

RAPHAEL SCOTT AHBENG

PORTRAYING THE WONDER OF SARAWAK'S RAINFORESTS

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The late Raphael Scott Ahbeng, storyteller of Sarawakian landscape with his vivid and robust painting

Raphael Scott Ahbeng
"Forest Arena"
Oil on Canvas
205 x 315 cm

Raphael Scott Ahbeng was and remains, Sarawak's most famous painter of any style or age. He was one of the greats; a prominent Bornean artists, regarded as the master of Sarawak's landscapes. Ahbeng, in his lifetime was born during the Japanese Occupation into a family of eight siblings, saw a fleeting return of Brooke rule, cession of Sarawak to Britain and he also witnessed the birth of modern Malaysia.

The artist's father shipped him off to school at an early age, where he endured the harsh discipline of an austere mission education. Despite this, a visiting delegation of British Council officials noticed the well-spoken, bright young man, and eventually recommended him for a scholarship to study broadcasting in England.

A young boy in a new frontier, Ahbeng attended the Bath Academy of Art in the United Kingdom, where he studied Art and Photography

from 1964 to 1967. Battling off homesickness and alienation, the artist opened himself up to the experience, garnering lasting friendships and immeasurable experiences along the way. He returned to England again in 1973, under the British Council Grant to study English and Drama at the British Drama League in London.

After his English sojourn, Raphael returned to Sarawak and settled into a career at RTM, where he eventually became head of the English service. He was also a teacher, cartoonist and radio producer. Throughout his career as a broadcaster, Raphael continued to pursue his passion in art and painting, which he had done from an early age. As his talent grew, so did the voices encouraging him to pursue painting full time. When the time came to leave broadcasting, he did exactly that, setting up a studio at Rubber Road. Ahbeng also studied broadcasting at the BBC in 1990 under a joint Sarawak/British Council Grant.



Raphael Scott Ahbeng
Old Promise, 1997
Acrylic on board
38 x 121 cm

Accolades

Raphael's very first solo exhibition was in 1954. His awards included securing the 1st Prize in the Sarawak Shell Open (1959, 1982, 1983) and 3rd Prize in the Natural Malaysia art competition in Kuala Lumpur in 1991. Pursuing a painting career in Sarawak then, was a daunting and unpaved path. Even for a man like Raphael, it must have taken real steel of soul. But a slew of early commissions, notably for the Rhiga Royal Resort and the Royal Mulu Resort, gave the impetus he needed. His daughter June recalls her father strapping 150 canvases

into a single car, before driving them to Mulu himself. Through sheer talent and hard graft, his career as a sought-after painter of modern canvases took off.

After making a name for himself through his paintings, Ahbeng played an important role in the art industry, as the adviser to the Sarawak Artists Society (SAS) in 1999 to 2000 — an organisation with the objectives to preserve and promote local culture, arts and crafts and to create interest and appreciation of art. Apart from that, he helped to save the

lives of animals through his artworks sold at a Christmas Charity Bazaar organised by the Sarawak Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals (SSPCA) in December 2011. His many accomplishments reveal a spirited character, with an unquenchable thirst for learning various subjects. His works have been exhibited at Convergence held at Petronas Gallery in 2013 which addresses the spiritual, social and economic concerns of the Malay Archipelago. His solo exhibition Legend: A Borneo Artist, showcases the complete oeuvre of Raphael's 60 years of work.



Raphael Scott Ahbeng
Power Garden, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
38 x 121 cm

Artistic Prowess

His single most enduring subject was Sarawak itself, captured in a style that was purely his - atypical and fantastical. Ahbeng's interpretation of nature strayed far away from the rest of his contemporaries became something he was famed for. The artist's renditions of his favourite subject, the Bornean forest, is often depicted engulfed in various shapes, colours and shades.

Apart from his painting, Raphael loved to sketch. In contrast to his professional painting, which consisted mostly of landscapes, his pen-and-ink drawings show his acute observation of people. As he grew older, they became more like cartoons, with little snatches of dialogue and witticisms. They depict ordinary people in everyday situations - in queues at the bank, at the market, furiously politicking in coffee shops - showing a deep interest in what people on the streets felt and thought.

From his secluded studio in Bau, Sarawak, Raphael Scott Ahbeng painted on a variety of subjects and styles, with his métier being abstract. He employed various methods from water colour, acrylic to artworks of copper murals to convey his concern for the environment. His works could be seen in solo and group exhibitions held all over the country including Borneo and Kuala Lumpur. Due to his particular love of the colour red from a rich ironwood called diamond wood (kayu berlian) or "Staas" in Bidayuh, the colour strikingly stands out among the other colours he uses in his artworks.

As his painting career took off, Raphael could have chosen to live and work in the big city, closer to the wheelers and dealers of the art world. Instead, he decided that if people wanted to seek him out, they would have to come to him at Bau. The man himself was inseparable from his homeland.

Like most of Ahbeng's works, it beams with visual wonder and its viewers can discover for themselves the hues as they explore the canvas, each colour special and diverse, as trees and floras are in the forests. Ahbeng has produced prolific renditions and variations of nature that are naturally allure, each embodying an underlying message or mystery to discover and to get acquainted with. Perhaps this is how Raphael Scott AhBeng sees plants, leaves and flowers collectively - he sees them as having their own aura, their own colour and own shapes despite their intrinsic and natural façade.

Rapheal Scott Ahbeng has left behind a piece of him through every artwork and will be remembered for being an eloquent master of paint, a trailblazer, a brilliant artist and most importantly, a wonderful human being.



Raphael Scott Ahbeng
Silent Afternoon, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
121 x 181cm

Silent Afternoon, 2014

Raphael Scott Ahbeng's abstract interpretation of nature has always been atypical and bizarre, although aesthetically so, and this visual adaptation of a forest turns out to be a marvellous surge of colours evident in this piece. Obvious tree trunks and branches are illustrated in this painting, enveloped by what's presumably rock formations against a backdrop of green. There's something enigmatic and engaging about this piece, commanding for viewers to slow down and appreciate it.



Raphael Scott Ahbeng
Landscape, 2008
Oil on canvas
60 x 90cm

Landscape, 2008

The late Raphael Scott Ahbeng was known for his strong, unique and individualistic personality. He was mostly identified through his lively display of rainforests in West Malaysia and his quirky outlook on nature, making him evidently distinct from the others. Hailing from Sarawak, Ahbeng was one of the most prominent Borneo artists. Landscape 2008 is an abstract perspective of nature, decorated through soft and large movements of the brush, followed by trickling of bright red paint at the bottom. The piece is impactful, stirring emotions throughout anyone who studies it - loud, big yet calming at the same time. The creative and artistic canvas painted with acrylic displays Ahbeng's visual rendition of nature that never fails to attract.



Raphael Scott Ahbeng
July Survivor, 1996
Acrylic on board
43 x 73.5 cm

July Survivor, 1996

The artist was mostly recognised for his energetic depictions of the Sarawakian rainforests and his bizarre interpretation of nature, which made him distinct from his contemporaries. His abstract perspective of nature is not only robust, but unusual and odd to those who are used to naturalistic ways of painting them. The canvas is decorated through heavy, forceful movements of the brush, creating an impactful piece that cannot be overlooked. It is loud, it is vigorous and filled with artistic value. Raphael illustrated massive trees with thick trunks, signifying the age of the tree its leaves are painted in subtle colours of autumn with occasional bursts of orange.



The artist's workstation in his home, in Sarawak



Raphael Scott Ahbeng
New Garden, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
89 x 59 cm

New Garden, 2008

New Garden is an expressionistic, abstract rendition of nature, enlivened through sweeping and soft brushstrokes, supplemented by trickling of bright red paint at the bottom. This piece depicts shapes that mimics the canopy of trees as far as the eyes can see, stirring impactful, stirring emotions throughout anyone who studies it – loud, big yet calming at the same time. It's a visual wonder that evokes curiosity, provoke emotion and further inspection of the work painted with acrylic displays.



Raphael Scott Ahbeng
Landscape near Bali, 1997
Acrylic on board
77 x 45 cm

Landscape near Bali, 1997

This piece is engulfed in various shapes, colours and shades. Struck with visual wonder, the audience is left to discover more and more colours as they explore the canvas, each colour special and diverse, as trees and floras are in the forests. This variation of nature just seems to pull the viewer in, coaxing them to take a longer look, as there are many more colours to discover and to get acquainted with. Perhaps this is how Raphael Scott AhBeng saw plants, leaves and flowers collectively – he sees them as having their own aura, their own colour and own shapes in spite of their original and natural colour.



Raphael Scott Ahbeng
Terraced Forest, 2006
Acrylic on canvas
118 x 90 cm

Terraced Forest, 2006

Nature and landscapes are two things that Raphael Scott AhBeng held dear to his heart. In classic AhBeng style, he expressed his love for solitary environments with his rendition of a terraced forest. "Painting is a way of expressing my feelings. I like to paint good things that give viewers a good feeling, and make them think and feel rejuvenated," said AhBeng. That seems evident in this piece as he does incited the soothing and calm atmosphere that seems to emanate from his beloved hometown, Sarawak. With intense colouring and bold strokes, the display of the forms and colours instantaneously create an aura of calmness and comfort while being close to nature at the same time.



Raphael Scott Ahbeng
Bidi, 2012
Acrylic on canvas
149 x 240 cm