

**Apparent contrast:** There is no lack of clarity in Zakii's works, which faithfully replicate every crease, vein and hair of the human figure (above) while Pramuhendra continues with his practice of executing large canvas drawings based on actual photographs (below)

# Picture perfect, and eerily so

Using charcoal, 2 artists depict figures to meditative, primordial effect, says **CLARISSA TAN**

**C**HARCOAL, that material made up of compressed living matter from the past – stilled life, if you like – is the medium of choice in two concurrent art exhibitions at the NUS Museum.

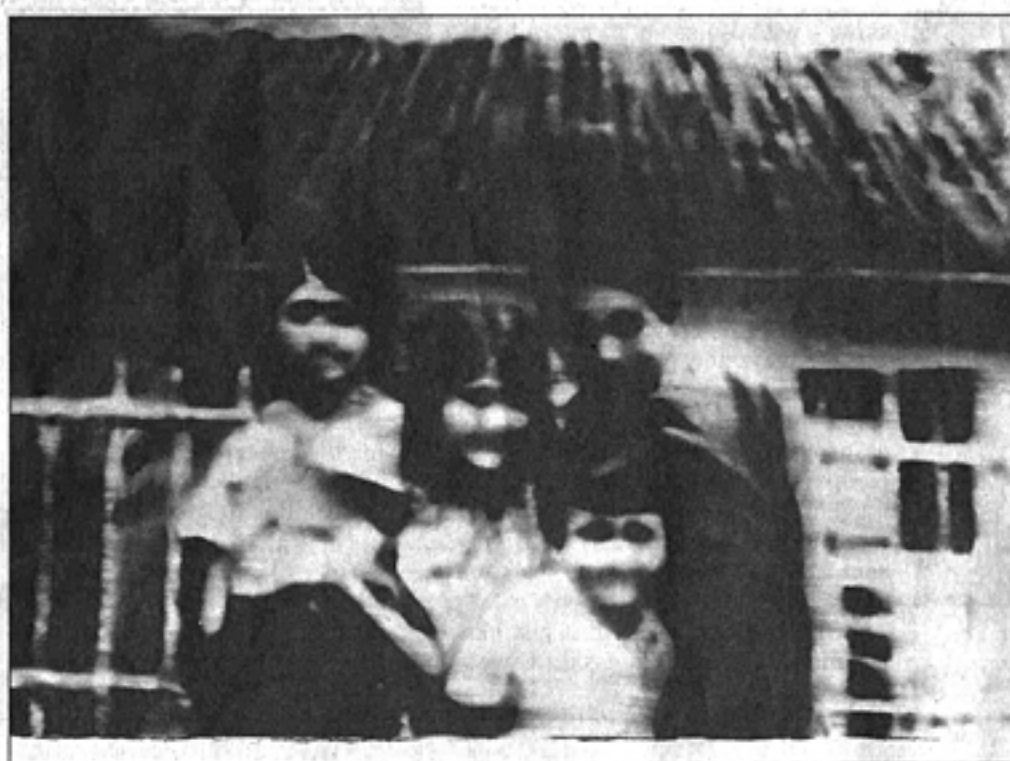
The two artists featured, Indonesia's J Ariadhitya Pramuhendra and Malaysia's Ahmad Zakii Anwar, have vastly different styles, but both use charcoal to depict figures to meditative, primordial effect.

Pramuhendra, continuing with his practice of executing large canvas drawings based on actual photographs, gives us a series on family portraits this time around. Called *Spacing Identities*, his exhibition is haunting, to say the least.

The viewer will immediately recognise the kind of photos and poses he depicts – the cluster of children with Mummy and Daddy on the living-room settee; the multiple-generation shot with two or three rows of carefully placed, doggedly smiling relatives; the classic pyramidal classroom memento with Teacher at the apex and ever-widening tiers of students sitting diligently below her.

And yet something familiar has been sucked out from these portraits, the life and the soul of the people maybe, so that they look zombie-like and washed out, like nothing we have ever seen. Creepier even than the kind of portraits whose eyes seem to follow you about, his figures don't have eyes at all – they gaze at you from blackened sockets, deep holes that the artist has smudged over.

Pramuhendra has used actual photos from his childhood, and several of the boy figures in the pictures are actually the artist himself. Aside from the academic discourse of being and non-being, identity and displace-



ment, the nature of memory, and so on and so forth, one feels he has something very personal invested in the matter. Pramuhendra is rebuilding his past exactly the way he wants it, accentuating something here, blanking out something there, refurbishing something here, deleting something there.

Interestingly, some of his larger canvases gain in clarity and delineation the further away you stand from them, as though distance helps make things more distinct. There is also a long, white corridor on which a host of framed photos have been assembled and hung, a poignant and eerie reproduction of that cliché, the family portrait gallery.

The whole thing is a mesmerising, deeply indelible display.

There is no lack of clarity in Zakii's

works, which faithfully replicate every crease, vein and hair of the human figure. His exhibition, called *Being*, features 10 large works of charcoal-on-paper, most of them 200 cm by 114 cm, all of them of a single male model. So realistic are Zakii's drawings – the term "hyperrealism" comes tantalisingly to mind – that they achieve a kind of supra-symbolism, enhanced by the totemic, archetypal poses of his model.

Yes, Zakii makes his drawings look like photos snapped by a machine, in the way Pramuhendra makes his photos look like human attempts at retrieval, but at the same time his male model is set against a pristine white background that is anything but "natural". His human figure is born fully formed, as though of a sophisticated and replete Nature emerging from nothing. That sense of clari-

ty suspended in space, along with the stark palette of black and white, lend his works a meditative, even ascetic quality.

Zakii has said that his works, particularly those of human figures, can be seen as visual and aesthetic responses to theological issues, especially to his interest in Islamic Sufism.

"The prohibition of the figure in Islam is controversial, even in Islamic circles," the artist says in an interview with NUS Museum head Ahmad Mashadi published in the exhibition catalogue. "But you'll find figuration common in Islamic art, albeit stylised. The whole of Islamic theology focuses on Man and his salvation. The figure became central to my art because of this. It was unavoidable because it was the central issue I was addressing."

Zakii sees *Being* as a culmination of a search that began with his two previous series that also featured lone figures, *Smokers* and *Meditations*.

"The figure exists on a white background with no reference to place or circumstance," he says. "Everything unnecessary has been edited out. Even his gestures are minimal, giving no clue to the state of his emotions. Stripped of a specific identity, the figure becomes an icon – a universal being representing mankind, like a logo."

*Spacing Identities* by J Ariadhitya Pramuhendra (until May 31) and *Being* by Ahmad Zakii Anwar (until June 7) at NUS Museum