



IMAGINING IDENTITIES

NARRATIVES IN MALAYSIAN ART

VOLUME

1

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Love Me in My Batik

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"BATEK is on the move groove with a splash of colour and a dash of patriotism"

*Good grief, as Charlie Brown would say – what's this present craze on batek? They've even dared cover Venus de Milo with the colourful drapes?*¹

So reads *The Sunday Mail* 1968 headline and article suspended in the arms of a languidly voluptuous, self-assured, batik-draped, seductive, Malaysian-esque Venus collaged into Joseph Tan's iconic painting *Love Me in My Batik* (1968) [46]. Who is being seduced and commanded to "love me in my batik"? What understanding is Joseph Tan alluding to with this work? What statement is he making about batik and its relationship with art history, popular culture, patriotism, the body and who are "They"?

Love Me in My Batik asks us to examine the role of batik, as both medium and subject, in Malaysian society and Malaysian art. To chart batik in Malaysian art disrobes nationalist cultural constructs, be these ideological or sentimental. The medium, and its depiction, speak of large agendas and forceful imaginings through a crafty language of significations. Parallel to the story of Malaysia runs the story of our batik art.² No other medium in Malaysian art carries this same agency, burden, or magic.

The origins of the batik medium are unknown and shared by cultures in Southeast Asia, China, Japan, the Indian Subcontinent, the Middle East and Africa. Throughout Southeast Asia, from mainland mountainous inland cultures to Southeast Asia's Nusantara island coastal populations,³ batik was most commonly manifested as the untailored sheath known as the sarong or *kain panjang* in the Nusantara archipelago,⁴ "a common mode of dress and cultural capital whose worth lay in the fact that it was the lingua franca to all".⁵ These batik fabrics were worn by both genders and at all levels of society for daily wear, as work clothes, for special occasions such as weddings and funerals and for high court functions. The batik cloth contains a plethora of meanings describing social status and personal details. Initially largely imported from Java and Sumatra, batik has been produced on the Malay Peninsula, mainly along the East Coast, for about a century.

Wang Zineng in his thesis on the genesis of Malayan batik as fine art and its patronage states: "a fuller consideration of how an art form emerges as modern art medium necessitates us to examine not just how it is produced, but also how it is displayed and received in social context. Cultural discourse in 1950s and 60s Malaya was dominated by the idea of Malayanisation, devised and pursued by the colonial ruling elite in the late colonial period in Malaya. Malayanisation was a broad cultural policy characterised by efforts and activities to establish a hegemonic vision of the "Malayan" in all aspects of cultural life."⁶

Frank Sullivan, with the palpable glee of someone who has discovered the answer, questions, "Is there a Malayan School of Art?" in the 1968 *Batik* catalogue published by Chuah Thean Teng's Yahong Gallery.⁷ When Chuah Thean Teng, a migrant to Penang from China, pioneered the use of batik as a fine art medium in those heady pre-Independence 50s, he was celebrated and enthusiastically promoted by the "Anglophile patronage class" – "Batik painting, with its apparent fusion of the indigenous cloth-making tradition of batik and Western painting techniques, was put forward as a key Malayan artistic expression."⁸

Teng trained briefly at the Amoy Institute of Art in China in the early 1920s. He was versed in Chinese and Western painting styles, and an accomplished printmaker in his early career. In 1945 he went into the business of making commercial batik sarong, but then began experimenting with the medium in his art-making. He started to draw portraits and pictorial scenes in the compositional style of Western paintings with the molten wax. Rather than use blocks of colour in segmented cells to fill in waxed patterning on the sarong cloth, as is common practice, he started to play with batik dyes, applying many layers of overlaying colours achieving painterly effects. He then took the radical step of framing his batik cloth and hanging it on the wall.

Teng provided a prolific and comprehensive pantomime of histrionics and iconography through his batik paintings, a post-war and then post-colonial, early-days-of-nationhood visualisation. His batik works are full of romantic idealism. The recurring, carefully choreographed, batik sarong-clad, large-breasted, motherly women can be read as metaphors of his new homeland: fertile, caring, industrious and generous. The sociological landscape is aestheticised to the point of mythification in his paintings, yet these pictures are seemingly humble in their content.

His paintings show the shapes and chores of daily life. We see scenes of industry in *Penang Waterfront* (1952), buzzing with activity [19]. Each character is singularly absorbed in the task at hand, culminating as a whole in a collective driven movement and agenda. Every surface is detailed and busy with the intrinsic batik veins pulsating with static energy. The apparently earnest iconographic language, the amnesia of negatives, the memory of cultural artifact, feed a construction of a sense of wanting to belong, in an aesthetic decorative style and language that was "fusing the old with the new" as he was promoting, in his own words, "the national art of Malaya".⁹

The cultural continuity that Chuah Thean Teng propagated by using the medium of batik in his art essentially "created" a tradition, helping to provide a sense of shared history as a basis for imagining the future of a new country. In the reciprocity between artist, patron and the growing sense of nationhood that came with the formation of a new country "Malaysia" in 1963, Teng, through his art, gave a visualisation of nostalgia thus providing a grounding or language on which state propaganda could develop ideologies associated to nation-building. Teng's images helped invent an oxymoronic nostalgic future, an "origin" for a new singular hybrid Malaysian identity.

Although his early works appear to have been influenced by the traditional subjects and compositional styles of established Nanyang artists, Teng further developed a localised modernist form and design aesthetic that was characterised by pastoral idylls, blinkered from any contrariness or conflict with the modern world; his pictorial world is characterised by the reduction of subjects to core shapes and referential cultural patterning. *Menanam Padi* (1963) is typical of Teng's optimism [31]. The pictorial plane is broken into simplified, ordered shapes and forms and arranged rhythmically into a receding horizon. The image depicts women harvesting paddy, wearing conical hats common to ethnic groups in East and West Malaysia, with the effect of comfortably coralling the South China Sea into an inclusive submissive identity. At a time of massive socio-political changes, of re-imagining the national border, no sense of contradiction or collision with such complexities is in evidence.¹⁰

In contrast, *Welcome* (1967) presents us with a very bold, very rude hand gesture rendered in poster-type graphics. Rumour has it this was made in response to a hand gesture presented to Richard Nixon by Malaysian

crowds when he visited the Southeast Asia region in April of 1967.¹¹ The meanings behind this unusual batik painting are uncertain but it surely refers to the Vietnam War, with the "red plague" of communism perhaps represented by a prominent red sun. It is unclear whether the figures in the background, with their arms raised in dance-like formations, are celebrating or protesting. The poster-like tone of the painting, however, is clearly one of socio-political consciousness. These kinds of politically-emboldened art works, in any medium, were rare at the time.

Teng's popularity and success as an artist, strengthened by institutional patronage, contributed to a batik renaissance. Singaporean artist Seah Kim Joo made several large batik murals for public spaces in Singapore such as the phantasmagorical narrative *Malayan Life* (1968). Batik art thus began to document umbrella solidarities from multiple vantage points.

Among the batik art pioneers was Tay Mo Leong from Penang. Tay was unique in his handling of batik crackle.¹² Rather than render batik crackle as registering texture only, he used its mark-marking qualities as image. In his early works *Rubber Estate* (1961) and *Rubber Tapper* (1964), emotive, abstract, suggestive qualities take form, bristling with energy [28].

Khalil Ibrahim from Kelantan was trained as a painter at St Martins School of Art in London. His approach towards batik was less sentimental, focusing on the handling and physicality of wax and dyes. His early works are studies of hue, tone and colour temperature made with assembled batik collage. He is, however, best known for his analogous figurative studies, accentuating and exposing the positive negative qualities of batik, such as the *Colour/Form series* (1970-1980).

Grace Selvanayagam, who was part of the influential Wednesday Art Group (WAG) and an art teacher at the Specialist Teachers' Training Institute in Cheras, Kuala Lumpur, employed batik simply as an available medium, using its qualities to accentuate shape and patterning in cool non-narrative modernist abstracts in the 60s. The WAG was unique at the time as it had a multi-cultural personality. It was concerned with art education in general terms, and was less sentimental or political than other groups in its worldview.

Another WAG member, Cheong Laitong, won a government-initiated mural competition for the main façade of the new National Museum in

1962, with a design inspired by the graphic propensities of batik art [34]. The two 115' murals decorating either side of the museum front entrance were made using Italian glass mosaic and were completed in time for the proclamation of Malaysia in 1963.²³ The mural on the right depicts significant episodes in Malaysia's history such as early maritime trade, the Malacca Sultanate and the Independence of Malaya. The mural on the left depicts various traditional cultural activities and crafts including the batik sarong-making industry.²⁴ The murals signify the "museumification" of batik, with batik becoming "profoundly political" within the practices of nation building.²⁵ The batik-inspired murals also demonstrate and phrase an early example of official Malaysian national collective identification.

Batik simultaneously became part of the wider cultural landscape and its industries, in the form of batik artefacts and souvenirs made for the tourist market, becoming essentially an exportable branding exercise for "Malaysia" from the 60s onwards.²⁶ Often these were mass-produced reproductions of the batik art of the time. Special commemorative batik designs were created for a diverse range of occasions, from man's first landing on the moon to the inauguration of Malaysia Airlines System. Batik was commercially produced by the yard depicting the national pastime of badminton.²⁷ In the same year Joseph Tan created his collaged painting *Love Me In My Batik* (1968), all Information and Broadcast Ministry staff throughout Malaysia were encouraged to feature batik in their office wear each Saturday to support the local batik fashion industry. Khalid Ibrahim painted *The Last Supper* in his loose sketchy batik style in 1970. By Christmas mass in 1971 parish priest Father M. Pakiam at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Ipoh had decided the Church would welcome the aspirations of Malaysians eager for a new identity by wearing batik vestments along with the altar boys.²⁸ Batik art-inspired graphics were being designed into greeting cards for every occasion. Batik had entered the sentimental realm of kitsch.

Milan Kundera in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* writes about kitsch as a language of propaganda made possible through sentimental consensus. "When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object... The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitudes can share. Kitsch may not, therefore, depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories..." He goes on to write "political movements rest not so much on rational attitudes as on the fantasies, images, words and archetypes that come

together to make up this or that political kitsch."²⁹ Batik was becoming a type of "political kitsch" in Malaysia. *Love Me In My Batik*. Because batik and batik art had been simultaneously embraced by popular culture, and promoted and endorsed by the state administration to encourage a homogeneous vision within a highly pluralistic society, batik became a kind of unifying, collectively sentimental "kitsch" visual language of state; it inter-subjectively allowed the machinations of propaganda to construct nationalistic narratives within the dominant cultural discourse of this new country. Batik provided a kind of comfortable Malaysian skin, a fabricated embodying of the corporeal flag, camouflaging differences into the landscape to collectively represent the Malaysian body, "*BATEK is on the move groove with a splash of colour and a dash of patriotism*".

However, art that was perceived to have a strong nationalistic agenda, such as much batik art, did have its opponents. *Good grief, as Charlie Brown would say – what's this present craze on batek?* Redza Piyadasa, a conceptually-driven young artist, spearheaded an exhibition in 1969 titled *The New Scene*, hosted by Gallery 11 in Kuala Lumpur, complete with a two-page manifesto written by collaborator Tan Teong Kooi, published as an accompanying exhibition brochure. The New Scene artists argued for the importance of analytical attitudes and of knowing the history and geography of sites as markers to what was "new" (or perhaps what could be described as "avant-garde").³⁰ They wanted "to consider the relationship between the international and the local [art world] along open or mobile trajectories."³¹ The brochure questions "the notoriously popular idea that the first responsibility of the artist is towards creating a national image."³² "Such an image is diagnosed as necessarily fabricated from a sterile notion of authenticity which was regressive and deprecating. Indeed, the artists go further to warn that if this quest is pursued or insisted upon, then the only outcome was a debased form of orientalism."³³ The text concludes with a nod to the rival expressionist and abstract expressionist painters of the 1967 GRUP exhibition that have "done much to cause art in Malaysia to swing away from the standardised and repetitive commercial formulae of batik painting and village scenes."³⁴ The New Scene artists seemed to be questioning nationalistic agendas and the sentimental use of the traditional, without reinvention, as an impediment to developing critical positions within Malaysian art.

There was a conscious shift in subject matter depicted in Malaysian batik art, along with all other arts forms, with the seismic awakening and

assertion of post-colonial Malay-ness following the race riots of 1969. Mahathir Mohamad published *The Malay Dilemma* in 1970, the New Economic Policy was implemented in 1971 and in the same year the National Culture Congress was held, resulting in a National Cultural Policy (NCP). This policy asserted a hegemonic ethno-nationalist Malay and Islamic focus, co-opting artists into its agenda. The NCP defined goals for cultural pursuits with the aim of creating a national and common culture for purposes of identity formation within nation-building, and to install the status of Malay culture and Islam as core foundations of nationalist constructions.

Ideologies championed within this policy were not new and were already featured in cultural discourses during the closing years of the colonial period. The influential literary circles of Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (ASAS 50), established in 1950 and initially based in Singapore, had questioned the direction of Malay language literature. Writers linked to *Utusan Melayu*, such as Asraf Haji Wahab, Kamaluddin Muhammad (Keris Mas) and Usman Awang dominated, with a philosophy summed up in their slogan "*Seni untuk Masyarakat*", "Art for Society", "propounding the themes of societal awareness, politics and culture with the aim of revitalising the spirit of freedom, the spirit of independence of a people (*bangsa*) of its own unique sense of honour and identity, upholding justice and combating oppression."²⁶ Meanwhile, a splinter group led by writers such as Hamzah Hussein, Rosmera and Abdul Ghani Hamid pursued a philosophy of "*Seni untuk seni*", "Art for Art's Sake" which was "characterised by a plot style known as *nasa*, a construction of emotional ideas. Here realism was a kind of expressionism in which 'literature is the picture of the thoughts of a generation', reproductive of the self-development of the individual, rather than society."²⁷ "Hamzah found it preposterous that arts should be compromised in the name of the people or, worse, for the pretense of nation-building."²⁸ The artist group Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung, APS (formed in 1956 by the painter Hoessein Enas, and initially named *Majlis Kesenian Melayu*), closely associated with ASAS 50, also pursued an agenda to promote and uplift traditional Malay characteristics in the arts as the basis of a national arts identity.

The effect of the NCP was to cement relationships between politics, culture and religion with a heavy emphasis on the "*Ketuanan*" of the Malay in all aspects of Malaysian society. The artist's role had been defined and it became their responsibility to serve and enrich the officially sanctioned

agenda with a commitment to "*kerajaan* (government), *umat* (Islamic body) and *bangsa* (Malay race)".²⁹ Many artists became inspired to re-look traditional art forms and artefacts, such as batik and its motifs, as points of departure for contemporary readings and use. Malay-Islamic revivalism dominated the intellectual and artistic manifestations of the 1970s and 80s with the implementation of the NCP and through cultural education programs championed by Institut Teknologi MARA's new School of Art and Design (founded in 1967). Traditional motifs and the incorporeal worldview of Malay culture, traditions, and artefacts were given much thought and study within the new policy's framework. A landmark exhibition hosted by University Malaya in 1979 titled *Rupa dan Jiwa*, curated by the artist Syed Ahmad Jamal, presented for the first time an index of Malay artefacts and visual arts. This provided a catalyst for latticing design aesthetics, motifs and commentary attesting to the distinctive cultural legacies of the Malays. The urgency in this post-colonial society was to reclaim, reaffirm and to redefine Malay cultural identity. "In the wake of nationalism, one of the demands was to re-evaluate the continued propagation and proliferation of European values; it was associated to many things: from poverty and inequality to enslavement and exploitation to the resulting isolation and estrangement from tradition and culture. Without an anchor, the colonized felt lost and faceless and yearned to root themselves again in their pure and romantic past. To reclaim that past was also to re-affirm their own dignity, pride and identity. Tradition provided the inspiration."³⁰

Ismail Zain, the first local Director of the National Art Gallery (1972-1975), advocated that the subject of traditional Malay arts, crafts and culture should be re-approached in conversation with post-colonial contemporary commentary, avoiding the sentimental use of the traditional for tradition's sake without criticality. This would ensure the relevance of a continued dialogue with the traditional in contemporary art beyond the comfort (and, perhaps, laziness) of historicism and ethnocentric exotica. As his friend Krishen Jit wrote in his retrospective catalogue, Ismail cautioned all to be wary of "the narrative gaze trained at 'primitive' art objects (which) reduce them to pieces of exotica that are ripe for acts of artistic imperialism...", and warned against "the dangers of religious and political chauvinism that were beginning to dominate popular and critical artistic discourse... Ismail believed artistic thought should be free of enclosures whether erected by politics, religion or egocentric gestures."³¹

Ismail Zain in his own artistic practice rejected the nationalistic framework as both restrictive and contrived while exploring issues and elements of Malay culture. He often used symbols of tradition as a strategic language for contemporary commentary, exploring patterning derived from Malay artefacts such as traditional textiles and woven crafts in a structuralist manner to recontextualise them into ontological observations. In 1972, he began experimenting with commercially-purchased woven placemats and converting them into stencils and chops (in reference to the batik chop) for use in his paintings. *Ku Bunuh Cintaku* (1972) was made as a response to a poem by Anis Sabirin [54]. Here, patterns derived from these commercial mats create the overall look of *songket* cloth. The tone of the painting feels ominous, with dark horizontal bands scrupulously blocking, crossing out, distancing and defamiliarising the background patterning. The transference of the woven placemat patterns into stencils and chops puts human contact with the work at one remove, contributing to its cold detachment while retaining the memory of a familiar surface. His assistant in making these experiments and chops at the Kutang Kraft batik studio was the young graduate Fatimah Chik.

Fatimah Chik's career path and her engagement with batik as an artist can be read as emblematic of the reassertion of Malay confidence in the arts resulting from the NCP, signifying a fascinating confluence of social and cultural forces in the 1970s, in the fields of art education, architecture, fashion, intellectual thought and criticism. The influence of Islamic design and regional textile traditions in her batik art reflects a general shift away from the early post-colonial modernist approaches of the 1960s.

She was one of the inaugural batch of students at Institut Teknologi MARA's School of Art and Design in 1968, graduating in 1971. In the art and design course, a broad range of subjects including architecture, fashion and batik art was taught. Her grandfather had been a traditional builder in Johor and her mother a seamstress. She was drawn to batik chop (as opposed to the more painterly *batik tulis* techniques popularly used in batik painting),³² as well as ideas introduced by her architecture lecturer Hijjas Kasturi.³³ She developed an early interest in integrating concepts derived from architectural principles, patterning, alignment and registration with batik chop techniques and constructed fabric.

Fatimah married Redza Piyadasa (a lecturer at MARA at the time) in 1972 and began work at Kutang Kraft for batik fashion designer Tengku

Zubeidah, assisting on batik pieces for a fashion show at University Malaya and a boutique in London.³⁴ Through Piyadasa, she met many of the most prominent Malaysian artists, but was yet to think of herself as an artist. In 1975, she followed Piyadasa to Hawaii, and here she discovered, via books, a world of rich textile traditions and motifs from the Nusantara region. Following a period of self-initiated research, she began to design batik chops influenced by Nusantara forms in tandem with the interests formed during her time at MARA.

In 1981, Piyadasa opined that "When batik painting was first introduced into the local art scene, it was hailed in some quarters as Malaya's unique artistic contribution to the world. The claim, in retrospect, can only be described as naïve. Batik painting remains a craft involvement displaying hackneyed mannerisms and lacking in any underlying sophistication in terms of a distinct and regenerative aesthetic.... The underlying aesthetic governing the artists' intentions again seems to have come from easel painting. Batik painters in this country have yet to propose an approach that will exploit the inherent physicality of the process and thereby establish a viable enrichment of the commitment. As it is, the hackneyed manner of making pictures seldom, if at all, approximates an understanding of the complexities of idiom. The possibilities of scale, for instance, have not been realised. Preoccupations with picture-making concerns persist and the renderings of colourful rural scenes must account for the popularity of batik paintings among the tourists."³⁵

The views of Piyadasa and the art of their close colleagues – the structuralist paintings of Ismail Zain and Syed Ahmad Jamal's large *songket* wall hangings – must have had an influence on Fatimah Chik. In 1982, Fatimah exhibited her large-scale batik chop works for the first time. Her *Nusantara Series* produced through the 1980s can be read as encapsulating Malay cultural ethos and state-sanctioned principles for Malaysian art following the NCP [80]. Syed Shaharuddin Syed Bakari had also begun to produce batik works which incorporate traditional motifs with Islamic aesthetics such as *Kain Merah, Biru, Hijau* (1982) [79]. Fatimah's works display a complex gestalt, cross-referencing between regional textile traditions and architectural influences, grounded by a geometric aesthetic expressing Islamic precepts. However, the series is unusual as it also stretches beyond the immediate Malaysian cultural landscape to concede a regional fraternity and shared heritage, an acknowledgement of Nusantara influence. Fatimah Chik's idiom celebrates constructed notions of tradition

and identity, exhibiting a self-consciousness that is both a search for and a construction of place while at the same time relishing and embracing wider textile vernaculars.

Hashim Hassan's paintings also promote a regional cultural ethos, making commentary on issues such as globalisation and neo-colonialism by embedding batik iconography with elements outside of the Nusantara lexicon. Hashim Hassan appropriated the central segment of the batik sarong, called the *badan* (body), meticulously transferring its design aesthetic onto canvas using acrylic paint. By using the aesthetic of the sarong, a common item of clothing, Hashim uses batik as a mnemonic device to gather affinity within the region, to imply intimacy and shared cognition, "the basic images people have engraved in their memories". In *Pencereboh* (1987) we witness a confrontation between two painted batik-styled, mythical phoenixes [88]. Feathers are ruffled. We see a white dove, a Western icon of peace, and find, hidden in the background patterning, two tiny telecommunications satellites. There is a sense of dilemma, of battling ideologies in a contemporary world. The batik represented here takes on a loaded tone of indigenous righteousness, of ethnicity becoming an internalised boundary that is attempting to rationalise its place in modernity whilst clinging to notions of identity bound to concepts of tradition and place.

Mastura Abdul Rahman's batik-lined *Interior Series* reinforces this internalised domain. We enter its collaged paintings from an extreme height, afforded a bird's eye view of timeless domestic interiors of Malay homes/homeland. No figures are depicted but there is a powerful sense of humanity in these settings. They are evocative depictions of Malay identity with no separation between cognitive, spiritual and physical life. As described by Tengku Sabri Ibrahim, through "the conception of *zat Allah*, the Malays consciously produce their arts to portray the greatness of Allah, and to convey messages pertaining to their beliefs and social systems... the word 'order' or in Malay, *tertib*, can be understood as basic guidelines in which the artist's intentions, methodologies, disciplines, creativity and techniques are organised to achieve desired images or forms."³⁶ Mastura's paintings present this order with great delicacy, held together by culture as a pattern, anchored by deeply held spiritual beliefs, coloured by a quest for harmonious living, and decorated with an enveloping skin of floral batiked cloth. Mastura's images also act within a regional storytelling continuum, part of a textile tradition historically dominated by women which has through the

centuries helped to describe their worlds.³⁷ Historically, batik production has rarely been gender neutral in that it has always contained references to the female, even when made, worn and used by males. Throughout Southeast Asia, there has always been an intimate relationship between women, the textile arts, ritual and spirituality. Textile arts were considered "the work of women, the complex designs that symbolised genealogies, legends, and memories could be "read" in relation to individuals, families, and clan or tribal groupings. The role of textile motifs as markers in an indigenous record meant that female knowledge could incorporate not merely skill in execution but also a huge pool of cultural codes."³⁸ Mastura's *Interior Series* is sensitive to this contextual materiality and operates as a cross-indexing of cultural, spiritual, ethnic and gender specificity to describe a state of being [85].

On a more direct level, the art of batik master Ismail Mat Hussin from Kelantan draws from Malay traditional arts in both subject and medium, celebrating Malay traditional culture and lifestyle as a representation of Malay cultural identity. His rich figurative narratives from the end of the 70s depict performances of *makyung*, *wayang kulit*, and *main gasing*, as well as day-to-day rural activities like mending nets, pounding rice, and scraping coconut [86].

By the late 80s, batik in Malaysian art had settled into a widely understood, officially sanctioned lingua franca heavy with connotations of identity and place. Batik had become less valued for its qualities as a medium than for its qualities as language and as a corporeal flag in Malaysian art. Artists were now using batik, not just for its aesthetics or as a reference to local historical traditions necessarily, but for what it could represent about their contemporary times. Batik had become a kind of visual linguistic shortcut which could be used to make commentary about various concerns. Hashim Hassan's *Pencereboh* regionalises the issue of globalisation to Southeast Asia. Mastura's *Interior Series* speaks of a specifically Malay Islamic art that is sited within a Malay worldview. Ismail Mat Hussin centralises Malay cultural heritage as core to Malay identity.

Meanwhile Sarawak, with its own long-established textile traditions, exhibited a rich display of batik art during the landmark Sarawak State-Wide Art Competition 1988, organised in conjunction with Sarawak's 25th Independence Anniversary Celebrations (also the 25th anniversary of the formation of Malaysia). The competition, supported by the Sarawak

Museum and the Society Atelier Sarawak, had as its theme "Heritage of Sarawak", and allowed for three types of media, namely, "oil, watercolour and batik".³⁹ Its panel of nine judges included Redza Piyadasa and Hoessein Enas from West Malaysia.

The winning work was a pair of batik paintings by Ramsay Ong, *Headman* and *Master of Wood* depicting Dayak/Iban iconography in muted earthy tones [87]. The majority of finalists had made works in the batik medium. These were all pictorial narratives, usually dominated by scenes of indigenous cultural activities or flora and fauna. Stephen Teo's *An Outstation Regatta* harks back to Chinese ink landscape paintings in its spatial layout and handling of line. Lai Kim Leong's *Afterwork* and Lai Sey Min's *An Early Settlement* display deft uses of perspective in highly detailed images capturing longhouse activity. Lai Kim Leong removes all spatial perspective in a flattened modernist view of *Satok Sunday Market*. S. Eng's *Colourful Sarawak* playfully depicts a crowded multicultural Malaysia, where cultural elements ranging from *silat* to the lion dance are laid out in conjoined planes, not dissimilar to theatrical standee dioramas. Michael Lim's *Sarawak Melody* is a highly textural batik painting of a jungle scene made with natural dyes created by the artist.

Sarawakian artists had clearly embraced the medium of batik and flavoured it with what could be perceived as their own vernacular with great technical handling of the batik medium. The iconography is local. Thematically, however, these batik works by Sarawak artists reflect the early pictorial idealism of Chuah Thean Teng and other pioneer artists using batik in Malaya. These Sarawakian batiks display the same earnest iconographic language, and amnesia of negatives, corresponding perhaps to what had been prescribed by well-meaning cultural organisations eager to develop a Sarawak countenance alongside "the national art of Malaya". These attempts to assimilate the art of Sarawak into a national narrative with Malaya taking the lead, however beautiful, appear forced, especially when viewed alongside the incredibly powerful art of the ancient woven *pua kumbu* cloth traditions indigenous to Sarawak. Further north, Sabah artists had yet to embrace the medium of batik.

Joseph Tan's astute and suggestive demand to "love me in my batik" is perhaps a call to recognise the body, the skin, and to get into the "groove" with a "dash of patriotism". This (batik) skin, the body's largest, most sensitive and visible organ, wraps the national body politic within a corporeal

flag into a singular imagining and stains our consciousness. The propagator of the message is the languidly voluptuous Malaysian-esque Venus draped in batik that both accentuates and conceals her secrets and desires, in parody of the motherland. The patriotism within these nationalistic narratives signified by batik is only possible because of our submission and participation as Malaysians versed in this visual language.

Batik art of the 1950s and 1960s was celebrated as a new fine art medium and used by artists to create a new cultural tradition, and to build a sense of belonging to this motherland. The 1970s and 1980s saw the subject of batik being used by Malay artists in introspective ways to question and assert issues of identity and place in response to the NCP. By the late 1980s, a quarter of a century after the formation of Malaysia, political developments brought fearful and uncertain times. Operation Lalang in 1987 brutally arrested critical thought but was to rouse some artists into a heightened state of political awareness.⁴⁰ Batik in Malaysian art from the 1990s and into the new millennium was often used consciously in direct recognition of batik's partnership with state propaganda just as Joseph Tan's *Love Me In My Batik* had done. *They've even dared cover Venus de Milo with the colourful drapes?* In the 25 years leading up to Malaysia's golden jubilee in 2013, batik would become a critical device to open discourse between art and tradition, engage with popular knowledge, the politics of fashion, disrobe and engage with nationalist constructs of cultural discourse and contribute to the continuing documentation of our history of ideas.

- 1 The headline and opening paragraph featured are from an article in *The Sunday Mail* newspaper - *Her Page: Women and Fashion*, 19 May 1968, collaged into Joseph Tan's painting *Love Me in My Batik* (1968). "Charlie Brown" refers to a popular syndicated comic strip character by Charles M. Schulz. "Venus de Milo" refers to the ancient Greek marble sculpture found on the Aegean island of Milo believed to represent the Greek Goddess of love and beauty, on permanent display at the Louvre Museum. The statue is of a nude woman's torso with fabric draped around her hips and legs.
- 2 In this essay, "batik" refers to the dye-and-wax resist process commonly used for sarong, heavily influenced by Javanese batik and used on the Malay Peninsula since the turn of the 20th century, while "batik art" refers to original modern artworks employing batik as a medium.
- 3 Though it is unclear how the technique spread throughout Southeast Asia, batik has an ancient history in southern China where it is known as *loron* (Mattiebell Gittinger, *Splendid Symbols: Textiles and Tradition in Indonesia*. Singapore/New York: Oxford University Press.

- 1985, pp. 163-168]. Archaeological finds of batik in China date back to the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) and sophisticated batik made by wax resist techniques had spread to Japan from China by the eighth century." Robyn Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia: Tradition, Trade and Transformation* (Singapore: Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd 2003), pp. 241-242.
4. *Kain panjang* ("long cloth") is a length of cloth about 2 1/2-3 yards long, not sewn but worn wrapped tightly from waist to ankles and worn by both men and women. Traditionally, the *kain panjang* was considered more formal and was usually worn by the upper class and aristocrats. Body movements are restricted when wearing *kain panjang* thus not practical for the working classes. *Sarong*, or *sarung*, means "sheath" and is a length of cloth shorter than *kain panjang*, the ends are usually stitched together to be worn as a skirt. It is tied more loosely than *kain panjang*, allowing it to be a flexible garment to work in.
 5. Farish A. Noor, 'The Cloth that Cuts: Batik as the Lingua Franca of Southeast Asia', *Batik Guild Magazine* (2011).
 6. Wang Zineng, 'Knowledge, Patronage & Malayan Iconography: Three aspects in the emergence of Malayan batik painting', undergraduate thesis, National University of Singapore 2007.
 7. *Batik, Penang: Yahong Gallery 1968*. Frank Sullivan was an Australian national who took up Malayan citizenship, who along with Mubin Sheppard led the Malaya Arts Council and campaigned for the establishment of the National Art Gallery, becoming its first administrator in 1958.
 8. Wang Zineng, 'Knowledge, Patronage & Malayan Iconography'.
 9. *Teng: Satu Penghargaan - An Appreciation*, Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery 2008.
 10. The Federation of Malaysia was formed by signatory territories Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore in 1963. Singapore was evicted from the Federation in 1965.
 11. A study trip which influenced Nixon's paper 'Asia after Viet Nam', *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, 46:1 (October 1967). Summary: The war in Viet Nam has for so long dominated our field of vision that it has distorted our picture of Asia. A small country on the rim of the continent has filled the screen of our minds; but it does not fill the map. Sometimes dramatically, but more often quietly, the rest of Asia has been undergoing a profound, exciting and on balance extraordinarily promising transformation. One key to this transformation is the emergence of Asian regionalism; another is the development of a number of Asian economies; another is gathering disaffection with all the oldisms that have so long imprisoned so many minds and so many governments. By and large the non-communist Asian governments are looking for solutions that work, rather than solutions that fit a preconceived set of doctrines and dogmas. In October of the same year, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed by founding countries Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand as a geopolitical and economic organisation with the primary goal of enhancing collective economic growth, social progress and cultural development within the region and to stand guard in shared mistrust of external powers.
 12. Batik crackle is made by covering the cloth surface with molten wax then cracking the hardened surface into hair-line fissures allowing dye to seep through the cracked wax staining the cloth.
 13. Lai Chee Kien, *Building Merdeka: Independence Architecture in Kuala Lumpur, 1957-1966*, Kuala Lumpur: Galeri Petronas 2007.
 14. Cheong Laitong's oil painting *Batik Dyeing* (1958), depicting the backs of women dyeing batik cloth, was one of the first artworks donated to the National Art Gallery and is an early example of batik as a subject in a Malaysian painting.
 15. Benedict Anderson asserts that the lineage of "imagined communities" and nationalism can be traced to the lattice between three institutions, namely the census, the map and the museum - state tools to construct monuments and ways of thinking about the superiority of the state. He asserts the museumising of artefacts to be "profoundly political", acting as regalia to the guardianship role of the state within an imagined community. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London/New York: Verso 1983.
 16. Beginning in the early 60s the batik handicraft industries received much support through the establishment of the government linked Rural and Industrial Development Authority (RIDA), the Majlis Amanah Raya (MAR) subsidiaries MARA Handicraft Development Centre and MARA Bumiputra Marketing Board as well as Malaysia Batek and Handicraft Berhad (MBHB) primarily to assist rural Malay batik makers. This strong government support of the batik industries coincided with Konfrontasi with Indonesia and the nationalistic assertion of a Malaysian style of batik breaking away from highly influential Indonesian styles.
 17. Raja Fuziah bte Raja Tun Uda, *Batik Malaysia: A Living Heritage*, Kuala Lumpur: Galeri Petronas 2007.
 18. Philip Mathews (ed.), *Chronicle of Malaysia: 1957-2007, Fifty Years of Headline News*, Kuala Lumpur: Editions Didier Millet 2007.
 19. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, London: Faber & Faber 1991, pp. 250-251.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
 21. The New Scene artists were Choong Kam Kow, Sulaiman Esa, Redza Piyadasa, Tan Teong Kool, Tan Teong Eng and Tang Tuck Kan. See T.K. Sabapathy, 'Pathways to An-Other Reality', in *Piyodasa: An Overview, 1962-2000*, Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery 2001, p. 39. See also Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', *Partisan Review*, 6:5 (1939), pp. 34-49. Here, Greenberg argues for the values of critical thinking in the avant-garde versus kitsch, which he argued was fundamentally conservative and not "genuine culture".
 22. T.K. Sabapathy, 'Pathways to An-Other Reality', p. 39.
 23. 'The New Scene: The Idea', in *The New Scene*, Kuala Lumpur 1969, cited in *ibid.*, p. 38.
 24. T.K. Sabapathy, 'Pathways to An-Other Reality', p. 38.
 25. 'The New Scene: The Idea', cited in *ibid.*, p. 40. The GRUP exhibition (1967) showed the works of painters Latiff Mohidin, Anthony Lau, Cheong Laitong, Ibrahim Hussein, Jolly Koh, Syed Ahmad Jamal and Yeoh Jin Leng. They have been described by Redza Piyadasa and others as expressionist and abstract expressionist painters although some of these artists have rejected these terms to describe their painting style.
 26. Keris Mas, 30 Tahun Sekitar Sastera, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1979, p. 131. Cited and translated in Athi Sivan, *Hamzah Hussein: Sekitar Pemikiran Seni untuk Seni*, Bangi: Penerbit UKM 1997, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asas_50#cite_note-1.
 27. T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and The Making of Malaya*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 303.
 28. Johan Jaaffar, 'Vindication of the "forgotten" Hamzah Hussein', *New Straits Times* 2 June 2007.
 29. Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press 2002. Milner writes about the historical shifts from the struggle of sultanates (ie. "Ke-raja-an", or government) to the struggle of the Malay race and the struggle of Islam - particularly, the changing ways in which the advocates of *kerajaan*, *bangsa Melayu* and *umat Islam* competed or complemented one another as foundations of Malay identity and nationalism.
 30. Wong Hoy Cheong, 'Contradictions and fallacies in search of a voice: Contemporary art in post-colonial culture', in *First ASEAN Symposium on Aesthetics*, Kuala Lumpur: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information 1989, p. 118, referring to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press 1968, pp. 148-248.
 31. Ismail Zain, 'Seni Dan Imajinasi: The Appearance of Coda', in Ismail Zain: *Retrospective Exhibition 1964-1991*, Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery 1995, p. 22.
 32. Batik chop or batik cap developed in the 19th century with industrialisation and was practiced by men, rarely women; here, a metal or wooden stamp is used to apply molten wax to cloth. Batik tulis, or batik canting is originally a Javanese technique dating back centuries that uses a fine drawing implement with a wooden handle and copper reservoir spout allowing highly controlled application of molten wax to cloth. Batik canting is traditionally only practised by women.
 33. Singapore-born architect Hijas Kasturi graduated in Architecture and Town Planning

in Australia. He moved to Malaysia in 1967, where he founded the School of Art and Architecture at Institut Teknologi MARA.

34. Tunku Zubeidah Abu Bakar's cousin, Tunku Mariam ran a fashion boutique in London promoting contemporary Malaysian batik fashion internationally giving a significant push to a nascent industry that was about to expand and soar.
35. Redza Piyadasa, *The Treatment of the Local Landscape in Modern Malaysian Art 1930-1981*, Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara 1981, p. 38.
36. Tengku Sabri Ibrahim, 'The Use of Traditional Malay Art Images in the Paintings of Mastura A. Rahman', student essay, 1989/1999, <http://tsabri.wordpress.com/2010/03/02/the-use-of-traditional-malay-art-images-in-the-paintings-of-mastura-a-rahman/>
37. "Since traditional textile production in Southeast Asia was exclusively the task of women, textiles are able to show history from a different perspective by reflecting a female view of the contact between different cultures and are an alternative to the princely epics of war, succession and dominance." Robyn Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia: Tradition, Trade and Transformation*, p. 24.
38. Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2008, p. 62.
39. Edric Ong, Introduction, *Sarawak State-Wide Art Competition*, Kuching: Sarawak Museum and Society Atelier Sarawak 1988.
40. "Operation Lalang" ("Lalang" is a type of weed) was a code name for a Malaysian police operation that saw 106 arrests on 27 October 1987 under the Internal Security Act (which allows detention without trial). Those arrested consisted of political opposition members including Members of Parliament, civil rights leaders, Chinese educationists and social activists. The arrests under the ISA were said to be due to a period of perceived mounting political tensions with racial overtones in the country that would lead to social instability. The result of the Operation Lalang arrests saw a tightening of civil liberties under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's rule and further control over the Printing Presses and Publication Act. This would also lead to the 1988 sacking of the Lord President, two Supreme Court judges and accusations that the judiciary had become subjugated to executive rule undermining the separation of powers within the democratic fundamentals of the country.