

OBITUARY

Seeing beyond his canvas



CAMERA VIEW OF THE ARTIST... 1993, acrylic on canvas

ARTIST Puah Kok Yew, who died on March 29 at age 51, of heart failure, was a prophet, critic and messiah all rolled into one.

His 1993 solo exhibition, *Kok Yew Puah: 1985-1993*, which celebrated his return after a 12-year hiatus from painting, presaged the boom-boom development that saw the country's economy burning on all cylinders until the Black September 1997 meltdown.

In this exhibition, the works rung in a requiem for the *kampung* house and colonial shophouse and heralded the big change that was to come in the country's development from agrarian to industrial to high-tech.

The clean gloss finish in most of his works exuded a mood of eerie quietness, always suggesting some impending danger.

By his next solo, *Klang and Beyond*, at the Valentine Willie Fine Arts in August 1997, the alienation of Man had become more keenly felt, and the focus had moved from a crumbling defenceless traditional landscape to figuratives of the boisterous young generation of the Vacuous New World.

The abandoned padi fields, illegal rubbish dumps and playgrounds demarcated for development of his 1985-93 oeuvre were now replaced by pictures of mon-

ster megaliths such as serpentine flyovers, rapid-transport superstructures, and skyscrapers often depicted in nocturnal light.

The vacant "plots" underneath elevated highways had become home and a clubhouse of sorts for a group of teenagers on designer mountain-bikes or snazzy skateboards.

The ethnicity of the group, reflecting social polarisation, further added an element of concern. These were the kids dubbed by some as the McDonald's Generation, living in a fast-food culture, very Internet-driven and technology-savvy with all the new Ds of gizmos - CDs, CD-ROMs, mini-Discs, Video CDs, DVDs...

More frighteningly, these were by general extension, US, our future hopes of the New Millennium.

Kok Yew's works always had this cutting social relevance. His canvases were peopled with real faces, with real interests, real problems, and in a real place, often with his hometown Klang as the 'microcosmic' mileau.

As the normally reticent Kok Yew told me during the 1997 exhibition: "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.

As an artist, Puah Kok Yew had a vision that was almost prophetic, writes OOI KOK CHUEN



KOK YEW'S STUDIO... with his final work yet unfinished

"Technology has affected them greatly, with most of their information coming from television, radio and the computer. They are not so attuned to Nature."

His themes revolved around the immediate physical environment around us and the psychological environment therein, the encroachment of modernisation into the *kampung*. There was a subtle shift in his 1990s works - into questions of conflicts of generation, cultural tradition and transformations and spiritual values.

Since his comeback, Kok Yew had, for the last 14 years, worked and worked like a man possessed. He found himself reinvigorated by the impulses of social change around him. When he was in Singapore and Jakarta as one of the five Malaysian winners of the Philip Morris Group of Companies' Asean Art Awards in 1994 and 1995 respectively, he was excited by the maturity and skills shown by the young artists in the region.

"The works of the (Asean)

young artists are very strong, rooted in their place of being, and show they are moving away from Western idioms and aesthetics," he told me in Jakarta in 1995.

Kok Yew's works throbbed with great relevance and irony, with immediacy and urgency. His was Art Now, with a topicality and locale, and a visual language and style that was eye-catching and easily understood.

Klang was used as his backdrop because it was something real and familiar to him. Ditto, the "characters" in his paintings - they were there also to play-act his little 'operas' with socio-economic themes. The cast included wife Sally Anne and children, Ser Hon, 19, and Sze Ning, 15 as well as an artist-friend, Chan Chiow Teng.

On a personal note, Kok Yew was also intrigued by passing time, transiency and ageing, and the sense of one's own mortality.

In one work, *Portrait of Anne Puah* (acrylic on canvas, 1994), he depicted Sally Anne in a symbolic floral dress against a flower bed, but with a discarded car in the

backdrop. The ephemeral nature of flowers was ranged against the car left to rust and rot. The human parallel was unsettling.

Some may see it as artistic ego when Kok Yew insinuated himself into one of his paintings, *Camera View of the Artist*, which had idle boats in the background. To him, it was also an overwhelming urge to reclaim a fast disappearing past of the Klang that he grew up in.

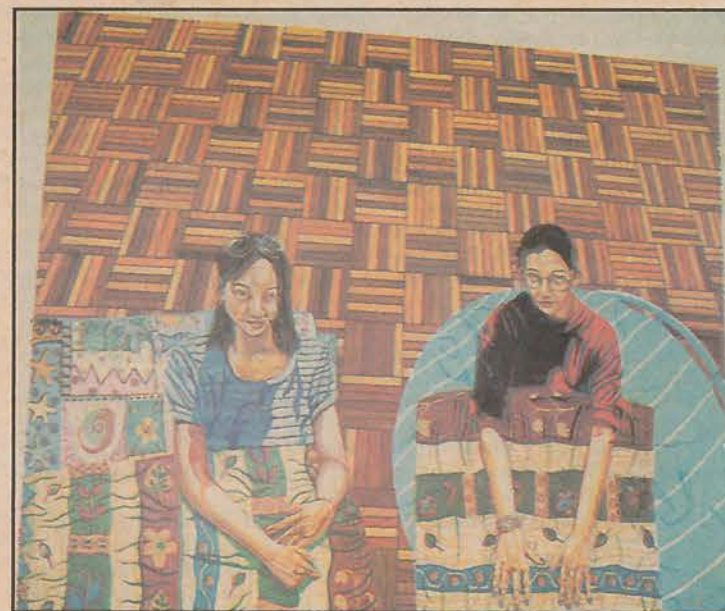
His portrait works relied heavily on photography. Photography re-affirmed a reality, showing him at a certain place at a certain time.

The camera viewfinder device helped him create a sense of detachment between artist/viewer-voyeur and the subject depicted.

In his new works, Kok Yew seemed intrigued by the interplay of patterning (patchwork quilts) and geometrics (parquet flooring). Another set "canned" people inside cars against the backdrop of garishly spruced-up shophouses.

Said Sally Anne: "Up until his death, he kept on painting. One work is only partly finished."

She said that Kok Yew had been

STUDY OF FIGURES... one of Kok Yew's latest works using his son's schoolmates for models
LEFT... the same study in monochrome



THE LATE KOK YEW... with Masks and The Modern Man (1995)

feeling lethargic in the last two weeks of his life.

Kok Yew belonged to that group of artists schooled overseas on the rigours of printmaking and who returned during the late 1960s and early 1970s - Lee Joo-for, Long Thien Shih, Loo Foh San, Sulaiman Easa, Choong Kam Kow, Chew Teng Beng, William K.K. Lau ...

On his return, he was given a solo at Frank Sullivan's Samat Gallery, where he showed his large silkscreens of colourful non-representational shapes and forms, As luck would have it, the country was reeling in the throes of recession and Kok Yew found it difficult to make a living as an artist.

In 1973-74, he tried teaching printmaking part-time at the Mara Institute of Technology. But, as his close friend Joseph Tan, observed: "In a Chinese family, painting and not having a steady job were just not acceptable. Besides, Kok Yew could not develop his work properly because there were no printmaking facilities to speak of. What was available at ITM was not accessible to the public."

Joseph (also Australian-trained at first), waxed lyrical over Kok Yew's prints, which together with those of another returning Klang artist Long Thien Shih, was regarded as an eye-opener.

"He (Kok Yew) was exposed to new ideas and had tremendous potential. But he came back to the doldrums," he said.

Then family pressure forced him to take over the reins of his family's food business. It proved taxing and art had to take a backseat. It was not until 1985 when his responsibilities were not so onerous, that he earnestly got back to painting, at first during the night.

But he was in a quandary. He did not know where to start and had to re-learn his painting skills.

"I was lost for direction. My perceptions of life had changed, and I wanted to say something new," he had said.



CAMERA VIEW OF CHILDREN ON PULAU KETAM... 1993

At that time a friend gave him a monograph by the American-domiciled British artist David Hockney, and that put him on the way. His colours betrayed a sanitised Hockneyian veneer at first, and there were also traces of his 'Pop Art/Hard Edged' roots which happened at the tail-end of his master-diploma printmaking studies at the Victorian Institute of the Arts in Melbourne (1966-72).

As he rediscovered the landscapes of his childhood, Kok Yew found his subjects, and his voice. The works also showed his fascination for colour relationships.

He was deeply moved by the rapid changes going on around him, and the result was a series of works on environmental degradation with textual use of signages. He also commented on the incongruities of Chinese folk religion and

practices such as the Hungry Ghosts Festival.

The *T-Junction* (1988); *Kenyataan*, 1992; *For Sale*, 1992; *The Hungry Ghost Festival* (1992); *Abandoned Padi Fields*, 1990; *The Rubbish Dump*, 1992; *The Portrait of the Insurance Salesman, Pulau Ketam*, 1993. No doubt about it, Kok Yew was back in his element!

From marginalised spaces, Kok Yew moved to people alienated by the new mantra of IT (information-technology) which had created borderless worlds in more ways than one.

His depictions of symbolic Hindu pantheons on temple stupas or wall parapets unsettled some, who found him treading on dangerous ground, especially when "dramatised" and contrasted against the living and the parked Mercedes, the fount of material-



PORTRAIT OF ANNE PUAH... 1994, acrylic on canvas

ism. In these few works, he switched to the oil medium for greater textural nuances, colour scheme and where he could get greater facial tones.

In 1994, Kok Yew divested his business interests under what he confided was in acrimonious circumstances.

That year, he became active in forming an alternative "modern" group of aquarelle artists who called themselves the Malaysian Contemporary Watercolorists Association, and was elected its first vice-president.

If not for the disruptions of his business years, one wondered if Kok Yew would have progressed much, much further, especially when he had started art at a young age under the tutelage of Tan Kim Sar during his Peng Hwa Secondary School days.

Artist-cum-art historian Redza Piyadasa, who had been a great encouragement to him in easing his comeback, found him an important figure for the social content and context of his works.

"He's been very much underrated. His art is about today. There is an authenticity about the man and his art. There is a contemporaneity in his art."

As an artist of the figuratives, Piyadasa said that Kok Yew was in the eye of the resurgence in the mid-80s, together with the clutch of younger artists like Wong Hoy Cheong, Bayu Utomo Radjikin (and Haron Mokhtar).

Whatever the label, Kok Yew remained enigmatic, just like the *topeng* figures in one work depicting three people holding a mask to their faces, the middle one dressed in business suit.