

THE MANIFESTATION OF MALAYSIAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST ART IN THE CONTEXT OF MALAYSIAN MODERN ART (THE LATE 1950s-2010s)

(Manifestasi Seni Abstrak Ekspresionis dalam Konteks Seni Moden Malaysia [Lewat 1950 hingga 2010])

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Abstract

Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art has continued to impact and influence the nation's art scene since the late 1950s. Malaysian artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin and Chew Teng Beng have experimented and explored with abstraction in pursuit of their distinctive style, adding to the dynamic and ever-evolving context of Malaysian art. As the earliest proponents of Abstract Expressionist art in Malaysia, their influences are still strong today, as can be observed in the works of the following artists who achieved prominence in the Malaysian abstract art scene in the late 1970s: Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, Yusof Ghani, Rafiee Ghani, Suzlee Ibrahim and Awang Damit Ahmad. Thus, this paper aims to elucidate the connection between abstract art creativity and the aforementioned artists by examining the selected artworks produced by them. In this case, the domesticating strategy facilitated the transformation of Abstract Expressionism into

the art creation of nine Malaysian artists, who used diverse abstraction approaches to convey their inner spirit. Based on the authors' observation, the diverse abstraction trends bridge a connection between these two generations of Malaysian artists. Through the application of Edmund Felman's visual analysis method, their works are observed to exhibit a variety of abstraction trends that have contributed to the diversification of Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art, which can be seen in gestural, pure, organic and calligraphic abstraction.

Keywords: Gestural abstraction, pure abstraction, organic abstraction, calligraphic abstraction, domesticating strategy, abstract expressionism

Abstrak

Seni Abstrak Ekspresionis Malaysia terus memberikan impak dan mempengaruhi arena seni negara sejak akhir 1950-an. Seniman Malaysia seperti Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin dan Chew Teng Beng telah bereksperimen dan meneroka abstrak dalam usaha mencari gaya yang berbeza, seterusnya menyumbang kepada konteks seni Malaysia yang dinamik dan sentiasa berubah. Sebagai pelopor terawal seni Abstrak Ekspresionis di Malaysia, pengaruh mereka masih kuat sehingga kini, seperti yang dapat diperhatikan melalui karya pelukis berikut yang mencapai kemasyhuran dalam arena seni abstrak Malaysia pada akhir 1970-an: Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, Yusof Ghani, Rafiee Ghani, Suzlee Ibrahim, dan Awang Damit Ahmad. Oleh itu, makalah ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan hubungan antara kreativiti seni abstrak dengan seniman yang disebutkan dengan mengkaji karya terpilih yang dihasilkan oleh mereka. Dalam kes ini, strategi domestikasi memudahkan transformasi Abstrak Ekspresionisme menjadi penciptaan seni sembilan orang seniman Malaysia, yang menggunakan pendekatan abstrak yang pelbagai untuk menyampaikan semangat dalaman mereka. Berdasarkan pemerhatian pengarang, pelbagai trend abstrak yang pelbagai membentuk hubungan antara dua generasi artis Malaysia ini. Melalui aplikasi kaedah analisis visual oleh Edmund Felman, karya mereka akhirnya memperlihatkan pelbagai trend abstrak yang menyumbang kepada kepelbagaian seni Abstrak Ekspresionis Malaysia, yang boleh dilihat dalam abstrak gerak isyarat, tulen, organik, dan kaligrafi.

Kata kunci: Abstrak gerak isyarat, abstrak tulen, abstrak organik, abstrak kaligrafi, strategi domestikasi, abstrak ekspresionis

INTRODUCTION

After World War II, Abstract Expressionism gained success not only in America, but across Europe as well (Lucie-Smith, 1984:80). Later, it became a profound influence on the transition of Modern Art in Asia. The exhibition entitled “The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989” raised the notion that the development of American modern art is not only associated with Europe (Guggenheim, 2009:20), but there is also a dynamic impact of Asian art on the shaping of American art, especially Oriental ideology and the Buddhist school of Zen (Smith, 2011:20). American artists have selectively adapted Eastern ideas and art forms to create new styles and give new definitions of their works, and in turn, the new American Painting (of which Abstract Expressionists are a part) became the catalyst in the transition of modern art in Asia (Sarena Abdullah & Chow Sow Yeng, 2024:60).

In the translation circle, domestication and foreignization are two basic translation strategies that have been the focus of debate (Wang, 2013). The concepts of foreignization and domestication in the translation field were first introduced by an American scholar, Lawrence Venuti, in his 1995 book titled *The Translator's Invisibility*, which concerns not only the transfer between languages, but also between cultures (Wang, 2014: 2423–2424). Domestication and foreignization are thus concerned with two cultures, the former meaning replacing the source culture with the target culture and the latter, preserving the ideas and principles of the source culture (Yang, 2010:77). Foreignization advocated by Venuti is a source-culture-oriented approach (Wang, 2014), highlighting the foreign identity and protecting it from the ideological dominance of the target culture (Yang, 2010:78). While domestication is focused on the target culture, minimizing the identity of the foreign culture (Wang, 2014). Domesticating strategy could be observed in ancient Rome, when Latin translators not only removed Greek culturally distinctive characteristics, but also added literary elements to Roman culture and replaced the Greek poet with their own in any text originally written in Latin (Wang, 2013:175).

However, the two basic strategies of foreignization and domestication could supplement and complement each other, in which case the translator should introduce foreignization and choose domestication when it is needed (Wang, 2014: 2423). In this sense, Claudia Heide viewed that both foreignizing and domesticating played on the process by which British artists transformed the Alhambra, the Nasrid architecture, into a range of idioms that could be understood and sold at home (Heide, 2010). The British representations of the Alhambra reflect the intercultural communication between the Occident and the Orient (Heide, 2010). In another context, Li Pan

investigated the role of translation in intercultural communication as it allows two cultures to communicate with one another, and highlighted the differences and unbalance between cultures, particularly in the performance arts (Li Pan, 2011). In his research, Li Pan examined the foreignizing and domesticating strategies in the translating texts for the performing arts in Hong Kong (Li Pan, 2011:112).

Abstract Expressionism, an international art movement, has been ongoing between Eastern and Western ideas and art forms (Guggenheim, 2009). American artists were fascinated with the Buddhist school of Zen and translated the Oriental ideology of Zen into the idiom of American Abstract Expressionism (Smith, 2011). They successfully created new styles and gave new definitions to their works, and in turn, Abstract Expressionism became the main influence in Asian countries and advocated the transition of modern Asian art after World War II through both foreignizing and domestication strategies (Sarena Abdullah & Chow Sow Yeng, 2024:60).

In the case of Malaysia, domesticating strategy takes place when Malaysian artists transform the idiom of Abstract Expressionism into their art making to convey their emotions or conceptual states, which imbue their cultural context, personal experiences, and local narratives through various abstraction approaches. Sarena Abdullah (2009) stated that Abstract Expressionist art in Malaysia has been well adapted and localized in terms of their artistic output that is derived from their cultural context and personal experience, while Safrizal Shahir (2012:250) claimed that Malaysian artists did not embrace the philosophies underlying Western abstraction, but only focused on the style and format of their works. Therefore, the concept of domestication, a target-culture-oriented approach, would be useful in analysing some of the artworks highlighted in this paper.

Malaysian artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng have experimented with abstraction in pursuit of their distinctive style. Eventually, their works exhibited a variety of abstraction trends, contributing to the diversity of Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art from the 1950s to the 1970s (Sarena Abdullah & Chow Sow Yeng, 2024:79). The diverse abstraction trends that were developed by these four earliest proponents can also be seen later linked to the abstract artistic creativity of Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, Yusof Ghani, Rafiee Ghani, Suzlee Ibrahim and Awang Damit Ahmad. This paper therefore discusses the connection of abstract artistic creativity between these nine Malaysian artists by examining the selected artworks produced by them, and how a domesticating strategy was applied to support the process of translating the idiom of Abstract Expressionism through various abstraction approaches in their art making.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, Edmund Feldman's visual analysis method was employed to investigate the selected artworks by these nine Malaysian artists because it provides a systematic and critical analysis in interpreting a work of art. His visual criticism method consists of four steps for interpreting a work of art: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment (Feldman, 1994). First, description entails gathering information about the work of art, such as the artist's name, the work's title, date of creation, size, medium, and work environment. The second step is analysing the principles and elements of design, which is formal analysis. This is followed by interpretation, which clarifies the content through the process of finding the meaning of work or expressive qualities, such as mood, feelings, or emotions. The last step is judgement, which involves assessing the work in relation to aesthetic excellence and other works of its type. Feldman's formalist method gives a methodical approach to analysing the quality of artworks, finding the techniques used by the artist, discovering innovative aesthetics, and gaining aesthetic experience in relation to the artwork, all of which are suitable for investigating the selected artworks in this study. In the following section, the early history of Abstract Expressionism in Malaysia is first presented in detail before the analysis of works.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

New Direction in the Malaysian Art Scene after World War II

In the early post-World War II period, the diverse styles and techniques of the School of Paris were widely applied by artists in British Malaya (Redza Piyadasa, 1994:16). At that time, the practice of Western art, such as oil and watercolour painting, was well accepted and promoted by local artists. Artists of the 1940s and 1950s, such as Abdullah Ariff, Yong Mun Sen, Khaw Sia, Cheong Soo-Pieng, Patrick Ng Kah Onn, Mohd. Hoessein Enas and Tay Hooi Keat, to name a few, provoked the early artistic manifestations of Malaysian modern art, which are linked to Naturalism, Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1982). When the Japanese army invaded and occupied Malaya for over three years during World War II, art activities were disrupted and slowed down in British Malaya (Redza Piyadasa, 1994:29). It was only after World War II that the art scene in Malaya/Malaysia took a radical turn, in which the local artists' art education abroad and the internationalization of the National Art Gallery can be observed as two dominant beneficial factors in Malayan/Malaysian art circumstances that influenced Malayan/Malaysian artists' attitudes towards art.

Between 1945 and 1969, young Malayan/Malaysian artists went abroad for art education in Europe and later the United States. Peter Harris, the Art Superintendent in the Education Department who founded the Wednesday Art Group, was responsible for the procurement of scholarships for training art teachers (Low, 2015: 478). Several of them were later sent for a full course in formal art education in the United Kingdom (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1982). Malayan artist-teachers such as Syed Ahmad Jamal, Tay Hooi Keat, Yeoh Jin Leng, Anthony Lau, Ibrahim Hussein, Ismail Zain, Khalil Ibrahim, Ahmad Khalid Yusoff, Redza Piyadasa and Lee Joo For were among those who were sent to England under the Malayan Government Scholarship to pursue their fine art education (Sarena Abdullah, 2021:9). This was followed by Jolly Koh and Cheong Laitong, who also left for London in the 1960s (Lai et al., 2017:143–144).

The 1960s saw an increase in the number of individuals who were given foreign scholarships for fine art studies. Several Malayan/Malaysian artists, such as Syed Ahmad Jamal, Cheong Laitong, Latiff Mohidin, Ibrahim Hussein, Anthony Lau and Jolly Koh, also later furthered their art studies in the United States (Lai et al., 2017:142–145). They received the USA Scholarship, Fulbright Scholarship, John D. Rockefeller Fund and USIS Exchange Scholarship (Wharton, 1971:39, 45, 49, 58; Lai et al., 1973:142–145). In addition, Latiff Mohidin also received a German scholarship and studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin (Lai et al., 1973). This group of artists went for art education abroad not only to obtain their art teacher training, but to later pursue their art careers.

During this time, New York City emerged as the new centre of the art world. Due to early post-war opportunities, these artists encountered Abstract Expressionism either through their art education or the exhibitions that they visited when they were abroad. Syed Ahmad Jamal and Yeoh Jin Leng, for instance, first encountered Abstract Expressionist work when they attended exhibitions at the Tate Gallery and the White Chapel Art Gallery in London respectively (Wharton, 1971:39; T. K. Sabapathy, 1995:153).

The internationalization of the National Art Gallery, established on August 27, 1958, could be seen as an advantage. Malaysian artists gained international recognition through exhibitions organized by the National Art Gallery. In April 1957, Malaysian artists began to participate in the Southeast Asian Art Exhibition in Manila, the first major international art exhibition that provided a platform for these artists internationally (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1988).

Sarena Abdullah (2021:7–8) argued that there was a need for Malaysia to gain international visibility during the post-World War II period due to Malaysia's formation as an independent nation (1957) and the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation

(1963–1966) to attain support to increase its position as an independent country by internationalizing the arts. Regardless of the context, opportunities such as art education abroad and participation in international exhibitions benefited these artists and even started to raise awareness about visual arts in general (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1988).

When these artist-teachers returned to Malaya in the 1960s, they took up art education positions in local institutions (Low, 2015:477). For example, Syed Ahmad Jamal served in Specialist Teachers Training Institute (STTI) (Senior Lecturer, 1961–1963; Principal, 1964–1972), Universiti Malaya (Visiting Lecturer 1975–1979, Director of the Cultural Centre 1979–1983), and the National Art Gallery (Director 1983–1991) (D’Zul Haimi Hj Md Zain, 2009:534). While Syed Ahmad Jamal was the principal of STTI, Yeoh Jin Leng served at STTI as a lecturer (1963–1968) and as the Head of the Art Department (1969–1983). Yeoh Jin Leng later worked at the Malaysian Institute of Art (Dean of Studies, 1984–1994) (T.K. Sabapathy, 1995:117). Chew Teng Beng established the Fine Arts Department at Universiti Sains Malaysia after his return to Malaysia in 1972 (Teng, 1998:32). He then served at the Equator Academy of Art and Design (1994–1998) and the Central Academy of Art (1995–1996) after retiring from Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1993 (Teng, 1998:32).

Many of these art teachers, as Yvonne Low stated, later became “accidental” artists (Low, 2015:477). Their works were collected, properly housed, presented for public exhibition, and recognized as part of the cultural heritage of the nation (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1982). Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin and Chew Teng Beng have demonstrated their experimental approaches and explorations in the abstraction pursuits through their creative artistic journeys. Their distinct visions and varied approaches add to the dynamic and ever-evolving context of Malaysian art, providing an engrossing investigation of abstraction that later significantly evolved as Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art that is infused with local subject matter and inspiration (Sarena Abdullah, 2013:455).

At the beginning stages, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the works of Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin and Chew Teng Beng denoted the transition of Abstract Expressionism into a non-Western context through the application of abstraction approaches with Expressionism means, and their works shifted from representation to non-representation styles (see Sarena Abdullah & Chow, 2024). They shared similarities in their artistic journey, traversing various styles from Naturalism, Expressionism, and Semi-abstraction to Full-abstraction. They incorporated abstraction approaches that comprise simplification, free acts of spontaneity, and gestural brush. For example, Syed Ahmad Jamal’s *Tulisan* (1961),

Yeoh Jin Leng's *Rockforms* (1965), and Latiff Mohidin's *Pago-Pago-Penjelmaan* (1969) are derived from the simplification of a tree, rock, and pagoda respectively (Sarena Abdullah and Chow Sow Yeng, 2024:64–68). Yet, the improvisation, spontaneity, and gestural brush of Abstract Expressionism became the prominent modes of expression in their paintings.

This early period of experimentation and exploration of abstraction by Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng led to their achievement in their search for their distinctive way. Although some of their early works can be observed as fundamentally abstract in their approaches, their later search for a local identity became a turning point for Abstract Expressionist art in Malaysia. Each artist brought their own voice and interpretation to the realm of abstraction, expanding the boundaries of artistic expression and challenging conventional notions of representation. Their works eventually showed varied abstraction trends, contributing to the diversification of Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art, which can be seen in pure, organic, gestural, and calligraphic abstraction, as discussed in Sarena Abdullah and Chow Sow Yeng (2024:70–79) (see Figure 1).

With the emergence of the next generation of abstract artists—such as Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, Yusof Ghani, Rafiee Ghani, Suzlee Ibrahim, and Awang Damit Ahmad, to name a few—Abstract Expressionist art has its own followers and has expanded in Malaysia, despite the fact that many artists have also explored conceptual approaches in art making and produced installation art and even performance art (Ling & Sarena Abdullah, 2023).

Domestication: Abstract Expressionist Art in Malaysia from the Late 1970s to the 2010s

The late 1970s saw the maturity in the abstraction creativity of the following four earliest Abstract Expressionists: Syed Ahmad Jamal and his *Langit dan Bumi Series* and *Ledang Series*; Yeoh Jin Leng's *Ecology Series* and *Icon Series*; Latiff Mohidin's *Gelombang Series*, *Rimba Series*, *Voyage Series*, and *Seascape Series*; and Chew Teng Beng's *Coralscape Series* and *Reflection Series*. These series of paintings best indicate their exploration of abstraction in the local context. In terms of artistic approach, they adapted the idea of Abstract Expressionism in their distinctive ways, yet their artistic motifs were derived from their cultural context and personal experiences with a unique Malaysian perspective (see Sarena Abdullah, 2009). The late 1970s to the 2010s saw the following generation of artists who are associated with Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art and became active in the art scene: Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, Yusof Ghani, Rafiee Ghani, Suzlee Ibrahim, and Awang Damit Ahmad. Their artistic creativity, reasoning, experience, exposure, and ideas

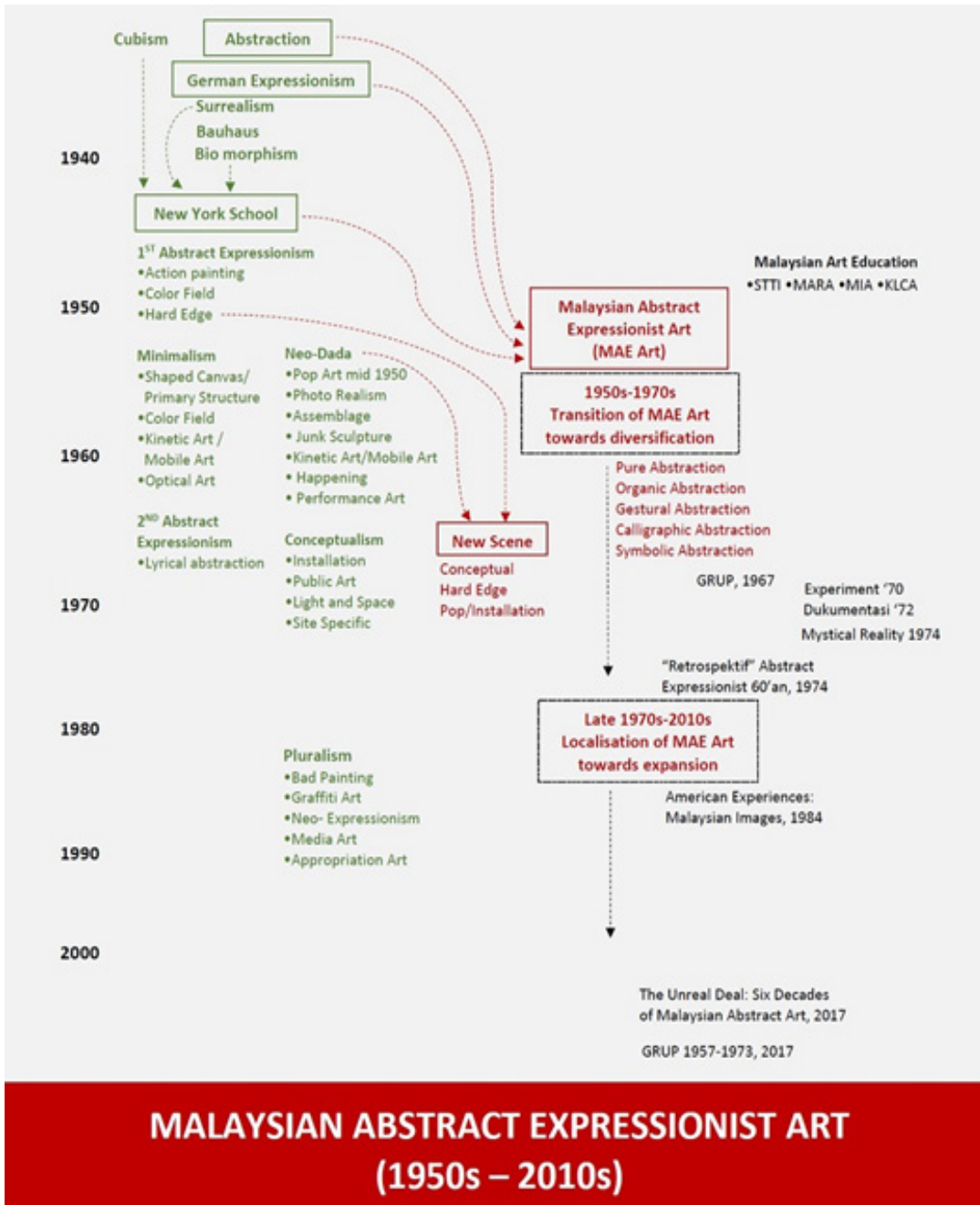


Figure 1 Malaysian Abstract Expressionist Art (1950s–2010s).

about their works are inclined towards that of Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng.

The abstraction tendencies such as gestural, pure, organic, and calligraphic abstractions developed by Latiff Mohidin, Chew Teng Beng, Yeoh Jin Leng, and Syed Ahmad Jamal respectively can be linked further with the abstract artistic creativity of subsequent artists such as Yusof Ghani, Suzlee Ibrahim, Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, Rafiee Ghani, and Awang Damit Ahmad. By infusing their local spirit, which is rooted deep inside them, they transformed the artistic style of Abstract Expressionism through diverse abstraction tendencies to create something significant and suitable to them as individuals of Malaysian identity. In this way, domesticating was implemented when they ignored the philosophy underlying the global movement of Abstract Expressionism and replaced it with their inspirations from the Malaysian perspective. This point is further discussed in the following sections.

Gestural Abstraction by Latiff Mohidin, Yusof Ghani and Suzlee Ibrahim

Harold Rosenberg described the canvas of Action Painters as “an arena to act in” in his essay titled “The American Action Painters,” which was published in the December 1952 issue of *Artnews* (Atkins, 1990:36). Paint is applied intuitively and physically by gestural artists to explore their innermost feelings and primal realities (Barcio, 2016). In the context of Malaysia, works such as *Rawa-Rawa 2* (1988), *Evolved* (2005), and *ENERGY (MONSOON SERIES)* (2009) are action paintings that embrace the similarity of visual effects such as spontaneity, improvisation, and accidental. The qualities of these works show the artistic approach of Gestural Abstraction by Latiff Mohidin, Yusof Ghani, and Suzlee Ibrahim. However, personal experiences and local narratives serve as the inspiration for their artistic output.

In terms of artistic style, Latiff Mohidin’s paintings after 1969 are mostly akin to the Abstract Expressionism of the New York School, even though the initial influence on his artistic journey was German Expressionism. Latiff Mohidin’s works since then mark a step into gestural painting with an energetic, dynamic, and vibrant force. The modes of expression of Abstract Expressionism, such as free acts of spontaneity, improvisation, and haphazardness, can be discerned in his oil paintings from 1969 (Koay, 1994:48). For example, *Pago-Pago-Penjelmaan* fully developed the characteristics of gestural painting, reflecting the exuberant energies of nature and giving a sense of being vibrant and dynamic. His uniqueness in gestural painting matured in the *Gelombang Series*, the *Rimba Series*, the *Voyage Series*, and the *Seascape Series* (Dato Mohd Yusof Ahmad Haned Masjak et al., 2012: 66), which directed Gestural Abstraction in Malaysia. For instance, the powerful and dynamic strokes with free acts of spontaneity dominate the paintings of the *Gelombang Series*.

The *Gelombang Series* expresses vitality, passion, and energy, as well as a departure from any formal components in favour of pure expression (Koay, 1994:48). These paintings are surrounded by the charming rhythm of nature, arising from the swift movements of brush strokes and layers of colours that seem to be in constant motion (Dato Mohd Yusof Ahmad Haned Masjak et al., 2012:66).

As a gestural painter, Latiff Mohidin applies the elements of line, colour, and space to reflect the mysterious energies of nature and internalize the literature he read in his gestural painting (Sarena Abdullah & Chow Sow Yeng, 2024:75) by infusing local narratives in his works. This is evident in his painting *Rawa-Rawa 2* (Figure 2), which was created in 1988. In *Rawa-Rawa 2*, Latiff Mohidin articulates the elements of lines and spaces freely in the whole composition. Yellows and whites dominate with the contrasting black strokes, radiating bright and positive

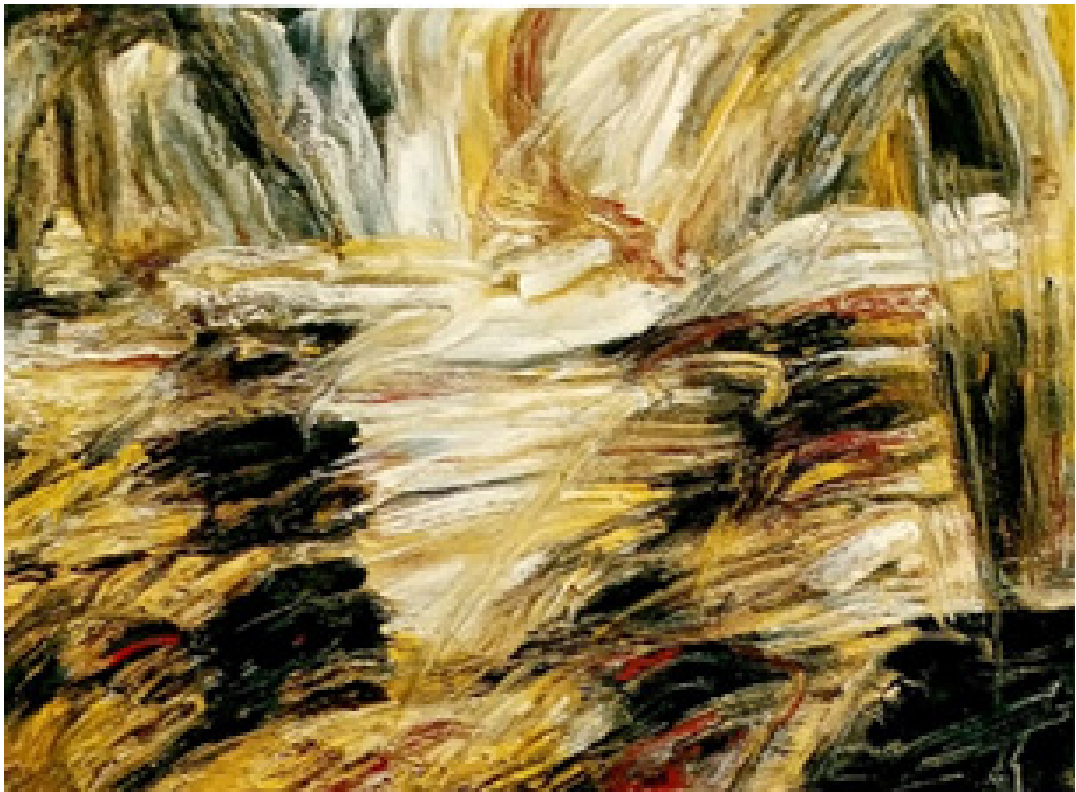


Figure 2 Latiff Mohidin. (1988). *Rawa-Rawa 2*. [Oil on canvas, 90 x 121 cm].
Source: Koay, S. (1994). *Pago-Pago to Gelombang, 40 Years of Latiff Mohidin*. Singapore Art Museum. pp. 148.

energy. Moreover, textures and paints are displayed all over *Rawa-Rawa 2*, creating thick and bright brush strokes with dynamic and energetic force. This painting highly expresses the technique of free acts and spontaneity, yet it is inspired by the insight of Latiff Mohidin's poetry, which holds an expressive of the Eastern mind, and by the nature where his search for localness takes place.¹ The domesticating strategy was implemented when Latiff Mohidin shifted away from the Western philosophy embraced by Abstract Expressionist in New York as mentioned earlier and replaced it with his local creativity idea that emphasized Eastern spirit in his work. In addition, his creativity process can be observed as target-culture-oriented, which is the core of domestication.

As an action painter, Yusof Ghani², like Latiff Mohidin, applies paint intuitively as well as gestural techniques to create his paintings, which came to be comprehended as the characteristic means of Gestural Abstraction. Walter Kravitz, a professor of painting at the George Mason University in Virginia, was Yusof Ghani's early influence (Rusli Hashim, 1996:147). After he returned to Malaysia, Yusof Ghani showed his mastery of gestural painting in his early *Tari Series* and *Topeng Series* of the 1980s and 1990s, and continued in his own way in the next phases of his works. In the 2000s, Yusof Ghani worked on the *Hijau Series*, the *Segerak Series*, the *Biring Series*, and the *Wajah Series*. Like Latiff Mohidin, Yusof Ghani's paintings highly express gestural techniques and intuitive paint. For example, *Evolved* (2005) (Figure 3), one of the paintings from the *Segerak Series*, is mainly painted in bright yellows, which serve as a foil to the abstracted and unclear figures. Many free associations and spontaneous lines are moving around, gracefully expressing the dynamic force. Moreover, the moving lines and strokes seem to hold the profound energy within, traversing all over the painting. In terms of artistic inspiration, Yusof Ghani's paintings serve as a documentation of the journey of life, a process of discovery, a diary of his thoughts, and a reflection of his feelings (EDGE GALERIE, 2015:9). He expresses his personal experiences, which relate to local rendering and have marked the implementation of the domesticating strategy.

Suzlee Ibrahim³ (1967–) is a highly accomplished action painter who paints intuitively and applies the gestural approach to explore his innermost feelings. As an action painter, he creates his artwork to convey a mode of energy and expression (G13 Gallery, 2012). His paintings are characterized by vibrant brushstrokes and splashes that display dynamic forces. *ENERGY (MONSOON SERIES)* (Figure 4) is a work with acrylic and oil paint on canvas created by him in 2009. In this painting, the ground's yellows and reds create a warm atmosphere. With the dispersion of black strokes, the energy seems to vibrate turbulently in this painting. However, the whites emerge mostly at the top left, alleviating the vigorous effect of this painting. Suzlee



Figure 3 Yusof Ghani. (2005). *Evolved*. [Oil on canvas, 106 x 91 cm].
Source: Safrizal Shahir. (2010). *The Aliya and Farouk Khan Collection*. pp.77.



Figure 4 Suzlee Ibrahim. (2009). *ENERGY (MONSOON SERIES)* [Acrylic and oil paint on canvas, 90 x 90 cm].

Source: Courtesy of the artist.

Ibrahim paints in a distilled and suggestive way to reflect himself, his emotions, and his thoughts as an individual of Malaysian identity, identified through the title-Monsoon Series, referring to the Malaysian monsoon. His work thus demonstrates the heightening of the local identity, which is the key to domestication.

Pure Abstraction by Chew Teng Beng and Sharifah Fatimah Zubir

Pure Abstraction begins with no reference to a physical object as a non-representational statement (Ocvirk et al., 2009:19–20), and Wassily Kandinsky was the first person to embrace pure or total abstraction in the West (Atkins, 1990:35–36). Since then, many artists around the world have expanded and developed Pure Abstraction. In the context of Malaysia, Chew Teng Beng and Sharifah Fatimah Zubir express their soul and spirit in their works through the manipulation of formalistic elements. Chew Teng Beng infuses his works with personal experiences that are associated with his daily life, and transfers his spirit deep in his heart into his works through inspiration from nature in his homeland (Paul, 2014), while Sharifah Fatimah Zubir applies colours to reflect her inner space, intuitive mind, and thoughts (Chu Li, 1989). The works of Chew Teng Beng and Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, *Reflection I* and *Ascent*, embrace purely abstract imagery by reflecting on their inner spirit as Asian artists. This approach reflected the domesticating strategy inherently could be observed through the works of these artists. Chew Teng Beng's work undeniably demonstrates affinities with the expression of Abstract Expressionism.⁴ He expresses his thoughts and innermost feelings through the manifestation of space and emptiness, which is Pure Abstraction. In the 1970s, Chew Teng Beng discovered the art of paper craft and produced some handmade paper works that were derived from non-representation statements, such as *Batu Ferringhi* (1974), *Seascape Series* (1976), *Landscape* (1976), and *Siew-siew* (1978). Later, his new series of oil paintings in the 1990s shared similar visual effects of spontaneity, accidentality, whimsy, and haphazardness. For instance, he painted *Reflection I* (Figure 5) in 1995. This work is filled with cool blues and greens, with large void spaces occupying the top and bottom parts of the composition. The combination of colours and spaces gives a sense of peace and serenity. The void space of this painting combines with the fullness of cool colours in the middle, which can be related to the concept of Eastern philosophy, "absence and presence." For example, "The void space is not actually empty but instead is a place for the outside world (nature) to collide with the canvas" (Joseph, 2003:55). In Chew Teng Beng's art making, domestication takes place when he eliminates the ideology underlying American Abstract Expressionism and, instead, highlights his thoughts and feelings, which are closer to Eastern philosophy.

Sharifah Fatimah Zubir⁵ was exposed to American culture and art, which influenced her art making in terms of artistic approach, as her works present a greater degree of spontaneity (Ho, 2015:7). Her paintings are about forms, spaces, and colours, which is total abstraction; examples include *Greenscape* (1987), *Purple Grow* (1988), *The Link* (1989), and *Ascent* (2008). *Ascent* (Figure 6) is an acrylic painting that was produced in 2008. Like Chew Teng Beng's *Reflection I*,



Figure 5 Chew Teng Beng. (1995). *Reflection I*. [Oil painting, 62 x 51 cm].
Source: Chew Teng Beng. (2000). *Penang-New York: A lifetime journey*. The Art Gallery. pp. 25.

Ascent is a full abstraction work with non-representation statements. It is full of free and spontaneous strokes, with mainly the colours red, green, blue, and yellow. The colours' stripes are interlocking and moving upwards, creating a graceful and steady rhythmic sense. As a whole, *Ascent* reflects the artist's inner spirit and innate motivation. Hiranmanyii Awli Mohanan (2021:87) noted that Sharifah Fatimah Zubir exhibits the true matters of the heart, mind, and soul, and how the thought processes are never muted and never silent, and always showing their garish colours from deep within. Behind the free and spontaneous strokes lay the spirituality of a strong



Figure 6 Sharifah Fatimah Zubir. (2008). *Ascent*. [Acrylic on canvas, 102 x 61 cm].
Source: Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir. (2008). *Note of a Journey 40@60*. Art Folio Kuala Lumpur. pp. 113.

intuitive and spontaneous passion for her inner stirrings (Chu Li, 1989), which is a local spirit that is rooted deep inside her heart.

Organic Abstraction by Yeoh Jin Leng, Rafiee Ghani and Awang Damit Ahmad

In contrast to the non-representational works of Pure Abstraction, Objective Abstraction is a non-recognizable work of complete abstraction that depends on a physical object, but the final image no longer seems to represent the original reference (Ocvirk et al., 2009: 19). Thus, there are two fundamental variations of abstraction: geometric and organic (Atkins, 1990: 36). Organic Abstraction is described as rounded abstract shapes derived from those found in nature (ZATISTA, 2023), which can also be regarded as Objective Abstraction. In the context of Malaysia, *Ecology Series*, *Lost and Found*, and *Alun-alun ke Marista* by Yeoh Jin Leng, Rafiee Ghani, and Awang Damit Ahmad respectively exhibit how these three artists have similarities in their abstract artistic creativity as Organic Abstraction.

In terms of artistic approach, they manipulate abstract shapes derived from those found in nature and convey them through gestural and free brush strokes. On the other hand, in terms of artistic inspiration, Yeoh Jin Leng, Rafiee Ghani, and Awang Damit Ahmad drew inspiration from local landscapes and indigenous cultural elements to express their thoughts and feelings. For instance, *The Pink Hill* and *Lost and Found* by Rafiee Ghani, and *Rockform* and *Ecology Series* by Yeoh Jin Leng, show affinity with nature and humans. As for the works of Awang Damit Ahmad, just as Yeoh Jin Leng's *Ecology Series* and *Icon Series*, both of them were inspired by the elements of indigenous culture, and they simplified the features using free strokes, reduced forms, and colours. Their works thus best witness the domesticating translation by infusing the Malaysian perspective and their cultural context, personal experiences, and local narratives. By infusing local landscape and indigenous cultural context, their works show highly local narratives, which is the important key to domesticate the abstraction approach.

Yeoh Jin Leng⁶ drew inspiration from nature and rendered the local landscape to the point of simplification after his return from Chelsea, United Kingdom, in 1963. His paintings, such as *Ricefields* (1963), *Kuala* (1963), and *Light and Reflection* (1963), were mostly derived from Trengganu's landscapes with broad strokes of colour, which later developed into abstract colouristic harmonies with vibrant qualities (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1988). In the 1980s and 1990s, Yeoh Jin Leng created the *Ecology Series* and *Icon Series* respectively. In this series of works, his affinity with nature still remained as the main subject, in which he expressed his concerns about the environmental issues of Malaysia, which was under urbanization at the time (T. K. Sabapathy, 1995:66). By looking at nature and revisiting landscapes,

Yeoh Jin Leng painted *Lata Gala* (1981), *Ecology Series* (1983), and *Mother Earth* (1984) using painterly constructs with brush strokes. Besides the *Ecology Series*, Yeoh Jin Leng also tapped the symbolic resources of Southeast Asian tradition and developed the attributes of indigenous culture in a series of paintings and ceramic forms entitled *Icon* (T.K. Sabapathy, 1995: 68). *Ecology Series* (Figure 7) is an acrylic painting produced in 1983. In terms of colour, it is filled with cool colours, mainly blues and some greens. An unclear figure is lying at the centre of this painting, which seems to reflect the initial relationship between humans and nature. *Ecology Series* thus depicts Yeoh Jin Leng's concern about humanity and the environment in Malaysia. His artistic creativity best witnesses the domestication that is oriented



Figure 7 Yeoh Jin Leng. (1983). *Ecology Series*. [Acrylic, 90 x 90 cm].

Source: T. K. Sabapathy. (1995). *Yeoh Jin Leng, Art Thoughts 1952–1995*. National Art Gallery. pp.140.

towards the target culture since he adapted only the Western abstract styles or formalistic elements of Abstract Expressionism and instilled the local landscape and Eastern indigenous culture elements into his work, thus creating his own voice in the abstraction realm.

Rafiee Ghani, just as Yeoh Jin Leng, often associates the organic forces of nature with abstraction and the expression of conveying feelings and emotions, which denote Organic Abstraction. His works of the 1990s show strongly the expression of emotions by distorting colour, shape, surface, and space in a highly personal fashion. For instance, the work titled *The Pink Hill*, created in 1996, shows the simplification of a landscape that is filled with dynamic and vibrant colours. An unclear scene of *The Pink Hill* is filled up with many free, spontaneous, bold, and broad strokes. In the following decades, the works produced by Rafiee Ghani show a combination of landscape and figurative composition, which focus on linear strokes and appear more drawing-like (Rafiee Ghani, 2016:6). Rafiee Ghani creates works that are simple and lyrical, which is something he preferred in the 2000s (Aiman Bakhtiar, 1996). For instance, he created *Lost and Found* (Figure 8) in 2015. This oil painting consists of abstracted figures with free brush paint and drawing-like strokes. The figures are painted mostly in bright colours, such as high-key yellows and greens, all over the composition. In terms of form, the images are simplified and distorted by applying spontaneous and intuitive lines. The final images of this painting become unclear and partly abstract. In terms of artistic motif, Rafiee Ghani expresses his feelings and emotions through the manipulation of forms, colours, and space (Rafiee Ghani, 2016: 86).

Similar to Yeoh Jin Leng, Awang Damit Ahmad (Muliyadi Mahamood, 2002: 24) frequently links the organic forces of nature to abstraction and the expression of their feelings and emotions, which is a trend towards Organic Abstraction. Awang Damit Ahmad paints to capture his life experience, which is full of twists and turns (Muliyadi Mahamood, 2002:29). For instance, his paintings *Saging dan Pucuks Paku* (1992), *Pilatong* (1992), and *Musim Kelabu* (1995) display simplified images of local culture and elements of flora and fauna that relate to his rural lifestyle (Muliyadi Mahamood, 2002:26). *Alun-alun ke Marista*, created by him in the 1990s and 2000s, is a continuation of his *Essence of Culture* series in terms of form and content (Muliyadi Mahamood, 2002:28). The *Essence of Culture* series is based on forms of the elements of Sabah culture and rural lifestyle (Muliyadi Mahamood, 2002: 26), while the subject matters in *Alun-alun ke Marista* are simplified and developed into a more abstract form. *Marista-Pangkalan Senja* (Figure 9), created in 2002, shows the manipulation of the spontaneous gesture of brush strokes besides the previous approach used by him. In *Marista-Pangkalan Senja*, the images are



Figure 8 Rafiee Ghani. (2015). *Lost and Found*. [Oil on canvas, 183 x 122 cm].
Source: *Homeland* by Rafiee Ghani. (2016). The Edge Galerie. pp. 40.

simplified and distorted by applying formalistic elements. The colours and lines are displayed all over the composition, mostly in dull paint. The white on the right gives brightness to the painting, though the picture gives a sense of stiffness, unease, and discomfort as a whole. The subject matter in *Marista-Pangkalan Senja*



Figure 9 Awang Damit Ahmad. (2002). *Marista- Pangkalan Senja*. [Mixed media, 183 x 183 cm]. Source: Mulyadi Mahamood. (2002). *Alun-alun ke Marista, Awang Damit Ahmad, 1996-2002*. Balai Seni Lukis Negara. pp. 124.

has been discarded and transmuted entirely into formalistic elements to convey the artist's concept of mind and emotions. The features found in nature and images of local culture that are related to Awang Damit Ahmad's rural lifestyle became his source of inspiration, which contributed to his domestication.

Calligraphic Abstraction by Syed Ahmad Jamal and Yusof Ghani

Some abstract painters, who are part of the American Abstract Expressionism movement, combine calligraphic compositions with Eastern meditation and Western expression. For instance, 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). Calligraphy, which by nature is non-representational and composed of strokes and lines, is a source of pictorial values that are particularly adaptable to the methods favourable to Malaysian artists (T. K. Sabapathy & Redza Piyadasa, 1983: 15), such as Syed Ahmad Jamal and Yusof Ghani.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Syed Ahmad Jamal⁸ manifested uniqueness in terms of monochromatic Jawi form/structure, such as *Chairil Anwar* (1959), *Winter Wind* (1959), *Umpan* (1959), and *Tulisan* (1961). In the painting *Chairil Anwar*, the Jawi calligraphic form exudes gestural expression and can be seen in its most natural and organic form. The Jawi letters, as mentioned by D' Zul Haimi Hj Md Zain (2009), represent an answer to the issue of the depiction of the human figure as a method for Syed Ahmad Jamal to express himself. *Winter Wind*, *Umpan*, and *Tulisan* also reveal the correspondence between Jawi script and abstraction in expressing Syed Ahmad Jamal's conceptual state of mind. Islamic calligraphy can be seen as the content of the paintings *Winter Wind*, *Umpan* and *Tulisan*. By constructing with strokes and textures, these paintings mark a remarkable entry of Islamic calligraphy into a tradition for new pictorial expressions, infusing Eastern aesthetics through the Western abstract artistic approach.

Tulisan (Figure 10) is an oil painting created by Syed Ahmad Jamal when he returned to Malaysia and worked at STTI in 1961. With non-representative tendencies, *Tulisan* emphasizes brush painting with gesture, improvisation, and spontaneity. The vibrant blues and yellows of the backdrop are subdued by the impulsive, free-flowing black calligraphic strokes, which produce a striking contrast and highlight the calligraphic strokes. Inherent in the strokes, tension seems to flow freely within and out, which reveals a spirited and energetic force, giving a sense of briskness and joy. Islamic calligraphy became the subject of this painting.



Figure 10 Syed Ahmad Jamal. (1961). *Tulisan*. [Oil on board, 35.5 -x 76 cm].

Source: Lai, C. K., Fan, P. & Soon, S. (2017). *Gerak Rupa Ubur Penyataan 1957-1973*. In Joseph, R. (Ed.), pp. 88. IB Tower Gallery Sdn Bhd.

Syed Ahmad Jamal's *Tulisan* thus held the target-culture-oriented approach that is also seen in Yusof Ghani's *Hau Wau II*.

In 2009, Yusof Ghani also created paintings that show the practice of the collaboration of Islamic calligraphy and abstraction. For instance, his paintings *Ha Wau I* (2009), *Ha Wau II* (2009), and *Alif Lam Mim* (2009) adapted the practice of gestural painting by an action painter to hyperbolize the vibrant nature of the characters' strokes (Haffendi Anuar, 2009:9). *Ha Wau II* (Figure 11), which was painted in 2009, is an oil painting on jute. This work reveals the characteristics of gestural, improvisational, and spontaneity. The black, wild, vigorous brush strokes are emerging in the bright yellowish ground, expressing a high use of free association. The twisted brush strokes seem to hold profound energy within, traversing all over the painting. The character is pulled apart (Haffendi Anuar, 2009:9) and transposed into dynamic accents in the composition.



Figure 11 Yusof Ghani. (2009). *Ha Wau II*. [Oil on jute, 304 x 213 cm].

Source: Haffendi Anuar. (2009). *Kalam: Impressions of calligraphy*. Three Hundred Sixty Sdn Bhd. pp. 43

CONCLUSION

In Malaysia, the spirit of Expressionism was transferred to Abstract Expressionist art through the advocacy of Abstract Expressionism in the years after World War II. This is supported by the idea of domestication when Malaysian artists transformed the idiom of Abstract Expressionism through various abstraction approaches—such as gestural, pure, organic, and calligraphic abstraction—and created something significant to them, infusing a unique Malaysian perspective and their cultural context, personal experiences, and local narratives. Gestural, pure, organic, and calligraphic abstractions developed by Latiff Mohidin, Chew Teng Beng, Yeoh Jin Leng, and Syed Ahmad Jamal respectively could be linked with the abstract artistic

creativity of Yusof Ghani, Suzlee Ibrahim, Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, Rafiee Ghani, and Awang Damit Ahmad. The selected works by Latiff Mohidin, Yusof Ghani, and Suzlee Ibrahim showed similar characteristics of Gestural Abstraction; Chew Teng Beng and Sharifah Fatimah Zubir delved into Pure Abstraction; Yeoh Jin Leng, Rafiee Ghani, and Awang Damit Ahmad were inspired by nature and engaged in Organic Abstraction; and Syed Ahmad Jamal and Yusof Ghani collaborated Islamic calligraphy and abstraction into their paintings as Calligraphy Abstraction. Consequently, the abstract artworks produced by these nine artists have contributed to the expansion and extension of Malaysian Abstract Expressionist art.

NOTES

1. Latiff Mohidin (1941–) is a poet, writer, and artist. His works, comprising poems and paintings, are close to the spirit of nature. See T. K. Sabapathy (1994:17), “Pago-Pago to Mindscape,” in *Pago-Pago to Gelombang, 40 Years of Latiff Mohidin*, Singapore Art Museum; T.K. Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa (1983:103), *Modern Artists of Malaysia*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
2. Yusof Ghani (1950–) fitted himself into the art education in the United States when he was studying at the George Mason University, USA (1979–1981) and Catholic University of America, USA (1982–1983). See Rusli Hashim. (1996). “An Interview with Yusof Ghani,” in *Yusof Ghani Sri Tari-Topeng*, Rusli Hashim Fine Art. pp. 147.
3. In art education, Suzlee Ibrahim worked as a lecturer at the School of Art & Design, Institut Teknologi MARA, and is currently Dean at the Faculty of Fine Art, ASWARA (National Academy of Arts & Culture) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. See Tan Chee Khuan. (2015). *310 Malaysian Artists*, The Art Gallery. pp. 248.
4. Chew Teng Beng (1938–) fitted himself into the art education in the United States. See Tan Chee Khuan, *310 Malaysian Artists*, pp. 55.
5. Sharifah Fatimah Zubir (1948–) pursued her post-graduate studies in Fine Arts at the Pratt Institute, New York, in 1976. See Ho Kay Tat (2015), “First Lady of Malaysian Abstract Art,” in *Recent Works by Dato’ Sharifah Fatimah Zubir*. The Edge Galerie. pp. 6–7.
6. Yeoh Jin Leng (1929–) was exposed to American new painting during his study at the Chelsea School of Art, where he saw the works of Mark Rothko at the White Chapel Art Gallery in London. See T.K. Sabapathy (1995), *Yeoh Jin Leng, Art and Thoughts 1952-1995*, pp. 61.
7. Awang Damit Ahmad (1956–) left for America to further his studies in painting at the Catholic University of America, New York, in 1988. See Mulyadi Mahamood (2002), *Capturing Nostalgia in Alun-Alun Ke Marista*, in *Alun-Alun Ke Marista, Awang Damit Ahmad, 1996-2002*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara. pp. 24.
8. Syed Ahmad Jamal (1929–2011) admitted that after his first-hand experience visiting the exhibition of American Abstract Expressionist work held at the Tate Gallery in London, the strong formative influence on him has been Abstract Expressionism. See T. K. Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa (1983:85).

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