

Art for special children

Teaching art to special needs children requires one to do it one stroke at a time, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

"ISALUTE Seeling," says Parimala Kunju Pillai, 48, with conviction. "We were looking high and low for people who could help children like my son."

Her 12-year-old son, Ryan Raveen Raj is a sweet boy who has been diagnosed with Down Syndrome. "Not many people want to spend time with these kinds of children but Seeling does."

ART LESSON AND EXHIBITION

An artist, Seeling Tan, 41, has developed teaching methods to guide special needs children and young adults with learning difficulties such as Asperger, Autism, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Down Syndrome. At her studio, Thumb Art in Taman Segar Perdana, Cheras, she provides basic foundation in art through observation, imagination and creations. She has also created the Tutti Art Club for all artists under her guidance.

From Oct 13 to 20, in collaboration with Artemis Art Gallery, Seeling is holding an exhibition called Colours Of Joy to promote the works of 11 of her students (including Ryan) from this club and some of her selected works.

Seeling's work with special needs individuals began some four years ago. "I was actually teaching a boy who had Asperger syndrome," says the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Fine Arts degree holder from Universiti Sains Malaysia. "He was being bullied at school and his mother asked if I could take him in. Just to see how he coped with art. From there,



Seeling guiding Ryan with his artwork

I started to work on this seriously."

Seeling also holds a Diploma in Learning Disorder Management and Child Psychology. Her philosophy is that art is not merely a form of expression but also a therapeutic tool. The process of making art builds the children's confidence and self-recognition and helps them improve

their social skills, especially when they participate in art exhibitions.

ONE STROKE AT A TIME

"You must understand that with most children, when you say, 'Paint a hill', they can visualise what a hill is. These children can't," says Seeling. "It's impossible for them to do this."

She demonstrates her techniques when she starts to reach Ryan. His assignment is to draw a whale. Seated next to him, Seeling's instructions are simple. "Straight," she says and draws a line across a piece of paper to denote the division between sea and sky. Ryan then takes a brush and follows her, but on a canvas.

"It is one stroke at a time," says Seeling. "I guide them by showing them. How they do the stroke is up to them. I follow each instruction with a hand movement. That way, they are trained to listen to instructions as well."

That is precisely what Parimala

and feeding it. With swimming, he will just jump in. He doesn't listen to instructions."

What becomes obvious when Ryan completes his painting, is that Seeling's underlying aim to raise the child's self-esteem and self-confidence, has been achieved. Ryan is enormously proud and can't wait to show off his painting of a whale.

Then, there's Suen Yi, an autistic child aged 7. "In the beginning, she would draw lines and divide the canvas. Every square was equal. It was as though each one of those squares was her territory. It was very hard to tap into her. She decided what colours to use. Slowly, the divisions became less and less. Once the canvas was divided only into two, I knew we were making progress. I could show her how to create a scene."

Pointing to one of Suen Yi's latest creations, Seeling says: "Now, this is what she produces in class. Her paintings are without borders. When I put all her paintings in a collage form, you can see the story behind her progress."

When all Suen Yi's paintings were sold last year, no one was more surprised than of Suen Yi's mother. "I couldn't believe that a child like this could buy these paintings," she says. "But the person who bought them loved them. She said they were all pure, plain and innocent."

PROMOTING INDEPENDENCE

The revenue generated from such sales goes towards another one of Seeling's aims and that is to help her charges become independent. "I think this is because I have a design background," explains Seeling. "In the past, I worked in industrial design. I designed furniture. I want to turn the artworks that these children create into something that others can use. It encourages them to work on their art and teaches them to become independent."

Two brothers, Jason Liew Boon Long, 29, and Bernard Liew Boon Chen, 18, as well as Mohd Fitri Junus Mohd Raslan, 18, have seen their works of art developed into commercial products such as bags, scarves and pencil cases under the Pink Jambu label.

The teaching methods are constantly evolving. "Jason and Bernard had already mastered all I could teach them. So, I had to think of something new to teach them to create tones. Together with their mother, we came up with a new technique — rolling," says Seeling. As the boys demonstrate, they roll the paint brush when they create art.

Their mother, 52-year-old Helen Khoo, is relieved that since work-



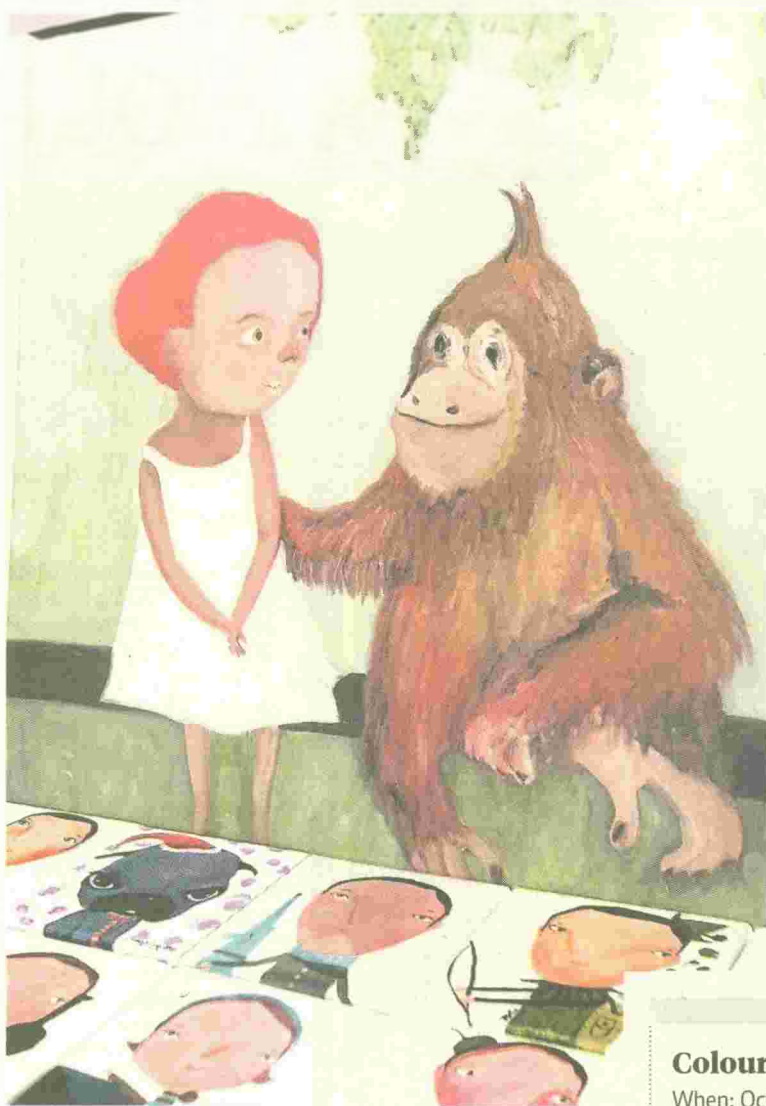
Artwork by Seeling's charge.

wants Ryan to do. "He does not follow instructions and teachers in school complained that he sleeps in class. With Ryan, you can expect the unexpected. For example, with horse riding, I was scared that he would fall off the horse. But he was more interested in bathing the horse



Jason Liew Boon Long has had his work developed into commercial products.

PICTURES BY AMIRUDIN SAHIB



Artwork by Seeling Tan capturing her fascination with children and animals

ing with Seeling, her sons' attitudes have improved. "They have Aspergers. Before, if we said 'no' to anything, there would be a huge fight. Now, they accept the reason we say 'no' to certain things," says the mother of four boys. After a pause, she adds: "But it's not without a challenge."

THE CHALLENGES

Some of the challenges Seeling faces can be quite painful, literally. "One boy was so frustrated that he bit my arm," says Seeling. That said, she empathises with what these children are going through. "I have learnt to dance. And you know, sometimes, what my right hand can do, the left

can't. I have to think about what to do. Imagine how these children feel. They can't coordinate their movements. These children, have no idea what to paint. They are not happy and can't express much. They cannot tell you what is on their mind. We need to go inside their world to bring them out."

She says she has little patience but attributes her ability to understand these children to something that happened when she was a child. "I

Colours Of Joy

When: Oct 13-20
Where: Artemis Art Gallery in Publika, 1 Jalan Dutamas 1, KL
Call: 03-62111891
For registration, contact Seeling at 012-2882 048 or visit tuttiartclub.blogspot.com or www.thumbartstudio.com.

once painted a reindeer with a round nose. The nose was perfectly round and I remember the teacher praising me no end. It made me feel great. This is what I'm trying to help the children with."

She classifies all the art the children make as "expressive art". "There is no inability in art. For these children, art is not about creating dreams but about making every child's dream a reality. I feel wonderful. Even though they have no mental picture, I can guide them to create something visually."

In a voice full of faith and courage, Seeling sums up what she does, saying: "Fear is in the mind. Before we even try, we say cannot. But it's just taking paint and letting your hand follow your heart."



THE A-LIST COMPILED BY ZUHAILA SEDEK-DE BOOIJ

The Big Picture by Stewart MacFarlane
Where: Wei-Ling Gallery, G212 Ground Floor, The Gardens Mall, 59200, KL
When: Daily till Nov 15. 10am-9pm.
Admission: Free
Call: 03-22601106 or visit www.weiling-gallery.com.

A SOLO exhibition by one of Australia's prominent figurative painters. Stewart MacFarlane's previous series of works witnessed both figurative and landscape depictions. The Big Picture is a revisit of these subject matters, this time on a larger scale than previously. Using bold colours and dramatic lighting, his mysterious paintings are a surreal look at the convoluted intricacies of human relationships, set against a backdrop of familiar Australian cityscapes and landscapes.

Tin Mine Landscapes
Where: Shalini Ganendra Fine Art, 8 Lorong 16/7B, 46350 Petaling Jaya.

When: Until Oct 31. Tuesday to Sunday, 11am-7pm
Admission: Free
Call: 03-7960 4740 or visit: www.shaliniganendra.com

A COLLECTION of 41 black and white photographs shot on film in the 1970s by Eric Peris. These photographs first appeared in an eponymously titled book and document our nation's past, which was built — or rather mined — from tin. These glory days aren't exactly spelt out in the show. In fact, it's mostly bleak landscapes where human presence is low, and the stillness in the quarries and ponds all signal the impending change. And change sneaks up on even art, it seems, as most of Peris' original negatives have disintegrated with time and only 23 have been salvaged with digital technology.

Media/Art Kitchen — Reality Distortion Field
Where: Publika, Solaris Dutamas, 1 Jalan

Dutamas 1, Solaris Dutamas, KL.
When: Daily till Oct 20. Daily, 10pm-8pm
Admission: Free
Call: 03-4023 4128 or visit www.mediaart-kitchen.tumblr.com

THIS is a travelling exhibition of works by curators and artists across Southeast Asia and Japan. Viewers will explore sight, sound and the light fantastic.

Solo Exhibition — A Dialogue by Rafiee Ghani

Where: 69 Fine Art Gallery, 22 Jalan Bruas, Damansara Heights, KL.
When: Until Nov 5.
Call: Patrice Vallette at 019-3012 569 or email: 69fineart@gmail.com

THE artist plays with shapes, colours and forms to paint his feelings on canvas. With a hope that the paintings will create a mood for viewers, Rafiee Ghani hopes to offer a lasting memory through his artworks.



Solo Exhibition — A Dialogue by Rafiee Ghani