

LIFE&TIMES **ART**

# Intelligent expression

Gallerist Nazli Aziz wants to delve into the creative soul of Malaysian artists, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**H**OW would you feel if you discover that your father had kept a work of art you created when you were a child? After all, you were 4 when you created this masterpiece.

"It was a pleasant surprise for me to find out that my father placed this work of art in his office. I never knew that he kept it," says Mohammad Nazli Abdul Aziz, managing director and founder of Galeri Chandan.

The affable 47-year-old elaborates: "In 1972, I won a set of poster-coloured paints in an art competition. I remember my father staying by my side while I painted this on the terrace of our modest home in Ampang Jaya. He came home with a plywood-backed Pacific Asia Travel Association (Pata) conference poster and suggested that I paint on the flipside.

"At that time, I was fascinated with aeroplanes. I don't know why I painted the colours of the rainbow on the wings of the plane but I remember it was the year when Malaysia Singapore Airlines (MSA) was changed to Malaysian Airlines System (MAS). I wasn't sure how to arrange the letters M, S and A, and decided to do it in a triangle. My dad asked me to sign the painting and helped me to paint the date."

Nazli once exhibited this painting at his gallery, Galeri Chandan. This local multi-disciplinary arts gallery recently won the "Most Promising Asean Gallery" award at Prudential Eye Awards, a series of awards for contemporary Asian art. Nazli has also been appointed as the Local Advisor for the upcoming Prudential Malaysian Eye exhibition.

This exhibition will showcase the works of over 20 local artists, a seminal art reference book featuring 75 local artists and a series of programmes around creative education. It doesn't stop there, though. As an extension of the Global Eye Programme, selected works from this exhibition will then form part of an art collaboration called Start Art Fair at Saatchi Gallery in London, from June 26 to 29.

## THE GALLERIST

Delving into stories about his past, it is easy to see where this father of four



gets his foresight, ambition and discipline. Tongue-in-cheek, he says: "I was born, bred and I am breeding in Kuala Lumpur. I was sent to the Royal Military College (RMC) in Sungai Besi. They put you in situations where you are taught to become a leader. You start at ground zero. They reset you and infuse you with

military-style principles. For example, one of the things we had to do was clean our rooms and the windows. Of course, the inspections were very thorough. But if they found that the windows were dirty, it wasn't the person who cleaned it that was punished. He was excluded. It was the rest of us in the rooms. That way we learnt not to sabotage our work and not to be selfish, that whatever we do has an effect on others."

Will he send his children to the RMC? "No, they don't want to go. No playstation and no Internet. How?"

After Nazli qualified as a chartered builder with a focus on interior designing, he forged a career in the corporate world. Though successful, he decided to leave, "to create something for myself. I was tired of living on other people's glory".

Then again, Nazli didn't jump

straight into setting up the gallery. "In fact," he says, "before I started the gallery, I took a 'helicopter view' of the local arts scene. I could see the gaps in it. The interior designing business is still my core business. But with this gallery, what I can do is to give the client a full service of design and artwork. For instance, I can design a beautiful office. Then, the client will come in and put his own paintings up. It spoils everything we tried to create."

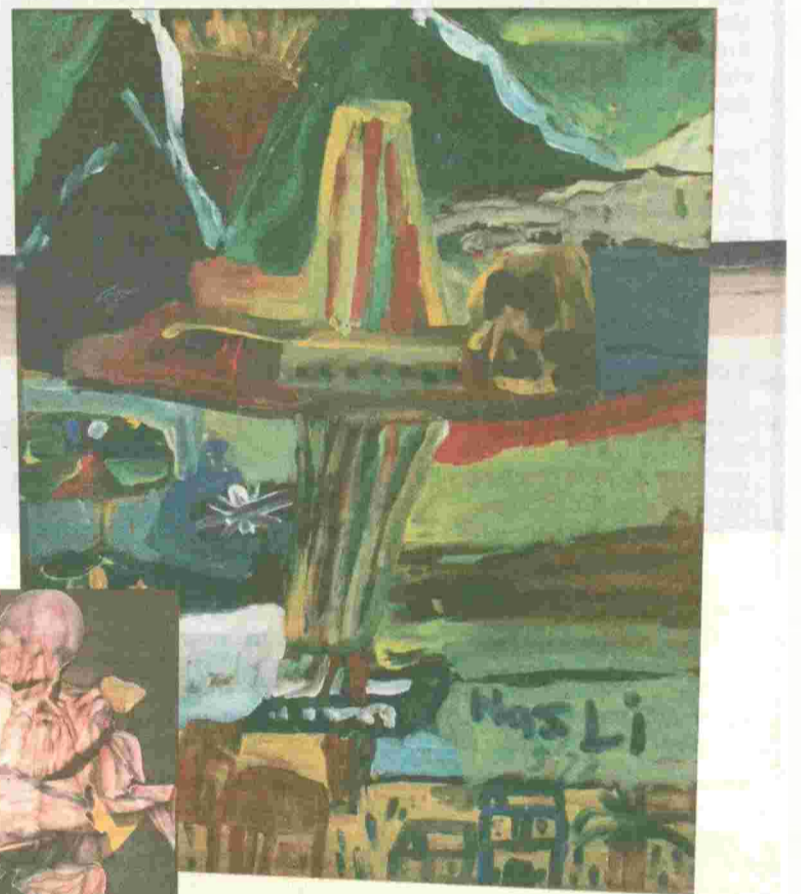
He admits that his venture is "half commercial and half an institution." Nonetheless, he concedes that: "There must be a concerted effort to bring Malaysian art overseas. One has to be positive about these things."

Running a successful gallery can be an uphill task, though. Nazli says: "We need to transform Malaysian art into a cultural asset."

He believes that the highest



Nazli is focused on producing unique pieces.



Nazli's painting when he was 7.

point of evolution is contemporary thought and a stamp of such contemporary thought in a people is its culture. "Many in this country have not reached that yet. It is only when they are well-fed and there are policies that promote equality to all can the people focus on something beyond aesthetics."

This will involve delving into what he calls "intangibles".

## EYE FOR ART

Looking thoughtful, Nazli says: "Artists need to go beyond aesthetics and express themselves. And Malaysians are unique in a way that sets them apart from everyone else. There are still three main races and each is

allowed to practise its own culture. I mean, being Indian in India is nothing new. But being Indian in this country still makes you unique."

Therefore, Malaysian Eye, Nazli feels, was a natural progression for Galeri Chandan. "They came to us. And that's a validation that we're good. Saatchi Gallery has an eye for visual trends and this is an opportunity to survey what's available in Malaysia. It will be like looking into the souls of Malaysians and is reflective of our society at any given time."

Nazli insists that we need to understand that artists are smart people. "They have the ability to say sensitive things creatively. Artists are creative professionals who earn their degrees. They deserve credit for that ability for 'intelligent expression'."