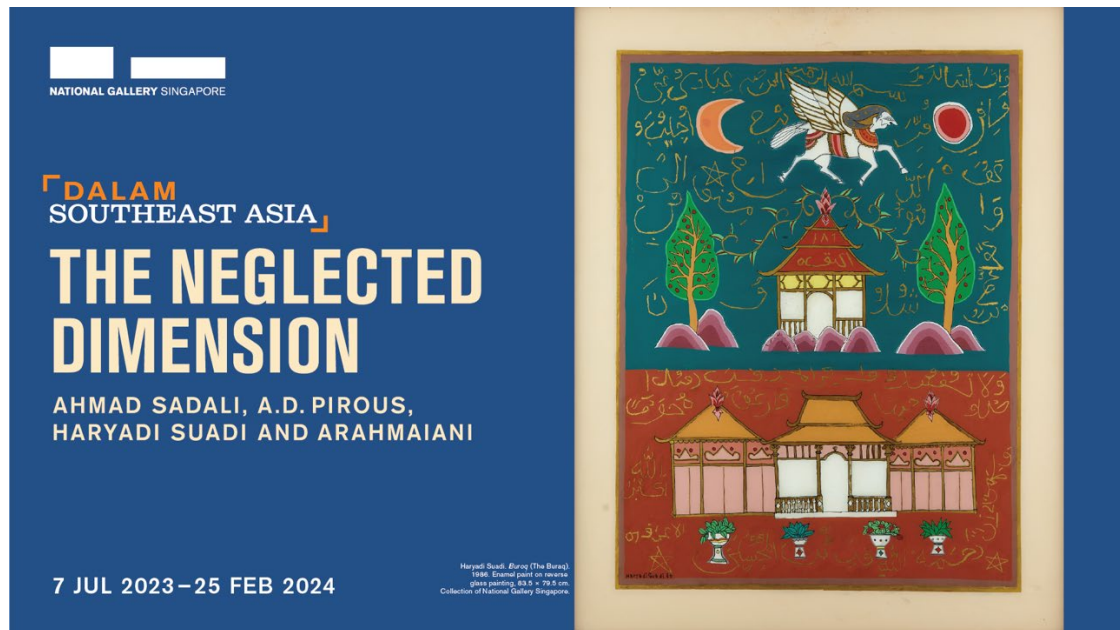


## MEDIA RELEASE

### 'THE NEGLECTED DIMENSION' EXPLORES THE INTERSECTION OF CALLIGRAPHY AND ABSTRACTION IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN MODERN ART

*The third installation of Dalam Southeast Asia sheds light on pioneering Indonesian artists who rework and reimagine Arabic calligraphic writing*



**Singapore, 5 July 2023** – National Gallery Singapore unveils the third edition of DALAM SOUTHEAST ASIA: *The Neglected Dimension* which opens from 7 July 2023 till 25 February 2024. The exhibition explores the incredible artistic experimentations that occurred in Indonesia with Arabic calligraphy, showcasing its significant role in the development of modern and contemporary art in the region.

The title of the exhibition, *The Neglected Dimension*, is borrowed from a 1987 essay by the Indonesian art critic, Sanento Yuliman, which offers a tribute to the life and work of Ahmad Sadali, one of the artists featured in the exhibition. In his essay, Sanento rearticulated Sadali's idea to reconsider the position of spirituality in the development and practice of modern painting in Indonesia.

While exhibitions of modern calligraphy have taken place since the 1970s in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, *The Neglected Dimension* offers a deep dive into new ways of engaging with calligraphy by focusing on the Faculty of Art and Design, Institut Teknologi

Bandung (FSRD ITB), an art school in Indonesia that stood at the forefront of experimentations with forms of Islamic spirituality and abstraction. This move occurred as its artists engaged with the language of modern art through their formal training at ITB as painters and printmakers, their extensive travels to Western Europe and North America, and their careful studies of the rich material traditions of Southeast Asia. In this way, Bandung, with its new approach to modern art played a pivotal role in realising what this exhibition terms “calligraphic abstraction.”

**Dr Eugene Tan, Director of National Gallery Singapore**, says, “The intention of Dalam Southeast Asia has been to explore understudied aspects of Southeast Asian art through cutting-edge exhibition making. Although considerable work has been done on Islamic aesthetics in West Asia, North Africa, and South Asia, debates on modern art rarely featured the rich and diverse developments in Southeast Asia. Through this exhibition, we invite visitors to discover the untold stories and vibrant innovations that have flourished in our region. *The Neglected Dimension* is a testament to the Gallery’s commitment to fostering inclusive and diverse artistic dialogues, while continuously pushing the boundaries of art experience.”

Four artists are featured in the exhibition: Ahmad Sadali (1924–1987), A.D. Pirous (b. 1932), Haryadi Suadi (1938–2016), and Arahmaiani (b. 1962). They represent three generations of artistic training at ITB and distinct approaches to calligraphy that reflect changing values, identities, and conventions in Indonesia from the 1970s to the present.

Together, their works highlight how they interacted with global conventions in modern art, evolving ideas around Islamic spirituality, feminist activism, and the experiences of being Muslim in Indonesia. Visitors can look forward to a range of artistic expressions, from abstract paintings to explorations with prints, glass paintings, installation, and performance art.

*The Neglected Dimension* runs from 7 July 2023 to 25 February 2024 at National Gallery Singapore’s Dalam Southeast Asia located within the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery in the Former Supreme Court Wing. General Admission (free for Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents) applies to Dalam Southeast Asia.



More information can be found in the following annex, and you may visit <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/TheNeglectedDimension> for information on curatorial programmes, talks, and tours. Media assets are available via this [link](#).

- *Annex A – Key Artwork Highlights*
- *Annex B – Artist Bios*
- *Annex C – Programmes*

For further information, please contact:

**National Gallery Singapore**

Yeo Yu Ting

Senior Manager (Integrated Marketing)

[yuting.yeo@nationalgallery.sg](mailto:yuting.yeo@nationalgallery.sg)

**National Gallery Singapore**

Ling Ying Shing

Assistant Director, Integrated Marketing

[yingshing.ling@nationalgallery.sg](mailto:yingshing.ling@nationalgallery.sg)

**About Dalam Southeast Asia**

Dalam Southeast Asia is the Gallery’s first-ever Project Space that features under-studied artists from the region and innovative curatorial approaches in the presentation of Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art. Located within the UOB Southeast Gallery, Dalam Southeast Asia enables the public to gain an ‘inside look’ into the fresh curatorial approaches against the backdrop of key masterpieces in Singapore’s National Collection. A majority of the artworks in Dalam Southeast Asia exhibitions will be drawn from the National Collection as well, including many never-before-seen works, recent acquisitions, and donations.

**About National Gallery Singapore**

National Gallery Singapore is a leading visual arts institution that oversees the world’s largest public collection of Singapore and Southeast Asian modern art. Situated at the birthplace of modern Singapore, in the heart of the Civic District, the Gallery is housed in two national monuments—City Hall and the former Supreme Court—that have been beautifully restored and transformed into this exciting 64,000 square metre venue. Reflecting Singapore’s unique heritage and geographical location, the Gallery aims to be a progressive museum that creates dialogues between the art of Singapore, Southeast Asia, and the world to foster and inspire a creative and inclusive society. This is reflected in our collaborative research, education, long-term and special exhibitions, and innovative programming. The Gallery also works with international museums such as Centre Pompidou, Musée d’Orsay, Tate Britain, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (MOMAT), and National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA), to jointly present Southeast Asian art in the global context, positioning Singapore as a key node in the global visual arts scene.

In 2020, the Gallery was the only museum in Southeast Asia that received a ranking in The Art Newspaper's annual global survey of attendance at art museums, taking 20<sup>th</sup> place. It was the first museum in Asia to receive the Children in Museums Award from the European Museum Academy and Hands On! International Association of Children in Museums in 2018. The Gallery also won awards for "Best Theme Attraction" at TTG Travel Awards 2017, "Best Attraction Experience", "Breakthrough Contribution to Tourism" and "Best Customer Service (Attractions)" at the prestigious Singapore Tourism Awards in 2016 for its role in adding to the vibrancy of Singapore's tourism landscapes.

## ANNEX A: KEY ARTWORK HIGHLIGHTS



Ahmad Sadali

*Lukisan (Painting)*

1966

Oil on canvas

99.5 x 81 cm

Collection of National Gallery Singapore 2001-01260

Translated simply as "Painting" in English, *Lukisan* is Ahmad Sadali's early experimentation with calligraphy and modernist abstraction. *Lukisan* puts forward an abstract field of colours in dominant yellow and light ochre counterpoised with an expressive stroke of a blue orb on the right corner of the bottom left corner. Diagonally facing the blue orb, Sadali thinly incised Arabic writing. While one can make out the letters, it is somewhat difficult to read as it shows no clear diacritics, with some letters appearing more simplified. There is a crude quality to Sadali's writing – they are less refined, more hidden, and dissolved in the expressiveness of Sadali's brushwork and the heavy layers of textures and irregular shapes that form the painting's horizon. Sadali's calligraphy prompts one to move closer and look at the painting more intimately to contemplate more profoundly.



A.D. Pirous

*Tulisan Merah* (Red Writing)

1974

Marble paste and acrylic paint on canvas

82 x 107 cm

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

*Tulisan Merah* (Red Writing) shows the intense play of textured calligraphic writing with smooth and even strokes of bold red paint. Clusters of calligraphic writings float unevenly on the top part of the composition, accentuated by the smooth layer of purple that peeks from the top right corner. *Tulisan Merah* represents the early period when A.D. Pirous primarily experimented with the expressive and formal qualities of Arabic calligraphy. Unlike his works from 1975 onwards that showcase the primacy of legible Qur'anic calligraphy, the inscriptions on *Tulisan Merah* are illegible and only perform an approximate similitude to Arabic script.



Haryadi Suadi

*Buroq* (The Buraq)

1986


Enamel paint on reverse glass painting 83.5 x 79.5cm

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

New acquisition

Haryadi Suadi's *Buroq* shows a localized rendition of the widely circulated image of the Buraq. The Buraq is a hybrid winged semi-mythical creature with a beautiful human head known to have transported the Prophet Muhammad in his miraculous night journey known across the Muslim world as *Isra* and *Mi'raj*. Painted in white with the facial feature derived from a Javanese *wayang* (shadow puppet) form, the Buraq floats between the sun and the moon over two Cirebonese



	<p>architectural structures on the middle and bottom part of the composition. <i>Buroq's</i> glass surface is further adorned with gold calligraphic inscriptions that defy orders and clear directions for reading. They are indeed illegible. Suadi's illegible calligraphy points to the notions of secrecy in the production and circulation of Islamic talismanic objects in the Indo-Malay Archipelago and the wider Muslim world.</p>
	<p>Arahmaiani  <i>Crossing Point</i>          2011          Video documentation (5'38) and installation of flags          Collection of Singapore Art Museum</p> <p><i>Crossing Point</i> is a video documentation and installation of Arahmaiani's performance at the Singapore Art Museum in 2011. The work was one of many iterations of Arahmaiani's ongoing collaborative and community-based <i>Proyek Bendera</i> (Flag Project) that started in Yogyakarta in 2006. The installation includes fourteen colorful flags inscribed with different words from varied origins written in Jawi script - a permutation of Arabic script used to write local languages in many parts of Muslim Southeast Asia. The words on the flags suggest notions of the impermanence of the physical world and bear the importance of the sense of belonging, love, and local knowledge and wisdom. They are a visual and creative manifestation of the artist's collaborative work with different communities across the globe, including in Singapore.</p>

## **ANNEX B: ARTIST BIOS**

### **AHMAD SADALI**

Ahmad Sadali (1924, Garut -1987, Bandung, Indonesia) is considered one of the key figures in the development of modernist abstraction and modern Islamic art in Indonesia. He is one of the first group of students trained at the art school in Bandung in 1948, one year after the school was established. The school was formerly named *Universitaire Leergang voor de Opleiding van Tekenleraren* (University Level for the Education of Art Teachers), and is known today as *Fakultas Seni Rupa dan Desain, Institut Teknologi Bandung* (FSRD ITB – Faculty of Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology). His early paintings show a strong formal engagement with the scientific cubism of the Dutch teachers who introduced the students to the works of European modern painters. Sadali continued his study in the United States in the late 1950s and experimented with liberating his colors from rigid structures and emphasizing the importance of textures. From the 1950s onward, Sadali has participated in numerous exhibitions in and outside Indonesia. Aside from being a leading modern painter, Sadali is also known for his *dakwah* (proselytization) work through the Salman Mosque – the university mosque he established at *Institut Teknologi Bandung* (ITB) in 1972.

### **A.D. PIROUS**

A.D. Pirous (b. 1932, Meulaboh, Indonesia) is a painter and printmaker who is recognized as one of the important figures in the development of modern and modern Islamic art in Indonesia, along with Ahmad Sadali and his other colleagues from Bandung. He was born in Meulaboh, a small coastal town in the southern part of Aceh. His family from his father's side comes from a line of Muslim textile traders from Gujarat who had traded textiles in Sumatra since the 1800s. After being actively involved in producing propaganda posters during the Indonesian revolution (1945-1950), Pirous moved to Bandung to enroll in the *Universitaire* in 1955, which soon changed its name to *Bagian Seni Rupa* (Fine Art Section). He studied painting under Ries Mulder and Ahmad Sadali, and continued to study printmaking at the Rochester Institute of Technology from 1969-1971, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Since his return to Indonesia, Pirous has actively exhibited his calligraphic works and organized numerous exhibitions of modern calligraphy and Islamic art that culminated in the *Festival Istiqlal 1991 and 1995*, and his contribution to the exhibition *Modernities and Memories: Recent Works from the Islamic World* in 1997 in Venice.



## **HARYADI SUADI**

Haryadi Suadi (1938 Cirebon – 2016, Bandung, Indonesia) is a well-known printmaker who is also celebrated for his glass painting works and his effort to popularize glass paintings within the Indonesian modern art scene. Suadi was born in Cirebon, one of the most important port cities on the northern coast of Java, connecting trades in textiles, ceramics, and other objects between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. His childhood was immersed in Javanese and Cirebonese arts and culture, such as *wayang* or shadow puppet performances. He joined the newly opened printmaking studio at *FSRD ITB* in 1964 under the tutelage of Mochtar Apin (1923, Padang – 1994, Bandung). Despite the school's modernist approach, Apin opened a space for Suadi to continue his preoccupation with local visual materials. His works consistently incorporate localized visuality and materiality derived from Cirebon and Java, engaging in dialogs with the woodblock prints aesthetics of a Japanese printmaker, Shikō Munakata (1903-1975, Aomori, Japan). Through Munakata, Suadi articulated his modern position by returning to local techniques, materials, and language of representation of Cirebonese glass painting. From 1975 onwards, Suadi actively exhibited his prints and glass paintings that often display abstracted calligraphy and subject matters that manifest the cosmopolitan nature of Cirebon as a port city and the interweaving of diverse cultural and spiritual exchanges that make up Cirebon as a site of convergence.

## **ARAHMAIANI**

Arahmaiani (b. 1961, Bandung, Indonesia) is a well-known artist for her performances and environmental activism. Arahmaiani's reputation and active participation in global contemporary art exhibitions since the 1990s, and her intense focus on social and political issues that impact women, have put her at the front and center of contemporary art practice from the Global South. Arahmaiani was born in Bandung, and she studied painting under Ahmad Sadali and Srihadi Soedarsono at *FSRD ITB* in 1979. Like several other of her cohorts of students, Arahmaiani's practice was shaped by a new political awareness and activism that could address the limitation of their teachers' modernist works in responding concretely to the dictatorial regime of Soeharto's New Order, its modernization project, and global capitalism. Performance, installation, and happening art became the modes of resistance against the modernist approach and the violent political regime, which put Arahmaiani in trouble very early during her student days. One of her performances in 1983 led to her forced withdrawal from *FSRD ITB*. In 1994, Arahmaiani's solo exhibition in Jakarta elicited a reactionary response from a Muslim fundamentalist group that forced Arahmaiani to seek refuge outside of Indonesia. Since then, Arahmaiani has lived a nomadic life, working and exhibiting internationally from one place to another. Many of her projects, especially since 9/11 in 2001,



seek to redress the increasingly negative images of Islam in global media as a feminist and a Muslim. Through the use of Jawi script and her environmental activism, Arahmaiani's works tackle several issues, including the widespread stereotypical images of Islam, religious fundamentalism and commoditization of religions, marginalization of women and minority groups, and environmental degradation driven by capitalist extractions.

## **ANNEX C: PROGRAMMES**

### **The Calligraphic and The Modern In Haryadi Suadi's Printmaking and Glass Painting**

Wed 19 Jul | 7pm | Dalam Southeast Asia, Level 3, UOB Southeast Asia Gallery |

Free, registration required

Join us for a talk about Haryadi Suadi's artistic practice with his son and collaborator Radi Arwinda and scholar Jérôme Samuel as they delve into his experimentations with printmaking and reverse glass paintings in Indonesia. Interested participants can join and sign up [here](#).

### **Talk With A.D. Pirous, Kenneth M. George & Anissa Rahadiningtyas**

Sat 26 Aug | 2pm | Online webinar

Hear directly from the artist A.D. Pirous as he discusses his artistic practice together with his long-time friend and scholar of Islamic art, Professor Kenneth M. George, and exhibition curator Anissa Rahadiningtyas.