

I meet Hamidi Hamidi. His wide smile is framed against the architecture of Batu Gajah train station and the lush vegetation beyond. I get into his car and we set off to toward his studio. We're both painters and we're the same age. Tentatively we began to talk about patterns of working, about the necessary rituals that we perform to create the creative space from which the works emerge. As we talk we drive along the highway and Hamidi remarks on the rapid changes to the roads and the landscape that has happened since he lived in the area. The single track is now multilane and the highway is lined with parking lots, walls and sections that delineate commercial zones. As I stare out of the window I try to imagine it without the new commercial blocks and buildings, but cannot. Hamidi asks if I wanted to go to the studio first. I say perhaps we could talk some more, maybe over coffee. I say I wanted to learn something about the man before I see the work. In the restaurant we drank Teh Tarik. Hamidi lights one of many cigarettes and we flippantly reference the ritual of smoking as a contemplative space in the artist's practice. We discuss Hamidi's time in Wolverhampton in the UK, about his return to Malaysia, his history with the Wei-Ling Gallery, his employment at the University, his PHD in Printmaking. In this subject we find more common ground.

Hamidi's first floor studio is on a commercial block and the windows frame a view across the highway and into the landscape. Hamidi looks out of the window and smokes as I look at the work stacked up against the wall, spread out on the floor. Some finished, some still in progress. Cans of industrial paint dribble their contents down the sides of the tins, tarpaulins cover sections of the floor where a large work is in progress. Paint pools and eddies on the canvas on the floor, textures resist and meld into each other, surface viscosity tensions wrinkle and pull as they find each other. The canvases are all square in aspect ratio, all the same size, except for two panoramic formats that are twice as long as they are wide. The format is familiar to my own practice. I know the difficulties and the joy of facing the square composition.

Hamidi talks about the rain on the window in a monsoon, about the change in the landscape, about getting older, spending time with his children. He looks out at the sky. He smiles some more. We talk some more about when he was studying in Wolverhampton, about meeting his wife, the beginnings of his family life, the old days of working multiple jobs to make ends meet. We talk about the everyday things, about memories, about what we think about when we look away from the paintings. Hamidi talks about walking in the hills with his father, about the sky and the earth. He says his father studied the Qur'an and wrote in Arabic script in his journals. I notice a book on his shelf "*Fifty Great Disasters & Tragedies that Shocked the World*" and we begin to talk about terror and the sublime. We find common interest in Caspar David Friedrich's '*Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*'. Hamidi then takes a break to pray and I think about Romanticism, spiritual contemplation and Hamidi's life in the changing Malaysian landscape.

Hamidi's career as a painter is well established in South East Asia. Well known for his experimental use of materials and for his transition from a figurative approach of his studentship to the abstraction of his maturity. The paintings that I looked at in the studio on my visit represented at least 2 years of work. They embody a refinement of a variety of approaches that represent Hamidi's steady focus on the material and process that forms the texture and surface of the work. Previous catalogues of his shows speak eloquently about his approach to experimentation and form, about the transition from figuration to abstraction. However, what interests me in speaking to Hamidi is the man, the artist and

the motivations that keep him returning to his studio day after day, and how these have shaped the subjectivity of the work.

Standing looking at the paintings I initially struggle to see the connection between them. Works like *'Perfect Moment'* and *'Tumbuh'* seem impermanent, temporal, with translucent colours and shapes cling to the white mist of the canvas surface. Paintings like *'Renungan'* and *'Antara 2 Musim'* layer up deep textures of resin over gridded planes with quiet target motifs. *'Angin Tenggara'* is overlaid with waxy layers of semi-translucent resin and deeply coloured paint drifting across, clouding, obscuring the flat planes of the composition below. The largest of the paintings is *'The Garden of Eden'*. This has a bifurcated composition where each side of the painting has random elements that mirror the other in a form that appears both as a Rorschach ink blot like those used in psychoanalytical tests and also as great apocalyptic clouds suspended above a low horizon line. In the centre of this composition a single tree appears rendered in a pictorial form. It is damaged, burnt, but still alive.

As we talk about Hamidi's experiences studying in the UK and European landscape painting Hamidi talks about Friedrich's *'Wanderer above the Sea of Fog'* (1818) as a core influence and we discuss European traditions of landscape painting and the sublime. We go on to talk about Chinese mountain-water painters and I think about Shan-Shui-Hau and the compositions of the artists of the Liu Song Dynasty. In talking to Hamidi, I begin to think about the theory of aesthetics, about Burke's "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful" (1757) and Kant's "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime". I think about Hamidi's paintings, about how they seem effortless once completed. However, as a painter myself I know there has been a struggle to find them. I think about the immensity of Hamidi's attempts to convey something of the human condition when faced with the landscape. I think about Kant saying "the mind in the presence of the sublime, attempting to imagine what it cannot, has pain in the failure but pleasure in contemplating the immensity of the attempt". We talk about the Garden of Eden and I think about God as the great gardener and Hirshfield's 1785 text "Theorie der Gartenkunst" which translates as the 'theory of garden art'. Hirshfield never actually designed or made an actual garden himself and wasn't a gardener. His text theorised how the imaginary garden should look as he laid down his aesthetic principles. These descriptions and theories influenced the German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich in his creation of paintings of imagined landscapes that capture an evocative emotional mood like 'Eldena in the Giant Mountains' (1830/5) and 'The Great Enclosure' (1832). Like the Chinese mountain-water brush painters Friedrich observed the landscape and studied the optical phenomena of meteorological conditions to compose imagined landscapes that ask the viewer to contemplate the sublime potential of nature and the nature of the human soul.

Hamidi's practice as an artist has formally migrated from pictorial representation of the objective world into abstraction and the synthesis of complex materials and methods to describe his emotional and spiritual responses to being in the world. We can see that throughout this transformation he, like Friedrich and like the Shan-Shui-Hau artists, observes the natural phenomena of the world and uses this in his imaginary landscapes. Hamidi has seen the rain on the windscreen, the clouds across the landscape, the stripped vegetation giving way to industrialisation and commercial development. He investigates these phenomena through the use of industrial paint, resin, wax, marks, blends, in pools of material, gravity, surface tension.

As we contemplate the work that is revealed through the techniques and methods then we begin to connect the reference points that give us clues to Hamidi's inner landscape, his contemplation of his place in the world, the clues that connect us to his respect for tradition, to his relationship to his father's love of the mountains, to his father's study journals on the scripture and divine nature of god. Looking at the thousands of random resin peaks that push out from the surface of Hamidi's paintings we can see the monsoon rain lashing on the windscreen. Looking at Hamidi's grids that lie underneath the ebb and flow of the paint and resin we can see this painter's own landscape carved up by industrial development, parking lots and malls. Looking at the Garden of Eden we feel Hamidi's concern for the Malaysian landscape, for a landscape facing the apocalypse of a coming ecological storm brought on by commercial development, for a world torn apart by terror and the tension between the faiths of nations. In Hamidi's new work we contemplate a fall from grace that is both terrifying and fascinating.

*"BALAM: Journey to the Garden of Eden"* is a metaphor for Hamidi Hadi's experience of being on the world, for the development of his creative practice, for the changes happening to the Malaysian landscape and for human consciousness contemplating the sublime, faith and the nature of the soul.

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