

By LUCIEN DE GUISE

**A**ZULKIFLI Yusoff exhibition is something approached with hesitation by this writer. When you only know one work by an artist, it's better if it fills you with admiration.

Unfortunately, my previous acquaintance with Zulkifli Yusoff was based on a painting that I heartily disliked when I first saw it, and time has only slightly endeared it to me.

Still, judging such diverse talent by one large canvas is like judging the timeless David Bowie by his 1967 song, *The Laughing Gnome*.

*Whisky Dan Tempoyak* is one of those rare historical works to emerge among the political-consciousness paintings of modern Malaysia.

When artists delve into the past, they tend to re-emerge with semi-mythological situations like Hang Tuah. Zulkifli does at least rummage in the rubbish bin of history with some thoroughness.

Out comes the 1875 incident in which the British imperialist J.W.W. Birch was murdered by the same Datuk Maharajalela who is honoured in a KL street name.

Birch's demise is a theme Zulkifli has used a few times. The idea of whisky (Western values) being incompatible with the solid virtue of tempoyak is an intriguing one, although not half as deadly as folklore would have us believe.

A gun – non-British issue – floats incongruously in the painting, along with some durians. My first impression was that it all seemed rather preachy.

On seeing the full range of Zulkifli's work, I can see that I did him an injustice.

He has been able to accomplish a lot without resorting to mysterious bits and pieces hovering on the canvas.

However, his most recent works, the *Malaya Series* are quite indebted to this collage-like approach. They have gone down well with the art establishment. Visitors to the National Art Gallery can take in the full majesty of the enormous installation *Merdeka 57* as they enter the building.

Classic-film lovers can enjoy reliving a few (still) moments with P. Ramlee and Jack Hawkins. Lovers of quaint English tea sets have a chance

# An original

to get nostalgic too, and whisky is never far from the equation either. Where would the Empire have been without The Balvenie 12-year-old blended?

*The Malaya Series* shows the thinking side of Zulkifli Yusoff. The artist's originality is as apparent as his social consciousness.

On seeing his earlier paintings, though, I realised that there is a heart as well as a mind at work. The beauty of this exhibition, *Zulkifli Yusoff: A Historical Survey 1996-2009*, in the high-rise, high-tech terrain of Mont Kiara, is that it goes back a comparatively long way.

It's not all about image-transfer techniques. There's oil on canvas too. His later work inclines towards the clinical coldness of Gilbert and George, that loveable British duo whose work is executed in glass. If their work was any chillier, it would be ice sculpture.

Once Zulkifli gets back to the old media, the passion ripens like the peculiar vegetation he paints. The recent series known as *Early Malay Sketches* was inspired by Sir Frank Swettenham's 1895 book on the Malay peninsula.

These large oil paintings on canvas convey the appropriate vitality combined with a sinister impenetrability. Although hardly an invitation to go jungle trekking, they should encourage the viewer to look more closely at Swettenham's book.

The second British Resident of Perak was also an accomplished artist, with an extensive exhibition at the National Art Gallery a few years ago, but it is through his writing that the reader comes to understand how outsiders saw the peninsula. Open any page and there are fascinating generalisations to behold. He provides an admirable

introduction to Zulkifli's

voracious-looking plants with his description of the Malayan rainforest: "The reading public, no doubt, believes the jungle of Darkest Africa is a place of gloom, terror and difficulty without parallel. It may be so, but few of those who know it have visited Malaya... Whatever gruesome peculiarities there are about the African jungle, it seems possible for large bodies of men and women to make their way through it at a fair pace without much difficulty. In that respect it has the advantage of the Malay forest."

By the time Swettenham gets on to the vegetation itself, you know that he would rather stick to the road or river. "It may be added as a minor but unpleasant detail that this tangle of vegetation harbours every kind of crawling, jumping and flying unpleasantness."

Zulkifli does not let himself get bogged down in the rainforest mulch. More than any artist I can think of, he enjoys immersing himself in issues. These range widely and often mysteriously. He takes a look at colonial and post-colonial matters as effortlessly as a dynamic body of paintings known as the *Reformasi Series*.

As with many of his paintings, it's hard to know what he has to say about Reformasi. What's clear is that he paints with joy and vigour. There is a fair amount of humour thrown in too. His cartoon-like

Rest A While, 1996, steel sculpture



Penceramah, 1999, oil on canvas

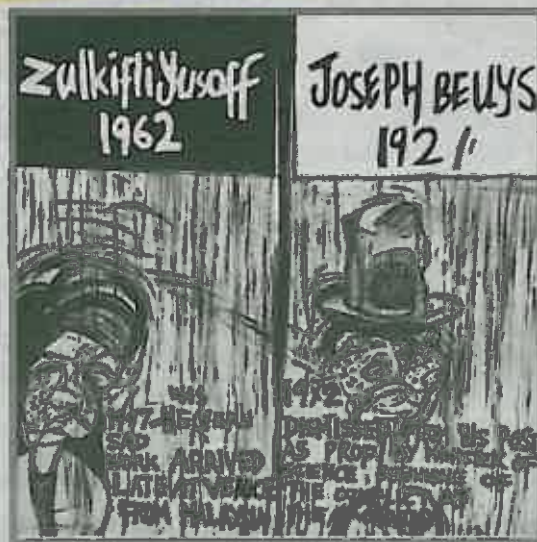
painting Zulkifli Yusoff and Joseph Beuys compares the fate of two artists: a Malaysian whose work arrived late at the Venice Biennale of 1997, and a German dismissed as professor of the Kunstakademie Dusseldorf in 1972.

Zulkifli may not be as eccentric as Beuys, whose performance art included sharing a room with a coyote, but he is undoubtedly one of Malaysia's true originals.

■ Zulkifli Yusoff: A Historical Survey 1996 to 2009 at Art Salon @SENI until March 20.



Pak Itam, 2009, acrylic on canvas



Zulkifli Yusoff and Joseph Beuys, 1997, oil on canvas



The Warriors, 1997, oil on canvas

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