

#1, Bondage Series

145 x 125 cm, compressed charcoal on paper

1987

Private Collection

Jalaini Abu Hassan

Drawing Response *by Beverly Yong*

Jalaini Abu Hassan dedicates his life and work to recording the element of patterns he sees in his world, the small things, often forgotten, which together build his sense of a perceived reality. If the majority of us think in pictures, then Jai's work is to give form to that very thinking process, literally drawing out his response to experience using simple objects which trigger visual and imaginative interpretation.

The choice of drawing as a technique is very particular - it brings across the immediacy and intuitiveness of sense perception, laying bare the almost subconscious process whereby the seen or imagined object is translated onto the paper or canvas. In terms of genre, Jai's work is born from the sketch and the sketchbook. The resonance of Jai's completed work owes much to a commitment to the mastery of scale and composition, so that the problems being solved in his art are always at once formal and autobiographical.

If we turn first to the biography, we find a telling story of change and dislocation. There is a childhood spent in various military bases around the country with a father in the army, already being recorded by the pre-adolescent young artist. First formal art studies at Mara Institute of Technology in the 1980s were followed by the recession, which he spent with Anak Alam ("The Sons of Nature"), an enclave for Malay poets and artists still flourishing after its foundation by Latiff Mohidin in the early 70s; three years in London at the Slade, ending in a trek back through Europe and Middle Asia; and finally two in New York at the Pratt Institute before settling

Born 1963
Malaysia

Education
Mara Institute of Technology
Shah Alam, Malaysia

Slade School of Art
London, UK

Pratt Institute
New York, USA

down in Malaysia. A life as provincial, communal, cosmopolitan, an extensive personal search marked by perpetual changes of context and a longing for the familiar. When so unrooted, there is an inevitable questioning of perceived reality which tends to turn inwards for answers, a need to map one's own references.

The elements Jai uses in his work are things, or ideas of things, collected from nature, his childhood, his travels, his daily life, seemingly obscure reference points charged with a symbolism that begins as deeply personal. As they are worked through his art, they form a picture of how an external life becomes an internal life, and they further open to broader inferences, beginning a dialogue between the artist's inner map and the viewer's. His art attests to the power and relevance of the seen

object by investing a personal attachment, a love of its form, and anticipating symbolic interpretation and tactile response.

Catan Orang Kampung, a mixed media work which won the National Art Gallery's Young Contemporaries Major Award in 1985, shows an early, if rather literal, effort to make use of this symbolic potential. Here, the wooden floor of a kampung house is strewn with a few sticks of 'rokok daun' (traditional hand-rolled leaf cigarettes), a folded Jawi-scripted Utusan Malaysia newspaper and the edge of a typical pandanus floor mat. By a simple act of juxtaposition, the artist conveys his sense of the fragility of traditional life in the face of our amorphous and mass media-driven environment, a concern which lives on through less polemical later work.

An interesting series, *Bondage*, made during his Slade years in response to the South African boycott in Britain in 1987, has Jai making a metaphor of the human form. Here he uses his own body and identity, blinded and muffled by bandages, or a gas mask, and handcuffed, to contemplate issues of identity, anonymity and the stifling of expression. Again, the treatment is direct and polemical, though not without a certain power. However, the series is remarkable because it shows the artist at his most self-referential.

Jai's vision only really begins to take shape with the *Lifeform* series (1993-1996), where he harnesses his immense drawing abilities to explore the visual possibilities of natural form, to find an expression of how nature manifests itself in its details.



Yang Hidup
1993

"My work is a manifestation of nature's private affair that is hidden by our sense of generalization. It subtly evokes the life within material forms, a sense of birth, life and living, decay, rebirth, metamorphosis, transmutation and death. All these in one great circle of the macrocosm."

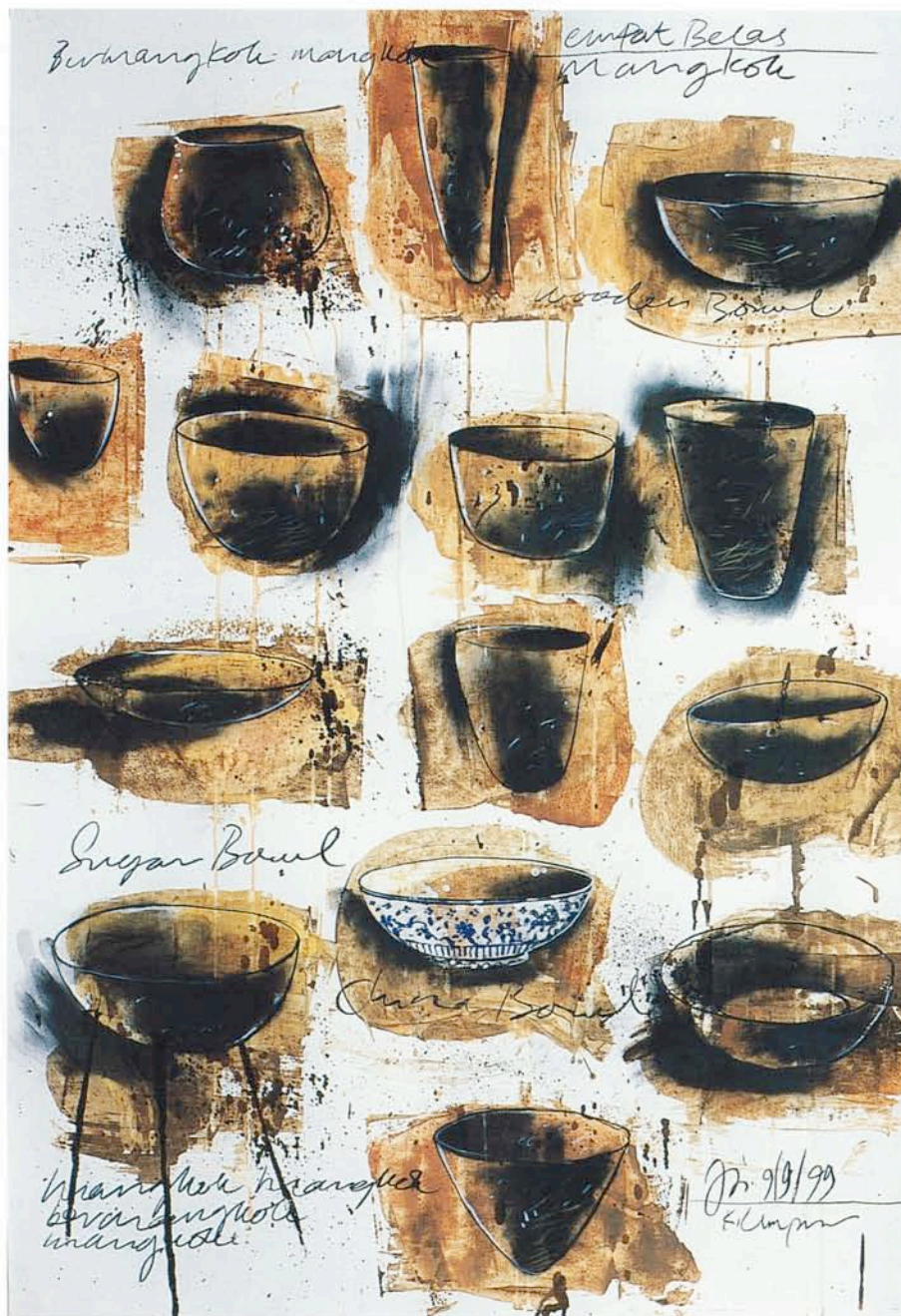


Female

120 x 137 cm, compressed charcoal on paper

1993

Artist's Collection



14 Mangkok
 146 X 103 cm, mixed media on paper
 1999
 Artist's Collection

Biomorphic entities evolve from studies of shells, cocoons, plants. The process of the sketch is refined and wrought to a virtuoso climax. Each subject is recorded in its many aspects, and these aspects are fused together into a single form to create a dynamic and emotional response, an essence of the natural. The compressed charcoal used effects strong contrasts, allowing the opposition of dark and light tones to play in endless counterpoints. The sheer scale of some of the works from this series make them loom large and inescapable in the mental landscape. *Male and Female* (1993) are incredibly tactile visualisations of concepts of gender built from shell forms, and seem to come out of the depths of the psyche as much as they do out of the depths of the sea. The metaphors and symbols inherent in this series are subtle and unique yet Jai succeeds in giving them a universal register.

What has followed the *Lifeform* series is an extraordinary unraveling of this focus on the single object, and an unraveling too of Jai's use of drawing. In formal terms, objects become compositional elements at play with each other; Jai moves away from a practically sculptural treatment of form and explores instead the relation of forms on the picture plane. The objects are simply outlined rather than built up and operate on a rough colour grid, often together with scrawled text. These recent works appear like an ordering of the sketchbook page, but also as a development of the traditional still life. Where in traditional still life objects are arranged in a particular, artificial way with solid relationships caught in a single time frame, Jai's objects freefloat, not so much a construction of what is perceived, but of how we perceive. The motives here are not far from those of Cubist or Surrealist initiatives, but what is different about Jai's approach is that it ties an attention to the formal potential of objects to an attempt to express the thinking process and visual memory through two-dimensional composition. The single point of focus is simply removed, nudging the eye around the surface, inviting formal and symbolic links, much like thought association.

Pulau (1993/4) is a transitional work which shows Jai experimenting in this new direction, incorporating Female, Male and other shell-based forms in a larger idea which also features the artist's brushes and an inset series of past sketches of shell forms, a sort of mapping of the artistic process which is also a personal farewell to the *Lifeform* series. The new objects which come into play alongside these natural forms in the works that have followed are recurring icons of the everyday - bowls, teacups, slippers, cooking pots, electric fans, congkak (a Malay game played using a wooden boat-shaped board with pockets), bananas, bunga kantan (ginger flowers), edible things; and collected ornaments charged with memories. Like the still life artist, Jai limits his inventory of subjects to allow a more concentrated development in what he is work-

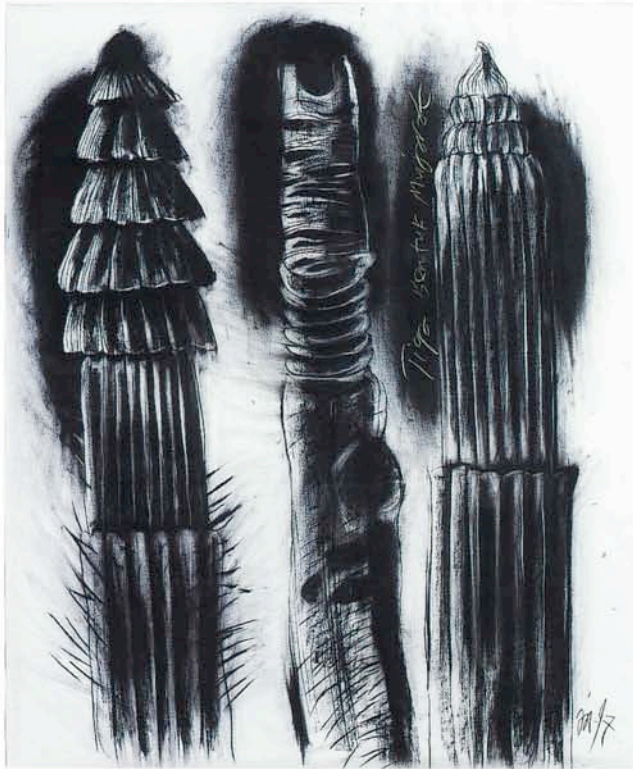
ing at compositionally. In this way, the objects also take on a life of their own outside of the individual works, building up a personal lexicon for self-expression.

Vessels in particular have an important role in the works and Jai uses their forms extensively. They are drawn as transparent, in mere outline, but the very suggestion of their volume gives the picture plane an added dimension and an important dynamic without which the works could become simply pattern-like. This can be seen to full effect in 14 *Mangkok* (1999) where the eye is kept constantly busy moving

in and out of the picture plane and around it, as if caught in a prism. As signs, the vessels trigger a plethora of readings. Things for contemporary everyday use, their lineage goes as far back as that of human civilisation. Their emptiness connotes potential, mystery, or further, the bowl for example can symbolise *rezeki* (which might be inadequately translated as a sense of offering). Two steaming glasses placed against each other with a handwritten text *teh tarik* at hand suggest something more local and intimate, a friendly tryst.

That we can infer such a range of significance from the simplest of objects attests to the success of the work. The rawness of the drawing, subjected to disciplined and careful organisation makes for a seamless and immediate impact to allow these inferences to take shape. Artistic process is laid naked and the effects of media are paramount, hence the use of charcoal for outlines to emphasise the sketchlike quality of the drawing. In the works on canvas especially, bitumen is also used for drawing, often dripping down the canvas and giving a sepia tone, exposing process in a similar way. Two very recent works, *Gurindam Jiwa* (2000) and *Kuali* (2000) show the artist at the height of development in this vein, working on a large scale on canvas. *Kuali*, interestingly enough, with its dominating central element, seems to indicate a renewed interest in the single object.

In trying to place Jai's achievement as an artist in Malaysia, we could do worse than begin with a comparison between his life and work, and the career of his venerated predecessor, Latiff Mohidin. At a glance, Jai might seem to follow in the footsteps of this seminal modern artist, from early days with Anak Alam and a love of poetry to further technical training in Europe, and even in the embarkation after the Slade on his wanderjahre (a period of roaming as a journeyman undertaken by 15th century German artists), which Latiff made across Southeast Asia after Germany. They have a shared fascination and reverence for the artistic process, for how what is seen is worked into art, and both have recorded extensively in diaries and sketchbooks, using their lives and travels as working material. Even their investigations into natural forms begin on similar lines.



3 Bentuk Muja'rab
1997



Kuali

122 X 122 cm, mixed media on canvas

2000

Private Collection



Gurindam Jiwa

122 X 122 cm, mixed media on canvas

2000

Private Collection

However, where Latiff's search has been essentially modern, a conscious or subconscious attempt to create a monolithic new aesthetic for Malaysia and Southeast Asia, distilling form, and fusing common regional elements and natural forces into his vision, Jai's approach is distinctively personal. It is a discovery of seen life and nature, often in a localised context, made through specific and first-hand experience and expressed as such. If we glean any sense of a larger Malaysian or Asian aesthetic or culture in his work, then it is via a complex process of association. His art beats an important path to a consciousness of our daily environment and beyond through our own eyes, our own maps of perception.

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