

Selamat Datang ke Malaysia. Welcome to Malaysia.

Beverly Yong

These warm words salute visitors and homecoming Malaysians alike on the arches that cross the highway as we drive out of KL International Airport. What is this place we are being welcomed to?

2007 marks the 50th anniversary of Merdeka, Malaysia's independence from British rule. To celebrate this, it has also been declared Visit Malaysia Year. It is a year for the world to come and see Malaysia, and a year for Malaysians to take a good look at themselves in the mirror.

At Independence in 1957, we were left with a legacy of colonial rule and its systems of law and government, a Malay culture of sultans and their courts, and kampung communities, indigenous tribal cultures with their own strong traditions⁽¹⁾, a large migrant population of mainly Indians and Chinese, busy trading centres and vast tracts of agricultural estate growing mainly oil palm and rubber.

Today we are classed as a "developing nation", still building infrastructure at a furious rate, negotiating our place on the international stage. Our society is multi-ethnic, our culture a hybrid of tribal, Malay, Chinese, Indian, Western, Middle-Eastern and regional influences. Our official religion is Islam. We remain rich in natural resources, and can boast a Formula 1 circuit, once having the world's tallest building, and a former James Bond girl.

Malaysia is, of course, many other things, and this modest travelling exhibition attempts to open a wider window, past the facade. Selamat Datang ke Malaysia is a cultural expo of sorts. It is an exhibition of contemporary Malaysian artists on Malaysia, on the one hand playing off the clichés and truisms in how we are asked to present and think of ourselves, and on the other dismantling the structure of such prescriptions to reveal the fault-lines in such a presentation. For Malaysia is a complex idea, hard enough to grasp for her citizens let alone unsuspecting visitors.

The ten participating artists, all born after Independence in different parts of the country, come from diverse backgrounds. Many have studied abroad and returned to Malaysia to practice. (A number have studied in Australia, like generations of fellow Malaysians). Each has been both a participant and keen observer of the unfolding drama of our developing nation. Their works in the exhibition, many of them commissioned, take on various aspects of the Malaysian experience, giving insights into a nation's successes and failures, its contradictions and eccentricities, its growing pains.

Roslisham Ismail aka Ise would always be the first to fly the Malaysian flag. A true ambassador, Ise spends much of his time making friends from around the world, showing them how warm, open, witty, dynamic, gregarious Malaysians can be, whether bringing visitors around KL or getting to know the art folk in Sydney, where he spent three months on an Australian High Commission residency last year. His billboard "welcome" to Malaysia however is laced with precaution – he rips off the grandiloquent façade of ferris-wheels, twin towers and fireworks to reveal a little nation with a bit of a size complex, with its share of loansharks and con-men as well as would-be astronauts.

We do like a sense of our own monumentality and success, and it shows in our architecture. Nadiah Bamadhaj imagines our proud structures – the Palace of Justice in Putrajaya, our new administrative capital, the "welcome" arch that sits over the Federal Highway between Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding state of Selangor, a typical housing estate – in the open wilderness of the Faroe Islands (as far northwest as you could go from Malaysia). What do these structures mean? Nadiah Bamadhaj and Wong Hoy Cheong are two artists who have consistently explored Malaysia's socio-political history and its post-colonial condition. Wong Hoy Cheong's extensive research and work on the Malaysian subject has been a shaping force in local art, especially his *Of Migrants & Rubber Trees* which charts the modern history of immigration in Malaya and its contribution to the country's makeup. Ten years on, however, he takes a more direct, "experiential" approach to the subject, exploring the suburbia which so much of Malaysia's population, working and middle-class, including himself, inhabit. What have we built ourselves to live in? What sort of quality of life have we afforded ourselves?

It is not surprising that a number of the works here are about the Malaysian people. Yee H-Lann's and Vincent Leong's photographs and video respectively give clear messages about the diversity of our community, and the importance of coming together. Emil Goh came back to Kuala Lumpur for two weeks to document the special mix of English and various local dialects that is "Wanglish", adopted by all races, at least in urban centres (you even hear it quite often in certain parts of Sydney, Melbourne and Perth). It is, however, crucial for the outsider to realise that such multi-racial togetherness is not or, perhaps, no longer the reality for most Malaysians. The groundwork for racial harmony has been laid poorly, designed to cater to the specific needs of specific communities rather than uniting them and emphasizing joint goals, and we continue to be dragged down by