

Lifestyle

# From Malay weddings to forgotten Singapore histories, artist Fyerool Darma explores his roots

He once burned all his paintings to start anew. Now, artist Fyerool Darma taps into the past and present to create artworks that look at the complexities of Singapore's histories and his own Malay heritage.



Singaporean artist Fyerool Darma with his second solo exhibition Monsoon Song. (Photo: Yeo Workshop)

SINGAPORE: In 2013, Singaporean artist Fyerool Darma decided he wanted a clean slate in making art. So one night, he gathered all 12 paintings that he had made up to that point.

After which, the fine arts graduate from LASALLE College of the Arts burned all of them.

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“It was spontaneous. I burned them in my old studio at Ubi Road 1 during the Hungry Ghost Festival month,” the 30-year-old recalled with a laugh.

“I kind of felt liberated after doing that. My old paintings were very illustrative

and kitsch, and I felt they weren't honest enough. There weren't any pegangan."



Fyerool Darma's own take on the bunga manggar titled *We Resign Ourselves To A Long Wait*, and another work titled *At Dusk, We Return To Perch Together*, which incorporates shoe leather as a nod to the Malaysian sneaker brand Aliph, which was famous among rock bands. (Photo: Yeo Workshop)

It was a word he kept hearing from his father, as Fyerool was growing up as a teenager. It meant "firm grip" in Malay, to signify the need to anchor oneself.

Fyerool's father was a history buff who would regale him with stories of the Majapahit and Srivijaya empires, and the old wars that took place in the region. He would also talk about the writings of Tun Sri Lanang and Munshi Abdullah.

"He would constantly tell me I had to start knowing my roots. That I should never forget where my roots are," he said.

### EXPLORING HIS ROOTS

These days, exploring his roots is very much at the centre of what Fyerool does.

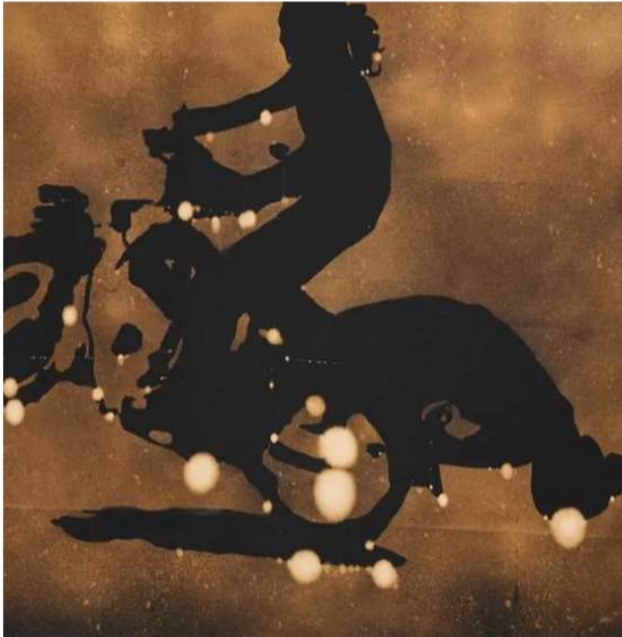
This is evident in his solo exhibition *Monsoon Song*, which is ongoing at Yeo Workshop in Gillman Barracks.

When visitors walk in, they hear a haunting, layered soundscape that

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naunting 100pea soundscape that combines elements from songs by 1960s pop singer Oslan Husein, music and film icon P Ramlee, and legendary rock singer Ramli Sarip.



Biking subculture and traditional calligraphy collide in Fyerool Darma's new show Monsoon Song. From left: Our Chants, They Grace The Skies As We Wall With The Monsun (Biru), and The Rushing Winds Fail To Keep Us Apart. (Photo: Yeo Workshop)

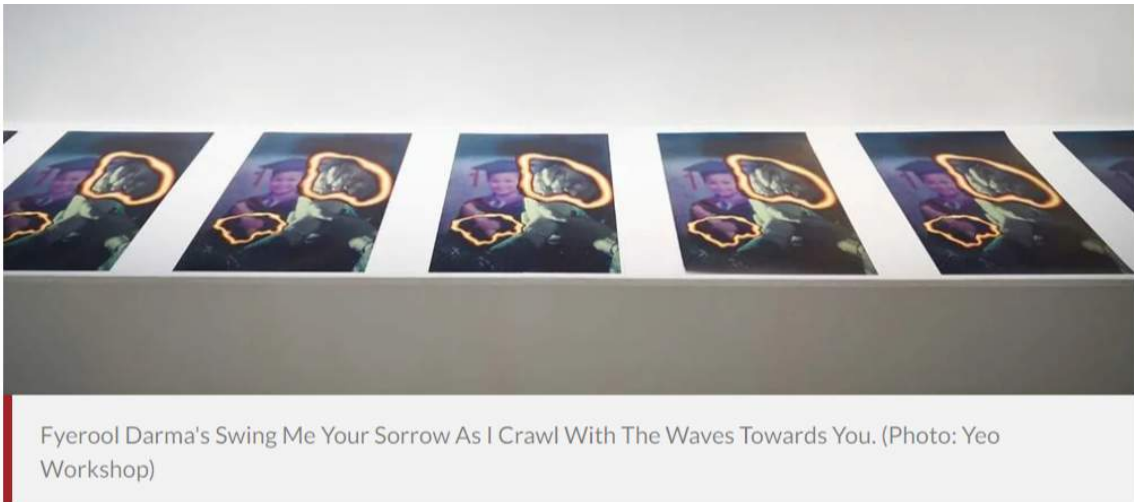
On the wall, you see calligraphic works done on artificial cowhide, similar to what one often sees hanging inside the houses of Malay households. There's also what looks like bunga manggar, the ubiquitous palm blossoms made of tinsel and bamboo poles used in weddings.

But these works have also been remade to incorporate more contemporary elements.

The calligraphy pieces have a modern touch, courtesy of shiny aluminum frames, a nod to the culture of customisation. And the calligraphy isn't in Arabic but in English – and one of them is a translation of a line from Sofea, a famous rock band in Singapore and Malaysia during the 1980s.

As for the bunga manggar, it's made of artificial plants, raffia strings – and even includes bandanas, yet another allusion to youth culture.





Fyerool Darma's *Swing Me Your Sorrow As I Crawl With The Waves Towards You*. (Photo: Yeo Workshop)

## BEYOND THE BUNGA MANGGAR

His playful reimaginings are the result not just of painstaking research but also of personal experience. His grandparents and their generation were known cooks for weddings or extended gatherings in their estate. One of his grandaunts is a decorator of wedding trays used for the ceremony.

In fact, it was a discussion with his grandaunt that got him curious about the history of the bunga manggar.

“She told me that these are all remnants of our moyangs, our ancestors, and were things that we needed to know because it’s part of my heritage and our collective heritage,” he said.



Fyerool Darma's take on the bunga manggar (left) uses artificial plants and even bandanas as a nod to youth culture. (Photo: Yeo Workshop, Wikipedia)

And this heritage doesn't just include elements from longstanding traditions but new ones, too. Elsewhere, allusions to the biking and street art subcultures pop up

in other works.

Combining past and present, personal and larger histories is part of his current interest in the idea of “ghaib”, an Arabic term that refers to that unseen presence that is “transmitted” from one generation or group to the next, through history.

“I was curious about what were the things that are still lingering today that have been left from far ago,” he said.

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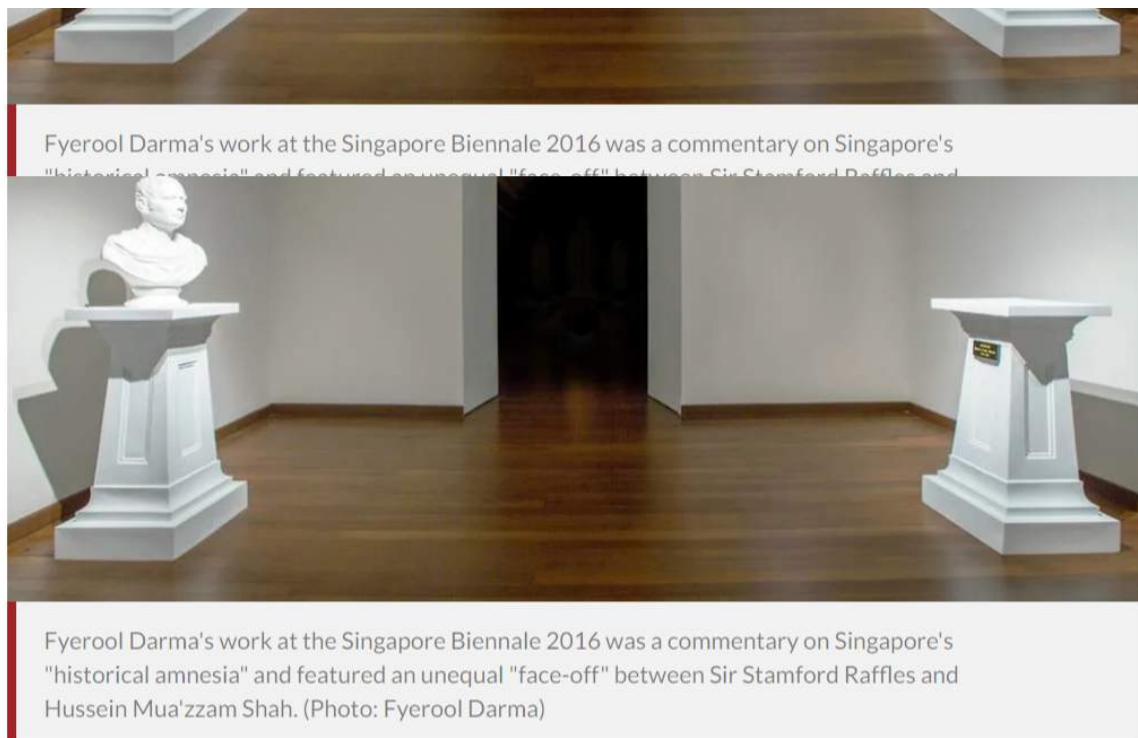
#### **FLUID YET COMPLEX MALAY IDENTITY**

One “hidden” work in the gallery provides further clues into his preoccupation with the layered elements that make up his heritage – behind the curtains leading to the space’s storage area is a portrait of Munshi Abdullah.

Known as the scribe of Sir Stamford Raffles, he was a complex historical personality. He is regarded as the Father of Modern Malay Literature, and is of Tamil and Yemen descent.

In a way, the scribe’s own fluid identity mirrors Fyerool’s own tradition-meets-contemporary artworks – both complicate one’s perception of what constitutes a Malay.





“This whole idea of race is a problem in that it creates borders that define what a Malay individual is – and its very concept is a myth that’s created by Raffles and his contemporaries,” he said. “In actual fact, a Malay individual could be someone who embodies several cultures, such as the Minangkabau or Bugis. It is fluid yet complex, which is a beauty in itself.”

### **LOOKING AT HISTORIES**

Monsoon Song is only the latest iteration of Fyerool’s artistic explorations into identity. In fact, he has previously tackled much bigger historical themes.

Right after his particularly fiery epiphany in 2013 – and after burying, literally, the few paintings that remained under a then-soon-to-be-demolished Eminent Plaza as part of a group exhibition – he was already diligently looking at such cultural and historical concerns.

He would pore through texts and interview family members and friends. One area that piqued his curiosity was the old concept of Nusantara, a term that collectively refers to the Malay archipelago, that stretches from what’s now Malaysia and Singapore to Indonesia.





In his early Moyang series, Fyerool Darma created portraits of overlooked historical figures such as Ali Wallace (left) and Raden Saleh. (Photo: Fyerool Darma)

“I was curious in locating the roots and connectedness of it all,” he said.

In 2015, his first solo show Moyang featured paintings of historical figures, such as Sri Tri Buana, the pioneering Javanese modern artist Raden Saleh, and Ali Wallace, the Malay assistant of English explorer Alfred Russel Wallace.



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At the recent Singapore Biennale, he put up two plinths in an imagined “face-off” between Raffles and Sultan Hussein Mua’zzam Shah, two figures that were instrumental in the founding of modern Singapore.

### LEGENDS IN A MAP

But at the same time, he emphasised erasures. In the Moyang series, faces would be obliterated or portions of the portraits literally cropped out, while the plinth dedicated to the Sultan featured no bust.





From Fyerool Darma's Moyang series: Portrait No. 11 (Puan Saleha, Zaliha or Salihat) and Portrait No. 4 (The Progenitor, Pendatang Or Probably Seri Tri Buana). (Photo: Fyerool Darma)

In these works, personalities relegated to historical footnotes are put in the spotlight while also reminding viewers how they were literally erased from history.

From history with a capital H in his earlier works to the current, more personal ones, Fyerool sees all of these as a way to help him make sense of his complex identity.

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Fyerool Darma's Tempinis, one of the early works he did after burning his old paintings, which looks at the rural, forested roots of Tampines long before it became a bustling town. (Photo: Fyerool Darma)

“I’m doing it for my niece and nephews,” he laughed, adding how they would often observe him working at his sister’s place, where his studio currently is.

In the same way that his father and older members of his family have opened up new worlds for him, Fyerool hopes his artworks would spark something in the next generation – the ghaib in action, as it were.

“We are still a work-in-progress when it comes to discussing issues of identity or geography. But as individuals, we all contribute to the diversity of culture.”

*Source: CNA/mm*

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