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# PULSE

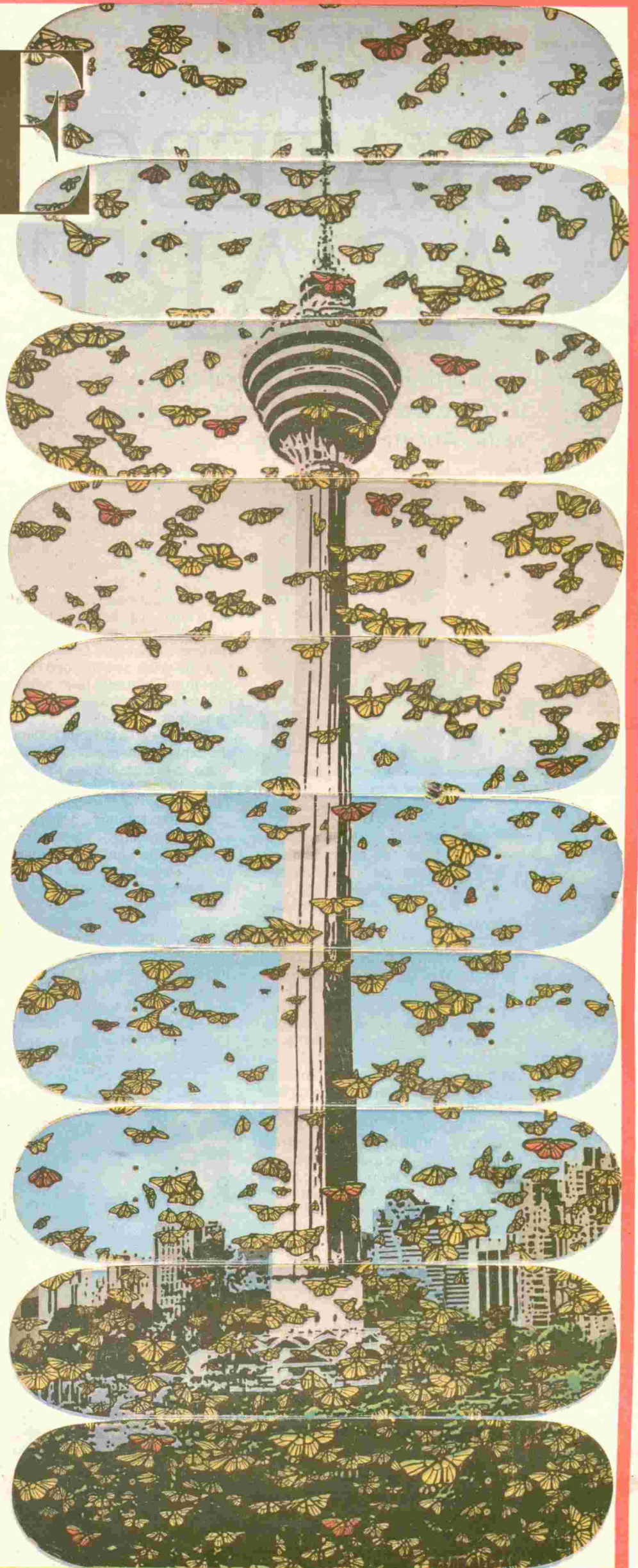
## Skate of the art

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BY LIFE & TIMES**PULSE** people

# SKATEBOARDING AS ART

Three artists have gone beyond convention to create works of art on a unique canvas, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**



Iman Ismail (left) and Najib Ahmad.

**W**HEN someone tells you he's an artist, chances are you'll think he uses conventional media from sketchbooks, canvases and paper to acrylic paint, oil paints and palettes. Then there are the artists who buck the system and do something out of the ordinary to stamp their mark.

This is precisely what happened early this year when a Singaporean curator decided to marry two of his interests: Skateboarding and art. In so doing, what has become manifest is a debut art exhibition in Malaysia called *Cannot Be Bo(a)rdered* that is currently being held in *Urbanscapes House*, in *Jalan Hang Kasturi*, KL.

In this exhibition, 25 artists from Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia use skateboards as their primary medium to create their art works. It's part of the on-going *Urbanscapes 2016* which aims to bring together Malaysian creative communities from the fields of music, the arts, design, film and other creative disciplines.

**SANITY PROJECT**

"It's my 'sanity project,'" explains the 35-year-old curator of the exhibition, Iman Ismail. Sometime last year, while having lunch at a shopping centre opposite the Singapore National Museum where he works, he chanced upon a shop selling skateboards and was tempted to take up the sport again after more than 20 years.

"As a fat kid at 9, I knew I had to lose some weight," he says. He refused to follow his parents' suggestions that he learn to play regular sports like soccer. Instead, he opted to learn to skateboard. But skateboarding as

a boy was completely different from skateboarding as an adult. Could he do this now as an adult? What if he fell and injured himself? He may not recover as fast. It would be embarrassing.

The pull of the sense of freedom once he mastered the skill again was too strong. Also, having achieved some stability in his career and with a regular income, Iman could feel the onset of a mid-life crisis and decided that it was time to give himself a treat. So he bought a skateboard. Smirking, he adds: "It was either that, or a Harley."

There's also a curious addendum to the explanation about the exhibition's name, as this graduate of the LASALLE-SIA College of The Arts explains. The reason the letter "a" appears in parentheses is Iman's idea of a bad pun.

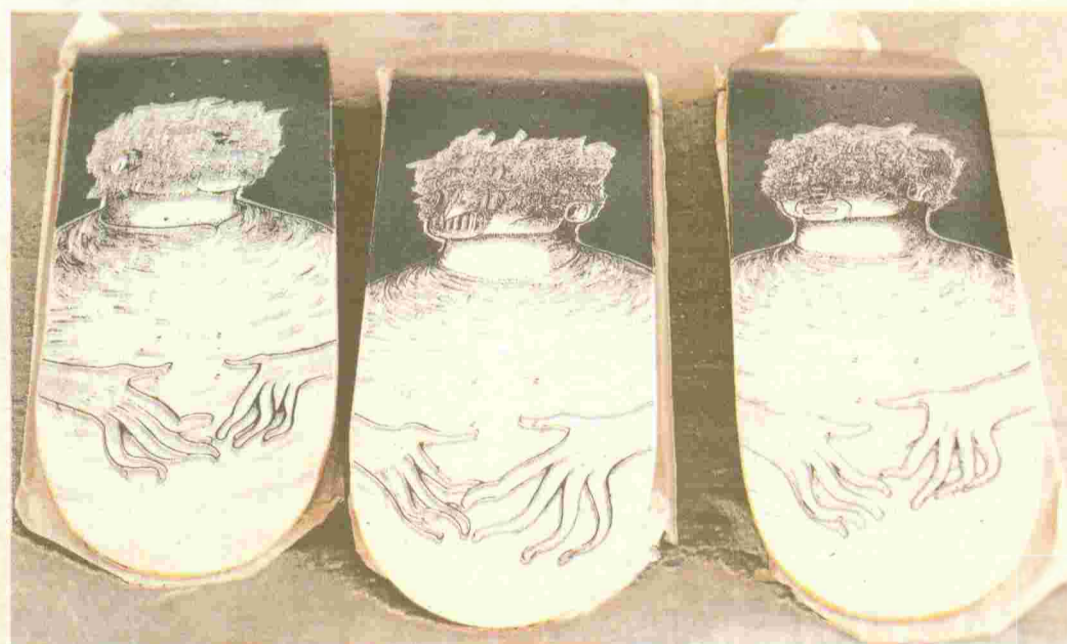
"I have a tendency to be corny," says Iman. "Sometimes, in my emails with friends, when we want to meet up at the skate park, we'll say something like 'Board meeting tomorrow' and we'd know what it means." A formal interpretation, however, is that it's a unique take on the phrase "can't be bothered" as it marks mischievous disregard for authority and the youth rebellion of skateboarders.

That rebellion wasn't, in fact, why the sport started. Sometime in the late 1940s and 1950s, a group of passionate surfers in California were bored out of

their minds while the waves were flat. They got together, pooled their ideas and created a set of wooden square boards and attached wheels to them. In this manner, they could practise "sidewalk surfing" which emulated surfing styles. Today, though, in Iman's opinion, the Singaporean skateboarder often follows a fad when skateboarding, but his Malaysian counterpart has "a burning passion" for the sport.

**UNIQUE RESPONSE**

One of the things that fascinated Iman was the graphics that people created on the



More interesting offerings from the exhibition.

PICTURES BY AMIRUDIN SAHIB



**PULSE** *people* BROUGHT TO YOU BY LIFE & TIMES



**"It was either that (skateboard), or a Harley."**

*Iman Ismail*



skateboards as an identifying mark. From this observation, he began to conceive the idea of fusing both his passion for skateboarding and art. The basic question he put forward to the artists whose works he chose to curate was: "If I give you, the artist, 10 skateboards — which are essentially pieces of wood — how will you respond?"

Two of the Malaysian artists who did respond are Azrin Mohd and Najib Ahmad Bamadhaj. Azrin is intensely fascinated with retelling of stories through material objects, social commentaries and his

own childhood experiences, while Najib is known for his affinity for the concept of "wall translated on" canvas. Although they have won many local and international awards between them, it's highly amusing to watch them interact.

"You should see his studio," Azrin says. "It's so neat. All the brushes are arranged in a straight line. Everything in its place."

"No. I'm not so bad," Najib replies.

"Yes, you are!" Azrin is quick to respond. "You have OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder)."

"No," Najib says, his tone resolute.

Azrin snuffs out his cigarette and says: "You're in denial." And with that, Najib responds by pursing his lips and saying nothing, perhaps giving deference to an artist who's some 18 years older to him.

**EXPRESSING THEIR VIEWS**

Their work-methods aside, there's a common thread between their work in this exhibition: the need to express their views through their art. Indeed, to counter Iman's opinion that Najib's work has that "touristy" feel to it, Najib insists that there are many "layers of metaphors" to his work.

In *Stand Tall* (cover picture), the image of a whole host of pretty butterflies superimposed on the Kuala Lumpur Tower actually mean something altogether different. Those butterflies are a metaphor for the *rakyat* (citizens), who are seen as fragile, pure and free.

"As a nation, we must have pride and stand tall," adds the 29-year-old alumnus of Johor High School and graduate of UiTM Malacca and Shah Alam. Azrin's work is called *Dulu Lain, Sekarang Lain*. The intersecting lines of thread show the connection between each of the people he's chosen to paint, who included political figures.

Ultimately, the aim of the entire exhibition can be summed up in this way: we have to recognise that the skate culture has influenced many aspects of our lives from present day music to the designs of our urban space.

As Iman insists, it has even contributed to uniting people all over the world. He believes this is so simply because the singular parting greeting that skateboarders the world over will use is this: "Skate Safe, Bro."



*Azrin Mohd*