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Celebrating 45 years with 3 renowned artists



Petronas Gallery is staging an art exhibition that highlights the symbiotic relationship between arts and economy, which is essential for the growth of a progressive nation

By AZALEA AZUAR / Pic By ARIF KARTONO

PETROLIAM Nasional Bhd (Petronas) has been one of Malaysia's biggest prides since its inception in August 1974.

Not only has it been the custodian of the country's hydrocarbon resources, the oil and gas (O&G) giant has also contributed largely to the growth of the local arts scene.

For instance, in 1998, the doors of the iconic Petronas Philharmonic Hall were opened to the public, graced by the maiden performance of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra.

Those who grew up in the 1990's might also remember anticipating Petronas' television commercials during festive seasons.

Some might even say they did not bother watching other commercials which were not from Petronas, which seemed to have set the bar very high.

One of the earliest and most famous commercials which captured the hearts of all Malaysians was "Tan Hong Ming in Love", directed by the late Yasmin Ahmad in 2007.

The work was simple and cute, but the message was deep. It explored the theme of "colourblindness" where in the eyes of innocent children, everybody is the same regardless of their race or skin colour.

The O&G company also established Petronas Gallery in 1992 to promote, develop and preserve Malaysia's contemporary art.

Petronas has indeed come a long way in listing its achievements for the nation.

In conjunction with its 45th anniversary this year, Petronas Gallery is staging the "Bersama Merentas Zaman: Melakar Identiti Melalui Bakat dan Semangat" art exhibition.

The exhibition highlights the symbiotic relationship between arts and economy, which is essential for the growth of a progressive nation.

It showcases selected artworks from three renowned Malaysian artists namely Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Zulkifli Yusoff and Abdul Multhalib Musa, who have captured Petronas' achievements and its move forward.

Petronas Gallery director Dzalina Abd Manan believed that behind every great organisation lies great people — Malaysians.

"We have put together this exhibition with three renowned Malaysian artists who had been with us throughout the development of Petronas Gallery.

"The gallery has turned 27 years old and these artists have collaborated with Petronas for a long time.

"Three distinctive expressions of fine arts are displayed according to each artists' style. We have paintings by Bayu Utomo, installation works by Zulkifli Yusof and sculptures by Multhalib Musa," she said.

Petronas Gallery, Petrosains and Petronas Philharmonic Hall are all housed at Suria Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC), where Petronas establishes the importance of three key areas — music, arts and science.

Dzalina believed that these areas are the foundation for a developed society.

Bayu Utomo's The Unnamed Series

The Unnamed Series consists of four acrylic paintings and 10 charcoal pieces which are all titled numerically, but the exhibition is only featuring three of these works which are *Limabelas*, *Tigabelas* and *Empatbelas*.



Bayu Utomo's artworks reveal self-portraits of him in Silat poses

The artworks reveal self-portraits of the artist in Silat poses. Silat is a form of Malay martial arts. In the self-portraits, the artist is moving forward into the unknown.

This represents Petronas taking Malaysia forward and venturing into uncharted territories.

For Bayu Utomo, Silat warriors are inspirational because although legendary, they are very mysterious.

The Sabahan artist used figurative realism in his artworks to accurately capture the expressions of the male anatomy.

This approach makes the painting look almost photographic, especially with the skilful combination of light and shadow.

The Unnamed Series comprises of Bayu Utomo's largest paintings in terms of scale and size of the figures.

He only painted the topmost section of the body which is the head, arms and shoulders.

This way, viewers are able to marvel at the enormous and detailed figures that Bayu Utomo had carefully created, however, they cannot see much of the face because the artist believes that it is not important.

When he paints the entire face, people can easily recognise what the artwork is about but this time, he makes it akin to talking to somebody wearing a helmet with the visor down.

He does not show the whole face, but the hands and eyes can speak for themselves. In a way, the figure is avoiding intimate bond with the viewers.

'Merdeka' by Zulkifli Yusoff

Zulkifli Yusoff's *Merdeka: A Work in Progress* is a unique collection of installation pieces as it is made up of 16 objects which are divided into two parts, objects on the floor and wall mounts.



Zulkifli's Merdeka. The planet-shaped displays are metaphors for ripe fruits, or wealth of the nation, which is shared among all Malaysians

The pieces which are hung on the wall look like planets, just not the ones in our solar system, while the ones on the floor resemble inverted UFOs (unidentified flying objects).

The sci-fi setting that Zulkifli included in his installation works makes you want to go back in time, when the spirit of Merdeka was not a foreign concept like in today's political and social landscape.

However, Zulkifli is not interested in spoonfeeding his audience and wants them to decipher the meaning of his works and message.

As an artist, he believes that rationality plays an important role in engaging with issues.

Earlier commissioned by Petronas in 2013, *Merdeka: A Work in Progress* highlights the freedom to manage our natural resources which help develop the country into what it is today.

Petronas' values are closely linked to the principles of the Rukun Negara, which is expressed in Zulkifli's artwork.

Although they closely resemble alien spaceships in Hollywood films, the artwork on the floor resemble "kawahs" or large woks. The planet-shaped displays are metaphors for ripe fruits, or wealth of the nation, which is shared among all Malaysians.

***Ascend* by Abdul Multhalib**

Theoretical thinking, science and engineering have always been Abdul Multhalib Musa's key interests.

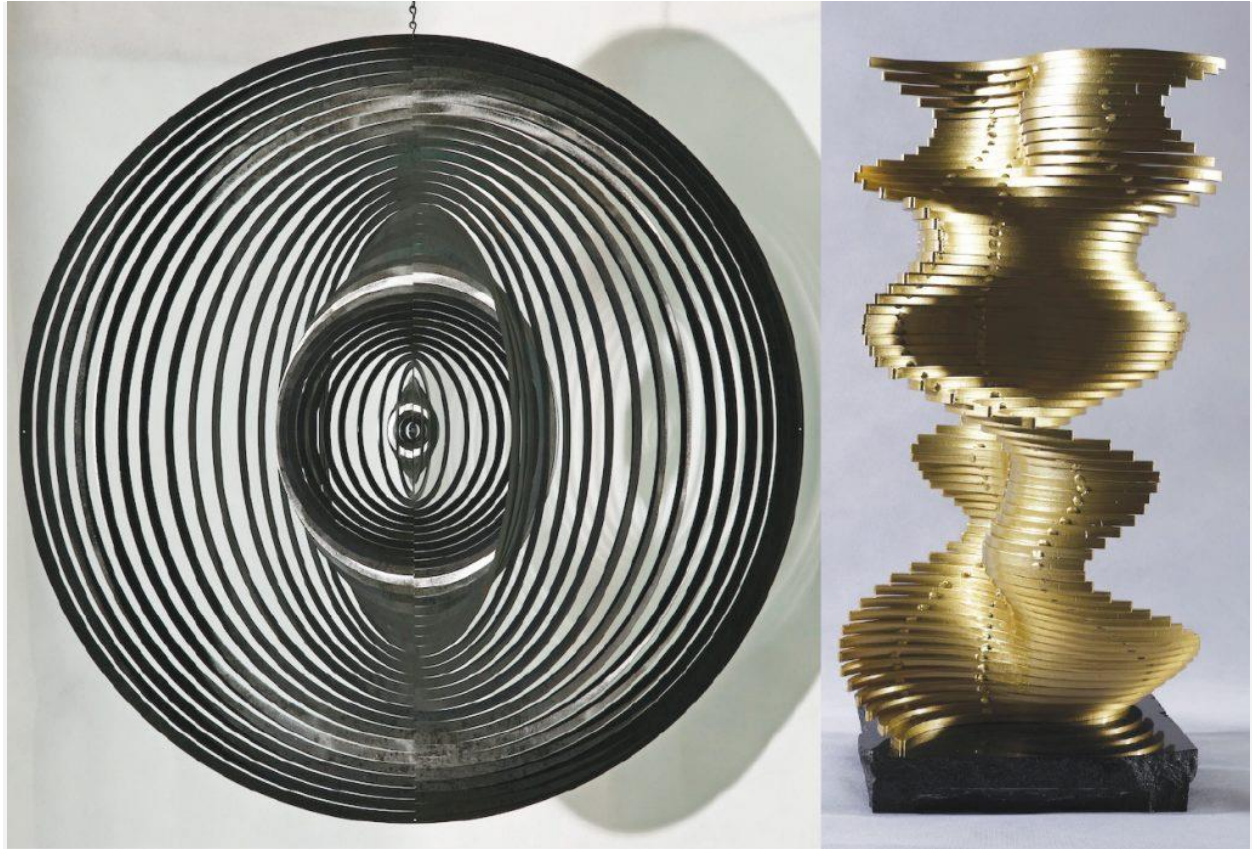
The Penang-born artist studied architecture in Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam, Selangor, after pursuing design studies at the University of Adelaide, Australia.

His knowledge in architecture combined with his sculpting skills helps him create remarkable works.

One of them is *Ascend*, which can be seen in this exhibition.

It is a beautiful product from the marriage of mathematics, art, literature and technology.

The sculpture resembles that of a mythical bird, the *Jentayu* from the epic of *Merong Mahawangsa*, which represents strength, humility and pure heartedness.



Abdul Multhalib's Involute (left) and Twist Gold. Theoretical thinking, science and engineering have always been Abdul Multhalib's key interests

Inspired by the *Jentayu*, *Ascend* shows a bird in a state of taking off for flight although it is still firmly anchored to the ground.

With these elements, the sculpture represents Petronas' commitments in building Malaysia for the past 45 years.

Taking a closer look at the sculpture, it is arranged in such a way that each piece merges to form a single composition that creates wonder and awe.

In a way, it resembles what could happen if Malaysians unite and synthesise their talents together for a greater purpose.

Ascend delivers a message for Malaysians to propel forward and upward together. Abdul Multhalib has been collaborating with Petronas since he was young.

According to Dzalina, in 2006 or 2007, Petronas commissioned him to sculpt for the Prince Court Medical Centre.

"Today, he has gone international. He configured *Ascend* to fit into our bustle space and I think he's very passionate in everything that he does," she said.

Abdul Multhalib was nominated as a finalist at the Oita Asian Sculpture Exhibition and Open Competition at the Fumio Asakura Memorial Park in Oita, Japan in June 2002.

Moving Forward

Petronas Gallery has received almost two million visitors since it opened its doors and it has hosted many local and international exhibitions.

“Clocking in 45 years, there are only five to go to 50. Petronas Gallery will continue to grow and develop, and hopefully we can see what we can achieve in those five years, at the 50th anniversary,” said Dzalina.

Petronas is developing a new gallery at the moment, which they hoped that it will be ready in three to four years’ time.

“The new gallery will be located around the KLCC vicinity. That will be managed by another unit.”

Dzalina has been with Petronas since the company was only 13 years old and was with Petrosains for 10 years.

“I am so inspired to have more Malaysians, especially the young ones, to have a keen interest in music, arts and science, regardless of what they aspire to be in their careers,” she said.

In its effort to foster interest in art among Malaysians, Petronas Gallery’s admission is free.

The “Bersama Merentas Zaman: Melakar Identiti Melalui Bakat dan Semangat” is currently running at the gallery until Oct 6.

The gallery is located on Level 3 in Suria KLCC and it is open from Tuesday to Sunday from 10am to 8pm.

(Source : <https://themalaysianreserve.com/2019/09/19/celebrating-45-years-with-3-renowned-artists/>)