An unusual collaboration between painter and dancer will bring paintings alive on stage, reports OOI KOK CHUEN.

THE paintings of Datuk Ibrahim Hussein will come alive in the Asia-Europe Pointe to Point dance experience in Warsaw in November.

Imagine his trademark sinuous lines and gorgeous colours with all the syncopated rhythms dramatised as living art in a performance.

Tasked with interpreting the thoughts behind the works and their expression and spirit is choreographer-dancer Bruno Pradet. The Frenchman recently visited Ib, as the artist is more popularly known, at Ib’s extensively renovated Bukit Pantai home in Kuala Lumpur and then his world-class museum, the Ibrahim Hussein Museum and Cultural Foundation, on Pulau Langkawi, off the coast of Kedah.

Ib is among four artists selected for the project helmed by the Asia-Europe Foundation (asef.org). The others are Benedicto Reyes Cabrera, better known as Bencab (from the Philippines), Anne Rochette (France) and Jose de Guimaraes (Portugal).

Besides Pradet, the other choreographers-dancers chosen are Chiyo Ogino (Japan), Alden Lugnasin (the Philippines) and Paulina Wycichowska (Poland).

When I meet him at Ib’s residence, Pradet, 43, seems overwhelmed by the range of emotions and ideas expressed on Ib’s canvases. Especially since, recently, Ib has taken to working on larger canvases measuring 3m by 2.6m.

There will be much for Pradet to focus on, in terms of subjects. He can choose from Ib’s masterpieces, like May 13 (1969) with its painted-over Malaysian flag, My Father and the Astronaut (1980), Pak Utih (1970) or socio-political works on the Trafalgar Square (London) nuclear disarmament sit-in, the Sabra-Chatila (Lebanon) refugee camp massacre, Myanmar’s political icon Aung San Suu Kyi and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York besides works on self-struggles and celebrations of life, dance and drama.

“The idea is to create a dance in relation either to a painting or a group of paintings. It is to interpret and enhance the work,” says Ib, who turned 70 in March.

I ask Pradet if he has decided how long his performance will be and how many dancers he will use. "There is no
fixed time nor have I decided on how many dancers I might need," he replies.

In the programme, 16 dancers will be sourced from Europe and Asia for an eight-day workshop with the four choreographers-dancers before the grand event in Warsaw.

Before coming over here, Pradet already knew quite a bit about Malaysia. One of his early mentors was Malaysia-born, Paris-based contemporary dancer Lari Leong, who died soon after performing a mesmerising last dance in KL in 1991.

The young Pradet had enrolled in the Electrical and Electronic Engineering in Paris when he became smitten with a girl in the school’s dance class. At that point, he had never seen a dance performance or even been to a theatre but that didn’t stop him from taking up dance!

Once hooked, Pradet began concentrating more and more on his creative pursuits. He practised as an electrical engineer for 10 years while dallying with dance before deciding to follow his heart and concentrate full time on his passion. He’s been doing that for the last 10 years now.

“My family members (he has two brothers and a sister) were all professionals and not culturally inclined at all and my parents were aghast when I told them about my decision,” says Pradet, who was born in the Bordeaux wine district but is now based in Paris.

In the last five years he has come out on his own, choreographing a provocative repertoire that includes the acclaimed Forbidden Reproduction, which revolves around questions of genetic evolution without sexual relations. Pradet has also performed outside Europe – in Africa, Japan (Shizuoka) and South America (Peru and Nicaragua).

His dance defies classification, drawing elements from theatre, music, mime and daily life. He is unfazed about whether his style is “more theatre than dance, or more music than theatre” as the aim is to make the audience think, be involved and even engage in the performance.

His works also have a “strange” quality about them, not only because there are speaking parts, but also because of the subjects and the way the subjects are presented, in an unconventional, off-the-edge way with humour and irony.

You’ll get an idea of what his work is like if you consider the people he’s impressed by: German choreographer Pina Bausch and French-Serbian choreographer Joseph Nadj, who was artistic director of the Avignon Theatre Festival. Bausch is noted for infusing theatrical elements into dance, revisiting classical ballet and her unusual techniques while Nadj’s works are partly inspired by Kafka’s theatre of the absurd style.

“My works always mix the different arts in an absurd and humorous way,” says Pradet. “There is also a social commentary side to it, and I also speak in my performances,” he explains.

But isn’t speaking an admission of something lacking in the dance?

“No, there are times in a performance when you feel a dancer should add a voice to it, but by not speaking, the act is the poorer for it,” says Pradet, who throughout the interview is as articulate with his facial expressions and animated gestures as he is with words. Later, when he shows me some videos of his works and also does an impromptu dance in front of one of Ib’s huge canvas, he shows that he can be almost Chaplinesque – comical and controlled, or freewheeling, moving with the agility of a spider.

He also likes to get the audience involved in his act.
It can be something simple like reading out some of the spectators’ names randomly during a performance, or giving them troboscope-like torches to shine in quick succession on any part of the actor’s anatomy in a darkened hall, or allowing them to touch the props, like allowing someone to cuddle a dummy baby one moment only to snatch it back in the next.

It is a dance that calls for more interaction unlike the days of say, Rudolph Nureyev or Merce Cunningham, who offered feats of athletic conceit.

And wherever he goes, Pradet has an unusual ritual of talking and “making love” to the space in which he will perform.

“This is to get a connection with the floor or ground. I would lie down and slowly move around in all kinds of movements,” he says. It is a kind of callisthenics limbering up and a virtual “touching base”.

Dance is also a pet theme in Ib’s works, be they on Balinese or contemporary and ballet (the Royal Danish Ballet, 1986) dance. His 1982 painting, *Dance of Life*, was even selected for a top award at the 18th Prix International d’ Art Contemporain de Monte Carlo.

Says the artist: “Next year will be my 50th year of creation and I am planning a major show to celebrate it,” citing his starting point as 1956 when he first left for Singapore with the hope of taking up art studies. But his early art education was at the Byam Shaw School of Drawing and Painting in London.

His last major show in Malaysia was when the National Art Gallery honoured him with a retrospective in 1986, which coincided with his 50th year of age, when 199 of his works done since 1957 were shown.