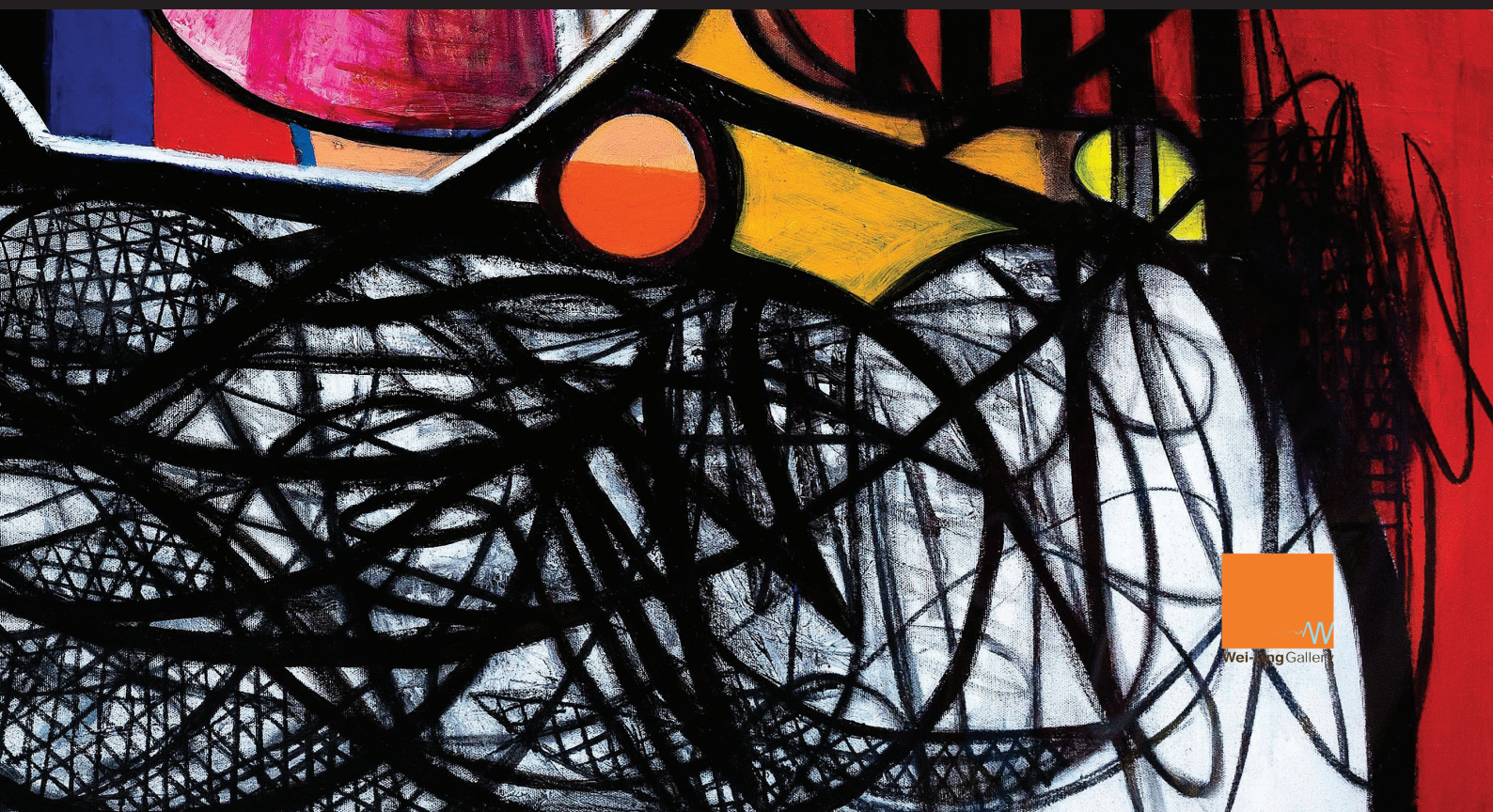




Coded Diaries
NORMA ABBAS

24th September - 22nd October 2022



Coded Diaries

Wei-Ling Gallery is pleased to announce our exhibition, '*Coded Diaries*' by legendary Malaysian artist Norma Abbas in her first collaboration with the Gallery.

After a hiatus since her last exhibition in 2016, Norma Abbas presents a body of new works, revealing magical spaces, a 'hidden' genesis, and demonstrating an incredible arc of creativity to articulate the meaning of her existence.

These deeply-reflective paintings, 'marrying' semi-abstractness and figuration are delightfully-eclectic - an homage to her feline companions, and a spiritual awakening in its most profound sense.

One of the most striking aspects of '*Coded Diaries*' is Norma's unleashing of constraints, resulting in works which are enveloped in a windswept sense of 'freedom'. The influx of themes close to her heart serves as a metaphor of the human condition, of someone who survived and thrived despite impossible situations.

'*Coded Diaries*' has nuances of printmaking-like qualities, exquisite angles, a delicate colour-palette and hints at a Cubist approach. As the artist quietly expresses, "*I prefer Braque to Picasso*", she is wonderfully-modest about an illustrious career spanning decades, and in these times of artists experimenting with wildly differing persuasions, Norma Abbas never wavered. Her paintings unveil a vulnerability yet simultaneously shows us gusts of the most intimate relationships of her life.



Installation view at Wei-Ling Gallery, Brickfields

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.

Gowri Balasegaram

Art Writer

October 2022



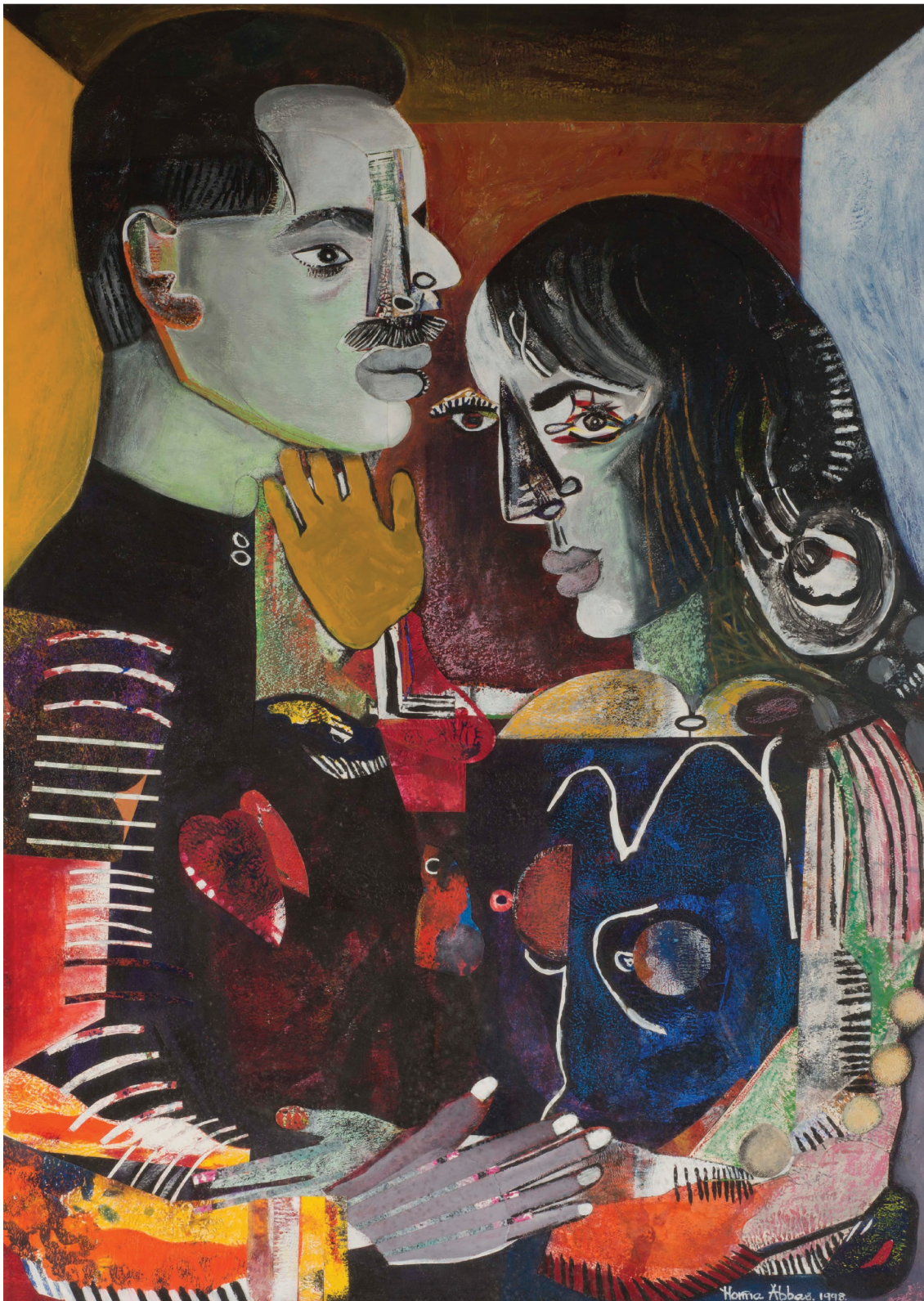
Woman in baju with numbers
Acrylic / Collage framed in perspex
Canvas size: 121cm x 182cm
Frame size: 132cm x 193cm
2019



Relaxing with kiddos
Acrylic framed in perspex
Canvas size: 90cm x 136cm
Frame size: 106cm x 152cm
2022



Cat lady
Acrylic framed in perspex
Canvas size: 135cm x 90cm
Frame size: 152cm x 106cm
2022



The Proposal
Acrylic / collage framed in perspex
Canvas size: 94cm x 67cm
Frame size: 132cm x 105cm
1999/2000



I made a new friend
Acrylic / charcoal framed in perspex
Canvas size: 135cm x 91cm
Frame size: 152cm x 106cm
2019



Listening to birds singing
Acrylic / charcoal framed in perspex
Canvas size: 120cm x 150cm
Frame size: 144cm x 175cm
2015



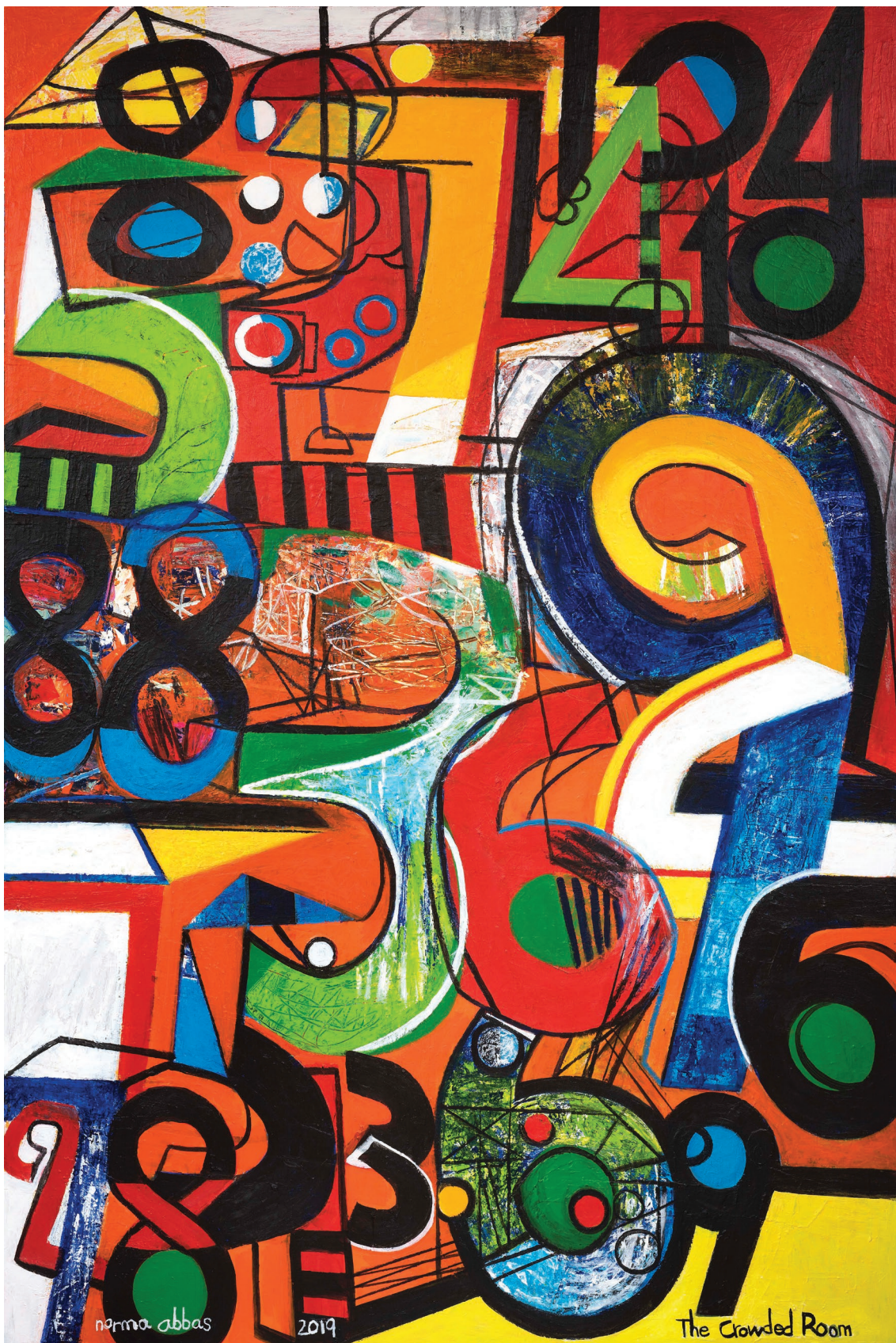
Eliminating devil in disguise
Acrylic framed in perspex
Canvas size: 122cm x 122cm
Frame size: 145cm x 145cm
2022



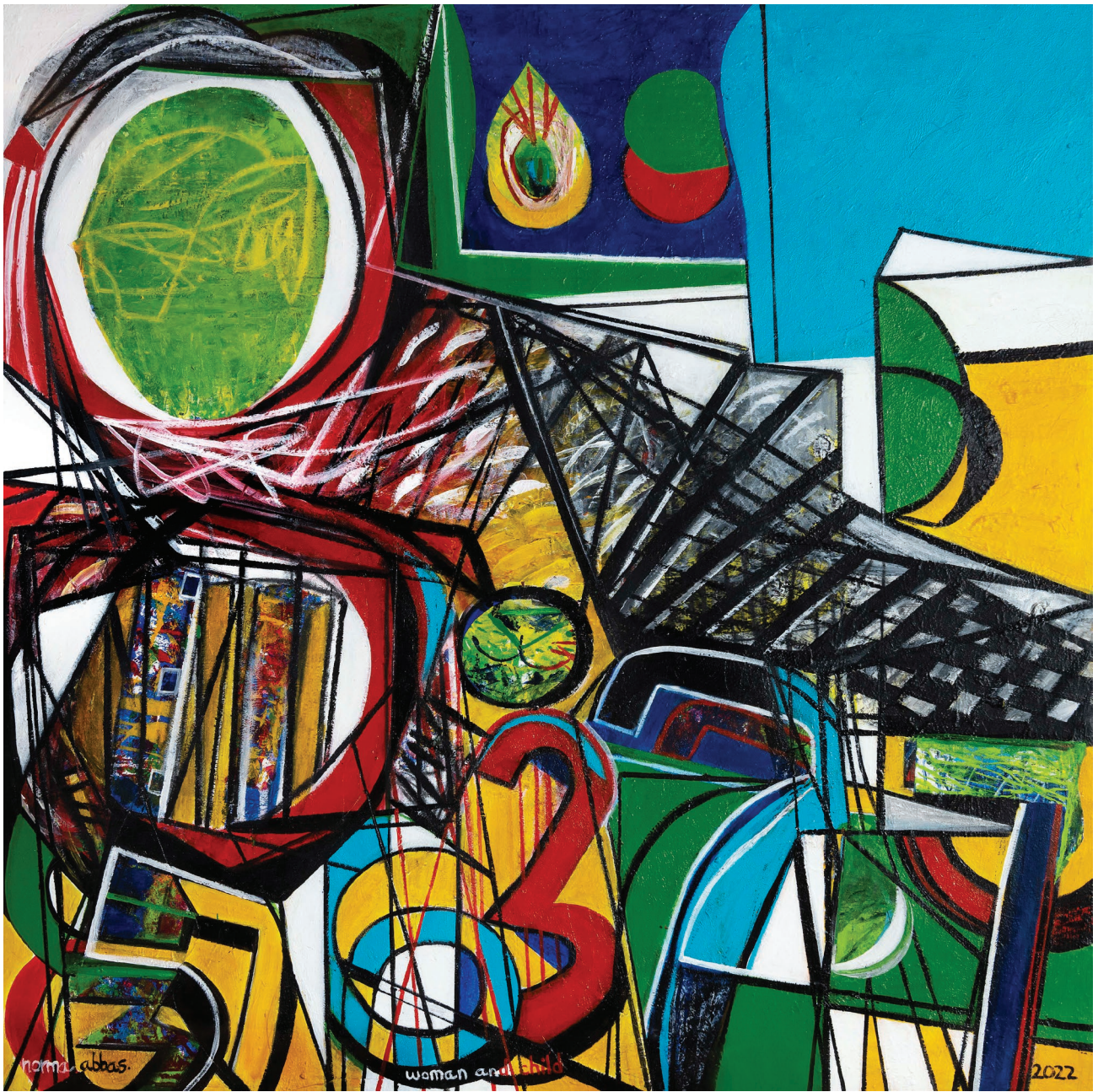
Titat girl in stripe pants
Acrylic framed in perspex
Canvas size: 95cm x 109cm
Frame size: 112cm x 125cm
2022



Entering Formlessness
Acrylic / minimal collage framed in perspex
Canvas size: 120cm x 120cm
Frame size: 144cm x 144cm
2016



The Crowded Room
Acrylic / minimal collage framed in perspex
Canvas size: 180cm x 121cm
Frame size: 192cm x 131cm
2019



Woman and child

Acrylic / minimal collage framed in perspex

Canvas size: 120cm x 120cm

Frame size: 144cm x 144cm

2022



“My artworks are true expressions of my own inspiration, spirituality and reality. Love, peace and compassion flow through my heart and actions on to the canvas with absolute intent to cause other hearts to stir with passion and spreading consciousness to all like-minded souls all over the world. If art is true to the artist’s inner being, then this fact, above all, makes everything meaningful.”

-Norma Abbas-

Installation view at Wei-Ling Gallery, Brickfields

Norma Abbas was born in 1951 and was trained in various disciplines:

1969 - Pre-Diploma Foundation Studies in Art Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

1975 - Bachelor of Arts, Printed/ Woven Textiles, Manchester Polytechnic School of Art, England.

1982 - Masters in Autographics Print Making at Chelsea School of Art, London.

She began exhibiting in 1975 in England and later with Malaysia’s National Art Gallery, Shah Alam Gallery, Art Salon Gallery, Maybank Gallery, Galeri Citra, Badan Warisan and Smith’s Gallery, London to name a few.

At Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), her classmates included Tajuddin Ismail and Fauzan Omar, and her teachers were Joseph Tan, Redza Piyadasa and Jolly Koh.

During her third year at UiTM, Norma decided to continue doing a Degree in Fine Art, but was told her prospects afterwards were limited. At the time, UiTM began offering student loans and after speaking to one of her teachers, she applied and was amongst the first to acquire one and journeyed to Manchester Polytechnic School of Art before completing her Diploma course.

In her third year at Manchester, Norma was offered to do her Post Graduate Studies but unfortunately, UiTM had ceased providing loans of that particular vein.

She soon returned to England, working part time and painted whenever time permitted and was soon accepted to do her Masters in Fine Art at Chelsea School of Fine Art.

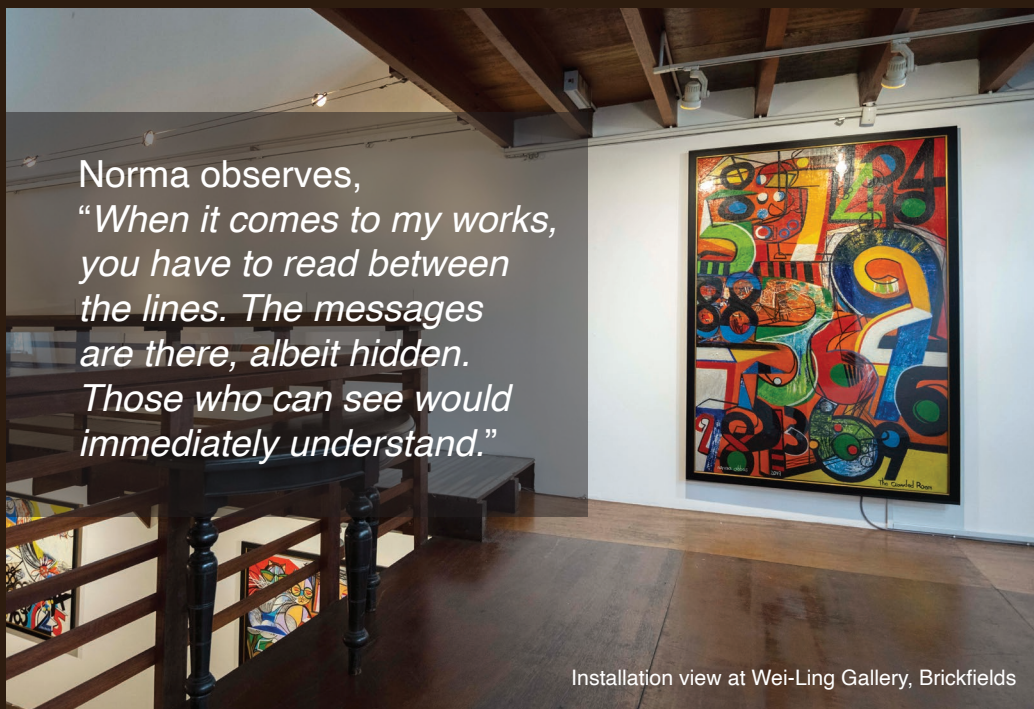
In 1989, she held a two-person show with Khalil Ibrahim, *'Liku-Liku Hidup'* at Galeri Citra and began a 20 year collaboration with the establishment.

At the urging of the late Tan Sri Zain Azraai, Norma began preparing for her first solo, and *'Spreading Consciousness'* was held at Galeri Citra in 1995. *'99 Names of Allah Part 1 in 1999'* was held at Galeri Citra, and *'99 Names of Allah Complete Collection'* 2001 with Badan Warisan.

Even from the beginning of her artistic journey, Norma has always explored themes encompassing relationships, intimacy, love and contemplation as a way to commune with her Maker and those she is close to.

Her works in the 70s and 80s primarily focused on printmaking, leaning towards etching, monotypes and lithographs. Her love-affair with Cubism is apparent, but Norma puts her own signature on every piece - colours are heavily stratified and exceptionally detailed, resulting in her 'characters' dancing their way out the frames.

Norma Abbas is one of Malaysia's most esteemed women artists, whose works stand alongside illustrious artists Ruzaika Omar, Nirmala Shanmughalingam, Siti Zainon Ismail, Fatimah Chik, Kalsom Muda and Sivam Selvaratnam.



A comprehensive collection of her works, *'A Colourful Journey to a Promise'* (Kembara Pelangi Menuju Janji) was held at the Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery in 2016.

Norma Abbas currently works from her home-based studio accompanied by her feline family, Titat Girl, Matisse Boy, Hiyo Boi, Mavrik Girl, Bojie Boy and Poody Boy.



A Participating Gallery of



Produced by Wei-Ling Gallery

To accompany the exhibition entitled '*Coded Diaries*' by Norma Abbas
from 24th September - 22nd October 2022

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IMAGE COURTESY | Wei-Ling Gallery & Norma Abbas

COVER IMAGE | *Norma Abbas - Listening to birds singing (2015) close-up*

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