

RAFIEE GHANI

Painting the Colours of Emotion

BY HIRANMAYIL AWLI MOHANAN

Rafiee Ghani is one of the most prominent and important contemporary artists who probably leads his generation of artists in Malaysia. Born in Kulim, Kedah in 1962, the artist comes from a mixed parentage family, his father an Englishman who worked as a travelling geologist while his mother is a mix of Thai and Malay. The verdant landscape of padi fields in his hometown served as his early inspirations in moulding his artistic prowess and colour vocabulary. When Rafiee was in secondary school, his most prominent influence came from Dewan Budaya which featured periodical articles on local artists and their work. At the age of 15, names like Latiff Mohidin and Sharifah Fatimah Zubir were firmly etched in his mind, bearing a source of inspiration. He began his education in art at the prestigious De Virgen Academie Voor Beeldende Kunst at the Hague in the Netherlands before continuing his studies at Institut Teknologi MARA in Dungun. Much of his muse and exposure to art began in Europe, where he visited all the great art spaces and museums.

Consequently, Rafiee drew his inspirations through old masters like Vincent Van Gogh and Henri Matisse and their works. Rafiee has been actively involved in shows in both private and public galleries and art spaces around the world. His works have been collected by major corporations both within and outside of Malaysia that include Bank Negara Malaysia, Petronas Gallery, Dynasty Hotel, Bank Utama, Malaysian Tobacco Company as well as Oriental Bank. His works are also in the collection of Albert Rene, president of the Seychelles, and several private collections in the United States, Europe and Asia. Rafiee Ghani is one of the few hugely successful Malaysian artists today whose works have been sold in notable auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's in Hong Kong.



ARTISTIC PROWESS

Rafiee Ghani's artworks are just as colourful as he is and he is well known in the local fine arts sphere for his lyrical abstract and contemporary paintings. The artist's style can be associated with French paintings of the 19th and early 20th centuries, especially those of Post-Impressionists, the Nabis and the Fauves. This kinship reveals a continuous juxtaposition of Western and contemporary Malaysian paintings since the 1930's. His artworks aren't easy to miss for their loud, dynamic use of colours and strokes that make his style particularly distinctive and emotive. There are several important factors that have contributed to the formation of Rafiee's style, among which include his formal education in art and design and his various trips to other countries. A formal training in art provided him with practical and theoretical foundations, whereas his journeys to various parts of the world enabled him to experience nature as well as global cultures and climates. More importantly, these trips have given him the invaluable opportunity to be in direct contact with the original works of great painters such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse, the Nabis and the Fauves, which seem to be the dominant influences on his style.

For Rafiee, aesthetics is an important part of his paintings – this is where balance and compositions are utilised to their fullest potential, often producing artworks that are artistic and pleasing for the eyes. The artist was formally trained in the arts and techniques of print-making, but it is his mastery in oil painting which sets him apart from other artists. He is known to fully utilise the limited use of colours known in printmaking techniques. The artist also creates an imaginary illusion of objects and images by overlaying them with colours which are vibrantly mixed and integrated. Rafiee's Garden series is brilliant and every artwork from the series is a bold and vivid spectacle of colours. The inspiration for this series is derived from the artist's hometown in Kelantan – his favourite place to be in as a child. This included swimming in the river with other children after school. Intimism remains prominent throughout his pieces. The bold strokes of colour were his way of conveying the brilliance of the local forest filled with natural colours to delight and excite. Rafiee's works evoke nostalgia, longing, tranquillity and optimism.

ARTWORKS ON PAPER

Rafiee Ghani's works paper are as brilliant as his oil painting, if not better. He still employs his signature loud and dynamic colours, complemented by brushstrokes where his style of Intimism is well established. Rafiee's artworks in the medium of paper produce an imaginary illusion of images and objects which are submerged below his mastery in playing with colours which are vibrantly mixed and integrated. This is where one would be able to clearly see the objects or scenes which are portrayed amidst the sea of a strong tone of the colour scheme which epitomises Rafiee's body of work. His paintings are also known to portray the interior domestic scenes of still-life objects, plants and flowers in vibrant colours. The artist once mentioned that to him, these are mere symbols of everyday objects that surround us, bringing with them a deep sense of comfort that are frequently forgotten or taken for granted in our everyday life.

In a recent interview with the artist himself on the subject of his works on paper, he disclosed that people tend to underestimate paper. Any major project starts from paper but it tends to be dismissed. "To me, paper is where my first dialogue with creativity starts. I capture spontaneity on paper because it's where one doesn't mind making mistakes and there's no pressure to be perfect. It's where you explore your thought process and it's not pretentious," said Rafiee. The artist is one who's always with his sketchbook, especially during his travels, capturing his personal interpretations of locations, people and even architecture in situ. It is where his masterpieces first take shape and form. He sketches whatever scenes that arrest his eyes which then serve as a guide for him when transferring the images onto canvas. He would also draft his musings or sometimes poems and stories to go with the colourful sketches in his sketchbook.



Tetouan Old City, Morocco. One of the most intact and preserved walled-city (Medina) in Morocco



Beautiful girls of Nouadhibou, Mauritania, West Africa



Canadian Road Trip. We drove all the way from Quebec to Vancouver and back. We used to do this every other year before Covid 19



Canadian Road Trip. We drove all the way from Quebec to Vancouver and back. We used to do this every other year before Covid 19

TAKING INSPIRATION FROM HIS TRAVELS

It's no secret that Rafiee's subject and creativity in his artworks have been long inspired by his travels. This is owed to his travelling geologist father who brought back pictures of exotic destinations and museum exhibits that really sparked his appreciation for aesthetics. Whenever he came across a beautiful sight, he would take a photograph and later capture the scene on canvas. A formal training in art provided him with practical and theoretical foundations, whereas the artist's adventures to various parts of the world enabled him to experience nature as well as global cultures and climates. More importantly, these trips have given him the invaluable opportunity to be in direct contact with the original works of great painters such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse, the Nabis and the Fauves, which seem to be the dominant influences on his style.

The combination of warm and cool colours which brightens Rafiee's Intimism can also be attributed to his surrounding culture, the landscapes he has come across in his travels and to the tropical climate he lives in, and especially to the richness of colours and patterns of traditional East Coast art of batik. These are intermingled with Rafiee's vast experience and broad exposure gathered through his journeys, just like Fauvist Manguin who captured the fascinating warmth of the Mediterranean landscapes, climate and cultures in his exhibition *La Lumiere du Midi* (The Light of the South of France). Rafiee finds his adventures extremely stimulating and inspiring, creating a series of artworks from his travels.

Ever with a sketchbook during his travels, the artist would craft colourful sketches along with his thoughts and musings, be it on the bus or the train. The artist first visited Morocco in 1986 as a young man and has since spent two months each year in the Moroccan-Algerian-Tunisian region. He felt drawn to these places for a number of reasons, the first being that it's Africa but not really 'African' because of its proximity to Europe. Rafiee fell in love with the architecture and the influence of Moorish Islamic architecture and calligraphy on modern arts. It amazed the artist that the people of the desert were very accepting of his career as an artist and had on many occasions invited him to spend the night in their homes, huts or makeshift tents. It was moments like this that made him a curious traveller. Throughout his travels, he had made many friends and memories, some of which he can't put into words or paintings. Whether it is the rugged casbahs or crowded medinas of Moroccan cities or the vastness of desert sands at night, the artist captures the essence of a beautiful country with striking, brilliant hues and free-flowing lines.

An avid traveller, Rafiee has been travelling since being a teenager and has seen most of Europe, Middle East, as well as North and South Africa. He had also covered most of the Indian subcontinent, from Peshawar in the northwest to the tip of Bangladesh in the east; Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of India and also Gilgit in the north of Pakistan, where he attempted to cross over to China on a bicycle. The artist had also driven across North America, from coast to coast a couple of times. Rafiee has travelled so much that he said he could draw the map of Southeast Asia blindfolded. When he visits a location that has been depicted in a certain painting, he finds it very inspiring. For instance, when Rafiee was at the Maritime Alps in France, he contended that French painter Cezanne brilliantly translated the light, atmosphere and the colours of the region onto his canvas. Another instance was when he drove along the coast of California, the artist soaked in the myriads of colours and shades along the way, contemplating how the region influenced his favourite American painter, Richard Diebenkom.

When Rafiee was in Northern Thailand, he tried to decipher what inspired artist Latiff Mohidin to write his epic poetry entitled 'Sungei Mekong' and the famed series of paintings known as Pago Pago. In Morocco, he sat in the cafe where the venerable French artist, Henri Matisse produced his sketches. Rafiee was also in Tunisia where the German-born painter



The fairy tale village of Banu Amr, Southern Saudi Arabia



Breakfast with some locals in Myanmar



Canadian Road Trip. We drove all the way from Quebec to Vancouver and back. We used to do this every other year before Covid 19



Spent two weeks in Cuba and I think it is one the best places in the Caribbean. The safest Latin American country for sure !

Paul Klee lived and produced some of his works for a while. "I think all my travels helped me refine my observations while understanding and enriching my creative process," said Rafiee. When asked about his fondest countries, he replied, China because of its rich Islamic heritage and history. "It's very strange because I have discovered some of the best Muslims there. Morocco is another place close to my heart along with Africa. I love the desert, the vastness and how desolate it is. In the Sahara, people are very casual – they invite you to their huts for a few pennies without even knowing you. When this pandemic goes away, these would be the first two countries I would definitely return to." relayed Rafiee.

CHRONICLE OF RAFIEE GHANI'S TRAVELS:

CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTIST

Evidently Van Gogh and Matisse had a big influence on you as they do today. Tell us a bit more about your artistic inspirations.

It has to do a lot with my travels. I love visiting places where artists get inspired – where they produced their works and where they went in their early days. For example, Matisse visited Morocco and I too visited that country, went to the same cafe and sat where he sat. I like exploring places like this to try to get into their thought process, emulate the environment and discover what inspired them.

WHAT WAS THE EXPERIENCE LIKE VISITING THESE PLACES? DID IT INSPIRE ANY OF YOUR ARTWORKS?

In the 18th and 19th century, many big names in the industry who were studying art in Europe left to travel to America and Africa which puzzled many. When they returned from their sojourn, there was a difference in their artworks and people didn't understand why. Only when I went to Morocco and stayed where Matisse stayed and saw what he saw, I realised – it was a divine revelation. It was the air, the noises and the colours that he experienced that changed him and his artworks forevermore. For example, there was an instance when Matisse was stuck in his hotel due to a storm for two weeks and he painted the hotel's interior. What he regarded as probably as mundane was in fact the turning point of his artistic career.

As to whether these places where the great artists visited inspired my works, I would say it certainly did. I'm familiar with these artists' works but I do not try to duplicate their works, it serves as a catalyst to embark on another creative journey. I say this because I may not be inspired by the same things that inspired them but it's rather the journey that's inspiring.

YOU TRAVEL WITH A SKETCHBOOK IN HAND. WHAT IS YOUR ARTISTIC PROCESS LIKE DURING THESE TRAVELS?

I often travel with a sketchbook and draw in situ, be it architecture or figurative works. However, when I travel to obscure, restrictive places where there are clashes or religious bigotry such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, where they don't really like people drawing so I resort to patterns or motifs that I observe. I also take photographs, which is a paradox because my paintings are colourful in nature while the pictures that I take are in black and white. That's also part of my process.

WHAT IS YOUR TAKEAWAY FROM EACH PLACE YOU VISIT?

My takeaway, which isn't an artistic journey per se, is that people are kind across the world. You can be in America, India or South Africa, wherever you are, you can find good people. You need to be open to be able to appreciate people from all walks of life. When I was younger and I told my father that I wanted to travel, he said that there were two things that one needed to master – to be able to eat anything permissible in the religion and be able to communicate with others. I think I was able to master these two points. I know only about 10 words in Mandarin but I could stay in China for a month.

INSPIRED BY THE ARTIST'S TRAVELS TO UK



Upcountry, 2016
Mixed media on paper
132 x 191 cm



The Red Stone River, 2017
Mixed media on paper
57.5 x 76 cm



Thered Stone Hill, 2017
Mixed media on paper
57.5 x 76 cm



Clouds, 2010
Mixed media on paper
90 x 61.5 cm

WHAT IS YOUR FONDEST COUNTRY THUS FAR AND WHY?

There are too many to choose from, honestly. I like China because of its rich Islamic heritage and history. It's very strange because I have discovered some of the best Muslims there. Morocco is another place that is close to my heart along with Africa. I love the dessert, the vastness and how desolate it is. In the Sahara, people are very casual – they invite you to their huts for a few pennies without even knowing you. When this pandemic goes away, these would be the first two countries I would definitely return to.

WHAT WAS THE MOST RECENT COUNTRY YOU VISITED BEFORE THE PANDEMIC HIT?

Myanmar. It was actually India but Myanmar was the first country I had not visited in about 20 years. So I took a train from Kuala Lumpur to Bangkok and then Chiang Mai, subsequently took a bus to Myanmar where I spent a month. I then took a train to India. This Asian adventure took me about two to three months which wasn't very long. My takeaway from this trip, as with many other travels I had gone on, were friendly and interesting people that I met along the way. I love going off the beaten paths during my travels and in Myanmar, I didn't feel much of the restitution as portrayed in the news. The people there are very friendly and things seemed to move at a much slower pace as compared to Malaysia. It made me think about my life and how people are living with much less than what I have at home.

LASTLY, WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM RAFIEE GHANI IN THE FUTURE?

I think I want to be more flexible and perhaps go back to printmaking and drawing or photography. I'm also very jealous of people who can write so I might brush up on writing or even delve into sculpting. So basically, I want to be very flexible.

SINCE FATHER'S DAY IS IN JUNE, WE'D LIKE TO FIND OUT WHETHER ANY OF YOUR TEN KIDS ARE FOLLOWING IN YOUR FOOTSTEPS.

Not fine art per se but one of them is into design and video production. I believe that all my children are talented and born with skills. They're pursuing their own passions but I believe one or two of them will return to art. In fact, we've always encouraged them to be creative be it taking up sculpting, photography or drawing. To be precise, only one of my kids is in the arts and design segment, focussing on video production and product photography. Apart from that, my children are doing various things from veterinary sciences, linguistics, religious studies and teaching English.

WHAT WAS YOUR FATHER LIKE AND WHAT TEACHINGS OF HIS HAVE YOU IMPARTED TO YOUR CHILDREN?

My father was a travel geologist. He has always encouraged my passion, from the beginning, even when most of my family members were into sciences like mathematicians. I was one of the few who ventured into art and he was unfailingly supportive. As for his teachings that I've carried on to date is basically when I travel, I have to be able to eat anything and be able to communicate with others and this can be adapted to life as well. He also taught me that the best education comes from travelling because it really broadens your mind, teaches you about different cultures and how they do things and a lot more.

COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR MIXED PARENTAGE UPBRINGING?

My father is English and my mother is a mix of Thai and Malay. We had a very laidback culture in Kelantan. I was exposed to the English culture when I was very young, thanks to my dad. Growing up at the tip of Kelantan, close to the border where everything was slow-paced, my world view hadn't developed yet, until I started travelling. When I furthered my studies abroad, that was when my perspective changed and my thinking

INSPIRED BY THE ARTIST'S TRAVELS TO MOROCCO



Marrakesh Garden I, 2016
Mixed media on paper
57.5 x 76 cm



Marrakesh Garden II, 2016
Mixed media on paper
57.5 x 76 cm

evolved. It also fuelled my love for visiting other countries and its people. As my father was a travelling geologist, he was definitely a driving factor that inspired me to see the world, just like him.

WHAT KIND OF FATHER DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

That's a difficult question. I think I give my kids too much freedom and they appreciate it. We have very diversified pursuits in the family ranging from Islamic studies to linguistics and video production. I try to be the best father I can be, encouraging my children to pursue their passion just as my father did for me. I've also brought my children on my travels on numerous occasions but not to remote places because that would be unrealistic. I want them to experience everything I experience through my travels.