

# KHALIL IBRAHIM

In loving memory of this prolific artist, KL Lifestyle looks back at his long-spanning and illustrious career

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Pantai Melawati, 2004  
Acrylic on board 116 x 152.5cm  
Collection of Datuk Gary Thanasan

**M**aestro Khalil Ibrahim, Malaysia's iconic art legend returned to his Creator at the age of 84 on May 15, in University Malaysia Medical Centre, Petaling Jaya. While we grieve the passing of this great man, we pay homage by looking back at his colourful life and long spanning career as one of Malaysia's greatest artists. Aply described by KLAS as Malaysia's father of figurative painting, Khalil Ibrahim was born in 1934 in Kubang Krian, Kelantan. He was one of the earliest Malaysians who received a full state scholarship in 1960 to

study art at the prestigious Central St Martins School of Art and Design, London.

His masterful skills in drawing, watercolour and acrylic, are styles that move from the almost real to the almost abstract. Until his passing, Khalil was ardent to art, surrounded by familiar canvas or batik on canvas before him and paint brushes for days in his studio in Petaling Jaya. A book on this artist entitled, 'The Art Journey of Khalil Ibrahim' by KL Lifestyle Art Space pays homage to his journey as an artist and the amazing artworks he had created over the span of his career.



## HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Khalil's rich Malay cultural background in the East Coast and the discipline of Islamic values that he learnt at the Pondok school shaped his primordial artistic journey. These values stuck by him which then merged with the freedom of expression that he encountered later through his formal art education at St. Martins in London. Though he did not receive any formal art education during the early years in Kelantan, Khalil's awareness of modern art was cultivated through a period of colonialism and the experiences of pioneering artists from the Nanyang Academy.

Khalil is well known for his amazing watercolour paintings, delicate batik works and intriguing acrylics. His artistic talent began as a young boy with a passion for making wayang kulit. He would make the wayang kulit by drawing on a big leaf with the addition of a cardboard, which would then be used to play with his friends. He took this newfound interest and participated in competitions and shows held almost every month. Unfortunately, his mother disapproved of his newly found passion while his father, wanted him to be a teacher. Despite his parents' disapproval, Khalil remained steadfast to his passion.

In pursuit of his passion, he began attending art classes held every Sunday, in Kota Bharu. The art inspector, Nik Mahmud Idris bestowed upon Khalil the art of watercolour and painting techniques. Equipped with the painting techniques that he learnt in the art classes, he allowed his creativity to blossom, which resulted in the scenic landscapes of the Malaysian East Coast in his works, such as the undulating hills and the padi fields. His works generated the interest of army officers and civil servants who went on to purchase many of the paintings he produced. He was a teacher in a primary school, but he painted in his spare time and he travelled from Kelantan periodically to sell his works at the annual MAHA (Malaysian Agriculture and Horticulture Association) trade fair.



Pahang River Boathouses, 1957  
Oil on canvas 35 x 61cm  
Private Collection



With Tan Sri Khir Johari (circa 1967) at the Parent Teachers Day Celebration at the SMK Temerloh, Pahang. Khalil Ibrahim was an art teacher there for several years upon his return from England.

## THE TEMERLOH HOUSE

Khalil's initially planned to pursue his studies in the arts in Bandung, Indonesia, but his application wasn't successful. That didn't deter him as he achieved his artistic breakthrough some years later in Pahang around 1957. It was during this period that the artist was first introduced to the District Officer, Claude Gibb Ferguson, previously a District Officer in Perak. Ferguson got on very well with the locals as he spoke good Malay, subsequently inviting Khalil to come over to his house and later asked him to paint an image of it, in Temerloh, Pahang.

It wasn't an easy request for Khalil to complete, but he successfully completed it and other commissions followed suit. He eventually adopted the Temerloh Rest House as an impromptu art gallery, due to the number of travelling dignitaries who had the tendency to stop over at the Rest

House, and would view his works there. This time proved to be a significant one for Khalil as his time was filled with creations of new artworks. Some of the artworks he created in 1957 include, Bachok, Pahang River, the Pahang Series consisting of fishing boats, the river and thatched houses.

One of his most notable commissions in that year was the task to paint the portrait of the Sultan of Pahang – Sultan Abu Bakar Ri'aytuddin Al-Mu'adzam Shah, in conjunction of the Sultan's birthday. With the guidance of Claude Gibb Ferguson, Khalil studied English at Clifford School, Kuala Lipis to gain the necessary language skills for him to continue his art studies in England. While studying at Clifford School, the artist submitted some of his works to enter The Malaysian Way of Life – the Lever Brothers art competition, and received the second prize in that competition.



A very young Khalil Ibrahim and Ibrahim Hussein with the cook from the Malaysia Hall. Photo taken outside the Malaysia Hall in 1963. They painted a lot together during his early years there.

### LIFE IN LONDON

Sponsored by the Pahang state government, Khalil continued his studies at the prestigious St. Martins School of Art in London. In the same year, the renowned art critic, Clement Greenberg, visited London and Cornwall, to check out contemporary works of art. The next year, British pop artist Peter Blake joined St. Martins and lectured in the school at the same time Khalil was studying there. David Hockney used to drop by to give the budding art students lectures, and Khalil attended some of those sessions. During his stint there, he continued to study English in evening classes and met the woman who was to be his future wife, Judith Hürzeler, in 1963.

Khalil's 'English' works exposed a comparatively different style from his earlier landscapes and portraits. Influenced by his peers, lecturers, and his foreign surroundings, the early 1960's saw him experimenting with abstraction in works like Destruction and Destruction II and Abstract I. There are distinct influences of Italian Futurism, both in the movement of the subjects and with his works In Geese and the Figurative Study. His interest in Futurism was shortlived when he began painting his own self-portrait and the Temerloh girl in acrylic. His love for Expressionism was clearly portrayed in the Portrait of a Balinese lady. His interest in painting abstraction surfaced in other ways throughout his career as an artist.



Khalil in his flat in London, whilst attending art school at St Martins, 1963



Abstract II, 1968  
Oil on canvas 120 x 95cm  
Private Collection

### POST ART SCHOOL

Over the span of his artistic career, Khalil's abstraction was overshadowed by his other, more naturalistic works when he produced paintings such as 'Pembicaraan III' in 2002, 'Velocity IV' in 2003, 'Tangtu and Pura' in 2003, 'Padang Galak' and 'Pabean' in 2004 and the intriguing ink-on-paper set of images from Bali, Indonesia, The Spirit of the East Coast and Sanur. Upon completing his course for the National Diploma of Design in Fine Arts from St. Martins in 1966, Khalil furthered his education at the University of Malaya and became a qualified art teacher. It was during this time that he painted an oil study reminiscent of the Post-Impressionist works of Paul Gauguin – Temerloh Girl. This work is an acrylic, on board, which has all the feel of Gauguin's oil paintings from the South Seas.

At this point, he had already become close friends with Ibrahim Hussein, while visiting Malaysia Hall, in Bryanston Square, London. Khalil also met another famous painter and poet, at the University of Malaya, which was none other than Latiff Mohidin. In 1968, he was given the opportunity to meet Frank Sullivan, former Press Secretary to Malaysia's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj. Sullivan was a champion of the arts in Malaysia and was instrumental, along with the prime minister, in the creation of Malaysia's National Art Gallery back in 1958.

Sullivan, the first administrator of the National Art Gallery, had set up the Samat Art Gallery in 1966 with his partner Samat Silat, and encouraged Khalil in his painting and batik images. Sullivan was mainly responsible for Khalil's first solo exhibition at the Samat Art Gallery. This followed with numerous solo exhibitions including in Jakarta, the Gallery of Fine Art, Singapore and again at Samat Art Gallery. In 1971, he hosted an exhibition at the Galeries De la fontaine in Geneva and two years later at the Raya Gallery in Victoria, Australia.

In 1977, Khalil had his works touring New Zealand as part of a University of Malaya exhibition.

Khalil was drawn to observing and depicting the hard working lives of ordinary people influenced by his East Coast upbringing. From his earliest works of Pahang fishing villages, thatched roof dwellings, fishermen hauling their catch, to more enigmatic and stylish beach works, he was definitely in touch not only with his own humble origins but with the heart and soul of the country he loved.

He was one of the few Malaysian contemporary artists who had successfully worked using batik as a medium. 'Gadis' painted in 1968, a portrait of a young girl, is a good example of Khalil's batik work, made shortly after his return to Malaysia, while 'Pantai Timur II' painted in 1985 is a very provocative and strong piece using muted colours, but demonstrates the artist's command of line and details, in his chosen medium.

Due to his affiliation with MAS (Malaysia Airlines) in the 1980's, Khalil became actively involved with the Malaysian Watercolour Association, which held successful exhibitions around Asia, including Hong Kong, Japan and Korea. He continued producing watercolours like Beach Vista in 1990, Sunset in 1991, Berserah in 1994, Kota Bharu and the East Coast Series in 1995. In his brief look at Malaysian art, in Modern Malaysian Art – from the pioneering era to the pluralist era (1930s – 1990s).

His selected group exhibitions included X Biennale, Sao Paulo, Brazil (1971) and Man & His World, Montreal Canada (1970). His subsequent solo exhibitions included Khalil Ibrahim 'The Art Journey' (2015), A Tribute to Khalil Ibrahim (2011), Khalil Ibrahim - A Continued Dialogue, Galeri Petronas (2004) and The Spirit of the East Coast, Yayasan Seni Artisan, Kuala Lumpur (2001).



Abstract I, 1968  
Oil on canvas 82 x 64cm  
Private Collection

The past two decades had seen Khalil produce sets of brightly hued watercolour images, acrylics and oils, which have updated his familiar theme of the East Coast beach and young girl series. In his last few watercolours, the viewer is treated to the gaiety of the girls' sarongs and the brightness of their lengthy Malaysian blouses, while they stroll or stand on the beach.

In more recent times, Khalil exhibited around Malaysia and had a number of his works held both in private and public collections including Hilton Hotels, Maybank, Petronas, Bank Negara, and KL Lifestyle Art Space. Wherever his works may be and whichever medium he chose to use, the base of his form and colour was drawing, more specifically the sketches he had always done, culminating in a large number of sketchbooks filled to the very covers with fresh, vibrant sketches.

## REMEMBERING KHALIL IBRAHIM A TRIBUTE EXHIBITION @ KLAS 1 - 17 JUNE 2018



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