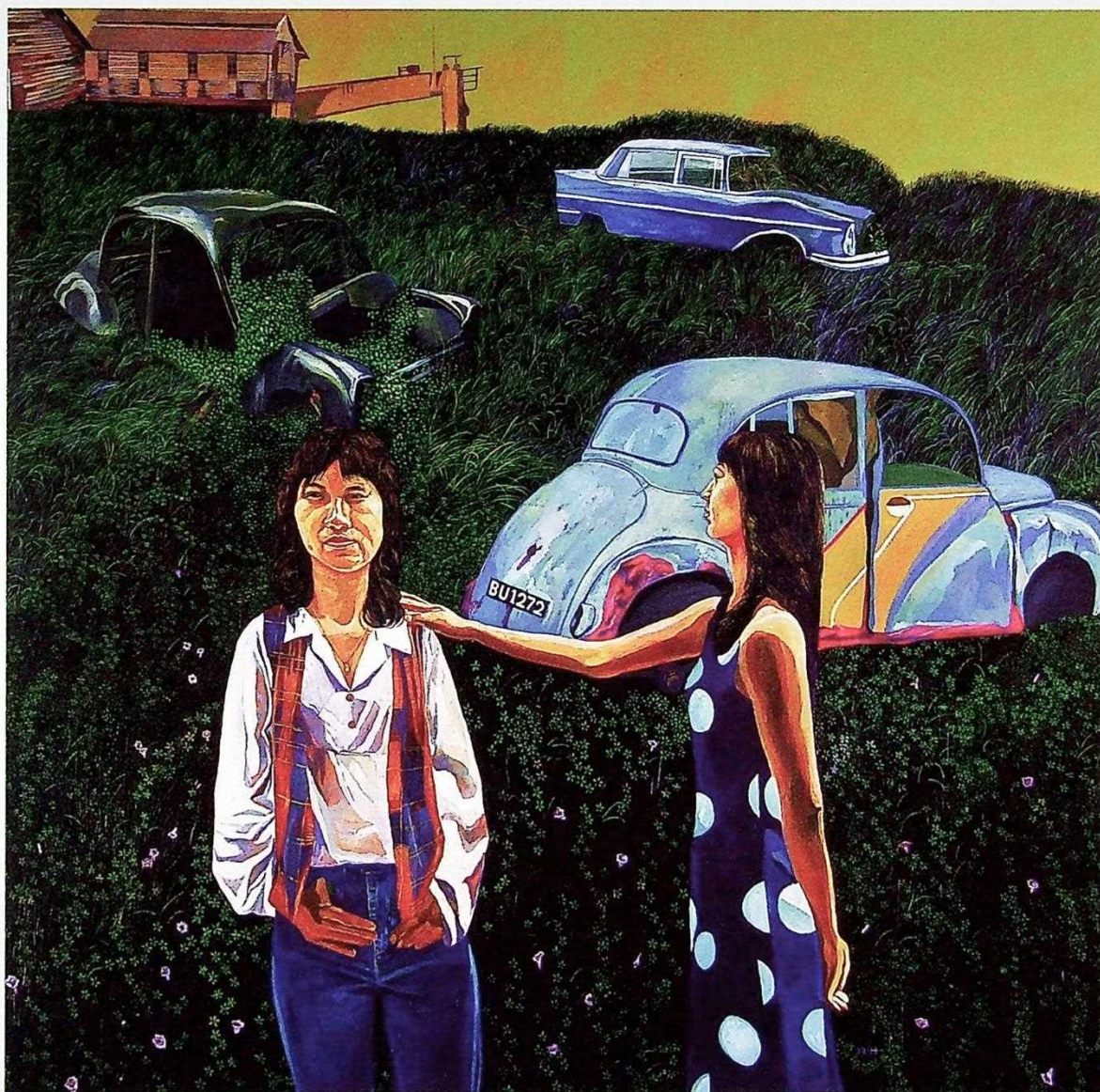


***Self Portrait in Despair***  
1994, Acrylic on canvas, 104 x 124 cm



*Self Portrait in Deep Thought*  
1993, Acrylic on canvas, 115 x 165 cm

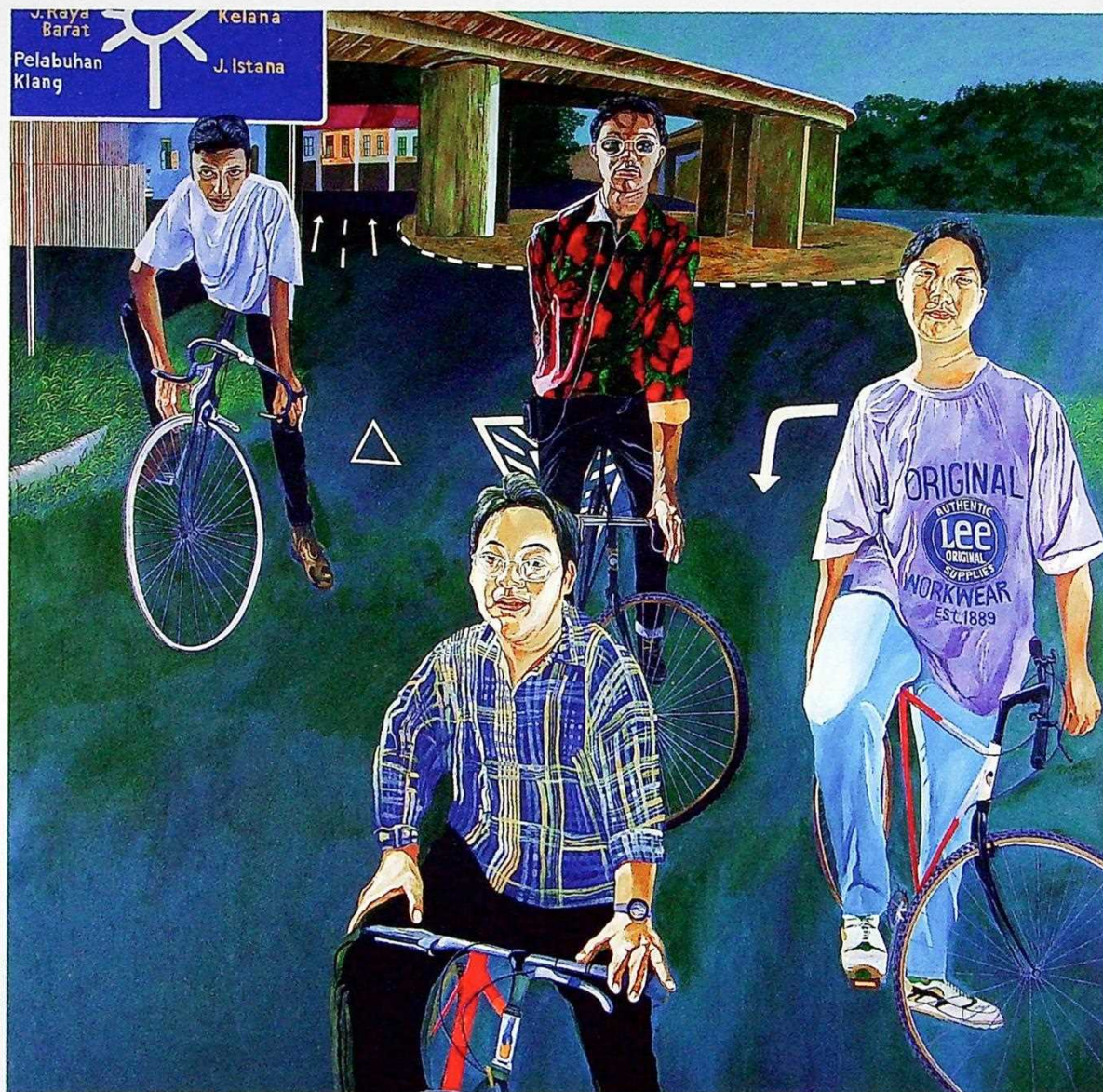




**Sisters**

1994, Acrylic on canvas, 143 x 143 cm





*Cyclists*

1995, Acrylic on canvas, 163 x 163 cm





**Untitled (Portrait in Three Postures)**  
1994, Watercolour on paper, 56.5 x 76 cm



**Camera View of Figures Series One**  
1994, Watercolour on paper, 56.5 x 76 cm





*Portrait of an Insurance Salesman in Pulau Ketam*  
1993, Oil on canvas, 164 x 162.5 cm





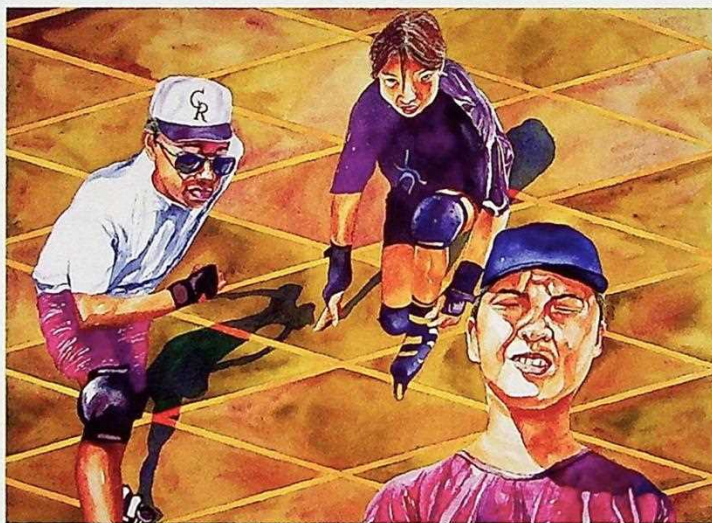
*Untitled (Two Abandoned Cars)*  
1995, Watercolour on paper, 55.5 x 77 cm





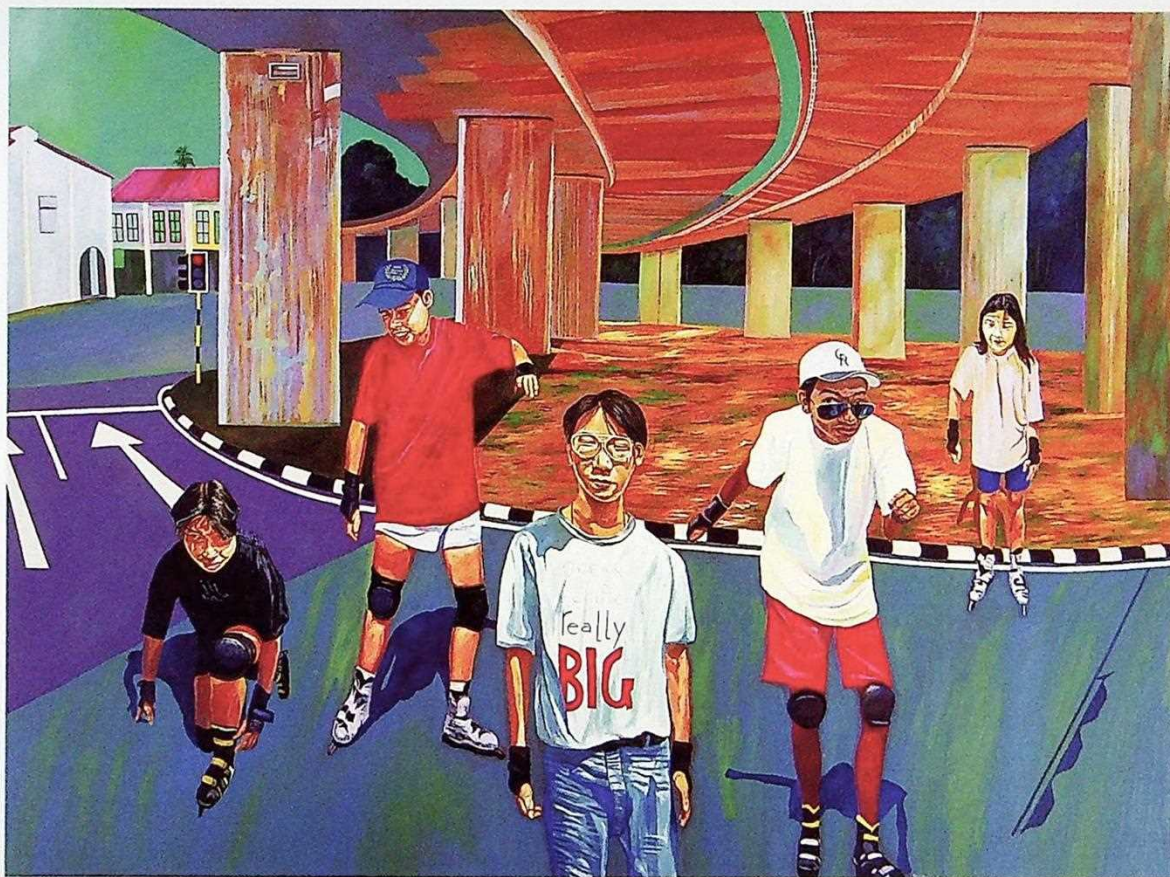
*Untitled (Two Abandoned Cars)*  
1995, Acrylic on canvas, 162 x 162 cm





**Untitled (Roller Skaters)**  
1995, Watercolour on paper, 55.5 x 77 cm





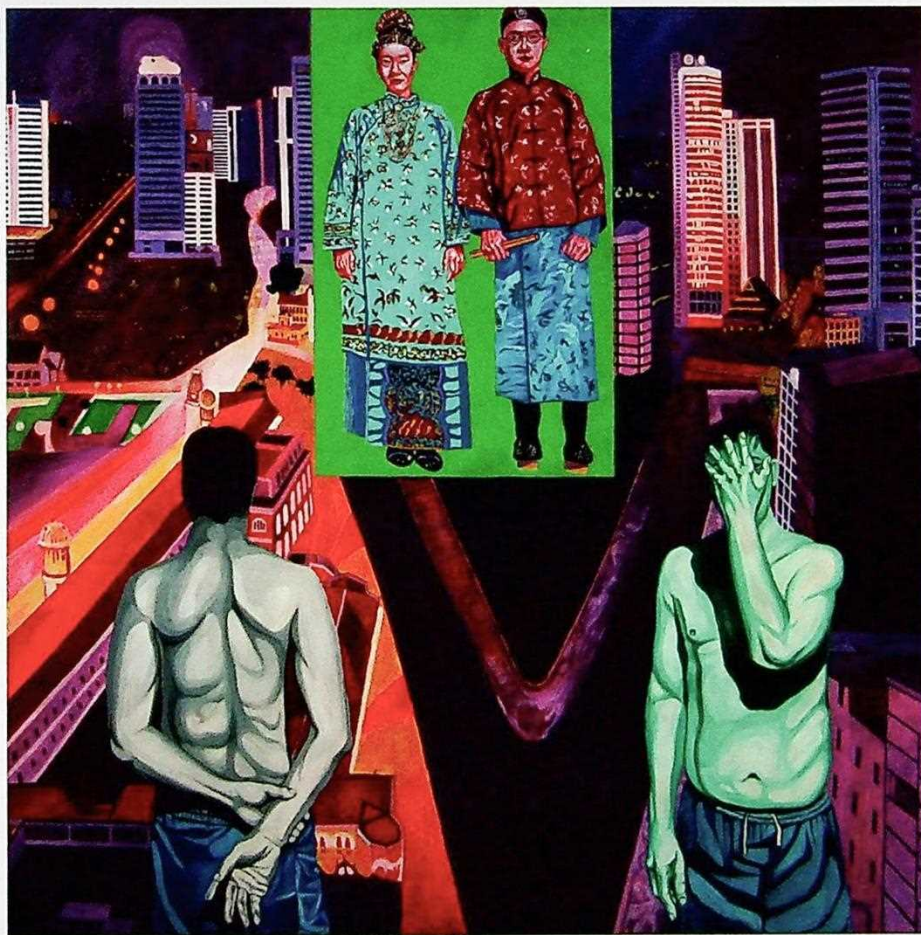
*Urban Playground*  
1994, Acrylic on canvas, 139 x 185 cm





***Untitled (Nightscape)***  
1996, Watercolour on paper, 77 x 92 cm





*Untitled (City at Night)*  
1998, Acrylic on canvas, 127 x 127 cm





**Untitled (Study for Temple Figures)**  
1997, Charcoal on paper, 79 x 110 cm





*Temple Figures*  
1997, Acrylic on canvas, 144.5 x 144.5 cm





*Study for Camera View of Two Tourists in a Malaysian Town*  
1995, Watercolour on paper, 55 x 76.5 cm





*In Front of an Indian Temple*  
1997, Acrylic on canvas, 137 x 137 cm





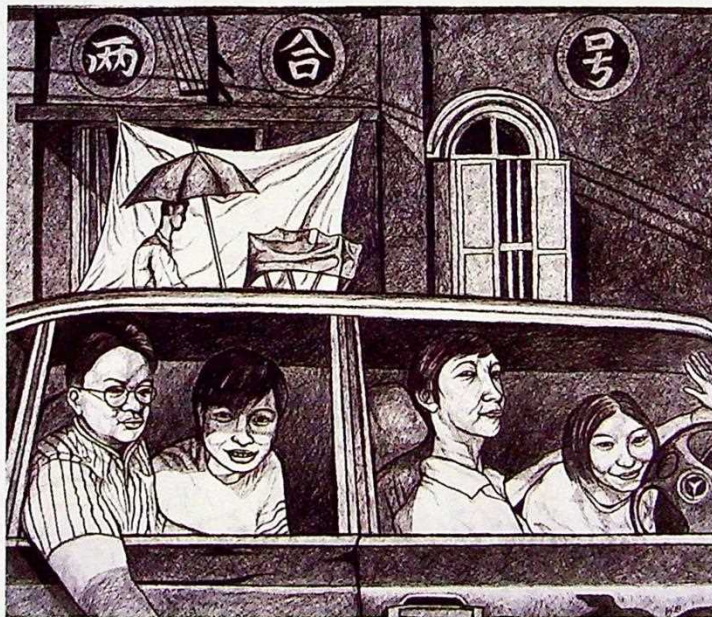
*Study for Portrait of Noel Aaron Peter & Ganesh Subramanrum*  
1997, Charcoal on paper, 77.5 x 82 cm





*Portrait of Noel Aaron Peter & Ganesh Subramanrum*  
1998, Acrylic on canvas, 137 x 137 cm





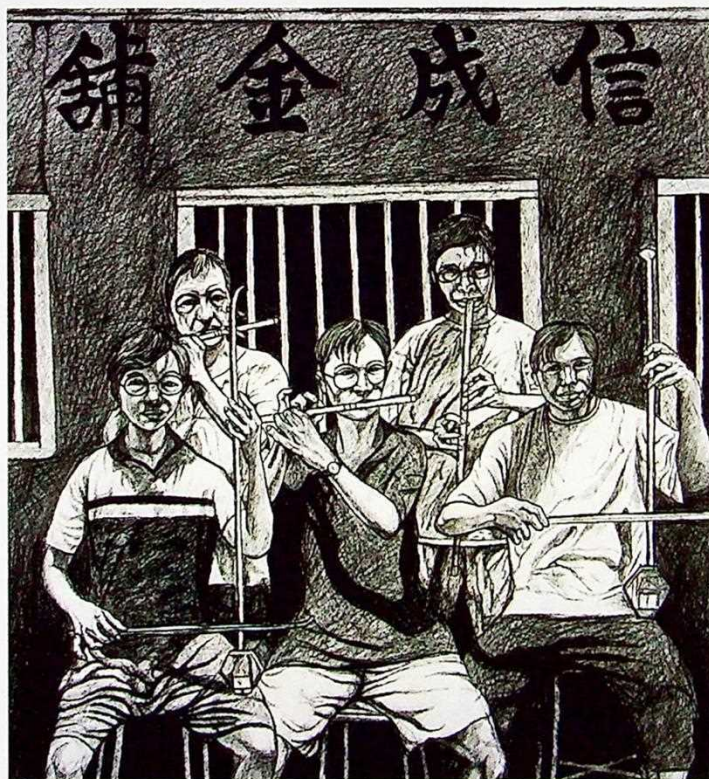
*Study for Untitled (Driving Past)*  
1998, Charcoal on paper, 77.5 x 91 cm





*Untitled (Driving Past)*  
1998, Acrylic on canvas, 127 x 127 cm





*Study for Untitled (Musicians)*  
1998, Charcoal on paper, 87.5 x 81 cm



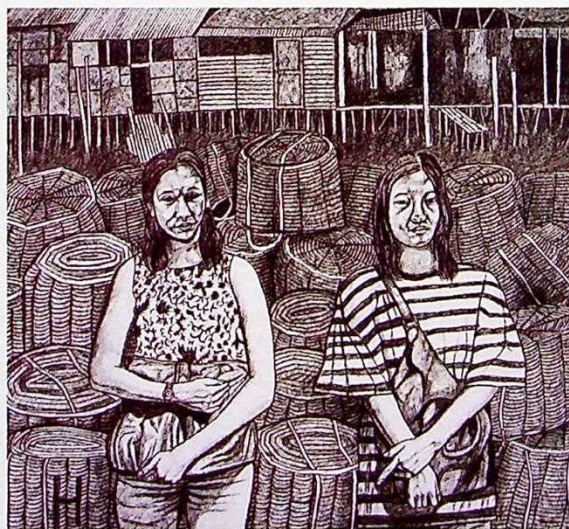


*Untitled (Musicians)*  
1998, Acrylic on canvas, 122 x 122 cm





*Study for Untitled (Two Friends)*  
1998, Charcoal on paper, 81 x 101 cm



*Untitled (Two Friends by the River)*  
1998, Charcoal on paper, 81 x 88 cm



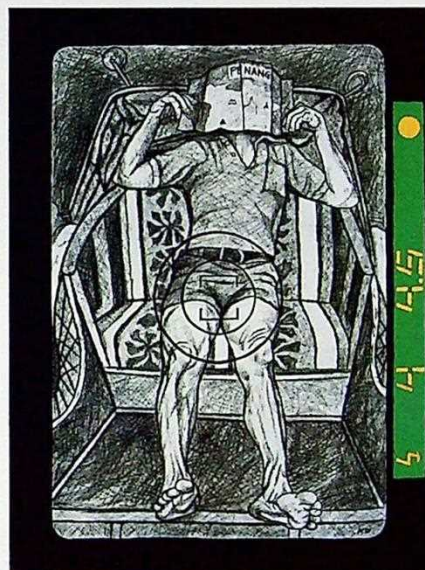


**Untitled (Two Friends)**  
1998, Acrylic on canvas, 127 x 152 cm





**Untitled (Man in a Trishaw)**  
1998, Poster colour on paper, 76.5 x 56 cm



**Untitled (Man in a Trishaw)**  
1999, Charcoal & watercolour on paper, 55.5 x 74.5 cm



**born**

1947 Klang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

**education**

1966-72 Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, Australia  
Awarded Diploma in Painting and Master Diploma in Print Making

**awards**

1994 2nd Prize, Philip Morris Art Awards Malaysia  
1995 Winner, Philip Morris Art Awards Malaysia  
1997 Honorable Mention, Philip Morris Art Awards Malaysia

**solo exhibitions**

1972 Gallery III, Brisbane, Australia  
1973 Samat Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
1993 Creative Art Centre, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
1997 *Kok Yew Puah: Klang and Beyond*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

**group exhibitions**

1970 s National Art Gallery Invitation Shows, Kuala Lumpur  
*Student Print Makers in Australia*, touring Exhibition in Asia  
*International Print Exhibition*, Tokyo, Japan  
*Young Artists International*, New York, USA  
  
1980 s *Malaysian Art From 1970-80*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
National Art Gallery Open Shows, Kuala Lumpur  
Malaysian Artists Association Show, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
Klang Artists Association Show, Klang, Malaysia  
  
1990 s *Art and Its Social Context*, Internal-State Touring Exhibition in Malaysia  
*Man and His Environment*, National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur  
1st Invitation Show for Asian Touring Exhibition  
2nd Invitation Show for Asian Touring Exhibition  
Bangladesh International Exhibition, Bangladesh



*Exhibition dates* • 16th December 2004 – 15th January 2005

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