

BOTANY AND METAPHOR

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Introduction

I started the doctorate program with works depicting fictional plants as a mirror or metaphor for my thoughts and feelings. The plants in the watercolour works on paper are impossible biologically and in terms of the environments in which I place them.

In connection with these artworks I looked at the work of Charles Avery and Marcel Broodthaers, who both put their artwork in a fictional frame of an invented island and an imaginary museum using different methods and media. Charles Avery exhibits drawings, sculpture and text to realize his imaginary island, while Broodthaers uses readymade objects to create his fictional museum. I wanted the plants I make to have the quality that, although they are fiction, they can possibly exist in the mind of the viewer.

Among my methods of working are collecting plants and photographing them in my surrounding area and looking at photographs of plants including Karl Blossfeldt's magnified images of plant parts. These plant parts reveal anthropomorphic qualities that are very appealing to me. Imaginative perceptions, such as those described by Bataille, also create the fictional characters in my plant works.

It was suggested I look at Georgia O'Keefe's flower paintings which highlight the reproductive parts of plants because some of my plant drawings alluded to sensuality. From there I also looked at other works concerning the body by female artists such as Dorothea Tanning and Cathy de Monchaux.

I made digital works by grafting watercolour images of plants onto photographs of landscapes, or close up images of buildings. This included making 3D version of the plants using air drying clay and wires and photographing them in specific places.

My plant works took a turn when I visited my parent's house in Malaysia during summer 2010 and I found decaying plants in a 'wasteland' area, visually appealing. I looked at works of Cathy Newell and Lynn Collins concerning decay,

abandoned spaces and burned buildings. I looked at the writing of Justin Crumbaugh who discussed perspective and aesthetics of ruin and decay. I make sculptures of what I called 'plant-objects' and photograph them in destroyed landscapes.

When I came back to London, I made two sculptures referring to traditional floral craft. The sculptures resembled body parts, which for me alluded to sensuality. These can be referenced back to the paintings of Dorothea Tanning, and Whitney Chadwick's analysis of the female body as the object of anxiety or fantasy in the representation of self for female artists.

I also considered metaphor and its relation to the plant world in the traditional Malay context and also other texts that relate to this. I wanted to identify the choices of plants that I draw or sculpt, the rationale behind these choices and their relationship to my own personal metaphors.

Autobiographical Context

I was born and raised in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I had always been interested in nature, especially plants. After graduating I worked part time at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia on a botanical illustration project for a new *Vatica* species. I was taught the techniques of botanical illustration and some basic botanical knowledge for the drawing project. The brief freelance work ended as I received a permanent position in the Art School, University of Science Malaysia, as a tutor. The courses that I was assigned to were painting, drawing and two-dimensional studies. It was during this time that I started to develop my body of artwork. The first series was a large scale drawing of plants and their growth on Penang, an over populated urban island. This was followed by an installation of digital prints and potted plants that simulate a show house exhibition. The image below is part of the installation.



Fig.1 (2005) *Serving Suggestion* [Digital print and potted plants]

I took painting as a major subject on my BFA. Nature and environmental concern was the motivation for my creative practice. The final artwork was a mixed media artwork of acrylic and spray on aluminium. The artworks were based on a selection of plants and their botanical anatomy (including dissection and microscopic views of plant parts) combined with laboratory equipment. One of the pieces was made of aluminium pasted onto plywood; cut into shape that looked like a graphic dissection of a leaf. Details of dissected leaf structure were painted on the surface. On the aluminium surface, some sections were left unpainted in the shapes of test tubes and water drops.



Fig.2 (2001) *Acid Drops* [Acrylic and spray paint on aluminium]



Fig.3 Tetriana Ahmed Fauzi and Ahmed Fauzi Mohamed (2001) *Untitled* [Watercolour on paper]

Between 1997 – 2002, I undertook illustration projects for a book company, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. The most prominent project during this period for me was the Nature Heritage Series, which comprised of children's books on Malaysia's natural environment. The series that I was involved in was, "Mangrove Swamp" and "Coral Reef". The task included research for visual images, rearranging the lay out of the book and making illustrations.

The initial idea for my MA project was to create a new species of plant through drawing. The plants that I have created are fictitious and in the creation of my hybrid plant, two or more species are chosen. The combination of the traits will construct the new hybrid plant. The hybrid will be able to adapt in its new surroundings. For example an aloe vera plant that is normally medium sized becomes smaller and has a root system that can hang onto a brick wall.

Drawing was a central part of my practice during my MA at Camberwell College of Art. Study of plant forms was important to help create a realistic image of a hybrid plant. Extensive study of botanical illustration was conducted in terms of composition and style. As the work was intended to have scientific allusions, the drawings were drawn in a botanical illustration style. Details of the plant character, root system, flower and leaf arrangement were emphasized depending on the drawing and species. The resulting drawings were meant to be compiled in a book form.

As the work progressed, the plants began to look stranger, more mysterious, and anthropomorphic. Parts of plants such as roots, twigs and tendrils imitate a humanlike position or the anatomy of body parts and internal organs. One of the first pieces was a combination of Lotus that grows in water and a Wild Orchid plant (fig. 4) that is an epiphyte type of plant that can be easily seen growing on most trees in the wild. This particular hybrid looks like the carnivorous plant in *Little Shop of Horror*, a dark comedy horror film.



Fig.4 (2008) *Lotus X Wild Orchid* [ink on paper]

I decided to focus on creating these anthropomorphic plants, combining two or more plant types to create a new one. The drawings became larger, up to 150 cm x 120 cm each. As the drawings became darker and adopted chiaroscuro techniques, the botanical illustration style was no longer relevant.

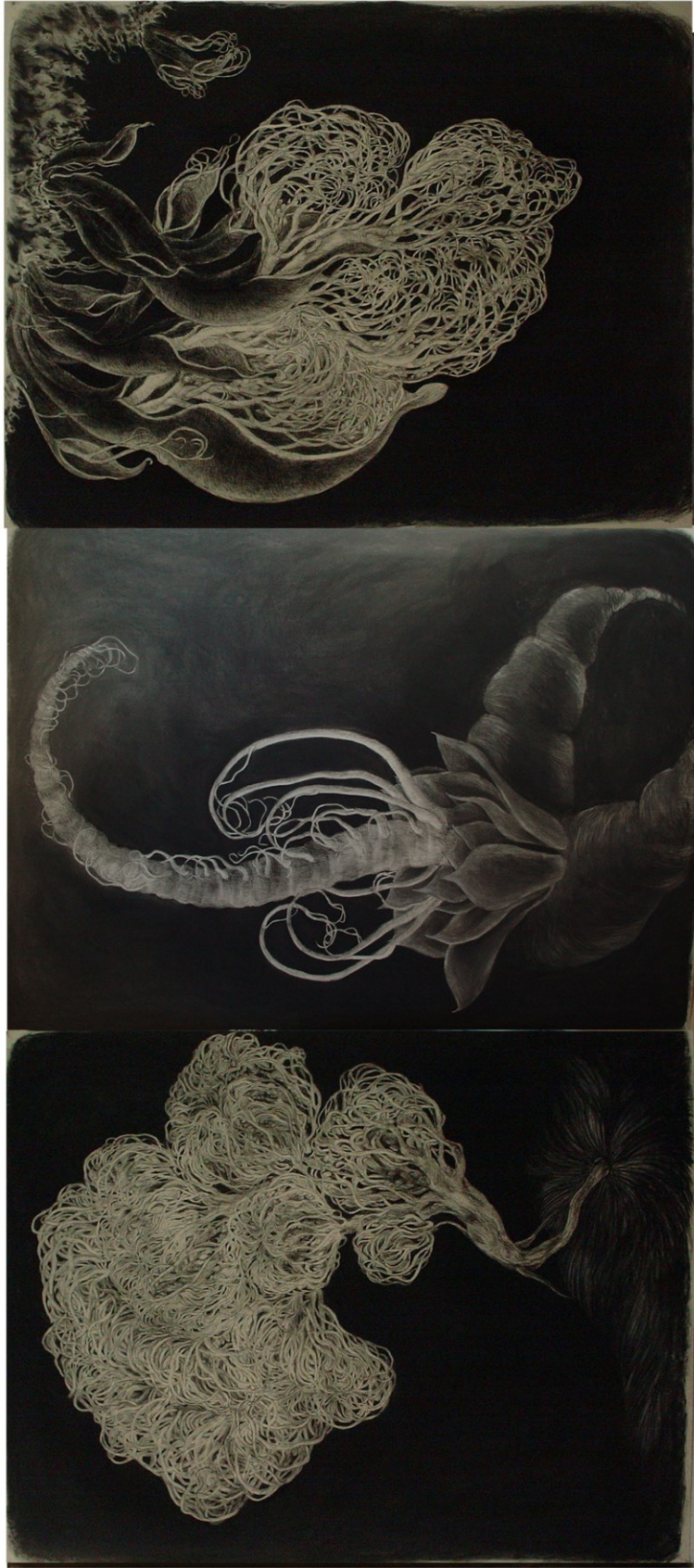


Fig.5 (2008) Gumpal [Charcoal on paper] 150cm X 120cm X 3

Creative practice and theory

The central theme of my creative practice is the investigation of plant forms as metaphors. I am attracted to interesting characteristics of plants for example, the crowded flow of veins in leaf, curling tendrils, cascading leaves, a clot of roots, unusual looking shapes of a fruit or flowers, transparent seed pods or the crackled patterns of a tree bark. These plant parts sometimes resemble human or animal body parts, internal organs and even imitate human-like action. I see these anthropomorphic qualities in Karl Blossfeldt's black and white photographs compiled in several books including *Working Collages* (2001). The plant images in Blossfeldt's photographs intrigue me as they always remind me of something which is not a plant.



Fig.6 Karl Blossfeldt. Images from *Working Collages*

In my previous practice the images in *Working Collages* served as a visual reference for my drawing. Blossfeldt's plant forms are still valid as a visual reference. For example a leaf bud reveals two young leaves clasping each other, whilst in the middle, a small leaf holding on in between as if trying to touch the two leaves (fig.6). In the image beside it I see layers of thin and glossy unfurling leaves enveloping something or trying to protect something inside it. These are

among the features I am keen to look at especially at close range. Human-like characters emerge in my imagination, and the forms have inspired the fantastical characters for my drawing and sculpture.

In *The Language of Flowers* Georges Bataile personifies the characteristics of flowers such as the wilting and blooming. According to Bataile (1929) flowers wither like old and overly made-up dowagers. He also constantly refers to the ugliness of flowers while 'dissecting' and examining them, making the most beautiful flowers seem morbid. He not only describes flowers, but other parts of the plant, including the leaf. Bataile (1929) said that the appearance of leafy stems generally gives the impression of strength and dignity. He also goes on to state 'Nothing less is necessary than the impossible and fantastic visions of roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin'. Bataile's descriptions demonstrate how characters can be seen in plant forms.

During my MA I drew plants by combining several types of plant, creating a new plant which does not exist in the botanical world but presents a possibility of existence. My artwork was a 'creation' of a new species of plant by combining, altering and adding several types of plants in the drawing. In the first attempts of 'making' these plants, they reflected environmental issues such as biotechnology and genetic modification, but as they 'evolved' they became more personal. They have become a mirror or metaphor for my feelings and thoughts. Many of the plants that I created in my drawings have a close resemblance to the female reproductive system. In fig. 7, a bigger flower in the middle is bracketed by two smaller ones at its side. The plant grows and clings to another branch. Other than its origins and species, the drawn plant raised questions in regard to its physical appearance such as: can the small stem support such a large flower?

For the work in progress seminar in January 2010, I made eleven works using watercolour and drawing- of imaginative plants. They were of A2 size intended to be bound as book art. The first process I went through was to select the right plant to make studies from, to enable the 'creation' of my plant forms. I referred to nature books especially on English plants in the selection process. Habitat,



Fig.7 (2008) *Paut* [Charcoal on Paper] 150cm x139cm

shapes, characteristics and the ability to withstand weather are among the factors that I considered in the choice of combining and developing the drawings of the plants. In the development of these plant forms, the plants that I 'created' have a special feature that makes them tougher, or more resilient and adaptable. Some have 'developed' a unique ability that plants do not normally have.

Fig. 8 is a spongy mushroom like hybrid that proliferates in a very organic way and has a stem-like structure that can attach itself to most surfaces. In this work I imagine it growing on a steel pole.

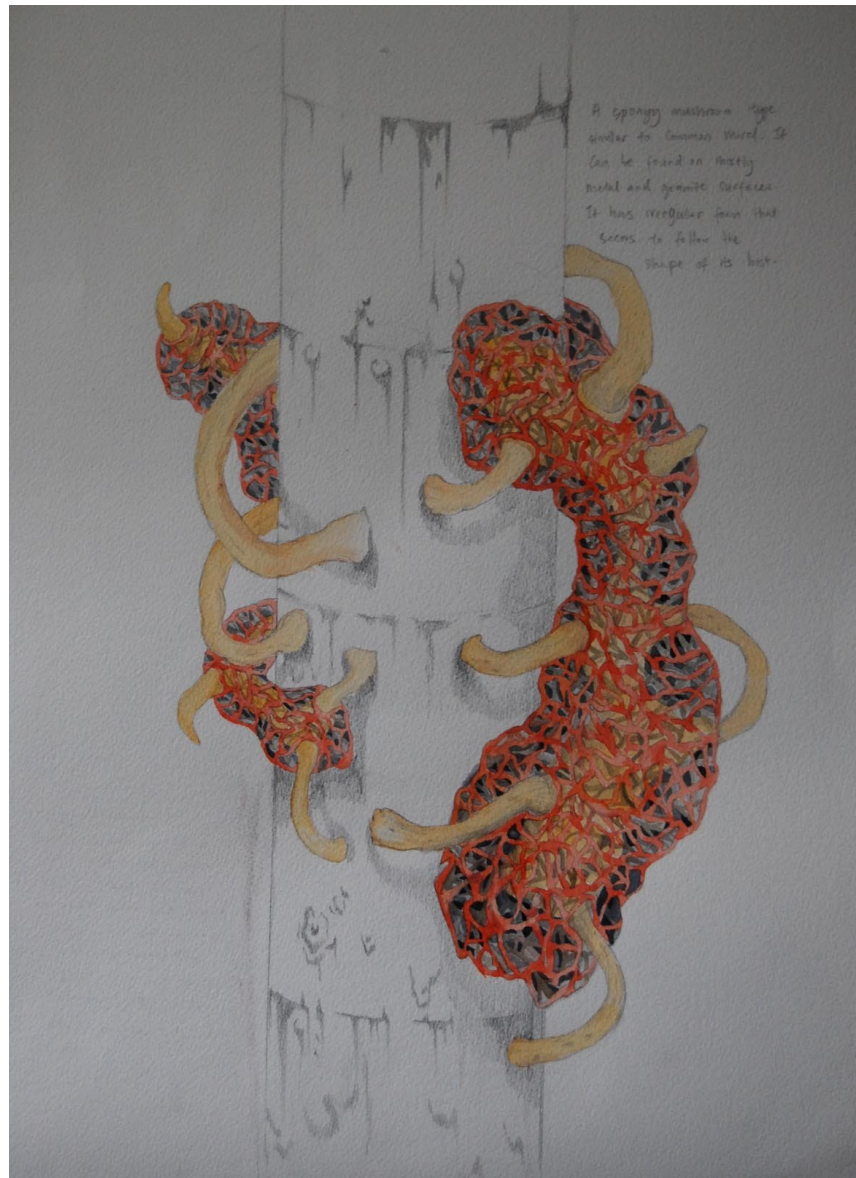


Fig.8 (2010) A 'hybrid' mushroom species [Watercolour and pencil on paper] 59cm X 42cm



Fig.9 (2009) The inside of shell-like mushroom [Watercolour on paper] 59cm X 42cm

A shell-like character kept recurring in many of my watercolour drawings. For example, in fig. 9, a mushroom type plant combines the characteristics of two other mushroom types. One is a tinder bracket, which has tough flesh and grows all year long and the other is the edible Field mushroom which grows in the summer and autumn. In this plant I picture a Field mushroom growing upside down inside the shell of a Tinder Bracket. The protective shell of the outer plant keeps its interior growth safe.

Shells or casings appear in a variety of forms. Some are structures only barely covering the middle part of the plants, while others are thin flimsy surfaces with veins crawling around them. There are also plants that look like a seedpod attached to a host. These recent plants, (fig. 10) resonate with images of an embryo, with casings that envelop the embryonic form.

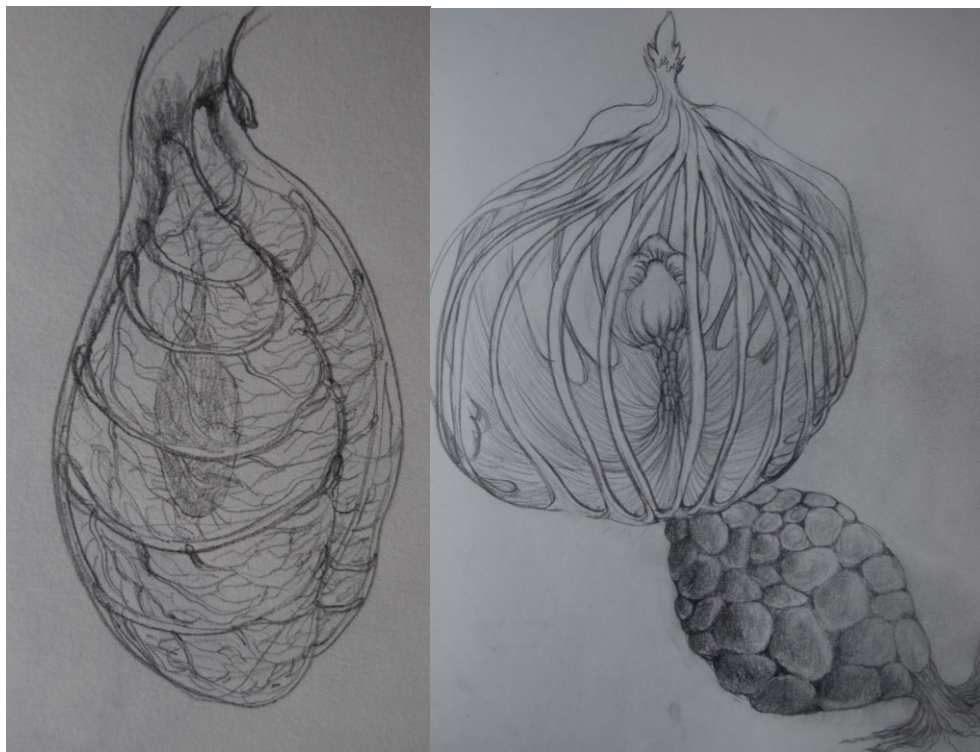


Fig.10 (2010) Images from sketch book [Pencil on paper]

Initially I planned to use text to provide additional information on the invented habitats. After reflection I decided to let the image tell its own story. I decided not to continue the book format because it was felt that it would not be substantial enough for a final year exhibition. Instead I hung the watercolour drawings as wall pieces.

During a tutorial it was suggested that I look at Charles Avery's work; his work continues to inspire me. Based on a project that started in 2004, Avery made an installation at the Parasol Unit of his 'findings' of an island titled '*The Islander: An Introduction*' (2008). The exhibition consisted of drawings, sculpture and text that described a fictitious island based on his experience of growing up on the island of Mull. In this project Charles Avery positioned himself as an unnamed narrator who travels to a remote island. The island has its own social structure, system of belief, flora and fauna and geography.

The majority of the sculptures in the exhibition are taxidermy animals. These animals have been modified to be fictitious creatures. In fig. 11, an animal which has four chicken feet and the head of a dog, is called Ridable. These sculptures are presented as the collection the narrator has taken from the island. There are also drawings that depict scenarios of life on the island which act as 'documentations' by the narrator. Avery builds the imaginary world of the island and its inhabitants as he creates the drawing and the sculpture pieces based on them. There is a great sense of absurdity in the creation of the island's plants and animals. An example would be the wavy long grasses that are alive and moving and a stone-mouse, a part rodent and part mineral which looks exactly like a stone and doesn't seem to move at all but has a heart that beats only once in a thousand years. There are even mythical beasts among the hybrid animals created by Avery.

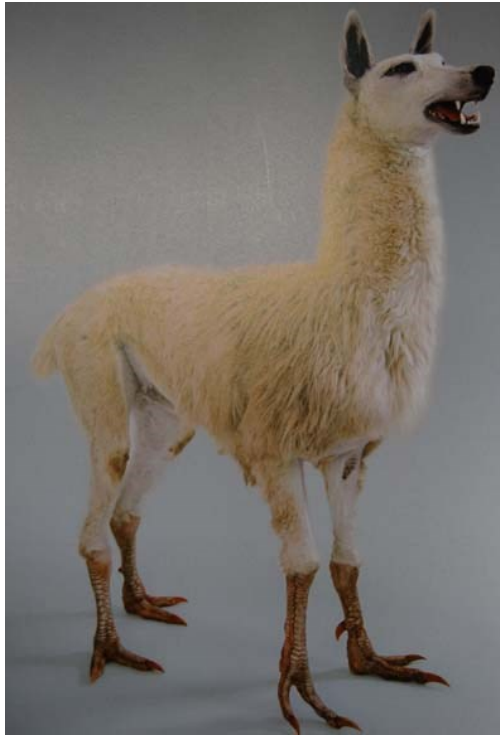


Fig.11 Charles Avery (2008) *Ridable* (Taxidermy animal)

A history and description of the island is written *In the Islander: An Introduction* book. The critic Nicholas Bourriard relates Avery's island with other artwork that has fiction as its basis. Marcel Broodthaers invented a fictional museum between 1968 and 1972. According to Bourriard (2008, p. 148) Broodthaers 'centred his artistic creativities on a fictional proposition, Musée d'art modern, département des Aigles (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles)'. During those years he used found objects in appropriating and altering traditional museum practice. If I decided to continue the book project, this might be my premise.

Both Avery and Broodthaers created a world. Avery's works are clearly fictions because of his weird creations and the absurd descriptions of the island and islanders. Broodthaers used ordinary museum things such as old maps, wall labels, signage and illustrations as evidence of the museum's existence in an installation. His museum can easily be accepted as real in the first place. I wanted my watercolour plants to have the quality that, although they are fiction, they have the appearance of genuine organisms.

During the first year I decided to build my own collection of plant photographs by photographing plant parts such as seeds, flower buds, bits of twigs, tree bark or mosses that have fallen from buildings. I wanted to create a more personal collection of references- such as the plants which are found in my surrounding area or the vegetables which are consumed by my family- instead of using photographs from books and the internet. The plant parts are shot in close up then enlarged using Photoshop software. A selection of the images are printed as references for my visual research. I select an interesting characteristic in the plant, for example the crumpled leaf in fig. 12, which to me looks like a very dried and old hand grasping for something. Among the plants that I photographed are wild berries, weeds and vegetables such as brussel sprouts, carrots, and broccoli. I intend this collection of visual references to be a long term project. It is still in progress and continues to grow.

I also photographed parts of buildings, roads and houses. My intention was to draw plants and 'put' them in these locations. In taking these photographs I looked for possible locations for the plant that I would then create. I am interested in



Fig.12 Photograph of plant parts (2010)

weeds which grows in crevices of buildings and in roadsides - dandelion, ivy, shepherd's purse. Most of the photographs of what I called, 'urban landscape' are images of cracks, crevices and corners of buildings and streets where these weed types of plant can be found in my housing area, parks and on the high street.

I made a watercolour drawing of something that I had imagined: an epiphyte type of plant that has a large oversized flower which resembles a cage and has fruit or seeds growing inside. The plant is leafless with a stem that looks like the magnified surface of a leaf. I photographed the finished image and digitally cut and pasted it on one of the photographs of my 'urban landscapes'.



Fig.13 (2010) *Sangkar* [Digital print]

In fig. 13, the image is a close up of a brick wall in front of my flat. The *Sangkar* (2010) plant is growing from the brick wall. Here I try to create the illusion that the plant grows out of the brick wall. The image has a realistic quality because of the texture of the brick wall. On closer inspection, it can be seen that the subject and ground is of different material, thus making the plant look fictive.

After a trip to Cornwall, I produced a watercolour drawing of a plant that combines species of cliff flowers, seaweed and tropical plants. The plant has a large flower that protrudes out from another plant, which has large two-coloured leaves. The flower has a veiny surface and looks as if it is trying to cover another small flower or seed clinging to its stem (fig. 14). Using the same technique that I used for the *Sangkar* work, I pasted the watercolour plant on to a photograph of a building I took in Cornwall. In this image it is obvious that the plant doesn't belong in the picture, not because of the different material that I was using but also because the plant looks as if it came from another climate. The plant in fig. 14 looks both out of place and fictional.



Fig.14 (2010) *Cliff hanger 2* [Digital print]

This cut and paste technique didn't fulfill my objective. I wanted the viewer to see the uniqueness and the mystery of the plant's existence. I also felt that the work lacked technical accomplishment. The lighting of the photograph and the painterly quality of the drawing was problematical.

According to Bataile (1929), 'Men have linked the brilliance of flowers to their amorous emotions because on either side, it is a question of phenomena that precede fertilization'. In my plant drawings I tend to focus on the parts likely to flower, such as *Cliff hanger 2* and *Sangkar*. My drawing always depicts the whole

plant but the flowers or fruits are out of proportion in relation to the size of the stem. Some of my plant works are said to lean towards sensuality. This is especially true when I focused on flowers in the plant artworks, instead of leaves or roots. Previously I have not fully accepted the sensuous interpretations of my work, but as I tried to better understand my metaphorical intentions, I began to embrace the sensuousness that I see in plant forms and relate this to my work.

I began to look at Georgia O'Keeffe's flower painting. Georgia O'Keeffe is a renowned female painter, which is more relevant to my research. O'Keeffe is known for her large paintings of magnified flower parts including roses, camellias, poppies and calla lily. Her statement was 'I paint what I see', because she wants people to see what she sees in flowers. Her signature style in the flower painting is the abstraction and rhythmic forms of nature.



Fig.15 Georgia O'Keeffe (1926) *The Dark Iris* [oil on canvas]

O'Keefe's flower paintings lend themselves to a sexual interpretation. According to Benke (2003, p.38),

'In the social climate of America of the twenties and of New York enamoured with the latest theories of Sigmund Freud, O'Keefe's outsized flowers and enlarged details of plant anatomy were attributed with unfeigned erotic implications.'

O'Keefe's magnified flower parts highlight the reproductive organs of the plants. Botanically O'Keefe's flower paintings are incorrect. The sensuousness which is especially evident in her Black Iris and Calla Lilly paintings, is something O'Keefe may not have intended. She stressed that, she just paints what she sees and according to Pyne (2007, p.281) her works are more than what the flower symbolise and that in her work we look into a private space, the body's inner space.

I was unsatisfied with what I was achieving with watercolour and its digital transformation, so I decided to make a three dimensional version of a plant creation, put it in an environment and photograph it. I started with a sketch of plants that I wanted to 'combine' in my sculpture. I used swede, carrot and potato as my reference for this sculpture. I purposely choose a tuber type of plant, which for me 'hides' under the ground as they grow, and are well adapted to the cold weather.

I used air drying clay and wire to make the sculpture (fig. 16). The sculpture was designed to look like a creature moving slowly, carrying a heavy burden on its back whilst coming out from the ground. On the 'head' part of the creature are three small flowers which are not yet in full bloom. The finished sculpture was then painted with acrylic and defined with air brush. After the process was completed, I took the finished sculpture and photographed it at the locations that I had earlier photographed. Some of these locations include the bushes in my backyard and on the footpath. I wanted the sculpture to look as if it were natural to the area.



Fig.16 (2010) *Crawler 2* [Digital Print]

The 'plant-animal' is more fantastical compared to the plant in the watercolour works. In the watercolour works, the plants look as though they could have been real. But in this work it looks more like a prop than a real plant or animal. The *Crawler* work reminds me of science fiction film characters. I was inspired by science fiction films that feature anthropomorphic plants such as *Little Shop of Horror*, *The Day of the Triffids*, and *The Thing From Another World*. All three films feature alien plants that are from another planet. I am interested in the unnatural characteristic of these plants. They have the capability to grow and mutate and have animal or human-like quality. For example in *The Day of The Triffids* the plants grow rapidly and they can uproot themselves and move about, although slowly, to hunt humans.

It was at this time that I researched the photography of Jan Dunning. Dunning uses odd combinations of plants in interior spaces. She uses a doll's house for the interior setting and carefully places plants in the setting. She then photographs it with a pinhole camera. For example in *Untitled (Ballroom)* (2008) (fig 17), she placed rose thorns on the parquet floor, on the floor is a mirror ball while sunlight coming in through the window is scattered by the mirror ball all over the room. The

mirror ball, the landscape seen through window, the reflected lights, and the thorns on the floor are a beautiful twist that opens up the imagination. Dunning's work was inspired by her own daydreams and imagination. The photographs of Dunning (2010) 'stage a confrontation between fiction and reality, the possible and impossible, the natural and unnatural'.



Fig.17 Jan Dunning (2008) *Untitled (Ballroom)*

When I visited my parents in the summer of 2010, I was inspired to make artworks about their house in Kuala Lumpur, which has been my only permanent home. In the past few years there has been some development behind the house: a beautiful lake, which was an operating tin mine during the British occupation in 1950's, has been covered with sand. The development has been very rapid and last year when I arrived the lake and the plants around it were completely gone, replaced by mountains of dirt and sand. When rain falls bits of domestic and industrial debris are revealed. The landscape is only 5 feet away from my parents' backdoor and they are separated by a blue zinc wall about 10 feet high. The view, although devastating, looks majestic from the top of my parents' house and I felt that I must include it as part of my work.

I found an article entitled '*An Aesthetic Of Industrial Ruins in Bilbao: Daniel Calparsono's Leap Into The Void ('Salto al Vacio') and Frank Gehry Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*'. It is a film review of 'Salto al Vacio' and the architecture of the Bilbao Guggenheim in connection with the city's industrial ruin. The film, which I managed to see parts of, depicts the industrial ruin in Bilbao along with the city's problems of unemployment and drugs. The film was beautifully shot in a

documentary style. According to Crumbaugh (2001, p.43) in this film, each scene relentlessly captures the metallic scraps, the garbage and the unidentified rubble of Bilbao's *margen izquierda*. This could equally describe the ambience behind my parent's house.



Fig.18 Photograph taken behind my parent's house (2010)

Many varieties of plants grow naturally in the area including the vegetables and flowering plants which my mother grew. In the process of development almost everything has been destroyed. The effect of the earth-covered mine lake can be seen in and outside the blue wall. Outside of the wall, in my parents yard, engulfed by dirt and pieces of cement are the surviving garden plants, herbs and vegetables. Wild plants crawl up metal structures and wooden planks scattered around the area. Among the heap of sand and soil and debris inside the wall, wild grass, mushroom and a type of wild green pod plant grow (fig. 18). The details of the debris, sand and dirt have an affinity with the aesthetic I see in the urban decay. The kind of ruin here as Crumbaugh (2001, p.40) states render its story of urban decay tragically beautiful.

I decided to make sculptures using plants, man-made and found objects as references. First I made sketches looking at the plants and objects around my parents' house. I tried to find a way to merge these references. Fig. 19 is a sketch of a fig plant and mesh wire sculpture. The sketch looks like a short, stout python lying with a bulging belly and decorated on its head is a large flower with many 'eyes'. Other sketches combine mineral water bottles and mushrooms, or nails sticking out of the stem of fern plants.



Fig.19 (2010) Sketch of *Fig X Mesh* [Pencil on paper]

I tried to realize these sketches again using the air drying clay and wire. The resulting sculptures look like an odd assimilation of the references that I was looking at. I made 3 sculptures: one a combination of fig and mesh, the second an amalgamation of the Malay herb called kantan, eggshell and roots, and the third sculpture used fern and nails as reference. The man-made and found objects are things that can be found especially in my parent's backyard. I wanted the sculptures to act like mini monuments to the plants which used to be there, and also to carry a sense of their destruction.

I mixed plaster of paris with sand from the back of the house, poured the mixture and sprinkled it on the sculptures to get the look of mud and sand splatters as if rain had fallen on it for days. After that I sprayed dark and earth tones using a spray can, as well as painting and dripping the sculptures with acrylic paint. Sometimes, accidentally, the sculpture looked like a burnt object splattered with paint, wet cement and mud as seen (fig. 20).



Fig.20 (2010) *Fig X Mesh* detail [Mixed media]

I wanted the plant to look very realistic and I wasn't satisfied with the imitation of the plant in the sculpture. But I felt that I had achieved the overall look of the sculpture that I wanted, which is a fragile and decaying mess of a plant-like object. I placed these sculptures among the debris and soil of the landscape and photographed them from many angles. I wanted the sculptures to look as if they belonged to or that they come from the landscape. I wanted them to blend in but at the same time I wanted the viewer to feel curious about them. These photographs are a series which I call *My Mother's Garden*. Below is an example of the digital prints entitled *Fern X Nail* (fig. 21).



Fig. 21 (2010) *Fern X Nail* [Digital print] 66cm X 97cm

The plant-object sculpture tried to capture the temporality of the plant. It is portrayed frozen in cement. The beautiful landscape of my parent's yard is gone forever and can only be retained in memory, but now wild plants are taking over the mountains of earth and dirt; the garden surrounding my parent's yard slowly starts to rebuild. Now the majestic view of urban decay sits in my memory alongside the beautiful landscape of the lake behind my mother's garden.

Some of the comments that I received from the seminar are that the sculptures could be things which I found at the back of the house, instead of sculptures that I made. Maybe this is because of the physical quality of the sculptures that makes them look like they really are part of the environment. They also raise a question over the traditional presentation of sculpture on plinth or pedestal and my method of placing them in an environment and photographing them.

Both the sculptures and the photographs of the landscape are important in my work. The sculpture represents a decaying object frozen in cement and the

wasteland is a place of ruin, which is beautiful in its own way that I tried to capture in a photograph. According to Worthen (2010) the artist finds beauty in ruin, which is why some artists especially during 15th and 16th century found inspiration from Classical ruins. The picturesque beauty of ruined building and temples became the subject of interest for these printmakers and painters. Contemporary artists such as Catie Newell carry on this tradition. Newell created an installation out of ruined buildings called *Salvaged Landscape*. Using burned and damaged timber from a burned house in Michigan, Detroit, she created a passageway or room inside that house. According to Newell (2010) the project responds to the new textures, spaces, and light effects that resulted both from the fire and demolition. The resulting installation transformed the burned house and the tragedy of the situation.



Fig.22 Catie Newell (2010) *Salvage Landscape*

I also looked at Lynne Collins' works in the *Trespasser* series, which is a superimposed photograph of contrasting images of still life and decaying spaces. Collins laid a still life of wine, fruit and food- inspired from the 17th century Dutch masters- on a table covered with flowing cloth drapery and placed them in an interior of an abandoned building. The derelict room is normally empty except for the table and the still life arrangement. The still life of food and wine is set often as the centre or focus of the photograph and in the background crumbling walls and peeling paint suggests emptiness and abandon. There seems to be a mysterious presence or curious activity going on within the space. It is as if these foods are an offering, waiting to be feasted upon by the 'inhabitant' of these spaces.

Looking at the works of Jan Dunning and Lynne Collins made me rethink the technical and formal aspect of digital artworks. I looked for possibilities to improve my photography techniques by looking at other artist's photographic work such as Gregory Crewdson's *Sanctuary* series, which I had seen in January 2011 at the White Cube Gallery.

I wrote an essay published in *Taman Syifa' Garden of Healing* for Abu Bakar Idris' solo exhibition in Kuala Lumpur. I had several interviews with him in his studio and later via telephone when I returned to London. I tried to locate the critical aspect in Abu Bakar's methodology. Abu Bakar stresses that his paintings are but the 'remainder' of his herbal practice and research. For him his paintings are the 'ice breaker' for something much more important: the distribution of herbal knowledge. In his paintings, he illustrates parts of herbal plants such as flower, leaves and roots and sometimes he only draw their shapes. The murky background sometimes drowns the plants parts, making the species barely recognizable in some paintings (fig. 23).



Fig.23 Abu Bakar Idris (2010) *Manis Dihujung Pahit II*
[Mixed media on canvas] 91.5 x 91.5cm

I made two drawings similar to the drawings which I made during my MA to test out whether this was the work that I wanted to show for my viva exhibition. One is a drawing of watercolour and charcoal on paper. The drawing (fig. 24) is a fantasy landscape where a bud on a stem grows out of a coconut shell-like form surrounded with roots much like the sonneratia species. All of these plants seem to lean in one direction toward the end of a small red 'river' flow.



Fig.24 (2010) *Tunas* [Charcoal and watercolour on paper] 80cm X 58cm

Another drawing is made with thin washes of watercolour and ball-point pen. I had a collection of close up images of my skin and they looked to me like a surrealistic landscape with repeated patterns. I tried to copy the lines and wrinkles on my skin as accurately as possible on paper. On the surface of the 'skin-landscape', three small plants or flowers of different sizes emerge. During the work in progress seminar in November 2010, one of the responses that I received was that both the sculpture and the skin drawing have the same quality of fragility and because of that quality it seems that the work needed 'care' and protection. I submitted this drawing (fig. 25) for the Jerwood drawing prize competition, but unfortunately was rejected.

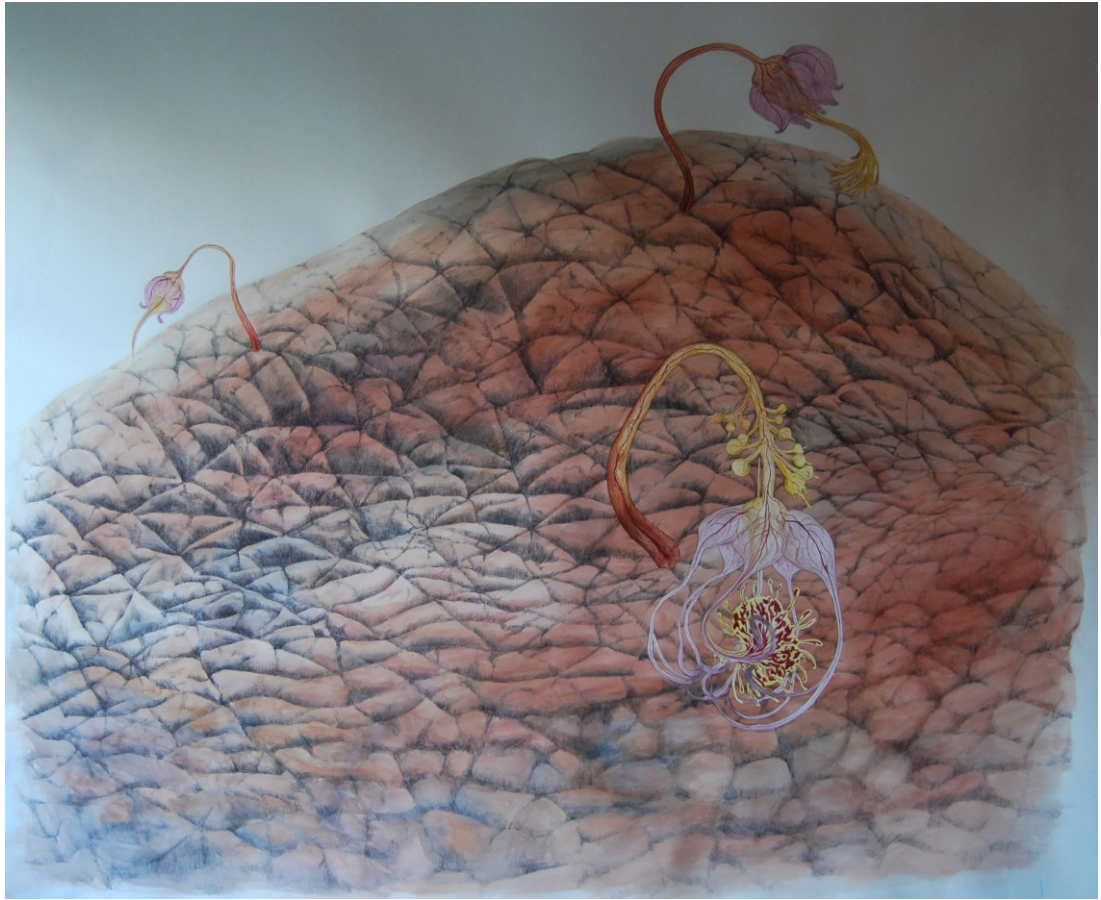


Fig.25 (2010) Untitled [Watercolour and ball-point pen on paper] 125cm X 98cm

Both of these works are responses to the herbal rituals that I went through after giving birth. Traditionally the Malays have elaborate confinement rituals involving herbs to be taken internally and applied to the body. I tried to express this experience in my drawing, taking the herbal plants forms and my body as reference.

Apart from the theme of 'fiction as medium', the other strand of my research concerns the body. I have been looking into anthropomorphism in plants through the work of Georgia O' Keefe, and the female body in artists such as Dorothea Tanning and Cathy de Monchaux.

I was attracted to Cathy de Monchaux's sculptures, especially ones made in late 1990s. Her work *Cruising Disaster* (1999) is a combination of fabric, fur and leather, and seems to create a sensation that is repulsive but also attractive. Her manipulation of materials, which simulates flesh suggests the female sexual organ.

According to Sooke (In the Studio: Cathy de Monchaux, 2005) her sculptures evoke ideas of fetishism and sexual fantasies. But de Monchaux herself claims that her 'pieces are not about sexual fetishes' and she 'just wants to create objects loaded with many meanings'.

Dorothea Tanning's painting portrays female imagery with surrealistic elements. Throughout the 1940s most of Tanning's paintings were centered on female figures and body parts which represent the artist herself. *The Night Music* (1943) is a painting of two girls and a large sunflower in a setting of a corridor and staircase. Like most artists in the surrealist movement, the subjects in her works are often symbols to convey a certain meaning or story. According to Lumbard (1981) this painting is portraying images that suggests an initiation into puberty.



Fig.26 Dorothea Tanning (1942) *Children's Games* [Oil on canvas]

Tanning frequently uses the female figure or more precisely, images of girls in her paintings. Sometimes the figures are only body parts as in *Children's Games* (1942) in which the hair of one of the girls seems to swirl into what looks like a rectum on the wall partly hidden by wallpaper (fig. 26). Whitney Chadwick explores how the body is used in surrealist women's artworks as self representation. The female body according to Chadwick (1998) is a representation of the self. It is an

interpretation of female experience and the journey of self-discovery. According to Chadwick (1999), the female body has been a passive subject of desire and sensuality for male surrealist artists and in the hand of the female artist it was presented as an object of anxiety or fantasy.

The second series of works that I created after 'My Mother's Garden' are sculptures based on plant references. I was working at home most of the time and I wanted my work to be part of the domestic environment. I decided to make an unconventional flower arrangement as a sculpture for my next work. Flower arranging is traditionally part of interior decoration. In Malay culture, 'sirih junjung' it is one of the gifts to be exchanged during a wedding ceremony. The sirih junjung is an arrangement normally made of betel nut leaves and fresh flowers. I used fake betel nut leaves for the sculpture and I created the rest of the arrangement with air drying clay.

I also considered varieties of orchids as reference. The orchid is an exotic tropical plant, which my mother used to plant in pots. The flowers' undulating contour and formation are beautifully sensuous to look at and I tried to simulate that quality in my sculpture. I made some sketches and created two sculptures, taking either the sirih junjung formation or the folding of the betel nut leaves from the sirih junjung.

The first sculpture *Dialogue*, was pear-shaped with a large flower on top which is similar to an orchid (fig. 29). The sculpture has many branches that seem to protrude out of its body. On the 'neck' of the sculpture tiny bumps which look like the mengkudu fruit appear. I painted parts of the sculpture with acrylic paint. I used bright and eccentric colours. This choice of colours is typical in Malaysian domestic environments (curtains, table cloth, bed sheet, sofa and tiles).

There is an image from Karl Bossfedt's photographs that I was particularly interested in. It is an image of two young leaves, not yet fully unfolded. The unfolding leaves in fig. 27 to me have an anthropomorphic quality that alludes to sensuality. From this image I made a sculpture, which looks like two plants, which grow from a different root and stem morphing at the end of the flowers (fig. 28).



Fig.27 Karl Blossfeldt, Image from *Working Collages*

I then positioned the finished sculptures in my flat and tried to find the best way to photograph them. I put them on the table, window sill and other settings where a flower arrangement might sit without removing anything or setting up a set for the photograph session. These photographs acted as my sketches, but none of them worked for me because they looked like amateur photography. I wanted an enigmatic feel to the presence of the sculptures rather than a snap shot image of an interior of a house.

During the seminar, different ways of photographing the sculpture were suggested to me, including finding matching wallpaper or table cloth with patterns and also putting the sculpture in places that could have a psychological effect on the viewer such as a half open fridge that lit up in a dark kitchen. I tried different approaches with the photography again, using spaces in cupboards, under chairs, in ovens and



Fig.28 (2011) *Here We Go Round* [C-type print] 71cm X 86cm

with domestic props and also using my son's toys. The setting becomes theatrical, with the sculptures as the 'main actors' in a domestic space.

I printed some of the photographs for the work in progress exhibition 2011. Among the digital print exhibited is *Here We Go Round* (2011) (fig. 28). For this work, I laid the inside of the kitchen cabinet with vinyl sheeting. Then I placed the sculpture and arranged mini dinosaur toys around it. In *Dialogue* (2011) (fig. 29), the sculpture is on a chair laid with a blue and yellow floral bedspread placed in front of a mirror, thus showing its reflection. I purposely put it in front of a mirror so that it seems to be looking at itself.

In the work in progress forum 2011, some of the comments that I received were that the work is reminiscent of classical paintings where a model is pictured with her reflection in the painting. Behind and above the sculpture are white cloth drapes like a curtain filtering the light from the window.



Fig.29 (2010) *Dialogue* [C-type print] 91cm X 61cm

I researched into work that deals with homemaking and women artists because I wanted to look into how domestic life influenced the works of female artists and I found several articles and videos on this subject. One article is by Helen Molesworth entitled *Home Work and Art Work*. The article discussed the feminist works of Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Martha Rosler in 1970s. It is an investigation into how these female artists appropriate daily chores within their works.

These artists work differently in methodology and context from my own practice. Most of these works according to Molesworth (2000) suggest the domestic chores of cooking and child rearing are not exclusively private but instead, that such labours are intimately connected to public events, and furthermore that unpaid and underpaid maintenance labour needs to be thought as equivalent to other forms of oppressions. I feel that these female artists have found a way to appropriate daily chores and domestic space in their works that also reflects their life. My works that involve the flower arrangement as part of a domestic life is about the connection between the life of a mother and the life of a female artist.

It was suggested that I listen to a talk by Linda Nochlin *Consider the Difference: Women Artists from Cassat to Contemporary*. Nochlin discussed several women artists who represent domesticity, family and homemaking in artworks. Among the artists discussed are Mary Cassat, Lily Martin Spencer, Dorothea Tanning, Judy Chicago and Mierle Laderman Ukele. Nochlin explored how these artists incorporated either their personal domestic space or the family and homemaking in general, and how they represent it in their artwork.

During a tutorial in 2011, I was asked why I make plant sculptures or draw plants and relate them to personal metaphors and invent narratives for them. My response was that I had always had a fascination with plant forms and that my works have always dealt with nature and the environment. We discussed the restriction of figurative works in Islam and why I use plants as a metaphor of my life. Previously and until now I had never had any issue with making figurative artworks. I reflected that perhaps there could be a subconscious intention in the use of plants in my works, other than my fascination with the plants forms, to adhere to the Islamic ideals of art making. In Islamic art, figurative works of humans and animals are rejected; plants become the alternative for artist wanting to work figuratively.

Raja Shahrman Raja Aziddin is a Malay artist who is struggling with his religious conscience in his art practice. Raja Shahrman is known for his figurative sculptures of martial art positions shaped and welded using iron rod and plates which were shown in his solo show titled *Gerak Tempur* (1996). The exhibition synopsis (*Gerak Tempur*, 2010) reveals that,

‘The powerful, complex and often disturbing work of Raja Shahrman has given rise to many questions. Its violence and its portrayal of the figure sit uncomfortably with the artist’s life as a devotee and student of Islam. The work itself might be seen as a manifestation of conflict – spiritual, psychological and socio-cultural.’

I met Raja Shahrman at his home studio to do an interview for my BFA assignment in 2001. During the interview he confessed to feeling guilty about making figurative art, although his sculptures are an abstraction of human figures. He tried to make the abstraction more ambiguous and he made a series of nonfigurative works for his second solo exhibition *Api, Bayangan dan Kemenyan* (1998) and third solo exhibition *Semangat Besi* (2001).



Fig.30 Raja Shahrman Raja Aziddin (2001) *Semangat Besi* [Welded metal]

The works for Api, Bayangan dan Kemenyan are functional sculptures of candle holder, mirror frame and incense burner and for *Semangat Besi* (fig. 30) the sculptures seem to be a holder for keris, a weapon in the Malay martial arts. For him the works are not figure sculptures but there are still traces of figurative elements in some of the works because the urge to make figurative works is still strong within him. The figurative sculptures of martial arts positions appear again in his fourth solo exhibition titled *Nafas* (2004) and since then figures have been constant features of his work.

This is the dilemma facing some Malay Muslim artists and it directly affects their creative practice in the choice of subject and content. Artists find various alternatives in substituting the figurative element in their works, including using patterns, flora, object or landscape.

Sulaiman Esa is one of the prominent figures in the rise of the quest for the assimilation of Islamic fundamentals in art. He turns to traditional Malay craft characterised by geometric and arabesque patterns. According to Hani Ahmad (1995, p.9),

‘Through Islamic art a Muslim artist strives to investigate his religious belief/life with his creative/artistic one, to wed his creativity to his spirituality, to render his art and religion as mutually reinforcing becomes an ideal objective for a Muslim artist’.

I started to research traditional Malay art because I think that my practice of using plant forms and imbuing metaphor in plant sculpture resonates with the traditional Malay arts and crafts. I read the *Symbolism of Malay Kelantanese House* which discusses the symbolism in the architecture of the Malay house in the Kelantan province. According to Muhammad Afandi Yahaya (1995, p.123) flowers, colourful as they are do not just function as internal decorations in terms of traditional motifs, they represent certain symbolic meanings as well. Plant parts such as flower, leaf or roots adorned architecture, or become patterns in textile or decorations for traditional boats and jewellery.

In Malay culture, flowers among other things in the natural world are associated with the concept of nature and the spiritual. Abdullah Muhammad in describing the concept of the waterlily says that it is a symbol of faith for a person to god.

The flowers or plants represent a certain meaning, the way the patterns are designed to intrinsically convey a philosophy or principle. 'Awan larat' motif (fig. 31) is a good example of the relationship between the design and symbolism in a traditional Malay carving. The design may start with a flower or stem from several sides of the motif. These 'starting points' symbolise how life begins. From these points, tendrils appear, which are a symbol of growth that needed 'lesson' or 'knowledge'. The tendrils continue to intertwine with tendrils from other 'starting points' and when the movement goes downwards it mean that death is inevitable and humans will eventually die.



Fig.31 Awan larat carving from Malay Kelantan house

It was suggested that I listen to a recorded discussion on the internet of a panel discussion with Melvin Bragg on a radio 4 slot, 'In Our Time', to explore the notion of metaphor. The discussion revolved around metaphor in western literature and its history. I learnt that there is a collective similarity in the notions of metaphor in the eastern and western arts and literature. Both cultures use metaphor quite similarly in literature, for example Shakespeare used the agricultural metaphor of 40 seasons for death, love aging and passion in a sonnet.

In the analysis of plant and metaphor I recognise 3 aspects that influence the choice of certain plants in my works which are:

1. Shape or form.

Certain plant shapes will instantly attract me as they remind me of something else, for example I see sensuousness in orchids. I also respond to structure, and the physical quality of the plants for example the type of stem, either it is hardy or not, or its texture. I then relate the characteristic with the metaphor in my work.

2. Symbol

The plants which I always choose are plants that symbolise something, in Malay culture especially. For example a Frangipani is associated with death because it is always planted in a Malay cemetery. The plants could also be reminder of the beautiful landscape of my parent's house which is why I choose the types of plants which can easily be found there.

3. Plant properties or characteristics

The choice of plant is also based on its herbal value such as in my drawings where I draw herbs that are used in confinement rituals. Characteristic such as the way it grows, its seasonal availability, its type (e.g. parasite, epiphyte, saprophyte) and its habitat are also important. My choice of plant in the watercolour drawings have the ability to survive in a particular environment.

I went back to Kuala Lumpur during summer 2011 and I found that the 'wasteland' behind my parent's house is still there. The development works had been halted and wild plants were growing on the sand and debris. I made a sculpture shaped like a monitor lizard's skeleton from wire and put real flowers and leaves I found in the area on them (fig. 32). Some of the flowers were bought from shops as there were not enough flowers around the house for the sculpture. I put the sculpture behind my parent's house to photograph it. I left the sculptures for a few days to let the flowers dry and poured clay mixture (slip) on it. I left it to dry, and poured again the same mixture.



Fig.32 (2011) *Beautiful Skeleton* [Wire, leaves and flowers]

Back in London I had several sculptures in progress. These sculptures were arrangements of flowers and plant parts dipped either in plaster of Paris mixture, white acrylic or glue and left to harden, then stuck onto flower foam. I put some of these plant parts in silica gel to dry and left some in a fresh condition. So I have plant parts in variety of conditions in the same sculpture. These flowers and plants are gifts from friends, picked from my surrounding flat and bought in a market. I also put broken parts of toys belongs to my son on the arrangement which are mostly vehicles and construction machines. The sculptures thus refer simultaneously to animals, objects, buildings and plants.



Fig.33 (2012) *Calcifer Rules* [C-type Print] 55cmX 77cm

I placed this sculpture in my garden to be photographed with the plants that grow there naturally. I wanted the sculpture to look as if they were part of the natural environment despite their fictional appearance. The result was disappointing. The images had little impact. I feel that I was forcing the concept of making the sculpture part of my surroundings. As a consequence, the images did not have the presence or the potency of my previous works. I tried photographing the same sculpture in with a different setting, in my kitchen (fig 33). I used food and toys as a setting for the photograph. At the time of writing this report I am experimenting with photographing plant-like sculptures in various places inside my house (fig 34).



Fig.34 (2012) *Sixfid Quest* [C-type Print] 55cm X 80cm

Professional Practice

Exhibitions

2009 Interim Exhibition, University of East London

Watercolour on paper, A4 x 11 pieces

2010, Thou Art Women, Shanghai Expo'10, Shanghai drawing.

Two drawings, charcoal on paper, 150 cm x 120 cm.

2010 Interim Exhibitions, University of East London

C-type print and pen and watercolour on paper drawing

2011 Interim Exhibition, University of East London

C-type print

Publication

Uwei H Shaari, Rahimidin Zahari and Tetriana A Fauzi (2010) *Taman Syifa' Garden of Healing*, Kuala Lumpur: Chandan Gallery.

(An essay for Abu Bakar Idris : Taman Syifa exhibition catalogue)

I was invited by Gallery Chandan in Kuala Lumpur to co-curate a solo exhibition of Abu Bakar Idris, a Malaysian artist, planned for early 2011. During summer 2010 I went to Abu Bakar's studio and did an informal interview with him. Abu Bakar is a painter and an herbal enthusiast. He and his wife collect recipes of herbal remedies as well as growing them in their garden. His artworks are paintings of the plants and his interpretations of their herbal properties. The interview continued later via telephone when I had returned to London. The exhibition date was brought forward and my role was reduced to writing for the exhibition catalogue. The exhibition, held in November 2010 consisted of 15 paintings and several watercolour sketches on paper.

Conclusion

When I started the doctoral programme, I intended to continue the creative practice and research I had developed during my MA. However over the course of the three years, I have moved very far from the MA work. As well as developing new methodologies and imagery, I have found a better way to contextualize my creative practice.

Over the three years of the doctorate, I have created fictional plants through drawings, sculptures and digital prints, and I researched artists who have used fiction as their premise such as Charles Avery and Marcel Broodthaers. I explored different layers of meaning of images of fictional plants living in particular environments, and I experimented with images through different means, including water colour on paper, digital collages, drawings, and digital prints of sculptures.

I began to recognize and embrace the sensuousness that others see in my work, whereas before I was unaware of this element. I have begun to better understand the conscious and possibly unconscious intentions behind the work. I looked at works by Georgia O'Keefe and Dorothea Tanning to consider how a female body is portrayed by female artists.

I learned a lot through the seminars when other students presented their works, their working methodologies and the relevant theories. This learning process has matured my method of working and helped me to evaluate my own works in a closer and more critical way. My work is the creation of fictional plants relating to personal and cultural metaphor. My plant sculptures, placed in urban or domestic settings, are monuments of memory. A turning point was when I went back to Malaysia for the summer and became intrigued with the landscape behind my parent's house. I began to appreciate the aesthetic not just in blooming flowers but also in decayed and withering plant life.

I have identified what is behind my choice of the plants I use as reference: shape or form, the plant's symbolism, and its characteristics and properties. I also tried to understand the intention behind my way of working with botany and metaphor, by researching the philosophy of traditional Malay craft. This is important for me to understand, as a Malay Muslim artist making contemporary work.

Part of my interest in creating these fictional plants and making an environment/world around them is because of my interest in science fiction. I grew up watching western science fiction movies. I also read Malaysian science fiction short stories. Even now I still have a strong interest in science fiction. When I

started this programme, my intention was to make an encyclopedia-like book, which would have images of invented plant drawings and accompanying text that would describe its habitat and characteristic. Although I abandoned the idea of a book in the end, my creation of the plant sculptures is nonetheless based on ideas derived from science fiction. I combine different botanical attributes to create an imaginary plant form. My method is to 'hybridise' plant characteristics to create a plant-like sculpture that can then be inserted imaginatively into particular environments. I select the botanical characteristics of plants, such as resistance, adaptability, ability to withstand weather, which would allow them to survive in a specified environment and therefore make them a 'superior' species. I see this as similar to the practice of cross-breeding in agricultural industry or evolutionary biology in biological science. The influence of science fiction sometimes can be traced to the physical appearance of the sculptures themselves; some of them reference imagery of plant forms or aliens found in science fiction films such as *Little Shop of Horrors* or *The Day of The Triffids*.

The symbolism of particular plants in a Malaysian context is also important in my imaginative process in developing the imagery. For example, the betel nut leaf is a symbol of humbleness and is widely used in many traditional practices because of this association, as well as because of its herbal properties. Apart from the botanical characteristic of the plants, I also consider the symbolic associations during the making of the sculpture. In traditional Malay design philosophy, especially in woodcarving, the way in which the plant grows intrinsically conveys meanings. As I researched it more deeply, I realised that my appropriation of plant attributes is closely related to this philosophy of design.

Historically, this philosophy was introduced because of the restriction of figurative elements in the arts. This echoes the intention behind several contemporary Malay Muslim artists in Malaysia not to use figures in their work; instead they use flora or patterns as substitutes, or to render figures more abstract. At the beginning of the programme I was unaware of a desire to avoid figuration in my work. But now I have accepted this as part of my intention in using plants as metaphors. I have not always rejected figures, but in my current phase I am using plants as substitutes for human figures. My dilemma in consciously knowing and admitting this fact is that I do not want to be branded as a Malay Muslim artist who rejects figures totally.

Although I did not start with this intention, I now consider that this is part of my intention in making artwork, along with my fascination with plant forms. This is why I perceive or look for anthropomorphic characteristics in plant forms as a personification of the characters of human beings. This is also why the sculptures have a bodily reference. Some of the plants can be identified with parts of human

body; some of them seem to imitate human-like positions. Apart from this figurative characteristic, they also allude to sensuality. Some of the forms have a resemblance to internal organs or the physical attributes of a female figure, such as the pear shape of a female body, bodily movements, the flow of hair, or even the sensuousness of flowers that could have a sexual interpretation. This is because the metaphors arising from the works are related to me and the people I am close to, such as family and friends who are dealing with the same kind of life issues.

I normally have an idea or image in my mind of where my sculptures will be placed and photographed. These spaces are mostly the domestic spaces of my flat or my parent's house. The character of the environment also contributes to the creation or placement of the sculpture, for example, a burnt plant sculpture in the oven or a pale bluish flower in the fridge. I have worked at home during the programme, in very close proximity with my family, so family activities, especially related to my child, are sometimes evident in the works. The materials that I have used (air drying clay) are non-toxic so children can play with. I also used plasticine, toys, food and things that are already in the house as props in photographing the sculpture. I feel that my roles as mother, wife, student or artist are alternately incorporated in the process of making artwork. Because I do not want to part from these roles, I would always be thinking of ways to incorporate my daily life and environment in my work. I feel that the domestic space surrounding the plant sculpture provides a potent setting. The banality of home spaces is somehow changed by the presence of fictional plant forms and other props, creating an unsettling tension between the familiar and the strange, and evoking the sense of fecundity, invasion and survival.

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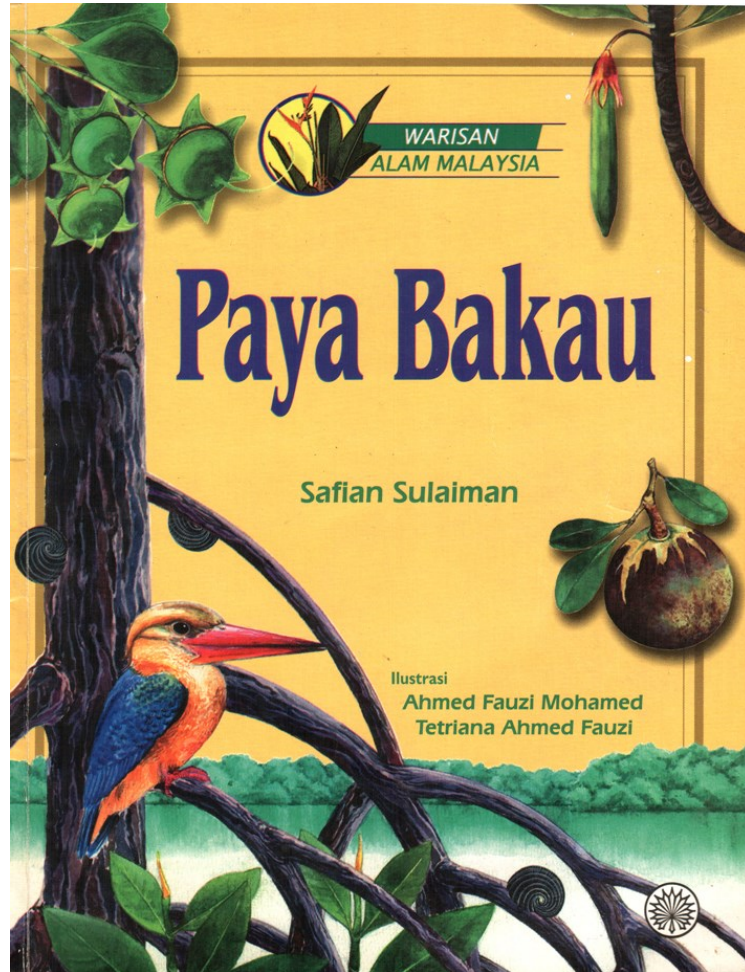


Fig.35 Tetriana Ahmed Fauzi and Ahmed Fauzi Mohamed (2005) Book cover
Malaysian Natural Heritage Series: Mangrove Swamp

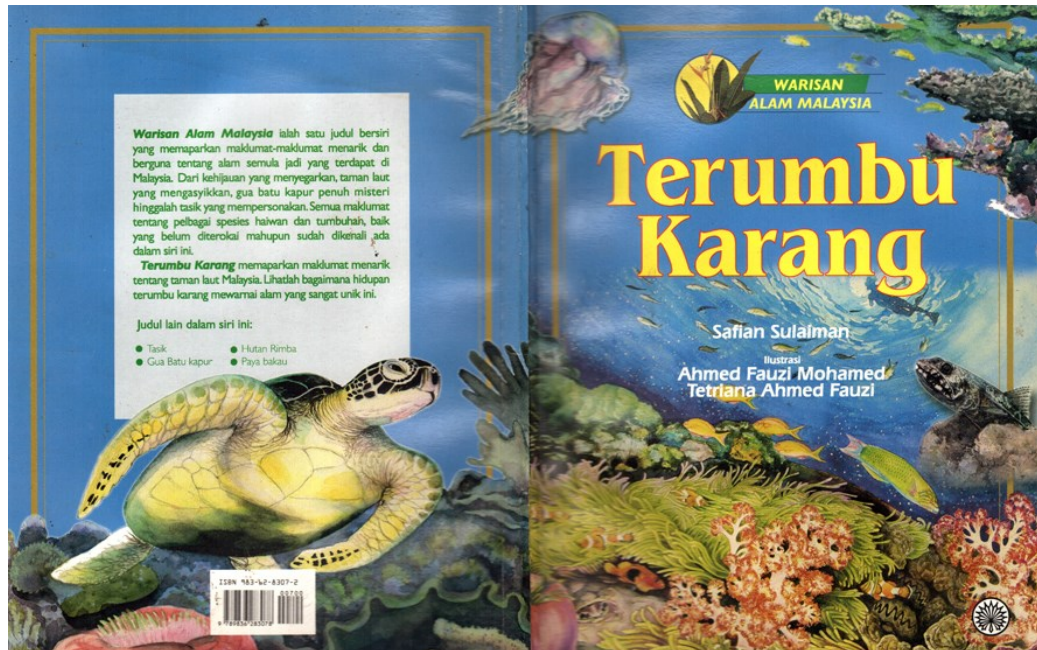


Fig.36 Tetriana Ahmed Fauzi and Ahmed Fauzi Mohamed (2006) Book cover *Malaysian Natural Heritage Series: Coral Reef*

ABU BAKAR IDRIS: EXPRESSING BELIEF IN HERBS

BY TETRIANA AHMED FAUZI

I remember seeing a painting by Abu Bakar Idris in an exhibition catalogue. It depicts a volume of *Sura Ya-sin* and a pair of reading glasses in an ablution room. Its title seems to be a dialogue between his father and him, or maybe his own monologue: "Abah, Saf Surau di Bandar Lebih Panjang Dari Saf di Kampong Kita" (Dad, the Prayer Row in the Town's *Surau* Is Longer than in Our Kampong's *Surau*) [1998]. There was another piece that caught my eye titled "Isteriku Seorang Peguam" (My Wife Is A Lawyer) [1996]. This is a still-life painting of a sewing machine and a volume of *Kitab Barzanji* with a view of hills outside seen through a window. Although the title hints that the wife is a career woman, the images there imply deeper meanings; the sewing machine suggests domesticity, the *Sura Ya-sin* is a sign of religious devotion, and the robe signifies a scholar. A viewer will immediately link one subject with another while comprehending the meaning of the painting. That is how Abu Bakar plays with subjects and metaphors here. Metaphor is 'speaking of one thing in terms of another' or 'another way of saying things'.^[1]

In his previous series, the lyrical titles largely serve as the extensions of the works. They too help establish the meanings or contents of the paintings. In this recent series, however, the titles are more indirect and act sort of as proverbs accentuating the meanings behind

the paintings. The interrelationship between the works and their titles is another technique used by Abu Bakar to express himself. Abu Bakar Idris, or Along as I call him, is very much like his paintings. He is a person who loves to employ analogies in his conversations. Now, more than ever, having related to him by marriage to his youngest brother, I find that his art encapsulates several things; the essence of the Malay philosophy, the concept of *kias-ibarat*, his personal life, old folks' words of wisdom, nostalgic memories, Islamic attributes, and hence a mirror of himself.

It was during his student days at Malaysia Institute of Art (MIA) that Along decided to dedicate his art practice to following Islamic principles. During one tutorial, Along presented to his lecturer a proposal of artwork that featured a figurative image of a woman. They also talked about his long-term planning and strategies for his art-making. After the discussion, he then chose to abandon the idea of figuration and turn instead to the art of calligraphy, still life and landscape loaded with metaphors. His awareness to anchor his art in Islamic principles became the turning point for his creative practice.

In this latest series of work, he turns to botany to look for subject matters. To create these recent paintings, he draws his inspiration mainly from the curative

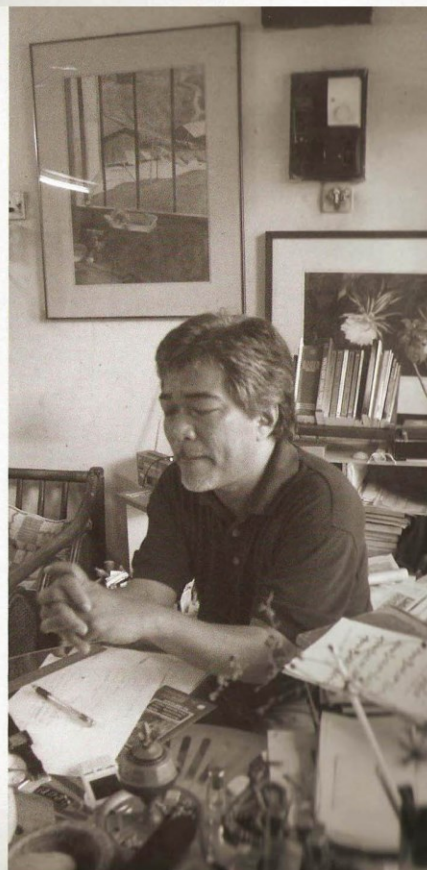
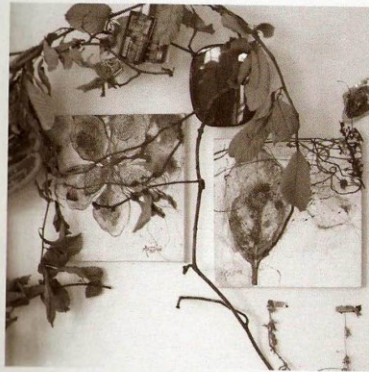


Fig.37 Essay from *Taman Syifa' Garden of Healing* page 32 and 33

properties of herbal plants and alternative treatments. These medicinal plants are depicted in an illustrative way, and in such a manner as to purposely forsake the naturalistic approach of his earlier works. He too is inspired by Islamic miniature painting with its focus on flat space. Moreover, he strives to reject typical Western (Renaissance) elements such as the illusion of 3D realism and deep space. In his effort, he is very diligent in keeping to the Islamic artistic dogma. Sulaiman Esa is one of the prominent figures in the rise of the quest for the assimilation of Islamic fundamentals in art. He resorts to geometric forms and arabesques with the infusion of traditional Malay craft. He says, "Through Islamic art a Muslim artist strives to integrate his religious belief/life with his creative/artistic one, to wed his creativity to his spirituality, to render his art and religion as mutually reinforcing becomes an ideal objective for a Muslim artist."¹²



Being avid practitioners of herbal and traditional/alternative medicine, both he and his wife Hamidah love collecting herbal plants and herbal health recipes. The herb garden in front of their house is a proof of their interest in herbalism. They would often bring friends for alternative medications, swap herbal recipes with them and practise whatever recipes suggested by their friends. Herbalism then becomes the central idea for his current art practice.

As he rejects the naturalistic mode of painting, the herbs portrayed in his works are mere representations of the plants. Therefore, they are not botanical renderings by a botanical illustrator. The plant parts found in his paintings include fruits, flowers, twigs, seeds, leaves and roots of certain types of herbs. Most are left hanging in the middle of canvas, and some look as though they are floating in space. Just like a botanical researcher, he does a lot of studies on plants under his magnifying glass, dissecting and peeling the petals and leaves to look for the best forms to copy from. Most of the plant parts he illustrates still bear close resemblance to their actual appearances, and their types or species are mostly easily recognisable.

Along chooses certain types of herbs for his painting because of their healing properties and their connections with the people around him. For example, *mempelas* plant had been used to treat his mother's ailment, whereas *susu kambing* plant for my father's and later his father's gout. Knowing that each herb can offer a remedy for an illness, he himself finds cures in these herbs. The whole herbal experience is definitely a therapeutic process, and even the distribution of herbal knowledge gives him a sense of satisfaction. This reminds me of Michael Landy's etchings of weeds. In a performance that commented on consumerism and capitalism titled "Break Down" (2001), Landy catalogued all 7,227 of his

possessions and deliberately destroyed them in an old branch of a clothing store in Oxford Street. After "Break Down", Landy was left with no money, no possession, and no artwork to sell. He then stayed with his partner, and friends donated some stuff to him. It was at this juncture that he started making detailed etchings of weeds. He even kept and nurtured the weeds he found growing in the wild. In late 2002, he came out with a solo show of the weed etchings entitled "Nourishment". Both Along's and Landy's encounters with plants are indeed therapeutic. Their botanical experiences, though happened in different ways, provide some kind of 'nourishment' in some phases of their lives.

The somber and 'dirtied' backgrounds of all the paintings make me wonder; is there any dark side in all these works? Why do these plant parts, though still in 'good' condition, appear bruised and look dried or dead? Amidst the dark tones are cold hues like blue, green and purple, with occasional yellow and orange that give warmth to the paintings. Despite the muddy hues, whiteness and lightness still occupy the main areas of the painted surfaces. This imparts a sense of light emerging from behind the dirty smears and patches of somberness. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1997 edition), Kandinsky explains how looking at a painter's palette gives a purely physical effect to the eye, and when delving deeper the effect "causes an emotion and a vibration of the soul, or an inner resonance, which is a purely spiritual effect", meaning the colour touches the soul itself.

To me, the hazy and vague backgrounds seem to uplift the mystical aura of herbs. The spiritual and mystical aspects of Islam have always been an integral part of Along's life. Having a serious discussion or coffee-table talk with him will always end up towards a mystical direction. Stitched marks, deliberate horizontal lines

that seem dripping down, and vortex-like spirals are his interpretations and ways of imbuing the spiritual elements into his paintings. These marks can be observed in some of his works, and for him each one of them behaves as a signifier to a certain spiritual meaning. In this recent series, there are swirling lines resembling random doodles that cover most surfaces of the paintings. These trance-inducing lines visually translate his meditation practice; they appear almost like trails left by the movements and rotations of a Dervish dancer. These swirls and doodles, albeit somewhat minimal and less aggressive, take us back to the abstract expressionist action painting.

Along firmly believes that every mark, arrangement and choice that he makes for each painting is for a reason. He wants everything in his painting to signify or to mean something. His ways of wanting everything to be meaningful reminds me of traditional Malay carvers. According to Muhammad Afandi Yahaya, traditional Malay carvers do not just carve for the sake of producing beautiful objects. They, on the other hand, also hold responsibility and credibility of producing works permeated with the motives and philosophy acceptable in their cultural context. Each carving motif and arrangement on a house must follow certain rules.

there are swirling lines that looks like doodles covering most parts of the painting. This trance like lines translate his meditation practice in visual, it seems almost like a Dervish dancer

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And these rules must adhere to the cultural, religious, aesthetic, and other positive traditional values.

Along is very particular in his choice of subjects and colours. He is prepared to wait for months, at times up to a year, to get the right subject matters for his works. Sometimes he faces a conflict between formalistic considerations and his strict principle of wanting everything to be meaningful. For example, if he wishes to put black for some reasons but the colour is not compatible with the composition, he is then in a conflict to make the best decision. He once told me, "I need to rationalise my choices, I want my artworks to be original, with my own personal touch, and not just for the sake of following the latest trend".

For the purpose of researching for his artworks, Along collects numerous herbal plants, as well as books on herbal tips and magic incantations. His sources of reference include scientific findings on herbs, an old calendar featuring herbs, and herbal knowledge he gathers from books and practitioners of alternative medicine. These things are essential for the creation of his works. He also turns to the stories about him and other people near him who have some experiences with herbs. When asked how he conveys the knowledge on herbs through painting, he replied that it would be done via indirect communication. As herbal experiences

and information cannot be translated directly through the visual elements of painting, he thus renders those matters in the form of representation or expression. Of course we cannot obtain those experiences and information unequivocally from painting. Realising that painting is just a secondary medium communicating the herbal knowledge, he regards it as a way of telling and encapsulating the entire herbal experience.

I am instantly reminded of Martin Barret's, my classmate's etching of mythologies that touches on colonization, consumerism and other issues, which was shown in a critic forum during our course's last term. We all talked about the issues and the changing facts of the story behind the work, and not just criticising the physicality of the work. It was not that we were detached from the work, but the whole theme was an overwhelming topic to talk about.

All that Along hopes is for his artworks to be appreciated as his personal expression, and as reminders of the importance of herbal plants. He expects when people look at his latest series of painting they will be reminded of the herbal medicinal practice in our culture, and as such it will be a good starting point to converse about the curative benefits of various herbs. For him, the paintings are the 'keys' to instigate a dialogue and a sharing of experience among different people.

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Images of artworks



Fig.40 (2011) *Kantan X Egg* [C-type Print] 66cm X 98cm



Fig.41 (2011) *Fig X Mesh* [C-type Print] 66cm X 98cm



Fig.41 (2011) *Cold haven* [C-type Print] 66cm X 95cm



Fig.42 (2011) *Fortress* [C-type Print] 66cm X 85cm



Fig.43 (2011) *Safe Spot* [C-type Print] 90cm X 60cm



Fig.44 (2011) *The Veil* [C-type Print] 66cm X 89cm



Fig.45 (2011) *Tiga Rasa* [C-type Print] 55cm X 83cm



Fig.46 (2012) *Untitled* [C-type Print] 80cm X 119cm



Fig.47 (2012) *Black Book Recipes* [C-type Print] 80cm X 119cm



Fig.48 (2012) *Keepers* [C-type Print] 66cm X 98cm



Fig.49 (2011) *Illegal Skeleton* [C-type Print] 66cm X 98cm



Fig.50 (2012) *Siti* [C-type Print] 66cm X 91cm



Fig.51 (2012) *Untitled* [C-type Print] 88cm X 66cm

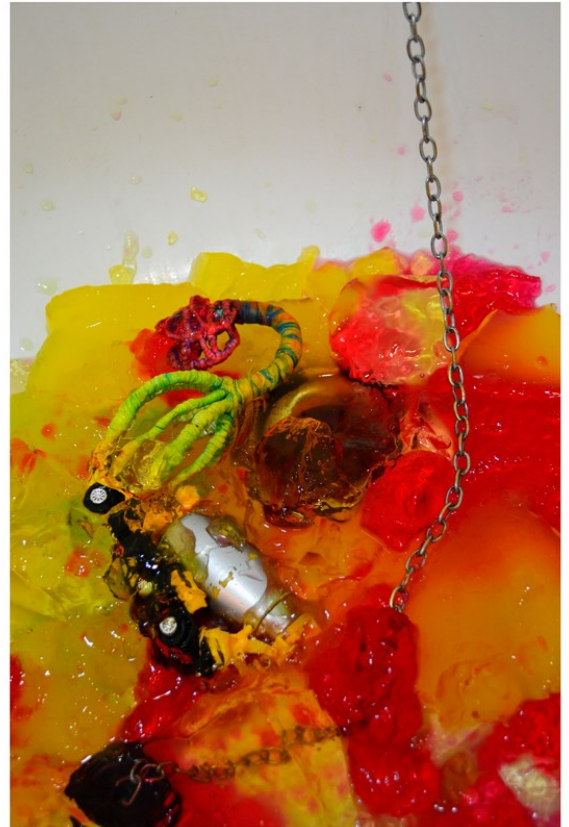


Fig.52 (2012) *Hantu Air* [C-type Print] 55cm X 36cm, 55cm X 36cm



Fig.53 (2012) Images of artwork in exhibition space



Fig.54 (2012) Images of artwork in exhibition space



Fig.55 (2012) Images of artwork in exhibition space



Fig.56 (2012) Images of artwork in exhibition space



Fig.57 (2012) Images of artwork in exhibition space



Fig.58 (2012) Images of artwork in exhibition space