

Flaming issues

In Malaysian art, few artists handle sociopolitical subjects as deftly as Jalaini Abu Hassan, who has established himself with works that continuously prick our collective conscience.

By Sarah Abu Bakar



Jai in his studio with a painted portrait of his wife Jaslena Amir in the background



Bahang Pisang (2016) is inspired by Jai's hometown in Taiping

Constantly pushing the envelope in search of new processes, leading contemporary artist Jalaini Abu Hassan has created a new body of works that is pregnant with meaning associated with Malaysia today.

Popularly known as Jai, the 53-year-old artist is showcasing a dozen acrylic paintings at his 27th solo show at The Edge Galerie in Kuala Lumpur from Sept 22 to Oct 7. Entitled *Siang & Malam: The Landscape in Mind*, the latest works are grouped under two categories — one section characterised by bright, vibrant hues and the other, dark, monochromatic compositions.

In an attempt to recollect, rearrange or retell stories and meanings, the works are said to comprise “fragmented narratives” derived from travel notes, postcards and snapshots.

For instance, his largest work, *Exotica Malaya* (184cm by 245cm), is full of irony. It illustrates the lush landscape of green trees, blue sky and the silhouette of mountainous terrain in the background. And amid the beauty of nature lies three camouflaged tanks visible through the expulsion of white smoke.

In this work, Jai references Caspar David Friedrich's 1807 painting *Cross in the Mountains*.

“As a subject matter, the picturesque landscape was a convenient adaptation [of scenes] from periodic trips back to my village up north. The transient journey from day to night, from bright light to twilight, ultimately transpired in the theme of day and night,” says Jai in

an interview at his studio in Ulu Klang, on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.

“I began to find interest in the way these two linear and cyclical tracks intertwined with each other in a defusing manner, where the contrast between light and shadow and the subtle darkness hidden between the night clouds became full of meaning.”

Such a contradiction is also evident in *The Burning Love*, in which Jai illustrates the captivating view of the blossoming sakura (*Prunus serrulata*) with its branches in flames. The artwork bears an arresting caption, painted across the canvas, in another attempt to liberate it from the serial notion.

Another work, *Bahang Pisang*, contains an element of surprise with the use of fabric collage amid the burning landscape. Inspired by his wife, Jaslena Amir, a fashion consultant, Jai collects fabric with titillating prints and patterns from around the world. Besides stretched canvas and linen, he also works with printed fabrics in silk, chiffon and georgette as part of his collage work.

“Look at these prints. It's amazing how beautiful imagery, such as birds and flowers, is found on simple cloth motifs! This is a piece of art itself. It's irresistible not to include them in my work,” says Jai.

Nature being set ablaze seems to be a recurring theme in Jai's rendition of the light of day. In works like *Aku Terbakar*, *Bahang Pisang* and *Bumi Membara*, he expresses his admiration for picturesque scenes in the backyard of his family home in Batu Kurau, Taiping.

“The landscape is, without doubt, a symbolic place where one moves back and forth between internal and external realities. Embedded are the mysteries and personal stories of joy, despair, hope and struggle,” explains Jai.

In *Hakone's Three Samurai*, Jai selects an intriguing vantage point of a cable car tower and a scenic mountain in the background. Depicted at close range, the towering steel dominates the entire left plane against the split perspective of the mountain and blue sky. Three miniature samurais are seen ascending the steep hill.

“Japan is one of my family's favourite destinations because of its rich culture and history,” says Jai.

Noted for its onsen or hot-spring resorts, Hakone is a popular tourist attraction due to its proximity to the greater Tokyo metropolis and Mount Fuji. Places of interest include the Owakudani geysers and Hakone Shrine on the shore of the lake as well as the Hakone Botanical Garden of Wetlands. Cherry blossoms in April and the *Miscanthus sinensis* (susuki) in autumn are the main highlights.

NOCTURNAL MYSTERY

The *Malam* group of works features a more mysterious approach to the unknown and an almost surreal landscape. According to Jai, “the night becomes the time for stories told in the brightness of the moon.”

In *Injured Mountain (Bukit Putus)*, Jai depicts a mysterious hill at nightfall. The trunk road that connects Serem-



Exotica Malaya (2016) is Jai's most arresting work in the show



Injured Mountain (Bukit Putus) (2016) reflects the lack of concern for the natural environment in pursuit of materialistic goals

ban to Kuala Pilah is notorious for its narrow and sharp bends. Jai emphasises the split in the hill by creating a void in between and accentuates the cloudy and gloomy atmosphere with hints of stars in the darkened sky.

Diego Garcia alludes to the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 in 2014. The painting features an aerial view of the atoll located south of the equator in the central Indian Ocean. A single commercial plane is seen ascending above the controversial island.

Conspiracy theorists suggest that MH370 was either captured by a foreign power and then flown to the military base of Diego Garcia or made to land at the base directly.

In the same vein, *The Island of Shame* contains elements of metaphor. The atoll of Diego Garcia is



The Island of Shame (2016) reflects the element of mystery and secrecy associated with a tragic event that may never be fully resolved

illustrated from an aerial perspective. Jai accentuates the vastness of the sea and sky that depicts seamless assimilation. The Polaroid format has also been appropriated in its presentation.

“I was inspired by David Vine's book about human political behaviour and displacement, the abuse of human rights and people's struggle to survive. The work in monochrome reflects the element of mystery and secrecy in addition to a journalistic, photo-narrative element,” explains Jai.

“For most of us, the infamous location (Diego Garcia) only surfaced after the tragic MH370 episode. It aptly conspired with many unfounded theories of conspiracy to suit our agendas. This is my most intriguing painting executed as the last work for *Siang & Malam*.”

As a “process painter”, Jai is interested in exploring the act of creation that goes into forming a work, the exploration of material and media and the marks that form a drawing. His works are inspired by current affairs, and expressed using local and familiar imagery seen through his personal lens of nostalgia and history.

“*Siang & Malam* can be read in multiple ways, either by thinking about real landscape, imaginary landscape, conceptual landscape or landscape as process,” says Jai.

Mainly devoid of human figures and portraiture, one of Jai's strong points in art-making, his latest works celebrate the splendour of nature and the art of landscape representation.

EDUCATIONIST

Jai obtained his bachelor's degree from Mara Institute of Technology in 1985 and did his master's degree at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, where he obtained his master's degree. In 1994, he earned a master's degree in fine art at the Pratt Institute in New York.

Since 1988, the painter has also been an academician at his alma mater. He has been an associate professor in the faculty of art and design at Mara University of Technology from 1999. And since 2005, Jai has been mentoring master's degree students in fine art. Over nearly three decades, Jai has mentored hundreds of fine art students and young artists.

“Artists like Najib Bamadhaj, Fadilah Karim, Shafiq Nordin, Faizal Suhif, Khairudin Zainudin, Anisa Abdullah, Arikwibowo Amril, Yusri Sulaiman, Fawwaz Sukri and Khairul Izham, to name a few, have shown incredible talent and growth,” says Jai.

“Art education evolves just as we do. Art production also changes as knowledge expands. What was once important will become obsolete and vice versa,” says Jai, in response to a question about the level of improvement or differences in art education for every generation since the 1980s and today.

“In the 80s, I was taught to look for the Malaysian identity or Islamic values. The word ‘peribumi’ was imposed in the education system, which was a much more secular concept before.

“In the 90s, when I was teaching, this sensibility was suitably reversed to focus on universal concerns. Art in the Nineties embraced globalism and addressed the social, political and economic forces that triggered global art. And local narratives were about colonialism, political war, social dysfunction and the degradation of nature, among other concerns.

“In the new millennium, issues have become more individualistic where experimentation and cross-disciplinary approach are encouraged. Technology-based art-making is the new phenomenon.”

As an educationist, Jai encourages the younger generation to understand the economics of art besides producing artworks.

“In today's global economic system, I think it is crucial for young Malaysian artists to be exposed to the elements of commerce in art. Besides formal knowledge, art schools should also educate students on business ethics, counsel them on the challenges of early fame and teach them to deal professionally with galleries and art dealers, and address collectors skilfully and so on. These skills will put Malaysian art on a higher level.”

Supported by IJM Land,
Siang & Malam: The Landscape in Mind
runs until Oct 7 at The Edge Galerie in Mont'Kiara.
Opening hours: 11am–7pm (Tues–Sun)
Closed on Monday and public holidays.
Tel: (03) 6419 0102
Visit www.theedgegalerie.com for more details.