

And yet something has so far managed to bind us together, some unifying principle has kept us going in this grand experiment. It must be something like our rivers, the once essential element of our human and physical landscape that are now treated like glorified monsoon drains. They start in the mountains, flow through the jungle, emerge ignored through the towns and cities and then flow into the sea, which was once as much a part of the landscape as the land itself. Some kind of river must still be flowing through us. Well, most of us.

You won't find much landscape in Malaysian art. The homes of regular folk might have paintings of village scenes with coconut trees, water buffalo and rice fields, or there might be a Taiwanese waterfall complete with flashing lights for good luck, but even these are human landscapes. Artists have by and large searched in the urban landscape for the unifying principle even though the jungle can still be seen from most places. The jungle has been a resource and a hindrance in recent human history, filled with spirits, dangerous animals and disease. For the major races in present day Malaysia it is not wood that has created the landscape but metal. Gold, silver and above all tin ores washed down from the mountains and traded around the world have created cities where there was once nothing but those pesky trees in vast swathes of land that nobody owned. Now cars, motorcycles and the steel and glass of the Petronas Twin Towers (paid for with oil and gas that lie even deeper below the surface) are the obvious symbols of today's Malaysia. We live bright shiny lives smelted from this new landscape.

The gaps that lie between the various races have, perhaps, helped hold this strange split-up nation together. As long as people stay inside the box of whatever race they are apparently from then the contradictions can be understood and balance maintained. But there are always people who feel not entirely at home in the archetype of their skin. There are those who wonder what they are: Malay? Chinese? Indian? Malaysian? Other? And what does it mean to be Malay, or Chinese, Indian, or other? And in a nation that was created by globalized trade, commerce and industry, is there something else? And what about all the other people that make up this nation, with whom we may or may not share a language – who are they? Do we have anything in common with them?

When we look at the faces from the photo studio in Yee I-Lann's work we search for connections. Maybe they look like somebody we know, somebody we once were, maybe they look like us. They have come to this photo studio, these Malaysians of different backgrounds, to commemorate the same moments that we have had: birthdays, graduations, just because. They look just like us, we're just like them. We are connected. Except we're not entirely, we're all very different.

In this mixed-up, split-up landscape of Malaysia we search for our identity and our own space where we can be safe and at home. We're all so different and our artists must be our rivers.