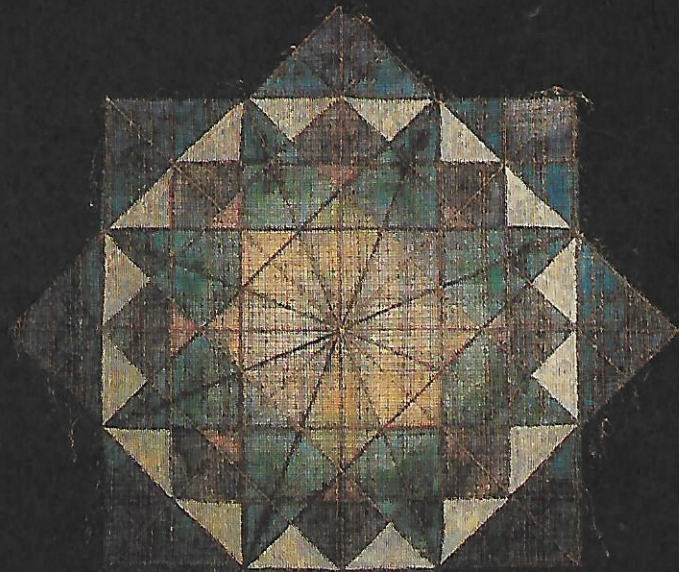


KEARAH

T A U H I D



#Surrain

U A I

"God is light of the Heavens and the Earth"
.....(*Sura Al Nur — the H. Quran*).

KEARAH TAUHID

Recent works by Sulaiman Hj. Esa
Australian High Commission
Jalan Yap Kwan Seng, Kuala Lumpur
2 April — 8 April '84.



*This exhibition is being sponsored by
Hong Leong Assurance Sdn. Bhd.*

“KEARAH TAUHID” — AN OVERVIEW

Bergson once delineated experience as being of two dimensions, the qualitative and the intellectual. The qualitative by its nature is tangible and at times inexplicable even through the process of logic or mathematics.

Yet it is the quintessence of one's neurology when the whole neural system and cognition combines to allow for the emanation of responses of the possible kind. It is often said that aesthetic objects derived in this manner can be non — discursive, insurpassable and at times non — repeatable. The intellectual on the other hand is the ordinary, in the sense that it can be of use in daily life such as when mathematics and language are of practical use. Anything of this nature can thereby lead to formulae and are therefore repeatable or duplicable. By this argument, art that is bred purely from the intellectual dimension alone can lack quality and can be abundant in quantity if some forms of formulae can be theorised and practised. However as art is the product of both dimensions, it is only when there is an assertion of the qualitative dimension of experience that it becomes significant

Colonisation of the mind is rampant to-day when knowledge is sought without the values attached to such knowledge being sieved and filtered. Thus, in an area that is fraught with values such as art, the more influential theories, and the more intellectual stances are dispersed louder and wider and become more popular. Thus, the growth of western centric postures among artists who have among other things seldom come into contact with philosophic works of Bergson, Schiller, Plato, Santayana etc. and have at times never even been to the west. This happens despite the fact that western artists have been turning to Zen, Tao, Hindu and Islamic philosophy in order to achieve greater meaning. This truly is indicative of the colonisation of the mind and the creation of an inferiority syndrome when Paris, London and New York

are the centres of art and that we are in the periphery. It is in this light that I view Sulaiman Esa's works as significant as after having visited and arrived in London, Paris and New York, and after having studied Tao and Zen, he realises that his centre of the universe is but the soil beneath his own two feet. It is the philosophy (regional and religious in nature) of this country that is pertinent and meaningful to him and will erode away the dissonances that can prevail in himself and his works.

It is also interesting to note that after the National Cultural Congress of 1971, Sulaiman persisted with the 'Avante Garde' approach as typified by his works on simultaneous contrasts, hardedge and conceptualism (Mystical Reality). Yet his present works seem to endorse the conclusion of the Congress. I would prefer to conclude that his present works are not the result of his turning to the conclusion of the Congress and adopting them as stances but are the end results of his meanderings and search for meaning and order. Having come to this present stage he realises that what he sought out and what he has implicitly worked out are compatible with the findings of the Congress. Within this context it can be implied that what was mooted out during the Congress can be of significance and meaning despite its supposed biasness.

His pre occupation with Islamic Art and philosophy creates the realisation within him that man is but a small element within the vastness of space and thinking that God has made possible. Oscar Wilde once said that in painting good landscapes the artist has often perfected what lacks in nature which in a way is a typical posture of secularism. Much of western art is built round such secular thinking based on the supremacy of man over nature. In Islamic philosophy and most of Eastern philosophy such egoticism is minimised. The role of the artist is subservient to nature, to society and to

God. In essence the artist is but an individual serving the 'ummah' and the Almighty. The acceptance of divine intuition as an important will of God cannot help but render works done within this framework, spiritual and intangible and are thereby inexplicable from the point of view of logic and the psychology of thinking. Such a framework to Collingwood within a strong intellectual bias, is magico-religious in orientation and since to him religion is useful in daily life, it is but 'craft'. On the other hand it is often said that art looked at in Collingwood's manner is but an exterioriation and can only be a poor reflection of the actual interioration of felt and intrinsic experiences. When the 'inner' is truly reflected by the 'outer', then the outer is no longer a poor reflection, it is indeed meaning. With the concept of NUR (light that symbolises the ultimate energy which not only illuminates but can also destroy and dematerialise), the use of gold and silver threads and manipulations of colour pigments, to give a sensation of light, Sulaiman has successfully tried to reflect the inner spirit and beauty of faith and love. In a way this falls within the ambience of what Bergson called 'qualitative' and ought prove to be significant and superior:

However as meaning has to be contextual rather than be purely general or universal, Sulaiman's use of bamboo, silver and gold thread as can be found in the crafts of the region adds extra meaning in the sense that meaning is enhanced by such use of traditional material as there is added contextual relevance. Order is derived from his reference to sufi geometry and Islamic patterns. In this regard Nader Adalan and Laleh Bakhtiar stipulated that:

"The concept of geometric pattern is based on the number 1, and its generation in the world, where geometric shapes and patterns abound. These shapes as the personality of numbers, are understood by traditional man as aspects of the multiplicity of the Creator. As number, the concept is

based on symmetry, the correspondance in size, shape, and relative positions of parts in the whole; bilateral symmetry, divisible by a single plane or divisible into two similar halves by either of two planes passing through the axis at right angles to each other; radial symmetry, divisible into equal symmetrical portions by any of three or more planes passing through the axis. In this way, the concept relates to the cosmic processes characterised by extension in all directions, by boundless, any by infinite divisibility"

Amidst all these there finally arises question of temporal relevance and whether Sulaiman's works can truly be considered modern. His use of paper form merely as a base or 'supporting surface' to a dynamic, sensitive, malleable and pulplable substance to be worked at and fashioned into various kinds of surfaces structure, form, shapes, colour, texture etc is contemporary and modern. His concentration on geometric patterns and the withdrawing away from representation leading to pure forms has temporal relevance in the sense that such a framework is timeless. His works are therefore not only modern, but they are also different and yet relevant. In short each work as he himself aptly puts it 'is a confluence; a synthesis between the physical, tangible and identifiable elements of Malaysian crafts and culture with the metaphors and aesthetics of Islamic Art'

I look forward eagerly for further development and other future works of Sulaiman Esa.

Dr. Mohd. Ahmad Hj. Hashim
Head
School of Art and Design
I.T.M. Shah Alam.

SULAIMAN HJ. ESA — TOWARDS AN ISLAMIC CONCEPT IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Sulaiman Esa has for many years been accepted as one of Malaysia's most serious and also most innovative artists. It is thus worthwhile to begin this statement with a brief description of his development as an artist over the last decade or so. What have been the main forces and ideas, the outstanding influences and happenings which have shaped the Sulaiman of the present?

Right from the time of his return from art studies in England at the end of the sixties, Sulaiman, along with a number of other artists had begun to search for forms and concepts of art more suited to the local sensitivities and cultural background than were those of modern Western art. At first this thrust was fairly vague in its direction, but the National Culture Congress of 1971 acted both as a spur and as a more specific guideline. What had been an intuitive longing was now part of a nationwide movement.

Sulaiman's first show which attempted to manifest this new approach was 'Mystical Reality', for which he teamed up with his colleague and friend Piyadasa. Their lengthy statement rejected Western art concepts in no uncertain terms, and proposed a more spiritual base, in keeping with Eastern culture. It was unfortunate, perhaps, that their main source of reference, Zen Buddhism, was a philosophy almost as alien to Malaysians as Western philosophy. The works were also highly esoteric, and without digesting the written manifesto first, one would not have made much sense of them. It was, however at least a forceful challenge, which the Malaysian art world could not afford to ignore.

Sulaiman's interest in local art crafts began to develop during the second half of the seventies, and once again a timely seminar — the Seminar on the Peribumi (Indigenous) Heritage, held by the School of Art and Design I.T.M. in 1979 — reinforced his own thinking, and at the same time

strengthened a nation-wide tendency. The keynote address by Professor Awang Had Salleh in particular impressed him: Professor Awang Had lamented the fact that to date there seemed to be a notable lack of continuity in Malaysian arts — there was simply no connection between the traditional arts (ie the rich heritage of craft work) and modern art.

Soon after this Sulaiman began to pay deeper attention to Islam, as one important, yet so far somewhat neglected facet of the Malaysian cultural heritage. Once more this was part of a general trend, and many seminars have been held locally since the beginning of the eighties on various aspects of Islam — philosophy, culture, the Islamization of knowledge and of various professional fields. In a broader context this surge of interest is also connected to the worldwide reawakening of Islam.

Whilst he was perhaps initially drawn towards Islam on a purely intellectual basis, he evidently began to feel more and more that there was a philosophy and a complete way of life that was totally satisfying. Its scope was far-reaching, and it could be perfectly meaningful and clearly understood at many different levels. Not only was the intellect satisfied, but mind, heart and spirit were in perfect harmony.

Sulaiman saw that Islam could, first of all, provide an eminently suitable concept of the role of art — art and the artist — in society. Art should be created for the benefit of the 'ummah' (society) and thus the Western concept of the artist being free to 'do his own thing' without any sense of responsibility to his society is unacceptable. The artist should not try to be different just for the sake of change, nor should he aim merely to project his own ego, he should not get so carried away with his concepts and techniques that he neglects to make his work comprehensible to the majority of the public. In the Islamic view, elitist art is, at best, useless.

In following the Islamic way, the artist not only has a responsibility to bear, but he has much to gain in terms of possibilities of personal development, and thus also possibilities of achievement, both as an artist and as an individual. The Islamic artist is supposed to try to express not merely his personal ideas or feelings, nor even ideas whose significance is restricted to his own society, but ideas which are meaningful to mankind, and of course in keeping with Islam, which is itself a universal religion.

His personal understanding, interpretations and sensitivities contribute towards the expression of something far greater than could ever be conceived by an individual human being. Far from being overshadowed or belittled, the individual artist is, in this way, ennobled and immensely enriched. His contribution is far greater, and his reward, too, commensurately greater. Furthermore, the work of art itself will be comprehensible and meaningful at all three levels — to the individual, to the people in the same community as the artist, and to people everywhere.

Certain Islamic concepts have also been of particular interest to Sulaiman, and constitute the main emphasis in his work. The first of these is the central concept of Islam, that of 'tauhid' — the unity of God. The aspect of this concept that seem most significant to him at this juncture is 'unity in multiplicity, multiplicity in unity'. This quality of Allah the One, Indivisible yet possessing many attributes, is reflected in the cosmos created by Him, as well as in the many individual parts of the cosmos.

Sulaiman has chosen to take the traditional form — the abstract pattern — as a vehicle to express this concept. Far from being a limited form (as it seem to many Western eyes), Sulaiman sees in it an opportunity to escape from the limitations of representational art, and create pure form, with

carefully balanced tensions, and dynamic equilibrium. The form will reflect the inner-self, and this in turn will have its reflection in the universe or cosmos, of which it is one of the individual units. In this connection, Sulaiman has also been stimulated by the theory of numbers relating to Islamic cosmology.

The other concept which has become a focal point in Sulaiman's work is that of 'Nur' (light), symbolizing the Ultimate Energy, which can illuminate (with knowledge and understanding), and can also dematerialize or destroy (the mundane or less important characteristics of form). In his work Sulaiman includes actual light, through the use of gold and silver threads which are literally interwoven into the entire piece, delicately criss-crossing in every direction. Secondly, he resorts to manipulation of colour to produce sensation of light.

These are the philosophical sources of inspiration. Beside them, on a much more mundane level (but in no way incompatible, in the Islamic view), is the inspiration from the materials and techniques employed to create the works.

The first of these takes us back to the thread of local crafts — the technique of weaving, especially the form which uses strips split bamboo or dried screwpine leaves to make mats, house walls and a host of other items. Weaving, by its very nature, lends itself to the creation of geometric patterns.

Secondly, the material: paper. Again, this is something which is present in the indigenous culture, being employed to make kites (wau). Sulaiman is also familiar with the use of paper for the walls of Japanese houses. In both these forms he has been entranced by the fragility, the relative impermanence of the material, its light, ethereal quality. Then, while he was in the United States for further studies at the turn of this

decade, he was introduced to a new craft, that of papermaking. He discovered that paper can be far more than just a smooth, ready-made surface for applying pigment — working with the soft pulp, he discovered it to be sensitive, malleable, dynamic, ready to be shaped and textured in any way the artist wished. It was the challenge of this new-found material that was the final inspiration in his work.

If it has been felt useful here to write at some length on Sulaiman's intellectual/artistic development, it does not in any way imply that his work cannot speak for itself. His works indeed speak clearly and movingly of a well-formed concept and a total commitment. Here is an artist who, whilst his finger has always been on the pulse of not only contemporary Malaysians, but also of contemporary man, has worked towards and achieved a unique personal style with which to express his own understanding of universal concepts.

Animah Syed Mohamed
Senior Lecturer
School of Art and Design, I.T.M.

COMMENTS/STATEMENTS OF WORKS BY SULAIMAN ESA

"Sulaiman Esa states that his involvement in art symbolises a sacred path towards truth. The artist has been following a consistent line of direction. Together with Piyadasa, Sulaiman injected excitement into Malaysian art of the seventies, with thought-provoking works, often esoteric. His recent works deal with the spirit of matter through the use of 'new' material/medium"

.....*Syed Ahmad Jamal from the catalogue National Invitation Exhibition*

"Sulaiman Esa devotes his energy to colour and woven linear forms in handmade paper and stiff painted strips of paper. A grid, systematic or subtle, underlies his honest geometric forms which seem to sing of his heritage as a Malaysian. He unites symbols with sophisticated pattern movements to explore the relationships that exist between paper and painting, printmaking, and sculpture. In the end all the crucial elements of these areas become a uniquely new visual expression, because of Mr. Esa's abilities to extend boundaries with the flexible surfaces"

.....*Helen C Frederich, guest curator from the catalogue 'Works on Paper' (1981 Travelling Show), of Maryland State Arts Council Baltimore, USA.*

"Sulaiman Esa, a Malaysian on leave from the MARA Institute of Technology, where he was head of Fine Art Dept. in the School of Art and Design, brings to his work traditional weaving techniques with handmade paper, bamboo, canvas and beads.

His works are icon, spiritual and symbolic. The Arabic names underscore his intent: Kaaba, the holy shrine of

Mecca; Nur, the divine light; Maghrib and Zuhur, the Muslim prayers for twilight and afternoon. He has deliberately introduced 'craft art' into the realm of 'fine art' to stress his belief that the two cannot be separated as the Western tradition supposes"

.....*Victoria Gellner, art critic from C. Grimaldi's Gallery, Baltimore, USA.*

"Certain Islamic concepts have also been of particular interest to Sulaiman and constitute the main emphasis in his work. The first of these is the central concept of Islam, that of 'tauhid' — the unity of God. The aspect of this concept that seems most significant to him at this juncture is 'unity in multiplicity, a multiplicity in unity'. This quality of Allah the One, indivisible yet possessing many attributes, is reflected in the cosmos created by Him, as well as in the many individual parts of that cosmos.

Sulaiman has chosen to take traditional form — the abstract pattern — as a vehicle to express this concept. Far from being a limited form (as it seems to many Western eyes), Sulaiman sees it to an opportunity to escape from the limitations of representational art, and create pure form with carefully balanced tensions, dynamic equilibrium. The forms will reflect the inner self and this in turn will have its reflection in the universe or cosmos. In this connection, Sulaiman has also been stimulated by the theory of numbers relating to Islamic cosmology"

.....*Animah Syed Mohamed Senior lecturer in the Dept. of Liberal Studies KSSR, ITM.*

"The most interesting exhibits by far are those by Sulaiman Esa. Basically he is a colourist who in the past had taken an intellectual stance like probing into simultaneous contrast, hard edge and Mystical Reality (with Piyadasa). His last major work — 'Waiting for Godot' (1977) indicated his coming to a cross-roads and found him grappling with the dichotomy of Eastern spiritual thought and Western secularism resulting in the presentation of a nude in front of an Islamic pattern.

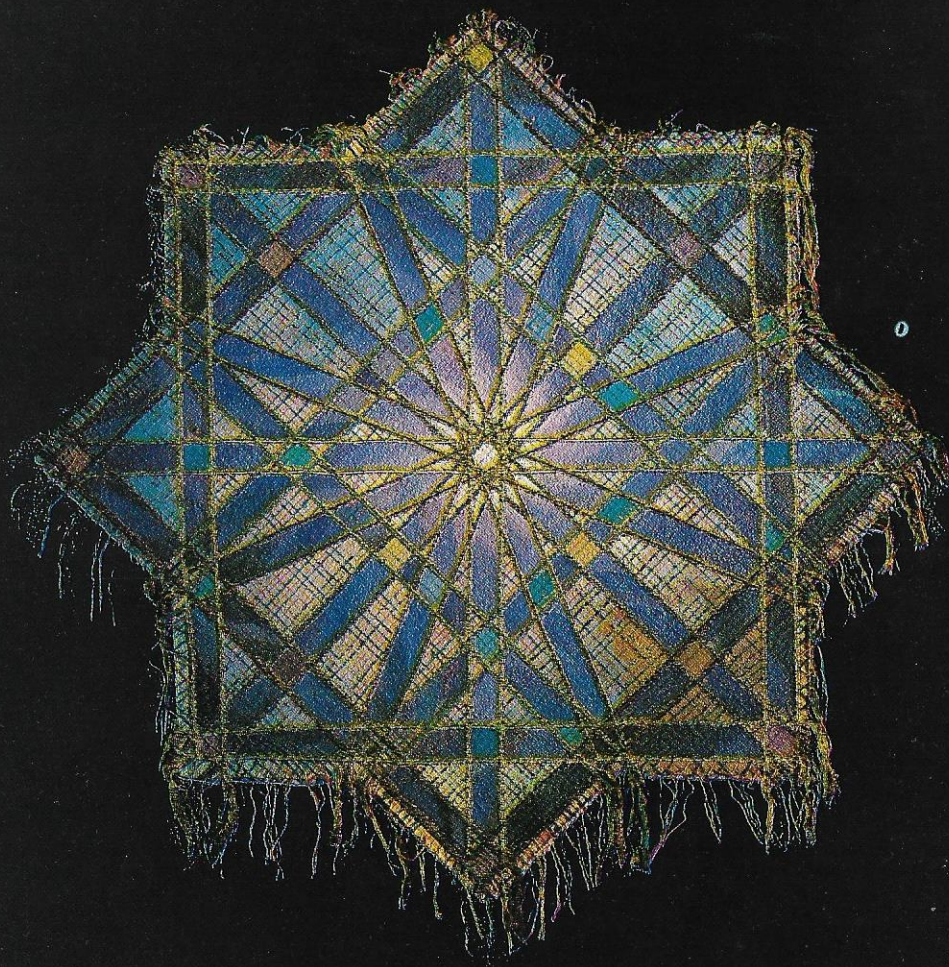
His works in this exhibition indicate he has almost rejected Western-centric values and he is going for Islamic concepts. While the shape and the tussle of his self-made paper cannot help but remind us of 'waus' and kites, his pattern seem to resonate with sufi geometry. His colours symbolise the emergence of the supreme light of Nur. Despite the constrain of having to grapple with the lowest form of light (reflected by pigments) to symbolise the purest form of Nur, he has shown that, unlike other artists of the day, he has not rested on his laurels and still searching and experimenting. As a colourist, he is without rival in the Malaysian Art today.

.....*Dr. Mohd. Ahmad Hj Hashim an article from NST Oct 4 1983.*

"Sulaiman Esa carries "Nur" perceptions a step further, by incorporating with symbolic geometric shapes material substances of gold and silvery threads as 'actual light'. The tracery pattern of gold and silver threads and yarns is developed on a field structured from the circle, which is "the archetypal governing basis for all geometric shapes that unfold within it" (Critchlow). Three primary shapes — the triangle, the hexagon and the square — evolve from an arrangement of tangential circles, and tessellations from them

give Islamic Art mathematical foundational structure which supports "the intuitive insights that characterise all true art". For contextual significant, Sulaiman Esa relates his art form to the traditional woven crafts of "songkets". The message is directly felt, and the compulsive biomorphic computations of geometric shapes suggested within the major field, reinstate, as it were, the law of creation "through revealed forms which, while externally bound and limited, open up inwardly towards the Boundless..... from the relative to the Absolute, from the finite to the Infinite, from multiplicity to Unity" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr).

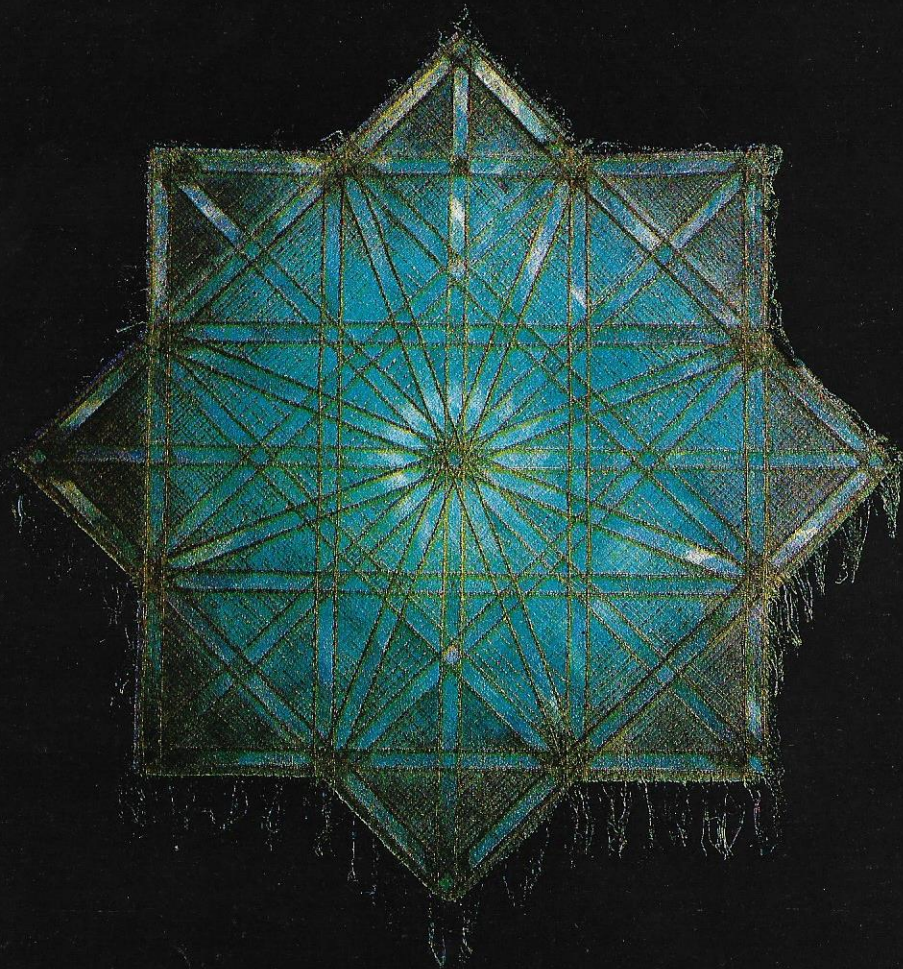
.....*Yeoh Jin Leng from catalogue American Experience: Malaysian Images.*



Islamic Art is: "a means of relating MULTIPLICITY to unity by means of mathematical forms which are seen, not as mental abstractions, but as Reflections of the celestial archetypes within both THE COSMOS and the MINDS and SOULS of MEN"

.....Titus Burckhardt (*'Art and Islam' Language and Meaning*)

Fairuz 1 1984
Acrylic, dye, yarn, hand-made paper
167cm x 167cm



"The study of the geometric patterns in Islamic Art is the key to the understanding of many aspects of Islamic civilisation and also the Reality which both surrounds and transcends MAN"

..... *Titus Burckhardt ('Art of Islam' Language and Meaning)*

Fairuz 2 1983
Acrylic, dye, yarn, hand-made paper
76cm x 76cm



"The visible world was made to correspond to the world
invisible and there is nothing in this world but is a symbol of
something in that other world"

.....*Al Ghazali (Ihya.)*

Zamrud 1983
Acrylic, dye, yarn, bamboo, hand-made paper
123cm x 210cm



SULAIMAN ESA

Biography:

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <p>1941 — Born in Johor Bharu, Johor.</p> <p>1962-66 — Studies at the Hornsey College of Art, London.</p> <p>— Awarded the Diploma in Art and Design</p> <p>1967 — Post-Graduate Course in Print-making at the Hornsey College of Art (under Michael Rothenstein)</p> <p>1968 — Further study in Print-making at the 'Atelier 17' Paris (under S.W. Hayter)</p> <p>1969 — Appointed Designer at DBP, KL</p> <p>1970 — Appointed Lecturer at the School of Art and Design, ITM.</p> <p>1974-75 — Awarded the Italian scholarship to study Costume Design at Academia de Roma, Rome, Italy.</p> <p>1979 — Awarded ITM scholarship to further studies at Maryland College of Art, Baltimore, USA.</p> | <p>1981 — Awarded the Master in Fine Art</p> <p>1982 — Appointed Senior Lecturer at the School of Art and Design, ITM.</p> <p>Exhibitions:</p> <p>1969-70 — Travelling Exhibition of Malaysian Art to Australia and New Zealand</p> <p>— Salon Malaysia, National Art Gallery, KL</p> <p>1970 — Experiment 70 sponsored by Gallery II</p> <p>— First Poets-Painters Exhibition, KL</p> <p>1971 — "Situasi Baru" Kuala Lumpur</p> <p>— "Poets and Painters" DBP., Kuala Lumpur</p> <p>1972 — ASEAN Art Show Singapore.</p> <p>— "Personal Choice" National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.</p> <p>— Annual Invitation Art Show, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur</p> <p>— "Malaysian Landscape" National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur.</p> <p>— "Dokumentasi 72," Samat Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.</p> | <p>1973 — "Man and His World," National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur.</p> <p>1974 — ASEAN Exhibition, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok, Jakarta, Manila.</p> <p>— "Mystical Reality," Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.</p> <p>1977 — "Painting & Graphic Art Malaysia," National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.</p> <p>1978 — "Malaysian Art, 1965-78," Commonwealth Institute, London.</p> <p>1979 — "Salon Malaysia," National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.</p> <p>1980 — ASEAN Exhibition, Jakarta. Contemporary Asian Art, Fukuoka, Japan.</p> <p>1981 — "Works on Paper," City Hall Courtyard Galleries, Baltimore, USA.</p> <p>— "Works on Paper," The Goldman Fine Art Gallery, Washington, DC, USA.</p> <p>— Painting Exhibition, C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, USA.</p> |
|--|---|--|

- "Works on paper,"
Kanagawa Prefectural
Museum, Yokohama, Japan.
- Art Show, Hiratsuka City
Museum, Japan.
- Graduate Exhibition,
Maryland Institute College of
Art Baltimore.

Awards:

- 1972 — First Prize "Man and His
World" National Art Gallery
Kuala Lumpur.
- 1977 — Minor Prize, Print Section,
"Open Art Show," National
Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

- 1982 — "25 Years of Malaysian Art,"
National Art Gallery
Kuala Lumpur.
- Print Show, National Art
Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

- 1983 — "Titian 1," by Malaysian
Artists Association National
Museum Art Gallery
Singapore.
- Open National Art Show,
National Art Gallery
Kuala Lumpur.
- "Viva La Palestine," City Hall,
Kuala Lumpur.
- 2nd Asian Art Biennale,
Bangladesh.
- "Art works on paper,"
Manila.

- 1984 — "American Experiences:
Malaysian Images,"
American Embassy,
Kuala Lumpur.

Acknowledgement

Y.B. Datuk Seri Adib Adam
Australian High Commission
En. Tajuddin Ismail
Dr. Mohd. Ahmad Hj Hashim
Puan Animah Syed Mohammad
En. Zulkifli Hj Abidin
Duke Studio KL
En. Mohammad Ahmad
Aini Sanusi
Tengku Asri
Tuan Hj. Omar Basree

