

The Jakarta Post

Croatian painter brings obsession to canvas

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JAKARTA (JP): Looking at the work of Croatian painter Vatroslav Kulis, 49, is to get a glimpse of what the world may have looked like before God formed man from the dust of the ground and exhaled into his nostrils the breath of life. Also before man went on to make lamps to distort night, dugup clay to carve cups and trampled upon deserts, mountains and forests in the name of creating shelters and amusement for himself.

The traveling exhibition of 36 dazzling canvases on oil takes the visitor back into time billions of years ago to pre-adamite times before the ocean was choked with seafood, the ground filled with fossil fuels, bees were forced to pour all their honey into bottles and when the earth was perhaps one big ball of liquidity radiating a pristine combination of colors both primary and pastel.

Using each and every paint that it is possible to put on a palette, Kulis approaches his canvas with a colory brilliance that is passionate. He gives the background a certain texture that resembles the negative of a photograph or a grey-black mesh and then proceeds to lacquer layer upon layer of different hues, sometimes vertically and at other times horizontally, to create a depth that repeatedly drowns the senses into manya watery mirage. To behold the intimate play and intercourse between the patterns in the background and those in the foreground is what Kulis' work is all about. And if it was at all possible to cough up between US\$1,200 and 3,000 it would have been nice to carry at least one of Kulis' moist pleasures to one's private chamber.

All the 36 paintings are very similar in subject, style and emotion and yet each one has its own story to tell whether it is about the wind obeying deep, bottomless dreams of a wavy waste, of a thousand creases made on the surface one minute and of a clear, glassy top another, or an entire saga involving the great naked sea draped in a riot of dyes often on a canvas as large as 130 x 98 cm. Besides, all of them are titled *Structure of the Sea Surface* and have been painted this year itself, in bold strokes dipped in technic colors.

A graduate of the Zagreb Art Academy, Kulis has spent time in Paris, Munich and New York but he has also spent a whole decade witnessing war in the former republics of Yugoslavia.

His obsession with waves, the sea and water is understandable since Kulis was brought up on the shores of the Adriatic sea and seems to have put into his work much of the inspiration imbibed from the surroundings of Dalmatia, Kute, Kornati, the gushing waters of the Neretva estuary, and the stony isles in central Adriatic.

Replying to e-mail questions, Kulis confessed to *The Jakarta Post* he has spent a great part of his life gazing at the sea.

""At first glance, the sea looks the same, but if you look again, the surface changes every second,"" he said.

However, his obsessive fascination with the sea makes one wonder if there is more reason than one to put so much water to paint?

Since Kulis is not accompanying the exhibition, it is difficult to know what the artist's work looked like before the terrible war that divided so much territory and even more hearts in the once united Yugoslavia?

Does Kulis seek solace in water only because he has watched his country and people succumb to the fiery tongue of so much war? Does he have nothing but water on his mind also because he tries to drown the devastation and to submerge his memories of being forced to watch Croatia burn?

Kulis does admit that before the war the sea that he painted was much more ferocious. It is depicted as a much more calm and beautiful creature in his recent work.

As one reluctantly tears one's self away from such a rich variety of pigments, one does so with the happy thought that the war is over and hopefully, the cheerful colors used by Kulis will go a long way in inspiring his countrymen and those in neighboring countries to rebuild their homes and to live in comparative peace and prosperity in the future.

The exhibition continues at the Duta Fine Arts Foundation until Nov. 27. For inquiries, the gallery may be contacted at 7990226.