

Jalaini Abu Hassan and the Malaysian Contemporary

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One of the greatest challenges facing any artist working in Malaysia today is identifying a context. We live in a society built on shifting ground, in a new country with long and variegated cultural roots, within a larger sphere which is growing increasingly partisan, volatile and opaque. There is barely time to calibrate the changes that alter our lives on so many levels at such a rapid pace. Experience is at best ambiguous.

The history of fine art practice in Malaysia is short, although it tells the story of how individuals and groups have sought in myriad ways to find a visual language to capture local experience and to address pertinent issues of nationhood, identity, ethnicity, community, the religious and the spiritual. It tells the story of a post-colonial past, native and migrant peoples, an emerging modern state full of hope, a multicultural society trying to come to terms with diverging interests and ideas. The very role and nature of artistic practice has continually been questioned and reinterpreted in the local context from one generation of artists to the next.

The story of Jalaini Abu Hassan, or Jai as he is best known, is one of change, adaptability, survival and good fortune. *Jalak* follows the making of an artist through the changing processes of his work, how he tries to place himself and his art within this quite

special Malaysian contemporary context and beyond, negotiating a changing world, and a changing life, in almost purely visual terms.

Jai was born in 1963 in the state of Selangor. The second son of four children, he was almost named "Jalak", champion of the roost. His father was a soldier in the British Army and Jai's childhood was spent moving from one army base to another around the country. He attended an English medium primary school in Batu Kurau, a little boy learning to draw imaginary still-lives, and the world of soldiers, cars, *kampung* houses that surrounded him.

By the sixth form, he had decided to pursue his vocation to "draw and paint", and enrolled at Mara Institute of Technology (ITM), then and still the largest fine art educational institution in the country. His peer group graduated in 1985, at the height of an economic recession. He joined Anak Alam ("sons of nature"), a haven for Malay artists and poets initiated by artist-poet Latiff Mohidin in the 1970s, surviving by odd jobs. Nonetheless, that year he won first prize at the National Art Gallery's Young Contemporaries Art Competition, won an ASEAN travel grant to Manila and was granted a scholarship to study at The Slade School of Fine Art in London.

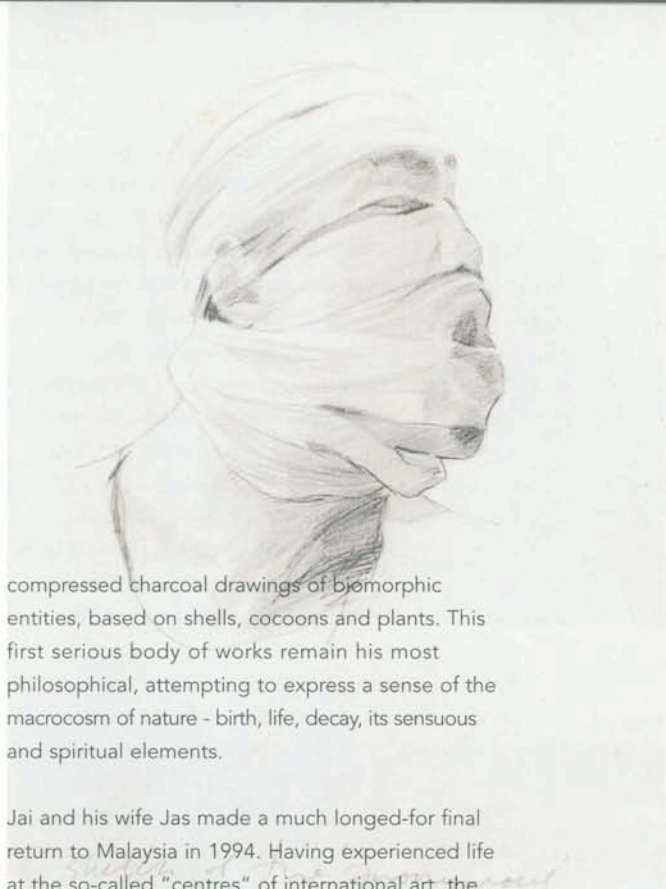
Jai's years at The Slade provided a strong foundation, and opened him up to very different realms of experience. He studied under the likes of Bruce Mc Lean, Uan Uglow and Mick Moon. He produced the powerful *Bondage* series, figurative works making use of the self-portrait, in reaction to the South African boycott in Britain in 1987. He hung out in the West End, travelled overland across Europe, West Asia and Pakistan. After London, he came back to Malaysia, teaching at ITM for three years, and getting married, before receiving a second scholarship, this time to study at the Pratt Institute in New York.

In New York, Jai learnt to break the rules, enjoying a sense of personal and artistic freedom that has driven his work ever since. In a tough city and its famously competitive art scene, he held a solo show in Brooklyn and won first prize for drawing in the Murray Hill Art Competition. At the time, it seemed to Jai that American art was still very much in awe of giants like Jackson Pollock, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein and James Rosenquist, and there seemed to be an almost decadent climate still celebrating the all-American dream. He actively sought alternatives to this mainstream, attracted instead to the work of "outsiders" such as German Neo-Expressionists Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer, who were exhibiting in the city, and extremely influential in the larger picture of contemporary art, with their radical new approaches to the painting process. Jai particularly admired the immediacy of Julian Schnabel's explosive, uninhibited paintings, and this notorious artist's hit-or-miss/all-or-nothing efforts. This idea of risk-taking, of exploring the boundless possibilities of painting and its materials, what he himself calls "the open-ended areas on either side of meaning and symbolic communication" becomes key to Jai's own approach. At Pratt, he developed *Life Form* (pp. 32-35), a body of giant

compressed charcoal drawings of biomorphic entities, based on shells, cocoons and plants. This first serious body of works remain his most philosophical, attempting to express a sense of the macrocosm of nature - birth, life, decay, its sensuous and spiritual elements.

Jai and his wife Jas made a much longed-for final return to Malaysia in 1994. Having experienced life at the so-called "centres" of international art, the return to a very different milieu, where artists continually struggle to find a voice or a place in society, saw Jai step up to a set of different challenges. He went back to teaching at ITM, fathered a son, Jabil, in 1999, and a daughter, Jada, in 2004, while continuously developing and exhibiting perennially fresh new series of work. Currently working on a studio-based PhD, he held his sixteenth one-man show last year in 2005.

A basic tenet of Jai's thinking and a key to reading his work is that his art is inseparable from his being and experience. Broadly, we might term Jai a "process painter", primarily interested in what happens in the act of making a work, exploring material, following through the accidents of drawing



i Study for Bondage Series

1987, Compressed charcoal on paper

29 x 21 cm

Private Collection, Kuala Lumpur

ii Visual Documentation 1

1991, Watercolour on paper

76 x 56 cm

Artist's Collection

iii Study for Life Form

1993, Mixed media on paper

19.5 x 27 cm

Artist's Collection



iv **Keris Pesaka (Manjapahit)**
1999, Mixed media on paper,
110 x 74 cm
Collection of Tengku Ibrahim
Petra & Nariza Hashim

v **14 Mangkok**
1999, Mixed media on paper,
108 x 74 cm
Collection of Rosemary
& Steve Wong

vi **Maaf Jika Tersentuh
Susumu Yang Penuh...**
2002, Mixed media on canvas
69 x 69 cm
Collection of Rosemary
& Steve Wong

vii **Study of Jabil & The
Astronaut**
2002, Mixed media on paper,
20.5 x 31.5 cm
Collection of Rosemary
& Steve Wong

1 Galerie Taksu,
Kuala Lumpur, 1998

2 *petai* - a pungent
green bean used in Malay home
cooking, or eaten raw; *congkak*
- a two-person strategy game
played in Malaysia, Indonesia
and the Philippines, from
"congklak", or cowrie shells,
often used as game-pieces;
sarang burung tempua - weaver
bird's nest

3 Project Room, Barbara
Greene Fine Art, New York, and
Jai, Sunjin Gallery, Singapore,
both 2000

4 "...Jai uses Malay to push
home his feelings... in most of
the works. For an artist seeking
a larger, international audience,
the use of the vernacular is
always a risk", Iqbal Abdul
Rahim, "Controlled
Spontaneity", Jai, Galerie
Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, 2002

and mark-making, looking into new processes. It is an approach informed by and which grows out of developments in late 20th century western painting. It suits an artist who likes the freedom of going back to basics, whose art essentially stems from the primal or child-like impulse to draw and make marks, never aiming at the finished object. Running in tandem with this impulse, however, is Jai's innate sense of narrative, his love of the object, its line and form, and his acute sense of time and place. Like the young student eager for adventure while longing for the familiarity of home, his work constantly pushes in new directions in terms of form and technique while remaining rooted in his experience of the world immediately around him.

Following an exhibition of his *Life Form* drawings, Jai's second show after returning from New York, *Re-Found Object* (1) (pp. 38-39), featured a series of works on paper we might describe as unravelled, floating still-lives. Using charcoal, acrylic and watercolour, working on a flat picture plane awash with bright tropical or richly burnished colours, Jai has boldly outlined rubber slippers, bananas, lotus roots, *petai*, local flowers and fronds, *congkak* boards, *sarang burung tempua*, bowls and other kitchen vessels (2), together with elements of his *Life Forms*, in a vivid, intuitive mental map of seen objects. It is work that is confessedly attractive, and celebratory, intended to engage his audience in an immediate, sensory way. Jai is seldom an introspective artist - as much as he is interested in exploring the process of making art, he is equally concerned with the viewer's response. Here he focuses on the basic

impulses of drawing and how drawn images work as a visual trigger, how a picture is pieced together from bare bones. At the same time, he builds up a lexicon of forms specific to his experience - objects found and kept in his studio, used in the kitchen, remembered from childhood, and familiar to a local audience, that he will continue to use throughout his future work. These motifs hold cultural weight, and often have symbolic nuances, and we see in these drawings the echoes of casual, everyday narratives - a hint at a romantic tryst in a pair of teacups, a conversation with friends over three glasses of *teh tarik halia*. A handwritten note, phrase or line of a poem scrawled in a corner, as if on the page of a sketchbook, might further nudge our reading.



iv



v

By 1999, the bright and playful excursions into local "still-life" have begun to grow into more ambitious projects (pp. 40-47). In 2000, Jai was working towards two solo shows abroad in New York and Singapore (3). The body of work which emerged shows a marked leap in formal complexity, even while it retains the core imagery of the earlier drawings. Jai, faced with the prospect of a new audience, pushed himself to present what is essentially a Malaysian vernacular in a compact and rigorous language which would translate in the international field (4). The native intuition, the spontaneity of the local artist's approach is now couched in a more sophisticated vein, addressing broad formal, painterly concerns. The loose energy of his drawings is channelled into tighter compositional plays, elements of his objects are picked out and schematised - for example, the rhythmic pattern of the *congkak*

board. Bright washes give way to a more sombre and serious mood, colour becomes an accent in a shifting grid of white space and deep shadows. More often than not, a single object anchors the activity. After working primarily on paper, Jai begins to take on the large canvas as well, answering to its fresh demands and possibilities. Process still drives the painter, but now involves texture, contrast and pattern, making for a richer compositional narrative. We reach a mature climax to a long investigation of local forms. Many of the strategies that he works out here will provide a basis for work to come, especially his focus on the narrative of process.

The following year, Jai makes a complete turnaround with a series of works in acrylic on canvas which enter into a different genre of painting (pp. 50-56). We come into a more literal pictorial world of interiors and street scenes. Jai had been looking for a new angle, something different to draw. At the time, he and fellow artists were discussing ideas about design and illustration, movie posters, advertisements, book and album covers, the tactics of in-your-face mass culture. Jai appropriates some of the devices and aesthetics of 60s Pop - its simplified illustrative style, its gaudy colours and dated look, using them to recreate and make iconic a remembered world of big cars, barber-shop chairs, ceiling fans, *kampung* life - his childhood Malaysia, post-war, post-Independence, a quiet community taking on the trappings of modernisation, American mass culture.

Jai's focus is no longer on painterly strategies and their range of effects, instead he now explores the power of the image, and pictorial narrative development. He has not wandered too far from his schema: we can see the skeleton of his visual map, once populated by free-floating objects, spatial planes and shadows, taking on a new guise in faded technicolour. The object forms Jai has been using are put back into context - bananas hang in bunches, glasses rest on the ground. Text is stencilled as labels on the surface, often flipped backwards. Here is an investigation into the process of distant memory, of imagining time and place, of the quality of nostalgia. The compositions are very still, the visual triggers he uses are still familiar, now buried by years. The space they inhabit is not literal



vi



vii

or specific but imaginary - Jai's treatment of perspective is loose and undeliberate, still driven by the flow of thought. Colours are another trigger - used flat, they fill spaces and things, jarring against each other. The clarity and familiarity of the content of the paintings offer a sense of safety for the viewer, but Jai immediately undermines this by provoking feelings of displacement. Time has the same effect - "modern life" changed the world of the *kampung* before a child's eyes, and the decades that have followed stretch us even further away, making keener the feeling of longing.

The paintings of 2001 lead into *Linear Narratives*, an exhibition in 2002 (5) (pp. 57-62). Concerns with time and nostalgia weave into a more personal and specific exploration of narrative. Jai's son Jabil is by now three-years-old, and as a father, he is taking on the role of story-teller, passing down the lessons and joys of his childhood and reaching into his child's future. The viewer is emphatically played to – the child listener. Many of the canvases take on a panoramic form, prompting a different, "linear" way of reading. It is a new "cinematic approach to visual narrative" (6), taking the appropriation of mass media aesthetics a step further. The figure has made a very occasional appearance in his work so far, but here father and son come in as characters in a pictorial record of their dialogue. These are conversations about boys' things – aeroplanes, cars, friends, animals, robots and Ultraman, a red bus, a tricycle – experiences that span time and place and generations. For the first time, action comes into play – we follow toy cars, real cars, toy planes, real planes around the surface of the paintings through areas of activity, bursts of texture and colour, eye-catching patterns. By 2003, some of the stories have become more sombre. The war on Iraq has begun. In a very unusual reference to current events, Jai made a pair of paintings titled *The Peacekeeper* and *And the Peacekeeping Plan...* (7) (pp. 64-65), in which the central character is a large bull. Here the warplanes loom real, smoke rises on the horizon.

As abruptly as he entered the world of "real" images, Jai leaves it again as he prepares a new body of paintings for a solo exhibition in Jakarta, *WIP – Work in Progress* (2003) (8) (pp. 69-73). Working on the *tabula rasa* of the unprimed canvas, he returns to the problems of painterly process, seeking a new way to approach it. He has moved out from his studio at home, with its familiar clutter, to a bare space in the back of a friend's animation house, open to the hot outdoors. Here he investigates a fresh means of mark-making, using found objects or cut-out stencils as templates which he "burnishes" onto the bare canvases. In a process similar to the brass-rubbing used by archaeologists, a template – a car licence plate, a pair of tongs, a gun – is placed under the canvas on which he then uses a dry brush coated with bitumen.

The "paintings" appear like the backside of paintings – everything is in reverse, turned inside out, carrying the imprint, or fossil, of man-made objects, symbols, language. We are in those first caves we discovered, looking at the shadows of things. Narrative line and colour give way to basic textural narrative; colour is almost altogether leached in the final event, only blood crimson makes a showing. In *Bio and Non-Bio* Jai makes oblique references to molecular structure – if there is any theme to this series it lies in the elemental. We are made to work much harder to read the visual triggers, marks as signs, to follow the trail of his progress. The whole experiment is almost an early definition of the painter's work, the making of marks, the translation of form into image.

The elemental process of making art steers Jai into his next project, *Mantera* (9) (pp. 76-87). The theme of this series is unusually specific, encompassing the world of mysticism and ritual, particularly in the context of Malay culture – the world of *bomoh* (10), miraculous plants, lucky charms and magical stones. These interplay with Balinese masks, Chinese and Indian symbols. "Mantera" derives from the Sanskrit *mantra* (11). A pivotal analogy is drawn between art-making and magic, between the artist and the conjurer. Jai returns to drawing, working mostly in charcoal and employing both tried and new techniques of rendering to create a realm of shadows and mysteries. Exotic symbols are pregnant with unknown significance, random scribbles appear cryptic, masks loom. Smooth stones are rendered out of negative space, their shape created out of the velvet density of surrounding charcoal, like magic. "His working drawings... are studies of temperament, where the artist searches for the 'mysterious'"





ix



x

qualities of inanimate objects, forms and textures to suggest the inner spirit of matter" (12). The larger drawings are narratives, often created around a central figure – the *serai wangi* (lemongrass) plant, said to be the hiding place for treasures borrowed by *orang bunyian* (13) (p. 81), or the magnificent Tok Batin, a famous real-life bomoh from the state of Pahang (14) (p. 79).

Towards the end of *Mantera*, there are three giant portraits of the artist as *bomoh* - *Bomoh Hujan* (rainmaker), *Bomoh Urut* (medicine man), *Bomoh Patah* (fixer of broken parts) (pp. 85-87). The artist exposes himself in a rare fit of exhibitionism, underlining, interestingly, his Malay roots and "identity" (15). He is dressed up as a stereotype, the "magic-maker" in *songkok*, *kain pelikat* and white Pagoda t-shirt (16) surrounded by tools of "his" trade – drawn forms, magical objects. He is coy, at a bit of a loss in his grandiosity and even rather camp-looking. The artist concludes with a powerful parody of his central thesis - a caricature of his "identity", as a "Malay artist", as a "magic-maker".

Jai has always made references to specific aspects of Malay culture and a traditional Malay way of life, yet these have been part and parcel of a larger reality permeating his work. His expression of his Malaysian experience is overwhelmingly personal and non-precious, making no specific claims, trying no definitions. In a contemporary urban context, much of the visual information he offers might even be read as a nostalgic ideal – it speaks of community, shared memories, shared histories.

Following the *Mantera* exhibition, Jai formed part of a group of artists commissioned to work on the theme of traditional craft and performance in Kelantan and Terengganu (17). In recent years, there have been efforts to document and raise awareness of these northern states as a surviving centre of the Malay arts. From the field trip, Jai produced a set of beautifully executed portraits on paper, of a *keris*-maker and *silat* practitioners (18), among others, rendered in charcoal, pencil and brilliant watercolour, a favourite medium of the his early youth. These studies pay homage to a generation of craftsmen-artists guarding a disappearing tradition, and Jai lovingly records the strength and wisdom written in their physiognomy. At the same time, he also continued to explore the *bomoh* theme in watercolour.

5 Gallerie Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, 2002

6 Iqbal Abdul Rahim, *Linear Narratives*, Gallerie Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, 2002

7 Exhibited in Games People Play, WWF Art For Nature Charity Exhibition, Rimbun Dahan, Kuang, Selangor

8 Gallerie Taksu, Jakarta, 2003

9 Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, 2004

10 A Malay traditional psychic healer, magician or fortune teller

11 a special word used in meditation, a sacred message or text, or charm, a spell and counsel; a prayer, an invocation or a religious formula; an instrument of thought

12 Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Mantera*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, 2004

13 *orang bunyian* are a species in Malay legends, said to inhabit the deep forests, possess great supernatural powers, and have been known to befriend and assist humans, in particular pawangs or bomohs

14 Long Bin Hok from the Jah-hut tribe of Sungai Krau in Pahang, who was declared the late Sultan Abu Bakar's official state bomoh, *penglipurlara* (storyteller) and *puyang* (powerful shaman)

15 The Malay community make up over half the population of multi-ethnic Malaysia; Malay is the national language, Bahasa Malaysia

viii Spare Parts

2003, Mixed media on canvas
69 x 69 cm

Artist's Collection

ix Working Drawing V (Mantera)

2004, Charcoal, bitumen, ink & pastel on paper
102 x 81 cm

Collection of Farha Nor

x Pak Jeng Rokok Daun (Seated)

2005, Watercolour on paper
100 x 70 cm

Collection of Mr. & Mrs Too Hing Yeap

16 *songkok*-Malay headdress for Muslim prayer (for men); *kain pelikat* - traditional checked wrap worn by Malay men; white Pagoda t-shirt-common locally made t-shirt

17 to complement an exhibition of the work of renowned *keris*-maker, the late Nik Rashiddin, *Spirit of the Wood and Other Treasures*, Gallerie Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, 2005

18 *keris* - Malay/Indonesian dagger, often with a wavy blade; *silat* - Malay/Indonesian martial arts form

These watercolour studies provide a starting point to Jai's most recent complete body of work, exhibited as *Wet Paint* (2005) (19) (pp.90-101), his most ambitious project to date. The focus here is once again process, akin to the *WIP* works in its experimental spirit. If *WIP* examines the primal creation of marks and images, these new paintings explore surface noise, how a painting is constructed and how the viewer might read, not the final picture, but that very act of construction and the strategies involved. Fascinated again by the effects created by watercolour, Jai started by trying out the possibilities of water-based media on canvas and during this initial phase of experiment began to develop ideas about the role of accident and the impossibility of completion.

xi Tok Bomoh

2004, Watercolour on paper
41 x 32 cm
Private Collection

"The evocative narratives of previous series have been eroded by a new concentration on surface narrative, regaling unique histories of how each painting is made. The artist reduces the viewer's creative options through a number of optical interferences." (20)

19 Valentine Willie Fine Art,
Kuala Lumpur, 2005

20 Adeline Ooi, *Wet Paint*,
Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala
Lumpur, 2005


21 gelang getah – rubber
band

22 baju melayu – traditional
Malay dress worn by men

23 Latiff Mohidin, *Kulukis*
Engkau, Hofheim, 1963

On several of the canvases he begins with enlarged figures from existing watercolour studies. These already "complete" images provide just a first layer, upon which he then posits further layers. In *Hulu Balang Kuala Sepetang* (p. 96), Jai employs a whole gamut of forms and strategies from his historical oeuvre - we see echoes of plant studies, the pattern of the *congkak*, the cartoon outline of a robot, filling every nook of the surface. In *Gelang Getah* (21) (p. 100), we recognize the same echoes, but within the painting itself there are loose rhymes which link its drastically different layers, however precariously. A boy in *baju melayu* (22) and *songkok*, taken from a working drawing, stands "at the back", veiled by a layer of dry bitumen, and a double layer of brightly coloured circular stamps. The loose red lines of rubber bands play in and out of this double layer, and among them is also a tiny red doodle of a tricycle. On the left of the painting is a "real" tricycle from *Linear Narratives* and, somewhere hidden within the surface is the fine outline of another, larger tricycle. These paintings do not stop anywhere, and never let the viewer rest, making us continually search for meaning.





While Jai refuses to acknowledge any specific subject or story in any of the paintings, however, and while his emphasis is on the processes of constructing and reading, his personal interests and concerns still ring clearly through the noise. The tensions and the complex histories that underpin these paintings are not merely formal. By making references to earlier images, strategies and forms in his work, and to his immediate surroundings – to family, friends, the rituals of daily life, he really presents us with a non-linear autobiography of himself and his work.

Within this wide arc of experience, we can measure the distance and continuities between grandfather, father and son, *kampung* and city life, the weight or value of tradition in a modern context, the mass and the personal, an ambition to progress tempered by a lingering sense of nostalgia, an artist's pride allayed by a humble, almost self-deprecating sense of irony. Crossing generations and crossing cultural histories, there is strife and there is reconciliation. They resonate most strongly as we weave in and out of the shifting layers of these most recent paintings, but we can trace this dynamic through the whole progress of Jai's work over the years.

One of the paintings in *Wet Paint* is *Tribute to Latiff Mohidin* (p. 98). This seminal artist-poet has been an inspiration to many – a brilliant, independent light in both the Malay world and the Southeast Asian

region. For Jai, he might be regarded as something of an artistic father-figure – decades earlier, Latiff Mohidin went to art school abroad (in Germany), and later the Pratt Graphic Centre in New York, travelled across Europe and Southeast Asia with a sketchbook, and explored vernacular forms for a new idiom for modern Malaysian painting. Ultimately, his achievements have to do with the expression of emotional and spiritual experience, bound up with the forces of nature, where Jai's art is founded on the temporal – on adventures in life and in the studio. They belong to different generations of the same lineage, seeking to give voice to their particular reality. In the painting sits a man alongside a rooster. They appear behind a "lattice" screen, tracing the forms of a Malay woodcarving, and across the surface Jai has written out the text of Latiff Mohidin's poem *Kulukis Engkau (I Draw You)* (23). The poem speaks of the fundamental act of drawing as an act of love, using the raw materials of the world that surrounds us. Somewhere within the unstable narrative and its layers of metaphor lies a tribute to eloquence, to the artist's endeavour and its continuity. *Jalak*, the rooster, the young champion, stands to the side, a quiet but definite presence in the larger, ever-changing picture.

JALAK: Jalaini Abu Hassan

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