

GOING WEST

Malaysia's leading contemporary artist, Jalaini Abu Hassan returns to the US for his first solo exhibition after 10 years.

Text Noelle Lim Photos Jalaini Abu Hassan & Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York



Jalaini Abu Hassan has come a long way since the time when his works were rejected by Malaysia's National Art Gallery and his student's works accepted instead. Now loyal Malaysian collectors queue up to place bookings, the Singapore Art Museum knocks on his doors, and his works have been sold at Christie's and Sotheby's. Is it time to get out of the comfort zone and spread his wings beyond South-East Asia? Jai says yes. After a long hiatus of not exhibiting in the US, Jai will be presenting a body of works entitled *Bangsawan Kebangsaan* at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York. On whether an American audience would appreciate his brand of art and its cultural nuances, he says: "Buying art is like liking a song. If it connects to you heart, you automatically like it without needing to understand it, nor knowing why you like it. Collectors could relate it to their own experiences, or just simply like the colours."

Jai continues to explore themes connected to tradition, race and religion that resonate within him on a deeper level, pointing out contemporary parodies, showing off uneasy relationships, and at times, subtly mocking an issue. The issues he works on are not unfamiliar to the Malaysian market but new to the American audience, who remain scarred by 9/11 and may have misconceptions about Muslims. A consistent thread in *Bangsawan Kebangsaan* is paradox, playing off different perceptions American and Malaysian audiences may have, and also showing elements of Malay Muslim culture. Pointing to *Kerbau Betina*, he says: "The stereotypical Western response you may get is animal brutality, right? But, during Hari Raya Haji, we slaughter animals to give meat to the poor." In the same vein, *Gincu Merah* shows a young, angelic-looking girl wearing a *tudung* (head scarf), but her ruby red lipstick, slightly smeared, is suggestive and a contradiction to religious propriety. In *King of Prejudis*, it raises the question of who is the real king? Is it the Aboriginal man on the horse with an umbrella, inspired by a statue in front of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, or the deceptively tame *King Kong* who hovers in the background? Jai says: "We are talking about Orang Asli, the issue of prejudice as a political issue in Malaysia, between the Chinese and Malay, and the rise of Perkasa."

Jai's artistic pedigree can be traced back to his training in two of the finest art schools – the Slade School of Fine Art in London and the Pratt Institute in New York. At Slade, he mastered

figure drawing and oil painting in a formal studio environment but eventually yearned to break away from this regimented approach before finally finding the creative outlet at the Pratt where he experimented with abstract ideas. "The two disciplines of figurative and abstract art became my strength in approaching art. You study the rules of art and then break them in New York," he says. His trademark bitumen style, popular among German artists in the 1960s, was discovered by accident and adopted for economic reasons. When he was in New York, instead of going to art shops, he would scout around hardware stores looking for alternative cheaper medium when, and one day, he stumbled upon a barrel of bitumen on sale.

Jai throws different objects together to create a narrative, and the brownish effect of the bitumen lends an air of mystery and nostalgia to the work. He says: "You may ask me why there is an arrow here. I draw it waiting for it to tell you a story. Sometimes it does not make sense. I am not telling a message very clearly to the audience, nor do I make it easy to interpret. I just give hints. It's up to the viewer's interpretation." A favourite composition is to juxtapose traditional and modern elements like a *bomoh* (medicine man) and girl in modern garb, all reflecting the many phases of Jai's life experiences. Raised in a very Malay orthodox family in a village, his grandfather was a religious teacher and his father a *bomoh* who also worked with the British army as a dresser. He quips: "My dad inherited his medicinal skills from his father. Luckily it didn't pass on to me!" Nevertheless, traditional practices have had a profound impact on him. He says: "There must be something to it. For example, after my father eats, he washes his hand and then wipes his hands on his hair. Till today, he does not have a single strand of grey hair. He does that everyday, something he saw my grandfather doing."

Studying in an Arabic school, he learnt to read and recite the Quran (he still writes to his mother in Jawi) and was not exposed to other ethnic communities until he was sent to a boarding school in his teens and then to London. Here, he was exposed to the ideas of multiculturalism and

OPPOSITE PAGE Jai sits in creative repose in front of *Gincu Merah*.

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different structures of society. "The thing about Malay being the origin and the purity of the culture does not exist at all. Culture is very much hybrid – that gives it richness. Malay has a bit of Chinese and Javanese. My great, great-grandfather is from Siam. If you claim ownership to culture, that's not healthy at all."

The conversation becomes more serious when he says we need to differentiate between culture and religion and increasingly in the past few years, Malays have to grapple with who they are. "I'm not a religious person but I like what one controversial Malay writer said – the more Islamic you are, the less Malay you become," he says. "Now you see people wearing the *jubah*, an Arab style clothing, to mosques. I'm not saying it's wrong. The question is what happened to the Malay costume like the *baju melayu* and the *songkok*, which is part of our history and culture." Jai had to face the conflict of being a Muslim artist painting figures and started researching Islamic art. Pointing out that the art has a rich tradition of figuration since the 16th and 17th centuries, and contemporary art also incorporates figuration in the Middle East and Indonesia, he says: "The 12th-century Muslim scholar Muhammad Ghazali argued that there should be exceptions to the rule on not

ABOVE *King of Prejudis.*
BELOW *Kerbau Betina.*



depicting figure. It depends on your *niat* (purpose). Introducing Islamic values is good, but people kind of simplify the whole thing and mix culture and religion. These are issues I'd like to highlight but as an artist, you don't go in depth into these issues, you just use them as inspiration."

"For the past four or five years, I've been bombarded with social and political commentaries. It's in your neighbourhood, coffee shops and media and it becomes your reality. Other established artists like Matahati, and also young artists have also become more politically aware since March 2008, and have moved away from just painting landscapes." Despite his much talked about *Chanang* exhibition in Indonesia and *Bisik Menjerit* charcoal drawings presented in Singapore, Jai denies that he is overtly making political statements and justifies it as only reacting to the environment. "I'm not easy about corruption and party politics. But I'm not trying to run the country. We leave that to the politicians. Then again, if you say you're not political, you're actually extremely political by saying that," he says with a grin. ■

Jai's solo exhibition, *Bangsawan Kebangsaan*, runs from now till June 11, 2011, at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York. His next solo will be at Valentine Willie Fine Art in Kuala Lumpur at the end of the year.



Noelle Lim, a business presenter with BFM89.9, is also an avid fan of fine art. She discovered the world of art at the age of six, while poring over Britannica encyclopedias.

