



cover

**IMBANGAN
DINAMIK 1**
2024
enamel paint &
acrylic on canvas
152 x 122 cm

HIJJAS BIN KASTURI Born to a poor family in Singapore in 1936, Hijjas 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 Hijjas 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. Hijjas' 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 Hijjas' 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.

Hijjas continues to teach at various universities, and contributes to seminars and academic programmes. He is a member of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia.

Hijjas 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.

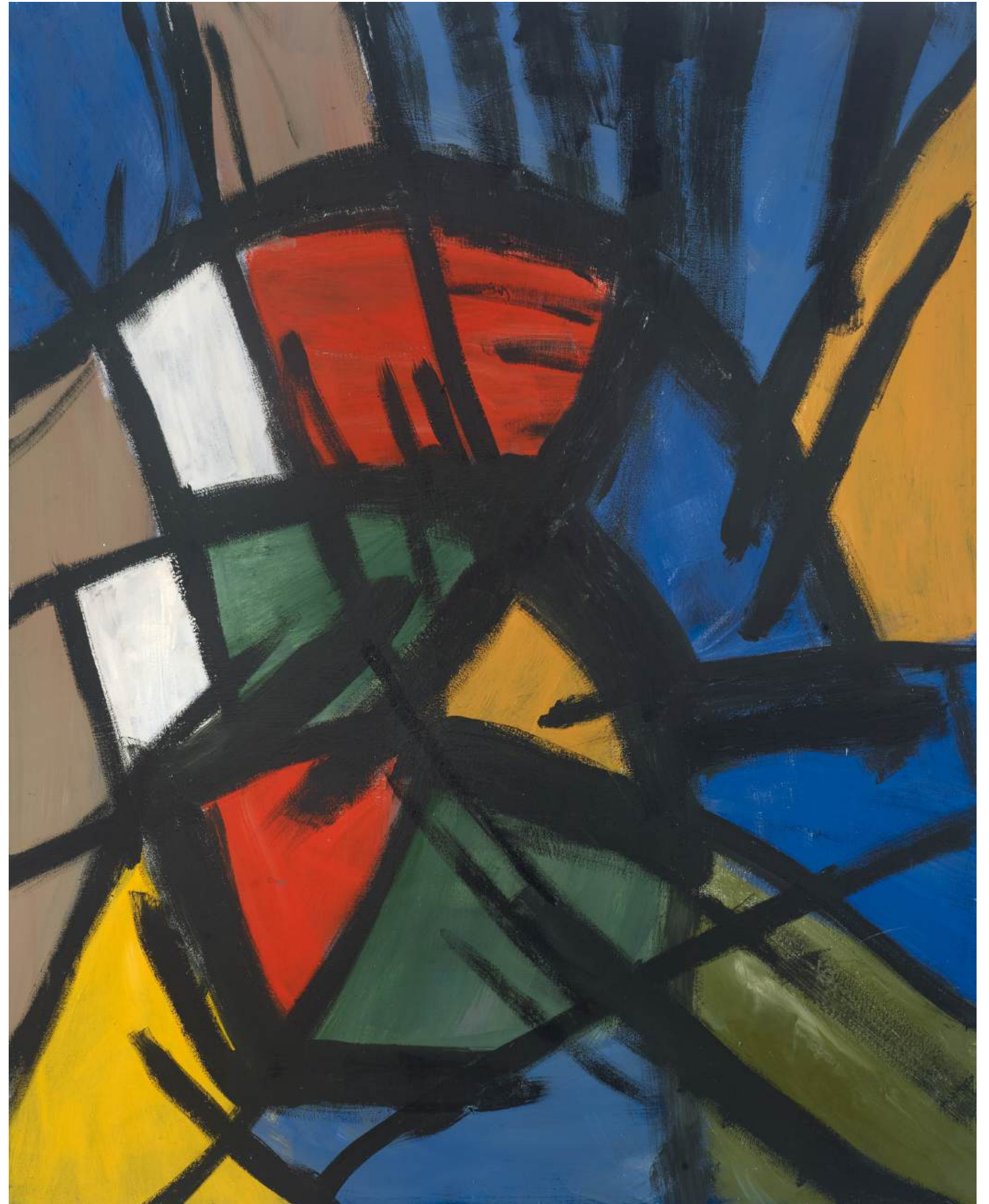
One factor that has constantly guided Hijjas' life is his wish to "pay back" to society for all the support that he has enjoyed that made his success possible. This was his objective in starting the artists' residencies at his family home, Rimbun Dahan, 30 years ago in 1994. The programme has hosted and supported hundreds of Malaysian, Australian and ASEAN artists and writers, and continues to do so.

CURATION: **Angela Hijjas and Bilqis Hijjas**

Proceeds of sales from this exhibition will go to UNRWA.

Rimbun Dahan
www.rimbundahan.org

D: MATCHBOX STUDIO P: PUAN CHIN KOK



BOLD:

HIJJAS KASTURI AT 88

Rimbun Dahan — 28/09 — 20/10/2024



left
AKSARA #11
2023
acrylic on canvas
101 x 76 cm

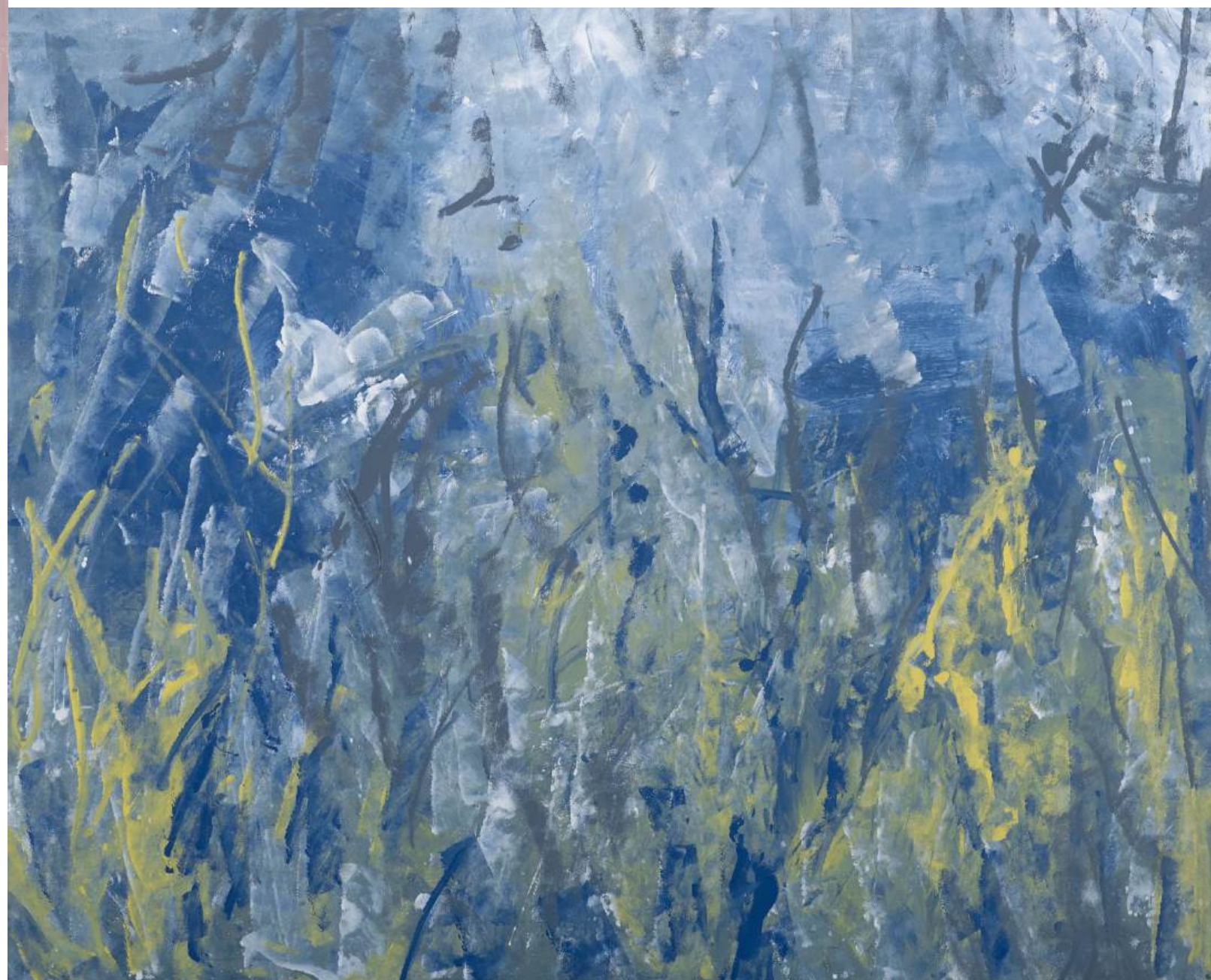
right
**KUNING MARA
KE MEDAN**
2024
enamel paint &
acrylic on canvas
102 x 76 cm



top left
**ISEN-ISEN
BERJIWA**
2024
enamel paint &
acrylic on canvas
122 x 122 cm

top right
**ISEN-ISEN LARI
KE KOTA**
2024
enamel paint &
acrylic on canvas
122 x 122 cm

bottom
**MENGANYAM
NILAM**
2024
acrylic on canvas
138 x 170 cm



MY FATHER HAS A FAVOURITE ANECDOTE ABOUT PICASSO. One day, as Picasso is sitting in a cafe, a woman approaches and asks for a work of art. Picasso sketches something on a napkin. When he names his price, the woman is horrified. "That sketch took you 5 minutes!" she says. Picasso responds, "Lady, this sketch may have taken me five minutes, but it took me 50 years to learn how to draw like that!"

The story is probably apocryphal, but Dad makes his point. The works that you see in this exhibition were created over the last two and a half years, since *Renewal*, my father's first solo exhibition in early 2022. And although Dad has only been painting regularly since the pandemic, he has been sketching as a daily practice for almost his entire life, and it has taken him 88 years to learn to make art like this.

The works are a product of all the experiences he has ever had: from his deprived childhood in war-time Singapore, to his lucky escape with a Colombo Plan Scholarship, his decades of practice as an architect in Malaysia — at first in obscurity and later celebrated — as well as his years as a sailor, art collector, businessman, traveller, husband, father. He still listens to the crooners, thinks every proper gentleman should have a personal valet, and, although he avidly consumes hours of videos on YouTube about the contemporary art world, the Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s still hold an abiding fascination for him. I think if you look for them, you can see all these things in his work.

Another facet of his background is his fondness for quoting Shakespeare. *Macbeth* is one of his favourites. Looking at these works, the witch's exhortation to "Be bloody, bold and resolute" comes to mind. My father has never been timid or hesitant. The exuberant energy of his artworks comes from a deep well of personal resilience. He cannot tell you what he is thinking about when he makes art, and by and large he doesn't plan his works. They come to him spontaneously, when he has a brush in hand, paint pots at the ready.

And yet we see that his works have evolved significantly since his previous exhibition, although there are traces of the same preoccupations. The motifs of scallops and cross-hatching from his

batik-inspired *Canting* series of 2022 return in the Isen-Isen works, but now more layered and deconstructed. The upward sweep of the *Sanjung* series recurs, with its familiar energetic rising action from bottom left to top right. The dominant black hieroglyphs of the *Aksara* series can also be detected, although now he often uses paler colours in his outlines, creating a more translucent lightness. And while the trenchant dark lines and primary colours of *Imbangan Dinamik 1* are definitely characteristic, his own favourite artwork in this exhibition is *Menganyam Nilam*, a more delicate suggestion of gauzy strokes creating a sense of layered depth — but of course on a grand scale.

Although Dad is occasionally deeply immersed in his painting studio, his primary practice will always be architecture. If the opportunity presents itself, he would rather be working on a building than a painting. But we think that the practice of painting has given him a new lease of life and a new direction for his relentless desire to be at work. Through it, he finds a way to relate to the groups of architecture students who often visit Rimbun Dahan on school excursions. He urges them to study art as an avenue into architecture, and perhaps they can more easily understand the creative urge expressed as a sweep of paint on canvas, rather than in the laborious repetition and correction involved in designing a building.

Throughout my life, I have seldom seen my father without a notebook and a black Artline pen. Most of the time, every line on the page has been meant to symbolise a structure: a wall here, a window there, a roofline or a street. It must be liberating, I think, to make marks just for the sake of it, marks that refer to nothing but themselves. In his most recent works, Dad has been moving beyond the black outlines that gave structure to many of his earlier paintings. Black is now obscured by other colours, outlines are in white or blue, sometimes the lines disintegrate entirely. It's a bold new world he's moving towards, and he is not tired yet.

___ Bilqis Hijjas 2024