



# GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

*Pioneering culture-building networks*

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

UNESCO OBSERVATORY  
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

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# UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

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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

BA, MA Hons (Cambridge.), LL.M.

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 interview with Ahmad Fuad Osman

## AUTHOR

Yung Lo, BA (Hons), University of Cambridge

## BIOGRAPHY

**Ahmad Fuad Osman** was born in Kedah, Malaysia and graduated with a BA in Fine Art from MARA Institute of Technology (UITM).

In the 1990's, Fuad was involved in the Malaysia film and theatre industry; this period



influenced a shift in his artistic practice from Neo-Expressionist painting to conceptual multi-disciplinary works encompassing installation, sculpture, print and video. Socio-political themes have long been central, as he investigates subject matters including identity politics, the abuse of power and historical amnesia.

A conceptual turn for Fuad has led to an emerging interest in the veracity of truths, alternate histories and contesting or reinterpreting of existing histories. This comes through in *Recollections of Long Lost Memories (2007/08)*, which won

Jurors' Choice Award at the APBF Signature Art Prize (2008) in Singapore, and his more recent work, *Enrique de Malacca Memorial Project*, shown in 2016 in Singapore Biennale 14 and again in Sharjah Biennale 2019, UAE. Fuad's recent practice not only reconsiders narratives from historical accounts, texts and archives he uses, but opens up possibilities of contesting and rewriting established canons.

Fuad has had extensive experience exhibiting internationally, including *Blackout* at Kunsthall Rotterdam (2019); *Leaving The Echo Chamber*, Sharjah Biennial 14 (2019); and *An Atlas of Mirrors*, Singapore Biennale (2016–2017). His works can be found in collections of the National Visual Art Gallery (Malaysia), Petronas Gallery (Malaysia) and Singapore Art Museum, amongst others. Fuad spoke at the session “Curating & Creating” for Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2019 at the National Art Gallery, Malaysia.

*[...] GWKL could be a very good platform to bring local arts and cultures to the international attentions. With a slightly different format from other existing arts and cultural programmes around, it is a good effort to bridge Malaysian art into the world and vice versa [...] Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur could become a Gallery Week Kuala Lumpur.*

- Ahmad Fuad Osman



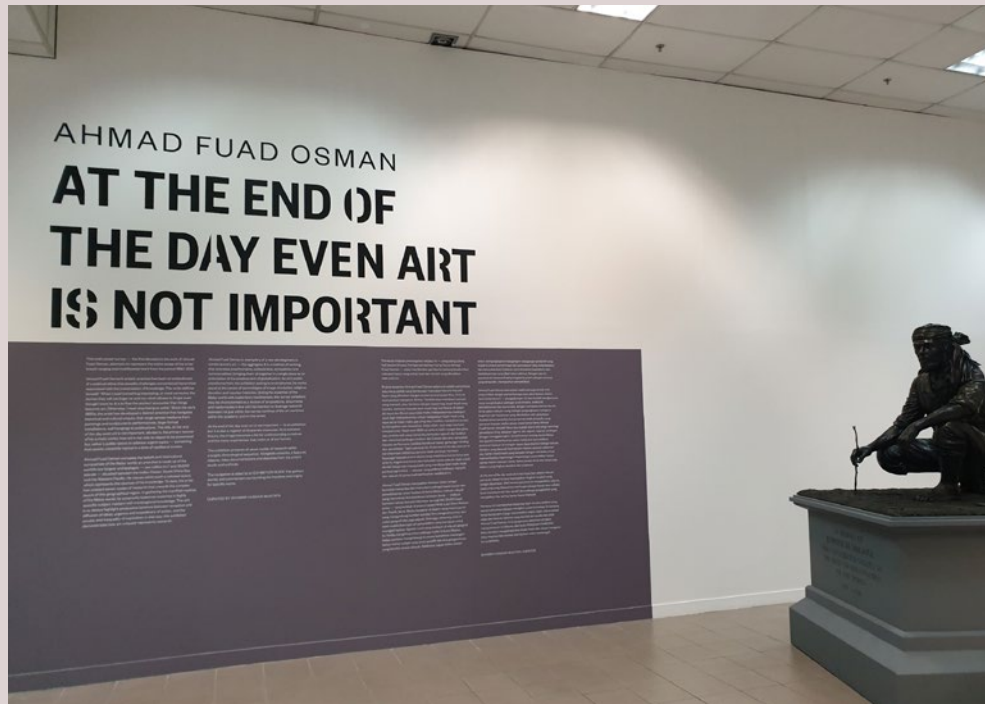
**We interviewed Ahmad Fuad Osman, who shares his experience before, during and after his critical solo exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur, entitled *At The End Of The Day Even Art Is Not Important (1990-2019)*, whilst also reflecting on his participation as a luminary for GWKL 2019.**

Q: What was the history of the exhibition and what was the response to it? How did you select the pieces?

Ahmad Fuad Osman: Sometime in mid-2018, Balai Seni Negara invited me for a solo exhibition in 2019 but I proposed a mid-career survey of my 30 years of works instead. They expected me to work with their curator, but I personally wanted to take this opportunity to work with Shabbir Hussein Mustafa, a senior curator at the National Gallery Singapore, whom I've heard about for many years before. Surprisingly, Balai agreed and Mustafa also agreed to take up and explore the project. After a lot of meetings and conversations, the show slowly evolved and started to take shape. We even shortlisted a few possible titles and finally, we agreed on one that is a bit ironic and carried the notions of interventionist strategy. *At The End Of The Day Even Art Is Not Important* opened on the 28th October 2019. We got a very strong and positive response from the collectors, art fraternities, media, critiques, and the public alike.

As for the selection of the works, fortunately, I had already started compiling my works with this (mid-career survey) show in mind as early as 2015. By putting them under three different sections according to their year of productions, I categorised them under specific titles. First, I called it a 'Tabula Rasa' for the works created between 1990 to 1999, 'The Flux and Flow of States of Being' for my works dating between 2000 to 2009, and 'Ways of Knowing' for the works from 2010 until 2019. With these existing lists of works, I think it was easier for me and the curator to track down, embark and explore the project further. But I tried to limit myself on deciding the final selection of works, as I wanted to give the curator full freedom in reinterpreting and reimagining the whole narrative of the works and the show using refreshing ways or perspective. For this particular show, it's important that the curatorial aspect must go beyond and break the public's familiarity and expectations; and it should somehow surprise myself too.

Figure 1: Ahmad Fuad Osman's retrospective exhibition, *At The End Of The Day Even Art Is Not Important*, shown at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q: How did you and the curator work together? How did you resolve disagreements, if any, on works to be included?

AFO: We discussed a lot through meetings and conversations. The curator, Mustafa, would come to KL and sometimes I went down to Singapore. He would jot down notes while we talked about things, especially regarding certain works, the ideas behind it and the process. With the help from an assistant curator from Balai Seni, we started to look through all those works that I had mentioned before. From there, we would discuss the importance of some key works and why certain works should be in the show while some should not. I realised from the beginning that the curator was very much interested in the stories and context of the works, how it was conceived and how it reflects my life and my artistic practice along the way.

Q: Did you consider local censorship sensitivities when organising the exhibition and if so, what were these concerns?

AFO: Coming from a Malay Muslim background, I totally understand the rules and regulations undertook and practised by Balai Seni Negara [The National Art Gallery of Malaysia] to ensure that every work and exhibition staged under their roof would really resonate with their stand as, first and foremost, a national arts and cultural institution. Both of us, the curator and me, totally understood this and that's why from the beginning, we tried to strictly follow their regulations.

Especially when considering some works that were clearly containing some sensitive and controversial elements such as nudity, religious and political issues and personalities. At last, we consciously decided and submitted the complete list of selected works, including those sensitive and controversial works with one other intention: since Malaysia was at that time under the new government and the new banner, 'New Malaysia', we thought that this is the best time to test whether the arts scene has also changed or not. So, in other words, we considered the show as a 'litmus test' of the 'New Malaysia' through its arts and cultural policies. The list of works went through all the necessary process and to our surprise, we had no problems and all the works were accepted for the show. There was no censorship. At least, for three months, we managed to see and experienced the mindset of the so-called 'Malaysia Baru' [the 'New Malaysia']. But at last, it proves that not everyone in there was ready for the renewal. Some of them are still very conservative about things, especially when it comes to the questions of faith, the traditional values of the Malay Muslims and their arts and cultures.

Figure 2: Ahmad Fuad Osman touring his retrospective exhibition, *At The End Of The Day Even Art Is Not Important*, with fellow GWKL 2019 Luminaries. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q: You toured the exhibition with GWKL participants – what was the response and dynamic there, and did the experience further inform you of your work and reveal any insights on engagement?

AFO: Since GWKL's participants were also some of the most established international arts and cultural practitioners, to walk and talk to them personally throughout the exhibition was a valuable opportunity for me. Some of them even shared their experience and thoughtful insights; that was some of the best feedback I got during the show.

Q: Thereafter, we know that the National Art Gallery suspended the exhibition, around 3 months after the opening. What was your reaction to this suspension? What was the public response? How do you feel about the incident now?

AFO: To me, firstly, it was unnecessary and ridiculous as we had followed and complied with all their rules and regulations. The show had no problems for at least three months but suddenly, as if being awoken from a nightmare, one of the board of directors brought up the issues that we had anticipated much earlier, even before the show started. They called me up and told me that I have to take out four works from the show.

Figure 3: One of Ahmad Fuad Osman's works from his National Art Gallery exhibition, *At The End Of The Day Even Art Is Not Important*. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Of course, I was not happy with that sudden change of events. I tried to buy some time and negotiate but they were very serious about it. At last, they took down all those four works. I had no other way than to retaliate back through a long and clear open letter posted on my Facebook, expressing my feelings towards the whole incident without expecting any quick and big support from the art fraternities and the public. But that was what happened. People started to respond immediately and very quickly. Like a wildfire, it was unstoppable. The ripples went on to become very big and messy, but it turned out to be an advantage for me.



Q: How was the issue of the exhibition closure resolved and what was the public response to visiting it thereafter? (Did many people visit after the show was re-instated in full and for your later tour of the same?)

AFO: I was really surprised that it became so big until it reaches an international audience including some important international art magazines like Art Forum, Artnet, Art Asia Pacific, Art Reviews etc. They started to pick up the news and at last, it reached the ministers. The order came straight down from Deputy Prime Minister at that time, Datuk Sri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, that the work should be reinstalled back until the show ends. They had no other choice.

Some people said, bad publicity is still publicity but in this particular case, it was not bad at all. Even the title of the show itself, *At The End Of The Day Even Art Is Not Important*, became more ironic with all those unexpected subplots, twist and turns. The incident had somehow created more curiosities and opened up more eyes and awareness towards those four (censored) works, the show, and my other works. It undeniably garnered more attention after the re-instalment of the works until the end of the show.

Figure 4: Ahmad Fuad Osman introducing his works to fellow GWKL 2019 Luminaries, at his retrospective exhibition *At The End Of The Day Even Art Is Not Important*. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q: What was your experience being on the GWKL Luminary Panel and meeting the other international speakers?

AFO: It's always good to make new friends and to establish new networks. My involvement last year in GWKL gave me that.

Q: What does the Malaysian art scene need to do for more local and global appreciation?

AFO: Evidently, one of the main problems we have in Malaysia is not having a well-established curator. They are the bridge we really need to bring our local arts out onto the world stage, whilst also bringing the international art scene into local contexts. One of the ways that we could do this without a local curator who is well-known internationally, is by initiating a project that is good and interesting enough to attract [the interest of a well-established curator], invite them to curate it and let them choose their lists of artist preferences (especially combining international artists with the locals). This will automatically put Malaysia on the art world map but of course, it can't be a one-off project. It will take a few years or editions for the international audience to take it seriously. Only then will it really establish us among the main players in Southeast Asia or even the world. Some art biennales are doing this. An international art event like the Dhaka Art Summit is also one of the best examples of how to establish a country amongst world-class art events. The invited participants have to be the right people. It can't be just anybody.

Figure 5: Ahmad Fuad Osman participating in the GWKL 2019 Luminary Programme session, "Curating and Creating", at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia. Fuad spoke alongside Zanita Anuar, Dr Adele Tan and Biung Ismahasan, moderated by Lisa Movius. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q: Any thoughts about GWKL and its value as a cultural marquee promoting engagement with local and global?

AFO: With the right strategies, I think GWKL could be a very good platform to bring local arts and cultures to international attention. With a slightly different format from other existing arts and cultural programmes around, it is a good effort to bridge Malaysian art into the world and vice versa. However, the challenge is how to get the right support from the right people in the industry, especially in terms of involving established international figures in the project. This will definitely make a lot of difference.