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the nature of

He delightfully smolders their shape, accentuating the areas where some would find it erotic, while others would naturally assume it as a form of art. His choice of colours that change upon every series would still keep intact the beauty of Sarawak, whom he claims have the most amazing culture. Regardless, through his discovery of painting based on the shapes he find most comfortable, Chew Fang Chin has connected people with his paintings.....



the indigenous

by elyantje mohamed



chew fang chin

His paintings speak of Sarawak, the hidden paradise of Borneo. Far away from the familiar sights of the city, he ventures deep into the jungles and sail over rivers to ponder upon his destination, beholds the many unique ethnicity, giving him the conquest to tell the tale through his eyes onto his paintings.

Before dwelling deeper into his paintings, it is most often a question to understand his technique. Chew practices the use of watercolor and Chinese ink, on textile paper, infusing the elements of Asian and Western Art. The result creates a mixture of oil and Batik motives. His style - a cross between fine art and graphic design. Being out of the ordinary, Chew wanted his pieces to collectively remain Asian.

His work creates a strong contrast between the simple strokes and complicated subjects. The choice of lines, the way he moulds his subject makes it seem so natural and somewhat easy yet the object within each painting requires constant scrutiny, he wishes to recreate the colours that are so important within the culture and the vibrancy that exists within the society itself. He understands the need to reconstruct the unique motif within the background, for it provides clarification to the viewers on the indigenous origins that support the painting.

An instance, "Kayan Woman & Hunting Dogs" reflects the languid pose of the Kayan woman deep in pensive



kayan woman & hunting dogs, 1990



chatting, 2000, 35.6 cm x 76.2 cm



natural elegance colour ink, 1999, 35.66 cm x 45.7cm

thought. Many would assume that Chew was in a meditative mood - hence the application of cool hues, the woman with the background may possibly represent the nonchalance and relaxed mood he was in at the time he painted - even the couple of dogs in the background could not break her reverie. It is interesting to realize that everything outside the woman and the two canines was left indistinguishable. As it is, the main subject is preferred the external environment - it is the woman and her inner contemplation that holds the main focus of the painting.

It is interesting to observe that a man as quiet as he has accomplished many in his years as an artist. Up to date, Chew has twenty three exhibitions to boast, having exhibited locally as well as the likes of Australia, China, South Korea and Taiwan. Making his first solo exhibition debut at the Sarawak Museum in 1986, it was one of the many 'firsts' that he has achieved.

Carving a name as the man who paints the indigenous community, according to his written profile, Chew was the first Malaysian representative to hold two

exhibitions to Taiwan and China. The first was in 1987, sponsored by the Pacific Cultural Foundation, where he was given the opportunity to hold four solo exhibitions in Taiwan. His second was in China in 1991, where the exhibition was conducted in the Qingdao Museum and Jinan Hall.

Chew receives much attention internationally. Fret not, his paintings are far from being left unnoticed by the local government. The Sarawak Tourism Ministry has personally selected Chew's paintings for Sarawak's 1993 and 1994 tourist calendar. The ministry believed that it is only logical to include Chew's works in the calendar as they reflect the unique culture and identity of Sarawak.

Regardless of the publicity he receives, Chew still strives to keep his individuality and remain the same, making sure that the objective of his paintings would never change simply to win others. He wants his painting to reach its goal, to assure that the very object that he paints receives the most attention. It is after all, his main motive, to provide informative paintings,



orang ulu maidens - the hornbill feather dance, 1990, 45.7 x 61cm

where people are able to understand and see the gradual changes the culture faces, from one decade to another. This of course, would require one to observe his very first series, all the way to his latest in 2001.

Apart from taking a keen interest with his subjects, he understands the responsibility weighed over his shoulders, where his paintings will be part of a legacy someday. His paintings are no exception in its desire to convey a message and desire, but the way it is conveyed is indeed captivating. His painting, 'Orang Ulu Maidens - The Hornbill Feather Dance', displays the Ulu women whilst performing the traditional dance of their community.

On the surface, his painting remains docile, subtle even, but often, it tells a story. As such, it holds a significant role in narrating the tale of the culture. The background's curves and colours represent the indigenous art motif, often found on their traditional 'baju' and within the interior of their home.

Observe the painting a little longer, and you will realize how the women are painted in such a way that they are infused into the background of indigenous motifs - they are as very much part of the culture as the dance itself. Awkwardly, you no longer just see the painting, but you

have transcended and become part of the painting. This is the factor that sets Chew apart from other artists; as he makes you enter into his realm.

Indeed, Chew has contributed a lot to the art industry, where his paintings are highly appreciated in the local and international scene. Nonetheless, his sincerity in devoting his life for the love of Sarawak culture has ultimately made his work of greater value.

During the interview, I asked him what he feels his future would bring, whether he will begin to embark painting the indigenous from other countries. Interesting to hear, he chooses to stay within the boundaries of Sarawak, as he had since his very inception as an artist. He claims that there is so much to learn, so much to capture that his only worry is that his life span would not permit him from painting all the ethnicity living in Sarawak.

Thus, upon viewing Chew's paintings on the indigenous people of Sarawak, we should soak in the vibrancy of colours that the batik offers us and observe the many cultural nuances that the artist had imbued upon his art; that way we can appreciate and remember the many things that the people and cultures of Sarawak has to offer us. ■