

JOLLY KOH

The Art Romanticist

BY SITI WAJIBAH KHOLIL



Dr Jolly Koh is one of the most respected artist-academician of his years. His artworks are very much celebrated as he is considered as one of the prime movers in the modern art scene. He is an intellectual as well as an aesthetic tour de force with a vast range of experience gained through his residence in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia and many other countries. Since the 1960's, Koh has played a major role in transforming local art and amazingly still continues to do so until this very day.

KOH'S HISTORY & EDUCATION

Jolly Koh was born in Singapore in 1941. His family moved to then Malaya during the Japanese occupation when he was an infant. They then resided in Malacca. He was part of an affluent Straits Baba family. In one of his book publications, *Artistic Imperatives: Selected Writings and Paintings*, he credits his grandfather for being an integral influence on his development during his teenage years. At the age of 13, he had already won the prestigious Milo Art competition and by the time he was 16, he was given a one-man

show at the British Council in Kuala Lumpur, followed by another one in Singapore. Drawing and painting had always been an interest to Koh and at the age of 15, he took part in the Selangor Art Society exhibition. Impressively at the age of 16, he held his first solo exhibitions; one in KL and the other in Singapore.

Koh wanted to pursue his passion and become an artist. Dedicated to his dream, he went to Hornsey College of Art in London to major in painting in 1959 when he was



Jolly Koh signing his most recent publication, *Jolly Koh@76* during his latest exhibition



Jolly Koh with his guests at the *Jolly Koh@76* exhibition held at the White Box in Publika

only 18, with his grandfather supporting his studies. His student life in London allowed him to experience first hand in his initiation into the world of literature, theatre and music. His time at Hornsey played a major part in his development as an artist and art educator. He was introduced to the Basic Design programme initiated by figures such as Victor Pasmore and Maurice de Sauzmarez, and he received his National Diploma in Design in 1962.

In the same year, he expanded his career prospects by furthering his studies and received the Art Teacher's Certificate from London University in 1963. He then went off to teach but he also painted at the same time. In 1970 onwards, he pursued his Master of Science degree majoring in Art Education as well as his Doctor of Education degree in Philosophy of Education at Indiana University in the United States.

During the 1970's and 80's, making an income through painting was difficult, thus his sole occupation was teaching. After the

completion of his studies in 1975, he was offered a job in Australia and taught at a high school in Melbourne. He also worked with celebrated Australian artist John Olsen for a certain period and subsequently secured a senior lecturer post in Adelaide where he worked for 10 years. It was only in the late 90's that he became a full-time artist after he returned home.

THE ART OF JOLLY KOH

Paint is Jolly Koh's forte and he uses various techniques, mainly acrylic with oil on top that modifies the initial layer. Lively yet dreamy, vibrant but enchanting, Koh's romanticism is very apparent with lyrical quality, unveiling his inner persona. Therefore, his works portray a strong and resolute quality that reflects his personality.

Koh's paintings are reflections of more than the sensual pleasure of painting, exploring colour and space like no other. The awe-inspiring result of his intention in invoking his viewers' feeling of pleasure when gazing into his

magnificent work stems from the belief that a painting must be beautiful in order to be able to fulfil its function of providing aesthetic pleasure which he does so very well.

His works have been collected by numerous local and international museums, corporations, banks and hotels such as J.D. Rockefeller III Collection in New York, the National Art Gallery in Victoria, Australia, the Kasama Nichido Museum of Art in Japan, Bank Negara Malaysia and The Fullerton Hotel in Singapore as well as the Kuala Lumpur Hilton.

Although he has had several solo exhibitions in Malaysia between 1957 and 1969, he did not exhibit in Malaysia again for almost 23 years. Until recently, he has participated in numerous exhibitions in the USA, Australia, Thailand, Brazil and India. One of Koh's most recent solo exhibitions was held at the White Box in Publika, KL from Nov 30 to Dec 17, 2017, featuring over 40 of his best works in the last 15 years as well as the launch of his art book, *Jolly Koh@76*



The *Terang Bulan Series* marked his moon-painting era between 1994 and 1996, which later led to his rising sun paintings at the end of the era. The series shows Koh's alchemist-like talent in manipulating the hues of colour and temperature, which sets the tone and mood of his masterpieces. The glow of his *Terang Bulan series* incites an ethereal feel that makes the beauty of his works eternal in one's memory. Art aficionados, collectors and interested buyers can expect his magical works to be featured at the KL Lifestyle Art & Space auction this April 2018.

Untitled (*Terang Bulan Series*), 1995
Acrylic on linen 91 x 121.5 cm
RM 35,000 - RM 50,000
KLAS Art Auction April 2018
Sale XXXI