



Singapore Preview Exhibition at The Luxe Art Museum

HENRY BUTCHER ART AUCTIONEERS IN SINGAPORE

Malaysia's entry into the regional art auction market through auction house Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers will spur development of the secondary market in Malaysian art industry and raise its profile.

Such is the observance of many who turned up recently at Henry Butcher's Singapore preview of its coming auction, showcasing 22 selected works. Some 50 people attended the opening officiated by the Malaysian High Commissioner, Dato' Mohd. Hussin Nayan. The preview had earlier toured Kuala Lumpur and Penang.

The inclusion of Singaporean pioneer artists (who were part of Malaya before 1965) this time around, has created a potential for more synergetic exchanges between Singapore and Malaysia, and there has been a lot of interest in Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi and Liu Kang, all of whom made a historical trip to Bali in 1952 that has been credited as part of the genesis of the Nanyang Style.

The auction house's decision to stage a preview across the border for the very first time this year proved to be fruitful as it yielded in a healthy dose of enquiries from Singaporean collectors, some of whom have already registered for telephone bidding, while others expressed interests to be present at the Kuala Lumpur auction on the day itself. Not surprisingly, many of the registered phone bidders are eyeing not only works by Singaporean artists, but also those of Malaysian artists.

Although Singapore boasts of being the regional centre for art auction houses such as Sotheby's, Christie's, Borobudur and Larasati, the accent is more on Indonesian and China contemporary artists. Thus many Singaporean collectors who were present at the preview

welcomed Henry Butcher's foray into their land as they could easily identify with Malaysian art due to the two countries' close ties, history and shared heritage.

There were also institutional interests in the works, particularly Soo-Pieng's 1952 watercolour, Rubbish Dump. The Henry Butcher art auction scheduled for June 19 is the only one dedicated exclusively to Malaysian art. Its debut last year was widely acclaimed as being the first and only professionally-run art auction in the country, grossing RM1.7 million, (doubled the pre-sale estimates).

This year's auction will be held at the MAP@Publika in Solaris Dutamas on June 19, with a total of 104 works up for bidding.

At the last HB auction, some 82% of the lots were sold, with the top grosser being a vintage 1969 work by Ibrahim Hussein, which went for a record RM500,500.

This year, the red ticket item is a rare 1968 Pago-Pago oil on canvas by Latiff Mohidin, entitled Pago-Pago Forms. It was bought by an American diplomat in Bangkok and is now back on Malaysian soil. It has a price estimate of RM280,000- RM350,000. **HB**



Guests viewing auction's feature masterpiece
Rise Above It (2008) by Datuk Ibrahim Hussein.



(left to right) HBArt Director Mr. Lim Eng Chong,
Malaysian High Commissioner Dato' Mohd. Hussin Nayan,
HBM Honourary Chairman Tan Sri Kamal Hashim,
HBArt Director Mr. Vincent Sim.

Singapore Preview Exhibition opening night.



MALAYSIAN ART: APPRECIATION & CRITIQUE

16 APRIL 2011

Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers in its efforts to promote the art industry besides establishing auctions to provide a transparent platform and an avenue for collectors, galleries and others in the art world to buy and sell their works, is also collaborating with Petronas Art Gallery in organising Public Art Programmes 2011 to rouse interest among the general public. The first of this series examined the appreciation and critique of art, with focus on Malaysian Art.

Art is indeed a very subjective matter; similar to beauty where it lies mainly on the eyes of the beholder. Each and every one of us respond differently towards art without any rational reasons. Art appreciation, on a personal level, is a form of an opinion towards art where it is purely based on instinct and preferences whereas art criticism is a formal way of responding to a particular artwork based on one's knowledge of history, psychology, sociology and philosophy. An art critique needs to be well-equipped with art knowledge, background and experience because criticism plays an important role in determining the image and credibility of a painter. There is no good or bad critique because every critique has a different function in developing and influencing the art scene.

As described by Professor Dr. Zakaria Ali, modern Malaysian art found its way into our society through a few books which became pioneers in realizing the potential of the Malaysian art scene. *The Art of Malaya* by Tony Binnish is the earliest art book published in Malaysia, which was followed by Dolores D. Walton in 1970s, author of *Contemporary Artist of Malaysia*, a biographical compilation of Malaysian artists such as Dato' Chuah Thean Teng and Dzulkifli Buyong. From these, it can be seen that the early connoisseurs of Malaysian art were foreigners who were more artistically knowledgeable in arts education and knowledge, in comparison to the Malaysian society which was then focused on the nation's economic development.

In 1980s, the local art scene in Malaysia had started to pick up its pace with more involvement from local institutions and artists. More books on Malaysian Art entered the market due to the growing number of universities and college offering art and art history courses. The National Art Gallery published *Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia* in conjunction with an exhibition of Malaysian artworks in the Asia Pacific Museum in Pasadena, California where many of our best artworks were exhibited there. In the same era, Abdul Latiff Mohidin, a renowned artist and poet, popularly known as Latiff, published *Garis* in



PANEL (left to right): Mr. Lee Khai, Prof. Tony Godfrey, Pn. Zanita Anuar (moderator) and Prof. Dr. Zakaria Ali.

1988 which revealed the inner works of his creative drive from basic live sketches to complete oil paintings.

The formation of a group of artists called *Anak Alam* was led by Latiff whose *Pago- Pago* paintings helped loosen the division between theatre and paintings, and poetry and prose. Works from Long Thien Shih and Redza Piyadasa also emerged in the 70s art scene. The 80s saw the rise of artists such as Nirmala Shanmughalingam who used multimedia art and commentary scenes from the 1970s as her inspiration.

Penang, rich in living heritage, history and culture, has become a major art centre in Malaysia due to the increasing number of talented artists emerging the local art scene. Lee Khai, practising lawyer and avid art lover, shares his special taste for Penang artists by presenting a selection of 39 prominent names in the Penang art scene. Although a few of them were not Penang born, their contributions to local art "qualify" them as Penangites.

Latiff, a famous Penang painter made his mark in the national art scene by having his work made into stamps. Khoo Sui Hoe's artwork saw the beginning of monumental art in Malaysia and until now, he is still an active painter. Another prominent name, Dr Chew Teng Beng was instrumental in setting up the Fine Arts department in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), which has turned into a major art centre in Malaysia.

Penang saw the emergence of great watercolourists such as the late Tan Choon Ghee, Khalil Ibrahim, James Sum and many others. This medium is synonymous with the use of watercolour as a part of Penang tradition and culture of the art scene.

Among the young artists from Penang mentioned are Chan Kok Hooi, Khoo Cheang Jin, a protégé of the late Tan Choon Ghee, Soon Lai Wai and others. These young artists flourished due to the efforts by 'vintage' artists in the 20th century, whose presence secured Penang a foothold in the local and international art scene.

Professor Tony Godfrey examined the Malaysian art scene from a regional point of view where he analyse its engagement and disengagement with the rest of the region. Art needs to be appreciated globally, not just from a preferred region or country because there might be a biased tendency towards exhibitions spanning from a specific region or area. This has become a real concern where



Q&A session

curators are not able to display artworks from around the world within the same space without partitioning the artworks based on its country of origin.

Tony claimed that his understanding of the Malaysian art is limited as he gathers it through what he sees as an outsider. Compared to other countries, it is observed that very few Malaysian artists are featured in international auction houses, exhibitions and other significant art events.

Wong Hoy Cheong is the most exhibited artist outside Malaysia. His work portraying Malaysia as the colonial power received positive response from the West. Malaysian Art is under-represented due to an issue of 'speaking of others' where we are represented by others and not by ourselves. Because of this, local artists could lose their identity if they do not speak for themselves.

Many fail to realise that art has been a big part of our daily lives. In Malaysia, art education is taught at every level of education from pre-school to tertiary level. However, art itself is not the main subject in the society. It is still considered as the underdog in the mainstream popular culture.

To move the Malaysian art scene forward, the public needs to be more aware of the current art trends and culture. It is important to engage the new generation from a young age to nurture their interest and knowledge in order to cultivate more Malaysian artists in the future. It is never too late to learn art as knowledge can be found and gathered easily through reading materials, art exhibitions and public talks. However, the key art players in the industry, such as artists, galleries, collectors and auction houses need to do their part in promoting and creating awareness among Malaysians, and transforming our art landscape forward to new heights and dimensions. **HB**

ART: THE NEW ASSET CLASS IN MALAYSIA

14 MAY 2011

The second of its series examined the topic 'Art: The New Asset Class in Malaysia', brought together authorities on the subject, namely, Ambassador Dato' N. Parameswaran, CEO of Iskandar Investment, Singapore, Phil Whitaker, Director of Sotheby's Institute of Art, Singapore, Professor Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Director of Museum & Gallery Tuanku Fauziah, USM, Richard Koh, Founder of Richard Koh Fine Art and guest moderator, Suryani Senja Alias, Founder & Managing Director of Cult.

Art is observed as the expression of imagination and creative skill which is usually translated into a visual form such as paintings and sculptures, among others. It is appreciated for its beauty and power in revoking emotion as it often relies on symbolic significance but what about its monetary value? The following article is an abstract of the various views and exchanges made during the forum from not only the art experts but also members of the public.

Director of Sotheby's Institute of Art, Phil Whitaker, tackled this absorbing topic of discussion by presenting a graph chart on the risk and return of art investment by using data collected from January 1976 to December 2004. The chart showed that art investment was divided into three categories – US art, UK art and general art. The chart indicated that US art had the greatest return and a greater variability compared to the other groups with a little over 8% on the average annual return and 14% average annual return standard deviation. Whereas, UK art had about 5% average annual return and an even lesser reliability than US art as its average annual return standard deviation was 9%. The average annual return for general art was 7% and showed 13% average annual return standard deviation.

These statistics can be justified by taking into consideration that art has low liquidity. Some may even go so far as to say that art is illiquid, opaque and unregulated. Phil Whitaker cited Picasso's *Nude, Green Leaves and Bust* as an example. The 1932 work of art is a depiction of the painter's mistress and often-time subject which fetched a record-breaking price of \$106.5 million in 2010. The concern when it comes to liquidity of art as an asset class is that if and when the current owner of the painting wishes to sell it, there would be the arduous task of looking for a buyer willing to top the price that it was bought for inclusive of the administrative, insurance, storage as well as conservation costs during the time of which the artwork was in the care of the owner.

When looking to invest in art, one must be aware of its low transparency in the market. Price assessment is a thorny issue as there is a high asymmetric relationship with the information given out in auctions. Potential buyers are strongly urged to do their due diligence and research the works of artists – be it their educational background, their

PANEL (left to right): Pn. Suryani Senja Alias (moderator), Mr. Phil Whitaker, Associate Prof. Hasnul Saidon, Mr. Richard Koh and Ambassador Dato' N. Parameswaran.



promotional representatives, as well as the location of works displayed, and most importantly, the quality of the artwork. Richard Koh, the founder of Richard Koh Fine Art shared his personal experience concerning artworks which were showcased excessively and how the value of these works are deemed as less valuable due to the mere fact that the artist's work is heralded as common and not exclusive. This form of promotion greatly affects the artist's career.

More often than not, the decision to purchase an artwork lies deeply rooted in its appeal to the beholder but in the case of art investment, beauty alone may not be enough. One must seek art pieces which have strong symbolic significance – even better still, cultural icons as they capture our invaluable heritage and culture and are able to withstand the test of time. Art buyers were strongly advised not to purchase fashionable or trendy works

collection is a specialized one which gravitates towards periodic representation of modern Malaysian art rather than representation of selected major artists. This approach led MGTf's art collection to be recognized internationally by scholars and researchers as one of the most valuable and momentous collections of modern Malaysian art in the region as it signifies the socio-cultural uniqueness of Malaysia then and now. This purchasing behavior has resulted in an exponential growth in the market value of the artworks in MGTf's collection. With art investment in mind, the foresight of the Museum can be seen as an inspiration to keen art investors in order for them to garner a profitable purchase.

In summary, art is not deemed as a popular form of short-term investment as it does not repeatedly generate a steady income flow, especially when the buyer has not invested in works which appreciate in value. The task of determining the price appreciation of an artwork is a challenge in itself as its valuation defies financial logic. While some work of art appreciate considerably over a short course of time, it is oftentimes difficult to uphold a



Audience listening to speakers' presentations.

Q&A session



of art which lose their appeal very rapidly. Richard Koh and Phil Whitaker shared the same opinion pertaining to this matter; quoting that 30-40% of artists featured in art auction houses significantly lose their popularity within the time frame of 5 years.

Another reason to purchase good quality artwork is that it holds high residual value. Professor Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Director for Museum and Gallery Tuanku Fauziah (MGTf), University Sains Malaysia (USM) revealed that the University's art gallery acquired art on a selective basis. MGTf's

positive rate of return in the long run. Yet those who have achieved profit by investing in art constantly stress on the importance of investing in high-quality art. Dato' N. Parameswaran, who owns a remarkable collection of over 3,000 artworks, is one of them. Studies prove that return in art investment definitely surpassed fixed incomes, though it falls short of performance when weighed against equities. For that reason, it is safe to say that investing in art is a viable option depending on the quality of the works purchased.



CARING FOR YOUR ART COLLECTION

11 JUNE 2011

Conservation is defined as the study of preservation and restoration of cultural objects of significance for the future generation. The third and final of its series, titled *Caring For Your Art Collection*, aimed to create awareness among the public on the importance of preserving this important element of cultural heritage.

Collections and Conservation Manager at Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery, Josephine Atkinson highlighted five main threats to artworks from both modern and contemporary eras, which are weather, light, pollution, biology and humans. Each threat imposes peculiar effects on the artworks and requires different counter act strategies. She stressed that an artwork is constantly changing, revolving and adapting to an environment in reaching stability to survive.

Threats coming from weather are our hostile humidity and climate where the level of heat and water in the environment can cause the canvas to expand and contract, thus causing the paint layer to crack. Visible and ultraviolet lights cause the artwork to respond constantly on a chemical level where organic paints are fading continuously due to exposure to excessive light. Furthermore, artworks may react when exposed to pollutants such as gases, dusts, chemicals and many more. Biological threats from moulds and insects could forever alter the aesthetic value of an art piece as they could easily stain the artwork. We as humans are also a potential threat through unfortunate events such as accidents and clumsiness.

The most important strategy one could consider is to think carefully before purchasing artworks. If proper analysis and studies are done before purchasing, the tedious and at times costly process of restoration may be avoided. Minimal cracks, fading and foxing can be acceptable on older masterpieces as indication of age and authenticity. However, these marks may interfere with the appreciation of high contrast contemporary works and it reflects the poor condition the works have been kept under.

Head of Conservation Department of Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, Aristotelis Sakellariou touched on preventive conservation methods which aimed to create an appropriate environment for the stability and safety of artworks. He stressed on the importance of keeping the ideal amount of light, temperature and humidity when storing artworks while eliminating pollutants, disasters and invasive living organisms are also equally crucial.

Aristotelis provided informed advice on how to handle and transport artworks properly. For instance, inspection of the artwork should be practiced before transporting by taking photographs and making records of the object's detailed descriptions so that in case of any misfortune, claims could be made easier. In addition, gloves should always be used for handling and moving artworks – never use bare hands as they might transfer unwanted pollutants and bacteria that could be damage the objects. Artworks need to be handled properly from the base and not by the projecting member where it could easily break due to unbalanced weight.

As mentioned by Aristotelis, living organisms such as pests, insects and microorganisms are the culprits in damaging artworks. One must make sure that the spaces around the artworks are clean and dry because these detrimental organisms are easily attracted to dust and damp area. If infestation occurs, a few alternatives treatments such as low oxygen content, freezing and poisons can be done to stop it from worsening.

Lawrence Chin, a conservation expert from The Conservation Studio in Singapore, introduced conservation techniques such as Interventive Conservation, Preventive Conservation and Formative Conversation. Before conservation is done it is most important to do a technical examination of the object and analyse it in details. After identifying the problem, a conservation proposal would follow, listing out the most suitable treatments for the damages. Then, a thorough analysis is done where the proposed treatment is implemented. However, as new damages and problems arise, different methods or treatments may be added on an ad-hoc basis to ensure the efficiency of the process.

According to Lawrence, art conservation stands by three main principles; stability, minimal intervention and reversibility. The function of stability is to ensure that the condition of the painting is stable and will not deteriorate further. In the restoration process, the losses are disguised but with minimal intervention; for instance a dot of paint will be replaced with a dot of paint only. The last principle of reversibility or re-treatability stands on the concept that any restoration that is done can be undone by the future generation with the advancement of technology, skills and knowledge which may very well surpass the current conservation techniques.

Conservation framer WinSon Loh from PINKGUY, who has been in the industry for nearly three decades, shared his trade secrets of conservation framing. Due to Malaysia's hostile weather and environment, conventional framing techniques such as framing with chipboard, foam board or ply wood is not able to stop humidity from entering the frame while the standard mat boards material that contains acidic elements could further damage the paintings. Similarly, the standard glue, water-based tape or masking tape has irreversible damaging effects. To counter these problems, PINKGUY came up with solutions of using corrugated plastic boards and hard PVC tapes with natural rubber adhesives. The corrugated plastic board is extremely lightweight, waterproof, and more durable than the conventional framing materials.

For general art care, WinSon advised collectors to service their frames every five years to ensure that they are in good condition. He also mentioned that the right way to carry an artwork is by supporting the bottom area and the side of the frame. Furthermore, frames need to be cleaned regularly as dust contains a large amount of airborne mould spores. He advised never to spray cleaning glass solution directly onto the surface of the glass; instead apply the liquid onto a cloth first before cleaning the frame.

Artworks are delicate and precious objects to its collector and artist. One must conserve their art collection in order to preserve its value and condition so that the next generation get to witness and appreciate these significant cultural objects. The knowledge gained from this talk can be practised by private collectors, galleries and even museums. Always remember that prevention is better than cure. **HB**



Josephine stressed the need for collectors to treat artworks like living objects that are constantly interacting with its surrounding environment.