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Sunday June 24, 2012

Instinctive talent

By ANDREA FILMER
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A little cafe opens its doors to 17 special needs artists and serves up a feast for the senses.

THE rustic, cosy eatery of Chai Diam Ma is no stranger to indie art. The cafe, housed in a pre-war shophouse on a quiet part of Queen Street in George Town is rather well-known for showcasing the work of local artists.

Handmade jewellery, porcelain figurines, clothes, bags and a variety of other arts and crafts from some 20 local artists line the walls and shelves for easy browsing while customers await their food. But from now until the end of the month, art enthusiasts are in for an extra special treat as the cafe is hosting *The Outsider Art: Showcasing An Exhibition Of Hidden Talents*.



Individuals I and artists c: (From left) Sabri Bakar, Seah Ciao Shen, Azril Kamaruddin, Loo Jian Wen, Ang Hock Bin, Isniza Ismail, Chin Mun Kit, Henry Yeoh and Azniza Ismail outside Chai Diam Ma cafe in Penang.

Jointly organised by Chai Diam Ma (quirkily named after the Hokkien translation of "sundry shop") and Asia Community Service (ACS), a non-profit organisation that aims to empower people with special needs, this showcase is held in conjunction with the month-long George Town Festival that began on June 15.

The 36 art pieces by 17 artists with intellectual disabilities are truly a feast for the senses. Whether the media are conventional (oil paint and pastels), or more uncommon (marker pens and colour pencils), each piece speaks volumes about the individuality of the artist.

From the broad, bold strokes of Ruslan Yusuff to the cartoon-like pictorials of Ang Hock Bin, each creation is startlingly honest and offers insights into creative conscientiousness. Titles are not necessary, and, indeed, none are offered in this display of instinctive talent.

For Lim Lay See, the exhibition is a new experience as it is the first time her son, Seah Ciao Shen, has had his art on public display.

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M. Chella and his 70-year-old father, K. Muthuveloo, on the walkway outside their shophouse in Queen Street, where a painting from The Outsider Art is on display.

"He does batik painting and the results are quite nice, but I never knew he could draw like this," Lim, 54, says, gesturing to a massive mixed medium canvas in Chai Diam Ma's upstairs room.

She says Seah, 29, who was present but too shy to speak to reporters, is happy and fulfilled when engaged in his art.

Isniza Ismail was inspired to dabble in art after a visit from a Canadian Fine Arts student early last year.

"Enoch (Tee) visited us at ACS Stepping Stone Centre in Balik Pulau. I now like art very much," says Isniza, 40, who painted her vision of kampung houses against a background of brilliant orange, red and blue.

For Chin Mun Kit, it was the mysterious pyramids of Giza that had called to him as a subject for an oil painting.



Lim Lay See is surprised by what her son, Seah Ciao Shen, has done for this exhibition of hidden talents.

"A few people have painted this scene in Egypt, so I took advantage of that. I would like to go and see them myself, but I don't have the money," says Chin, 21, who used bold colours to attract attention to his piece, adding that the finished work has a "therapeutic" feel to it.

Proceeds from *The Outsider Art* will go towards ACS artists' trust fund. The exhibition will also be "taking to the streets" during its run.

Cafe owner Queen Lee has asked her neighbours' permission to use their common walkway as an extended venue for the artworks – several large paintings will be displayed outside the half-a-dozen linked shophouses.

M. Chella, a third-generation occupant in one of the houses, says he is happy to do his bit for the exhibition.

"We're fine about letting them put up their art. This is an avenue for these artists to keep growing mentally and we like to help keep them motivated," says Chella, 51.

■ **The Outsider Art** is on show till Saturday. Viewing from noon to 5pm daily, except Tuesday. Chai Diam Ma is at No.15, Queen Street, George Town. For details, call Queen Lee at 016-431 4452.

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