

## A Brief Discourse on The Work of Norma Abbas

*"I'm a simple person who hides a thousand feelings behind the happiest smile."*

- Norma Abbas

This statement by Norma Abbas reveals an important insight into her work. An artist who has made it her life's work to create meaning and purpose, she draws from the vast array of emotions brought about by the vicissitudes of her daily existence.

'*Coded Diaries*', Norma's latest exhibition at Wei-Ling Gallery, derives its name from the autobiographical nature of the works and the multiple tiers of meaning they accommodate. Eleven paintings, largely acrylics and collage on canvas beguile the viewer with their presence and verve. Their immediate warmth and vibrancy veil and obfuscate deeper and more poignant messages, apparent only upon closer inspection and contemplation.

All the works in '*Coded Diaries*', with the exceptions of '*The Proposal*' (1998) and '*Listening to Birds Singing*' (2015) were produced after the artist's major (and to date most recent) exhibition '*A Colourful Journey To A Promise*' (*Kembara Pelangi Menuju Janji*), held at the Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery in 2016.

After a 6 year hiatus, *Coded Diaries* marks a triumphant return of this legendary artist. This essay explores themes around subject matter, meaning and style in the works exhibited in '*Coded Diaries*'. Norma Abbas has seen a long and illustrious career spanning nearly 5 decades. Her artistic trajectory can be described as a gradual and methodical ascent into the spiritual, mirroring a lifelong journey in which the artist has examined, without judgement or artifice, love in all its forms - romantic, sexual, platonic and increasingly spiritual including love of her Creator. Her depiction of the human form evolved with that journey to become increasingly disembodied. Intricate figures have morphed into single eyes, lips, indeterminate shapes and numbers, in a disavowal of the physical for the essential, and the body for the soul.

'*Woman In Baju with numbers*', (2019) captures the artist's spiritual essence and exemplifies this physical transition. The large horizontal shape of the canvas and its extensive white background distinguish the painting from others in the exhibition. We see a closed eye, calm in contemplation, two-toned fulsome lips of a closed mouth, hinting at the many things left unsaid, and long flowing black hair, released from constriction. Surrounding the woman's face on three sides are a constellation of numbers, flowers with missing petals, triangles, circles, and random shapes, effaced and drawn over. One might interpret the *baju* (attire) of the painting's name as the white background and the flowers, although another interpretation is that the artist has chosen to depict herself without form. The numbers represent people in Norma's life; the flowers could be perceived as events, symbolic of birth, death and regeneration and creation; the white, from the fulfilment that has come from communing with her Creator. Circles, shapes and flowers present in other spiritual paintings are depicted more subtly, their beauty lies in their delicate hues and textured depth of their collage. The painting could be regarded as a reckoning of her past and present, an acceptance of everything that has gone before and the calm and tranquillity of the present, as if the artist herself has finally achieved peace and purpose.

Love in all its forms is a recurrent theme in Norma's oeuvre. She also explores the juxtaposition of personal love with that of society's expectations, in the form of archetypal female roles - mother, lover, sister (friend) and daughter. Her subjects both capture and invert accepted conventions or norms. They challenge the viewer with their meaning, albeit in an indirect and non-confrontational manner. This aspect is very apparent in the mixed media collages of Norma's '*Women Series*' during the 1990s. In a cornucopia of colour and energy, these works portray women as sensuous, confident beings with their own sense of innate wisdom. Yet, also discernible is a veneer of vulnerability and insecurity, hinting at society's demands to define and shape their identity.

In '*Eliminating devil in disguise*', (2022) Norma explores the complex relationship between mother and daughter and its dichotomies. On one hand, the mass of black lines throughout the canvas serves to efface and obscure, portraying a fraught, tense relationship, constricted forever by physical ties that bind, whilst on the other hand, the rich colour and facial features speak of unconditional love, warmth, acceptance and growth. Half sequestered within the black and white lines in the top left hand side are

intricate doodles from the artist's own daughter collaged onto the canvas, hinting at the inevitable separation of identities, and the creation of one's own.

In Norma's paintings, meaning often appears to be overt. This can partly be attributed to her choice of titles which appear to explain the composition. Deeper layers of meaning are revealed only after closer examination of the work or a greater awareness of the artist's reality and her oeuvre, or her spirituality.

'*The Proposal*', (1998) an acrylic and collage painting on canvas, exemplifies this complex unveiling of meaning. Painted almost two decades before the other works in the exhibition, 'The Proposal' reflects overtones of Cubism. As the title suggests, the painting depicts a marriage proposal, but the painting is essentially an ode to her late husband Tan Sri Dato' Seri Zain Azraai and a celebration of their love for one another: two figures with clasped hands and bodies locked in a poignant gesture that make them appear as one. Norma captures the essence of her subjects, giving the viewer the impression of looking into their soul. The man appears noble and forthright; the woman wide-eyed yet knowing. Her head is bowed - in deference to the proposal, but also in acknowledgment that her happiness will be short-lived with the awareness of her suitor's impending fate. This future is reflected by the sombre colours of black and dark red throughout the painting. In the background two of the walls, black and dark red (again), contrast with the dark yellow and blue of the other two walls, invoking earth and sky, the physical and the spiritual, melancholy and joy. The enclosed nature of the walls at once reinforces the feeling of intimacy - the lovers' world where no other person exists - but also suggests a feeling of being hemmed in and foretells of a sufferance to be borne; an impending tragedy from which there is no escape. As such, the finality of death and the eternity of love coalesce sublimely in this work.

In '*The Proposal*', like most of her works, meaning is transmuted through emotion which manifests in colour, forms and lines. Norma's paintings exist as montages of emotion, documenting and exploring a vortex of feelings captured from a particular event or experience, but they also convey emotions from beyond that specific moment in time. One imagines that for Norma time exists as a continuum, where past, present and future merge seamlessly into one. 'The Proposal' so beautifully captures this with its sense of time extending from the present of that moment into the future that holds the lovers' inevitable destiny.

Over the course of her artistic journey, the evolution in Norma's style has been marked by ruptures or turning points. These ruptures correspond with changes in her own life experience and manifest in her art through shifts in her subject themes, techniques or style. Etchings, monotypes and lithographs from the late 70s and 80s transitioned to mixed media collages in the 90s, which evolved to acrylics and collages on canvas around the 10s of this century.

Commentators have remarked about the Cubist references in Norma's work although this is often over-emphasised, with the consequence that other art processes and styles also present are overlooked. Whilst the use of geometric shapes in some works, such as '*The Proposal*', indeed suggest Cubist overtones, its presence appears accidental; a by-product of the artist's gradual transition from the figurative to more abstract forms to the formless and symbolic. One might argue that the link with Cubism has less to do with a deliberate choice of its trademark visual expression and more to do with Norma's love affair with collage (which still pervades her work, although in a more subtle manner).

In a contrasting observation, it would appear that Norma's painting process reveals a hint of Surrealism. She approaches her work by drawing first, espousing that this connects her more closely to her emotions. Often, she is guided by an alternative consciousness, unaware of where the graphite will take her. This practice is reminiscent of Surrealism's 'psychic automatism' and its desire to disrupt logical and rational thought and project an unfettered stream of interior consciousness, or the unconscious.

In another observation of Norma's works, meaning is conveyed through dichotomies ('*Eliminating devil in disguise*' and '*The Women Series*'). We see two apparently opposing ideas, united by their difference, as well as the many layers of meaning in works such as '*The Proposal*'. It is this polysemous nature of meaning that aligns her work to the post-structural artists and philosophies of the 70s which critiqued representation and the stereotype.

What has remained consistent as Norma's aesthetic developed, is the use of vibrant colour palettes combined with a visual depth and rich texture. These choices have imbued both intricacy and intimacy in her work and can be attributed to the artist's formative education in Printed/Woven Textiles at Manchester School of Art, and Print Making at Chelsea College of Arts in London.

Many of the works in 'Coded Diaries' feature two recently introduced visual themes: cats and numbers. Cats first made an appearance in 2011. These feline companions are portrayed either as single disembodied faces or as a pack of abstract figures and take on the mantle of silent and all-knowing guardian angels, as evinced in 'Cat Lady' (2022). Numbers, which the artist uses to represent people, first made an appearance in 2017. 'The Crowded Room' (2019) is the only painting in the exhibition to only feature numbers and therefore explores this fully. The work depicts a cosseted arrangement of numbers, like a colourful and eclectic cast of characters in a party. We see a masculine-looking number 9 dominating over others like the more sanguine number 3. Colourful, effervescent number 6 at the bottom of the painting calls to mind a person of hidden complexity, whilst 88 on the left-hand side of the painting, stands aloof on a black panel and looks on with amusement. There is a delightful element of wry humour in the painting, a quality that is often overlooked in the artist's work.

Although cats and numbers appear to have little in common with each other, both themes demonstrate a further shift in Norma's work into the symbolic and the spiritual: cats as traditional symbols of divinity and protection, here used as talismans watching over the artist; and numbers, no longer in the realm of the rational and the logical, imbued with spiritual significance of numerology, here used as a cipher to convey the essence of people.

As Norma herself has said: "*When it comes to my works, you have to read between the lines. The messages are there, albeit hidden. Those who can see would immediately understand.*" Certainly, understanding her messages enriches both the experience and appreciation of her works, but their unique sense of vibrancy and warmth stirs the soul on any level.

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