



Scent of power: Malaysian artist Yee I-Lann has two photography works in The Roving Eye exhibition at the Arter gallery in Istanbul. Pictured are 10 photographs with the title *YB*, a part of a larger series entitled *Orang Besar*. Her second work, the *Picturing Power* photograph series comments on imperial legacy in British-period Malaya.

Stretching the borders

Three Malaysians are among the leading contemporary artists at a major South-East Asian exhibition in Istanbul.

By **DARYL GOH**
star2@thestar.com.my



Our People,
Our Community,
Our Vision

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WHAT does the inside of your fridge say about you? Would you like the contents of your fridge to be a part of an art exhibition with viewers having a peek at your groceries? Is there an intersection between identity, place and time when it comes to eating habits?

Malaysian artist Roslisham "Ise" Ismail's installation *Secret Affair*, which features three fridges, has sparked curious conversation at the The Roving Eye: Contemporary Art From South-East Asia exhibition, which is now showing at the Arter art space, located in a restored mansion on the busy Istiklal Caddesi street in Istanbul, Turkey.

The Roving Eye is a group exhibition that presents more than 40 works by 36 of South-East Asia's most innovative contemporary artists from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam. The exhibition, which opened in September and runs till January next year, is curated by Iola Lenzi, a Singapore-based researcher and critic focusing on South-East Asian contemporary art. With the Arter gallery lending strong support, it took over three years for this project to be realised.

In the first two months, the show drew more than 44,000 visitors.

Apart from the Kelantan-born Ise, two other homegrown artists Yee I-Lann and Chris Chong Chan Fui's works are also part of this largest sweep of contemporary South-East Asian art on exhibition in Europe to date.

"This project is about how people live their lives via the fridge. For me, the fridge is a secret box of the family. You can read everything about the family via what is inside their fridge. It's like modern anthropology," says Ise, 42, about this updated version of *Secret Affair*, which was tweaked from the original installation first seen at the Singapore Biennale in 2011.

For this Istanbul version, Ise selected two local families composed respectively of Malaysians (Baharuddin Sulaiman and Kalthum Sulaiman) established in Istanbul for work purposes, and a mixed Malaysian-Turkish couple (Ilyani Ismail and Beycan Vatanserver).

These two families contributed the contents of their refrigerators as clues to the way they bridge Turkish and Malaysian cultures. By definition, the contents of peoples' fridges change every week, so audiences can expect this work to evolve throughout the exhibition. Thus, the viewers, through food, will partake in an intimate observation of cultural and geographic adaptation.

"Why are there three fridges? Two fridges represent the families and the other one is just an empty fridge to represent a hollow or vacuum space. In a sense, that's Istanbul. It is not influenced by any continent – either Europe or Asia," explains Ise.

"I selected Malaysian artists whose works could reveal something of the South-East Asian condition (post-colonial identity questions; effects of diasporic shift; multi-culturalism; state paternalism) while remaining legible to a Turkish audience. Chris, Ise and I-Lann are three practitioners who juggle parochial codes, form, and critical insight with urbanity and confidence," says Lenzi through an email interview.

"Their pieces tend to be rooted in the local but also move into a register that allows them to speak to wider audiences. In this case, the pieces selected also show the moving perspective that is my exhibition motif. Chris and I-Lann had older works that fit the exhibition perfectly. Ise, however, made new work, based on an existing series. His piece was one of a few in the show that involved the Istanbul public in its production. Interactive art that includes the public actively is fairly typical of South-East Asian contemporary, so, Ise's piece brought that aspect of regional practice to Istanbul, too," she adds.

Elsewhere, Sabah-born Chong's *Block B* video (2009) brings a naturalistic depiction of a single day in the life of countless inhabitants of a Kuala Lumpur public housing estate. Shot in a single take in



Chris Chong Chan Fui's video *Block B* shows the daily lives of the inhabitants of an apartment block in Kuala Lumpur.



Roslisham 'Ise' Ismail's installation entitled *Secret Affair* at The Roving Eye: Contemporary Art From South-East Asia exhibition in Istanbul.

Brickfields, the film reveals the intimate details of the lives of recent immigrants to Malaysia. The themes of immigration and the reconstruction of lives are thus investigated from many perspectives through fictionalised dialogues between the block's residents.

"I hope that *Block B* would express alternative ways of visually telling big and small moments of life around us," says Chong, 42, about this observational piece of cinema, filled with disparate voices comprising Malaysia's own religious complexities and insecurities.

"We are all migrants. Irregardless of where we think we come from, our administrative borders and our cultural borders are porous. *Block B* shows a small ecosystem within a condo compound in KL, but in this case, the inhabitants were predominantly expatriates," he adds.

Fellow Sabahan I-Lann, 43, has two photography works in the exhibition. The 10 photographs, titled *YB*, are a part of the larger series, *Orang Besar* (2010). Her second work, the *Picturing Power* (2013) photograph series, comments on imperial legacy in British-period Malaya. *YB* is a photographic collection of wilted orchid corsages shown pinned to the breast pockets of officials' jackets. This work embodies a critique of undesired hierarchical or political status, cor-

ruption and general abuse of power.

"I made the *Orang Besar* series as an attempt to understand why we are the way we are. It is not meant to be disparaging or to insinuate that the 'Orang Besar' political or economic systems need to be dismantled or eradicated so much as to be understood and registered," says I-Lann.

"I think this is what Indonesia has been going through with the rise of Jokowi (Indonesian president Joko Widodo). I loved that the centrifugal spine of his election campaign was the radical and inspiring 'Revolusi Mental'. He is now *Orang Besar* and I am sure encumbered by the accompanying demands. The *Orang Besar* structures, I suspect, will always be there. Our political and economic structures exist and thrive because of the citizenry, the ordinary folk, the *Orang Kecil* that subscribe to the sense of security it promises, but it is best we recognise and name the games we play," she adds.

Meanwhile, *Picturing Power's* sequence is an essay on evolving representations of colonial domination and more generally, the reversibility of power.

The Roving Eye exhibition is not a postcard perfect picture of South-East Asia by any means. Instead it channels the region's contemporary currents and brings European view-

ers up to speed – through art – with far-reaching themes like the impact of colonial rule, the emergence and triumph of the independence movements, economic transformations, the impact of social change and the roles played by religion, ethnic minorities and immigrant groups.

Among the other highlights are Thailand's Sutee Kunavichayayont's *History Class Part 2* work, which includes 23 wooden school desks on which scenes from Thailand's political history are carved. Viewers can put a sheet of paper on the desks and transfer the carvings to take home. Artist Josephine Turalba from Philippines made sandals from bullet-cartridges, titled *Scandals*, which can be worn by the visitors, while Singapore artist Lee Wen's *Ping Pong Go-Round* is a donut-shaped ping pong table that invites visitors to grab a paddle.

"This exhibition is designed to bring both the breadth of South-East Asian practice and its depth to Istanbul. It is my hope that through this work from three generations and eight SEA countries, Turkish viewers will get a sense of the central thematic and conceptual preferences of regional artists, far from exotic stereotypes and very much anchored in often uncomfortable, fast-evolving Asian life," says Lenzi.

"With The Roving Eye, Turkish audiences will be able to discover that contemporary art can simultaneously be aesthetically triumphant, socio-politically engaging, and audience-involving. Through this show non-Asian audiences will become acquainted with some of South-East Asia's concerns, many of which are likely to resonate. Ultimately, what I hope all will take away is that art in South-East Asia, before being a commodity, is very much part of and about life, and has a role to play on the ground in shaping society," she concludes.

■ *The Roving Eye: Contemporary Art From South-East Asia* exhibition runs at Arter, Beyoglu, Istiklal Caddesi, No. 211, Istanbul, Turkey till Jan 4. Admission is free. Browse www.arter.org.tr.