The Gift

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The *Gunungan* Dialogue: Spirituality and Materiality in Ahmad Sadali and Salleh Japar’s Works

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In the Southeast Asian context, *gunungan* is an all-encompassing word or image that captures various ideas of spirituality within and beyond certain religiosity. It can be seen as a symbol of creation, or the representation of cosmic Mount Meru in the Hindu-Buddhist religious system. It is a visual metaphor for a spiritual bridge between humans and higher realms, an axis of power, a signifier for non-linear temporality in vernacular storytelling and performance (specifically, Javanese and Balinese *wayang*, or shadow play theatre) and a marker of movement and transition. It is also the image of the real mountain itself. *Gunungan* stands on its basic triangular structure, a transhistorical symbolic form and compositional method that has been utilised widely across places, times, and cultures. Etymologically, “*gunungan*” stems from the Malay word “*gunung*” or mountain, a shared word found in Javanese and Sundanese. “*Gunungan*” then can be translated as “mountain-like,” referring to the heterogeneous manifestations of the form in Southeast Asia: from monumental and vernacular architectures such as temples and traditional houses, to illustrations or decorations in manuscripts, textiles, paintings, *wayang* and so on. As noted by Astri Wright, *gunungan* is a pervasive motif that continues to inform the artistic preoccupation of modern and contemporary artists in Southeast Asia.¹

*Gunungan Emas* (The Golden Mountain) by Ahmad Sadali and *Gunungan II* by Salleh Japar are two of many works that feature abstractions of the *gunungan* motif. The three-dimensional construction of Sadali’s *Gunungan Emas* with ochre and dark green colours is accentuated by the application of gold leaves, pasted carefully on the textured surface in the center and top part of the canvas. When juxtaposed with Salleh’s slightly bigger rendition of the motif in *Gunungan II*, the three-dimensionality in *Gunungan Emas* certainly provides a stark contrast. However, Salleh’s comparably textured surface and the experimentation of unlikely materials beyond tube paints produce a relatively similar effect of extreme texturality.

Sadali and Salleh belong to different generations of artistic training and artmaking traditions. If Sadali aspired to push the boundaries of painting as a medium within the period of high

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modernism in Indonesia in the 1970s and 1980s, then Salleh’s method of representation and artmaking developed within the context of Singapore contemporary art in the late 1980s and 1990s. Salleh and his contemporaries forged new practices that sought to re-examine the foundation of art and expand the connection between artists, art, and the public using multimedia, multidisciplinary, and multicultural approaches. This emerged as a re-evaluation of established practices and values of previous generations. Sadali and Salleh’s reinterpretations of and approaches to transhistorical symbolic form that permeates widely across time and space in Southeast Asia provide frameworks for looking at shared affinities, genealogies, and points of divergence.

As a hypericon or metapicture in the Mitchellian sense, the gunungan can capture different relationalities to the world, through ethical, political, and aesthetic models, and to the Divine. Sadali’s three-dimensional gunungan, made of solid and enduring materials, with parts covered in gold, seems to represent a straightforward transcendental and vertical movement from the dark ochre base to the top golden surface. Many of Sadali’s critics and contemporaries often experienced his “concrete” forms as a contemplative journey towards piety. Further defined by his artmaking process, Salleh’s gunungan, on the other hand, shows a rather cyclical movement, capturing both an ecological and cosmological relation and process of creation, preservation, and destruction. Nevertheless, like Sadali, Salleh’s gunungan series that he began creating in 1984 originated from his religiosity: from an inclination to unveil Truth through material experimentation, informed by global Sufi intellectual traditions and the specificity of the Indo-Malay cultural traditions.

**Gunungan and the Image/Idea of Spirituality**

For many who knew Ahmad Sadali, he was an intellectual, a modernist, and a pious artist without contradiction. Many critics and scholars of Indonesian modern art considered him “the father of abstract painting” in Indonesia, having developed the legacy of painterly and formalist abstraction both in his pedagogy and artistic practice. However, Sadali often refused the attribution of his works as “abstract” as he argued that his forms were derived from a concrete “reality” of the world that he experienced. This idea certainly reflects Sadali’s engagement with the modernist approach and Sufi essentialist tradition of apprehending reality or “Truth” as beyond the perceptible world, and therefore must

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As Bandung’s first generation of West Javanese artists trained by Dutch teachers in the tradition of mid-20th century international modernism, Sadali and his cohort influenced the making of new representations of modernity that responded amicably to the new social and political reality under the New Order regime (1967–1998). The “Bandung School” of aesthetics, cultivated by the Dutch teachers and further developed by Sadali and his cohort, prioritised universal principles of art that placed emphasis on the essence of forms and colours. This approach to aesthetics allowed artists to engage with the spiritual aspects of their artmaking practice. As a devout, modernist-leaning Muslim who believed in the fruitful interaction between Islam, science, and art, Sadali found the principles and language of modernist abstraction to be in harmony with Islam. Sadali noted, “The teaching of Islam shows the artist the ways and means to achieve beauty, truth, and excellence in art. As such abstract art is most congenial to Islam.”

In the 1960s, Sadali began experimenting with Quranic and Arabic calligraphy in search of Islamic expression in modern painting. The painting *Lukisan* illustrates Sadali’s early experimentation with Quranic calligraphy. Translated as “painting,” “lukisan” shows the effort to interpret and make universal Clement Greenberg’s essentialist notion of painting and its supremacy as a medium in the Indonesian context. Painted in 1966, the year that marked the rise of artists associated with the Bandung School and their formalist aesthetics in the Indonesian exhibitionary space, *Lukisan* displays a tense juxtaposition of colours and irregular shapes in the centre that form an intricate horizontal swathe resembling a zoomed-out urban landscape. In this painting, Sadali gave substantial attention to textures by creating brushstrokes of different thicknesses on the canvas. As we

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7 Ahmad Sadali joined the first cohort of students the newly established colonial art training institution, *Universitaire Leergang voor de Opleiding van Tekenleraren* (University for the Education of Art Teachers) in 1948, where he trained under the Dutch teachers Simon Admiraal (1903–1992) and M.N. Mulder (1908–1973). Just like Sadali, several students from his cohort such as Srihadi Soedarsono (b. 1931), Mochtar Apin (1923–1994), Sudjoko (1928–2006), But Muchtar (1930–1993) and a few others became instructors at the school after they graduated, continuing the legacy of abstraction taught by their Dutch teachers who left the newly independent country in 1959.

8 By “modernist Islam,” I refer to the concept summarized by Martin van Bruinessen as movements that expressly seek accommodation of Islam with modernity, with an emphasis on rationality and compatibility with modern science. This term is often interchangeable with “reformist Islam” or used in a much broader range of reformist movements in Islam that favour more literal readings of the Quran and Hadith. See Martin van Bruinessen, *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the ‘Conservative Turn’ of the Early Twenty-first Century* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013), 1.


see in Sadali’s later works in the 1970s (such as Gunungan Emas),
texture became increasingly important for him as he explored
its complexity using unlikely materials to experiment with the
boundaries of painting as a medium. It is on the wide strip of alm-
most yellowish ochre that Sadali incised inconspicuous shallow
writing of the Quranic verse from the second sura, al-Baqara, verse 255.11This intimate writing was Sadali’s early attempt to in-
scribe a personal note to express his profound utterance of love
and praise to God.

Gunungan Emas, however, is without any calligraphic inscrip-
tion on its protruding pyramidal surface. On its base is a layer of
brown delineated neatly with darker brown, which Sadali sub-
sequently overlaid with marble paste in ochre and dark green,
the colour of oxidised bronze. There is a sense of irregularity
in the structure of the artwork, created by the jagged edges and
textured surface of the marble paste contrasted against the plen-
titude of straight lines. In addition to the lines that construct the
pyramid, Sadali also etched two parallel square lines into the
marble paste layer, further framing the summit of the gunung
structure. The most dominant element of Gunungan Emas is
certainly the emas (gold) created through the careful pasting of
delicate gold leaves along the top part of the composition and
on the peak of the gunungan. Gunungan Emas is as much a formal
and careful inquiry into space and materials as it is a proposition
for spiritual contemplation and devotional expression praising
God’s greatness.

While gunungan has a strong association with Hindu-Buddhist
cosmologies, it could picture or theorise a different relation-
ship informed by Islamic theology. Through an Islamic lens,
gunungan may signify the idea of taubid (oneness of God) and the
Islamic ethics of the balanced relationship between humans and
God and between fellow human beings. The gunungan in this
work might capture an understanding of an upward movement
towards the Divine’s oneness through contemplation and reflec-
tion. However, Sadali claimed that his use of the gunungan did
not originate from an intention to create a spiritual metaphor
when he first experimented with it in 1969. Instead, it was de-

erived from how he imagined a viewer would interpret and form
an association with it.12 In an interview with Krishna Mustajab
in 1983, Sadali elaborated:

Gunungan is only an appellation, similar to mass, chunk,
surface, bar, nodule, green, red, ochre, gold, etc. These
elements convey an almost automatic association in the
viewer’s mind because of how these elements make a sug-
gestion in the viewer’s mind. Often, they (the viewers)

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11 Eugene Tan, “Ahmad Sadali,” in Reframing Modernism: Paintings from Southeast Asia, Europe, and Beyond, eds. Sarah Lee and Sara Siew (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 234.
interpret the triangle that grows on my canvas as *gunungan*, and I came to use it as a name of the (triangular) element.\(^{13}\)

When Salleh Japar saw Sadali’s paintings as a student at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in Singapore, he read their significance to be other than a manifestation of spirituality. Perhaps it was Sadali’s rather formalist approach to forms that led Salleh to interpret the paintings as such.\(^{14}\) However, Salleh found peace in the intensity of colours and serene swathes of strokes that make up Sadali’s colour field paintings. At the exhibition, Salleh remembered looking at Sadali’s work *Bars with Gold Remnants* (1984), a painting depicting the dialogue of rectangular elements and gold leaves swathes: two other formal elements other than gunungan and calligraphy that preoccupied Sadali’s composition throughout the 1970s and 1980s.\(^{15}\) Since the present whereabouts of *Bars with Gold Remnants* is unknown,\(^{16}\) *Batang-Batang Melingkar* (1987) might serve as a tangible comparison to Sadali’s earlier works for it demonstrates an exploration of the same formal elements. This work also shows Sadali’s latest experimentation with smaller works on paper before his passing in 1987.

Salleh belongs to a generation of artists in Singapore that came to prominence in the late 1980s. This generation, as characterised by T.K. Sabapathy, questioned the ideals and values of universalism and internationalism championed by Singapore artists in the 1960s and 1970s, sharing parallels with Sadali’s generation in the Indonesian context.\(^{17}\) Salleh’s emergence and prominence in Singapore art history are closely tied to *Trimurti*, one of the most important and experimental exhibitions in Singapore which opened in March 1988 at the Goethe-Institut. In this exhibition, Salleh and two of his NAFA contemporaries, S. Chandrasekaran (b. 1959) and Goh Ee Choo (b. 1962), sought to re-examine dominant artistic practices, methods and values, as well as the ones disseminated by NAFA. Informed by the concept of *trimurti* in Hindu mythology, Salleh, Chandrasekaran, and Goh employed the *trimurti* as a method to examine notions of belonging and ethnic identities in modernising Singapore.

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14 Salleh Japar, in conversation with the author, June Yap, Selene Yap, and Kenneth Tay on Zoom, December, 2020; Salleh Japar, in a written interview via email with the author, January, 2021. Salleh encountered the works of many Bandung artists, including Ahmad Sadali’s, at the annual traveling ASEAN exhibition of Painting and Photography when he was a student in the mid-1980s.


16 Thus far, I am unable to find references to this work in several of Sadali’s exhibition catalogues. It is also notable that Sadali often produced several paintings that share almost similar title indexings with the formal or material aspects of the works, which makes it even more difficult to pinpoint his works with a high degree of certainty based solely on titles. I speculate that this work was likely sold at a certain point as it could not be found in Sadali’s family collection.

The three artists engaged in multimedia and multidisciplinary approaches in investigations of the self in relation to their cultural memories and experiences. *Trimurti* also displayed these young artists’ preoccupation with newer forms of artmaking and representational strategies, such as installation and performance art, which allowed for a more direct ways of confronting issues through immediate dialogues between the artists, artworks and audience.  

The basic configuration of *trimurti* is the cyclical movement and shifts from creation, preservation, and destruction. These ideas seem to have an enduring presence in Salleh’s subsequent works including, I would argue, *Gunungan II*. However, Salleh interweaves and strengthens the trimurti concept with new and existing ideas from Persianate Sufi philosophy; in particular, those that govern the levels of knowledge within the “logic of three”—the Expert, what is known, and true knowledge (Truth). Right after the *Trimurti* exhibition, Salleh continued his studies at the Curtin Institute of Technology in Australia from 1989 to 1990. During this time he continued working on his series involving the *gunungan* motif, and *Gunungan II* came into existence. Salleh also learned about indigenous technologies and methods of being through Aboriginal faculty members at Curtin, and his closer experience with open nature impressed upon him and his subsequent works. Learning about the indigenous method of controlled bush fire from the Aboriginal people in Australia, Salleh professed, allowed him to think of a different relationship to be had with nature and more importantly, fire as a regenerative power. Salleh’s preoccupation with the destructive yet generative potential of fire is further reflected through his artmaking process and his choice of materials. This approach manifests most visibly in his installation *Born Out of Fire* (1993), where he displayed three hanging canvases inscribed with personalised hieroglyphs and sign systems on textured and monochromatic surfaces. The three canvases loomed large over a rectangular acrylic stand containing a burnt book, signifying the cyclical and tense relationship between knowledge and power. 

Made before *Born Out of Fire*, *Gunungan II* seems to manifest Salleh’s then-newly discovered approach to materiality stemming from long-standing ecological practices and knowledge of the Australian Aborigines, along with Salleh’s understanding of *gunungan* in the Southeast Asian context. Reflecting on this work, Salleh also recontextualised his fascination with fire as a method of religious contemplation and devotion as he affirmed the view of Muḥd. Mostamali Nadjari, who asserted that “the

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19 Salleh Japar, in conversation with the author on Zoom, January, 2021. Salleh was influenced by books on Sufism by Persian authors that he read based on the recommended list of readings on Islamic art and aesthetics by T.K. Sabapathy. Like Sadali, Salleh was influenced by perennial thoughts in Islamic art history, such as those from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Laleh Bakhtiar, and Nader Ardalan, that introduce Islamic art as manifestation of an abstract concept of *tauhid*. The differentiation between “what is known” and “true knowledge” finds resonance in the hierarchical stages in Sufism, where the first refers to the stage of common knowledge and the latter to the Truth—knowledge that one acquires through spiritual undertaking.

contemplation of secret is like the burning of fire, which is itself the contemplation, and its sparks are sings, and the fumes of fire are like a prayer.” In Gunungan II, Salleh performed multiple controlled burnings of strings, fibers, soil and other non-traditional materials on his canvas. During our conversation, he reminisced that the process of making Gunungan II was one of the most challenging and labour-intensive ones as he had to work with the uncertainty of chance and unexpected consequences of multiple burnings. The result is layer upon layer of fossilised ephemerality; some textured surfaces are thicker than the rest, some are cracked, and some cover faint traces of circular lines and writings around the circles within the triangular structure. The ephemeral quality of the materials used in this artwork certainly contrasts with Sadali’s use of marble paste and gold leaves to signify enduring monumentality in Gunungan Emas.

The presence of diagrammatic lines, incised pathways that connect the three circles within the gunungan, use of individualised scripts, and the talismanic configuration of the artwork’s composition also seems to correspond to Salleh’s prevailing interests in mandala patterns, Islamic geometry, and talismanic scrolls. These elements can be found in his 1988 work, Fitrah/Human Nature. In its entirety, Gunungan II manifests Salleh’s exposure to new environments and technologies he encountered during his travels and studies. It is also an illustration of his continued interest in the mixing of Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic forms—a “syncretic” approach, as Sabapathy asserted in his essay on the Trimurti exhibition, to the region’s visual traditions.

Materials, Texture, and Religiosity

Sadali and Salleh belong to different generations of artists. Their works respond to distinct social, cultural, and political contexts of Indonesia and Singapore. Despite this, they both engaged with corresponding ideals of spirituality and religiosity in their art. These ideas manifest in their engagement with extreme texturality and attention to material specificities to inspire contemplations of reality in different ways. While Sadali never intended for the materials in his works to take on metaphorical meaning as he was a true modernist, his use of pulverised marble and gold in combination with paint gives rise to a sense of grandeur, establishment and permanence. In his other works, textures built on smeared marble paste, oil and acrylic paints also bear resemblance to stone walls or ruins that weather through time—an allusion, perhaps, to the impermanence of worldly materials in the longue durée of space and time. Materiality in Sadali’s works is therefore a paradox. It is a desire to capture a fraction of the Divine greatness, yet surrender to knowing that it cannot

21 Salleh Japar, in a written interview via email with the author, January 2021.

22 Salleh Japar, in a written interview via email with the author, January 2021.
Gunungan II in progress. Image courtesy of Salleh Japar.

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be perfectly captured through human creation. In comparison, the materiality of Salleh’s works demonstrates a rejection of medium specificity in the metadiscourse of Western modernism, where art is thought to be capable of reflecting the modern world. In *Gunungan II*, Salleh’s cyclical process of creation and destruction through the use of fire for its capricious nature is both a processual contemplation (an extension of Salleh’s daily prayer) and a surrender to unknowing and chance as a way to “see” things better.  

For Sadali, materiality and texture play an important role not only in the expression of beauty, but also his religiosity. As described in a note found in the artist’s archives, he yearned to regain human’s God-gifted poetic sensitivity through the interplay of textures, a subtlety of expression that he felt we had lost. Likewise, texture is significant in many of Salleh’s works such as *Gunungan II*, which involved a laborious and somewhat unpredictable and dialectic process of destruction and creation. Salleh’s preoccupation with texture was further invigorated after his encounter with the Bandung artists’ works when he attended the traveling ASEAN Art Exhibition: Third ASEAN Exhibition of Painting and Photography as an art student in 1984. Salleh still remembers the Balinese *prahu* (boat) of Srihadi Soedarsono (b. 1931), the calligraphy on the textured and fragmented surface of A.D. Pirous’s canvas (b. 1932) and Sadali’s *Bars with Gold Remnants*. But it was the reproduction of Sadali’s painting *Gunungan dan Bulatan* (*Gunungan and Circles*) on an illustrated page shared by Salleh’s Indonesian colleague that made a strong impression during his initial experiment with texturality. Furthermore, like Sadali, Salleh also found appreciation in Antoni Tapies’ (1923–2012) works, an abstract Catalan artist who is known for his exploration of textures and humble everyday materials.  

While their practices are defined by an often-rigid distinction between modern and contemporary art discourses in the Southeast Asian context, both artists interrogate the largely

23 Salleh Japar, in a written interview via email with the author, January 2021.

24 “Lukisan Bertekstur dan Lukisan Tekstur,” Ahmad Sadali family archives, Bandung Indonesia. This note about Sadali, which appears to be written by someone else, details Sadali’s engagement with textures. “Tekstur bagi Sadali termasuk alam yang kuat memiliki potensi ekspresif dan estetis, namun sering dilupakan, padahal sekitar habitat manusia selalu mengingatkan. Nampak di mata namun tidak kelihatan, karena kebiasaan tidak menghargainya dan memandangnya sebagai hal yang tuna-guna. Melalui setiap karya Sadali setiap kali kita diajak meraih kembali kekayaan sensitivitas kesajakan, karunia agung ilahi...” (“Texture for Sadali is a powerful source of expressiveness and beauty that we often overlook even though our surrounding always reminds us of their presence. Because of our seeing habit, we see them (textures) but they are still invisible because we never appreciate them and view them as useless. Through each of Sadali’s paintings, we are taken to regain our lost poetic sensitivity, a great gift from God...”)

25 Salleh Japar, written interview with the author, January 2021. To date, it is still difficult to pinpoint for certain the details of *Bars with Gold Remnants* and *Gunungan dan Bulatan* that Salleh encountered in Singapore. It is likely that *Bars with Gold Remnants* was made in mid-1980s, as other paintings consisting of a similar pattern of bars with gold were made during this period. The date of the other painting is more difficult to ascertain, but it was likely made in the 1970s or 1980s. Both paintings are no longer in the collection of Sadali’s family.

26 Salleh Japar, in a written interview via email with the author, January 2021.


28 Salleh Japar, written interview via email with the author, January 2021.
secular vision and conception of modernity in their practices. Their heightened attention to materiality is a way to unveil the true reality and beauty that indicate the existence of God as the almighty Artist. Echoing perennial thoughts in Islamic art history proposed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ibrahim Titus Burckhardt, Sadali believed that art is a form of devotion. Sadali thought of his paintings as methods, tools and products of that devotion and dhikr (reflection and an awareness of God). In the development of modern art in Indonesia, this devotional aspect of art was thought of by Sadali and reiterated by Sanento Yuliman as dimensi yang tersisihkan or the “neglected dimension.”

Salleh’s artist’s statement for Trimurti also shows a similar understanding of the significance of Islamic religiosity in his artistic practice. Salleh was influenced by the works and ideas of Sadali and those who shared similar views, such as A.D. Pirous, Sulaiman Esa, Latiff Mohidin and Ibrahim Hussein. Salleh reaffirmed that his artistic practice is an extension of ibadah or religious servitude for God and the community of umma. Therefore, even though the gunungan motif in Sadali and Salleh’s paintings might reflect different movements and cosmological relations, it also pictures similar ethical, political and aesthetic assemblages guided by Islamic ethics and piety.


Installation views of *The Gift* at The Ngee Ann Kongsi Concourse Gallery, National Gallery Singapore.