

# THE SHAPING OF MALAYSIAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST ART IN THE CONTEXT OF MALAYSIAN MODERN ART (1950s–1970s)

*[Pembentukan Seni Abstrak Ekspresionis dalam Konteks Seni Moden Malaysia (1950-an–1970-an)]*

Chow Sow Yeng<sup>1</sup>  
yengchow@student.usm.my

Sarena Abdullah<sup>2</sup>  
sarena.abdullah@usm.my

School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Penang, Malaysia.<sup>1 & 2</sup>

Corresponding Author (*Pengarang Koresponden*): <sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Abstract Expressionism is an art form that began in the West and later gained influence in the East. In the years after World War II, Abstract Expressionism became the catalyst in the transition of modern art in Asia. In Malaysia, with the advocacy of Abstract Expressionism and the spirit of Expressionism, abstract art became mainstream in the art scene since the 1950s. Abstract Expressionism from two different worlds—America and/or Europe and Malaysia—is different, especially in terms of the artists' respective approach and creativity. This article discusses how the evolution of abstraction works through the artworks produced by Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng. This is followed by a discussion on the diversity of abstraction forms in Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art through the study of works by the aforementioned artists.

Keywords: Abstraction, expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art, evolution of abstraction, modern art

### **Abstrak**

*Ekspresionisme Abstrak yang bermula di Barat dan kemudiannya turut mempengaruhi negara di Timur. Pada tahun-tahun selepas Perang Dunia Kedua, Ekspresionisme Abstrak menjadi pemangkin dalam peralihan Seni Moden di Asia. Di Malaysia, dengan sokongan terhadap Ekspresionisme Abstrak dan semangat Ekspresionisme, seni abstrak menjadi trend utama dalam dunia seni sejak tahun 1950-an. Ekspresionisme Abstrak daripada dua dunia—Amerika dan/atau Eropah dan Malaysia—adalah berbeza, terutamanya daripada segi pendekatan dan kreativiti seniman masing-masing. Makalah ini membincangkan evolusi karya abstrak melalui hasil karya oleh Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, dan Chew Teng Beng. Perbincangan seterusnya tentang kepelbagaian bentuk abstrak dalam seni Ekspresionis Abstrak Malaysia melalui kajian hasil karya oleh semua seniman yang tersebut.*

*Kata kunci: Abstrak, ekspresionis, Ekspresionis Abstract, seni Ekspresionis Abstrak Malaysia, evolusi abstrak, seni moden*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Unlike the early 20th century forms of art that mostly depicted realism and impressionism using watercolour and oil drawings, the Malaysian artists of the 1950s to 1960s made various artistic explorations and efforts in bringing Abstract Expressionism to Malaysia. In Malaysia, “Abstract Expressionist” is often used as an umbrella term that covers a multitude of abstract styles of local artists’ works, which range from Semi-Abstraction to Pure Abstraction. Within the context of the history of Malaysian modern art, the terms “abstract”, “semi-abstract”, “abstract expressionist” and even “Abstract Expressionist” have been used in describing local abstract work (Sarena, 2013:455). Yet, there is no specific term to depict Malaysian abstract work in an explicit way.

Unlike the West, the works of Malaysian abstract expressionists reveal the unity of local culture and Western abstract artistic approaches (Safrizal, 2012: 246). According to Niranjana Rajah (2002:39), “(i)n the years after World War II, early modernist Expressionism and its informing values were only transferred to the Malaysian context indirectly via American Abstract Expressionism.” Since then, local artists have delved into abstraction pursuits in search of their artistic mode and, later, in pursuit of the Malaysian identity.

This paper, thus, discusses the phenomenon of early evolutions and forms of diversification in these abstract works. This will be done by examining the early artistic evolution of four Malaysian artists—namely Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin

Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng—and later discussing the diversity of abstraction that could be observed through their artworks from the 1950s to 1970s. The selection of these four artists is grounded in their profound artistic experimentation and dedication to exploring the shift towards Abstract Expressionism in Malaysian art in the early years of post-independence Malaysia, which was when Abstract Expressionism was introduced in the country. Their paintings, for instance, exhibit a range of abstract tendencies, yet Abstract Expressionism ultimately emerged as the prevailing mode of expression in their artworks. Therefore, studies of their early artworks could contribute to understanding how these styles evolved, diversified, and later localised.

### **ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM IN THE WEST AND EAST**

Before proceeding further, it is noteworthy to first explain the concept of Abstract Expressionism. In the context of Western Art history, Expressionism is the antecedent to American Abstract Expressionism (Yeoh, 1996:111). In the 1920s and 1930s, the economic crisis and the Great Depression in Europe and the United States of America, along with the failure of post-war treaties, led to the eruption of World War II in 1939 (Kleiner, 2009: 909). Artists, as other members of society, deeply felt the effects of significant upheaval worldwide and searched for new approaches to art and their applications (Kleiner, 2009:910). Expressionism, as per avant-garde principles, is the general art movement that emerged forcefully in European art in the early 1990s (Kleiner, 2009: 910). Expressionism can be traced back to as early as the works of Vincent van Gogh, the Fauves and other artists such as Henri Matisse, Andre Derain, Raoul Dufy and Maurine de Vlaminck (Atkins, 1990:73). For example, the immediacy and boldness of the Fauves' works have been of interest to many artists, including the German Expressionists (Kleiner, 2009:913).

Abstract Expressionism also has its roots in surrealism (Lucie-Smith, 1984:25). The Surrealists incorporated many of the Dadaists' improvisational techniques and eventually invented new methods, such as automatic writing, to provoke reactions closely related to the subconscious experience (Kleiner, 2009:943). This aspect of automatism that stresses on the process as central to creativity was taken over by the Abstract Expressionists, who gradually changed the emphasis from the process of inventing and generating images to the process of painting itself (Rose, 1975:140). In general, Abstract Expressionism, based on trends highlighted above, came to be divided into two groups—gestural painting and colour field painting (Moffat, 2008). Gestural painting includes techniques of automatism, such as those done by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, while colour field painting emphasises

on the lyrical effects and unified blocks of colour, as seen in the works of Barnett Newman, Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland and Clyfford Still (Moffat, 2008).

The proposition of a new art-historical construct by the exhibition entitled “The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989”, however, challenges the view that the development of American modern art is merely associated with Europe. This exhibition shows the dynamic impact of Asian art on the development of American art through engagement with forms and ideas aligned with Asia that challenged the notion of the development of American modern art as a dialogue with the Europe (The Third Mind, 2009). In fact, the incorporation of Eastern and Western aesthetic principles can be observed in the New York School as the internalisation of Oriental ideology. Zen was an especially important influence in shaping American art in general.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States of America experienced the “Zen boom”, which was a fascination with the Buddhist school of Zen that influenced literature, music, and visual arts as well as areas of social science, such as psychoanalysis (Smith, 2011:v). Zen found its way, through John Cage, into the New York City group of painters and sculptors known as the Artists’ Club (Smith, 2011:20). In fact, much of Cage’s knowledge of Zen came from his teacher, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, the man who helped popularise Zen during the 1950s in the West, particularly in the United States (Smith, 2011:ix). In the New York School, Robert Motherwell and Franz Kline painted in a style similar to Zen Sumi-e painting, which is a Japanese style of brush painting (Smith, 2011:20). They had united Western expression with Eastern meditation to produce symbols resembling calligraphic compositions in enlarged dimensions (Yeoh, 1996:111).

Abstract painters such as Mark Tobey, Ad Reinhardt and Robert Rauschenberg painted emptiness as an expression of the elimination of boundaries, in which their works were a visual translation of the Zen concept (Smith, 2011:iii). Mark Tobey himself visited China and Japan in 1934, where he sensed the spontaneous linear character of calligraphy and re-dimensioned it into a new form (Yeoh, 1996:111). American artists selectively adapted Eastern ideas and art forms to create new styles and give new definitions of their work, from which the new American Painting (in which Abstract Expressionists are a part of) became the catalyst in the transition of Modern Art in Asia.

After World War II, Abstract Expressionism was widely received by regional artists in Asian countries such as Japan<sup>1</sup>, Korea<sup>2</sup>, Thailand<sup>3</sup>, the Philippines<sup>4</sup> and even Malaysia, indicating how the art form transcended transitory and local interests in many non-Western countries. In the case of Malaysia, the style and approach became one of the earliest art styles/movements that influenced several Malaysian artists to

the point that Syed Ahmad Jamal associated the “expressionistic” with the spirit of Independence (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1982:unpaginated).

Moreover, exhibitions that highlighted and promoted the credo of Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art contributed to the stylistic discourse as well. For example, the GRUP exhibition at the former AIA Insurance Building on Ampang Road in 1967 (Sarena, 2018:76) were participated by seven artists, namely Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin, Jolly Koh, Cheong Laitong, Yeoh Jin Leng, Anthony Lau and Ibrahim Hussein. According to Simon Soon, GRUP, which stands for *Gerak* (movement), *Rupa* (form), *Ubur* (torch) and *Penyataan* (statement), entered the mythology of modern art in Malaysia based on three main factors. First, many of the artists who participated in the exhibition were categorised as Abstract Expressionists. Secondly, many artists from this group were accorded retrospective exhibitions over the years. Thirdly, the canonisation of GRUP was also reiterated in the 30th anniversary reunion exhibition titled “Re: GRUP” in 1997 (Soon, 2017:7).

One exhibition of GRUP, entitled “American Experiences: Malaysian Images”, was held at the Embassy of the United States of America and American Universities Alumni Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur in 1984. It gathered artists who had pursued their art studies in the United States and determined their American experiences on their artistic development (Yeoh, 1995:92). Another exhibition entitled “The Unreal Deal: Six Decades of Malaysian Abstract Art”, which consisted of 28 artists and was held at the Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery from August 2017 to January 2018, showed that the newcomers of Malaysian abstract art were emerging to gain public recognition (The Unreal Deal, 2017). By looking at the exhibitions of GRUP and other exhibitions on Malaysian abstract art since the 1960s, we can see that Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art continues to hold a prominent place in the Malaysian art scene until the present day. For example, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, Cheong Laitong, Ibrahim Hussein and Jolly Koh are among the senior artists who gained recognition in the 1960s. They are followed by artists such as Chew Teng Beng, Fauzan Omar, Yusoff Ghani, Sharifah Fatimah, and Rafiee Ghani, who became established in the 1980s. More recently, the newcomers of the 2000s include artists such as Awang Damit Ahmad, Suzlee Ibrahim, and Jack Ting.

Since the late 1950s, Abstract Expressionist art has flourished for six decades in Malaysia. However, there are scarce studies on this artistic style and its influence in Malaysia. Therefore, this paper focuses on examining Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art from the 1950s to the 1970s, which was the period of its early evolvement. The second part of this paper, however, examines related artworks in the context of the diversification of the Abstract Expressionist approach through the

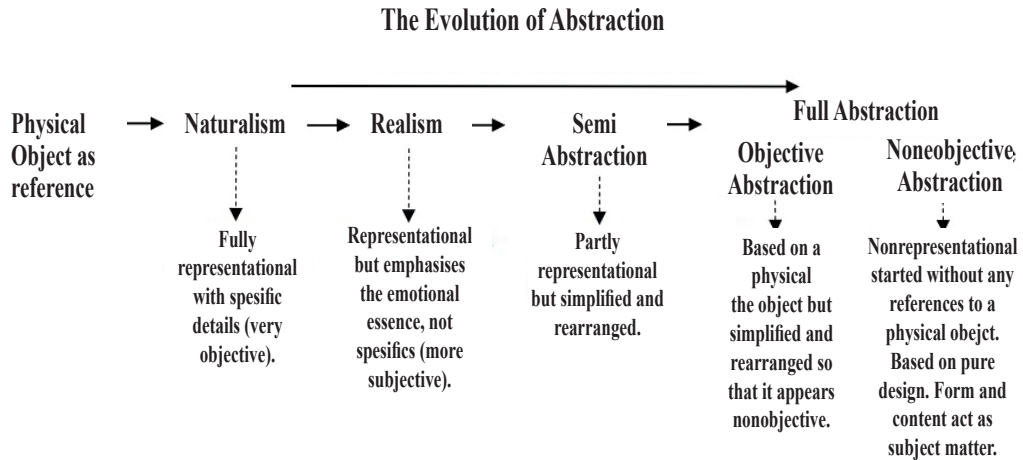
works of four selected artists, namely Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng.

## **THE ARTISTIC EVOLUTION OF FOUR MALAYSIAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST ARTISTS FROM THE 1950S TO THE 1970S**

Drawing from Ocvirk et al.'s research on the evolution of abstraction, this paper delves into and constructs the artistic progression of four Malaysian artists: Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng. The selection of these artists is based on their artistic experimentation and efforts in the path of exploring the transition of Abstract Expressionism in Malaysia. Besides, they were among the earliest artists in Malaysia who introduced Abstract Expressionist art to the larger Malaysian public. Their paintings, which will be discussed later in this paper, display a diversity of abstraction tendencies, yet Abstract Expressionism is the dominant mode of expression in their art.

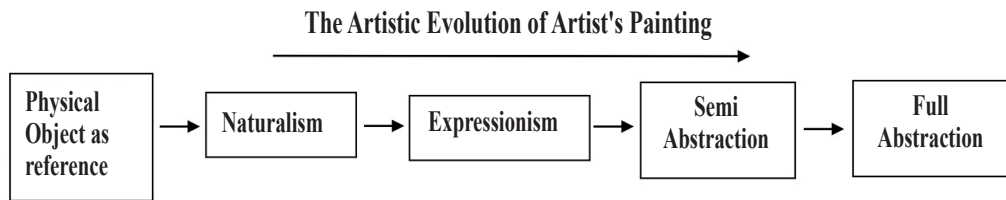
According to Ocvirk et al. (2009), the progression of abstraction includes Naturalism, Realism, Semi-Abstraction, Objective Abstraction, and Non-objective Abstraction. As such, progression could also either happen over the lifetime of an individual artist or within the process of developing a single artwork, as outlined in Figure 1 (Ocvirk et al., 2009:18). In the initial style of Naturalism, the subject has a physical reference and the artist uses a descriptive approach to reproduce its image as close to optically perceived as possible. Subsequently, this is followed by the style of Realism, in which the artist uses more experimental brushwork and sacrifices some details of the image to emphasise his emotional response. When the work of an artist becomes more subjective, consequently, the image is stripped down and becomes semi-abstract, though it is still reliant on an initial physical reference. When an artist continues to search for a new way, he organises various visual elements into a Full Abstraction work. Although Ocvirk et al. (2009) use this concept to explain the evolution of art movements in the West, they also state that this progression of abstraction could also happen over the lifetime of an individual artist (Ocvirk et al., 2009:18). Thus, Ocvirk et al.'s (2009) concept of abstraction will be applied in this study's discussion of the evolution of abstract works by Malaysian artists.

Based on Ocvirk et al.'s (2009) evolution of abstraction discussed above, this section discusses the basis that laid the foundation of the artistic evolution of Malaysian artists. It must be noted that Expressionism marks a more subjective or innovative approach in studying these phases of evolution. These four Malaysian artists use more experimental brushwork and sacrifice some specific information to emphasise an emotional response. Therefore, it is not Realism but rather Expressionism that



**Figure 1** The evolution of abstraction by Ocvirk et al. (2009).

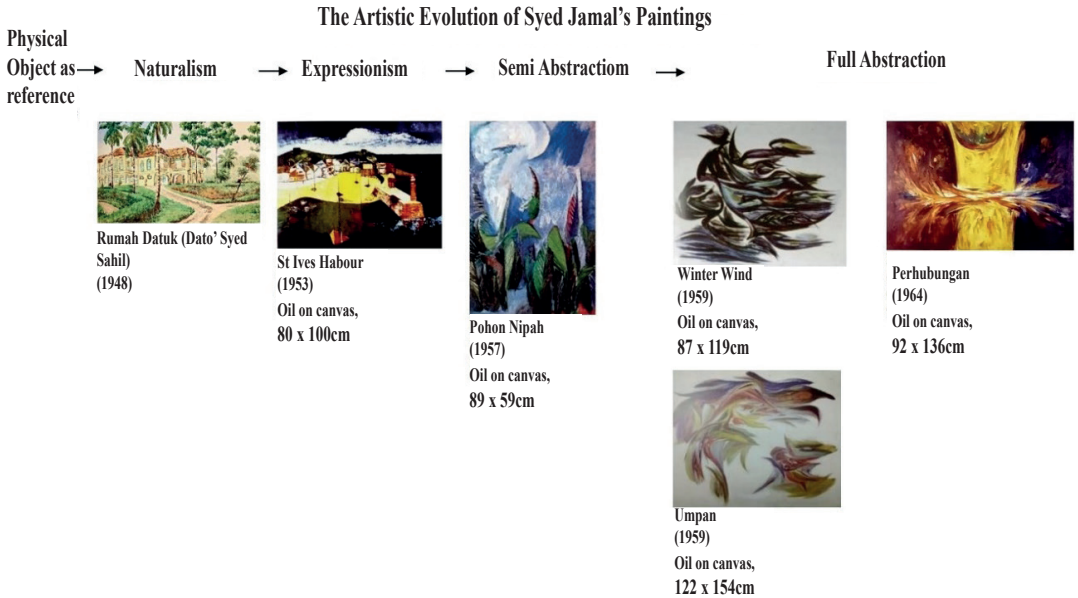
denotes a crucial drive for Malaysian artists in producing their art. The progression of abstraction in the model of “The Artistic Evolution of An Artist’s Painting” (Figure 2) thus includes Naturalism, Expressionism, Semi-Abstraction and Full Abstraction. This framework is applied in the following discussion to examine the artistic evolution of the selected four Malaysian artists.



**Figure 2** Artistic evolution of an artist’s painting.

(a) Artistic Evolution of Syed Ahmad Jamal’s Paintings

Syed Ahmad Jamal (1929–2011) attained his formal art education at the Chelsea School of Art (1951–1955), the Institute of Education, London University (1955–1956), the School of Art Institute Chicago (1963–1964) and the University of Hawaii, Honolulu (1973–1974) respectively (Sarena, 2018:85). In his school years, Syed Ahmad Jamal acknowledged that he was very interested in art and aspired to become a painter like John Constable and J. M. W. Turner (Syed Ahmad Jamal,



**Figure 4** Artistic evolution of Syed Ahmad Jamal's paintings.

1999:77). His early work, which includes Naturalism (representation), was produced closely to perceive with a purely descriptive image. An example of this is his work called *Rumah Datuk (Dato' Syed Sahil)* (1948). When he was in London, his works reflected all the exposure and knowledge he gained from the West. For instance, in his painting called *St Ives Harbour* (1953), Syed Ahmad Jamal applied unnatural colours that are dominated by blue and yellow, simplified the scene and developed to emphasise his emotional response. It can be observed that the work has a remarkable reduction of volumes into simple shapes and colours that move away from Naturalism and towards Expressionism.

Syed Ahmad Jamal's works between 1956 and 1957 reveal the influence of Cubism and Expressionism. Examples of such works include *Mandi Laut*, *Pemudi dalam Hujan*, *Joget* and *Pohon Nipah*. For example, *Pohon Nipah* shows the Cubist use of planes and simplified use of colour. In this painting, Syed Ahmad Jamal expressed the surface facets and multiple views of objects, where the image of *Pohon Nipah* was stripped down and eventually became semi-abstract.

While teaching in Kirkby from 1958 to 1959, Syed Ahmad Jamal formulated his creative maturity through the abstract stage of expression (D'Zul Haimi, 2009:106). His paintings during this period, such as *Chairil Anwar* (1959), *Winter Wind* (1959) and *Umpan* (1959) marked a step into Full Abstraction. These three paintings derived



from the simplification of a tree—Syed Ahmad Jamal’s inspiration came from the bare trees bent by strong winds from the Irish Sea during the winter season in Kirkby. He captured the branches twisted in a drawing—*Pohon Musim Dingin*—and then abstracted them into paintings (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1999:88). The abstraction can be seen in *Winter Wind* and *Umpan*, in which he applied gestural, spontaneous, and improvisational brushstrokes as well. *Winter Wind* and *Umpan* are based on a physical object, but the finished images no longer appear to represent the initial reference since the forms of the tree have lost all value and are transposed into a dynamic force. These paintings by Syed Ahmad Jamal best indicate his embrace of the elements of Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism and Expressionism.

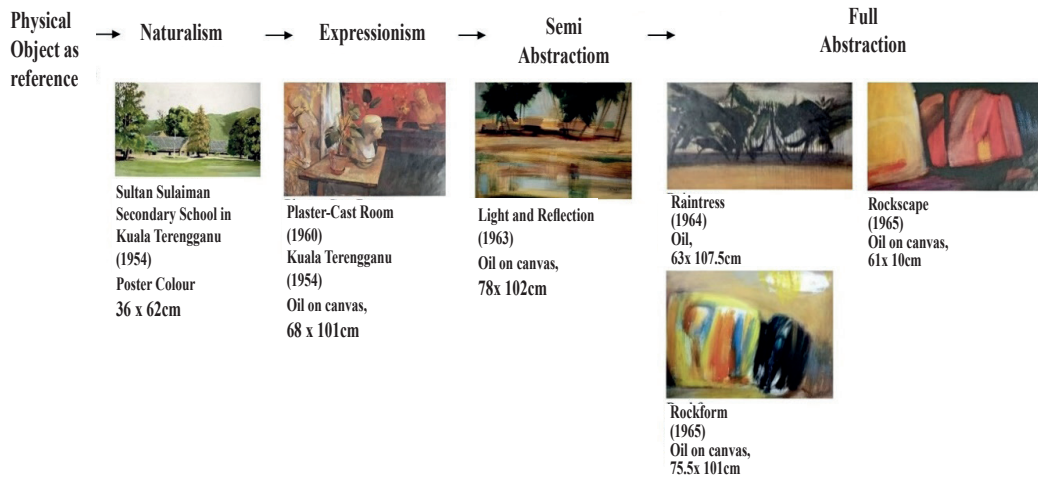
During his stay at the Institute of Chicago, Syed Ahmad Jamal began to explore the art of sculpting (D’Zul Haimi, 2009:113). *Perhubungan* (1964) is the painting version of *The Link*, which is an abstract metal sculpture that he produced in 1963 as a way to convey his symbolic association with feelings or his personal history—tension and confusion (D’Zul Haimi, 2009:113). *Perhubungan*, with non-representative tendencies, eventually became a Full Abstraction work.

#### (b) Artistic Evolution of Yeoh Jin Leng’s Paintings

Yeoh Jin Leng (1929–), like Syed Ahmad Jamal, was exposed to the new American painting during his residency in London. Yeoh obtained his formal art education at the Malayan Teachers’ Training College, Kirkby (1952–1953), the Chelsea School of Art, London (1957–1962) and the Institute of Education, London (1962) respectively (Lai et al., 2017:145). After returning from the Malayan Teachers’ Training College in Kirkby, Liverpool, in 1953, he worked as an art teacher at the Sultan Sulaiman Secondary School in Kuala Terengganu (T.K. Sabapathy, 1995:15). The paintings he produced between 1952 and 1957 were as close to optically perceived as possible and thus lean towards Naturalism. An example of such a work is *Sultan Sulaiman Secondary School in Kuala Terengganu* (1954). While studying at the Chelsea School of Art, Yeoh Jin Leng developed the simplification approach in which descriptive narrative interest gave way to the dynamics of structure and organisation (T.K. Sabapathy, 1995:33), which can be observed in *Plaster-Cast Room* (1960). The painting displays the use of broad brushstrokes, the elimination of details and simplification, experimental brushwork, and sacrifices of some specific information.

After his return from Chelsea, Yeoh Jin Leng was posted again at the Sultan Sulaiman Secondary School in Kuala Terengganu, where he started to render the rural landscape and conveyed the organic force of nature through his paintings (T.K. Sabapathy & Redza Piyadasa, 1983:94). In the painting *Light and Reflection* (1963),

## The Artistic Evolution of Yeoh Jin Leng's Paintings



**Figure 4** Artistic evolution of Yeoh Jin Leng's paintings.

Yeoh Jin Leng rendered the landscape to the point of simplification as the work became more subjective and the image became semi-abstract. The scene in this painting is simplified and developed into the spontaneous exploitation of gestural brushstrokes, giving an impression of *inner nature*. In 1964, Yeoh Jin Leng produced *Raintrees*, which was derived from his study on thematizing trees, with calligraphic strokes, thereby exemplifying another set of his expressive free acts of spontaneity. In *Raintrees*, the image is reduced and simplified, yet it shows the expressiveness of the spontaneous brushstrokes and the sense of improvisation. The forms of the tree in this painting are transposed into rhythmic accents. Thus, *Light and Reflection* and *Raintrees* best indicate Yeoh Jin Leng's integration of the elements of Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism and Expressionism.

In 1965, Yeoh Jin Ling started a new study of thematising rocks, which then developed into *Rockform* and *Rockscape*. Both paintings are Full Abstraction works that are based on a physical object, but the final images no longer appear to represent the initial reference. The composition of these paintings are derived from Yeoh Jin Leng's study and depiction of rocks, which can be seen in *Sungai Gombak* (1965) and *Jungle Stream* (1964) (T.K. Sabapathy, 1995:46–47). With the employment of simplification and the expressiveness of spontaneous brushstrokes, *Rockforms* and *Rockscape* evoke sensations of movement and also give a dynamic and lively spirit. This series of paintings involve the progression of abstraction from representational to

non-representational, and include the aspects of Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism and Expressionism.

(c) Artistic Evolution of Latiff Mohidin’s Paintings

Unlike Syed Ahmad Jamal and Yeoh Jin Leng who gained their formal art education abroad in London, Latiff Mohidin (1941–) pursued his formal art education in Germany in 1960. During the Pre-Berlin period, Latiff Mohidin’s paintings were mostly close to the characteristic of Naturalism. One such example is the painting *Kampung III* (1953), which depicts a scene of a village in Malaya during the post-war years—it is a full representational painting. In 1960, Latiff Mohidin left for Berlin to pursue art education at the Hochschule fur Bildende Kunste, Germany. His works during the Berlin Period (1960-1964) show evidence of Expressionism as the subjects were simplified and developed to emphasise emotions and feelings. An example of this is his work *Kabuki Actor* (1962).

After the completion of his art education, Latiff Mohidin returned to Malaysia and started his Pago-Pago series. *Pagoda I* and *Pagoda II*, created by him in 1964, can be categorised as Semi-Abstraction. They are based on literal transcriptions of architectural forms, such as stupas and prangs (tall, slender Buddhist shrines



**Figure 5** Artistic evolution of Latiff Mohidin’s paintings.

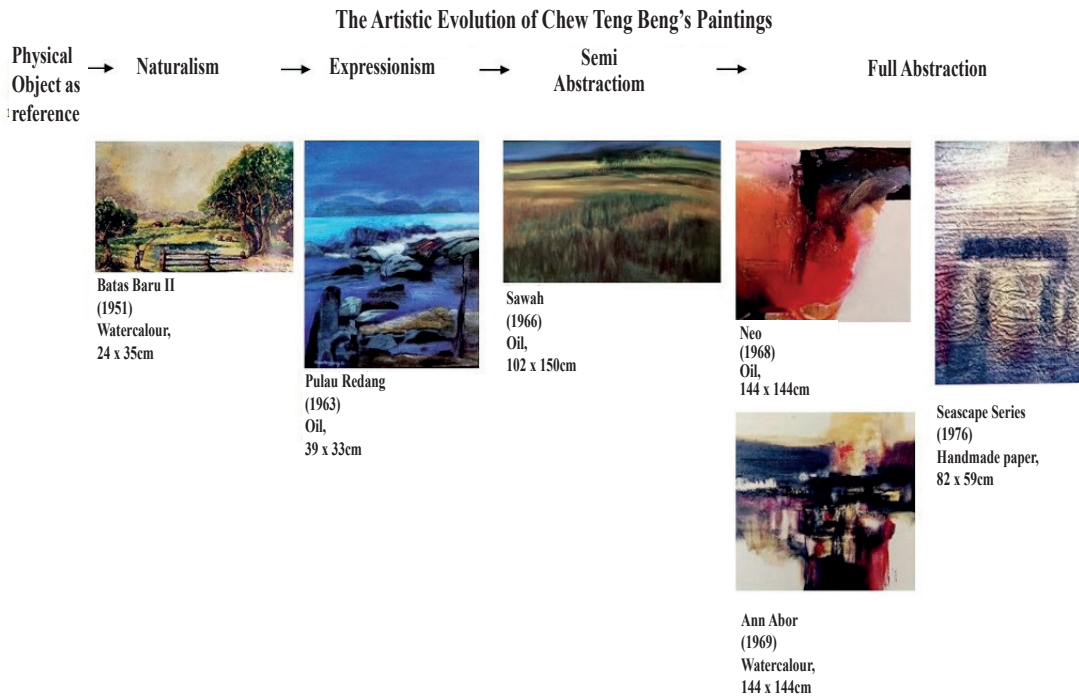
in Thailand). Latiff Mohidin retained the shapes of these shrines and altered their surfaces by drawing on them and stamping them with various patterns. As a result, the images are simplified and arranged in tight mass, at times abutting and overlapping (T.K. Sabapathy, 1994:27, 28). The images of these two paintings finally became semi-abstract, though they were still reliant on an initial physical object.

In 1969, Latiff Mohidin left for the United States to further his studies at the Pratt Graphic Design Institute in New York (Lai et al., 2017:79). During this time, his work again progressed from the former technique and gradually transitioned into gestural painting with a powerful, dynamic force. Latiff Mohidin was exposed indubitably to American art at that time when Abstract Expressionism had become part of the mainstream art movement internationally. Therefore, it is not difficult to discern the spontaneity of Abstract Expressionism in his paintings since 1969. For instance, in *Pago-Pago – Tropika* (1969) and *Pago-Pago – Penjelmaan* (1969), the characteristics of Abstract Expressionism emerge significantly. *Pago-Pago Series - Tropika*, with the spontaneity of calligraphic-like brushstrokes, shows a balance between contradictory elements, freedom, and necessity, while *Pago-Pago – Penjelmaan* shows the fully developed characteristics of the gestural painting of Abstract Expressionism for it is vibrant, and dynamic. Indeed, both paintings comprise the elements of the gestural painting of Abstract Expressionism as well as the ideas of Abstraction and Expressionism.

In the 1970s, Latiff Mohidin created the *Mindscape* and *Langkawi* series to convey his conceptual state of mind through the application of gestural painting. In the *Mindscape* series, the dynamic explosion of colours and forms are contained in dome-like parameters. For example, *Mindscape IX* (1973) shows the expression mode of the dynamic strokes with free acts of spontaneity emerging remarkably, in which the imageries are filled with energetic, vibrant and dynamic pigments. In terms of spirit and inspiration, this series of paintings is linked to the next phase of Latiff Mohidin's work.

#### (d) Artistic Evolution of Chew Teng Beng's Paintings

Among the four selected artists, Chew Teng Beng (1938–) is an artist who fitted himself into the art education in the United States. He attained his formal art education at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan (1967–1968), the University of Michigan, USA (1968–1970) and the New York University, New York (1983–1986) respectively (Tan, 2015:55). Chew Teng Beng's early works in his school years were in the style of Naturalism, which he reproduced as close to optically perceived as possible. For instance, in his painting *Batas Baru II*, the images of trees,



**Figure 6** Artistic evolution of Chew Teng Beng's paintings.

cows, lakes, and houses are rather specific with no room for personal interpretation, making it a full representational work. A few years after his school education, from 1959 to 1963, Chew Teng Beng's produced *Pulau Redang* (1963), a painting that reveals the characteristics of German Expressionism, which is anti-naturalistic subjectivism. A bright blue dominates *Pulau Redang*, showing Chew Teng Beng's non-naturalistic use of colour. Regarding the painting's form, he simplified the subject and transformed it into his own impression of reality. In 1966, he created a painting called *The Sawah*, in which he rendered the landscape to the point of simplification as the work became more subjective and the image became semi-abstract. In *Sawah*, with recognisable scenes, the image of the paddy field becomes partly representational, characterised by free, broad and gestural brushstrokes, and a lack of naturalism.

In 1967, Chew Teng Beng left for the United States to further his studies at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, USA. He proceeded along the path of abstraction, in which he experimented with different materials, colours, styles and techniques. During this period, Chew Teng Beng moved completely

away from any reference to physical objects, and his works started out as a non-representational statement, entering into Pure Abstraction. This is demonstrated in *Neo* (1968) and *Ann Arbor* (1969); two such paintings that hold a similar emphasis on formalistic visual elements, such as space, colour, and form. These works present the organisation of positive and negative spaces, which show the juxtaposition between emptiness and fullness. Remarkably, these works also reveal the expression modes of Abstract Expressionism, such as spontaneity, the accidental and haphazard, which convey Chew Teng Beng's emotions, spirit, and memory.

After Chew Teng Beng returned to Malaysia in 1972, he experimented and discovered the art of paper craft, and produced a number of handmade paper works that were derived from non-representational statements. He eventually utilised an old craft—papermaking—in a unique way (PSAG, 1998:23). His handmade paper works marked the beginning of a new phase in his artistic journey. In this series, the colours of the works diffuse into the space, which creates beautiful imagery. An example demonstrating this is *Seascape Series* (1976). Zakaria Ali describes that this handmade paper is an added factor to the integrity of the work that has been executed according to a design that is both pre-planned and accidental (Zakaria, 1998:8).

The above examination of the artistic evolution of Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng shows that these four artists began their artistic creativity by producing simplified representational work, after which their artistic evolution eventually delved into Full Abstraction. Their creativity throughout the milestones of their art journey evolved from Naturalism, Expressionism, and Semi-Abstraction to Full Abstraction, as conceptualised earlier by Ocvirk et al. (2009). This shows the first phase of the artists' evolution in personal style that later would evolve even further, resulting in the diversification of their artistic approaches, which will be discussed in the next section.

## **DIVERSITY OF MALAYSIAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST ART FROM THE 1950S TO THE 1970S**

As discussed in the previous section, the artworks created by Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng showcase a rich spectrum of abstraction, ranging from Semi-Abstraction to Full Abstraction. However, what becomes evident in their creations is the profound impact of Abstract Expressionism on these talented Malaysian artists. The convergence of Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism, and the spirit of Expressionism have resulted in a diverse array of abstraction within the Malaysian art scene, which can be observed in the works of these four artists. Their artistic endeavours traverse various styles, techniques, and

subjects, yet they all share a common thread of embracing abstraction as a means of creative expression.

This section will further discuss two matters: firstly, how these artists infuse their works with a unique Malaysian perspective despite their artistic practices drawing inspiration from the international movement of Abstract Expressionism, and; secondly, how their cultural context, personal experiences, and local narratives find their way into the fabric of their creations in doing so. This allows the artists to have a distinct identity within the broader abstract art landscape that resulted in the diversity of the abstraction trend of Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art.

From several of these works, it was observed that these artists have been influenced by their Western art education, which has shaped their formal artistic experiments. Their works embody abstraction (and even expressionism), which can be compared to their counterparts in the United States and Europe. This can be observed in the pure, organic, and gestural abstractions in the works of Chew Teng Beng, Yeoh Jin Leng, and Latiff Mohidin. However, upon closer scrutiny, besides organic, gestural, and pure abstraction, the influence of the non-Western approach can also be observed through the calligraphy and symbolic abstraction in Syed Ahmad Jamal's works as well. Even though Sarena (2013) has explained how Abstract Expressionist art has been localised, it must still be noted that some of these early works can be observed as fundamentally abstract in their approach, and it is only later that the search for a local identity became a turning point for several Malaysian artists.

According to Ocvirk et al. (2009:19–20), Pure Abstraction started without any reference to a physical object as a non-representational statement. In the West, Wassily Kandinsky was the first to plunge into pure or total abstraction (Atkins, 1990:35–36). Since then, many artists have expanded upon Pure Abstraction. In the context of Malaysia, Chew Teng Beng attempted to manifest his thoughts, feelings, and emotions visually with non-representational visual statements in his work.

During his stay in the United States between 1967 and 1972, Chew Teng Beng's art marked an entry into Full Abstraction. This can be seen in his works *Neo* (1968) and *Ann Abor* (1969). After returning to Malaysia, his art underwent a renewal and he started the art of paper craft. These works of paper craft depict his thoughts and feelings through the presentation of spaces and colours with effects that are whimsical, accidental, and haphazard. For instance, *Seascape Series* (1976) (Figure 7), with its non-representational visual statements, presents the fullness and emptiness in which the void space can be related to the concept of divine emptiness and meditative essence. In *Seascape Series*, high-key colours that are bright, airy, and energizing penetrate all over the composition, and commingle with the middle-and low-key colours such as dark blue, blue, purple, and red. The void space in the painting is not



**Figure 7** Chew Teng Beng, *Seascape Series* (1976), Handmade paper, 82x59cm  
Source: Dr. Chew Teng Beng: A Retrospective: 45 Years of Selected Works (1998)

actually empty but instead is a place for the outside world (nature) to collide with the canvas (Joseph, 2003:55). In addition, the texture in *Seascape Series* creates vibrant effects, which give a sense of entering into the mysterious, secret waves of the sea.

Chew Teng Beng expanded into Full Abstraction in his later works, which are a series of oil paintings, such as *Reflection I* (1995), *Deh-Deh* (1997), and *Lelina* (1999), among others. His works present the interconnections of fundamental visual elements, in which the juxtaposition between emptiness and fullness is suggested.





**Figure 8** Yeoh Jin Leng, *Rockforms* (1965), Oil on canvas, 75.5x101cm  
Source: *Gerak Rupa Ubur Penyataan 1957-1973* (2017)

His works, which are Full Abstraction with no reference to an existing visual world, strongly lean towards Pure Abstraction.

Besides the works of Pure Abstraction that start out with non-representational statements, Objective Abstraction is non-recognisable work of complete abstraction that is reliant on a physical object but the finished image no longer appears to represent the initial reference (Ocvirk et al., 2009:19). Therefore, abstraction has also two basic variations, which are geometric and organic (Atkins, 1990:36). Organic Abstraction is depicted as rounded abstract shapes inspired by those found in nature (ZATISTA, 2023), which can also be regarded as Objective Abstraction. In Malaysia, Organic Abstraction persists in Yeoh Jin Leng's works as he drew inspiration from nature and rendered the local landscape to the point of simplification and spontaneous exploitation of gestural strokes in order to create an impression of inner nature.

Yeoh Jin Leng often rendered the rural landscape and conveyed the organic force of nature through his paintings after his return from Chelsea. His paintings, such as *Light and Reflection* (1963), *Rockforms* (1965), and *Trenggan* (1968), are among the works that have embraced these organic forces of nature through their lines, colours, shapes, and forms. These paintings evoke an impression of *inner nature* through the employment of the simplification and the idiom of Abstract Expressionism. In *Rockforms* (Figure 8), the images are reduced and simplified yet

they show the expressiveness of the spontaneous brushstrokes. *Rockforms* is a good example of a work of Objective Abstraction as well as Organic Abstraction. This painting derived from his study of the rock theme, which is shown in his drawing of *Sungai Gombak* (T.K. Sabapathy, 1995:47). In terms of colours, *Rockforms* in general displays a contrast with the warm yellow and black mass. The spontaneous exploitation of gestural strokes in the mass evokes a sense of movement and gives a sense of dynamic and lively spirit. The white mass on the top right of *Rockforms* adds an outgoing and imaginative space for the viewer to comprehend. Without it, what would the painting speak? Yeoh Jin Leng's painting demonstrates affinity with nature as the main involvement by applying the artistic approaches of Abstraction and Abstract Expressionism. His painting is often essentially associated with organic forces of nature, which lean towards Organic Abstraction.



**Figure 9** Latiff Mohidin, *Pago-Pago Series – Tropika* (1969), Oil on canvas, 100x100cm. Source: *Pago-Pago to Gelombang, 40 Years of Latiff Mohidin* (1994).

Geometric Abstraction, through Piet Mondrian, became the dominant style of 1930s American Abstraction (Atkins, 1990:134). At that time, in New York, apart from the American Abstract Artists group, another group was the first generation of Abstract Expressionism—the action painters. In the essay “The American Action Painters” published in the December 1952 issue of *Art News*, Harold Rosenberg described the action painter’s canvas as “an arena to act in” (Atkins, 1990:36). Gestural painters apply paint intuitively and physically to explore their deepest emotions and primal realities (Barcio, 2016). As a gestural painter, Latiff Mohidin applies the elements of line, colour, and space to reflect the mysterious energies of nature and internalise the literature he read in his gestural painting. He captures the energetic essence of nature in free gestural brushstrokes and utilises gestural techniques to create his paintings.

*Pago-Pago Series – Penjelmaan* and *Pago-Pago Series – Tropika*, which were created by Latiff Mohidin in 1969, have fully transmuted into the gestural painting of Abstract Expressionism, embracing a free act of spontaneity of expression and individuality. Tracing back, *Penjelmaan* is a continuation of the Pago-Pago series, which first began with the studies for *Pagoda I* and *Pagoda II* in 1964. In *Penjelmaan*, the simplified images of Pagoda have been discarded and transformed entirely into the expression mode of Abstract Expressionism, that is, vibrant and dynamic, thus reflecting the exuberant energies of nature. *Tropika* (1969) (Figure 9) by Latiff Mohidin reveals the influences of Oriental calligraphy through the spontaneous and free gestures of black calligraphic-like strokes. However, it also demonstrates the application of “Point, Line, and Plane”, where the composition is divided into several compartments by using black strokes and lines, and the fill of yellow, orange, and white. The free gestures of strokes stretching all over the compartments create a sense of striving for balance between contradictory elements, freedom, and necessity. *Tropika* embraces the affinity of gestural quality, showing the integration of both Eastern and Western aesthetic values. It must be noted how Latiff Mohidin’s uniqueness in gestural painting later matured in his subsequent works, such as in his *Gelombang Series*, *Rimba Series*, *Voyage Series* and *Seascape Series*. With his mastery of gestural painting into pure expression as his own hallmark, Latiff Mohidin directed Gestural Abstraction in Malaysia.

Among the artists of American Abstract Expressionism, there are abstract painters who incorporate Western expression with Eastern meditation into calligraphic compositions of works, as mentioned in the earlier part of this paper. Calligraphic brushstrokes became an approach to abstract painting that is focused on the spontaneous gesture of the artist’s hand and is informed by the East Asian art

of calligraphy (*The Third Mind*, 2009). Comprising lines and strokes, calligraphy as a source for pictorial values is particularly adaptable to the methods favourable to Malaysian artists (T.K. Sabapathy & Redza Piyadasa, 1983:14–18). For instance, Syed Ahmad Jamal embarked in the direction of Calligraphy Abstraction through his incorporation of Islamic calligraphy into his Abstraction and Abstract Expressionism pursuits in conveying his conceptual states.

While teaching at Kirkby, Syed Ahmad Jamal developed his creative maturity through his pursuit of abstraction. His paintings of 1959, such as *Winter Wind* and *Umpan*, are derived from the simplification of a tree from the Irish Sea in Kirkby. With the spontaneous exploitation of gesture strokes, he transposed the forms of the tree into a dynamic force. The original tree forms were abstracted, leading the final images in these paintings to no longer clearly resemble their initial references. The Jawi script, which is based on the Arabic script, became the inspiration for these paintings.

Upon returning to Malaysia, Syed Ahmad Jamal created his masterpiece titled *Tulisan* signifying another leap forward from his previous technique, where his non-representational approach becomes more pronounced and explicit. Like *Winter Wind* and *Umpan*, *Tulisan* (1961) (Figure 10) reveals the calligraphy of the Jawi script and abstraction in expressing the artist's conceptual state of mind. In this painting, Syed Ahmad Jamal emphasises brush painting with gesture, improvisation, and spontaneous strokes. *Tulisan* dominates with the spontaneous and free gestures of black calligraphic strokes on the bright blues and yellows background. This creates a clear contrast, making the calligraphic strokes stand out. A tension flowing freely within and without, inherent in the strokes, reveals a spirited and energetic force, giving a sense of briskness and joy. T.K. Sabapathy and Reza Piyadasa (1983) observes that:

Syed Ahmad Jamal's *Tulisan* characterises the vigour of brushstroke as a carrier of expressive and gestural properties. Drawing substantially from Islamic calligraphy, he gives free rein to the flow and rhythm inherent in the strokes. The texture, dimension and structure of these strokes constitute part of Jamal's vocabulary.

The gestural qualities of *Tulisan* reflect the affinity with the idiom of Abstract Expressionism. The calligraphic brushstroke becomes an approach to this painting that focuses on the spontaneous gesture of the artist's hand. By constructing with strokes and textures, *Tulisan* by Syed Ahmad Jamal marks a remarkable entry of Islamic calligraphy into a tradition for new pictorial expressions, fusing Eastern and Western aesthetic influences.



**Figure 10** Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Tulisan* (1961), Oil on board, 35.6 x 76cm.  
Source: *Gerak Rupa Ubur Penyataan 1957-1973* (2017).

A work of total abstraction frequently implies a meaning to the artist as it evolves (Ocvirk et al., 2009:19). In the case of Symbolic Abstraction, the term was used by Karl Hagedorn to refer to his work, which spanned from the 1950s to the 21st century (Hagedorn, 2023). Hagedorn's work relates the elements, such as vivid colours, forms and shapes, in the search for a connection between the human system, spirit, and the world it simultaneously reflects and creates (Hagedorn, 2023). Like Hagedorn, Syed Ahmad Jamal used formalistic visual elements to reflect his thoughts and feelings on events or social issues that are associated with his surroundings in life, though these issues have been approached in oblique and personal terms. He documented historical events from his perspective, as these events touched his soul and intellect, urging him to express his response in the form of art (D'Zul Haimi, 2009:134).

D'Zul Haimi (2009:118) writes, "Syed Ahmad Jamal is aware of the events that occur around him. He sketches his reactions and later expresses them through works of beauty although the occurrences that they refer to may have been unpleasant, sad, or painful." For example, the painting *13.5.1969* (1970) (Figure 11) holds symbolic social content, as it depicts Syed Ahmad Jamal's thoughts and emotions on the tragedy of 13th May 1969 in Malaysia. In this painting, the blue and green composition denotes a harmonious and peaceful land. The colour red is intruding from the bottom of the painting and penetrating the green land. It eventually becomes a sharp red when entering the blue field. As a whole, the combination of formalistic



**Figure 12** Syed Ahmad Jamal, *13.5.1969* (1970), Acrylic on canvas, 194x129cm.

Source: *Syed Ahmad Jamal: PELUKIS* (2009).

visual elements in this painting creates a sense of sacrificing the harmony of the land, as an implication of the artist's unpleasant feeling on the tragedy of 13th May 1969.

*13.5.1969*, which was created by Syed Ahmad Jamal in 1970, reveals gestural expression with symbolic means, and sees a tendency towards Symbolic Abstraction, which he maintained until his later works. After Syed Ahmad Jamal retired from his government service at the National Art Gallery, he continued creating works that documented historical events from his perspective as the events touched his soul and intellect, urging him to express his response in the form of art (D'Zul Haimi, 2009: 134).

From the 1950s to the 1970s, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng explored and experimented in their search for art

creativity to achieve something significant for them. Their signature way of work denotes a path towards a diverse abstraction tendency, which are Pure Abstraction, Organic Abstraction, Gestural Abstraction, Calligraphic Abstraction, and Symbolic Abstraction. As the earliest proponents of Abstract Expressionist art in Malaysia, their influence remains strong until now, and can be observed in the works of emerging artists who have gained prominence in the Malaysian abstract art scene (*The Unreal Deal*, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Since the late 1950s, Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art has retained its immense impact on the Malaysian art scene. Malaysian artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin and Chew Teng Beng have explored abstraction in the search for their signature style. Their works eventually showed varied abstraction trends that contributed to the diversification of Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art from the 1950s to the 1970s. The diverse directions taken by these artists in their exploration of abstraction have contributed to the richness and vibrancy of the Malaysian art scene. Each artist has brought their own voice and interpretation to the realm of abstraction, expanding the boundaries of artistic expression, and challenging conventional notions of representation.

This paper has demonstrated how the works of Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng exemplify the wide-ranging possibilities within abstraction in a non-Western context. Rooted in the influence of Abstract Expressionism, their artworks showcase the fusion of abstraction, expressive spontaneity, and improvisation. Through their unique visions and diverse approaches, these artists have contributed to the dynamic and ever-evolving context of Malaysian art, offering a captivating exploration of abstraction, which later significantly evolved as Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art that is imbued with local subject matter and inspiration, as discussed by Sarena (2013).

## NOTES

- 1 In Japan, the Gutai Group, consisting of 18 painter members, was influenced by New York Abstract Expressionism in the late 1950s. Their inspiration came from the “new American Painting” (Action Painting) and they worked with the idea of complete freedom from formality and “rules” of art. The members included Kazuo Shiraga, Saburō Murakami, and Atsuko Tanaka, among others (Tiampo, M., 2011:213, 215).
- 2 In Korea, a group of artists called Hyondae Misulga Hyophoe (Contemporary Artists’ Society) was organised in the 1950s. Their works were expressionist and most similar to Art Informel in

Europe or Abstract Expressionism in the United States. They are known as Informel in Korea. Pak So-Bo and Kim Chang-yeul's works showed affinity to Pollock and Soulage respectively (Kim, 1993:162–163).

- 3 In Thailand, the influences of Abstract Expressionism only began in the 1960s when Thai modern art started to gain more independence and become less dependent on the state with the establishment of private art galleries and exhibitions (Michaelsen, 1993:74).
- 4 In the Philippines, the late 1940s saw the influence shift from Europe to the United States, and the dominant influence became the New York School and Abstract Expressionism. Filipino artists such as Jose Joya and Anita Magsaysay were products of this American phase in modern Filipino art (Guillermo, 1993:121).

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APPENDIX I

NO.	IMAGE	DESCRIPTION
1		<p>Syed Ahmad Jamal, Datuk b. 1929, <i>Johor</i> d. 2011, <i>Selangor</i></p> <p>Pohon Nipah – <i>Nipah Palms</i></p> <p>Cat minyak atas papan 1957 100.5 x 69 m BSLN1959.017(H)</p> <p>Koleksi Seni Visual Negara <i>Hadiah – Federation Art Council</i></p> <p>Source: Penerbitan buku Syed Ahmad Jamal: PELUKIS, Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Malaysia (2009), pg. 36</p>
2		<p>Syed Ahmad Jamal, Datuk b. 1929, <i>Johor</i> d. 2011, <i>Selangor</i></p> <p>Umpan – <i>The Bait</i></p> <p>Cat minyak atas masonite board 1959 165 x 135 cm BSLN1959.018</p> <p>Koleksi Seni Visual Negara</p> <p>Source: Penerbitan buku Syed Ahmad Jamal: PELUKIS, Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Malaysia (2009), pg. 108</p>

NO.	IMAGE	DESCRIPTION
3		<p>Yeoh Jin Leng                      b. 1929, Ipoh</p> <p><i>Cahaya dan Bayangan – Light and Reflection</i></p> <p>Cat minyak atas kanvas                      1963                      90.5 x 114 cm                      BSLN1964.035</p> <p>Koleksi Seni Visual Negara</p> <p>Source: Penerbitan buku Yeoh Jin Leng:                      Art and Thought 1952-1995, Kuala Lumpur:                      Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Malaysia (1996),                      pg. 130</p>