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# Focus on environment



LUCIEN DE GUISE

IT seems that the northern Malaysian rainforest serves a new purpose these days: As an unobtrusive place to imprison and bury migrants. The only comfort in this recent discovery is that there is enough forest left to hide countless modern-day concentration camps.

Similarly, the seas are still empty enough that hapless travellers can journey for weeks across them and not encounter any vessel willing to help them.

The last time Malaysia received this much media attention was December 2014.

On that occasion it was nature, rather than slave traders, doing the damage. The landscape on the East Coast of the peninsula has still not returned to normal.

Malaysian environmental diversity is as important as ever but is more usually aimed at tourists than residents. With the exception of desert, tundra and snow-capped peaks, the local scenery covers just about everything. It is a land blessed by God, but not always by artists.

From Sea To Summit is the work of four artists whose fascination with the environment is exceptional and enduring. Each one has a different focus, forming a complete picture of our surroundings. The sum of these parts is Malaysia. So diverse are these ecospheres, it is easy to forget that one small country can have such an abundance.

The link between these landscapes is a future of extreme uncertainty. Mankind at harmony with nature is rarely a feature of modern life, except in property develop-

ments so exclusive, they form an entirely new and sanitised environment. The only work that artists do on this type of landscape is impres-

sions for marketing brochures.

Where artists feel inspired are settings that have taken longer to evolve than a short trip from the drawing board to the corporate launch. Artists exist to provide a record, not necessarily of what they see but what they

feel. They try to see what those who do not look so closely might fail to observe.

The four artists in this exhibition are masters specialising in different niches that build up to a collage of all that makes Malaysia if not "truly Asia" then "truly Asean". This region still has a huge percentage of essential ecological resources, from rainforest to coral reef, economic development is both a risk to this heritage and its potential saviour. As the region becomes richer, it is possible that more respect will be shown to what is, in

highly developed nations, viewed as a recreational resource. For the original occupants of these habitats, it is already too late in many cases. As the habitats shrink, the number of endangered species keeps growing.

The artists in From Sea To Summit take a variety of approaches to habitats and inhabitants.

Ajis Muhammad focuses on living creatures with minimal intervention from mankind. His paintings are devoid of divers in pursuit of selfies with lamentably slow representative of a species facing extinction.

Similarly, Joseph Tan keeps his distance from his own intrepid species, preferring firmer foundations. His solid rocks of ages stir with a glimmer of life as mist moves around them. Nothing crawling out of them though, and no people to disturb the air of immutability.

At the other end of the biosphere is Yeong Seak Ling, an artist who conceives landscapes as a backdrop to human activity. Even at his most

nature loving - a melancholic scene of a rubber plantation with fallen leaves and a feeling of desolation - a village house sits in the distance, almost at one with its surroundings. This is an old work. You will now find nature in the background, and people dominating the foreground. Babies in sarongs steal the scene, or cheerful villagers bringing their lifestyle into the picture. Birdcages without birds feature prominently.

Somewhere between these extremes of mankind's place in the environment is Raphael Scott Ahbeng. Being a Sarawakian, he has plenty of nature to work from. There is also a long history of human intervention in the landscape, usually well integrated but when it comes to mining, the priority has never been to keep things unobtrusive. His homeland's longhouses provide a setting that is as much a compromise between man and nature as has existed for millennia.

Sustainable forestry used to be the only way in this part of the world, unlike Europe, which ravaged its forests long before the age of industrial-scale destruction. Respect for nature is so much a tradition in Sarawak that it should be leading the way throughout the nation. Unfortunately, this has not been the direction. Just as the East Coast of the peninsula, there is a level of abuse that only becomes apparent when a flooding catastrophe strikes.

Artists have a part to play in ensuring that the balance is maintained, and that people can enjoy these wonders, at least second-hand. Showing solidarity with the cause at the exhibition launch was Datuk Dr Abd Latif Mohmod, the director-general of the **Forest Research Institute of Malaysia**. The preserved leaves of a now-extinct tree, brought out with a flourish during his speech, confirmed in a very visual way the importance of conservation.

From Sea To Summit is a reminder of what Malaysia has, at the moment, and offers some hope that it can be kept for a bit longer.

**Lucien de Guise is passionate about art and antiquities. You may write to him at [luciendeguise@yahoo.com](mailto:luciendeguise@yahoo.com)**

## From Sea To Summit

**Where:** Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery, Sasana Kijang, KL  
**When:** Ends Aug 9

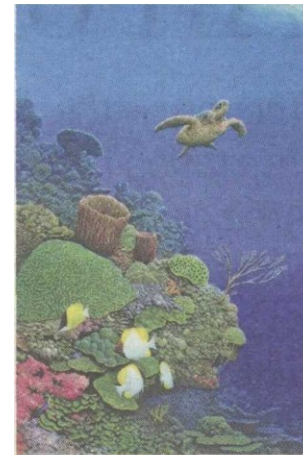
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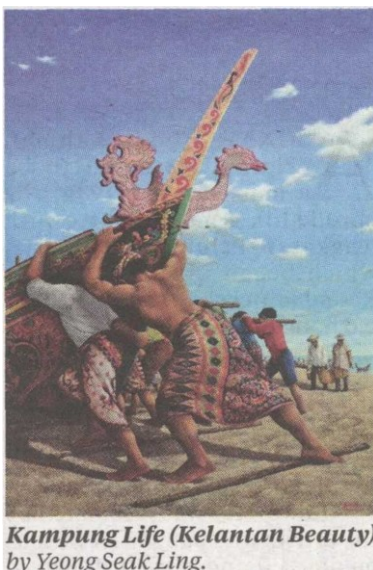
*Untitled (Formation Series) (1989) by Joseph Tan.*



*Murum Landscape (2014) by Raphael Scott Ahbeng.*



*Underwater Bliss (2009) by Ajis Muhammad.*



*Kampung Life (Kelantan Beauty) by Yeong Seak Ling.*