

Certain Uncertainties

The Malaysian artist Sabri Idrus makes dynamic abstract art that deals with control, chance, movement, and time. Each of these is something that people experience every day. Through his strong colors and graphic line Sabri seduces the viewers' imagination.

By Gina Fairley

Sabri Idrus is an artist defined by his compulsion to experiment. Using industrial materials, technology, and the language of graphic design, he has consistently pushed abstraction to new levels in Malaysia.

Like most Malay artists of his generation, Sabri Idrus (b.1971) studied fine art at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). This was the time the art scene was growing increasingly aware of an alternate identity outside the ethno-religious framework prescribed by the National Cultural Policy of 1971¹, namely the birth of a local commercial gallery scene and alternative art practice.

In 1999, Sabri had his first solo exhibition, *The Search of Uncertainties*, at The Painting Studio (TPS), a diverse design studio he had founded that was located within Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park before moving to the gritty edges of Petaling Jaya, a landscape that fed both flourishing new industries and Sabri's creativity.

While many artists moonlight as designers, and visa versa, for Sabri this was more than just a financial lifeline or coincidental collision of design, technology, art, and experimentation. For him it was a philosophy that pushed conventional boundaries and definitions of material communication as well as informing the next decade of his art-making.

Speaking with the author earlier this year, he described his process as labor-intensive craftsmanship rooted in the deepest respect for traditional skills, a

counter position to the de-skilling of the artist that was globally the *raison d'être* of art schools during the 1990s.

Sabri marries that craftsmanship with a kind of digital pre-staging of his images, using the computer to explore composition as open-ended negotiations of layers, lines, and colors. This duplicity and

an extension of the body and the mind.² Is it merely a dance between the certainty of skill and the uncertainty of nature? Or, as Wassily Kandinsky preferred to posit, between materiality and spirituality?

Simply, Sabri Idrus's studies of order and sequence turn to their own value structure, a preoccupation with spatial stacking,

luminosity, temporality, time, texture, and organic fluid forms where, he reiterates, "surface is its final resolution." This personal language of abstraction has evolved over his career. While he has chosen long spells between his exhibitions, that gap is not experienced in the work. There is a coherency across successive series driven by persistent studio enquiry.

Consider the five-year gap between the exhibitions *The Search of Uncertainties* (1999) and *Lorek-Lorek* (2004). Sabri's 'Uncertainties' called on nature as the primary motif, an uncurling fern or tropical plant, for example, rendered in industrial paint on aluminum or zinc sheeting, its luminance offering a shimmer between layers and marks. *Lorek-Lorek* extended that natural patterning to the rhythmic structure of mathematics

and music, abstract equations that loosely referenced the Fibonacci sequence where each number—or line in terms of Sabri artworks—was a methodical accumulation that manifests as a kind of pulse, accent, or phrasing. Sabri's translation of *Lorek-Lorek* was "the making of marks between the picture plane."

His use of surface texture and



Sabri Idrus, *Dikala kalbu*, 2005, epoxy resin, wax, plastic color pigment, light, 104 x 114.5 cm. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

commitment to skill, both new and old, is a complex consideration, and it continues to define his art.

The academic and architect Wan Azhar Sulaiman described it as a presumption by Sabri, "... that total control of the crafting tool is a necessity and a fundamental requirement needed to express an artwork in its richness ... [where] his tools are

tensions to get beyond painting to the energy force that sits within—tracing, peeling, scoring, buffing, rusting, polishing—echoed varying human and cultural conditions. He increasingly became interested in this cognitive mapping of nature's universal dimensions reduced to the elementary visual expression—a kind of dermis of humanity. The obvious next move was light.

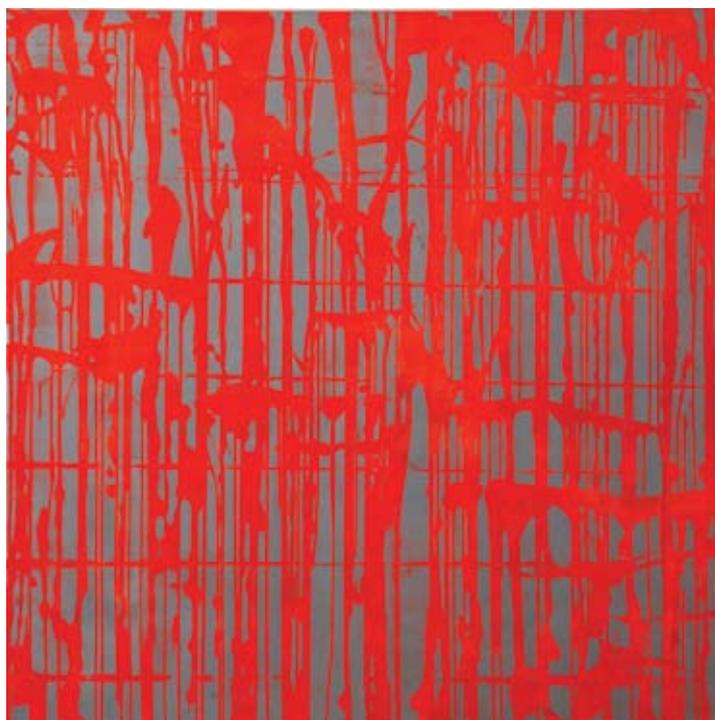
Sabri had long wanted to extend his use of industrial materials to epoxy resin. What resulted after years of experimenting and expanding that vocabulary of painting into a chemical blending of color pigmentation, resin, air, and light was his *Keroncong Series* (2006).

Keroncong describes a Javanese music tradition brought to Malaysia in the 15th century, “a soft and soothing sound that complements a particular ambience to space.”³ The very nature of epoxy that captures a feeling of air and light within its chemical layer became key. Unlike the metal sheeting that Sabri had favored for its industrial luminosity, resin had greater flexibility to suspend pigment as pools, increasing depth not unlike a smear on a glass slide that opens to a world of biology under the microscope.

Furthermore, the conceptual frame of time had a manipulated physicality in these works, as accelerants to the resin slowed or speed the drying process. Time and light in the hands of Sabri seemed held in stasis like a resonate note bowed on a cello.

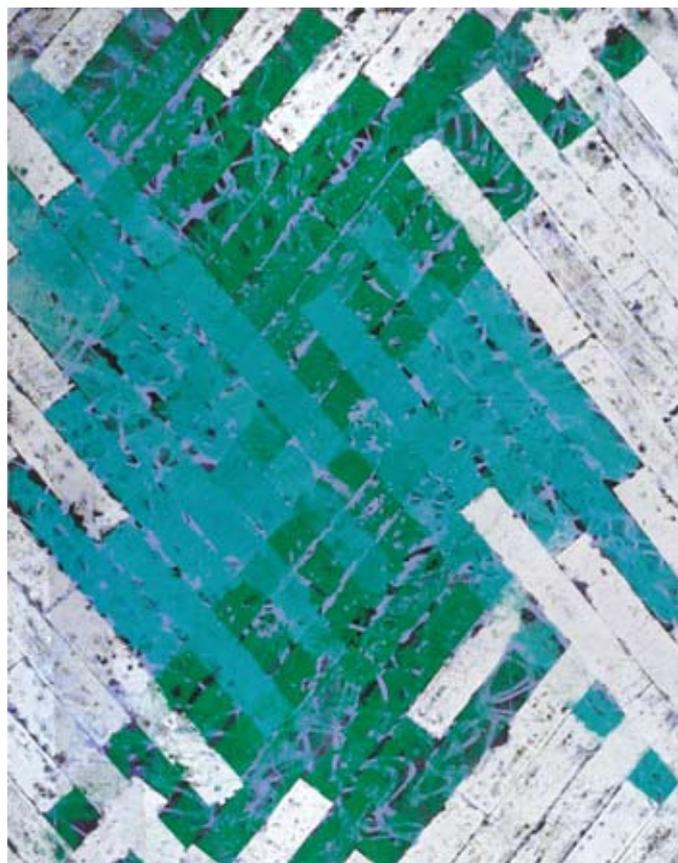
A good example from this series is *Dikala kalbu* (2005) where light penetrates its formal composition of vertical columns, charging it with “inner glow.” It is this light that becomes the overriding subject, not the gesture or the mark, the intense palette that alludes to bodily fluids, nor the scratches and bubbles that flaw the artwork's surface. The intangible becomes tangible.

Media artist and writer Hasnul J. Saidon described the



Sabri Idrus, Present, 2010, acrylic and oil medium on canvas, 120 x 120 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Taksu Kuala Lumpur.

Keroncong works as “... perceived physical forms dissolve into overlapping, interconnected, interactive, and ever-vibrating micro and macro energy patterns. It is in such state that we may discover our present disposition as the borrower of light ...



Sabri Idrus, Present, 2010, acrylic and oil medium on canvas, 120 x 120 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Taksu Kuala Lumpur.

always in constant flux of energy exchanges.”⁴

While the presentation of the *Keroncong Series* was not entirely resolved, light bleeds around the object and the hardware of these light-boxes visible, undermining the ethereal mystique of their content. Standing in front of these pieces, however, one was absorbed into their field of energy. It could even be suggested that through them Sabri questioned painting's ability to convey the physical beyond science.

When we think of light-filled abstractions, the immediate Western reference is the drenched washed fields of American Mark Rothko (1903–1970). An interesting point of departure from such formulaic points of reference—Western abstraction, science, and the phenomenology of light's properties—is the Indonesian tradition of *Wayang Kulit* and its duality of pattern and light, both artificial and real.

The *Dalang* or puppet master, not unlike the artist, plays a somewhat shamanistic role as the orchestrator of light and cosmic lessons, manipulating projections both physical and metaphorical. That idea of light as a transmitter of something more than just luminance finds meaning in the words of Wan Azhar Sulaiman: “To absorb the artwork in its potent state is to harness the surrounding ambience that bounces against the artwork ... it is a projection of space. Hence the artwork suggests a gesture of looking not at the painting, but into it and through the locus of the moment.”⁵

Sabri's obsession with ‘moment’—with time—has been ingrained from the outset; his first artwork he titled *Susur Galur (Generation)* (1990).⁶ A decade later that passion remains. His exhibition *Masa Series: A Reduction Process* (2010) uses time as both a conceptual platform and an elementary tool, through oxidation and gravity for example. Reading the show's titles—*Hourglass, Eclipse, Oxidized, Present, Speed, Spinner, and Moment*—clearly they were a

set of conceptual propositions or directives predicated on time-based sequences. The work was becoming increasingly introverted and formally marginalized.

In 1974, the influential Malaysian artist, critic, and curator Redza Piyadasa (1939–2007) said, in the wake of commentary surrounding the important exhibition *Towards a Mystical Reality*, “Asian artists do not place value on tangible forms as completed work in itself but as a process that hints of a timeless continuum.”⁷ In the context of Sabri’s work I would have to agree. Process no longer hints, but has become that timeless continuum.

Curator Simon Soon takes this idea further. He notes that both Piyadasa and his contemporary Sulaiman Esa observed a tendency in Western art to emphasize “the physicality of the tangible forces of nature through form.” Soon writes, “Traditional art in Asia, however, was more attuned and driven by a desire to represent the occult and spiritual energies of the invisible world or ‘semangat’ ...” He continues, “Art in this instance was not a window into another reality—whether an abstract gateway towards transcendence or the naturalistic mirror of our physical reality—instead the objects served as triggers of a collusion in time and space, between the past and the present.”⁸

To introduce this idea in the context of Sabri’s *Masa Series*, let’s turn to the huge canvas *Moment* (2010). Its black lines are cast in a diagonal gesture over a neutral grid; control and chaos find a harmonious balance. The lines hover, separating it dimensionally and allowing light to filter through the painting’s depth, perhaps mimicking the luminosity of Sabri’s earlier use of aluminum sheeting or his backlit *Keroncong* resin fields. It is a well-rehearsed device that abates spatial tension with what Soon described as ‘semangat’ (a vigorous spirit).

We see a layering of the systems in how we read these images again in the painting *Present* (2010), its controlled web of orange drizzles impose a presence or intense energy signaling danger or impenetrability not unlike a local traffic barrier, yet its gestural expression places it within the lineage of drip painting and international abstraction, embracing universality.



Sabri Idrus, Ripple, 2009, acrylic and oil medium on canvas, 111.5 x 183 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Taksu Kuala Lumpur.

Technically, these paintings are as individual as their content. Sabri controls his process of mark-making by using PVA



Sabri Idrus, Juggler, 2009, metal, slate, fibreglass and bearings, 175 cm diameter. Image: Courtesy the artist and Taksu Kuala Lumpur.

acrylic glue as a masking fluid within oil-based paint, allowing him to build many layers or veils of color and information while keeping the surface ‘thin.’ Some have described them as resembling ‘surface maps’ or a personal cartography that allows us to trace the artist’s journey both mentally and emotionally.

Parallel to this fluidity are paintings weighted by the history of their surfaces. Like rust they carry a patina of age, atmosphere and place. Sabri will work back into his paintings, reducing his palette to simulated monochromatic tones that are seemingly etched through sanding and scraping back into the oil paint and applied layers of dilute solvents. Rust is a time-borne process, and so are these paintings. The action of creating a surface takes time. Beauty is revealed from within.

The most extreme application of this physicality of surface is Sabri’s mixed-media constructions where he uses slate, pieces such as *RGB* (2010) and *Juggler* (2009). They continue his interest in everyday surfaces but, at the same time, present a ‘ready-made’ polished luster. An extremely hard surface to work with, the manual skill and labor required harnesses Sabri to those early foundations, again working through tensions and a balance of material, form, weight, and light. Mechanical action is repeatedly tested and contested in a series of time-based sequences, lifting them into something sublime and memorable.



Sabri Idrus, Pandora, 2010, acrylic and oil medium on canvas, 127 x 178 cm. Image: Courtesy the Artist and Taksu Kuala Lumpur.



Sabri Idrus, **Moment**, 2010, acrylic and oil medium on canvas, 124.5 x 236 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Taksu Kuala Lumpur.

Juggler (2009) takes us full circle fusing Sabri's early use of industrial bearings and metal strips with white slate bars floated within a fiberglass field sanded and polished to high luminance. Arranged in concentric circles these bars read as an abstraction that flutters between the target paintings of Jasper Johns, Damien Hirst's spin paintings, and a rather antique craft relic. It is an ambiguity and an individuality that has become signature to Sabri Idrus's work.

To illustrate the progression of surface, it is interesting to consider the painting *Pandora* with a painting of similar palette and scale, *Ripple* (2010), where the stacking and locking of forms relax into expansive calligraphic ellipses. It has a correlation with *Juggler*. Sabri has always been attracted to printmaking for its ability to 'remove a surface' and transpose it to another. *Pandora* (2010) has the quality of parquetry transposed to canvas: its systematically woven forms speak of a grander geometry, one curiously played out in Sabri's series of slate works made at the same time. They have the same formality as Sabri's use of the grid foundation, but are used less as a device upon which to hang lines

"Form", writes Kandinsky, "is the external expression of inner content."⁹ In my conversations with Sabri he conveyed that he repeatedly refers to Kandinsky's calculation of vision—his distinction between spirituality and materialism—as a way of filtering and defining the various energies at play. That is why there is a

persistence of the grid, of vertical lines, and a carefully laid out geometry that always reverts to form. It is superbly enacted in these slate works.

Perhaps it is the designer in Sabri Idrus that drives for graphic clarity, or perhaps this order and repetition come from understanding the discipline of worship, as Sabri explains, applied unconsciously in the laborious process of making his art.

Hasnul J. Saidon posed the question in the context of Sabri's *Keroncong Series*: "Can we then reach the threshold of quantum consciousness to knock on the door of our spiritual Self in order to live in harmony with God?"¹⁰

It is an interesting position to consider that while abstraction is neutral from 'message,' it has the capacity to convey a rhythmic dialect of the times and kind of reverberation of self-expression within a more universal chant or spirituality that sits beyond rhetoric or policy. Being certain of nature's uncertainties is the ethos of process and having the courage to embrace that is the definition of a mature artist. Sabri Idrus continues to push his abstraction in new and individual directions and, for their very layered points of reference in his complex country, hold an important place in contemporary Malaysian art. Δ

Notes:

1. In 1971, the National Cultural Congress met to reconstruct the terms of a 'national culture.' The National Economic Policy had recently been put in place with the aim of reconstructing wealth and opportunity for advancement in favor of the Malays. The National Cultural Congress outlined: (a)

that the National Culture would be based on that of the indigenous inhabitants of the region; (b) that elements from other cultures, which were suitable and reasonable, might be incorporated into the national culture, and (c) that Islam would be a crucial component of the National Culture.

2. Wan Azhar Sulaiman, "Knowing and Liberating the Artist", *Lorek-Lorek* exhibition catalogue 2004, published by Townhouse Gallery.
3. Wan Azhar Sulaiman, "Keroncong Series: Texts for the 'Physical Listener'", catalogue essay, *Sabri Idrus 2006: Keroncong Series*, published by Weiling Gallery 2006.
4. Hasnul J Saidon, "Light or Colors am I? The Keroncong of Catan", catalogue essay, *Sabri Idrus 2006: Keroncong Series*, published by Weiling Gallery 2006.
5. Wan Azhar Sulaiman, *ibid* 2006.
6. First at the National Art Gallery Malaysia in 1990 and held in Bank Negara Malaysia Collection.
7. Simon Soon An Empty Canvas upon which many shadow have already fallen, published in *Malaysian essays 3*, Matahari Books, 2010 pg. 33.
8. *Ibid*.
9. Wassily Kandinsky, 'On the Question of Form', 1912, published in "Kandinsky" 1994, pg.237 and sourced in 1910, *the emancipation of dissonance* by Thomas J. Harrison, University of California Press, 1996, pg.56.
10. Hasnul J Saidon, *ibid*, 2006.

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