

GREAT Malaysia contemporary ART

GMCA II



GREAT MALAYSIA CONTEMPORARY ART GMCA II

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Core Design Gallery Sdn Bhd
Artcube Sdn Bhd

First published in Malaysia in 2014
Core Design Gallery Sdn Bhd
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47500 Selangor, Malaysia

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by Zena Khan

An exhibition that brings together explosively talented and critically acclaimed contemporary Malaysian artists, The Great Malaysian Contemporary Art Show, or GMCA as it is affectionately termed, returns for a second year in Art Expo 2014. As was witnessed in its inaugural 2013 show, the GMCA aims to foster the concept of handpicking artists based on their critical value and showcasing a manner of mediums from painting to installation - thus transcending the limitations of regular local exhibits in both aesthetic and curatorial terms. Not only does the GMCA present works by the most exciting critical contemporary Malaysian artists, it also seeks to provide documentation and context on the art shown, thus creating an environment which allows the Malaysian public to appreciate and connect with the immense local talent.

The GMCA first launched in 2013, with a selection of thirteen artists, exhibited by Core Design Gallery and curated by Farouk Khan. Artcube and Core Design Gallery, two top contemporary Malaysian art galleries, have now joined forces to present the GMCA 2014 - an exhibit worthy of the artists shown. The impact of a super-sized, well-curated space is one that has never been seen before at Art Expo, and it was with this reason in mind that both galleries came together. It must be noted that Artcube and Core Design Gallery have been at the forefront of raising the documentation and representation within contemporary Malaysian art, and their innovative and professional approaches have quickly set new standards within the industry, as is demonstrated by the quality of the GMCA 2014.

Meticulously curated, the GMCA 2014 focuses on contemporary Malaysian artists ranging from established to mid-career to emerging. The exhibition stems from the long-standing vision of collector Farouk Khan who noticed a disparity between commercially successful and critically acclaimed art in Malaysia. Farouk's ability to contextualize art from both a local and international perspective has guided his curating to include those artists who set international level benchmarks within the Malaysian art industry. An example of this phenomenon is artist Susyilawati Sulaiman, who is arguably the most prominent contemporary Malaysian artist on the international art scene today. Famed for her narrative driven works which study constructions of identity from a highly personal starting point, Susyilawati has been extensively exhibited at key international events. These include the prestigious Documenta 12 (2007), Asia-Pacific Triennale in (2009-10), Singapore Biennale (2011), Florence Biennale (2003) and Continuities: Contemporary Art of Malaysia At The Turn of The 21st Century, Guangdong Museum of Art. 2014 brought with it an invitation to show at the Gwangju Biennale from Jessica Morgan, creative director of the biennale. Just as exciting has been Susyilawati's inclusion at Art Basel Unlimited, where she has been described as South East Asia's most important artist - an honour for both the artist herself as well as for Malaysia.

Disparities in critical acclaim and commercial success may be attributed to the fact that critical artists tend to make avant garde art. Working ahead of their time, these pieces appeal to a more developed and sophisticated art palate as opposed to decorative art, which tends to find quick success locally. Casting away the idea of equating art to pretty pictures means the GMCA is a much needed platform in which artists can express themselves and show the types of works which have garnered them international fame. One such example is with the artist Zulkifli Yusoff. Zulkifli is one of the foremost installation artists in the country and has been invited to participate in several important international exhibitions, most notably at the Venice Biennale in 1997. He has also shown at the Biennale of Visual Arts in Seychelles, the Fukoka Asian Art Exhibition in Japan, Immunity 11 show at Art Space, Sydney and the First Asia-Pacific Triennale in Brisbane, Australia. The lack of a local platform has led to Zulkifli exhibiting his key works outside of the country, but the curatorial vision of the GMCA now provides a local arena for his art to be showcased. The 2014 GMCA show will exhibit his latest



large-scale installation, The Green Book. A piece from his series on Tun Abdul Razak's speeches, it covers aspects of economics, politics and society within a Malaysian context.

Similar parallels can be drawn in the careers of Tan Chin Kuan and Eng Hwee Chu. Chin Kuan, an artist whose repertoire encompasses painting, sculpture, performance and installation, is well-known among curators and critics both in Malaysia and abroad. Not only has he displayed at the Gwangju Biennale (1995) and Osaka Triennale (1993 and 2001), he has also had a solo exhibition at the Fukoka Art Museum in Japan and won numerous prizes for his works. Both 1989 and 1990 saw him win the Major Award at the Young Contemporaries, National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur, in 1991 he won the Minor Award at the Salon Malaysia 3 and in 2001 he was presented with the Bronze Prize at the Osaka Triennale. The critical endorsement from his plethora of awards and exhibits has earned Chin Kuan a place in museums such as the Fukoka Art Museum, The Osaka Prefectural Government & Osaka Foundation of Culture in Japan, The Singapore Art Museum and the National Art Gallery Malaysia. Again it is now here at the GMCA that Chin Kuan has found a space to present an artwork which fits in with his ethos of producing shockingly impressive art, to upset complacency and engage viewers in debate. Eng Hwee Chu is the wife of Chin Kuan and impressive in her own right. She is often described as a Malaysian Frida Kahlo for her surreal paintings filled with reflections of herself. Her autobiographical painting practice has earned her several important awards such as the Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards (1994) and Painting Award at Salon Malaysia 3 (1991). Additionally, Hwee Chu has displayed at the Osaka Triennale (2001) and Asia-Pacific Triennale in Brisbane (1996).

Equally exciting are the works of Fauzin Mustafa and Mohd Noor Mahmud. These established artists demonstrate not only thorough understandings of fine art's formalistic tenants but also innate understandings of the framework of Malay cultural identity. Both work in mixed media, demonstrating real flair for building up textural surfaces with the use of materials traditional and non-traditional materials such as cut canvas, batik, acrylic, sand and glue. Hearty helpings of references to symbols such as calligraphy, batik and Malay poetry render them as key players in bringing culture into forums of contemporary discourse and thus they are known as important visual documenters of heritage in a rapidly developing environment.

Blending similar inferences to heritage, society and patriotism with ultra modern materials such as neon lights and razor blades is Suhaimi Fadzir. Pioneer of a new type of assemblage, "archipainting", Suhaimi uses his architectural training to understand spatial structures, assembling reliefs that present typically Malaysian artifacts in wholly current terms. This ability is prized with international curators, who increasingly look for cultural identifiers, and has earned Suhaimi invitations to show at the Dublin Biennale (2012) and Venice Biennale (Architecture) (2010, 2012). Additionally, he has had his works exhibited alongside famed photographer Ansel Adams, and has also shown at the world-renowned Saatchi Gallery.

Art has long had a responsibility to document society's culture, whether through the use of cultural artifacts, as seen in the works of Fauzin and Mohd Noor, or icons to act as metaphors for social and political shifts, as seen in Hamir Soib's epic paintings. Known for his mastery of oil paint, Hamir delights in developing new mediums within his painting focused practice. Of all his experiments, he is possibly best known for his innovations with bitumen, magically transforming the coal tar into a media which he can control with the finesse of paint. Hamir's oversized proportions have captured the attentions of collectors, critics and artists alike; his influence is clearly present in the trend of large works that currently dominates Malaysia's contemporary art scene. Hamir utilises his unparalleled skill and sharp insights to create large-scale socio-political commentary paintings. Having dedicated his career to the analysis of

current events he affords his audience new ways of experiencing the world, resulting in an archive of paintings that have both artistic and social importance.

Hamir is not the only member of the notable Matahati collective to gain fame. Also on display at the GMCA is celebrated mixed media genius Ahmad Shukri, who has won the prestigious Philip Morris Award a stunning three times. Popular for his ability to present typically Malaysian elements in universal tones, Shukri skillfully connects discussions on cultural positions in global societies to his large audience. As a mixed media artist Shukri understands the value of layers, producing pieces heaving with strips of canvas, coatings of print and paint, to construct dynamic visuals. His stress on layering extends to the concepts within his art; Shukri studies the shifting values and attitudes of his quickly developing environment, linking various issues, events and thoughts together to produce art that has real intellectual depth.

Rounding off the Matahati representatives are multi-disciplinary artists Masnoor Ramli and Ahmad Fuad Osman. The increase in complex, multi-cultural societies globally has led to expansions in visual language, thus rendering multi-disciplinary artists as crucial to the progress of contemporary art, both in Malaysia and abroad. Fuad and Masnoor effortlessly translate their deep concepts into reality with the use of paintings, photography, installations and videos, displaying above all else a true reverence for the message in their art. Fuad has based his artistic practice on the ruminations of life, death and what exists in-between. The philosophies that form the cornerstone of Fuad's works coupled with his ability to work across every medium have earned him the prestigious Philip Morris Juror's Choice Award in 200 and 2003, and residencies at the Vermont Studio Centre (2004), Goyang National Art Studio in Korea (2005-2006) and the Rimbun Dahan Residency (2007-2008). Masnoor displays understandings of the human psyche by discussing history and current events through the use of highly identifiable popular imagery. His ability to effortlessly juxtapose modern icons with ancient artifacts, heightened currency of content and technical finesse across all artistic genres single mark him out as a truly contemporary artist. Known to be non-prolific, the ability to view works by both Fuad and Masnoor, especially alongside Hamir and Shukri, is a treat for those fans of contemporary Malaysian art who have an understanding of the industry's history.

Within a secular Islamic society such as Malaysia, calligraphy holds a special place in its art world. At the forefront of contemporary calligraphy there is Husin Hourmain. Having developed a mastery of the most fundamental element of Islamic art, Husin uses calligraphy as an icon to discuss the theme of 'identity' that is a cornerstone of post-colonialist societies such as Malaysia. Skillfully, Husin ruminates on subjects that resonate with society at large, especially the meanings behind personal relationships, being a Malay and being a Muslim. His hyper-detailed, colourful canvases have quickly earned him a large following, which is well-deserved in the wake of his abilities to add new facets to an already dynamic art industry.

Daud Rahim, known for his stunning drawing talents, also turns to ideas of spirituality. Often he mixes these with ultra-modern or macabre images, engaging the curiosities of his contemporary viewer. His skill is easily demonstrated in his use of deceptively difficult 'reverse-technique' colour styles, where he primes his canvas black then works with a myriad of colours to add light, tone and life. Audiences today enjoy visuals in which all is not as it seems, and this characteristic is employed in another manner by the expansive and humorous painter Ali Nurazmal. Comprehending the classical tenants of painting as developed by Renaissance artists, Ali updates the style by depicting scenes of modernity. His perfectly rendered canvases, bursting forth with wit, sarcasm and personality, are as charming as the artist himself.

The GMCA introduces audiences to all genres of fine art, and the plethora would not be complete without the inclusion of ceramic art. Malaysia boasts the foremost contemporary ceramic artist of South East Asia - Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail. Years of dedication to her careful craft have endowed Umibaizurah with a dexterity within her chosen medium, and she utilises her gift to create enchantingly beautiful pieces that invoke desire within viewers. Umibaizurah shares her knowledge and skills with the emerging generation of young artists, and her apprentice Al-Khuzairie Bin Ali takes his place at the GMCA as the torchbearer for a new generation of ceramic artists. Juxtaposing masculine elements such as mechanical forms with the delicacy of porcelain and stoneware, Al-Khuzairie proffers deeply philosophical ruminations in sleek, sculptural forms.

The journey of discovery at the GMCA is enhanced by the inclusion of a wide selection of young artists. The experimental nature of these young artists is now openly displayed collectively in one space, thus showing a cross-section of recent developments within the younger generation. The important role painting plays in contemporary art is evidenced by Fadli Othman's commitment to presenting modern issues in traditionally formalistic aesthetics, bolstered by the easy confidence of his incredible skill. Raja Lope presents large-scale fantastic narratives which merge science-fiction and myths in a finely painted format which viewers easily appreciate. Witnessing new technical developments in the art industry is a key concern for visitors to art fairs, and they will not be disappointed by the boundary pushing experiments of Azad Daniel. Azad has developed a new technique which involves primed cement surfaces covered in auto-paint, and his glossy, pop-art esque results are a delight for sophisticated, urban audiences.

Just as innovative are the pyrographic prints of Haafiz Shahimi. Merging the laws of physics with printmaking, Haafiz adds new twists to the classic medium of print. It is interesting to be able to view his art in the same enclosure as Zulkifli Yusoff, whose use of print in his installations is a cited inspiration for Haafiz. Assemblage artist Azrin Mohd attempts to set new directions within his chosen genre by personally making each element within his works. The use of purpose-built rather than found objects enables the artist to tightly weave his concept and visual together, and so his messages on society, politics and culture are clearly transmitted. Rounding off the young artist selection is the talented and conceptual Annabelle Ng. Annabelle's research-based practice and ability to create strong atmospheres within her installations are indicative of new international directions, and it is a treat for audiences to view an important work by this non-prolific artist here at the GMCA.

It is said that art history today is being written by exhibitions. Indeed, exhibitions now form an important stage on which contemporary art can be articulated and positioned. In providing an alternative to museums, which are highly politicised in Malaysia, the rapid development of the art movement is able to garner an immediate response. Curation from the private sector is key at this time as well, as museums are obliged to highlight and curate largely from their own institutional collections. The GMCA 2014 therefore provides an outlet for the public to view the best of what is out there, decisions substantiated by the merits of critical art as understood on a global scale. By holding the GMCA 2014 at Art Expo the show reaches out to the masses, due to the nation-wide and international reach of this highly successful art fair.

“GMCA introduces audiences to
all genres of fine art”

Installations and Interpretations

Installation art has always been part of the contemporary art landscape in Malaysia. Often site-specific in nature, this genre possesses the ability to challenge viewers by providing an experience that confronts both the intellect as well as the senses. Malaysian installation artists are internationally lauded for their penchant for self-expression through highly varied creative processes, stemming from traditionally formalistic and researched fine art positions.

ZULKIFLI YUSOFF

Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book

Any discussion on installation in contemporary Malaysian art necessitates a thorough examination of Zulkifli Yusoff. Exploding onto the art scene in the 1980s, Zulkifli has the ability to successfully incorporate vivid cultural iconography and symbolism into his internationally lauded artwork. His firmly Malay artistic essence is the result of an exhaustive scholastic approach based on research and the fundamentals of fine art, elements which when combined explain the recognition his powerful portfolio receives both at home and abroad. Looking at history through a contemporary lens has been a favourite subject for the artist to explore, as audiences will note here with his newest installation *Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book*.

By studying Zulkifli's mixed media paintings and installations such as *Asian Voice*, which was shown at Art Stage Singapore and *Believe In God*, exhibited at the 2013 Singapore Biennale, viewers can track the development of the multilayered, monochrome cut canvas strip surfaces which have found great popularity both critically and commercially. Technically, both works are similar to his seminal installation *Pendita*. Thematically, *Asian Voice* looks at the national anthems of South East Asian countries, while *Believe In God*, the first work in the *Rukun Negara* series, speaks of belief in God as resulting from an appreciation of nature. Both however are based on the artist's exhaustive research based pre-production process. *Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book* began with this same academic approach, and was inspired by Zulkifli's readings of speeches by Tun Abdul Razak at the National Archives.

Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book continues Zulkifli's interest in the policies and rhetoric of Tun Razak, Malaysia's second prime minister. This interest has been documented in his production of Zulkifli's *Tun Razak Speeches* series, which includes works such as *Wasiat 1975*, inspired by Tun Razak's last speech broadcast on 31st December 1975 and *Demonstration*, inspired by

Tun Razak's speech in the aftermath of the 1974 student demonstrations.

Tun Razak was a great statesman who implemented several key policies, which have had long-term benefits for the nation, such as the New Economic Policy (NEP). *Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book* draws on another of the late Prime Minister's initiatives for inspiration: The Green Book. Up until the 1970s Malaysia relied heavily on its rubber industry. An international decrease of rubber requirements however led to a depression of rubber prices which set back the economy. Coupled with inflation, rural citizens were badly affected. Tun Razak understood the need to create new economic avenues within the country, and to this end The Green Book, an agricultural initiative, was conceived. The Green Book had a dual aim of aiding those in rural environments, who had been affected by the depression of rubber prices and inflation, as well as lessening the country's dependence on international commodity markets. Implemented in 1974, it aimed to make Malaysia self-sufficient agriculturally through subsidies and encouraging farmers to increase their output.

The Green Book emphasised using land to its fullest capacities, with short-term crops, clustered agricultures, livestock breeding and freshwater fish conservation plans. Additionally, certain vegetables, such as corn, long beans and chillies, and livestock, such as cattle and poultry, and fish were especially promoted. Zulkifli represents this on the surfaces of his installation, where he collages on monotone images of the agricultural produce emphasized within The Green Book. These images were created on canvas, with the thick black strokes that is consistent with Zulkifli's mark making, before being neatly cut out and pasted on the installation's base. Layering these images in neat grids alongside each other emphasises the order and structures outlined within the initiative when Tun Razak unveiled it on December 20th 1974. Technically this style of collaging represents a new movement from the artist, forward from

the collaging style he developed over the last few years, beginning with *Pendita*. Previously, Zulkifli added imagery over his cut canvas strips. Now in *Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book* he begins by painting his canvas a dove grey, interspersed with large circles of deep green representing agricultural landscapes in rural Malaysia. The images are then pasted directly onto the painted surface, before being overlaid with cut canvas strips, creating interplay of negative and positive spaces in new directions. The overall tone moves away from his recent style of working in black and white and adding colour through resin, by beginning with the painted colour fields. This sequence of painting, collaging figurative images and then adding linear canvas strips is continued from the panels, which make up the 'walls' of the installation to the large shapes in its centre. Zulkifli stylises agricultural produce and tools to create large sculptural shapes from fibreglass, which are arranged in freestanding compositions in the center of *Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book*. Covering them in the same process creates a natural linkage between all elements of the installation, and allows the viewers' gaze to easily flow across the large-scale work.

Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book is an example of Zulkifli's fascination with the impact historical texts expound on both cultural memory as well as contemporary understandings of society and individuals on themselves. Excitingly, the artist unveils the beginnings of new aesthetic directions in *Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book*, building on past experiences to further his explorations of the formal tenets of art creation. Equally as exciting for those who avidly follow Zulkifli's career is the opportunity to view one of his installations, which is the genre he has gathered acclaim for at important international events such as the Venice Biennale. A turning point work for the artist, resulting from the academic pre-production process prized by critical contemporary art, *Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book* is a stunning visual explanation for the adoration Zulkifli receives from critics, curators and collectors alike.

“Looking at history through a contemporary lens has been a favourite subject for Zulkifli to explore, as audiences will note here with his newest installation *Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book*.”

Zulkifli Yusoff
Tun Razak Speech Series - The Green Book
Installation - Resin and Collaged
Typographical Canvas Stripes
with Printing and Painting
300cm (h) x 500cm (w) x 500cm (d)
2014





“This sequence of painting, collaging figurative images and then adding linear canvas strips is continued from the panels, which make up the ‘walls’ of the installation to the large shapes...

Zulkifli stylises agricultural produce and tools to create large sculptural shapes from fibreglass, which are arranged in freestanding compositions in the center.”

SUHAIMI FADZIR



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Suhaimi Fadzir

Warung Kita: Teh Tarik dan Nasi Lemak

Mixed Media

220cm x 242cm x 70cm

2013-14

Warung Kita: Teh Tarik dan Nasi Lemak (Duality) is a 2014 mixed media work by eminent artist Suhaimi Fadzir. A colourful large-scale piece over two linked canvases, it continues the exploration of the boundary between two- and three-dimensional art and assemblage that Suhaimi has dedicated his career to.

Suhaimi has spent the last phase of his career working on a major series, *Merdeka*, in which he explored the themes of nationalism, the Malaysian constitution and social contract as well as political issues. The serious nature of *Merdeka*'s concept consumed Suhaimi, who looked to subsequently move on to a lighter concept, starting with the idea of creating a series of works to act as a visual journal of his experiences and observations as he lives and works between Malaysia and America. The duality of his life and studio practice is hinted at in the title, and indeed *Warung Kita: Teh Tarik dan Nasi Lemak (Duality)* attempts to highlight the laws of duality that the artist observes governing life. Suhaimi equates duality with balance, as exemplified by yin and yang, night and day or male and female, thus concluding duality to be an essential pillar for maintaining harmony.

"Warung Kita" translates to "Our Stall", and is an apt phrase for this work, which observes the daily routines of Malaysians, centered on the hawker stalls dotted across the country. Malaysia has a strong food culture that acts as a unifying force across all the ages, races and religions inherently present in a naturally multi-cultural society. At a time when conversations on race politics have arisen, particularly during the lead up to 2013's General Election, *Warung Kita: Teh Tarik dan Nasi Lemak (Duality)* is an apt reminder of the common grounds that exist between all Malaysians. An intricately layered mixed-media work, it captures a snapshot of a typical day at any Malaysian

Warung Kita: Teh Tarik dan Nasi Lemak

"Warung Kita" translates to 'Our Stall', and is an apt phrase for this work, which observes the daily routines of Malaysians, centered on the hawker stalls dotted across the country."

hawker stall, with the layers of colour, objects and imagery representing the multitude of customers and conversations that appear therein.

Warung Kita: Teh Tarik dan Nasi Lemak (Duality) itself is comprised of two canvases, whose backgrounds are overlaid with mixed media prints and paint, bridged by a large canary yellow wheelbarrow. On each canvas are three-dimensional found objects, such as Coca-Cola crates and steel woks, linking the works visually to the stall scene inspiration. The work is carefully composed, with bright yellow elements originating at the top of the canvas on the left and ending at the base of the canvas on the right, thus expertly guiding the viewer through the visual narrative. Juxtaposing sleek metal and block coloured three-dimensional elements against a highly patterned wallpaper-like base creates a visual tension that immediately attracts viewers, demonstrating Suhaimi's innate understanding of not only concepts that are relevant to his audience, but also the ability to produce a highly current and engaging aesthetic.

Suhaimi is well known for his distinct style dubbed 'archipainting'. Archipainting is defined as a blending of fine art principles with the structural and spatial intricacies of architecture to create paintings, and is a progression from Suhaimi's interests in assemblage art. The usage of found objects provides immediate visual clues for the audience, thus allowing them to quickly connect to the thought process which led to the creation of *Warung Kita: Teh Tarik dan Nasi Lemak (Duality)*. An energetic and colourful piece, it fulfills his desire to create a type of visual journal in order to in order to communicate his professional and personal journey, thus allowing for a direct connection between the art, audience and artist himself.

TAN CHIN KUAN

Rainy Night, Lonely Night

Rainy Night, Lonely Night is a 2014 installation by Tan Chin Kuan. It forms part of his latest series, *Rainy Day*, which was unveiled at the GMCA 2013 with the self-titled painting *Rainy Day*. Measuring nine by five by fifteen feet, this mixed media work draws on Chin Kuan's technical and conceptual abilities to create what he terms as "Shock Art" in order to stir powerful responses within his audience.

Chin Kuan is celebrated for his ability to combine aspiration, tone, form and concept to create strongly atmospheric visuals, which establish dialogue on serious issues pertaining to society. Although he works across all mediums, he is best known for his seminal paintings and installations which have earned him several awards such as the 1989 and 1990 Major Awards for Young Contemporaries at the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur and the Minor Awards for painting and sculpture at the 1991 Salon Malaysia. Chin Kuan has shown internationally at the 1995 Kwang Ju Biennale, Osaka Triennale in 1993 and 2001 and has had a solo exhibition at the Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan. The Fukuoka Art Museum is not the only institution to collect Chin Kuan's works; his works can also be found in the collections of the Osaka Prefectural Government, Osaka Foundation of Culture, Singapore Art Museum, the National Visual Arts Gallery of Malaysia and the Aliya & Farouk Khan Collection.

Integral to the transmission of Chin Kuan's concept in *Rainy Night, Lonely Night* is the artist's ability to set the mood of the work. This is achieved mainly via his heavily worked painted background of five canvases. The artist compares the canvases in *Rainy Night, Lonely Night* to a theatre backdrop, in that their function is to set a scene for the characters which appear at the front. Over the central canvas, Chin Kuan creates an optical illusion, casting a surreal tone all over *Rainy Night, Lonely Night*. Now the foreground of the canvas appears imaginary, with all clear definitions confined to the background. The perfect perspective of the architectural background adds to the contrast between dream-like and reality. The subtlety with which Chin Kuan creates tension through the visual tools of perspective, realism and abstraction speak about his ability to effortlessly harness his skills to efficiently transmit the socio-political messages he is famous for. Despite setting a calm tone on the surface in *Rainy Night, Lonely Night*, the mood Chin Kuan infuses into the installation is a strongly emotional one, arising from the impactful issues the artist chooses to discuss.

Chin Kuan's main directive with *Rainy Night, Lonely Night* is a discussion of his views on contemporary Malaysian society. As the artist sees it, there are several issues besetting the country, from politics to inflation to social welfare. Pointing to the discord between inflation and stagnant salaries as an example, he comments on his position that the everyday man feels lonely and at a loss, unsure of where to turn for help. The everyday man is represented by the crowd of people gathered in the central canvas, all of whom wear masks, thus obscuring their identities. This element of facelessness corresponds to the artist's observation that society today forces people to choose camps, politically and socially. There is no room for the individual anymore – those who refuse to join a group are ostracised. The three-dimensional foreground of the installation emphasises this with its clear distinction between left and right, resulting in two separate sections which act as visual metaphors for groups within society.

To the top right of the central canvas, viewers will spy the most important of symbols within *Rainy Night, Lonely Night* – a horse. Chin Kuan, who was born in the Chinese lunar year of the horse, is famous for cameos in his works in the guise of a horse, often using the animal to describe his feelings and reactions in relation to his environment. Here the horse is shown to be locked in what viewers can imagine is a tight room, with only a small window for the horse to peer out of at the people below. Left alone with no space to leave or ride freely, it allegorically represents Chin Kuan's current vision of being confined within the precincts of society. He comments on the struggles of striving for artistic and personal breakthroughs within the enclosures of his environment.

Despite Chin Kuan's sombre narrative, there is an element of hope radiating from the canvas, illustrated by the lights which illuminate the mass of people upon which the horse gazes. The first step towards making a breakthrough is the comprehension of one's situation, which the artist wholly demonstrates through his vivid imagery of heavy rainfall and strong symbolism. His ability to arrest his audience's attention through the strength of his perfectly executed atmospheric installation bears testament to the technical and conceptual skills which mark him out as an important socio-political commentator in the contemporary Malaysian art industry.

“The subtlety with which Chin Kuan creates tension through the visual tools of perspective, realism and abstraction speak about his ability to effortlessly harness his skills to efficiently transmit the socio-political messages he is famous for.”

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Tan Chin Kuan
Rainy Night, Lonely Night
267cm x 405cm x 140cm
Mixed Media
2014



“The artist views her illustrative aspects as a tool to aid her primary concern, and while she understands that implying time in a static work can be achieved in a number of ways, the use of a sequential series of images that capture several moments in time, is her symbolic representation of choice.”

Young female artist Annabelle Ng enjoys combining ideas of memory, experience, the familiar and the unfamiliar in the creation of her often-melancholic art. Her latest installation, *The Notation*, is no exception. Inspired by personal memories, Annabelle uses her creative practice to track the connections between the tangible and intangible in this mixed media work which is comprised of metal, Perspex, wood, prints and drawings.

The Notation is based primarily on the notation of time as it passes by. Annabelle sees time as relevant to all life, with each living organism being granted a pre-ordained time frame. Understanding her own collection of memories and experiences as a way to mark the passage of her allotted time, Annabelle began her pre-production process through a poetic reflection on the aforesaid memories. This introspective approach is a common characteristic in female artists, who often use themselves as a starting-point in their narrative approach. Annabelle has a fascination with documenting her surroundings and involvements through photography, leading to a well-recorded image bank of her experiences.

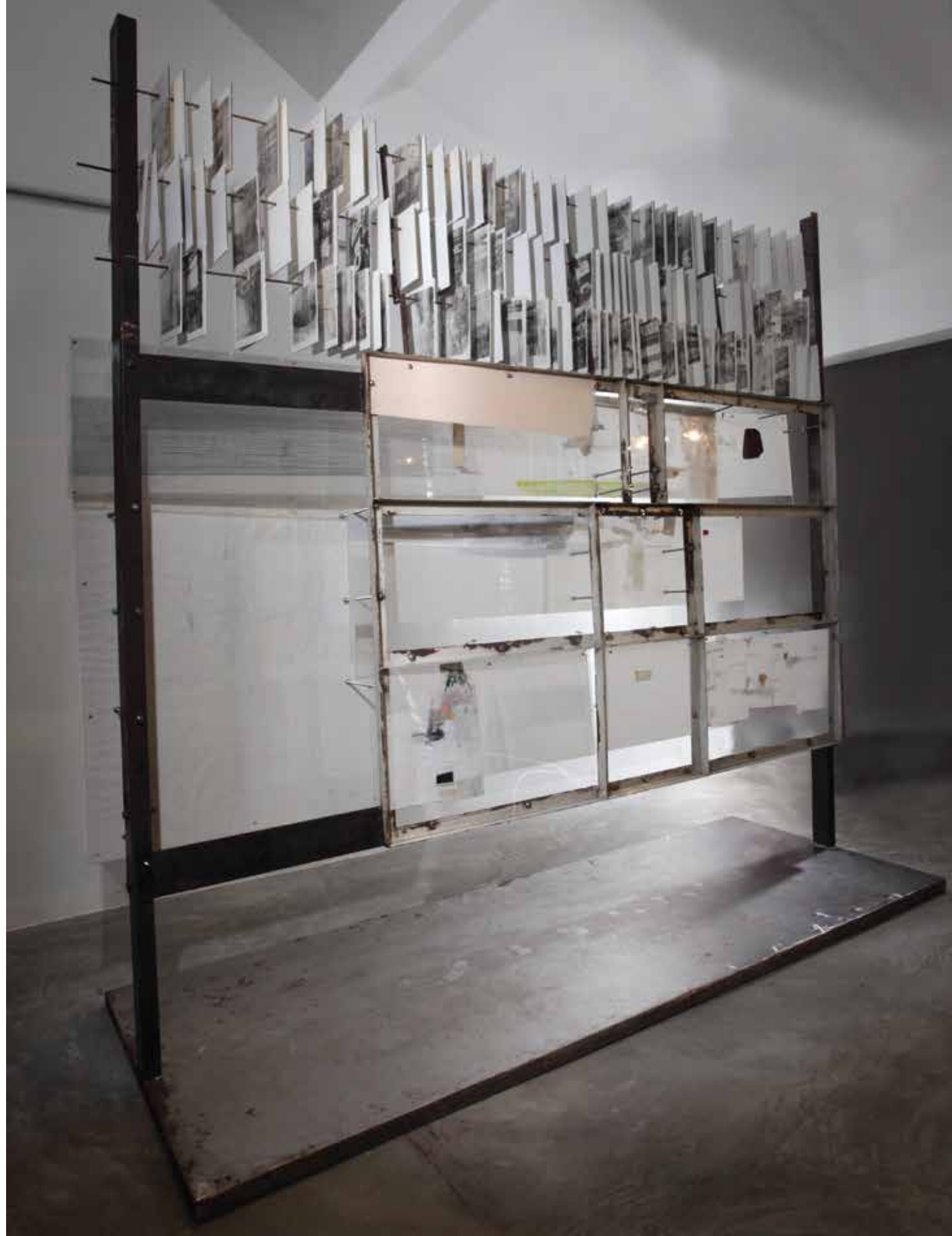
The Notation provides evidence of passing of time through the actions of the artist. By printing images from her stockpile onto rice paper and then threading them through three metal rods at the top of the installation, Annabelle infuses a snapshot of history onto each sheet. Lined up in three rows with one stacked on top of another, the photographic prints are mostly architectural in nature. Generally of doors and windows, they mark physical spaces the artist has either inhabited or passed through. As such, she examines her relationship with the physical space she occupies, and the way she uses her pre-ordained time. The grainy black-and-white quality of her prints renders them slightly ambiguous, much like memories, which at times are hard to perfectly recall. The translucency of the rice paper prints

mirror the clear Perspex sheets forming the lower half of *The Notation*. Some of these Perspex sheets have pieces of rice paper with faintly illustrated minimal drawings on them. Layering the Perspex sheets asymmetrically in front of each other, she forms a visual metaphor for the layers of experiences and memories noting the formation of time. These drawings are different not only in medium but also in content; they record the activities of Annabelle's present, as opposed to the prints, which speak of her past.

Contemporary artists enjoy exploring the concept of how their audience experiences their art, by means of encouraging the viewers to become aware of their process of experiencing a piece or inviting them to participate in the artwork itself. By placing *The Notation* in a freestanding position on a stand, Annabelle removes the notion of a front view or a back view. As the viewer encircles the installation, Annabelle's thoughts and subconscious are projected onto the viewer, and they are invited to enter the reflective facets of her personality.

For Annabelle, the careful composition of her prints, drawings and assemblage elements are the main focus within *The Notation*. The artist views her illustrative aspects as a tool to aid her primary concern, and while she understands that implying time in a static work can be achieved in a number of ways, the use of a sequential series of images that capture several moments in time, is her symbolic representation of choice. Although the images appear neutral and flat in their linear manner, they present a highly detailed account of the artist, recording details of her past, present and personality. In this way, *The Notation* provides audiences with deeply personal information on Annabelle, establishing an intimate connection that creates a natural interest in the works that are yet to come from this highly conceptual and instinctive artist.

Annabelle Ng
The Notation
Mixed Media
234cm x 239cm x 92cm
2014



Paintings and Expressions

Contemporary Malaysian artists have a talent for exploring the boundaries of painting to represent the expanding social, political and cultural realms of society. In doing so they create current historical narratives, easily engaging audiences in the development of contemporary Malaysian culture through beautiful and enchanting visuals. The medium's development is evident in the range of works presented at the GMCA, and in a wider context is reflective of the elements that continue to shape Malaysia's rapid progression.

HAMIR SOIB

Hamir Soib is widely regarded as one of the most eminent socio-political painters of Malaysia, and for good reason. Works such as *Sepat O Sepat*, *Auctionland* and *Wet Cat* are quick, witty observations of events within the rapidly evolving social landscapes of our time. Often large in scale, these paintings are crucial for Malaysia in terms of both art history as well as social history, particularly given the penchant for visual traditions over literary, locally. Hamir has an innate ability to inspire, provoke and mobilise society with his painting-based practice, often using animals as allegories, as audiences will note once again in the beautifully painted *Hot Seat*, whose main body is filled with the depiction of a larger-than-life golden horse armour, set against a starry blue background.

Following on from his last painting, *Wet Cat*, which discussed the political situation in Thailand following 2014's coup d'état, *Hot Seat* turns Hamir's critical analytical skills to Malaysian politics. As such, audiences are reminded of the artist's position as an insightful participant in Southeast Asia's political discourse. Malaysia finds herself in an interesting position today, as the world's superpowers fight for supremacy, given the country's links with America, China and Russia. Recent events such as America's pivot to Asia, the war in Gaza and the Russian and Ukrainian crisis are indicators of the superpower struggle, and each nation needs to strengthen its diplomatic ties with strategic countries internationally. Malaysia is often described as a pivotal state in this battle. On the home front, the country is dealing with the unprecedented event of two tragic aviation disasters within a space of four months, MH 370 and MH 17. Often, both local struggles and superpower manoeuvring, as seen in 2014, leads to external and internal forces provoking unrest, which can lead to colour-coded revolutions as in Thailand and Ukraine. Hamir understands the key to surmounting these problems and making the choices that will lead the country to greatness lies with the leader. He likens the country to a horse, in need of steering from a powerful rider. The artist's patriotism is evident in the perfectly painted golden armour as a tool to describe Malaysia as a nation literally made of gold, with abundant natural resources and a strategic geographical position that has led to courting from powerful global countries. Additionally, the armour harks back to tales of brave knights such as the Knights of the Round Table, who bravely fought for the good of their country and King, speaking to the need of the person who leads the horse to always keep the interests of the nation above all else. Conversely, the richness of Malaysia turns the Prime Minister's position into a most desirable one, a "hot seat" if you will. It is the Prime Minister who makes all the major decisions on governance, diplomacy and economics, and chooses

the cabinet members and chief ministers who act as a crucial supporting cast. As such, the fates of thirty million people lie in his hands. Viewers will note the bright red seat in the centre of the work is twisted in its perspective. Hamir imagines the seat as literally hot, causing it to twist and warp in the heat. Lending some humour to the seriousness of *Hot Seat*, this detail is a delightful insight for audiences into the engaging personality of such an eminent artist.

While the mediums of acrylic and bitumen are favoured by the artist, the colours in *Hot Seat* are unusual for Hamir, particularly the fire engine red of the central element. Each was chosen to speak specifically about the points being raised. Gold likens the position of Malaysia to a precious jewel, while red speaks about heat and desirability. Experimental elements from 2013's seminal work *Auctionland* can be seen in *Hot Seat*, for example in the use of blue instead of regular brown bitumen. Depicting the bitumen painted background as a cloudy, starry night adds a dream-like quality to the piece and shows Hamir's mastery over the notoriously difficult medium. His technical genius is apparent throughout the meticulous layering of the work, leaving the viewer with the sensation of gazing at a constellation of stars in the night sky. His effortless mastery of layering is evident again in the landscape hidden along the length of the armour. Viewers will note not only the reflection of a cityscape, but also their own shadow as they stand in front of the piece. As such, the idea of the individual's participation in selecting the correct leader for the country is underscored. Again, this is an element observed in *Auctionland*, and this trait is highly demonstrative of the layering skills that mark Hamir out as one of the strongest painters working today.

Artists are considered central to cultural, political and social discourse, particularly in contemporary societies. The ability to witness an event, understand its implications and produce an immediate response mark contemporary artists as the visual reporters of our time. Socio-political art in particular has been an important part of the visual landscape for centuries, a way to challenge authority and rethink social conventions. In this way, contemporary artists encourage reflection and analysis, thus promoting intellectualism within society, as can be seen in *Hot Seat*. It must be further noted that it is Hamir's wondrous technical skills that afford him the ability to create imagery that effortlessly connects to his audience, thus allowing for the transmission of his powerful messages. Continuing the central role he plays in the cultural, social and political discourse of Malaysia, Hamir's position as a favourite in the contemporary Malaysian art industry seems confirmed with *Hot Seat*.

Hot Seat

“Depicting the bitumen painted background as a cloudy, starry night adds a dream-like quality to the piece and shows Hamir's mastery over the notoriously difficult medium.”

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Hamir Soib

Hot Seat

Acrylic & Bitumen on Jute

202cm x 342cm

2014



“Perspective is key in convincing audiences what they see is “real” and Ali’s confidence in performing technical experiments from a tricky angle is a display of the self-confidence that radiates from his canvases.”

The Glint is a new painting by the popular contemporary painter Ali Nurazmal Yusoff. At six feet by five feet, this monochromatic oil on canvas piece is a wonderful mix of expressionism and realism, demonstrating the artist’s technical mastery, while opening up new directions within his portfolio.

Ali is well known for his immaculately rendered realism style of painting, with works such as *Imitation Master: After Caravaggio*. He has experimented just as enthusiastically with an expressionist style, as can be noted in early works such as *Konflik - Which One #1 #2 #3*. These earlier canvases leaned towards abstraction, and showed the beginnings of the wavy lines audiences will note dominating *The Glint*. Ali then turned his attention back towards his now-signature style of realism, occasionally dabbling with a mix of abstraction in the process. *Entertainer In Love* showed a clown, an oft-used icon for Ali, who lay back in a bed that radiated wavy lines out in all directions. The idea of using undulating strokes to interpret form was thus born, representing a polar opposite to the Renaissance-esque realism the artist was easily perfecting. The pinnacle of these early experiments is embodied in *Infernal Affair*. At first glance, the entire canvas appears to be a red sea of rippling strokes; however standing back, audiences are able to detect the traces of a face filling up the entire canvas. *The Glint* pushes this technical concept forward, with an easily recognisable form created from a series of monochromatic waves.

Ali’s choice to use a smoking self-portrait is a mark of the experimental nature of the work. The artist is known to use his self-portraits as a control image while perfecting new techniques, and viewers well-versed in his career will remember his highly popular earlier smoking self-portraits, such as *Supplier*. Much like *Supplier*, the angle in *The Glint* is tricky; Ali paints his face from a perspective of looking up

at the face, including the tips of his fingers at the bottom edge of the canvas. Perspective is key in convincing audiences what they see is “real” and Ali’s confidence in performing technical experiments from a tricky angle is a display of the self-confidence that radiates from his canvases.

Another new feature in *The Glint* is the monochromatic palette. Ali’s works are usually associated with the colours red and green, yet here audiences will note the dominant shades of grey, highlighted with touches of white and black. Ali’s mastery of realism painting is due not only to his ease with rendering perspectives but also his expert grasp of colour theories and their applications. His expertise in chiaroscuro techniques, the portrayal of light and dark, is a major benefit to a monochromatic expression, as he innately understands the gradations necessary within shades of grey in order to produce the subtleties required for realism. The black and grey tones are a result of layering several colours together, thus producing an unusual amount of depth and atmosphere. Ali’s foray into monotones indicates several new key developments. Serious painters require an almost scientific understanding on the properties and behaviours of colour. By producing black and grey from a series of brighter tones, the artist develops a truly intimate understanding on hues and shades, and is able to push them to their boundaries.

In the past, Ali has described his finished works as a series of studies that he hopes will lead him to an eventual “ultimate painting”. The mix of experimental mark making and new directions with colour in one of the artist’s most sought styles of a smoking self-portrait indicates to viewers that he is definitely on the right track. *The Glint* represents a turning point in Ali’s career, setting the stage for exciting new movements for this popular artist.

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Ali Nurazmal Yusoff
The Glint
184cm x 168cm
Oil on Canvas
2014



MASNOOR RAMLI

Moulding the History: The Eye That Blink Our Mind is a 2014 acrylic on canvas by quietly contemplative contemporary painter Masnoor Ramli. Forming part of his new series *Moulding The History*, it is the first piece created after his 2014 solo exhibition *Aviation*, and fittingly combines the major themes of global politics and economic power, which the artist constantly ruminates on, with the minor theme of MH370, which has occupied Masnoor's mind for most of 2014.

Most of the canvas in *Moulding the History: The Eye That Blink Our Mind* is comprised of a seascape. Either side of the canvas is lined with a figure: to the left, the artist has painted the current Chinese premier Xi Jinping, while to the right is the American president Barrack Obama. As in the first work from *Moulding The History*, Obama is pictured from the back. Masnoor relies on his subject's popularity as a pop icon of the twenty-first century to render the American president as instantly recognisable. The ease with which viewers are able to identify a faceless Obama speaks to the dominance of American culture and media in today's global societies, hinting at the control America exerts over most of the globe. As Obama stares out into the ocean, Xi Jinping turns to him as if in conversation. It is as if the artist does not state the conversation between the two politicians, but rather opens it up for his audience to interpret. In this way, the artist asks the public to connect their understandings on current events to his work, and can be seen as encouraging discourse on socio-political affairs throughout society.

The layout and colour palette of *Moulding the History: The Eye That Blink Our Mind* has purposefully been kept simple, so as not to detract from the complexity of the issues being discussed. Masnoor's use of Obama and Xi Jinping stems from his thoughts on the struggle for economic and strategic controls by the world's superpower nations. China is experiencing incredibly rapid growth as a global force, mostly due to the indisputable fact the country looks set to become the world's largest economy. America, which has been the dominant world superpower since the end of World War II, is having a natural reaction to this, and is attempting to gain strongholds within the Asian region to temper China's power. This has led to the strong interest in Southeast Asia from America, as evidenced by Obama's 2014 state visit where he described Malaysia as a pivotal state for America's efforts to solidify its position

regionally. Despite painting international politicians, the effect their actions currently have on Malaysia roots the works as staunchly local in content. Through the ambiguity of the discussion hinted at between Obama and Xi Jinping, Masnoor further highlights the secrets within political discussions and agreements, not all of which are released to the public.

Linking theories of secrets of state to the theories behind the MH370 aviation tragedy, Masnoor emphasizes that these discussions have an impact on far more than just economic matters. The stormy, grey seascape stretching across the canvas, coupled with Obama's stance as staring out at the expanse, underline the vastness of the search and rescue areas for MH370. Several theories have emerged in relation to the cause of the flight's disappearance, and its eventual fate, yet there is still a lack of concrete evidence. Originally chronicling the speculation and conspiracy theories behind MH370 in the painting *Moulding The History: Grey Area in a Grey Sky*, Masnoor now questions if there is truth behind the thoughts of the conspiracies, especially as several seem to stem from information of military personnel. Masnoor has an affinity for theories, which he sees as different from speculation; as they are based on facts and finds, often they add to the information or ideas he has on a current event. Today, secrecy seems to shroud mainstream media; internationally this has led to the public placing increasing amounts of faith in theories. Accordingly, the public has begun to rely heavily on alternative news sources for information in order to determine individual perceptions on events and their outcomes; so as to avoid the influence of a single media whose bias increasingly seems influenced by those in positions of power.

An expected responsibility of contemporary visual art is to respond to international socio-political questions. Incorporating key symbols and compositions to chronicle the state of twenty-first century society, Masnoor revisits a favourite theme on the impact of a borderless world on local culture with *Moulding the History: The Eye That Blink Our Mind*. The first painting after his long awaited solo *Aviation*, *Moulding the History: The Eye That Blink Our Mind* can be seen as a classic Masnoor Ramli work, bolstered by the beauty of its highly atmospheric, almost exclusively grey-toned aesthetic.

Moulding the History - The Eye that Blink our Mind

“Masnoor's use of Obama and Xi Jinping stems from his thoughts on the struggle for economic and strategic controls by the world's superpower nations.”

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Masnoor Ramli Mahmud
Moulding the History -
The Eye that Blink Our Mind
172cm x 310cm
Acrylic On Canvas
2014



The Cube is a 2014 painting by distinguished contemporary artist Husin Hourmain, who is garnering great acclaim for his progressive calligraphic works. Inspired by the Hajj pilgrimage which Muslims must undertake, the surface of the canvas is covered in Husin's signature hyper-detailed calligraphic style with numerous tiny Arabic alphabets to denote ideas of form and space.

An Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, the Hajj constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam. It is a duty that must be carried out by every able-bodied Muslim at least once in their life. This act demonstrates the solidarity of the Muslims to each other and to their faith. For these Muslims, the most sacred site in Mecca is the Kabah, and much of the rites and devotion centers around this ancient cloth-covered brick building. The Kabah is considered the center of the Islamic world, and as such has been placed at the center of *The Cube*. Viewers will note the square representing the Kabah is not aligned with the canvas' edges; instead it has been tilted. This is in accordance with the structure's actual position from an aerial view, in relation to the geographical position of the mountains Safah and Marwah. While the two mounts are not physically shown in *The Cube* they are thus acknowledged, recognizing their key role in Islamic history and in the rituals of Hajj.

Every year, millions of Muslims gather to perform this pilgrimage, constituting the largest gathering of Muslims in any one place. Husin denotes the devotees in the act of circling the Kabah, which is known as Tawaaf, with innumerable Arabic letters. Layered one over another, these letters weave together to form different names, signifying the endless stream of people who have been performing the Hajj annually for centuries. The use of calligraphy to represent a form through an idea is typically Husin, as can be seen in the works from his hugely successful solo Awal Hurouf Asal Hurouf, where he brought together several characters to form a larger character. This idea now progresses in *The Cube* to an aerial image of pilgrims encircling the Kabah, and to describe the

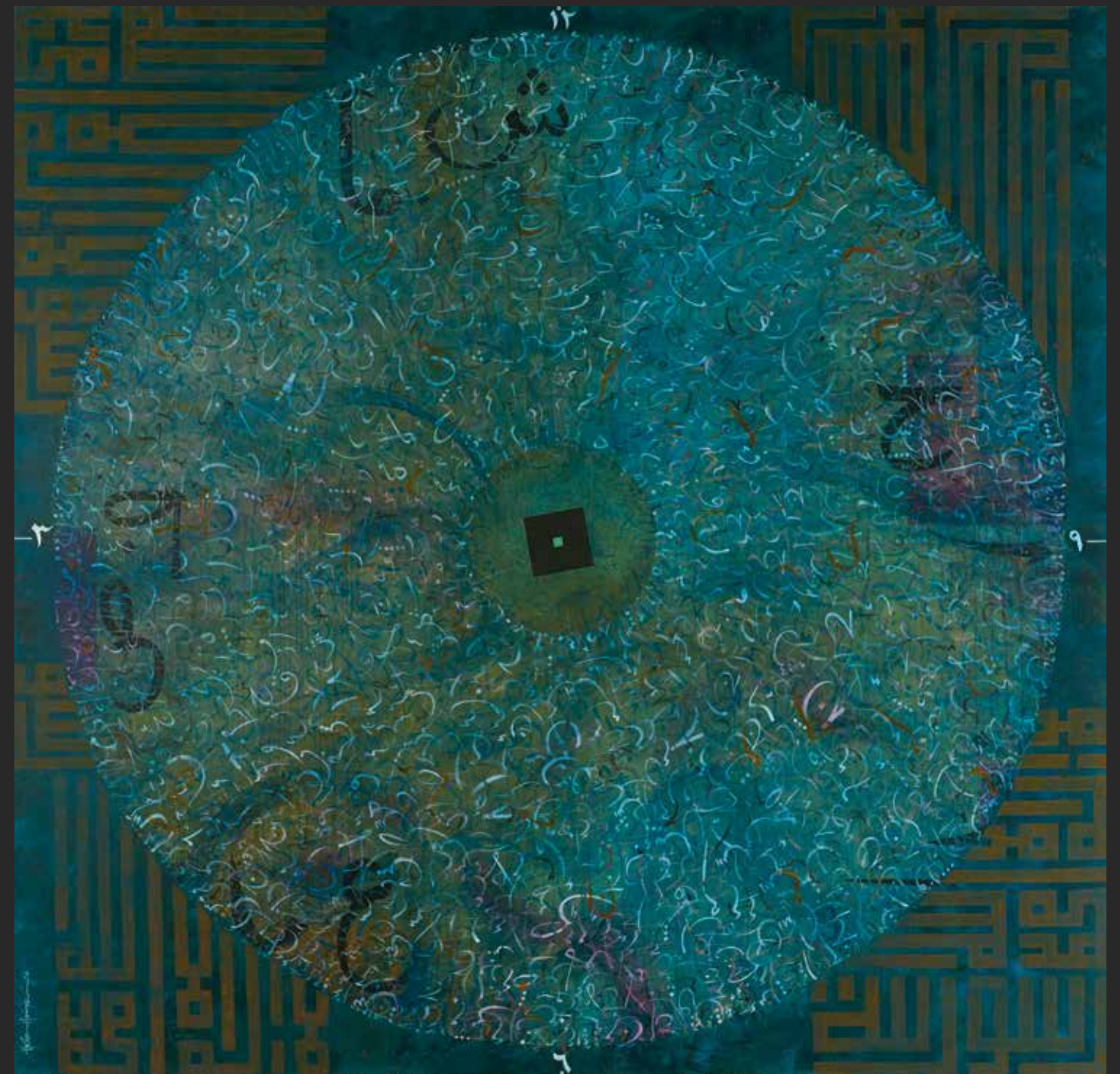
resultant swirling movement. The use of calligraphy pays homage not only to Husin's reputation as Malaysia's most popular calligraphy painter, but also to the Surah Al-Bakrah, which acted as a trigger for the artist. On a pilgrimage to Mecca in 2013, Husin as a deeply devout Muslim, felt his connection to Allah was strongest at the historical and holy site. This spurred him on to study the Hajj both anthropologically as well as within its Islamic context. In Surah Al-Bakrah, he came across the command from Allah to Mohammed for the Muslims to turn the kibat from its original point, Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, to the Kabah. This sparked the artist's fascination with the Kabah itself, and the history and endless devotion it signifies.

The five pillars of Islam, of which the Hajj is one, are basic mandatory acts by which all Muslims are bound. The other four are Shahadhah, declaring the oneness of Allah and accepting Mohammed (S.A.W) as the last prophet; Salat, praying five times a day; Zakaat, giving charity and Sawm, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. No one of these pillars can be seen as more important than another, and together they form the basis of a good Muslim life. Husin acknowledges the equal weight Muslims need to ascribe to each of the pillars by adding a representation of each along the edges of *The Cube* in the form of colored squares and Arabic lettering.

Husin views his art as an extension of his consciousness, and thus the works he creates stem from issues close to his heart. Especially conscious of his religious obligations, it naturally follows that a large portion of his career has been devoted to understanding Islam and its teachings through his art. Ruminating on the act of Hajj, the artist unravels the rituals connecting all Muslims in their faith, despite differences in culture, race or language that might otherwise exist. In the moderate Islamic society of Malaysia, Husin's lead in the field of contemporary calligraphy marks him out as a key artist, as is highlighted by the prodigious content and technique demonstrated in his painting.

"Husin denotes the devotees in the act of circling the Kabah, which is known as Tawaaf, with innumerable Arabic letters."

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Husin Hourmain
The Cube
239cm x 234cm
Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas
2014



“Despite re-embracing figurative painting in 2007, *Monabukelisa* is an indication of Fadli’s continued reservations of working in the realism genre, and the inner turmoil that exists between his talent and his conscience.”

Monabukelisa is a 2014 painting by the acclaimed contemporary realist painter Fadli Yusoff. Measuring five feet by six feet, it is a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* painting by Leonardo Da Vinci in the artist’s signature style. Fadli uses the iconic image as a basis to explore his own limits within figurative art, a subject he has ruminated on throughout his career.

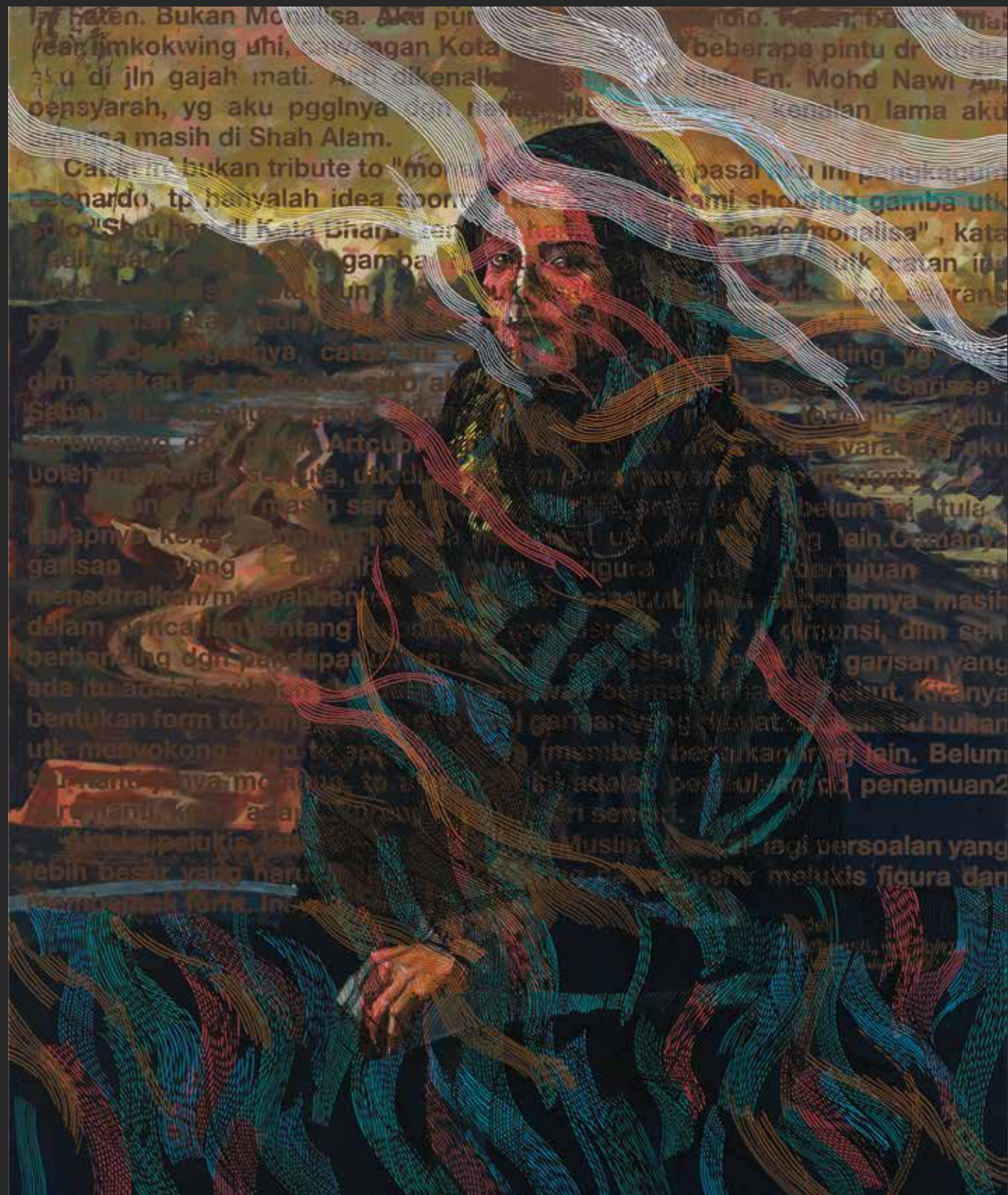
A half-length portrait of a woman, the *Mona Lisa* has been described as “the best known, the most visited, the most written about, the most sung about, the most parodied work of art in the world.” Painted between 1503 and 1506, it is an icon of Renaissance art and testament to the skills of Leonardo Da Vinci. Da Vinci was known for his scientific experiments as well as his art, and the striking realism of the portrait was seen as a result of his in-depth studies on human anatomy. Da Vinci’s studies on light and colour theory are well-documented, and apparent in *Mona Lisa*. The Renaissance artist captured the light on the curves of the face, casting a glow over the central figure and endowing an appearance of realism that has stunned audiences until modern times. Furthermore, his perfection of the sfumato technique is apparent in the imperceptible transitions between light and dark, shade and colours. This technique was a break from the Florentine tradition of outlining images that was the norm during this period. The breakthroughs Da Vinci made in figurative art through his understanding of anatomy, colour theory and light have had a large impact on Fadli, and formed the basis of *Monabukelisa*.

Fadli is celebrated within the contemporary Malaysian art industry as one of the greatest figurative painters of his time; yet in a twist, this gift is also the source of one of his greatest struggles. A devout Muslim, Fadli turned away from figurative art for a time after reading The Ruling on Photography based on Islamic Law according to Fatwa Issue. Concerned that he was contravening the teachings of Islam by producing realistic figures, he spent eleven years devoting his practice to landscapes and abstract subjects. The draw of his true calling as a figurative artist proved too great and following further research on the subject, he returned to realism in 2007. Fadli has spent most of 2013 and 2014 in furtherance of his technical

skills, which resulted in the series *A Day In Kota Lama*. This body of works primarily focused on the perfection of the chiaroscuro and sfumato techniques, satisfying an inner desire to push his technical abilities. Confident in his skill level, he now turns to developing new techniques within his creative practice, exploring figurative representation through systems that, while avoiding realism, will endow his work with an authentic appearance.

Monabukelisa follows on aesthetically from *Tribute To Amron* with the use of lines inspired by Ibrahim Hussain’s way of working. While *Tribute To Amron* featured lines swirling across the canvas for purely aesthetic reasons, *Monabukelisa* stems from the idea that these lines can be applied to break down the figurative form. Much in the manner of Da Vinci, Fadli is embroiled in a search for fresh techniques in order to elevate his artistic practice. The title *Monabukelisa* translates into “Not Mona Lisa”, and given Fadli’s experiments in abstracting the form, it is an apt title. From a distance, viewers will see the *Mona Lisa* but upon drawing closer realise she is a tudung-clad woman instead. The background is filled with a landscape as in the original painting, but is again updated to fit in with the artist’s contemporary experiments with silkscreen printed texts overlaid. These texts are literary accounts of the inspiration behind *Monabukelisa*, and form an oral documentation of the complex thought process that led to the creation of Fadli’s latest painting.

Despite re-embracing figurative painting in 2007, *Monabukelisa* is an indication of Fadli’s continued reservations of working in the realism genre, and the inner turmoil that exists between his talent and his conscience. As the basis of his training has been in Western art principles, it is apt that he uses one of the most iconic symbol of Western art traditions to illustrate his prodigious skill level. Given Da Vinci’s reputation for creating new techniques within established art traditions, the *Mona Lisa* is a fit starting point for Fadli to push his own creative limits. *Monabukelisa* is a beautiful expression of Fadli’s personal beliefs, values and struggles, and hints at the beginning of entirely new directions within the portfolio of one of the most gifted figurative artists working in Malaysia today.



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Fadli Yusoff
Monabukelisa
Acrylic on Jute
183cm x 152cm
2014

“Fuad’s love of portraiture is well-documented throughout his career; the seed for *Blindspot* was planted when the artist saw a photograph of Hawking in his wheelchair.”

Blindspot is a 2014 painting by renowned contemporary artist Ahmad Fuad Osman. Beautifully finished, the painting combines elements of realism and abstraction and as such continues the deeply philosophical thread that links several of Fuad’s key works together.

In medical terms, a blind spot is the point of entry on the optic nerve that is insensitive to light; the term has been appropriated in popular vocabulary, however, to describe an area in which a person would lack understanding or impartiality. With *Blindspot*, Fuad speaks to intellectuals within society – artists, scientists, politicians and such who reach a level of success that leads them to forget anything exists other than themselves and their accomplishments. As Fuad understands it, the path to success is complex and full of trials and uncertainty. Fuad views two challenges for those who embark on this life: the first is attaining success and the second is deciding what to do with that success. He observes the human trait of pride, which particularly rears its head when one finds success. In Islamic traditions, Allah tests believers not only with trials and tribulations, but often also with wealth, health and happiness.

In Fuad’s estimations, art sits next to religion. He comments that one of the most effective ways to gain access to higher spiritual realms and God is through the creation and appreciation of art; for art involves observing and analysing one’s surroundings. For the artist, regular observation and comprehension of the world around him has sealed his faith in an unseen Higher Being. Finding parallels between science and art – both involve experimentation, observing and dissecting the natural world – he equates the practice of science to the practice of art, and therefore to the practice of religion. Fuad’s ruminations on life and death are well-documented; indeed, several of his key works such as *Fragile* and *Mat Jenin* act as a reminder for the artist of the presence of God. He likens himself to an empty vessel, whose purpose is to act as the medium through which God carries out his Divine Work. To the artist, this

understanding is crucial for keeping the ego in check.

To the right of *Blindspot* is the portrait of Stephen Hawking, a physicist and undisputed genius of our times. Hawking suffers from a degenerative motor neuron disease, which has rendered him paralysed. Fuad paints the great physicist in his specially adapted wheelchair, turning to look out at the audience with a piercing gaze. Fuad’s love of portraiture is well-documented throughout his career, and the seed for *Blindspot* was planted when the artist saw a photograph of Hawking in his wheelchair. For Fuad to capture the essence of his portraiture subjects, he delves deep into their characters, and so set about researching the life of Hawking in depth. Hawking possesses one of the most intelligent minds of the twenty-first century, and yet remains physically trapped. For Fuad, whose portfolio is bound together by an almost Sufi train of thought on the boundaries in life, this great paradox between the mind and body triggered an in-depth reflection into the gratitude that spirituality teaches humans. The left of the canvas is an abstract expressionist background, harking back to the early abstract period with which the artist began his career. Viewers can note this linkage as a personal visual reminder of a time when Fuad was still embroiled in the search for success, thereby acting as a warning to the artist about the dangers in allowing the ego to take over.

Fuad is respected as an established multi-disciplinary artist, whose primary aim is the transmission of his deeply philosophical concept to his audience. As such, he views painting as the clearest way to transmit the thoughts behind *Blindspot*, enabling it to act not only as a reminder to his audience but also himself about the importance of holding onto one’s spirituality. Additionally it beautifully showcases both the abstract expressionist and figurative abilities that have garnered Fuad a large following and the title of one of the foremost contemporary artists in Malaysia.



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Ahmad Fuad Osman
Blindspot
143cm x 182cm
Oil on canvas
2014

ENG HWEE CHU

Beyond Border



Eng Hwee Chu
Beyond Border
154cm x 224cm
Acrylic on Canvas
2014

Eng Hwee Chu is one of the most prominent contemporary female artists in Malaysia, known for her painting-based practice that acts as a visual journal of her life. Filled with key icons that are repeated throughout her works, such as the rocking horse and red and black figures, Hwee Chu uses her art as a vehicle in her quest for truth, as a way to work out her own personal issues and a platform to discuss women's issues. Her latest painting *Beyond Border* exemplifies all these traits, while depicting a turning point for the introspective Hwee Chu in her personal life.

At first glance, *Beyond Border* might appear strikingly similar to Hwee Chu's past works, but closer inspection shows several disparities. Viewers will note the re-emergence of several of her key elements: the rocking horse, the red and black figures, symbols of Chinese culture and detailed side imageries framing the centre visual. The artist comments that *Beyond Border* is a personal review of sorts of the last fifteen years of her career as she prepares to enter a new phase in her life. The first clue to a happier state of mind for Hwee Chu comes from her colour palette, and is further bolstered by the absence of tied-up figures which have previously appeared in her paintings. The lack of constrained figures points to a freedom, both artistic and personal, for Hwee Chu. Reviewing other symbols in *Beyond Border* only serves to strengthen this analysis.

Perhaps the most fundamental of all symbols for Hwee Chu is the rocking horse, which first appeared in *Tragic: People Image On Rocking Horse*. Hwee Chu's recurring portrayal of stunningly pretty horses points to their role in her life as a symbol of aspiration. Derived from a childhood memory of a toy horse she could not possess, the horse previously signified loss, longing and all that she could not possess. In *Beyond Border*, Hwee Chu shows herself on horseback via the red figure which has been central to her past works as a representation of her true self. Viewers familiar with her paintings will understand her penchant for working in self-portraits in the guise of this red figure, which portrays her perception of herself. The red figure usually appears in anguish or uncertainty, as in *Black Moon 4* where we see her crouched over, cradling her head in her hands. *Beyond Border* shows a stark contrast to these usual depictions however; now she is shown confidently galloping across the canvas on horseback. This newfound ability to ride the horse represents a shift in the metaphorical relationship: now the horse is her partner.

Through all her years of struggle and uncertainty, she has emerged victorious; her life today filled with all of the personal and professional achievements she dreamed of. The allegorical conquering of the horse can be equated as a representation of quelling the demons and insecurities of her past.

A second self-portrait of sorts also appears in the form of the black figure that represents her inner self, that is her inner feelings and workings. Again this figure is shown in a new light in *Beyond Border*, chasing after the red figure who rides away rather than appearing as a dark looming figure in a heavy or frightened stance. A closer look reveals the figure is not solid black either; Hwee Chu has layered several colours over each other to create a textural finish that imparts an impression of black.

Anchoring the central background is a derelict, albeit beautifully painted, staircase, in the style of Nyonya architecture. Two Chinese stone guardians flank either side of the staircase. This mix of Nyonya and Chinese influences reflect the cultural blend of Malaysian society, the use of traditional artefacts reflects the traditions of society. In the distance lies a desolate, uninviting landscape. Several stern-faced people crowd together to the right of the canvas; for Hwee Chu, they are depictions of a general society who have held her back. As she rides away, with her inner self trailing closely, she leaves behind a difficult environment, with no intention to return to the invisible shackles of society.

In the tradition of female artists, who are known for their penchant for self-reflection, Hwee Chu consistently produces introspective works, which when studied in an entirety tell a tale of her life. *Beyond Border* is the closing of a chapter for Hwee Chu. Where she tended to express angst in her autobiographical paintings, now viewers are treated to a strong expression of joy. After the difficulties of struggling as an artist and raising a young family, she finds herself in an enviable position of being established, personally and professionally, which brings about the contentment expressed in this new canvas. Hwee Chu's unparalleled painterly skills have yet again encapsulated her inner reflections, radiating hope and anticipation for the next phase of her life, and leaving impatience within her audience for what will come next.

SHOOSHIE SULAIMAN

Subculture, Komunis & NGO

Subculture, Komunis and NGO are three out of a set of six mixed media works by Susyilawati Sulaiman, or as she is popularly known, Shooshie. Created in the aftermath of the Malaysian General Elections in 2013, they are a wonderful example of the energetic manner in which Shooshie engages with the world around her.

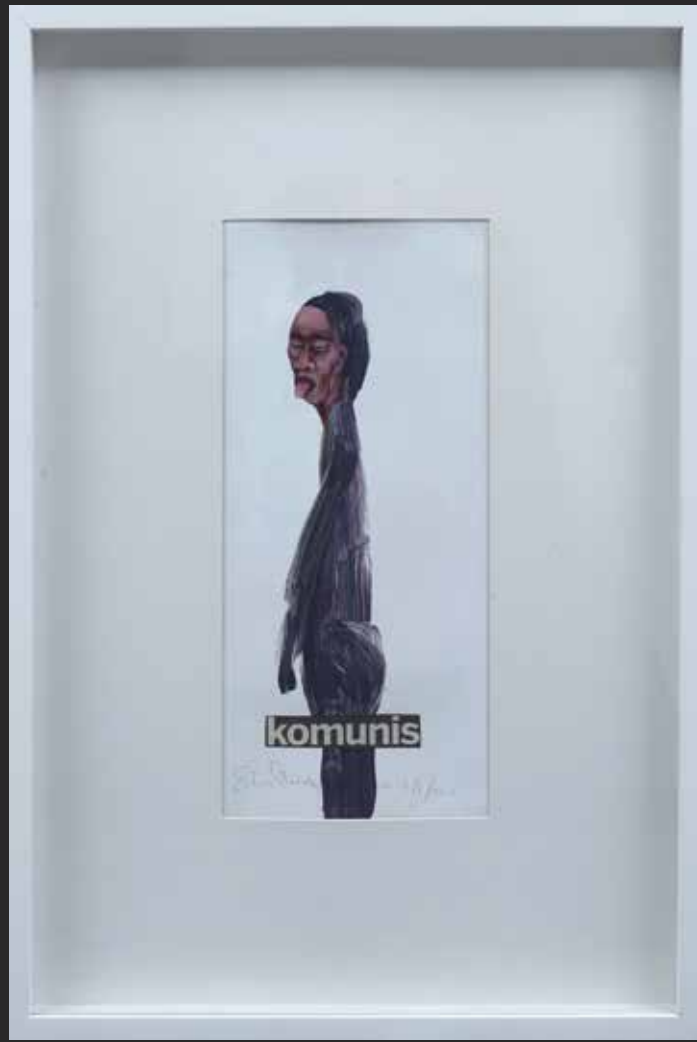
Shooshie is known for producing two-dimensional works, which are small in comparison to the often room-sized installations that are garnering her great acclaim on the international art scene, and *Subculture, Komunis and NGO* are no exception. Measuring forty-six by twenty-one centimetres in size each, they nevertheless are filled with an explosive dynamism that belies their relatively dainty dimensions. Each work has a caricature-like figure positioned squarely in the centre of the canvas. The faces of each figure have more detail than their bodies, which are the result of a few thick, expressive brushstrokes, aimed to convey the side-profile silhouettes. Cutting out the words “subculture”, “komunis” and “NGO” from newspaper headlines, she carefully pastes one word across the mid-section of each character. As with many of the artist’s two-dimensional works, the final outcome was surprising for her due to the highly expressive manner in which she creates them.

Shooshie comments that her two-dimensional works are highly spontaneous often created as an immediate response to an emotion or event. *Subculture, Komunis and NGO* form part of her response to the hotly discussed GE13 in Malaysia. A highly anticipated political episode, which sparked off intense debates and often strongly polarized allegiances, the GE13 was a major event in the life of most Malaysians in 2013. Influenced by her late father who was the Ketua Umno of Padang Lalang in his lifetime, Shooshie is an avid follower of Malaysian politics, keenly studying the events leading up to and results of GE13. *Subculture, Komunis and NGO* along with *Demokrasi ke 13*

and *Propaganda ke 13* which were unveiled at the GMCA 2013, result from her natural response to her observations. Shooshie questions what are the elements necessary for a progressive, intellectual society and which is the natural path towards a successful democracy. While *Demokrasi ke 13* and *Propoganda ke 13* had a stronger focus on the actual politics of GE13, *Subculture, Komunis and NGO* busy themselves more with the social understandings and education that act as the support system for successful democracies, reminding citizens that it is ultimately their involvement which affect the environment they live in.

Contemporary artists are tasked to be the visual commentators of their time. One of the artist’s notes via *Subculture, Komunis and NGO*, and indeed *Demokrasi ke 13* and *Propoganda ke 13* as well, is the shift within citizens taking responsibility for their political situation. She observes a lessening in nationalism from when she was growing up in Johor and through her art, strives to identify the forces responsible for this change. As she is known to do, Shooshie makes her comment on society and politics from a highly personal starting point, this time referencing her childhood environment.

Shooshie’s efforts to decipher the precincts of Malaysian identity, society and politics, as exemplified in the highly energetic trio *Subculture, Komunis and NGO*, have been identified as an important marker in the discussions of the evolving cultural landscape that is twenty-first century Southeast Asia. 2014 has been an exciting year for Shooshie, with her invitation to showcase her art at both the seminal Art Basel Unlimited and Gwangju Biennale, prestigious events she adds onto her glowing CV. It is her ability to present fully realized concepts in perfectly resolved visuals, whether two- or three-dimensional, which has caught the attentions of not only Malaysia, but the world, to her thought-provoking works.



Shooshie Sulaiman
 Subculture, Komunis and NGO
 79cm x 54cm (each)
 Oil on Boxboard & Newspaper Cutting
2014

RAJA LOPE RASYDI RAJA ROZLAN

Sita & Rama

Emerging Malaysian contemporary painter Raja Lope Rasydi Raja Rozlan continues his theme of narrative art with his latest work, *Sita* and *Rama*. Based on the ancient Indian legend of the Ramayana, this beautifully detailed diptych showcases not only Raja Lope's talents as a painter, but also his enchanting storytelling abilities.

A great Indian epic, the Ramayana essentially explores the duties of human relationships through the story of Rama, an avatar of the Hindu God Vishnu. Rama was considered perfect in his duties as a son, husband and ruler, despite the trials and tribulations he faced, such as the abduction of his wife Sita by the villainous Ravana. The Ramayana can be seen as much more than just a story; it presents the teachings of the ancient Hindu sages through narration, and so is filled with philosophical and devotional elements, and acts as a behavioural guide. Due to the spread of Hinduism from South Asia into Southeast Asia, the Ramayana and all its characters – Rama, Sita, Ravana, Hanuman to name a few – are entrenched in the cultural consciousness not only of India and Nepal, but also Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Kelantan and Cambodia. Raja Lope has studied the myth as it is perceived in each of these societies and combined them to produce his personal narration on the legend, as presented in *Sita* and *Rama*.

Raja Lope's embrace of the mythic landscape is evident in the rich imageries of *Sita* and *Rama* which show the scene of Sita's search and rescue. Ravana, embodied by a large hydra, snakes menacingly across the canvas of *Sita*, faced by Sita as she holds Jentayu with Hanuman the white monkey by her side. As the audience watches, Ravana is defeated by Rama, astride a metallic Chinese horse. Rama was aided in this epic battle by his allies, including Hanuman and Garuda. A man-bird hybrid God, Garuda originates from the Balinese version of the legend and is shown on the second canvas, Rama. Raja Lope mixes together patterns and symbols from the various South Asian and Southeast Asian cultures who contribute to the Ramayana legend in this work, for example with the Maharisi character in *Rama*. A Shaman who is the

father of Sita, Maharisi is shown in possession of a dragon wand, whose design is based on Royal Siamese barges. A strong influence of the shadow puppetry of Indonesia and Kelantan filters through the depiction of Sita and Garuda.

Raja Lope is known to produce narrative works, which he describes as painted films, filled with fully resolved characters. Indeed he views *Sita* and *Rama* as a two-part film. Although they are connected, they narrate a sequence and each canvas is able to exist independently due to its position in narrating an exact moment in the Ramayana tale. In his pre-production process, he produces several sketches of each character, considering their appearance from all angles, their personalities and how they move. Such intense attention to detail results in the creation of graceful figures, which appear realistic despite their fantastical features. Working with acrylic and airbrushing on canvas aids the artist's ability to achieve the surreal quality he strives for in his paintings, as his medium enables him to portray scenes of fantasy with precise realism. Airbrush painting can be regarded as a tool which advances Raja Lope's abilities to fully express the dreamy tales he weaves through his paintings. By layering airbrushing, in which a small spray gun filled with paint uses compressed air to apply colour to the canvas like a pencil, over a fully finished acrylic realism painting, the artist shows his dual mastery of traditional mediums and experimental practices.

Re-telling myths such as the Ramayana is a valuable and valid concept. The survival of these legends has always been due to the fact they are constantly readdressed, readjusted and reinterpreted through the ages. With his re-telling of the Ramayana, the artist hopes to challenge the imagination of his audience, particularly the younger viewers. Raja Lope understands the importance of history and mythology to culture, and searches for a way to connect younger generations to these stories through his paintings. *Sita* and *Rama* come together to achieve this ambition, with a wonderfully detailed combination of several Asian cultural elements presented in techniques both established and experimental.



Raja Lope Rasydi Raja Rozlan
 Rama
 162cm x 195cm
 Acrylic and Airbrush on Canvas
 2014



Raja Lope Rasydi Raja Rozlan
 Sita
 163cm x 183cm
 Acrylic and Airbrush on Canvas
 2014

The Quest is a 2014 oil on canvas painting by Goh Chai Seng. A gothic work with dominant bright elements interspersed, Goh has deftly brought a thoroughly contemporary, personal concept to life, with the aid of his highly proficient painterly skills.

Measuring six feet by six feet, the seed of *The Quest* was planted in Goh's mind from his weekly visits to tend the grounds of a palm oil estate. Goh senses an atmosphere of mystery in the silence of the estate, enhanced by the falling leaves and abundance of palm oil trees, which have a strong tie to the physical and economic development of Malaysia. As such he postulates the estates themselves are each imbibed with a "life" of their own that relates to the stories behind them. The long strand of palm leaves crowding over the grey figurative element and religious carved symbols spread out over the canvas expresses the overpowering sense of mystery Goh notices. Highlighted in bright yellow, a fairly new addition to his colour palette, the leaves are a stark contrast to the rest of the painting's colours, and thus are rendered as a dominant element despite the simplicity of their silhouette.

Seated on the left of the canvas is a portrait of Goh's grandfather. An elderly Chinese man, he stares unseeingly into the distance, hinting at the loss of his ability to see sharply as he ages. The artist comments that since the death of his grandmother, his grandfather became increasingly withdrawn, less vocal and often lost in his own thoughts. Goh links both the loss of his grandmother and the decline in his grandfather's eyesight to his inability to understand what weighs on the older man's mind. Depicting a faraway expression on his grandfather lends another dimension to the sense of mystery in *The Quest*. Portraiture has long been a tool used by painters to depict not only the visual appearance but also the inner essence of a subject. Goh fulfills this criterion in a subtle yet effective manner by capturing a melancholic expression, and as

such his superlative technical skill is easily shown.

The Quest might utilize Goh's traditional painterly approach but demonstrates a shift in subject matter and a less "crowded" visual. By merging the figurative element with the imagery of foliage he presents both symbols of "mass narrative" and "mini narrative", all representing several layers of meanings. While the imagery is still finely detailed and fills the entire canvas, the artist eschews the densely packed minutiae of his earlier paintings in an attempt to focus deeper conceptual meaning within key icons, creating an easily relatable visual for his audience.

Goh's works conventionally have been a product of living in Klang and are often infused with religious iconography. These are still involved in *The Quest*, albeit in a lesser quantity. Their inclusion ties in strongly to the traditional and religious values to which Goh holds firm. However the artist has noticed a shift in the pace of his environment, where it once was serene and slow in comparison to Kuala Lumpur the tempo of daily life has sharply quickened and tradition slowly recedes. In his newer works Goh comments that the rapid pace of urban living, which he considers more influenced by perception than reality, is no longer avoidable. The mass of information that is now readily available to him, along with the changes in his landscape, have been major contributors to the subtle shifts in his compositions and icons.

The Quest continues Goh's quest to rationalize his observations of the world around him through his artistic practice. The beautifully finished complex composition, with its dominant figurative element, hints at the inextricableness of modern life and tradition in Goh's rapidly developing physical landscape, demonstrating the particular ability contemporary art holds to describe the shifts occurring locally in the twenty-first century.



Goh Chai Seng
The Quest
Oil on Canvas
186cm x 186cm
2014

Emerging realism painter Mohd Fazli Othman is well known for his dedication to the traditional tenets of figurative art. Understanding his genre from both a technical and historical perspective allows him the freedom to update his style with current images, often anthropological in nature, as can be seen in his latest painting, *Daily Struggle*.

Daily Struggle is the last in Fazli's series of paintings on garbage collectors. Fazli lives near the largest landfill in Malaysia, and this sparked his interest in the individuals involved in the collection and management of the garbage industry. In an approach similar to method of acting, he began his investigations into the subject by actually working as a garbage collector and cleaner after certain large public events, in order to understand the mindset through experience. In his pre-production process, he documented these experiences via a series of self-portrait photographs, dressed in the distinctive orange uniform and posing with props including brooms against backdrops of rubbish in the actual environments where he was working. From this self-involvement, initially came paintings with self-portraits, as a way to transmit his personal experience to his audience. *Daily Struggle* takes another step forward by featuring a portrait of three unknown cleaners, in an attempt by the artist to raise awareness not only on social empathy but also to evoke civic responsibility for the community's shared spaces.

Horizontally the canvas is divided into thirds; the top third is bright blue sky, the next third is a royal blue hoarding and the bottom third is a roadside scene. The traffic light, road dividers and black-and-white striped rail and curb are artifacts, which mark almost all junctions nationally. Fazli positions three flags throughout the work: a Malaysian flag at the top left, an orange flag warning motorists of men at work ahead to the right and in-between is the flag of Selangor. In this way, what was originally a general scene has been definitely contextualized in the artist's

home state Selangor. Not only is Selangor where Fazli's concept was born, the artist feels there are now several issues besetting the state, ranging from the drought to the influx of foreign workers to respect for the environment and those who maintain it.

Large-scale works historically were reserved for important subjects; Fazli upsets this notion by shifting the scale into an area of depicting genre scenes of ordinary people, in a setting familiar to all Malaysians. The three cleaners, recognizable in their bright orange jumpsuits, are also life-size, adding to their realism and giving them due prominence as the subjects of Fazli's discourse. The title *Daily Struggle* refers to the daily act of cleaning the city. Bringing the cleaning crew and the repetitiveness of their task to the fore, Fazli raises the point that the maintenance of our landscape is a joint effort that needs to be undertaken by the whole community, and the level of pride in the physical landscape is an indication of the pride that the society has in its social and intellectual landscape.

The beauty of realism art is that through figurative elements, viewers are able to immediately recognize symbols and create associations necessary for the artist's message to be transmitted. Fazli's delight in the traditional aspects of his art is evident in the perfect perspectives and proportions in the large-scale *Daily Struggle*. His wonderful painterly skills are exciting in a contemporary art landscape, which often turns to the excitement of new media art. This is in large part due to his ability to heighten the currency of his Renaissance-esque way of working through the currency of his content. *Daily Struggle* presents not only a technical challenge for the artist but also a discourse on civic responsibility in an upbeat tone. As the last work in this series, audiences can look to it to appreciate his ability to mix formalistic and contemporary, and anticipate great things to come from this engaging young painter.



<<
Mohd Fazli Othman
Daily Struggle
214cm x 304cm
Oil on Canvas
2014

Daud Rahim
Transport
250cm x 171cm
Oil on Canvas
2014



Contemporary artist Daud Rahim has gained recognition for both his wonderful technical skills as well as his deeply philosophical conceptual abilities. Of late, he has ruminated on the eternal dilemma of materialism versus spiritualism in the modern world. His latest work, *Transport*, which represents the beginning of a new series *Pregnant*, demonstrates his continued explorations into this theme accompanied by a beautifully resolved, colourful aesthetic.

Malaysia, with its sustained economic growth, has seen not only an increase in disposable income among its population, but also large migrations from rural to urban areas. As lifestyles have changed, so have values. Where once the country was largely rural, and therefore held tightly to traditional value systems, now the consumer culture has strongly taken root. Given the stronghold religion has traditionally had within Malaysia, this rise of materialism, with its conflicting principles to spirituality, is at the forefront of several moral dilemmas that contemporary society faces. Finding the ideal balance that needs to be struck between the two disparate value systems is at the core of Daud's explorations in *Transport*.

Daud began ruminating on spirituality in a material world with his successful solo *Jiwa*. Presenting natural forms, mainly animals with details of vegetation, filled with mechanical or electrical skeletal components, he discussed the anxiety the human soul suffers when immersed in a covetous society. *Transport* pushes this idea forward with popular brand symbolism. Intertwining the Ferrari car logo and name with suggestions of embryos in his detailed imagery, Daud speaks to the entrenchment of the consumer culture today. Furthering his analogy of the struggle between the search for spiritual fulfilment and the quest for material things that currently exists in society, he hypothesises the lack of spiritual fulfilment as eventually

leading to the cessation of humanity. Daud's ability to astutely observe the world around him results in realistic depictions of both the natural and mechanical forms in *Transport*, infusing the work with a surreal atmosphere.

Daud works his canvas for *Transport* in colour pencil, which is unusual for such conceptual work. Given the rave reviews the artist receives for his drawing skills, it is unsurprising that he manages to harness his chosen medium with such decidedly striking detail. Working in a reverse technique is part of the technical challenge Daud sets himself, in an effort to fully comprehend the tenants of colour theory. Initially, he primes his surface black with acrylic, and then works with colour pencil to add colour and light. Achieving three-dimensionality in this manner is notoriously tricky, as it is the polar opposite of the regular task of bringing shadow onto light surfaces. Layering together several different colours composes each shade. Using confident, controlled lines to create marks and shade reveal not only Daud's confidence but also the delight he takes in the labour of art production. As such, the artist's innate understanding of colour theory, exemplary draftsman skills and commitment to his craft are demonstrated, cementing his reputation as a master of the formal aspects of art.

Analogies on the struggle between the search for spiritual fulfilment and the quest for material things are highly relevant in the increasingly globalized capital systems that dominate most of today's world. The ability to harmoniously combine opposite imageries as seen in Daud's work is a highly prized trait in contemporary artists today. Indeed, both the artist's natural talents for art creation and innate understanding on the issues besetting his audience has led him into the creation of *Transport* as a work which effortlessly engages his viewers with the wonderfully appealing aesthetic that is Daud's calling card.

Mixed Media and Culture

Mixed media art refers to artwork in which more than one medium has been employed. This characteristic explains the genre's popularity with contemporary Malaysian artists, who work in a culturally diverse, rapidly developing society. The key to mixed media art is layering, and successful pieces reward viewers with a rich aesthetic experience. Mixed media offers an opportunity to combine traditional, cultural and current iconography and techniques, resulting in works that reflect the boundary between heritage and modernity that Malaysian society straddles today.

“The constant emergence of new techniques and mediums is not only encouraged but also lauded, as can be seen in the experimental pyrographic print works.”

Contemporary art is expected to mirror the state of contemporary society, thus acting as a rich resource for individuals to draw on as they reconsider the familiar, and challenge established notions. In this spirit, the constant emergence of new techniques and mediums is not only encouraged but also lauded, as can be seen in the experimental pyrographic print works such as *Catfish* of young artist Haafiz Shahimi.

Art is primarily a visual medium, and the form it takes is a physical representation of the ideology it contains. Understanding contemporary art's role to speak about the current state of society, and further understanding Malaysian society as one that constantly undergoes rapid developments, it follows that for an artist of the new generation rethinking the application of known mediums would be a primary concern. Haafiz views the responsibility of an artist as educating their audience through the evaluation of existing ideas. For him, this extends to both the content and execution. It was his search for a resolution to this self-led brief as a student that led him to discover the pyrographic print technique for which he is quickly gaining fame. Stemming from Haafiz's correlation between the formalistic principles of printmaking and the laws of thermodynamics, his innovative prints are testament to the artist's commitment to his skill and innate understanding of contemporising local craft traditions to enable connections between his work and audience. Haafiz's first step is to personally cut out images onto the metal blocks he uses, creating personalized chops that are similar to the batik chops used in traditional Malaysian batik printing. Heating these to an exact temperature, which depends on the quality of the image he wishes to imprint, he applies the chops onto surfaces of canvas or jute. *Catfish* is imprinted on a base of jute. The difference in quality between canvas and jute is apparent in the final tone of the work. Where canvas, which is similar to paper, burns and produces a blackish tone, jute is thicker and does not burn as strongly. This leads to an overall sepia tone covering *Catfish*. Quick gestural drawings in charcoal and pencil are laid over the print, adding a sense of movement to the two-dimensional surface. This layering of experimental print and gestural drawing are testament to the artist's knowledge of his chosen print medium, love of

drawing and skills as a draftsman.

Haafiz looks to Malay lore for his main image of *Catfish* and has reproduced an image of a black leopard. In Malay folklore, the black leopard has associations to black magic, “Harimau Kejadian”. According to this myth, a pact with the devil endows the individual to transfigure themselves into the form of leopards. According to the Kerinchi people of Sumatra from who Haafiz learned this tale, this ability is usually within women, who use it to safeguard their homes when their husbands are away working. The artist understands this myth as a way of garnering a status to demand respect, by creating fear. Stylistically he renders it to appear as the image from a crest of nobility, as in contemporary society logos are equated with status. He questions the issue of status within twenty-first century Malaysia, equating the attainment of titles as a way of demanding respect within society. Originally titles were bestowed on those who made contributions economically, socially, culturally and patriotically, but now the artist raises the issue of those, whose contributions to the betterment of society are unclear, yet have received titles. There is also the global issue of institutions and governing bodies that expect their official branding to garner them admiration, yet they fail to fulfil the very duties they were set up for. It is perhaps an apt time for this discussion given the current political climate in the Middle East and the lack of support Palestine receives from the United Nations and leaders of the international communities. Haafiz comments on the need for individuals and institutions to contribute to the community as a way of attaining respect, rather than relying on the smoke and mirrors of titles and brands as a way of demanding it.

The expansion of technique into new directions is an indication of Haafiz's desire to contemporise existing issues so as to connect to younger audiences. *Catfish* is a wonderful visual landmark in the refinement of his signature style, filled with the dynamism and depth that is required for socio-political works to arrest an audience's attention. Noting these leaps, Haafiz makes in the creation of highly individual content and aesthetic, marks him out as a young artist within the Malaysian contemporary art industry to watch out for.



Haafiz Shahimi

Catfish

154cm x 183cm

Pyrography Print, Charcoal, Spray Paint, Oil on Jute

finished with 2K Matte Paint

2014

Fauzin Mustafa is one of the most respected contemporary artists working in Malaysia today. His mixed media approach, which combines thoughtful concepts with the formalistic aspects of fine art through recognisable Malay iconography, eases the boundaries between conceptual art and the public. As such, his visual language easily communicates social issues to a wide audience as can be seen in 2014's mixed media work *Cerita Ceriti I: Whose artist is this?*

Measuring five feet by seven feet, *Cerita Ceriti I: Whose artist is this?* continues Fauzin's signature style of building up textures and colour through the layering of collaging and paint. The structural integrity of mixed media work such as this is preserved by the construction of individual layers, each carefully selected with appropriate intervals between applications. The initial layer in *Cerita Ceriti I: Whose artist is this?* was the patchwork of colourful batik, which created the dominant colour field. Fauzin then overlaid the batik with cut canvas patterns, coated in thick white oil paint so as to produce a monotone textural surface. As such, the dimensions of light and shadow are introduced, adding to the depth of the visual when light shines on the painting. Fauzin's use of batik can be considered crucial in connecting the audience with the work, as it initiates a dialogue with the cultural context his art exists in. The representation of a highly recognisable traditional artefact bridges the gap between innate cultural understanding and contemporary life, thus fulfilling the criteria of contemporary art to describe the current state of society.

Cerita Ceriti I: Whose artist is this? is a personal introspection by Fauzin into the hopes and expectations of contemporary artists working in Malaysia today. The art industry is experiencing a period of rapid growth

stemming from an increase in both interest and support for the industry. Art demands contextualisation, and this is increasingly provided by the surge of private galleries, auction houses and the rise of Art Expo. As such, information and knowledge is better disseminated, appreciation is on the rise and the number of collectors is higher than ever, leading to hope within the artists themselves with respect to the appreciation and success they will be able to attain. The main body of *Cerita Ceriti I: Whose artist is this?* is dominated by the portrait of a man whose face is obscured by the batik collage. In doing so, Fauzin visualises the mysterious and intangible quality that he postulates drives artists, which is not linked to money or fame, but instead is based on an indescribable personal need to create. Surrounding the figure is text from a poem, *Cerita Ceriti*, which the artist wrote himself as a means to intellectualise his observations on the swirling changes occurring. The ability to resolve his concept in both literary and visual form speaks highly to the depth of Fauzin's critical thought process, and the rare inclusion of poetic text marks *Cerita Ceriti I: Whose artist is this?* as an interesting piece within the artist's beautifully prolific portfolio.

Uniting formal methods and cultural motifs in a contemporary arrangement is a signature for Fauzin. Incorporating batik evidences his thorough knowledge of the physical characteristics of materials as having both aesthetic as well as intellectual value, and grounds the work in a definitively Malaysian context. In an environment which looks to understand the rapid changes dominating the social landscape, *Cerita Ceriti I: Whose artist is this?* marries aesthetics and analytical thought within a beautifully presented framework to help reconcile the past, present and future of Malaysia, from the personal experiences of Fauzin himself.



"Fauzin visualises the mysterious and intangible quality that he postulates drives artists, which is not linked to money or fame, but instead is based on an indescribable personal need to create. "

Fauzin Mustafa
Cerita Ceriti I: Whose artist is this?
218cm x 157cm
Oil and Mixed Media on Canvas
2014

"Buying stuff is not just our popular culture; it is how we understand the world." James Twitchell

Of all the issues provoking debates about the free economy and globalisation, the question of the culture of consumerism is one guaranteed to ignite heated debate. Are the material goods of today's marketplace a result of dynamic entrepreneurial economies, or do they harbour a sinister aim to exert control by leading consumers astray from the higher things in life? On the flipside – does the culture of consumerism, in fact, contain much to be celebrated rather than disparaged? Azad Daniel continues this discourse into the role of commercialism in twenty-first century society with his three new works, *Malaysia Boleh*, *Dope* and *.44 Magnum*. A continuation of his limited edition iPhone cover works, he utilises ideas of art appropriation and hyper contemporary technique to discuss the role of materialism in the modern world.

Consumerism's impact on the field of technology is widely accepted, and one of the most important technological contributions to society has been the refinement of the hand phone. Consumer demand has forced the evolution of multi-purpose hand phones for companies to keep a competitive edge; this can be seen as an example of the influence consumerism has over all industries today. Azad began his examination on the role of consumerism with an inspection of one of today's most recognisable products: the iPhone and its cover. In a move towards a new base medium, he casts oversized iPhone covers out of Perspex. The process of casting allows for repetition, unifying the works across his iPhone series, and mimicking the mass-production process of actual iPhone covers. These six feet by three feet Perspex shells are detailed exactly as an actual iPhone case. The ergonomic spaces for access to the buttons and camera lens are present, strengthening the viewers viewers' immediate recognition of the object. The artist individualises each piece through the designs he applies via his innovative auto paint technique, switching the covers from a mass produced consumer driven product into a high end, one of a kind artefact.

Within *Malaysia Boleh*, *Dope* and *.44 Magnum* themselves, viewers can note technical advancements in the artist's process, particularly in *.44 Magnum* and *Malaysia Boleh*. *.44 Magnum* marks the artist's foray into the usage of candy paint to achieve a delicious watermelon red colour in a metallic finish, contrasted against black in a play of positive and negative space. In *Malaysia Boleh* it appears as if the entire casing has been wrapped in a Malaysian

flag. The impression of fabric with the printed folds and shadows is startlingly real, and incredibly difficult given the flat, graphic nature of working in auto paint. It points to Azad's mastery of his technique and exciting new directions opening up for him technically as he moves his medium forward. *Dope* shows a subtler experiment, where the artist contrasts a matte black background with shiny letters, as opposed to a fully lacquered, high-shine visual. The glossy impressions of these graphic works result from a highly technical process, mirroring the neat exactness involved in creating technology.

Despite the perfect uniformity from being cast, the varied finishes on the five covers lend an air of sporadic randomness, imitating the choices consumers face when walking into a store for iPhone covers. Playful and witty, they nonetheless make serious statements on the role of art in contemporary society by challenging their viewers on several levels. Almost mirror-like, *Malaysia Boleh*, *Dope* and *.44 Magnum* reflect their surroundings and audience. The seductively shiny finishes have a surprisingly historical connotation; for centuries highly polished artefacts have been displayed by the upper echelons of society in an attempt to portray material security and enlightenments of a spiritual nature. Their glossy appearances, whose appeal lies in the tastes and allegiances of the individual, are as appealing as the real objects would be in an Apple store. As such *Malaysia Boleh*, *Dope* and *.44 Magnum* perfectly utilise art appropriation in addressing luxury and consumerism.

As a shining example of the pinnacle of technological development, the iPhone can be seen as the perfect symbol to appropriate in discussions on consumerism. Recontextualising the iconic object allows Azad to comment on its original meaning while addressing the audience's immediate associations by tapping into ideas of big business, consumerism, commercialism, and middle class values that permeate twenty-first century societies. The desire within humans for individualism however is revealed in the individuality of each perfectly executed work. Each piece is unique, propelling the covers from an assembly-line product into a desirable artefact that speaks about its collector. With his signature observant skills and dry wit, Azad has once again captured the two opposing sides of material society – the need to conform versus the innate desire to be an individual – with the perfect execution and stunningly clear insight his audience has come to anticipate from him.



Azad Daniel Haris
Dope, Malaysia Boleh & .44 Magnum
182cm x 92cm x 16cm (each)
Auto paint on Perspex
2014

AHMAD SHUKRI MOHAMED

Open House “SOLD”



Ahmad Shukri Mohamed
Open House “SOLD”
211cm x 272cm
Mixed Media on Canvas and Salvaged Wood Panels
2014

Open House “SOLD” is a 2014 mixed media on canvas work by the acclaimed contemporary Malaysian artist Ahmad Shukri. Centred on a large figurative painting, visually it appears familiar and yet vastly different to avid followers of Shukri's prolific career. Shukri is known to be a keen observer of human nature, and *Open House “SOLD”* is a sharp parody on current social conditions and the effect of civilisation on the natural environment.

Open House “SOLD” is made up of a six-and-a-half foot square canvas with a wooden panel to the right. The background of the canvas is filled with a detailed landscape of a rainforest as is indigenous to Malaysia. Over this, Shukri paints a large figurative scene, depicting three adults and two children sitting around a table. This scene is the replica of a local 1950's advertisement poster, and shows all the races present in Malaysia: Malay, Indian, Chinese and European. It was this multi-racial overtone that initially drew the artist to the original image. As the five individuals sit around a table, they appear to be having tea together, and their interaction is natural and affable, presenting an idealised vision of the 1Malaysia concept for society. In this way, audiences can view *Open House “SOLD”* as a continuation of recent works such as *Hello! Obama Speaking...* and *Papan Hitam: Hari Pertama Sekolah Negaraku*, which also speak of local political and social issues in a serene presentation. Shukri's charming manner of putting across his views is well known, and fits in with his manner of being quietly persuasive rather than outwardly confrontational.

As the group speaks animatedly with each other, there is an informal party-like atmosphere to their gathering. Shukri subtly plants the question of what is the topic of their seemingly informal discussion in his viewers' minds. Now the viewer is almost voyeuristic in their appreciation of the work. Shukri likens this to the voyeuristic culture cultivated by the prevalence of social media in today's society. Sites such as Facebook and Instagram now allow open access into the inner lives of most people, and increasingly privacy is flouted as much as it once was protected. Friends and followers can log onto these sites and trawl

through updates of people they know briefly or not at all, and be presented with an often carefully scripted version of someone else's life. This phenomenon has been termed “social voyeurism” and is a by-product of the mass integration of technology into daily lives of today's population.

As a mixed media artist, layering is a crucial tool in Shukri's arsenal. Typically he layers paintings with collages and three-dimensional elements, but *Open House “SOLD”* relies more heavily on the layering of painted imagery to present his observations. Pre-civilisation, Malaysia would have been almost entirely made up of rainforest, and a fully detailed forest landscape is Shukri's vision of the original state of the environment. Adding people over this shows a visual of the current landscape of Malaysia; now the country is developed and hosts people of all races who co-exist. The yellow stain rising like a cloud over the right of the canvas speaks to the destructive feature of civilisation towards natural environments, an unavoidable reality as society develops. The wooden panel on the right has the word “SOLD”, giving rise to several connotations. With its poster inspired central imagery, *Open House “SOLD”* clearly has a link to pop art, which is sometimes seen as quite commercial due to its natural popularity and accessibility. “SOLD” reminds the viewer the original visual was used in advertising, therefore rendering it aspirational and an image used to sell products or an idea to a 1950s audience. Aesthetically, the use of the wooden panel is also typically Shukri, providing a strong link to his signature style given the fresh painterly visual of the main canvas.

Open House “SOLD” is a simple but fitting title for this new work which depicts a utopian scene of past life in Malaysia. Overall, the atmosphere of *Open House “SOLD”* slants more heavily towards a Malaysian flavour than other recent major works by the artist. Shukri's penchant for mixing pop elements with a local twist is highly attractive not only to Malaysian audiences, who have a deep affection for their culture and habits, but also to international viewers for his ability to aptly describe the scenes that constitute Malaysia's physical and intellectual landscapes.

“The background of each panel in *Bumi yang Berdarah* shows the literal devastation caused by bombing a city, and its inability to rebuild and move forward.”

Bumi yang Berdarah is a 2014 mixed media assemblage by up-and-coming artist Azrin Mhd. This three-dimensional triptych was created as a reaction to recent events in the Gaza Strip, and what the artist perceives to be a lack of reaction from international governing bodies and world superpower nations to the ongoing crisis.

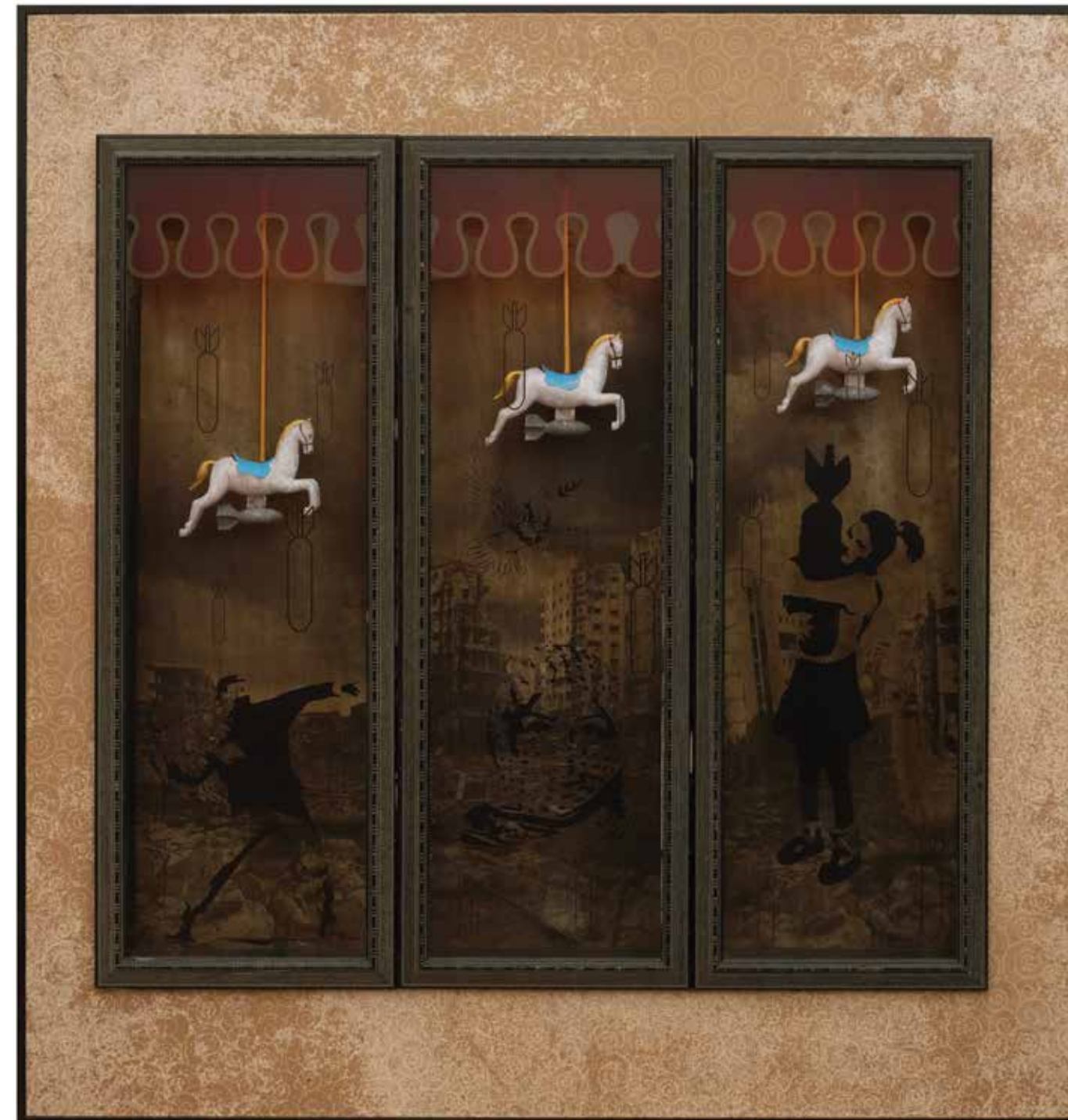
On July 8th 2014, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge in the Gaza Strip, a coastal strip of land bordering the Mediterranean, Egypt and Israel. Israel controls Gaza's airspace and territorial waters thus having the ability to restrict the movement of people and goods into Gaza. The import of construction material such as steel, cement and bricks has been barred due to the ability to manufacture weapons from these materials. Israel is considered an occupying power in Gaza, where they regularly launch military operations. Operation Protective Edge is the deadliest military operation to have taken place in Gaza since the 2008-2009 Gaza War, and has resulted in the death of hundreds of Palestinians, mostly civilians. The Israeli Defence Force justify their bombing of civilian-populated areas with claims that Hamas hides in these spaces, a pattern that is repeated every time the occupying force launches a campaign in Gaza. Due to the ban on importing construction material, rebuilding bombed buildings is close to impossible, and Gaza is left with the permanent appearance of being ravaged by war. The background of each panel in *Bumi yang Berdarah* shows the literal devastation caused by bombing a city, and its inability to rebuild and move forward. Azrin digitally prints scenes of the landscape of Gaza, littered with shells of bombed-out buildings and rubble. There has been notable silence from several high-profile international media outlets, such as the BBC, CNN and Fox News, on the effects of Operation Protective Edge on the Palestinians. Noticing this silence, Azrin attempts to use his work to explore the immediate and long-lasting visual dimensions of this strike, which appear to be absent from a large majority of official current accounts of events.

Across the top of each panel, Azrin has added a carnival-like bunting, whose festive associations are at odds with the connotations of destruction and despair cast by the background print. Matching these are the carousel horses floating across the center of *Bumi yang Berdarah*. The left canvas features a full horse, while the center and right

canvases share a horse that has been split in half. Azrin prints his horses three-dimensionally, a new technique he began experimenting with in 2014, as seen in his set of works *Bila Pandangan Mata Hati Tertutup #1-#4*. Historically, horses have regularly been used in warfare; Azrin makes this connotation by painting his horse in colours suggestive of a military animal. The horses seem to be suspended in an up and down movement, suggestive of the actual movement of carousels. In this way, Azrin speaks to the unending cycle of violence in the Middle East, likening it to a game controlled by a single source. This allegory raises the question: which power is the source constantly fuelling this unrest, and for what reasons? By raising this discourse, Azrin encourages his audience not only to broaden their knowledge on the Gaza situation, but also to analyze information from news sources or international governing bodies before drawing conclusions.

Azrin is known for composing his three-dimensional assemblages in the form of dioramas, and uses this format again here in *Bumi yang Berdarah*. He encases the work with a Perspex sheet overlaid with digital prints of objects associated with war. Images of weapons, aircraft and skulls provide strong associations with combat and act as palpable visual markers of cause and effect.

The term “war horse” is used to refer to soldiers or politicians who have fought several campaigns, and is an apt title for a work that speaks about an ongoing crisis. Although Azrin usually focuses on Malaysian issues, this time he was struck by what he deems a lack of sensitivity demonstrated towards civilians caught in the crossfire in Gaza. He comments on the expectation for world superpowers and governing bodies, particularly the United Nations and NATO, to stand up for the rights of civilians in accordance with their official charters. *Bumi yang Berdarah* is a personal analysis of Middle East conflict, and an attempt by the artist to resolve his own understandings of the reactions he sees. As a contemporary artist, he views his responsibility in disseminating information and encouraging discourse, and by hand-fabricating all the elements within this striking and thought-provoking assemblage, this has allowed him to tailor his message with a specificity that allows it to resonate within his audience long after viewing *Bumi yang Berdarah*.



Azrin Mohd
 Bumi Yang Berdarah
 115cm x 218cm x 10cm (Diptych)
 Mixed Media - 3D Printing, Bitumen, acrylic paint, ABS
 plastic and digital print on canvas
 2014

Alhamdulillah is a mixed media on canvas work by popular contemporary artist Mohd Nor Mahmud, or as he is popularly known, Matnor. Following on from his recent series *Siri Rasa Bertuhan*, this five-panel work continues Matnor's studies into the link between craft and cultures in eastern states of Peninsula Malaysia.

Understanding the traditions of Kelantan, where Matnor has lived most of his life, is essential to understanding not only his artistic practice but also the importance of his work within a contemporary Malaysian framework. Kelantan is often referred to as the 'cradle of Malaysian culture' due to its ability to preserve and maintain Malay culture. Both artisan crafts, such as Songket weaving, silversmithing and woodworking, as well as performance arts such as wayang kulit and dikir barat is still prevalent in the state today. At the same time, Kelantan is known for being a strongly religious Islamic state. *Alhamdulillah* was created as part of a study into these two parts of Kelantanese identity: the definition of the Malays as an ethno-religious community, and the description of Malay culture via highly recognisable cultural iconography.

A triptych, *Alhamdulillah* has seven columns of different colour breaking up the length of the work. Together they form a vibrant, textural background. The textures on *Alhamdulillah* are created via Matnor's signature style of mixing acrylic, sawdust and glue into a thick paste, which he primes over his canvas. The artist then works pattern and detail into the paste using antique batik chops, from his carefully curated collection of antique chops. Matnor's discussion on Malay culture in contemporary times is beautifully exemplified by this technique of organising the traditional floral patterns in entirely new presentations. The grainy surface of the canvas itself causes an abstraction within the motifs, infusing the familiar floral representations with an altogether fresh aesthetic.

Laid over the textural batik-inspired background in Arabic calligraphy is the phrase Alhamdu Lillahi Rabbi 'Alamin (All the praises be to Allah, The Lord of the 'Alamin). The first verse of the first Surah of the Quran, it is one of the sentences most commonly repeated by Muslims in their daily lives. Combining it with a highly Malay motif, Matnor comments on the deep intertwinement of religion within the Malay culture, particularly in the philosophical eastern states of Peninsula Malaysia. Matnor is part of the growing contemporary calligraphy movement in Malaysian art, and his ability to use calligraphy as a meaningful symbol instead of simply as a mere pattern speaks about the state of contemporary society. Interestingly despite the obviously Islamic connotations of Arabic calligraphy, Matnor's work attracts audiences across all religious and cultural groups. This can be seen as a reflection of the infusion of Malay communities into urban environments, which is a direct result of government policies aimed at educating the rural communities. As such, *Alhamdulillah* demonstrates the role of the Malays economically and culturally in twenty-first century Malaysia.

Matnor's relevance within Malaysian art today lies in his ability to juxtapose craft traditions and innovation. While his works appear serene and almost typically Malay, they are the result of a highly dynamic, self-discovered process, resulting in an extremely original portfolio of work. *Alhamdulillah* fulfils all the expectations of a mixed media work in a contemporary Asian society; combining the formal aspects of art creation with experimentation to speak about the contradictions of convention today. The inclusion of a key Islamic phrase roots the work firmly in discussions of ethno-religious Malay identity, describing the Malay culture in a manner that appeals to a wide cross section of Malaysian audiences.



“Matnor is part of the growing contemporary calligraphy movement in Malaysian art, and his ability to use calligraphy as a meaningful symbol instead of simply as a mere pattern speaks about the state of contemporary society.”

Mat Noor Mahmud
Alhamdulillah
142cm x 412cm (Triptych)
Acrylic on sawdust on canvas
2014

UMIBAIZURAH MAHIR ISMAIL

Dinner with Someone...?

The observational quality of Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail's personality has led to a thread of works documenting human characteristics running through her successful ceramic practice. Indeed, the highly appealing, multi-layered characteristics of her ceramic artifacts themselves seem to understand the nature of human desire, cementing the idea that Umi, as she is popularly known, is well-versed in the wants of her audience, as demonstrated in her latest works *Dinner with someone...?*

Dinner with someone...? forms the basis of a new series of works for Umi, through which she aims to make distinctions between the natures of humans and animals. While genetically animals themselves, humans are said to be better than animals due to the gift of self-consciousness. A deeply spiritual soul, Umi aims to understand the meaning behind this statement, and utilize it to further her own personal growth. While animals tend to busy themselves with fulfilling the basic requirements of living, the evolution of man and society has led humans to constantly pursue superfluous desires. Possibly a result of the hold consumerism has on societies of the twenty-first century, these pursuits often give way to the worse sides of human nature to emerge, exaggerating the wickedness which is inherent in mankind. Good can only conquer evil through the acknowledgement of both sides within a person, and through her discussions on the duality of human nature, Umi reveals the possibility for redemption.

The basis of *Dinner with someone...?* is a series of ceramic busts. Umi casts the basic bust form out of her regular plaster-of-paris and clay mold techniques, subsequently deforming the faces by hand. Pulling out the noses and lips, she exaggerates certain features until the faces themselves border on grotesque. The artist is known to have affection for creating hybrids or distorted forms within her artifacts, using it as a way to amplify the basic characteristics she studies. This penchant for making impressions over perfect real human bodies is continued in the abstract organic shape the head is perched on, which is a distorted representation of the human figure. Her skills as a ceramist are shown in the layers and textures covering the face and neck of her busts. Layering several detailed colourful

finishes on the ceramic is a signature finish for Umi, and a testament to her thorough understanding of the medium. Each dye or decal requires an exact temperature and length of time in the kiln; knowledge of this process is the end result of several years of dedicated experimentation.

Each bust has a plump ceramic bird perched on its head, signifying freedom and a link between humans and animals. Umi appreciates the character of the bird, which she sees as a constant presence in daily life, as careful and practical, and by placing a bird on the top of her work suggests these characteristics are ones that should be closely followed and emulated.

The busts are fixed on wooden pedestals, which appear to be antique cabinets. In reality, they are hand-made by Umi specifically for *Dinner with someone...?* from salvaged wood. By using the same stand for the different busts, she introduces a unifying element. The stands are all on wheels, reminding viewers who are familiar with her career of the successful earlier *Toy* series. The element of antique furniture roots the work in a framework of Malaysian tradition, yet the wheels point to the contemporary evolutions of life continuously moving forward.

Umi is recognized as one of the foremost ceramic artists in Malaysia, and displays her work not only locally but also in Japan, Singapore and Germany. Her dedication to her craft enables her to mix her philosophical insights with a feminine air of whimsy, leading to perfectly pretty and tightly detailed ceramic artifacts such as *Dinner with someone...?* Her work is a wonderful example of artists understanding themselves intellectually and visually, and transmitting that to their works, and in this way she establishes a highly specific connection with her audience.





Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail
 Dinner with Someone...?
 142cm x 37cm x 37cm (each)
 Mixed Media-Stoneware procelain
 transfer image flower meta, rubber rish on
 wood cabinet with wheel
 2014

AL-KHUZAIRIE BIN ALI

The Contender

>>

Al-Khuzairie bin Ali
The Contender
Mixed Media - Ceramics and Stoneware
185cm x 124cm x 10cm
2014

Animal figures are among the earliest known representations in art, as evidenced by the painted bison in the caves of Lascaux or early illustrations of animal heads by the Ancient Egyptians. These early representations were a mix of realism by way of direct observation, mixed with the essence of the creature's significance to the culture depicting it. In this way, wildlife art has always commented in some form or another on the relationship between man and animals, often giving clues to the values that societies or individuals desire or admire, as can be seen in Al-Khuzairie bin Ali's latest work, *The Contender*.

The Contender is part of Al-Khuzairie's recent body of works, which explore the relationship between man and animals through several views, such as conservation and the environment. Mass migrations from rural environments into urban areas due to the rapidly developing landscape of Malaysian society naturally lead to a widening in the gulf between humans and nature. Al-Khuzairie feels a need to strike interest in an urban audience on wildlife, given the disconnect that might exist due to increasingly different environments. With *The Contender*, he looks at the popularity of the horse, as corroborated by its frequent use in brand imageries. The artist wonders what the reasons are that the horse as a creature is aspirational for people, and feels the answer lies in the majesty of its character. Traits associated with the horse are strength, energy and dignity, all of which humans strive to achieve for themselves. Al-Khuzairie's appreciation of the animal is shown in his composition of the horse; it rears up on its hind legs, standing tall with a great presence. Infusing his ceramic horse with magnificence, he translates it into an object to motivate and stir aspiration within his viewer.

As with his earlier works, the main area of *The Contender*

is filled solely with a ceramic skeleton of the animal Al-Khuzairie is discussing; in this case, a horse. The individual bones forming the skeleton are interspersed with a series of mechanical parts, establishing a subtle contrast between the smoothness of sculptural ceramic bones and an industrial atmosphere resulting from the mechanical elements. Al-Khuzairie achieves this through a mix of cast stoneware and hand built techniques. As a medium, ceramics naturally lend themselves to industrial depictions given their approval as a utilitarian trade material. Finishing the stoneware in white gives a natural impression of bleached bone, masking the mechanical elements slightly from a distance, thus rendering the object instantly recognisable to audiences. The deep, dulled gold touches speak to the majesty of the animal's innate characteristics the artist wishes to convey. Fragility is innate in ceramics, which satisfies the delicacy of the bleached bone aesthetic with which the viewer is presented.

Ceramics are known to be temperamental in the making process, and achieving a quietly perfect finish to his complex piece speaks highly of Al-Khuzairie's quick mastery of his tricky medium.

His ability to elevate the genre of wildlife art from mere reportage into a commentary on the changes he witnesses in the environment and society, as a result of government policies creating economic success leading to urban migrations among the Malaysian population, speaks to a philosophical streak inherent in artists from the East Coast. Simultaneously personal yet narrative of the changes within society, *The Contender* encapsulates a truly contemporary presentation of a highly traditional process in a beautiful finish.



Acknowledgements

The gallery would like to thank the following individuals, without whom this publication would not have been possible:

- the artists
- ahmad**fuad**osman
 - ahmad**shukri**
 - al-**khuzairi**ebinali
 - alinurazmal**yusoff**
 - annabell**eng
 - azad**daniel
 - azrin**mohd
 - eng**hweechu**
 - fadli**yusoff
 - fauzin**mustafa
 - goh**chaiseng**
 - haafiz**shahimi
 - hamir**soib
 - husin**hourmain
 - masnoor**ramli
 - matnor**mahmud
 - mohd**fazli**othman
 - raja**loperasydi**
 - shooshie**sulaiman
 - suhaimi**fadzir
 - umibaizurah**mahirismail
 - tan**chinkuan**
 - zulkifli**yusoff

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