



Helen Guek Yee Mei **Pilgrimage**

Foreword

Each year since the opening of our gallery, Valentine Willie Fine Art has given a debut solo exhibition to a young Malaysian artist of exceptional promise with something fresh and unique to bring to local art. The aim of the show is to introduce, in a substantial way, such an artist to the public and to provide in this way a springboard for their career. It takes a great deal to commit to a life as a fine artist, especially in a context as nascent as ours, and the danger of marginalisation, no matter the talent, is ever present.

Helen Guek Yee Mei: Pilgrimage is in many senses a fledgling debut. Helen studied fine art at the Malaysian Institute of Art from 1992 to 1995, and has shown in a small number of group exhibitions, where we have been able to glimpse her world of quiet emotion, subtle metaphor, and her intuitive and distinctive grasp of emotional colour and figurative line. In our first *3 Young Contemporaries* exhibition in 1997, her work centred around her love of family, her solitude, and moments of joy and silence - a vocabulary very much drawn from personal experience and infused with personal symbolism from which she has built her own visual language.

In *Pilgrimage*, we see the artist coming of age, both in her life and in her art. Helen has used the body of work she has made for the exhibition as an exploration of growing into adulthood, an expression of self-realisation and a developing personal philosophy. For this she has adopted an imagined innocent tropical landscape through which the characters of herself and her loved ones make their journey.

There is here a much heavier weight on symbolism than before, and the paintings are coloured with religious references as well as historical overtones, giving an universality to a very personal subject. Yet Helen's use of metaphor is never wry or over-clever, and her work never loses emotional immediacy in its narrative.

It is interesting to see an artist of Helen's generation using the imagery of native tropical innocence. She has worthy predecessors in the history of Malaysian art - most notably Khoo Sui Ho, who created a world nostalgic for a beauty that never quite came to be; and Wong Hoy Cheong, who turned the Gauguinesque ideal of beauty into political parody, highlighting the dangers of stereotype and seduction. Helen's approach is altogether different, of course - she simply uses the strangeness and familiarity of such imagery as expressions of her own doubt and excitement. She is the heroine in a new land, and in this way, she claims the paradise as her own.

cover:
In The Vessel
2001
Oil on canvas
138.5 x 161.5 cm

Beverly Yong, managing director

We do not choose the beginning of life, which also inevitably leads us to its end. We can only hold on to the decision of how to go along with life.

Pilgrimage is the expression of a woman who is trying to respond to her invitation to life, her happiness and struggles within this life; to believe, to love, to be free and free to be oneself. This experience, to me, has a close relation to the rites of passage still practiced among many native cultures. This is the moment we realise that no one can walk the path we have to walk, the path to be "oneself"; to be conscious of one's own desires, limitations and strength; to rely not in others' strength and influence but seek inner happiness and fulfillment from deep within.

This journey has helped me to see clearly, to know anxiety, and it has helped me to realize how little faith I once had, faith which helps my heart to get through all the trials to achieve courage. I have realized that what I want is not a readily available result, but for the whole journey and process to shape me, form me and test me. Confronted with choices in life, I feel myself each time like the girl who is holding two birds in her arms, not knowing how to let my life fly freely, let my heart enjoy every moment of the journey.

After all, the truly important things might be found on the journey itself, and are not a question of time and destination; all the fragments of things, the happenings, the people I have met in my life. I am so grateful to share this life in some way through my work, and this always makes me feel happy and satisfied in the making of my art.

Helen Guek Yee Mei



Girl with two birds in arms
2001
Mixed media on paper
92 x 88 cm



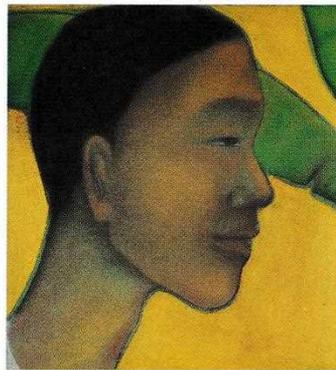
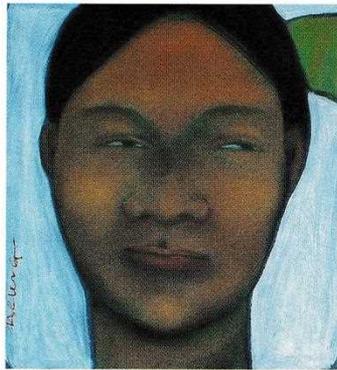
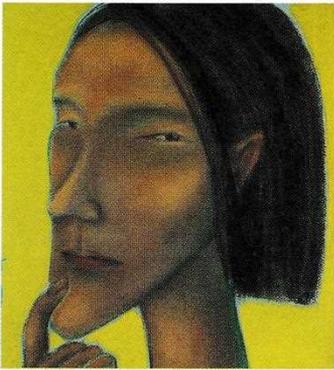
Across The Red Sea
2001
Oil on canvas
108 x 124 cm

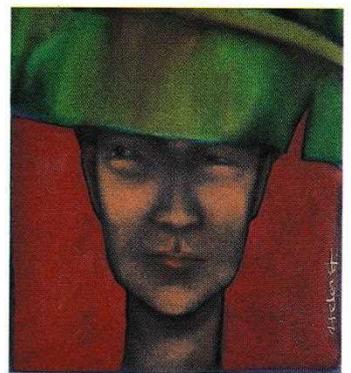
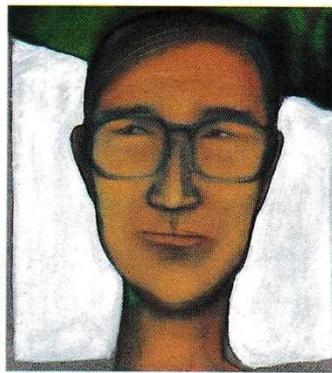
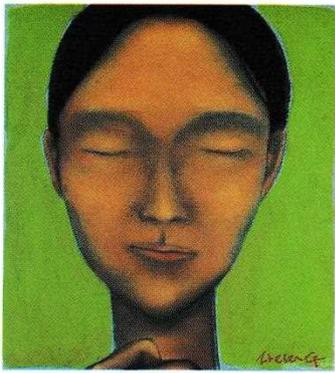
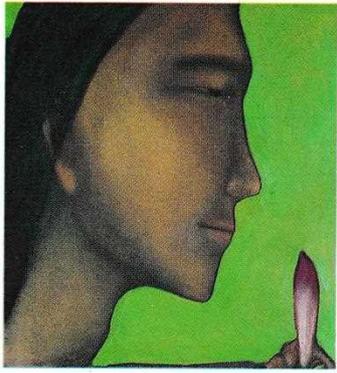


Sojourn
2001
Oil on canvas
108 x 124 cm



Colours of the Night VI
2001
Mixed media on paper
26 x 75 cm





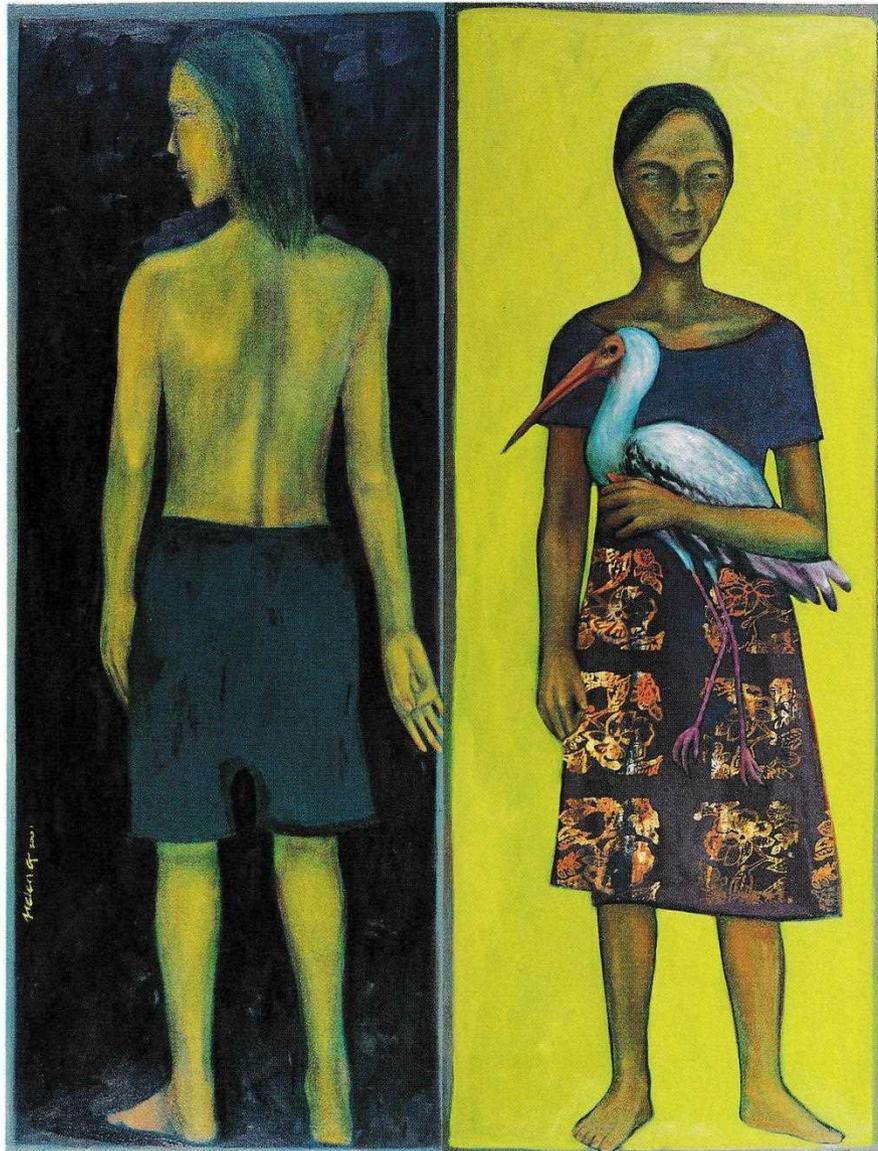
Journey - For Yesterday
2001
Mixed media on paper
35 x 32.5 cm each (showing 8 of 13)



Silent Blooms - Studies for Noon & Midnight
2001
Mixed media on paper
55 x 59.5 cm (x 2)



In Search Of Full Moon
2001
Oil on canvas
108 x 124 cm



Invitations
2001
Oil on canvas
169 x 133 cm (diptych)

Artist's Biography

Born 1st May 1971

Education

1995 Diploma in Fine Art, Malaysian Institute of Art, Kuala Lumpur

Selected Exhibitions

1996 *Fresh Faces*, Pelita Hati Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

The Cornucopia of Malaysian Arts, Metropolitan Gallery of Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Art Exhibition, Beijing, China

Horse Exhibition, Pelita Hati Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1997 *3 Young Contemporaries: Chai Chang Hwang, Chuah Chong Yang and Helen Guek Yee Mei*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

Philip Morris Malaysian Art Awards, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1999 *Through Our Eyes*, Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur

2000 *Love on Paper*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

Tribute to Women, ASEANA, Kuala Lumpur

Awards

1996 Best Student Award, Malaysian Institute of Art

1997 Honourable Mention, Philip Morris Malaysian Art Awards

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Thank you

We would like to thank Nokia (M) Sdn Bhd for making possible this accompanying catalogue to the exhibition, without which the event would have gone largely undocumented. A young artist's first catalogue is as important as her first show. Nokia's support and commitment to visual art in this country and the region has been enormous. A leading company in future-oriented technologies, Nokia focuses its corporate and social responsibility programme on youth and education. Recognising the importance of creative thought and expression to the development of society, it has devoted much attention to visual art. By supporting a younger generation of artists through the Nokia Art Awards and smaller projects such as this, they are helping to nurture and develop creativity where encouragement is most needed.

VALENTINE
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fine ART

Southeast Asian Paintings & Works of Art

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Exhibition dates: 14-30 June 2001
This exhibition catalogue is sponsored
by Nokia (M) Sdn Bhd.

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