

DATUK IBRAHIM HUSSEIN

“Art is, in the end, the thing that makes you realise the beauty of life itself”

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



(I) Man with Possessions, 1964
Oil on canvas 122 x 122 cm

(II) Study for Man with Possessions, 1964
Gouache on magazine page laid to card
24 x 24.8 cm

RM 480,000 - RM 650,000
KLAS Art Auction 30 July 2017
Sale XXVIII

Ibrahim was born in 1936 in the village of Sungai Limau Dalam in the Yan district of Kedah.

Growing up, Ibrahim was a very curious lad. He was constantly in search of meaning. There was a time when he saw a gleaming light from a distant, shining in the middle of the paddy field. Out of curiosity, he ran over to only find that it was the sun's reflection off the zinc roof of a hut. However, he did not regret running over as it satiated his curiosity. It was his thirst in self-discovery which landed him at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore first, then London, to study at the Byam Shaw School of Art.

However, that fuel somehow died down when he first entered the Byam Shaw College; he did not concentrate in class nor lifted a paintbrush. He felt uninspired. Then one day, while he was strolling about the campus, he came about a facility that housed a printing press. He stood in front of that machinery for hours, in complete awe of its function. That piece of machinery sparked the fire that was within him all along, subsequently lifting him from the art daze he was facing; he rushed home to start painting. His hands moved over the

canvas effortlessly, and his ideas materialised in painting, almost as if it had been bursting to come out.

Consequently, he won an award at the end of the school year for the Byam Shaw Award of Merit for three consecutive years. That paved the way for an opportunity that led him to a guest studentship in the Royal Academy Schools. With the Malaysia Hall in Brynston Square, London, as the epicentre, Ibrahim met many fellow Malaysians, including local legend, Khalil Ibrahim with whom he shared a close friendship and a fondness for painting together.

Besides meeting Khalil, another friendship that also blossomed from Ibrahim's days in London was one with Datuk Abu Mansor and Datin Paduka Zaitoon Othman, one of Ibrahim's pioneering collectors. The Mansor's became familiar faces in Ibrahim's exhibitions. Moreover, it was their close-knit friendship that led them to organise Ibrahim's exhibitions in Malaysia. Among their early and prized masterpieces of Ibrahim's is the diptych, 'Now and Again with Flowers'. It was personally hung by Ibrahim, at their Taman Duta residence and remained there for several decades, between late 1973 and 2006.



Datin Paduka Zaitoon Othman with her prized masterpiece of Ibrahim's, the diptych, 'Now and Again with Flowers' at her residence in Taman Duta.



Khalil Ibrahim and Ibrahim Hussein with the Cook from the Malaysia Hall outside the Malaysia Hall (1963)

ARTISTIC APPRECIATION FOR HIS EARLY MASTERPIECES IN LONDON

Many would consider that the 50s and 60s were the period where Ibrahim's works were the most momentous, vibrant and honest, which would explain the fascination of its viewers and the numerous sold-out exhibitions. In his autobiography titled, 'IB: A Life', he mentioned that his life was made of points, textures, colours, shapes, darkness and light, mass, weight, planes, volumes, sounds, smells and warmth, which he seamlessly depicted on his canvases. Ibrahim's works, such

as, the 'Man with Possessions' 1964 illustrates his skill in making his works an extension of himself, packed with vigour and life.

In 1963, Ibrahim walked into a gallery on a whim in London and showed his paintings to its owner who happened to be there. The owner then became fascinated with the artist's works and prompted him to have his first one-man exhibition. Needless to say, the exhibition was a raging success. All of his paintings showcased at the exhibition were sold out by the end of the night.



Reaching Out, 1964
Gouache on magazine page laid to card
25.4 x 22.9 cm
Collection of Simon Wong



Two Figures, 1972
Acrylic on paper 35 x 30 cm
Private collection Kuala Lumpur



Untitled, 1968
Mixed media on paper 28 x 25.5 cm
Private collection Kuala Lumpur



Jelly Fish, 1967
Oil on canvas 141.6 x 146.4 cm
Private collection Kuala Lumpur

FIRST MALAYSIAN ARTIST TO HOLD A SOLO EXHIBITION IN NEW YORK

With the earnings from his pioneer exhibition, Ibrahim decided to embark on a journey to the United States, along with fifty of his gouaches. A few days' post-arrival in the US, Ibrahim paid a visit to a Mr Lauda, the European editor of Sports Illustrated magazine then. Lauda took a liking to the paintings and immediately called his colleagues in Time Magazine, including a critic to view the artist's gouaches. The critic came and introduced a couple of potential galleries that would be interested in Ibrahim's gouaches. Thus, the next day, Ibrahim set forth to a gallery which almost immediately signed him to a contract with them. All that this talented artist asked was for

his gouaches to be sold in order for him to prolong his visit in the US. Luck would have it that in a mere couple of days, Ibrahim received a call from the gallery owner, Mr. Calfino asking him to drop by. When the artist did, he was astonished as well as amazed to find out that his remaining gouaches were sold for a whopping US \$10,000. In April 1964, Ibrahim was to have his first one-man exhibition in New York. Soon after the painter's success in selling his gouaches, he travelled all over US, discovering the beauty of each state. He was ecstatic about his journey and all that he had discovered. With a few hundred dollars left in his pocket, all his gouaches sold and a solo exhibition awaiting him the following year, he returned to London and the Royal Academy, contented.



Mother and Child, 1964
Gouache on magazine page 33 x 25 cm
Private collection Kuala Lumpur



Untitled, March 27, 1975
Acrylic on canvas 73 x 61 cm
Private collection Kuala Lumpur



Window Cleaner, 1964
Gouache on magazine page 26 x 25 cm
Private collection Kuala Lumpur

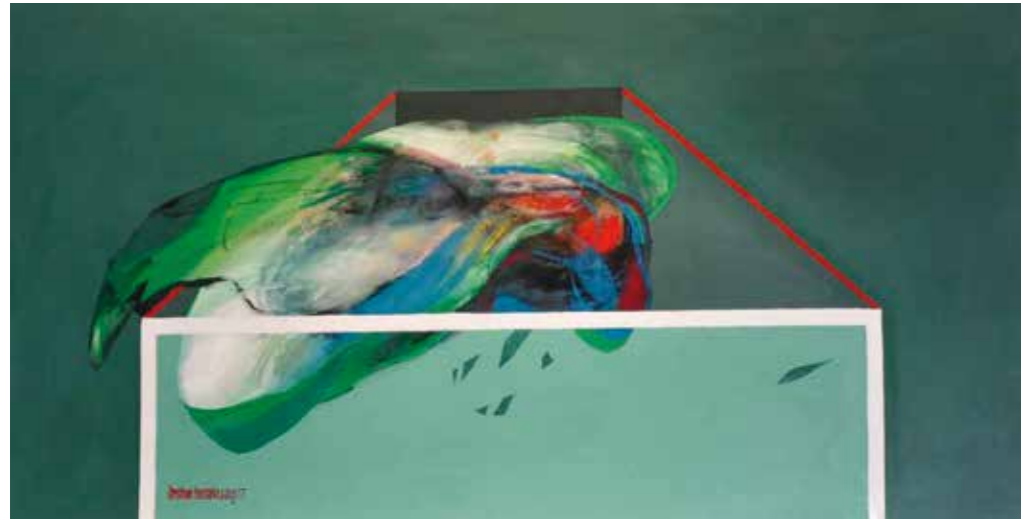


The Traveller, 1964
Gouache on magazine page 29 x 19 cm
Private collection Kuala Lumpur

IBRAHIM THE JOHN D III ROCKEFELLER SCHOLAR

The long-awaited moment then came for Ibrahim to travel back to New York, for his one-man show. In New York in the 1960s, it was fashionable for a gallery to host a dinner at a Chinese restaurant after the cocktails and champagne. At the dinner, he discovered that one of the guests who attended his exhibition was the director of the John D. Rockefeller Fund. With the New York exhibition, he realised that things had surpassed anything he expected from life and that he thoroughly enjoyed himself. After the exhibition, he returned to London to continue studying at the Royal Academy.

Ibrahim left for New York again in 1967 to attend further training under the Fullbright Travelling Scholarship and the John D III Rockefeller Fund Fellowship which ended in 1968. He was told that his presence in New York was to experience the life and culture there. He could buy anything his heart desired as he was given an allowance to do so. Needless to say, he was gratified



Untitled, 1977
Acrylic on board 59 x 120 cm
Private collection Kuala Lumpur



Multiple Figures, 1976
Mixed media on wooden barrel
10 cm (Diameter) 19 cm (Height)
Private collection Kuala Lumpur



Catita, 1965
Acrylic on canvas
173 x 161.5 cm
Collection of Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin

and agreeable to the arrangement because after all, painting was joy and not something to agonise over. Overjoyed about his life then, Ibrahim was inspired to produce paintings in a very swift manner. While in New York, he had serendipitously met several public figures such as Mrs. John Rockefeller Prentice, actress Colleen Moore, Ravi Shankar and Saul Steinberg (a famous New York cartoonist). It was during this period that Ibrahim Hussein stumbled upon the method of 'printage', a combination of printing and collage which he developed further with his maverick style.

The idea of 'printage' came about because he became aware that America, New York especially, was a country dotted by billboards. The billboards were ubiquitous, adorned by beautiful women to

sell all kinds of products. That sparked an idea to use images as a social commentary. Before he mastered the technique, plenty of trial and errors were involved. The 'printage' technique uses a mixture of chemicals which allows images to be transferred from printed paper onto canvas. There are depths and antiquity through striations that run through the transferred images.

IBRAHIMS EXPLORES ASIA

In 1969, Ibrahim made a trip to Siem Reap, Cambodia. Without distractions, he headed straight for the ancient ruins of Angkor Wat. The ancient temple complex was so majestic and magnificent that it left him overwhelmed and in awe. "I imagined how exotic life must have been then. There were vast spaces for dancers to perform for the king or prince, great pools and everywhere there was a sense of glory. I thought of why and how this city was built in the middle of nowhere. The surroundings, the landscape was not unlike my own village but here was a city of temples that had been created. Why?", he had said in his book, 'IB: A Life'. The artist's fascination with the Angkor Wat resulted in him painting the image of this grandiose ruins, with an image of Pol Pot (Cambodian politician and revolutionary who led the Khmer Rouge) emerging from a crack in the ruins.

Then, the tragic incident of May 13, 1969 struck in Malaysia and Ibrahim's heart sank, thinking about home, thoughts trailing back to Sungai Limau Dalam. He watched the tragedy unfold, from the opposite end of the world, feeling helpless. The turmoil in Malaysia was the reason he left New York; he wanted to help his home country. The racial riots demonstrated to the artist that there was more he could do through art. He returned to Malaysia where certain parts of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor were under curfew and looking like ghost towns. One morning, Ibrahim decided to walk about a deserted Petaling Street and came about a shop selling flags. He then placed an order for the Malaysian flag which then materialised into an entire series of paintings, in reference to the May 13 incident. Through his paintings, he was able to offer his depiction on sensitive topics such as religion, corruption, the false promises of politicians, and religious fanaticism.

In the May 13 series, the central figure and subject that Ibrahim turned to was his father, portraying him in his work, 'My Father and the Astronaut' and in the role of a poor farmer in the painting 'Pak Utih', titled after Usman Awang's poem. The artist's return to his home country and his May 13 series incident grabbed the attention of Ungku Aziz (then vice-chancellor of Universiti Malaya), who invited Ibrahim to



Squatting Figure in Landscape, 1964
Gouache on magazine page
22.5 x 25 cm
Private collection Kuala Lumpur



Assembly of Figures, 1964
Gouache on magazine page laid on card
26.4 x 21.3 cm
Private collection Kuala Lumpur

Untitled, 1960s
Oil on board 41 x 16.5 cm
Private collection Kuala Lumpur

hold an exhibition at Dewan Tunku Canselor. The artist agreed almost instantly and requested for the then Prime Minister, Tun Razak Hussain to officially open the exhibition for the simple reason, it was a social commentary or rather, his social commentary.

On the morning of the exhibition day, however, misfortune struck and armed policemen fetched Ibrahim to Parliament House to meet with the prime minister. He was naturally perplexed and later found out that there was an issue with one of his paintings, the piece with the Malaysian flag in it. Ibrahim had painted it black, put a red line on it and then a circle below it in white. The black canvass represented the dark tragic situation the nation was in, the red line represented he twilight after darkness and the white circle a bright day and renewed energy. Prime Minister Tun Razak was under the impression that Ibrahim had tarnished the national flag on purpose. However, after clarification on Ibrahim's thought process and the underlying meaning behind the series, he was

given the green light to proceed with the exhibition. The exhibition was undoubtedly a success. You will find this painting on display at the Ibrahim Hussain Museum & Cultural Foundation.

"The exhibition was the result of a whole series of coincidences that finally brought me back to Malaysia and led me to this moment. From my work and paintings I could have stayed anywhere in the world and the world had, in fact, become a very small place for me. I had never taken much of an interest in politics but it was a political event that brought me back here"

"I would consider my paintings to be about life, celebrations of life, justice, the joys and disappointments. Painting is, if I could borrow from my brother Abdullah, "Like a vehicle or trolley, where I could sit and sit and travel with it, and during the journey encounter all kinds of things." he had said.