



In black and white and colour collages, Zulkifli highlights the symbols and icons which shaped the country.

ARTIST Zulkifli Yusoff's works are the windows to his soul. Each and every piece has a meaning, a story to tell – they are not just inspiration put together for the sake of art.

In an exhibition entitled *Negaraku* at the National Art Gallery, the paintings, mixed media and installations portray what Zulkifli feels for and sees in Malaysia as his country. Mostly collages, the creations depict his childhood, his parents and of the many things that surrounded him evoking old kampung memories in Yan, Pendang, Kedah, in 60s and 70s.

His works in the series is a narration of his feelings from the past and the excitement he underwent in his teenage years.

The excitement is featured under the sub theme "Patriotic

My art, my country

ZAKIAH KOYA takes a peek into the soul of lecturer-artist Zulkifli Yusoff whose works depict his childhood, parents and sights and sounds growing up in Pendang, Kedah, in the 60s and 70s.

Spirit" that goes through the patriotic songs, recalling the memorable moments Zulkifli spent with his father.

The sub theme "Economy in Broadcasting" recalls the role of radio and broadcasting vans in relaying the national development agenda while "Bunga Raya the National Flower" serves as the enigma symbolising the unanimity of the various races in Malaysia.

"The excitement comes from my senses. There are the ones that I see,

the ones that I listen and the ones that I feel and the satisfaction in the 'peace' gesture," he said.

"Listening to the plea made by the security forces through the radio evoked a deep sense of gratitude as the nation was just recovering from the May 13 tragedy.

"Then we were listening to broadcasts that were to help set Malaysia on the path of progress and fulfil the aspirations of Merdeka," he said.

They include guidance to farmers and not forgetting the memorable "Fajar di Bumi Permata" (Sunrise in the precious landscape).

"I was very impressed with the broadcasting efforts then. They were highly creative and compelling. By listening to the radio, the villagers could learn of the ways to farm, plant padi twice a year, and of the conflicts of the day," he said.

His "Me, father and the patriotic songs" is a new genre of art that he puts forth for Malaysians to ponder over the teachers' role around the 1970s, and to show the high regards he had of his father.

One depicts his mother – in black and white. Pictures of old religious books and entertainment magazines of the 60s are put together – the reading materials of many Malay kampung folk those days.

The one of his father, a stern-looking Cikgu Yusoff Hashim (left), has his portrait accompanied by lyrics of *lagu-lagu perajurit* (patriotic songs) that used to be played over the radio when he was a child. "These songs I remember so well, as they played so often over the transistor radio which we powered with AA batteries which we dried in the sun again and again," said Zulkifli, now 48.

Another collage shows a bottle of Tonic Chop Gajah, which was akin to Red Bull now, and farmers' planting tools.

One interesting work of art are three peace signs which were just put up on the wall. "The younger generation now tends to flash their two fingers but do they really know what peace means?" asked Zulkifli, a lecturer at the Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in Tanjung Malim.

One of his favourites is a collage of what he saw outside an Indian barber shop in Tanjung Malim which depicted the bunga raya (hibiscus) to brand the shop. The barber's pole and the bunga raya all over the shop as well as another old Chinese inn, the Hotel Bunga Raya, proved to be inspiring.

"These are all sentimental themes – the bunga raya is our national flower and it was used to brand an Indian barber shop," said Zulkifli, stating that the love for Malaysia must have been the reason they did so.

In those days, most barbers were Indian migrants.

For Zulkifli, the bunga raya evokes beautiful memories as he remembers when it was first declared the national flower and people in the kampung started planting it.

"Somebody must do more research on the bunga raya to stop it from withering so fast," said Zulkifli, who has a small garden to plant hibiscus set up as part of the exhibition.

His art is all education tools, as each and every piece in the *Negaraku* exhibition educates the audience of what happened and what should be preserved.

The old transistor radio is the

most prominent feature on many of his pieces.

"The radio used to be the only lifeline for us. We would be informed of everything only through the radio. The fiancées of the soldiers who were sent to fight the communists in the 50s would keep their ears to the radio at all times," said Zulkifli.

He remembers when the first *Van Penerangan* (Mobile Information Unit from the Information Department) came to his kampung. "That was the first time we watched the news of the floods in Pahang in the early 70s," he recalls.

He wants those who view his works to have an ecstatic experience.

"When I started work on this, I asked myself 'what can I give to my religion, people and country?' I wanted a balance between the reality and the subconscious," said Zulkifli, who believes that Malaysians do not judge art from its aesthetic value alone anymore.

"If in those days art forms only revolved around their beauty, now we have to look at the micro level, the balance between beauty and content.

"The content is the one that will help promote civilisation and develop the nation," said Zulkifli, adding it was time to ask the local artists especially the younger generation "how does your work benefit the religion, race and nation?"

He said that with the passage of time, society has become more knowledgeable, so people no longer purchase works based on beauty but prefer the ones with imagination behind them. "That is what I consider expensive. If it is just beautiful only, then it is meaningless. Void!" he said.

Zulkifli's art pieces will definitely create a feeling of déjà vu, especially for those who grew up in the 60s and 70s. The exhibition at the National Art Gallery, Jalan Tun Razak, ends on Sept 26.

– With additional reporting

SHARIL AMIN/THESUN



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