

A time to move on

An artist contemplates the sadness felt when the city's 'old, soulful' places are lost to redevelopment.



Dhavinder's solo exhibition *Recollectus*, encompasses nine paintings triggered by the redevelopment of KL's historic Razak Mansion, where his studio was based. — Photos: Project Room Fine Art

By QISHIN TARIQ
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SPACES are more than the sum of their location and function.

KL-based conceptual artist Dhavinder Singh believes a space collects memories and character alongside the people in that neighbourhood, crystallising into something ephemeral that cannot be transferred by merely slapping on its name, and likeness to a new location.

His latest series, *Recollectus*, is inspired by his reluctant departure from his studio, located in the soon-to-be-demolished Razak Mansion, a 50-year-old public housing project, nestled near the old Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Sungai Besi, on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.

"They (the developers) have issued the final notice of eviction, and you can see it's going to be abandoned soon. It's a tearing down of an old, soulful place," says Dhavinder.

Of the 658 original residents, 557 have given up their old Razak Mansion flat units in exchange for new apartment units free of charge. Dhavinder is among the residents set to move to the nearby 1Razak Mansion, a newly completed high-rise that shares an address, if not the charm of its predecessor.

He stresses that it is hard to recreate things. Dhavinder, a graduate from the Cardiff School of Art and Design, is in a nostalgic mood and it shows in *Recollectus*, his second solo exhibition.

His first solo *MO:Formal(and)scapes*, which featured a formalistic view of landscapes, showed at Project Room Fine Art in 2014.

Recollectus, if anything, sees Dhavinder's personal feelings seeping into art. It features nine pieces, titled *Recollectus I-IX*, which reflect the despairing nature of loss and moving out.

"The Razak Mansion's humble origins, strong community spirit and its surroundings hold a special place in Dhavinder's heart. Through this latest series of works, he offers sophisticated and poignant takes on the place and its people," says Azad Daniel, Project Room Fine Art founder.

During a recent interview at the Project Room Fine Art gallery, where *Recollectus* is exhibiting, Dhavinder reveals the show is also to commemorate the three years that he lived in the Razak Mansion.

He inherited the space from his late grandmother, and converted the flat into his studio.

"I was close to my grandma, so maybe that's why she left it to me. I grew up in Chan Sow Lin (in KL). But I visited my grandma's place often. I never thought I'd move there one day," he reveals, adding that it was a perfect fit as he happened to be looking for a personal

studio space at the time.

Though he usually works on conceptual site-specific installations, moving into the small flat in Razak Mansion inspired him to try out smaller, more intimate pieces, including paintings.

"It gave me the mood to sit in front of a canvas, stare at it, and at the end of the day, if I drew one line, that's an achievement."

The nine pieces in *Recollectus* took a year to complete, with the 34-year-old explaining, rather philosophically, that as a person gets older, it changes the way he or she thinks, resulting in a more introspective approach when executing a project.

"This time, I had total freedom, no deadline nor rush, so I took my own sweet time," he says, sheepishly adding that he sat on one piece for nearly six months.

For his work, Dhavinder, who is a fan of British painter David Hockney's clinical approach, uses carefully measured lines, set slightly off, to create balance against the purposely flat structures.

Describing himself as "somewhat spiritual", Dhavinder also blends numerology into the measurements, using his destiny number and psychic number to set the angles of the lines, and certain cues like the number of steps on a staircase or length of a ladder.

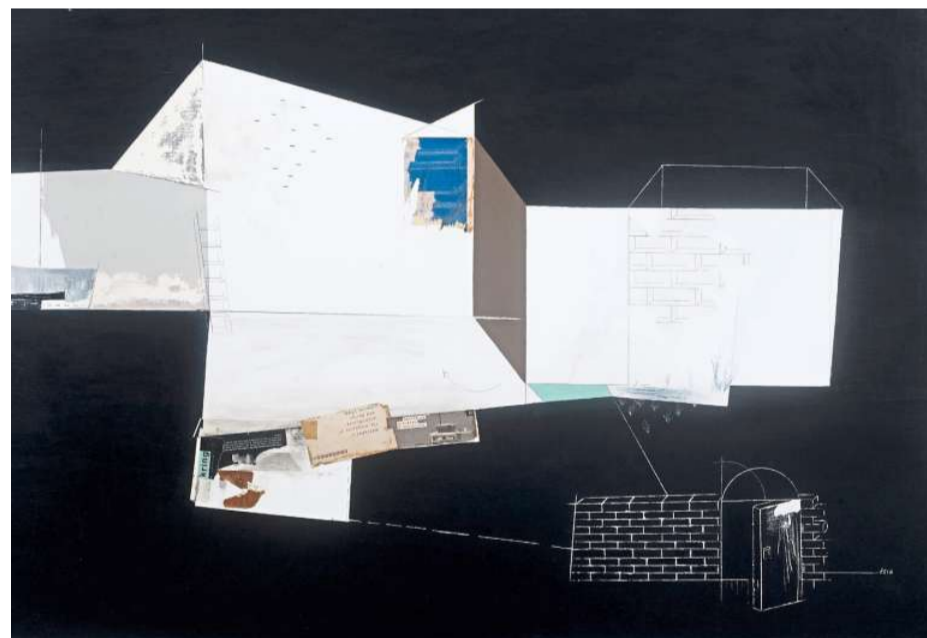
Dhavinder, pacing the gallery during the interview, also explains the collection's sparse landscapes, composed in muted creams and whites. They also feature small bursts of pastel yellows, greens, and blues, which he calls "little dashes of colour, hope across the monotone".

While mostly done in acrylic, the new works also feature collage elements, like meticulously chosen clippings from architecture magazines, repurposed art books and an encyclopedia passage about a long dead German king. He wryly chuckles that the materials were pulled from his stash of magazines and books. Finally, he says his hoarding habits earned a degree of approval from his mother.

He sums up that the *Recollectus* project is, ultimately, an attempt to collect memories into paintings, and to move on with life.

"My (old) studio used to be four steps from ground level, now it will be 16 floors up in a tower. Life, right?" he says with a sigh.

Recollectus is on at Project Room Fine Art gallery, 10B-1, Jalan Kolam Air Lama 1, Ampang Jaya, Ampang in Selangor till May 15. Opening hours 11am-6pm, Monday to Friday, Saturday and Sunday by appointment, contact 03-4820 5323 or 016-288 4976. Facebook: Project Room Fine Art.



Recollectus I (acrylic, collage on canvas, 2016) was the first piece done by Dhavinder, the heavy use of black resulting from his covering up 'regrettable choices' and teething problems of starting a new series.



Recollectus VIII (acrylic, collage on canvas, 2016) features a pigeonholed structure inspired by the compartmentalised nature of high-rise living.