

Breaking New Ground

A dystopian landscape by Malaysian artist Fadhi Shaimy on display in the subterranean gallery of the Rimbun Dahan arts center.



KL'S CREATIVE EDGE

A visit to the Malaysian capital reveals an art scene that has emerged as one of the most dynamic in the region.

BY GABRIELLE LIPTON

My friend, an accomplished Indonesian poet named Khairani Barokka, was glowing when she described her residency at Rimbun Dahan, a private arts center just outside Kuala Lumpur. For six months, Okka had lived on a wildly gardened property in an old Malay house writing poetry all day, breaking just to chat with the other residents or go for a swim. A harmless python resided atop one of the houses and monkeys were known to pay visits. Though she would never let on how prestigious a stay at Rimbun Dahan really is, she was effusive about her time there—the backstory of the owners, the field trips to openings and exhibitions at galleries in the city, and the excitement of Kuala Lumpur's art scene in general.

Okka's enthusiasm convinced me to go and see what was happening for myself. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Singapore have largely been regarded as the two primary—albeit very different—art hubs, but recently, Malaysia's art scene has hit a major growth spurt. Since 2010, four Malaysian art auction houses and a host of new galleries have opened, giving the country's artists more visibility both at home and internationally at events such as Art Basel Hong Kong and the Asia Art Fair in New York.

"Everything's really changed in the past five years," said Harni Jonet, the manager at Galeri Chandan, which opened eight years ago in Damansara and was one of the first galleries to display Malaysian art abroad. I'd come to visit its second location situated in a line of contemporary galleries at the top of the enormous Publika mall, the closest thing in sprawling Kuala Lumpur to an art neighborhood. It was the month of Ramadan at the time, and on the walls was an exhibition called "Tawaf: A Sacred Journey," which included works by four artists who had recast Arabic calligraphy as the subject of colorful oil paintings, the scripted letters formed into motifs and designs. The literal meanings were spiritual, but the larger objective of the works was to reinterpret a Malaysian tradition as contemporary art.

As I continued to galleries in Publika and elsewhere around the city, I noticed that much of the art I was seeing was inspired by Malaysia in some way, often in concept more than visuals. The results are distinct, a sure sign of a burgeoning art scene that can sustain growth. At Shalini Ganendra Fine Art in the well-to-do neighborhood of Petaling Jaya, I was immediately met with a massive wooden wall-hanging just inside the entryway. I knew from one glance that the piece was by Anniketyni Madian, a Rimbun Dahan alumnus whose work Okka had raved about after their residences had coincided. In an intensely laborious process, Madian carves



The Details

Rimbun Dahan
Km. 27 JI. Kuang,
Selangor; 60-3/6038-3690; rimbundahan.org; visits by appointment only.

Shalini Ganendra Fine Art
8, Lorong 16/7b, Petaling Jaya; 60-3/7932-4740; shaliniganendra.com.

Galeri Chandan
L/G4, Block C5, Publika Shopping Gallery, JI. Dutamas 1; 60-3/6201-5360; galerichandan.com.

Richard Koh Fine Art
229 JI. Maarof, Bangsar; 60-3/2095-3300; rkfineart.com; visits by appointment only.

Wei-Ling Gallery
8 Jalan Scott, Brickfields; 60-3/2260-1106; weiling-gallery.com.

Lostgens' Contemporary Art Space
8C JI. Panggung; 60-19/683-8397; lostgenerationspace.blogspot.com.

small pieces of mixed hardwoods that, when pieced together, become patterns inspired by the woven Dayak textiles of Sarawak, her home. Her studio attire consists of a dust mask and carpenter gloves, but the finished products—often some three meters in diameter—are graceful, feminine, and distinctly Malaysian.

"Being from Malaysia is a strength," says Ganendra. "It can't be contrived. It's an identity that needs to be organically developed. We only represent [Malaysian] artists who are doing that." Originally from Sri Lanka, Ganendra has been an art collector most of her life and started SGFA in 1998 with the primary goal of educating Malaysian collectors on how to recognize and invest in art that will appreciate—the core of a profitable art market. Now, it's at once a gallery, residency, advisory, and stage for art events unlike any others in the region, including an annual pavilion installation and lecture series endorsed by the UNESCO Observatory that brings in top curators from around the world. Even the building is—like Ganendra herself—impeccable and visionary, one of the first buildings in Malaysia to receive a Green Building certification.

The curators that come are in thanks to Ganendra's connections from years of activity in art world circles. They come to speak, but also to scout for an undiscovered breed of art that could be the next big thing. Ganendra says they're always shocked at the quality of art



they encounter, which is carefully selected from regional artists, many Malaysian. When I visit, the second floor of the wind-chimney-cooled space is hung with large-scale oil paintings from one of the country's top living artists, Zac Lee, which at first appear as wild murals—of fighting hawks, a fat boar, a wide-eyed tiger—but reveal themselves as visual fables with political morals. On another wall hangs a series by Bibi Chew of small sheets of different woods, each representing a different Malay skin tone and etched with the silhouette of a human face. Within the outline of the visages, Chew lifts up bits of lacquered wood with a penknife, as if the face is covered in dewdrops, or tears.

Over the remaining few days of my trip, I make sure to see the bookends of the gallery scene. On one end, there's Wei-Ling Gallery and Richard Koh Fine Art, the Gagosians or Paces of Malaysia; on the other, there's Lostgens' Contemporary Art Space, a co-op atop a shop-house in Chinatown where the works are far more experimental, often commenting aggressively. The galleries at Publika and a few others scattered around the city fall somewhere in

between. And then, like a buffet with tastes of them all, there's Rimbun Dahan, which I head out to visit on my final day.

In the early 1990s, architect Hijjas Kasturi—widely held as the most significant Malaysian architect—inherited a five-and-a-half hectare piece of land just outside of the city in Selangor. As a way to give back to their respective countries, him and his Australian wife Angela converted it to a residency, each year hosting one Malaysian and one Australian artist, all expenses paid. At the time, the Malaysian art market was just getting its footing, and Rimbun Dahan was one of the places where it had its first steps.

"It was just the right thing at the right time," said Angela nostalgically, curled up on a black leather couch in her and Hijjas's home on the property, looked down upon by two big, gleeful oil portraits of them both—gifts from Chong Siewying, a resident in 2000. "We developed a reputation for having all the best artists—Haslin Ismail, Samsudin Wahab, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed—and it's simply because we gave them an opportunity to develop their craft on a full-time basis." It also drew all the nascent serious

All Hung Up

Above: The gallery space at Shalini Ganendra Fine Art displays works from Malaysian painter Zac Lee and wood sculptor Anniketyni Madian. Opposite: The gallery's namesake founder, backed by a row of works from Bibi Chew.



collectors with its annual exhibition of work from the residents. The night before the exhibit's opening, Hijjas would go to the gallery, and with the company of a cigar and a whiskey choose one piece for Rimbun's private collection. Every other piece always sold. Since then, Rimbun's residency program has expanded and now offers shorter sponsorships to a wide range of artists from around Southeast Asia. It also accepts artists from outside the region who pay to stay. The annual exhibitions sell out before they even open.

During my visit, the residents include an improvisatory performance group as well as Malaysian artists Hasanul Isyraf Idris and Yeoh Choo Kuan, both of whose works I had just seen that morning at Richard Koh as part of Koh's special 10-year anniversary exhibition. I was enraptured with a triptych by Yuan of massive paintings slathered sculpturally thick with black oil paint and lacquer when the gallery assistant informed me that Yuan was presently at Rimbun as part of a special program to give some of Koh's artists a space to work uninterrupted. (The assistant, it turned out, was up-and-coming sculptor and painter Haffendi Anuar, who'd received a residency as well.)

Just as my friend Okka described, it's hard to imagine a more inspiring place to create. Angela, whose first love is botany, has spent years planting the land with native species—durian

and rambutan trees, endangered dipterocarps, a spice garden—which clear occasionally for sculptures commissioned for the grounds. Restored heritage houses from Malaysian villages sit in one part, while other artists live in apartments above studios in another. But the centerpiece of the property is hidden: the gallery where Rimbun hosts its exhibitions, underground.

As Syar Alia, the arts manager, led me down the stairs to the gallery, we passed a poem painted on the wall—the work Okka left behind—before entering into a circular white space centered around a hollow glass colonnade extending up to the ground, tunneling in sunlight to illuminate the colossal works hung all around. There was an oil painting of a meat hangar by Malaysian painter Justin Lim, who wanted to paint something no one would ever want to see on a wall (the result is stunning); a mural painted on sarongs by Htein Lin, a Burmese artist who stayed at Rimbun after being imprisoned for more than six years under charges of planning opposition activities, using inmate uniforms as canvases and having guards smuggle him paint; an Escher-esque work by Australian artist Megan Keating of palm trees trapped inside a grid, lamenting the environmental problems associated with monoculture in Malaysia. It was an exhibit that could have put that of any international gallery to shame, yet couldn't exist anywhere else but here. ©

Change of Art

From left: Rimbun Dahan co-founder Angela Hijjas walks beside the main pond and pavilion on the center's grounds; the mixed-media ceramic work "Dinner With Someone...?" by Umibaizurah Mahirismail displayed at Galeri Chandan.