

## *Perspectives on Malaya - Photographic Stories*

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Recognition of photography as a collectable art has gained ground in recent years in South East Asia, and in particular, Malaysia, reflecting the trends of the international markets. The art market dynamism, increased consumer prosperity and a perception of undervaluation, have awoken interest in a previously sleepy area which lacked patronage and appreciation, except by a cultivated few.

Malaysia has witnessed an increase in collectors for black and white photography, reinforcing the growing recognition of this medium as an art form. Indication of increasing sophistication is that photographers themselves now grapple not only with issues such as technique and exhibition exposure, but also with finding originality in the local context, and in the case of more established talents, in the global context. Established talents wrestle with issues of national and individual identity as they seek to develop signature styles.

Derivation is unavoidable – but refreshing takes on past aesthetics are always welcome. There are now more significant photographic *series* that are interesting and collectable. Additionally, there is focus on vintage, ethnographic and historically significant images which stand out for nostalgia, originality and relevance.

The local popular support for photography is growing as is evidenced by the number of websites and blogs dedicated to the artform. There are, however, no significant groups beyond the educational institutions and galleries, that have consciously promoted photography (such as the 'salon' groups of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century). In the late 1990's, a group of photographers started *Silver Gelatin* to promote skill and knowledge in the black and white medium. But the momentum of the group has faded along with its identity.

There has been an effort to raise the profile of local photography through the Kuala Lumpur Photography Festival, a biennial event started in the summer of 2005 and held again this year. During this time, participating commercial and national galleries host photography exhibitions.

However, the most significant impact continues to be made through the efforts of individual galleries with well curated and selected photography shows. The Malaysian National Gallery featured a selection of photographs by amateur photographers in a show to commemorate independence, *Malaysia @ 50*. The variety of styles and subject matter reflected commendable effort.

### History:

Photography was introduced to Malaya (what is now Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia), by J. Newman, an American who opened a studio in Singapore in 1856. He was probably one of the first photographers to have documented the Malayan peninsular with studies of Malacca. Much more documentary photography followed, executed by numerous Western photographers including John Thomson. In depth documentation of Malaysia probably started

in 1862, led by K. Feilber and Hermann Sachtler, who set up an eponymous studio in Penang. During this time, studios sprouted up throughout the main commercial centres of Malaya responding to market needs.

G.R. Lambert & Co is the longest surviving photography company in Singapore and was established in 1876. The studio was well known for documentary and portraiture work, setting a strong standard in the field. Amateur photography followed suit and societies such as the Perak Amateur Photographic society (1897) and the Singapore Amateur Photography Society (1887) sprung up encouraging broader perspectives, dimensions and lay interest.

From this period, many a romantic image of an ethnically varied populace – in western and traditional regalia – look back at the camera, memorialised in sepia or black and white. The images complimented the predominant colonial desire for adventure and discovery of new lands and new peoples. Photography helped to document these quests and create a history which was a somewhat sanitised version of reality.

In addition to portraiture, the postcard movement was gaining momentum at the end of the 19th century. A superb publication with strong examples of works from this period is *Malaysia: A Pictorial History 1400 – 2004*, compiled by Wendy Khadijah Moore.

The twentieth century witnessed greater interest in photography as more individuals took up the camera professionally and as a hobby. One of the notable, early local photographers was **Sultan Ismail Nasiruddin** (1907 – 1979), from Terengganu. An avid photographer with an elegant eye, he extensively documented scenes from his state as well as other parts of Malaya, capturing daily life during an era of innocence. He often printed his own work. A few vintage prints remain and the collection in the care of its custodian, the Sultan's great grandson.

The arguably more internationally recognized images of Malaysia to date, however, are ethnographic. One of the earliest local followers of this genre, **KF Wong** (1916-1988), based in Sarawak, documented images of Borneo. These images remain a significant point of reference and aesthetic delight, having been memorialised in the publication, *Borneo Scene* (1979). Wong owned a studio in Kuching, Sarawak and photographed the indigenous peoples of this region as a matter of interest and documentation. (The influence of ethnographic photographer, Hedda Morrison, who also photographed this region, is evident.)

#### Current:

Borneo offers much variety and uncommonness through its peoples and their lifestyles. **Bob Teoh** exhibited a series documenting outer regions of Sarawak in the exhibition *Between Two Rivers*, in Kuala Lumpur in 2007. The exhibition presented images and scenes novel to most viewers, since these regions have very limited access. The works, taken between 1989 and 2007, reflect diligent study by Teoh of the indigenous peoples and cultures of these areas. Photojournalist **Dennis Lau**, a protégé of KF Wong, has also documented Borneo for over 40 years. His images appear in a number of publications, most notably: *Borneo, A Photographic Journey* (1999).

Other established local names are: **Eric Peris, Ismail Hashim, Syed Rashid Zainal, Chan Kin Wah, Alex Moh, S.C. Shekar, Arthur Teng, Soraya Ismail and Nirmala Karupiah.** Karupiah participated in a show of black and white photography featuring traditional Indian dance details, in *'Malaysia Today'* at Asia House, London earlier this year. Works by SC Shekar and Bob Teoh were featured in the exhibition, *Borneo, Bowl of Land and Water* at the English Speaking Union USA headquarters, New York City during Asian Art Week.

**Ismail Hashim**, a veteran photographer, has a signature style that primarily addresses the rural life of Malaysia in a more contemporary ethos. Working in black and white, he often hand tints his works. His (and Peris') works were recently featured in the group exhibition of 50 artists in the exhibition, *"50 Ways to Live in Malaysia"* at the Petronas Gallery.

**Simryn Gill**, a Malaysian citizen and Australian resident, in the *Forest* series, has used photography in a contemporary format, to image other art forms. "Forest" has 16 large-scale black-and-white photographs that document transitory installations placed among the trees and bushes in cultivated and uncultivated locales, in Malaysia and Singapore. Some of the works from the series was exhibited at the Sackler Gallery earlier this year as part of that Gallery's *"Perspectives"* initiative.

In 2002, Gill completed a series of 254 photographs, *'Dalam'*, which document a range of Malaysian interiors. The series, which was conceived by her and commissioned by the Petronas Gallery in Kuala Lumpur, is part of its permanent collection.

The only photographer in the region to make it to international auction thus far is Singaporean, **Russel Wong.** He has gained international recognition as a commercial photographer and film maker. He had a solo show at the Singapore Art Gallery two years ago and his photographic work was auctioned by Christie's Hong Kong, in this year's Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art sale in May.

All these artists address issues of identity, placement, cultural perspectives and aesthetic. One of the most culturally significant series, *The Tin Mine Landscapes*, by veteran photographer and leading regional talent, **Eric Peris** (b. 1939), remains an outstanding example of the effective and lasting incorporation of these issues into what was originally meant to be a documentary exercise. *The Tin Mine Landscapes* have now resurfaced to be one of the iconic series of this region's art history. Some images from this series was featured in this year's Asian Art Week, New York.

From the mid 1960's, photography became a life long passion for Peris. His stamina for detail, use of light and technical ability is locally unsurpassed. He developed and printed his work for over 50 years, though recently he has used digital printing. He works exclusively in the black and white medium, but sometimes selectively hand tints. The subject matter is landscapes, architecture and still life.

As with a number of well known series, *The Tin Mine Landscapes* was not originally intended to be a series and came into being by chance. The images were shot in the late 1970's, over a period of 4 years and soon after the death of Peris' father. In memory of his father, Peris selected 41 images for a book which was published in 1980.

The images themselves were never exhibited. After years of dormancy, twenty three images from the published series have been salvaged and resurrected in high quality digital format, each print horizontally measuring 36"x 54". Peris has consistently maintained: "*I am not the creator of the image. It has always been there. It is just that over the years I have trained my eye to see it...*"

And "see" these landscapes he certainly did, to create a series which is arguably the hallmark of his career. Not unlike Ansel Adams, whose influence is evident in Peris' work, Peris patiently waits for the image to surface. However, unlike many of the views in Adams' photographs which have been embraced in the protective arms of national forests such as Yosemite, the Malaysian tin mine landscapes have virtually vanished.

The images thus speak to the history of a nation since a significant portion of Malaya's (in fact, the region's) early wealth was derived from tin mines. Since these landscapes have been lost to development, the irony is that economic wealth has participated in their erasure.

To borrow Peter Galassi's language when describing the works of American photographer Walker Evans "...[the works] *showed that unembellished photographic fact could serve as highly poetic language*". Peris' *Tin Mine Landscapes* speak this language and more in a Southeast Asian context, being works that are poetic, documentary, currently relevant and with a strong story of identity.

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