



RIMBUN DAHAN  
5-27 March 2022

# **Renewal:** Paintings by Hijjas Kasturi





top

**CANTING 4**  
2021  
acrylic and chalk  
on canvas  
182.8 x 122 cm

bottom left

**AFTER  
MULTHALIB'S  
60 TURNS**  
2020  
acrylic on canvas  
61 x 122 cm



bottom right

**RIMBUN SERIES -  
DEDAUN KERING**  
2020  
acrylic on canvas  
61 x 122 cm



**RIMBUN DAHAN CONNOTES SHELTER** — lush, verdant, generative, branching out, fully expressed in the architecture of its buildings and its generous landscape, a family home expanded into an environment for fostering creative practice with a broad and enduring legacy. Its artists' residency programme, seeded by Hijjas and Angela in 1994, has been running now for almost 30 years.

Through the pandemic, Rimbun Dahan has harboured an unexpected artist in residence — Hijjas Kasturi himself. During this time, he has made over 300 paintings, an extraordinary undertaking, whose ambition is rivalled only by its sheer range. Here at the gallery is an exhibition presenting a selection of these paintings. It is a 'residency' show unlike those that have come before, and one very much about Rimbun Dahan itself, which has enabled this new lease of creative life.

We think of Hijjas Kasturi as one of our nation builders, giving formal expression to Malaysia's ambitions, identity and progress in the many iconic structures he has designed that shape our capital's cityscape and beyond. His creative work to date has been public, even monumental, but it is work that is contingent on the needs of site and client, its processes necessarily collaborative and demanding of time and labour. For Hijjas, art and architecture are closely related, but artists are differentiated by their unique freedom.

And so, since March 2020, he has been enjoying Rimbun Dahan's gift, going back to exploring a more personal creative space, painting with no holds barred, taking on every day the challenge of the blank canvas. His aim, no more and no less, has been to find himself in art and to see what he might be able to offer.

It is a turning inward to home, where he works in a downstairs studio in the guest house, which opens out fully

into the garden; and also from his study upstairs, overlooking former resident Multholib Musa's steel sculpture, *60 Turns*. Angela, who has run the residency since its inception, and Bilqis, who has more recently taken on its management, are not quite sure what to make of their latest charge, who, busy with his many projects, had paid scant attention to Rimbun Dahan until now.

I have seen many artists' exhibitions at Rimbun Dahan, and how important a role the residency has played in supporting them. What is showcased here is not a specific body of work by a professional artist, researched and developed studiously over the course of their stay. For Hijjas, this exhibition is a test of his work as an artist, while also creating an example of his artistic processes, their trials and errors and triumphs.

The initial challenge was inspiration, and he has found this, like many artists before him, all of a sudden, all around him. In the thick vegetation, the pathways and spaces, and the details of the native Malaysian and Southeast Asian flora — biji kapok, medang payung, pakis, pinang — in the garden that Angela has curated and cultivated over three decades. In the art collection. In the life of Rimbun Dahan itself.

In coming to the canvas, he finds he is met with the same questions as he has faced as a modern Malaysian architect — how to integrate forms that are meaningful to the local, how to be different and find an expression of self. As in his architectural practice, he means to define himself as an artist by his capacity for reinvention. The process of making has therefore been experimental and intuitive, following paths down different painterly approaches, and in Angela's selection of small works on paper and board we get a sense of the intriguing range of his experiments.



There are experiments which have not been included; notably missing here is *A Bad Painting of Bad People*, the punchiest of Hijjas' interpretations of the human figure, with a playful political edge. With the limitations of space, the show follows some consistent themes that have grown out of his study of his immediate environment — often building on ideas that relate to a visual vocabulary already embedded in his architectural practice.

With the compact timeframe of Hijjas' process, we easily trace how natural forms translate into sculptural and graphic forms and painterly ideas. The tangled branches in *Ranting 1* pare down into striking scratchy abstractions, or insinuate themselves into *Aksara*, playing on calligraphic forms — Chinese, Arabic, perhaps Sanskrit — and these unfold in turn into the busier, bigger, more ambitious compositions of *Corak-Caring*.

Hijjas and Angela were early collectors and patrons of the local art scene, and he has lived among the figurative stylisations of Nanyang painters like Cheong Soo Pieng and the works of peers such as Latiff Mohidin, whose explorations of regional architectural and natural archetypes have long been an inspiration, together with more recent sculptures by past residents, whose works he has painted. There are compelling conversations happening between natural, sculptural, architectural and painted forms. Interestingly, while the sail or leaf blade-like shapes of *Puncak* remind us of the Telekom building's silhouette, their lightness, luminescence and bold outlines relate more closely to Serina Hijjas' 'metal and glass' aesthetic than the distinctive sculptural masses of his own designs.

At times, Hijjas has started

top

**CORANG-CARING 2**  
2021  
acrylic on canvas  
131 x 211 cm

bottom

**BAYANGAN SEDULU**  
2021  
acrylic on canvas  
121 x 91.4 cm



by taking a cue from modern painters he admires — Joan Mitchell, Gerhard Richter, Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella — and from there seeks some way of creating something original, bringing to it something of where he is from. The mark-making and geometric patterns of *After Stella* soon make way for the arresting *Canting* paintings, where plant-like forms and strong linear patterns create a different kind of hybrid inspired by batik motifs, perhaps in tribute to his mother, who could do batik canting, and whose father was a batik trader.

Hijjas' favourite piece is one he has had the most problems with and painted over twice. It has stood on the easel in his study these past months, slash-like blue strokes over leafy green forms, over bright yellows and oranges like sunlight peeking through branches (he revels in the freedom he has as a painter to play with colour). *Bayangan Sedulu* — shadows of the past, not in the negative sense of haunting, but a description of the layering of paint, time and memory. In Hijjas' frenetic, energetic latest foray into art-making, nothing stands still, all is dynamic and changing and bursting to find shape.

*Renewal* celebrates what it is to explore painting, and the processes of creative intelligence and inspiration. It is very much Hijjas Kasturi in the mode of "grab it now, and see what we can do". It presents his tireless search for original form and expression, ranging through the wider aesthetics and visual impulses of his architectural work, and finding their richest source in the natural abundance, and the artistic, cultural, personal and family memory cultivated under the broad, generous shelter of home.

— Beverly Yong 2022



cover

**SANJUNG 9**  
2021  
enamel paint on  
plywood board  
122 x 91.4 cm

left

**PUNCAK 3**  
2020  
acrylic on canvas  
91.4 x 91.4 cm

bottom

**SELF PORTRAIT,  
MASKED**  
2020  
acrylic on canvas  
91.4 x 61 cm

**HIJJAS BIN KASTURI** Born to a poor family in Singapore in 1936, Hiijas witnessed the Japanese occupation and the powerful movement for independence in Sumatra where his family found refuge. Returning to Singapore after the war, he attended Kota Raja primary school and won a place at Raffles Institution where he was a mediocre student (while working nights binding bales of newspapers) but an enthusiastic explorer. He didn't qualify for university so he worked as a draughtsman at the Singapore Housing Trust, while studying art at weekends and architecture by correspondence.

After writing to every university he could find seeking bursaries, the Australian government offered Hiijas a Colombo Plan scholarship to study architecture, which was a life changing opportunity. He studied in Adelaide and Melbourne and graduated with a degree in architecture and a diploma in town and regional planning, and then returned to Singapore with his young family.

Finding few opportunities there for his great ambitions to practice, teach and build, he moved to Malaysia at the invitation of Tun Razak and MARA, the Majlis Amanah Rakyat, who were looking for someone to start a school for Form 4 drop-outs that would give them technical skills to support national development; the MARA Institute of Technology was born, later to become UiTM. Hiijas' ambition was to provide young people with the opportunity for an education that could alter their lives. He was strongly influenced by Bauhaus ideas and included a wide variety of experiences for the kampong youth that made up his student body.

Starting his own architectural practice was a struggle; in the late 60s there was little work and less money, but educational buildings became Hiijas' forte, designing junior science colleges, libraries and facilities for the many new universities started at that time, as well as planning new townships in Pahang for the FELDA Triangle. In the '70s and '80s he designed and supervised the construction of many high rise buildings such as Bangunan Dato Zainal, Tabung Haji HQ, Menara MPPJ, Apera building and won the international competition for the design of Malayan Banking's HQ. He also completed regional offices for Bank Negara and community centres for the state of Sarawak; and in the '90s there were many institutional projects like the Convention Centre in Putrajaya. He did some international work, most notably the Al-Faisal University in Riyadh where he designed for the inclusion of women in the

student body, but decided he was best suited to working in Malaysia.

Hiijas continues to teach at various universities, and contributes to seminars and academic programmes. He is a member of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia with whom he has been developing an ArtScience Prize.

Hiijas has been awarded the PAM Gold Medal, five honorary doctorates from Australian and Malaysian Universities, the ASEAN Award in 1990 in recognition of his work in the arts and architecture, and the Tokyo Creation Award, also in 1990. His family and practice published a book on his life and practice, *Concrete, Metal, Glass* in 2006 that records his professional work.

One factor that has constantly guided Hiijas' life is his wish to "pay back" to society for all the support that he has enjoyed that made his success possible. This was his objective in starting the artists' residencies at his family home, Rimbun Dahan, in 1994. The programme has hosted and supported hundreds of Malaysian, Australian and ASEAN artists and writers, and continues to do so.



**CURATION: Beverly Yong, in collaboration with Angela Hiijas and Bilqis Hiijas**

**Rimbun Dahan**  
www.rimbundahan.org