

ART MALAYSIA: THE POST-MOLTEN CORE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

By Peter Frank

It comes as no surprise that an art scene has emerged in Malaysia resembling those in Western countries in its social and aesthetic complexity. After all, the last two decades have seen such art scenes assert themselves in many Asian countries, to various extents and subject, of course, to local variation. What is notable is that art production in Malaysia, as evidenced both by its art production and the infrastructure supporting that production, is evolving and growing at an increasingly rapid rate. At this point, in fact, it may be not only patronizing but inaccurate to describe Malaysia's art scene as "maturing." It may already have matured; if not, it is certainly on the verge.

Such an observation itself can smack of patronization by any outside observer, especially a Western one. But, then, were it to come from an inside observer, it could smack of boastfulness. Finally, we can't worry about sins of motivation on the part of the assessors; whether by art critics or sociologists, such assessments must be made, especially at a time when artists around the world compete for attention and sources for that attention multiply.

The regard an American commentator, in particular, can have for artistic activity in Malaysia is one of recognition, leading almost to a sense of kinship. Here, recapitulated on the other side of the globe, is a vigorous, rapidly changing discourse driven by a similarly dynamic polity – a polity whose dynamism is generated as much by its diversity as by its natural or commercial wealth, its history, or its indigenous heritage. Indeed, although there is an indigenous identity whose re-assertion figures so forcefully in this

Malaysian Renaissance, the true nature of this Renaissance is multi-sourced, dependent as much on non-original peoples as on original.

Any number of Malaysian artists are, or can be, individually poised to emerge in the international discourse of art. But that is not what is remarkable. The emergence of a discourse in Malaysia itself that can not only produce, but sustain, such artists pays testimony to Malaysian contemporary culture's accession to a state of sophistication concomitant with global standards. The Malaysian art scene is not one of the largest in the world, but it is arguably becoming one of the most vibrant.

In this light, a collection like this one, immense in its breadth, serves as a laboratory full of "core samples" taken around the Malaysian art world. To be sure, the coring is done with a certain prejudice; formulated by the taste as well as dedication of only two people (whose intellectual harmony forges a single comprehension), the Khan collection has been assembled by methods whose empiricism is their only resemblance to science. But, then, whatever their biases, such privately-held assessments – and there are several in Malaysia – serve as counterbalances, even goads, to those collected and tended in the name of the state. After all, the eyes of officials, no matter how trained or sympathetic to art and artists, are necessarily compromised by the demands of polity and bureaucracy – very different factors than those that might compromise the activities of private patrons.

This has been true throughout the Western art world ever since the task of collecting bifurcated into state and private roles. The Wunderkammer created by princes became museums, while the Wunder they embodied re-asserted itself in the passions of the merchant class. Or, to put it perhaps closer to home, the khanates hoarded for their

people(s), while our Khans hoard for – well, for far more than just themselves, but for themselves at least to start. But the nature of the Khans' collecting vision – the fact that they have a vision of collecting – bespeaks the existence, worldwide and in Malaysia equally, of a third force between the state and the private collector: the public collector. The Khans collect for more than their own delight and amusement; it is simply that their delight and amusement enter into the shaping of their hoard the way it can't in a publicly held collection. But both such collections are designed to serve audiences – and serve artists.

In this light, can the Khan collection be regarded as a helpful, informative sampling of Malaysian art? Certainly in the breach, the fact that there are relatively few other such collections as yet makes the Khans' invaluable to the Malaysian art scene and its observers alike. But the expansiveness with which the Khans collect, always tempering their discretion with the urge to seed and nourish their art world – and vice versa – renders their collection special, if not unique. There is no way – or for that matter, need – to argue whether their collection is more discerning, more accurate, more profound, or even larger than their friends' and rivals', or even the state's. We need only acknowledge that the collection, by the Khans' own decision, goes back no further than the 1970s; from there, we can satisfy ourselves that it includes many Malaysian artists and, in its aggregate, argues for the relative sophistication of the milieu in which these artists have been working.

Of course, this particular commentator determines this "relative sophistication" according to his own experience of "sophistication," as manifested in the United States, various European countries, and certain Asian ones. Like collectors and curators, critics

and other observers lug stacks of personal baggage to every experience – the weightiest bags being those most recently acquired. The temptation is simply to laud Malaysian art for being more or less like Western art, or, conversely, to over-emphasize its differences – that is, either to unpack the bags or to hide them. The Khan collection, in particular, challenges us to keep the bags open but not unpacked, to weigh what is Malaysian in Malaysian art against – or with – what is international in Malaysian art. That is, whose “sophistication” is it, Malaysia’s or the world’s?

And what, indeed, constitutes artistic “sophistication” in the world at this point? That yardstick is ultimately wielded by the West, and over the past three decades non-Western societies have sought to answer to it, with varying degrees of success at various times. East Asian societies in particular have pressed against this yardstick, often with an eagerness that evinces not just a desire to join the club, but to beat the West at its own game. Current conditions of artistic/art-world sophistication, after all, maintain according to rules grounded largely in Western civilization and philosophy, rules that distinguish art from artifacture, that privilege individual “expression,” and that create elaborate intellectual, social and economic relationships between makers, purveyors, adjudicators and owners of “artworks.” The sophistication of non-Western art scenes is evaluated according to these determinants today no less than it was in, say, the 1920s; today, however, those art scenes are passing the bar – some with flying colors.

The question that this writer is thus at all qualified to answer is, is Malaysia passing the bar? By how much? How much success in these terms can, and do, Malaysia’s artists expect to enjoy internationally? And does the Khan collection reasonably reflect

these conditions – and abet them? (I'm tempted also to ask, should Malaysia and its art scene care about passing the bar? But, inevitably, they do.)

Unquestionably, Malaysia's art scene passes muster at this juncture – and, to judge by (among other things) work in the Khan collection, does so in part by emulating Western models and formats directly, in part by improving upon them, and in part by adapting them to formats and idioms associated with indigenous artistic production. Art in Malaysia cannot be dismissed as the mere result of imported Western idioms; more and more of the country's artists have access to an ever-wider variety of Western and non-Western styles, and are increasingly concerned with making those styles work in a Malaysian context – a strategy that includes addressing universal issues from a specifically Malaysian standpoint. A range of topics, from ecological disaster to political corruption to the turmoil in Islam, is fair game for contemporary Malaysian artists; as well, abstract approaches continue to appeal to more formalist sensibilities. Perhaps it is that particular range of topics, rather than the modes used to address them, that constitute what is Malaysian in Malaysian art.

But perhaps not. There is a stylistic weight to Malaysian art, as the Khan collection avers, that may allow a variety of formal modes but is hardly indiscriminate. We find at the heart of contemporary Malaysian artistic expression an a priori acceptance of the sensate. That is, the expressive, the expansive, and the beautiful is favored over the restrained, the rationalized, and the self-effacing. But, in contrast to Western artistic discourse, "expressive" here does not infer "ugly." Few Malaysian artists – certainly among the successful ones – indulge themselves, but in general they do seem to indulge their viewers' eyes. Even harsh or strange imagery tends to be rendered with

exquisite craft and/or exhilarating extravagance; to drive home what may be complex and unflattering points about society or human nature, Malaysian artists (abstractionists not least) are likely to resort not to technical coarseness, but to elegant line, vivid color, assured (if almost imposingly complex) composition, and/or disarming pictorial wit. Malaysian art is no less an art of declaration than are its counterparts in other parts of the world; but, that said, it is an art of persuasion more than it is an art of alienation. However offended Malaysian artists might be by their land or world, they speak to it rather than reject it.

Malaysian art, then, has little room for the Western romantic construct of the artist as a conflicted being in natural, irresolvable struggle with his or her society. Rather, artists in Malaysia display a close and confident connection to their cultural heritage and equally to the forms and techniques they have been provided by Western models, all in the service of a dynamic but constructive relationship to the society – and by extension world – they occupy. While Malaysian artists practice distinctive styles, to the point where more than a few are ready to take their place on the international stage, their artistic vision is driven by sensitivity as much to what is happening outside the studio as to what is happening inside. Some balance inner voice and outer view better than others, of course, but most seem to seek that balance as a matter of course. The embrace of the Pop idiom, for instance, allows various painters and sculptors to entertain, criticize, satirize, and propagandize while exercising sometimes surprising formal invention. Malaysians are also adept at realism, expressionism, conceptualism, geometric and gestural abstraction, and various other modalities forged in the West; but

rather than invest their individual sensibilities in these idioms, they employ these idioms to posit vigorous (if still personal) reflection on the world around them.

Thus, while aggressively embracing Modernism, post-Modernism, and even neo-Modernism, the Malaysian artist's stance rejects the extremism that has so often characterized Western artistic expression since Modernism dawned. There is no declared submission of the Malaysian artist's vision to the broader social good, but in their practice Malaysian artists seem tacitly to acknowledge their responsibility to their compatriots, their species, and their planet. Malaysian art is not political, but it is unusually conscious of polity. And, conversely, it is not decorative, but is notably accepting of what might visually gratify its audience. It sets reason astride passion, assuring at its best a wild ride but not an irresponsible one. Such a balanced sensibility may or may not propose itself as universally ideal, but it works for Malaysia – and, as the Khan collection demonstrates, results in some very engaging, compelling, and even surprising art, art that speaks well beyond the borders of its land.

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