The Calligraphic Subject: The Body and Social Power in Malaysian "Abstract Expressionism"

Izmer Ahmad[1*] and Elham Shafaei Darestani[2]
[1,2]School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, MALAYSIA

Current Affiliation:
[1]College of Fine Arts and Design, University of Sharjah, UAE

[*]Corresponding author: iahmad@sharjah.ac.ae

Published online: 31 October 2017

To cite this article: Izmer Ahmad and Elham Shafaei Darestani. 2017. The calligraphic subject: The body and social power in Malaysian "abstract expressionism". *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 16: 35–68. https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2017.16.2

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2017.16.2

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the discourses surrounding "abstract expressionism" in modern Malaysian art. While stressing the local context and imageries in the readings of this particular episode in modern Malaysian art, we do not assume Malaysian "abstract expressionism" as existing independently from its western counterpart. Rather, we see the New York and Malaysian painters as co-extensive and that the latter has chosen to pursue an aspect of the former that has always already been in effect in New York since its inception in the 1940s–50s but had mutated differently in Malaysia under distinct historical and cultural trajectories. These, we argue, can be better understood once we attend closely to the stylistic feature, or more accurately, the visual vocabularies adopted by these artists which privileges the gesture of the painter. By doing so we may link "abstract expressionism" in Malaysia to the ideology of the body that is grounded in a nationalistic imaging.

Keywords: *modern Malaysian art, abstract expressionism, calligraphy, the body*

THE MALAYSIAN ENCOUNTER WITH "ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM"

"Abstract expressionism" began in New York in the 1940s with roots as diverse as European modernism, American Regionalism, Mexican murals, Native American art, Surrealism, and eastern calligraphy (Craven 1999; Polcari 1991; Shapiro and Shapiro 1990). Some of its better-known representatives are Willem de Kooning, Barnet Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, and Jackson Pollock; the less well known includes Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Janet Sobel, Norman Lewis, and Romare Bearden (Gibson 1997). By the time "abstract expressionism" was institutionalised in New York at the end of the 40s the movement had acquired its own technical and conceptual characteristics:

> The new painting dispensed with recognizable images from the known world. Its surfaces were often rough, unfinished, even sloppy, with uneven textures and dripping paint… It was an art that aimed to negate the art of America's recent past as well as that of more distant times and places… The tradition of art as communicator or as source of pleasure appeared to have been abandoned by an intensely individual school of painting, in which each artist had a distinct, immediately differentiable calligraphy. Yet all seemed to share certain assumptions: the need to explore the subconscious, the value of the exploitation of chance; the capacity of paint to serve as a vehicle for emotional expression… The artist became, in a sense, only the conduit, the brush by means of which automatic writing transmitted emotion onto an external objects, the painting surface. (Shapiro and Shapiro 1990: 1–2)

This stylistic and conceptual innovation was transplanted into Malaysia in the 1960s. This development occurred due to the immediate need for teachers of modern subjects after national independence in 1957, a period of dramatic enrolment in local schools. Consequently, the government established the Specialist Teacher's Training Institute (STTI) in Kuala Lumpur in 1960 to re-train teachers into specialist-teachers. Out of its graduates, a number were selected and sent to Britain for further training. Among them were Yeoh Jin Leng (Chinese Malaysian) and Syed Ahmad Jamal (Malay Malaysian) who were dispatched to the Chelsea School of Art in England. Both of them would return as propagators of "abstract expressionism". However, neither painter was officially trained as an abstract expressionist,

for they did not encounter "abstract expressionism" in their British classroom. Syed Ahmad Jamal describes his academic life in England as "disappointing" and "uninspiring" (Sabapathy 1996a: 31). Instead, that particular inspiration was supplied by local galleries in England which were hosting abstract expressionist works at the time.[1] Syed Ahmad Jamal also found his catalyst in the paintings of Goya (Spain) which contained the "raw" quality that he could not find in British and French art.[2]

Both Jamal's and Yeoh's interest in "abstract expressionism" is founded in their conviction about the relevance of the New York paintings in regard to their local experience. For Yeoh, Robert Motherwell's and Mark Tobey's encounter with eastern calligraphy had "united western expression and eastern meditation" to arrive at "calligraphic compositions in enlarged dimensions" (Yeoh 1988: 57) (See Figure 1 and 2). Similarly, Syed Ahmad Jamal is

Figure 1 Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic #70* (1961).
Oil on canvas, 175 × 289 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Source: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/65.247/ Accessed 10 February 2017.

convinced of the validity of "abstract expressionism" to the Malaysian experience, describing the "immediacy and mystical quality" of "abstract expressionism" as appealing "particularly to the Malaysian temperament and cultural heritage" (quoted in Sabapathy 1996a: 35). He was consciously articulating his expressionism within the confines of local signification, drawing substantially from the flow, rhythm and form of Islamic calligraphy, both in subject matter and manner of painting. Thus, these two painters found two of the criteria of the New York school previously mentioned particularly relevant. These are: calligraphic immediacy and the idea that the artist is the conduit through which human interiority flows; both are ultimately linked to ethnic and religious identity and ultimately to the nation.

Figure 2 Mark Tobey, *Untitled* (1964). Guoche on paper, 24.5 × 27.3 cm.
Source: https://www.1stdibs.com/art/paintings/abstract-paintings/mark-tobey-untitled/id-a_458092/.
Accessed 10 February 2017.

"Abstract expressionism" in modern Malaysian art was challenged during the 1970s by the "New Scene" artists. The latter intended to end the expressionist era, by a sustained rejection of the gestural emphasis. Their hostility towards the local expressionists was founded on what was perceived as the latter's uncritical use of western-style modernism, which was perceived to usher in "an individual approach to knowledge which differed from the more traditional and religio-centred world-views" of the region (Piyadasa 1994: 23). The Malayan modernism of the 1950s and 1960s were seen by the New Scene Artists as unable or unwilling to challenge its problematic foundation that is the colonial educational system with its dual emphasis on individualism and naturalism. For them, "abstract expressionism" in Malaya essentially extended the colonial system that was implemented to train

> … local personnel to serve in the various government agencies, especially at the lower levels. For this, competency in the English language was the principle requirement… Legal and cultural values and systems were promoted in order to ensure a sense of loyalty to the regime. (Sabapathy and Piyadasa 1983: 1)

Gestural emphasis epitomised for the New Scene artists western individualism and the painters were seen as reinforcing western aesthetics. Therefore, the decolonising potential of expressionist aesthetic is severely limited. In the 1980s, amidst the Malay-Islamic revivalism, Ismail Zain stated that:

> … there is no other artistic convention within Modernism of the West which was not only politically motivated, at its initial stage, but had also congenially availed itself so conveniently to the imposition of cultural or political adjuncts for the purpose of legitimizing the ethnic and the vernacular within Modernism, as Abstract Expressionism and the post painterly abstraction of Late Modernism. Being a product of the post-[S] econd World War era as one of the facets of its internal history, Abstract Expressionism is truly one of the most successful exports to the world; perhaps next to MacDonald[s] and Coca-Cola. … It is ironic… and derisive… that… the Eastern man… would find his… sufi wisdoms and hypothetical forms of a lost vernacular [through Abstract Expressionism]. (Zain 1989: 23–4)

According to Sabapathy (1994), Zain's arguments drew from the works by Max Kozloff, Eva Cockroft and David and Cecile Shapiro who investigated the appropriation of "abstract expressionism" by the United States of America's (US) Cold War propaganda during the 1950s. They examined the co-optation of "abstract expressionism", via the International council (IC) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York and by the United States Information Agency (USIA), as US governmental efforts to tout the freedom and individualism available in the West in contrast to Soviet totalitarianism. Serge Guilbaut (1983) extends Kozloff's (1985) argument that the promotion "abstract expressionism" as an American avant-garde during the 1950s was aimed at supplanting Paris with New York as the art centre of the world by focusing on "abstract expressionism" as a triumph over the technical perfection of European avant-garde. The American essayist/art critic Clement Greenberg saw Jackson Pollock as "more interesting" than his French counterpart, Jean Dubuffet, because Pollock was "more rugged, violent, and brutal". He regarded Pollock's brutality, crudeness and virility as "crucial elements in such uncertain times, more impressive than Parisian charm". For him, Pollock offers the powerful and vigorous art that the Western world needed (Guilbaut 1983: 176–8). "Just as the nations of [post-war] Western Europe were reduced to the level of dependent client and colonized states", Kozloff wrote, "so too was their art understood here [in the USA] to be adjunct, at best, to our own" (Kozloff 1985: 115–16).[3]

However, other scholars like Orton (1996), Larson (1983), and Jachec (2000) demonstrate that the project of promoting "abstract expressionism" by the US government was actually done more diplomatically. Rather than focusing on the "inferiority" of the European avant-garde, the USIA's and the IC's efforts strove to present "abstract expressionism" as a continuity of Euro-American cultural and intellectual history, thus stressing the significance and compatibility of the USA as an ally to Europe (and western civilisation in general). The need for a "leftist" art was identified by the US government after an internal assessments conducted by the USIA in 1953 on the European reception of their exhibitions. The USIA found that the Europeans were particularly unimpressed by the more traditional fine art exhibits under their auspices, and was told that "America needs to … dispel 'skepticism' about the value of modern American art and to demonstrate to the world that the US possesses spiritual values" (quoted in Jachec 2000: 165). The 1955 Senate hearing on the "American National Arts, Sports and Recreation" supported the promotion of American avant-garde because

> … the United States have fallen to the habit of letting the rest of the world believe… that the creative artists of the United States have little to contribute to the cultural growth of our civilization. The communists have exploited this myth by propagandizing the peoples of the world with the story that we… are materialistic barbarians. (Senator Herbert Lehman quoted in Larson 1983: 110)

It was in the interest of winning the European left's hearts and minds that led MoMA's open lobbying of the Congress during the 1950s to finance a cultural campaign against communism. MoMA argued that the avant-garde artists are able to supply post-war western society the political and spiritual leadership it needed, in an era tortured by doubts and by fears for the very survival of civilisation. Yet, MoMA's call, which was printed in *The Magazine of Art* in November 1954, never referred to any specific modernist practice but was prefaced by a photomontage of a "range of painterly styles, from… social realism to … abstraction" (Jachec 2000: 167). "Abstract expressionism" was only singled out as a viable US political investment in 1958, well after it had a well-publicised reputation in the United States as an art of dissent. European responses, particularly of the unaligned left, to "abstract expressionism" and its existential rhetoric

> … made it the vehicle for promoting the United States among recalcitrant independent leftists groups in Western Europe as, the very least, tolerant, and, at best a potentially socialist society. Abstract Expressionism was formally and ideologically the closest American practice to Western Europe's own informel practices, which were critically supported by the European non-aligned leftist intelligentsia. (Jachec 2000: 14)

This absorption of existentialist politics into American political establishment was made possible through an appropriation of Harold Rosenberg's idea on individual agency in relation to "abstract expressionism". Rosenberg perceives the historical function of artistic modernism as to provide an uncompromising humanist response to industrialism's mechanisation and massification of human existence, and "abstract expressionism" for him is the new modernism that renews the essentially Marxist critique of the old one's (Rosenberg 1952). The painters' emphasis on bold, gestural brushstrokes that represent the painter's

presence on the canvas stands as an effort to preserve individualist value and agency within an increasingly mechanised society. The emancipation of the individual became a cultural and artistic, rather than political enterprise. Since artistic modernism is the natural counterpart to industrialisation, its vitality being commensurate with industrial strength, the place of its emergence inevitably favoured the US at this historical juncture. Thus the assimilation of "abstract expressionism" by the American establishment added cultural and intellectual ingredients to its military and economic privilege at the time. "Abstract expressionism" came to embody the role of the USA as the saviour of the post-war west, physically and intellectually. However, the success of this campaign was not premised on the superiority of America over Europe, but instead on the affirmation of their ideological and intellectual kinship.

While the story of "abstract expressionism's" co-optation into the Cold War machinery within the Euro-American context was amply documented, we are not aware of anything similar in the rooting of "abstract expressionism" in Malaysia, and neither did Ismail Zain provide any such evidence in his critique. However, we can see how the role of the state in promoting "abstract expressionism" outside the USA lends the rhetorical device for Zain to extend the New Scene's critique into the years of traditional revivalism in modern Malaysian art. The assault continues in the 1990s through the pen of Krishen Jit:

> the hold of Abstract Expressionism appears to be strong despite the changing times and the emergence of alternative gestures. New art manifestations that arose in the 1970s… have not been sufficiently compelling to inspire dissenting art movements powerful enough to nudge Abstract Expressionism from its hegemonic position. (Jit 1994: 7–8)

However, the activities of the local expressionists never coalesced into any unified collective or manifesto, meaning that the claim on the hegemony of "abstract expressionism" in Malaysia might be rather exaggerated.

Nonetheless, Yeoh Jin Leng responds to these criticisms and insists on the relevance of "abstract expressionism" to the Malaysian experience:

> Artists of the 60's were conveniently grouped as Abstract Expressionist and, even though the basic drives that launched American Abstract Expressionism

> are quite different from those of the Malaysian "group", categorized as "Abstract Expressionist"… [it] was not in reality a borrowed idiom. It was a natural means, as a natural development from the loose atmospheric form of the early watercolours…[it] drew substantially from *Nusantara* spirituality, regional landscape elements as well as the flow, rhythm and form of Islamic and Chinese calligraphy. (Yeoh 1996: 94)

Instituted after national independence, the local landscape and rhythmic brushwork that forms its image (Figure 3 and 4) signified the birth of a nation and the reaction of its subjects to the occasion.

Syed Ahmad Jamal remarks that the energetic immediacy of expressionist brushstrokes in the 1960s (Figure 5) captured the spirit of national independence, the "joy, ecstasy, optimism, and all those things which happened because we were right in the midst of the great happening" (Syed Ahmad Jamal quoted in Balai Seni Lukis Negara 1975: 7). The same enthusiasm was shared by Yeoh, for whom the "utopian visions of nationalism generated the freedom for self-expression and the creative will" that were manifested through energetic brushstrokes that designate the land and the interiority of its subjects (Yeoh 1997: 32). At this particular historical juncture the painter's gesture and the marks it ejected were bound to a nationalistic sentiment that was held to be linked to the freedom of the individual. These were proposed through the image of the land and the language of gesture.

Figure 3 Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Nipah Palms* (1957). Oil on canvas, 70 × 46 cm. National Art Gallery Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.
Source: Sabapathy and Jit (1994).

Figure 4 Yeoh Jin Leng, *Rice Field* (1963). Oil on canvas, 50 × 42 cm.
National Art Gallery Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.
Source: Sabapathy and Jit (1994).

Figure 5 Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Tulisan* (1961). Oil on board, 27 × 39 cm.
Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Georgetown.
Source: Photo by Izmer Ahmad.

THE EXPRESSIONIST LANDSCAPE

Nationalism and individual autonomy are linked by the painters through the landscape genre that are partially abstracted due to the use of energetic brushstrokes. The ideological implication of this genre in relation to modern Malaysia can be traced to works of colonial painters to document the state of British empire in equatorial Southeast Asia. The formal convention employed in these paintings served an explicit colonial theme, one that instilled a commanding view in their British viewers/patrons. With the achievement of national independence landscape became a medium for articulating national consciousness and identity.

To the post-independence generation the landscape genre provided a "sense of cultural identification and emotional belonging" (Piyadasa 1993: 71) with which "to define a role for themselves in the new contexts they had found themselves in" (Piyadasa 1998: 24). For the Malay/sian artists, this significance was historically located in the works of the *Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung* [Peninsular Painter Coalition] who emerged during the years of Malay nationalism to represent Malay struggle through the images of Malay bodies in rural landscapes.[4] The linking of the land to national sentiment was also suggested by Abdullah Arif, the early and only Malay painter working among the Penang artists in the 1930s. His *Malayan Tin Mine* (Figure 6) portrayed a land that "has been violated [and] disemboweled in order to exploit its interior contents for industrial and commercial purposes." (Sabapathy 1996a: 38).

Sabapathy's reading of the painting resonates with the historicity of the Malayan soil, for the tin mine is what brought about the full colonisation of Malaya, and the subsequent economic dominance by European and Chinese entrepreneurs (Andaya and Andaya 2001; Ali 1981). The mine is the context through which the rural Malay had become gradually and increasingly displaced throughout its modern history. It is also the context through which the complexity of the Malaysian condition would be punctuated by ethnic politics, occasionally erupting into physical violence. The colonial desire for tin and the industrialisation of palm and rubber had brought in the influx of migrations from China and India, leading to a radical imbalance in Malayan political life, as factional struggles erupted between and within the communities.

Figure 6 Abdullah Ariff, *Malayan Tin Mine* (1960). Watercolour on paper, 54.1 × 36.4 cm.
Source: Sabapathy (1996a)

The Malaysian expressionists continued the ideological connotation of landscape. Their works that appeared immediately after national independence project "a sense of overt idealism and expectant hope and pride in the land and its peoples… attempts to define a role for themselves in the new contexts they had found themselves in" (Piyadasa 1998: 24). This was emphasised by Syed Ahmad Jamal who writes: "the root of Malaysian painting certainly seemed to grow in the countryside—the rural scene of rice-fields, fisherman's huts, boats, and the ubiquitous swaying of coconut palms, served as germs of ingredients of visual identity" (Syed Ahmad Jamal 1979: 71). Of his own *Nipah Palm* (1957) (Figure 3) he wrote that it was the "result of ecstatic response by the artist in his re-acquaintance with his birth-place… home from overseas" (Syed Ahmad Jamal 1979: 72). To offer context to this statement, the 1960s, according to Piyadasa,

> … was essentially a decade marked by new-found pride and euphoria in our new sense of nationhood… a veritable symbol of the new sense of exuberance. … The land afforded the returning artist a sense of cultural identification and emotional belonging. Some of our best landscape paintings were produced during that era of nationalistic euphoria. (Piyadasa 1993: 71)

Kanaga Sabapathy welcomes the tone of Syed Ahmad Jamal's and Piyadasa's passages when he describes the significance of the landscape genre as a means to demonstrate a "profound, strong and enduring kinship with the land" (Sabapathy 1996a: 38). The artists "expressed this by employing a variety of pictorial methods. Additionally, there are particular ideological manifestations arising from these affinities—the eminence of the Malay is foregrounded, as they lay first claim to possession and suzerainty of the land" (ibid.).

The indigenisation and nationalisation of the expressionist landscape are given a distinct ethnic flavour in a historical exposition of Malaysian expressionism at the National Art Gallery in year 2000. The exhibition was entitled *Bara Hati Bahang Jiwa* and central to the curatorial intention:

> … is the claim that *semangat, amok and adab*, concepts from the Malay worldview, have resonated with and against incoming expressionist tropes, enabling both their assimilation and their transformation into new indigenous forms. At the heart of the Malay system of ideas is *semangat* or the vital principle… in the sense of the will to exist and in the sense of disembodied essences ... It is proposed in the present exposition that it is an engagement with *semangat* that characterizes the first phase of Malaysian Expressionism – that what is ostensibly a response to the vitality of the tropical landscape, is in fact, at a deeper unconscious level, an encounter with an indigenous vitalism. (Rajah 2000: 39)[5]

The concepts of *semangat, amok,* and *adab* are threaded with the concepts of "indigenous vitalism" and "unconscious" to indigenise Malay/sian "expressionism" as a form of internalisation where nature becomes the source of inner motivation. It is a reading of human interiority as the residence of nature, whose voice and animating power are within

us. Therefore, the self is discovered by a turning within, towards one's own sentiments and inclinations. Knowledge and truth radiate from within the subject, as that which nature marks as significant, and through it the individual rediscovers his/her natural impulse and is opened by it. The revivification and restoration of the individual through nature slides into the pantheism of *semangat* that "expresses" an ethno-national landscape, identity, and spirituality. Consequently, fast and bold brushstrokes were valorised as citations of "the flow, rhythm and form of Islamic and Chinese calligraphy" that articulates "*Nusantara*[6] spirituality" in paint. Graphic automatism becomes a "natural" means to affirm individuality through the nation, as well as a means to articulate their modern identity.

CALLIGRAPHY, THE BODY, AND THE NATION

Gestural emphasis was adopted by the New York painters to produce effects of spontaneity and directness of marking, which intimates one's signature as a graphic "immediacy" that establishes a sense of authentic individuality. Disillusioned with the war and bourgeois dominance, the New York painters perceived the tangible world as a subject no longer worthy of painting. It was their conviction that the value and meaning of painting could be retained only through the act of doing it, that is, in the act of (continuing) to paint. In *de Kooning Paints a Picture* (1953), Thomas Hess describes Willem de Kooning's spontaneous and impulsive-looking paintings as demonstrating that the process of making the works was actually more relevant than the final product itself (quoted in Landau 2005: 14). Hess' interpretation renders de Kooning's paintings quasi-ritualised and this understanding of painting as a ritualised performance becomes the basis for Harold Rosenberg's re-conceptualisation of gestural "abstract expressionism" into the more experientially based category dubbed "Action Painting". For Rosenberg, the canvas was to the painter "an arena in which to act—rather than a space in which to re-produce, re-design, analyse, or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (Rosenberg 1952: 22–23). To further stress the importance of the process/act of painting over the actual final product, he asserts that the "apples weren't brushed off the table in order to make room for perfect relations of space and colour. They had to go so that nothing would get in the way of the act of painting" (Rosenberg 1952: 23). This is a particular aspect of the movement, a conviction in the power of the medium itself to signify, that meaning does not precede the painterly process but "hinges upon those points where the artists encounter our response—namely the

picture plane" (Anfam 1990: 108). The freshness of mark-making that signals the painter's bodily rhythm during the execution of the work is a strategy to invoke viewers' participation in the process of painting so that the making and viewing collapse into each other to form an occasion to create meaning. Thus, the spontaneity of brushstroke, materiality of paint, bodily trace and viewing experience are not to be understood as the presence of subjects, but rather as techniques to (re)invent the subjects. They function to inscribe immediacy and to situate the painting and viewing subjects spatially and temporally. Historically, this may be dated back to Leonardo da Vinci who encouraged artists to seek aesthetic motivations and technical innovations in random stains on walls (Kemp 1989). This spontaneity of inspiration is matched by the Renaissance convention of illusionism and the picture plane as a window that offers immediate access to the world. Later in French Impressionism, thickness of paint and the speed of its application intensify fleetingness of appearance, placing objects at specific place and moment in time. All these technical transformations are threaded by the same conceptual premise: a commitment to painting as a technique whereby vision can be organised to create experiential immediacy as a present moment of viewing. In other words, painting—the act of making it, viewing it and responding to it—becomes an instalment of automatism. The New York painters are heirs to this technique and in their hands the very process of making marks itself is maximised and so is its inscriptive power to create automatism. This culminates in Jackson Pollock who describes the primacy of process as follows:

> When I am *in* the painting I am not aware of what I am doing. It's only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well. (quoted in Landau 2005: 140)

The spontaneity of marks is produced by a certain play between passivity and activity, by letting "it come through" because "the painting has a life of its own", and this play is constantly regulated so that he does not "lose contact" with the process and produces mess. Hence graphic automatism has little to do with being spontaneous or expressive. On the contrary, automatism to Pollock "served more as an instrument to add calculated elements

of chance, spontaneity and flux" (Anfam 1990: 110). As an instrument, automatism is an invention, and its role in western painting since the Italian Renaissance up to post-war New York avant-garde testifies to the historicity of this invention. Given abstract expressionism's interest in the unconscious, one finds the status of automatism is indeed a disciplined technicality, as opposed to natural reflex, also evident in Andre Breton's instruction on how to write a surrealist text:

> Put yourself in the most passive, or receptive, state you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and those of everyone else. Tell yourself that literature is the saddest path that leads to everything. Write quickly, without a preconceived subject, fast enough not to remember and not to be tempted to read over what you have written. (quoted in Lucie-Smith 2001: 34)

Both Breton and Pollock testify to the conventional or prescriptive status of automatism, and hence do not assign it with autonomous or originating subjectivity in any sense. They confirm spontaneity as a fabrication, achieved by inscribing passivity and by putting the subject "in the most passive, or receptive state" so that "I am not aware of what I am doing". It is precisely this aspect of "abstract expressionism" that renders it suitable for communal, ethnic, and nationalist sentiments. It is an unmistakable legacy of eastern calligraphy where linear automatism does not signify an autonomous subjectivity, but instead is a disciplinary conditioning of the body by social power. The joining of calligraphy and "abstract expressionism" means that graphic automatism is fundamentally a fabrication of personhood, agency, and empowerment that is rooted in and inextricably bound to the manufacturing of what Michel Foucault terms docile body. The body in this sense is a malleable object on which disciplinary forces acted upon, the body—its movements, postures, and positionality—as a discursive field on which power is organised and arranged (Foucault 1984b). As we will demonstrate in the following, it is precisely the hold of power relation on the body that defines the aesthetic of "abstract expressionism" in Malaysia where the artist's brushstrokes are motivated by the gestures of ideology and history.

As mentioned earlier, Yeoh Jin Leng (1988) emphasised the affiliation between "abstract expressionism" and eastern tradition by invoking the encounters by the American painters Mark Tobey and Robert Motherwell with eastern calligraphy, which resulted in a re-dimensioning of calligraphy into a new form of art. For Yeoh, this serves as an appropriate

model for the newly independent Malaya, because it exemplifies the possibility of merging tradition with modernity. Furthermore, the migratory elements that underlie the technical and conceptual development of "abstract expressionism" approximates the syncretic tradition of Malaya, where local and foreign elements are constantly forged together to shape its pre-modern kingdoms and continue to do so in the new, modern nation-state. The valorisation of eastern calligraphy by "abstract expressionism" exemplifies the "cultural intrusion and infusion" that has always been an integral part of the nation's history and artistic production (Yeoh 1988: 57). This privileging of calligraphy by a Malaysian artist of Chinese descent in the service of national sentiment captures a particular aspect of Chinese calligraphy that is tied to social power. According to Yuehping Yen (2005) and Kraus (1991) Chinese calligraphy has always been ideologically motivated, for the control over written characters has always been the determinant of power in China. This was evidenced by the unification of China by the Qin dynasty in the third century BCE through standardisation of written characters for the entire nation. The Communist's Revolution undertook similar reform in the 1950s, simplifying hundreds of characters to increase literacy rate. It is a feudal remnant retained by the revolution, and political figures have scattered their marks throughout the nation, in titles of local newspapers and names of buildings. The calligraphic state is also more intimately diffused on the bodies and gestures of its subjects. Consider the regimentation of the body in the following calligraphy lesson taught to children seven to eight years of age in China:

> The pupils are first taught… how to handle the brush and to grind the ink. They are encouraged to hold the brush very tightly. To test this, the tutor will sometimes creep up behind a pupil and try to snatch the brush out of his hand… Then the tutor shows them how to move the brush and shape the strokes… The wrist and the elbow should be level with one another and maintained at a height not much below the shoulder. When a pupil has practised for some time, the tutor places on his elbow joint a flat weight of some kind. The weight is not fastened to the elbow… and has to be balanced while the writing is executed. This exercise has the effect of strengthening the muscles of the arm… The body should be held square to the table, with the chest not more than three inches from the edge. The back should be upright – at right angles to the surface of the table; and the shoulders level and parallel to the table… The body should form an immobile base from

> which the arm can operate like the "arm" of a crane. The left elbow is bent … and the left hand rests on the paper… The right elbow is bent and the right hand holds the vertical brush… The head… is inclined slightly towards the paper. (Chiang 1973: 189–201)

Such dispersal of power at the corporeal level summarises Yuehping Yen's reading of calligraphy as "social calligraphy" where "the significance of calligraphy has escaped the confines of literati's studies and aestheticians' theoretical ruminations… calligraphy becomes part of everyday life and carries with it the power and influence that affects people's social life" (Yuehping 2005: 3–4). Through calligraphy individuals are taught discipline and self-preservation and enhancement, for the act of writing bestows the individual a sense of historicity and belonging in the circuits of power and knowledge. More importantly, calligraphy is the very technique of creating the individual itself, for the regimentation of the body aims to ensure "that each stroke be made in a single movement, with the brush travelling the length of it in the right direction. It is utterly contrary to the nature of Chinese calligraphy … to correct or retouch a single dot" (Chiang 1973: 190). Graphic automatism is achieved by making the body the locus of reason and deliberation, and the resulting spontaneity is essentially a coupling of reason and habit that intensifies inwardness and internalisation. The body is thus interiorised from which agency emerges as reflex, that is, as habitualisation and automatism. Calligraphy becomes the inscription of the very depth from which self-articulation rises, thus enabling the illusion of the subject as the autonomous origin of actions and behaviours.

Given the above, we may question the accusation levelled against the gestural emphasis by the Malaysian expressionists as being apolitical. On the contrary, it is rooted in an affirmation of social power that seeps into the body and animates the painter. A similar stand is taken by Syed Ahmad Jamal, the Malay-Muslim painter who defines his painterly gesture as a "cultural habit" that stemmed from the parental and social demand to practice his *Jawi* (Arabic) letters when he was growing up.[7] This work of the social is represented by Jamal in *Tulisan* (Writing) (Figure 5), which takes the Arabic letter ج (pronounced *jeem*) as its subject-matter, executed in the modern medium of oil on canvas. It was produced in 1961, four years after national independence, confirming therefore Jamal's "expressionistic" calligraphy as a nationalistic gesture. In fact, his interest in calligraphy as a painterly subject began in 1958, just months after the historic moment was declared. His choice seems fitting,

for the Arabo-Islamic letters that would be the mark of Malay-Muslim are also closely tied to social power. The earliest known evidence of the use of Arabic script in Malaysia can be found on the Trengganu Stone. Located in the state of Trengganu (north-east coast of the Malaysian peninsula), the stone dates from the early fourteenth century and signifies the finalisation of the Jawi alphabet in the country (Al-Attas 1970; Awang 1985). It employs the *naskh* script (Ali 1994), a cursive script that also forms Jamal's *Tulisan*. The choice of the script by the engraver of the Trengganu Stone surprises the art historian Zakaria Ali because it is a fluid form that does not suit one to engrave in stone, compared to the geometric and vertically oriented Kufic script. This choice can be explained if we look at the history of the script. The cursive script was invented and included into the calligraphic canon by Ibn Muqlah, the *wazir* (minister) and calligrapher to the Abbasid Empire (750–1258 A.D) (Blair 2006; Roxburgh 2003; El-Said and Parman 1976).[8] This script was instituted after the ninth century and represented a specific development in Islamic calligraphy. Traditionally Quranic manuscripts employed the rectilinear script, but after the ninth century the round script, which was traditionally reserved for the chancery, was assimilated into the aesthetic canon. The fluidity of the round script deemed it a more efficient bureaucratic tool than

> … the stately kufic [script] reserved for monumental inscriptions and Koranic manuscripts. … This canonization of the round script was part of major social changes that produced international Islamic civilization… in which power and culture were decentralized to many courts. (Blair 2006: 143)

The invention of the cursive script was politically motivated; it was the vehicle through which a Muslim identity was forged under a centralising power.[9] The expanding of the Abbasid empire was accompanied by the adaptation of the Arabic alphabet "to other languages, such as Persian, Seljuk and Ottoman Turkish, Hindustani, Pushtu, Malay, Berber and Swahili" (ibid.: 132). This expansion led to modifications of the script, giving birth to various modalities of Ibn-Muqlah's prototype, including the ones on the Trengganu Stone and Jamal's canvas.

As the script of the chancery, the cursive alphabet is based on a notion of secular authority as opposed to a spiritual one. The secular foundation of the round script is demonstrated by the inclusion of signed colophons in the Quranic artefacts and manuscripts

utilising the script. In contrast, manuscripts before the ninth century employing the rectilinear kufic were penned by the *ulama'* (religious scholars) and they were never signed (Blair 2006). Furthermore, the nature of cursive script made it especially suited for the democratisation of writing, paving the way for the institutionalisation of handwriting in the expanding empire. This, in turn, functions to bind the body to the legal sphere, because "the handwriting of each individual… can be distinguished from the handwriting of any other individual" and it "indicates a person's will and intention" (Muslim jurist quoted in Rosenthal 1971: 61). The individual character of writing and the innate meaning and purpose of writing bestows writing an evidential role, binding the writer into a legal contract as a subject who is legally accountable for his/her act and intention. In short, writing writes the inhabitants of the empire out of anonymity into existence as subjects of the caliphate.

The status of the cursive script as the vehicle that binds the self to the law is also in effect with the Trengganu Stone. The inscription it bears are legal edicts by the state which was then headed by "the self-styled Raja Mandalika [who was] bent on implementing Islamic laws" (Ali 1994: 47). It warns the people against stealing, fornication and rebellion. While other offences may be expiated through payment of fines, fornication may not: "if they are free persons and bachelors then whack them with rattan a hundred times. If they are … with wives or … husbands, then bury them up to the waist, stone them to death. If they revolt then torture them" (quoted in Ali 1994: 51).

The political role of the cursive script continued into modern Malaysia when it was used by vernacular literatures during the 1920s–1930s to instil nationalist sentiments among the Malays. These ranged from the moderate nationalisms of the *Lidah Teruna* (The Stripling Tongue) and *Majallah Guru* (Teachers Magazine), to the Islamic reformisms of *Idaran Zaman* (March of Time) and *Al-Ikhwan* (The Brotherhood). They all signified, on one hand, the

> … reestablishment of religious nationalism… and, on the other… growing recognition by Malays of their social and economic backwardness in relation to other communities…. [The] newspapers… were regarded by many literate and aspiring Malays as essential prerequisites for membership in the modern world. (Roff 1967: 162)

These periodicals were born from urban Malay intellectual clubs, such as the *Persekutuan Perbahasan Orang-Orang Islam* (Muslim Debating Society) and the *Maharani*

Group that were devoted to defend, promote and improve Malay life. Published exclusively for the Malay audience, these periodicals were all printed in the Jawi script, which made clear its targeted audience. The script "was rarely mastered by the non-Malays" and used in all traditional Malay texts and education system (Islamic *madrasah*, or religious school) (Hooker 2000: 87). Jawi provides the Malays with a sense of allegiance, and is regarded "as their 'national script'; most Malays rejected publications which did not use it" (ibid.: 80). The Jawi script fulfils an entho-nationalist function to form what Benedict Anderson (1991) terms "reading coalitions", by providing a common point of reference that bonds members of a social group. The status of the script, however, was challenged in 1963. Due to the

> … increase of secular education via the Malay language, the Latin script began to advance in popularity. This situation was reinforced by the Language Act of 1963 which clearly stated that the script of the national language shall be the Rumi [Roman] script. (Asmah Haji Omar 1982: 4)

The displacement of the Jawi script was meant to shape a unified national language through the Roman script that standardises the tongues, eyes, and hands of its multi-ethnic speakers. It took place "only after a lengthy and heated debate about the significance of the Jawi script for Malay (Islamic) identity" (Hooker 2000: 87). Despite its marginalisation by the 1963 Act, the Jawi script continued to be the preferred script for the rural Malay population and the generation educated before 1957 (Asmah Haji Omar 1982).

Given the history of the script, we can certainly dismiss the allegation against Malaysian "abstract expressionism" as ideologically non-committal. Its valorisation in the painting *Tulisan* reminds us of the continuing influence of the script. Its specific contribution, however, lies outside linguistic context and foregrounds the politics of form. This is also central to the history of the cursive script. El-Said and Parman (1976) point out that Ibn-Muqlah's prototype not only signifies the reach of the Islamic empire, but also provides the template for the development of Islamic aesthetics. It led to variations of the script that caused calligraphy to develop "into a major decorative art form which provided scope for self-expression to the artist in the Muslim world" (El-Said and Parman 1976: 132). Through calligraphy words assume the role of an image where "writing is … a symbol of Islam, the writing and not necessarily the meanings of the words which were used so decoratively" (Leaman 2004: 21).[10] This means that writing is not simply a utilitarian, technical invention

that carries a meaning. Here writing is meaningful in itself; writing in itself is symbolic hence is laden with ideological potentials. The latter is achieved through positing calligraphy as a concept of imaging-writing that provides the common image of identification among the ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse population. Due to its visual intricacies and highly abstracted forms, the majority of the viewers, especially the non-Arabic ones

> … have no idea what the writing actually means. … Just because calligraphy is writing, and consists of words and sentences… it does not follow that the meanings of those words and sentences are what the words and sentences are all about… [They] sometimes indeed are literally… unreadable, and often difficult to read. Some styles… are deliberately illegible… What is going on here is indeed writing, but… it is the form which is all important. (ibid.: 35-7)[11]

This "formalist" turn entails a significant ideological impact because the form of the script of the text fulfils a political end more immediately than the (readerly) content. The concept of writing and letters as symbolic objects in themselves offers a crucial political solution to the expanding empire. While "it was no longer possible to influence… speakers of foreign tongues in ever more remote territories and to require of them the tremendous sacrifice of giving up their own languages… the sacrifice of changing scripts was much more easily accomplished" (Rosenthal 1971: 53). The result of this formal shift is comparable to raising a new national flag. The "believers may be unable to read it, understand it… just the same way that those on the battlefield who fight to save a flag from capture are not necessarily fighting for that particular configuration of shapes and colours. Rather, they fight for a cause" (Leaman 2004: 55).

Tulisan is an heir to the development of the cursive script that landed on the shore of the Malaysian Peninsula sometime in the 14th century to displace the (Indic) Pali script (Asmah Haji Omar 1982; Sweeney 1987). As a marker of nationalistic inspiration, it continues the work of the script in vernacular literatures to mobilise the Malays against colonialism under the "flag" of Islam. In this regard, Syed Ahmad Jamal anticipates the embodied marks of ethno-nationalism formulated during the 1971 National Cultural Congress and those in the years of Malay-Islamic revivalism that followed about a decade later.[12] In both cases, the disparities of Malay lives are brought together under the singularity of Islamic identity. The

embodied nature of the script can also be discerned if we consider Benedict Anderson's notion of "reading coalition" which is accomplished through print-capitalism to distribute the nation among strangers, enabling them to imagine their connectivity (Anderson 1991). A "reading coalition" is accomplished by imbuing the graphic mark with the mission to domesticate and mobilise the body and its interiority (emotion, thoughts, etc.). This is precisely what *Tulisan* demonstrates, through the painter who, "like a calligrapher… paints from right to left" (Galeri Petronas 2000: 11). The painting does not stem from an autonomous self but is a result of what the painter terms "cultural habit". This "cultural habit" is no personal affair for it seeks to capture the "ecstasy" and "optimism" of national independence through energetic brushstrokes. The limiting of gesture to a Malay-Islamic context (painting from left to right) is a nationalistic imagining through a fashioning of the body. The act of the letter on the painter's sense of self is emphasised by the fact that not only the letter ڽ forms a part of his name, but the letter also symbolises the soul in Islamic mysticism (Schimmel 1984; Seyyed Hossein Nasr 1978). *Tulisan* confirms the status of the letter as the vehicle for the self and the nation, the site where the body becomes a social body. Within nationalistic terms, the letter was meant to be the proof of the painter's empowerment which emerges as an after-effect of national triumph.

Having said that, one may, however, question the sociality of *Tulisan* given the form it assumes. The painting does not present a recognisable symbol but appears to be what would generally be termed as expressive or spontaneous. It hardly resembles its prototype, the letter ڽ. The iconographic certainty of the cultural template is replaced instead by mere wandering and swirling of lines, sketchy effects alluding to the process of forming the letter rather than the letter itself. The painter himself related that while the painting is rooted in the letter ڽ the icon itself is quite secondary to the painting. What is important is the act of painting the letter itself, hence the title *Tulisan* (writing).[13] This assertion seems to undermine the formalist ideology of the cursive script and convey a full authority of the painter over his "creation". However, such view is nullified by the notion of "cultural habit"; what appears to be "expressive" and "spontaneous" notation is in fact a manifestation of a convention at work. The form that *Tulisan* assumes is grounded in a practice known among Islamic calligraphers as *mashq*, the disciplined scribbling or constant application of an interrupted movement. The act defines the foundation of calligraphy, for "the constant application of *mashq* improves the hand writing" (Abu Hayyan 1978: 29). The accomplishment of a pupil is first graded by "*sawwadhu* (he sketched it)", followed by a permission "to sign with *mashaqu* (he practiced

it)" before finally graduating with the permission "to sign with *katabahu* (he wrote it) (Schimmel 1984: 43–4). Even an accomplished calligrapher "had to fill page after page or wooden slate after slate with *mashq*" before executing a letter (ibid.: 42).

The calligraphic lesson itself is a regimentation of the body, involving specific coordinating of the body. The student must learn

> … how to sit properly, usually squatting, but also sitting on his [or her] heels; the paper should rest on his [or her] left hand or on the knee… The calligrapher needs five things: a fine temperament, understanding of calligraphy, a good hand, endurance of pain, and the necessary utensils… While practicing, the calligrapher was not supposed to lift anything heavy in order to protect his [or her] hands. (ibid.: 38–44)

The care of the hand results in the "decisive factor" in calligraphy, for it ensures "the ability to keep the ends straight, to make even the beginnings of the letters, to preserve order and arrangement, to avoid precipitation, to show forcefulness while letting oneself go, and to let one's hand go while using a forceful compact writing" (ibid.: 31). While constant scribbling improves one's skill, it can also cause fatigue in the hand, making "the calamus aggressive, or caus[ing] the writing tool to be rebellious" (ibid.: 29). In short, *mashq* is a disciplinary regime to harness the work of the body to service of convention. The corporeal effect of *mashq* is given by the story of the calligrapher Hafiz Osman who struggled to rise above his fatigue during an arduous pilgrimage "to fill sheets of paper with his *mashq*" (Schimmel 1984: 38).

Given the factors outlined above, Jamal's understanding of gesture is fully within the confine of tradition: it is born out of the conditioning of the body by convention through the agency of the letter. *Tulisan* affirms the dependency of personhood on the citationality of gesture and mark, thus stressing cultural force as the disciplinary mechanism that compels the hand to move in a specific way. Since the painter's gesture is instituted externally, it is not possible to define it as "expressive", i.e. as a full-presence of an originating subject, intentionality, or thought. Rather, Syed Ahmad Jamal's agency is obtained through a repression of his body so that his hand is habitualised to gesture "properly". His approach towards gesture concurs with Elizabeth Grosz's description of the body as a "concrete, material, animate organisation of flesh, organs, nerves, skeletal structure and substances, which are

given a unity and cohesiveness through psychical and social inscription of the body's surface" (Grosz 1990: 104). Rather than representing autonomous agency, gesture is an effect of social discourse that shapes the body's capacities, desires and materiality. Rather than preceding the body as a mastery of a biologically/naturally given thing by a free, self-constituting agent, Syed Ahmad Jamal's subjectivity is a result of his occupying a "malleable" body that is formed through time by being constituted within a specific nexus of culture. The artist's expressive marks are the result of a body that is dependent on social power that trains the body to perform and emit signs.

Calligraphic gesture and automatism contribute to the naturalisation of the body—its thoughts, emotions, desires, and behaviours—and open the way to mark the canvas in a manner that mimes the bodily movement of the painter. Within the ethno-nationalist framework the subordination and domestication of the painter's body compels the body to signify the limit as its manifest essence, style, and necessity. Formed as such, identity becomes a natural reflex, with yearning for attributes one passionately desires to attach to for the possibility of individuation. By making self-determination coterminous with national autonomy, nationalism becomes the technique of power that disciplines the body and by doing so creates and proliferates the individual in the sense espoused by Foucault, as "an effect of power, and at the same time… the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle" (Foucault 1980: 98). Calligraphy and its duration in the re-imagining of modern Malaysian painters are normalisation of the body through specialisation of body parts and gestures that stands for "the temporal elaboration of the act", a process through which "a collective and obligatory rhythm, imposed from the outside... assures the elaboration of the act itself. ... [T]o each movement is assigned a direction, an aptitude, a duration... Time penetrates the body and with all the meticulous controls of power" (Foucault 1995: 266–267). Since nationalism is the instituting moment of the self, society and state, the shaping of the painter's gesture by tradition is the very act of forming him as a national subject, of securing and maintaining his individuality and subjectivity. Personhood is signified by his/her mark, the graphic evidence, his brushstroke as a body embalmed in inscription to become a social anatomy. The calligraphic signature of Malaysian "abstract expressionism" is indeed the effect of power, the very material of power, and through it the individual becomes the body of the nation.

CONCLUSION

All the factors outlined, woven and explicated throughout this essay provide enough ground for us to dismiss the labelling of Malaysian "abstract expressionism" by its critics as apolitical or propagating autonomous individualism. The style may invoke a certain notion of individuality through its spontaneous appearance, but the historicity of automatism as a technical invention and the regimentation of the body that it requires challenges the conventional notion of expressivity and artistic agency. Malaysian "abstract expressionism" illustrates such conceptual nuances, where automatism and individuality are developed as the effect of sociality and history through the intermediaries of painting and calligraphy. The painter's gesture on the canvas is proof of the body that is offered to ideological force of calligraphy that domesticates the body into a community. In the case of Syed Ahmad Jamal, the letter ج enables the painter and "creates" him as a communal and national subject by assuming a violating function. The letter carries the normative force that forms the painter's name, dictates his bodily conduct and ritualises the modern painter into the larger Malay/sian-Islamic community. It provides the behavioural template by inscribing the painter's body, transforming muscular articulation into a meaningful act, and through its stroke the individual and the nation are instituted. It demonstrates the centrality of the body in identity-formation and shows that any attempt at identification is always an ideological project.

NOTES

1. Personal communication with Syed Ahmad Jamal, January 1, 2006. According to Nancy Jachec (2000), the United States Information Agency held its first exhibition of American art in England in 1953. This means that the movement was already circulating in England by the time the Malaysians arrived.

2. [Ibid.] Goya's important works were produced during the brutal French occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. His works were anti-colonial, which provides an interesting comparison with Jamal's nationalistic stance.

3. One may argue that the merging between "abstract expressionism" and local traditions by Malaysian artists functions to subdue such hierarchy in the post-colonial context.

4. The *Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung* was founded in 1956 under the banner Majlis Kesenian Melayu (Malay Arts Council) by the Indonesia-born Hoessein Enas and Yaacob Latiff (who would later become the first mayor of Kuala Lumpur). The council was formed in the spirit of Malay nationalism, at the height of the struggle towards national independence that was achieved one year after the formation of the council. It was subsequently renamed as *Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung* (Kassim 1998; Piyadasa 1994).

5. *Semangat* is the universal spirit that is contained in every physical manifestation of life and the world. These are the spirits that dwell in rocks, earth, fire and all natural objects and may become disembodied when "startled", whereby the harmony of creation is disrupted, resulting in illnesses and other misfortunes. The human soul itself is comprised of three elements: *nyawa* (vital breath), *roh* (the Arabic term for spirit or soul), and *semangat* (the spirit of physical life) (Endicott 1970).

6. The term *Nusantara* designates the Malay world, referring to the regions in the Indonesian-Malaysian archipelago including the southern islands of the Philippines.

7. The artist Syed Ahmad Jamal passed away in 2011. Some of the materials pertaining to his practice were gathered through the author's interview with him in 2006. The term *Jawi* came from early Arab traders and designates the Malay world in general. It did not carry any specific religious connotations to the Arabs but it certainly did among the Malays. The local category of "*bahasa Jawi* [Jawi language] was used to denote Malay as a Muslim language" as well as to distinguish it from languages of Islam (Sweeney 1987: 56). This ethno-religious meaning of Jawi is also evident in the Malay/sian term *Jawi Peranakan*, which refers to Muslim Malays of Indian ancestry, and in the fact that conversion of non-Muslim and circumcision are both designated by the term *masuk Jawi* (entering Jawi) (ibid.).

8. The empire included Persia, the Arabian Peninsular and northern Africa. Ibn-Muqlah is known as "the prophet in the field of handwriting", whose graphic mastery "is poured upon his hand [by God], even as it was revealed to the bees to make their honey cells hexagonal" (Abu Hayyan 1978: 33).

9. Anthony Welch also provides similar observation when he wrote about a caliph who decreed Arabic to be "the administrative language of Islam and that epigraphic statement should replace the portrait of rulers on coins… and legitimized rule on coinage, the art form most seen and most used by the populace. On documents, doorways, minarets, and objects it was also the ruler's name, and not his face, that symbolised the state… The script served as the binding visual medium of the state – both to its Muslim and to its many minorities" (Welch 1979: 23).

10. The conception of writing as image was critical to the identity-formation of the early Arab-Muslims. Rosenthal (1971) points out that the early Arab-Muslims were of very modest political organisation compared to "great civilisations" that surrounded them. The politico-linguistic project of the early Muslims encountered most resistance from the administrative institutions of these civilisations and their non-Arabic-speaking subjects. As a result, the linguistic mission was compromised, giving way to graphic projects. This move was significant because it bound the Muslims to regional history as well as asserting their status as a break from that history. Christianity distinguishes itself from Judaism through the sacralisation of images, which is forbidden in the latter. The Muslims arrived as a new monotheistic generation, distinguishing themselves from the previous communities through the aestheticisation of the letters, the imaging of the script, a non-imagery image. Thus, in Judaism and Christianity, whose sacred texts dominated the Middle East for many centuries, calligraphy did not develop into a similar position and status as it did in Islam (ibid.).

11. A contemporary counterpart to this phenomenon is typography. The primacy of forms in typography explains why, for example, institutional letterheads are less likely to employ "fluffy" letters that a bakery would.

12. The National Cultural Congress that convened in 1971 concluded that the official National Cultural Policy shall be founded on the pre-eminence of Malay cultural values and forms. The congress identified five areas as needing immediate attention for the development of national identity: language, official attire, the arts (dance, music and carving), architecture, and food (Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan 1973). This formulation suggests that the postcolonial modern nation-state of Malaysia may be further constructed through the assemblage of national markers on the regions of the body, both interior and exterior. The marking of the body continued in the decade that followed, albeit with distinct religious meanings. The crises of modernity and its attendant moral uncertainties that accompany nation-building and subject-formation led to Islamism among modern urban Malays to negotiate the changing meaning of Malay-Islamic nationalism through their bodily practice and representation (Ong 1995). By framing gestural emphasis within the language of ethnicity, nationalism and identity, Malaysian "abstract expressionism" in the 1960's not only anticipates the discourse of the body in contemporary postcolonial Malaysia but also extends the history of this discourse in early modern Malaysian art (1900–1950), when the identity of the region and the land were being articulated by European, Chinese and Malay painters through the image of the body of the natives (see Ahmad 2012).

13. Personal communication with Syed Ahmad Jamal, January 1, 2006.

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