



Spiritual Zoo

A solo exhibition by

Hasanul Isyraf
Idris



Details of Valley of Quest (2021)

In Search of Love, Home and Redemption through Hasanul's Spiritual Zoo

by Dr. Izmer Ahmad (College of Fine Arts & Design, University of Sharjah, UAE)

Spiritual Zoo is a recent project by Hasanul Isyraf Idris for his latest solo exhibition at Richard Koh Fine Art. This body of work comprises of a series of intricate, vibrant, and 'unearthly' drawings laden with narrative potentials that have come to be the visual signature of the artist. These evocative imaginings and imaging draw their momentum from multiplicity of sources as Hasanul reflects upon the death of some of his family members. While pondering on the journey of their passing souls, he encountered in a bookstore a collection of Buddhist death poems and the much-studied *Mantiq Al-Tayr*. Hasanul also re-visited a memory of a bird hospital near a Jain temple during his visit to India (Plate 1). He keeps this thought safe among his sketches as he did with the resuscitated animals in *HOL (Higher Order Love) Chapter 2.3* that recalled the political violence that he endured as a child (Plate 1). *HOL 2.3* also featured cigarette bearing duck-like personas in uniform, re-configured now in *Spiritual Zoo* into another species of nicotine lovers as life moves on towards yet another fold.



Plate 1:
Hasanul Isyraf Idris, 'Bird Hospital'. Notes
& Sketches for *Spiritual Zoo*. Pen on paper.
2021.



Plate 1:
Hasanul Isyraf Idris, Kaiju Tactics.
From Higher Order Love 2.3 Wound:
Environmental of Naga & Doubt.
Watercolor, ink and color pencil on paper, 61
x 91.5 cm, 2017.
Source: Richard Koh Fine Art

Like Hasanul's previous endeavors, *Spiritual Zoo* emerges from complex networks of events and occurrences that are historical, personal, actual, and imaginary, including those from Unsayable abyss – pre-conceptual, unconscious, trauma- as all human acts do. Nonetheless, all seven drawings in *Spiritual Zoo* carry the names that are plucked from within *Mantiq Al-Tayr*, a literary work which thus serve as a particular entry point for both the artist and his audience, myself included. Commonly translated as *Conference of the Birds*, the *Mantiq* is a well-known mystical rumination penned by Farīd ud-Dīn Attār, a twelfth century Persian poet and sufi intellectual.



Details of Valley of Love (2021)

It is an allegory for the search of spiritual truth or source that is narrated through symbolisms of birds and flight. The *Mantiq* is a story about the birds of the world who ventured on a quest to find *Simorgh*, the mythical Bird King. The birds are led by the hoopoe to cross seven valleys – *Quest, Love, Understanding, Detachment, Unity, Bewilderment and Fulfillment in Annihilation* – towards Mount Qaf where *Simorgh* is believed to be found. But there is no *Simorgh* at the end, only a lake in which the birds behold their own images that are reflected in the water. The mystical journey brings the destination back to the searchers themselves; the path to spiritual awakening is not far elsewhere but within the collective self of the searcher and totality of things.

Mantiq Al-Tayr is a fable, an ancient literary form that is practiced across the world. It is a short story where animals are anthropomorphized and given human characters and emotions to teach moral lessons through fictional storytelling. Fables accomplish this didactic aim by stereotyping animals according to human behaviors; for example, mousedeer is cunning, monkey is naughty, and so on. In the *Mantiq*, each bird species embodies specific human behaviors and tendencies: romantic nightingale, vain peacock, water-bound duck who finds salvations in water and perform ablutions tirelessly, and so on. Therefore, the *Mantiq*, as all fables do, is structured like a zoo where animals are re-located from their natural homes into institutionalized human-made environments where they are made into icons of their respective species for the sake of human learning and entertainment.

Like the *Mantiq*, *Spiritual Zoo* also features anthropomorphic strategy, grafting human characteristics onto non-human



Plate 2:
Nameneko Postcard.
Source: W. David Mark. <https://twitter.com/wdavidmarx/status/987846604911665153/photo/3>
(Accessed 5 July 2021).



Plate 3:
Hasanul Isyraf Idris. Details from *Valley of Independence & Detachment*. 2021

species to animate the interpretative potentials of each drawing and the details of its contents. While each of the seven drawings in *Spiritual Zoo* bears the title that corresponds to the valleys in the *Mantiq*, the protagonists in Hasanul's works are not birds. Instead, they are anthropomorphized cats who smoke cigarettes. These smoking cats have their genealogy in Hasanul's Quranic class during his childhood, where he first saw them as printed images on his classmate's bag. They are residues of 'Nameneko', the Japanese brand whose label is embodied by a group of anthropomorphized cats in human attire posing in various human activities including smoking (Plate 2).¹

'Nameneko' is that segment of consumerist modernity which re-invents the Japanese notion of *kawaii* that has become among the building blocks of transnational cute consumerism where cute objects, love and empathy are activated "to excite a consumer's sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle."²

The cats of *Spiritual Zoo* make their debut in a global financial hub with transactional intent and strategies towards potential 'homes'. But not as cuddly *kawaii* objects. They've been re-imagined into a rather masculine phantasy to personify human soldiers. The protagonists of *Spiritual Zoo* are specialists in permissible homicide, paradoxical professionals trained in manufacturing destruction and death hence are specialists in mitigating catastrophe and rescuing lives. Hasanul releases his cats from childhood nostalgia and sentimentality, away from Nameneko's huggable consumerism and let them roam closer to their instinctual existence as mammals who pleasure themselves in strategizing against others – stalking, hunting,



Details of Valley of Understanding (2021)

pouncing, and killing birds with their signature ‘hello-kitty’ strike.

These whiskered feline soldiers whose animality prey against the anthropomorphic heroes of the *Mantiq* conjure some provocative (co)incidences with Attār’s original text and a seventeenth century illustration of the *Mantiq* by Habiballah Sava where a mustached gunman sneaks a peek at the birds from the corner of the composition (Plate 4).

In Habiballah’s rendition of the fable all the birds are occupied with their *Mantiq* (discourse; speech), presented on side-views with the exception of the peacock that is presented frontally, with its tail fully extended. This presentation reflects the peacock’s character in the Attar’s text, as allegory of vanity and attachment to external beauty. The peacock longs to return to paradise from which he was banished. He was “Gabriel among birds” but “was friendly with the serpent in the earthly paradise, and for this was ignominiously driven out”³. Attar’s peacock in the *Mantiq* is a fallen soul, in alliance with the figure of Iblis, who’s story appears in the *Valley of Quest*, exiled from paradise with “collar of malediction” as the mark of crime imposed on his neck by God⁴. In *Spiritual Zoo*, the peacock, the avatar of Iblis in the *Mantiq*, is also the subject of the ‘*Valley of Quest*’. Hasanul places the bird at the center of the composition buttressed by two feline soldiers on each side. The one on the left looks on attentively as its comrade aims a temperature gun at the bird. An unmistakable allusion to the present pandemic, with something resembling popular infographic of the spiky pathogen afloat on the right by the ‘shooting’ soldier, its crown perches into the air like that of the wise hoopoe, the crowned leader of the *Mantiq*.



Plate 4:
Habiballah of Sava. *The Concourse of the Birds*. Folio 11r from ‘*Mantiq Al-Tayr* (Speech of Birds) ca.1600. Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451725> (Accessed 5 July 2021)



Plate 5:
Detail of the peacock in *Valley of Quest* from *Spiritual Zoo*. 2021.



Plate 6:
Hoopoe. Source: <https://alchetron.com/Hoopoe> (Accessed 5 July 2021).



Plate 7:
Valley of Quest. 2021.

Hasanul offers a graphic fable of transgression, cleansing, and redemption where lines and colors coalesce for a new species to present itself:

*A new peacock comes out from the pond, its feathers soaking wet. Its colors descend to the water, but they don’t mix with each other, like oil. Two feline soldiers climb onto a branch that is full of corals. This species of ‘coral’ is able to live in water and on land. But this peacock is a hybrid peacock, with a big standing ‘collar’ at his neck. There are patterns of golden ratio on its tail (Hasanul’s notes for *Spiritual Zoo* (my translation).*

This collared hybrid peacock sits with its back facing us. Colors drained pass its humbled tails, replacing the eye-like patterns of the common peacock’s tail with Φ , which is the Greek alphabet ‘phi’ that stands for what is known as the ‘Golden Ratio’ or ‘Divine Proportion’. It points to the mathematical ratio detected in many parts of nature including on peacock’s tail, now revealed in Hasanul’s hybrid bird where the symbol of divine harmony displaces the symbol of vanity on its feathered pride (Plate 7 & 8).⁵ Poised in pale melancholic chroma, this newly formed species is cleansed, refreshed, and (re)collared. Φ also occurs in the Hasanul’s ‘*Valley of Independence & Detachment*’, inscribed on a flag carried by a masked soldier atop the maze of bricks under the rather contented eyes of three towering cat soldiers (Plate 9).

Cats in *Spiritual Zoo* are not cute lumps of fuzz that laze around. They are dutiful characters who are busy at work. They provide intriguing juxtaposition between the artist’s personal life and the *Mantiq*. Cats are kept by all Hasanul’s family members and to him are akin to some kind of a divine



Details of *Valley of Independence & Detachment* (2021)

presence, which is also the case with the *Mantiq*. While cats are not the subject of Attār’s mystical fable, they were mentioned twice in the book, both instances outside the main text. First, in the ‘Invocation’, that is the prologue that prefaces the fable where cats are mentioned as the creature that God sometimes use to show travelers the Way. Secondly, in the glossary where cat awakens the Prophet Muhammad when it was time to pray. In both cases, cats are referred to in the *Mantiq* as ones who serve a higher power as conduits for guidance to humanity.⁶

Likewise, cats in *Spiritual Zoo* are in charge to keep things in order. They saw to the nesting eggs in the ‘Valley of Love’ and checked on Iblis’ ally in the ‘Valley of Quest’. In the ‘Valley of Independence & Detachment’ a cat carries the flag of Φ , which is the sign of the mathematical manifestation of divine order in the details of life and the cosmos that we live in. But these dutiful cats are neither idealized nor idolized. The ones in the *Valley of Love* “like eating food from Family Mart and litter everywhere. They have no discipline and are dirty.”⁷ A spiritual and ideological critique thus cut from the tips of Hasanul’s pen into our everyday life, itching the wound that is kept open by those who had betrayed their pledge to care for life and its future.

At the end, *Spiritual Zoo* is a sustained plea for understanding, healing, and redemption. It is a plea that began long ago in Hasanul’s art, memory and history which continues to find its articulation through lines, colors, and creatures, again and again.

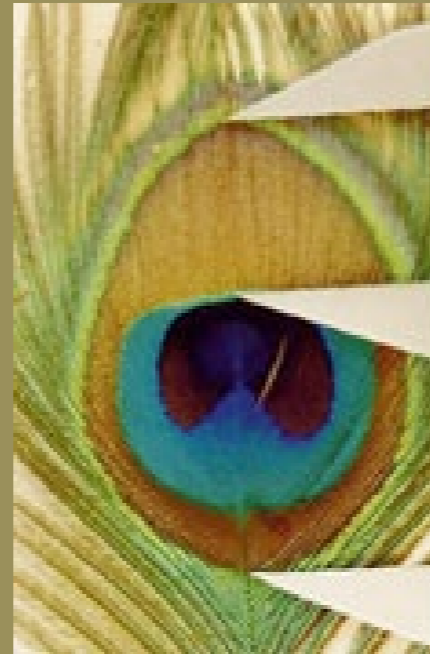


Plate 8:
Golden Ratio on Peacock’s tail.
Source: <https://goldenmeangauge.co.uk/applications/nature/>
(Accessed 5 July 2021)



Plate 9:
A masked soldier cat carries a Φ symbol flag in *Valley of Independence & Detachment*. 2021.

Endnotes

- 1 See *Nameneko* official site by Mr. T (Satoru Tsuda), www.nameneko.com
- 2 Sianne Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” in *Critical Inquiry* no. 31 (summer 2005), page 816. See also: Daniel Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* (New York: 2000), pages 2-4; Deirdre Barrett, *Supernormal Stimuli: How Primal Urges Overran Their Evolutionary Purpose* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), pages 52-53. Cute aesthetics become the stuff of capitalist consumption by feeding into our desire by establishing empathy between us and objects. Deeply rooted in comic aesthetics and animated films, cute consumerism work through abstraction and simplification based on the proportions and forms of the human babies. Infantile features – soft, round, and seamless contours that are empathetic to human touch – trigger maternal instincts, which, when reconfigured into the marketplace, translate commercial products into materiality of love and helplessness to be ‘adopted’ into a home.
- 3 Farīd ud-Dīn Attār. *Mantiq Al-Tāyr*. Translated by C.S. Nott (Berkeley: Shambala, 1971), page 17.
- 4 Farīd ud-Dīn Attār. *Mantiq Al-Tāyr*. Translated by C.S. Nott (Berkeley: Shambala, 1971), page 17. Iblis in the *Mantiq Al-Tāyr* was guilty of (forbidden) knowledge, for having a glimpse at God’s secret. He was punished not so much for rebelling, but for knowing something that he was not supposed to know.
- 5 The Golden Ratio is a mathematical ratio that is found in various designs and structures in the universe, including in nature. For this reason, it is considered as a geometrical archetype underlying the cosmos, thus dubbed divine proportion. It has also become a principle of beauty and harmony in music and art that governs ancient artefacts as well as modern design and cosmetic surgery.
- 6 These references to cats in the *Mantiq* are present in the English translation by C.S Nott (1954/1971)
- 7 Hasanul Isyraf Idris. Notes and Sketches for *Spiritual Zoo*.



Details of Valley of Unity (2021)

Valley of Qyest

2021, Gouache, ink and watercolor on paper, 153 x 153 cm



Valley of Love

2021, Watercolor, ink and color pencil on paper, 153 x 153 cm



Valley of Understanding

2021, Gouache and watercolor on paper, 153 x 153 cm



Valley of Independence & Detachment

2021, Watercolor and ink on paper, 153 x 153 cm



Valley of Unity

2021, Gouache, ink and watercolor on paper, 153 x 153 cm



Valley of Bewilderment

2021, Gouache, ink, watercolor and color pencil on paper, 153 x 153 cm



Valley of Astonishment

2021, Gouache, ink, watercolor and color pencil on paper, 153 x 153 cm





Details of Valley of Bewilderment (2021)

Artist's Biography



Hasanul Isyraf Idris (b. 1978, Malaysia) was trained at Mara University of Technology (UiTM), Perak, and is presently based in Penang. His practice spans a variety of media, including painting, drawing, installation, video work and sculpture. His works typically manifest a fictional, surreal iconography drawn from personal invention as from a melange of pop cultural references, such as comic books, science fiction, street art and film. He personifies his personal struggles as an artist with strange characters that inhabit his invented universes.

He was a finalist in the *Bakat Muda Sezaman (Young Contemporaries) Awards* in 2007, and has shown in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, India, Switzerland and Jakarta. Selected exhibitions include: *HOL: Scab: Crying Tiger In The Night Market* (2019) at Art Jakarta, *HOL Chapter 2.3, Wound: Environment of Naga and Doubt* (2016) at VOLTA NY, United States, *HOL Chapter 3, Scab: Lucky Draw* (2018), *HOL Chapter 1: The Fall* (2016), *Back from Planet Luvox* (2014), *Clash of the Pigments* (2011), all at Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Public collections include Singapore Art Museum (SAM), Galeri Z (Malaysia) and ILHAM Gallery (Malaysia).

Education

Bachelor in Fine Art, Mara University of Technology UiTM, Perak, Malaysia

Awards & Activities

- 2019 Third SeaShorts Film Festival, Malacca, Malaysia
Perak Cartoon Fest (PECAF) 2019, PORT Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia
- 2007 Young Contemporary Arts Award, National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 1999 Incentive Award, Open Show, Shah Alam Gallery, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
- Consolation Prize, Young Talent Art Exhibition, Penang Art Gallery, Penang, Malaysia

Residencies

- 2015 South East Asian Art Residency, Rimbun Dahan, Kuang, Malaysia

Public Collections

Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
Galeri Z, Malaysia
ILHAM Gallery, Malaysia
Collection of Alain Servais

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2021 *Spiritual Zoo*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
- Mini Zoo*, The Back Room, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2019 *HOL: Scab: Crying Tiger In The Night Market*, Art Jakarta, Richard Koh Fine Art, Jakarta, Indonesia
- 2018 *HOL Chapter 3*, Scab: Lucky Draw, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- HOL Chapter 2.3, Wound : Environment of Naga and Doubt*, VOLTA NY, Richard Koh Fine Art, New York, United States
- 2016 *HOL Chapter 1: The Fall*, Richard Koh Fine, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2014 *Back from Planet Luvoox*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2011 *Clash of the Pigments*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2021 *Constructing Worlds*, Online Exhibition on Discord, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Curated by Rebecca Yeoh
- Tranchée Racine (Root Trench)*, Halle Saint Pierre, Paris
- 2020 *In Our Own Frame: 15th Year Celebration*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- S.E.A. FOCUS*, Gillman Barracks, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- 2019 *The Body Politic and the Body*, ILHAM x SAM Project, ILHAM Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Malaysian AIDS Foundation ARTAID 19 Exhibition*, The Malaysian AIDS Foundation (MAF), Whitebox Publika, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Art Expo Malaysia*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Hotel Art Fair*, Richard Koh Projects, Bangkok
- FIELD MEETING Take 6: Thinking Collections*, 13th Edition of Asia Contemporary Art Week, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

- 2018 *Bintang 5 Vol#3*, Segaris Art Center, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- India Art Fair*, Richard Koh Fine Art, New Delhi, India
- ART STAGE Singapore*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- 2017 *VOLTA 13*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Basel, Switzerland
- Contemporary Forum*, ILHAM Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Art Central Hong Kong 2017*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Hong Kong
- Art Stage Singapore*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- The Artlink Pop-up*, Artspace @ Helutrans, Singapore
- 2016 *Malaysian Art, A Special Preview*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Malaysian Art, A New Perspective*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- ART AID16*, White Box @ Publika, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- AB+C Charity Arts Exhibition*, Georgetown Festival, Penang, Malaysia
- 2015 *Malaysian Art, A New Perspective*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- Malaysian Art, A New Perspective*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Open Gate - Asian Sounds Research*, with Japan Foundation, Hin Bus Depot, Georgetown, Malaysia
- 2014 *Southeast Asian Pavilion*, KIAF/14, Seoul, Korea
- Malaysian Eye*, White Box, Publika, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- MEAA (Malaysian Emerging Artists Awards) Finalist Exhibition*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Arts Kuala Lumpur - Melbourne 2014*, Space @ Collins, Melbourne
- 2013 *YOUNG MALAYSIAN ARTISTS: NEW OBJECT(ION) II (YMA II)*, Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2010 *Ringan-ringan*, Map White Box, Publika, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- January Showcase*, Chandan Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2009 *International Contemporary Art Show (Imcas)*, Danga Bay, Johor Bahru, Malaysia
- Our Hearts For Yours*, Chandan Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 18@8*, Weiling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2008 *Semangat Chandan : Contemporary Artist From The Land Of Grace*, Chandan Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2007 *Young Contemporary Art Exhibition*, National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Three New Voices*, Wei Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2006 *Pameran Titian Budaya Malaysia*, Brunei Darussalam
- Open Show*, National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Tribute To Jeri Azahari*, National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2005 *Miniature Show*, Maya Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- AID For Tsunami Relief*, National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Below 1000*, Gema Rimba Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2004 *Young Contemporary Art Exhibition*, National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- The Junction*, Pelita Hati Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 1999 *Open Show*, Shah Alam Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Young Talent Art Exhibition*, Penang Fest, Penang Art Gallery, Malaysia
- 1998 *Julung*, Melaka Museum, Malaysia
- Senirupa, Darul Ridzuan Museum, Perak, Malaysia



Details of Valley of Astonishment (2021)

Writer's Biography



Dr. Izmer Bin Ahmad teaches Fine Arts at the College of Fine Arts & Design, University of Sharjah. Trained as a practicing artist as well as an academic researcher his professional experience moves between studio practice and scholarly writing. As an artist, Izmer's work focuses mainly on drawing and painting. His academic research and publication had been primarily about the body and modern Malaysian art, especially in examining the manifestation of somatic nationalism in Malaysian artistic and cultural production. Izmer's current research interests remains bodily within the materiality of studio practice and aesthesis.

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a solo exhibition by Hasanul Isyraf Idris

1 - 23 October 2021

Richard Koh Fine Art
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Front cover page: Details of *Valley of Love* (2021)



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Founded in 2005, with spaces in Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Singapore, Richard Koh Fine Art is committed to the promotion of Southeast Asian contemporary art on regional and international platforms. Centred around a core belief in developing an artist's career, the gallery looks to identify understated, albeit promising practices, and providing it opportunities to flourish. Through its regular exhibition cycles, print & digital publications and cross-border gallery collaborations, Richard Koh Fine Art engages the art community with the aim of developing regional and intercultural dialogue.



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