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SPEECH BY MR LEE KHOON CHOY, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE (PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE) AT THE OPENING OF UTARA 81 AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM ART GALLERY ON WEDNESDAY, 25 NOVEMBER 1981 AT 8.00 PM

The eight North Malaysian artists from Utara 81 are the brave ones who have come to a city where there are few who understand contemporary paintings. Each of them brought six paintings of contemporary art paintings which are the culminations of three years of effort, because the last they visited Singapore was 1979. These are paintings expressing their feelings and emotions in the abstract form. Abstract art in Singapore is still not widely appreciated. The average Singaporeans are used to appreciating the Singapore River, the scenes of China town, and other traditional styles of presentation. Frankly speaking, it would be difficult for the average Singaporean to understand abstract art. Yet, they are not discouraged and have come a long way to exhibit their paintings.

The dilemma of a contemporary painter who lives on his painting is that he paints as he feels, something which comes to his mind without any consideration of the likes and dislikes of his audience. More often than not, he paints something which the average audience find difficulty in comprehending and appreciating. And yet, the painter hopes that it would catch the eye of someone who would buy it. Fortunately, except for Khoo Sui-Ho, who is already well-known internationally, the others do not depend on the sale of painting for a living.

When a contemporary painter paints, his eyes are not on the audience. He is moved by unseen forces which tell him or her what to paint. Why is it necessary even to have a subject? Why not just have lines, forms, colours, shapes, angles and arrangements to express a subject. There is no reason to depend on a ghost of reality if lines, colours and arrangements alone can do the job. This is the essence of abstract art.

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Picasso once said something like this: "When you like the smell of a rose, you don't ask why and where the smell comes from. When you are captivated by the chirps of birds, you don't ask how the sound was created. So when you like a painting, what does it matter what it is and why was it painted." So is with contemporary painting. The lines or colours or shapes may appeal to you and you like the painting. Is there any reason to ask what is it or why it was painted?

Our audiences are so used to seeing subjects that it is difficult for them to appreciate a painting without a subject or when a subject is incomprehensible to them. There are however a small group of modern art enthusiasts in Singapore and I hope that these paintings will appeal to them.

Be it modern paintings or traditional paintings, the exchange of visits between artists of two neighbouring countries will go a long way towards cementing relations between the peoples of two nations. Whilst in Singapore, I was told you have met many artists and have seen many interesting places. I hope that Singapore artists will also visit Malaysia and hold exhibitions there. This inter-flow of artists will help promote better understanding and friendship among artists of the two countries.

I wish the exhibition every success and I wish the artists a pleasant stay in Singapore.
