



Ahmad Sadali's Gold Remnants on A Beam Against White Background (1986)

# A TIMELY Review

DEBORAH ISKANDAR EXAMINES  
THE CHANGING FACE OF  
ISLAMIC ART IN INDONESIA

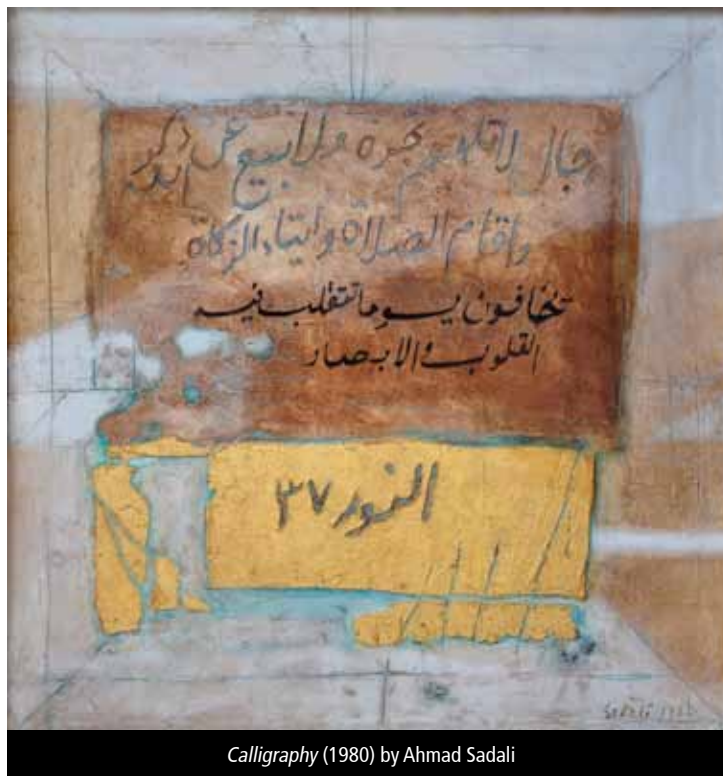
As we look back on the holy month of Ramadhan, we reflect on the history and meaning of Islam and our culture. This leads to the question of how do we look at Islamic art in Indonesia? Islamic art has evolved over a period of 1,300 years and spans incredible geographic diversity with Islamic empires and dynasties controlling territories from Spain to Indonesia at different points in history.

The starting point for Islamic art is usually found in the mosques and the prayer carpets, (sajadah). The grand mosques in cities like Istanbul reflect the culture, architecture, and furnishings from the ancient to the modern day. Inside the Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque in Turkey and the Sheikh Lotf Allah mosque in Iran, you see ornate inscriptions, writings in gold and marble, which reflect the richness of the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Dynasty. In Indonesia, we don't historically find Islamic art as ornate in our mosques as in other Muslim countries, because Islam was an introduced religion that competes with Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and local Javanese language, customs and practices across the archipelago.

Indonesia is the largest Muslim populated country in the world. The historical development of the teachings of Islam has had a tremendous influence on social and cultural aspects of Indonesian society. However, modern artists did not often incorporate Islamic concepts in their work, because Islam is wary of the production of an image



One of the paintings that A.D. Pirous does every Ramadhan based on surah Al-Qad'r titled Through The Glorious Night, Before Dawn (2014)



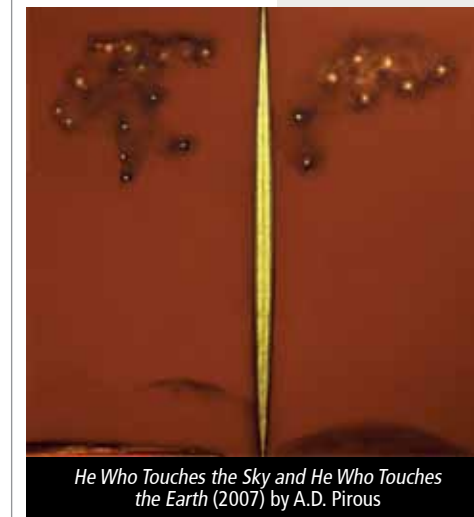
Calligraphy (1980) by Ahmad Sadali

that could detract the worship of Allah. Therefore, the use of calligraphy and Islamic verse, rather than figures such as those favoured by Europe's modernist painters, was one of the more common forms of expression for Indonesian artists.

Only two modern abstract masters, Ahmad Saddali and A.D. Pirous, were able to successfully incorporate Islamic values as the focal point of their artworks.

There are two distinct ways in which to interpret the works of Sadali and Pirous. For Sadali, the value of spirituality brings a poetic message to his paintings. Sadali's work has 'tauhid values', meaning his works form a kind of nature and divinity. Sadali often used triangles and geometric shapes pointing to the heavens and calligraphic script functions as a reminder of Allah in our lives. Sadali's work is important because he helped modernise Islamic art in Indonesia, using more meditative abstract style and making it as a form of Islamic art.

A.D. Pirous, on the other hand, incorporates Islamic verses from the Qur'an into his work. Through his Arabic script, Pirous' work is not only expressive but it also communicates messages that can help the viewer find spirituality in the art, regardless of their religion. Every year during Ramadhan, Pirous creates a painting inspired by the surah Al-Qad'r which tells the story of how the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to the prophet Muhammad during an odd-numbered night of the last 10 days



of the month of Ramadhan. This sacred night was captured in his recent work, "Sepanjang Malam Kemuliaan, sebelum Fajar Menyingsing/Through the Glorious Night before Dawn", handcrafted using marble paste and gold leaf.

But as Pirous has pointed out to me during one of our many conversations over the years, his



A sculpture by Arahmaiani titled I Love You (2009) at Esplanade, Singapore



Gunung Mas (1980) by Ahmad Sadali

art reflects his own personal spiritual journey, recalling childhood memories of his grandmother teaching him the stories of the Qur'an as a young boy. Years later, he discovered his identity as an Islamic artist in New York in the late 1960s, falling in love with calligraphy after seeing a painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York that reminded him of Aceh's spiritual culture. Seeing this, he returned to his Acehnese roots to find his Islamic expression in modern abstract art.

Today, contemporary Indonesian artists have found greater freedom of expression in their art. Arahmaiani, an Indonesian artist based in Jogjakarta, produces works that challenge the connection between religion and feminism. Her works take issue with the portrayal of Islam in the West and explores the intricate nature of faith according to its geography and tradition. Arahmaiani's father was an Islamic scholar and she was brought up in a mixture of Islam, Kejawen and Hindu traditions, so her upbringing saw the co-existence of both strict Islamic culture and Javanese legends, dances

and customs. Part of Arahmaiani's ethos as a female artist is to use her presence to attract attention to violence against women and female discrimination in Islamic society. However, after the 9/11 attacks, Arahmaiani felt prompted to combine her critiques towards the fight against the stigmatisation of Islam. Her more recent works include installations called "Stitching the Wounds" which displays the word "Allah" in outsized Arabic letters in the form of brightly coloured cushions, suspended from the ceiling or scattered invitingly on the floor. Her exhibition "Violence and More" is a retrospective of her works, ranging from photographs of her performances, paintings of colourful calligraphy and large plush sculptures of Arabic words.

There is a significant change underway today in the way Indonesian artists of the Muslim faith visualise religion in their artwork. From the geometric patterns of Sadali, to the marriage of abstraction and calligraphy by A.D. Pirous, continuing to the political critiques from Arahmaiani, each of these artists speak of their own faith, and how art became the most powerful medium to communicate to the viewer their spiritual lives.

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