

Ahmad Zakii Anwar & The Search For Divine Truths

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Great art presents its viewers with defining moments. Ibrahim Hussein's retrospective exhibition at the National Art Gallery in 1986 was one. Wong Hoy Cheong's *Migrants and Tappers* was another defining moment.

And I vividly remember the first time I saw Ahmad Zakii Anwar's *White on Grey on Grey* and *Grey on Black on Black* at GALERI PETRONAS. These were the legendary smokers at their infancy. The sitters are awkward in posture and proportion, their masks of smoke are sketchy and tentative but they are bursting with the raw, calm promise of what they would become.

Nearly twenty years later, *Disclosure*, Ahmad Zakii Anwar's retrospective reveals his developing maturity and sophistication as a painter. An accomplished designer in a previous life, Zakii embarked on a career as a fine artist in the late 1980s, laboring with a diligence and passion bordering on obsession to achieve a high degree of technical prowess while he experimented with numerous stylistic modes. The result has been a mood-filled and emotional naturalism dominated by the monumental - whether it is a modest painstaking portrait of his mother's kettle or epic depictions of the deviant and glorious Selembu. First and foremost, Ahmad Zakii Anwar's paintings are without a doubt intensely beautiful and beautifully designed.

From the early still lifes and erotic fruit, to the iconic smokers, perfect nudes and voluptuous sofas; from the decorated Balinese dancers to the celebrated *Meditation Series* and the narrations in *Kota Sunyi*; finally culminating with the black, tactile charcoals of the armored rhino, the hairy boar or the rotund Hindu devotee - there is a cheekiness and religiosity within the irrational seeping light of dawn which emanates from beneath the dark and somber calm of his picture planes.

These works celebrate the spiritual and the mystical over the empirical and the material - his actors live in a realm where the search is very much between the dream and mathematics. At the risk of sounding contrived, his is an autobiographical exploration of the eternal search for God by Man. This brand of spiritual naturalism that Zakii has brought to the contemporary Malaysian art scene has to a large extent been treated like some curious aberration within the landscape of Malaysian art histories.

However, Ahmad Zakii Anwar's work quite naturally owns a very interesting place within a modern Malaysian art history which continues to be dominated by figurative painting although there has been the more recent rise of new alternative media in their expression.

Yet the artist remains committed to serious painterly works within our current art historical period that is challenged by an artistic sphere rife with photographic and new media manipulation. And there is no doubt that his work has its place within a legitimate contemporary context, firstly since within a South East Asian and Malaysian art histories, the figurative, albeit within the context of the social narrative, is the dominant visual obligation. Secondly, these paintings have been produced in our own time by a painter whose works are now being exhibited in the halls of high art.

Zakii's works, old and new are being anxiously subscribed to in a thriving secondary art market, both locally and regionally. As such, a critical appreciation of Zakii's brand of naturalism is timely - not only on aesthetic and commercial levels - but also as far as finding its contemporary context within a Malaysian art movement which is currently simmering with historicist polemics.



From its earliest recorded paintings like O Don Peris' Portrait of My Wife in her Wedding Dress (1933) Malaysian art has been influenced by Western naturalistic portraiture. The period of Malaysian art leading up to Independence, from the 1930s till the 1950s, boasted the works of the Nanyang artists like Cheong Soo Pieng and Georgette Chen who depicted idyllic, noble village life through realistic as well as stylized representational paintings.

Parallel to this movement was that of the early art groups like the Wednesday Art Group that advocated modernist experimentation but as far as a reading of Zakii's work is concerned the Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung is a much more relevant entry point. Led by famed Malaysian naturalist painter, Hoessein Enas, boasting members like Mazeli Mat Som, the APS celebrated the rural Malay world and its inhabitants in the most romantic and naturalistic portraiture, leaving their lasting legacy on the face of Malaysian modern art.

However, the return of foreign-trained artists like Syed Ahmad Jamal, Jolly Koh, Yeoh Jin Leng, Ibrahim Hussein and Latiff Mohidin in the 1960s saw the rise of a brand of abstraction celebrating the gestural mark with broad references to the landscape and vague ones to the human figure.

This direction within our art movement was compounded by the racial tensions of 1969, the consequent formation of the Cultural Congress and the search, ever since, for a single unified Malaysian identity. It is an aesthetic shaped by a Malay-Islamic cultural and religious ethos which would give rise to a philosophical abstraction and for a period, detract from the figurative in the Malaysian art scene. Artists like Syed Ahmad Jamal, Ahmad Khalid Yusof, Suleiman Esa and Fatimah Chik moved in the direction of a contemporary Islamic abstraction in tandem with these events at home as well as larger global developments like the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

However, while Islamic abstraction dominated Malaysian art in the early 1970s, artists like Syed Tajudeen, Amron Omar, Zulkifli Buyong, Ismail Zain, Nirmala Shanmugalingham as well as Redza Piyadasa continued to explore the figure – again in various degrees of naturalist, realist and stylized tendencies.

What followed was the rise of social commentary within figurative art in Malaysia that became firmly entrenched in Malaysian art via artists like Wong Hoy Cheong, Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Zulkifli Yusof, Tan Chin Kuan and the Matahati who in turn have spurred a pluralism of styles, media and intentions so apparent in the contemporary social realism practiced by artists like Nadiah Bhamadaj, Yee I-Lann and Anum Nor Mahnun.

Zakii, on the other hand, has consciously avoided the penchant for social and political commentary which has preoccupied so many figurative artists both locally and regionally.

Ahmad Zakii Anwar's art certainly can be referenced to the nationalist naturalism of works by artists like Hoessein Enas in the 1950s and 60s which celebrated the Malay/Malaysian coming of age.

But his contemporariness owes more to the abstract figuration, designed picture-plane, rich symbolism and spiritual nuances of a work like Ibrahim Hussein's seminal My Father and the Astronaut (1970) or Amron Omar's silat players set within their abstract spaces than it does to these purely naturalist masters.

Even within the pluralistic approach to the figure within contemporary painting in Malaysia by artists like Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Kow Leong Kiang, Jailani Abu Hassan and Ivan Lam, Zakii's position again differs.

Bayu Utomo Radjikin is one of the founding members of the Matahati group of multi-disciplined artists who have been at the forefront of social commentary as well as the use of new media. More recently he has alternated between these tendencies while producing works that explore academic self-portraits against layered dripping backdrops equivalent to abstract expressionist compositions.

Kow Leong Kiang's depictions of contemporary rural Malay life at its most idyllic even when bathed in a bloody mire of crashing economies in works like *Hey Mr Foreign Investor Leave Our Country Alone* (1998) and *Shadowland* are bathed in a romanticism and narrative which are quite different from Zakii's intention.

Jai's brand of explosive figurism that explores issues of self and place, the traditional and the popular is completely at odds with the integral silence which provides the resolute voice of Zakii's work. And the telling of human stories through the obsessive exploration and replication of new color technologies sets Ivan Lam at odds with the naturalist tendencies of Zakii's aesthetic.

While Zakii has a place within a telling of Malaysian art history, the influence of these figurative artists - early and contemporary - should not be exaggerated.

Zakii's relationship to traditions in the Malaysian art movement has always been quite free.

What the artist has chosen to incorporate into these seemingly minimal picture planes is an esoteric calm that is conveyed in the examples of the contemporary Islamic aesthetic which initially grew out of the aforementioned search for a national identity post 1969.

However, his is not an Islamic aesthetic which relies on the appreciation of a Malay identity. Neither does he draw directly from specific Islamic motifs, symbols or calligraphy. Instead, he convincingly conveys a subtle aesthetic that may rely on the representational but finds its resonance in a strange mix of enlightened religiosity tinged with a hint of wry, dark humour and a sad regret.



And at the heart of this work is the artist himself.

Zakii speaks in depth about the way his life as an artist, a husband, father, son, friend – has been shaped by Sufism. Whatever role he plays, he does it with excellence, with a deep regard and aspiration for beauty and perfection as God intends at the moment of Creation.

To achieve that pure beauty, he holds to the basic tenet of Sufism - that knowledge and enlightenment are inextricably tied to taste or experience. To hear or learn about something, to then encounter it and see it and finally to actually experience it... these are the components that give his work the element of fundamental truth that removes it from the realm of cliché.

When making his work, in accordance with the Islamic tenet of *ihsan* or excellence the artist strives to do things beautifully. More than being a good painter, he strives to be a heavenly painter and that can only become a reality if this beauty transcends all our everyday dealings and interactions with each other, socially, professionally, spiritually and racially.

It is this state of grace – humanity in perfect balance - that the artist is able to convincingly convey through the unapologetic perfection and beauty which dictates his picture planes.

In Islam, God is described as loving beauty and perfection absolutely. The artist believes that the way the world is designed attests to this. The rising and setting of the sun, night and day, the ebb and flow of the tides are perfect in their conception.

While this striving for absolutes in the quest for beauty and perfection is apparent in works like *Manifesto* through the composition of objects and of the beautiful things that occupy his picture planes and most of all through the perfectly formed and anonymous human players in his paintings, there are deep unresolved questions that the artist raises.

In negotiating Humanity's place within that perfect landscape, the artist searches for a philosophical balance within the meanings in his work through the positive and the negative in the paintings; between light and dark; in the use of the masks as a symbol of human frailty.

There are constant elements of the alternative spirituality that he has been exposed to. Even the briefest encounter with his Meditation Series and it becomes obvious that the artist has always been interested in comparative religions – the repeated Buddha heads aren't simply convenient manipulations of a popular icon. They possess an authentic and generic spirituality that provides a platform for a kind of humanistic dialogue which transcends their Buddhist iconography.

The reference to the crucifixion with some of the smoking men; the sofas or the monolithic black rhino as altar tables; the nudes stripped of all their human baggage; the Balinese carver and dancer, all draw their resonance from different faiths and denominations but are expressed with such equal tenderness and care that they find a commonality that transcends their difference.

In essence, Zakii is a purveyor of poetic moods and philosophical reflections on the wholeness of God's creation, or perhaps the divine presence within the pervading, visible yet thoroughly incomprehensible light within his work.

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From a purely aesthetic point of view, Zakii seems to have developed a visual language which hinges on realism and this play of often incomprehensible light caught between a startling resemblance to classical Dutch painting and the designed approach of the American Luminist school in the 19th century.

What is unique, sensational, and for some derivative about Zakii's painting is that he employs a classical tradition of painting in portraying contemporary themes and subjects – from the smokers in the crisp white shirts in downtown Johor Bahru or neon-lit hotel rooms to the pure tourist theatre of the Balinese dancers in their finest costume captured forever in the midst of performance.

In the layers and layers of wash, pigment and hair-dryer that go into creating these paintings, in the way with which Zakii distresses his paper with charcoal that is at once hard yet velvety, it becomes obvious that he wants us to be able to physically taste the material while emotionally responding to its visual experience.

Using projection intermittently when planning his picture-plane, the artist seems anxious to get past the details of proportion, placement and relationships and is more interested in conveying a mood or a feeling about the actors as well as the surreal dark spaces they inhabit.

The sensuality of the solitary figure or object – at times accompanied by mythological or religious symbols as with the smoking men; at other times by props within the almost staged settings; and occasionally as part of larger narratives especially in some of the works in the Bali and Meditation Series' - is palpable.

And in searching for this sensuality, the works reveal elements of social commentary through their very contemporary players. The long-sleeved smoker, the nude stripped of the layers of subterfuge in works like Transcend, the swarthy Indian Kavadi-carrier just before the fact – they all possess elements of commentary.... about class and culture and always the Search.

It is also interesting that almost as a reflection of a growing Malaysian middle-class, the artist, whether unconsciously or not, captures the phenomenon in his paintings – in the dress and manner of his smokers as well as the props that accompany the players from the clocks to the fullblown sofas in blue and orange.

It is a device which is reflected in the Still-Lives in the way he features everyday nostalgic and grand objects. Even the Bali narratives - dancers, musicians, artisans – when stripped of their finery – quite easily refer to our middle-class aspirations of adventure. The Meditation Series with its New Age overtones is most definitely, again, an extremely middle-class preoccupation.

Whatever elements of protest or commentary that exist in the work are merely an incidental part of the process but not a style – the artist seeks to understand himself and why he makes what he does – his is not an aesthetic that stands in judgment of the world around him.

V

DISCLOSURE demonstrates the artist's prodigious strengths – all of them – whether in the earliest small squares of still-lives or the gargantuan heads from his recent STPI works on paper. The retrospective gathers over 100 works from the numerous series – the Still Lives, the Smokers, the Nudes, the Balinese Series, the Meditation Series and his current preoccupation with his monumental Charcoals on paper.

While these distinct series are presented here in a broad chronology, Zakii continuously revisits themes and encourages dialogue between the series as they begin to appear in each other's picture-planes. The overriding universal themes remain the same – beauty and its aesthetic, a strong sense of design as well as the play of light and the constant search for some kind of higher meaning links the series - as if when installed together, they could be the clues that give us the Answer.

THE STILL LIVES

The Still Life Series was Zakii's earliest investigation of a picture plane that consisted of a single dominant central object or actor, on a stage, sometimes with props and always within a receding light for added drama.

The items were drawn from a myriad of objects, precious, rare, nostalgic – they ranged from rare earthen vessels to his mother's kettle. There is no discrimination here – every object is given the same loving attention and labor.

Always captured in actual size or larger-than-life, the artist simply uses the compositional device of a central vessel that glows in an intensely dark background.

Despite the realistic rendering of the object, the contrast of light and shadow invites a contemplation of the object as something more than it is. It is rendered significant, mysterious and alive – autobiographical in their being chosen.

The sexy fruits – far from being purposely lewd as their names would imply – Days of Sodom, Sixty-Nine – are obviously references to fertility, completeness and perfection. The Still-Lives were small squares of intense preparation for the Smokers which were to follow.

THE SMOKERS

The Smokers are Zakii's most recognizable works. The Series finds its beginnings in early self-portraits done as a student in UiTM. Small works like Lazy afternoon and Two Men are quite obviously personal and anecdotal... the cigarette-smoke as a masking device to indicate our reluctance to show our true selves. Another early self-portrait Untitled 5, an intricate tapestry of line and wash, is the first reference to the mask – the face of the figure in the landscape obscured in a pattern of floating fragments.

The smokers - contrary to what the artist evasively implies, is not about his love for smoking. At least not completely...

And though the Smokers may owe their being to more than an incident with a friend in works like Thank You for Smoking I & II the incident was a mere catalyst. The veil of smoke – as a device to explore the duplicitous nature of Man - surfaced at art school itself.

The Smokers are a seminal part of his body of work because they also spawn everything that comes after as far as their allegorical content as well as their aesthetic sophistication is concerned.

The sofas may be massive deities to monumentalism, they may evoke a sense of something lost; they may even be symbols for middle class aspirations but made during the middle of the Smokers series they are also about the absence of these signature actors. With works like Parlor and Room with Figure, the Smokers are taken out of their mythical space rich with Sufi symbolism and familiar dark umber backgrounds and supplanted into more defined, alien settings. Largely autobiographical, these works coincide loosely with the artist's initial international exhibitions in New York and Hong Kong that seemed to awaken a disconnection within the artist himself eloquently conveyed by these paintings.

The neon lights and clinical furniture, the anonymous back alleys in Lit led quite naturally to the Kota Sunyi works which are obviously dark 3am tributes to his native, much-loved Johor Bahru, even if only its underbelly. In these beautiful monochromes, the artist captures the stillness and sobriety of a single but long moment, where the actors are familiar interlopers in the picture plane as well as its narrative.

Again, it becomes obvious that in spite of his familiarity with the Meldrum Street surroundings, the artist is an outsider.

It is almost as if while he is obviously exploring spatial depth in these works his intention is, through these stark and unforgiving shadows, to trap the subject within the room which is the picture plane.

Despite the figurative realism, they represent a space beyond reality; they are a synthesis of fantasy and realism, of cinema and real life. Whether it is an interior or a street scene, the picture plane becomes the stage where the elements are arranged. And despite the fact that some of the paintings suggest exteriors, the players, as if a reflection of our human condition, remain confined, even trapped within their settings.

The use of this mask-device either through face coverings or simply by the cropping of the head in some of the later Smokers becomes the constant consideration in the work whether in the more literal use of the device in the Bali paintings or their meditative resonance in the Meditation series.

THE NUDES

Almost as a reaction to the Smokers and their numerous screens, the consequent Nudes were the artist's attempt at 'the bride stripped bare'. Here the artist expresses the human figure free of all the layers that they dress themselves in on a daily basis.

While the striving for perfection in the name of the Divine is obvious in the sculpted torsos and glorious details, like the erotic fruit, their sexuality is incidental. That is why there are no women sitters beyond the initial nudes – the artist seems to feel that exploring the female anatomy is too distracting both for the viewer and himself.

The Nudes are also the perfect vehicle for the artist to use flesh in exploring the issues of the science of evolution through intense works like Meat while continuing to flirt with the ideas of divinity and Creationism in works like the massive Being and Primordial Dream which in turn owe much to an Ibn Arabi poem written a thousand years ago.

Of course the Nudes also owe much to Zakii's favorite model over the last few years. In every sitting, the artist presents the viewer with Iqbal, the forcefulness of his personality asserting himself as the enthroned monarch of sinew and muscle.

Through the Nudes, as with the fruit, the artist's intention is to develop a symbolism of wholeness and perfection.

THE BALI SERIES

Like some kind of obligatory rite of passage the Bali Series unashamedly enjoys the theatre and regalia of traditional court dances and traditional drama within the contemporary construct of a kind of clichéd tourism. On closer scrutiny, these celebrated works form a relatively small part of the artist's portfolio. Like a reprieve from the monochromatic sobriety of the smokers and the still-lives, these are executed in rich colour, emblazoned with golden detail, and through biographical triptychs, for the first time, abandon a stoic disengagement from social narratives to attempt to tell the stories of Ida Bagus Made and Ida Bagus Anom. These works in a sense herald the use of a storyboard device which reaches its peak in the Meditation series.

While works like Red Legung 5 and Jauk are the artist's joyous flirtation with pure decoration, their strict formats – how the players exist within the various grounds of the picture - inform the artist's concerns with composition and the placement of objects. These works also mark the entrenchment of a storyboard device which the artist uses with familiar ease in many of the Meditation works.

THE MEDITATIONS SERIES

While the artist has particular attachments to his numerous series of works, he finds the Meditation series the most meaningful.

These paintings are an amalgamation of a broad inclusive system of beliefs which the artist, a devout and confident Muslim, chooses to convey most clearly through the use of the Buddha head. It is interesting that in a current context – both locally as well as globally – where religion can be the most fractious of dialogues, the artist opts to use a spiritual icon outside his immediate religious faith to express a longing for the divine and for paradise.

In the same breath, the Buddha is in many ways the appropriate vehicle. Firstly to coin a cliché, Buddhism is a way of life rather than a ritualbased religion. Secondly, the Buddha as an icon, in the same way as the crucifixion, has so entered the realms of popular iconography.

As a means of communication there is universality in his appropriation which transcends the specificity of our individual faiths. This series eloquently explores Divinity through exploring the tenuous relationships that the central protagonist has with nature; race and culture; the modern world and as always – the Self.

In works like The Sight with which You See, the attempt at an ambiguous synthesis of faiths is obvious. The Buddha's head is juxtaposed with symmetrical floating stones which seem to represent a kind of geometric order that suggests ritual, calm and order generic to most religions through which he (the Buddha) like the artist is also searching for Enlightenment.

To quote the artist, *"In Sufism, your heart must be big enough to contain all things... especially in relation to other belief systems."* *"Although I remain a Muslim and remain true to the tenets of Islam and raise my family as Muslims, I know the strength of my faith and that gives me the confidence to learn about other systems of belief and always find a place within my own."*

"If, through intellectual knowledge we become closer to God, then through my work I want to transcend the fences to find the parallels between the great religions."

"We all play a role, each part has a name, an attribute, a function and how we all fit together completes the experience."

It is true of the family unit – it is true as far as human relations are concerned and this coming together of various improbable elements in surprising harmony is certainly a hallmark of his work as an artist.

THE CHARCOAL SERIES

The Charcoals are a new distinct direction in Zakii's art. It has provided the platform for the artist to release himself from the cluttered fundamentals of painting – colour and tone are replaced by the celebration of a monochromatic world where light and shadow are the only factors in considering form, texture and as always, the mood and purest essence of the subjects he embarks on.

The artist has not worked with Charcoal and paper in its classical sense since art school. At first the smaller – albeit no less intense - portraits of Balinese performers, artists and musicians were merely subsidiary to their painting mainstay.

Their breakthrough was marked by two tremendous portraits of Salleh Ben Joned (Salleh 1 & Salleh 2) executed in a velvety play of layered black charcoal and an immediate and obvious love for the material that immediately won the viewer over for its pure aesthetic enjoyment.

What followed were monumental, larger than life drawings of Balinese dancers and silat players that revel in vibrant decoration despite the blackness of the medium. Syed Ahmad Jamal's irresistible profile firmly positioned drawing as the next phase of the celebrated painter's career.

His time at the STPI residency in Singapore where he experimented with printmaking but more importantly discovered the possibilities of Paper is relevant.

However it was with the making of Badak, a labour of ambiguous form and meager light that the Charcoals undoubtedly begin to take centre stage within his practice.

All of Ahmad Zakii Anwar's works are visually compelling and direct us towards the search for something that eludes us in life.

I am not sure that this outlook is long retained without some religious or divine commitment by the viewer.

Neither does Zakii give us an unambiguous model to follow in moments of personal, political or artistic crisis if we haven't already accepted the tenets of our chosen system of beliefs.

What his art does is what all good art or literature does in giving us some clear and beautiful overviews of an increasingly confusing world.

No matter how great his own faith may be, Zakii does not become otherworldly.

He does not abandon his community of viewers but instead supplies them with complex and fulfilling, quiet and elegant pictures of life's varying forces, to be viewed on whatever spiritual or aesthetic level we may choose.