

Jessica Chew Cheng Lian: Advancing environmental goals through sustainable finance initiatives in Malaysia

Speech by Ms Jessica Chew Cheng Lian, Assistant Governor of the Central Bank of Malaysia (Bank Negara Malaysia), at the Launch of "Nature Nurtured/Pameran Lestari Alam" Exhibition, Kuala Lumpur, 19 January 2017.

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Malaysia attracts millions of tourists each year, many who come for the beautiful and unique attractions that nature has to offer in our country. Today, we celebrate this through art, and by bringing art and nature together, we hope to draw more attention to both. This exhibition, 'Nature Nurtured', continues Bank Negara Malaysia's efforts to preserve our natural heritage, and follows closely on the heels of steps that we took in 2016 to restore the natural habitat of the grounds in Shah Alam where the Bank's brand new Automated Cash Centre now stands.

The region's natural treasures have been a magnet for merchants and travelers for centuries. Spices were what brought the European powers to Southeast Asia six hundred years ago, while the Chinese came in search of fine food and medicine.

Almost exactly 200 years ago, General Farquhar, the Resident of Malacca, commissioned a team of artists to paint every aspect of the Peninsula's wildlife. Efforts to document nature through art had, however, existed long before. I should mention that women, too, counted among the talented observers of life forms who went on to capture nature in vivid artistic creations that have informed and inspired generations.

Maria Merian, one such famous artist from the 17th century, was recently celebrated for her works at an exhibition at Buckingham Palace last October. Merian's work which featured detailed drawings of plants and insects are preserved to this day in private and academic collections all over the world.

I confess I knew nothing about Maria before this week. Having now seen specimens of her incredible body of work, I can only imagine the sensation she would have created in her time with the quality and eye for detail that brought her drawings to life – and on a subject like insects, of all things, which were her passion. They are immensely, strikingly beautiful.

We hope the artists of 'Nature Nurtured' will receive the same appreciation. The artists in this exhibition do much more than record what anybody with a handphone can manage these days. They immerse us in the natural wonders that surround us, from the bustling cities to the more distant hinterlands. Whatever the setting, every one of the artists has a visual story to tell, informed by research and many hours spent to observe and understand the subjects of their artistic creations. These are not just snapshots, in many ways they tell us as much about the artist as they do their subjects.

If people centuries ago could be thrilled by pictures of insects, then surely these artists can reignite a deeper appreciation in all of us of our environment. A bombardment of high definition images of nature in photographs and film, may have numbed some of us to nature's wonders. For example, I am not sure how many of us are still captivated or awed anymore by the sight on television of yet another leopard pursuing its lunch.

The human hand makes for a much more intimate experience of nature. Back in the days of Maria Merian and General Farquhar, there was no other way of recording the world around us. Now we are seeing a return to paint and other traditional art forms.

I am told that painting in general is the art medium that has shown the biggest resurgence recently. Some of the paintings in this exhibition look like photographs, which is a mark of the skill

of contemporary artists. Malaysian painters are as good as any in this category, and they have no shortage of nature at their disposal to paint, compared with their counterparts in New York, London or Shanghai.

We should all be celebrating the world around us, not just as artists or eco-tourists, but as inhabitants of Planet Earth. These paintings bring us up close and personal with nature, as it should be. The skilled precision of the work featured by the artists does not diminish the connection and passion that the artists have with and for their subjects. Indeed, it enhances our experience viewing these beautifully executed pieces. Please also do take some time to read the statements by the artists. Artists usually do visuals better than words, but some of those present today have effectively combined both to capture our natural treasures.

Bank Negara Malaysia has a long history of encouraging local artists. For almost as long as the Bank has existed — 58 years — we have been building up an art collection. This asset is both an incentive to artists and a mirror to the nation's development. We can trace our society's evolution through the collection. We are honoured to have among us in the audience today, those who have worked and committed their lives to the preservation of our environment and wildlife, so that future generations can continue to experience the richness of life, and not only in a natural history museum. This exhibition hopes to inspire more of us to take up this important cause. No matter in small or big ways, we all can – and must – do our part.

Dato' Dino has brought home today the urgency of the environmental challenges that we face – not in the distant future, but today. Just this morning, the news carried reports of Earth reaching its highest temperature on record in 2016. This is the third successive year that temperatures have exceeded past record levels. We have long passed the point where global warming is a problem for tomorrow.

Bank Negara Malaysia welcomes the opportunity to work with organisations like the WWF to increase the impact of financial institutions in advancing environmental goals through sustainable finance initiatives. An area of focus has been in green finance, with over RM2.5 billion in financing extended from the financial sector to companies that promote clean and efficient energy from sustainable sources.

There are many ways in which we can better protect our environment. Art provides a sober reminder of this, as depicted in one painting from the Bank's collection which captures the KL Banjir of 1971, by Mohd Hoessein Enas, showing the iconic Merdeka Square under several feet of water, just a stone's throw away from the location of the Bank's headquarters which had moved only shortly before the event.

Another exhibit at the BNM Museum and Art Gallery depicts the two major Asian tsunamis of the past 13 years. This piece of installation art by Malaysian artist Oi Nuen Sprunt was displayed here in 2014, bringing home the message of nature's power and unpredictability, but also the healing power of human compassion and kindness.

Today, we bring you a more hopeful exhibition, with works that remind us of what exists just beyond our doorsteps, to be preserved and nurtured. The artists featured here today have all created their imagery direct from the source, which says a great deal about their passion and commitment to their craft. Few of us would take the time or trouble to observe nature at such an intimate level. These works allow us to do so in some measure. I am deeply encouraged by our own Bank staff who have also submitted works for the exhibition. They are wonderfully talented and represent the diversity in interests and perspectives of the team that we have here at the Bank.

Celebrating the beauty and diversity of nature is as good a reason as any for an art exhibition. This is the first time that I have had the distinct pleasure of launching an exhibition here at the Gallery, and I am thrilled and honoured for it to be on this particular theme.

I am grateful to all who have taken the time to be here today – to share an appreciation of not just the artistic works exhibited, but also their message. I would like to thank in particular all the artists, Dato' Dino of the WWF and the team from the Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery who worked to put this exhibition together.