



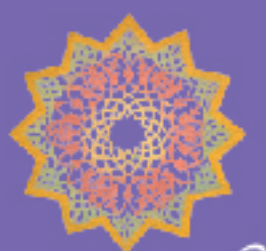
Raja'ah

SENI, IDEA DAN KREATIVITI SULAIMAN ESA dari 1950-an - 2011
ART, IDEA AND CREATIVITY of SULAIMAN ESA from 1950's - 2011



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Raja'ah:

Seni, Idea dan Kreativiti Sulaiman Esa dari 1950-an - 2011
Art, Idea and Creativity of Sulaiman Esa from 1950's - 2011

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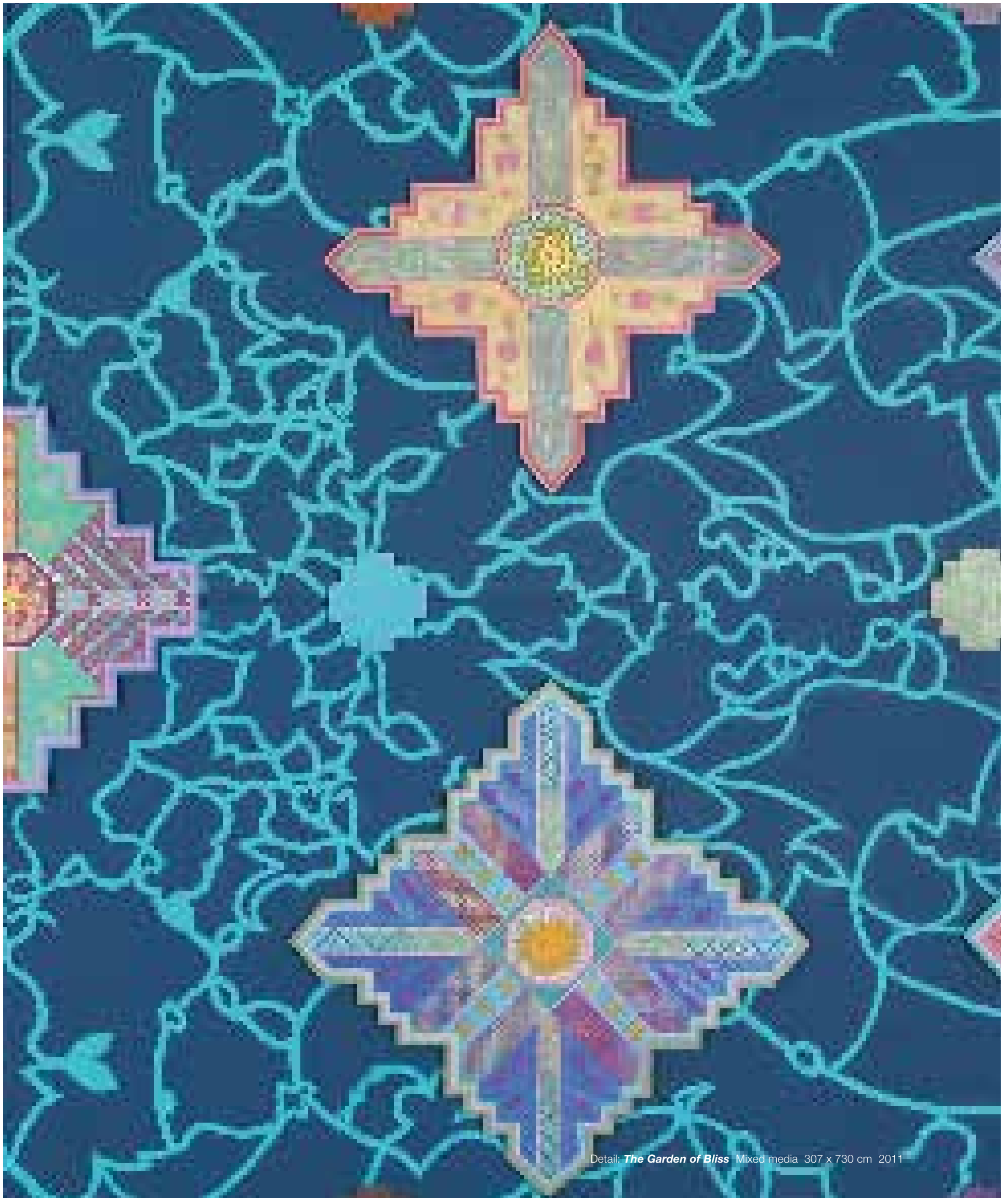
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PRAKATA FOREWORD

Ambassador Dato' Mohd Yusof Ahmad

Ketua Pengarah Balai Seni Visual Negara
Director-General National Visual Arts Gallery

Balai Seni Visual Negara (BSVN) dengan bangganya mempersembahkan Pameran **RAJA'AH: Seni, Idea dan Kreativiti Sulaiman Esa dari 1950-an - 2011** sebagai sebuah penghormatan kepada seorang tokoh pelukis yang sudah bergiat selama lebih dari 50 tahun hayatnya. Dr. Sulaiman Esa bukanlah satu nama asing di dalam bidang seni visual Malaysia. Beliau telah berupaya mengangkat seni yang berinspirasi Islam ke satu peringkat yang lebih kontemporari. Di dalam karya-karya mutakhir beliau, rupa bentuk seni Islam dipadankan dengan simbol serta ikon asing untuk menampilkan pergolakan yang terpaksa dihadapi umat Islam di dalam era Islamophobia.

Ketinggian keilmuan dan pemikiran intelektual Dr. Sulaiman Esa telah berupaya menempatkan diri beliau sebagai individu yang bertanggungjawab kepada makna dan hala tuju seni kontemporari tanahair. Penghasilan kerja seninya begitu teliti, rapi serta mempunyai nilai yang tinggi dan menjadi bahan rujukan serta diskusi ramai pihak. Pesona dan anugerah ini memberi kekuatan kepada beliau untuk kekal lama bertapak sebagai seorang pelukis yang disegani dalam sejarah seni visual Malaysia.

Tumpuan masa dan tenaga beliau terhadap penyelidikan sejarah dan teori telah mencetuskan satu fenomena segar di dalam dunia seni visual tempatan. Kelantangan beliau dan Redza Piyadasa menerusi manifesto yang mengiringi pameran *avant-garde "Towards A Mystical Reality"* (TMR) (1974) boleh dianggap sebagai satu titik permulaan perdebatan serta persoalan mengenai bentuk seni Malaysia. Secara tidak langsung, beliau memberi satu impak dan anjakan paradigma kepada perkembangan seni di Malaysia.

Justeru **RAJA'AH** diabadikan sebagai pengiktirafan terhadap kelangsungan seniman ini di dalam penerokaan dan kebangkitan beliau meneruskan perjuangan demi kembali kepada fitrah sebenar.

Semoga pameran ini dapat memberi kepuasan maksimum kepada masyarakat dan dimanfaatkan sebagai rujukan ilmiah bagi yang berminat.

BSVN menzahirkan rasa kesyukuran di atas kerjasama yang diberikan oleh Dr. Sulaiman Esa untuk menjayakan pameran yang amat bermakna ini.

The National Visual Arts Gallery (NVAG) proudly presents **RAJA'AH: Art, Idea and Creativity of Sulaiman Esa from 1950's - 2011** to pay homage to a very illustrious artist who has devoted over fifty years of his life to the visual art. Dr. Sulaiman Esa is indeed a very well-known figure in the world of Malaysian visual art. He has successfully elevated Islamic-inspired art to a more contemporary level. In his recent works, Islamic motifs and images are ingeniously juxtaposed with foreign symbols and icons to depict the trials and tribulations faced by the Muslim *ummah* in this current era of Islamophobia.

On account of his extensive knowledge and intellectual acuity, Dr. Sulaiman Esa has been able to position himself as an artist responsible for the progress and trajectory of local contemporary art. Refined and intricate masterpieces created by him are highly invaluable, and they serve as vital sources of reference and discussions for many enthusiasts. It is this gift and aura that provides him the strength to continually establish himself as an artist to be reckoned with in the history of Malaysian visual art.

His devotion with all his energy and time to researching the history and theories of art has instigated a new phenomenon in the local visual art scene. The boldness displayed by Redza Piyadasa and him in the manifesto accompanying their avant-garde exhibition "*Towards A Mystical Reality*" (TMR) (1974) proved to be a pivotal turning point for the start of the debate and query concerning the form of Malaysian art. He has, to some extent, sown the seeds of a paradigm shift towards the development of art in Malaysia.

RAJA'AH is therefore organised as a tribute to the artist's unwavering determination and single-mindedness in his artistic explorations and continuing struggles to return to his primordial self.

We hope this exhibition would give maximum pleasures to the general public, and would be used as a source of academic reference by interested parties.

NVAG is truly humbled by the overwhelming cooperation and assistance rendered by Dr. Sulaiman Esa in making this momentous showcase a reality.

PENGENALAN

Apabila saya diminta oleh Dr. Sulaiman Esa sendiri untuk menjadi kurator pameran terkini beliau bagi menggantikan tokoh sejarawan seni T.K. Sabapathy yang tidak dapat dilamar tahun ini kerana kesibukan masa, jiwa saya berkecamuk. Saya merasa gusar kerana tidak begitu yakin dapat memberi hasil pengkuratoran yang mampu mencecah tanda aras yang diharapkan oleh seorang 'Sulaiman Esa'. Tambahan pula, tempoh singkat kurang lebih lima bulan yang diberikan, setelah dilantik secara rasmi oleh Balai Seni Visual Negara pada awal Mei, adalah satu tempoh cubaan penuh berisiko bagi semua pihak yang terbabit. Namun begitu, atas dasar rasa hormat saya ke atas beliau dan isteri, Profesor Madya Dr. Khatijah Sanusi, selaku dua tokoh pendidik yang pernah mengajar saya di ITM Shah Alam kira-kira dua dekad lalu, selain mempunyai pertalian rasa dengan sebahagian besar karya dan pemikiran mereka, saya akhirnya menerima pelawaan Dr. Sulaiman.

RAJA'AH: Seni, Idea & Kreativiti Sulaiman Esa dari 1950-an – 2011 dirancang sebagai sebuah pameran persis retrospektif yang menghimpun sejumlah karya yang pernah dihasilkan oleh Dr. Sulaiman Esa, salah seorang seniman tersohor tanah air. Ia bertujuan memberi peluang kepada khalayak masa kini menyelami bukan cuma perubahan bentuk tetapi yang lebih pentingnya peralihan proses, idea dan konteks yang melatari setiap siri pengkaryaan beliau sepanjang tempoh 50 tahun.

Perkataan *raja'ah* bererti kemunculan semula, dan secara khusus merujuk kepada peralihan diri manusia dari yang duniawi dan eksistensial ke yang spiritual dan primordial. Dari satu segi, ia perjalanan batini yang terungkap dalam maksud potongan ayat Al-Quran "*inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un*" – sesungguhnya kita adalah kepunyaan Allah dan kepada Allah jualah kita kembali. Doktrin atau aqidah *raja'ah* menjadi pertikaian di kalangan ramai ulama Islam, lebih-lebih lagi dari sudut perkaitannya dengan fahaman Syiah. Begitupun dalam kerangka pameran ini, perkataan *raja'ah* digunakan semata-mata bagi merujuk kepada kepulangan atau kembalinya Sulaiman kepada sifat-sifat fitrah dan primordial dirinya sesudah hampir setengah abad berkecimpung di lapangan kesenian, pendidikan dan kesarjanaan.

Pameran ini dibahagikan kepada empat bahagian utama, dan susunannya menggarisbawahi secara kronologi peralihan ciri-ciri ideatik dan formalistik kesenian Sulaiman Esa. Bahagian *Era London: Sebelum dan Selepas* mempertontonkan karya-karya terawal beliau sekitar 1950-an, 1960-an dan awal 1970-an. Dihasilkan oleh seorang pelukis yang baru meningkat, karya-karya tersebut mendedahkan banyak pengaruh estetika Barat, dan turut menyingkap usaha-usaha awal beliau merangka gaya serta identiti seni beliau. Sementara segmen *Towards A Mystical Reality (Ke Arah Hakikat Mistik)* pula mempersembahkan karya-karya bernada konseptual-konstruktivis beliau di dekad 1970-an. Digarap secara kolaborasi dengan Almarhum Redza Piyadasa, kumpulan karya yang secara umumnya berlandaskan falsafah-falsafah mistik Timur ini menampilkan percubaan dan eksperimentasi julung kali beliau menggali inti-inti estetika dan budaya tradisional Asia demi menilai semula dan justeru menolak, atas semangat pascamoden dan refleks pascakolonial, gagasan-gagasan seni moden Barat.

Karya-karya dari 1980 hingga 2000, yang kebanyakannya pernah ditayangkan sempena pameran solo beliau pada 2001, diletak di segmen *Insyirah*. Kelompok karya ini menandakan perkembangan selanjutnya seni Sulaiman yang menjurus ke arah pengamalan konsep-konsep Seni Peribumi Melayu dan kemudian Seni Islam dengan penampilan bentuk serta imajan yang mengungkap keperibadian Melayu-Islam beliau dan pemahaman beliau terhadap realiti dunia multi-kultural. Bahagian terakhir, *Raja'ah: Taman Duka Lara*, menghidangkan karya-karya mutakhir beliau. Berbicara dan berkomentar tentang isu-isu sosio-politik-budaya kontemporari, Islamofobia dan Terrorisme misalnya, siri ini antara lain melampirkan jukstaposisi imej-imej budaya pop Amerika dengan motif-motif Peribumi-Islami sebagai kritikan ke atas kondisi keracauan pascamoden, proses globalisasi dan kerenah Amerika. Selain daripada empat segmen utama ini, pameran ini turut diserikan dan ditokok nilai dengan kehadiran beberapa karya yang cukup sinonim dengan Sulaiman dan cukup ikonik dalam sejarah seni moden Malaysia.

Saya amat bersyukur di atas kesudian empat orang penulis undangan untuk menyumbang esei mereka demi menambah makna dan warna kepada penerbitan dan pameran ini. Profesor Madya Dr. Khatijah Sanusi, Profesor Madya Dr. Abu Talib Putih, Simon Soon dan Zabas, masing-masing memberi pandangan yang cukup menarik, padat dan kritis berhubung dengan pemikiran dan pengkaryaan seni Sulaiman Esa sepanjang 50 tahun.

Jutaan terima kasih kepada Balai Seni Visual Negara kerana membantu menjayakan sebuah lagi pameran perdana pelukis penting tanah air. Terima kasih juga kepada Zabas, YM Tengku Sabri Ibrahim, Profesor Madya Dr. Ruzaika Omar Basaree, Yap Sau Bin, YM Dato' Raja Zahabuddin, Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, Profesor Dr. Siti Zainon Ismail, Badrolhisham Tahir, Nasir Baharuddin, Roopesh Sitharan, Safrizal Shahir, Simon Soon, Hasnul Jamal Saidon dan tokoh paling akrab dengan kedua-dua Sulaiman Esa dan Almarhum Redza Piyadasa, yakni T.K. Sabapathy, kerana sudi berkongsi buah fikiran mengenai pameran *Towards A Mystical Reality (Ke Arah Hakikat Mistik)*.

Akhir kata, setinggi-tinggi penghargaan saya kalungkan kepada Dr. Sulaiman Esa dan Profesor Madya Dr. Khatijah Sanusi di atas kepercayaan mereka akan khidmat tidak seberapa saya ini.

Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin

Kurator

Ipoh, Ogos 2011

INTRODUCTION

When I was personally asked by Dr. Sulaiman Esa to replace the renowned art historian T.K. Sabapathy as the curator for his latest exhibition, due to Sabapathy's unavailability, my mind went haywire. I was fretting over whether or not I could fulfil my curatorial role to the level expected by THE 'Sulaiman Esa'. To make matters worse, I was given what would surely be a mere five short and tumultuous months, after being officially appointed by the National Visual Arts Gallery in May, to get everything going. In the end though, I accepted the invitation as the respect I have for him and his wife, Associate Professor Dr. Khatijah Sanusi, is enormous. These were the two teachers and mentors who had a profound impact on me during my student years at ITM Shah Alam almost two decades ago, and whose art and thought I most identify with.

RAJA'AH: Art, Idea & Creativity of Sulaiman Esa from 1950's – 2011 showcases a collection of works by Sulaiman Esa, one of Malaysia's distinguished artists. This exhibition is meant to give contemporary public the opportunity to review the shifts not only in forms but more importantly in processes, ideas and contexts that underscore each and every series of works created by Sulaiman Esa over a period of 50 years.

The term *raja'ah* means return, and specifically refers to man's transition from his worldly and existential self to spiritual and primordial nature. Looking at it from one aspect, it is the spiritual journey insinuated by the Quranic verse "*inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un*" – verily we belong to Allah and unto Him shall we return. The doctrine of *raja'ah*, however, has been a great subject of debate among Sunni Muslim scholars, especially with regard to its close affiliation with the Shiite theology. Nevertheless, in the context of this exhibition, the use of the term *raja'ah* is limited to describe Sulaiman Esa's return to his natural and primordial self after nearly 50 years of active involvement in art, education and academia.

This exhibition is divided into four main parts, and their chronological sequence is reflective of the apparent changes in Sulaiman Esa's ideatic and formalistic tendencies. *London Era: Before and After* displays his earlier works from the 1950's to the 1970's. Created by an impressionable and up-and-coming artist, the pieces largely expose his inclination towards the Western aesthetics. Interestingly as well, it was with these early works that Sulaiman Esa began to experiment, developing his own artistic style and identity. The *Towards A Mystical Reality* segment, on the other hand, presents his conceptual-constructivist works done in the 1970's. This body of work, which is the outcome of a collaborative effort with the late Redza Piyadasa and generally rooted in Eastern mystical philosophies and thoughts, represents his initial attempts and experiments to rediscover the essences of Asian aesthetics and cultural traditions in order to re-evaluate and subsequently reject, in the spirit of postmodern reaction and postcolonial reflex, the notions and constructs of Western modern art.

Works created between 1980 and 2000, most of which had been displayed during his solo show in 2001, are included in the *Insyirah* segment. These works indicate the next direction in Sulaiman Esa's artistic course that entails the utilisation of the concepts of indigenous Malay art and then Islamic art. They feature forms and images indicative of his Malay-Islamic identity, and suggestive of his understanding of the realities of multi-cultural world. The final segment in this exhibition, *Raja'ah: The Endangered Gardens*, is where all his latest works are put on display. Essentially dealing with contemporary social, political and cultural issues, such as Islamophobia and Terrorism, these final pieces highlight, among others, the delicate juxtaposition of American pop cultural images with indigenous-Islamic motifs as a means of criticising postmodern raves and conditions, the process of globalisation, and the hypocrisy of American government. Apart from the four main segments, the exhibition is also graced by the presence of several signature works by Sulaiman Esa which have become important icons in the history of Malaysian modern art.

I am grateful to the four guest writers for their willingness to contribute their essays that would surely add further meaning and colour to this publication and exhibition. Associate Professor Dr. Khatijah Sanusi, Associate Professor Dr. Abu Talib Putih, Simon Soon and Zabas have each provided insightful and critical commentaries as regards Sulaiman Esa's artistic thoughts and endeavours that have spanned over half a century now.

My sincere gratitude to the National Art Gallery and its staff for their invaluable assistance in making a success of yet another major exhibition of a highly influential Malaysian master artist. My heartfelt thanks also to Zabas, YM Tengku Sabri Ibrahim, Associate Professor Dr. Ruzaika Omar Basaree, Yap Sau Bin, YM Dato' Raja Zahabuddin, Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, Professor Dr Siti Zainon Ismail, Badrolhisham Tahir, Nasir Baharuddin, Roopesh Sitharan, Safrizal Shahir, Simon Soon, Hasnul Jamal Saidon, and above all T.K. Sabapathy, the person closest and dearest to both Sulaiman Esa and the late Redza Piyadasa, for their generous feedbacks and inputs concerning the *Towards A Mystical Reality* exposition.

Last but not least, my highest appreciation to Dr. Sulaiman Esa and Associate Professor Dr. Khatijah Sanusi for having confidence in me to serve as the curator for this momentous event.

Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin

Curator

Ipoh, August 2011

ESEI KURATOR

PUSARAN PERJALANAN SENI SULAIMAN ESA: DARI LAMAN DAMAI KE TAMAN DUKA LARA

| Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin

ERA LONDON: SEBELUM DAN SELEPAS

Ketika Sulaiman Esa mula terjun ke bidang seni lukis sekitar pertengahan 1950-an, semasa berusia belasan tahun, Malaysia sedang melalui proses transformasi daripada sebuah negara terjajah kepada negara merdeka. Sewaktu itu, protokol dan doktrin seni moden Barat, yang mula diperkenalkan sekitar 1930-an, kuat mempengaruhi pelukis-pelukis tempatan termasuk Sulaiman sendiri. Ekoran daripada itu, hampir kesemua lukisan cat air awal beliau memperlihatkan sentuhan idiom-idiom Realisme dan Naturalisme. Kemudian setelah mengenali Van Gogh dan pelukis-pelukis seumpamanya, lenggok dan warna Impresionis mulai terpalit pada puluhan lukisan potret, pemandangan dan imitasi karya-karya Barat yang beliau hasilkan, terutama sepanjang dua tahun sebelum bertolak ke London.

Tempoh belajar di Hornsey College of Art di London (1962-1967) merupakan fasa penting dalam pembentukan awal lebih serius diri pelukis Sulaiman. Lagi pula, 'swinging' London pada 1960an, "kota yang sarat dengan dinamisme kreativiti dan kesenian ... menyediakan suasana yang memberi kepuasan intelek, kekayaan pembelajaran, suluh budaya, dan pencerahan sosial," jelas beliau. Dari semata-mata melukis atas dasar minat dan dengan meniru karya-karya Barat, beliau didedahkan kepada konsep seni yang lebih tinggi dan bertalian dengan lain-lain bidang termasuk falsafah, psikologi, sosiologi. Sistem pendidikan seni di Hornsey yang diadaptasi dari tradisi Bauhaus menyedarkan beliau bahawa kerja-kerja kreatif bukan semata-mata kegiatan vokasional untuk menghasilkan objek atau ekspresi diri. Sebaliknya, ujar beliau, "Sistem Bauhaus menyifatkan seni sebagai penyelidikan saintifik. Seni bukan sekadar berkait dengan kerja melukis, tetapi proses berfikir di mana pelukis menyoal setiap aktiviti, bahan, teknik. ... Yang ditekankan bukanlah konsep pelukis sebagai pengkarya, tetapi sebagai pemikir." Beliau sedar kemahiran tangan mestilah disepadukan dengan kecerdasan akal. Berbeza daripada lukisan-lukisan landskap alam dan bangunan semasa di Johor Bahru, karya-karya figuratif, peristiwa, pemandangan dan alam benda serta lakaran-lakaran 'study' di Hornsey memperlihatkan mekanisme berkarya yang reflektif, empirikal dan analitikal dengan penggunaan beberapa medium yang baru bagi dirinya, seperti cetakan goresan dan media campuran.



Lakaran 'study' ketika di Hornsey



Antara ilustrasi Sulaiman Esa yang mengisi Dewan Sastra pada tahun 70-an

Setelah menamatkan kursus seni cetak di peringkat pasca siswazah untuk selama setahun di Atelier 17, Paris, beliau kembali ke tanah air pada 1968 dan berkhidmat sebagai pereka grafik di Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) membuka peluang bagi Sulaiman berinteraksi dengan pelbagai kelompok di luar lingkaran seni rupa. Dekad 1970-an menyaksikan gandingan padu para intelektual, khususnya di kalangan bangsa Melayu, yang berkecimpung dalam pelbagai bidang termasuk teater, sastera, akademik, falsafah dan politik. Pertembungan rentas bidang ini, dalam ruang yang disediakan DBP selaku pusat pertemuan minda Melayu, menguak luas ufuk pemikiran beliau. Selain subjek-subjek Pengajian Liberal yang dipelajari di Hornsey, pertembungan ini turut memperluaskan beliau dengan ilmu dan paradigma di luar cakupan disiplin seni, lantas mempertingkatkan daya cipta dan rasa seni beliau.

Ketika itu aliran-aliran Realisme, Impresionisme dan terutamanya Ekspresionisme Abstrak mendominasi seni moden Malaysia di kalangan pelukis-pelukis serius dan mapan. Namun begitu, ekoran pengaruh besar Konstruktivisme ke atas dirinya, Sulaiman lebih berminat mengkaji struktur-struktur rekabentuk visual serta konsep-konsep 'objecthood' dan fizikaliti bahan. Sebagai langkah menolak tradisi catan 'easel' dan pengkaryaan berlandaskan refleksi terhadap alam dan manusia, penerokaan beliau tertumpu kepada sifat-sifat fizikal, struktural dan perseptual warna serta bentuk. Catan-catan konstruktivis dan minimalis beliau, khususnya lukisan skrol berteraskan 'field-painting', dipamerkan dalam dua pameran kumpulan New Scene, iaitu *Experiment '70* (1970) dan *Dokumentasi 72* (1972).

Bersama-sama beberapa pelukis muda yang baru pulang dari Eropah dan Amerika di akhir 1960-an dan awal 70-an, Sulaiman



Di sebuah pameran di British Council, KL bersama Redza Piyadasa dan Siti Zainon Ismail.



Pergerakan Biru Akrilik & Pewarna 82 x 143 cm 1971
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara

terbabit secara aktif dan radikal ke arah mencetus sistem estetika yang 'cerebral', 'impersonal' lagi objektif sebagai alternatif kepada gaya-gaya representasional, 'gestural' lagi emosional yang menguasai seni moden Malaysia kala itu. Mereka mengemukakan pemikiran dan strategi kesenian serta teks-teks manifesto yang lantang dan sedikit terpesong dari amalan pelukis-pelukis tempatan. Mengulas pameran *Situasi Baru* (1971), Syed Ahmad Jamal menyifatkan ia sebagai "... cabaran kepada angkatan enam puluhan untuk mengwujudkan peralihan sikap dari tegasan terhadap nilai isyarat ... kepada pendekatan berasaskan pengetahuan dan penerangan. Pelukis-pelukis Merdeka menaruh kepercayaan terhadap peranan berus dan cat; pelukis-pelukis angkatan baru pula berpendapat mereka terpaksa menyokong manifestasinya dengan kenyataan". Melalui pelukis-pelukis New Scene berjiwa 'liar' inilah seni moden Malaysia mula disua dengan prinsip-prinsip 'avant-garde', anti-formalis, pascamodenis.

Meskipun tumpuannya lebih kepada permasalahan warna dan 'kebendaan' situasi, namun pada 1972 beliau menerap elemen baru ke dalam karya beliau. Dalam karya media campuran mirip 'assemblage' bertajuk *Man and His World* (Manusia dan Alamnya) yang memenangi pertandingan bertema *Manusia dan Alamnya* pada 1973, Sulaiman menyelitkan bukan saja kepekaan sosial dan psikologi tetapi juga unsur spiritual. Dengan pendekatan yang tidak terikat kukuh pada tampuk estetika formalistik, karya ini bukan cuma lahir dari konteks tetapi juga menatangnya. Barang-barang peribadi milik beliau dipersembahkan tanpa diubah rupa, bentuk dan peranan asalnya. Objek-objek seharian yang mewakili identiti, subjektiviti dan kewujudan diri beliau selaku sesosok orang Malaysia, Melayu, Muslim dan jejak kota, diangkat sebagai 'readymades' atau 'found objects'. Ini sekaligus merintis satu strategi baru menghasilkan karya di persada seni moden tempatan. Bahan-bahan seumpama ini muncul semula dalam *Towards A Mystical Reality* (Ke Arah Hakikat Mistik) yang berlangsung setahun kemudian.

KE ARAH HAKIKAT MISTIK

Kesan daripada Tragedi 13 Mei, 1969, kerajaan menganjurkan Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (KKK) pada 1971, yang mana turut melibatkan tokoh-tokoh seni seperti Syed Ahmad Jamal, Redza Piyadasa, dan Sulaiman sendiri. Walaupun, pada hemat beliau, KKK bertujuan “mencari satu paradigma seni-budaya alternatif,” tetapi penganjurannya “tidak berlandaskan isu-isu estetika atau falsafah, tetapi atas sebab-sebab politik dan sosial”. Rumus-rumus KKK, yang menekankan nilai, norma, pemikiran dan simbol kebudayaan Melayu dan Islam sebagai teras kepada identiti budaya kebangsaan, mendatangkan implikasi yang tidak kurang hebat ke atas seni moden tempatan. Salah satu kesan besarnya, menurut beliau, pelukis-pelukis “mulai menjerumuskan diri ke Dunia Melayu”. Justeru muncul sentimen-sentimen revivalis Melayu-Islam sehingga menimbulkan ketidakselesaan sesetengah pelukis berbangsa lain yang merasa terpinggir oleh kuasa hegemoni Melayu-Islam. Meletusnya semangat neo-nasionalis Melayu semakin menyengitkan kancah politik budaya nasional.

Towards A Mystical Reality (TMR) direalisasikan oleh Sulaiman dan Piyadasa di Sudut Penulis DBP pada 1974. Usaha-usaha mereka dalam New Scene bagi memulakan gerakan seni yang lebih serius dan sejajar dengan arus internasional bolehlah dikira berkemuncak dengan ‘pementasan’ TMR. Walaupun TMR merupakan lanjutan kepada *Dokumentasi 72*, tetapi tidak dapat dinafikan ia mempunyai kaitan dengan KKK. Bagi sebilangan pelukis Malaysia, perbincangan seputar KKK, dari satu sudut, melampias persoalan mencari identiti seni tempatan. Hidup di negara pascakolonial yang terkial-kial keluar dari kerangka jiwa abdi dan minda tertawan menuntut mereka menyelidik berbagai-bagai falsafah, tradisi dan mitos yang ada di sekitar namun lama terpinggir dek kolonisasi dan modenisasi. “TMR adalah titik permulaan kami paparkan kelancungan pemikiran Barat dan bebaskan diri dari ‘penjajahan’nya,” tegas beliau. “KKKlah, dari satu segi, mencetus sikap atau paradigma sebegini”.

Bagi Sulaiman, “Kongres tersebut menyedarkan kami untuk mencari sesuatu yang asli dalam budaya dan realiti kita sendiri ... ia merangsang kami menyoal balik keyakinan kami kepada seni Barat, menilik balik keutamaan kami, mengingatkan kami yang seni itu berkait dengan usaha mencari makna, konteks, kerelevanan ... Namun KKK bukan jawapannya kerana ia memperjuangkan keetnikan dan kesenian Melayu. Kami bercakap perkara lebih universal”. TMR



Movements in Pink Acrylic 122 x 167.5 cm 2011
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)



Empty bird-cage after release of bird at 2.46 p.m, on Monday 10th June 1974
Bahan Jumpaan 50 x 40 x 40 cm 1974 | Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara

menjadi gelanggang buat Sulaiman dan Piyadasa mengajak pelukis-pelukis menilai semula paradigma seni berkiblatkan Eropah-Amerika. Mereka diseru meninjau kembali tradisi-tradisi Asia, menyemak rasa warna, rasa bentuk dan rasa kewujudan asli orang Timur agar tidak meniru membabi-buta seni Barat. Ujar beliau, “TMR melontar cabaran keras terhadap corak perjalanan seni Malaysia sepanjang 40 tahun lampau sejak dari era Nanyang, malah sejak munculnya lukisan-lukisan cat air Abdullah Ariff”.

“Kerana besarnya impak KKK ke atas minda dan perasaan kami, dua tahun selepas *Dokumentasi 72* Piya dan saya tidak menghasilkan karya. Sebaliknya, kami banyak membaca dan menyoal”. Pameran TMR tercetus hasil ribut akal yang dijalankan oleh Sulaiman dan Piyadasa demi menghurai beberapa dilema yang dihadapi para pelukis tempatan sehingga menjumudkan sikap pemikiran serta gerakan seni negara. Di antara beberapa isu yang dibangkitkan mereka ialah penghasilan karya-karya derivatif dan imitatif ekoran kebergantungan melulu pelukis pada isme-isme Barat, kurangnya suasana intelektual dan polemikal hasil penumpuan pelukis kepada aspek stailistik dan formalistik, dan kesangsian pelukis kepada warisan tradisi akibat terpesona dengan rasionalisme dan materialisme Barat. Salah satu hal terpenting yang dibicarakan ialah ketidaksediaan pelukis tempatan menggarap satu sistem baru menanggapi realiti bagi menggantikan perspektif saintifik, empirikal dan egotistik Barat. Di kala segelintir seniman ‘avant-garde’ Barat gigih memandangi ke Timur, beliau dan Piyadasa tertanya-tanya kenapa bukannya mereka yang mencipta bentuk kesenian baru dengan menggunakan konsep masa-ruang serta falsafah mistisisme Timur.

Selain kelantangan dan keseriusan manifesto yang menghurai panjang lebar premis TMR, ada satu lagi perkara pokok – selain barangkali insiden ‘kencing’ dan perdebatan di *Dewan Sastra* – yang berjaya meletakkan TMR sebagai episod yang membuka lembaran baru sejarah seni moden Malaysia, atau menurut T.K. Sabapathy, pencetus pelbagai aspek konseptualisme di Malaysia sepanjang 1970-an dan awal 1980-an, atau seperti kata Krishen Jit, titik masuk teori pascamodenisme ke dalam seni rupa Malaysia. TMR tidak menyajikan sebarang objek yang lazim dikaitkan dengan seni lukis konvensional, tetapi benda-benda di sekeliling dan konon dipilih secara rambang oleh pelukis. Benda-benda tersebut dipersembahkan dalam bentuk dan citra semulajadinya, tanpa dikacau sifat asalnya melalui campurtangan sedar pelukis. Seperti yang ditegaskan oleh mereka, demi memenuhi tuntutan skema representasi mereka objek-objek mestilah bebas daripada gangguan tangan dan emosi mereka agar tidak muncul kesan humanistik dan subjektif.

Sabapathy percaya, titik permulaan bingkai konsep TMR dapat disusurgalur bukan saja daripada kerja-kerja Sulaiman dan Piyadasa dalam *New Scene* tetapi juga karya *Man and His World* Sulaiman sendiri, terutama dari dua aspek: pengitaran artifak-artifak harian sebagai elemen-elemen seni tanpa dihakis jejak-jejak urusan sosialnya, dan penyisihan prinsip serta bahan lukisan ilusionistik. Begitupun, berbanding dengan barang-barang personal dalam *Man and His World*, objek-objek jumpaan dalam TMR lebih menonjol ciri naturalnya serta aura realitinya. Botol Coca-Colanya masih berisi air, ubat nyamuknya seolah-olah masih berasap, kusyen kerusinya masih hangat, kanvas kosongnya masih dihinggapi bayang-bayang. Ini mengingatkan balik pada kata-kata Ismail Zain ketika mengulas *Dokumentasi 72*: ia membawa ke satu dimensi yang “melenyapkan sepenuhnya kesan ilusi dan mengesahkan fizikaliti hakiki objek ... Keminimalan dan kesederhanaannya hampir-hampir tersirat dengan semangat Zen”.

Pemakaian tajuk-tajuk seperti *Two half-drunk Coca-Cola bottles, Empty bird-cage after release of bird at 2.46 p.m, on Monday 10th June 1974*, dan *Empty chair on which many persons have sat on*, satu lagi aspek utama TMR. Data-data tersebut bertindak sebagai petanda atau maklumat bagi khalayak memahami unsur-unsur temporaliti dan kontinum masa yang berkaitan dengan objek-objek atau peristiwa-peristiwa yang dirujuk. Tanpa tajuk-tajuk sedemikian khalayak sukar menanggapi situasi-situasi mental yang cuba dicetus oleh pelukis. Khalayak perlu menjengah melangkaui fizikaliti bentuk-objek dan masa-ruang material, lalu menggerakkan batin-akal bagi menangkap maksud dan intipati metafizikal yang dihidangkan. Dari kerana tumpuannya lebih kepada mental berbanding retinal, dan fokusnya kepada penglihatan periferal dan bukan sentral,

maka falsafah-falsafah mistik Timur, khususnya Zen, amat berguna buat menghayati realiti menerusi kontemplasi dan meditasi, dan bukan sekadar apresiasi mata.

Menurut Syed Ahmad Jamal, menerusi pameran ini, kedua-dua pelukis “memberi tekanan mengenai kesedaran pengamatan terhadap keadaan yang tidak semestinya dicipta oleh pelukis sebagai ‘barang seni’”. Sabapathy pula melihat TMR, salah satunya, dari sudut perseptualisme, yakni psikologi persepsi yang menentukan proses menerima dan mentafsir imej, “yang menjadi obsesi Barat tetapi bercanggahan dengan sensibiliti Asia”. Di dalam manifesto mereka, Sulaiman dan Piyadasa menegaskan, “Isu kritikal dalam seni moden hari ini ... bukan sangat bersangkutan dengan masalah bagaimana kita ‘melihat’ benda (visual/retinal) tetapi bagaimana kita ‘menangkap’ realiti (konseptual) ... [K]ami berminat dengan persepsi realiti itu sendiri”. Menurut Sulaiman, “Saya menyukai ... idea sekitar persoalan apa yang menjadikan sesuatu itu seni, pada ketika mana seni itu seni; adakah tatkala anda melihatnya, bila anda melukisnya, ataupun selepas itu”. Contohnya, objek sangkar burung. “Kami pameran objek itu, dan penonton perlu memutuskan pada detik mana ia itu karya seni? Adakah semasa kami mula-mula membeli sangkar dengan burung di dalamnya? Atau ketika burung sudah dilepaskan keluar? Atau waktu sekarang di mana burung itu telah terbang jauh?” Oleh kerana rupa yang menjelma dan realiti yang hakiki dua perkara yang sangat berbeza, maka kedua-dua pelukis cuba merobohkan tembok sempadan di antara medium seni dan pentafsiran subjektif, agar tercapai keadaan, seperti kata Sabapathy, “dimana aspek ‘kebendaan’ objek seni kurang ditekankan, ataupun difokuskan tetapi tanpa sebarang pengantaraan”.

Tindakan beberapa pengkritik tempatan mengaitkan TMR secara dangkal dengan sensibiliti Dadaisme ditentang oleh kedua-dua pelukis. Memang Calvin Tomkins pernah menyebut yang seniman-seniman Dada, kerana jelek dengan dunia materialistik, cuba mencari dalam karya-karya mereka ‘hakikat mistik’ yang baru. Namun penggunaan ‘readymades’ dan objek-objek anti-seni dengan tujuan mengangkat ‘nilai’ dan ‘maruah’ bahan-bahan tersebut melalui aksi pemilihan oleh pelukis, sesungguhnya bercanggah dengan isu perseptualisme yang dibicarakan Sulaiman dan Piyadasa. Kalau pendukung-pendukung Dada menganggap seni tidak lagi berperanan mentafsir realiti tetapi sebaliknya menjadi realiti itu sendiri, Sulaiman dan Piyadasa pula melihat seni – khususnya yang berpaksikan mistisisme – sebagai cara untuk lebih merasai dan menjiwai persepsi ke atas hakikat sebenar-benar kehidupan dan kewujudan di sekeliling manusia.

INSYIRAH

“Kerana TMR begitu provokatif dan radikal, saya jadi keliru dengan halatuju saya selepas itu sebab TMR seolah-olah menafikan segenap perkara yang saya pegang selama ini,” jelas Sulaiman. Sepanjang period ketidakpastian itu, beliau terperangkap dalam krisis identiti di antara seni Barat yang moden-sekular dan latarbelakang agama serta budaya asli dirinya. Sepertimana Piyadasa, beliau turut menginsafi kurangnya pengetahuan beliau berhubung dengan sejarah seni, budaya dan falsafah Asia. Lantaran itu, beliau menghabiskan masa membaca, menelaah dan merenung diri, di samping bereksperimen dengan teknik-teknik cetakan.

Hanya pada 1977 beliau terpanggil untuk menghasilkan siri baru *Waiting for Godot (Menunggu Godot)*. Karya-karya gurih foto ini mengungkap keparahan bukan cuma krisis identiti seni tetapi juga kemelut keperibadian sosio-psikologi yang melanda batang tubuh Sulaiman. Ia turut dilihat sebagai pemaparan konflik budaya yang menimpa Malaysia moden, terutama di kalangan masyarakat Melayu-Islam. Karya-karya dibahagikan kepada dua ruang yang diisi oleh dua simbol ikonik yang saling berlawanan: pertama, citra wanita telanjang dalam pelbagai kedudukan sensual – kata Sulaiman, representasi diri psikologinya; tulis Niranjan, simbol kepada tradisi seni Barat dan hal-hal yang menghalang zikir pada Tuhan –; kedua, elemen-elemen arabes dan khat Islami yang disalin dari masjid Cordova atau Alhambra. “Selepas menggantungnya di dinding, datang ketua jabatan. Beliau terkejut, dan menyoal ‘Ini apa ni?’ Saya tanya balik, ‘Kenapa?’ Beliau kata, ‘Salah awak letak ayat Quran sekali dengan gambar perempuan bogel!’”

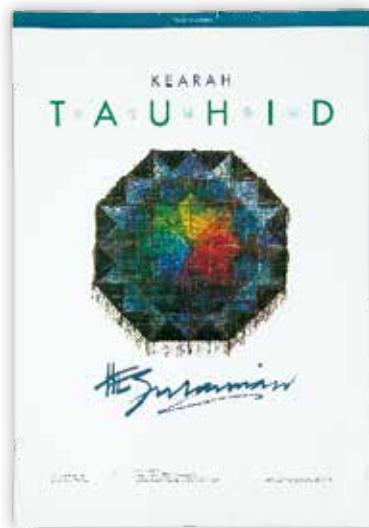
Sebenarnya, pergeseran di antara tamadun Timur-Islam dan Barat-Sekular telahpun disaran oleh Sulaiman menerusi *Man and His World*. Dalam karya dulu, tali leher, baju kemeja dan kasut (dunia material Barat) digantung di sebelah kanan, sementara sejadah (dunia spiritual Islam) di sebelah kiri. Dengan kedua-duanya mengapit lain-lain barang peribadi yang disusun di dalam poket-poket plastik di bahagian tengah, beliau mengisahkan bagaimana identiti dirinya menjadi rebutan di antara dua kuasa saling bertentangan. Namun, nada yang dilantun oleh *Menunggu Godot* lebih erotis dan profan, justeru lebih keras dan provokatif. Ironinya, tatkala para seniman ghairah berbicara tentang identiti nasional pasca KKK, salah sebuah karya dari siri berpendekatan eklektik dan tegang imej visual ini terpilih menjuarai satu pertandingan anjuran Balai Seni Lukis Negara. Syed Ahmad Jamal menilik karya ini sebagai ikhtiar pelukis Melayu-Islam bermuhasabah secara simbolik mengenai agamanya, keseniannya, persekitarannya, dan keresahannya berada di tengah-tengah perlawanan tradisi dengan modenisme. “Bila Syed Ahmad Jamal menulis sesuatu tentang “the secret and the sacred” dalam ulasan beliau ke atas karya itu, barulah saya betul-betul faham. Saya sebenarnya lukis potret diri saya sendiri. Saya bercakap tentang diri saya yang ketika itu berdepan dengan dilema ... Jadi bila Jamal menyebut tentang perkara tersebut, itulah ungkapan sebenar yang saya cari-cari”.

Menunggu Godot membuktikan, antaranya, betapa sesudah hampir sedekad berlalunya KKK para pelukis tempatan yang serius, setidak-tidaknya Sulaiman sendiri, masih terkapai-kapai mencari satu definisi yang boleh mentakrif identiti seni Malaysia secara muktamad. Walaupun sesetengah rumus KKK ditolak oleh segelintir di kalangan mereka, namun kerangka-kerangka yang digarisbawahi oleh KKK menyedarkan mereka kewujudan elemen-elemen di sekeliling yang dapat membantu menjayakan usaha tersebut. Setelah beberapa siri pameran diadakan, misalnya *Rupa dan Jiwa* (1979), bagi merangsang pelukis-pelukis Melayu menyelidik akar-akar dan jatidiri asli mereka sendiri, seminar dan pameran *Akar-akar Kesenian Peribumi Dan Perkembangan Kini* (AAP) anjuran Institut Teknologi MARA pada 1979, yang turut disertai Sulaiman, benar-benar mengangkat Seni Peribumi Melayu ke dalam kancah wacana seni kontemporari Malaysia. Ulas beliau, “Selepas lapan tahun berlalunya [KKK], AAP merupakan usaha mengukuhkan semula rumus-rumus Kongres. Apa yang telah terjadi kepada Seni Peribumi? Adakah ia berkembang? Atau semakin menghilang? Jadi AAP cuba melihat tahap perkembangan [KKK]”.

“Ekoran daripada TMR saya mulai meninggalkan Barat dan makin mendekati diri Melayu-Islam saya,” kata Sulaiman. Selepas bergelumang dengan Zen dan lain-lain falsafah Oriental sewaktu TMR, beliau merasakan tradisi-tradisi budaya Melayu dan Nusantara pun memiliki inti peradaban dan teras spiritualiti, dan bukannya sekadar bersifat dekoratif. Ia boleh dijadikan sumber ilham dan rujukan untuk ekspresi kreatif. Dari situ beliau menggali tema-tema, simbol-simbol dan bentuk-bentuk seni halus dan kraf tradisional. Bagi mendalami dunia seni Melayu, buat pertama kali beliau dan pensyarah-pensyarah ITM membawa pelajar-pelajar bertemu dengan tukang-



Sulaiman di samping karya *Manusia dan Alamnya* (1973)



Poster pameran **Ke Arah Tauhid**, 1984

tukang kraf di Terengganu dan Kelantan. “Perkara sebegini tidak pernah dilakukan sebelum AAP. Dulu kita asyik memandangi ke Paris atau New York ... tapi kini wujud anjakan paradigma ... Ini bermakna AAP memang meninggalkan kesan ke atas perkembangan pendidikan seni dan aspek kreativiti pelukis”.

Persoalan berkenaan dikotomi di antara pembuat kraf dan pelukis moden yang diutarakan oleh Awang Had Salleh ketika seminar AAP membuka minda Sulaiman. Sewaktu melanjutkan pelajaran di Baltimore (1979-1981), beliau menggunakan bahan fiber serta teknik anyaman untuk siri terbaru demi memperkembangkan idea-idea yang diilhamkan AAP, dan sekaligus menyangkal dogma kesenian Barat yang memisahkan kraf tradisional dari ranah seni moden. “Belajar di Baltimore membuatkan saya tanpa sedar mendefinisi diri saya sebagai orang Malaysia, Melayu, Muslim. Saya mula menekuni kraf Melayu. Di Asia Tenggara, seni kita sebenarnya seni tekstil. Kita tidak ada lukisan, tetapi sari dan sarong. Saya mengkaji batik, songket, ukiran kayu kita sebagai dekorasi kepada proses meMelayukan diri saya ... Saya belajar teknik anyaman ... yang tiada kaitan dengan seni moden Barat.” Sebagaimana dengan pelukis-pelukis wanita feminis, Sulaiman menganggap ‘femmage’ sebertuk ‘seni atasan’.

Dekad 1980-an merupakan satu lagi detik signifikan dalam rangka kesenian Sulaiman. Di bawah pemerintahan Mahathir Mohamed, khususnya setelah kemasukan Anwar Ibrahim ke pangkuan UMNO dan tampuk pentadbiran negara, Malaysia melalui program Islamisasi dan Dakwah yang dinamik bermula sekitar 1982. Fenomena ini wajarlah dilihat dari sudut kebangkitan semula Islam yang antaranya berpunca daripada Revolusi Iran 1979. Ketika globalisasi dan homogenisasi kencang melanda Malaysia di era 1980-an - 90-an, polisi Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam ditafsir oleh beberapa sarjana, misalnya Chandra Muzaffar, menyedarkan masyarakat tentang perlunya memelihara identiti asli mereka. Hal ini turut memberi tempas kepada dunia seni rupa bilamana sebilangan pelukis Melayu mula menyadur unsur-unsur Islam pada karya-karya mereka.

Bagi Sulaiman, minat untuk menyelami spiritualiti Islam dan manifestasi Islam dalam kesenian timbul setelah mendengar syarahan tokoh pemikir Ismail al-Faruqi. Terang beliau, “Sebelum itu kebanyakan sarjana bercakap tentang syaria, tentang hukum-hakam dan tidak pernah menyentuh bab kesenian. Tetapi ilmuwan ini [Ismail al-Faruqi] mengajar dan menulis mengenai Seni Islam. Ini menjadi pendorong bagi saya pergi lebih jauh daripada etnisiti Melayu kepada spiritualiti, metafizik Islam.” Beliau begitu tertarik untuk meneroka potensi yang ada pada Seni Islam sehingga mendorongnya menelaah tulisan-tulisan Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Titus Burckhardt, Frithjof Schuon dan lain-lain yang mengupas dimensi spiritual-formal seni-seni sakral dan religius. Setelah mengikuti Pengajian Islam di peringkat Doktor Falsafah di Temple University (1986-1990), di bawah bimbingan sarjana-sarjana terbilang seperti S.H. Nasr dan Lamyah al-Faruqi, beliau makin yakin dengan arah tuju kesenian beliau.



Ke Arah Tauhid Media campuran 161 x 230 cm 1984
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara

Sulaiman merupakan salah seorang penggerak utama Seni Islam – atau seperti kata Simon Soon, aliran formalisme Islami – di Malaysia, khususnya di saat pertumbuhan dinamikinya sekitar awal 1990-an. Selaku pensyarah di ITM, beliau mengembangkan konsep Seni Islam kepada pelajar-pelajar di sana. Sebagai pelukis-pemikir bernama besar, dasar-dasar Seni Islam mengikut tafsiran beliau yang disebar menerusi pelbagai katalog pameran, majalah dan kertaskerja seminar dikaji oleh ramai pelukis. Selain meresapkan idea-idea Seni Islam ke dalam minda seniman, satu sumbangan signifikan beliau terhadap seni kontemporari Malaysia ialah penyebaran teori estetika Melayu. Beliau percaya teori yang pada dasarnya berasaskan falsafah ukiran kayu Melayu ini mempunyai ciri-ciri yang berpadanan dengan rupa dan jiwa Seni Islam. Selain memperluaskan pemikiran Seni Islam menerusi penulisan dan pengucapan, beliau juga aktif menganjur dan mengkurasi pameran-pameran Seni Islam sepanjang 1990-an – tempoh kemuncak evolusi Seni Islam di Malaysia. Yang mustahaknya, beliau turut mencipta karya-karya demi merealisasikan teori-teori yang dipelajari dan dianuti beliau. Bermula dari pameran solo *Ke Arah Tauhid* (DBP, 1984) sehinggalah kepada *Insyirah* (Galeri Petronas, 2001), beliau terus bereksperimen dalam kerangka Seni Islam (juga Peribumi) dengan berwadahkan seni moden.

Ke Arah Tauhid sebuah pameran penting dalam sejarah seni Malaysia. Salah satu sebabnya, menurut Khalil Amran, ia detik julung kali di mana karya-karya yang sepenuhnya bernada Seni Islam dihimpunkan dalam sebuah pameran perseorangan. “*Ke Arah Tauhid* merupakan detik bermulanya saya beralih dari tema Melayu kepada Islam ... Saya menyelami lebih jauh dimensi metafizikal Islam”. *Ke Arah Tauhid* (dan *Homage to Nakula*), adalah kesinambungan kepada siri di Baltimore. Teknik anyaman dan bahan fiber, seperti buluh, kertas buatan tangan dan benang, dipakainya untuk mengolah corak-corak geometrik, arabes dan flora pada bidang beraneka format seperti oktagon, bulatan dan bintang. Gabungan teknik mirip anyaman songket dengan motif-motif abstrak tulen memperlihatkan adunan idea Seni Islam dengan teori estetika Peribumi-Melayu. “Dalam kraf Melayu, bahan-bahannya datang dari tradisi peribumi kita tetapi maknanya dari rekacorak Islam. Jadi, ada adunan Melayu dengan Islam”. Selepas tamat belajar di Temple University, sekitar awal dan pertengahan 1990-an, beliau menghasilkan beberapa siri kecil bermedia campuran seperti *Garden of Mystery* dan *Garden of Certainty*. Walaupun umumnya melanjutkan elemen-elemen formal-konseptual *Ke Arah Tauhid*, namun beliau turut memasukkan tulisan-tulisan khat berkalimah suci seperti ‘Allah’ dan ‘Al-hamdulillah’. Dalam siri-siri kecil ini, tulis Niranjan, Sulaiman mengungkap ruang simbolik permaidani Islam dalam format menegak catan moden, dan rekabentuknya mengingatkan kepada seni sejadah dan konsep taman syurgawi dalam tamadun Islam.

Dalam period ini beliau mengutamakan pengolahan permukaan rata dengan penggunaan sistem grid, motif abstrak dan warna terang. Keindahan karya-karya beliau terletak pada sifat-sifat matematika, seumpama keseimbangan, pengulangan, simetri dan infiniti, selain



Garden of Mystery VI Media campuran 216 x 157 cm 1992
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara



DOA Media campuran 129 x 96 cm 1999 | Himpunan Tetap Galeri Petronas



Waiting for Godot I Cetakan Gurisan 76 x 62 cm 1977 | Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara

daripada pancaran aneka warna yang harmonis, sistematik lagi rata hasil jalinan benang perak dan emas serta pemakaian pencelup fabrik. “*Ke Arah Tauhid* merupakan pernyataan tegas saya berhubung dengan pendefinisian lukisan, apa itu seni. Ini kerana, dari segi estetik dan gaya, bila saya hasilkan karya-karya *Dokumentasi 72* saya guna banyak grid. Dalam *Ke Arah Tauhid* pun saya pakai sistem grid untuk mengolah corak-corak arabes”. Bagi beliau, ada kemesraan di antara Konstruktivisme dengan Seni Islam kerana kedua-duanya menghormati unsur matematik sebagai struktur dasar, dan menghapuskan subjektivisme serta emosionalisme. Meskipun berciri abstrak tulen, namun karya-karya tersebut bijak memmanifestasikan konsep Tauhid dan Nur yang menjadi antara teras utama Seni Islam. Dalam suasana ekspresi meditatif dan anagogiknya, karya-karya itu berfungsi sebagai wadah pengucapan estetika Tauhid, sebagai wahana zikir dan fikir, ke arah mencetus proses ‘tazkiyyah al-nafs’ dan pengaliran ‘baraqah’ Ilahi.

Pameran *Insyirah* merupakan satu lagi tahap terpenting dan bermakna di dalam puseran perjalanan seni Sulaiman. Di samping beberapa siri yang pernah dipertontonkan sebelumnya, *Insyirah* menampilkan beberapa siri kecil baru yang dihasilkan sepanjang tahun 2000. Selain berkurangnya karya-karya berteknik anyaman, ada sekurang-kurangnya dua aspek yang memperlihatkan kemajuan beliau selepas era *Ke Arah Tauhid* dan siri-siri seumpamanya. Pertama, aspek medium, dan kedua, motif. Siri-siri *Last Supper*, *DOA*, *Surah al-Tin* dan *Convergence and Divergence* memaparkan eksperimentasi beliau dengan cetakan digital; manakala siri-siri *Alam dan Alamat*, *Beauty in Multiplicity* serta *Beauty in Diversity* kekal bermedia campuran. Dari segi motif pula, beliau memasukkan elemen figura (dalam *Last Supper* dan *DOA*), motif-motif peribumi (pohon beringin wayang kulit, kerawang etnik Sarawak dan haiwan dalam *Beauty in Multiplicity*), dan motif-motif agama lain (patung Buddha, mandala dan topeng orang asli dalam *Surah al-Tin* dan *Convergence and Divergence*). Aspek kedua ini menunjukkan ada anjakan ketara daripada konsep abstraksi tulen dan manifestasi ketauhidan Islam yang beliau amalkan selama ini.

Kehadiran potret diri dan nada pluralisme agama juga dua unsur yang menarik perhatian (tidak kurang juga, kritikan) ramai. Dari segi komposisi, *DOA* agak serupa dengan *Waiting for Godot*. Namun begitu, sekira karya terdahulu – dengan paparan dua ikon dan justeru dua wacana estetika saling berlawanan – memantul kegetiran jihad spiritual pelukis berdepan dengan pancaroba modenisme, sama ada yang berkaitan dengan seninya mahupun persekitaran sosio-politiknya, kini *DOA* – dengan paparan potret diri berlatarkan motif-motif geometri, awan larat dan pohon beringin dengan pancaran warna harmonis – sebaliknya membayangkan ketenangan diri ‘sufi’ pelukis. Pemandangan imej-imej Islam dengan simbol-simbol agama lain dan motif-motif kepercayaan kaum peribumi pula lebih memeranjatkan. Seheinggakan, “sesetengah ustaz tuduh saya sesat,” kata beliau. “Saya tidak mempertikaikan syariah; tapi kita perlu keluar dari kongkongan masyarakat ‘rasis’”. Walaupun beliau mentafsir simbol-simbol bukan Islam ini dari sudut *Weltanschauung* wahyu Islam dan bukan menyempitkannya dalam kerangka sinkretisme, namun tema pluralisme agama-budaya sesuatu yang sensitif di kalangan majoriti masyarakat kita – lihat isu-isu kebelakangan ini misalnya laungan azan, pemakaian kalimah Allah, serta kehadiran orang Islam di gereja dan orang bukan Islam di masjid dan surau.

Di dalam disertasi Doktor Falsafah beliau, Sulaiman menyoal: “Bolehkah praktis Seni Islam yang benar-benar tulen oleh pelukis-pelukis Melayu-Islam memberi sumbangan mewujudkan satu budaya baru yang sama-sama dikongsi dan dapat menyatupadukan masyarakat, serta boleh mengurangkan dan akhirnya menyelesaikan ketegangan kaum dan agama di Malaysia hari ini?” Beliau turut sedar khalayak dan seniman bukan Islam tidak mahu ikut serta dalam acara-acara bernuansa Seni Islam. “Saya lihat Seni Islam [yang dihasilkan oleh kebanyakan pelukis] bukanlah Seni Islam sewajarnya, tetapi Seni Peribumi-Melayu ... yang diangkat oleh pelukis-pelukis Melayu untuk menonjolkan cita dan citra keMelayuan mereka”. Dari itu, “Saya menyarankan Islam pada tingkat lebih tinggi, bukan pada takuk syariah tetapi di peringkat mistisisme yang boleh mempertemukannya dengan lain-lain agama”. Pemakaian elemen-elemen pluralistik dan multi-kultural dalam karya-karya itu, justeru, wajarlah ditilik dari sudut persoalan-persoalan yang pernah dibangkitkan beliau.

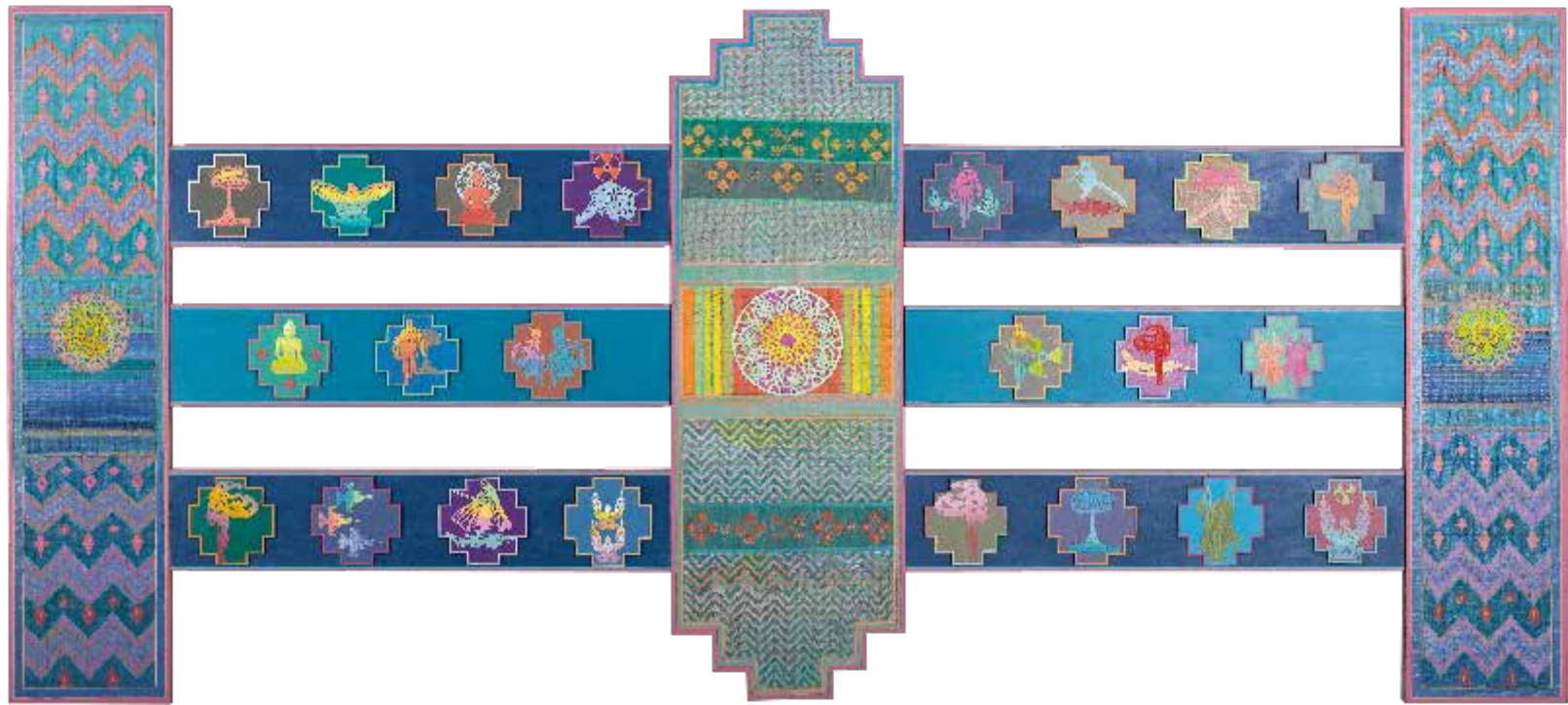


Last Supper I (Hidangan Terakhir I) Akrilik 65 x 50 cm 1998

RAJA'AH: TAMAN DUKA LARA

Kalau sarjana-sarjana seperti S.H. Nasr mempengaruhi beliau dari segi dimensi spiritual Seni Islam, beberapa cendekiawan seperti Chandra Muzaffar pula mengingatkan beliau peri pentingnya mengaitkan spiritualiti Seni Islam dengan realiti sosial. “Salah satu perkara yang merangsang saya menghasilkan siri *Endangered Garden (Taman Duka Laka)* ialah kertaskerja Chandra Muzaffar, “Muslim Artists and Their Challenges in the 21st Century,” yang dibentangkan di satu seminar seni,” ujar Sulaiman. “Antara kata-kata beliau, menjadi pelukis Muslim bukan bermakna semata-mata mengabdikan diri kepada Tuhan, buat ibadat sahaja, tetapi juga mu’amalat ... Anda [ada tanggungjawab] sebagai hamba Allah dan sebagai khalifah [Allah]. Anda perlu memegang prinsip Amar Ma’ruf Nahi Mungkar. Kalau Nasr bercakap tentang alam ghaib dan seumpamanya, bagaimana pula dengan alam syahadah di dunia ini?” Bagi Sulaiman, pelukis Islam tidak hanya mempunyai hubungan ‘hablum minallah’ dengan Allah tetapi juga urusan ‘hablum minannas’ dengan manusia sekeliling.

Isu-isu sosial dan politik sudahpun diterokai Sulaiman sejak 1960-an, tepatnya 1962, ketika belajar di London. Tatkala majoriti dunia membantah kekerasan Amerika sewaktu Perang Vietnam pada 1960-an, beliau bukan saja menyertai gerakan protes di London tetapi turut mengkritik keserakahan Amerika menerusi lukisan-lukisan *Vietnam War I* (1973) dan *Vietnam War II* (1973). Demikian juga, tragedi berdarah rusuhan kaum 13 Mei turut diulas oleh beliau dalam catan akrilik *The May 13 '69* (1971). Krisis politik nasional tahun 1998 yang meletus ekoran pemecatan Anwar Ibrahim dari UMNO dan kerajaan yang seterusnya mencetus Gerakan Reformasi turut mendapat respons beliau. Kira-kira tiga minggu selepas peristiwa itu, beliau menampilkan dua karya cetakan digital, *Last Supper at Bukit Aman/Last Supper 1* dan *Kebengongan* (berlandaskan sajak “Kebengongan” oleh Dinsman), di pameran tergepar *apa? siapa? kenapa?* anjuran Wong Hoy Cheong.



Endangered Garden 1 Media campuran 184 x 413 cm 2011

Namun isu-isu dunia berkaitan umat Islam yang meledak dan berlanjutan selepas peristiwa 9/11 benar-benar mengganggu emosi beliau, lantas mendesak beliau mengambil sikap lebih lantang. Siri *Endangered Garden*, yang menjadi fokus utama pameran kali ini, secara umumnya memberi tumpuan kepada tiga perkara pokok, yakni respons beliau terhadap a) ciri-ciri esoterik, ironik dan paradoksikal teori-teori pascamoden, b) sikap talam dua muka dasar-dasar luar negara Amerika Syarikat, khususnya dalam usaha memerangi keganasan antarabangsa – sebenarnya niat balas dendam kepada umat Islam di atas kemusnahan Menara WTC, dan c) kesan-kesan daripada proses globalisasi, sama ada menerusi kapitalisme pasaran bebas ataupun revolusi teknologi maklumat dan komunikasi, seperti konsumerisme melampau dan penghomogenan budaya-budaya ‘primitif’.

Meskipun Sulaiman mengekalkan permukaan abstrak tulen dengan penampilan motif-motif geometri, arabes dan flora serta skema pewarnaan yang sinonim dengan seni beliau, tetapi kali ini ada sedikit kelainan yang ketara. Selama ini beliau cenderung menyadur motif-motif dari tradisi-tradisi keagamaan dan kebudayaan primitif. Sebaliknya untuk siri ini, beliau menyelitkan citra-citra yang divedok dari lingkung budaya pop Amerika, seperti Darth Vader, Cat Woman dan Captain America, di samping ikon-ikon terkenal negara itu iaitu Statue of Liberty dan helang kebangsaan USA. Adunan simbol-simbol Barat yang ganas di atas latar ketimuran yang lembut (diwakili oleh anyaman dan kerawang) serta latar spiritualiti Islam yang tenang (diungkap menerusi motif geometri) menampilkan kesatuan visual yang tegang lagi dinamik, walaupun bukan janggal. Jukstaposisi imej-imej budaya pop Amerika dengan corak-corak Islam, Melayu dan ‘primitif’ berpadanan dengan komentar yang beliau lontarkan: tentang kemelut sosio-politik-budaya kontemporari, mitos Islamofobia dan Terrorisme ciptaan Barat, kebobrokan kondisi pascamoden dan proses globalisasi, kerenah ‘terror’ polisi-polisi Amerika.

“Siri ini menegaskan bahawa puak penceroboh, orang yang tak bertamadun, yang tak beradat itu, bukan kita, yang digelar masyarakat primitif, mundur; tetapi sebenarnya mereka ... Kita sebenarnya mangsa dan bukan pemangsa”. Harapan beliau, atas semangat Amal Ma’ruf Nahi Munkar, “saya dapat gunakan tenaga, pemikiran dan seni saya untuk mempertahankan Islam. Itulah motivasi utama yang mendorong saya beralih daripada aspek spiritualiti Seni Islam kepada kritikan sosial dan politik ke atas polisi Amerika”.

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NUR HANIM MOHAMED KHAIRUDDIN memperoleh ijazah Sarjana Muda Seni Halus dari ITM (kini UiTM) Shah Alam pada tahun 1994. Semenjak itu beliau berkecimpung sebagai pelukis dan kurator, selain menjadi penulis seni dan budaya. Beliau telah menyertai banyak pameran di dalam dan luar negara, dan menerima beberapa anugerah seni antaranya sebagai Pemenang Utama Bakat Muda Sezaman pada 1996. Dari 1996 sehingga 2010, beliau berkhidmat sebagai Kurator di Yayasan Kesenian Perak dan menjadi penggerak utama acara-acara kesenian, kesusasteraan dan kebudayaannya, termasuklah Festival Pekan Seni Ipoh (1996-2000). Sebagai seorang kurator bebas, beliau telah mengkurasi pameran beberapa pengkarya sohor seperti Raja Shahrizan Raja Aziddin, Shia Yih Yiing dan A. Samad Said. Beliau pernah menyumbang penulisan tentang seni dan budaya untuk majalah-majalah atas talian seperti kakiseni.com (Malaysia), ArtIT (Jepun) dan Universes-in-Universe (Jerman), dan sering dilantik sebagai penulis, penterjemah dan penyunting bagi pelbagai penerbitan seni. Pada 2007 beliau menerima geran penyelidikan dari American Centre Foundation untuk mengkaji isu-isu berkenaan seniman-seniman diaspora yang menetap di Copenhagen. Beliau merupakan pemilik Teratak Nuromar, sebuah penerbit independen yang menerbitkan majalah seni visual sentAp!—yang mana beliau menjadi ketua penyunting dan salah seorang pengasasnya.

CURATOR'S ESSAY

THE SPIRAL JOURNEY OF SULAIMAN ESA'S ART: FROM SERENE LANDSCAPES TO ENDANGERED GARDENS

| Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin

LONDON ERA: BEFORE AND AFTER

When Sulaiman first plunged into the world of art in the middle of 1950's, when he was still a teenager, Malaysia was undergoing a transformation process from being a colonial country to becoming an independent nation. During that period, Western modern art system, first introduced here around the 1930's, became the major influence among local artists. Consequently, most of his earlier watercolours show traces of Realism and Naturalism. Later, after being exposed to the works and lives of Van Gogh, Monet, Manet and other artists like them, he began to explore the Impressionist painting style and colour effects as evident in portraits, landscapes and their imitations of Western masterpieces that he created, especially throughout the immediate two years before his departure to London.

His schooling days in Hornsey College of Art in London (1962-1967) was an important phase in the early formation of Sulaiman as a serious artist. Furthermore, in his own words, the swinging London in the 1960's, as the epicenter of international music, fashion and art industries, "a city pregnant with creative and artistic dynamism," provided "intellectually satisfying, educationally enriching, culturally enlightening, and socially illuminating" surroundings. From the practice of doing base on painting purely on interest by copying Western artworks, he was exposed to more complex art and one that is interrelated to other fields of learning including philosophy, psychology and sociology. The art educational system rooted in the Bauhaus model adopted by the college made him realised that creative practices are not simply vocational activities aim at manufacturing objects or for the purpose of self-expression. On the contrary, he says, "Bauhaus system actually treats art as a form of scientific investigation. Art is not just about making pictures; it is a process of thinking whereby artist queries everything he does, his materials, his techniques ... The conventional concept of artist-doer is no longer significant thus ... [let to the concept of] artist as thinker became the main thrust of this course". He became conscious of the fact that technical brilliance must be accompanied by intellectual vigour. Compared to his subjective and expressive studies on natural and architectural landscapes axecuted in Johor Bahru, his paintings of human figures, sceneries and still lifes as well as his sketches during the Hornsey period reveal a more reflective, empirical and analytical approach with the use of several artistic mediums that were new to him then, such as etching and mixed media.



Study works at Hornsey



Compression 3
Acrylic & dye 142 x 82 cm 1971

National Permanent Collection

After completing his one year Post-Graduate course in Printmaking at Atelier 17, Paris, he returned home in 1968 and soon worked as a graphic designer at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP). This occasion provided Sulaiman with an opportunity to interact with other people outside the sphere of visual art. The 1970's witnessed the presence of strong and lively cooperation among intellectuals, above all among the Malay race, who were involved in various disciplines such as theater, literature, academic, philosophy and politics. This interdisciplinary interaction largely taking place within the space provided by DBP, which at that time functioned as the meeting place for Malay intelligentsia, opened up Sulaiman's mind. Apart from Liberal studies he learnt while in Hornsey, this interaction also equipped him with further knowledge and paradigm beyond art discipline and thus heightened his creative and artistic sensitivity.

At that time the styles of Realism, Impressionism and particularly Abstract Expressionism were dominating Malaysian modern art scene among serious and established artists. However, as he was deeply committed to the ideas of Constructivism, Sulaiman was more interested in studying fundamental elements and structures of visual design and notions of object-hood and physicality. As a move to renounce the tradition of easel painting and artmaking based on reflection of nature and human, his main focus then was on the physical, structural and perceptual qualities of colour and form. His constructivist-minimalist paintings, especially his 'field-painting' scrolls, were included in two exhibitions organised by the New Scene group, *Experiment '70* (1970) and *Dokumentasi 72* (1972).

Together with a few young artists returning from studies in Europe and America in the late 1960's and early 1970's, Sulaiman actively and radically participated in the movement to initiate a more cerebral, impersonal and objective system of aesthetics as an alternative to the representational, gestural and emotional styles dominating Malaysian modern art landscape then. This group of artists introduced radical art thoughts, creative strategies and manifestos that appeared to be deviating from the practice generally adopted by local artists. In his review of the New Scene show (1971), the late Syed Ahmad Jamal avers that the exhibition "...challenged artists of the 1960s generation to shift their emphasis on symbolic meanings ... to adopting an approach grounded in knowledge and information. While Merdeka artists believed in the roles of brush and paint, new young artists thought that they have to support their expressions with statements and texts". It was through these New Scene 'young turks' that modern art in Malaysia began to encounter the tradition of avant-garde, anti-formalist and postmodernist principles.

Despite mainly focusing on colour problematics and situational physicality, in 1972 Sulaiman embarked on a new approach to his artmaking. In *Man and His World*, an assemblage-like mixed media work that won the *Man and His World* competition in 1973, Sulaiman injected not only social and psychological impression but also spiritual element. No longer anchored in formal aesthetic consideration, this work was not only derived from social milieu but also retained its social linkage. He presented his personal belongings without changing their original forms and contexts. These mundane objects representing his Malaysian, Malay and Muslim identity and subjectivity were exploited as readymades or found objects. This seminal mixed media piece also instigated a new strategy in local art practice. Such objects and materials again turned up in the *Towards A Mystical Reality* exposition one year later.

TOWARDS A MYSTICAL REALITY

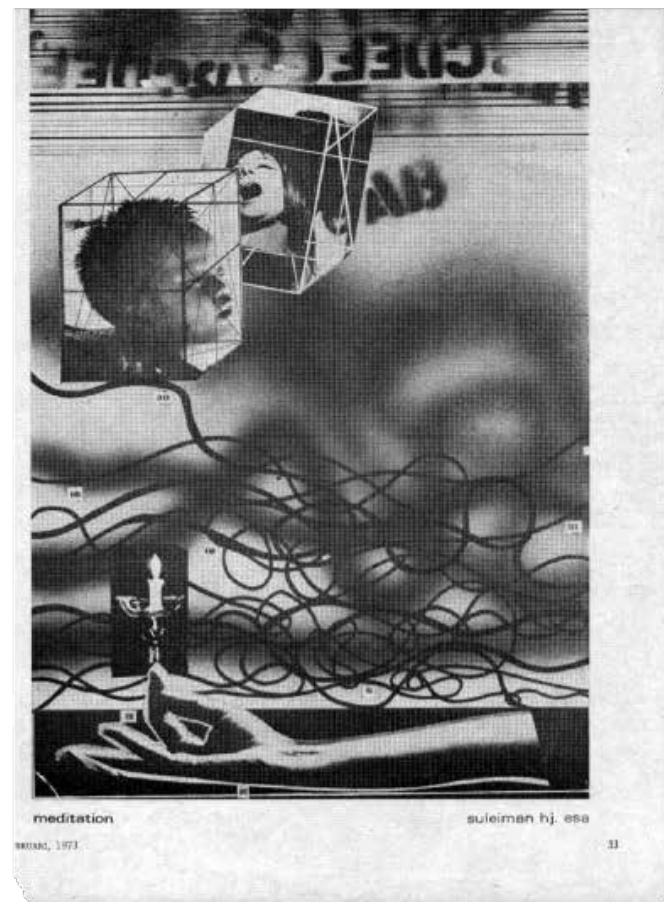
In the wake of 13 May 1969 race riots, the government convened the National Cultural Congress (NCC) in 1971, which also involved figures from the art world including Syed Ahmad Jamal, Redza Piyadasa, and Sulaiman himself. Although Sulaiman professes that the objective of NCC was “to find an alternative art and cultural paradigm,” its convention, in his opinion, “was not so much for aesthetic or philosophical reasons but for political and social reasons”. The resolutions passed at the Congress, which laid emphasis on Malay-Islamic values, norms, paradigms and symbols as the foundations for the establishment of a homogeneous, unified national cultural identity, to certain degree had a strong bearing on the further development of Malaysia’s modern art. According to him, one of the crucial impacts of the NCC policies was that artists “had to become immersed in the Malay world.” Thus, Malay-Islamic revivalist sentiments started to emerge so much so to the point that some non-Malay artists felt uncomfortable with the escalation of Malay-Islamic hegemony. The upsurge of Malay neo-nationalist spirit further intensified the wars and politics of national culture.

Sulaiman and Piyadasa held the *Towards A Mystical Reality* (TMR) show at the DBP’s Writer’s Corner in 1974. Many observers have presumed that their efforts in the New Scene group to initiate a more serious art movement along the lines of the progress of international art seemed came to fruition with the ‘staging’ of TMR. Even though TMR maintained the spirit and mission of *Dokumentasi 72*, it was indubitably inspired by NCC. For some Malaysian artists, the debates and issues surrounding NCC, to some extent, underscored the search for a national art identity. Living in a post-colonial society striving to free itself from the yoke of imperialism and intellectual enslavement drove them to explore the diverse philosophies, traditions and myths within their own contexts that had been marginalised with the advent of modernisation and colonisation. “TMR,” he claims, “is different because for the first time we began to debunk, decolonise ourselves from Western-centricism ... The Congress [NCC], in a way, triggered this kind of attitude in our mindset”.

As indicated by Sulaiman, “The Congress opened our eyes [to look for] something genuine to our own culture, to our own truth ... It made us question our beliefs in the spirituality of Western art ... made us question our priorities, made us realise that art is about searching for meaning, context and relevancy ... [B]ut it is not the answer because it actually champions Malay ethnicity and Malay art ... We [instead] talked about something more universal”. TMR served as an arena for Sulaiman and Piyadasa to provoke local artists to reevaluate the Euro-American-centric art paradigm. They were called upon to review Asian traditions and reexamine the sense of colour, form and existence indigenous to the East so that they would not blindly emulate the art imported from the West. TMR, he declares, “put a strong challenge to the way art was going on in the last forty years in Malaysia since the Nanyang movement, or even since the emergence of watercolourist works of Abdullah Ariff”.



Piyadasa burning one of his *May 13* (1971) series works with Sulaiman (centre) and friends



An illustration by Sulaiman Esa that was featured in *Dewan Sastra* in the 70’s

“So great were the impacts of NCC on our minds and consciousness that for two years after *Dokumentasi 72* Piyadasa and I didn't do any work. [Instead,] we read and questioned a lot of things”. TMR emerged from a brainstorming session held between Sulaiman and Piyadasa to address dilemmas encountered by local artists that had impeded the mindset and progress of art in this country. Among several issues discussed by them were the production of derivative and imitative works due to artists' utter dependence on and blind following of Western 'isms', the lack of intellectual and polemical atmosphere because of artists' sole focus on stylistic and formalistic aspects, and the skeptical attitude among artists towards their own traditional heritage in view of their obsession with Western rationalism and materialism. One main concern raised was local artists' unpreparedness to engage an alternative way of interpreting reality to replace a scientific, empirical and egotistical standpoint advocated by the West. While many avant-garde artists in the West then were looking to the East, Piyadasa and Sulaiman questioned themselves why it was not them that initiated a new kind of art rooted in Oriental space-time concepts and mystical thoughts.

Apart from the bold and serious tone echoing throughout their manifesto that extensively outlined the premise of TMR, there was another key element – aside from Salleh Ben Joned's urinating performance, and intense discussions in *Dewan Sastera* journal – that had marked TMR as a pivotal turning point in the history of Malaysian modern art, or as stated by T.K. Sabapathy, “a foundational impetus for a variety of conceptualism in Malaysia in the 1970's and early 1980's,” or as Krishen Jit puts it, “an entry point for the emergence of postmodernism in Malaysian art”. TMR did not feature any object normally associated with conventional art, but objects culled from immediate surroundings and supposedly selected randomly by both artists. These objects were presented in their natural forms and characters without any conscious intervention from the artists. As declared by Sulaiman and Piyadasa, in order to accomplish their scheme of representation these objects must be free from their manual and emotional interference so much so to prevent them rendering humanistic and subjective traces.

In Sabapathy's view, the conceptual framework of TMR could be traced back not only to Sulaiman and Piyadasa's endeavours while they were linked with the New Scene movement, but also to Sulaiman's own *Man and His World* piece, particularly in view of two aspects: the transformation of daily artefacts into artistic elements, and the rejection of the principles and materials of illusionistic art. However, compared to his personal belongings in *Man and His World*, found objects in TMR appeared more distinctive and their auras of reality more pervasive. As if in TMR the Coke bottles were still filled with drinkable liquid, the mosquito coils still emitting smoke, the chair cushion still felt a bit warm, the empty canvas still capable of capturing shadows. This reminds us of Ismail Zain's review of *Dokumentasi 72* when he wrote that “[Sulaiman and Piyadasa's art has] moved into a new dimension which totally annihilates illusion and accepts the actual physicality of things ... The minimality and simplicity of their art is almost Zen in spirit”.

The application of such titles as *Two half-drunk Coca-Cola bottles*, *Empty bird-cage after release of bird at 2.46 p.m, on Monday 10th June 1974*, and *Empty chair on which many persons have sat on*, was another essential aspect of TMR. These data served as signs or information that helped shed light on the audience's understanding of the temporal continuum of the objects or events that the titular texts alluded to. Without such titles it would be difficult for them to grasp the mental situations both artists tried to create. The audience had to transcend the physicality of object-form and the materiality of space-time in order to activate their inner minds and thus be able to perceive metaphysical meanings and essences presented to them. Considering their focus is more on the mental than retinal aspects, and on the peripheral than central vision, Oriental mystical philosophies, particularly Zen, are very useful means for the perception of reality via contemplation and meditation, and not merely through visual appreciation.

Syed Ahmad Jamal states that through this exhibition both artists “lay emphasis on visual awareness of the situations not necessarily created by the artists as ‘art objects’”. Meanwhile Sabapathy reads TMR, among other things, along the lines of perceptualism, or perceptual psychology

that defines the process of receiving and interpreting images, which “was a European/Western obsession and antithetical to Asian sensibilities and interests”. In their jointly authored manifesto, Sulaiman and Piyadasa asserted that “the critical issue in modern art today is not so much the problem of how we ‘see’ things (visual/retinal) but how we ‘conceive’ reality (conceptual) ... Our interest at this stage was with the perception of reality itself.” As stated by Sulaiman, he began to ponder on the “concept of what made art, at what moment art is art: is it when you conceive it, [or] when you’ve painted it, [or] after that ...?” For example, the birdcage object featured in TMR. “[W]hen we put the work on display, the audience have to decide at what point it turns into a work of art? Was it when we first bought the cage with the bird in it? Or when the bird was released? Or that the bird has now flown thousands of miles away?” Since manifested forms and actual realities are two entirely different things, both artists thus attempted to breach the wall separating artistic medium and subjective interpretation so as to achieve such a condition, in Sabapathy’s words, “where the materiality of artistic productions is emphasised with little or no mediation”.

Both artists also strongly objected the attempt by several local critics to superficially associate TMR with Dadaist sensibility. It is true that Calvin Tomkins once noted that Dadaist artists, “tired of a materialistic world, ... sought in such works a new ‘mystical reality’”. However, the employment of readymades and anti-art objects for the purpose of uplifting the values and dignity of such objects by way of artist’s selection is definitely in contradiction to the concept of perceptualism dealt with by Sulaiman and Piyadasa. While the exponents of Dadaism consider that art no longer function as interpreter of reality but instead becomes reality itself, Sulaiman and Piyadasa, on the other hand, see art – especially the one founded on mysticism – as a way to attain higher dimensions of perception towards the actual reality of human life and existence.

INSYIRAH

“Because TMR was so provocative and radical, I didn’t know what to do after that because the works were like negating everything that I believed in,” Sulaiman explains. During this period of uncertainty, he was caught in identity crisis between his modern and secular Western art and his religious and indigenous background. Like Piyadasa, he also realised his lack of knowledge about the history of Asian art, culture and philosophy. Therefore, he spent time reading, thinking, and meditating about himself, besides vigorously experimenting with various printing techniques.

Only in 1977 he felt called to produce a new series, *Waiting for Godot*. These photo etchings express the severity of not only the crisis of art identity but also socio-psychological predicaments encountered by Sulaiman. This series could also be read as the portrayal of cultural conflict in modern Malaysia, particularly among the Malay-Muslim community. In each of these works, the pictorial plane is divided into two spaces filled with two diametrically opposing iconic symbols: first, an image of nude woman in different sensual poses – Sulaiman proclaims it a representation of his psychological self; Niranjana interprets it as “a symbol for the Western tradition of art as for the distractions that impede the proper remembrance of God” –; second, arabesque patterns and Islamic calligraphic texts copied from a mosque in Cordova or Alhambra. “After I hung it on my office wall ... one day my Head of School came in ... He was shocked and exclaimed, ‘What is this?’ I said, ‘What’s wrong?’ He replied, ‘It’s the *ayat* Quran and you put nude woman there!’”

The clash between Eastern-Islamic cultures and Western-Secular civilisations had in fact been suggested earlier by Sulaiman through *Man and His World*, (1972). In that previous work, a necktie, a pair of shirt, and a pair of shoes (representing Western material world) are mounted on its right side, whereas a praying mat (Islamic spiritual world) on its left side. By arranging all these items to flank his other personal belongings placed inside plastic pockets in the centre, he informs us how his identity has become a site of contest between two conflicting powers. Nonetheless, the tone echoed by the *Waiting for Godot* series is more erotic and profane, and thus more strident and provocative. Whilst most local artists then were intensely discussing and debating the issue of national identity after the NCC convention, one particular print from this series that applies an eclectic approach and imparts a very appealing visual tension was ironically awarded as the



Empty canvas on which so many shadows have already fallen

Ready made 101.6 x 103 cm 1974

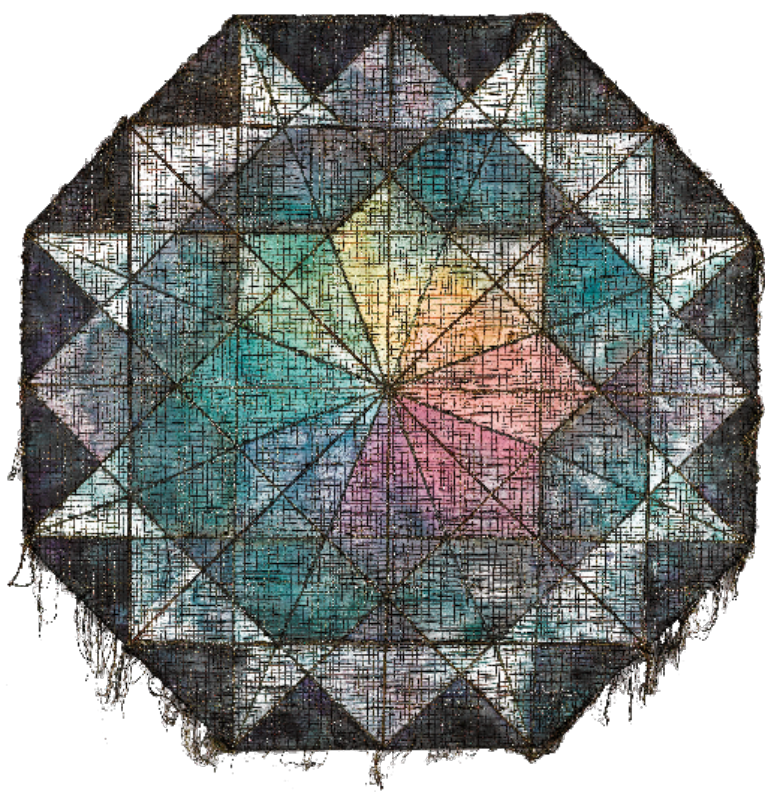
National Permanent Collection

winner of a competition organised by the National Art Gallery. Syed Ahmad Jamal viewed this work as an effort by a Malay-Muslim artist to conduct by means of symbols an introspective observation of his religion, his art, his environment, and his restlessness and anxiety being trapped in the middle of the conflict between tradition and modernism. Sulaiman recalls, “When Syed Ahmad Jamal came out with a statement on the print, mentioning about ‘the secret and the sacred’, then everything made sense! I realised I was actually painting my own self-portrait. I was talking about myself. At that time I was in a dilemma ... So, when Jamal said that, that was the phrase I was looking for”.

The *Waiting for Godot* series at that juncture indicated, among other issues, that nearly a decade after NCC convention serious local artists, at least Sulaiman himself, were still grappling with the search for an ultimate definition of the identity of Malaysian art. Although some NCC resolutions were rejected by certain artists, conceptual frameworks delineated by NCC largely made them recognised the presence of elements in their surroundings that could be used to achieve the goal of defining Malaysian art identity. After a few series of shows, such as *Form and Soul* (1979), that were specially staged to drive Malay artists to explore their own indigenous roots and identities, the *Roots of Indigenous Art and Its Recent Development* (RIA) seminar and exhibition arranged by Institut Teknologi MARA in 1979, which also saw Sulaiman’s participation, truly thrust Malay Indigenous Art into the discourse of Malaysia’s contemporary art. He says, “Now after eight years have elapsed [since NCC], RIA was a reinforcement of the recommendations made by the Congress. What had happened to the so-called *peribumi* art? Is it flourishing? Or is it diminishing? RIA was trying to ascertain the progress [of NCC]”.

“One impact of TMR was that I began to move away from Western ideology and gravitate towards my own Malay-Muslim self,” Sulaiman confesses. After immersing himself in intense study of Zen and other Oriental philosophies during TMR period, he came to realise that Malay and Nusantara cultural traditions too possess civilisational and spiritual essences, a part from their decorative elements. Hence traditions could serve as sources of inspiration and reference for creative expression. From that moment he started to retrieve themes, symbols and forms associated with traditional crafts and arts. In order to delve deeper into the world of Malay arts, for the first time he and some other lecturers brought ITM students to meet up with master craftsmen in Terengganu and Kelantan. “Such activity was never done before the [RIA] Seminar. We used to look up to Paris or New York. But now there was a shift of paradigm ... To certain extent, the [RIA] Seminar had significant implications on the development and education of art, as well as on local artists’ creativity”.

The issue of dichotomy that exists between traditional craftsmen and modern artists that was raised by Awang Had Salleh during the RIA seminar really struck Sulaiman’s creative consciousness. While continuing his studies in Baltimore (1979-1981), he employed



Nurani Acrylic on canvas 150 x 150 cm 1983 | National Permanent Collection

fibrous materials and weaving technique for his new body of work so as to expand the ideas inspired by RIA, and simultaneously to reject Western artistic dogma that separates traditional crafts from the sphere of modern art. “[T]he Baltimore trip ... has made me unconsciously defined myself as a Malaysian, Malay, Muslim. And I began to consistently look at Malay crafts ... In Southeast Asia, our art is actually textile art. We don’t have painting, but *sari* and *sarong*. So I began to seriously look at our *batik*, *songket* weaving and woodcarving as decorations for the Malaynisation of myself ... I learned weaving technique ... that has nothing to do with Western modern painting.” Just like feminist women artists, Sulaiman too regards ‘femmege’ as part of ‘high art’.



The period of 1980's constituted yet another significant milestone in Sulaiman's art journey. Under the premiership of Mahathir Mohamed, and primarily after Anwar Ibrahim's entry into UMNO and the government, Malaysia experienced a dynamic Islamisation process and *Dakwah* activities starting from 1982. This phenomenon should be observed against the background of global Islamic resurgence which was attributable, among other things, to the success of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. While forces of globalisation and homogenisation were gravely threatening the Malaysian society throughout 1980's - 1990's, the Islamisation process as well as the government's policy of assimilation of Islamic values had been considered by many scholars, including Chandra Muzaffar, among two vital factors that made the people aware of the need to protect their genuine identities. This consciousness also spilled into the world of art when several Malay artists began to instill Islamic elements in their art.

Sulaiman's interest in studying Islamic spirituality and artistic manifestation of Islamic faith initially came about after he attended a public lecture given by Ismail al-Faruqi, an eminent academic and thinker of Islam. He describes how, “Before that, most scholars only talked about *syariah* [and] Islamic rules; but never on art. But this guy was doing courses, writing books on Islamic art. That drove me to go deeper beyond Malay ethnicity to Islamic spirituality [and] metaphysics...” He was keen to explore the potentials of Islamic art that he engrossed himself in reading and analysing writings by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Titus Burckhardt, Frithjof Schuon and others who elucidate the spiritual and formal dimensions of sacred and religious arts. Upon completion of his Islamic Studies at doctorate level at Temple University (1986-1990) under the guidance of prominent scholars like S.H. Nasr and Lamyah al-Faruqi, Sulaiman felt more confident with the future direction of his art.

Sulaiman has been hailed as one of the main advocates and prime movers of Islamic Art – referred to by Simon Soon as Islamic formalism – in Malaysia, principally during its dynamic formative years in the early 1990's. Working then as a lecturer in ITM, he rigorously inculcated the notion and ideas of Islamic Art in the minds of the students there. As a well-known artist-thinker, his detailed interpretation of the fundamentals of Islamic Art has been widely circulated through exhibition catalogues, magazines and seminar papers, and has been analysed and cited by many artists. Besides propagating the ideas of Islamic Art to local artists, one of his other most significant contributions to Malaysia's contemporary art is the dissemination of the theory of Malay aesthetics. In his conviction, the various traits of this aesthetic system that is essentially grounded in the philosophy of Malay woodcarving craft are in sync with the form and soul of Islamic Art. Apart from his active involvement in the expansion of Islamic Art through his writing and lecture, Sulaiman also planned and curated a few Islamic art shows throughout the 1990s, an era that witnessed the culmination of the evolution of Islamic Art in Malaysia. More importantly, he also continues creating artworks manifesting the theories and ideas that he has learnt and

has long been advocating. From solo exhibition *Towards Tawhid* (DBP, 1984) through to *Insyirah* (Petronas Gallery, 2001), he keeps on experimenting in the framework of Islamic (and Indigenous) Art using the medium of modern art.

Towards Tawhid was an influential exhibition in the history of Malaysian art. According to Khalil Imran, it was the first ever occasion in which a body of work exclusively featuring Islamic nuances were showcased in a solo exhibition. As stated by Sulaiman, “*Towards Tawhid* was the beginning where I found myself shifting from Malay ethnicity to Islam ... I ventured deeper and deeper into Islamic metaphysical dimensions”. *Towards Tawhid* (and in this sense, *Homage*

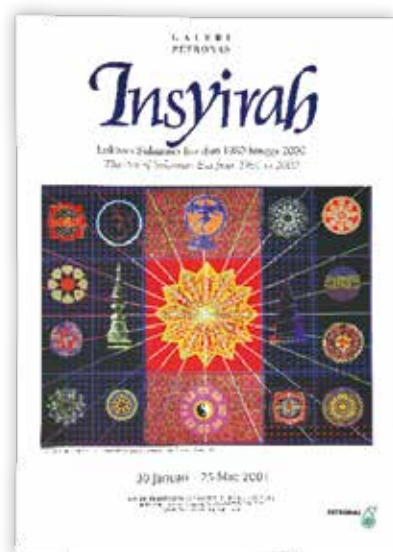


Study for UMNO Mural
Acrylic 61 x 463 cm 1984

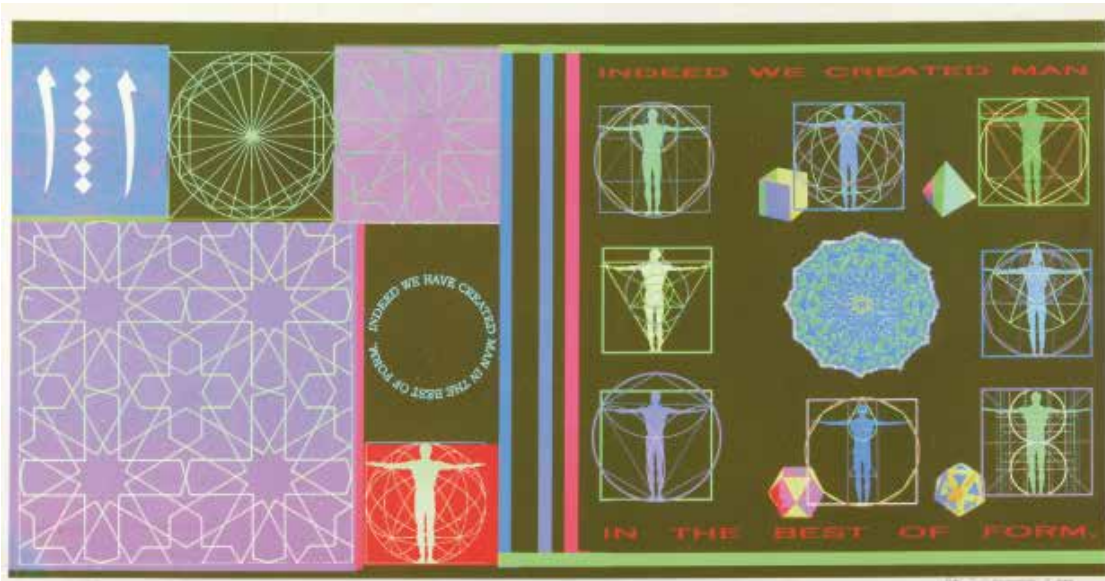
to Nakula) was a continuation of his Baltimore series. He employed weaving technique and fibrous materials, such as handmade paper and thread, to craft geometrical, arabesque and floral patterns in a variety of shapes, including octagon, circle and star. The combination of a technique resembling *songket* weaving and pure abstract motifs echos the synthesis between Islamic art ideas and Malay-Indigenous aesthetic theory. “In Malay crafts, materials come from our indigenous tradition but meaning comes from Islamic pattern. So, there was a fusion of Malay and Islam,” he claims. After completing his studies at Temple University, around the early and middle 1990’s he produced a few minor series of mixed-media pieces, such as *Garden of Mystery* and *Garden of Certainty*. Even though he basically retained formal and conceptual elements of *Towards Tawhid*, he inserted calligraphic designs bearing sacred words like *Allah* and *Alhamdulillah*. In these series, according to Niranjana, “Sulaiman represents the symbolic space of Islamic carpet in the vertical format of modern painting”, and its design is reminiscent of the art of praying mat and the concept of paradise in Islamic civilisation.

During this period he concentrated on composing flat surfaces with the application of grid system, abstract form and bright, luminous palette. The beauty of his such works lies in their mathematical attributes, like harmony, repetition, symmetry and infinity, in addition to their vivid bursts of harmonious, systematic and flat colours resulting from the interlacing of silver and gold threads and the use of fabric dyes. He explains that, “*Towards Tawhid* was my strong statement in defining what is painting, what is art. Because, aesthetically or stylistically, when I did my *Dokumentasi 72* I used a lot of this grid ... In *Towards Tawhid* I also used a lot of grid system to form arabesque and geometric patterns.” In his opinion, there is a subtle harmoniousness between Constructivism and Islamic Art since both adopt elements of mathematics as their fundamental structures, and both eliminate subjectivism and emotionalism. Despite their pure abstract quality, these works manage to subtly reveal the notions of *Tawhid* (Unity) and *Nur* (Light) which form the cores of Islamic Art. In view of their meditative and anagogical spirit, they function as a channel for the manifestation of Tauhidic aesthetics, serving as the mode for *zikr* and *fikr* in order to actuate the process of *tazkiyyah al-nafs* (soul purification) and the transmission of Divine *baraqah* (spiritual presence).

Insyirah was another important and meaningful milestone along the spiral journey of Sulaiman’s art. With the exception of a few series that had been presented somewhere else previously, *Insyirah* featured several new minor series that he produced throughout 2000. Apart from a reduction in the number of works applying the technique of weaving, there were at least two aspects that marked further development of his art since *Towards Tawhid* and other similar series. First, in terms of medium, and second, in terms of motif. While the series titled *Last Supper*, *DOA*, *Surah al-Tin* and *Convergence and Divergence* highlighted his experimentation with digital printing, the series of *Alam dan Alamat*, *Beauty in Multiplicity* and *Beauty in Diversity* still



The poster for *Insyirah* Exhibition 2001



Surah Al-Tin Digital print 50 x 31 cm 2000

engaged mixed media. In the aspect of the use of motif, he incorporated figurative forms (in *Last Supper* and *DOA*), indigenous motifs (*pohon beringin* derived from shadow puppet, Sawarakian ethnic patterns, and animals in *Beauty in Multiplicity*), and other religious images (Buddha statue, *mandala* and native ritual mask in *Surah al-Tin* and *Convergence and Divergence*). This second aspect suggested Sulaiman's apparent shift from the concepts of pure abstraction and Islamic *tawhid* that had hitherto defined his art practice.

The incorporation of self-portrait and the tone of religious pluralism also caught the attention of (and to some extent, received harsh criticism from) many people. *DOA* is compositionally similar to *Waiting for Godot*. Nevertheless, if the previous piece – with its depiction of two opposing icons, hence two conflicting aesthetic discourses – portrays the bitterness of the artist's spiritual struggles against modernism, either in relation to his art or his socio-political milieu, now *DOA* – with an illustration of the artist's self-portrait within the background of geometrical forms, floral patterns and *pohon beringin* bursting with harmonious colours – in contrast signifies the calmness of the artist's Sufic self. The juxtaposition of images of Islamic culture with symbols of other religions and motifs of beliefs and customs of indigenous communities, however, is the most shocking element, so much so that "some *ulama* said I have deviated [from Islamic teachings]," laments Sulaiman. "I am not fighting against the Islamic law; but I said we have to move on from being a racist society," he remarks. Although he interprets these non-Islamic symbols and images from the broader perspective of Islamic revealed *Weltanschauung* and not the confined structure of syncretism, the topic of religious and cultural pluralism is evidently a very sensitive subject among the majority members of our society – just observe the few recent issues pertaining to such controversial matters as the loud sound of the call of *azan*, the usage of *kalimah Allah*, and the presence of Muslims in churches and non-Muslims in mosques and *suraus*.

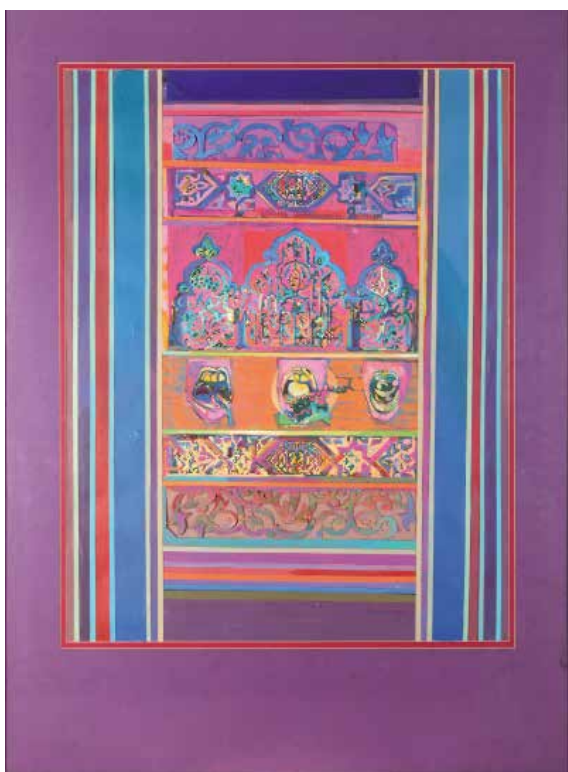
In his doctoral dissertation, Sulaiman asks: "Can the recovery of genuinely Islamic art by Malay-Muslim artists contribute to the goal of forging a new unifying, shared culture which could ease and eventually overcome the ethnic and religious tensions now prevailing in Malaysia?" He too realises how non-Muslim artists and audiences do not want to take part in any events and shows related to Islamic art. In one of the interview sessions with him, he argues that "Islamic Art [produced by the majority of Malay artists] was not the real Islamic Art; it was a Malay Indigenous Art ... practiced by Malay artists to project their Malayness." He further asserts that on account



Kebengongan Mixed media on paper 79.5 x 84.5 cm 1998



Vietnam War I Mixed media on paper 86.5 x 105 cm 1972



Last Supper V Mixed media 45 x 60 cm 2000

of this fact he “proposed Islam on the higher level, [which is] not on the level of *syariah* but of mysticism where it can meet with other religious traditions.” Therefore, the utilisation of pluralistic and multicultural elements in these works must be appreciated from the viewpoint of those few questions he had raised before.

RAJA’AH: ENDANGERED GARDENS

While scholars like S.H. Nasr inspired him to delve into the spiritual dimension of Islamic Art, several other intellectuals like Chandra Muzaffar reminded him of the importance of linking the spirituality of Islamic Art with the social reality. “One of the instances that made me commit myself to producing this *Endangered Gardens* series was the paper entitled ‘Muslim Artists and Their Challenges in the 21st Century’ that Chandra Muzaffar presented at an art seminar,” Sulaiman explains. “Among other things he mentioned was that to be a Muslim artist is not only to commit yourself to God, to carry out acts of worship or *ibadah*, but also *mu’amalah* or social interactions ... You have to fulfill your responsibilities as a servant as well as vicegerent of God. You need to uphold the principle of *amar ma’ruf nahi munkar*. If Nasr talks about *alam ghaib* and so forth, what about *alam syahadah* in this world?” As Sulaiman understands it, Muslim artists are not only linked ‘vertically’ with God, but also ‘horizontally’ with other human beings around him.

Sulaiman has been dealing with social and political issues since the 1960’s – 1962 to be exact – when he was a student in London. When protests over American imperialist aggression in the Vietnam War in the 1960’s were held all over the world, he did not only join student anti-war movement in London but also criticised American ‘terroristic’ acts through several of his paintings, for example, *Vietnam War I* (1973) and *Vietnam War II* (1973). Similarly with regard to Malaysia’s local context. As a visual response to May 13 incident, the bloody racial riots that has rather left a deep scar on the sectarian relationship between the Malays and the Chinese, he painted *The May 13 ’69* (1971). He also reacted to the national political crisis that occurred in 1998 soon after Anwar Ibrahim was conspiratorially expelled from UMNO and the government which then ignited the Reformation Movement. About three weeks after Anwar’s expulsion, he presented two digital prints, *Last Supper in Bukit Aman/Last Supper 1* and *Kebengongan* (based on Dinsman’s poem bearing a similar title), in an *ad hoc* exhibition titled *apa? siapa? kenapa?* (in English, what? who? why?) set up by Wong Hoy Cheong.

However, current world issues concerning Muslims that principally stem from 9/11 attacks and continue until today undeniably agitate his emotion, and thus urge him to take up a bolder and more defiant attitude. Sulaiman reiterates that the *Endangered Gardens* series, which constitutes the main part of this recent exhibition, focuses above all on three key subjects or his responses to a) the esoteric, ironic and paradoxical nature of postmodern theories, b) the hypocrisy of American foreign policies, particularly in its war against international terrorism – actually its revenge on the Muslims for the destruction of WTC Twin Towers, and c) the impacts of globalisation,

whether through forces of free-market capitalism, information and communication technology revolution and so on, which have given rise, among other things, to blatant consumerism and homogenisation of 'primitive' cultures across the globe.

Although Sulaiman still maintains his signature pure abstract surfaces adorned with geometrical, arabesque and floral motifs as well as his unique colour scheme, this current body of work seemingly accentuate a slightly different formalistic approach. All this while he has been more inclined to employ motifs culled from primitive religious and cultural traditions. However for this series, he also infuses his paintings with images derived from American pop cultures, like Darth Vader, Cat Woman and Captain America, as well as American famous icons such as Statue of Liberty and USA's national bird, bald eagle. The placement of violent Western symbols against the background alluding to Oriental grace (represented by intricate weaving technique and floral patterns) and Islamic spirituality (expressed by geometric forms) provides the subtle sense of visual unity that appears dynamic and intense, if not incongruous. The fusion of American pop cultural images with Islamic, Malay and 'primitive' motifs is consistent with the scope and depth of his comments and critiques: of the contemporary socio-political-cultural dilemmas, the Western-inspired myths of Islamophobia and Terrorism, the destructive effects of postmodern conditions and globalisation process, the dangers posed by American 'terroristic' policies.

"This series shows that the aggressors, the barbarians, the uncivilised people, are not us, they called the primitive, uncultured human race; but actually them ... In fact, we are victims and not victimisers". By adhering to the spirit of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, he hopes to be able to use his energy, thinking and art "to at least defend Islam." As Sulaiman points out, "That was the most important motivation that made me moved from my spiritual engagement in Islamic art to my social-political critique of American foreign policies".



Imperial Ambitions Mixed media 230.5 x 380.5 cm 2011

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NUR HANIM MOHAMED KHAIRUDDIN graduated from Institut Teknologi MARA (now UiTM) with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts in 1994. Since that time, she has been an artist and curator, as well as arts and culture writer. She has participated in numerous exhibitions both at home and abroad, and is the recipient of several awards, most notably the Major Winner in the 1996 Young Contemporaries. From 1996 until 2010, she worked as Curator at Perak Arts Foundation in which capacity she acted as the prime mover for its art, literary and cultural events, particularly the annual Perak Arts Festival (1996 to 2000). She has curated solo shows for some renowned artists including Raja Shahrman Raja Aziddin, Shia Yih Yiing and A. Samad Said. She contributes writings for online magazines kakiseni.com (Malaysia), ArtIT (Japan) and Universes-in-Universe (Germany), and is often engaged as writer, translator and editor for art publications. In 2007 she received a grant from American Centre Foundation to conduct research on diasporic artists in Copenhagen. She is the owner of Teratak Nuromar, an independent publisher of visual art magazine sentAp! where she also serves as its co-founder and editor-in-chief.



The background is a painting of a landscape with trees and a building. A semi-transparent grey box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text in red. The text is arranged in three lines: the first line is 'ERA LONDON:', the second line is 'SEBELUM & SELEPAS', and the third line is 'LONDON PERIOD:'. Below this, there is a fourth line with 'BEFORE & AFTER'. At the bottom of the box, there is a large red number '1.'.

**ERA LONDON:
SEBELUM & SELEPAS**

**LONDON PERIOD:
BEFORE & AFTER**

1.

PERMULAAN AWAL: RANG MUDA DI JOHOR BAHRU (1950-AN – 1961)

| Profesor Madya Dr. Khatijah Sanusi

PENDAHULUAN

Seperi yang selalu digambarkan, artis adalah penegak nasibnya sendiri, cermin kepada zamannya dan juga makhluk sosial yang karya-karyanya seringkali diwarnai oleh rentak dan semangat zamannya serta peristiwa-peristiwa masyarakat mahupun sejarah berulang kali muncul menjadi tema-tema ekspresi peribadinya. Sebagai genre yang menyaksikan artis berperanan selaku jurubicara dan pendukung tatanan sosial, pada dasarnya ia adalah model Fungsionalis menurut istilah Durkheim yang mengangkat seni sebagai daya cipta yang memperkukuh prinsip-prinsip serta norma-norma kolektif masyarakat.¹ Dalam nada serupa, Geertz berpendapat tiada seorang pun yang boleh hidup bersendirian, dan dia semestinya sejuzuk daripada kelompok majoriti yang memupuk beraneka perasaan dan pelbagai nilai serta cita-cita yang lazimnya dirai oleh seluruh masyarakat². Dengan yang demikian, seni mendapat semangat dan tenaganya daripada lingkaran sosio-budaya yang terkandung di dalamnya berbagai-bagai kuasa kognisi yang penting untuk perubahan sosial. Meskipun ciri-ciri terasnya ditentukan oleh kerangka bahasa visualnya sendiri, tetapi seni juga bersangkutan dengan aliran sejarah dan dipengaruhi oleh daya-daya politik dan sosio-ekonomi.³ Kesimpulannya, untuk mengaitkan karya seni dengan persekitaran masyarakat maka artis bukan sahaja bertindak balas terhadap realiti zamannya tetapi juga terhadap perkaitan dirinya dengan aktiviti menggarap makna yang ada di dalam masyarakat itu. Di negara ini, salah seorang artis yang cukup konsisten untuk selama lima dekad yang lampau menghurai pertautan dwihala di antara seni dan masyarakat ialah Sulaiman Esa.

Sebagaimana yang diamati dengan penuh firasat oleh sejarawan seni Zainol Shariff, Sulaiman Esa mungkin satu-satunya artis di Malaysia yang bersungguh-sungguh dan dengan cemerlang berjuang demi memahami pertalian di antara konsep kerohanian Timur, kosmologi Islam dan budaya Melayu di satu sisi, dan fahaman seni moden Antarabangsa serta hegemoni estetika barat di sisi yang satu lagi.⁴ Pada hemat Almarhum Syed Ahmad Jamal, salah seorang artis terkenal tanah air, Sulaiman Esa terus menerus terlibat dalam kegiatan seni dan beliau melakar pencapaian demi pencapaian dan merentasi fasa demi fasa sejajar dengan perkembangan seni: isu-isu konseptual, bahan-bahan jumpaan, hakikat mistik, lingkaran sosial, rujukan budaya dan terakhir sekali, Islam, menjadi tunjang dan paksi kepada praktis seni beliau.⁵ Almarhum Redza Piyadasa, pengkritik seni dan artis, turut menyatakan:

Sumbangan terpenting Sulaiman terhadap seni moden Malaysia tertumpu kepada tiga aspek. Pertama, dalam bidang pengkaryaan catan berteraskan falsafah warna; kedua, dalam bidang perangkaan teori dan konsep seni; [dan ketiga], dalam lapangan seni cetakan. Di dalam kesemua bidang tersebut beliau telah memperlihatkan tahap pencapaian yang cukup luar biasa.⁶

Begitu juga dengan pendapat Lois Lamy Faruqi. Di dalam kertas kerja berjudul *The Literary Studies and the Visual Art: Case study in Malaysia* beliau menyatakan:

Sulaiman Esa merupakan perintis perkembangan seni Islam kontemporari di Malaysia.⁷

Selepas menamatkan pembelajaran seni secara formal selama enam tahun di London dan Paris, Sulaiman seperti seorang anak muda yang merbahaya dan sukar dikawal bila beliau mula melibatkan diri di persada seni moden Malaysia pada awal 1970-an. Satu persatu usaha beliau untuk mencetus pembaharuan bukan sahaja memukau orang ramai malah turut menimbulkan pelbagai kontroversi dan perdebatan berkenaan budaya seperti menerusi siri-siri *Manusia dan Alamnya* (1972), *Ke Arah Tauhid* (1984), *Mural UMNO* (1985), *Ke Arah Hakikat Mistik* (kolaborasi dengan Redza Piyadasa, 1974), *Menunggu Godot* (1977) dan *Insyirah* (2001).

Apabila seseorang mengamati kecenderungan berterusan Sulaiman melanggar tembok-tembok sempadan seni, sehingga diulas oleh Almarhum Syed Ahmad Jamal betapa “Sulaiman tidak mahu sesekali taat kepada norma dan adat...,”⁸ orang itu pasti sekali akan bertanya: siapa artis ini? Apakah latarbelakang didikan dan asuhannya? Siapakah para guru dan pembimbingnya? Apakah faktor-faktor yang membentuk kepekaan seninya terhadap warna?⁹ Apakah punca yang menyebabkan beliau berterusan berusaha memecah sempadan-sempadan seni? Esei ini, justeru, diharapkan dapat menjawab sebahagian daripada persoalan-persoalan tersebut.

Bagi memperkemas riwayat hidup artis ini, mengkaji dengan dekat didikan zaman kanak-kanak serta pengalaman peribadinya mengikut kerangka analisis naratif seperti saranan Catherine Riesman (1983), yang menghurai urutan peristiwa bukan fiksyen dalam kehidupan seseorang, merupakan satu kaedah paling wajar. Analisis naratif pada asasnya adalah suatu kajian rentas disiplin yang mengandungi rangka-rangka permulaan, pertengahan dan pengakhiran. Lantaran itu, analisis naratif dapat mencungkil pelbagai maklumat subjektif tentang kehidupan sang artis memandangkan jalinan cerita, seperti yang dapat dilihat dalam kajian-kajian silang budaya, menjadi tunjang kepada kegiatan manusia dan proses penciptaan maknanya.¹⁰

Walau apapun, perbincangan mengenai karya-karya penting mahupun apa jua pencapaian estetika beliau, pada saat ini, belum begitu lengkap atau tidak relevan. Bagaimanapun, seawal tahun 1960-an Sulaiman Esa agak secara tidak sedar telah menabur benih-benih proses pemikiran yang barangkali suatu hari bakal disemak semula, dan beransur-ansur berkembang lalu akhirnya membuahkan hasil setelah beliau menjangkau kematangan intelektual. Pembabitan awal beliau dalam bidang seni mungkin boleh dikias sebagai langkah menyediakan kepingan-kepingan bagi membina sebuah gambaran lengkap mengenai kesenian beliau yang mana pada tahun-tahun berikutnya terus dipertingkatkan dan disusun semula sehingga mencapai kemuncak.

Bahagian pertama esei sempena pameran retrospektif ini mengambil pendekatan menjejak riwayat hidup artis ini secara kronologi dengan memberi tumpuan kepada urutan peristiwa di masa lalu yang membentuk persepsi masa kini beliau, serta menyelidik bagaimana keadaan sekarang mencorak persepsi masa silam beliau, dan bagaimana kedua-dua fenomena ini mempengaruhi persepsi dan perkaitan masa hadapan beliau yang serba rumit. Berlatarkan pemahaman beliau terhadap peranan sosial artis inilah maka hubungan dialektika di antara kesenian Sulaiman dan masyarakat akan diperjelaskan.

Maka untuk memenuhi objektif-objektif yang disebutkan di atas, esei ini dibahagikan kepada tiga bahagian. Bahagian pertama memberi gambaran zaman kanak-kanak Sulaiman sekitar

tahun '50-an di kota kelahiran beliau, Johor Bahru, tatkala bakat beliau dipupuk oleh ahli-ahli keluarga yang berdarah seni dan kemudian dilanjutkan di sekolah menerusi “khidmat” seni yang dipertanggungjawabkan ke atas beliau oleh guru-guru, khususnya Encik Lim Teck Siang, guru matematik yang juga peminat seni, di mana Sulaiman mulai mengasah kemahiran seninya. Dalam bahagian kedua, saya akan meninjau latihan seni secara formal yang beliau terima ketika di Hornsey College of Art, London, dengan sistem pendidikannya yang melibatkan pendekatan seni berteraskan daya intelektual dan proses penyelidikan menurut kerangka ideologi Bauhaus. Sedangkan ketika belajar seni secara sendiri-sendiri di JB dulu Sulaiman telah pun tanpa sedar menyemai bibit-bibit halatuju masa depannya, apatah lagi pula setelah selesai mengikuti pembelajaran seni pelbagai disiplin secara rasmi selama lebih lima tahun di London beliau tentunya terus berbuat demikian, tetapi kali ini dengan sengaja menghidangkan idea-idea yang mencabar lagi provokatif yang mana pada dekad-dekad kemudiannya “disemak semula” dan disuntik dengan paradigma baru serta diolah menjadi karya-karya yang belum pernah dihasilkan sebelum ini.¹¹ Bahagian terakhir esei ini pula akan membicarakan tempoh waktu pasca London selepas beliau pulang ke tanah air pada hujung 60-an, apabila beliau dan Almarhum Redza Piyadasa begitu taksud dengan seni barat dan bertanggungjawab mencetus satu paradigma alternatif kepada gerakan seni arus perdana iaitu Ekspresionisme Abstrak di awal 70-an. Walau bagaimanapun, di samping aktif dalam bidang seni visual Sulaiman turut terlibat merekacipta hiasan panggung dan busana untuk pementasan teater seperti *Uda dan Dara*, *Alang Rentak Seribu* dan *The Birds*, dan ini membuka peluang kepada beliau untuk bekerjasama dengan penggerak-penggerak teater ternama seumpama Syed Alwi, Usman Awang, Krishen Jit dan lain-lain lagi.



Sulaiman Esa pada usia 13 tahun

Bahagian I: Asal dan Usul: Zaman Rang Muda di Johor Bahru ('50-an – awal '60-an)

Menurut Sulaiman, ada tiga faktor utama yang boleh dikatakan membentuk didikan awal seninya. Pertama, peranan ahli-ahli keluarga beliau yang menyediakan suasana yang sesuai untuk pemupukan dan pertumbuhan daya kreativiti beliau – bapa saudara, ibu, serta saudara-saudara kandung yang lebih tua dari beliau. Kedua, pembelajaran seni secara tidak formal di kedua-dua sekolah rendah dan menengah, iaitu di Sekolah Rendah Bukit Zahrah dan Maktab Inggeris, terutama sekali di bawah bimbingan Encik Lim Teck Siang. Ketiga, rakan-rakan artis sebaya yang menghulur tali persahabatan paling akrab, serta memberi sokongan dalam hal-hal kesenian dan merangsang beliau melihat seni sebagai suatu kerjaya yang bermanfaat.

Asuhan Kesenian

Dilahirkan pada tahun 1941 dalam sebuah keluarga berbakat seni, dan sebagai anak bongsu, Sulaiman Esa sentiasa di bawah pengawasan rapi kedua ibubapanya. Bapanya Hj. Esa Abdullah, yang mahir berbahasa Inggeris, bertugas sebagai kerani majlis bandaran di Johor Bahru (JB). Bapanya juga seorang tokoh yang dikenali oleh pihak Istana, pejabat Majlis Bandaran dan ramai penduduk Johor Bahru. Manakala ibunya Hajah Aishah Ismail pula seorang suri rumah yang berdarah seni. Seingat Sulaiman, ketika berusia lima tahun beliau pertama kali ‘diperkenalkan’ kepada konsep seni lukis apabila beliau melihat lakaran-lakaran corak bunga-bunga yang diolah ibunya untuk menghiasi bakul telur sebagai hadiah perkahwinan. Sulaiman terpesona dengan kemahiran ibunya menggunakan pen pelbagai warna untuk menghasilkan berpuluh-puluh lakaran secara spontan dan tangkas meskipun ibunya tidak pernah dilatih menjadi artis! Seperti kelaziman anak-anak kecil sebaya beliau, Sulaiman menconteng dan melukis di dinding, lantai dan perabot rumah sehingga dimarahi ahli-ahli keluarga yang lebih dewasa.

Tiga orang adik-beradik Sulaiman merupakan artis-artis berbakat besar, dan lukisan-lukisan mereka menghiasi rumah kediaman keluarga. Abang sulung, Abdullah, yang sangat rapat dengan beliau dan ada kala duduk sebilik dengan beliau, menjadi pembimbing beliau. Abdullah juga seorang artis serba boleh yang berkemahiran menghasilkan lakaran, lukisan figuratif dan rekaan poster, malah gubahan busana untuk acara-acara di sekolah seperti pertandingan pakaian beragam dan persembahan konsert. Apabila Abdullah tiada di rumah, Sulaiman menghayati



Sekolah Rendah Bukit Zahrah, Johor Bahru. Sulaiman berdiri ketiga dari kiri, di barisan belakang (1953)

bakat abangnya dan cuba sedaya upaya meniru gaya lukisan beliau. Dari abang sulung inilah Sulaiman banyak menimba ilmu tentang selok-belok lukisan cat air. Kakaknya Hamidah pula pernah memenangi beberapa pertandingan merekacipta poster di sekolah. Begitu juga dengan abang di atasnya Ahmad, yang cukup cekap melukis kereta lumba dan motorsikal yang sering dihasilkan dalam versi licin lagi berkilat. Tidak syak lagi, pengaruh dari ahli-ahli keluarga beliau sendiri sudah cukup merangsang Sulaiman untuk menuruti jejak langkah mereka!

Selain daripada pengaruh keluarga di rumah, bapa saudaranya Hj. Rahmat Ismail merupakan seorang pelukis cat air yang terkenal di kalangan kaum keluarga dan juga di JB. Hasil bimbingan bapa saudaranya itu Sulaiman terus mengasah kemahirannya dalam lukisan cat air dan penggunaan garisan-garisan grid. Kesempatan menemani bapa saudaranya pergi melukis pemandangan-pemandangan penting di sekitar JB di setiap hujung minggu merupakan sesuatu yang ditunggu-tunggu ketika zaman remajanya kerana ia memberi peluang bagi beliau menimba ilmu mengendali medium dan teknik cat air secara langsung daripada seorang artis ternama! Bersama-sama rakan-rakan artis, beliau sering mengunjungi tempat-tempat tersebut dan melukisnya mengikut gaya beliau sendiri. Kesimpulannya, membesar dalam persekitaran yang sarat dengan elemen-elemen seni pada usia sedemikian muda tidak boleh tidak menjadikan beliau amat-amat meminati seni dan lantaran itu menyediakan ruang untuk beliau menjana dan mendedahkan bakat kreatif beliau dari seawal usia kanak-kanak lagi!

Zaman Persekolahan di Bukit Zahrah dan Maktab Inggeris

Sulaiman mendapat pendidikan sekolah rendah di Bukit Zahrah. Ketika di sana, Sulaiman cemerlang dalam mata pelajaran sains dan seni serta pernah memenangi satu pertandingan seni yang dianjurkan oleh guru kelasnya, iaitu Hj. Taib Ibrahim. Sejak menjuarai pertandingan itu, nama beliau meniti di bibir orang ramai. Beliau seterusnya dilantik sebagai “pembantu seni” kepada guru-guru kelas seni dan ilmu alam, dan terlibat dengan lain-lain kegiatan kreatif. Pengalaman tersebut benar-benar memberi keyakinan dan meningkatkan kemahiran melukis beliau.

Dengan pencapaian akademik yang cemerlang ketika menamatkan pengajian sekolah rendah di Sekolah Bukit Zaharah, beliau ditawarkan tempat di Kolej Melayu Kuala Kangsar (KMKK) untuk meneruskan pendidikan sekolah menengah. Digelar sebagai “Eton Malaysia” – penubuhannya dicetus oleh sekelompok elit British inspirasi dari Kolej Eton di United Kingdom – KMKK pada

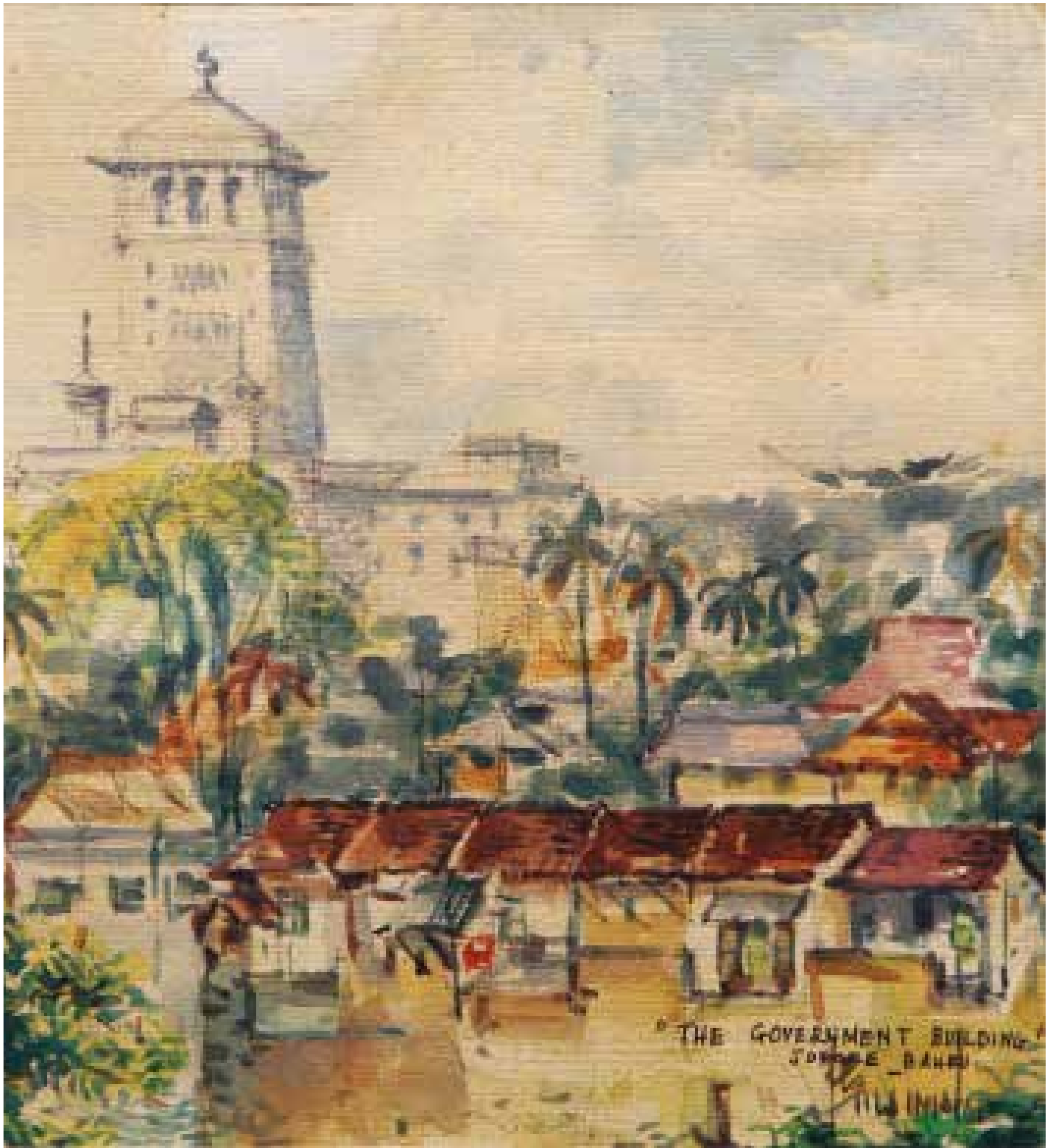
waktu itu satu-satunya sekolah berasrama penuh yang berprestij yang dikhususkan untuk golongan atasan. Memasuki institusi pengajian seumpama KMKK di zaman 50-an merupakan satu pencapaian hebat kerana kebanyakan pelajarannya terdiri daripada putera-putera raja-raja Melayu yang mempunyai pertalian rapat dengan pegawai-pegawai kolonial British. Walau bagaimanapun, dengan penuh rasa sesal Sulaiman terpaksa menolak tawaran keemasan itu disebabkan oleh masalah keluarga. Pada tahun 1953 beliau mengikut jejak langkah abang-abangnya bersekolah menengah di Maktab Inggeris Johor Bahru. Di sana, sebagaimana dengan abang-abangnya, beliau turut mendapat bimbingan Encik Lim Teck Siang yang mengetahui tentang wujudnya bakat-bakat seni dalam keluarga Hj. Esa. Melalui sokongan padu Encik Lim inilah maka potensi-potensi seni yang ada pada Sulaiman menjadi makin terserlah dan terus dipupuk. Encik Lim seorang lulusan bidang matematik tetapi beliau juga meminati seni. Lebih setahun kemudian, Sulaiman diiktiraf oleh orang-orang di sekeliling sebagai artis tunas harapan apabila beliau menjuarai Pertandingan Seni Lukis Kebangsaan anjuran Milo. Beliau menghantar dua buah lukisan cat air bertemakan pemandangan bertajuk *Padi Field* (Sawah Padi) dan *Kampung Scene* (Pemandangan Kampung), yang menggambarkan kedamaian dan ketenangan suasana di kampung dengan penuh imaginasi.

Sejak memenangi pertandingan itu kejayaan Sulaiman pantas tersebar. Guru-guru sekolah kemudiannya mengambil kesempatan atas bakat semulajadi beliau. Dalam tempoh empat tahun berikutnya Sulaiman dilantik sebagai “pembantu seni” untuk membuat lakaran dan lukisan berkenaan mata pelajaran geografi dan seni, mencipta poster untuk persembahan konsert sekolah, dan sebagainya. Di luar sekolah, bakat seni beliau dimanfaatkan pula oleh rakan-rakan berbilang kaum yang meminta beliau melukis simbol-simbol agama untuk sambutan Tahun Baru masing-masing.

Rakan Sebaya Pemberi Semangat

Ekoran daripada pengaruh Impressionisme, Sulaiman dan kawan-kawannya meniru kaedah melukis alam dan suasana di luar seperti yang diamalkan oleh seniman-seniman Impresionis. Dengan beberapa orang rakan sebaya, iaitu Yahya Hassan, Sanip Lasman, Ahmad Mohamad dan Yusof Sarman, mereka berpakat menjadi sekumpulan artis yang belajar sendiri, dan mereka melukis pelbagai mercu tanda penting yang terdapat di sekitar bandar JB. Sulaiman teringat, ada kalanya beliau dan rakan-rakan berjanji untuk berjaga sepanjang malam hanya untuk menyalin karya-karya pelukis-pelukis ternama Perancis! Ini berlaku beberapa kali. Selain daripada melukis, mereka sering juga berbincang mengenai seni dan mengkritik hasil karya masing-masing. Selepas menyiapkan karya-karya secukupnya, kerap juga mereka mengadakan pameran sama ada di sekolah ataupun di tempat-tempat lain. Antara karya-karya yang dihasilkan adalah *Government Building II* (Bangunan Kerajaan II), *Istana Garden I* (*Taman Istana I*) dan *View of Ayer Molek II* (Pemandangan Ayer Molek II).





The Government Building II Cat air di atas kertas 48.5 x 54 cm 1961 | Himpunan Puan Aini Sanusi



Kajian bahagian Tengkorak dan Tulang-tulang Utama Dakwat 27.5 x 37.5 cm 1961

Disiplin Ketat Pengajian Seni Secara Sendiri

Setelah menduduki peperiksaan Senior Cambridge dan memperolehi pangkat tiga, Sulaiman tidak punya banyak pilihan kecuali menyambung pelajaran di maktab perguruan, sesuatu yang tidak kena dengan minat beliau berbanding dengan cita-cita membaranya demi memenuhi impian zaman kanak-kanak untuk menjadi seorang pelukis. Lantaran itu, dalam tempoh dua tahun selepas itu beliau bersungguh-sungguh belajar seni secara sendiri (memandangkan beliau tidak perlu lagi rusing dengan alam persekolahan!). Saban hari Sulaiman melatih diri untuk mempertingkatkan ilmu mengenai persepsi visual dan kemahiran teknikal yang berkaitan dengan lukisan figura, potret, alam benda dan sebagainya, dengan cara meniru teknik-teknik lukisan pelukis-pelukis hebat Eropah dan membuat lakaran-lakaran teliti bahagian-bahagian tubuh manusia.

Dua tahun selepas menamatkan persekolahan menengah Sulaiman menjadi begitu taksub dengan seni Barat, sehinggakan, menurut cerita kakak beliau, Hajah Yok:

Eman jarang bergaul dengan kaum keluarga; beliau sering berkurung di dalam bilik untuk melukis dan keluar hanya untuk makan. Beliau seolah-olah tidak pernah bosan melukis setiap hari; beliau melukis, melukis dan melukis sepanjang masa! Kalaupun beliau terpaksa keluar dari bilik, itupun hanyalah sama ada untuk melaksanakan urusan keluarga atau menyertai kawan-kawan melukis di luar. Bilik beliau berselerak dengan lakaran dan lukisan, dan beliau tidak benarkan sesiapa memasuki biliknya kecuali teman-teman beliau. Eman lebih seronok melayan seni daripada kaum keluarga!¹²

Karya-karya pelukis-pelukis agung Eropah yang ternama, khususnya seniman-seniman Impresionis seperti Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, Degas, Vincent van Gogh, Renoir dan lain-lain, menjadi sumber ilham bagi beliau. Sulaiman mula mengenali pelukis-pelukis Impresionis setelah diperkenalkan oleh teman rapat beliau, Ahmad Mohamad, seorang artis berbakat. Salah satu sebab utama mengapa pelukis-pelukis Impresionis begitu memberi kesan terhadap beliau adalah cara mereka melukis berpandukan kesan perubahan cahaya yang mempengaruhi pewarnaan lukisan dan justeru menjadikan setiap karya nampak berlainan. Warna-warna terang penuh

bertenaga di bawah limpahan cahaya yang berbeza-beza benar-benar menyentuh perasaan dan kena dengan sensitiviti beliau. Sapuan berus dengan tona yang tepat dan sinaran cahaya atas warna yang sampai menggetar lubuk emosi, bagi Sulaiman, merupakan satu aspek penting keharmonian warna. Seperti kata Sulaiman: “Bila saya lihat warna-warna yang diolah oleh pelukis-pelukis Impresionis saya jadi tidak keruan; ada sesuatu pada warna-warna tersebut yang menjadikan perasaan saya bergetar.”¹³ Berbekalkan inspirasi daripada buku-buku tentang karya-karya para pelukis Impresionis agung Eropah, Sulaiman berkobar-kobar menyalin semula karya-karya tersebut demi memahami cara-cara berkarya secara langsung di tempat terbuka bagi menghasilkan sapuan berus dan calitan warna segarang dan sepenuh perasaan seperti Van Gogh, atau melukis keindahan alam di taman di bawah limpahan cahaya dan suasana semulajadi seperti Monet, atau mengolah perasaan intim dan mendalam terhadap sifat dan kuasa sapuan berus seperti Pissarro, atau menggunakan secara terkawal warna-warna merah tua, zamrud dan biru laut untuk memuncakkan nada keriaan hasil ledakan warna-warna seumpama kilauan bintik-bintik permata seperti Cezanne. Kesemua teknik dan gaya Impresionis ini cukup mempesonakan Sulaiman. Pendek kata, cara pelukis-pelukis Impresionis mengolah pelbagai nuansa warna untuk mencapai keharmonian di bawah pelbagai keadaan cahaya berlainan sesungguhnya menjadi pendorong utama kepada sikap pengamatan tajam beliau terhadap warna!

Kesimpulannya, bagi menzahirkan sensitiviti terhadap warna ini beliau meniru pendekatan Van Gogh seperti berikut. *After Van Gogh II* (Sesudah Van Gogh II) merupakan sebuah lukisan potret sarat emosi dengan simpang-siur sapuan berus memaparkan pelbagai nuansa warna hijau di latar belakang serta pada topi lelaki dan bayang-bayang hijau gelap di bawahnya. Sapuan-sapuan berus ini yang seterusnya ditekankan pada janggut lelaki itu dan pada baju putih berjalur hijau dan merah pulasan yang dipakainya serta pada tompok-tompok kuning pucat dan hijau di wajah dan topinya serta di permukaan latar belakang, menggambarkan peri penting keharmonian warna sebagai salah satu prinsip asas gaya Impresionisme. Pendekatan sedemikian yang menampilkan sapuan-sapuan berus secara garang dan dinamik *ala* Van Gogh dan Cezanne boleh dilihat pada karya-karya *After Van Gogh I* (Sesudah Van Gogh I) dan *After Cezanne I* (Sesudah Cezanne I). Namun demikian, dalam lukisan-lukisan pemandangan Sulaiman lebih gemar menggunakan struktur-struktur bertentangan. Misalnya, posisi-posisi menegak dan melintang bagi mewujudkan daya-daya dinamik pada satah gambar yang menampilkan sapuan-sapuan warna pucat dengan limpahan cahaya kuning air membentuk tekstur sungai dan rona-



Self Portrait Gouache 49 x 81 cm 1961



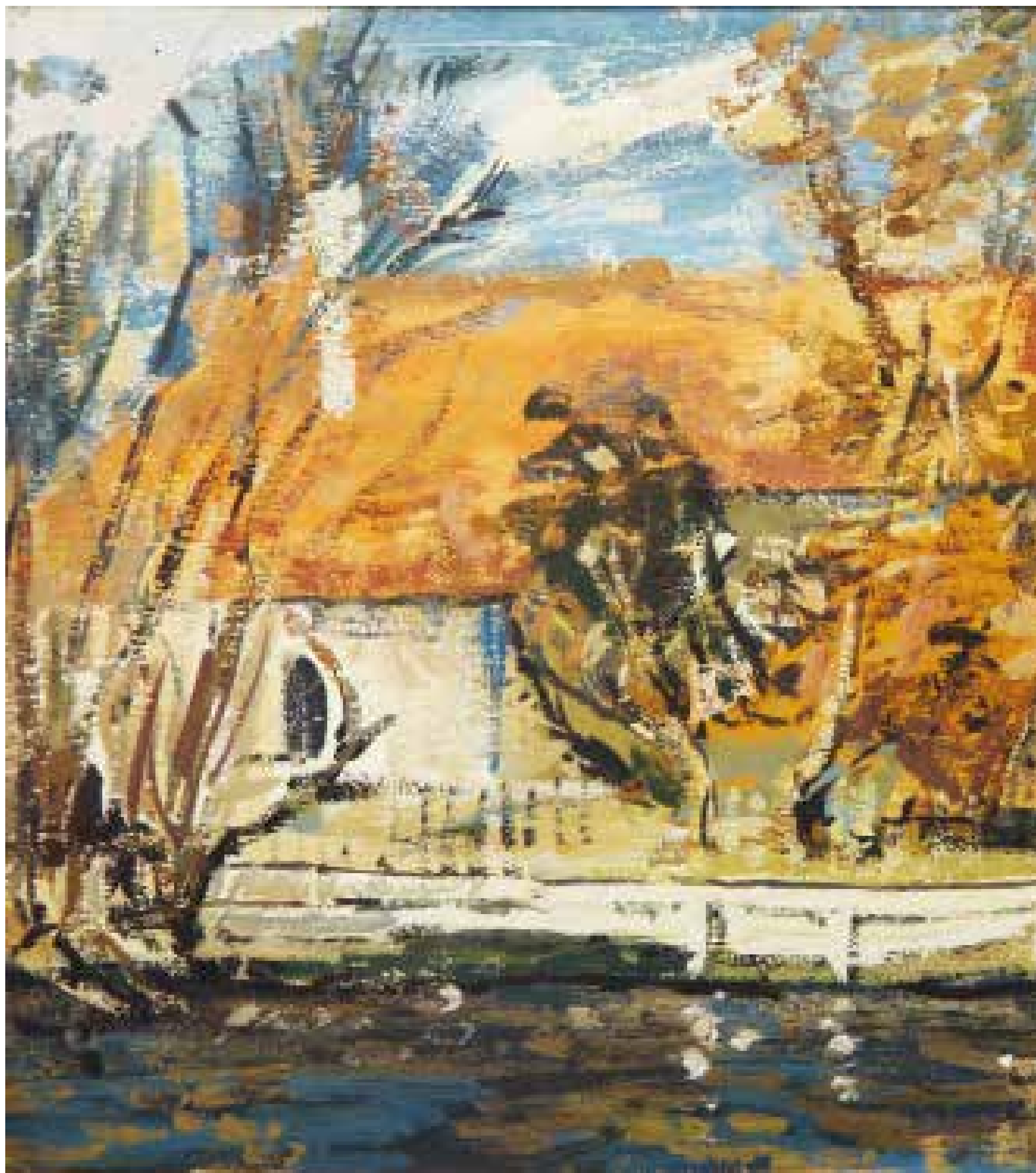
After Cezanne III Gouache 51 x 71 cm 1960

rona biru merentangi latar hadapan di sebelah jalan yang dilitupi salji dengan imej-imej rumah dan pohon kering musim dingin memenuhi latar belakang. Sebuah struktur yang tinggi dan tegak berdiri di belakang rumah-rumah ini menghasilkan suasana dinamik berlatarkan sebatang jalan dilitupi salji yang merentasi satah gambar seperti di dalam *After Monet IV* (Sesudah Monet IV). Bagaimanapun menerusi *After Degas* (Sesudah Degas), beliau meniru komposisi gadis-gadis balet Degas dan merakam keindahan pergerakan, kemilau serta warna-warna hebat di bawah cahaya asli, seperti yang terpancar pada tarian sebenar. Teknik seumpama itu bukan sahaja memberi kesan yang lebih indah kepada karya seni tetapi turut memancarkan kestabilan serba berseri ke serata permukaan gambar.

Sepanjang dua tahun serba pancaroba inilah beliau tanpa sengaja telah mencipta sejumlah karya yang kemudiannya “disemak semula” dan diubah menjadi karya-karya yang sama sekali berbeza. Misalnya lukisan cat air di Johor Bahru berjudul *Istana Garden I* (Taman Istana I) (1961) yang meniru gaya Impresionisme melalui penggunaan berbagai-bagai nuansa warna hijau tua yang disapu pendek-pendek dan beralun-alun pada latar hadapan berbanding dengan garis-garis samar dalam bentuk sapuan-sapuan kecil yang menghilang ke dalam limpahan cahaya di latar belakang. Selang-seli di antara warna-warna hijau yang harmoni dengan tompok-tompok warna kuning kemerah-merahan atau merah jambu yang lut cahaya memancar suasana kedamaian dan ketenangan kepada orang yang melihatnya. Namun beberapa dekad kemudian dan ekoran daripada peralihan beliau kepada nilai-nilai ideologi Islam, lakaran-lakaran realistik seumpama itu bertukar menjadi siri *Garden of Mystery* (Taman Misteri) pada tahun ‘90-an selari dengan sudut pandangan simbolik Islam terhadap alam yang diungkap dalam bentuk-bentuk abstrak berteraskan intipati alam yang sakral sebagai anugerah kurniaan Ilahi. Golongan Sufi menegaskan bahawa alam itu manifestasi keTuhanan – sebagai tanda kewujudan Allah, sebagai *ayatullah*. Demikian juga dengan lukisan beliau bertajuk *Landscape Istana Garden III* (Landskap di Taman Istana III) yang kemudian diperkembangkan menjadi siri *Alam and Alamat* (alam sebagai tanda keberadaan Tuhan). Sama halnya dengan minat Sulaiman mengkaji dan melakar anatomi tubuh manusia seperti yang dinyatakan di perenggan di atas, bilamana selepas empat dekad berlalu figura-figura ini disalin semula dalam bentuk cetakan digital untuk karya *Surah Al-Tin I & II* (2001) bagi menzahirkan dalam format visual maksud sepotong ayat Al-Quran: “Sesungguhnya Kami telah menciptakan manusia dalam bentuk yang sebaik-baiknya.” Akhir sekali, potret diri beliau yang diolah seperti yang biasa dilihat dalam tradisi seni Barat kemudiannya bertukar menjadi potret diri bertunjangkan konsep tauhid aliran Sufisme di mana manusia adalah sebuah alam kecil dalam lingkungan alam semesta, sebagaimana yang dapat disaksikan dalam catan *DOA* (Insyirah, 2001).

Inilah beberapa contoh yang memperlihatkan bagaimana benih-benih yang disemai oleh beliau ketika gigih belajar seni secara tidak formal di Johor Bahru dulu diubahsuai di kemudian hari untuk sedaya upaya melakukan perubahan dan kesinambungan pada trajektori kesenian beliau yang bermula di pinggiran di zaman remajanya dan kemudian semakin menghalu ke Pusat. Perbandingan karya-karya dan pemikiran beliau sebelum dan selepas anjakan paradigmanya ke arah Islam barangkali dibincangkan dengan lebih terperinci di dalam tulisan-tulisan beberapa orang penulis lain dalam esei-esei berikutnya.

Berbalik semula kepada dilema yang dihadapi oleh Sulaiman pada awal ‘60-an selepas dua tahun bertungkus-lumus belajar seni secara sendiri yang akhirnya membuahkan beberapa karya yang disebutkan di atas. Suatu peristiwa penting berlaku di pertengahan 1962 yang mengubah nasib masa depan Sulaiman. Atas galakan bekas guru seni beliau, Encik Lim Teck Siang, Sulaiman memohon biasiswa dari kerajaan Negeri Johor walaupun beliau sedar peluang untuk mendapatkannya sangat tipis memandangkan saingan sengit daripada kursus-kursus pengajian yang lebih penting seperti perubatan, kejuruteraan, perniagaan dan lain-lain lagi. Namun nasib menyebelahi beliau. Biasiswa Negeri Johor yang diidam-idamkan ramai orang itu telah diberikan kepada beliau!





After Monet IV Gouache 50 x 45 cm 1961



Bersama para pensyarah ketika di studio seni cetak, Hornsey (1962 - 1967)

Bahagian II: Zaman Belajar di London (1962 – 1968)

“Memang ajaib,” ujar Sulaiman di saat menerima berita yang beliau merupakan satu-satunya pelajar yang ditawarkan biasiswa tersebut meskipun peluangnya amat tipis sekali. Beliau pada mulanya tidak percaya ketika mendapat berita baik itu. Kemudian beliau sedar barangkali inilah sebabnya kenapa beliau dengan begitu berat hati terpaksa melepaskan tawaran untuk masuk ke KMKK beberapa tahun dulu. Ia semata-mata kerana Allah merancang sesuatu yang lebih baik demi masa depan beliau!

Tidak seperti Syed Ahmad Jamal yang pergi ke London dalam tahun 50-an untuk belajar seni bina (tetapi kemudian beralih kepada seni lukis), mahupun Redza Piyadasa yang sama sekali tidak meminati bidang seni tetapi memilih tawaran mengikuti pengajian seni semata-mata untuk lari daripada mengajar kelas pendidikan jasmani¹⁴, Sulaiman sebaliknya, seperti yang dijelaskan sebelum ini, sangat meminati seni lukis semenjak kecil lagi. Tiada sebarang ungkapan yang mampu menggambarkan kesyukuran beliau setelah mendapat tahu yang cita-cita sejak dari zaman kanak-kanaknya akhirnya menjadi kenyataan, dan tiada tempat lain yang lebih baik dari kota London. Pastilah ia anugerah Ilahi yang hadir tepat pada waktunya!

Dengan rasa gembira yang meruap-ruap memikirkan beliau akan pergi ke pusat antarabangsa seni moden dunia, Sulaiman tiba di Hornsey College of Art, London pada musim luruh tahun 1962. Menarik dicatatkan bahawa London di zaman 60-an, yang mendapat jolokan “*Swinging Sixties of London*”, amat terkenal sebagai pusat kesenian dunia yang radikal di mana para artis di sana sentiasa mengintai peluang untuk mencabar bentuk-bentuk kesenian yang sudah ketinggalan zaman, mengasak dan merempuh batas-batas prinsip kesenian silam, lalu membawa seni

ke ruang-ruang dan dimensi-dimensi yang belum pernah diterokai, dengan harapan menjadi artis-artis *avant-garde*. Kota London pada tahun 60-an sedang sengit mengalami perubahan, dengan munculnya beraneka bentuk kesenian baru yang bersemangat moden dan sarat dengan seribu satu macam keseronokan, kesusahan, malah kekecewaan!

Sistem pendidikan seni di United Kingdom pada awal 1960-an juga sedang mengalami perubahan mendadak. Daripada pendekatan ilmu secara konvensional dan autoritatif yang berakhir dengan penganugerahan National Diploma in Design (NDD), satu sistem yang agak sudah terlalu lama diamalkan di England, sistem pendidikan seni itu beralih mengambil pendekatan yang lebih menekankan kajian kritikal dan penyiasatan saintifik dalam acuan Diploma in Art & Design (Dip. AD) yang didokong oleh Walter Gropius dari kelompok Bauhaus – cara pembelajaran yang berinspirasi corak pemikiran George Berkeley dan David Hume yang empirikal dan rasional. Perubahan tersebut menekankan artis sebagai “pelaku yang berfikir” demi mengangkat seni sebagai lapangan yang ketara kritikal dan provokatif di mana sempadan-sempadan kesenian itu perlu dipecahkan dan harus dijangkau lebih jauh ke dalam ruang-ruang yang belum pernah dijelajahi sebelum ini.

Kaedah terbaru program bertempoh empat tahun pendidikan seni di Hornsey, yang memberi penekanan kepada kajian dan pembuktian saintifik menerusi kerja-kerja ujikaji dan eksperimen, berjaya menarik ramai tenaga pengajar yang berasal dari tanah besar Eropah. Salah seorang daripada mereka ialah Maurice de Sausmarez, Ketua Jabatan Seni Reka dan juga penulis buku *Basic Design: The Dynamics of Visual Form* (1964). Buku ini wajib ditelaah oleh semua pelajar seni lukis dan seni reka untuk mereka dapat menguasai bahasa seni tampak dan justeru membangkitkan kesedaran terhadap pelbagai sumber yang ada di kedua-dua alam semulajadi dan alam buatan manusia. Buku ini juga dapat mempertingkatkan pemahaman empirikal berkenaan bermacam-macam realiti fenomenal, dan lantaran itu, tindakbalas ke atas realiti-realiti tersebut dengan menggunakan beraneka media dan teknik. Sausemarez mengajar seni reka ketika Sulaiman mengikuti kursus Asas – satu pengalaman yang pada mulanya sukar hendak dibayangkan kerana Sulaiman diheret masuk ke dalam konteks seni yang benar-benar baru yang belum pernah didengari dan dipelajari oleh beliau sebelum itu!

Kemudian terdapat pensyarah-pensyarah seperti Bridget Riley yang mengajar seni optik; Mauro Kunst, warganegara Argentina yang pakar dalam seni neo-konstruktivisme. Selain mereka, Morley Berry, guru rekabentuk berbangsa Inggeris; Guido Belmonte, warga Itali yang mengajar seni reka tiga dimensi; manakala di Jabatan Seni Lukis pula, antaranya, Jack Smith dan Derek Boshier Keith Grant.¹⁵

Bagi menyediakan lingkungan lebih luas untuk memahami kerangka ilmu pengetahuan yang lebih besar dari segi konsep bersepadu seni dan konteks budayanya, maka beberapa mata pelajaran baru yang lazimnya diajar di universiti-universiti diperkenalkan ke dalam kurikulum di bawah naungan Pengajian Liberal, termasuklah Sejarah Seni. Arnold Hauser mengajar Sulaiman mengenai pendekatan sosial terhadap sejarah Seni Sosial. Sejak itu, Sulaiman amat terkesan dengan implikasinya. Selain dari subjek-subjek yang dinyatakan di atas, wacana-wacana dari bidang multi-disiplin yang berkaitan antaranya seperti arkitektur, kritikan seni, ekonomi, teater, perubahan, muzik dan budaya massa turut diajar oleh para pensyarah jempukan. Hal tersebut sesungguhnya memberi impak kepada momentum perkembangan pelajaran seni di Hornsey – sesuai dengan persekitaran sosialnya pada masa itu.

Sewaktu melukis *Snowscape* (Pemandangan Salji) Sulaiman mengimbau kembali bagaimana pensyarah beliau ketika itu sangat mengagumi persepsi tajam beliau terhadap ruang ilusi yang diolah dengan beraneka nuansa warna sehingga menimbulkan suasana ketenangan dalam lukisan beliau. Ketika menilik karya Sulaiman itu pensyarah tersebut berkata Sulaiman telahpun mengetahui banyak perkara yang diajar di tahap Asas; oleh yang demikian beliau patut melangkau Kursus Asas dan terus ke kursus Seni Halus!¹⁶ Walau bagaimanapun, keyakinan tinggi beliau mengolah pelbagai nuansa dalam lukisan pemandangan mungkin hasil daripada latihan dan

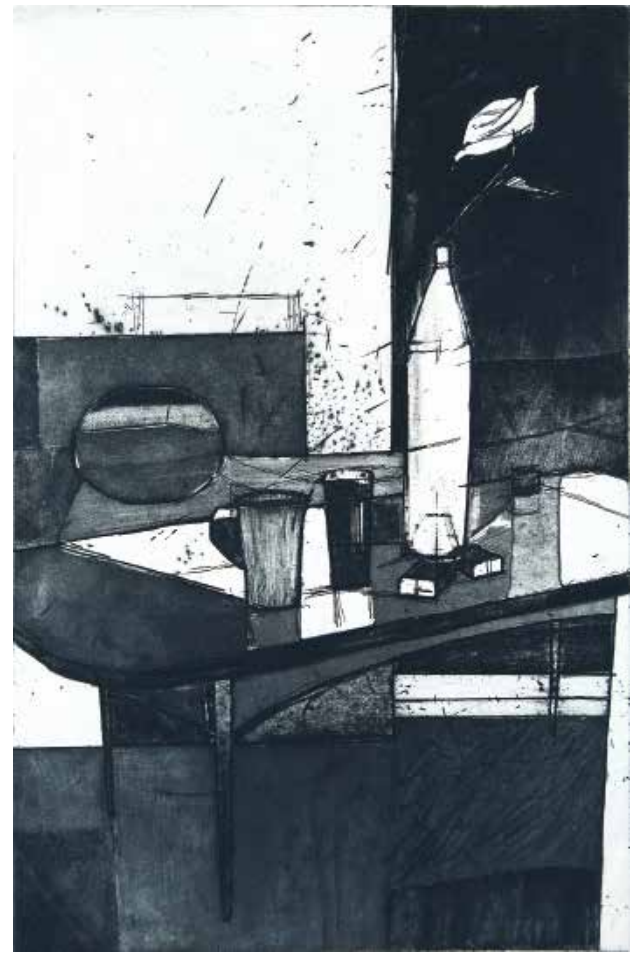
pembelajaran beliau secara gigih dan berdisiplin sewaktu di tanah air sebelum berangkat ke England.

Pada tahun kedua di Hornsey College of Art, Sulaiman buat kali pertama bertemu dengan Redza Piyadasa yang ketika itu sedang mengikuti Kursus Asas. Memandangkan hanya mereka berdua sahaja rakyat Malaysia yang belajar di Jabatan Seni Halus, maka serta-merta mereka menjalin tali persahabatan. Kebetulan pula, sebagaimana Sulaiman, Piyadasa juga cukup seronok dengan kaedah pendidikan seni di Hornsey yang sangat intelektual dan menekankan kajian berbentuk tinjauan. Seingat Sulaiman, selalunya, pendekatan baru bercorak empirikal dan multi-disiplin terhadap seni, sama ada dari segi teori mahupun amalan, dirasakan sungguh merangsangkan hinggakan mereka berdua tetap meneruskan perbincangan walaupun sesudah kelas tamat. Pendedahan bermanfaat tersebut, apatah lagi dengan kehadiran Redza Piyadasa (mereka berkongsi apartmen buat beberapa tahun) sesungguhnya menguak luas akal beliau, dan justeru menyedarkan beliau betapa kegiatan-kegiatan kesenian itu amat berkait rapat dengan perkembangan sosial dan nilai-nilai budaya dalam sesebuah masyarakat. Pengalaman dengan aspek kajian yang sangat-sangat kritikal serta pendedahan kepada sejarah pemikiran dan idea meninggalkan satu pengalaman yang tidak dapat dilupakan, dan ia menjadi tenaga utama yang membentuk kerangka pemikiran Sulaiman di dalam apa yang pernah disebut oleh Krishen Jit sebagai “usaha berterusan meneroka pembaharuan.”¹⁷ Secara ringkas, pengalaman beliau menerima ilmu berbentuk rentas disiplin di Hornsey sesungguhnya memberi kesan kepada beliau untuk lebih memahami unsur-unsur di sebalik pengabsahan bentuk-bentuk seni dalam struktur sosial yang ada.

Setelah menamatkan empat tahun pengajian di peringkat Dip. AD, Sulaiman kemudian meneruskan pengajian ijazah lanjutan dalam bidang seni cetak, juga di Hornsey. Kali ini beliau berpeluang bereksperimen dan meneroka dengan lebih mendalam lagi berbagai-bagai ragam teknik seni cetak. Selesai pengajian pasca siswazah dalam seni cetak, Sulaiman disyorkan oleh penyelia beliau untuk melanjutkan pelajaran selama enam bulan lagi di Atelier 17, Paris di bawah bimbingan artis seni cetak terkenal dunia, William Hayter.

Zaman Pasca London di Malaysia

Sejurus pulang ke tanah air pada pertengahan 1968, Sulaiman bekerja sebagai Pereka Grafik di Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP). Sewaktu bertugas di situ, beliau menghasilkan beberapa ilustrasi yang menampilkan kesan-kesan pengaruh genre seni pop (pengalaman yang dibawa pulang dari Hornsey) yang dimuatkan di dalam beberapa jurnal terbitan DBP. Ilustrasi-ilustrasi beliau sebenarnya dipengaruhi oleh budaya seni pop zaman '60-an di London, di mana para artis menggunakan objek-objek seharian untuk menggambarkan unsur-unsur budaya pop, terutamanya imej-imej yang terdapat dalam iklan atau televisyen. Sebuah gerakan seni yang berjaya menyeimbangkan aspek seni dengan konteks masyarakat dan memecahkan benteng dikotomi di antara



Still Life in B/W Cetakan Gurisan 37 x 62 cm 1967



Flight 4A Cetakan Gurisan 63 x 67.5 cm 1967



Salah sebuah ilustrasi untuk kulit jurnal *Tenggara*
Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1961

seni komersial dan seni halus, seperti yang dituntut oleh Lawrence Alloway, dapat dilihat pada karya-karya ciptaan Allen Jones, Peter Philips dan David Hockney.¹⁸

Berkaitan situasi seni di Malaysia di penghujung 60-an, terdapat dua kelompok saling bertentangan yang mendominasi arus perdana. Pertama, kumpulan Ekspresionisme Abstrak yang didukung oleh Almarhum Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin, Yeoh Jin Leng, Anthony Law dan lain-lain, yang mana karya-karya mereka kebanyakannya mengutamakan ekspresi dan sensasi yang subjektif dalam penciptaan imej. Sementara satu kelompok lagi ialah New Scene (NS) yang diterajui oleh beberapa artis muda, termasuklah Redza Piyadasa, Tang Tuck Kan, Choong Kam Kow dan Tan Teong Eng. Kemunculan NS adalah untuk melawan ideologi bawaan pelukis-pelukis Ekspresionisme Abstrak. Ia secara khususnya menitikberatkan hal-hal rasional dan intelektual tanpa pembabitan emosi peribadi serta melalui pendekatan empirikal berteraskan prinsip-prinsip konstruktif dan analitikal yang berpunca daripada sistem Bauhaus. Kelompok NS tidak mengambil ilham dari alam semulajadi di sekeliling mereka; sebaliknya, elemen-elemen formal dalam seni menjadi titik permulaan untuk proses pengkaryaan mereka. Pendek kata, seni bagi artis-artis New Scene ialah suatu amalan baru melihat.¹⁹

Berlatarkan situasi sedemikianlah Sulaiman melangkah masuk ke persada seni Malaysia. Masih segar dengan pengalaman yang dibawa pulang dari Hornsey, beliau mempertingkatkan momentum selanjutnya demi menyebarkan idea-idea seni Barat sewaktu kuliah-kuliah di studio dan melakukan eksperimen ke atas seni dengan menggunakan bahasa/unsur tempatan. Sebagai salah seorang pendukung faham Konstruktivisme, Sulaiman yang mengajar di ITM (sekarang UiTM) menyertai beberapa pameran penting sebagai sebahagian daripada usaha gigih beliau (bersama-sama Piyadasa) untuk mencetus satu paradigma estetika alternatif dalam pembangunan seni moden Malaysia.

Sangat menarik untuk diperhatikan betapa kerja-kerja seni Sulaiman dan Piyadasa sejak 1970-an kelihatan berkembang secara konsisten berdasarkan pada empat buah pameran utama yang merangka detik-detik penting perkembangan sejarah seni moden Malaysia. Misalnya, dua tahun selepas *Experiment*, pada tahun 1972 Sulaiman dan Redza Piyadasa mengusahakan pameran *Dokumentasi 72* dengan matlamat menolak aktiviti dan idea membuat lukisan kesan daripada pengaruh seni Zen yang mengangkat nilai-nilai kesederhanaan, keminimalan dan sifat merendahkan diri. Berkaitan idea beliau menolak kaedah melukis konvensional yang menggunakan bahan-

bahan seumpama kanvas dan papan serta mempunyai struktur sisi dan bingkai, seperti yang dapat disaksikan pada lukisan skrol beliau, Sulaiman menegaskan:

Mereka [yakni lukisan-lukisan skrol tersebut] cuba menilai semula penerimaan lazim dan tanggapan jumud kita berhubung dengan apa yang sebenarnya dimaksudkan dengan "lukisan". Mereka cuba meluaskan batas-batas definisi lukisan ke tahap paling ekstrim dengan memperkenalkan falsafah dan konsep estetika baru yang semata-mata berteraskan pada ciri fizikaliti bahantara dan proses/aksi fizikal merubahnya menjadi karya seni.²⁰

Selaku objek fizikal yang melenyapkan ruang ilusi dan kesan ekspresi pelukis, karya seni bernafas baru ini merupakan percubaan terpenting dalam perkembangan sejarah seni di negara ini. *Scroll* No. 6 (1971) Sulaiman, pada dasarnya, mengkaji hubungan stuktural di antara realiti optikal dan realiti fizikal bahantara di mana warna-warna olahan beliau bertindak sebagai "unsur visual" yang memperhebatkan sifat "object-ness", atau "keobjekan", dan "real-ness", atau "keaslitan", bahantaranya. Melalui proses memanipulasi secara fizikal struktur permukaan bahantara dengan merenyuk dan melipatnya, beliau mencipta satah-satah sebenar di dalam ruang sehingga satah-satah itu kelihatan beralun-alun dan merekah laksana rabung-rabung dan rekahan-rekahan banjaran gunung bila dilihat dari aras tinggi.

Setelah lama bergelumbang dengan teknik lukisan skrol ini di mana beliau menggunakan bahan-bahan permukaan yang lut sinar dan berkilau-kilau, Sulaiman merumuskan kesimpulan berikut:

Anda tidak menatap lukisan saya tetapi anda melihat ke dalamnya dan menerusinya. Pada permukaan karya-karya saya yang padat dengan jalinan, deria visual seseorang difokuskan kepada entiti jirim dan ia memberi tumpuan kepada gabungan seluruh tenaga bahantara dan bahan warna. Dalam catan lut sinar, akibat penjelmaan permukaan-permukaan berwarna secara material, seseorang itu serentak mentafsir bentuk dan jirim/anti-jirim, isipadu/kekosongan, figura/latar.²¹

Amat menarik untuk diperhatikan betapa segenap kisah ini, yang menceritakan tentang seni sebagai objek, tentang pelenyapan ciri material permukaan, tentang permainan cahaya sebenar daripada bahan-bahan bersinar dan warna-warna yang dipengaruhi oleh cahaya fizikal, secara kiasannya merupakan satu lagi tahap penyebaran benih-benih yang pernah disemai oleh beliau suatu ketika dulu (selepas zaman Johor Bahru). Beberapa dekad kemudiannya, benih-benih ini bertukar menjadi cahaya ilahi – *nur* pada pameran seni bertema Islam beliau yang pertama, *Ke Arah Tauhid* (1984). Begitu juga dengan konsep pelenyapan unsur jirim/anti-jirim dalam siri *Scroll* beliau yang kemudian dihuraikan dengan lebih lanjut dalam siri *Insyirah* (2001), yang memaparkan penyangkalan beliau terhadap dunia jasmani dan sebaliknya penumpuan beliau kepada dunia rohani. Dan bila beliau ucapkan petikan di atas, "*Anda tidak menatap lukisan saya tetapi anda melihat ke dalamnya dan menerusinya...*," beliau menyarankan bahawa, "*Dalam konteks ideologi seni berorientasikan Islam, kita tidak boleh terpesona dengan penampilan fizikal luaran sesebuah karya, tetapi yang lebih pentingnya, tuntutan ke atas umat Islam untuk berfikir dan berzikir tentang makna-makna teras yang dirujuk oleh simbol-simbol ini dalam usaha mereka untuk mencapai kebahagiaan di dunia dan di Akhirat.*"²²

Namun begitu, keasyikan Sulaiman dengan konsep seni sebagai objek terus dijana dalam karya beliau yang dihantar menyertai pertandingan *Manusia dan Alamnya* anjuran Balai Seni Lukis Negara pada tahun 1973. Karya ini menampilkan gugusan identiti peribadi beliau dalam bentuk aneka barangan yang digunakan buat menjalani kehidupan sehari-hari di kota, seperti surat/dokumen peribadi, koleksi gambar foto, majalah dan lain-lain, yang disusun secara sistematik dalam poket plastik jernih yang dibuat khas dan dijahit pada sebidang permukaan lut sinar. Pendekatan beliau sangat didorong oleh sifat fizikaliti objek sepertimana dalam siri *Scroll* sebelumnya. Namun kali ini ia diperpanjangkan kepada objek-objek biasa yang ditemui dalam kehidupan masyarakat kota. Beliau tidak menggunakan amalan konvensional mengungkap objek-objek ini di atas kanvas

menurut kerangka estetika formalisme; sebaliknya beliau mengekalkan konteks asal imej-imej tersebut agar dapat memelihara makna dan isi sosialnya, lalu mengangkatnya sebagai karya seni. Melalui koleksi barangan peribadi ini perjalanan kehidupan seharian beliau mirip cara hidup kebaratan yang lazim dengan baju kemeja, tali leher, kancing baju, kasut kulit, kad hari raya, piring hitam Francoise Hardy dan sebagainya; tidak dilupakan tikar sejadah yang digantung di sebelah kiri karya. Sejadah tersebut melambangkan beliau masih lagi seorang penganut Islam meskipun hanya di pingiran, seperti yang dapat kita saksikan pada kedudukan sejadah yang seolah-olah terpinggir dari keseluruhan komposisi karya instalasi itu! Bagaimanapun, berkenaan hubungan jitu di antara *Manusia and Alamnya* dengan *Ke Arah Hakikat Mistik*, Sabapathy menegaskan:

Sebagai karya seni, elemen-elemen material tersebut berdegil mempertahankan sifat fitrahnya dan memaparkan kegunaannya dalam urusan-urusan sosial. Namun begitu, destinasiya ialah dunia seni; dalam dunia senilah kewibawaannya ditentukan. Dalam dunia itu jugalah ia akan disahkan dan penekanan intelektual yang tidak bersifat peribadi dikenakan ke atasnya melalui proses dialektika empirikal.²³

Tidak ramai yang tahu, pada awal 70-an selain daripada pembabitan beliau dalam seni visual Sulaiman juga menunjukkan sifat serba-boleh beliau dengan terlibat secara aktif merekacipta pentas dan busana untuk pementasan teater di Panggung Eksperimen Universiti Malaya. Beliau pernah bekerja, antara lainnya, dengan Usman Awang untuk teater *Alang Rentak Seribu*, Syed Alwi untuk *Uda dan Dara*, dan Vijaya Samawikrama untuk *The Birds*. Beberapa rekaan beliau dipakai untuk rekaan pentas dan busana dalam pementasan teater, *The Birds*. Begitu kuatnya kecenderungan beliau terhadap bidang tersebut sehinggakan Sulaiman ditawarkan biasiswa untuk mengikuti kursus rekaan pentas dan busana selama setahun di Academia de Roma di Rom, Itali. Barangkali, salah satu sentuhan kreatif yang muncul daripada pengalaman tersebut dizahirkan dalam karya terbaru beliau berjudul *The Primitive Others* yang menghidangkan baju perang Iban yang dianyam dengan tangan – sebuah karya serba inovatif sarat dengan simbol-



Cadangan rekaan kostum untuk teater *The Birds* Cat air dan dakwat 1974

simbol warisan peribumi Iban yang perlu dikekalkan dan dipelihara daripada hegemoni Barat – suatu ancaman sengit terhadap tradisi kehidupan dan cara hidup kita sebagaimana yang dijelaskan oleh Sulaiman menerusi siri Taman Duka Lara yang dikemukakan dalam pameran sekarang ini.

Ringkasnya, sebagaimana yang ditegaskan oleh Guillermo, seni memiliki dua aspek yang saling berkait. *“Pertama, ciri kekhususannya muncul kerana ia memiliki bahasa formalnya sendiri yang wajar dipelajari yang justeru menjadikan seni sebagai aktiviti yang berbeza daripada kegiatan-kegiatan lain. Kedua, dari segi konteks pula ia dipengaruhi oleh persekitaran sosio-budaya dan lingkungan politik artis”.*²⁴ Berbanding dengan jiwa dan prinsip estetika artis ini, aturan sosial yang merangka pandangan dunia atau etos masyarakatlah yang memperkukuhkan bentuk serta isi karya-karya beliau. Dalam konteks ini, penglibatan Sulaiman Esa dalam seni tidak terkecuali. Minat beliau terhadap seni dari awal-awal lagi telah dipengaruhi oleh daya-daya sosio-budaya yang wujud di negara ini sekitar 1950-an sebelum Malaysia mencapai Kemerdekaan, bilamana seni ketika itu berpaksi pada ideologi ciptaan Barat. Keasyikan beliau dengan seni Barat semakin meningkat selepas beliau mendapat pendidikan seni secara formal di London. Namun ekoran daripada peristiwa-peristiwa sosio-budaya dan politik yang terjadi di Malaysia sewaktu beliau kembali ke tanah air pada akhir 1960-an, Sulaiman menempuh beberapa anjakan paradigma demi mengesahkan ideologi dukungan kebanyakan orang bahawa seni wajib berkait dengan masyarakat dan perlu berfungsi sebagai aktiviti menggarap dan menghasilkan makna. Trajektori beliau dari diri yang keBaratan kepada diri yang berteraskan Islam dan kembali kepada asal dipancarkan melalui pameran *Raja’ah* ini.

*Diterjemahkan dari teks berbahasa Inggeris oleh:
Penterjemah I: Rahmat Haron
Penterjemah II: Teratak Nuomar*

RUJUKAN

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KHATIJAH SANUSI merupakan pensyarah senior di Jabatan Pengajian Pasca-siswazah di Fakulti Seni Lukis & Seni Reka, UiTM, Shah Alam. Beliau menerima ijazah Sarjana Muda Seni Halus dari Curtin University of Technology, Australia dan Diploma Pendidikan Seni, diikuti dengan setahun pengalaman bekerja dengan syarikat penerbitan di Sydney. Sekembali beliau ke tanahair, beliau dilantik sebagai pensyarah di Fakulti Seni Lukis & Seni Reka pada bulan Julai 1974. Di pertengahan 1986 beliau menerima ijazah Sarjana di Temple University, Amerika Syarikat dan melanjutkan ijazah Doktor Falsafah (Ph.D) dalam Pendidikan Seni di universiti yang sama di bawah bimbingan Profesor S.H. Nasr, Almarhum Profesor Ismail al Faruqi, Profesor Mahmood Ayoub dan Profesor D. Silva. Sepanjang tiga puluh tahun di UiTM, Khatijah telah diberi kepercayaan mengetuai tiga jabatan dalam Fakulti; Kursus Asas (Foundation); Diploma Guru Seni Pasca-siswazah dan Pengajian Pasca-siswazah. Beliau dianugerahkan gelaran Profesor Madya pada tahun 2000. Beliau bukan sahaja mengambil bahagian di dalam pameran-pameran tetapi turut mengkurasi sekumpulan pameran, selain menulis artikel untuk jurnal-jurnal dan membentangi kertas kerja dalam seminar-seminar tempatan mahupun luar negara. Beliau telah melengkapkan tiga buah projek kajian (masih belum diterbitkan), yang didanai Institut Pengurusan Kajian UiTM, dengan tajuk-tajuk *Visual Art Education: An Islamic Perspective* (1998), *The Search for Transcendence in Contemporary Malaysian Art* (2002) dan *From the Periphery to the Centre: The Social Significance of Sulaiman Esa's Works from 1950s-2007* (2010).

EARLY BEGINNING: FORMATIVE YEARS IN JOHOR BAHRU (1950's - 1961)

| Associate Professor Dr. Khatijah Sanusi

INTRODUCTION

As often described, an artist is the architect of his destiny, a mirror of his time and also a social creature whose work is often coloured by the tempo and temper of his epoch where public or historical events constantly recur as themes in his personal expressions. Such a genre in which the artist assumes the role of a spokesperson and supporter of social order is in essence what Durkheim terms as the Functionalist model which subscribes art as creativity in reinforcing collective social ideals and norms.¹ In similar vein, Geertz posits no man is an island and he is not but part of the mainstream invoking the feelings and commonly shared values and aspirations². Art, as such, receives its vitality from socio-cultural context that constitutes vital cognitive forces for social change. Although it has its specificity with the visual language of its own, art is also historically situated and shaped by socio-economic and political forces.³ As a corollary, in situating work within the social milieu, an artist not only responds to the reality of his time but his relevancy towards a meaning-giving activity within a given society. In this country, one such artist who has been consistent for the past five decades delineating the dialogic relationship between art and society is Sulaiman Esa.

As art historian Zainol Shariff so presciently observes; in Malaysia Sulaiman Esa, is arguably the only artist struggling prominently and intently to make sense to himself of the connections between on the one hand, concepts of Eastern spirituality, Islamic cosmology and Malay culture, and on the other hand, International modernism in art and the hegemony of western aesthetic.⁴ To the late Syed Ahmad Jamal, one of the country's prominent artists, Sulaiman Esa has been continuously involved in art one achievement after another, phase by phase in tandem with artistic development—conceptual, found objects, mystical reality, social context, cultural reference and most recent, Islam as central in his art involvement.⁵ Art critic and artist, the late Redza Piyadasa also remarks:

*Sulaiman's most significant contribution in modern Malaysian art lies in three aspects. First in the area of colouristic painting; second, in the theoretical and conceptual art endows and in the field of print-making. In all these areas he had projected unusual standards of achievement.*⁶

In similar vein, Lois Lamy Faruqi, in her presentation *The Literary studies and the visual art: Case study in Malaysia*, Sulaiman Esa is a trailblazer in the development of contemporary Islamic art of Malaysia.⁷

After undergoing six years of formal art training in London and Paris, Sulaiman was like a loose cannon upon his entry into modern Malaysian art in early 1970's. One after another his pursuits for perpetual renewal, have not only awed the public as much as he sparked cultural debates and controversies as in *Man and His World* (1972), *Towards Tawhid* (1984), *The UMNO Mural* (1985), *Towards a Mystical Reality* (collaborated with Redza Piyadasa, 1974), *Waiting for Godot* series (1977) and *Insyirah* (2001).

Observing Sulaiman's continuous propensity in breaching artistic boundaries as reiterated by the late Syed Ahmad Jamal; "Sulaiman never wants conform to the norm ...,"⁸ one could not but ask: Who is this artist? What was his upbringing like? Who were his mentors? What factors shaped his refined sensitivity to colours?⁹ What causes him to be perpetually obsessed in trailblazing boundaries in art? This essay therefore hopes to answer some of these questions.

To accommodate the artist's autobiography, investigating his childhood upbringing and personal experience up close, a narrative analysis, as espoused by Catherine Riesman, (1983) describing a sequence of non fictional events in the lives of a person, would be most tenable. Essentially, narrative analysis is an interdisciplinary study structured with identifiable beginnings, middles and the end. In so doing, it would tap a rich vein of anecdotal information of the artist's life since stories, as evident through cross-cultural studies, are at the heart of human and meaning-making activity¹⁰

Notwithstanding, at this juncture, discussion about his master pieces or any kind of aesthetic achievement is immature if not irrelevant. However, early as it was in the 60's, Sulaiman Esa has somewhat unconsciously disseminated the seeds for thinking processes which might someday be revisited, gradually blooms and later bears fruits as he achieved intellectual maturity. Perhaps his early artistic engagements can be metaphorically interpreted as providing pieces for a mosaic for a total picture of his art which in later years are further enhanced and transformed into fruitions.

As the first part of this retrospective exhibition essay, chronological approach of his biography focusing on sequential events of his past that shaped the perceptions of the present, how the present shaped his perception in the past, and how both of these phenomena shaped his complex interconnections and perceptions of the future, will be delineated. It is against the background of this understanding of the social roles of the artist that the dialectical relationship between Sulaiman's art and society revolves.

Thus to fulfill the abovementioned objectives, this essay is divided into three parts. First, will be a description of Sulaiman's childhood years at his hometown of Johor Bahru in the 50's, nurtured by his very artistic family members, and then further continued at school, through artistic 'services' entrusted to him by art teachers especially by Mr. Lim Teck Siang, a mathematician but an art enthusiast, where he underwent direct experience polishing his skill. Second, I will delve into his formal art training at London's Hornsey College of Art, whose education system espoused the highly intellectual and investigative approach to art pioneered by the Bauhaus ideology. If during his untutored years in Johor Bahru, Sulaiman has unconsciously sowed the seeds of his future direction, what more after undergoing multidisciplinary formal art training over five years in London, he continued doing so but this time deliberately provocative in which decades later these ideas are 'revisited' and injected with a new paradigm and transformed into an unprecedented work of art.¹¹ And, the final part of this essay addresses his post London period after his return home in late '60-s, when with the late Redza Piyadasa, they both were intoxicated with western-centric art and were responsible in launching an alternative paradigm in the Malaysian mainstream art vis-a- vis the Abstract Expressionist movement, in the early 70's. However, besides being visually dynamic, Sulaiman was also involved in theatrical arena in stage and costume designs for *Uda dan Dara*, *Alang Rentak Seribu*, and *the Birds* working with renowned theatre personnel like Syed Alwi, Usman Awang, Krishen Jit, and others.

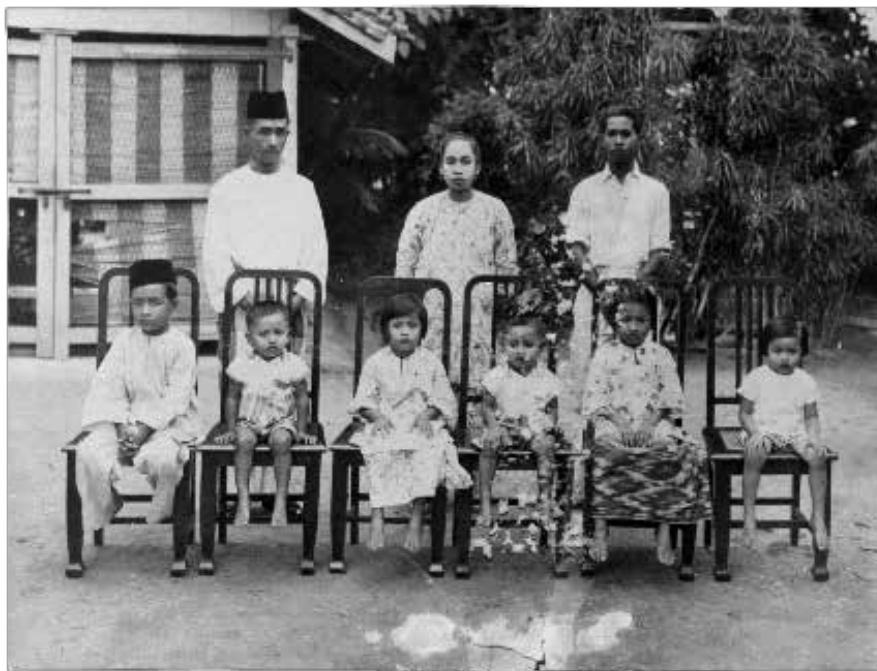
Part I: Origin and Beginning: Formative Years in Johor-Bahru (50's - early 60's)

According to Sulaiman, three significant factors were attributed in shaping his artistic upbringing. First, is the role of his immediate family members who have provided healthy ambience in nurturing and unfolding his creative growth – his uncle, mother and his elder siblings. Second, the informal art teaching both at elementary and secondary schoolings at Bukit Zahrah primary school and the English College, especially under the guidance of Mr. Lim Teck Siang. Third, his peer group artist friends who provided effervescent companions, artistic support and motivations in art as a viable vocation.

Artistic Upbringing

Born in 1941, to a home filled with artistic talents and the youngest of them all, Sulaiman Esa was always under the watchful eyes of his parents. His father Hj. Esa Abdullah, proficient in the English language was a successful clerk councilor in Johor Bahru (JB), a popular figure among the Palace people, the Councilor's office and the JB folks. While his mother Hajah Aishah Ismail was a housewife gifted with artistic ability. It was at a tender age of five as Sulaiman recalls, how he was first 'introduced' to the concept of drawing when watching his mother's vivid and swift impressions of floral designs to decorate egg baskets as wedding gifts. Sulaiman was overwhelmed by the fresh and spontaneity of his mother's skill using coloured pens for mass-produced drawings although not trained as an artist! Natural as he was for a young boy, Sulaiman emulated his mother's actions on the walls, floors and furniture much to the disdain of the elders in the family.

Three of his siblings are very talented artists whose work graced the walls of his home. His eldest brother Abdullah with whom he was very close with and even at times shared a room together, was his mentor and a versatile artist good in drawing, figurative art, poster design and even costume designs for school activities as in fancy dress competition and concert. In the absence of Abdullah while at home, Sulaiman admired his brother's talent and tried to imitate his style to the fullest and from whom he often received tuition in the nuances of water colour painting. His sister Hamidah, had won a number of competitions for posters at school and so was his immediate elder brother Ahmad, skillful in still-life drawing of fast cars and motorcycles always done in sleek renditions. Undoubtedly these in-house motivators were enough for Sulaiman to also join the bandwagon!



Sulaiman Esa's parents with their children. Elder brother Abdullah Esa seated on the left (1930's)



At English College. Mr. Lim Teck Siang seated on second left (1955)

Apart from home grown influences, his uncle Haji Rahmat Ismail was a noted water-colourist among family members and in JB. Sulaiman further developed the skill in water-colour painting, as well as learning to use the grid system. Accompanying his uncle for open air painting of significant landscapes around JB on weekends was something that Sulaiman anticipated in his junior years for it gave him the opportunity to obtain a direct hands-on knowledge in handling the medium of watercolour technique from an established artist. Along with his artist friends, he frequented these places and painted them in his own style. In sum, to have been nurtured in an artistic environment at such an early age, he cannot but become passionate in art then and thus, had the opportunity to generate and unveil his in-born creative talent right from his early childhood years!

School Days at Bukit Zahrah and the English College

Sulaiman received his primary schooling at Bukit Zahrah, a similar school that the late Syed Ahmad Jamal went to. Whilst there, Sulaiman excelled both in science and art studies and won art competitions organised by the school's classmaster, Hj. Taib Ibrahim. Since winning the competition, he became popular and was given the task to assist his teachers in art and geography classes and other creative activities. Such experiences, had given much confidence and as well as refining his artistic skills.

Impressed with Sulaiman's academic achievement on completion of his primary schooling at Bukit Zaharah School, he was offered a place at the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) to continue his secondary education. Dubbed as the 'Eton of Malaysia' – inspired by the British elite Eton – MCKK was the only prestigious boarding school for the upper elites then. To gain entry into such an institution in the '50s was a great achievement since most of its students were sons of the Malay rulers with whom the British colonials have had close affinity with. However, much to his regret, due to family reasons, Sulaiman had to reject the offer of a lifetime. Thus in 1953, he joined his elder siblings for his secondary schooling at Johor Bahru English College where he underwent the same training as his elders with Mr. Lim Teck Siang who had already knew the pool of talents stored in the Esa family. It was through unwavering support from Mr. Lim that Sulaiman's artistic potentials were further harnessed and nurtured. Mr. Lim was a mathematician by training but an enthusiast in art. Over a year later, Sulaiman gained local recognition as a budding artist when he won the first prize in a National Art Competition organised by Milo. His

entry was two landscape paintings rendered in watercolor depicting an imaginative version of the peaceful and tranquil atmosphere of *Padi field* and a *Kampong Scene*.

Since winning the competition, Sulaiman's success went viral. His inbuilt talent was later exploited by respective teachers to be their "art assistant" in the next four years by making posters, illustrations and charts to be used as visual aids, in the geography, biology and art classes and posters for school concerts. Outside school, his talent was further utilised by his multiracial friends in drawings of religious symbols for their respective New Year celebrations.

Peer Group Motivators

Inspired by the Impressionists' approach to artistic creativity, Sulaiman and his peer group friends had adopted the Impressionists' working styles by practicing their *plein-air* techniques from nature at different times of the day. With his artist friends Yahya Hassan, Sanip Lasman, Ahmad Mohamad, and Yusof Sarman, they form a loose group of self-taught artists and together painted important landmarks around JB town. There were times, as Sulaiman recalls, he and his friends made a pact to stay up all night long just to paint works copying French masters! Such an occasion happened quite a few times. Besides painting, they often had discussions on art and criticising each other's work. Frequently, they held exhibitions be it in school or at locations outside. Among some of his significant works produced were *Government Building II*, *Istana Garden I* and *View of Ayer Molek II*.

Regimented Self-taught Study in Art

On completion of his Senior Cambridge exam with Grade 3 provides little choice for Sulaiman in terms of career building except joining the teacher's college which he had no interest compared to the burning desire to fulfill his childhood dream to be an artist. Consequently, for the next two years, he embarked on a rigorous self-taught study of art specifically in painting and drawing (since there was no more schooling to worry about!). Sharpening his



Padi Field Watercolour on paper 50 x 44 cm 1954



View of Ayer Molek III Gouache 54.5 x 70 cm 1961



Istana Garden II Watercolour 50 x 58 cm 1961



Istana Garden I Gouache 43.5 x 54 cm 1961

knowledge on visual perception and technical skills in figurative drawings, portraits and still life, through articulate imitations of works by European masters' techniques, and close-up studies of human anatomy became part of his daily routine. In the last two years after his secondary schooling Sulaiman's passion to Western art was so intense, when his sister, Hajah Yok cited:

*Eman seldom socialise with family members; he always keeps to himself in his room to do art and came out of his room only at meal times. He never seems to get bored doing art everyday; he draws, draws and draws all the time! And if ever he has to go out, it's either to do errands for the family or to join his friends to paint outside. His room was full of drawings and paintings all over and he didn't let anyone come into his room, except his friends. Eman, is more passionate with art than his elders!*¹²

Renowned European masters' works especially the Impressionists -- Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, Degas, Vincent van Gogh, Renoir, etc were his constant source of inspirations, after being introduced to them by his close friend, Ahmad Mohamad, a very talented artist. The reasons why the Impressionists struck him most is in their renditions of the simmering effects of colours under different intensity of sunlight that makes each version differs from the other. The changing effects of light in terms of colours strike a chord in him. The brush strokes of the right value and the glow of light on colours that vibrate into lyrical excitement, to Sulaiman, give important bearing on colour harmony. As he recalls: When I looked at the Impressionists' colours I went crazy; there is something in these crystalline colours that resonate in me".¹³ Inspired by his collection of books on works by French Impressionist masters, Sulaiman became obsessed in copying them in his effort to have a better grasp in working directly in the open-air especially to paint the violent and emotionally charged strokes of van Gogh, or Monet's impressions enraptured by the natural beauty of his garden under natural light and atmosphere. Futhermore, Pissarro's intimate and profound feeling for nature and power of brush, or, Cezanne's inhibited usage of vermilion, emerald and ultramarine to heighten the pitch of excitement in the explosion of colours in jewel-like disposition overwhelmed Sulaiman. In short, it is the Impressionist's treatment of multifaceted color subtleties to achieve harmony under different light conditions becomes the driving force in his highly perceptive aptitude to colours!

As a corollary, to refine his sensitivity and sensibilities toward colours, he internalised Van Gogh's approaches intensely. For example, *After Van Gogh II* is an emotionally charged portrait painting

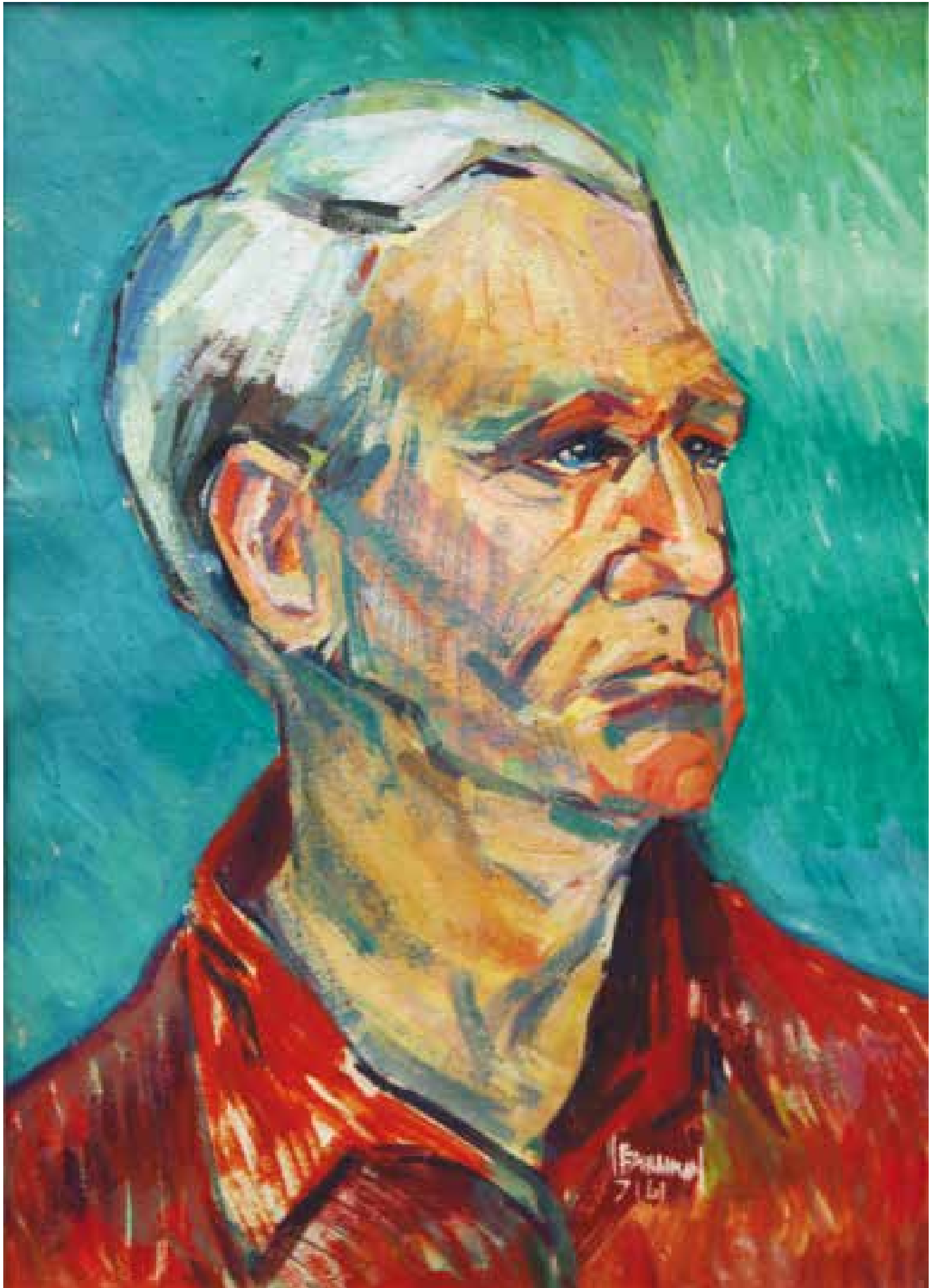


Studies of the ligaments and arm muscles

Watercolour and ink on paper
27.5 x 37.5 cm 1961



Government Building I Gouache 55 x 42 cm 1961



Henry Moore I Gouache 51 x 65 cm 1961



After Van Gogh VII Gouache 65 x 54 cm 1961

with textured brush strokes, to emphasise the different shades of green in the background as well as on the man's hat and its dark green shadow underneath. These brushstrokes that are further accentuated on his beard and the white shirt with stripes of green and maroon and the pale patches of yellow and green on the face, hat and in the background, allude an important bearing on colour harmony as one of the principles of the Impressionist's canon. Such approaches rendered in bold and aggressive brushstrokes of Van Gogh, Cezanne are repeated in the portraits *After Van Gogh VII* and *After Cezanne I*. In landscape painting however, Sulaiman was drawn to execute opposing structures; vertical and horizontal positions to create dynamic forces in a picture plane as seen in dashes of subdued colours with light textured river in beige and shades of blue running across the foreground next to a snow-white riverbank lined with late autumn trees. The tall vertical structures of these trees evoked the feeling of dynamic forces against the flat horizontal road along the riverbank as in *After Monet VI*. However in *After Degas*, echoes the ballet girls of Degas catching the beauty of movement in actual performance, its glitter and superb colours beneath the natural lights. Such a technique is not only impacted his rendition with much grandeur but exudes a dignified stability across the picture plane.

It is during this intense period of two years that he has unconsciously imprinted a number of works that were later "revisited" and transformed into different contexts and dimensions. For examples the watercolour work of Johor Bahru *Istana Garden I* (1961) echoing the Impressionists' style through the translucent washes of pigment superimposed in rich membranes of fresh green in rhythmic short strokes in the foreground vis-à-vis the blurred outlines gradually disappearing into the dim light in the background. These harmonious colours interspersed with traces of translucent peach/pink exude a feeling of peace, tranquility and there is a sense of nature seen and experienced, of forms and colours grasped and transmuted.

However, decades later due to his paradigm shift in responding to Islamic ideology, such realistic studies had been transformed into *Garden of Mystery* series in the 90's in tandem with the Islamic view of nature that is expressed in abstract forms embodying sacred meanings since the Qur'an accords that nature is a theophany – a reflection of divinity. In similar vein, his *Landscape at Istana Garden III*, is also transformed into *Alam and Alamat* series embodying the concept of infinity. Notwithstanding Sulaiman's obsession in studying human anatomy, decades later these skeletal figures are re-invented into prints as in *Surah Al-Tin I & II* (2001) manifesting the Qur'anic verse that "God has made man in the best of form." Finally, his self-portrait's rendition as commonly seen in Western tradition was later departed in a self-portrait shaped by the Sufi's concept of divine unity where man is a microcosm among the cosmos as discerned in *DOA (Insyirah)* (2001).

These are some examples how the seeds that he disseminated during his untutored years in Johor Bahru were transformed decades later in his response to social milieu then reflecting change and continuity of his arduous journey to his primordial-self. Such delineations before and after his paradigm shift to Islam are discussed further in the writings of other curators in the following essays.

Returning then, to Sulaiman's predicament in the early 60's after two years of intensive self-study producing some of the above-mentioned work; a momentous event took place in early 1962 that was to shape his future destiny. With much encouragement from his former art teacher Mr. Lim Teck Siang, Sulaiman applied for the Johor State scholarship although knowing the chances of securing it was very slim due to the stiff competitions to other more important studies like medicine, engineering, business, etc. But luck was on his side. The much coveted Johor State scholarship was awarded to him!

Part II. Students days in London (1962 - 1968)

"It was a miracle!" exclaimed Sulaiman when knowing he was offered the only scholarship against all odds. He felt incredulous when he was told of the good news. Then he realised perhaps this was the reason why he had to reject from going to MCKK against his will years ago, simply because the Almighty has a better plan for his future!

Unlike Syed Ahmad Jamal who went to London in the 50's to study architecture (but later changed to art), or Redza Piyadasa was not interested in art at all but chose to do so to escape from teaching physical education (PE) class,¹⁴ Sulaiman as cited earlier, was passionate with art right at the outset. No words could ever be scripted how grateful he was after knowing his childhood dream was finally realised and studying at no other better place than in London. It certainly was a timely gift from Above!

Brimming with exhilaration at the thought of joining the international hub of modern art world, Sulaiman arrived at Hornsey College of Art, London in autumn of 1962. It is interesting to note London city in the 60's, was nicknamed as *Swinging Sixties of London*, renowned for being a radical city centre of the art world where individual artists were perpetually seeking opportunities to challenge the outmoded past, pushing and breaching boundaries into unknown domains in their hope to be an avant-garde. London in the 60's was in a state of flux, with new art forms in modern spirits charged with both of excitement, rigour and disenchantment!

Art education system in the United Kingdom in the early 1960's too, was undergoing a significant revolutionary change from the conventional and authoritative approach to knowledge which led to the National Diploma in Design (NDD), to one that emphasises on critical enquiry and scientific investigative approach as in Diploma in Art & Design (Dip. AD) espoused by Walter Gropius of the Bauhaus group whose art teaching was inspired by George Berkeley's and David Hume's insights of empirical and rational thinking. Such a change proposes an artist as a "thinking doer" in striving art to be explicitly critical and provocative where boundaries should be breached and crossed into unknown separate domains.

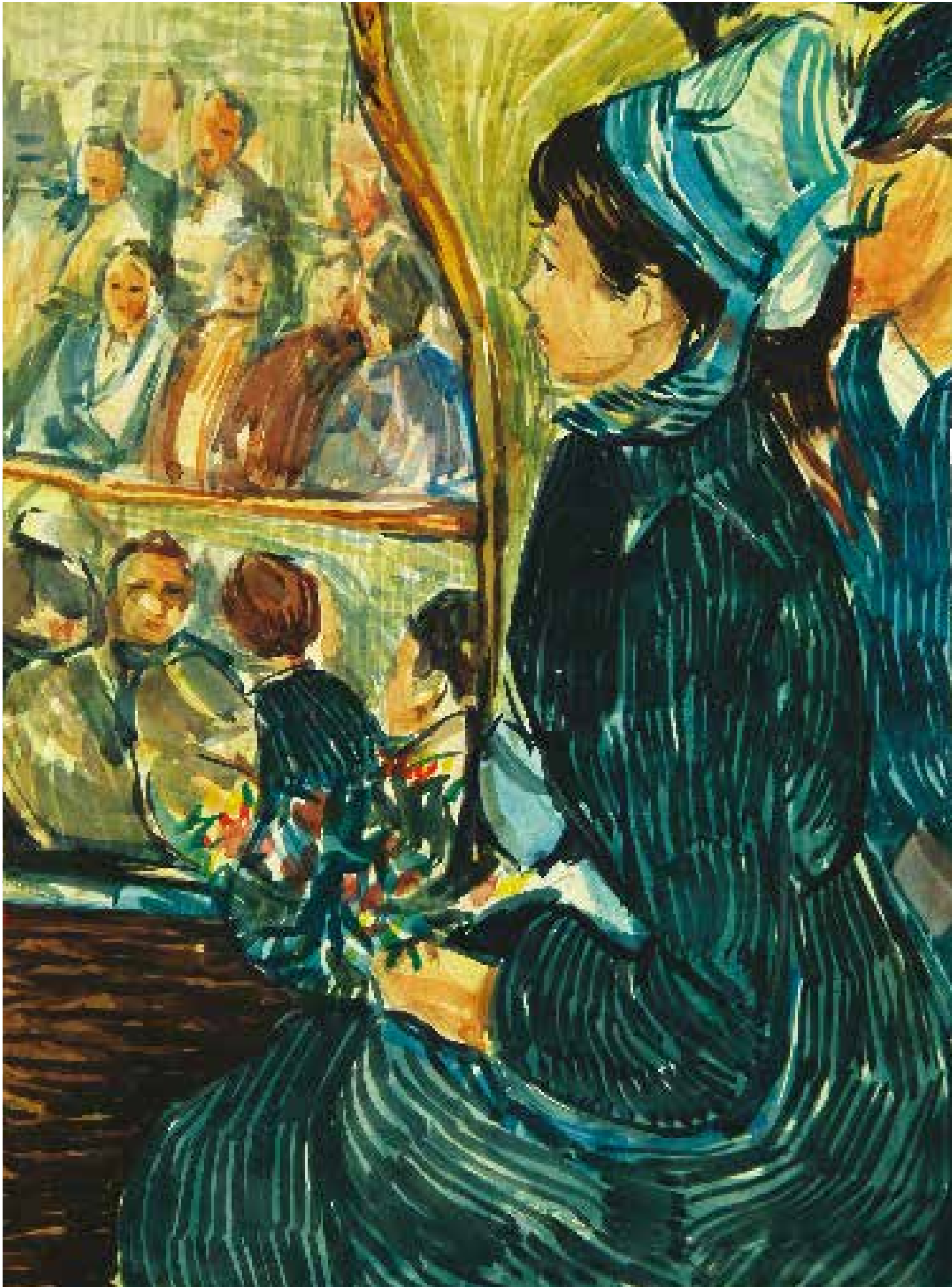
Thus, the introduction of the new four-year art program at Hornsey (with two other art colleges in England) had attracted a strong pool of staff members who came from mainland Europe. Amongst them was Maurice de Sausmarez, the Head of Design department who wrote, *Basic Design: the Dynamics of Visual Form* (1964) which was a must for all art and design students in grasping the visual language of art in inculcating awareness toward resources in natural and man-made world as well as responding to the phenomenal realities and the wide range of media and techniques. Sulaiman was taught the vision and approach by Sausemarez in Design subject in the Foundation department. It was a mind boggling experience at first as he was engulfed into a radically new art studies unheard before.



After Degas Gouache 42 x 66.5 cm 1961



After Manet IV Gouache 71 x 52.5 cm 1961



After Renoir Gouache 42.5 x 53.5 cm 1960



Self Portrait Mixed media on paper 47.5 x 59.5 cm 1965

Then also, there was Bridget Riley teaching optical art; Argentinean Mauro Kunst specialised in neo constructivist. Another was an Englishman Morley Berry, a design instructor while an Italian Guido Belmonte was the three-dimensional design instructor. In the Painting Dept. there were quite a number of established painters such as Jack Smith, Derek Boshier, Keith Grant, to name a few.¹⁵

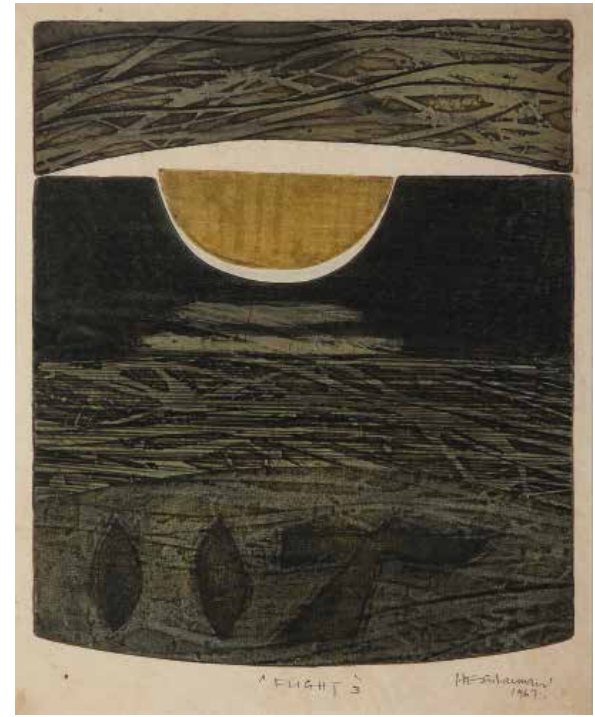
In its effort to offer a wider horizon in understanding a broader form of knowledge with regard to the integrated notion of art and its cultural context, a number of new subjects traditionally taught at university programs were brought to Hornsey College, under the auspices of Liberal Studies including Art History, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology were offered. Renowned Arnold Hauser also taught Sulaiman Social Art history. Its implication however, is deeply felt by Sulaiman since then. Apart from the above-mentioned subjects, discourses from related and multi-disciplinary themes such in architecture, art criticisms, economy, theatre, medicines, music and mass culture, among others, were delivered by visiting lecturers and thus, such activities bolstered the momentum in the historical development in art studies at Hornsey which are deeply intertwined with its social milieu.

While working on his *Snowscape*, Sulaiman recalls, his lecturer then was very impressed with his sharp perception of illusionist space rendered with accurate multiple perspectives with a rich pictorial language that exude the feeling of atmospheric tranquility in his work. Discerning at Sulaiman's work his instructor reiterated he already knew what was to be taught at Foundation level and that he should just skip the Foundation Course and joined the Fine Art!¹⁶ Notwithstanding, such confidence in handling landscape painting and its nuances was perhaps the fruition of his regimented study way back at home prior to his coming to England.

It was during his second year that Sulaiman first met Redza Piyadasa, who then was in the Foundation course. Being the only two Malaysians in the Fine Art Dept., they struck an immediate friendship. Like Sulaiman, Piyadasa too enjoyed the highly intellectual and investigative approach to learning art that Hornsey practiced. Often times as Sulaiman recalls, the new empirical and multidisciplinary approaches to art both in theory and practice, were found to be intellectually stimulating that they could not but constantly engaged in its discourses in and outside class hours. Such illuminating exposures especially with the presence of Redza Piyadasa (they shared an apartment for a couple of years together) had indeed opened up his mindset that artistic



Plant Form II Etching 61 x 87 cm 1967



Flight 3 Etching 51 x 60 cm 1967

activities are more than just making pictures, it is intricately intertwined with socio-cultural, political and economic development in a given society. As a corollary, the dialectical, highly investigative and the unflinching search in breaching boundaries in art complimented with comprehensive exposures in the history of ideas shaped Sulaiman's thoughts and ideas in his "perpetual renewal" as Krishen Jit once posits.¹⁷ In short, his experience in the interdisciplinary studies at Hornsey had indeed left an indelible mark in understanding the underlying forces in determining the legitimacy of art within a given social structure.

On completion of his four-year Dip. AD, Sulaiman continued another year for post-graduate study in print-making also at Hornsey. This time he had the opportunity to experiment and explore deeper the nuances of print techniques. And on completion of this post-grad study, he was recommended by his supervisor to study further at Atelier 17, Paris with world renowned print-maker, William Hayter, for another six months.

Post-London Period in Malaysia

Upon his return home in mid '68, he was employed as a Graphic Designer at *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (DBP). Whilst there, quite a number of illustrations with traces of pop art genre (experience brought from Hornsey) can be discerned in journals published by the DBP. His illustrations were actually inspired by the pop art culture in London in the 60's where artists used common everyday objects to portray elements of pop culture primarily those images found in advertisements or televisions. Such a movement as asserted by Lawrence Alloway as achieving flexibility between art and society in shattering the divide between the commercial art and the fine arts can be seen in works by Allen Jones, Peter Philips, and David Hockney.¹⁸

In the context of Malaysian art in the late 60's, there existed two opposing mainstream groups. The first being Abstract Expressionists espoused by the late Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin, Yeoh Jin Leng, Anthony Law, etc. whose work are primarily subjective expression and sensations in image-making. While the other, is the New Scene (NS) group included Redza Piyadasa, Tang Tuck Kan, Choong Kam Kow and Tan Teong Eng, whose emergence was to counter the Abstract Expressionists' ideology. Specifically, it posits the impersonal cerebral emphasis through empirical approach manifesting constructive and analytical principles deeply rooted from the Bauhaus system. The NS group is not inspired by the natural environmental world; instead the



Snowscape Oil paint 57 x 67 cm 1963

formal properties of art become their point of departure. In short, art to the New Scene artists is but a new habit of seeing.¹⁹

It was within such a scenario Sulaiman entered the Malaysian art scene. Fresh from Hornsey's experience, he contributed further momentum in propagating western art ideas in their studio teaching hours and experimenting art in local language. Belonging to the Constructivist group, Sulaiman who joined ITM (now UiTM) in mid-1970, began to take part in a number of groundbreaking exhibits in his (together with the late Piyadasa) tireless attempts to elucidate alternative paradigm in the development of modern Malaysian art.

Since the 1970's, Sulaiman's and the late Piyadasa's artistic pursuits seem to have evolved consistently on four significant exhibitions marking milestones in the historical development of modern art. For example, two years after Experiment in 1972, they held an exhibition entitled "*Dokumentasi 72*," debunking picture-making to the unpretentious, minimal and simplicity of Zen art influence. In rejecting the conventional method of using support and edges of painting, as in his "Scroll painting" Sulaiman reiterates:

*They attempt to re question our conventional acceptance and preconceived notion of what a "painting" really is. They attempt to stretch the limits of painting to its extremities by injecting new aesthetics whereby the physicality of the material and the physical act of transforming it into a work of art becomes the sole criteria.*²⁰

This new art entity as a physical object suppressing illusionist space and traces of personal expression was a cardinal attempt in the historical development in the country. In essence Sulaiman's *Scroll No. 6*, (1971) was to investigate the structural relationship between the optical and the physical reality of the material where his colours act as "visual agents" in enhancing the "object-ness" and the real-ness of the material. In physically manipulating the surface structure of the material by crumpling, and folding the material, he created actual planes in space where they become like "ridges and crevices" like that of mountain ranges when seen from high altitudes.

After much involvement in this scroll painting technique and working with transparent and glowing surface materials, Sulaiman came with the following conclusion:

*You do not look at my paintings but you look into them and through them. In the richly textured surfaces of my works, ones visual sensation is drawn to the entity of matter, concentrating of the sum of energy pigment and material. In the transparent work, as the result of the materialisation of coloured surfaces, one is exercising a simultaneous reading of form and matter/antimatter, volume/void, figure/ground.*²¹

It is very interesting to note that, this whole story about art as object, dematerialisation of surfaces, the play of actual lights from glowing materials and colours affected by physical light, are yet again his second phase (after the Johor Bahru days) in disseminating the seeds of his vision which decades later were transformed into a new dimension—the concept of divine light—*nur* at his first Islamic-oriented art solo show *Ke Arah Tawhid* (1984). Similarly, the concept of dematerialisation of matter/anti-matter in his *Scroll* series is further articulated in his *Insyirah* (2001), in his denial to the world of matter vis-à-vis, to the world of the spirit. And when he cites the above mentioned quotation: "You do not look at my paintings but you look into them and through them..." he posits; "... in the context of his Islamic-oriented art ideology is for us, not to be captivated by the physicality of the art work's external appearances but what is most crucial, is the need for Muslims to contemplate (*fikir*) and remember (*zikr*) the underlying meanings that these symbols allude to, in achieving felicity in this world and the Hereafter."²²

Notwithstanding, Sulaiman's preoccupation with the concept of art as objects was further generated in his *Man and His World* (1973) competition organised by the National Art Gallery. It is a collection of personal identities through his belongings used in his daily city life; personal letters/ documents, collections of photographs and magazines are systematically arranged in custom-





Scroll No. 6 Acrylic 117 x 232 cm 1971

made clear plastic pockets sown on to large transparent material. His approach echoes the physicality of objects as in his previous *Scroll* series. But this time it extended to paraphernalia of mundane objects rooted in social urban life. Instead of the conventional practice of formally expressing these pieces on canvas interpreted with formal aesthetics, he kept these images in their original contexts in maintaining their social significance and treated them as art. Through his collections of personal belongings, his daily life story alludes to a typical Westernised way of life with a shirt, a necktie, cuff links, leather shoes, birthday cards, Francoise Hardy's long play record, etc. The prayer mat hung on the left side of the work, signifies he is a Muslim, perhaps its role is just on the periphery due to its placement in the work! Nonetheless, in asserting the strong link between *Man and His World* with *Towards A Mystical Reality* which Sabapathy avers:

The material components as a work stubbornly retain their commonplaceness and display their use in social transactions. Yet, its destination is the art world; it is in that art world that its credence is determined. It is in that world too that it will be validated and an impersonal cerebral emphasis through empirical dialectic.²³

Unknown to many, in the early 70's, apart from his visual art engagements, Sulaiman displayed his versatility by being actively involved in stage and costume designs for theatrical plays working with among others, Usman Awang's *Uda dan Dara*, Syed Alwi's *Alang Rentak Seribu* and *The Birds* by Vijaya Samawikrama. His designs were made for the stage and costume for *The Birds*. Notwithstanding, Sulaiman's propensity in stage and costume designs earned him the one-year Italian scholarship in Stage and Costume Design course at Academia de Roma in Rome. Perhaps, one of the numerous traits from such experiences echoed in his current work entitled *The Primitive Others* signifying the hand woven of the Iban war jacket—an innovative renditions replete with sacred indigenous symbols of the Iban traditional identity that ought to be preserved and protected vis-à-vis the Western hegemony—a critical threat to our living traditions and way of life as eloquently elucidated in Sulaiman's *Endangered Garden* series of the current exhibit.

In sum, as espoused by Guillermo, art has two interrelated aspects; while it has its specificity in having its own formal language that constitutes art as activities different from others; it is also contextually shaped by the artist's socio-cultural and political environment.²⁴ More than the artist's psyche and aesthetic ideology, it is the social order of a society's worldview that reinforces the form and content of his works. In this context, Sulaiman Esa's engagement in art is no exception. His interest in it right from the outset has been shaped by the socio-cultural forces in the country before Independence in the 1950's, when art was but of a Westernised activity. His intoxication with Western art was further accelerated after receiving formal art training in London. But his response to the socio-cultural and political events that took place in the country as he returned home in late 1960's, Sulaiman out rightly debunked Western art that he once embodied and treaded on paradigm shifts in legitimising the prevailing ideology that art has to be socially relevant and a meaning-giving activity. His trajectories from western-centric-self to that of Islamic primordial-self is what the current show--*Raja'ah* alludes to.



A proposed stage design for *The Birds*, (1974)



Proposed costume designs for *The Birds* Watercolour and ink 1974

ENDNOTES

1. In K. Sanusi's article *Sharmiza: Labyrinth Search for Identity*. Art Corridor, October-December 2002, issue 8.
2. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 1983, p. 96
3. A. Guillermo in *Image to Meaning*, 2001, pp. 4-11.
4. Preface for *Insyirah: The Art of Sulaiman Esa* (from 1980-2000), by Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur.
5. A translated version of Syed Ahmad Jamal's article entitled *Seni Rupa Islam in Islamic Art Civilization* exhibition catalog, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
6. T.K. Sabapathy & R. Piyadasa's *Modern Artists of Malaysia*, 1983, p.137.
7. L. Faruqi in her seminar paper entitled *Islamic Literary Principles and the Visual Arts: Case Study from Malaysia*, DBP, Kuala Lumpur.
8. Interview with Syed Ahmad Jamal in December 2010, at the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
9. Elucidated by Dr. Ahmad Hj. Hashim, in *Ke Arah Tauhid* catalog, 1984.
10. As stated by C. Reisman (1993) "narrative analysis is vital to give the reader an exact picture as far as possible thus, its demands for transparency is of crucial important."
11. Cited by N. Rajah, curator for *Insyirah*, 2001.
12. An interview with the artist's sister, Hajah Yok at his parents' home in Johor Bahru on 3rd June '11.
13. An interview with the artist on 20th May 2011, at Shah Alam.
14. As mentioned by Piyadasa that "art was not an important component in education and in being educated." in T. K. Sabapathy in *PIYADASA: An Overview, 1962-2000*, p.18.
15. *Ibid.* p.112
16. Interview with the artist on May 20th 2011, at Shah Alam.
17. Refer the introduction in *Towards a Mystical Reality* manifesto, 1974.
18. Refer *Criticizing Art* by Terry Barret, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1994, p.13.
19. T.K. Sabapathy & Piyadasa, 1983, p.12.
20. Refer catalog *Dokumentasi '72*, 1972, p.5.
21. *Ibid.* p.6
22. Interview with the artist on May 20th, 2011.
23. See T.K Sabapathy in *PIYADASA: An Overview, 1962-2000*, p. 68.
24. Guillermo, 2001, p. 4.

KHATIHAH SANUSI is a senior lecturer in the Department of Post-graduate Studies at the Faculty of Art & Design, UiTM, Shah Alam. She received her Bachelor of Fine Art from Curtin University of Technology, Australia and a Diploma in Art Education, followed by a one year working experience with a publishing company in Sydney. Upon her return, she was employed as a lecturer at the Faculty of Art & Design in July 1974. In mid 1986 she pursued her Master's degree at Temple University in the United States and furthered her Ph.D studies in Art Education at the same University under the tutelage of Professor S.H. Nasr, the late Professor Ismail al Faruqi, Professor Mahmood Ayoub, and Professor D. Silva. During her more than thirty years tenure ship at UiTM, Khatijah was given the task to head three departments in the Faculty; the Foundation Course; Post-graduate Art Teachers' Diploma and the Post-graduate Studies and was awarded Associate Professor in 2000. She has not only took part in art exhibitions but also curated a number of shows in addition to writing articles for journals as well as presenting papers for local and international seminars. She has completed three research projects (yet to be published) funded by UiTM's Research Management Institute as in *Visual Art Education: An Islamic Perspective* (1998), *The Search for Transcendence in Contemporary Malaysian Art* (2002) and *From the Periphery to the Centre: The Social Significance of Sulaiman Esa's work from 1950s-2007* (2010)





**KE ARAH HAKIKAT
MISTIK DAN
IMPLIKASINYA**

**TOWARDS A MYSTICAL
REALITY AND BEYOND**

2.

KE ARAH HAKIKAT MISTIK MANIFESTO TOWARDS A MYSTICAL REALITY

| Terjemahan teks ini ditaja oleh Projek Naratif Seni Malaysia, Rogue Art.

SATU: DILEMA SENI MODEN MALAYSIA

Pameran ini tercetus dari hasrat dua orang seniman yang terlibat di dalamnya untuk membangkitkan beberapa persoalan berkenaan halatuju seni rupa Malaysia pada 1970-an. Walau bagaimanapun, bagi melaksanakan usaha ini kami tidak terikat pada perspektif yang kena-mengena dengan rantau ini semata-mata. Yakin bahawa persoalan-persoalan yang kami lontarkan ini berkait langsung dengan situasi yang melanda sebahagian besar benua Asia maka kami tidak bertindak mengikut pertimbangan dan semangat nasionalisme. Ini terutamanya kerana bentuk-bentuk masalah yang dihadapi oleh seniman-seniman moden Malaysia hari ini turut dialami oleh seniman-seniman moden di lain-lain tempat di Asia yang dihipit oleh rasa serba salah kerana terpaksa menggunakan langgam dan gaya kesenian yang sama sekali tidak bertunjangkan tradisi-tradisi kebudayaan asli mereka sendiri. Fenomena bermain-main dengan idea-idea seni moden, yang nampak ketara sepanjang lima puluh tahun kebelakangan ini, setidak-tidaknya sudah tentu mencerminkan kewujudan beberapa segi kemelut kebudayaan. Dilema ini mungkin boleh dianggap berpunca daripada beberapa faktor, dan yang paling mustahak barangkali ialah proses penyerasan yang menimpa ramai seniman Asia yang menyedari diri mereka telah terpisah dan tercabut daripada akar kebudayaan mereka sendiri. Hidup di bawah penjajahan kolonial bagi tempoh masa yang amat panjang pasti menjadi penyumbang kepada timbulnya pergolakan ini. Dalam konteks seni rupa, segala hubungan dengan budaya tradisional nyata telah terputus pada hari ini. Apatah lagi dengan kemunculan kemajuan sains dan psikologi abad ke-20 maka seniman-seniman moden Asia yang serius tidak punya banyak pilihan kecuali bersandar semata-mata pada tradisi seni moden yang berasal dari dunia sains dan pemikiran barat.

Anggapan dan prinsip umum yang tidak jelas berhubung dengan pendekatan seni "berpusatkan barat" dan "berkiblatkan timur", yang terus dipegang sampai sekarang, sememangnya membayangkan betapa rumitnya situasi ini yang masih belum benar-benar difahami oleh kebanyakan seniman Asia sendiri. Kecenderungan ramai seniman Asia untuk melibatkan diri dalam kegiatan melukis atau membuat gambar, yang masih berterusan sehingga hari ini, nampaknya tidak begitu membantu kita menyelami intipati sebenar masalah yang ada. Tiada sebarang tindakan bersungguh-sungguh diambil bagi menyoal semula keadaan serta faktor asas yang menimbulkan dilema kesenian ini yang khusus terdapat di Asia. Betapa begitu banyak karya seni moden yang dihasilkan di Asia dalam tempoh beberapa dekad mutakhir ini tampak remeh serta tidak signifikan menjadi latar kepada keparahan situasi itu. PAMERAN INI JUSTERU CUBA MEMBANGKITKAN BEBERAPA PERSOALAN BERKAITAN BERHUBUNG DENGAN SITUASI TERSEBUT SERAYA MENAWARKAN BEBERAPA JALAN PILIHAN. MESKIPUN IA KHUSUS MEMBINCANGKAN SITUASI-SITUASI "MALAYSIA", NAMUN PERSOALAN-PERSOALAN YANG DIUTARAKAN ITU LANGSUNG BERSANGKUT PAUT DENGAN KANCAH SENI MODEN DI ASIA. SEBARANG USAHA UNTUK MENILIK KERJA-KERJA KAMI INI SEMATA-MATA DALAM KERANGKA "MALAYSIA" HANYA BAKAL MENATIJAHKAN KEGAGALAN MENYEDARI IMPLIKASI-IMPLIKASI DARIPADA PERSOALAN-PERSOALAN YANG KAMI MAHU BANGKITKAN. PAMERAN INI MEMBICARAKAN SUATU SITUASI YANG MENYELUBUNGI KEBANYAKAN WILAYAH DI ASIA DI MANA TERDAPAT PENGLIBATAN DAN PERHUBUNGAN DENGAN SENI MODEN.

Nampaknya perlu sedari awal lagi ditegaskan bahawa kami merupakan seniman MODEN, dan dari kerana itu kami tidak terlibat dengan bentuk-bentuk kesenian Asia yang tradisional. Begitupun, kami meminjam falsafah-falsafah Asia supaya dapat mengemukakan satu sikap atau pendirian yang kami harap bakal membantu memperkayakan gerakan seni moden antarabangsa yang pada hari ini wajar dipertimbangkan dari sudut global. Oleh yang demikian, bukan niat kami untuk mencela atau mengkritik segala kemajuan besar yang telah berlaku di barat selepas munculnya Sekolah Seni Paris. KAMI SEBALIKNYA CUBA BERKARYA DI LUAR PARADIGMA GAYA DAN KERANGKA BERPUSATKAN BARAT. APA YANG KAMI INGIN LAKUKAN ADALAH MENYEMAI BENIH-BENIH PROSES PEMIKIRAN YANG MUNGKIN SATU HARI NANTI AKAN MEMBEBAHKAN SENIMAN-SENIMAN MALAYSIA DARIPADA BERGANTUNG PADA PENGARUH-PENGARUH BARAT. Kami percaya seluruh karya seni moden yang dihasilkan di Malaysia sehingga ke hari ini tidak sesekali bebas daripada unsur-unsur eklektik yang datang daripada berbagai-bagai "isme" atau falsafah barat. Jelas sekali, belum ada lagi sebarang usaha

gigih bagi mengkaji semula sikap eklektisme di sebalik tindak-tanduk kita bermain-main dengan langgam dan gaya kesenian yang berasal daripada gerakan-gerakan utama seni barat. Seni rupa kita bersandar sepenuhnya pada sistem estetik yang didorong oleh pemikiran-pemikiran falsafah barat. Lantaran itu, seniman-seniman Malaysia tidak mampu mengolah satu sudut pandangan realiti yang berbeza daripada apa yang diamalkan oleh seniman-seniman barat. Selagimana kita tidak berusaha menyoal semula lunas-lunas falsafah yang mendasari aktiviti kesenian kita, maka kita akan terus menghasilkan karya-karya yang selama-lamanya sekadar berbentuk derivatif, atau cuplikan, dan paling buruknya, imitatif, atau tiruan, meskipun karya-karya itu nampak cemerlang dan mengkagumkan dari segi teknik!

KAMI JUSTERU PERCAYA SENI RUPA MALAYSIA HANYA BOLEH MENJADI PRODUKTIF DAN KREATIF APABILA SENIMAN-SENIMAN KITA MULAI BERFUNGSI DAN BERKARYA PADA TAHAP LEBIH MENDALAM DARIPADA YANG ADA SETAKAT INI. Untuk berbuat demikian, seniman-seniman kita pertama sekali perlu menilai semula kemajuan-kemajuan yang telah tercapai selama ini. Oleh kerana kerja-kerja seni secara umumnya lebih dipengaruhi oleh pendekatan kesenian yang bersifat "membuat gambar" daripada "menyelesaikan masalah", maka semestinya sebab itulah tiada tradisi polemika mahupun dialektika dalam kancah seni rupa tempatan. Terlalu ramai seniman, misalnya, masih tidak berupaya membicarakan karya-karya mereka dari sudut formalisme, dan masih tidak menyedari implikasi nahu-nahu modenisme yang sedang mereka gunakan. Tidak juga terdapat mana-mana usaha bersungguh-sungguh bagi menghayati hasil-hasil kerja mereka dalam konteks zaman. Masih wujudnya pendapat yang mengatakan seniman tidak perlu membuat pernyataan atau memberikan hujah bagi membela karya-karya mereka sudah pasti mendasari mentaliti yang menganggap seniman pada dasarnya pembikin artifak dan bukan pemikir ataupun pakar teori. Dua puluh tahun lalu sikap sedemikian barangkali bolehlah dimaafkan; tetapi sekarang ia tentu sekali tidak senada dengan peredaran zaman 1970-an ini. Kegagalan seni rupa Malaysia pada tahun 1970-an untuk mengatasi faktor-faktor tersebut benar-benar menggambarkan betapa seriusnya keadaan yang ada hari ini.

KETIADAAN SECARA UMUM SUASANA INTELEKTUAL DAN POLEMICAL YANG SERIUS DI PERSADA SENI RUPA MALAYSIA LALU MENJADI SATU MASALAH GENTING YANG PERLU DITANGANI PADA DEKAD 1970-AN INI. IA MESTI DIATASI. Walaupun sebenarnya kita sekarang memiliki begitu ramai seniman terlatih dan terdidik, namun kelompongan tradisi intelektual sebahagian besarnya mungkin disebabkan oleh beberapa faktor. Dalam banyak contoh, penglibatan secara cetek dengan

permasalahan gaya dan teknik semata-mata sudah pasti nampaknya menyempitkan aktiviti kesenian kepada kerja "membuat gambar". Terlalu sedikit usaha telah dilakukan bagi menyelami aspek-aspek estetik dan falsafah yang bersangkutan paut dengan kerja-kerja kesenian. Meskipun ada beberapa usaha untuk memikirkan aspek estetik, tetapi malangnya tiada pemahaman mantap berhubung dengan isu-isu tertentu yang sedang dihadapi. Lagi pula, kecenderungan di kalangan ramai seniman tempatan untuk tidak mepedulikan perkaitan Sejarah Seni dengan sejarah falsafah pasti sekali menjelaskan sebab-sebab kelemahan sebegitu ramai seniman bila tiba masa untuk mereka menilai semula rasional atau prinsip asas yang mendokong karya-karya mereka. Terlalu ramai seniman terbaik kita kepupusan idea selepas beberapa tahun berkarya, dan lantaran itu tidak lagi mengabdikan diri kepada Seni. Ramainya seniman terbaik kita sepanjang sepuluh tahun kebelakangan ini menemui jalan buntu ketika berdepan dengan bermacam-macam idiosinkrasi gaya serta keanehan seni tentu mengundang kita untuk benar-benar merenung semula pembabitan kita dengan seni moden dalam keadaan sedemikian. Sejauh manakah bermaknanya komitmen yang sebegitu dangkal terhadap bahasa dan nahu modenisme? Kita percaya jika seniman-seniman Malaysia mahu berkecimpung dalam modenisme, mereka sekurang-kurangnya harus tahu bidang yang mereka ceburi itu dengan terperinci dan secara serius! Sehingga hal ini dilaksanakan, maka seniman-seniman moden kita, di sebalik kecemerlangan teknikal mereka, tidak akan berjaya ke mana-mana. Seni rupa kita akan kekal sebagai aktiviti yang sekadar berkisar dan berputar dalam bulatan, dan selama-lamanya tidak mungkin menjadi produktif serta inovatif!

Banyak lagi faktor penting yang menjadi penyebab kepada ketidakupayaan para seniman tempatan untuk berfungsi dan berkarya pada tahap lebih mendalam daripada yang terzahir setakat ini. Satu faktor yang mungkin paling serius ialah minat begitu ramai seniman kita untuk meladeni gaya-gaya kesenian moden tetapi pada masa yang sama masih memikul paradigma-paradigma kreativiti abad ke-19. Konsep "keunikan" susuk dan karya seniman, sebagai contoh, tentu sekali diacu oleh faham Romantisisme abad ke-19 dan diterap oleh idea bahawa karya seni pada dasarnya dibuat untuk muzium serta galeri seni. SIKAP MEMUJAMUJUA KESUCIAN SENI SERTA NILAI DAGANG KARYA SENIMAN SUDAH PASTI MENATIJAHKAN PENOLAKAN LAIN-LAIN BENTUK Kesenian yang BERPOTENSI. JUSTERU, OBSESI ATAU SIKAP TERLALU MEMENTINGKAN ARTIFAK-ARTIFAK TRADISIONAL MASIH BERTERUSAN SEKALIPUN PADA DEKAD 1970-AN, DAN SELARI DENGANNYA SIKAP BERGANTUNG BULAT-BULAT PADA TEKNIK-TEKNIK YANG LEBIH MENAYANGKAN KEMAHIRAN TANGAN DARIPADA KECERDASAN AKAL. Sikap sedemikian masih lagi

terlalu "berorientasikan benda" dan masih kekal meskipun sampai sekarang, dan lantaran itu tidak hairanlah bilamana terlalu ramai seniman kita yang kononnya "moden" masih terus meregang kanvas mereka dengan penuh hati-hati dan mempersiapkan plat cetakan goresan mereka dengan penuh jerih-perih! Ketiadaan secara umum penglibatan para seniman kita dalam bidang arca selama ini tentunya menunjukkan bahawa seniman-seniman kita setakat hari ini tidak begitu berminat dengan realiti pelbagai dimensi berbanding dengan kerja-kerja membuat "gambar-gambar" cantik untuk hiasan di dinding! Bila diimbis kembali, karya-karya yang digarap sampai sekarang tidak lebih sekadar usaha-usaha menghasilkan pilihan atau citarasa yang baik. Hakikatnya, seni Moden Malaysia yang sewajarnya masih belum benar-benar bermula.

Seniman-seniman tempatan yang berada dalam suasana itu tidak pernah bersua dengan watak seni moden yang analitikal lagi kritikal. Usaha mencari sudut pandangan realiti yang baru atau cara baru menghayati realiti memang tidak menampakkan sebarang rangsangan sebenar setakat ini. Faham akademisisme, atau formalisme tradisional, yang disalah anggap sebagai faham modenisme di Malaysia, justeru wajar dipersoalkan semula secara serius. Apakah peranan para seniman Malaysia dalam konteks Malaysia, dan apakah iktibar yang dapat diambil daripada perkembangan seni moden yang muncul di barat sampai saat ini? SUDAH TENTU JAWAPANNYA BUKAN DENGAN CARA MENELADANI PENGARUH DAN GAYA EKSPRESIONISME MAHUPUN KONSTRUKTIVISME. SENIMAN-SENIMAN YANG TERLIBAT DI DALAM PAMERAN INI JUSTERU MENOLAK SEGALA KEMAJUAN YANG BERLAKU DALAM KONTEKS SENI RUPA MALAYSIA SEHINGGA KINI, KHUSUSNYA PENGLIBATAN KELOMPOK ABSTRAK EKSPRESIONIS PADA 1960-AN SERTA PEMBABITAN KELOMPOK KONSTRUKTIVIS "NEW SCENE" SEKITAR AKHIR 1960-AN DAN AWAL 1970-AN. KAMI YAKIN KEDUA-DUA KELOMPOK SENIMAN MALAYSIA INI, YAKNI DUA KUMPULAN SENIMAN PALING SERIUS YANG MUNCUL SETAKAT INI, GAGAL MENGEMUKAKAN SEBARANG PENYELESAIAN BAGI BENAR-BENAR MENANGANI DILEMA YANG DIALAMI OLEH SENIMAN-SENIMAN MODEN MALAYSIA. KETIDAKMAMPUAN HAMPIR KESEMUA SENIMAN YANG TERLIBAT DALAM KEDUA-DUA "GERAKAN" INI UNTUK TERUS BERKEMBANG SECARA SIGNIFIKAN BAGI SATU TEMPOH MASA TERTENTU SEMESTINYA MENJADI ASAS KEPADA KETIDAKUPAYAAN MEREKA UNTUK TERUS MEMANIPULASI PENGARUH DAN GAYA YANG MEREKA CUBA PERKENALKAN. KAMI PERCAYA, SESUNGGUHNYA, TIADA KEYAKINAN INTELEKTUAL SEBENAR DI SEBALIK PEMBABITAN MEREKA! KOMITMEN MEREKA, BILA DITINJAU KEMBALI, NAMPAKNYA LEBIH DIDORONG OLEH PERTIMBANGAN STAILISTIK BERBANDING INTELEKTUAL DAN TIDAK HAIRANLAH KENAPA SENIMAN-SENIMAN DALAM KEDUA-DUA GERAKAN

INI BEGITU CEPAT BERHENTI BERKARYA. SATU PERKARA YANG PALING KUAT MENDORONG SEMANGAT MANA-MANA SENIMAN PENTING IALAH KEYAKINAN MEREKA KEPADA SENI MEREKA. FAKTOR INI MALANGNYA SAMA SEKALI TIDAK HADIR DALAM SENI RUPA MALAYSIA!

Oleh itu kami yakin beberapa penilaian semula wajar dilakukan sejujur mungkin pada dasawarsa 1970-an ini. Salah satu yang paling mustahak, barangkali, bersangkut paut dengan watak dan peranan seni dalam konteks Asia. Beberapa pencerapan menarik mungkin dapat dibuat bila kita mengkaji bentuk-bentuk kesenian yang muncul di Asia pada zaman dahulu. Sekiranya di waktu silam seniman-seniman Asia menghasilkan karya-karya yang memperlihatkan sikap-sikap falsafah dan keagamaan yang menjadi tunjang kepada kehidupan dan peranan mereka, namun hari ini hampir tiada langsung komitmen sedemikian. Sekiranya di waktu silam seni Asia mencerminkan soal-soal kebudayaan tertentu, tetapi hari ini langsung tidak kedapatan elemen-elemen kebudayaan sebegitu. Seniman-seniman moden Asia pada umumnya memilih untuk bersikap saintifik dan rasional, dan tidak menghiraukan unsur mistik dan keagamaan yang dulu membantu merangka tradisi-tradisi kesenian agung Asia di zaman lampau. Nyata sekali, dilema yang dihadapi oleh seni moden Asia sebahagian besarnya kena mengena dengan kelemahan seniman-seniman Asia untuk mengaitkan diri mereka dengan tradisi serta nilai budaya dan falsafah mereka sendiri. Tempoh penjajahan kolonial yang cukup panjang serta kemunculan faham materialisme saintifik abad ke-20 tampak merimaskan seniman Asia dan mengakibatkannya berpaut pada pandangan yang sepenuhnya berasaskan rasionalisme. Bentuk dan gaya keseniannya beransur-ansur berubah dan seniman Asia kini bergantung hampir menyeluruh pada idea-idea kesenian yang dicetus oleh tradisi di barat. Yang peliknya, kisah seni moden Asia sebenarnya kisah tentang ikhtiar yang dilakukan hampir dengan penuh sedar bagi membebaskan diri daripada tradisi ini! Amat sedikit seniman Asia sampai ke saat ini yang cuba mengkaji masalah ini di tahap akarumbinya. PAMERAN INI SUATU PERCUBAAN.

Alasan bahawa sikap saintifik dan rasionalistik dalam bidang kreativiti seni tidak dapat dielakkan sama sekali akibat daripada kemunculan faham materialisme abad ke-20 walau bagaimanapun nampaknya mengetepikan intipati dan matlamat sebenar-benar seni iaitu untuk memuncakkan daya tanggapan dan pengalaman penonton terhadap realiti. Seniman MEMPUNYAI pilihan dan beliau BOLEH menentukan jalur proses persepsi itu. PADA PENDAPAT KAMI TERDAPAT KAEDAH-KAEDAH ALTERNATIF BUAT MENGHAYATI REALITI DAN BUKANLAH PANDANGAN EMPIRIKAL DAN HUMANISTIK BARAT SAJA YANG SAH DIGUNAPAKAI. OLEH YANG DEMIKIAN, KECENDERUNGAN DI KALANGAN PARA SENIMAN MODEN MALAYSIA UNTUK AKUR PADA SUDUT PANDANGAN REALITI BERKIBLATKAN BARAT YANG BERMULA DI ZAMAN PEMBAHARUAN DI EROPAH (SEBENARNYA DI YUNANI!) NAMPAKNYA MEMPERLIHATKAN SIKAP PASRAH SEWENANG-WENANG MEREKA KE ATAS PANDANGAN

SAINTIFIK BERHUBUNG DENGAN REALITI. HAKIKATNYA, TERDAPAT SANGAT SEDIKIT USAHA YANG DIBUAT OLEH WARGA-WARGA ASIA (KECUALI MUNGKIN OLEH SEGELINTIR SENIMAN JEPUN) BAGI Mencari PENDEKATAN ALTERNATIF DI DALAM MENGHAYATI REALITI. KESEDIAAN MEREKA MENERIMA SUDUT PANDANGAN BARAT ITU SEMESTINYA MENDORONG SENIMAN ASIA MERUJUK DAN MENIRU BENTUK SERTA GAYA KESENIAN DARI BARAT. LANTARAN ITU, KEBANYAKAN SENIMAN MODEN ASIA TIDAK MAMPU MEMBERIKAN SUMBANGAN YANG BENAR-BENAR BERADA DI LUAR KERANGKA PENGALAMAN BARAT. JUSTERU, MEREKA BARANGKALI TIDAK AKAN DAPAT MEMBUAT SEBARANG SUMBANGAN PENTING KEPADA DUNIA SENI MODEN ANTARABANGSA. WALAU BAGAIMANA CEKAP SEKALIPUN PENGUASAAN MEREKA TERHADAP GAYA-GAYA KESENIAN BERKIBLATKAN BARAT, NAMUN MEREKA AKAN TERUS MENGHASILKAN KARYA-KARYA YANG TETAP BERBENTUK DERIVATIF DAN BERTAHAP KELAS KEDUA!

DUA: "ANTI FORMALIS DAN ANTI ESTETIK"

Pameran ini harus dilihat sebagai lanjutan kepada pameran "Dokumentasi 72" yang diadakan di Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka pada bulan Mei 1972. Pameran itu memaparkan kesimpulan hasil daripada kajian yang kami jalankan secara berasingan di antara Disember 1970 dan Mei 1972. Ketika itu kami amat terkesan dengan perkembangan Seni Konstruktif selepas Perang Dunia Kedua. Berbekalkan kesedaran terhadap keadaan fizikal hakiki benda, kami tiba pada tahap di mana karya-karya kami mendorong kami menilik sifat asli, atau "kehakikian", elemen-elemen yang kami gunakan. Menjelang tahun 1971, kami langsung menyetepikan teknik-teknik ilusionistik, dan mulai berminat mengkaji ruang, masa serta cahaya hakiki. Masalah-masalah berkaitan graviti dan pergerakan sebenar muncul dalam skema representasi kami waktu itu. Walau bagaimanapun, pendekatan yang kami ambil ketika itu masih dibelenggu oleh perhitungannya "formal-estetik". MESKIPUN BEGITU, PERTEMBUGAN LANGSUNG DENGAN REALITI TANPA BERGANTUNG PADA TEKNIK-TEKNIK ILUSI MEMAKSA KAMI MEMBUAT PENILAIAN SEMULA JIKA KAMI MAHU TERUS MEMANIPULASI KEADAAN FIZIKAL HAKIKI. MISALNYA, BAGAIMANA KAMI BERDEPAN DENGAN REALITI FIZIKAL? SEBAGAI SENIMAN KONSTRUKTIVIS, SEHINGGA SAAT ITU KAMI CONDONG MELIHAT REALITI DARI SUDUT SAINS DAN SECARA OBJEKTIF; TETAPI SELEPAS PAMERAN ITU KAMI MULA MEMIKIRKAN KEMUNGKINAN UNTUK MENILIK REALITI DARI PREMIS ATAU ANDAIAN YANG SAMA SEKALI BERBEZA. Contoh-contoh karya yang dihasilkan oleh sesetengah seniman moden Jepun yang cuba menghayati realiti dari sudut pandangan yang pada dasarnya bersifat oriental mendorong kami meneliti semula kebenaran sudut pandangan saintifik serta materialistik. Pameran ini menghidangkan beberapa penemuan dan kesimpulan yang kami capai menyusuli keputusan yang kami ambil hampir dua tahun lepas.

Terdapat dua isu fundamental yang menjadi titik fokus kami selepas pameran "Dokumentasi 1972". Kami mempersoalkan semula dua elemen asas yang melatari karya seni tradisional, iaitu, (i) PERKAITAN IDEA "FORMAL-ESTETIK" DALAM KARYA SENI, DAN (ii) KONSEP HUMANISME YANG MELIHAT SENIMAN SEBAGAI MAKHLUK "UNIK" SERTA KETERLIBATAN EGO SENIMAN DALAM PENCIPTAAN SEBENAR KARYA SENI.

Pada waktu itu kami mengikuti perkembangan pemikiran "anti formalis" yang melanda barat sepanjang tahun 1960-an. Memandangkan kami perlu berdepan dengan beberapa senario di dalam menghayati keadaan fizikal hakiki benda, maka kami wajar mempertimbangkan semula kesahihan dan keberkesanan bentuk-bentuk kesenian tradisional (yakni lukisan, arca, cetak timbul, cetakan, dll.) Tumpuan kami sudah pasti kepada seniman-seniman "anti seni" seperti kelompok Dadais, Marcel Duchamp, Yves-Klein, Piero Manzoni, Tinguely serta John Cage (penggubah "muzik bisu"). Ketika itu kami turut meminati karya-karya konseptual oleh seniman Konseptualis Jepun, Yoko Ono. Menyedari TIDAK MUSTAHIL untuk menyingkirkan segala unsur formalistik dan estetik daripada karya seni maka kami terdorong melihat seni sebagai pengalaman Konseptual. Kami mengambil keputusan untuk menghasilkan karya di luar kerangka "formal-estetik". Keazaman untuk berkarya melangkaui unsur-unsur "berorientasikan barat" dikuatkan lagi bila kami sedari ramai pelopor "anti seni" di barat sebenarnya mendapat inspirasi daripada luan dan konsep falsafah timur.

Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat beberapa implikasi kesan daripada anjakan kepada proses pengkaryaan Konseptual. Pertama sekali, kami sedar latarbelakang pendidikan seni kami tidak menyediakan cukup bekalan bagi tujuan ini. Pelbagai kemahiran yang kami pelajari, dan seiring dengan itu pelbagai teori estetik yang didedahkan kepada kami menerusi subjek Sejarah Seni, sekonyong-konyong dirasakan tidak lagi relevan. Isu kritikal ketika itu kelihatan menjurus kepada penglibatan bidang falsafah! Di saat itulah kami menginsafi kelemahan dan kekurangan diri kami. Bertolak dari kesedaran ini kami merangka satu program menelaah buku secara tekun dan gigih yang mengambil masa selama hampir dua tahun. Kami membaca falsafah-falsafah timur dan barat. Memandangkan tugas yang kami ingin laksanakan ini sukar lagi rumit, kami membuat keputusan untuk bekerjasama dari sudut intelektual yang akhirnya mendorong kami menghasilkan karya secara bersama-sama. Rancangan kami ini tidak sepenuhnya berjaya sampailah di saat akhir; tetapi ketika itu, pada tahun 1972, ia nyata sekali tidak dapat tidak mesti dilakukan.

Program pembacaan buku secara gigih itu satu aspek paling mustahak dalam kerja penyelidikan kami. Selain daripada menelaah ilmu falsafah, kami turut membaca pelbagai buku tentang seni timur dan barat dengan harapan menemui perbezaan-perbezaan asas di antara tradisi kesenian timur dengan tradisi kesenian barat. Pada tahap ini lagi, kami mulai sedar seniman-seniman tempatan tidak berapa berupaya untuk membantu kami kerana mereka lebih condong ke arah kerja "membuat gambar" yang masih bergantung pada pertimbangan stilistik dan teknik yang mempunyai

kaitan dengan pendekatan "formal-estetik". Kami justeru beralih kepada mereka yang tidak berkecimpung dalam bidang seni rupa Malaysia. Di pelbagai peringkat, kami merujuk kepada tokoh-tokoh di luar lapangan seni yang mahir dalam bidang sejarah pemikiran serta berpengetahuan luas mengenai perkembangan peristiwa-peristiwa sejarah. Kami berbincang dengan beberapa pensyarah universiti, sejarawan, pakar sosiologi, agamawan, penulis dan dramatis. Pengkajian ke atas luan falsafah yang bakal membolehkan kami berkarya di luar kerangka realiti "berpusatkan barat" mendesak kami untuk berfikir dan bekerja melangkaui sempadan seni itu sendiri.

Keinginan untuk menyisihkan segala pertimbangan "formal-estetik" dalam skema representasi kami boleh juga dianggap bertitik-tolak daripada keyakinan kami bahawa seni moden seputar 1970-an bukan sangat memerlukan penglibatan teknik dan gaya tetapi menuntut satu kaedah baru menghayati realiti yang tidak dikekang oleh pertimbangan "kesenian" yang semata-mata diacu oleh konsep formalistik dan estetik. Ringkasnya, isu kritikal dalam seni moden hari ini sesungguhnya bersangkut paut dengan masalah bagaimana kita "melihat" benda (visual/retinal) dan bukan bagaimana kita "menanggap" realiti (konseptual). Sikap baru dalam seni ini mendesak kita pada hari ini untuk menyoal semula kesahihan Kritisisme Seni yang masih dikanun, setakat ini, mengikut hukum-hukum estetik dan formalistik. Bantahan golongan seniman muda hari ini terhadap kesahihan kritisisme seni konvensional yang bersumberkan metodologi objektif memperlihatkan wujudnya kemahuan secara sedar di kalangan para seniman serius pada dekad 1970-an untuk menghayati realiti tanpa dikongkong oleh "perhubungan" data dan maklumat yang dirangka mengikut pemikiran seni berilhamkan bentuk seperti yang disaran oleh para sejarawan seni. Sekarang timbul keinginan di kalangan seniman-seniman paling serius untuk memahami proses "fenomenal" menerusi kaedah dialektika, dan perkara ini seolah-olah meletakkan seniman setaraf dengan ahli falsafah! Penyisihan mitos "jiwa seni yang unik" serta konsep pengalaman seni sebagai proses interaksi batin di antara "seniman/pencipta" dan "tenaga dalaman"nya sesungguhnya dicetus oleh kesedaran akhir-akhir ini betapa penonton mampu menghayati realiti secara terus dan langsung. Penilaian semula hubungan penonton dengan seluruh sistem representasi sebenarnya mencetus penilaian semula matlamat asal seni itu sendiri.

BETAPA SENI PADA HARI INI BERANSUR-ANSUR BERUBAH MENJADI KEGIATAN YANG DIALEKTIKAL SERTA KONSEPTUAL MENGALAMATKAN KEWUJUDAN SATU SITUASI BARU YANG BELUM LAGI DISEDARI KEMUNCULANNYA OLEH SENIMAN-SENIMAN ASIA YANG DIKIRA

"MODERN"! Lantaran itu, idea estetik dan formalistik agak tidak relevan dan dikira lapuk dalam skema representasi baru kerana pada asasnya idea itu didasarkan pada pemikiran yang melihat seni sebagai sesuatu yang "dicipta" menerusi proses manipulasi serta penyusunan beraneka elemen rekabentuk (yakni garis, bentuk, warna, jalinan, rupa, permukaan, rekacorak, dll.) Jelas sekali komitmen seni moden hari ini menjurus kepada fungsi yang melangkaui keseronokan memanipulasi bahan dan gaya, serta kepada kesedaran bahawa lunas rasionalnya terletak pada penilaian semula secara dialektikal proses-proses fenomena yang berlaku di luar kerangka seni "berorientasikan bentuk". Dengan yang demikian, seniman dituntut mengkaji semula watak dan sikap nahu-nahu kesenian yang dipakainya.

Fahaman seni sebagai kegiatan konseptual dan dialektikal seterusnya mendesak seniman untuk melengkapkan diri dengan pelbagai cara agar dapat melaksanakan tugas rumit berdepan dengan jagat yang sarat dengan idea-idea tulen! Seseorang seniman justeru dituntut melihat melangkaui kemahiran teknikal dan mempersiapkan diri dengan perkara-perkara seperti kesedaran terhadap berbagai-bagai cabang ilmu pengetahuan seumpama falsafah, linguistik, psikologi, sosiologi, fizik, komunikasi massa dan malah matematik! Oleh yang demikian, keberkesanan seseorang seniman yang serius di masa hadapan akan bergantung kepada kebolehannya berfikir dan berkarya melepasi sempadan-sempadan yang melingkari konsep-konsep "tradisional" seni itu sendiri. Seniman-seniman terbaik pada 1970-an nyata sekali bukan lagi pembikin-pembikin artifak tetapi pemikir-pemikir dan pakar-pakar teori, dan hakikat ini semestinya meletakkan mereka setaraf dengan individu-individu yang memiliki akal paling kreatif dan paling berpengaruh di zaman kita ini. Seni akhirnya mengetepikan peranannya yang agak tradisional dan mencapai pengertian baru yang justeru melontarkan satu cabaran yang sepenuhnya baru ke atas para seniman dekad 1970-an yang benar-benar serius.



Sangkar burung yang kosong setelah pembebasan burung pada jam 2.46 petang, Isnin 10 Jun 1974.

TIGA: "TIADA MAKSUD HUMANISTIK MAHUPUN SUBJEKTIF"

Kami berbincang seawal 1972 lagi untuk kemungkinan menghasilkan karya secara bersama-sama. Rancangan ini memerlukan kami menilai semula kedudukan ego seniman dalam skema representasi kami. Malah persoalan mengenai ego seniman mendorong kami meneliti sesetengah perbezaan asas di antara kaedah ekspresi seni "berpusatkan barat" dengan yang "berkiblatkan timur". Kami dapati sudut pandangan humanisme, yang memberi penekanan ke atas seniman sebagai sesosok individu serta terhadap perspektif realiti berciri saintifik dan objektif, sesungguhnya berlawanan dengan kerangka tradisionalisme masyarakat Asia seperti yang pernah wujud satu ketika dulu. Alam, misalnya, tidak berapa "dirasai" seperti dalam kes seniman-seniman China, tetapi direnung dan dikaji berdasarkan rupa dan jelmaan lahiriahnya oleh seniman-seniman barat sejak dari zaman Pembaharuan. Kami lihat perbezaan asas ini lebih berkait dengan masalah sikap berbanding dengan sudut pandangan. SATU PIHAK DIRANGSANG OLEH HUKUM MISTIK, SEMENTARA PIHAK YANG LAIN PULA PADA ASASNYA OLEH PRINSIP SAINTIFIK! Lagi pula, kami merasa hairan melihatkan hampir kesemua seniman tersohor Malaysia sebenarnya berkarya mengikut kerangka Humanisme dan rasionalisme yang bermula dari Zaman Pembaharuan Eropah abad ke-15. Tiada sesiapa pun pernah terfikir untuk mempertikaikan kecenderungan ini!

Perbezaan asas di antara pendekatan individualisme bergejolak ego

di kalangan seniman barat dengan pendekatan tawaduk merendah diri di kalangan seniman timur tatkala berdepan dengan Alam, patut juga diberikan perhatian. Di dalam tulisannya bertajuk "Art in the East and West", Benjamin Rowland menghuraikan situasi ini menerusi perbincangan ke atas karya-karya Michaelangelo dan Wu Tao-tzu, pelukis China abad ke-18:

"Luapan rasa dan ekspresi bertenaga Michaelangelo merupakan manifestasi lahiriah konflik dalaman kuasa-kuasa yang saling merangsang serta melemahkan antara satu sama lain. Bentuk-bentuk agam ini memang lumrah dalam seni Barat, dan terpacul dari lubuk sukma seorang manusia yang bijaksana, dan merupakan luahan tindakbalas individu terhadap alam. Bentuk-bentuk yang dipaparkan oleh Wu Tao-tzu bukan sangat ekspresi rasa seseorang individu tetapi lukisan universal buat mengungkap geraktindak alam, yakni pusaran tenaga yang mencetus fenomena air pasang, yang menghasilkan kejadian puting-beliung. Lukisan Wu Tao-tzu tiada maksud humanistik mahupun subjektif!"

JUSTERU, ASPEK KETAWADUKAN KESENIAN TIMUR INILAH YANG MENARIK PERHATIAN KAMI. Terlalu ramai seniman moden Asia yang terlibat dalam seni moden menerima bulat-bulat pandangan sains dan humanisme tanpa langsung terdetik untuk mengkaji semula lain-lain kemungkinan, pada hemat kami, sesuatu yang agak menyedihkan pada hari ini. Betapa mereka sampai sekarang tidak pernah terfikir untuk mengkaji semula penerimaan dan pemanipulasian mereka terhadap bentuk-bentuk seni dari barat, tentu sekali menjelaskan kenapa sampai ke saat ini seluruh bentuk seni yang dihasilkan berkemungkinan kekal tidak lebih sekadar pengulangan bentuk-bentuk asli barat. KAMI LIHAT DIRI KAMI DENGAN JELAS MENYOAL SEMULA JENIS SERTA MATLAMAT BENTUK-BENTUK YANG MUNGKIN DAPAT KAMI KUASAI. KINI KAMI PERLU MENYUCIKAN DIRI DARIPADA SEGENAP PENGARUH DAN IDEA BERPUSATKAN BARAT AGAR DAPAT KAMI MARA JAUH KE DEPAN. KEPUTUSAN UNTUK MENYINGKIRKAN SETIAP PERKARA YANG KAMI PELAJARI DI SEKOLAH SENI BARAT DULU MENJADI PRASYARAT WAJIB. KINI MUNCUL DESAKAN SERIUS UNTUK MENGAJI SEMULA "PERANAN" SENIMAN DALAM RANGKA SKEMA REPRESENTASI BARU KAMI.

Keterujaan kami terhadap ketawadukan seniman tentu sekali memperjelaskan keputusan yang kami ambil untuk mula membongkar dan menjejak bentuk-bentuk kesenian tradisional yang wujud dalam tradisi-tradisi kebudayaan pribumi Malaysia. Minat kami khususnya

pada cerita lakon Wayang Kulit dan fungsi Tok Dalang menyedarkan kami akan "peranan" baru yang boleh kami mainkan dalam skema representasi baru kami. Konsep Tok Dalang menghidangkan kepada kami beberapa kemungkinan dan harapan untuk berkarya dalam ruanglingkup "mediumistik", yakni selaku perantara atau wasitah dengan alam rohani. Satu perkara berkenaan Tok Dalang yang rasanya paling istimewa adalah keupayaannya menuturkan dialog cerita dan menggerakkan patung wayang tanpa khalayak dapat melihatnya mahupun menyiasat latarbelakang dirinya! Sikap tawaduk Tok Dalang, kami sedari, hampir-hampir sempurna meskipun beliau merupakan tenaga sebenar yang menghidupkan seluruh pertunjukan wayang itu! Ringkasnya, beliau bertindak selaku "perantara" dan "pencetus" di antara khalayak dengan patung-patung wayangnya. Di sini nyata hadir seniman "timur" yang berkarya tanpa pengaruh humanistik mahupun subjektif! Justeru kefahaman kami mengenai fungsi "mediumistik" seniman wajarlah dikira berpunca daripada konsep Tok Dalang ini.

Pada tahap inilah kami bercadang menghasilkan karya secara kolaborasi. KEPUTUSAN UNTUK MENGHASILKAN KARYA SECARA BERSAMA-SAMA INI DICETUS OLEH KEINGINAN KAMI UNTUK MENGECILKAN FAKTOR INDIVIDUALISME SELAGI MANA MUNGKIN. SEGALA KEPUTUSAN KAMI AKAN DIBUAT BERSAMA-SAMA DAN TIADA SEBARANG UNSUR EMOSIONAL DIBENARKAN MEMPENGARUHI PROSES MANIPULASI BENTUK-BENTUK YANG AKAN KAMI GUNAKAN. OBJEK-OBJEK YANG BAKAL KAMI PAKAI, SETAKAT MANA YANG BOLEH, TIDAK AKAN DIBUAT OLEH KAMI. DARI SATU SEGI, KAMI BERHAJAT MEMISAHKAN DIRI KAMI SECARA SEDAR DARIPADA KARYA SENI. TIDAK AKAN ADA SEBARANG MAKSUD HUMANISTIK MAHUPUN SUBJEKTIF! KAMI TURUT MEMUTUSKAN, KARYA KAMI AKAN MENGAMBIL WATAK YANG MISTIKAL.

EMPAT: KEPENTINGAN SUDUT PandANGAN MISTIK

Keputusan kami untuk menghasilkan karya seni dari kerangka mistik berbanding saintifik sudah tentu menimbulkan beberapa persoalan berhubung dengan kepentingan dan kesahihan usaha sedemikian dalam konteks situasi abad ke-20. Ada orang nescaya akan mempertikaikan kemampuan pendekatan mistik dan akan mencemuhkannya sebagai tindakan yang agak "tidak realistik" dalam konteks zaman sains dan teknologi kita. Adakah kita tidak merasa bersalah berkarya berdasarkan sesuatu yang kabur dan payah dihuraikan? Kami menjawab soalan itu dengan menegaskan bahawa pendekatan mistik masih lagi sesuai pada hari ini sepertimana di masa lampau semata-mata kerana persoalan-persoalan paling asas mengenai kehidupan dan kematian, dan seiring dengan itu hasrat untuk memaknakan kewujudan kita, masih lagi wujud dalam diri kita! Fahaman materialisme barat yang keterlaluan seolah-olah mengalih perhatian kita kepada unsur-unsur yang pasti berbanding dengan kuasa-kuasa yang 'ghaib', dan seniman seperti John Cage, penggubah "muzik bisu", mengajak kita melihat dilema yang dihadapi oleh manusia moden. Calvin Tomkins dalam buku "Ahead of the Game" menjelaskan sikap Cage berhubung dengan situasi tersebut:

"Cage percaya dunia ini sedang berubah dengan lebih pantas dan mendadak daripada yang disangkakan oleh ramai orang. Pada pendapat beliau, sebahagian besar sikap tradisional dalam kerangka pemikiran barat tidak lama lagi akan menjadi lapuk, dan sebahagian besar tradisi lebih tua dalam kerangka pemikiran timur semakin padan dengan kehidupan di barat. Tegas Cage, peranan sebenar seni di zaman kita ini adalah untuk menguak seluas-luasnya akal serta jiwa jejak dan wanita sezaman untuk menerima kedahsyatan perubahan-perubahan yang terjadi agar mereka "terjaga daripada tidur lena kepada hakikat kehidupan" yang sedang merekaalui ini. Kesenian dan kehidupan, bagi Cage, bukan lagi dua perkara yang terpisah sepertimana di zaman silam di Barat, tetapi dua hal yang hampir serupa; dan seluruh kerjaya Cage bahkan boleh dilihat sebagai usaha panjang demi meroboh sempadan yang memisahkan kedua-dua unsur itu."

Tong-tong, palet dan berus cat yang dijumpai di Jabatan Seni Lukis dan Seni Reka ITM.



Barangkali menarik diperhatikan bahawa (i) John Cage menimba banyak ilham daripada falsafah Zen Buddhisme, dan (ii) kesenian dan kehidupan tidak pernah wujud berasingan di Timur! Profesor Daisetsu Suzuki, sarjana tersohor bidang Zen, telahpun menyentuh hal ini di dalam buku beliau "Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist":

"Dengan cara yang sama, setiap detik kehidupan manusia selagimana ekspresi diri batinnya bersifat asli, indah, kreatif dan tidak boleh diungkapkan semula. Setiap kehidupan manusia justeru sebuah karya seni. Sama ada seseorang itu mengolahnya menjadi karya seni yang halus lagi unik bergantung kepada kesedarannya terhadap gerak-tindak "sunyata" dalam diri beliau."

Kami ingin memetik pandangan seorang lagi pengkritik seni barat untuk kami tunjukkan betapa pentingnya pendekatan mistik dalam lapangan seni masa kini. Kenneth Coutts-Smith menerusi rencana beliau "Art in Violence" yang disiarkan dalam majalah "Art and Artists" (Okt. 1966) menyatakan:

"Seni bukan suatu fenomena terpencil, atau suatu perkara gampang mengenai estetik, tetapi dari satu segi, merupakan sebahagian daripada seluruh pengalaman yang kita alami secara psikologi mahupun sosial, dan dari satu segi yang lain pula, pengungkapan pengalaman "batin" kita. Namun begitu, seperti yang dinyatakan oleh Roland Laign, kita "kebanyakannya telah terputus hubungan dengan alam batin kita ketika sibuk meladeni dunia zahir kita. Kita menjadi orang asing kepada pengalaman kita sendiri; kita telah terpisah daripada diri kita sendiri."

Kepentingan pendekatan mistik justeru tampak cukup signifikan. Di dalam usaha kami untuk dengan sengaja menolak sudut pandangan realiti berciri materialistik, kami sekadar kembali semula kepada sikap kesenian yang pada dasarnya bersifat oriental. Keinginan untuk mencari pendekatan yang bakal mendorong pembabitan "spiritual" dan bukan "intelektual" di pihak penonton menjadi tunjang kepada pengambilan pendekatan alternatif yang berbeza daripada kaedah yang dipakai oleh seniman barat. Oleh yang demikian ia bukanlah pembabitan nihilistik, bukan juga sikap destruktif. IA MERANGKA SATU PENGESAHAN YANG AMAT POSITIF BAHAWA SENI, PADA TAHAPNYA YANG PALING MENDALAM, MENGHIDANGKAN KEPADA KHALAYAK PENGALAMAN JIWA MISTIK YANG LANGSUNG MELORONG MEREKA KEPADA KEHIDUPAN ITU SENDIRI.

Betapa di barat hari ini timbul keperluan sungguh-sungguh untuk mengangkat komitmen mistikal dan spiritual sudah barang tentu mengalamatkan munculnya satu keadaan yang agak pelik yang menjelma ekoran penekanan melampau masyarakat barat ke atas nilai-nilai materialisme. Kita hanya perlu melihat kemunculan bermacam-macam kumpulan kultus agama palsu di Amerika Syarikat akhir-akhir ini untuk kita sedar betapa tidak tenteram dan lompongnya 'batin' kebanyakan manusia di barat. Lagipun, kecenderungan ramai generasi muda barat untuk mencari "hakikat kehidupan yang lebih tinggi" dengan cara mengambil segala jenis dadah yang mengkhayalkan semestinya menjadi musabab kepada keperluan terdesak mereka terhadap perkara-perkara yang menenangkan dan mendamaikan yang dapat disalurkan oleh mistisisme, iaitu falsafah kebatinan dan kerohanian. Dengan terasingnya diri kita daripada kehidupan itu sendiri, dek kerana unsur-unsur teknologi, maka usaha mencari kedamaian "batin" menjadi salah satu masalah utama di zaman kita sekarang. Sememangnya terdapat banyak pengajaran daripada kemajuan yang berlaku di barat yang boleh dijadikan iktibar oleh para seniman Asia, dan salah satu daripadanya ialah kewajaran mutlak kerangka pandangan timur di dalam menghayati kehidupan dan dunia di sekeliling manusia. Barangkali satu gejala tidak sihat di zaman kita ini ialah bilamana sudut pandangan mistikal dan spiritual sering dicemuh dan dianggap "kuno" oleh warga-warga Asia sendiri tatkala mereka diterjah oleh sikap dan fahaman materialisme yang semakin menjadi-jadi!

Kami percaya kekuatan yang ada pada seniman Asia di zaman silam (khususnya seniman Timur Jauh) terletak pada keupayaan mereka menilik kehidupan dan realiti menerusi proses meditasi dan unsur spiritualiti. Sikap mistikal, dengan sudut pandangannya yang "spiritual" dan bukan "intelektual", yang menjadi pegangan seniman-seniman timur sudah pasti berbeza daripada konsep "seni demi seni" yang kelihatan menjadi gaya ikutan masa kini. Seni Asia di zaman silam tidak sesekali bermatlamat menawarkan "hiburan intelektual", tetapi bertujuan merangsang kesedaran manusia terhadap realiti dan membantu mewujudkan hubungan kerohanian dan mistik dengan alam semulajadi serta Alam Semesta itu sendiri. Lantaran itu, tiada garis pemisah di antara kesenian dan kehidupan. Dan lagi, terlalu ramai seniman agung barat di kurun ke-20 sebenarnya menimba inspirasi mereka daripada falsafah-falsafah mistik timur (seperti John Cage, Yves-Klein, Ad Rheinhart, Tobey, Brecht) semestinya membuktikan sejauh mana perlunya seniman-seniman Asia menilai semula warisan dan tradisi Asia mereka. Keinginan ramai seniman kreatif Asia (sama ada pelukis, penulis, penyair, dramatis, mahupun pemuzik) untuk terus berkarya berdasarkan lunas-lunas estetik dan formalisme "berpusatkan barat" sambil terus mengabaikan tradisi kesenian

dan falsafah mereka sendiri sesungguhnya membuktikan satu situasi yang amat menyedihkan masih lagi berlangsung di seluruh Asia hari ini!

Di sini rasanya perlu dibincangkan beberapa perbezaan asas di antara sudut pandangan falsafah mistisisme dengan falsafah materialisme kerana dengan memahami perbezaan-perbezaan asas di antara kedua-dua sudut pandangan tersebut mungkin dapat membuahkan penghayatan lebih baik berkenaan realiti itu sendiri. Jikalau sudut pandangan saintifik itu dirangsang oleh pendekatan empirikal yang diasaskan pada pembuktian "logikal", sudut pandangan mistik pula berfungsi berdasarkan "perasaan" serta "gerak hati". Satu perkara yang amat menarik adalah, sementara para saintis bercita-cita mencanai pemahaman "intelektual" berkenaan kuasa-kuasa nyata alam semulajadi menerusi kajian dan analisa "objektif", golongan mistik pula berusaha gigih untuk mencapai "hubungan spiritual" dengan kuasa-kuasa ghaib Alam Semesta melalui renungan dan meditasi "mental". Seorang ahli sains, kerana terlalu mematuhi pendekatan praktikal, lazimnya cenderung menolak pertimbangan mistik; manakala seorang mistik yang tenang pula lebih suka menguntum senyuman dengan penuh sabar melihatkan kerenah objektiviti para saintis. Dulu memang benar sains positivisme tidak akan menerima sebarang perkara yang tidak boleh dihurai secara "objektif"; namun keadaan ini tampak sudah berubah. Jika di masa lalu "gerak hati" dianggap oleh saintis sebagai kalimah yang mencurigakan, tetapi sekarang ia menjadi kunci yang sangat diperlukan bagi membongkar penemuan-penemuan baru. Lagi pula, terdapat banyak "ciptaan baru" sains yang penting telah dihasilkan berdasarkan konsep-konsep yang mula-mula muncul sebagai rumusan dan andaian yang dicetus oleh intuisi! Selari dengan itu, jika sebelum ini sains enggan berfungsi atas dasar ketidakpastian, tetapi kini ia lebih bersedia melayan faktor-faktor yang tidak boleh dijelaskan secara logik. Satu contoh klasik dalam bidang fizik kurun ke-20 ialah "hukum ketidakpastian" Huisenberg yang menjadi batu sempadan kepada penyelidikan saintis berhubung dengan sifat sebenar elektron dan kedudukannya dalam ruang. Sepanjang dekad terakhir ini berlaku banyak perubahan hebat dalam sistem pemikiran barat berkenaan fitrah alam fizikal, dan hal ini amat jelas dalam bidang sains fizikal. Para saintis tidak lagi yakin dengan dunia yang serba terbatas, mahupun dengan kekekalan jirim. Pakar fizik mungkin menghuraikan fenomena itu dengan memakai istilah gelombang, zarah, atau tenaga, mengikut aspek fitrah yang beliau kaji, dan beliau tidak lagi berbicara tentang objek tetapi peristiwa. Menarik diperhatikan betapa golongan mistik timur, sejak hampir 2,000 tahun lampau, sebenarnya telahpun menganjurkan idea bahawa realiti dan dunia kita ini terdiri daripada serangkaian proses dan bukan selongkok entiti atau benda!



Tumbuhan dalam pasu yang disiram dan dijaga oleh kedua-dua pelukis sepanjang tempoh tujuh bulan.

Sepuluh tahun kebelakangan ini menyaksikan banyak penemuan baru yang mulai menggoncang penegasan tradisional para saintis terhadap penyelidikan "objektif". Salah satu kesannya ialah kesediaan untuk menilai semula dan mengkaji kedudukan para mistik. Justeru tidak hairanlah kenapa saintis terkemuka Amerika, Dr. Elmer Green dari Yayasan Menninger, sanggup menghabiskan masa berbulan-bulan di India dan memasang ribuan wayar pada seluruh tubuh seorang pengamal Yoga yang tengah bermeditasi dan tidak sedar apa yang berlaku di sekelilingnya. Seorang fakir India yang tidur bertelanjang di atas katil yang dipenuhi paku jelas sekali kian mendapat perhatian para saintis! Tambahan pula, kesedaran betapa hanya satu persepuluh daripada keseluruhan fungsi akal manusia dapat diketahui oleh sains semestinya mendorong saintis menilai semula perkara-perkara seumpama ESP dan EEG yang dulu dianggap isu-isu mistik yang karut-marut. Dalam bidang kosmologi, sesetengah penemuan terhebat yang telah dibuat turut menggugat pemikiran-pemikiran tradisional berkaitan Alam Semesta. Sekarang ia meluru dari pelbagai arah – hal-hal yang tidak dapat dijelaskan dan perkara-perkara yang luar biasa. Jirim dan anti-jirim, pengunduran masa, lohong hitam di angkasa, zarah-zarah terbang lebih pantas daripada cahaya dan melewati dunia tanpa melanggarnya! SECARA RINGKAS, APA YANG KAMI CUBA SARANKAN IALAH BAHAWA SANYA SUDUT PANDANGAN SAINTIFIK DAN EMPIRIKAL BERKENAAN REALITI BUKANLAH SATU-SATUNYA YANG SAHIF DIGUNAKAN. SUDUT PANDANGAN GOLONGAN MISTIK MENGENAI ALAM SEMESTA JUGA BOLEH DIPAKAI MEMANDANGKAN WUJUD BANYAK KESELARIAN YANG SEMAKIN KETARA HARI INI. Di dalam banyak contoh, perbezaan-perbezaan tersebut hanya sekadar dari sudut bahasa. Apa yang disebut oleh mistik Taois sebagai "Chi" atau yang dipanggil oleh pengamal yoga India sebagai "samsara" mungkin dihuraikan oleh sains sebagai "tenaga" yang tidak boleh dicipta mahupun dimusnahkan tetapi mungkin boleh diubah! APA YANG KAMI INGIN TEKANKAN DI SINI ADALAH TERDAPAT BEGITU BANYAK TAHAP REALITI, DAN PANDANGAN SAINTIFIK SERTA EMPIRIKAL CUMA MENDORONG PEMAHAMAN KE ATAS HANYA SATU PERINGKAT REALITI. Tokoh pemikir seperti Arthur Koestler, seorang penulis barat berpendidikan sains, secara terbuka mengakui hakikat ini. Di dalam bukunya "The Roots of Coincidence", Koestler menulis:

"Saya tidak tahan dengan ajaran agama. Mengenai mistisisme pula, ia istilah yang sukar ditakrif. Saya cuma berkata terdapat lain-lain tahap realiti selain daripada yang kita tilik menerusi mata kasar manusia biasa, menerusi mata saintis."

LIMA: KONSEP MISTIK PERIHAL MASA DAN PERISTIWA



Baju hujan buangan yang dijumpai di tempat pelupusan sampah di Klang pada jam 4.23 petang, Ahad 13 Januari 1974; yang semestinya pernah dipunyai seseorang.



Contoh rambut manusia yang dihimpun secara rambang dari kedai gunting rambut di Petaling Jaya.

Usaha mencari satu asas falsafah bagi membolehkan kami berkarya merupakan masalah terbesar yang kami hadapi. Di sini perlu ditegaskan yang kami tidak berminat dengan mana-mana bentuk atau imajinasi yang ada secara spesifik di Asia, tetapi kami berhajat mencari sudut pandangan yang bakal mengizinkan kami berkarya luar daripada sikap terhadap bentuk berpusatkan barat. Kami mengambil keputusan berkarya di luar rangka pendekatan "berpusatkan barat" (dengan konotasi Humanisme, materialisme dan empirisismenya) dan kini kami berhasrat mendekati seni dari kerangka mistik. Sedang kami cuba menjejak satu tradisi falsafah Asia yang sesuai, kami bagaimanapun mengambil langkah berhati-hati untuk menghindari tradisi-tradisi yang bertunjangkan kepercayaan keTuhanan yang mutlak lagi bermoral. Kami tidak mahu dihalang oleh hal-hal yang berkait dengan moral dan agama! Kajian rapi ke atas pelbagai tradisi falsafah Asia seterusnya membawa kami kepada falsafah Taoisme/Zen. Cara Taoisme melihat dunia dengan penekanannya terhadap kespontanan "perasaan" serta sudut pandangan pinggiran/periferalnya dalam menghayati realiti, kami rasa amat berbeza daripada konsep objektiviti sains barat. Tambahan pula, ia bebas daripada sebarang dogma dan ajaran keagamaan. Pemikiran Taoisme/Zen yang lebih menumpukan sudut pandangan "mental" (yakni akal) berbanding "retinal" (yakni mata) dalam melihat alam meyakinkan kami bahawa jawapan yang kami cari mungkin ada padanya. Di sini barangkali wajar dinyatakan bahawa Taoisme (dan Zen, yang muncul daripadanya) pada asasnya sebuah falsafah dan bukan agama. Falsafah Taoisme mempunyai kaitan dengan proses memahami kehidupan dan realiti secara langsung dan bukan dalam bentuk pemikiran representasional yang abstrak lagi linear.

Pada peringkat ini kami berminat dengan persepsi realiti itu sendiri. Kami kini berdepan dengan dua kaedah spesifik di dalam menanggapi realiti. Yang pertama, konsep penglihatan "sentral", atau pusat, yang menilik secara sedar satu benda pada satu masa yang berasal dari Zaman Pembaharuan di Eropah, dan yang kedua, konsep penglihatan "periferal", atau pinggiran, anjuran Taoisme yang merenungi realiti sebagai kontinum berterusan "peristiwa-peristiwa". Jika masyarakat barat cenderung mengasingkan aspek-aspek realiti dan mengkajinya secara sedar, masyarakat timur pula lebih cenderung menanggapi realiti dengan keseluruhan unsur yang terdapat padanya. Konsep penglihatan "periferal" anjuran para mistik Taoisme justeru membolehkan seseorang memerhati objek dan gerakan tidak sepertimana konsep penglihatan

"sentral". Mungkin menarik disebutkan di sini bahawa golongan mistik Taoisme sudahpun menyarankan kaedah melihat alam dengan cara ini semenjak hampir 2,000 tahun lalu, dan masyarakat barat tidak mengiktiraf pandangan ini sampailah Einstein mengemukakan teori-teori tentang jirim, masa dan ruang. Gaya Kubisme Picasso yang begitu terkenal, bila disorot kembali, merupakan usaha yang muncul agak lewat untuk membetulkan kelemahan sudut pandangan realiti yang mula-mula digagaskan oleh Euclid dan digunapakai oleh seniman-seniman Zaman Pembaharuan.

Pada zahirnya, bentuk sudut pandangan "periferal" yang kami pinjam daripada para mistik Taoisme/Zen mungkin kelihatan serupa dengan sudut pandangan yang diterimapakai oleh seniman-seniman barat selepas kemunculan konsep Kubisme dan Konstruktivisme. Walaupun kami percaya terdapat beberapa persamaan dan keselarian tertentu, namun di kala seniman-seniman barat masih terus menilik keadaan fizikal alam, kami pula pada dasarnya mendekati realiti daripada perspektif yang benar-benar berciri "mental" dan "metafizikal". Perbezaan-perbezaan asas di antara sudut pandangan penganut Taoisme dengan sudut pandangan seniman barat masih wujud hari ini, dan ia sesungguhnya bersangkut paut dengan persoalan sikap dan pendirian. Minat seniman barat terhadap keadaan "fizikal" benda sudah tentu membayangkan kecondongan beliau terhadap pendekatan "berorientasikan bentuk" yang secara umumnya masih wujud sampai sekarang. Petikan berikut mengenai Cezanne yang dikutip dari buku "Kaleidoscope of Modern Art" tulisan Neville Westone mungkin menarik untuk direnungkan:

"Cezanne mahu memerhati alam menerusi sepasang mata tulus sang bayi yang baru lahir, dan untuk berbuat demikian, beliau mencipta satu kaedah yang hampir berkait sepenuhnya dengan proses abstraksi satah. Disebabkan beliau mencari dan mengutamakan satah-satah yang selari dengan satah gambar, maka beliau melibatkan dirinya dan diri khalayak dengan PERBUATAN MENENGOK DAN MELIHAT SECARA FIZIKAL. Kaedah Cezanne ini bergantung kepada rangka penglihatan peribadi yang menerima kualiti hemisferik yang berbeza daripada rangka penglihatan perspektif berfokuskan titik ghaib yang dipelopori oleh Leon Battista Alberti di Zaman Pembaharuan. Cezanne mengizinkan kedua-dua bola matanya menjalar dan merewang ke serata permukaan lukisan di depannya, sama ada lukisan itu potret, alam benda ataupun pemandangan, dan memilih pelbagai titik ghaib sebagai pusat tumpuan beliau. Di dalam sepucuk surat yang dikirim kepada Emile Bernard, beliau mengesyorkan kajian dibuat terhadap

objek-objek berbentuk geometri, seperti kon, kuib, silinder serta bulatan, dan kemudian menambah, Alam Semulajadi boleh diperi dan disifatkan menerusi bentuk-bentuk ini. CEZANNE MENYARANKAN SATU KAEDAH MELIHAT BENTUK-BENTUK RUMIT ALAM." (penekanan oleh kami).

Perbezaan asas di antara sudut pandangan realiti yang berkait dengan ontologi seperti anjuran Taoisme/Zen dengan kaedah "retinal" saranan Cezanne dijelaskan oleh Alan Watts di dalam buku beliau "The Way of Zen":

"Teori sains justeru menentukan sama ada belut itu sepatutnya ikan atau ular, dan hukum tatabahasa memutuskan mana pengalaman yang seharusnya dipanggil benda dan mana satu pula sewajarnya dipanggil perbuatan. Betapa bercelarnya hukum-hukum tersebut mungkin dapat dilihat pada soalan, "Apa yang terjadi kepada genggam tangan (nama benda) bila anda bukakan tangan anda?" Benda itu sekonyong-konyong lenyap kerana perbuatan itu disamakan oleh kalimah pengucapan yang biasanya dipadankan kepada benda! Dalam bahasa Inggeris, perbezaan di antara benda dengan perbuatan dapat dicam secara jelas meski bukan secara logik; tetapi sejumlah besar perkataan bahasa China mempunyai kedua-dua fungsi sebagai nama dan perbuatan – sebab itulah orang yang berfikir dalam bahasa China tidak berapa sukar melihat yang benda itu adalah juga peristiwa, dan dunia kita ini terdiri daripada serangkaian proses dan bukan selonggok benda."

Dan lagi, sudut pandangan mistik pegangan seniman Taois dihuraikan dengan begitu tepat oleh Mario Bussagli di dalam buku beliau "Chinese Art":

"Bagi seniman China, tumbuhan dan haiwan bukan hanya unsur-unsur kewujudan fizikal, dan lukisan pemandangan bukan juga sekadar citra yang menggambarkan tempat. Semua unsur mempunyai kaitan langsung dengan sesuatu hal yang tidak terbatas dan tidak dapat ditakrifkan, sepertimana kehidupan itu sendiri dirasakan oleh seniman China sebagai keberahian yang hampir-hampir mistikal."

Mario Bussagli seterusnya menulis di bahagian lain buku beliau:

"Dari kerana mereka yakin dengan konsep kesatuan Alam Semesta, maka seniman China (dan Timur Jauh)



Kerusi kosong yang mana telah diduduki ramai orang.

enggan memegunkan realiti dalam satu detik masa atau menempatkannya dalam satu titik ruang yang muktamad.”

Daripada semua kenyataan di atas dapat disimpulkan bahawa sudut pandangan realiti dalam falsafah Taoisme sudahpun mengambilkira persoalan masa. Kecenderungan pengikut Taoisme/Zen melihat benda sebagai “peristiwa” dan bukan “bentuk” menunjukkan bahawa benda wujud dalam ruang yang saling berkait, atau dalam jajaran kontinum. Masa, dalam hal ini, ialah masa “mental” yang tidak boleh diukur kerana semua ukuran hanya bersifat relatif! Sebaliknya, marilah kita mengamati pertimbangan seniman barat terhadap unsur masa dalam seni. Seniman barat, yang berkarya dalam cakupan konsep MASA/RUANG duniawi, cenderung melagang unsur masa dari sudut “fizikal”. Beliau memberikan penekanan terhadap masa dengan cara menghidupkan ruang dengan penuh sedar, sama ada menerusi gerakan “Kinetik” (Gabo, Maholy-Nagy, Calder, Tinguely, Le Parc, Schoeffler, Takis dll.) atau dengan mewujudkan secara paksa hubungan fizikal antara penonton dengan karya melalui elemen-elemen “alam sekitar” (Giacometti, Caro, Carl Andre, Serra, Flavin, de Maria, Agam, dll.) Usaha yang dibuat oleh seniman barat untuk menghasilkan karya yang muncul “dalam ruang penonton sendiri” lantas tampak tidak berapa bermanfaat bagi seniman timur. Demikian juga, anggapan lumrah di kalangan ramai seniman “Kinetik” bahawa karya-karya mereka hanya “hidup” bila dipetik “suis”nya nampaknya suatu anggapan yang naif bagi pengikut-pengikut Taoisme. Sementara seniman barat biasanya menanggap masa menerusi perbuatan “fizikal”, seniman timur pula “merasai”nya secara rohani, secara mental. Seniman timur sesungguhnya mengambilkira konsep masa yang pada dasarnya amat metafizikal!

PADA PERINGKAT INI RASANYA PERLU DINYATAKAN WALAUPUN SELURUH KARYA KAMI KEKAL STATIK, NAMUN MEREKA BERSIFAT “KINETIK” KERANA MEREKA MENGAMBILKIRA FAKTOR-FAKTOR MASA DAN RUANG. ELEMEN MASA DALAM KARYA-KARYA KAMI SEMESTINYA MASA “MENTAL”. PENGALAMAN DIMENSI KEEMPAT MENJELMA DALAM AKAL PENONTON. BENTUK-BENTUK MELANGKAUI KEADAAN “KEBENDAAN” MEREKA DAN HADIR PERTAMA-TAMA SEKALI SEBAGAI RAKAMAN-RAKAMAN “PERISTIWA”. LANTARAN ITU KAMI TIDAK BERMINAT DENGAN PERTIMBANGAN FORMAL DAN ESTETIK. KAMI BERMINAT DENGAN PROSES ITU SENDIRI. MANAKALA SENIMAN BARAT MENDEKATI SENI DARI SUDUT PERTIMBANGAN “RUANG/MASA/RASA”, KAMI PULA MENDEKATI SENI MENERUSI SIKAP “MENTAL/MEDITATIF/MISTIKAL”.



Dua botol Coca-Cola yang sudah diminum separuh airnya.

**ENAM: SUDUT PANDANGAN REALITI "MENTAL/MEDITATIF/
MISTIKAL" YANG BERLAWANAN DENGAN SUDUT PANDANGAN
"RUANG/MASA/RASA" SENIMAN BARAT**

Terdapat beberapa prasyarat asas yang rasanya diperlukan oleh sesiapa yang mahu memahami dan menghayati karya kami. Yang paling utama, penonton harus mengetepikan sebarang tanggapan awal mereka berhubung dengan makna dan bentuk "Seni". Sesiapa yang datang ke pameran ini dengan sangkaan akan menemui objek-objek tradisional (lukisan, arca, cetakan dll.), mereka pasti akan merasa kecewa. Kami tidak menampilkan objek-objek tetapi serangkaian pengalaman "mental" yang kami berdua sama-sama cetus. Karya kami jelas sekali tidak bersifat konseptual. Kami berharap "pengalaman-pengalaman" ini, yang kami cetuskan, akan mencerna kesedaran baru di kalangan penonton terhadap fitrah realiti yang pelbagai dimensi. Seperti yang telah kami nyatakan, kami tidak berminat dengan isu-isu formalistik mahupun estetik. Dengan menolak segala pertimbangan estetik dan formalistik, kami berusaha dengan penuh sedar bagi membebaskan pertimbangan "berorientasikan bentuk". Lantaran itu, konsep-konsep yang menggarisbawahi makna "keindahan", "harmoni", "struktur", "gaya", "perlambangan" dan "teknik" tidak terdapat dalam skema representasi kami. Sebarang usaha membaca prinsip "estetik" pada objek-objek yang kami pilih secara rawak ini akan hanya menggagalkan proses memahami matlamat sebenar kami iaitu pembabitan kesedaran "mental" berhubung dengan masa dan bukan bentuk. Matlamat kami bukanlah penghayatan estetik penonton tetapi kesedaran spiritualnya bahawa segenap bentuk pada dasarnya peristiwa-peristiwa yang benar-benar berlaku sebagaimana jua kewujudan dirinya dalam konteks masa dan ruang. Kami memaksa penonton sedar yang diri beliau sendiri merupakan hasil daripada satu rangkaian proses. "Objek-objek" yang kami pilih untuk dipamerkan justeru terdiri daripada cebisan-cebisan peristiwa yang sungguh-sungguh berlaku. Sebarang usaha melihat cebisan-cebisan peristiwa itu sebagai bentuk-bentuk "fizikal" hanya akan membataskan seseorang kepada cakupan sudut pandangan realiti "berpusatkan barat" yang pada dasarnya diasaskan atas hal-hal yang berkait dengan "ruang/masa/rasa". Yang kami paparkan di sini ialah sudut pandangan realiti bertunjangkan ontologi serta tidak berpaut pada faktor "fizikal" tetapi pada unsur "mental" dan mistikal. Oleh yang demikian, ia sudut pandangan yang melangkaui pancaindera serta dirangsang oleh gerakindak akal.

Barangkali perlu juga kami ingatkan para khalayak sekali lagi bahawa elemen-elemen humanistik dan subjektif tidak terdapat pada karya kami. Hal yang menyentuh ego seniman tidak wujud di dalam skema representasi kami, meskipun kamilah yang menjadi pencetus kepada proses persepsi mental tersebut. Secara ringkasnya, kamilah "pemula" kepada proses mental yang pada asalnya tercetus daripada pertembungan penonton dengan situasi yang kami paparkan kepada mereka. Apa yang kami fokuskan ialah "empati meditatif" di pihak penonton: yakni empati yang terhasil daripada pelakuan meditasi dan kontemplasi. Yang demikian, karya kami dilandaskan pada usaha penuh sedar bagi mewujudkan proses kontemplasi dan meditasi di pihak penonton. Meskipun begitu, yang menjadi titik fokus kami ialah satu proses kontemplasi yang istimewa lagi unik. Iaitu proses kontemplasi yang bukan bertujuan mencari "keindahan" dan "harmoni", tetapi yang menjurus ke arah kesedaran terhadap tenaga, kuasa serta hukum graviti yang sukar difahami yang mana penonton sendiri wujud dan berfungsi di dalam lingkungannya!

Kami telah meletakkan penonton dalam situasi di mana beliau digesa menyoal semula realitinya sendiri. Dengan memaparkan amat sedikit "petanda" kepada penonton dalam setiap situasi itu, kami membawa penonton kepada pengalaman "mental" berkenaan masa yang menggugat kesedarannya sendiri terhadap konsep masa fizikal. Satu rangkaian peralihan masa terzahir dalam akal penonton dan penonton dibawa secara "mental" ke dalam dimensi masa yang pada dasarnya bersifat cair serta tidak dihalang oleh batasan-batasan fizikal. Ia seharusnya berakhir dengan kepelbagaian "pengalaman masa" yang wujud di luar karya itu dan di luar diri penonton sendiri. Maka akan terhasillah pengalaman realiti dari segi ontologi yang tidak disekat oleh faktor "ruang/masa/rasa". Kesudahannya, proses-proses pemikiran ini yang berfungsi dalam ruanglingkup masa "mental" bergantung kepada aktiviti akal penonton serta imaginasi beliau sendiri. Pada tahap ini, kami selaku "pencetus" tidak lagi mempunyai kuasa ke atas situasi itu! Penonton bebas berundur ke belakang atau maju ke depan dalam ruang masa kerana akalnya sendiri mengambilalih proses kontemplasi dan meditasi.

Rasanya perlu bagi kami huraikan proses simulasi yang ada di dalam skema representasi kami. Terdapat tiga keperluan asas dalam proses ini: (i) "benda/peristiwa", (ii) data-data yang telah kami sediakan yang membantu memenuhi syarat peristiwa itu, dan (iii) kemampuan penonton mentafsir dan menterjemah situasi yang kami paparkan (yakni "benda/peristiwa" dan data). Kesedaran betapa "benda" itu sebenarnya sebuah peristiwa dapat menyingkap perhatian penonton yang "benda" itu pada hakikatnya wujud dalam jajaran kontinum sepertimana jua kewujudan diri

penonton itu sendiri. Kesedaran bahawa diri beliau dan "benda" adalah dua proses yang wujud dalam satu cakupan masa lantas mengakibatkan terlerainya perbezaan-perbezaan asas di antara "benda" dan "manusia". Dalam satu pengertian, kedua-dua perkara itu pada asasnya tenaga yang terdapat dalam situasi yang tidak terbatas. Lantaran itu, tiada aturan hirarki di antara perkara yang bernyawa dengan yang tidak bernyawa. Kesedaran penonton terhadap hakikat ini sewajarnya membebaskan mereka secara berperingkat-peringkat daripada pertimbangan-pertimbangan humanistik. Hal ini tidak menghasilkan proses "penyahan insan" (satu perkara yang ditakuti masyarakat barat) tetapi menerbitkan kespontanan baru yang membawa penonton lebih dekat kepada "sunyata" (kekosongan). Prasyarat pertama proses meditasi dan kontemplasi ini merupakan matlamat penting karya kami. Alan Watts di dalam buku beliau "The Way of Zen" menjelaskan perkara ini:

"Matlamatnya bukan untuk merendahkan akal manusia ke tahap kekosongan yang dungu, tetapi membangkitkan akalbudinya yang semulajadi lagi spontan dengan cara menggunakannya tanpa paksaan. Falsafah yang terbatas kepada pilihan-pilihan bahasa konvensional tidak memiliki keupayaan untuk mengamati akalbudi yang tidak bekerja mengikut tatanan pemikiran linear. Akan tetapi, bukti kukuh berhubung dengan kewujudan akalbudi itu betul-betul terdapat pada jasad-jasad yang disusunatur sembarangan. Ketidaksedaran ini bukan bermaksud kehilangan kesedaran tetapi satu perkara yang ditakrif oleh tokoh-tokoh Zen terkemudian sebagai 'wu-shin' – secara harfiah, bererti 'nir-akal', 'tiada akal' – yakni bukan-kesedaran-kendiri. Ia perihal kesempurnaan diri di mana akal berfungsi secara bebas dan santai, tanpa kesedaran akal kedua atau perasaan ego menjadi batu penghalangnya."

Segenap usaha kami jelas digerakkan ke arah mencetus 'perasaan akal' menerusi proses meditasi. Kami cuba menghasilkan situasi di mana penonton akan dapat memahami 'intipati' karya itu sendiri yang sebenarnya merupakan serangkaian peristiwa. Perkaitan data-data yang kami sediakan kepada penonton justeru dirasakan perlu bagi menarik perhatian penonton kepada hakikat bahawa apa yang pertama sekali dilihat beliau ialah peristiwa dan bukan bentuk. Pada peringkat ini nampaknya wajar untuk mengingatkan orang ramai yang biasa dengan cara berfikir dari segi "entiti", atau benda, bahawa sebuah kerusi kosong sesungguhnya "kerusi yang pernah diduduki oleh ramai penonton". Demikian pula, dengan cara menyediakan data-data yang diperlukan, kami mengingatkan penonton bahawa sebuah sangkar burung yang kosong bukan satu 'benda' tetapi



Sutera saring buangan yang pernah digunakan untuk menghasilkan banyak cetakan indah.

satu peristiwa kerana ia sebenarnya "sangkar kosong yang burungnya telah terbang keluar." Penonton bakal menyedari bahawa kesemua tajuk yang kami gunakan sebenarnya merujuk kepada peristiwa. Oleh itu, agak sukar mentafsir objek-objek dalam pameran ini sebagai bentuk-bentuk, yang mana jika tidak kerana konsep pameran ini maka memang akan dianggap begitu.

DENGAN MENARIK PERHATIAN KEPADA ASPEK PERISTIWA MAKA KAMI SECARA TIDAK LANGSUNG MENGISYARATKAN KEPADA 'INTIPATI' ATAU 'SEMANGAT' KARYA TERSEBUT YANG WUJUD DISEBABKAN OLEH PERISTIWA. EKORAN DARIPADA ITU, SESEORANG SEDAR BAHAWA BENDA-BENDA YANG PALING LUMRAH DALAM SITUASI-SITUASI

SEHARIAN KITA SARAT DENGAN 'INTIPATI' PERISTIWA. KEPERCAYAAN BAHAWA BENDA-BENDA MEMILIKI 'SEMANGAT' TIDAK SUKAR DIFAHAMI JIKALAU ORANG ITU BERASAL DARI TIMUR. SENIMAN TIMUR SENTIASA BERUSAHA MENGUTAMAKAN 'INTIPATI SPIRITUAL' BERBANDING BENTUK LUARAN! Profesor Daisetsu Suzuki telah menghuraikan pendekatan seni "berpusatkan barat":

"Kesenian timur tertakluk kepada pemaparan semangat dan bukan bentuk. Kerana mereka berkata apabila semangat itu difahami maka bentuk pun akan wujud dengan sendirinya; perkara utama adalah menyelami semangat yang terdapat pada benda yang diangkat oleh seniman sebagai subjeknya. Dunia Barat sebaliknya menekankan perihal bentuk, dan usaha-usaha untuk menjangkau semangat menerusi bentuk. Dunia Timur sama sekali berbeza: semangat merupakan segala-galanya."

Akan jelas bahawa apa yang dirasakan menjadi perkara asas kepada skema representasi kami ialah kesudian penonton untuk menerima satu kaedah menanggapi bentuk yang sama sekali baru, iaitu satu kaedah yang melangkaui faktor-faktor yang semata-mata berkait dengan pancaindera. Meskipun bentuk-bentuk yang kami pilih untuk dipaparkan di dalam pameran ini mungkin nampak terlalu biasa dan lumrah, namun mereka dihidupkan dengan intipati proses-proses pengalaman dan peristiwa. Lantaran itu, apa yang kami tampilkan ialah sesuatu yang tidak boleh dialami melalui jalan indera tetapi yang boleh difahami dengan teramat mudah menerusi akal fikiran. Kami malah menganjurkan satu cara alternatif menilik benda-benda yang paling biasa di sekitar kita dalam situasi-situasi seharian kita. Oleh yang demikian, karya-karya dalam pameran ini bukan "karya-karya seni" tetapi cebisan-cebisan realiti itu sendiri yang dipilih secara paling rambang! Menawarkan elemen-elemen realiti yang dipilih secara rawak ini untuk jualan, justeru, sesuatu yang teramat mustahil lagi bebal. Malah, bagaimana hendak menilai unsur-unsur realiti yang paling lumrah ini dalam bentuk wang dan ringgit? Sebab itulah kesemua karya kami dalam pameran ini "bukan untuk dijual".

Akhir sekali, kami fikir wajar dipertegaskan bahawa sudut pandangan realiti yang kami usulkan, meski berkait dengan peristiwa, bukan sangat terarah kepada konsep fenomenologi tetapi sebaliknya berciri mistikal dan spiritual. Pengalaman-pengalaman yang kami kemukakan sedemikian rupa kepada penonton tidak harus berhenti setakat pameran ini sahaja, tetapi harus bermula daripada pameran ini dan kekal berterusan dengan penonton menyedari bahawa beliau berfungsi sebagai satu mata rantai di

dalam keseluruhan rangkaian "proses" yang merupakan misteri kehidupan itu sendiri. Dengan memilih untuk merenung peristiwa-peristiwa yang paling lumrah, paling biasa, kami berharap penonton akan berdepan dengan misteri kewujudannya sendiri dalam Alam Semesta yang tidak terbatas dan selama-lamanya hidup!

Kuala Lumpur Jun /Julai 1974



Lingkaran obat nyamuk yang sudah terbakar, yang diguna untuk menjauhkan nyamuk pada malam 25 Mac 1974.



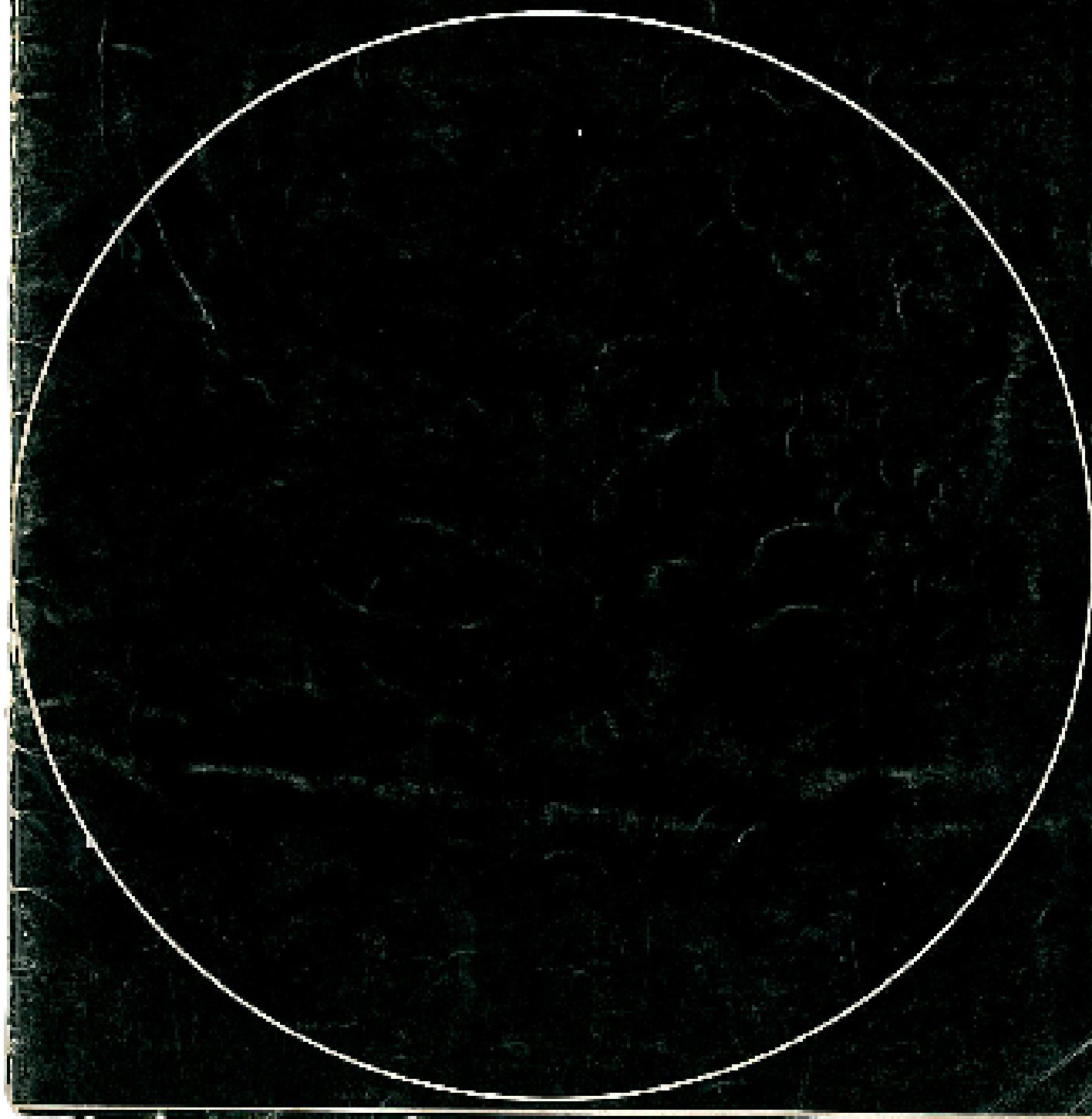
Kanvas kosong di mana telah jatuhnya banyak bayang-bayang.

TOWARDS A MYSTICAL REALITY MANIFESTO

| Cover design by Raja Zahabuddin Yaacob

TOWARDS A MYSTICAL REALITY

a documentation of jointly initiated experiences by redzu piyadees and sulaiman esa



ONE: THE DILEMMA OF MODERN MALAYSIAN ART

The present exhibition has been motivated by the two participating artists' desire to raise some questions regarding the direction of Malaysian art in the 1970s. In attempting to do this, we are, however, not limiting ourselves to a wholly provincial outlook. It is our belief that the questions we are raising relate directly to a greater Asian situation and as such, we are not functioning within 'nationalistic' considerations. This is especially so because the kinds of problems faced by Malaysian modernists today are also being faced by Asian modernists elsewhere who are beset with the dilemma of having to employ idioms and styles which are not altogether indigenous to their own cultural traditions. The flirtation with modern art influences which seems to have manifested itself over the last fifty years at least certainly reflects a cultural dilemma of sorts. Several factors may be attributed to it and perhaps, the most important is the general displacement faced by the Asian artists who have found themselves uprooted from their own cultural influences. The very long period of exposure to colonial domination has certainly contributed to the general disruption. Clearly, the links with a traditional culture is all but severed today as far as the plastic arts are concerned. What with 20th century scientific and psychological advancements, the serious Asian modernists have been left with little choice but to lean heavily on a modern art tradition that has its origins in the western scientific and intellectual climate.

That vague generalisations still persist today regarding the notion of a "western-centric" and "eastern centric" approach to art only reflects the complexity of a situation that is as yet not fully understood by most Asian artists themselves. The general tendency amongst Asian artists to become involved with picture-making pursuits which still persists today does not seem to have made it easier to understand the problem for what it is. No real attempts have been made to re-question the underlying considerations which have given rise to this artistic dilemma which is peculiarly

Asian. That so much modern art produced in Asia these last few decades has tended to be trivial underlies the seriousness of the situation. THE PRESENT EXHIBITION THEREFORE ATTEMPTS TO RAISE SOME PERTINENT QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SITUATION AND OFFER SOME ALTERNATIVES. WHILST DEALING WITH SPECIFICALLY "MALAYSIAN" REFERANCES, THE QUESTIONS RAISED HOWEVER APPLY DIRECTLY TO THE MODERN ART SCENE IN ASIA. ANY ATTEMPT TO VIEW OUR CONTRIBUTIONS WITHIN A PURELY "MALAYSIAN" CONTEXT CAN ONLY RESULT IN A FAILURE TO REALISE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE QUESTIONS WE ARE ATTEMPTING TO RAISE. THE PRESENT EXHIBITION DEALS WITH A KIND OF SITUATION WHICH PREVAILS IN MANY PARTS OF ASIA WHERE SOME KIND OF MODERN ART INVOLVEMENT EXISTS.

It seems necessary from the outset to state that we are MODERN artists and as such, we are not involved with traditional Asian art forms. We are however borrowing from Asian philosophies in order to come up with an attitude which we hope will help enrich the international modern art movement which needs to be considered in global terms these days. It is therefore not our intention to condemn or criticise all the major developments that have taken place in the west after the advent of the School of Paris. WE ARE HOWEVER ATTEMPTING TO WORK OUTSIDE THE WESTERN-CENTRIC ATTITUDE TOWARDS FORM. WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO DO IS TO SOW THE SEEDS FOR A THINKING PROCESS WHICH MIGHT SOMEDAY LIBERATE MALAYSIAN ARTISTS FROM THEIR DEPENDENCE ON WESTERN INFLUENCES. It is our belief that all modern art produced in Malaysia up to the present time has not been altogether free of some kind of eclectic influences derived from the various "-isms" of the west. Clearly, there has as yet been no real attempt to re-question this underlying eclecticism behind our flirtation with idioms and styles derived from the major art movements of the west. Ours has been a total dependence on a system of aesthetics that derives its impetus from western philosophical considerations: Malaysian artists have, as a result, not been able to come up with a viewpoint of reality that differs from that being adopted by western artists. So long as we do not attempt to re-question the

philosophical basis upon which we are functioning, we will go on producing works which for all their technical brilliance can only remain derivative and at worst, imitative!

IT IS OUR BELIEF THEREFORE THAT MALAYSIAN ART CAN ONLY BECOME PRODUCTIVE AND CREATIVE WHEN OUR ARTISTS BEGIN TO FUNCTION ON A VERY MUCH MORE DEEPER LEVEL THAN THAT WHICH HAS EXISTED TO DATE. To do this our artists will first of all have to requestion the kind of developments that have taken place so far. That the artistic activity has by and large been influenced by a "picture-making" rather than a "problem-solving" approach to art certainly accounts for the absence of any polemical or dialectical tradition within the local artscene. Too many artists, for instance, remain incapable of discussing their works formalistically and too many remain oblivious of the implications of those modernist idioms that they are manipulating. Nor is there any serious attempt made to view their contributions within the context of time. The notion which still persists that artists do not have to verbalise on or justify their work certainly underlies a kind of thinking which accepts the artist as essentially a maker of artifacts and not as a thinker or theoretician. Perhaps such an attitude might have been excusable 20 years ago but certainly it is out of joint with the times in the 70s. That Malaysian art in the 70s has still to surmount these considerations certainly reflects the seriousness of the situation.

THE GENERAL ABSENCE OF A SERIOUS INTELLECTUAL AND POLEMICAL ATMOSPHERE WITHIN THE MALAYSIAN ARTSCENE THEN BECOMES A CRUCIAL PROBLEM THAT NEEDS TO BE SURMOUNTED IN THE 70s. IT MUST BE OVERCOME. The absence of an intellectual tradition for the most part despite the fact that we have so many trained artists today may be attributed to several factors. A superficial involvement with stylistic and technical considerations alone certainly seems to have limited the involvement to a "picture-making" one in most cases. Very little attempt has been made to consider the aesthetic and philosophical aspects of the artistic commitment. Where there has been some kind of attempt made to consider aesthetics there has unfortunately been not enough understanding of the particular issues being dealt with. Again the general

tendency amongst local artists to have ignored the relevance of Art History and the history of ideas must surely account for the weakness of so many artists when it comes to a reconsideration of the rationale behind their work. Too many of our best artists have become exhausted of ideas within a few years and ceased to become committed to Art because of this. That so many of our best artists of the last ten years have become bogged down by stylistic idiosyncracies and artistic whimsicalities certainly necessitates a very serious questioning of our involvement with modern art under the circumstances. How valid is such a superficial commitment to the language of modernism? It is our belief that if Malaysian artists are going to become involved with modernism they should at least know their area of involvement thoroughly and meaningfully! Until this is done, our modern artists for all their technical brilliance will never succeed in arriving anywhere. It will remain very much a closed circuit activity that cannot possibly become productive and innovative!

There are many other important reasons for the inability of local artists to function on a much deeper level than that which has manifested itself so far. Perhaps the most serious has been the tendency by so many of our artists to become involved with modernistic idioms and yet go on functioning on the basis of essentially 19th century attitudes toward creativity. The idea of the "unique-ness" of the artist and his work has, for instance, certainly been dictated by a 19th century Romanticism and by the notion that art is essentially for the museums and the art gallery. ONE RESULT OF THIS KIND OF REVERENCE FOR THE SACREDNESS OF ART AND FOR THE SALEABILITY OF ONE'S WORK HAS CERTAINLY BEEN A REFUSAL TO CONSIDER OTHER POSSIBLE FORMS OF EXPRESSION. THE OBSESSION WITH TRADITIONAL ARTIFACTS CONTINUES THEREFORE EVEN IN THE 70s AND WITH IT A SLAVISH DEPENDENCE ON TECHNIQUES WHICH REFLECT MANUAL DEXTERITY RATHER THAN MENTAL DISCIPLINE. It is still very much a "artifact-oriented" attitude which prevails even today and it is no wonder then that so many of our supposedly 'modern' artists still persist in carefully stretching their canvasses and laboriously preparing their etching-plates! The general absence of a sculptural involvement so far amongst our

artists certainly points to the fact that our artists have so far been not so much interested in the many dimensions of reality as with the making of pretty "pictures" that will hang on a wall! In retrospect, the works produced so far have constituted little more than exercises in good taste. Modern Malaysian art proper has hardly begun.

The local artists under the circumstances have never come face to face with the analytical and questioning nature of modern art. The search for a new viewpoint of reality or a new means of reflecting reality has certainly witnessed no real incentives so far. The kind of academicism that passes off for modernism in Malaysia then needs to be very seriously questioned. What is the function of the Malaysian artist within the Malaysian context and what is the lesson to be learnt from the modern art developments which have manifested themselves in the west so far ? THE ANSWER CERTAINLY DOES NOT LIE IN THE EMULATING OF EXPRESSIONIST INFLUENCES OR EVEN, CONSTRUCTIVISM. THE ARTISTS IN THIS EXHIBITION ARE THEREFORE REJECTING ALL THE DEVELOPMENTS WHICH HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN MALAYSIAN ART SO FAR, ESPECIALLY, THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST INVOLVEMENT OF THE 60s AND THE CONSTRUCTIVIST "NEW SCENE" INVOLVEMENT OF THE LATE 60s AND EARLY 70s. WE BELIEVE THAT THESE TWO GROUPS OF MALAYSIAN ARTISTS WHO CONSTITUTE THE TWO MOST SERIOUS GROUPS OF ARTISTS TO HAVE EMERGED SO FAR HAVE FAILED TO COME UP WITH ANY REAL SOLUTION TO THE DILEMMA OF MODERN MALAYSIAN ART. THE FACT THAT ALMOST ALL THE ARTISTS WHO FUNCTIONED WITHIN THESE TWO "MOVEMENTS" HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO CONTINUE DEVELOPING MEANINGFULLY FOR ANY ACTUAL LENGTH OF TIME CERTAINLY UNDERLIES AN INABILITY TO CONTINUE MANIPULATING THOSE INFLUENCES WHICH THEY HAD ATTEMPTED TO INTRODUCE. IT IS OUR BELIEF THAT THERE WAS, IN THE FINAL COUNT, NO REAL INTELLECTUAL CONVICTION BEHIND THEIR INVOLVEMENTS! THE COMMITMENT, IN-RETROSPECT, HAD TENDED TO BE MOTIVATED BY STYLISTIC RATHER THAN INTELLECTUAL CONSIDERATIONS AND NO WONDER THEN THAT THE ARTISTS OF THESE TWO MOVEMENTS HAVE SO EASILY CEASED TO PRODUCE WORKS. THE MOST MOTIVATING INFLUENCE ON ANY

WORTHWHILE ARTIST HAS, IN THE FINAL COUNT, BEEN HIS ARTISTIC CONVICTION. THIS FACTOR IS, SADLY, VERY MISSING IN MALAYSIAN ART!

It is our belief therefore that some honest reconsiderations be made at this juncture in the 70s. Perhaps, the most important will have to do with the nature and function of art within the Asian context. Some interesting observations may be made when we begin to look at the art forms which appeared in the Asian past. If in the past Asian artists had produced works which reflected the underlying philosophical and religious attitudes within which they lived and functioned there is today an almost total absence of such commitment. If in the past, Asian art had reflected particular cultural considerations there is today a very serious absence of such influences. The modern Asian artists have by and large opted for a scientific and rationalistic attitude and ignored the mystical and religious considerations which helped produce the great artistic traditions of Asia in the past. Clearly, the dilemma of modern Asian art to a very large extent has been the inability of Asian artists to identify themselves with their own cultural and philosophical traditions and values. The long periods of colonial domination plus the advent of a 20th century scientific materialism seems to have overwhelmed the Asian artist and left him dependent on a wholly rationalistic outlook. His art forms have changed in the process and he today mirrors an almost total dependence on artistic influences which are the outcome of a tradition which found its impetus in the west. The story of modern Asian art, ironically, has really been the story of an almost self-conscious attempt to escape this tradition! Very few Asian artists up to the present time have attempted to study the problem at its roots. THIS EXHIBITION IS AN ATTEMPT.

The argument that a scientific and rationalistic attitude toward artistic creativity is very inevitable in the light of a 20th century materialism seems somehow to ignore the very essence and purpose of art which is the heightening of the spectator's perception and experience of reality. The artist HAS a choice and he CAN dictate the process of perception. IT IS OUR CONTENTION THAT THERE ARE ALTERNATE WAYS OF APPROACHING REALITY AND THE WESTERN EMPIRICAL AND HUMANISTIC VIEWPOINTS ARE NOT THE ONLY VALID ONES THERE ARE. AS SUCH, THE TENDENCY AMONGST MODERN MALAYSIAN ARTISTS TO HAVE SUCCUMBED TO A WESTERN-ORIENTED

VIEWPOINT OF REALITY WHICH BEGAN IN THE EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE (REALLY, GREECE!) SEEMS INDICATIVE OF AN EASY CAPITULATION TO A SCIENTIFIC VIEWPOINT OF REALITY. THERE HAVE, IN FACT, BEEN VERY FEW ATTEMPTS MADE BY ASIANS (EXCEPTING PERHAPS FOR SOME JAPANESE ARTISTS) TO SUBSTITUTE AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH IN THE APPRECIATION OF REALITY. ONE RESULT OF THIS READY ACCEPTANCE OF THE WESTERN VIEWPOINT HAS CERTAINLY BEEN THE INEVITABLE DEPENDENCE AND EMULATION OF FORMS AND IDIOMS THAT HAVE THEIR ORIGINS IN THE WEST. AS SUCH MOST MODERN ASIAN ARTISTS WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO COME UP WITH CONTRIBUTIONS THAT ARE TOTALLY OUTSIDE THE WESTERN EXPERIENCE. AS SUCH, THEY CANNOT POSSIBLY MAKE ANY SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE INTERNATIONAL MODERN ART SCENE. THEY WILL GO ON PRODUCING WORKS, WHICH NO MATTER HOW EFFICIENT THEIR HANDLING OF WESTERN-ORIENTED IDIOMS, WILL ALWAYS REMAIN DERIVATIVE AND SECOND-RATE!

TWO: "ANTI-FORMALIST AND ANTIAESTHETIC"

The present exhibition needs to be viewed as an extension of the "Dokumentasi 72" show which was held at the Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka in May 1972. The exhibition featured the results of our individual experiments carried out between December 1970 and May 1972. We were then very much influenced by Post-War developments in Constructive Art. In accepting the actual physicality of things, we had reached a point where our works drew attention to the "real-ness" of the elements that we were employing. We had abandoned illusionistic devices altogether by 1971 and had become involved with actual, space, actual time and actual light. Problems pertaining to actual gravity and movement were also manifesting themselves in our scheme of things then. Our approach at that time was however still dictated by "formal-esthetic" considerations. THE DIRECT CONFRONTATION WITH A REALITY THAT WAS NO LONGER DEPENDENT ON ILLUSIONISTIC DEVICES HOWEVER FORCED UPON US A RECONSIDERATION THAT HAD TO BE MADE IF WE WERE TO CONTINUE WITH THE MANIPULATION OF ACTUAL PHYSICAL SITUATIONS. HOW, FOR INSTANCE, WERE WE GOING TO CONFRONT PHYSICAL REALITY? AS CONSTRUCTIVE ARTISTS, WE HAD UNTIL THEN TENDED TO VIEW REALITY SCIENTIFICALLY AND OBJECTIVELY BUT AFTER THAT SHOW, WE BEGAN TO CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY OF APPROACHING REALITY FROM AN ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT PREMISE. The examples of certain modern Japanese artists who had attempted to view reality from an essentially oriental standpoint tempted us to requestion the validity of a scientific and materialistic viewpoint of reality that is essentially western in origin. This exhibition is the outcome of several developments which took place following that decision nearly two years ago.

There were two fundamental issues that occupied our attention after the "Dokumentasi 72" show. We questioned two essential considerations behind the traditional work of art, namely, (i) THE RELEVANCE OF "FORMAL-ESTHETIC" INFLUENCES IN THE WORK AND (ii) THE HUMANISTIC NOTION OF THE ARTIST AS A "UNIQUE" INDIVIDUAL AND HIS EGO-CENTRIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE ACTUAL CREATION OF A WORK.

We were at that time fully aware of the "anti-formalist" developments which had taken place in the west during the 1960s. Having arrived at a point where we were faced with the prospects of having to deal with the actual physicality of things, it seemed natural that we should question the validity and effectiveness of "traditional" art-forms (i.e. painting, sculpture, relief, print, etc.) Our attention was inevitably drawn to such "anti-art" artists as the Dadaists, Marcel Duchamp, Yves-Klein, Piero Manzoni, Tinguely and John Cage (the composer of "silent music"). The conceptual work of the Japanese Conceptualist Yoko Ono also interested us at this point. The realisation that it WAS POSSIBLE to jettison all formalistic and aesthetic considerations from the work of art drew us quite inevitably to the notion of art as Conceptual experience. We became determined to work outside "formal-esthetic" considerations. Again, the realisation that so many of the "anti-art" pioneers of the west had in fact been inspired by essentially oriental philosophical considerations certainly bolstered our determination to function outside "western-centric" considerations.

There were some implications about the move toward a Conceptual involvement, however. For one thing, we realised that our art-college backgrounds had left us with very little to go on with. The many skills that we had acquired suddenly seemed irrelevant and with it, the many aesthetic theories that we had been exposed to in Art History. The crucial issue now seemed to point to a philosophical involvement! It was here that we found ourselves very inadequate. One outcome of this realisation has been a voracious reading programme that has lasted nearly two years. We read eastern as well as western philosophy. The realisation that the task at hand was a difficult

ty. The realisation that the task at hand was ad and complex one resulted in our deciding to enter upon an intellectual collaboration that was to finally lead to our deciding to produce works together. This was not to be achieved until very much later but it seemed inevitable even then in 1972.

The voracious reading programme then constituted the most important aspect of the search. Besides reading philosophy, we also read books on the art of the east and west in the hope of discovering essential differences which exist between the artistic traditions of the east and the artistic traditions of the west. We began to find even at this stage that local artists were unable to help us very much as their interests lay in "picture-making" pursuits that were still dependent on stylistic and technical considerations that are linked to a "formal-esthetic" approach. One outcome of this fact has been a dependence on persons outside the Malaysian artistic community. We consulted at various stages people outside the artscene who were very well-versed in the history of ideas and with the evolution of historical events. We consulted university lecturers, historians, sociologists, religious experts, writers and dramatists. The search for a philosophical rationale that would allow us to function outside a "western-centric" viewpoint of reality demanded that we think and function beyond the confines of art itself.

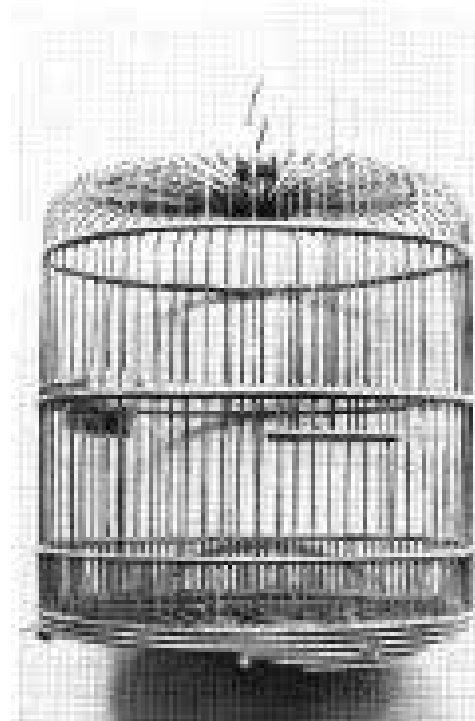
The desire on our part to reject "formal-esthetic" considerations in our scheme of things must also be attributed to our belief that what is needed in modern art in the 70s is not so much an involvement with techniques and styles but rather a new way of confronting reality that is not hampered by purely "artistic" considerations dependent on formalistic and aesthetic criteria. Very simply, the crucial issue in modern art today is not so much the problem of how we "see" things (visual/retinal) but how we "conceive" reality (conceptual.) This new attitude in art today demands that we question the very validity of a codified Art Criticism which has so far been founded upon aesthetic and formalistic criteria. That the validity of a schematised art criticism founded on an objective methodology is today being attacked by younger artists points to a deliberate desire on the part of the serious artist of the 70s to view aspects of reality without the limitations of certain "relationships" of codified data which

are based upon the art historian's form-inspired view of art. There is today a deliberate desire on the part of the most serious artists to understand "phenomenal" processes via dialectics and this seems to have brought the artist to a position that is akin to that of the philosopher's! The deliberate attempt to reject the myth of the 'unique artistic soul' and with it, the notion of the artistic experience as being an interplay of esoteric circumstances between the "artist/ creator" and his "stimuli" has in fact been motivated by a *new* respect for the spectator's ability to confront reality directly. This new reconsideration of the spectator's relevance in the whole scheme of things has in fact resulted in a reconsideration of the very purpose of art itself.

THAT ART IS BECOMING A VERY DIALECTICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ACTIVITY TODAY IS INDICATIVE OF A NEW STATE OF AFFAIRS WHICH SUPPOSEDLY "MODERN" ASIAN ARTISTS ARE YET TO BECOME AWARE OF! Aesthetic and formalistic influences then become quite irrelevant and obsolete in the new scheme of things for they are essentially founded on the notion of art as something that is "created" out of the manipulation and organising of the various elements of design (i.e. line, shape, colour, texture, form, surface, design, etc.). Very clearly, the modern art commitment today is pointing to an involvement that transcends preoccupation with the manipulation of materials and styles and finding its *raison d'être* in a dialectical reconsideration of phenomenal processes that exist outside a "form-oriented" notion of art. The artist has, as a result, been forced to requestion the nature of his idioms.

The notion of art as conceptual and dialectical activity then demands that the artist equip himself with the means to undertake such a complex activity dealing with the world of pure ideas! He has, as a result, been forced to look beyond technical skills and equip himself with some semblance of awareness of such diverse areas of knowledge as philosophy, linguistics, psychology, sociology, physics, mass-communication and even mathematics! The effectiveness of any serious artist of the future therefore will depend on his ability to think and function beyond the confines of "traditional" notions of art itself. The best modern artists of the 70s are very clearly no longer makers of artifacts but rather thinkers and theoreticians and

this fact must surely place their contributions on the same level as those of the most creative and influential minds of our epoch. Art is finally shedding its somewhat traditional function and acquiring a new significance that places upon the serious artist of the 70s a whole new challenge.



Empty bird-cage after release of bird at 2.46 p.m, on Monday 10th June 1974.

THREE: "NO HUMANISTIC OR SUBJECTIVE INTENT"

We discussed the possibility of jointly-producing works even as early as 1972. The idea of producing works jointly brought with it some reconsiderations that had to be made about the artist's ego in our scheme of things. The question of the artist's ego in fact drew our attention to some fundamental differences which exist between the "western-centric" and "eastern-centric" modes of artistic expressions. The Humanist viewpoint with its emphasis on the artist as an individual and its scientific and objective view of reality, we found, contrasted with the traditional Asian view of things as it had once existed. The attitude toward Nature, for instance, was not so much "felt" as in the case of the Chinese artist but observed and analysed on the basis of its outward appearances by western artists from the Renaissance onwards. The essential difference then was not so much one of viewpoint as that of attitude, we found. WHEREAS ONE WAS MOTIVATED BY MYSTICAL CONSIDERATIONS, THE OTHER WAS ESSENTIALLY SCIENTIFIC! Again, the realisation that all our important Malaysian artists have in

fact functioned within a Humanistic and rationalistic attitude which stems from the European Renaissance of the 15th century seemed quite absurd to us. No one had bothered to re-question this tendency!

The essential difference between the individualistic approach of the western artist with his egoistic preoccupations and that of the oriental artist who remains a non-entity in his confrontation with Nature is also worth considering. Benjamin Rowland in his "Art in East and West" sums up the situation by discussing the work of Michealangelo and the eight-century Chinese painter, Wu Tao-tzu :

"Michealangelo's violence and dynamic contortion appear as the outward manifestation of an internal conflict of forces mutually stimulating and paralysing each other. These titan forms are typical of the West, in that they are called from the vasty deep of the soul of an individual genius and are the expressions of his unique reaction to the world. Wu Tao-tzu's forms are not so much expressions of an individual's own state of emotion, but universal graphic portrayals of the flux of the world movement in action, the force that sucks up the tide and breathes whirlwinds. Wu Tao-tzu's design has no humanistic or subjective intent!"

IT WAS THE SELF-EFFACING ASPECTS OF ORIENTAL ART THEN THAT BEGAN TO ATTRACT OUR ATTENTION. That so many modern Asian artists involved with modern art have so readily accepted the scientific and humanistic view of things without having bothered to reconsider any other possibilities seems to us quite sad today. That they have up till the present time never bothered to re-question their acceptance and manipulation of art-forms derived from the west must certainly account for the fact that up till now all the art-forms produced have tended to remain little more than echoes of their western originals. CLEARLY, WE FOUND OURSELVES RE-QUESTIONING THE TYPES OF FORMS THAT WE COULD POSSIBLY MANIPULATE AND THE PURPOSE OF THESE FORMS. WE NOW HAD TO PURGE OURSELVES OF ALL WESTERN-CENTRIC INFLUENCES IN ORDER TO PROCEED FURTHER. THE DECISION TO THROW OVERBOARD EVERYTHING THAT WE HAD LEARNT

IN A WESTERN ART-COLLEGE BECAME A NECESSARY PRE-REQUISITE. THERE WAS NOW A SERIOUS NEED TO RECONSIDER THE "ROLE" OF THE ARTIST IN OUR NEW SCHEME OF THINGS.

Our interest in the self-effacing role of the artist must certainly explain our decision to start looking at the traditional artistic forms existing within the indigenous cultural traditions of Malaysia. Our special interest in the "Wayang Kulit" repertoire and especially, the role of the "Dalang" or the manipulator of this indigenous form of shadow-puppetry was to result in our discovering a new "role" for ourselves in our new scheme of things. The "Dalang" suggested to us the possibilities of functioning within a "mediumistic" capacity. What seemed especially interesting about the "Dalang" was that whilst he had to mouth all dialogue in the plot and play out the parts of all his puppets, the audience never saw him or learnt anything about him! His self-effacement, we discovered, was almost complete even if he constituted the real force in the whole performance! He was quite simply the "medium" and the "initiator" between the audience and his puppets. Here was very clearly an "oriental" artist who functioned with no humanistic or subjective influences! Our idea of the artist as functioning within a "mediumistic" capacity then must be attributed to the "Dalang".

It was at this point that we decided to produce works jointly. THE DECISION TO PRODUCE WORKS JOINTLY WAS MOTIVATED BY OUR DESIRE TO PLAY DOWN INDIVIDUALISTIC CONSIDERATIONS AS FAR AS THAT WAS POSSIBLE. ALL DECISIONS WE DECIDED WOULD BE MADE JOINTLY AND NO EMOTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS WOULD BE ALLOWED TO DICTATE THE MANIPULATING OF THE FORMS THAT WE WOULD USE. THE OBJECTS WE WOULD USE, AS FAR AS IS POSSIBLE, WOULD NOT BE CONSTRUCTED BY US. IN A SENSE, WE WERE AIMING AT A CONSCIOUS DETACHMENT FROM THE WORK OF ART. THERE WOULD BE NO HUMANISTIC OR SUBJECTIVE INTENT! OUR WORK, WE ALSO DECIDED, WOULD BE MYSTICAL IN NATURE,

FOUR: THE RELEVANCE OF A MYSTICAL VIEWPOINT

The decision on our part to approach the artistic involvement from a mystical rather than scientific standpoint must inevitably raise certain questions about the relevance and validity of such an undertaking in the light of 20th century conditions. There are those who will no doubt question the relevance of a mystical approach and dismiss it as a somewhat "unrealistic" involvement in the context of our scientific and technological times. Are we not guilty of functioning on the basis of something that is vague and difficult to account for? Our answer to such a question would be that a mystical approach is as valid today as it was before simply because the very basic questions about life and death still remain with us and with it, the desire to attach some kind of meaning to our very existence! The overbearing materialism of the west seems somehow to have forced our attention to a consideration of tangible rather than intangible forces and no less an artist than John Cage, the composer of "silent music", has drawn attention to the dilemma of modern man. Calvin Tomkins in his book, "Ahead of the Game" describes Cage's attitude toward the situation:

Used tins of paint, palette and paint brushes found at the ITM School of Art and Design.



"Cage believes that the world is changing more rapidly and more drastically than most people realise. A great many of the traditional attitudes of western thought will soon be obsolete, he feels, and a great many of the older traditions of oriental thought are becoming increasingly relevant to life in the west. Cage insists that the true function of art in our time is to open up the minds and hearts of contemporary men and women to the immensity of these changes in order that they may be able "to wake up to the very life" they are living, Art and life, for Cage, are no longer separate entities as they have been in the western past, but very nearly identical; and Cage's whole career can in fact be seen as a long campaign to break down the demarcations between the two."

It is perhaps interesting to note that (i) John Cage was very much inspired by Zen Buddhist influences and (ii) that art and life have never been divorced in the East! Professor Daisetsu Suzuki, the great Zen Scholar, has in fact alluded to this fact in his book, "Mysticism : Christian and Buddhist" :

"In the same way, every minute of human life as long as it is an expression of its inner self is original, divine, creative and cannot be retrieved. Every individual life is thus a work of art. Whether or not one makes it a fine inimitable work of art depends upon one's consciousness of the working of 'sunnyata' within oneself."

We wish to quote the opinion of yet another western art-critic in our efforts to prove the relevance of a mystical approach in art today. Kenneth Coutts-Smith in his article "Art in Violence" which appeared in "ART AND ARTISTS" (Oct. 1966) states :

"Art is not an isolated phenomenon, or a matter of simple aesthetics, but is on the one hand part of our total experience, both psychologically and socially, and on the other an objectification of our 'inner' experience. But we have, as Roland Laign has pointed out 'largely lost touch with our inner world in gaining control of our external world. We have become strangers to our own experience, we have become alienated from ourselves."

The relevance of a mystical approach then should seem meaningful enough. In the deliberate attempt to reject a materialistic viewpoint of reality we are simply returning to an artistic attitude that is essentially oriental. The desire to search for an approach that will induce a direct "spiritual" rather than "intellectual" involvement on the part of the spectator underlies the adoption of an alternate approach from that employed by the western artist. It is as such not a nihilistic involvement nor is it destructive in outlook. IT CONSTITUTES A VERY POSITIVE AFFIRMATION THAT ART, AT ITS MOST PROFOUND, AFFORDS THE VIEWER A MYSTICAL PSYCHIC EXPERIENCE THAT LEADS HIM DIRECTLY TO LIFE ITSELF.

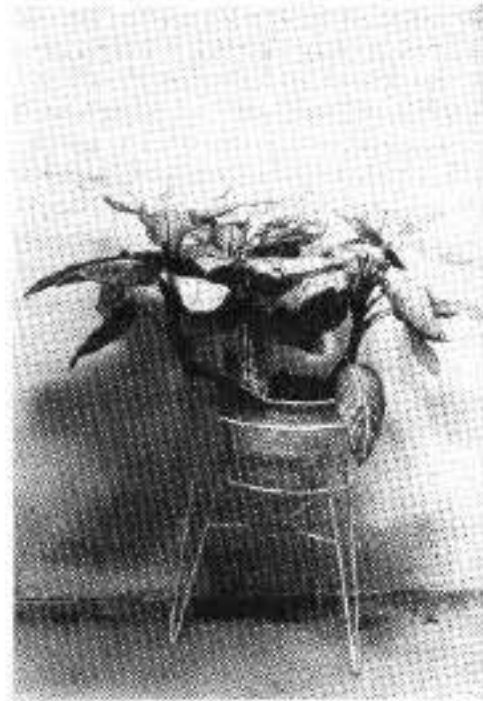
That there is today in the west a serious need for mystical and spiritual commitments is certainly indicative of

a somewhat unusual situation which has arisen out of the western society's over-emphasis of materialistic values. One needs only to be reminded of the many pseudo-religious cults that have manifested themselves in the U.S. lately to become aware of the general absence of 'inner' peace in the west. Again, the tendency amongst the younger generation in the west to seek a "higher reality" via the taking of hallucinogenic drugs certainly underlies a crying need for the balming and soothing influences that mysticism can provide. In the face of a technologically-inspired alienation from life itself, the search for 'inner' peace becomes one of the crucial problems of our time. There are certainly many lessons that the Asian artist can learn from the developments taking place in the west and one of these is the very relevance of his oriental view of life and the world around him. It is perhaps symptomatic of our times that a mystical and spiritual viewpoint is so often ridiculed and dismissed as "old-fashioned" by Asian themselves in the face of a growing materialism!

It is our belief that the strength of the Asian artist of the past (especially the Far Eastern artist) lay in his ability to view life and reality in terms of the meditative and the spiritual, The mystical attitude of the eastern artists with its "spiritual" rather than "intellectual" outlook certainly contrasts with the notion of "art for art's sake" that seems to be the fashion these days. Art in the Asian past was never meant to provide "intellectual entertainment" but rather it aimed at a heightening of one's awareness of reality and helped bring about a spiritual and mystical communion with nature and the Universe itself. As such, there was no dichotomy between art and life. Again, that so many major western artists of the 20th century have in fact drawn their inspiration from the mystical philosophies of the east (e.g. John Cage, Yves-Klein, Ad Reinhardt, Tobey, Brecht) certainly indicates how necessary it is for Asian artists to reconsider their Asian heritage. The tendency amongst so many creative Asian artists (be they artists, writers, poets, dramatists, or musicians) to go on functioning on the basis of a "western-centric" aesthetics and formalism whilst remaining oblivious of their own artistic and philosophical traditions is certainly indicative of a very sad state of affairs which prevails all over Asia today !

It seems necessary here to discuss some fundamental differences which exist between the mystical and materialistic philosophical viewpoints for an understanding of their essential differences might allow for a better appreciation of reality itself. If the scientific viewpoint draws its impetus from an empirical approach founded on "logical" demonstration, the mystical viewpoint functions on the basis of "feeling" and "intuition". What seems especially interesting is that whereas the scientist aspires toward an 'intellectual' understanding of the tangible forces of nature via 'objective' research and analysis the mystic strives toward a "spiritual communion" with the unknowable forces of the Universe via "mental" contemplation and meditation. As a rule, the scientist has tended to dismiss mystical considerations in his adherence to a "no nonsense" approach to things whilst the unperturbed mystic on his part has tended to smile tolerantly at the scientist's objectivity. It used to be a truism that positivist science would not admit anything that could not be explained 'objectively' but things seem to have changed. If in the past 'intuition' had seemed a suspicious word to the scientist, it is today becoming a necessary key to new discoveries. After all, how many significant scientific 'breakthroughs' have been made on the basis of notions that first manifested themselves as 'intuitive' deductions! Similarly, if previously science had refused to function on the basis of uncertainties, there is today a greater willingness to entertain factors which cannot be explained logically. A classic example in 20th century physics is Huisenberg's "uncertainty principle" which marks the limit of the scientist's interest in the electron's exact nature and location in space. There have been profound changes in western thinking in the last ten years as regards the nature of the physical world, most clearly expressed in the physical sciences. No longer do scientists believe in a finite world or in the permanence of matter. The physicist may describe it in terms of waves, particles, or energy, according to the aspect of nature which he is investigating and he no longer speaks of objects but of events. It is interesting to note that oriental mystics have in fact been advocating the notion that reality and our world is a collection of processes rather than entities nearly 2000 years ago!

The last ten years have witnessed many new discoveries which have upset the scientist's traditional insistence upon



Potted plant watered and looked after by the two artists over a period of seven months.

"objective" scrutiny. One result has certainly been a new willingness to have second thoughts about the mystic. No wonder then that an eminent American scientist, Dr. Elmer Green of the Menninger Foundation chose to spend months in India sticking all kinds of wires on the body of a meditating Indian Yogi who remained quite oblivious of the happenings going on around him. The naked Hindu fakir resting on his bed of nails has evidently begun to interest the scientist! Again, the realisation that only one-tenth of the workings of the human brain is known to science has certainly brought with it a new reconsideration of such things as ESP and EEG which were at one time dismissed as mystical nonsense. In the field of cosmology, some of the most remarkable discoveries have been made that have upset traditional notions about the Universe. It is coming from all sides now — the inexplicable and the extra-ordinary. Matter over anti-matter, time flowing backwards, black holes in space, particles flying faster than the speed of light and passing through Earth without bumping! WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO SUGGEST QUITE SIMPLY IS THAT THE SCIENTIFIC AND EMPIRICAL VIEWPOINT OF REALITY IS NOT THE ONLY VALID ONE THERE IS. THE MYSTIC'S VIEW OF THE UNIVERSE IS ALSO VALID FOR THE MANY PARALLELISMS THAT ARE BECOMING APPARENT TODAY. In so many cases, the differences are no more than linguistic differences. What the Taoist mystic referred to as the "Chi" or Hindu yogi refers to as the "samsara" may be described scientifically as that "energy" which can neither be created nor destroyed but which may be transformed! WHAT WE ARE INSISTING IS THAT THERE ARE MANY LEVELS OF REALITY AND THE SCIENTIFIC AND EMPIRICAL VIEWPOINT ONLY LEADS TO AN UNDERSTANDING OF ONE FACET OF THAT REALITY. No less a thinker than Arthur Koestler, a scientifically-trained western writer, has openly admitted to this fact. In his book, "The Roots of Coincidence" Koestler admits:

"I have no patience with religious dogma. As for mysticism, it's an undefined term. I just say there are other levels of reality than those we see with the eyes of the common man, of the scientist."



Discarded raincoat found at a Klang rubbish dump at 4.23 p.m. on Sunday 13th January 1974 that must have belonged to some one.



Randomly collected sample of human hair collected from a barber shop in Petaling Jaya.

FIVE: A MYSTICAL CONCEPT OF TIME AND EVENT

The search for a philosophical rationale within which we could function constituted our most serious problem. It must be stated at this juncture that we were not interested in any specifically "Asian" forms or imagery but rather in a viewpoint that would allow us to work outside the western-centric attitude toward form. We had chosen to work outside the "western-centric" approach (with its Humanistic, materialistic and empirical connotations) and were now interested in approaching art from a mystical standpoint. In our search for a suitable Asian philosophical tradition, we were careful however to avoid those traditions which had their origins in the notion of an absolute and moralistic God. We did not want to become encumbered by moralistic and religious issues! A close scrutiny of the various Asian philosophical traditions then drew us to Taoist/ Zen influences. The Taoist view of things with its emphasis on the spontaneity of "feeling" and its "peripheral" viewpoint of reality seemed to us a direct contrast to the scientific objectivity of the west. Again, it was very free of dogma. The fact that Taoist/Zen attitudes emphasised a "mental" (i.e. mind) rather than "retinal" (i.e. eye) view of the world convinced us that our answer might lie in this direction. It seems necessary to state at this point that Taoism (and Zen, which springs from it) is essentially a philosophy rather than a religion. Taoist thinking concerns itself with the understanding of life and reality directly instead of in the abstract, linear terms of representational thinking.

Our interest at this stage was with the perception of reality itself. We were now faced with two particular ways of perceiving reality. There was firstly a conscious one-thing-at-a-time "central" vision that went back to the European Renaissance and there was the "peripheral" vision of the Taoists which envisaged reality as a never-ending continuum of 'events'. If in the west, the tendency had been to isolate aspects of reality and study them consciously, in the Far East the tendency had been to observe reality in its entirety. The "peripheral" vision of the Taoist mystic thus allowed for the noticing of objects and movements not in the line of a "central" vision! It is perhaps interesting to

note that the Taoist mystic had utilised this manner of looking at things nearly 2,000 years ago and that the west was not to accept this viewpoint until Einstein published his theories on matter, time and space. Picasso's much celebrated Cubism was, in retrospect, a very belated attempt to correct the limitations of the Renaissance artist's Euclidian view of reality!

On the face of it, the kind of "peripheral" viewpoint we have borrowed from the Taoist/Zen mystics might appear similar to the viewpoint accepted by the western artist after the advent of Cubism and Constructivism. It is our belief that there are certain parallelisms but whereas the western artist still persists in viewing the physical state of the world, we are essentially approaching reality from a purely "mental" and "metaphysical" standpoint. The essential differences between the Taoist point of view and that of the western artist still remains today and it is in the final count one of attitude. The western artist's interest in the "physicality" of things must surely account for his interest in a "form-oriented" approach that generally persists. The following quotation from Neville Weston's "Kaleidoscope of Modern Art" on Cezanne might be interesting to consider:

"Cezanne wanted to see nature with the uninhibited eyes of the newly-born, and to deal with this idea, he evolved a method which was almost wholly concerned with planar abstractions. Looking for and emphasising planes parallel to the picture-plane, he involved himself and the spectator in the very PHYSICAL ACT OF LOOKING AND SEEING. Cezanne's method relied on an acceptance of the hemispheric quality of personal vision, which is contrary to the Renaissance Albertian perspective with its central vanishing-point. Cezanne allowed his eyes — both of them — to wander over the scene in front of him, whether it was portrait, still-life or landscape, and select different vanishing-points. In a letter to Emile Bernard, he recommended the study of geometric objects such as the cone, cube, cylinder and the sphere, later adding that Nature could be treated in terms of these shapes. CEZANNE WAS SUGGESTING A WAY OF SEEING NATURE'S COMPLEX FORMS." (The capitals are ours).

The essential difference between the Taoist/ Zen "ontological view" of reality and that of Cezanne's "retinal" approach is summed up by Alan Watts in his book, "The Way of Zen" :

"Thus scientific convention decides whether the eel should be a fish or a snake, and grammatical convention determines what experiences should be called objects and what shall be called actions. Now arbitrary such conventions may be seen from the question, "What happens to your fist (noun-object) when you open your hand?" The object miraculously vanishes because an action was disguised by a part of speech usually assigned to a thing! In English, the differences between things and actions are clearly if not logically, distinguished, but a great number of Chinese words do the duty of both nouns and verbs — so that one who thinks in Chinese has little difficulty in seeing that objects are also events, that our world is a collection of processes rather than entities."

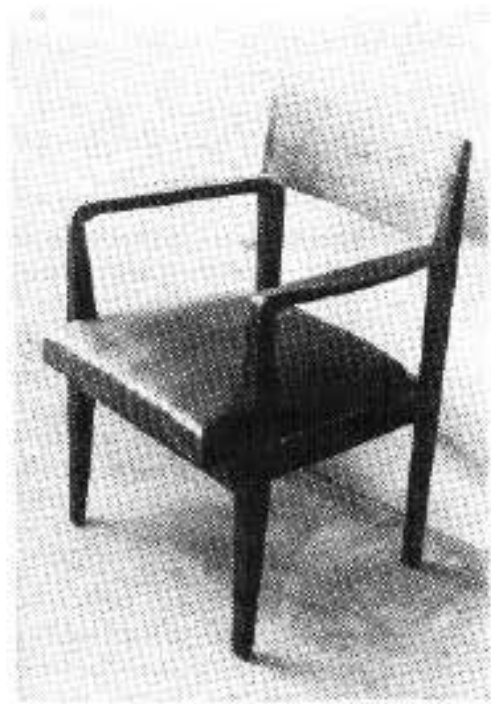
Again, the mystical viewpoint of the Taoist artist is very aptly stated by Mario Bussagli in his book, "Chinese Art":

"For the Chinese artist, plants and animals are not just physical presences, nor are landscapes just representations of places. All have a direct connection with something infinite and indefinable, as the very life of nature itself, for which the Chinese artist feels an almost mystical propensity."

Mario Bussagli goes on elsewhere in his book:

"Being convinced of the unity of the Universe, the Chinese artist (and the Far East) refuses to halt reality in a single instance in time or localise it in a definite point in space."

It will be gathered from all this that the Taoist view of reality is one that has already considered the question of time. The Taoist/Zen tendency to view the object as an "event" rather than as "form" presupposes that objects existence within an interrelated field or continuum. Time in this case



Empty chair on which many persons have sat on.

is a "mental" time that cannot be measured for all measurements can only remain relative! Let us on the other hand consider the western artist's treatment of the time-element in art. Working within a temporal TIME/SPACE concept the western artist has tended to go on dealing with the time-element in "physical" terms. He has emphasised time by the deliberate activating of spaces either by actual "Kinetic" movement (Gabo, MoholyNagy, Calder, Tinguley, Le Parc, Schoeffer, Takis etc.,) or by forcing a physical interaction between the viewer and the work by means of 'environmental' considerations (Giacometti, Caro, Carl Andre, Serra, Flavin, de Maria, Agam etc.,). The western artist's attempt to create works which exist "within the viewers own space" then must seem quite redundant to the oriental artist. Similarly, the commonly held notion amongst so many "Kinetic" artist that their works are only "active" when "switched on" would seem very naive to the Taoist. Whereas the western artist has tended to envisage time through "physical" action, the oriental artist "feels" it mentally. It is essentially a very metaphysical concept of time that the oriental artist deals with!

IT SEEMS NECESSARY AT THIS POINT TO STATE THAT ALL OUR WORKS, WHILST REMAINING STATIC ARE NEVERTHELESS "KINETIC" FOR THEY ENCOMPASS TIME/ SPACE CONSIDERATIONS. THE TIME FACTOR IN OUR WORKS IS VERY MUCH A "MENTAL" TIME. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE FOURTH DIMENSION EXISTS IN THE MIND OF THE SPECTATOR. THE FORMS TRANSCEND THEIR "OBJECT-NESS" AND EXIST PRIMARILY AS DOCUMENTATIONS OF "EVENTS". WE ARE AS SUCH NOT INTERESTED IN THE FORMAL AND AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS. WE ARE INTERESTED IN THE PROCESSES THAT THEY ARE. WHEREAS THE WESTERN ARTIST APPROACHES ART IN TERMS OF "SPATIOTEMPORAL/SENSORIAL" CONSIDERATIONS, WE ARE APPROACHING ART FROM A "MENTAL/MEDITATIVE/MYSTICAL" STANDPOINT

Two half-drunk Coca-Cola bottles.



SIX: A "MENTAL / MEDITATIVE/MYSTICAL" VIEWPOINT OF REALITY AS OPPOSED TO A "SPATIO/ TEMPORAL/SENSORIAL", VIEWPOINT OF THE WESTERN ARTIST

There are some fundamental pre-requisites that seem necessary for anyone wanting to understand and appreciate our work. For one thing, it seems necessary for the spectator to rid himself of any preconceived notions about what "Art" is and ought to be. Anyone coming to this exhibition with the expectation of being exposed to traditional artifacts (painting, sculpture, print etc.,) will certainly be disappointed. We are not involved with artifacts but rather with a series of "mental" experiences which we have jointly-initiated. Our work very clearly is of a conceptual nature. It is our hope that these "experiences" which we are initiating will result in a new awareness of the multidimensional nature of reality on the part of the spectator. As we have already mentioned, we are not interested in formalistic and aesthetic considerations. By rejecting all aesthetic and formalistic considerations we are attempting a deliberate liberation from "form-oriented" considerations. As such, concepts governing "beauty", "harmony", "structure", "style", "symbolism" and "technique" are non-existent in our scheme of things. Any attempt to read "aesthetic" considerations into the pieces that we have randomly selected can only result in a failure to understand our objective which is an involvement with the "mental" awareness of time rather than of form. What we are aiming at is not the spectator's aesthetic appreciation of forms but rather his spiritual realisation that all forms are in essence events as real as his own existence in time and space. We are trying to force upon the viewer a consciousness that he is himself the result of a series of processes, The "objects" that we have chosen to display therefore encompass fragments of actual events. Any attempt to view them as essentially "physical" forms can only result in limiting oneself to an essentially "western-centric" view of reality that is founded on "Spatio-temporal/ Sensorial" considerations. Ours is essentially an ontological view of

reality that is not based on "physical" but rather "mental" and mystical considerations. It is as such a viewpoint that transcends the senses and finds its impetus in the workings of the mind.

It might also seem necessary to remind our audience once again that there are no humanistic and subjective influences in our work. The artists' egoistic preoccupations are non-existent in our scheme of things even if we are initiating the process of mental perception. We are quite simply the "initiators" of a mental process that begins initially with the confrontation which takes place between the spectator and the situation we have placed him in. What we are aiming at is a "meditative empathy" on the part of the spectator. It is an empathy that is the outcome of meditative and contemplative action, Our work is therefore founded upon a deliberate attempt to force contemplation and meditation on the part of the spectator. It is however a contemplation of a special kind that we are aiming at. It is a contemplation that does not seek "beauty" or "harmony" but aims at an awareness of the forces, the energies and the ungraspable laws of reality within which the spectator himself exists and functions!

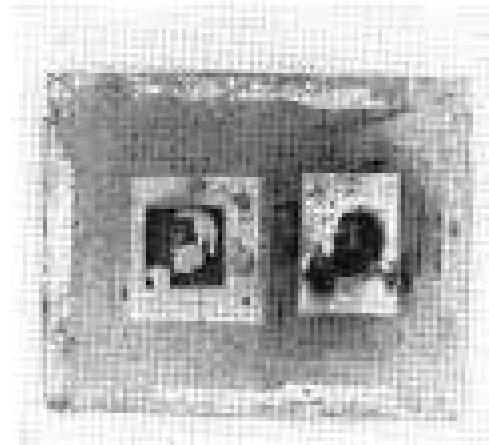
We have placed the spectator in a situation in which he is forced to requestion his own reality. By supplying the spectator with the barest "hints" in each situation we are forcing upon the spectator an experience of "mental" time which interferes with his own consciousness of physical time. A series of time shifts manifest themselves in the spectator's mind and the spectator is transported "mentally" into a time-dimension that is essentially fluid and not hampered by physical limitations. The final result should be a multiplicity of "time-experiences" which exist beyond the work and the spectator himself. An ontological experience of reality that is not hampered by "spatio/ temporal/sensorial" considerations results. The final outcome of these thought-processes functioning within "mental" time is dependent on the workings of the spectator's mind and his own imagination. At this point, we as the "initiators", have no more control over the situation! The spectator is free to move backwards and forwards in time as his mind takes over in contemplation and meditation.

It seems necessary to break down the process of stimulation that

exists within our scheme. There are three basic requirements in the process: (i) the "object/event" (ii) the data we have supplied which helps to qualify the event and (iii) the spectator's ability to interpret and decipher the situation we have presented (both "object/event" and the data). The realisation that the "object" is really an event draws the spectator's attention to the fact that it exists within a continuum just as he does. The realisation that he and the "object" are both processes existing in time results in a breaking down of the essential differences between the 'thing' and the 'person'. In a sense, both are essentially energies in an infinite situation. As such, no hierarchy can exist between the animate and the inanimate! The spectator's realisation of this fact should result in a gradual liberation from humanistic considerations. This does not result in "dehumanisation" (a western phobia!) but rather in a new spontaneity which brings him closer to "sunyata" (nothingness). This first pre-requisite of meditation and contemplation constitutes a significant objective in our work. Alan Watts in his book, "The Way of Zen" sums it up:

"The idea is not to reduce the human mind to a moronic vacuity, but to bring into play its innate and spontaneous intelligence by using it without forcing it. A philosophy restricted to the alternatives of conventional language has no way of conceiving an intelligence which does not work according to an (one-at-a-time) order of thought. Yet the concrete evidence of such an intelligence is right at hand in our thoughtlessly organised bodies. This unconsciousness is not coma but what the exponents of Zen later signified as 'wu-shin' — literally "no-mind" which is to say un-self-consciousness. It is a state of wholeness in which the mind functions freely and easily, without the sensation of a second mind or ego standing in the way."

It should become clear that our whole effort is geared towards the initiating of "state of mind" via meditation. We are attempting to bring about a situation whereby the spectator will be able to grasp the 'essence' of the work itself which is the event that it is. The relevance of the data that we are supplying the spectator then seems necessary in order to draw the spectator's attention to the fact that what he is seeing in the first instance is an event not a form. It seems almost necessary at this stage to remind people used to thinking in terms of



Discarded silk-screen which was used to produce many beautiful prints.

"entities" that an empty chair is really "a chair on which many spectators have sat on." Similarly, by providing necessary data we are reminding the spectator that an empty bird-cage is not so much a 'thing' as an event because of the fact that it is "an empty bird-cage with the bird flown away." It will be noticed that all our titles allude to the event. As such, it will be quite difficult to read the objects in this exhibition as forms which would be the case, otherwise.

BY DRAWING ATTENTION TO THE EVENT WE ARE INDIRECTLY ALLUDING TO THE 'ESSENCE' OR 'SPIRIT' OF THE WORK WHICH EXISTS BY VIRTUE OF THE EVENT.. ONE IS AS A RESULT CONSCIOUS THAT THE MOST MUNDANE OBJECTS IN OUR EVERYDAY SITUATIONS ARE CHARGED WITH THE "ESSENCE" OF EVENTS. THIS NOTION OF OBJECTS POSSESSING "SPIRIT" (OR "SEMANGAT") IS NOT DIFFICULT TO GRASP IF ONE IS AN ORIENTAL. THE ORIENTAL ARTIST HAS ALWAYS STRIVEN TO EMPHASISE THE "SPIRITUAL ESSENCE" RATHER THAN THE OUTWARD FORM ! Professor Daisetsu Suzuki has in fact summed this "eastern-centric" approach in art:

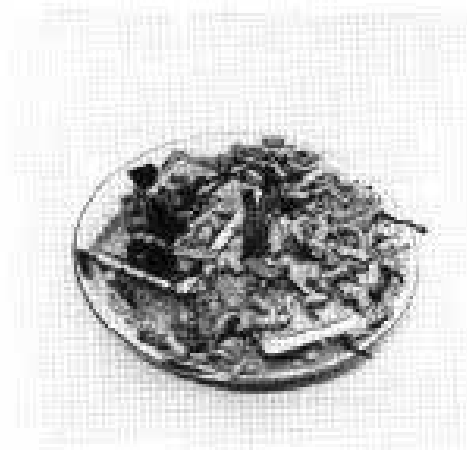
"Oriental art consists in depicting spirit and not form. For they say that when the spirit is understood the form creates itself; the main thing is to get into the spirit of the object which the artist chooses for his subject. The West on the other hand emphasises form, endeavours to reach the spirit by means of form. The East is just the opposite: the spirit is the all in all."

It will become obvious that what seems so essential to our scheme of things is the willingness of the spectator to accept an altogether new way of perceiving forms that transcends the purely sensorial. Whilst the forms we have chosen to exhibit in this show may appear banal and mundane, they are nevertheless charged with the essence of phenomenal processes. As such, what we are drawing attention to is something that cannot be experienced by sensorial means but can be very easily grasped by the mind. In effect, we are advocating an alternate manner of viewing the most mundane things around us in our everyday situations. The works in the show, as such, are not "works of art" but the most randomly-chosen fragments of reality itself! To offer these randomly-chosen examples of reality for sale would therefore be most absurd. Indeed how does one go about pricing the most banal aspects of reality in dollars and cents? This fact should explain why all our works in this show are "unsaleable".

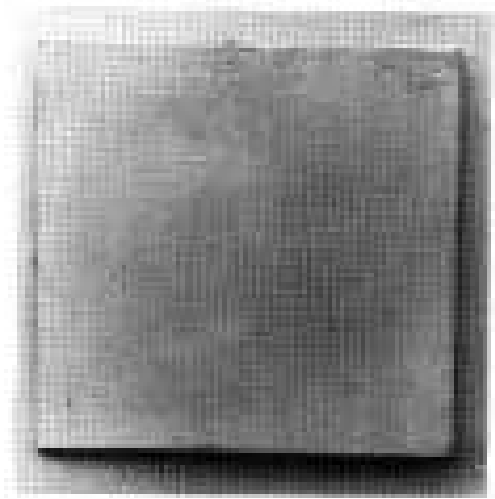
It seems necessary to state finally that the view of reality that we advocate whilst dealing with phenomena, is not so much phenomenological as mystical and spiritual. The experiences

that we are forcing upon the spectator as such should not stop with this exhibition, but rather it should begin from this exhibition and continue with the spectators' realisation that he constitutes yet another link in the whole chain of "processes" that is the mystery of life itself. By choosing to contemplate on the most mundane of events, the spectator, we hope, will come face to face with the mystery of his own existence within an infinite and ever-evolving Universe !

Kuala Lumpur June/July 1974



Burnt-out mosquito coils used to keep away mosquitoes on the night at 25th March 1974.



*Empty canvas on which so many shadows have
already fallen.*





INTERVIEWS WITH PROMINENT ART PERSONALITIES

| By Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin

- T.K. Sabapathy
- Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff
- Simon Soon
- Yap Sau Bin
- Roopesh Sitharan

T.K. SABAPATHY

| Email interview on 21st August 2011

Do you agree that TMR provides a new paradigm in Malaysian art? From your observation, do you think that TMR has greatly influenced or given some kind of intellectual impact on your generation and contemporaries? What about the National Cultural Congress 1971? Has it has somehow influenced or triggered both artists in the executing of TMR?

These are answered extensively in the publication I put together for Piya in 2001 (*Piyadasa. An Overview, 1962-2000*, National Art Gallery, 2001, pages 37-70). You may well have read the discussion that was set out in it; if there are matters arising from the content/tenor of that account, and its connections to your thinking/writing on Sulaiman particularly, we then have grounds to further our thoughts on that event's reception and effect.

For that matter, it would be pertinent to republish *Mystical Reality* as a text, in conjunction with its most strident, persistent critiques that were published. I give vent to the ensuing critical landscape in the publication cited above.

A way of measuring its impact on an emergent sense of the contemporary (and it decisively marks a turn to the contemporary) is to deal with works/projects produced by students in MARA (where Sulaiman and Piya were teaching), in USM where the effects of *Mystical Reality* were felt (Piya visited USM and gave a public lecture there to students in 1974) and in exhibitions in KL between 1975 until 1980. An immediate offshoot was the widening interest in conceptualism. Sulaiman critically assessed this in his appraisal of the *Young Contemporaries*, as did Siti Zainon generally. I am sure there were other voices representing exhilaration as well as apprehension in the surge of conceptualism in Malaysia in the late 70's and 80's (Ismail Zain and Yeoh Jin Leng took up polar positions on this matter).

In my view, *Mystical Reality* was a foundational impetus or spur for varieties of conceptualism in Malaysia in the 1970's and early 1980's. *Mystical Reality* also marked a contemporary turn, discernibly. See Salleh Joned's intervention for a whiff of a flavour of the contemporary, as he tells of it.

An issue that has received no critical attention is the subsequent status accorded to some of the objects in the exposition as works of art, collected by and displayed in public institutions. The birdcage is one instance; another is the 'empty canvas' on which shadows are cast, etc. What do such actions signify when they are weighted against the loudly proclaimed disavowal (by the two artists) of any aesthetic value of things that were chosen for display? The power of museums/national galleries is one aspect, of course, whereby the alternative, the margins are incorporated into and by the centre. There surely is more to all of this. For instance, are the two artists complicit in commodity-fying and aestheticising objects that were presented as mere things! If so, have they betrayed themselves and abandoned or forsaken some of the principles expounded in the manifesto? Etcetera, etcetera!

There is so much still to do in all these spheres?

Both artists argued that perceptual reality is irrelevant from the Asian perspective. What are your thoughts on this?

Yes, both artists stridently opposed perceptualism on the understanding that it was (a) a European/Western obsession and (b) antithetical to Asian sensibilities and interests. Such a posture was necessary to consolidate their ambition to wrest themselves (and Malaysian artists) free from the yoke of Euro-American aesthetics and to chart new, alternative pathways for practicing art.

Perceptualism was affirmed recently by E.H.Gombrich in his publication titled *Art and Illusion* which, in the 1960's, was the primer for all students and scholars of art. In truth, resistance to it was already discernible in academies in London and the instatement of basic design

(which Piya studied and Sulaiman too – check with him on this matter) is an index of a move away from reliance on the external world as the primary stimulus for visual representation (which is at the heart of perceptualism).

In my view, perceptualism surfaces in many art cultures. How it is articulated, upheld and represented differ, historically. Sight, seeing and beholding are highly cherished attributes that may be divinely ordained or spiritually nurtured or humanly cultivated – as means for being in the world and for signaling an other-worldliness. I dare say both Sulaiman and Piya have traversed all three domains.

The necessity to conform to the world of sight and seeing as establishing the first principles in visual representation is particular to an aesthetic ideology that emerged in European enlightenment philosophical thinking. Seeing is given other and different perspectives in various cultures. This is a complicated matter that will require several exegeses.

In my view, perceptualism has been given new life in some kinds of contemporary art practices, where the materiality of artistic productions is emphasised with little or no mediation ... at least we are persuaded to think so. Performance art strategies spring from such premises. When we consider the varied, fervent claims of **reality** in so much of contemporary art, by practitioners and interpreters, we are forced to revisit perceptualism, recast and redefine it in ways that are pertinent to contemporaneity. As far as I know no one has done this, no one is doing this!! Here is another sphere that needs researching and thinking on.

Should art be free from sentiments that are subjective and personalised vis-a-vis philosophy and concepts, for example?

It is not a matter of whether one should or should not ... this is not a useful way of putting the issue. **Sentiment, subjectivity, personalisation, philosophical, conceptual** are highly charged notions and powerful motivations. They do not cancel one another out, however they may be arraigned or combined. Often they interweave into one another in varying configurations. We could usefully discuss the dominance or pre-eminence or preference of any one over any other.

In wishing to advance conceptual procedures and values, Sulaiman and Piya certainly suppressed the subjective and sentiment. I dare say in the *Godot Series*, Sulaiman's subjectivity in asserting a postcolonial/post-conceptual position is willingly, if somewhat painfully, self-exposed. Subsequently he surrenders or disperses the sense of the persona as a discreet entity or principle in the intricately webbed gardens, seeking integration within encompassing, expansive structures. (Whichever way it is said, artworks propose structures.) Piya's *Malaysian Series* signifies empathy. And so on.

What you ask by way of this question is important. We have to pick our way discriminatingly through each of these notions by examining particular phases and productions in an artist's practice. Above all, we must avoid adopting dogmatic or programmatic stances in advancing critical frames for interpretation.

Should we or shouldn't we be beset with western art? Do you feel that there must be a specific 'form and soul' of Malaysian art?

We can say that we are afraid of the world, shut our eyes and ears, cross our legs, crawl into a hole and die. This is one answer to the first half of the question, as it is put.

Why adopt a defensive posture? Have we not been dealing with the West all our lives, in one way or another, and do we know nothing of it!? The matter is not that we are beset with western art (what is the matter with it, anyway?). The matter is that we know little or nothing of any art beside western art. This is a matter of utmost critical, educational, cultural, political, subjective pertinence and consequence.

May I cast the scope a little wider? How do we know, and therefore picture the world? My entire life, as a teacher and a writer, has been impelled by a question such as this. I am not naive to assume that the world is there for the taking. The world is an intricately, contested site. What apparatus do we bring to such contests and how might any one of us prevail for the duration of any single contest, wherever it is convened? The quest is to prevail; I know little of victories.

As to a soul or form that is Malaysian ... this is not a historical issue or topic; and I am not able to deal with it. It is best to direct this matter to a seer or a politician masking as a seer (and there are many of those in all our societies).

ZAINOL ABIDIN AHMAD SHARIFF (ZABAS)

| Interview on 1st July 2011

What could you recall of the TMR exhibition?

In a very distinct way the TMR exhibition was at least something different. Perhaps one can call it as an extraordinary run of exhibitions in the development of Malaysian art. Having said that, however, I'd like to add that what transpired and what was presented in TMR was not something new within the context of world art, or the development of world modernism and contemporary art.

What I can recall now as the gist of the manifesto and perhaps what I could derive and remember from the exhibition is that, both Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa were attempting to challenge or to confront western-centric aspects of modern Malaysian and non-western art. Two things became clear then and still remain clear now about their attempt. Firstly, both of them came to this project from perhaps quite a rigorous appreciation of Western art and Western modernism. And from this both of them quite amazingly came up with this idea of challenging what they have been exposed to in the West, specifically in Europe. Secondly, what they offered was something that's supposed to lean towards non-western thinking and non-western philosophy. They hinted about the meaning of Zen in the beliefs of the East, the meaning of Hinduism and perhaps touched a bit, albeit indirectly, on Islamic principles. Essentially, though, it's about the Eastern way of thinking, the Eastern way of appreciating and the Eastern spirit of creativity.

Coming from Western aesthetics and then adopting Eastern or rather Oriental aesthetics, put the Malaysian situation in a very unusual light. This is because what they were offering us was not thinking about what Malay or Nusantara art is or the local sensibility in terms of modern art. They decided to look into bigger ethos of Zen, Buddhism and Hinduism in order to confront the Western-centric approach of modern art.

Another thing that I could say is that this experimental project, at least in the Malaysian context, came up in the midst of the emergence of conceptual art or rather at the beginnings of conceptual art in the West into which both of them were beginning to delve deeper. But both were thinking about things that were not traditional or formalistic. Both were thinking of other ways of artistic creation and other ways of thinking about art. And this has definitely differentiated itself from the artistic practice of the time. These kinds of things of course are not surprising today with the existence of a variety of art.

Having said all these things, if I reread the manifesto now, I might have other ideas and might be challenging them. Perhaps if we could discuss this in a group, I might be able to say things which will be quite different. At this point, I'm just trying to remember. I'm not even deliberately dissecting.

Do you think that TMR has greatly influenced your generation and contemporary?

When that show opened in DBP, I was still a student in USM. I was not a student of Piyadasa, neither was I student of Sulaiman. But Sulaiman and I were colleagues for a while when I was teaching at ITM in 1977. And Piyadasa was a colleague of mine in USM. Being a student in the midst of the early years of the dynamism of Malaysian art, I would have to say that I looked forward to anything that the big artists were doing. I regarded Sulaiman and Piya as big artists of Malaysia. I think every student at that time, mostly from ITM and USM, looked forward to what the art lecturers were doing because they were the ones that can tell us what they understood in terms of international art developments. And from what I know

about Sulaiman and Piyadasa's art, I can conclude that they were creative and innovative and TMR was proof that they were brave. Maybe too brave, to the point of being arrogant, if I may use the word, because maybe that perception of arrogance was what stopped other people from making an analysis or confrontation in the academic sense. As far as I can remember, there were only two important or significant responses to the exhibition. One response was from Salleh Joned, and another was from Siti Zainon of in Dewan Budaya.

What about the National Cultural Congress 1971? Has it has somehow influenced or impacted both artists in the executing of TMR?

That is a strange connection that I have not thought of deeply. The artists walked out of the congress because they didn't want to be dictated by the society. The walk out was lead by Syed Ahmad Jamal. They left on the basis that they didn't agree with what Prof. Ungku Aziz said that art should cater to the needs of society. To put it simplistically, modern artists, Malaysian artists at that time, at least the ones that attended the congress, believed that artists should not be dictated. They have their own existence and they want to follow what perhaps rightly or wrongly, 'art for art's sake' not 'art for society's sake'.

But that connection has to be seen and investigated in terms of how TMR is a logical extension of that or in fact totally illogical. I'd like to think that both should be considered when we look at the relationship between NCC and TMR. There were lots of things which were quite inconsistent in the early days of the 60's and 70's, in the minds and development of artists at that time. There were others who think that what matters in Malaysia was not the arts, but the economy. The more pressing issue at the time was how to develop the country socially, politically and economically. So there was the question of what the artist's role at that time was.

Your final words on TMR?

For whatever it's worth, TMR was the only exhibition at the time, probably until the 80's, that had substantial documentation of its intentions and objectives in a manifesto. That by itself was very important which ironically also put them in an incriminating situation. That'll put anybody in a situation they might have to swallow, they might have to challenge and defend themselves. Before that they were bits of writing here and there. The only so-called manifesto in culture, was the NCC proceedings and ASAS 50. Those were major statements of art culture.

I would say that TMR could be considered avant-garde in the local context at that time. This dialectic development of art and culture is always there. New generation will go against the previous generation. Yes, whatever it is, TMR was something quite radical.

SIMON SOON

| Email interview on 21st August 2011

Do you agree that TMR provides a new paradigm in Malaysian art?

Whether TMR provides a new paradigm or not is a matter of debate. I believe the likes of Salleh Ben Joned, Jolly Koh, Siti Zainon Ismail would argue that in terms of adopting the readymade and Dada-esque provocation as a form, TMR was merely offering following another Western art trend. However, I think that TMR is an important flashpoint from the modern into the contemporary in its radical reevaluation of the aesthetic paradigm. In the case of TMR, it proposes a pan-Asian form of mystical perception of reality as an alternative to the objectivist Cartesian notion of perception. This would have taken the idiom of the local, which has been explored by artists such as Latiff Mohidin and even Chuah Thean Teng, to another level, one that is beyond the formal language of art to the phenomenological experience of art that is in dialogue with the emergence of conceptualism on a global level.

From your observation, do you think that TMR has greatly influenced or offered some kind of intellectual impact on your generation and contemporaries?

We do not have either any quantifiable or qualifiable data if TMR had any direct influence on contemporary artists. Research needs to be done in this area. You do occasionally hear Sulaiman Esa and Redza Piyadasa's practices being mentioned as influential by younger artists. But this would not necessarily amount to any impact. Besides, how does one measure impact empirically anyway? TMR did open up the floodgate to the contemporary but it was by no means the ONLY exhibition that did that and certainly not the first. You have other artists such as Lee Kian Seng doing performance since the early Seventies and Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam working on these grids like photography reportage on environmental destruction. Let's not forget that Anak Alam burst into the art scene on the very same year that TMR was held. It might be more interesting to consider how art production and discourse during the Seventies, in all its stripes and colours, have impacted subsequent notions of the contemporary in Malaysian art.

Both artists argued that perceptual reality is irrelevant from the Asian perspective. What are your thoughts on this?

Both artists are guilty on the count of essentialising what Asian-ness is just as they then set up the 'perceptual reality' as a strawman of the West. But it is not an uncommon position to advance given that they were trying to negotiate their relationship with this centre from the periphery vis-a-vis their art. I think their later works have sought to address this flaw by painting a much more complex picture of the shifts and currents of ideas across the here and now.

What about the National Cultural Congress 1971? Has it somehow influenced or triggered both artists in the executing of TMR?

I would imagine so. In my essay for New Malaysian Essay 3, I tried to consider TMR within the cultural turn of the National Cultural Policy (NCP). In spite of its seemingly ethno-religious focus, the horizon afforded by the NCP was much broader for many of the artists practicing in the early to mid seventies. This includes but not limited to a turn towards the socially-engaged practice as well as the displacing the primacy of painting via performance, photography, readymade and multidisciplinary practices.

Should we or shouldn't we be beset with western art? Do you feel that there must be a specific 'form and soul' of Malaysian art?

I don't know if it's a case of whether one should or should not, but because Malaysia did experience its own modernity, it does have its own modern history and therefore a modern art development that is discursively unique to its historical context even as it remained constantly in dialogue and was continuously nourished by what is happening in the art world centres. I think it is important to understand, recognise and develop the historical dimensions of the discourses. In this sense 'Malaysian art' is a productive way to think and situate a domain of practice unique to this modern trajectory. However I doubt one can essentialise or define a 'form and soul' of Malaysian art, that would become kitsch or worst, motivated by fascist thinking.

YAP SAU BIN

| Interview on 1st July 2011

In 2002, you produced a conceptual work for the Young Contemporaries competition. Can you relate that to the TMR manifesto?

The title of the work is "...Who gave birth to the great white one?...". It is a red carpet running from one white wall to the floor with a mobile white frame. And there's a stretched canvas painted white and polished on the surface which is entitled "Coated, Coded, Loaded Canvas On Which Many Meanings Have Failed or Frailed" as a tribute to the specific piece that Sulaiman and Piyadasa did in TMR. So it's my own way of negotiating with the work and going back to what I said earlier - how nice it would be if that show was successful in the sense that people would say TMR really changed us.

Now, we are more comfortable doing provocative works and dealing with conceptual ones or installations. It could be a mistake on my behalf as well to read them as part of a conceptual art approach. I can't recall them saying they were creating conceptual works. I think they have strategically stayed away from claiming that that is a conceptual approach. Having said so, however, the whole manifesto is in a sense a conceptual challenge of the whole idea of what they perceived as the situation of modern art at that time. In essence, it is the borrowing of western art techniques to extend their structure to speak for ourselves, which is problematic according to the TMR manifesto. So, in a sense, they were showing a new philosophical proposition to the art audience and most certainly got a lot of people thinking about it.

It wasn't progressive but I suppose it was definitely provocative to the sensibility of that time. And it is interesting to note that Piyadasa had always used the word 'sensibility' in his discussion which almost naturally brings us to ponder on whether or not the work has sensibilities. The white canvas piece in TMR had a profound impact on me especially in the process of giving my own "white canvas" work its name. From that work, I looked into the context and the power play of a meaning within the art system and realised that meaning does not lie solely in a piece of work. It lies on the frame, on the wall and in the feasible context of the institution. The meaning of art does not lie within objects. It lies in a more complex structure of context in which the artist, the critique and audience partake in an artistic discourse or interaction.

Only after looking at it from that particular angle that I could justifiably claim that TMR did work in a certain way. It worked through being rejected by a lot of artists. It worked when Piyadasa did not continue referring to Zen and Buddhism. It worked because Sulaiman didn't continue using Zen and Buddhism for example as the basis and philosophy of their work. They had moved on to do other things.

***Let us know your personal thoughts
on TMR?***

In retrospect, I consider TMR quite a successful collaboration that no one, at least within my knowledge of Malaysian art, has topped. The shared willingness that we put in there, to talk about it, to look at the manifesto and to get TK Sabapathy to write about it again must mean something to us. They really have put something on the table to challenge the rest. And it is not only through the art object and the form but also through the manifesto. All those objects are just signifiers that point to the manifesto. The mundane daily object itself can be so provocative because it has to link back to the larger notion of how we experience modern art. We have seen enough of literati paintings from the East, we have seen enough classical paintings from the West and we have seen enough big monumental paintings through art history books. And when we see someone creating works like these, from our own background, we can't help but wonder if we are being taken for a ride. That really hit people I suppose. I could say the approach is derivative of conceptual work but the basis is still quite political. There is politics of meaning. They are trying the politics of aesthetics.

ROOPESH SITHARAN

| Email interview on 1st September 2011

Do you agree that TMR provides a new paradigm in Malaysian art?

Yes and no, to be honest, I am not sure. In my perception of Malaysian art, I tend to believe that no dominant narrative can have solidarity for any historical claim. What I see when I look at Malaysian history (including our art history as well as my very own history) are only ruptures with competing narratives. So there wasn't a paradigm to shift away from in the first place. Instead, what TMR did was to create strong focal point of reference amidst these competing narratives and this I believe has its pros and cons.

From your observation, do you think that TMR has greatly influenced or offered some kind of intellectual impact on your generation and contemporaries?

Well it depends. I see my peers making claims and exploring ideas undifferentiated to older generations, or simply "repeating" similar ideas over and over again - from one generation to another. What this means is that there is no critical engagement with the history (and by history I am referring to any narrative, including TMR) so that any chain of "questioning" could be extended and explored further. So the influence solely depends in the "engagement" as well as "the need for engagement" in any given time or what we now call as contemporary time.

Both artists argued that perceptual reality is irrelevant from the Asian perspective. What are your thoughts on this?

There are two handlers here - first is the "perceptual reality" and second being "Asian". These two handlers have their very own problems in their usage and claims. In terms of identity, I believe it's unfair to claim the dismissing of "perceptual reality" purely as Asian when many others have (and still are) attempted to explore the very meaning of reality beyond the limits of empirical evidence. Conversely, the use of "Asian" as a cluster for (diverse) identity marking of any given region has also become obsolete in our current global context, thus, making TMR's argument relevant in our contemporary terms less convincing, I must say.

Should art be free from sentiments that are subjective and personalised vis-a-vis philosophy and concepts, for example?

I strongly believe and advocate that art should be free, but not in the way conceived by this question. The freedom of art should be in its very INCLUSION, not in its exclusion and exclusiveness. What I meant to say by this is that what draws and attracts me to art is its ability to sustain the "undefinedness" of art by enabling different (any) experiments/ thoughts/concepts/philosophies/ideas/sentiments to be explored, expressed and most importantly critiqued. In this way anything can be called as art, while simultaneously nothing can define art.

Should we or shouldn't we be beset with Western art? Do you feel that there must be a specific 'form and soul' of Malaysian art?

This is a tricky question but before getting into Malaysian art, I am unsure what exactly this thing we call as "Malaysian" is. In that sense, even labelling something as Western/ Eastern, Malay/non-Malay, bumi/non-bumi, immigrant/citizen, legal/illegal, inside/outside, are all part of the old method/paradigm of identity politics that I tend to believe is fast becoming obsolete and irrelevant to our contemporary culture and society. Having said that, I want to emphasise that searching for form and soul is even more immanent in our current climate. However, it should not be limited to the frame of identity but expanded to include humanity as a whole.





WAWANCARA DENGAN TOKOH-TOKOH SENI

| Oleh Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin

- Profesor Dr. Siti Zainon Ismail
- Tengku Sabri Ibrahim
- Badrolhisham Tahir
- Profesor Madya Dr. Ruzaika Omar Basaree
- Hasnul Jamal Saidon
- Nasir Baharuddin
- Raja Zahabuddin Raja Yaacob
- Safrizal Shahir
- Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman

PROFESOR DR. SITI ZAINON ISMAIL

Wawancara pada 23 Ogos 2011

Anda merupakan di antara seniman yang ketara dikaitkan dengan polemik TMR di dalam Dewan Sastera. Boleh berkongsi kisah sebenar?

Sewaktu itu saya baru pulang dari belajar. Sebagai anak muda berusia 24 tahun, saya merasa tercabar apabila ada sesetengah kawan senior mengusik saya supaya memberi pandangan terhadap pameran ini. Bagi saya, ianya bukan pertentangan idea yang sebenar tetapi sekadar respon bagaimana saya menghayati bahan-bahannya. Sebagai pelajar yang baru balik dari Jawa, perkataan ‘mystical reality’ ini memang sesuatu yang sudah biasa. Ini memberi saya satu rangsangan, selain didorong oleh guru-guru— pelukis-pelukis yang lebih senior.

Rangsangan saya menulis itu sebagai satu latihan kerana kami sebagai pelajar di sana memang wajib mengikuti kelas kritikan. Konsep kami “tidak mengapa salah selagi anda masih muda”. Kesilapan-kesilapan ini memang berlaku terutama sebagai orang muda yang pemikirannya masih belum matang dan ini memang sudah diajar dari awal— lakukan kesilapan waktu muda untuk memperbetulkan apabila anda semakin dewasa. Jadi, apabila mereka membuat pameran begini, saya yang sudah juga belajar seni lukis moden Barat, sebenarnya tidak merasa. Mungkin dua pelukis ini sudah bertungkus lumus untuk menyampaikan idea mereka terutama dari segi mistikal, dunia-dunia mistik, dan mereka menggunakan juga pendekatan Taoisme. Saya melihat ada kenyataan tentang mistik ini dalam keadaan persekitaran, di tempat kita sendiri.

Jadi itulah isu yang timbul kenapa saya ingin menulis. Ianya cuma respon saya. Dan Piyadasa sebagai guru memang bagus bila beliau menjawab dan menegur di mana kelemahan-kelemahan saya. Dan di belakang saya juga terdapat dua tiga orang yang menggoda dan mengusik saya dengan memberi majalah-majalah; yang saya gunakan untuk rujukan bagi penulisan itu. Antara yang terlibat ialah mereka-mereka yang sudah ‘pergi’ seperti Pak Mail (Ismail Zain) dan juga Usman Awang, dan rencana tersebut terbit di dalam ‘Dewan Sastra’, satu-satunya majalah sastera yang memuatkan esei-esei seni lukis. Jadi itulah latar belakang terjadinya tulisan yang terbit di Dewan Sastera.

Telah dikatakan bahawa antara objektif pameran TMR adalah untuk menolak fahaman Barat. Apakah kita perlu kkuatir dengan pengaruh-pengaruh Barat? Perlukah kita mempunyai satu bentuk seni Malaysia?

Tidak, sebagai pelajar seni kita memang sudah terdidik. Cuma kemungkinan pendidikan kita ini tidak bermula dengan kesenian warisan, kesenian tradisional. Di Indonesia, sebelum para pelajar mengikuti kelas seni moden mereka telah ada latarbelakang wayang kulit, gamelan dan sebagainya. Berlainan dengan sistem pendidikan seni di ITM yang terus cenderung ke dunia Barat seolah-olah kesenian tradisional ini tidak penting. Sehingga terjadi peristiwa Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan, barulah kita balik semula mencari. Sebagai pelajar seni kita harus mengkaji satu-satu bidang seni bermula dari kesenian tradisional dan warisan, sebelum mendalami seni lukis moden dan latar belakang sejarahnya. Dengan melompat terus ke dalam kesenian moden tanpa mempunyai asas-asas ini, kita seperti meninggalkan identiti kita sendiri.

Kalau kita lihat konsep-konsep karya-karya Zaman Yunani juga ada falsafah Timurnya. Wayang kulit umpamanya adalah unsur seni rupa agung. Cuma kita tidak melihat sebagai karya seni rupa. Kita hanya melihatnya sebagai seni permainan. Sebab itu saya selalu membayangkan kita tidak boleh memisahkan kursus seni lukis dengan sastera, seni teater, seni muzik dan seumpamanya kerana melaluinya kita mampu memperolehi inti sebenar.

Adakah pelaksanaan Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan dan Seminar Akar-akar Peribumi memberi kesan kepada dunia seni?

Saya kira ini peristiwa sejarah pasca kerusuhan Mei 1969. Bagaimana pentingnya seniman ataupun budayawan memberi idea untuk menyatukan keadaan yang terjadi. Seni berperanan mendamaikan suasana yang sudah tegang. Seniman-seniman budaya telah berkumpul hingga tercetusnya idea konsep kebudayaan kebangsaan. Semua badan-badan budaya dari kelompok sarjana, seniman, aktivis, pemimpin, orang politik bergabung dan wujudlah kongres itu pada tahun 1971. Ia merangkumi semua bidang tetapi kita sentuh bidang kita sahajalah— seni dan budaya. Jadi, kelompok seniman Cina, India dan Melayu mengambil keputusan dan ia disahkan sendiri oleh Tun Razak. Konsepnya harus berakarkan unsur-unsur warisan dan tempatan sebagai titik tolak untuk membangunkan seni budaya kita. Manakala unsur-unsur yang datang dari luar perlu dikaji jika perlu digabungkan. Selain itu, Islam sebagai unsur yang mengharmonikan dijadikan landasan— walaupun waktu itu timbul kekeliruan bahawa semuanya hendak diIslamkan. Bukan begitu. Maksud di sini ialah menggunakan elemen-elemen Islam iaitu baik hati, lembut, tenang dan seumpamanya. Unsur-unsur itulah yang harus digunakan untuk membangunkan seni budaya kita. Dan itulah yang berentetan dalam seni lukis kita dan pada tahun 1979, golongan sasterawan dan golongan seni rupa bergabung dan kita terlibat dengan seminar di ITM waktu itu. Jadi kenapa kita harus menyingkirkan peristiwa-peristiwa tersebut? Apakah ini diajar dalam sejarah kesenian Malaysia?

Dari segi intelektualisme, adakah TMR memberi apa-apa sumbangan?

Saya menganggap mereka (Sulaiman dan Piyadasa) telah menghasilkan sesuatu. Pokoknya semacam memecahkan satu tembok seni lukis di mana kita harus keluar dari apa yang kita belajar pada kebiasaan yakni dua dimensi, arca, lukisan. Mereka membawa halaman, membuka halaman-halaman tradisi Barat walaupun mereka menganggap ini juga dari Timur. Setelah ia terbit di dalam Dewan Sastera, ramai kalangan sasterawan mula membaca ataupun melihat. Selama ni orang sastera hanya mengenali Latiff Mohidin sebagai penyair, AGI (Abdul Ghaffar Ibrahim), termasuk saya. Mereka juga tidak pernah terfikir untuk ke galeri umpamanya. Kini kita juga dapat melihat anak-anak muda sudah masuk ke dunia yang sama. Kalau pada tahun-tahun 80-an orang mungkin bingung melihat karya-karya begini. Jawapannya sekarang adalah 'mystical reality' sudah ada di kalangan generasi baru. Contohnya Raja Shahrizan yang menjawab tradisi 'mystical reality' Melayu itu di dalam dunia seni rupa. Jadi memakan waktu ya—30 tahun, 40 tahun dan sudah berhasil. Jadi Sulaiman dan Piyadasa telah memecahkan ruyong dan sagunya sudah timbul sekarang.

Dari segi dunia pendidikan, kebanyakan universiti sudah memiliki fakulti seni rupa masing-masing. Ini peluang, kalau kita tidak memberi latihan serta peluang kepada pelajar untuk menjadi pengkritik seni, kita akan kehilangan dunia kritikan masa depan terutama dalam bahasa kebangsaan. Kalau bahasa bersifat dunia luar memang sudah ramai.

TENGGU SABRI IBRAHIM

Wawancara pada 19 Julai 2011

Apakah pendapat anda mengenai TMR? Adakah ia memberi apa-apa kesan kepada dunia seni rupa kita?

TMR sudah menjadi semacam 'milestone' dalam sejarah seni rupa di Malaysia. Impaknya besar. Merujuk kepada apa yang diutarakan oleh kedua-dua Sulaiman Esa dan Piyadasa melalui TMR, kita dapati banyak perkara, yang pada saya secara peribadi, seolah-olah masih tidak selesai sampai sekarang. Dan kalau di 'flash back', tujuan mereka berdua mengadakan pameran itu di antaranya ialah untuk melihat apa yang berlaku dalam seni rupa Malaysia pada zaman itu secara kritis.

Mereka dapati terlalu banyak 'picture-making', membuat gambar sahaja, selain proses kreatif yang sewajarnya juga diketengahkan. Ketika mereka membuat TMR ini mereka mengumumkan yang mereka adalah 'modern artists', tidak terlibat dengan pembuatan bentuk-bentuk seni tradisional. Namun mereka menyatakan mereka (ingin) berkarya di luar konteks estetika seni rupa Barat ataupun moden. Dan apabila keadaannya begitu, saya rasa mereka tidak dapat mengalami proses kreativiti seni rupa tradisional, yang mereka sebut sebagai seni tradisional Asia.

Mereka berwacana tentang satu kegersangan perkembangan intelektual dalam perkembangan seni rupa Malaysia. Dan memang sampai sekarang pun saya rasa perkembangan intelektual itu masih kurang. Kekurangan ini pada saya adalah lebih kepada soal pendidikan, soal apa yang kita pelajari. Sulaiman Esa dan arwah Piyadasa mengatakan bahawa pelukis-pelukis ketika itu tidak dapat menerangkan karya mereka dengan terperinci atau mendalam. Dan perkara ini pun masih berlaku hari ini. Jadi kekosongan ataupun kekurangan perkembangan intelektual itu memang sesuatu yang patut kita tingkatkan. Dari segi perkembangan peribadi memang saya mengangap TMR itu sebagai satu perangsang kepada saya untuk berkarya. TMR menuntut kita untuk memahami banyak perkara. Jadi seharusnya setiap orang itu melihat kembali soalan-soalan yang dilontarkan oleh mereka berdua, yang sememangnya relevan hingga sekarang.

Mungkin kita boleh sentuh sedikit mengenai kesan Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan 1971 terhadap pencetusan TMR. Selain itu, apakah kesan pengaruh Barat itu mempengaruhi keberadaan seni kita?

Saya rasa dari segi sejarah, period 60-an memang dipengaruhi oleh idea-idea seni Barat. Dan ketika itu banyak persoalan-persoalan yang dikemukakan sendiri oleh mereka berdua melalui Dokumentasi '72 misalnya, yang mengetengahkan idea-idea daripada Barat, seperti konstruktivisme dan seni konseptual. Ketika itu seniman kita juga digalakkan mendalami seni tradisional atau yang berlandaskan unsur peribumi. Namun mereka berdua tidak berkarya dalam bentuk tradisional, tetapi secara filosofikal. Dan kalau kita lihat perjalanan mereka berdua kemudiannya, memang ada percubaan untuk mendalami soal-soal kebangsaan atau soal tempatan - Allahyarham Piyadasa dengan siri 'Baba dan Nyonya' nya dan Sulaiman Esa dengan 'Seni Islam'. Kita dapat lihat di situ bahawa mereka berdua memang meneruskan idea-idea dari TMR.

Cuma kalau kita tengok sekarang, apa yang diusahakan dalam 80-an dan 90-an tidaklah begitu ke depan. Saya lebih suka kalau Sulaiman lebih aktif memajukan Seni Islam secara meluas, bukan setakat pameran perseorangan, tapi mungkin pameran berkumpulan, pameran tahunan, siri diskusi atau apa saja aktiviti yang lebih berkala. Dia boleh menjadi contoh yang baik kepada generasi muda. Dan memang apa yang telah dibuat oleh mereka berdua itu adalah satu sumbangan besar cuma mungkin penerus-penerusnya agak kurang. Sejauh mana pendidik kita mempunyai kesedaran kepada perkara-perkara yang berbentuk intelektual? Para pelukis sekarang lebih cenderung kepada stail. Kita memang pakar dari segi itu tetapi akhirnya ia hanya akan menjadi adaptasi semata-mata, seperti seolah-olah kita tidak punya jati diri. Itu persoalan yang harus kita tangani hari ini. Kalau tidak saya rasa apa yang digagaskan oleh Sulaiman Esa dan Redza Piyadasa empat dekad dahulu akan menjadi sia-sia.

Sebagai seorang artis yang banyak menghasilkan karya instalasi dan arca, adakah anda terkesan dengan TMR? Patutkah TMR itu menjadi rujukan kepada artis semasa?

TMR memang patut menjadi rujukan. Cuma seperti saya sendiri, saya tidak berpengalaman melihat TMR secara 'real', hanya melihat melalui dokumentasi, artikel dan gambar-gambar sahaja. Ia sememangnya patut menjadi rujukan kerana telah menjadi salah satu peristiwa besar dalam perkembangan seni rupa kita. Kita patut memberi perhatian dan mengkaji mengapa mereka menyuarakan pandangan mereka sebegini. Kenapa mereka menyuarakan bahawa apa yang pelukis buat selama ini adalah 'picture-making' semata-mata? Kenapa tidak ditekankan soal 'creative process', 'value'?

BADROLHISHAM TAHIR

Wawancara pada 17 Ogos 2011

Apakah di antara perihal TMR yang meninggalkan kesan kepada anda?

TMR adalah satu titik penting dalam arus sejarah seni Malaysia yang cuba mengangkat tradisi intelektualisme Barat dalam seni tampak. Piyadasa dan Sulaiman cuba mengetengahkan falsafah Timur bagi menggantikan falsafah Barat dalam mod kritisisme. Kesannya, intelektualisme yang diimpikan masih belum dapat dibangunkan kerana ia tidak mendapat perhatian banyak pihak terutama para akademik seni juga seniman. Buktinya, setakat yang saya tahu, tiada lanjutan perbahasan yang dipanjangkan untuk dijadikan fasa-fasa wacana dan penyelidikan selain beberapa komentar yang bersifat situasional pada ketika itu sahaja dalam Dewan Sastera dan sebagainya. Apa yang ditinggalkan (sedih sekali) TMR adalah hanya lompingan intelektualiti keseniman untuk sekian lama walaupun isi kandungan yang dimajukan boleh diperbahaskan dan diperhaluskan bagi melahirkan satu asas kerangka intelektualisme yang unik.

Adakah TMR menyediakan satu anjakan paradigma di dalam seni Malaysia?

TMR telah mencadangkan supaya anjakan perlu berlaku. Namun ia masih belum mampu berganjak kerana justifikasi anjakan tidak mendapat perhatian menyeluruh. Pada hemat saya, anjakan haruslah berlaku secara total dan melibatkan pelbagai pengubahsuaian persepsi dan kefahaman dimensi dari konsep yang jelas dan perlu dibangunkan. Setakat ini, TMR hanya boleh dianggap sebagai satu bentuk reaksi terhadap bentuk-bentuk seni Barat yang secara paradoksnya terperangkap di dalam amalan tradisi dari Barat (catan, arca, cetakan dsb.nya) yang merupakan saki baki modenisme yang TMR sendiri tolak.

Mungkinkah TMR ada memberi impak intelektual kepada dunia seni rupa?

Ada tetapi hanya setakat sebuah representasi intelektualiti keseniman dan tidak sebagai model intelektualisme kesenian dalam menyatakan gambaran seni Malaysia keseluruhannya. Intelektualisme kesenian harus dibina dan dikembangkan kerangkanya supaya pelbagai kefahaman diangkat bagi meraikan intelektualiti seseorang seniman yang mendokonginya. Apa yang ingin saya jelaskan, impak intelektual yang disumbangkan TMR adalah dari segi melahirkan satu bentuk awal kritisisme, yang merupakan sebuah disiplin ilmu yang memiliki asas epistemologi dan metodologinya, sepertimana yang telah lama dipraktikkan di Barat.

TMR dijalankan untuk lari dari konsep Barat dengan menerapkan falsafah Timur/Oriental. Patutkah kita risau dengan pengaruh seni Barat?

Tidak perlu. Tradisi seni Malaysia sememangnya mengangkat model seni Barat termasuklah kritisisme. Seperti yang saya hujahkan sebentar tadi, jika kita mahu beranjak paradigma, maka maksud 'pengaruh' contohnya harus difahami dalam bentuk kefahaman yang lain dari mod epistemologi yang juga lahir dari kerangka keilmuan yang berbeza dan menyeluruh agar kita mampu beranjak dari paradigma lama. Maka kita tidak perlu risau tentang pengaruh Barat tetapi risaukan konsep yang harus dibina tidak lagi terbina hingga kini.

Sejak dari Kongres Kebudayaan 1971 dan Seminar Akar-akar Peribumi 1979, para pelukis telah mula mencari jati diri tempatan masing-masing. Pada pendapat anda, perlukah wujud satu bentuk seni Malaysia?

Saya rasa kedua-dua acara ini sangat penting setelah TMR walaupun ada banyak perbezaan perspektif realiti hujahnya contohnya Zen dengan Melayu. Melayu dengan Islam dll. Namun begitu pada hemat saya, sesebuah identiti terbina bagi menyatakan justifikasi bentuk (diri atau negara) adalah secara pemerhatian dari corak pelakuan dari amalan seni yang berlangsung dalam ruang dan jangka masa yang panjang oleh pemerhati. Sekiranya seni Malaysia membina identiti dengan mengappropriasi motif untuk melambangkan "Malaysia", ia sudah menjadi sangat silap dan ini merisaukan saya!

PROFESOR MADYA DR. RUZAIKA OMAR BASAREE

Wawancara pada 19 Jun 2011

Sebagai salah seorang yang terlibat membantu pelaksanaan pameran TMR, boleh anda terangkan serba sedikit mengenainya?

Sebelum Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan '71 (KKK), kami pelajar-pelajar seni halus di ITM masih berkarya mengikut isme Barat seperti Konstruktivisme. Piyadasa menghasilkan karya ala Joseph Kosuth waktu itu. Sulaiman Esa dan Piyadasa merupakan pensyarah kami, selain Ahmad Khalid Yusof, Choong Kam Kow dan lain-lain.

Sulaiman dan Piya mempunyai idea yang 'avant-garde' tetapi mereka juga dipengaruhi KKK yang mempersoalkan semula tentang budaya dan di mana halatuju kita. Kedua mereka mempersoalkan, "Mengapa tidak kita kembali kepada nilai-nilai Asia, kepada akar?". Dari situ timbul TMR yang banyak menggunakan falsafah Timur seperti Zen dan Buddhisme. Seni menjadi lebih mistikal. 'Burung telah terbang dari sangkar'. Begitu Zen dan konseptual. Lukisan bayangan Usman Awang oleh Piya mempunyai implikasi yang penuh misteri.

Tiada pelukis lain yang berkarya seperti itu. Rata-rata masih berstail Kubis, Ekspresionis Abstrak. Jadi, mereka seperti 'leaders' yang memulakannya. Kami sebagai pelajar menjadi pembantu pameran TMR. Saya terlibat secara penuh, bersama-sama beberapa pelajar lain. Kami bantu memasang karya. Pengaruh mereka begitu besar bagi kami. Oleh kerana kami terlalu memuja mereka, mereka kerap menyatakan "*You must'nt follow. You must lead and get back to your roots*". Saya rasa ada kebenaran di situ. Kita perlu kenal siapa diri kita. Bagaimana kita ingin maju ke depan jika kita masih tidak tahu asal usul kita?

Bagaimana dengan penerimaan khalayak?

Ramai yang hadir. Para penulis juga terlibat sama. Walaupun ramai yang tidak faham dengan konsep baru itu, mereka dapat mendalami melalui manifesto TMR yang mengiringi pameran. Manifesto mempersoalkan halatuju kita, Asianess. Salleh ben Joned. Dia yang menjadi 'mystical reality' sewaktu buang air kecil di tengah-tengah pembukaan pameran. Sebelum itu, dia membuat pengumuman lebih kurang begini, "*I want to make a statement. What I'm going to do is part of the mystical reality*" (ketawa).

Adakah pameran ini memberi apa-apa kesan kepada anda dan golongan pelukis waktu itu?

TMR membuka minda kami. Sebelum ini tidak pernah ada pameran seperti itu yang melibatkan 'happening', polemik dan 'discourse'. *I consider it as one of the great shows*. Ada impak kepada artis. Tapi ramai juga yang tidak suka. Pameran itu sangat 'powerful', siapa berani buat pameran sebegitu?

Kita ini selalu menjadi 'half baked artist'. Kita berkarya 'for a living' atau sengaja suka hendak buat. Bukan untuk mempersoalkan sesuatu. Bila ada orang seperti mereka yang membuatnya, kita mesti hormatlah. Mereka melakukannya mesti ada sebab. Dari satu segi, ia mendidik kita untuk belajar menjadi intelektual. 'I was lucky to have Sulaiman Esa dan Redza Piyadasa as my lecturers'. 'They were very critical. Show itu memang memberi impak kepada saya to really think deep'.

I pay respect to both of them.. they made me what I am today..

HASNUL JAMAL SAIDON

Wawancara pada 25 Ogos 2011

Adakah pameran dan manifesto TMR memberi apa-apa kesan kepada dunia seni rupa?

Pada saya, TMR mungkin satu contoh, satu kajian, satu perkara yang kemudian menjadi satu projek yang boleh dijadikan satu kajian seni lukis untuk satu usaha menyoal semula kerangka seni moden Barat. Peristiwa tersebut berlaku tiga tahun setelah Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan pada 1971, tahun-tahun yang dianggap kritikal serta penuh dengan sikap menyoal semula.

Sumbangan TMR yang pertama adalah menyoal semula kebergantungan kita dari kerangka amalan dan teori seni moden yang kita ambil daripada Barat. Kedua, TMR merupakan satu contoh bagaimana sesebuah pameran itu tidak semata-mata mengusulkan barangan komoditi untuk dijual tetapi adalah sebuah pameran yang mengusulkan idea atau konsep. Kalau sebelum itu aktiviti pameran hanyalah satu usaha mengumpul barang untuk dipamer, dilihat, ditonton dan dibeli, TMR sebaliknya mempersembahkan gagasan idea, konsep atau cara berfikir, termasuklah susulan respon.

Mungkinkah TMR ada memberi impak intelektual kepada dunia seni rupa?

Bagi mereka yang serius dalam mengkaji sejarah amalan dan teori seni rupa di Malaysia, khususnya orang-orang akademik yang terlibat dalam penulisan ataupun pensejarahan seni rupa, TMR sememangnya satu projek atau peristiwa yang penting dan sebagai penanda dalam naratif atau seni rupa di Malaysia. Sesetengah orang menganggap manifesto itu *rubbish*, ada yang memberi respon yang sinikal terhadap manifesto yang ditulis, contohnya Salleh ben Joned yang membuat aksi kencing dan sebagainya. Tapi untuk itu kita harus adakan satu perdebatan atau perbincangan untuk kita lihat bagaimana kesannya terhadap pembangunan intelek dalam bidang seni rupa.

Salleh ben Joned pada satu ketika telah menjadi satu bahagian kepada pembinaan ilmu dan polemik pengadaptasian ciri-ciri kerohanian ke dalam amalan moden. Beliau berandaian bahawa untuk melengkapkan 'mystical reality', 'reality' itu harus dijadikan pentas untuk membahaskan sebuah lagi brand yang menarik dan apa yang dikatakan 'mystical' itu.

Sejak dari Kongres Kebudayaan 1971 dan Seminar Akar-akar Peribumi 1979, para pelukis telah mula mencari jati diri tempatan masing-masing. Pada pendapat anda, perlukah wujud satu bentuk seni Malaysia?

Perlukah bentuk kesenian kita bergantung kepada fungsinya dalam struktur sosial sesebuah masyarakat? Kalau fungsinya boleh mensejahterakan masyarakat tempatan, masyarakat di peringkat negara dan dengan cara itu boleh memberikan negara sumbangan yang bagus dan global, OKlah. Jadi kita tidak boleh anggap identiti itu penting atau tidak penting kerana kita harus melihat konteksnya. Kalau kita kata tidak penting pun tidak semestinya ia tidak penting 'all the time'. Kalau kata penting pun kadang-kadang terlalu menekankan identiti secara teknikal, ataupun terlalu jumud hingga menyebabkan kita mengasingkan diri kita daripada orang lain.

Kedua Piyadasa dan Sulaiman menjalankan TMR kerana cuba lari dari konsep Barat dengan menerapkan falsafah timur/oriental. Patutkah kita risau dengan pengaruh seni barat?

TMR ini penuh dengan ironi ataupun paradoks. Salah satu daripadanya, kalau kita 'step out' dan lihat sebagai saksi misalnya. Kita akan teruja dengan usaha-usaha untuk menyoal kerangka Barat dan untuk memperkasakan atau menggunakan konsep Timur, yang mana dalam konteks ini mungkin ada unsur Zen dan sebagainya. Tetapi, akhirnya keseluruhan usaha itu dipersembahkan, dipamerkan di dalam satu premis. Tindakan itu secara tidak langsung menidakkan objektif yang disebut tadi. Dia menjadi satu *stage event*. TMR tidak berlaku secara spontan. Saya rasa, youtube pelajar kita yang dibelasah di London oleh orang-orang London baru-baru ini adalah lebih 'mystical reality'. Itulah pandangan saya, 'not that I want to be sinical about this'. Sebab saya ingin mengajak orang balik ke keterujaan ataupun keseronokan kita untuk kembali kepada apa yang kita anggap orientalisme, ataupun sifat-sifat Asia, berstruktur spiritual, kerohanian dan sebagainya. Ia mungkin boleh menjadi paradoks kerana akhirnya kita terpaksa membingkaikannya ke dalam kerangka seni moden, bilamana ia dipamer dan diletakkan di dalam satu premis yang kelihatan seperti sebuah galeri, ataupun dipersembahkan dalam satu ruang yang boleh dibaca sebagai sebuah pentas. Bukan untuk merendah-rendahkan usul itu tetapi sebagai satu sisi yang boleh kita gunakan untuk melihat 'mystical reality'.

Itulah juga kehebatan TMR yang berupaya menolak kita untuk membaca polemik secara lebih ilmiah dan mendalam. Ada beberapa pelukis konseptual misal kata yang cuba membuat sesuatu yang kononnya spontan, kononnya meraikan kespontanan ini. Tetapi akhirnya kespontanan itu dipentaskan di dalam satu ruang yang formal, yang mempunyai sistem atau skruktur institusi yang sangat besar dan 'complicated' dan secara tidak langsung menjadi makanan kepada sistem, dalam kes ini, kapitalisme, modernisme yang ingin disoal.

Dia menjadi lebih nyata bila kita, bila saya baca penulisan Salleh ben Joned yang memberi respon kepada TMR. Saya rasa Salleh lebih memberi ingatan terhadap apa saya sebut tadi. Ia bukanlah sesuatu yang sangat mudah. Konsep kerohanian dalam budaya Melayu atau bersumberkan Islam atau apa-apa sahaja dari Timur itu bukanlah sesuatu yang kita boleh pentaskan begitu sahaja. Apabila kita masuk dalam abad yang sekarang, abad yang ke 21, dikotomi Timur-Barat ini semakin lama semakin menjadi kurang berkesan. Ini disebabkan perubahan demokrasi dan perubahan mobiliti manusia terutama kerana sebab faktor tekanan ekonomi. Perubahan demokrasi juga salah satu faktor yang menyebabkan wajah yang kita kata Barat itu sebenarnya Timur.

Adakah TMR menyediakan satu anjakan paradigma di dalam seni Malaysia?

Pada saya ada. Bagi sebahagian orang, tiada langsung. Beberapa pensyarah saya malahan menganggap TMR tidak penting. Ada yang mengatakan Piyadasa dan Sulaiman sekadar 'flirt' dengan idea baru akibat sudah bosan dengan keberadaan seni ketika itu – di mana semua pelukis membuat dan menjual 'painting'.

Akan tetapi, kita tidak patut menyanggah apa yang mereka buat kerana TMR telah memberi satu inspirasi kepada ramai khususnya pelajar, termasuklah saya sendiri. Pelajar-pelajar ada yang berminat dengan cara berfikir di belakang seni. Biasanya TMR akan menjadi satu topik wajib dalam perbincangan atau dalam 'data base' mereka bila bercakap tentang sejarah seni rupa Malaysia. Anjakan paradigma itu berlaku, dan terus berlaku, mungkin tidak secara serta merta tetapi secara perlahan-lahan bergantung kepada sesuatu tempat. TMR memberi inspirasi supaya kita tidak mengambil mudah semua benda— 'by default'. Kalau kita ikut 'by default' kita akan hanya menjadi pengikut dan tidak menjadi orang yang menggerakkan sesuatu yang baru. Keduanya, ia tidak menekankan bentuk. Ia mengajak kita untuk melihat sesuatu 'beyond form'. Dalam hal ini, TMR mula memadam kebergantungan kita melihat benda kepada membaca fikiran.

Saya tidak pasti sama ada ia memberi satu anjakan atau tidak. Mungkin secara kolektif dengan perkara-perkara lain. Contohnya, ia mungkin menyebabkan sekolah seni mula melihat tradisi seni rupa yang bertapak di Asia. Mungkin selepas itu mereka mula memasukkan pengajaran seni Hindu, Buddhist, Islamik dan sebagainya dalam silibus, dan melihat kepelbagaian pelbagai jenis pengzahiran bentuk seni rupa di pelbagai lokasi atau daerah di Asia. 'Paradigm' adalah perkataan yang digunakan dalam kajian sains. Ia adalah tentang cara berfikir, cara bagaimana kita melihat sesuatu. Dari segi anjakan paradigma, kita tidak patut melihat hanya dari sudut 'mystical reality' sahaja tetapi harus melihat juga dari sudut yang lebih multi dan saling berkait. Dan trans-discipline bukan hanya dalam seni sahaja, tetapi banyak bentuk anjakan sedang berlaku di sekeliling kita. Banyak simptom, ciri atau kriteria, yang perlu kita kenali, hadir dalam seni dari segi perubahan. Tanpanya kita akan hanya duduk di tempat yang sama—mati dan beku.

NASIR BAHARUDDIN

Wawancara pada 23 Ogos 2011

Apakah di antara perihal TMR yang meninggalkan kesan kepada anda?

Usaha-usaha TMR merupakan satu tamparan kepada perkembangan seni lukis di Malaysia. Ia mewujudkan satu proses dialog dan wacana dalam pembinaan atau pembangunan seni lukis Malaysia itu sendiri. Walaupun pada waktu tersebut berlaku beberapa tentangan dan konflik di antara seniman, saya rasa itu perkara biasa bila sesuatu konsep baru ingin diperkenalkan.

Saya melihat TMR sebagai satu 'reference' tentang aliran seni konseptual yang sedang hebat berlaku di Barat pada waktu itu. Ia membuka dimensi kepada cara-cara berfikir dalam bentuk baru.

Manifesto TMR turut memberi impak. Kenyataan pada segmen pertama tentang dilema seni Malaysia pada waktu itu sepatutnya direnung kembali. Sayangnya, tidak ada satu kesinambungan tesis terhadap perkara tersebut.

Mungkinkah TMR ada memberi impak intelektual kepada dunia seni rupa?

Saya rasa kekontangan dari segi penulisan seni dan intelektualisme itu ada diisi. Cuma dari segi penampilan mereka itu perlu dilihat apa sebenarnya yang mereka ingin kemukakan. Itu yang menjadi topik perbincangan hangat pada waktu itu. Mereka mengusulkan bahawa dalam seni kita harus "go beyond", tetapi 'beyond' yang macam mana? Ramai yang mengalami kekeliruan dan tidak dinafikan bahawa Salleh ben Joned juga mempersoalkan perkara tersebut di dalam artikelnya. Tentang "kencing dalam kesenian". Dia mengatakan bahawa Piyadasa kerap menggunakan nahu-nahu yang bombastik namun tiada pengabsahan, menjadikannya seolah-olah seperti seorang intelek yang tenggelam dalam dunia sendiri. Saya rasa itu sekadar provokasi tentang 'substance' TMR itu sendiri.

Sulaiman dan Piyadasa membawa sebuah konsep yang mempersoalkan tentang identiti serta pengembalian mereka kepada dunia oriental dan tradisi walhal pendekatan yang dibawa mereka adalah sangat Western dari segi penyampaian. TMR melontarkan persoalan-persoalan tentang 'anti-establishment', 'anti-commercialism', kerana Sulaiman dan Piyadasa merupakan tenaga akademik yang hendak melihat seni Malaysia tumbuh menjadi sesuatu yang ilmiah. Seni harus berkisar seputar wacana-wacana yang intelektual. Kita kena melihat itu sebagai satu platform yang positif dan tidak terus menolak. Sebab itu perlu diusahakan untuk diterbitkan tesis baru bagi memperpanjangkan wacana ini. Kita harus mengangkat martabat ilmu itu, bukan martabat pameran. Bagi saya, teks yang lahir dari TMR adalah sebagai penerokaan dan pencetusan idea-idea baru untuk dilonjakkan ke depan. Tetapi kita tidak pernah merujuk dan 'quote' apa yang telah dilakukan Sulaiman dan Piyadasa. Jadi ilmu pengetahuan tentangnya seakan-akan mati.

Patutkah kita risau dengan pengaruh seni Barat? Pada pendapat anda, perlukah wujud satu bentuk seni Malaysia?

Persoalan bentuk ini merupakan persoalan yang besar sebenarnya. Adakah jati diri kita bergantung pada bentuk itu? Jadi, 'that is the most important thing that we have to define' terlebih dahulu, dan saya rasa tidak perlu kita kluatir tentang pengaruh Barat. Apa yang perlu kita kluatir adalah bagaimana kita perlu 'challenge' isu sebegini dengan ilmu-ilmu pengetahuan yang perlu disemai.

Bentuk itu universal. Bentuk mesti ada tetapi tidak semestinya berbentuk Malaysia, berbentuk Indonesia dan sebagainya.

Melalui TMR, Sulaiman dan Piyadasa mengambilpakai ideologi dan falsafah Zen, namun tidak mencukupi. Persoalannya, mengapa Zen? Adakah Zen itu dalam konteks tradisi kita? Mereka ingin menolak Barat tetapi masih menggunakan kaedah persembahan dalam konteks galeri, yang ternyata sangat Western. Jadi perbincangan atau pertentangan dari segi falsafah dan ideologi semacam ini terus berlaku di kalangan golongan seni, yang mempersoalkan bagaimana bentuk baru itu seharusnya disampaikan.

RAJA ZAHABUDDIN RAJA YAACOB

Wawancara pada 19 Julai 2011

Boleh cerita sedikit tentang pengalaman anda ketika pameran TMR serta terangkan mengenai konsep kulit katalog pameran yang anda reka?

Saya memang terlibat secara langsung daripada awal hingga akhir dari segi rekaan katalog dan juga keseluruhan fotografi. Dari segi rekaan kulit katalog, ada perbincangan dengan kedua pelukis. Asalnya kami mengambil dari segi konsep 'element of design' seperti bulatan, segi empat dan segi tiga. Namun apabila melihat konsep pameran itu saya biarkan bulat, konsep 'kosong'. Satu ruang kosong dimana saya menggambarkan bahawa dalam seni sesuatu yang ideal itu sebenarnya bermula dari persepsi atau permukaan yang kosong dan tidak ada istilah akhirnya. Ia juga sebagai cerminan tentang kekosongan intelektualisme dalam dunia kesenian pada masa itu. Ia sengaja tidak diwarnakan kerana dari segi fotografi konsep hitam-putih adalah lebih bertenaga untuk garisan membulat.

Bagaimana dengan penerimaan khalayak TMR?

Pameran di Balai Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka memang sungguh menarik. Saya rasa pertama kali dalam sejarah seni visual tanah air di mana seorang penonton, dan kebetulannya seorang pensyarah di Universiti Malaya iaitu Salleh bin Joned, telah cuba sama ada membuat satu sindiran sinis ataupun cuba hendak membuat kenyataan... tetapi saya rasa ianya lebih kepada sindiran. Pameran dirasmikan oleh arwah Ismail Zain, yang menjawat jawatan Pengarah Balai Seni Lukis ketika itu. Beliau (Salleh Ben Joned) memang faham tentang maksud falsafah kedua-dua pelukis ini tetapi bagi khalayak yang lain mungkin susah untuk memahami. Jadi dengan beraninya tiba-tiba dia pergi ke satu sudut dan membuang air kecil sambil terus berkata lebih kurang begini "ha... tengok sini semua. Inilah karya rasmi saya iaitu air kencing yang keluar sikit dan jatuh ke atas lantai itu" dan "ha .. ini karya saya yang terbaru" (ketawa).

Tapi apa yang Salleh buat menjadi satu polemik juga kerana tidak siapa menyangka yang beliau berani melakukannya di hadapan khalayak. Jadi itulah antara karya-karya 'mystical reality' masa itu selain antaranya yang saya ingat seperti rambut, sangkar burung kosong, botol *Coca-cola* dan sebagainya. Saya pernah bertanya kepada Sulaiman dan Piyadasa apa yang ingin disampaikan melalui karya ubat nyamuk. Jadi, bentuk lingkaran ubat nyamuk itu mempunyai seni dan falsafahnya tersendiri. Asas dan pelajaran itulah digunakan sebagai karya.

Pameran itu menjadi satu fenomena juga pada saya. Banyak kritik yang keluar dalam surat khabar dan majalah. Ada juga yang mengata mereka 'gila' dan mempersoalkan bagaimana produk orang lain boleh menjadi hasil seni mereka. Saya masih ingat selepas itu semasa pameran solo Piyadasa (akhir 1978), dia telah mengecat sebuah lukisan Anuar Rashid dan kemudian mendakwa sebagai karyanya (haknya). Itu juga menjadi satu polemik pada zaman itu. Tapi yang saya ingat dan kagum adalah bahawa Sulaiman dan Piyadasa memang banyak membaca dan sangat kritis. Mereka mahu melihat respon orang-orang awam.

Piyadasa juga selalu menyuarakan tentang 'Art for Art Sake'. Oleh kerana 'Art for Art Sake', karya-karya tidak diletak harga dan bukan untuk dijual, dan kalau boleh saya istilahkan ketika itu TMR hanyalah untuk tatapan dan renungan sahaja. TMR itu mungkin satu ujian, satu 'test' kepada masyarakat sama ada boleh menerima atau tidak. Pendapat saya masa itu, masyarakat susah hendak menerima, apatah pula seni konseptual pada zaman 70-an masih agak baru lagi dalam konteks tempatan.

Adakah kesan pameran tersebut mempengaruhi golongan pelukis semasa itu?

Dari segi sejarah seni visual kita, pameran ini penting kerana ia berjaya menimbulkan polemik. Sungguhpun pameran ini memang menimbulkan semacam perbalahan di antara pelukis-pelukis lain dengan kedua pelukis ini, Sulaiman dan Piyadasa tetap merupakan pembawa arus lukisan yang mempunyai falsafah sendiri. TMR menimbulkan satu pergolakan dan diskusi yang cukup panas.

TMR telah membuka mata para cerdik pandai seni visual Malaysia pada masa itu dan menimbulkan percanggahan pendapat kerana hampir semua pelukis-pelukis yang ternama (seperti Syed Ahmad Jamal, Ismail Zain, Jolly Koh, Yeoh Jin Leng, Joseph Tan, Tan Teong Eng, Tan Tuck Kan, Khalil Ibrahim, Grace Selvanayagam, Anthony Lau dan Long Thien Shih) berpendidikan seni formal dari luar negara – England, Eropah dan Amerika. Sepertimana yang saya nyatakan tadi, TMR telah sedikit sebanyak mencetus dan menjana anjakan paradigma kepada seni visual tanah air. Para pengkarya dipengaruhi oleh sentimen karya-karya yang dihayatinya, sama ada dari dalam mahupun luar negara. Malah ada yang menjadikan pelukis tertentu itu sebagai idola mereka dalam menjana idea. Dan TMR, pada saya telah sedikit sebanyak menyediakan ruang ini dalam pergolakan dan perkembangan seni visual Malaysia.

Saya sendiri telah banyak menggunakan falsafah yang sama dalam hasil karya 'photo montage' saya.

Perluah seni itu bebas dari sentimen, menjadi subjektif dan mengikut acuan tertentu dari segi falsafah, konseptual dll.?

Saya kira seni visual itu adalah hak peribadi setiap seniman untuk meluahkan isi hati atau ekspresinya melalui apa jua bentuk media yang dipilih. Karya yang baik atau bermutu seharusnya mengandungi intipati atau elemen-elemen seni itu sendiri, termasuklah falsafah dan konsepnya, bersentimen dan kedua-dua subjektif atau sebaliknya.

SAFRIZAL SHAHIR

Wawancara pada 25 Ogos 2011

Adakah pameran dan manifesto TMR memberi apa-apa kesan kepada dunia seni rupa?

Kalau diikutkan dari segi momentum kedua-dua Redza Piyadasa dan Sulaiman Esa, TMR adalah bernawaitukan pencarian mereka dalam seni. Dari segi seni itu sendiri, TMR adalah sebagai satu manifesto, satu 'fabrication' atau satu penerbitan yang boleh dipertahankan secara intelek. Pertama, kita melihat dalam konteks seni, kedua, kita melihat keadaan itu secara sosial. Saya rasa mereka dari kalangan orang-orang seni tiada masalah untuk menghadam TMR sebagai satu manifesto. Masalahnya, bagaimana kita hendak meletakkan status teks itu sebagai sesuatu yang bersifat akademik. TMR pada satu peringkat mungkin sekadar reaksi kepada manifesto seperti yang dicetus oleh Siti Zainon, Salleh ben Joned dan lain-lain.

Sebagai satu 'art' ia berjaya dan signifikan tetapi dari segi akademik, dari segi falsafah, dari segi teori, ia gagal. Ini kerana ia tidak berupaya memperpanjangkan wacana dan kritikan dengan lebih mantap.

Mungkinkah TMR ada memberi impak intelektual kepada dunia seni rupa?

Wujudkah kesan intelektual itu dalam persekitaran seni Malaysia? Sebab yang menjawab dan yang bereaksi itu hanyalah dua, tiga orang sahaja. Statusnya adalah hanya sebagai satu manifesto dan bukan sebagai satu makalah yang boleh dipertahankan secara akademik.

Kita harus melihat sejauh mana keadaan pameran dan juga isi kandungannya memberi kesan. TMR mempunyai dua keadaan yakni subjek dan kaedah. Bila kita bercakap tentang teks dan subjek yang dihujahkan, seperti nilai-nilai Asia yang hendak diketengahkan, dari sudut manifesto pada saya tiada masalah. Tetapi sebagai satu teks akademik untuk dipertahankan, ada banyak masalah. Is it about art history, art theory, art criticism atau apa? Bila kita bercakap tentang 'Asian Art', bila kita berhujah mengenai nilainya dalam konteks kerangka Barat, kita harus fasih dan memahami betul-betul asasnya. Tidak perlu teori.

Bagi saya teks TMR adalah teks teori yang rapuh. Ia tidak boleh dipertahankan secara menyeluruh. Walaupun mempunyai asas di sana sini, meminjam kata-kata Zakaria Ali "jika diuji logiknya satu persatu, pasti hancur".¹ Dalam konteks akademik, perlu adanya 'review' intensif yang mengulas apa kelemahan dan apa sebenarnya idea yang terselindung di sebalik TMR. Saya rasa Salleh berjaya menangkis secara intelek. Sangat kuat dan sudah nampak masa itu dia sudah berjaya— bukan mematahkan hujah tetapi— menyoal semula keabsahan atau legitimasi teks dan juga pameran, secara langsung atau tidak.

Sememangnya tidak boleh dinafikan bahawa TMR merupakan satu peristiwa dan satu usaha yang berani. 'Art' ini memang kena goncanglah. Keberanian Sulaiman dan Piyadasa tidak dapat dinafikan, tetapi saya juga suka membaca keadaan itu dari segi sosial. Saya pernah membuat kaji selidik dengan beberapa orang pelajar seni yang berada pada zaman itu dan apa yang boleh disimpulkan adalah ramai tidak begitu pasti apa yang berlaku. Saya rasa perjalanan Sulaiman dan Piyadasa dari segi sosial, mencari makna dari segi

Nota Kaki:

1. Lihat kenyataan Zakaria Ali, "di dalamnya (TMR) terkandung pernyataan-pernyataan yang berani dan gagah. Kalau diuji logiknya setiap satunya berkecai", *Seni dan Seniman*, Kuala Lumpur: DBP 1989, h. 135.

konseptual, dan bagaimana mereka berhadapan dengan kritikan pada masa itu sesuatu yang amat menarik. Ke mana Piyadasa dan Sulaiman pergi selepas itu? Itu sudah memberi isyarat kepada kita tentang apa yang berlaku dan apa harapan mereka terhadap pameran itu. Mereka mempunyai harapan tinggi dengan bercakap tentang sesuatu yang boleh saya katakan 'jargon'. Mereka bercakap sesuatu yang 'highly intellectual'. Melalui kritikan-kritikan di dalam Dewan Sastera, secara tidak langsung mereka 'review' balik apa yang mereka buat.

Dari segi pameran, TMR memang bergegarlah. 'Happening'. Dari segi intelektual bagi saya ia tidak berkembang kerana perdebatan dan perbahasan mengenainya hanya berlaku sementara sahaja. Secara umum ia tidak terlalu memberi impak intelektual kepada seniman.

Sejak dari Kongres Kebudayaan 1971 dan Seminar Akar-akar Peribumi 1979, para pelukis telah mula mencari jati diri tempatan masing-masing. Pada pendapat anda, perlukah wujud satu bentuk seni Malaysia?

Isu identiti keMalaysiaan berkait rapat dengan persoalan sains sosial, ekonomi, politik sebab formasi Malaysia sendiri masih baru sewaktu itu. Pasca '69 kita bercakap mengenai akar-akar kebudayaan. Ramai yang telah menyentuh tentang kesan Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan dan kemudian Seminar Akar-akar Peribumi di ITM. Syed Ahmad Jamal dan para pensyarah mula masuk ke kampung-kampung untuk mengkaji signifikan rupa dan jiwa. Kita sudah mula memiliki kesedaran itu sejak pertengahan 70-an lagi. Namun satu perkara yang lupa ditangani adalah pengaruh sistem Bauhaus-Hornsey-Barat yang masih menular dan dijadikan tunjang pendidikan seni di ITM. Dalam konteks sekarang pula dengan kebanjiran ideologi 'post-modern' dan sebagainya, lebih sukar untuk kita menentukan bentuk seni tempatan.

Kedua Piyadasa dan Sulaiman menjalankan TMR kerana cuba lari dari konsep Barat dengan menyerapkan falsafah Timur/Oriental. Patutkah kita risau dengan pengaruh seni Barat?

Barat-Timur ini sememangnya isu besar. Namun apa yang baik untuk kita terima seharusnya tidak menjadi masalah untuk kita mengambilnya. Ismail Zain ada bercakap tentang perkara ini, di mana kita harus ada satu sistem dalam diri kita, semacam satu eko-sistem. Kita di Timur memiliki sistem. Di dalam kesenian Timur, sistem dan falsafah itu tidak sama. Bila kita membesar dalam sistem Timur, belajar dalam sistem Barat kita boleh jadi "pening". Memang ada semacam percubaan untuk menyuntik kesedaran – melalui kongres, seminar dan pameran rupa dan jiwa – yang memperkatakan tentang isu-isu identiti namun masih tiada lagi bentuk-bentuk penyelesaian yang boleh dijadikan paksi.

Banyak persoalan-persoalan yang relevan dan menarik jika kita kaitkan dengan TMR. Mereka telah mengangkat satu pandangan/falsafah Timur, akan tetapi bentuk persembahan masih lagi keBaratan. Ada banyak yang perlu diperbahaskan dari segi konseptual oleh kerana nature TMR itu sendiri adalah konseptual. Persoalan bagaimana konseptual sudah mempunyai bentuk, kerap menjelma. Karya-karya mempersembahkan bentuk, ada 'painting', ada objek. Banyak persoalan rupanya TMR ini. Hendak menjadi universal? Mahu ke Timur atau ke Barat?

NOOR AZIZAN RAHMAN PAIMAN

Wawancara pada 11 Jun 2011

Apakah pandangan anda mengenai TMR?

Saya beranggapan ia merupakan satu pameran yang begitu mencabar pada zaman itu. Cabaran itu timbul kerana ia bersifat baru di Malaysia dan menawarkan satu pandangan kritikal tentang kemungkinan-kemungkinan yang ada dalam pembinaan seni itu sendiri bilamana bentuk produk seni itu bukan lagi utama. Pembicaraan mengenai konteks seni itu sendiri kepada environmen kita juga diusulkan. Pada masa itu rujukan berkenaan seni lukis moden dunia memang kurang di Malaysia. Jadi Sulaiman dan Piyadasa memperkenalkan seni konseptual yang disuntik dengan falsafah Timur.. walaupun falsafah Timur itu pun pada asalnya disuntik dengan falsafah Barat juga.

Dari pemerhatian saya, TMR banyak membantu pelukis era 70-an untuk menghubungkan idea dengan alam sekeliling mereka. Saya juga pernah menggunakan cara ini sekitar tahun 90-an. Pada zaman sekolah sewaktu saya ke Balai Seni Lukis Negara, saya pertama kali berpeluang menatap karya *Man and His World* (1972), sebuah karya Sulaiman Esa yang memenangi sebuah pertandingan. Walaupun tidak begitu jelas tentang maknanya, karya itu terasa begitu dekat dengan saya. Hanya setelah saya masuk ke sekolah seni barulah saya faham bagaimana Sulaiman Esa menggunakan benda-benda dari kehidupan seharian sebagai diari hidup di dalam karyanya. Dan selepas itu objek-objek jumpaan harian juga hadir dalam pameran TMR.

Adakah TMR mempengaruhi perkembangan seni instalasi di Malaysia?

Jika sesiapa ingin mengkaji sejarah instalasi Malaysia, tidak boleh nafikan bahawa salah satu titik atau mercu tandanya adalah pameran TMR. Pameran ini amat penting dalam sejarah seni instalasi di Malaysia.

TMR berteraskan falsafah Timur dan cuba menolak nilai-nilai kebaratan. Pada pendapat anda, perlukah kita kluatir dengan pengaruh Barat di dalam seni kita?

Dengan berlangsungnya Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan, diikuti TMR dan Akar-Akar Peribumi (AAP), kita pegi kepada aspek mencari nilai-nilai kita kembali. Namun dalam konteks sekarang, ia agak jumud oleh kerana mungkin konsep AAP hanya boleh digunapakai sekitar 5 tahun saja. Apabila dipaksa-paksa ia menjadi satu perkara yang pseudo kerana terlalu ingin mewakili entiti Melayu, Cina, India dan sebagainya. Jadi ia tidak dapat melestarikan seni itu dalam keadaan mapan. Seniman harus bijak memilih dan menyaring mana-mana kemasukan idea-idea Barat dalam usaha untuk menjadi universal.

Selepas itu kita lihat bagaimana budaya Melayu itu dikahwinkan pula dengan Islam. Tidak silap saya sekitar awal atau pertengahan 80-an 'pattern Islamic Art' itu masuk ke dalam seni Malaysia dan dipelopori salah satu institusi yang boleh dikatakan penting dalam dunia seni lukis tanahair. Paralelnya di situ, ia sebenarnya berlaku akibat kesan politik dunia mahupun tempatan. Chandra Muzaffar menyebut 'Islamic Art' itu tercetus ketika revolusi Iran dan di Malaysia pula ketika Anwar Ibrahim menyertai UMNO – dia dikatakan sebagai 'mengislamkan UMNO'. Itulah pembacaan yang ada. Jadi di situlah saya nampak kemungkinan besar bagaimana Sulaiman menghidu peluang atau secara tidak sedar, benda itu berkaitan. Selepas itu banyak karya seni berlandaskan roh Islam muncul terutamanya di kalangan pelajar dan pensyarah ITM. Kita juga dapat melihat bagaimana sebuah karya penting Sulaiman Esa, iaitu mural jubin yang melambangkan perjuangan UMNO, diabadikan di PWTC.

Salah sebuah contoh karya Sulaiman yang saya kira berjaya menampilkan kedua elemen Timur dan Barat adalah *Waiting for Godot*. Satu tema yang agak cantik. Imajan yang mempunyai keseimbangan – panas-redup, wanita berbogel dengan latar arabes. Saya berpeluang menonton teater serta naskah video asal Samuel Beckett tersebut. Saya mempersoalkan bagaimana pada satu titik di dalam teater itu, ia seolah-olah dilihat lebih Islamik dari karya Sulaiman Esa. Layangannya begitu cantik, begitu menekankan keTimuran, berbanding karya Sulaiman. Mungkin itu pandangan beliau pada masa itu yang sedang dalam pencarian. Namun, saya kagum dengan keberanian beliau menghasilkannya. Pada saya karya itu berjaya menimbulkan persoalan-persoalan yang merangkumi berbagai aspek. Persoalan bagi saya adalah lebih penting dari jawapan. Jawapan adalah keputusan yang tidak akan dapat memuaskan hati semua pihak.





Garden of Certitude III Mixed media 181 x 298.5 cm 1995-2000





INSYIRAH

3.

AL-INSYIRAH: MAQAM KESEDARAN DALAM PERJALANAN SENI SEORANG PELUKIS

| Profesor Madya Dr. Abu Talib Putih

Menukil kata-kata Titus Burckhardt,¹ kejahilan dunia moden tentang spiritualiti dalam seni timbul dari semata-mata satu kesilapan – yakni, melihat simbolisme kesenian mempunyai tidak lebih sekadar segi-segi peribadi, psikologi mahupun emosi. Akibat tergalang oleh kecenderungannya mengaitkan aspek bentuk kepada sentimen dan perasaan sahaja, maka kerangka pemikiran moden menjadi semakin keliru dan bingung lantaran kedangkalannya memisahkan intuisi seni daripada sains lalu meletakkannya ke dalam dua ranah berbeza.

Berterusan jahil tentang spiritualiti memang suatu sikap yang mengecewakan, tetapi terus-menerus mengabaikan unsur spiritual dalam seni, khususnya di kalangan pelukis-pelukis Islam, pada hemat Sulaiman Esa, suatu hal yang sangat malang dan amat dikesali. Oleh yang demikian, beralih kepada “seni tradisional berorientasikan spiritual”² menjadi pilihan muktamad beliau, dan juga seruan bersungguh-sungguh beliau kepada rakan-rakan pelukis yang lain. Sikap tidak mempedulikan warisan sendiri dan tidak peka kepada sejarah silam akan hanya menimbulkan kehinaan dan menjatuhkan maruah diri.

Kehidupan kontemporari kita jelas sekali sudah keterlaluan mengesampingkan tradisi. Seperti Sulaiman sendiri akui, “sains moden dan kuasa akal” telah melenyapkan elemen-elemen “metafizik dan tradisi” dari masyarakat moden, lalu hanya meninggalkan hanya minda dengan satu pandangan hidup dan gagasan seninya “telah tercerai daripada sebarang cakupan spiritual dan arketip”.³ Tafsiran beliau tentang kemerosotan segi epistemologi dan metafizik ini memang tajam. Lagi pula, pemerhatian beliau terhadap tindakan manusia moden menyangkal hal-hal spiritual dan hermeneutik dan menggantikannya dengan sudut pandangan yang sepenuhnya berteraskan sains, serta kesannya ke atas kerja-kerja kesenian dalam kehidupan moden turut dikongsi oleh Lipsey yang mengamati betapa “tiada spiritualiti ortodoks di abad ini ... kebudayaan pada umumnya bukan kepalang sukar menerima aspek-aspek spiritual pada pemikiran dan karya para pelukis”.⁴ Seni kini sudah hilang ciri kesempurnaan dan kebersatuan yang pernah ia lambangkan sewaktu hubungan antara pelbagai agama masih erat. Rasa kehilangan yang mendalam dan kritikal inilah yang mendorong Sulaiman terus mengorak langkah teladan ke arah menggarap seni berunsur spiritual. Dan seperti yang tertera, beliau telah membuktikan berjaya mencapai tahap kejayaan yang benar-benar hebat. Walaupun ada pandangan yang mengatakan Sulaiman sudah tiba ke “kemuncak pencapaiannya” melalui siri *Ke Arah Tauhid* (1984) dengan menampilkan ketekunannya “membicarakan estetika Islam/Peribumi” dan meneladani “konsep tradisional menghasilkan karya sebagai doa atau proses penyucian jiwa”,⁵ namun siri *Insyirah* (2001) tampak lebih banyak lagi memperkatakan tentang usaha beliau melengkapkan apa yang boleh dikira sebagai “kitaran spiritual”, dari sudut kesempurnaan pemakaian imej-imej simboliknya. Melanjutkan kecondongan ini, pameran kali ini yang berjudul *Raja’ah*, yang membawa maksud “kembali pulang”, meneruskan usaha memperbincangkan karya-karya beliau dari sudut apa yang disifatkan oleh Martin Lings sebagai pembaharuan atau pengembalian⁶ dengan cara menitikberatkan semula, bak kata Schuon, “bahasa simbolik tradisi-tradisi agung manusia”.⁷ Menerusi siri ini, Sulaiman atas kerelaan sendiri berazam menerapkan, jika benar ada, konsep *ta’wil*, yakni proses mengembalikan “sesuatu ke titik asalnya”,⁸ dengan harapan untuk menyingkap lebih lanjut pentafsiran hermeneutik ke atas unsur-unsur spiritual dalam karya-karya beliau.

Hakikat bahawa hal spiritual umumnya akan sentiasa kekal menjadi rahsia merupakan sebahagian daripada ciri-ciri keunggulannya.⁹ Bagi memahami aspek spiritualiti, seseorang memerlukan simbol-simbol agar dapat ia meneruskan “perjalanan” hidup “menuju ke satu destinasi”.¹⁰ Menurut penjelasan Bakhtiar, ia perjalanan bertunjangkan simbol yang mengasak manusia untuk meningkatkan kesedaran terhadap realiti lebih tinggi di dalam proses menjadikan diri mereka semakin sedar dan berubah. Dan “melalui simbol-simbollah seseorang meluahkan isi hatinya”.¹¹

Simbol-simbol di sekeliling kehidupan kita merupakan misteri yang menyelubungi keadaan yang hanya dibongkar oleh akal bersikap ingin tahu melalui pembabitan apa yang dipanggil “kemahiran menggarap simbol”.¹² Pelukis-pelukis tersohor yang diketahui telah mencapai tahap kemahiran ini menampilkan kehandalan mereka memberi tindakbalas intuitif, bersifat peka kepada gerak hati, serta mahir menggunakan bahasa mengasosiasi simbol. Simbol adalah elemen asas dalam semua bentuk kesenian sakral kerana “setiap bentuk”, menurut Burckhardt, “bertindak selaku wahana pengungkap sifat tertentu makhluk”.¹³

Pemahaman dan penguasaan Sulaiman ke atas simbolisme tradisional memang dikagumi. Ekoran daripada penyelidikan beliau ke atas subjek ini dengan merujuk kepada tulisan-tulisan sarjana-sarjana berwibawa dari dalam dan luar negara, beliau memperlihatkan kecekapan luar biasa menyulam pengetahuan terperinci mengenai simbolisme Islam ke dalam penulisan beliau.¹⁴ Untuk mengingatkan kembali, simbol-simbol merupakan bentuk-bentuk yang memunculkan semula aspek-aspek maujud dari hakikat metafizik perkara-perkara yang wujud sama ada manusia menyedarinya atau tidak. Menyusun semula kalimat Andalan dan Bakhtiar, seni dan kraf dihasilkan dengan berpedomankan prinsip teras *Tariqah* agar difahami makna tersembunyi yang ada pada semua perkara. Lantaran itu, bahasa simbolisme yang diterapkan oleh pelukis ini adalah untuk mengungkap penghayatan ke atas kesedaran tersebut, yang dicapai menerusi daya fikir.¹⁵

Dua bentuk asas simbol – yang tabii dan yang diwahyukan – melahirkan sistem-sistem tatacara tertentu untuk diikuti oleh manusia menerusi praktis seni mereka bagi memantul prinsip pertama, iaitu *Tauhid*, serta melambangkan idea “kesatuan dalam keesaan” dan penyerakan Makhluk yang datang dari konsep “kepelbagaian dalam kesatuan” yang Tunggal. Karya seni adalah “bekas” atau “wadah” yang dicipta dengan perantaraan hukum-hukum yang objektif bagi tujuan menatang “isi” (roh) melalui proses rekapitulasi Arketipa secara simbolik yang berkait dengan pelbagai tahap kewujudan dalam kerangka hierarki *Tauhid*.¹⁶

Dari kerana seni itu proses simbolisasi atau pelambangan yang dilaksanakan menerusi pembabitan “gagasan intelek” manusia, menurut istilah Burckhardt,¹⁷ maka ia menghasilkan bentuk-bentuk yang jauh mengatasi objek-objek yang dibuat berlandaskan pada kuasa emosi dan perasaan semata-mata pada kuasa emosi dan perasaan. Daya intelek, bila difahami sebagai *al-‘aql*¹⁸ dalam konteks kebudayaan Islam, sesungguhnya lebih lengkap daripada logik dan pemikiran kerana ia melibatkan intuisi berkenaan hakikat-hakikat yang kekal abadi. Kehadiran hakikat-hakikat abadi ini di dalam karya seni ada kaitannya dengan dakwaan Martin Lings bahawa “seni ... dalam aspek-aspek tertingginya amat berkait rapat dengan spiritualiti”.¹⁹

Pemanifestasian unsur spiritualiti oleh Sulaiman dalam karya-karya beliau mengalamatkan usaha mengungkit kembali kalimat keramat Hegel: “pelukis itu roh”²⁰ dengan cara menyelaraskan semula peranan pelukis dalam masyarakat kontemporari; dan lantaran itu, mentafsir semula nuansa-nuansa estetika demi mempengaruhi proses pemaknaan baru. Namun dalam kaitan serupa, ia satu pertimbangan yang mengumandang neologisme anjuran Lipsey, “Sebuah seni milik kita sendiri – spiritualiti di abad ke-20”, yang mana intisarinya ialah huraian terperinci mengenai proses belajar “melihat seni abad ke-20 dengan pandangan dan pemikiran baru, yang lebih sensitif kepada isi dan makna spiritualnya”, dan “kemustahakan menghimpun lalu menterjemah tafsiran kita sendiri mengenai hal-hal spiritual menjadi kod-kod perlambangan dalam seni”.²¹

Bagi meneruskan usaha mengikut landasan haluannya sendiri dalam konteks kedua-dua gesaan tersebut, Sulaiman mencuba memulau dengan membaharui tekad untuk menterbalikkan resam persepsi sekular daripada lazimnya melihat perkara yang tersirat kepada menilik apa yang dapat disimpulkan daripada karya seni. Ini bererti, Sulaiman berazam mengetengahkan semula makna-makna yang mana, menurut kata Keeble,²² realitinya berpunca daripada kewujudan naluri kebijaksanaan yang mengambil kira peranan akal intuitif yang rahsia demi mengembalikan, jika benar ada, matlamat ulung karya-karya agung silam yang berwawasan serba imaginatif. Semestinya, beliau telah berikhtiar merubah ciri-ciri dan aspek-aspek tertentu yang merangkumi pola sebab-akibat yang sementara lalu menjadikannya tahap rujukan meta-sejarah yang kekal selama-lamanya.

Oleh yang demikian, apa yang berlaku seterusnya ialah ulasan-ulasan sambalewa, seperti “ketekunan Sulaiman membahaskan isu-isu agama, budaya dan identiti yang berperanan mencorakkan masyarakat”, pembicaraan beliau “berkenaan persoalan bagaimana menjadi orang Melayu, Islam dan moden, dan mengangkatnya sebagai tema pokok karya-karya beliau”²³ atau “menandakan satu lagi anjakan dalam sebuah genre seni yang berkembang sejajar dengan nasionalisme Melayu serta usaha berterusan mencari identiti Islam”,²⁴ sampai ke saat ini sudah menjadi pernyataan-pernyataan kabur bersangkut dengan fokus sebenar beliau dari segi pemikiran dan pertimbangan beliau yang telah disebutkan di atas. Sulaiman semakin tegas menjajarkan dirinya lebih dengan persoalan “pembaharuan”, berbanding “pembangunan”, seperti yang difahami daripada maksud kemajuan yang diutarakan Martin Lings.²⁵ Sebaik sahaja pembaharuan sebenar makna dan nilai dalam kehidupan dan kesenian menjadi isu pokok, maka praktis beliau tidak boleh lagi dianggap berpunca semata-mata daripada proses mengatur semula dengan serampangan reaksi kita terhadap situasi-situasi luarnya yang berlaku secara kebetulan. Sebaliknya, ia mestilah bertitik-tolak daripada komitmen kita menerima pola sedia ada yang tersirat dan yang menetapkan bagaimana aturan baru itu perlu dirangka. Memandangkan perspektifnya yang tradisional, “pola sedemikian hanya boleh ditemui pada sumbernya yang paling teras, di mana subjek sebenar kita bertapak dalam jaringan abadi dari mana segenap proses orientasi dan pembaharuan bermula”.²⁶

Sekarang kian ketara bahawa perkara yang menjadi titik pangsi kepada tumpuan perhatian Sulaiman ialah nilai-nilai abadi untuk menyampaikan sesuatu yang kekal, dan sehubungan dengan ini lepas bebas daripada syarat-syarat dan kondisi-kondisi sejarah, bukan hanya di tahap permulaannya tetapi juga di sepanjang proses pelestariannya. Bersabit dengan makna abadi inilah maka sesetengah bentuk tertentu dikekalkan sekalipun di zaman yang penuh dengan kancah revolusi benda dan jiwa. Memandangkan kecenderungan ini, Sulaiman bolehlah dikira tidak lagi menghasilkan karya-karya yang menerapkan jalur fenomenologi yang terlalu sangat meyakini “kenyataan persepsi” dan “pembezaan estetika” seperti saranan Merleau-Ponty²⁷ dan Dufrenne.²⁸ Beliau malah sudah beralih ke arah mengaplikasi idea “transcendelia” Wilbur²⁹ untuk menampilkan “akal pemikiran yang ‘mandalik’ atau paradoksikal (‘intelligibilia’)” di dalam usaha beliau menyelami masalah roh. Ini, menurut Gadamer,³⁰ membabitkan usaha membangkitkan semula persoalan tentang kebenaran hal-hal kesenian menerusi prinsip kesedaran estetika tanpa pembezaan dengan cara mengembalikan pengalaman seni sebagai teras tumpuan ontologikal kita terhadap makna kewujudan dan kesedaran itu sendiri. Dalam pelbagai tahap kehalusan dan

keindahannya, siri-siri karya Sulaiman sebelum *Insyirah* mengesahkan persepsi ini dari sudut pemaparan evolusi kesedaran yang boleh disamakan dengan cara beliau mentafsir kitab suci yang diwahyukan. Di kala menilik karya-karya beliau, kita digesa “naik” ke atas tatatingkat kesedaran bagi memafhumi tanda-tanda “transcendelia” yang dizahirkan dalam bentuk konkrit. Bermula dengan memahami rentetan idea beliau yang pada awalnya memfokuskan usaha memaparkan pengetahuan tentang “zat” berdasarkan konsep “quiddity” Aristoteles,³¹ kita akhirnya didorong beralih menghayati karya-karya mantap beliau yang mencerminkan idea “kewujudan” sebagai “ruang terbuka”, dan dengan yang demikian, mendedahkan konsep “ketakterhijaban” demi mengetengahkan “konsep realiti dan ilmu yang dikupas oleh Suhrawardi”.³²

Memandangkan tindakan dan sikap pemikiran sedemikian, Sulaiman Esa boleh dilihat sebagai salah seorang daripada para pelukis yang percaya bahawa seni berfungsi di serata lingkungan kesedaran. Siri-siri karya beliau menggambarkan pelbagai tingkat perjalanan kreatif beliau untuk mencipta makna-makna baru. Setiap siri merupakan satu *maqam* dalam perjalanan evolusi kesedaran untuk bergerak dari tahap menanggapi kewujudan berdasarkan unsur-unsur partikulariti, individualiti dan kolektiviti kepada tahap menjadikan universaliti dan uniti satu kenyataan. Beliau merangka perjalanan itu dengan mula-mula sekali menolak penggunaan visi atau penglihatan tunggal yang membataskan kerja-kerja seni hanya kepada aspek-aspek formal dan estetika, dan kemudian beliau mengadaptasi visi berganda dengan melibatkan roh di dalam melihat minda dan jirim, diri dan bukan diri, proses sedar dan tak sedar melangkaui batas-batas khayalan perkara-perkara tersebut.

Menerusi seninya, Sulaiman ibarat memegang watak seperti seorang *salik* yang berjalan dalam *tariqah* Sufi. Kemajuan dirinya dalam erti kata ini ditandai oleh tahap-tahap pemahamannya ke atas realiti menerusi penyingkapan hijab secara berperingkat-peringkat untuk sampai ke setiap *maqam*. Atas alasan ini, maka huraian Ooi Kok Chuen³³ yang mengatakan *Insyirah* menjadi petunjuk kepada “kitaran penuh perjalanan spiritual beliau atas bidang kanvas” memang benar sehinggakan seolah-olah mengingatkan kita kepada berakhirnya tujuh takuk *mi’raj* (tangga naik) dan *tanazzul* (tangga turun) para Sufi, atau tingkatan *Martabat Tujuh* dalam Sufisme Melayu seperti yang diperjelaskan oleh Sulaiman sendiri.³⁴

Seperti yang ternyata, rangkaian karya-karya Sulaiman yang dihasilkan sepanjang empat dekad yang lalu mempamerkan ciri-ciri ketekalan atau konsistensi yang agak baik. Walaupun muncul dalam rampaian kias-ibarat dan rentak-irama yang nampaknya berbagai-bagai, namun kesemua karya itu bersama-sama menghidangkan satu postulat atau saranan berkenaan makna-makna berbilang aras dalam medium yang serupa. Ia serta-merta akan menjadi jelas jika seseorang sanggup bersusah-payah menelaah karya-karya beliau yang dipersembahkan mengikut rantaian siri tema-tema tersebut, dia akan berdepan dengan satu hakikat menghayati bentuk-bentuk kesenian pilihan Sulaiman yang sesungguhnya berkait dengan prinsip-prinsip yang dicetus oleh inspirasi dan disalurkan secara tetap, serta berkeupayaan menyampaikan secara nyata segala kemungkinan dan potensi abadi lagi tak terbatas yang ada pada Roh, yang justeru membayangkan sebertuk “logika” dalam erti kata universalnya.

Lipseylah orangnya yang mengesyorkan bahawa “permulaan kepada aspek spiritual tentulah terbit daripada proses memandang ke luar atau menilik lebih jauh ke dalam ini”.³⁵ Berpandukan saranan ini, karya-karya Sulaiman wajarlah diselidiki dengan satu prinsip dan imperatif baru. Oleh yang demikian, meskipun salah sebuah siri awal beliau yakni *Dokumentasi 72* sering dijulung sebagai eksperimentasi Sulaiman “mengkaji sifat-sifat natural dan perseptual seni ... berdasarkan prinsip-prinsip konstruktif ... dengan matlamat ... menghasilkan karya seni tanpa makna metaforikal, nilai sastera, dan ciri ekspresif serta asosiatif”,³⁶ namun dakwaan sedemikian ada satu pengecualian. Di dalam beberapa kenyataannya sendiri mengenai karya-karya tersebut, Sulaiman mendedahkan bahawa tujuan utama pengolahan karya-karya itu adalah untuk membangkitkan “dalam diri khalayak kesedaran memuncak terhadap Hakikat ...” dan membuatkan mereka “sedar pada...” dan mengajak orang lain “melihat ke dalam ... dan menerusi” karya-karya beliau.³⁷ Kesemua ini andaian yang membayangkan minat mendalam terhadap hal-hal spiritual.



Compression 3 Akrilik dan pewarna atas kanvas 142 x 82 cm 1971 | Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara

Sekira seni harus bertitik-tolak daripada keperluan untuk melibatkan aspek-aspek kebersatuan dan kesatuan dalam kerangka metafizik, maka cara pendekatannya tentulah dengan memberi saranan agar segenap perbuatan dan pembuatan manusia disandarkan pada operasi-operasi berkesan prasyarat-prasyarat metafizik. Oleh itu, konsep mematuhi perspektif yang menempatkan dan menyatukan manusia dengan rangka rujukan alam semesta dan hari akhirat mestilah disertakan sekali dengan langkah mengedepankan satu praandaian bermula dengan proses objektif memperinci sifat-sifat unik yang ada pada setiap benda dan berakhir dengan proses menghuraikan benda-benda tersebut menjadi konsepsi yang abstrak. Dalam hal ini, agar kita dapat mencetus kesedaran diri kita memahami cara bagaimana sesuatu benda tertentu dan bersifat sementara memiliki intipati yang kekal dan tidak berubah, kita dikehendaki melihatnya sebagai satu tanda, menurut Brian Keeble, “yang penting” dan “khusus memeri sifat Hakikat Ilahi”.³⁸

Karya Sulaiman *Scroll No. 3* (1970) merupakan satu contoh istimewa dalam isu ini. Ia sebuah karya berasaskan sebahagian daripada dunia baru ciptaan manusia. Ia semestinya terpantul daripada dunia ilusi sebagaimana ia terpancar daripada dunia alam semula jadi, resam harian dan urusan kehidupan. Kehadirannya tidak menampakkan tahap kemuktamadan yang vital dan tidak menampilkan hakikat rupa tepat sebuah objek sebenar, tetapi hanyalah segugus konsep. Segala persepsi, formula, kejadian dan nilai mempunyai lingkaran lokusnya di sana yang disusun dalam satu entiti yang utuh lagi serba lengkap. Bagaimana setiap benda saling berpadanan – digambarkan oleh jalur-jalur aneka warna – seolah-olah mencerminkan pencerahan sejenak ke atas seseorang oleh apa sahaja cahaya yang mungkin bersinar berterusan namun sama sekali tidak boleh diuraikan pada tahap pengalaman. Yang hadir ialah imej-imej berkaitan metafizik dan teologi untuk menghasilkan kesan-kesan psikologi yang mendalam dan nasihat-nasihat spiritual untuk menampakkan pola keseluruhan dengan penuh yakin. Jalur-jalur adalah pancaran cahaya menegak bagi mata batin mengetahui dan melahirkan perasaan dalam dunia warna-warna terang agar didesak perubahan haluan perspektif psikologi. Sejauh mana jalur-jalur itu membentuk zip untuk hanya dibuka akhirnya dalam *Insyirah* terpulunglah kepada akal spekulatif penonton untuk mengesahkannya.

Mengutip kata-kata Lipsey,³⁹ salah satu rahsia agung namun sedikit menyedihkan berkenaan seni ialah betapa sebahagian besar realiti biasa tidak diberikan perhatian langsung. Namun begitu, hakikat pengalaman fizikal yang diabadikan dalam imej ciptaan pelukis boleh diambil sebagai panduan untuk seluruh proses kreatif terjadi di dalam sebuah karya. Berpandukan tafsiran munasabah Langer,⁴⁰ hayat sesebuah imej menyerupai karya seni di mana seluruhnya berhubungan hanya disebabkan oleh adanya aktiviti. Ia semacam satu siratan makna yang boleh dikesan pada *Compression* (1972). Karya ini melestarikan dirinya dalam hayat yang sering berubah-ubah akibat tujahan kualitatif ringkas atau denyutan luapan di kedudukan yang hampir-hampir bersinar penuh magis daripada satu pusat. Dengan cara meyakinkan, ia turut mengundang kita melihat, pada mulanya di peringkat fizikal, keindahan karya itu yang dicapai dengan membuatkan sesuatu yang ideal meresapi ke setiap bahagian material bahan dan dengan itu mengenakan satu bentuk sensual kepada perkara yang ideal itu. Walau bagaimanapun, di luarnya terdapat satu realiti yang cukup penting yang mampu memperhati berlatarkan masa dan untuk beberapa ketika. Meskipun karya itu serba lengkap dengan sendirinya, serta memiliki kewibawaan, pusat graviti dan sifat kecemerlangannya sendiri tetapi ia mengingatkan kita pada tanda di mana intisari objek-objek diperbesarkan seolah-olah bagi menyusun semula apa yang Martin Lings sentuh berkenaan konsep *Prakriti* dalam falsafah Hinduisme yakni keseimbangan sempurna di antara gerakan menaik, mengembang dan menurun iaitu *sattwa* (pengekalan), *rajas* (penciptaan) dan *tamas* (pemusnahan).⁴¹

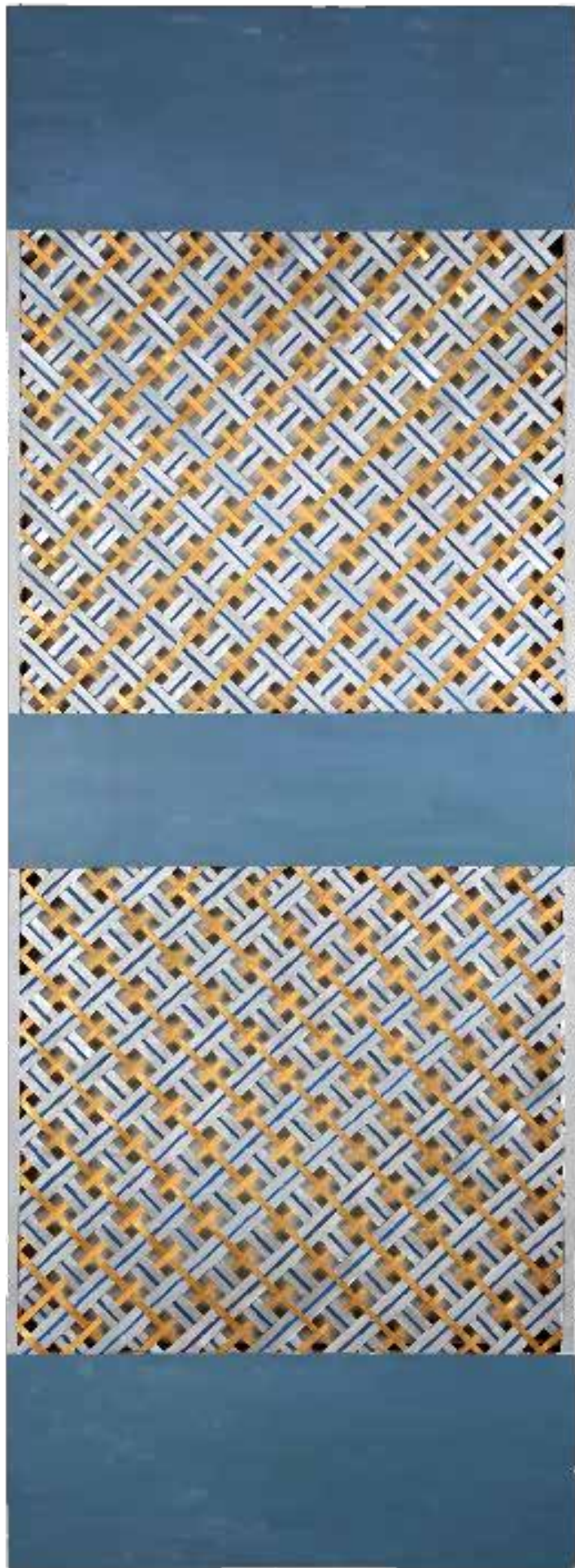
Ianya seolah-olah Sulaiman sudahpun menduga yang unsur spiritual akan mencari jalan untuk perlahan-lahan mendedahkan diri di sepanjang proses pembikinan karya beliau itu. Ia malah tidak perlu pun dipanggil “unsur spiritual”, tetapi kalimat-kalimat semacam itu akan ditemui bagi menerangkan perihal kecapaian manusia pada taraf atau maruah tertentu seperti yang ditampilkan

dalam *Manusia dan Alamnya* (1974). Seperti yang terpampang, karya tersebut memperlihatkan kepada kita bahawa manusia telah membentuk dunianya tetapi bukan secara *ex nihilo*, yakni bukan dari kosong. Ciptaannya hanyalah penciptaan semula. Ketika menghayati dunianya, manusia cuma tahu ciptaan Tuhan. Sungguhpun begitu, sebagai *insan* (makhluk pelupa), dia sering tidak sedar lalu menilik dunia ini dan setiap perkara yang berkait dengannya seolah-olah bergantung semata-mata pada manusia. Setakat mana judul karya itu berbetulan dengan tajuk sebuah pameran bertemakan *Manusia dan Alamnya*, pada 1967 ia turut sama mengambil berat terhadap usaha memaparkan aspek-aspek kehidupan dan aktiviti manusia. Dari satu segi, ia mengumandang rayuan S.H. Nasr agar kita “berhenti sejenak dan menyoal siapa gerangan orang ini yang dikatakan memiliki dunia ini”.⁴² Isi karya ini menyentuh persoalan-persoalan yang maha mustahak dan memperlihatkan apakah bentuk kecemerlangan yang sepatutnya dan lantaran itu apakah yang harus dilakukan oleh manusia bagi membangkitkan dan melibatkan kewujudan paling peribadi manusia. Yang pastinya, tidak cukup bagi manusia menyedari seluruh potensi yang ada pada kewujudannya sendiri dan betul-betul mempunyai kesedaran tentang dirinya, untuk beliau mencapai kebahagiaan dan ketenangan yang cukup bernilai yang dicari-carinya secara zahir di sana sini namun rasanya tidak pernah ditemui.

Langkah-langkah awal ke arah kehidupan intelektual dan berbudaya manusia mungkin boleh dihuraikan sebagai satu tindakan yang melibatkan semacam penyelarasan mental kepada persekitaran yang terdekat dengannya. Namun di kala budaya manusia berkembang kita pun sertamerta bertembung dengan aliran yang bertentangan dengan kehidupan manusia. Satu persoalan yang masih terdapat adalah bagaimana pembangunan dan kemajuan – dari sudut individu dan juga budaya – dibicarakan dalam karya Sulaiman *Waiting for Godot* (1977). Jawapan-jawapannya terpampang dengan sendirinya di sana. Ia boleh dikutip daripada elemen pembangunan bersifat dialektik yang dipaparkan oleh pelukis. Kerana apa yang kita mulai hayati pada proses meditasi pelukis ke atas situasi dirinya sendiri dalam konteks dunia seni ialah “hanyutan” yang dapat ditanggap di antara perkara yang diketahui dan yang berkemungkinan, di antara apa yang telah berlaku dan apa yang mungkin akan terjadi. Pelukis dihantui oleh imej-imej perkara-perkara yang nyata dan yang benar, dan citra-citra ini, yang disusun seiring berlatarkan potensi kepura-puraan pelukis sendiri, tampak pada lahirnya bertindak memprovokasi beliau untuk sekurang-kurangnya mempertimbangkan cara-cara menyelesaikan suatu percanggahan penuh trajis. Sekali-sekala, jika tanda-tanda dialektik itu menjadi cukup ketara dan hasrat keinginan berjaya menembusi, menyelinap ke dalam ruang kesedaran, maka aspek pembangunan mengurai masalah-masalahnya sendiri; kerisauan titik ‘liminal’, atau di ambang rangsangan fisiologi mahupun psikologi, meluncurkan dirinya ke depan, mengikut arah tuju penyerakannya.

Walau bagaimanapun, fasa-fasa aksi dan reaksi, tindakan dan tindakbalas ini, yang kebanyakannya merupakan dialog di antara manusia dengan citranya, hanyalah permainan samar-samar cermin-cermin psikologi. Sulaiman mula menyedari bahawa “psikologisme” seumpama itu tidak kena-mengena secara langsung dengan hakikat spiritual, tetapi sekadar menangkap “impuls psikologi yang hanya akan memunculkan “ekspresi kesenian” peribadi seseorang.”⁴³ Kesedaran menghapuskan obsesi penuh kreatif, berani lagi nekad ini mendekatkannya dengan idea mencari model-model dan sistem-sistem yang mana tradisi boleh mengemukakan padanya makna intrinsik dan nilai spiritual.

Berdasarkan pengetahuan manusiawi dan rasional semata-mata, seseorang sering melihat yang pertentangan itu berlaku antara Timur dengan Barat, dalam situasi sekarang.³⁴ Ada disebutkan bahawa sementara dunia Barat moden mengekalkan kelebihan aksi berbanding meditasi, dunia Timur pula menjunjung keunggulan kontemplasi mengatasi aksi. Pendirian yang saling berlawanan sebegitu samalah dengan pertentangan yang berlaku di antara pandangan tradisional dan perspektif anti-tradisional. Seperti yang telah dirumuskan, dalam lingkungan dunia intelektual Barat ilmu metafizik telah dilupakan, manakala di Timur ia masih kekal menjadi matlamat utama kepada ilmu pengetahuan yang berkesan.⁴⁴ Lantaran itu, seseorang wajarlah memandang ke Timur kalau dia ingin menemui sesetengah tradisi metafizik. Berdasarkan hujah ini, langkah



Meditation II Mixed media 217.5 x 80 cm 2010
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)



Meditation III Mixed media 217.5 x 80 cm 2011
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)

Sulaiman menganjurkan pameran *Towards A Mystical Reality*,⁴⁵ bersama-sama dengan Redza Piyadasa, amatlah munasabah. Walaupun kelihatan menampilkan aspek-aspek yang agak bercanggahan, namun pameran itu memperlihatkan langkah-langkah jitu Sulaiman menjangkau jauh ke alam ilmu metafizik, lantas mengukuhkan kebolehan yang telahpun diperolehinya di dalam melihat objek-objek sebagai perkara-perkara yang pada dasarnya melangkaui segala bentuk dan segenap kontigensi.

Mustahak ditegaskan bahawa Sulaiman seorang pelukis-pemikir. Kerana memiliki kebolehan berfikir secara analitis dan tajam, beliau mampu menganalisa pengalaman metafizik asas beliau menjadi konsep-konsep yang dirangka dengan baik dan kemudian menggabungkan konsep-konsep ini dalam bentuk sistem imajan yang serba ilmiah. Karya *Meditation* (1979) beliau dipertontonkan untuk mengajak kita mula melihat melangkaui bukan sahaja ruang kosong yang berjalinan tetapi juga potensi yang ada pada aspek “plenitud” atau “kepenuhan” – yakni kehidupan yang telah sempurna tercapai dan terlaksana dalam erti kata yang lebih luas dan lebih dalam. Karya tersebut bukannya lapisan perhiasan serba dangkal yang berciri Islami dan Melayu, tetapi ekspresi pelukis yang mengungkap betapa ketenangan tidak diganggu-gugat oleh sebarang emosi. Ia turut membangkitkan dalam diri kita pemikiran kontemplatif yang mana rangka logik luarannya bergantung pada penglihatan batinnya, dan membimbing kita untuk tidak “memberi gambaran” tentang realiti yang ditanggap secara langsung tetapi “membina” hujah-hujah mental yang rasional berdasarkan idea-idea prasangka tertentu, yang barangkali memang benar, namun “diterima” dan bukan “difahami”.

Dengan meningkatnya keyakinan beliau, Sulaiman menghidangkan keseluruhan karya-karya matang beliau untuk menggambarkan usaha menyadur definisi beliau sendiri ke dalam seninya agar ia wajar dilihat sebagai seni “yang benar-benar spiritual.” Di kala kita meneliti idea-idea Sulaiman, kita perlu menilik seni beliau bukan saja sebagai sebuah inovasi estetik yang ulung tetapi juga sebagai se bentuk seni spiritual yang gigih berjuang ke arah menampilkan ekspresi tulen tentang kebenaran dan hakikat. Perkara ini tampak terlebih nyata khususnya dalam karya Sulaiman berjudul *Ke Arah Tauhid* (1984), yang mengungkap kesedaran beliau terhadap realiti dengan cara menjiwai dan menyatu dengan hal-hal sejagat. Kesedaran sedemikian melimpahkan ke atas diri beliau kepuasan estetika yang paling hebat dan rasa keindahan yang tinggi. Peningkatan kesedaran terhadap realiti bermakna kepuasan dirinya menjadi kian memuncak. Begitu juga, lebih cekat penyatuan dengan alam semesta ini dirasai, maka lebih menyusut subjektiviti individual dirinya. Ini kerana *Tauhid* mengingatkan kita bahawa setiap perkara itu datang dari Tuhan dan kepadaNya ia pulang. Namun, seperti yang dijelaskan kepada kita oleh Chittick, umat Islam sentiasa mengatakan yang proses datang dan pergi ini bukan hanya merujuk kepada peristiwa-peristiwa pada masa lalu dan masa akan datang tetapi juga pada masa sekarang.⁴⁶

Sulaiman nampaknya telah menamatkan kitaran pertama perjalanan seni beliau. Atas keyakinan betul-betulnya, Sulaiman menghidangkan kepada kita karya-karya *Insyirah* (2001) seolah-olah bagi mengizinkan siri itu menceritakan segala hasil daripada pancaran kreatif beliau. Siri-siri kecil dalam pameran ini sarat dengan unsur-unsur simbolisme dalam pelbagai bentuk metafora dan analogi. Karya-karya *Taman*, sebagai siri yang paling mewakili semangat *Insyirah*, bertujuan meninjau semula lingkungan luaran kewujudan duniawi seperti mahu memadan setiap butir-butir terperinci kepada dunia dalaman jiwa manusia dan justeru membayangkan persamaan dan kecocokan antara Taman Hati dengan Taman Jiwa. Yang menariknya, susunan-susunan pelbagai simbol itu mungkin juga menghasilkan perkara-perkara sampingan dalam bentuk kritikan-kritikan terhadap kononnya ketakserasian, ketakpadanan, ketakmunasabahan, serta lain-lain sindiran yang serupa – sama ada pandangan-pandangan itu berkenaan isu-isu formalistik mahupun bersabit dengan perwakilan-perwakilan yang diungkap oleh imej-imej tersebut. Sulaiman barangkali sudah menjangka akan menerima kritikan-kritikan sebegitu. Sungguhpun demikian, oleh kerana beliau pelukis yang sudah matang serta cekap dengan bahasa simbolisme, maka beliau benar-benar arif tentang penzahiran dan perupaan simbol-simbol yang mana teras



Convergence and Divergence II Cetakan Digital 37 x 45 cm 2000

realiti dan khayalannya, daya citarasa dan pembezaannya tidak berlandas pada mana-mana bentuk agama tertentu. Kesemua simbol bertindak sebagai praandaian terhadap kefahaman dan kesedaran metafizikal. Ini bermaksud, kehandalan Sulaiman dalam hal simbolisme merupakan natijah daripada kesedaran beliau terhadap kerelatifan bentuk-bentuk – serta prinsip-prinsip asas mereka. Seperti dinyatakan oleh Titus Burckhardt: “Hanya mereka yang memiliki ilmu yang menjangkau bentuk tahu mana satu bentuk yang diperlukan”.⁴⁷

Dari apa yang diperkatakan tadi, karya-karya Sulaiman dalam *Beauty and Diversity* serta *Convergence and Diversity* turut sama menjadi contoh-contoh representatif bagi siri *Insyirah*. Karya-karya tersebut menampilkan idea pelukis berkenaan pelestarian kesedaran terhadap misteri kosmos and keheningan fenomena yang ditayang menerusi imej-imej pratanggap atau imej-imej sedia ada sebagai usaha memaparkan makna-makna yang eksponential, namun tersebar ke seluruh alam semesta yang luas terbentang, kekal abadi dan tidak terperi. Bila kita mengambil imej karya seni sebagai satu punca mutlak, yang bebas daripada rujukan luaran yang pasti, kita sebenarnya menyamakan proses penglihatan terus kepada objek sebagai imej dengan proses pelambangan, dan kita jelmakan ia sebagai sebuah keindahan abadi. Sebagai penambahan, kita boleh katakan bahawa langkah menyeru dan membangkitkan keaktifan semangat dan tenaga manusia yang terpendam dalam lingkung kesempurnaan pengalaman kualitatif, menggesa kita memahami, memperbaharui dan memperluas kesedaran kita yang sedang meningkat. Maka langkah ini menindan proses pentafsiran di atas proses kreatif yang akhirnya membawa kepada pemahaman terhadap struktur dalamannya menerusi kerja-kerja seni rupa.

Sulaiman percaya bahawa memahami isu-isu yang berterusan wujud dalam segenap situasi, jika tidak berasaskan pada kebenaran-kebenaran abadi, tidak akan lagi menarik perhatian sesiapa. Atas alasan ini, beliau tidak henti-henti berikhtiar menimbulkan di dalam hati dan akal manusia kecenderungan dan kepentingan untuk menghubungkan manusia di sepanjang zaman dan dalam pelbagai suasana persekitaran serta menyedarkan mereka untuk sama-sama menginsafi ketekalan takdir spiritual mereka. Pameran *Raja'ah* ini menjadi bukti kepada usaha ini yang menyaksikan Sulaiman menggunakan kreativiti beliau sendiri demi mencari kaedah-kaedah bijak bagi mencungkil rujukan-rujukan penting dari al-Quran yang terus-menerus berjalanan dengan kehidupan seharian manusia, dan menterjemahkannya ke dalam karya-karya beliau. *Raja'ah* barangkali dapat juga mengingatkan para pelukis untuk memberi perhatian serius kepada model-model dan representasi-representasi di mana tradisi boleh menawarkan kepada mereka makna intrinsik dan nilai spiritual mereka, yang mana jika tidak berbuat demikian nescaya akan menjadi tandus dan sia-sia belaka.

*Diterjemahkan dari teks berbahasa Inggeris oleh:
Penterjemah I: Mohd Jamil bin Omar
Penterjemah II: Teratak Nuromar*

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Man and His World Mixed Media 164 x 247 cm 1972 | National Permanent Collection

AL INSYIRAH: A STATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE ARTIST'S CREATIVE JOURNEY

| Associate Professor Dr. Abu Talib Putih

Recalling Titus Burckhardt,¹ modern incomprehension of spirituality in art arises from one and the same error – seeing artistic symbolism as having no more than an individual, psychological or even merely sentimental bearing. While being blinded by its inclination of attaching the aspect of form only to sentiments, the modern mentality is sunk into further stupefaction by its prejudice of separating artistic intuition from science into two different domains.

To remain ignorant of spirituality is lamentable, but to continually neglect the spiritual in art especially by the Muslim artists, to Sulaiman Esa, is unfortunate. Therefore, making a recourse to the “spiritually-oriented traditional art”,² is his ultimate choice, and also his earnest call to other fellow artists. Insensitivity to own heritage and callousness of the past would only lead to indignity and defamation.

It has been all too evident that our contemporary life has gone too far in displacing tradition. As Sulaiman himself has admitted, “modern science and the power of reason” has robbed the modern society of its “metaphysics and tradition”, leaving only the mind with a worldview and its conception of art “divested of any spiritual and archetypal realm”.³ His interpretation of this epistemological and metaphysical shrinkage is astute. Further, his observation on the modern man’s denial of the spiritual and hermeneutic in favour of the exclusively scientific perspective, and the impact it has on artistic endeavour in modern life is well shared by Lipsey who noted that: “there is no orthodox spirituality in this century ... the culture at large has been amazingly unreceptive to the spiritual aspects of artists’ thought and work”.⁴ Art now has fallen away from the wholeness it once symbolised during the traditions of religious cohesiveness. It is this intense and essential feeling of loss that made Sulaiman move on setting out an exemplary attempt in working towards an art of spiritual content. And as it goes, he has since proven to have succeeded to a remarkably real degree. Despite the comment that Sulaiman is said to have reached the “pinnacle of” his “achievements” through his *Towards Tawhid* (1984) by displaying his scrupulous attempt “to articulate an Islamic/Pribumi aesthetic” and to emulate “the traditional idea of making as an invocation or a form of spiritual cleansing”,⁵ his *Insyirah* (2001) would seem to have a lot more to say about his perfecting the “spiritual cycle”, so to speak, in terms of fullness of his employing symbolic imagery in his art. Going further into this direction, the present show *Rajaah*, which means “to return”, sets a continuity in a move to recount in his works what Martin Lings termed as a renewal or restoration⁶ by way of reaffirming the use of, in Schuon’s words, “symbolical language of the great traditions of mankind”.⁷ Through this series, Sulaiman is determined by his own accord to rehearse, as it were, the engagement of *ta’wil*, a process of taking “something back to its origin”,⁸ hoping to further unveil the spiritual hermeneutics in his works.

That the spiritual will always remain largely unknown is part of its greatness.⁹ To access spirituality, one needs symbols to proceed in a life “journey towards a destination”.¹⁰ By Bakhtiar’s explanation, it is a journey in symbols in which man is set upon in increasing awareness of the higher reality within things in a process of his becoming further awakened and transformed. And “it is through symbols one expresses”.¹¹

The symbols surrounding our life are a mystery of a quality only to be unveiled by the yearning mind through a participation of so-called “symbol-making skill”.¹² Great artists known to have developed this skill display an exquisite ability in visceral responses, awareness of impulses, and fluency with a language of making connections with symbols. Symbols are inherent in all sacred art forms as “every form”, according to Burckhardt “is the vehicle of a given quality of being”.¹³

Sulaiman’s grasp of traditional symbolism is admirable. Having researched on the subject by culling references from authorities both local and abroad, he displays a virtuosic ability of weaving into his writing a deep knowledge of Islamic symbolism.¹⁴ To refresh, symbols are forms reenacting the sensible aspects of the metaphysical reality of things that exist whether or not man is aware of them. Rephrasing Andalan and Bakhtiar, art and crafts are to be produced by subscribing to the central postulate of the Way (*Tariqah*) so as to be conscious of the hidden meaning present in all things. Thus, the language of symbolism that the artist uses is to express the knowledge of such consciousness, acquired through the intellect.¹⁵

The two fundamental forms of symbols – the natural and the revealed – establish certain systems of order to be emulated by man through his art form in order to reflect the first principle (*Tawhid*), representing “unity within unity” and the effusion of Being that emanates from the One “multiplicity within unity”. The art form is a “container” (*zahir*) created through objective laws to hold “the contained” (*ruh*) in a symbolic recapitulation of the Archetype related through multiple states of being in hierarchical structure of Unity.¹⁶

Since art is a practice of symbolisation actualised through participation of what Burckhardt termed as man’s “intellectual vision”,¹⁷ it results in forms far surpassing the products of mere power of emotion. Intellect, when understood as *al’aqil*¹⁸ in Islamic tradition is far more comprehensive than reason and thought by virtue of its involving the intuition of timeless realities. The presence of these timeless realities in art has connection to the reference made by Martin Lings who claimed that “art ... in its highest aspects is inextricably bound up by spirituality”.¹⁹

Sulaiman’s embodiment of spirituality in his art bespeaks a quest to relive Hegel’s aphorism: “artist is spirit”²⁰ in a way to reposition the artist’s role in the contemporary society; thus, redefining aesthetic nuances to bear on a new signification. But of equal relevance, it is a consideration that echoes the resonance of Lipsey’s neologism “An art of our own - the spiritual in the twentieth century” whose essence is an exposition of learning “to see twentieth-century art with new eyes and minds, more sensitive to its spiritual ... content” and the “need to assemble our own conception of the spiritual in art”.²¹

To proceed on his own course in reference to both persuasions, Sulaiman sought to start off with reaffirming to invert the all-too-prevalent habit of secular consciousness of seeing what it implies to what can be deduced from a work of art. This is to say; Sulaiman is bent on re-asserting meanings that have, in Keeble’s terms,²² their reality in virtue of the presence of sapiential intuition, calling into play the role of undisclosed intuitive intellect in the way to restore, as it were, the perennial purpose of past great works of imaginative vision. Of necessity, he has worked to

transform the attributes that comprise pattern of temporal causality into the permanent, meta-historical level of reference.

Therefore, what follows is that the passing comments such as Sulaiman's "engagement with the debates around religion, culture and identity that shape society", his taking "on the question of how to be Malay Muslim and modern, and made that central to his work"²³ or "marks yet another shift in an art genre that develops in tandem with Malay nationalism and continuous search for Islamic identity"²⁴ have by now become vague claims to his true preoccupation in respect to his foregoing considerations. Sulaiman is getting firmer with his alignment to the question or "renewal", more than "development", as understood in Martin Lings'²⁵ sense of progress. Once the true renewal of meaning and value in life and art becomes the central issue, the attribution of his practice can no longer come about simply from arbitrarily rearranging our reaction to its external and contingent circumstances. Rather, it has to emerge from our obligation in admitting to an implied, pre-existing pattern according to which the new arrangement must be conceived. Given the traditional perspective, "such a pattern can only be located at its innermost source, where our true subject is rooted in the timeless matrix from which all orientation and renewal proceed".²⁶

It has now become more obvious that what matters pivotal to Sulaiman's concern is the perennial values to convey something timeless and in this respect escape historical conditions, not only in its genesis – but also in its preservation. It is with regard to this timeless meaning that certain forms have been preserved in spite of all material and psychic revolutions of an epoch. By virtue of this inclination, Sulaiman can be said to have departed from presenting works that constitute the kind of phenomenology, which grants too much credence to the so-called "fact of perception" and "aesthetic differentiation" in the way proposed by Merleau-Ponty²⁷ and Dufrenne.²⁸ In fact, he has since moved towards engaging Wilbur's²⁹ "transcendelia" to present the "mandalic or paradoxical thinking mind (intelligibilia)" in an attempt to reason about spirit. This involves, following Gadamer,³⁰ an effort to retrieve the question of artistic truth through the principle of the non-differentiation of aesthetic consciousness by reinstating the experience of art as central to our ontological concern for the meaning of being itself, of consciousness itself. In their varied degrees of subtlety, Sulaiman's series of works leading to *Insyirah* testify to this lore in terms of displaying the evolution of consciousness that can be likened to his interpreting a revealed text. While following his works, we are forced "upward" on the hierarchy of consciousness to an understanding of objectified traces of transcendelia. Beginning with making sense of his thread with an early preoccupation to project knowledge about "essence" on the basis Aristotelian quiddity,³¹ we are eventually led to move on into seeing his steady works that reflect the idea of "existence" as an "open clearing", thus, revealing the concept of "unhiddenness" to evoke, as it were, "Suhrawardi's idea of reality and knowing".³²

Given such a move and attitude of mind, Sulaiman Esa can be described as one of those artists who believe that art functions throughout the spectrum of consciousness. His series of works represent the stages in his creative journey to take on new meanings. Each series is a 'station' in the evolution of consciousness to move from the state of realising existence based of particularity and individuality, and collectivity to one of actualising universality and unity. He set the journey by first refuting the use of single vision that has restricted art only to its purely formal and aesthetic aspects, and proceeded to adopting a two-fold vision by engaging the spirit in seeing mind and matter, self and not-self, conscious and unconscious processes beyond their imaginary boundaries.

Through his art, Sulaiman assumed, so to speak, an analogical role of a *salik* seeker (of a Sufi). His progress in this sense is marked by the levels of understanding reality through a gradual lifting the veil to reach a station (*maqam*). For this reason, Ooi Kok Chuen's³³ description of *Insyirah* as to mark "the full cycle his spiritual quest on canvas," is true to the extent that it is as if to remind us of the culmination of the seven Sufi arc of Descent and Ascent, or the Malay "*Martabat Tujuh*" as Sulaiman himself has described.³⁴



Scroll No. 3 Acrylic on canvas 256 x 160 cm 1970

As it turned out, the range of Sulaiman's works produced over the last four decades exhibit features of a reasonable regularity. Although appearing in seemingly varied analogical and poetic assortments, all offer a shared postulate of multilevel meanings within the same medium. It will become immediately clear if one but takes the pain to peruse his works presented in those series of themes, one will run into a reality of seeing his artistic choice of forms pertains to inspired and regularly transmitted principles, capable of tangibly conveying the permanent and inexhaustible possibilities of the Spirit, thus implying a 'logic' in the universal sense of this term.

It is Lipsey who suggested that "the beginning of the spiritual must be this looking beyond or looking more deeply within".³⁵ Going by this suggestion, Sulaiman's works ought to be examined with a new imperative. Therefore, although his one of early series *Dokumentasi 72* is often touted as an attempt by the artist's seeking "to investigate into the natural and perceptual properties of art... based on constructive principles ... aiming ...for an art without metaphorical significance, stripped of literary, expressive and associative values"³⁶ there is an exception to such a claim. In his own statements about the works, it has been revealed that the key intentions of his works are to result "in ones heightened awareness of the Reality..." making them "aware of..." and inviting others "to look into... and through" his works.³⁷ All these are suppositions bearing on spiritual keenness.

If art is to proceed from the necessity to imply metaphysical context of wholeness and unity, the approach to it must be of proposing to rest all acts of human doing and making upon effective operations of metaphysical pre-conditions. Therefore, the notion of keeping faith with a perspective that situates and unites man with a cosmic and eschatological frame of reference must come with advancing a presupposition starting with the objective particularization of each thing of its unique qualities, to dissolving things into abstract conception. In this sense, for us to make our consciousness grasp the way in which particular and transient thing possess an immutable essence, we are urged to see it as a sign, in Brian Keeble's words, "significant" and "specific to the quality of Divine Reality".³⁸

The case of Sulaiman's *Scroll No. 3* (1970) is special in this reference. It is a work of art made part of a new world created by man. It is as definitely bounded off from the world of illusion as it is from the world of nature, daily convention, and practical affairs. Its presence does not have the vital ultimacy, neither the final hard reality of an actual object, but only a host of abstraction. Perceptions, formulae, happenings and values have a locus there, organised in an integral and self-contained entity. How everything fits together – is represented by the colourful stripes – as to reflect one's own brief illumination with whatever enduring light there may be but never be altogether resolved on the level of experience. In waiting are metaphysical and theological maps to produce profound psychologies and spiritual admonitions to indicate the pattern of the whole convincingly. The stripes are the vertical light for an inner vision to know and express in the world of brilliant colours so that a



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Alam dan Alamat IV Mixed media 79.5 x 194.5 cm 2000

veritable reversal of psychological perspective is demanded. As to what extent the strips form the zipper only to herald its opening in the eventual *Insyirah* is for one's speculative mind to verify.

Recalling Lipsey,³⁹ one of the great and rather sad secrets of art is that ordinary reality goes largely unobserved. However, the reality of physical experience sustained in an artistic image can be a guide to an entire creative process eventuating in a work. Going by Langer's⁴⁰ felicitous construction, the life of an image resembles the work of art as a whole held together only by activity. It is a kind of spirit that one can sense in *Compression* (1972). The work maintains itself through a life of shifting change under a simple qualitative impetus, or throbbing regurgitation in place almost numinously radiating from a centre. Persuasively, it also calls on us to see, initially at the corporeal level, the beauty of the work which is achieved by making an ideal permeate every part of the material, thereby giving the ideal a sensuous form. However, beyond it is a substantial reality capable of standing over against and for a time. Self-contained though the work be, with its own integrity, centre of gravity, and excellence in its own right it nevertheless recalls the sign in which the quiddity of objects being enlarged as if to re-enact what Martin Lings referred to the Hindu *Prakriti*, a perfect equilibrium between the upward, the expansive, and the downward tendencies, *sattwa*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.⁴¹

It is as though Sulaiman has already intuited that the spiritual would find its way to makes itself known slowly in the course of his work. It needn't even be called 'the spiritual', but words of some kind will be found to describe man's arrival at certain status or dignity as represented in *Man and His World* (1974). As it appears, the work points to us that man has constituted his world but not *ex nihilo*. His creation is only re-creation. In positing his world, man only knows God's creation. However, being an *insan* (the forgetful), he is often oblivious, seeing this world and everything related to it as if it is essentially dependent on man. To the extent that the title coincided with a world exhibition whose theme is *Man and His World*, in 1967, it shares a common concern to display aspects of man's life and activities. In a way, it resonates S H Nasr's plea that we "pause for a moment and pose the question who is this man to whom the world is said to belong".⁴² The content touches on questions of vital concern, revealing what excellence is believed to be and therefore what men should do appeals to and involves men's private, innermost being. To be sure, it is not enough for man to realise the total possibility of his own existence, to become fully conscious of himself, to gain that treasure of felicity and peace that he seeks outwardly here and there but never seems to find.

The initial steps toward man's intellectual and cultural life may be described as an act which involves a sort of mental adjustment to the immediate environment. But as human culture progresses we very soon meet with an opposite tendency of human life. The question remains as to how development and progress - both individually and culturally is raised in Sulaiman's *Waiting for Godot* (1977). The answers present themselves. It can be gleaned from the



Meditation I Mixed media 217.5 x 80 cm 2010
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)

artist's dialectical dimension of development. For what we begin to see in the artist's meditation on his own situation in relation to the world of art was a perceptible "drift" between the given and the possible, between what was and what could be. The artist had become haunted by images of the real and the true, and these, juxtaposed against the possibility of his own charade, seemingly to serve as provocation for him to at least consider ways of resolving a tragic contradiction. Occasionally, if the strain of the dialectic becomes palpable enough and desire manages to break through, into consciousness, development solves its own problems; the anxiety of the liminal projects itself forward, in the direction of its dispersion.

However, these phases of action and reaction being mainly a dialogue between man and his image are but an ambiguous play of psychological mirrors. It dawned upon Sulaiman that such kind of "psychologism" was not directly concerned with the spiritual truth, but mere capturing of "the psychological impulse that had only led to one's personal "artistic expression".⁴³ This awareness of doing away with promethean obsession drew him near to the idea of looking for models that tradition can offer him intrinsic meaning and spiritual worth.

On a purely human and rational knowledge, one often sees the antithesis between East and West, in the present state of things.³⁴ It is mentioned that while the modern West maintains the superiority of action over contemplation, the East upholds the superiority of contemplation over action. Such bipolarity of stances coincides with the opposition between the traditional and the anti-traditional outlook. As it has been reasoned out, in the intellectual state of the West world metaphysics is a thing forgotten, while in East it still remains the object of effective knowledge.⁴⁴ Thus, it is to the East that one must look if one wishes to discover some of the metaphysical traditions. Going by this justification, Sulaiman's move to present the *Towards A Mystical Reality* (1974),⁴⁵ together with Redza Piyadasa, was highly justifiable. Although appearing somewhat paradoxical, it signified Sulaiman's steady steps to reaching out further into the metaphysics, thus strengthening his already acquired aptitude of seeing things as essentially above and beyond all forms and all contingencies.

It is important to point out that Sulaiman is a thinker-artist. Being well equipped with a sharp analytic ability, he is able to analyse his basic metaphysical experience into well-defined concepts and then to put these concepts together in the form of a scholastic system of imagery. His *Meditation* (1979) is presented to invite us to start looking beyond not only the interlacing void but also the possibility of plenitude – of life fulfilled in wider and deeper terms. Far from being a superficial Islamic and Malay overlay, the work is an expression of the artist that serenity is not disturbed by any emotion. It also invokes in us a contemplative thought whose external logic is dependent on its inner vision, guiding us not to 'describe' realities that are directly perceived but to 'construct' mental justifications on the basis of preconceived ideas of some kind, which may indeed be true, but are 'accepted' rather than 'understood'.

In his growing confidence, Sulaiman poses the entirety of his mature art to represent an effort of bringing his own definition to his art that it must be thought of as "truly spiritual." As we follow his ideas, we need to view his art not only as a major aesthetic innovation but also as a spiritual art struggling toward a pure expression of truth. This is nowhere more apparent than in Sulaiman's *Towards Tawhid* (1984), which expresses his consciousness of reality by recognizing and uniting with the universal. Such recognition gives him the greatest aesthetic satisfaction and an elevated sense of beauty. The increase in consciousness towards the reality means his more heightened satisfaction. By the same token, the more determined this union with the universal is felt, the more his individual subjectivity diminishes. This is because *Tawhid* reminds us that everything is from God and everything goes back to Him. However, as Chittick has told us, Muslims have always insisted that this coming and going is not only a reference to past and future events but also to the present moment.⁴⁶

Sulaiman has seemed to have completed, so to speak, the first cycle of his artistic journey. In his perfect confidence, Sulaiman has his *Insyirah* (2001) presented to us as if to let it speak for all



Beauty in Diversity I Mixed Media 287.5 x 273.5 cm 2000

results of his creative illumination. The series are loaded with symbolism in a variety of metaphors and analogies. The *Gardens* being the most representative of the series are to rehearse the outer world of earthly existence as if to correspond in all its detail to the inner world of man's soul reflecting, as it were, the correspondence between the Garden of the Heart and the Garden of the Soul. Interestingly, those arrays of varied symbols may well spin off criticisms of their seeming incompatibility, mismatch, absurdity and the like insinuations – be they the views of formalistic issues or representations the images carry. Sulaiman would have expected all such criticisms. However, by virtue of his being a matured artist, and having a good command of symbolism, he has a perfect knowledge of its appearance whose basis of reality and unreality, discernment and discrimination is not dependent on any special religious forms. They are all presuppositions of metaphysical understanding and consciousness. This is to say, Sulaiman's adeptness in symbolism owes to his awareness of the relativity of forms – as well their necessity. As Titus Burckhardt puts it: "Only a man whose knowledge transcends forms knows what forms involve".⁴⁷

That being said, Sulaiman's pieces in *Beauty and Diversity* and *Convergence and Diversity* are equally representative of the series. They are to carry the artist's idea of preserving a sense of cosmic mystery and the transparency of phenomenon projected through existing or preconceived images in order to portray meanings which are exponential, but exfoliating out into the vastness of cosmic, the eternal and the ineffable. When taking artistic image as an absolute origin, independent of a definite external reference, we are indeed equating the direct vision of the thing as image with symbolisation, and make it incarnate as timeless beauty. By way of extension, we can say that summoning and evoking into active operation the human vitality which dwells within the fullness of qualitative experiencing, is forcing us to understand, renew, and enlarge our developing consciousness. This superimposes an interpretive process upon a creative process that leads to an understanding of the deep structure through representational act.

Sulaiman believes in penetrating into issues that persist in the face of conditions, when not founded upon perennial truths, would have long ceased to be of interest to anybody. For this reason, he has worked unrelentlessly to summon in the human heart and mind those resonances of affinity and significance to link people of all ages and differing climes and bring them to a common recognition of their unchanging, spiritual destiny. The present show *Raja'ah* is a testimony to this effort in which Sulaiman exploits his own ingenuity to find skilful means to draw out resonant references from the Qur'an that weave seamlessly into everyday human life, and translate them into his works. Perhaps, *Raja'ah* can also remind artists to pay keen regard to the models in which tradition can offer them their intrinsic meaning and spiritual value, which would otherwise be left sterile.

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47. Burckhardt, T. 2001, p. 317.

ABU TALIB PUTIH was born in Pekan, Pahang in 1952. He attended the Temenggong Ibrahim Teachers' College, Johor Bahru and graduated with a Teacher Certificate in 1973. He also attended the MARA Institute of Technology School of Art and Design (now the UiTM Faculty of Art and Design) and was awarded a Diploma in Art and Design (Fine Art) in 1981. He obtained a Master of Arts degree in Art Education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA in 1988 and a Doctor of Education degree in 1997.

He was a secondary school teacher for a few years. He first served the University of Malaya in 1983 as an art tutor at its Cultural Centre, then under the directorship of Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal. In 1990 he was appointed as a faculty member in the Department of Educational Foundations and Humanities, Faculty of Education, and was entrusted with the teaching of art education to undergraduate TESL students. He had initiated the establishment of art education as a core area in the programme of Master of Education and was promoted to Associate Professor in 2003. He was initiated as a member on Kappa Delta Pi in 1988 and into the University Of Illinois Chapter Of Phi Delta Kappa in 1994, and has been a member of National Art Education Association since 1998.





Alam dan Alamat III Mixed media 85 x 190 cm 2000

CONSIDERING IDENTITY

| Laura Fan,
The Edge, February 21, 2001

Insyirah: The Art of Sulaiman Esa from 1980-2000 presents an overview of the artist's contribution to Malaysia art. Comprehensive and intelligently presented, it allows viewers to view the dimensions of the artist's practice. The wall text also aids understanding considerably, identifying the varied concepts Sulaiman draws on for his work.

The overview grants an unflinching view of the artist's practice. In term of aesthetics, the work varies with peaks in the *Tawhid* and the *Gardens* series. Other works such as the recent *Beauty in Diversity* have not yet achieved a similar level of synthesis between concept and form.

However, it is only in looking at the spectrum of Sulaiman's practice can one see the engagement with the debates around religion, culture and identity which shape society. Sulaiman took on the question of how to be Malay, Muslim and modern and made that central to his practice although recent works reflect a self-conscious effort to represent a more pluralistic outlook.

His early *Pribumi* series incorporates emblems of a Malay cultural identity within traditional Western paintings formats. Batik motifs and other emblems appear within a grid pattern, the classic device used from the Renaissance to structure a painting. The use of abstracted sections and the refusal to rely on direct symbolism attest to Sulaiman's desire to bring together the traditional and modern. The effect is forced but is an important transitional step to his latter series.

This interest in the grid resurfaces in his *Tawhid* series. In this series, he incorporates the Malay craft tradition and uses thread to form a grid pattern. This series sees the marrying of geometric characteristic of Islamic art and the traditional Western painting grid structure. Certain works such as his *Marakesh I*, use evocative washes and colours to evoke the mysterious allure of a location without relying on realism. It's a combination that works well, the mathematic precision of the grid contrasts with the romantic washes, the metallic colours of the thread is enriched by the darker jewel-like tones of the underpainted lines. Moreover, the texture produced by the yarns is contradicted by the emphatic two-dimensionality of the work as a whole.

The use of colour and thread is picked up and used towards attaining even more complexity for his *Gardens* series. At times the palette can veer towards the saccharine, however, at others, it is very harmonious. Sulaiman embraces the decorativeness of Malay aesthetics and deepens it by using that to express Islamic concepts.

Gardens as metaphors for Paradise, the just reward for doing good and being devout, becomes the central symbol for this series. He depicts various gardens, including the *Enclosed Garden of Truth I* and *Garden of Certainty III*. Through palette and composition, he symbolically represents these realms. *Garden of Certainty III* emanates a sense of calm confidences. The work is centrally composed using muted tones. The resulting image has a subtle regular patterning forming the stable foundation for the emerging pattern. It's an unexpectedly successful combination.

His latest *Convergence and Divergence* series reflects a desire to include and respect the varied religious practices of Malaysia. It's a laudable endeavour but the work itself is still in a early stage and lacks the considered application and careful crafting found in previous series.

ON A SPIRITUAL QUEST

| Ooi Kok Chuen

New Straits Times, February 19, 2001

NSYIRAH (Spiritual Awakening) marks the face of change in Sulaiman Esa's 20-year devotion to Islamic art, and one full circle in this highly spiritual quest on canvas.

From the highly provocative *Waiting For Godot* to his present *Doa* (from the *Aku* group show), the in-between series of sacred supplications in cosmogonic geometry of symmetry and beauty has crystallised, in recent years, into a more encompassing concept of *Tawhid* (Unity with God).

They are still expressions of Allah's divine attributes - his limitless, transcendence and infinite presence.

Many used to Sulaiman's monolithic, monotheistic paeans and invocations, which are also dual acts of spiritual cleansing with *Zikir* (Remembrance) and *Fikir* (Contemplation), would have been flabbergasted.

In his new *Convergence and Divergence* series, symbolic totems of other faiths like Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism are also juxtaposed with Islamic aesthetics, forming a mandala of divine lights.

This "dramatic" change, presaged by his *Doa* in which he uses the figure again, a self-portrait at that, throws Islamic art, speciously thought by the uninformed to be just a phalanx of geometric patterns and harmonious colours, into something more dynamic and vibrant, while not losing indeed enhancing, its philosophical timbre.

His bold, more holistic and universal interpretations of *Tawhid* will have more far-reaching impact than he could ever imagine.

Sulaiman, after all, speaks with the authority of a Ph.D in Islamic Studies (at Temple University in Philadelphia in the United States). His is a brand inspired by the progressive thoughts of eminent scholars like Seyyed Hoessein Nasr, Ismail and Lamya' al Faruqi, Martin Lings, Ibrahim T. Burckhardt and F. Schoun.

This could well open the floodgates to a kind of "liberalism".

Many young Muslim-Malay artists less knowledgeable but with the same deference have found themselves in a cul-de-sac of iconographic straitjackets and what they see as uncompromising ideology.

"I no longer subscribe to the kind of monolithic design. I have said what I want to say about Islamic art as I see it. Now I am moving out of it, not moving out to reject it but broadening my horizon" says Sulaiman.

"I don't feel I'm obliged to repeat the kind of structure. The space is also hierarchical, not structural.

"I don't see Islam in the context of Malay and Muslim but Islam as a religion having a dialogue with other religious traditions. It's my new departure from my works, especially in the context of

Malaysia today. When people talk about religion, it's something that divides us, not unites us.

("I want to) show that Islam is not like that. No. True Islam is the religion of peace, which talks about integration.

"If before, when I talk about arabesque, you have all the patterns, every part of the pattern to shape, needing each other to make it into a whole thing.

"Now I see arabesque with socio-religious meaning... like every religion needing each other as support. They have something else you don't have. When we diverge, we respect.

"If before I see *Tawhid* (unity, oneness) within the Islamic context, (now) it is tied with more universal values.

"The great Sufi sage, Jalaluddin al-Rumi, said different religions are like different rays that emanate from the sun. All prophets speak the same truth but in different tongues" says Sulaiman.

"It's another implication of the concept of *Tawhid*. *The oneness of mankind, and to mankind as a single nation*.

Because in Islam, in the Quran, men are created in different types and in different races, not for you to condemn each other, but to know each other. And the best of you is the most righteous.

"I am moving to another phase about shared vision. I still use figures even though Islam says it's prohibited. But in Aku, I defend it. It's conditional, it's not absolute".

By this, Sulaiman stresses that he is not advocating syncretism.

Waiting for Godot, with a nude female figure in provocative poses superimposed on to his composition filled with sacred *surahs* is one of the most powerful Islamic artworks. Not because a nude figure was used, but the wit, irony and subtlety of the tensions and struggles between the flesh and the spiritual.

Godot has become a byword of a futile longing tinged with mystery, an eagerly awaited somebody who won't show up but still elicit a kind of eternal vigil.

This work (1979) was painted at a threshold of the looming resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism espoused by Ayatollah Khomeini.

Godot was a nude painting with the figure looking down. And Aku with myself looking up" Sulaiman puts it succinctly.

It was my response to social-political condition.

Godot was my entry point to Islam, I just came back from overseas, from Paris, from painting in the west. I came back to Malaysia, meeting this tradition, which is to be my own tradition".

"So being still not deep in Islam, I just responded intuitively to the image of the mosque and the woman. I was just trying to say who I am. It just happens. It can't be explained rationally. It's fun, by accident ... I just respond to the image, to the shape of the dome, the mosque... something in me said, it's good. I didn't even write down a statement. It just happened".

"My Muslim friend said that was sacrilegious, blasphemous, an affront to Islam".

"I don't feel guilty about it. (It was) my response to my own self, having this conflict of civilisation. A Western background and being a Muslim and Malay coming back again. How do I insert myself into that reality?"

"And in *Aku*, now that I know myself better, I am not afraid to paint figures. It's part of the growing

process,” he said.

Godot was an open-plate etching produced in the wake of the artist's *Colours Field*, *Constructivist* and *Conceptual* experiments which culminated in *Mystical Reality*, the controversial collaboration with Redza Piyadasa.

It is taken as “a point of reflection and inflection at which the artist sought resolution to his personal and artistic conflicts between the modern and the traditional, the western and the Islamic”.

His development is chronologically pigeonholed there after as *Pribumi* (traditional Malay arts and craft), *Tawhid*, *Garden of Mystery*, *Penghormatan Untuk* (Sufi master Ustaz) *Nakula*, *Umno Mural* (for the Umno head quarters in 1985), *Doa*, *Alam & Alamat*, *Last Supper* (at Bukit Aman), and *Convergence and Divergence*.

Sulaiman's more sacred Islamic art, though he prefers the term Islamic-inspired, comes in various shapes and sizes and in various media from paper cut-outs, stencils, bamboo, yarn, gold thread, handmade paper and fabric dye.

He also innovated the prayer rug (*sejadah*) into the painting format, using it as a heavenly, sacred space with all the inherent ornamentative qualities, while also adding a more metaphysical spectrum to colours.

His *Last Supper*, his only works that fall under the sociological/political category, is a quest for truth in a different way. So the artist as a social activist can fall under the Islamic Art penumbra, seen as a modern day Khalifah (Vicegerant).

On *Doa*, the perception of the self is shaped by the Sufi version of *Tawhid* in which man is seen as a microcosm who is ontologically interrelated with the cosmos and God, which refers to the macrocosm and the metacosm respectively.

The *Surah Ikhlas* on top represents the transcendence of God, his immanence in the cosmos, while the supplicator is small.

This work is also developed into a series of digital prints, bringing to mind the ground-breaking 1980s *Digital-Collage* of the late Ismail Zain.

Sulaiman, Ismail and Piyadasa formed the intellectual triumvirate that dominated Malaysian art in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The figure is used in mock-Leonardo da Vinci proportions.

“After all, God has created Man in the best of form. I am using the Quran in its more open and broader form, the concept of beauty and the unity and divine attributes alluding Man is theomorphic,” says Sulaiman.

On the less sanctimonious note and away from just quintessential tessellations, Sulaiman's Islamic modernism promise greater dimensions and advancement of Islamic thoughts and forms.

BUILDING BRIDGES TO PROMOTE DIVINE UNITY

| Veronica Shunmugam

Sunday STAR, March 18, 2001

Islamic art in Malaysia broke an impasse last month when associate professor Dr Sulaiman Hj Esa, a pioneer of Islamic modernism in contemporary Malaysian art, held a solo exhibition entitled *Insyirah – The Art of Sulaiman Esa from 1980 to 2000 at Galeri Petronas*.

In conjunction with this display, Sembang-sembarang with Sulaiman Esa (a discussion with Sulaiman Esa) was held at the gallery.

Speaking to artists, art lovers, educators and journalists, Sulaiman trailblazed once more into the controversial realm of Islamic art in this country.

With conviction steaming from more than two decades of experience, Sulaiman boldly tackled issues like the use of human, animal and non-Islamic images.

Debunking common misperceptions of Islamic art, Sulaiman, 60, made known that there is no absolute in Islamic art: "Islamic art has so many interpretations because there are so many scholars of the field. Islamic art is not monocultural as there is also the Islamic art of the Malay, North African and Chinese world. Islamic art is not only calligraphy. Art should encompass more than this."

Sulaiman's stand marks yet another shift in an art genre that develops in tandem with Malay nationalism and continuous search for Islamic identity.

Insyirah curator, Niranjan Rajah, write in the exhibition notes that although earlier modernist painters had used Islamic alphabet and calligraphy, it was not until the 1980s that Islam came to the fore in modern Malaysian art.

During the decade, many young Malay artists turned from non-Islamic art traditions in the course of an Islamisation wave. However, some bumiputra artists like Bayu Utomo Radjikin found pure geometry parochial and unable to represent the country's multiculturalism as well as the reality of social problems like child abuse and pollution. The result was a divide between Malay Muslim artists who faced an impasse on how to integrate Islamic art with Malaysian culture.

Undaunted, Sulaiman's work shows him to have been developing a solution to the 80s dilemma even before Bayu Utomo's breakaway. *Insyirah* displays Sulaiman's works from the 70s which were inspired by *pribumi* or indigenous art.

"I used hand-made paper to create many of these artworks which reflect a time when I was trying to grapple with my Malay Muslim and Asian identity. The whole process is my way of emulating the indigenous culture. Also, exploring material is one of the characteristics of modern art," he explains.

Niranjan writes that throughout the 80s and 90s, Sulaiman integrated Islamic geometry with Malay craft traditions in an attempt to practice Malaysian modernism within the parameters of Islam and Malay nationalism.

Sulaiman attributes his penchant for Islamic art to growing up in a normal Malay Muslim family who were not fanatically religious. At 21, he began formal art studies at Hornsey College of Art, London and Atelier 14, Paris. Later, he pursued an MA in Fine Art at Maryland Institute College of

Art and Ph.D in Islamic Studies at Temple University in the United States.

“As a 20-something artist, my heroes were Van Gogh and David Hockney. I was overwhelmed by the western masters so when I returned home, my paintings were very Constructivist, hard-edge and very much influenced by line, colour and shape.

“However, Islam was deeply embedded in me and after a while, I realised that one just can’t be borrowing from the West. In the 1970s, I started flirting with Islamic art and in the 1980s, I studied under Islamic scholars during my Ph.D studies. So in the 1990s, I produced heavier Islamic artworks using geometry,” he explains in relation to his recent, bolder works.

“Before my *Tauhid* series, I abstained from the figure because I thought, at that time, that it was *haram*. It is not *haram* if the figure is used to enhance the image and moral and ethical teachings of Islam. For instance, a figure of a woman reading the Quran, a man praying in the mosque or a son kissing his mother during Ramadan – these do not denigrate Islam but instead promote it.

“God said, ‘I created man in the superior form’. I paint a man surrounded by geometric pattern to show that Man is a perfect creation of God and is therefore as perfect as the geometric patterns in Islamic art.

“I never do anything not allowed by the Quran. I work within the parameters of Islam.”

In paintings like *Doa* and *Waiting for Godot*, there are two zones. The upper zone represents the macrocosm or the cosmos where Sulaiman places God. The lower zone represents the microcosm where human figure are placed.

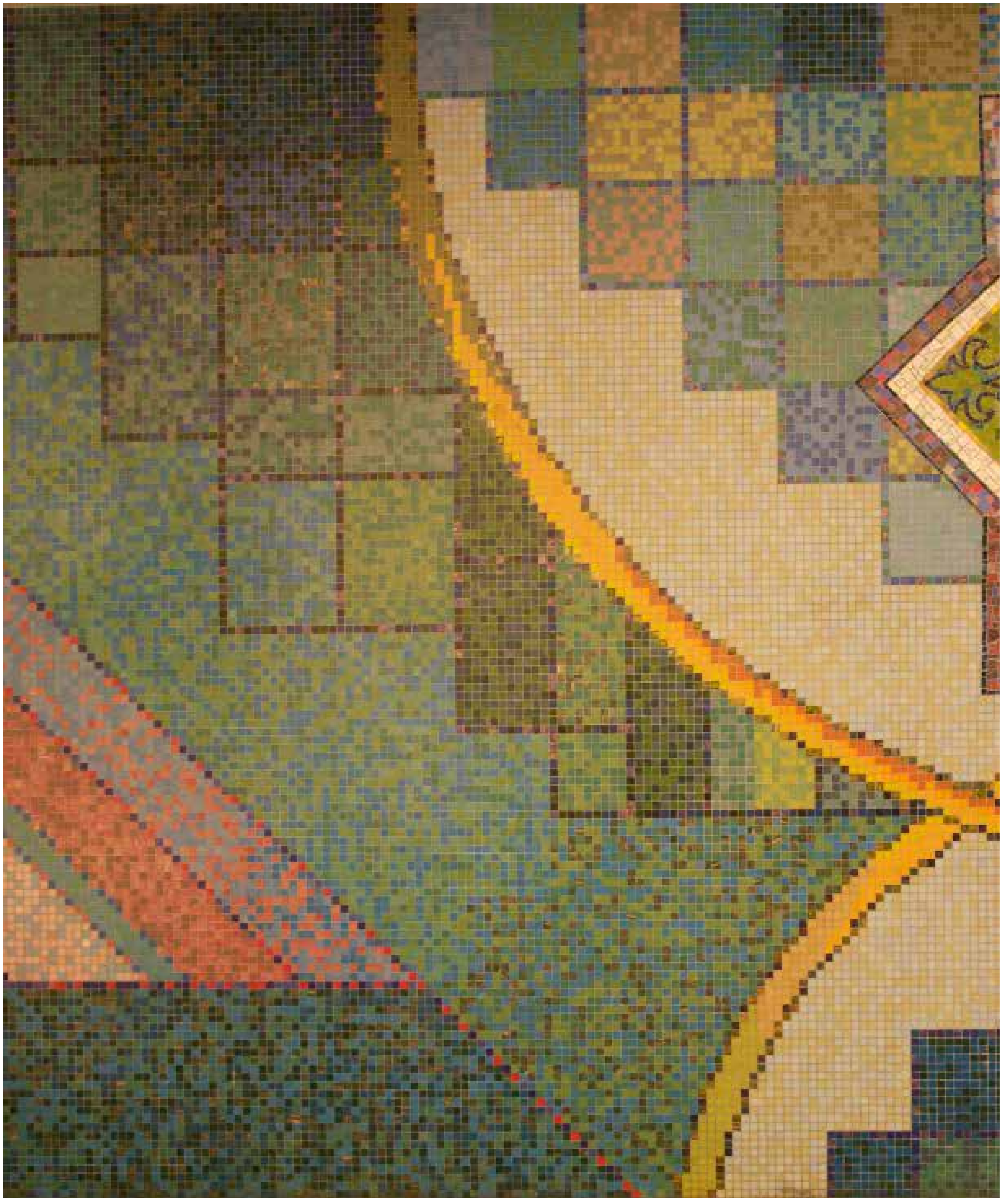
Of his works like *Convergence and Divergence* which have symbols from other religions, Sulaiman states: “Islam is a religion of peace and harmony. We are all fellow travelers searching for truth.”

Sulaiman also answers critics of Islamic art who say that it is an artform that looks backwards instead of forwards.

“For modernist, art must be avant-garde and move forward. They reject religion which they see as old. Their concept of time and space is linear as they have western sensibilities. However, for Islamic art, to go back is to move towards the origin of Islam: God.

A case in point, Sulaiman’s use of colours are actually various shades of the spectrum blended to originate from one point. Although this effect was not intentional, he admits to being conscious of colour.

“Colour is one of my major points in the 20 years of works that you see in *Insyirah*. Green represents Islam, red symbolises Chinese culture, yellow denotes Buddhism and so on.





MURAL UMNO

UMNO MURAL

4.

WARNA WIRA

| Satu Rakaman Simbolis “Perjuangan UMNO”

Pereka: Sulaiman Esa

Kontraktor: Tetuan Bina Warehouse, Kuala Lumpur

Pembekal/Pembuat: Italian Mosaic Spallinbigo, Venice, Italy

Saiz sebenar mural: 10’ tinggi x 168’ lebar

Bahan: Mozek kaca Itali

Tempat: Pusat Dagangan Dunia Putra, Kuala Lumpur

Tahun: 1985

PENGENALAN

Dalam persediaan untuk menghasilkan rekabentuk mural ini beberapa garis panduan telah ditetapkan kepada pelukis, khususnya terhadap aspek tema dan juga beberapa aspek tertentu yang perlu ditonjolkan.

Menurut garis panduan ini, tema yang telah dipilih ialah ‘Perjuangan UMNO’ sementara tiga aspek penting yang perlu dititiberatkan ialah:

- 1) Aspek semangat perjuangan
- 2) Ciri Islam sebagai unsur penting yang mendasari keseluruhan perjuangan UMNO
- 3) Aspek identiti Melayu

Memandangkan penggunaan satu pendekatan yang bersifat ‘literal’ dan ‘realistik’ dalam menginterpretasikan aspek semangat perjuangan ini mungkin akan menghasilkan satu karya yang kaku dan dangkal, pelukis telah memilih satu pendekatan yang bersifat interpretatif—iaitu dengan menekankan pertimbangan-pertimbangan formalistik dan simbolik.

Pencapaian olahan ini adalah melalui penggunaan unsur-unsur formal seperti:

- 1) Warna-warna yang kontras dan berlawanan—seperti merah dan hijau (tetapi dijalin sedemikian rupa supaya ianya tetap menarik dan berharmoni).
- 2) Juga menerusi pengolahan bentuk-bentuk yang bersifat agresif dan tajam.

- 3) Dan akhirnya menerusi pengutaraan simbol-simbol yang konkrit seperti keris, yang secara tersirat dikaitkan dengan idea keberanian, perjuangan dan keperwiraan.

Aspek unsur Islam:

Pengutaraan aspek unsur Islam dalam mural ini dilakukan menerusi pengolahan bentuk-bentuk klasik yang terdapat dalam rekabentuk geometrik seni Islam yang pada dasarnya mencerminkan konsepimbangan, aturan, kejelasan dan keharmonian.

Aspek Identiti Melayu:

Seterusnya demi mewujudkan ‘suasana’ dan aspek identiti Melayu dalam pengolahan mural ni, pelukis telah merujuk kepada penggunaan motif-motif serta simbol-simbol yang terdapat dari hasil kraftangan tradisional Melayu seperti senireka songket, tenunan kelalai dan ukiran kayu.

Di samping itu, beberapa ikonografik tertentu dipilih untuk menggambarkan aspek kehidupan dan kebudayaan orang Melayu—contohnya motif-motif pucuk rebung, sulur bayu dan kerawang yang pada dasarnya mempunyai pengertian yang mendalam dari segi budaya dan falsafah hidup bangsa Melayu.

Di samping penggunaan simbol-simbol yang merujuk kepada aspek agama dan budaya ini, juga terdapat pengutaraan simbol yang berkait dengan aspek nasionalisme dan politik – seperti simbol bendera Malaysia, bunga raya simbol ASEAN dan logo UMNO.

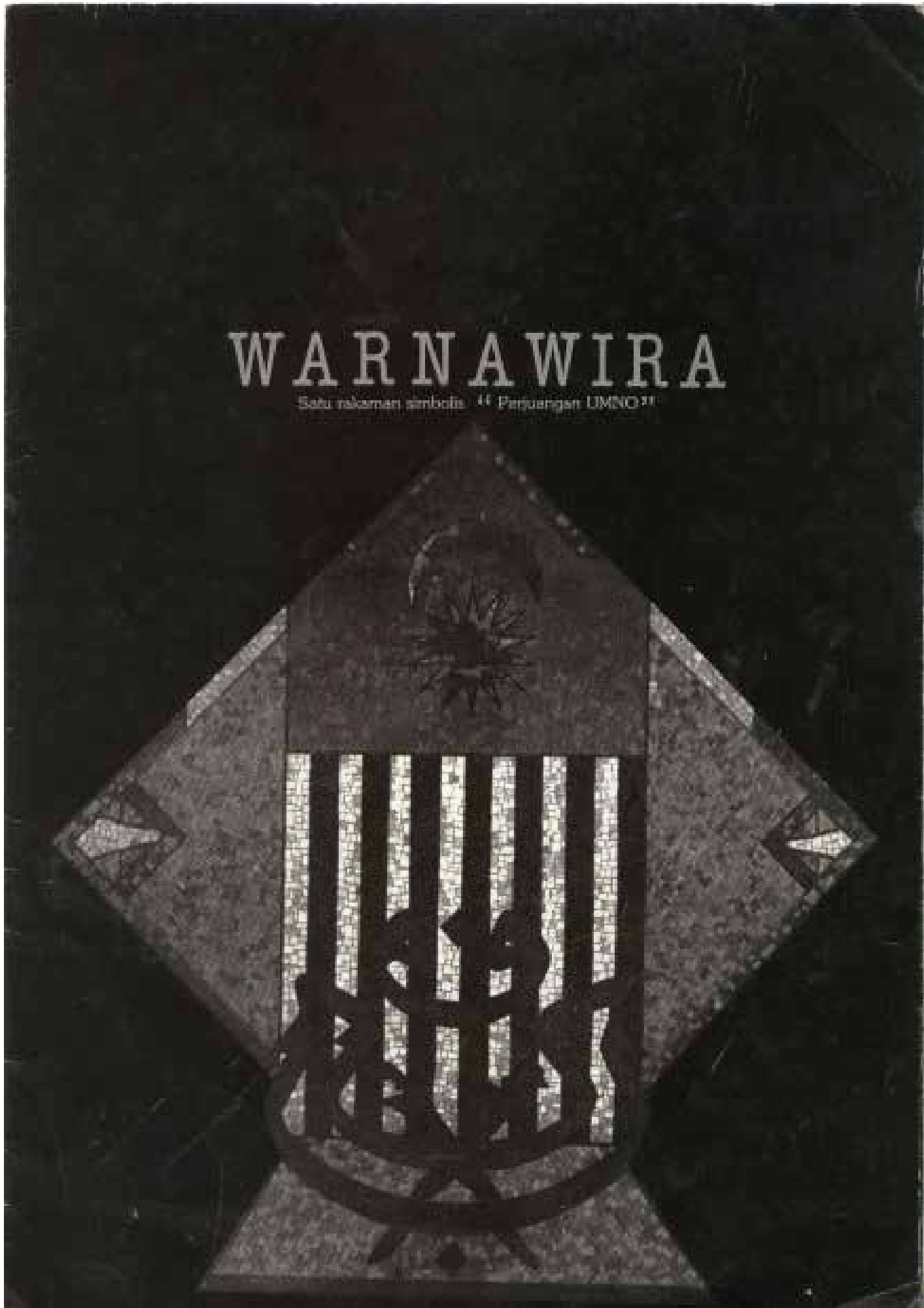
Aspek isi kandungan mural:

Sekiranya ditinjau dari segi sejarah perkembangannya, UMNO, sebagai sebuah parti yang ‘dinamik’ telah menjalankan pelbagai usaha dan mencapai pelbagai kejayaan demi kepentingan dan kesejahteraan agama, negara dan bangsa. Walau bagaimanapun dalam usaha menghasilkan mural ini sebagai satu hasil seni, fakta pertimbangan formalistik dan estetik perlu diberi tekanan yang wajar supaya terdapat perimbangan di antara Isi dan Bentuk, aspek realiti dan kreativiti. Oleh yang demikian untuk dijadikan isi kandungan mural ini, pelukis telah memilih hanya detik-detik dalam sejarah perjuangan UMNO yang benar-benar difikirkan penting.

Secara kasar mural ini mengandungi enam panel, di mana tiap-tiap satunya menggambarkan kemuncak terhadap satu-satu aspek aktiviti UMNO. Namun demikian, pengolahan rekabentuknya masih memaparkan kesinambungan dan kesatuan di antara keenam-enam panel ini.

WARNAWIRA

Satu rekaman simbolis "Perjuangan UMNO"



WARNA WIRA

| A symbolic documentation of “The Struggle of UMNO”

Designer: Sulaiman Esa

Contractor: Tetuan Bina Warehouse, Kuala Lumpur

Supplier/Maker: Italian Mosaic Spallinbigo, Venice, Italy

Real size of mural: 10' height x 168' width

Medium: Italian glass mosaic

Venue: Putra World Trade Center, Kuala Lumpur

Year: 1985

INTRODUCTION

In designing this mural, a broad but clear guidelines were given to the artist with regard to the theme as well as the general mood which the mural should project.

The guidelines stipulated that the central theme should be ‘The Struggle of UMNO’ and that the following three aspects should be emphasised, namely:

- 1) The spirit of the struggle
- 2) Islam as the foundation of all it's activities
- 3) The Malay identity

Since a ‘literal’ or ‘realistic’ interpretation of this spirit of struggle would be clumsy and narrow in significance, the artist has decided to interpret it in a more abstract manner –ie. formalistically and symbolically. This was to be achieved through manipulation of ‘contrasting’ and ‘clashing’ colours, such as red and green (which would nevertheless still be harmonious and aesthetically pleasing), through sharp, spiky shapes and through more concrete symbols such as the ‘keris’, standing erect and proud, yet taking it's place naturally within the composition of more abstract shapes.

Islam was to be represented by the classic forms of the geometric patterns of Islamic art, with their qualities of balance, order, clarity and serene harmony.

The Malay identity was to be based on symbols and on images from the traditional crafts. Motifs were borrowed from songket designs, women mats and wood-carvings, whilst certain iconographic images were selected to represent various aspects of Malay life – the Malaysian flag and hibiscus flower as symbols of nationalism, the bamboo shoot (*pucuk rebung*) and meandering plant motifs

(*kerawang*) of wood-carving to represent Malay culture, traditional geometric motifs to represent spiritual (Islamic base of Malays life, and the symbols of UMNO and of ASEAN to represent the political activities.

In terms of the overall pictorial contents of the mural, the artist has chosen to view the UMNO struggle in terms of broad areas of achievement as a literal chronological record of every single achievement or activity of UMNO over the decade would be visually overwhelming and too mundane.

The mural is thus composed of six panels each high-lighting a particular aspect of UMNO activities. These panels nevertheless flow imperceptibly into one another, creating a continuous and harmonious whole.



PANEL 1

(dilihat dari kanan ke kiri)

Panel ini melambangkan era bibit-bibit kebangkitan Nasionalisme Melayu. Terdapat simbol-simbol utama seperti 'perisai' dengan motif seni Islam di tengahnya diapit oleh dua bilah keris. Secara simbolik imej-imej ini melambangkan teras semangat keperwiraan dan kepahlawanan ahli-ahli UMNO yang sanggup berjuang dan berkorban dalam usaha menuntut kemerdekaan demi menegakkan keunggulan dan keutuhan agama, negara dan bangsa.

(seen from right to left)

This panel depicts the era of Malay nationalism. The chief symbols here are a shield with an Islamic motif in its center, flanked by a pair of 'keris', representing the spirit of fearless struggle and loyalty with special reference to the fight for the nation's independence in the name of race, religion and country.



PANEL 2

Panel ini merupakan satu kesinambungan dan perkembangan dari panel pertama tadi. Ianya melambangkan kewujudan sebuah negara yang MERDEKA –(hasil dari kemuncak perjuangan parti UMNO) iaitu negara Malaysia, negara kita yang benar-benar merdeka, makmur, berdaulat dan berbudaya. Simbol bendera Malaysia yang dilingkungi oleh bentuk geometrik Islam melambangkan negara Malaysia yang mana Islam menjadi agama rasminya. Kewujudan warna kuning dalam rekabentuk adalah simbol Diraja—sebagai negara yang berdaulat. Bunga Raya melambangkan peranan yang dimainkan oleh parti UMNO yang menjadi 'teras' dalam menuntut kemerdekaan dan seterusnya pembentukan negara Malaysia yang kini merdeka dan makmur.

Tiga panel seterusnya melambangkan kegiatan dan pencapaian parti UMNO dari aspek pembangunan negara yang pada dasarnya merangkumi aspek sosial, politik, ekonomi, kebudayaan dan agama.

This second panel continues naturally from the first, not only formalistically but also in terms of content, for it represents the nation which was born as the fruit of that struggle –Malaysia –an independent, sovereign nation, possessing its own identity. The Malaysian flag, contained within an Islamic geometric form, represents the country whilst the presence of yellow within the design refers to Royalty, as the symbol of the nation's sovereignty. The hibiscus flower represents the national identity, whilst at the base of these is the UMNO logo, signifying the crucial role played by UMNO in the establishment of Malaysia.

The next three panels depict the continuous process of nation building undertaken by UMNO in terms of all aspects of human, endeavour-social, political, economic, cultural and religious.



PANEL 3

Keseluruhan panel ini melambangkan usaha UMNO ke arah mencapai kestabilan dan perkembangan ekonomi negara terutama melalui rancangan Dasar Ekonomi Baru (DEB) yang dirancang untuk membasmi kemiskinan. Oleh kerana dasar ini ditujukan kepada sektor luar bandar, pelukis telah memilih imej motif kerawang (sebagai merujuk kepada idea alam semulajadi dan dengan secara tidak langsung dikaitkan dengan kegiatan pertanian dan kegiatan luar bandar) yang dilingkungi oleh bentuk-bentuk segi tiga mengarah ke atas – yang membawa maksud perkembangan dan pembangunan.

The first of these, and the third panel in the whole series, depicts the struggle to achieve economic development and stability especially through the New Economic Policy, which was created to eradicate poverty. Since this effort was aimed especially at the rural sector, the artist chose to use image of a meandering plant motif (an obvious allusion to agriculture) contained within triangle thrusting upward – again symbolising growth, to convey this idea.



PANEL 4

Panel ini merujuk kepada aktiviti-aktiviti sosio-politik yang diperjuangkan oleh UMNO untuk mencapai kestabilan dan keharmonian di antara negara-negara jiran dan juga rakyat berbilang bangsa di negara ini.

Pengolahan logo ASEAN yang digambarkan di bahagian atas panel ini melambangkan kematangan dan kebijaksanaan yang ditunjukkan oleh ahli-ahli UMNO di arena politik antarabangsa kerana dengan terbentuknya kesatuan dan keharmonian di antara negara-negara ASEAN, usaha ke arah menyatupadukan rakyat yang berbilang bangsa semakin terjamin. Oleh kerana pada hakikatnya, kestabilan rantau menjadi asas keperluan untuk kestabilan kebangsaan.

Seterusnya simbol berbentuk separuh bulat yang diolah hingga menjadi motif kerawang Bunga Cempaka (bulatan penuh) melambangkan konsep perpaduan kebangsaan.

The fourth panel refers to the political activities, in which the ASEAN symbol features prominently—this reflects the important step of trying to achieve regional stability as a necessary basis for national stability. Another part of this section deals with national unity – six fragments of circles, placed in step-like procession in two mirror-image sets, represent the different racial groups these two set flank, and are drawn towards a central complete circle, which contains a motif based on the frangipani flower – a symbol of beauty and sweetness which alludes to the achievement of unity and harmony amongst Malaysians. Here also is the representation of the cultural aspect, symbolised by the basic bamboo shoot motif (triangle) containing a meandering plant, a motif borrowed from the traditional wood-carving.



PANEL 5

Panel ini menggambarkan kegiatan penerapan nilai-nilai Islam yang kini sedang giat diperjuangkan oleh parti UMNO untuk mewujudkan satu perimbangan di antara kemajuan dan perkembangan yang dicapai oleh negara dan rakyatnya dari segi material dengan perkembangan yang bersifat moral dan rohaniyah. Idea ini dipaparkan menerusi penggunaan bentuk-bentuk dan motif-motif yang terdapat dalam rekacorak geometrik Islam.

This panel depicts the adoption of Islamic value as the basis of Malaysian society –an effort which is currently being pursued with renewed vigour.

The cultural and religious aspects represented in the mural further reflect the fact that the UMNO struggle has maintained a balance between the material and spiritual development.

The Islamic aspect symbolised once again by the essential geometric motif pure and serene, contained within a mihrab-shaped forms.



PANEL 6

Panel terakhir ini merupakan intipati falsafah perjuangan UMNO yang mana prinsip dan nilai-nilai Islam yang suci dan luhur menjadi 'landas' atau 'batas' dalam segala tindak-tanduknya demi mencapai kemerdekaan, kebahagiaan dan kesejahteraan untuk agama, negara dan bangsa. Konsep ini diutarakan di sini melalui motif geometrik Islam berbentuk matahari memancar, yang di dalamnya terdapat imej-imej yang merujuk kepada kegiatan pengindustrian dan ekonomi negara.

The sixth and final panel can perhaps be seen as a summary of the whole theme, where Islam, represented by a geometric 'sunburst' motif, is shown as the guiding principle, the spiritual foundation upon which all material developments have been based, from the beginning until the present time.

*Kenyataan ini telah diterbitkan dalam risalah WARNA WIRA, PWTC, 1985
This statement was featured in the WARNA WIRA pamphlet, PWTC, 1985*





**RAJA'AH:
TAMAN DUKA LARA**

**RAJA'AH:
THE ENDANGERED
GARDENS**

5.

MENUNGGU DI PINTU KOTA

| Simon Soon

Penganjuran *Raja'ah* sebagai sebuah pameran retrospektif yang menelusuri perkembangan praktis dan pemikiran seni Sulaiman Esa anehnya tidak jauh berbeza daripada proses pulang asal, yakni langkah penuh hati-hati yang diambil oleh pelukis ini untuk menemui diri primordial, peribadi sejatinya. Lantaran itu, penghayatan ke atas siri terbaru karya-karya Sulaiman Esa yang dihasilkan sejak tahun 2000 wajarlah dilakukan berlatarkan beberapa titik penting peralihan gaya yang menggarisbawahi penglibatan beliau dengan pola-pola lebih luas perubahan-perubahan sosial, politik, falsafah dan spiritual yang bertaut dengan kajian Sulaiman dalam hal-hal kesenian.

Di kalangan karya-karya tersebut, yang paling menonjol ialah dua siri karya yang menyelidik dengan terperinci percanggahan di antara dua strategi gaya kesenian dalam satu satah gambar yang sama, khususnya di antara pengkaryaan yang berteraskan figurasi dengan yang berasaskan abstraksi, serta unsur-unsur falsafah dan spiritual yang mendukung penggunaan kaedah-kaedah figurasi dan abstraksi tersebut sebagai laras-laras bahasa visual. Di sini saya merujuk kepada *Menunggu Godot* dan *DOA* bagi memperjelaskan kompas semantik yang menunjukkan arah baru kesenian Sulaiman Esa.

Dalam *Menunggu Godot*, pergelutan spiritual di antara identiti Islam Sulaiman Esa dengan pendidikan seni Baratnya dipaparkan secara dramatik dengan meminjam alegori 'absurd' garapan Samuel Beckett terhadap falsafah eksistensialisme. Siri goresan plat terbuka ini memapar imej wanita telanjang dalam pelbagai gaya kedudukan yang diatur di satah bawah dengan berbingkaikan motif khat dan kerawang arabes Islam. Kedua-dua imej tersebut mewakili dua wacana estetika yang berlainan dan penyusunan dua bentuk berlawanan ini secara bersebelahan di antara satu sama lain memperlihatkan pertempuran nilai yang wujud di dalam usaha pelukis menjejak jadinya.

Sementara *DOA* pula, yang dihasilkan dua puluh tahun selepas *Menunggu Godot*, cuba mengemukakan satu tafsiran yang sedikit berbeza mengenai perkaitan lukisan berfigura dengan ajaran Islam.¹ Walaupun aturan komposisi *DOA* serupa dengan *Menunggu Godot*, namun wanita telanjang kini digantikan dengan sosok lelaki (kemungkinan besar potret diri pelukis) yang sedang mendongak ke arah *Pohon Beringin* iaitu motif corak Melayu tradisional sebagai lambang pohon hayat, yang bertindak selaku paksi di antara subjek (pelukis) dengan entiti lebih tinggi yang diwakili oleh sekeping cakera bulat bermotifkan tulisan abstrak khat Islami.

Apa yang digarap oleh karya-karya terkini Sulaiman Esa yang senada dengan kedua-dua contoh karya di atas ialah usaha untuk secara langsung menghurai ikonografi seni rupa Barat dan seterusnya pengenalannya kepada dan penerimaannya oleh pelukis-pelukis moden bukan Barat. Namun begitu, terdapat satu perkara yang sangat ketara membezakan siri ini daripada kedua-dua contoh berkenaan. Kehadiran sebegitu banyak motif dan ikon budaya visual popular betul-betul merubah lengkok visual yang sesungguhnya menjadi ciri teras kepada apa yang disifatkan oleh pelukis ini sebagai paradigma estetika Barat.

Dan sekarang, apa bakal terjadi pada kita tanpa puak gasar?

Mereka, orang-orang itu, umpama satu jawapan.

- Constantine Cavafy,
(diterjemah dari terjemahan Bahasa Inggeris oleh Edmund Keeley)

Sekira lukisan figuratif sebelum ini memakai gaya ekspresi klasik berimejkan wanita telanjang dalam *Menunggu Godot* dan sosok nabi/salik sufi yang sayu lagi tenang dalam *DOA*, ikonografi dalam siri terbaru ini pula muncul natijah daripada tindakan budaya pop mengamati semula estetika sezaman sebagai berskema dua dimensi dan umumnya diolah dengan menggunakan potongan-potongan imej yang rata, di samping berorientasikan metode rekabentuk serta rupa bentuk linear serba ringkas. Pemfokusan ke atas aspek pop ini menyarankan keberadaan panggung baru tempat di mana dipentaskan teater konflik dan persengketaan masa kini – yakni, globalisasi.

Di sini kita lihat satu anjakan ketara dari sudut tumpuan perhatian Sulaiman. Pertama-tama, penerokaan gaya figuratif klasik itu berkait dengan usaha menggunakan elemen-elemen seni untuk merungkai konflik estetika dalam konteks ikhtiar pelukis ini menyingkap peranan spiritual dan identiti agamanya. Dalam siri terbaru karya-karya beliau yang sarat dengan nada kebimbangan, jagat peribadi ini yang telah dirangka selama beberapa dekad yang lampau sekarang dicabar oleh isu-isu lebih besar yang selanjutnya mendorong Sulaiman menghubungkan isu-isu tersebut dengan bahasa dan strategi kesenian yang begitu susah payah beliau bina dan mantapkan sepanjang dua puluh tahun pembabitan beliau dalam bidang seni.

Peristiwa terpenting yang boleh dikira memberi kesan hebat terhadap halatuju baru Sulaiman Esa ialah serangan pengebom berani mati ke atas Pusat Dagangan Dunia di New York pada 11 September 2001, yang mana telah menimbulkan kemarahan kuasa-kuasa Barat kepada Islam. Tragedi itu kini dikaitkan dengan “Pertempuran Peradaban” mengikut huraian tokoh sains politik Amerika Syarikat, Samuel Huntington. Kalau dulu konflik ini difokuskan kepada perlawanan ideologi zaman perang dingin, kini ia diacu semula menurut kerangka peradaban.²

Para pengkritik mengakui yang struktur taksonomi dalam tesis Huntington terlalu memandang remeh ketegangan hubungan antarabangsa selepas tamat perang dingin dan sering keliru mentafsir kekalutan serta pergolakan dalaman negara menurut kerangka peradaban kerana mementingkan cita-cita perpaduan sejagat. Sungguhpun begitu, ia memperlihatkan retorika pascakolonialisme yang kian tersebar dalam kotak imaginasi masyarakat di kedua-dua sisi dunia Barat dan Islam, meskipun api kemarahan mereka itu pada umumnya dibakar oleh pemimpin-pemimpin kerajaan dan pihak media yang berlagak selaku penidiayah rasa takut dan benci.

Dilema ini ditampilkan dalam karya-karya terkini Sulaiman Esa. *Taman Duka Lara I*, karya anyaman yang secara simbolik mengingatkan kepada hamparan sejadah yang digunakan umat Islam ketika bersembahyang, menandakan ruang suci iaitu ruang yang dikhususkan bagi tujuan-tujuan spiritual. Dengan mempamerkannya secara menegak, sejak dari siri *Taman Misteri* beliau, Nirnanjan Rajah berpendapat Sulaiman ‘melukis ruang perlambangan permaidani Islam ... bersekali dengan seluruh isyarat pengembangan diri, *mi'raj*, *tariqat* serta penyingkapan eksistensial kewujudan hakiki manusia dalam ruang dan masa’.³ Namun begitu, di bawah taman-taman spiritual tersebut disusun potongan-potongan bersatah rata ikon-ikon budaya popular. Dalam keadaan dunia kita tepu-sendat dengan imej-imej buatan media, pepotong ikon tersebut mewakili sebarang hegemoni representasi yang selama ini dikuasai oleh Amerika Syarikat.



Tree of Life I Media campuran 190 x 72.5 cm 2011
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)



Tree of Life II Media campuran 209 x 82.5 cm 2011
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)

Satu alegori tentang keganasan membayangi apa yang mungkin sepatutnya menjadi wawasan murni perihal hakikat ketuhanan dalam karya-karya terbaru Sulaiman Esa. Catan-catan *Taman Duka Lara I* dan *Taman Duka Lara II* memperlihatkan kepada kita ancaman dari luar yang menggugat aturan dan norma kehidupan. Apakah yang boleh kita rumuskan daripada olahan serbaneka imej-imej kartun ini – Captain America, awan atom bak cendawan, Darth Vader, tugu Statue of Liberty yang diselubungi *niqab*, keserakahan ‘Jerung Putih’ gedang – yang sekarang tegak berdiri di ambang antara hal-hal sakral dan profan, yang cuba merempuh masuk menerusi pintu-pintu serba indah berkerawangan ini?

Sebuah pertempuran, suatu isyarat dan petanda kepada situasi pertentangan, pertelingkahan, konflik. Adakah pertembungan nilai ini, yang dirangka menurut kriteria peradaban dan justeru lunas-lunas kebudayaan, merupakan satu bentuk bantahan yang masih meneruskan idea stereotaip berkenaan Barat/Islam? Atau terdapatkah satu cara lain di mana karya tersebut melontarkan respons yang lebih rumit ke atas tesis popular ini?

Demi mengurai dualisme berciri reduktif di antara Timur dan Barat ini, biarpun karya-karya tersebut memanfaatkan binari struktur untuk meneliti dalam-dalam aspek perduaan ini, kita dikehendaki melihat premis struktur tersebut dalam konteks tindakbalas Sulaiman Esa yang secara umumnya lebih dipengaruhi oleh falsafah mistisisme Sufi daripada hukum-hakam ortodoks agama.

Dalam hal ini, usaha mengangkat Sulaiman Esa sekarang selaku pendukung kuat gaya formalisme Islam dalam sejarah seni rupa Malaysia, meskipun pembicaraan mengenai kesenian beliau dalam konteks sosial dan sejarah di akhir 1970-an dan awal 1980-an tampak strategik, sesungguhnya benar-benar menyukarkan kita memahami bahasa serba canggih yang sudah diperkembangkan sepanjang tiga puluh tahun karier Sulaiman yang terhasil ekoran daripada tindakbalas beliau ke atas perubahan budaya yang menjadi ciri utama dekad ‘pengislaman’ Malaysia.⁴

Tambahan pula, formalisme, sebagai wacana seni moden, melihat pengkaryaan abstraksi dalam cakupan sempit kuasa autonomi seni dari lingkungan sosial. Ini satu rancangan yang bertentangan dengan cara Sulaiman Esa menanggapi kajian kesenian sebagai ‘imaginasi sosiologi’ yang mana ‘menerusi penggunaan serangkaian ekspresi pelbagai bentuk dan simbol yang bersama-sama diamalkan oleh seluruh komuniti maka tukang kraf tradisional mewujudkan semangat kehairahan dan kesalingberhubungan masyarakat’.⁵

Sulaiman Esa buat pertama kali cuba mengecilkan aura kehadiran diri beliau ketika pameran *Ke Arah Hakikat Mistik* pada 1974. Ia sebuah pameran penting yang menampilkan objek-objek jumpaan hasil kolaborasi beliau dengan Almarhum Redza Piyadasa. Dengan menengahkan bahan-bahan buangan dan objek-objek seharian di dalam ruang galeri, kedua-dua pelukis mengajak penonton beralih ke arah bukan hanya hal-hal konsep tetapi juga aspek-aspek mistik. Manifesto yang diterbitkan sempena pameran itu menggesa khalayak merangka satu sistem menanggapi realiti yang berlainan daripada kaedah empirikal dan menyebarkan sistem pemikiran Asia yang bertunjangkan falsafah mistik sebagai teras kepada proses pengkaryaan seni.

Walaupun beliau kemudian menekankan semula gaya unik pelukis dalam karya-karya beliau, tetapi kita lihat sambil Sulaiman menerap motif-motif dan teknik-teknik tradisional ke dalam praktis beliau serta meninggalkan strategi melenyapkan kemahiran tangan dalam pameran *Ke Arah Hakikat Mistik* dengan memperkenalkan kepandaian kraf tempatan, beliau turut mewujudkan semula proses penghasilan karya dalam suasana bengkel di mana para pelajar dan sukarelawan diambil untuk bekerja secara muafakat. Dengan cara demikian, kesan-kesan ‘bekas tangan’ individual pelukis terus-menerus dihapuskan melalui pengaplikasian serentak kedua-dua teknik kraf dan lukisan grafik popular dalam siri terbaru ini.

Persilangan hal-hal kemasyarakatan dengan ehwal-ehwal kerohanian menggambarkan wujudnya rangkaian asosiatif di antara makrokosmos dan mikrokosmos yang biasa terdapat di dalam semua aliran falsafah mistik. Sewaktu diwawancara baru-baru ini, Sulaiman Esa mengulas kepentingan *Tao*

of *Physics* sebagai wacana generatif berkenaan minat beliau terhadap aspek kesalinghubungan atau 'konektiviti'. Hujah yang mengatakan fizik Kuantum menganjur pandangan selari berhubung dengan keterkaitan jirim, yakni bukan sebagai zarah-zarah yang berasingan tetapi wujud dalam jaringan pelbagai perkaitan dan pertalian yang rumit, menunjukkan ketegangan dinamik yang tidak bercerai daripada pelihat.⁶

Untuk menggambarkan landskap sosial ini, pertama-tama sekali mustahak bagi Sulaiman mengakui kedudukan beliau sebagai pelukis beragama Islam yang berkarya dalam masyarakat bukan Barat. Yang kedua, beliau kemudian mestilah mengiktiraf binari duaan di antara Islam dan Barat sebagai pengelasan yang boleh digunakan untuk menyelesaikan masalah dan bukan sekadar fenomena demi menghurai dan menjangkau lebih jauh, dari kerana dualisme ini merupakan selaras retorik kritikal yang nyata menonjol serta sudah berakarumbi dalam imaginasi kebanyakan orang.

Dengan mengetengahkan rangkaian penghubung di antara titik-titik temuan pengalaman dan menempatkannya menerusi penglibatan serentak beliau sebagai pelukis dan pemerhati, barulah subjek itu dapat dizahirkan secara gambaran. *Cita-cita Imperial* karya anyaman yang diolah dalam lima lajur, merupakan satu contoh baik berkait dengan segi-segi relativisme moral yang dibincangkan dalam karya-karya Sulaiman. Sebagai permukaan berlapis-lapis yang mengandungi kedua-dua rekacorak motif-motif Melayu tradisional/Islam dan Grafik Barat, karya ini juga nampak bercanggahan dari sudut tekstur dan jalinannya.

Kehadiran serentak motif-motif Melayu/Islam dan Grafik Barat memang jelas bertentangan, malah barangkali pelik dan tidak munasabah. Begitupun, dalam keadaan percanggahan metode representasi dan suasana ragu-ragu mereka, elemen-elemen tegangan yang menunjangi pertentangan kedua-dua situasi itu dijelmakan untuk menarik perhatian kepada proses penciptaan makna dan nilai yang kelihatan bertaut dengan strukturalisme Saussure. Ini kerana pentakrifan jati diri seseorang tidak boleh dilestari tanpa adanya unsur 'yang lain'. Umpama komuniti-komuniti Rom dalam sajak *Waiting for the Barbarians* ciptaan Constantine Cavafy yang menyebut puak Gasar sebagai 'umpama satu jawapan', maka dari sudut perlembagaan, unsur 'yang lain' sentiasa melampirkan 'jawapan' kepada proses pendefinisian diri seseorang.

Disaluti dengan warna-warna benderang yang sedikit berkilauan, kesan visual secara terus-terang meluahkan, menerusi langgam kesedaran psikedelik era 60-an, rasa bimbang terhadap realiti sosial kita, di samping melalui perkaitannya dengan kesedaran spiritual alam semesta dan bagaimana kesedaran itu berkemungkinan memberi kesan ke atas persekitaran sosial kita. Yang lebih mustahak lagi, pemakaian motif dan kaedah pertukangan tradisional ini sekira ditafsir sebagai riadah Sufi akan turut mewakili sejenis teknologi minda.

Mistisisme, rasa-rasanya, menghasilkan satu dimensi moral yang berbeza bukan dengan cara melangkaui konflik kepentingan dan pertentangan nilai. Sebagai pelakon yang mencuba menyelaraskan ketidakseimbangan representasi dengan memberi peranan dan watak orang Gasar kepada Barat, Sulaiman mengorak langkah cermat di antara niatnya mengekalkan dwiunsur stereotaip dan menyatakan secara jelas keterlibatan serta peranannya sebagai kuasa etika utama yang bertindak balas terhadap hegemoni representasi Barat.

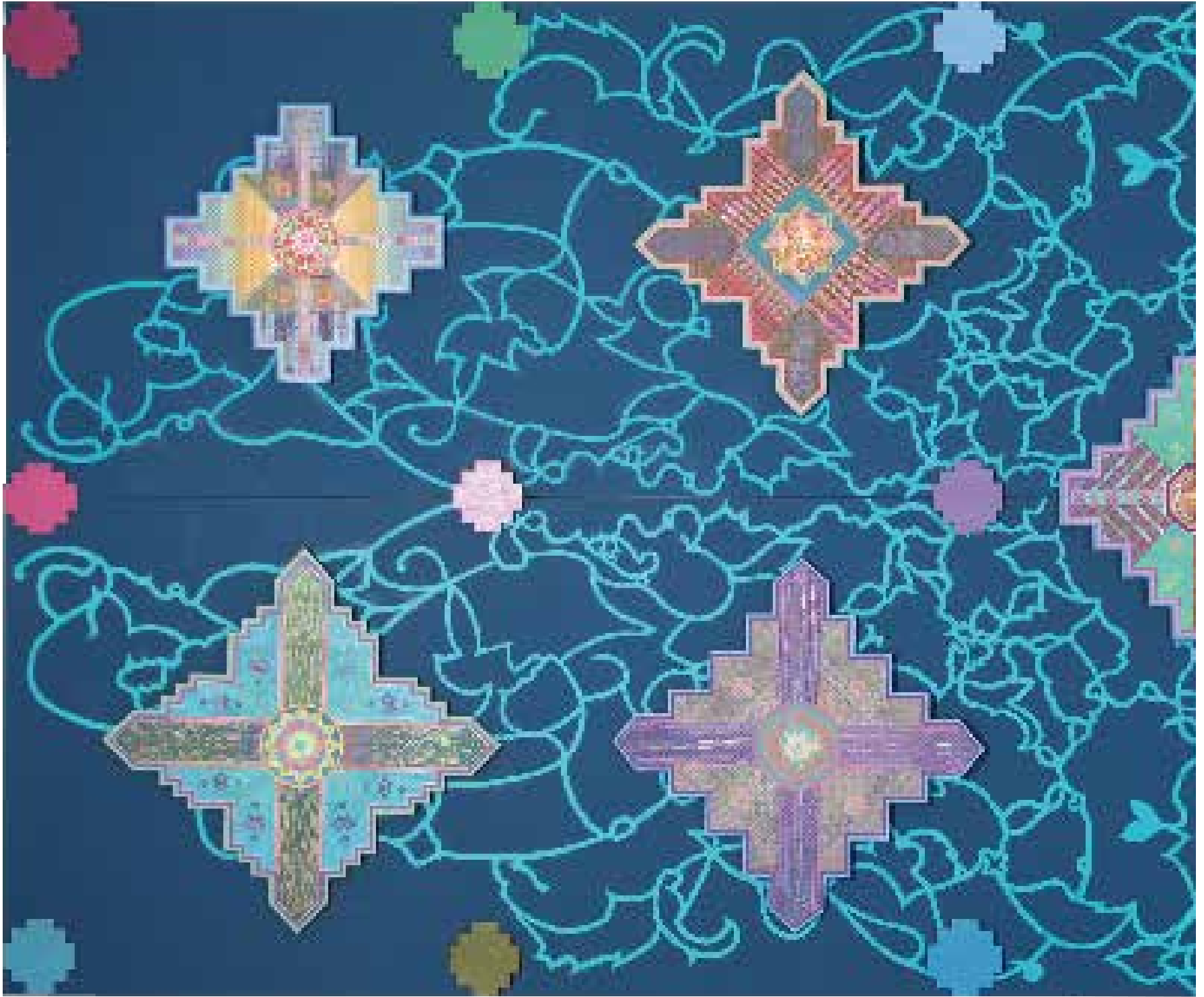
Sekalipun Sulaiman memilih untuk berkarya menerusi unsur dikotomi di antara Barat dan Islam, namun ia seringkali dirumitkan oleh keazaman beliau untuk terus-menerus mencari satu bentuk ekspresi yang menyeluruh lagi komprehensif yang mengambil kira aspek kesalingberhubungan semua fenomena dan menyedari dialektika yang semula jadi wujud dalam kancuh arena pergelutan. Dengan demikian, beliau berupaya melaksanakan dua perkara serentak: menzahirkan garis-garis sesar dan sekaligus menilai semula Islam dan Barat. Sebagaimana ahli Sufi, beliau telusuri jalur pemikiran yang serba saujana, dan mengungkapkannya menerusi karya-karya seni beliau.

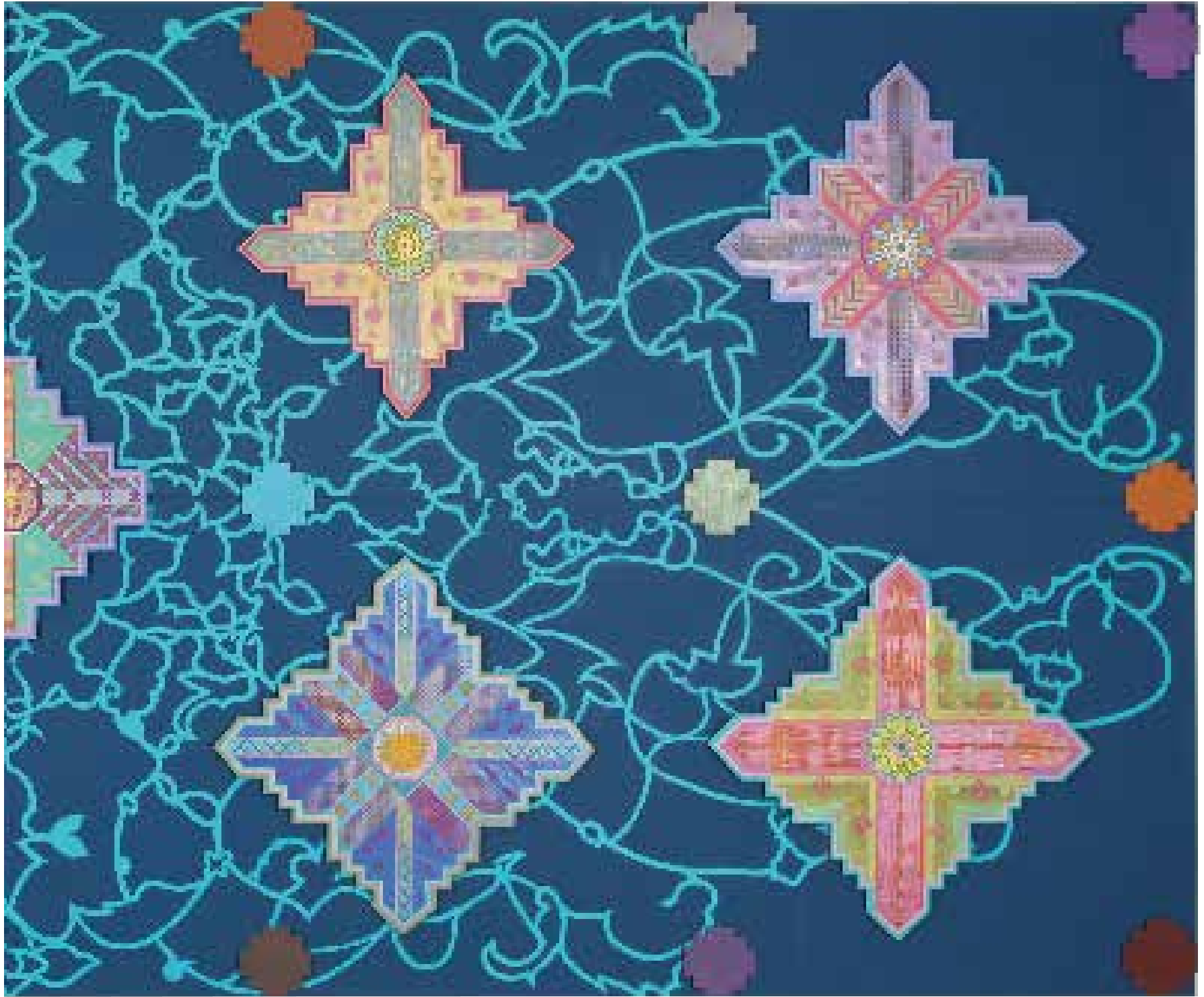
*Diterjemahkan dari teks berbahasa Inggeris oleh:
Penterjemah I: Mohd Jamil bin Omar
Penterjemah II: Teratak Nuromar*

NOTA HUJUNG

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SIMON SOON dilahirkan di Kuala Lumpur pada tahun 1983. Beliau menerima pendidikan Sejarah Seni dan Kesusasteraan Inggeris dari University of Melbourne, dan mendapat ijazah sarjana kelas pertama pada 2006. Pada tahun 2008 beliau kembali ke Malaysia dan berkhidmat sebagai kurator di Valentine Willie Fine Art, sebelum menjadi kurator bebas pada 2009. Beliau diundang mengambil bahagian di *Manchester International Festival Talent Campus for Cultural Producers* pada 2009. Pada tahun 2010 beliau dijemput menghadiri acara *JENYSES Programme for Creators* oleh Japan Foundation. Beliau merupakan editor bersama di ARTERI—sebuah blog dengan fokus khusus mengenai seni kontemporari di Malaysia dan Asia Tenggara—dari tahun 2009-2010. Selain itu, beliau pernah dianugerahkan dengan Australian Post-graduate Award pada tahun 2011. Kini, beliau sedang melanjutkan pengajian sarjana Doktor Falsafah (Ph.D) dalam bidang Sejarah Seni Asia Tenggara di University of Sydney.





The Garden of Bliss Mixed Media 307 x 730 cm 2011



Primitive Others Mixed media Dimensions Variable 2011



Pandangan dekat salah sebuah karya *Primitive Others*
Close up view of one of the works in *Primitive Others*

WAITING AT THE GATE

| Simon Soon

The unfolding of RAJA'AH as a retrospective exhibition that charts the progress or development of Sulaiman Esa's art practice and thinking is paradoxically just as much a process of restitution, the slow step of uncovering the artist's primordial self. Therefore in considering Sulaiman Esa's new body of work that has been made since 2000, they need to be brought into relief against a number of key stylistic turning points that have marked the artist's engagement with the broader patterns of social, political, philosophical and spiritual shifts that have come to dialogue with Sulaiman's artistic inquiry.

The most apparent of these are two series of work that have previously investigated extensively the dissonance between of two stylistic strategies within a single image plane, mainly that of figuration and abstraction, and the broader philosophical and spiritual vectors that underpin their deployment as visual languages. Here I refer to *Waiting for Godot* and *DOA* in order to articulate the semantic compass for Sulaiman Esa's new direction.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the spiritual struggle between Sulaiman Esa's Muslim identity and his Western art education is dramatised by borrowing Samuel Beckett's absurdist allegory on existentialism. The female nude portrayed in a variety of poses, in this series of open plate etching, is placed below and framed within an ornate block of Islamic calligraphy and decorative frame. They belong to two different aesthetic discourses and this juxtapositioning of forms suggests a clash of values in the artist's search for his identity.

On the other hand, *DOA* created twenty years later sought to posit a more nuanced reading the relation of figurative representation to Islam.¹ While compositionally similar to *Waiting for Godot*, we have in place of the female nude the figure of a man (presumably a self portrait of the artist) casting his gaze heavenward towards the *Pohon Beringin*, a traditional Malay design motif symbolising the tree of life, that forms the axis between the subject and a higher reality symbolised by a round disc that contains abstracted Islamic calligraphy.

What is being undertaken in Sulaiman Esa's new series of work that resonates with the above two examples is its attempt to directly address Western art iconography and consequently its introduction to and adoption by non-Western modern artists. Yet what sets this new series apart is also remarkably striking. The pervasiveness of popular visual culture and icons has dramatically shifted the visual registers that have come to characterise what the artist considers to the aesthetic paradigm of the West.

While previous figurative representation resorted to the classical idiom of the female nude in *Waiting for Godot* and the solemn placating figure of the prophet/spiritual seeker in *DOA*, the iconography of today is derived from pop culture's reimagining of contemporary aesthetic as schematically two dimensional and constructed largely of flat cut-outs with a orientation towards design and simple linear form. This thrust towards pop suggests the new stage on which the theatre of conflict is staged on – globalisation.

Here we see a significant shift in engagement. In the first instance, the exploration of classical figurative idiom speaks to an artistic attempt at resolving an aesthetic conflict within the discovery

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?

They were, those people, a kind of solution.

- Constantine Cavafy,
(translated by Edmund Keeley)

of the artist's spiritual role and religious identity. In Sulaiman's new series of work, which is characterised by the tenor of anxiety, this personal universe that has been formulated over the preceding decades is now challenged by much larger concerns that have compelled him to factor their relations to the artistic language that have been so arduously developed and built over the past twenty years of Sulaiman Esa's practice.

The keystone event that can be said to have a profound impact on Sulaiman Esa's new direction is the September 11, 2001 suicide bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York, which has catalysed resentment of Western powers towards Islam. The tragedy has since been applied to what American political scientist Samuel Huntington has described as "The Clash of Civilisations". The locus of conflict, previously grounded on cold war ideological divide, has now been recast in civilisational terms.²

While detractors have claimed that the taxonomic structure of Huntington's thesis has grossly simplified the tensions of international relations in the post cold war period, often glossing the internal tensions and struggle within the civilisational sphere in favour for a unitary imaginary, it is nonetheless reflect a rhetoric of post-colonialism that has gained currency in the popular imagination across both Western and Islamic societies, even if this resentment have been largely directed by the fear mongering leadership of ruling bodies and the media.

This predicament is registered in Sulaiman Esa's new body of work. In *Endangered Garden I*, the mat weaving that symbolically echo the Muslim prayer rug is suggestive of a sacred space, a demarcated space for the spiritual. In presenting it vertically, since his Garden of Mystery series, Niranjana Rajah has suggested that Sulaiman 'represents the symbolic space of the Islamic carpet... with all the inherent intimations of expansion, ascent, flight and the existential unfolding of man's essential being in time and space'.³ Yet situated below the spiritual gardens are the flat cut out icons of popular culture. In our media saturated world, they come to stand for a kind of hegemony of representation that has been dominated by the United States.

An allegory of terror casts a dark and long shadow over what would otherwise be a sacred vision of divine reality in Sulaiman Esa's new body of work. We see in *Endangered Gardens I* and *Endangered Gardens II* an external threat to the order of things. What can we make of this patchwork of cartoon representation – Captain America, the atomic mushroom cloud, Darth Vader, a Statue of Liberty draped in a Niqab, the terror of a great White Shark – who now stand at the threshold between the sacred and the profane, attempting to force their way through these ornate gates?

A clash, the promise of antagonism, irresolution, conflict. Is this collision of values, cast on a civilisational and therefore cultural scale, a form of protest that has continued to perpetuate the West/Islam stereotype? Or is there another way in which the work register a much more complex response to this popular thesis?

To unsettle this reductive form of dualism between the East and the West even as the works have appropriated the structural binary in order to think through this binary, we are required to



The Garden of Bliss III Mixed media 191.5 x 93.5 cm 2011

consider the structural premise in relation to Sulaiman Esa's response that is inflected largely by Sufic mysticism rather than religious orthodoxy.

In this sense, the prevailing recognition of Sulaiman Esa as the proponent of a style of Islamic formalism in the history of Malaysian art, while strategic in thinking about his trajectory in relation to the social-historical context of the late seventies to early eighties, has severely delimited our understanding of the sophisticated language that has developed in Sulaiman's practice over the past three decades in response to the broader cultural turn that has characterised the period as the 'Islamisation' of Malaysia.⁴

Moreover, formalism as a modern art discourse reads abstraction within the narrow parameter of art's autonomy from social reality, an approach that is antithetical to Sulaiman Esa's formulation of the artistic investigation as a 'sociology of imagination' in which 'through the usage of a collectively shared vocabulary of forms and symbols, the traditional craftsman generates the spirit of collective effervescence and interconnectedness'.⁵

Sulaiman Esa's first attempt at downplaying his authorial presence was in the seminal joint presentation of found objects with the late Redza Piyadasa in their 1974 exhibition *Towards A Mystical Reality*. By presenting detritus and everyday objects within the gallery, both artists were inviting the viewers to make not just a conceptual leap but also a mystical one. The exhibition manifesto calls for an apprehension of a reality that is different from the empirical one, promulgating a Pan-Asian mode of thought grounded on mystical thinking as the basis for art making.

Later even as he continues to reassert an authorial signature over his work, we see that as Sulaiman incorporates traditional motifs and techniques into his practice, reversing the deskilling operation employed in the *Mystical Reality* exhibition by introducing local craft skills, he also reproduces a shift in the mode of production into a workshop environment where students and volunteers are enlisted to work collaboratively. In doing so, the gestural and signatory mark of the individual artist is unremittingly erased by the sole employment of both craft technique and popular graphic representation in this new series of work.

The intersection between the social and the spiritual reflects the associative chain unfolding between the macrocosmic and the microcosmic common to all threads of mystical thinking. In a recent interview, Sulaiman Esa cites the significance of *The Tao of Physics* as generative discourse in his interest in connectivity. The argument that Quantum physics posits a parallel view of the interconnectedness of matter, not as isolated particles but existing within a complicated web of relations, demonstrates a dynamic tension that is not divorced from the observer.⁶

In picturing this social landscape, firstly it is therefore imperative for Sulaiman to acknowledge his position as a Muslim artist practicing in a non-Western society. Secondly, he will then need to acknowledge the dualistic binary between Islam and the West as a productive categorisation to work through and not merely a phenomena to deconstruct or transcend, given that this form of dualism is an urgent rhetoric that palpable and internalised in the popular imagination.

By highlighting the connective tissue amongst different nodes of experience and situating it from his participation as an artist-observer can the subject be made to manifest pictorially. *Imperial Ambitions* a mat weaving arranged in five columns, is exemplary of the relativistic moral dimensions that have played out in the work of the artist. As a layered surface that contains both traditional Malay/Islamic motifs and Western Graphic as design, the composition is also texturally dissonant.

Their co-existence is contradictory and perhaps even absurd, yet in their very opposition on the representational scale, in their very irresolution, the tensions that has sustained arguments on both grounds are made visible to underscore the seemingly Saussurean nature of meaning and value generation. For the definition of one could not be sustained without the 'other'. Like the Roman publicans who spoke of the Barbarians as a 'kind of solution' in Constantine Cavafy's poem

Waiting for the Barbarians, the other is always constitutionally a 'solution' to the definition of the self.

Coated with the bright colours that burns with a kind of luminosity, the visual effect articulates, through the language of Sixties psychedelia consciousness, a kind of direct apprehension of our social reality, twinned by its reference to cosmic spiritual realisation and how this consciousness could potentially impact on our social world. More importantly, this use of traditional motif and craft techniques if understood as a Sufic activity, would also come to represent a kind of technology of the mind.

Mysticism, it would seem, weaves a different moral dimension not by transcending the conflict of interest and values. As an actor that seeks to redress the imbalance of representation by casting the West as a Barbaric force, Sulaiman treads the fine line between perpetuating the stereotypical binary and articulating his complicity as a crucial ethical force to counter the Western hegemony of representation.

Even as Sulaiman has chosen to work through the dichotomy between the West and Islam, this position is always complicated by way of how the artist persists to find an encompassing vocabulary, one that recognises the interconnectedness of all phenomena and recognises the inherent dialectics within the arena of struggle. In picturing this, the artist is able to do two things at once, which is to both make visible the fault-lines as well as reappraise Islam and the West, treading as the Sufi mystic does along an expansive line of thinking and expressing this insight through his art.

END NOTES

1. See Sulaiman Esa, 'An Islamic Perspective on Figurative Representation' in *Aku 99*, exhibition catalogue with M.Z. Atan (ed.), Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 1999.
2. See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, 1st edition, 1998.
3. Niranjan Rajah, 'Insyirah Al-Sadr: The Art of Sulaiman Esa' in *Insyirah – The Art of Sulaiman Esa from 1980 to 2000*, Galeri Petronas, 2001.
4. Jennifer Lovel, *Malay Artists and the Malaysian National Cultural Congress: Three Case Studies*, 2004, Unpublished thesis.
5. Sulaiman Esa, 'Islamic Roots of the Malay Philosophy of Beauty' in *Insyirah – The Art of Sulaiman Esa from 1980 to 2000*, Galeri Petronas, 2001.
6. Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, Shambhala Publications, 4th edition, 2000.

SIMON SOON was born in Kuala Lumpur in 1983. He read Art History and English Literature at the University of Melbourne, graduating with first class honours in 2006. In 2008, he returned to Malaysia and worked as a curator at Valentine Willie Fine Art before becoming an independent curator in 2009. He was invited to participate in the Manchester International Festival Talent Campus for Cultural Producers in 2009 and the Japan Foundation's JENYSES Programme for Creators in 2010. He was also co-editor for ARTERI an online blog for contemporary art in Malaysia and Southeast Asia from 2009 - 2010. He has been awarded with the Australian Postgraduate Award in 2011 and is currently pursuing his PhD in Southeast Asian Art History at the University of Sydney.





Celebrating Diversity Mixed media 261 x 455 cm 2011

'The artist is not an astronaut, who goes into outer space..

The artist goes into inner space..'

- Syed Ahmad Jamal

**RE-TURN OF THE SULAI MAN:
A Toward/y Realistic Mystery**

| zabas, August 2011

**Remembering this, I will always think of Ib's 'astronaut'
painting... and wondered 'why',**

When looking at aRT, I am always bewildered by my wonderings if it is important that I know the artist's *in-tension* behind the artwork. Not surprisingly the level of this bewilderment varies according to the 'type' of art that I am *caught* with.

What is it between the artist and their artwork..?

Between *outer space* and *inner space*...

Heaven and Earth...

Bare-chested father and space-suited astronaut...

Between the NUDE and the *ARABESQUE*...

FORM and VOID...

BODY and SOUL...

Between *WAITING* and *GODOT*...

for

Reminds myself: I am bewildered by MY wonderings about the artist's **intention**.. not by the artwork itself..

I am **bewildered** by SA JAMAL's words.. By SA JAMAL's *inner space* art.. By Ibrahim Hussein's work about *Encik Hussain* and the *angka sawan*..

by the Mysticality of the Real.. by the 'MAN and his WORLD'.. by '*INSYIRAH*'.. by '*RAJA*'ah'..

This is not the MacArthur... of “I SHALL RETURN..”
This is not a library’s commandment - ‘Thou shall *return* thy books..!’
This is Sulaiman Esa.. taking another TURN, *again*..
TURN, TURN, TURN... re-bewildering..

.....

Bringing back the woman.. CAT WOMAN.. *Wonder Woman*?
I wonder about this woman.. who was waiting for Godot thirty three years
ago.. and is she now a cat TURNed into a woman? I wonder.. CAT?
Why *woman*? “No woman No cry..” Curtis Mayfield’s *Man’s
Temptation*.. Woman as symbol of Man’s weakness.. Woman as
Distraction.. symbolic of Western culture.. (Niranjan Rajah, in *Insyirah*,
Galeri Petronas, 2001)

(And I think about the allusion of women to **GRACE**, and the **Orient**
as feminine.. and the *Ying-Yang* complement to the masculine.. and
Maryam, *Ibu Nabi ISA* a.s...) Is it the Mona Lisa? Duchamp’s
L.H.O.O.Q?

De Kooning’s women? The women in your work - sometimes
naked, sometimes skimpily clad, mostly sensuous -The *Mona
Esa*..

From *Mona Lesu* in ‘Waiting for Godot’ to *Mana Lisa?* in
‘*Ke Arah Tawhid*’ and ‘Garden of Mystery’, to MAHA ESA...
Between TAO and TAWHID...

The mystery thickens as reality sinks (in)...

Part of artmaking (and art appreciating), even part of living (and loving),
for that matter, is realising that we are not in control of everything.. (Let)
something else take(s) over... Let it be and see how it goes...

ART(work) is never completed by the artist; it reminds me of your
mystical conspirator, Piyadasa’s portrait of Krishen Jit of 1979, which he
explained ‘incorporated Conceptual art elements’, presumably referring to
the words ‘To be completed’ painted therein. But he meant something else
by those words: ‘he considered the painting a *private work* that he did when
his *artistic career was on hold, as it were*... and that *something would turn up
sooner or later*...’ (TK Sabapathy, *Piyadasa: The Malaysian Series*, RA Fine Arts, Asia
Contemporary, 2007). So the reference was to the continuation of his

career as an artist after a *hiatus*... **HE**, not anybody or anything else, would complete the painting later... The ‘completion’ referred to the physical completion of the work, not its reception and appreciation within sociological and institutional contexts. Nonetheless, Piyadasa undoubtedly had ‘conceptual art’ considerations (whatever that may signify) in alluding to the potential completion of the work at a later time, not withstanding his assertion in another work that ‘art works never exist in time..’ **I wonder whether there are traces of ‘conceptual art’ in your post ‘Mystical Reality’ works...** Although not literal or obvious, I suppose I could *imagine* them, and *complete* your artworks, at least for myself if not for you or for others. But then.....

”Why do you waste your time and mine by trying to get value judgements? Don’t you see that when you get a value judgement, that’s all you have? Value judgements are destructive to our proper business, which is curiosity and awareness”. (Joseph Kosuth, *Introductory Note by the American Editor*, Art-Language, Vol 1, No.2 (1970))

Yes, the Mystery... of your intent...and mine *in tension*.
“Conceptual art makes the ideational premise of the work known, a decided contrast to other contemporary art, which is not concerned with defining the intention of the work, attending (mostly) exclusively to its *appearance*”.
(Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, Dutton, 1972)

I am now stranded with having to ‘get value judgements’ for your work. No *propositions* or *investigations* this time – no manifesto.. Would I be a *barbarian* approaching your work? The antipodean barbarian to complement your existential world? Aaa.. The barbarian in us..!
The barbarism in Duchamp’s *Fountain signed by R.Mutt.* that we could be reminded of by Salleh Ben Joned’s *complementary* gesture at the *Dewan Bahasa* in 1974. But what about Tanizaki’s praise of the shadowy Japanese toilet? – “*The parlor may have its charm, but the Japanese toilet truly is a place of spiritual repose..No words can describe that sensation as one sits in the dim light, basking in the faint glow reflected from the shoji, lost in*

meditation or gazing out at the garden..” (Junichiro Tanizaki, In Praise of Shadows, Jonathan Cape, 1991)

Aaa.. the barbaric aesthete..

We just need to know.. or to UNKNOW – *unknowing* as a part of the human condition. Getting lost as a way to reach somewhere.. ‘..To lay aside objective analysis, which seeks in some way to master what it contemplates’, as Karen Armstrong puts it: *When confronted with a work of art, we have to open our minds and allow it to carry us away.. (The Case for God, Anchor, 2009).*

And so, confronting your art, do I wish to realistically embrace the mystery, and be overwhelmed by it, even as it creates further mysteries and towardly provides the path to unknowing..? Mysteries that I hope would remain mysteries... unsolved?

Yours is IDEA art... Your art is ART idea... Still...

Even though ‘*RAJA’ah*’ (and the other post-Mystical Reality series) is idiomatically and physically different from the ‘Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences’... Whatever else ‘*RAJA’ah*’ is, it is to me still *post-Mystical Reality*... as are the ‘*Godot*’, ‘*Pribumi*’, ‘*Tawhid*’ and ‘*Garden of Mystery*’...

All beautifully-coloured works and coloured too by the *jointly initiated experiences*... Hence, I derive meaning in them as conceptual art. Because, approaching them via ‘modernist’ ideological canons is inadequate... and *missing the point*... Yes, they are *paintings, patterns, pictures, craftworks*... whatever you like... But they are also paintings, patterns, pictures, craftworks of IDEA...

But don’t ask me their meaning(s)... They remain mysteriously mystical... as the *Jointly Initiated Experiences* of 1974.

Mysterious as an iconoclastic ‘*Godot*’, mystical as a *post-modernist Godot*... ..seeming sometimes to be within grasp but ultimately elusive.. Perhaps not unlike the Derridan *undeconstructibles*: - forgiveness, friendship, justice... “...in the same way, ‘*God*,’ a term often used in the past to set a limit to human thought and endeavour, becomes for the postmodern philosopher

the desire beyond desire, a memory and a promise that is , by its very nature, indefinable.”. (Armstrong, The Case for God)

- Zabas , August 2011

ZABAS (*ZAINOL ABIDIN BIN AHMAD SHARIFF*) was born in Serdang, Selangor in 1952. He had his secondary education at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, undergraduate study majoring in Fine Arts at Universiti Sains Malaysia Penang, and graduate study in Art History at the University of California Los Angeles. He had also undergone a graduate certificate study in art authentication at the University of Melbourne.

Zabas is an artist whose first job was selling tractors, before entering academia as lecturer in art and art history at Universiti Sains Malaysia after a year of teaching at the UiTM art school. He had also taught part-time at University Malaysia Sarawak, apart from being senior curator at Bank Negara Malaysia, and director of Galeri Petronas.





SULAIMAN ESA

6.





PANOPTICON

| Sulaiman Esa dan Fairuz Sulaiman

PANOPTICON

| Sulaiman Esa dan Fairuz Sulaiman

Karya ini dicetus oleh idea berkenaan kerja-kerja pengintipan dan pengawasan secara sulit lagi melampau-lampau yang dilakukan oleh kuasa-kuasa Barat, khususnya Amerika Syarikat, ke atas negara-negara Islam di serata dunia selepas peristiwa 11 September. Semua orang tahu yang AS telah melancarkan beberapa buah satelit mengelilingi dunia untuk mengambil gambar dan menghimpun pelbagai maklumat penting mengenai negara-negara Islam. Pelanggaran hak secara licik ini tidak berhenti setakat itu sahaja kerana lain-lain peralatan perang, seperti kapal terbang pengintip, *drones* serta ejen-ejen perisikan CIA, turut dikerah bagi memastikan mereka dapat bertindak lebih awal dan lebih terdahulu terhadap sebarang anasir yang dikira boleh mengancam keselamatan mereka.

Panopticon sebenarnya sebuah model penjara ciptaan tokoh falsafah utilitarian bernama Jeremy Bentham (1748 - 1832). Pada asasnya, konsep ini menyarankan bilik-bilik penjara diatur dalam bulatan agar para banduan dapat diawas rapi dari sebuah menara kawalan utama. Hasil daripada cara susunan bilik-bilik ini, para banduan kerap kali mengalami perasaan takut, cemas dan halusinasi. Khusus dalam konteks karya saya ini, kubus tersebut mewakili Ka'abah dan sejadah-sejadah yang dihampar mengelilinginya melambangkan umat Islam sejagat. Di keempat-empat penjuru di bahagian atas kubus diletakkan alat-alat pengawasan dan lampu-lampu sorot yang dipasang sebegitu rupa agar mereka dapat meninjau dan memerhati seluruh ruang di sekitar kubus tersebut. Pada kain yang membaluti kubus itu dipancarkan pula imej-imej video yang memaparkan banduan-banduan beragama Islam, sama ada yang diculik atau ditangkap oleh askar-askar penjajah, sedang diseksa dan diperlakukan dengan kejam di penjara-penjara dan kem-kem tahanan seperti Abu Gharib di Iraq dan Guantanamo Bay di Cuba, selain daripada imej-imej ngeri serangan bom yang dilancarkan ke atas negara-negara Islam.

Menerusi karya ini saya berniat mendedahkan sikap munafik, pura-pura dan bermuka-muka pemimpin-pemimpin AS di Rumah Putih yang kononnya sering melaungkan nilai-nilai demokrasi, keadilan dan hak-hak manusia, tetapi pada hakikatnya merekalah sebenarnya segerombolan pembunuh dan pemusnah yang maha zalim!





This piece was inspired by the idea of the intense surveillance clandestinely perpetrated by Western superpowers, particularly the US, on Muslim countries all over the world after the September 11 incident. It is a well known fact ...that the US has launched scores of satellites circling the globe taking aerial photographs and gathering other vital information on Muslim countries. The surreptitious transgressions do not stop there as other instruments of covert warfare such as spy planes, drones and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) are deployed to ensure that they can take preemptive actions against elements that are assumed as threats to their security.

In its original sense, panopticon was a model prison designed by the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748 - 1832) in which basically the cells are arranged in a circle so that the prisoners can be scrutinised from a central watch tower. The effect of this is that prisoners constantly experience that niggling and crippling sense of being watched. In the specific context of my work, the cube represents the Ka'abah and the surrounding prayer mats symbolise the global Islamic community. On the top four corners of the cube, surveillance devices and spot lights are installed in such a way that they are able to survey and scrutinise the entire space surrounding the cube. On the cloth that is wrapped around the cube, there will be video images of Muslim prisoners, either kidnapped or arrested by occupying forces, who suffer inhumane hardships at the hands of US soldiers in prisons and detention camps such as at the Abu Gharib in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, as well as horrifying images of bomb attacks on Muslim countries.

My intension here is to expose the hypocrisy and pretensions of the US government occupying the White House who constantly preach about democracy, justice, and human rights but who in reality are the main violators themselves.

MEDEKATI KEPERIBADIAN SULAIMAN ESA

Wawancara Sulaiman Esa dan Nur Hanim pada 12 Jun 2011 di Shah Alam

Bolehkah anda kenang kembali selagi yang dapat diingati, bagaimana anda mula-mula berminat dengan seni?

Saya pastinya akan meletakkan tiga faktor yang telah mengilhamkan penglibatan awal saya dalam seni. Pertama, ahli keluarga terdekat saya, kedua, latihan seni peringkat sekolah rendah dan menengah saya dan ketiga, kumpulan rakan sebaya saya yakni kelompok kawan-kawan seniman yang belajar sendiri. Sememangnya persekitaran keluarga yang berseni di rumah telah mempengaruhi minat saya dalam bidang kesenian. Mereka terdiri daripada Rahmat Ismail bapa saudara saya, abang sulungnya, Allahyarham Abdullah Esa, arwah ibu saya, Aishah Ismail dan adik-beradik saya yang lebih tua. Bapa saudara saya seorang pelukis cat air ternama yang melukis beberapa landskap penting di sekitar Johor Bahru seperti Taman Istana, bangunan kerajaan Negeri Johor, kediaman persendirian, perkampungan nelayan di Stulang Laut, sekadar menamakan beberapa contoh. Kebanyakan karya-karya beliau digantung di rumah ibu bapa saya dan kemudiannya, selepas memerhatikan cara beliau menghasilkan karya, saya mula mencontohi teknik catan airnya dan juga melukis landskap yang sama, sepertimana yang telah beliau lakukan. Abdullah, abang saya sangat berbakat dan seorang artis serba boleh. Seninya merangkumi pembuatan poster, karya-karya catan air, lukisan figura tubuh (kadang-kadang saya menjadi model untuknya) dan membuat rekaan kostum untuk konsert sekolah. Kakak saya, Hamidah dan abang saya, Ahmad juga artis yang bagus dalam karya-karya grafik dan lakaran lukisan. Saya juga teringat ketika saya masih kanak-kanak, ibu saya membuat lukisan bunga-bunga yang cantik dan berwarna-warni pada telur yang kemudiannya diisi di dalam bakul. Saya amat terpesona bagaimana beliau berjaya membuatnya tanpa pernah melalui apa-apa latihan seni. Ringkasnya, saya datang dari keluarga yang secara semulajadinya sangat berseni. Jadi, ahli keluarga terdekat saya telah memberi pengaruh besar serta membangkitkan minat saya kepada seni.

Faktor kedua adalah pengalaman saya di sekolah rendah di Bukit Zahrah. Selepas memenangi pertandingan seni anjuran sekolah yang digerakkan oleh guru saya Taib Ibrahim, populariti saya semakin meningkat. Saya menjadi selebriti! Saya dipanggil untuk melibatkan diri dalam penghasilan alat bantuan visual dan kerja-kerja seni untuk ramai guru. Sudah tentu saya berasa amat baik kerana 'diperlukan' setiap masa dan pengalaman ini yang mendorong keyakinan saya dalam seni. Kemudian, apabila tamat sekolah rendah, saya telah ditawarkan tempat untuk meneruskan persekolahan menengah saya di Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) tetapi disebabkan oleh hal-hal keluarga, saya terpaksa menolak tawaran itu dan menyertai adik-beradik saya yang lebih tua di English College, Johor Bahru. Pada tahun kedua saya di situ, saya memenangi pertandingan seni peringkat kebangsaan tajaan Milo. Sekali lagi nama saya menjadi sebutan ramai dan saya menjadi terkenal – kini di peringkat sekolah menengah. Namun demikian, Encik Lim Teck Siang guru seni sayalah yang sebenarnya membantu membentuk hala tuju seni saya. Di samping memberi saya peluang untuk memperbaiki diri saya dalam seni melalui amalan dalam kelas dan projek-projek mural sekolah, beliau meminjamkan kepada saya buku-buku demi membantu meningkatkan bakat saya. Dan Encik Lim jugalah yang menasihati saya untuk memohon biasiswa Negeri Johor walaupun ia bertujuan untuk seni bina (yang telah ditawarkan kepada Syed Ahmad Jamal sedekad lalu, tetapi dia beralih kepada seni tampak semasa di London). Pada suatu hari, Encik Lim mengungkapkan bahawa saya seorang artis yang lebih baik daripada saudara-saudara tua saya dan saya mesti mencuba biasiswa ini!

Faktor ketiga adalah pengaruh kumpulan kawan-kawan artis saya seperti Sanip Lasman, Yahya Hasan, Ahmad Mohamad dan Yusof Sarman. Kami jenis artis belajar sendiri yang mempunyai minat sama – melukis pemandangan popular Johor Bahru hampir setiap minggu. Setelah karya-karya kami mencukupi untuk ditunjukkan, kami mengadakan pameran. Kami juga membincangkan tentang seni dan seringkali mengkritik hasil karya masing-masing. Ahmad Mohamad sangat dekat dengan saya. Beliau adalah seorang pelajar seni bina di Kolej Teknikal di Kuala Lumpur. Ahmad amat taksud dengan gaya seni Van Gogh sehinggakan beliau menghasilkan banyak karya dengan meniru gayanya. Selanjutnya, saya juga turut menaruh minat di dalam Van Gogh, seperti yang dibuktikan dalam sekumpulan karya-karya saya. Benar, amat menarik untuk menyimpulkan bahawa pada tahap yang berbeza dalam hidup saya, saya telah diberikan input yang berlainan untuk memajukan lagi pengetahuan dan kemahiran seni saya.

Kemudian pada suatu tahap kehidupan, anda telah ditawarkan belajar ke luar negara?

Pada tahun 1960, saya hanya mendapat gred 3 untuk peperiksaan Senior Cambridge. Saya tidak berminat menjadi guru sepertimana rakan-rakan saya yang lain. Sebaliknya dua tahun selepas sekolah, saya mengambil keputusan membangunkan lagi seni saya. Untuk membeli buku-buku bagi meningkatkan kemahiran kreatif dan pengkajian seni dengan rakan-rakan artis saya, saya memberi tuisyen seni kepada anak-anak jiran. Dalam tempoh ini, saya menjadi amat taksud dengan seni – membuat banyak lakaran dan lukisan serta ada yang disalin dari buku. Saya masih ingat berbasikal dari Johor Bahru ke Singapura untuk membeli buku-buku dan bahan-bahan di kedai-kedai seni. Selepas belajar banyak tentang kehidupan peribadi dan gaya Van Gogh, yang mana Ahmad kawan saya adalah peminatnya, saya juga menjadi sangat berminat pada gaya Impressionis, justeru membeli banyak buku mengenai Van Gogh, Monet, Renoir, dan lain-lainnya. Apabila saya melihat warna-warna mereka, saya menjadi gila! Terdapat sesuatu yang bergetar dan bergema jauh ke dalam diri apabila saya temui warna bertenaga Impressionis. Saya masih ingat pada masa itu, apabila saya tidak melukis pemandangan di luar, saya akan terus melukis sehingga larut malam, kadangkala dengan kawan-kawan saya, menyalin lukisan-lukisan Van Gogh, Monet, Manet. Cara ini telah membantu saya mengasah kepekaan saya terhadap warna. Saya juga mula berminat dalam cerita kehidupan artis-artis terkenal di Eropah. Saya pernah membaca buku ini - *Diary of Van Gogh* – tentang penderitaan dan kesengsaraannya. Ia benar-benar memberi ilham kepada saya untuk menjadi seorang artis!

Jadi, dalam masa dua tahun yang saya habiskan sebelum saya mendapat biasiswa, saya telah menghasilkan banyak lukisan. Ia seperti latihan tidak rasmi bagi saya dan secara tidak langsung banyak membantu saya ketika temuduga biasiswa negeri pada tahun 1960. Walaupun tiada biasiswa yang ditawarkan untuk seni, saya mengambil peluang membawa kesemua lakaran dan lukisan saya terutamanya gambar-gambar pemandangan dan bangunan-bangunan terkenal di Johor Bahru. Panel juri dengan mudah dapat mengecam pemandangan dan bangunan yang terkenal itu dan mereka menjadi kagum sehingga memutuskan untuk menawarkan saya biasiswa-pengkajian seni, walaupun tidak ada untuk bidang seni pada mulanya. Dan bagi saya, peluang untuk pergi ke London selama lima

tahun benar-benar merupakan satu kejayaan besar kerana selama dua tahun saya di sini berjuang sendiri dengan kawan-kawan. Sekarang saya mempunyai peluang untuk belajar secara rasmi di sekolah seni terbaik di London dengan guru-guru seni terbaik, berserta kemudahan yang terbaik - galeri, muzium. Oleh itu, ianya tuah kejayaan yang melancarkan saya ke dalam dimensi lain.

Bagaimana anda melihat kota London pada tahun 1960-an itu? Barangkali anda boleh berkongsi pengalaman bertemu Piyadasa di sana?

Pada tahun 60-an London digelar “Swinging Sixties” (fesyen dan perkembangan budaya paling terkini). Ia menjadi pusat kesenian Eropah yang menjadi idaman kesemua artis. Kebanyakan artis di situ menjadi tokoh dunia. Dunia fesyen Mary Quant, super model Twiggy, Vidal Sassoon, muzik Beatles, Rolling Stones dan lain-lainnya, kesemuanya mencipta nama di seluruh dunia. Ia adalah suatu peristiwa yang sangat pelik yang membawa saya mendarat di Hornsey College of Art - bukan kerana saya memilih tempat itu, saya memohon lain-lain tempat tetapi telah ditolak. Satu perkara mengenai Hornsey adalah ianya merupakan antara sekolah seni pertama yang mengamalkan sistem pendidikan seni Bauhaus.

Dan jika anda membaca tulisan Piyadasa, wawancara dengan T.K. Sabapathy, beliau menyebut mengenai sifat latihan Diploma dalam Seni dan Reka Bentuk (Dip. AD) yang telah diberikan, yang jauh berbeza dengan kursus konvensional dalam National Diploma in Design (NDD) yang dilalui Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Lai Tong dan lain-lain lagi. Teras utama Dip. AD adalah pembangunan intelektual dan pembelajaran seni sebagai bahasa visual. Sistem Bauhaus sebenarnya menganggap seni sebagai suatu bentuk penyiasatan saintifik; seni tidak hanya membuat gambar, ia adalah satu proses pemikiran di mana artis mempersoalkan kesemua yang dilakukannya, bahan-bahannya dan teknik. Ia tidak begitu banyak mementingkan **apa** hasilnya tetapi yang paling utama sekali tentang **bagaimana** dan **kenapa** ia dihasilkan.

Oleh kerana sifat kursus tersebut yang sedemikian, kami digalakkan untuk menjadi lebih fleksibel, berfikir luas dalam bidang-bidang lain sesudah kami didedahkan kepada beberapa disiplin rentas budaya hasil lawatan para pensyarah tamu. Jadi, pelukis atau artis bukan sahaja perlu untuk lulus peperiksaan di ruang-ruang studio tetapi dia juga mesti lulus peperiksaan dalam mata pelajaran seni Liberal atau teori seni, falsafah dan estetika. Dalam erti kata lain, semua bidang teori perlu dikuasai sebagai bahagian penting dalam amalan latihan studio kami. Oleh itu, konsep artis sebagai pembuat menjadi tidak berguna, sebaliknya **artis sebagai pemikir merupakan teras utama kursus tersebut**. Sebelum saya dapat memulakan kursus lukisan saya, selama satu tahun saya menjalani latihan di dalam kursus Dasar, mempelajari asas bahasa dan nahu seni. Maurice de Sauzmarez mengajar kursus Reka Bentuk Asas. Pembelajaran seni telah menjadi sangat intelektual. Bukan sahaja kami perlu menjalankan pendekatan pengkajian seni, kami juga harus mengambil mata pelajaran liberal seperti falsafah seni, estetika, sosiologi dan psikologi seni yang diwajibkan. Hal ini memberi kejutan budaya dan intelektual kepada saya dan membuat saya keliru. Saya perlu meningkatkan keupayaan pemikiran kedua-dua otak sebelah kiri dan kanan, memandangkan sistem Bauhaus tidak berminat dengan hasil karya tetapi proses, bagaimana dan mengapa hasil karya diciptakan.

Oleh itu, 'Swinging Sixties' London pada tahun 60-an menjadi seperti pintu kawalan saluran air untuk intelektual yang cukup memuaskan, pendidikan yang memperkaya dan berkhasiat, pencerahan budaya (disebabkan oleh kehadiran banyak muzium dan galeri seni) dan secara sosialnya menerangi, menerusi pertemuan dengan guru-guru atau orang-orang seperti David Porsche, Bridget Riley, Buckminster Fuller, Lawrence Alloway dan ramai lagi tokoh lain serta menyepadukan dengan spektrum luas para pelajar antarabangsa.

Ia seperti *vertigo* sebenar – pengalaman asyik yang sangat memabukkan dan paling diingati – yang pernah dialami dalam hidup saya. Seorang budak kampung datang dari kemunduran Johor Bahru tiba-tiba terpelanting ke London, sebuah kota yang sarat dengan dinamika kreatif dan artistik dari seluruh dunia! Bayangkan, beberapa tahun sebelum itu di Johor Bahru saya meniru lukisan bunga matahari Van Gogh dan kemudian di galeri seni di London yang saya hadiri, terdapat perbincangan daripada pakar yang menjelaskan lukisan bunga matahari Van Gogh yang sama itu, dalam penerangannya yang begitu teliti. Saya cukup takjub. Ia amat surreal dan memukau!

Saya pertama kali bertemu Piyadasa pada tahun 1963, pada tahun kedua saya di Hornsey. Oleh kerana hanya kami yang merupakan pelajar Malaysia yang mengambil program serupa di kolej, kami terus merasa kesefahaman antara satu sama lain. Kami menjadi pasangan sahabat yang harmoni. Piya sendiri secara semula jadinya merupakan seorang yang sangat berfikir. Beliau banyak membaca dan berhujah. Dan kursus ini adalah sangat sempurna bagi seseorang dengan sifat yang sedemikian. Dan saya juga berkongsi kecenderungan intelektual yang sama ke arah seni.

Jadi, apabila kami bertemu, ia benar-benar suatu perkongsian yang sempurna. Kami juga bersama-sama berkongsi kediaman yang sama. Itulah saat-saat yang sangat saya nikmati, kerana apabila kami membaca sesuatu, kami akan berbincang, berhujah mengenai apa yang telah kami baca atau menyelesaikan apa sahaja masalah yang kami hadapi di dalam kelas. Walaupun saya banyak belajar di studio, hidup dengan Piya meluaskan pengetahuan saya dalam bidang seni dan bidang lain yang berkaitan. Belajar di Hornsey adalah suatu pengalaman yang sangat memperkayakan saya kerana bukan sahaja saya menikmati lawatan dan penyelidikan ke semua muzium dan galeri seni serta menyedari seni tidak hanya perihal membuat gambar, tetapi terdapat banyak pertaliannya dengan estetika, falsafah dan masalah sosial. Jadi ia adalah satu dunia baru bagi saya, bagi seorang budak lelaki yang datang dari Johor Bahru yang mundur, yang mempelajari seni hanya dengan penyalinan, yang mula sedar bahawa seni mempunyai hubungan yang lebih besar dengan disiplin-disiplin lain.

Bolehkah anda berkongsi tentang pameran luar biasa Towards A Mystical Reality? Apakah benar Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan pada tahun 1971 turut menjadi pencetus ke arah pameran tersebut?

Izinkan saya menyambung dari mana saya sebutkan tentang Piya tadi. Apabila kami pulang, kami berkongsi banyak cita-cita dan ideologi yang kami serap dari Barat. Malah, apabila saya menyertai Piya pada tahun 1970 untuk mengajar di ITM kami merupakan antara beberapa orang terawal yang mula menyebarkan sistem Bauhaus dalam pendidikan kita. Oleh itu, kita mempunyai kursus asas ini. Kami memperkenalkan model yang sama. Pada masa itu, kami amat cenderung terhadap seni yang berpaksikan Barat. Kami tergolong di dalam kumpulan

yang dikenali sebagai Konstruktivis. Terdapat pensyarah lain yang berkongsi ideologi kami - Tan Teong Eng, Tan Tuck Kan, dan mungkin Choong Kam Kow. Bersama-sama, kami sibuk mengembangkan seni berpaksikan-Barat ini: Minimalisme dan Konstruktivisme. Kami percaya pada masa itu, menjadi *avant-garde* adalah satu-satu caranya untuk maju. Konstruktivisme dan minimalisme merupakan salah satu hal yang terkini dalam pergerakan seni, tetapi itu hanya berlangsung selama satu tahun.

Walau bagaimanapun, akibat rusuhan kaum 1969, kerajaan yang memerintah pada tahun 1971 telah menganjurkan Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan. Dan cukup aneh sebenarnya, sementara kami masih kukuh berakarkan idealisme berpaksikan Barat di dalam pemikiran kami, Piya dan saya sangat serius terlibat dalam organisasi kongres ini. Syed Ahmad Jamal merupakan salah seorang pemimpin, dia memilih kami untuk menjadi sebahagian daripada organisasinya. Oleh itu, sama ada kami suka atau tidak, kami tetap tersedut ke dalam dunia Melayu kerana kongres tersebut pada asasnya suatu langkah kerajaan dan cendekiawan kita untuk mencari paradigma alternatif bagi seni dan budaya; yang tidak semestinya berdasarkan pada budaya dominan negara ini.

Sebahagiannya kerana rusuhan, kerajaan cuba untuk mencari formula, sejenis bentuk seni yang boleh menyatupadukan masyarakat, nilai-nilai yang dikongsi bersama di kalangan orang ramai anggota masyarakat awam. Sebahagian tujuannya adalah untuk menentukan bagaimana seni boleh digunakan sebagai ikatan sosial, sebagai simen untuk perpaduan. Ia bukan sangat atas sebab-sebab estetika atau falsafah, tetapi atas sebab-sebab politik dan sosial. Sudah tentu ia mempunyai dimensi budaya dan politiknya sendiri. Tetapi bagi saya dan Piya, penglibatan kami tidak bersifat politik sama sekali. Ia adalah intelektual. Buat pertama kalinya, kami mempunyai kira-kira tiga puluh orang sarjana, pembuat filem, orang-orang teater, dan pensyarah yang berkumpul bersama dan membincangkan hala tuju seni dan budaya Malaysia. Entah bagaimana, saya menjadi tenggelam di dalam hujah-hujah. Saya fikir untuk berlaku adil, komitmen kami terhadap seni Barat itu adalah dangkal kerana Piya dan saya masih rakyat Malaysia. Oleh itu, dalam permainan menggoda seni Barat, kami menjadi sungguh kagum dengan kuasanya yang hebat. Namun begitu, dari masa ke semasa kami mula sedar bahawa ia bukanlah sebegitu rupa. Saya masih ingat mengenai kenyataan saya kepada Piya. "Mengapa kita sentiasa membaca dan perlu membeli majalah Art Forum, Art International, American Art hanya untuk mengetahui apa yang akan berlaku seterusnya seolah-olah kita pak turut ikut mengekor kesenian Barat? Mengapa kita melihat lukisan terbaru oleh Arakawa, Frank Stella, dan kemudian kita perlu melakukan perkara yang sama seperti mereka?". Perasaan rasa tidak puas hati mula menjelma.

Kongres tersebut membuka mata kami, sebenarnya kita perlu mencari sesuatu yang tulen daripada budaya kita sendiri, kepada kebenaran kita sendiri. Oleh itu, kongres tersebut adalah sangat penting kepada kami kerana ia benar-benar membuatkan kami mempersoalkan kepercayaan kami dalam kerohanian seni Barat. Dan kemudian jauh di lubuk hati saya, saya masih ingat di London saya pernah membuat kaligrafi Islam. Kerana saya fikir secara bawah sedarnya bahawa diri Islam saya masih terkebumi di bawah diri Barat saya. Tetapi penganjuran kongres tersebut membuatkan saya mempersoalkan keutamaan saya. Namun

demikian, sebelum kongres, kami mempunyai dua pameran penting melibatkan Piya dan saya. Hanya semata-mata untuk menyebarkan nilai-nilai kebaratan. Mula-mula kami adakan *Experiment '70* dan *Dokumentasi 72*. Kedua buah pameran tersebut membincangkan seni sebagai objek, seni untuk mencari struktur, masalah asas - ruang, warna, jalinan berdasarkan latihan rasmi dari Barat, tanpa langsung merujuk kepada seni atau budaya tempatan.

Pada waktu itu, dipercayai bahawa kebudayaan nasional tidak relevan di peringkat antarabangsa. Kami percaya untuk bertaraf antarabangsa adalah untuk menjadi seorang artis yang hebat, yang bertujuan untuk menjadi *Avant-garde*. Tetapi kongres tersebut membuat kami menyedari bahawa seni adalah berkenaan pencarian makna, konteks dan kaitan. Salah satu kesan Kongres tersebut, selama dua tahun, selepas *Dokumentasi 72*; Piya dan saya tidak menghasilkan apa-apa karya, kami banyak membaca dan kami mempersoalkan keutamaan kaitan seni Barat dengan seni di bumi Malaysia. Secara beransur-ansur, kesannya mula meresap ke dalam kesedaran kami. Dan akhirnya selepas membaca falsafah Asia, kami menyedari bahawa beberapa seniman *Avant-garde* di Barat seperti John Cage, Mark Rothko sebenarnya telah banyak memasukkan pengisian kerohanian dalam karya-karya mereka. Misalnya John Cage ataupun Yoko Ono, beberapa karya-mereka berdasarkan ajaran Tao dan falsafah lain, konsep kekosongan dan ketiadaan gerak.

Jadi, kami mempersoalkan, mengapa kita memandangi ke Barat dan mereka semua memandangi ke Timur? Kenapa pula kami tidak pergi ke akar Timur kami? Oleh itu, ia permulaan *Mystical Reality* di mana kami mula melihat ke dalam Zen Buddhisme, Taoisme, tidak begitu banyak kepada Islam dan mula memikirkan mengapa kami tidak mencipta satu bentuk baru kesenian yang menggunakan konsep masa dan ruang, falsafah berdasarkan ajaran kebatinan Timur. Jadi, kerja-kerja yang datang pada tahun '74 dalam *Towards A Mystical Reality* (TMR) adalah sesuatu yang mengejutkan kepada khalayak seni kami kerana ia benar-benar menafikan apa yang Piya dan saya laungkan hanya pada setahun yang lalu. Ia juga meletakkan satu cabaran yang kuat terhadap cara senilukis Malaysia bergerak sejak empat puluh tahun lalu, sejak Nanyang, bahkan sejak karya-karya pelukis catan air Abdullah Ariff. Ia mengemukakan soalan kepada artis, "mengapa kita berpaksikan Barat apabila diri kita sendiri adalah warga Asia, penganut Islam dan kita mempunyai falsafah yang begitu besar, metafizika".

Apakah kita hanya menjadi catatan nota kaki dan pak turut membuta tuli meniru kesenian Barat? Dalam erti kata lain, Jolly Koh ada menyebut sesuatu seperti ini: "mana-mana pergerakan seni kita sentiasa datang dari Barat. Sesuatu berlaku di Barat, kemudian gema getarannya sampai ke Malaysia". Tetapi TMR adalah berbeza kerana untuk kali pertama, kami mula untuk membongkar, membebaskan diri kami yang terjajah daripada paksi keBaratan. Jadi karya-karya perlu provokatif. Ia bertujuan untuk menjadi radikal. Dan kerana ianya begitu provokatif dan radikal, saya tidak tahu apa yang perlu dilakukan selepas itu kerana karya-karya tersebut seperti menafikan segala-gala yang kami percaya serta cuba untuk membatalkan apa yang kami tahu.

Adalah penting TMR telah mengejutkan masyarakat seni kita dan juga para pencinta seni untuk sedar bahawa kita tidak boleh terus pergi begini dengan hanya menjadi pihak yang kedua terbaik. Namun kita perlu untuk menimbang semula, bukan model yang sempurna tetapi kita perlu membina model kita sendiri. Kongres dalam caranya yang tertentu mencetuskan sikap sebegini pada cara berfikir seseorang itu tetapi ia bukanlah jawapannya kerana ianya menjuarai etnik Melayu dan seni Melayu. Kami tidak pergi ke arah itu tetapi kami bercakap mengenai hal yang lebih sejagat. Tentang apakah yang dapat dikongsikan dari mistisisme (kebatinan) lainnya.

Sebenarnya TMR sangat kuat buat saya kerana kadangkala saya mula berfikir tentang kesemua unsur-unsur seni dari Barat ke Timur. Seperti idea waktu dan ruang, konsep apa yang menjadikan seni, pada saat apa ia menjadi seni? Apakah ketika anda memikirkannya, atau apabila anda melukiskannya? Dan selepas itu, apa? Misalannya, idea dalam sebuah karya berjudul "Empty bird cage.." itu amat provokatif kerana pada saat kami mempamerkan karya, khalayak perlu memutuskan pada titik manakah ianya menjadi karya seni? Adakah apabila kita mula-mula membeli sangkar dengan burung di dalamnya? Atau apabila burung itu dilepaskan? Atau burung itu kini telah terbang beribu batu jauhnya? Ia sesuatu yang sangat bersifat Asia, dalam kata lain - masa bukan garis lurus mendatar, ia bulatan pusingan. Persoalan seperti itu merupakan suatu hal yang belum pernah didengar oleh kebanyakan artis. Ia turut merangsang seniman lain yang tidak berlatarbelakangkan seni halus. Orang teater seperti Krishen Jit mendapati ia amat menarik kerana terdapat keselarian di antara apa yang kami lakukan dengan apa yang dibuat beliau. Karya-karya tersebut menjangkau pembuatan imej yang tulen dan sudut pandang yang mistikal. Meskipun karya-karya ini bersifat provokatif, selepas pameran kami berdua benar-benar kekeringan idea dan kehilangan tenaga! Saya terkenang seseorang yang memberitahu saya, "Leman, jadi setelah ini kamu tidak boleh melukis lagi, kamu tahu?" Kata saya; "Anda betul. Jika saya melukis semula anda tentu akan benar-benar mentertawakan saya. Saya tak dapat hendak menjawabnya tetapi saya rasa anda betul!" (Ketawa)

Selepas itu, ia seperti kekosongan yang cukup berongga di dalam tubuh saya, saya bertemu dengan titik sifar, jadi sekarang ke mana saya hendak pergi dari sini? Dari tahun '74 hingga '79, saya tidak berbuat apa-apa. Saya hanya berputus asa. Dan Piya pergi ke Hawaii untuk melanjutkan pengajian Sarjana dan melakukan perkara yang lain. Bagi saya, terdapat kekosongan dan kesepian yang sesungguhnya. Ia memberi kesan mendalam terhadap daya penciptaan saya kerana ia benar-benar menafikan apa yang saya percaya sebagai amalan seni saya selama dua dekad yang lalu. Walau bagaimanapun, pada penghujung tahun 1974, saya dianugerahkan biasiswa kerajaan Itali bagi pengajian singkat selama sembilan bulan dalam Rekaan Pentas dan Busana di Rom. Ia seperti cuti rehat pendek daripada tekanan semasa TMR dan juga pekerjaan menyegarkan untuk terlibat dalam bidang lain. Saya memiliki beberapa pengalaman dalam bidang itu apabila di tahun '73 dan '74, saya amat aktif terlibat dalam kerja-kerja rekaan pentas dan busana untuk beberapa drama seperti *Alang Rentak Seribu*, *Uda dan Dara* dan *The Birds* serta lain-lainnya.

Tetapi tiga tahun kemudian pada tahun '77 anda menghasilkan siri *Waiting for Godot* sebelum siri *Akar-akar Peribumi* pada penghujung 70-an. Boleh jelaskan anjakan paradigma ini?

Seminar Akar-akar Peribumi (AAP) telah diadakan di ITM dan dianjurkan oleh ahli-ahli Fakulti. Ya, dan ia menunjukkan peneguhan semula Kongres Kebudayaan 1971. Disebabkan tajuknya "*Seminar Akar-akar Peribumi dan Perkembangannya Kini*," dan soalnya sekarang selepas lapan tahun berlalu, apakah yang berlaku terhadap apa yang disebut sebagai seni peribumi itu? Adakah ia berkembang? Atau adakah ia semakin terhakis? Mereka cuba untuk memastikan kemajuan. Dalam erti kata lain, saya mengaku, ia telah memberi kesan sekurang-kurangnya kepada kakitangan ITM hingga membuatkan mereka mengadakan pameran yang berlangsung selepas seminar tersebut. Saya mengambil bahagian dalam pameran ini dengan karya yang bertajuk *Contemplation '79* (Renungan '79). Karya anyaman tangan biasa yang dibuat dari kanvas dicat berjajaran dengan bahan permukaan rata mendatar mengenang kembali teknik menganyam tikar yang dilihat saya pada rumah-rumah di Kelantan dan Terengganu semasa perjalanan dalam lawatan pelajar saya ke sana. Walaupun mungkin kelihatan kasar, ia merupakan percubaan pertama saya, yang mentah, untuk menggambarkan teknik seni tradisional kita sebagai suatu bentuk ungkapan kontemporari.

Di samping itu, salah satu dari keputusan Kongres adalah melantik Ismail Zain sebagai Pengarah Kebudayaan, di mana sebelum itu beliau merupakan Pengarah Balai Seni Lukis Negara. Dan salah satu tugasnya adalah untuk memastikan bahawa semua institusi pengajian tinggi mengambil satu aspek kebudayaan nasional kita dan memasukkannya ke dalam program pendidikan.

Misalnya USM, mereka memberi tumpuan khusus pada teater. Krishen Jit berada di sana mengendalikan bidang seni persembahan. ITM telah diberikan tugas tentang bagaimana untuk menyelidik mengenai seni peribumi dan membuatnya masuk ke dalam program studio. Saya masih ingat Encik Hashim Hassan, diri saya sendiri, dan bahkan Piyadasa pada masa itu begitu mengambil berat tentang bagaimana mendidik semula para pelajar untuk memperluaskan pengetahuan mereka dan menghargai budaya mereka sendiri. Kami mempunyai pelajar seperti Anuar Rashid dengan lukisannya yang berjudul *Kelahiran Inderaputra* yang sangat kuat sekali. Bagi saya, ia adalah lukisan yang hebat tetapi masih berdasarkan seni peribumi. Dan seperti Amron Omar yang lukisannya berasaskan pada silat, sekarang kita boleh menciptakan lukisan figura tubuh, tetapi dengan perbezaan yang berdasarkan pada seni mempertahankan diri Melayu atau mitologi Melayu.

Bagi saya, Kongres tidak mempunyai kesan ke atas program seni kerana pensyarah itulah sendiri yang sepatutnya menjadi penggerak utama atau ejen perubahan. Dan kerana kami terlibat dalam Kongres serta juga dalam profesion perguruan, selain kami sendiri adalah artis, kami mula bertanya kembali arah haluan kami. Sebagai contoh, setelah TMR, saya sendiri mula merenung akar kelslaman saya. Meskipun saya tidak semudahnya terjun ke dunia seni berpaksi-Melayu, saya membawa para pelajar ke Kelantan, Terengganu. Kami bertemu dengan pengukir terkenal Melayu seperti Latif Long, Wan Su, Tengku Ibrahim dan lain-lainnya. Dengan kata lain, kelas kami buat pertama kalinya pergi berkunjung ke pusat-pusat budaya di pantai Timur, bertemu dengan para tukang kerajinan tangan, bertemu dengan Habibah Zikri yang membuat songket. Jadi hal ini tidak pernah dilakukan sebelum

Kongres. Kami pada suatu waktu hanya melihat ke Paris atau New York. Tetapi kini terdapat satu anjakan paradigma. Malah kemudiannya, Ruzaika Basaree memulakan siri tettingkap *Dungun* beliau. Dalam banyak cara, Kongres mempunyai kesan yang besar ke atas pembangunan pendidikan seni, dan juga karya-karya kreatif artis tempatan.

Dalam tempoh lima tahun saya tanpa ketentuan, perkara tentang Godot datang tiba-tiba tidak dirancang. Selepas TMR, saya telah lenyap selama lima tahun. Saya tidak tahu apa yang perlu dilakukan. Tetapi kemudian saya berkata kepada diri saya sendiri, saya tidak boleh hanya duduk tidak berbuat apa-apa, disebabkan saya hanya melakukan sesuatu yang tidak dirancang. Jadi, apabila saya membuat siri cetakan Godot, saya cuma mahu melakukan sesuatu yang tidak dirancang. Imej itu datang kepada saya dan bukannya saya yang mencari imej. Cetakan Godot adalah berdasarkan dua imej. Satu, imej masjid di Cordova atau Alhambra, dan di bahagian bawahnya pula imej wanita bertelanjang menunduk ke bawah. Saya hanya mengosongkan fikiran saya. Saya barangkali melihat imej bogel daripada majalah yang saya beli di Rom semasa tugas singkat saya di sana. Ia sangat puitis—tidak juga seksi, tetapi amat sayu.

Waktu itu, saya merupakan tutor di Jabatan Seni Halus dan saya mempunyai akses ke bilik seni cetak. Saya masih ingat apabila ia telah siap, saya telah menggantungnya pada dinding di pejabat saya. Suatu hari, Ketua Jabatan (Saya tidak akan menyebut namanya) datang ke pejabat saya. Beliau terkejut dan berkata, “Hei, apakah ini?” Saya berkata, “Apa salahnya?” Beliau berkata; “ayat al-Quran dan anda meletakkan wanita bogel di sana!” Saya acuh tak acuh. Di sini datang seorang lelaki yang sangat Islamik, Ketua Jabatan, yang berasa terkejut dengan cetakan tersebut.

Kemudian saya telah dicabar jika saya berani untuk mempamerkannya di luar. Kebetulan, ada satu pertandingan seni cetak di Balai Seni Lukis Negara yang dianjurkan oleh Syed Ahmad Jamal. Saya telah mengambil bahagian dan telah dianugerahkan sebagai salah satu daripada penerima hadiah utama! Hal itu merupakan satu jenaka. (ketawa) Dan Syed Ahmad Jamal datang dengan satu kenyataan pada cetakan – “*the secret and the sacred*” (“kerahsiaan dan kesucian”) – maka selepas itu semua perkara menjadi masuk akal. Saya sebenarnya mencipta potret diri saya sendiri. Saya bercakap mengenai diri saya. Pada masa itu, saya berada di dalam dilema. Saya telah begitu kukuh berpaksikan Barat - tetapi saya tahu saya perlu bergerak keluar darinya. Jadi, ia tidaklah sepertimana saya telah diberikan peringatan untuk berpindah ke pusat Islam. Saya sekadar menggunakan imej-imej ini secara bersahaja. Namun apabila Syed Ahmad Jamal berkata sebegini, itulah perkataan yang saya cari. Kemudian Piyadasa berkata ia adalah “cetakan hebat” dan T.K. Sabapathy berkata “ia adalah semangat zaman!”

Setelah itu anda ke Baltimore dan membuat anyaman buat pertama kalinya. Bolehkah anda huraikan berkenaan kegiatan baru itu?

Saya meninggalkan tanah air, ke Baltimore pada tahun 1979, untuk melanjutkan pengajian Sarjana dan mula sedar akan jati diri Melayu saya. Di sana saya mula membuat kerja-kerja seni berdasarkan teknik anyaman. Saya masih ingat, semua pelajar seni halus pergi ke kelas sejarah seni. Sebaliknya, saya pergi ke kelas tekstil dengan semua pelajar perempuan. Saya mahu belajar membuat anyaman. Saya hanya mahu melakukan perkara-perkara lain kecuali lukisan Barat. Dari situ saya mula belajar bagaimana untuk membuat kertas buatan tangan dan benang. Saya telah mengadakan pameran dua orang “Works on Paper” (karya atas kertas) di galeri Grimaldi di Baltimore pada tahun 1980, di mana buat kali pertama lukisan saya diperbuat secara anyaman menggunakan potongan-potongan kertas.

Tiada apa yang hebatnya tentang hal itu tetapi saya cuma mahu menafikan diri daripada pemikiran Barat. Ia mendapat sambutan yang baik. Kemudiannya saya terus perhalusi dengan benang dan pulpa kertas buatan tangan dan bahan-bahan yang sepatutnya lalu mengadakan pameran kedua di Baltimore City Council. Ia diterima dengan amat baik. Saya berada di Baltimore selama dua tahun. Tahun pertama saya membuat tenunan mudah tetapi pada tahun yang kedua saya belajar menggunakan benang, pulpa dengan proses yang lebih rumit. Buat saya, perjalanan ke Baltimore untuk program pengajian Sarjana saya telah secara tidak langsung mengtakrifkan diri saya sebagai rakyat Malaysia—Melayu, orang Islam. Dan saya mula secara berterusan melihat pada kerajinan pertukangan Melayu. Perkara-perkara yang saya beritahu kepada para pelajar di dalam kelas, saya mula amalkan sendiri.

Di Asia Tenggara, seni kita sebenarnya seni tekstil. Kita tidak mempunyai lukisan tetapi memiliki sari dan sarung. Jadi saya mula secara serius melihat batik, tenunan songket dan ukiran sebagai perhiasan kita, untuk meMalaysia-kan diri saya sendiri. Apabila saya pulang, saya tahu bahawa saya perlu bergerak dari kerajinan pertukangan Melayu kerana semasa Seminar Akar-akar Peribumi terdapat ucaptama yang diberikan oleh pendidik terkenal, Awang Had Salleh. Satu persoalan yang dibangkitkan beliau yang begitu mengusik fikiran saya, berbunyi lebih kurang begini: “Mengapa hari ini di tanah air kita, kita mempunyai di satu sisi, para tukang kerajinan tangan - wanita yang menciptakan kerajinan tangan, bakul dan lain-lain, manakala di pihak yang satu lagi pula ada orang-orang yang menciptakan lukisan, arca, seni Barat dan sebagainya. Mereka adalah orang-orang Melayu dan umat Islam tetapi mereka tidak boleh bercakap antara satu sama lain. Mengapa? Kita kini mempunyai Makyong, ronggeng dan kemudiannya jazz serta rock and roll. Mengapa pemisahan ini berlaku? Anda mesti menyelesaikan masalah ini. Anda mesti mencari jambatannya”. Kenyataan itu benar-benar melanda fikiran saya. Kami dicabar. Sebagai pensyarah, kami mesti menyelesaikan dikotomi ini. Jadi, semasa saya berada di Amerika, saya memberitahu diri saya, apa itu pertukangan kerajinan tangan? Siapa yang mentakrifkan kerajinan tangan? Siapa yang memutuskan kerajinan tangan adalah tidak bagus?

Terdapat ramai penulis feminis di Amerika yang bercakap tentang kerajinan pertukangan tangan pada peringkat kerohanian. Kerajinan tangan merupakan sesuatu yang amat mendalam, bukan dengan cara seorang artis seni halus melihat pada kerajinan tangan tetapi bagaimana seorang artis seni halus melihat hasil karya oleh wanita. Ia adalah suatu perkara

yang berkait dengan kerohanian, hal-hal kewanitaan. Justeru, wacana yang berbeza dalam kerajinan tangan membuat saya menilai semula apa itu kraf. Ia sebetulnya istilah merendahkan yang dipakai oleh Barat terhadap budaya kita, makanya Barat memancarkan kebudayaan mereka sendiri. Ianya seperti perumpamaan muslihat dari Barat. Kemudiannya, saya menjadi anti Barat, melihat kembali budaya saya sendiri dengan cara yang sangat kritikal dan intelektual. Jadi, ia bermula dari situ. Kesan TMR adalah saya mula bergerak meninggalkan ideologi Barat dan bergerak ke arah jati diri Melayu-Islam saya.

Kemudian datang kebangkitan semula Islam di Malaysia, barangkali atas pengaruh kejatuhan Shah Iran. Pada tahun '84 anda muncul dengan pameran Ke Arah Tauhid, yang lebih keIslaman daripada keMelayuannya, selepas itu anda membuat mural UMNO di PWTC. Bolehkah anda memberi penjelasan tentang hal ini?

Apabila saya balik pada pertengahan 1981, saya membuat kertas sendiri dan menenun. Dan kemudian saya sedar di dalam ITM banyak perkara sedang berlaku. Kami ada Ismail Faruqi dan isterinya Lamyah al Faruqi yang datang melawat kami dan berceramah, yang mana saya ikut hadir. Buat pertama kalinya saya bertemu dengan ilmuan Islam yang bercakap tentang seni Islam. Kali terakhir, ramai para cendekiawan hanya bercakap tentang syariah, perundangan Islam tetapi tidak pernah mengenai seni. Tetapi beliau menganjurkan kursus-kursus, menulis buku tentang seni Islam. Apabila saya bertemu beliau dan mendengar beliau bercakap, saya mula menyedari saya perlu mendalami pengetahuan ilmu Islam saya.

Selepas itu, kami mempunyai satu pameran besar pada tahun 1984 di Balai Seni Lukis Negara selenggaraan kurator Syed Ahmad Jamal dan Sharifah Fatimah Zubir. Karya-karya oleh artis-artis Islam dari seluruh dunia. Saya dapat rasakan semangat Islam yang bakal datang sekitar 80-an dan seterusnya. Pusat Islam dibina betul-betul di pusat bandar Kuala Lumpur. Terdapat kebangkitan Islam. Dan saya mula merasakan tenaga itu. Saya mula meneroka seni anyaman saya. Sebelumnya ia hanya tentang membuat corak tetapi saya mula untuk membuat corak yang berdasarkan corak gaya Islam *arabesque*. Kemudian saya mula membaca dan mula berminat dalam penulisan oleh Syed Hoessein Nasr, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Frithjof Schuon dan lain-lain lagi serta menjadi berminat dalam pemikiran Islam. Ia mula meresap ke dalam kesenian saya.

Ke Arah Tauhid merupakan permulaan di mana saya mendapati diri saya berpindah dari etnik keMelayuan kepada keIslaman. Dan di dalam katalog, saya memetik satu kenyataan oleh Nasr, Titus Burkhardt, berkenaan matematik dan kosmologi dalam Islam. Saya meneroka lebih mendalam dan lebih jauh ke dalam dimensi metafizik Islam. *Ke Arah Tauhid* adalah bentuk seni yang canggih, diperbuat dari kertas buatan tangan. Saya menggunakan corak Islam yang berjajaran dengan motif Mandala. Saya menggunakan buluh, benang, benang emas dan benang kapas – perkara-perkara yang anda dapati dalam kerajinan tangan Melayu, bahan-bahan yang datang dari warisan peribumi kita namun maknanya pula datang dari corak Islam. Jadi, terdapat gabungan Melayu dan Islam.

Ke Arah Tauhid merupakan kenyataan saya yang kuat dalam mentakrifkan apa itu lukisan, apa itu seni, kerana secara artistik dan rupa bentuknya sewaktu saya membuat karya saya *Dokumentasi 72*, saya menggunakan banyak grid. Mereka berkata intipati kerohanian ditentukan oleh grid ini. Ia bercakap tentang struktur logika. Dalam *Ke Arah Tauhid* saya menggunakan banyak grid yang membentuk corak *arabesque* agar corak-corak geometri

dan disiplin-disiplin dalam matematik masih dapat digunakan. Saya dapati pertalian rapat di antara Konstruktivisme dan seni Islam, memandangkan kedua-duanya menanggapi matematik sebagai struktur asas. Kedua-duanya bercakap tentang menghapuskan subjektivisme, emosionalisme. Kerana dalam Konstruktivisme ia perlu menjadi seni yang tulen. Apabila anda melukis permukaan, ia tidak menunjukkan pergerakan sapuan berus anda seolah-olah dilakukan oleh robot. Dalam seni Islam, matematik menafikan subjektiviti. Anda perlu mengikut sistem grid. Anda telah menjangkau ke tahap yang lebih tinggi, undang-undang sejagat yang tertentu. Bagi saya, pengertian telah berubah – teknik, warna-warna dan geometri digunakan dalam konteks yang berbeza.

Hanya pada tahun 2001, lebih daripada 15 tahun setelah Ke Arah Tauhid, anda mengadakan pameran Insyirah. Kenapa begitu?

Saya menghabiskan masa selama lapan tahun untuk mendapatkan Ijazah Kedoktoran Falsafah (Ph.D) Saya pergi dalam tahun '86 untuk program kedoktoran saya di Temple University di Philadelphia. Saya tidak dapat menamatkan kursus saya pada masa yang sepatutnya (empat tahun) disebabkan dua orang profesor saya, Ismail dan Lamya' al Faruqi, tiba-tiba meninggal dunia – lebih tepat lagi dibunuh. Saya terpaksa menukar kepada kursus lain serta berjuang dan hanya setelah empat tahun berlalu, saya lulus peperiksaan yang komprehensif, maka sudah tibalah masanya untuk saya pergi. Saya mengambil masa empat tahun lagi untuk menyelesaikan penulisan disertasi saya, pada ketika itu saya sudah kembali ke tanahair dan bekerja di Jabatan Seni Halus.

Bagi kesemua tahun-tahun yang saya tidak melukis, biar secalitpun sapuan berus itu, saya telah melakukan penyelidikan dan dalam masa yang sama menjadi kurator menyelenggara beberapa pameran penting Seni Islam tajaan BSLN. Beberapa penulisan kuratorial merupakan bahagian daripada hasil kerja penyelidikan Ph.D saya yang mana saya perlu benar-benar memerah otak untuk menyiapkannya. Hanya pada pertengahan 90-an, akhirnya saya lulus program kedoktoran falsafah saya. Dan saya perlu mengucapkan terima kasih saya kepada Dr Mohamad Tamyez Bajuri (Al-marhum), Dekan Sekolah Pengajian Seni dan Reka Bentuk, yang telah memainkan peranan penting dalam menyokong serta menggalakkan saya untuk menamatkan pengajian Ph.D saya pada waktu itu, setelah saya asyik dengan semua perihal *tasawuf, usuludin*, kajian agama Islam, China, India, Kristian dan perkara-perkara yang bukan kebiasaan penelitian saya – pengajian tersebut berkisar teologi semata-mata dan pengajian seni tidak dimasukkan! Ia hanya menumpukan pada pengajian teologi daripada berbagai sudut pandang. Jadi lapan tahun itu dihabiskan bukan kerana saya dalam kesamaran tetapi perlu bergelut dengan perkara lain yang mana sepenuhnya merupakan suatu pengalaman yang baru dalam hidup saya. Saya mengambil masa yang lama kerana saya terpaksa meredakan diri selepas penyelia saya meninggal dunia secara tiba-tiba. Tetapi bagi saya apa yang saya hilang? Apa yang saya dapat? Walaupun lapan tahun berlalu, saya tidak merungut kerana dari segi pengetahuan, lebih banyak anda mengkaji lebih baik hasilnya. Saya tidak berasa menyesal. Bagi saya, ia meluaskan kefahaman diri saya sendiri untuk menghormati agama lain; konsep kecantikan dan kebudayaan mereka. Saya rasa lebih yakin sekarang.

Peluang untuk belajar dengan Nasr, Faruqi, Mahmud Ayoub, John Raines (sosiologi), dan para ilmuwan lainnya di Temple University di Jabatan Agama, memberikan saya kepastian bahawa saat saya membuat *Insyirah* pada tahun 2001, saya berada di landasan yang kukuh seperti yang disebut oleh Ooi Kok Chuen. Tetapi oleh kerana tesis saya berdasarkan *Insyirah*, bercakap tentang seni Melayu Islam di Malaysia, ia tidak mengundang artis-artis lain untuk ikut serta. Malah, apabila saya menjadi kurator menyelenggara tiga pameran Islam pada awal dan pertengahan 90-an, artis-artis yang bukan beragama Islam tidak datang ke pameran atau seminar kami. Mereka hanya mengelak. Saya ingin tahu mengapa jadi begitu.

Setelah itu, saya mendapati, bahawa seni peribumi Melayu mengunjurkan keMelayuan itu. Oleh itu, dalam tesis saya, saya cuba untuk membetulkan salah faham ini. Jadi saya mencadangkan Islam di peringkat tinggi, bukan di peringkat syariah tetapi mistisisme (kebatinan) di mana ia boleh menemui tradisi agama lain. Oleh itu, apabila saya melukis Shiva Nadarajah, saya berkata tiada masalah. Mereka boleh bercakap antara satu sama lain tanpa sebarang masalah. Apabila saya menciptakan apa yang telah saya pameran dalam *Insyirah*, ramai artis-artis Cina dan bukan Islam datang serta berjabat tangan dengan saya. Orang-orang seperti Eric Peris, Ooi Kok Chuen, Thor Kar Hong, Eddin Khoo dan lain-lain lagi telah memeluk saya.

Rumi, seorang Sufi Mistik yang hebat pernah berkata: “kita mesti menghormati agama lain”. Dan apabila dia meninggal dunia para penganut Kristian dan Yahudi menangis, kerana dia mengajarkan keindahan agama. Malah firman di dalam al-Quran, “Aku telah ciptakan kamu dalam bersuku-suku, kaum dan agama yang berbeza, bukan untuk membenci antara satu sama lain tetapi untuk saling mengenal dan menghormati antara satu sama lain”. (*Surah al-Hujurat, ayat 13*). Kebenaran tersembunyi di sana. Tetapi saya tahu sesetengah orang tidak berpuas hati. Sesetengah ulama berkata saya telah sesat. Baiklah, itu antara saya dan Allah. Jika saya salah Tuhan perlu mengampuni saya, namun saya tidak menentang undang-undang Islam, tetapi saya kata kita perlu beralih daripada masyarakat perkauman.

Sekarang mari kita pergi kepada karya-karya terbaru anda, *Endangered Gardens (Taman Duka Lara)*, yang mana saya fikir lebih cenderung ke arah bidang sosial dan politik dalam kehidupan. Saya difahamkan bahawa pada tahun 70-an, anda telahpun mengupas isu-isu terhadap pergolakan sosial politik (Perang Vietnam). Selain ikut terlibat dalam “apa? siapa? kenapa?”, pameran bantahan para pelukis Malaysia semasa kemelut politik 1998. Sebenarnya, bolehkah anda kaitkan tindak balas anda sebelumnya ke dalam siri terbaru ini?

Siri *Taman Duka Lara* ini didorong oleh dua peristiwa penting yang menggerakkan saya untuk meletakkan komitmen diri saya dalam beberapa tahun yang lalu. Pertama, peristiwa tragis 11 September. Keruntuhan Menara Berkembar di New York kepada saya suatu peristiwa yang sangat bersejarah yang mempengaruhi seluruh dunia Islam. Kedua, Dasar Luar Amerika (*American Foreign Policy - AFP*) yang saya dapati propagandanya sangat mencabar dan provokatif, penuh tipu muslihat dan mengelirukan kebenaran di sebalik kejadian tragis tersebut. Dan juga buku Fukuyama *The End of History and the Last Man* dan buku *Clash of the Civilizations* oleh Samuel Huntington. Penulisan ini bukanlah dibuat secara tidak sengaja, ianya adalah suatu propaganda oleh AFP untuk menghalalkan serangan dan kutukan terhadap Islam. Mereka menetapkan senario supaya mereka dapat merasa wajar untuk sekarang ini menghina Islam. Selepas kejatuhan Perang Dingin di Rusia, agenda mereka seterusnya adalah serangan terhadap umat Islam. Ini adalah untuk meneruskan cita-cita imperialis mereka seperti yang disebut oleh Chomsky dalam mengekalkan status kuasa besar dengan menjadikan Islam sebagai ancaman mereka kepada apa yang dikenali sebagai “demokrasi dunia dan kesejahteraan sejagat pada keseluruhannya.”

Buku Chomsky *Imperial Ambitions* dan Ziauddin Sardar dengan bukunya berjudul *Barbaric Others*, buku Farish Noor bertajuk *Terrorizing the Truth: the Demonization of the Image of Islam and Muslims in Global Media and Political Discourse* serta banyak lagi buku-buku lain telah membuka tabir kebenaran terhadap muslihat jahat dan rancangan membimbangkan untuk Amerika memerintah dunia! Jadi seseorang itu tidak boleh membaca peristiwa tragis 11 September berasaskan taksiran cetek AFP untuk menuduh penganut Islam sebagai kuasa jahat di sebalik malapetaka tersebut. Tuduhan menjenamakan umat Islam sebagai pengganas ini yang akhirnya membawa kepada Islamofobia, yang sebenarnya merupakan sebahagian daripada Dasar mereka untuk menangani dan akhirnya menghapuskan Islam, sepertimana yang mereka lakukan terhadap Rusia.

Oleh itu, kesemua tragedi ngeri yang dicetuskan di negara-negara Islam; pembunuhan, pengeboman Iraq, Afghanistan dan Pakistan adalah manifestasi Dasar kejahatan sejagat yang bercita-cita besar itu. Pendirian anti AFP saya tidak bermula dengan kedatangan 11 Sept tetapi saya telah membuat lukisan saya seawal '62 di London. Saya telah terlibat dengan gerakan pelajar memprotes di Kedutaan Amerika kerana membantah Perang Vietnam. Kami adalah satu kumpulan yang sangat radikal. Kemudian pada tahun '68 ketika di Paris, saya terlibat lagi di dalam bantahan Perang Vietnam, dimasukkan ke dalam penjara untuk semalaman kerana disalah tafsir sebagai pemberontak walaupun sebenarnya saya hanya mengambil gambar. Hasilnya, saya banyak membuat lakaran dan melukis pengalaman ini. Bagi saya metamorfosis ini bukan baru tetapi ia sudah wujud seawal tahun '62. Kini saya kembali membuatnya sekali lagi. Namun keasyikannya kini lebih besar kerana saya bercakap tentang Islam melawan AFP, bercakap mengenai Islamofobia. Ia perlu ditangani dengan betul kerana ianya merupakan ciptaan mitos palsu oleh Barat.

Karya-karya saya cuba untuk menterbalikkan keseluruhan idea. Kamu melihat kami sebagai mangsa bukan penyerang. Pada dasarnya, siri *Taman Duka Lara* merupakan kritikan sosio-politik atau ulasan terhadap kepura-puraan, sikap pilih kasih Dasar tersebut yang mana

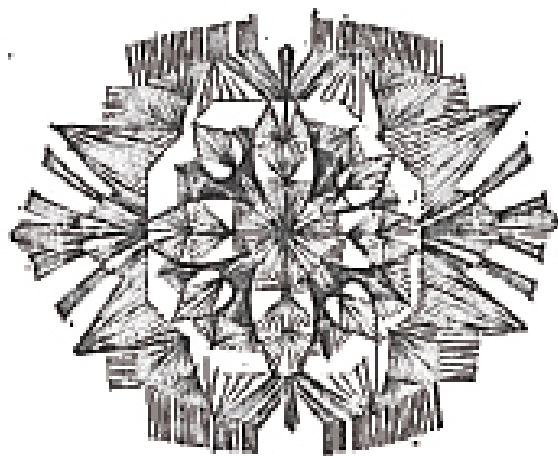
saya cuba secara visualnya menaksirkan idealisme sejagat kebudayaan Amerika itu sebagai ancaman kepada orang-orang yang mentaati Tuhan. Ikon-ikon Amerika yang ganas, kasar, cantik, menggoda dan membinasakan jiwa sepertimana yang diungkapkan menerusi para Superhero mereka; Captain America, Batman, Cat Woman, Madonna, Statue of Liberty (patung Kebebasan) dan Darth Vader, merangkumi kuasa-kuasa jahat dan lain-lain lagi sebagai unsur-unsur metafora sebagai usaha mereka untuk menggantikan kepercayaan kerohanian kita sama ada dalam Islam, Hindu, Buddha atau apa-apa yang dipunyai oleh masyarakat peribumi di negara ini. Dengan kata lainnya, *Taman Duka Lara* menyampaikan kepada manusia yang taatkan Tuhan, orang Islam atau bukan Islam untuk bersama-sama menolak hegemoni subversif budaya Barat dan tidak dengan semudahnya menyerapkan ke dalam fikiran, nilai-nilai yang memudaratkan agama dan warisan budaya kita.

*Diterjemahkan dari teks berbahasa Inggeris oleh:
Penterjemah I: Rahmat Haron
Penterjemah II: Teratak Nuromar*

PPIYA, Piya, kau nak seni, tapi betapa kacaunya kau tentang seni; Kau nak realiti, tapi betapa kacaunya kau tentang realiti. Realiti? Ingatkan lengkung pancutan air kencingku—yang merayakan hakikat perpaduan realiti: yang halus dan yang kasar, yang spiritual dan yang vulgar, yang mistik dan yang konkrit; suatu hakikat yang Zen yang kausanjunginya itu sedia mengakui.

Jadi, Piya (dan Cik Siti), bila aku buka seluaraku di-pameranmu yang bersejarah' itu, aku bukan 'melacurkan maruah'. Sebenarnya aku mendedahkan realiti. ●

— *Salleh ben Joned*



UP, CLOSE & PERSONAL WITH SULAIMAN ESA

| Interview between Sulaiman Esa dan Nur Hanim on June 12, 2011 in Shah Alam

Can you recall, as far back as you can remember, how did your interest in art first begin?

I will certainly attribute three factors that inspired my early involvement in art. First, my immediate family members; second, my primary and secondary school art trainings; and finally, my peer group of self-taught artist friends. I must say that the artistic family environment was an overwhelming influence in shaping my interest in art. They were my uncle Rahmat Ismail, my eldest brother the late Abdullah Esa, my late mother Aishah Ismail, and my elder siblings. My uncle was an established watercolourist who had painted a number of significant landscapes around Johor Bahru, such as the Istana Garden, the Johor government state buildings, private residences and the fishing village at Stulang Laut, just to name a few. Most of his works were hung in my parents' house and later, after observing him doing his artworks, I began to emulate his watercolour technique and even painted the same landscapes that he had done. My brother Abdullah was a very talented and versatile artist too. His art ranged from posters, watercolours, figurative drawings (sometimes I modeled for him) to costumes for school concerts. My elder sister Hamidah and brother Ahmad were also good in graphic work and drawings. Finally, there was my late mother. I remember when I was young she used to make coloured eggs and put them in baskets, and paint beautiful images of flowers. I was really fascinated by her ability to do them without having any art training. In short, I came from a family who is very artistic in nature. Indeed, my immediate family members exerted a great deal of influence in inspiring me to be visually interested in art.

The second factor related closely to my experience at the Bukit Zahrah primary school. After winning a school-run art competition organised by my teacher, Taib Ibrahim, my popularity went viral. I became a celebrity! I was called in to engage in making visual aids and artistic works for many teachers. Of course I felt good being 'needed' all the time, and the experience bolstered my confidence in art. Then, on completion of my primary school education, I was offered a place to continue my secondary schooling at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK). However due to family matters, I had to reject the offer, and instead I joined my elder siblings at the English College, Johor Bahru. During my second year there I won a national art competition sponsored by Milo. Again, my name went viral and I became a celebrity at the high school level now. But it was my art teacher Mr Lim Teck Siang who was influential in shaping my artistic direction. Besides giving me the opportunity to improve myself in art through practice in class and school mural projects, he also lent me his books to improve my talent. It was Mr. Lim too who advised me to apply for the Johor State Scholarship, even though it was meant for architecture (that was offered to Syed Ahmad Jamal a decade earlier, but he changed to art while in London). Mr. Lim one day confided that since I was a better artist than my elder siblings, I should give it a shot!

The third factor was the influence of my peer group of artist friends such as Sanip Lasman, Yahya Hasan, Ahmad Mohamad and Yusof Sarman. We were kind of self-taught artists whose common love was to paint popular Johor Bahru landscapes almost every week, and together we held exhibitions once we had enough works to show. We also very often discussed about art and criticised each other's work. Ahmad Muhammad was very close to me. He was an architecture student at the Technical College in KL. Ahmad was so madly

Could you elaborate on that one phase of your life when you were offered to go abroad?

obsessed with Van Gogh's art style that he did lots of works imitating him. Eventually, I too became interested in Van Gogh as evidenced in the collection of works I came up with imitating his style. Yes, it is interesting to recapitulate that at different stages of my life I was given different inputs to further develop my artistic knowledge and skills.

In 1960, I managed to get only 3rd Grade for my Senior Cambridge exam. I didn't want to become a teacher as my other friends did. Instead, the two years after school I decided to expand my art further, and began giving art tuitions to my neighbours' children so that I could buy books to improve my creative skills and art studies with my artist friends. It was during this period I became deeply obsessed with art so much so that I made a lot of drawings and paintings, some of which I copied from books. I remember cycling from Johor Bahru to Singapore to buy books and materials from art stores. After learning much about the personal life and styles of Van Gogh, whom my friend Ahmad was a fan of, I too became very interested in Impressionist styles that I bought many books on Van Gogh, Monet and Renoir, among others. When I looked at their colours I just went crazy! There was something inside me that vibrated and resonated deeply when I encountered Impressionists' vibrant colours. I can also recall the time when I was not painting landscapes outdoor, I would be painting with my friends, copying works by Van Gogh, Monet and Manet until very late at night. This in a way helped me to sharpen my sensitivity towards colours. I also became fascinated with the life stories of famous artists in Europe. I used to read this book, *Van Gogh's Diary*, that tells about his sufferings and tribulations. That book really inspired me to become an artist.

In the two years that I spent before I got my scholarship, I was actually doing a lot of paintings on my own. It was like a very informal training as self-taught exercises for me. One good thing came out of that was when I went for the State Scholarship interview in 1960. Although there was no scholarship offered for art, I took the chance and brought all my paintings and drawings, especially those images of renowned landscapes and buildings in Johor Bahru. That somehow impressed the panel of jury since they could easily recognise those renowned landscapes and buildings. They were so impressed with my works that they decided to offer me a scholarship for art even though there was none for art study in the beginning. And for me, the chance to go to London for five years was really a tremendous breakthrough. After two years struggling on my own with friends, now I had the chance to study formally in the best art school in London, with the best art teachers, and with the best art infrastructures around - galleries, museums. It was indeed a very lucky break that launched me into another dimension.

***How did you find London in the 1960's?
Perhaps you can share your experience
meeting Piyadasa in London.***

In the 60's, London was called the 'swinging London'. It was an art centre in Europe where all artists were aspired to go to. Most artists there became world figures. In the fashion world, there were Mary Quant, Twiggy, Vidal Sassoon; in music, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, etc. They were all making names worldwide. It was due to a very strange occasion that I landed at Hornsey College of Art. It wasn't my place of choice. I actually applied at many other places, but was rejected. One significant thing about Hornsey was that it was amongst the first art schools that adopted the Bauhaus art education system. If you read Piyadasa's writing, of his interview with T.K. Sabapathy, you would find his mentioning about the nature of the Diploma in Art and Design (Dip. AD) training given there which differed greatly from the conventional NDD courses that Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Lai Tong, and many others went through. The main thrust of Dip. AD is the intellectual development and the learning of art as a visual language. This Bauhaus system essentially treats art as a form of scientific investigation. Art is not just about making pictures; it is a process of thinking whereby artist questions everything he does, his materials, his techniques. It is not so much about what you produce; but what really matters is the how and why.

Due to the nature of this course, we were encouraged to be much more flexible and broad minded in other areas. We were also exposed to a number of cross-cultural disciplines by visiting guest lecturers. Painters or artists had to pass exams not only in studio practice but also in liberal arts subjects such as art theory, philosophy and aesthetics. In other words, theoretical areas were very much integral to our studio practice. Thus, the concept of artist-doer is no longer significant. Instead, the notion of artist as thinker becomes the main drive of this course. Before I could start my painting course, I had to undergo one year training in the foundation course to learn the basic language and grammar of art. We had Maurice de Sauzmarez who taught us Basic Design course. Art learning became very cerebral in the sense that not only we had to conduct investigative approach to art, but we also had to study subjects of liberal arts that were made compulsory, like art philosophy, aesthetics, and sociology and psychology of art. This was both so intellectually and culturally shocking for me personally that I became very confused. I was constantly forced to rationalise the thinking processes of the left and right sides of the brain since the Bauhaus system is not interested in products but rather processes – the how and the why products are being created.

In a sense, swinging London in the 60's sort of opened the floodgates for me to go through intellectually satisfying, educationally enriching and nourishing, culturally enlightening (due to the presence of many museums and art galleries) and socially illuminating experiences in meeting teachers or people like David Porsche, Bridget Riley, Buckminster Fuller, Lawrence Alloway and many other luminaries, as well as in integrating with a wide spectrum of international students. It was like a real vertigo – a very dizzying, intoxicating and most memorable experience I ever had in my entire life. A kampong boy from the backwaters of Johor Bahru was suddenly catapulted to London, a city pregnant with creative and artistic dynamism globally. Imagine years ago in Johor Bahru I was imitating the painting of sunflowers by Van Gogh; then in a London art gallery that I attended, there was a detailed

discussion by an expert on the same Van Gogh's sunflowers. I was astounded. It was surreal and mesmerising.

I first met Piyadasa in 1963 when I was in my second year at Hornsey. Being the only two Malaysian students in the college and studying in the same art programme, we struck an immediate affinity between us. We became harmonious partners. Piya himself by nature was a highly cerebral person. He read and argued a lot. And this course was very perfect for a person like him. I too shared the same intellectual inclination towards art. So when we met, it was really a perfect partnership. We even shared the same flat together. That was the time I enjoyed the most because when we read something we would then discuss and argue about what we had read, or we would solve whatever problems we encountered in class. Although I learnt a lot in the studio, living with Piya broadened my knowledge in art and its related fields. Studying at Hornsey was an incredibly enriching experience for me. Not only I enjoyed visiting and researching at all the museums and art galleries and realising that art was not just about making pictures, but I also learned countless other things that deal with philosophical, aesthetical and social issues. It was an entirely new world for me. From being a boy who came from the backwaters of Johor Bahru and learnt art merely by copying, I now began to see that art has bigger connections to other disciplines.

Can you elaborate on the phenomenal Towards a Mystical Reality exposition? Was it true that the National Cultural Congress in 1971 also triggered the execution of the exhibition?

Let me just continue where I left about Piya. When we came back, we shared a lot of ideals and ideologies we absorbed from the West. In fact when I joined Piya in 1970 to teach at ITM, we were the first few people who started to propagate the Bauhaus system in our education until we eventually had this foundation course. It was exactly the same model that we introduced at ITM. We were then very much into Western-centric art. We belonged to a group called Constructivist. There were other lecturers who shared our ideology: Tan Teong Eng, Tan Tuck Kang, and perhaps Choong Kam Kow. Together we were busy propagating Western-centric art, namely Minimalism and Constructivism. At that time we believed that to become avant-garde was the way to go. Constructivism and minimalism were two of the latest in art movement; but they lasted only for one year. However, as a result of the 1969 racial riot, the National Cultural Congress was convened by the ruling government in 1971. And strange enough, while our thinking was still deeply entrenched in Western-centric idealism, Piya and I took active and serious part in the organisation of this Congress. Syed Ahmad Jamal was one of the leaders and he chose us to be part of it. Therefore on account of the Congress, whether we liked it or not we had to immerse ourselves in the Malay world. Basically, it was a move initiated by our government and intelligentsia to find an alternative paradigm for art and culture in this country which should not necessarily be based on the dominant culture. Partly due to the riot, the government tried to find a formula, some kind of art form that could integrate the society and uplift the common shared values among members of the public. To a degree, the purpose was to explore a way to use art as social glue, as cement for social integration. It was not so much for aesthetic or philosophical reasons, but for political and social ones. Of course it had its cultural and political dimensions too. As for me and Piya, our involvement was not at all political but purely intellectual. For

the first time we had about thirty scholars, filmmakers, theatre people and lecturers getting together to discuss the direction of Malaysian art and culture. I somehow became immersed in the arguments. To be fair, I think our commitment to Western art was superficial because Piya and I were still Malaysians. Although our flirtation with Western art was so overwhelming and powerful, over time we began to realise that it did not work well. I remember talking to Piya, "Why are we always reading and having to buy *Art Forum*, *Art International*, *American Art magazines* just to know what will happen next, as though we were following the tail end of Western art? Why do we look to latest paintings by Arakawa, Frank Stella, and then need to do the same things like them?" The feeling of disenchantment was there.

The Congress really opened our eyes to find something genuine to our own culture and our own truth. The Congress thus was very significant for us because it absolutely made us question our beliefs in the spirituality of Western art. But then, deep down, I could still remember doing Islamic calligraphy on my own while in London. Because I think subliminally my Islamic self was still buried under my Western self then. But the convening of the Congress triggered me to question my priorities. Before the Congress, there were two important shows that involved Piya and I which exclusively propagated Western values. Both exhibitions, *Experiment 70* and *Dokumentasi '72*, discussed art as object, art as a search for the structures and fundamentals of space, colour and texture rooted in our Western formal training but with no reference whatsoever to our local art or culture.

It was widely held at that time that our National culture did not have international relevancy. We believed that to be international was to be a good artist, and to be avant-garde was what artists strived for. The Congress, however, made us aware that art, in essence, is about seeking out meaning, context and relevancy. One of the impacts of the Congress was that for two years after *Dokumentasi '72* Piya and I didn't do any work. Instead, we read and questioned the relevance of Western art to Malaysia. The effect began to gradually seep into our consciousness. And after reading much about Asian philosophy, we finally realised that some avant-garde artists in the West, like John Cage and Mark Rothko, had actually incorporated a lot of spiritual contents in their works. Like John Cage or even Yoko Ono, some of their works were grounded in the teachings of Tao and other philosophies, in the concept of void and non-action.

Subsequently, we asked ourselves, "Why are we looking to the West when they are all looking to the East? Why don't we go back to our Eastern roots?" That was thus the beginning of *Mystical Reality* when we started to look to Zen Buddhism and Taoism - not so much to Islam - and began toying with the idea of creating a new art form in the frame of the concept of time and space derived from the wisdom of Eastern mysticism. Accordingly, the works featured in *Towards A Mystical Reality* (TMR) in '74 were a real shocker for our art audience because the works completely negated what Piya and I had propagated just a year before. The show also put a strong challenge to the way art was going on in the last forty years in Malaysia since the Nanyang or even since the emergence of watercolourist works of Abdullah Ariff. It posed a question to local artists, "Why are we being Western-centric while we are Asian, Muslim, and possess such great traditions of philosophy and metaphysics?"

Should we just be blind imitators and become a footnote to Western art? Jolly Koh did mention something like this: “Any art movement we have always comes from the West. Something happened in the West, then its reverberation comes to Malaysia.” TMR, however, was different because for the first time we began to debunk and decolonise ourselves from Western-centricism. Therefore, the works had to be utterly provocative. They were meant to be radical. And because they were so provocative and radical, I didn’t know what to do after that because they sort of negated everything we believed in and tried to cancel what we had known then.

It is important that TMR shocked our own art community and art lovers and brought them to a realisation that we could not go on being second best. We even needed to reconsider building our own model. The Congress in a way sparked off this kind of attitude in our mindset. However, it was not the answer since it actually championed Malay ethnicity and Malay art, and we didn’t want that. We talked about something more universal and what other mysticisms can share. In a sense, TMR was very strong for me because sometimes I began to reflect upon all the elements of art, from Western to Eastern art. For instance, the idea of time and space, and the concept of what art is. At which moment art is art? Is it when you conceive it, or after you have finished painting it? And then what? The idea behind the creation of a piece titled *Empty Bird Cage* was fairly provocative because when we put it on display, the audience had to decide at what point it was a work of art – was it when we first bought the cage with the bird in it, or the moment the bird was being released from it, or the fact that the bird had now flown thousands of miles away? It’s something very Asian in a sense that it briefly pointed out that time is not linear but circular. Such questions were never heard of by most artists. It excited non-fine artists as well. Theater personalities like Krishen Jit found it particularly interesting because there seemed to be a parallelism between what we were doing and what he was doing. The work went beyond the making of pure image and the mystical point of view. While the work was provocative, after the show we were both completely drained and lost. I remember someone asked me, “Leman, so after this you cannot paint anything you know?” I said, “You’re right. If I do painting you’ll be laughing at my head you know. I can’t answer you, but I think you’re right!” (laughters)

After that there was like a deep hollow in my body. I reached point zero, and didn’t know where was my next direction. And sure enough, from ‘74 until ‘79 I didn’t do anything. I just gave up. And Piya went to Hawaii to do his Masters and something else. As for me, there was a complete blank and silence. TMR had profoundly impacted on my creativity because it totally negated my firm belief in my art practice in the last two decades. However, towards the end of 1974 I was awarded an Italian government scholarship to do a short nine-month study in Stage and Costume Design in Rome. It served as a brief break from the stress incurred during TMR, and also a refreshing vocation engaging in another discipline that I had some experience before. In ‘73 and ‘74 I was actively involved in stage and costume design for a few plays, including *Alang Rentak Seribu*, *Uda dan Dara*, *The Birds*, and some others.

But three years later in '77 you produced the *Waiting for Godot* series before the *Akar-akar Pribumi* series in the late 70's. Can you explain this paradigm shift?

The Akar-akar Pribumi (AAP) Seminar was held at ITM and organised by its Faculty members. Yes, it was meant to be a reinforcement of the 1971 Cultural Congress. Given its title "*Seminar Akar-akar Peribumi dan Perkembangannya Kini*", it was to find out what had happened to the so-called *peribumi* art after an elapse of eight years. Was it flourishing, or diminishing? Those participants tried to ascertain its progress. I must confess that in a way it made an impact at least to the ITM staff that they held an exhibition concurrently with the seminar. I took part in this exhibition with a work entitled *Contemplation '79*. It was a straightforward hand-woven piece made from painted canvas juxtaposed with plain flat surface material. It was reminiscent of the technique of weaving mats that I saw in houses in Kelantan and Terengganu during my student trips there. As brutal as it may look, that was my first raw attempt to portray our traditional art technique as a form of contemporary expression.

By the way, one of the outcomes of the Seminar was that Ismail Zain was appointed as the Director of Culture, while previously he was the Director of the National Art Gallery. One of his duties was to ensure that all institutes of higher learning took up an aspect of our national culture and included it into their educational programmes.

Those in USM, for example, focused specifically on theatre. Krishen Jit was there handling performing arts. ITM was given the task to research on *peribumi* art and incorporate it in its studio programme. I remember at that time Encik Hashim Hassan, myself, and even Piyadasa, were concerned on how to re-educate students so as to broaden their knowledge and to inspire them to appreciate their own culture. We had students like Anuar Rashid whose painting *The Birth of Inderaputra* was very powerful. To me, it was a great painting albeit rooted in *peribumi* traditions. There was also Amron Omar, famous for paintings derived from *silat*, who paved a new way to do figure painting based on Malay art of self defense or Malay mythology.

To me, the Seminar had an impact on art programmes because lecturers themselves acted as the prime movers, the agents of change. Since we were involved in the Seminar and also in teaching profession, apart from being artists ourselves, we began to requestion our direction. For instance, after TMR I started to contemplate on my Islamic roots. Even though I couldn't just simply plunge into Malay-centric art, I brought students to Kelantan and Terengganu. We met renowned Malay woodcarvers including Latif Long, Wan Su and Tengku Ibrahim. In other words, for the first time ever our class visited cultural centres in the East Coast to meet up with crafts persons like Habibah Zikri, the *songket* weaver. This sort of activity was never done before the Seminar. We used to look to Paris or New York. Now there was a shift of paradigm. Even Ruzaika Basaree started her *Dungun Window* series at this juncture. In many ways, the Seminar had a significant bearing on the development of art, education and also local artists' creative outputs.

In my five years of uncertainty, the *Godot* thing came really unplanned. During the five years after TMR, when I was in the wilderness, I didn't know what to do. But I told myself that I couldn't just do nothing. Things happened to me without me realising it. So, when I did the *Godot* series print, as I just wanted to do something that I didn't plan. The images came to me rather than I sought them. The *Godot* print was based on two images. One was the image of a mosque in Cordova or Alhambra, and another, at the bottom of the page, was an image of a nude woman looking down. I just emptied my mind. I probably saw this nude image from a magazine I bought in Rome during my short stint there. It's very poetic and not even sexy, but very sad. At that time I was a Course Tutor in the Fine Art Department and I had access to the printmaking room. I remember when it was completed, I hung it on the wall in my office. One day, my Head of School (I won't mention his name) came in. He was shocked and said, "Hey, what is this?" I said "What's wrong?" He said; "It's the ayat Quran and you put nude woman there!" I was nonchalant. Here came a guy, a very pious Head of School, and got upset by the print. I was then challenged if I dare to show it outside. Coincidentally, there was a competition at the National Art Gallery organised by Syed Ahmad Jamal on printmaking. I took part and was awarded as one of the recipients of the major prizes! That was a joke. When Jamal came out with a statement on the print, mentioning something about 'the secret and the sacred', then everything made sense! I was actually doing my own self-portrait. I was talking about myself. At that time I was in a dilemma. Although I was deeply entrenched with Western-centricism, I knew I had to move out of it. So, it's not like I had this admonition to move into Islamic centre, but casually I used these images. However when Jamal said that, that was the word I was looking for. Then Piyadasa asserted it was "a great print", and T.K. Sabapathy declared it was "the ethos of the time!"

After that you went to Baltimore and did weaving for the first time. Can you elaborate further on this new pursuit?

When I left for Baltimore in 1979 to do my Masters, I became more conscious of my Malay self. There I began to make artworks based on weaving technique. I remember as other fine art students went to art history class, I on the other hand went to textile class with the girl students. I wanted to learn weaving. I just wanted to do everything else except Western painting. From there I began to learn how to make handmade paper and yarns. I had a two-person show titled *Works on Paper* at the Grimaldi gallery in Baltimore in 1980. It was for the first time that my paintings were entirely made of weaving, with cut-out paper. There was nothing great about it but I just wanted to deny myself from Western thinking. It received good response. Later on I further refined it with proper handmade paper pulp and yarns, and held a second show at Baltimore City Council. That show was also very well received. I spent the first part of my two years in Baltimore doing simple weaving. And during the second part, I learnt how to use yarns, pulp with more complicated processes. To me, the Baltimore trip for my Masters programme had made me unconsciously defined myself as a Malaysian, Malay, Muslim. And I began to consistently look at Malay crafts. I began to practice myself the things I told my students in my class. In Southeast Asia, our art is actually the textile art. We don't have painting but *sari* and *sarong*. Thus, I began to seriously looking at our *batik*, *songket* weaving and woodcarving as decorations for the Malaysianisation of myself. When I came back, I knew I had to shift from Malay crafts because during the *Akar-akar Pribumi* seminar there was this keynote address given by renowned educationist, Awang Had Salleh. He raised one question that struck my mind which went something like this: "Why is that today in our country, we have on one side, the crafts people, like women doing craft, basketry etc., and on the other side, people (like me) doing painting, sculpture, Western art etc. They are both Malays and Muslims but cannot talk to each other. Why is that? We now have *makyong* and *ronggeng*, and at the same time jazz and rock and roll. Why does this dichotomisation happen? You must solve this problem. You must find the bridge." That really hit my mind. We were challenged. As lecturers, we must resolve this dichotomy. When I was in America I told myself, what is craft? who defines craft? who decides craft is no good? There were many feminist writers in America who talked about craft at spiritual level. Craft is something very profound; not in the way a fine artist looks at it but how he looks at works by women. It has something to do with spirituality, women thing. So, the different discourses in crafts inspired me to reassess what craft is. It is actually a degrading term by the West to define our culture according to their framework. It's like an analogical ploy from the West. Then I became anti West. I wanted to look back to my own culture in a very intellectual and critical way. So, it started from there. One impact of TMR was that I began to move away from Western ideology and move towards my own Malay-Muslim self.

Then came the Islamic revivalism in Malaysia, perhaps also influenced by the fall of Shah Iran. In '84 you came out with Ke Arah Tauhid exhibition which was more Islamic than Malay. Right after that you did the UMNO mural at the PWTC. Can you enlighten us on these?

When I came back in mid 1981, I was doing handmade paper and weaving. I then realised that in ITM things were happening. Ismail Faruqi and his wife Lamy Faruqi visited us and gave a series of talks which I attended. For the first time I met true Muslim scholars talking about Islamic art. Most scholars before them only talked about *syariah* and Islamic rules but never on art. This guy, on the other hand, was doing courses and writing books on Islamic art. That drove me to move deeper from Malay ethnicity to Islamic spirituality, metaphysics and all that. When I met him and listened to his talk, I realised I needed to expand my Islamic knowledge. We had one big show in 1984 at the National Art Gallery curated by Syed Ahmad Jamal and Sharifah Fatimah Zubir. The works shown were by Muslim artists from all over the world. I could sense at that time that from 1980's onwards Islamic fervour was on the rise. An Islamic Centre was being built right in the centre of KL. There was an Islamic resurgence, and I began to feel the energy. I began to explore my weaving. Before, it was about the making of mere patterns; but subsequently I shifted to making patterns based on Islamic arabesque designs. Then I started reading and becoming interested in writings by Syed Hoessein Nasr, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings and Frithjof Schuon, and immersing myself in Islamic thinking. Things about Islam began to seep into my art. *Ke Arah Tauhid* was the beginning where I found myself shifting from Malay ethnicity to Islamic spirituality. In the catalogue I quoted a statement by Nasr and Titus Burkhardt about mathematics and cosmology in Islam. I ventured deeper and deeper into Islamic metaphysical dimensions. *Ke Arah Tauhid* was more of a sophisticated art form created with handmade paper. I applied Islamic patterns juxtaposed with mandala motifs. I used bamboo, gold threads, cotton yarns and other materials found in Malay crafts and coming from our indigenous tradition with meanings derived from Islamic patterns. So, there was a fusion of Malay and Islam.

Ke Arah Tauhid was my strong statement in defining what is painting, what is art. Because when I did my *Dokumentasi 72*, aesthetically or stylistically, I employed a lot of grids. They say the essence of spirituality is determined by grid system. It talks about logical structure. As I used a lot of grids to form patterns of arabesque in *Ke Arah Tauhid*, so I still applied geometrical arrangement and hence mathematical principles. I find very close affinity between Constructivism and Islamic art since both respect mathematics as fundamental structures and deal with the idea of eliminating subjectivism and emotionalism. Art in Constructivism has to be pure art because when you paint the surface, it does not show your brush stroke as if it is done by a robot. In Islamic art, mathematics denies your subjectivity. You have to follow the grid system. You have to transcend to a higher level of certain universal laws. For me, the meaning has changed but the technique, colours and geometry I use are now being applied in a different context. I find it more meaningful because at that time I felt myself moving away from Western-centricism and coming nearer to my Islamic self. It was also relevant to the challenge of the time because it was the time of Islamic resurgence. Propagation of Islamic values was the talk of the day then. I was caught in that current but did not pretend to be following the trend. I just picked up the energy and it happened.

It was in 2001, more than 15 years after Ke Arah Tauhid, that you held the Insyirah exhibition. Why is that?

I spent eight years doing my Ph.D. I left in '86 for my doctoral programme at Temple University in Philadelphia. I couldn't complete my course on time within four years due to the death, or murder to be accurate, of my two professors, Ismail and Lamya al-Faruqi. I had to change to another course in which I struggled. I took another four years to finish writing my dissertation while I was already back home and working in the Fine Art Department (in ITM). In all those years I didn't paint a single brush stroke. While doing my research, I curated a number of important Islamic Art shows sponsored by the NAG. Some of these curatorial writings became part of my Ph.D research work that I was cracking my head to complete. It was only in the mid '90s that I finally passed my doctoral programme. I must express my utmost gratitude to Dr. Mohamad Tamyez Bajuri, the then Dean of the School of Art and Design, who was instrumental in supporting and encouraging me to complete my Ph.D after being engrossed with *tasawuf, usuludin*, Islamic, Chinese, Indian and Christian religious studies and things not to my nature. The course was purely theological, and art was certainly excluded. It was all about the study of theology from various perspectives. So the eight years were spent not because I was dim but because I had to grapple with another course that was totally new to my life experience.

I took that long to complete my Ph.D because I had to cool myself down after the sudden passing of my supervisors. What had I lost? What had I gained? I don't feel any regret over the eight years because with knowledge, the more you study it the better. To me, it had propelled me to respect other religions, their concepts of beauty and their cultures. I feel much more confident now. The chance to study with Nasr, Faruqi, Mahmud Ayoub, sociologist John Raines and other scholars in the Department of Religion at Temple University gave me that certitude so much so that when I did my *Insyirah* in 2001 I was on a strong footing, as mentioned by Ooi Kok Chuen. But since my thesis was based on *Insyirah* and talked about my Malay-Muslim art in Malaysia, it did not invite other artists to participate. In fact, when I curated the three Islamic shows in early and mid 90's, non-Muslim artists didn't come to our shows or seminars. They just shied away. I was curious to know why. And I found out that it was a Malay *peribumi* art projecting the Malayness. As such, in my thesis I tried to correct this misconception. I thus proposed Islam on the higher level, not on the level of *syariah* but of mysticism where it can meet other religious traditions. So when I painted Shiva Nadarajah, I said there's no problem. They can talk to each other without any problem. When I did what I had shown in *Insyirah*, a lot of Chinese and non-Muslim artists came and shook my hand. People like Eric Peris, Ooi Kok Chuen, Thor Kar Hong, Eddin Khoo and many others embraced me.

The great Sufi Mystic Rumi once said, "We must respect other religions." When he died, the Christians and Jews cried because he preached the beauty of religions. Allah mentioned in the Quran that "I created you in different tribes, races and religions not to hate each other but to know and respect one another." (verse 13, *surah al-Hujurat*). The truth is all hidden there. I knew some people were not happy. Some ulamas said I had deviated. Fine, that's between me and God. If I'm wrong, God has to forgive me. I was not fighting against Islamic laws, but I said we have to move on from being a racial society.

Let's talk about your recent body of work, *Endangered Garden*, which I feel is more inclined towards social and political spheres in life. I was made aware that in the 70's you had already delved into issues pertaining to socio-political upheavals, like Vietnam War. Apart from that, you also participated in apa? siapa? kenapa?, an exhibition of works by Malaysian artists protesting against the 1998 political saga. Could you relate your reactions then to your new series?

The *Endangered Gardens* series is spurred by two important events that drove me to commit myself in the last few years. First, the tragic September 11 incident. The collapse of the Twin Towers in New York was to me a very momentous event that affected the whole Muslim world. Second, the American Foreign Policy (AFP) which I find very challenging and provocative, and utterly deceptive and misleading in telling the truth behind the tragic incident. I also felt that Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* and Samuel Huntington's *Clash of the Civilizations* are not accidentally written. These are American propagandas to legitimise their attack on and condemnation of Islam. They purposely set the scenario so that they can feel justified to degrade Islam. After the end of Cold War against Russia, their next agenda is to attack the Muslims. This is to continue their imperialist ambition, as mentioned by Chomsky, and to maintain their superpower status by alleging Islam as the next threat to the so-called "world's democracy and global well-being."

Books such as Chomsky's *Imperial Ambitions*, Ziauddin Sardar's *Barbaric Others*, Farish Noor's *Terrorizing the Truth: the Demonization of the Image of Islam and Muslims in Global Media and Political Discourse*, and many other books have unmasked the real truth of America's sinister and disquieting plan to rule the world. Therefore, one should not read the September 11 incident along the lines of superficial interpretation of AFP and their accusation that Muslims were the evil forces behind the catastrophe. The branding of Muslims as terrorists, which ultimately led to Islamophobia, is actually part of their plan to deal with Islam and eventually eliminate it as they had done to Russia. Thus, all the horrific tragedies and killings and bombings inflicted in Muslim countries, like Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, are manifestations of the AFP's sinister grand global ambition. My anti-AFP stunts started not in the wake of September 11 as I had made several protest drawings before. In '62 in London, I was involved with the student movement protest at the American Embassy because of the Vietnam War. We were a very radical group. Then in '68, while in Paris, I was again involved in Vietnam War protest. I was even put in jail for one night because I was wrongly thought as a rebel; but I in fact was only taking photographs of the event. The offshoot of it was that I made a lot of drawings and paintings of this experience. To me, the metamorphosis is not new but goes back to as early as '62. The intensity now is nonetheless much greater because I'm talking about Islam against AFP, about Islamophobia. Owing to this false creation of myth by the West, it has to be rightly addressed.

My body of work here is trying to reverse the whole idea. You see, we are actually the victims, not the aggressors. In essence, the *Endangered Gardens* series is simply a socio-political critique of the hypocrisy and double standards of American Foreign Policy. In this series, I seek to visually interpret the idealism of global American culture as a threat to God-fearing people. The violent, aggressive, beautiful, seductive and destructive icons of American psyche as expressed by their superheroes such as Captain America, Batman, Catwoman, Madonna, Statue of Liberty with wings symbolising the angel of death, and Darth Vader embodying dark evil forces, serve as metaphorical elements in their pursuit to displace our spiritual beliefs, be it Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, or those belonging to the indigenous societies in the country. In other words, *Endangered Gardens* is addressing to God-fearing people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, to be weary of the subversive Western cultural hegemony and not to easily imbibe values detrimental to our religious and cultural traditions.

FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN MALAYSIAN ART: THE DIALECTICS OF DISPLACEMENT AND REAPPROPRIATION

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INTRODUCTION

Among the most essential needs of man, beside such physical necessities as food, and shelter, is the metaphysical need of meaning. Weber attributes this as a drive to attain comprehensiveness – to cosmosize the world by grounding it in ontology.¹ “The search for meaning and order,” Weber argues, “is central for man”. For Mansoor, this need constitutes man’s “will for self-understanding, and authenticity” - in short, “a will to Truth”.²

Concomitantly, the soul-searching questions of “Who am I? Where do I come from? and Where am I going? That constantly assail the conscience of modern man prove his innate desire to attain knowledge – nay, certitude, of the deeper meaning and purpose that lie behind his existential reality in relation to the cosmos.

Hence in the context, the wise sayings, and exhortations of great philosophers, sages and prophets, such as ‘Know thyself’ (Socrates); “He who knows himself knows his Lord”, (Prophet Muhammad); or “True man before true knowledge” (Chuang-tzu),³ are precious insights that aid man to discover the deeper truth about his inner and other reality.

ART IN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

For man living traditional societies, this metaphysical need for “meaning and order” is fulfilled by two inextricably related and mutually reinforcing institutions: religion and art. While religion provides the epistemological and cosmological paradigms that shape his world-view and the self-view, art plays the supportive role by embodying its complex spiritual and metaphysical teachings through the use of sacred symbols, and transcendent archetypes. Thus in a traditional society the significance of sacred symbols lies in their power to relate ontology and cosmology to aesthetics and morality.⁴ As argued by Nasr:

“Traditional man lives in the cosmos that is meaningful. The cosmos reflects the divine principles and so does man ... he is a microcosm and like the cosmos reflects the metacosmic reality”.⁵

But more importantly, the indispensability of art in traditional society resides in the fact that it functions as a handmaiden – a counterpoint to religion in contributing to man’s better understanding of the deeper meaning, purpose and order that circumscribe his existence.

Thus, as maintained by Nasr, there is no elucidation of the complex Buddhist metaphysical teachings of spiritual enlightenment that is more eloquent than the sacred monument of Borobudur, or the Islamic doctrine of “Divine Unicity” (Tawhid) than the Mosque of Qarawiyyan, or the Taoist concept of the “void” than the landscape painting by Mi-Fei.

By adhering to the Tao of the past you will master the existence of the present.

(Tao-te ching)

Tradition means the truth or principles of a divine origin revealed or unveiled to mankind ... principles which bind man to Heaven and therefore, religion.

(S.H. Nasr)

SOCIALLY INTEGRATIVE

Besides being spiritually revitalising, traditional art is also socially integrative. Artistic creativity is indissolubly related to sociality and a sense of collectivity. The driving force behind creativity is not the “cult of the individualism” but the “sociology of imagination”. Through the usage of a collective and shared vocabulary of forms, patterns, and symbols, the traditional artist is able to generate the spirit of collective effervescence and interconnectedness which positively contributes to the process of social integration and cohesion among the different members of society. Hence, the elitist and exclusive concept of art-for-art’s sake is simply unacceptable in traditional society. Being positively functional, the primary objective for the creation of art is to serve the spiritual, moral and material needs of the people.

But what is equally significant is the psychological cleansing power of traditional art. As argued by Arguelles, the act of creativity itself—due to its direct involvement and strict adherence to the sacred and transcendental principles of traditional art, becomes a sort of spiritual exercise, a form of “internal technology” which is akin to the process of ennobling or “transubstantiation” of matter. It is the same concept which the Sufis, in reference to the process of creativity in Islamic art refer to as, “tazkiyah-al-nafs” (spiritual purification). One direct result of the psychologically sublimating and ennobling power of the principles of traditional art is the deep sense of humility, self-effacement and anonymity that characterises the personality of many “unknown craftsmen”. Unquestionably, the absence of assertiveness and self-aggrandizement on the part of many unknown craftsmen is a testimony of souls which have achieved wholeness, an inner equilibrium and perfect harmony both within their souls and the cosmos.

There are two important postulates which need to be highlighted here. First, the principles, laws and rituals involving the creation of traditional art are considered sacred thus inviolable. Second, the concept of creativity in traditional art is synonymous to the process of internal technology viz. the disciplining of psychic energy. As maintained by Arguelles:

Creativity at the most primary level is not a thing done, but the dissolution of matter. Whereas from the rationalistic-materialistic view, the creation of an object is an addition to reality, from the view of internal technology it is a dissolution of duality, the fusion of subject and object, the inner self and the outer self, and a merging into an initiative state producing a transformation of reality. Thus, art becomes not a specialised profession or a particular style, but a path to greater self-realisation – a means of relating the self to the whole.⁶

DEFINITION OF TRADITION

Since the term tradition constitutes the key idea in this writing, it is crucial that a definition of its precise meaning be attempted here. The term tradition is derived from the Greek “paradidomi” or Latino “tradio” indicates a transmission, a handling down of something received.⁷ In terms of its content it implies a vertical axis of descent as to its transhuman (Divine) and integrative principle. As Nasr posits: “tradition means truth or principles of supra-individual or divine origin revealed or unveiled by mankind through the various figures envisaged as messengers, prophets, avatars, etc. “Coomaraswamy identified the principle of tradition as laws which are immutable, eternal that constitute the basis of philosophia perennis (perennial philosophy). It is what the Hindus call “santana dharma” and the Muslims’ “hikamat al-khalidah”. As such it should be confused with custom, habit, or inherited patterns of thoughts. Underscoring this point, Sabapathy in elucidating Eliot’s notion of tradition posits:

*Elliot rejects the musological embalming of tradition ... “Tradition”, he writes, “cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour ... Elliot proceeds to claim this as a necessary attribute of creativity and a criteria for judging works that are good. For Elliot, tradition is a force that is active and in a state of flux.”*⁸

As implied in the wise saying of Confucius: “I do not create, I only repeat the past or that of the Tao-te-Ching, and that only by adhering to the Tao of the past, one can master the present”.⁹ Tradition, far from being archaic, or fossilised, is very much the invigorating, revitalising and regenerating force that is vital to existence of both man and the cosmos.

THE TRADITIONAL MALAY ARTS

What is deducible from the above discussion is that, due to its transcendental and divine origin, traditional art is spiritually revitalising, socially integrative and psychologically ennobling. Interestingly, these qualities constitute part of the unique and overriding nature of traditional Malay arts.

For example, Dr. Lamya Al-Faruqi, in arguing for the spiritual basis of traditional Malay art, observes that the coming of Islam to the Malay World in the 13th century brought with it the Holy Qur’an, the scripture of Islam, which provided a concrete model for its artistic content and form”.¹⁰ One direct result of the “Qur’anisation of the traditional Malay art” is the birth of Islamic calligraphy – *Seni Khat*, whose ubiquitous presence is manifested in traditional Malay architecture, wood-carving, pottery, textile, metal-works, etc. Since the content of calligraphy deals primarily with Divine Words of God, the physical, visual and psychological ambience that it pervades cannot but spiritually enriching the souls of those who come into contact with it. There is a deep-seated belief among the traditional Malay craftsmen that their involvement with the sacred texts brings double blessing (*baraqah*). For the beautifully-written sacred texts, in their capacities as talismans, not only render the protection against evil forces or elements, but more importantly, their regular contact with the divine text implicitly constitute a form of *zikir*, which beyond doubt, is spiritually enriching.

In highlighting the spiritual root and the spiritualising nature of traditional Malay art S.A. Jamal in “*Rupa dan Jiwa*”, avers:

Seni Rupa Melayu berasaskan falsafah dan konsep seni rupa Islam dalam beberapa hal, kedua-dua seni rupa mempunyai sifat-sifat yang sama, seperti yang terdapat pada seni ukir, seni logam, tekatan dan sebagainya.

Furthermore,

Seni Rupa Melayu ... menjadi titian di antara realiti yang zahir dan yang batin ...”¹¹

Hence, as succinctly maintained by Jamal, traditional Malay art (especially in the case of seni khat) bridges the material (seen) and the spiritual (unseen) worlds and thus induces transcendentalising and spiritual upliftment both to the artists who create it and the onlookers who contemplate it.

Another equally crucial aspect of traditional Malay art which can never be over-emphasised is its socially integrative role. That its nature is singularly societal and collective is affirmed by Jamal when he posits that “*Seni Rupa Melayu adalah pernyataan kumpulan*”,¹² and that its *raison d’etre* is essentially to fulfill the material and spiritual needs of the society, is highlighted by Jamal when he posits that “*seni tradisional Melayu adalah seni untuk rakyat*”. Concomitantly, the modernist concept of “art-for-art’s-sake” and its corollary notion of “fine art” are simply unthinkable and irrelevant in the traditional Malay society. As Jamal would argue, not only does traditional Malay art reject modernist delineation of decorative (*barang hias*) and functional objects (*barang gunaan*), but it pre-eminently advocates the concept of “museum without walls” (*muzium tidak bertembok*).

With regard to the psychological dimension of traditional Malay art, to what extent can a claim of the psychological ennobling power of its transcendental principles be justified? As an oblique reference to the above question, Jamal posits:

The most distinguishing aspect of Malay culture is the sense of moderation, the complete lack of pride and a refusal to show off their expertise and wealth. The sense of humility becomes the hallmark of the traditional Malays.¹³

In affirming this point M. Sheppard in “*Living Crafts of Malaysia*” avers:

One other cultural tradition which has persisted in Malaysia through the centuries is that of anonymity. The finest Malay craftsmen and women ... did not inscribe their names on carved panels or silverware, nor did weavers or weapon-makers use a mark by which their masterpieces could be recognised.¹⁴

In some, the spirit of self-effacement and lack of self-aggrandizement reflected in the works of the traditional craftsmen mirror a soul that has found its equilibrium, inner peace and tranquility both outside and inside it. More importantly, it signifies a soul that has transcended all dualities separations and all seemingly opposites.

The traditional Malay man, whose world-view, art and culture are shaped by the “Tawhidic weltanschauung”, is acutely sensitive and profoundly respectful of the principles of cosmic laws that unite him as microcosmic reality with the universe as metacosmic reality. As crystallised by the etiquette-centred Malay philosophy of woodcarving:

Tumbuh berpunca,

Punca penuh rahsia,

Tajam tidak menikam lawan,

Tegak tidak memaut kawan,

Tapi berlegar penuh mesra.¹⁵

MODERN ART MOVEMENTS AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF TRADITIONAL MALAY ART

The British colonisation of the Malay Peninsular in the early 19th century contributed to the birth of modern Malaysian art which engendered the dislocation and subsequently, the marginalisations of traditional Malay art. Founded on a secularistic and materialistic world-view, it advocated various philosophies and theories of art which directly in conflict with their religio-mystical world view of traditional Malay art. As embodiment of the Post-Renaissance humanism, modern art epitomises the modern man’s revolt against God, and hence, metaphysics and tradition. He has banished God from this world and in God’s place deified modern science and the power of human reason. The cosmos of modern man is one which has been divested of any spiritual and archetypal realm and is indisputably materialistic and mechanistic in nature. Modern man, according to the reductionist rationalism of Descartes, is an entity reduced to body and mind only, devoid of any soul. For Descartes, “he is essentially a physiological system of various mechanical functions in which no soul could be discovered and which existed apart from nature because of its reasoning faculty - cogito ergo sum!”

Since art is defined “as a form of self-expression, most modern artists” maintains Arguelles, “like the scientist-technologist, become the soulless manipulators of forms and matter, totally unrelated to organic impulse of life.” Cut off from metaphysical root, their works generally seldom transcend the realm of the personal to enter the realm of the archetype.

In fact as argued by Arguelles:

Art of the modern artists have embraced fundamentally life - denying and aesthetics technique, their art is moving towards death—in fact art becomes the death of the psyche!¹⁶

Apart from being spiritually debilitating, modern art is also self-consciously anti-social. Unlike the traditional society, modern art is not creating for the practical or spiritual needs of society instead

it functions as vehicle for the expression of artists' individual feeling and ideas. It is the concept of art-for-art's sake and not art-for-society's sake that determines the rationale of modern art. Under the impact of formalist theories, art assumes the status of an independent, autonomous, self-referential entity. This, inevitably further exacerbates the alienation between art and society.

The intelligibility and communicability of art suffer when it concerns itself primarily with formalistic, aesthetic and plastic problems, and is impervious to the material, cultural and spiritual needs of society. Unquestionably, it is the self-image, attitude and posture of the modern artists that betrays his essentially antagonistic relationship towards society. Nurtured by the romantic notion of his own uniqueness, the artist assumes various labels such as cultural hero, social rebel, genius, and "avant-garde". Even the life style that he leads reflects his anti-establishment stance. Living on the fringes of society, he usually leads the life of the bohemian, and an outsider, who is excessively ill-at-ease with the common people.

Hoy Cheong poignantly captured the socially alienating spirit of modernist art and culture when he observes:

European modernism...was the age of Great Refusal - a protest against that which is. It was an adversary culture which pitted the self-I against the establishment. It was a self-willed refusal to be co-opted into the status-quo.

Further, in underscoring the spirit of rebellion, and refutation that characterises works of modernist artist, Hoy Cheong continues:

The art he made was one of rage against society, the past and present styles. Modernist art was no longer one of mimeses of "the beautiful". It was ugly and consciously made to subvert and to overwhelm.¹⁷

It is in this light the magisterial deconstructivist discourse by the late Ismail Zain entitled "Towards a Utopian Paradigm: Contingencies and Displacement" which unmasked the myth surrounding the birth and development of modern Malaysian art needs to be appreciated.¹⁸

To Ismail, the phenomenon of modern art when viewed from a traditionalist's perspective constitutes a form of cultural aberration, an anomaly which is decidedly alien, displacing and subversive. Contrary to the euphoric and grandiloquent descriptions of the propitious birth of Modern Malaysian art in the '30-s, Ismail argues that its occurrence was nothing more than "simply symbolical of change". The crucial question that needs to be raised here is why do many Malaysian artists succumb to the influence of modern art inspite of its subversive and debilitating effects of tradition?

As elucidated by a number of local scholars and historians the underlying causes are attributable to some of the following factors:

1. the sense of inferiority, as a reflection of colonised mentality of our artists who were pulverised by the supposedly "superior culture" of the white man.

2. the sense of a crisis of identity as a manifestation of split-personality due to the onslaught of modernistic culture,
3. the error of unwittingly equating “modernization” with “progress” and “development”.

THE LOSS OF MEANING AND ORDER

However, viewed from a philosophical perspective, the adoption of a secular form of modern art by Malaysian artists, reflects a state of “crisis of meaning” caused by the “epistemological irrupture” brought about by the onslaught of nihilistic - modernistic culture. To Khun this is clearly a case of “crisis of paradigm”, due to an intellectual, psychological and cultural disorientation suffered by our Malaysian artists who are overawed by the cultural superiority of the Western man.

THE REVITALISATION OF TRADITION

The Post-Independent periods of the 70’s, marked a decisive turning point in the Malaysian artists’ involvement with secular-modernist art. More specifically, it inaugurated a period of re questioning and reevaluating as our artists endeavoured to free themselves from the culturally alienating and subversive influence of Western modernism. The need to requestion the authenticity, relevancy and validity of their own artistic involvement with the western-centric form of art in the context of their own spiritually-oriented traditional art and culture, become urgent. As succinctly quoted by Masahiro;

The time has come for us to examine ourselves in the light of what we have become as opposed to what we ought to be.¹⁹

As observed by many historians the spirit of self-discovery and critical-mindedness of our artists is inspired by the occurrence of two propitious event. First, the National Cultural Congress (1971) and the other, the global phenomenon of Islamic Revivalism beginning from the seventies.

More importantly, the impact of the National Cultural Congress on contemporary art has been to challenge our Malaysian artists to consider overriding significance of such issues as national identity, origins, and traditional norms and values as central to their artistic creativity.

Hence, among some of disconcerting thoughts that assail the collective conscience and consciousness of our artists as they struggle to recover their true selves are:

1. Until and unless they are able to rid themselves of the captive mentality, the pitiable sense of inferiority – complex when confronted with Western art, their art will continue to be regarded as a carbon copy and mere footnote of Western art.
2. The authenticity and intelligibility of their art can only be achieved when there prevail an ability to re contextualise and reconnect their art to the socio-cultural and socio-political reality of their time.
3. That the solution of the subversive and dichotomising impact of secular modernism can be

found when artists look upon tradition not as something regressive, obsolete or fossilised but invigorating, revitalising and regenerative life force that is eternally dynamic and active.

4. For art to achieve meaning and order, there must be willingness not only on the part of the artists to deal technical issue but also philosophical and axiological in nature. Hence, the definition of art as a meaning-giving activity can only be validated when artists take cognisance of the interconnectedness between matters such as philosophy, ideology, world-view and artistic creativity.

It is against these ideational and philosophical backgrounds that the move to recover traditions among Malaysian artists in the following decades of the 70's, 80's and 90's need to be appreciated. Consequently, traditional forms and themes that once were relegated as peripheral such as myths, legends, cosmology, religious faith and the history of the regions etc were retrieved and given prominence in their works.

At least four major themes dealing with both contemporary and traditional are discernable. One addresses the directions of the alienating and displacing effect of modernism on tradition. Included in this group are the works of Ismail Zain, Zulkifli Yusof, Wan Jamarul, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Din Omar and Rosli Mat. The second, focuses on the spiritual and metaphysical theme which constitute the essence of Malay tradition. Among those included in this group are the works of Sulaiman Esa, Ruzaiika Omar Basaree, Ramlan Abdullah, Fatimah Chik, Syed Ahmad Jamal and Khatijah Sanusi. The third group focuses on topic of cultural and traditional themes mainly to highlight the beauty and uniqueness of its form, techniques, symbols etc. as exemplified by the works of Fauzin Mustafa, Awang Damit, Romli Mahmud, Patrick Ng, Chuah Thean Teng, Cheong Lai Tong, Nurwani Nawawi, Koh Shim Luen, Normah Surip etc.

Finally, those who are dealing with the theme of myths and legends as evidenced in the works of Nik Zainal Abidin and Syed Ahmad Jamal.

ACHIEVEMENTS

In highlighting the major achievements made by contemporary Malaysian artists as a result of the shift of paradigm, from the Western-centric to an essentially Malaysian-centric, Jamal enunciates:

The direction is essentially from within, inspired by a rich environment, tradition and culture rather than echoing trends from outside...What it does mean is that creativity and artistic developments come from the centre itself and not pale imitations of mainstream internationalism.²⁰

The underlying postulates of Jamal's quotation that significance of our artists' works lie in their ability to achieve a creative synthesis between the contemporary-modern elements (-forms, materials, and techniques) with that of a tradition. Tradition thus serves as a catalyst which has immensely contributed in revitalizing and enriching their creativity and art. Furthermore, being deeply rooted in the reality of their life and culture, their works are no longer "pale imitation" of Western art but

project distinct Malaysian identity and personality and contribute to the enrichment, the growth and development of contemporary Malaysian art. Most importantly in the context of modernism but more particularly post-modernism whose suicidal nihilism has declared not only the death of God but more tragically, the death of man, their works which is traditionally inspired and thus not with its spiritualising and transcendental element, constitute the bulwark and the bastion that can contain or even repel this destructive menace.

In spite of the admirable achievements, there are however few important challenges which our artists need to face if their commitment to tradition were to become meaningful. First, it pertains to the need to render their art more socially-oriented, more accessible and viable to the general public. The predilection to function strictly within the elitist and gallery system art, and worst, where art is as essentially perceived as commercial commodity, should be seriously considered. Living in the Third World country, perhaps it is the concept of art for society and not for art-for-art's-sake that should constitute the philosophical basis of their artistic creativity. In this respect creations of public art and the practice of collaborative efforts between artists and members in a community should be greatly encouraged.

Secondly, the traditional concept of creativity as a process which involve the sublimating and ennobling of the soul or the artist inner self deserves serious consideration. The term "fine" art surely should not only refers the external form, the physical artefact produced by the artists but more specifically inner quality of being, the personality, and the character of the artists themselves. After all, as insisted by Burckhardt, "an artist is not a special kind of person but every person is a special kind of artists". Hence the cult of individualism, psychologicalism and ego-centricism which still prevail among some of our artists need to be questioned.

Finally, the task of how to give a universal appeal to their works also needs to be highlighted. Unquestionably, in this respect a deeper study of the philosophical, morphological and axiological aspects of tradition art is indispensable. Failure to do this will inevitably render their art parochial, and superficial and subsequently, devoid of a meaningful cultural continuity and relevancy with the times. For even though their artistic involvement may be brilliant from the stylistic and technical standpoint, they will still be lacking the deeper "meaning" and "order" unless the deeper structure of art such as the philosophical principles, world-views and ethos etc. are given serious considerations.

END NOTES

1. See *Sociology of Religion* by Max Weber, p.34.
2. An interview with the writer on the problem of Islamization of Knowledge, held at University Islam Antarabangsa in June 1991.
3. As quoted by Prof. Foo in one of his lectures at Temple University, U.S.A in 1987 in his discourse on the fundamental difference between Taoist sages, Lao Tse and Chuang Tse.
4. See Clifford Geertz's on "Ethos, World-view and Analysis on Sacred Symbols" in *Interpretation of Culture*.
5. An introduction by S.H. Nasr in "The Sense of Unity" by Nadar Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, Uni. Of Chicago Press, 1973.
6. See "Transformative Vision" by Arguelles, Shambala, 1975, pg 211.
7. See article by P Gerttaton on "Tradition, Intelligence and the Artist. Journal of Comparative Religion", June 1967.
8. "The Painted Depicted. Two pictures by Liu Kang" by K.Sabapathy in First Asean Symposium on Aesthetics, held by National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur, 1989.
9. These quotations were used by Nasr to elucidate the principles of tradition as being essentially eternal, immutable principles which is of Divine origin as found in this "Knowledge and the Sacred" (based on Gifford lecturers 1981).
10. According to Lamy al-Faruqi, "the principles of the arabesque are shaped by the structure of the Quran itself which is essentially non-developmental, repetition and embodies the concept of infinite which accords with the Divine Nature of God".
11. S.A. Jamal *Rupa dan Jiwa* (KL: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 1992)
12. *Op. cit.* pg 20
13. *Op. cit.* pg -xv
14. Mubin Shepard, *Living Craft*, KL: Mobil Oil Malaysia, 1978.
15. Quoted by Aziz Deraman in his monograph: *Islam Dalam Kebudayaan Melayu*, KL: Kem Kebudayaan Belia & Sukan, 1967.
16. *Op. cit.* pg 223
17. W.H. Cheong, "Contradictions and Fallacies in Search of a Voice: Contemporary Art in Post Colonial Culture" in First Asean Symposium on Aesthetics, KL: National Art Gallery (NAG), 1989.
18. Ismail Zain, "Towards a Utopian Paradigm" paper presented at the First Asean Symposium on Aesthetics, KL: NAG, 1989.
19. Ushiroshoji Masashiro., "The Labyrinthine Search for Self-Identity," from *New Art from Southeast Asia* catalogue, 1992.
20. S.A. Jamal, "Contemporary Islamic art in Malaysia", paper presented at the Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, U.S.A 1989.

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2. Callinicos, Alex. *Against Modernism*, U.K: Politic Press, 1989.
3. The Japanese Foundation Asean Culture (ed.), *New Art from Southeast Asia*, 1992.
4. Boyne, Roy and Rattansi, Ali *Postmodernism and Society*, London: Macmillian Education Ltd. 1990.
5. Geertz, Clifford. *The Intrepretation of Culture*, New York: Basic Cooks, Inc, 1973.
6. N. Ardalan and L. Bakhtiar. *The Sense of Unity*, University of Chicago Press, 1979.
7. Jamal, S.A., *Rupa dan Jiwa*, KL : Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992.
8. Shepard, Mubin, *Living Crafts*, KL: Mobil Oil' Malaysia Sdn Bhd, 1978.
9. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein – *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. N.Y: State Uni. Of New York Press, 1987.
10. ____ *Knowledge and Sacred*, N.Y: The Crossword Pub Co., 1981.
11. Gablik, Suzi, *Progress in Art*, NY: Rizzoli International Publication, 1979.

THE REFLOWERING OF THE ISLAMIC SPIRIT IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN ART

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INTRODUCTION

In his much celebrated book, *'Islam Dalam Kebudayaan Melayu'* (1972), Prof. Al-Attas avers that the coming of Islam to the Malay world in the 13th century signified a momentous event that revolutionised the Malays world-view and turning it from the crumbling world of mythology to the world of reason, intelligence and order. "Islam", he further asserts, transformed the body and soul of Malays".¹

Concomitantly, as a civilising force and as *ad-Din*, Islam has not only decisively affected the social, political, educational structures of the Malay society but also its spiritual, cultural and artistic expressions.

SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION

However, more than the jurists (*fuqaha*) or the theologians (*mutakallimun*), it was the contributions of Sufi *ulamas* which was most decisive in Islamising and spiritualising the Malay "body" and "soul", which was subsequently mirrored in the their lives, art and culture. As argued by Mukti Ali, in his numerous writings on the Islamisation of the Malay Archipelago, it is the names of Sufi *ulamas* such as Hamzah Fansuri, Al-Raniri, Shamsudin al-Sumatrani, Rauf al-Singkel, Daud al-Fatani and Tok Kenali that are often cited as being the most dominant and contributory in informing and transforming the Malays' spiritual, intellectual and cultural landscape.²

In affirming the spiritualising impact of Sufism in Malay life and culture al-Attas maintains;

*Islam came to the Malay world couched in Sufi metaphysics. It was through tasawwuf that the highly intellectual and rationalistic religious spirit entered the receptive mind of the people... the existence of numerous copies of treatises on metaphysical topics expounding a cosmology and ontology that can be traced back to the classical Sufis... and further back to Plotinus, Aristotle and Plato... As late as 13th century, works by famous Muslim mystics such as Ibn Arabi, Ibn Ghazali, Ibn Raslan of Damascus and others were still being copied in the Malay language.*³

In retrospect the popularity and mass appeal of the Sufis as propagators of Islam and Islamic spirituality are traceable to three interrelated factors. First, it pertains to their subtle and flexible missionary strategy; second, to their noted charismatic personality; and finally and most importantly, to their authoritative and profound knowledge of Islamic metaphysics and spirituality which deeply appealed to the mystico-spiritual psyche of the Malays, from simple folks living in the villages to the various Malay Sultans in palace courts. In his book, 'Some Aspects of Sufism as Practiced and Understood by the Malays' (1963), Al-Attas, in underscoring the Malays' propensity for mysticism maintains that by the end of 17th century, there were at least nine Sufi orders (*tariqat*) existing in various parts of Malaya, the most active being *Qadiriiah* and *Naqsyabandiah*. As for the attraction of Sufis to the royal households, the early history of Islam in the Malay world is replete with accounts of Sufi *ulamas* (such as Shamsuddin al-Sumatrani, Al-Raniri, etc), who were appointed as spiritual masters (*Sheikh*) as well as viziers to various Malay sultans throughout the Archipelago.⁴

SUFISM AND ITS IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL MALAY ART

That many Malay Sultans were avid students of Sufism and sometimes were practising Sufis themselves, had profound implications on the growth and developments of Malay court arts, in terms of their socio-economic viability as well as their philosophical, morphological and symbolical dimensions. Besides providing the indispensable royal patronage that indisputably contributed to the flourishing of traditional Malay arts, the religious and spiritual commitments of the Malay Sultans oftentimes affected the nature of form, contents and symbolism of traditional Malay arts and inevitably rendered them with the unique and distinctive Malay-Islamic identity. Nakula for example, cited instances of Kelantan royal families who as practising Sufis, were personally involved in determining the particular motifs, style and forms in the designs of royal palace in Kelantan. Similar case also occurred in Java, where the nine *walis* especially Sunan Gunung Jati and Sunan Kalijaga who not only participated in the creation of art works but employed them as strategic means to propagate the message of Islam. Notwithstanding this, the ubiquitous presence and the encompassing sphere of influence of Sufi *ulamas* have also deeply affected the nature of Malay folk arts. In spite of their modest and unpretentious use of materials and techniques, the motifs, symbolism, and concepts underlying the designs of Malay “folk arts” such as Malay house, wood-carving, mat weaving, batik, daily household utensils, are not without their spiritual and religious significance. In his innumerable writings, Nakula had highlighted a number of central Sufi concepts which he believed had a deep impact on the development of traditional Malay arts. These included Ibn Arabi’s mystical idea of ‘Divine unicity’ (Wahdat al-Wujud), the notion of ‘perfect man’ (Insan al-Kamil), the concept of *Ihsan* (spiritual virtue and nobility), the concept of universe as *theophany* and the concept of God as Transcendence - (the Absolute Truth) as well and Immanence (Omni Presence). In reference to the concept of God as the Source and Origin of all creations and the related notion of God’s Omnipresence on all levels of realities, Nakula explains;

“The concept of Divine Essence constitutes the foundation of Malay culture. A lack of this particular knowledge will render one’s study of Malay culture superficial. It is from the Divine Essence (Zat) that everything in this universe is created... hence, the multiple levels of realities are none other than the revelation of Divine Essence (Zat)”.⁵

Hence, to most Malays, the central importance of nature resides in the fact it is essentially a theosphany – a mirror which reflects God’s divine names and attributes. Nature is therefore regarded as sacred, being an open *kitab* which 4 manifests the signs (*ayats*) of God – thus correspondingly reinforces the sacred signs and messages that are contained in the sacred book of Islam-the Quran. In underscoring this notion of nature as theosphany, Aziz Deraman quotes the following Malays perception and attitude towards nature;

1. *Baik-baik membelah buluh*

Dalam buluh ada ulat

Baik-baik mengkaji tubuh

Dalam tubuh ada sifat

Be careful when splitting the bamboo

For it contains the maggots

Be careful when studying the human body

For it contains Divine attributes

2. *Baik-baik membuang ulat*

Dalam ulat ada sengat

Baik-baik mengkaji sifat

Dalam sifat ada zat.⁷

Be careful in discarding the maggots

For they have stings

Be careful when studying the divine attributes

For they reveal Divine Essence

For Nakula, the influence of Sufi cosmology is deeply embodied in the various forms of traditional Malay art including calligraphy, palace decorations, mosques and houses, kite-making (*wau*), wood-carving, silverware, etc...

1. **Calligraphy**

In the Quran God, in speaking of man says "I created him so that he might worship Me". (51:56) Further it is said,

"Nothing is better than the remembrance of God. (29:45) To be in constant remembrance (*zikir*) and contemplation (*fikir*) of God and His sacred Word as embodied in the Quran is crucial to Muslims toward the attainment of the state of "*Ihsan*" (spiritual beauty and nobility) as perquisite to achieving success, efficacy and felicity on this world and the next. In this respect, the driving force behind the rapid and dynamic growth of *Seni Khat* (Islamic calligraphy) in Malay traditional arts is an expression of this desire to achieve spiritual purification as well as creating a physical and psychological ambience where the signs of God and His omnipresence are manifested everywhere. This explains the ubiquitous presence of calligraphy in place architectures, royal regalia, mausoleums, Malay houses, textiles, metalwork etc. More importantly for the calligraphers (*khatat*) themselves, the constant practice of producing these spiritually noble and intricate art forms constitutes a form of *zikir* that directly contributes to spiritual purification and transformation of their souls. For, as argued by Nasr, the Quranic verses which generally constitute the content of their calligraphic art are "powerful presences" deeply infused with the Divine "*baraqah*" (blessings) that are spiritually purifying and uplifting.

2. Mosque Architecture

Equally significant is the influence of Sufi cosmological model in the design of Malay mosque architecture. As argued by Nakula in *'Falsafah dan Pemikiran Orang Orang Melayu'*, (1980) the hierarchical structures of Malay mosque symbolise the various levels of realities which include; 1) *"Alam nyata"*, 2) *"Alam ghaib"*, 3) *"Alam ghaib lagi ghaib"*, 4) *"Hakikat Wahidiah"*, 5) *"Hakikat Muhammadiyah Wadah"*, 6) *Ahadiah"* (Divine Essence).

In accord with Nakula's position, A. Rahman al-Ahmadi in expounding the Sufistic interpretation of the roof structure of Malay mosques avers;

*"The ventilated roof structures were normally arranged in odd numbers of three or five. This arrangement was of great importance in the Malay's Islamic philosophy... It signifies the stages of man's search for God through mysticism, tariqah, haqiqah and ma'arifah."*⁷

3. Awan Larat

Other examples of the indelible Sufi imprint on the traditional Malay art included the ornamental motifs (*awan larat*) whose ubiquitous presence pervade almost all forms of traditional art such as architecture, *songket* and *batik* design, wood-carvings, metalwork, book illuminations and even mortuary art-royal mausoleums and tombstones. In his book entitled *'Warisan Kesenian Dalam Tamadun Islam'*, (1990) Othman Yatim identified a number of important ornamental motifs inscribed on numerous royal tombstones (*batu Acheh*) which he believes to be mystically inspired. These include images of doors or gates (*pintu-gerbang*), ladders (*tangga*), *mihrab* and spiders' cobwebs.

Yatim, in reference to the symbolism of the gate, cited the Arabic translation of Sufi poem inscribed on one of the tombstones which states that, "Death is the gate and all men go in threat".⁸ He posits that according to Sufi's interpretation the door symbolises the traditional point, which every person must pass in his/her journey from this transient and material world to the next which is spiritual and permanent. As for the symbolic significance of the ladder motif Yatim observes;

*"God is one (Ahad) and the spiritual path (tariqat) is the road that leads to the One. Hence, the motif of the ladder can be interpreted as the path leading to God"*⁹

CONCLUSION

The Islamisation of the Malay world, principally through the tireless efforts of Sufi *ulamas* had decisively shaped the philosophy, form and contents of traditional Malay art.

The facts that many Malay Sultans were devoted disciples of Sufism has not only contributed to the system of royal patronage that led to the flourishing of court arts but also ensured that their forms and contents were spiritually inspired. Under the impact of Islam which emphasises man's vertical relationship with God as well as his link with society, traditional Malay arts become not only spiritually enriching and socially ennobling.

THE MODERN PERIOD AND THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL MALAY ART

As argued by a number of scholars, the religious and spiritual nature of Malay art suffered a gradual process of modernisation and secularisation with the advent of British colonial rule in the early 19th century. That the onslaught of British imperialistic rule had violently dislocated traditional Malay society is an observation shared by many historians. The British incursion had inevitably led to the

destruction of political, economic, social and religious structures which are vital to the survival and continued growth of traditional Malay arts. More specifically, by marginalising the political and economic hegemony of the Malay Sultans, the British had severed the Malay craftsmen from the economic umbilical cord-viz. the royal patronage which traditionally had contributed to the flourishing of traditional Malay arts. Furthermore, through the creation of plural society, the British effectively destroyed the social and cultural dominance of the indigenous Malays and subsequently displaced the centrality, relevancy and viability of their spiritually-oriented traditional arts. In the field of education, the British caused irreparable damage when they displaced the traditional religious education with one which is decidedly humanistic and secular in nature. Pulverised by the supposedly scientific, intellectual and cultural superiority of the white man, many Malays as evidence of their captive mentality glorify everything that is Western, while feeling disenchantment towards their own traditional art, culture and religion. And finally, through the bureaucratisation of religion, the British severely curtailed the traditionally pervasive and dynamic roles of Muslim *ulamas* in the Malay society that indisputably enfeebled the spiritualising and civilising power of Islam.

THE RISE OF MODERN ART AND THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL ART

From the spiritual perspective, the rise of modern art evidenced the process of secularisation and humanisation which the psyche of Malay artists had undergone.

Hence, as argued elsewhere, the emergence and ascendancy of modern Malaysian art movement such as Realism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Abstract-Expressionism, Constructivism and Conceptual art are but manifestations of Western cultural and intellectual colonisation on Malaysian art scene. Unlike the traditional art, modern art is spiritually debilitating, sociologically alienating and psychologically corrupting. Rather than God-centric, modern art is decidedly man-centric. Instead of creating art for spiritual fulfillment of community or society, modern art is uniquely aimed at expressing the individualistic and idiosyncratic tendencies of an artist. Furthermore, instead of contributing towards the refinement of the artist's soul, modern art oftentimes created intriguing characters who take pride in considering themselves as avant-garde, social rebels, and unique cultural heroes. The irony of the Malaysian artists' involvement with Western-centric art is that, intellectually and culturally, the artists exist in no man's land. The late Ismail Zain in his devastating attack on modern Malaysian artists,¹⁰ considers their involvement essentially as cultural aberration and an anomaly. He linked the state of modern Malaysian art to that of "Ersatz", namely the "state of being not quite what it is" – in other words, a state of cultural delusion. For him, the sense of inadequacy exhibited by many Malaysian artists concerning the complex philosophical and semiological structures" that shape and determine the various art movements renders their involvement with Western modern art movements, highly questionable!

THE REFLOWERING OF THE ISLAMIC SPIRIT IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN ART

From the socio-cultural perspective, the post-Independent periods of the 70's marked the critical turning point in the growth and development of contemporary Malaysian art. Specifically, the period witnessed the committed efforts made by a number of Malaysian artists to re-evaluate their involvement with the Western-centric art in their drive to decolonize their artistic creativity from the hegemony of Western culture. As eloquently expressed by Masahiro the "time has come for us to examine ourselves in the light of what we have become as opposed to what we ought to be".¹¹ In retrospective, this drive to attain authenticity, intelligibility and self-understanding by many Malaysian artists is attributable to the occurrence of two propitious events. First, the

National Cultural Congress (1971) and second, the global Islamic resurgent beginning from the 70's.

As described by many historians, these two events signify a radical shift of paradigm that exerts a profound effect on the philosophical and axiological orientation in the creative involvement of many Malaysian artists.

There are two resolutions proposed by the Congress which proved to be most propitious. First, to restore the role and status of Malay indigenous and traditional art forms and elements as vital component in the formation of Malaysian culture. Second, to sanctify Islam as crucial element in Malaysian cultural development.

That the national Congress was sponsored by the ruling government in its attempt to harness the power of culture in fostering unity and social integration among the multi-racial society of Malaysian, is a significant fact. But what is equally important is the recognition given by the Malaysian government of the indispensable role which Islam in the life and culture of the people. Given the peripheral position relegated to Islam during the period of British colonisation, the privileged position and recognition that it now achieved, augurs a greater role that Islam is to occupy in the decades that follow. In this context, the global phenomenon of Islamic resurgent in the 70's was most propitious in that it provided the driving force that inevitably led to process of religious and spiritual revitalisation in the lives of post-Independent Malaysians.

Hence, due to the committed and positive support given by the ruling government on "Islamisation policy", the decade of the 70's witnessed the reflowering of the Islamic spirit which manifests itself in various spheres of life including the social, intellectual, economic and cultural. For example, in the field of economy, the Islamic spirit manifests itself in the establishment of Islamic system of banking; in the field of education it is the establishment of International Islamic university which is committed in spearheading the program in the sphere of art and culture, the pervasive and ubiquitous spirits of Islam found its expression in the various creative activities including the performing arts, literary arts and the visual arts. While in the world of theatre, the name of Nordin Hassan is often associated as a pioneer who is committed to incorporate spiritual values, while in the field of literature, it is the names of Kemala, Affandi Hassan, Shahnnon Ahmad, Salleh Yappar etc; that deserve mentioning.

Specifically, in the domain of the visual arts, the impact of Islamic spirit is embodied in the form of numerous art exhibitions, seminars, and scholarly writing that deal with Islamic art and culture. Thus, from the beginning of the '70's till today, there are at least no less than thirty art exhibitions organised both by the culture and various higher institutions of learning. These include one-man shows and group exhibitions both by local and foreign artists. Notable amongst these are; The "Living Craft" of Mubin Shepperd (1978), *'Rupa dan Jiwa'* (UM, 1979), *'Akar-akar Peribumi'* (ITM, 1979), the 'Islamic Civilisation Exhibition' sponsored by the National Art Gallery (1984) and the National Museum. Beside these, there were various exhibitions of Islamic calligraphy sponsored by institutions of higher learning such as UM, ITM, UKM etc. In addition to these are the one-man exhibition of Islamic – oriented art both by local and foreign Muslim artists namely Omar Basaree, Omar Rahmad, Ahmad Khalid, S. Fatimah Zubir, Sulaiman Esa, Siti Zainon, etc. Of the foreign artists, the exhibitions of Omar Ermes, Hassan Celebi, Wajih Nahla, Maqbool Husain, Nayyer

Rashid have incontestably contributed to the creative and cultural effervescence in the Malaysian art scene.

Concomitantly, to provide further intellectual and cultural enrichment to the artistic endeavours of these Muslim artists, books by local and international Muslim scholars were written on topics related to Islamic art, philosophy and culture. These include Al-Attas's *'Islam Dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu'*, 'The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri', etc.; Mubin Shepperd's *"Taman Indera"*, 'Living Craft' and Syed Ahmad Jamal's *"Rupa dan Jiwa"*. Equally significant are the writings of eminent international scholars such as S.H.Nasr's 'An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines', 'Knowledge and the Sacred', 'Islamic Art and spirituality' etc.; the late Lamy and Ismail al-Faruqi 'Islam and Art and The Cultural Atlas of Islam', etc.; Titus Burckhardt's 'Islam and Art: Language and Meaning', to mention a few.

Through their dedication and active participation in various solo and group exhibitions since the '70's, the presence of Islamically – oriented Malay artists have undeniably given a new dimension to the story of contemporary Malaysian art. Some critics considered their presence as a new emerging force which has radically affected the flow, direction and development of contemporary Malaysian art. Local as well as international critics, have expressed their appreciation of the achievement made by these artists. For example, writing on the Islamically – inspired art pieces by Syed Ahmad Jamal, Animah Syed Muhammad, an art historian writes;

Syed Ahmad Jamal who had made a great deal to promote knowledge and appreciation of Islamic art....emphasised with the unity, the serenity and clarity of Islam. In his work, he is interested in suggestion of the vast space of the cosmos, with the striving of human heart to attain higher level of experience and consciousness.¹²

Impressed by the works of another artist-Ahmad Khalid Yusoff, the above-mentioned art historian observes;

In this exhibition, he is embarking on another new phase, in which the motif is again important and a deeper meaning is emphasized. Khalid admits to being caught up to some extent in the Islamic Revival which has made him think more deeply about life and thus strengthened his attachment to the Jawi script, which is of course a manifestation of Islamic roots of Malay culture.¹³

Commenting on the "Nursyah"s series by another Islamic-oriented artist, Zakaria Ali, an art historian posits;

"Sharifah transforms the infinite to finite, the intangible into tangible, the inner into the outer... Her imagery is refreshing because her approach is philosophical in which the notion of space is tied to her perception of colour imbued with the symbolic mystical connotation".¹⁴

In reviewing the works of Sulaiman Esa, an art critic from the USA, Victoria Gelineer observes;

"Sulaiman Esa brings to his work traditional weaving techniques with hand-made paper, bamboo, canvas... his works are spiritual and symbolic. The Arabic names underscore his intent: Kaabah, 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".¹⁵

In spite of general achievements made by Malaysian artists, their approaches are not without their shortcomings. As observed by many critics, the most serious of these is the lack of sound understanding of basic philosophical and metaphysical principles that constitute the foundation of Islamic art. Their approaches to things Islamic deal mainly with the obvious elements of form, imagery, and content of Islamic art, but seem to ignore the fundamental issues such as the rationale, the metaphysical and philosophical principles and the spiritual role and the objectives of Islamic art.

It is in this context that the significance of the current exhibition entitled; 'The Manifestation of the Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art', held in conjunction with the 'Islamic discourse on The Unity of Science and Art in Traditional Islamic Arts' needs to be appreciated. It is hoped that the series of lectures which will be delivered by an eminent Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr, on the role of contemplative geometry and sacred science in Islamic art, the inadequacy and the challenge currently faced by many Malaysian-Muslim artists in their effort to produce a more profound and meaningful Islamic works of art, will be realised.

ENDNOTES

1. See Al-Attas's "Islam Dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu", p.22
2. Sidek Fadil, "Islamisation of the Malay Archipelago: A Human Transformation and Cultural Revolution" working paper for "International Conference of Islamic Civilization,"p. 2
3. *Op. cit.* p. 23
4. *Op. cit.* p. 49
5. See Nakula's "Falsafah Pemikiran Orang Orang Melayu." P. ii
6. See Aziz Deraman's "Kebudayaan Islam di Malaysia", p. 10
7. R. Rahman al-Ahmadini's "General introduction to the Cultural Development in Malaysia", published in Arts and the Islamic World, vol. 5, 1988, p. 42
8. O. Yatim. "Warisan Kesenian Dalam Tamaddun Islam." p. 84
9. *Op. cit.* p. 84
10. Ismail Zain. "Toward an Utopian Paradigm: Contingencies and Displacement," in the First ASEAN Symposium in Aesthetics, p. 19
11. See U. Masahiro's "The Labyrinthine Search for Self-Identity" published in New Art in Southeast Asia, p. 2
12. See "Islamic Element in the Contemporary Visual Arts of Malaysia" pameran Tamadun Islam, NAG, 1984
13. Catalogue of Ahmad Khalid's one-man show, 1983
14. Zakaria Ali. The Malaysianess of Malaysian Art: A Question of Identity, NAG, 1991
15. See Sulaiman Esa's One-man Exhibition 'Ke Arah Tauhid' 1984 catalog.

ISLAMIC ART AND ITS INTERPRETERS

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Islam emphasises the importance of beauty as the aura of truth for the famous saying of the Prophet of Islam states, “God is beautiful and He loves beauty”, and furthermore, “God has written the mark of beauty upon all things”.

The field of Islamic art, which is once dominated by Western art historians, assumes a new dimension with the emergence of writings by a number of Muslim scholars in the early seventies. Today, the scope of theoretical interpretations on Islamic art has widened considerably to include not only the viewpoints of Western but also Islamic scholars. Hence, students of Islamic art will not only encounter names such as K.A C. Creswell, Thomas Arnold, Graber, Dimand and, Ettinghausen – (the early pioneers representing the Western perspective) but also that of Muslim scholars such Titus Burckhardt, Nasr, Faruqi, Martin Lings, N. Ardalan and others. What most distinguishes the writings of former group of scholars from the latter lies in their approach, interpretations and evaluations of Islamic art.

Consequently, there exist today not one but a number of diverse and competing school of thought on Islamic art. While the diversity of their interpretations is welcomed, they are not without their problems. Oftentimes, their scholarly writings contradict and conflict with one another to a point that an unwary student of their works will end up becoming more confused rather than enlightened. For example, while according to Western scholars, the Quran is irrelevant in the discussion of Islamic art, a Muslim scholar such as Nasr would insist that the Quran is not only relevant but indispensable in understanding the philosophy, meaning and content of Islamic art. “Without the Quran”, Nasr would argue, “there will be no Islamic art”...

Arguably, among the various school of thought that best exemplify these extremely contradictory positions; two may be considered the most representative. These are the Western and Sufi perspectives.

The objectives of this two-part article are *twofold*. First, to identify the factors that contributes to the conflicting interpretations and viewpoints of the above-mentioned two schools of thoughts on Islamic art. Second, to demonstrate the contradictory nature of their elucidations by presenting examples of their arguments on the following forms of Islamic art; the *arabesque*, miniature painting and architecture. However, while in the first part of this article discussion will be focused mainly on the *arabesque*, the second part will delve into the two remaining aforementioned Islamic art forms...

A perusal of writings of the aforementioned scholars’ evidences that contributes to their conflicting elucidations on the philosophy, meaning and significance of Islamic art are attributable to two interrelated factors – worldview and methodology.

First, the exponents of Western perspective basically adopt the Post-Enlightenment materialistic and secular outlook. One of the cardinal principles of Post-Enlightenment thinkers is the belief in the supremacy of logic and rational thinking in their effort to understand the world. The saying of Descartes, “I think therefore I am”, is a form of absolutism whereby the human mind is the only legitimate means of arriving at truth. Descartes’ rationale in fact becomes the bedrock on

which the structure of Western epistemic model is erected. Truth and certitude in whatever field of study whether scientific, sociological, cultural or aesthetic should and can only be obtained by the method of objective and empirical investigation. This involves the process of analysing, quantifying and classifying measurable and observable data. Concomitantly, Western scholars of art and art historians will never tolerate idea that Islamic art, for example, may have been shaped or influenced by religious metaphysical or spiritual, factors – precisely because these are considered to be non-material, non-observable and therefore non-quantifiable elements. A case in point is the Western scholars' secular and rational interpretations of the origin, cultural significance and meaning of *arabesque*.

Arabesque

As a form of Islamic art, the arabesque affords a classic example of the extreme contrast of viewpoints between the Western and Sufi-oriented scholars. In their expositions of the arabesque, most Western art historians tend to concentrate their discussions on the purely materialistic, humanistic and non-religious factors. They thus studied in either from it's a stylistic-formalistic, sociological, psychological, and historical aspects. As they often argued religion and spirituality is inconsequential in an understanding of an arabesque. Furthermore, rather than employing the term "Islamic Art", most Western scholars prefer the appellation "Muslim Art" or "Art of the Muslim". The former designation suggests that the art in question is decisively influenced by the religion; Islam. The latter designations, "Muslim Art" on the other hand implies that art is instead the creation of an ethno-conglomerate; the Muslim, with no religious or spiritual factors intended. O. Graber, an eminent Western art historian in *The Formation of Islamic Art* offers an interpretation of an *arabesque* which not only divests it from its spiritual or religious elements but worse, relegates it to a status of mere decoration. Citing an example of the use of the *arabesque* found in a mosque in Damascus, Graber assert: "... almost all the designs found in mosques can be interpreted simply as ornament". The architectural compositions of the mosque of Damascus, when imagined as a sort of sheath covering the whole building, can also be understood as just a sheath of glitter and not with iconographic meanings. In other words, it is not only possible, but even correct to see the decoration of mosque as primary as ornamental.

Two interrelated ideas can be deduced from the Graber' above-observation, which I betray his Western ideological position and biasness. First, coming from a Western tradition where great art are figurative, representational or iconic, Graber holds a negative view of art form which does not conform to this expected model. The fact that all great masters of the Western world, such as Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Rembrandt, were figurative artist who paint in the representational manner leaves no room for doubt in Graber's mind that the *arabesque* in contrast, being essentially non-representational, and non-figurative is at best an inferior form of art devoid of culture and intellectual content. Second, Graber also stresses the role of the *arabesque* in the context of the mosque design to be non-structural, for it is content-less and lacks coherent cognitive order. He thus relegates its significance as nothing more than a form of decoration, a kind of embellishment, bordering on the whimsical, and the superficial.

In *A Handbook of Mohammedan Decorative Art*, another Western scholar M.S. Dimand offers a psychological interpretation on the origin of the *arabesque*. According to Dimand, far from being spiritually or religiously motivated, the driving force behind the creation of an *arabesque* is essentially psychological in nature. The early Muslim Arabs' proclivity for the *arabesque* – the abstract, and highly stylised infinite pattern is, engendered, Dimand insists, by a kind of psychological aberration or complex known as "horror vacui" – i.e. phobia for empty space. As the result of their prolonged exposure to the vast and desolate environment of the desert, the Arabs developed this extreme fear and abhorrence for empty space. Dimand posits:

The reason why the Muslim artists spent all his creative energies on decoration is because an empty space intolerable to the Mohammedan eye. The Muslims become so obsessed in having to establish whatever empty surface he encounters as such the walls, the pages of the book, objects of daily use, and are all richly decorated with ornament, floral, geometrical and abstract, often combined with representation of figures and animals.

Hence for Dimand, far from being an artistic form that embodies the spiritual ideals of Islam, the *arabesque* is nothing more than a kind of therapeutic art whose aesthetic significance remains questionable since it possesses neither intellectual nor civilising contents.

Beside Graber and Dimand, another Western scholar D.B. Richardson offers another intellectually provocative insight on the *arabesque*. In an article, '*A Non-Religious Dimension of Islamic Art*', Richardson challenges the Muslims' claim to be the originator or creator of the *arabesque*. Contrary to the popular belief, the *arabesque* Richardson insists had existed long before the arrival of Muslim civilisation. To substantiate his claim Richardson traces the origin of the *arabesque* to the past civilisations of Europeans – the Romans, the Greeks, The Germanic, the Hun (central Asia) and even the Indians. By underscoring the borrowed and derivative nature of *arabesque*, he suggested that Muslims' debt to these past cultures should be recognised. Concomitantly, Richardson also dismisses the Muslim claim that the intricate, interlaced patterns of the *arabesque* symbolise the infinity and the transcendence of Allah. Instead, he proposes that as understood in the past cultures, the *arabesque* is symbolic of restless motion or ceaseless motion which is intimately linked to the idea of ever-changing reality and a deep sense of historical becoming.

Contrary to the above rationalistic and materialistic arguments of Western scholars, S.H. Nasr, T.Burckhardt, Faruqi, N.Ardalan and so on in representing Muslim's perspective, have advanced theoretical expositions of Islamic art which are essentially religious and spiritual in nature. Central to their arguments is the belief in the inseparability of Islam and Islamic art. Islam they maintain is more than a religion. It is *Ad-din*; a total way of life which comprehensively encompasses Muslim's social, political, cultural and spiritual lives. To understand Islamic art, its definition, philosophy and role; a basic appreciation of Islam as total way of life is indispensable. In Islam, it is the religion-spiritual order that determines its aesthetic-formal order. To wed his creativity to his spirituality, to render his art and religion as mutually reinforcing becomes an ideal objective of Muslim artist. Thus in defining Islamic art, Muslim scholars have never failed to acknowledge the reality of God

as its absolute determinants and vital frame of reference. Hence, art has been defined by some Muslim scholars as “*submission to Divine will*”. As for al-Faruqi, Islamic art is conceived as “*the aesthetic expression of Tawhid – God’s Absolute Transcendence*”. Nasr, in representing a Sufi perspective, describes Islamic art as “*the crystallisation of the spirit of the Quran (i.e. the doctrine of Tawhid) in the world of matter*”.

Consequently, Nasr in *Art and Spirituality* provides a spiritual interpretation of the meaning of *arabesque*. He explains that the manifestation of an *arabesque* is inextricably related to the Islamic doctrine of Unity (al-tawhid) as contained in the Muslim’s testimony of faith or *shahadah*. According to this interpretation, the *shahadah* has many layers of meaning, two of which have direct relevance to our appreciation of the *arabesque*. First, metaphysically, the Muslim declaration that “*there is no God but God*” underscores the fact that that only God is real and eternal while all his creations such as man and the cosmos, are perishable and transient. Secondly, this declaration also implies the two separate, qualitative realms or orders of reality. First, we have the physical, material and visible – the world of the created order; second, the spiritual, metaphysical and transcendental realm of the Creator – God. Accordingly, if God’s created order that is impermanent and transient is manifested in material and perceptible form, than God who is Eternal, absolutely Unique and Transcendent, exist in realm that is non-material and non-perceptual. Hence, according to Nasr, the significance of an *arabesque* resides in the fact that it is through the existence of its two interrelated structural elements i.e. the positive – the dynamic interlaced lines, and the negative-the empty spaces or void, that a Muslim artist strives to symbolically express this vision of the physical/visible and spiritual/transcendent worlds. Nasr further explains: “*In the arabesque, the significance of the empty space-the void, can never be over emphasised. Since Islam prohibits an expression of Divinity through representational or concrete form, it is through the void that the Divine presence is conveyed. From a Sufi perspective the void becomes the symbol of both the transcendence of God and His presence in all things.*” Hence, for Nasr, the metaphysical significance of the void or “*No-Thingness*” in Islam is not unlike the Buddhist notion of Emptiness (*Sunyata*) or the realm of the Formless as expressed in Taoist metaphysics.

With regard to the positive element of an *arabesque* namely its dynamics, continuous and ceaselessly moving interlaced lines, Nasr sees their spiritual significance as being no less than that of the void. By its very nature the repetitive, rhythmic movements the interlaced lines render it impossible for a viewer to concentrate or focus his or her attention on any specific part or portion of the design. Visually, one sees the possibility of transfixed in one place from the movements of these interlaced lines. Upon contemplation and revitalisation, one sees the possibility of becoming imprisoned in any particular solidification and crystallisation of matter. The significance of guarding oneself from being totally distracted or trapped in the physical and concrete world of matter can be fully appreciated when it is remembered to encourage the Muslims to be in a constant state of remembrance and contemplation of God and not that of His created, material and transient world!

Another equally enlightening discussion on the origin and significance of *arabesque* is afforded by the late Muslim thinker and scholar al-Faruqi. In his numerous scholarly writings, he challenges the Western negative views on the origin of the *arabesque* by insisting on its Islamic roots and origin. In rejecting the position of Western scholars who maintain that the origin of Muslim *arabesque* is derivative and imitative, Faruqi insist that the original model from which Muslim artist draw their inspirations in creating the *arabesque* comes from the holy Quran itself. The Quran not only provides moral, spiritual and social guidance for Muslims but also cultural and aesthetic. In this context, Faruqi highlights the following three constitutive characteristics of the Quran which Muslim artist have adopted in the creation of *arabesque*.

1) The non-developmental nature

As a divine book, the Quran is unique precisely due to the non-developmental and non-chronological nature of its content. Unlike most epic, narrative or other great literary text, the Quran is not organically structured. Literally speaking, it has no specific beginning, the middle or the “*climatic moment*” or an ending. Hence, in reading the Quran, one can begin from any part, from any section or chapter and yet obtain a coherent and intelligible understanding of the ideas that are being expressed. There is no loss in understanding regarding its content or message whether one begins with the last Sura or chapter and ends with the first. For being non-developmental and having no internal organic continuity and literary sequence, a reader is free to study any part of Quran as he/she wishes...

Similarly, this non-developmental character of the Quran is also found in *arabesque*. As a stylised, abstract infinite pattern, an *arabesque* can be viewed or read from any part any section or unit of its visual field or overall design. Just like the Quran, being infinite in nature, an *arabesque* pattern has no specific beginning, a focal point or an end. A viewer is thus free to study and appreciate its formal and aesthetic beauty without having to follow any fixed or prescribed order. Being non-developmental and non-sequential where the Quran is a free and random reading of its dynamic stylised pattern is totally permissible.

2) Modular structure

Another unique character of Quran is its modular structure. In spite of comprising 112 chapters, each of its chapter is complete in itself. It exists independently and is self-contained, if the whole content of the Quran can be compared to a big tree, each of its chapter is a single leaf which when microscopically studied – each of its modular structure is perfect, integrated and intelligently coherent. This modular structure is also found in an *arabesque*. *In studying the pattern of arabesque*, one can either read the whole field in terms of the total complex design of the pattern or focus specifically on the one specific unit and module. The formal beauty and the aesthetic enjoyment that one derives in contemplating on this small unit or modular structure of the *arabesque* is no less than that of studying its overall pattern.

3) Infinite patterning

The Quran is itself a literary embodiment of infinite patterning for it is a work which comprises of seemingly unending series of independent units. Each 'Ayat' or sentence can be considered a module within that series. However, comprehension of each literary unit of the Quran invites progression to the next in the series of infinite possibility. The infinite pattern embodied in the Quran could continue *ad infinitum*. Similarly, the very essence of an *arabesque*, its defining characteristic is nothing less the dynamic, restless and ceaseless movement of lines embodying the spirit of infinite pattern.

Unquestionably, our previous discussion has clearly demonstrated that due to their adoption of conflicting and mutually opposing world-views and approaches irreconcilable differences exist between Western and Muslim scholars' views on Islamic art. This clash of interpretations is inevitable since the former represent the position of an outsider, which is concerned only with the outer, physical and visible reality while the latter choose to focus on its deeper inner religious and spiritual dimension. Thus, while Western discourses provide us with exterior or outer reality of Islamic art, the latter are more interested in unveiling its essence and inner spirit.



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 Home Address 36 Jalan Mendapan 8/21, Seksyen 8,
 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan.
 Malaysia.

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

1962 – 1966 Diploma in Art and Design,
 Hornsey College of Art, London.
 1967 Post-Graduate in Printmaking,
 Hornsey College of Art, London.
 1968 Post-Graduate in Printmaking at 'Atelier 17',
 Paris.
 1974 – 1975 Certificate in Costume Design,
 Academia de Roma, Rome, Italy.
 1979 – 1981 MA in Fine Art, Maryland Institute College of Art,
 Baltimore, USA.
 1986 – 1996 Ph.D (Islamic Studies) Temple University,
 Philadelphia, USA.

MAJOR AWARDS, FELLOWSHIP, APPOINTMENTS AND COMMISSION

1969 Appointed as lecturer in the Dept. of Pre-Diploma at the School of Art & Design, ITM.
 1973 Major Award "Man and His World" Competition sponsored by National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
 1975 Appointed as lecturer in the Dept. of Fine Art, ITM.
 1977 Minor Award in Printmaking sponsored by National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
 1982 Appointed as Senior Lecturer, School of Art & Design, ITM.
 1985 Commissioned by UMNO for the longest Mural at Putra World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur.
 1993 Represented Malaysia for the first Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Gallery, Aust.
 1994 Appointed as the President of Malaysian Artists' Assosication (PPM),
 1995 Appointed as Associate Professor, School of Art & Design, ITM,
 1997 Appointed as the Editorial Board for SEMURNI, Jurnal Pengucapan Islam Dalam Kesenian, FSSR, ITM.
 1998 Appointed as Consultant to Mashaf al-Quran Malaysia
 1999 Awarded the Arnold Hancock Fellow, Melbourne, Australia.
 2001 Appointed in Editorial Board of Advisor to Art Corridor Magazine, Kuala Lumpur-Koid Foundation.
 2002 Appointed as Chief Judge for the Phillip Morris International Art Competition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
 2010 Member in the Panel of Judges for Young Contemporary Art Competition.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS: NATIONAL LEVEL

- 1970 Salon Malaysia, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1970 *Experiment '70*, Galeri 11, Kuala Lumpur.
Manifestasi Dua Seni 1, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1971 *New Scene (Situasi Baru)*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1973 *Pemandangan Malaysia*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
Manusia dan Alamnya, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1974 *Towards A Mystical Reality*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1977 Pameran Terbuka Senilukis dan Senigrafik Malaysia,
Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1979 Salon Malaysia, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1982 *Senilukis Malaysia 25 Tahun*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
Seni Cetakan, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
Viva La Palestine, Dewan Bandaraya, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1984 *Lukisan dan Seni Khat*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
American Experience Malaysian Images, American High Commission, Kuala Lumpur.
Ke Arah Tauhid I, (Solo Exhibition), Australian High Comm, Kuala Lumpur.
Ke Arah Tauhid II, (Solo Exhibition), Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.
Pameran Terbuka, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
Sinarcipta, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.
Second One Show, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1985 *Seni Fabrik*, Daya Bumi, Kuala Lumpur.
Pameran Fakulti, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1986 *Side By Side Contemporary British and Malaysian Art*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1988 *Alam Fabrik*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1991 *Identiti Malaysia*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1992 *Islamic Identity in Malaysian Art : Achievements and Challenges*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1993 *Form and Soul*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
Manifestation of Islamic Spirit, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
Islamic Art Exhibition for Ramadhan, Hotel Istana, Kuala Lumpur.
Imbasan Ledang, Balai Seni Maybank, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1994 *Pameran Seni Islam*, Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1995 *Lembaran 1*, Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
Alternative Printmaking, Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
Art and Spirituality, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1996 *Islamic Expressions in Art*, Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1997 *Oasis in a Storm*, Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
Echoes of Infinity, Kajian Senilukis dan Senireka Gallery, ITM.
- 1998 *Contemporary Islamic Art of Malaysia: Change and Continuity*, Galeri Maybank, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1999 *AKU: 99*, Galeri Petronas, KLCC.
- 2000 *Rupa Malaysia*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
Contemporary Islamic Art in conjunction with Maal Hijrah 1421, Gallery Shah Alam.
- 2001 *Insyirah - The Art of Sulaiman Esa 1980 – 2000 (2nd Solo Show)*, Galeri Petronas, KLCC.
- 2002 *Dance of the Cosmos*, Sutra Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
- 2007 *50 years of Independence*, Universiti Malaya (UM), Kuala Lumpur.
- 2010 *KepadaMu Kekasih*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS: INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

- 1967 Graduate Show, Hornsey College of Art, London.
- 1968 Post-Graduate Show, Hornsey College of Art, London.
- 1969 *Malaysian Art, Mobile Show* in Australia and New Zealand.
- 1972 *ASEAN Art Mobile Show*, Singapore, Jakarta, Manila, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.
- 1974 *ASEAN Art Mobile Show*, Singapore, Jakarta, Manila, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.
- 1978 *Malaysian Art 1965 – 1978*, Commonwealth Institute, London.
- 1980 ASEAN Art Show, Jakarta, Indonesia.
Contemporary Asian Art Show, Fukuoka Museum, Fukuoka, Japan.
- 1981 *Works on Paper*, City Hall Baltimore, Maryland, USA.
Works on Paper, The Golden Fine Art Gallery, Washington DC, USA.
Works on Paper, Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.
Works on Paper, Kanagawa Prefectural Museum, Yokohama, Japan.
Art/Drawing Exhibition, Hiratsuka Museum, Hiratsuka, Japan.
- 1982 ASEAN Show of Paintings and Photographs, Singapore, Manila, Bangkok and Jakarta.
- 1985 *12 Malaysian Artists*, Museum of History, Taipei, Taiwan.
- 1988 *Contemporary Malaysian Art Exhibition*, Pasadena Asian Art Museum, California.
- 1991 Istiqlal Festival, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- 1993 Australian Triennial, Brisbane National Art Gallery, Queensland, Australia.
Contemporary Islamic Art, Royal Holiday Inn Crown Plaza, Singapore.
- 1995 *Opening Ceremony*, National Art Museum, Singapore.
Istiqlal Festival 2, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- 1997 *ASEAN Masterworks*, Mines Resort City, and the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1999 *Rupa Malaysia*, Brunei House, London.
- 2006 Singapore Biennial, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore.

PUBLICATIONS: SEMINAR PAPERS/ARTICLES – FACULTY LEVEL

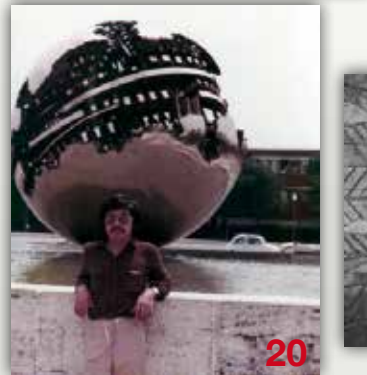
- 1977 “*Penyelarasan Terhadap Pengambilan Penuntut-penuntut Pra-Diploma KSSR*” bersama Susan Chong dan Zainal Rahman untuk seminar KSSR.
- 1982 “*Syor Terhadap Penubuhan Akademi Yang Dinamis*”, kertas kerja disediakan untuk KSSR.
- 1985 “*Perseragaman Sistem Akademik di KSSR*”, kertas kerja untuk KSSR.
- 1991 “*Cabaran Seniman Islam Masakini*”, ceramah untuk KELURI KSSR.
- 1994 “*Educating Artistic Vision*”, induction Course for faculty members at KSSR.

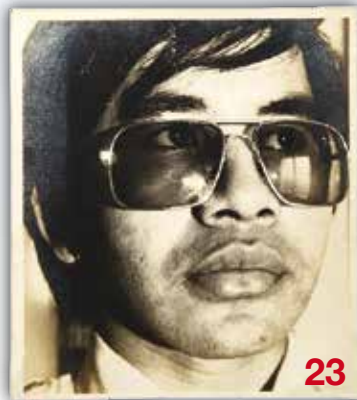
NATIONAL LEVEL

- 1972 *"Bakat Muda Sezaman"*, ceramah anjuran Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1974 *"Mystical Reality"* (bersama Redza Piyadasa) satu manifestasi dua seni di Malaysia, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1978 *"Form in Space"*, ceramah anjuran Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
"Mass in Art", ceramah anjuran Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
"Pertandingan Seni Lukis Kanak-kanak" anjuran Berita Harian.
- 1985 *"Sudut Seni"* (bersama Raja Zahabuddin Raja Yaacob), skrip untuk TV Malaysia Rangkaian Satu.
- 1991 *"Laporan Para Hakim Pertandingan Bakat Muda Sezaman"*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1992 *"An Islamic Identity in Contemporary Malaysian Art: Achievements and Challenges"*, exhibition catalogue for *Identiti Islam Dalam Senirupa Malaysia*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1993 *"The Reflowering of Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art"*, exhibition catalogue for *Manifestasi Jiwa Islam*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1994 *"From Traditional to Modern Malaysian Art: The Dialectics of Displacement and Re-Appropriation"*, exhibition catalogue for *Rupa dan Jiwa*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1997 *"Art and Spirituality: An Introduction"*, exhibition catalogue for *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1999 *"An Islamic Perspective on Figurative Presentation"* exhibition catalogue for *Aku: 99 Potret Diri*, Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur.
- 2000 *"Expressing the Inexpressible: The Development of two Decades of Malaysian Contemporary Islamic Art"*, exhibition catalogue for *Contemporary Islamic Art in Conjunction with Maal Hijrah 1421*, Gallery Shah Alam.
"Islamic Roots for the Malay Philosophy of Beauty", exhibition catalogue for *Insyirah: The Art of Sulaiman Esa*, Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur.
- 2001 *"Figurative Art in Islamic Perspective"*, Art Corridor Quarterly Magazine Issue 4.
- 2002 *"ASEAN Tradition, Contemporary Expressions"*, Art Corridor Quarterly Magazine Issue 5, January – March 2002.
"Expressing the Inexpressible", Art Corridor Issue 5, January – March 2002.

INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

- 1988 *"Contemporary Islamic Art in Malaysia"*, Pasadena Museum of Art, California, USA.
- 1991 *"Islam, Art and Cultural Identity: A Search for Transcendence in Modern Malaysian Art"*, International Conference of Arts in the Islamic World, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, UK.
- 1993 *"Zulkifli Yusof: Immunity 2"*, exhibition catalogue, Airspace Gallery, Sydney, Australia.
"The Qur'an and Its Impact on Islamic Art", Brisbane National Art Gallery, Queensland, Australia.
"Contemporary Writings on Islamic Aesthetics: Sufi and Western Perspectives", Canberra Art Gallery, Australia.
"Contemporary Modern Malaysian Art: Issues and Challenges", Canberra School of Art, Australia.
- 1995 *"Seni Islam Sezaman Malaysia: Perkembangan dan Cabaran"*, Simposium Festival Istiqlal 2, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- 1996 *"Islam, Art and Social Construction: The Development of Contemporary Malaysian Art"*, Ph.D Dissertation, Temple University, Philadelphia, USA.
- 1998 *"Contemporary Islamic Art in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges"*, RMIT Art Gallery, Melbourne, Australia, in conjunction with the A. Hancock Award.
- 2002 *"The Symbolic and Spiritual Significance of Mountain in Contemporary Malaysian Art"*, a keynote address for the International Conference on Culture, Science of Mountains, organised by UNESCO.





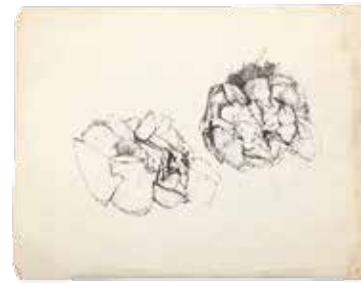
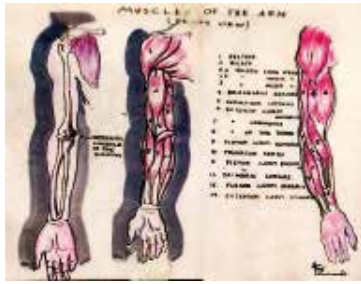
1. Sulaiman Esa's parents with their children. 2. Bukit Zahrah Primary School JB, Sulaiman stands at the back row third from left. 3. Sulaiman Esa at the age of 13. 4. With family, sisters, wife and mother. 5. With children—Fairuz, Suzy and Taufik (corner left)—at his apartment in Philadelphia. 6. In Mecca (1987). 7. With class-mates at Bukit Zahrah Primary School, Johor Bahru. 8. Studio Baltimore 9. At English College. Mr Lim Teck Siang seated on second left. 10. Second left - Professor Raines (Advisor), Dr. Gisela and Professor James Morris. 11. With lecturers at Hornsey College. 12. On his left - Professor Nasr, Professor Mahmoud Ayoub and Professor James Morris. 13. At the opening of *Islamic Art Show* by S.H. Nasr at the National Art Gallery (1993). 14. *Insyirah* official opening by Professor Ungku Aziz at Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur (2001). 15. Stage design proposal for *The Birds*, at Experimental Theatre, University Malaya (1974). 16. While attending the First Asia Pacific Triennial in Australia, with David Williams (1993). 17. With Dato' Adib Adam, the late Nik Rashid, and an Australian cultural officer during the opening of *Ke Arah Tauhid* exhibition at the Australian Embassy, Kuala Lumpur (April, 1984). 18. UMNO Mural in progress at Putra World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur (1985). 19. Sulaiman at his studio apartment in Baltimore, USA. 20. In Rome (1975). 21. At Temple University with visiting Professor Arkoun from Soubourne University, France. 22. *Ke Arah Tauhid II* di Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. Bersama Profesor Ismail Faruqi (Ogos, 1974). 23. Sulaiman sewaktu 'Swinging Sixties' London. 24. Bersama Professor Anne-Marie Schimmel semasa lawatan beliau ke Kuala Lumpur pada awal 90-an. 25. Pembinaan Mashaf Al-Qur'an di bengkel di Bandung—bersama arkitek Ahmad Noeman (1994). 26. Di Academia De Roma, Rome, di penghujung Kursus Rekaan Pentas dan Kostum (May 1975). 27. Sulaiman sebagai Arnold Hancock Fellow explaining about his works to weavers at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, Melbourne. 28. Sulaiman (left, on guitar) with Tan Tong (centre) and his friend, and Long Thien Shih (right) at Rue Beanbough, Paris 3rd District (1967). 29. Foundation course studio in Hornsey, 1962 - 1967. 30. Group Exhibition at English College, Johor Bahru—Yahya Hassan on his left (1954). 31. Frank Sullivan (centre) trying a costume designed by Sulaiman, assisted by Khatijah (left) and Piyadasa (right). 32. With his Professors at the Printmaking Studio, Hornsey College. 33. With colleagues from Hornsey College. 34 & 35. Sulaiman at his studio in Hornsey. 36. Sulaiman beside *Man and His World (Manusia dan Alamnya)*. 37. Piyadasa burning one of his *May 13* series works. 38. With Redza Piyadasa and Siti Zainon Ismail during an exhibition at British Council, Kuala Lumpur. 39. With colleagues at the back garden of Hornsey College, London (1963). 40. Painting landscape in the backyard of his flat.

1. Ibumapa Sulaiman bersama anak-anak. 2. Sekolah Rendah Bukit Zahrah, Johor Bahru. Sulaiman berdiri ketiga dari kiri, di barisan belakang. 3. Sulaiman Esa pada usia 13 tahun. 4. Bersama keluarga, kakak-kakak, isteri dan ibu. 5. Bersama anak-anak—Fairuz, Suzy dan Taufik (sudut kiri)—di apartmen di Philadelphia. 6. Di Makkah (1987). 7. Sekolah Rendah Bukit Zahrah, Johor Bahru. 8. Studio Baltimore. 9. Di English College. Mr Lim Teck Siang duduk kedua dari kiri. 10. Kedua dari kiri: Profesor Raines (Penasihat), Dr. Gisela dan Prof James Morris. 11. Bersama para pensyarah sewaktu di Hornsey College. 12. Di sebelah kiri beliau Profesor Nasr, Profesor Mahmoud Ayoub dan Profesor James Morris. 13. Sewaktu pelancaran *Pameran Seni Islam* oleh S. H. Nasr di Balai Seni Lukis Negara (1993). 14. Pembukaan rasmi pameran *Insyirah* oleh Profesor Ungku Aziz di Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur (2001). 15. Proposal untuk rekaan pentas teater *The Birds* di Pentas Eksperimental, Universiti Malaya (1974). 16. In Australia while attending the First Asia Pacific Triennial with David Williams on left (1993). 17. Bersama Dato' Adib Adam, Almarhum Nik Rashid, dan pegawai kebudayaan Australia sewaktu pembukaan pameran *Ke Arah Tauhid* di Kedutaan Australia, Kuala Lumpur (April, 1984). 18. Mural UMNO dalam pembinaan di Putra World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur. (1985). 19. Sulaiman di studio apartmen beliau di Baltimore, Amerika Syarikat. 20. Sewaktu di Rome (1975). 21. Profesor Arkoun dari Soubourne University, Perancis sewaktu lawatan beliau ke Temple University. 22. *Ke Arah Tauhid II* di Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. Bersama Profesor Ismail Faruqi (Ogos, 1974). 23. Sulaiman sewaktu 'Swinging Sixties' London. 24. Bersama Professor Anne-Marie Schimmel semasa lawatan beliau ke Kuala Lumpur pada awal 90-an. 25. Pembinaan Mashaf Al-Qur'an di bengkel di Bandung—bersama arkitek Ahmad Noeman (1994). 26. Di Academia De Roma, Rome, di penghujung Kursus Rekaan Pentas dan Kostum (May 1975). 27. Sulaiman sebagai Arnold Hancock Fellow menerangkan tentang karya-karya beliau kepada para penganyam di Victorian Tapestry Workshop, Melbourne. 28. Sulaiman (kiri, bermain gitar) bersama Tan Tong (tengah) dan kawannya, serta Long Thien Shih (kanan) di Rue Beanbough, Paris 3rd District (1967). 29. Studio kursus Dasar (Foundation) di Hornsey, 1962 - 1967. 30. Pameran berkumpulan di English College, Johor Bahru—Yahya Hassan di kiri beliau (1954). 31. Frank Sullivan (tengah) sedang mencuba kostum rekaan Sulaiman, dibantu Khatijah (kiri) dan Piyadasa (kanan). 32. Bersama beberapa Profesor beliau di Studio Senicetak, Hornsey College. 33. Bersama kawan-kawan dari Hornsey College. 34 & 35. Sulaiman di studio beliau di Hornsey. 36. Sulaiman di samping karya *Manusia dan Alamnya*. 37. Piyadasa membakar salah satu karya dari siri *13 Mei* beliau. 38. Di sebuah pameran di British Council, Kuala Lumpur bersama Redza Piyadasa dan Siti Zainon Ismail. 39. Bersama rakan-rakan di halaman belakang Hornsey College, London (1963). 40. Melukis landscape di halaman belakang pangsapuri beliau.

KARYA ARTWORKS

SENARAI KARYA DALAM PAMERAN

LIST OF ARTWORKS IN EXHIBITION







Padi Field
Watercolour 50 x 44 cm 1956



Malay House
Watercolour 44 x 49.5 cm 1956



Istana Garden I
Gouache 43.5 x 54 cm 1961



Istana Garden II
Watercolour 50 x 58 cm 1961



Istana Garden III
Watercolour 54 x 68 cm 1961



View of Ayer Molek I
Gouache 49 x 62 cm 1961



View of Ayer Molek II
Gouache 54 x 64 cm 1961



Government Building I
Gouache 55 x 42 cm 1961



Government Building II
Gouache 48.5 x 54 cm 1961



Wet Market in JB I
Watercolour 40 x 45 cm 1960



Wet Market in JB II
Gouache 52 x 55 cm 1961



Stulang Laut Fishing Village
Watercolour 52.5 x 45 cm 1961



3 Red Apples
Watercolour 58 x 51 cm 1961



Japanese Garden, JB
Gouache 52.5 x 44 cm 1961



Landscape Study
Gouache 55 x 43 cm 1961



Istana Besar
Gouache 52.5 x 45 cm 1961



Self Portrait
Gouache 49 x 81 cm 1961



Japanese Garden II
Oil paint 53.5 x 61 cm 1961



Malay House II
Oil paint 99 x 73 cm



After Monet I
Gouache 46 x 50 cm 1960



After Monet II
Gouache 40 x 46 cm 1960



After Monet III
Gouache 43 x 57 cm 1961



After Monet IV
Gouache 57 x 54 cm 1961



After Monet V
Gouache 46 x 42 cm 1961



After Van Gogh I
Gouache 54 x 71 cm 1961



After Van Gogh II
Oil paint 59 x 74 cm 1961



After Van Gogh III
Oil paint 47 x 59 cm 1961



After Van Gogh IV
Oil paint 53 x 57 cm 1961



After Manet I
Gouache 60 x 75 cm 1961



After Manet II
Gouache 47 x 60 cm 1961



After Manet III
Oil paint 56 x 78 cm 1961



After Manet IV
Gouache 71 x 52.5 cm 1961



After Manet VI
Oil paint 46 x 60 cm 1961



Henry Moore I
Gouache 51 x 65 cm 1961



After Cezanne III
Gouache 51 x 71 cm 1961



After Cezanne V
Gouache 52 x 71.5 cm 1961



After Degas
Gouache 42 x 66.5 cm 1961



Portrait of a French Gentleman
Gouache 47 x 60 cm 1961



After Renoir
Gouache 42.5 x 53.5 cm 1960



After Toulouse Lautrec
Gouache 45 x 52 cm 1961



Police Constable
Oil paint 47.5 x 67.5 cm 1961



After Van Gogh V
Gouache 51.5 x 57.5 cm 1961



After Van Gogh VI
Gouache 43.5 x 54 cm 1961



Chinese Temple
Watercolour 59 x 43.5 cm 1961



Celebration
Gouache 50.5 x 61 cm 1961



After Monet VI
Gouache 50 x 45 cm 1961



After Van Gogh VII
Gouache 65 x 54 cm 1961



Snowscape
Oil paint 57 x 67 cm 1963



Hamstead Heath
Oil paint 38.5 x 38.5 cm 1964



Untitled I
Mixed media on paper 54 x 48 cm 1966



Untitled II
Mixed media on paper 54 x 48 cm 1966



Self Portrait
Mixed media on paper 47.5 x 59.5 cm 1965



Plant Form I
Etching 60 x 87 cm 1967



Plant Form II
Etching 61 x 87 cm 1967



Plant Form III
Etching 61 x 88 cm 1967



Study in Grey
Etching 47 x 59 cm 1965



Flight 3
Etching 51 x 60 cm 1967



Flight 4
Etching 50 x 58 cm 1967



Flight 4A
Etching 63 x 67.5 cm 1967



Still Life B/W
Etching 37 x 62 cm 1967



Untitled
Etching 41 x 51.5 cm 1967



Two Figures
Etching 51 x 70 cm 1967



Mother/Child
Etching 53.5 x 42.2 cm 1967



Waiting for Godot
Etching 46 x 79 cm 1977



Between the Horns of Dilemma
Etching 49 x 67 cm 1977



Unholy Print II
Etching 51 x 86 cm 1977



Harapan
Etching 42 x 72 cm 1977



Harapan I
Etching 76.5 x 45.5 cm 1977



Waiting For Godot IV
Etching 79 x 44 cm 1977



Meditation I
Mixed media 217.5 x 80 cm 2010
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)



Meditation II
Mixed media 217.5 x 80 cm 2010
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)



Meditation III
Mixed media 217.5 x 80 cm 2010
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)



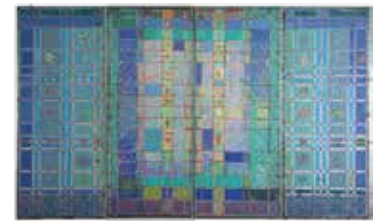
Magrib
Mixed media 170 x 304 cm 2010
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)



Nusantara I
Acrylic 165.5 x 96.5 cm 1982-2000



Nusantara II
Mixed media 158 x 82 cm 1982-2000



Garden of Certitude III
Mixed media 181 x 298.5 cm
1995-2000



Garden of Mystery IV
Mixed media 201 x 193.5 cm 1995



Alam dan Alamat III
Mixed media 85 x 190 cm 2000



Alam dan Alamat IV
Mixed media 79.5 x 194.5 cm 2000



Last Supper I
Acrylic 65 x 50 cm 1998



Beauty in Diversity I
Mixed media 287.5 x 273.5 cm 2000



Beauty in Diversity III
Mixed media 153 x 153 cm 2000



*Convergence Celebrate
Divergence Respect*
Mixed media 157 x 157 cm 2000



Surah Al-Tin
Digital Print 50 x 31 cm 2000



Last Supper V
Mixed media 45 x 60 cm 2000



DOA
Mixed media 129 x 96 cm 1999
Koleksi Galeri Petronas



The Garden of Bliss
Mixed media 307 x 730 cm 2011



Endangered Garden II
Mixed media 232 x 357cm 2011



Study for UMNO Mural
Acrylic 61 x 463 cm 1984



Primitive Others
Mixed media Dimensions variable 2011



Sulaiman Esa dan Fairuz Sulaiman
Panopticon
Video installation
274 x 731.5 x 731.5 cm 2011



Tree of Life I
Mixed media 190 x 72.5 cm 2011
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)



Tree of Life II
Mixed media 209 x 82.5 cm 2011
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)



The Garden of Bliss II
Mixed media 203.5 x 91.5 cm 2011



The Garden of Bliss III
Mixed media 191.5 x 93.5 cm 2011



The Garden of Bliss IV
Mixed media 202.5 x 91 cm 2011



Endangered Garden I
Mixed media 184 x 413 cm 2011



Celebrating Diversity
Mixed media 261 x 455 cm 2011



Imperial Ambitions
Mixed media 230.5 x 380.5 cm 2011



Garden of Mystery
Mixed media 153 x 214 cm 2010



Used tins of paint, palette and paint brushes found at the ITM School of Art and Design
Ready mades Dimensions variable 1974



Potted plant watered and looked after by the two artists over a period of seven months
Ready mades Dimensions variable 1974



Discarded raincoat found at Klang rubbish dump at 4.23 p.m on Sunday 13th January 1974 that must have belonged to some one
Ready mades Dimensions variable 1974



Randomly collected sample of human hair collected from a barber shop in Petaling Jaya
Ready mades Dimensions variable 1974



Empty chair on which many persons have sat on
Ready mades Dimensions variable 1974



Two half-drunk Coca-Cola bottles
Ready mades Dimensions variable 1974



Discarded silk-screen which was used to produced many beautiful prints
Ready mades 1974



Burnt-out mosquito coils used to keep away mosquitoes on the night of 25th March 1974
Ready mades Dimensions variable 1974



An outlined area occupied by the shadow of the poet Usman Awang made at 4.05 pm on Sunday 8th December 1973
Charcoal on canvas 91.8 x 91.8 cm 1973



Compression 3
Acrylic & dye 142 x 82 cm 1971
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara
National Permanent Collection



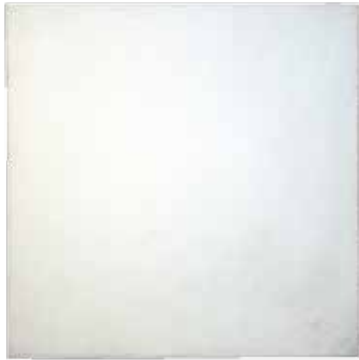
Pergerakan Biru
Acrylic & dye 82 x 143 cm 1971
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara
National Permanent Collection



Man and His World
Mixed media 164 x 247 cm 1973
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara
National Permanent Collection



Empty Bird-cage
Ready mades 50 x 40 x 40 cm 1974
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara
National Permanent Collection



Empty Canvas
Canvas 101.6 x 103 cm 1974
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara
National Permanent Collection



Waiting for Godot 1
Etching 76 x 62 cm 1977
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara
National Permanent Collection



Ke Arah Tauhid
Mixed media 161 x 230 cm 1983
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara
National Permanent Collection



Nurani
Acrylic on canvas 150 x 150 cm 1983
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara
National Permanent Collection



Garden of Mystery VI
Mixed media 216 x 157 cm 1992
Koleksi Himpunan Tetap Negara
National Permanent Collection



Kebengongan
Mixed media 79.5 x 84.5 cm 1998



Vietnam War I
Mixed media 86.5 x 105 cm 1972



Scroll No. 6
Acrylic 117 x 232 cm 1971



Dance of the Cosmos
Mixed media 90 x 58.5 cm 2002



Dance of the Cosmos
Mixed media 78 x 61.5 cm 2002



Movements in Blue
Acrylic 147.5 x 81.5 cm 2011
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)



Movements in Pink
Acrylic 122 x 167.5 cm 2011
(Dibina semula/Reconstructed)

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