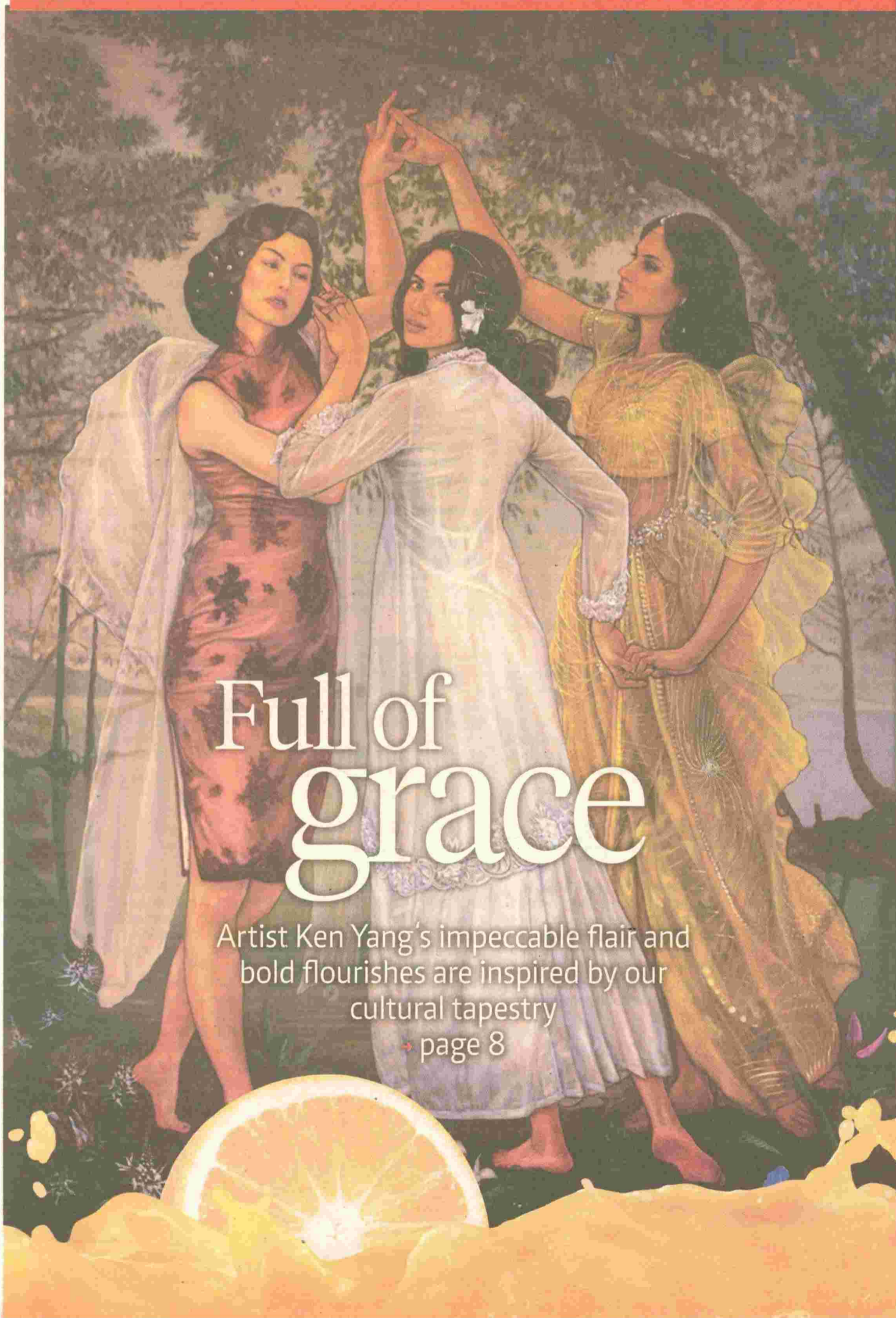


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BROWSER



Full of grace

Artist Ken Yang's impeccable flair and bold flourishes are inspired by our cultural tapestry
→ page 8



LASTING LOVE

→ FAMILY PAGE 5

JUICY BONDING

→ FAMILY PAGES 6 & 7



Hayden Christensen talks about Outcast

→ SHOWBIZ PAGE 14

Ken the artist

Paris-based Malaysian artist Ken Yang aspires to transmit positive energy through his work, writes Aneeta Sundararaj



Ken Yang PICTURE BY SHAHRUL ZAIN

WHEN you meet Ken Yang, he will insist that you refer to him using the title artist. The 35-year-old explains that he has often been mistaken for an architect with the same name and does not appreciate such errors being made.

Nonetheless, here is a man who recently celebrated a successful exhibition called Weaving Tradisi Raya, at Pavilion KL.

One look at Yang's work and it is obvious that he is precise, determined and self-assured. He is also most relaxed when he talks about his work since the only information he is willing to share about his family is that his parents are still alive and his father is "a talented artist".

ARTIST AND HIS ART

"I am not just a painter," he says as he flips the pages of a catalogue that features high quality photographs of his paintings. "I'm an artist."

Referring to an oil painting called *Self-Portrait*, he adds that, apart from wearing the clothes and posing for the painting itself, he exhibited the clothes in his atelier (art studio). He points to an image of a hand-woven shawl from Rajasthan and a cap that men wore when they smoked so their hair would not smell. "I've been collecting all these things. I'm an artist," he says.

White is his favourite colour because "it has almost no colour, yet a lot of colour." He says that each painting takes three to six months to complete. He sidesteps the question

of where he studied art, saying, "I learnt to paint by myself. I've always wanted to paint. My earliest memory was as a child in kindergarten. It was a painting of mountains with a stick of stars sticking out."

Having left Malaysia for Paris 15 years ago, one of the hardest things for him to get used to there was the language. Still, this Kuala Kangsar native now returns home to much glory. There is enormous pride in him when he speaks of his visits to the palace to meet the King and Queen of Malaysia and that he's had the honour of painting members of several royal families.

Citing Leonardo da Vinci as his favourite painter, Yang says: "My work has to be of the highest technical quality. It's not just superficial. It is impeccable. I can work 24 hours a day because this is not work. It may be challenging but I don't feel it. I love it."

To illustrate his point, he turns the pages to another favourite painting, *Pewaris Mutlak Silat Cekak* and says: "I love this painting and I feel very lucky that I got to paint it. The people came to pose for me. They showed me how they wore the sarong, how they did the movements and I learnt that silat is not just martial arts. It's not about fighting but about self-defence. It's a way of life."

"Originally, there were supposed to be two people in the painting -



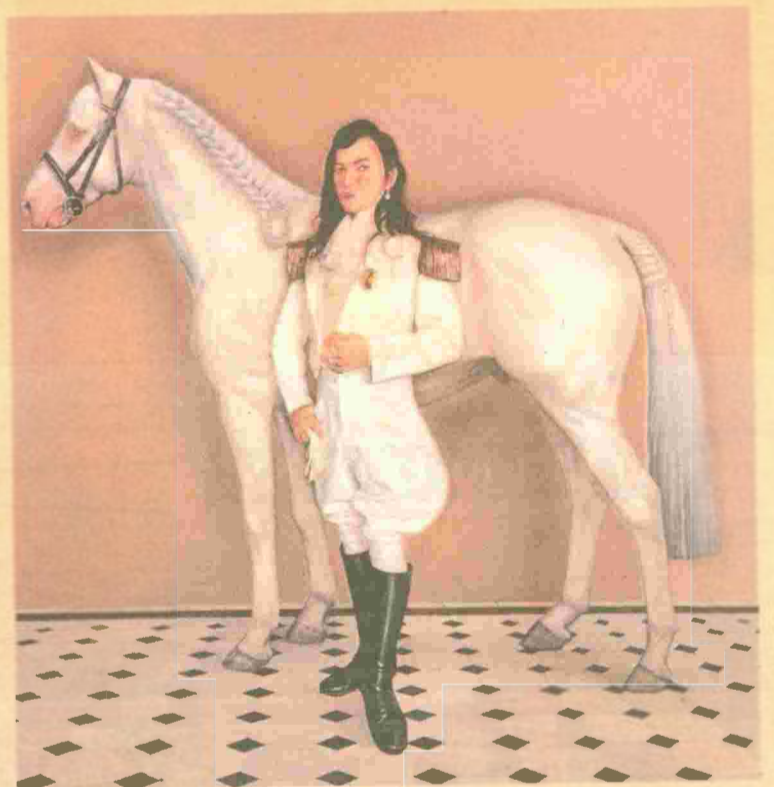
Table Games III - Congkak

good and evil. Then I chose to make it only about one person because I wanted to show that sometimes the biggest enemy is our self. I've also not given this image a time. It's not morning, it's not night. I want it to be timeless. Permanent. In the background, you have Masjid Zahir and it shows this man is protecting religion. Also, it's very flat because this is in Kedah where the land is flat. There's a river which shows movement."

DESIRE FOR MUSEUM PIECES

With a desire to create artworks that are museum pieces, Yang is based partly in Paris and partly in Malaysia. He shows a deep appreciation of all things Malaysian when he admits that something that is quintessentially Malaysian for him is the coconut tree. "If I think of Malaysia, I think of coconut trees. Every part of the tree is useful," he says.

Though it is very hard for him to choose, he says that a painting that he favours most is *The Three Graces - Satu Malaysia*. He explains: "Danielle Graham, Diana Daniel and Deborah Henry posed for this painting. I used the Renaissance technique and I enjoyed working on this. The three women also knew each other and it was not a stranger posing with a stranger. For the background, I studied all the flowers in the garden. Look at the details — white hibiscus, birds that eat insects, decorations in the hair, white hibiscus, morn-



Self-Portrait

ing glory flowers. All details."

Not all his work is serious. For a series on games, he chose to feature a beautiful congkak in *Table Games III - Congkak*. "I was lucky. That is an actual piece from Kelantan. Can you see the look on the man's face? Can you see that there is a marble behind him? Maybe, he's cheating," says Yang with a mischievous smile. Also featured is his favourite animal, the cat.

"That's my neighbour's cat. If used to visit me and even

posed for me. People think the cat is waiting for the food in that food container. Actually, it's waiting to catch the frog stuck to the cover. That is also something so Malaysian — a frog."

Yang sums up his work by saying that he abhors working on pieces with political, sexual or violent messages. Not using his artwork as a form of psychoanalysis either, he sees his work as his ability to transmit positive energy. He concludes: "I want to be a historical painter. If I have to fight, then I will fight for beauty."

