Artists’ Sanctuary
Grace Chin, The Edge Cultural Index, September 8-14, 2008

Malihom Estate tucked away in Balik Pulau, Penang provides a retreat for artistic exploration.

A fortunate few have spent time in Balik Pulau, Penang, atop Bukit Penarai, a hill dotted with magical fruit trees. Fewer still have been privy enough to spend six months at the Malihom artist residency on the same hill, some 400m above sea level. The steep access to the privately-owned estate comes as a shock to the average urbanite, for air is crisp and cool, and there is a breathtaking view of new and old rivers. Peacefulness surrounds the hill — no oto, no incessant katuk-e music from the neighbours, and no annoying ring tones. A mobile phone reception is thankfully out of Bukit Penarai.

Bustle and philanthropist Datin Kristin Sunning, who has made a fortune building Malihom Estate in 2006, Apart from being a beautiful retreat, Malihom provides for artistic exploration through its artist-in-residence programme. Now in its second year, the K3 Malihom artist in Residence (AIR) programme is a brainchild of Sunning, who was inspired at a point to visit another artist residency, Kristin Dahan in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, few years ago. Together with co-sponsors Royal Bank Scotland (formerly known as ABN- AMRO), AIR has provided more than $7,000 international and local artists this summer — working on a 10-month stay in the lush, pristine land and gallery and living in one of the four artist sanctuaries. Artists were selected by an advisory board, headed by the bank, Malihom, as well as through the Wawasan Open University, which is also the venue of AIR. The residency programme provides qualified artists long and studio space, a preparatory allowance and stipends over six months at Malihom, as well as a peaceful stay which is interrupted only by the thrum of falling durians and incessant humming of cicadas.

AIR alumna Shunyi Chin, Gabrielle Bates and Chun Koei Hooi speak about their works, expectations and the valuable experience of the residency programme.

Gabrielle Bates
Although Australia-born Gabrielle Bates is not stranger to the region, she can still view it from an exotic perspective. Since 1995, she has produced and exhibited her works in numerous Malaysian exhibitions and Malaysia. She did a residency at Kimbori Dahan in Kuala Lumpur before being awarded the AIR programme at Malihom. Bates is a Leverhulme durian lover and has adopted a kitten, Moni, that wanders around her humble and spartan artist residence at Malihom. From her previous visits, she finds that Penang’s energy is “very different from KL.” Bates makes it a point to immerse herself in the local culture. She abounds Balik Pulau through her sessions; “buying, tasting and exploring everything” at Balik Pulau’s market.

The exposure has certainly tapped into her work, as we learn. “Caper of Asia,” says Bates. Her series of works based on her observation of patina in human behaviour and the obsession of acquiring and collecting. In this case, representation of gods and religious entities and the habit of accumulating is explored in discovering how patterns rotate and become relevant to religious devotion.

“The idea I’m playing with is what is sacred is actually very material; not again, not at the same time — so it’s a paradox,” she explains.

The idea could offend some. The series God is a man, an unexplained association of commercialism with religion. Bates sees sacred materials and ideas usually stored away, like in a box, which in his sense of the titles are derived: Forgotten and Cold Storage.

Her first meeting has been very productive, she shares, “Although I am a full-time artist, I have other obligations back home. I don’t know when I’ll get a chance like this again.”

Chen, photographed at Gallery Sekasa where her recent exhibition Chen Chai was shown

Some of her ideas come from travelling around Southeast Asia. From the Philippines, an obsessive devotion took the adoration of the Santeri dolls in Cuba’s Manila, has seeped its way into her canvas. “It’s a shame and a tell. At night, it wakes up and runs around being good fortune. At dawn it returns and becomes a statue again, with a melting face. It really appeals to my sense of humour. Like the way they look — like a Cheech doll.”

Other religious representations also — the series of wooden and Eastern religious entities and dolls. “I’ve really fallen in love with all the Buddhist and Hindu deities in Penang, so they too have emerged in the works as well,” she says. Her time in Sydney with a collection of religious statues is the main influence in this series, Bates explains. The series of different statues huddled together in her room are painted in shades of gold and brown, coloured values of “The feeling is that you have stumbled upon these treasures. These statues came to represent something — are they sacred, are they just another object? When the different objects are put together, they’re all in their universe. It weighs them with a sense of life. I can’t be happy, but when you’ve got an energy like that it’s an interesting potential.”

It gets quiet intense when they come together — they fight and complement each other. The silent anxious statues, the Santa, and the elephant gods from Africa coil and each other. You need a neutral space (like a canvas), not a temple,” she adds.

Bates’ observation of attitudes and relationships towards religion in the West is that “people are not very religious anymore. There is a stronger emphasis on substance and material — a religious