

Interview with Mr. Haned Bin Masjak, the DG of National Visual Arts Gallery

Artists create, they put their soul and feelings into their work and maybe their art works will survive them for centuries; the names of a few only will remain in history... But to be able to create, an artist needs someone to value and appreciate his work during his lifetime. At least enough to feed him and supply the materials... Yet the people who provide artists with the conditions to work most probably will never be remembered by history or even thanked for their intentions, understanding and care... This is the paradox...



All artists who were invited by the National Gallery were approved by the Board members. In any big organization it is always a few personalities who head it; their vision decides if this kind of project happens or not... Malaysia is a country where leaders of national culture have the understanding to help artists to survive, feel needed and appreciated; they set the conditions for artists to create.

This is an interview with the Director General of National Visual Arts Gallery of Malaysia Mr. Haned Bin Masjak. He is the one who not only organized and got approval for this project, but he also personally cared for the every day needs of the artists. Sir Haned every day visited our workshop, not only to see the artworks creating process or supply different materials, but to check on catering, food quality, transportation and so on... Sometimes he was even more easy to approach than his staff. On a few occasions, I witness him doing what one would never expect from a person in his position, such as removing used plates from tables or even changing table cloth! These simple actions reveal his humble and caring nature, which is a sign of a great personality...

One great lady once told me : "Natalya, if you want something be done perfectly, you have to check it yourself..." The lady was the leader of her country with dozens of attendants working for her, and I often remember her

words. When I saw how Mr. Haned tried to make every artist here comfortable, despite of his busy schedule and other duties, I was proud for Malaysia to have this kind of person as head of the National Art Gallery. It shows that Malaysia is a flourishing country with great impulse, comparing to Russia for example, who's best art and culture times is already in the past... This kind of sincere and human attitude to artists, from a head of a great museum, is impossible to imagine now in my country...

The greatness of a person is in his attitude and understanding. Well known Russian artist Gregory Pototsky accepted the symposium invitation, because he always try to respond positively to those who need him, regardless of payment or conditions of work. Gregory says that an artist should never place any conditions for his work; if someone arranges for him possibilities to work and feeds him, for that alone he should be grateful, despite that his artworks might be worth thousands of dollars.

The National Gallery provided artists with perfect work conditions and all necessary raw materials. We are all very honoured and privileged to be a part of this unique Art symposium. In gratitude to all organizers, here is my short interview with Mr. Haned Bin Masjak, Director General of National Visual Arts Gallery of Malaysia.



NB: Sir, how was this project created, who got the idea first?

DG: At the unveiling of the monument “Islam is peace” last March, it occurred to me to introduce bronze to the local sculptors; bronze is something not really practiced by the local sculptors

because they don't have the heavy equipment to cast the bronze and also bronze is most expensive, they can't really afford it. I would like a few sculptors to work together, to enrich one another. I thought of inviting Gregory Pototsky, because he so famous for his bronze castings. Also Gregory donated four monuments to Malaysia, two of which are here in National Gallery.

We also invited Lutse, an artist from Indonesia, who is also familiar with bronze castings. And of course, we invited four local sculptors that have never actually done bronze; technically they did aluminum or other forms of metals, but I learned that the process of bronze casting is almost the same. So, they were very much pleased to participate in this program, because it will be a challenge for them, working the bronze, sharing knowledge with Gregory from Russia and also with Lutse from Indonesia.

In the meanwhile, I searched around for who could be our partner in bronze casting to fulfill the project and got in touch with a few manufacturers around Kuala Lumpur; it seemed to me at first, it may not be quite possible, because this service would be quite costly.

However, one company, Sirim seemed interested to explore something artistic, because up to now they had been making casting for machinery parts. In art, each piece is cast one by one, and of course cannot be mass produced. Now, since we have this cooperation with Sirim, I'm sure that the project would be possible to fulfill.

NB: You actually started something that was never done before?

DG: Yes, never done before, and somehow I knew I should initiate this project and bring it to its end on June 16th.

NB: Which difficulties occurred during the project that you did not expect at first?

DG: Of course, doing something new for the first time is always a hassle, unexpected things are possible. However, the commitment we ask from the artists is so well received. They are here, since the first day of the program on the 25th of May. Some stay every day at the workshop; some of course have their own commitments but they will stay until the end because they have promised to create five sculptures each; so they have to meet the project targets and so far, almost all have met their targets...

NB: Gregory Pototsky did 22 pieces!



DG: Yes, Gregory is so skilful and with his vast experience, has managed to create many more artworks than was demanded. So, it is something that practice makes perfect and then of course, the rest is very technical; it has to be done as per the targets.

NB: What was the most interesting in this project for you personally Sir Haned?

DG: How we see artists creating their sculptures right in front of us!

Most don't actually produce a drawing of their sculpture first, they transform from their mind directly onto the form of the clay model. So it is something unique to me: it surprises me that not necessarily everything has to be done on paper before transforming into a real structure...

Then there is also the documentation that is going on every day, picture taking, video taping... So in the end, there will be good documentation of the process of each artist doing his art creations. Everything will be shown and each artist will get their own copy of the video they can replay and see their work. Then we will officially launch this program, hopefully in August, to hold an exhibition of the bronze art works in the gallery.

August is the month of Independence for Malaysia. It is my plan of doing this



exhibition of bronze sculptures in August 2015, it is to celebrate the month of our Independence!

NB: Art should cause emotions! Which piece from this project will you remember best, that touches you the most?

DG: I will remember all of them! Of course that piece by Gregory Pototsky, so unique, how he created the sunflowers; and then, how he sculpts very skillfully a Malaysian woman as five fingers and how he makes portraits of personalities...

NB: Your portrait as well Sir...

DG: Yes my portrait of course; the portrait of our chairman and the portrait of a girl visitor, who walked into the workshop. It impressed me how quickly he sculpted the portrait of this young local girl.

I will also remember the sculpture done by Annua from Malaysia; how he used cloth to wrap around his sculpture and then Lutse from Indonesia, how he cast parts of human body in their shape and their size very realistically...



NB: With metal wires from a body part...

DG: Yes metal wires... the artist is searching how to explore form! In fact, they all have their own style and technique; they apply their own experience and expertise.

NB: Do you plan to make this collection a permanent exhibit here at the National Gallery?

DG: Yes, this is going to be a permanent collection about bronze casting. We have managed to secure over thirty pieces of sculptures in the end; each artist contributing 5 pieces, times 6 artists, so that will be thirty pieces in the permanent collection. They will be on display here at the gallery, and also travelling within Malaysia.

NB: Do you plan to show them outside of Malaysia?

DG: Of course, depending of requests we get, but our focus is mostly domestic, within the various states of Malaysia.

NB: And the program itself... Do you plan to repeat it every year?

DG: Yes, I intend to do it every year; we will do a post mortem of this one and bring some corrections for next year.

NB: Improve the program...

DG: Yes...

NB: The question then is: what would you like to improve?

DG: I would like to improve the participating artists, seek out more international artists. Now we have two, one from Russia and one from Indonesia. Hopefully next year there will be more. Then of course, we will hope on a bigger budget and decide the concept for the next year; this year we have thirty pieces, next year if we get another thirty or forty, that will be plenty for us. That's eighty pieces, for one gallery it is many...

NB: Do you really think its many for the National Gallery? Its suppose to be the grandest collection in the country! Its not a little private art gallery... Do you know that Gregory alone has over 300 bronze pieces in his small art studio in Moscow. For a the national gallery, it should be hundreds & hundreds...

DG: Of course....that could be considered! And then we have networking with other state galleries of Malaysia, so maybe we will put some there; I believe there are seven state galleries.

NB: You are a headliner; here you are creating the history of Malaysian art... Do you feel yourself as a creator?

DG: Hum... I just created the program... But the artists, they make the success of the program!

NB: Your knowledge of Gregory Pototsky came from the monument "Islam is peace", when we talked about installing it outside of the Gallery. At the time we didn't expect this would become a reality; and then suddenly, with your collaboration, there it is! I would say you did a

miracle Sir, when you took the monument from the archives and placed it outside for all people to see.

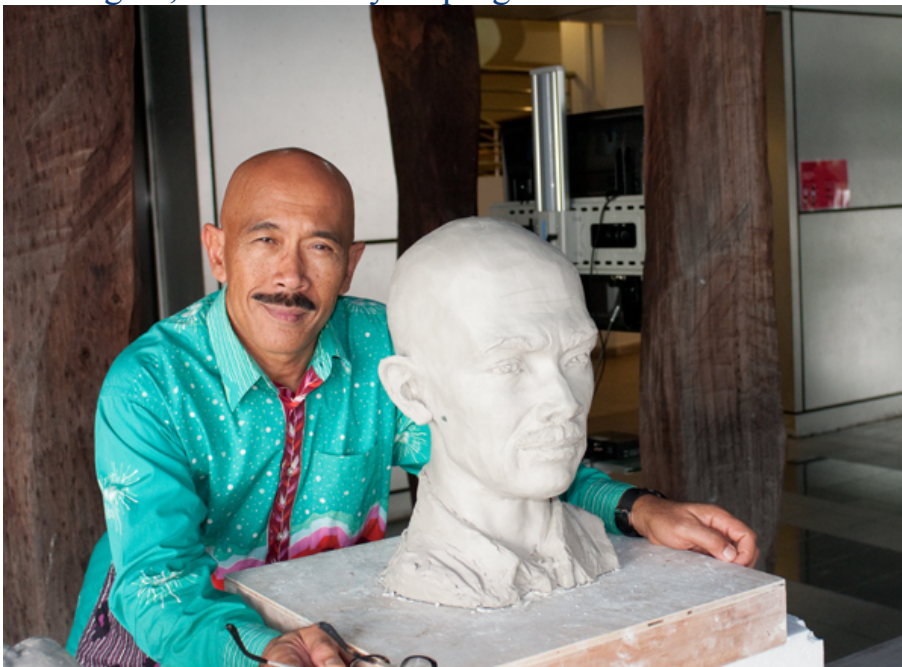
DG: Yes the monument “Islam is peace” was donated to the gallery in 2007. We thought of how to place it within the premises of the gallery. When you suggested to me that “Islam is peace” should be outside, not inside the gallery... I had never realized that “Islam is peace” should be outside. But the idea behind it is very grand and people should see it.

NB: That’s why Gregory and I, believe that it is a miracle that you were able to hear it!

DG: It suddenly sounded to me so logical... “Islam is peace” should be outside; it’s no miracle, just common sense Natalya!

NB: I find that it is placed in a very beautiful environment.

DG: In the garden, people come and take pictures... So it will be a place for peace donated by Gregory Pototsky. He gives deep philosophical meaning to each of his artworks and it impresses any one who meets him. I hope he will come again, for the next year program.



NB: Maybe there is something I’m forgetting to ask Sir?

DG: This bronze casting program is part to be launched in September; then lasting all October & November 2015.

NB: So it will be here at the National Gallery?

DG: Yes... It is a project where they will be getting value with time. We want to consider art pieces as something very valuable, not only in the form of art but value for money also. I am sure that the artists will be proud of the value for each of their sculptures. I think the value will keep on increasing because most of them are young, except one or two, and they have a great potential in the coming years to practice bronze castings in their career as artists. Also now they have the networking and can go directly to get assistance in bronze casting.

NB: I find you are a great man for giving artists such possibilities; you open them new doors... And you enrich your culture Sir, in the same time.

DG: I wish this program will continue, not only on certain days or certain months, hopefully next year it will continue for four months, or even 6 months. So we will popularize bronze castings, it should be here.

NB: That is really great!

DG: We have many productive sculptors around, young, they come from art schools, this will let the gallery introduce & coordinate this program to help them.

NB: Maybe next year the gallery can do a real master class when students from art schools will come...and maybe have questions & discussions. I think what was missing from this symposium was discussions, no real interaction between artists...

DG: In fact, now that most artists have completed their subjects, I will start doing discussions tomorrow; we will start discussing things in the afternoon and will need collaboration by the artists to get their opinion how they see the program, what could be done better. We wanted schools to come and join the program, but now it is semester leave, so they are away... Hopefully the program next year will not be during semester break, it should be during normal sessions, so the students can come.

NB: Thank you so much Sir! I wish you a great future with the Bronze Art Casting project. I was very honoured to be a part of it and write about it.

The interview was taken by

Natalya Bronzova

In Kuala Lumpur, on June 10th, 2015