

# HALAL



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## CHANANG:

# The Reformasi\*, Jai's version

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**R**eformasi, or reform, is a political term coined by pro-democracy activists in Indonesia and Malaysia, referring to their demands for change in socio-political life. Reformasi movements sparked shortly after both countries were hit by the Asian financial crisis of 1997.

If the result of a general election is tangible proof of winds of change descending on a country, then perhaps the artworks created by a sensible artist of the country is a seismographic indicator that such changes have deeper and more lasting effects than a mere passing wind. This is somewhat true in the case of the recent works shown by

▲  
*Halal*, 2007  
mixed media on canvas  
152 x 152 cm

►  
*Bringing the Devil Out in Me*  
2008  
mixed media on canvas  
122 x 122 cm



Malaysian artist Jalaini Abu Hassan — or Jai as he is more commonly known to his friends and colleagues — at his second solo show organized by Valentine Willie Fine Art at the Borobudur Auction Building, Jakarta in June, 2008.

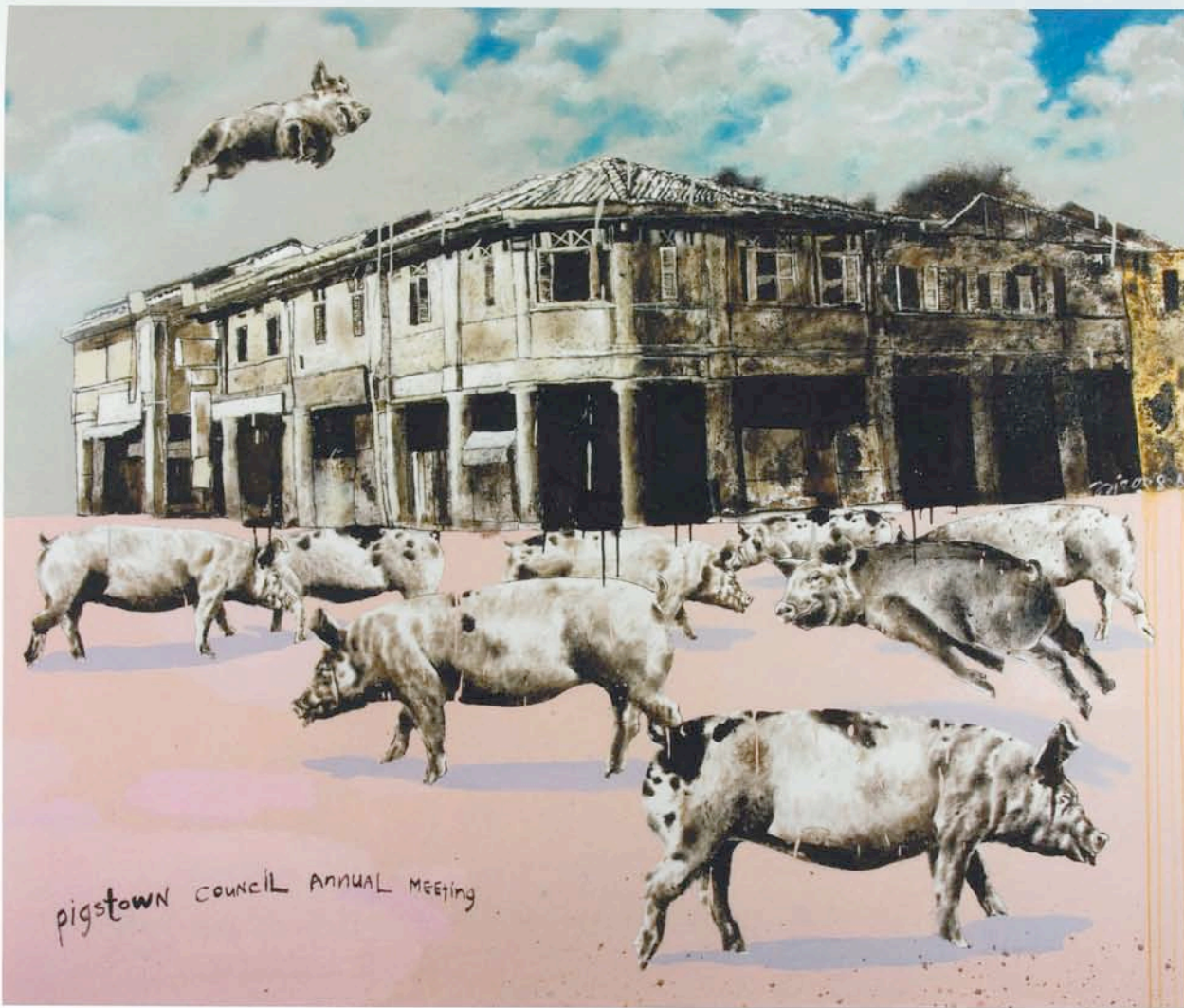
Jai's works, consisting mostly of paintings and drawings, have always dealt with his strong and cohesive understanding of the dynamics and painterly strategies in the long tradition of modern painting. His earlier paintings were manifestations of his intensive exploration, trying to find and capture the widest possibilities of these painterly strategies. Splashes of colors, traces of swift brushstrokes, marks and scribbles, text and textures, were all part of his explorations in the process of making a painting. These artistic explorations are related to his extensive studies and educational background. After finishing his studies in fine art at MARA Institute of Technology, Selangor, Malaysia (1985), he received a grant to continue his studies and finished his MA degree at the Slade School of Fine Art, London in 1990. He obtained his MFA degree at Pratt Institute, New York in 1996.

Jai returned to Malaysia, teaching at the Faculty of Fine Art and Design, MARA while continuing his artistic explorations in painting. Back in his own country, Jai started to deal with a very specific content in his works; to generalize, let us call this the 'Malaysian experience', looked upon and approached by a Malaysian artist bearing Malay sensibilities. In other words, in the process of enriching and furthering his previous explorations in painterly strategies (that

he had already mastered), he now started to fill his canvases not only with visual elements or images, but narratives as well. His exploration of the complexities of the process of painting moved towards and perhaps combined with content – the reality of life in the Malaysian context.

This tendency is visibly present in many of his works from 2000 onwards where he started to depict shapes, patterns and objects like fruits, tools and utensils — all popularly known and used by Malaysians daily. This approach then developed into a deeper investigation and understanding of Malaysians' way of life and values when he created a series of drawings portraying *bomoh* (traditional medicine man) in which he cast his own portrait as *bomoh*, wearing a typical Malaysian national costume, complete with *sarong* and *pici* (head cap). Many of the drawings from 2005 clearly reveal that Jai has developed his sensibility in capturing the many hidden aspects of Malaysian daily life. Almost inevitably, these works have led to his artistic approach now which is directly engaged with the realities of socio-political life in contemporary Malaysia. He personally admits that "recent works [in the exhibition *Chanang*] have a piercing louder tone, compared to previous works which are polite and modest."

They are indeed loud - and direct - considering the fact that some of the works address the issue of political leaders' corruption and greediness, and the absurdity of religious (Islam) norms that are supposedly protecting a person — a Muslim, in this case — from such



▲  
*Pigstow Council Annual Meeting, 2008*  
 mixed media on canvas  
 152,5 x 183 cm

wrongdoings. Some years ago, Jai would have described this situation as a Malaysian dilemma or paradox. But certainly in *Chanang* (the Malay word for a type of *gong*, a brass percussion instrument), he describes all of these circumstances such as the hypocrisy of Malaysians plainly. See for instance how in the works, *Dajal*, *Bringing Out The Devil in Me* and *Senyum Setan*, he positions himself as the gleefully smiling devil, with horns erect on his head; his posture, standing tall and staring at us with his conceited, arrogant looks.

In other works, Jai shows himself, still with his *sarong*, standing and looking at a cow, with Chinese characters marking out the cow's body parts. In the corner of these paintings, he inscribes the label, *halal*. For those who know that the word *halal* — a very specific term in Islam used to categorize the types of food permissible for consumption (or more extensively, the type of actions or behavior allowed), these paintings immediately confront the term *halal* itself. Many Muslims in Malaysia, quite certainly, still believe that images representing a human being is considered *haram* (completely the opposite of *halal*). Furthermore, within the present Malaysian context where ethnic strife is surfacing, cows (considered sacred by Hindu Indians) and Chinese characters mark out deeper symbolic meanings.

Finally, to drive home his point concerning the term *halal*, Jai created a painting, *Untitled, Halal* (2008) which almost looks like an advertising poster with a used condom wrapper as the primary image and the word *halal* at the lower bottom. Some Muslims still believe that having children is God's gift and that it is a task to be accomplished by the faithful. Overpopulation? Never mind. The world is big enough for all of us *lah!* Safe sex? Isn't that a euphemism for, uhm ... free-sex? Definitely *haram*.

But isn't it in Malaysia that we are presently witnessing how the word 'sodomy' can evoke a kind of political *déjà vu*? How does one deal with such absurdity of values as shown in Malaysian politics? In Jai's view, these political leaders, or any individuals with their inconsistent ideals, are simply pigs — the most abject, the lowest, the dirtiest, the most *haram* animal in the Muslim worldview. And in the works *Pigstow Council Meeting*, *Pig Project* and *Babi Harus* (all 2008), it seems that too many pigs exist in Malaysia nowadays. With his *Chanang* sounds becoming louder and clearer, Jai has already started his version of *reformasi*. Will this be a sign of a 'bigger' upcoming *reformasi* in Malaysia? 🐷