

SUNDAY

STYLE

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Brushing up on the past 12/13

Moviemaker Sam Wanamaker 2/3

Outdoors: Great going on all fours 20/21

Kok Yew Puah – brushing up on the past



TODAY'S YOUTH... Portrait of the Insurance Salesman in Pulau Ketam

Family commitments forced him to take a decade-long break from painting, but now Kok Yew Puah is back with a solo exhibition, writes REDZA PIYADSA

AFTER an absence of some 15 years or more, artist Kok Yew Puah is back with a one-man exhibition.

Klang-born Kok was initially exposed to the local art scene in the early 1970s, when he returned from Australia where he majored in painting and print-making.

His first show here was held at the Samat Art Gallery in 1973 and even then, his talent was obvious. He employed the silk-screen technique to produce large prints, depicting the interplay of colourful abstract shapes and forms.

His prints were, at that time, very stunning visually, and his works were sought after by the National Art Gallery and by local art collectors.

He also took part in local art exhibitions regularly during the 1970s while lecturing on print-making part-time at the ITM School of Art.

Then suddenly, in the late 1970s, he dropped out of the scene, not through choice but family commitment. Pressured into taking on the responsibilities of the family business, Kok spent the next 10 years setting up a food manufacturing company in Klang.

This left little time for such "frivolous pursuits" like art. Moreover, by now, he had a wife and two young children who needed his attention as well.

Nevertheless, Kok did not forget his first love. He continued to visit local art exhibitions and to read art books. Deep inside, he wished he could return to his artistic interests.

As his company grew, Kok started delegating time-consuming aspects of the business to others. This way, he was able to indulge in his art, mostly at night.

By 1985, he was beginning to express himself artistically once again. This time, the maturity shows in his work as he turned to representational art.

Initially, he says, he found it difficult to pick up the threads of his artistic past. To start, his perception of life had changed and he wanted to say something new.

Quite lost for direction, he came across a monograph on the English painter, David Hockney whose approach struck a cord in him.

He began to produce works with a distinct Hockney influence. In doing so, he was re-learning his painting skills that he had neglected for so long. This helped him recover his confidence.

What is significant about Kok's 'Hockney-style' works is that they deal with local themes.

To find suitable subject matter, he had no need to look further than his hometown of Klang – old kampung houses, shophouses and children's playgrounds.

His predilection for meticulous details is evident; so is his interest in bright light and blue skies and contrasting colours.

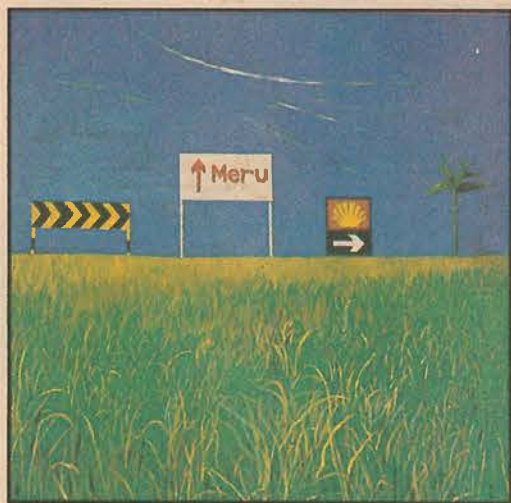
And it was also while re-discovering the environments of his childhood in Klang that awoke in Kok an awareness of the social and cultural ravages brought about by too rapid modernisation.

Finding the need to address these issues, he now embarked on a new series of works such as The T-Junction, For Sale, Abandoned Paddy Fields, Kenyataan, and Composition, which are, in essence, comments on the environmental issue.

In The T-Junction, an old, traditional Malay House is threatened by a new highway. The sign Berhenti may be interpreted as a traffic sign or as a warning to us to respect the past and its values.

In For Sale, an abandoned playground remains, amidst a plot of real estate that has been put up for sale. On the horizon is an elongated red and white No Entry sign.

Similarly, The Abandoned Paddy Fields is a pointed reminder on the disappearance of our padi-fields. Lallang grows now where padi once flourished and in the distance are the encroaching commercial



ABANDONED PADDY FIELDS... lallang grows tall where fields of padi once stood



THE T-JUNCTION... an old kampung house threatened by development



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... with Kenyataan where abandoned shells of old motor cars litter the landscape



... the children's playground for progress

boards, and road-signs. Kenyataan, the abandoned shells of motor cars litter the landscape. This is addressing the environmental issue marked by a poetic yet discomfiting at. They are commentaries on the disturbance of affairs born of our materialistic pursuits and our failure to understand the deeper meaning of man's relationship with land and the past. Personally, I find these works highly significant creations, because of their content and also, the artist's technical dexterity. The quietness inherent in these works

is indeed deceptive, pointing to irresponsibility on our part.

In the last two years, Kok has also addressed issues related to his own ethnic background.

In a number of works celebrating the Hungry Ghost Festival, he places large joss-sticks and altars against denuded landscapes or against commercial posters of tantalising girls advertising soft drinks.

In other works, he depicts the stage of the Chinese wayang, suggesting cultural links with the Chinese past and heritage.

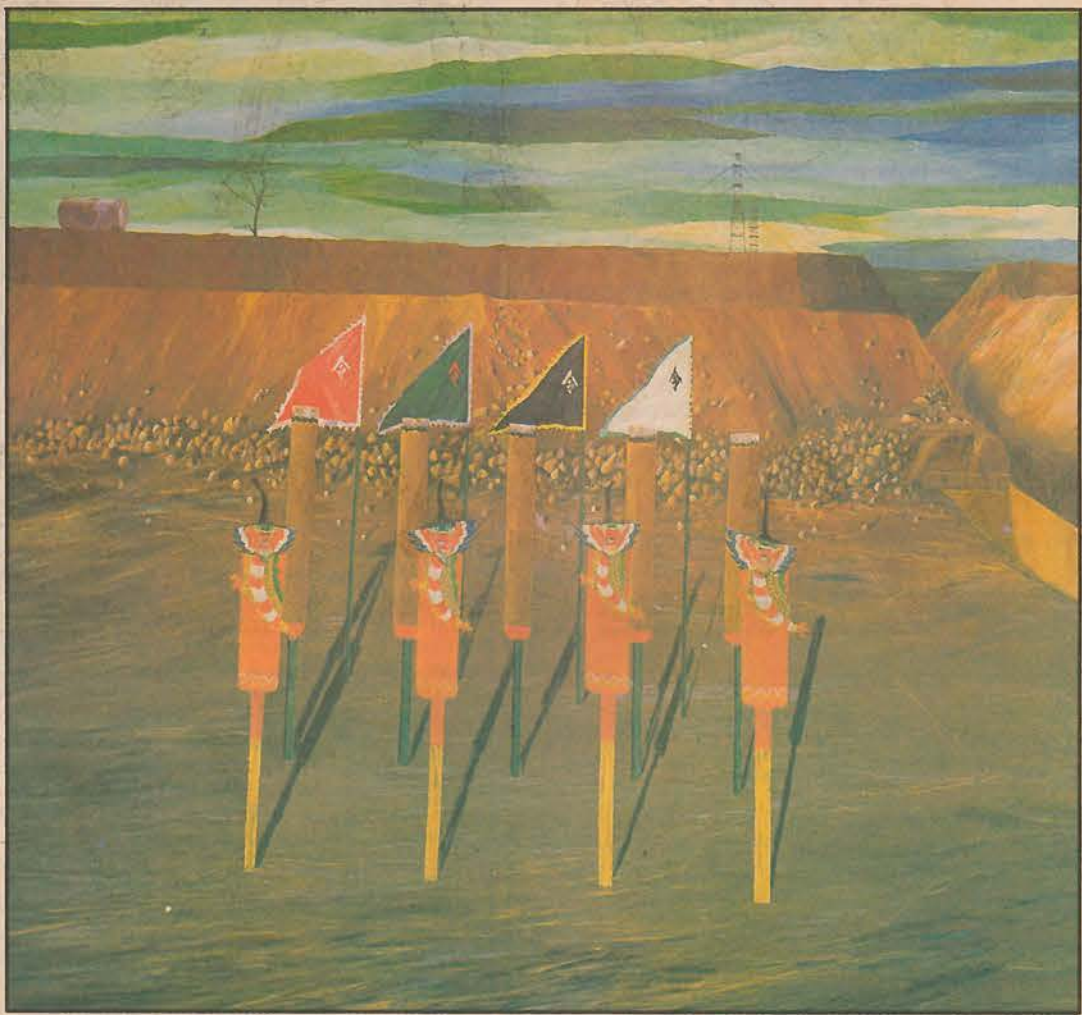
One of Kok's more recent works is a comment on the new-world professions pursued by Chinese youths.

The Portrait Of The Insurance Salesman In Pulau Ketam is both brilliant and satirical. A young, well dressed and neck-tied insurance salesman poses against the backdrop of a rural Chinese riverine village, holding his inevitable briefcase.

The old and the new meet in a work that is beautifully composed and painted. The essential flatness of the highly spatial composition is most satisfying.

Clearly then, with Kok's return, one can look forward to the further flowering of a serious artistic talent.

• The exhibition, Paintings by Kok Yew Puah: 1985-1993 is being held at the Creative Centre at the National Art Gallery, 1 Jalan Hishamuddin, Kuala Lumpur. Opened on March 5, the exhibition ends tomorrow. Viewing hours are from 10am to 6pm.



THE HUNGRY GHOST FESTIVAL... joss-sticks against a stark, denuded landscape