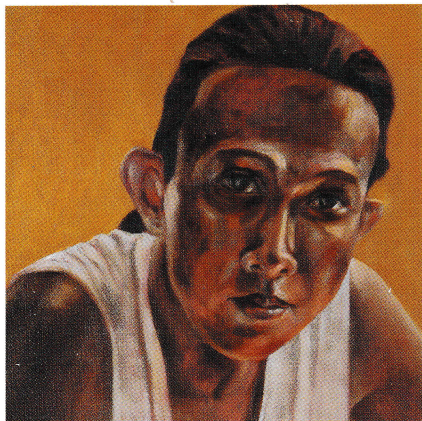
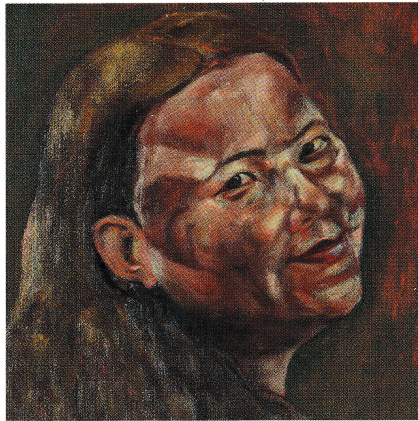


pictures of you, pictures of me





Pital M, 2004, Oil on linen, 43 x 43 cm



I-Lann, 2004, Oil on linen, 43 x 43 cm



Fee Ming, 2004, Oil on linen, 43 x 43 cm

NOOR MAHNUN MOHAMED: PICTURES OF YOU, PICTURES OF ME

"When I was in my 20s, I made a painting of myself wearing different hairstyles. I was interested then in the idea that women change their hair to feel better, to "renew" themselves. I remember at the time planning to try this again when I turned 40."

In *My Red T-Shirt I, II and III* (2004/5), the artist sports in turn an edgy crop, a ladylike bob and finally grows it out. Her features alter ever so slightly with time, but she wears the same expression throughout, her lips set closed, her eyes hold out a dare to judge her; the look is also one of scrutiny, of a woman sizing herself up in the mirror.

While an element of self-portraiture has always been inherent in Noor Mahnun's painting, it has generally been deeply couched, a dark current underpinning her work. The body of work in this exhibition is unashamedly personal, cutting away the veil of mystery. In the simplest terms, "I have painted myself and the people around me as I see them, and relate to them."

A series of thirty small portraits of her circle of friends and acquaintances, and five large canvases and the triptych form a sort of diary of the current life and times of the artist. In a contemporary art context where the portrait has been appropriated into so many different discourses, and where photography might be said to have claimed dominion over the genre, Noor Mahnun's approach seems almost refreshingly straightforward.

As a painter, Noor Mahnun is a traditionalist, in the best sense. Technically, and even in her broader appreciation of painting, she has stubbornly located herself in a humanist tradition which has its roots in the European Renaissance ("when I was starting to work in figuration at art school in Germany, painting had just been declared dead"). The craft of painting she has learnt and modified from long-past masters like Piero della Francesca, Giotto and van



Christian B, 2004, Oil on linen, 43 x 43 cm



Wong Perng Fey, 2004, Oil on linen, 43 x 43 cm



Beverly, 2004, Oil on linen, 43 x 43 cm

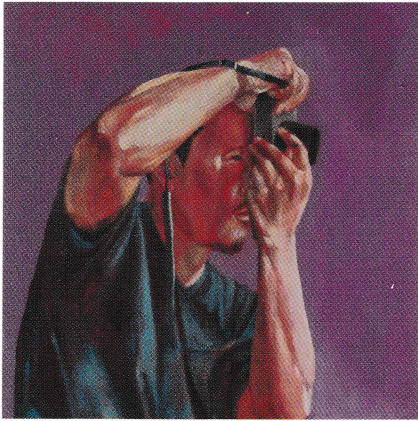
Eyck. In her new work, she might be said almost to revive the use of the portrait as a remembrance, to immortalise the subject. "When I started painting this series I kept thinking of how artists like Masaccio or Simoni would paint themselves and the faces of their contemporaries into their frescoes."

If some of the impetus and the painterly strategies of her portraiture echo a past age, however, they have been transcribed successfully into a vivid document of a life now, partly due to the very specificity of her chosen subjects. "I am interested in how people are linked, relate to each other, relate to me" - the body of smaller portraits, captured starkly against a coloured ground almost like passport photographs, form "a sort of tree of associations". She uses for reference several photographs of each subject, working to capture them according to her image of them in life - "it's much harder to paint someone you know well, and I wanted to avoid caricature". Positioned as a group, they are defined by their social and emotional relationship to the artist, and to each other. The motive, then is not simply a wish to immortalise an identity with all its pretensions, but a wish to document friendship, people's meaning to one another, and to establish in some way their continuity.

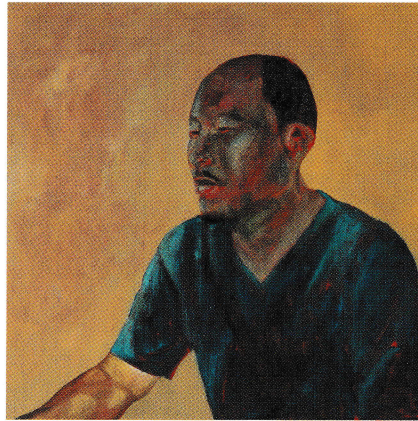
In two of the larger paintings, Noor Mahnun poses her subjects against her own paintings, which these friends have previously collected. In *Adeline, Stars and Fireflies*, Adeline is set inside the landscape of the earlier portrait belonging to her, becoming its subject. Oon Soon appears with *Ram*. So the artist's work itself adds another layer to her relationship with her subject, as something whose meaning is shared between the two.

In *Eddie Smiles*, Noor Mahnun poses her friend against a horizon line, which refers both to a photograph belonging to him by another artist friend, Yee I-Lann, and also her own use of the horizon as a strong compositional element in her painting. "Eddie has this way of carrying himself which is so particular. I wanted to capture his smile as a contemporary smile, like Mona Lisa's smile, but for our time".

The artist takes a look at her early roots in *My Parents*, a portrait of herself at age seven with her mother and father. "When my dad fell ill recently, I



Manit S i, 2004, Oil on linen, 43 x 43 cm



Manit S ii, 2004, Oil on linen, 43 x 43 cm



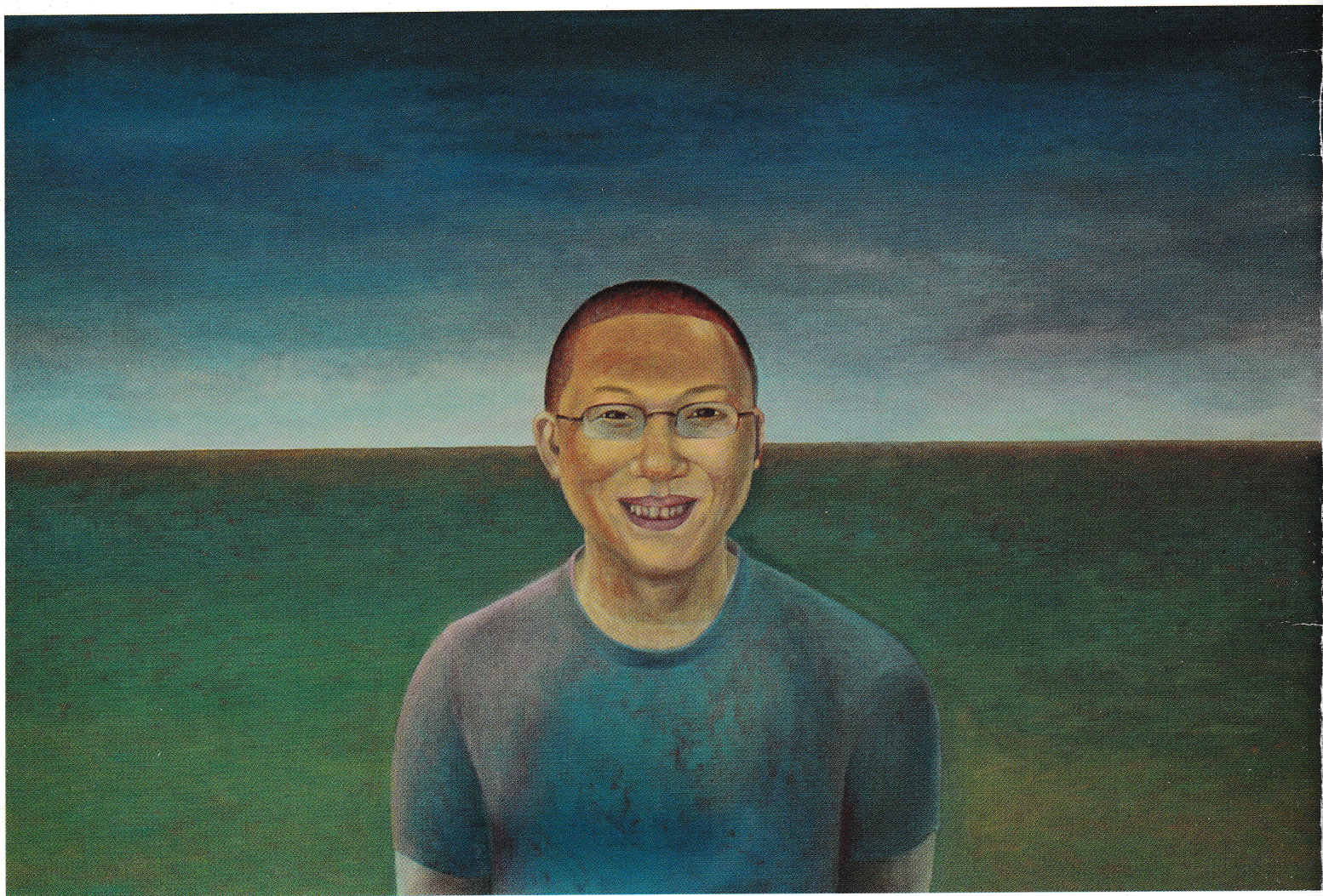
Manit S iii, 2004, Oil on linen, 43 x 43 cm

suddenly felt the need to look again at old photos of the family. In fact the picture of my parents is from the 60s, but the one of me is taken from the 70s." It is an image which tries to capture her childhood persona as she remembers it, in relation to the powerful character of her parents, and is set in a faintly circus-like environment often used in her painting. The painting takes a cue from a David Hockney portrait of his parents, *My Parents and Myself* (1975) and plays off its silent poise. The child is very small next to the wonderfully dignified Malay couple, in a typical photo-studio pose of the 60s. "I was a tiny person, but quite loud - that's why I've put myself on a drum."

The Couple, Noor Mahnun's portrait of Joe and I-Lann at home with their cats is a portrait of a more contemporary pair, a complement to *My Parents*. "They represent for me a kind of institution, perhaps the equivalent of my mum and dad, today". There are references too to earlier couples in art history, a nod again to Hockney, to *Mr and Mrs Clarke and Percy* (1970-71) and also to van Eyck's *Marriage of Arnolfini* (1434).

"When I was in Berlin, I remember watching a play in 1989, "Die Zeit and Das Zimmer" ("Time and The Room") by Botho Strauss produced by Luc Bondy at Schaubühne Theatre. There were just two central figures who would constantly slip into different roles with every slight change of set. I read later that the play centred on a protagonist who 'embarks on a process of self-examination slipping into a strange state that reveals the gap between modern individuality and the search for life's meaning'".

In *Pictures of You, Pictures of Me*, we are captured in a time and place for posterity, defined by the artist's gaze, and by our relationships to each other. Some part of our character defines that milieu by simply imposing itself on her canvas, but is in the nuances of her reading of us, her positioning us in her sense of history that the painter delineates the scene. In turn, her portraits of herself and of others define her. In a life which has seen a number of "set-changes", and one marked by some significant losses, they are a means of keeping safe her time and place.



Eddie Smiles, 2005, Oil on linen, 100 x 152.5 cm

Front Cover

My Parents, 2005, Oil on linen, 200 x 152.5 cm

Exhibition dates

17th February – 5th March 2005

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Southeast Asian Paintings & Works of Art



Anum, 2004, Oil on linen, 43 x 43 cm

NOOR MAHNUN MOHAMED

Born 1964, Kelantan, Malaysia

EDUCATION

1989-96 Masters in Fine Arts, Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Braunschweig, Germany

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- | | | | |
|------|--|------|--|
| 1985 | Video Diva, Florence, Italy | 1997 | Kunst in Treppenhaus Feldschloßchen, Braunschweig, Germany |
| 1989 | Sparkasse der Stadt, Berlin, Germany | 1998 | Mysteries Angelucci, Kuala Lumpur |
| 1995 | Galerie im zweiten Rang des Staatstheater, Braunschweig, Germany | 2002 | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia |

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- | | | | |
|------|--|------|---|
| 1993 | Aufheben Alpirsbach Galerie, Alpirsbach, Germany | 2002 | Painted Southeast Asian Contemporary Artists, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur |
| 1994 | Werkschau Klasse Gorella Galerie der HBK Braunschweig, Germany | | Touch in aid of the World Wildlife Fund, Rimbun Dahan, Selangor |
| 1995 | Überall Alpirsbach Galerie, Alpirsbach, Germany | | Identities National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur |
| 1996 | Meisterschüler '96 BMG Halle, Braunschweig, Germany | | Bara Hati Bahang Jiwa National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur |
| 1997 | 5x5 Galerie Peters-Barenbrock, Braunschweig, Germany | | Laughter iPreciation Gallery, Singapore |
| 1998 | Of Allegory and Symbols Galeri Tangsi, Kuala Lumpur | | Urbanart 2003 Melbourne, Australia |
| 1999 | Tangsi Braunschweig Collaboration '99 Galeri Tangsi, Kuala Lumpur | 2003 | Mostra di Fine Anno Il Bisonte, Florence, Italy |
| | Aku – Potret Diri Petronas Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur | | Games People Play in aid of the World Wildlife Fund, Rimbun Dahan, Selangor |
| | Through Our Eyes Petronas Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur | | Il Bisonte agli Uffizi Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy |
| 2000 | Love on Paper Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur | 2004 | Portraits Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur |
| | Arang Gallerie Taksu, Kuala Lumpur | | Malaysian Art Now National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur |
| | Water for Life in aid of the World Wildlife Fund, Islamic Arts Museum, Kuala Lumpur | | Paradise Lost / Paradise Found in aid of the World Wildlife Fund, Rimbun Dahan, Selangor |
| 2001 | Headlights Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur | | Sleight of Hand Darling Muse Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia |
| | Ilham Galeri Shah Alam, Selangor | 2005 | Spirit of Wood and Other Treasures Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur |
| | Rimbun Dahan Artist in Residence , Rimbun Dahan, Selangor | | |
| | Flashpoint in aid of the World Wildlife Fund, Rimbun Dahan, Selangor | | |

AWARDS & RESIDENCIES

- | | | | |
|---------|---|------|--|
| 1995 | 2nd Prize Alpirsbach Galerie Competition, Alpirsbach, Germany | 2002 | Italian Government Scholarship Programme, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to study etching at Il Bisonte, Florence, Italy |
| 2000-01 | Artist-in-Residence, Rimbun Dahan, Kuang, Selangor; Malaysia | | |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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My family, Abah & Emak for your unconditional love.