



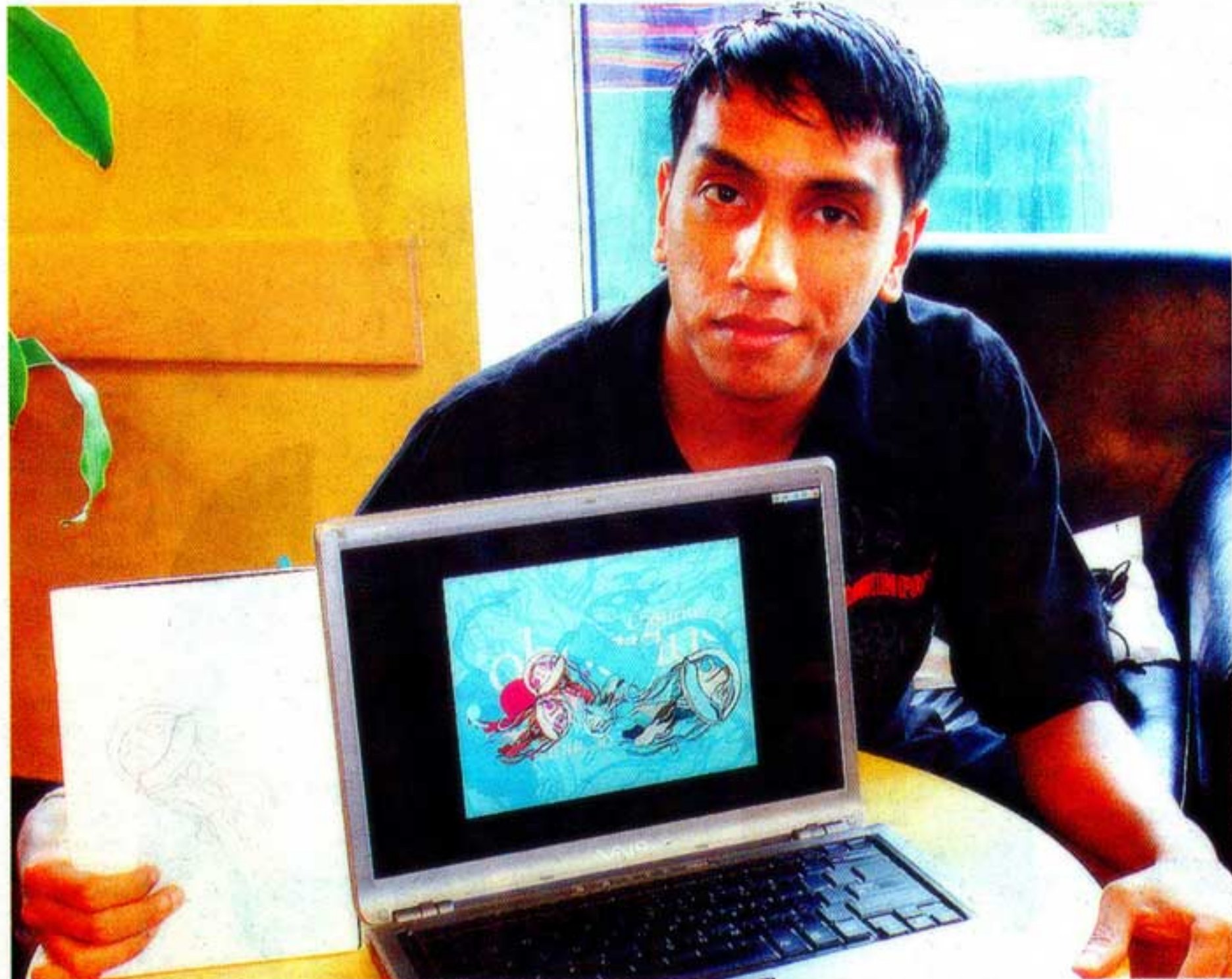
IT'S ART JIM, BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT

Art in the 21st century is evolving with the advent of cutting-edge digital technology. But is this evolution welcome?

By STEVEN PATRICK and JO TIMBUONG

NO SPLASHING of paint, no lying in back-straining positions for years, just the clicking of a computer mouse.... Would Leonardo da Vinci have scoffed at today's digital art? Although we can't answer on behalf of this renaissance legend, digital artists today feel that their art isn't taken seriously enough. Digital artists feel that traditionalists think this new age work is easy to do. All you need is the right software, a little imagination and presto out comes digital art. This brings about the impression that the computer does it all.

The way traditional artists see it, digital art requires no more than a PC, a comfortable room and a steaming cup of latte — all too convenient. But as the digital artists see it, it's merely a progression of art. A computer screen replaces a piece of canvas and digital palettes and a mouse or a Wacom tablet replaces colours and brushes. And though it may be computerised, it is nowhere near easy, some digital artists say. "The canvas they sweat on is their computer! Do you think it's easy to come up with a concept? No! Their mice are covered in sweat just to produce a masterpiece so don't say blood, sweat and tears were not shed to produce an art piece," enthused Izuldin Hani Mohd Noor, director and founder of art gallery Galleriizu. Izuldin, or simply known as Izu, explains that digital art is hardly different from the "ordinary art."



ARTISTIC: Muid showing off his digital masterpiece, Obourius, on his notebook screen. Like many artworks, digital art starts with a simple sketch (left) before it is scanned and manipulated using computer software.

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IZU, GALLERIIZU DIRECTOR AND FOUNDER

The only difference is in the process of creation. It is just a natural progression of the art scene. Izu said even the great masters changed their processes as technology became more abundant. "You think Michelangelo made his own dyes? No, he used paints

and yet he was still ridiculed by his peers," Izu said and that is exactly what digital artists are facing now. "For ordinary art, you need brushes but for digital art, you need a computer. That's all there is to it," he said. He said that most of the pictures around us are in fact digital art as they were produced digitally. He points at a sugar packet and said that its package design is digital art and then points at a mural in one of the



IS IT ART?: Though digital art is usually dismissed by traditionalists, digital artists say it takes a lot of effort and patience before a digital piece, like this portraiture by artist S. Junning, can be produced.

Digital art defined

THE Wikipedia definition of digital art is artwork created on a computer in digital form. Digital art can be purely computer-generated, or taken from another source, such as a scanned photograph, or an image drawn using graphics software using a mouse or graphics tablet. The availability and popularity of photograph manipulation software has created a vast and creative library of altered images. Digital artists use electronic versions of brushes, filters and enlargers to produce images that are unattainable through conventional photographic tools. Also, digital artists may manipulate scanned drawings, paintings, collages or lithographs or a combination of all. Many museums are now

beginning to collect digital art such as the San Jose Museum of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Closer to home, digital art is not new and was, in fact, introduced in the 1980s. Digital artist Muid Latiff explained that the first digitised artwork was produced by the late Ismail Zain where he manipulated photographs of local celebrities using a very early version of *Adobe Pagemaker* on a Macintosh computer. Then in the 1990s, people like Faisal Hasnool and J. Saidun emerged producing video art that was showcased at the National Art Gallery in 1997. In the recent decade, the local digital art scene is populated by Muid and his peers including Tan Jin Hor and Adi Saman.



3D ART: An example of digital art by Yu Chang Seng.

designer boutiques and said that it is digital art too. "The music videos on MTV are also a form of digital art," Izu said. But not many realise this because not many can appreciate art in all its forms, Izu said. **Efficient medium** "Digital art is not easy at all," argues digital artist Yu Chang Seng, who uses Autodesk's *3dsMax* software for his art. "Sketches need to be done, filtered, then modelled with 3D software. Generating a concept and idea on paper is easy because it involves only one particular angle. "But in 3D, you need to take care

of every angle. Then you need to add the appropriate texture and colour to the models or characters," Yu said. Yu explains that traditional artists still emphasise on painting on canvas or sculpting a clay model using a knife and can't understand more modern methods. He explains that a lot of the traditional artists in Malaysia refuse to adapt to the digital world because to them it's something that is not real and is too high tech. Yu believes that the digital medium is a highly efficient medium and suits artists of the new millennium. "Digital artists prefer to produce everything digitally without

DEBUNKING DIGITAL MYTHS



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spending time and money on painting materials," he said.

"Acceptance for digital art is rare but I guess it will slowly catch up," commented digital artist S. Junning.

Junning uses Adobe's *Photoshop*, and *Illustrator* software to render his art.

Digital artists are excited over the flexibility of digital art.

"I chose to work digitally because it can shorten the time to create pieces and something unexpected can be produced with just a click of the mouse," said Junning.

"I also have unlimited 'undo' options when producing digital art," chuckles Yu.

"I am basically a computer person. I am too scared to dirty my hands with traditional painting materials," he said.

Another artist, Sheiko Hussin, says that with the digital medium, artists have more freedom in terms of changing colour, tweaking the elements in the artwork and undoing something they don't like with ease.

A part-time graphic artist who also works with Adobe software, Fayrus Efendy, explains that by combining different types of media and approach, there are endless possibilities to explore.

Refreshing genre

Contemporary artist Roslisham Ismail, also known as Ise, sees the difference in opinion held by people in the traditional art world and the digital art world.

Though he does not indulge completely in digital art, he has dabbled in it somewhat and finds it a refreshing genre.

"Digital art can be anything. It could be a piece of artwork scanned and manipulated and printed," he said.

He added that he has given some of his work that type of treatment and sold them for a significant amount.

But the trouble with the local art scene is not many can appreciate art.

"Never mind digital art, many people have trouble appreciating a painting," he said.

Digital art gets the strongest blow, Ise said, because it is perceived as something that didn't come from the heart.

"Many are still romantics and don't understand how something produced with the help of computers can be art," he said.

He adds that certain quarters of the art scene are fussy about art and prefer only art genres that are perceived as fine, high quality art.

"This kind of attitude does not only impede the development of digital art but also art in general," Ise said.

Digital artists are treated with even less respect even from the so-called *crème de la crème* of the art scene.

"This is because digital art is not seen as art by many but this is wrong," said Izu.

He added that the main reason why digital art is not perceived as an art form by a large quarter of the art community is that because no effort has been put into it, a fallacy that needs to be corrected.



LONG ROAD: Ise showing off his book on his time in Australia after taking up a residency offer from the Australian High Commission in Malaysia. Many artists, especially digital artists, need to travel overseas in order to make a name for themselves before they are recognised locally.

»Companies that support the arts get up to RM500,000 deducted from their annual taxes«

IZU, GALLERIIIZU DIRECTOR AND FOUNDER

Digital artists grouse

Given the low appreciation of art in the country, digital artists find it hard to survive in the local art scene.

Muid Latiff, a renowned digital artist, laments something that would sell for thousands of dollars overseas would only fetch a mere RM500 in Malaysia.

There is also a misconception that anyone can produce digital art and it does not require thinking or passion.

"I find it insulting when people say that they can get students to do it for less," Muid said adding that even digital art students feel insulted when these jobs are thrown at them. "It is an affront to our talents," said Junning.

The cost of equipment and time to produce a digital art piece does not cost anywhere near RM500, Junning said.

"A good computer that supports



SURREAL: A digital artwork by Fayrus.

proper designing hardware can cost more than RM3,000," Junning claimed.

He said pirated designing software is not the way to go.

"That's just wrong and the originals are not cheap either," Junning said.

But what troubles digital artists the most, especially the new ones, is that there is hardly any place for them within the walls of the National Art Gallery (NAG).

This is not the case elsewhere. In Singapore, Muid said the government took the initiative to showcase digital art every week.

"They also provide the space for young and upcoming artists to showcase their work," he said.

Just as a musician needs to practice to get to Carnegie Hall, an artist needs to build a proper portfolio before the NAG accepts his work, Muid explained.

Portfolio building usually requires the artist to travel outside of the country before the local art

scene recognises his or hers talents.

"I find it disheartening that we have to go elsewhere to be recognised before they appreciate us," Muid said.

What's all the fuss?

Local digital artists are putting the blame on the NAG for not being conscious of the digital art movement in the country.

But in its defence, NAG is aware of digital art and recognises the Malaysian "godfather" of digital art, the late Ismail Zain.

"His masterpiece is part of our permanent collection," said a NAG official who requested anonymity.

The official also said digital artist make up about 60% of artists in Malaysia.

So, what is the fuss about? Apparently, although NAG recognises digital art as an art form, Izu explains that digital art is not really high on NAG's priority list.

Offering support

TO HELP create more awareness towards digital art, Izu plans to have an event in their honour.

Called the 7-Bintang Digital Art Awards, the event aims to bring together local digital artists.

The event also aims to enhance the international perception of Malaysian art by celebrating its beauty in a glamorous event.

In conjunction with the event, Izu also plans to set up a database of Malaysian digital artists.

This, he hopes, will facilitate the matchmaking of businesses with artists and encourage them to continue working in their field.

Given the lack of support for digital art, more often than not, digital artists end up doing something else other than art.

Izu also suggested that art supplies, including those for digital art, be made tax-free to allow the art scene to flourish.

This is echoed by digital artist Muid Latiff.

"If the software for producing digital art were to be tax-free, it would definitely encourage us to produce more work of even higher quality," he said. Though digital art is in the process of being accepted as a form of art in the country, Muid said art schools are exposing its students to it.

"Some art schools teach it and encourage their students to experiment with it," he said.

Perhaps with a little bit more encouragement, the digital art scene will blossom in no time at all.

"They know about it but let's just say they need some time to understand this new art form," said Izu, who is also a member of the Malaysian Arts Council and president of the Arts and Craft Guild of Malaysia.

Digital art, Izu said, is still a novelty art form in Malaysia and arouses the curiosity of many art lovers and followers.

Though they may not appreciate it the same way they do a normal painting, people come in droves to find out more about digital art.

"Once I had an exhibition, about 3,000 visitors came and a group of them even chartered a bus from Penang," Izu said.

He added that a normal exhibition would probably attract an average of 100 to 200 people.

No local support

Izu said the Malaysian education system is to blame for the lack of appreciation.

"In school, students are only taught to draw but not to explore that drawing further," he said.

"It is only those who go on to study art at university that appreciate it. But when they come out as artists, they are faced with the art-ignorant communities. Then, they have trouble explaining and selling their art.

"But without the knowledge of this form of art, the support for digital art is almost non-existent.

"Without this support, our digital artists really don't have a stage to perform," Izu said.

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UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL
Google's 'Street View' service will allow people to virtually experience cities like New York before they even get there.
— Reuters

■ The competition between online mapping services is bringing exciting, new features to consumers.

STREET-LEVEL VIEWS ON ONLINE MAPS

»With Street View users can virtually walk the streets of a city, check out a restaurant before arriving, and even zoom in on bus stops and street signs to make travel plans«

JOHN HANKE, DIRECTOR OF GOOGLE EARTH AND MAPS

GOOGLE and Microsoft are battling anew for online travellers with rival Internet mapping services that provide vivid real-world views of major US cities. Google Maps and Earth recently launched Street View, a feature that gives pedestrian-eye looks at parts of San Francisco, New York, Las Vegas, Denver, Miami, and renowned technology Mecca Silicon Valley in northern California. Street View "will soon be expanded to other metropolitan areas," according to director of Google Earth and Maps, John Hanke. "With Street View, users can

virtually walk the streets of a city, check out a restaurant before arriving, and even zoom in on bus stops and street signs to make

travel plans," Hanke said in a blog posting at the Google website. The same day, Microsoft Live Search Maps began offering three-

dimensional, photo-realistic views of cities "with perspectives that few people apart from Superman have ever seen."

Microsoft said its map service provides "birds-eye" views of cities in Britain, Canada, and the United States and will expand to include more cities worldwide by the end of summer.

The free Microsoft maps come with services for finding businesses, reviews and directions.

Microsoft's Live Maps already incorporates street-level imagery into its service.

Camera icons on Google's map of the United States indicate places where online visitors can zoom in and explore city streets complete

with traffic, people and 360° panoramic views.

The static street scenes are seamless compilations of photographs, prompting some concerns about privacy because people, homes and cars are clearly caught in the images.

"Google takes concerns about its services very seriously," the Mountain View, California, company maintains in an online tutorial with an Internet link "to report concerns about an inappropriate street view."

Street Views includes looks at Google's address in Mountain View and glimpses of Stanford University where the co-founders of the world's most popular online search engine were students. — AFP

Corporate sector can help raise awareness of digital art

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One example Izu encountered was when he attended an exhibition by a group of students from Multimedia University a few years ago.

He found the digital prints and character designs stunning but what saddened him was a question a lecturer posed him.

"Where will these kids be in a couple of years?" the lecturer asked and Izu did not have an answer.

The closest answer he could give was these kids would probably be doing something else.

But for those with inextinguishable flames in their bellies, their ambitions would bring them to other places where digital art is more appreciated.

It's no wonder our digital artists have to travel far and wide to get their art recognised.

They take up three-month residencies in Australia, Indonesia or Singapore to build up their

reputation and only then are they recognised locally.

Alternative

It's a sad fact for many but that is an alternative way out of this situation.

If the NAG is not about to put digital art on top of its priority list anytime soon, corporations can help develop this art form.

Izu said digital artists could help corporations associate their brands with the images they produce.

It's a symbiotic relationship that is shared over time.

A digital artist designs prints or videos for a company and that unique thumbprint becomes the image of the company.

The image sticks in the head of consumers and the artist is recognised and goes on to other endeavours.

And this has already been done, Izu said.

"In fact, BMW employs Joshua Davis, a digital artist, to produce its



PSYCHEDELIC: Another digital artwork by Fayrus.

banners which now hang in the company's showroom in Germany and he is renowned for his other works too," Izu said.

And if that isn't a good reason,

did you know that companies that support the arts get up to RM500,000 deducted from their annual taxes?

"Not many companies chief

executive officers know that but their accountants sure do," Izu laughed.

If there is a place digital artists can find the appreciation they want from the people who are likely to give it to them, it's the large corporations.

But digital artists are also to take some of the blame for the lack of support in their field.

They scare people with their exorbitant prices. Izu said. It's no wonder not many are willing to support them.

"Wouldn't you be surprised too if someone told you to pay them RM5,000 for an art piece without explaining why?" Izu asked.

He said that if digital artists want people to support them, they need to explain their prices.

When that is done and people understand what goes into producing a piece of digital art, they will start to appreciate it just as they do an exquisite scenery painting, Izu said.