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FEATURES

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ART & DESIGN



Human Nature by Ken Pattern (acrylic on canvas, 2009)

JP/P.J. LEO

BACK TO NATURE BACK TO THE KAMPUNG

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Life is nothing but a cycle and so, after more than two decades walking around labyrinthine Jakarta, “visual writer” Ken Pattern has arrived back where he started: Humans vs nature.

His most recent acrylic paintings might appear green and lush at first glance – especially among his mostly black-and-white

lithograph pieces – but a handful of them are actually reminders of how destructive the human race can be.

Deforestation, commodification, exploitation, call it what you please – for Pattern it is nothing but a one-way street that humans have taken toward doom by placing consumption and capitalism above all else.

“We are worried about the economic crisis, which is actually a recurring event, when we ought to be more concerned with environmental issues,” the Canadian artist said, pointing at his piece called *Palm Oil*.

A ravaged forest serves as the grim background for the green image of a palm oil plantation placed on a billboard. Despite the symbolism, it is portrayed in a straightforward manner in Pattern’s 2009 work how the battle of human versus nature is probably just human nature.

Although his works have long taken a more sociological approach, Pattern’s ecological concerns keep on recurring. And it seems that his early 1970s experience in making posters, brochures and displays for a grassroots environmental group in his hometown Vancouver has taken center stage once again.

Perhaps it was also his current reading that has revived the environmentalist in Pattern. Perhaps Weisman’s *The World Without Us* was like a slap, awakening him from the exoticism of everyday life in Jakarta to the harsh reality of the global environmental problem, even though the latter is a grander narrative.

Or perhaps the city that has become Pattern’s muse for the past 20 years has run out of charm?

“Oh, I am never bored of Jakarta.

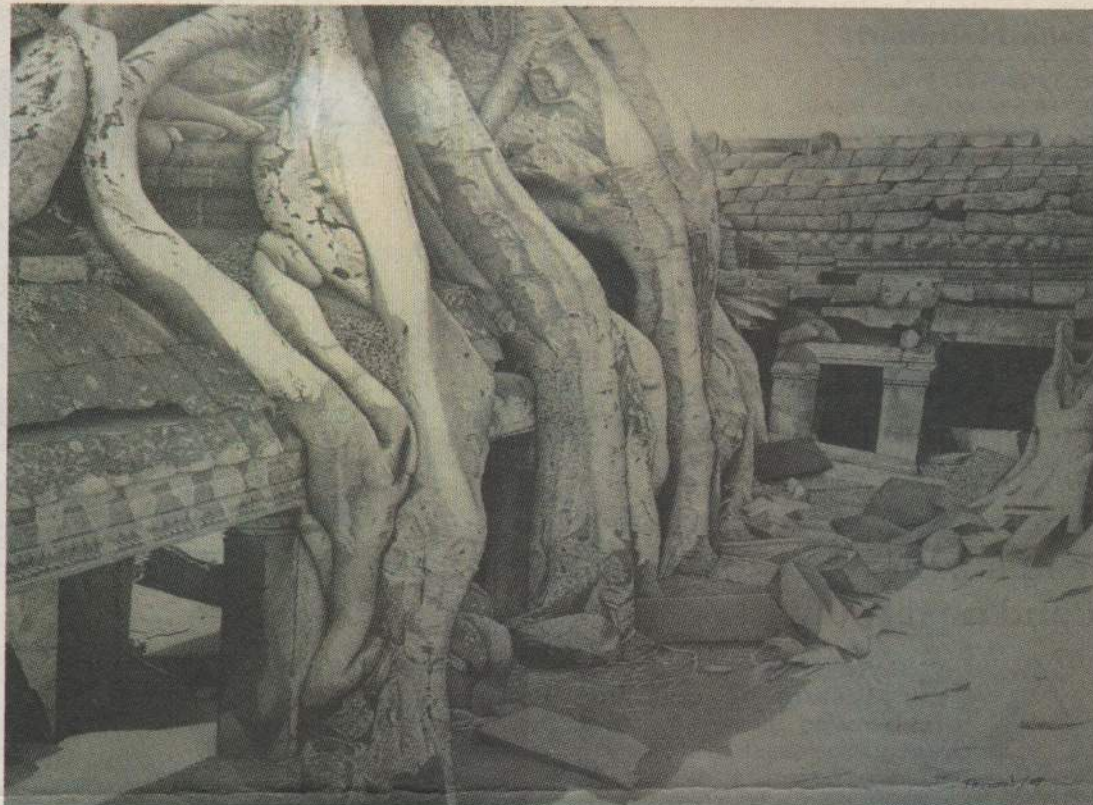
It still fascinates me,” said the artist, who is renowned for his images of Jakarta’s kampungs.

Pattern, who majored in printmaking at the Emily Carr School of Art and Design, said that his most recent paintings, aside from coming from his deepest concerns, were also something that he did “in between”.

In between his time spent here in Jakarta and the days dedicated to creating lithograph works in Canada.

In between safeguarding the tradition of making art more affordable through printmaking and finding delight in the strokes of a brush on canvas.

In between his passion for the small things he sees on the street and his restlessness over the more distant but pressing problems of the environment.



JP/P.J. LEO

Silk-Cotton Tree: Ta Prohm, Siem Reap by Ken Pattern (pencil drawing, 2009)

Having worked in Jakarta since 1988 yet still intrigued by the simplest sight of food vendors passing by his home, Pattern's fascination with the city clearly never runs out.

Yet it is a fascination that keeps on evolving.

His older works of Jakarta portray more the "black and white" manner of how the urban space is developing, while his more recent lithographs tend to capture the vibe of the everyday.

Ten years ago, his art was a statement trying to convey the message of how disparity looms in a city that he deemed to be rapidly losing its own character. For Pattern, Jakarta's Gini coefficient might not be above average, but the gap between rich and poor is so in your face.

Pattern's meticulous stone lithographs and ink drawings of the late 1990s and early 2000s portrayed kampungs and high-rise buildings standing side by side, all intentionally void of people as the artist wanted to highlight the built environment.

His more recent works are more about the people, the Jakartans and how they live their lives.

Pattern's 2007 *Family Outing* captures the laid-back, who-cares-about-regulations nature of Indonesians through an image of a family of four riding a motorcycle.

His *Meals on Wheels* series of the same year was the result of him sitting in front of his home in Bangka, South Jakarta, captivated by the array of meals offered door-to-door by vendors. Meanwhile, *Traditions* is a blend between the message of economic disparity and segregation,

with a slight human touch.

It was also this later work that reminds Pattern to avoid romanticizing poverty and building preconceptions about a class that one does not belong to.

"When I saw the sight of an ongoing apartment building construction from the kampung below, I thought the kampung people must be offended by such intrusion," he said. "It is a known fact that these [kampung] people will never be able to move to the apartment blocks nor even enter them.

"How wrong I was."

The hours he spent listening to the inhabitants of the kampung being proud of a new symbol of modernity in sight made him realize that he would never fully grasp the lives of others. Or, perhaps, the mind and logic of Indonesians in general.

Part of Pattern's work clearly reflects this confusion of a Western mind trying to understand how Asian lateral thinking works. The labyrinth he juxtaposed with a map of Java island is one such expression.

Indonesia is indeed a labyrinth for the artist, who was influenced by the surreal, symbolical work of Belgian painter Rene Magritte.

"The more you find out about Indonesia, the more confused you become," he said.

It seems that Pattern is not alone, as the buyer of that particular piece said, "I couldn't agree more."

Ken Pattern Annual Charity Exhibition runs until May 23 at the Gran Melia Hotel, South Jakarta