

Kok Yew Puah

Klang and Beyond

VALENTINE  
WILLIE  
*fine* ART

# Kok Yew Puah

## Klang and Beyond

Kok Yew Puah first emerged within the local art scene in 1973 when he staged a one-man exhibition at the now-defunct Samat Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. He was then a young 24-year-old man who had just returned from his artistic studies in Melbourne in Australia. He had specialised in print-making endeavours and his silk-screened prints were quite large and colourfully vibrant to behold. These earliest works were circumscribed by abstract “hard-edged” colouristic pursuits, emphasising an interest in bold minimalist shapes and contrasting colour relationships. For most of the 1970’s he participated in group exhibitions. Some of his prints were purchased by the National Art Gallery and also by local art collectors. He became a well-known and well-liked younger artist.

Sometime during the late 1970’s, he suddenly disappeared from the local art scene and did not produce any more artistic creations. Forced to take up responsibility in the family business endeavours, he was to spend many difficult and back-breaking years setting up a food-manufacturing company in Klang. His company would become famous for the chilli and tomato sauces, and the exotic curry powders that it manufactured. During these very difficult years, he produced no art works. He had become a businessman. In the process, he also married and fathered two children. But deep inside of him, he missed making art works.

Towards the late 1980’s, he decided to find some time for his art-making instincts. He began painting after his office hours but the progress was slow and difficult. He had to start all over again. He had initially focussed on themes related to environmental decay and also personalised portraits related to his own family background. He also painted a series of works based on the Chinese “Hungry Ghosts” festival. His new works were now representational and inclined toward social commentary. In 1993, he finally resurfaced in the local art scene and exhibited his new works. His one-man exhibition, held at the National Art Gallery’s Creative Centre, was well-received and several works were also sold. He was encouraged but he now had to make a serious decision - to be a businessman or an artist?

*On the cover*

**Temple Figures**

1997

Acrylic on canvas

144.5 cm x 144.5 cm



After the 1993 one-man show, Kok Yew Puah bravely chose to give up his business commitments and become a full-time artist. The transition was made in stages. He eventually sold off his business and returned to his first love - art. And he has not regretted that fateful decision. In 1995 and 1996, he was one of the winners in the prestigious Philip Morris Malaysian-level painting competition. He was already on his way back to being a serious artist. That his wife, Sally-Anne, who is a working woman, has been fully supportive of his decision has certainly helped him find new confidence as an artist. Clearly, he is a very much happier man these days, following the artistic vocation on a full-time basis.

Kok Yew Puah is presently 50 years old. He is an older man with more mature perceptions about life and the social environment. His basic interest in the nature of change, especially the new rapid social transformations taking place all around him in the 1990's, has given him his main themes as an artist. His art is essentially geared towards social commentary, albeit underscored by a predilection towards both the lyrical and the prosaic. And this is clearly detectable in his handling of colour and his inherent interest in juxtapositioning contrasting sets of pictorial images.

Two young women are located amidst a deep green backdrop that turns out to be a graveyard for discarded motor cars. A group of young and zestful Malaysian schoolchildren on their bicycles pose eagerly before a dehumanising concrete flyover. Men dressed in fashionable Western clothes are depicted wearing tribal masks derived from the traditional Southeast Asian cultural past. Japanese tourists in the act of photographing the Malaysian environment are themselves, unknowingly, being framed by another camera observing their antics. Young Malaysian schoolchildren, groovily dressed, are caught in a formal pose and set against a backdrop of colourful Hindu gods and goddesses that are part of a temple wall. Playful, animated Chinese Kids in Pulau Ketam, near Klang, strain towards the camera's framing view-finder amidst a tranquil landscape filled with fishing boats and wooden huts.

There is a suggestion of the voyeur somewhere in Kok Yew Puah's mental make-up. The recurring use of the camera's framing view-finder, capturing vignettes of life's odd, fragmented moments, is an especially interesting aspect of the artist's works. The use of this device in some of his best paintings creates a sense of entrapment and also an existential quality. The artist is, in this case, a somewhat detached observer and recorder of the environment and the people who fill the painted spaces, frozen in a particularised moment in time. It is a controlled and carefully manipulated kind of statement that is underpinned by a seemingly unforced kind of realism.

I have known Kok Yew Puah since the time of his first one-man show of 1973. And I have been following his artistic development ever since that earlier time, when he was a very young man. It is gratifying to note that the artist in him has finally won over the sometime committed businessman he also once was. This present one-man exhibition may be viewed as his real point of "arrival", as a distinctive and highly satisfying Malaysian artist. One cannot but feel that Kok Yew Puah, the older artist, can only further mature and improve, like old wine, with the continuing passage of time.

**Redza Piyadasa**

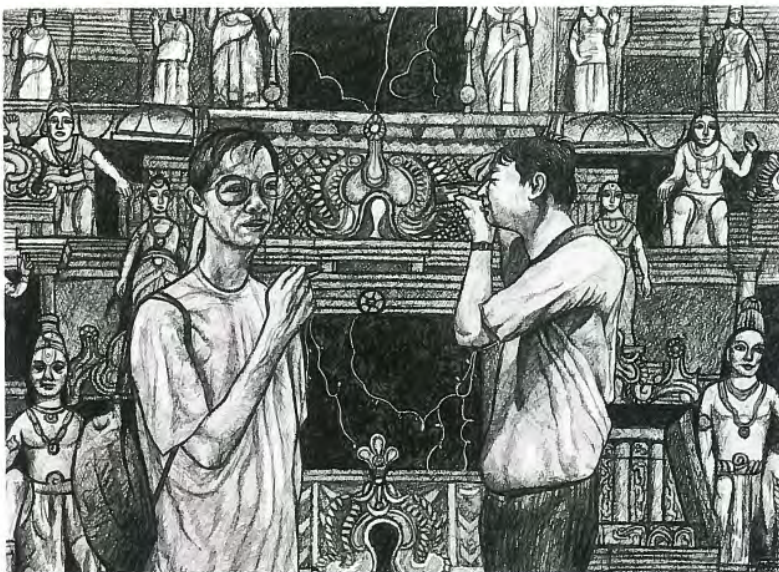


**In Front of an Indian  
Temple**

1997

Acrylic on canvas

137 cm x 137 cm



**In Front of an Indian  
Temple: A Study**

1997

Charcoal on paper

56 cm x 76.5 cm





### Masks and the Modern Man

1995

Acrylic on canvas

162 cm x 223 cm



### Temple Figures: A Study

1997

Charcoal and acrylic on paper

77.5 cm x 108.5 cm





**Posing with Mercedes: A Study**

1997

Charcoal and acrylic on paper

79 cm x 109.5 cm



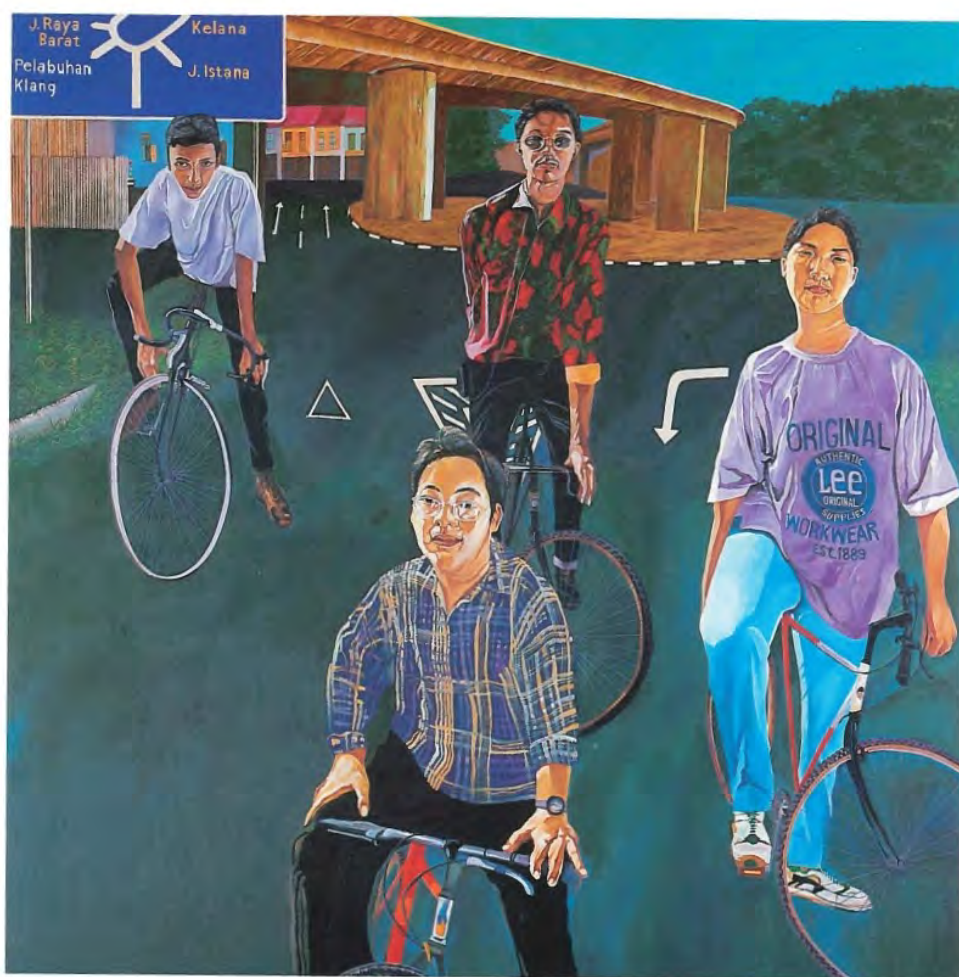
**Sisters**

1994

Acrylic on canvas

143 cm x 143 cm





**Cyclists**

1995

Acrylic on canvas

163 cm x 163 cm

**No Pictures, Please**

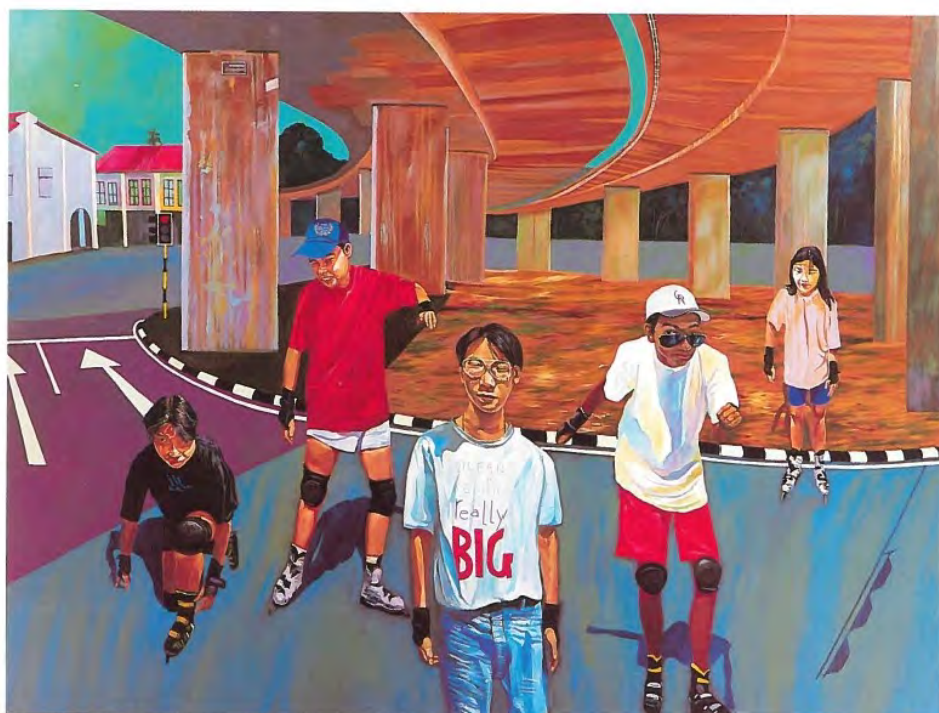
1997

Charcoal and acrylic on paper

78.5 cm x 108.5 cm







**Urban Playground**

1994

Acrylic on canvas

139 cm x 184 cm



**Camera View of Children  
on Pulau Ketam**

1993

Acrylic on canvas

136 cm x 136 cm



**Camera View of the Artist**

1993

Acrylic on canvas

136 cm x 136 cm

**Kok Yew Puah****Born**

1947 Klang, Selangor

**Education**

1966-72 Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, Australia

Awarded Diploma in Painting and Master Diploma in Print Making

**Awards**

1994 2nd Prize in Philip Morris Malaysia Awards

1997 Honorable Mention, Philip Morris Malaysia Awards

**Solo Exhibitions**

1972 Gallery III, Brisbane, Australia

1973 Samat Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1993 Creative Art Centre, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

**Group Exhibitions**

1970's National Art Gallery Invitation Shows, Kuala Lumpur

*Student Print Makers in Australia*, touring Exhibition in Asia

International Print Exhibition, Tokyo, Japan

*Young Artists International*, New York, USA1980's *Malaysian Art From 1970-80*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

National Art Gallery Open Shows, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Artists Association Show, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

Klang Artists Association Show, Klang, Malaysia

1990's *Art and It's Social Contacts* Invitation Show for Internal-State

Touring Exhibition in Malaysia

*Man and His Environment*, National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur

1st Invitation Show for Asian Touring Exhibition

2nd Invitation Show for Asian Touring Exhibition

Bangladesh International Exhibition, Bangladesh





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*Southeast Asian Paintings & Works of Art*

This exhibition will be opened by  
YBhg. Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar, Special Envoy of the Prime Minister  
on Monday 11th August 1997, and will end on 31st August 1997.

Curated by Valentine Willie.