

Malaysian painter breaks religious taboos with work

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Islam forms the basis of the Malay culture. Its values pervade almost every aspect of Malaysian life, including its art.

It is therefore an aberration that Malaysian painter Jalani Abu Hasan, also known as Jai, depicts the devil and pigs in his latest collection of paintings, titled *Chanang*.

The devil is the cursed creature of the creator God, and it is forbidden for Muslims to eat pigs. The appearance of the two images, as curator Rifky Effendy said, has made his works "provocative" within a Malay context.

Jai's *Chanang* paintings are currently on display at the Borobudur Auction Building in Central Jakarta until June 28.

If the exhibition is to be regarded as an artistic mirror, reflecting the society in which the painter lives, then Jai is highlighting the dark side, the paradox and the irony of contemporary Malaysia.

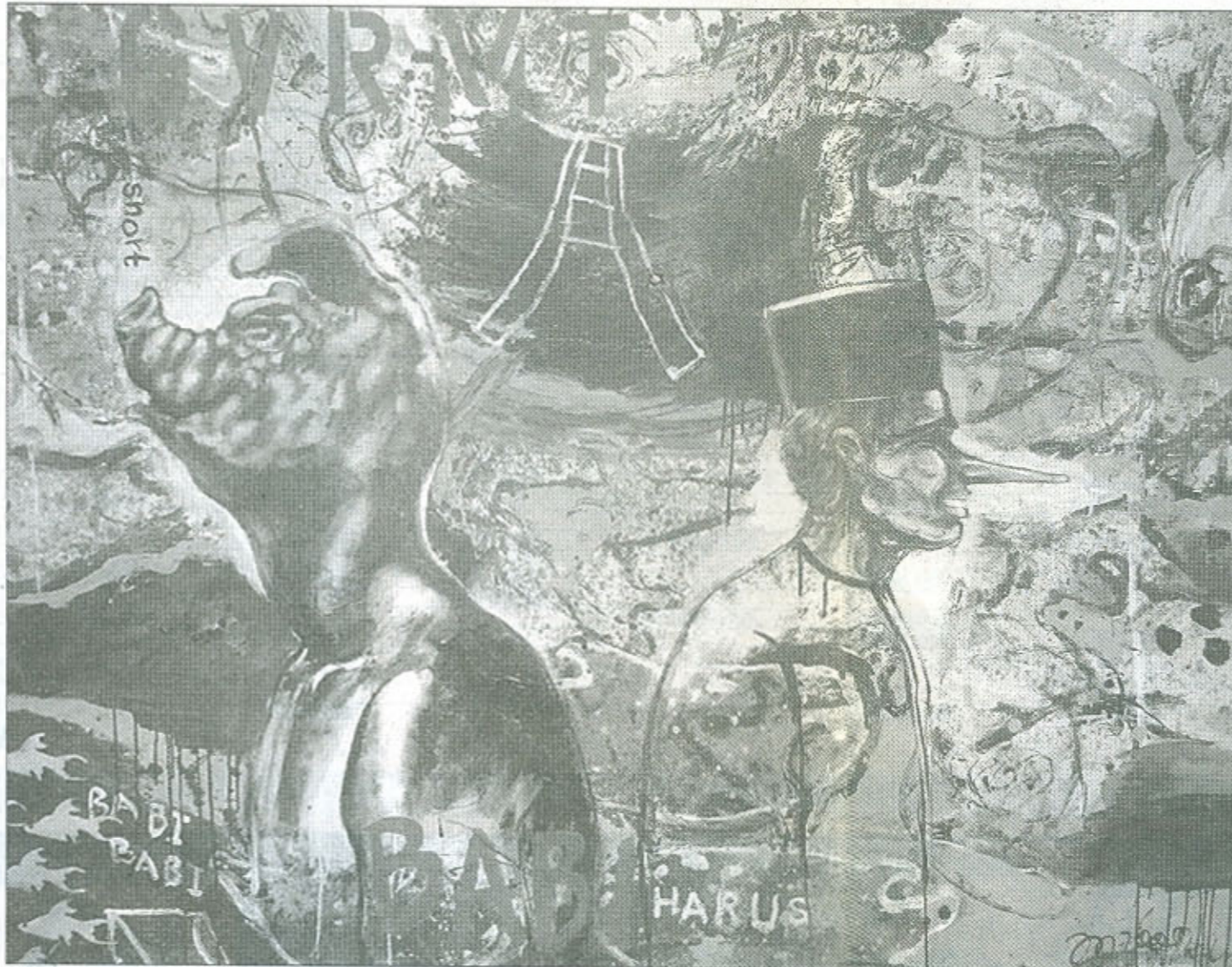
"The nuance of these works is more provoking compared to my previous works which tend to criticize politely and silently," Jai said as quoted by Rifky.

Art lovers in Indonesia, which has become a haven for critical work since the fall of former president Soeharto, will immediately sense the satirical aura surrounding *Chanang*, which refers to a loud Malay percussion instrument.

The style of his paintings are as unconventional and provocative as his subject matter.

A renowned figure in the Malaysian contemporary art scene, Jai is well known for his use of bitumen and charcoal, which strengthen the darkness of his subjects and dramatize his messages.

His work entitled *Pigstown Council Annual Meeting* is reminiscent of George Orwell's classic novel, *Animal Farm*, in which dictatorial and corrupt



Babi Harus (Pig Definitely), mixed media on canvas, 152.5 X 183 centimeters.

politicians are depicted as pigs. The building in the background of the convening pigs is empty and filthy, signifying that the town over which they preside is dead.

"*Chanang* sees Jai narrow his themes, and concentrate more on specific political narratives. He brings to his second solo exhibition in Jakarta a keen discernment of the current social political climate in Malaysia by deploying a range of radical strategies that draw these issues into his new body of paintings," art critic Simon

Soon said.

The symbol of the pig is now no longer confined to Malaysian religious discourse, Jai says. It has now been brought into the political arena, as some have accused Muslim politicians of becoming *taukeh-taukeh babi* (pig farmers) for the sake of power and wealth.

In *Babi Harus*, however, Jai intriguingly juxtaposes a naked man whose head is that of a pig with a man in traditional Malay clothing who has a Pinocchio-like nose, which

may be interpreted as a sign of dishonesty. Is the pig-headed man, who has a shorter nose, more honest than the man standing next to him? There is indeed ambiguity in his works. What is good and what is bad?

Intriguingly, the devil finds his place in Jai's self-portraits. In *Dajal*, Jai portrays himself as pretending to be the devil, with his index fingers pointed upward above his head in mockery of Lucifer's horns. In *Bringing Out the Devil in Me*, he portrays himself wearing a red T-shirt, and this time has

real horns on his head. Jai is bold and so the horns fit him well.

"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," Simon says.

The devil paintings are not without ambiguity as well. Is the devil the manifestation of evil or just a symbol for evil? In his other work, *I Protect You*



Senyum Setan (The Smile of the Devil), mixed media on canvas, 152.5 X 152.5 centimeters.

from *Myself*, Jai portrays himself standing with his back against a woman.

It is unknown whether the woman is his wife, a prostitute or a girlfriend, thus, the painting hints at the possibility of a violation or a betrayal, Simon said.

In that painting, however, Jai paints himself in a traditional Malay sarong and cap, this time without any horns. *Senyum Setan* (The Smile of the Devil) seems to confirm the ambiguity; Jai, with demonic horns, smiles behind a dour-faced politician who is smiling devilishly.

The religious notions of *haram* (forbidden) and *halal* (permissible) take on new complexity when depicted in a profane social context. A painting entitled *Untitled (Halal)* depicts a used condom wrapper lying against an approval stamp that reads *halal*. Is a condom *halal* or *haram*?

Simon said Jai's works tried to question what could be considered *halal*, allowing the artist to explore such taboo subjects within the context of

permissibility.

"To speak of what is *haram* is to describe the specific — (which means) what is already contemptible, what is already reviled and what is already esthetically displeasing."

Jai was born in Selangor in 1963. His father was a soldier of the British legion and he spent his childhood moving around army bases in the country. He graduated from Universiti Teknologi Mara before continuing his studies at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London and Pratt Institute in New York.

Although his works frame a Malaysian context, they also reflect the social political condition of Indonesia, where politics run rife with corruption, and religion has become more and more superficial.

Jai's works serve as a reminder that the notion of *haram*, to borrow Simon's words, is beyond what is already "contemptible", "reviled" and "esthetically displeasing".

Beware, for the *halal* cow is probably the *haram* pig, and the sheep the wolf in disguise.