

# Reset

## About Us

Core Design Gallery is an exclusive boutique art gallery that represents the face of Malaysian contemporary artists and their cutting edge artworks.

With its main philosophy of holding major shows that have critical values and museum qualities, Core Design Gallery aims to create massive awareness on the significance of Malaysian contemporary art through solid art management and important publications.

The gallery is committed to promoting and developing the artists to achieve international standard and global recognition for their quality artworks.

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# Zena Khan

*Reset* is an exhibition which showcases a series of historical artworks by some of Malaysia's most important and avant garde first generation contemporary artists. The nine artists featured- Anthonie Chong, Eng Hwee Chu, Fauzin Mustafa, Husin Hourmain, Masnoor Ramli, Mohd Nor Mahmud, Tan Chin Kuan, Yusof Ghani, and Zulkifli Yusoff- are well known today amongst Malaysian contemporary art audiences. With practices that span the spectrum of drawing, painting, mixed media, sculpture and installation, they have each contributed to shaping the dynamic landscape of contemporary Malaysian art. *Reset* in fact stems from a curatorial desire to not only document and record contemporary art history, which is very much a field in formation, but to also return to the origins of the Malaysian art canon, giving recognition to its key players.

The artists featured in *Reset* have navigated worlds of change; witnessing the transformation of Malaysia from a largely agrarian, newly independent country to one that sits at the forefront of political, technological and social development. They have responded creatively to these changes, marking the transformation from the modernist art movement to the contemporary one. While the relationship between art and society is well documented, it takes on a particular urgency in the contemporary world, where discussions on contemporary art involve the networking of several factors, from the social, political and historical, to the cultural and the personal. Thus, the emergence of a Malaysian contemporary art movement from the 1980's seems natural, when looking at the changes Malaysia underwent in the postcolonial period following the declaration of Independence on August 31st 1957, thanks to economic growth alongside the social and political policies that were put in place from the 1970's.

In 1971 the First National Cultural Congress was held. Simultaneously both the New Economic Policy (NEP) and New Cultural Policy (NCP) were introduced, with the twin aims of improving the quality of life for all Malaysians and upgrading the lives of the Bumiputras, and fostering a national cultural identity. As these political, social, educational and economic policies began to transform the structure of Malaysian society, the art being produced locally began to shift. One important consequence of these policies established in the 1970's was the inauguration of educational facilities for the arts. Two universities stood out in particular during this period: UiTM and Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA). Almost all of the artists featured in *Reset* have not only graduated from these institutions, but several of them have gone on to teach at them, such as Yusof Ghani and Eng Hwee Chu, cementing their influence over subsequent generations of Malaysian artists. Another important consequence of these policies was the urbanisation of the rural Malays, exemplified by the rise of the MATAHATI art collective, which Masnoor Ramli was a founding member of.

In the early 1980's and 1990's, a strong mixed media movement emerged, heralding the beginning of a serious contemporary art movement in Malaysia. This was closely followed by the development of installation art practices, due in large part to Zulkifli Yusoff and Tan Chin Kuan, who are today regionally recognised as geniuses of the genre. These new developments in the arts felt exciting, and were encouraged through a series of art competitions, such as Bakat Muda (Young Contemporaries), Salon Malaysia and the Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards, which promoted the production of increasingly experimental artworks. Additionally, artistic innovation was rewarded in the form of cash prizes, which acted as an early source of patronage and funding, a necessity for

contemporary art ecologies to grow, especially with regards to non-commercial practices such as installation art. A healthy competitive spirit was fostered, leading to expansions in the accepted conventions of art production locally. Concurrently, competitions allowed for artworks to be displayed at a national level, thus introducing these dynamic artistic practices to the public, making them aware of the dawn of a contemporary art movement and allowing for potential collectors to connect with these newer artists. Thus, it is the contention of this curator that it was the 1980's and 1990's that ushered in the contemporary art period in Malaysia, and that the practices of these first-generation artists was solidified in those decades and throughout the 2000's.

The works on display at *Reset* date back as early as 1987 (*Blue Night 7-Reborn*, Tan Chin Kuan), and thus offer audiences an opportunity to study the development of the contemporary movement and senior artist practice across the various decades. *Reset* does not claim to represent every senior artist in the Malaysian contemporary art canon. However, the exhibition aims to provide a brief and engaging snapshot of senior contemporary art practice, from the instigation of the contemporary art movement up to present day.

A further question instigated by *Reset* is what are the qualities that define a senior artist in our art ecology? It would appear that while a strong mix of innate creative and conceptual skill is a given, a dedication to art and commitment to their own careers was necessary to carry these artists forward to establishing themselves as senior artists. Furthermore, these artists have all stuck through the difficult early period of helping to pioneer the contemporary art movement, and to introduce new genres and styles as well as the prevalence of increasingly critical and conceptual artwork. It was with this intention *Reset* was conceptualised: to provide an insight into which Malaysian contemporary artists were able to make this progression, and why

Fauzin Mustafa's mixed media practice speaks not only of a thorough understanding of the formalistic aspects of fine art, but also an innate insight into the framework of Malay cultural identity. An early master of the mixed media genre that heralded the serious start of Malaysia's contemporary art movement, Fauzin has consistently demonstrated a flair for building up super textural surfaces that often explode in a dense riot of colour. Artwork, which dates back to 1998, exemplifies not only these signatures, but also the aesthetics of balance and the raised gold dots which are associated with his artistic practice.

Fauzin was born in the town of Teluk Intan, Perak, in 1966, graduating from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) in 1988 a Diploma in Fine Art and Design (Fine Arts). Soon after graduating he formed one of the earliest contemporary artist collectives with three peers from university, Mohd Nor Mahmud, Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Taufik Abdullah, *Empat Persepsi* (which translates to four perspectives). *Empat Persepsi* was key not only as a source of support for the four young artists, but also in furthering a mixed media movement at a time when the local art establishment was still focused on modernist painting. As a young artist Fauzin achieved strong critical acclaim. In 1987 he displayed works at the National Art Gallery's Young Contemporary Exhibition, going on to compete regularly at local and regional art competitions. He won his first award, the *Bakat Muda* Minor Award in 1988, going on to receive several prizes since, such as the 1991 Salon Malaysia

Minor Award and 1994 Philip Morris Art Award. Most recently his *Satu Dan Lima* series garnered first place in 2010's 1 Malaysia Mural Competition. Fauzin's works can be found in several respected public and private art collections, including the Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan, Tosuko' Resort Hokkaido, Japan, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Bank Negara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Airlines, Kuala Lumpur, Petronas Carigali Berhad, Kuala Lumpur, Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur and The Aliya and Farouk Khan Collection. In 1992 he was selected as Malaysia's representative for the *Container 96- Art Across Oceans* exhibition in Copenhagen, Denmark cementing his position as an artist with critical recognition from the early period of the country's contemporary art movement.

*Rimba dan Api-Api* exemplifies particular signatures from Fauzin's career up until its production in 1998, and is thus immediately recognizable as one of his mid-career artworks. Intensely patterned and textural, the artwork at first glance appears dominated by a sea of green, with flashes of gold and edges of white. A second look reveals the main body of the canvas to be built up from a series of canvas strips that have been dipped in several colours of acrylic and pasted over each other on the canvas' surface, in a technique he successfully worked with for *White Painting in Black Frame*, which won him Third Place in the 1994 Philip Morris Art Awards, Malaysia. The stark white edge at the side of the painting offers viewers a sense of visual relief, providing balance to the intensity of colour,

pattern and texture that densely fills the majority of *Rimba dan Api-Api*. At the same time the boundary between the main body and white edge slopes, referring back to Fauzin's desire to confront what are the expected compositions and confines for a painting's edges?

The raised gold dots strewn across *Rimba dan Api-Api*'s surface not only add to its textural quality, but are in fact a graphic icon that unifies Fauzin's career, appearing in earlier periods such as his solo exhibition *Dari Bumi, Ke Bumi* held at Art Salon in 1994 but also in more recent works, such as those displayed during his most recent solo exhibition *Life Between the Dots* at Core Design Gallery in 2017. Circular, they represent life. Appearing continuously throughout the painting, in an almost random grid, they allude to infinity. Gold brings with it associations to purity, with a stable, unchangeable qualities, and

has a strong prevalence in Malay culture and craft, thus, its inclusion here in *Rimba dan Api-Api* visually reminds audiences of the local cultures that have influenced Fauzin.

As a mixed media artist, Fauzin's practice is rooted in post-formalism, with a strong focus on the materials and methods used in artwork production. Yet as is the case for many Malaysian contemporary artists, concept and technique are to be given equal weighting, and he is known for deeply philosophical concerns. This is in fact in line with the abstract aesthetic of his works, as he seeks to produce visual clues to communicate objects, ideas and emotions. In striking a balance between the various elements that came together to produce *Rimba dan Api-Api* he captures the attention of his viewers, challenging them to examine the artwork- and by extension the world around them- in a search for deeper truths.

*Rimba dan Api-Api*  
Mixed Media on Canvas  
153cm x 153cm  
1998



# Anthonie Chong

Often, a particular series from an early period stands out throughout an artist's career as one of the best examples of their practice. This idea holds a sense of validity when considering Anthonie Chong's *Untitled-Eastern Memory Series*. A tight series, mainly produced during the mid 1990's, preceding his second solo exhibition in Kuala Lumpur, *Untitled (from Mime Series)* is unusual in that it is more thematic as a single body of work than others the artist has produced. Raw and haunting, it has since become a benchmark when critically considering Anthonie's formidable skills as a figurative painter within the Malaysian contemporary art ecology.

Born in 1971, Anthonie graduated from the Perak Institute of Art with a degree in Art and Design. Originally training as a graphic designer, he subsequently shifted his attentions to a fine art practice as a way to satiate his explosive creative impulses. In the process of making this transition Anthonie not only experimented with different styles of painting, from abstract to expressionist to illustrative, but he voraciously consumed books on art history, from the classical Renaissance to contemporary periods. As a result, a great deal of his initial influence was from an intellectual, academic standpoint, with the works and traditions of German and British Expressionist artists particularly capturing his imagination. The content of these artworks was not focused on an aesthetic prettiness; rather it spanned off uncomfortable themes, challenging social taboos or depicting disturbing, violent imagery. Thus his eyes were opened to the wider possibilities offered to a fine artist, and what, as a contemporary artist, he could offer society.

Traces of German and British Expressionism are clearly visible in the *Untitled (from Mime Series)*, and here in *Untitled (from Mime Series)*. The human figure dominates as a central concern, built up from expressive, gestural brushstrokes that hint at the painting's social and psychological undertones. Anthonie's ability to produce an accurate figure, resoundingly raw, through a series of quick painterly strokes speaks to his ability as a figurative artist, who

has a thorough understanding of the human figure. Indeed Anthonie's practice in the 1990's and early 2000's, in particular the *Untitled (from Mime Series)*, might be a crucial link for those seeking to gain an overview of Malaysian contemporary art's history, as one strong piece of evidence pertaining to the continued presence of figurative art throughout the movement, which counters claims by some quarters that figurative art was not present in this period.

Anthonie acknowledges the influence of Western Expressionism and art history on his practice during the 1990's. Yet he comments that for him as an artist, while it is possible to draw on stylistic inspiration from other artists, it is crucial to create content that draws on direct experiences- be they personal, political or social. At the time of the artwork's production, Anthonie was thinking about the way in which information was being spread. His mother ran a hairdressing business out of the family home in Perak, with a stream of customers coming through the house almost daily, bringing with them news, stories or opinions on social or political current events. Anthonie felt that with this spread of information through word of mouth particular issues arose- how could he find out details or establish the veracity of truths in what he was hearing? These searing questions which underpin *Untitled (from Mime Series)* are represented in the raw, quickly expressed figure- as Anthonie felt that the figure represented an opportunity to immediately and succinctly convey emotion to his audience. In today's post-Internet era, the question of the spread of information, and fact checking, holds a great deal of relevance.

While *Untitled (from Mime Series)* was not a particularly prolific series for Anthonie, he has commented on its influence on his practice subsequently. While he doesn't consider himself to be an especially thematic artist, he is currently revisiting elements and developments from this early time, in particular a figurative turn, raw aesthetic and surreal elements.



*Untitled (from Mime Series)*  
Oil on Canvas  
127cm x 96cm  
1995

*Kala Kota Bharu: Mak Sum Meraut Daun*  
Sawdust and Acrylic on Wood  
169cm x 137cm  
2006



## Mohd Noor Mahmud

Mohd Nor Mahmud's relevance within the Malaysian contemporary art canon stems from his position as a narrator of local sociocultural evolution. Born and raised in the Eastern state of Kelantan, which is oft referred to as the cradle of Malaysian culture, he has consistently explored Kelantanese physical and cultural landscapes through the formalistic aspects of fine art; in particular composition and colour. His series *Kala Kota Bharu*, which *Mak Sum Meraut Daun* comes from, is an apt example of these tendencies.

Popularly known as Matnor amongst his peers, he graduated from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) in 1988 with a BA in Fine Art, before going on to gain his Master's degree in Leicester in 1996. Beginning with his first series, *Sri Imajan* (1986-1991), which was instigated during his time at UiTM, the influence of Kelantan on his creative practice intellectually and technically was evident. Examining the denim trend capturing global sartorial attention in the 1980's, and its effect on heterogenous societies from the view of Malaysia's *batik* industry, formed an interest in both *batik* as a recurring symbol as well as studies into the effects of increasingly uniform international identities of smaller local cultures. *Kala Kota Bharu* tackled these subjects from a new angle, in a look at Kelantan's capital Kota Bharu, and what makes the small city special to Matnor.

The title *Kala Kota Bharu* translates to 'the colours of Kota Bharu'. Through the series Matnor attempted to capture the essence of Kota Bharu, questioning what it is that defines a space? The prettiness of each work in the series that convey the deep affection Matnor feels for his home are a visual depiction of the people, places and stories that come together to form a community and its history, as the artist understands that art, architecture, artefacts and crafts offer a beautiful route for self-discovery. It was precisely this insight that led to the prevalence of *batik* as iconography for *Kala Kota Bharu*, as Matnor saw the textile as prevalent within Kelantanese daily life with both aesthetic and utilitarian uses. Furthermore, prominent *batik* landscapes such as *Mak Sum Meraut Daun* immediately communicate a fascination with heritage and textile traditions. Yet by producing them through contemporary techniques Matnor not only connects to newer

generations, both locally and internationally, but also wordlessly speaks to the rapid transformation felt throughout Malaysia. Additionally, turning to textile heritage asks and answers the query on methods through which artists can help preserve their own prominent and specific cultural identities.

*Kala Kota Bharu* featured an extensive five year research period, during which Matnor developed the techniques he would use. This detailed pre-production process is typical of his practice, as he typically conducts exhaustive research and experimentation seeds of ideas that have been germinating. *Mak Sum Meraut Daun* is a prime example of the layered technical process he developed for *Kala Kota Bharu*, where materials and techniques were carefully laid over one another, beginning with a thick sawdust paste. Here, he generously slathered the paste on a wooden base, carving in motifs specifically derived from Kelantanese *batik* while it was still tacky and malleable. This process created a relief-like texture, enhanced by applied gunny strips and smaller handcrafted wood pieces. A final layer of acrylic paint in bright shades cement the associations of Kelantanese *batik*. While the patterned representations of flowers initially seem familiar the compositions are not strictly traditional, creating a subtle juxtaposition that encourages audiences to stop and critically consider the visual they are confronted with.

*Mak Sum Meraut Daun* forms part of a period of experimentation with colour, pattern and texture that has acted as a base for Matnor's subsequent series, including *Siri Rasa Bertuhan* which was presented at Pahang State Museum in October 2013. Indeed, it might be supposed that the time Matnor spent on *Kala Kota Bharu* was instrumental in helping him understand the ways in which links may be made between craft tradition and contemporary art production. Using *batik* to spark discourse reflects the value of craft, heritage and textiles within Kelantanese society, intimating Matnor innate ability to address sociocultural topics in a manner that pulls in audiences of contemporary Malaysian art.

# Tan Chin Kuan

Tan Chin Kuan's *Blue Night 7- Reborn* was debuted at his Diploma Exhibition at the Malaysian Institute of Art in 1987, marking this work out as one of the earliest in his practice. While Chin Kuan is highly regarded as a pioneering installation artist both in Malaysia and regionally, parallels run between his three-dimensional artistic practice and two dimensional artworks, in the sense of theatricality that visually bind both. Crucially his works also speak to the experiences of the Malaysian Chinese community in Malaysia, acting as a benchmark of their histories and experiences.

Chin Kuan's practice has consistently won him critical favour, evidenced by the plethora of awards he has garnered from the late 1980's. Amongst these are the Major Award for Young Contemporaries at The National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur, which he won in both 1989 and 1990, the Minor Award in both the categories of Painting and Sculpture at the Salon Malaysia 3 at the National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur in 1991 and the Bronze Prize at the Osaka Triennale in Japan in 2001. Additionally, his artwork has been presented on numerous occasions at international exhibitions including a solo exhibit at the Fukoka Art Museum in Japan, the Osaka Triennale in 1993 and 2001, the Kwang Ju Biennale in Korea in 1995 and exhibitions in Australia, London and at home in Malaysia. Museums have responded accordingly, and his works may be seen in the permanent collections of the Fukoka Art Museum in Japan, The Osaka Prefectural Government & Osaka Foundation of Culture in Japan, The Singapore Art Museum and the National Art Gallery in Malaysia.

The *Blue Night* series exemplifies Chin Kuan's belief in the 'shock value' of art. Referring back to a statement by the late Lee Ku Chan, "A successful painting must be one that is shockingly impressive.", Chin Kuan strove to balance tone, form, composition and execution in a way that would grab his viewer's attention and shock them into responding- believing that this was an inroad to establishing critical dialogue in society. In this regard concept is key,

and the *Blue Night* series hints at a mysterious night, when the true nature of humanity is unmasked. The first work in the series was with *Blue Night 1*, which Chin Kuan sees as the painting version of a horror movie, which he conceived when bearing witness to scenes of death and mortality while hospitalised. He channelled resulting ideas of memento mori into a series of paintings which expressively discussed feelings of fear and loneliness- paving the way for an intensely personal body of work that has come to be one of the defining moments of his artistic career.

The anguished central figure in *Blue Night 7- Reborn* is the clearest marker of the theme of loneliness and self-awareness Chin Kuan sought to explore. While representing the solitude he felt would mark his career as an artist, this figure also acted as a tool through which he questioned himself and wider society, opening up the path for him to develop strands of socio-political commentary in later works. In the background viewers will notice a horse, a key recurring symbol in his works from the 1980's to present day. Having been born in the Chinese Lunar Year of the horse, Chin Kuan feels an affinity to the animal. Thus, the horse is a visual vehicle through which he can represent himself and his reaction to the world around him.

As an artwork, *Blue Night 7- Reborn* can be seen as a critical piece of Malaysian contemporary art history. Not only does the work state Chin Kuan's conceptual interests from the beginning of his career, and introduce symbols that have had longevity throughout his practice, the expressive quality of his brushstrokes and composition strongly hint at an innate technical prowess. The quality of spatial awareness demonstrated through the composition of *Blue Night 7- Reborn* announces a keen awareness of space, which translates across both the two and three dimensional spheres, a talent that has seen him develop as one of Southeast Asia's most prominent contemporary installation artists.



*Blue Night 7- Reborn*  
Oil on Canvas  
152cm x 116cm  
1987

A period of abstract expressionism marked Husin Hourmain's early career, and has, in fact, had a profound impact on the contemporary calligraphy practice which he is lauded for today. Abstract expressionism leans heavily on emotions, gestures and a sense of movement, so as to be wordlessly expressive. As he became adept in the visual language of Abstract Expressionism, Husin began developing a contemporary style of calligraphy, which grew from his personal spiritual and religious positions. He began experimenting with the genre through one-off works such as *Allah- Study* (2006) and *Abjad Dua (antara 1 dan 3)* (2009), but it was his 2013 solo exhibition *Awal Hurouf, Asal Hurouf* that announced Husin as a pioneer of the contemporary calligraphy genre, locally.

*Awal Hurouf, Asal Hurouf* has the distinction of being a transformative moment both for Husin and the Malaysian contemporary art industry. Prior to this landmark show calligraphy was not widely produced and displayed in Malaysia. *Awal Hurouf, Asal Hurouf* marks a key moment in the timeline of when contemporary calligraphy strongly began taking root as a dominant genre in Malaysian art. It might be thought that calligraphy's appeal would be directed to the Islamic or Malay cultures; yet the

Malaysian contemporary calligraphy movement resonates strongly with Malaysians of all races and faiths. Thus, it may follow that if contemporary art reflects contemporary life, this appreciation for contemporary calligraphy is indicative of the growing changes to social landscapes in Malaysia, as the local Malay-Muslim population became increasingly urbanised, due to their increasing economic strength, which stems from the successes for the government's NEP and education policies. Thus, *Awal Hurouf, Asal Hurouf* appeal to a diverse audience has grown from Husin's subtle observations on the transformations to urban Malaysian societies. Moreover, the series demonstrated the ways in which calligraphy was being used by Malaysian artists as an icon imbued with personal, social, cultural or aesthetic values.

For Husin art is an extension of his own consciousness; thus, his artworks stem from issues close to his heart. In being especially conscious of his religious obligations, understanding Islam and its teachings through his art thus seems to be a natural progression for him creatively. Consisting of 30 mixed media paintings, *Awal Hurouf, Asal Hurouf* explored not only issues of personal spirituality, but also the role of education and reading within Islam, through the individual

letters that the Arabic alphabet is comprised of. The characters of the Arabic alphabets were transformed into visual components as individual brushstrokes were clustered together closely to build up wider compositions. Husin built on his earlier experiments from *Allah- Study* (2006) and *Abjad Dua (antara 1 dan 3)* (2009), going on to marry the genres of abstract expressionism and calligraphy.

*Awal Hurouf, Asal Hurouf* three years in the making, with each year of production bringing marked progressions and styles. The first year began with *Alif*, and was marked by intensely saturated colours, gestural, expressive lines and centred characters. The second year of production, 2010, was one of intense experimentation, bringing an increasingly bolder use of lines, set into layered lettering as characters exceeded the confines of the canvas. The third year, which was when *Zal* was painted, built on the formalistic developments of 2010 as the artist sought to expand his own painting skills and styles. The ideals of minimalism presented a possible entry point, and he turned towards restrained colour palettes. The characters of *Zal* are increasingly clearly defined, leading to a dominance of content, yet Husin's expressive brushstrokes audiences have come to delight in remain, indicating an increasing

mastery and widening of his calligraphic repertoire.

'*Awal*' translates to 'the beginning of', and '*Asal*' to 'the origin of'. This seems an apt title for the series on two strands: as conceptually studied the letters that form the basis of the Arabic language and the original text of the Holy Quran, as well as marking a new beginning for Husin. Husin considers the conceptualisation and execution of *Awal Hurouf, Asal Hurouf* an important learning period for him as he studied his craft as well as his understanding of his religion, which he states is a defining feature of his character. His ability to produce thirty individual canvases on this single subject matter speaks volumes to his creative ability, and the series has since gone down in the canon of Malaysian contemporary art as marking a momentous growth through the wider representation of calligraphy in a contemporary, conceptual context. It was subsequent to the success of *Awal Hurouf, Asal Hurouf* that Husin deepened developments into his calligraphic practice, most notably through the progression from depicting individual letters into the formation of words with *Nota dan Yasin Untukmu* (2013) and *Iqra* (2013).





Zal  
Acrylic on canvas  
152cm x 244cm  
2011

# Eng Hwee Chu

If, as a whole, Eng Hwee Chu's collection of paintings can be read as a chronicle of her life, then her seminal *Black Moon* series is the window into her early years. Produced between 1989 to 1994 the series instigates a search for identity and her inner self, a thread that runs through the entirety of Hwee Chu's artistic practice. Seeking to explore the juxtaposition between the outer world, or society at large, against her personal feelings and thought processes, she introduced several symbolic constants which have since consistently marked her work- the horse, red and black figures, strong figurative tendencies and Chinese imageries- bound up in brooding overtones of blue and black. Within this oeuvre *Black Moon 10* stands out. Painted in 1991, a year that has since been recognised as seminal both for Hwee Chu as well as wider Malaysian contemporary art, *Black Moon 10* is indicative of her increasingly confident shifts forward as an artist staking her claim in an all new art ecology.

Born in Batu Pahat, Johor, in 1967, Hwee Chu graduated from Malaysian Institute of Art in 1988. Almost immediately she gained widespread critical acclaim for her painterly reflections on identity, gender, culture and change, through the lens of the Chinese-Malaysian experience. In 1990 she was awarded the Minor Prize at the Malaysian Salon Exhibition, and the following year she won the coveted Painting Award at the Salon Malaysia 3 competition, which was held at National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur. It is of note that this 1991 edition of the Salon Malaysia competition has since appeared to be a watershed moment that helps define the emergence of a Malaysian contemporary moment, with the list of winners reading like a 'who's who'

of accomplished senior artists. (Successful entries included *The Power I* by Zulkifli Yusof, *Tragic of Blue Night* by Tan Chin Kuan, *The Lost Horizon* by Fauzin Mustafa, *Black Moon 12* by Eng Hwee Chu, *Lang Kachang* by Bayu Utomo Radjikin, *Harimau Mati Meninggalkan Belang*, *Manusia Mati Meninggalkan Nama* by Ahmad Shukri Mohamed and works from Fauzan Omar's *Diversity and Unity* series.) 1992 saw Hwee Chu take home the Minor Award from Young Contemporaries (*Bakat Muda*) at National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur, and in 1994 she won the Grand Prize at the Philip Morris National Art Award.

Hwee Chu has frequently exhibited locally and internationally; notable amongst these showings are the second Asia Pacific Triennale in Brisbane, Australia (1996), Art in Southeast Asia 1997: *Glimpses into the Future* at Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (1997) the Osaka Triennale, Osaka (2001), Sovereign Art Exhibition in Hong Kong (2005). In early 2013 Eng participated in *Women In Between: Asian Women Artists 1984-2012* in Fukoka, Japan with her work *The Role of the Female*. Amongst these prolific showings of her work, *Black Moon 10* has been exhibited thrice in museum contexts, highlighting the appreciation critical audiences have for the work in particular. In 1991 the work was included in *The Question of Identity: The Malaysianess of Malaysian Art* at National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, going on to travel to Singapore for the exhibition *Art and Material* at Singapore National Museum Art Gallery in 1992. In 1995, *Black Moon 10* appeared in Solo Exhibition of Eng Hwee Chu at National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

In the spirit of Magical Realism artists, Hwee Chu faithfully depicts the outer appearance of objects as a means through which she might reveal their inner spirit to her audience. Of all the objects which receive this treatment at her hands, perhaps the most prominent to date has been the wooden horse, closely followed by Chinese icons and artefacts, which are present in *Black Moon 10* in the form of classical furniture and lotus flowers. The wooden horse that approaches the dancing black shadows across the bottom of the canvas represents desire and longing. Having grown up in a *kampung* Hwee Chu was never exposed to rocking horses, and by the time she saw one, she was too big to ride on it, despite feeling a fervent desire to. Thus, in her paintings, the horse has come to symbolise that which she cannot possess, and the unfulfilled dreams of every adult.

The notion that Hwee Chu is drawing on her own experiences in the artwork's narrative is reinforced through the inclusion of Chinese furniture, highlighting the idea of home and personal spaces, as well as the Red Figure who is central to the painting's composition. Tracking developments in Hwee Chu's Red Figure, who has appeared in nearly all of her paintings to date, is a clue to the changes in her life and her state of mind. Indeed, it was in the *Black Moon* series when the Red Figure began to take on an increasingly realistic figurative appearance; one of the characteristics that marks the series out. Here the Red Figure moves from the representation of a purely emotional state in its *Black Moon 4* (1989) debut to the representation of Hwee Chu as a woman and artist, as she gains confidence in her abilities.

The seemingly disparate composition of *Black Moon 10* adds to the surreal atmosphere of the artwork. While all the objects are in and of themselves familiar, their placements against each other conjures a dream like sensation for viewers, one that is almost hypnotic. In this way Hwee Chu has marked herself out as a pioneering contemporary artist in Malaysia, one whose name is almost synonymous with the Surrealist and Magical Realism genres locally. It must be noted that this has, in large part to do with her superlative painting skills and formal artistic ability, as it is the mild twists and distortions in the circumstances of instantly recognisable iconography on which the success of surreal work stands.

Producing autobiographical work using reflections of the self is a thread that seems to bind the practices of several female artists, as the confessional photographs of Cindy Sherman or surreal self-portraits of Frieda Kahlo might reveal. While the works of these women might appear highly personal at first glance, they actually open up critical spaces within which reflections on broader political, social and cultural concerns can take place. For Hwee Chu this might be a rumination on the role of women in Malaysian society, or the experience of the Chinese diaspora locally? At other times she nudges her audience towards questions on the transformations in society which parallel the economic and political transformations, and rapid urbanisation in the postcolonial period. Along the way she has cemented her place in the Malaysian art history canon, as a pioneering contemporary artist, and a woman who has made her voice heard and count.



*Black Moon 10*  
Acrylic on Canvas  
148cm x 217cm  
1991

Enriching historical understanding through art is a conceptual hallmark of Zulkifli Yusoff's practice. With a portfolio that consists of two-dimensional mixed media work, painting, sculpture and installation, he consistently seeks ways through which his art might encourage interrogations of personal and collective histories amongst wider audiences. This is certainly the case with *Rukunegara Voice 1* and *Rukunegara Voice 3*, which in fact may be seen as a segue between two of Zulkifli's recent significant series: *Negaraku* and *Green Book*.

Zulkifli's position in the Malaysian art canon is well renowned. Critical success came early in his career, and from a young age he has been the recipient of several major art awards. In both 1988 and 1989 he was presented with the Major Award for Young Contemporaries at the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur and in 1992 he gathered three prizes at the third Salon, the Grand Minister's Prize, Major Award and Consolation Prize for sculpture and also won an Honourable Mention in Painting in 1995 at the Philip Morris Awards. Additionally, he frequently exhibits at important international exhibitions, most notably the Venice Biennale in 1997 and again this year, 2019. His works have also been presented at

the Biennale of Visual Arts in Seychelles, the Fukoka Asian Art Exhibition in Japan, Immunity 11 show at Art Space, Sydney and the First Asia-Pacific Triennale in Brisbane, Australia. Major international institutions, including the Fukoka Museum of Art and Hiroshima Art Museum in Japan and the Singapore Art Museum and Gallery, as well as local institutions such as Bank Negara Malaysia and the Kedah State Gallery, collect his work.

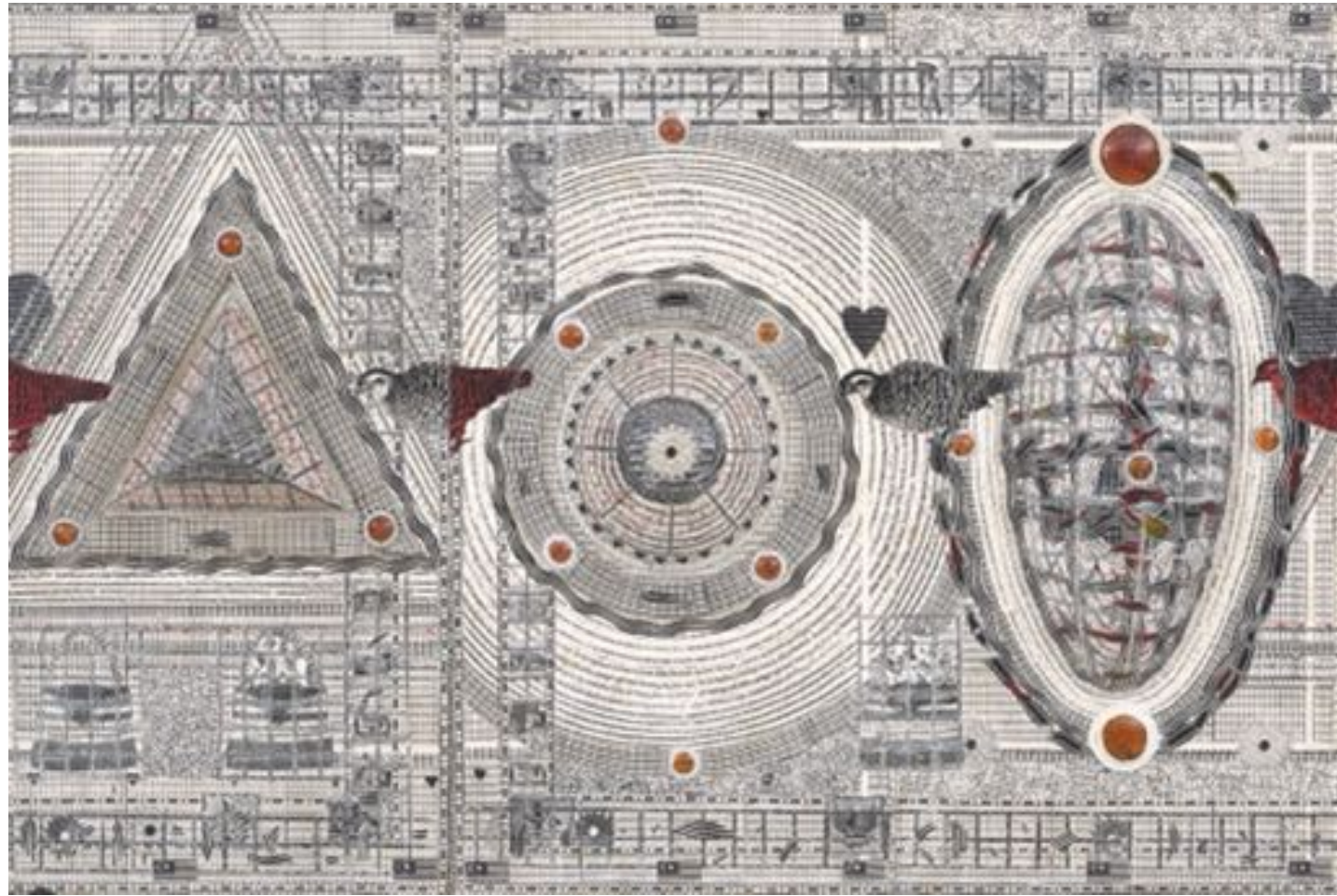
While Zulkifli is adept across several genres of art, he is particularly known for his stunning installations. Amongst these are *Don't Play During Maghrib*, his entry to the 1997 Venice Biennale. A detailed work that comprises of drawing, print, sculpture, *Don't Play During Maghrib* references both common Malay cultural practices as well as Zulkifli's own relationship with his father, a figure who has had a major influence on Zulkifli's affection for historical narratives. 2003's *Hikayat Pelayaran Munshi Abdullah*, which is based on the classic story *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah* (1849), was a crucial transformative point for the artist conceptually, driving the development of research based art and socio-political commentaries within his practice, using in depth historical and literary research. This attitude is explored in further

installation works such as the *Pendita* (2011), which is the first time Zulkifli brought the Jawi script into his black and white layered cut canvas works. This aesthetic is now closely associated with his practice, as is seen in *Artwork I* and *Artwork II*, two extremely detailed examples of this particular style.

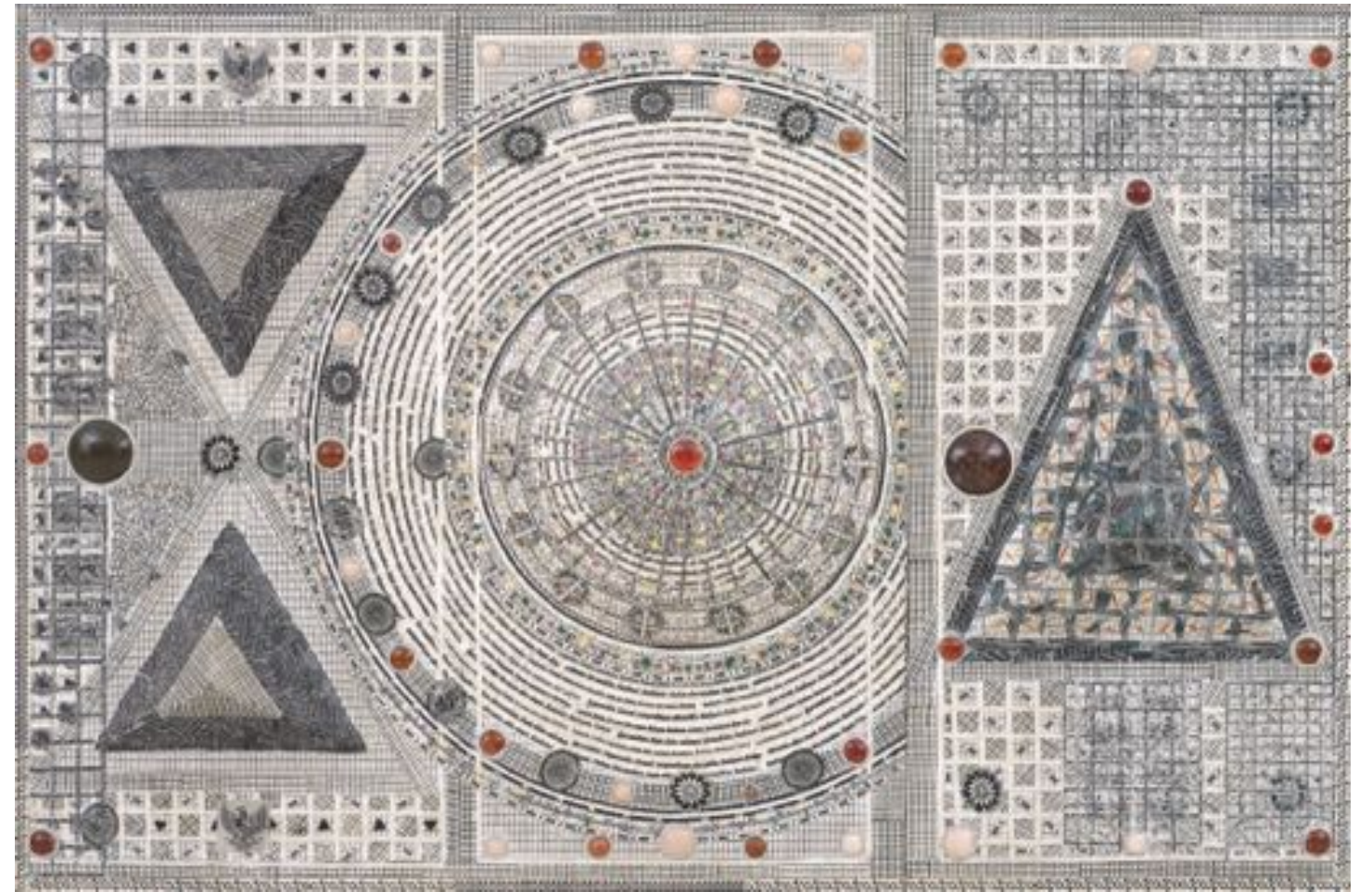
Both *Rukunegara Voice 1* and *Rukunegara Voice 3* were produced subsequent to his 13th solo series, *Negaraku*, which was presented at Balai Seni Lukis in 2010. On the whole, *Negaraku* can be viewed as a visual accumulation of Zulkifli's interrogations into particular aspects of Malaysia's history; most notably Tun Razak's response to the economic issues brought about by the worldwide recession of 1973-1975. It is of note that Zulkifli does not simply retell the events of the period, but rather uses his artistic practice as a way to understand past events and their impact on the present and future, while making this information accessible for audiences who were not present or have no recollection of the events of 1973-1975. He begins thinking through the *Green Book* initiative, which encouraged agricultural initiatives within Malaysian society, not just on industrial levels but also for individual families as a way to increase self-reliance and combat issue

brought about from the recession. Zulkifli presents visual clues in the form of imagery, such as small animals, and printed excerpts, thus infusing these mixed media works with the concepts on which he ruminates.

Audiences today are familiar with Zulkifli's black and white layered strips of printed canvas; *Rukunegara Voice 1* and *Rukunegara Voice 3* are pivotal to the development of what is now a signature style for the eminent artist. Zulkifli pasted long ribbons of white canvas which had images and text printed on in black over one another, building an abstract base dense in information and visual tension. He added images of small animals as a final layer, which march across the canvas in single file, in what represented the first time he presented imagery in this manner. The built up shapes protruding from the surface speak to the artist's desire to resolve the conceptual and formalistic aspects of his artworks, commenting that graphic shapes and patterns often offer the solution for the balance he seeks between the visual and cerebral elements of his work.



*Rukunegara Voice 1*  
Mixed Media, Screenprint  
and Acrylic on Canvas  
122cm x 183cm  
2013



*Rukunegara Voice 3*  
Mixed Media, Screenprint  
and Acrylic on Canvas  
122cm x 183cm  
2013

# Yusof Ghani

Within the Malaysian art canon, Yusof Ghani's name is almost synonymous with abstract expressionism, as his wide portfolio of paintings typifies the emotive, gestural style of the genre. Despite this nod to an art movement closely associated with American art, his practice is grounded in a staunchly Malaysian aesthetic. Initially this is through colour, but on a deeper level it is through movements inspired by Malay dance and compositional structures inspired by Eastern heritage arts. A merging of abstraction and representation seems to run through the majority of Yusof's works, such as in *Segerak VII-Victory I*, which while clearly an abstract expressionist painting, clearly represents human figures, engaged in energetic movement.

Born in 1950 in Johor, Yusof received a government scholarship to pursue a fine art degree in America, graduating in 1983 with a Master of Fine Art in painting from the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. During this time he became influenced by the works of American Abstract Expressionist painters, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, and began experimenting with the genre in his seminal *Sri Tari* series. It was with this series that Yusof found ways to produce figurative art through expressive brushstrokes, effectively marrying two genres which captured his imagination. He continued using the figure as a primary source of inspiration with his subsequent series *Segerak*, capitalizing on the use of a symbol as familiar as the figure as a narrative tool, as may be seen here in *Segerak VII-Victory I*.

It was as a student in America when Yusof first became keenly aware that art is, in fact, a global culture, one that allows for open communication and the transfer of knowledge. Similar mediums, styles and techniques were emerging from disparate places around the world. While Yusof was excited by this, he simultaneously began to wonder how he could set apart and communicate Malay culture within this transnational visual language? He began by drawing out the Western formal techniques underpinning Abstract Expressionist artwork production, attempting to translate them to

the language of the Nusantara, thus creating the bedrock of a technical process which continues until today.

Both de Kooning and Pollock, who Yusof cites as influences, were notable as Action Painters, a form of gestural abstraction. In action painting, paint is spontaneously applied to the canvas. At times this is through free-flowing movements, akin to dance; at other times it might be through the direct dripping, pouring or splashing of paint. From the beginning, Yusof understood the instinctual impulses of this style, which naturally raised the question: what would the instinctual free-flow movement emerging from the Malay culture, or Malaysian context, look like? To solve this creative problem Yusof inserted subtle substitutions to his technical process, which are present here in *Segerak VII-Victory I* that are keenly inspired by Malay and Malaysian culture.

Visually in *Segerak VII-Victory I*, a Malay influence initially comes to the fore through colour palette. The mix of bright colours, with reds and yellows as a base, is inspired by local textile traditions such as *batik*, and their ceremonial uses. Yusof comments that combining several bright colours so as to overwhelm such a sizeable canvas is a strongly Eastern aesthetic, grounded through his own observations. Most pertinently however, he took on the essence of Action Painting and used an energetic series of movements inspired by Malay choreographies while attacking his canvas. The long, gestural marks Yusof produces are overlapped in a crisscross fashion to produce a sense of depth and allow for both the top and the bottom to come to the foreground of the canvas, linking back to Oriental compositions. Yet audiences can still note Western Formalism and the influence of the American contemporary movement through his visual language, which is comprised of a harmonious organization of space and balance between straight and curved lines. Thus audiences can understand one of Yusof's most important contributions to Malaysian art: in seeking to create a new contemporary art language which is rooted in a local context, yet connects to contemporary art practices globally. In this way



*Segerak VII - Victory I*  
Oil on Canvas  
153cm x 153cm  
2017

Yusof has found a way to open a dialogue between Malaysian contemporary art and the rest of the art world.

Today Yusof commands a great deal of respect from his peers as well as audiences of contemporary art. His influence in the Malaysian art scene is evident not only through an art practice that has garnered critical and commercial success, but also his time

as an art professor at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), where he oversaw the instruction of several successful younger artists. In 1985, as a young art graduate Yusof won the Major UNICEF Art Asia Award in Kuala Lumpur, and his work has been shown around the world at exhibitions in Washington, Vancouver, Hong Kong, Singapore and Barcelona, as well as in Kuala Lumpur.

Masnoor Ramli's multidisciplinary practice encompasses painting, print, photography and video while balancing the emphasis on conceptual urgency and visual delivery. Often incorporating Western icons- American politicians such as George W Bush in *I Dream of Rome* and Barack Obama in *Moulding the History* spring to mind- Masnoor is known for employing the figure as a site of discourse. Juxtaposing these against symbols staunchly embedded in Malay folklore, he continuously questions the uncertainty of securing diverse local cultural tradition in the face of the rapid technological and economic developments arising from globalisation. *A Tale of Be(LIE)vers* engages with these aesthetic signatures, most notably through the representation of a tennis playing Donald Trump and the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets.) The artwork originally debuted in London at an exhibition titled *Past* which was presented at Battersea Power Station in a reflection on contemporary artistic practices in the capital cities of London and Kuala Lumpur; now the artist has updated the artwork from photographic prints to a series of digital prints on raw aluminium.

Upon graduating from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Masnoor went on to found the MATAHATI

art collective along with Ahmad Fuad Osman, Ahmad Shukri, Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Hamir Soib. Today, he stands out as one of the most influential contemporary figures in Malaysia, as both an artist and an intellectual. Director of the National University of Singapore Museum Ahmad Mashadi views the MATAHATI as representational of the transformations within the Malaysian art ecology which resulted from a changing postcolonial landscape, saying that "as young, ethnic Malays, they represent part of a new generation as well as an urban class that emerged during a period of intense economic and cultural transformation." Despite this inextricable link to four other artists, Masnoor stood out individually from the start. This was evidenced by his receipt of several art awards, among them the Honourable Mention at the Philip Morris Art Awards (1994 and 1995), and the Petronas Nusantara 4X4 Xpedition (2006), and his inclusion in regional art collections, among them Singapore Art Museum, National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur, GALERI PETRONAS and Maybank.

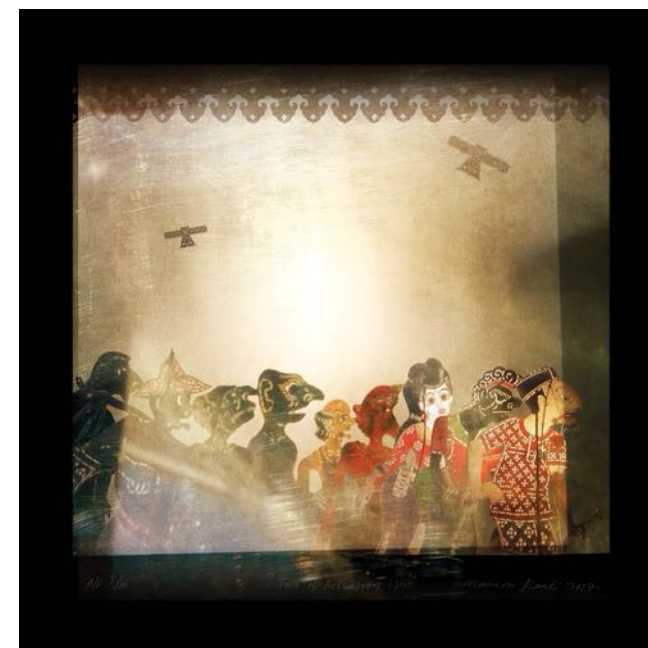
*A Tale of Be(LIE)vers* draws on what are perhaps Masnoor's favourite intellectual concerns: political content and the dual use of political and mythical figures. Eight individual photographs come together to tell a single story: a reminiscing of colonial times,

paralleled with the political situation in Southeast Asia. On one side Donald Trump plays tennis; bookending the series of images is Xi Jinping, who appears to be returning a serve with a Hurley stick, but Masnoor has replaced the expected leather sliotar ball with a distinctive Malaysian '*sepak raga*' woven ball. The use of these two political figures speaks not only to a balancing act between Western and Eastern Superpower nations in Malaysia, but also past beliefs that those who colonise have a superiority- both intellectually and culturally. In the twenty-first century, this notion still lingers within individuals in ex-colonies- who may favour foreign culture and opinion, despite the appearance of independence.

In the centre panels are a crowd of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) characters, representing the Malaysian 'everyman', who appear to be watching the match between Trump and Jinping. As a symbol, the *wayang kulit* appears throughout Masnoor's oeuvre, for example in *Rama in Cyberjaya* (1996), a mixed media artwork that questioned the fate of cultural identity in the face of the information revolution. Furthermore, the inclusion of the *wayang kulit* icon, which is local to Malaysia and the Nusantara region, acts as a vehicle through which

historic forms of pictorial recitation and storytelling are reflected upon within a time where access to information is constantly evolving, and reminds audiences of the oral traditions that are staunchly embedded in the culture of the Nusantara.

*A Tale of Be(LIE)vers* is produced in the inventive digital print on raw aluminium style which Masnoor has been developing since his celebrated 2014 solo *Aviation*. Since then he has gone on to rework and refine the medium, making it a signature style in his multi-disciplinary practice, as he achieves a nostalgic quality by printing images and photographs on a matte finished aluminium. Typically, the printing of images requires four base colours, but Masnoor cuts this down to three. By using the natural grey of the unpolished aluminium as a substitute for white, he tones down the intensity of his palette, while retaining the aluminium's textural character. The resultant dream-like quality that *A Tale of Be(LIE)vers* is imbued with not only compliments Masnoor's melodic, philosophical character, but also the mythical characteristic of the nostalgic symbolism he employs.



From Top left to right:  
Tale of Be(LIE)vers 1-8  
Digital Print on Aluminium  
60cm x 60cm  
2017





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