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BY AWE & TRANCE**PLUSH** art

# ART OF PAIN

Three artists project their intense emotions on to abstract art, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**



Marisa's TNT 9

**V**AN Gogh. Gauguin. Goya. These artists were propelled by their pain and suffering to create great art. This thread of pain and suffering, though not in similar degree, also permeates the works of some of the artists featured in an exhibition called Women Visual Interpretation Exhibition 2016, currently showing at Galeri Prima, Balai Berita, KL.

Indeed, from the moment the guest artist (and only man) in the exhibition, Suzlee Ibrahim, says hello, there's no mistaking the sense of restlessness that emanates from him. It's as though he's running out of time, and needs to achieve so much more although he's had 30 solo exhibitions in more than 20 countries and countless other accolades.

He's also the Dean of the Faculty of Visual Communications & Design at the National Academy of Arts, Culture & Heritage (Aswara).

#### RESPONSE AND MOOD

Prior to describing his artwork in this exhibition, Suzlee shares stories from his childhood in Kuala Terengganu. Often, he feels that his work today is a response to his "lost playground". As the eldest of five children, Suzlee used to accompany his parents when they worked in the paddy fields.

Carefree days were spent climbing trees, making scarecrows and swimming. Shaking his head, he laments that none of these places exist anymore because of development.

Today, this 49-year-old allows his children to decide what paths to choose for their careers. It's a deliberate move on his part because Suzlee wants to be different from his parents. "My parents didn't support the idea of me being an artist," he explains.

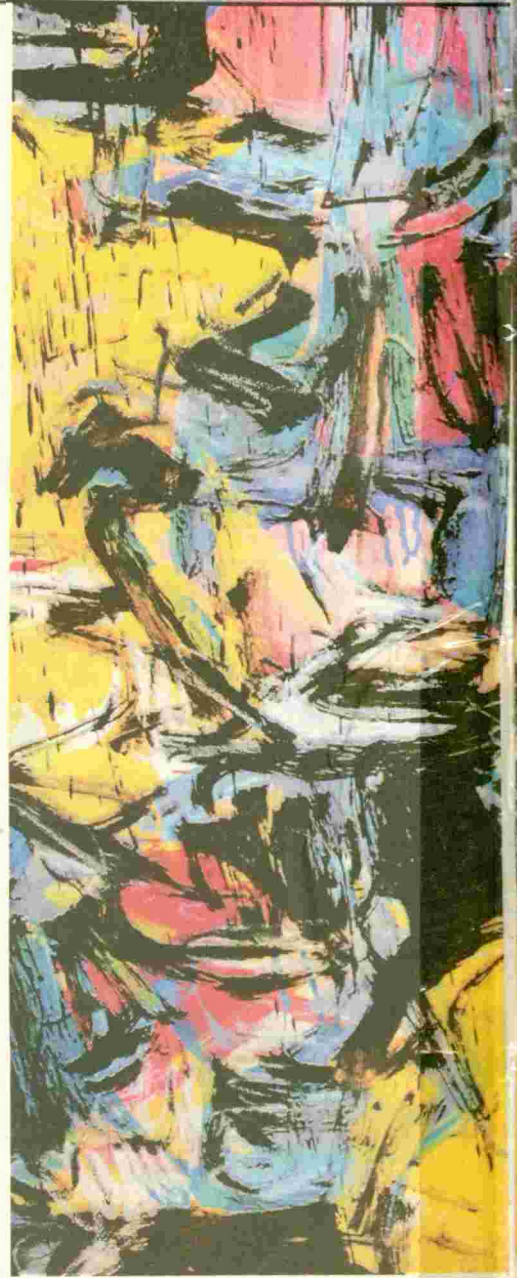
"If good in art meant we had only three options — become an architect, teacher or artist. I chose to be an artist and I took it as a challenge to prove to them that I'd made the right choice."

Some paintings that Suzlee creates are based on his mood at the time of painting. A case in point is *Dark Fire*, where he explored the use of colours that you can see in a flame — dark blue, yellow and black. "I saw that we all have a fire within us," he explains. "I wanted to know how we could control that fire."

That said, the one colour that appears



Marisa R Ng feels charcoal is a tool for creativity.



in all of his paintings is red. This is most evident in his piece from the *Meditation* series. The seemingly happy piece has a base colour of white which Suzlee considers as the colour of emptiness; it's also the one colour that's capable of evoking an immediate sense of calm. Allowing only so much of a glimpse into his past, the idea and concept of this painting was conceived when Suzlee was once detained; it was a time of contemplation and soul searching.

#### SOUL SEARCHING ART

A former student of Suzlee's, Marisa R. Ng, acknowledges that her creative juices were definitely stoked after a period of soul searching. Today, Marisa's works are a response to her many struggles in the past few years. At her lowest point, this single mother of one left her home in Kuala Lumpur and sought refuge in Pulau Kapas in 2010. Throughout her short stay there, Marisa had one recurring thought: "What's wrong with me?" She leans forward, takes a deep breath, looks straight at me and says: "It took a long time for me to accept myself."

Upon her return to the city, Marisa enrolled in a course at Aswara. Marisa ventured into abstract art 1,800 figurative sketches later. The 11 paintings she's offered (titled TNT-1 to TNT-11) for this exhibition are a study of the male figure. Why this particular subject matter, though? Because it's now passe to want to focus on the female body, she says. "There's much more study with their (men's) muscular form," she adds.

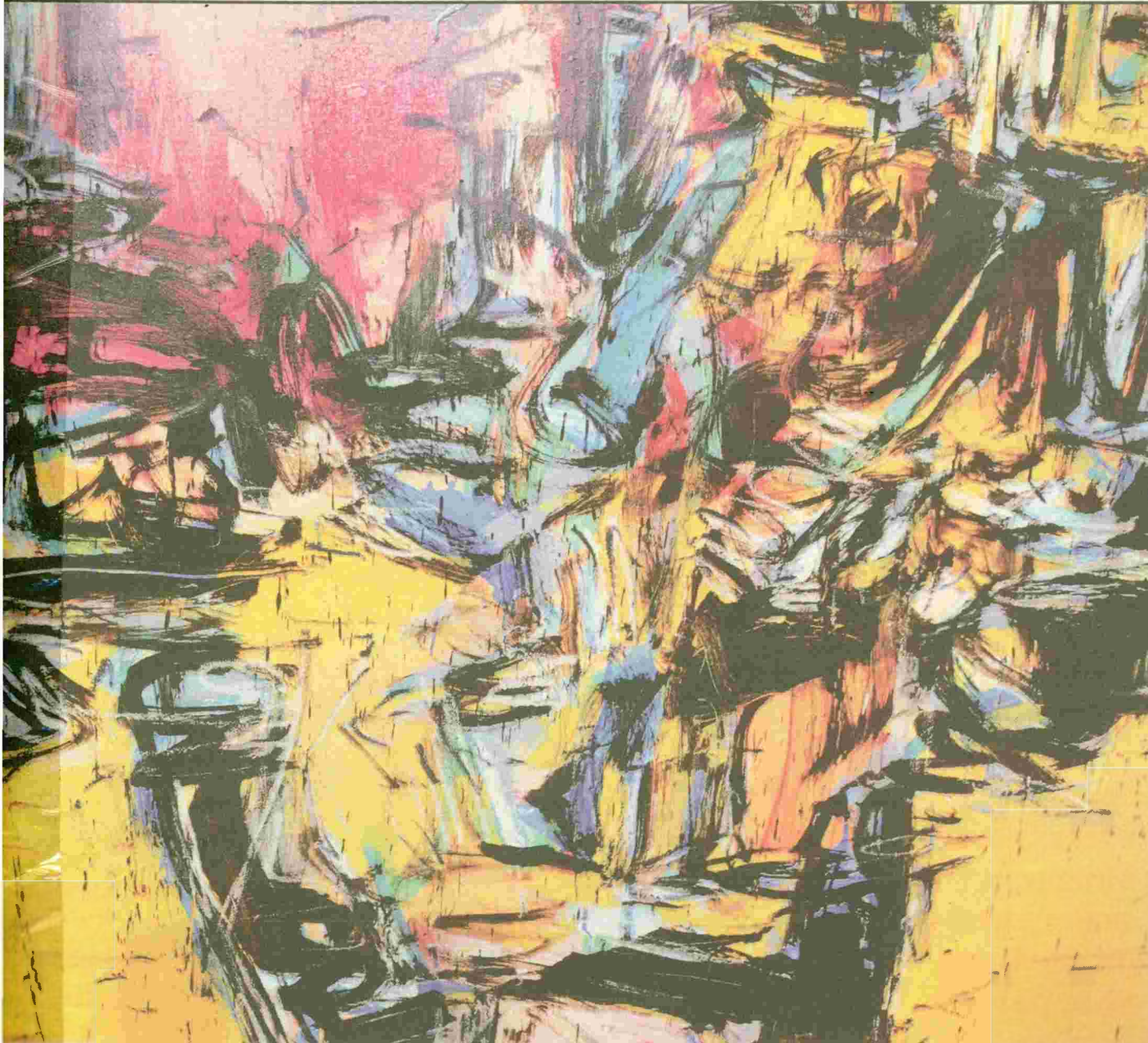
#### A STRONG BACK

This former air stewardess chooses to work with charcoal because she likes its feel in her hands. "I love to use only black in my work," Marisa says.

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**WHAT** Women Visual Interpretation Exhibition  
**WHERE** Galeri Prima, Anjung Liku, Balai Berita, 31 Jalan Riong, KL  
**WHEN** Until Sept 9



One of Suzlee Ibrahim's exhibits, *Reach For Gold*.

PICTURES BY KHAIRUL AZHAR AHMAD AND MUNIRA ABDUL GHANI

Almost tripping over her words, she adds: "There are a thousand colours in black. There are different tones. Shades. Holding the charcoal is like singing. Apply pressure and the lines are chunkier. Tap. Tap. Tap. And you'll get a staccato. Finer lines." None of your paintings will be boring if you use a charcoal as your tool of creativity," she adds.

A common detail that emerges between Suzlee and Marisa is that neither remains seated when they're painting. In fact, when Suzlee refers to his piece *Reach for Gold*, he says: "Look at the brush strokes. They're fast-moving. Sometimes, I jump up and down. It's technical and needs action."

Standing in between two panels that house her paintings, Marisa poses: "Have

you noticed why all my paintings show a man's back?" Without waiting for an answer, she replies: "Because it says a lot when a man has a strong back. It shows that he's not easily swayed. Even if the world around him is crumbling, he'll say, 'So what? I can still find something to do.'"

Such opinions stem, perhaps, from the memory of her grandfather (Ng Meng Guat) whom Marisa says often enlisted her help with his many DIY projects. Today, as an ode to him, Marisa used his old tools to create a unique chandelier that hangs in her home.

#### REALITY AND ROCKS

While Marisa focuses on the male form, Naddia Zakaria chooses to study women. The inspirations for her paintings belie



Naddia Zakaria's *Throw Me Some Socks*.



Naddia Zakaria believes emotions are made crystal clear in facial expressions.



Suzlee Ibrahim paints emotions on canvas.

the seemingly docile persona that this recently married mother-of-one outwardly projects.

With *Remembering*, Naddia confesses that it's her passionate response to the jealous rage she felt when she thought another woman wanted her the husband-to-be. "I was staking my claim," adds Naddia in a deceptively calm tone when describing the sultry woman that she's painted.

"I didn't like my bosses," says Naddia, pointing to another of her paintings, *Throw Me Some Rocks*. "They sent me outstation and it was for a long time. When I returned, they had issues with claims. I worked hard, but I was not appreciated."

With seven siblings, Naddia is the only one who had any interest in art. "I *selalu conteng* (always scribbled) on the wall in the house." Once she stepped away from the corporate world and decided to focus on her art, Naddia first worked on countless images of flowers and landscapes.

With a hunger to improve her artistic skills, Naddia settled on portraiture and says: "It was the only way. Drawing the face can show a person's emotions." Mindful of the religious strictures to refrain from portraying the human body, Naddia chooses to study only the human face.

There's a decidedly sad and dazed vibe coming from the painting called *Realism*. This, Naddia explains, depicts the empathy she feels for the suffering of the Syrians and Palestinians. "The eyes here are telling you to stop the war," she explains. "It's as though she's asking 'Why me?'"

In all, although these artists eschew any association with realism, there's no denying that their works and the stories behind them have a lyrical quality based on gritty realism.