



GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

Pioneering culture-building networks

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

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**ABOUT THE
e-JOURNAL**

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

Editorial

Shalini Amerasinghe Ganendra – Guest Editor

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Cultural Leader, Scholar and Founder of
Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur

BIOGRAPHY



Shalini Ganendra's impact on cultural development has been defined by over two decades of informed cultural engagement. Through programming, research, publication and an overarching commitment to transnational connection, she has furthered recognition of, inter alia, the distinct and longstanding creative practises of Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

Some notable projects include: Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur with its Luminary Programme featuring international and local creatives in dialogue and presentation, pioneering exhibitions of Sri Lankan modern and contemporary art in Kuala

Lumpur, London and New York, and research with publication on cultural practices.

Shalini is Sri Lankan born. She was educated in the US and UK, graduating secondary from Phillips Exeter Academy where she is a Harkness Fellow, after which she read law at University of Cambridge, Trinity Hall. She obtained an LL.M. from Columbia University Law School and is a qualified Barrister and New York Attorney. She has been awarded Visiting Fellowships by Oxford and Cambridge Universities to further cultural research.

FOREWORD

Culture celebrating difference. Culture complimenting commerce. Pioneering culture – The Story of Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur

Developing appreciation for and bringing greater accessibility to culture as a whole and visual art in particular, has been the foundation on which Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) has developed, over a meteoric five years, reflecting evolution and invention. Culture complimenting commerce. Culture celebrating difference. Culture as the creative. Starting out as a prayer, a dream, GWKL has steadily and organically grown, embracing free participation and access, presenting a dynamic platform of multi-disciplinary content. GWKL has been a mechanism through which Malaysia can reconnect with its own cultural landscape (both traditional and contemporary). The cultural marquee has introduced valuable local culture to global audiences; facilitated global exchange; and bridged cultures and disciplines to deliver engagement and project development. As such, GWKL has critically become about the culture of encounter.

The term ‘gallery weekend’ is somewhat of an anomaly for this marquee because the duration now spans two weeks. This longer period offers the opportunity for guests to participate in all offerings and for cultural stakeholders to derive more value through programme build-up. GWKL remains an immersive and intense cultural experience.

Our goal has been for the long-term development of cultural appreciation (local and global), coupled with the creation of a sustainable and appreciative cultural ecosystem through which audiences develop a greater appreciation for the creative. Such appreciation fostered through talks and viewings inevitably sprouts economic support. As a platform, GWKL complements art fairs and biennials, taking the best features from all such events, and presenting them over a shorter period of time with mainly free programming. Since 2016, GWKL has been supported by a wide array of cultural

stakeholders and endorsed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture. We have partnered with major local museums including the National Art Gallery and Islamic Art Museum Malaysia, in addition to including more than 30 select project spaces, galleries, collection venues and cultural spaces annually.

The GWKL Luminary Programme, consisting of public talks (panel and individual) presented by a diverse range of creative talent, has been the anchor feature of GWKL and has defined the gravitas of the marquee. Over these five years, we have hosted more than 30 Luminaries from over 12 countries, including curators, museum directors, auction experts, artists, journalists and collectors. Twenty-two luminaries, a major foundation participant, one moderator and one observer are represented in this publication.

Their form of contribution, whether through essay, interview or presentation format, provides a vibrant glimpse of the diversity of topics, experience and outlooks presented over the past five years– covering art practise, craft, curation, museology, markets, architecture, design, collecting and more. I thank each of these amazing personalities for their valuable insights; editorial assistant, Yung Lo, for adeptly ordering and coordinating these submissions; and Lindy Joubert, Director of the UNESCO Observatory, for quality endorsement of GWKL.

When GWKL launched in 2016, the Art Newspaper wrote “The next Berlin? Kuala Lumpur launches gallery weekend. Dealers and museums join forces to put the Malaysian capital on the art map.” In fact, GWKL has gone beyond being just another “gallery weekend”. Rather, the connectivity that the marquee offers has enriched many thus far with the promise of growing returns through increased awareness and appreciation. In 2020, the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic propelled us to innovate and deliver what turned out to be one of the most successful Luminary Features virtually, where everyone had a front-row seat. The high attendance was a testament to a growing realisation that culture can be the pivot to recovery. “GWKL continues to pioneer culture-building bridges and networks. It applauds creativity and provides a platform for dynamic discussions that continue long after the event itself closes. Likewise, this UNESCO Observatory ‘Arts in Asia’ publication extends this culture of connectivity for greater reach and duration. GWKL continues to pioneer culture. We hope you enjoy the read.

An artist's odyssey to forge a Southeast Asian consciousness in Art: Latiff Mohidin's Pago Pago

AUTHOR

Shabir Hussain Mustafa, Senior Curator, National Gallery Singapore and Singapore Art Museum

BIOGRAPHY

Shabir Hussain Mustafa is Senior Curator at the National Gallery Singapore and Singapore Art Museum. At the Gallery, he oversees *Between Declaration and Dreams*, a multi-year exhibition surveying Southeast Asian perspectives from the 19th century to present.



In 2017, Mustafa received the DAAD Artist-in-Berlin Award for his curatorial work. His curatorial projects include *Sea State: Charles Lim Yi Yong* for the Singapore Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, *The Sunwise Turn*, a meditation on Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy at the Dhaka Art Summit in 2018, and *Ahmad Fuad Osman: At the End of the Day Even Art is Not Important (1990-2019)* at Balai Seni Negara.

He co-curated *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969-1989)* and *Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago (1960-1969)*, an exhibition first held at the Centre Pompidou and later at the Ilham Gallery and National Gallery Singapore. He was a panellist for *GWKL's Luminary Forum III: Collecting & Curating – Ways of Seeing*.

Since its inception in 2016, GWKL has emerged as an important platform for critical dialogues on modern and contemporary art in Southeast Asia. At a moment in time when much of the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, GWKL has staked a claim for solidarity amongst peers by enabling conversations that attempt to make sense of this new world that has been thrust upon us.

- Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, Senior Curator, National Gallery Singapore and Singapore Art Museum

An artist's odyssey to forge a Southeast Asian consciousness in Art: Latiff Mohidin's Pago Pago

Oasis

In Latiff's terrace house in Lembah Keramat
there are many marvellous alcoves and arches.
Even the TV there's no common TV;
bats and butterflies dance out of the box.
A train's always arriving in his backyard,
the strumming of a gypsy strikes the suburb out.
Webs of light quiver lightly in the corners;
tigers prance, colours roar in the corridors;
and white horses, winged and wanton, whirl
in the dark secret attic of his world.
Amidst the dull labyrinth of this desert,
he creates his own oasis of the sacred.
Holding on to the clew, gift of Ariadne,
He paints his way towards epiphanies.

- Salleh Ben Joned
Kuala Lumpur, October 1986

Reading it for the first time, this passage from the poet Salleh Ben Joned may well appear fantastical. But it does convey some of the aura surrounding Latiff Mohidin or Pak Latiff, as he is affectionately called by friends and younger colleagues. There is a magic in his mode of working, as he moves seamlessly between two very distinct art forms – painting and poetry, the image and verbal. In this essay, I will navigate through the diverse geographies Latiff Mohidin adventured from 1949-1969, resulting in an awareness he came to evoke as “Pago Pago”.

Half Art Half Craft: Singapore, 1949

Latiff Mohidin arrived in Singapore from Kampong Lenggeng, a remote village in Negeri Sembilan with his mother Hajjah Noor in 1949. Until then, he had been raised by his grandparents who were Minangkabau migrants to British Malaya from West Sumatra.

Singapore was a stark contrast to Kampong Lenggeng. A cosmopolitan centre for trade and cultural exchange, it was also a major transit point to Mecca for pilgrims from across the Malay world. Latiff Mohidin lived in the Kampong Glam area where his father Haji Mohidin owned and operated a lodging house for Hajj pilgrims.

Kampong Glam became a playground but also an informal school. The neighborhood was the city's centre for Malay literary and cultural activity. At 134 Arab Street was the legendary Toko Haji Hashim, the most prominent Malay literature bookshop in Singapore at the time. It was a favourite spot frequented by writers, journalists and intellectuals from the Malay world. It was here that Latiff Mohidin first encountered the whole gamut of Minangkabau writers from Chairil Anwar to Hamka and Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana. It was also in Kampong Glam that he experienced his first *kuda kepang*, *ketoprak* and *wayang wong* performances. Every weekend, he would visit the beachfront along Alhambra to observe a tall and elderly Chinese man in shorts and a loose singlet standing on a short bamboo stool, animatedly telling stories from the *Tripitaka*.

It was in this urban climate that Latiff Mohidin was discovered as an artistic prodigy. At Kota Raja Malay School where he had been enrolled, his drawing of two brinjals with a stalk and leaves caught the eye of the art teacher. Soon after, the headmaster informed Latiff Mohidin's father that his son's hands possessed a gift. Not knowing much about art, his father Haji Mohidin contacted Abdul Ghani Hamid, at the time a young journalist, poet and painter—who became the prime initiator for Latiff Mohidin's early art activities. Hamid introduced the young Latiff to leading painters of the period like Suri Mohyani and Liu Kang. He became an instant sensation in the press, which hailed him as the “wonder boy.” In 1951, at the age of 11, he held his first solo exhibition at Kota Raja Malay School (Fig. 1) featuring paintings such as *Kampung 1* (Fig. 2) and “half craft half art” objects, which he had made using pieces of tin, plywood, cartons, textiles and straws scavenged from around Kampong Glam. In a recent conversation with Latiff Mohidin, he remarked, “This city presented ideas at every corner.”

These formative childhood experiences geared him for a life of travel and art in the decades to follow. Indeed, one of the key approaches that Latiff Mohidin adopted during the ostensibly Pago Pago years of the 1960s was *merantau*, a sensibility instilled in him through his Minangkabau upbringing, which encourages members of the community to leave the familiar and seek knowledge from the world.

Figure 1: Latiff Mohidin, aged 12, at his first solo exhibition, held at Kota Raja Malay School, Singapore, 1951. Image courtesy Latiff Mohidin.



Figure 2: Latiff Mohidin. Kampung I (Village). 1951. Oil on canvas, 41 x 52 cm. Gift of BinjaiTree in memory of Chia Yew Kay and Tan Kim Siew. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.



My fever is Getting Worse: Berlin, 1964

In 1960, Latiff Mohidin was awarded the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) scholarship to study at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste (Academy of Fine Art) in West Berlin. This city too, like Singapore, presented all sorts of opportunities. In school, he focused on still life, landscapes, and figures, along with studying the German language.

But beyond the school's walls, he was initiated into the raging debates within Germany at the time, especially the tensions that had emerged from the division of Berlin into East and West. Within art circles, there were burgeoning discussions around Primitivism's use of imagery from colonised cultures in European modern art. The city also gave him access to the worlds of drama, music, experimental film, cabaret, and jazz, along with the as the progressive ethos of modern movements such as Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism and Surrealism.

He also bought his first German language books in Berlin. From Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum*, an incisive commentary on Nazi Germany to Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), which is set in the working-class neighbourhoods of central Berlin. He also discovered the world of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Breaking down disciplinary boundaries between the visual and literary, in 2012, Latiff Mohidin published his translation of Goethe's *Faust* (Part 1). At the same time, Berlin enabled him to examine links between his own ancestral imaginary and these progressive ideas. In his writing at the time, the artist evokes the experience of being between these two worlds as a "fever" he carried from British Malaya to Europe, which got increasingly intense as European modernism and Asian thought clashed in his art and thoughts.

Latiff Mohidin's mode of working transitioned significantly during his Berlin years. In 1961, he encountered Thai and Khmer relics in the city's extensive ethnological museums, which led to the horns and serrated edges typical of his Pago Pago paintings. In a recent conversation, the artist observed, "I must have seen fragments of the reliefs of the apsaras, crafts and colonial photographs. All I can recall is feeling very excited upon returning home. Pagoda in German may be called "pagoden," and the word stuck. Later, I took out the suffix "den;" Pago remained (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Latiff Mohidin. Pagoden. 1961. Ink on paper, 14.8 x 10.4 cm. Collection of the artist.



To evoke it colloquially in the Malay language, I began to repeat the word for rhythmic effect—Pago Pago. This was three years before my trip to Thailand... I also began to recall that the traditional Minangkabau and Batak homes in western Sumatra have shamanic carvings within the four cornered roofs and fences, which are called Pagar Pagar. In my ancestral village in east Sumatra, Pagar Pagar is pronounced Pago Pago.”

Often in A Trance? Bangkok, 1964

Latiff Mohidin returned to Southeast Asia in 1964 with the hope of reengaging with a region that had been relegated to his reservoir of imaginings. He had been in Europe for four years, during which time various nationalist movements had emerged in this region. 1965 was both a formative and disruptive year: Singapore separated from the Malaysian Federation, while *Konfrantasi* raged. The communists in Vietnam were perceived to be expanding, which led to the establishment of ASEAN two years later. While he acknowledges the potency of Cold War ideologies, having witnessed first-hand the rise of the Berlin Wall, he felt it was important to resist such rigid doctrines and saw Pago Pago as a site of that.

Activating *merantau*, Latiff Mohidin decided to travel to Bangkok, where he met the artists Thawan Duchanee and Damrong Wong Uparaj. He explored the city, observing the pagodas and infinite forms that lined the banks of Chao Phraya River (Fig. 4). Duchanee organized the first Pago Pago exhibition at Bangkapi Gallery, a space he ran out of his studio (Fig. 5).

From 1964-1969, Latiff Mohidin travelled extensively across Indochina and the Malay world with the hope of uniting two continents, Asia and Europe, through words and images. Along the way, he connected with painters and writers of his generation. From Goenawan Mohamad to Usman Awang and Mochtar Apin. Constantly evoking the phrase “Pago Pago”, his aim was to manoeuvre Southeast Asia into an active position as a source of new ideas for modern art.

Latiff Mohidin’s poetry, often written as he moved from place to place, is in free verse and consciously breaks from the traditional structure of the Malay *pantun* and its quatrain a-b-a-b rhyme scheme. His sketches construct an intricate cosmology of seeing the world, as he encountered distinctive regional phenomena from the temples of Angkor, Balinese dance, and the bamboo rhizome. Latiff Mohidin queried about his aesthetic responses to these encounters as “often in a trance?”

Figure 4: Latiff Mohidin. Pagoda II. 1964. Oil on canvas, 99.4 x 99.2 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. This artwork has been adopted by BinjaiTree in memory of Chia Yew Kay and Tan Kim Siew.



Figure 5: Latiff Mohidin with Thawan Duchanee at the opening of Abdul Latiff: Exhibition of Paintings, Bangkapi Gallery, Bangkok, 2-13 April 1964. Image courtesy Latiff Mohidin.



The Pago Pago paintings of this period are composed of jagged and curvilinear shapes with thick outlines, rendered in controlled brushstrokes. Each Pago Pago painting maintains a monochromatic colour scheme, constructed with a black, dark blue or brown contour. Whether in oil on canvas or ink on paper, Pago Pago appears to emerge from the ground like a biomorphic object. In some works, these singular entities lose their cohesion and blend into one another, highlighting how all forms carry an element of interdependence (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: Latiff Mohidin.
Pago Pago II. 1965. Oil
on canvas, 85.5 x 58 cm.
Private Collection.



Restlessness: New York, 1969

“In 1969, I realised Pago Pago was exhausted,” Latiff Mohidin recalls. “It was time to move on.” 1969 marked a significant turning point for the artist. The Sino-Malay riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur on 13 May. This was the same day that Latiff Mohidin had planned to open his final Pago Pago exhibition, which eventually opened a week later.

That year he also received the John D. Rockefeller III Grant to study printmaking at the Pratt Institute in New York. Rather than undertake the journey by air or sea, he decided to travel across Eurasia via land. After leaving Kuala Lumpur, his first stop was Bangkok, and then Kathmandu. After cycling in Nepal, he crossed into Kashmir to visit the spectacular Lake Dal, and then went on to New Delhi, Amritsar and Kabul. He had hoped to travel through Iran, but ran out of time, and eventually made it to Ireland before catching a ship to New York City.

Latiff Mohidin describes this deep engagement with the world as driven by a “restlessness.” In his words, “By restlessness, I refer to the “individual,” an artist, who has always wanted to remain on the move. Not staying long in one place, not doing the same thing for too long.”

New York City was also in the throes of change. The summer of 1969 saw massive anti-Vietnam War demonstrations alongside civil rights protests. Amidst this volatile environment, he connected with numerous other Southeast Asian artists such as AD Pirous who were also recipients of various grants. He explored the city with his lifelong friend, the poet Usman Awang, with whom he conceptualized literary magazines and happenings.

These events would galvanise young people across East and West Malaysia throughout the 1970s. Pago Pago registered a shift too: “The shape became minimal, almost hard edged. Some say Pago Pago froze in America. Maybe. But I knew something else was emerging.”

Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago was held at National Gallery Singapore from 27 March to 27 September 2020. Conceived by curators Catherine David and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, this exhibition premiered at the Musée national d’art moderne, Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2018 under the title *Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago (1960–1969)*. It then travelled to ILHAM Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. For National Gallery Singapore, the exhibition was expanded to include a section on Latiff Mohidin’s childhood years in Singapore (1949–54).

The exhibition is accompanied by two publications. Namely, *Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago (1960-1969)* (2018), which traces how the Pago Pago image crystallised amidst counter-culture debates of the decade and *Latiff Mohidin: Half Craft Half Art* (2020), a text that traces the importance of childhood and how its impulse of insatiable curiosity can be sustained as lifelong inclinations.

Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago at National Gallery Singapore was accompanied by a major digital symposium titled *dan kau merentau lagi // and you wander again* from 15-17 September 2020. Conceived with poet-painter Latiff Mohidin, this event brought together artists, activists and writers who traverse the spheres of Asian philosophy, critical theory, and spatial analysis to generate speculative assemblages of liveability in a post-COVID-19 Southeast Asia. The following website carries the documentation of *dan kau merentau lagi* and other discursive programmes held in conjunction with the exhibition: <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/latiff-mohidin-symposium>.