Haryadi Suadi

PHRENOLOGY
1986
Enamel paint on reverse glass painting,
72 × 62 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

In this glass painting, Haryadi Suadi has drawn various abstracted forms inspired by phrenology—a pseudoscience developed in Europe that claims a person’s psychological attributes can be determined from the shape of their skull—Chinese medicinal diagrams and Islamic talismanic symbols.

The painting features figures with round, white faces that look like topeng (masks) and transparent bodies with organs and line diagrams resembling acupressure points in Chinese medicine. They are juxtaposed with drawings of hands inscribed with illegible writings and crudely drawn golden scribbles. The sun and the crescent moon—symbols of prayers often used in Cirebonese glass paintings—appear at the top of painting, and below them is a sequence of upside-down symbols that resemble Arabic letters.

Suadi’s abstracted depictions of these seemingly random symbols and writings may reflect his penchant for collecting. Together, they represent the diverse knowledge systems, beliefs and signs that make up the cultural backdrop of port cities like Cirebon in West Java, where Suadi grew up.
Haryadi Suadi

KALIGRAFI (CALLIGRAPHY)

1971
Woodcut print
on paper,
81.5 × 72 cm
Edition 3/25
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore

*Kaligrafi* showcases Haryadi Suadi’s early experimentation with various calligraphic forms. The woodcut print loosely resembles the fluid and thin writing associated with Arabic script, alongside thick textured lines similar to Chinese or Japanese scripts. The simple composition also evokes the rapid flow of brushes and irregular strokes in Chinese ink paintings.

Suadi produced several woodcut prints that present these speculative and highly abstracted calligraphic forms that convey no textual meaning. Instead, they are meant to highlight the expressive and performative qualities of calligraphy.
Dua Wanita dan Isim is one of Haryadi Suadi’s strongest print works, highlighting his experimentation with writing and anthropomorphic bodies. Visually, his woodcut works are inspired by the works of well-known Japanese printmaker Shikō Munakata, who helped elevate woodblock prints (known as hanga) as a modern art form in mid-20th century Japan.

As the title suggests, the print depicts two feminine forms with strings of calligraphic isim wrapped around them. Isim is the local term in Cirebon—and possibly other parts of Java—for Islamic talismanic writings and objects with protective and healing qualities. Below the two forms are a small round shape and a series of three triangular shapes, all inscribed with and surrounded by illegible writing. One of the few characters that can be distinguished is the Arabic letter ٩ (wāw).

The print also features a calligram—a calligraphic design that forms a particular shape, usually animals or figurative images—often found in Islamic talismanic objects and manuscripts in the Indo-Malay Archipelago.

While Suadi certainly did not intend to create a sacred talisman, the presence of the calligram and calligraphic writing show his preoccupation with replicating the sacredness of Islamic talismanic objects through illegibility and abstraction.
Haryadi Suadi

BUROQ (THE BURAQ)

1986

Enamel paint on reverse glass painting,
83.5 × 79.5 cm

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
Haryadi Suadi

UNTITLED

2001
Acrylic on canvas,
196 × 152 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
Kaligrafi dalam Segitiga features Haryadi Suadi’s experimentation with the expressivity of the calligraphic form using a silkscreen print. This print presents illegible writing derived from Arabic script, forming diagrammatic structures of a large triangle in the centre that expands to smaller triangular forms within and beyond it. The Arabic letter wāw (و) is repeated and is the most recognisable form in this print. The diagrammatic structure also references Suadi’s fascination with Islamic talismanic writings that often employ diagrams and formulas.
In *Potret Diri*, Haryadi Suadi juxtaposes text with an anthropomorphic body through undulating calligraphic lines inscribed all over the print. The composition of this work closely resembles another work, *Dua Wanita dan Isim*, with the figure representing Suadi raising his left hand as if to greet the viewer. Suadi frequently incorporates *ism* or Islamic talismanic writing, incising calligraphy on woodblock and making prints on paper of varying thicknesses and textures to create calligraphic forms that are highly expressive.

Many of Suadi’s prints and glass paintings exude a sense of crudeness and simplicity, inspired by the amateur and imperfect lines and forms in the sketches of *wayang* (shadow puppet) stories by local Cirebonese *dalang* (puppeteers), as well as those in the prints of Shikō Munakata.