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Contemporary artist
Jalaini Abu Hassan on his
artistic journey
and the nature of
his visual narratives

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Jalaini Abu Hassan stands among the giants on the emerging local contemporary art scene, adopting an experimental and progressive approach to his visual narratives. He pushes back the boundaries of painting in new and exciting ways, using a wide range of mediums and materials. **Elaine Lau** meets up with Jalaini to learn more about his new exhibition, *Dendongeng*, and his journey to becoming the artist he is today.

To most of us, loose threads are just that — disparate pieces of yarn. But in the hands of a masterful weaver, they are the primordial beginnings of an intricate piece of tapestry. Like a weaver, an artist picks up bits and pieces from life and personal experience to thread together a visual tale with brush strokes of colour.

But not every artist is a storyteller. It takes a particular mind, an innate inquisitiveness and a healthy sense of curiosity to see the extraordinary in the mundane and be able to knit together a story from that. Jalaini Abu Hassan is one such artist.

Jai, as he is affectionately known, is a spellbinding raconteur. His visual narratives are very Malaysian. They are alive with elements of Malay mythology, mysticism and folklore, his observations and interpretations on the state of the nation, and distillations of kampung and city life. He works from a particular, personal experience, real as well as imagined, felt in the immediate present as well as remembered. In all this, Jai's intuitive treatment of the various subjects, done in a style distinctively his own, has established him as one of Malaysia's leading contemporary artists. Jai has also exhibited in Singapore, the US, the UK, Spain and Iraq over his 20-odd years as an artist.

He has not had a solo show in Malaysia in a while as he has been holding exhibitions abroad in Jakarta and Singapore. This year marks Jai's "return" with a new solo exhibition, *Dendongeng*, at Valentine Willie Fine Art in Bangsar Baru, Kuala Lumpur. In this series of eight large-scale works, Jai again weaves magical tales on canvas, this time with larger-than-life characters from Malay literature and folklore. Jai explores the malleability of oral traditions, how over time they can evolve and take on a new life. Jai has given a contemporary spin to characters such as the bearded civet cat, Mat Jenin the dreamer, Sang Gedembai and Badang the eater of a demon's vomit, skilfully employing pop vernacular to rearrange, reinterpret and retell these age-old tales. The works are sheer visual poetry.

This body of work is a huge departure from his last one-man show in Singapore, *Bisik Menjerit*, a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the political deadlock in Perak last year. Jai likened the whole debacle to animals in a circus and his works, done in charcoal, illustrated the tragicomedy of the situation.

In *Dendongeng*, Jai says he is going back "to the not so important things, mythology and folklore, to tell the story again" — and to using bitumen as well, a material that has become synonymous with his practice.

Jai is speaking to me at Valentine Willie Fine Art on the sunny afternoon his works are being put up. He is one of the few who defy the stereotypical image

of the dishevelled artist, looking refreshingly snazzy in a floral shirt, blue jeans and chunky belt, and shod in a stylish pair of dark brown boat shoes.

Jai is a man very much at ease in his own skin, and by extension puts others instantly at their ease. A wide, clownish smile is an ever-present accessory, and though he may be 47 this year, he still has a charming boyishness about him — "young at heart" is the phrase that comes readily to mind to describe him. Jai has no pretences and carries no airs about being one of Malaysia's most established and successful artists. He seems to take it all in his stride.

He reveals that his new series stems from the experience of telling his own two children the stories and folklore his mother used to tell him. "Stories change over the course of time," he says. "I've been telling my children stories adapted from my mum's stories every night. And it's surprising how they can relate to the stories, but in a different form. When I was telling my 10-year-old about Sang Gedembai, a character who turns you into stone when you speak to her, he immediately said: 'That's like Medusa!' — we have a Malay version of Medusa. My son didn't know about Sang Gedembai, but knew about Medusa because of a movie. It was interesting to see that link, and how he was familiar with that mythology but in a different context."

Jai says *Dendongeng* is a personal and intimate work, the storytelling an extension of two previous shows: *Linear Narratives* (2002), a delightful series on the father-and-son relationship, and *Mantera* (2004), which looked at black magic and mysticism in the Malay culture. The title, *Dendongeng*, is a marriage of two Malay words, "dendangan", to serenade, and "dongeng", which is myth or legend. "It's kind of like serenading legends or stories. I like that, it has a musical tempo to it," Jai quips.

Ever one to surprise with something different in each show, this time Jai composed poems to accompany the paintings. It is the first time he has ever done so. He says, "I'm playing with words and images, the combination of the two. It's a word of images, and the images of word. It's about words, but when translated to images gives you a different reality altogether."

Jai wrote the poems and created the paintings simultaneously. "I loved it. It was all part of the painting process. The poems are not so much an explanation of the paintings, but give a certain generality to what they are all about," he says.

Nature or nurture?

At the core of Jai the artist is one who is ever-changing, unconfined and experimental, producing shows

with that element of surprise and the unexpected. He never stops exploring and pushing back the boundaries of painting in new and exciting ways, and is adept at using different mediums, materials and techniques. He scoffs at the idea that talent has anything to do with why he is the artist he is today. To him, it all boils down to training.

He explains: "I don't believe that the artist is an individual born with a specific talent. It's methodical. You have to learn the specific method to get you into this art thing. You're not born with it. Anybody, if he or she has the interest, passion and hard work, can be an artist. Seriously!"

"Partly because I'm a teacher as well, I know the tricks. It's a system you have to learn to do things like I do. Talent, if you have it, is a bonus. But if you don't, it doesn't stop you from becoming a good artist," adds the artist, who is teaching at Universiti Teknologi Mara.

It is refreshing to see an artist who is not full of himself and who holds such a matter-of-fact and pragmatic view of things.

Jai's training in art began in the 1980s at the School of Art and Design at the then Mara Institute of Technology, where he studied fine art. I asked if he knew then that art was to be his mistress.

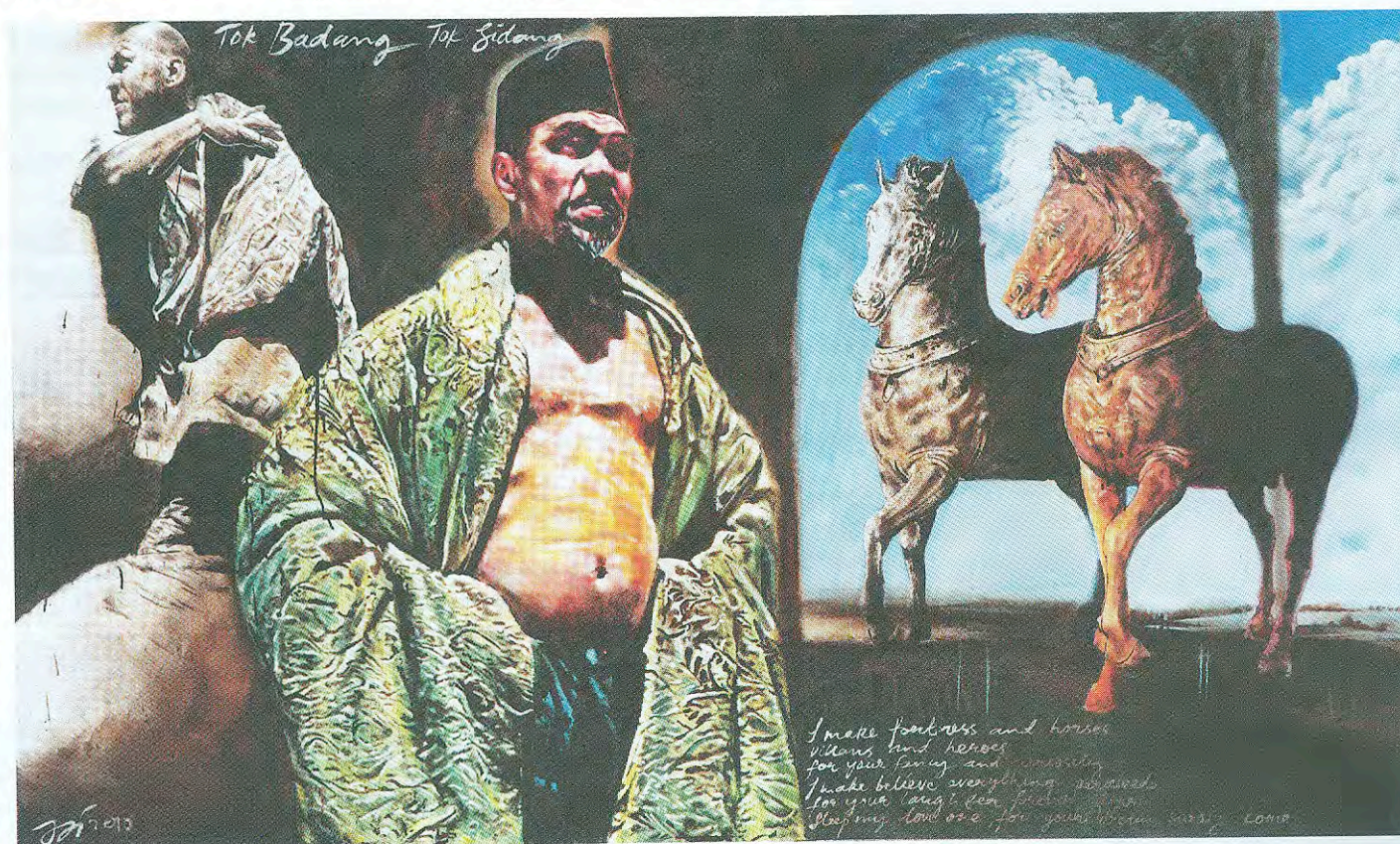
He says, "Mara was just a starting point. It was a fun place, a place where they let you do what you like, which is drawing and painting. At the time, I knew I liked it — that was it. Becoming an artist, making this my career, was the last thing on my mind. But when I got the scholarship to the prestigious Slade School of Fine Art in London and later the Pratt Institute in New York, I started to think that this is a serious thing. And you meet all these professionals, see the international artists and what was going on in London at the time, then New York, and I knew this was the thing for me. It was a journey."

How Jai came to develop his own narrative style was also very much a journey of discovery. When he first went to London, he emulated the abstract impressionist style that was all the rage then, thinking that that was how he should paint to be recognised as an artist. "That was when my professor said, 'This is not you. You come from another side of the world. You can't be doing this.' I realised it was true so I came back to my roots, and that's why until today, my work is strongly informed by local issues and Malay subjects. It's very Malaysian."

He continues, "You get more and more mature as you go along. You pick things up. You have your idol, an individual or a group that really inspires you, and

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Tok Badang
Tok Sidang



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those are the ingredients that add to your maturity. Also, my students inspire me greatly. I've been teaching for 20 years now — that's a long time. Teaching also provides a theoretical framework for me, and working in the studio is the practical framework. The combination of these two makes you more mature."

Jai is a chameleon of sorts because he changes his mediums — charcoal, bitumen, acrylic, watercolour or a combination — with each series he produces. This is why one body of work can be distinct from another. "I would like to see that as my forte, jumping from one medium to another," he says. "You tell different stories in different forms, depending on the genre of the story. Every medium speaks its own language, and you can't be telling a story without knowing what language you're going to tell it in. Also, you don't want to be trapped in your technique."

Again Jai points to his training to explain why he is so experimental. "The medium changes according to the story you want to tell, but also the fact that it has a lot to do with training. When I was in art school, you change medium according to the project given to you. Each project requires a different medium, different rationale. You can't stick to one medium for the rest of your life. God forbid, that would be the last thing an artist wants."

Jai is famous for pioneering the use of bitumen, or tar, as a painting medium in Malaysia, inspiring a generation of Malaysian painters who have adopted it.

The story behind how Jai started using bitumen in his work is a classic case of necessity being the mother of invention. "It's a sad story actually," he chuckles. "When I was studying in New York, I didn't have a lot of money. I couldn't afford expensive oil and acrylic paints, so I looked for alternatives. Instead of going to an art material shop, I would go to a hardware store, a flea market or gardening store. It forced me to become creative, to look for something else to use. At one store I found a big barrel of expired tar, or bitumen, and I could afford that. So I bought it, and that's how I started."

What began as a last resort has since become Jai's defining medium as an artist, next to acrylics. He waxes lyrical about the material. "Its character



Top: Mat Jenin and The Angel of Mercy

Right: Sang Gedembai



is similar to oil paint, and it gives you this brownish sepia tone, which you can't get from mixing on a colour palette at all. The richness and the brownish effect go very well with most of my stories, themes, concepts and ideas."

I ask him where his ideas usually come from. "Ideas

One such idea sprouted from his unease about dining out in Beijing, China. On the wall of a Chinese Muslim restaurant Jai went to hung a large poster of a cow with different parts of the animal sectioned off and labelled in Chinese — that visual caused him to lose his appetite. After coming back, he developed that into a painting, with the cow in the background and himself in the foreground. It portrayed his struggle of being in a completely foreign and unfamiliar place.

This work went on to become a defining moment in his career. Called *Halal*, the piece fetched a handsome HK\$320,000 (RM137,126) at a Christie's Southeast Asian art auction in Hong Kong in 2007.

"I never thought a painting of mine could be accepted to a Christie's auction and sold for that price. I thought, I must be doing something right, or maybe it's sheer luck," he laughs. "It's not so much about the money, but the recognition given to the work, and it's also back to the notion of how a simple idea can become such a significant thing."

Family man

Outside of his roles as an artist and academician, Jai is also the doting husband of a stylist wife and father to a 10-year-old son and six-year-old daughter ("my princess", he calls her). His son has no inclination towards art at all — "he wants to be a rocker" — but his daughter likes to draw.

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have to be invited," he says simply. "You can't wait and hope the idea comes — it doesn't work that way. Ideas have to be searched for. You have to walk the streets, mix with people, be in that situation. It doesn't have to be big things, it can be ordinary things. You can talk about the political situation if you want, or you can talk about your neighbours, which is just as important or interesting as world issues. So it depends on how you look at it, how you digest that and turn it into an interesting story."

For Jai, an idea is but the starting point. "You may think you want to do this, and it changes and becomes something else, which is totally fine. That is the interesting thing about having ideas, they evolve ... depending on your physical studio environment, the material used, the surface you're dealing with. So it's very fluid, very organic in that sense."

When he needs to "get away from this art thing", Jai dons his leather jacket and bandanna, hops onto his Harley Davidson Road King and rides off. "I love that ... sometimes you just want to switch off, so you take off. And you mix around with people who have nothing to do with this art thing, who don't even care who you are ... We never discuss career or business, we're just a bunch of Harley enthusiasts — we just love bikes."

As the interview draws to a close, I ask him where he sees himself in his career. "Definitely not been there, done that yet — I have a long way to go. I always look at myself as progressing. Every piece of work I make, every exhibition I put up, is always a step ahead, a progression from the previous one, always to the better. I don't think I'm there yet, wherever 'there' is."

We'll definitely be seeing more from this visual weaver of tales in the years ahead.