

SOUTHEAST ASIA RISING!

Proceedings of The 5th International Conference on Southeast Asia (ICONSEA2013)
Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur



Edited by

Hanafi Hussin, Mohammad Raduan Mohd Ariff, Lowell B. Bautista, Rodney C. Jubilado,
Christine Yun May Yoong, Desiree Quintero, Wayland Quintero & Jem R. Javier

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CONTEXTUALIZING ABSTRACTION AND ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST ART IN MALAYSIA

CONTEXTUALIZING ABSTRACTION AND ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST ART IN MALAYSIA¹

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Abstract

Abstract Expressionism has been one of the Western art movements that has influenced Malaysian artists. Since late 1950s and even until today, abstraction and works that falls into the formalistic approach of Abstract Expressionist have been well accepted and produced and this is more so since the promulgation of the National Cultural Policy in 1971 and the Islamization Policy in the late 1970s. This paper discusses abstraction and Abstract Expressionism and their acceptance, adaptation, and transformation under local conditions and situations. This could be observed as abstraction and Abstract Expressionism were used as a stylistic approach or an artistic method to highlight local subject matter and personal experiences by Malaysian artists through works that render local landscapes and nature, themes and religion and/or cultural references such as Jawi script, myths and mythologies and the abstraction of figuration. This paper will also discuss how works that seem to be rooted in formalistic exploration flourished aligned to this condition. Within this framework, this paper will discuss several works that have been recognized and discussed as abstract and Abstract Expressionist works produced by Malaysian artists.

Keywords: Malaysian art, abstract art, Abstract Expressionist, National Cultural Policy

Introduction

Art writings in Malaysia have utilized the terms -- “abstract”, “semi-abstract”, and “abstract expressionist” and even “Abstract Expressionist” in a non-explicit and definitive way as a merely descriptive analysis of works that departs from reality in its depiction of imageries. This form of abstraction in the depiction of imageries produced by Malaysian artists that fall under this realm can be slightly partial or comprehensive. The usage of the terms listed above, however, needs to be explicated and further discussed within the context of Malaysia’s modern art development. Such discussion on the influence of Western artistic movement on Malaysian art forms need to be problematized to challenge the notion that Asian arts are merely derivative of the Western Abstract Expressionist style.² On top of that, the development of Malaysian modern art and Western art was not produced in a parallel timeline: So, the acceptance and development of such artistic styles and approaches need to be investigated and problematized especially within the local context of local reception.

The foundation of Western art, for example, had been underpinned by the logic of perspective in order to reproduce an illusion of visible reality. Only in the late 19th century and early 20th century, the early modernist tendencies in art can be seen as artists moved towards abstraction in their art making. This could be seen in various modern art movements from Impressionism, Cubism to Abstract Expressionism etc. Since then, Western modernist artists have begun to present recognizable subject matter in distorted manners, or created completely abstract

¹ The author would like to thank Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) for its Short Term Grant under which this research is embarked and completed.

² John Clark, "Open and Closed Discourses of Modernity in Asian Art," in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Broadway, NSW: Wild Peony and The University of Sydney East Asian Series Number 7, 1993), 2; Virginia Spate, "Preface," in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Broadway, NSW: Wild Peony and The University of Sydney East Asian Series Number 7, 1993), unpaginated.

or non-representational art that exclusively communicates through formal means such as line shape, space, colour, and texture that reach its pinnacle in Abstract Expressionists works.

In Malaysia, on the other hand, the acceptance of abstraction as mode of Western art, was not rooted to these circumstances faced by their Western counterparts who challenged the tradition of perspective making rooted during the Renaissance era, but the term “modern art” has been used very loosely to describe artistic activities such as oil and watercolour painting as early as the 1930s.³ The term modern art employed in the context of Malaysian modern art, of which I have argued elsewhere, have been adopted in employing the Western-based modern system modelled by the practice of 18th century arts including the grouping of five arts -- painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry and music.⁴ It was within this different historical trajectory that abstraction as a stylistic exploration was introduced.

This paper will, however, argue that these artists, despite their adopted stylistic approach, are not without their own agency. The works by these Malaysian artists, however, must be scrutinized carefully as much as these works appear to be “abstract,” the works ~~were~~ actually possess the strength of local and modern elements, creating their own style and identity mostly rooted in Malaysia or the region’s depictions or renditions. It is true that these artists were influenced by their formal artistic experiments attained from their Western artistic education and they have produced works that embody abstraction (and even expressionism) that can also be argued as similar in the outlook with their counterparts in United States of America and Europe. But if we were to scrutinized further, the stance in the form of these artists’ art making, however, were contextual and culturally specific, as the subject matter represented in their works were mostly local and regional imageries, with local themes and cultural references and reflected the need of abstraction of figuration.

The context and cultural specific of Abstract Expressionist style as employed by these artists need to be investigated extensively. This is even more so since Malaysia’s Independence and after the 1971 National Cultural Congress,⁵ the search for a local identity has become a pertinent drive among Malaysian artists. This paper will further argue what I term as the appropriation of Abstract Expressionist style. It is actually a stylistic approach that imparted the non- or semi-representation imageries approach with local and/or regional issues, themes and cultural references and has further been accepted and formed under the local condition. Instead of producing works that either fall as the gestural abstraction⁶ or chromatic abstraction⁷ which are known to be some of the main approaches of the Abstract Expressionist in the United States of America, artworks in the outlook of Abstract Expressionist style produced by Malaysian artists have different concerns and trajectories. It is definitely not based on the idea of unraveling the medium to its purest form or what was “essential” to painting such as the making of marks on a

³ Mohamed Ali Abdul Rahman, *Modern Malaysian Art: Manifestation of Malay Form and Content* (Shah Alam: Biroteks Universiti Teknologi Mara, 2000), 29.

⁴ Sarena Abdullah, “Postmodernism in Malaysian Arts” (Unpublished thesis, The University of Sydney, 2010), 27. In regards to this circumstances, Jolly Koh also have problematized the term “Modern art” and “Abstract Expressionism” used by Redza Piyadasa and T.K. Sabapathy in their early writings of Malaysian art. See Jolly Koh, “Some Misconceptions in Art Writing in Malaysia,” *sentAp!* 5 (2007): 6-8.

⁵ The 1971 National Cultural Congress could be seen as the first official attempt to shape Malaysian identity. Inspired by Tun Abdul Razak, who was then Malaysia’s second Prime Minister, and the increasingly pro-Malay government policies, Malay intellectuals convened at the University of Malaya in August 16-20th 1971 to formulate the country’s policy on national culture.

⁶ The Gestural abstraction or Action painting -- a style of painting in which paint is spontaneously dribbled, splashed or smeared onto the canvas, the work emphasizes the physical act of painting itself.

⁷ The Chromatic Abstraction or Color Field painting on the other hand consists of large fields of flat, solid colour spread across or stained into the canvas -- less emphasis on gesture, but emphasis on the overall consistency of form and process.

flat surface as espoused by Clement Greenberg.⁸ Similarly, works akin to the Abstract Expressionist style that Malaysian artists produce are often non-representational, in parallel with the spontaneity or at least given the impression of spontaneity that characterized many abstract paintings similar to the Abstract Expressionist works in the United States and Europe. Although these paintings give the audience the spontaneous impression, they actually involved some levels of development of ideas and planning in abstracting local and regional imageries such as local landscapes and nature, themes and cultural references such as cultural symbols such as Jawi script, myths and mythologies.

One of the early renditions that were taken by these artists were local and regional imageries such as local landscapes and nature. Yeoh Jin Ling's "Rice Field" (1963) (Figure 1) can be argued as another important work within this realm that has rendered the landscape as a simplistic abstraction work that mainly emphasized on the brush strokes and has reached a certain level of sophistication in terms of its execution. Through the limited warm colors and spontaneous strokes in the work, we can still see the semi-representation of paddy fields, palm trees, and village houses. Yeoh Jin Leng explains that he began to develop and re-learn his language when he was back from Chelsea and was transferred to Kuala Terengganu in which he was attuned to his surroundings, lifestyles and livelihood in the East Coast that largely rooted in rice planting which then resulted in this work. In terms of his early position, he explains,

"Landscape was the only substantial entity and concrete ground that I could secure to determine my position as an artist in this country. Landscape provided the space, and my concern was with the process of locating this space, finding this space deep within my consciousness, so that I could deal with the art-life for which I had made the choice and was committed to grow in."⁹



Figure 1 Yeoh Jin Leng, "Ricefields" (1963), oil on canvas, 82.8 x 102 cm.
Source: *Yeoh Jin Leng: Art and Thoughts*. Kuala Lumpur National Art Gallery, 1995.

In the similar spirit, Latiff Mohidin's "Pago-Pago series" (1964-1969) cannot be excluded in the discussion of abstraction of landscape. His series were based on abstract forms of pagoda, stupas, and lingams of the Southeast Asia region that he experiments with a more expressive language of colours, gestures, forms, and his highly energized strokes. In " 'Pago-pago' Bangkok" (1964) (Figure 2), his bamboo shoot-like forms rise vertically and are composed of

⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 5-6.

⁹ Yeoh Jin Leng and T.K. Sabapathy, "Dialogue between Yeoh Jin Leng & T.K. Sabapathy," in *Yeoh Jin Leng: Art and Thoughts 1952 – 1995* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1995), 83.

interlocking units, deriving from various motifs such as leaves and bamboos, with highly visible shorten strokes with colours directly from the tube. Latiff Mohidin's "Pago-Pago series" ranges from drawings, etchings and linocuts, including countless of detailed studies from the simple forms of snail's shell, leaves, flowers, bamboo shoots, butterfly cocoon and seashells. The series reflected the artist who came back from his studies in Germany and influenced from the most ordinary forms that he found around him, particularly the natural, organic, and architectural forms local to the Southeast Asian region.¹⁰



Figure 2 Latiff Mohidin, "Pago-pago' Bangkok" (1964), oil on canvas, 21 x 21 cm

Source: *Line: From Point to Point*. Trans. by Adibah Amin. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1993.

Since the 1970s, after the 1971 National Cultural Congress (NCC), the declaration of the Malays and Islam as the basis of national culture has an impact either directly or indirectly on the development of art in Malaysia.¹¹ Since then, many artists began to look for new ideas related to issues of race, culture, language, nationhood and identity. I have argued elsewhere that the direct or indirect impact of these congress were the proclivities of the mostly Malay-Muslim artists, who were in particular rooted to the ideas of personal identity either by race and/or religion.¹² Despite these proclivities supported by artworks that were produced within the Malay culture and Islamic realm, abstraction and Abstract Expressionism as a stylistic approach has persisted and flourished. As T.K. Sabapathy observed in 1994,

¹⁰ See Latiff Mohidin, *Line: From Point to Point*, trans., Adibah Amin (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1993).

¹¹ During the convention, the Congress decided on three principles of the National Culture: First, the Malaysian National Culture must be based on the culture of the native people in the region, second, suitable and appropriate elements from other cultures can be accepted as elements of the national culture.) and third, Islam is an important source in shaping the national culture. See Mohd Affandi Hassan, "Preface," in *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan: Mengandungi Kertaskerja Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan Dari 16hb Ogos -- 20hb Ogos 1971*, Siri Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan Belia dan Sukan, 1973).

¹² Sarena Abdullah, "The Shaping of Modern Art Identity in Malaysia" (Unpublished Thesis, SUNY at Buffalo, 2005), Chapter Three.

“In the production of art itself, the hold of Abstract Expressionism appears to be strong despite the changing times and the emergence of alternative gestures. New art manifestations that arose in the 1970s, expressed for example in the Redza Piyadasa-Suleiman Esa exhibition called *Towards a Mystical Reality*, have not been sufficiently compelling to inspire dissenting art movements powerful enough to nudge Abstract Expressionism from its hegemonic position. Art reflecting the global Islamic revivalism in the 1980s has either aligned itself with tendencies in Abstract Expressionism or found kinship with decorative art.”¹³

In the subsequent decades of 1970s and 1980s, artists who adhered to the Abstract Expressionists style proliferated. It can be argued that these artists may or may not be influenced either consciously or not by the Abstract Expressionist movement in the United States or in Europe but what matters is that these artists worked within the realm of abstraction (or semi-abstract) forms and imageries, emphasizing formalistic experimentation such as using colours, stressing lines, and emphasizes the simplification of forms. Even some of these works can be argued as expressive thus the term “Abstract Expressionist.” The main difference that drives these artists since the 1970s and 1980s are the fact that they are conscious with the drive towards the search of their own identity within the construct of the larger national identity and the promulgation of National Cultural Policy. So, the form of Abstract Expressionism have been accepted, adapted, and established under these local conditions and trajectories. This could be seen in the abstract and akin to the Abstract Expressionist work that are actually developed towards to highlight local themes and cultural references although at the same time the outlook of their work can be argued as emphasizing on formalistic pursuits.

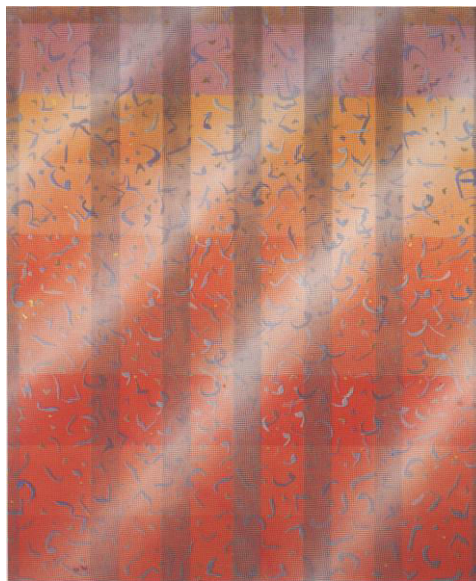


Figure 3 Ahmad Khalid Yusof, “Calligraphy in Space” (1986), acrylic on canvas, 150 x 120cm. Source: *Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1988.

Ahmad Khalid Yusof’s “Calligraphy in Space” (1986) (Figure 3) was based on the Jawi script or Arabic calligraphy that he had drawn or written randomly on his work. As if floating on the warm coloured background, Ahmad Khalid Yusof was one of the first Malay artists to obsessively employ the Islamic Jawi script in his paintings and was initially influenced by the

¹³ T.K. Sabapathy, "Introduction," in *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 7.

Abstract Expressionism of the American artist Mark Tobey.¹⁴ In his work, his calligraphic works were used as both motif and formal elements as he overlays the Jawi script, written over and over again on the canvas, as the motif dissolves into abstraction.

Anuar Rashid's "Births of Inderaputra" (1978) (Figure 4), on the other hand, is a semi-abstract work that highlighted Malay stories and myths as the key subject of the work. As the title depicts, it can be suggested that the artist is visualizing an ancient story of Inderaputra in the form of semi-abstract images of animals (maybe Pegasus?) that are visible as flying in the sky. What is most important is that the brush strokes produce various line qualities, various strokes and forms that are positioned horizontally. The dominant cool color of bluish purple is punctuated with warm colors pertaining to the subject matter and effort in creating luminous effect through the transparency-like to depict the birth of Inderapura as a moment of emanating light.



Figure 4 Anuar Rashid, "Births of Inderaputra" (1978), oil on canvas, 244 x 306cm.
Source: *Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1988.



Figure 5 Ismail Abdul Latif, "Valley Of Lake Chini: Flight Of Magical Golden Peacock" (1986), acrylic on paper, 37.4 x 91.8 cm

Source: *Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1988.

Ismail Abdul Latif's "Valley Of Lake Chini: Flight Of Magical Golden Peacock" (1986) (Figure 5), has also been read as another form of Abstract Expressionist work that focuses on

¹⁴ Redza Piyadasa, *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2002), 106.

local folklores based on local legends. This work is spectacular and awe-inspiring and yet at the same time, one can argue that Ismail Abdul Latif's work here is not the full form of abstraction, as he is driven by local folklores, myth and magic, based on local or made-up legends and fantasies. The Abstract Expressionist aspect of this work, I argue, can be seen in how Ismail Abdul Latif's work exclusively communicates through formal means through various lines flaunting and splattered across his canvasses. His work also positioned the lunar phases of the moon usually at the top of the panel in the form of truncated circle. The fact that the lines and shapes were the main formalistic element that mainly denote the work, imbued with luscious textures and exquisite patterning of various accidental or purposeful lines that reiterates in his other works, aligned his work to be discussed under the Abstract Expressionist rubric.

Another artist, Awang Damit Ahmad explores his inner experience and emotions in regards to his childhood experience. Born and brought up in Sabah, Awang Damit explores and experiments with formalistic aspects of the cultural symbols or imageries that reminds him of his younger days living in the fishing village, raised by his fisherman father and housewife mother. In the abstract or semi-abstract works, Awang Damit represented his half-remembered shapes and forms that lurk in his memory from time to time. This can be seen in semi-abstraction of sea-gulls, fishes, *nipah* palms, sago plants, fishing nets, fishing boats, baskets and fish-traps, and even elements of the flora and fauna. The title also refers to the lives of fishermen and farmers such as "Nyanyian Sang Pelaut" (Fisherman's Song) (1991), "Nyanyian Petani Gunung" (Mountain Farmer's Song) (1991), "Saging dan Pucuk Paku" (Saging and Fern) (1993) and "Saging & Petani Gunung" (2001) (Figure 6).¹⁵

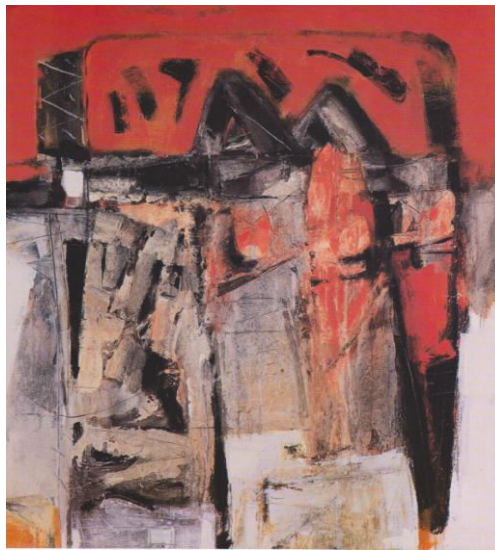


Figure 6 Awang Damit Ahmad, "Marista "Saging & Petani Gunung"" (2001), mixed-media, 100 x 107cm
Sumber: *Alun-Alun Ke Marista: Awang Damit Ahmad 1996 -- 2002 (Path to Marista)*. Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 2002.

The Islamization policy in the late 1970s also have further entrenched the National Cultural Policy especially in term of the search of a national identity. It can be argued here that this happens as it is generally presumed that artists can still abide by Islamic tenets and yet able to produce work that is 'international' or 'western' or 'modern' in its form. This is true especially when dealing with the issue of figuration in the arts. It can be argued that many Malay/Muslim artists abstract their figures as they feel that they are still able to explore their artistic approach in the modernist tradition while observing their Islamic tenets. Khalil Ibrahim and Yusof Ghani are among the artists who have produced abstracted figures in their work. Khalil Ibrahim "Rhythm of

¹⁵ Muliyadi Mahamood, "Capturing Nostalgia in Alun-Alun Ke Marista," in *Alun-Alun Ke Marista: Awang Damit Ahmad 1996 -- 2002 (Path to Marista)* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 2002), 24.

Life” (1987) (Figure 7), for example, represented figures in *sarong* in silhouetted dark color against a predominantly brightly red background, making it a distinctive work influenced by graphic approach. These figures were executed with ranges of colours contrasting to each other against the stark backgrounds of landscape of these coastal villages.



Figure 7 Khalil Ibrahim, “Rhythm of Life” (1987), acrylic on canvas, 96.5 x 122cm.
Source: *Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1988.

Yusof Ghani’s “Tari Series” (Dance Series), for example, emphasizes on action or movement of the figures as the subject and his various bewildering and aggressive line qualities. Inspired by American Abstract Expressionists - Pollock and de Kooning, his main content was on his commentary on the local performance art and culture. By doing so, he superimposed, incorporated, stylized and abstracted various intertwining dancing figures by exploring various lines and movements through his abstract composition (Figure 8).



Figure 8 Yusof Ghani, “Dance Hilal” (1987), mixed media, 116.8 x 129.5cm.
Source: *Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1988.

With the emerging interest in Malay culture and Islamic aesthetics, artists working in Abstract Expressionist style find their works interpreted or viewed from the Islamic perspective. Even Syed Ahmad Jamal's "Ledang Series" that emphasized his exploration of colors and form have been read from Islamic scholarship,

"The Spirit of Ledang has over the years undergone a series of evolution in respect of the artist's use of colors. The artist used darker colors in his early works, which he changed to warmer reds, yellow and oranges as well as the explicit use of white, which produces powerful intonations of energy. This use of light that literally pours out of his paintings is not limited to a visual impact. According to the artist's interpretation, it represents the spirit and commitment required for the life's vicissitudes.

In Islamic art, the concept of light is fundamental as representing the Supreme Spiritual Guidance and its importance to life. This truth has been part of Syed Ahmad Jamal's life since childhood and he recalls his fascination with light's mystical beauty and light of fireflies. ..."¹⁶

Lastly, the usage of Abstract Expressionist as a stylistic approach or an artistic method to highlight local subject matter and personal experiences by Malaysian artists does not mean that all artists produced works that are only pertained to local subject matter. There are artists who still persisted in producing works that are founded by their interests in formalistic approach -- Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir and Fauzan Omar, for example, have consistently experimented with colors and forms. Sharifah Fatimah's work plays around with contrast in terms of shape, appearance and color. In "Rhythm and Rhyme" (1987) (Figure 9), she uses a lot of basic colors of such as primary and secondary colours such as red, green, blue and purple. Color is as visual element that plays an important role in the production of her works. In her work, simple shapes were broken into several parts that include organic forms. Similarly, in "Repose 3" (1997), with dark bluish background, the work was filled with layers of contrasting colors such as red, orange, and green.



Figure 9 Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir, "Rhythm and Rhyme" (1987), acrylic on canvas, 183 x 183cm.
Source: *Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1988.

¹⁶ "Alight," *Vox*, September 17, 2000, 11.

Artist like Ibrahim Hussein, Suzlee Ibrahim and Latiff Mohidin (in his later series) have consistently played with lines and movement. Ibrahim Hussein, in the early phase of his early artistic development, produces works that plays with forms that could be seen in "Manja" (1960) and Lovers (1964), and in his later works, he produces art works that are denoted by lines that are always rigid and yet fluid which could be seen in "Red, Orange & Core" (1984) and "Floating Figures & White Sand" (1985). There are also artists who produce expressionistic works 'ala Jackson Pollock. In his "Monsoon Series," Suzlee Ibrahim he uses layers of color from the mixture of warm colors and cool colors to make an emotional painting that reminds him of the monsoon season in the East Coast. He uses complex brush strokes, texture, composition and color limited proficient on the canvas to create his Abstract Expressionists work perhaps to show the pain, sorrow and hardships faced during that testy season. In the work, he expresses the depressive aspects of the weather by exuding strong waves and winds that persist during the monsoon season. Such approach can be seen similarly in Latiff Mohidin's later series of "Gelombang," "Rimba," and "Kembara." It can be argued that Latiff Mohidin and Suzlee Ibrahim's paintings in such series, are an autobiographical act of self-creation and the expression of their personality and personal journey that were expressed on blank canvas and yet created works that are filled with lines and mark makings, dynamic and full of movement, and layers of texture, possessing an energy of immediacy.

To conclude, abstract and Abstract Expressionism in the form of art has to be read and understood within its local acceptance, embracement and transformed locally. As I have discussed in this paper, abstraction and works that falls into the formalistic approach of Abstract Expressionist have been accepted, adapted, and transformed in reflection of the Malaysian context. The form of national identity through the promotion of Malay culture or religious identity have deeply shaped Malaysian artists who wanting to produce works that they deemed to be modern both in terms of its approach and content. The complexities of this position that these artists faced in terms of artistic positions and approach should not be relegated especially in terms of the influence of Western art movements in Malaysia.

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