

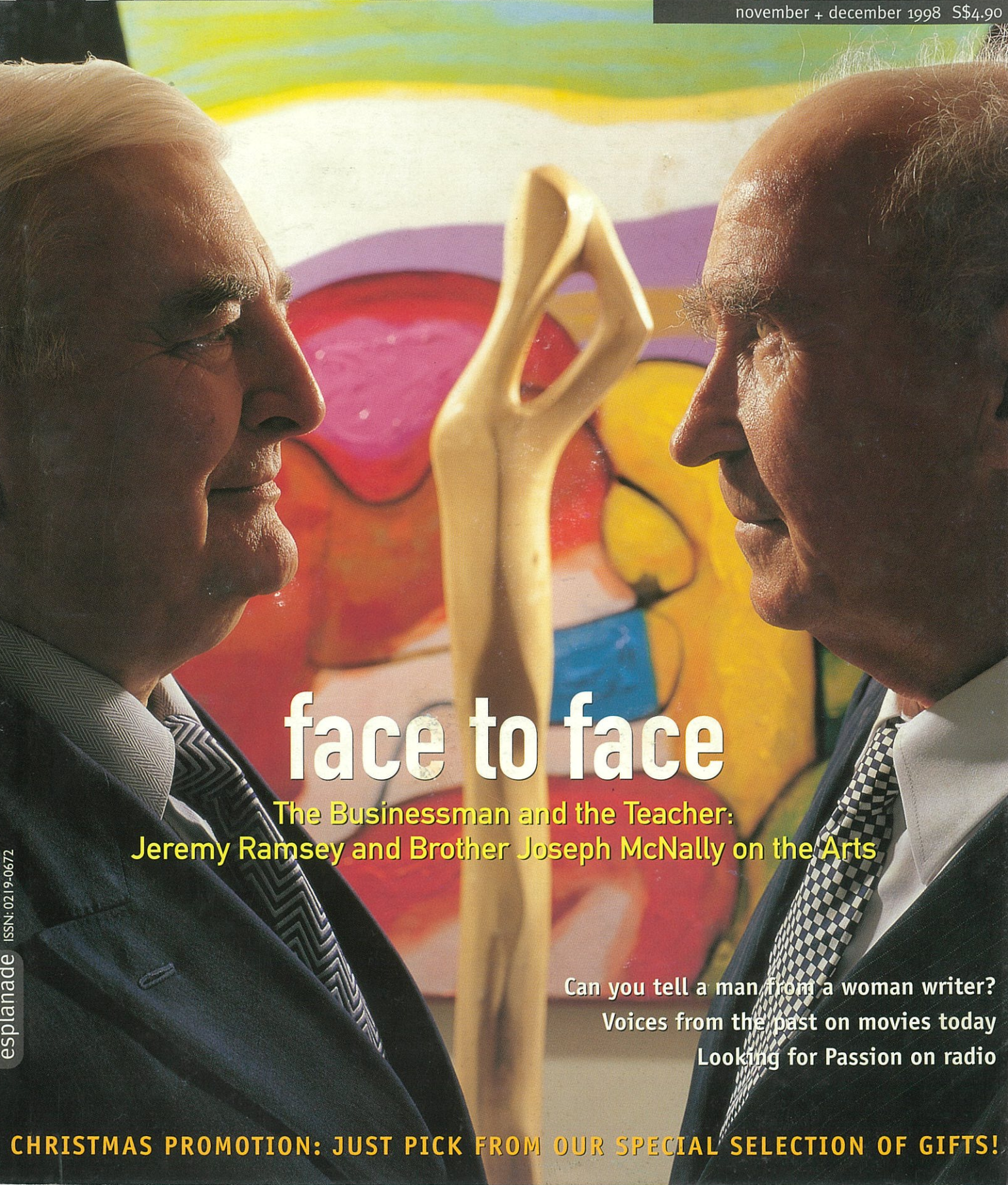
the arts magazine

Festive Seasonings!



Arts festivals
galore in Berlin,
Turkey, Brooklyn
and of course ...
Singapore!

november + december 1998 S\$4.90



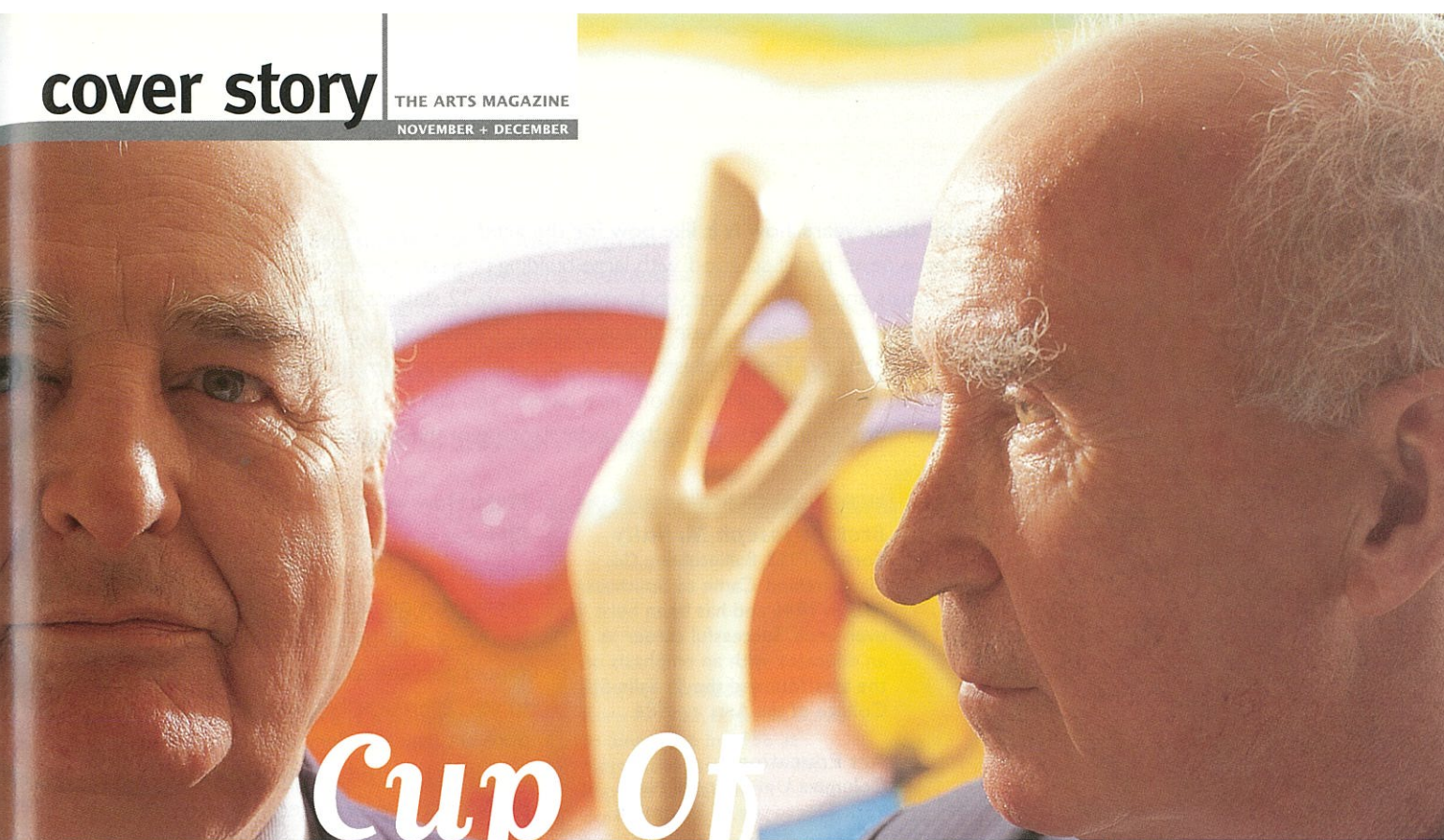
face to face

The Businessman and the Teacher:
Jeremy Ramsey and Brother Joseph McNally on the Arts

Can you tell a man from a woman writer?
Voices from the past on movies today
Looking for Passion on radio

esplanade ISSN: 0219-0672

CHRISTMAS PROMOTION: JUST PICK FROM OUR SPECIAL SELECTION OF GIFTS!



Cup Of Tea For Two

In any conversation about the arts in Singapore, there is no escaping two personalities: Brother Joseph McNally and Jeremy Ramsey.

These remarkable men are institutions in themselves. Brother McNally founded the LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts in 1984.

Ramsey, managing director of Rolex Singapore, is a well-known businessman.

Both men are well-known artists: Brother McNally is a sculptor and has exhibited here and in Japan. Ramsey's paintings have been seen in London, Australia and Macau: last year at the President's Charity Art Exhibition at LaSalle-SIA, all 15 of Ramsey's works were snapped up even before the show opened.

Here, visual artist Parvathi Nayar Narayan (PNN) speaks to Brother Joseph McNally (BJM) and Jeremy Ramsey (JR) about the arts in a country that they have come to call home. Although born abroad, both men have spent more than half their lives here and are now Singapore citizens. Ramsey is a member of Singapore Watercolour Society and considers himself a Singapore artist while Brother McNally's office and workshop are at the centre of the LaSalle-SIA campus, surrounded by the students whom he had played an important role in nurturing.

PICTURES: MARCUS YEO

PNN: How would you describe the development of art in Singapore?

BJM: When I first came here in 1946, immediately after World War II, there was a shortage of food, let alone books and paints. We started off with art classes in the British Council. I taught a little art at St Joseph's though art teaching was centralised at Raffles. Gradually materials came in, the art shop Straits Commercial started in '47/'48, and art was slowly added to the teachers' training curriculum in the '60s. But there has always been a problem regarding trained art teachers, and it took time for prejudices against art to break down.

JR: Singapore in the 1950s and '60s had many problems like the communist insurgency in Malaysia, strikes, riots and civil commotion in Singapore. Art was at the bottom of the list of priorities when I came here in 1956, but there were a few names like Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang, Georgette Chen and Cheong Soo Pieng who were exhibiting. In those early days, everyone believed in everything having to pay for itself, so there was not much room for art. The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts was quite active. But apart from that, there was not much till Brother Joseph founded LaSalle.

PNN: So, after these years, how is it like now for the arts?

BJM: Artists have never had it so good, with large building projects investing in art. For instance in the MRT project, artists and architects are working together on 22 stations. The artists who are part of this project are doing well even in these difficult times. It is easier now to study art. Each art form is supported by an "industry". The administration of art is also being formally taught. Thus if you enter the field of art but recognise your limitations as a painter, you can turn your energies towards curatorship or management. We are getting a better understanding of the industry of art, and of art itself.

PNN: How would you define "art"?

BJM: Art is not an intellectual exercise, it's connected more with feeling than with intelligence per se. Art is an essential part of life. Art should be at the service of life and should pervade all aspects of life. People used to see differences between applied art and pure art (say jewellery design) but that definition has died to a large extent.

JR: Art is a diverse subject. The most common comment you hear from Singaporeans contemplating any art is, "What's it meant to be?" But does art have to represent anything? Art can fill our lives with pleasure, but many people don't know how to access that pleasure. Once people learn how to do that, art doesn't have to be explained any more.

PNN: What do you think of the idea of making Singapore a regional arts centre?

BJM: We should thank the Singapore government that it has provided us with the necessities of life, and a green city, before telling us to be artistic and cultural, because that's where public art should begin. It is very important that the Government encourages the arts, for it usually achieves what it sets out to do. Of course to produce good art is not an easy task. Still, people were sceptical when we started a national symphony, but we have a very good

one now. I am optimistic about the future of art here.

PNN: What is the role of art, if any, in the economic crisis?

JR: It does not lessen the value of art. What it does do is impact the economic side of art. People see it as a luxury, something we can do without. Galleries find it hard to make money.

BJM: The arts are no less important in periods of crises. Artists will want to create, though they will have to tighten their belts, and cut their suits according to the cloth.

PNN: So how do you think can artists cope with the crises?

BJM: A lot of artists haven't had any formal training and this could be a good time to learn new things. Art is a constant learning process, something that has to be constantly practised.

JR: In certain areas [of art] we haven't scratched the surface. Take printmaking — the beauty of it is that it's a way of more widely distributing art at more affordable prices.

Brother Joseph McNally

Born in 1923, Ballintubber, Co. Mayo, Ireland. Came to Southeast Asia in 1946 and has been here ever since. Successful career as an educator with an emphasis on the arts; founded the La Salle-SIA College of the Arts in 1984.

Art Education

Columbia University of New York: Doctorate of Education (1972)
Columbia University New York: MA (1968-69)

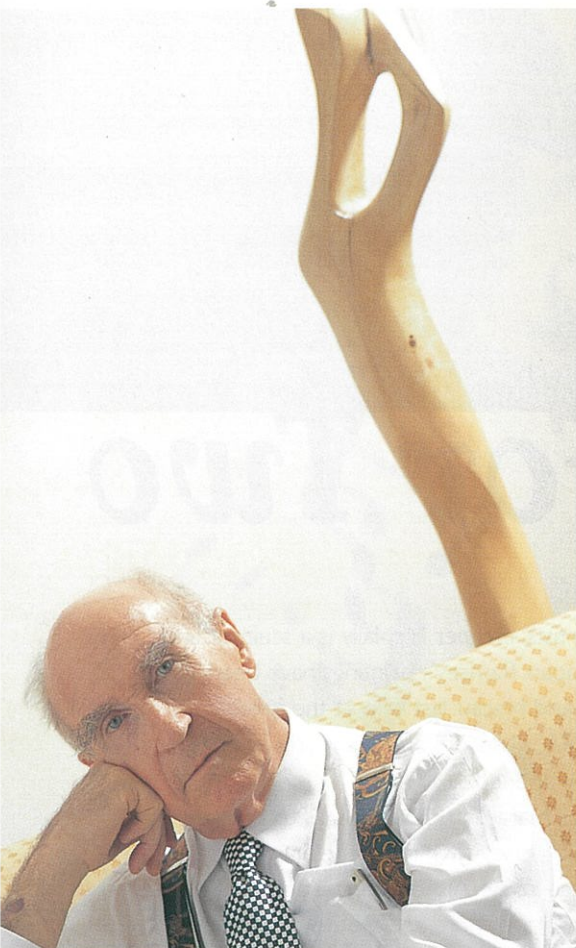
Selected exhibitions

1996 *A Flash of Lightning*, sculpture exhibition, at LaSalle-SIA
1994 *A Terrible Beauty*, sculpture exhibition, at LaSalle-SIA
1994 Group exhibition at the opening of the Atrium Gallery, Singapore
1985 Participated in Fukuoka 2nd Exhibition

Honours

1998 Montblanc de la Culture Award
1997 President Emeritus of La Salle-SIA College of the Arts.
La Salle-SIA Medallion award
1994 Honorary Doctor of the Arts RMIT, Australia

1990 Singapore National Day Award (Public Service Award)
1984 President of La Salle-SIA College of the Arts



PNN: What will arts sponsorship be like in these tough times?

JR: It is bound to be more difficult with a hardening of attitudes. For companies it's difficult to quantify the returns for the money they spend on the arts. To sell their product they need direct advertising; the rest is icing on the cake. But on another level, sponsorship of the arts does present the company as one we can respect because they are contributing to the community at large.

PNN: Do you think it is important for artists to sell their work?

BJM: Yes, artists should sell their works. My advice to students is 'Sell as much as you can, early, so that your work gets the widest possible exposure.'

JR: Young artists price their works too high. Then people don't buy it and no one sees it.

PNN: But do you feel there is a minimum price for works?

BJM: *(Smiling)* Well, some French impressionists exchanged their art for a meal.

PNN: Can the ordinary man support the arts in a time of crises?

BJM: People want to improve the appearance of the places they live and work in, and this needn't cost much. It is an attitude of mind. And in terms of original works, there are young artists whose work is not expensive.

PNN: Do you see a distinction between art that sells as commercial and 'pure art'?

BJM: I would never have got government support if I had spoken of art for art's sake. I emphasised art for life, art as a business, and that I was training "art entrepreneurs." An artist must sell, for an artist needs money to produce art, but it is the wrong attitude to say 'I will produce art that sells and only such art.' The right attitude is to produce art because it means something, because it conveys some feeling.

JR: The "salability" of art to some extent depends on the subject matter. For instance, landscapes and flowers are easier to sell, but if artists become repetitive and only paint a limited range of subjects, they will lose any feeling of enjoyment and creativity when executing their work. As Dr Earl Lu once said, every work of art must have a life force.

BJM: An artist should grow; where there is no growth, art falls into a rut and the artist is no longer being creative.

PNN: What are your personal contributions to art in Singapore? How have your individual professions influenced your artistic career?

JR: I can't claim a great contribution but in a modest way I have tried to help artists who are struggling financially with small sums like \$2,000 to \$3,000 as advertisements in their exhibition brochures, or by agreeing to buy a certain number of works. As to my own work, some artists have

Jeremy Ramsey

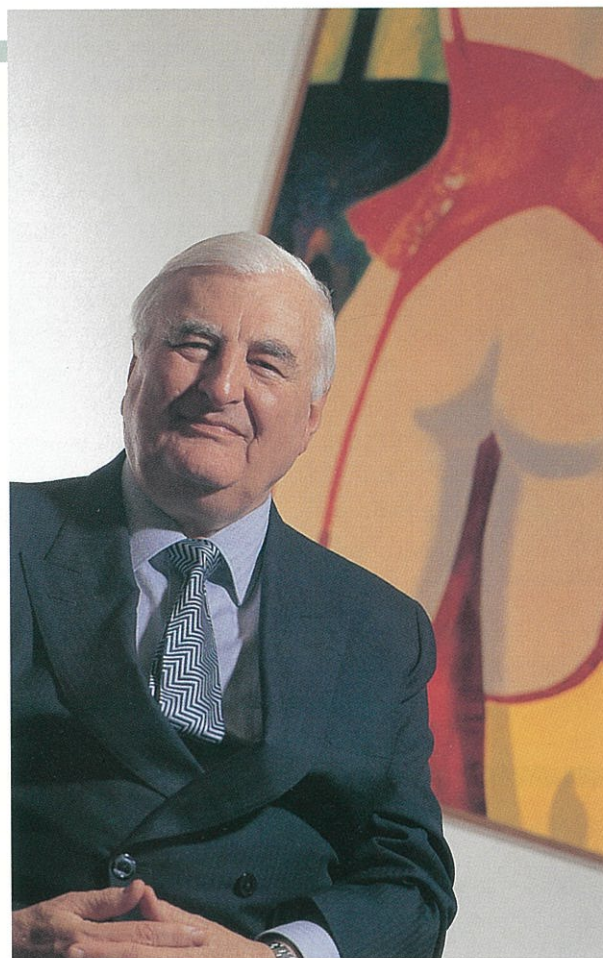
Born in 1932, England. Came to Singapore in 1956 as mercantile assistant in the Imports Department of the Borneo Company. Has been here since. Successful businessman and Managing Director of Rolex Singapore

Art Education

Studied fine arts at Reading University, Hammersmith School of Arts & Crafts; attended the Post Experience Programme under Prof. Bryan Kneale, Royal College of Art, London (1993, 94)

A selected list of exhibitions

1998 Group exhibition at Redfern Gallery, London
1998 Australian Contemporary Art Fair
1997 12th Asian International art exhibition, Macau
1997 Solo, Wetterling Teo Gallery, Singapore
1996 Solo, The Gallery, 28 Cork Street, London
1994 Solo, Empress Place Museum Art Gallery, Singapore



told me that the sort of colours I use has to some extent influenced them, and they have become more daring in their use of colours. I hope that as people approach their retirement they don't get depressed about it. I would give them my own example. Though I trained as an artist when I was young, it is only in the last 10 years that I have really applied it. So there must be something you can do — people rather foolishly think that when you get past a certain age, there's nothing you can do.

BJM: As you grow older you lose something, you gain something. If you lose memory, you may gain skill. It is well-known, for instance, that calligraphers may reach their prime in their 70s and 80s.

JR: People ask how I can run a business and find time to paint. People sit and watch television every evening. Well I can do a lot of painting in that time. I got down to art quite late, but I've had an interesting life. I have had lot of good times as a 'businessman,' but to say 'I'm only a businessman' was a terrible indictment — surely I should do something more inspiring.

BJM: 'By their students are they taught.' As an educator, one is constantly learning from one's students. I painted for the first 20 years, then gave it up in favour of sculpture. Now I try for a balance; when

I'm tired I paint because painting is not so physically demanding. When I feel energetic I sculpt, using bronze, stone, wood, glass, plastics ...

JR: Do you use synthetic stuff?

BJM: Yes, I insert epoxy and polyester resins into the natural substances, and even mix them.

PNN: In terms of art, where do you see the major holes that need to be plugged in Singapore?

BJM: Art appreciation has to develop. We need criticism, to be told what is good or bad. Criticism has to develop; we need to be challenged.

JR: We are lacking good art critics; most of the time we are reading things by people who may be good journalists but don't know very much about art.

PNN: What about the criticism against critics, that it is one person's view that influences an entire artist's career?

BJM: But why should there be only one critic? We need 20, 30. And I would add that critics should take experience and age into consideration for new

artists can be discouraged. Criticism should help the young to make progress.

JR: And what good does harsh criticism do? There is no harm in criticising someone's work but it should be constructive and well-written.


PNN: Would you go out on an artistic limb and make a few Millennium predictions about art in Singapore?

BJM: Art will be profoundly affected by new technology. Like it or not, we live in a world of instant communication and we're at the beginning of a tremendous renaissance. Though there may be a movement towards virtual art, the virtual reality will not replace the artifact that is physical.

Art is the holding up of a mirror to nature. Art creates symbols of life and these become so common they are part of life. Art and life are intertwined. But art has to be governed by good taste. To create sculpture with faeces, for example, is in very bad taste. When we hold a mirror up to nature, it is with a purpose. To say something about our view of life, that is important.

We have been through the whole gamut of pictorial forms, from representation to abstraction and even to conceptual art, and I hope the cycle is complete. We will return to something more than the concept, we will demand something more from our brain and skills. Skill is very important. Artists must have some craftsmanship in the way they present the reality of art.

JR: Art is a moving thing. But it is a tragedy that some artists treat art like fashion and are concerned by the latest shape, colour. If someone pickles sheep in formaldehyde, they rush to pickle something.

But I am not totally discouraged. There are beautiful original works of art being produced, and as to the rest, these will just go into the refuse bin of history. 

*An artist must
sell, for an
artist needs
money to
produce art,
but it is the
wrong attitude
to say 'I will
produce art
that sells and
only such art.'*

— Brother
Joseph McNally

*Art is a
moving thing
but it is a
tragedy that
some artists
treat art like
fashion and
are concerned
by the latest
shape, colour.
— Jeremy
Ramsey*

Wind of the Spirit:
A Retrospective of
Joseph McNally is on
from 13 Nov 1998
to 31 Jan 1999 at
the Singapore Art
Museum. The
exhibition commemo-
rates the conferment
of the Meritorious
Service Award on
Brother McNally for
his achievement as
artist and cultural
activist.