

# SPIRIT OF THE EAST COAST

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by Ismail Mat Hussin



*Wau Series, 1983  
94m x 105cm. Batik*

Ismail Mat Hussin approaches the batik medium with laborious techniques which encapsulate the elegance of Malaysian life in the east coast of the peninsula, predominantly painting village scenes familiar to most Malaysians with their people as his subjects: villagers going about their daily activities; scenes of a typical bustling market; children playing and village folks at leisure. There is distinct warmth and expression in his unique batik art, which transcends the ethnic divide.



## ISMAIL MAT HUSSIN

### Batik Art

Batik as a garment has been worn for centuries by inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago, the patterns settling by the 20th century into a collection of floral and geometric motifs etched in hues of brown, black, cream, red and green. Scholars say India pioneered batik in the first century and exported it widely.

It is Java, however, that has had the greatest impact on the evolution of the batik industry in many parts of the world. Pesisir batik, a product of coastal towns in Java that came under the influence of Arab, Chinese and Dutch traders, is more vibrantly coloured. The colours come from natural dyes extracted from flowers, berries, leaves, tree barks, earth and sand. It became the particular favourite of the Peranakan Chinese, colonial-era Dutch and Eurasians. Malaysian batik has been influenced by Javanese batik since the 14th century, some experts claim. Certainly, batik is recorded in the Malay Annals of the 16th century, worn by royalty.

Modern Malaysian batik has its roots in the 1920s, when Javanese batik designers introduced their designs and techniques to parts of Peninsular Malaysia, where they took hold in the east coast states. The Javanese favoured hand-drawn patterns and brought wax and copper blocks that the local folk experimented with.

Malaysian sarung and shirts became the most popular garments made from the craft of dripping wax onto cotton fabrics to render the waxed areas resistant to dyes that were subsequently poured on the fabrics. How crinkled the finished batik looked depended on the wax used. For example, paraffin wax broke easily and didn't adhere as well to the fabric as other waxes did, leaving spider veins or "crackling" that is a batik characteristic.



*A 1977 newspaper clipping on batik artwork from Ismail Mat Hussin's sketchbook*



*Wax burners and tools used by Ismail Mat Hussin in the studio*



*Chuah Thean Teng's influence seen here on a sketch by Ismail Mat Hussin*

In the 1950s, local artists took up batik painting. Art reviewers consider the late Datuk Chuah Thean Teng (1914-2008), an immigrant from China living in Penang, as the foremost pioneer of batik painting in Malaysia. Chuah took up fine art in 1953, learning from his brother's former factory workers (Indonesians) how the waxes and dyes had to be applied. Other artists followed suit, among them a renowned Malaysian master, Khalil Ibrahim and a whole list of other seniors including Patrick Ng Kah Onn, Ida Ruth Tallala, Hse Te Hsein, Koay Soo Kau, Syed Shaharuddin Syed Bakeri, Tay Mo Leong, Lim Khoo Hock, Osman Mansor, Ahmad Nashidi Ismail, Yusof Abdullah, Muhammad Jusoh, Rozana Mohamed, Mat Desa Mat Rodzi and Ismail Mat Hussin. Cotton is the age-old traditional fabric that they used mostly, but batik painting has evolved to encompass silk twill today.

Contrasting the batik paintings of Khalil and the 20-years-old Chuah in 2007, Malaysian photographer and artist Yee I-Lann wrote: "Batik is humble in its very nature and this permeates the paintings ... these paintings are also oxymora – humble epic declarations of national identities. Batik wraps the figuring. This is our Malaysian identity and it is comfortable."

Batik painting is a unique art form, requiring of its maker two separate and distinct skills of being able to visualise designs and translate that on fabric, then wax the fabric and paint on the coloured dyes with an exactitude that leaves no margin for error. The more complex the design, the more tedious the process of endlessly waxing and dyeing in turn. All mistakes are permanent.

### Ismail Mat Hussin

Ismail Mat Hussin is today said to be Malaysia's most senior living master of batik painting. Born in Pantai Sabak, Kota Bharu, Kelantan in 1938, he developed an interest in painting at 12. He took up weekly art painting classes at Padang Garong Malay School under the tutelage of Cikgu Nik Mahmood between 1954 and 1955.

His creativity was further enhanced through music. He

took up the violin in 1962 and obtained a Grade V certificate in the instrument from The Royal School of Music London. Being able to play a musical instrument allowed him to sustain his creative interest in painting. As well, he was able to support himself by becoming a part-time musician with Radio Televisyen Malaysia Kota Bharu.

Three years later, in 1968, he took the plunge and took up painting full-time. At that time, experimentation with batik painting among artists in Malaysia was building strongly. Ismail's mentor was Khalil Ibrahim. Ismail became very good at batik painting, having patience in spades and an innate talent for



*Study of movement II (1981)  
Pen & Ink on Paper*



*Khalil Ibrahim Kelantanese (1968) Batik  
36cm x 45cm*



*Ismail Mat Hussin and his mentor, Khalil Ibrahim*

combining warm tones and earthy hues from a restricted palette of colours to depict everyday rural scenes with lively good humour.

Khalil was trained in rendering human figures and Ismail followed suit, but he did not embrace Khalil's lightly stylised depiction of them. Looking at Ismail's batik paintings, one sees real-looking people rather than the doll-like figures that Chuah favoured. To draw them into the spotlight Khalil tends to juxtapose the figures against vibrant solid colours whereas Ismail dulls the background surroundings.

Ismail's trademark is heavy limbs with the muscles rendered mosaic-like on every part of the body that is visible. In outlining the muscles, Khalil's influence can be seen but Khalil does not "break" the muscles into pieces. Languid postures and fluidity in the movements of the figures is apparent in the works of both Khalil and Ismail. Recently, KL Lifestyle Art Space sent Ismail a photograph

of his batik painting "Playing Gasing" (1982). Ismail told us that it was Khalil Ibrahim's painting. KL Lifestyle Art Space had to send Ismail a photograph of his signature on "Playing Gasing" before he would acknowledge that the painting was his!

Ismail's batik paintings may be found in the art collections of the National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur, Petronas, Bank Negara Malaysia, ESSO Malaysia and Maybank among others, including a clutch full of notable individuals. They include N.A. Rahman, Tan Sri Abdullah Ayob, Muhammad Haji Saleh and Tan Sri Eric Chia.

For a short spell in the 1990s, Ismail also worked as a graphic designer and illustrator for the Kota Bharu-based Syarikat Percetakan Dian. He has created a MAS-TDC calendar for Malaysia Airlines and the Tourist Development Corporation, designed playing cards for Malaysia Airlines and been featured in an ESSO advertisement.



*Khalil with a batik artwork from the 1970s*



*"Playing Gasing" (1982) Batik 92cm x 105cm*



## ABOUT KL LIFESTYLE ART SPACE

Datuk Gary Thanasan

Chief Executive Officer of KL Lifestyle Art Space

**K**L Lifestyle Art Space's chief goal is to offer another avenue for the local public and visitors to view Modern and Contemporary artworks from Malaysia and the region beyond the institutions and existing art spaces. We have been fortunate to have secured a couple of prime locations in the Klang Valley: on the ground floor at Tropicana City Mall in Petaling Jaya and the ground floor of 150, Jalan Maarof, Bukit Bandaraya in Kuala Lumpur. KLAS' visibility is high and its accessibility at both locations will no doubt encourage many walk-ins, thereby raising public awareness of Modern and Contemporary Art.

The Malaysian visual art scene is growing rapidly. However, we believe more needs to be done to propel it to the same heights as many of our Asian neighbours, such as China, India, Indonesia and even Thailand. It is KLAS' intention to bring the country's visual art scene one step closer to or, even, one step ahead of those of our neighbours. *Our Being*, a solo exhibition by Jeihan Sukmantoro, a highly reputable senior artist from Bandung, Indonesia, marks KLAS' foray into promoting artworks by renowned artists from the region.

As a commercial gallery space, we hope to encourage a secondary market for Malaysian art, particularly for Modern or pioneer works from established senior artists and masters from Malaysia and the region. These chiefly constitute artworks created up till the 1960s and many will be surprised to know that these artworks, as well as artworks by these pioneering artists, are still attainable at relatively affordable prices.

KLAS will also provide the service of receiving consignments from artists or individual collectors, thereby making their artworks available to interested parties. This will no doubt increase the chances of serious collectors acquiring those hard-to-secure pieces from specific periods, series or individuals and in the process encourage fresh, young collectors.

All art collections have to begin somewhere. What matters most is the steps that follow and, as all serious collectors know, it is important to deal with a reputable source. KL Lifestyle Art Space offers an assurance of legitimacy for all the artworks that pass through our doors. Acquisitions made through KLAS will come complete with a certificate of authenticity bearing the original signature of the artist. If it is a posthumous work, then a guarantee of authenticity will be made through an appropriate governing body for a token sum.

KLAS has its presence on the Internet too, a comprehensive website at [www.kl-lifestyle.com.my/artspace](http://www.kl-lifestyle.com.my/artspace) that details previous and on-going exhibitions and which includes a stockroom with an inventory of artworks for sale.

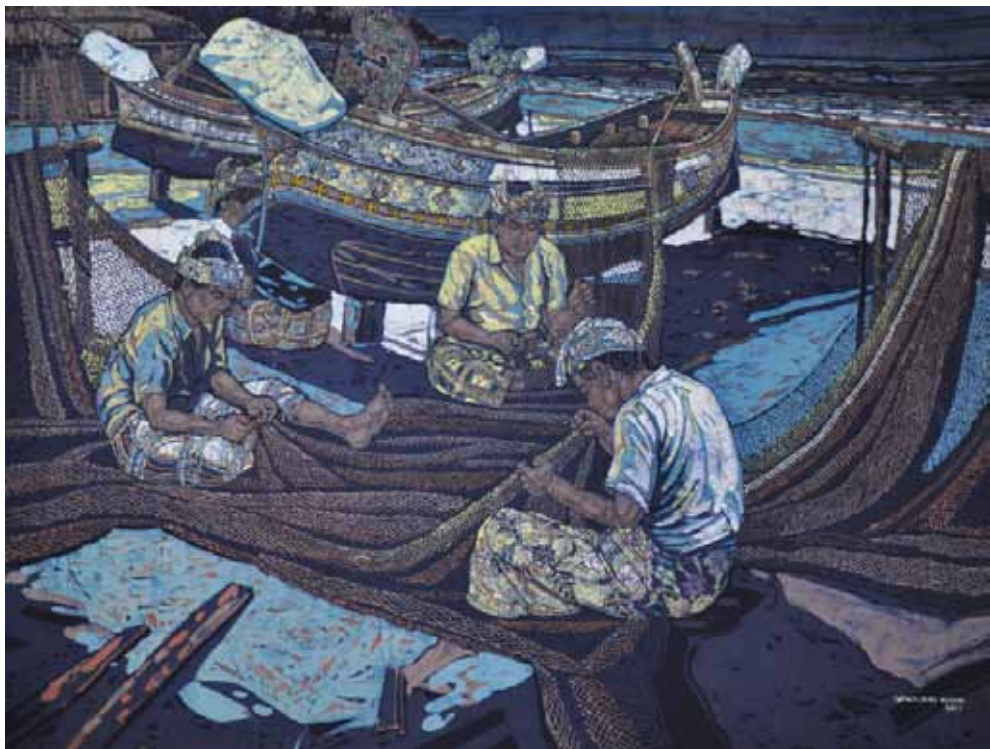
We look forward to seeing you at KL Lifestyle Art Space.

Datuk Gary Thanasan

Chief Executive Officer of KL Lifestyle Art Space

BATIK



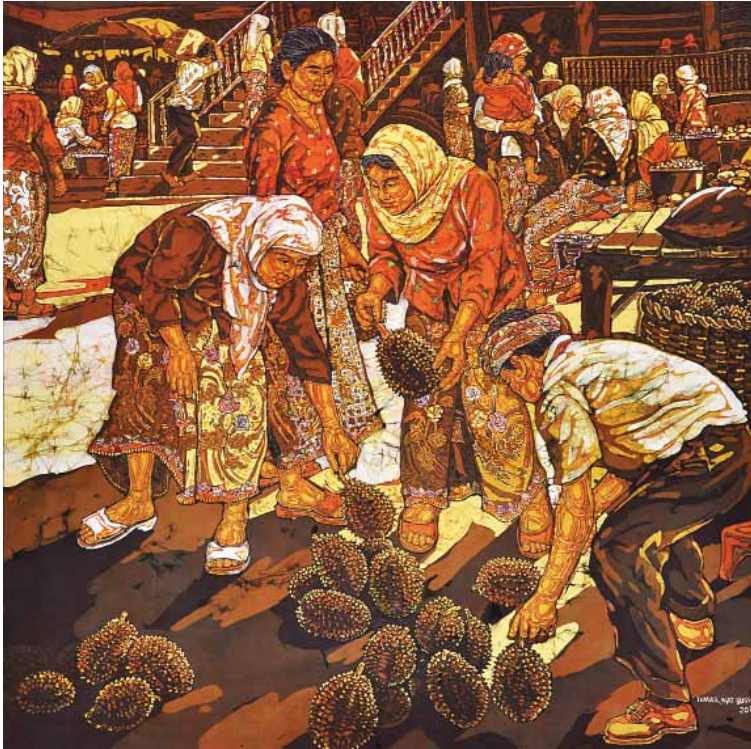


Pantai Sabak Fisherman, 2011 | Batik | 118cm x 142cm



Pantai Sabak Fishing Village, 2011 | Batik | 118cm x 143cm





Kota Bharu Market, 2011 | Batik | 122cm x 122cm



Pounding Rice, 2010 | Batik | 65cm x 60.5cm



Pounding Rice III, 2010 |Batik I 65cm x 60.5cm

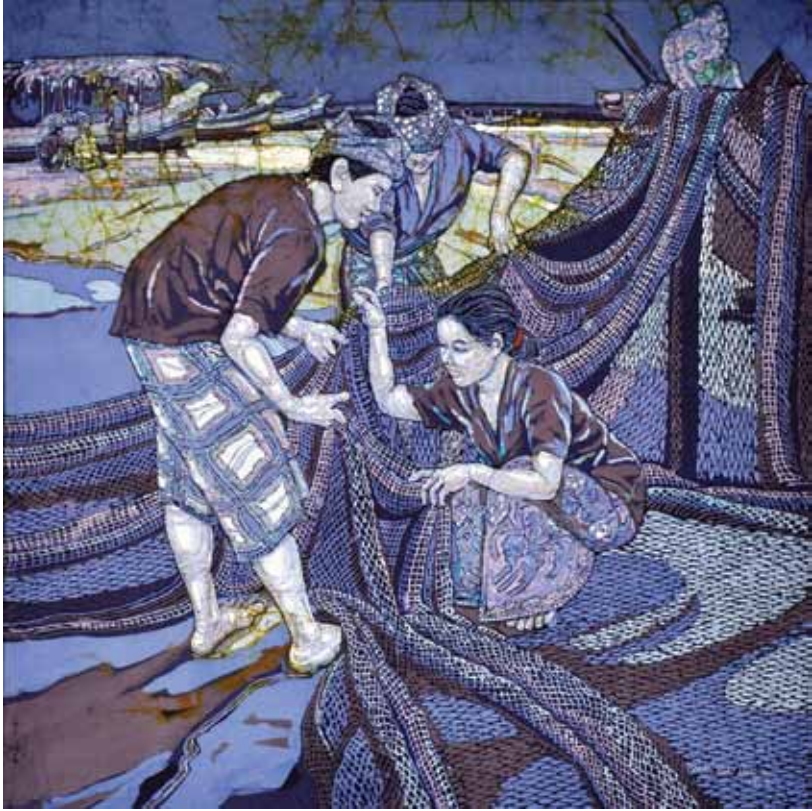


Weaving, 2010 | Batik | 65cm x 60.5cm





The Boats, 2010 | Batik | 75cm x 149cm



East Coast - Knitting Fishing Nets, 2008 |Batik | 105cm x 105cm





Pantai Sabak Fishermen, 2008 | Batik | 76cm x 76cm



Wayang Kulit, 2006 | Batik | 81cm x 76cm



Pounding Rice, 2004 |Batik | 88cm x 95cm



Durian Seller, 2000 | Batik I 101cm x 106cm





Playing Gasing, 2000 | Batik | 98cm x 104cm



Scrapping Coconut, 1995 | Batik | 116cm x 95cm





Wau Series, 1983 | Batik | 94cm x 105cm



Sarawakian Native, 1983 | Batik I 94cm x 105cm



Birds, 1982 | Batik | 88cm x 94cm



Pounding Rice, 1982 | Batik | 94cm x 106cm





Playing Gasing, 1982 |Batik | 92cm x 105cm



Wayang Kulit, 1982 | Batik | 88cm x 94cm

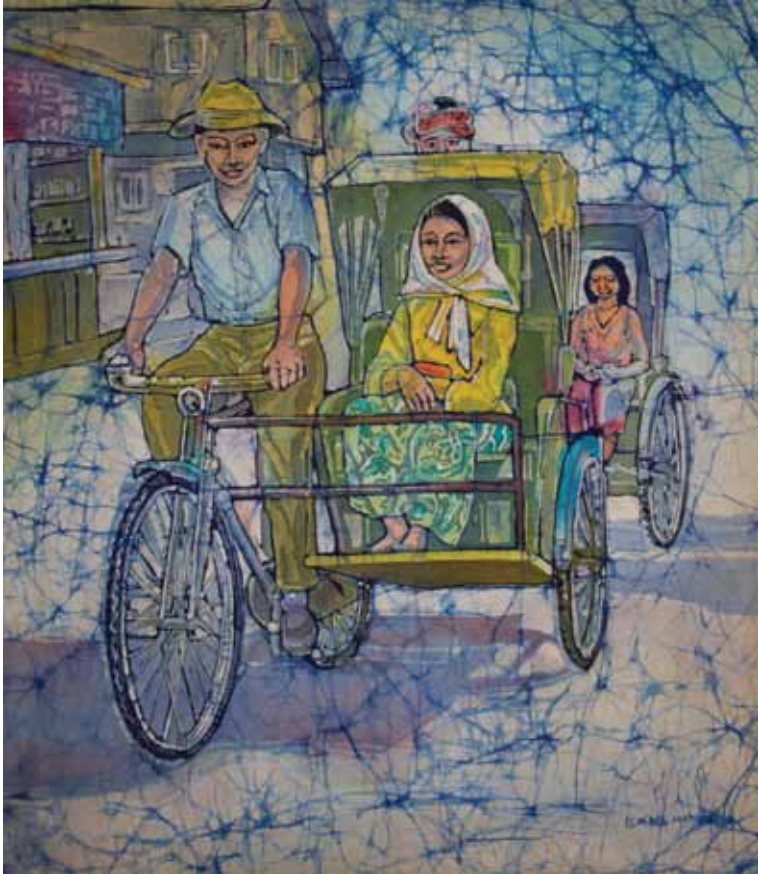




Wayang Kulit, 1980 | Batik | 88cm x 94cm



Knitting Net, 1974 | Batik | 52cm x 63cm



Trishaw, 1974 | Batik | 57cm x 50cm



Vegetable Seller, 1974 | Batik | 57cm x 50cm

WATERCOLOUR ON  
PAPER





Pokok Kelapa di Tepi Pantai, 2008 | Watercolour on Paper | 54cm x 36.5cm





Pelikat Weaving, 2003 | Watercolour on paper | 53.5cm x 73.5cm



Stamping, 2003 | Watercolour on paper | 53.5cm x 73.5cm



Weaving, 2003 | Watercolour on paper | 53.5cm x 73.5cm





Pantai Sabak, 1976 | Watercolour on paper | 29cm x 42cm

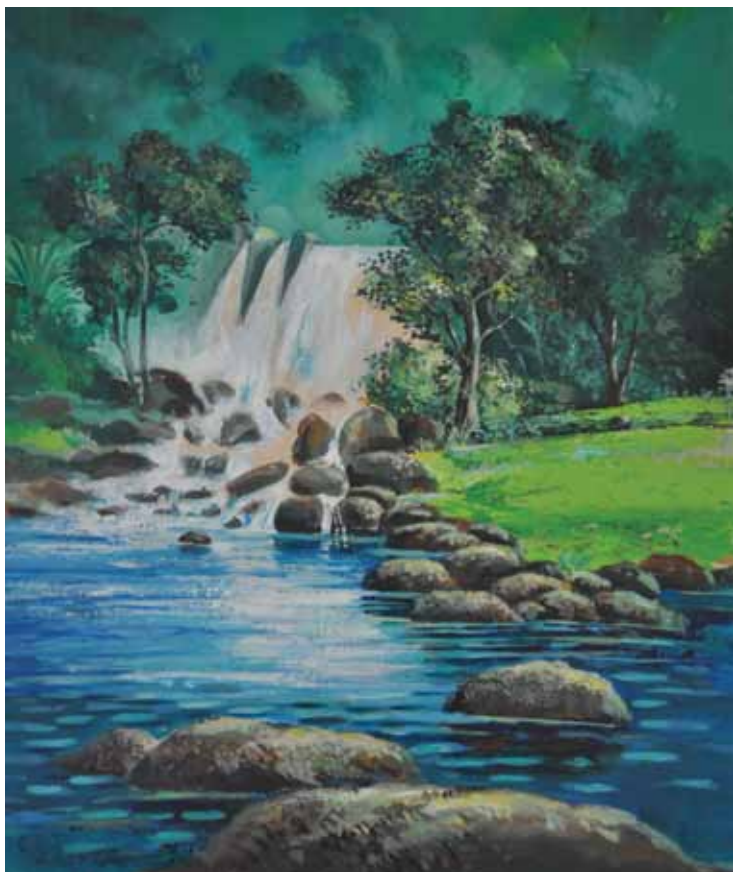




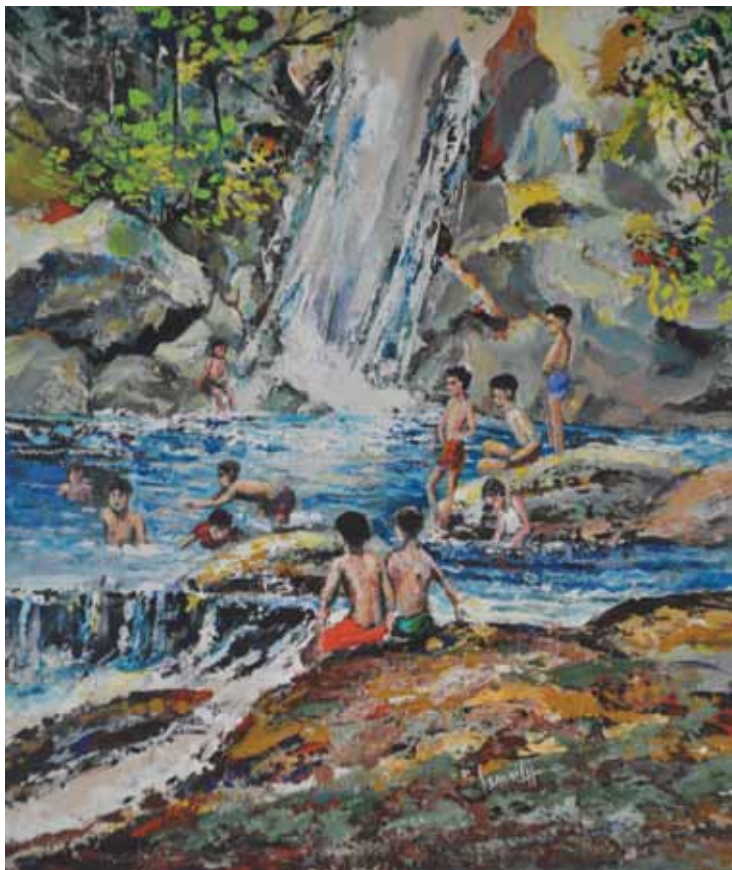
Wakaf, 1976 | Watercolour on paper | 27.5cm x 39.5cm



East Coast Village, 1974 | Watercolour on paper | 27cm x 39.5cm



Imaginary waterfall, 1974 | Watercolour on paper | 17.5cm x 13cm



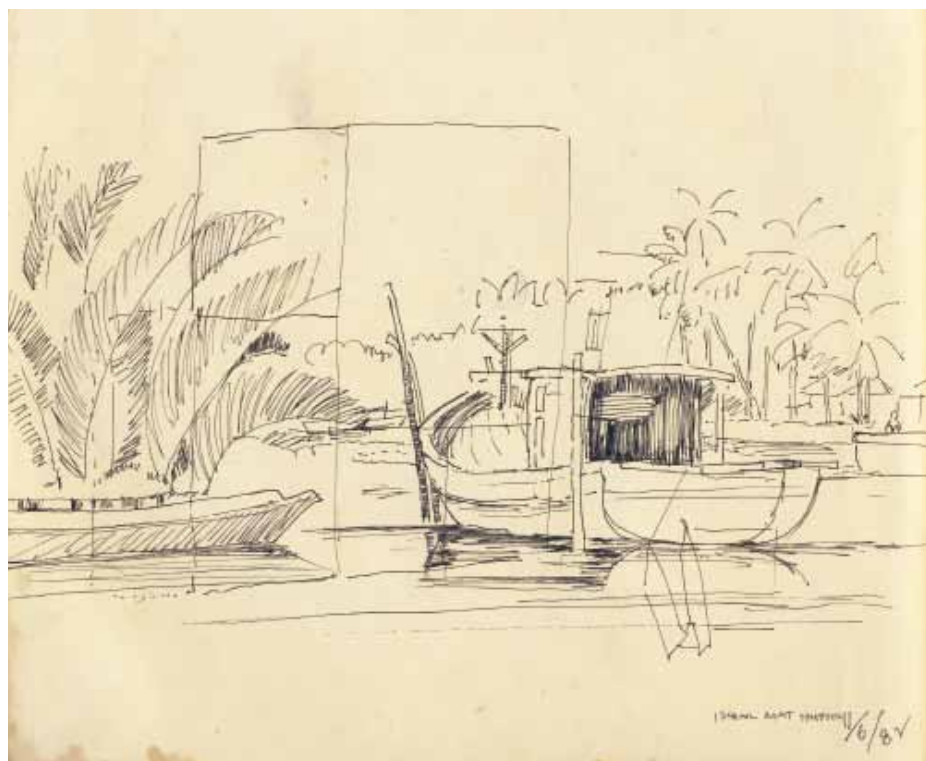
Picnic at the waterfal, 1974 | Watercolour on paper | 23.5cm x 20cm





Tin Miners, 1974 | Watercolour on paper | 16cm x 14cm

# SKETCHBOOK



Study of boat and river, 1982 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Sabak, 1982 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm





Tumpat, 1982 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Study of movement, 1981 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Study of movement I, 1981 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Study of movement II, 1981 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm





Kg. Besut, 1980 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Village scene, 1980 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Kg. Besut Tumpat, 1980 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Melawi, 1980 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Kuala Kemasin, 1980 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm





Kuala Kemasin, 1980 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Kg. Besut, 1980 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



**Top: Study of movement, 1975 & Bottom: English, 1980**

Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Kuala Besar, 1979 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Sabak, 1978 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm





Left: Study of figures, 1968 & Right: Study of figure, 1978

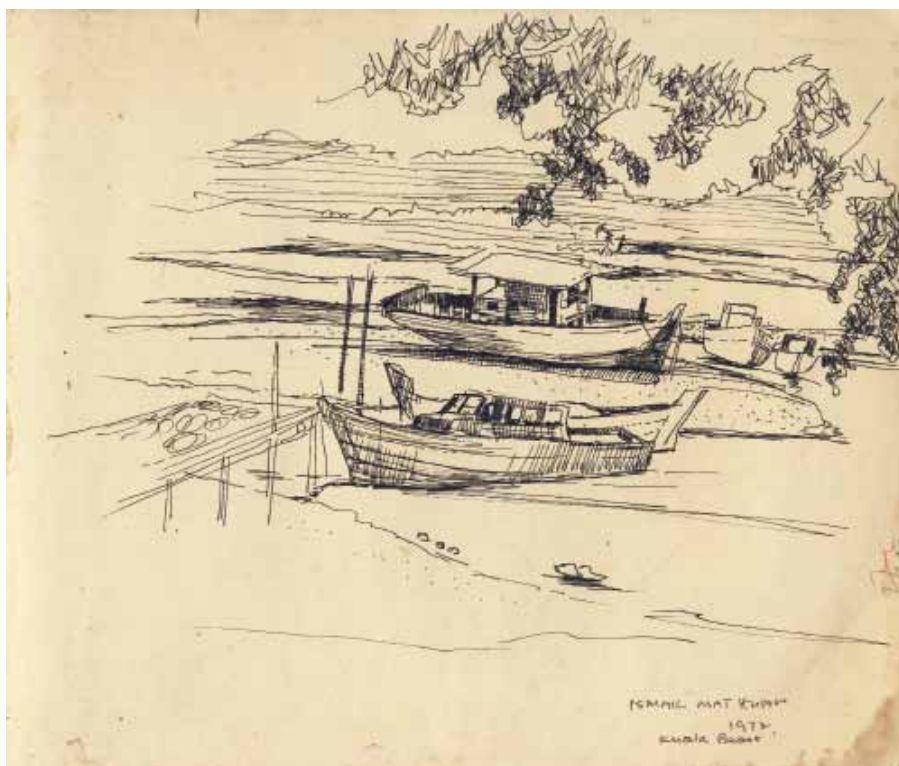


**Study of movement, 1975** | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Study of movement/dancers, 1974 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm





Kuala Besar, 1972 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm





Top: Wayang kulit musicians, 1971 & Bottom: Wayang kulit musicians, 1972

Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Wakaf, 1971 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Study of movement/wau, 1971 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Pantai Melawi, 1971 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Left: Study of mother and child, 1971 | 7.7 cm x 10.4cm  
 Right: Study of mother and child, 1971 | 20.2cm x 24.5cm  
 Pen & Ink on Paper





**Dancers, 1970** | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Study of movement/wau, 1970 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



**Top: Study of leaves I, 1970 & Bottom: Study of leaves II, 1970**

Pen & Ink on Paper I 20.2cm x 24.5cm

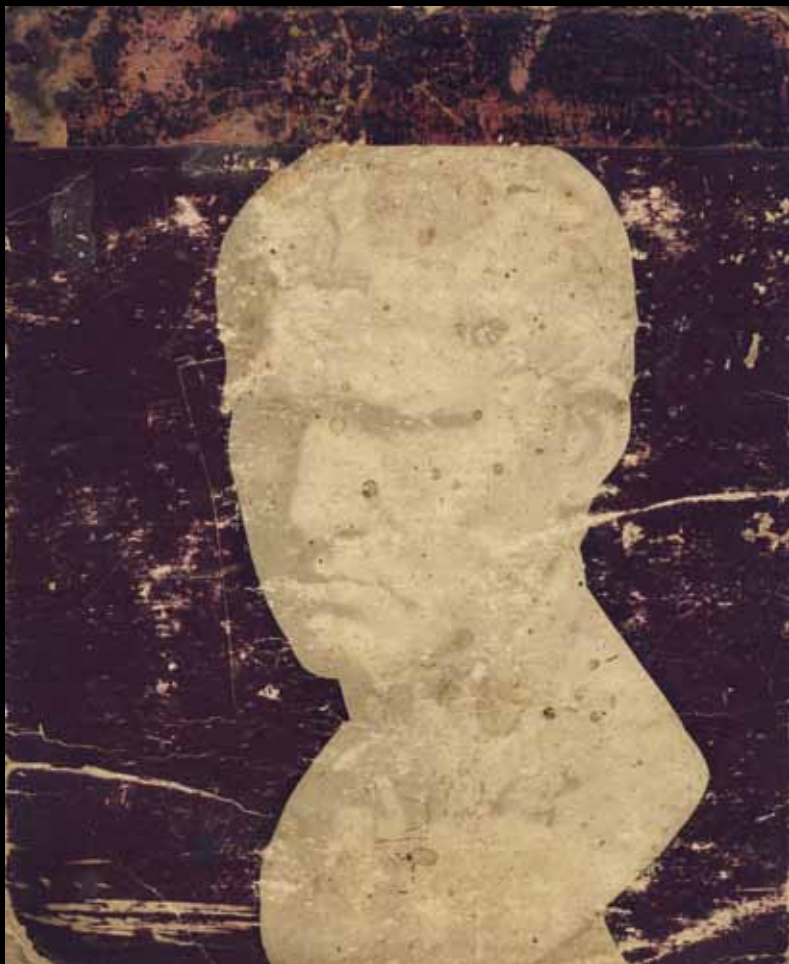


**Weaving, 1969** | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm



Study of mother and child, 1969 | Pen & Ink on Paper | 20.2cm x 24.5cm





## NEWSPAPER & MAGAZINE CLIPPINGS

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FROM ISMAIL MAT HUSSIN'S  
1968-1982 SKETCH BOOK



"Festival"





*This colourful abstract, a 1971 work in gouache, is entitled "Deserted Hut"*



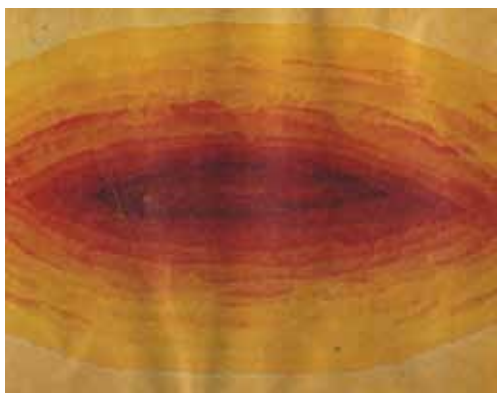
*In a different style, "Growth" is a 1969 acrylic*





"The Sea"





"Sunflower"







## ISMAIL MAT HUSSIN'S EXHIBITIONS

- 1960: Pameran anjuran Kelab Senilukis bersama Kelab Senifoto, Kota Bharu di Dewan Pengakap Kota Bharu
- 1968: Pameran APS (Cawangan Kelantan) di Dewan Pengakap, Kota Bharu.
- 1969: Pameran salon Malaysia di Balai Senu Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1979: Pameran salon Malaysia di Balai Senu Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1980: Pameran Expo Islam Maal Hijrah 1400, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1980: Pameran anjuran Persatuan Senilukis Kelantan ( PESENI ) di Dewan PPK, Kota Bharu.
- 1981: Pameran PESENI di Pejabat Penerangan dan Pelancongan Negeri Kelantan, Kota Bharu.
- 1983: Pameran PESENI di Dewan Pandu Puteri, Kota Bharu.
- 1985: Pameran "Self-taught Artist" di Capital Insurance Berhad, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1988: Pameran sempena pembukaan Balai Seni Lukis Negeri Kelantan.
- 1989: Pameran terbuka Balai Seni Lukis Negeri Kelantan.
- 1993: Pameran berkumpulan di Muzium Negeri Kelantan.
- 1993: Pameran "Bosnia" di Galeri Petronas Kuala Lumpur.
- 2000: Pameran Citarasa 2000 di Bank Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 2004: Pameran bersama PESENI dan MWO di Kota Bharu.
- 2004: Pameran pelukis-pelukis Kelantan di Gallery Maybank, Kuala Lumpur.
- 2004: Pameran di The Legend Hotel, Kuala Lumpur.
- 2004: Pameran di Gallery Metro, Kuala Lumpur
- 2011: Pameran "East Coast Native" di KL Lifestyle Art Space, Kuala Lumpur

### Collectors

- Pejabat SUK Kelantan
- National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur
- Bank Negara Malaysia
- Secretary General PATA
- Petronas Gallery
- Kelantan Art Gallery
- ESSO Head Office, Kuala Lumpur
- Toyota Company, Pattani, Thailand
- Malaysia Airline System (MAS), Kuala Lumpur
- N.A.Rahman (NAR Tenggara Bina Sdn Bhd)
- National Museum Kuala Lumpur
- Maybank, Kuala Lumpur
- Tan Sri Abdullah Ayob
- Muhammad Haji Saleh
- Tan Sri Eric Chia