

Silent Conversation

A SOLO EXHIBITION BY MASNOOR RAMLI MAHMUD

"Jika rosaknya manusia maka rosaklah alam kerna manusia itu miniatur alam"



ABOUT US

Established in 2010 with years of experience in arts management, Core Design Gallery is committed to its principle venture in representing Malaysian Contemporary Art.

The gallery is passionate in promoting and developing emerging, mid-career as well as blue-chip artists in order to catapult Malaysian contemporary art into achieving worldwide recognition for its critical and artistic values in various platforms.

Our approach is centred on the philosophy of a strategic documentation system as we believe in stimulating cultural discourses within the art community, regionally and internationally.

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Siapa dirimu?

Aku bukan bertanya tentang spesis mu

Siapa dirimu?

Aku bukan bertanya tentang namamu

Siapa dirimu?

Aku bukan bertanya siapa bapa dan ibumu

Siapa dirimu?

Aku bukan bertanya jenis kelamin mu

Siapa dirimu?

Aku bukan bertanya suku dan bangsamu

Siapa dirimu

Aku bukan bertanya apa profesi kerjamu

Siapa dirimu?

Aku bukan bertanya apa pegangan mu

Siapa dirimu?

Aku hanya bertanya ‘Siapa dirimu?’

Diri Sejati, Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, 2020–2022

Masnoor Ramli Mahmud (b. 1968, Kedah, Malaysia) graduated with a BA in Fine Art from University Teknologi Mara (UiTM).

Masnoor Ramli Mahmud





this ‘motion’, so does he extrapolates the need for such creation.

Once belonged to the instrumental art collective Matahati (dispersed in 2011) has placed him under an unavoidable spotlight since the 1990s, one of the many directions in his art career that pushed his artistic ventures into multiple trajectories which include travelling across the globe spanning decades, concurrent with significant exhibitions that have emerged in-between. His impressive oeuvre over the years is not merely cultivated through his engagement with the tethered world, with investigative-like subjects encompassing insightful commentaries on the social, ethical, and cultural issues, but also his reevaluation on weighing its tendency to coalesce in the ‘maturing’ state of his being. Masnoor’s contemplative nature has always been his critical signature brought about in his experiences regardless of who, what, when and where — this, in essence, is how Masnoor relates as close as he possibly could to achieve a certain, not as superficial accomplishment when it comes to his art practice, impervious to the outcome.

Masnoor, also generally known for his dialectical approach, possesses a guiding principle that art should not conform to a rigid visual response. This is notable with his intersecting skills and techniques including experimentations with new media art that he favours courtesy of his shifting, overlapping careers which, to date, have inadvertently influenced his art practice. Breaking boundaries between genres seems to be the route he is comfortable taking as far as said practice is concerned, based on the fact

that two years in the pandemic had curiously translated his methods to becoming mystically complex; something about the subjects Masnoor had concocted, moulded, and dutifully revised all these years that had felt at given times obscure to process in, yet adamant to resolve.

During this pivotal global phenomenon, too, Masnoor took off in reflecting on the subtle difference between being ‘stationary’ and ‘cautionary’, in which he allowed himself to delve deeper into the crux of the matter concerning the ‘disrupted’ routine in his art practice, its peculiarity on chances and occurrences, carrying the allegorical disconnection he had experienced in the wake of worldwide devastation — at the same time decontextualising and refocusing its situational turbulences that he deems appropriately imperative to share and perhaps, have a ‘silent conversation’ with.

*

“Sejak 90an, selain bergerak secara berkumpulan dalam Matahati, saya juga bergerak bersendirian menyertai pelbagai pameran berkumpulan, malah, pameran pertama 1988, Hiroshima Never Again di Lobby City Hall, DBKL. Ketika dalam Matahati juga saya belajar dengan pengalaman bagaimana menerima ledakan media baru dengan pernah bekerja di rumah-rumah produksi, animasi dari stesen itu.”

*

For clarification, paragraphs that are in asterisks are Masnoor’s take on writer’s perspective after further discussions.

*

“Apakah pandemik ini menjadi kegelisahan yang menghantui fikiran akibat pengaruh media itu sendiri yang menakutkan?”



Fitrah, Graphite and Collage on Canvas, 123cm x 123cm, 2020

and illuminating, accompanying his current body of works which have been studiously in the making for close to five years. His honest admittance of lacking the time to truly sit down and progress before the pandemic outbreak propelled an instant solution to this dilemma. Due to this torrential time, which was almost two years of resorting to working from home, Masnoor were in the mindset of being self-obligated to finish what he had started.

The exhibition *Much 2do About Drawing* held in Core Design Gallery in November 2020 can be seen referencing the pandemic as the theme, with Masnoor’s work *Fitrah* (2020) seeming to be expanded into the current premise. Unexpectedly, coming to know him and learning about his past works through seminal exhibitions, readings, and scavenging web articles so far proved to be quite inadequate. Masnoor’s deliberation in continuing a similar style is a rewarding surprise, especially concerning his major pieces for this exhibition now being predominantly done with graphite instead of paintings of oil or acrylic. Several other pieces occupy the gallery space to ante up and set the tone of the overall exhibit, with personal poems, video projection and installation affixed almost as an esoteric approach. Exacting the purpose of distinctive mediums to elaborate on his astute worldviews, with-in or with-out, become ‘enlightenment’ on its own.

I believe that there is an intrinsic drive in each of us to voyage beyond the trappings of one’s shell and localized self. When we lost trust to our habitual gravitation towards physical desires, we usually yearn for a journey into

our souls. We yearn to journey beyond the confines and confusion of our shrouded earthy selves. We begin to indulge into a ‘quantum state’ in which we become more engaged with our deeper thoughts and emotions. We may discover that our minds and emotions are more entangled, intertwined, closer and interconnected with each other than we thought. Not only that, they are also very noisy.

— excerpt from ‘Masnoor Ramli: Through the Eyes and Heart of a Friend’ by Hasnul J. Saidon

The trappings of one’s shell, as aptly put by Hasnul J. Saidon in the excerpt above came close to describing what this exhibition is attempting to issue forth. For close to two decades Masnoor was in the habit of crucially assessing the social and cultural happenings, reflections on catastrophes that strike the nation and the consequences society had faced for it. Recurring themes of political landscapes and technological expansion that foray into brainwashed mindsets were also riddled with unending condemnation about how the world is structured, as can be understood executed in his past series *Moulding The History*. These temporal issues often contribute to the mind’s restlessness, given that Masnoor, after exhaustive years of processing said issues, inevitably attempts in mirroring inward, reading into his sense and reality of self once more.

II

There are always matters of uncertainty in one’s existence, regardless of how one lives through it. Does one live in a way so that he may be certain or does one live in certain so that he may live? Questions on livelihood recurs extremely the moment the worldwide pandemic was announced in early 2020. Did we start to live, then? Did it feel far-reaching instead to live the moment we realise our limited capacity to understand what living truly is, hindered and restricted as it was? Cooped up perpetually for years in one’s home necessitating conditional boundaries has triggered interwoven issues, perhaps regressing our typical way of conduct at some point.

The intricacies in dealing with such a vexing circumstance manoeuvred into ‘renegotiating’ the spaces we were forced to reside in and be comfortable with at the same time. In light of this drawback, Masnoor had found it advantageous

the means to counter them with an infallible truth as guided by God. His given ‘sorcery’ was an example of trying to reason with the ‘rationalists’ of the time, as unfolded in the story.

When it comes to factual causation, what Moses did was necessary conduct and act as part of the condition to convince the unbelievers of the proof he had acquired by direct communication with God. It should be well noted that society then grew with the concept of ‘seeing is believing’; because of the prophetic proof witnessed by the people, they declared themselves believers in Moses’s God. Angered by this turn of events, Pharaoh remained an unbeliever to the end, despite several truths presented before him.*

Of course, there is more to ‘see and believe’ than just blind faith. Masnoor exemplified this by referring to our contemporary ethos, with heavily distorted ‘serpentine’ facts that gradually become incomprehensible; facts that are constantly manipulated and altering our views despite and perhaps because of the overabundance of information we have recklessly absorbed in our life. There is a limit to believing truths these days that has felt ‘borrowed’ and repressed, that searching for a veritable one every so often requires collective agreement, or else it is void of reasoning or consideration. Humans that act on mechanical thoughts and are convinced of the functioning brain, relied on logical conclusions and practical solutions. The reimposition of believing the impossible into the possible is more often than not trivialised as an expiring chemical impulse. Granted, the many derivations that come from this are in the ‘absurd’ idea of seeking truth on the other side of our physical

reality, of ‘voyaging’ beyond our compelled truths and uncomputable reimagining.

Is this a critical cry in the terminal search for the truth [*in our soul*] then? There will always be a conflict between the mind and the soul, the truths and the falsehoods. Muslims’ understanding is that *aq̄l* (mind) followed by *naql* (scripture) should correspond to our day-to-day life, an apt indication given that Moses was one of the prophets believed to have direct communication with God when he received the ten commandments. Moses’s immense belief is paramount in his judgement of the impossible, despite his fear of not knowing. Should society today strive for that implausible search in the absence of reason or emotion, neither attesting confirmation nor denial, or the negligence in wisdom despite the knowledge that befalls before and after it?

✱

“Saya tidak melihat tentang keajaiban tongkat menjadi ular tapi yang saya tekankan adalah kecerdasan minda Musa yang dianugerahkan melalui wahyu yang terpancar dengar rasa yang amat dalam, lalu mematahkan semua serangan akal semata-mata dari para ahli sihir. Sihir serangan-serangan ini bercampur-baur dengan kemarahan dan keangkuhan setelah dipatahkan Musa dengan kecerdasan dan segala kearifan milik Tuhan.

Mungkin untuk zaman itu terjadinya ada kekuatan mistik, tetapi saya tidak menyaksikannya. Apa yang saya boleh lihat adalah metafora dibalik cerita-cerita sedemikian. Otak manusia kalau dalam kepercayaan Greek kuno tidak ubah seperti Medusa — ular-ular yang banyak yang cuba menyerang

dan menyumpah hingga menjadi kaku.

Hanya dengan satu kecerdasan Musa mampu merungkai segala kerumitan yang berbelit dari para ahli sihir ini. Saya anggap ahli sihir ini adalah dikalangan para cendekiawan, sarjana bijak pandai, para penghafal di bawah sistem pentadbiran tinggi di zaman raja-raja Mesir kuno.

Sebab itu saya maknai fikiran itu adalah tempat segala ketakutan dan kebijaksanaan. Jin/Genie/Genius sumbernya adalah di fikiran yang sentiasa mahu berada di atas kerana fikiran yang dianugerahi emosi ego, nafsu-nafsi tidak ubah seperti api yang bernyala ke atas; sudah pasti api tidak akan turun ke bawah. Itu sifat api = jin.

Cuba kita berbalik kepada kejadian Adam. Pabila Adam mahu dijadikan, lalu dipertikai oleh para malaikat kerana menjadikan manusia yang akan merosakkan alam. Jadi dari sini bagaimana malaikat tahu manusia akan mendatangkan kerosakan? Tidakkah sebelum Adam sudah ada manusia? Saya simpulkan manusia tanpa Adam adalah Jin sementara manusia di dalamnya Adam adalah manusia sejati yang ingin menjadi manusia, bukannya Tuhan.”

All these questions pose a vague, yet somehow concrete correlation with Masnoor's other works. *Musim*, for example, is a set of four, scrolled canvases illustrating humans in a 'depth of unawareness'. Cocooned and as if reclaimed by 'nature', the figures are mostly seen blissfully in repose — the first introduction being a mysterious man shrouded and buried in what resembles a grave of 'infectious' wilderness (see: the subject as shown is discernibly the multiplying covid-19 virus), his palms protruding forward as if to push, the face hidden in the thriving growth of it. The figure's relaxed posture signifies a state of consciousness, possibly in between the process of awakening or sleeping. The anonymity in this piece unearthed the question of who it might be; whether it is the artist himself or someone else. In the next piece, a man can be seen laying timidly curled on his side on top of nature's bedding, his face is still hidden but only partially, and the growth now has loosely disappeared as it gives a much clearer breadth in exposing the subject. No longer it rests partially on top of the subject but here, we

are still pondering over the identity.

As the third finally revealed the subject, and by now we are aware of who it is, the full frontal position remained passive and calm, but again he has not fully faced forward, seemingly content in a tranquil-like state. The hands are positioned on the chest, propped limply against it. The last piece however depicts a foetus in an emulation of a mother's womb amidst the flourishing sunflowers, oblivious and as bare as a newborn could be. The unanticipated change in the choice of the subject seems to be rather arresting as if we are going back to the beginning of existence.

Musim / Season is envisaged to conceivably represent the interstice of four stages in life — infancy, youth, middle age, and old age — yet the metamorphic process of 'nature' as an interrelated subject symbolically is seen as a cycle that arrives at an impasse, as felt through reading Masnoor's poem, *Ritma Musim*¹. Nature's occurrence depicted in the drawings is evocative of the passage of time, with changes in nature's growth in each piece as a universal remark on our inevitable phases in life. The common consensus about life is that it will always be an ouroboric course, prevalent without man's intervention despite mankind's obstruction, although life itself is sometimes scrutinised as an abstracted truth that is stripped from the conception of an eternal ending. What else is there to life besides living before everything comes to an end? Life is as all-encompassing as we make it to be — an unborn child on top of a summer's bedding projected as the genesis of said life, ultimately manifests

as the one literal reason for mankind's survival.

Within this narrative, *Tanpa Tanda* follows as the subject of infants, male and female, is drawn in close-ups, revealing their physical parts accentuated in hyper detail. "Infants are born without 'specificity'", described Masnoor, verifying the anonymity every newborn effectually obtained. The planned arbitrary angles of distinct body parts constitute metaphorically searching in depth for their supposed designated identity, whether there should be a 'mark' to testify for their very existence. *In a hadith² believed by the majority of Muslims, it is said that "every child is born in the state of *fitrah* (true nature), but it is the parents who make them a Jew or a Christian or a Magian." Neither races nor religions are essentially attributed to newborns, further demonstrating that they are irrespective of such divisiveness despite it being normative to predetermine this aspect of assigning said identity.*



Ibu bapa lah yang akan membentuk dirinya sebagai apa.

Hal sedemikian lebih mengundang saya melihat dan membaca diri dari terpengaruh dengan muslihat fikiran yang berbagai-bagai.

¹
*Irama itu hidup
Ada awal
Ada akhirnya
Pandemik datang
Melahirkan jutaan gagasan dan kegelisahan
Mengeruh keadaan
Di fikiran ku difikiran mu
Lalu berlalu pergi
Percayalah
Hidup adalah siklus
Berputar
Dan terus berputar*

²
Reference: Sahih Muslim 2659a, In-book: Book 46, Hadith 40

Given the context of newborns being the sole recurrence (of life) of our perpetual existence, the artist posits that they also inherently possess a 'light' in their being that is indubitably eternal and indistinguishable. Their 'lights', or introduced to as souls according to Masnoor, are 'untampered', flickering yet unprovoked. The artist imagined for himself that this particular 'light' is purposefully implemented into our embryonic reasoning, growing inquisitive in due course only by divine nature. This 'light' not only paints the soul as a living paradox but its intrinsic deliverance, a metaphor for inborn homogeneity among humankind.

Wadah dan Esensi straddles this concept further by way of associating the external and physical qualities of this 'light'. Sensibly, the different forms of lanterns are viewed as the receptacles for the 'lights'. Especially apparent to correlate in this context is that humans are only physically distinct and apart from each other, yet this only surmises a similitude in terms of everything else; emotions, reasons,

behaviours, etc. The disassociation is only felt by way of 'seeing' this aspect of physicality, with Masnoor addressing that humans are essentially the same, regardless of to whom, or where they are born. Creations are not merely creations, for the artist — every living being possess innate intelligence specific to their genetic makeup, factoring in various rationalisations and plausible causes, whether organic or inorganic. Burrowing into this explanation, it is apt to say that Masnoor's attention to detail not only points to his hyperrealistic drawings, but also the thorough connection he had attempted to contextualise. The justification of fusing physical and metaphysical — the lantern and the light, respectively — is as ingrained in this circumstance as in any emblematic understanding.

The lines are blurry when we address the immeasurable forms of existence since the dawn of time, postulating whether there is an 'exit' to the recurrences. Some believe that death is the absolute ending, and some do not. The juxtaposition of life and death is always a debilitating topic, revolving infinitely, gaining perplexing responses once queried. Masnoor recalled a personal anecdote regarding the sudden deaths of his loved ones, even before the pandemic in which he had asked himself — where would the dead go? Where would the 'light' disappear to? And this 'vessel' which the deceased had inhabited just seconds before, why was it so *still*?

**Kenang Daku / Remember Me*, a digital UV print on an aluminium composite material is visualised to raise a question to end all questions: *where*

do we all go from here? In this manmade numbering of grave lots, breaching humans' predisposition and wilfulness is the mystifying remedial to a cessation that is fated to happen. It is an irrefutable fact for religious people to believe in an afterlife following death³. In this respect, the idea of life after death is heretofore entertained as a congruent truth. Interestingly, this image was posted in November 2021 on the artist's private social account with a caption that says, '*daerah hening itu segalanya hampa*', loosely translated as 'the dwelling of serenity is all disillusionment'.*

While we may assume that it is directed to the phenomenon at the time, it equally elucidates a pacifying reality that is geared towards our limited comprehension of the unknown. This specific piece evokes a feeling of reconciliation touching on intimate acceptance; of our self-defining truth that speaks of our corporeality that constantly agitates our frame of mind. Perhaps, this is the nexus of a spiritual embodiment that Masnoor is reaching for, designed to extricate his sense of selfhood into probing the abyss of an unfathomable profoundness.

The darkness of the abyss only consumes those who are without 'lights', and Masnoor who has searched — and searching, still — into the deepest recesses of his psyche finds himself unerringly placated with unanswerable questions. This is no longer a concern of doubting what would entail in the unsought bleakness of the future, but of presently restructuring a quaking temple (of the mind), bearing deep silence introspection. *Faded Love*, an installation piece is presented in such a way that relays

interest towards the hidden objects, wrapped as if to remark on its high confidentiality. Placed on top of the pedestals with bookrests to add to their height, the sheathed objects seem to be conceptually elevated, reminding us of their inadvertent importance.

The evident suggestion might be that these private objects are books — but the questions persist on what types of books they might be. The artist observed that for all the years he has been learning and researching, books have always felt imperious to him. While occasionally books are regarded as a structural implementation, they are also 'weapons'. Nations have risen and fallen due to different ideologies that started with as simple an act as reading. Those who read and understand, implement it for their just, sometimes beneficial, cause. Mankind is indoctrinated to such a thing that it has steered unprecedented outcomes, fascinated by its immaculate value (in theory) and what would follow after (in practice). Masnoor proposed that deep introspections, as mentioned before, begin with reading. Through readings — with the acceptance that he may or may not understand it — he finds life and consequently death, is much more liberating.

✱

“Hampa bukan kecewa, tetapi kosong. Bila keheningan menyelubungi jiwa, semua yang dialami dan dirasai adalah ‘kosong’. Kosong disini bukan tidak ada nilai tetapi tidak ternilai langsung. Umpama cuba mengira bintang di langit. Jumlahnya akan terus berubah dan berubah kerana jangkauan fikiran tidak mampu menilai ‘kosong’.”

✱

“Buku/Kitab/Bacaan filosofi hidup seseorang itu untuk difahami, dihafali, atau diingati. Namun tanpa menyelami setiap bacaan akan menjadi dongeng halusinasi dalam jangkauan akal fikiran. Kita lebih suka menyimpan di tempat yang tinggi dari kerosakan atau dibalut tanpa membuka dengan membedah lalu melaksanakan dengan perbuatan dan akhirnya menyelaminya sendiri sebagai rahsia pengalaman individu.”

³ *Every soul shall taste death. And We test you 'O humanity' with good and evil as a trial, then to Us you will 'all' be returned. (Quran 21:35)*

III

There is a passage in the book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera that resonates:

“Living for Sabina meant seeing. Seeing is limited by two borders: strong light, which blinds, and total darkness. Perhaps that was what motivated Sabina’s distaste for all extremism. Extremes mean borders beyond which life ends, and a passion for extremism, in art and in politics, is a veiled longing for death.”

Without delving too far ahead in the novel, I suppose the key insight to be had here is in the way we have always perceived our way of living. What is seeing, without limitations? In the novel, Kundera explained that the light/weight that one must certainly feel is always ambiguous in nature, which was built onto the idea of the eternal return⁴ being preposterous.

In Sabina’s perspective, this translates to the borders that which divide into two extremisms — her existential contemplations are restricted to only achieving the in-between. She has lived, throughout the novel, disregarding the extremes. Untethered to the world’s whims, she had taken no consideration into binding herself to anything. She is as free as she wants to be before resentment of her own choice breaks her.

For how the theme of the book centred on romance, the existential crisis did not escape anyone. Life and death were posited as failures (or successes, depending) in grasping freedom once had, yet still succumbing to being captive and tangled in their respective fates. There is push and pull on resistance and acceptance in all the characters that wired how the story ends, and it all accumulates to their oscillating decisions outweighing their caged desire.

This is perhaps the struggle that we have always suffered throughout our lives; in understanding that existential attraction in oneself is remarked

as counteracting the decisions one has to make, reaching for the balance that would appease our chasmic conscience.

Silent Conversation, perhaps in a way, pushes us to think about *navigating* aliveness — the result of our own existence — ever since the world was put to a halt. Despite the years in a lull and questioning our state of being, we are eventually obligated to look into the interior of ourselves, searching for the right way to survive, while reconnecting to our innermost senses.

May this exhibition opens up the mind of those who are willing.

FALIL JOHARI

⁴ *Eternal return* relates to the philosophy of ‘predeterminism’ in that people are predestined to continue repeating the same events over and over again. Kundera agreed with Friedrich Nietzsche’s [resurrected] thought experiment on this.



For clarification, paragraphs that are in asterisks are Masnoor’s take on writer’s perspective after further discussions.

Irama itu hidup
Ada awal
Ada akhirnya
Pandemik datang
Melahirkan jutaan gagasan dan
kegelisahan Mengeruh keadaan
Di fikiran ku difikiran mu Lalu berlalu
pergi Percayalah
Hidup adalah siklus Berputar
Dan terus berputar

Ritma Musim, Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, 2020-2022



Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, *Musim I*, Graphite and Acrylic on Canvas, 160cm x 122cm, 2022

Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, *Musim II*, Graphite and Acrylic on Canvas, 160cm x 122cm, 2022





Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, Musim III, Graphite and Acrylic on Canvas, 160cm x 122cm, 2022



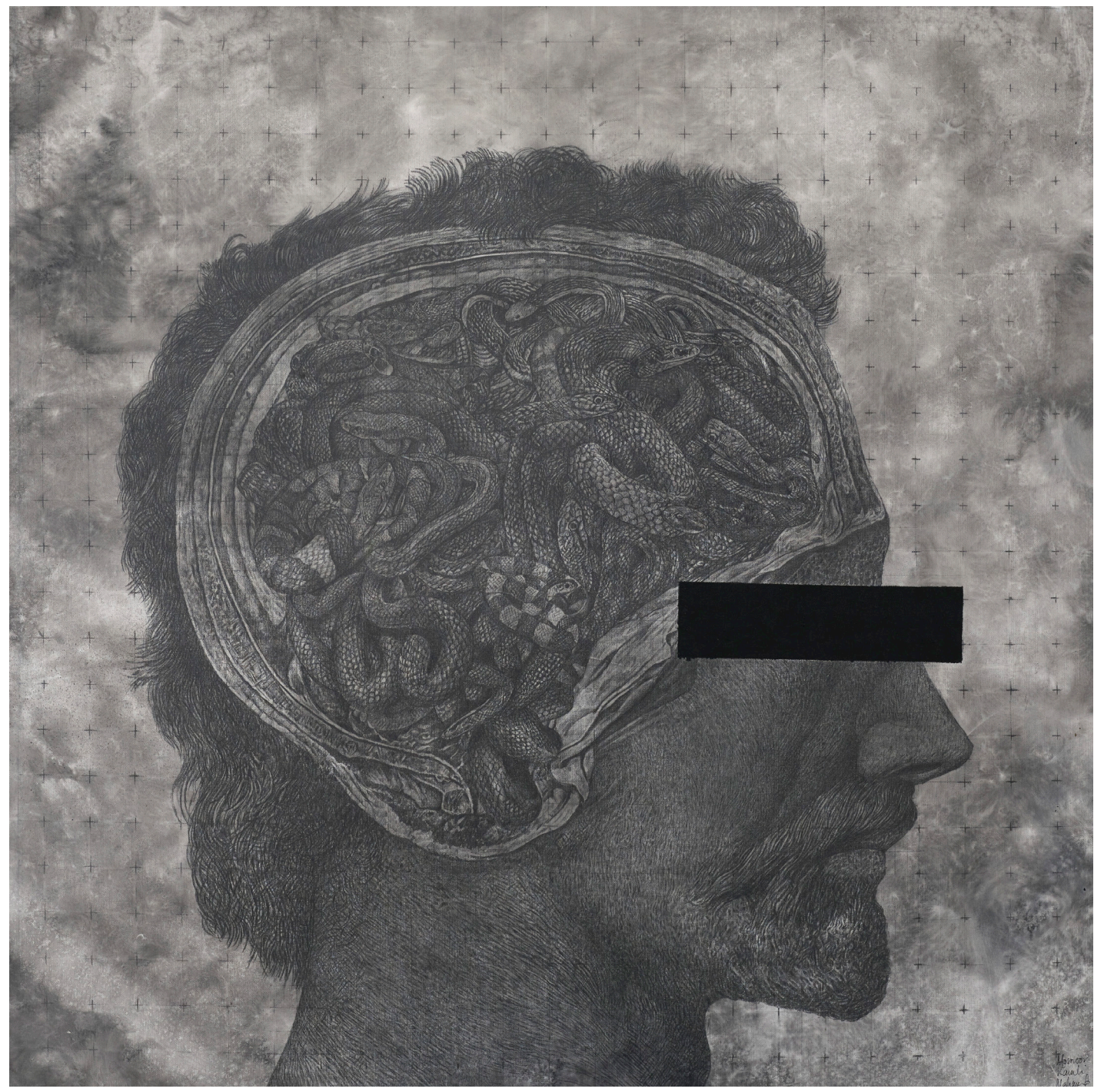
Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, Musim IV, Graphite and Acrylic on Canvas, 160cm x 122cm, 2022



Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, *Kenang Daku (Remember Me)*, Digital Print on Aluminium Composite, 36cm x 247cm, 2022

Wajahmu
Kulitmu
Bahasamu
Watakmu
Dan segalanya yang ada padamu
memantulkan TajaliNya
kerana kau dan aku hanyalah Wadah
dari biasan cahayaNya

Wadah dan Esensi, Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, 2020-2022



Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, *Ima(jin)asi / Ima(genie)tion*,
Graphite and Acrylic on Canvas, 122cm x 122cm, 2022



Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, *Wadah Dan Esensi*, Graphite and Acrylic on Canvas, 30cm x 30cm each (25 Panels), 2022



Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, *Tanpa Tanda*, Graphite and Acrylic on Canvas, 30cm x 30cm each (25 Panels), 2022

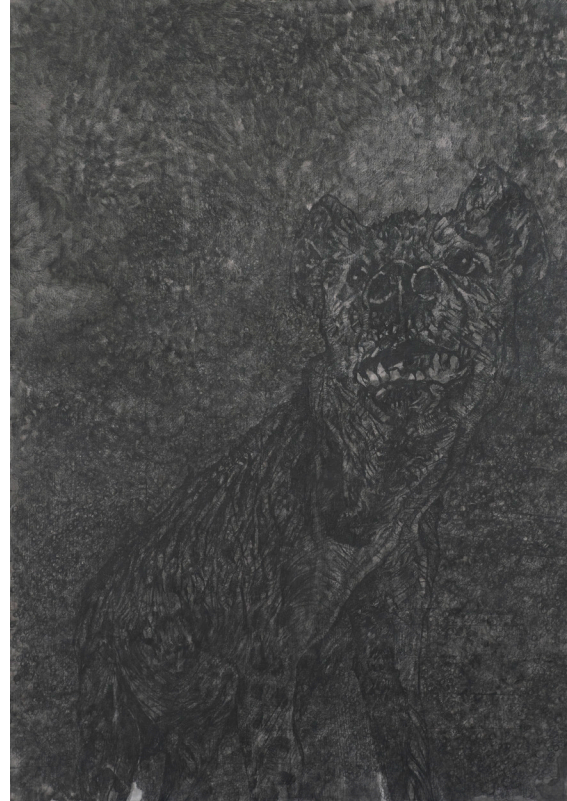
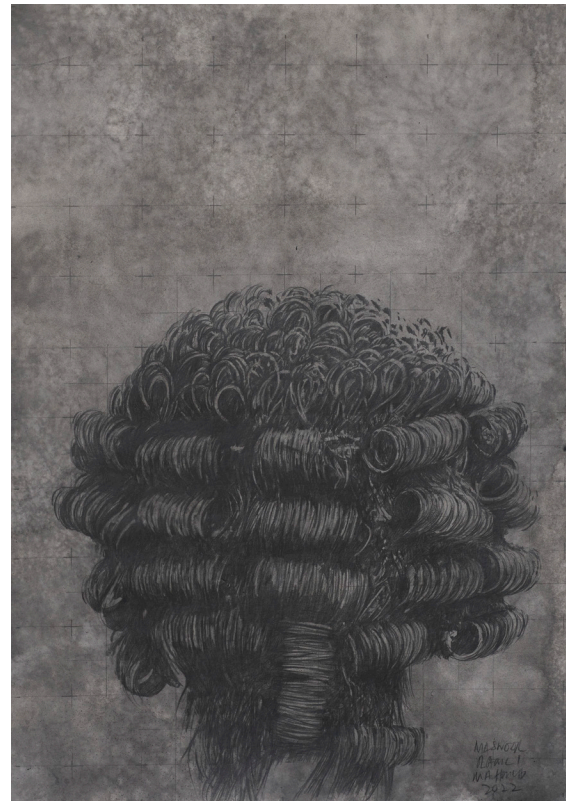
Aku mencari
Tanda tanda
Pada anak kecil ini
Bau harumnya
Yang tiada istilah di dunia perfume
Di dunia konsumer yang dikatakan
segalanya benar
Nyatanya, hanya berlalu pergi

Aku mencari lagi
Tanda tanda
Milik siapa anak ini?
Ibu dan bapanya kah?
Suku dan bangsanya kah?
Pegangan leluhur kedua orang tuanya
kah?
Organisasi atau perlembagaannya kah?
Atau...
Ahh ternyata
Anak kecil ini tidak punya tanda apa apa
Pada setiap bahagian tubohnya
Tidak punya tanda apa apa
Untuk menjadi milik organisasi dan

lembaga
Dia hanya anak kecil
Yang terlahir tanpa diminta
untuk menjadi apa dan milik siapa

Anak kecil
Suatu masa
Akan kembali mencari dirinya yang sejati

Tanpa Tanda, Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, 2020-2022





Kolam fikiran
Cara berfikir kecil
Tidak utuh seperti kolam yang cetek
Apabila memasuki kedalamnya
malah menjadi keruh
kerana menanggapi dirimyalah yang paling benar.
Fikiran yang jernih
Akan kelihatan dasarnya

Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, *Faded Love*, Site Specific Installation (Wrapped Objects, Bookrests, Pedestals), Variable Sizes, 2022



Close up details of *Faded Love* Installation



Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, *Jalan Sehalu*, Single Channel Video Projection, Digital Print on Cut Canvas, Acrylic on Canvas, Variable Sizes, 2022



Detail shot of *Jalan Sehalu* Video Projection

GUEST WRITER
ZENA KHAN

Masnoor Ramli exemplifies the idea of the artist as an observer. His works traverse a multitude of mediums, including drawing, painting, print, video and performance, and are united by use of symbolism and context, laid forth through his own intellectual perceptions. His newest series presented in the solo exhibition ‘Silent Conversation’ illustrates the way his artistic practice is a path for his thoughts and observations to flower, underscored by the poetic visuals filled with raw emotion that audiences have come to identify as ‘typically Masnoor Ramli’.

Masnoor has exhibited extensively throughout his career, including his solo shows ‘Bumi Manusia’ (2007) at Galleri Petronas, ‘Bumi Manusia Revisited’ (2008) at Penang State Museum and ‘#Pathfinder’ (2014) at Artcube Gallery. In 1993, MATAHATI held their first group exhibition at Maybank Gallery, with the last exhibition held in America at DCA Gallery, Los Angeles in 2009.

Born in Kedah in 1969, Masnoor graduated from UiTM with a Bachelor of Art in 1991. His time at Malaysia’s premier art university is an important foundation on which his practice has been laid down on. Studying at UiTM during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, Masnoor received instruction from several professors who were also artists, and whose practices nudged the Malaysian contemporary art movement forward. Amongst them was Fauzan Omar, the instigator of the local mixed media movement whose influence as an artist and teacher is far-reaching for breaking down the boundaries of what art could be in the newly developing landscape of independent Malaysia.

From 1969 to the late 1980’s Malaysia was turning from the sleepy agrarian colonial outpost of the British, into a country who had her own independence and thus was searching for her own voice. As in any post-colonial context, there were immediate issues to be addressed, amongst them the education and enrichment of the local population. In the 1970s several economic and educational policies were set up which began to benefit the local populations, many of whom lived in quieter rural areas, away from main cities and development. Masnoor is part of a generation whose early life was informed by the area he came from (evident in the staunchly localised imagery that recurs in his artworks such as the *wayang kulit* figures) and whose later years were impacted by the policies set in place by government and institutions, and an increasingly urban way of life. He is part of the generation that exemplifies the urbanisation of the rural Malays, and the change in thinking and artistic production that was brought forth during that time.

UiTM was also where Masnoor met Ahmad Shukri, Ahmad Fuad Osman, Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Hamir Soib. In 1989 these five young Malay art students banded together to form the MATAHATI artist collective. While artist collectives had existed successfully and with artistic impact prior to MATAHATI, including the Modernist artists’ group Wednesday Art Group (1952), and one of Malaysia’s earliest contemporary artist collectives Empat Persepsi (1989).

Empat Persepsi (which translates to four perspectives) is an interesting collective to know of when considering the history of MATAHATI. Preceding MATAHATI by a couple of years, the group consisted of four young Malay artists who had also met at UiTM as art students: Fauzin Mustafa, Hasnul J. Saidon, Mohd Nor Mahmud (known in the art world as Matnor) and Taufik Abdullah. Empat Persepsi’s value was not only as a source of support for the four young artists but also in its furtherance of a mixed media movement at a time when the local art establishment was still focused on modernist painting. In 1989 Empat Persepsi held their first group exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. The collective was only active for about a year, but their impact resonates, particularly through the contributions Fauzin, Hasnul and Matnor over the course of the development of Malaysia’s contemporary art movement.

While Empat Persepsi can be associated with the mixed media art movement, the framework of MATAHATI was more fluid. The group had no formal conceptual position. Instead, the five young artists recognised that intellectual camaraderie would be of advantage to them, and they came together to share ideas, experiences, and materials and provide each other with moral support. The continuous discourse and intellectual engagement that the group found in one another became a strong foundation for each to member to develop their own critically minded pursuits. While they worked independently, there was a sense of support that should not be underestimated, as MATAHATI emerged at a time when the contemporary art scene was still finding its footing in the wider art market, a place still focused on Modernist painting. Quite immediately the members of MATAHATI differentiated themselves by turning to an array of mediums and styles, with this multi-disciplinary quality becoming a staple for Masnoor.

Much as Masnoor’s youth was informed by the development of Malaysia in the post-colonial context, so too was the emergence of MATAHATI. The Singaporean curator Ahmad Mashadi has described the group as the “pulse of Malaysian contemporary art”, a comment that brings us back to the ideas of social, political, technological and educational developments that were occurring at the time. Within this broader framework of seeing how the MATAHATI were representative of a new generation of increasingly urbanised Malays, and the successful infiltration of national policies within the creative community, so can we understand the emergence of Masnoor as a major artist in this important contemporary period.

Masnoor’s art has a consistent concern with a search for identity, be it personal or social, and this makes sense when we consider the fact he grew up at the time Malaysia was quickly turning from a colonial outpost into an independent nation. As the country found her footing on global economic, political and technological stages, changes were occurring at breakneck speed. Several of his early works make clear the wider changes occurring in this time and Masnoor’s reactions to it, with ‘Rama in

Cyberworld' (1996) standing out as exemplary.

'Rama in Cyberworld' is a personal documentation of the past moving into the future. In 1995 Tun Mahathir Mohammed broke ground in Cyberjaya, heralding a transformation of what was once an area of swamps and palm oil estates into a leading centre of technology. For the young Masnoor it was clear this represented as a turning point for Malaysia's development. Society was leaning evermore on technology with the advent of the 'cashless society', and for the first time ever Masnoor acquired a credit card and an ATM card. This was a revelation. He wondered how this shift from cash to more ephemeral transactions would impact him and his community. Rama, depicted as a wayang kulit (shadow puppet) figure represents the feelings of confusion and excitement that swirled around the young artist, grounding this mixed media work firmly in the Malaysian context through distinctly local symbolism.

Masnoor's search to merge Malaysian and global contemporary culture through medium and context is strong in 'Rama in Cyberworld', and was influenced in part by two important local artists: Hasnul J. Saidon and Ismail Zain. Hasnul had recently returned from studying in America, bringing back with him new mediums, such as digital print and photocopying, with this notion of merging materials an exciting development. At the same time, Masnoor had secured full-time employment at an animation company, where he began learning more about computers and graphics, allowing him to explore working with digital mediums. These experiences melded together in this work to influence Masnoor to move forward from the raw Expressionist style of previous works, as seen in 'The Truth Within' (1994), to experimenting with more instantly recognisable forms and merging mediums. The shadow puppet Rama sits against a variety of technological references: dollar signs, circuit boards, newspaper extracts and the MSC logo. A new visual emerged, marking 'Rama in Cyberworld' as the point of departure from which mixing media within his practice began to solidify. Since then it has been apparent through the presence of technological aspects such as iPads within installations, or mediums such as digital print on raw aluminium.

With 'Rama in Cyberworld' another tendency emerged, that for Masnoor to use the figure as a site for discourse. Masnoor understands how a recognisable figure becomes loaded with meaning, and by either producing a single icon or by juxtaposing figures into a visual narrative he draws out extended commentaries. Look at his 'Moulding the History' series (2014, 2015, 2016). A mix of paintings and prints on raw aluminium, this series is populated with images of world leaders such as Barrack Obama, Dato Sri Najib Razak, Xi Jian Ping and Donald Trump, set against real and imagined landscapes to document Masnoor's view on history as it evolved before his very eyes.

Masnoor's propensity to merge Malaysian and global contexts through iconography is well-recorded.

In 'I Dream of Rome' (2008) a *wayang kulit* figure, representing the Malaysian everyman, and George W. Bush face each other, separated by the ruins of the Roman colosseum, in a discussion on the evolution of empires and their far-reaching effects on geographies and histories.

As a consequent series 'Moulding the History' takes the idea of the impact global superpowers have, as laid down in 'I Dream of Rome', even further. Masnoor only ever paints Obama from the back, whether he is observing the Great Ludovisi Sarcophagus in 'Obama/Rome' (2013) or engaged in conversation with Xi Jian Ping as they look out over Malaysia's East Coast in 'Eye That Blink Our Mind' (2014) - yet audiences immediately know who this figure is. Not only has Masnoor understood the power of pop culture and how much media informs the knowledge we hold, but he also demonstrates an innate understanding of the powerful associations embedded in figures. This is a tendency he returns to now again in 'Silent Conversation', which is populated with images of the figure, albeit anonymously.

Understanding Masnoor's youth and artistic journey as underscored by witnessing change and seeking to articulate it, 'Silent Conversation' takes on an added relevance. These works began life during the Covid 19 pandemic, a global health crisis that united all nations and communities in a manner that was unprecedented in recent human history. The most obvious ways in which this appeared might be through the lockdowns that swept the globe, as everyone in every country was told to stay at home, indoors, unless it was absolutely essential (and perhaps the search for a vaccine and cure). Locked safely at home with his family, seeking an outlet to practice his art and mark this moment in history, Masnoor turned to drawing.

Drawing is not only a fundamental hand skill for artists, it is a fundamental exercise in observing. To really draw an object or a figure well one first has to truly see that object or figure. Thus before an artist can draw, they have to study their subject in depth with their eyes, which often leads to understanding their subject on a deeper level. That is why, for this writer at least, drawing is a non-negotiable skill in an artistic arsenal, the basis from which we understand technical and conceptual ability. Returning to drawing in the pandemic Masnoor returned to the essentials of practice, at a time when his practice was bolstered by decades of life and artistic experience.

A parallel may be found between Masnoor's earliest works, which resulted from reflection following on from the changes of national development and his own growing up, and 'Silent Conversation', which results from reflecting on another period of flux in the form of the Covid pandemic and Masnoor's current life experiences as a father and senior artist. Times of upheaval or change are often fertile creative grounds. For Masnoor 'Silent Conversation' connects to his past via processes of working and the recurrence of spiritual, searching qualities in the face of change.

The pandemic and ensuing lockdowns created a setting in which the global population at large was forced to isolate and be left only with that which was immediately around us. Masnoor was no exception. At home, away from his studio where he is able to experiment with cross-disciplinary mediums, he went back to one of the essentials of art production: figurative drawing in pencil. Thus began work on 'Musim', the first of three major works anchoring 'Silent Conversation'.

A quartet of graphite drawings, 'Musim' (which means seasons) was an outlet for Masnoor to lay down his mental state and experiences in lockdown. Three self-portraits and the drawing of a baby, interspersed with renderings of the virus and dying landscapes, allude to the mental and emotional state Masnoor was in, and how he has been able to relate with the wider communal experiences in Covid. Through drawing and conversations that enabled him to draw out relatable links Masnoor found 'Musim' was in many ways a return to the birth of his life as an artist, by returning him to basics and opening up routes for discourse. Thus through inception, production and concept this work focuses on the cyclical nature of life, which has felt evermore present in the precarious pandemic period.

As a multi-disciplinary artist medium is a vehicle for Masnoor's messages. With the focus on reflection on the pandemic, the focus on drawing for 'Silent Conversation' feels apt. Much like many other people Masnoor spent isolation seeking to understand himself, which parallels with drawing. As a young artist, it was drawing that taught him the fundamentals of artistic practice, which enabled him to branch out to a multi-disciplinary practice. Thus, for Masnoor drawing became a metaphor for the processes of teaching and learning. Asking the question of how could he uncover himself as a person and his essence, he found stripping down to essentials was key.

Along with 'Musim', the other two works in 'Silent Conversation' focus on the notion of the communal via drawing processes. In 'Tanpa Tanda' twenty-five small drawings zoom in on parts of a baby-furrowed foreheads, eyes blinking open, clenched fists- to think about the ways in which people are born as blank slates who learn identifying structures through family and community. 'Wadah dan Esensi' again is a series of small drawings, using lanterns as a metaphor for the light that guides each person's conscience.

The monochromatic palette of his graphite pencils connects conceptually too. Pre-pandemic Masnoor saw the world hurtling towards individualism on a mega scale. The pandemic brought back the value of community. The choice and opinion on colours are often a mark of individualism, therefore an absence of colour creates uniformity, which heightens the notion of a single (or at least similar) experience no matter one's personal viewpoint.

As Masnoor worked on the drawings for 'Silent Conversation' he would play lectures on YouTube.

This is a habit he has had since his time as an art student, where he preferred to find information from primary sources by listening to interviews or lectures on the radio as he worked, so as to find source information that would allow him to form his own opinion. The lectures he followed as he drew focused on philosophies, encouraging him to look inwards. He began to write a series of short-form writing, in quick, individual sentences, a new form for him to express conceptualism in a previously visual-focused practice. In seeking an aesthetic form for these lines, Masnoor has them presented around the artworks themselves during the staging of the exhibition, so as to mirror the cohesive environment in which they were born.

'Silent Conversation' might have been born from a return to essentialism, via drawing, but it demonstrates how the world has opened up with a turn to multi-disciplinary works. In addition to Masnoor's writings, audiences encounter video works and performances, two mediums he has experimented with throughout his career. As a whole 'Silent Conversation' is not only an insight into Masnoor's time during the Covid pandemic and lockdowns, but seems to provide a route through which we might think back on his artistic journey to date. Deeply poignant, intricately detailed and woven through with ideas of communalism and discourse, these silently beautiful works mark a new artistic moment for Masnoor.









