

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BEB-21

Portfolio

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Malaysia

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Dear Peter, .

Reportage usually takes two forms, verbal and pictorial. Verbal reportage, whether written or spoken, can be concrete, concise and factual or vague, imprecise and opinionated. Editorial reporting falls somewhere between these two extremes, combining reality with speculation, accuracy with generalization. The result: a slanted tale, a point of view.

Pictorial reportage has the same parameters; sketches and photographs can show an event or process as it occurs, on the spot, or can be reworked, re-designed or fabricated from scratch back in the studio. Editorial illustration can merely inform; more often, like advertising, it influences or manipulates.

My art work -- sketches and finished illustrations -- is usually narrative, often editorial: it tells a story, with a point of view. My slanted tales are meant to influence the viewer; perhaps they also manipulate. The pieces reproduced here are a selection of the illustrations I have done since November of 1981. Two were assignments, the transformation of a client's idea into a pictorial message. One is a sketch, an on-site impression, more than a specific communication. The remainder are studio illustrations, "easel work", painted, personal expressions of my Southeast Asian experience.



AFS: Dua Puluh Lima Tahun

AFS International Intercultural Programs is a student exchange program with headquarters in New York. Begun by the American Field Service ambulance corps after World War II, the organization now has chapters in fifty-five countries. A Malaysian chapter has existed since 1958, sending and receiving students from the

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United States, Europe, Asia, Australia and New Zealand. For the Malaysian chapter, one traditional event is the annual dinner-dance, a chance for current students and returnees to meet and renew ties. This year, Halim Othman, president of the organization and my landlord, asked me to design the cover of the twenty-fifth anniversary dinner-dance cover. I chose to paint a twenty-five frond Ravenala Madagascariensis, the Traveler's Tree. This tree, a relative of the banana and native to Madagascar, was imported to Malaysia as an ornamental plant. Its fleshy, water-bearing stems were once a popular source of refreshment for tropical travelers, thus the name. This image seemed appropriate, not only for the leaf count and itinerant connotations, but also for the innocuous, non-sectarian aspect; neither Chinese, nor Indian nor Malay, the Traveler's Tree favors no one Malaysian race, promotes no one Malaysian culture. It is merely tropical. This is important in an organization that is both multi-racial and international, in a country where every image, every symbol is weighed for appropriate cultural content. One could complain that the Traveler's Tree is imported; but then this is true of many things that are now regarded as "truly Malaysian".

The typography, in the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, reads AFS: Dua Puluh Lima Tahun (AFS: Twenty-Five Years). The painting was executed in oil on masonite and measures 89x53 centimeters (35x21 inches).



### Malaysian Christmas

This painting was developed over the course of the first Fellowship year, during my frequent trips to Kelantan and Trengganu states on the northeast coast of Malaysia. The east coast is Malaysia's cultural heartland and combines all the elements of a movieland tropical paradise: palm-fringed beaches, coastal padi fields, peaceful villages of thatch, split-bamboo and wood, and islands; emerald-green on a calm, sapphire sea. This idyllic setting is one of Peninsular Malaysia's biggest tourist meccas, and thus is now host to a number of appropriate oases: Tanjung Jara, Rantau Abang, Club Mediteranee; sultanate-style timber-and-tile palaces, temporary splendor for the moneyed traveler. I skipped the palaces, but kept the setting, reflecting the surf, sea and sun in the mirror-surface of a Christmas tree ornament, washed up on a Malaysian shore. The image was meant to be peaceful, quiet, beautiful. I'm told it looks lonely. In any case, it seemed a more appropriate vision than the flocked windows and sweating Santas one sees in downtown Kuala Lumpur during the holiday season.

The painting was executed in acrylics and gouache on illustration board and measures 20x30cm (8x12").



### Pura Teratai

This pastel sketch, executed on the spot in the village of Ubud, Bali, depicts a teratai (lotus) pond and pura (temple), centerpiece of the Lotus Cafe, Ubud's newest tourist restaurant. Opened in mid-1983, the cafe is a joint venture between a Sumatran-Austrian husband-wife -- who manage the restaurant -- and a Balinese family -- who own the land and help with the cooking and serving. The enterprise adjoins the Puri Saraswati, a complex of Balinese-style tourist bungalows, owned by the same family. Both hotel and Cafe make novel use of the family compound, integrating commercial enterprise with domestic routine. Both border on sacred family temple land, the area reserved in every Balinese home for the gods and ancestors. The pond is sacred; so too is the pura. Both are grander than most (few families can even afford a lotus pond), indicating a wealthy, leisured past. The hard present, however, has forced the secularization of the family heritage. A bale (pavilion) fronting the pond has been furnished with cushions and low tables. In days past chokordas (kings) might have rested there, munching on suckling pig and scented rice. Today, tourists wile away the hours there with the Cafe's eminently Western fare: coffee, cheesecake, quiche, fettucine, guacamole. One wonders whether the gods would approve of such bizarre cuisine, so close to home.

The sketch was executed on canson paper and measures 38x46cm (15x18").



### Performance

The Pokok Beringin is a well-known symbol of the Malaysian wayang kulit shadow puppet theater. Triangularly shaped, intricately carved, this buffalo-hide puppet is thought to represent the tree of life (an actual pokok beringin is a banyan tree) or the mythical Hindu peak, Mount Meru. It is ubiquitous

in all the shadow puppet theaters of Southeast Asia and is known in Java and Bali as the kayon or gungungan. The Pokok Beringin is manipulated by the dalang, the master of the performance, in a variety of ways. Stuck in the banana trunk that serves as the base of the wayang stage, the puppet can demarcate the beginning or end of the play. In other contexts the Pokok Beringin can indicate a change of scene, denote a house or tree, or, flapped and spun, symbolize a conflagration or other cosmic disturbance.

When Krishan Jit asked me to design the cover of Malaysian Theatre, an anthology of articles he was editing for the Malaysian Historical Society, I suggested a variation on the Pokok Beringin theme. The actual puppet is often used as a logo for Malaysian cultural events ranging from dance to theater. The symbol is easily recognized by Malaysian audiences. Since the book was to include articles on music, dance, drama and wayang, I proposed an image that would symbolize the essence of the collection: performance. I envisioned a Pokok Beringin shape inter-penetrating a circular group of figures; both audience and performers, merging with the Pokok, the simultaneous source and object of their attention.

From this initial idea, Krishan Jit and I worked through a series of concept roughs and color sketches, before finally hitting upon a chromatic scheme and design that best suited the tone and theme of the publication.

The illustration was executed in pastels on canson paper and measures 38x48cm (15x19").



Bung Harto

I painted this portrait of Indonesian president Suharto, during the 1982 presidential elections, the Majlis Permusyawaratan Rakyat (People's Congress). This elaborate ritual is held once every four years. Though the democratic machinery is impressive, the result is always the same: since Suharto's ascension in 1965 he has been re-elected four times (the current term is expected to be his last). His rule, successor to the chaotic Sukarno regime, has been marked by increasing bureaucratization and militarization of the government. Suharto himself has become one of the prime symbols of state: his portrait hangs in every office in the land and graces most Indonesian postal stamps. During official foreign-leader visits to the capital, twenty-foot high portraits of the President and his guest

grace the highways of downtown Jakarta. During Independence Day celebrations, billboards are erected depicting him in a variety of heroic poses: with shears, pruning the economic bush during the resesi dunia (world recession); in suit, leading his cabinet into administrative battle; in sarung, sheltering the masses from worldly vicissitudes; in batik shirt, studying Indonesia's agricultural bounty. I have depicted him merged with a more ancient Indonesian symbol: the national coat-of-arms, the Garuda, mount of Vishnu.

The portrait was executed in acrylic, oil pastel, colored pencil and magic marker on illustration board. It measures 25x33cm (10x13").



#### Java From Bali

Rice and volcanoes are interdependent constants on Java and Bali. Throughout my travels on these two islands, padi terraces and distant volcanic peaks were my ever-present companions. Java alone has fifty-nine volcanoes, many of which are active. Little neighbor Bali has more than her share. The over-sized populations of both islands owe their lives, and occasionally their deaths, to the fire mountains: though Java and Bali suffer repeated holocaust from volcanic eruptions, volcanic lava and ash have created some of the most fertile land on earth. All but the steepest land is terraced; most produces two, sometimes three rice crops a year. Annihilation and fecundity are the yang and yin of the region.

This painting is an attempt to capture both fertility and destruction: the just-planted rice terraces of Bali reflecting a volcanic eruption on Java. This is not literal reportage. Though volcanoes like Mount Semeru in East Java do erupt frequently and can be seen from Bali, this painting does not attempt to show a specific mountain from a specific set of rice terraces. Instead, the volcano and the terraces have been created from combined photographs and sketches from Java, from Bali and from my own living room in Malaysia (my landlord posed with shorts, rattan hat and broom for the male figures in the piece. The female and water buffalo were sketched in a Balinese market). Extensive research was required to understand the working of the terraces, waterways and dikes that cover the hills of Bali and Java.

This painting is derivative of the work of two artists: Walter Spies, a German painter who lived in Bali during the 1930's, (Bali's most famous expatriate artist, he was instrumental in the development and promotion of indigenous Balinese art); Frederick Church, the nineteenth century American landscape painter who won world renown during the latter half of the nineteenth century for his gigantic, romantic canvases of New World scenes.

The painting was executed in acrylic and gouache on illustration board and measures 46x56cm (18x22").

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bryn Barnard', written over a horizontal line.

Bryn Barnard

Received in Hanover 10/14/83

