



From the Ground Up

Text
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Long overshadowed by its showier neighbours like Singapore, the art scene in Malaysia, with its experimental artist-run spaces, grassroots festivals and vibrant gallery scene, is finally attracting the attention it deserves. We sit down with Liza Ho, founder of The Back Room gallery and Beverly Yong, co-founder and director of art consultancy RogueArt to get their take on the scene.

DESIGN ANTHOLOGY: Liza, you spearheaded the rejuvenation of The Zhongshan Building, a 1950s building that's been transformed into a creative hub. How would you introduce the project and the community you cultivated?

LIZA HO: We started the project in 2017. My mother-in-law inherited the building, which is tucked away in a forgotten area of Kuala Lumpur, quite near Chinatown. It's actually three buildings that are interconnected, and we had about 2,200 square metres to play with. I only wanted a gallery at first, but then I realised that the area wasn't really hip, so we wanted to bring in people from different backgrounds related to art.

On the ground floor of the building, we have the more sophisticated shops and a bakery with a courtyard. Up one level we have a small coffee shop and the gallery. The building was previously residential, so on the upper levels the original layout of each space includes a living room, pantry and a corridor. All the spaces are quite small and intimate. We have many graphic design studios, artist studios and all kinds of grassroots initiatives, like the Malaysia Design Archive and The Ricecooker Archives.

Having the gallery here makes it a little more approachable than a white cube in the middle of an expensive area, so we have more people coming in and coming back. In Malaysia we don't have the kind of culture where people go to museums or galleries regularly.

So it's a more recent phenomenon for people to visit galleries on the weekend, even in venues like The Zhongshan Building?

BEVERLY YONG: Yes, there was always a gallery scene in Malaysia, but it was very small. We had a handful of the first galleries in the 60s and 70s, and in the late 80s that expanded to a few more. Really what you see now was born in the 90s and 2000s, and since then it's kind of mushroomed.

Outside of institutions and white cube spaces, in Malaysia there are many artist-initiated spaces, as well as artists who include their communities in their art practice. Could you tell us more?

BY: That's a huge part of what you might call 'the Malaysian art scene'. There have been very strong community-based practices for decades now, with several notable artist collectives. Some great veteran groups like Five Arts Centre have been around since the 80s. Their idea was to bring together individuals from different disciplines like art, music and theatre. They're still active today, though now they're more performance-based. Then there's Lostgens', which has an artist-run space. One of their early projects was notthatbalai, a self-organised public art festival whose name plays off that of a major national art institution in Malaysia. They also did an artist-run festival around the historical Penang Clan Jetties where a fishing community lives, involving live music performances, installations and a concert on a sampan. A lot of their work is about researching and communicating with local communities about what kind of art they want to see.

LH: Pangrok Sulap is another art collective. They work with woodcut printing and use the medium to talk about social issues. There are about twenty of them in Sabah, and they reach out to the community and do community workshops.

BY: The idea is for them to teach the community to be able to make woodcuts to express themselves and to talk about the struggles they're facing. There's also an economic element where proceeds from sales of the work support the community's needs.

LH: As for spaces, not a lot of people are aware of all the galleries in Kuala Lumpur, and even less so the artist-run spaces like REXKL, an old cinema space that's been repurposed into a cultural hub in Chinatown, which shows art, serves food, hosts workshops and has a huge bookstore. Another one is The Godown, which used to be a club a

long time ago and is now a multidisciplinary space with performances, exhibitions and pop-up markets.

Have you been impressed by any shows recently? Are there any Malaysian artists that you're particularly excited about right now?

LH: Multidisciplinary artist chi too. He put ten sky dancers, the tube men you see at a petrol stations, in the confined space of our gallery. The title of the show was It Will Be Noisy, Messy, and Very Touchy-Feely, which is exactly what it was.

BY: There's a tendency to say 'Oh, it's all painting in Malaysia' and that it's stuck in this market-driven narrative. But I saw several video-based storytelling works and installations at a recent show at ILHAM Gallery. I liked Hoo Fan Chon's work about a transgender figure called Ava whose photographs he discovered. She has passed away, so he talked to her childhood best friend who shared their life story and their experiences. The work consisted of photographs, video and audio interviews.

What do you think sets the Malaysian art scene apart?

BY: The challenge and the interesting thing is that it's hard to get a grip on. The challenge is that we'd like to see more people talk and engage with each other across different divides. At the same time, there's a lot of room for discovery. There's a whole alternative scene with a lot of independent spaces. There's also a burgeoning digital art and NFT scene. And the art market has been going quite healthily now for a good twenty-five years, and it continues as a driving force. So, I think there's lots to dip into from different directions.

Beverly, in *Narratives in Malaysian Art*, the four-volume publication you co-edited, you describe your subject as 'unwieldy, complex and colourful'. Would you say this description also applies to the contemporary art scene?

BY: Liza, what do you think? Is it complex and unwieldy?

LH: I think it's definitely complex. In Malaysian society, we not only have classes, but we also have so much cultural diversity. There's a bit of segregation, and the arts mimic that a bit.

BY: If you're looking at Malaysian art history, for example, it's written in three different languages, which not many people have cross read and there's not that much documentation. And as Liza said, with the arts there's so much cultural identity and complexity embedded in that narrative. When we say it's colourful, it's like how you might say, 'Oh, they're a colourful character'. So, parts of it can be a bit exasperating sometimes but it's also beautiful and constantly fluid as well.



Previous page and facing page
 Malaysia's dynamic art scene
 has been led by community-
 based initiatives for decades.
 One such initiative is Beverly
 Yong's art consultancy
 RogueArt, which worked on an
 exhibition for artist Yee I-Lann,
 titled Borneo Heart, at Sabah
 International Convention Centre
Images by Flanegan Bainon

This page, top and middle
 Liza Ho (middle, right)
 spearheaded the transformation
 of a 1950s apartment building
 in Kuala Lumpur to become
 the creative fulcrum that is The
 Zhongshan Building
*Images by Alvin Lau (top), Eiffel
 Chong (middle, left) and Amani
 Azlin (middle, right)*

Bottom, left
 Yong co-founded Malaysian art
 consultancy RogueArt in 2008

Bottom, right
 Multidisciplinary artist chi too's
 exhibition *It Will Be Noisy, Messy,
 and Very Touchy-Feely* at The Back
 Room
Image by Kenta Chai

