

AJIM JUXTA WAS TRAINED as an architect a decade ago. But in his heart of hearts, he always wanted to be an artist. He says: "My father was a curator at the Muzium Darul Ridzuan in Perak. He wanted to be an artist too, but he put aside those dreams to get a salaried job and raise a family... I don't want to wait till I'm old to be able to paint full-time."

Last year, Mr Ajim, 34, showed his art at the Artemis Art booth in Taiwan's art fair Young Art Taipei and won the Young Art Award. That accolade fuelled his dreams further, as he and his friends strive to keep afloat their small artist-run gallery in Publika Shopping Gallery, a popular mall in Kuala Lumpur where several galleries operate. Mr Ajim's gallery, called Titik Merah, is one of several artist-driven alternative spaces in the country.

"Malaysia's industry is slowly getting better for us artists, with more and more people buying art. So we're optimistic that market conditions are improving," he says, echoing a popular sentiment that the art scene has been improving gradually despite 2016 being a weak year for the market due to economic and political uncertainties.

Since 2010, the arrival of four auction houses – Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers, Masterpiece Auction House, The Edge Galerie and KL Lifestyle Art Space – changed the complexion of Malaysian art market. Where previously most art collectors bought art simply for the love of it or to decorate their houses, the rise of these auction houses has driven up the value of local art. It has also attracted many new white-collar collectors who buy for a variety of reasons, including speculative ones.

"All of a sudden, you see faces you've never seen before at auctions, snapping up as many as seven or eight pieces," says Nizam Rahmat, CEO of Segaris Art Centre, which promotes the art of students of MARA Institute of Technology, whose fine arts course has produced an impressive alumni including Ahmad Zakii Anwar and Zulkifli Yusoff.

"But all this has meant a more competitive secondary market than ever before. There are definitely speculators who are trying to manipulate the market, but there are also more serious collectors who love art and see it as an asset class that they can pass on to their kids."

Recognition has also come forth from the government. Last month, the country launched its first official Kuala Lumpur Biennale at the premier contemporary art institution National Art Gallery, with 114 artists mostly from Malaysia. Considering that KL is one of the most developed metropolises in Asia, it is somewhat late to the biennale game and is trying to catch up.

Augmenting official efforts is the Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) started last year by longtime gallerist Shalini Ganendra, who runs Shalini Ganendra Fine Art. Taking inspiration from popular Gallery Weekend events in cities such as Berlin and Beijing, the three-day city-wide programme offered the public an in-depth exploration of the country's art through gallery exhibitions, curatorial tours at museums, and public talks by well-known figures.

Even high-profile art collector Zain Azahari was persuaded to open the doors of his home and let strangers stream in to look at his rarely-seen collection of mostly Malaysian and Southeast Asian art.

Mr Zain says: "I've been collecting art since the 1960s, and I do think the situation for the art scene is better than ever. While I worry a little about the growing number of speculators as well as incidents of artistic censorship, we have better-trained artists now than before. They're well-travelled, well-informed, and the art is steadily maturing... Malaysian art is taking a while to gain global recognition, but there is a wealth of unique art here that deserves to be seen widely."

Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur will return next year from Nov 30 to Dec 2, 2018.

KL ART SCENE ON THE RISE

After a weak 2016 market due to the economy, the Malaysian art scene is back on track with its first Biennale and second Gallery Weekend

by HELMI YUSOF



Weekend

GUIDE TO THE KL ART SCENE

Museums, Galleries & Private Collections



01 NATIONAL ART GALLERY

Established in 1958, the National Art Gallery is simply called "Balai" by the locals – short for Balai Seni Negara, its Malay name. Currently, the gallery is hosting the inaugural Kuala Lumpur Biennale with 114 artists from Malaysia and abroad. Though somewhat limited in its scope (about 90 percent of its artists are Malaysians) compared to biennales elsewhere, it's a promising start for a country whose wealth of art is generally under-exposed and under-appreciated.

Many of the works come from the gallery's own permanent collection – hence, the strong presence of very established names such as Sulaiman Esa, Ibrahim Hussein and Yusof Ghani. The remainder of the works tend to be those of mid-career artists such as Saiful Razman, Chang Fee Ming and Shooshie Sulaiman whose skills and perspectives have sharpened over time. Contributions from international artists are few and far between, but they do include notable figures such as Cambodia's Anida Yoeu Ali, Indonesia's Krisna Murti and Singapore's own street artist Speak Cryptic whose massive mural occupies pride of place on the main display wall of Level 3.

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03 THE ZAIN COLLECTION

Well-known lawyer Zain Azahari is one of the most prolific collectors in the country. Having amassed some 500 works over 50 years, the 82-year-old has an enviable trove that includes rare pieces by Latiff Mohidin, Jolly Koh and Ibrahim Hussein. Esteemed curators the world over regularly knock on his door to view the works and sometimes request a temporary loan for their museums and institutions.

Though his holdings are private, Mr Zain has in recent years opened his home to small groups of art lovers for a sampling. At the recent Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur, the works on display included a large painting by Singapore wunderkind Ruben Pang, Indonesian stalwart Affandi and several stunning pieces by Malaysian artists Nadiah Bamadhaj, Haffendi Anuar and Chan Fee Ming. Though no dates have been set, he plans to open his home again on special occasions throughout 2018.



02 TAKSU GALLERIES

Taksu is one of Malaysia's oldest and most successful galleries, with branches in KL and Singapore. Its KL gallery is the more beautiful of the two, set in a well-conserved villa with a swimming pool at the back, in the leafy neighbourhood of Keramat. Founded by Suherwan Abu, who has a near unerring eye, the home gallery has a terrific stable of artists including Zelin Seah, Faizul Yusri and Noberto Roldan.

17 Jalan Pawang, 54000 Kuala Lumpur, T: +603 4251 4396



04 ISLAMIC ARTS MUSEUM MALAYSIA

It's often said that if you have time for only one arts institution during your visit to KL, visit the Islamic Arts Museum. Its world-famous private collection of 7,000 objects includes some of the rarest and most breathtaking artefacts of the Islamic faith. The 30,000-square metre museum houses intricate textiles, ceramics, arms and armour, jewellery and manuscripts from all over the world, including China and India.

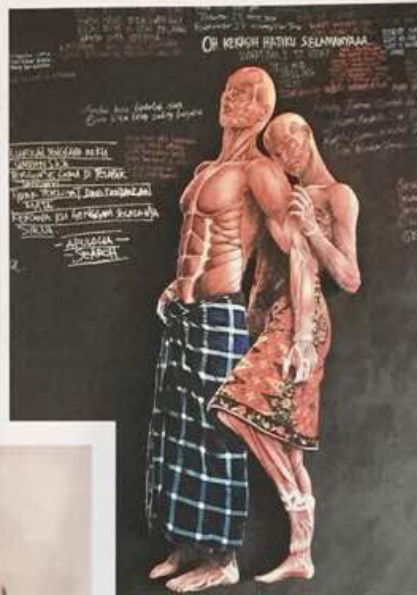
The collection aside, the building itself is architecturally splendid, with all-around glass walls that allow natural light in and patterned domed ceilings. Meanwhile, the museum's only restaurant serves an excellent, mid-priced lunch buffet of Middle Eastern cuisine that foodies swear by.

Jalan Lembah Perdana, Tasik Perdana, Wilayah Persekutuan, 50480 Kuala Lumpur, T: +603 2274 2020

05 SHALINI GANENDRA FINE ART

Also set in a residential area, this home gallery is run by Shalini Ganendra who is also the founder of Gallery Week Kuala Lumpur. Ms Ganendra is a strong champion of young talent, and two of her latest finds are Alena Murang and Shaq Koyok, a pair of rare artists from the Orang Asli (aboriginal) tribes trying to give voice to their disappearing heritage through contemporary art. Works by other young terrific artists such as Anniketyni Madian and Afiq Faris can also be found here.

No. 8 Lorong 16/7B, Section 16, 46350 Petaling Jaya, T: +603 7932 4740



07 GALERI CHANDAN

Chandan is situated at Publika Shopping Gallery, which itself is worth visiting because of the cluster of good galleries there. The best of them is Chandan, which made a mark for itself by helping to organise the Malaysian Emerging Artist Award and talent-spotting some of the most popular artists today, including Chong Ai Le and Cheong Tuck Wai. Its curation leans towards new blood and fresh ideas.

Lot 24 & 25, Level G4, Block C5, Publika Shopping Gallery, Jalan Dutamas, 50480 Kuala Lumpur, T: +603 6201 5360



06 SEGARIS ART CENTRE

Also located at Publika Shopping Mall, Segaris was created to promote the art of students of MARA Institute of Technology whose impressive alumni includes the who's who of Malaysian art such as Ahmad Zakii Anwar, Zulkifli Yusoff and Bayu Utomo Radjikin. Beside showing and selling art, it also host events such as seminars, workshops, performances and art fairs.

Lot 8, Level G4, Publika Shopping Gallery, Jalan Dutamas, 50480 Kuala Lumpur, T: +603 6243 1108



08 MAP @ PUBLIKA

Also at Publika Shopping Gallery is one of the most popular arts spaces in the city, MAP @ Publika. It consists of an art gallery frequently showcasing top-shelf art, as well as an auditorium hosting theatre, comedy and dance events. Recent shows include the Jolly Koh @ 76 exhibition (pictured), Art Against AIDS art competition and the Malaysia Startup Festival.

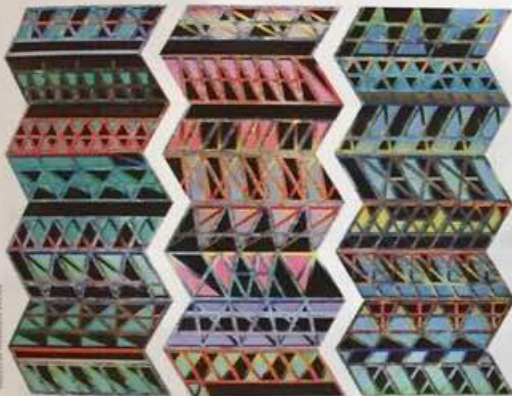
Level G2, Block A5, Publika Shopping Gallery, Jalan Dutamas, 50480 Kuala Lumpur, T: +603 6207 9732



11 WEI-LING GALLERY

A visit to this leading gallery rarely disappoints. Its shows are typically ambitious and it has a strong stable of artists that includes Anurendra Jegadeva and HH Lim, both of whose works have shown in the Singapore Biennale. The gallery has also published numerous good books on its artists and the art scene of Malaysia.

Wei-Ling Gallery has two branches in KL. Visit weiling-gallery.com for the addresses and contact numbers.



12 G13 GALLERY

A little out of the way but worth the journey, G13 is a young gallery that has quickly attracted the attention of collectors in just a few years. It has a roster of young artists and established veterans including Awang Damit Ahmad, Kow Leong Kiang, Faizal Suhif (pictured), Khairudin Zainudin and Gan Tee Sheng. If you'd like to sample its art, visit Singapore's biggest art fair, Art Stage, which G13 regularly participates in.

G13, Ground Floor, Block B, Kelana Square, Jalan SS 7/26, 47301 Petaling Jaya, T: +603 7880 0991

09 RICHARD KOH FINE ART

A purveyor of bold, challenging works, Richard Koh is one of Malaysia's best-known galleries at home and abroad. Founder Koh has exquisite taste and has talent-spotted several artists whose names are on the lips of serious collectors. These artists include Natee Utairit, Haffendi Anuar (pictured) and Yeoh Choo Kuan.

229 Jalan Maarof, Bukit Bandaraya, Bangsar, 59100 Kuala Lumpur, T: +603 2095 3300



10 NADINE FINE ART

Founded by artist Yusof Majid, Nadine (the name of his daughter) is best known for its selection of Malaysian and Indonesian artworks that are accessible and well-priced. Its artists include Indonesia's Nasirun and Malaysia's Jalaini Abu Hassan and Ahmad Shukri Mohamed.

64, Jalan Kemajuan, Seksyen 12, 46200 Petaling Jaya, T: +603 7931 5069



13 HOM ART TRANS

A terrific independent art space funded by prominent artist Bayu Utomo Radjikin, HOM Arts Trans has fervently supported many young artists over the years, often giving them their first chance to show their works publicly. As it receives no subsidy from the government, it operates entirely from the money it gets from the sale of the artworks. Hot artists of today who got some of their early breaks at HOM include Azam Aris, Zelin Seah and Anniketyni Madlan.

6A Jalan Cempaka 16, 68000 Ampang Jaya, T: +60 12 373 6004