

A Conversation with Ahmad Zakii Anwar

by Eddin Khoo

EDDIN KHOO: You have stated, "I don't find the need to distort when I'm drawing the human figure to find what I'm looking for. I'd like to find it within the principle of the human figure as it is". Implied in this remark is a flawlessness of the human figure; what then becomes the process of discovery for the painter – representation, emulation, depiction?

AHMAD ZAKII ANWAR: *I am basically articulating rasa in the form of images. It is always about that, always about the feeling. The structure of the human figure is just a means to convey that feeling. I am not an intellectual painter. I am not even an emotional painter... I paint my rasa. So, when I am painting, or before I start painting, there is something that moves me – an idea, a thought, my heart skips a beat, and I try to find the images that can emulate that rasa. I try to work out the ingredients. Rasa has to be manifested, always, in tangible things, if not it remains hidden. When you see or taste something, it's always something solid. The painting then becomes a conduit for that rasa and when I paint what guides me is the rasa that I first felt. The whole purpose of making the painting is to actually get to that, and that becomes the guide. There are times when you can get lost and it becomes something different. It happens, and I am open to that too, but basically that original rasa is what will guide me. It is also never clear; it's never worked out, reasoned or rationalised. That's not necessary. But when you look back over a body of work or several years work, you begin to see that there is actually a rationale behind everything, though it is not revealed in one or two works but through a series of works. Some may be strong, others not as strong, or you may have lost the way but you always get back on course because it is that rasa which really makes you paint. You can even say that this is the spirit that [the traditional woodcarver] Nik Rashiddin Nik Hussein talks about, which guides you.*

So it's not about expression, really. Artists may distort the figure to fit their emotions, for example. I don't want to do that because I think the human figure is perfect as it is. In fact, I would subscribe to the notion that man is created in the image of the divine. And in that sense I don't perceive any reason to distort. Whatever I can find in it is fine in its present condition.

You have recently been working on a series of charcoal drawings of animals. The animal figure is very complex in form, perhaps more so than the human figure. Would you agree with that?

I wouldn't say the animal figure is more complex than that of the human; I'd say it was more particular. It conveys particular characteristics. If you break down life forms, you have the mineral, the vegetal, the animal and then humankind. It starts from the very simple – minerals; then there is plant life which is a bit more complex; the animal then is more complex than plant life and the life of humankind is the most complex of all. In Islam, Sufism in particular, every aspect of life on earth bears a name which is particular to its characteristics. Everything is sort of fixed. Only humankind can fluctuate between this and that – between good and evil, being merciful and cruel. But apart from humankind, all other forms of existence are fixed. That is why you don't have prophets among animals, because they are fixed in their potentiality.

So most of the animal figures I draw are basically an appreciation of the names they carry. I haven't done many – I've done a rhino, a babi rusa - but you can perceive in them the ingredients that make up the human being. They are raw ingredients. A human being will have all these diverse ingredients present within him as a person, while outside of him they are

particular to singular objects or life. Within the human being we have greed, anger, ferocity, mercy, cruelty... it is all mixed and that is what makes us so confused! And because stations are never set, there is the human need for guidance, God perhaps, the need for prophets. The station is set only in death. In death you can measure a human being but until then you can say that everything is in fluctuation, the human being is a traveller.

In that sense my depictions of animals are simply about that – exploring particular aspects of the human being.

We have had discussions about two painters you admire – Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon. You have remarked that Freud is all about the flesh, while Bacon's work you find more profound because it possesses a psychological dimension. That would be something you aspire to. But as someone who works not from life but from photographs how do you not just translate but incarnate that psychology into something palpable?

For me, at least, it doesn't really matter if I work from life or work from a photograph. Freud always works from life. He could never paint from a photograph because for him it is all about the flesh so it must be 'live'. For Bacon, however, it is about painting the psyche so he doesn't really need to see. I am that way because, really, I am painting myself. All of the paintings are about my, not the model's psyche. The model is just a tool so I don't really need the presence. In fact, it would be almost an intrusion into my privacy, my communion with the canvas.

You distinguish clearly between the intellect and the senses and remain firm that your work is of the senses. Do you actually perceive a contradiction?

Yes. When I speak of the intellect - say $2 + 2 = 4$ - that is intellectual knowledge and it stays purely in your mind. The taste of a cigarette? Nothing intellectual about that but you do have knowledge of it. Basically, it all boils down to being about knowledge. And knowledge about a cigarette gets into my blood, it becomes my flesh. I get addicted to it... this is where any form of addiction comes from. Once your biology participates, it becomes total. The intellect alone is not enough. Because it gets into my blood stream, because what I eat gets processed by my liver and gets delivered to my cells as nutrients, it becomes me and that is total knowledge. It doesn't matter if your mind doesn't know it, your body knows it! It becomes real..

A dancer dances because of that not because of intellectual knowledge. The body...that is something undeniable. Biological knowledge and a biological attraction - painting has to be that to me. It has to speak to me like that. I would like to see the canvas bleed. Then it becomes real to me. If I feel that way about my canvas then, I would hope someone who sees my canvas would experience the same thing. When there is participation from your whole being, it is intellectual and biological at the same time. Art today, I think, is too preoccupied with intellectual stuff. It's dry; and intellectual propositioning in art is like a salesman trying to sell you something - maybe yes, maybe no. But a biological proposition is undeniable. You simply cannot deny it. You know, when I fast in Ramadan, I would go for the first 3-4 days on a totally fruit diet. But after 4-5 days you can hear your body scream. It's not really hunger since your body is being filled with food. But your body is screaming for that chilli, for the blood in the meat. It wants its share. Now that is real knowledge. It is not an intellectual proposition. This is a scream for something real. So for me, it has to reach that; if not, I would rather not paint.

I am not fully convinced. Surely the mind operates at some level? Or does it perform a purely utilitarian function?

When you want to make things manifest on the canvas you need to think about technique – what to apply first, and logic comes into play there. The beginning of a painting is always difficult for me. It is always the most boring part because it is technical. You are just beginning and there is nothing to see and feel, really. I'm merely constructing to get it moving. I have to be quite intellectual when putting in the layers, measuring the proportions and making preliminary preparations.

But then half way through...perhaps a bit more than half way...when there are enough attributes on the canvas to play around with, when it begins to come alive, that's when the real process of painting begins, when it gets most interesting and also when you know whether it's going to work, or if you're going to suffer for days and weeks trying to make it work. The real battle really starts from there.

You are unmotivated at the beginning where the first stages of a painting are purely functional and technical. Nevertheless, you are firm in your belief that consummate skill is crucial?

In Islam we have four concepts - syariat which is law; tariqat – the way; hakikat – the truth; and marifat - knowledge. If I used a cooking reference, syariat would be the recipe; tariqat, the actual cooking, hakikat, the dish, and finally marifat, which is taste. These four processes are important to me in the making of art too. I have an idea, but in order for that idea to be fulfilled to its truest potential, I need to perform the process of painting itself, and for the truth of that painting to exist I must have the skill. To have a really good curry that doesn't just get into the brain but into you, you need a skilful cook. It's essential. In life, everything is about skill. You can have an idea for anything in the world but without skill nothing will come of it. In life, nothing can be made without skill, so why should we throw it away? I see no reason. If your only interest is the recipe – the intellectual part of things - and you don't need to cook, what's the point? It must all come together. The syariat is an intellectual process that resides in the realm of ideas. It is non manifest, but the act of painting actually lies between the non manifest and the manifest because it is transient. It becomes manifest in the work then disappears again into the appreciation of that work. So from something non manifest, it becomes partially manifest, then completely manifest before it goes back inside, completing the process.

This notion governs my methodology - where everything is one. These four processes are actually a singular thing and each plays a part. So in a sense, even if I have painted a Buddha, it is quite Islamic in nature because the concepts behind it are Islamic...for me at least. And the four aspects I have detailed, I wouldn't even say they are just Islamic, I would say they are universal because it applies to everything you do. Anything in the creative act - you have a blueprint for a building, then there is the construction, then the building itself and finally, the experience of the building. These four processes come into play in every aspect of life. I wouldn't want to call it only Islamic because I believe truth transcends all labels. People are so concerned about who says what in life. And that's why we're all so confused! The simple truth transcends borders, religions, races and culture. Truth is truth...

To dwell awhile on this dichotomy between the mind and senses - in the contemporary art setting, where concept (mind) appears to precede everything, you'd be regarded as an anachronism? What is your response to that?

I really don't care what is said of me. It disappoints me a little because this is a result of a lack in understanding the nature of things. We basically live in a Western context and when it comes to art everything is based on modernist or post-modernist concepts. But we, here in Asia, have to be careful not to accept that hook, line and sinker since we have very strong traditions that our young seem to discard so easily. These are true, real traditions that we're throwing away for something less profound.

That saddens me a little. But then again, that's part of the process of life. I can only paint how I paint. I am aware of the various concepts in modernist theories and all that, but as I said I don't believe in them uncritically. You take the good and discard the bad. So I may borrow parts which I think are relevant to my thinking and will discard the rest. How am I perceived in the art world? I don't want to think about that. It's not my business anyway. My business is to paint, so I paint...

If we could explore further this idea of 'tradition' – when you depict the Buddha heads of Southeast Asia, for example, a chain in representation occurs and you are in communion with an artisan who has preceded you by several centuries. What kind of empathy do you possess?

It's total empathy. In fact, I would like to empathise with everything in life. One of the most important concepts in Islam is tauhid (oneness), and tauhid doesn't just encompass things Islamic. It encompasses everything – thoughts, religions, cultures, races, and the cosmos. And in Islam tauhid is the mother of all concepts. If you look back a thousand years, the scientist and the theologian in Islam would have many things in common because of their involvement in the concept of tauhid. In contrast today, the scientist and the theologian are forever battling about who is right and wrong.

Tauhid is all about unity. If you take this house and were to dismantle it, there could be a million different parts. And if all the parts were to be taken and laid out on a field, each part would have a name, an attribute and a function. Each would have a relationship with another part - some close, some distant. The tiles would have a close relationship with the wood and the beams that support it. It will probably have a further relationship to the floor but they would all have a relationship in different degrees. If you know the attributes, function, relationship, placement of each of these parts, you would be able to put them together again. That is tauhid.

So, when I paint the Buddha, it is with this in mind – as part of tauhid. And if I know what I'm doing, I can paint anything I want.

You appear to be speaking about art as a fundamentally metaphysical experience. Where then, within this experience, does the aesthetic dimension exist?

After all that is said about Tauhid, there is one important element that needs to be considered - ethics. Tauhid would mean nothing without ethics. The study of Tauhid encompasses four separate realms - Metaphysics, Cosmology, Psychology and Ethics. Metaphysics is basically the study of God. But since you can't understand God without understanding his creation, the next area of study is Cosmology, which is the study of everything in existence - life and all that we see around us. But we cannot really understand life fully if we can't relate it to ourselves and for that we need to study Psychology. Islamic psychology is actually the study of the human soul. The intellect is just another name for the soul. Once we are conscious of these elements, we move on to the study of Ethics. In the end knowledge and power without ethics is dangerous. Ethics is principally about choice - choosing right over wrong.

In Islam, the word used is Ihsan - the notion of excellence. It involves beauty and grace in the performance of our daily lives, and in our duties and relationships with others. As far as my works are concerned, I have been criticized for painting 'beautiful things', for the balance and calmness which exists in my compositions...that it lacks anarchy. But the matter of ethics demands that I choose the good from the bad, understanding over confusion and order above anarchy. That doesn't, however, mean that there is no anarchy in life.

It is crucial we understand that even anarchy is a process. In a revolution, for example, anarchy is a tool employed to bring down a tyrant. But once that tyrant is overthrown order must resume.

Anarchy serves a purpose, but once that purpose is realized we have to cast it aside. We can't rebel forever - there has to be resolution and closure. Anarchy can't be mere fashion.

My search for beauty can take me to the unlikeliest places - through dark shadows and into the deepest recesses of the human mind. But, it is a search for beauty nonetheless. There is beauty even in the Rangda mask, which to the Balinese regard as the epitome of all evil. Yet, beauty resides here too; for in the end, God's mercy precedes his wrath. This dichotomy, confusing as it may appear, opens the door towards a greater understanding of the processes that govern existence. It forms the basis for the making of my art.

A consistent aspect of your work is that it contains historical, archaeological, natural and primitive dimensions. There is a strong primordial element to them. Is there some kind of reclamation going on?

My parents were very religious. They would send me to religious school and I would play truant. Then, they sent a religious teacher to the house to teach me. After three months, he fled. He couldn't take me. I kept asking him, "What is God?" "Where is God?" "What is this thing called God?" He couldn't explain to me! That question of the nature of God began to obsess me.

And when I started painting, until today, it continues to do so. It was this very question that I wanted answered, rather than questions about modernist theories...

In the process of doing this, and the previous book, I discovered quite a few things about myself. I could see there was a train of thought – questions about existence, purpose, life – that was common to the work. It all came to some sort of a conclusion when I incorporated the Buddha and a few Hindu deities into the paintings, and discovered that all this while I was actually psychoanalysing myself – my rasa and thoughts about the divine. These were reflections I was trying to project on the canvas about the nature of divinity and how it relates to me as a person.

There were lots of things that went on the canvas throughout the years - some linear, others haphazard, because I never really bothered to rationalise and define...I was shooting from the hip actually. You might even say it was quite Freudian.

I thought it resolved itself in my Meditation Series when I began incorporating images of the divine, man and that relationship. I wouldn't say I resolved it completely since nothing is ever completely resolved...

But that's when I started my charcoals. They were done for pure pleasure since I felt that part of the search almost over and there was nothing much more to seek. I mean, we all have to come to some conclusion in life; you can't keep asking questions forever.

At this stage of my career I would say I enjoy the charcoals most because they are appreciations of simple things. I may draw portraits like that of Syed Ahmad Jamal and they are simple joys to me. The previous paintings were heavy and serious, and the act of painting very intense. Maybe that is why I fear starting because I know I am going to get lost somewhere along the way and it's going to be painful, and when it's not working I get crabby, snap at my wife and it can all get very unpleasant. But the charcoals are easy. I enjoy doing them and since I have handled more complex material, technically it's a 'snap'. You could say, I suppose, that I am in the process of enjoying the art... rediscovering that simple enjoyment of art again.

There is something about essences that is very enjoyable...

Especially charcoal - where you're just working with your fingers; in painting you need all kinds of props – different kinds of mediums, gels - but with charcoals, just your fingers, the eraser and paper. It's like a comfortable love affair – you've gone through all the complexity and now you're just enjoying each other's company...

You referred earlier to the woodcarver Nik Rashiddin; you've painted images of the Buddha, Mak Yong performers. How much is this also an act of reclaiming your past?

I'm never conscious of it. I grew up on Bugs Bunny. I'd never seen a Mak Yong my whole life till I was much older. I was quite unaware of culture, actually. But there was a point in my career when I felt a little guilty and thought to myself, "I must reclaim my heritage, my Malay-ness, Islam-ness"...whatever that meant. Yet, my attempts at doing that were superficial. Then I discovered that a dancer dances because it's in the blood, not because he wants to reclaim some form of culture or wants to contribute to the culture of the nation, or...that's for the bureaucrats!

The artist paints because it's in the blood. Since then I've never really bothered with questions of 'reclaiming my culture' and so on. You just got to go with what you feel, how you feel, and if that later becomes culture, that's fine. If not, who cares? But it is what it is. And it is how artists should work. Not because they want to enrich the nation or something.

I should pose the question in a different way - for someone who was raised on Bugs Bunny, Bruce Lee films and Westerns, did it at all surprise you when, in encountering the words of Nik Rashiddin or watching a Mak Yong performance, you were actually as compelled by it as you were?

I could only have done that (and did) in the later parts of my life. In my teens and in my twenties, I was very much into movies and comic books. But as I went deeper into Islam, Sufism in particular, with a guru, a whole new realm opened for me. And I can say today that I can confront anything I see and relate to it. I can empathise, or at least try, my heart is probably larger than it was and there is more room for all kinds of things.

Also, when I first went to Bali, I felt the place incredible – that whole experience of the spiritual so blatantly displayed played a part in the transformation of my thinking. Then again, I could also say that the capacity for it was always there but remained unfulfilled and undiscovered. We all have this thing called aptitude - the readiness to receive things.

Sometimes it is not revealed till certain other things are resolved and discovered then it begins to open up. I think everyone has an aptitude for all kinds of things; it all depends on how deeply you want to go.

Yours is a highly personal perspective. Nevertheless, you are contextualised by your times. There have been some theological objections to your work but the paradox is what you depict is not historically alien to us at all. What do you think inspires such objections? What do you think it means, and how does your work confront that?

I have never really listened...maybe I'm too thick headed...to such opinions. If I think an opinion arises from something shallow, I never respond or act on it. There are certain principles I hold on to, and as long as these are fulfilled I believe the work to be true, no matter what the opinions are.

Today, In Malaysia, in particular among the Malay-Muslim community, there is such fear. It's a fickle mind that produces silly thinking. The reason for that is the lack of understanding of your own religion – of the Quran, Hadith, a reliance on hearsay, what this or that ulama says but is never proven through self verification. There is so little effort at trying to understand that if you pray five times a day, why 5 times a day? No one questions. Everyone is simply concerned with the halal and haram. The intellectual tradition in Islam, from the mystics Ibn Arabi and Rumi to philosophers like Avicenna, is so strong but I can say that today we have lost it because we have never bothered to verify their thoughts. You may know tauhid but in order to understand unity you have to be able to verify and reason, until that knowledge becomes a part of you. Only then does true understanding come.

In Islam there is yakin (certainty) which can be identified in 3 stages – the first stage occurs when you hear of a thing...it's a little form of knowledge; the second stage involves confronting that thing and the third is actually knowing it, tasting it. In Islam that stage of knowledge is essential for understanding.

But it's not something that is really talked about among the ulama. They are too preoccupied with petty things and never with the real issues. This, I think, is the failure.

Only when you have certainty in your religion, will true faith come; only then will you not be shaken by every little thing you experience, or feel threatened; and only then can I paint a Buddha and still remain a Muslim because I know my religion well enough. Unfortunately, in Islam today, people can't see that.

These are actually very familiar images to us. I remember my late brother coming to see me and saying, 'why don't you paint images from Mecca'? God bless his soul, but that's the mode of thinking. My father never saw any of my paintings so I wouldn't know what he would have thought. Maybe I would be most concerned with hurting the people closest to me, but then again I would see it as a challenge, not for me, but for them - that your father can paint this and still pray with you, as your imam, at Maghrib. So, think about it. That is what I would say to my son.

The issue of representing the figure in Islam has been widely debated, while there is a vast and very influential aspect of Islamic art history that does involve representation and the figure. This seems to have been forgotten, or denied?

This subject is highly debatable and controversial. There are fatwa issued here and there among people who condemn artists who draw the figure, but there are also opinions to the contrary who say it is not wrong to represent the figure as long as you don't paint images of heathen gods! This kind of controversy has existed since the time of the Prophet himself. Ibn Arabi had so much trouble in Mecca from the religious authorities that he had to travel to Damascus.

It has existed through time because human thought has never really evolved - technology has evolved, but not human thought. We are still playing out the killing of Abel by Cain. Human beings are human beings, thoughts are thoughts, and we haven't really changed because of the yin-yang element. How can there be creation if there are no opposing forces? You need opposing forces

because in order to recognize the good, there must be the bad. Knowledge itself...creation, in fact...is based on these opposing forces. You can't create with just one ingredient.

So there is always a need for diversity, for the opposing aspects for creation. Only then can there be this thing called synthesis - the mixture of two different properties that creates a third. The basis for creation itself is this - black and white, the million shades of gray in between - and there is a need for dichotomy and tension so that things can mix. Within all of that, I guess, is the search for where we are and where we stand.

So much of Malaysia art history has been written according to the dictates of movements, social concerns and particular trends. The perception is that your work defies such categorisation. I read with interest your remark, "I am not prone to anything Malaysian. I come from Hockney and Western movies" and recall one of Lucian Freud's most memorable statements about his place in British art, "I love the anarchic idea of coming from nowhere" Is that something you share?

In a sense; technically I am Malay, a Malaysian...that is undeniable. But my mind is universal. I don't want to anchor myself in anything; I want to be free to roam. I am a citizen of the world. I don't want anything to tie me down, any particular thought or race, even. But because I am born a Muslim, a Malay and Malaysian I will remain thus and will conduct my search within these parameters. I was born a Muslim so will try my very best to understand my religion and perform the needs required to the best of my ability. At the same time I can roam in the concepts which exist in other religions. I can roam in Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism - it was never a problem for me from the very beginning.

I was always a kind of a free spirit. Maybe earlier on I couldn't rationalise and understand fully why but today I think I can. Technically, I am of a certain race, religion, nationality but my mind wanders everywhere. I wouldn't like to have borders imposed on my thought. Here again, the principle of tauhid needs to be understood.

Of course all this is actually understood within one's capacity to understand - the greater your capacity to understand the better. It's a matter of recognising your capacity while remaining true to its spirit. Tauhid in the end leads to God, to an understanding of God, for in Islam God is one and many at the same time. You have the essence, which is unknowable, the One, and that is tauhid - unity in diversity. Then you have the names, the attributes and acts of God

and through the names, attributes and acts, you get an insight into the essence of what unity is about and the more ingredients you have in your pot, the greater your understanding will be.

If you can basically understand how it all works, you may have a notion of what God is really all about, and not the figure that you carve in your thoughts. That is what we would call, or what Ibn Arabi calls, "a personal God" - a God to fit ones understanding, a God that one makes through one's thoughts and then breaks. The situation then is actually reversed – it is not God who made you but you who made God. God is not like that, He can't be contained within your mind and your thoughts. It's like trying to put an ocean in a little cup.

So the understanding of Sufism is – and to me, that is Islam in its truest thought - verification through tasting.

This has been an extraordinary conversation because it would seem, from your perspective, that your vocation then is defined by religion, and that you are, in essence, a religious painter...

Oh yes! I would say I was an Islamic painter, but not in the traditional or conventional sense of the word. My whole body of works is about tauhid, about verification, trying to understand. I am not a writer, a dancer or musician, I am a painter and it all gets worked out there on the canvas. That's my only concern when I am creating. In that sense I am actually conforming, and Islam is about conforming and submission, and I am submitting to the notion of tauhid, to what Islam actually is.

So yes, you could say I am a religious painter. That's a good observation...

*(Interview with Ahmad Zakii Anwar conducted at the artist's residence in
Johor Bharu on 4th March 2008)*