

*At the Nexus of Nature and Culture: Botany as Metaphor*

Tetrianah Ahmed Fauzi

University Science of Malaysia, Malaysia

0257

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

This paper describes the creative processes and philosophy behind the works of created during my doctoral programme in University of East London. It emphasized on the relationship between the botany and metaphor theme and its relationship with nature and culture.

iafor

iafor  
The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

Over the three years of the doctorate programme that I enrolled since 2009 in London, I have created fictional plants through drawings, sculptures and digital prints. I explored different layers of meaning from images of fictional plants living in particular environments, and I experimented with images through different means, including watercolour on paper, digital collages, drawings, and digital prints of sculptures.

The central theme of my creative practice is the investigation of plant forms as metaphors. I am attracted to interesting characteristics of plants for example, the crowded flow of veins in leaf, curling tendrils, cascading leaves, a clot of roots, unusual looking shapes of a fruit or flowers, transparent seed pods or the crackled patterns of a tree bark. These plant parts sometimes resemble human or animal body parts, internal organs and even imitate human-like action. I see these anthropomorphic qualities in Karl Blossfeldt's black and white photographs compiled in several books including *Working Collages* (2001). The plant images in Blossfeldt's photographs intrigue me as they always remind me of something which is not a plant.



Fig.1 Karl Blossfeldt. Images from *Working Collages*

During my MA I drew plants by combining several types of plant, creating a new plant which does not exist in the botanical world but presents a possibility of existence. My artwork was a 'creation' of a new species of plant by combining, altering and adding several types of plants in the drawing. They have become a mirror or metaphor for my feelings and thoughts. As the work progressed, the plants began to look stranger, more mysterious, and anthropomorphic. Parts of plants such

as roots, twigs and tendrils imitate a humanlike position or the anatomy of body parts and internal organs. One of the first pieces was a combination of Lotus that grows in water and a Wild Orchid plant (fig. 2) that is an epiphyte type of plant that can be easily seen growing on most trees in the wild.



Fig 2 *Lotus X Wild Orchid* [ink on paper] 2008

In *The Language of Flowers* Georges Bataile personifies the characteristics of flowers such as the wilting and blooming. According to Bataile (1929) flowers wither like old and overly made-up dowagers. He also constantly refers to the ugliness of flowers while ‘dissecting’ and examining them, making the most beautiful flowers seem morbid. He not only describes flowers, but other parts of the plant, including the leaf. Bataile (1929) said that the appearance of leafy stems generally gives the impression of strength and dignity. He also goes on to state ‘Nothing less is necessary than the impossible and fantastic visions of roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin’. Bataile’s descriptions demonstrate how characters can be seen in plant forms.

For the work in progress seminar during my doctorate programme in January 2010, I made eleven works using- watercolour and drawing- of imaginative plants. They were of A2 size intended to be bound as book art. The first process I went through was to select the right plant to make studies from, to enable the ‘creation’ of my plant forms. I referred to nature books especially on English plants in the selection process. Habitat,

shapes, characteristics and the ability to withstand weather are among the factors that I considered in the choice of combining and developing the drawings of the plants. In the development of these plant forms, the plants that I 'created' have a special feature that makes them tougher, or more resilient and adaptable. Some have 'developed' a unique ability that plants do not normally have.

Fig. 3 is a spongy mushroom like hybrid that proliferates in a very organic way and has a stem-like structure that can attach itself to most surfaces. In this work I imagine it growing on a steel pole.

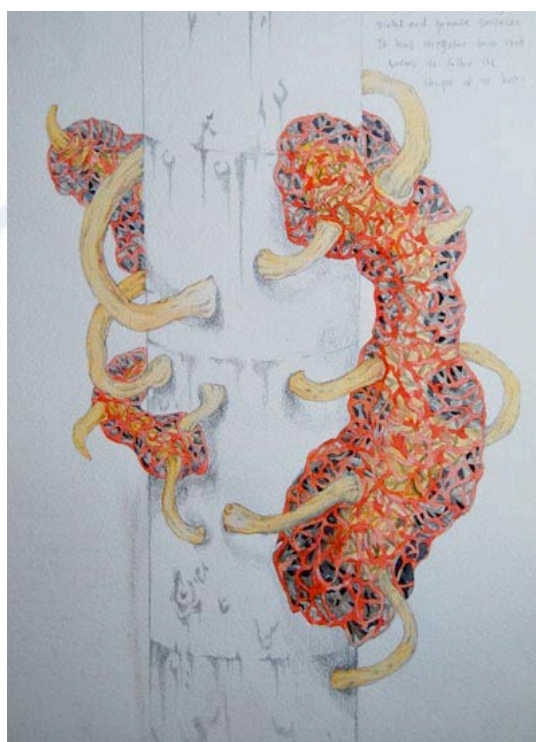


Fig.3 (2010) A 'hybrid' mushroom species [Watercolour and pencil on paper] 59cm X 42cm

I combine different botanical attributes to create an imaginary plant form. My method is to 'hybridise' plant characteristics to create a plant-like sculpture that can then be inserted imaginatively into particular environments. I select the botanical characteristics of plants, such as resistance, adaptability, ability to withstand weather, which would allow them to survive in a specified environment and therefore make them a 'superior' species.

A shell-like character kept recurring in many of my watercolour drawings. They appear in a variety of forms. Some are structures only barely covering the middle part of the plants, while others are thin flimsy surfaces with veins crawling around them.

There are also plants that look like a seedpod attached to a host. These recent plant drawings, (fig. 4) resonate with images of an embryo, with casings that envelop the embryonic form.

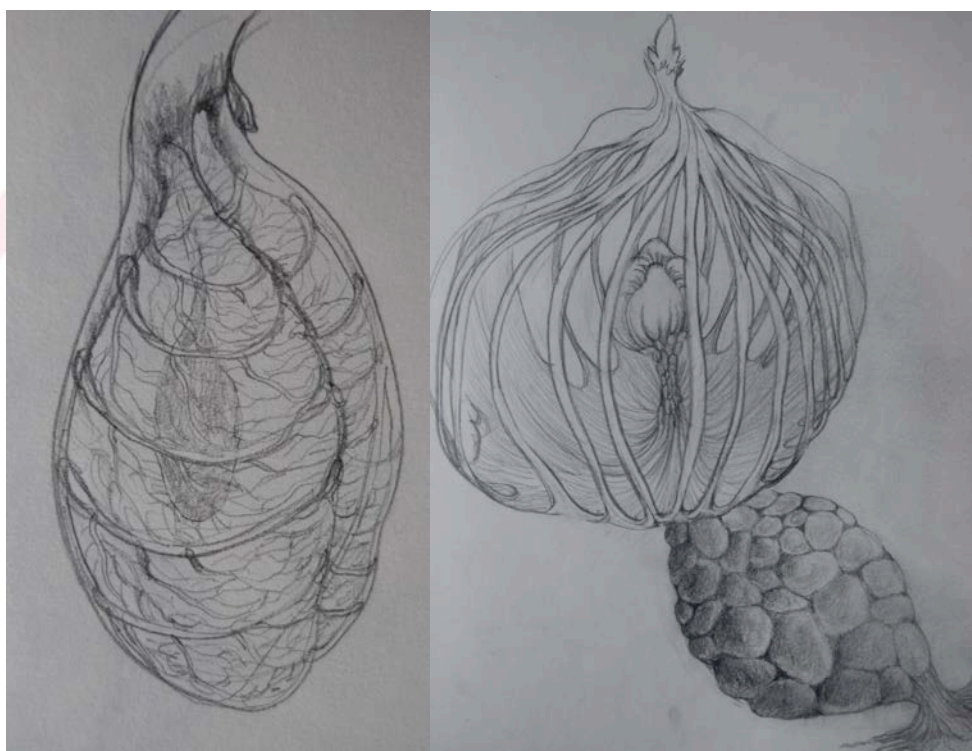


Fig.4 (2010) Images from sketch book [Pencil on paper]

When I visited my parents in the summer of 2010, I was inspired to make artworks about their house in Kuala Lumpur. In the past few years there has been some development behind the house: a beautiful lake, which was an operating tin mine during the British occupation in 1950's, has been covered with sand. The development has been very rapid and last year when I arrived the lake and the plants around it were completely gone, replaced by mountains of dirt and sand. When rain falls bits of domestic and industrial debris are revealed. Many varieties of plants grow naturally in the area including the vegetables and flowering plants which my mother grew. In the process of development almost everything has been destroyed. Outside of the wall, in my parents yard, engulfed by dirt and pieces of cement are the surviving garden plants, herbs and vegetables. Wild plants crawl up metal structures and wooden planks scattered around the area. Among the heap of sand and soil and debris inside the wall, wild grass, mushroom and a type of wild green pod plant grow.



I decided to make sculptures using plants, man-made and found objects as references. First I made sketches looking at the plants and objects around my parents' house. I made 3 sculptures: one a combination of fig and mesh, the second an amalgamation of the Malay herb called kantan, eggshell and roots, and the third sculpture used fern and nails as reference. The man-made and found objects are things that can be found especially in my parent's backyard. I wanted the sculptures to act like mini monuments to the plants which used to be there, and also to carry a sense of their destruction.

I placed these sculptures among the debris and soil of the landscape and photographed them from many angles. I wanted the sculptures to look as if they belonged to or that they come from the landscape. I wanted them to blend in but at the same time I wanted the viewer to feel curious about them. These photographs are a series which I call My Mother's Garden. Below is an example of the digital prints entitled *Fern X Nail* (fig. 5).



Fig 5 (2010) *Fern X Nail* [Digital print] 66cm X 97cm

I went back to Kuala Lumpur during summer 2011 and I found that the 'wasteland' behind my parent's house is still there. The development works had been halted and wild plants were growing on the sand and debris. I made a sculpture shaped like a monitor lizard's skeleton from wire and put real flowers and leaves I found in the area on them (fig. 6). Some of the flowers were bought from shops as there were not enough flowers around the house for the sculpture. I put the sculpture behind my parent's house to photograph it.



Fig. 6 (2011) *Beautiful Skeleton* [Wire, leaves and flowers]

I left the sculptures for a few days to let the flowers dry and poured clay mixture (slip) on it. I left it to dry, and poured again the same mixture. I brought the sculpture to London and one winter day, snow covered my backyard garden and I placed the sculpture on the ground. I photograph the sculpture with some oranges and chilies. The work (fig 7), reflects the way outsiders still wants to bring a piece of home to visiting or immigrating country.



Fig 7 (2011) *Illegal Skeleton* [C-type Print] 66cm X 98cm

The second series of works that I created after 'My Mother's Garden' are sculptures based on plant references. I was working at home most of the time and I wanted my work to be part of the domestic environment. I decided to make an unconventional flower arrangement as a sculpture for my next work. Flower arranging is traditionally part of interior decoration. In Malay culture, 'sirih junjung' it is one of the gifts to be exchanged during a wedding ceremony. The sirih junjung is an arrangement normally made of betel nut leaves and fresh flowers. I used fake betel nut leaves for the sculpture and I created the rest of the arrangement with air drying clay.

I also considered varieties of orchids as reference. The orchid is an exotic tropical plant, which my mother used to plant in pots. The flowers' undulating contour and formation are beautifully sensuous to look at and I tried to simulate that quality in my sculpture. I made some sketches and created two sculptures, taking either the sirih junjung formation or the folding of the betel nut leaves from the sirih junjung.

The first sculpture *Dialogue*, was pear-shaped with a large flower on top which is similar to an orchid (fig. 8). The sculpture has many branches that seem to protrude out of its body. On the 'neck' of the sculpture tiny bumps which look like the mengkudu fruit appear. I painted parts of the sculpture with acrylic paint. I used bright and eccentric colours. This choice of colours is typical in Malaysian domestic environments (curtains, table cloth, bed sheet, sofa and tiles). I then positioned the finished sculptures in my flat and tried to find the best way to photograph them.





Fig. 8 (2010) *Dialogue* [C-type print] 91cm X 61cm

There is an image from Karl Bossfedt's photographs that I was particularly interested in. It is an image of two young leaves, not yet fully unfolded. The unfolding leaves to me have an anthropomorphic quality that alludes to sensuality. From this image I made a sculpture, which looks like two plants, which grow from a different root and stem morphing at the end of the flowers (fig. 9).



Fig 9 (2011) *The Veil* [C-type Print] 66cm X 89cm

I perceive or look for anthropomorphic characteristics in plant forms as a personification of the characters of human beings. This is also why the sculptures have a bodily reference. Some of the plants can be identified with parts of human body; some of them seem to imitate human-like positions. Apart from this figurative characteristic, they also allude to sensuality. Some of the forms have a resemblance to internal organs or the physical attributes of a female figure, such as the pear shape of a female body, bodily movements, the flow of hair, or even the sensuousness of flowers that could have a sexual interpretation. This is because the metaphors arising from the works are related to me and the people I am close to, such as family and friends who are dealing with the same kind of life issues.

During a tutorial in 2011, I was asked why I make plant sculptures or draw plants and relate them to personal metaphors and invent narratives for them. My response was that I had always had a fascination with plant forms and that my works have always dealt with nature and the environment. We discussed the restriction of figurative works in Islam and why I use plants as a metaphor of my life. Previously and until now I had never had any issue with making figurative artworks. I reflected that perhaps there could be a subconscious intention in the use of plants in my works, other than my fascination with the plants forms, to adhere to the Islamic ideals of art making. In Islamic art, figurative works of humans and animals are rejected; plants become the alternative for artist wanting to work figuratively.

Raja Shahrman Raja Aziddin is a Malay artist who is struggling with his religious conscience in his art practice. Raja Shahrman is known for his figurative sculptures of martial art positions shaped and welded using iron rod and plates which were

shown in his solo show titled *Gerak Tempur* (1996). The exhibition synopsis (*Gerak Tempur*, 2010) reveals that,

‘The powerful, complex and often disturbing work of Raja Shahrman has given rise to many questions. Its violence and its portrayal of the figure sit uncomfortably with the artist’s life as a devotee and student of Islam. The work itself might be seen as a manifestation of conflict – spiritual, psychological and socio-cultural.’

I met Raja Shahrman at his home studio to do an interview for my BFA assignment in 2001. During the interview he confessed to feeling guilty about making figurative art, although his sculptures are an abstraction of human figures. He tried to make the abstraction more ambiguous and he made a series of nonfigurative works for his second solo exhibition *Api, Bayangan dan Kemenyan* (1998) and third solo exhibition *Semangat Besi* (2001).



Fig.10 Raja Shahrman Raja Aziddin (2001) *Semangat Besi* [Welded metal]

The works for *Api*, *Bayangan dan Kemenyan* are functional sculptures of candle holder, mirror frame and incense burner and for *Semangat Besi* (fig. 10) the sculptures seem to be a holder for keris, a weapon in the Malay martial arts. For him the works are not figure sculptures but there are still traces of figurative elements in some of the

works because the urge to make figurative works is still strong within him. The figurative sculptures of martial arts positions appear again in his fourth solo exhibition titled *Nafas* (2004) and since then figures have been constant features of his work.

This is the dilemma facing some Malay Muslim artists and it directly affects their creative practice in the choice of subject and content. Artists find various alternatives in substituting the figurative element in their works, including using patterns, flora, object or landscape.

Sulaiman Esa is one of the prominent figures in the rise of the quest for the assimilation of Islamic fundamentals in art. He turns to traditional Malay craft characterised by geometric and arabesque patterns. According to Hani Ahmad (1995, p.9),

‘Through Islamic art a Muslim artist strives to investigate his religious belief/life with his creative/artistic one, to wed his creativity to his spirituality, to render his art and religion as mutually reinforcing becomes an ideal objective for a Muslim artist’.

I started to research traditional Malay art because I think that my practice of using plant forms and imbuing metaphor in plant sculpture resonates with the traditional Malay arts and crafts. I read the *Symbolism of Malay Kelantanese House* which discusses the symbolism in the architecture of the Malay house in the Kelantan province. According to Muhammad Afandi Yahaya (1995, p.123) flowers, colourful as they are do not just function as internal decorations in terms of traditional motifs, they represent certain symbolic meanings as well. Plant parts such as flower, leaf or roots adorned architecture, or become patterns in textile or decorations for traditional boats and jewellery.

The flowers or plants represent a certain meaning, the way the patterns are designed to intrinsically convey a philosophy or principle. ‘Awan larat’ motif (fig. 11) is a good example of the relationship between the design and symbolism in a traditional Malay carving. The design may start with a flower or stem from several sides of the motif. These ‘starting points’ symbolise how life begins. From these points, tendrils appear, which are a symbol of growth that needed ‘lesson’ or ‘knowledge’. The tendrils continue to intertwine with tendrils from other ‘starting points’ and when the



movement goes downwards it mean that death is inevitable and humans will eventually die.



Fig.11 Awan larat carving from Malay Kelantan house

Historically, this philosophy was introduced because of the restriction of figurative elements in the arts. This echoes the intention behind several contemporary Malay Muslim artists in Malaysia not to use figures in their work; instead they use flora or patterns as substitutes, or to render figures more abstract. At the beginning of the programme I was unaware of a desire to avoid figuration in my work. But now I have accepted this as part of my intention in using plants as metaphors. I have not always rejected figures, but in my current phase I am using plants as substitutes for human figures. My dilemma in consciously knowing and admitting this fact is that I do not want to be branded as a Malay Muslim artist who rejects figures totally.

In the analysis of plant and metaphor I recognise 3 aspects that influence the choice of certain plants in my works which are:

1. Shape or form.

Certain plant shapes will instantly attract me as they remind me of something else, for example I see sensuousness in orchids. I also respond to structure, and the physical quality of the plants for example the type of stem, either it is hardy or not, or its texture. I then relate the characteristic with the metaphor in my work.

2. Symbol

The plants which I always choose are plants that symbolise something, in Malay culture especially. For example a Frangipani is associated with death because it is always planted in a Malay cemetery. The plants could also be reminder of the beautiful landscape of my parent's house which is why I choose the types of plants which can easily be found there.

### 3. Plant properties or characteristics

The choice of plant is also based on its herbal value such as in my drawings where I draw herbs that are used in confinement rituals. Characteristic such as the way it grows, its seasonal availability, its type (e.g. parasite, epiphyte, saprophyte) and its habitat are also important. My choice of plant in the watercolour drawings have the ability to survive in a particular environment.

### References

Bataille, Georges, 'The Language of Flower'. *Vision of Excess: Selected Writings*, 1927-1939.

Hani Ahmad, *Art and Spirituality*. (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1995).

Hasnul J. Saidon, *Semangat Chandan : Contemporary Artists From The Land of Grace*. (Kuala Lumpur: Chandan Gallery, 2008).

Molesworth, Helen, 2000, House Work and Artwork, The MIT Press October, Vol92 (Spring. 2000). Accessed 24 March 2011

Muhammad Afandi Yahaya, *Simbolisme dalam Seni Bina Rumah Melayu Kelantan*. (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1995).

Nochlin, Linda. *Consider the Difference: Women Artists from Cassat to Contemporary*, < <http://www.artbabble.org/video/saam/linda-nochlin-consider-difference-american-women-artists-cassatt-contemporary> >[Accessed 16 March 2011]

Ronnberg, Ami. (ed) and Martin, Kathleen. (ed), *The Book of Symbols*. (Cologne: TASCHEN, 2010).

Sherwin, Brian, *Polly Morgan*. Juxtapoz October 2008, pp 127.

Taylor, Sue, 'Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation by Whitney Chadwick'. *Art Journal*, College Art Association, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Summer, 1999)

