

Halal and Haram: On the Permissibility of Image Production and Circulation

Simon Soon

In his most recent body of works, Jalaini Abu Hassan (or “Jai”) makes a radical new approach to his painterly stage. It is marked by a powerful engagement with narrative and the emergence of the figure at its centre.

Prior to this, Jai has tended to identify the Malaysian context almost by default, drawing everyday cultural references into his pictorial surface, using the canvas as a horizontal flatbed, often painting on the floor. The surface becomes a screen, a deposition of images that falls into place, characterized by noisy flecks, the exposure of its processes, and a crucial sense of incompleteness.¹

The horizontal plane is not without its conceptual significance. This staging was first used in the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock in a gestural act of de-sublimation, of dissolving the painterly subject, casting the formless against the verticality of the figurative. Later, the destruction of the subject was reinforced by Robert Rauschenberg, and then Pop Art's adoption of the horizon as a register screen of images of our everyday as pure simulacra.²

Reversing this trend, which has to date informed his approach to the painted canvas, Jai now revisits figuration to probe the very notion of the subjective.

In the pop “style” that Jai has worked with before, the arrangement and fittings of cultural references used may evoke narratives, and play with archetypes, but they shy away from specific subjects. Yet, it is still from working through such a specific cultural context that Jai, as an astute observer, came to realize the need to develop upon the pop strategies that he is fond of. That popular culture in Malaysia is not as homogenised and industrialised as mass culture in the United States provides an impetus for Jai to consider the production and circulation of the image within a nation's particular context.

Working in a country where Islam is the official religion, there is a particularly local discourse that regulates image making — the notion of the *halal*, or permissible, became Jai's next formal inquiry.³

The return of the subject to the canvas not as noise but as a coherent, gestalt form is a return towards a locus of meaning. In order to determine whether an image, or subject, is *halal* or not, reference has to be made to the structure that polices its appropriateness and suitability, hence its context, meaning and significance.

An *Untitled (Halal)* painting pits an image of a used condom wrapper against an approval stamp that reads “*halal*”. The appropriateness of the subject is questioned in this playful subversion that mimes a regulatory body that has the power to decide whether a subject is taboo or not.

The question of appropriateness or “propriety” is further complicated in a painting such as *I Protect You from Myself*, in which Jai projects himself into the pictorial plane, standing with his back against a woman — is she a wife, a prostitute or a girlfriend?, hinting at the possibility of a violation or a betrayal.

It is particularly interesting that Jai has incorporated Chinese characters into his pictures, not as language or words, but painting them as ‘ideograms’, as symbolic graphic puzzles in which visual elements are arranged

in a variety of ways to construct complex characters with new and more abstract meanings.⁴

In a sense, the *Halal* paintings are constructions along similar lines. The piecing together of disparate images, the return to a clearer, bolder figurative form, the will to cohere and to return to more conventional painterly strategies all suggest the discursive limits of *halal*(ness), as it comments on the notion of appropriateness in both image production and circulation. They seem to form an argument towards orthodoxy, or rather they expose the constructs and interpretations of such an argument.

Having explored the notion of *halal*(ness), or permissibility, how does this read against Jai's new series of work in *Chanang*? Perhaps the logical sequel to *Halal* is for Jai to delve into its opposite but complementary other, which gives the word *halal* its meaning. This is the notion of *haram*, describing the forbidden or inappropriate, which becomes a useful lattice with which to grid his new paintings.

Chanang sees Jai narrowing in on his themes, concentrating on more specific political narratives.⁵ He brings



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to his second solo exhibition in Jakarta a keen discernment of the current social political climate of Malaysia, deploying a range of radical strategies that draw these issues into his new body of paintings.

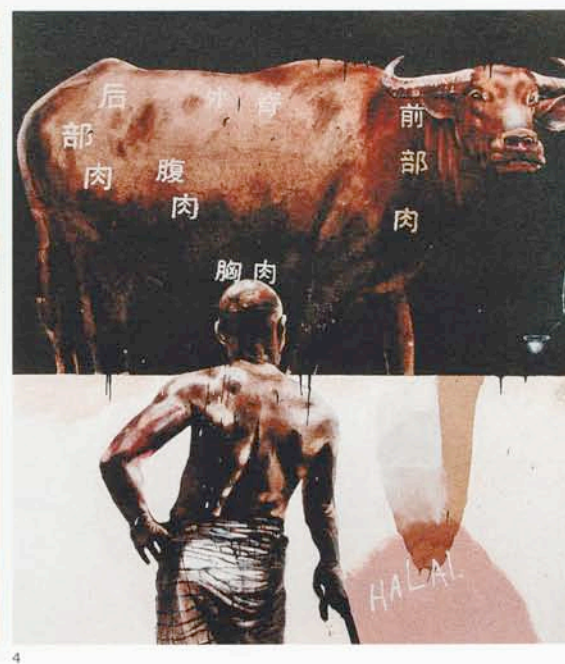
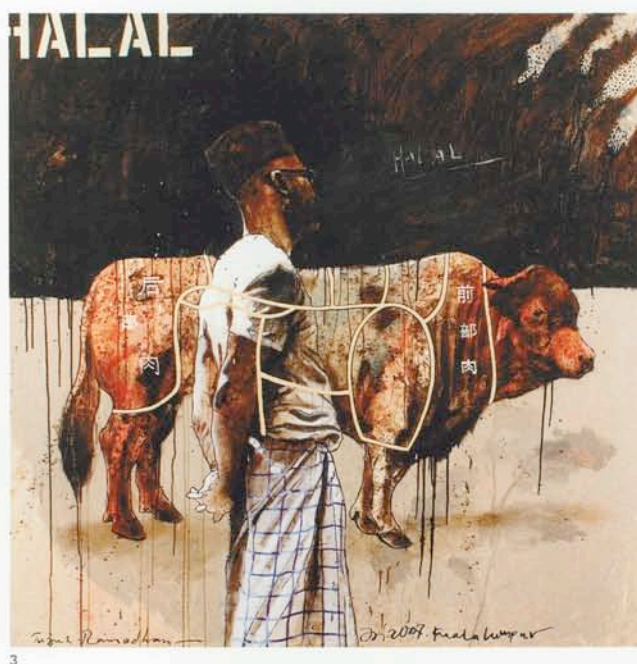
This turn towards the cultural and historical specific is in part informed by his gradual realisation of the restrictiveness and the boundaries of image circulation explored so thoroughly in the *Halal* series. If *halal*(ness) is about appropriateness, then the *Halal* paintings question the boundaries of its inclusiveness — what is *halal*, what is suitable, what is appropriate, what is good? It has thus far allowed Jai to explore taboo subjects within the discourse of permissibility. But to speak of what is *haram* is to describe the specific — what is already contemptible, what is already reviled and what is already aesthetically displeasing.

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Disgust comes into play and the subjects are even more specific this time, drawing from recent social issues that fuel the news in Malaysia's fervid political climate.

Flying pigs, parched rice fields, and dour-faced politicians make their irreverent entry into Jai's pictorial vocabulary as the artist wrestles, from the uncertainty of our times, a context marked equally by both hope and anxiety. His narratives blend elements of traditional Malay and modern global culture, creating juxtapositions that often explore the antagonism and disquietude between the two models of living as his subjects articulate the misgivings as well as the conflicting values that make up contemporary Malaysian experience.

We might begin with Jai's subversion of the romantic genre of Malaysian landscape painting. *The Great Malaysian Landscape* paintings pay homage to an iconic work of the same title by Redza Piyadasa, which thirty years ago achieved the same aim, through a conceptualized deconstruction of the genre. The current



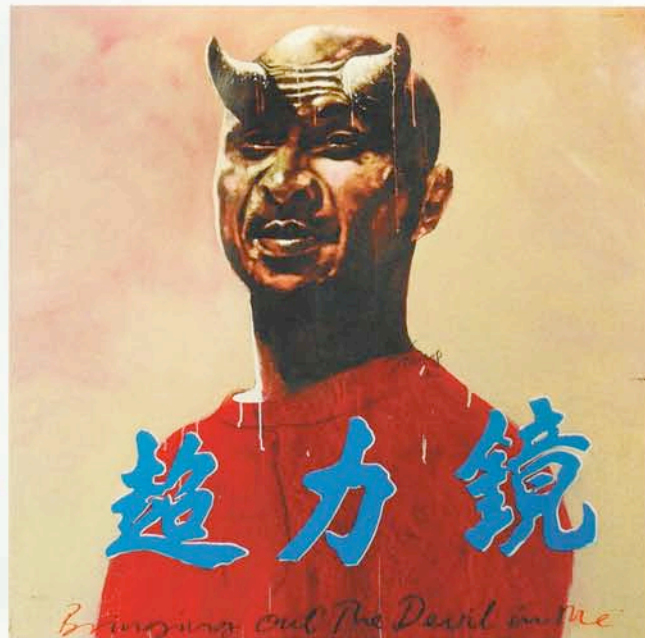
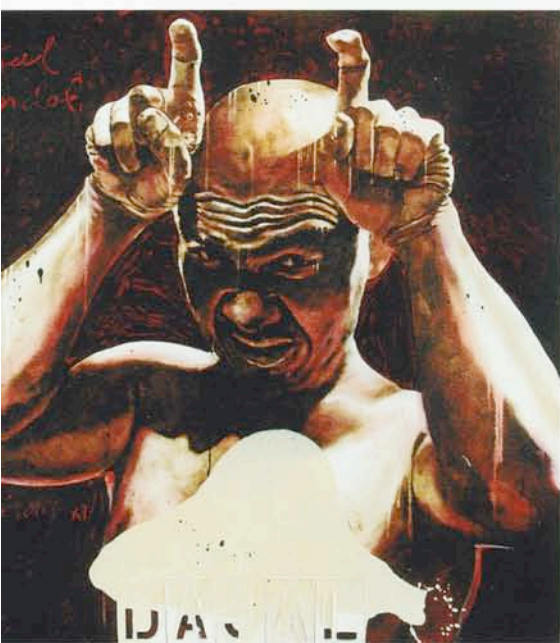
paintings by Jai not only perform a bold artistic self-subversion in their very narrativity, but also undermine the notion of the idyllic countryside through their depiction of a cultivated rural economy on the verge of destruction and exhaustion. This dystopia, seen most clearly in *Padi Tak Jadi*, broadly hints at the kind of wastefulness, neglect and economic failure of certain agricultural models. But there is pollution on an ideological front also with the contamination of the Malaysian utopian ideal. This becomes an invasion into the timelessness of the archetypal *kampung* or plantation as Jai suffuses this genre with an awareness of the conflicting and urgent present.

In *Senyum Setan*, a sequel to *Bringing Out the Devil in Me*, Jai continues to explore self-portraiture in a cheeky mirroring act which began with the *bomoh* portraits of *Mantera*. To read the artist as the devil is then to see the artist figure as a romantic adversarial force to be reckoned with. To paint is then to execute judgment, to announce the distinction of the painterly sphere from that of the image. To paint now is to be

able to provide content as opposed to the image, which is vacuous, floating and meaningless. To paint is then to provide gravity, to resist the hegemonic, to be able to challenge and to respond.

Perhaps the most abrasive commentary of the *haram* can be found in Jai's series of paintings of pigs. The pig, or *babi* in Malay, is considered as a symbol of the profane amongst Muslims — abject, the lowest of low, detestable, and Jai's "*babi*" paintings make an acerbic allusion to the corruption within political structures of the country. With flying pigs in *Pig Project* as well as pigs overrunning a town in *Pigstown Council Annual Meeting*, the taint of the *haram*, its pervasiveness, colludes with the realpolitik of the governing hierarchies.

More interestingly, *Babi Harus* turns to another new formal strategy in order to further explore the notion of banned images — graffiti. Recent urban political discontent in Malaysia has often found its most strategic expression in graffiti scrawl. There is an element of criminality in this guerilla-like assault of information,



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but it represents a counterpoint to any form of slick and smooth mainstream propaganda, relying on its baseness to carry through a message about corruption, filth and wrongdoings.

When the pictorial surface is marked, scarred and tarred, the effect achieved is similar to that of a tarnished wall. Drips of paint bleed carelessly. The choice of painting with bitumen furthermore scratches and mars the already blemished surface. An element of entropy sets in, signified by the drips of paint to dirtied wall to the soiled effect of bitumen as if the corrupted subjects are embroiled in their own self-destruction.

This is 'pop' art at its best, a recurrent reflexivity that not only looks into the effects of other media practices to expand its painterly vocabulary, but also digging into the history of painting itself — whether traditional figuration or modernist strategies (e.g. entropy) — to be critically aware of the tropes that allow us to understand the processes of representation and the system that governs representation. This level of inquiry provides

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us with a much richer and more nuanced understanding of the politics of representation and how these respond to a local experience.

For us to trace Jai's artistic development on both thematic and formal grounds is to falsify any distinction between form and content in his practice. This is Jai coming full circle in fusing his modernist exploration of the medium with a now unimpeachable concern with the socially specific. *Chanang*, the brassy percussion that incites and excites, is a loud proclamation of this achievement.



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- 1 For more information about Jalaini's works prior to the *Halal* series, please refer to Beverly Yong, "Jalaini Abu Hassan and the Malaysian Contemporary" in *Jalak* (Kuala Lumpur, Valentine Willie Fine Art, 2006), pp. 6-13 and Adeline Ooi, *Wet Paint* (Kuala Lumpur, Valentine Willie Fine Art, 2005).
- 2 Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 74.
- 3 'Halal', from the Arabic, is used in both Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia to describe actions that are permissible for Muslims, and also what foods are permissible for consumption, based on Islamic beliefs and teaching. 'Haram' in both languages describes its opposite.
- 4 For example, the word for brightness is composed of the characters 'sun' and 'moon' to imply a combination of light sources, hence brightness or clarity. However, not all Chinese characters are ideograms. In fact, this term is considered as an inaccurate description of Chinese characters in linguistic studies today. Nevertheless, the misreading of Chinese characters as ideograms in the early twentieth century has spurred some of the most innovative formal practices in modern art from Sergei Eisenstein's symbolic montage to Ezra Pound's inquiry into the pictorial quality of the Chinese ideograph as a medium for poetry.
- 5 'Chanang' refers to a Malay percussion instrument of the *gong* family.

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BEIJING
2007
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS
122 X 244 CM

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