



Publication: TODAY

Date: Sep 20 2007

Headline: Emergency Works

EMERGENCY WORKS

An exhibition showcases paintings from The Malayan Emergency period of Singapore's history

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MEMORY served this artist right – twice.

The first occasion was in 1959. At the height of the monsoon season, a twenty-something student named Lai Kui Fang, together with fellow volunteers, rushed to the flooded village of Bedok to distribute food and help dig drains.

He did not have a camera with him, but was so moved by the scene of people helping each other that he later painted it.

Now, 47 years later, long after the original painting had deteriorated, Lai has recreated that same painting – *Bedok Flood* – in just 74 hours.

It can be seen in the exhibition *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency*. At the Singapore Art Museum until Oct 31, the exhibition touches on the various works done during the “Malayan Emergency”. This period from 1948 to 1960 was one of chaos, when the British colonial government clashed with the Malayan Com-

munist Party, and events such as the 1956 Chinese Middle School student riots and the 1955 Hock Lee bus strikes took place.

Part of the show centres on the works done by two contrasting art societies: The Singapore Art Society (SAS) and the now-defunct Equator Art Society (EAS), of which Lai was a member.

Back then, you could not paint strong slogans, said Lai, 71, who was conferred the Knight in the National Order of Merit award by the French government this month.

“If you painted poor people or poverty, you would get noticed by the British government (for being sympathetic to the Communists).”

Which was why, Lai felt it was “safe” to put some elements back into his work now.

Aside from including dogs “to add to the village atmosphere”, he also “put back” a notice board that was erased from the original painting. But he has replaced the original message “Unity Is Strength” – a slogan linked to communists during that time – with a different one about Bedok residents helping each other.

The EAS’ social realist, pro-poor works were a distinct contrast to those done by the SAS, whose members included expatriates and which catered to well-heeled art patrons.

According to Choy Weng Yang, an artist



DOCUMENTING THE TIMES: Dr Lai Kui Fang is one of the artists featured in the exhibition *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency*.

now in his late 60s who was an exhibit organiser for the SAS in 1957, their group “was a mirror of the state of arts back then. There was diversity. Everyone looked forward to the annual exhibitions”.

The EAS was a reaction to this. “A lot

of works by social realist artists were not being accepted,” said Lai. But while the SAS stands to this day, its so-called counterpart eventually fizzled out.

Lai, a former head of the fine arts section of the group, left it in 1961 to study in Paris, where he heard that the group had eventually become “very left-leaning.” After holding its last group exhibit in 1968, the EAS was dissolved six years later.

Lai said his experience with the EAS was a very important one – he voluntarily taught about 100 budding student artists at the EAS’ headquarters at Lorong 32 in Geylang.

The group was a product of its time, and was responding to the nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments of an era that saw the rise of Red China as well as nationalist movements in India and Indonesia, led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Sukarno, respectively.

“We played an important role in nation building,” said Lai, who continues to paint on socially relevant topics like 911 and the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

“Artists are the forgotten heroes.”

Dr Lai Kui Fang will talk about his experiences tomorrow at 7.30pm at the SAM lobby. Admission is free. Call 6332 3220 for details.