

"...ALWAYS MOVING"

The Batik Art of Sarkasi Said

NUS MUSEUM

Published on the
occasion of the exhibition

"...Always Moving"

Batik Art of Sarkasi Said

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FOREWORD Ahmad Mashadi	4
CURATOR'S INTRODUCTION Chang Yueh Siang	11
BATIK: CULTURAL PRODUCT OR COMMODITY Diyannah Nasuha Bte Omar Bahri	18
SARKASI – IN HIS OWN WORDS	27

Ahmad Mashadi

I have built my experience as a street artist.
I have met with many, and their perspectives
enriched me. An artist must welcome life's
adversity. It cultivates him.
— Sarkasi Said, 1988¹

Sarkasi Said had been active as an artist for almost five decades.² While he experimented with a range of media, he became known for his batik works in the early 1970s. His entry into the scene was somewhat orthodox; a struggling autodidact who explored his way into batik production and painting - often at considerable personal cost - traveling across Malaysia and Indonesia before eventually undergoing training with a batik master; an entrepreneur who risks both his art and resources, undertaking ventures to popularise and market the batik, even as he sought to develop his practice³; a willing foil to the quest for the national motif⁴. Above all, it is a journey sustained by a conviction for the batik medium, a remarkable fascination for an art that for him embodies the question of identity along with its idealism and sheer economic considerations. It is a tension that he revels in encountering. He says, "I want emphasize: we need to be clear when we are talking about batik as a product, and batik as a technique."

The year 1973 was a breakout year for Sarkasi Said (b. 1940). He held two solo exhibitions, the first included 300 paintings, and the latter, 50. These were works completed in varying mediums, batik paintings alongside acrylic, ink and watercolours. What would the works completed in batik look like? Images printed in newspaper coverage of the period provide limited clues.⁵ The wax resist technique, using the *canting* or brush, is deployed by Sarkasi to develop designs ranging from the illustrative to the abstract. A publication from 1997 may provide some indication, included into which were paintings included figures, flora, landscapes and street scenes, semi-abstracts and abstracts. The representational works – typified by subjects like a Malay woman cradling a child, a village scene, shop houses and the Singapore River – are developed using defined lines and well-quoted pictorial schemas where design is restrained to maintain readability. Through subjects such as landscapes and nature however, he progressively exploit the fluidity afforded by the batik lines and the

opacity of dyes, creating complex compositions that are featured interlocking and overlapping forms, often referencing the use of traditional motifs to vary density and textures.⁶ In this regard, *Lyrics in Wax* (1997) is an important publication that provides an account of Sarkasi's wide ranging interests. Contributing a foreword to the book, T.K. Sabapathy wrote about the artist's body of work:

It is a vision on which nature and artifice are entwined and which appears to promise images symbolizing continuous metamorphosis. On first encounter, these pictures seem to the eye as being unbearably decorative; yet, on closer viewing complexities emerge. Yes, ornament is employed pervasively and it is employed as a dynamic device to establish order, to generate rhythm and to suggest a variety of relationship that are intricate and subtle.⁷

This exhibition "*... Always Moving*" includes eleven works by Sarkasi Said from the 1990s to the present. While most are being featured in an exhibition for the first time, the works are selected primarily by the artist with curator Chang Yueh Siang to speculate a trajectory of a practice that accommodates a transaction between traditional craft and modern art. For Chang, it necessitates an exploration into the artist's regard to batik, his entry into the evolving art scene and the batik market. Sabapathy's remarks resonates here to point towards artistic choices made, and what these decisions may be contingent on. Chang conducted her work in part through video interviews (made available in the exhibition), to secure a biography that is read alongside the beginnings of the batik medium in British Malaya and an independent Singapore. This allows an interaction between the personal narrations of history, and the settings that establish such narratives and even myth making.

Here, Sarkasi's invocation of his Javanese heritage⁸ and disclosure "my grandmother used to sell batik" propose a complicated discourse of patrimony and the question of batik within a modern multicultural context. In this publication, Diyanah Nasuha bte Omar Bahri traces the nature of batik production and consumption to its Javanese roots, the community and industry that

sustain them, its distribution as a long held commodity, and eventually the adaptations that took place, as an industry taking root in Singapore and British Malaya and the use of the batik technique in fine art, aided by its "malleability and pliancy to acculturation", as such built into its constitution a range of tensions related to appropriation and patrimony, identity and its authenticity, and, ornamentation and expression.

Commercialisation of batik textile production, including its association to the tourist industry, defines a tension even as artists like Sarkasi attempts to secure a gallery practice or institutional affirmations. Arising from this situation, the complex intermeshing of the batik publics, and its intractable tendency to 'ornament' remained an abiding condition of batik practice, a modernity for Sarkasi that is experienced through sublimity that is derived from an act of masterful and meditative embellishment, ambivalent or even elusive in his positions as a contemporary artist.

Sarkasi organized his practice between Singapore and Indonesia, producing his works among batik communities in Jogjakarta, attracted by the resilience and authenticity of their work, as much as economies that these production centers afford his practice.⁹ Sarkasi's extra-national regard to batik and their originaries may be explained by the migration and identity-making in Singaporean cultural discourse. In this sense, the claim for batik as a source for a modern identity is situational and personalised, accommodative to their appropriation to groups outside of its 'Javanese' category. One may contrast this however to other evolving projects of cultural and national identities in modern art. Writing in 1967, Claire Holt remarked:

... none of the arts in Java could be enriched by, or synthesized with, elements of Western art except such applied arts as the vast and varied field of batik design.¹⁰

Holt's generous perspective into heritage and its cultural value pervades through her scholarship. Her lament on the lack of status accorded to Indonesia's living traditions in the post-independence quest for economic development¹¹ may in part explain her ambivalent regard for the nascent project of modern art.¹² Her comment on batik is made in passing, to be seen perhaps in relation to its potential in clarifying the modern to a dynamics of societal change, if not sustain practices, that fulfill the requisites connected to identity-making, as much as they accommodate diverse approaches.¹³

While Holt holds the role of tradition in modern art central to the question how Indonesian art could cohere even as it evolves, she may have well anticipated the emerging strain of Islamisation in reshaping social conventions towards cultural elements to fulfill newer lines of orthodoxy.¹⁴ In Malaysia, the greater role of Islam in cultural life demands a dexterity that implicates the traditional form into the project of national identity. Zainol Shariff wrote in his seminal essay on Malaysian contemporary art:

The pursuit of artistic identity, especially among Malay artists, for instance, often cannot be understood without implicating the role that Islam plays in it. And the celebration of multifarious aesthetics in post-modernist cultural practices of developing countries not only is often intertwined with the insistent statement of indigenous identity in artistic explorations, but also offers significant approaches to understanding Islamic art as contemporary art.¹⁵

By the early 1980s, the traditional form, and their incarnation as modern vocabulary comparable to formal elements associated to hard-edge abstraction or abstract expressionism, are to be philosophically (re)formulated along the precepts of Islamic aesthetics defined in terms of denaturalization, abstraction and infinite patterning, hence insisting into the modernist project, an ethno-religious purpose. These instances, relating to modern art of Indonesia and Malaysia, brings to light the pliability of batik as it is sought to fulfill variegated roles that facilitate claims – for example, Malay-ness, Islamicness-ness, and Malaysian-ness – each variously dynamic, and may be hyphenated to the other. Batik, in Malaysian art, is especially useful if one is to prospect identity purged of its potential for dissention and political contestation, its use across ethnic spectrum through artists like Chuah Chean Teng, Fatimah Chik and others advanced as "propositions of a Malaysian identity in art". Zainol explains:

Of the various propositions toward characterizing Malaysian art, one of the earliest and most abiding has to be batik painting. There is of course a notion of feasibility in this, considering its alleged indigenoussness, if not to Malaysia, then to the cultures of Southeast Asia. But apart from this, a perhaps not unimportant and usable art-historical reading could also be proposed. In the cooption

of the medium from its unpretentious craft origins in traditional fabric printing, to the staid and sacrosanct sanctum of “fine art”, it offered a construction of art historical continuity, unlike for Instance with the medium of oil-painting which was quite alien indigenous artistic endeavours.¹⁶

The appropriation of batik into the corpus of tradition, held latent or overt in the cases of Holt and Zainol respectively, may as such be read as part of the broader positioning of tradition to render visible a negotiation with modernity, at the onset a post-colonial response, a tropical turn to resist against Western cultural domination and at the same time to access a global system coalescing around specific features: the language of abstract expressionism, and later, installation and performance art. Where these appear as common historical experiences across regional terrains, compatibilities may be readily proposed. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, traditional or indigenous aesthetics emerged as a currency in Southeast Asian art. From national to inter-national, Alice Guillermo lays this inevitability:

Historical experience is particularly significant in the development of Philippine aesthetics and that of many Third World countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America which underwent decades, even centuries of colonization by European countries and the United States. With independence, the continuing process of decolonization involves shedding Western dominance in aesthetics and culture on their societies and asserting their own aesthetic norms and standards proper to their societies.¹⁷

The practice batik amongst practitioners in Southeast Asia requires further explication beyond the scope of this exhibition project involving Sarkasi Said. The sketch rendered in previous paragraphs are also not introduced to limit Sarkasi within specific frames of reading, but rather submitted to allow speculations into the intersections that may render Sarkasi and his practice vital to such questions of originary and lineage, their efficacy in the proposition of a cultural or national type, resistance against hegemony, or perhaps more crucial the occupation of the spaces in between, interstices that may bring clarity to the artist’s oscillation between the plebeian and the critical, as a device to negotiate between identitarian burdens and artistic potentials, simultaneously constrained and sovereign.

- 1 “Pelukis tak terikat dengan kekauman” [Artist free from constraints of race], *Berita Harian*, 6 May 1988
- 2 One of the first articles written on Sarkasi featured him as a rarified curiosity, an artist in temporary residence in a bungalow owned by his expatriate patron: “A humble housekeeper – yet Inche Sarkasi bin Said can lay two claims to fame as an unusual artist. He is probably one of Singapore’s leading exponents of abstract art – though virtually unknown locally. He is almost certainly the only Singaporean artist who gets his inspirations solely from great music.” C. Alahendra, “Debussy music inspires this abstract artist-housekeeper”, *The Straits Times*, 10 August 1970.
- 3 At times during his long career, Sarkasi often simultaneously undertook commercial undertakings including the production of batik as textiles, which may explain the prolific nature of his artistic practice, as well as approach to exhibition making. Bemoaning the number of works and, figurative and abstract range of Sarkasi’s 1975 exhibiton, A. Ghani Hamid deliver a caution: “A careful selection was not done prior to the exhibition. As such ... I may surmise that only a handful of works were the best in contrast to the numbers. Except this, Sarkasi’s success as an abstract painter is undeniable”. A. Ghani Hamid, “Sarkasi harus pilih jumlah karya atau mutunya” [Sarkasi must choose between numbers and quality], *Berita Harian*, 16 February 1975.
- 4 Sarkasi participated in a textile design competition often using Singapore’s national flower, the orchid, as theme, which for him allows for batik to be considered as part of Singapore’s national identity. “4 designs for Singapore dress”, *New Paper*, 8 September 1989.
- 5 These exhibitions were reported and reviewed by the Singaporean press. “300 lukisan karya Sarkasi dipamirkan”, *Berita Harian*, 24 April 1973; A. Ghani Hamid, “Gerakan-gerakan berus, sentuhan-sentuhan Sarkasi berani dan bergaya” [Brush movements, Sarkasi’s touch daring and new] *Berita Harian*, 29 April 1973; Violet Oon, “A Sarkasi Touch for Singapore Scenes”, *New Nation*, 29 September 1973. By the end of the 1970s, Sarkasi would have completed six solo and five group exhibitions.
- 6 A. Ghani Hamid’s account is useful: The 1973 exhibition showed “Sarkasi’s unique touch ... Sarkasi is unencumbered by the conventional forms associated to the wax, pushing into place his own, towards something more innovative.” He adds, “these works may provide the basis for modern and abstract batik, set among the development of competitive ideas ... Sarkasi may be highlighted as a local artist capable of exploring abstract art which had taken flight in Singapore. ... [simultaneously] opening newer grounds where batik art is no longer dependent on traditional styles.” (A. Ghani Hamid, *Gerakan-gerakan berus, sentuhan-sentuhan Sarkasi berani dan bergaya* [Brush movements, Sarkasi’s touch daring and new] *Berita Harian*, 29 April 1973.) This tone of encouragement was later accompanied by caution. In another article about the *Balai Seni Melayu* published in the same year following an eventful visit by the well-respected artist Georgette Chen and a writer for French magazine Aline Ferraci, A. Ghani’s reportage turned to lament, “Ms Aline was drawn to the batik works of Sarkasi and Bakar Banafek ... [and] their potentials for success if given full attention. ... In short, such opinions had been well understood here, and had been expressed elsewhere by me, but it has yet to be articulated through our approaches as artists, with courage. ... The decline of those artists deemed earlier to be promising illustrates Ms Aline’s view. The growth of artistic activities such as that connected to batik had materially benefited the artists. Such success had pushed them towards ‘mass production’

... to the detriment of their art. ... profit eventually turns to loss." A. Ghani explains, "It became obvious that tourists are discerning ... The batik painting being attractive became a souvenir of choice. From its status as a souvenir, the batik can evolve if they are also produced and purchased as a form of artistic appreciation." He concludes, "... incidentally, the visit of Ms Aline provided additional perspectives for artists to consider. She purchased and brought home to Paris two batik paintings by Bakar and Sarkasi." (A. Ghani Hamid, Nilai seni merosot jika pelukis-pelukis cipta semata-mata untuk pelancung [Artistic decline if artists create only tourists] Berita Harian, 18 November 1973.)

- 7 T.K. Sabapathy, Foreword in *Lyrics in Wax* (Singapore: Tzee Creation Pte Ltd, 1997) 15
- 8 Sarkasi recalled that it was the irony of seeing expatriate artists using batik that motivated him to learn the craft. He reflected, "... I said to myself, 'I should be one using it'. After all I am Javanese and batik is so much a part of Malay culture." Notice the Javanese-Malay conflation, indicative of the relatively opened and affective discourse of Malayness in Singapore. Sarkasi initially travelled to Malaysian centres in Kelantan, Terengganu, Malacca and Penang to survey batik practices before travelling around Central and East Java, and eventually coming under the tutelage of Aznam Effendy in Jakarta. Ibid., 34-37
- 9 Although not discussed fully here, interests in the technique was significant in colonial Malaya. Penang based Chuah Thean Teng was among those better known, and along with others including Seah Khim Joo, keen to advance a medium that may complement the prevailing themes Malayan life they adopted almost exclusively as their subjects. They proposed imageries that were compelling to the project of Malayan, and later Malaysian identity, inflection of the modern made complex by the émigré status of ethnic-Chinese artists like them. Sarkasi enters into the scene in the early 1970s fully aware of the pictorial conventions associated to batik, keeping such subjects as part of his repertoire, even as he explore the expressive possibilities of the medium.
- 10 The quote comes from Holt's conclusion in her seminal *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (1967), being the first scholarly publication that surveyed the living traditions and modern art in Indonesia shaped by its longstanding Hindu-Buddhist heritage and the contemporary setting, researched during a period of momentous political and social changes in Indonesia. In its inevitability, she traces the Indonesian modern to its decolonizing beginnings rooted in the great debate of the *Polemik Kebudayaan* in search of a new culture characterized by cultural emancipation, identity-making and progress. Although she is sympathetic to developments in modern art, she highlighted the subject matter of Dewi Sri (goddess of fertility) as an example though which artists had render meaningful the artistic legacies of Indonesia as it continues to evolve. Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1967) 259
- 11 Holt asserts, "Attainment of independence and the changing social order have drastically affected what we may call the 'aesthetic order' of Indonesian society in human appearance and behaviour. ... And yet it is likely for a long time to come, while modernising at home, the Indonesian national and cultural identity will be stressed abroad, at international fairs, on propaganda publications, or good-will missions, with all the forms and colours animating Indonesia's old traditional arts and institutions." Ibid., 205

- 12 Holt remarked: "Modern art in Indonesia reflects the groping creativity of artists who are exposed to all art trends, past and present, including schools in the West which, though reflecting perhaps anticipating the spirit of the times, baffle many members of the society in which they are created. It is questionable to what extent a *Weltgefühl*, arising in a highly developed technological society in the atomic and space age, has penetrated Indonesia." Ibid., 259
- 13 Writing years later in 1995, Astri Wright devoted a section of her book *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain* to modern batik artists. Sustaining her central premise that tradition as an aggregate of cultural legacy and the foreign generate "new synthesis which simultaneously echo of the past and comment on a changing condition", she highlighted the varied conceptual and formal intentions; artists whose art formed a connection between batik and the Javanese mystical practices *kejawan*, drawn to designs (such as the *kawung* and *semen*) and the use of colours in batik originally imbued with spiritual meaning, and intrigued at the same time by the formal possibilities of batik's geometric patterning and interlocking motifs to produce new forms. That fascination for the esoteric or patrimony while palpable, is also rationalized to an emerging 'internationalist' convention of abstract art; angular shapes, flat or translucent planes, intermingling with fluid or muscular lines, interrupting recognizable textile motifs or even calligraphic scripts, their expressive vibrancy at times deny/contradicts/masks the very technique deployed, a labour that is characterized by measured or patient application of wax, dyes, re-waxing and repeats to produce images that are complex and layered. Astri Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain: Preoccupations of Contemporary Indonesian Painters* (Oxford University Press, 1995) 83-86, 241
- 14 Holt wrote about Islam and its impact on the visual arts, "With the establishment of the Indonesian Republic, the conservative Moslems insisted that the state and its culture be based on the precepts of Islam ... orthodox Moslems could not possibly sanction 'the making of images'. An interesting footnote ... is a remark by a young painter, who was a leader of a Moslem student organisation. He observed that abstract art was very congenial to the Islamic spirit." Claire Holt, op. cit., 213
- 15 Zainol Shariff, "Towards an Alter-Native Vision: The Idea of Malaysian Art Since 1980", in T.K. Sabapathy Ed., *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994) 79
- 16 Ibid., 87-88
- 17 Alice Guillermo, "*The Aesthetics of ASEAN Expressions: A Documentation of the First ASEAN Workshop, Exhibition and Symposium on Aesthetics*" (Kuala Lumpur: ASEAN COCI, 1989) 129. In another symposium following this, Guillermo further underlines her position, locating indigenous aesthetics beyond a symbolic pursuit of identity, but a cultural grounding to inspire political action: "Colonisation marginalised these traditional indigenous arts and excluded them from aesthetic discourse ... our efforts cannot end in theory and appreciation alone. What difficulties did the T'boli weaver, for instance, suffer as she wove the cloth under the threat of being driven away from her ancestral lands by land grabbers from the dominant groups? The desired condition would be for these arts to be part of people's means of empowerment in the cultural, political and economic realms." Alice Guillermo, "Introduction: Affirming ASEAN Cultural Integrity" in *Art and Aesthetics* in *The Aesthetics of ASEAN Expressions: A Documentation of the Second ASEAN Workshop, Exhibition and Symposium on Aesthetics* (Manila: ASEAN-COCI, 1994)



Sarkasi Said
Forest
2017
210 x 149 cm



Sarkasi Said
Ethnic Wonder
circa 2007
269 x 200 cm



Sarkasi Said
Celebration
2000
269 x 289 cm

Chang Yueh Siang

In the catalogue to a recent exhibition on textile-art, author Peter Lee discussed extensively the literature on Southeast Asian costume history, and in this context, pointed out that the writing of fashion history is still Eurocentric, where "non-Western textiles are classified as 'ethnographic' or 'ethnic'"¹ While not about fashion, and while "batik is not only sarong"², an exhibition on batik art easily falls into the category of 'craft'.

Of the NUS Museum's 400 textiles in the collection, around 30 are made in the resist-dye technique identified as batik. Constance Sheares, in writing for the inaugural exhibition catalogue of NUS Museum's South and Southeast Asian Gallery in 1999 identified that "nearly all batik can be classified into three main categories - *ceplok* (geometric repeats of squares, circles and polygons), *garismiring* (diagonal bands of decorations) and *semen*, (from semi, "young shoots" or "buds" and refers to the use of leaf-like tendrils as filling or background elements). A project undertaken by University Scholars Programme students, *Past-Present: Craft Communities in Contemporary India* (2009), attempted to "partially bridge the epistemological silences represented by traditionalist discourses by engaging with the weavers' narratives and their stupefying socioeconomic contexts."³ *Kebon Indah: Mintio & Kabul, Kelompok Batik Tulis Sido Luhur, Collaboration* (2013) also looked at the sociology of batik-making as a craft tradition today.

Sarkasi Said's batik art may trace its origins to a different context. The medium is resist-dye, and one of the latest works in this exhibition, *Forest* (2016), highlights this technique entirely. In this sense, batik denotes 'technique'; but the context in which the technique is applied is a fine art context, a fine art medium in the regional language. Sarkasi wandered into promoting this as art form. He may not have been the first (neither does he claim to be) to have pioneered the art form, but he is one of the few who have continued and persisted in the medium.

On the origins of batik as a fine art medium in Southeast Asia, it has been transmitted orally that

around the time of decolonisation and independence, artists were seeking a new visual language that could be vernacular to the region. Canvases were Western in origin, and the ink tradition brought by the Chinese overseas was not culturally indigenous (and in the post-independence Malay-speaking world, somewhat problematic to claim as representative cultural identity of the region). Batik was identified as a technique that had currency in Southeast Asia: textiles made by *batik tulis* or *cap* were worn by communities in Malaysia and Indonesia, but the resist-dye technique was also known and used more broadly in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, Straits Chinese people had adapted and adopted batik sarongs as their costume. The medium was both indigenous and hybrid at the same time, between the post war years of 1950s to 70s, experimentations were made to create 'paintings' in the medium, and by 1970, mention of Malaysia or Singapore abroad "immediately" brings batik art to mind: "The medium of painting, so closely associated with these countries, is now internationally accepted as a new method of creative expression in art..."⁴ So much so that by 1971 Siva Choy joked, "How refreshing to attend an exhibition of local art and be spared seeing stylised, traditional batik art -- the sort of colourful, meaningless stuff we've been seeing enough of in our commercial art galleries."⁵

Among early adopters of the medium were Chuah Thean Teng: Frank Sullivan identified him as "the acknowledged master of this development,"⁶ and the medium of 'fine art' batik may have been invented out of serendipity: when the batik manufacturing business he owned failed in 1947, Chuah had a stockpile of textile and dyes that he experimented with. Out of this new endeavour, came Chuah's first solo exhibition in 1955 at the Penang Library, followed by a second exhibition at the British Council Gallery in Singapore, in 1956⁷ (from which the University of Malaya may have acquired *Feeding the Chickens*.) Seah Kim Joo, another prominent batik artist, also began to experiment in the medium in 1965, returning to his childhood home of Kuala Trengganu, a batik town on the East Coast of Malaysia, devoting his time to learning the craft.



12

Chuah Thean Teng, *Feeding the Chickens* (1956),
103.5 x 76 cm S1956-0018-001-0



Seah Kim Joo, *Street Scene* (Undated),
92.1 x 47 cm S2003-0004-001-0

"MY GRANDMOTHER USED TO SELL BATIK"

Sarkasi may not have found his calling yet as a batik artist at this time. In his own words, his encounter of batik was more familiar, and familial. His Javanese heritage is important enough to him, that he signs his works as "Tzee" (from the harder Javanese pronunciation of his name). In the context of his early experiences of batik, they were encountered as functional signifiers of festivities and identities. The mention of his grandmother selling batik signals the textile as a trade commodity, one that has a long history of being transacted over in the region: "It was said that, about the year 1500, travellers brought back from the island of Java tales of highly artistic batik fabrics ..."⁸ In the essay following this one, a historical view of recent developments in batik trade provides a broader context to the background behind the commerce even of the fine art textiles made by artists like Chuah, Seah and Sarkasi. Sarkasi recalls and recounts the vibrant trade in batik sales to tourists in the video interview section on "Trade", where busloads of tourists visited factories in Singapore in the 1970s, making the fortune of batik manufacturers: the company of Rufino Lee was able to offer its staff a holiday to a location of their choosing each year during boom times. Newspaper reports document Seah Kim Joo diversifying into producing interior furnishings in batik, in response to a healthy market demand.⁹ Sarkasi himself even worked in one of the batik manufactories, Shahab, although he was never allowed onto the workshop-floor as manufacturing was a closely guarded secret. Sarkasi attributes the commercial success of the batik industry to the rapid stamp-printing technique adopted in Singaporean factories, contrasting this with the slower-paced, meditative *tulis* methods employed in traditional Indonesian workshops such as visited by the artists Mintio and Kabul, where Mintio observed that the intensity of labour and time involved made the finished product unaffordable for the batik makers to even keep for their own use.¹⁰

Even into the 1990s, Sarkasi was involved in the commercial production of batik for fashion and dress,¹¹ but whatever the production outcome was, what drives Sarkasi more is the fine art aesthetic, rather than commercial instincts. Sarkasi is first an artist, before he became a batik artist. His early artistic exploits as a student is well documented in the press,¹² and also in the book *Lyrics in Wax*¹³: as a student his afternoons



Market Place (Undated), 80 x 140 cm

were spent painting and sketching from place to place: Macritchie Reservoir, Botanic Gardens, the Singapore River... Working with whatever materials he could find, his earlier works were mostly sketches and paintings, and he created street scenes and landscapes that he sold to a ready tourist market. Even though he knew of, and would have seen the batik artworks such as created by his contemporaries Seah Kim Joo, Tay Chee Toh, Choo Keng Kwang, Khalil Ibrahim or Yusman Yusuf, and had had an exhibition of miniature batik works in 1973 at the now defunct Malay Art Gallery, it was a chance encounter with an exhibition of batik artworks by the Italian artist Ottavio Romano (1977) that Sarkasi identifies as the pivotal moment he was inspired to turn significantly to the medium that was from his 'heritage', as his medium. Another event that precipitated his experimentations with batik around the same time was one similar to the catalyst of Chuah Thean Teng's beginnings: an acquaintance who had been a stage designer for the National Theatre one day presented Sarkasi with remnant stock of dyes and fabric, and the artist experimented with the best way of using the materials. From there, Sarkasi developed his batik painting technique, expanding from smaller sized pieces he had previously exhibited before at the Malay Art Gallery, to bigger and bigger sizes: first for commercial gallery sales, developing his confidence

and pieces to an exhibition at the National Museum Art Gallery titled "Big and Bold."

"BATIK IS NOT JUST SARONG"

To begin with, by his own account, Sarkasi's artistic foundation was fairly conventional, with art classes in school, and a discipline of sketching and drawing. One of his earlier teachers, Cikgu Sulaiman Suhaimi, was significant in imparting the importance of the observation of, and reflection upon, Nature. By contrast, the experience of studying with Aznam Effendy at the Yayasan Akademi Senirupa Nasional in the 1960s, was remembered for teaching the technicalities of colours, but left an imprint less deep.

Drawing was the foundation of his beginnings as an artist: the pictures that he sold in tourist areas in the early years of nation building, and the items he brought to commercial art galleries to sell as he developed confidence, were mostly "sketches, drawings and watercolours"¹⁴. Even into the 1990s, Sarkasi's works, be it paintings, or the textiles that he designed for dress, were predominantly figurative. The publications *Introspection* (1991) and *Lyrics in Wax* (1997) document (and therefore date) early experimentations with abstracted "patterns", but also feature street scenes and his floral prints that were very popular with collectors. *Ethnic Wonder* (c. 2007) is reminiscent of the works that mark the beginnings of his foray into a more expressionistic style, traces of his landscape and life drawings, and a planned compositional method may still be detected.

"... Always Moving..." is descriptive of Sarkasi's early itinerancy as an artist. His artistic instincts move him forward: from being an itinerant street artist to seeking grounding in art school, to approaching galleries and museums for the chance to show his works. An artist seeks always to evolve, and at one point Sarkasi's style, moved from a signature figurative style to one that was more abstracted and expressive. The pivotal works around this time were from his "Mother and Child" series begun circa 1997, where the maternal figure was depicted without lips: "Love does not need to be spoken of to be expressed." In a similar way, natural themes, which dominate the latter part of his practice, no longer depended on line-drawn representation to be depicted. It is here where Cikgu Sulaiman's earlier instructions on deep observations of nature is drawn upon, for the artist to



Mother and Child (circa 1997), 58 x 72 cm

extract the essence of his experience, to represent his imaginations. *The Beach* is one of the chronologically-earlier works featured in this exhibition, based on an imagery of the clear, shallow waters of Hawaii. Similarly *Purity* is the epitome of a series of works grouped as “The Lotuses of Nara”, but moves a step further from symbolism into a more conceptual reflection of a spiritual idea. *Light* (2000s) on the other hand, is a physical depiction of the artist’s imagination of luminiscence, inspired from his being in a completely darkened mine in Sawahlunto, Sumatra.

Apart from *View of Life* (Gift of Land Transport Authority), made for the Circle Line in 2009), none of the works chosen for this exhibition has ever been displayed publicly before, though some may have been executed as part of another series. The sizes of the works belie the momentum the artist is caught up in as he is in the act of creation. At the same time, after completion, these pieces were set aside in privacy, rather than sold or exhibited; it is almost as if these works were private expressions of interior sentiments.

To appreciate the sublimity of the works in this exhibition, one needs to understand that batik is to Sarkasi, technique as well as a spiritual expression. The following essay touches on the mysticism associated with Javanese batik, which Sarkasi lays claim to as his heritage. Succinctly, the meanings of batik in the Javanese tradition is as Indonesian batik designer Era Soekamto describes:

“[Batik] is a magnificent process, from drawing using a *canting* and stamp and then there’s the isen process, sogan process, coloring and many more steps to achieve a smooth and soft batik. A batik-making process should be accompanied by meditation as for the makers it is a meditation process ... The motifs in batik are made through a process of ‘emptying’ the soul to receive inspiration, or as the Javanese say, ‘*kewahyon*’. This is a very sacred process because batik is a chronogram or visual communication that always speaks about God’s oneness or God within ourselves.”¹⁵

The eponymously-titled *Movement* (1990s) is a demonstration of the dynamism of action, drawing and traditional motif-making Sarkasi exercises reflexively. Expressed in a contemporary manner, this piece contains a variety of traditional motifs that, for the artist, recall the mysticism of Sarkasi’s Javanese heritage and identity.

In modern/post independent nationalist terms, traditional symbolisms evolve as new national and cultural identities are forged. In 1980, a competition was launched to define a ‘national dress’ for formal wear in Singapore and abroad;¹⁶ but for a variety of reasons the project was cancelled. (A look at the press coverage reveals some clues to its failure: class and ethnic considerations may have been reasons - the designers were couture creators from Chinese backgrounds, and “officials would like to see more sketches from other sources.”¹⁷ While this may not have been the explanation for the demise of the project, “the optics” were not reflective of the multicultural demographic a national dress intended for: The Ministry of Culture had also hoped for “more contributions from designers and boutiques — “generally people from the grassroots” — so that tastes of Singaporeans could be reflected.”¹⁸) The search for a representative costume was resolved several years later, when it was reframed as a ‘textile design’

for national costumes, based on the orchid motif, Singapore's national flower. Sarkasi's, was one of the designs selected.¹⁹ Understandably, the design was much more publicly accessible, being representative of a response to a commission with a national motive, with the canonical floral emblem of the batik tradition rendered modern.

Whether traditional or contemporary, for Sarkasi, a motif, as an emblem, remains simply a motif. What is more significant is how the artist expresses his interior ideas. Here is where Cikgu Sulaiman's imprint may be felt again, inspiring Sarkasi to see any subject matter "from the inside".²⁰ With maturity and confidence — or perhaps, rather, when free of guidelines — Sarkasi expresses himself more freely and personally in his art. *Celebration* (c. 1997), a piece originally proposed for National Day commemoration, is recast as a modern festive decoration, recalling the significance and function of the batiks of Sarkasi's childhood, used on special occasions.²¹ Contrasting with his early 'national' designs of flowers, and a more corporate-influenced style in *The Beach* (1990), is Sarkasi's *View of Life*, made for Circle Line's Art in Transit project, which asserts the artist's imagination (of the emergence of the urban state out of swamps) against the corporate design brief.

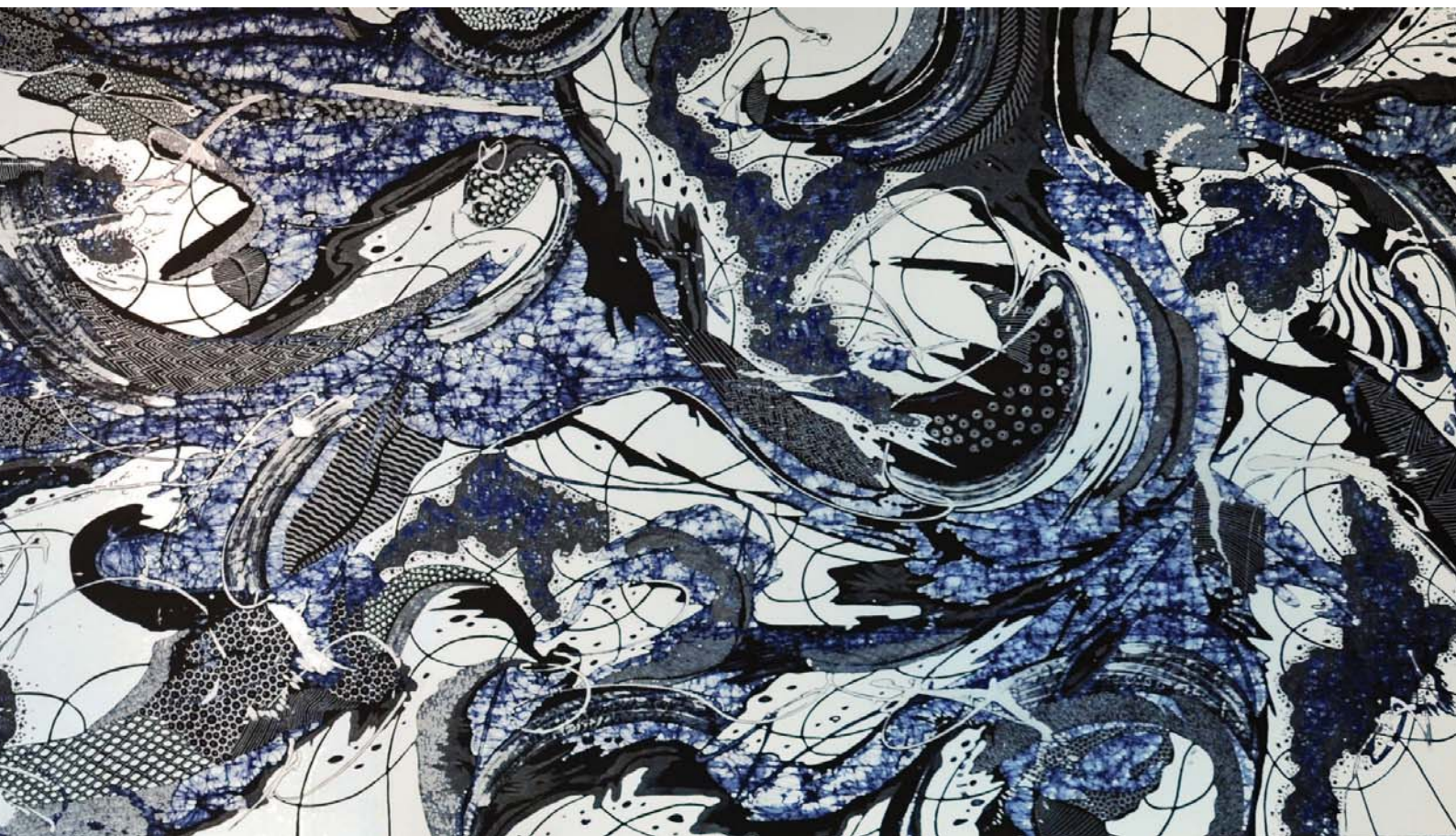
"ALWAYS MOVING"

This exhibition includes video recordings that allow Sarkasi to speak of his practice in his own words. Organised into the segments "Early Beginnings"; "Becoming an Artist", "Trade", "Identity", and "Artistic expressions", the interviews present the biographical development of Sarkasi's life and work, connecting him with the contexts of Singapore's social, urban and economic developments after independence. The journey, also seen through the artworks, is of a practitioner whose creations are constantly moved by inner promptings, yet responding at the same time to his environment, to developing a personal language to express what the mind's eye 'sees'. When asked about the decisions he made at different points at his life (why he painted for tourists; why he approached art galleries, why he made dress textiles ...), Sarkasi replies that it was for survival. While one might, in the backdrop of the economic development of post-independence Singapore read this as 'economic'

survival, a deeper meaning contained within is that if the artist does not express himself and does not evolve, he cannot live. "If there is no movement, there is no life."²²

- 1 Peter Lee, *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World, 1500-1950*, University of Hawaii Press, 2014, p.31
- 2 "Big on Batik", *The Straits Times*, 19 Oct 1992, p.10.
- 3 Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, "Past Present: Craft Communities in Contemporary India", NUS Museum, p.5
- 4 Frank Sullivan, "The Batik Art of Khalil Ibrahim", *The Straits Times Annual*, 1970, pp.55 - 59. See also, "The Art of Seah Kim Joo", *The Straits Times Annual*, 1969, pp. 50-55.
- 5 Siva Choy, "Getting away from batik", *New Nation*, 23 January 1971, p.11
- 6 Frank Sullivan, "Batik's Art", *The Straits Times Annual*, 1966.
- 7 <http://www.ilhamgallery.com/love-me-in-my-batik/batik-timeline/> Last Accessed 26 August 2017
- 8 Mafoot Simon, "Wear-and-tell for Batik", *The Straits Times*, 3 Nov, 1997, p.9.
- 9 "Artist turns industrialist." *New Nation*, 3 Dec 1979, p. 14
- 10 Foo Su Ling, *Kebon Indah: Mintio & Kabul, Kelompok Batik Tulis Sido Luhur, Collaboration*, NUS Museum, 2013. p.6
- 11 T. Sasitharan, "Wax-and-dye in vibrant colours", *The Straits Times*, 14 July 1989, p.21
- 12 Eg Mardiana Abu Bakar, "World View of Sarkasi", *The Straits Times*, 24 March 1988, p.1
- 13 Serene Goh (ed.), *Lyrics in Wax: The Art of Sarkasi Said*, Tzee Creation, 1997.
- 14 From Video "Early Beginnings"; see also "Sarkasi: In His Own Words," p. 17
- 15 <http://www.thejakartapost.com/longform/2016/11/29/batik-a-cultural-dilemma-of-infatuation-and-appreciation.html> Last accessed 25 Aug
- 16 "A public show to pick a national dress?" *The Straits Times*, 29 July 1980, Page 10
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 "Search for a national dress fizzles out." *New Nation*, 8 April 1981, p.7.
- 19 Brenton Wong, "4 designs for Singapore Dress", *New Paper*, 8 September 1989, p.10
- 20 Conversation 25 Aug.
- 21 Refer to footnote 14 above
- 22 In conversation 25 Aug.





Sarkasi Said
Movement
2000
176 x 595 cm

Diyanah Nasuha Bte Omar Bahri

18

Textile traditions has been particularly rich throughout the Malay Archipelago for centuries, where they fulfil social, practical and even spiritual obligations for its peoples. Batik, is created through a dyeing method that uses a wax-resist technique which produces intricate patterns onto cloth. It is produced elsewhere in the world where its roots are difficult to trace, stretching as far as India and China. However, it has arguably reached its peak in craftsmanship and artistry in the courts of Central Java, Indonesia. Not only were these fine textiles much sought-after commodities that were valued for its prestige, but it had ritualistic, political and economic significance throughout the region. Batik cloth had been a luxury item which was reserved as daily attire for royalty and nobility. While its symbolic significance and tradition have waned over the centuries, exquisitely detailed batik are still sought after and collected by Indonesian elite and international tourists as objects to be admired, instead of being worn as in the past.

“Baticking is, first and last, a dyeing process. For the present, without going into detail, it may be described as a method whereby cotton fabric is adorned with patterns of variegated colour by successive dippings in different dyes, a layer of wax being laid, prior to each dipping, upon those portions of the surface not intended to come into contact with that particular colour.”

— Banner 1927, 98

This is evident in the finest form of hand-drawn Javanese batiks, called *batik tulis* (hand-drawn batik), which may take weeks or even years to complete. In between dye baths, the cloths are waxed with a canting, a copper crucible that has spouts attached to a bamboo handle that is uniquely Indonesian. Intricate and delicate patterning is attributed to the usage of the canting, allowing for the refinement and the production of *batik halus* (fine batik) in Java. Batik isn't simply just a piece of decorated cloth, but contains special socio-cultural significance for the population. The arrangement of the patterning and choice of motif invokes spiritual, mystical and supernatural meaning for its maker and wearer. The diverse anionic symbols are inherently symbolic in its meanings, and therefore

“speaks”. Most batiks from the *keratons* (palaces) of Central Java are those of which have visual textile communication skills. Batik is thus produced within villages which are usually located near or within the *keratons*. In the following decades, the concentration of batik workshops and urban factories would be shifted elsewhere in the archipelago, with the Javanese still dominating as the biggest entrepreneurs of batik.

Previously only flourishing in the early courts of Surakarta and Yogyakarta at the hands of noblewomen and artisans, batik that were produced in these principalities are often referred to as *batik klasik* (classical batik). In the past, the sultans of the Central Java had proscribed certain batik patterns, called *larangan* (forbidden), for the exclusive use of the royalty and their relatives. Distinct due to their tricolour scheme, with their colours being limited to *soga* (deep yellow-brown), white (or cream) and indigo blue, Central Javanese batik motifs have remained fairly unchanged and resistant to stylistic acculturation in terms of their colours and patterns. This is in marked contrast with the batik developments along the cities of Pekalongan, Lasem, Cirebon, Tegal and Semarang that are located along the Northern Coast of Java. Distance from the codified courts of Central principalities allowed for freer artistic licenses of batik design, being produced more for commercial and trading purposes.

The diversity of Java and dynamism of the coastal region had enabled for the assimilation of numerous inspirations that were drawn from various sources. It had developed while maintaining a distinct form of Javanese aesthetic. Javanese batik artisans have adopted and adapted stylistic iconographies and motifs from various sources of Indian, Arabic, Chinese and European influences. Catering to the tastes of both domestic and foreign populations, batik-makers experimented with different dyes and technical innovations to produce distinctive regional designs and styles of batik. Chinese, Arab and European traders had long been commercially active in the northern coast, either in handling the trade of raw materials or cloth for batik-making. Thus, merchants who eventually settled and intermarried with locals eventually spawned a sizeable ethnic group, called the *Indische*. Hence,

the existence of foreign settler communities too had produced syncretised *pesisiran* (coastal) batik that were for commercial export, or for their own usage.

By the mid-19th century, the industrialisation of batik began with the widespread usage of the *cap*, a wax printing handheld stamp made usually out of copper that was used to apply wax to the cloth. The early 19th century saw the flooding of imitation batik cloth into Java by European merchants, who were keen to tap into the lucrative batik market. In 1812, the first attempts of introducing imitation batik in Java was made by Sir Stanford Raffles. Over the next few decades, the Dutch, German, Swiss and even Japanese companies produced imitation batik cloth for export. Imitation batik was initially popular in Java due to its relatively low prices as compared to genuine batik. However, imitation batik did not lead to the imminent collapse of the batik industry in Java by the 1840s — or, to be precise, the failure of the batik industry to develop into a substantial, centralised industry or even just remaining as a small-scale industry. The *cap* revived and revolutionised batik production. It had significantly reduced the amount of time that was needed to produce a piece of batik by batik-makers, who previously could only rely on the time-consuming wax-resist methods of the *batik tulis*.

Consequently, such laborious work made *batik tulis* expensive for most Javanese. Thus, the usage of the *cap* not only allowed for more lengths of cloth to be produced within a day but also made *batik cap* affordable to the general populace. This revitalised the domestic batik industry, which enabled it to compete against the imitation batik from Europe. *Batik cap* was eventually preferred and supplanted the imitation batik in the batik market. The usage of natural dyes, extracted from fruits, tree bark, roots and even leaves, ensured its superiority in terms of its aesthetic form and relative colorfastness. It also centralised batik production, becoming more labour-intensive and requiring larger workspaces, hence leading eventually to the industrialisation of the batik industry. Both forms of batik production co-existed because there was continued demand for *batik tulis* by those who could afford it as well as for those who required *batik tulis* for special occasions.

By the end of the 20th century, the batik industry in Indonesia was sustained by both domestic and foreign demand. The latter was spurred on globally, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and availability of

regular steamship services which boosted trade and tourism. The Netherlands East Indies was brought closer to Europe, with reduced travelling times that thus spread the fascination of the other Europeans with the aesthetic and fashions of the Far East. In particular, batik became fashionable amongst European and Indo-European women as sarongs. However, fashion accessories and interior decorations would also be made out of batik, or were inspired by its motifs. This period also saw the rise of tourism to the Netherlands East Indies as well, due to its promotion as a holiday destination and the establishment of the first ever official tourist bureau in Batavia. While the Japanese Occupation of the early 1940s restricted batik production and affected tourism, this period produced a distinct form of Japanese-acculturated batik — namely the *Jawa Hokokai*¹ in the motif of the *pagi-sore* (morning-afternoon) which contained two different designs within a single piece of fabric.

The post-war period revived batik production, with the recovery and growth of the tourism industry of Indonesia. This consequently led to the burgeoning demand for leisure wear. By the 1960s, western tourists from America and Australia were wearing beachwear made of batik as well as the Indonesian equivalent of the Hawaiian shirt which was manufactured for holiday goers. Particularly, the batik sarong re-emerged in its popularity, in the form of beach cover ups. From bags, wall-hangings, curtains, kimonos to upholstery fabrics, batik had been transformed into a myriad of products and thus diversified the batik market. The advent of tourism was also an active agent in transforming and re-inventing batik. The lucrative traditional handicrafts and textiles market, supported by tourists who purchase them as souvenirs or mementos, involves many people. It also involves traditional artisans belonging to the royal courts of Java who have adapted their products to suit their tourist clientele.

However, this is not simply the denigration of material culture due to tourist industry. Batik itself, as a cultural product, is not historically stable. Over centuries, it too has been impacted by the inflows of new ethnic groups and cultures, being the apparent in the northern coastal region of Java. Batik, while initially being manufactured for the domestic market, eventually became renowned as an export good with its ability of being malleable and pliant to acculturation. So much so that it is the most contested cultural

heritage product between Indonesia and Malaysia. While batik has been employed as politically as an ethnocultural resource by Indonesian presidents, there is a commercial stake for both countries due to the lucrative batik export market that is worth millions. Malaysia has successfully marketed batik to western countries as its own cultural heritage export and as a result, its batik exports is far outpacing Indonesia's.

While Indonesia's economic underperformance is chalked up to its poor ability in marketing batik overseas in comparison to Malaysia, the latter's boom in its batik industry is due to the migration of Javanese batik artisans and workers to the eastern coast of Malaysia, where bulk of the batik production heartlands that were producing quality batik are located at. The earliest batik factories had been set up in the 1940s, in Kota Bahru and Kuala Trengganu.² Their migration was a result of competitive wages and better living standards that was offered in the Peninsula, as compared to the famous batik centres of Solo, Pekalongan, Yogyakarta and Laweyan whereby the same amount of work would receive far lesser financial compensation. Many have become naturalised Malaysian citizens, after being invited or scouted by Malaysians to work for their batik business. Due to the cramped and competitive conditions in the batik centres of Java, batik factories and workshops have been increasingly built along the peripheries of these areas. As the production of *batik cap* requires a larger workspaces to facilitate dyeing and stamping of the fabrics by a larger workforce, businesses have expanded horizontally or shifted away from these centres.

At the height of batik's popularity in the early 20th century, batik businesses had expanded throughout the Malay archipelago to directly tap onto potential batik markets elsewhere. Similarly, this had occurred in Singapore, then part of Malaya, which was famed for its strategic location as an entrepôt in the archipelago. Founded by Syed Amin Shahab in 1935³, the Malayan Weaving Works Ltd⁴ was a weaving factory that had a Batik Department which produced *batik cap* for export. It was the first of its kind to be set up in Malaya at that time. In the following decades, Singapore became established as a batik production centre with batik factories for Robert Khoo's Hand Batik, Low Eng Chong's Singa Batik House as well as the Merlion Batik Factory that produced batik for international export, competing with

the East Coast, the Netherlands East Indies and India. 'Made-in-Singapore' batik was created to suit foreign tastes⁵, by modernising traditional designs that were dyed in bold colours while eschewing automation, to keep the handicraft aspect of batik alive. Thus, Indonesia had to compete with new players within the batik industry, with larger capitals and far more advanced technology that may manufactured mass-produced machine-printed batik textiles.

Batik's malleability and pliancy to acculturation had lent itself to the efflorescence of contemporary batik in the preserve of haute couture as well as new avenues of expressions like fine art. The recent decades had seen both designers and artists pushing boundaries in their explorations with batik. Technological innovations had enabled batik to be now produced by the yard, which allows batik fabric to be tailored into western-styled fashion garments. Singapore's Shirley Dressler ran a batik factory that produced such garments for export to mainly western countries in the 1970s. Directly involved in the processes of dyeing, printing and designing, her own creations were on display at her shop called Design Batik, located at the Singapore Handicraft Centre. By the late 1970s, Seah Kim Joo who is Singapore's first batik painter would join Dressler in manufacturing batik garments as well as fashion accessories and interior decorations made out of batik.

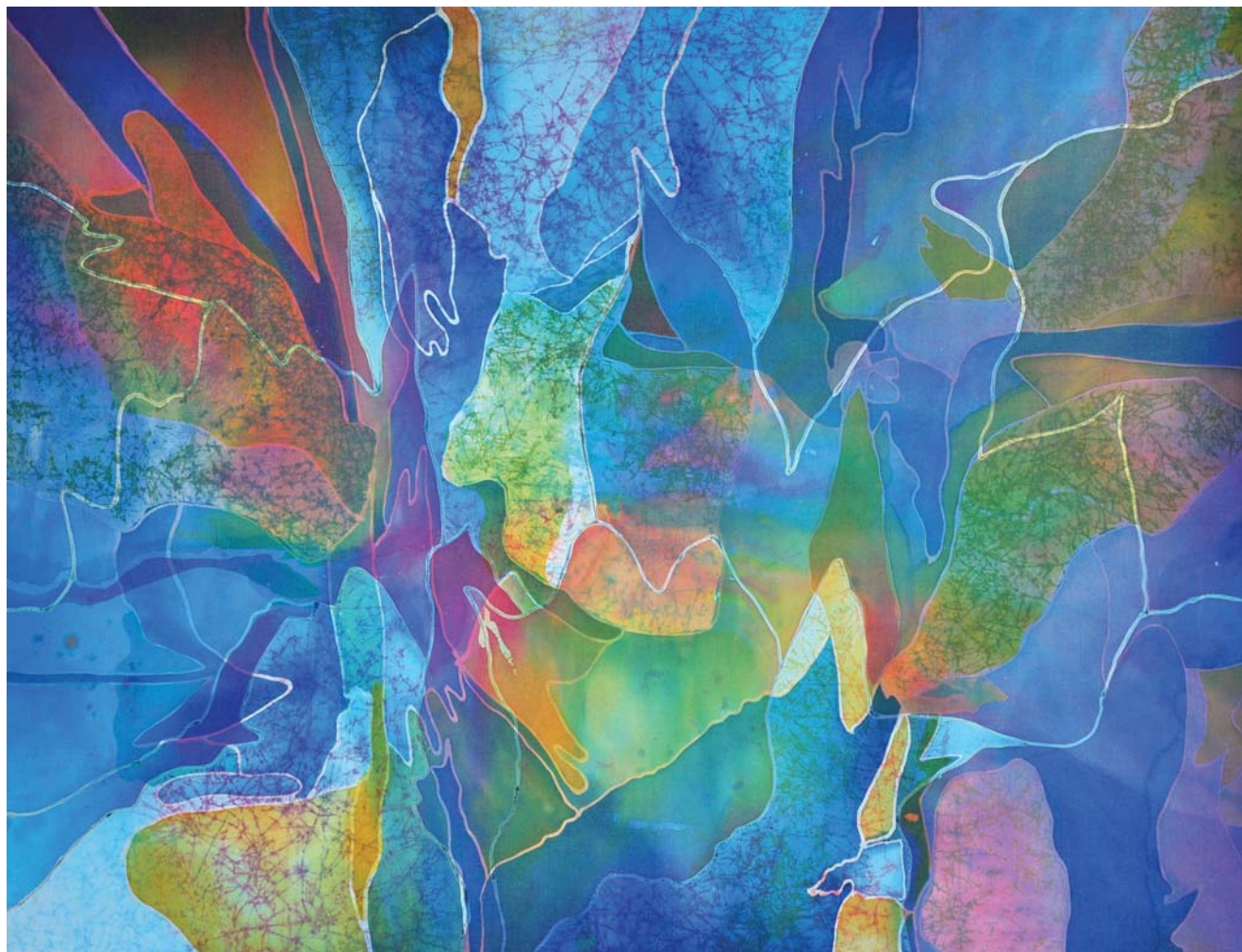
Before Seah Kim Joo's rise to fame as a batik artist, Chuah Thean Teng was the pioneer artist of using traditional wax-resist techniques in his batik paintings. Thus, elevating batik painting into a new form of fine art. The exploration of artists using such techniques not only reflects a pride in Southeast Asian traditions but also a keen awareness of Western art. Thus, batik paintings are essentially a form of modern Southeast Asian art whereby its process of production is similar to that of traditional batik. However, batik paintings may not necessarily depict traditional batik motifs. Instead, they may be adorned by motifs and patterns deriving from the artist's imagination. The artist may even adopt the practice of filling the background of the batik with *isen-isen* (fillers) — in the form of dots, curls, hooks and so on. He/she may even stay true to the *pakem* (rule and regulations) of the more traditional batik styles. The deconstruction and reconstruction of visual symbolism, usage of light, colour as well perspective builds upon the existing traditional patterns and thus have produced innovative designs as seen from the

contemporary batik works of Indonesia's Soelardjo and Soemihardjo brothers, Amri Yahya, Dudung and Bagong Kussudiardja.

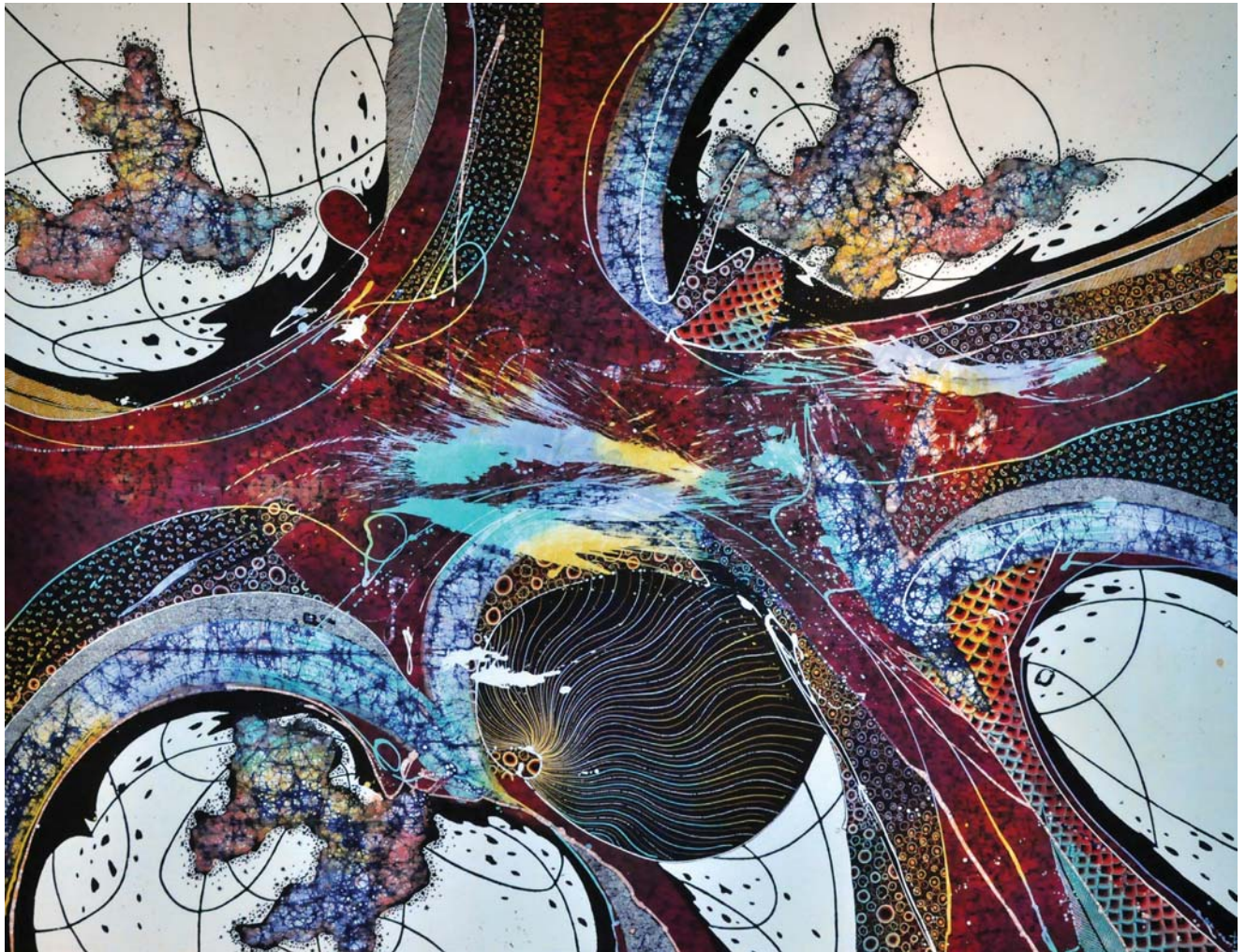
Maintaining its position of cultural importance, batik remains a source and symbol of Indonesia's strong traditions and ethnic pride. Following the declaration of the independence of Indonesia in 1949, batik has been embraced as a part of Indonesian cultural nationalism. Under the first president of Indonesia, Sukarno, the batik industry was aided by governmental cooperatives. He too promoted the implementation of batik as Indonesia's national dress in collaboration with Hardjonagoro, a batik designer. This resulted in the identification of *Batik Indonesia* with the republic, that incorporated Central Javanese motifs and patterns with colours of the North Coast. By the late 1960s, both Sukarno and his successor, Suharto, succeeded in popularising batik as formal wear for Indonesians and gradually revived local demand for batik, which was only previously popular amongst the older generation. The listing of this traditional dyeing technique in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2009 was also a cause of celebration for Indonesia, which prompted President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to call for Indonesians to wear batik to commemorate such a momentous occasion.

Underlying the antagonism of cultural nationalisms between Indonesia and Malaysia where both have been mired in controversial disputes over various cultural heritage products, is at its core, a pragmatic contest over the gaining of commercial and political leverage over such products.⁶ Batik is a lucrative commodity that is worth millions in potential export revenue for any country. What is apparent is that batik, a textile traditional that is rich and diverse in its heritage, has been adjusting itself to the ever changing circumstances of our modernising society by continually updating and transforming itself..

- 1 Batik with bright floral patterns set against complex *isen-isen* (fillers) backdrop
- 2 "Our Heritage." *New Nation* (Singapore), January 21, 1972.
- 3 Gretchen Mahbubani, Gretchen. "Made in Singapore Singaporean Batik." *The Straits Times* (Singapore), July 8, 1980.
- 4 "Malaya's Bid for the Sarong Industry." *Sunday Tribune (Singapore)* (Singapore), August 15, 1937.
- 5 June Lim. "Handicraft Item." *Business Times* (Singapore), May 9, 1981.
- 6 See for example, Chong, Jinn Winn. "'Mine, Yours or Ours?': The Indonesia-Malaysia Disputes over Shared Cultural Heritage." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 27, no. 1 (April 2012): 1-53; and Clark, Marshall, and Juliet Pietsch. *Indonesia-Malaysia Relations: Cultural Heritage, Politics and Labour Migration*. Routledge, 2014.



Sarkasi Said
The Beach
1990
181 x 235.5 cm



Sarkasi Said
Marine Forest
2000
266.5 x 341 cm





Sarkasi Said
View of Life
 2009
 120 x 130 cm each
 Gift of the Land Transport Authority



Sarkasi Said
Longevity I
 1999
 189 x 91 cm



Sarkasi Said
Longevity (Koi)
 1997
 222.5 x 91 cm

Excerpt of transcript of interviews
recorded on 29 May and 12 June 2017, NUS Museum

EARLY BEGINNINGS

I have been doing artwork since my childhood days ... I lived in a small kampong situated off Gentle Road in the Cairnhill district... There were only about 1000 – 2000 occupants in the kampong. Most of them were Malays, or from Javanese origins. There were some Chinese and Indians who lived together with us. Everybody was related to someone in the village, and we knew each other very well.

In those days, every Malay house had a collection of Batik. On special occasions everyone would be using batiks, mostly the elderly Malay ladies. These occasions also called for batik to be used, such as at weddings; funerals... Visitors would wear batik, and batik was also used to cover the body of the deceased, for example. People did not use batik for everyday attire, because it was rare to get good batik. If we saw someone using or wearing batik, we knew something was happening.

My grandmother was selling classical batik from Indonesia, especially from Java. She obtained them from relatives who were traders dealing in special batik. She sells to families whom she knew. This was the time when batik production was increasing. Batiks had developed from being handdrawn, to blocks, even silk screens. There was more batik available to the community, and the diversity of the batik will tell the quality and value of the batik itself. Generally batik was not a product that was produced domestically. We were not generally a batik producing nation, it was usually produced somewhere else. People knew batik only as a product, but not the process of making it. This is where I want to emphasise: we need to be clear when we are talking about batik as a product, and batik as a technique. Someone has to be the one doing the batik. I became curious about the process. I had the opportunity at a very young age to visit Indonesia and visit places where the produced batik. That is how we became acquainted with it and became interested in how it was produced.

It was not until the 1960s or mid-70s that there were a few batik producers that came to Singapore, such as Mrs Shirley Dressler (of Design Batik), Seah Kim Joo,...

They produced batik in Singapore, and they hired their workers from Indonesia and Malaysia (from Kelantan). In this period batik had become more popular, not only in this region, but also in Japan, Europe. This is the period where batik flourished. Singapore was the place that was a centre of trade for the region, because of that, people from all over the world came, and saw and appreciated batik, and that is how batik became more popular.

BECOMING AN ARTIST

My interest in art was from the beginning, since I was a child.

In the mid 60s, I started to go to Indonesia and Malaysia to see if I can get some knowledge and learn about how batik is being made. Fortunately, or unfortunately, people were not so generous with sharing their technique. Of course I understood that that is their bread and butter. So I went around the producers and looked at what they used, and what they did. I learnt from trial and error. When I came back to Singapore, I asked myself what I could do. By chance I met someone who was a stage decorator at the National Theatre. To my surprise he gave me a chest full of textile dyes which he didn't know how to use. I tried mixing the colours, mixing the dyes with oils, but my experiments did not succeed.

In my earlier years in school, art education was emphasised. I had special teachers who taught us to be aware of what art is. One of the teachers was Cikgu Sulaiman Suhaimi. I didn't learn much about technique, but concepts: for eg: why is a tree different from another; what makes one tree reach up to the skies, and another creep on the ground. They taught me how to develop awareness, of the reasons for the anatomical developments of the subject.

When I was young I used any material I could find: wood, paper, coal ... I used clay as colour on paper, like pastel. In school, I would be the last person to leave the class, in order to pick the remnant of the chalk that has been thrown in the bin, and used it for my scribbles or sketches.

From around 11 years old, I was living by myself on the street. In those days not many families would encourage their children to take up art. This was one of the reasons I left the house. My feeling for art was so strong. It was easier in those days to live on the streets: even if I didn't have food, other children would give me food, and that is how I lived. This is also what I practice today: give what I can, and do the best I can.

There was a garden centre near Newton Centre, Kian Kee Gardens: they had different plants, and they imported orchids from Hawaii. The owners invited me to be a caretaker, and I took up the offer. First I learnt how to break bricks from our Alexandra Brickworks, for use in planting orchids. The parents of the owner was so nice: I would sleep at night in the garden, but in the morning they would provide breakfast daily, without fail. With this employer, I had the chance to travel to Malaysia, where in my free time, I travelled around to try to learn from people how they used batik.

28

In the 1970s, there was an exhibition of batik, and I found out that it was an Italian artist who had made the works [Ottavio Romano].¹ That made me think. I had believed that batik was from this region: it should have been me using the batik technique to do my artworks. I became more serious to learn about the technique and to make batik artworks. I had the idea to offer myself as a designer for the first batik factory in Singapore, Shahab, (formerly Shahab Weaving Factory), owned by the Shahab brothers. They were a weaving company from Indonesia, but they came here because they realised Singapore was becoming important for trade. I offered to work as a designer: but I was not allowed to go into the dye store, I could not go into the workshop, so I had to work in the office. But at lunchtime I would sneak to the workshop and try to get a glimpse at what they were doing.

Before the exhibition by the Italian artist, I did batik works but it was not my only technique. I was making sketches, watercolours, as well as batik. I sold my works at places with tourists. But I also was looking at smaller galleries and shops to sell my works, including Cheong Soo Pieng's shop. I walked into Suncraft Gallery at Tanglin Shopping Centre and approached them to sell my works.

Most of the exhibitions organised by the Malay Art Galleries were on works by Malay artists. My exhibition (1973) was on batik miniatures: one of the reasons

they were small was economic, I could not afford more materials then; and I made more than 300 pieces for that exhibition. After that exhibition I was offered the chance to be an in-house artist, I could work in the studio at the Gallery.

The Guest-of-Honour who opened the Malay Art Gallery exhibition was Mr Christopher Hooi, Director of the National Museum. I asked him. Most of the time I made the approaches on my own to pursue opportunities.

TRADE AND BUSINESS

[In 1979 Seah Kim Joo opened a Batik factory, producing decorative furnishings "for a Singaporean flavour".] This is still batik: the workers were from Malaysia, and they used the block method, even though they don't use the handdrawn method. These blocks still reflect the Malay/Indonesian culture. He was using the orchid motif but at that time everyone was using the orchid motif because that was what sold.

Even Shahab exported Batik products to Florida, that was further shipped to the Caribbeans, by container loads. Manufacturers were taking the opportunity to make money. For those who had factories with tourist visits, it was like a gold mine. The Japanese were snapping batik up, even before it dried. Everything was dealt in cash, and the drawers were stuffed with cash.

The production methods in Singapore were similar to those adopted in Malaysia and Indonesia, but in Singapore it was much faster because the workers were paid by the piece. In Indonesia they were given a fixed salary regardless how many they produced. The ladies in Indonesia will sit down from 6am to 4pm and produce batik in their own good time, in trance, only stopping when the piece is finished. In the factories here, Malaysian workers simply blocked repeated patterns, and it was messy.

IDENTITY

Batik was not something associated with art, so in the 60s when people saw art made with batik, that was where the interest came from, art collectors and art lovers also thought it may be a technique that could continue. The Chinese artists making art in the batik technique were the ones who were so enthusiastic in looking for alternatives. Seah Kim Joo, Chuah Thean

Teng went to Trengganu, Indonesia, to study the batik technique. They were the first batch to do batik art: Batik fine-art had never been done in Trengganu and Indonesia before. It was only afterwards that Malay artists, such as Yusoff [Abdullah] from Kelantan, and Amri [Yahyah], Bambang [Oetero Bagong K.] from Indonesia, also started making batik fine art.

[On whether Batik can be representative of a Singaporean dress, and the National Dress campaign in 1980] Singapore is multicultural, not only Malay. Also, we are living in a time where [batik textiles] are competing with the t-shirt: In many Singaporean functions they wear t-shirts, or normal shirts. Therefore I felt at that time (1980s) we could not make it a "National Dress". The [later idea from 1989] was right: to have different materials and design textiles, then let everyone make their dress according to what they want: the *baju kurung*, whatever you wanted to design, with the textile.

For the works that I do [whether it is fine art or fashion textile], somehow it has the value of batik, Javanese batik. For example, there are line motifs that come from traditional batik. Even when I design dress fabrics, I will have certain portion with that traditional motif that relates to the understanding of what batik is.

What makes batik Javanese, is the design, and the socio-cultural knowledge of the value of the batik... Design can be copied: Malaysian Batik also adopts classical Indonesian designs: whether this makes it batik depends on how society defines what batik is. Batik is known as a mystical textile, used for religious purposes. Each individual motif has meaning to it and the wearer is adorned by the auspicious meaning of the motif. The same socio-cultural meaning used to be shared in Singapore, but slowly this is being lost,

because it is felt that some of these meanings are not compatible to Islam due to their associations with Hindu culture.

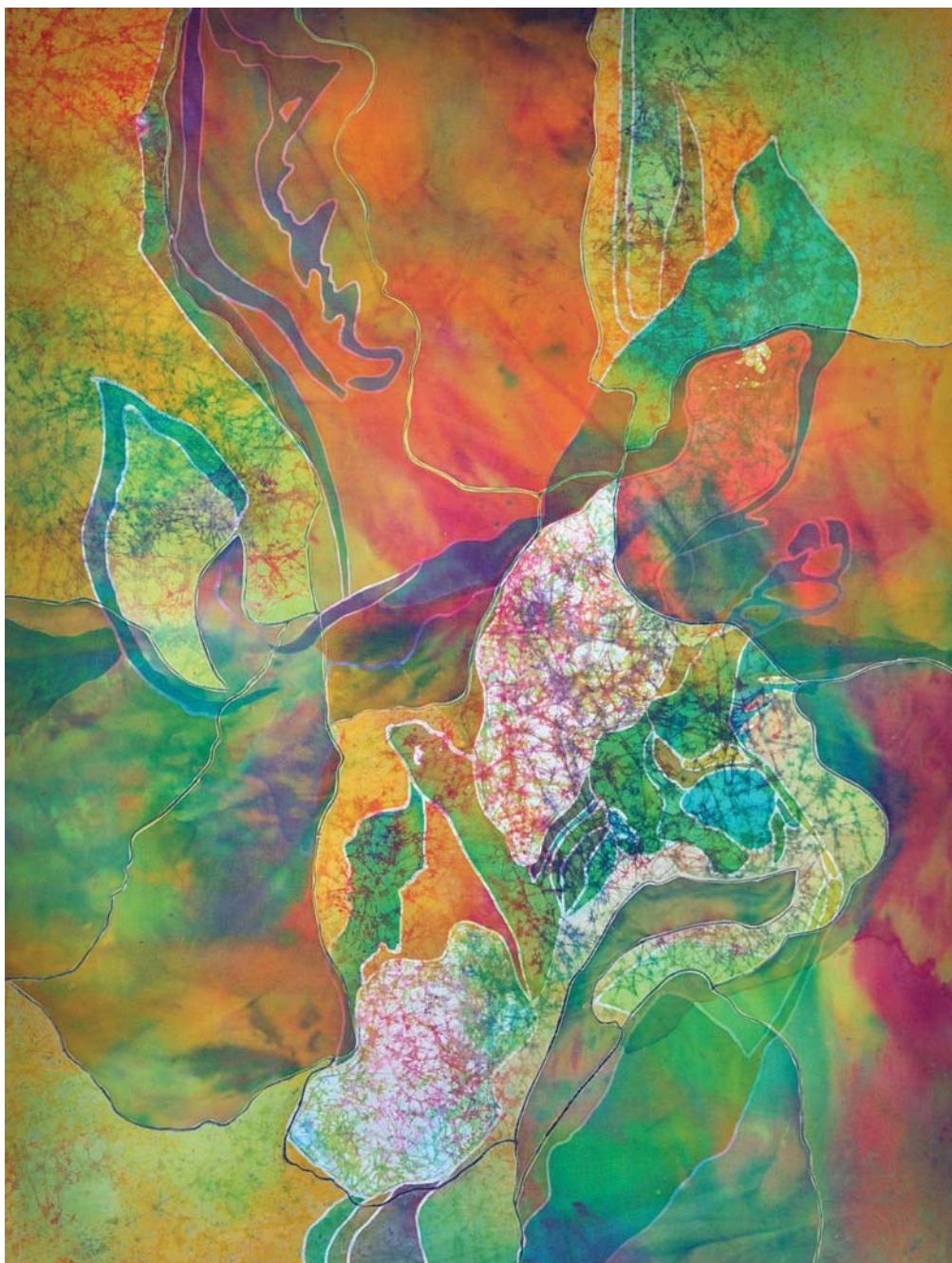
ABSTRACTED EXPRESSIONS

When I do painting, when I look at leaves, I look at the different colours, and I ask myself why is one leaf a different colour from another. These are things that are constantly in my mind.

Nature changes as it grows, and I do the same as plants: at a certain time I will move on to a certain place; instead of charcoal I begin to do watercolours; it develops by itself. ... I let Nature develop my thoughts, about how I can express my feelings. Batik technique itself is an abstraction: just like Chinese characters are sometimes symbolic, batik lines used to depict water or mountains can also be symbolic. In any technique, what is important is the idea of what you are painting. This is what I am doing; using technique and presenting my work and my perceptions into the artwork that I am doing.

The development of our knowledge of batik is that we are more inclined towards abstraction than classical or ethnic elements. When people look at batik, the first thing they look at is the colour, whether the colour is suitable. They may not even look at the design, because it is more about fashion, rather than what the design means. Why I continue to do my work is to tell people that this technique exists, this resist technique is called batik - to bring awareness to society about this technique. Then I would like people to understand that this technique is related to traditional batik.

1 "Turning point of my life came with a batik painting, says former architect", *The Straits Times*, 6 June 1977, p.9



Sarkasi Said
Purity
2000
235 x 181 cm



Sarkasi Said
Light
2000
255 x 253 cm

