



Whispered Landscapes of Jumaadi

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In many ways art is similar to religion. Its development consists not in new discoveries which invalidate the old truths (as is obviously the case in science). Its development consists in sudden illuminations, similar to lightning, in explosions, which burst in the sky like fireworks ... this illumination shows with blinding light, new perspectives, new truths, which are basically nothing but the organic development, the further organic growth of the earlier wisdom ...

Wassily Kandinsky, 1918¹

Speaking with Jumaadi (b. 1973) earlier this year, he brought up Wassily Kandinsky and the idea of 'witness' in the way one lives their life guided by nature. For Jumaadi, Kandinsky's writings have a somewhat Quranic tone, an inner light or spirituality traced in his own art making. While I had never previously considered Jumaadi's artworks as 'religious', the increasing stillness in his recent paintings places the viewer in a zone of consideration much broader than mere narrative or storytelling, or one couched within his Indonesian identity. As Jumaadi pointed out, 'The place is witness rather than the art itself – *place* is narrating'.²

In Australian art 'place' is usually navigated from a long mythologised Australian landscape tradition or the perspective of charged identity politics. Jumaadi seemingly bridges both tenets without subscribing to either. He started making art in Australia, not Java, studying during the 1990s at the National Art School, Sydney. Visiting Alice Springs and Broken Hill at the end of his second year, it was within this landscape that he found his own visual language. For him it was an emotional contact. He recalled, 'It is how I feel rather than what I see in that landscape. I can't get

as close to it as Arthur Boyd's rocks or trees, for example. It is always that idea of the window from which we view it, slightly removed. I am an observer of this place.'

In 2007 Jumaadi took the train from Sydney to Thirroul on the South Coast of New South Wales; a rainy winter's day winding down the lush escarpment, moving *through* the landscape. It had a significant impact on his work, its palette, its pace, its lyricism, and its sense of stillness. This idea of framing, albeit it through a train window or as part of a landscape tradition, moved beyond a metaphor to a formal application for Jumaadi. He deliberately calls the individual drawings that make up his artworks 'frames'; elements within a grid that focus our eye and open it to another world of consideration, building emotion like a storyboard.

The word narrative may derive from the Hindi verb *narrar*, 'to recount', and is related to the adjective *gnarus*, meaning 'knowledge' or 'skilled'. Is it so dissimilar to Kandinsky's notion of 'new truth' in art's illuminations or indeed the wise revelations of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, storytelling traditions Jumaadi grew up on? Landscape – as a constant – has been that place of narrative, of witness, and of spirituality for Jumaadi.

Travelling Light

Over the past decade Jumaadi has travelled extensively, living for periods in Bali, East Java, Jakarta, Sydney, Adelaide, Hill End, Kuala Lumpur and, most recently, Leiden in the Netherlands, collecting visual diaries that meld over time. His drawings and paintings are the fusion of those places: histories, heritage, gossip,



tales, sentiments and emotions that are downloaded before moving on. They float with the lightness of dreams across paper tiled together in no formal order, somewhat musical, largely subconscious in their flow. The necessity to demarcate or define 'place' has become inconsequential.

More recently Jumaadi has been interested in the night, perhaps as a place of stillness in all this movement and congestion. His exhibition *Travelling Light* at Taksu Kuala Lumpur (March 2011) introduced a suite of paintings on board and canvas made in Bali and Malaysia that reduce the landscape to its most essential elements, in particular light and colour. While the diffused light fields of American Mark Rothko or Jumaadi's former teacher, minimalist David Serisier made an impact on him, it was not from the position of stylistic practice but rather as a way of seeing and absorbing the landscape.

Jumaadi's high primary palette of the earlier works, especially ochres and sharp blues to describe an Australian landscape, were replaced with moist moss greens, rich soily browns, deep violets, and velvety black-blue skies, atmospheric fields weighty yet infused with light. Emotion had replaced information. Jumaadi says of these new works: '... as much as I am moving, travelling, I really try hard to bring these works into absolute stillness. I talk and pray and meditate through my paintings.' It is an innate spirituality that sits outside religion. There is sureness, a resolve in these new paintings, almost mantra-like drawing on a complexity of emotions and thoughts that are distilled into very pure expressions — each page a visual haiku.

Structure, while appearing loose and spontaneous, is deeply considered. It is a little like the Japanese calligraphic stroke the *Ensō*, a circle executed in a single gesture after prolonged meditation and symbolising strength, enlightenment and elegance. All things come together in an abridged expression. The horizon works in the same way for Jumaadi. As part of the grid that characterises so much of his work, it also articulates an internal balance that has nothing to do with formalism.

Living in Australia there is an ever-presence of an expansive emptiness captured in Jumaadi's meditative repetition of earth and sky. In Asia it is rare to experience that sharpness of horizon, either obstructed by density, pollution or tropical vegetation. Jumaadi explained: 'Australia is my reference even in Bali. I am always looking for a larger space, a larger horizon. When I am too cluttered by people I go to the beach to find that openness. The sea is witness to the greatness of God.'

While Jumaadi's images clearly separate night and day, they are timeless, slowing the viewer down to a metronomic repetition and meditation. Time becomes an abstracted lament. Equally, composition and rhythm are in sync. That is, key motifs and text offer punctuation to Jumaadi's images: fragments of poems by TS Eliot, for example, or love letters and songs sung as a child. Their phonetic rhythm is in harmony with the landscape, refusing to be confined within a single page, a single moment or a single place. As Jumaadi pondered, 'I like the sound of text. Whether written in *bahasa* or English it's not important anymore.' The words' literal meanings are inconsequential and translation has become abstracted.

In the same way Jumaadi's landscapes, whether figurative or minimal, present familiar motifs: a leaf, a cloud, rain, a tree, string,



lovers. Their non-linear manuscript are largely autobiographical and connect with oral histories and his cultural roots, and yet they act as a kind of compass across Jumaadi's landscapes easily transported and translated to the viewer's own realm of understanding. For example, rain washes his new paintings in torrents, a symbol that speaks of nourishment for the earth but also for sorrow, cleansing, renewal and forgiveness. It points to broader environmental concerns, a sentiment extended to the delicate medium of gouache and Jumaadi's presentation of his drawings floating on the wall temporal and fragile. The physicality of the work mirrors its metaphorical frame.

This physicality and use of motifs ties Jumaadi's work to another tradition, that of Javanese shadow puppet traditions, or Wayang Kulit, but with a new twist. The *gunungan* is a 'leaf-shaped' symbol of the cosmos and the tree of life used at the beginning and the end of every shadow-play performance and to show scene changes. It can be used to represent a mountain, trees, water, sea and fire – essentially landscape that is abstracted. Its role is to hold the narrative together and to offer pause.

Jumaadi uses this abstraction of landscape as a conceptual frame for his new works. *Gunungan*, or mountain, is the archetypal symbol in both Christianity and Islam where God speaks to the prophet. It is observed as a particularly interesting meeting of ideas in the painting *Lubang Malam (opening night)* (2011) that for me has a subconscious Australian flavour sitting comfortably alongside the creation myth paintings of William Robinson. These works are less about narrative and increasingly about passage, pause and cosmic unity as an idea; the journey has moved from travel and identity to spirituality and oneness, or as Jumaadi describes, 'a place of witness rather than the place of narration'.

Box of curiosities

The idea of 'witness' in the stream of contemporary Indonesian art, both at home and abroad, is laden with socio-political intent. Jumaadi sits largely outside that position. However, one can't deny the melancholy and environmental perspective across his wider oeuvre which is given new insights through what he is calling his *Box of curiosity* (2011). Working with Jumaadi on his exhibition for Taksu earlier this year, it was decided a Perspex museum case containing his journals, drawings in progress, and ephemera would extend his artworks by including a



'narrative of process'. This concept was repeated for the environmentally themed group exhibition *Sim City* at Jakarta's National Art Gallery in April with a piece titled *Seeds and Secret*, and again will form the foundation of his inclusion in the forthcoming (December 2011) XIV Jakarta Biennale with the theme 'The Maximum City: Survive or Escape?'

I suppose Jumaadi has always been a collector, in the most abstract sense through his constant journeying but simply through the arrangement of his works. What is interesting in these new collections is that they have moved well beyond my desire to reveal Jumaadi's process to Malaysian audiences to a zone where narrative, tradition, mythology, research, and commentary are 'placed' in a museum case to construct new histories, new stories. Jumaadi uses the museological language of the vitrine, denoting truth, authority, value, and preciousness, to site contemporary realities within traditional stories. Jumaadi seemingly combines the roles of ethnographer and *dalang* (puppet master).

Viewing Jumaadi's artworks one is constantly drawn into their intimacy. It is a feeling that goes beyond their scale or presentation and back to that notion of witness. His sparse, softly illuminated landscapes eloquently articulate a 'presence', a humanity with which we connect. To return to Kandinsky's words, '... this illumination shows with blinding light new perspectives ... the further organic growth of the earlier wisdom'. 🌿

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1. Wassily Kandinsky, *Kandinsky*, Frank Whitford, Paul Hamlyn Ltd, London 1967, p. 31/3. (check)
 2. All quotes by Jumaadi from interview with the author in Sydney, 14 June 2011.
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Gina Fairley co-founded (with Tony Twigg) SLOT, a front-window space gallery on Botany Road, Alexandria, Sydney, in 2003. She is a freelance writer and curator with a particular interest in Southeast Asia.

P55: *Cakrawala*, 2011, gouache on paper, 18 x 12.5cm each / installation 37.5 x 126cm.

P56: 1/ *Bebukit Sunyi (Silent Hills)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 121cm.

2/ *Selembur Daun Di Gurun (A Sheet Leaves in the Desert)*, 2010, gouache on paper.

3/ *One Night with Mark*, 2011, acrylic on board, 40 x 49cm.

P57: 1/ Jumaadi at work.

2/ *The Dance of Eucalyptus*, 2009, gouache, paper, string, 12.5 x 18cm each.

All images of work by Jumaadi; courtesy the artist.