



re **GRUP**

30 years on

1967 - from l to r: Anthony Lau, Ibrahim Hussein, Latiff Mohidin, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Cheong Laitong, Jolly Koh, Yeoh Jin Leng.

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The Disbanded GRUP - Houses, Myths and Art

GRUP was the name of a group and exhibition put together by seven artists in 1967. The acronym GRUP stands for *Gerak, Rupa, Ubur, Penyataan*; loosely translated into English, it means Movement, Form, Torch, Statement. The seven artists are Cheong Laitong, Ibrahim Hussein, Jolly Koh, Latiff Mohidin, Anthony Lau, Syed Ahmad Jamal and Yeoh Jin Leng.

So much has been written about this group of artists - 4 out of 7 have books published on their works, writings and lives - that a short essay like this seems somewhat inadequate. Nevertheless, I will attempt to delineate some links among them, not through the analysis of their works because it has been done in much detail elsewhere, but rather, locate them in the context of their surroundings and how they present and represent themselves in the Malaysian art community.

A review of the 1967 exhibition noted that "the common feature is that most of them trained in Europe, and have subsequently worked for several years in Malaysia as professional painters or art teachers"¹. This exhibition was the first and last put together by these artists and a year and a half later, an art-critic remarked that they are "the more enlightened echelons of Malaysian artists, who have fallen on (their) high hopes and have gone their separate ways..."².

That the GRUP did not survive is not surprising. History has revealed to us that most visual artists - with their conflicting ambitions, world-views, large individualistic personalities and the inherent solitary nature of the creative process - find it difficult to have a community-based relationship. And yet, 30 years later, even if their voices are not united and their paths have diverged, what this group of artists still represent is worth considering.

¹ *Malay Mail*, 7 March 1967

² *Sunday Mail*, 17 November 1968



An innocuous and mundane, yet revealing and instructive common feature of their lives is their physical environment, their homes. All of them, except for Latiff Mohidin, own bungalow houses on hills in areas of prime property. Yeoh Jin Leng lives in the Ukay Heights/Hillview area with fruit trees surrounding his house and swimming pool. Upon entering Anthony Lau's garden in Damansara Heights, one is transported to a forest of large arching trees, wild ferns and orchids.

Syed Ahmad Jamal's house is perched on a steep slope overlooking the Cincin River in Gombak. In the compound of Cheong Laitong's airy house in Taman Seputih is a large fish pond filled with carps almost the length of arms. Jolly Koh, who now resides in Australia, owns "a log cabin, in a semi-rural atmosphere, on top of the hill, with a view of the sea, and a sunset every evening".

And Ibrahim Hussein, who epitomises such worldly success in the Malaysian art world, lives on Pantai Hills in a house with a swimming pool designed by architect Lim Chong Keat. His house became significant enough to be featured in the catalogue accompanying his retrospective at the National Art Gallery in 1986. In that catalogue, Lim Chong Keat wrote on



the design of the house, and claimed that, although it was a "modest house, no budget constraint was set". This "immaculate" house was to "accommodate his international set of friends", display "not only Ibrahim's work, but also... new trophies and souvenirs" and "become an artistic and social destination for tourists and locals"³.

Owning a house is a symbol of security and stability, of having arrived within the dominant paradigm of success. Within this paradigm, all the disbanded GRUP artists have unequivocally achieved well beyond owning faceless, stultifying middle-class homes in housing estates. If Ibrahim Hussein, with his well-groomed pony tail and immaculate white clothes, sits on one end of this axis of worldly success, - he was featured in "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" - on the other end is Latiff Mohidin.

³ *Ibrahim Hussein: A Retrospective*, Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery 1986, p.91

⁴ T.K. Sabapathy (Ed.), *Pago-Pago to Gelombang: 40 years of Latiff Mohidin*, Singapore: Singapore Art Museum 1994, p.15

⁵ *Art and Asia Pacific*, Vol.1 No.4. 1994, p.88

⁶ *Ibid*



Although Latiff Mohidin now owns two single-story link-houses which have been generously renovated and his paintings fetch the highest prices after Ibrahim Hussein's, his image for many years, especially in the 60's and 70's, was that of an outsider. He was perceived as not subscribing to the dominant paradigm of stability and success. This is how he was described in 1970:

Abdul Latiff Mohidin wanders around the world with a little knapsack - an itinerant artist who feels and works more in the tradition of the ancient monks and *sannyasis* of Southeast Asia than the modern hippie.⁴

If the other artists bought houses, he lived off his knapsack. If the other artists opted for stability, he chose transience. Furthermore, he was other-worldly.

What particularly interests me here is not that these artists own beautiful houses or have other-worldly powers but rather what these images have come to represent. For practising artists, their houses have become symbols of status and success, something tangible and within reach in the profession. For art students, the knowledge of their worldly success

gives these young students the courage to plod on in a field of studies which is otherwise risky. For the public, their houses provide a concrete respectability to a profession which is still largely perceived as misguided.

Intertwined with the house as a yard-stick for success is something less tangible - the artist as a mythic hero and art as a mystical venture. All the artists in the disbanded GRUP have cultivated this aura to varying degrees with the help of writers, the media and public. Syed Ahmad Jamal has talked about the "mystical qualities" of abstract art. Cheong Laitong suggested that there exists "a mystery between oneself and the canvas". Ibrahim Hussein has projected himself as having some form of mysterious power: "Touch on something and it grows". Jolly Koh's art has been described as possessing "a mystical union with the elements". Yeoh Jin Leng has been called "an enigma".

Such mythifying anecdotes are perhaps most astonishingly illustrated by Latiff Mohidin who, as a teenager, was hailed as a "*budak ajaib*" (a boy with supernatural powers). In recent years, this power has been extended to include extraordinary sexual powers:

...Dr. Earl Lu, Chairman of the Board of the Art Museum, asked the audience to imagine Latiff standing naked except for a fig-leaf beside one of his paintings: 'I think he would need a very big fig-leaf!' he exclaimed.⁵

Like a Hindu god, Latiff had acquired the totemic *lingam* of his Pago-Pago paintings. He had become "the sexually prodigious creator"⁶.

Nature, which has since the beginning of time been the location for spiritual awakening and mystical revelations, became a logical entry-point and outlet for these artists. Landscape - the mountains, forests and seas - became a conduit for these artists to express both the mystical and mythical in Nature. Syed Ahmad Jamal uses *Gunung Ledang* (Mount Ophir) to explore a mystical journey upwards to God. Yeoh Jin Leng makes paintings on the spiritual vastness of the land and earth. Cheong Laitong focuses on the microscopic wonder of trees. Latiff Mohidin created altar-like sculptures to meditate upon and named the whole series after the mystical island *Langkawi*. Jolly Koh recalls the mystery of the moon which followed him from place to place. Anthony Lau fashions in steel the lingering echoes of the sea.



Whether one agrees with such mythification of artists and art is irrelevant. What is important here is the historical fact that these artists and the media have constructed an aura around art and the artist, lifted the profession to a new level of sublime mystery. This myth, even as it distorts and transforms history into nature, also functions as an idealised frame for artists and art students to negotiate with and aspire to. Such myths prove to be particularly useful and comforting when artists and art students are trying to find a *raison d'être* and heroic models within the social fabric. They function almost like a subconscious knowledge to fall back on; to know that there exists in flesh and blood a mythical ideal.

The other link between these artists is their deep belief in art as an expression of the 'inner self', the search for the quintessential and authentic through the use of colour and abstraction. Because they studied abroad in the 1950's and 60's during the time when such world-views began to congeal as theory and pedagogy in art institutions, they inadvertently absorbed these late modernist sensibilities. They are in a way products of history and circumstances.

Back in Malaysia, these artists instituted a *coup* of sorts in response to the mannered and petrified local academic realism. The antagonism between them, the abstract artists, and the realist artists from APS (*Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung*) is well documented by art historian, T.K. Sabapathy.⁷ These artists became the purveyors of a new internationalist sensibility; they were suave, articulate and above all possessed

sophisticated views on art. Some of them - Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Anthony Lau and Jolly Koh - became educators. They brought their new-found knowledge into practice and became instrumental in shaping art education policies, and influencing a whole generation of teachers and students. The Specialist Teacher's Training Institute (S.T.T.I.), where Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng and Anthony Lau were teaching, became the centre where young trainee teachers were challenged and inspired by these new ideas. These teachers, armed with a new cause, disseminated what they learnt in high schools all over the country. Institut Teknologi MARA (I.T.M.), where Jolly Koh taught, quickly became the place where trends were set and deconstructed. Before long, the views of these artists became the dominant ideology. Abstract art had become mainstream and ensconced within major art institutions.

(I was a product of this fervour in the seventies by art teachers who sported moustaches, beards and wore sun-glasses. In the eighties, when I finally met Syed Ahmad Jamal and Yeoh Jin Leng, I realised that these art teachers had even fashioned their image after Syed Ahmad Jamal and Yeoh Jin Leng.)

The beliefs of these artists in the quintessential and authentic might appear archaic and naive in this age of cyberspace and genetic cloning. However, what they propagated, formulated and instituted were significant because for the first time in the history of the visual arts and art education, a set of reference points and pedagogic tools were made available to be appraised or debunked. It is not possible to talk of abstract art without referring to all of these artists, their art and ideas. It is not possible to discuss the development of art education without reference to Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, and to a lesser extent, Anthony Lau and Jolly Koh.

The artists of the disbanded GRUP, who had at one point enough affinity to exhibit together, continue to exist as looming figures. Anecdotal myths still surround them. While some of their views have been deconstructed and their works have begun parodying themselves, they nevertheless established frameworks and entry-points for the Malaysian art community and public. The development and direction of art, even today, is founded on negotiations with and through their art, thoughts and lifestyle.

Wong Hoy Cheong
Curator

⁷ T.K. Sabapathy (ed.), *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art*, Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery 1994, pp. 61-64

Suggested further reading

T. K. Sabapathy, *Syed Ahmad Jamal: A Historical Overview*,
Kuala Lumpur: Nanyang Gallery of Art 1994

T.K. Sabapathy (Ed.), *Pago-Pago to Gelombang: 40 years of
Latiff Mohidin*, Singapore: Singapore Art Museum 1994

T.K. Sabapathy, *Yeoh Jin Leng - Art & Thought 1952-1995*,
Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery 1995

Sharifah Fatimah Zubir & Others, *Ibrahim Hussein:
A Retrospective*, Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery 1986

Redza Piyadasa & T. K. Sabapathy, *Modern Artists of Malaysia*,
Kuala Lumpur 1983



reGRUP - 30 years on

The works on show in this exhibition chart the careers of the seven GRUP artists over the past three decades. An effort has been made to acquire some of the original works from 1967 despite the fact that a number of the pieces have been lost or are untraceable. During the 1967 show, only three works were sold. Each artist is today acknowledged as a founding father of modern Malaysian art. Through showing their works in this way, this exhibition aims to explore the identity of abstract expressionism and its role in Malaysian art, mapping its beginnings and its evolution here.

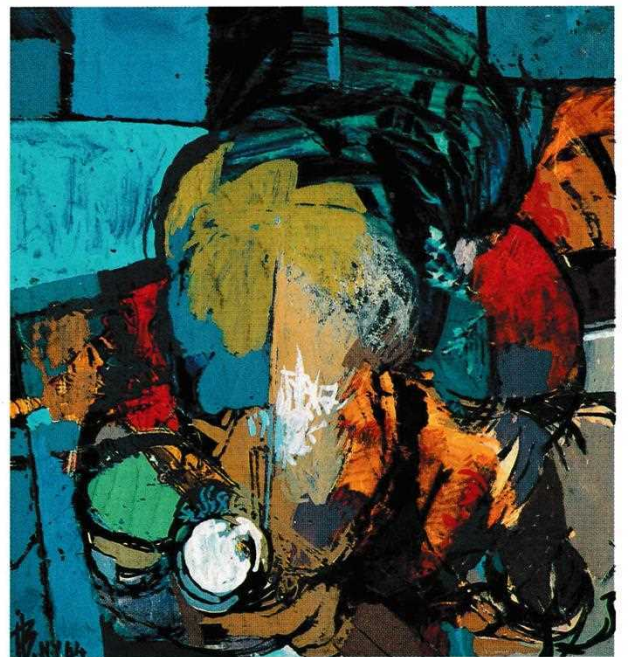




1



2



3

1

Anthony Lau
Gotong Royong
1959
Mild steel
118 x 42 x 42 cm

2

Ibrahim Hussein
Acrobats
1964
Mixed media on paper
43 x 24 cm

3

Ibrahim Hussein
Two Crawling Figures
1964
Mixed media on paper
23.2 x 22 cm



4



6

4
Yeoh Jin Leng
Along the Way
1964
Oil on canvas
57.5 x 81.5 cm

5
Cheong Laitong
Red and Black Rhythm
1966
Oil on board
120 x 90 cm

6
Cheong Laitong
Blue Rhythm
1966
Oil on board
45 x 112 cm

7
Syed Ahmad Jamal
Arjuna
1967
Acrylic on canvas
122 x 107 cm

9
Jolly Koh
Floating Form
1967
Oil on board
74.2 x 59.3 cm

8
Syed Ahmad Jamal
N.S.E.W.
1967
Acrylic on canvas
76 x 107 cm

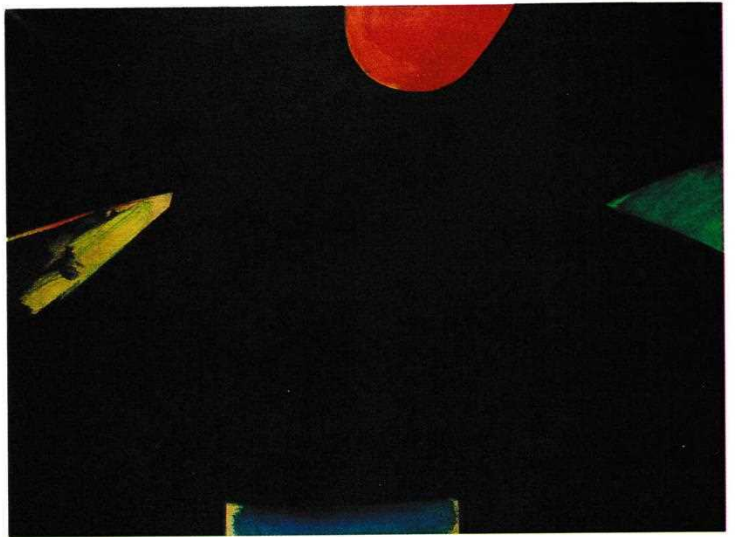
10
Yeoh Jin Leng
Form Suppressed
1968
Oil on canvas
95 x 95 cm

7



9

8



9



10



11



12

11

Anthony Lau

Sea Echo

1968

Mild steel

28.2 x 79.5 x 21 cm

12

Anthony Lau

Sungai Mekong

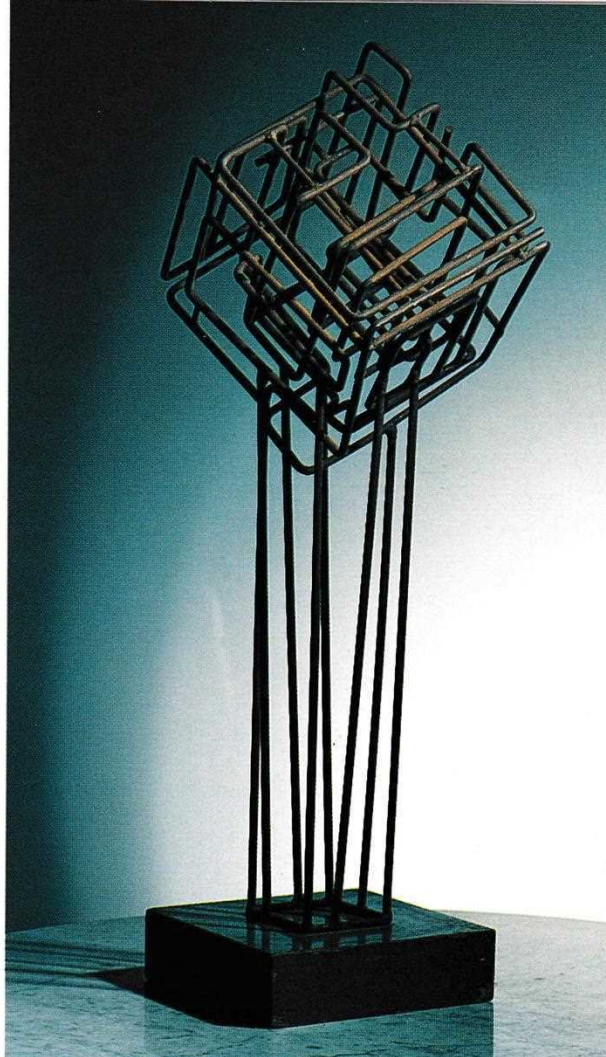
1969

Mild steel

60 x 37 x 37.5 cm



13



14

13

Anthony Lau

Is it not one?

1967

Mild steel and wood

68 x 35 x 15 cm

14

Anthony Lau

Space Trap

1967

Mild steel and wood

111 x 44 x 43 cm

15

Cheong Laitong

Ramayana Dance

1975

Oil on canvas

100 x 103 cm



15

16



16

Jolly Koh

Reflection

1977

Oil on canvas

121 x 91 cm

17



17

Syed Ahmad Jamal

Tikar Tenaga

1981

Acrylic on canvas

199 x 199 cm

18

Jolly Koh

Morning Walk

1981

Oil on canvas

100 x 120 cm

19

Cheong Laitong

Night Palm

1983

Acrylic on canvas

134 x 134 cm

20

Jolly Koh

Overhang

1984

Oil on canvas

120 x 81 cm

21

Yeoh Jin Leng

Ilang

1984

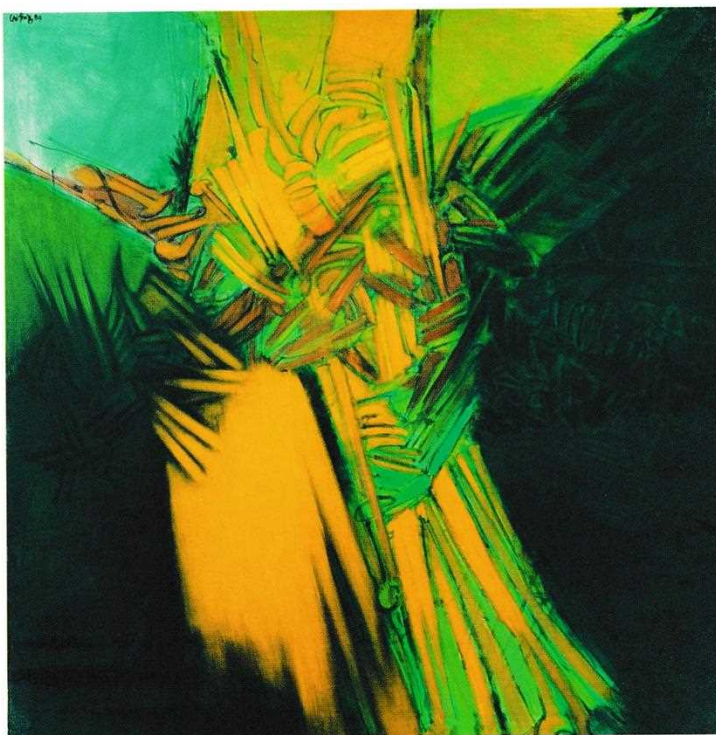
Oil on canvas

102 x 102 cm

18



19



20



21



22



23



24

22

Syed Ahmad Jamal

Gunung Ledang

1992

Acrylic on canvas

173 x 239 cm

24

Jolly Koh

Tannillion Revisited

1996

Acrylic on canvas

152 x 278 cm

23

Cheong Laitong

Voices of Nature

1995

Acrylic on canvas

135 x 163 cm

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