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Exhibition

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What viewers will see in October when the doors of the ``Fusion Art III Exhibition" open at Siam City Hotel on Si Phraya Road will be more than a priceless and colourful collection of oil, pastel and acrylic paintings, conceived in a variety of media. ``In Sync: Puzzle and Paradox", presented by Finola and husband Fiat P. Devahastin, with friend Supee Pasutanavin and his son Krisakorn, is an invitation to go beyond appearances and surfaces, and to try and grasp the invisible _ made visible, to some extent, by the artists.

Fiat, for example, unfolds for closer examination, through his paintings, the plight of women and children in various regions of the world, and the hardship and suffering they may endure at the hands of their husbands or authoritarian rulers _ a reality usually pushed into the background and, as Fiat says, relegated to a ``blur-like dream or some subconscious leftover".

This latent reality, crystallised by the art pieces, lies just beneath the surface, like a watermark, of the artists' history and the progression of their work.

In the case of Fiat and Finola Devahastin, the two main contributors of the upcoming exhibition, it is perhaps this singular history which deserves special mention; a winding path spanning decades and continents with great love and fusion art at the end of it all.

Their joint story started nearly 30 years ago in the tiny entrance hall of the avant-garde Dun Laoghaire School of Art in Ireland, when Finola _ then a first-year student _ caught hold of the coat rack that Fiat _stepping into the building for the first time _ had bumped into and overturned.

``She saved me from a lot of embarrassment by grabbing that coat rack. The first time I met her, and she was already saving me!" Fiat recalls with a laugh.

The Thai student, born Poonpol in Bangkok in 1952 of an architect father and an actress mother, had already been living in Ireland for several years in a boarding school when he decided to pop into the art college he had heard people speaking very highly of.

``A friend had told me that this school had a very good and innovative way of thinking, echoing a whole artistic movement taking place in Ireland at the time and that the best teachers were there. ``Why don't you give it a try?' this friend asked me. So one day I just got on the bus and I walked in the school during a mid-term class and got lucky _ I came across the school director Trevor Scott, who gave me a tour of the school and found me likeable," remembers Fiat, who was advised to drop by on a regular basis and finally managed to enrol as a regular student of the school.

His choice of career had been strengthened by a prestigious award earned three years earlier, in 1970 from the Irish Nation Youth Art competition, for a painting entitled ``A Chara".

``I gave all the prize money to charity and kept the confidence. I told myself, `At last! I am good at something!' I was never brought up to believe that I would be an artist _ although I had always been fond of drawing and teachers would often rip sketches off me during classes _ but I started to realise that this artistic ability existed within me, more than within most people."

An unhopd-for award was also the stimulus which steered Irish-born Finola towards a career in art; the regional sculpture prize won in 1972 for a piece entitled ``Ode to the Wheel".

``No one in my family was an artist and yet since my childhood, I drew sketches on my own and developed a strong interest in sculpting. When I won the award I realised that art was really the field which would give me the greatest happiness," Finola said in a gentle, thin voice.

Whatever her secondary school teacher's views on the matter _ he would have rather seen her enrol in a more traditional art institution_ Finola opted for a ``revolutionary and up-to-date" college.

Out of more than a thousand applicants battling for a mere 30 places available in this government-funded institute, Finola grabbed the 25th rank. She secured herself a seat in the school whose barrier-free teaching would prove so meaningful to her malleable spirit.

Trevor Scott, the founder of Dun Laoghaire School of Art, had envisioned a new breed of creative young artists.

``During these four years spent in this school, we really learned to express ourselves. It was like a free forum space. It was there that our concept of fusion art started," Finola said.

Her husband added, ``We were trained to think, question and very honestly express ourselves in the way we felt like doing it. Whatever we were good at, they knew how to bring it out."

``We were also trained at being very self-sufficient and doing everything ourselves, with a very limited budget. They were careful about how every penny was spent so we were used to working with whatever material was available around us_ from garbage cans and plastic bags to house putty," they said.

The two lovebirds took a year off after graduating ``to find out what we really wanted" _ and also look after their first baby, Mati, who is now 26.

Meanwhile both kept taking part in exhibitions and other art festivities throughout their remaining time in Ireland.

In 1979, the Irish-Thai couple decided to move to Thailand with ``the expectation of re-establishing their artistic ambitions". Family commitments (looking after Mati and soon little Sida) prevented them from doing so with the sort of dedication they had in mind. Compromising, they both entered the education sphere ``to promote art consciousness among the young".

Finola stepped into the circle of Bangkok's international schools, starting with Bangkok Patana School and the establishment of the Middle and High School Art Department, holding the position of head of art and eight years later joining Ruamrudee International School (RIS) _

an institution with which she is still related, holding the position of art teacher and head of arts.

Fiat worked at RIS as well, but took ill. He suffered from a severe kidney disease called Systemic Lupus Erythematosus, SLE or Lupus, an auto-immune disease, and was in peril of his life. At one point, his weight went down to 42 kilogrammes and his life expectancy was only a few weeks.

Although the disease had claimed the lives of some 15 patients in Thailand before him, Fiat managed to pull through. He says his ``daily beer potion'' contributed to his recovery.

He swapped his teaching career at RIS' old campus for freelance and commission work in the field of graphic design.

It wasn't until another major crisis _ the economy-wrecking Asian financial meltdown in July 1997 _ that their passion for art exploded again.

Finola says, ``As the years passed by and our roles in life changed, we kept sketch-books with us so that no matter what, we could always draw. But some seven years ago, I somehow suddenly realised that `God! Here I am, an endangered species _ an artist firstly, but also a woman artist.' So even though we had three children and a lot of commitments, I decided to work even harder. I felt that time was precious and that I needed to do something worthwhile, something more than teaching.

``A few years later, we were wracked by the financial crisis which was then unfolding, affecting close friends and family members. We felt like doing something positive about it, reacting, saying `although things are very depressing, opportunities are there'."

She pointed to a canvas made for their first exhibition in 1998, depicting Celtic-inspired spirals of rebirth and suns piercing through deep, thick clouds of acrylic colours.

``We were caught up in making a living, taking the roles which society pushed us into. I thought I was happy enough to create art pieces for my own pleasure, without exposure, without making a big deal out of it. But the big step was taken in 1998. We really agreed that we had to do something with it," Fiat said.

The couple's first exhibition, in the Log Cabin of Benz Thonglor on Soi Thong Lo, opposite the bubbling ``Formerly Rich Market'' in December 1998, met with a very receptive audience.

``Almost every piece was sold. That came as a real surprise for us as we didn't intend to come up with a commercial exhibition," Fiat said.

Their current exhibition, the third, is being held together with their friend Supee Pasutanavin and his son Krisakorn.

The couple has obviously grown into becoming fusion art experts and vigorous exponents.

``Fusion is the art of adaptation while maintaining our own identity and individuality. We will not lose our heritage or culture as easily as some have predicted, not if we are able to learn the art of modern living that is mirrored in fusion art," the pair said.

``Spontaneity and a willingness to explore the possibilities of a variety of media, combined with layers of meaning, perhaps characterise fusion art. It is important to find a balance, a mid-path between process, idea and outcome. It is not about creating a melting pot but it is a quest ...

``Fusion is a 21st-century trend. We indeed need to start thinking about finding a common ground, even between countries, between winners and losers, between economy and environment. It might be that only politicians are not on the same wave length, perhaps too much involved in petty things and running after money," Fiat said.

They practise what they preach, ``fusion" being the family's very lifestyle. Feeling as much Irish as Thai, Fiat has also explored all the 20th-century art movements, from impressionism to expressionism, surrealism, art nouveau, vortism, cubism and abstract art.

Making the most of her position as an art teacher at RIS, mingling with students from over 40 different nations, Finola _ born of a protestant mother and a Catholic father in Ireland _ has investigated Pre-Celtic Irish art and connected it to diverse cultures: African, Tibetan, Chinese, Thai, North and South American, Indian and Australian Aboriginal.

And in this gigantic mixing up and constant exposure to other points of view, Finola and Fiat have managed to safeguard their own individuality.

``I work by instinct," Fiat explained. ``Ideas pop out and have to be channelled, a bit like kids. An art piece in the making evolves in the same way as a child, with a toddler stage, a period during which you may play with it, a period during which conflicts may arise like in teenage years, and then a time when they just walk out of the house.

``My aim is to create paintings which can change with the light, looking every minute different. Like a piece of music, which asserts itself in a time frame, I want my pieces to keep on saying something."

Finola adds, ``I want the presence of my work to be felt as a positive energy. Art pieces are not a commodity but have spiritual facets, they have their own power." She is a fervent advocate of positive thinking and the search for a universal energy.

Some 30 years, three children (Mati, 26, Sida, 22, Jessica, 15) and nearly three joint-exhibitions after being brought together by a clumsy Fiat, the couple seems more in tune with each other than ever. Yet not to the extent of being able to work together on the same canvas.

``We don't want to end our relationship that quickly," they joke.

It is surely wiser that way, if only for the sake of art.