

Art For All

A conversation about public art and how artists, landscape architects and patrons of the arts can collaborate for a burgeoning urban scene.

BY TAN SIOK HOON

The mere mention of New York City instantly conjures a mental image of the towering Statue of Liberty, while closer to home, the National Monument is a bronze sculpture that has come to symbolise national pride and identity for many Malaysians. While statues and monuments are the oldest and most common forms of public art, the physical public domain is a dynamic one today as a *mélange* of artwork, from murals to light art, installations, and contemporary and architectural sculpture become a more common sight in cities around the globe.

At the launch of the Pentago House Public Design Series, slated to comprise 6 talks of round table discussions and knowledge sharing, the inaugural chapter kicked off with a discourse themed *Artwork, Sculpture and Landscape Architecture — An Artistic Collaboration*. “As architects, we design a lot of public spaces so we want to create a dialogue and more awareness to see how we can move forward,” said Wendy Khaw, principal of Pentago Landscape and one of Asia’s leading landscape architects.

“Landscape architects have always worked with engineers, planners, interior designers, but rarely with sculptors even though we know the importance of art and sculpture, and how they can enrich our lives and add value to landscape spaces. More than ever, there is a need to collaborate with people who are good in their fields to push boundaries and achieve a better outcome for the spaces we design and build.”

To understand art and sculpture within a city context, Khaw highlighted the Melbourne International Gateway, dubbed the Ribcage and Cheesestick. The allure of the Denton Corker Marshall-designed urban architecture, a sophisticated fusion of art, landscape and infrastructure, is best experienced rather than viewed from a static vantage point. Its massive scale and

sculptural appearance generate a cool kinetic effect as you drive past at 100 kmph, making for 30 seconds of unforgettable sensation.

What then does this mean for Malaysia’s public art and design scene? While public art can take many forms —temporary or permanent, independent or commissioned —Khaw opines that there is a need for a formal framework for parties commissioning artwork locally to navigate through religious and cultural sensitivities, and as a guide to what is “permissible” especially for sculpture in public spaces.

Among the younger fraternity of sculptors leading Malaysia’s contemporary art movement are: Abdul Multhalib Musa, Nizam Abdullah and Haffendi Anuar, each having an admirable *sui generis* design philosophy and language.

ABDUL MULTHALIB MUSA (PUBLICSCULPTURE.WEEBLY.COM)

Trained architect Abdul Multhalib Musa is a master of his craft, with numerous international awards, residencies and commissions under his belt. Today, his clean, kinetically influenced and fluid metal sculptures are seen in many locations such as Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, China and Australia, in both private and public collections.

Armed with 18 years of experience in commission works in the public realm, his journey as a contemporary sculptor was kickstarted after a visit to Rimbun Dahan. The private arts centre was founded by legendary architect Hijjas Kasturi and his wife, Angela Hijjas and located on the 14-acre compound of their home to develop traditional and contemporary art forms through residencies, educational opportunities and other support.



Courtesy of Xiamen University, Malaysia & Abdul Multhalib Musa

Ascension by Abdul Multhalib Musa (2017) at Sunsuria City, Dengkil, Malaysia

“My discovery, dare I say. He (Multhalib) was a final-year architecture student when he came to my place for a guided tour to look at buildings, landscape and how to use indigenous plants in landscape settings,” Angela says. “After the tour, he applied for a residency as he was interested in using 3D modelling, CAD and other tools to create sculpture. He came for a year, worked in isolation and was very nocturnal as he worked on his programme and computer. After 6 months, he started to build his sculptures.

“His skill in CAD allows him to break vertical things into layers. His great talent is in creating 3-dimensional experiences. As you walk past his work, the appearance changes from different angles — sometimes solid, sometimes transparent...,” Angela describes Multhalib’s multifaceted sculpture.

The Rimbun Dahan residency which proved pivotal in the launch of Multhalib’s art career also allowed him to “recuperate” from a particularly challenging final year in architecture school. “I feel there has always been a need to redefine the relationship between art and architecture, in bridging the highly technical aspect prevalent in architectural works, and the seemingly abstract representation of art,” he says.

Almost two decades on, despite his many accolades, the elusive and somewhat mysterious sculptor remains modest about his creative process. Anyone who has encountered Multhalib’s work indubitably marvels at his modern vision and creativity, and will not be surprised by what he says next, having seen his highly complex structures which exude a certain poetic beauty in motion.

“It has been a struggle for me to envisage a three-dimensional

and non-planar composition such as a non-Euclidean design for a sculpture, which needs to be drawn on the two-dimensional plane in the form of sections, plans and elevations,” he says. “Even more difficult perhaps, is the need to acquire a sort of paradigm shift from thinking in terms of large-scale projects such as buildings, to more subtle language that is better suited for a sculptural undertaking, that is much smaller in scale by comparison.

“These concerns have been an ongoing personal conflict and the result, whether successful or not, is apparent in the work. My undergraduate studies in architecture have undoubtedly moulded a certain way of thinking in conceptualising the physical body of the work.”

As to the elements that inspire him, he cites *Patience*, one of his sculptures on display at Prince Court Medical Centre, as stemming from the culture of visiting loved ones facing health issues; when there is nothing you can do but wait, whether good or bad, it is a very private struggle within each person, revealing the mindful, contemplative psyche behind his stunning works of art.

Though his works are predominantly crafted in metal simply because it is what his commissioning clients request for, Multhalib’s personal preference is timber as it was alive and possesses a history or story. His woodcarving technique can be distilled to the essence of subtracting from a block, and refining and redefining the original block of wood, which to him is inherently a sculptural beauty.

His thoughts about public sculpture is that although the idea behind an artwork is paramount, we ultimately need to consider aspects such as maintenance, surroundings, physical



Commission sculptures at NAZA TTDI's Platinum Park, Kuala Lumpur by Nizam Abdullah

Courtesy of Platinum Park & Nizam Abdullah

limitations of engineering, public safety and sensitivity of the work in relation to cultural differences of the local community.

NIZAM ABDULLAH (NIZAMSCULPTURE.COM)

While Multhalib's jaw-dropping sculpture displays are deep studies of abstraction, the works of fellow artist Nizam Abdullah veer towards a figurative bent. Nizam's sculptural output, to a large extent, bears human and animal forms, embodied by his private collection of the *Rooster Series* and many of his commission works, such as the vibrantly coloured figurines portraying harmony in life and nature, as seen at Platinum Park, KLCC.

In dealing with the so-called local taboos of human figurines and animal sculptures, Nizam's approach is a practical one. "How I sell the work when clients ask if they can display figurative objects is by simplifying," he says. "There are no facial features and I elevate the poses as the subject matter. The last two years have improved as before this, the idea of proposing figurative stuff was not even a possibility."

Specialising in metal, and also working with wood and fiberglass, his forte comes forth in his experimentations with new forms, textures and finishings. The founder of Nizamsculpture also dabbles in fine art and interior design, and thrives on a design philosophy fuelled by exploration and a sense of curiosity.

Currently working on three public sculptures commissioned by Johor Corporation for the Ibrahim International Business District (IIBD), Nizam feels that public art not only serves to educate the public in the appreciation of art and the artists,

but it also complements and enhances our surroundings to become more inspiring, especially in places such as schools, universities and parks.

"I do admire how our neighbours Singapore and Thailand invest in public art and integrate it into their developments," he says. "You can find sculptures at any corner of their buildings which give personality to the buildings and their environments."

"Public artwork should not be destroyed but preserved for future generations, with due credit given to the artists who should not be taken for granted and be obliged to offer free design services," Nizam says. "Artists need to work hand in hand with the public and their clients to make art projects a success, as an artist's work will not happen without his or her supporters."

HAFFENDI ANUAR (WWW.HAFFENDIANUAR.NET)

A relative newcomer in the public art scene, Haffendi Anuar was trained in prestigious art schools in Providence and London. His first point of wanting to be a sculptor occurred during his internship as an in-house model-maker for architecture firm T. R. Hamzah and Yeang in Kuala Lumpur.

"I was making models at the firm. There I realised I enjoyed just constructing things," Haffendi says. "I have always valued the notion that one can test out ideas and thoughts, as well as observations of the immediate environment and the world through physical materials. I discovered that there is a way of understanding something through the senses, and prodding and nudging objects and materials are alternative gestures to reading and looking."



Courtesy of Battersea Power Station and Cass Sculpture Foundation. Photo: Thierry Bal

Machines for Modern Living (2017) in London by Haffendi Anuar

"It is quite magical that as a sculptor, I could work on something and try to make the material behave in a new way; while also through this manipulation, open new readings and understanding of another subject."

Not a medium-specific artist, Haffendi's choice of materials and final sculptural forms are often dictated by his ideas. He has worked with paper, metal, clay, wood, plastic, printed images, Plexiglas and cement among others. Like Multhalib, he was also a Rimbun Dahan art resident alumnus, and during his second residency there, he collaborated with artist friend and ex-coursemate Veronika Neukirch on a painting and sculpture, accompanied by a book, *Hafka*, to document the exchanges and works produced during that period.

About his first ever-public artwork entitled *Machines for Modern Living* for the Battersea Power Station Powerhouse Commission in 2017, Haffendi says, "Being a site-specific sculpture, the premise of my proposal are the iconic and majestic chimneys of the power station, and how they appear in relation to modern sculpture of the West, and in formally echoing the stilts of traditional Malay architecture."

"For it to be my first ever commission and in London makes it a significant moment in my career. Furthermore, the opportunity to work with such a respected institution like the Cass Sculpture Foundation on the project was a pleasure and a great learning curve."

Haffendi is currently busy with his next outdoor sculpture, an interactive piece for BRDB's Tamansari development in Rawang, which will be unveiled soon and also, on a commission

project with his alma mater (International School of Kuala Lumpur) to install artworks by students in their new campus. At his studio practice, a new installation-like series of freestanding and tabletop sculptures straddling figuration and abstraction, based on Malaysian plants and composed of flowerpots and vases, is in progress. On top of that, he is experimenting on combining photographic images with abstract sculptural forms.

Malaysia being a developing nation is one where most do not understand art and sculpture, with a small minority who appreciate it. Cultivating the appreciation of art is a process that needs to start somewhere through education and awareness as concluded at the inaugural Pentago House event. As for Haffendi, his stance is an optimistic one about the role of public art in the country.

"A lot of Malaysians do not visit galleries and museums regularly as it is not yet part of the general culture," he says. "Bringing art to the public realm is great way for people to encounter art and making art seem like a natural part of the living environment."

He points out the issues concerning the maintenance of public sculptures, and the ethical implications and responsibilities of the commissioning body, so setting up an association of sculptors to monitor and advise could be of help, in addition to sourcing for funding for more public commissions, says Haffendi.

"When good public artworks are sensitively incorporated into the urban fabric in which they become more than just a 'spectacle' and instead something that could be pondered upon and ignite conversations, I think then, slowly, we are educating the public on art being beyond just a commodity but an integral part of society and the city."