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Canvassing Culture

Evanna Ramly



Peeping Future – Where is my home by Sim Hoi Ling

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Formerly known as the Tanjong Heritage National Level Art Competition, the Usaha Tegas Heritage Art Competition saw 21 participating art institutions with a staggering 955 entries. Only 29 of the 535 shortlisted artworks stood out, winning a total of RM77,000 in cash prizes.

Incidentally, 2017 marks the first time Usaha Tegas is organising the competition which is currently in its 18th year running. Taking over from its subsidiary company, Tanjong PLC, at the heart of the competition is Malaysia’s wondrous heritage.

“We see our national heritage as the sum of all our accomplishments achieved as a nation,” says Maureen Toh, director of Usaha Tegas. “Beyond ancient relics and heritage sites, it reflects the contributions made by the various ethnic groups that make up Malaysia. Indeed, our heritage as Malaysians is unique and irreplaceable.”

Toh says it has been the company’s mission over the years to celebrate and preserve Malaysian heritage through a union of creative and artistic minds.

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“Since its inception, the Heritage Art Competition has grown considerably,” she shares. “It is today a forum for budding talents to show their artistic creativity and an opportunity for us to encourage young artists not only to pursue their passion in the arts field but to also cultivate a love for our shared national heritage.”

This year, the award for the first prize winners has been doubled from RM4,000 to RM8,000. Toh is optimistic that such an incentive would encourage the next generation of stellar talents.

“Your artworks have paid tribute to our nation’s rich and vibrant traditions,” she says, addressing the winners at the prize-giving ceremony. “We hope that you will continue to nurture your artistic skills and become an active advocate for Malaysia’s heritage conservation.”

Judging was led by award-winning printmaker Juhari Said, whose career spans over 35 years. Joining him are Chin Kon Yit, Asia’s watercolour maestro, Dr Kim Phaik Lah, adviser to art and heritage education organisations, Laurence Loh, leading conservation architect and cultural heritage expert, as well as Elizabeth Cardoso, president of Badan Warisan Malaysia.

This year sees a new addition to the panel of judges, Hasanul Isyraf Idris. The award-winning member of Penang’s Run Amok (RA) art collective has been part of numerous exhibitions and art fairs locally and globally, among them the Art012 Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair, Asia Now Paris Asian Art Fair and Context New York 2017.

“These artists represent our youth and their varying perspectives of our heritage. These youngsters look at our heritage in a fresh way,” he says. “Taking a very young approach in their artwork is very 2017 and reflective of how people are now more interested in contemporary art.”

Hasanul believes the younger generation may still find traces of lost heritage in stories from their parents and grandparents. “That’s how they remember it. References are still all over the place, and historic locations like George Town continue to thrive today,” he continues. “That said, experiencing this culture in the future might be limited to archives if we don’t preserve it.”



Snack Biscuits by Foo Fang Xuan

Foo Fang Xuan of Kuala Lumpur's Dasein Academy of Art won first prize in the Oil/Acrylic category with her evocative painting of *Snack Biscuits*.

"I was at the market with my mother when I saw these biscuit jars in a traditional sundry shop," she recalls. "I realised these things would probably be extinct in a few years. The younger generation prefers the supermarket and branded confectionery."

The memory is particularly meaningful to her as it is from her childhood. "Our childhood memories are fading now. Art competitions like this are important to raise awareness of heritage conservation."

Sim Hoi Ling, also from Dasein Academy of Art, emerged triumphant in the Mixed Media category. Her artwork, *Peeping Future - Where is my home*, was actually inspired by the recent floods that rocked the nation.

"I joined a flood relief team rebuilding houses," she shares. "We used a fast method and received good feedback yet a friend of mine felt sad to think of traditional practices giving way to new techniques."

For the artwork, Sim wove advertisements of new condominiums with another layer featuring old wooden houses and covered the whole picture with a gate. "This is to illustrate how traditional practices have been eaten up by new techniques and we can only look on from a distance. We ask ourselves, where are the houses we were familiar with in our youth?"

Fung Wei Wei of Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang charmed many with her winning watercolour. *Foodfie_it is melting*. #throwback was inspired by foodfies (food selfies) on Instagram, in which food items are held up against a background.

"I wanted to combine modern and traditional aesthetics in my work so I used that particular composition," Fung adds. "My melting ice cream cone features old landmarks in Penang. The selection includes buildings that are abandoned or under renovation, as sweet as desserts to their creators but now disappearing."

Fung ties with Seow Yong Khin of The One Academy in the Watercolour category. Seow's piece, *Malacca's Traditions*, is simple yet beautifully poignant in his expert manipulation of white space and discerning utilisation of spatial adjustment.



Goh Ka Ki (Five Foot Way) by Lee Lih Xian

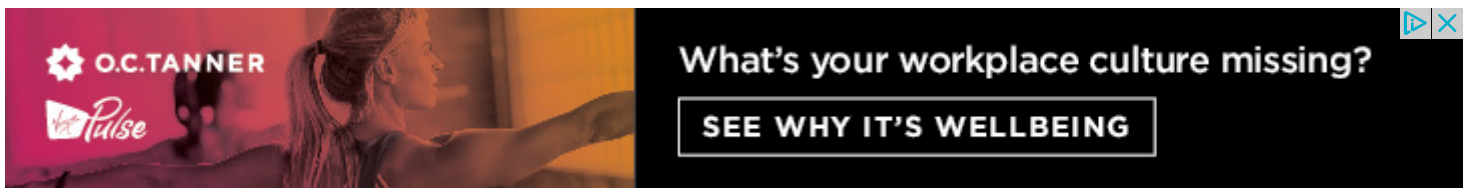
Then there is Lee Lih Xian from ATEC Academy in Penang. Lee's highly detailed *Goh Ka Ki* (Five Foot Way) was a clear winner in the Charcoal/Pencil/Ink category.

"My teacher took us on an excursion to learn more about our heritage," she reveals. "Walking down Love Lane in George Town, I saw these beautiful floor tiles and decided to draw them."

Teh Jun Yang of Penang's Equator College won the Print Making category for his mysterious and captivating artwork, *Night Alley*. "I like streetscapes – especially in Penang, which is so rich in history – and I wanted to try an alternative way to showcase this aspect of our heritage," he explains. "This style is semi-abstract, and it's my first time experimenting with it."

“Competitions like this force students to think further in terms of ideas. In college, your focus may be on completing assignments but in a competition, you have to push yourself in order to win,” Hasanul surmises. “Your ideas need to be more solid. It excites me to see how students take advantage of such competitions, brainstorming to come up with fresh ideas.”

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