

# ISMAIL LATIFF

## Man Behind the Moon

BY CHEE SUE ANNE



Waterdance ... Blue Night Dreams, 1999  
Acrylic on canvas 140 x 180 cm  
**SOLD RM 60,500.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 21 September 2013  
Edition V

### EARLY YEARS

Ismail Latiff's story is one that brims with fascination. Brought up predominantly by his mother, his father often absent, overseeing his duties as a ship captain, Ismail's intriguing past began in Singapore. He later went to live with his grandmother in Merlimau, Melaka where he received his early education in an English medium school, shaping his naive worldview and nurturing his love for the artistic.

He had a sturdy start in the art industry, completing his Diploma in Fine Art from Mara Institute of Technology (now known as UiTM) in 1979. It was during this period of time where he met people who were about to play significant roles in his life including his wife, Noraini Jaafar and his famous course mate, Anuar Rashid. It was here that he was mentored by a few famous artists, Latiff Mohidin and Long Thien Shih, amongst them.

With a diploma under his belt and many paths ahead to walk, he took what seemed like the most practical route and went corporate with McCann-Erickson. At this international advertising company, with the role of visualiser, Ismail began his art journey.

How he landed a job there is another story to tell: Ismail first started drawing using mostly watercolours and sketches on paper. He actually sold his paintings to the then creative



Tiomman Deep Blue.. My Drovine, 2014  
Acrylic on canvas 71 x 152 cm  
**SOLD RM 27,052.80**  
KLAS Art Auction 31 January 2016  
Edition XIX



Extreme Places I Didn't Know, 2012  
Acrylic on canvas 71 x 152 cm  
**SOLD RM 23,671.20**  
KLAS Art Auction 15 January 2017  
Edition XXV

director, John Lane, who was impressed with the artistic talent that he possessed. That was what landed him a job as a finished artist and visualiser in the company, and he wasted no time in climbing the corporate ladder where he bagged many achievements such as being nominated for the Young Illustrator of Asia in Japan, 1981, and winning the first prize at the Biennale of Visual Arts, Seychelles in 1992, before becoming an art director himself.

However, a year into his new role, Ismail could no longer ignore the draw of artistic creation. It was then his art journey culminated and he finally became who he was meant to be. It was as if fate had long decided that Ismail was bound to hang in the wall of fame of internationally-acclaimed artists – his abstract and mystical artworks have not only earned him reputation, but recognition locally and internationally, putting him at par with the master artists of the world.

### THE ENTRY INTO FINE ART

This venerable man has been described as 'one of the greatest escape artists ever to wield the brush'. His is the realm of the enchanted and the enchanting, a utopian world built on love, beauty, purity and power. Ismail's works reflect a combination of movement and mythology.

For Ismail, he only sees himself as a traveller who embarked on a conquest to bring the inner space, texture, colour and beauty of the natural world together and interpret them onto paper and canvas.

Art, as he perceived, is life and one of the best introductions to art is nature.

To put his remarkable paintings into words would be to take away the spark of life from his work, a necessary evil, to convey the brilliance of his work. When given a chance, one should stand to gaze at one of his

paintings to completely absorb and savour its poignant beauty.

His paintings are typically brimming with vigour and energy. They exude life as if silently capturing the raw state of an enthralling spectacle.

Usually acrylic in medium and abstract in nature, his art reflects a fusion of movement in the flow of colours – invoking the realm of mystical enchantment that can be found in nature.

Often vibrant and captivating, Ismail's paintings are designed to capture one's attention from afar before drawing them in for a more intimate affair. He aims to encourage people to slowly unpeel the layers of intrigue to uncover paradise, serene and tranquil. Ismail's paintings can be described to have elements resembling the ocean. Beneath the cacophony of vivid



Kingdom of the Sky... Valley of the King, 2005  
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas 173 x 250 cm  
**SOLD RM 56,360.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 30 July 2017  
Sale XXVIII

colours alike the waves of the sea, the deep blue ocean is the quiet and profound calm that should resonate with gazers of his paintings.

Emitting an almost dreamlike vibe, the individual elements dance gracefully across the painting to an ethereal unheard rhythm. Its tiny, delicate individual strokes and splatters made with deliberation, all accumulate to produce something much grander.

Unique to all his paintings is a shape of a circle purposefully placed in the centre of the canvas. The circle, according to Ismail is symbolic of perfection and balance, meant to embody his quest for wholeness and oneness with the cosmos.

One of his paintings, the Island in the Sky... Floating World (2001) resembles brilliantly coloured waves parting in the middle to reveal the centrepiece of the picture, a

turquoise sphere. Almost chaotic in nature, the colourful waves seem to layer atop each other with the deepest layer being the soothing bluish green smooth undertone, the foundation of the entire painting.

Another signature artwork of his would be Ismail's Magical Night... Angledance No.8 (2003). This bewitching piece of black, silver and gold captures the majestic visage of a dragon. With the sphere staying its place as the painting's focal point, it gives the appearance of the 'dragon' snaking around a moon, encircling, protecting, even worshipping the symbol of oneness and perfection.

Holy Night...Jungle of Darkness (2003) presents quite a conundrum with its amalgamation of contrasting elements. A rigid, cornered almost prison-like base of black and brown symbolic of a dark forest, is disrupted with tiny bursts of light resembling

colourful birds scattered across the painting, creating a mesmerising frame, inviting the gazer to meticulously study each 'bird', whilst similar in terms of colour combination, differ in stroke and arrangement. A stunning piece indeed.

Barungan Dance (1993) and Floating Dreams (1995) portray an entirely different world. The infusion of brush strokes create a movement that resemble the motion of the stars across the galaxy. The upward brush movements elicit a sense of reach towards the heavens, an attempt to grasp hold of an ethereal reality, a new dimension that currently escapes all of us.

It doesn't take much to appreciate many of Ismail's works. His art speaks for itself and is very open to interpretation. One just has to spend a few moments, patient to study and encounter the slow reveal of beauty and pulchritude each painting contains.



Cermin Alam...Biarkan Cahaya Bicara, 1997  
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas 138 x 178 cm  
**SOLD RM 52,800.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 2 December 2012  
Edition II

#### ACCOLADES AND AWARDS

To display the calibre his works imbue, this illustrious artist has won many awards and held many exhibitions, garnering him the credit his art deserves.

His first breakthrough in the art arena was in 1979. He was bestowed with the Frank Sullivan Award in the graphic art section of the Salon Malaysia art competition held by the National Art Gallery Malaysia. While he was in McCann-Erickson, he even managed to lead his team to win advertising awards such as the one for a Malaysia Airlines advertisement, an early sign of his prolific talent.

As an artist, he was nominated Young Illustrator of Asia in Japan in 1981 and won first prize at the Biennale of Visual Arts, Seychelles in 1992. It seemed like this man was destined for greatness, because his achievements continued to pile.

His first international exhibition happened in 1980, where Ismail showcased his art at the International Graphic Art Exhibition at Osaka University, Japan. His next took place at the Asian Art Biennial in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1981.

In 1984, Ismail had his first solo exhibition in Paintings & Drawings, Hotel Equatorial, Kuala Lumpur. His international accolades

continued in 1988 with yet another showcase at the 3rd ASIAN International Art Exhibition at the Fukuoka Art Museum in Fukuoka, Japan.

1989 was a prolific year for Ismail with his taking part in three separate exhibitions, the first being at The First Asean Travelling Exhibition in Paintings, Photography & Children's Art, that took place in numerous cities; Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Manila and his hometown, Singapore, to name a few. His second stint of the year was at the 3rd International Asian European Art Biennial Exhibition that took place at the State Museum of Fine Arts, Ankara, Turkey. There, he was one of the five outstanding Malaysian artists including Choong Kam Kow, Ahmad Khalid, the esteemed Khalil Ibrahim, and the inspiring Long Thien Shih. Standing among these creative giants brought Ismail to his rightful place in the art arena. Again the same year, he exhibited at the Osaka Triennial '90 International Competition of Painting at My Dome Osaka, Japan.

Three years later, in 1992, Malaysian artists were honourably given recognition at the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, in Amman, Jordan. There Ismail exhibited his work alongside Ahmad Khalid, Khalil Ibrahim, Nirmala Shanmughalingam and Sharifah Fatimah Zubir.

Ismail also took the spotlight in 1993. His solo exhibitions took the art world by storm with his



Mystery Tour... Magical Love Bird, 2014  
Acrylic on canvas 90 x 71 cm  
**SOLD RM 22,544.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 15 January 2017  
Edition XXV

Nine Years On showcase at Art Salon, Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur and again in the "Magical Tour" at the Substation Gallery in Singapore.

The following years, Ismail exhibited all over the world. He was in China in 1997, showcasing his work at "The 12th Asian International Art Exhibition" Nucleo De Pintura Contemporanea at the Circulo Dos Amigo Da Cultura, De Macau. In 1998, he was in Spain at the Exposition Art Actuel Association Ariane Essor at the San-Juan Museum, Lerida. That same year, his artworks saw France as well, when he was invited to exhibit at "The Ocean" - UNESCO and AIAP, World's Ocean, Seas, Rivers and Waterways in Perpignan. And in 2000, he touched base with his homeland, in Kuala Lumpur's "Art For Nature - Forest For Water, Water For Life WWF Malaysia" at the Islamic Art Museum.

In 2004, Ismail went solo again on his exhibition in Blend at XOAS Gallery, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, and again in 2005, in "Magic in the Sky" at the Elle Six Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

Today, this illustrious artist needs no introduction. With amazing pieces that dominate the art world, gorgeous at glance and profoundly penetrating upon inspection, Ismail has created masterpieces that will not easily escape the art community, unnoticed. The canvas comes to life with the brush of the master wielder, that is Ismail Latiff.