

# Evolving art scene

In anticipation of a full reopening, industry players in Klang Valley are rethinking gallery concepts with SOP in place to enable in-person viewings, which are preferred by collectors who find virtual exhibitions lacking in feel. >2&3



**Changing perspective:** The National Art Gallery, which is currently undergoing renovations, is expected to fully reopen next year. — GLENN GUAN/The Star





Brendan says the digital form of an artwork is not a complete substitute for viewing the piece in person. — Photos: AZLINA ABDULLAH and GLENN GUAN/The Star

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# Galleries draw up new strategies

## Shifting perspective in promotion of art and artists keeps industry motivated amid pandemic

WHILE live performances are now allowed and art galleries and museums are open to those fully vaccinated under the National Recovery Plan (NRP), these venues have yet to see significant visitor numbers.

The government announced on Sept 7 that art galleries could open with 30% capacity from Sept 9, but visitors must make an appointment beforehand.

When the movement restrictions were in effect, National Art Gallery (NAG) had taken the opportunity during its shutdown to begin renovation work in November last year for readiness in 2022 when it would fully reopen to the public.

Initially, NAG was supposed to reopen in November this year with a focus on hybrid visual arts programmes, but the movement control order in May and changes in standard operating procedures (SOP) resulted in delays.

The approximately RM6mil renovations at the NAG includes changing the entire roof as well as renovating the gallery's gift shop and cafe.

Its project management unit assistant engineer Mohd Razip Abdul Razak said the current aluminium composite panel roofs would be completely changed to asphalt shingles.

"We are changing the roof because the old roofing has a high maintenance cost every two years.

"The new roof will have a 10-year warranty and less maintenance," he said, adding that the

**"We are changing the National Art Gallery roof because it has a high maintenance cost every two years."**

Mohd Razip Abdul Razak



current blue roof will be changed to grey and black.

Other renovations at NAG will include interior design changes in the main lobby and a new coat of paint for the exterior of the building.

"The Gallery Cafe was in the main lobby. It will be relocated to the back, and there will be air-con-

ditioning upgrades in all seven galleries," said Mohd Razip.

As for exhibitions, NAG corporate communications unit head Adinaquraisa Ibrahim told *StarMetro* that the plan had been to hold its "Bakat Muda Sezaman" exhibition featuring contemporary young artists in December this year at the gallery.

"But when the lockdown hit, we had to change our concept and theme to 'Seni di Lokasi' (Art on Location) which is ongoing," she said.

The Seni di Lokasi virtual exhibition and competition invites audiences to see the work of contemporary Malaysian artists under age 35 at the artists' locations throughout the country.

Local art enthusiasts can vote for their favourite choices online through selection polls and on-site via the artist's touchpoints at all locations in Malaysia.

While virtual art exhibitions were not uncommon in spite of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was a challenge for NAG's curatorial team to carry out.

"It's challenging to curate without being able to feel the exhibits, not only the paintings but installations as well," said Adinaquraisa.

"There is a technical aspect to curating because when putting out artwork, our team needs to observe the area that is suitable for the art piece," she explained.

### Employing online tools

Suffice to say, the Covid-19 pandemic and movement restrictions have affected operations at the various art galleries. Taksu Gallery in Kuala Lumpur is among them.

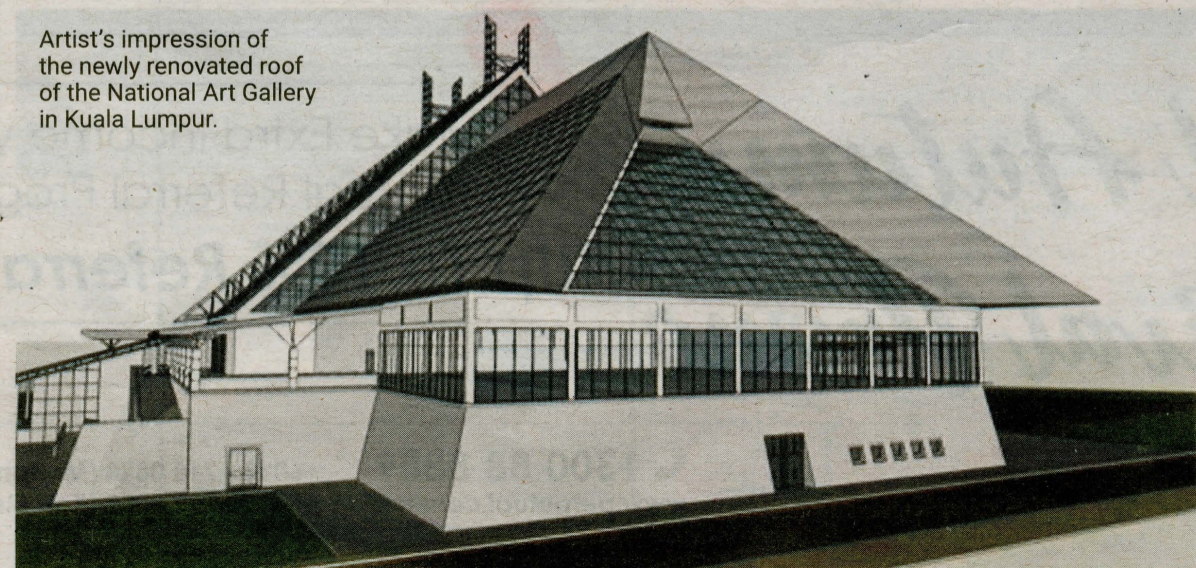
"The pandemic impacted the way we operate," Taksu Gallery manager and curator Syukur Ali told *StarMetro*.

"Art is visual, and people like to visit the gallery and enjoy the surroundings and gallery space.

"Due to the travel restrictions, we had to implement working from home, staff rotation and adjust the working hours," he said.

Taksu Gallery, like others, had to come up with mitigation plans like online viewing to counter losses.

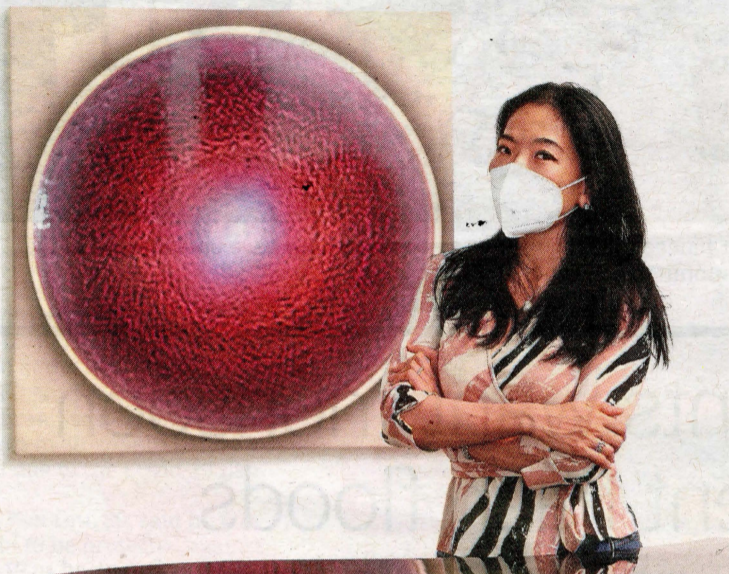
Artist's impression of the newly renovated roof of the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur.







Visitors to Taksu Gallery must make prior appointments, says Syukur.



After months of closure, art galleries in Klang Valley, like Wei Ling Gallery, are reopening, subject to SOP compliance.

“We switched to online exhibitions to promote awareness and visits by appointment only to maintain physical distancing and limit the number of visitors,” said Syukur.

“We continue to promote art work and artists online through social media channels and to our clients.

“Interest from both local and international markets are positive.

“The world pivoted to doing and buying everything online.

“And so, we recently launched our Taksu online shop and cryptocurrency.”

Syukur said visiting the gallery was only allowed by way of appointments for fully vaccinated guests to ensure the SOP was complied with.

“Wearing of masks is mandatory.

“All our employees have been fully vaccinated.

“We also registered via MySejahtera to obtain a QR code to track and trace.

“Our gallery and storage is sufficiently equipped with proper air control and ventilation for storage of artwork,” he added.

Despite the challenges, Syukur said Taksu continued to encourage, guide and promote artists.

“We work with partnership galleries to collaborate and access new markets to promote our local artists.

“We are all affected by the pandemic in some form or another, and having a sense of community with both our customers and artists is vital to not allow art to get less important during these times.

“In fact, it’s been interesting to especially see the art that is being created now (during the pandemic),” he added.

### Reflection of the times

While the Covid-19 pandemic generally put a muzzle on the arts scene across the world, Wei-Ling

Gallery adapted to look at it from a positive perspective and tune in to the challenging times.

Wei-Ling Gallery and Wei-Ling Contemporary founder Lim Wei-Ling said this meant motivating her staff and the artists they work with.

Their team of four came together for Zoom calls once a week to stay upbeat.

“Each of us shared or taught each other something.

“One of our colleagues taught us interesting art terms used in French, while another took us on a walkabout of her vegetable garden.

“These sharing sessions were important during the pandemic because we actually had the time to do this, unlike before the pandemic where everyone got caught up in everyday work.

“It has provided some balance.”

Wei-Ling Contemporary in The Gardens Mall had recently concluded an exhibition called “Aesthetics of Silence”, which borrowed from Susan Sontag’s first essay from her famous oeuvre, *Styles of Radical Will* (1969) in which she examined how silence mediated the role of art as a form of spirituality, particularly in a globalised world.

Lim reflected on the galleries’ journey.

“Art is not all the time fun and bouncy.

“A lot of critically acclaimed artists and their artwork deal with expressions like human suffering, and many come from a dark and disturbed place or show what people have been through.

“Art can be a form of cathartic expression.

“So during the lockdown, we had to lighten things up a bit.”

She said the exhibition also looked at the time in which we lived now.

“Humanity is living through a challenging period where it is his-

torically relevant for all of us, and for the first time, we are all experiencing the same thing.

“Now with lots of solitude, we reflect, and ‘Aesthetics of Silence’ looked at the artists’ works that talk about this silence,” she added.

### Art collectors on new norm

During the pandemic when art galleries were closed, art collectors had to decide on their choices based solely on digital descriptions and possibly videos taken by the artist themselves.

Lawyer and collector Brendan Siva said of the new approach, “E-catalogues have been the new norm in the last two years due to the movement restrictions.

“The advantage of this is to promote and provide visibility to a wider audience of the new works showcased by art galleries, as these are easily circulated to existing collectors and new art lovers.

“This is how I became reacquainted with the local art scene.

“I received a few e-catalogues during the MCO,” he said.

Even during periods with less restrictions in the last two years, the digital medium had allowed art lovers to view new works from artists and if they liked something they saw, they would find a way to get more information before deciding on a purchase.

“Many of the younger artists, and some of the established ones, have a strong social media presence, which helps in the online viewing aspect,” said Brendan.

“But at the end of the day, it is still very important to view any artwork in person, as the piece must speak to you or captivate you in its direct form, face to face.

“The digital form is not a complete substitute for the real thing; to see and experience the textures, interplay of colours and style and the overwhelming feeling a piece of artwork gives you,” he said.

As someone recently immersed in the arts world, lawyer Vinu Kamalanathan said the online art viewing experience and virtual tours did not really offer the same experience as viewing an art piece physically.

“With the surge in Covid-19 cases, it was understandable that art galleries were closed.

“But viewing the art in an e-catalogue is not the same.

“For example, when I observe an artwork in front of me with thick brown lines, these same lines are black in the catalogue.

“There is a prominent difference in this sense and you don’t get a feel of the nuances.”

He added: “In terms of purchasing art based just on e-catalogues, I think it is a gamble because we are unable to gauge the textures.”