

# Canadian artist discovers Indonesia

**M**ention the name Ken Pattern to most Jakarta art lovers and you will get a nod of recognition. His intricate pen and ink drawings, documenting the dramatic changes in Jakarta's cityscape in the 1990's have made him almost a household name.

The chaos of ramshackle houses and city farmland, juxtaposed with the sharp angles of skyscrapers leaves the viewer of his photo-like art in no doubt that this is a peculiar city.

His everyday scenes show a way of life that was almost erased from the city during that period of frantic building when thousands of homes were demolished. Between 1991 and 1996 he produced more than 80 pen and ink drawings that are a subtle form of social commentary, highlighting a turning point in Jakarta's social history.

The 61-year-old Canadian artist is less widely known for his colorful paintings of rural landscapes and bright surrealist explorations of Indonesia.

Gallery Kafe Linggar in Kemang, South Jakarta displayed these aspects of his work over the last month in an exhibition entitled *Emerging Expatriates*. Pattern's sketches of Jakarta do not feature in this exhibition, his twelfth in Indonesia in 14 years. These paintings and lithographs (hand made fine art prints) of country scenes and surrealist themes have a softer tone, more color.

So has he mellowed out? Not quite. Pattern explains, in a soft Canadian accent, that he is doing what he has always done. He is still a campaigning artist, concerned with environmental and social issues but he is also a landscape artist committed to his art.

"Some Indonesians used to

ask why I was always painting the slums. I reply that I'm just trying to show the many faces of Indonesia that I experience. I was spending as much time painting romantic colored landscapes — no poverty or pollution, just beauty for beauty's sake," he recently told *The Jakarta Post*.

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## David Kennedy

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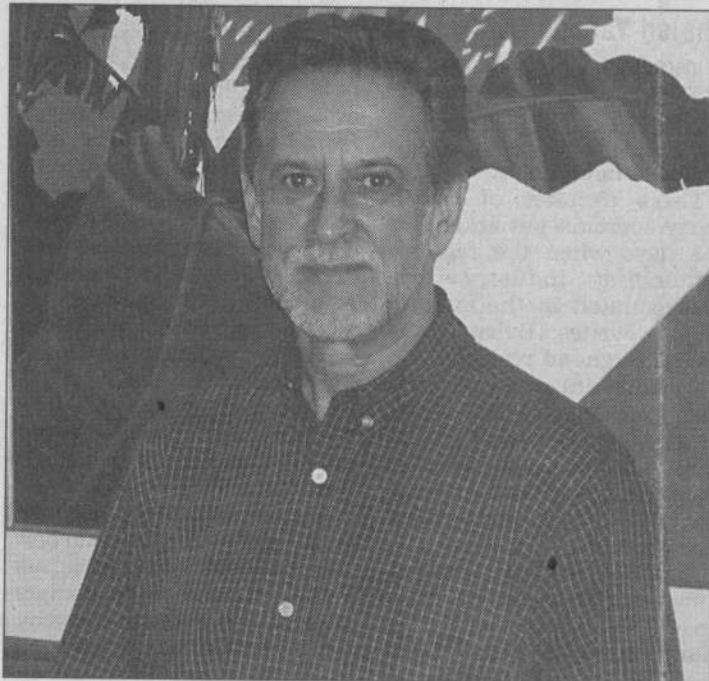
He uses color to create effect in rural landscapes and in surrealist, often allegorical, paintings. The latter are heavily influenced by his work in the 1970's as a graphic artist for a grassroots environmental group in Vancouver where he grew up.

"It was a very surrealistic symbolic type of art that dealt with the conflict of man and nature and it's still there — that theme has reoccurred over and over again throughout all these years, though in the meantime I've gone off on other tangents and done other things," he said.

His studies in Sociology at university, which he left a year early to pursue a career in art, have also influenced the themes he has chosen to work on.

The foreigner's difficulty in understanding Indonesia is one of those themes. Pattern believes that Western logic, with its linear way of looking at things, makes it hard to understand how the country works.

The complexity of Indonesia for the outsider, he said, lies in the complexity of Java which he likens to a labyrinth. His painting *Key to the Empire* is an attempt to fathom Java from a mental or psychologi-



JP/David Kennedy

## KEN PATTERN

cal point of view rather than a visual one. It features a map of Java inside a bright green labyrinth. The map itself is covered in labyrinths and repeats into infinity.

"Even if you discover Java, there's many layers to it and anyone who spends any time here probably realizes that just when you think you've started to figure it out you've not really got anywhere yet," he said, laughing in mock exasperation.

Pattern arrived in Jakarta in 1989 when his wife, a development expert, was posted here. At first his paintings were awash with vivid colors and showed icebergs melting on tropical seas.

"When people asked how I liked the climate here," he said, "I used to say that I feel like an iceberg melting."

Fascinated by Jakarta, he spent days exploring the streets, marveling at how a city with more than 10 million people could still have

the feeling of a series of connecting villages. His enthusiasm is infectious when he describes his first forays into the city's kampongs armed with a camera to capture scenes to draw.

"You have all these glass and steel towers hovering above all the little orange roofed buildings which surround them. What an incredible city ... I'd been in cities before where all the slums are in one place and the rich people in another. Here it was all just thrown together," he said with genuine amazement.

Pattern, however, stopped doing pen and ink sketches of the city just before most development ground to a halt with the 1997 financial crisis.

"I felt I'd gone as far as I could with the scenes I was working on. I'd moved on to looking at Indonesia from another perspective."

Although he does not readily speak out about political issues Pattern's unique brand

of "hyper realistic" and surrealist art lends itself naturally to political satire.

In 1999 he painted the Indonesian legislature building with a "Toys R Us" sign on the roof and a playground in front. He said he never expected to take it out of the closet and only painted it for his own amusement. But when then president Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid called the assembly a kindergarten six months later he decided to display the piece called *Playschool* along with some similar satirical work.

"I felt that though Soeharto had gone and the new government was in power nothing really had changed," he said. "It was a legislature full of people just having a good time and it reminded me of a playschool."

Pattern sees freedom of expression as the single biggest change in Indonesia since the end of the New Order. In particular he appreciates the unfettered access to news sources in the country today. He is scathing when he compares the media in Indonesia to that of North America which he sees as inward looking and almost devoid of any world news.

Lately, he has been spending up to five months each year in Vancouver where he works on lithographic prints in a studio he has used for 22 years.

The wanderlust that brought Pattern to Indonesia in the first place also draws him away time and again. He is continuing a world tour he began in his youth and he still prefers backpacking.

"Indonesia for me. I love it and I hate it but I gotta get out of it sometimes. I need some distance. I think I have the best of both worlds being able to work in two places and also have time to travel to other countries."