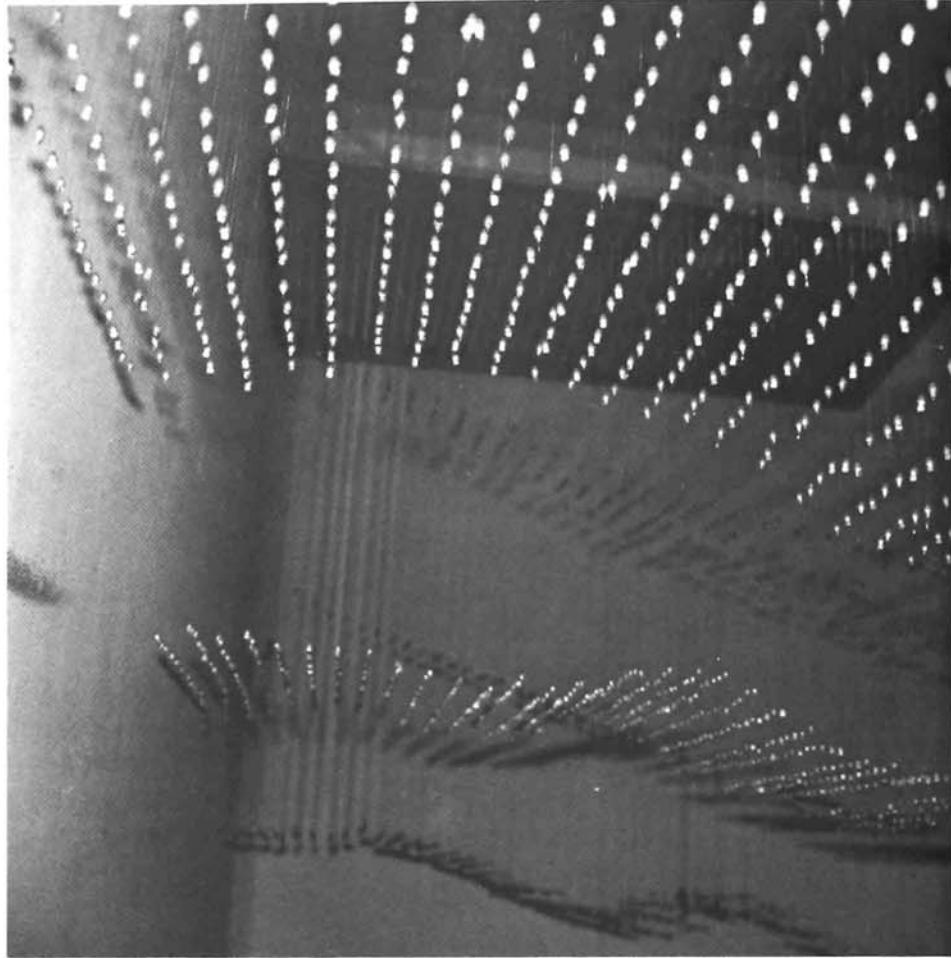


“**A**rt is not an isolated phenomenon, or a matter of simple aesthetics, but is on the one hand part of our total experience both physically and socially and, on the other hand, an objectification of an inner experience. But we have, as Roland Laigh has pointed out “largely lost touch” with our inner world in gaining control of our external world. We have become stranger to our own experience, we have become alienated from ourselves”. - Kenneth Couths Smith

The '50s were the pioneering period for modern art in Malaysia. They were the years discovering wonders and creativity. For artists who had undergone formal education in the west, the '50s became their first real encounter with awareness in the visual arts and values. These artists had nothing to relate to except the immediate world of their experience in art and education. In the early '60s, modern art in Malaysia was in a period of style. Artworks produced at that time prescribed mainly on the aesthetics of abstract expressionism. In the late '60s, the main approach to Malaysian art was mostly critical and scientific.

“The New Scene” exhibition marked the end of the era of gestural emphasis. There was a deliberate rejection of earlier practices. The new approach was based on faith in the technological future, on the belief in progress and the objective truth.

In 1971, The National Cultural Congress was held in Kuala Lumpur. The objectives were to look into issues concerning culture in Malaysia, with a view to advising the government on formulating its policy on national culture. Following this congress, a tremendous effort was made in the field of art including visual arts, trying to analyse the possibilities of formulating a Malaysian identity.



Malaysian Art :

A Search for Local and Islamic Through Sculpture

by Zakaria Awang

Alif Lam Mim
1983 Mixed Media (1.7×2.5×1.2 m)
Zakaria Awang



There rose consciousness among artists, sculptors, performers, etc., to mediate through means which were ethnically, socially and culturally significant.

The School of Arts and Design, *MARA* Institute of Technology, played a leading role in finding a solution to the problem of visual arts. The school shouldered the great responsibility of formulating a concrete convincing basis as to how art should be reflected in the process of searching for identity.

Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, from the academic staff of the Fine Arts Department, *MARA* Institute of Technology, in 1974 made an impact on the Malaysian art scene. Their exhibition, "Towards the Mystical Reality", attempted to question the philosophical tradition, upon which artists in Malaysia had been functioning. The question of a "metaphysical" and "spiritual" standpoint as opposed to a "scientific" and "analytical" one was raised. The main objectives of the show were: firstly, to raise some questions regarding the directions of Malaysian art in the '70s, and secondly, to sow the seeds of a thinking process which might someday liberate Malaysian artists from their dependence on western influences.

This was a period of reassessment for Malaysian artists, in identifying themselves with their own cultural and religious traditions and values.

In 1978 the School of Arts and Design took the opportunity to organize a seminar to discuss "The Roots of Indigenous Arts and Its Recent Development". This marked

a turning point in the Malaysian art scene. Following the seminar, the exhibition entitled "Akar-Akar Pribumi" (The Roots of Indigenous Art) was set up. The result was positive. Artists, designers, students, historians, critics and individuals realized that they had to break away from complete reliance on the west for the the latest movement in avant-garde art. They were no longer terrorized about not being with the latest in the contemporary art. Alberto Moravia, in his essay, "The Terrorist Aesthetic", commented that avant-garde is terroristic because it believes not in value but in time. That anything which is not in time is obsolete. The following paragraphs will review specifically how this influence reflected itself in the area of sculpture in Malaysia.

A survey of "Modern Sculpture in Malaysia" by Kanaga Sabapathy, an art critic, was presented in The National Art Gallery in 1979. The aim was to trace the origin, development and direction of three-dimensional plastic manifestation in Malaysia. In his survey, Sabapathy concluded that, unlike painting, sculpture does not have a healthy development. Although there exist some sculptural objects with superior aesthetic qualities, as in a group of menhirs in Pengkalan Kempas, Negeri Sembilan, and the Julong Bronze, there is no certainty in tradition.

There was quite a number of young sculptors who were very serious with their roots, while others were fundamentally committed to Islam. They represent a new force in search of a deeper meaning in life while attempting to provide alternatives to the notion of art created within the framework of Malay aesthetics.

Mohd. Ariffin Mohd. Ismail, a young sculptor has been consistently making a series of experiments to employ traditional motives derived

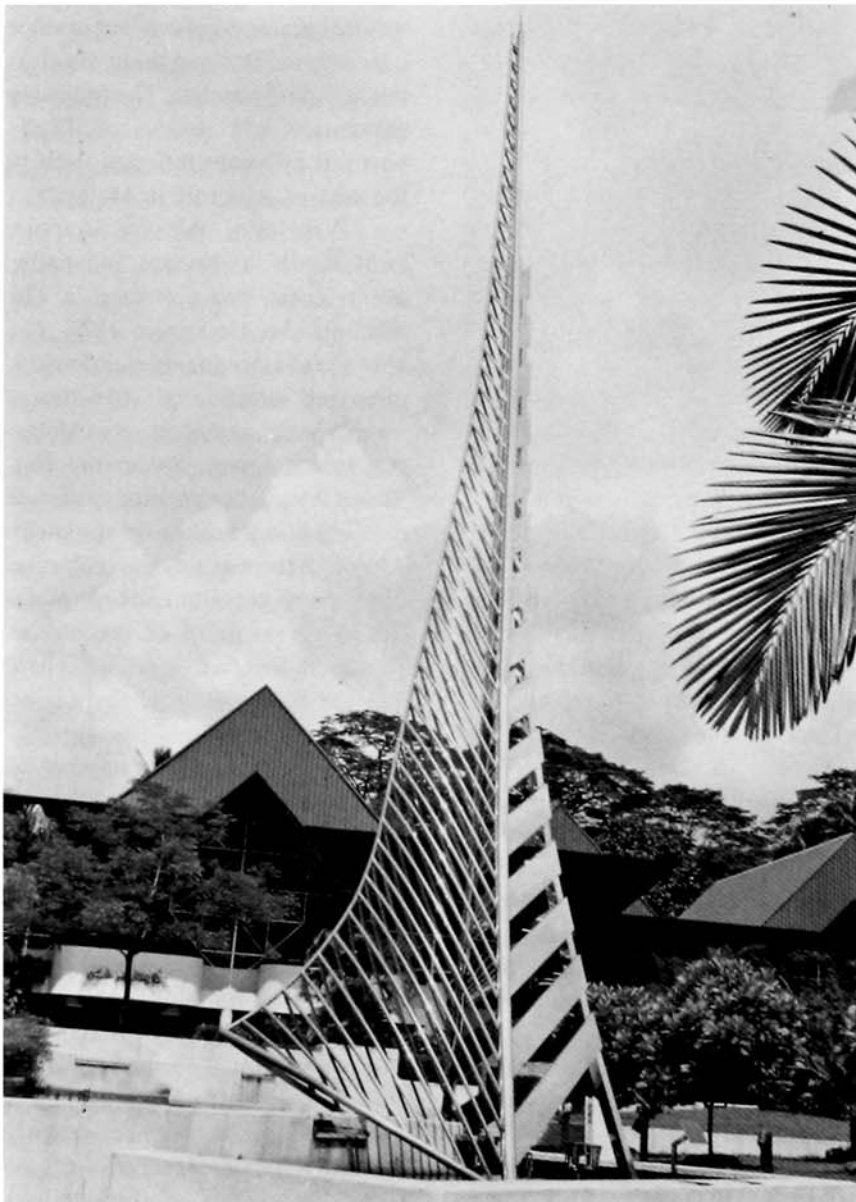
from a distinct traditional Malay weapon, the "Kris". "Taming Sari" was erected in Singapore and presented for the First ASEAN Sculpture Symposium in 1981.

"Pekaka", another of his work was placed at the National Archive Square, Kuala Lumpur, in 1979. The motive was derived from another type of weapon believed to have its origin from Patani.

Abdul Latiff Moheidin is a well-known artist of the '60s whose earlier works reflected his extensive travel in Asia and Europe. He moved from two-dimensional work to monolithic "Langkawi Series" in the form of wall sculpture in 1977. He later took "Keris" as his motive for his 17 metre stainless steel sculpture, erected in 1988 in front of the Maybank, Kuala Lumpur. Latiff has successfully



Allah
1985 Stainless Steel (2.7×3.2 m)
Syed Ahmad Jamal



Pekaka
1979 Copper (2×5 m)
Mohd. Ariffin Mohd. Ismail

Keris
1988 Stainless Steel (2.5×17 m)
Abdul Latiff Moheidin

expanded the value and the hidden philosophy behind the "Keris" through the interlacing of lines with void, gracefully meandering endlessly upward, leaving the public with a new and unique experience through this contemporary art form.

The emphasis on a national culture identity in the '70s took a back seat to Islamic aesthetics. This was parallel to the revived positive com-

mitment to Islam as a total way of life - in everyday life, politics, economy, administration, education, medicine, as well as in the arts. It resulted in the conscious effort to redefine values and norms - as a departure from western-based secular values and practices.

A notable example of a sculptor whose work is directly involved within the framework of Islamic aesthetic

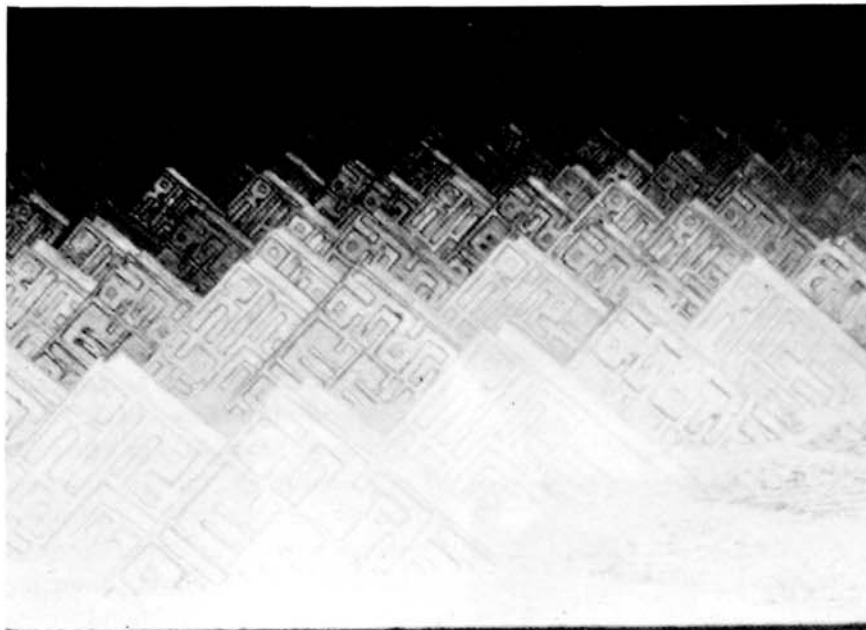
principles is Zakaria Awang. He teaches at the Fine Arts Department, MARA Institute of Technology, Malaysia. His sculpture, "AL Rahman", won him a major award in the Young Contemporary Competition, organized by Malaysia's National Art Gallery, in 1982.

In the following years, he exhibited another series, entitled "Alif Lam Mim". Alif, Lam and Mim are the three letters found at the beginning of the first chapter of the Koran (Surah Al Baqarah). The letters signify that Allah, the All Knowing, knows every secret of the known and the unknown. The sculpture consists of three panels hanging from the ceiling with lead weights suspended by transparent nylon strings, producing calligraphic forms. The sculpture conveys, at once, the temporal character of the material world and the vacuity of the object. The audience savoured the secret found in the three letters and enjoyed the positive material, form and colour employed in this work.

Another work of his, "The Path", consists of ceramic cast units. The units are triangular in form, with the "Kufik" relief, "La Illa Ha Illallah" (There is no God but Allah). The work was an attempt to go back to the very roots of the Islamic principle of faith (Al-Tawhid), the concept of unity that lies within multiplicity, that creates a harmonic order. By adding contrasting colours alternately on the surface of each triangle, i.e., gold and silver, they appear to be visually opposed but inwardly contained in one another. They are therefore complementary,



Lunar Peak
1986 Marble Slab (3.5×8 m)
Syed Ahmad Jamal



The Path
1980 Ceramic (3.2×3.2 m)
Zakaria Awang

just like a dramatic orange sunset against a deep, liquid blue sky: an example of nature's superb use of harmonious contrasts.

Most leading artists in the '60s, while maintaining their role as painters, felt the need to extend their efforts by seriously considering the future direction of art in Malaysia, in public spaces. Syed Ahmad Jamal, who is known chiefly for his "Gunong Ledang" series in oil and *songket*, has done quite a number of sculptures in public spaces. For example, they are: "Lunar Peak" in front of the Public Bank (1986), "Growth" at the Lake Garden of Kuala Lumpur (1987), and "Allah" in front of Dato Zainal Building, Kuala Lumpur (1985).

The fan-like sculpture, composed of 20 sideway tiers of reinforced concrete and marble ties, entitled "Growth", is intrinsically religious in a non-sectarian way. Constructed in 1987 at the Laman ASEAN, Lake Garden, Kuala Lumpur, "Growth" conveys the very essence of Islamic characteristics. The slabs are arranged

in a repetitive manner, pointing upwards in a parabola, creating a *tumpal* shape, allowing the interplay of light and shadow. The succession of slabs arranged at equidistant intervals resembles the geometric patterns of Islamic ornamental designs found in Islamic architecture.

Another of Syed Ahmad Jamal's works is a stainless steel sculpture in front of the Dato Zainal Building, Kuala Lumpur. It uses the Kufik Islamic calligraphy and is en-

titled "Allah". This was the first public sculpture in Malaysia, directly using a word from the Koran.

The process of the Islamization of sculpture in public areas drew strong reactions from the public. This was especially so when deciding the proper placement of sculptures, to ensure that due respect be given to the sacred words from the Almighty.

The ASEAN Sculpture Workshop held in Kuala Lumpur in 1986, coupled with the government policy of the Islamization of knowledge, motivated members of the public and private enterprises to call for sculptors to participate in the urban development of the country. This interest to include sculpture in landscape designs became rapidly widespread among state municipalities.

It is hoped that this interest will open a new era in modern sculpture in Malaysia. And then someday the public will learn to appreciate the true worth of the three-dimensional, an art held in disregard for too long.



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