

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

23, Jalan AU5 C/3  
Dembah Keramat  
Ulu Kelang, Selangor  
Malaysia  
29 March 1982

BEB-4

Sketchbook I

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

Outdoor sketching is an uncommon practice in Malaysia, greeted with that mixture of incredulity and amusement usually reserved for circus side-show acts. I have only to sit down by the roadside, pull a pencil or brush from my rucksack, open my sketchbook and within minutes an audience has gathered for the day's entertainment. This is particularly true in the rural areas where caucasians are still comparatively rare and the mere sight of an orang putih (one of the many Malaysian terms for white-skinned folk) raises a hue and cry. In cosmopolitan Kuala Lumpur, the national capital, Occidentals are less sensational, but Occidental artists can still raise a jaded eyebrow or two; at a recent sketching session in downtown KL I looked up to find 35 faces studying my every move.

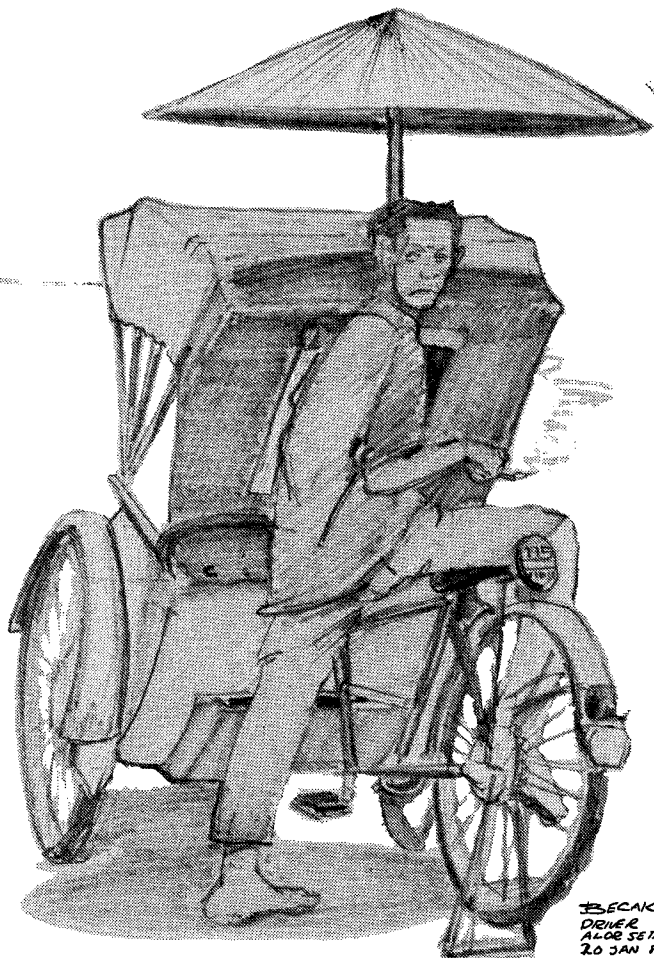
Though plein-air sketching is a venerable Western tradition, it is relatively unknown in South-east Asia, where rigid, stylized conventions have characterized most representational art and artists have traditionally worked indoors. There is a compelling reason to stay in the studio: the weather. In Malaysia, annual temperatures range from 70° to 90° F., peaking at midday. Humidity averages 80 percent. Hence, after about 10:30am concentration and creativity rapidly lose out to sweat, even under an umbrella. This is not the weakness born of an upbringing in temperate climes; by midmorning, wiser Malaysian heads have retreated to the comforts of shade, fans and air conditioning. Afternoon sketch-

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Bryn Barnard is an Institute Fellow studying visual communication in Southeast Asia.



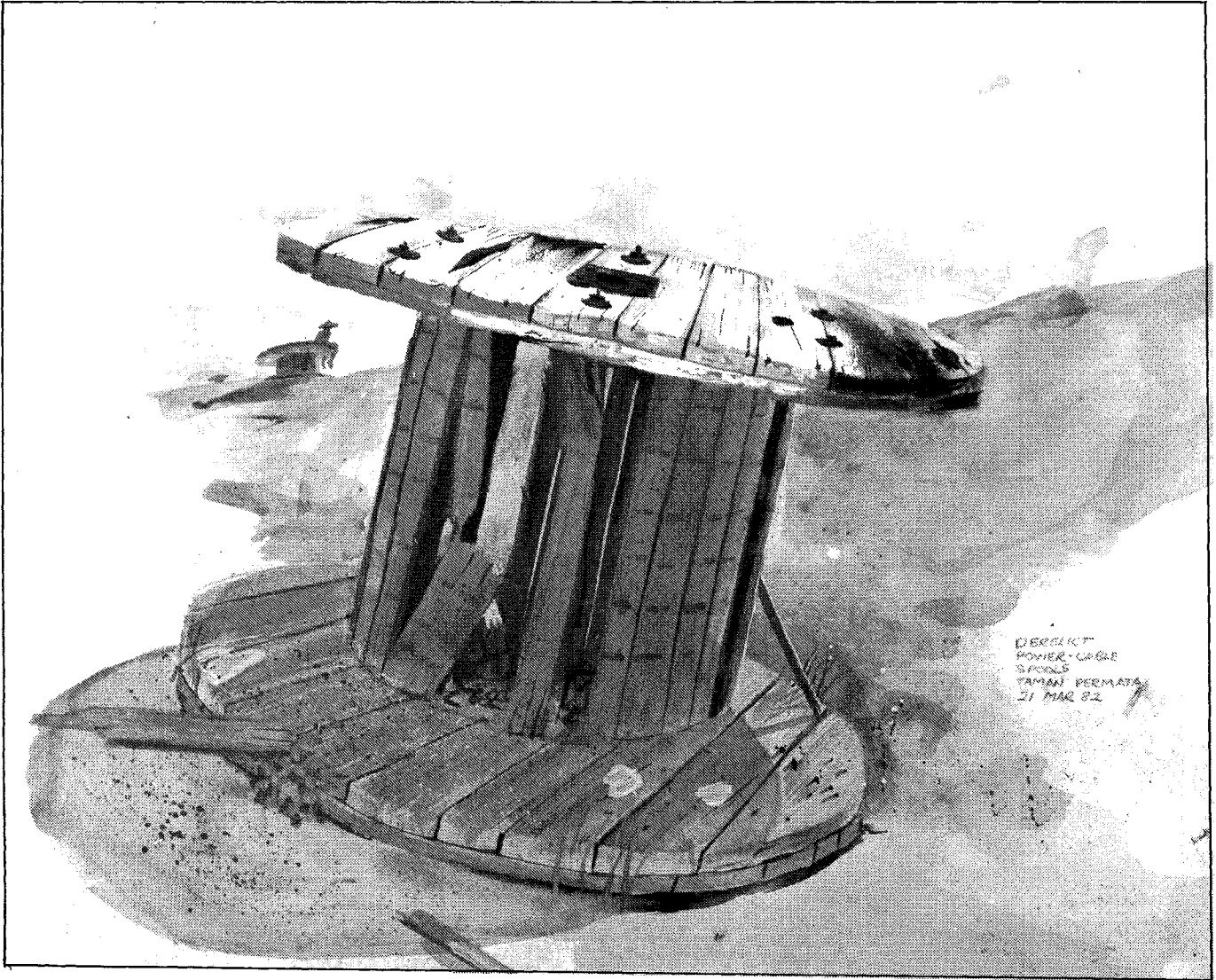
ing is circumscribed by frequent cloudbursts that put down an average of 90 inches of rain per year (during the northeast monsoon, from October to February, rain is an all-day affair, particularly on the east coast of the Peninsula, which suffers from severe annual lowland flooding).

Such climatic obstacles could conceivably be overcome by photography. The camera records the maximum amount of visual information in much less time than it takes to sketch, a distinct advantage when a storm is brewing. In fact, I do take photographs, for their own sake and as adjuncts to sketches for studio paintings.

Sketching, however, is an idiosyncratic preference. For most Western, academically-trained artists, there is no substitute for drawing from life. The camera can re-

cord, but it cannot provide the on-the-spot practice afforded by an hour's sketching. Nor is the camera always an appropriate tool. Artistic devices not readily available to the photographer, such as line-weight, selective emphasis and compositional manipulation, can transform a visually jumbled subject into a clear, precise drawing (one of the reasons that line drawings, rather than photographs, are so often used in technical manuals).

I carry a sketchbook most everywhere I go here, accompanied by an assortment of pencils, erasers, pens, charcoal, markers and occasionally, brush, paint and palette. There is no conscious theme connecting my sketches. Subject matter is determined by a combination of design, inspiration and serendipity. Though I sometimes set out with a particular subject in mind, more often I sketch while waiting: at a busstop or bengkel (workshop), enroute to an interview or during a tea-break at a warung (eating stall). The result is a melange of abandoned bulldozers, crumbling shophouses, pastoral river scenes, palm trees, becaks (pedicabs), construction workers, clouds and sunsets.



Though this is certainly not a balanced view of Malaysia, these sketches do reflect the rather incongruous aspect of the local landscape. Malaysia's expanding economy has wrought tremendous changes on the cities and countryside, particularly in the Wilayah Persekutuan, the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur (the capital's motto is, after all, Maju dan Makmur: "Progress and Prosperity"). City shophouse blocks have been demolished to make way for skyscrapers, surrounding villages have been transformed into suburbs, linked together with freeways and the interstices filled with industrial



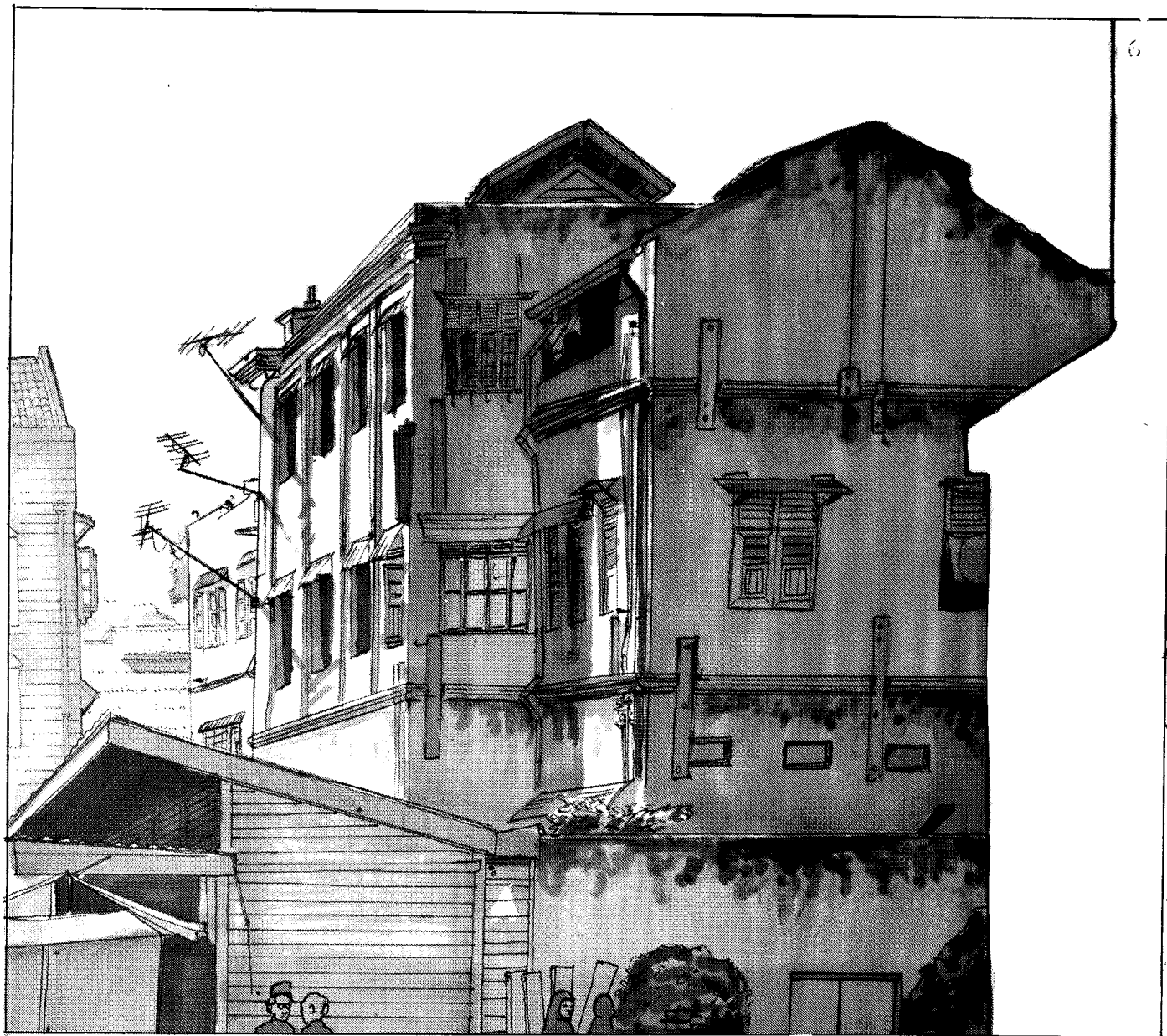
parks and setinggans (squatter settlements). Landscaping, greenspaces and parks have not kept pace with this rapid development, hardly a peripheral consideration in an already hot city. New trees are only belatedly being included with the new buildings.

Though the Federal Government claims to have a Master Plan for Kuala Lumpur's development, it has yet to be revealed to the public. One official I spoke to at the JKR (the Public Works Department) confided that the Plan could not be made public because it was not yet complete and existing sections were still being revised. Present strategies occasionally appear somewhat haphazard. One popular story has the JKR laying down a fresh asphalt road only to have it subsequently ripped up by the LLM (National Electricity Board) for power cable installation, resurfaced, torn up by the Talikoms Department for phone lines and yet again resurfaced.

Uneven development has produced an uneven metamorphosis: becaks still ply the narrow lanes near the new multi-lane







Kuala Lumpur-Seremban superhighway and jumbled hawkers' stalls continue to clog the byways, thriving despite the mushrooming imported competition: Shakey's and Godfather's Pizza, Kentucky, Texas and McDota Fried Chicken, Mr. Donut, Orange Julius, A&W Rootbeer, Wendy's Hamburgers, Arby's Roastbeef and come April Fool's Day, McDonald's.

My attempts to capture some of this in my sketchbook often provoke expressions of surprise, amusement and consternation among onlookers and occasionally provide a forum for debate. Inevitably, as a drawing progresses, art critics in the audience seek to enlighten their less fortunate neighbors on the nature of my work. Commentary turns to dialogue and eventually to

general conversation.


Such audience reactions have proven to be an unexpected side benefit of sketching, providing insights into Malaysian attitudes and beliefs that I might miss in an interview situation. As I have sketched, onlookers have discussed art and artistry and orang putihs, complained about political corruption, praised the Prime Minister and his insistence on time clocks for government servants, debated the wisdom of the new Reading, Writing and Arithmetic primary education policies and compared notes on the latest episode of Roots.

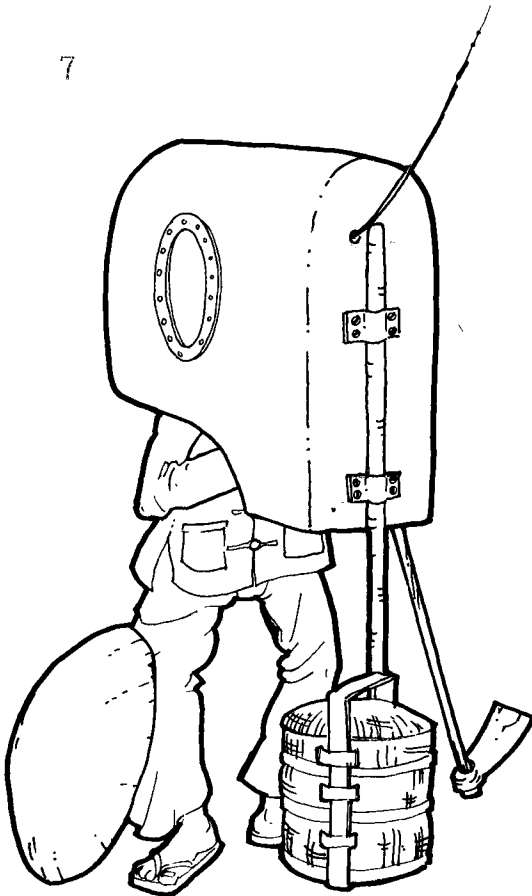
Occasionally passersby even engage me in conversation. While I was sketching the bulldozer (sketch 11) a Chinese onlooker, seeing my obvious interest in old things, inquired whether I had visited a local Chinese temple of ancient vintage. Our conversation eventually turned to Chinese custom and belief and the place of Chinese in the Malaysian political system. Before parting, my new acquaintance invited me to a Chinese healing ceremony the next day. Not a likely chain of events I'd simply clicked a shutter and moved on.

Sometimes, pictures really are worth a thousand words.

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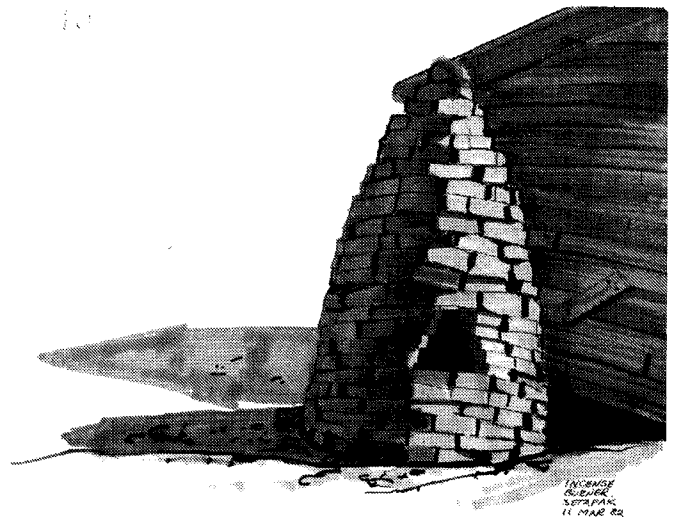
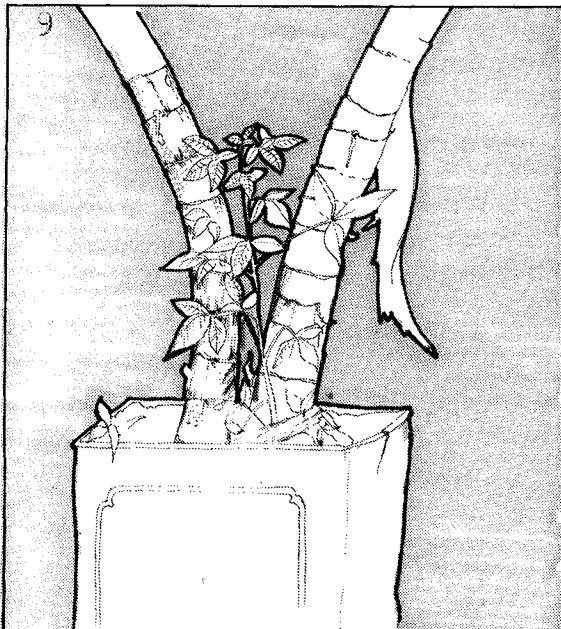
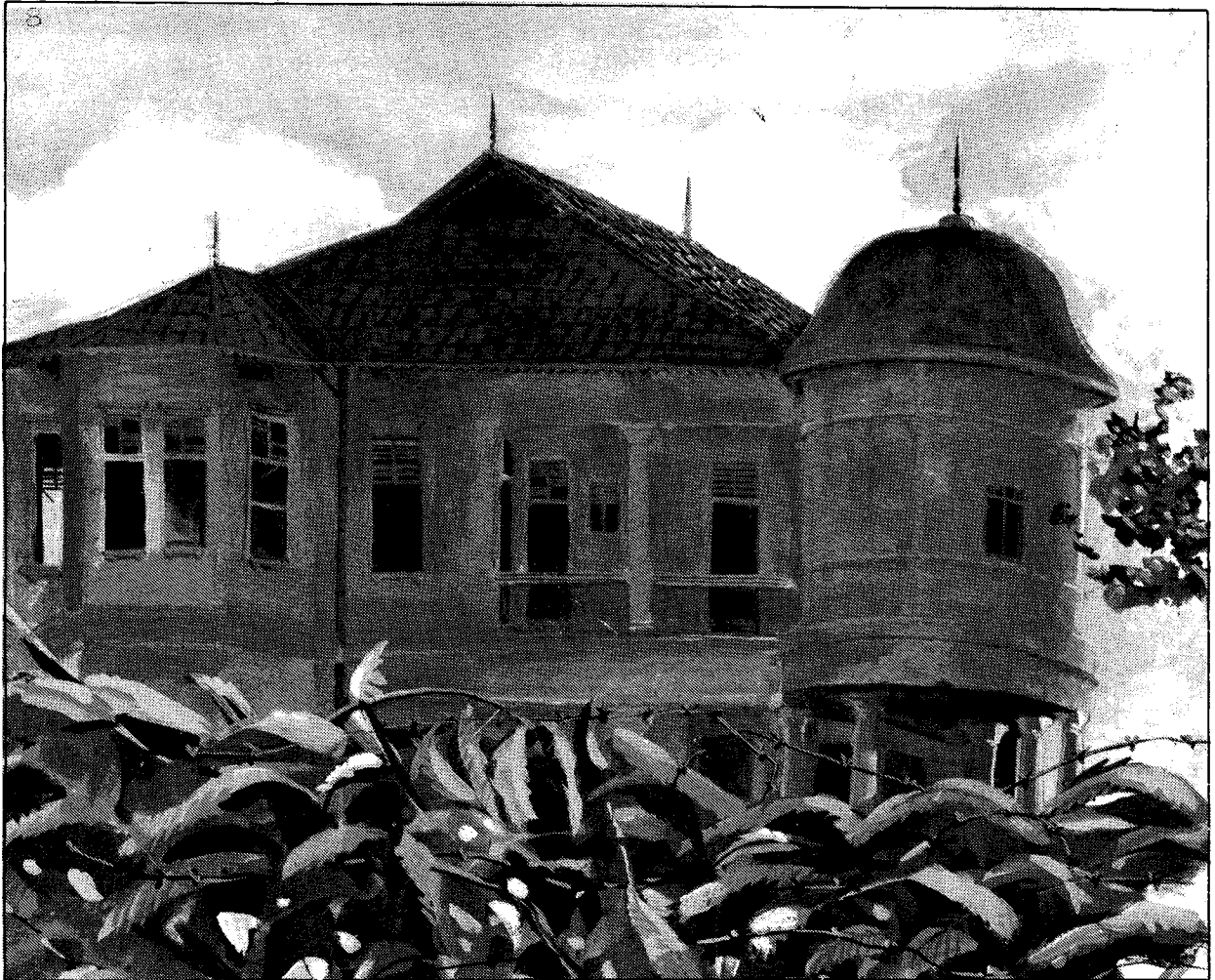
Sincerely,

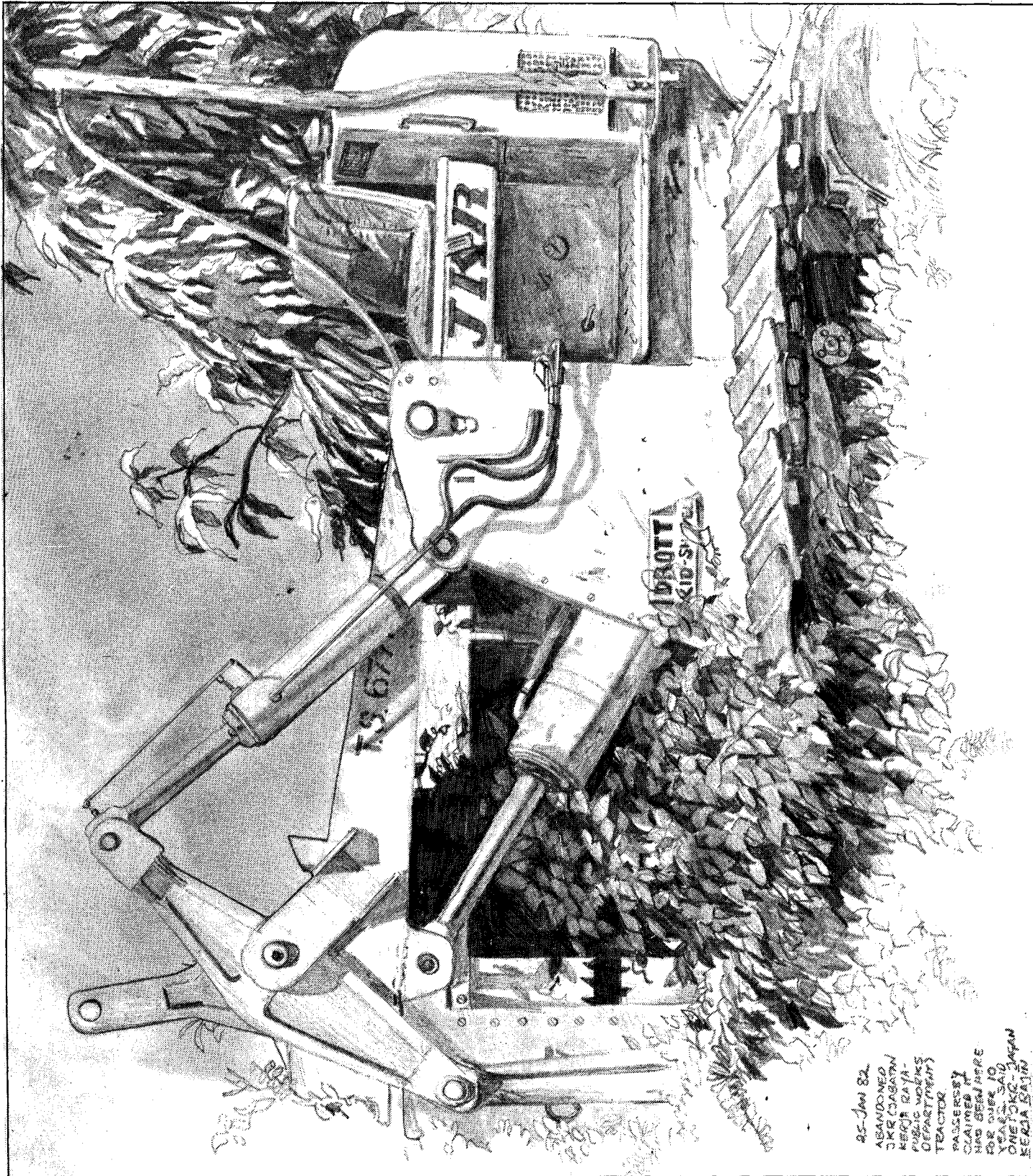
  
Bryn Barnard



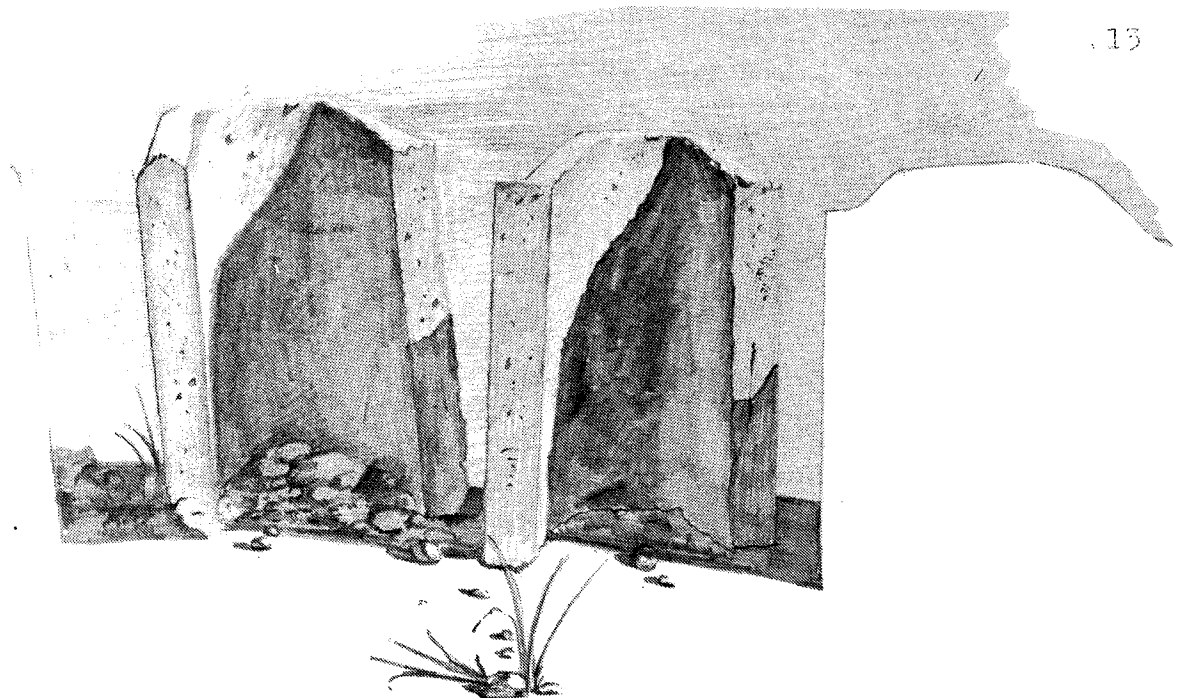
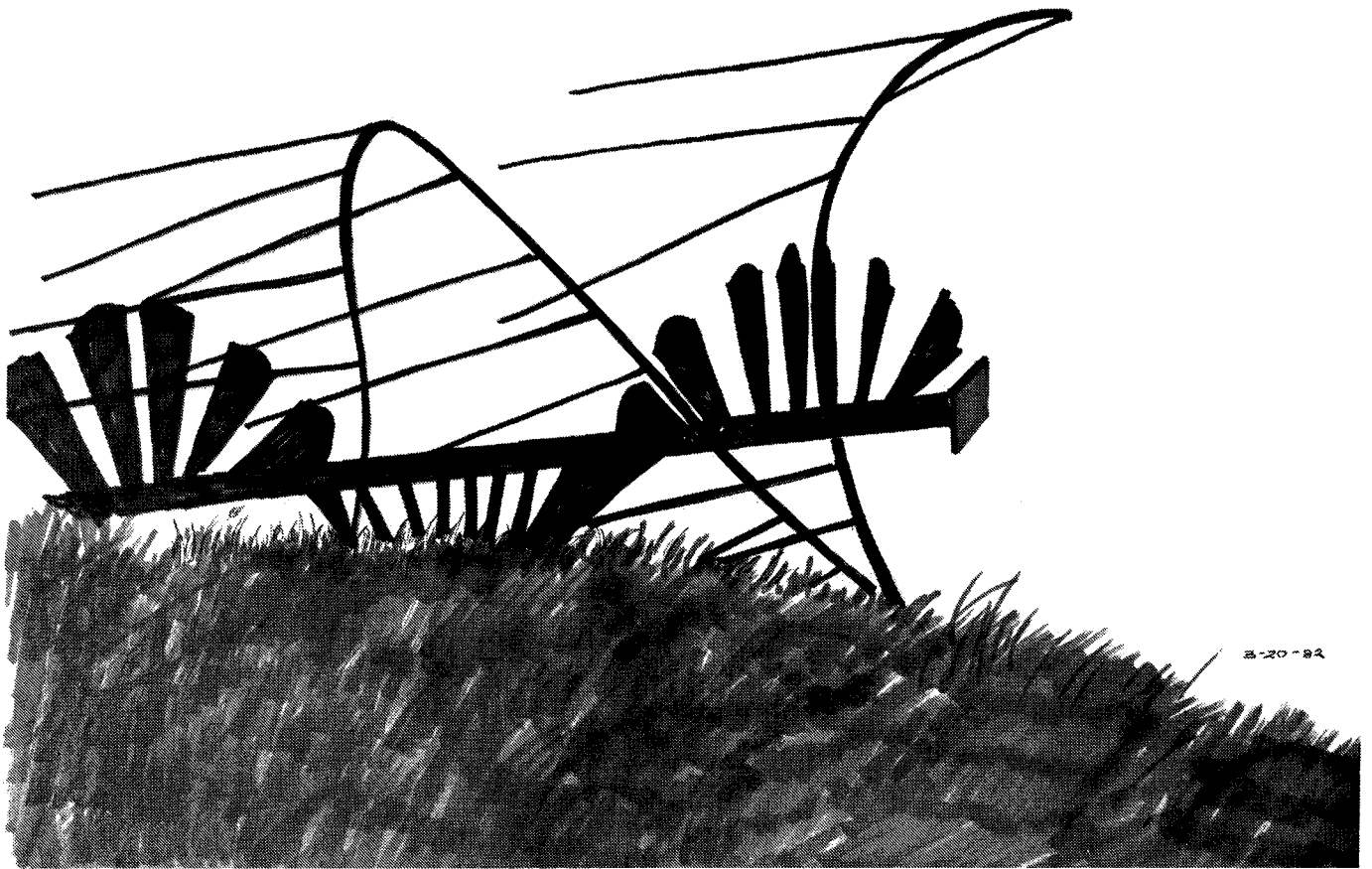
DULANG  
WASHER  
AND  
PHONE BOOTH  
20 MAR 82

Received in Hanover 4/12/82











DANDANG 11 MAR 8  
INDONESIAN RICE  
COOKER MADE FROM  
SHEET ALUMINUM. US  
BY BATAK IMMIGRANT  
FROM MEDAN, SUM



24 DEC 81  
STEVE TISHMAN-  
RIVER BORTMAN  
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ENROUTE TO NEPAL  
TO SET UP A WHITE  
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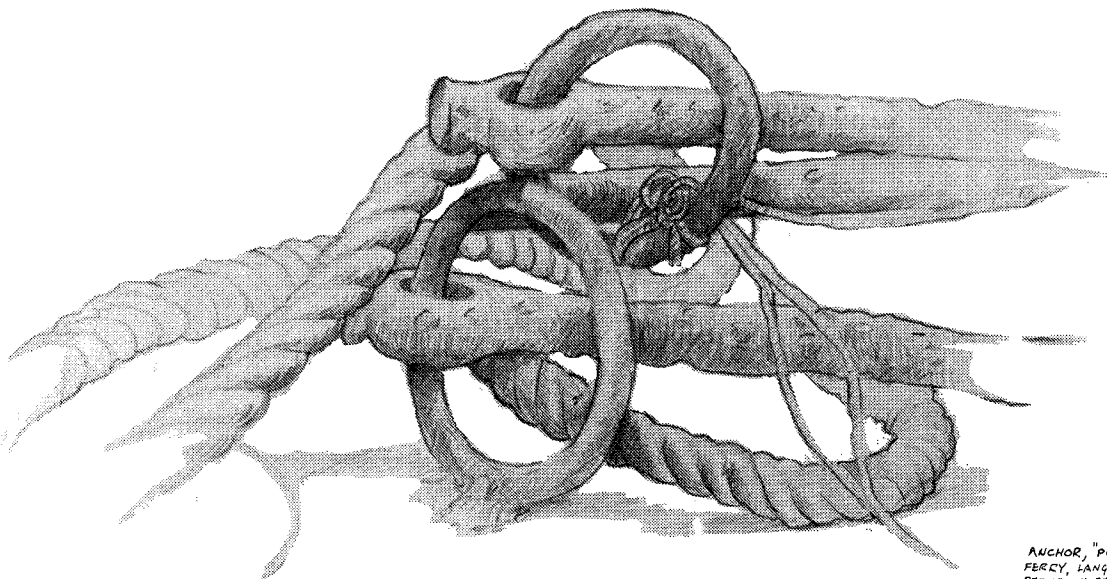
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OF CALIFORNIA  
HOSPITAL  
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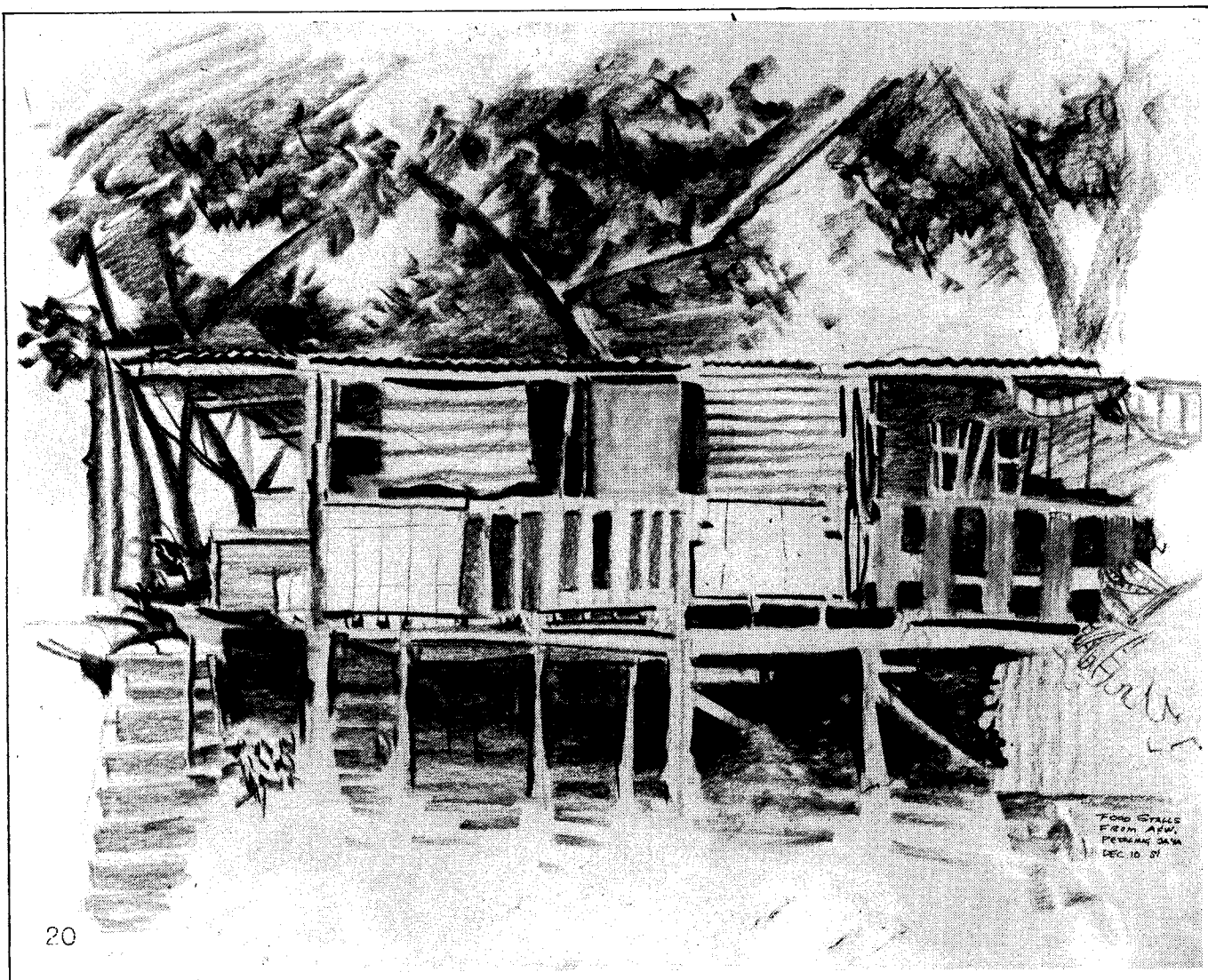




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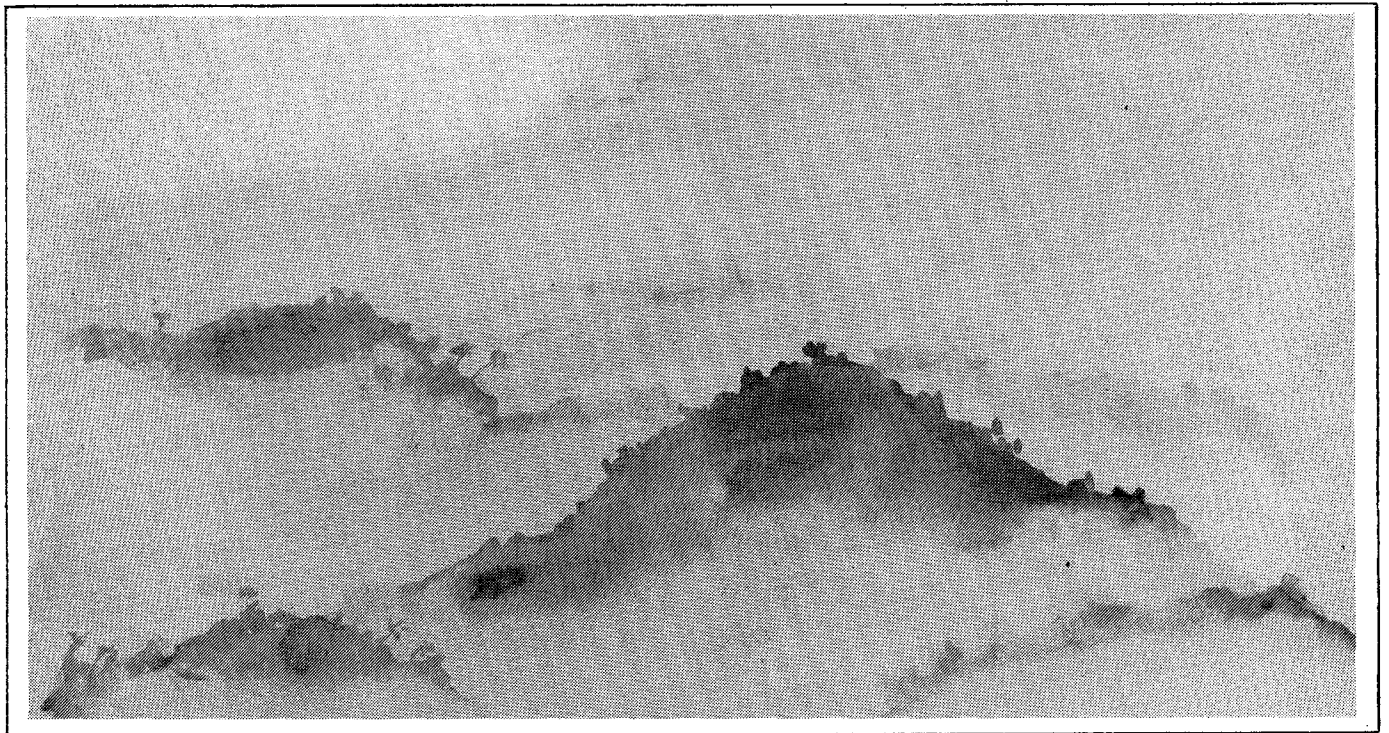


ANCHOR, "PULAU PANDAN"  
 FERRY, LANGKAWI TO KUALA  
 PERLIS 11.30.81



TODD STALLS  
 FERRY, LANGKAWI  
 PERLIS 11.30.81

20



List of Sketches

1. Female construction worker, Hong Kong; pencil on bristol board
2. Becak and driver, Alor Setar, Kedah; pencil on bristol board
3. Derelict LTN power cable spools, Taman Permata, Selangor; gouache on bristol board. Full color.
4. Virgin power cable spools, Taman Permata, Selangor; charcoal on bristol board.
5. Boom-crane and shophouses on Jalan Mesjid India near construction of new United Asian Bank building, Kuala Lumpur; ink and grey markers on bristol board.
6. Shop houses and alley behind MOCCIS Building and Wisma Lee Rubber, Kuala Lumpur; ink and grey markers on bristol board.
7. Dulang washer and phone booth. Dulang washers pan for tin in mining tail-races; ink on bristol board.
8. Haunted house, Kuala Lumpur; gouache on bristol board. Full color
9. Abandoned tractor (actually a bulldozer), Alor Setar, Kedah; pencil on
10. Brick incense-burner adjacent to Chinese temple, Setapak, Selangor; ink and grey markers on bristol board.
11. Abandoned tractor (actually a bulldozer), Alor Setar, Kedah; pencil on bristol board.
12. Rusting, dismembered spiral staircase, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur; ink and grey markers on bristol board.
13. Drain tiles near Road Transport Office, Petaling Jaya; pencil on bristol board.
14. Dandang, Taman Permata, Selangor; gouache on bristol board. Full color
15. Riverbank, Gombak River with City Hall in distance, High Court reconstruction project to left, Kuala Lumpur; pencil on bristol board.
16. Steve Tishman, Taman Permata, Selangor; charcoal on bristol board.
17. Toddy palm, Universiti Kebangsaan, Kuala Lumpur. Toddy is an alcoholic beverage derived from this sap this variety of tree; ink on bristol board.
18. Cloudy sky, Ulu Kelang, Selangor; brown acrylic and white gouache on bristol board.
19. Rusting anchor with ropes on the "Pulau Pandan" ferry to Langkawi Island; pencil on bristol board.
20. Food stalls, Petaling Jaya; charcoal on bristol board
21. Sprouting tree-stump, Tanah Rata, Cameron Highlands, Perak; pencil on bristol board
22. Fog and hills after rainstorm, Taman Permata, Selangor; watercolor on bristol board. Full color.