

JALAINI ABU HASSAN



BANGSAWAN KEBANGSAAN

Tales of the

BANGSAWAN KEBANGSAAN
JALAINI ABU HASSAN

FOREWORD

TYLER ROLLINS

Tyler Rollins Fine Art is pleased to present *Bangsawan Kebangsaan*, a solo exhibition of new works by Jalaini Abu Hassan, taking place from April 28 – June 11, 2011. Jai, as he is also known, is one of Malaysia's most highly respected contemporary artists. He returns to New York this spring for his first US solo exhibition in over ten years, comprising a new body of mixed media works on canvas and paper.

Malaysia has a dynamic and diverse contemporary art scene, which is still little known in the United States. Jai's exhibition will give American audiences a rare opportunity for an in-depth viewing of the work of one of Malaysia's leading contemporary artists. The exhibition's title refers to a form of Malay popular opera (*Bangsawan*) and the notion of the national (*Kebangsaan*) – something like a "National Operetta." During its heyday from the 1920s through the '60s, *Bangsawan* combined Malay and Western styles, along with Indian and Chinese influences, and featured colorful, often satiric stories and stock characters such as the prince, shaman, and beautiful maiden. Jai remembers these performances as a main source of entertainment in the Malay village where he grew up in the 1960s and '70s. Like the *Bangsawan* operas, Jai's show puns on ideas of cultural framing, political drama, and the artist on stage. In a sense, Jai's exhibition also constitutes a play about the artist's own oeuvre, as themes and characters from his earlier works reappear here, as if to be introduced to New York audiences in a special performance.

Jai's work is infused with references to traditional Malay life and culture while being actively engaged in contemporary developments in Malaysia's rapidly changing society. His work is also informed by an international perspective and cosmopolitan outlook, the product of extensive graduate training abroad. Jai received an MA from the Slade School of Fine Art in London and an MFA from the Pratt Institute in New York. It was while living in New York City that he first began to paint with bitumen, which has since become one of his principal media. Since his first solo show in London in 1987, his work has appeared in almost sixty exhibitions in Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. He remains fascinated by the power of iconic imagery, whether traditional or contemporary, and by the process of making the art object – as he restlessly pushes the boundaries of drawing and painting.

An interview with Jalaini Abu Hassan at his studio in Bukit Antarabangsa, Kuala Lumpur, 25th March 2011.

B: I think that this exhibition in New York for you marks a very interesting intersection in your career. Eighteen years ago you were there as a student at the Pratt Institute, and that experience and training helped lay the foundations of your approach to painting. Since your return to Malaysia, the development of your work has been deeply rooted in the local, finding a broad range of expressions of your personal experience of that environment. In coming back to New York to exhibit (for the second time), you bring that experience with you. There may have been a long gap in between, but in a sense this is a continuation of a dialogue between two seemingly distant cultures that you have engaged with.

I'd like to begin by turning back the clock to what you found when you first got there as an art student. What was your first impression of New York?

J: It was like I'd expected. I remember being in the middle of Times Square with my wife, Jas. I was very excited: we said, "No way, we're actually here!" It was like being in a scene from a movie, the whole thing moving very fast, and you saw the stretch limos, the celebrities.

B: How did you find the local cultural landscape? How did it feel to be a Malaysian artist in New York?

J: I'm sure I was the only Malay artist at Pratt, probably the only artist from a Third World country. I took elective classes like "New York Cultural Scene," where we went to see plays, and the ballet. I even took up Martha Graham dance classes. Funnily enough, there was even a class on Third World economy.

B: What do you think influenced you most in your training at the Pratt? Which artists made the greatest impact on how you felt you wanted to approach your own art-making?

J: I couldn't help but compare it with London, because I was fresh from the Slade. Both experiences had strengths of their own which strengthened my work.

At the Slade, I was trained in a formal studio environment, figure drawing classes, the material of oil painting. I wanted to get away from that. In New York, I found bitumen, which became my first attempt at a non-conventional approach to material, it gave me a sense of freedom. I began to focus on drawing, especially using charcoal, which worked best for an early series of large-scale works called *LifeForm*. Both bitumen and charcoal have become key materials in my work.

CULTURAL DISTANCE: JOURNEYS BETWEEN NEW YORK AND KUALA LUMPUR

BEVERLY YONG

In New York, they fed us with Pollock, Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg, we were coached with this. Up to a certain level, I just had enough. So I looked at the new German artists – New York was the center of everything and I got to see Richter’s real work, Kiefer’s real work, even Beuys. I could relate to them because they were rebuilding, healing their country – compared to the US, where there was a different agenda. I liked Beuys’ remarkable statement that the best artwork he ever created was to be a teacher.

New York to me was running away from certain rules and idolizations, and looking for alternatives. Running from the system, running away from all these abstract expressionists. I was a “rebel with a cause,” and in that way I think fitted in.

New York was a turning point. My professors, they were professionals, and they encouraged students to come and see their work, their studios. So I think this is the place where I decided: “This is it. This is me. This is what I’m going to be.” Because you had the example, the model, as a first hand experience.

B: How did you apply your knowledge and experience gleaned from your time in New York when starting out a career at home?

J: I was sent there to become an artist and a teacher, and you can’t separate these two things. Whatever I planned in New York artistically or educationally, I was always thinking about delivering this knowledge and experience back home. When I returned, they asked me to set up a new drawing syllabus, a new structure for the painting syllabus, even the whole approach to teaching art.

B: What was it like coming home? It seems to me that throughout quite different bodies of work, you’ve consistently developed a sort of vocabulary and grammar for your locale, creating your own unique drawing approach. Your earlier works draw on local flora and fauna, objects of the everyday to create what I think of as abstracted, intuitive visual poems about home and memory.

J: When I came back, I found that I did not fit in somehow with what other artists I knew were doing. “Had I been taught differently?” I wondered, “Do I belong to a different generation?” I tried to adjust and re-evaluate myself, did research, “re-looked” for objects, giving them new life. I called an early series *Re-found Objects*.

B: Then you brought a small body of works to New York in 2000¹ ... what was the response?

J: It was only a small drawing show. Our plan was to go with larger paintings, but I wasn’t that confident then. We sent about eight pieces and didn’t even frame them, just pinning them on the wall.

And there was a great response, I was surprised.

B: In the early 2000s, you were exploring narratives of place, creating a kind of “pop retro” aesthetic of a remembered *kampung* (village) childhood but one infused with the presence of modern globalism and popular, Americanized, culture. They also seem to talk about you and your son, Jabil – two different eras. I recall particularly two paintings which featured American warplanes and buffalo, during the second Gulf War². I think this is the first glimpse we get of the notion of cultural distance, and cultural proximity in your work, and the problem of its representation. Where did you see yourself as an artist within this landscape?

J: I was born in a small village, and all of a sudden there was ... London, New York. I think it helped me to look at myself again. I was no longer a small kid from the *kampung*, I had bigger responsibilities, as a teacher too. I could see myself as absorbing or borrowing or adopting certain foreign elements, digesting, re-creating, sharing. Both things have become the core ingredient in most of my work - the global and international, and this little *kampung*, Malay “retro” culture. When I was in the US, I saw it as the ideal nation. Then all of a sudden I’m back here. You look at “them,” look at yourself, the war, terrorism, President Bush (the second), and you start having a different view.

B: Over the past six or seven years, your work has become predominantly figurative, and narrative. It seems increasingly to focus on aspects of Malay folklore and politics, often using your own self-portrait as the jester, healer, demon or story-teller in these compositions.

J: I was trained as a figurative painter but I always had this conflict about being a Malay Muslim artist painting figures. While working on my doctorate, I started reading more about Islamic art and its long and important tradition of figuration, since the 16th century, in Persian, Mughal art. The 12th century Muslim scholar Muhammad Ghazali argued that there should be exceptions to the rule on not depicting the figure, depending on one’s *niat*, or purpose. After studying the issue, I felt more liberated in a sense to develop my work in figuration. But essentially, the figures and objects in my works, iconographically, have the same resonance, deal with the same story.

B: The framing of Malaysia has changed in your work, and so has your “location.” It seems to hold up a mirror to our society. In his essay in the catalogue to the exhibition *Chanang* in Jakarta (2008)³, Simon Soon discusses how you explore and manage the politics of representation, playing with ideas of *halal* and *haram*, what is perceived as permitted or forbidden, good or bad. *Chanang* paints a very critical picture of Malaysian politics and its effect on society.

J: *Chanang* means “to make a loud noise.” It was meant for a different, outside audience, which does give you a kind of freedom, though you don’t want to abuse or take advantage of that. I wanted to talk about the state of Malaysia right now in a way I couldn’t back home. I could disengage myself, step back.

B: Your last exhibition in KL, *Dengdongdeng*, was inspired by the stories told to you as a child, that you tell to your children today, about princes and warriors and demons. For this show in New York, you have a very different audience. How do you imagine this audience, and what sort of stories are you trying to convey?

J: I have to bear in mind that generally these are people that view Islam as a threat; it’s a society that’s cautious of what other people think about them, and perhaps has less friends and more enemies than rest of the world, with its paranoia after 9/11.

Here I am coming to their backyard – I’m a Muslim from a third world country, or no longer a third world country now but a developed country. I was taught here, trained here, so I’m part of this culture whether you like it or not. My language, my icons, my references come from this very ground – I’ve gone home to my country and I’m coming back here showing you what I have using your tools, equipment, knowledge.

B: Would you say there is an overarching theme to this series of stories?

J: Not exactly. I’ve been reflecting on my previous exhibitions – I wanted to bring different elements of my work to a new audience. They are Malaysian stories, though not specific – fragmented memories of stories picked up along the way. I took a look at my inventory of references and images and objects I’ve collected all this while and tried to compose from here. All these people are from my personal photo albums – of weddings, *kenduri*⁴. Some are deliberately misplaced. I don’t worry about meanings, I’m exploring the mystery of the image, searching for its strength, seeing whether or not it can offer a story.

***Bangsawan*⁵ is a stage show. When I was young, every time we had a festival or celebration, even a wedding, we made a wooden stage in the village. We’d use it for dancing when I was a teenager – we didn’t have nightclubs then. So in various paintings here there is a connotation of a stage. In this one, the Malay maiden contrasts with the huge dog with his ass facing the audience, and there’s a *bomoh* (healer) at the back acting as a gatekeeper – me, detached from any personal involvement with the story.**

***Tales of Heroes* is about my family. My grandfather was a *bomoh*, and my father was also a “*bomoh*” in the British army – he was a dresser with the medical team. He has a heart problem,**

but he’s a strong man. There are more heroes in the *Blind Musician*. There are two separate stories going on here. I remember my daughter Jada giving this man some money, like an angel. In comes a prince (he’s a *bangsawan* actor), swaggering proudly, but his sarong (sheath) is empty, there’s no sword, only a false sense of security.

The character Pak Kadok in *Mimpi Pak Kadok* (Pak Kadok’s Dream) is a dreamer. I wanted to play around with the proportions in this work. I thought I’d make fun of a picture I have of this sexy lady on a bike, so instead of a bike I put her on a cow. It’s a little toy actually, like the spaceship. But the bus is very much a local Malaysian bus.

In *Srikandi*, each character stands on his or her own personal stage. There’s a sense of a space landing. In the foreground there is a dancing lady in a *tudung* (headscarf). The rooster mask on the ghostly figure in the background is a reference to “*bapak ayam*,” which is slang for “pimp.” And then there’s a plane, and a rice bowl.

B: Yes, this work speaks to me quite strongly of a third-worldist kind of stance, quite a clear narrative, whereas *Ikan Segar* is a bit obscure. The red onions and garlic – *bawang merah*, *bawang putih* – that refers to an old Malay story, doesn’t it?

J: Yes, it’s like a Malay version of Cinderella, which starts with a girl’s mother being cursed and turned into a fish, and thrown into a well. Every day the girl goes to the well to talk to the fish, telling her how she’s being tortured by her stepmother and sister. When they find out about this, they fry the fish and serve it to the girl, who eats it without knowing it’s her mother, and so on. The two sisters’ names were Bawang Merah and Bawang Putih. Near my home there’s this little van selling fish, with this huge sign that says “*Ikan Segar*” – “Fresh Fish,” and you ask yourself, are they really fresh? Fresh enough to jump out of the van? You get this wild idea and then you start connecting it with the story of *bawang putih* and *bawang merah*. I like the mystery, the misplacing of the images.

B: There’s an interesting risk-taking here, of references getting “lost in translation,” which you seem to revel in. These last three paintings, for example, seem deliberately provocative.

J: Yes. *Post-Colonial Landscape* refers to the *Great Malaysian Landscape* works I made for *Chanang*. What do you think the nude is doing there? The two things don’t belong together at all, they’re foreign to each other – the *kebun getah* (rubber plantation), and the naked, hippie flower-child. She’s “*haram*,” of course, but it’s also a Western art narrative in the local landscape.

The *King of Prejudis* is King Kong, here a domesticated, tame king. We’re talking about prejudice as a political issue in Malaysia – between the Chinese and the Malay, and the rise of Perkasa⁶. The statue is actually from outside the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney,

and the man on the horse is an aborigine, not a white man.

I like that there are these stereotypes the audience is going to react to. In *Korban Kerbau Betina*, the image conjures up issues of animal brutality in art (which has been topical), and torture.

B: But the process of *korban* is actually good and clean, *halal*, inflicting the least suffering to the beast. Tell us about *korban*.

J: It celebrates the last day of the haj pilgrimage – eid el haj. We share the meat, to help the poor. It goes back to Ibrahim’s sacrifice of his son. In Malaysia we divide each cow into seven sections – if you have the money you buy one cow, if not you can just pay for one section – which will be distributed to the poor. Last year we had cow number seven. The whole family went to see the slaughter; Jada had to watch – she was scared of the blood. It looks mean and scary, but there’s no way you’re going to kill the cow without tying it up like that. The knife has to be extremely sharp and the imam has to make sure it stays in contact with the body until the arteries are cut. We pray, recite from the Koran, and within a few minutes they are cutting up the meat.

I chose this subject in *Gincu Merah* because she’s so young – three or four years’ old and she’s wearing *tudung*, Islamic dress. Her really red lipstick contrasts with the extreme Islamic religiosity. She’s still just a little girl. The lipstick wasn’t really so smeared, I exaggerated that. I had to write the word *gincu* otherwise it would look like she’s been battered. *Gincu merah perasa strawberry – strawberry flavoured red lipstick*.

B: How do you think this audience will perceive the images in these works?

J: We’re talking about a New York audience – they’ve seen it all, done it all, there’s no such thing as new in New York. When I was there, I thought I had to come up with something new, and it was almost impossible. But the least I can do is to show the truth, show where I come from. This is it, this is me, this is my reality, my story – that’s the best thing I can offer.

NOTES

1. Project Room, Barbara Greene Fine Art, New York.
2. *Peacekeeper and And the peacekeeping plan...*, both 2003, acrylic on canvas.
3. Simon Soon, “Halal and Haram: On the Permissibility of Image Production and Circulation” in the exhibition catalogue, *Chanang*, a Valentine Willie Fine Art exhibition held at Borobudur Auction Jakarta, 2008.
4. “Feast.”
5. A type of Malay opera created in the 1920s that remained popular until the 1950s and ‘60s. “Bangsawan” translates literally as “noble, aristocratic.”
6. An organization championing and protecting constitutional Malay rights in Malaysia.



PLATES



BANGSAWAN MELAYU

2010
ACRYLIC AND BITUMEN ON CANVAS
54 X 54 IN. (137 X 137 CM)

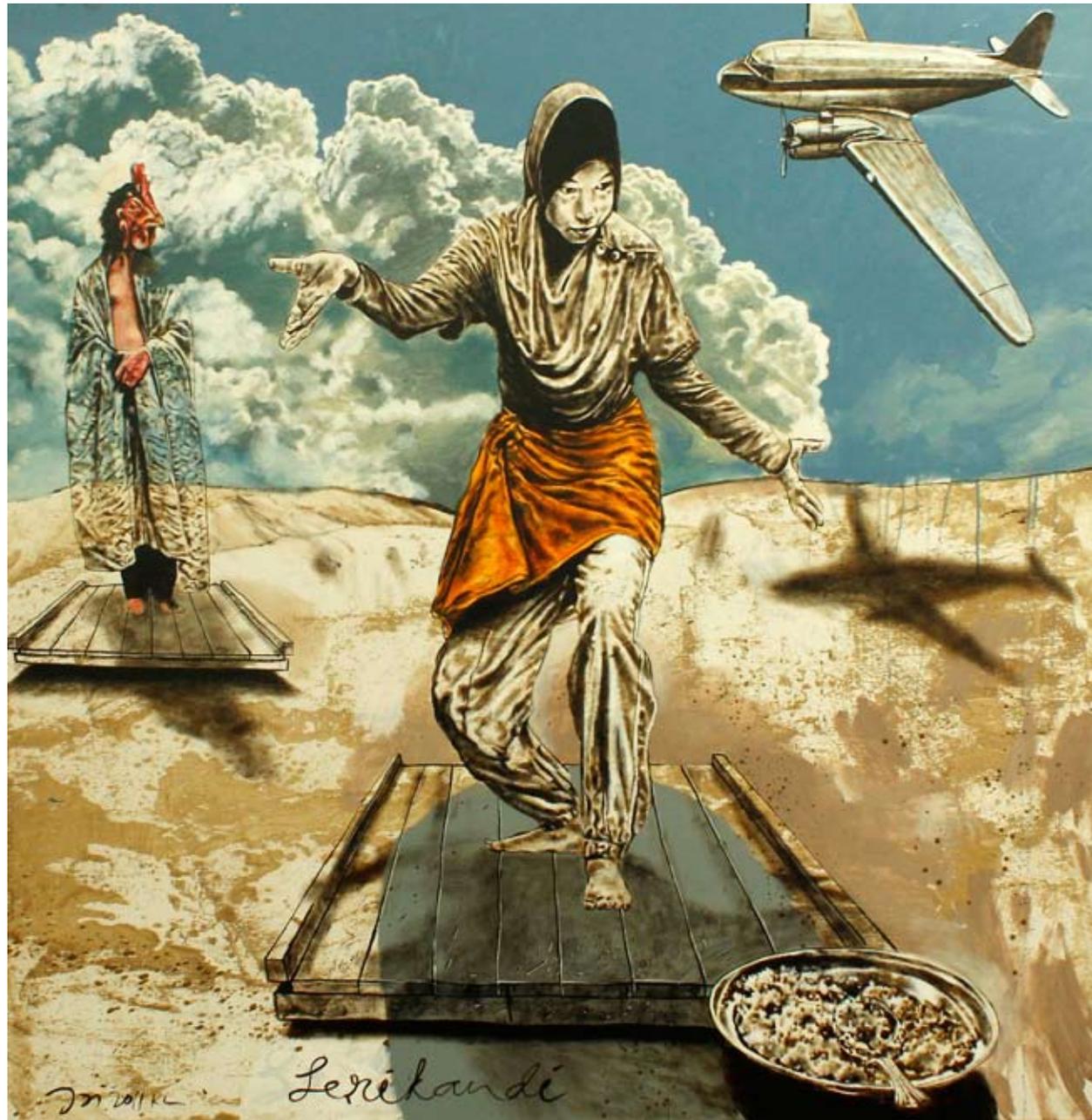


THE BLIND MUSICIAN AND THE ANGEL

2011
ACRYLIC AND BITUMEN ON CANVAS
54 X 54 IN. (137 X 137 CM)

MIMPI PAK KADOK

2011
ACRYLIC AND BITUMEN ON CANVAS
54 X 54 IN. (137 X 137 CM)



SRIKANDI

2011
ACRYLIC AND BITUMEN ON CANVAS
54 X 54 IN. (137 X 137 CM)

TENGGANU (GINCU MERAH)

2011
ACRYLIC AND BITUMEN ON CANVAS
54 X 54 IN. (137 X 137 CM)

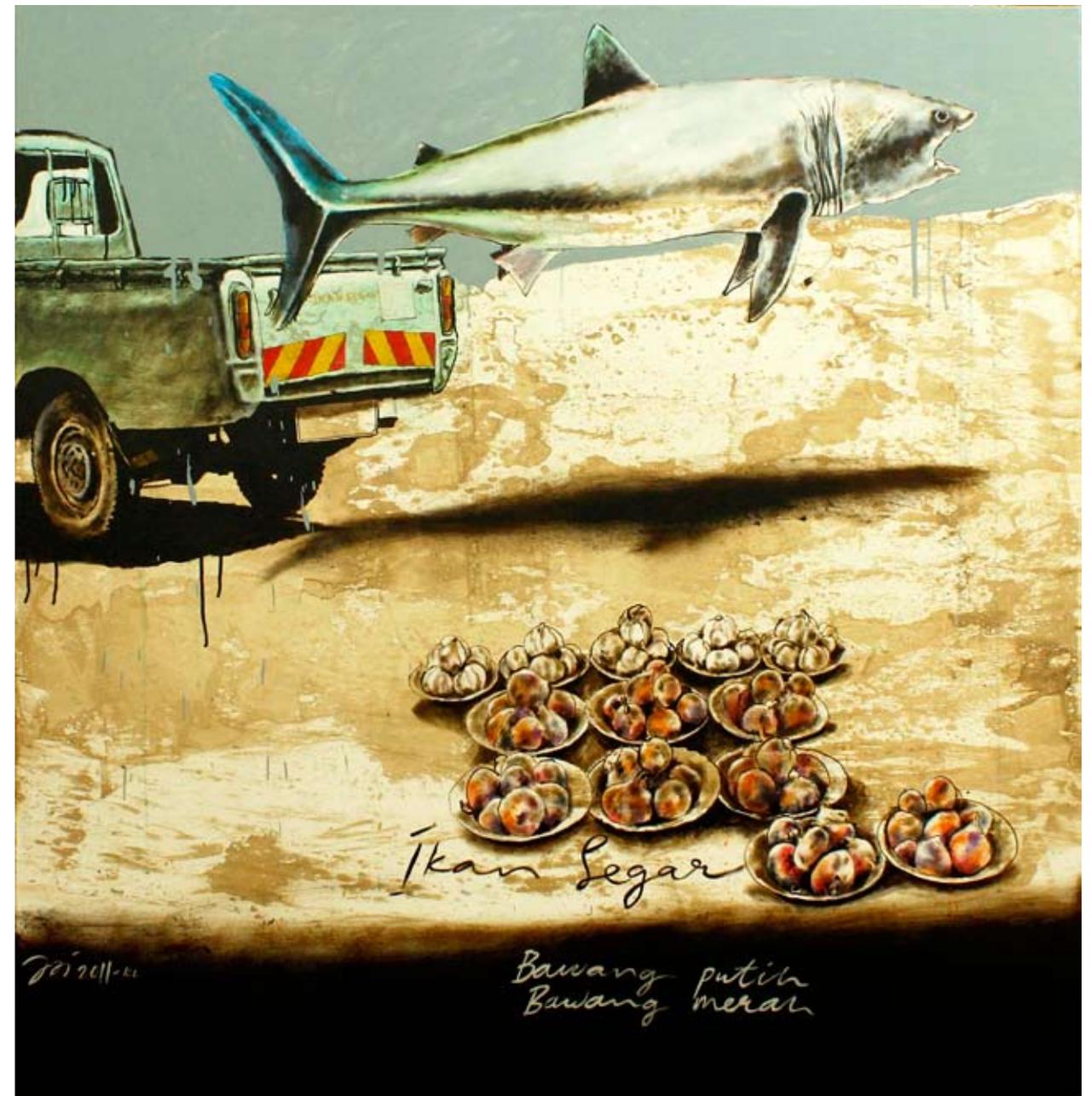


THE GREAT POST-COLONIAL LANDSCAPE

2011
ACRYLIC AND BITUMEN ON CANVAS
54 X 54 IN. (137 X 137 CM)

KORBAN KERBAU BETINA

2011
ACRYLIC AND BITUMEN ON CANVAS
54 X 54 IN. (137 X 137 CM)



THE DOMESTICATED KING OF PREJUDIS

2011
ACRYLIC AND BITUMEN ON CANVAS
54 X 54 IN. (137 X 137 CM)

IKAN SEGAR

2011
ACRYLIC AND BITUMEN ON CANVAS
54 X 54 IN. (137 X 137 CM)

JALAINI ABU HASSAN

SELECTED BIOGRAPHY

EDUCATION

2005 - present
PhD Candidate (Studio Practice and Research in Painting), MARA Institute of Technology, Shah Alam, Selangor.

1994
MFA, Pratt Institute, New York.

1988
MA, The Slade School of Fine Art, University College of London.

1985
BA (Fine Art), MARA Institute of Technology, Shah Alam, Selangor.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2010
DENDONGENG, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2009
Bisik Menjerit, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2008
Chanang, Borobudur Auction Building, Jakarta, Indonesia.

2006
Berlacu Berdepa, Berlagu Berupa, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2005
Wet Paint, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2004
Mantera, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2003
Work in Progress, Gallerie Taksu, Jakarta, Indonesia

2002
Linear Narratives, Gallerie Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2001
Jai, Gallerie Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Rhythmic Line, in collaboration with Dida the dancer, Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2000
Project Room, Barbara Greene Fine Art, New York, NY.

Jai, Sunjin Gallery, Singapore.

1999
Jai - Drawing With the Mind's Eye, National Art Gallery, Malaysia.

Solo Exhibition, Gallery Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1998
Refound Object, Gallery Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1996
LIFEFORM, Gallery Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1995
Drawing, Gallery KSSR, ITM, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.

1994
Drawing, New Gallery, Brooklyn, NY.

1988
Solo Exhibition, Pearson Building, UCL, London, UK.

1987
Solo Drawing Exhibition, Malaysia Hall, London, UK.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2010
WORK, Rogue Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2009
KIAS, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Bitumania, Pace Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Personal Effects, Rogue Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Headlights, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Singapore.

2008
Headlights, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2007
Selamat Datang ke Malaysia, Gallery 4A, Sydney, Australia, and Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Headlights, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2005
Rado & Art, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Spirit of Wood and other Treasures, Gallery Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2004
Malaysian Art NOW, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Art Singapore 2004, Suntec City and Convention Centre, Singapore.

2003
Grand Opening, Gallery Taksu, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Art +/- 1000, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2002
Art Singapore 2002, Suntec City and Convention Centre, Singapore.

Identity, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Gerak Rasa, 21 UiTM Contemporary Artist, Muzium Negara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2001
Painted, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Art Singapore 2001, Suntec City and Convention Centre, Singapore.

Headlights, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2000
12 ASEAN Artists, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Arang, Gallery Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

1999
Malaysian Perspectives, Hot Bath Gallery, Bath, UK.

1998
Gallery Casa Cantabria, Madrid, Spain.

Group International Artist Exhibition, Gallery Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

A Day In A Life Drawing, Artist's Space, Concorde Hotel, Shah Alam, Malaysia

Rupa Malaysia, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London, UK.

1997
Two Man Show with Joe Flemming, Angell Gallery, Toronto, Canada.

Two Men Show, Artist Colony, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The 8th Asian International Art Biennale, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

ART to HEART, Gallery Petronas, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Malaysian Drawing Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1996
Expressi Nusantara, University Malaya, Malaysia.

1994
Drawing, New Gallery, Brooklyn, NY.

1993
4th Asian International Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1992
Baghdad International Art Festival, Iraq.

Traveling Exhibition, Malaysia – Indonesia. Gallery Citra, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1989
Artist Call, GaleriWan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1985
Young Contemporaries Competition 85', National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

AWARDS

2005
Rado Switzerland Commission Award

1994
First Prize (Drawing), Murray Hill Art Competition, New York, NY.

1992
MARA scholarship to study art in the United States.

1991
First Prize (Gold Award), Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank Art Competition, Malaysia.

1985
First Prize (Major Award), Young Contemporaries Competition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1981
Expo Art Competition, Malaysia.

PUBLICATIONS

Jai: Drawing with the Mind's Eye, Melbourne: Australia Art Forms & Kuala Lumpur: Rusli Hashim Fine Art, 1999.

Jalak: Jalaini Abu Hassan, Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art, 2006.

PUBLISHED ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION

JALAINI ABU HASSAN
BANGSAWAN KEBANGSAAN
APRIL 28 - JUNE 11, 2011

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