

**KOTA  
SEPTA**

AHMAD ZAKII ANWAR **KOTA SEPI**

23 August - 12 September 2012  
Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur



## KOTA SEPI Exhibition Introduction

Valentine Willie Fine Art is proud to host Ahmad Zakii Anwar's latest solo exhibition *Kota Sepi*. Disturbingly ambiguous, Zakii presents nine charcoal drawings of clandestine affairs filled with mysterious characters and secretive spaces. Passive, active, heroic or sinister, audiences can only guess at the personalities and hidden exchanges taking place in this cinema of the urban night. Necessarily functioning within a set of tensions—physiological, physical and sexual—each work is then filled with a purposeful silence emphasizing human isolation. This is the 'loneliness' suggested in the Bahasa title that hints at various questions unanswered or words left unsaid. Such remoteness, whether in coffee shop interiors or street scenes, allows each figure to take on a formal significance synonymous with Zakii's style of Iconic Realism.

As a continuation of visual ideas first seen in *Kota Sunyi*, a series of works loosely inspired by the artist's hometown of Johor Bahru, *Kota Sepi* is backgrounded by Kuala Lumpur, where Zakii now spends half of his time. After working late into the night, he takes a break to wander the city, photographing those who prefer the cover of darkness for their business and pleasure. However, unlike *Kota Sunyi*, that focuses on one protagonist, here he works in pairs, developing physical pressure points, suggesting mysterious anxieties and covert relationships. As such the success of each piece is the curiosity and fascination they provoke over the complexity of human life itself. It is not specifically portraiture, but rather the fine line between the real and surreal, or what the artist calls 'psychological set pieces'. Here he allows his subconscious to take over, transferring movement and marks to paper, revealing Freudian clues to the depths of our fears and desires.

To achieve such transcendence Zakii must work alone, when the rest of the world sleeps. Much like when he was a child drawing secretly the images of female nudes he would see in magazines. Working therefore is

a private, personal endeavor, the artist voyeur alone with his subjects, translating them into a significant form of film noir. This isolation hones various intentional and subconscious technical decisions and it is only after they are complete that he can analyse and begin to answer the bigger questions of who and why. But Zakii's dramas always remain as cliff hangers since he does not share these answers with his audience. This is the reason for his success: the ability to reveal and conceal, to engage in the human condition, whilst retaining the magic of its mystery.

On behalf of everyone at the gallery we would like to congratulate Zakii on his latest solo show with us. As always, it has been a pleasure to work with him and has been ever since his first solo at VWFA in 1997. We would like to thank him for his generosity of spirit, and willingness to share his thoughts, laughter and artworks with us across our galleries in the region. As a testament to this relationship, this introduction is followed by an intimate conversation between the artist and the Director of the Gallery, Valentine Willie. This is reflective of a friendship built over time with many memorable moments, both personal and professional experienced along the way. We look forward to working with him as his career continues to go from strength to strength and would like to wish him every success with all his future projects.

Eva McGovern  
Head of Regional Programmes  
Valentine Willie Fine Art





## A CONVERSATION

between Ahmad Zakii Anwar and Valentine Willie

V- Why don't we start at the beginning since, I'm interested to talk about how you transitioned from the commercial sector and graphic design to the Fine Arts.

Z- I went to art school at MARA (now UiTM). My intention was always to go into the Fine Arts department and be an artist, but after my foundation year, my mother and my sisters were worried I would starve and swayed me to specialise in graphic design. So I went commercial instead.

V- Which advertising agency were you working with after you graduated in 1977?

Z- I was doing magazine work first. Do you know Kancil Magazine? Kancil Magazine was the Malaysian Playboy, but with no nudity! Unfortunately, when I was there they weren't doing very well. Their publication frequency was erratic and I wasn't getting paid.

V- You were living in KL at that time.

Z- Yes I was living in KL, and then the magazine folded and I moved to Idris Lim Associates, a local advertising agency. I was at the magazine for six months, and then at Idris Lim for six months. After that I quit and began freelancing as an illustrator and designer. I was doing publishing and then some animation. I did quite a lot actually. I did animation for Padini and for Ajinomoto. There was this one advert for Colgate where a girl and boy meet at an ice skating rink. When they start talking flowers come out of their mouths. Of course, I'm the one animating the flowers!

Then in about 1987 I moved back to Johor, and I started freelancing in Singapore. That's when I worked with really big agencies. I was an illustrator doing visuals, storyboards and illustrations. The agency came up with the concept and I would execute them and they would present the finished work to the client.

V- But you didn't have to deal with the clients directly?

Z- No. The agency would come back to me and say 'Oh, the client wants this, the client wants that.' So that was a downer, you know? I was in that situation for 12 years. I mean, every time the phone rings, I would jump and think 'Oh no, another change.' I was sick of it, so I decided to quit and started painting.

V- You went to Richard Koh. I remember you were doing work with him.

Z- Yes, Richard was one of the first people to collect my work. In those days, no one knew who I was. So once in a while I would be included into these little shows. I'd write my name, address, phone number, everything, behind the canvas! One day I got a call from Richard...

V- Writing your contact details paid off then.

Z- Yes, Richard wanted to commission a painting and I asked him how did he get my number? 'It was there' he said, 'at the back of your painting. So that's how I started selling. But I could hardly make a living because my paintings then were only RM 1,500... RM 2,000. It was during that time that I met Latiff [Mohiddin]. I went to his house. We were talking and he asked me what I was doing. I said I had just quit advertising to paint but that I was finding it difficult. I was so used to working with a job brief in advertising. Suddenly I was left out on my own and realising, oh shit, I don't know what to do.

V- You must have been thinking about what could sell too.

Z- Yes I had to survive. And I was doing all sorts of things, abandoning a lot of canvases and all that. Unfinished works.

V- Did you keep them?

Z- No, it's my hall of shame!

V- You should look at them again.

Z- You sound like Latiff! He said to me, 'You're thinking too much. Before you get to the canvas you're already tired. Just do it, finish it and put it aside. Don't look back, don't go back and retouch, just go forward, keep going. Use your strength.' He then asked me what my strength was and I told him I'm good at Realism. 'Then use that' he said. 'That's how you're designed. You were made this way.' He said, 'Don't think too much... just be instinctive.' So that's what I did and that's how the still lifes started because it was the easiest form of art, you take an object, you put it there, and you paint it.

V- You were in your thirties by this time?

Z- Thirties approaching forty. Because I was doing very well in advertising, so to give that up...well it was a difficult time actually. But then, my biggest stroke of luck was this show with the Malaysian Artist Association, at the old Galeri Petronas. That was the first time I showed The Smokers, there were two of them in the show. Then J. Anu [Anurendra Jegadeva] came in; he was the writer for The Star at the time. He loved the works and wrote about them. And then, Ooi Kok Chuen caught on it. He wrote another piece in the Straits Times, and the next day I asked the gallery and they said both paintings were sold. You know, that put me on the radar.

V- And built up your confidence. After that what happened?

Z- There was the solo I did with you [at VWFA KL] in 1997. Those two early Smokers at

Petronas gallery led to the series I made for you. That solo put me on the map.

V- How about Syed Ahmad Jamal? Did he have an impact on your work? Apart from the fact that you're both from Johor.

Z- Not really. But I was close to Syed Ahmad, because he was more approachable. I used to buy paint for him in Singapore and every time he visited Johor he would drop by the house and we would talk, but he didn't really have an influence on my work.

V- Who else then? Who were the other artists you looked up to when you first started?

Z- Ib [Ibrahim Hussein], but I think perhaps even more so Sulaiman Esa and Redza Piyadasa, because they were my lecturers. And in those days artists talked about philosophy. My favorite teacher was Joseph Tan. I remember him coming in one afternoon after lunch. I think he had had a few beers because I could smell it. He looked at a work of mine, smiled and said: ' Hmm.. quite Surrealist.' That, from Joseph was a compliment, and it really made my day. Then he launched into a discourse on automatic painting. I was in my first year and I was trying hard to grasp what he was saying. But he made me think and he made me want to pick up a book and learn more.

V- Yes, they were all very intellectually minded artists.

Z- Yes very clever. And sometimes Sulaiman was very vocal with Ahmad Khalid Yusof who was also one of my teachers. He was a very nice old man. When I first started to be an artist, he was one of the first people I came to see because he was the President of the Malaysian Artists Association. I went to him and said 'I've quit advertising and I'm starting to paint, so can I join the society?' He immediately gave me the application form. Once you joined you got to travel and show at the National Gallery as well as

Galeri Petronas. And more important, I got to meet senior artists and show my work with them at exhibitions.

V- Lets talk about how you work. An artist said to me once, the most frightening thing is the blank canvas because it's too precious to waste. That's why he sketches. He has a book for every month. And he'll sketch, even Abstract. People have this idea that Abstract artists don't sketch- but they do.

Z- You know why they do it? To figure out the relationship between control and spontaneity and how accidents can be orchestrated to produce art. It's something I practice in my work. Although I'm a Realist, certain things, like *Warthog*, are a mixture of action painting and control. It's both.

V- Your background of graphic design gives you that discipline.

Z- Not only that. The way I work now has something to do with what happened much earlier in my life. The first painting I ever saw was a picture in LIFE magazine. That was the early sixties, we didn't have a TV then, so my window to the world was LIFE magazine which my father subscribed to. I was six or seven years old and the painting I saw had nude female figures, maybe from the Renaissance. I was so taken and excited by it that I started copying them. But thinking back, I realized I felt guilty doing this, because I hid behind these two huge rattan armchairs in the house so that my mum and my sisters wouldn't see me.

V- So that was the time you started drawing?

Z- Yes, I would lie on my stomach and draw these figures—the slope of the shoulders, the curve of the breasts, the hips, it was incredibly sensual and exciting.

V- Who did you show it to?

Z- No one, and this went on for quite a while without anyone knowing. But one day the drawings disappeared, I think my mother found them and threw them out! Then recently, I got to thinking, you know, this is still going on today! I draw from photographs now, just like when I was six and drew from magazines. The excitement of rendering a human figure...I use ground charcoal, grinding it into dust and using my fingers to spread it across the surface.

V- It's a sensual process.

Z- Yes, you feel it, it's very intimate. You're transferring something of yourself onto the paper. And that is why I work actually. Not for a conceptual reason. The process of drawing itself; the final work on the wall is a product of the process, but the making of the work for me is what art is about.

V- The basics.

Z- I haven't really changed. This passionate idea of making art has stayed with me since that first time when I copied the nudes. When I started school, I become aware of Superman, Spiderman and I start drawing them. But the nudes, they were my first love. And you know, the moment I lose that passion for making, I probably will stop because you need it for the essential act of creation. That's the most primitive of all gestures. A child finds a chalk, and he start making marks.

V- And also in a way the most difficult in a sense because we all know how bodies should look, and can tell straight away whether an image is right or wrong. So it doesn't

take an art historian or art lover to see it because we all know what we look like. It's more difficult to fool people now.

Z- And playing with accidents, that's a lot of fun too. Throwing paint and seeing how it falls, erasing the things you don't like, keeping the ones you like, and then letting it dry, and doing it all over and turning around the canvas.

V- But? There's a but, right?

Z- Yes there's a but. Perfection- now that's harder. It's more difficult. It's something you can't ever achieve. It's something you aspire to.

V- It's what you strive for.

Z- Yes. But there are times when you transcend yourself, when you transcend your talent. I'm absolutely aware of my limitations and certain things I'm weak at, but there are times when you overcome all this without realising it. You feel comfortable doing it and it becomes automatic, a whole painting happens like that. You finish very fast because there's no friction. Everything goes well, every colour that you mix, it's right and you put it on the canvas. You know it's right because you get the feeling that it's right.

V- But you're happy to allow some of the ones you're not 100% happy with to go out?

Z- Yes...

V- Because it's difficult to get perfection.



Z- Yes, it's almost impossible but it's something you strive for. You reach for a state when you, your tools and the medium become one. I work very fast. If you're painting a small picture you're using your wrist...if you're painting a bigger picture, you're using your shoulder. With charcoals at times I use the tip of my finger, or sometimes the whole palm. That's the idea- that it's no longer technical, it's beyond technical. You know your materials well, you know what you're painting, and you go and get it done because you have a very clear image of what you want to do before you start.

It's almost like a hymn, a rhythm that governs the act of creation because I believe that there's a certain order in life, a certain purpose to the world, something bigger than all of us. The whole of the ecosystem, nature, the way the sun rises and sets...you can be sure of them.

V- Natural Order.

Z- And I believe that in human endeavour, when I work I want to emulate that, aspire to that, as a thank you, an appreciation or understanding, that this whole thing, this gift of creation, is actually beautiful.

V- Because at six years old, you were drawing, you obviously realised it's a gift and it came from somewhere, and that's when you basically say 'Thank you, God.' You want to always make use of that gift in the best possible way...to respect that gift and to honour that gift. There are probably many other artists like you in the West, and their charcoal is so free, but it makes them totally old fashioned, so they're probably doing something else or are struggling. You were just in the right place at the right time. That's the other gift. It's so humbling.

Z- Yeah. But sometimes it gets difficult, and I do get tired. I don't work as much as I

used to. People get caught up in the technical aspects of my work, because it's so meticulous... I think they shouldn't. That part is mine and I don't want the technical aspects of the work to get in the way of looking at the work. Their part is to enjoy the finished work.

V- Definitely. You're human. You're not perfect. But you do often talk about your work in a kind of spiritual way as a quest for transcendence.

Z- But the funny thing was that I didn't realise all of this when I was working at that time. I was doing it without thinking. It's a subconscious gesture, a natural way of working. It was only later, that I started looking back at all the works and analysing myself, that I saw a certain order...

V- Remember what Latiff said, 'Don't think too much!'

Z- Yeah don't think too much, just do!

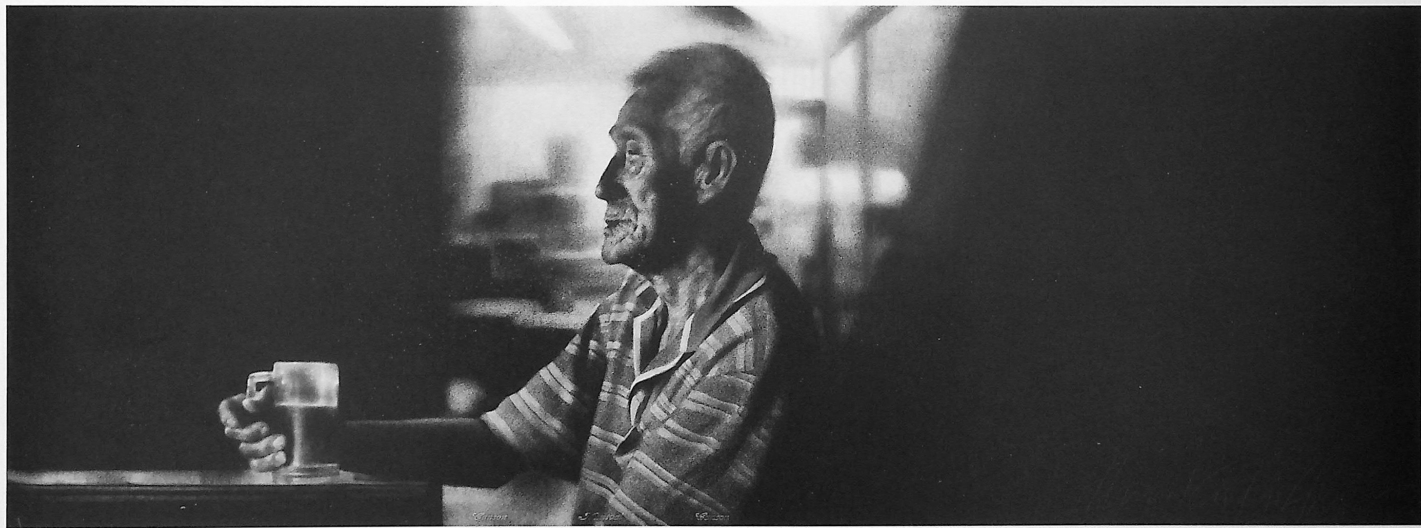
V- Just do what you're good at. The gift...



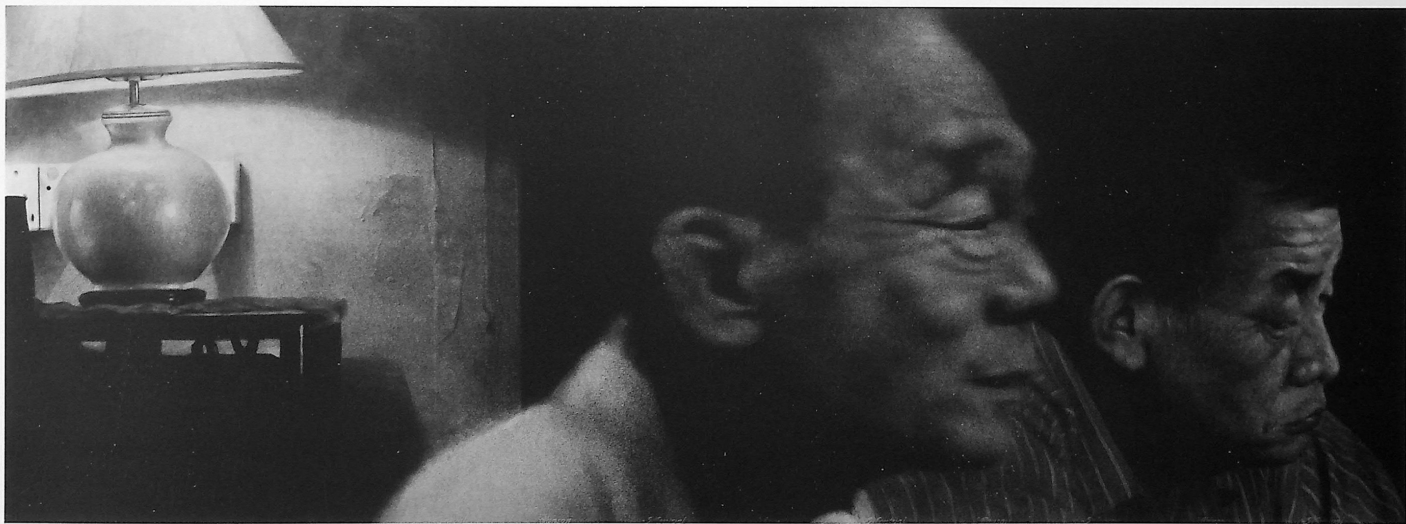


satu kekasihku  
aku manusia, rindu rasa, rindu rupa- *Amir Hamzah, Nanyí Sunyi*

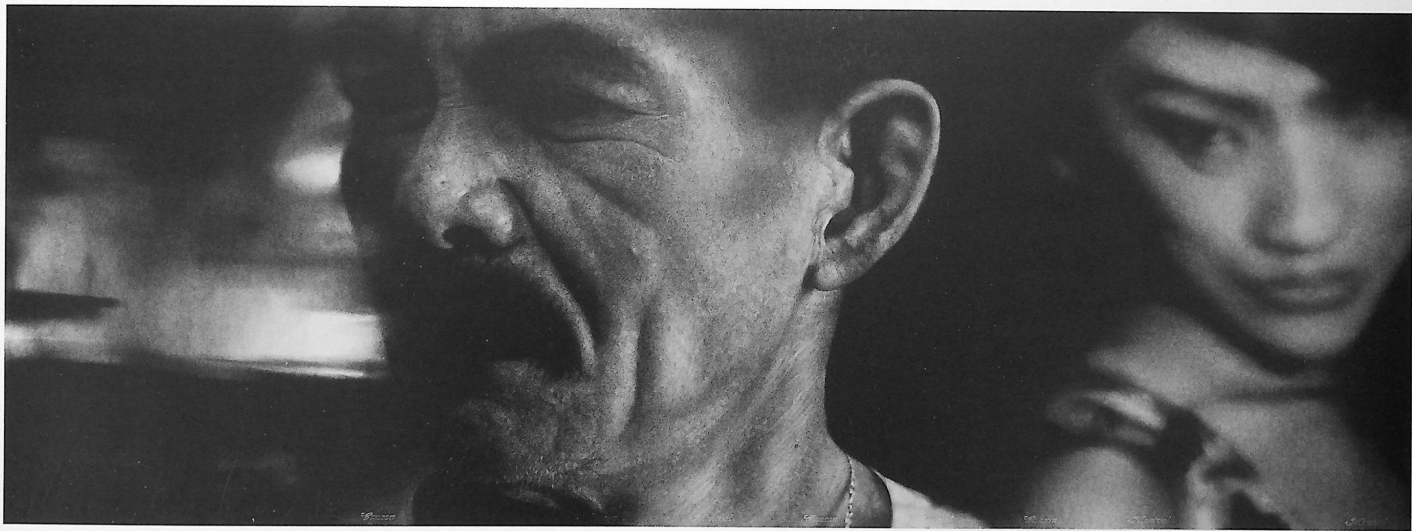
KOTA SEPI 1 | 2012 | CHARCOAL ON PAPER | 76 X 206 cm



KOTA SEPI 2 | 2012 | CHARCOAL ON PAPER | 76 X 206 cm

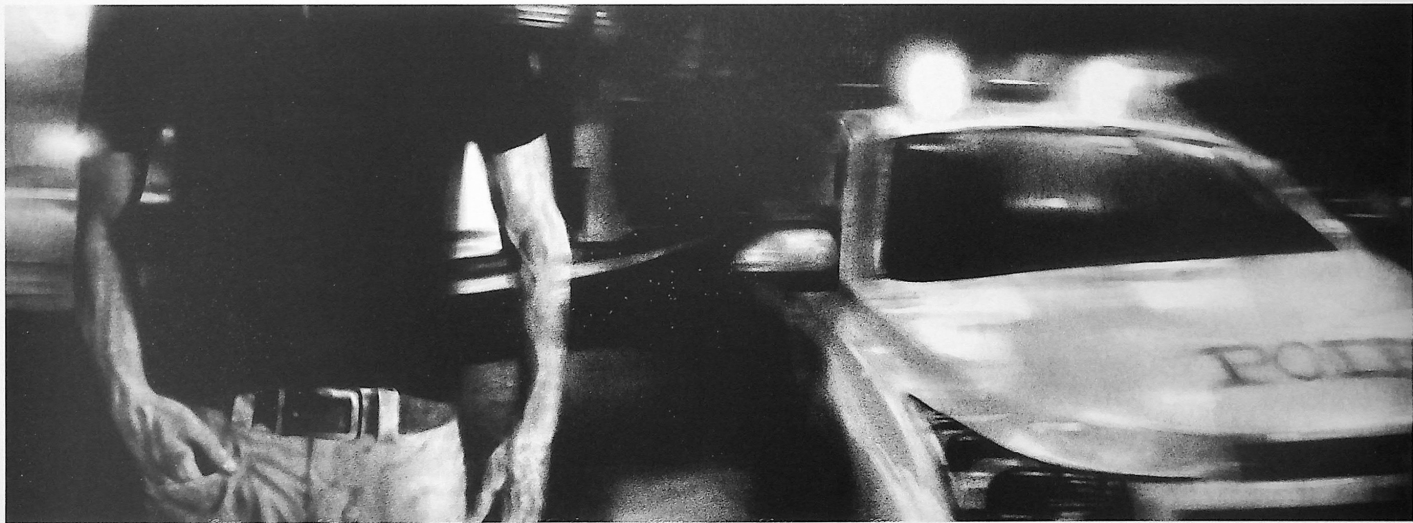


KOTA SEPI 3 | 2012 | CHARCOAL ON PAPER | 76 X 206 cm



KOTA SEPI 4 | 2012 | CHARCOAL ON PAPER | 76 X 206 cm





KOTA SEPI 5 | 2012 | CHARCOAL ON PAPER | 76 X 206 cm



KOTA SEPI 6 | 2012 | CHARCOAL ON PAPER | 76 X 206 cm



KOTA SEPI 7 | 2012 | CHARCOAL ON PAPER | 76 X 206 cm

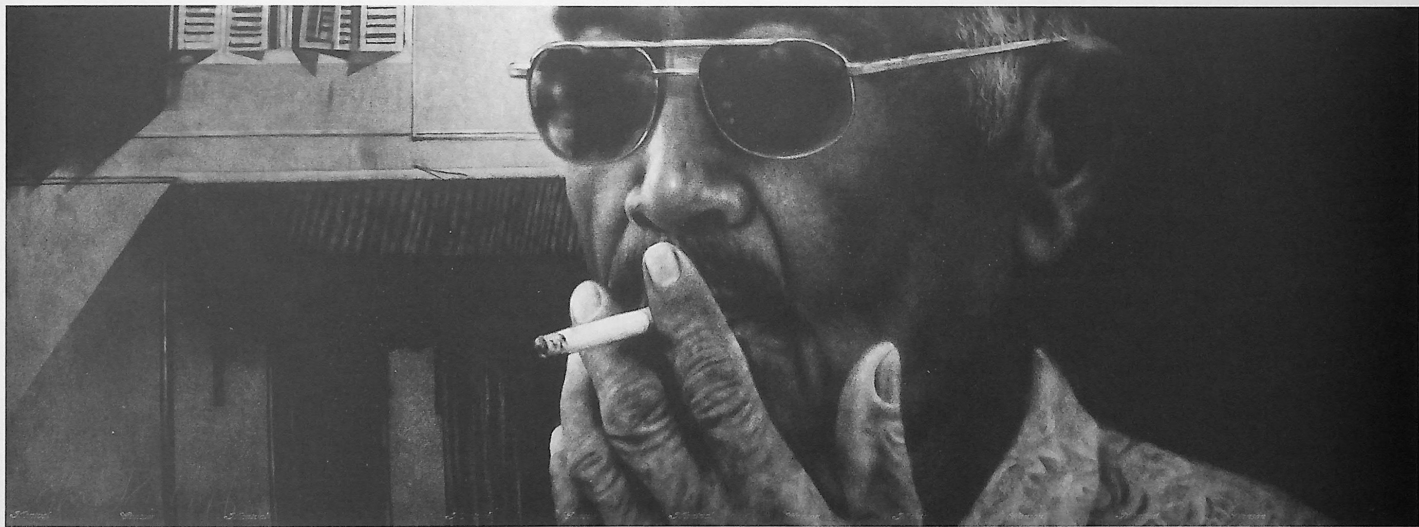


KOTA SEPI 8 | 2012 | CHARCOAL ON PAPER | 76 X 206 cm





KOTA SEPI 9 | 2012 | CHARCOAL ON PAPER | 76 X 206 cm





Ahmad Zakii Anwar (b. 1955, Johor Bahru, Malaysia) was educated at the School of Art and Design, MARA Institute of Technology (now UiTM), Malaysia. The artist lives and works in Johor Bahru and Kuala Lumpur.

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2012

*KOTA SEPI* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

2011

*BONES AND SINEWS* | AndrewShire Gallery, Los Angeles

2010

*NAFSU* | Nadi Gallery, Jakarta

2009

*BEING* | NUS Museum, National University of Singapore

2008

*DISCLOSURE, A MID-CAREER SURVEY* | Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*DRAWINGS, SKETCHES & STUDIES* | Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur  
*GIMME SHELTER* | Rogue Art, Kuala Lumpur

2007

*AHMAD ZAKII ANWAR: PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS & PRINTS, 1991-2007* | Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore  
*KOTA SUNYI* | CP Foundation, CP ArtSpace, Jakarta

2006

*SUBLIMINAL* | The Drawing Room, Manila and Numthong Gallery, Bangkok

2005

*PRIMORDIAL DREAM* | Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore  
*ICONS* | Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

2004

*BOROBUDUR* | Amanjiwo, Jogjakarta, Indonesia  
*ARANGBALI* | Taksu Jakarta

2003

*INTERPRETER OF DESIRES* | Taksu Kuala Lumpur

2001

*SHADOWLAND* | Plum Blossoms, Hong Kong

2000

*STILLS* | Taksu Kuala Lumpur

1999

*PRESENCE* | Barbara Greene Fine Art, New York

1998

*DISTANT GAMELAN* | Art Focus, Singapore

1997

*ONE MAN SHOW* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur



## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2012

*MONUMENTAL* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore  
*SUBJECT SHALL REMAIN ANONYMOUS* | Give Art Space, Helutrans, Singapore

2011

*PERSONA* | Awas, Penang  
*TWO PERSON SHOW WITH BEN CABRERA* | Foundation Sebastian, Mexico City  
*WAYANG UWEI ANGKAT SAKSI*, National Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*TANAH AYER* | Selasar Surnaryo Art Space, Bandung

2009

*WORK* | 19 Jalan Berangan, Kuala Lumpur  
*HUMANITIES* | Andrewshire Gallery, Los Angeles  
*BITUMANIA* | Pace Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*KIAS* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

2008

*THE SCALE OF BLACK* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore  
*ONE NIGHT ONLY* | Gallery at the Back of the House, Johor Bahru  
*HEROIC PRIMA DONNAS* | Pace Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

2007

*50TH INTERNATIONAL E.V.B.K* | Prum, Germany  
*THE FORCE OF NATURE* | Darling Muse, Kuala Lumpur

2006

*FEED ME* | Rimbun Dahan, Selangor  
*SIGNED AND DATED* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

2005

*YOU ARE HERE* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur  
*INTERFACE* | Taksu Singapore  
*SPIRIT OF WOOD AND OTHER TREASURES* | Taksu Kuala Lumpur  
*NEW WORKS* | Taksu Singapore

2004

*PORTRAITS* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

2003

*GAMES PEOPLE PLAY* | Rimbun Dahan, Selangor  
*GRAND OPENING* | Taksu Jakarta  
*EXHIBITION 2003* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

2002

*KEMBALI KE BALI* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Bali  
*CONTRA / INDICATIONS* | Taksu Kuala Lumpur  
*TOUCH* | Rimbun Dahan, Selangor

2001

*EXHIBIT X* | Taksu Kuala Lumpur  
*FLASHPOINT* | Rimbun Dahan, Selangor  
*MALAYSIA STILL LIVES* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Bali

2000

*HEADLIGHTS* | Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur  
*ARANG* | Taksu Kuala Lumpur  
*EXHIBITION 2000* | Taksu Kuala Lumpur

1999

*AKU 99* | Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*14TH INTERNATIONAL ASIAN ART EXHIBITION* | Museum of Asian-Art, Fukuoka  
*PERCEPTION & PERSPECTIVE: A MALAYSIAN EYEVUEW* | Hotbath-Gallery, Bath & Pittville Gallery, Cheltenham, UK  
*THREE PERSON SHOW* | Taksu Kuala Lumpur

1998

*MALAYSIAN EXPRESSIONS* | Panorama Gallery, Beijing  
*CULTURE COLOUR CONNECTION* | Fremantle Arts Center, Perth  
*NO RETREAT* | Oberoi Gallery, Bali  
*JUST DRAWINGS* | Art Case Galleries, Kuala Lumpur  
*COMMONWEALTH GAMES EXHIBITION* | Taksu Kuala Lumpur  
*CULTURE COLOUR CONNECTION* | Art Case Galleries, Kuala Lumpur  
*EIGHTS ARTISTS* | Galeri Citra, Kuala Lumpur  
*MENJELANG SYAWAL* | Maybank Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1997

*DANCE, RHYTHM & MOTION* | Maybank Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*FIGURATIF* | Andi's Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia  
*MALAYSIAN DRAWINGS* | National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*ART FOR NATURE* | NN Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*TRESORS* | Singapore International Convention & Exhibition Centre  
*PEKAN SENI IPOH* | City Hall, Ipoh, Perak  
*12TH INTERNATIONAL ASIAN ART EXHIBITION* | Centro de Actividades-Turísticas, Macau  
*MAYA* | City Hall, Kuala Lumpur

1996

*MEN ON WOMEN* | MIM, Kuala Lumpur  
*KARYAWAN SENI JOHOR* | Hyatt Regency, Johor Bahru  
*OPEN SHOW* | Galeri Shah Alam, Selangor

1995

*CULTURE COLOUR CONNECTION* | Takashimaya Gallery, Singapore  
*RECENT WORKS* | The John Erdos Gallery, Singapore  
*DIMENSION 95* | Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1993

*TITIAN 111* | Hanoi School of Fine Art, Vietnam  
*THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE* | Maybank Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*IMBAUAN LEDANG* | Maybank Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
*EXPOSURE* | Quo Quo, Hong Kong  
*DIMENSION 93* | Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1992

*ISLAM CONTEMPORARY WORKS OF ART* | Holiday Inn, Singapore

1979

*SALON MALAYSIA* | National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1976

*NATIONAL DRAWING EXHIBITION* | National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

1975

*YOUNG CONTEMPORARIES* | National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur



© Valentine Willie Fine Art & Ahmad Zakii Anwar 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, except for purposes of research, criticism and review, without prior permission from the artist, writers and publisher.

Published by Valentine Willie Fine Art in conjunction with the exhibition Kota Sepi by Ahmad Zakii Anwar.

*EDITORIAL TEAM*  
Ahmad Zakii Anwar  
Valentine Willie  
Eva McGovern  
Liza Ho  
Snow Ng

*DESIGN & PHOTOGRAPHY*  
Ahmad Zakii Anwar

*PRINTING*  
Pakatan Tusen Cetak Sdn Bhd

vwfa

1st Floor, 17 Jalan Telawi 3  
Bangsar Baru  
59100 Kuala Lumpur  
Malaysia

T +603 2284 2348  
F +603 2282 5190  
info@vwfa.net  
www.vwfa.net

