JOURNEYS THROUGH SOUTHEAST ASIA

KARIM RASLAN

JOURNEYS THROUGH SOUTHEAST ASIA

Ceritalah2

TIMES BOOKS INTERNATIONAL
Singapore • Kuala Lumpur

For Pak Ngah and Mak Ngah

(the late Tuan Haji Ahmad Boose and
Puan Hajjah Hashimah Tun Abdul Aziz)

Political Life

Art And Literature

Preface

This collection — my second — brings together newspaper columns and essays written over the past six years. With the exception of the art criticism, most of the work dates from 1999 onwards, when after a hiatus of over three years, I started writing a column regularly.

At the time, my brief was wide-ranging and at times quite unfocused. In retrospect, I realise that I was driven by a desperate desire to get away from Malaysia — to forget about the ugliness and the injustice of Anwar Ibrahim's case. I wanted to be elsewhere, to experience other countries and blot out the debacle. It was cowardly and I knew it. However, over the years, my travels have begun to assume a greater degree of order and I found myself being drawn to three key themes time and again: Islamic practices in Southeast Asia (an interest that predated the World Trade Center attack), the emerging generation of leaders and the importance of art and culture as a means of deepening regional understanding.

For better or for worse, '9/11' and the American-led 'War on Terror' has focused the outside world's attention on the struggle within the Islamic world for the hearts and minds of believers. Interestingly, in Southeast Asia at least, the forces of modernity and conservatism are more evenly matched than almost anywhere else in the Islamic world. Separately, I've spent a great deal of time meeting with and listening to the successor generation of regional leaders. As Suharto, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Lee Kuan Yew and Chuan Leekpai pass from the stage, I've been in search of the new faces.

Finally I've begun to realize that greater regional integration cannot take place unless and until we learn more about one another. Cross-border understanding in Southeast Asia is limited. Culture and the arts remain a superb way of learning about the different communities: a window as it were into the soul of a nation, illumi-

Natyada Na Songkhla, Kraisak Choonhavan, Numthong Sae-Thong, Chalidaporn Songsamphan, and Albert Paravi Wongchirachai.

Indonesia: Desi Anwar, Harry Bhaskara, Ati Nurati, Yusuf Wanandi, Tara Sosrowardoyo, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, Clara Joewono, Dini Djalal, Ramasurya, Pak Suteja Neka, Ibu Srimin Suteja Neka, Wahyu Suteja Neka, Goenawan Mohamad, Felia Salim, Rayya Makarim, Rizal Sukma, Leonard Leuras, Rio Helmi, Renate Kant, Bob Feldman, and Restu Imansari Kasumaningrum.

Philippines: Doris Ho, Maan Hontiveros, Nereus Acosta, Mar Roxas, Paulino Que, Evita Sarenas, Sylvia Garcon, Didi Dee, John Silva, Jonathan Best, and Washington Sycip.

Hong Kong SAR: Michael Vatikiotis, Thomas Abraham, Philip Bowring, Lorraine Hahn, Celine Tng, Tion Kwa, Glen Schloss, and Al Reyes.

Australia: Susan Wyndham, Eric Beecher, Chong Weng Ho, Simon Longstaff, Stephen Fitzgerald, Pilita Clark, and Clare Florence.

Singapore: Patrick Daniel, Walton Morais, Ronnie Lim, Michael Richardson, Marjorie Chu, Cheong Yip Seng, Sharon Siddique, Helina Chan, Kwok Kian Chow, Dr Earl Lu, Joanna Lee, Lim Chee Twang, and Dr Simon Tay.

USA: Moises Naim, Nicholas Platt, Abe Lowenthal, Valerie Norville, and Don Emerson. Alan Batkin, Dorinda Elliot, Vishakha Desai, and Marshal Bouton.

Karim Raslan
Kuala Lumpur

Culture And Society

were writing at that time, it was exhilarating. There were new radio stations (*Time Highway Radio* burst onto the airwaves), new magazines such as *Men's Review* and newspapers such as *The Sun*.

It really was the best of times. I have an enduring memory of endless parties, official visits, police sirens, black government Mercedes-Benzes, not to mention the ever-present boom of piling equipment as heads of state from increasingly obscure African nations declared their admiration for the 'Malaysian Way'.

However, July 27, 1997, marked the boundary between innocence and experience, the transition from a period of relative comfort and security into something more uncertain and edgy. In Malaysia — after the financial crisis — the wailing of police sirens sparked off very different associations.

The images I associate with the period after the baht's devaluation are more disturbing; the haze, white surgical masks and combat police in balaclavas.

I can recall the clouds of yellowy brown smog and the smell of fear and mute anticipation when everyone cowered in houses, as infinitely more powerful men sought to destroy one another. And now, with the darkness if not the actual smog about to descend on Kuala Lumpur once again, and the city bracing itself for yet another bout of street demonstrations and snap arrests, I am reminded of how much our country has changed over the past five years... and for the worse.

As I look through my book, I find myself searching for clues as to how I got it wrong. Why were my conclusions so far off the mark? How was it that I didn't see the confrontation between Anwar Ibrahim and Dr Mahathir Mohamad that everyone else thought was inevitable? Why was I so easily seduced by all the trappings of success? Given the shallowness of my conclusions — Asian values *et al.* — is it any wonder that the book makes me feel very uneasy?

My wholesale acceptance of the greed of those years now makes me cringe. In its defense, I'd have to argue that I was young and

really didn't need to turn out like this.

Still, as I turn the book in my hands, I cannot help but feel a little cheered. On hindsight I may have been wrong, but at least I tried to interpret events and understand the players. Even if I was the only person at the time who thought Malaysia could have become a freer, more open and more liberal country, at least I knew there was a time when such a dream was possible. But, as they say, the past is another country.

jellabah as you gorge yourself on *nasi lemak* and *goreng pisang* whilst watching 24-hour wrestling on satellite TV.

Having overcome my despondency and fought off the temptation of gorging myself on Haagen Dazs ice-cream, I started thinking about the other countries that were also celebrating their birthdays around the same time. For a start, there was India and Pakistan with their fiftieth anniversary. They were a pair of impossibly fractious twins — siblings that hated each other in the way that only siblings can — fighting and snarling at one another from kindergarten through to high school, university and middle age. Everyone talked about their very bloody and near tragic birth-pangs during Partition (or was it Parturition?).

Malaysia, by comparison, had been born quietly and happily — a bouncing eight-pound baby boy. Thankfully, we have been spared all that "trysts at midnight... " nonsense! Delivered into the world under the hot midday sun, Malaysia's arrival was proclaimed to all the world by Tunku Abdul Rahman's three clear-as-bell cries of "Merdeka!"

Of course, like all children, Malaysia had endured his fair share of minor childhood illnesses and injuries. In 1965, at the age of eight, enraged by a painful in-grown toenail, he chopped off his big toe. Strangely enough, the toe lived on (in-grown toenail and all)... but that's another story. As a toddler he had had a series of nasty arguments with most of his neighbours. Unlike the Indians and the Pakistanis, however, Malaysia's minor differences over toys and childhood games rarely went any further than shouting matches. Essentially, nothing that couldn't be resolved when everybody calmed down and grew up. More telling, in 1969, he succumbed to a terrible fever that left him bedridden for weeks as different viruses battled over his body.

But that was some time ago and Malaysia, now measuring himself up for his one-size-fits-all *jellabah*, was hitting the big Four-O both in age and in terms of inches around the waist. Emboldened by

Asia in Europe and Europe in Asia

The Business Times Singapore, March 25, 2000
The Eye, Australia, April 6-9, 2000
The Sun, June 11, 2000

As Asians, we tend to think of our own world as being unique. When we're around Australians, we love to drone on about the distinctiveness and sophistication of our ancient civilisations. We are this, we are that. In short, we are so special. But there again we may not be judging like with like. *Neighbours* is hardly comparable to *Ramayana*.

Recently I hosted a Dutch friend from my Cambridge days who now lives in Paris. A European to his fingertips, he was, like so many of his countrymen, fluent in a slew of languages. Now in his mid-thirties, my friend Hans had spent all of his life, with the exception of a few years completing a Ph.D. in the United States, living and working in Europe.

As we talked, catching up on the past, I discovered to my surprise how little I knew about his world and his points of reference. He told me how good French healthcare was, praised St. Petersburg for its opera, extolled the strengths of Dutch design, recommended Madrid's nightlife and Berlin's hip counterculture. The British, he said, were not Europeans and we never mentioned them again.

Since I travel so often for work, I tried to give him a sense of my world, my Southeast Asia. It wasn't easy and, in desperation, I found myself describing the region by way of analogy, comparing a country or a city with a European equivalent.

The first thing I did was mention the similarity between the Jewish and the Chinese diaspora, and how the host countries differed in terms of their ability to integrate this community. Was the forced conversion of the Jews in fifteenth century Spain very different from the suppression of the Chinese community under Suharto's New Order?

It was more of a challenge when it came to the particular coun-

tralizing forces at work in Indonesia and a fear of the separatism had led almost inevitably to the harsh treatment meted out to the Timorese and Achenese, a situation not dissimilar to the events unfolding in Chechnya. Indeed, Suharto's regime had certain key Soviet characteristics — brutal and authoritarian, it depended on the army and a one-party state driven by cronyism to enforce its writ.

Moreover, the *kraton* Suharto created around himself in Menteng's Jalan Cenang was as redolent of intrigue and back-biting as Stalin's Kremlin.

However, despite the centuries of oppression, the Javanese, like the Russians, had created a literature rich in subtle, hidden meanings. The language had evolved in a manner that suggested the people were wary of expressing themselves too clearly or too forcefully. For every hard-hitting Pramoedya or Solzhenitsyn there were host of poets and artists like Pushkin and Goenawan Mohamad whose work, whilst imbued with a deep sense of what it is to be Russian or Javanese, danced suggestively at the boundaries of the political mainstream.

The Philippines presented us with a quandary. It was definitely Latin, but was it more Spanish or Italian? Finally I decided it was more Italian. Riddled with corruption and hampered by a deep north-south divide, the country was unable to shake off its past. Burma, I thought was more appropriate a comparison for Spain, especially with the restrictive, isolationist Spain of Generalissimo Franco and the historic animosity between the French and the Spanish — the comparisons also worked well for the Thai and Burmese with their tense shared frontier.

Of course there were instances where the comparisons failed miserably. If Vietnam was Germany, the only point of similarity appeared to be recent political history and communism. Brunei was the equivalent of Liechtenstein, albeit gripped by a seedy soap-opera.

Malaysia and Singapore presented me with the most difficulty.

Coming Home to the City

The Business Times Singapore, January 22, 2000
The Eye, Australia, January 27–February 9, 2000
The Sun, December 24, 2000

Some years ago, I was in Jakarta on the eve of *Lebaran*, the religious festival that we in Malaysia call Hari Raya. That year, the fasting month of Ramadan had been particularly wet and much of the city had been inundated by floods. The incessant rain, the mud, the overcast skies and the darkly tinted car windows left me with a gloomy sense of the Indonesian capital.

This was reinforced when, as I prepared to leave the city, I was nearly overwhelmed by the scale of the migration that was taking place. There were families waiting patiently on every street corner.

As I watched the crowds gathering at the train stations and bus depots, the airports and sea ports, I remember pausing to consider the vast shifts in human settlement over the past fifty years and the enormous cities that had been created out of these changes. In many ways, the movement of peoples is a testament to the newness of many of these cities — urban communities that most would still hesitate to call 'home'. Given their ragged ugliness, the construction sites, the traffic jams, the smog and the squatter settlements, who can blame them?

But for people like myself, born and bred in the cities, try as we might, the countryside is often as alien as any foreign country, if not more so. I am sure most KL-ites would understand the gloom that descends on me when I am forced to drive through thousands of acres of oil palms, interspersed by the occasional dusty one-street town.

Still, the rush is infectious and even city-bound cynics such as myself begin to feel the pull of our distant roots — and in my case, with a Welsh mother and sixteen years of weak tea and soggy fish and chips under my belt, I do mean distant. However, during the

are times when I have wanted to reach into the TV screen and wring the neck of one of those perfectly composed, ridiculously content TV mummies, even if she is wearing a headscarf.

However, quite apart from my own misanthropic nature, another more important reason why I stopped going back to Kuala Kangsar was the sense of having to grapple with too many ghosts. Like Dickens' Scrooge (at least initially), I'd wake up enthused and excited on the first day of festivities, throwing myself into the day's events: the early morning prayers at the mosque, the visit to the graves and then the food. Ah, what magnificent food! Even now it still has the power to stop me in my tracks: beef *rendang*, *lemang*, sweetmeats and endless red, pink, green and yellow cakes.

But somehow I'd always felt like an outsider. I was going through the motions whilst others were happy enough just 'being'. I was too conscious of needing to belong before I could simply 'be'. As a consequence, I never really became anything more than a frenetic observer.

It's only now that I realise my 'Ghost of Hari Raya Past'. In essence my memories of the countryside were just too faint and insubstantial to be revived. And try as I might, they resisted the artificiality of reconstitution.

Unlike Scrooge, I was on my own, or rather I discovered that my roots, notwithstanding my father's grave all those miles away to the north, were really here in the city. It has taken me a long time to acknowledge the fact that the co-ordinates of my existence are to be found in Kuala Lumpur.

I know where I am from, and I understand as much as I can ever understand the nuances of my father's world: but it is not the world I chose to live in. Instead, I've created, perhaps unknowingly, my own *kampung* life here in the city. My home, my office, my favourite restaurants, friends and family are all within a mile of one another. It may not be as richly layered or wholesome as Kuala Kangsar. But the point is it's mine. And whilst the pull of the coun-

The Credibility Syndrome

The Business Times Singapore, June 2, 2001
The Sun, June 3, 2001

Every morning without fail, as I switch on my computer and check the Internet for news, I do something that might seem innocuous but is in fact extremely detrimental to national unity. In essence I am rejecting mainstream Malaysia. And since I have no confidence in the alternative national vision espoused by the opposition — will someone remind the DAP and PAS that they're supposed to be allies? — you can understand my frustration.

In the modern IT age, a sense of community and national identity depends on the media. By way of comparison, in ancient Greece, it was possible to practice democracy in a highly personal manner. Leaders were able to create a sense of civic responsibility by canvassing for support face-to-face amongst the electorate. Clearly that is impossible today.

Today, the media — the TV, the newspapers and the Internet — are the sinews of the body politic. In certain countries, such as the United States, it has almost supplanted the political process. Love it or loathe it, the media is an inescapable part of the national psyche, breathing life into our societies and articulating our every concern. Without it, we are merely a fractured mass of body parts — disparate communities with no core.

Ideally the media should be the guardian of our shared identity and values, giving voice to the things we want to say. Its icons are our icons; its victims, our victims. Similarly, its bad guys are our bad guys and we expect its practitioners — TV news anchors and journalists — to champion our concerns. We want them to ask the rich and powerful questions that we are too busy and at times too scared to pose. They are expected to expose corruption, venality and hypocrisy.

So, whilst sipping my coffee and scanning through the various

However, for many younger Malays and Chinese, 'opting out' means a retreat into religious and or racial intolerance (the comfort zone of chauvinism) — a world where solutions are engagingly simple. Frustrated and angry, the other alternative has been to hit the streets.

To the young, the authorities seem to be more concerned about the interests of the rich and powerful. There are times when ordinary men and women appear to be mute observers at the feast that is called national development. In such a poisonous environment, attempts to foster a genuine multi-racial identity and 'belonging' seem ludicrous.

In the past, this state of affairs wouldn't have attracted much attention. We had become habituated to our bad newspapers. Moreover no one in government seemed to have made the connection between the younger generation's alienation and the Credibility Syndrome. However, the recent acquisition of *Nanyang Siang Pau* by the MCA's investment arm, Huaren, has brought the issue of media freedoms once again into the limelight.

Curiously, the Chinese language press has long enjoyed a greater degree of independence — partly because most of the political elite cannot read Chinese. Newspapers such as *Nanyang*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *China Press* are robust and feisty, especially on the key issues affecting the community such as Chinese language education and culture. In fact, their credibility has meant that there hasn't been the same proliferation of Chinese language news websites. One shudders to think of the *Nanyang*'s impending emasculation.

If the government is serious about winning popular support and especially amongst the younger generation, it will have to reassess its handling of the media.

Currently, the media has become the Barisan Nasional's biggest liability. Its craven and unthinking support for the authorities appals the majority of the population. And when it turns its attentions to attack the opposition, people are further turned off by its partisanship. This is a tragedy because, in overall terms, the Barisan Nasional's

The Emperor's Clothes

The Eye, Australia, February 24–March 8, 2000
The Business Times Singapore, February 26, 2000
Berita Harian, May 7, 2000
The Sun, May 7, 2000
Philippine Daily Inquirer, July 14, 2000

It all started when I met a Filipino newspaper columnist and academic, Ambeth Ocampo, in Manila.

Intrigued by his dry wit, I bought a stack of his books and was immediately plunged into an ironic if engaging investigation of his country's bizarre history (as they say, "four hundred years in a Castilian monastery followed by fifty years in Hollywood").

Ambeth, however, eschews 'big' history: the history we all hated in school — dates, more dates and grand themes. Instead, he settles his eye on the telling details of everyday life, illuminating tiny corners of the past with a solitary and expertly directed torchlight.

Ranging over the centuries and digging deep into overlooked archival material, he'll tell us about a turn-of-the-century breakfast with the Filipino rebel leader, Emilio Aguinaldo, and most curiously, a heavy overcoat that Aguinaldo's contemporary, the great nationalist martyr Jose Rizal, appears to wear in many of the remaining photographic images of the man.

As it happened, Rizal's overcoat, apparently made in Hong Kong, really puzzled me. Why, I wondered, did the great man wish to be seen wearing such an inappropriate item of clothing? It was neither very Filipino nor would it have been particularly comfortable in the heat. And contrary to what my host said, a Manila winter didn't seem very different from a Manila summer.

The more I thought about Rizal sweltering in his overcoat — even the statue of him in the capital city's Luneta Park has him wearing the wretched thing — the more I wondered about its possible symbolic significance.

After four hundred years of repressive Spanish colonial rule,

dence Malaysia. Formal wear (I still have one of my father's outfits) was a combination of silk and lavish brocades with a myriad of sashes and decorations. With nine separate sultans, the splendid and expensive formal wear of the day reflected the underlying feudal character of Malay society.

Sukarno's uniforms, his *songkok*, his dark sunglasses and the swagger stick he toted tell a very different story. Arrogant and vain, Sukarno understood the importance of projecting an image of power. Because of his baldness, he always wore a *songkok*, realising that his hair-loss would affect the people's perception of his virility and thus his political power. His much vaunted success with the women, the delightful Japanese-born wife Dewi Sukarno included, reinforced his mystique.

Even though he had never been a soldier, Sukarno's military affectations (he designed his own uniforms) contributed to his *waluju* or divine radiance. Whilst many have accused him of overweening vanity, he saw his posturing as a national necessity, saying: "Indonesians must overcome self-consciousness and inferiority. Our people need confidence. This I must give them before I am taken away."

Having been launched by Ambeth onto this offbeat path, it became difficult to stop. Every time I watched the TV or read the newspapers I'd find myself scrutinising the clothes people were wearing.

What, I wondered, were the political implications of a minister delivering a press conference in a tracksuit? Was he running for office? Or was it because he was fat and needed to lose weight?

I can still remember the dismay years ago when former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim discarded his populist slippers and his *sarong* for Giorgio Armani and Hugo Boss. Interestingly, many of the friends and allies from his activist past saw the change of garb as a loss of idealism.

Of course one could take the exploration further and ask about the significance of Ho Chi Minh's generous goatee, Estrada's pomaded hair or Gus Dur's slippers.

The Dot Com Boom

The Business Times Singapore, March 11, 2000
The Eye, Australia, March 23–April 2, 2000
The Sun, April 9, 2000

Last month, I turned up in Singapore after an exhausting round-the-world trip. Stumbling into a crowded hotel foyer, I sensed that something was going on — the bars were full, the restaurants jam-packed and the talk dense with deals.

Sure enough, I'd arrived only days after the conclusion of the US$38 billion Hong Kong Telekom deal, and the city state was still buzzing with excitement, notwithstanding the fact that the losing party had been Singapore's telecom utility company, Singtel.

In a reprise of the staggering AOL-Warner transaction, real assets and the world of 'bricks-and-mortar', had been subsumed by the world of 'click-and-mortar'.

The winning party, a dotcom upstart called Pacific Century CyberWorks, helmed by the buzz-cut sporting Richard Li, a scion of a Hong Kong property dynasty, had only been established ten months before.

The hotel lobby was like a Nintendo game crossed with Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. Having lived through the 'Great Emerging Markets Boom' of the early '90s, I realised I'd landed in the middle of its infinitely more complex progeny, the 'Great Asian Internet Boom'.

At first, I was depressed. There was no way I was part of the Internet Boom. I was under-equipped and over-dressed. I was marching around in my double-breasted suit and clutching my lawyer's notebook (WAP-less to boot) as bright young things barely out of puberty were wearing GAP, with baseball caps turned backwards, bounced their way in and out of meetings, trailing stock options, Palm V's.

Finally, at dinner, a charming young lady from a venture capital fund (that's what she told me) took me by the hand and showed me

provider. It was all so simple. I would serialise the material, releasing it in tantalising weekly excerpts. I was creating a soap opera on the Net. Think *Neighbours*, think *Coronation Street*. Think, more importantly, of all the millions of women reading romantic novels for whom the Net offered so little. It was too good to be true!

Ahh… the romance, the sex, the intrigue, the betrayal! But before I allowed myself to get carried away with the sordid ins-and-outs of Malaysian politics, I reminded myself, *karimraslan.com* would confine itself to good, wholesome entertainment. Whatever the case, it was an unexplored, unexploited market. Of course, there would be parallel translations in Malay, Hindi and Chinese of my bodice/*choli*/*samfu*/*kebaya*-ripper.

It soon became apparent that just by saying I was a 'content provider', they would understand immediately. Whereas before they'd ignored me, now they couldn't get enough of me. The investment bankers, the venture capitalists, the incubators and the private equity guys would start running after me — literally throwing money at me.

Of course, like any well brought up Southeast Asian, I would stand my ground. I would only accept funding in American dollars. One of the great advantages of business in the Internet age was that everyone was in far too much of a hurry to bother with spreadsheets, business plans or accounts. Instead — and this I thought a little surprising for people who eschewed what they called 'snail mail' — they were always talking about 'back-of-the-envelope' calculations. And I thought envelopes went out of fashion with George Michael? Despite my misgivings, I would learn to whip out the requisite envelope, doodle on the back of it and then talk about an imminent Nasdaq listing. My impression of Madonna's latest video secured a commitment US$5 million.

In order to ensure the stickiness of my site and the necessary volume of hits, I would to sell strategic stakes to AOL-Warner, The New York Times, Microsoft, and the *roti canai* man at the end of my

The Modern Malay Dilemma

The Star, April 28, 2002
Sin Chew Jit Poh, April 28, 2002
The Business Times Singapore, April 30, 2002
Berita Harian, May 6, 2002

The Malay world vision has narrowed drastically in the past five years. This is a national tragedy because parochial and pedantic thinking in the corridors of power will destroy the Malaysia we know and love. Why? Firstly, the country is multi-racial. As such the Malays — who are politically dominant — have to maintain their ability to speak (and listen) across the religious divide. Consensus-building is an important part of nation's success. Secondly, the nation's trade is far larger than our GDP. As such, the prosperity we see around us depends on an export-driven economy. In short, we cannot maintain our livelihood — the Protons, the bungalows and the holidays in Medan and Hong Kong — unless we look outwards. Our horizons have to be global.

However, a succession of missteps culminating with Anwar Ibrahim's ouster, detention and trial has emboldened the forces of religious conservatism. PAS's growth might have resulted in the heightening of religious and moral issues. As such the political debate has focused almost entirely on the battle for moral legitimacy and supremacy, shifting the attention inwards rather than outwards.

In many ways this is understandable. PAS, as a party led by *ulamas*, has concentrated on their core strength: Islam. They have attacked UMNO at the ruling party's weakest point — its perceived lack of religious credentials. This in turn has raised important questions about the efficacy and effectiveness of contemporary liberal democratic institutions such as the judiciary and the civil service. PAS poses the question: if corruption is truly endemic, shouldn't we be replacing the entire western system of governance? However, in their haste to denounce the government at every turn, PAS has ne-

Similarly, last week when China's Vice President Hu Jintao and heir apparent visited Kuala Lumpur, most Malaysians just yawned: the KLSE Index was more important for them. Very few Malaysians (and Malays in particular) realise the extent to which our export-driven prosperity is threatened by China's gargantuan economy. If we are not careful our puny industries will be overwhelmed.

There is no one easy solution for the two challenges I've outlined. However there is an underlying theme — that of openness. We cannot address the country's weaknesses, domestically and internationally, unless and until we try to create a truly global agenda for the Malay community. This in turn will help strengthen racial understanding as well as an all-encompassing Malaysian identity.

Firstly, the Malay community has got to wake up. Whilst faith is vital, religious practices do not prevent us from addressing the challenges of everyday life. We must equip ourselves with contemporary knowledge — with science, economics and technology — in order to defend our way of life. Economics and business are going to have to be the drivers of this re-tooling of the Malay mindset. The engagement with China is a good illustration of what I mean by re-tooling. We have to learn about the world's most populous nation and create niches for ourselves in tourism, educational services, agriculture and natural resources.

We will need a vast pool of Mandarin-speaking Malaysians in order to achieve this goal. We can of course turn to the Malaysian Chinese community and task them with the interaction. But that is not a sensible long-term solution. Instead, the Malay community must also get involved in what is potentially the world's largest marketplace. The Malays must be equipped to handle the relationship head-on, globalising their mindset.

This brings me back to the disturbing educational record of Malay males. Frankly, our national education system does not encourage the Malay community to be sufficiently open to other cultures and languages. This resistance to external ideas and influences

The Clash of Liberal and Literal Islam

The Star, May 5, 2002
The Business Times Singapore, May 6, 2002
South China Morning Post, May 6, 2002
Jakarta Post, May 7, 2002
Sin Chew Jit Poh, May 12, 2002
Foreign Policy, July 2002

Who will win over the hearts and minds of Indonesia's two hundred million Muslims? Certainly, the images of extremism and violence have monopolised the headlines. However, the struggle between two contrasting visions of Islam — 'liberal' on the one hand and 'literalist' on the other is on-going. Still, in Indonesia, the moderates are a force to be reckoned with. Unlike most other Muslim countries such as Pakistan and Egypt, moderate scholars, thinkers and political activists occupy key positions in Indonesia.

The internationally celebrated scholar, Nurcholish Majid, Azyurmardi Azra, Dean of the leading mainstream Indonesian seminary, and IAIN's (State Academy of Islamic Sciences) Syarif Hidayatullah, are among the leading moderates. The two men are known for their willingness to address the challenges of modernity, their tolerance of other faiths as well as their sensitivity to gender rights. There are also a number of young-generation figures — such as the irrepressible political commentator Rizal Mallarangeng and the academic Luthfi Assyaukanie.

On the other hand, there are ultra-conservative leaders such as Hidayat Nur Wahid of the Justice Party and the recently detained Ja'afar Umar Thalib of Laskar Jihad. Both men espouse a more radical agenda that calls for the wholesale imposition of the Syariah Law.

Certainly, there is no fondness between the two groups. Recently, the Laskar Jihad leader was quoted in the Indonesian newsweekly *Gatra* as saying "the difference between us and them (the liberals) is the same as between the followers of Islam and non-believers." However, the moderates are not running scared. Whilst

the Islamic world, the religious establishment has often sacrificed its independence in working hand-in-glove with the authorities. At the same time, liberally-inclined writers and thinkers are generally embattled and isolated. In Egypt, for example, Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz was even the subject of a brutal assassination attempt in 1994.

Indonesia's liberals are not going to be victims. They are mobilising. They think strategically. They understand the media and they plan for the future. A good example is the work being conducted by the Jaringan Islam Liberal — the Islamic Liberal Network. The group has focused on shaping public opinion. They appear on TV and radio shows, they write very regularly and syndicate their commentaries in newspapers across the archipelago.

The country's liberals are not effete, western-educated secularists. Most of them have emerged from *pesantrens*. They are fluent in Arabic and trained in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). Their background gives them the confidence to debate substantive religious issues. They do not retreat from confrontation. As Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, the NU's head of human resource development, says: "We come from within the tradition. We can challenge the conservatives head-on."

Exposed to a wide range of classical works by many different Islamic scholars, including all the great legal traditions (the *Maliki*, the *Hanbali*, the *Hanafi* and of course, the *Shafi'i*), most of the students have developed an innate understanding of the 'internal dissension' and dialogue that lies at the heart of Islamic jurisprudence. In short, they realise that there is no 'one' answer for any given question.

Their scholarship is prodigious and detailed. As deeply committed Muslims, they approach the Holy Koran with enormous respect, intense piety and intellectual rigour. Some have combined their profound knowledge of the Holy Koran and the Sunnah with a stint in leading western universities such as Canada's McGill and the Netherlands' Leiden. Newly-learned philosophies and techniques

People And Places

"I was only six when Pol Pot's people marched into the city on April 17, 1975. My mother was a schoolteacher, she taught French and my father worked at a naval base. I had six brothers and sisters. We fled the city and took refuge with our relatives. There was very little to eat and my parents had to sell their gold to feed us. But the food was very poor and the rice was not clean; two of my sisters died then.

"The villagers were always hunting for the 'April 17' people — people like us. We would be summoned and transported further and further away from the capital. Luckily, in the last camp where the family was split up, I became very good at taking care of the water buffaloes. I could ride them and control fifty or hundred at a time."

By now he had cheered considerably, as if still proud of his unexpected skill with the water buffaloes, "Pol Pot's people gave me good food whereas my parents received very poor rations. They couldn't believe I was from Phnom Penh. I was so dark and so clever with the animals. But it was then that they started killing people at random, selecting them by night and taking them away. One night they wanted to take my parents but my mother said she wouldn't leave without me. Because I was useful to them, the headman finally allowed her to stay. Thereafter, I fed and looked after my parents."

Rereading my notes later I suddenly realised that Souphay would have been no more than ten years old at the time when he saved his family from the "Killing Fields". And it was this theme of duty and responsibility to his family (and his mother in particular) that underscored our entire conversation. He had spent the last twenty years fighting to preserve the family's integrity, defending them through war and indiscriminate violence.

I could see that as normality returned to the country, as the United Nations peacekeepers came and went in the early '90s and commercial ventures opened up, Souphay, once a champion water buffalo herder acquired the skills that would be needed in the changing environment. He worked at his spoken English, listening to the

The Women of Ban Krua

The Business Times Singapore, October 14, 2000
The Sun, October 15, 2000

Living in Malaysia, one gets the impression that women are viewed as a source of evil. A recent trip to Thailand reassured me that not all Muslims see women through such misogynous eyes.

Bangkok is a deceptive city. Just when you think you have the measure of the place, it reveals something different and unexpected, something that forces you to reassess your first impressions. The city confounds with its stark contrasts: Patpong on the one hand and an ancient Islamic community of silk weavers on the other.

It was whilst visiting the small but thriving Muslim enclave of Ban Krua in Bangkok that I was reminded that women — as wives, mothers and grandmothers — play a key role in nurturing a community's faith, its identity and its sense of purpose.

As a Muslim minority in an avowedly Buddhist state, identity can be a compromising factor in the quest for survival. In Ban Krua, however, I saw that their Islamic identity had been the reason for their survival. Moreover, this complex matrix of faith, language and culture was maintained largely by the women. They were the custodians of the community. They were the ones working at their looms, who had maintained the community's sense of self when the men are too busy working, preaching or having fun with other women.

In Ban Krua, a stone's throw from the honky-tonk attractions of Siam Square, in a tiny, overlooked and seemingly squalid corner of the city, there is a small mosque and a cemetery — two key symbols that stake the inhabitants' unwavering claim to their faith and way of life.

The tightly-knit enclave of Cham Muslims are currently fighting for their survival in the face of development. Led by the women, Ban Krua has managed to stall — for the past twelve years — the hotly contested construction of an expressway. The threat of evic-

had historically assumed leadership roles in their own right, fighting tenaciously alongside their husbands as they attempted to defend themselves from external marauders.

The contrasts between the Cham view of a woman's more active role in society and our own preconceptions here in Malaysia seemed particularly glaring that afternoon. Talking to Somchai as she led me through the narrow *sois*, or lanes, of Ban Krua, I could see that she had inherited the mantle of her predecessors. In fact, the interpreter whispered to me quietly as we were exploring the lanes: "You're lucky Khun Karim, they don't normally allow strangers in here. They look out for one another."

And it was clear to me that the houses, whilst densely packed, had not been built with security in mind. I could peer deep inside the homes. There were pictures of the Ka'aba, occasional portraits of the King and beautifully carved and framed Koranic script. The dichotomy between the overtly Buddhist environment and their own deeply-held Muslim identity cheered me.

But that didn't mean they weren't modern or savvy. Attuned to the demands of a fledging democracy, they'd employed the 'weaponry' of contemporary protests: the media, public demonstrations outside Government House, the NGO movement and their own community-mindedness. And it was in this manner that they had been able to prevent the rich and the powerful from excluding them from their birthright: a remarkable feat for what was essentially a poor inner city slum. However, the threat was by no means over and they were expecting at any time another attempt to dislodge them from their ancestral homes.

Aware of their struggle and yet struck by Somchai's good humour, I remember thinking, 'this woman is tough.' She had fought for the community and held onto her independence, bringing up three children without a father — oh, she'd added in passing, he had many wives and she'd been left to fend for herself.

She related to me how the children had moved away from Ban

Malang and the Indonesian Chinese Predicament

The Business Times Singapore, July 21, 2001
The Sun, July 22, 2001
Sin Chew Jit Poh, September 9, 2001

Both households kept dogs: the quiet older couple had a pack of miniature terriers behind the kitchen. The dogs bounced around excitedly. They were like rats with *sang kancil* legs, spritely and energetic. Whereas the doctor, a more thoughtful man, had a large, oddly-shaped and lugubrious pariah. It didn't bark so much as bellowed when it saw me.

I thought little of the pets at the time. It was only later when I remembered that one of the terriers — the mother of the pack — had been feverish. The elderly bitch sat alone in a cardboard box (they were very small animals). The animal's belly was distended and it shivered uncontrollably. It's eyes were glazed as if it had seen its own death in the face.

And as I conducted my interviews and talked about the condition of the Chinese in Malang — and by extension the rest of Indonesia — I began to see the feverish animal as a compelling symbol of the minority's predicament. Vulnerable, isolated and only marginally richer than their neighbours, they waited anxiously, fearing the violence that they sensed could explode at any moment. And here in East Java, a province with well over 35 million inhabitants and more than 700 people per square kilometre, the threat of violence was as much a fact of life as an afternoon thunderstorm.

Tensions simmered under the surface. Only two months before, the nearby town of Pasuruan (some forty minutes away by car) had been rocked by a wave of destruction when hordes of angry Nahadatul Ulama supporters went on a rampage, destroying churches as well as the offices of its rival Muhammidiyah, the modernist Muslim association. Law and order was slowly unravelling as civility and decency creaked under the strain. I watched as people shouted at

doubled-up and his wife's gentle face never lost the look of pained anxiety even when she smiled.

Only the week before, their only daughter had landed a job in Vancouver. They were relieved and the mother smiled broadly as she discussed the good news. "I don't see a good future for her here. But Malang is not so bad as the other towns. We have the military to thank for that. It's not like Pasuruan or Lawang. Still we have to keep a low-profile in order to maintain the good relations between us and the native people." 'Native people' was a phrase the couple was to use again and again.

I had been struck by the incongruity of their house. They were a couple in their fifties and yet their furniture was clearly from the 1940s and 1950s. The wife smiled weakly once again and Paul answered. I knew I had touched something infinitely more painful.

"This is my family home. My father built it in the 1950s and my mother only passed away a month ago. She was ninety-eight."

As we talked I sensed that Paul — the youngest of nine children in a wealthy trading family — had been entrusted with looking after the mother. His other brothers and sisters had emigrated, leaving him alone in Malang. Some were in America and others in Canada. They had fanned out all over the continent.

Emigration and movement was a constant theme in the family history. There had been brothers and sisters who had left to study in Germany in the mid-'60s as the reality of being Chinese in Indonesia became increasingly tortuous. But Europe hadn't proven to be as welcoming as they'd hoped and they moved on to the New World. One sister, in desperation, had even wanted to leave for Communist China, but she had been dissuaded.

Despite the air of uncertainty and travelling, Paul had kept the faith. I imagined him recording the family's movements and reporting them to his aged mother. Left behind, he dealt as best he could with the brutal reality that his siblings had wanted to put behind them.

tion: "serving" the people, religious "service". He talked happily about the period when he was "serving" on the island of Flores. There, among Christians, and for the first time in his life, he hadn't felt discrimination. As he explained:

"We prayed together. There were no barriers between us. And in a small community, doctors are respected. It's not like here in Java," he added sadly.

Having received an American scholarship, he had studied at Cornell University. Despite the thrill of studying abroad, he hadn't wanted to emigrate. The loneliness and competitiveness had given him an inkling of life in the United States and he'd returned home after two and a half years.

However, he acknowledged that his sons (both were in their twenties) might be more inclined to leave Indonesia. They were more direct, "more straightforward", and you could see from the expression on his face that whilst he respected them and was proud of them, he feared for their survival.

Nonetheless, just as I was about to leave, his mood lightened as he talked about the community work he did in his spare time.

"I am not gloomy like the others. I see a future for us. We have to adapt to the situation. Societies are not permanent. We have to be involved and take a role. It can't be 'us' and 'them' — the exclusivity works against us." I shook his hand warmly as I left. For Dr Sweeheng, engagement was the solution, not withdrawal. He would not be the shaking animal in the cardboard box.

jecting a strong dose of professionalism and competence into government service whilst overhauling the banking sector.

At the same time, he pushed for the formation of a Board of Investment in order to attract foreign capital. Systematic and orderly, he promoted the introduction of a programme of central planning that helped coordinate Thailand's hitherto erratic economic management with a series of five-year plans that was inaugurated in 1961. Moreover, he pushed for investment in infrastructure, opening the U.S.-financed "Friendship Highway" in the impoverished northeastern province of Isaarn, bringing prosperity to millions.

Still, he was criticised by many for agreeing to work with the military. But Puey — ever the realist — understood that he was presented with a unique opportunity to set in place reforms that would transform his country, and he seized the chance readily.

This did not mean that he turned his back on principle. One of the hallmarks of his career was his emphasis on education. He was also willing to tackle broad socio-political issues. As a passionate believer in *santi-prachadarmma* — a civil society based on Buddhist principles — he sought to balance the ugly rush to development with a greater emphasis on spirituality. Indeed, in his book, *The Economy of Thailand*, he argued that moral principles had to be taught alongside traditional economics if any measure of social justice was to be achieved.

Puey's dedication lent him considerable moral authority and in 1973 he dared to challenge Thanom's increasingly authoritarian rule with a heartfelt, if provocative open letter that is now considered to have been the precursor to the military strongman's ouster later that year. As Dr Puey wrote; "Nothing is worse than the pollution caused by the fear of intimidation. Such fear posions people's minds and wisdom."

However, Puey was to end his life (he died in late 1999) in ignominy and exile. Unlike so many of his Southeast Asian counterparts, he rejected the comfort of a government sinecure or establishment

However, I should caution that Puey's moral stature came from his unwavering adherence to principle. He had no personal agenda and no patrons to impress. He did not bend in the face of political charisma nor did he advocate religious extremism. Finally, he did not succumb to the enticements of the business community.

Instead, he remembered at all times that a civil servant's duty was to the people as a whole, not to one particular section of the community or to its political masters: lessons that are still instructive today.

off my shoes, the doubts crowded in on me.

Had I been deluding myself all these years? Was Pak Ngah's death a coming of age? A moment when my foolish and naive views finally drifted away, like the storm clouds over the city, to reveal the ugly scars across our society?

By now I was standing slightly apart from the rest of the mourners. Unable to shake off my writerly perspective — despite my own sadness — I found my attention wandering as I looked around. The family had found a magnificent spot for Pak Ngah's grave. The Taman Keramat cemetery was almost exactly between the Melawati Range on the one hand and the concrete and glass canyons of the Golden Triangle on the other.

Scanning the horizon, I picked off the coordinates of Pak Ngah's adult life. There was the neighbourhood where he lived, Jalan Damai; Taman Sri Ukay with its bizarre A-shaped homes, one of the many housing estates that he had built in his earlier days as a successful property developer; and not to mention the city, now swathed in mist, that he loved. It was a dizzying prospect made all the more alluring as the sun finally emerged, its rays slicing through the clouds. But I couldn't enjoy the beauty that morning. Shaking my head, I tried to think of Pak Ngah again, wanting to be reminded of what he had stood for.

Kelantanese by birth, a chess-player by inclination and an epicure despite his diabetes, he was generous to a fault, open-minded and always willing to spend time with younger people. Pak Ngah loved to talk, but unlike so many men, he also understood the importance of listening. It was a rare gift.

Having gone to the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, he studied economics at the University of Malaya in Singapore and then entered the Malayan Civil Service, he was — despite the blue-chip credentials — a reluctant member of the Malay elite that have long dominated the country. Unlike them, he was down-to-earth and friendly, treating people with a genuine warmth and disarming friend-

Solo and Jogjakarta

The Business Times Singapore, August 11, 2002
The Sun, August 12, 2002

Hereditary monarchs are not doomed: they do have a future. Recently, when travelling in Central Java, I came across two traditional rulers — one of whom had adapted to the challenges of modernity whilst the second had failed miserably. Moreover, I saw that a ruler's ability could have a substantial impact on the surrounding community.

In Jogjakarta, I encountered a city that had been transformed by the Hamengkubuwono family. By way of comparison, in Surakarta (or Solo), I discovered a community that was languishing along with the feckless and decadent Pakubuwana dynasty.

The experience taught me that a ruler's success or failure does matter. Monarchies are not necessarily a thing of the past. Illiberal, stupid and spendthrift rulers destroy both their patrimony and their people's prosperity.

A smart and intuitive ruler can wield considerable influence. He can become a force for change. Just witness the Hamengkubuwonos.

Separated by some sixty kilometers of excruciatingly bad roads, the towns of Jogjakarta and Solo share similar histories. Both cities and their respective rulers, in particular — the two leading royal houses the Susuhunan of Solo and the Sultan of Jogjakarta — emerged in the mid-eighteenth century from the strife-torn remains of the ancient Javanese kingdom of Mataram.

However, in the decades since the World War II, the Sultans of Jogjakarta have managed to retain and indeed, enhance the family's all-important *wahyu*, or divine power. Through a combination of enlightened self-interest and astute political manoevring, the Hamengkubuwonos have secured autonomy for their domain.

The story of Prince Dorodjatun's (who later became Hamengkubuwono IX) foreign education at Leiden University, his

courtly arts — poetry, dance and music. Several of the most famous Javanese poets lived and worked in Solo, including Ronggawarsita, whose dark, brooding verse, written in the late 1800s best captures the Javanese sense of impotence at the height of the Dutch colonial period.

With its exquisite and accomplished gamelans and dance troupes, Solo retains its reputation as a haven of refinement and artistic excellence. Whilst the political authority of the *kratons* is diminished, they still serve an important function as a vital store of cultural capital. In time to come, this will help prevent the Arab-isation of Indonesian society.

Unfortunately the Pakubuwanas have squandered countless opportunities to reinvent themselves. Instead of supporting the independence movement in 1945, the Susuhunan inclined towards the Dutch. This was to cost the family dearly when the city of Solo — unlike Jogjakarta — was absorbed into the Province of Central Java, to be governed henceforth from the coastal city of Semarang.

Lacking the vision or the education, the Susuhunan later sought to re-impose his feudal authority. This was fiercely resisted by the townspeople. However, in retreating behind his *kraton* walls, the Susuhunan left behind a dangerous leadership vacuum that remains unfilled to this day. The dramatic outbreak of violence in 1998 demonstrated the dangers of the Susuhunan's powerlessness. On May 14, 1998 — mirroring events in Jakarta — Solo, was suddenly engulfed by a rioting. Within two days, twenty-eight people were reported dead and countless buildings destroyed.

"It was unbelievably fast," Amna Kusumo, a NGO activist explained, "I was having lunch one minute with friends and the next — well, the city was on fire. Jalan Slamet Riyadi (the main road bisecting the city) was littered with overturned cars and buses. Everything was burning."

Whilst most foreign reports focused (perhaps understandably) on the destruction in Jakarta, the fall-out for Solo, was equally dev-

Michelle Yeoh

The Business Times Singapore, April 7, 2001
The Sun, April 8, 2001

After three years of cringing with anger, embarrassment and shame whenever my country flashed into the international spotlight, last month's Oscar ceremony suddenly made me feel proud again to be a Malaysian. In the midst of rating downgrades and bailouts, shabby policing and dubious administrative measures, a glamorous and steely 38 year-old Ipoh-*nari* actress, wearing an elegantly beaded cheongsam, reminded me how remarkable our country and its people truly are.

Quite apart from Michelle Yeoh's dignified and serene presence at the Academy Awards, I also noted her role (and others such as Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou) in influencing and shaping the growing Pacific-ness of Hollywood's global popular culture. But first of all, thank you, Michelle Yeoh.

Contrary to what most people think, the most famous Malaysian in the world is neither a 75 year-old man living in Putra Jaya or a 53 year-old currently residing in Sungei Buloh. In the global scheme of things — a world dominated by the entertainment industry, by fashion, by music and by celluloid — both men are at best marginal figures. Sorry chaps.

In this realm, where one's influence is ganged by how many pages in the 1.5 million-circulation *In Style* magazine you can command and who answers your telephone calls in Hollywood, Malaysia's roving ambassador — our international superstar — is a sleek but feisty actress, the grand dame of Asian action movies.

In Lala-land terms, she's floating somewhere in the stratosphere. For those who've seen her film *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, her current state, her weightlessness, is unsurprising since she spends much of the movie suspended in mid-air, leaping in an exhilarating fashion through forests, bamboo groves and out across city walls along

Thank you for showing me that Malaysians can compete at the highest levels, that we are world-class when we want to be.

Thank you for reminding us of the importance of creativity and the imagination. If our society continues to restrict freedom of expression, we will remain the world's workshop and rubbish dump. Unless we learn to embrace knowledge and independence of thought, we will never be able to design, write, paint, sculpt, direct and produce work of world-class standards.

Thank you for not losing touch with your roots, for acknowledging your friends and your family, for plugging your homeland and your hometown at every opportunity. In every interview, without fail, you stress your childhood in Ipoh — how happy you were, how fortunate and blessed. We've long suspected that both Ipoh and Perak were overlooked, now we're certain.

Thank you for not moving to Los Angeles. Despite the attractions of going mainstream, you are hanging on in Asia (living in an apartment on the Peak in Hong Kong) and supporting the region's film industry. I like the way you turned down the Armanis and Donna Karans and chose instead to wear Asian fashion (her Oscar gown was by Hong Kong couturier Barney Cheng). Unlike many of your Asian sisters, you're loyal to who and what you are. You've also demonstrated that you don't have to be obnoxious and recalcitrant, curmudgeonly and rude to be noticed by the world. You've shown that Asians and especially Malaysians can be graceful and yet firm, diplomatic and frank.

Thank you for being a positive role model. You're living proof that beauty without brains is hollow and vapid. Moreover you've tossed out the idea that revealing flesh is the only way to become a screen siren. Unlike Sharon Stone, you've never had to remove a stitch of clothing to get 'into' character. You are a role model for all Asian women. Your perseverance and integrity shine through in the way you live your life and pursue your career objectives. You've proved that the good old-fashioned values of honour, hard work and self-

Kuala Lumpur is not Kabul...

The Business Times Singapore, December 1, 2001
Sin Chew Jit Poh, December 9, 2001
The Star, January 20, 2002

"Kuala Lumpur is not Kabul...", my talks here in the United States always begin the same way. It's superficial, a bit cheap and certainly melodramatic, but it makes the point because Kuala Lumpur really isn't Kabul. I find that I need to stress the underlying diversity and complexity of the Muslim world and Southeast Asia in particular whenever I open my mouth.

Unfortunately, most Americans have precious little knowledge of the Islamic faith. They tend to think all Muslims are Arabs and since all Arabs (in their eyes) are terrorists, I decided very early on that it was better to telegraph my message rather than try to be too subtle. Nuance just doesn't work in Britney Spears's homeland. Of course, that's not to say that there aren't people in Malaysia who want to turn the country into Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan — but that's another story.

Over the past few weeks, I've spoken at countless venues in front of audiences ranging from a handful of students — one of whom stormed out because she thought I was being shallow and ridiculous — to much larger groups that have included State Department officials, businessmen, academics and professionals.

At one gathering in San Francisco just before I began my presentation, I was introduced to an affable and elderly gentleman called Walter Shorenstein. Later, someone took me aside and to tell me that "San Francisco is a town 'Walt' built", which at least explained why his name featured so prominently on many of the city's buildings.

Elsewhere in the city and a few days later — at a weekend retreat of a high-level think-tank where the mood lighting was so diffused I thought for a moment I'd contracted jaundice — I dodged

'nice'; but I'm not convinced. Nonetheless, the frivolous mood typified by the Internet boom has evaporated, along with all the talk of stock options, Fendi handbags and houses in the Hamptons.

Mammon and the mindless pursuit of wealth has been replaced by jingoism. The American flag is everywhere: in pharmacies, Chinese-owned laundries and private residences. In short, New Yorkers have become passionate and highly emotional Americans. Influential TV anchors such as Dan Rather and Geraldo Rivera, whose faces are familiar to millions, don't bother trying to contain their patriotism. In fact, one senses that if they could they'd be out there on the frontline in Kandahar hunting down Ossama bin Laden. So much for the media's independence....

Since the city is also the centre of the liberal media (both print and television) as well as countless NGOs ranging from Human Rights Watch through to Committee to Protect Journalists, the sudden shift in mindset has had a deep impact on the political debate within the country. There is a growing skepticism of individual freedoms — especially since such freedoms are thought to have permitted the murderous attack.

For the first time in many decades (at least since the Vietnam War) Americans are reassessing the delicate balance between individual freedoms and issues of national security. Unsurprisingly, they are coming down heavily in favour of the tighter security even if it threatens civil liberties. One would not have expected New Yorkers, with their reputation for independent thinking, to have led the way in such a discourse.

The tragedy of '9/11' has made them more willing to compromise. Nowadays — especially if earthy tabloids such as *The New York Post* are an indication — human rights and civil liberties have become less pressing. Of course *The New York Times* has presented a broader cross-section of views. Whatever the case, human rights are now considered to be luxuries that are all very well, so long as they don't undermine national security.

The Singaporean Dilemma

Business Times Singapore, March 23, 2002
Sin Chew Jit Poh, March 31, 2002
The Star, March 31, 2002

Malaysia-Singapore bilateral relations are among the most ridiculous in the Asia-Pacific. Since I'm neither a member of the People's Action Party nor the Barisan Nasional, I ignore the nonsense, get on with my own affairs, and leave the squabbling to the politicians.

However, there are three key themes in the relationship that people tend to forget. The first is the Malaysian-Malay sense of inferiority on the one hand, and the Singaporean-Chinese sense of insecurity on the other. The second is the Singaporean refusal to acknowledge the impact of 'perception' in its diplomacy; although this is matched by a perceived Malaysian sleight-handedness when it comes to actual negotiations. The third is the growing cultural and linguistic divide between the city-state and Malaysia, not to mention the rest of the region.

While I've been writing about Malaysia for over ten years, I've not had the same opportunity to turn my attention to Singapore. I like to think I've built up a fairly extensive knowledge of the island republic and several of its leading personalities. Certainly, there's a need in Singapore for alternative voices as it grapples with the changing face of economics and politics in the Asia-Pacific. Excluding bright and independent thinkers seems to be the highest art form in the city-state. Still, I've grown quite fond of the place and that warmth infuses what I say because I'm too aware of the island republic's charms, as well as its inconsistencies and flaws.

In fact, while I've been in the United States on a Fulbright fellowship, I've spent more time with Singaporeans than with Malaysians. I've dined with former journalist Cherian George in Stanford, shared a panel at the World Economic Forum with United Nations Permanent Representative Kishore Mahbubani, discussed bilateral

For example, while Singapore as a sovereign nation is fully entitled to strike whatever bilateral free trade agreements it wishes, I've personally found Singapore's pursuit of them as indicative of the city-state's lack of commitment to the region.

All states must identify their national interests and pursue those goals. Sometimes, however, the determined pursuit of those objectives can end up irritating and alienating the neighbours, especially if the aims are stated too bluntly. Technocrats are often the worst communicators and squander vital goodwill.

The third issue is the one that troubles me the most and makes me worry for Singapore's future. I have discerned in Singapore a deliberate de-emphasising of the region — in terms of language policies, culture and politics.

Try as it might, Singapore will never be a great global city like New York, London or Paris. Singapore is thoroughly provincial though not quite as provincial as Kuala Lumpur or Jakarta. However, the region's other capital cities enjoy the benefit of an extensive hinterland, providing a greater depth of cultural and political diversity. If you doubt my conclusion, read the city-state's newspapers and examine the cultural concerns of the citizenry; the banality is astounding. But that doesn't mean that Singapore can't be an important regional centre.

A further complication is the fact that young Singaporeans don't seem to possess the same facility as their parents to meet and mix with fellow Southeast Asians. The fixation with the global agenda has made many Singaporeans lose sight of the imperatives of geography, turning their backs on the region. The hinterland is steadily being forgotten and, like a dream, it's beginning to drift away with the morning mist. For example, less and less Singaporeans can speak Malay — even *pasar* Malay eludes them.

I've had to keep reminding my Singaporean friends that the nation is located in the heart of Southeast Asia. It's not floating off North America — it is neither Long Island nor Catalina Island. As it

Ulil Abshar-Abdalla

The Business Times Singapore, November 10, 2001
The Sun, November 11, 2001
Sin Chew Jit Poh, November 18, 2001

Many years from now we'll be asking ourselves: where were we on September 11 and what were we doing? In time, the horror of the initial tragedy will fade. By then, the recycled and replayed image of the two collapsing towers will have become indistinguishable from a Hollywood schlockmeister movie. By way of comparison, we'll discover that our own memories of the day remain crisp and vivid; we'll remember exactly what we were doing at that moment, however banal. I certainly will.

Two months ago, I was sitting in a grubby concrete courtyard in East Jakarta, talking to Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, a youthful and lanky, thirty-something *kiyai* (religious scholar) from former President Abdurrahman Wahid's 30 million-strong Islamic association, the Nahdatul Ulama (NU). Ulil, as with most talented and energetic people, appeared to be able to manage a hundred things at once. He was a regular columnist for the daily newspapers *Koran Tempo* and *Republika*. He worked with the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace (that was his full-time job) and he was also the head of NU's Lakpesdam, a unit that conducts research and human resource training. Unsurprisingly perhaps, his name had cropped up everywhere I went after I mentioned the words "liberal" and "Islam" in the same sentence.

In fact, that evening, I was interviewing him — probing and testing him on his interpretations of the Holy Koran — just as a hijacked American Airlines 767 bound for Los Angeles crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center and then a second United Airlines jet slammed into the South Tower.

Ulil had a broad, open face, a square jaw and a confident smile. His voice was loud yet cadenced, teacher-like and clear. He was ob-

Jombang, a major center for *pesantrens*, and then, instead of returning home, he chose to make his own way to Jakarta, where, by his own admission he had a "wonderful time."

"I read everything: novels, books on culture, philosophy and history. I dreamt of becoming an assistant to a Muslim intellectual like Nurcholish Majid or Gus Dur but I couldn't contact them, so instead I signed up at a local university. This upset my father who felt that the institution was too closely linked to the Wahabi philosophy."

At the same time Ulil also discovered the cinema and classical music — an interest in the arts that matched Gus Dur. His first film, Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth*, was an epiphany of sorts.

"It was fantastic... the music and the emotion. The conservatives would have been appalled by the nudity. But for me it was the 'idea' that impressed me and moved me — the way how human beings were able to withstand and survive such inhuman conditions. I guess you could say that after that I developed a career as a liberal Muslim."

For Ulil, the world of his youth — his twenty-year training in Islamic jurisprudence and science as well as his fluency in Arabic — was entirely compatible with the modernity. In fact, he was convinced that he had acquired the means to tackle, and yes, even to embrace the modernity with all its sharp contrasts and desperate inconsistencies.

I found that Ulil's remarkable rhetorical skills and the warmth of his humanism infused his dynamic interpretations of the Holy Koran: "The tradition that I live in and that I've been trained in has prepared me to work with sophisticated and contentious arguments. In the past the NU and the Muhammadiyah were deeply divided over issues of ritual — the *khilafiyah*, or the performance of prayer, and *niat*, or the intention. However, people are less and less concerned with such arguments.

"The greatest challenge facing men such as myself is how to

Political Life

unpleasant heads of government in the Asia-Pacific. Small-minded, Anglo-centric and bigoted, John Howard represents all the worst attributes of the Australian national character and none of the best. Campaigning on the platform of 'Strength and Security', Howard's Liberals didn't need to mention the Norwegian registered container-carrier, the MV Tampa, and its human cargo: the message was loud and clear — we will defend our shores from all, especially if they're Muslim and poor.

Sadly his strident stance vis-á-vis the Afghan boat-people as well as his political posturing on the eve of an election won him thousands of extra votes, wiping out Kim Beazley's Labour party. However, Howard's suburban, small-town parochialism clings — like a recalcitrant stain — to the poorly-cut lapels of his suit. Uneasy with non-whites and unrepentant in his handling of long-standing aboriginal land-claims, he stands as a barrier to the island nation's self-realisation.

Moreover, his government's shabby handling of the boat-people — the swiftness with which safe asylum was denied a group of desperately poor but deserving Muslims — underlines his frighteningly narrow and racist vision of the world. At a time when the world is supposed to be joining as one to rid the globe of the scourge of terrorism, John Howard was too busy trying to resettle the refugees in 'lovely' Nauru.

Mercifully, Howard, despite his electoral victory, doesn't speak for all Australians. Whilst he is trying to impose the banality and bleakness of small, declining, agricultural towns and endless suburbs on the rest of the country, Australia's astoundingly talented and diverse artistic community are entertaining the world.

In essence, they have rejected Howard's pinched world vision. They have reached out to the world and are currently enjoying the benefits of a globalisation of the arts. And amidst an unprecedented flowering of the arts, Australia has come to stand for something vivid, open, and dynamic: strangely, everything that John Howard abhors.

gine in neutral so to speak — the songs enhance the plot in *Moulin Rouge*.

The characters blossom when they sing and dance. And nothing is sacred in this movie. Everything is haphazard and out of context. The Moulin Rouge of the film is entirely imagined. The setting is little more than excuse for a dense, sexually-charged exploration of love, jealously and creativity. In fact there is a moment when the heroine herself, played by Nicole Kidman, emerges from behind the canopy in full Indian regalia just as the infectious Hindi-pop beat kicks in.

The divide between the two worlds — the political and the artistic — has never been wider. Admittedly, the creative professions have always tended to despise and shy away from the world of politics. However, the distance that has emerged between the two in Australia reflects the schizophrenic quality of the national personality: at once deeply inward-looking and xenophobic as well as cosmopolitan and welcoming.

Furthermore, after decades of trying to overcome a sense of 'cultural cringe', Australians have shrugged off art critic Robert Hughes's damning indictment of his own nation's lack of artistic self-confidence. In the last few months, at the Golden Globe Awards and the recent Booker Prize, Australians have become the world's hottest acting, directing and writing talents. Will their vitality win the day or will the conservatives with their quasi-racist message prevail? Keep watching and reading.

were to be found locally, he explained that everyone in Vietnam called him 'Uncle Ho'. Sadly, at least for the lonely septuagenarian icon, Zhou En Lai rejected the request and Ho died unmarried, if not unloved.

The image of an aging leader isolated within a popular image of his own making is heart-rending because it reminds us of two things: firstly, that he was human, and secondly, that it is lonely at the top. At a certain point of a politician's ascent to power, solitude becomes his or her main companion.

Besides the occasional telling psychological insight, Druiker's book also draws out three main conclusions. The first is that 'Uncle Ho' was a nationalist patriot first and foremost. The second was that the French and the Americans misread the postwar scenario in Tonkin and Cochin China to their detriment, and the third is that Chinese diplomatic and military support comes at great cost to the recipient nation.

In establishing Ho's nationalist credentials, Druiker makes much of the man's remarkably peripatetic existence. In a period of some thirteen years, Ho traversed much of Asia and Europe, acquiring new languages with all the aplomb of a university professor. Moreover, in his earlier guise as an international political agitator using the name Nguyen Ai Quoc, Ho was a notorious figure. The Ossama bin Laden of his day: he was constantly harassed by the French.

Druiker argues that Ho was not a passionate communist. In fact, his conversion was often questioned. Suffice to say, he found communism broadly in sympathy with his concerns, ascribing a great deal of importance to Lenin's *Theses on the National and Colonial Questions*, which was a major attack on the oppressive conditions within the European colonies. Years later, both Stalin and Mao chastised Ho for accommodating the moderate nationalists, the middle classes as well as his wariness of full-scale agrarian reform.

Secondly, Druiker seems to suggest that Ho was enough of a pragmatist at least in the immediate postwar period to have discarded

Party (CCP) demanded ever greater doctrinal purity from their counterparts in Hanoi. Just as the Vietminh was facing turmoil internally, the CCP insisted on domestic land reforms and political cleansing amongst the military. Enforced rigorously, these measures destroyed a great deal of Vietminh's support. Minority groups such as the Catholics, not to mention the middle classes and the intellectuals, became increasingly restive.

It is clear from Ho's biography that whilst he welcomed the CCP's support, he chafed at their heavy-handedness and insensitivity to Vietnamese interests. In many ways, Ho's experience presents an interesting historical lesson for Southeast Asia. China's interests will always be larger and more diverse than our own, leading Beijing to adopt diplomatic positions that are invidious to its neighbours. Part of Vietnam's tragedy has been its proximity to this all-powerful nation and its inability to stave off Beijing's pressure peaceably.

That Ho Chi Minh, one of Asia finest strategists, was unable to achieve this end is a testament to enduring impact of China both on his country and on the rest of region.

Moreover, the leadership has always stressed its commitment to the parliamentary system. For example in the aftermath of the March 1992 elections when General Suchinda Kaprayoon tried to seize power, sparking off huge demonstrations in Bangkok, the Democrats refused to join Palang Dharma leader, Chamlong on the streets.

During the World Economic Forum's 1999 East Asia Economic Summit in Singapore, Abhisit silenced a crowded plenary session with his searing honesty as he told them of his impressions of the earlier October 1973 student-led coup: "Suddenly to me, politics was no longer the business of the few. It was everybody's business." Similarly, at the same meeting, he criticised a predominantly business crowd for the way many had overlooked the real human suffering sparked off by the financial crisis in 1997: "People were saying that the recession wasn't deep enough to push through the necessary reforms. At the same time many players were reluctant to accept the idea of 'bailing in' or other such arrangements."

Abhisit is an outward-looking leader who balances his innate cosmopolitanism with a deeply-rooted confidence in the Thai ability to weather change: "We can more than adapt to the challenge of globalisation. Thailand has always maintained its independence. At the same time we've remained open to new economic and political ideas. Even though we've had long and enduring ties with the Americans, we also possess a strong cultural affinity with China."

"ASEAN has been wounded and the current membership has yet to set in place a coherent vision that takes us beyond the basic motherhood statements. The real substance of integration has to be brought forward." His extraordinary fluency in the English language as well as his education (at Eton and Oxford University) lends him a great deal of confidence. Unlike many of his Thai equivalents, Abhisit is able to move on both the domestic and the international stage with ease.

For a studious and committed family man (he is married with two children and has been a lecturer at Thammasat University), his

emergence in the late '80s represents a last ditch attempt by the traditional Thai elite to reclaim the political world from the carpet-baggers.

His career also shows that despite the allure of commerce and the private sector, public life is still a realistic alternative for talented and ambitious young men and women. Mercifully there are some good people entering the fray. With his world-class education, his wealth and status, Abhisit chose to devote himself to his country and his people. He's rejected the easier, less-exacting world of business. As he says: "I relish the challenge. I enjoy the process of building a consensus. I want people to support me for my ideas and my commitment, essentially for what I want to do for them."

Quite frankly he may not succeed in making Thailand a better place but, by god, he's going to try. Moreover it's his spiritedness, his honesty as well as his raw determination that sets him apart from the mere political practitioners. And if I'm any measure of his capacity to inspire (and I can assure you I am the gloomiest man in Kuala Lumpur), I'm convinced that he's the kind of leader who could make a difference not only to Thailand but also to ASEAN.

manoeuvring to replace his boss. Because of this and his own unwavering confidence in UMNO's ability to drive Malaysia's political and socio-economic reforms, many of his pronouncements may well seem anodyne. Nonetheless, it is interesting to observe how he has been tackling the four major challenges facing the UMNO-led administration.

The first, Islam, is one of Pak Lah's strengths. The deputy prime minister is the only member of the UMNO hierarchy who can articulate the party's modernist religious position. Pak Lah has demonstrated a surprising sense of moderation and progress when discussing Islam, advocates, in one speech last year, "an Islam that is dynamic and modern... not one that is static, obscurantist, rigid and entrenched in literalism." His espousal of contemporary *ijtihad* (interpretation) of the Koran sets him head-to-head with the *ulama*-led PAS. Nonetheless, he enjoys a degree of credibility in the Islamic arena for three reasons: firstly, his background as an Islamic student; secondly, his impeccable family life; and thirdly, by dint of his grandfather, the late Sheikh Abdullah Fahim, a former *mufti* of Penang and a renowned Islamic scholar.

These factors have tempered the tone of opposition attacks. Certainly the taunts bear no comparison to those levelled against Dr Mahathir. For example, when Datuk Fadzil Noor, the leader of the opposition, accused the deputy prime minister — at the time of the encephalitis epidemic and attendant pig culling — of being little more than a pig herder, the insult backfired, drawing a barrage of angry criticism on the PAS leader. Interestingly, even Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat, the *Mursyidul-Am*, or spiritual leader of PAS, and Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Kelantan has conceded that Pak Lah, as the descendant of a notable cleric, shares certain characteristics with himself.

Secondly, the handling of racial issues. Pak Lah's religious background is matched by his roots in Penang's cosmopolitanism. In his speeches, he has stressed his multi-racial credentials. Many NGOs,

to protect his credibility. It goes without saying that all his dealings (and especially those of his family) with the corporate world have to be wholly transparent. Any backsliding on this front will — and very swiftly, as Indonesia's President Abdurrahman Wahid is discovering to his chagrin — destroy much of the goodwill Pak Lah currently enjoys.

Fourthly, the civil society arena. The formation of the National Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM) and its growing credibility under Tan Sri Musa Hitam, as well as certain judicial appointments show an improvement in the government's civil society position. However, in many ways Anwar Ibrahim's case remains the litmus test of the government's civil society agenda, and in the years ahead, Pak Lah will have to turn his attention to the knotty problem of his former rival.

But as Michael Vatikiotis, the managing editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and a seasoned regional commentator, says of the courtly, if diffident politician: "He is the epitome of the gentleman politician. He considers himself a dutiful public servant. Both qualities make for a softer approach to issues and a tendency to seek compromise rather than confrontation. Some consider this a weakness — they are qualities nonetheless."

After two decades of extraordinary growth and traumatic sociopolitical change, Malaysia needs a period of reconciliation and consolidation. Maybe Pak Lah — the most underestimated man in Malaysian politics — will be able to heal the country's wounds and prepare the people for the future.

tional stability. This accounts for the remarkable way in which he has won over the support of the Chinese community while still brandishing his colours as a Malay ultra.

In essence, he will do the deal with anyone, as long as he and his vision for the Malay community prevail. In this respect, his ability to surprise and confound should not be underestimated. In the past, he has welcomed bitter personal enemies such as Tengku Razaleigh, compromised with the Chinese NGO Suqui, and even offered to relinquish *bumiputera* educational quotas for university entrance. As I said earlier, Dr Mahathir is a man with a mission. Back in the 1940s and 1950s, he identified the importance of overcoming Malay backwardness. From very early on, he was keenly aware of the humiliating position of the Malays, as mere tenants in their own land, beggars at the colonial feast. At the time, he singled out the community's predilection for superstition and the crippling impact of feudalism and fatalism. After half a century of cajoling and criticising, as well as the intervention of the New Economic Policy (NEP), there is no doubt that many of these challenges have been overcome.

Trumpeting the importance of education and knowledge, Dr Mahathir has been unflagging in his devotion to alleviating Malay poverty and ignorance. This is a consistent theme in all his work. His writings (beginning with his articles in the late 1940s when he first contributed commentaries under the pseudonym 'Che Det'), his speeches and his interviews have always focused on the Malays.

Nonetheless, in recent years, his implementation of the NEP has drawn considerable criticism. He has been attacked for the way he has emphasised *bumiputera* or Malay wealth accumulation at the expense of income inequality.

Many economists have argued, and justifiably, that he has devoted far too much of the nation's precious resources to trying to create a cadre of Malay entrepreneurs. As with all politicians of conviction, Dr Mahathir has scant concern for his critics. He has always

the opposition and bolster those within the administration who possess sufficient credibility in terms of Islam.

In many ways, he has already done this.

The position of Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi (the only senior Umno leader with impeccable Islamic credentials) as his anointed successor reveals Dr Mahathir's willingness to change course in mid-stream, taking on a man who had been an adversary in the past.

Increasingly, his energies and UMNO's resources will be directed at tackling PAS's mounting strength. He will do whatever it takes to secure UMNO's future — his intensity and passion will ensure that — but his survival instincts will mean that compromise cannot be ruled out.

For Dr Mahathir the didactic ideologue, the challenges today are not dissimilar to those of 1969. He continues to see events through the prism of his own experiences. As far as he is concerned, the Malay community is in jeopardy and he must fight to save his beloved people from PAS, if not themselves.

For Malaysia and Malaysians, the questions are more complex and less succinct. When will he relinquish his hold over the nation? Will his passions cloud his judgment? Can the nation withstand another bout of Dr Mahathir's brinkmanship? Are his solutions still valid in the new millennium? Is it too late? Have the Malays already changed?

Finally, can Dr Mahathir heal the deep rift within the *ummah* or will he merely exacerbate the divide?

parison, the leading Malay party is locked in the past. PAS's gestures in Kelantan and Terengganu, where land has been offered to Chinese language schools, are causing considerable waves within the community.

A good example of PAS's willingness to win support from the Chinese community can be seen in Dr Hatta Ramli's (party president Datuk Fadzil Noor's political secretary) outspokenness at the height of the Suqui controversy back in August 2000. At the time he said, "Let the Umno Malays be warned, they would have to step over the dead bodies of the Alternative Front Malays before they can harm the Chinese."

As the struggle for the hearts and minds of the Chinese community grows, it is important to note the four main reasons for this dramatic change as well as the key underlying theme that has to be addressed by those seeking to win (or retain) the hotly contested votes.

The first and most obvious reason for the altered situation is the disarray within the Malay community. However, as I've argued time and again, this disunity is a permanent feature of Malay politics. The uneven implementation of the NEP has resulted in the creation of different classes of Malays. Moreover, many of these classes have discovered that their unhappiness with government policies (ranging from privatisation through to judicial reform) are shared by the non-Malays. This is extremely important because it is shows that the fault lines in Malaysian politics are no longer merely racial.

Secondly, the Anwar Ibrahim debacle provided an opportunity for many new players (ambitious men and women) to enter politics. This younger generation are predominantly in their thirties. They — men like Tian Chua — are unencumbered by the trauma of 1969 and are willing to test the limits of government tolerance. Furthermore, they are fired on by the injustice of a system of positive discrimination that has excluded them, their friends and their families from government jobs, universities and contracts. As such, and of-

at a time (the 1970s) when China was still recovering from the madness of the Cultural Revolution. By way of comparison, China is now Asia's sole superpower. The country's ability to withstand the Asian financial crisis, not to mention its courage in standing up to perceived American bullying are indicators of its global stature. With Ang Lee's movie, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, bursting into international popular culture, China has also become a global cultural-cum-entertainment power. These factors have a deep impact on the identity and self-worth of the Chinese, prompting a more upfront and aggressive approach from its interlocutors.

However, the underlying theme in Malaysian politics and a critical factor in understanding changes in the Chinese community is the realignment of the national political agenda. Politics is no longer racially exclusive. Class — socio-economic class — is beginning to play a major role, and this gives issue-driven politics a higher profile. This has meant that the lower income groups are able to reach across the racial divide and establish working alliances based on shared interests and objectives.

Furthermore, the perceived humility and integrity of PAS leaders and the relative absence of corruption in Kelantan and Terengganu has been well received by many Chinese businessmen, most of whom are repulsed by what they see as UMNO's rapacity and incompetence. In fact, one could go so far as to say that the small town, Chinese-educated class share certain conservative — yes, even 'Asian' values, with their brethren in PAS.

The transformation of the political landscape requires a positive response from Barisan Nasional. In many ways, UMNO, with its history of multi-racial accommodation, should be the best-positioned to ride the new political wave. The question now is simple: Can UMNO rise to the challenge?

However, for confirmed cynics such as myself, his performance revealed the true nature of the visit: Build bonds, don't break them. Similarly, Dr Mahathir preferred to smooth over differences rather than accentuate them.

After the debacle of the SingTel bid for Time dotCom, I detect in both men a realisation that as the region continues to flounder, Singapore and Malaysia have to work together in order to survive. In short, outstanding issues must be resolved and deals concluded.

However, it is also important to stress once again the historical and emotional aspect of the trip. After ten long years, the Senior Minister has finally crossed the Causeway, revisiting the scene of his greatest failure — Malaysia. The fact that he did drive across the brackish water that divides Singapore from Johor marks an enormous step forward both for him and the entire city-state, because without his lead, the wound that is Separation will never be healed.

Arriving in Kuala Lumpur, I would imagine he must have been pleasantly surprised by the scale of the city's development. Notwithstanding the changes to the skyline, Kuala Lumpur remains at heart a 'company town', an UMNO town, a place where the past is always present.

The upper ranks of Umno are still peppered with names that are more redolent of history than current affairs. Meeting Datuk Seri Syed Hamid, son of Syed Jaafar Albar; Datuk Seri Najib, son of Tun Razak; and Datuk Hishammuddin, son of Tun Hussein Onn, it is all too easy to become seduced by the false allure of dynasty. The reality is very different, and while touching base with old friends is rewarding on a personal level, it would be unwise to take the familiarity and calm for granted.

The modern, progressive and multi-racial elite that have run Malaysia over the past four decades is facing its biggest challenge. The circle of power and influence has widened immeasurably, opening up competing sources of authority such as the PAS-inclined *ulama*.

Judging from his comments at the open forum about the

Muslim Malaysia and the twin challenges of credibility and legitimacy — stemming from last year's election and the Sauk incident — that has resulted in UMNO's domestic focus. In order to survive as the sole party of the Malays, Umno is battling for the community's soul.

In this context, relations with Singapore are secondary. Moreover, part of the reason the Senior Minister's comments did not elicit a firestorm of controversy is, quite simply, the fact that Umno's grip has receded.

Dealing with party luminaries in Kuala Lumpur or wining and dining with the party faithful will not give you much of an idea of the sentiment on the 'ground' as the 'ground' has become more truculent, disbelieving and querulous. The top-down, quasi-feudal UMNO political machinery has spluttered to an untimely halt while the party members undergo a re-engineering. The centre can no longer dictate reactions at the periphery. This is a sign of increasing democratisation in Malaysia. However, greater freedom of action will in the end make the bilateral relations far more complicated and their management far less simple. So while Singapore and the Senior Minister can enjoy a respite in their relations with Malaysia, the future will demand a more complex and subtle engagement.

be weeded out. As a Malaysian, I should also add that while Keating was ultimately concerned with the effects of his policies on the Australian people, his Ozzie 'in-your-face' diplomacy has provided a necessary and important balance to the arcane and at times utterly futile 'let's not lose face' Asian diplomacy.

In retrospect, I think Keating was extremely fortunate in his timing. As he very rightly points out, the world in the early '90s, in the wake of communism's spectacular collapse, was a period of "sheer malleability." Armed with his "sceptical, intuitive, power-based view of the international system," he identified what he thought were Australia's strategic goals (security in Asia and not from Asia), and then sought to secure them.

Realising that Australia's voice, internationally, was too small, he concentrated on multi-lateral groupings such as APEC, that would provide him with a stage upon which to drive home his nation's agenda. Because one shouldn't forget that Keating, even when he was grand-standing — was *always* focused on Australian interests.

And it was in this respect that he went head-to-head with another ambitious regional premier, Mahathir, who was attempting exactly the same strategy in order to promote a Malaysian agenda. Reading between the lines, I would argue that a key component of Keating's success in this contest — the recalcitrant spat was always about a great deal more than mere semantics — was the bovine docility of his northern neighbour Indonesia, and the inward-looking President Suharto.

Flattering the older man with his attention, Keating turned the Indonesian President into a foil for his grand ambitions. In meeting after meeting, he managed to manoeuvre the tentative and inarticulate leader into becoming the chief promoter of APEC. And with Suharto as an ally, he knew he could ignore the rest of ASEAN.

Another major change in the international system over the past decade has been the rise of the NGO movement, as fuelled by the Internet and the ever-increasing influence of the media. It is hard to

never even mentions (except to downplay them) will be the deciding factor in Canberra's constant quest for the conduit to power in Washington D.C.

dead is merely a tragedy. I leave my readers to think it through. The word you are thinking of begins with the letter 'h'.

Another aspect of the same point is the fact that many Americans (not all, mind you) can't seem to comprehend that whilst we are shocked and appalled by the terrorist attack, we do not wish to be involved in the retaliation, nor do we support it unreservedly. Sympathy is one thing; revenge dressed up as justice is another. But our reservations are immediately seen as an indication of anti-Americanism and, god forbid, anti-semiticism.

As a lawyer, I believe that anyone, however heinous their alleged crime, deserves a legal hearing. The Nazis were tried for their war crimes as is former Serbian President, Slobodan Milosevic.

Retribution must follow the due process of the law. When we circumvent the law and proceed unilaterally (as judge, jury and prosecution rolled into one) we descend to the level of the uncivilised — we are no better in essence than those whom we accuse and then attack. Respect for the law in turn earns us respect. Needless to say, this is a lesson that the Malaysian government often refuses to heed as well. However, I would expect better of the world's indispensable nation.

Secondly, there is a great deal more uncertainty in the North Atlantic Alliance than many would realise from listening to the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair. Despite the fact that Tony Blair's face is firmly buried in George W. Bush's fundament, many Brits (and these are not just Guardian-reading pacificists), whilst horrified by the terrorist assault, are dismayed by a number of things:

They are perplexed by the American refusal to acknowledge how their own past actions might have outraged the rest of the world. I watched an astounding piece of 'live' TV in the U.K. (BBC's *Question Time*) where a studio audience tore apart a visibly distressed former American diplomat. The seething anger shocked me, if only because this was taking place in London and not Beijing or Baghdad. The audience that night (and these were British people, not Libyans

It strikes at the heart of America's fundamental liberties.

In conclusion, all I can say is that tragedy reveals an individual's true strengths and weaknesses. The same is true of nations and whilst I am deeply sorry for the atrocious violence perpetrated on American soil, I am becoming equally saddened by the irrational and foolish response it has provoked in a country that I have long admired.

The second and third objectives are clearly aimed at countries such as Malaysia as well as the United States. The Kuala Lumpur that I know and love is as imperiled by events as Washington D.C. and New York. If Malaysians are not vigilant the attackers will also be able to undermine our prosperity and stability. One only has to observe the speed with which Indonesia — a remarkably moderate Islamic polity — is buckling under the onslaught of Islamic extremism, to grasp the potency of the threat.

Firstly, Americans no longer feel safe and secure in 'Fortress America'. Everyday life — waking up in the morning, commuting to office and switching on the computer — has become a series of potentially lethal acts.

Obviously, I can't offer any solutions to this multi-faceted threat except to observe that the '9/11' attacks were a coming of age for the United States. Effectively, the American people have been put on notice: their actions — or rather the actions of their leaders — will have serious ramifications on their lives, and isolationism is self-defeating. An ostrich is no less vulnerable when it buries its head in the sand.

Secondly, the television barrages me with images of anger and frustration. I am confronted by images of Muslims protesting in the streets, their faces contorted with venom and fury. Day by day, the list of countries where the demonstrations are taking place grows longer: Philippines, Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt, Indonesia and now, even in Malaysia.

Of course, television is a superficial medium. It is stark, simplistic and unsubtle. It does not record the gradations of human experience so much as exaggerate the peaks and troughs, ignoring the commonplace. News footage is seldom representative of the reality on the ground. Television cameras thrive on certain level of emotional intensity — focusing on moments of anger, suffering and tragedy. On TV, Pakistan, a nation of over 130 million people, is merely a stage for Islamic clerics and hotheads to rally in the streets, chant

CNN, CNBC or the BBC.

Malaysians must show the world (both the Muslim and the non-Muslim nations) that the so-called civilisational clash can be avoided and how. Our political leaders must show fortitude and restraint. Fadzil Noor's flag-burning is exactly the type of act that we should condemn.

But what can ordinary Malaysians do?

Civil society organisations, professional associations (such as the Bar Council) and networking groups (Rotarians, Lions, YPOs, YEOs) should arrange inter-faith meetings and dialogues as well as memorial services for the civilian victims of the '9/11' tragedy and the American bombing in Afghanistan. Both sets of victims are innocent. The act of joining together to commemorate the losses would signify and strengthen our multi-religious character. We must show through example that dialogue and interaction foster greater mutual understanding and not distrust.

Moderate voices must speak up. Now is not the time to disagree quietly with extremism or intolerance. Furthermore, we must attract the attention of the world's media in an intelligent manner. We are carrying on our shoulders the good name of the faith. In time to come the margins of Islam will reinvent and renew the faith. If we are courageous and determined, our pragmatic religious practices will become the reality for the entire Islamic world.

erate members have also undermined Anwar's authority.

The first factor has been the awakening of the silent majority. There have been a large number of seminars and discussions on the issue hosted both by the various major newspapers such as the Chinese-language daily, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, as well as community and religious organisations.

The openness of the sessions, the calmness and maturity reveals once again the essential moderation of Islamic expression in Malaysia. Moreover, the government has had to rethink its initial position, whilst Muslim liberals led by Sisters in Islam's Zainah Anwar and the academics Farish Noor and Chandra Mudzaffar have articulated a persuasive, moderate alternative to the *ulama*-led bigotry and the government's indecisiveness.

The second factor has been the swiftness of the Taliban's collapse. The cowardly flight of Ossama bin Laden has left many in the Muslim world appalled. Most Muslims want a form of governance that balances their everyday socio-economic aspirations without sacrificing their faith in Allah. They do not see the two — or indeed modernity — as being mutually exclusive.

The conservative forces that seemed intent on power are now in retreat. What had seemed inevitable months ago — PAS's eventual victory at the national level — now looks impossible. Needless to say, there is a palpable sense of relief amongst the city's political and business elite, but this is grounded in a broader sense of disillusionment in the Malay community at large with the vision held out by PAS and the Muslim extremists.

A good example of this change is an old friend of mine. Let's call him 'Azran'. Azran is someone I'd trust with my life. He's the kind of guy who'll tell you straight to your face when you're screwing up, even if you don't want to hear truth. And yet, he's considerate enough not to say 'I told you so' when, having ignored his advice, you turn up at his doorstep asking for sympathy.

After a career in the financial world and many years of hectic

country felt like a slap in the face.

The year after, he decided that his children needed a better grounding in the religion. With this in mind he withdrew them from their cushy private schools and enrolled them in an avowedly Islamic educational establishment. However the experience proved to be problematic. According to Azran, his children became less tolerant of other races, and his wife who doesn't wear a *tudung* was insulted at the school gates.

"I am afraid the school didn't teach true Islamic values. It was arrogant and exclusionary: it wasn't the kind of environment I wanted for my children."

Azran was moderately upbeat on the issue of corruption: "The Prime Minister knows that in order to restore his credibility he must continue the reform process. I am concerned that the process might be stalled and I am watching closely what is happening at IWK and with Halim Saad.

"Still, I believe he is essentially a 'fair man': he was right in speaking up against terrorism after the attacks on the WTC and equally correct to qualify his support for the Americans by reminding them of their role in supporting the Israelis.

"He showed real leadership and balance. I respect that. PAS just shot themselves in the foot. I was appalled by the demonstration outside the American Embassy!

"You can only address violence and terrorism with force. We've had experience here in Malaysia with the dealing with the communists. Personally, I think Malaysia is on a far higher plane than other Muslim nations. We are a model to others and '9/11' has reminded many of the conservative-leaning moderates in the country that the Wahabi-inspired future — with its bigotry, its poverty and its discrimination against women was not the right way to go."

not be limited to a small section of the population; and fourthly, that we are embarking on an extremely exciting — and let's face it — potentially bumpy ride as we endeavour to meld the virtues of democracy, good governance and modernity with the timeless principles elucidated in the Holy Koran.

What we are doing in Malaysia has not really been attempted elsewhere in the Islamic world. We are entrusted with an enormous burden. Given the incompetence, corruption and injustice in much of the Arab Muslim world, our model of Islamic practices, moderation, minority rights, development and social justice will become increasingly valuable for the entire globe. This means that we shouldn't rush things or deny space to serious and reasonable voices from outside the *ulama*.

As I said, everyone should be concerned with this issue — Muslims and non-Muslims alike, because Islam (unlike modern-day Christianity) cannot be relegated to the private and personal domain. Islam embraces all aspects of our lives.

Moreover, contrary to what many people think — the Islamic world is not monolithic. There is a great deal of diversity in how people practise the faith. Believe me. During my time in the States, I have been meeting with Muslims from all over the globe — from Egypt, Iran, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Morocco. Whilst we all share the same faith, our expression of that faith varies and our cultural practices matter in this respect. In fact, Islam both recognises and celebrates freedom of expression. Moreover, there is a long-established tradition of *ikhtilaf* (difference of opinion) within Islam that actually seeks to acknowledge and respect these differences of opinion within a framework that is accommodating and moderate.

The confrontation between the PUM and the writers is concerned with the all-important question of who controls the interpretation of the Holy Koran. Should one set of people — the *ulamas* in PUM — monopolise the right to interpret the Holy Koran? Should

realise that instilling fear is counterproductive.

Unfortunately PAS — a party that subscribes to the view that the *ulamas* are the supreme and unchallengeable interpreters of the Holy Koran — have been the biggest supporters of PUM. This is a shame because the issue will end up being little more than a political football with UMNO on one side and PAS on the other.

This does not mean that liberals such as myself want to deny the *ulamas* the right to interpret the Holy Koran. Far from it. Instead we — as representatives of the people, because we are your voice — want to share the space. We want to show to the world that Malaysia is different from the rest of the Islamic world in that we have the confidence and the substance to be able to debate the issues of modernity and faith. We want to win the *ulamas* in PUM over to democracy and *ikhtilaf* and work together to ensure that our future here in Malaysia avoids the disasters that have bedeviled the many Islamic societies where discourse, tolerance and moderation have been ignored. If ordinary Malaysians remain on the sidelines, we as a nation are doomed.

gious, education or economic policies. The goal is always the same, with UMNO concentrating on the 'ends'. In essence UMNO — whilst always being intrinsically Malay and Muslim — is 'ideology-free': pragmatism is the party's trademark.

By way of comparison, PAS possesses a 'core' ideology, namely, its own highly idiosyncratic and particular interpretation of the Holy Koran — witness the controversial attempt to introduce the *hudud* in the state of Terengganu. As far as PAS is concerned, the 'process' is all-important.

According to the *ulama*-led party, the Muslim Malay community can only be uplifted if their brand of Islamic practice is implemented. In their eyes anything that veers from this message is entirely wrong and un-Islamic. For PAS, ideology is all-important and the *ulama* are the sole arbiters of religious purity.

Whilst PAS should be commended for their zero tolerance of corruption, the emphasis on the 'process' rather than the 'ends' has made the party unwieldy and inflexible. For example, PAS fluffed the opportunity to sustain an alternative to the Barisan Nasional in 2000. The *ulamas*' tunnel vision prevented PAS from reaching out to the non-Muslim community, condoning the party to political wilderness once again.

Reform and renewal in Malaysia has to come from within. UMNO has been able to draw on its three formative historical experiences: firstly, its interaction with outside powers such as the British during the period leading up to Merdeka; secondly, the troubled relationship across the racial divide with the all-important Chinese community; and finally, its own struggle with Islamic religious conservatives.

These three forces have shaped contemporary Malaysia as well as the party's sense of self. As a consequence, anyone hoping to lead UMNO has to be able to deal with the three forces, and occasionally all at the same time. In order to handle these factors, an UMNO leader has to have an 'open' mindset: a combination of cultural flex-

that the Malay agenda and the nation's future depended on selecting the very best manpower on offer. Back in those days, professionalism and the ability to work was more important than blind loyalty. Dato Hishammuddin, to his credit, is replicating Tun Razak's policy of reaching out and engaging with the younger generation, and there are many other young faces emerging under his patronage across the nation.

Men like Khairy and Zaki do not need to work in Malaysia. With their elite education, they can get jobs anywhere in the world: New York, London or Hong Kong — the list is endless. Nonetheless, they're home and they're committed to the nation. In fact they represent the cream of the NEP — they are the Mahathir Mohamads and the Musa Hitams of the future. Moreover, they recognise that the English language is merely a key to knowledge and that fluency in a foreign tongue does not make you any less of a Muslim or a Malay.

As men and women of this calibre are once again inducted into UMNO, I am confident the party will become more plural, more professional and more democratic. This does not mean that the party will lose its 'Malayness' or its Muslim identity. Far from it: for men such as Dato Hishammuddin and the younger generation (both men and women) in UMNO, modernity and tradition can be bridged: the two are not mutually exclusive.

In many ways they reflect the vision laid out by Dr Mahathir in his book *The Malay Dilemma*. Certainly they are his creation, they are his 'children'. They are the young leaders of the future and in their hands we will have to entrust our nation's fate. They are the change agents.

Art And Literature

ligious bigotry.

In one of his greatest novels, *A House for Mr Biswas*, Naipaul charts the eponymous hero's (Mohun Biswas') desperate bid for security and self-respect in an unforgiving and viciously petty milieu. The battle to succeed, culminating in the construction of his own home consumes the hero's energies, leading to his premature death at the age of forty-six.

This theme — the individual's struggle for self-realisation and autonomy — pervades all his writings. It also mirrors the writer's own determination to make something of himself on his arrival in the United Kingdom, his adopted home. Born on the 'margins', as it were, of the civilised world into an émigré Hindu family on the Caribbean island of Trinidad, Naipaul has always been concerned with reaching the 'centre' and storming the metropolitan citadel.

As with all writers, his ambition (as well as his fear of failure) has shaped his perception of the world. He is a fiercely defensive man, a loner for whom all systems of belief and social organisation (including African tribalism) are an anathema. His rage is directed against the small-minded and the petty; against religious clerics, self-important Brahmins and corrupt bureaucrats.

For those of us in Southeast Asia, his two travelogues — *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief* — still bear rereading. Both books focus on the unfolding drama of Muslim revivalism in the non-Arabic, Islamic world. His accounts have been attacked for their lack of scholarship. The criticisms are valid, especially in his treatment of Indonesia. For example, he derides the *pesantren* system of education without acknowledging Gus Dur and the Nahadatul Ulama's remarkable attempts to broaden and professionalise the curriculum. Nor does he recognise that the *pesantren* is in fact a vestige of the pre-Islamic tradition embedded in the mainstream religious culture and a vital bastion against rampant Arab-isation.

But there again, Naipaul is not producing an objective record of Islamic practices in the region. He is not a historian. He is a polemi-

Could it be that his thesis — the converted peoples — no longer seemed applicable in modern day Kuala Lumpur? Had Southeast Asian Muslims managed to escape the tragedies that had engulfed their fellow believers? Was this success too difficult to chart?

In essence, Naipaul fumbles in Malaysia because the country does not submit to his neatly constructed hypothesis. Malaysia defied his attempts at reduction. What many Malaysians don't seem to see is that the writer's failure is as much a testament to our achievements as a nation as it is to the many flaws in his argument.

However, having said that, we are now beginning to realise that the boom years of the 1990s concealed many of the issues — the resentment and dislocation that he had prefigured in *Among the Believers*. Had he been writing today, his assessment might have been far less hesitant.

ness. Fruits such as pineapples, mangoes and watermelons, that are considered to be peculiarly Malaysian, are in fact, exotic and imported. Hybridised and in certain cases even genetically modified, they're an ironic comment on our preconceived ideas of what is and what isn't 'local'.

At a time when race and religion dominate public discourse across the globe, Simryn Gill's wry, tongue-in-cheek artwork satirises our preoccupations with identity in a particularly Southeast Asian manner. Similarly, last October in another show, at a solo exhibition entitled *dalam* at Galeri Petronas, Simryn presented a series of over two hundred sensitively-shot colour photographs of Malaysian living-rooms — this time without people.

The result was an illuminating panorama of domestic life, debunking in many ways the resistance we, as Malaysians, still have to one another. She included Chinese, Malay and Indian living rooms. There were also middle-class, working-class and affluent homes. Taken altogether, Simryn stresses the various similarities in all our lives: the ever-present TV screens, the family portraits, the ramshackle furniture — in short, the cozy, guileless warmth of family life.

Under Simryn's gaze, the 'other' is no longer an unknowable or distant force. Once we're ushered into peoples' homes, entering the inner sanctum, the 'other' becomes a tamed and domesticated presence, something we can associate with and understand intuitively. However, for Malaysians (and even Singaporeans), this process remains difficult and strained. If anything, the racial divide has widened over the years as narrow-minded and bigoted religious zealots have sought to separate the believers from the non-believers.

Simryn grew up in the small Negri Sembilan seaside town. Despite the fact that she now lives in Australia and exhibits on virtually every continent, her work is quintessentially Malaysian. She is proof of the maxim that, whilst you can take the girl out of the *kampung*, you can't take the *kampung* out of the girl. Because of this 'rootedness', her photographs speak to us directly. We recognise the

Moreover, as an expatriate Malaysian, Simryn is transformed into an émigré — the 'outsider'. Her childhood memories make her yearn for a world that she can no longer experience as a resident. She is a sojourner and she is fated to wander. However, this does not detract from the work's impact. She remains authentic and true to her material. She is genuinely and tragically disenfranchised: 'belonging' is a luxury she will never enjoy again.

Unlike so many contemporary artists, Simryn recoils from the visceral and the shocking, nor does she need to tap into the giddy silliness of celebrity that so obsesses the Britpack. Simryn has no interest in photographing either Sir Elton John's backside or prepubescent girls. She signals the seriousness of her intentions by focusing on her personal concerns and communicating them to the world in a way that retains their freshness and relevance. She teases out meanings and hints at connections. She doesn't shout, she whispers. Subdued and understated, she lets the unspoken humorousness and deft elegance of her images do the work.

Her confidence and technical mastery is revealed by her willingness to work with colour photography. Ironically, colour (unlike black-and-white photography) has a tendency — at least in the hands of the untrained — to leach images of their emotional intensity. Colour suffuses the retina. The onlooker is drenched by the full polychromatic spectrum and over-stimulated. It obviates a response and leaves little to suggestion. This does not mean her work lacks intellectual heft. If anything, Simryn, at least in person, is inclined to over-philosophise. Thankfully, however, her work is not didactic and her photographs and installations can be interpreted in many different ways.

In exploring identity, racial and religious purity as well as hybridity, Simryn encourages a multiplicity of responses. Her work is playful. We can enjoy the photographs: we can laugh or we can smile. She's not forcing us to do anything in particular. However, if we really want to, we can also stop and take stock as we follow her highly

U Ba Nyan — Amidst Globalisation

The Business Times Singapore, December 1, 1999
The Sun, July 23, 2000

When we think about globalisation, we really stop to consider the impact of these forces (predominantly economic) on the individual. This is a mistake.

How does someone cope on a personal level with a world where the verities of one's childhood, one's faith, culture and traditions have been whittled away by modernity's harsher truths? Since this is a millennium essay (and therefore more entertainment than edification), I've decided to begin my simple (if contrary) hypothesis with one of my favourite works of art. Painted in 1937, the late Burmese master U Ba Nyan's self-portrait hangs in the National Museum in Yangon.

I've chosen a work of art because art, whether painting, sculpture, music or literature, reveals a great deal both about an artist and his world. And the Rangoon of U Ba Nyan's heyday — with its floating population of itinerant labourers, Indian tycoons and British administrators — is a very good example of a society undergoing the convulsions engendered by globalisation.

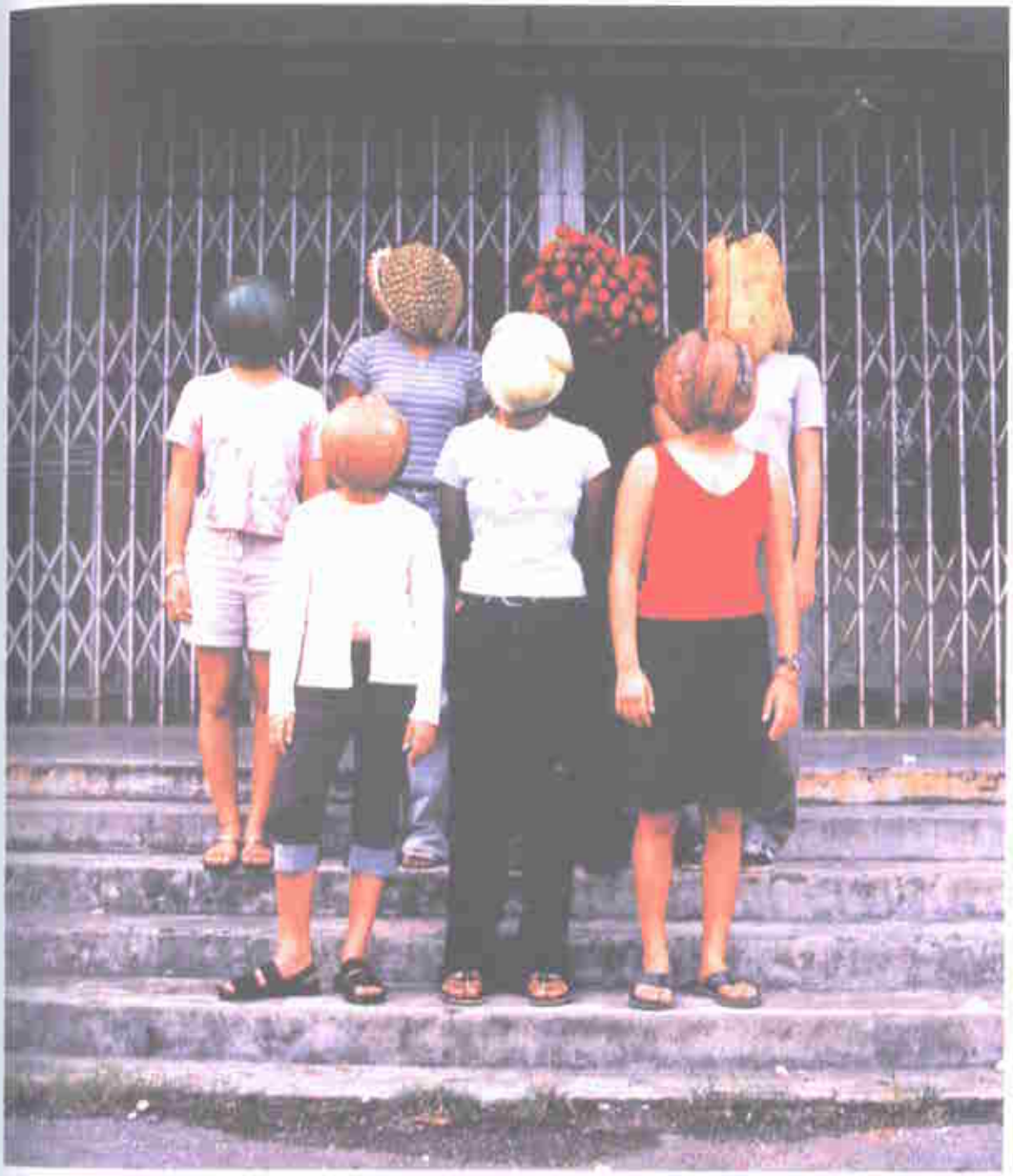
But before we turn to the city and its teeming masses, let's take a closer look at the artist and the way his life has also been altered. Does the opening of markets presuppose an opening of minds? And what does his personal struggle tell us about the turmoil in the Rangoon of the late 1930s? A 50 year-old man stares out from the canvas. Flamboyantly dressed in a generously-cut robe, a palette at his side, he appears, to us at the cusp of the new millennium, as the epitome of the modern man. There is a confident swagger about him, though on closer inspection you can sense a slight tremulousness and uncertainty around the mouth and eyes.

merce.

But let's move away from U Ba Nyan and try to imagine, if we can, the cacophonous city outside his studio. Eighty years before, it was nothing more than a muddy village on the banks of a minor branch of the Irrawaddy river. Now with a population of nearly half a million, the indigenous Burmese — U Ba Nyan's people — find themselves outnumbered three to one by harder-working, better-educated Indians and Chinese. The city possesses all the prerequisites of progress. There are motorbuses, a busy aerodrome, an electric tramway that bisects the city from east to west, fine government buildings including the largest gaol in the empire, a wealthy commercial quarter, a university in a leafy campus and the famous Pasteur Institute.

In terms of business, explosive global demand has made Rangoon the third busiest port in British India after Bombay and Calcutta. At Kanaungto just outside the city, Messrs Steel Bros operate one of the largest rice mills in the world. In Ahlone, the timber yards and saw mills of the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation with their working elephants delight the many tourists. And across the river in Syriam, the Bombay Oil Company has built an enormous refinery around which a grimy shanty town has grown. An exclusive cabal of merchants known as *hoxwallahs* ensure that satisfactory dividends are paid. In the case of Steel Bros, some 8 per cent is returned annually to the shareholders in London. Even in the midst of the Great Depression, the profitability is maintained.

However, all this commercial activity was not without its victims. It was estimated that by 1936, well over 9 million acres of rice-growing agricultural land in Lower Burma had been transferred away from indebted farmers. Chettiar landlords from Southern India rented the land back to the farmers at punitive rates. Meanwhile, a displaced Burmese peasantry was being undercut by itinerant Indian labourers of whom a quarter of a million arrived in Rangoon every year. Desperate for work, the daily wage rate (which had fallen



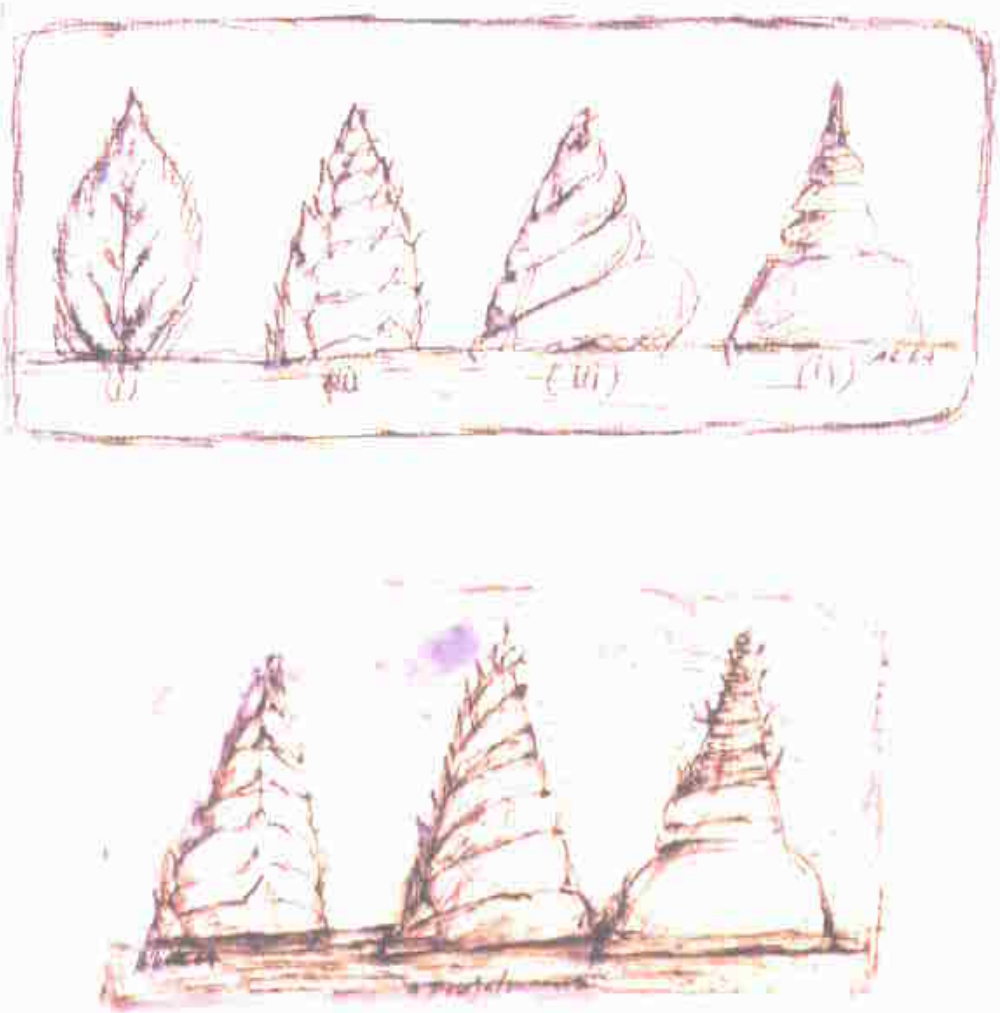
1.1 Simryn Gill, *A Small Town at the Turn of the Century* (1900–2000)

Type C Photograph series Ref. No. 34

(91.5 x 91.5 cm)

Courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Australia

1.3 Montien Boonma, *Venus of Bangkok* (1991)
Bucket, wood and paint
(180 x 180 x 94 cm)
Courtesy of the Estate of the late Montien Boonma/Eric Booth Bunnag, Thailand



1.5 Latif Mohidin, *Penjelmaan (Transformation)* (1964)

Pencil and water colour on paper

(12 x 22.5 cm, 7 x 15.5 cm)

Courtesy of Latiff Mohidin

1.7 I Made Budi, *Puputan* (1992)

Ink and acrylic on canvas

(123 x 200 cm)

Courtesy of I Made Budi/Valentine Willie Fine Art, Malaysia

1.9 Wong Hoy Cheong, *She was married at 14 and has 14 Children* (1994)

Charcoal and photocopy collage on paper

(190 x 150 cm)

Courtesy of Wong Hoy Cheong

1.11 Sanggawa, *Salubong (Beauty Queen)* (1994)

Oil on canvas

(203 x 607 cm)

Courtesy of Sanggawa/Valentine Willie Fine Art, Malaysia

1.13 Hendra Gunawan, *War and Peace* (c.1950)

Oil on canvas

(94 x 140 cm)

Courtesy of Amir Sidharta/Museum Universitas Pelita Harapan, Indonesia

1.15 Henri Dono, *Agenda in Bali* (1989)
Collage on canvas
(49 x 49 cm)
Courtesy of Henri Dono/Cemeti Art House, Indonesia

Montien Boonma — Alchemist of the Soul

The Business Times Singapore, November 24, 2001
Sin Chew Jit Poh, April 7, 2002
The Star, April 7, 2002

Just over a year ago, a leading Thai artist Montien Boonma died after a prolonged struggle with cancer. Montien, who was forty-seven when he passed away, had watched his wife die from cancer only six years before. Moreover, with his death, their young son was effectively orphaned.

Right up until his death, Montien (much like the ailing Matisse in his Nice apartment) refused to allow the cancer to prevent him from making art. Instead he drew and later directed his assistants. He worked for as long as health permitted, harnessing his frustrations and channelling his anger towards creative endeavours. As a consequence, much of his best were actually produced in the last decade of his life as he nursed his wife and then in turn succumbed to cancer.

Born in 1953, Montien was from the impoverished northeast of Thailand. As one of thirteen children with relatively poor parents, he was fortunate that his father, against his mother's wishes, finally allowed him to study art. By the time of his death, he had become one of the leading artists in the Asia-Pacific; someone that other artists, curators, critics and dealers talked about respectfully, if not reverentially.

Wherever I've travelled in Southeast Asia, serious artists, most of whom had never even met him will concur that Montien was the master of installations (artworks that are site-specific). Certainly in the last decade of his life he had become a veritable star on the avant-garde circuit, criss-crossing the globe as he made his way from one biennale or art expo to another, completing commissions along the way so much so that today his artworks are almost impossible to find on the open market.

Montien first came to my attention seven years ago when I came across his work in a commercial Bangkok gallery run by a laconic Austrian called Alfred Paulin. At the time I was amazed, if not relieved at what I thought to be the deliberate ugliness of everything he chose to make.

Having spent some time writing about Bangkok, its politics and business as well as exploring the city's art scene, I had found the prevalent temple mural style to be too saccharine for my tastes. I thought neo-traditionalists such as Chalermchai Kositpipat with their timeless village scenes were unreflective of the changes rippling through the country.

Stillness, elegance and refinement are the traditional hallmarks of much Thai culture and art. The murals in Wat Suthat, painted in reign of Rama I and Rama II, are the apogee of this style. Whilst there is a degree of tension and emotional intensity in the murals, sublimation and restraint are paramount even in the presentation of the Buddha's violent subjugation of the Mara. The murals are delicate and beautiful but their hallowed and reverential aesthetic jarred with the funky realities of modern Thailand where *lèse-majesté* and transgression were nibbling at the edges of polite society.

Montien's work defied expectations. It was startling and alive. At the time when I first met him — this was seven years ago in 1994, he was preparing for a solo exhibition at Thailand's National Art Gallery. He had a high-pitched, melodious voice and a grave face that lit up as he talked. Having studied in Paris, French terms and a slight gallic inflection slipped into our conversation. To my surprise, he was very concerned about the idea of Thai-ness, saying: "In the past, Thai art was inspired by either Buddhism or the royal family. I wanted to make Thai art but without the two. So I looked at the farmers. Could I use their implements to make something truly Thai? I wanted my materials to be part of my surroundings and my work."

I was disappointed by the extent to which the authenticity and

to large canvas sheets which he subsequently assembled into the familiar shape of a pagoda.

Like an alchemist at work in his laboratory, Montien was transforming his ordinary materials — ash, dust, mud, glue and charcoal — into elegant and beautifully-crafted objects. Ironically, for all their iconoclasm, they seemed to possess the same stillness and refined elegance of the traditional murals.

His art would have continued to evolve in this fashion had it not been for his wife's tragedy. In confronting her illness and coming to terms with her death, he was forced to reassess his work. Instead of being concerned with academic and intellectual issues such as authenticity and whether or not his art was truly 'Thai' in inspiration, he turned inwards, explored the raw emotions within himself and charted his own feelings. As he said to Albert Paravi Wongchirachai, a council member of the Siam Society in a 1995 interview, "Artists always make works that project our personal lives. We cannot just think about our ideologies — it's a fusion of the personal and private and the intellectual."

Indeed, the very personal nature of his anguish and deep disappointment with his faith was to transcend his art. The tragedies were to transform him from an academic fiddling around with 'scavenged objects' — a disciple of Beuys and the *Arte Povera* school — into an artist whose work resonated with meaning, reaching well beyond his native Thailand.

Having been advised by a Buddhist monk soon after he married not to live with his wife for ten years, the couple had lived in separate cities; he stayed in Chiang Mai while she lived in the capital. After the ten years were over, they made plans to set up home together only to discover that his wife had contracted cancer. The sense of betrayal was terrible.

"I guess I feel some resentment. Since my wife died, I have not been back to worship Mother *Kuan Im*. I've started to drink a little, because when I used to behave well I didn't get as good as I did... I

searching for answers that were infinitely greater than his initial quest for the essence of Thai art. Indeed his battle to retain his faith was a triumphant assertion of life over death, emptiness and nihilism, and it is this struggle that transcends his work and makes it great.

studies in the west having imbibed both the modern style of painting and the sensibility that underpins it."

One may have expected the fervency of the expressionist creed to have waned with age and experience, especially now that the artist is in his fifties, but the energy and strength of his latest works in the *Gelombang* series dispels such fears. A comparison of the first series *Pago Pago* (a title drawn from the word "pagoda") with his most recent series, the *Gelombang* (loosely translated from the Malay as "waves of energy") would seem to suggest no connections, no artistic exegesis.

It is my intention in this article to present and illustrate the continuity of underlying themes in Latiff's work, themes that link the different series together and at the same time explain his commanding importance for art within Malaysia and the rest of Southeast Asia.

But it would be an injustice both to Latiff and to Malaysia to jump into a discussion of the artist and his work without trying to place the man in his landscape and environment, since one is inconceivable without the other. Latiff's work smacks of the inherent contradictions of Malaysia: a country comprised of an eclectic racial mix of Chinese, Indians and indigenous Muslim Malays, that is at the same time the most industrialised Islamic nation in the world.

Given Malaysia's enormous diversity of languages, cultures, and the Malaysian government's advocacy of indigenous Malay rights, Latiff is one of the very few artists (and a Malay at that) whose work has escaped the moral stain of political accommodation. In the true spirit of expressionism, he has spurned the government's overtures and stayed quite single-mindedly within the plurality of Malaysian life, despite the fact that he is not only the nation's foremost painter but also its most exciting poet writing in Malay. Krishen Jit, the academic-turned-dramatist, considers Latiff's separateness from the cultural bureaucracy to have been a blessing in disguise: "Government patronage can be the kiss of death," he says.

"In retrospect," he says, "I think I was very lucky to have been sent to Germany and not to London where most Malaysians were sent. It gave me a broader exposure to Europe, in part because I was alone and had to mix with my German contemporaries." Another benefit was his exposure to the German language which opened up a literary tradition that had been a closed book to Malaysians. This has been an enduring bond which has resulted in him translating the plays of Buchner as well as Goethe's *Faust*.

The *Pago Pago* series consists of his most famous works, and in this series we can see the way nature has nurtured his art. In the book *Garis*, illustrated with drawings, etchings and lino-cuts from the period, there are countless detailed studies of the simplest of natural phenomena, including a raindrop, a snail's shell, a bamboo shoot and a butterfly cocoon. If one looks more closely at the works, one begins to see a recurring artistic motif, a product of the fusion of the immediate impression and emotion. *Kehidupan (Life), Kepong* (1965) features a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. The eye is drawn to the triangular shape of the cocoon and the insect's wings. This same shape, the triangle, is repeated in *Penjelmaan (Transformation)* in Bangkok, that was completed in 1964. In this watercolour, three forms are shown: a pagoda, a snail's shell and a bamboo shoot. Each appears from the ground, three separate but similar triangular shapes that begin to assume a totemic role in his iconography.

The triangle becomes a building block which enables him to 'see' an object, deconstruct it, and rebuild it again in an amalgam of blocks. Thus, the process of seeing becomes active and charged with meaning, a metaphor as it were for the artist's own unburdening and self-examination. Much of the excitement in looking at the *Pago Pago* series stems from the way it reveals the artist at work, the way he sees an object and then how it is transmuted into art through the prism of his emotions — in short, the expressionist at work.

In *Pago Pago Nocturno* (1967) an indigo blue canvas, the familiar triangles have been inverted, combined with one another and

naif drawings, *Kaktus, Hofheim* (1963) and *Blatter, Hofheim* (1963). In both works, watercolours have been used to draw what appear to be soft flowers in bloom. On closer inspection, the forms become less distinct and amoeba-like. Suddenly, the distance is stretched dramatically and the bloom becomes a pulsing amoeba seen through a microscope.

The *Pago Pago* series was received with almost unanimous praise. Redza Piyadasa says of the series: "His most important contribution to Malaysian art is his potent imagery which is, perhaps, the nearest thing to a Malaysian art that any artist of the 1960s has arrived at."

Understandably, Latiff suffered a degree of artistic 'burn-out' after the draining *Pago Pago* series. This was also a time of artistic experimentation with performance art, happenings and installations co-ordinated by the *Anak Alam* (The Sons of Nature). It is a time remembered very fondly by Krishen Jit as being extremely exciting, though he adds that the group, led by Latiff, lost their way when they strayed into more conventional theatre.

This activity was coupled with Latiff's growing interest in poetry. In the 1970s, he published four collections of poetry: *Sungei Mekong* (*Mekong River*) in 1971; *Kembara Malam* (*Night Travel*) in 1974; *Wayang Pak Dalang* (*Puppeteer's Wayang*) in 1977; and *Serpihan Dari Pedalaman* (*Fragments of the Interior*) in 1979. Switching between the two disciplines, Latiff mirrors the artistic development of some of his regional contemporaries and friends such as Angkarn Kalayanapongsa, who also became famous for their success in both fields.

The *Langkawi* and *Mindscape* series represent Latiff's break from the past. In these works, Latiff explores the relationship between the horizontal line and the superimposed triangular form. In the *Mindscape* series, he uses different shapes and colours in a manner which remains unconvincing in the end. The *Langkawi* series was greeted with widespread scepticism, although the wall sculptures have undergone a critical reassessment over the years since

ing drawn from the whole of Southeast Asia. The diversity of that background and the wealth of these motifs mean that Singaporeans, too, can appreciate the work."

Latiff's high seriousness of purpose and his quest for what he calls "the fusion of aesthetics and ethics" sets him apart from the Malaysian and Singaporean art scene in a way that has strengthened his work until it looms over the thin derivative works of his countrymen and so-called peers.

his experience as a dancer means that he is able to convey a sense of movement on a flat surface.

His work is also deeply-rooted in Balinese history and culture. This knowledge provides a strong foundation for his art. And for the viewer, it becomes a means of navigating and interpreting the paintings. The extraordinary torrent of images (Budi's seeming phantasmagoria) is manageable if you're mindful of cultural co-ordinates embedded in his work.

His understanding of Balinese history (for example the infamous Klungkung Puputan or massacre of 1909) enriches his art as well as our understanding of his world. Furthermore, it's important to realise the interplay between the *pemaksan* (temple), the *banjar* (village) as well as the *subak* (irrigation systems) that crisscross the island.

The Balinese pre-occupation with order and symmetry can be seen in his larger works, holding together the seemingly disparate and chaotic. Invariably, his paintings are framed by Mount Agung and the sea, the holy mountain occupying pride of place at the top of the canvas and the sea at the bottom. In this way, Budi defers to the fundamental Balinese axis of *kaja* (north) and *kelod* (south). In fact, when the artist first started travelling in Java, he would check his compass every night and reorientate his bed to ensure that his feet were facing away from Mount Agung.

The anchorage provided by Balinese iconography is missing (understandably) from the paintings he composed whilst touring Bangkok and the States. Interestingly, these works suggest a deracinated and de-cultured people. The figures are small and jerky. Budi seems to be saying that when man is shorn of his connection with the land, he degenerates, becoming a pitiable figure; a two-legged machine, godless and lost in an urban nightmare.

Unlike so many present-day artists, Budi employs the political themes deftly. The themes do not overwhelm the art. Eschewing the dogmatic, he ensures that contemporary events complement and

viewer head-on.

In fact, I Made Budi has managed to combine two apparently contradictory aspects of the Balinese personality: on the one hand the ribald and physical, on the other, the stylised and spiritual.

The inherent theatricality of Balinese life engulfs the viewer. As Clifford Geertz argues, display and drama lie at the heart of religious observance and everyday life — they aren't merely a reflection of the life so much as the central fact of life. And Budi, with a wry and comic touch, traces the fine line that divides the Hindu high priests and *pedandas* of Tabanan from the honky-tonk of Kuta, as well as the tensions between a history steeped in tragedy and a more prosperous, if hectic present-day.

In reaching this delicate balance, between the sacred and the profane, Budi also reveals the way in which the Balinese have effortlessly appropriated the foreign and made it their own. In a feat that has drawn anthropology students from all over the globe for well over a century, the island people have incorporated the alien, refashioning and reworking the alien until it becomes a part of and not apart from their lives.

A classic example of the appropriation is the way in which the tourist is placed in the heart of the ever-changing landscape. Pottering around, camera-at-the-ready, Budi has made the long-nosed visitor an integral part of his island. If his canvases are an archive, then he has documented the foreigners' presence and stripped them of their strangeness. In turning the traveller into a player in his theatrical set-piece, he is absorbed and localised. In a similar fashion, boats become weird fish-like forms and airplanes are transformed into birds.

However, the dazzling cornucopia is not an uncontrolled riot. For Budi, just as for all Balinese, there is order in the seeming chaos. Whilst the passions are allowed to flourish, they are also regulated. Budi's art is by no means an exercise in raw expressionism. His nature — our paradise — is minutely calibrated.

Faith and Despair in Manila

Far Eastern Economic Review, November 24, 2001

With the Philippines once again in the grip of a political crisis, *Faith + The City*, an exhibition of works by Filipino artists, highlights themes — from poverty and corruption to Catholicism — that have haunted the republic since the turn of the century. The display, which will move from Singapore to Malaysia in January, contains more than a hundred works. Selected by curator Valentine Willie, they provide an illuminating and ultimately disturbing overview of Filipino contemporary art.

Four centuries of Hispanic influence and a wealth of baroque devotional art left by the country's Spanish colonialists have given the Philippine's one of the richest oil painting traditions in Asia. And whether consciously or not, Filipino art demonstrates technical and thematic similarities with the art of other former Spanish colonies such as Mexico and Colombia — similarities such as the classical training of the artists, the post-colonial experience of bad government, the influence of Catholicism and of vernacular subject matter and the drawing on the daily life of ordinary people. Unsurprisingly then, the shadows of the great Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco and the Colombian artist Fernando Botero seem to be lingering at the corners of this show.

Faith + The City seeks to create a sense of place, and, to a large extent, succeeds. On the one hand there is the urban squalor and congestion of Metro Manila, home to 10.2 million people. In Jeho Bitancor's *Siyesta* (1995), construction workers snatch a precarious siesta on steel beams high above the skyline. In this harsh environment, shelter and security, even food and water, are precious and elusive commodities that remain beyond the grasp of the majority of the population.

The city dehumanises. In Jerson Samson's densely-worked paintings, men and women lose their individuality. Merging into an

At a time when so much contemporary art is contemptuous of the traditional skills of drawing and painting, it's a rare pleasure to come across a show that revels in these unfashionable attributes. From the verve and fluency of the Escora brothers to painter Geraldine Javier's lightness of touch, the exhibition underlines the vitality and dynamism of one of Asia's most overlooked artistic communities.

However, the gritty and uncompromisingly challenging nature of the artworks does make one question the aptness of the exhibition's title. Perhaps *Faith + Despair* would have more accurately reflected the exhibition's tone.

of its true global prominence. We soon decided that he was 'the man of the people' and that I wasn't. Having settled that, we became fast friends.

His urban persona was a surprise to me because his paintings, by way of contrast, seemed to yearn for a pastoral, spacious time that was all reds, purples, magentas and yellows. In these early works, Hoy Cheong painted in oils — bright, vivid colours that made your eyes squint if you looked at them for too long. In retrospect, the bizarre colour palette he employed and the distorted perspectives should have alerted me to Hoy Cheong's subversive intention, unless, of course, *kampung* life really is lived on acid?

Years later and after many lunches, dinners, discussions, disagreements and *kopi O's*, he moved from the city to Kuala Kubu Bharu, an idyllic town at the foot of Fraser's Hill and an hour's drive from Kuala Lumpur. Before he moved, he told me about the big project he would be embarking on. I know I should have visited him more but our paths took us in different directions and it was a long while before I managed to make my way to Kuala Kubu Bharu to see how his work was coming along and to chat with an old friend.

To my surprise, I discovered that my friend lived on the edge of the town and that his house was in fact more of a hut alongside a set of large fish ponds. The fish ponds and houses, he explained to me, were constructed as part of an agricultural project that appeared to have been discontinued. There was an air of quiet, gentle neglect about the project and I could see he liked the slowness and peace. Knowing that he was an American graduate, I thought it must have reminded him of Thoreau and New England.

The homeliness of the location was quite at odds with the very dramatic landscape that surrounded the hut. The fish ponds occupied the full extent of the narrow valley floor. There was a small stream that gushed and burbled like all mountain streams, and hills, perpendicular and lush, that rose out from behind the house, lending a sense of splendour to the isolated spot. And yet the tranquillity

tude is central to their purpose.

Hoy Cheong has turned his back on the quiet, empty spaces that marked the most successful of his oils. In this new series, by way of contrast, no space is left undrawn. What about the issue of the absent colours? I now realise too that the works are stronger for being monochrome. Colour emotes, supplanting an intellectual response. I imagine that Hoy Cheong wants to avoid a merely emotional response to the work. He wants to force the viewer to think whilst looking.

And looking at the drawings, one is immediately impressed by the remarkable personal tale that is being told. A grandmother with fourteen children, an incapacitated mother, the continuing diaspora — all of them subjects easily suited to pathos alone. However, Hoy Cheong has expanded the reach of his work because he is also documenting the migration and assimilation of a people. Having scanned all the drawings, I realise that it is from the personal and the particular that the epic and grand is born.

It has taken me a while to put the works in their context. As far as I see it, these drawings are not about one man or one family. These drawings, whilst rooted in the personal history of the artist, are in fact a depiction of a people. These drawings are a tableau for and of the *Nanyang* (South Seas) Chinese. The artist's personal family history has acted as a prism for the entire Malaysian Chinese community — some may even argue for all migrants. Hoy Cheong is drawing and reflecting on all states of migration, transition and transformation, as if he has realised some core truth about our nation, that Malaysia is in itself a product of unending migration and that without that migration we will never be able to regenerate.

But, as I said earlier, the epic proportions (the drawings are physically large) spring from tiny family stories and incidents. Each of the figures in each of the drawings bears a relationship with somebody's ancestor. Each of the figures is a symbol or an emblem for someone we know. Whilst they are identifiable figures within

chart a series of family journeys, from his ancestors' initial arrival in Malaya to his sisters' departure for North America. It is also a reflection of all Malaysian migrant experiences. The drawings are a touchstone for so many family stories and like all family stories, there are dead-ends, lacunae and names that no one can recall and faces that are now obscured by time.

in Vientiane, Latiff dealt with a conflict, which for a few years threatened to engulf Southeast Asia in blood, exploring the tragedy through the vortex of his personal emotions:

... to-night
a storm shall blow from the north
your banks shall burst
your waters shall run red
and your current shall rage more violent
than Niagara.

"Mekong River", transl. Adibah Amin (1977).

But that was much later, and before I explain how I was able to bring sense to my understanding of the region and its art, I should be frank about my initial skepticism. In short, I went through the motions, a little bemused by the intractability of my material. I spent my time calling on artists, dealers, curators and collectors from Singapore to Manila, Ubud to Thonburi, forever haunted by a sense of the disparateness and distinctiveness of the world that I was exploring and hoping to chart.

For example, in Yangon, I had sat in the orderly, antique-crammed atelier of the soft-spoken artist, Min Wae Aung (b.1960) as he displayed his calm, effortlessly graceful if banal canvases. Sitting there sipping Burmese tea, whilst his boisterous three-year old son played on the floor, I asked myself what possible connection his work could have with the rambunctious, crowded delights of Wayan Bendi's (b.1950) Balinese cornucopia. Similarly I wondered how the exuberant almost child-like zest of Brenda Fajardo's (b.1940) densely worked paintings (with their Catholic-inspired iconography) would hang next to the lyricism and splendour of Panya Vijinthanasarn's (b.1956) *Buddha in Sustentation* (1997) or Dang Xuan Hoa's (b.1959)

And it is these themes that have become my touchstone for the region.

Among the most noteworthy of the themes were the following: the limiting and reductive definition of contemporary art employed by the art establishment, or art versus handicraft; the absorption of the western art tradition; the ongoing conflict between nationalism and modernism in art; a sense of place and rootedness; the role of religious faith and devotion; the shock of the new; the art of collecting and finally, the emergence of a Southeast Asian aesthetic language, and how Latiff Mohidin, my silent guide with his evocative *Pago Pago* series provided me with a sense of a complete entity when nothing more than fragments had existed initially.

I should say that I have set out on an unashamedly personal and subjective journey. To my mind, any understanding of what ASEAN is, or can possibly mean to us must, in the final analysis, be refracted through the prism of our own personal experiences.

ART VERSUS HANDICRAFT — THE ARTIST AND THE ARTISAN

Kuching in Sarawak forced me to rethink the distinctions that modern art had fostered on us. Was the artistry of an unidentified pua weaver or any other exponent of handicraft any less worthy than the painter at his easel? Given the magnificence of our regional textile heritage and the remarkable heights achieved in places as diverse as Lampung, Solo and Jogjakarta, why did we persist in defining our concept of art and artworks so as to exclude textiles and handicrafts?

Quietly, I had resolved this doubt by arguing in my mind that textile weaving, for example, was mechanical, lacking in personal creativity and expression. Months later, when I was shown the equally complex handiwork of Laotian weavers by the textile specialist Carol Cassady, I conceded that I had been wrong. Carol explained how

SOUTHEAST ASIA — A SYNTHESIS OF INFLUENCES LONG BEFORE THE ADVENT OF THE WEST

Long before the advent of the colonial powers, cultural themes and trends from outside the region shaped and were in turn shaped by the region's peoples. Contrary to what many people now think, the Europeans were by no means the first to affect and influence art and culture in Southeast Asia. As a consequence, traditional art forms never remained static and unchanging. The rich Progo valley and the city of Jogjakarta in central Java are a clear example of this continuing flux. Caught between the pincers of the *Abangan* and the *Santri* world views, this tiny region — a cultural treasury of sorts — dazzles a visitor with all the complexities and contradictions of Indonesian life.

On the one hand, there is the Javanese classical *wayang* or shadow play, with its characters and narratives drawn from the Hindu *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* that I enjoyed one evening in the shadows of Borobudur surrounded at all sides by jostling villagers. On the other hand, I noticed that at night there are the small mosques that ring out with the call to prayer, reminding me of Java's Islamic *pondok-pesantren* culture. Over the centuries, Java and the Javanese have embraced not only Hinduism and Buddhism but Islam as well, enveloping one after another into a seamless web of custom and belief.

Neighbouring cultures and communities inevitably influenced and shaped one another, and Southeast Asian societies were noteworthy for their porous boundaries and adaptable, syncretic cultures. New trading partners and political alliances also brought with them new ideas and techniques. For example there can be no doubt that Moghul miniature painting had a considerable influence on the art of both the Burmese Konbaung and Thai Chakri dynasties, expanding a devotional art form beyond the realms of edification into subtle social commentary. Interestingly, the Konbaung era's rich Court-

The political power and technological advances of the West undermined the credibility and confidence of many kingdoms such as Malacca and Burma. Some of the traditional court-based cultures could not withstand the onslaught. In *Sejarah Melayu*, the unknown author describes the assault of the Portuguese troops on the great Malay entrepot, Malacca in 1511:

> *And the noises of the canon was as the noises of thunder in the heavens and the flashes of fire of their guns were like flashes of lightning in the sky.*
>
> *Sejarah Melayu*, transl. C.C. Brown, 1970.

With so many clear and at times shocking instances of European might and intransigence, it was perhaps unsurprising that artists and writers would seek to emulate and copy European styles and practices. In the 1800s in particular, as the Europeans cemented their stranglehold on much of Southeast Asia, their authority was unmatched.

Raden Saleh (1816–1880) and Juan Luna (1857–1899) stand out from this period, predating as they did the inception of local art institutions. Perhaps as a result, their work is marked by an excessive slavishness to western ideals and subjects, a slavishness that was only to be overcome by later generations of artists.

The Javanese aristocrat Raden Saleh was one of the very first to be schooled in the western academic tradition. In many way his vast, flamboyant canvases and their equally grand African-inspired themes, such as *A Head of a Lion* (1843) reflect both his cosmopolitan personality and exposure that included a five-year stay at the court of Ernst I, Grand Duke of Saxon Coburg-Gotha. Some might even argue that the sheer grandeur and imperiousness of his works (and especially his portraiture) were an ironic comment of a Java that was yoked under brutalities of the harsh Dutch administration and its

Inguimberty (1896–1971) were asked in 1925 to set up Hanoi's Ecole des Beaux Arts. The ethos of the two schools differed quite considerably in that Ferocci was less willing than Tardieu to expose his charges to the vigours of western art, preferring to school them in a more academic and traditional approach. Inguimberty, perhaps drawing on Paris' explosion of creativity, encouraged a more emotional and romantic approach that commensurated with a quest for poetic realism.

On the eve of my return to Malaysia, I was reminded of all three art teachers when the Laotian sculptor and art instructor Bounthanh Sommany talked of designer and art teacher, Marc Le Guay. We were touring Vientiane's National School of Fine Arts, stopping for a minute to gaze up at a three-panel Laotian diorama executed by Le Guay that was hung above the administrative offices — a diorama that the French artist had turned into a treasury of Laotian symbols.

Hanoi's Ecole des Beaux Arts was to produce Vietnam's most prominent artists. Men such as the driven and dynamic To Ngoc Van (1906–1954) and Nguyen Tu Nghiem (b.1922) stand out to this day. Nguyen Sang (1921–1988), despite his well-known fracas with Inguimberty, was a major talent. His work ranged across many different genres with equal confidence. His *Portrait of Mrs Lam* is both subtle and understated in the way it presents the *chatelaine* of Café Lam to the world — imbuing her with all the calm, dignity and intelligence of a society lady and reminding me of Picasso's famous portrait of Gertrude Stein.

However, the strong academic training that formed the basis for many of the artists of this period engendered a vision of the world that could at times seem overly contrived and naive. The works of the University of Philippines-trained Fernando Amorsolo (1892–1972) presented an idealised Philippines — a rural idyll of bathing beauties and contented farm workers — quite at odds with the poverty and squalor of the vast sugar-growing *estancias* of negros. Even after an extensive tour of Europe sponsored by a scion of the wealthy

asserts the extent to which the 'cult' of the individual painter, artist and 'master' had superseded and supplanted the silent, unknown artisan. Standing in front of his easel, in an elegant, rather foppish gown and palette in hand, the artist has become a gentleman — a figure in society and an authority in his own right.

NATIONALISM VERSUS MODERNISM

As more and more artists were trained in colleges and schools of art across the region, they also became increasingly aware of the intellectual and political trends sweeping much of Asia in the '20s and '30s. The cry for independence that was led by men such as Gandhi and Sun Yat Sen was taken up by artists and writers across the region. As Neil Jamieson says of Vietnam during the same decades:

> *... a new, westernised, individualistic poetry exploded... entirely displacing traditional forms and content. Similar changes took place in short stories and novels, in newspapers, and in historical writings.*
>
> *The Evolving Context of Contemporary Vietnamese Painting*, Siam Society, 1996.

In Indonesia and Vietnam in particular, the fervency of the struggle for Independence permeated and invigorated the entire society. Years later in the 1960s, the Indonesian *Manikebu*, or Cultural Manifesto, drafted by the ideologue Sudjojono exemplified the didactic and political imperatives that many felt should propel art and culture, that "culture is part of the battle to improve man's living conditions." In aesthetic and philosophical terms, the challenge left artists with a tussle that remains as pertinent today as it was then.

As artists began to assume a more pronounced and considered role in society (prefigured by U Ba Nyan's stylish self-portrait), the

According to prevailing art historical lore, the two artists' trip to Bali was to resolve these dilemmas and reinvigorate both their colour palettes and their passion for painting. There is no doubt that the island captivated them with its beauty and exoticism. Enraptured by Bali, both men painted with renewed vigour — witness Soo Pieng's *Tropical Life* (1959) and Wen Hsi's *Whales* (c.1960). But I should add that their much-vaunted trip has perhaps been over-hyped, to the detriment of the work they completed at home. I say this because their approach to Bali's sultry charms reminded me, having read Edward Said's *Orientalism*, of gentlemen artists such as Delacroix who when visiting the harems and baths of Algiers and Tunis sought merely to distance themselves from and isolate the unusual and different, without really understanding or comprehending their subjects.

In Indonesia, the struggle for independence unleashed a torrent of politically-charged creativity that continues to dwarf the nation's present artists much as the poetry of Chairil Anwar with its avowed cry for personal freedom shocked and enlivened Jakarta's intellectual circles. In the midst of these troubled years, a trio of artists were able to reconcile the tussle between modernity and nationalism, creating in turn some of the most impressive paintings in the region as well as a new and yet intrinsically Javanese aesthetic language of painting.

Hendra Gunawan (1918–1983), S. Sudjojono (1913–1986) and Affandi (1907–1990) drew on the energy and turbulence of the times. Prompted by their political consciousness, all three men portrayed a world of peddlers, prostitutes, farmers and workers — their vision was diametrically opposed to the world of Amorsolo or Dato' M. Hoessein Enas (1924–1995). *Harvesting Tobacco* (1962) perhaps reflects their greater emphasis on the need for truth in art and other more ideological imperatives.

Filipino art also experienced a period of radical change as the *faux* gentility of Amorsolo was further lambasted by a new breed of

extraordinary ability to reinvent and distort colour and line for emotional effect — turning a lurid green swirl into a finger and a blue dot into an eye. Seemingly anarchic, Hendra's work contains its own artistic verities. Rambunctious and earthy, he possesses a lofty disdain for the qualities so highly praised by the Javanese *priyayi* elite of *halus* and *kebatinan* — delicacy, breeding and decorum.

Both Hendra and Affandi were bold and daring in the face of artistic strictures. This courage was as revolutionary as the times they lived in. I would not hesitate to label the two men as giants of the region's art world. Moreover, both men also managed to resolve the twin and often conflicting pulls of modernity and nationalism with bravura and style. Looking at their work with its raw expressionism, one is left somehow with a sense of their sheer recklessness. Too busy to pontificate, they painted, and in painting they created the most compelling visual language that their island home and their people had ever seen.

A SENSE OF PLACE AND ROOTEDNESS

With each pit stop on my travels I found myself switching gear and slipping into the pattern of life in that community. In Bali, for example, I Wayan Bendi's Ubud became my Ubud. Whereas, in the Philippines, the frenetic, ear-splitting cacophony of the artist's cooperative *Sanggawa* 's tumultuous canvases became my Manila.

But a question began to haunt me: Had any of the artists captured their world, their homes and their dreams in their art? As I traipsed through Ubud from gallery to gallery, passing ATMs, padi fields and women bearing offerings, I felt myself falling into a world where the divide between art and life was hard to discern. Gazing from the terrace outside Pak Neka Suteja's museum across emerald green padi fields, as the man himself in full Balinese regalia threw up his arms in his casually flamboyant manner, I wondered what it

'root' his art in his cultural environment just as Hendra Gunawan, Affandi (witness his *Ibuku*) and Sudjojono had done in Indonesia. These works have a direct parallel with Degas' work amongst Parisian ballerinas and Toulouse-Lautrec's amongst the café singers of Montmartre. Evoking a popular and essentially 'low' art form, the artist reached out beyond the conventional confines of the art world as he followed the actors behind the screens and stages, and into their changing rooms.

Similarly in Malaysia and in the Philippines, Anita Magsaysay-Ho (b.1914) and Dzulkifli Buyong (b.1948) concentrated their attention on rural, small-town ethos — working and reworking the same themes over a period of decades . In delicate works such as *Hantu* (1984), Dzulkifli recreated the intimately observed world of a small child, shot through with a sense of foreboding and threat. In *Harvest* (c.1956), Anita evoked the semi-rural world of barrios.

Colour, by way of comparison, is Srihardi Soedarsono's (b.1931) point of reference. Bright, glaring blocks of colour — reds, white, yellows and blues anchor the viewer in the *nusantara*. Strangely, Srihardi is one of the very few artists in the region who has captured the glare of the harsh midday sun — and the way it bleaches colour from the surroundings. Floating above these blocks of colour in the painting *Dua Penari* (1975) are isolated figures, dancers in the main, who act as a counterpoint to the expanse of pure colour, their scale somehow perplexing to the eye.

Just as Srihardi explored the spirit of place in terms of colour, artists such as Vietnam's Nguyen Trung (b.1940), much like Latiff, conjured up a monochromatic world where shapes and forms were juxtaposed in a gentle painterly fashion that reminds one of the Indonesian artist Ahmad Sadali's (1924–1987) work. Hovering midway between the two is Tran Luu Han (b.1928), whose work, whilst discernibly in homage of the great Phai, is a marriage of colour and form in the most tradition of abstract expressionism.

No artist, seemingly, could have been more different from

from the Buddhist Jataka.

With their extremely public role, many of these murals were viewed as an amalgam of all things Thai, Laotian or Burmese. Their flat, unmodulated surfaces, devoid of shading and perspective but arrayed in gold and labyrinthine in composition, became another avenue for artists seeking to capture that elusive national spirit. The same process could also be the case in the Philippines with its strong Catholic iconographic tradition. The Virgin Mary, Christ on the Cross and the stories of the Bible are symbols of both spiritual and national identity. There is no division of church and state in the Philippines — the two had become intertwined in the national psyche. Brenda Fajardo exemplifies this in the way she synthesises Catholicism with native Filipino myths in her gorgeously detailed paintings.

In Thailand, Silpakorn University actually set up a Department of Traditional Thai Art and thereby encouraged the artists to acquaint themselves with these art forms. However, sitting in art historian Somporn Rodboon's crowded office, jam-packed with glossy art catalogues that tumbled on the floor as I tried to look at them, it seemed hard to reconcile the MTV-coolness of the student body outside with a school of Thai traditional art. Despite my quiet confusion, she assured me that the quest for Thai identity as exemplified by Thai ideologue Sulak Sivaraksa was still very much a force.

The work of the neo-traditionalist school led by Panya Vijinthanasarn (b.1956) and Chalermchai Kositpipat (b.1955) attempted to update a centuries-old mural painting tradition — just as the unnamed mural artists of the past had incorporated new themes and styles in the murals in Wat Suthat. With their famous joint commission at the London Thai Buddhist temple of Wat Buddhapadipa (1984–87), the two men expanded upon the motifs they had been schooled in at Silpakorn University. The extraordinary appeal of both men's work in Thailand is testament to the power of such icons as symbol of faith and nationalism.

Panya's depiction in the *Defeat of the Mara* juxtaposed the con-

His Son (1997), both the Buddha's palm and the sole of his feet are studded with a host of traditional Burmese motifs and zodiac symbols. Once again the boundary between what is art and what is devotion is unclear. Fascinated by the intermingling of Buddhism and traditional folklore in the form of spirits called *nats*, his work is chockfull of interpretations. Min Wae Aung's paintings are as spare as M.P.P. Wei Myint's are packed.

Islam's clear prohibition on the figurative has resulted in many Muslim artists — from Indonesia's Ahmad Sadali and Malaysia's Sulaiman Esa (b.1941) through to Syed Ahmad Jamal (b.1929) — working with the abstract. Not all have been successful. In the case of Sulaiman Esa and Syed Ahmad Jamal, a robust understanding of the conceptual and the aesthetic foundations of abstraction have given their work greater force — especially in their exploration of Islamic themes and motifs, many of which appear to be based on the triangle.

Interestingly, the *Gunung Ledang* series that has preoccupied Syed Ahmad in recent years may have a symbolic throwback to Buddhist or animistic symbolism in that the stupa is itself a symbol of the mystical Mount Meru. As such, mountains recur in many works as a focus for devotion and power. Nonetheless, abstraction has come to predominate Malaysian art, with Latiff Mohidin becoming the leading proponent.

Religious faith continues to underscore a great deal of Southeast Asian art. This distinguishes it from much contemporary European and North American art which has largely ignored the role of faith. How regional artists will develop their art with its predominantly western focus on self-expression alongside the more conformist nature of these faiths remains to be seen. Certainly the centrality of devotional themes in all our art is also matched by the paucity of paintings that delve into the intimate, private world of human love and emotion.

The politicisation of art has long been a regional reality. Sudjojono and To Ngoc Van have never recoiled from didactic intentions. Present-day artists are similarly upfront, with Wong Hoy Cheong (b.1960), Truong Tan (b.1963), Nirmala Shanmughalingam (b.1941) and Vasan Sitthiket (b.1957) amongst the most assertive and at times shocking — witness the Sitthiket's *Sinners are Monks who...* (1991) and its scathing comment on religious hypocrisy. The vast tapestry of references Hoy Cheong presents in his *Nanyang* Chinese odyssey, a series entitled *Migrants* (1996), accords with the postmodernist reality where all influences large or small are valid. His earlier, less didactic canvases such as *Fear of Falling, Joy of Flying* (1985) manages quite gracefully to interweave politics and art without lapsing into bleakness.

Having said that, one of the region's most brilliant artists — and perhaps its bleakest, at least superficially — is Filipino Ang Kiukok (b.1931). His scabrous nightmare of a Manila being ripped apart by wild dogs is disturbing, to say the least. However, a measure of humanity and salvation is afforded by the aesthetic process by which these angular, cubist forms are created on the canvas. Much like Latiff, whose singularity of vision he more than matches, Kiukok's is an architectonic art form that one can construct and deconstruct in like manner.

Not all young artists have reacted to the postmodernist future in like fashion. For every Chatchai Puipia (b.1964), Agnes Arellano (b.1949) and Dadang Christanto (b.1957) with their gruesome vision of the present, there are countless artists who have seen both release and sustenance in their cultural and spiritual heritage. Hanoi's 'Gang of Five' lace their works with a more humanist, gentle touch. Both Ha Tri Hieu (b.1959) and Hong Viet Dung (b.1962) yearn for a future that incorporates Vietnam's rural traditions in a tranquil, almost rustic fashion.

THE ART OF PATRONAGE

As I passed fro one country to another, I was to be hosted by two almost separate sections of society. On the one hand there were the artists, who, like all artists, tended to live rather ramshackle lives. Or else there were the art historians, dealers and younger collectors, some of whom collected art catalogues because that was all they could afford. On the other hand, there were a succession of rather grand homes and enthusiastic patrons who would whisk me through their collections personally rather than allow anyone else the pleasure of display and ownership. The interest and knowledge I displayed would soon be matched by an unfailing generosity.

From Yusuf Wanandi's magnificent mansion in Jakarta Selatan with its vast cross-section of Indonesian art to Paulino Que's incredible treasury of the very best of Filipino art, P.G. Lim and her heirlooms and Lim Chong Keat with his beagles, his palm leaves and his Balinese paintings, I soon began to realise that being a collector and patron was in itself a bit of an art.

In much of the rest of Southeast Asia, political realities under the colonial powers resulted in a diminution of the traditional rulers' authority. As the powers of patronage were curbed, artists who had once depended on royal patronage were forced to make do by selling their work to the new colonial masters or the emerging elite of local businessmen and administrators. Understandably, this altered the kind of art that was created and commissioned with a very substantial increase in paintings and drawings for the 'tourist' trade.

In many countries such as Myanmar and Indonesia, sizable communities of artists could be supported on this source of business. However, it wasn't until the wave of independence that a real culture of collecting began to pervade the traditional elites. The bourgeoisie with their love of finery, slowly began to appreciate the attractions of art, having in the past preferred traditional artifacts or carvings. Most tended to gravitate towards the less challenging works

Not all collectors were as socially well-connected and wealthy as Princess Chumbhot. In the Hanoi of the war years, perhaps the most important collector was the owner of a small coffee shop, Café Lam, not far from the Hoan Kiem Lake. Nguyen van Lam traded his rich, oily coffee for paintings, sustaining an impoverished Bui Xuan Phai amongst many other artists. Even today the musty, darkened interior of the coffee shop seems to be haunted by the presence of young, 'tortured' souls — neophyte artists in search of inspiration.

The role of collectors in the region shouldn't be underestimated. As the documentation around our art becomes more comprehensive, it will be interesting to trace the patterns of collecting. Has, for example, the art followed the money, as it has in Europe and North America? What do patrons do with their collections as they grow older and how will the corporate collectors marshal their substantial resources in the years to come? Social trends reveal themselves remarkably clearly through the art world, and the steely smiles of the international auctioneers reflect their present contentment with the healthiness of regional markets.

That does not mean that people will not buy the esoteric avant-garde work. They do. At an exhibition in Kuala Lumpur given by a young artist of the future called I-Lann Yee (b. 1970), I watched Gen-Xers in ponytails, wielding handphones and scratching their goatees before buying the pieces. Similarly in Indonesia, the wry but challenging creations emanating from Jogja's premier gallery, Cemeti, were snapped up by appreciative art lovers.

In Bangkok, over lunch with MR Sukhumbhand Paribatra at Suan Pakkad Palace, I met another young artist-turned-curator called Maymay Jumsai. The daughter of iconoclastic architect Sumet Jumsai, she had just returned from that citadel of shock, Goldsmiths College in London, assuring me rather firmly that it was the idea in art that was important, not the act of painting — beside which she was looking to hire someone to paint. Sophistication, I soon realised, was a

Returning to Kuala Lumpur, my head spinning with paintings and interviews, I resolved to make some sense of what I had seen and heard. In an attempt to clear my head, I turned to Latiff's notebooks, *The Line from Point to Point*, and rediscovered that he too, had made his fabulous trek across the region some thirty years before. He had travelled for months on end as if impelled to find the artistic and cultural parallels that could link the *nusantara* (the archipelago) with the mainland Southeast Asia, Sri Vijaya and the Champas, Islam and Buddhism.

His search had been successful because he had wanted it to be successful. He had opened himself up to his environment, he had talked and joked, drawn and composed poetry. As he had worked, he had stumbled across his personal interpretation of the world around him — developing a way of seeing that opened up a host of associations. His aesthetic approach was one that spanned mere boundaries of time, place, language, religion and class — realising that we would never be able to achieve even the merest fragment of unity if we dwelt overlong on these divisive forces.

Latiff's example made me realise that a regional vision such as his required a deliberate decision to broaden your world view. His act of opening himself up to both nature and people had allowed him to make sense, at least for him, of the region. A willingness to see had to precede the act of 'seeing'. And, in seeing, one would inevitably begin to discern many more threads linking our remarkable region ever closer. Thus, in order for me to succeed in drawing the parallels that exist across ASEAN, I too was required to open my eyes, my ears and my heart.

Also By Karim Raslan

Ceritalah: Malaysia in Transition

"Elegant and educated." — V.S. Naipaul

"Work that breathes fire and ice over Malaysian experiences"
— Business Times Malaysia

The limousine-chauffeured *tai-tai* in Kuala Lumpur. The Penang hunter on the banks of the Baram river. The *pak haji* in Kota Bharu. Who is the real Malaysian of today? What are his hopes, his desires, his fears? Most of all, what does it mean to be Malaysian?

In *Ceritalah: Malaysia in Transition*, Karim Raslan probes and explores the psyche of a changing nation as it hurtles its way through both history and economics. Crisscrossing the country, he asks the vital questions that need to be asked and points to the many inconsistencies that still exist in present-day Malaysia. Always personal, always thoughtful, *Ceritalah* is a measured and insightful guide to an Asian dragon now redefining its role as the fulcrum of Asia.

Heroes and Other Stories

Karim Raslan paints a vivid and compelling portrait of modern-day Malaysia in his first collection of short stories. Equipped with a keen sense of irony and black humour, Karim picks his way through a brittle, edgy social whirl. Charged with a mixture of eroticism and psychological insight and propelled by a cast of unforgettable characters, *Heroes* delves deep into Malaysia's gritty landscape. From the privileged socialite in Kuala Lumpur to the disgruntled planters in eastern Sabah, Karim trudges through a world where the gap between the glittering, seductive surface and grubby reality can be terrifyingly vast.