



HYPOCRISY OF HUMAN ACTION ... Kok Yew with one of his works. Pictures by K. SUKUMARAN

Kok Yew paints a changing world

By Ooi Kok Chuen

'COOL' Malaysian teenagers in T-shirts and jeans of the so-called 'McDonald's Generation' roller-blading or mountain-biking in 'faceless' urban thoroughfares.

Switch: Indian religious icons in the backdrop as stirring symbols of culture, faith and tradition, and to create ambiguity of space and time.

These two main thematic strands form Puah Kok Yew's new works in his solo exhibition, entitled *Klang and Beyond*, at Valentine Willie Fine Art in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur.

Since he made his comeback solo (entitled *Kok Yew Puah: 1885-93*) in 1993 after a 15-year hiatus, he has consistently focused on changes in our cultural, social, environmental (man-made and natural) and physical conditions and milieu.

His works reflect the incongruities of tradition and transformation, values and trends, with viewfinder detachment, and all from the prism of his Klang hometown.

New urban landscapes are depicted as serpentine transportation monsters. His landscapes of sanitised Hockneyian colours, lines and space are often coupled with questioning, pointed directional signages.

Gone is his palette of the late 1980s/early 1990s on abandoned padifields or playgrounds. In booming Klang now, every square inch of land is utilised for various developments.

When he deals with physical space, it is not only about modern infrastructural superstructures, but also the way we are becoming to look - what with changing diet, fashion (both in dressing and hair-style), lifestyles and exposures.

Globalisation, with innovations in info-technology, has brought about more than subtle changes within us, affecting our values and the way we think, approach and do things.

Compare the rural children grimacing in front of the painted 'camera' in an earlier work only a few years ago to a recent one on suave urban dudes on designer bicycles or strapped on roller-blades, complete with stylish protector gear.

The Indian temple and religious icons on pedestals such as Krishna represent bastions of truth and tradition, but the mythological epic triumph of Good over Evil seems forgotten in the "Mercedes syndrome" materialistic chase.



GLEEFUL ... One of Kok Yew's 'snapshots'

Such images also incorporate folk art elements into his works.

Kok Yew, 50, sees the young in a dilemma in the Info-Tech/Bio-Tech Age.

"I see the young as having their own set of values which is totally different from my generation's. It's like the 1960s (counter-culture movement) all over again when the young rebelled against the establishment. Technology has affected them greatly, with most of their information coming from television, radio and the computer. They are not so attuned to Nature."

Kok Yew's protagonists are often confrontational, fully aware that they are in the picture and 'talking' to, and interacting, with the viewer - sometimes through provocative gesticulations.

The figuratives are based on family members: his wife Sally, who is seven years his junior and often depicted slightly distorted, castigating something or swathed in icy indifference; his children - son Ser Hon, 17, and daughter, Sze Ning, 13; and fellow artist Chan Chiow Teng.

In one work, he also touches on the hypocrisy of human action with three men in the forefront hiding behind a *topeng*. The one in the middle in trim business suit is flanked by two others who are stripped to their waists. A souped-up Volkswagen is parked next to a man about to launch his giant wau to complete the puzzle.

Such dualism abounds in his works: the ludicrous scenario between the living and the dead in the Hungry Ghosts Festival; the

smartly-dressed insurance salesman in 'Sleepy Hollow' Pulau Ketam; a 1988 work on a road 'of development' leading towards an old Malay stilt house at a T-Junction (an ominous location) with the strategically located 'Berhenti' sign indicating affirmation as well as helplessness.

In his new works, Kok Yew has switched from brighter-hued acrylics to oils for greater facial tones, textural nuances and colour schema.

Though his new works reveal a more complex composition of ideas and images, vestigial elements of Pop and Hard-Edge remain. These movements also left an indelible mark on him for during his final-year studies at the Victorian College of the Art in Melbourne, when a new group of lecturers influenced by the American Pop Art and Hard-Edge took over, lecturers such as Bea Maddock, Allan Leash Jones, and Lantorn Parr.

So when a friend gave him a Hockney monograph, it triggered similar impulses in him and helped relaunch his career.

"I was lost then, having not been seriously painting for a long time because I had been concentrating on the family's ketchup business," he recalled.

Since then, Kok Yew has gone on to win one of the national level awards of the Philip Morris Group of Companies Asean Art Awards in 1994 and 1995, where he was sent to the finals in Singapore and Jakarta respectively.

He also received honourable mentions in the

same competition last year and this year.

In 1994, he also helped form the Malaysian Contemporary Watercolorists Association, and is its vice-president.

Besides the family business, Kok Yew was also turned away from art because of the unfavourable conditions on his return from his studies at the Victorian College of the Arts in 1972 with a diploma in painting and master diploma in printmaking.

But the country was hit by a recession and he couldn't hold a decent job in art. He taught printmaking part-time at the Mara Institute of Technology in 1973-74.

"I returned at the worst possible time. I could hardly sell my works and everybody was trying to find new direction. There were also no printmaking facilities for me to work on," he said.

"There was hardly anything at the National Art Gallery. If they organised something, few took part."

It was in Australia that he held his first one-man show, at Galeri III in Brisbane. On his return, he was given a solo exhibition at Frank Sullivan's Samat Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur in 1973.

When his business became more established and he could delegate the duties to others, Kok Yew went back to painting, mostly at night.

Kok Yew credited his progress in art during his secondary school days at Peng Hwa High School in Klang to Chinese brush master Tan Kim Sar.

"Kim Sar was closely connected to some lecturers at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore and adapted their teaching methods," he recalled.

"We also formed a fine art society with members such as Tham Siew Inn, T.S. Teo and Ng Chai Heng. We often went for field paintings in kampungs and fishing villages. We would also meet during weekends and school holidays and artists living in the vicinity would come over and share their knowledge."

"We also took part in art competitions in Kuala Lumpur, mostly organised by the Arts Council or the British Council."

□ Kok Yew Puah: *Klang and Beyond* was officiated by Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar, the Special Envoy of the Prime Minister, at Valentine Willie Fine Art at 17, Jalan Telawi 3 (1st Floor), Bangsar Baru, Kuala Lumpur. It ends on Aug 31.