22 Rhetorical Postures and the Photographic Condition: A Minor Malaysian Detour

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1 The exhibition was made in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the CCP.

2 Patrick D. Flores, "The Philippine Modern: Conceiving a Collective Category," in *Suddenly Turning Visible: The Collection at the Center* (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 2009), 7–8. The essay is also reproduced in the Philippine online journal *Ctrl+P* 15 (2009). This online version, however, omits the portrait and archival photos of the protagonists in the catalogue essay.

(22)

Rhetorical Postures and the Photographic Condition: A Minor Malaysian Detour

Adele Tan

In his 2009 essay for the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) exhibition catalogue *Suddenly Turning Visible: The Collection at the Center*, art historian and curator Patrick D. Flores begins his narrative with the pivotal role played by artist and curator Raymundo Albano (1947–1985) in the productive artistic and collection developments of the CCP.[1] Albano was the director of museums and non-theatre operations there from 1971 to 1985. My purpose here, however, is not to examine Albano's achievements; rather, it is to cast a small light on a neglected aspect of discourse and semiotic construction—that of the deployment of the "artist-as-photograph" (and in most cases it is also "artist-in-photograph")—enlisted into various discursive forms but which often goes unremarked or is complicit with the institutional strictures that try to repress it (as was said of the CCP).

In the margins of Flores' essay as laid out in the catalogue *Suddenly Turning Visible*, is a half-body portrait shot of the bespectacled Albano (fig. 22.1), his slight figure lying on the floor with his right arm outstretched towards the photographer and his left hand gripping a small Minolta SLR camera that is balanced below his chin and resting on his chest. In a majority of instances, the artist is presented as a headshot, or more often is the case, seen posing with his or her artworks, thereby cementing the intimacy between the artist's personage with his or her art. Seldom do we ask why some things look the way they do; why do we preface articles on artworks with images of the artist? Is what or how the artist looks like important? My attention is drawn immediately to this selection and placement of a photographic illustration in the catalogue, and to the subtle reflexivity or the "strategically ludic mode" (words used by Flores to describe Albano's own curatorial disposition) demonstrated on the page with regard to the relationship between the image and the text that lies next to it and follows on from it:

> The CCP thought of the period from 1971 to 1975 as the "exposure phase" in which "advanced art—experimental in nature—were deployed in the galleries. The use of sand, junk iron, non-art materials such as raw lumber, rocks … were common materials for the artists' development strategies. People were shocked, scared, delighted, pleased and satisfied even though their preconceived notions of art did not agree with what they encountered." This "curatorial stance" was provocative: it may have insinuated a level of democratic habit within a possible Kantian *sensus communis*, an engagement with strangeness and an encounter with disbelief, into an institution that was complicit in repressing the body politic in no uncertain terms. In all this, Albano was convinced that the atmosphere at the CCP "made one relatively aware of an environment *suddenly turning visible*." The Center, hence, was conceiving a world and its spellbound subjects, inventing an indispensable mythology of freedom and prefiguring the unknown in a regime that had claimed unerring destiny: *tadhana*, a fate written in the stars.[2] (emphasis mine)

In this passage by the author, who took pains to vividly evoke the intellectual gambit of Albano, Flores also unexpectedly raised two phrases to the reader's consciousness, "exposure phase" and "suddenly turning visible." These are phrases related to the practice of photography and darkroom techniques, both of which worked with and mirrored Albano's portrait image so as to surface and confirm the message—the importance of exposing or the exposition, the visual and the visible, all concerted tenets and objectives of the CCP in the 1970s. Flores was to again use this image of Albano in his essay "Turns in Tropics: Artist-Curator" (2012) and in his presentation for the 2016 symposium *How Institutions Think* at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. And as an artist deeply committed to play and experimentation with the medium of photography, it is striking that Albano himself chose to be photographed with his camera, and on another occasion with a camera tripod (without the camera). In comparison, Roberto Chabet, the founding museum curator-director at the CCP, was represented in Flores' catalogue essay with a nondescript headshot, although a more well-known image composition of Chabet would show him in a classroom setting, the preferred mode of reference, as Chabet was a long-serving professor of art studies at the University of the Philippines.

And, indeed, it is about *exposing* and *turning visible* some of the conditions and conventions that structure the visual presentation and construction of the artist. In ways these photographs function as if they were the literal non-coded message, or denoted image, whereby the signifier and signified are the same; what you see is what you see. Yet, we should call the bluff of these merely "denotative" images, because as the French semiotician and philosopher Roland Barthes reminds us, the absence of a code only reinforces the myth of photographic "naturalness" (although Barthes rejects the possibility of the purely denoted image) and it only naturalises, supports and contextualises the symbolic, connoted messages held within the overall image structure by making them look innocent. The hyperdistribution of images in the Information Age also means that the appraisal of imaging becomes more challenging as more images circulate but are going away unremarked, and the balance of power between maker, user and receiver is shifting constantly. As Barthes writes, with regard to the advertising photograph as denoted image:

> The denoted image naturalizes the symbolic message, it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation, which is extremely dense, especially in advertising. Although

the Panzani poster is full of "symbols," there nonetheless remains in the photograph, insofar as the literal message is sufficient, a kind of natural being-there of objects: nature seems spontaneously to produce the scene represented. A pseudo truth is surreptitiously substituted for the simple validity of openly semantic systems; the absence of code disintellectualizes the message because it seems to be found in nature the signs of culture. *This is without doubt an important historical paradox: the more technology develops the diffusion of information (and notably of images), the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning.*[3] (emphasis mine)

In this small excursus of the Philippines, I want to put forward that images of artists, used in their myriad ways, are not merely decorative, illustrative, secondary material.[4] They all come together to concoct the visual field in which we receive the artists and their work. Analyses at present must therefore be diverse, fluid and inventive, taking into account the varying contexts and usages, and critical orthodoxies frequently renewed and reappraised.[5]

If the camera was the abiding device in the photographic images taken of Albano, the camera also comes front and centre in the surreally funny but conceptually serious paintings of Malaysian artist Kok Yew Puah (also known as George Puah, 1947–1999). Although not photographs, Puah foregrounds the significant use and appreciation of the photographic apparatus in artistic practice and in the conveyance of the artistic self as image.[6] In *Camera View of the Artist* (1993, fig. 22.2), Puah paints himself into a scene as if looked upon through a camera viewfinder. In a later work from the Camera View series, *Camera View of Two Tourists in a Malaysian Town* (1995), the artist shows a scene framed again by the camera viewfinder, but this time of two tourists, one of whom is pointing

3 Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image—Music—Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 45–6.

4 The genesis of this paper and my desire for looking at photographs of artists is indebted to Craig Owens' two essays "Posing" and "The Medusa Effect or, The Specular Ruse," in his notable (posthumous) volume, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, eds. Scott Bryson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 191–217. Particularly important is Owens' consideration of Victor Burgin's photographic suite *Gradiva* (1982) on page 208: "Composed of seven photographs with accompanying narrative captions (photo-graphie), Gradiva is not simply a series of straightforward illustrations for Jensen's text; nor is it as is sometimes said dismissively of Burgin's work, merely an 'illustration' of (psychoanalytic) theory. For what is illustrated here is the process of—the desire for—illustration itself. To illustrate a text is in a sense to punctuate it, to arrest its development by the insertion of a gaze in the form of a figure of illustration—a gaze which brings the textual machine to a standstill."

5 In an attempt to push the boundaries of photography, and to distinguish his practice from journalistic or documentary photography, Filipino conceptual artist Johnny Manahan made the work *Self-Portrait with Lens Cap On* (1972), which had, however, proceeded to deny the viewer the visual index of the referent and instead presented an endgame scenario. The work comprised an entire film roll of 36 photographic prints of blackness (or blankness) which Manahan later developed after he had taken self-portraits by aiming the camera at himself with the lens cap on. See Clarissa Chikiamco, "Making 'Marks' and Leaving 'Evidences': The Art of Johnny Manahan 1971–82," in *A Fact Has No Appearance: Art Beyond the Object*, exh. cat., eds. Clarissa Chikiamco, Russell Storer & Adele Tan (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 19–20.

6 Puah's reference to photography can be situated

within and differentiated from a trend in the 1980s and 1990s in Malaysia, which the art historian Zakaria Ali has asserted as a market-driven endeavour where artists "gather a stock of ready-made ideas" from Kodak prints, "modifying, expanding, distorting as they go along" so as to create paintings "with photographic qualities: clear, crisp, hard-edged" for their corporate buyers. See Zakaria Ali, "Modern Malaysian Art in Search of an Identity," in *Malaysian Art: Selected Essays 1979–2009* (Tanjong Malim, Perak: Penerbit Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 2010), 261.

7 See Puah's 1995 *Camera View of Two Tourists in a Malaysian Town*, http://www.theedgegalerie.com/hidden-meanings/ (accessed 25 July 2016). Another painting that utilises the same figural composition is *In Front of an Indian Temple* (1997) except that in this case the backdrop is that of an Indian temple in Malaysia. Malaysian curator Beverly Yong has written: "In the *Camera View* paintings exhibited at his last solo in 1997, Kok Yew Puah discovered a brilliant conceptual and formal framing device—the camera viewfinder. He chose favourite familiar places—an Indian temple near his house, the Yacht Club in Klang and nearby Pulau Ketam, for example, and made these the backdrop of various portraits of himself, friends and family. He made these special places iconic, representative of our cultural heritage or our modern aspirations. The scenes are painted in vivid colourful detail, layer upon layer built up lovingly, only to appear flattened ultimately. The figures likewise are brought out in intense detail—the psychological probity of Kok Yew Puah's portraits undercut the flatness of his painting and the posturing of his subjects. The emotional texture and first impulses of his work can be seen clearly in his drawings and watercolours. See "A Malaysian Version," in *Kok Yew Puah: A Tribute*, exh. cat. (Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art, 2004), 5–6.

8 Ooi Kok Chuen, "Seeing beyond his Canvas," *New Straits Times*, 24 April 1999, 24.

9 Ibid.

his camera towards us, the viewer (although in a preparatory watercolour study of the work, the figure on the right is photographing the figure on the left, who is taking a puff of his cigarette, rather than holding the camera looking out for the next shot).[7] The most intriguing aspect of this 1995 painting is, however, the jumble of street and traffic signage in different languages in the background, a seeming appeal to the viewer to treat the picture (whether painting or photograph) as a complex semiotic and visual composition rather than merely attempt at reading it biographically or geographically. The *New Straits Times* arts journalist Ooi Kok Chuen, in a presciently titled article "Seeing Beyond His Canvas," stated that "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."[8]

Ooi denied that it was anything to do with "artistic ego when Kok Yew insinuated himself into one of his paintings" but posited that the focus was on the idle boats in the background which indicated "an overwhelming urge to reclaim a fast disappearing past of the Klang that he grew up in."[9] Yet the artistic ego or artistic subjectivity is precisely something which is aligned with the discourse of photography, not simply because the camera is used to take the myriad shots of the artist-figure, but also that photography is deeply mired in the debates and stakes surrounding subjective positions created by a supposed objective recording device (the denoted image that Barthes speaks about). Malaysian writer Alexandra Tan perhaps comes closest to articulating the investment Puah has as an artist with the act of seeing and visioning. For Tan, Puah is fascinated with the seemingly superficial world of the tourist, a class of individuals who visit a range of places and in the process encounter the foreign and absorb new cultural signifiers along the way, all within this important act of "looking and gazing" as

10 Alexandra Tan, "Kok Yew Puah: Looking In or Out?," The Edge Galerie—News, http://www.theedgegalerie.com/kok-yew-puah-looking-in-or-out/ (accessed 12 June 2016).

11 Puah dropped out of making art in the mid-1970s and went into his family's food business, and returned to art only in the mid-1980s with the encouragement of Piyadasa. Piyadasa regarded Puah an "important figure for the social content and context of his works" and held him in high esteem together with younger artists like Wong Hoy Cheong, Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Haron Mokhtar. See Ooi, "Seeing beyond his canvas," op. cit., 25.

12 As T.K. Sabapathy writes: "In *Bentuk Malaysia Tulen*, Piyadasa presents an image of himself as a site on which authenticity and purity (attributes affiliated with the word *tulen*) can be negotiated and tested. He simulates a capacity to read and write *jawi*, hence the inclusion of the script in the upper zone of the composition, written in the formal hieratic style. Will he qualify? Is he a true authentic Malaysian? Can he claim to speak on these matters? Whereas in *Self-*

exemplified by the tourist snapshot. Yet this is again a two-way relationship for Puah—the viewfinder motif reminds us that we, viewers of the painting, are also looking out from the vantage point of the camera lens, collapsing two different moments of voyeurism into a chiastic layer, that which is still an active process, a visual process ironically immortalised as a painting but not yet as celluloid, or until a photographic image is taken of the painting itself. Further, Tan also teases out the relationship between photography and painting, the interdependence these two modes have in the regimes of representation and, more crucially, self-representation of the artist:

> What does it mean to render the act of photography in the medium of paint? Any image is supposed to be a durable, permanent thing. Modern photography allows us to capture fleeting moments in a lasting way. Puah immortalises the activity of the scene, as does the painted photographer. The character holding the camera to his face is hypothesized to be Puah himself. If so, he is then being mirrored by Puah the painter. The dialectic of the relationship between artist, painting and viewer is enhanced by Puah looking at himself looking at us looking at him.[10]

The conscious scrutiny of the artistic self has continued for Puah beyond the remit of the camera viewfinder and can be gleaned in other paintings such as *Colour Guide for Self-Portrait in Four Different Postures* (1993) and *Colour Guide for Self-Portrait in Three Different Postures* (1994), both canvases emblazoned with a horizontal colour bar at the top, as if in anticipation of its turning into a printed published image. But the more peculiar issue that Puah's paintings have raised for me is the analytical invisibility of the artist's pose in art critical discourse in the Southeast Asian region, particularly of those in the panoply of images taken to illustrate exhibition catalogues, magazines or newspaper reports. Looking at Puah's paintings has prompted me to turn my gaze in the direction of Redza Piyadasa (1939–2007), an older peer and friend of Puah and one of Malaysia's most prominent artists of the second half of the 20th century. Piyadasa himself was a champion of Puah's work ("a significant Malaysian artist whom I genuinely admired and respected"), and wrote the foreword for Puah's posthumous exhibition in 2004.[11] Piyadasa himself had not conscientiously produced copious works of self-portraiture, apart from examples such as *Portrait of the Artist as a Model* (1977) and *Bentuk Malaysia Tulen* (1980), which examined his identity as a conceptual artist and a

Portrait of the Artist as a Model, he employs the self to interrogate aesthetic and art historical issues; here the self is desperately involved in defining legitimacy and in determining identity along social and political grounds that are slippery. The outcome can be either life-enhancing or life-threatening; the image of Piyadasa is both vulnerable and defiant." See T.K. Sabapathy, *Piyadasa: An Overview, 1962–2000* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 2001), 92–3.

13 A number of such photographs were published in newspaper obituaries of Piyadasa. See Ooi Kok Chuen, "Paying Piya Tribute," *The Star*, 10 June 2007, http://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/women/2007/06/10/paying-piya-tribute/ (accessed 14 June 2016); and Eddin Khoo, "Death of an Artist," *The Star*, 13 May 2007, http://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/women/2007/05/13/death-of-an-artist/ (accessed 14 June 2016).

14 Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 53.

15 Ibid., 55.

16 Ibid.

Muslim-Singhalese Malaysian.[12] Yet it cannot be denied that he has been prolifically documented in numerous profile shots and many of them with him positioned erect (the photo of him with his painting *Entry Points* is particularly well circulated) and arms crossed or holding a cigarette in his hand, next to his own work and fully aware of the photograph that he is making with art (like the photograph of him looking through an empty picture frame towards the camera, fig. 22.3).[13] The ineluctable power and presence of Piyadasa in such photographs (although the photographers are usually unnamed) recall American feminist art historian Amelia Jones' critical dissection of what she calls the "Pollockian performative," through Hans Namuth's black-and-white photographs of Jackson Pollock actively working his drip-and-flick painting technique on his large canvases lining the floor of his studio.

Jones is instructive in this regard because she had articulated how the mobilisation of Namuth's photographs of the artist functioned in the reception and construction of the artist as a subject, and his relationship to his work and his audiences. This was helped by the theatrical character of Namuth's images (and the physicality of Pollock's actions) which overwhelmed the article layout, and instead of "appearing as incidental illustrations of the text," stood out against other conventional imagery of artists sitting with their easels and trade tools. The photographic record of the artist is therefore contingent rather than deterministic, thereby de-privileging original artistic intentionality and opening itself up to the expressed receptivity of its viewers.[14] The formidable appeal of the Namuth photographs held sway in the mythic fabrication of Pollock, such as American critic Harold Rosenberg's construction of Pollock as a "labouring existentialist hero," and art historian Barbara Rose's acknowledgement that "[i]n retrospect, I realize Rosenberg was not talking about painting at all; he was describing Namuth's photographs of Pollock."[15] Stories about the profound effects of Namuth's photos have also themselves perpetuated the art historical narrative that Pollock "became internationally known through photographs published in art and popular magazines by the mid-1950s."[16]

But where Jones' exegesis on the "Pollockian Performative" concentrated on the outstanding and therefore exceptional shots of Pollock by Namuth, the photographs that I would like to pay attention to are the conventional and therefore discursively neglected or parried shots of artists posing with their artworks. As a class of image-type, these photographs nonetheless achieve a great degree of

17 See Ooi, "Paying Piya Tribute," op. cit.

18 Ronald Achacoso, "Kick in the Eye to Enlightenment 101," in *Roberto Chabet*, ed. Ringo Bunoan (Metro Manila: King Kong Art Projects Unlimited, 2016), 36. Others who were known to have publicly and acrimoniously disagreed with Piyadasa include Jolly Koh and Tan Chee Khuan.

19 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27.

20 Ooi Kok Chuen, "To Seek New Artistic Directions," *New Straits Times*, 19 August 1987, 6.

21 J. Anu, "An Artistic State of Affairs," *The Sunday Star*, 8 September 1996, 25–6.

22 Marzuki's article demonstrates passive–aggressive ambivalence in its treatment of Piyadasa as subject. Readers are not sure whether her fawning responses were made sardonically (if she knew what he had professionally professed to stand for) or that she genuinely admired Piyadasa. Marzuki was a well-known journalist for the *New Straits Times* covering issues and affairs related to women. It is interesting to note too that later even the obituaries of Piyadasa were filed under the "Women" section of *The Star Online*.

interpretative currency through their circulation, despite the methodological armoury of the establishment. For those of us interested in the practice of Piyadasa, we cannot ignore occasions where he has depicted himself or gave chance for himself to be depicted as "complex, difficult, arrogant;" the photographs that only demand a cursory glance in newspapers, magazines and books, fashion a distinct atmosphere in which the artist is read, and something which, I argue, can be imbricated with the practice of the artist and at times provide countervailing assessments towards prevailing narratives of the artist and the artworks.[17] Indeed, accounts of Piyadasa's personality are stuff of anecdotal legends in Southeast Asia, with a particularly well-recounted one of him dropping by unannounced into a local watering hole called Nanette's in Manila and attempting to force Roberto Chabet (who was having his beer and in no mood to entertain Piyadasa) into a debate about art. This resulted in flared tempers and Piyadasa apologising to Chabet days later that he was merely "jousting." This account would seem unremarkable except for the intriguing choice of words by Filipino artist and Chabet's former student Ronald Achacoso:

> The whole episode became a non-incident, but it presents an interesting study in contrast between Southeast Asia's two foremost conceptual artists and educators. I clearly remember the disappointment in the Malaysian's face as he left the wolf's lair. And it seemed he regarded the event as a potentially significant milestone in Southeast Asian art history while Chabet dismissed the whole affair and forgot about it. If we were to read and deconstruct the "minimalist" encounter between the two, it would speak volumes, and like a Zen parable, would be as enlightening for not having been concluded, the "what might have been" not as interesting or as resonant as what never actually took place.[18]

Although obviously siding with Chabet, what Achacoso had described was an exquisite collision between two viewpoints: one mined or mourned a lost potential, and the other flatly denying the situation any significance. This misreading or over-reading of what had happened produced a productive tension, a quality that is sought by anyone embarking on the hermeneutics of art. Achacoso's words also restored to view the necessity of looking into

missed encounters, the parts which were hastily disregarded and deemed to not have taken place (or taken its place), could yet be interesting or resonant.

This is the resonance I am giving to the images of Piyadasa that appear silently in printed materials, their selection and placement seemingly never to have bothered viewers to take a second look. For Barthes, these are the photographs which he deems good enough only as *studium* but not as *punctum*, whereby the levels of interpretation and investment would reach those of the cultural, linguistic and political (the "field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste") but not of the emotional or psychical ("that accident which pricks me [but also bruises me, is poignant to me]").[19] But what if the named and coded photographs under the regime of the *studium* are made to be considered differently, to be looked upon as the *punctum* of the institutional world of artwork images, the "sting, speck, cut, little hole" that is the work of these photographs when reading them (together with the headlines and captions on the page) against the stolid images of pure art? Take for instance the different uses of Piyadasa's work *Two Malay Women* in the *New Straits Times* articles. The 1986 article (fig. 22.4) shows Piyadasa as the gallerist proudly showing off the work in the background and shoring up the defiant headline "There's Still Business in Malaysian Art Business" and the caption "reputation of a gallery counts a lot." In the other article in the following year, *Two Malay Women* is an image apart, with a headshot of Piyadasa overlapping onto it, but signalling a vastly different message and marking the end of his Saujana Fine Art Gallery: "To Seek New Artistic Directions."[20] The repeat use of the same artwork is intriguing, and seems to suggest the breakdown of optimism, yet it also points to Piyadasa's method of reusing a certain found image and making numerous variations in treatment of the print (also by way of painting or collaging) for his Malaysian Series, which defined the last phase of his artistic career.

Images from the 1988 article "Piyadasa—The Romantic Artist" by Nora Marzuki (fig. 22.5)—which has an affected title that is incompatible with the cerebral outlook he had fashioned for himself—are more revealing of the artist's own anxieties and self-regard. This time a pose with yet another work from his Malaysian Series (a composite of the Tun Razak Family which the newspaper mistook for two separate works) and a candid half-body shot of the artist seated in a pseudo-pensive pose and having a smoke, with the words "I'm a painter and a unique one too" running under it. The words sound haughty yet they are also ironic—Piyadasa was not considered a skilful painter and his later forays into mechanical reproduction for the Malaysian Series meant that he was not particularly invested in the unique and original. The intimation of Piyadasa as a family man by Marzuki is taken up again by J. Anu's 1996 article for *The Sunday Star*, where Piyadasa's posed photo with his young children from his second marriage is included in the spread that however says very little of his family life, but works instead to secure Anu's impression that Piyadasa was "anxious to put you at ease," his reputation for being blunt, impatient and arrogant notwithstanding.[21] The invocation of the family man in Piyadasa is an odd gesture, clumsily asserted by Marzuki who read the presence of heritage family photos in his works as indicative of him interested in being a family man.[22] By 2001, with his solo retrospective running at the Balai Seni Lukis Negara (presently known as the National Visual Arts Gallery of Malaysia), the persona of the family man receded and a different picture of Piyadasa emerged, this time of photos of the artist not by himself but with his peers, his artistic and the Malaysian VIP community. The images work with the new rubric, describing an intellectual giant ("Challenging the Concept of Art," fig. 22.6) and therefore ripe for a

reassessment and critical plaudits ("Remaking Piyadasa," fig. 22.7).

Photographs of Piyadasa captured by undergraduate student Peter T. Brown (who majored in photography) in the mid-1970s at the University of Hawaii at Manoa where Piyadasa earned his Master of Fine Arts, however, surfaced a view of the artist as already cognisant of the power of the posed photograph. Similar to Albano before, Piyadasa is pictured in a series of photographs carrying a camera. Yet where Albano was just composing himself as a picture, Piyadasa not only does this but also pursued with his camera the actions of Laura Ruby, a Hawaiian artist and University of Hawaii art department faculty member who made a mock-conceptual work in protest against the conceptual "con-job" art that he was promulgating. Like a double entendre, Piyadasa turns around in one shot and looks smugly into Brown's lens (fig. 22.8), and then in another, proceeds to track the activity of Ruby with his camera. By posing with Ruby's work and standing proudly erect and chest puffed, Piyadasa enacts a visual sleight of hand—he made it look as if it were his own artwork (fig. 22.9). We should not be too surprised then that Piyadasa was further captured in a proclamatory gesture, arms outstretched with papers with a flower garland around his neck (instead of a camera), and standing next to a painting emblazoned with the stencilled words "ART IS A LIE." It was a painting he had acquired from his undergraduate friend Malcolm Wong at the University of Hawaii, who had completed it as a class assignment on Willem de Kooning. Piyadasa proceeded to appropriate Wong's painting through the reflexive addition of words that remarked upon its own condition and existence.

With these foregoing examples, the Penang collector, gallerist and aspiring art historian Dato' Dr Tan Chee Khuan was perhaps paradoxically prescient and astute in his assessment of Piyadasa, despite disparaging him as an inveterate "pastiche" artist who being "unduly influenced by another," makes work lacking individuality and originality—"In conceptual art, the concept is paramount since there is very little aesthetic. Borrowing the concept and adding in local flavour does not exclude it as pastiche."[23] Tan had also proceeded to illustrate this by way of his own "artwork," a crude poster titled *Pastiche Stinks* (fig. 22.10), parodying Piyadasa's *Portrait of the Artist as a Model* where the painting is reproduced in miniature on the right and captioned underneath with the words "historical transgression 1977 to 1994." This is, however, undermined by a caricature of Alfred E. Neuman, the fictitious mascot of *Mad* magazine, with his fingers stuck up his nostrils and broadcasting his riposte: "The reader may ask, 'What is a pastiche?' or 'Whose pastiches are we talking about?' "[24] Whilst careful not to say that art does not proceed from influence by predecessors, Tan enlisted art critics such as Robert Hughes and Suzi Gablik to his cause to decipher the conditions of pastiche, but in the very same gesture, he brings to the fore considerations of fraudulence, charlatanry, mimicry, imitation, dissimulation, camouflage and counterfeiting, aspects of which are precisely what occurs for Barthes, who wants a "history of looking," in the act of posing for a photograph.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes examines and philosophises on the centrality of forced and conscious duplicity ("a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture") of someone posing for the "whole photographic ritual" or "social game" (and even when one is observed without knowing it, one can often know the feeling of being observed by the lens and once knowing, it changes everything, leading to a transformation of the self in advance into an image) and how the posed photograph gets co-opted in the construction of self and identity:

> I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in

23 Tan Chee Khuan, "What is Pastiche?," in *Social Responsibility in Art Criticism: or Why Yong Mun Sen is the Father of Malaysian Painting* (Pulau Tikus, Malaysia: Art Gallery, 1998), 131.

24 This 1994 poster's background was subsequently retouched in 2013 and put up for sale by Tan for MYR 2000.

25 Barthes, op. cit., 11–2.

26 Ibid., 12, 14.

27 Paul Jay, "Posing: Autobiography and the Subject of Photography," in *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, eds. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore & Gerald Peters (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 194–5.

> no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from any effigy. What I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) "self"; but it is the contrary that must be said: "myself" never coincides with my image.[25]

Although there is the professed non-coincidence of the self to the image, there is however an admission that despite the mortification of the body by the photograph, "the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" and "represents the very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object."[26] In other words, when constituting oneself in the process of posing, the posed photograph enables the involuntary presentation of a dispersed self, where the subject turning into object permits the inhabitation of contradictory dimensions but turns away from the possibility of ever positing an objective self in a photograph. Paul Jay has argued that:

> Barthes's treatment of posing is really about the impossibility of not posing. It questions the very concept of authenticity and turns it into a kind of simulacrum in which the subject cannot stop "imitating" himself. […] But worse than the specter of inauthenticity is the specter of objectification, the fear that the always-inauthentic image does in fact constitute the objectified self. The problem Barthes's remarks on posing [reveal] is that the so-called profound or essential self can never be represented as such. Indeed the very nature of this essential self becomes paradoxical: its subjectivity is linked to a notion of authenticity, yet any image of that self is a sign of its objectification, and hence, its inauthenticity. The authentic self, in Barthes's terms, is finally an impossibility, for it would be a self freed from the process of becoming an object.[27]

In short, there is no running away from the objectification of the self, a self which at the same time requires and acquires its identity and substance from images that objectify or *other* it. In common parlance, the maxim "fake it till you make (or become) it" applies, as there is no way, to quote W.B. Yeats, to "know the dancer from the dance."

To look at and analyse Piyadasa through his poses in photographs is especially apposite, given his extensive recuperation and use of found heritage photographic material that are largely posed studio shots in his by now

28 Piyadasa's first forays with photographs in his art-making were with his two versions of *Tribute to Usman Awang* (1980). Piyadasa was commissioned by the editor of *Dewan Sastra* to produce an artwork for the journal's cover to honour the 50th birthday of Usman Awang. Piyadasa was given photographs of Usman which he subsequently replicated as a bromide halftone image of the poet via an electronic copying machine, with the help of photographer Ismail Hashim. The hand-coloured design was based on the idea of a postage stamp, the stencilled letters a carry-over from his conceptual art phase, and the bromide image pasted on rather than silkscreened like his later Malaysian Series images.

29 Rodolfo Paras-Perez, introduction to *Piyadasa* (The Hague: The Prince Claus Fund, 1998), 4.

30 Paras-Perez took Piyadasa at his own words: "The more I studied the old photographs, the more I became aware of the documentary power of the photographic medium, namely its ability to freeze and record so vividly aspects of social reality. These were very real people that I was confronting in the photographic images, and I had to consciously retain and project their individual personalities and also the cultural essence and mood of their times. In transferring the images to the silk-screens, I was of course, projecting them twice removed from their original "reality" but their pertinence as persona was not being diminished in any way, in the process." Quoted in "A Dialogue: T.K. Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa," in *Piyadasa: The Malaysian Series* (Kuala Lumpur: RA Fine Arts and Asia Contemporary, 2007), 32.

31 Sabapathy, *Piyadasa: An Overview, 1962–2000*, 95.

32 This was Nirmala's exhibition titled *Keadaan Manusia* (*The Condition of Being*). It was held at the Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka in Kuala Lumpur for eight days in January 1981.

33 It is interesting to note that unlike the photographs of Piyadasa published in the *New Straits Times*, Nirmala's feature (as does the female batik artist, Fatimah Chik's, the first wife of Piyadasa) credits the photographer clearly. See also Alina Ranee, "Fatimah Making Waves Again," *New Straits Times*, 1 May 1985, 8.

famous Malaysian Series.[28] Piyadasa too spent much of his time thinking about the practice of photography, particularly portrait photography and how it could be co-opted to deliver his own thoughts and arguments about his place within the multicultural history and identity of Malaysia and how the upsurge of ethnically divisive and polarising Bumiputra politics was jeopardising all of that. The evocation of these found photographs by the Filipino artist and art historian Rodolfo Paras-Perez as "half-forgotten," "unknown," "distant" and "dated" is similar to how one might consider the posed photographs of Piyadasa in newspapers and exhibition catalogues. Paras-Perez, however, offers up the possibility of redemption through the manipulation and conversion of these images into "serious works of art" (by Piyadasa) where the past and reality are transformed.[29] As such, one should pause to wonder: Could it not be possible too, to entertain ideas about the incorporation of marginal photos into the art historical narration of Malaysian artists?

And although Paras-Perez describes Piyadasa's use of collage and serigraphy ("photographing a photograph—a process that places the image at a point twice removed from reality") as non-threatening to "the subject's unique qualities and the specific references," otherwise known as "Malaysian aura," I would suggest that Piyadasa's method instead points to a potential change, or even violence, done *not* to the superficial image codes themselves but to the reception of the actual referent—and for my purpose here Piyadasa is the referent.[30] Opening art historical writing up to embrace this image class of artist poses and noticing their specific deployment on the page provides new interpretative modes that can be held in contention with each other. To this end, T.K. Sabapathy provides a far more accurate reading of the impact and effect of

photography in Piyadasa's work and on the artist himself:

> The portrait photograph is not a neutral value-free entity; on the contrary, the portrait photograph is a fabrication and consolidation of who one is by means of complex codes that are transacted and shared by the subject, the photographer and the community.[31]

Sabapathy calls Piyadasa's method "agglomerative," where fragments from diverse sources are arranged, shaped and repeated in a pictorial scheme. Yet it is also as a collective arrangement that Sabapathy realises such a schema would already harbour "a hint of a divergence," with coded images abutting each other, "prising these interests apart." The inclusion of the posed photos of the artists into the art historical ambit would not be a benign enterprise, for the recursive appearance of artworks, bodily postures and accompanying rhetorical tropes already ensure that dissonances will arise from the non-contiguity between them. If Piyadasa was expecting his use of found old photos of various ethnic families as a means to interrogate the identity politics of the country, he would not be too alarmed by the same manner in which photos of him could be taken as critical resources to appraise his work, attitudes and politics.

An important counterpoint to Piyadasa to raise here (as gender is also a missing operative term when writing about Piyadasa) would be Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam (b. 1941), a pioneering Malaysian female artist of socially conscious or committed art, and a peer and close friend of Piyadasa, who himself had also authored the catalogue essay of her solo exhibition in 1981.[32] Nirmala, who has an intense artistic engagement with the plethora of sociopolitical photographic imagery gleaned from topical news media, often feature in her works photo-silkscreened newspaper images collaged onto canvas which are then painted with bold expressive brushwork or traditional symbolic motifs. Her themes have regularly focused on issues of war, violence, sexual abuse, poverty and environmental degradation in local and international settings from the 1970s right up to the 2000s, frequently foregrounding or addressing women and children as the primary victims. Female subjects and roles have featured significantly too in Piyadasa's Malaysian Series, particularly the two Malay women, the Malay and Nyonya brides and the Indian mother. However, it is a study in contrast when we compare the photographic "fortunes" of Nirmala and Piyadasa—Nirmala has rarely been the subject of newspaper or journal features, and hence far fewer photographs of Nirmala posing with her work are out in public circulation. One newspaper article that presented such a photograph did so with an image of her placing one hand gingerly on the support on which her works were resting, and not with her arms crossed in a defensive posture. Such tentativeness of pose and posture may strike one as not immediately fitting for an artist who is seen as vociferously opposing the inequities of society (fig. 22.11).[33]

In 1973, Nirmala made a stunning entrance at the "Man and his World" competition organised by the Balai Seni Lukis Negara with her work *Statement 1* (she and Sulaiman Esa were the two major award winners). The form it took—documentary photographs in a grid layout flanked by two boards pasted with newspaper clippings and her extended artist statement on the growing urban pollution of Damansara in Kuala Lumpur, which was installed together with the waste she collected from the area—was so unusual at the time that in the place of medium, the work was just described as a "concept." Yet despite her photography-based art being the voice of justice for the oppressed and dispossessed, Nirmala was also well aware of the limits of photography. In another work *Statement II*, she explained: "The camera recorded only a small fraction of what was

seen and experienced by actually being in these areas. No single medium can actually communicate a whole experience."[34] And despite the innovative treatment of photo imagery by Nirmala, much less attention was paid to her craft than to her sentiments, with critics largely philosophising or pontificating about the state of humanity and the world. One such critic, Zakaria Ali, however, had unwittingly made a useful observation on her method and her scale: Nirmala's work was "heavy stuff, made even heavier by having these images enlarged. The viewer has no choice but be confronted by the gruesome pictures."[35] Unlike Piyadasa, who is usually seen posing confidently with his artworks, Nirmala is instead captured rather diminutively seated cross-legged and barefoot on the ground with her work looming behind her; she also does not look squarely at the camera but gazes out into the far corner (fig. 22.12).

Disliking labels but vexed by her own vested interests, Nirmala has declared that she is "an artist first and foremost—not necessarily just a woman artist or feminist artist or political artist" because "once labelled, people feel they can deal with you. It is easier to control and oppress you when you are put into a category. But I have not resolved how to deal with this as I really care a lot about issues that affect women and children." Her chosen posture in the photograph may have to do with her expressed desire to not be pigeonholed and to let the work and the issues speak for themselves.[36] Despite her divergent emotional responses of anger and compassion when confronted with issues, she lets on that she "had to sit through the pain of the incubation period," where she "might read a book and try not to think of it" or "do some research or collect things." This is because "the subconscious cannot be dictated to but rather, it dictates. And it cannot be forced into action or else your work will emerge a shallow mess."[37] These alternating psychical currents and her willingness to work through her own ambivalence may yet explain why Nirmala the artist has been presented in oddly contradictory ways to her viewers. Her self-portrait from 1999 (fig. 22.13) is a picture of crimson rage where two frontal head shots (one a facsimile of the other) are placed on separate diametrically opposing vectors but close to the points of convergence and the state of metaphorical eruption where she then visually chastises the viewer: "When are you all going to say enough! And stop it!" On the other hand, her profile page on The Edge Galerie's website is headed by an uncommon pose with the artist's head turning away from the viewer's gaze and her eyes downcast, as if rejecting engagement with the prevailing visual order of the world.[38] These are, I would argue, the two poles animating Nirmala's practice—one being detached and analytic, and the other being highly charged empathy, an interpretation supported too by how she herself is presented and received through the posed photographs that are in circulation. Viewers may not be privy to the intentions of the artist (as the posing subject), the photographer or the news media staff (who textually frames the images); these posed images as artefacts set in motion another form of agency, urging us to pay heed to the ways they interpose on how we read the artists, their art and their unexpected lifeworlds.

To end, I am reminded of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari had argued in the name of "minor literature": "Create the opposite dream: know how to create a becoming-minor."[39] Instead of having an "official, referential genre" and the proper assignation of names and sense, we ought to have "a sequence of intensive states, a ladder or a circuit for intensities that one can race around in one sense or another, from high to low, or from low to high."[40] Any word, name or image need no longer refer to only one thing but to other things or conditions—"the becoming-dog of the man and the becoming-man of the dog."[41] Turning our attention towards photographs of artists with their artworks that might otherwise be gleaned only as supplemental and marginal

34 Redza Piyadasa, "The Art of Nirmala Shanmughalingam," in *The Condition of Being* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 1981), 12.
35 Ali, op. cit.
36 Wong Hoy Cheong, "Let the Bamboo Grow in Your Heart: A Conversation with Nirmala," in *Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator* (Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art, 1998), 2.
37 Ibid.
38 See "Nirmala Shanmughalingham, Datin," in The Edge Galerie—Artists, http://www.theedgegalerie.com/artist/datin-nirmala-dutt-shanmughalingham/ (accessed 25 July 2016).
39 Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 27.
40 Ibid., 21.
41 Ibid.
42 Refer to Deleuze's comments on the minor in "Gilles Deleuze in Conversation with Antonio Negri," *Futur Anterieur* 1 (1990), trans. Martin Joughin, http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdeleuze3.htm (accessed 16 June 2016).
43 Krishen Jit, introduction to *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery Malaysia, 1994), 12. Piyadasa addressed this in his exhibition *Art and the Social Context* at the Balai Seni Lukis Negara in 1991 where he included a selection of cartoonists with other visual artists, making a point about the privileging of a certain hierarchy in the arts: "It is about time cartoonists were given their due recognition. The role of the cartoonist is more important than the role of painters who are still operating in an elitist context." See also Joseph Edwin, "Thought-Provoking Art Show," *New Straits Times*, 21 June 1991, 25.
44 This makes practical sense too as there is not yet a plethora of publicly available scholarly books and documents on artists. Corralling other types of visual material (which have been hitherto considered secondary or marginal) could potentially open up other methodological pathways.

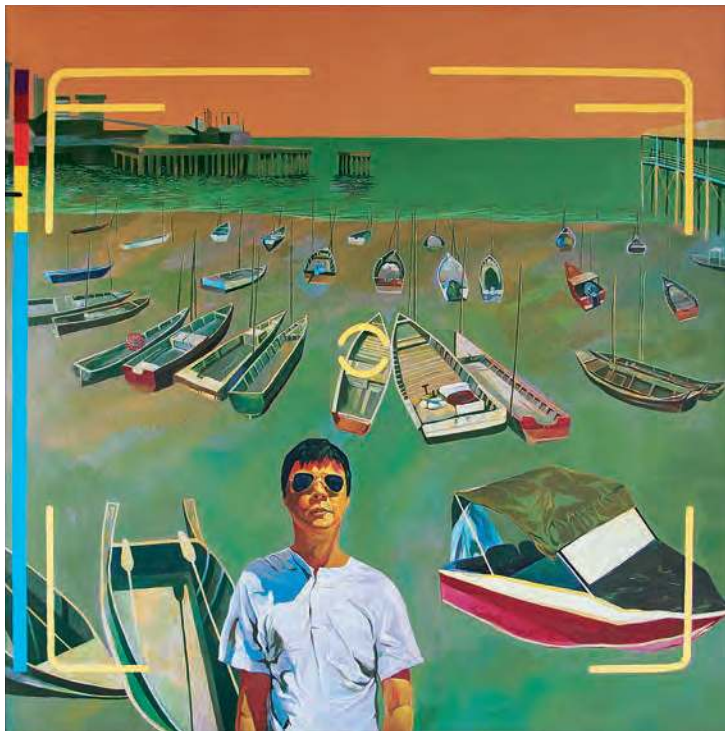
to an essay is one way of "becoming minor." For Deleuze, to invoke the minor is to jettison the established model for a process, a becoming that will lead into unknown paths, which does not in itself jeopardise its ability to acquire a major model should we wish it to.[42] The acquisition of a "major model" was also at the forefront of the minds of the convenors of the landmark exhibition *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art* at the Balai Seni Lukis Negara in 1994. It was a desire for a master narrative guided by a sense of history and continuity. Yet as the esteemed Malaysian dramatist and critic Krishen Jit rightly cautions in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, "historical meaning changes over time in perceptions of art and social contexts" and these are seldom tackled by art historians in Malaysia. Jit proposed instead to bounce off art and social contexts against each other, so that "we could enjoy the benefit of being both inside and outside the drama of modern Malaysian art":

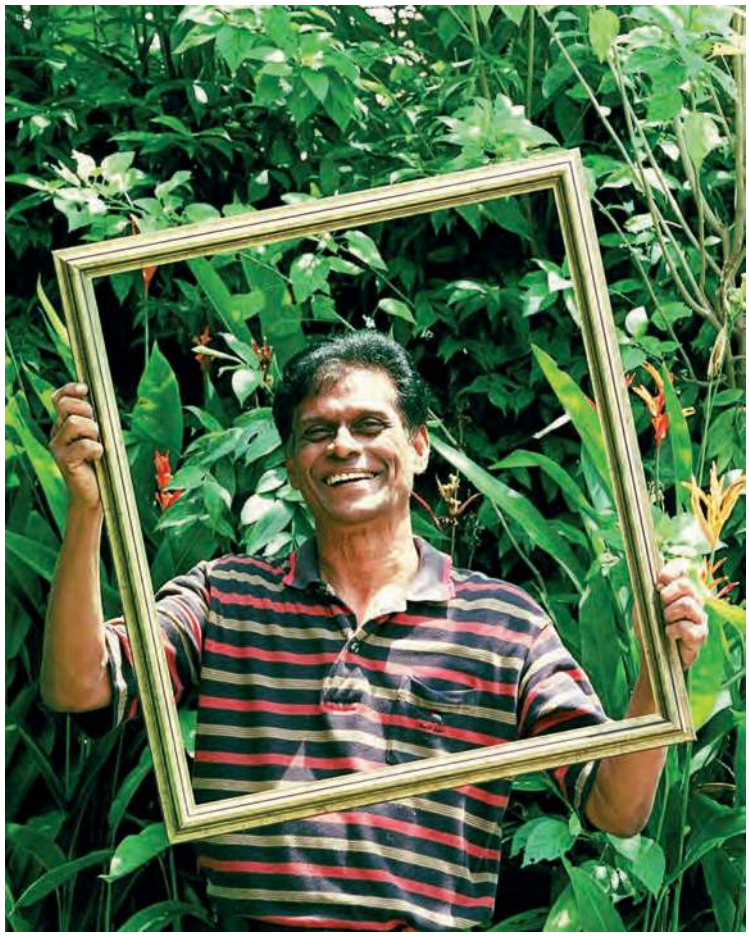
> On the one hand, our insideness would be ensured by our entanglement with the narrative of the relationship between art and society. On the other hand, the very act of bouncing off these forces and actions would release us, even if temporarily, from the dangers of an incestuous and claustrophobic involvement, and thereby help us to construct a critical distance from the evolving narrative.[43]

I would hazard that Jit did not go far enough. If we are truly concerned with the social nature of art, we should attend to the visual universe that the works of art reside in, and that one way to construct that "critical distance" and evolve the narrative would perhaps be to first expand and include the visual field of what can be considered *with* and *next to* artists and art-making—the minor streams of photographic material which circumscribe our daily visioning of art, that is.[44]

22.1

22.2





22.3

22.1 Photograph of Raymundo Albano.

22.2 Kok Yew Puah
Camera View of the Artist
1993
Acrylic on canvas
163 × 163 cm
Private collection, Singapore
© Family of the late artist

22.3 Redza Piyadasa holding an empty frame.
Image from *The Star*, Malaysia

THERE'S STILL BUSINESS IN MALAYSIAN ART BUSINESS

REDZA PIYADASA... "reputation of a gallery counts a lot"

RAHIMI HARUN... goin

> The serious collectors are still buying art. They have set aside part of their money for this purpose and are not affected by the economic slow-down.
>
> **Redza Piyadasa**

> We need to create an exhibition culture, just like an eating-out culture. More people have to be educated in art and become more culturalised.
>
> **Rahimi Harun**

By OOI KOK CHUEN

THERE'S no business like art business.

The economic slowdown has hit many businesses, but not the art of selling art. Or, at least not as bad.

But of the several art galleries that have sprung up in the Klang Valley over the last few years, a few have folded up while most others are just eking out an existence.

The official opening of the On-Tai Gallery three months ago, however, has caused ripples of anxiety even among the more established art dealers. On-Tai Gallery, the beach-head of On-Tai Development's art promotion, has 3,200 square feet of space devoted to over 150 works by over 45 artists in various media.

Saujana Art Gallery, which opened in Subang Jaya last August, is not directly affected as it has exclusive stranglehold on the artists under its roof. More directly affected by On-Tai's incursion is Art Promotors, based at KL Hilton and owned by Rahimi Harun. Some of the artists whom Rahimi acts for — like Latiff Mohidin and Amron Omar — also have a few of their works put up for sale at On-Tai.

"The artists can sell their works to anybody they want to. It's a free market. I don't believe in tying down any artist," Encik Rahimi said. "But I take exception if they sell their works lower than what they have asked me to.

"On-Tai has the obvious advantage of corporate backing. It can acquire good paintings. Many galleries are going to suffer from its competition," added Encik Rahimi, who has five years' experience in the business.

Encik Rahimi said some dealers have resorted to under-cutting to stay afloat. "Their overheads, like rental of shop-lots and staffing, are not so high so they can afford to charge lower commissions."

He does not consider the rental of his shop-lot at the KL Hilton as high, but will be moving his business lock, stock and barrel to the KL Central Market when it opens next month.

But Wilson Lim, On-Tai's building manager-cum-art coordinator, stresses that their venture is not profit-orientated. "We are not in the market to compete with the commercial galleries. We just want to give a showcase for the works of local artists and provide a meeting place for the exchange of art ideas.

"So we are not particular about whether the works can sell or not. We have sold only over 10 pieces so far."

The exhibition is ongoing and the artists are charged 20 per cent on every piece they sell. There is no levy for putting up the works and they can change or replenish their stocks. Besides, some of the paintings are not for sale.

On-Tai Gallery plans to set up a mini-library where enthusiasts can get more information about the artists and their works.

"We also act as a middleman for contracts for artists. For instance, if somebody wants a portrait done, we can recommend him to artists like Samjis Mat Jan," Mr Lim said.

Saujana's art curator, Redza Piyadasa, himself an artist, said art is still a good investment despite, and especially, in these lean times.

Although it is still difficult to gauge the trend of sales during the economic slowdown, Mr Piyadasa said Saujana is still very much alive and kicking.

Even then, the last three months of the year — October, November and December — are normally not conducive months for art sales, probably because of financial commitments for festivities.

"The serious collectors are still buying art. They have set aside part of their money for this purpose and are not affected by the economic slowdown," Mr Piyadasa said.

"Besides, the reputation of a gallery counts a lot."

Located in the thriving Subang Jaya township, Saujana showcases the works of Mr Piyadasa, his wife Fatimah Chik, Tay Mo-Leong, Ruzaika Omar Basaree, Askandar Unglerbt, Ponirin, Eric Peris, Syed Zainal Rashid, Ismail Zain, Ismail Hashim, Tay Hooi Keat and Nirmala Shanmugalingam, among others.

According to Mr Piyadasa, limited photographic prints by Eric Peris, Syed Rashid and Ismail Hashim are doing quite well.

Other galleries like Le Beaux and Art House at Wisma Stephens thrive on their sale of art paraphernalia and framing (mounting) services and are, therefore, not so dependent on the casual sales of the paintings which they exhibit from time to time.

Le Beaux Art Gallery, which also offers lessons in art and music has, in fact, moved from Jalan Imbi to bigger premises at Jalan Pudu.

Dealers may find the going tougher this year with most companies trimming their advertising and promotional budgets.

"Rich individuals are still buying art. But some of the companies I have approached so far lament that they have no reserve funds to sponsor exhibitions," said Encik Rahimi, who has organised 29 exhibitions over the last three years.

He, however, said that the economic slowdown has only a negligible effect on the sales of art.

But places like Galaxy Gallery, Gallery Six and Penang's Mun Sen Art Gallery have all succumbed to the harsh reality.

Both Saujana and Art Promotors depend very much on support from the corporate sector, like hotels, banks and exclusive clubs.

The reasons for purchasing paintings are usually to maintain corporate image, or for interior decoration, and only occasionally, for the actual aesthetics of the works.

Art Promotors, which has supplied paintings for establishments like Hyatt Kuantan and the Raintree Club, recently sold works of nine artists to the Pan-Pacific Hotel.

The Shangri-la Hotel of Kuala Lumpur recently bought 13 of Fatimah Chik's *batik* compositions.

Saujana prides itself on two outstanding features:

- Its uniformed pricing, fixed by Mr Piyadasa, who also decides on the artists to promote;
- Its attractive instalment scheme which can go a long way to help more middle-class art-lovers own local art works.

Also, Saujana is willing to buy back the pieces they sell.

As veteran artist Long Thien Shih puts it: "Art-buying cannot be construed really as an investment if the sellers are not prepared to buy back the paintings at the prices sold."

Encik Rahimi claims that his clients are mostly the affluent, but he is going more down-market to make his business more viable. His corporate individual clientele ratio is 60-40.

"High-priced works running into four digits are difficult to push. It's easier to sell off lower-priced paintings which can go a long way to keep a company afloat.

"Some people say that I'm operating a bazaar, but there is no place for pride or ego. I want to stay in this business for a long time."

Art dealers also have to put up with late payments, or worse, no payment at all. In this, they need the tolerance of the artists they represent.

Most dealers concur that the younger and up-and-coming artists will suffer most if there are any adverse sales in the art business. But to survive, even the more established ones will have to be at their best and not merely rest on their laurels.

Most artists have steady jobs to fall back on. Only very few, like Ibrahim Hussein, Lee Kian Seng, Teya and Lye Yau Fatt, depend on their art for a living.

Art galleries are also facing increased competition from modern frame-shops which, besides providing framing services, also act as agents for a few artists of their choice and sell foreign limited prints and decorative posters.

For instance, De Ari and Frame also sells the works of watercolourists Tan Choon Ghee, Lye Yau Fatt and Cheah Ewe Hoon. Noted KL framemakers Leong Brothers, who own the Hilton Art Gallery, also have an assortment of paintings by Yau Fatt, Mohamad Zain and Ismail Mat Hussin.

The battle for the art ringgit also extends to original lithographs and prints by European artists, which are often sold here at quite exorbitant prices.

Local artists also have to vie with artists from Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and even China, who make regular forays into the KL art market. This is particularly so in the case of Chinese brush paintings.

But from the information gleaned from gallery owners and artists, it would seem that Malaysian art's biggest hindrance is neither the depressed economic situation nor the intense competition.

They feel that art education and appreciation, or the lack of it, is stifling the local market.

Not enough people are going to art exhibitions, the sad part being that some of those who did went for the wrong reasons. In places like Japan, art lovers have to pay to look at the exhibited works. Over here, even the curious viewer is hard to come by, never mind the serious buyer.

But sometimes, it is the artists who have themselves to blame. There were so many slipshod pieces at the *Pameran Seni* put up by the Ceras '85 Group at the APS Gallery in Jalan Tun Razak which ended on Jan 31.

Perhaps, the art market situation is best summed up by Encik Rahimi.

"We need to create an exhibition culture, just like an eating-out culture. We must create that kind of atmosphere. More people have to be educated in art and become more culturalised."

22.4

22.4 Ooi Kok Chuen, "There's Still Business in Malaysian Art Business," *New Straits Times*, 9 March 1986, 11.

22.5 Nora Marzuki, "Piyadasa—The Romantic Artist," *New Sunday Times,* 9 October 1988, 11. Layout reconfigured.

g down-market to make his business more viable

Redza with two of his works — of Tun Razak's family.

REDZA .. I'm a painter and a unique one too

22.5

New Sunday Times, October 9, 1988

Piyadasa — the romantic artist

By NORA MARZUKI

REDZA is an exasperating, tough, artistically opinionated, temperamental, fastidious, overconfident person at Piyadasa.

I didn't say it. He did.

Redza is his Muslim name. He is a fourth generation Sri Lankan — Sinhalese".

I tend to agree with him when he said he is probably schizophrenic — for he also claims to be maudlin, deeply sensitive, insecure and romantic.

But who is Redza Piyadasa?

"I am a painter and a unique one for I am very articulate and literate," he says in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I am different from the others. Most artists are not able to express themselves but I have an analytical mind because I am a good critic and would have made a brilliant criminal lawyer except I chose art. This notion about artists don't talk but paint' is utter poppycock and balderdash. Good artists are haughty, erudite and eloquent. When I say this I am not being boastful — it's a fact." You don't say!

Before becoming a full-time artist Redza was a lecturer for 20 years. He was attached to Mara and Universiti Sains Malaysia. He also used to be a part-time lecturer at Universiti Malaya and Universiti Perlanian Malaysia. During this period he even managed to write several books.

Family man

"I enjoyed teaching and had a good rapport with my students. I used to give them either an A or B, never a C. What was important to me was their thinking. A student who's outlandish in his thinking used to get better marks from me than the doggedly unimaginative type."

Redza's last exhibition was held at the Pan Pacific Hotel some time this year. The response was not that great. I bought one of his works after much haggling. We compromised on a $10 discount.

He was not interested in art at all until he went to a teacher's training college at Brinsford Lodge, England in 1958.

"I had to take three options so I decided on art as a practical course as it was the easiest. Besides, it was winter and I would rather stay indoors."

Within that two years he discovered he had considerable talent as an artist. In 1963, he was given a scholarship at the Hornsey College of Art in London.

"It moulded me and my interest in becoming a lawyer died."

But his dream is to write a novel.

"But for that one needs to have no problems especially the financial kind. One should be in a position where one just wakes up and write. But I cannot afford that, so instead of writing, I paint."

Redza is obviously a family man. Nearly all his works portray a family — Indian, Baba, Indo-Eurasian, Malay, Chinese and Indian-Muslim. His favourite painting is the one of the late Tun Razak and his family. Datuk Seri Najib looks one-third his present size.

"One can survive as an artist without too much hassles. I am quite happy as I do get recognition here as well as internationally. Wealth is secondary. I am not successful financially — unlike those directors in big companies who live in big bungalows and drive BMWs. But I am richer than most of them for I have managed to achieve a certain level of cultural and spiritual growth.

"When I look back and do a reassessment of the notion of what being a real man is all about, I believe it is the ability to outgrow the earlier macho male chauvinistic hangup."

Good topic

Redza believes that creativity comes from an intensity in living — and one does need an anchor in life.

"I am highly charged. I have an overdrive in mental and intellectual energy. Thus I need an emotional anchor — a woman!"

Well, now we know that behind every man (regardless of whether he's great or not) there must be a woman.

Redza, who's just turned 50, admits frankly that he does get pangs of insecurity "for when you hit 50, according to the law of averages, your body does not feel the same, and those that you know at 20 are being buried." And I thought life begins at 40... to end at 50?

"But it's one hell of a life — a thrill of a life. To understand life you have to go through the most painful depressive soul-searching experiences as well as the most happy, carefree emotionally-stimulating feelings of exhilaration. Life is a movable feast."

He has experienced both extremes.

"Even if I don't get to write that novel I would be a good topic for a novel. One is hard-pressed to find a writer who is multifaceted and colourful. The only person who approximates my idea is Lat — and its ironic that he is a cartoonist!

"I am not saying that I am the best but I think I am well-equipped to do it."

Isn't he amazing?

22.6 Ooi Kok Chuen, "Challenging the Concept of Art," *New Straits Times*, 7 May 2001, 6.

22.7 Ooi Kok Chuen, "Remaking Piyadasa," *New Straits Times*, 8 May 2001, 2.

22.6

Challenging the concept of art

Redza Piyadasa has been a well-known figure in the arts scene, especially for his controversial themes. OOI KOK CHUEN gives an 'Overview' of his works in the first of a two-parter on the artist.

IT'S all an "illusion" thing to Redza Piyadasa when it comes to art. The more challenging and provocative the better; aesthetic conventions and decorum are secondary.

Art to him is a vehicle in which he tosses and provoke debate, even questions the basis of the art itself — the perceptions of it, its relevance and limitations, notions of identity and reality... a kind of K-Art (Knowledge-Art), if you like.

Since the 1970s, in both his writings and his art, Piyadasa has been a strong advocate of accountability as against gungho expressionist splurges.

"Until now, my art had little to do with me as a person; it was never personalised. It had to do with concepts, systems, processes, cultures, languages and so on," he reveals to guest curator T.K. Sabapathy on the occasion of the exhibition *Redza Piyadasa: An Overview, 1962-2000*.

Born in Kuantan to parents of Sinhalese heritage, Piyadasa attended the Malayan Teachers College in Brinsford Lodge in Wolverhampton in England (1958-59). On his return, he taught at the St Thomas Secondary School in Kuantan.

In 1962, he attended the Specialist Teachers Training Institute in Cheras where he met (Datuk) Syed Ahmad Jamal, who was a great influence on his career.

On the day Malaysia was formed on Sept 16, 1963, he left for England again on a government scholarship, this time to take up sculpture at the Hornsey College of Art in London (1963-67). His first year was spent on Design, under a seminal programme innovated by Maurice de Sausmarez, noted for his benchmark book *Basic Design: The Dynamics of Visual Form*. Approaches in sculpture then were veering away from the "volume-mass orientation of Henry Moore" to "painted sculptures" like those of Anthony Caro.

On his return, he was posted to teach in Kuala Terengganu. In 1968, he taught at the Mara Institute of Technology's School of Art and Design.

His first major exhibition was *The New Scene*, which showcased a group of artists (with the singular exception of Jolly Koh) reacting against the expressionism wave and espousing a hybrid Minimalism-Constructivism. *The New Scene* comprised Piyadasa, Choong Kam Kaw, Sulaiman Esa, Tan Teong Eng, Tang Tuck Kan, Tan Teong Kooi and Jolly Koh.

Then came *Manifesasi Dua Seni Satu*, at the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1970, when he created his painted plywood-and-mirror sculpture on the racial riots of May 13, 1969. (The original was destroyed, but a replica was made specially for the preview exhibition).

Marakesh IV (acrylic on plywood strips of symmetrical design) and *Open Painting* (acrylic on wood and polka-dot fabric on actual wall surface) are the precursors to the expansion of conceptual mind-teasers in *Towards A Mystical Reality*, his collaboration with Sulaiman Esa, which was held at Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka in 1974.

In 1972, Piyadasa's acrylic on canvas, painted wood, wire and paper called *The Great Malaysian Landscape* was adjudged the joint winner with Lee Kian Seng's *From the Window of the Bed* in a competition. The work introduced stencilled letterings a la Larry Rivers/Arakawa, it is a parody of the relevance and value of the ubiquitous rural scene favoured by artists then, and a ridicule of the kind of "commodification" of the picturesque and romantic.

Towards A Mystical Reality truly jolted an otherwise blase art community into vehement reactions, such as from (Prof Madya) Siti Zainon Ismail. Poet-essayist Salleh Ben Joned even "Blessed" the Conceptual posturings with something that came deep within himself while coming up with his own counter-*Manifesto. Kenching dan Resonkan* (The Art of Pissing).

Mystical Reality AMDNM(Pwas officiated by Ismail Zain, then Director of Culture in the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. Sabapathy described it as "a milestone in the growing debate on matters concerning identity in creative practices in the 1970s in South-east Asia," while the dramatised provocations moved Kresna M (Kristien Jit a.k.a. Udih) to comment that it was "perhaps more successful as theatre than as an art exhibition". He also declared, "Post-Modernism had made a dramatic entrance in Malaysian art with Mystical Reality."

While Piyadasa, Sulaiman and Ismail made up the great intellectual triumvirate that dominated Malaysian art in the 1970s, there is a fourth non-artist musketeer to the equation — Krishen Jit.

To some, what passed off as "art" seemed frivolous with the repertoire including an outlined area of (Datuk) *Usman Awang's Shadow, Found Objects* like discarded hair from a barber shop, two half-drunk Coca-Cola bottles, a crumpled raincoat from a Klang rubbish bin, and used mosquito coils.

There are also the installations of chairs like *Bacon's Chair, Transformed Chair and Shadows, Two Chairs, Situational Piece No. 2, A Matter Of Time* which are "principally as a means for staging situations which demonstrate that perceptions of time and objects in art contexts are unstable and unpredictable" (Sabapathy).

Some of the objects were discarded after the exhibition.

Said Sabapathy: "The Conceptual productions of Piyadasa were never aimed at securing permanence or staked as originals in the sense that they defy replication; they were intended to be provisional and as strategies to present ideas and concepts."

As an artist, Piyadasa was on overdrive.

In 1978, he produced another major work, *Entry Points* (1978, acrylic on wood, with originally framed 1968 oil painting called *River Scene* by Chiu Yu-Chiang).

A caption in the painting proclaimed, "Art works never exist in time, they have 'Entry Points' — over time". Over the years, the Yu-Chian painting within the painting itself has escalated in value and become an icon of "host" art for a more pedestrian art motive. Also, the question rises: Which has more value — the Yu-Chian or Piya's overall concept, where the painting has to operate within a new pictorial field of the frame?

The same year, Piyadasa also produced the highly controversial *Art Proposition* (1978), in which he blacked out Annuar Rashid's painting which he bought for RM130 and putatively put up for sale at RM500.

Artists have griped over this sacrilege, that he had no respect for artists and painting. Over time, one has come to detect an iconoclastic murderous violence in the whole act of obliterating something original. It's like a Christo "wrap-up", but with irrevocable and dire consequences.

But two decades after the "wanton" act, the pristine spirit of the "killed" painting could well be restored, with modern advances in art restoration, and Annuar Rashid's original could hypothetically see an "art cryonics" rebirth.

In 1975-77, Piyadasa did his post-graduate education at the University of Hawaii, specialising in art history and sculpture, and was awarded a Masters of Fine Arts. He joined Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang in 1977 as a senior art lecturer until 1985. During this time, he also managed the now defunct Saujana Fine Arts Gallery.

He taught part-time at Universiti Malaya until 1986.

In November 1978, he held his first solo at the Lincoln Cultural Centre in Kuala Lumpur. His other solos were at the Pan Pacific Hotel in Kuala Lumpur in 1987 and the Canberra School of Art's Foyer Gallery in Australia in 1991 during his artist-in-residency there.

It was at this time too that his scholarly credence was etched in the exhibition catalogues for *Nanyang Artists Retrospective* (1978) and *The Treatment of Local Landscape in Modern Malaysian Art 1931-91* — two years before his writing for the (Datuk) *Tuy Hoot Kent Retrospective*, and the *Modern Artists of Malaysia* book, which he co-authored with Sabapathy.

During the 1970s, Piyadasa, with Sulaimani and Abdul Latiff Mohidin, was also closely involved in designing sets for theatre, such as (Datuk) Usman Awang's *Basi Jayatilaka's musical Dido Dan Dinah*, (Datuk) Syed Alwi's *Along Bentuk Serdiu*, KL Theatre Club's staging of Aristophanes' *The Birds*.

Piyadasa also supervised puppet carving for the wayang kulit play *Raja Muda*, performed at UKM in 1978, and designed set for the Sasaran Theatre presentation of Lee Joo-for's *The Propitious Kidnapping of the Cultured Daughter*.

His monumental sculpture of reinforced cast concrete called *Monument* stands in Manila of the Asean Sculpture Symposium project.

Then came his pendulum o figurations on Malaysian families. It all started when ed the house of a Peranakan in 1981, the *Malaysian Se* born the next year.

Using acrylic on board media and collage on board, art "floots" of sorts but v thotic play of scale, hig brushed colour tones, backg patterned ambience with strips or floral designs or te lage.

They are all about "very ple, cultural essence and their times" (Piyadasa) *Eurasian family; Muslim Penang; Mamak Famil Malaysian Indian Famil Malay Women: Tun Razak's Rapkian Cina; Chinese fir* the poster of Loow Piang Tin San Swee's play); *Zoaba; Ha and Brother*, and sometimes "compendium" of the Ma ethnic mosaic.

Zainol Shariff, his fashion and now Galeri Petronas, rested the "historical backgr present-day Malaysian socie up; of multicultural reali migration and cultural e tion; of traditions and heri political and social history *and Idea; Beloobong Malaysian Art).*

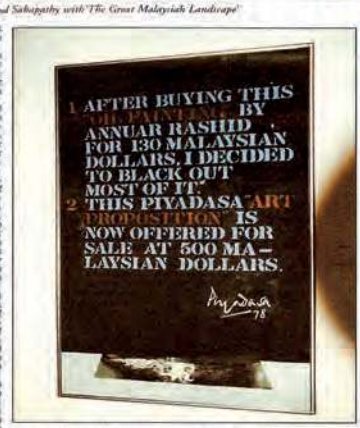
Later he also had a spell introduced the *Baroque's Elective* architectural facsi

The exhibition also reveal al drawings in pencils and c done by Piyadasa between 2000.

The works reveal an arti critical quality and commit one of artist who is most c ed, much misunderstood at times much maligned then his sharp critiques on art for Seens in The Sunday Times the 1970s. He was also art cr for Business Times from 19

Like him or not, Piyadasa is universal as he is an artist, art critic, curator and educ — demands to be heard a and the terrible shock is a pa ing point, if not an eye-open

WINNER ... Piyadasa (left) and Sabapathy with 'The Great Malaysian Landscape'



CONTROVERSIAL ... 'Art Proposition' with Piyadasa's proposition painted over Annuar Rashid's painting

WELL FORMED? ... The 'Female Figure', as Piyadasa "sees" it

Piyadasa was awarded the Ahli Mangku Negara in 1983, Kesatria Mangku Negara in 1984 and Darjah Pudiska Mahkota Perak in 1986.

He has also won Cultural Awards from Iraq, South Africa, Australia, Japan and the Philippines, and in 1988, won the Prince Claus Award from Holland.

Piyadasa's oeuvre comprises 100 works including paintings, sculptures, drawing, Conceptual artworks, installations, mixed media collages and comes with a 180-page catalogue written by Sabapathy.

The exhibition, officiated by Deputy Transport Minister Tan Sri Rahib Ngah Talib, ends at the National Art Gallery on Aug 19.

For details, call 03-4025-0980.

Next: T.K. Sabapathy on the 'Re-Making of Redza Piyadasa'

❑ **The writer can be contacted at ooik@nstp.com.my**

Remaking Piyadasa

Art historian T.K. Sabapathy is of the view that Redza Piyadasa's diverse works not only represent the 'debates' in Malaysian art but also show his creative dimension. OOI KOK CHUEN reports in this second of a two-part series.

IT is no easy task putting together all the disparate elements of the art and thoughts of one as complex, articulate and provocative as Redza Piyadasa.

But T.K. Sabapathy, who guest-curated *Redza Piyadasa: An Overview, 1962-2000*, was pat on the high note, again revealing his sharp insights, expansive vision, and excellent curatorial skills and methodology.

Sabapathy, 63 next month, is a rare brilliant mind who has done so much to shape and reshape art thinking with contemporary concepts, its history and defining personalities, on both sides of the Causeway and beyond.

His art-biographical wraps on Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal, Abdul Latiff Mohidin, Yeoh Jin Leng and Ibrahim Hussein are benchmark reading, and his latest curatorial effort on Piyadasa is a study of his wily, systematic approach.

Sabapathy, who taught at Universiti Sains Malaysia's then fledgling Fine Arts Department in the late 1970s, is now a senior fellow in the Department of Architecture at the National University of Singapore, where he teaches the history of art and architecture.

He is also director of the Contemporary Arts Centre of Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts in Singapore.

On the *Piyadasa Overview*, which could well be subtitled *ReLooking (Re-Making) Redza Piyadasa: Mission and Ideas*, Sabapathy says:

"What I try to do is to talk about Malaysian art history through Piyadasa. I talk about Sulaiman (Esa), I talk about the critical debates at that time, facets which have never been known, never been seen before.

"Piya has as much a rounded profile as an artist but the directions he took, to develop his practice after leaving college, are very distinct and very different from others, especially in the way that he interpreted and read the state of art in Malaysia in 1969, and beyond — with his encounter with Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism.

"In as much as Piya tried to counter that here, there were also encounters with it elsewhere. So he developed that kind of historical intervention.

"That sense of criticality has been integrated into his practice, so his works, especially culminating with the Conceptual period —*To be Continued* (his 1978 painting) marks the terminus of that — represent the critical dimensions in his practice.

"It is most vividly demonstrated by the juxtaposition of text and image. Until very recently, the word and the image have always been seen as occupying totally antithetical dimensions, hence, the iconoclasms that went through in so many cultures.

"But here it is very much a Conceptual strategy. Piya didn't invent it. One aspect of Conceptualism was the inclusion of text and the use of words as the carriers of concepts and meaning, denying the importance of the visual and the optical dimension.

"But what Piya did was to juxtapose the two and in some instances, the text works in harmony with the image. At other times, the text is at tensional relationship with the image, is contrary to the image — it undercuts the image. You

❐ PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 3

VIP PRESENCE ... Piyadasa (second from right) talking to Deputy Transport Minister Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib at the opening. On Piyadasa's right is Sabapathy.

INTERESTING ... Two works by Piyadasa entitled 'May 13, 1969' and 'Terengganu 3'

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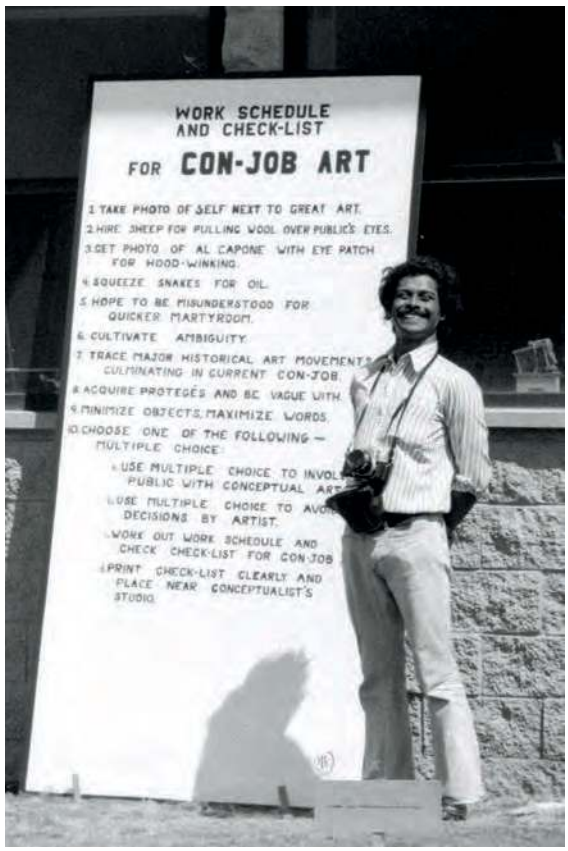

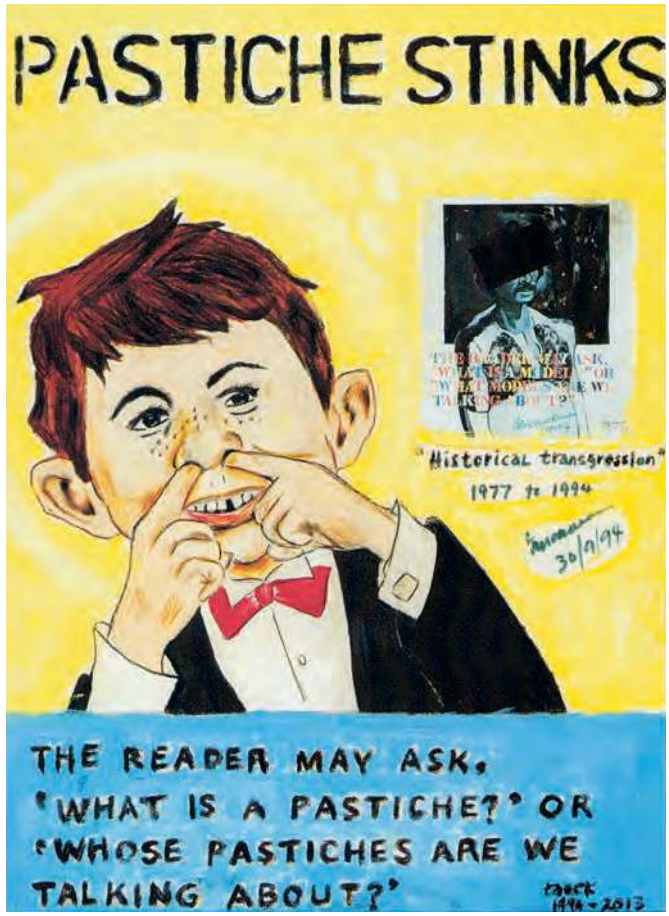

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22.8 Piyadasa photographing Laura Ruby unveiling her work.
Image courtesy of Malcom Wong
© Estate of Peter T. Brown

22.9 Piyadasa posing with Laura Ruby's work.
Image courtesy of Malcom Wong
© Estate of Peter T. Brown

22.10 Tan Chee Khuan
Pastiche Stinks
1994–2013
Mixed media on paper
37 × 27 cm
Collection of the artist

22.11 Ooi Kok Chuen, "Brush with Harsh Realities of Life," *New Straits Times*, 3 May 1992, 12–3.

22.12 Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam with her works.

22.13 Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam
Self-Portrait
1999
Acrylic and collage on canvas
101.5 × 91.5 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

22.11

SUNDAY STYLE MAY 3, 1992

COVER STORY

Brush with harsh realities of life

No Malaysian artist has so stirred our conscience on socio-political and environmental causes as Nirmala Shanmughalingam whose works present us with the veracity and shock of life's injustices

Story by
OOI KOK CHUEN
Pictures by
YIP HEE KEONG

IN an interview on Malaysian art by Dallas Adair over Radio Australia last year, I was asked if there were any artists doing art on political issues and if so, were there any restrictions?

Immediately Nirmala Shanmughalingam sprang to mind.

On socio-political and environmental causes, no Malaysian artist has so stirred our consciousness and conscience as consistently, effectively and honestly as Nirmala.

One is confronted by her stark mass media-derived images in photographic silkscreen and collage — the veracity, the immediacy and the shock — of estranged children and pathetic womenfolk, of indigenous people displaced by indiscriminate deforestation.

They inform and incite outrage at the injustice and the folly of war and in the case of the Sabra and Chatilla massacre in Beirut, the unspeakable atrocity.

Though Nirmala, 51, gained "notoriety" when her *Friends In Need* was removed by officials of the Malaysian-British Association from the Side-By-Side exhibition in 1986, she is no "fair-weather" activist out for a cheap shot.

Friends In Need had the then British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, as the wayang-kulit demon Raseksi from the wayang kulit Purwa repertoire, and also then US President Ronald Reagan as Raksasa Tjakil. Both leaders' policies were seen as being protective of white supremacy and even condoning apartheid in South Africa.

"I couldn't bear to look at the victims anymore, so I started looking at the perpetrators instead," she says with a vehemence unusual for this squeamish-looking soft-spoken mother of two grown-up children.

Another piece on South Africa, *Save The Soul That Will Save The Black People*, is inspired by German printmaker Kathe Kollwitz.

Her *Africa I* and *II* (1980) acrylics were based on the sufferings of women and children in the civil strife in Ethiopia.

Long before it became fashionable to go "green", Nirmala had already in the 70s been agitating caution in the wake of rapid development, particularly in Damansara and Batu Caves.

And her environmental concern has extended to logging in Sarawak with her series, inspired by the South American rallying hero Chico Mendez, called *Memulakah Tangan Sebarangan Nanti Dirimpa Balah* (Do Not Log Carelessly Lest Misfortune Befall You).

Her societal art (as opposed to propagandistic art) started with her composite photo documentations, *Statement 1* (1973), which jointly won the major award with Sulaiman Esa in the Man And His Environment exhibition. Until then her art was centred around picturesque landscapes and portraits (Her portrait painting was accepted for the first time in the National Art Gallery's Open Show in 1964).

Though she sourced her materials from museums, university and public libraries, newspaper morgues and forestry authorities (Forestry Research Institute of Malaysia), she is not just a studio artist. She is also directly involved in some of her works.

In *Berkabung* 1974–79, a comparison of the quality of life of the upper-class and squatters, she was with the squatters on the eve the bulldozers came and mowed down the hopes and homes of these have-nots.

"The people were evicted at short notice without any long-houses built for them. I kept in touch with some of the squatters. The dislocation affected the women, especially the pregnant ones, the old folk and the children," she recalls.

"I was there on the day before the bulldozers came at night. When I went there the next day, all I saw was the rubble. I remember an old woman picking up pieces of wood from her mowed down house to rebuild elsewhere."

Pollution (1973) is a 12-piece photo composite on the environmental decay in Batu Caves and Jinjang.

There are also her paintings of refugee children in her *Anak Ayu* series, and the nightmare of the Vietnam War (1970–80).

Her astute orchestration and intuitive manipulation of the images into disciplined grids is at odds with her withdrawn nature. One suspects that what she withholds in physical action, she reorganises and redirects the curious combination of inner nervous energy and outer tensions into her works.

The beguiling methodical framework of her paintings are often fashioned from chaos, the gestural brushworks of expressionistic hinges and flat organic blobs before the superimpositions of ready-made images from news magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek* and *The Economist*.

Nirmala does not go for the gut paintings of spontaneity. She researches meticulously the issues she is dealing with to get as close to the truth as possible, for truth today, as everybody knows, is very complex (even the motives of the do-gooders are suspect) and very relative, depending on which side of the fence you are on.

Nirmala has also been working on woodcuts of Balinese dancers, most of her tools like mallet and knives being sourced directly from Japan.

From 1984 to 1988, she did extensive research on Asian arts and crafts, particularly on the ikat and pua, and Kelantanese wayang kulit and the Wayang Purwa of Java.

She twice visited the Textile Museum in Jakarta to look into books and copy recipes on getting the elusive rust-red dye from the roots of the *mengkudu* or *engkudu* (*morinda citrifolia*). She also looked up the *dalangs* (puppet masters) to understand more the *lampung* (legends) of the traditional *batik*.

The *mengkudu* plants are used as backdrops in her more recent paintings, which herald a return to colours for Nirmala whose palette has erstwhile been restricted to black and rust-and-tawny brown.

There are times, she feels, she needn't be there to know, to feel and empathise.

"Often, I have already absorbed too much. My husband has told me I'm like a blotter; I soak up everything. It can torturous and agonising sometimes," she concedes.

"Graham Greene once said: 'Self-expression is a hard and selfish thing that can feed on everything, even upon the self.'"

After her works on the Beirut massacre (1983–84), she stopped working to do anything.

Working on depressing subjects gets her down, but she's feeling changes within herself and around her.

For one, since her Kboo Kongsi series (1988–89) inspired by the single-window motifs from the Penang clan house, the Penang-born artist has burst into colours again after many, many years of "abstention" and this has also seeped into her more recent environmental works.

The Kboo Kongsi series was inspired by her art teacher at Methodist Girl's School, Mrs Tay Hooi Keat, who would take them there to sketch and paint.

This proves a welcome distraction though she also takes the occasional holiday break, like to Melbourne and Bali (twice) last year.

Nirmala remembers how she had wanted to be an artist when young. Her father, Brahmas Dutt, was a Labour Office clerk and could not support her dream though her art-schoolteacher uncle, Ram Das Sharma, encouraged her.

Her interest was further kindled when her work sent by Mrs Tay, then the Federal Inspectorate of Art, was selected for the International Exhibition of Child Art at The Hague in Holland in 1957. It was a watercolour painting of a bazaar scene.

Nirmala attended Hoessain Enas' weekly portrait classes at the Angkatan Se-Pehlkis SeMalaysia, then Semenanjung's base, in Princess Road in 1962 when she moved to Kuala Lumpur.

In 1966–67, she took a non-graduating course at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington DC when her husband, M. Shanmugalingam, was at the World Bank. She had an extension course on the history of art at the Fogg Museum at Harvard University in 1970–71, and studied painting and drawing at the Boston College of Art before taking history of art and psychology for her B.Sc at the Oxford Polytechnic in 1975–78 when her husband was taking his doctorate in development economics there. She also majored in printmaking, photography and graphic design.

On her return, she worked for the Tourist Development Corporation as an officer from 1979 until 1980, four months before her first and only solo called the Conditions of Being at the Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka in 1981.

In 1989, she was invited for the Arx '89 Metromania in Perth.

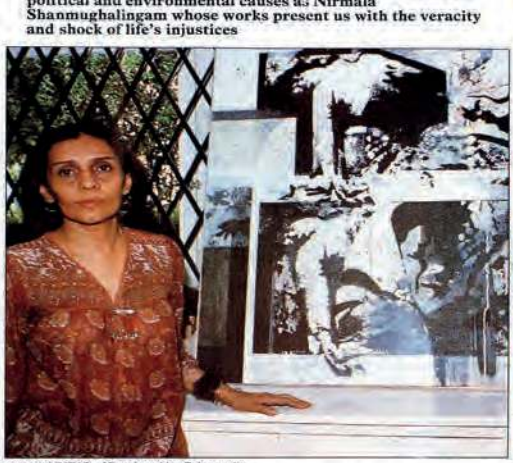
Her works are collected by the the National Art Gallery (four works), the National Museum of Singapore (three works), and the Jordanian National Gallery.

Though her art is not pretty and decorative, Nirmala has her small band of private collectors who don't mind putting part of the harsh reality of the world in their living rooms.

"When I work, I don't care about anything else. It's me and the works. In the end, it's the integrity that counts, not how it's going to look," she says.

For Nirmala, whatever she does, she is true to Goethe's stirring message in Goethe's Faustus Prologue: "If feeling fails you, vanity will be your cause and idle what you plan unless your art springs from the soul with elemental force."

FLATTENED HOPES... Nirmala's squatter series



FOLLY OF WAR... Nirmala and her Beirut series

PETRUK JADI RAJA... parody using the mischievous wayang kulit clown

BLOW TO ENVIRONMENT... another recent work on indiscriminate logging

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22.13