

MARKETING

ISSUE #457 JANUARY 2026

WEEKENDER

INDEPENDENCE IS POWER
INVICTUS BLUE
IS PROVING IT



WEEKENDER

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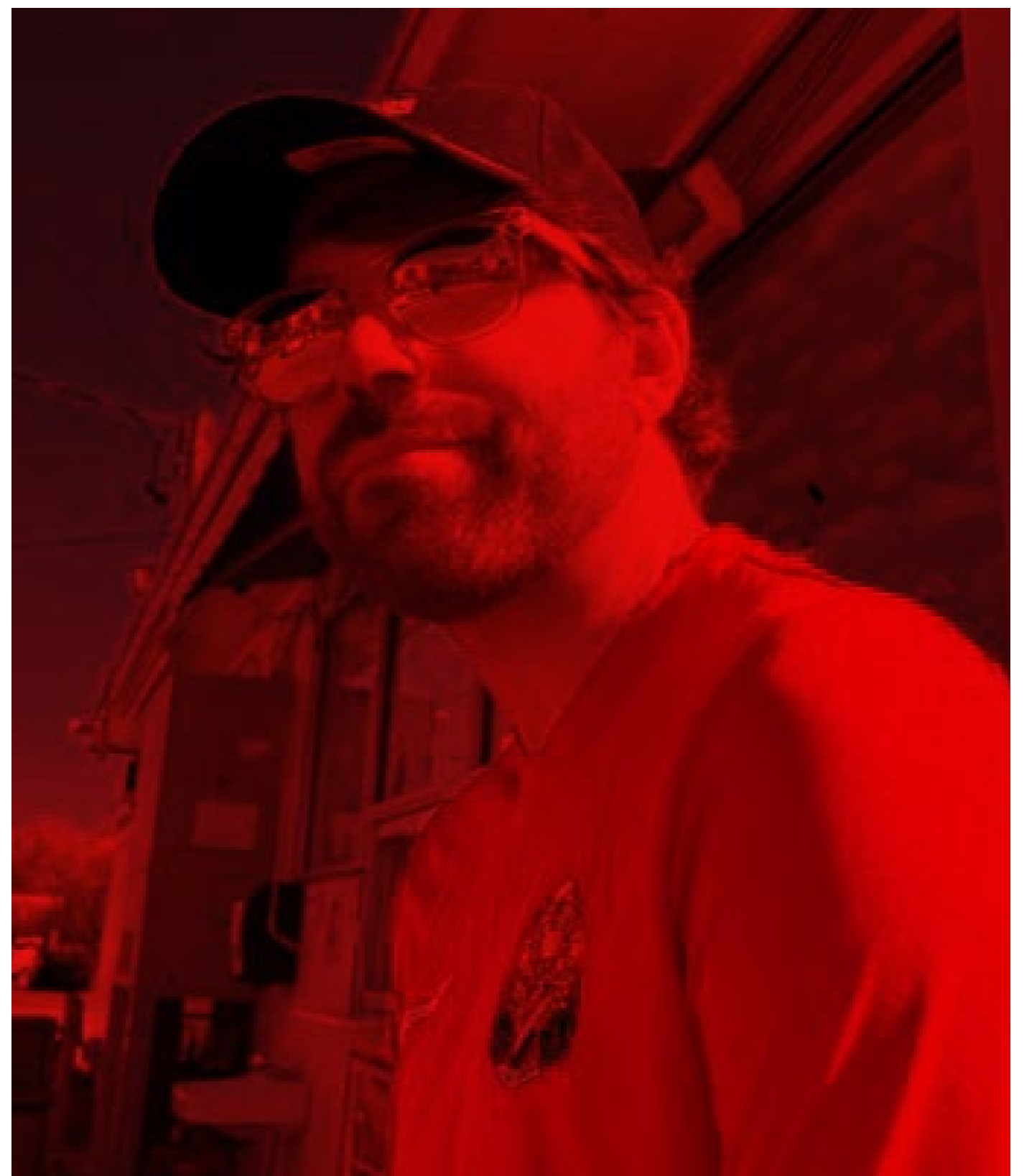
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**FROM PRODUCTION
TO PRESENCE: WHY I
BUILT ART + BEING**

“Removing the US as World Cup host would be eminently sad – and entirely justified.”

**Alexander Abnos,
The Guardian.**



“Clients say they want bravery. Then they ask for the safe version in 12 different colours.”

**Aisha Tan
Creative Director**

“I asked for insight, not a vibe. If you can’t tell me who we are changing and why, we’re not briefing yet.”

**Priya Nair
Client Marketing
Director**



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EPISODES AND STAYING AWESOME!



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(HIGHEST IN CATEGORY).




The
NexGen
Show

FEARLESS, NOT RECKLESS...

This issue lands at a strange moment for marketers. The dashboards look calmer than the real world. The headlines feel louder than the budgets. The tools are getting smarter, but

attention is getting poorer. And somewhere in the middle sits the modern CMO, expected to be part growth engineer, part culture translator, part chief therapist for a brand that is always anxious.



**... Fearless, not reckless.
Speed is not strategy.
Volume is not value...**

So we chose a simple word for the season ahead. Fearless.

Not the chest thumping kind. Not the LinkedIn kind. The useful kind. The kind that shows up when you are asked to cut spend and still grow. When you are told to “use AI” but also “do not break the brand”. When your customer says they want authenticity, then rewards whoever shouts the loudest. When your board wants certainty, yet the market is behaving like a cat on a hot roof.

But let's be clear about the headline lesson too. Fearless, not reckless. Speed is not strategy. Volume is not value. And “we posted something” is not the same as “we built something”. Fearlessness in marketing is rarely a leap. More often, it is

a disciplined walk towards the uncomfortable truth.

That is why this magazine keeps circling back to fundamentals, even as the industry invents new acronyms every quarter. Brands are still built on trust. Strategy still matters. Creativity still does the heavy lifting. Distribution still decides whether your best work is seen or forgotten. And measurement, despite its many sins, still tells you whether you are building a business or simply buying applause.

In the pages ahead, you will see familiar tensions playing out again. Craft versus automation. Long term brand building versus short term performance. Personalisation versus privacy. Relevance versus intrusion. We do not pretend there is one correct



answer for every category. But we do believe there is a correct question for every brand.

Here is one to keep close. What would you do differently if you were not afraid?

Afraid of losing share. Afraid of being copied. Afraid of upsetting a stakeholder. Afraid of looking wrong in public. Afraid of saying no to a safe brief. Afraid of backing the brave idea your customer will actually remember.

Malaysia is full of capable marketers. What we need more of are marketers with nerve and discipline at the same time.

Nerve to back the idea. Discipline to build it properly. Nerve to challenge the default plan.

Discipline to measure what matters.

Turn the page.

Steal what is useful. Argue with what is not.

Then go back to your desk and be fearless in the only way that counts.

Make the work better.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bernard' or similar, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

LETTER TO EDITOR



Dear Editor,

I'm writing as a creative who has been jobless for almost a year. I'm not looking for pity. I just want to say what it feels like from my side of things.

I came late to smartphones. Computers never really excited me. Not because I hate new things, but because my ideas have always come from real life. Watching people. Listening in. Picking up on little moments, jokes, feelings.

But now, every interview feels like a test of apps and tools. What software do I use. What platform do I post on. How fast can I learn the

newest thing. I can learn, sure. But sometimes it feels like that's all they care about.

In fact, I feel most bosses are curious about me but it ends after a few minutes. Like something to "clear" in their in box.

And it hurts, because I know I still have value. I can write. I can think. I can spot what people will laugh at, share, or remember.

I hope agencies and brands don't forget this. Don't throw away good creatives just because they're not "techy enough."

Yours,

A jobless creative

THE INDEPENDENT ADVANTAGE: THE REINVENTION OF **INVICTUS BLUE**

For years, independence was seen as a constraint. Invictus Blue's transformation suggests it may now be the advantage that matters most.



“Independence isn’t our status. It’s our strategy. We move with clarity, we decide with intent, and we deliver with accountability.”

Keith Miranda, President

The communications industry is shifting. Platforms dominate, consumer behaviour is fragmenting, and consolidation has reshaped agency economics. Against this backdrop, Invictus Blue completed a full restructuring in 2025, marking the final phase of a broader transformation designed to prepare the business for what lies ahead.

At the heart of that decision sits a clear view of independence.

Founded more than 32 years ago as the country’s first media agency, the Group has grown alongside the industry, amassing approximately USD1 billion in media billings and producing leaders that now head multinational and local agencies across the region.

That longevity, however, was never mistaken for inevitability. As the industry evolved, it became clear that incremental change would no longer keep pace. Operating

models built for a different era were beginning to strain under the weight of complexity.

For Invictus Blue, the decision to restructure fully in 2025 was not about fixing what was broken, but about acknowledging what no longer served the future.

“We reached a point where trying to fix around the edges would only prolong the challenges. So we redesigned the system completely, keeping what worked, removing what didn’t, and building a cleaner, more transparent, more efficient backbone,” Group CEO Jo Yau explains.

Leadership, capabilities, data and technology were realigned around a single ambition: long-term relevance over short-term efficiency. Crucially, independence was not treated as a cultural preference, but as an operating advantage that could be sharpened and scaled.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF INDEPENDENCE

Independence, in Invictus Blue's model, is not separation from global networks for its own sake. It's a practical enabler of clarity, speed and control. In a market shaped by platform-led pricing and performance signals, scale alone no longer guarantees advantage.

It also allows the Group to pursue what Keith calls "scale with intent". Growth that strengthens capability and judgment rather than chasing size for its own sake. Where global perspective is needed, an affiliate partnership with Havas gives access to international tools and expertise without compromising speed or autonomy.

Freed from network constraints, Invictus Blue can invest ahead of the curve, customise technology

“At the end of the day, clients trust agencies that deliver, not agencies that explain.”

Jo Yau
Group CEO





locally, and adapt operating models in real time. This flexibility allows them to integrate data, AI and human intelligence in ways that are practical, local and commercially effective.

While Technology and AI may

enhance speed and precision, governance remains key. Data-driven intelligence is always combined with human judgment, cultural insight and commercial context to sharpen thinking rather than replace it.



“Our winning strategy for 2026 is anchored in our people,” says Jo Yau, pointing to leaders such as Group Head of Media Ricky Cheok, Group Head of Strategy Chen Shi Yen, and the creative leadership of Irene Kuan and Heng Thang Wei at Alchemy SeventyNine. Together, they translate intelligence, culture and creativity into outcomes that matter.

“And that’s the culture we’re building here: deliver clarity, deliver

impact, deliver results.” Jo Yau, Group CEO.

This culture of delivery is reflected in how independence has been translated into structure, process and everyday decision-making.

Inside the new model, decisions sit closer to the work, approvals are simplified and teams move from insight to action without hierarchical delays.

Yet speed alone is not enough.



“Speed without rigour creates risk; rigour without speed creates irrelevance,” Jo notes. Invictus Blue pairs pace with discipline, using frameworks grounded in data, accountability and leadership judgment rather than outdated global templates.

This clarity extends across the Group, with Media, Creative, PR, brand experience and technology operating as one integrated system. For clients the impact is immediate, with fewer handovers, clearer ownership and teams aligned around outcomes.



“We’re not here to prove that independents can compete with networks. We’re here to show that independents, when designed right, can deliver better outcomes in speed, judgement and accountability.”

BUILT FOR WHAT’S NEXT

Looking ahead, success for Invictus Blue is not defined by scale, but by trust, performance and relevance. It is about consistently translating intelligence into outcomes, and evolving alongside clients in a constantly disrupted industry.

“We’re not optimising for scale alone. We’re optimising for relevance,” Keith adds. “We are deliberate about where and how we expand; ensuring that growth reinforces our capabilities, culture and standards rather than simply increasing footprint or headcount.”

If Invictus Blue stands for one thing today, it is this: independent thinking guided by intelligence, built on cultural truth, and accountable for real business results.

Invictus Blue’s commitment to independence, agility and accountable decision-making has earned recognition across the industry. Multiple wins at the MSA Awards, Campaign Asia and the Malaysia Excellence Awards prove that a strategy built on intent and results delivers work that truly counts.



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ICYMI: Advertising Is a Weak Force

... There are two ways in which big advertising successes usually occur – great creative work or enormous expenditures of money...

Gravity is everywhere.

Consequently, we think of gravity as a powerful force that keeps us glued to the ground. Actually, science tells us that gravity is a very weak force. In fact, it is the weakest known force in the universe.

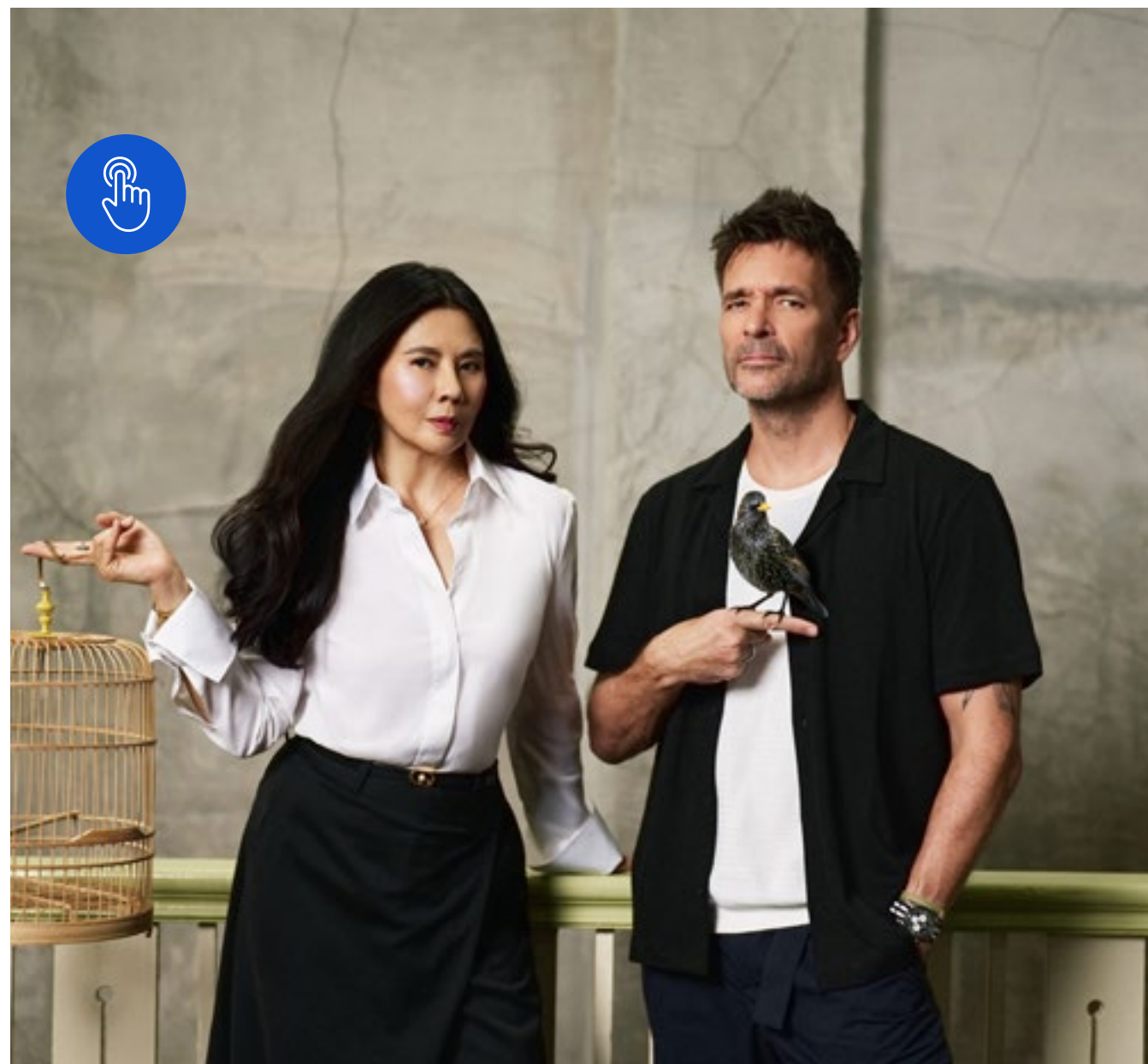
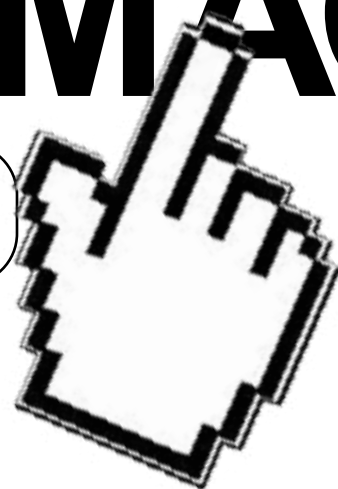
To prove this to yourself, go to a children's toy shop and buy one of those little horse shoe magnets. Then put a paper clip on the ground. Place the magnet near the paper clip. You now have two competing forces: the electro-magnetic force of the little magnet versus the gravitational force of the entire planet Earth. The little magnet wins.

MOST READ ON

MARKETING MAGAZINE



(23rd January – 30th January 2026)



GREY REAPPOINTED AS LEAD CREATIVE AGENCY FOR COWAY MALAYSIA

Pageviews: 3,305



MONKS APPOINTS MIHIR DHAIRYAWAN AS EXECUTIVE CREATIVE DIRECTOR FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA

Pageviews: 3,102



CASTROL MALAYSIA APPOINTS DNA CREATIVE COMMUNICATIONS AS PR AGENCY

Pageviews: 3,011



THE SHOUT GROUP KICKS OFF 2026 BY GOING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

Pageviews: 2,975



EX AIRASIA BRANDING CHIEF RUDY KHAW LAUNCHES CREATIVE PRACTICE.

Pageviews: 2,587



HOW TRUE IS THIS?

BY THE HAMMER


Kenanga Investment Bank says Malaysia's tracked media adex is likely to shrink 9.5% in 2026 to RM4.24 billion, after a much sharper 22% fall in 2025 to RM4.74 billion.

The drop is smaller. But it is still a drop. A "milder contraction" is not a recovery, it is just a slower slide.

So I am not sold on the "silver lining".

The report also leans on big 2026 sports events to lift marketing activity, including Sukma Selangor (Aug 15 to 24, 2026), the FIFA World Cup (June 11 to July 19, 2026), and the Winter Olympics (Feb 6 to 22, 2026).

Maybe that helps. But brands do not spend because an event exists. They spend when they can link it to growth, whether sales, market



... But the ball is round. So expect surprises, stay humble and play to the whistle...

share, or strong brand metrics.

However, if I may add, this is not completely true. Brands also spend to follow the herd and the last-minute FOMO rant from the board of directors.

Now, on Meta and Google. Malaysia's digital market is basically split into two big money pipes, social and search.

MAGNA data cited by Kenanga says digital was 77% of Malaysia's total adex in 2024, led by social media at 41% and search at 24%.

MAGNA also forecasts Malaysia's total ad revenue to rise 6.4% in 2025, driven by social media growing 11% and search growing 8%.

That matters because search in Malaysia is overwhelmingly Google. StatCounter shows Google

at 93.32% of search engine market share in Malaysia in December 2025.

So if search ad spending grows, Google is the clearest winner.

For Meta, the forecast is best read through the "social media" bucket. Meta's platforms have very large ad reach in Malaysia, for example Facebook and Instagram based on Meta tools tracked by DataReportal.

But most public forecasts do not break Malaysia social ad spend into exact company splits, so I would be careful about claiming a precise Meta ringgit figure from these sources alone.

Bottom line, the headwinds feel real.

But the ball is round. So expect surprises, stay humble and play to the whistle.

SIS, I JUST SAW YOUR BOYFRIEND TALKING
TO HIS EX AT THE BAR.

IT ONLY TAKES A MOMENT FOR
EVERYTHING TO GO UP IN FLAMES.
But there's always a way out.





From Production to Presence: Why I Built Art + Being

by Zora Gabrovsek

**...Advertising
is built on
output –
deliverables,
performance,
speed.
That world
taught me
discipline,
precision
and how to
execute at
scale...**

After more than three decades in global advertising and production, I could have chosen a quieter landing. Instead, I opened an art gallery.

Art + Being, based in Damansara Heights, Kuala Lumpur, is not a pivot away from my past — it is the accumulation of it.

My career began unusually early. At nineteen, I founded one of the region's first visual effects houses, working at a time when much of what is now standard simply did not exist yet. We were inventing as we went. There were no templates — just problems to solve, fast.

THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

That instinct — to build what is missing — has followed me for more than 35 years.

My professional life unfolded across Malaysia, Singapore, Asia and later the UK, spanning visual effects, production houses, post-production, music, film, and large-scale brand ecosystems.

I co-founded 25Frames, a VFX house, and later founded Yelocentric, a production company working with film directors, photographers, animators, artists and musicians. The work moved fluidly between commercial, cultural and experimental worlds.

Alongside this, I also curated and produced art exhibitions nearly two decades ago — successfully, but without the desire at the time to formalise them into a permanent institution.

Over the years, I worked with artists and musicians at formative moments in their careers, produced music videos and cultural projects across Southeast Asia, and was involved in complex VFX, early stereoscopic and experimental visual work long before it became fashionable.

I also led and produced larger cultural initiatives, including projects connected

to the Sarawak Music Festival — at one point bringing the founders of Soca Music from Trinidad into the jungles of Borneo, simply because it felt right.

Much of this work sat outside categories, driven more by curiosity and connection than by strategy.

In Singapore, my path moved into global roles. I became an agency executive producer working across international markets, shooting Asian and US celebrities, and collaborating with Oscar-nominated directors — often burning through eighteen-hour days with no weekends.

Eventually, this led to a transition into production consulting, working directly with brands.

For the past decade, I've worked as a global production advisor across APAC and global markets, supporting multinational brands including Ferrero and Nestlé — a role I continue today, often working across the US, Latin America, Europe and Asia time zones.

Running parallel to this high-pressure professional life, another thread was forming — not as a trend, but as necessity.

I wasn't looking to become spiritual. I was trying to understand my own mind well

THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

enough to stay sane — and to take responsibility for the reality I was creating.

Long before “wellness” became an industry, I began exploring ways to regulate a nervous system that had been switched on for decades.

Over twenty years ago, I landed in India, where my relationship with meditation began. I trained as a Hatha yoga instructor, explored breathwork, meditation and energy work, and travelled extensively — not out of ideology, but out of pragmatism.

I needed tools that worked. And, of course, who doesn't find India endlessly compelling?

That quiet, functional relationship with presence became foundational.

Returning to Malaysia after twelve years abroad — split between Singapore and the UK — brought everything into focus.

The UK, for me, had become far too cold in every sense, so I rented out my house and came back home.

Kuala Lumpur, where my children were born, felt like a return not only geographically, but energetically.

Art + Being grew from a question that had been circling for years: what happens in

the space between doing and being?

Advertising is built on output — deliverables, performance, speed. That world taught me discipline, precision and how to execute at scale.

It also made the gap very visible: the gap between making things and actually experiencing them.

Art + Being positions itself deliberately outside familiar categories. It is not a white-cube gallery chasing trends, and it is not a wellness space dressed up as culture.

It operates from a simple premise: art is not separate from being.

The programme brings together contemporary visual art — painting, sculpture, installation and mixed media — alongside carefully framed experiences that deepen perception: sound immersions, embodied reflection, and neuroscience-informed creative practices.

Not as “healing events,” and not as spectacle, but as ways of learning how to perceive more fully.

We don't fix people here. We don't promise transformation. We offer conditions — for attention, for reflection, for resonance. Art already does that, if you let it.

THE SPACE IN BETWEEN



The gallery's curatorial focus is rooted in Southeast Asia, with a strong emphasis on building meaningful bridges to Europe.

Many of the artists we work with are established in their own contexts but under-represented internationally.

Others are emerging voices whose practices are embodied, political, poetic or materially experimental — often all at once.

This approach reflects my own sensibility: practical, unsentimental and quietly radical. I'm not interested in spiritual bypassing, and I'm not interested in cynicism either.

Both are lazy. What interests me is presence — the kind that can hold contradiction.

That philosophy is embedded in the gallery's name. Art + Being is not about addition, but recognition: that creation and existence are already intertwined.

I haven't stepped away from my consulting work. If anything, the two worlds inform each other. Years in global production governance bring rigour and transparency to how the gallery operates; immersion in art and being sharpens my understanding of creativity beyond metrics and KPIs.

I didn't leave one life for another. I integrated them.

Art + Being opened with its inaugural exhibition *The Space In Between* and will continue to evolve through exhibitions, residencies and intimate public programmes.

I'm not building a brand empire, and I'm not chasing scale.

This is a long game. A place that earns trust over time.

For someone who has spent a lifetime building studios, projects and creative ecosystems, Art + Being may be my most distilled work yet.

Not louder. Just truer.



Marketing
Conference
& Festival
2026

FEARLESS

• 21st MAY, 2026. SIME DARBY CONVENTION CENTRE.