

YUSOF GHANI

MASTER OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSION

Focus on the rare and sought after 'Protest' and 'Tari' Series

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 VENUE : TAPAK GALLERY

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Yusof Ghani, born in 1950 in Johor, is a Malaysian painter, sculptor, writer, professor and curator and an art collector himself. His career spans almost four decades which has produced a very diverse series of artworks dealing with Southeast Asian motifs with an Abstract Expressionist approach. His works blend painting and drawing into a visual entity that is pleasing to the eye of its beholder.

As a young boy in a small town in Johor, Yusof enjoyed watching movies in a small cinema close to his house that was run by a family member. Watching Western movies such as cowboy films developed his interest in painting to depict visual movements and a sense of time in his pictures early on. Yusof was in graphic art for ten years. Between 1969 and 1979, he worked as an illustrator for a publishing firm for two years followed by six years as an instructor in technical drawings with the Fisheries Institute before joining TV Malaysia as a graphic artist.

He enjoyed graphic art and managed to obtain a government grant to study the subject at George Mason University in Virginia, USA in 1979. However, he became fascinated with neo art after he met Walter Kravitz, a professor in painting at the university, in 1980. After the meeting, he began to take elective courses in painting. Kravitz was his early influence. Then, he became enthralled in the works of American Abstract Expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning.

The following year, he took advanced studies under Kravitz who also brought him to visit artists' studios in New York. Yusof was hooked. After he graduated with a degree in graphic art, he decided to continue with his post-graduate studies in neo art. In 1982, he managed to get the opportunity to do so at the Catholic University in Washington, D.C. It was there that he met the professor in painting, Tom Nakashima. Nakashima is a superb artist and taught him the finer points of painting. Yusof was really inspired by him.

Years later, he is still actively painting in his tree house-like studio at Tapak Gallery and still, producing magnificent works. Painting with emotions and mood, the artist embarks on a dance with his canvas, exploring linear strokes, harmony and composition.

"Sometimes you get a little bit angry, then you start to paint differently, the colours you use, the energy is also different," the artist pointed out. "Sometimes, there's a force that pushes you to a level that is much heavier, with feelings of more pain, more aggression, more energy. I just follow the force. I never try to control, I let it go. And that's the interesting part. It's like a dialogue between you and the painting."

One might wonder if this legendary artist has a favourite artist? The answer is yes. His favourite Malaysian artist is undoubtedly Latiff Mohidin. Yusof mentioned that Latiff is the best local artist because of his spirit, thought process and style. "His style of painting and use of colours and composition is fascinating to me; his Pago Pago works are incredible and my favourite," said Yusof.



PROTEST SERIES WASHINGTON, USA - WE ARE IN THE SYSTEM, 1983
Oil on canvas 118 x 158 cm

PROTEST SERIES

Yusof Ghani was considered a good student when he was studying in the US. Evidently shown through his continuous hard work of meeting and fulfilling academic requirements at school, his passion for art also led him to step outside the university's perimeter to participate in bigger, important social events, all the while keeping his art at the very crux of it.

It was in 1983 that he became involved with a radical group of artists in Washington D.C, who protested against American interference in the internal affairs of neighbouring countries. Civil war and intervention by America in Nicaragua and El Salvador triggered reactions in cities in the US, and in Yusof, who was at the time, studying at Catholic University.

Appalled by these blatant political tactics and the discrimination, Yusof began expressing his thoughts and opinions by producing artworks for an exhibition with a number of artists registering their protest against America's involvement in the war. Its goals were to raise consciousness, to affect public opinion, and to express the cultural sector's outrage at the Reagan Administration's disastrous policies in Central America. Funds raised from the events and the sale of artworks would support cultural work in Nicaragua as well as education and unions in El Salvador and, in some cities, medical aid to El Salvador or Guatemalan refugees.

The protest-exhibition was titled 'American Intervention in Nicaragua and El Salvador' and the works produced by Yusof were then coined 'protest paintings'. The exhibitions were well-received as in New York alone, there were 31 exhibitions and some 50 events, and the protest-exhibition was the largest cultural campaign of its kind ever organised in the United States.

July 27 1984, marked Yusof's first solo exhibition at Anton Gallery, in Capitol Hill, Washington D.C where he featured the "Protest" Series. It was very well received by the crowd and even went on to draw rave reviews from Washington Post's art critic Jo Ann Lewis. It was a success.

"We never show artists who are just out of school, but with Yusof we did, and it was a very well received show." – Gail Enns, Anton Gallery Owner, Washington, D.C.

The revolving theme around the works of the 'Protest' Series embody a dark, serious and solemn mood. Some works might seem chaotic but that was exactly what the artist was aiming for - as these are direct representation and social commentary on humanitarian issues. The 'Protest' works also depict overblown faces that emerge into view unexpectedly and in close-ups. There are inscriptions of words, and the messages are unconcealed and hortatory. Scratchings also made their way onto the canvases, with masks that are offhand and spread throughout the space. Contrasted with his master's degree thesis submission (Dance: A Cultural Element), these compositions are agitated, wild and deliberately rough – a direct reflection of his frame of mind during his protest in America.

Upon Yusof's return to Malaysia, his works continued to revolve around social remarks but moved away from the solemn feelings exhibited in the 'Protest' Series. Yusof began to feel out of place with his "Protest" paintings as the local scene was heavily drawn into a search for an identity in the Malaysian art scene when Islamic and 'pribumi' (native/local) motifs were introduced into paintings by local artists. This led to the artist taking on the role instructor at Universiti Teknologi MARA. Painting, however, never left his side.



SIRI TARI VII, 1984
Oil on canvas 163 x 236.5 cm

'Siri Tari VII' was one of the 20 works created for Yusof's master's programme at Catholic University in Washington DC. It's a mighty figurative work, heavily influenced by American Expressionism and Willem de Kooning. Yusof resonated with Kooning and his works compared to the myriad of the celebrated expressionist's simply because they share similarities in subject matter and style. This particular Tari work, entitled 'Siri Tari VII' was inspired by Kooning's women series that depict an element of ambiguous space in the foreground and background.

Again, the recurring figures surrounding the Siri Tari steal the limelight, decorated in a dominant, electric blue colour with intended splashes of pink. The 'Siri Tari VII' is subtle, very sentimental and mellow in nature. It's one of my favourite 'Tari' works. Blue isn't always his colour of choice but this is one of the only paintings with this colour and the usage of undertones of pink to portray femininity and his mood at the time. Yusof said, "My works are like the performing arts, each portraying different moods."



Renowned art collector, Zain Azahari and guests at the launch of Yusof's Tari Exhibition at Citra Galeri Kuala Lumpur in 1989

TARI SERIES

During Yusof's master's programme at Catholic University, Washington DC, he had to produce a series of cultural paintings for his thesis. This was when he turned to his roots and found the dance 'mak yong', that inspired his thesis. The 'mak yong' is a dance-drama performed by women for the royal court. It is deemed a subtle message of the people to the king.

Enthused by 'mak yong', the Tari series was born and became his artistic platform for social commentaries such as the imbalance in Malaysian society, between the rich and poor as well as the powerful and the powerless. Initially, Yusof's Tari series was somewhat a literal interpretation

of women dancing, subsequently progressing into an expressionistic nature, particularly the American expressionism. Even though he used figures as his reference, it slowly developed into linear strokes and became very ambiguous. The technique of painting morphed into an aggressive, spontaneous dialogue with the painting. It allowed Yusof to be more free in expressing his thoughts.

"Life is sometimes like dancing – we move about with no purpose but we get lots of pleasure out of it," said Yusof.

After Yusof moved on from his 'Protest' Series, many assumed that his paintings had undergone a complete makeover, from sinister and edgy to orchestrated and graceful. Yusof, however, refuted this. This work from the Tari Series did not change course, it still revolved around social remarks, and until this day, it remains as his most popular and coveted series.

"In my opinion," said Yusof Ghani, "a reason to paint surely exists. Making beautiful paintings never brought me any satisfaction. Art has to mean more than that. It has to push man to think about life, humanity, our conduct, and so on."

COLLECTIONS

Yusof's works are in numerous public collections such as Anton Gallery, Washington D.C, Bank Negara Malaysia, Changi Airport, Singapore, Hijjas Kasturi & Associates, Kuala Lumpur, Istana Negara, Kuala Lumpur, Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco, USA, Malaysia Airlines, Kuala Lumpur, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Petronas KLCC, Singapore Art Museum, Youth Center, Washington D.C, and Zain & Co. Kuala Lumpur, to name a few.