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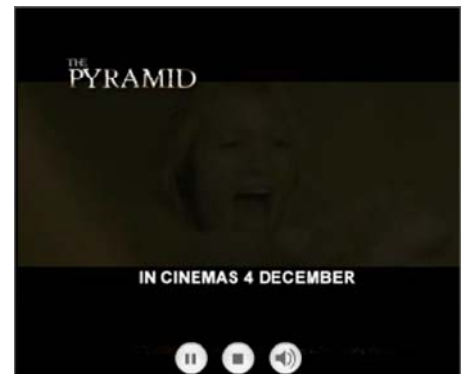
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The Sasaran International Art Festival three years on

BY ROUWEN LIN



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A fishing village is transformed into an arts and culture centre with over 60 participating artists from more than 20 countries.

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WHEN homegrown artist Ng Bee first mooted his idea almost a decade ago, it was met with scepticism and raised quite a few eyebrows.

An art festival in Sasaran, a sleepy little fishing village nestled between Kuala Selangor and Klang? In a place with 4,000 villagers, one school and one main road?

Whatever for? What a preposterous idea, surely!

Ng relates that many villagers were dismissive, telling him that art has no place here as it is a "rich man's hobby" – and that a fancy art gallery in the city, and not a humble fishing

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Ng Bee

village, is where it belongs.

But Ng, who was born and bred in this village, was relentless in chasing his dream of transforming this place into an art and culture centre.

His time spent pursuing his art studies at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore, and then his travels abroad to art exhibitions, art festivals and workshops, convinced him that there was not only a place for art in his hometown, but it would be where it converged and flourished.

"I believed that art can influence the villagers, change their attitude and their way of life. Alongside six other villagers, we stood our ground and we were committed to our goal. And at last that persistence paid off," he says.

Three years after he put forward the idea, the inaugural Sasaran International Art Festival played host to 35 artists from all over the world in 2008.



Ng Bee's *Chess on the Roof* ponders the influence of technology on face-to-face communication and interaction. — Photos RICKY LAI/The Star

It was a turning point of sorts. But for Ng, who is chairman of non-profit organisation Sasaran Arts Association, the journey was only just beginning.

"In this fishing village," he says, "you can talk about fish, boats and how to repair fishing nets. But art? With art, we had to start from scratch."

He recalls that in the early stages, a crash course he provided proved helpful in introducing the basics of art to the villagers. When the artists arrived from near and far for the festival, the villagers were encouraged to get involved in their art-making process. These efforts piqued the interest of some, but many remained indifferent.

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Ng relates that he only truly saw a change of heart when the second festival rolled around in 2011.

“Now, for our third art festival, the whole village has come on board – and with so much enthusiasm!” he says.

“The villagers have evolved from knowing nothing about art to being involved in the art circle ... they have contributed their time and energy in promoting art in this fishing village. They have allowed artists to paint on their walls and they let out their rooms and houses for artists to stay in during the festival.”



Chow Chin Chuan's *Fish and Release*.

SJK(C) Chung Wah, the only school in Sasaran, is used as the main venue, with its classrooms transformed into art studios for the duration of the festival.

Artists create their works in their classrooms-turned-art studios, and the public are invited to walk in and pay them a visit. Temple compounds and the alumni association of SJK(C) Chung Wah's building space will house different art exhibitions. Villagers young and old are pitching in, offering helping hands whenever and wherever needed.

“This is a sign that the seed of art has spread to every corner of this village and is deep in everyone's heart. Sasaran has indeed evolved from just a small fishing village into an art village,” says Ng.

Sasaran International Art Festival 2014, with 65 artists from 23 countries (including 17 artists and Art-Semble art group from Malaysia) will run till Dec 8.



Ng Kim Heoh's *Challenging the Unknown*.

Calling the art festival an “international cultural exchange”, veteran artist Long Thien Shih, who has been onboard this art festival since the beginning, first as an art advisor of sorts, then as a participating artist, says it has transformed the fishing village in more ways than one.

“The young people are leaving this place to seek better job opportunities in big cities, but this art festival is quite a big attraction and the whole village comes alive. At the last one we had about 1,000 people coming each day. The festival is only going to get bigger, so I think this place is going to be very well-known one day!”

Not only is the festival held in what seems to be an unlikely location for an art festival, but it also attracts artists from far and wide.

“I met Shipu (AZM Moniruzzaman) from Bangladesh at an art biennale 20 years ago. He teaches videography in university in his home country, and this year he is one of the participating artists in the Sasaran International Art Festival,” says Long.

“Another artist is Trinh Tuan from Vietnam, who has been very supportive of the festival, helping us to round up other artists from Vietnam,” he adds.

This year’s theme, *Art In The Air*, is inspired by the all-encompassing presence of art in our lives.

“Art exists everywhere,” says artist and secretary of the organising committee of this year’s Sasaran International Art Festival Ng Kim Heoh, who goes by Kim. She shares that they expect more than 10,000 visitors in total heading over to Sasaran to check out the festival.

“Art is universal, art is for everyone, art belongs to the public. Therefore, we

welcome everyone, from north to south, from Malaysia or overseas, everyone is welcome to come to Sasaran and share in the joy,” she says.



Sasaran International Art Festival presents murals and installation art in the little fishing village of Sasaran.

Kim adds that prior to the launch of the festival, the village already had visitors from other states dropping in and checking out the works that were completed in advance.

“The festival has expanded over the years. This year not only marks the biggest in terms of artist participation and involvement from the locals, but it also covers various art fields – from sculptures to printmaking, ceramics to installation works and performing arts.”

The main event of the festival is the art workshops, where local and international artists will work on sculptures, paintings, ceramics and printmaking. Additionally, the festival will present various exhibitions (ceramics, watercolour and other paintings), murals, installation art, seminars, an art competition and a student creative art camp.

An “Art in the Air Festival Night” will be held on Dec 6, with street performances, a parade from the student creative art camp and participating artists, and a music and dance stage show.

“We are excited that for the first time, Sasaran Arts Association and Romania Inter-Art Foundation have signed a collaboration agreement. This will encourage the exchange of ideas between fellow artists not just in Malaysia but also overseas,” she says.

Long comments that the festival is for the everyman and that it is impressive to see the villagers come together to make this art festival a success.

“Sasaran is a fishing village, right? So some of the villagers will be feeding hundreds of people with the fish they catch!” he concludes.

Sasaran International Art Festival runs till Dec 8. An exhibition, featuring selected works produced during the festival, will be on display till Dec 16. For more information, visit www.sasaranarts.org.my or call Ng Bee (012-257 9057) or Ng Kim Heoh (012-416 1933).

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