

HARDCORE Singapore

As our population swells, the concept of a 'core Singaporean' is becoming murky. In this ongoing series to find the Singaporean Core – a term raised in Parliament during the Population White Paper debate – we speak to people with a pink IC to see how red and white they truly are



TNP PICTURE: BENJAMIN SEETOR

FINE ART: Mr Sujak Rahman is one of the finest batik painters in Singapore.

If you feel you are uniquely Singaporean or you think you know someone who is, e-mail tnp@sph.com.sg and share your story with us. The best five stories this month will each win a pair of tickets to the National Day Parade (NDP). The next five best entries will each receive a pair of tickets to the NDP Preview. The winning entries will also be featured on the NDP website.

He got diamonds for first batik work

REPORT: LINETTE HENG
linheng@sph.com.sg

HIS first batik piece was exchanged for diamonds in the mid-1970s.

Mr Sujak Rahman, then 26, was displaying his art at an exhibition along Orchard Road, outside present-day Wisma Atria, when he was approached by a Russian tourist who liked his painting titled Tiga Wajah (Three Faces).

"He took the diamonds from his belt and told me to pick them with my fingers. "I went to the pawnshop and they told me that the diamonds were worth about \$2,000. Since diamonds are a woman's best friend, I gave them to my wife," he said.

This was the start of Mr Sujak's good fortune. At his peak, he sold a painting almost every other day.

"My friends asked if I placed some charm on my paintings because they were always sold..."

The eldest son in a family of 10 knew he wanted to be an artist since he was eight. But he was chastised by his grandmother who wanted him to be a policeman. He hated the idea of uniforms so he went against her wishes.

No formal arts education

Although he's regarded as one of Singapore's finest batik artists, Mr Sujak, 64, did not have a formal arts education. He went to Tanjong Katong Technical after finishing primary school.

The artist was inspired by famous local batik artists such as Choo Keng Kwang and Sarkasi Said. Although his grandparents were from Java, Indonesia, where batik art largely originated and flourished, it was his science background which helped him to understand it better. "I took chemistry and physics in secondary school so I could understand concepts like chemicals used in the dye," he said.

Mr Sujak is famous for his Mother & Child series,

What qualities do you have that make you Singaporean?

I was born here and am happy with what I have. When the British left, we could choose British citizenship. I'm glad my father chose to be Singaporean.

How would you describe Singapore to a stranger?

It is very international and more than one language is spoken here. Singapore is very peaceful, and you can walk around safely at night.

What are the little quirks you see every day?

People pat the seats before sitting down.

What food do you miss when you're overseas?

Rendang, kway teow, curry.

Your favourite Singlish phrases or words?

"Okay lah" and "no lah".

which was inspired by his mother who died in an accident about 20 years ago.

The artist, who is now divorced, has two sons in their 30s who are not interested in batik, so he is keen to pass his knowledge to his students.

"Batik is an important part of South-east Asian culture... We shouldn't lose our tradition."

Mr Sujak recently graduated with a specialist diploma in arts education, jointly developed by the National Arts Council and the National Institute of Education, to strengthen the teaching skills of arts educators.

These days Mr Sujak's works are worth even more than diamonds. He sold a Mother & Child painting for \$23,000 two years ago.