

Debunking

**THE
MYTH**

Debunking the Myth

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About Us

Core Design Gallery is an exclusive boutique art gallery that is committed to promoting and developing Malaysian contemporary artists to achieve international standard and global recognition for their quality artworks.

With its main philosophy of holding major shows of critical value and museum quality, Core Design Gallery aims to create massive awareness on the significance of Malaysian contemporary art through solid art management and important publications.

Debunking the Myth

Debunking the Myth is a curated exhibition of selected figurative paintings from the renowned Aliya and Farouk Khan (AFK) collection. It is Core Design Gallery's first showcase of a private collection.

This exhibition seeks to establish the role of the figure in the development of contemporary Malaysian art, a topic which has not been fully explored until now. Through a curated exhibition and accompanying critical essay, audiences are not only exposed to the developments in this genre through the different periods of contemporary art, from the 1980's to the 1990's and twenty first century, but also the various ways the figure has been represented.

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Written by Zena Khan

In his essay *Theses in the Philosophy of Curating*, Jean Paul Martinon states that "the curatorial disrupts knowledge in order to invent knowledge"¹. As a writer and curator working in the field of Malaysian contemporary art, Martinon's assessment of the curatorial as an act that halts blindly accepting received information in order to allow for the birth of actual knowledge² struck a chord. In my personal research, I have found discrepancies between the writings of the postcolonial writers and curators and the artworks that comprise the canon of Malaysian art history. Through this essay, I will unpick these discrepancies, particularly as they relate to the area of figurative art in Malaysian art history, in an attempt to engage Malaysian contemporary art practice with Martinon's definition of the curatorial. As such, it is my aim to allow for the beginning of an accurate picture that figurative art has played in Malaysian art history, in an attempt to engage with Martinon's definition of the curatorial. In doing so, I aim to build up a better understanding on the role of figurative art within the context of contemporary Malaysian art.

In *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia*, Redza Piyadasa puts forth the view that there was a Malay-Islamic art revival as a consequence of the 1971 National Cultural Congress and the 1978 Islamic Revolution in Iran. He builds on Zainal Abidin Ahmad Shariff's assertion that the "new Islamic dimension"³ in Malaysia was inspired by the emergence of an Islamic State in Iran after the Revolution to talk about an "Islamic dimension that appeared within the Malay-centered artistic movement. The projection of Islamic culture and civilization now became the rallying cry... And many Malay-Muslim artists linked to the *Institut Teknologi MARA (ITM)* art schools responded emotionally to new impulses, which saw the introduction of radical new ideas about an Islamic religious world-view being introduced. A larger philosophical debate ensued. Should Muslims reject the Western materialistic philosophy and Western ideas of modernism?"⁴ Piyadasa states that this led to a "rejection of the underpinnings of the Western modernist movement in art and the Western-derived idea of modernity and secularism itself. At the ITM art school, figurative art was now discouraged and a new prescriptive, abstract approach to art making, found on Islamic religious and design principles, began to be encouraged."⁵ This insinuates a lack of figurative art in Malaysian art history, as artists would have been neither trained in figurative art nor encouraged to explore it in their practices.

Writers that came after Piyadasa were influenced by this theory. In writing for the 2008 exhibition *Tukar Ganti* at Valentine Willie Gallery, Simon Soon states that "the reemergence of the figure came after its near obsolescence in the preceding three decades."⁶ Following this timeline set by Soon, it appears his contention is that figurative art was all but extinct from the late 1970's up until 2008. His subsequent statements in the exhibition catalogue appear to build on Piyadasa's contentions of a Malay-Islamic revival limiting the artistic scope in Malaysia: "subsequent development in local abstraction eventually led to the development of a dominant form of Malay-Islamic abstraction in the Eighties, which viewed the figurative image as non-orthodox. This has driven artists (both Malay and non-Malay) to rebel against the orthodoxy of an increasingly repressive, rigid and formulaic approach to painting."⁷

Soon is not alone in furthering the positions held by Piyadasa on the lack of figurative art, particularly in accordance with an Islamic doctrine, amongst Malaysian artists. Eva McGovern has stated in writings for the Asia Art Archive that "Malay artists addressed their own identity through non-figurative Islamic focus work in the 1970's and 80's that moved away from more Western international artistic dialogue."⁸

These quotes and views are problematic at several junctions. Firstly, there is the claim that the figure does not play a role in Malaysian art from the late 1970's. Secondly, this claim is specifically targeted at Malay-Muslim artists, putting forth a negative connotation of Islamization in Malaysian society as the root cause for the disappearance of the figure. Thirdly, there appears to be a disassociation of the local art movement from



*Zulkifli Mohd Dahlan *Kedai-Kedai* 1973

an international artistic and intellectual discourse. Through this essay, I will begin building a history of Malaysian contemporary art that sits at odds with these claims. As will be evidenced by the most important resource of all, artworks themselves, figurative art has played a pivotal role in the development of Malaysian contemporary art history, amongst both Malay and non-Malay artists. The prevalence of the figure along with the lack of a developed calligraphy movement will also cast doubt on the Islamization ideals dampening the creativity of Malaysian artists. Given the acknowledged position of calligraphy as the most celebrated of Islamic arts, had there been an Islamization in Malaysia's art movement, it is highly probable that the genre would have emerged explosively in the 1980's rather than with exhibitions such as Husin Hourmain's 2013 solo exhibition *Awal Hurouf, Asal Hurouf* and Mohd Noor Mahmud's 2014 solo exhibition *Siri Rasa Bertuhan*. Lastly, we will see that through education and international discourse, such as participation in important international art events, Malaysian artists were firmly a part of global intellectual exchanges.

The presence of the figure was established in Malaysian art history well before the contemporary period. This is revealed in studying the works of prominent modern masters such as Zulkifli Dahlan, Ibrahim Hussein, Hoessein Enas and Dzulkifli Buyong, all of whom were Malay-Muslim artists practicing in Malaysia from the 1950's onwards. Zulkifli Dahlan can be picked out as an artist whose surreal art practice enables the beginning of a transition between the modern and contemporary periods locally. One work in particular audiences can turn to in understanding this is his 1973 *Kedai-Kedai*. Zulkifli Dahlan depicts a busy urban scene, with masses of people mingling on the street, walking on pavements or driving down busy streets, past rows of shop houses. While reminiscent of a factual depiction of a town scene in the 1960's or 70's, Zulkifli Dahlan imbues his work with a surreal atmosphere by portraying all the figures as completely naked, yet casually continuing with their busy urban lives. Filling landscapes with renderings of naked people was a speciality of Zulkifli Dahlan's. Several other works, such as 1975's *A Separate Reality* attest to this. A large black and white enamel on board work, *A Separate Reality* takes Zulkifli Dahlan's imagination a step further by immersing his naked figures in the midst of a highly surreal landscape, where the rules of logic do not seem to apply.

It must be remembered that these pieces were created immediately after the National Cultural Congress of 1971, by a Malay-Muslim artist and their subsequent importance given frequent referencing

* Hoessein Enas Self Portrait 1954



* Dzulkifli Buyong *Kelambu* 1964

as well as being included in Balai Seni Visual Negara's (National Visual Arts Gallery of Malaysia) permanent collection. The subject matters, and indeed inclusions of multitudes of naked figures appear to sit at odds with Piyadasa's description of Malay artists working in the 1970's as "Malay-Islamic revivalists".⁹ As such, they go some way towards dispelling myths that Malay-Muslim artists narrowed their practices into highly Islamic art productions following the National Cultural Congress.

Zulkifli Dahlan was not alone in his use of the figure at this time. Indeed even before the creation of *Kedai-Kedai*, figurative works were a prominent part of the practices of Hoessein Enas, who frequently painted realistic portraits, and not forgetting Dzulkifli Buyong's *Kelambu*, which portrayed an everyday scene of individuals engaged

¹Martinon, Jean-Paul, 2013, *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, Bloomsbury, London, 30

²Martinon, Jean-Paul, 2013, *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, Bloomsbury, London, 26

³Piyadasa, Redza, 2002, *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 34

⁴Piyadasa, Redza, 2002, *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 34

* Image and information taken from the internet

⁵Piyadasa, Redza, 2002, *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 35

⁶Soon, Simon, <http://www.vwfa.net/tukarganti/>

⁷Soon, Simon, <http://www.vwfa.net/tukarganti/>

⁸McGovern, Eva, 2009, *The Politics of Play in Malaysian Art*, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaologue/Details/740>

⁹Piyadasa, Redza, 2002, *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 96

in their daily life in pastel. The works of these prominent artists can be traced throughout the 1950's and 1960's, but perhaps one of the most popular of all modernist figurative works can be attributed to Ibrahim Hussein, who is a firm favorite among the Malaysian modernist artists. In 1970, Ibrahim Hussein created his large acrylic painting *My Father and The Astronaut*. On the left of the painting, Ibrahim Hussein painted his father, who appears as a typical Malay man of a certain generation with a *songkok* and striped *sarong*. On the opposite end, he paints an astronaut in full space gear, as he would be ready to explore space. This juxtaposition creates an interesting insight for viewers into the situation in which Ibrahim Hussein came of age, straddling tradition with development both on a local front as Malaysia grew post-Independence, but also on a global scale with advancements such as space travel. It is interesting to note that several of these figurative works from the 1950's to the 1970's, and indeed beyond, are able to act as a form of visual historical documentation of the times and subsequent changes that took place whence they were produced.

Throughout the 1980's, when the contemporary Malaysian art movement was in full swing, figurative works were strongly developed through the practice of Amron Omar. Amron Omar is notable not only as a contemporary figurative artist, but also as a lecturer who taught figurative art. From 1986-1987 and again from 1993-1997, he taught at Institut Teknologi MARA – ITM in Shah Alam, where a number of Malay art students received rigorous instruction in figurative drawing under his tutelage. Several of his students have gone on to be prominent pillars of the local contemporary movement, lauded for exceptional talents in realism which they attribute to Amron's instruction, such as Fadli Yusoff and Ali Nurazmal. In 2012, Balai Seni Visual Negara held a retrospective of Amron's career in the form of a fully figurative exhibition, *Pertarungan*. Studying the works in *Pertarungan* provides an insight into the artist's contributions to the art movement as well as his ability to depict Malay culture through the use of the figure.

As an artist, Amron has been the beneficiary of critical acclaim. In 1982, he was awarded the Minor Prize at the National Art Gallery's Bakat Muda and in 1985, he won the Silver Award at Sime Darby Art Asia '85 competition held in Kuala Lumpur. His works can be found in several private and public collections, among them the National Visual Arts Gallery Kuala Lumpur, Kedah State Art Gallery, Bank Negara Collection, Raintree Club Kuala Lumpur and UMNO Complex Building, Kuala Lumpur. Over the years, Amron has also participated in a slew of local and international

exhibitions, most notably The Contemporary Asian Art Show, Fukuoka, Japan (1980), ASEAN Mobile Show, Jakarta (1981), The 4th ASEAN Mobile Art and Photography Exhibition, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei (1985) and Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia, Los Angeles (1988).

One of Amron's most lauded series to date has been his *Silat* series, which the artist began working on while still a student¹⁰. Indeed the catalogue of *Pertarungan* itself is filled with examples of Amron's early *Silat* series, such as 1979's oil on canvas *Silat*¹¹ that depicts two Malay Silat fighters in the midst of their graceful warrior poses. Countless more oil on canvas paintings from the *Silat* and *Pertarungan* series form the basis of Amron's artistic career and can be traced through the 1980's, 1990's and 2000's. If we recall Eva McGovern's statement quoted earlier in this essay "Malay artists addressed their own identity through non-figurative Islamic focus work in the 1970's and 80's"¹², and then look at these works Amron produced with great local and international critical and commercial success in the 1970's onwards, a chasm appears between McGovern's statement and the reality of Malaysian art production. To understand this chasm, first the position of Silat in Malay culture needs to be underlined.

Silat is a traditional form of martial arts, deeply rooted in the Malay culture. In fact, its presence can be traced back to the dawn of Malay civilization 2,000 years ago. As with many local cultural practices, the techniques are handed down from one generation to the next. Despite being a form of martial arts, Silat is not concerned solely with self-defense; it is also taught as a way to inculcate discipline, independence and respect for oneself and others, so as to produce well-rounded members of society. Practitioners usually wear sarongs, as depicted by Amron in his series of *Silat* paintings. These factual renderings of figures mid pose, engaged in an act so heavily steeped in Malay culture, are prime examples of a Malay artist using the figure as a way to express his identity.

**** Fadli Yusoff**
Catan diri-dua dalam kesatuan
 Acrylic on canvas
 137cm x 168cm
 2012



** Fadli Yusoff painted a similar piece in tribute to Amron Omar and Ibrahim Hussein. This work is borrowed from the private collection of Kuldeep and Aage Aasmundsen as part of the *Debunking the Myth* exhibition.

*** Amron Omar** *Catan diri* 1982



*** Ibrahim Hussein** *My Father and The Astronaut* 1970



¹⁰Pertarungan: Amron Omar, 2012, National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia, 170

¹¹Pertarungan: Amron Omar, 2012, National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia, 177

¹²McGovern, Eva, 2009, The Politics of Play in Malaysian Art, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaologue/Details/740>

Figurative Paintings from Aliya & Farouk Khan (AFK) Collection

The figure was represented in more experimental ways throughout the 1980's, a trend that has continued up till today, as evidenced by the exhibition *Debunking The Myth* that this essay accompanies. This exhibition is comprised of a selection of figurative artworks from *The Aliya and Farouk Khan Collection* of Malaysian contemporary art and include works from a variety of Malaysian contemporary artists. In the process, audiences are not only exposed to the developments in the genre throughout the different periods of contemporary art, from the 1980's to the 1990's and twenty first century, but also the various ways the figure has been represented. Certain artists offer faithful perfect realistic representations, such as Ahmad Fuad Osman, Eng Hwee Chu, Ali Nurazmal Yusoff and Fadli Yusoff, while others involve the figure within more

expressionist works, such as Yusof Ghani, Anthonie Chong or Shooshie Sulaiman. There are a variety of experimental media, such as Ahmad Shukri Mohamed's 1990 mixed media canvas *Hope Dishonest Series: IV* or Hamir Soib's 2008 *Nafsu Nafsi* which is painted in bitumen, a notoriously difficult medium that Hamir is the undisputed master of. Several surreal paintings are also included by the likes of Tan Chin Kuan, Chan Kok Hooi and an early Ahmad Fuad Osman, *Silent Sorrow*. This exhibition offers an exciting insight into the variety of ways Malaysian contemporary artists have engaged with the figure in their highly experimental, conceptual and diverse practices. In coming from a single private collection, the importance of well-curated collections as a resource in understanding contemporary art histories also comes to light.



Ahmad Shukri Mohamed
Hope Dishonest Series: IV
Mixed Media on Canvas
93cm x 92cm
1990



Ahmad Fuad Osman
Silent Sorrow
Oil on Canvas
152cm x 183cm
1995

Anthonie Chong
Mime Series: Painting 3
Oil on Canvas
91cm x 122cm
1995



Jalaini Abu Hassan
Wet Paint Series:
Tribute to Latiff Mohidin
Waterbase Paint on Canvas
130cm x 130cm
2005



Masnoor Ramli Mahmud
Once Upon A Time
Oil on Canvas
153cm x 183cm
1996



Ahmad Fuad Osman
Fatamorgana #3
The Spotlight Obsession
Oil on Canvas
248cm x 298cm
2006

One of the best examples of an artist experimenting with the figure in the 1980's is Yusof Ghani, beginning with his *Protes* series in 1980. In addition to this series, the artist was working on several watercolor studies beginning in 1981 that featured explorations of the human form. Yusof was a recipient of a government grant to study in America and in 1983, graduated with a Master of Fine Art in painting from the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. It was during his Masters that he began working on his seminal *Sri Tari* series, continuing to work on this theme for a decade from 1984. Yusof's merging of the human form and abstract expressionism, as seen here in his 1990 oil on board piece *Siri Protes:Protes Kenyalang*, were in fact a direct result of his American education and the influence of American contemporary art movement that dominated the international art scene during this period, not a result of Islamization or doctrines resulting from the National Cultural Congress as explained by postcolonial writers such as Piyadasa. Hasnul J. Saidon verifies this in his essay *Under-Deconstruction: Contemporary Art In Malaysia After 1990*¹³ where Hasnul describes these expansions into new genres as "an interest in expanding new materials, exploring new language of painting, printmaking and sculpture" as a result of exposures gained through overseas education.

Hasnul's articulation of Yusof's artistic engagement with the American contemporary art movement is important, and can be applied to other members of the first generation of Malaysian contemporary artists such as Fauzan Omar. **This recognition of a developed, experimental mixed media or abstract expressionist practice as being in line with the aims of contemporary art practice and global discourses of the times are key, as that needs to be the lens through which we study the works of these seminal artists.** The movements by Malaysian artists into conceptual driven artwork with these experimental technical processes was in fact the development of the local contemporary art movement, along the global contemporary trajectory; not a move into Islamization, as highlighted by the absence of a calligraphy movement within the Malaysian art scene during that period. This lack of understanding on the contemporary art movement could also go some way to explaining why there is a lack of contemporary Malaysian art collections in the region, as the institutions were following an unsubstantiated thesis. Today we are beginning to see an attempt to rectify this and assemble contemporary collections. For this to succeed however, there needs to be accurate documentation of the history of Malaysian contemporary art. Being important artists who subsequently taught at

MARA University of Technology (UiTM), Yusof Ghani and Amron Omar along with Fauzan Omar, had a strong influence over the younger generations of contemporary artists, helping to shape their formal skills and encouraging them to develop highly individual, experimental and conceptual practices. This point must be underscored here due to continuing myths about teachings at UiTM hampering artistic expression. Simon Soon, for example, has taken a position often favored by Piyadasa that the turn to abstraction in the arts was religiously motivated, and an agenda pushed by UiTM: "Moreover, choosing to paint figures can be viewed as a politically motivated choice. For many Malay artists, it was a rebellion against the Islamic abstraction that came to represent a hegemonic form of modernism, propagated largely by the ITM art schools in the Eighties."¹⁴ Whether intentional or not, this quote also misleads readers into thinking figurative art was not taught at UiTM, a thought that has no basis in facts.

Hasnul reminds us that a survey of UiTM students would reveal a wide and diverse range of approaches that involve the figure. Indeed, figurative art was taught by Hasnul himself, along with Fauzan and Amron. Ismail Zain ran advanced drawing classes using live models. Classes such as these were considered important for equipping the young artists with the formalistic tools necessary to pursue careers as artists.

There was also heavy emphasis on critical thinking at UiTM. Ismail Zain, for example, used his highly investigative and semiotic approach to drawing as a way to encourage his students to expand the ways in which they engaged with visual texts.¹⁵

Audiences can turn to Hamir Soib's bitumen on jute piece *Nafsu Nafsi* as an example of producing figurative paintings in experimental medium, or admire Ali Nurazmal's near perfect realism techniques in *Imitation Master: After Caravaggio II* or *Look At You as clear indicators to the emphasis on skill and concept at UiTM.* In fact, Ahmad Fuad Osman's 1995 painting *Silent Sorrow* provides one of the strongest rebuttal to remarks that UiTM students were headed down the path of Islamic indoctrination. A surreal oil on canvas piece, it is anchored by the naked, anatomically correct form of a female prostitute stretched on a red bed, while a white ghostly figure weeps over her. A series of portraits from an installation by Anurendra Jegadeva exemplify the artist's preferred cubist style of portraiture, while *Wet Paint Series: Tribute To Latiff Mohidin* encapsulates Jalaini Abu Hassan's highly layered, neo-expressionist style. A Masnoor Ramli Mahmud from 1996, *Once Upon A Time*, shows his early figurative style which was more expressionist than recent paintings from his *Moulding The History* series.



Yusof Ghani
Siri Protes: Protes Kenyalang
 Oil on Board
 123cm x 123cm
 1990 - 1991



Hamir Soib
Nafsu Nafsi
 Bitumen on Jute
 244cm x 244cm
 2008

¹³Saidon, Hasnul J., *Under-Deconstruction: Contemporary Art In Malaysia After 1990*, Susur Masa: Timelines, 2008, National Art Gallery, Malaysia, 244

¹⁴Soon, Simon, <http://www.vwfa.net/tukarganti/>

¹⁵Saidon, Hasnul J., *Under-Deconstruction: Contemporary Art In Malaysia After 1990*, Susur Masa: Timelines, 2008, National Art Gallery, Malaysia, 244



Ali Nurazmal Yusoff
Imitation Master- After Caravaggio II
Oil on Canvas
168cm x 352cm
2012

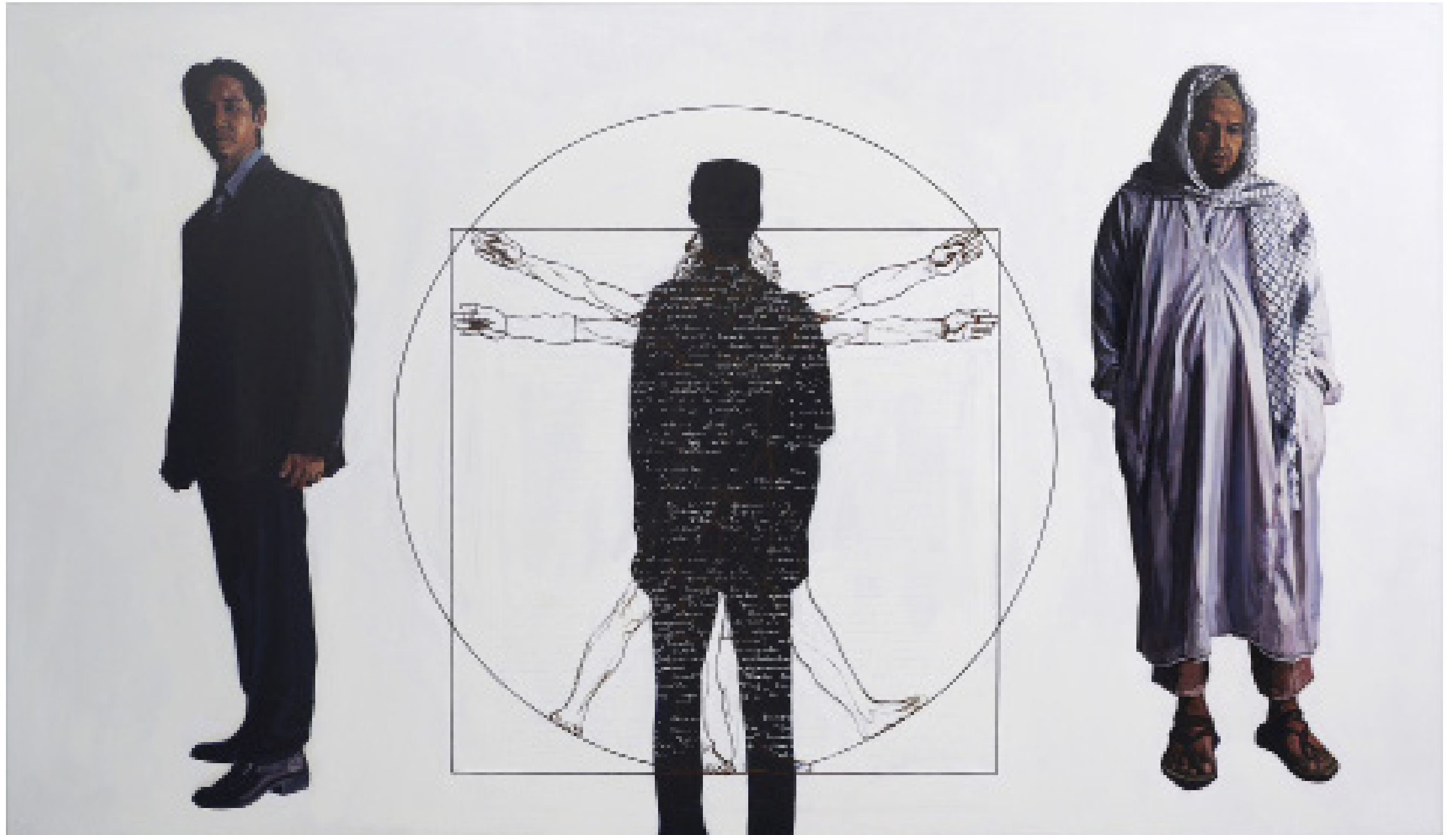


In questioning the truths behind the myths of Malay-Islamic proclivities driving artists away from the figure, the story of the career of Fadli Yusoff deserves special mention. Fadli was a student of Amron's notoriously difficult figurative class at UiTM. So noted for his innate talent and ability, he was one of the only student to ever receive an A-grade from Amron for his realism abilities and meticulous attention to detail. As a devout Muslim, Fadli questioned the position of figurative painting in Islam and for some years, turned his attention away from the human form, focusing instead on landscapes and abstract art. However, his desire to work with the figure remained strong and after reading a book by the United Ulama Council of South Africa, he decided to return to this form of painting in 2007. This return was marked by an intense period of producing large scale paintings that combined his technical skill with deep ruminations, culminating in an important 2013 solo exhibition with Gallery 12. The questions Fadli grappled with have been expressed in a key work from this period, *Stand And Choose Yourself (Museum Piece)* (2010), which is presented in this exhibition. A large scale painting that is actually part of a larger conceptual work, *Stand And Choose Yourself (Museum Piece)* speaks to ideas of choice and informing oneself, as well as the issues faced by Malay-Muslim artists today. As such, it is again a notable artwork in the discussion of Malay-Muslim artists exploring their identity with the use of the figure.

Ali Nurazmal Yusoff
Look at You
Oil on Canvas
182cm x 182cm
2010

Hasnul J Saidon
Hijab Nurbaya Series
Mixed Media on Board
152cm x 122cm
2003





Fadli Yusoff
Stand And Choose Yourself
(Museum Piece)
Acrylic on Canvas
213cm x 366cm
2010

It is not only Malay-Muslim artists who have turned to the figure in expressing their identity, as evidenced by the inclusion of paintings by Tan Chin Kuan, Eng Hwee Chu and Anurendra Jegadeva. Hwee Chu, in particular, is noted for her exceptional figurative skill and repeated inclusion of self-portraits in a series of surreal paintings that act as a narrative of her life and experiences. 2008's *Lost In Mind* features her well known red and white figures alongside strong Chinese figurative iconography, framed by numerous portraits of her children. Colourful, cultural and conceptual, it is a wonderful testament to her depth of thought and level of skills. Anurendra Jegadeva also regularly turns to portraiture in communicating his thoughts. Presented here are a series of twenty black and white portraits based on personal observations of devotees at an Indian temple in Brickfields. Painted in his gestural, cubist style, they come together to form a representation of his local community.



Eng Hwee Chu
Lost in Mind
 Acrylic on Canvas
 133cm x 119cm
 2008



Chan Kok Hooi
The Sour Milk of the Milky Way
 Oil on Canvas
 120cm x 150cm
 2005

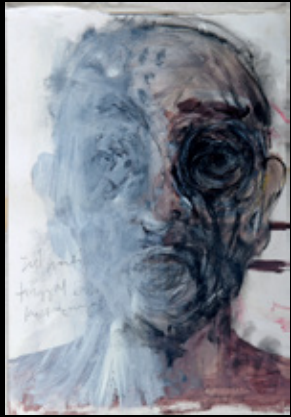
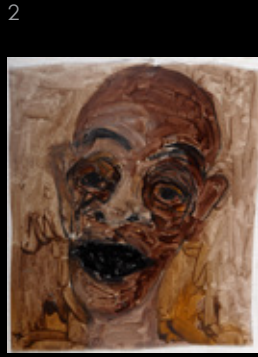


Tan Chin Kuan
American Dream
 Oil on Canvas
 200cm x 140cm
 2001



Anurendra Jegadeva
For the Love of Ghee- Temple Congregation
 Oil on Canvas
 Each piece 39cm x 39cm
 (Set of 20 pieces from a larger installation work)
 2010

Anurendra Jegadeva series of portraits are hung alongside another collection of individual portraits; those by Shooshie Sulaiman. Shooshie is gaining major critical recognition internationally for her immensely concept-driven practice, which often stems from personal narratives in order to comment on larger socio-cultural issues. She is famous for typically producing two types of works: super-sized installation works that fill entire rooms, or smaller gestural drawings of faces, such as the collection exhibited here. Committing to a daily practice of drawing as a way to communicate her thoughts and ideas, points to the artist's dedication to both the formal as well as conceptual aspects of her practice, underlining why she is held in such high regard by critically minded institutions and curators the world over. Having participated in events such as Documenta 12 (2007), the 6th Asia Pacific Triennale (2009) and the 10th Gwangju Biennale (2014), she has spent the better part of 2016 as the artist in residence at Kadist, Paris.



Thus, through the information brought to light by these artworks and this essay, the myth that the figure was absent, sidelined or not developed evaporates, and new questions emerge. Among these are why, despite visual evidence to the contrary and writings such as Hasnul's essay in the *Under-Deconstruction: Contemporary Art In Malaysia After 1990*, Susur Masa: *Timelines* publication, do young writers insist on looking through the lens of the unsubstantiated, postcolonial theories propagated by Piyadasa? We must also recall that Piyadasa declared a "personal need to counter the overt Malay-Islamic ethnocentric proclivities prevalent during that period"¹⁶ (1970's-1980's), yet when we study this period through the works of Malaysian artists as outlined throughout this essay, no overt Malay-Islamic ethnocentricities appear. Why then, is this continued gulf between insecure art writings and artworks appears to be hampering the articulation of a contemporary Malay identity?

These questions take on a tone of urgency when realizing that there appears to be an attempt to undermine artists or writers in the Malaysian art world who tries to look through the lens of Malay culture - decrying it as a negative form of Islamization or a Malay revivalist tendency. When Latiff Mohidin held a solo exhibition at the Edge Galerie in 2015, the accompanying interview with T. K. Sabapathy underlined this tendency with his question "We need to consider the great importance in Malaysia for Malays to show their Muslim identity. You hear of this all the time. An artist must show his/her Muslim-ness. Somebody seeing your work would say: "Ah, Latiff is also wanting to do so"."¹⁷ This question was raised in relation to a handful of calligraphy based pieces in the exhibition, which were a departure from Latiff's usual abstract expressionist styles. It is interesting to observe that Sabapathy immediately reacts to Latiff's inclusion of calligraphy as a new element in his art as a forceful sign of Malay-ness on his audience, yet as one of the eminent writers on Nanyang art, Sabapathy has never appeared bothered by the direct expressions of Chinese identity within the Nanyang movement.

Hasnul says it best in *Susur Masa* with his summarization of the expression of cultural identity through artworks as "geographically and culturally inherent and inscribed by their upbringing, more than by politicized, ideological considerations rooted in the new post-Cultural Congress governmental policies. Malay-ness, as with Chinese-ness or Indian-ness or Iban-ness, will persist regardless of whatever economic and socio-cultural policies a nation can come up with... It has to be respected, if not encouraged."¹⁸ As Hasnul emphasizes, it is the exploration and representation of all facets of culture and identity that form a strong contemporary art identity. Indeed the works presented here at the *Debunking The Myth* exhibition go quite some way in highlighting this point, by bringing together a cross-section of styles, artists and time periods, to show an accurate timeline of the role of the figure in contemporary Malaysian art. This has been made possible by seeking a narrative of our local art movement backed by evidence, of which most importantly are the artworks themselves. It is in this manner that younger writers must continue- that of studying the Malaysian art movement through the correct cultural and historical lens so as to allow for the birth of knowledge, as prescribed by Martinon.

Shooshie Sulaiman

1. *Painting*
Mixed Media on Paper
30cm x 21cm
2005

2. *Muka Lebih Bermanyak 6 (Bibir Lebam)*
Mixed Media on Canvas
31cm x 26cm
2007

3. *Four Elements Series: Yang Merah*
Mixed Media on Canvas
61cm x 51cm
2005

4. *Zul Mati Tinggal Bulu Kucingnya*
Mixed Media on Paper
30cm x 21cm
2005

5. *Muka Lebih Bermanyak 5 (Kalakatu)*
Mixed Media on Canvas
32 x 26cm
2007

6. *Four Elements Series: Yang Bertiuip*
Mixed Media on Canvas
61cm x 51cm
2005

7. *Tahniah Untuk Anim. Ikhlas*
Mixed Media on Paper
30cm x 21cm
2005

8. *Encik Tali bin Barut*
Charcoal on Canvas
61cm x 42cm
2005

9. *Muka Lebih Bermanyak 2 (Kalakatu)*
Mixed Media on Canvas
30cm x 26cm
2007

10. *Kotoran Belum Diselesaikan*
Mixed Media on Paper
30cm x 21cm
2005

11. *After Sulaiman*
Mixed Media on Paper
42cm x 58cm
2005

12. *Muka Lebih Bermanyak 1*
Mixed Media on Canvas
30cm x 26cm
2007

¹⁶Piyadasa, Redza, 2002, Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 148

¹⁷<http://www.theedgegalerie.com/approaching-modern-sculpture/>

¹⁸Saidon, Hasnul J., *Under-Deconstruction: Contemporary Art In Malaysia After 1990*, Susur Masa: *Timelines*, 2008, National Art Gallery, Malaysia, 245

a curated exhibition of figurative paintings



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