

**vwfa**  
valentine willie fine art

SOUTHEAST  
ASIAN ART



JALAINI  
ABU HASSAN

BISIK  
MENJERIT

Butterfly Hair Clipper





## BRINGING IN THE CLOWNS

*‘Every country gets the circus it deserves. Spain gets bullfights. Italy gets the Catholic Church. America gets Hollywood’ - Erica Jung*

What kind of a circus does Malaysia deserve? In Jalaini Abu Hassan's second solo exhibition in Singapore bravely illustrates the comic-tragedy of a nation and its most recent political deadlock in the state of Perak through the farcical spectacle of the big top.

Showcasing a new series of charcoal on paper, Jalaini (also known as Jai) returns to a medium that has not been explored by the artist on the level of a tightly edited solo exhibition since his series on Malay magicians in *Mantera* (2004).

Jai is recognised today as a pioneer of sorts in the local art scene, being the first in Malaysia to experiment with bitumen as a painting medium, and consequently fathering over a

generation of Malaysian painters who have adopted bitumen in their practice, prizing the medium's flexibility and pliability.

Silver Circus 2009 fabric collage and charcoal on paper 183 x 152.5 cm



Eschewing bitumen in this new series of drawings, this calculated decision reveals the values that the artist invests in bitumen. By Jai's account, bitumen is recognised as a spiritual medium, a material that is evocatively seductive. Therefore, to consciously refrain from using bitumen in depicting the current political debacle in Perak suggests a particular resolve and perspective in the development of Jai's artistic language.

*"Bitumen has the power to lure you. It has the power to mislead you, bring you into another reality. That is what I wanted to achieve in my Mantera drawings, which deals with the topic of Malay magic and tradition" Jai explained and then added, "But we're dealing with a different subject here. I don't want to evoke the spiritual or mystical, since it's about current political and social issues."*

By using charcoal, Jai is able to draw upon the strength of the medium, creating a base vocabulary for his incisive and satirical critique on the socio-political landscape of Malaysia. For Jai, drawing (or the *disegno*) as a necessary preparatory step in Western painting tradition can be exploited





Going to the Dogs 2009 fabric collage and charcoal on paper 183 x 152.5 cm

and explored to underscore the expressive and more immediate vision of the artist. It resonates with the pressing concerns of our times that have become Jai's preoccupation over the last two years of his practice.

The carnival-esque coterie animals and clowns that take centre stage in his new works are biting satire that hint abrasively at the collapse of reason and order. To visualise this regression, Jai returns to drawing as a technique and charcoal as a material that could thematise how our humanist ideals have devolved into animalistic buffoonery. In *Balancing Act*, this political charade is suggested as performance of equilibrium, comically enacted by two roosters, a dog and a miniature horse.

These large-scale drawings can also be seen as advertising posters and they refer to Jai's well-known compositional repertoire of using the pictorial surface as a container of cultural registers.



Borrowing the curlicue-like typeface that is normally seen in circus billboards, *Silver Circus* features a dog, chicken and bear as fun fair mascots, bedecked in cone hats and festive fez. The text 'party animal' is further scrawled right below the bear, a wordplay that links the parties in politics with the highlighted objects of entertainment.

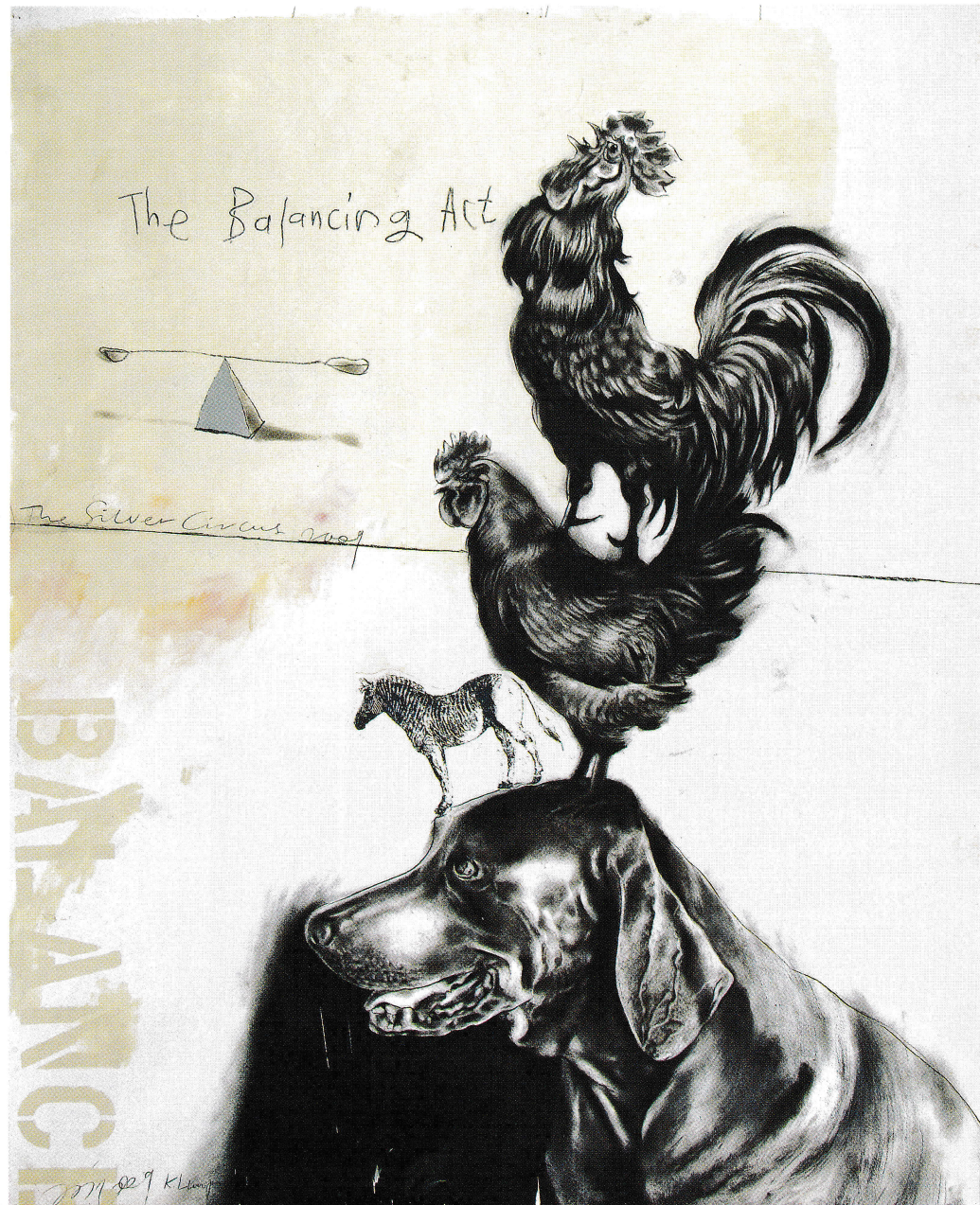
Like his previous series, Jai makes several self-deprecating appearances in *Bisik Menjerit*. He plays the clown figure this time and the butt of joke in *Juara Badut*, mocking at the contestation within our political battle arena as foolish and rib-tickling at best. In *Bring In The Clowns*, he takes on the role as a herald, blowing a medieval trumpet to signal the start of the show. Metaphorically, these roles allude to the expanded notion of the artistic identities that Jai playfully assumes in many of his works throughout his career, reflecting his conviction in an artistic expression that is not divorced from the socio-cultural (and also political) context from which the artist operates.

For all the atmosphere of festivity suggested in the series, the choice of charcoal also affects muteness and distance. They appear like worn posters, recoded to transcribe a reality that may also seem like an event of the past. This distancing highlights the circus as a unique trope in questioning the popular consumption of spectacle.

The modern concept of the circus developed since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century represents a form of mass cultural entertainment consumption. After all, Lenin once stated that the circus is 'the people's art form'. More importantly, it also stands for a taste for a specific type of entertainment spectacle, one that demands for the very public display of the antics from both its human and animal performers.

For Jai to address the current debacle in Perak through the trope of the circus is an attempt at relooking this present incident in light of what can be considered as a perennial trope in modern politics. Following this logic of entertainment, *Bisik Menjerit* underlines the intensity of the media spectacle that facilitates and drives our engagement with modern day political turmoil. The political fallout is then not only a unique chapter of our recent times but falls back into a chain of events that go way back to the early years of our political history, back to the heyday of the rapturous, rip-roaring, spectacular, event-of-the-year circus that was always coming to a town near you.

The Balancing Act 2009 fabric collage and charcoal on paper 183 x 152.5 cm





Bring In the Clowns 2009 fabric collage and charcoal on paper 152.5 x 213 cm



Meet the Juggler 2009 charcoal on paper 152.5 x 213 cm



JALAINI ABU HASSAN or "Jai" was born in Selangor in 1963. With a father in the British army, he spent his childhood moving around army bases in the country. Graduating from ITM in 1985, he went on to gain a scholarship to study at the famous Slade School of Fine Art in London and later the Pratt Institute in New York. Since his return in 1995, he has gone on to build an exemplary career as an educator, lecturing at ITM for over ten years, and as an artist, holding his sixteenth solo exhibition last year, while fathering two children.

Jai's story is one of change, struggle, adaptability, survival and good fortune. His work holds a special place in contemporary Malaysian art, consistently exploring and pushing the boundaries of painting in new and exciting ways, while investigating local forms and local life as he has experienced them. His powerful drawings and progressive approach to painting, using a wide range of materials, have earned him a considerable reputation among fellow artists, collectors and the art-loving public.

Jai has exhibited in Malaysia, Singapore, China, the USA, the UK and also in Spain and Iraq. Some of the noted exhibitions he has participated in include 12 ASEAN Artists (2002) and Malaysian Art NOW (2004) at the National Art Gallery, and international art fairs such as Art Singapore and Melbourne Art Fair 2006. His works are in the collection of the National Art Gallery in Malaysia, and in private, corporate and gallery collections around the world.

#### FRONT COVER

Butterfly Hair Clippers 2009

fabric collage and charcoal on paper 183 x 152.5 cm

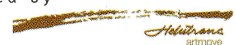


EXHIBITION DATES : 12 JUNE - 5 JULY 2009

**vwfa**

valentine willie fine art

supported by



ARTSPACE@Helutrans, 39 Keppel Rd [Block 2, Passenger Lift #6, 2nd Floor]  
Tanjong Pagar Distripark #02-04 SINGAPORE 089065 Tel : +65 8133 1760  
vwfa.singapore@gmail.com | www.vwfa.net

Gallery opening hours: Tuesday – Saturday: 11am to 7pm.  
Sunday: 11am to 3pm. Closed on Mondays and public holidays.