

# KOK YEW PUAH



P A I N T I N G S

1 9 8 5 - 1 9 9 3



# KOK YEW PUAH

## THE ARTIST: AN APPRECIATION

By Redza Piyadasa

The re-emergence of a serious artist within the local artscene, after an absence of some fifteen years is, indeed a happy event. More so, when the occasion is to be marked by an impressive one-man exhibition, as well. When the artist asked me to write an introduction to his exhibition catalogue, I was most happy to oblige him.

Kok Yew Puah was initially exposed to the local artscene during the early 1970s, when he returned from his artistic studies in Australia, where he had majored in Painting and Print-making. His first one-man show in this country was held at the Samat Art Gallery in 1973 and we were introduced to a highly accomplished artist, who employed the silk-screen technique to produce quite large prints, depicting the interplay of colourful abstract shapes and forms. His prints were, at that time, very stunning visually, and his works were bought by the National Art Gallery and by local art collectors.

His regular participation in local art exhibitions during the 1970s and his immense popularity as a part-time lecturer in Print-making at the ITM School of Art, already marked him out as a younger artist deserving our attention and respect. But suddenly, by the late 1970s, he had gone missing! He had withdrawn from the artscene altogether and begun life in a new area of commitment. Forced to take up responsibility in the family business endeavours, he was to spend the next ten years setting up a food manufacturing company in Klang, starting from scratch.

Perhaps, the overbearing pressures of his new responsibilities may be blamed for his giving up art during those years. In the interim period, he had also married and fathered two children. And, even if he did not produce art works anymore, he nevertheless visited local art exhibitions now and then and continued to read art books which he periodically purchased. Deep inside, he often wished he could return to his artistic interests.

After ten years of hard work and perseverance in the business world, Kok Yew Puah was able to watch his company grow. He was now able to delegate the more time-consuming aspects of his work to others and find some time for his art, mostly at night. By 1985, he was beginning to express himself artistically once again. But the task of finding his artistic directions after all this time was difficult indeed. Still, he has persevered and this present one-man exhibition tells us what happened, since he made his decision to start producing works again.

I might state here though that he has now re-emerged as an older artist and that he now reveals himself as a painter. He has also now turned to representational art. He has informed me that it was initially very difficult to pick up the threads of his artistic past. His perceptions about life had changed and he wanted to say something new. Quite lost for a direction, he had come across a monograph on the English painter, David Hockney. Hockney's approach struck a cord in him and he began to produce works that were clearly influenced by Hockney's style. In doing these initial works, he was, in fact, necessarily re-learning his painterly skills that he had neglected for so long. He needed to rediscover his confidence.

These earlier Hockney-inspired works need to be seen as tentative works that would eventually lead to his own self-discovery as a painter. What is significant about these works is that they deal with themes that are localised. The need to find suitable subject-matter made him look at the immediate environment of his hometown, Klang, where he had resided all these years. We find in these initial works an interest in old architectural edifices such as kampung houses and shophouses, play-grounds and also, portraits of his wife. Very evident is a predilection for meticulousness in the rendering of details and also, interest in bright light and blue skies and colour contrasts. Also, an interest in the interplay of strong shapes and forms that are reminiscent of his earlier coloured prints of the 1970s.

Kok Yew Puah has informed me that it was while re-discovering the environments of his childhood around Klang that he also begun to realise the social and cultural ravages brought about by drastic modernisation processes, especially on the physical environment. Finding the need to address these issues, he now begun to embark on a new series of works from about 1988 onwards. Works such as "The T-Junction", "For Sale", "Abandoned Paddy Fields", "Kenyataan", and "Composition" are, in



# KOK YEW PUAH

## ARTIST: AN APPRECIATION

By Redza Piyadasa

...e of a serious artist  
...l artscene, after an  
...ne fifteen years is,  
...y event. More so,  
...o be marked by an  
...xhibition, as well.  
...d me to write an  
...ibition catalogue, I  
...him.  
...initially exposed to  
...g the early 1970s,  
...his artistic studies in  
...majored in Painting  
...st one-man show in  
...at the Samat Art  
...were introduced to a  
...tist, who employed  
...ie to produce quite  
...g the interplay of  
...es and forms. His  
...ne, very stunning  
...were bought by the  
...and by local art

His regular participation in local art exhibitions during the 1970s and his immense popularity as a part-time lecturer in Print-making at the ITM School of Art, already marked him out as a younger artist deserving our attention and respect. But suddenly, by the late 1970s, he had gone missing! He had withdrawn from the artscene altogether and begun life in a new area of commitment. Forced to take up responsibility in the family business endeavours, he was to spend the next ten years setting up a food manufacturing company in Klang, starting from scratch.

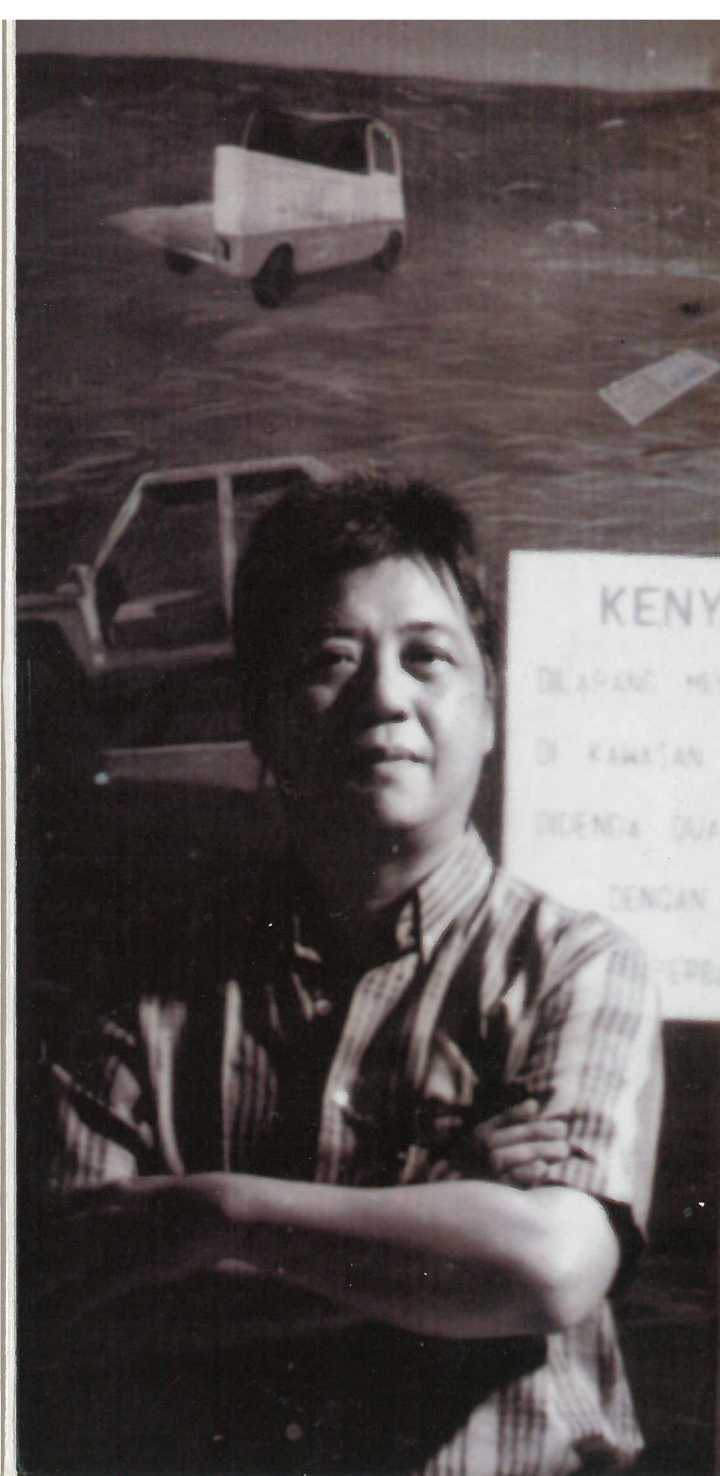
Perhaps, the overbearing pressures of his new responsibilities may be blamed for his giving up art during those years. In the interim period, he had also married and fathered two children. And, even if he did not produce art works anymore, he nevertheless visited local art exhibitions now and then and continued to read art books which he periodically purchased. Deep inside, he often wished he could return to his artistic interests.

After ten years of hard work and perseverance in the business world, Kok Yew Puah was able to watch his company grow. He was now able to delegate the more time-consuming aspects of his work to others and find some time for his art, mostly at night. By 1985, he was beginning to express himself artistically once again. But the task of finding his artistic directions after all this time was difficult indeed. Still, he has persevered and this present one-man exhibition tells us what happened, since he made his decision to start producing works again.

I might state here though that he has now re-emerged as an older artist and that he now reveals himself as a painter. He has also now turned to representational art. He has informed me that it was initially very difficult to pick up the threads of his artistic past. His perceptions about life had changed and he wanted to say something new. Quite lost for a direction, he had come across a monograph on the English painter, David Hockney. Hockney's approach struck a cord in him and he began to produce works that were clearly influenced by Hockney's style. In doing these initial works, he was, in fact, necessarily re-learning his painterly skills that he had neglected for so long. He needed to rediscover his confidence.

These earlier Hockney-inspired works need to be seen as tentative works that would eventually lead to his own self-discovery as a painter. What is significant about these works is that they deal with themes that are localised. The need to find suitable subject-matter made him look at the immediate environment of his hometown, Klang, where he had resided all these years. We find in these initial works an interest in old architectural edifices such as kampung houses and shophouses, play-grounds and also, portraits of his wife. Very evident is a predilection for meticulousness in the rendering of details and also, interest in bright light and blue skies and colour contrasts. Also, an interest in the interplay of strong shapes and forms that are reminiscent of his earlier coloured prints of the 1970s.

Kok Yew Puah has informed me that it was while re-discovering the environments of his childhood around Klang that he also begun to realise the social and cultural ravages brought about by drastic modernisation processes, especially on the physical environment. Finding the need to address these issues, he now begun to embark on a new series of works from about 1988 onwards. Works such as "The T-Junction", "For Sale", "Abandoned Paddy Fields", "Kenyataan", and "Composition" are, in





essence, comments on the environmental issue. In **"The T-Junction"**, an old traditional Malay House seems threatened by a new highway. The sign stating **"Berhenti"** may be read as a traffic sign or else, 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, an elongated red and white **"No Entry"** sign.

Similarly, **"The Abandoned Paddy Fields"** is a pointed reminder of the disappearance of our paddy-fields. Lallang grass has replaced the paddy shoots, whilst in the distance, the encroaching depersonalisation of commercial bill-boards, road-signs. In **"Kenyataan"**, the abandoned shells of old motor cars litter the landscape. These series of works addressing the environmental issue are marked by a poetic yet discomfoting omniuousness. They are commentaries on the disturbing state of affairs born out of our new materialistic pursuits and our failure to understand the deeper meanings of man's relationship with the land and the past. Personally, I have found these few works highly significant creations, because of their content and also, the artist's technical dexterity. The quiteness inherent in these works is indeed deceptive, pointing to irresponsibility on our part.

In the last two years or so, Kok Yew Puah has addressed issues related to his own ethnic

background. In a number of works celebrating the **"Hungry Ghost Festival"**, he places large Chinese joss-sticks and altars against denuded landscapes or else, against commercialised posters of tentalizing girls advertising soft drinks. In other works, he depicts the stage of the Chinese wayang theatre, suggesting cultural links with the Chinese past and heritage.

I must end with two works produced recently in which the artist begins to comment on the kind of professions pursued by a new kind of Chinese amidst the older cultural contexts. His **"The Portrait of the Insurance Salesman, Pulau Ketam"** is especially brilliant and satirical. A young well-dressed and neck-tied Chinese insurance salesman poses against the backdrop of a rural riverine village, holding his brief-case. 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. Similarly, his other painting, **"Insurance Salesman in a Chinese Temple"** is a witty comment on the Chinese need to approach the Gods for good luck and the acquisition of moneys. Insurance salesmen are no exception.

Clearly then, Kok Yew Puah has returned finally with an impressive one-man exhibition. One looks forward to the further flowering of a serious and honest artistic talent.



▲ **Title** : KENYATAAN, 1992  
**Media**: Acrylic  
**Size** : 183cm x 183cm





▲ **Title** : THE PORTRAIT OF THE INSURANCE SALESMAN, PULAU KETAM, 1993

**Media:** Acrylic

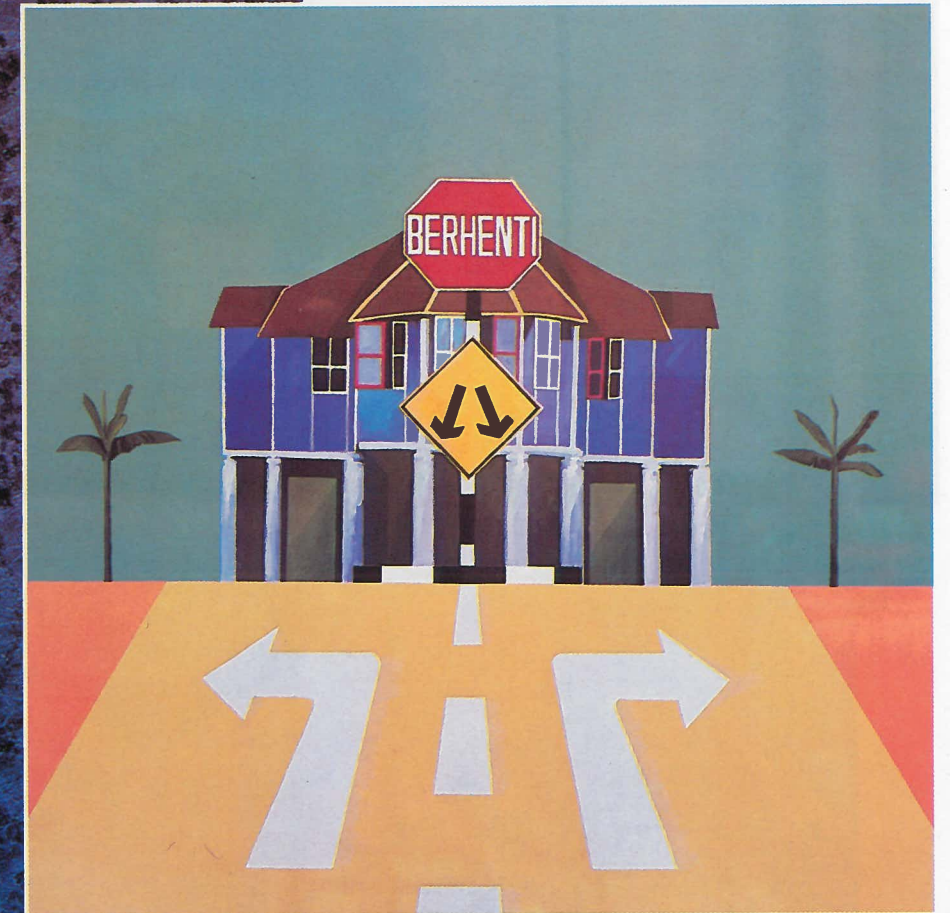
**Size** : 162.5cm x 162.5cm



◀ **Title** : THE SWING, 1990

**Media:** Acrylic

**Size** : 122.5cm x 122.5cm



▲ **Title** : THE T-JUNCTION, 1988

**Media:** Acrylic

**Size** : 129.5cm x 129.5cm





▲ **Title** : THE HUNGRY GHOST FESTIVAL, 1992  
**Media**: Acrylic  
**Size** : 162cm x 162cm



▶ **Title** : THE SIGNBOARD PAINTER'S SHOP, 1991  
**Media**: Acrylic  
**Size** : 122cm x 122cm

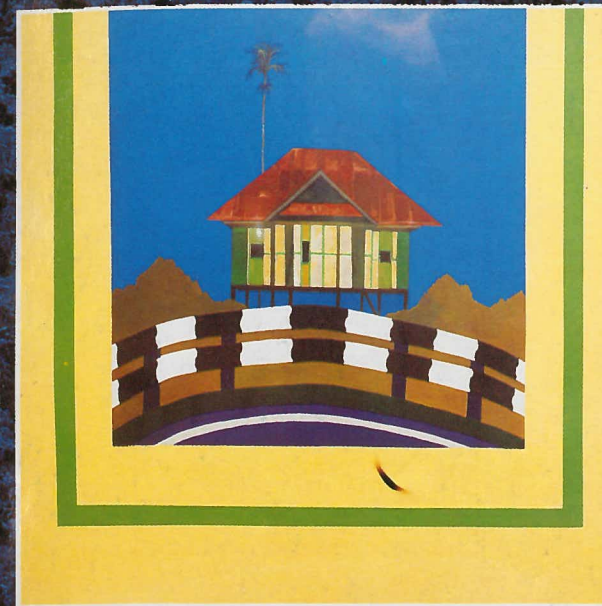


▲ **Title** : FOR SALE, 1992  
**Media**: Acrylic  
**Size** : 141cm x 141cm





▲ **Title** : ABANDONED PADDY FIELDS, 1990  
**Media**: Acrylic  
**Size** : 164.5cm x 147cm



◀ **Title** : KLANGSCAPE, 1987  
**Media**: Acrylic  
**Size** : 122cm x 122cm



▼ **Title** : THE HUNGRY GHOST FESTIVAL, 1992  
**Media**: Acrylic  
**Size** : 162cm x 162cm





▲ **Title** : THE RUBBISH DUMP, 1992  
**Media**: Acrylic  
**Size** : 141cm x 141cm