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EARL FU
GALLERY

Salleh
Japar

*Gurindam
dan
gaman*

Salleh Japar: Gurindam dan Igauan
4 – 26 September 2004
Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore

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Professor Robert Ely FRSA, President & CEO

ASIA PACIFIC'S LEADING ARTS INSTITUTION

Salleh *Qurindam*
Japar *dan*
gaman

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Preface

The exhibition of *Gurindam dan Igauan* is a momentous occasion for the Earl Lu Gallery and LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts. We are proud to present the eagerly anticipated second solo exhibition by Salleh Japar, one of Singapore's most dynamic and significant artists. In addition to his participation at numerous important international exhibitions, Salleh's significance for the development of contemporary art in Singapore was aptly acknowledged by his representation at the Singapore Pavilion at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001. Ever since his involvement in the ground-breaking *Trimurti* exhibition in 1988, Salleh's work has consistently explored the intricate relationships between contemporary art practice and his Malay cultural heritage. *Gurindam dan Igauan*, his stunning new installation, is no exception. It pertinently addresses the issues facing Salleh's own cultural background in the face of globalisation, in a way that re-asserts his Malay heritage. *Gurindam dan Igauan* is not only a reflection of Salleh's own heritage but also of the problems all Asian societies, in their struggle to retain their cultural identities, are currently grappling with.

Gurindam dan Igauan is a demonstration of the commitment LASALLE-SIA has to the exhibition and discourse of contemporary Asian art. It is the aim, through our exhibitions, publications and research activities, to contribute to the development of these discourses. To this end, I would like to thank Venka Purushothaman for his insightful essay on Salleh's work and for his editing of the catalogue. Gratitude must also go to T. K. Sabapathy and Susie Wong for their valuable contributions to the catalogue. Most of all, I would like to thank Salleh for working with Earl Lu Gallery to present this eagerly anticipated exhibition. It has certainly been well worth the wait.

Eugene Tan
Director
Earl Lu Gallery
LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts

History's Murmurs

by Venka Purushothaman

Essay

History asks us: what manner of cause are we? Are we uncompromising, absolute, strong, or will we show ourselves to be timeservers, who compromise, trim and yield?

Salman Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*

Penakik pisan serant,
Ambil galah b

Seludang jadihan nyir

The violent and virulent world mapped by history has always been watermarked by unquestioned precepts of fear, disarray and decrepitude. Between cycles of violence and peace belie an imaginary calm, which resurrects ideals of peace, harmony and equality. We only remember history for the great violence and traumas it offers us, not for the greater truths that hide behind these. Nations are founded upon this lie. It serves to bond people, mask resistance and emaciate mythic features of the social and cultural. Post-colonial nations, in themselves, celebrate and record political history and not necessarily social history. As such, humanity in its full range of complexities resides in-between violent events. The human spirit, when positioned 'within' these violent events, is seen as valiant, heroic and righteous and this is far from the truth. The human spirit 'in-between' these violent events, as Rushdie observes, compromises, trims and yields: It is vulnerable and erasable. It is like the hero and the villain in a movie. We remember the good and the evil, the proverbial binaries, but not the 'in-betweens' – the comic, the everyday, the anti-hero, and the extras – who are forgotten as each frame shifts ground. Yet, they are there, silently murmuring away, highlighting the displacement of the self.

batang lintabung,

History's in-betweens inform Salleh Japar's artistic interpretations over the last ten years crystallised perhaps in-between his first solo exhibition in 1993 (*Project R.O.H*) and his second solo exhibition in 2004 (*Gurindam dan Igauan*). An art practitioner and educator who came to prominence in the 1980s when he was involved in ground-breaking art exhibitions such as *Trimurti* (1988) and *Crossroads I* (1989), Salleh subsequently established a name as a practice-based researcher of history through *Confess and Conceal* (1993), *Project Pre-fx Point* (1994), *Rapport* (1996), *F.O.R.M* (1997), *49th Venice Biennale* (2001), *Portraits Reassessed* (2002) and *Wahana* (2003).

Concepts of history, subjectivity and referentiality have been at the core of Salleh's research. History, in its theoretical and ritual function, shapes individual subjectivity through the process of narration. For Salleh, narration and the act in itself is never a given but rather a formulaic structure that constructs meaning and order. The narrative potency of science and religion, in particular, forms the critical core of Salleh's investigation in his art throughout the 1990s and these have been interrogated through the masterful orchestration of materials – as a coherent form – with the presence of mind to violate them. The process of doing this violation – as History inflicts upon us— is linked to power: the power of blemishing history and its trappings. On the one hand, in Salleh's art one finds the power of history held in contrast to the power of the humble, often raw materials such as found materials hence, foregrounding a friction between the two. Salleh does not seek out the emotional qualities in the materials he uses, rather he presents their functionality and in doing so, celebrates the ordinary, the found and its essential reason for being. On the other hand, he inflicts violence on books and texts by burning, re-reading, re-

rendering or reducing them to textural scribbles. Here the power of the written word, in a postmodern fashion, is demolished. Furthermore, in Salleh's art self-referentiality (who you are) is a formation of historical textual traces (empirical formations) that form a complex discursive space that are undeniably difficult to unpack. For example, the presence of ghostly figures, in many of his artworks, suggests a pre-occupation with the individual as a tragic hero, a mythic figure. Salleh sees the individual not only as a culmination of textual traces but also as a semiotic text (epistemological formation). As such, the individual, who is often referenced to history, does not exist, but only through the representation of his/her ghostly history. There is an irredeemable quality to human existence.

Over the years, Salleh has registered a lack of interest in the politics of display and art commercialism and focussed on the power of the 'process of investigation' as a final outcome to his artistic practice. Furthermore, Salleh's history of exhibitions reveals a reticence toward one-man shows and this can be read as a rejection of the 'event' that marks the history and genealogy of an artist. The weightiness of the solo exhibition - a much revered coming of age, coming to completion of a cycle of investigation - is indeed a proverbial milestone in the life of an artist in the art making industry today but Salleh has resisted the finality of knowledge presented in solo exhibitions. It would seem that he has found comfort in researching, sharing and shaping his ideas in group exhibitions. These group exhibitions remain Salleh's notes, post-its or diary entries that reveal his concerns, ideas and personal processes. In presenting *Gurindam dan Igauan*, which he terms a work-in-progress, Salleh revisits the potential trappings of historicizing the life and oeuvre of an artist. In that vein, *Gurindam dan Igauan* is a self-critique of the research and knowledge discovered and shaped over the course of the last ten years.

Journey Within and Without an Installation

A singular yet monumental installation represents *Gurindam dan Igauan*. Celebrating the primacy of found and synthetic materials, the installation puts the viewer through a journey of kinetic experiences punctuated by information intense components. The installation has a stoic and cold presence yet has an anthropomorphic quality in entrapping the viewer to follow a path mapped by the artist – just as history forces us to take paths we have no control of. The tactility of the materials – the coldness of metal, the oldness of paper and cloth, the modernity of multi-media projection and the ordinariness of rock salt – presents itself in unadulterated forms. They remain true to themselves and their value realised only by their interaction with one another. The materials become life forces providing both nourishment and redemption for the banality of life.

My preferred approach to studying the installation is through the use of materials at seven different key signposts inherent in the work. The installation is a composition of several distinctive installations that stand on their own and yet are integral to the overall strategy in being together. In stopping at the various signposts, one is made aware of the influx of information that traps us to absorb information and exult ideas – because we have no time to verify ideas at short stops – and make judgement of the world around us. The powerful influx of information makes the traveller delirious (*igauan*), at best, for we have no control over history's power over our soul and psyche. *Gurindam dan Igauan* is site of struggle against history, perspective and interpretation.

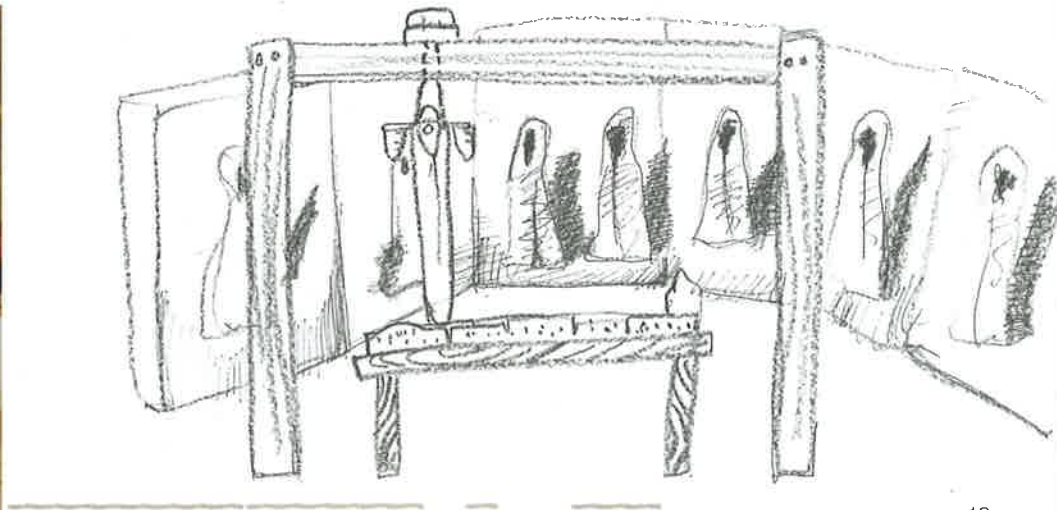
[i]

A singular unit of two huge flags (*panji-panji*) frames the start of a long piece of canopy. Placed side by side, the flags made out of thick black-maroon cotton cloth detailed with microscopic and unidentifiable flower-like patterns suggest a romantic landscape painting. Each flag bears a key emblem relating to navigational orientation and several bits of red motifs that serve as directional signs. One flag bears an astrolabe and another a teardrop shape orientated to the Kaabah in Mecca. Both flags are mounted on a flagpole wrapped in yellow cloth inspiring ideas of royalty yet it is the colour used for draping tombstones in a Malay burial ground (*kramat*) and they work in symmetry to frame the start of a 24-metre canopy structure. The flags are heavy and their navigational role emphasises the manner in which science (astrolabe – tool for measuring altitude) and religion (Kaabah) shape the human condition, in a heavy-handed manner, and how science and religion are instrumental in pre-determining the beginning and the end. History becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy is imminent in this critique. Both the astrolabe and the Kaabah, mounted on a flag suggest flight and height thus broaching the impossibility to chart one's own historical path.



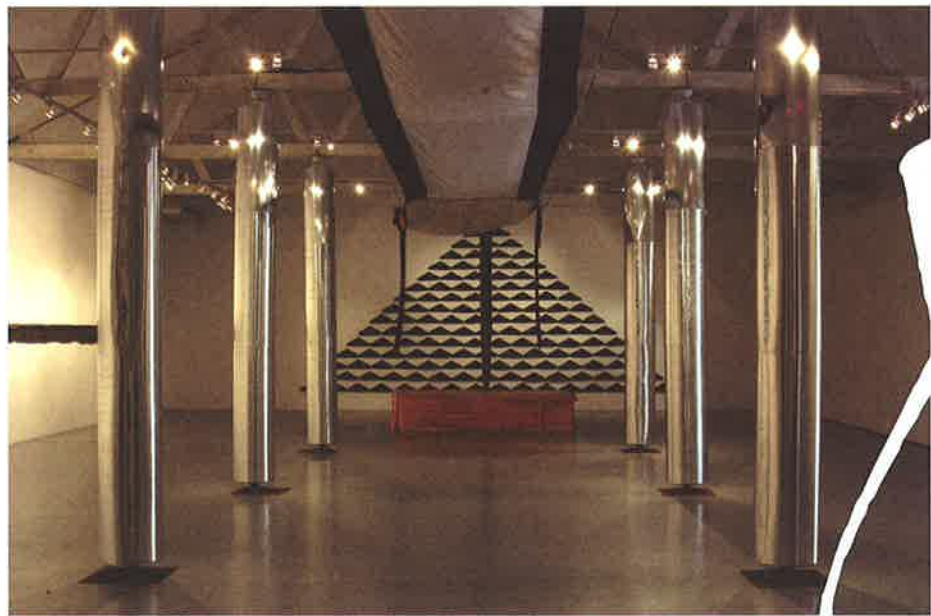
[ii]

A canopy structure bearing a tree motif and a human face rises in-between the two flags. The significance of the canopy is in its ability to link the vast installation from one end to another while giving a sense of ceremony and processional ritual to the journey through the installation. Made of unbleached calico with black border strips, the 24-metre canopy – painstakingly hand- sewn by the artist – pulls together the whole installation and clearly marks a journey. The motif of a tree at the beginning suggests the biblical notion of the tree of life and yet the face, inspired by a carpet with a portrait of a Persian woman seems apparition like. Here the play with other religious motifs (e.g. identifiable figure) antithetical to Islam foregrounds themselves. The last eight metres of the canopy is textured with little buntings, little flags, sewn into a larger flag. It is the start of the concept of layering as a key component in this installation. While the concept of layering means overlaying ideas and meanings, in this installation, layering is systematic yet it does not overlap suggesting the procedural means in which meaning is sequentially and consequentially ascribed to the traveller.



[iii]

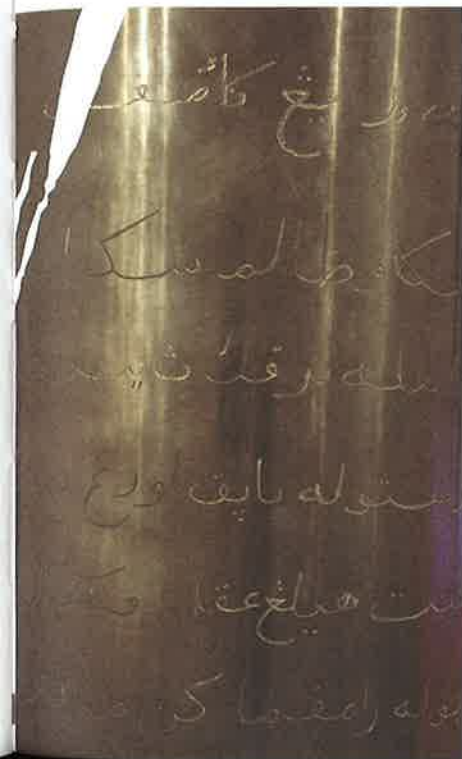
In the journey, the viewer encounters six revolving aluminium columns that bear scribed text. The columns frame the exhibition space and create a sense of a large ceremonial hall draped by a canopy. These massive columns are reminiscent of the Sumerian Hammurabi columns or Roman columns that carry pictorial narratives on written codes and laws, everyday life and the progression of humanity. Just as these columns, Salleh's columns represent knowledge, text, rules, regulations, moral, social codes etc., and represent rituals of blind belief in the written word of history. The revolving columns invoke dizziness yet there is a seductive perfection in these polished aluminium columns. The viewer is invited to feel the aura of the script and yet not invited to read and interpret it, reinforcing the role of unwritten codes that shape our social space.



[iv]



The columns are inscribed with *Gurindam Dua Belas* (Twelve Gurindam) written by Raja Ali Haji, who lived in the Riau islands adjacent to Singapore, in the 1800s. Gurindams are maxims that instruct and prescribe moral and social codes to the individual. Each column carries two Gurindams engraved in the Jawi language. The *Gurindam Dua Belas* was written in 1842 on an auspicious day marking Hijrah (the new calendar year for the Islamic faith). For Salleh, this Gurindam, written in couplets ranging between 4 to 8 lines, masks the layered depths of language and imagery (*bayangan*) that pervade our lives. The Gurindam was a sweeping statement of its time and its significance was in its provocative suggestions that dictate values and ethical codes for the individual, the community and even its rulers. It prescribed the manner in which the Malay community should live and react to each other. This is not dissimilar from Islam, as Salleh points out: "It is not different from Islamic teachings, not different from the Prophet's tradition but simply reinforcing the ideals of Islam. Writing it in the Hijrah was akin to writing down a new-year resolution." The attraction of the Gurindam is in its formal modalities that establish rituals as a means of establishing social space and identity. For Salleh, for whom a trip to the remote Riau islands sets the scene of interrogation of history and its contemporary usefulness, the value in the Gurindam is located in the vernacular structure of everyday life and how, be he a ruler or citizen, they are functionaries in the play of the everyday.



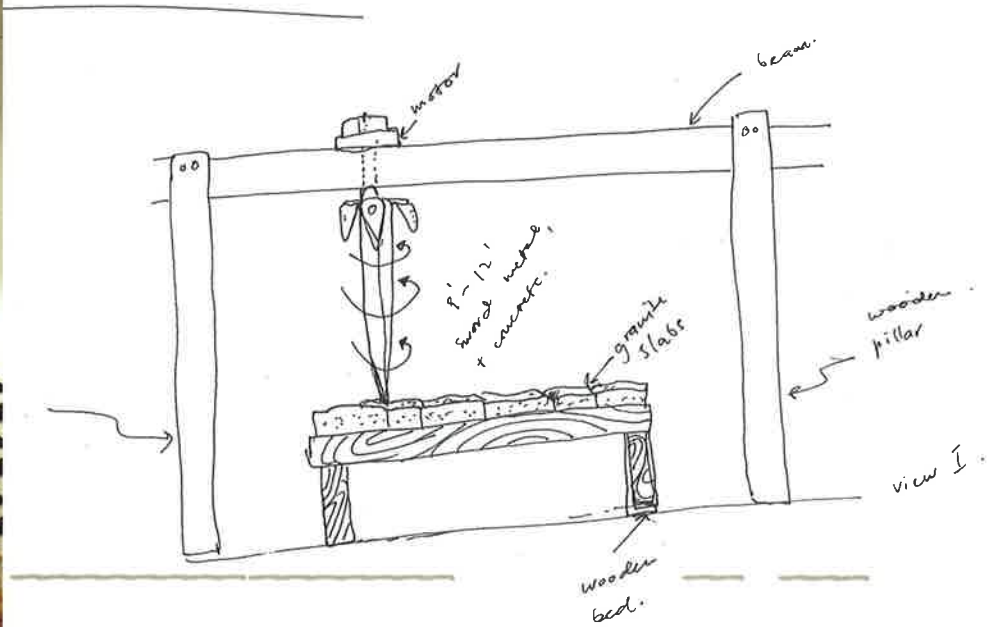
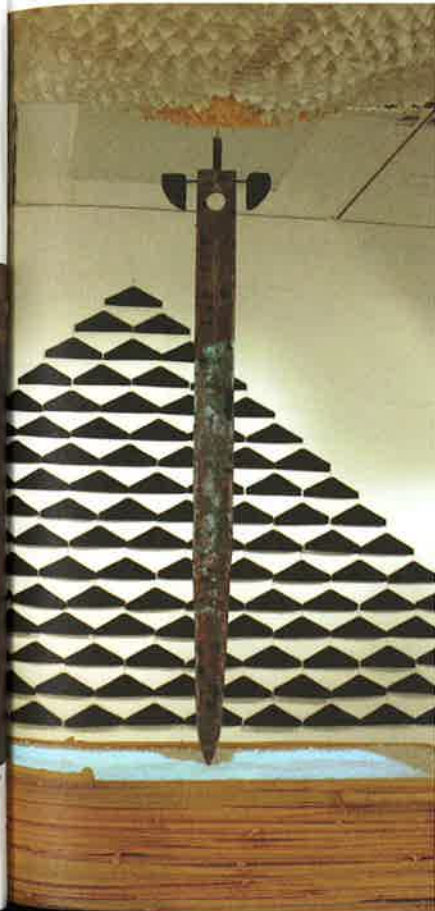
[v]

Adjacent to the columns on one side of the wall one finds a long and linear parchment along the veins of the *Dead Sea Scrolls* powerfully asserting an oppositional energy against the verticality of the aluminium columns. The parchment, made of paper collage, ink and dye with bits of nails, strings and threads, is a mixed media formulation that seemingly toys with ideas of reverence to ancient texts serving as repositories of history. Extracts of the Gurindam are written in Romanised Malay language and contrasts itself to the Gurindam in Jawi cast on the columns, reflecting and reverberating a certain social acceptance of the scriptures and their enforcement on cultures. The parchment is made to seem old and resemble thatched roofs in Malay houses. It would, however, be irresponsible to suggest that this is a response to Malay society and culture, for the installation merely refers to the old transcripts transplanted into the current Malay community. Neither the scripture nor the installation is a study of Malay culture or Islam but rather an exploration of ideas shaped inevitably by the inscriptive stones of history and religion.



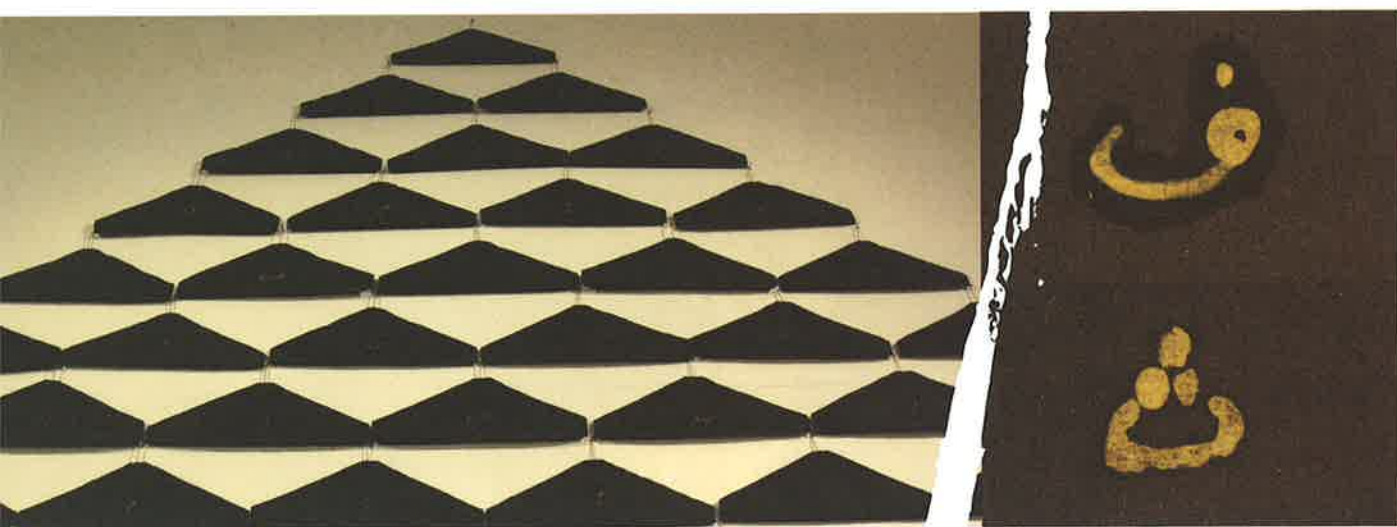
[vi]

Way past the columns locating itself as an altar-form (an inner sanctum) is a large brass-clad 185cm long sword (*keris*) pointing vertically down into a platform of rock salt. The larger-than-life sword proposes an impending danger, creating a sense of crisis that comes with danger, perhaps death. The rock salt formations can be corrosive yet the salt has a crystalline quality to it highlighting death as a purifying act. Perhaps then the platform becomes a resting place resembling and exuding a tomb-like feeling. The platform, draped in bright yellow cloth, gives a spiritual feel that decidedly seem Malay. An image is projected onto the platform. It is an image of a figure submerged in water, not drowning but simply lying dormant in a prayer state. The rock salt, with its scientific preservative qualities, conserves the dormant body. The platform is a state of rest, a state of suspension, as if someone is waiting to emerge out of it.



[vii]

Behind the sword and the platform is an installation of triangular flags. One hundred and thirty-one pieces of triangular yellow cloth dyed black are hung on clothes hangers. Each triangle carries a letter corresponding to Sufi cosmological diagrams, which carry certain attributes of the Arabic alphabet system (e.g. *Alif* as The One). Thirty-five faint yellow letters surface out of the dark depths of the black cloth. The clothes hanger is literal at best. We shed the old self and acquire different sets of values (clothes). We transform from one state to another.



Processing Process

The above procedural description of the installation is deliberate to highlight and open discussion of the concerns presented in *Gurindam dan Igauan*. There is no intention on Salleh's part to critic the *Gurindam*. But rather he sees the words, the structures and their meanings as an art form, thus opening it to deconstructive possibilities. However, three significant apparitions present themselves in an epistolary fashion in this exhibition.

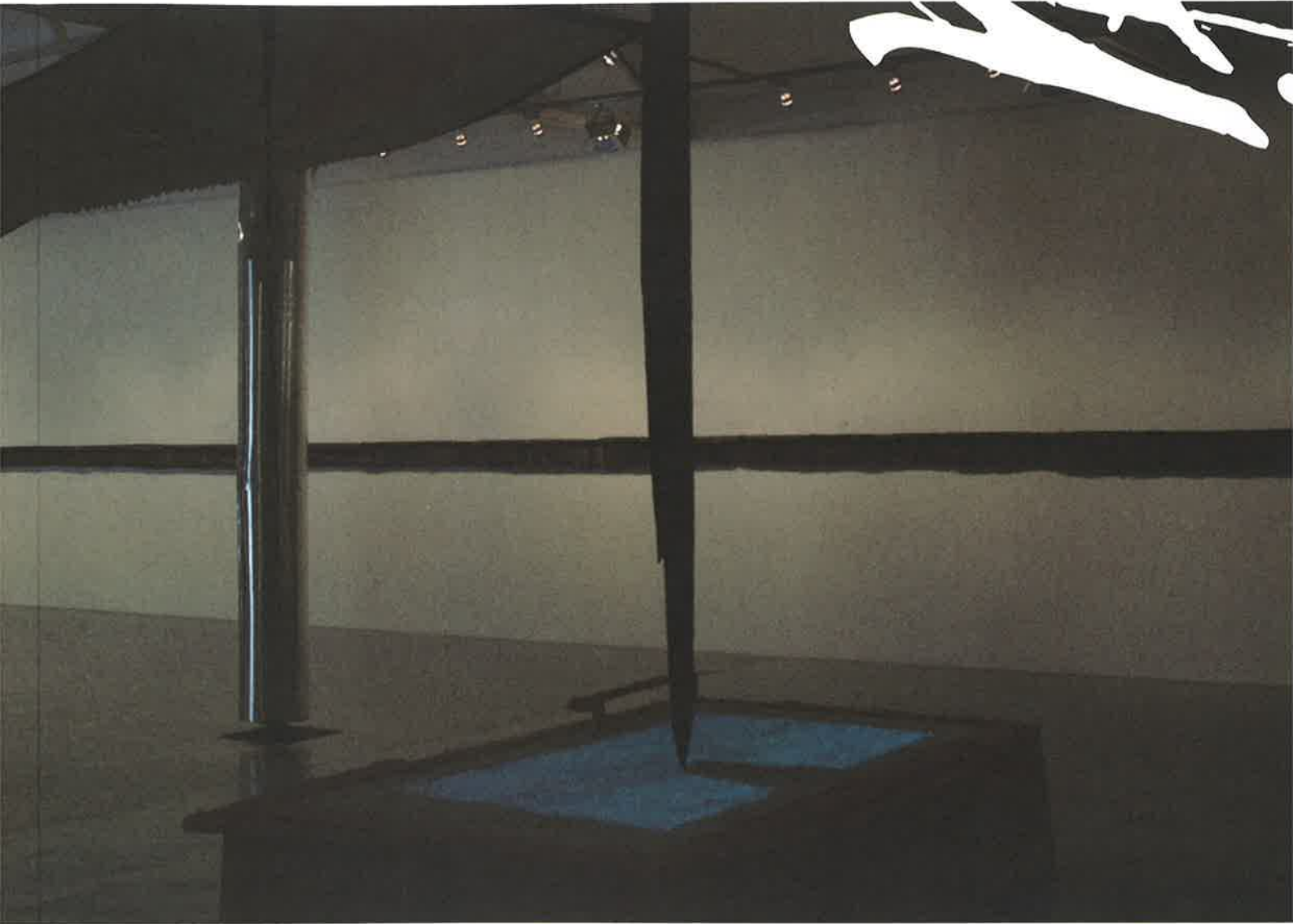
Firstly, History. For Salleh, History's role in forming knowledges of sorts that claim to provide a definitive answer to human experience is indeed suspect. In doing so, History transmitted through oral and written texts plays a metafictional role in hiding truth and reality in Salleh's works. Secondly, human identity. Identity for Salleh, formed through the vicissitudes of History, is primarily defined within geographic, not necessarily cultural, essentialisms. As such, human beings today as transnational, transglobal entities constantly integrate and disintegrate as they cross social, cultural and psychic boundaries. Death is a daily ritual and the proverbial search for a spiritual voice/self is constantly deferred. This features prominently in Salleh's critical discourse. Thirdly, language. Language in Salleh's world is primarily marked by instability and indeterminacy of meaning. As such, given such a situation no method of analysis (history or art theory) can have any special claim to authority over textual interpretation and therefore that interpretation is a free ranging activity more akin to game playing than analysis. This idea, portrayed through the overt use of drawings, and scribbles derived from scriptures, ancient texts, and emblems and symbols in Salleh's work, reveals a displacement of grammatical and codified written language out of his visual diary.

The installation proposes a traditional postmodern critique of history and narrative as totalizing genres that are primarily linguistic constructs and not necessarily objective in their social existence. They only appear transparent in terms of language or structure simply because they appear intertextual, palimpsestic and complex. Salleh's use of engravings (columns), mixed media (parchment) and flags (linearity and layers) correspond to this and in doing so, suggests an opportunity to question the stance towards conventions of history, subjectivity and referencing. There is a fair bit of auto-representation, a bit of the autobiographical that clings on to the corners of the installation. But to accrue the installation to an internal mind map would miss the point in this instance. Rather as a historical storyteller Salleh silences the Gurindam, absences the human and erases people and yet they are there, murmuring in the very structures that erase them.

Yang setitik jadikan

Yang sekepal jadikan gunung,

Alam terbentang



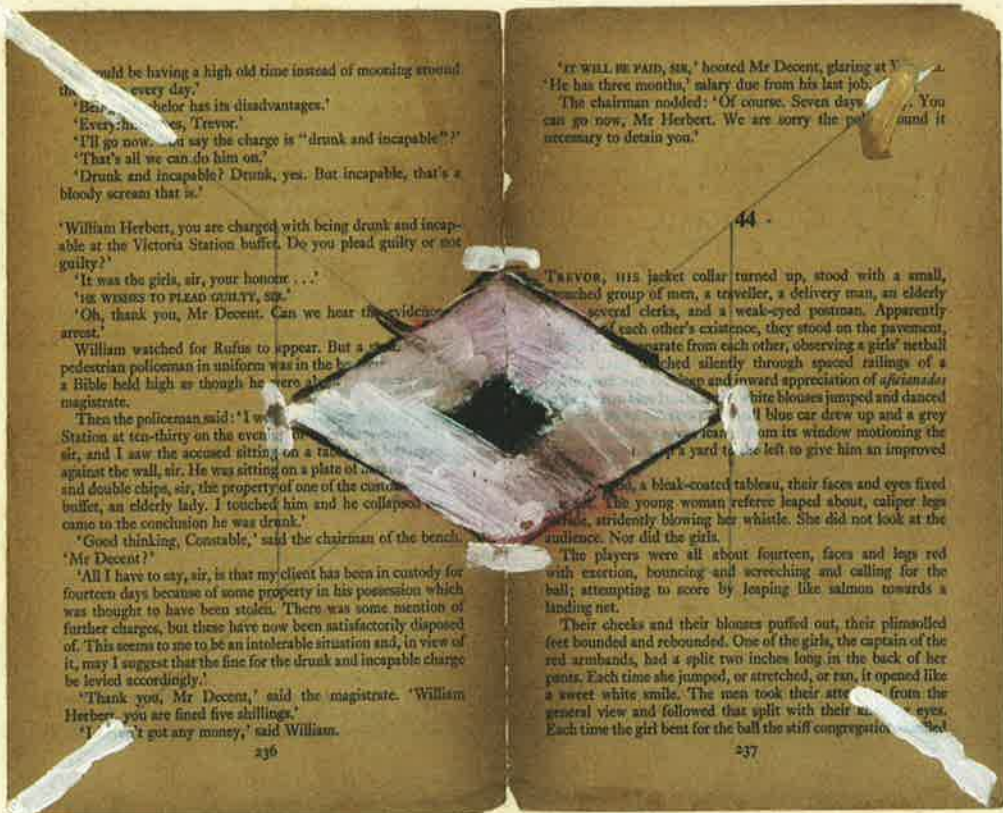
Installation (Left view)



Traces

Traces marks the myriad of directions from which the works of Salleh Japar have been contextualised and commented upon. These diaristic quotes bear rhythmic structures, aesthetic movements and social behaviours and clearly bring to the fore the artist's thoughts and processes.

Venka Purushothaman



... would be having a high old time instead of mooning around
the ... every day.
'But ... has its disadvantages.'
'Every ... Trevor.'
'I'll go now ... say the charge is "drunk and incapable?"'
'That's all we can do him on.'
'Drunk and incapable? Drunk, yes. But incapable, that's a
bloody scream that is.'

'William Herbert, you are charged with being drunk and incap-
able at the Victoria Station buffet. Do you plead guilty or not
guilty?'

'It was the girls, sir, your honor ...'
'HE WISHES TO PLEAD GUILTY, SIR.'
'Oh, thank you, Mr Decent. Can we hear the evidence
arrest.'

William watched for Rufus to appear. But a
pedestrian policeman in uniform was in the hall
a Bible held high as though he were about to
magistrate.

Then the policeman said: 'I was
Station at ten-thirty on the evening
sir, and I saw the accused sitting on a table
against the wall, sir. He was sitting on a plate of
and double chips, sir, the property of one of the custom
buffet, an elderly lady. I touched him and he collapsed
came to the conclusion he was drunk.'

'Good thinking, Constable,' said the chairman of the bench.
'Mr Decent?'

'All I have to say, sir, is that my client has been in custody for
fourteen days because of some property in his possession which
was thought to have been stolen. There was some mention of
further charges, but these have now been satisfactorily disposed
of. This seems to me to be an intolerable situation and, in view of
it, may I suggest that the fine for the drunk and incapable charge
be levied accordingly.'

'Thank you, Mr Decent,' said the magistrate. 'William
Herbert, you are fined five shillings.'

'I haven't got any money,' said William.

'IT WILL BE PAID, SIR,' booted Mr Decent, glaring at V...
'He has three months' salary due from his last job.'
The chairman nodded: 'Of course. Seven days ... You
can go now, Mr Herbert. We are sorry the police found it
necessary to detain you.'

TREVOR, HIS jacket collar turned up, stood with a small,
scrubbed group of men, a traveller, a delivery man, an elderly
several clerks, and a weak-eyed postman. Apparently
of each other's existence, they stood on the pavement,
separate from each other, observing a girls' netball
played silently through speed railings of a
and inward appreciation of *afirmadas*
white blouses jumped and danced
all blue car drew up and a grey
from its window motioning the
a yard to the left to give him an improved

... a black-coated tableau, their faces and eyes fixed
The young woman referee leaped about, caliper legs
stridently blowing her whistle. She did not look at the
audience. Nor did the girls.

The players were all about fourteen, faces and legs red
with exertion, bouncing and screeching and calling for the
ball, attempting to score by leaping like salmon towards a
landing net.

Their cheeks and their blouses puffed out, their plimsoll
feet bounded and rebounded. One of the girls, the captain of her
red armbands, had a split two inches long in the back of her
pants. Each time she jumped, or stretched, or ran, it opened like
a sweet white smile. The men took their eyes from the
general view and followed that split with their own eyes.
Each time the girl bent for the ball the stiff congregation

Drawing studies, Mixed media on paper, 28.3 x 38.5 cm, 1989

...an artist is a maker if he is good we call a creative man, a creator. But if he is a Muslim, he already knows that the supreme creator is God, and so we assume his interest is to reflect His works or even His creations. Based on this idea, there is more than just a drama of artistic creation but rather an encounter between the material and the soul which reverberates through the concept of Unity [Tawhid] and the immensity of the Supreme Creator. Thus the artist undertakes his creative process in total accord with the universe and of nature. The results lie not only according to one's imagination but also according to the nature of objects, bringing forth the laws and qualities which manifest through the objects themselves.

Salleh Japar

Tuesday March 25, 1975
One day after B's birthday

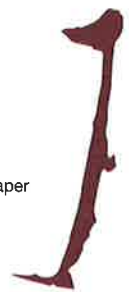
lessons in mathematics
& human social biology

Fetus size & infancy
calculations in glasses
(life-span)



To which both pictures
show the moon as Apollo
does. Closer & closer to it.
In these pictures we can
see (especially when we
hand-draw) details the image
that the camera print of
there is always faintly a
terrestrial point of view. If
you consider just their
photo, as if there were the
very heart of the trip then
the whole enterprise can be
understood as a process of magnification

But a second phenomenon
is an occurrence to
Alexander Neustadt (Section on Surveys)



Drawing studies
Mixed media on paper
38.5 x 28.3 cm
1990

The blatant criticism of the social in the war paintings is much more subtly, and more effectively portrayed in the mixed media work, *Genesis*. Here, a realistically rendered, well-formed, full-term foetus is about to be born. But, the birth is going to be breeched; the first sign of trouble. A collage of torn Jawi-script newsprint forms the canal through which the foetus must pass. The baby will inevitably be shaped by the "prison house" of culture, of society; there is no escape, however, above the foetus is the void of the womb and the natural degeneration of the placental

Chua Beng Huat 



Project R.O.H
Installation (Partial View)
Goethe-Institut, Singapore
1993




...One of the interesting elements that I'd like to pick and use as a starting platform, going back to your *Mechanised Learning*, is how you set forth a parameter in which what you're trying to deal with is a certain degree of imperfection, a certain incompleteness in your work. When you talk about *Cultural Sinkholes*, those floral looking thing...I think one of the interesting values of it is actually its incompleteness, in the sense of going back to your earlier concern about the self and itself, the self is such a complete thing, that it constantly tries to break out. So all the works seem incomplete, that incompleteness, it seems to happen....

Venka Purushothaman




Womb, Project R.O.H, Installation, Goethe-Institut, Singapore, 1993





Salleh Japar's works may be defined by a broad interest in the problem of knowledge and the limitation of rationalist inquiry. While the theme of science affords him the discursive platform to negotiate the precarious nature of rationalist positions, the artist also identifies and locates the problematic project of history in his latest work in the Venice Biennale. For the Venice Biennale, Salleh creates a series of three spaces that are sequential and experiential. The audience will first encounter a large metal-clad wall. The wall connects the two other spaces; one dominated by the presence and smell of spices, and the other salt. For Salleh, these series of materials provide a metaphor of engagements between colonial powers and the colonised. The references to the history of Venetian and European trade, the rise of West and its colonisation of the East, and the West's conception of its history and achievements, are some of the conceptual issues being addressed by Salleh. Salleh seeks to address the West's assumption of its own history, as well as its ownership over that history. He dislocates and dislodges historical fragments so that they can be opened to multiple inquiries. Salleh also identifies fragments – marginalised or forgotten texts, materials and experiences – that can provide broader and richer meanings to an otherwise static and stable picture.



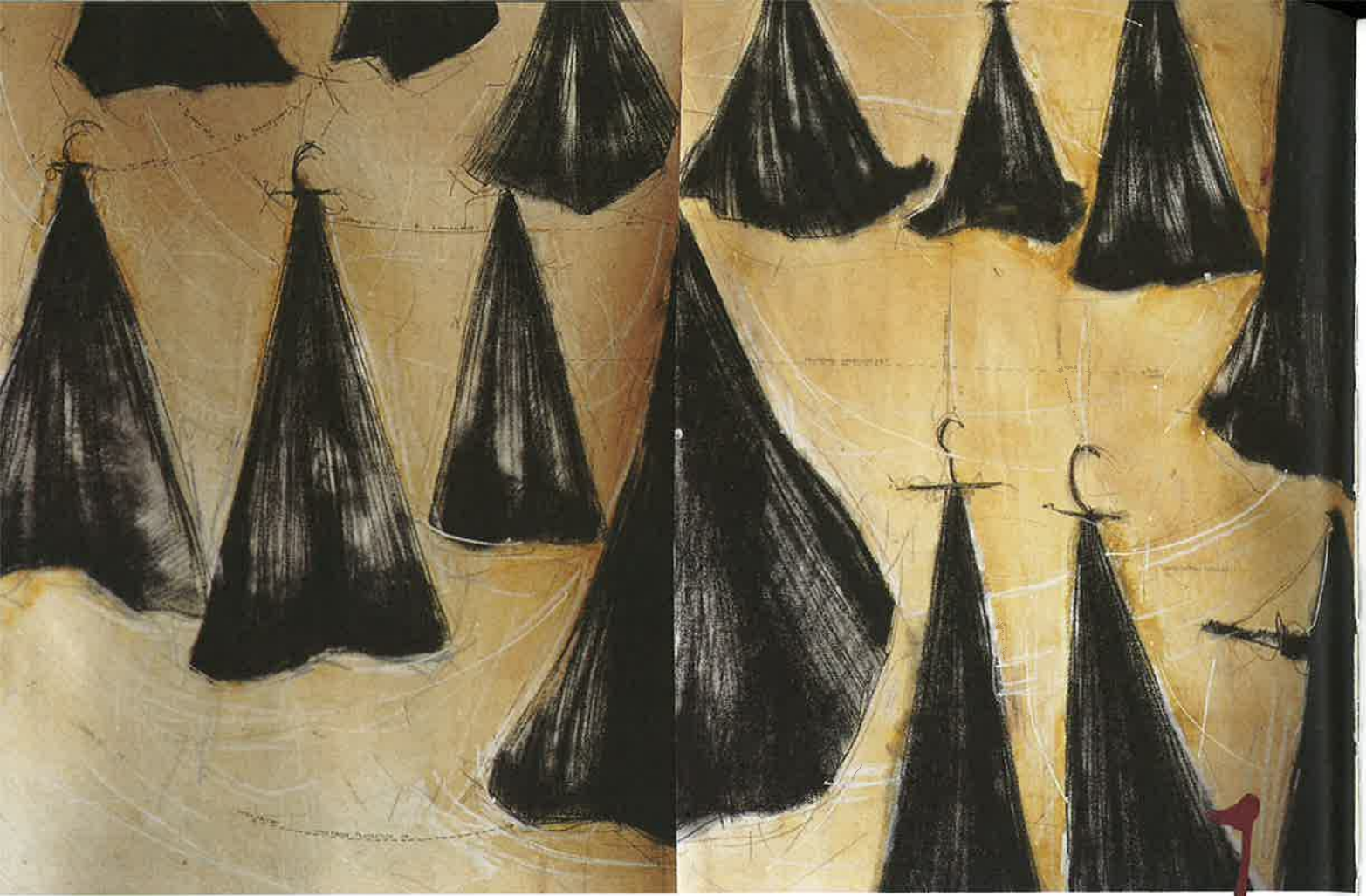


Drip Machine (Mesin Tetes), Installation (Partial View), Project Pre-fix Point Exhibition, Creative Centre, KL, Malaysia, 1994

Even while Salleh is skeptical about the nature of knowledge transfer and how it may benefit recipients who may not have the ability to mobilise it according to their situations and needs, he also declares the potential of knowledge as a recuperative agent once it can be owned, transformed and reproduced. A work consisting of four hanging hospital gowns is aptly titled the artist's native language in *Bahasa Melayu*.

Mesin Tetes (Drip Machine), completed in 1994, can be contrasted against the sinister *Mechanised Learning*. The hand-written text seen on these gowns are quotations from a book by Hamka, an Indonesian advocate who calls for the pairing of the ethics and morality alongside the pursuit of modern knowledge. Liquid from infusion bottles flows over the gowns, washing down and dissolving the scribbling, dripping and collecting in a long metal tray situated beneath the hanging rack. A tube runs from a tray to the same cast head – a metaphor for the colonised mind – which we saw earlier in *Mechanised Learning*. The head, however, does not appear rehabilitated despite the nourishment it receives. Here Salleh alludes to the problematic process of recuperating the colonised mind. The post-colonial enterprise is also about the unlearning of colonial habits. The idea of modernity as brought forth by Hamka necessitates questioning and re-deploying colonial knowledge to render it meaningful for newly independent societies. The nature of post-colonial production and reproduction of knowledge is defined not only by the relations between groups – the former masters and colonies – but the residues of such relations. It is also determined by the reflexivity of the newer societies to these relations.

Ahmad Mashadi

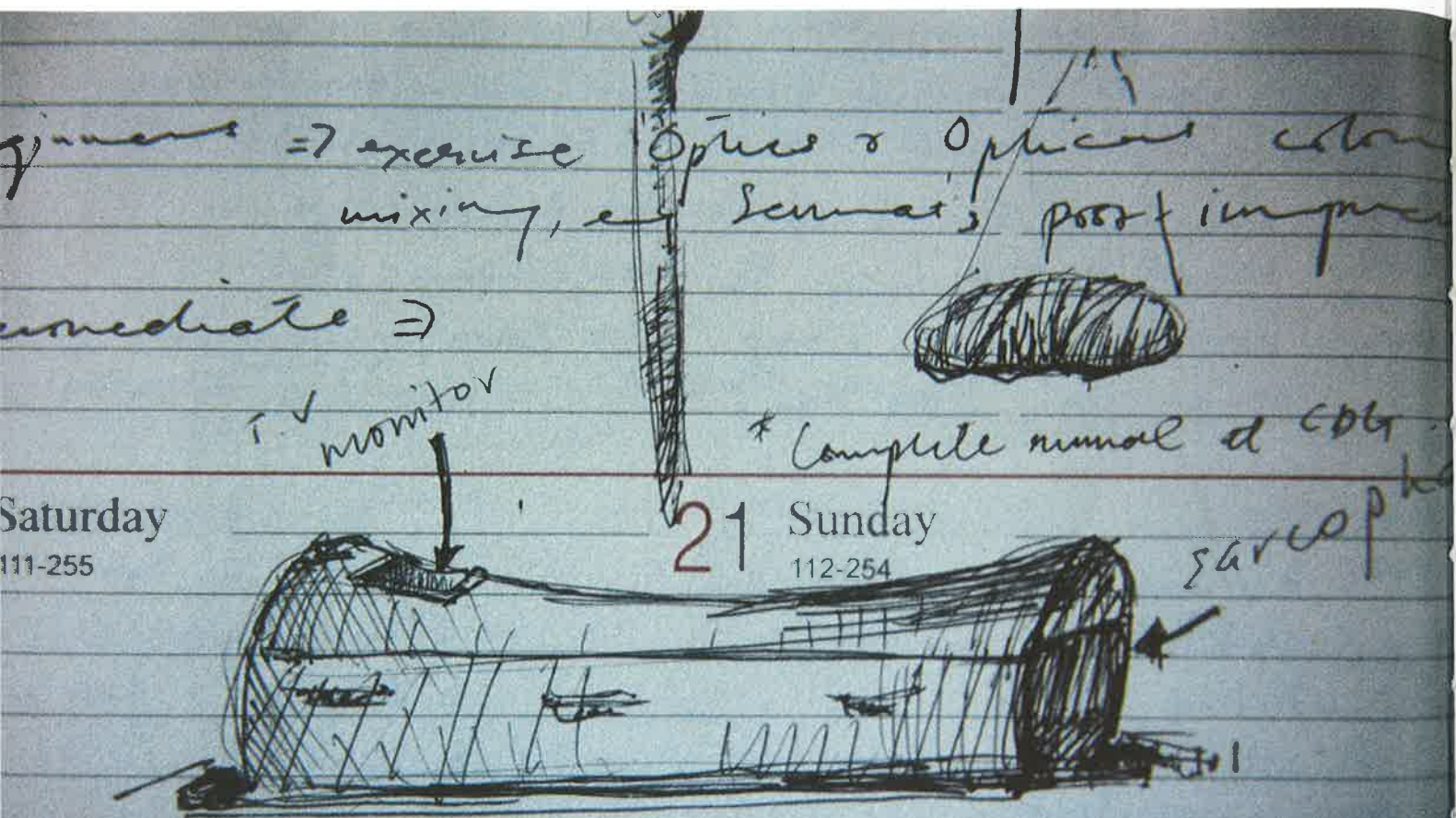


Inhabitants of the Cradle, Sketch, Charcoal on Paper, 110 X 75 cm, 1994

... And then this thing about the Malayness, I feel uncomfortable, because in that interview between you and Ahmad [transcribed interview; Project Pre-fx Point 94 catalogue], you forcefully refuted that you don't want to have anything to do with this whole thing about being Malay and this Malayness in that catalogue. I think you invoked internationalism, which is an interesting antidote or alternative from one to the other. I'm not saying that it is there or it is not there, but I think if one wants to look at it, one has to look at it much more obliquely, rather than frontally. Having a sort of remnants of Arabic script makes it no more Muslim than someone else using Aramaic to say he is Hebraic. I think it is the purpose with which you used it. You're talking about texts in so many different languages, so I think that that needs to be worked through, from Malayness and Islamicness. Islamicness was a word coined by Zabas, in one of his treatises on the Islamic influence in Southeast Asia. A very strange declension there in Islamicness. And then a whole section which is to do with cultural politics, your sinkholes, which, that's another point about the unfinished state of affairs, the incomplete. I don't know what to make of that, I never thought of it until you mentioned that, the cultural politics and the politics of culture, the way it is demarcated in Singapore, not necessarily only in Singapore, I mean you carry any passport and you look at the way the passport decides who you are and describes who you are, it's pretty hair-raising.



T.K. Sabapathy

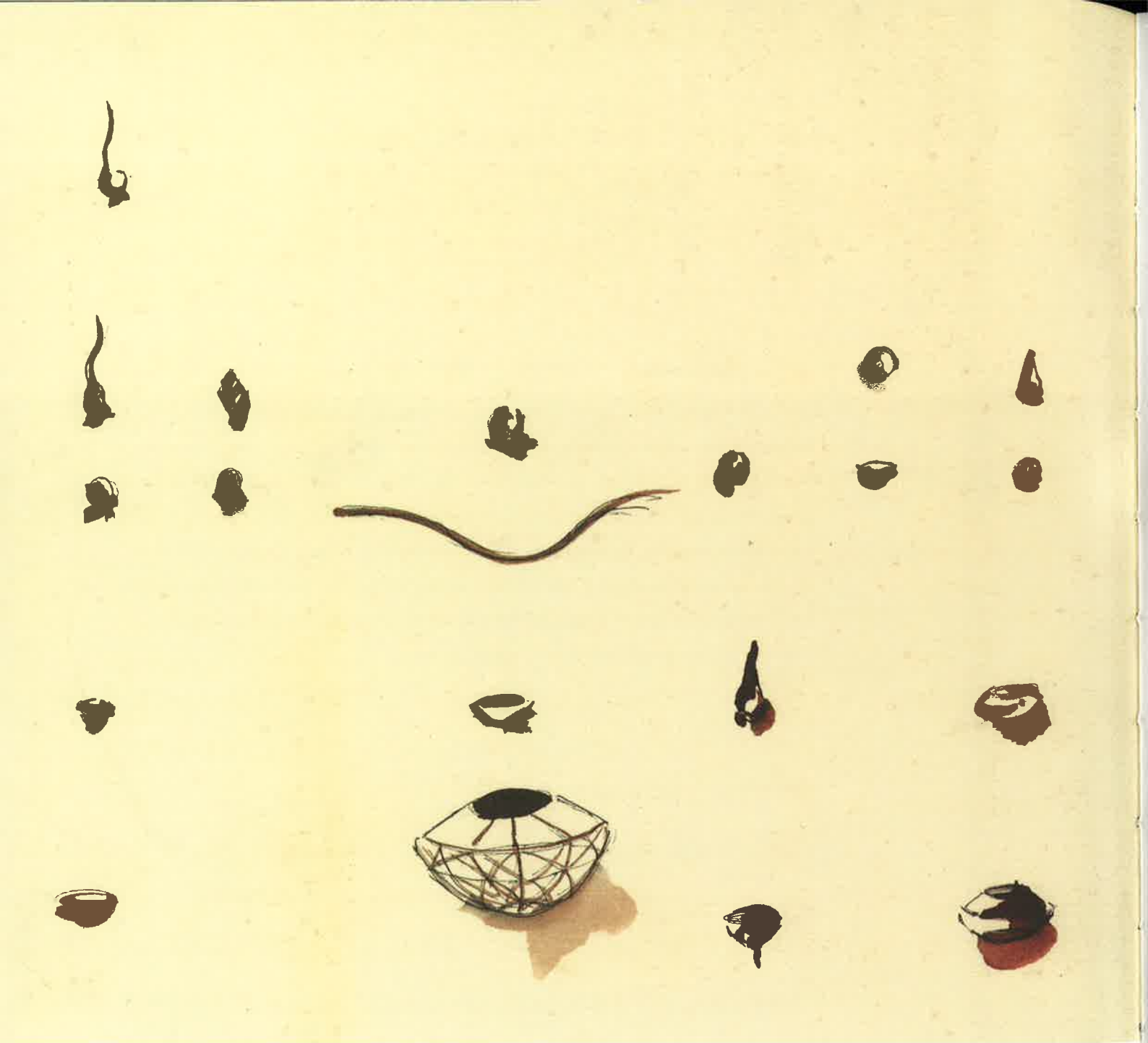


Thill me, Kiss Me, Kill me = Philosophy.
 icant Events: Thill me, Kiss Me, Kill me = sociology.
 April

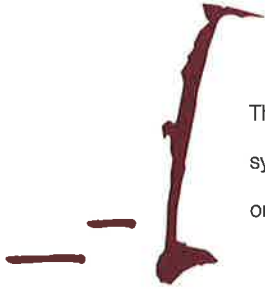
Drawing for me is like making notations in the diary.... [I] try to visualise the scale [of the artwork and] where it is going to be placed. And I guess basically it is always clear in regards to making a development where it is already [documented]...so it is almost like video editing – you see the footages – and I always enjoy looking at how these things transform from the beginning to the end and what is missing, what is edited, what is added to it. So I feel drawing offers me with that kind of clear visualisation of how things develop from one end to another and I guess the most important thing for me is the discovery of changes and why I made those decisions, rather than come up with the whole thing and not being able to recall how much has been developed through to the final outcome.

Salleh Japar





Sketch, Artist-in-residence, School of Arts, Canberra, 1997

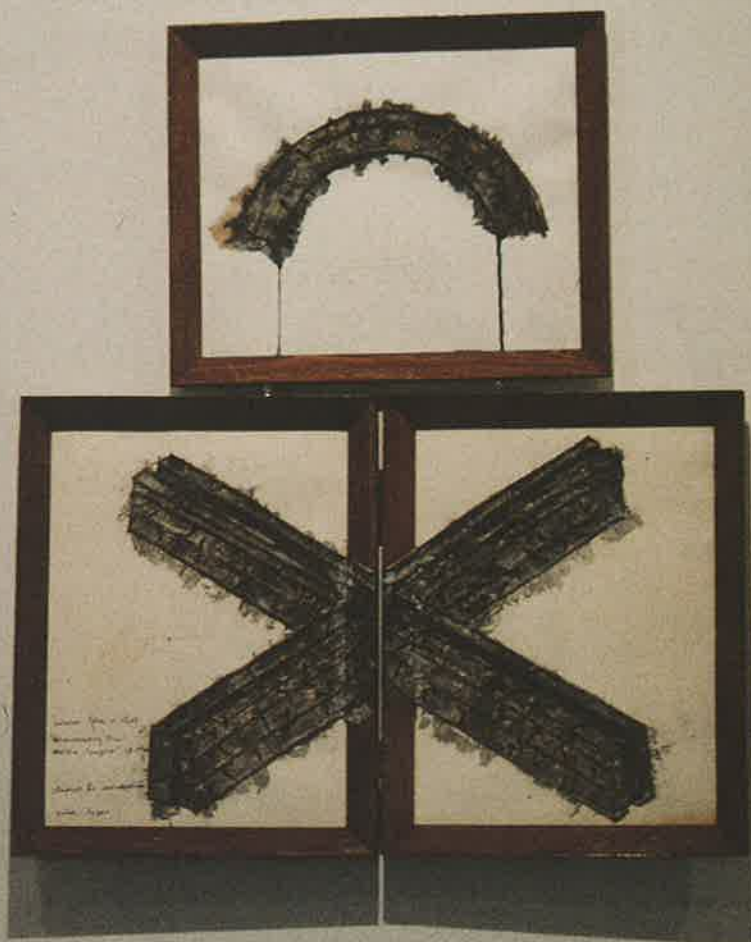


There are symbols in my work. Symbols are realities contained within the nature of things. It is through symbols that one is awakened; it is through symbols that one is transformed; and it is through symbols that one expresses.

Salleh Japar

nl

Spice and Steel;
Deconstructing the Media Temple
Mixed Media
Praxis Exhibition
Earl Lu Gallery, LASALLE-SIA
1998/99





For there is always a point of one's journey when one is confronted by this so called crossroads. I derive great experience in seeking a direct contact with sense and consciousness to enter between nature and self. Duality into oneness. And through the way of feelings and also by imagination, I hope to identify the self outside nature and nature within the self.

Salleh Japar





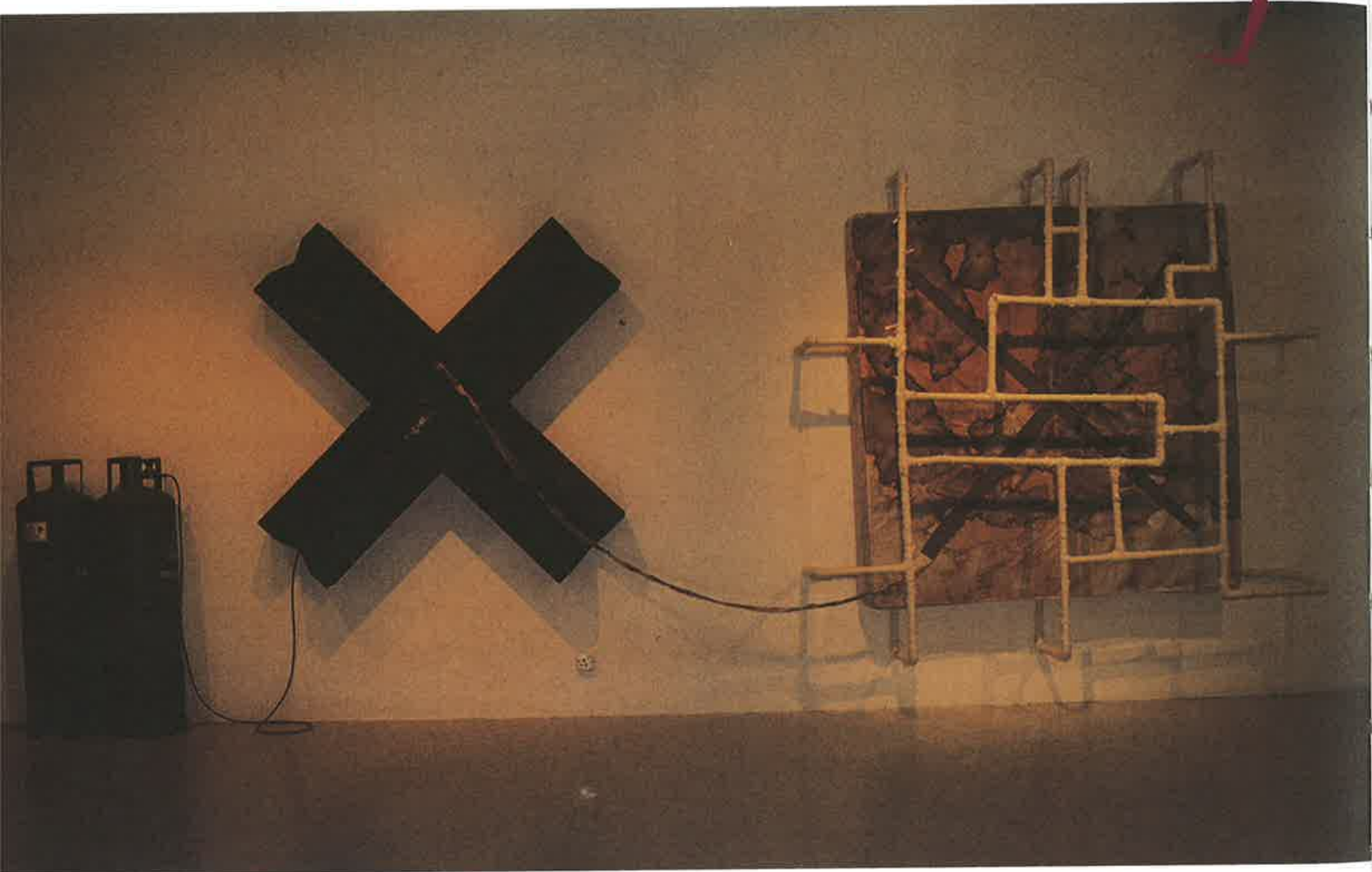
Cultural Sinkholes, Installation (detail), Nokia Art 1999, Singapore Art Museum


Again, and for the last time, we return to Salleh's *Cultural Sinkholes*. The Singapore city landscape, planned and organised, is richly inscribed with texts. It may be seen as a reproduction of ideology where the myths and parables of the state become tangible, expressed by architecture and aesthetics. As one of the key foundational concepts on which the nation is based on, multiculturalism asserts itself onto the landscape through a programmatic approach of simultaneous preservation and reinvention; the preservation of identity, through selective accentuation elements and suppression, thus emphasizing elements that aid in the exhaltation of ethnic virtues; the reinvention of ethnic cultures to proclaim links to a grand history and tradition in response to present anxiety about history, heritage and seeming acculturalisation. As we look again at Salleh's inverted cones, we realise that the tip of the each cone immediately above the surface of the floor is attached to a tube. It draws attention again to the concave surfaces of the cones. They are sinking or even collapsing. The ground that supports the surfaces is sucked in, perhaps like waste, or perhaps, to waste. Salleh's criticism may parallel those that speak against the impact of 'theme-park' preservation approach where "...privileging architecture and aesthetics alone was insufficient to capture the past and render it meaningful to Singaporeans...[and] buildings were 'mere shells' and that architectural veracity cannot compensate for, and may indeed be farcical substitute for, the loss of 'original' lifestyle and 'traditional' culture." In merely maintaining the veneer and reallocating their uses, social energy that had animated the sites had been removed, siphoned-off into the sinkholes – lost. Yet the lament should not be narrowed to a mere nostalgic longing of the imagined past. It also is about the contemporary anxiety of cultural lack, and the need to invent links to past civilisations and thus the claim for an indubitable ancestry, resulting in the overcompensation and imposition of cultural forms and representations, proselytized and reproduced along many fronts. And thus, Salleh's sinkholes do not merely speak of the perils of the artificiality of cultural constructions and suggesting the necessity of an organic culture, but also relate to something paradoxical; the fear of falling into an 'identity-void' and as such a need to maintain individual 'races' as discursive categories and therefore inversely perpetuating the act of drawing boundaries, distinctions and difference.

Ahmad Mashadi

Ahmad Mashadi. "Cultural Sinkholes: Landscape and Ethnic Representation in Singapore" in *City/Community: Singapore Art Today*. Ed. T.K. Sabapathy. Singapore: National Arts Council, 1999

Kemelut II – Iguan Orange Asing, Installation, Portraits Reassessed Exhibition, Earl Lu Gallery, LASALLE-SIA, 2002

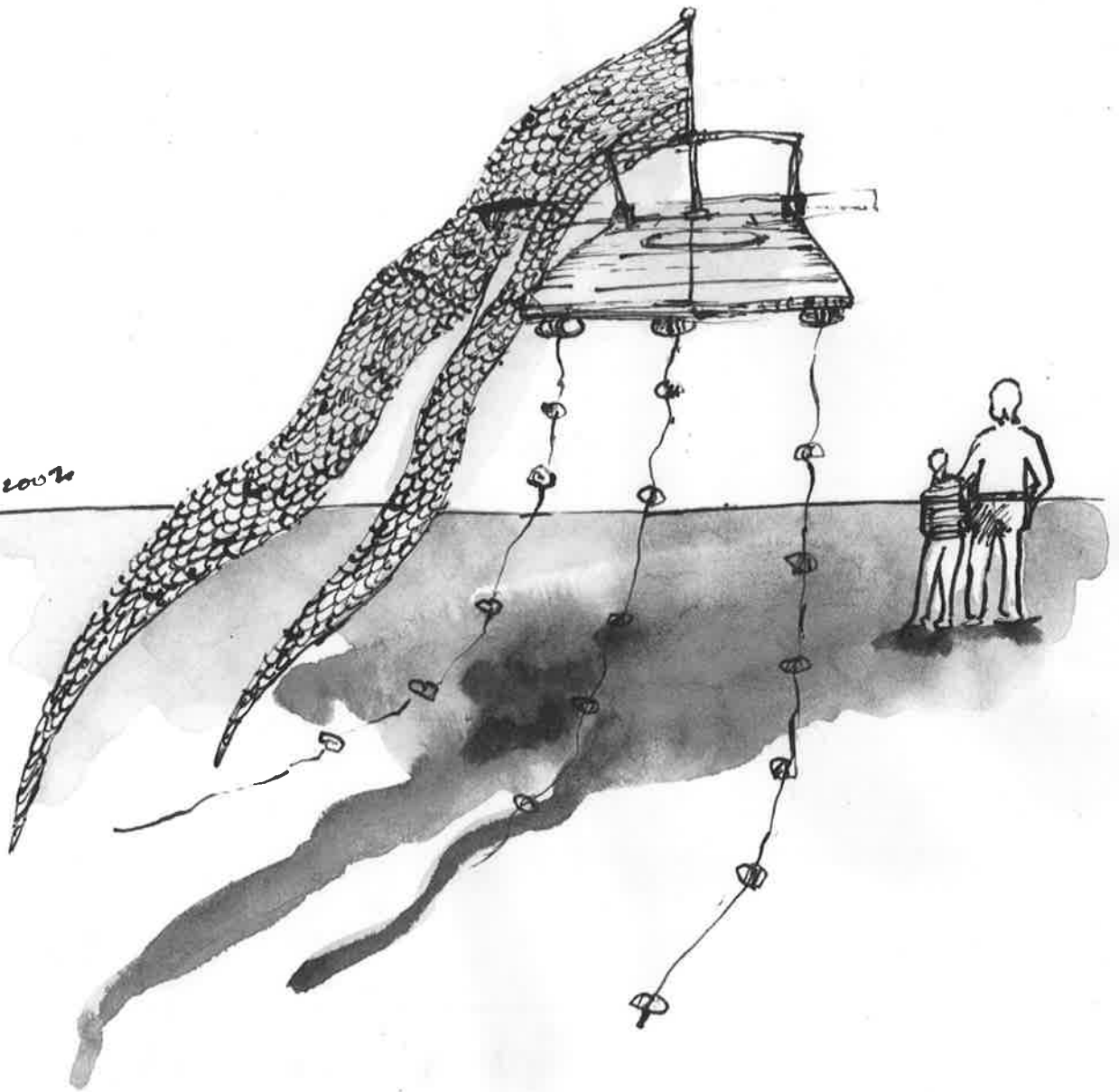




Salleh wishes to position the artist within the sphere of Muslim values; consequently, all claims to artists being creators are firmly disavowed. The focus is not the heroic status of the artist; it is not exclusively an individual imagination as the single originating force of artistic activity. Salleh assumes a moderating stand; he conceives artistic processes as dealing with materials and transforming them according to their nature and the principles of order. Such a conception is responsive to specific cultural and historical circumstances, as well as being hospitable to processes rooted in different value systems.

T.K. Sabapathy

lanji panti 2002



Sketch for Wahana
Ink on paper
37.6 x 27 cm
2003

Salleh Japar's artistic vocabulary is made up of the concrete, the tactile, the olfactory and the gustatory, all conceived as a single aesthetic principle, but which, at the same time, are symbols of a reality beyond perception. The viewer is brought back to history, in this case to the history of Venice and its relation to Asia, of colonial and post-colonial societies and of religious beliefs and religious wars – Islam in the Malay Isles, invaded by the Portuguese Catholics. In his Venice Biennale exhibit, the artist has used materials ranging from salt and spices to metal and marble. The materials formed as walls across the room, and the elements and their relationship to each other recall the history of commercial relations between Venice and the East, of power plays between the colonisers and the colonised, believers and heretics. Salleh Japar's construction is heavy with meaning, there are layers of information that the viewer must decipher and that are not accessible in their entirety at first glance.





Artist Biography

SALLEH BIN JAPAR

EDUCATION

- 1985 Diploma (Fine Art), Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore
1990 BA (Fine Arts) Curtin University of Technology, W. Australia
1995 Post-Graduate Diploma (Art Education), University of Central England, UK

WORK EXPERIENCE

- 1993 - 1995 Assistant Curator (Art), National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
1996 - present Lecturer, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore

SOLO EXHIBITION

- 1993 *Project R.O.H.*, Goethe-Institut, Singapore

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1987 *Quintet Exhibition*, Arbour Gallery, Singapore
1988 *Trimurti Exhibition*, Goethe-Institut, Singapore
1989 *Crossroads I*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, W Australia
1991 *National Sculpture Exhibition*, National Museum, Singapore
1993 *Confess and Conceal*, 11 Insights from Contemporary Australian and Southeast Asian Artists, Travelling Exhibition
1993 *Four Asian Artists Exhibition*, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan
1994 *Project Pre-fx Point*, Creative Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1995 *7th Bangladesh Biennale*, Bangladesh
1996 *Rapport Exhibition*, 8 artists from Australia and Singapore, A Travelling Show
1997 *F.O.R.M.*, Barli Museum, Bandung, Indonesia
1998 *Trimurti and Ten Years After*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
2001 *49th Venice Biennale*, Schola Di Santa Apollonia, Venice, Italy
2003 *Wahana*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2004 *'The LASALLE School': 20 Years of Fine Arts from the LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts*, Earl Lu Gallery, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore

COLLECTIONS

Singapore Art Museum
Curtin University of Technology, W Australia
DBS Bank
PSB
Private Collections

AWARDS

1997 Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Visual Art Award Recipient
1999 Singapore Youth Award (Visual Art), National Youth Council

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

1988 *Trimurti*. Exhibition Catalogue (limited printing). Singapore
1991 Sabapathy, T. K. (Ed). *Sculpture in Singapore*. Singapore: National Museum
1993 *Confess and Conceal: 11 insights from Contemporary Australia and Southeast Asia*. Exhibition Catalogue. Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia
1994 *Pre-fx Point Exhibition: Artists Project Pre-fx Point*. Exhibition Catalogue, Singapore
1994 Choy, Weng Yang. *5 Directions: Recent Artworks by Five Young Singapore Artists*. Exhibition Catalogue. Singapore: Takashimaya Singapore Ltd
1996 *Beyond Boundaries*. Exhibition Catalogue. Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts
1996 Van Fenema, Joyce (Ed). *Southeast Asian Art Today*. Singapore: Roeder Publications Pte Ltd
1998 *Drawing and Diagrams, Ideas Personified*. Exhibition Catalogue. Singapore
1998 Sabapathy, T.K. (Ed). *Trimurti and Ten Years After*. Singapore: National Heritage Board
2001 *Venice Biennale 2001: Singapore*, Singapore: National Heritage Board
2003 *Wahana*. Exhibition Catalogue. Singapore