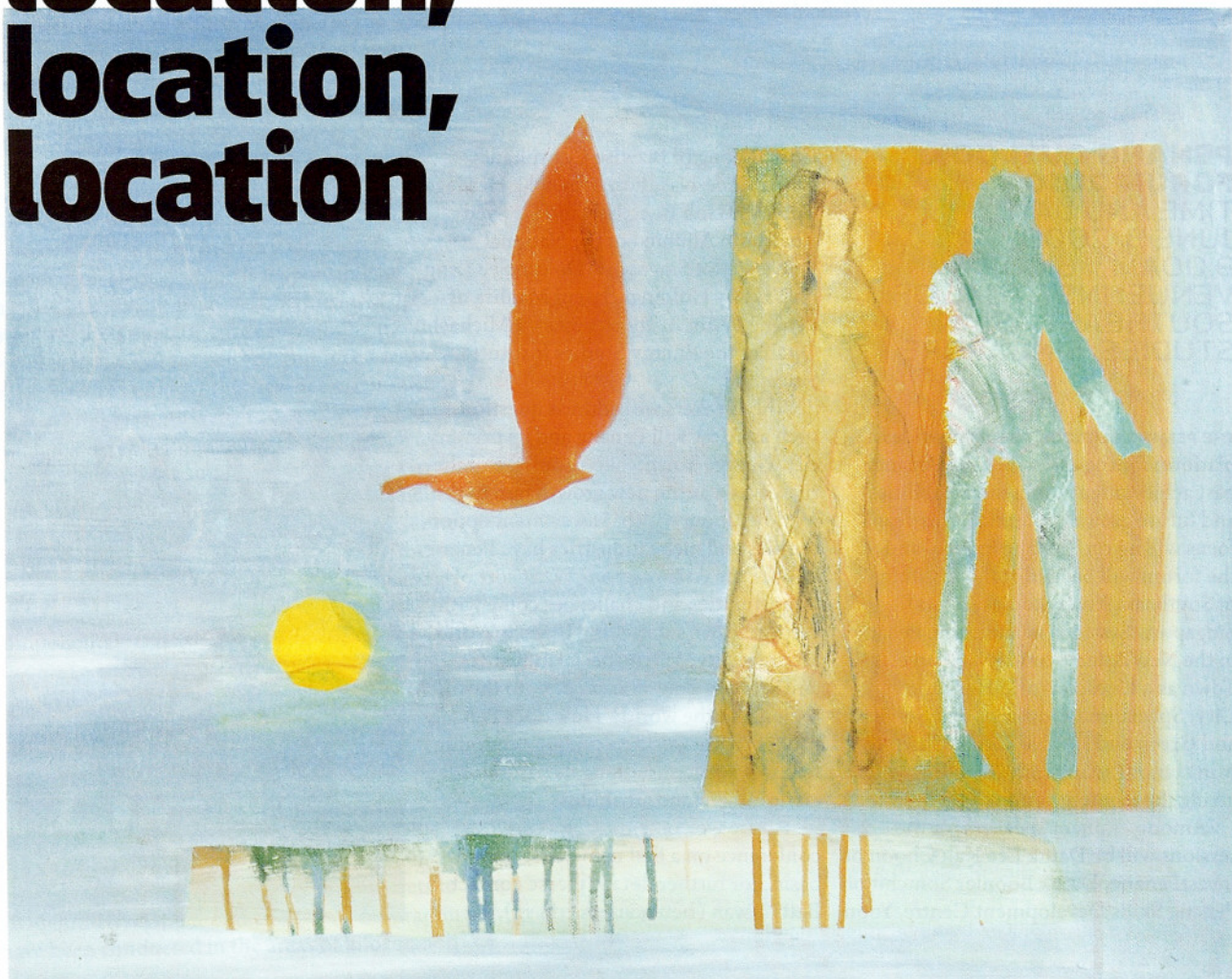




By Ooi Kok Chuen

Reading travelogues about one's own home is always an exciting pastime. All the more profound is the experience when absorbing visual art created in one's home by visitors, be they temporary or permanent. Penang holds an attraction for foreign artists that locals find hard to comprehend. Perhaps what is most obvious is what is most difficult to notice.

Even for artists, it's about location, location, location





Susanna Helena Hernesniemi's paintings (opposite page) often reflect a sense of disorientation and ambiguity of place.

STRANGE how artists locate to places they may not expect to end up in. Penang is such a place for quite a few of them. This is the story of four expatriate artists now working there – Helen Kim Yeon Tae from South Korea, Susanna Helena Hernesniemi from Finland/Denmark, Femke Ligthart from Holland and Drew Harris from Canada.

Helen Kim moved to Penang four years ago as part of a soul-searching odyssey through South-East Asia, while Susanna and Femke followed their husbands on work/business commitments. June will be Susanna's second anniversary in Penang, whereas Femke has watched her sculptures of feminine forms evolve in her nine years on the island. Drew had his Malaysian debut with Taksu Gallery in Kuala Lumpur in 1995 and had featured in solos there consistently until 2007.

It is apt that Helen Kim describes herself as a traveller. Born in Seoul, she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts at Duck-Sung Women's University before studying at the Art Students League and getting a Masters at New York University (1995).

Work and family commitments got to her so much that in the end she decided to break loose and become an independent full-time artist, using Penang as her base from which "to expand her vision of South-East Asia". This part of the world suited her because it is close to home, and her roots. Her sights are set next on Singapore, Indonesia and /or the Philippines.

Susanna, who was born in Australia to Finnish parents 57 years ago, is the quintessential modern nomad, having spent considerable time on four continents. Her works since 2006, involving a shadowy man often in truncated form as in Matissean paper cuts, perhaps reflect some sense of dislocation and disorientation and a potent ambiguity of place. Earlier, her works were centred more on strong abstract ruminations.

Femke is 41 this year. Since her children are quite grown up, she has more time for her sculptural work of voluptuous female forms and has begun incorporating Indian henna designs into some of her glaze-and-glass-enhanced clay torsos. This is for symbolic as well as ornamental value.

Despite the presence of these foreign artists, not many others have discovered Penang as a base despite the island's much vaunted natural beauty

(although much of that has been blemished in recent times) and its potpourri of food and culture.

Then and now, expatriate artists have been few and far between, unlike Bali, which is visited by hordes of artists – among them Walter Spies, Adrien Jean Le Mayeur de Merpres, Rudolf Bonnet and Willem G. Hofker, who all helped fuel its "artists' paradise" myth during the first half of the 20th century. (It should be pointed out that Penang has not lacked great admirers in authors such as Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham, Rudyard Kipling, Noel Coward, Herman Hesse and Han Suyin.) The situation has changed for base-searching artistic globetrotters though. As the world gets more and more globalised and Internet-mediated, people and money are moving more rapidly and easily. The quest for stimulation, markets and dreams, and even relaxation, is also more intense.



Evergreen by Helen Kim Yeon Tae, 56x74cm, acrylic, ink, embroidery on canvas (2008)



(Top) Femke Ligthart working on a sculpture in Ayutthaya, Thailand.

Some of Femke Ligthart's sculptures.

But Helen Kim, for one, believes in a universal humanism wherever one may be, be this noticeable in visible or invisible forms.

"The world of art, literature and learning is not about a certain country alone but is something that appeals to all," she says. Her painting oeuvre, in this sense, is like a perpetual rite of passage, in search of greater dimensions, depths and complexities.

An artist who works mostly in acrylic and ink and sometimes with silkscreen backdrops and embroidered embedding, Helen Kim confides that Penang has helped her to slow down, reconnect with Nature and live a freer and more spiritually fulfilling life.

"Actually, I needed to take a rest. I needed to get some fresh air and inspiration," she said. The rose-tinted-and-stained *Tears Streaming Down Her Face* (acrylic, ink and gel, 2007), a relatively big work at 166cm x 166cm, perhaps sums up the personal and transcendental thrust of her works.

Her creations are imbued with Minimalist strokes and pale colours with a gossamer lightness, which exude a refreshing dreamy ambience and a fragile sensibility.

In 2007, Helen Kim was a non-resident artist in the ABN-Amro Malihom artists programme. Her Penang stay was celebrated last October with an eye-opening solo, her eighth, called *Mystical Phenomenon*, at Galeri Seni Mutiara. She is slated for another solo in Seoul in May.

A new place does present awkward cultural boogies, she says. "It is not easy to be a female artist working independently in a foreign land. Not only is the culture and art scene different but public perceptions too are different."

Not so with Susanna, for wherever she goes, she gets involved in the artist community's activities while running the odd art class and workshop for disadvantaged children. She has been, among others, a member of the KC-MITT in Karlstad in Sweden, the Charleston Artist Guild, the Artist's House artists' cooperative in Silkeborg in Denmark and the Penang Art Society.

Susanna's biographical milestones read like a Geography lesson. She was born in the former copper mining town of Geraldton (formerly Gwalla), 52km to the north of Northampton, Australia, to which her Finnish parents had migrated. But when she was four, her parents moved back to their farm where they grew oats, rye and hay, in Kannus, western Finland. There, she was inspired by local artist and teacher Justus Sarisalo.

When in her teens, her parents again migrated, this time to Sudbury, another copper mining town, in Ontario, Canada. After that, it was back to Finland for her again until she started working in Sweden (at a porcelain works in Gustavsberg outside Stockholm), before she got a job as a flight hostess in Copenhagen, where she met her husband, Carsten Sorenson.

In 1989, Susanna moved to Charleston in South Carolina, the United States, where she took up a non-degree art course at the College of Charleston and was inspired by the abstract expressionist Michael Phillips, as well as Richard Diebickorn and George O'Keefe.

She moved back to Sweden (Soderkoping) in 2002 after deciding to become a full-time artist. The next year, she was in Jutland, Denmark, where she learned her masters in Finnish language and practical art theory (1996–2001).

She studied at the University of Aarhus and studied graphic design at the Aarhus Art Academy). After that, she did a stint in Beijing before coming to Penang.

In Copenhagen, Susanna took up evening classes under Naive artist Ejvind Schaldernose and was inspired by Danish artists Carl Henning Pedersen, Poul Kirkeby and Asger Jorn. In September 2006, she donated 35 of her paintings to the China Red Cross Foundation at an exhibition at the Eanni Art Gallery at the 798 Art Commune in Beijing to raise funds for children with leukaemia.

“My life has been influenced by many cultures,” says Susanna, whose family is applying for Malaysia’s Second Home status. Her two daughters, aged 18 and 24, are studying in Denmark.

Femke and her family originally planned to stay in Penang for only three to five years, but found the diverse variety of local cultures, fantastic food and “great weather” conducive. Her husband, Sjaak, runs a paper packaging company in Penang.

She studied under several artists back in Holland, and was motivated by Fernando Botero and Nic Jonk, but she gets her inspiration mainly from things around her. She is fascinated by nuances of postures and the female form, especially curves and the voluptuary, but at times by more acute rotund angles, especially when depicting the breast areas. She used to work with models back home in Holland.

“I have experimented with other mediums but clay offers me the most freedom to create because it is so flexible,” Femke says. “Michelangelo’s *David*, to me, is not necessarily the ‘perfect form’. To me, a perfect sculpture is one that looks good from every angle, and is nice to touch.”

It was a big step in her career when she set up her own art studio cum gallery in March last year. Apart from incorporating henna patterns in her works, she also turns to the local Chinese culture for inspiration, such as the auspicious fish head and lion dance head forms. After firing her clay marquettes in her kiln, she would personally send them to a foundry in Ayutthaya in Thailand to have silicon or plaster models made and then have them cast in bronze.

Of late, Femke has become more active in the local art scene. She held a two-women show with Singapore-born photographer Fiona Lim called *Les Femmes de Fem & Fiona* at the E&O Hotel in Penang and The Attic in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, in November and December 2007.

Drew Harris, 50, set up AWAS Studios with 1,700 square feet of space in Penang in 2008, together with his artist wife Sharifah Mazwari.

It’s hard to ascertain how much the new milieu these artists have chosen has influenced their content and style. What is undeniable is a strong affinity to Nature. Some may venture that much evolved from Penang’s environment, and whatever new attributes are add-ons and enhancements. Some may notice the dramatic stronger tropical colours, and some may wonder if specific cultural tokens were put in intentionally. Be that as it may, they represent the artists’ development.

They are there to be enjoyed: Helen Kim’s beautiful reveries of serenity and stillness that seem to come from inner melancholic emotive wellsprings, combined with a poetic empathy of natural splendour; Susanna’s indulgent tensions between the modern man in silhouettes increasingly torn from his spiritual anchors; Femke’s celebration of enigmatic female beauty through the strength, softness and suppleness of sculptural forms; and Drew’s large, highly textural vistas of mindscapes.

Location is perhaps just a state of mind, a new window providing the artist with fresh new vistas of the immediate world and the inner self. ●

Ooi Kok Chuen has been writing on the art scene at home and abroad for 28 years.

Conservation of the nature series by Susanna Helena Hernesniemi (2006)

