NUS MUSEUM

ARCHIVES AND DESIRES

Selections from the Mohammad Din Mohammad Collection

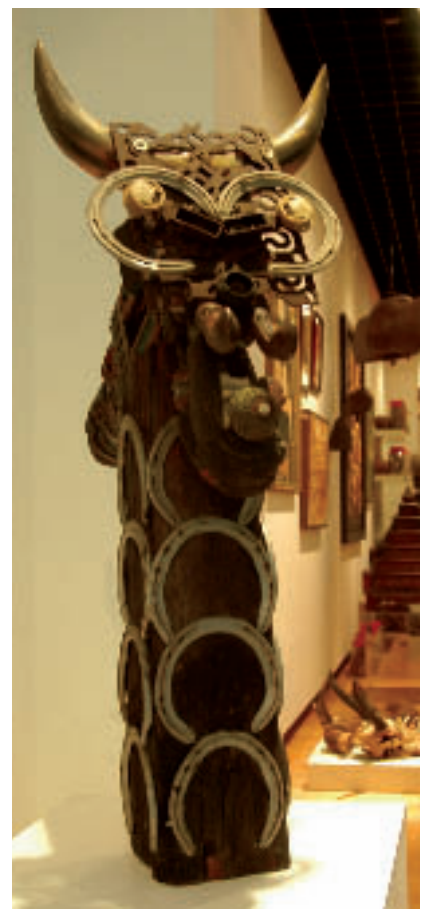
21 August – 23 November 2008

Foreword

Ahmad Mashadi – Head, NUS Museum

Entering into the home of the late Mohammad Din Mohammad (1955-2007), one is immediately drawn towards an ensemble of artifactual materials dominating parts of the house. Medicinal animal bones and skins, roots and herbs, oils, knives and spears, rare stones, crafted wooden furniture, miniature qurans and leather puppets intermix among expressionistic and calligraphic paintings and assemblages by the artist. Many who had known Mohammad Din would have acknowledged his practice as a traditional Malay healer and a collector of Islamic objects, but the sheer density of these objects and the manner in which they are existentially compressed into a given space, simultaneously point towards states of complementarity, unease and disjunction. If Mohammad Din's practice is to be understood through the lens of Asian and Singaporean modernity, a struggle in prospecting positions and directions contextual to place and self, how should these materials – a cacophony of signifiers of ethnicity, religiosity, indigienity – be read?

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, curator of this exhibition, regards that "the archive is the site for the accumulation of primary sources from which history is constructed", yet opened to multivariate struggles of perceiving and reading, osscilating between our faculties of reconstructive logic and the emotive ambivalence. For Mustafa, the exhibition creates "a fluid discursive space where the different 'elements' interact", reproducing Mohammad Din's oeuvre, urging a reflection of the indeterminate significance of these objects "knowledge, experience, memory and the lived realities" of the artist, thus broadening the frames within which the artist may be placed and understood.



The NUS Museum wishes to convey its sincere gratitude to Madam Hamidah Jalil and the rest of the late artist's family, for initiating a project to catalogue Mohammad Din Mohammad's works and collection and assisting in the production of this exhibition. Their material support and guidance had been crucial at the various stages of the project.

A Curatorial Preamble: Mohammad Din Mohammad

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

Jacques Derrida in his 1996 publication, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, notes that the term 'archive' derives from the Greek aekheion, a term which first referred to a house which was 'the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded' (2). It was a place where official documents were filled, with the *archons* not only acting as the guardians of the documents, but also having the hermeneutic right to interpret the archives and speak the law. This involves what Derrida refers to as 'the anachronistic principle' (3): the archive requires that the documents are gathered together in some place. Something which entails the power of *consignation*, that the documents are coordinated together into a single system that possesses a unity of identification and classification, which ensures that there cannot be any separate or secret cache. While the archive thus conceived was one source for the sovereignty and legitimacy of rulers and power holders, the grounds for the law and the knowledge base for the identity of the collectivity, it has also been increasingly seen as the repository of national memory. The archive is the site for the accumulation of primary sources from which history is constructed. This does not mean that what goes into the archive is not the source of overt and covert struggles – far from it.

'Archives and Desires: Selections from the Mohammad Din Mohammad Collection' broadly explores aspects of Asian art and museological discourse through the life and works of late Singapore artist, Mohammad Din Mohammad (1955-2007). Mohammad Din was born in Malacca and received his art training at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), graduating in 1976. As a fresh graduate with a relentless vision to develop a style which would remain uniquely his own, Mohammad Din spent his early years experimenting with the formalist training he received at NAFA. At first, the figure of the body and landscapes presented him with an artistic challenge of translating his vision of Southeast Asia (a region which he so closely identified with) onto the canvas. *The Bali Scene* (1978) captures the impressions of a lush and tropical landscape surrounded by idyllic palms nurtured by its inhabitants. Seemingly lodged between a British watercolor landscape tradition and an emerging postcolonial ambition of reclaiming 'traditional' spaces, albeit within a modernist framework, Bali, for Mohammad Din, represented a re-visioning of not just another landscape, but an ideal fused with the multivariate energies of nature.

Mohammad Din's engagement with nature extended from his practice as a traditional healer, an aspect of his life which grew immensely important after a road accident in the early 1980s which left him prone to developing gangrene. With the aid of a herb called *ubi nyaharu* (a wild yam), Mohammad Din was able to heal his injury and vowed to become a traditional Malay healer thereafter. For instance, *Raja Ma'jun* (2005) or 'King of Medicine' encapsulates a head made up of a cannonball fruit with bones symbolizing outstretched arms and the body composed of different wood carvings held upright to metaphorically resemble the *Alif*. The fused elements attempt to capture the composite energies and distinctive healing potential nature holds. It needs to be stressed that when it comes to understanding Mohammad Din, these 'objects' need *not* be understood as entirely detached objects of a 'folk tradition' or subjects of the 'modern' project, but as a living and dynamic reality. *Earth Energy II* (1994) represents a collage of various herbs, roots and animal bones which are said to contain talismanic and healing properties, all used by Mohammad Din in his practice as a traditional healer. What may seem as fascinations or 'curiosities' for the untrained (or if I may even call it, staunchly secular) eye, represented to Mohammad Din the authentic elements which could be fused into mediums of power, preeminence and faith. In sum, nature represented to Mohammad Din a limitless matrix of energies which could harness the use of natural elements as an alternative source of rejuvenation for the human body and spirit.

Therefore, the display strategy has been accordingly devised to make the reader examine and experience these objects in real-time. The various floral elements juxtaposed alongside the wooden chests and cabinets, all hovered over by Mohammad Din's sculptures and paintings attempt to create a fluid discursive space where the different 'elements' interact with each other in the hope of producing an aesthetic which is representative of Mohammad Din's oeuvre – all the while acknowledging the artificial reconstructive logic represented by the Museum and its taxonomic conventions. 'Archives and Desires' is then not just an attempt to capture a modernist duality between the rational and not-so-rational, but a critique which attempts to lodge itself in between the ambivalent spaces that are generated when objects which defy museological taxonomic classifications (and collected with a seemingly emotional intent) are forced to enter an implicit archival process before they can be 'exhibited' in the public museum. As such, the conflation and merging of the two terms 'Archives' and 'Desires' principally attempt to capture the different complexities and assumptions involved in what constitutes an institutionalized archival collection of 'art' objects (collected along taxonomic norms) and what forms a private collection based on a radically different *weltanschauung*. Although the reader is not encouraged to touch the objects on display, the curatorial intent is to evoke thoughts and ideas without much description or rational explanation. The hope is not to *learn* as much as *wonder*, and connect with the experience in a very personal, emotive way.

Earth Energy II, Mixed Media, 1994

The Bali Scene, Acrylic on Canvas, 1978

Raja Ma'jun, Mixed Media, 2005

Over the span of a professional artistic career that lasted four decades, Mohammad Din and his wife, Hamidah Jalil, collected different 'Asian' (and predominantly, Southeast Asian) artifacts ranging from Malayan and Indonesian stabbing and slashing knives with undulations (*lok*) along both edges, commonly referred to as *Keris*, to rare coins and historical textiles. The walls and cabinets of Mohammad Din's home in Singapore attest to the breadth and depth of the collection. Many of the collected objects were used in his sculptures, which vividly celebrate the rich and hybrid cultural heritage of Southeast Asia. The *Singa Kuda* (1997), for instance, relies on an assemblage of various objects collected from different parts of the region. It represents a syncretic pastiche of mystical realities that are channeled through the configuration of animal bones, wood, metal and an old computer stand; they discerningly express the artists' commitment in extending the life of things which seem to have lost their material worth – at least in the modern pecuniary sense. But they also narrate an aspect of Mohammad Din's practice and collecting habits which escape neat textual definition.

All this said, 'Archives and Desires' evolved from a request made by Hamidah Jalil to the NUS Museum in late 2007 to make sense of her late husband's collection of paintings, sketches and artifacts. As a student of history and emerging from the vicissitudes of plying through the archives – quite literally 'for a living' – I was intrigued by the prospect of entering a home which held a collection of Asian artifacts collected over four decades. Amidst the cacophony of modernity that is Singapore, Mohammad Din's home presented an *alternative* (but not entirely, detached) articulation of what is commonly understood as the Singapore dream, trans-locally contextualized in artifacts, paintings and sculptures, all emerging from a philosophy grounded in Sufi thought and exemplifying the idea of culture as a lived tradition. In many ways, the artifacts in Din's home represented a critical take on the 'plight' of material culture(s) but also of an aesthetic which seemed to have been pieced together based on knowledge, experience, memory and the lived realities of Din, his wife and their children.

To cast Mohammad Din's home into perspective, it may be said that collections and structures with museum-like functions have existed throughout the world for centuries. In Asia, precious objects have always been deposited for safekeeping in temples and shrines. In Sri Lanka, the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha is preserved at the *Sri Dalada Maligawa*, which acts as a holy site, but also a major tourist attraction. Historically, in tribal villages across the Malay Archipelago too, special houses were created to store sacred paraphernalia such as ancestor relics, lineage symbols and other valuables. However, these non-Western models have received little attention as alternative articulations of museological, archival and curatorial practice. Professional museology in Asia seems to rest heavily on one knowledge system, namely the modern Western one that is said to have originated in the 17th Century. This model (with exceptions) has dictated how non-Western objects are collected, documented, curated and perceived in modern museums around the world.

Any attempt at capturing Mohammad Din's *oeuvre* may be understood as prodding a tight rope which can, at best, hope to solicit numerous questions of artistic struggle and modern identity, but provide few (if any) concrete answers. This is a curatorial conviction that developed over months of research conducted at Mohammad Din's homes in both Clementi and Malacca where his own Galeri Mohammad Din Mohammad stands – a dream which reached fruition on 21 June 2008. As a result, an assortment of display strategies have been adopted to enable the different artifacts to form an assemblage, where the entire space is conceived as discursively representative of a Mohammad Din self portrait. A conscious decision has been to not restrict the exhibition to 'finished' products meeting museum conventions but display selections from the collection via a method which refuses the lure of producing a clear cut chronologically rational narrative. *The curatorial appeal, then, is one of a literal 'syncreticism' which is visually constructed by each individual reader by fusing the different arrangements together in an attempt to understand 'Mohammad Din', but at the same time acknowledging the artificiality and the problematics involved in the museumization of cultures*. The central problematic is attempting to enliven this curatorial method which relies not just on letting these objects 'speak' for themselves, but appropriating their composite energies in narrating 'Mohammad Din Mohammed' via an aesthetic which seems hidden and evasive. To render such an aesthetic pliable requires something like a leap of faith.

Mohammad Din's extensive Keris collection which ranges from the swordlike *Keris Panjang* to the sheaths of the *Keris Tajong* to the smallest *Keris Kelantan* that displays calligraphic inscriptions of the *Kalima Shahadat* (all intricately crafted and bedecked in all their finery) attempt to illustrate how the 'Malay world' is a space affected by so many 'influences', including what is epistemologically referred to today as 'Hinduism', Buddhism and Islam. To echo Richard Winstedt from his 1951 publication, *The Malay Magician* (4), an author who should be understood with some 'hermeneutic' caution:

> What is of great interest is the ingenuity shown in the assimilation and reconciliation of old and new beliefs. Often

Two Whirling Dervishes, Acrylic on Canvas, 2000

Alif Lam Min, Acrylic on Canvas, 2003

> the process was easy. The white blood of Malay royalty, for example, is that ascribed by Buddhist to divinities, by Hindus to Siva and by Muslims to certain saints. Muslim amulets and Sufi mysticism succeeded naturally to the talismans and ascetic practices of Hindus, and those talismans and practices to the fetish and shamanism of primitive days.

Although Winstedt casts 'shamanism' as 'primitive', a distinction which may be held suspect, it may be noted that Mohammad Din's use of wood and bones in his sculptures and healing practice borrowed from these innumerable influences and exemplified the thick negotiations that seemingly lie between the duality of the 'civilizational' and forested 'nature'. Lodged between this modern duality, the 'tree' continued to operate as a liminal entity for Mohammad Din, which on the one hand played a crucial role in the development of Malay society as well as its aesthetics, philosophy and sciences but also had to be well understood before it could be brought into use. This was a theme that remained intimately linked to Mohammad Din's practice. The amulets on display were carved by Mohammad Din himself and were based on an intensive credo and *adab* of woodcarving. For the amulets to contain a talismanic energy there needed to be a perfect match (*jodoh*) between the carver and his material. When making pieces that were intended for the personal use of others, Mohammad Din also ensured that the wood he chose was compatible with person the object was intended for, thereby complicating his task even further. This kind of intimate knowledge was known as *ilmu falak*. As such, the encounter between wood and the adab of woodcarving remained at the core of Mohammad Din's consciousness. And although not carved by Mohammad Din himself, the blades and handles of the various *Keris* on display are either decorated with metal inlay, intricate carvings (of calligraphy in Jawi or Arabic script) or simply polished to a gleam, displaying the wood patterns and veins. As an emblem of Malay identity, the *Keris* has been historically held as a plenipotentiary of meanings and significations. However, as the Malay world undergoes secularization, modernization and religious reform, the *Keris* and its attached sociocultural, political, totemic and most importantly (in the case of Mohammad Din) talismanic significance continues to diminish.

Therefore, ranging from the *Self Portrait* (1997) which documents Mohammad Din's intention to convey the split nature of his personality with tiny cutout images of his young son placed on his pupils to the multitudinous precious stones which form part of his collection were all part of a larger 'symbiotic' process whereby Mohammad Din was directly in communication with the medium that he was working with – be it, wood, acrylic, bones or an old computer table as in the case of the mixed media sculpture *Singha Kuda* (1997). The 'split personality' is not an inherently negative or positive statement, but a productive celebration (of perhaps even a Freudian sense of 'sublimation') that links everyday pursuits to particular circumstances, or as what Mohammad Din referred to as the constant 'upgrading of culture' – a theme which he reflected on profusely in his calligraphy.

From the mid 1990s, the spiritual dimension of Islam became an integral concern in Mohammad Din's work. It lies at the heart of what he commonly referred to as Sufism. Central to this dimension is the longing for an experiential awareness of God, in Qur'anic language, a yearning to see His face. Historically, this yearning in Sufism has been expressed in different ways and associated with varying styles of spirituality and spiritual taste. Ranging from the austere and sober, based on techniques of self-scrutiny, to the jubilant, induced by Qur'anic recitations, sometimes followed by music and dance – all leading to the commemoration of theosophical expression steeped in deep spiritual meaning. For Mohammad Din, the practice of *Zikr* which carries the meaning 'to remember' or to find methods to get closer to God presented a technique of expressing his praise to God with short phrases using the bold Arabic script (*Abjad Hijaiyah*) found in the opening *surahs* or verses of the Qur'an. *Alif Lam Min* (2003) painted with bare hand with acrylic on paper represents not just the very first opening fragment in the Qur'an but also symbolizes infinity, perched against the shining rays of the sun. To quote Mohammad Din, 'Zikr is religiously considered to be the ultimate connection to God. It is my personal hope that it will spark the sense of closeness between mankind and God'.

Until recently, the role and presence of Islam in Southeast Asia had been consistently underestimated in scholarship. In Central Java, for instance, many cultural forms of the pre-Islamic past still have a vigorous life, such as the *wayang kulit* and gamelan orchestra. *Two Whirling Dervishes* (2000) painted in the style of *wayang kulit*, intends to conflate the artificial distinctions between Sufism, Malay mysticism and Islam, categories for Mohammad Din which were useful, but also extremely fluid. By exploring pre-Islamic practices and then labelling them as 'whirling dervishes', Mohammad Din attempted to highlight the basic point that despite what is perceived as pre-Islamic literary culture, it is constantly coloured by the living and dynamic tradition of Islam, which lays unobserved or is taken for granted when it comes to understanding Southeast Asia.

In his calligraphy, a practice which he understood as something that accrued universally from a pan-Islamic sensibility but also contextually derived from 'Southeast Asian' motifs, Mohammad

Self Potrait – Split NFS Personality, Acrylic on Canvas, 2005

Din replicated Qur'anic verses in abstract forms and adapted *Zikr* to innovation that contributes, as he noted, 'to the upgrading of culture and tradition'. To quote Mohammad Din from a 2004 unpublished essay on the scope of calligraphy in his own practice, a theme which he understood as intensely embedded in 'Malay society':

> The Malays believe that Calligraphy is divine and talismanic. Some documented cases have shown that calligraphy has been used on many instruments of wars. There were many examples of *Keris* and swords with calligraphic inscriptions. Many spears carry a calligraphic design, which acts as a kind of talisman against the evil or enemy. The war jacket and outfits also carry words of calligraphy in the form of magic-square. The good example of it could be found in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul. The head gear of early Malays was also woven with verses of the Quran in the form of calligraphy. In the Malay tradition of house building or architecture, the intricate carving of calligraphy was applied to decorate and enhance its Islamic images. Similarly, for South East Asian textiles' coming from the Muslim Communities, they are sometimes decorated with woven calligraphy. A good example would be a *Songket* of Limar from Palembang and North Malaysia. *Kain Tapis* and *Kain Kapal* from South Sumatra or Lampang applied the design that incorporated calligraphy either in the form of Kufic or Thulut. In other words, the calligraphic design of floral motives has always been the favorite choice of the Muslim artisan.

As such, the mystical journey of life which derived from Sufi ideals colored by Mohammad Din's lived realities became the main focus of his art in the few years before his passing, where the notion of 'journeying' operated as apt a metaphor for 'Mohammad Din' as it did for Sufi longings to be one with the all mighty. In many ways, this conflation enlivened Mohammad Din's sculptures into an aura of unfinished business, of becoming rather than being. As Mohammad Din continued to use and reuse objects in his sculptures which had seemingly lost their pecuniary worth, from the *Soul Searching Vehicle* (1995) to *Dragon Journey* (2000) all presenting assemblages of animal bones, wood carvings and metals, they indicate that there is no finished 'system', no structure that can be overlaid to produce neat schemas and mappable territories, which, to say the least, represent a 'logic' of their own, assembled together by Mohammad Din, piece by piece. The celebration in Mohammad Din's works is that any journey alters not just the traveler but also the spaces travelled and as one encounters his collection, just like psychoanalysis, it instantly demands the recognition of the past in the present – definitely a worthwhile legacy!

Mohammad Din Mohammad Solo Exhibitions

1978 People And Landscape
M.S. Rasa Sayang Luxury Liner-Singapore-Malaysia-Indonesia

1980 Wishy And Washy
Oberoi Imperial Hotel, Singapore

1983 Memories Of South East Asia
M.S. Princess Mahsuri-Singapore-Penang-Klang-Jakarta-Surabaya-Bali -Padang-Nias

1994 Mystical And Talismanic Energy
Swee Guan Art Gallery, Singapore

1997 Flora and Foliate
Plaza Hotel, Singapore

1998 Tenaga Dua Alam
World Trade Centre, Singapore

2000 Inspiration Mystique
Cite International Des Art-Paris, France

2000 Winter to Spring
Raffles Marina, Singapore

2000 Paris Experiences
Pine Tree Club, Singapore

2000 Zikr – Hands On Calligraphy
Gallery Tinta, Kuala Lumpur

2001 Towards Self-Unification
Atelier Annette Huster-Paris, France

2001 Collaboration and Commitment
Galeri Zikr, Kuala Lumpur

2002 Nature's Energy
Galeri One Plus, Melaka

2003 Mystical Journey
Galeri Mystique, Kuala Lumpur

2003 Trancendence
Gallery Belvedere, Singapore

2003 Night of the Secret Wine
Galeri Mystique, Kuala Lumpur

2003 Experience And Memories
Cemal Resit Rey Concert Hall, Istanbul, Turkey

2004 Flowers and BMW Cars
Ocean Centre, Hong Kong

2005 Mysterious Rendition
Cavalry Gallery, Singapore

2006 Mystical Journey II
Gallery Mystique, Singapore

2007 Mystical Manoeuvre (post-humous)
Galeri Balai Berita NSTP, Kuala Lumpur

2008 Opening of Galeri Mohammad Din Mohammad
Galeri Mohammad Din Mohammad, Malacca, Malaysia

Calligraphy Energy, Acrylic on Canvas, 2006

NUS MUSEUM

NUS Museum is a comprehensive museum for teaching and research. It focuses on Asian regional art and culture, and seeks to create an enriching experience through its collections and exhibitions. The Museum has over 7,000 artefacts and artworks divided across four collections. The *Lee Kong Chian Collection* consists of a wide representation of Chinese materials from ancient to contemporary art; the *South and Southeast Asian Collection* holds a range of works from Indian classical sculptures to modern pieces; and the *Ng Eng Teng Collection* is a donation from the late Singapore sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient of over 1,000 artworks. A fourth collection, the *Straits Chinese Collection*, will be located at NUS' Baba House at 157 Neil Road.

NUS MUSEUM

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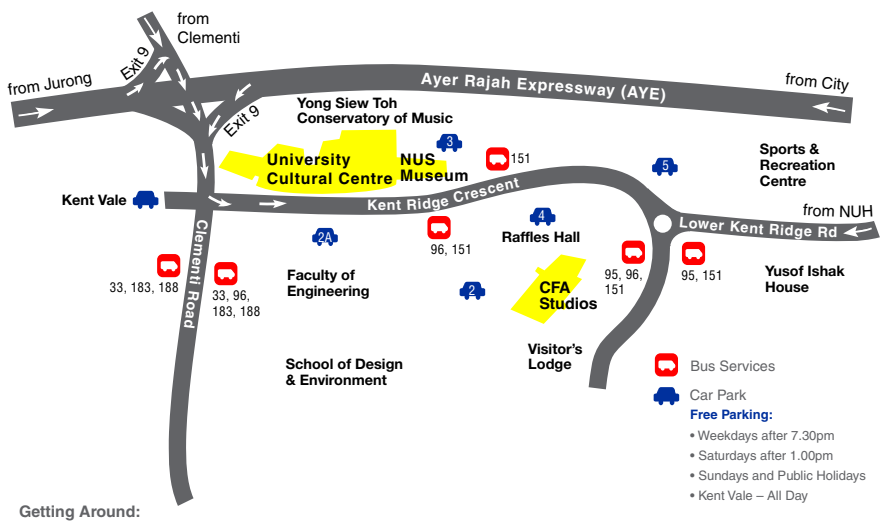
Opening Hours:

10am – 7.30pm (Tuesdays – Saturdays)

10am – 6pm (Sundays)

Closed on Mondays & Public Holidays



Getting Around:
SBS Bus No. 96 from Clementi Bus Interchange / No. 151 from Hougang Central Interchange / No. 33 from Bedok Interchange
SMRT Bus No. 188 from Choa Chu Kang Interchange.

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