



# Art Beyond Story-Telling

*Ngiom* explores a new, emergent vitalism and expression in contemporary Malaysian art, as exemplified by the works of Ahmad Fuad Osman



Opposite: *Fatamorgana #2*; above: *Too Much (Not Enough)*

Making sense of works of art is often akin to deciphering encryptions, where paintings can contain layers of meaning, and observers are left with only their own interpretations. Sometimes, meanings can shift depending on the mood of the day, or on the many subjectivities that influence the observer. On the other hand, artists often paint with no particular intent, except to bring to the surface their inner feelings; at other times they merely translate onto the canvas what the eye sees.

This is particularly prevalent with abstract paintings, where the meanings behind the slashes and splashes, constructs and colors are anybody's guess, and you nod your head when the artist explains the images mean one thing or the other. Particularly, in the Islamic context, where figurative images are frowned upon, if not actively discouraged – the modernist Malay painter is left to work with mere abstraction. Although these works can be pleasing (or challenging) to the eye, they are often practically useless as social, or even cultural, commentaries.

Until the twenty-first century, Malaysia has been one of those places where works of art are stifled by the absence of bravado on the one hand, due to reticent cultural norms, and the risk of upsetting religious dogmas in an environment run by a thin-skinned oligarchy. Things then began to look up with globalization, the need to trade, compete and – nowhere to hide. The new leadership in government from 2004 then appeared more tolerant toward freer expression, and this began to be translated in contemporary Malay art.

At the forefront of critical contemporary Malay art is a collective of friends, all graduated at the same year, 1991 from a local university near Kuala Lumpur. After all these years – rare in art circles – five among the group still interact regularly, hold joint exhibitions intermittently and share a collective studio. They call themselves “Matahati,” or “eye of the soul.” Their styles are contemporary but completely diverse and each could hold their own in the world of art. Things that are common among them are their satirical attitude and their propensity to appear to belong to the same heavy metal band.

Ahmad Fuad Osman is one among the quintet. Like the others (they include Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Hamir Soib Mohamed, Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Masnoor Ramli Mahmud), Fuad broke from the boundaries of prevalent abstract painting to narrative figurative painting, with stories to tell and commentaries to make. He also diversified to theatre and filmmaking.

As images, his works now lie somewhere between realism, expressionism, photography and information media. His series “Recollections of Long Lost Memories” are necessarily clever in order to be satirical, with a commonly identifiable figure adapted into pictures of historical events, jolting the observer to compare today’s world with yesterday’s nostalgia. It is also culture-contextual as it requires a Malaysian to be familiar and be jolted by the images. In the history of Malaysian public art in its natural cultural inhibitions, no one has ever displayed an all too real naked man as in Fuad’s *Imitating The Mountain* and *Imitating The Woods*. These were exhibited in a public gallery in 2008.

Fuad certainly makes commentaries about the Malay mindset and provokes this mindset to open up to a much larger world, including the postmodern one. Other than the naked figure, there are the beautifully constructed figures of dogs, a taboo in the Malay cultural ethos; the “tart” dancing with political icons; Darwinism; today’s popularity of a soccer club compared with past concerns; someone you know among an indoctrinated, faceless terrorist army.



Clockwise from opposite, top: Samson N Delilah; Recollection of Long Lost Memory; Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!; Self portrait

A single picture can speak as much as a whole thick book, and this is the usefulness of art as a communicative media in today’s difficult, dislocated and disparate world. Fuad speaks of art that can no longer afford to be merely an adornment in someone’s living room; but to say something that can eventually result in a better world simply because humans have the capacity to reason. The role of art can be an avenue to jolt reason out of indifference, callousness and doctrine.

The emergence of a contemporary Malay narrative in art speaks of a more hopeful world, the call for openness and an open discourse. All art speaks in metaphors, from painting, to sculpture, to literature, definitely in poetry and perhaps also in architecture. The new metaphors now point at a path to optimism and innovation, made possible by the removal of mental boundaries. ■■■