

Turning ordinary moments into extraordinary

By JENNIFER JACOBS

KUEN Stephanie captures the ordinary moments from childhood in her paintings; those seemingly inconsequential happenings which mean nothing at the time, but which we look back on with a pull in the gut.

In vivid acrylics, she depicts a mother feeding her child in front of her shophouse while the father tends to his shop in the background; or a rotiman selling his wares to children who have gathered around his bike; or three girls seated on the steps of a kampung house, just hanging out.

Simple moments, but the wealth of detail and bright Matisse-like colour scheme imbues each painting with a little magic ... like the biscuit tin or the frangipani tree or the bunch of bananas suspended from the ceiling or the numerous cats stretched out sleepily all over the place.

Kuen's paintings are her way of reconnecting to a fast disappearing past.

"When I go through older buildings in Malaysia, I get a sense of peace, of serenity. I enjoy that feeling of moving through old Malaya. I am drawn to black and white movies and old furniture.

"I cannot go back to those days, or live in a quiet kampung, so this is my way of bringing it into the present," she says at her house in Subang Jaya, which also doubles up as her studio.

A Malaysian story

Significantly, her favourite book happens to be an anthology of Malaysian stories written in the 1960s, known simply as *22 Malaysian Stories*. The collection, edited by Lloyd Fernando, was first published in 1968 and Kuen reads and re-reads the stories.

"They make me feel that part of Malaysia in its formative stage. The narratives convey the newness and hope that was present then.

"Similarly, in my paintings, I endeavour to capture little moments, ordinary in themselves, but infinitely precious and fast disappearing," she points out.

While most of her inspiration is drawn from childhood memories, there is a subtle interplay of forces that have influenced her. Her choice of colours comes from her admiration of artists Matisse and Gabriel Muntser. Her figures are reminiscent of Malaysian artist Eng Tay as well as Gauguin.

"In 1979, my mother brought back a calendar featuring the paintings of Matisse. I was immediately drawn to it, inspired by his use of colour."

Which is why, nearly 30 years later, that same calendar is still there, propped up in her studio.



Kuen at the canvas with two of her works (top right down) *Loving Care* 2007 and *A Day Together* 2008.

Like any talented young artist-in-the-making, Kuen started off doodling on rough paper. "Some people like to draw landscapes but for me it was always people. I loved sketching out human figures and there was always a story behind all my pieces."

False start

A fan of fairy tales, which rely on words and striking illustrations to carry the stories, she had nascent dreams of illustrating children's books when she grew up. She eventually realised that there wasn't much of a market for children's book illustrators in Malaysia.

Her father, by way of encouraging her, threw her into an art competition when she was 11. It was entirely the wrong thing for the sensitive budding artist. She was required to paint the skyline of KL city using oil paints. This would involve buildings, busy highways, automobiles – all things Kuen was not personally interested in drawing. In addition, she didn't know how to use oil paints and found the cheap variety supplied by the organisers of the competition smelly and difficult to control.

Her father had urged Kuen to hurry up and get it over with. Needless to say, the result was a disaster and she swore never to touch a tube of oil paints again. "Even in art college, I had a mental block when it came to oils and never bothered to explore it as a medium."

She obtained her diploma in commercial art and moved into advertising, shifting her studio to her house once her first child was

born. She ran a graphics studio with her husband Joshua, designing logos, corporate brochures, leaflets and handling newsletters. It was all right, but ultimately not fulfilling.

The inspiration

One day, when visiting an art show, she happened to see a piece by the famous Malaysian artist, Eng Tay. "It was very beautiful and I wished so much that I could buy it, but the price was sky high. Joshua suggested that I should try to paint like that. I didn't take him seriously at first, but one day, just on a whim, I bought three tubes of oil paints in primary colours.

"I started working with them and was pleasantly surprised that I was able to control it and get a feel of the medium. Before this I had been doing watercolours, but none of them were distinctive and I hadn't found my signature style. When I tried out the oils, I was surprised and really pleased with the results. I decided to experiment to see how far I could go with it."

She invested in higher quality oils and bought some art books. Within a short time Kuen was producing pieces she was actually proud of and those which she could actually imagine offering up for sale.

"In the early days my figures had eyes, but later on, I found that I preferred them blank-faced to let people participate in the emotion of the painting," she points out.

From hobby to gallery

Then Joshua felt it was time to move out of the studio into galleries. "I told him you must be joking. It's just a hobby. Don't



force me to let a gallery view it." His gentle persistence won through. It took a little persuasion for her to cross over from the mindset of "just a hobby" to "people may want to buy my paintings".

Here, they met their first reverse. Most galleries were unwilling to display her paintings when they found out she didn't have a degree in fine arts. "Although people seemed to respond warmly to my paintings, the galleries rejected them. It seems, my credentials were more important than my art."

Joshua tried other avenues. One lifestyle store (which sold both furniture and art together) agreed to carry some pieces. He developed a series of blank cards featuring Kuen's paintings, with a potted biography, her name and number at the back. He also started a website (www.kuenstephanie.com) with samples of her work and contact details.

The cards, which were sold in a little gift shop at the Bangsar Village, yielded some results. They started receiving calls.

"Our first call came from a German couple who bought a piece called 'Tiga Gadis Bersembang', which was basically three girls sitting on the steps of their kampung house." They also bought another painting.

Another expatriate who also bought a piece says he looks at it to chase away the Monday blues: "I love receiving this type of

feedback. It's one thing to sell your paintings but it's quite another to have people actually love and appreciate them."

So far, Kuen has done two series of paintings – the *Kampung series* (featured in an exhibition entitled "Essence of a Tropical Life – In the Kampung" at the KL Pac) and the *Chinatown series* (featured in an exhibition entitled "Bowful of Memories, also at the KL Pac).

She is now working on a series of paintings featuring Peranakan women in their natural setting, having tea or learning embroidery or buying expensive material from a batik seller, who comes to the house to purvey his wares.

As Kuen herself is not of Peranakan origin, she has done extensive research to capture the wealth of colour and detail in this culture. As with her other two series – it's the small, seemingly insignificant details like the floors or background architecture, that do the trick.

"We have a rich, intricate and colourful past. We have distinctive cultures that blend so well, like our food. It would be a pity to allow it all to be swallowed up by the industrialisation machine. This is my way of preserving it."

• Jennifer Jacobs, formerly a journalist with a local business daily, is now strategic communications manager of a personal financial services firm.