

# STATE OF THE ART

How far has the Malaysian art scene come?  
**Datin Shalini Ganendra** explores.

A few months back, when looking up 'Malaysian Art' on the Internet, a 1989 review by Daniel Collins in the *Artweek Newspaper* came up. The article discussed an exhibition of Malaysian art at the Pacific Asia Museum, California, representing 41 artists through a variety of two-dimensional media, including painting, drawing, batik and weaving. Collins writes: "An exhibition of contemporary Malaysian art currently at the Pacific Asia Museum provides a unique opportunity for examining some of the assumptions that inform our understanding of international practice... It is clear from the exhibition that, for Malaysian artists, it is only in the resistance to dominant Western conventions that there is hope for an art that speaks without apology of a general 'Asian' or specifically 'Malaysian' cultural identity."

This content reflects the limited understanding of the past. We are now well aware that Asian artists and art movements do not need to react to 'Western conventions' (whatever that means) to assume legitimacy. Asia and

its emerging economies have, within the last 20 years, arrived!

The thrust of exceptional and notable contemporary art the world over, is creation of works that through their formation, presentation and/or purpose captivate, educate and are memorable. Certainly, one art market development in the last 20 years is that distinctions between local and international are less, as artists, like all other professionals, participate in globalisation and have to distinguish themselves in that mire of competition. Art has become hugely commercial, academic and demanding. Demarcation of high art and merchandising is also blurred.

Our local art world has been busy too – developing ideas, artists, public institutions, collectors and patronage. Over the last 20 years, the new location for the National Art Gallery opened, very visibly, along Jalan Tun Razak. The Gallery has hosted a number of exhibitions and continues to focus on presenting Malaysian art history through programmes and well-curated shows. "NAG", as it is familiarly called, has also launched a newsletter this year,

*Senikini*, which comments and informs on art happenings, while the NAG website is a resource for exhibitions, awards and events.

Meanwhile, Galeri Petronas, which opened in 1993 at the Dayabumi Complex, moved to the elegant and hi-tech space within Suria KLCC, at the foot of the Petronas Twin Towers, in 1998. The gallery boasts 2,000 sq m of sleek, circular space. Its website explains: "The [Galeri Petronas] provides another avenue for artists, both Malaysian and foreign, to display their works to the public to help nurture a growing interest in art. [The gallery] also aims to increase awareness by exhibiting the diverse historical and cultural background of the multi-ethnic Malaysian society through visual art."

The establishment of the Islamic Arts Museum in 1999 also marked a significant development in the Malaysian art scene because of its international stature and collection. Though not a venue for Malaysian fine arts per se, the museum has contributed to the perception of Kuala Lumpur as a growing cultural centre. Both the Islamic Art Museum

RIGHT: Latiff Mohidin's *Pago Pago*.

and the National Art Gallery have strong conservation departments, providing much-needed expertise to repair damaged artworks and pieces as a result of humidity, poor storage and other tropical-induced problems. No longer do we need to ship works to Singapore, Australia or Europe for restoration.

With all these attractions, are these institutions drawing in more visitors? A senior artist comments that despite the existence of stronger art venues, visitor numbers have not increased significantly. This is not entirely true. Local visitors now have more to see in KL, and there appears to be increasing traffic at these institutions for specific purposes. Note also that museum visits are not the only way to learn about local art movements (though this writer maintains such visits are crucial for gaining aesthetic insight into local art in local contexts). By setting up physical presences, along with active electronic and hardcopy supports, these institutions are participating in the development of the local art scene in a positive and necessary way.

One way to gauge the impact of exhibitions is to read some entries on the numerous blogs and websites that have launched over the years. Kakiseni, established over 10 years ago, was the first site to cover local happenings including art exhibitions. Last year, *Time Out Malaysia*, ARTERI and What's Art also set up websites. Local art fairs and social 'art activities' are another measure of Kuala Lumpur's growing importance as a viable art centre. 2007 saw the launch of Art Expo Malaysia, while Galeri Shah Alam held the first Mail Art Festival in Malaysia earlier this year. Kuala Lumpur Design Week 2009 also drew in a number of interesting entries with sculpted functional art and design collaborations. It is also



Sotheby's

interesting to note more and more charities and NGOs are using art, by means of auctions and exhibitions, as a way to regularly raise funds for their respective causes.

On the international front, Malaysian artists have been featured in art fairs and exhibitions all over the world, including in the USA, UK, Europe, the Middle East, Hong Kong, Beijing, Australia and Singapore. International auction houses' investment in Malaysia is also not recent. Sotheby's and Christie's, particularly, have helped to create interest in art from Asia. Armed with strong PR departments, extensive collector bases and sturdy reputations, the auction houses provide artists with a short cut to financial success if their works are auctioned well. The houses give collectors peace of mind on provenance and, to some extent, quality. Sotheby's opened a representative office in KL in

1994 and Christie's, in 1997. Christie's first auctioned Malaysian artists in 1994 and Sotheby's, in 1996.

Mok Kim Chuan, Sotheby's Head of South-East Asian Paintings, comments: "Origins of collectors of Sotheby's South-East Asian Art on a whole have become more international in recent years. Apart from collectors from South-East Asian region itself or South-East Asian expatriates residing in other countries, we are also attracting more collecting from other parts of Asia, as well as from the West. We are seeing more collectors 'crossing over' from other categories." Ruoh-Ling Keong, Vice President & Head of South-East Asian Modern and Contemporary Art at Christie's, expresses a slightly different view: "Malaysian modern and contemporary art is characterised by a relatively strong domestic market with a handful of major collectors who enjoy close relationship with artists. At this moment, the majority of Malaysian art and artists are not generally known outside of Malaysia and Singapore, let alone the region of Asia. ....Recently

emerging from the increasing cross-exposure of Asian art through art fairs and auction sales, we have seen the works of contemporary artists ... gaining attention in the auction market from collectors outside of Malaysia."

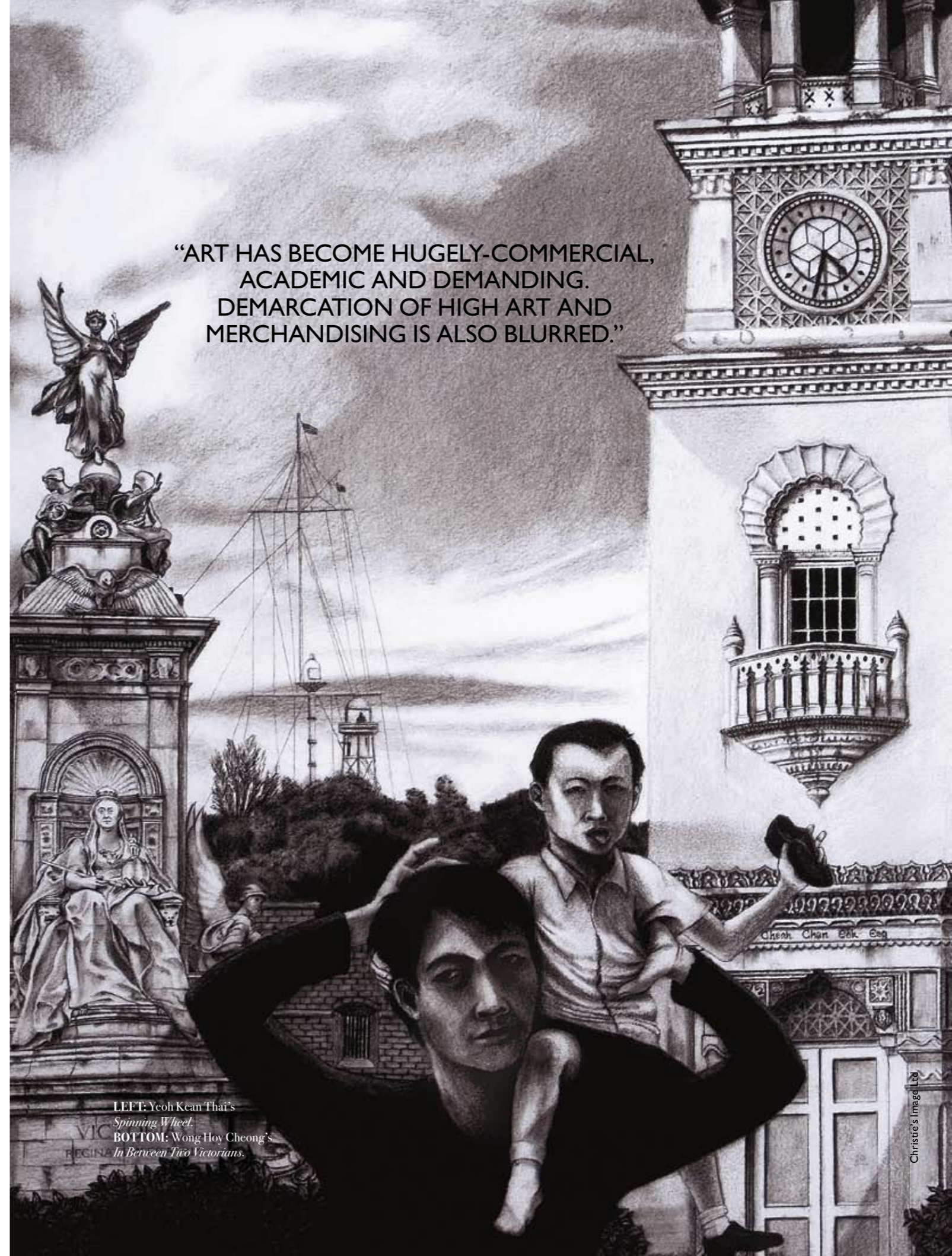
With regard to the identity of buyers of Malaysian art at auction, Keong observes: "Major collectors of Malaysian modern and contemporary art at auction are Malaysians. It's a reflection of the character of the art market and a support for their nation's artists. The works of Malaysian artists that were auctioned at Christie's mostly have a comparatively matured primary market." Auction houses also constantly

re-evaluate markets and marketing, looking for the next 'big area'. The areas selected need to be sustainable and well-managed to maintain credibility. As noted, part of that responsibility falls on local participation. Artists and clients who enter works into auction should be aware that there is the risk of the work not selling after such wide exposure – a consequence that does not help the artist or work.

And when art markets tumble, as they have done recently, even the auction houses are severely punished, showing the unfavourable consequences of speculation. Collectors who purchased high (and sometimes questionable quality) now cannot sell. Some have been badly affected – including once prosperous international galleries and dealers who have closed their doors. Hence the comparison of the art markets to stock markets, with the increasing commodification, manipulation, speculation and fraud, common to both. But not everyone plays auction, nor is inclined to do so.

A vital component of any growing art scene is local and individual participation. The websites and blogs, coverage by magazines, television, radio and other media (local and international), along with the growing sophistication of artists and commercial galleries, provide ample information and product. Additionally, newer mediums are being explored and mediums traditionally not considered fine art, e.g. photography, are now more mainstream than ever. New galleries and art advisors are surfacing regularly with exhibitions and projects featuring old and developing talents. There are a growing number of underground movements. All these activities now have to stand up to the scrutiny of a more informed public. With this onslaught of information and activity, there is a greater need (certainly more than there was 20 years ago) to be wary. Audiences should be thorough and discerning when processing this abundance of information. Intuition and

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LEFT: Yeoh Kean That's *Spinning Wheel*.  
 BOTTOM: Wong Hoy Cheong's *In Between Two Victorians*.

Christie's Image Ltd



**ABOVE:** Ibrahim Hussein's *Fighting Cockerel*.

time will tell who the most credible sources, presenting worthy content and advice, are.

Established artists who have observed and participated in the development of the last two decades are also excellent providers of constructive commentary. One asserts, "Audiences nowadays are more aware about art but most still lack the critical appreciation of art. Most are still looking for pretty pictures to decorate walls. Collectors still buy what is supposed to be a good investment, but sadly most of them are getting bad advice from some galleries concerned only with selling their goods." A similar sentiment is voiced by another established talent: "Collectors are more impressed with commodity rather than inculcating the culture of an art world and its understanding. I need art collectors who both to understand, rather than just buy my work."

In a recent *New York Times* article on Handling Art (9/6/09), a storage company CEO quipped: "Some Malaysian collectors rent entire apartments just to store their artworks." What an indication of growth! Be warned though, over-consumption is an indication of over-speculation. There will be many a white elephant left in these storage quarters. So, let us not ask: "Is yours bigger than mine?" when the real question should be: "Is yours better?" We know some collectors are collecting a whole lot more, but are there really more collectors? Some artists are doubtful, commenting, "Yes, we do see more individuals parting with four to five figure amounts to purchase artworks but are there really more collectors?"

This writer asserts there are. Different galleries have varying collector bases, though there is some overlap. By and

large, audiences are now disparate and not predictable. The number of artists has increased as well, fuelled by growing economic viability of the vocation and a host of art schools providing affordable and costly fine art and design degrees. Education-wise, the first local art colleges were UiTM and MPIK, both funded by the government and established in the early 1970s, with western influenced and traditional art. The first private art college was MIA, which focused on western art development and Chinese painting. Now, there are numerous private colleges and public universities with art programmes. There are also a growing number of art fellowships/residencies hosted by private and public entities, locally and internationally.

In so far as collectors' motivations for buying, these continue to be disparate the world over, though there is an increasing emphasis on 'investment' value. Some buy for decoration, some for social statement, others for investment and some for all of the above. Most reasons may be legitimate – but each comes with varying levels of risk.

Regardless of motivations, we must applaud the developments of the last two decades in the Malaysian art scene. My personal wish for the next 20 years is to see an increase in museum quality works by artists and in private and public collections, with the corresponding growth in awareness that what we create, collect and endorse should be, on the whole, world-class. Nothing more, nothing less. ■



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