

Gallery Weekend Malaysia

By Emma Talkoff

LAST SUMMER, Kuala Lumpur City Hall undertook the intentional destruction of the public art piece *Puncak Purnama* (Lunar Peaks), a large triangular sculpture which had stood on a main street. Created by the late national laureate Syed Ahmad Jamal, the sculpture's destruction sparked a wave of outrage among the local arts community, who felt they had been left out of what should have been a collective decision. Eventually, that backlash would lead to a press conference in which KL gallery leaders called for vigilance against future outrages.

The emotions stirred up by the razing of the sculpture are part of a bigger picture. For many, the destruction of *Puncak Purnama* was symbolic of a larger problem. A lack of patronage of and a chronic undervaluing in art – in short, a jagged disconnect between institutional forces and on-the-ground Malaysian artists which has become too pressing to ignore.

It is an interesting time for the arts in Malaysia. In a year when global art markets have cooled dramatically, there is economic challenge here as there is everywhere, but there is also exciting local progress, as independent stakeholders and artists continue to take the opportunity to expand mediums and subject matter as never before. Lacking government support and a solid arts infrastructure, private institutions are taking the lead and even local collectors have begun to publish on their own collections.

Successful cultural festivals have also brought new life to the field, piquing international interest. Malaysia's best known *Rainforest Music Festival* is internationally so popular that it is apparently booked out months in advance, and crowd control is implemented with discipline. The *Georgetown Festival* in Penang celebrates a mix of local and international performance for the month of August, and KL's alternative *Urbanscapes* heralds an annual celebration of film and culture over several locations in the heart of KL. *Festival Film Malaysia* has seen the promotion of award-winning local works (although the festival's separate designation for Bahasa films has stirred controversy).

This year sees the inaugural *Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur*, from 25 to 27 November, celebrating visual multi-disciplinary practices that aim to attract meaningful international and local engagement. In addition to participation by the best galleries, and public institutions, there will be a 'Luminary Pulse' programme with international talents (AKT II's Hanif Kara and ICP's Christopher Phillips). The event has secured the support of the Aga Khan Architecture Awards (AKAA). This event is a celebration of Malaysian talent and Malaysian vision – local and global – of the multidisciplinary, which offers unique and relevant perspectives on SE Asian development.

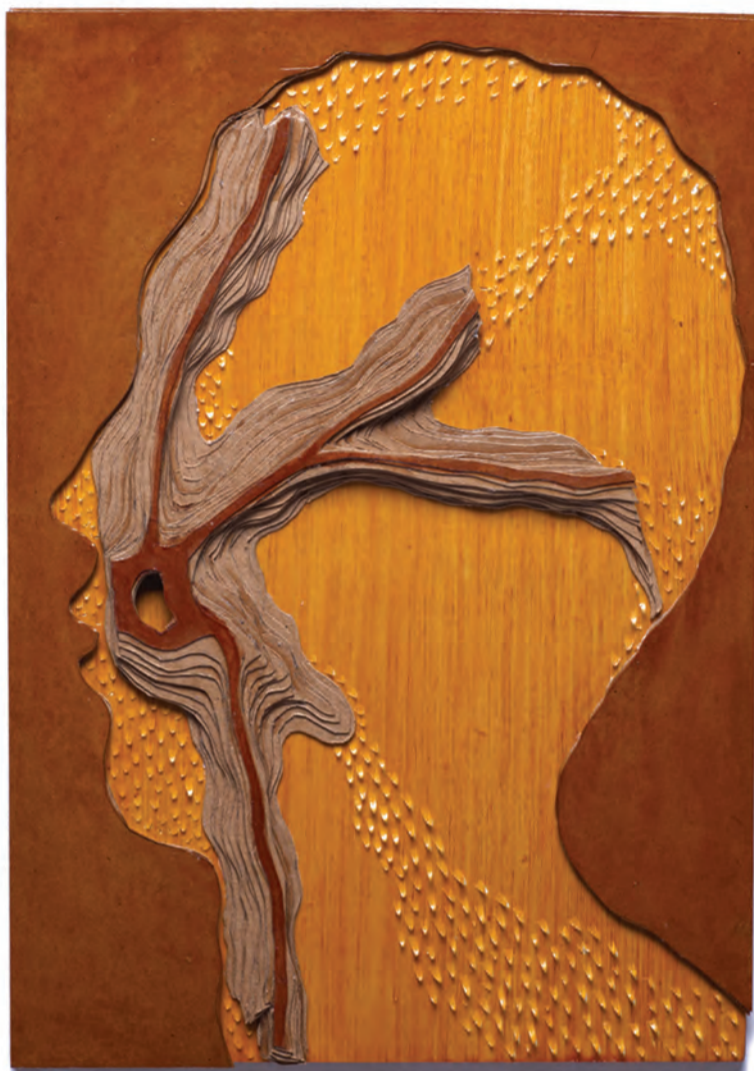
At the centre is Shalini Ganendra's art space that offers a vital platform for impactful cultural engagement, and has developed critical and quality traction in the contemporary landscape. One non-profit programme, the *Vision Culture Lectures*, is UNESCO Observatory endorsed, and has hosted curators from the ICP, Sackler/Smithsonian, Rubin Museum, Guggenheim, National Gallery of Victoria – many making their first visit to Malaysia for the programme. Her team has led the development of Gallery Weekend, inviting visitors to explore other aspects of Greater Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia.

In short, it seems that independent progress and arts celebration are flourishing; but then, there is government-sponsored destruction of public works, apparently without any oversight from the city's arts experts. Two steps forward, one step back. But as political turmoil and the slow progress of change continue to be issues, many artists and culture leaders are not waiting for support. Instead, they're moving forward, creating their own momentum, and continuing the work of building the nation's creative identity.

For many Malaysian contemporary artists, the country's complicated, if short (the nation gained independence from the UK in 1957) national history, not to mention its far more vast wellspring of heritage and tradition, can serve as inspiration. 'Art practitioners who understand roots, surrounds, geopolitics and technique, are destined to develop more meaningful professional practices,' Ganendra observes, pointing out the range of mediums beyond traditional painting, including multi-disciplinary and digital pieces, which have seen a recent rise. 'Local artists who have taken degrees at premiere institutions like Chelsea School of Art, Parsons, St. Martins – are coming back with experiential exposure,' Ganendra continues. 'The internet has extended information sourcing positively through level access. Good training teaches us how to process that access with depth.'

Artists like Sarawak-born wood sculptor Anneketyni Madian and KL-ites Zac Lee and Bibi Chew look to Malaysian heritage for inspiration and grounding. Madian's intricately carved wood forms bristle with twisting shapes inspired by the *pua kumbu* textile weaving of her homeland. Lee carefully presents social commentary referencing local iconography, dealing with ethnic and economic marginalisation. Chew, using local materials (including wood, cloth coffee filters, and paper) has created a thoughtful and tactile practice that calls for emotive response.

Adam Zainal's graduation project at Chelsea School of Art, *Place to Stay*, interestingly referenced an iconic Malaysian landmark in London, Malaysian Hall, and the nostalgia felt by the artist when in there. 'The thought of being familiar was surreal because I



Homesteader by Bibi Chew

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am in London but somehow wasn't,' Zainal says. 'This was the beginning of my interest in Malaysian Hall and to question what it represents as a space for Malaysians and belonging. What are the aspects of identity that make us feel comfort, individually and collectively?'

But even this is a thorny issue in today's turbulent political landscape, where it seems that many aspects of Malaysian society have been infected with rumours (or truths) of corruption



Collusion (2015) by Zac Lee, oil on jute, 138 x 175 cm

and government influence. Headlines from the *New York Times* paint a gloomy if somewhat theatrical picture of corruption and kleptocracy in the highest reaches of Malaysian government, an image which gallerists, artists and cultural bodies say they have to actively work around. 'There are pros and cons of that,' HOM Art Trans gallery manager Danial Fuad says of the recent political issues and their effect on Malaysia's global image. 'The pro is that the artists have a lot to do and comment on, and make Malaysia more recognised,' he says. Fuad cites an activist-artist work *1MDB*, a piece which takes on an eponymous government fund that had been allegedly misdirected for personal use by politicians. 'The bad side is that due to the corruption and everything, the economy is not quite stable,' Fuad adds. In a society where institutional and public support for arts is already tenuous, said Fuad and other local experts, this kind of instability can be fatal.

There are other negative consequences as well, says Fuad. Citing the example of Fahmi Reza, a graphic artist who in June was charged with violating multiple of Malaysia's media laws after depicting Malaysia's prime minister in clown makeup in an image which went viral online, Fuad says he believes many artists are afraid to create works that are too critical of Malaysia's government. Syed Nabil, a curator and former gallerist, expresses similar concerns. 'Everyone's afraid,' says Nabil, who says that he believes fear of being blacklisted may discourage some artists from creating critical works. Still, even these conflicts and trying times can be sources of inspiration and identity, Nabil says. 'I think this is a period we have to go through, because this generation has not experienced a war,' Nabil continues. 'We never had that kind of struggle, so this is a different kind of struggle, without war'. He amends the statement further: 'It is a different kind of war'.

But despite these challenges, among many there is a sense of hope. These are exciting times, in which artists are pushing the boundaries and finding new ground amidst the shifting political landscape. There is much to see, much to discuss. Over the last 10 years, KL's auction house scene expanded to include five local houses, a number which, if perhaps overly ambitious, signalled much liquidity. Over the past two years, however, the auctions have been far less frequent with inevitable contraction.

Efforts like the upcoming Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur aim to capitalise on growing, home-grown momentum. To support the initiative as a permanent platform, a cultural website features a snapshot of some of KL's best offerings, and there is a development of bespoke tours that focus on rich contemporary and heritage content (www.culture-connoisseur.com).

Shen Fei Lam, an academic and practising architect, is optimistic. Like many, he sees opportunity in the challenges the country currently faces, and hopes that the coming years will bring positive change to the arts sphere: increased patronage, increased art education, increased local and global appreciation for Malaysian art.

Shalini Ganendra similarly observes, 'A quality platform from which to grow and deliver meaningful aspirations – that is what we have and will continue to develop. Art has the powerful voice'.

• For more information on the weekend visit www.gw-kl.com