

ANUM

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17 May – 24 August 2025
Yeo Workshop, Singapore

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Text *Carmen Nge*
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INTRODUCTION

Visitors seeking escape from the blistering afternoon heat at the Gilman Barracks can spy from afar an enticing reddish-orange wall behind the glass doors of Yeo Workshop that beckons us in. The exhibition nestled within is modestly called ANUM, the moniker for Malaysian artist Noor Mahnun Mohamed.

By eschewing the conventional white cube gallery space in favour of warm terracotta walls, Anum brings a sensorial element of her Kelantan and Thai ancestry to Singapore. This distinctive wall colour is the artist's deliberate nod to the Singgora roof tiles of traditional Malay houses along the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia and Thailand, which she grew up seeing. Such heritage roofs are made of clay taken from paddy fields or rivers and that, until today, are handmade.

In the Kelantanese dialect, 'Singgora' means 'City of Lions' – indeed an apt choice for Anum's first solo exhibition in Singapura, a 'lion city' in its literal Malay translation.



Carnations











ANUM



how shoot



sunflowers



homework



Sunflowers



new shoes





now shows



lost memory



Leaf Monkey i

Leaf Monkey ii

Leaf Monkey iii







slipper ii



bisa kuning













Grand Hotel







Straw (pink)





ink

memory

house

pink straw



celos

wundertrupp

straw

A LIFE, REFINED

CARMEN NGE

Oil paintings take center stage in the ANUM exhibition at Yeo Workshop, with a few watercolour and graphite works – primarily preparatory drawings and experiments with tile patterns on paper – tucked at the back.

For her canvases, Anum still uses linen, which is widely regarded as the gold standard for classically trained artists due to its strength, durability and a tensility that is double that of cotton. Linen canvases are also less sensitive to humidity, making them less prone to deformation, a common problem for artists working in the tropics.

Anum also prefers linen because she paints in thin layers, using a technique of oil painting that she learnt while studying in Germany at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Braunschweig. This layered painting technique demands patience and careful attention to the mixing and application of materials such as pigments, oils, varnishes, and turpentine.

Her assiduous painting process is well matched with her admiration for manual handiwork and the domestic rituals of everyday life.¹ Anum recounts a childhood spent watching her grandmother weave mats and sew her own clothes; locals building elaborate, decorative bird traps and attending bird singing competitions; and her uncle harvesting wood from the jungle to make a traditional top called *gasing*, used in top spinning competitions.

The unhurried yet sustained rhythms of her hometown of Pasir Puteh in the 1960s and

1. Ong, Emelia. *Living Art: The inspired lives of 14 Malaysian artists and their art practice*. Areca Books, 2020.

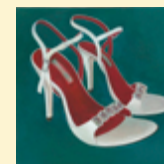
1970s Kelantan are a stimulus for her own creative practice. Many of her paintings contain a surfeit of such satisfying sedateness, layered with a deep appreciation for refinement.

At its heart, refinement is about small changes, not grand, radical gestures. To refine is to work incrementally, to persevere over time, honing and clarifying an idea, a technique, or a creative element. The artist's proclivity for painting repetitive geometric patterns is a manifestation of this wilful undertaking.

This interest in geometric elements comes as no surprise, as Anum wrote one of her master's degree essays on Italian artist Leon Battista Alberti, himself an avid student of Euclidean geometry, which greatly influenced his theories of art and architecture.² Alberti was considered the foremost theorist of Renaissance architecture and the quintessential Renaissance man, with a long history and affinity with the city of Florence, which also happens to be one of Anum's favourite cities and where she mounted her first solo exhibition, exactly forty years ago.

A signature motif in her paintings is repeating patterned tiles in varying shades of cool and warm colours – blues, reds, purples, whites. Some of them are positioned where one expects tiles to be: on floors, laid out in an understated rectangular grid of an artist's studio in *Homework* or as common parquet wooden flooring in *Recorder*; in striking, geometric patterns that threaten to overshadow a schoolgirl's fitting session in *Baju Kurung*;

2. Gorini, Catherine. "Geometry for the Artist: An Interdisciplinary Consciousness-based Course", *SSRN Electronic Journal*, August 2018. DOI:10.2139/ssrn.3824048



A Pair of Choos (2012), *Fish Head* (2017) and *Moka Pot – Single* (2017)

3. According to Catherine Gorini, "the flat surfaces of architecture and man-made items belong to Euclidean geometry [whereas] natural forms like the human body, fruit, flower petals, and so on belong to non-Euclidean geometry."

or as intricate Peranakan tiles commanding our attention in the foreground of *Lukis Rumah Lukis*.

More unusual placements of tiles can be found in her still life paintings. In the diptych *Slipper O*, patterned tiles share the frame with a solitary lady slipper orchid, the latter's gracefully curving leaves a visual counterpoint to the angular, characteristic 'V' shape of the adjacent chevron pattern tiles. Thanks to the artist's attentiveness to colours in her work, the delicate white and red hues in the orchid are picked up and accentuated by the adjacent white and red tiles. The tiles are reminiscent of colour swatches used in the design industry; here, they are beautifully reconfigured into hypnotic patterns.

Diptych oil paintings from Anum's previous exhibitions, notably *A Pair of Choos* (2012), *Fish Head* (2017) and *Moka Pot – Single* (2017), are early iterations of this unique pairing.

A similar colour logic is at play in *Atlas* and *Wentletrap*, where non-Euclidean geometric shapes (moth and seashell) are juxtaposed with Euclidean ones (straight and angled rectangular tiles), in a curiously harmonious composition.³ Anum is able to achieve a sense of balance and harmony due to her calculated choice of colours, and clever calibration of proportionality. The moth and the shell are large enough to command our attention but not so large that they would overshadow the patterned tiles in the background. By utilising a flat perspective,

Anum also ensures non-Euclidean and Euclidean shapes are equalised.

Viewed as a whole, the use of patterned tiles in Anum's paintings is a mild provocation; she invites us to look more closely at commonplace fixtures and to attend to their aesthetic appeal and latent power. What is typically underfoot is now entrancing; what appears as an unvarying background pattern can disrupt the plenitude of a still image. When combined with patterned tiles, her still life paintings are no longer imbued with repose, rather, they shimmer with vigour.

Also evident in Anum's paintings is her consideration of fundamental architectural elements when composing her paintings: line, plane, form, and space. Most who know her are aware of an almost decade-long artistic sojourn in Italy and Germany, where she received her tutelage in printmaking and painting. Not often cited is how Anum's formal artistic journey began in the field of architecture, which she studied in the United States. By her own admission, when she arrived in Europe, she was at first more in awe of its architecture than its art.

A masterfully compact testament to Anum's love for architecture can be seen in her most recent work, the diminutive *Grand Hotel*, modelled after an old hotel close to where her studio is currently based. By portraying a large building at a much smaller scale, she lends it a whimsical quality, much like a quirky Wes Anderson-inspired locale.

Anum's training in architecture enables her to design spaces in her paintings using lines and planes to simplify forms and delineate scale; additionally, these fundamentals also help her assign more value to certain elements over others, in unexpected ways.

In *Boxers*, the low horizon line guides our eyes to focus on the three buildings in the background, rather than on the three unclothed men in the foreground. There is a sense of orderliness to their apparent symmetry and an exacting way in which the buildings are positioned – with their distinctive white walls and grid-like windows – that invite scrutiny. Similarly, in *Lukis Rumah Lukis*, the multiple horizontal and vertical lines direct our eyes to the bottom half of the painting, which is visually dense with colours, patterns and architectural motifs. The male figure – although depicted much larger than his surroundings – is much less eye catching than the intricate and brightly coloured floor tiles beneath his feet, and the diverse facades of old colonial houses behind him.

In the *New Shoes* painting, the two horizon lines parallel to the river draw our attention to the natural elements – the forest of trees in the background and the irregularly shaped rocks in the foreground – and away from the male figure. In the smaller *new shoes* painting, our gaze is pulled away from the lone figure and towards the building on the left with the two-tiered roof, thanks to the left-leaning upward slope of the rock pathway.

Although figures are depicted in Anum's paintings, they are not meant to be the focal point. Almost all of them have barely discernible expressions and their poses do not convey much narrative information beyond the obvious. These figures have no desire to engage with their viewers, unlike the three monkeys in the *Leaf Monkey* paintings, who are looking directly at us with their forward-facing, penetrating eyes.

There is, however, one artwork that exhibits an equal consideration to theme and technique and it is a piece titled *Homework*, the most self-referential painting in the show. An artist is depicted at work, painting a seated schoolgirl in a ubiquitous secondary school uniform; the latter's surroundings are remarkably like the artist's own studio, and there are tiles aplenty in both locations. The observant viewer will notice that there is not just one painting within a painting but three: the painting of a fish hanging on the wall to the right, and a painting of the ANUM exhibition layout, in isometric view, placed on the table to the left.

Homework conveys a strong sense of equilibrium due to the interplay of triads — three paintings within a painting, three balcony windowpanes, three clearly demarcated spaces (indoors, balcony space, jungle area) — and dyads — two female figures, and two realities: the painter as object and the painter as a subject. It is a painting that reflects how Anum engages in her artistic practice, meditatively and conscientiously, with care and consideration for space, colour, and process.

* * *

In general, when viewed as a whole, the paintings in ANUM are not as thematically focused as they are technically rigorous. The artist is unfussy about her subject matter, sourcing loosely from memories, lived experiences, and her immediate surroundings. Yet she is fastidious about the process and techniques of painting, with her choice and use of colour, and with compositional elements that shape the spaces she designs for her pictorial creations.

Ultimately, for an artist who employs the layered painting technique, what lies on the surface of Anum's works is but the final layer of an enduring artistic practice that she will continue to spend a lifetime refining.

CARMEN NGE is currently an assistant professor at the Faculty of Creative Industries, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Malaysia. She has been writing about Malaysian arts and culture for a variety of publications for more than 20 years. She is the co-editor of two books: *Ismail Hashim: Essays, Interviews and Archives* (2015) and *Excavations, Interrogations, Krishen Jit and Contemporary Malaysian Theatre* (2018).



putting tiles

xx

xi

x



with
tiles



honey



take away



baju kurung



forest for homework



wow #3

aureolin m

sky blue iii

indigo ii



penang tiles iv

penang tiles x

penang tiles xi

penang tiles xii



OUTRO: INTRO TO XXV EXHIBITION CATALOGUE



OUTRO



In year 2010, as I started to be officially represented by NN Gallery, under the late Syed Nabil Syed Nahar and his sister Sharifah Nor Akmar in Kuala Lumpur, we held XXV, an exhibition in two parts; [see invite card]. Below is the writing in the XXV catalogue which I have edited slightly.

Twenty-five years ago, I had my first solo exhibition at 'Video Diva' in Florence. It was not a commercial gallery but a space for art-related activities run by a group of friends and was named after the French film 'Diva' by Jean-Jacques Beineix. The screening of the movie was presented using television screens in the different rooms of the rented shop-lot space on Via San Zanobi. One member of the collective of friends is a painter, who is a friend of a friend, who has a brother, who was in a local band, whose music video was done by one of the Video Diva's partners. The painter was using the space at the back, a courtyard, to work on his large-scale paintings. My friend and I would sometimes visit him at work if we happened to be in that area of town.

Winter in Florence is comparatively mild but it could get very cold at night. The influx of tourists is at its peak in summer so it is a pleasant time to be there, or any part of Italy, during the winter months. I had just arrived from Berlin a month and a half ago, and turned twenty-one. My Italian friends gave me baskets

of food — pasta, homemade pesto, blood oranges, and more pasta — as presents. I was staying in a summer cottage (in winter) on the outskirts of Florence. Instead of paying rent, I built architectural models for an architect who would occasionally use the cottage in spring and summer as his weekend retreat.

I was not a ‘proper’ painter then. All the works I did in Florence were on paper. A number of canvas works that were done in Berlin before were a mixed bag of still life and tonal studies. There were a lot of depictions of peaches and flowers, in watercolour, chalk pastel and oil. A few portraits and small figurative works of friends and a handful of printworks, many in the style of artists I was keen on following upon seeing the originals in the museums such as Cézanne, Morandi, and Kirchner, to name a few. The Florentine painter saw these paper works when he offered the possibility of an exhibition at Video Diva. I had a month to prepare and decided to do large-scale, mixed-media works on paper stretched on Masonite board.

The opening went well. We handed out handmade invitation cards and flyers. The solo was announced on the local Florentine radio and word of mouth seemed to work best. Besides my friends, and their friends, who were mostly students of law or medicine, I remember my show being attended by young fashion designers whose small boutiques were doors

away from ‘Video Diva’ as well as art students and a network of the painter’s friends in the music, design or creative industry. I took a slide documentation of the artworks which were mostly claustrophobic and angst-ridden figures in a composition of black, white and red with a sparse landscape. In one slide, I posed in front of a vertical diptych of a male and a female pair, looking very cheerful.

So that was my first official solo exhibition as an artist, a crossing over the threshold. To this day, Florence remains one of my favourite cities. I still keep in touch with my Tuscan friends. The Florentine painter moved to New York. I returned to Berlin and four years later enrolled into an art school in Braunschweig, Germany.

The solo at Yeo Workshop, Singapore celebrates forty years since that first outing.

Anum, 2025



Carnations, 2023
Oil on linen
30 cm × 25.5 cm



Recorder, 2025
Oil on linen
80 cm × 60 cm



Boxers, 2025
Oil on linen
150 cm × 120 cm



Homework, 2024
Oil on linen
80 cm × 120 cm



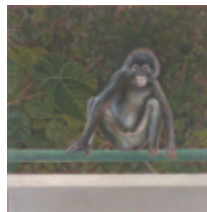
Sunflowers, 2025
Oil on linen
25.5 cm × 25.5 cm



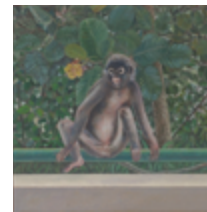
new shoes, 2024
Oil on linen
30.5 cm × 25.5 cm



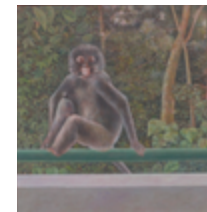
New Shoes, 2025
Oil on linen
120 cm × 90 cm



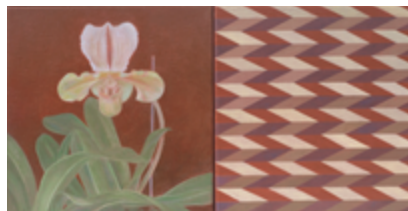
Leaf Monkey i, 2022
Oil on linen
20.5 cm × 20.5 cm



Leaf Monkey ii, 2023
Oil on linen
20.5 cm × 20.5 cm



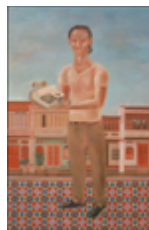
Leaf Monkey iii, 2024
Oil on linen
20.5 cm × 20.5 cm



Slipper O, 2025
Oil on linen
Diptych: 20.5 × 41 cm
Left: 20.5 cm × 20.5 cm
Right: 20.5 cm × 20.5 cm



Baju Kurung, 2025
Oil on linen
120 cm × 150 cm



Lukis Rumah Lukis, 2024
Oil on linen
90 cm × 60 cm



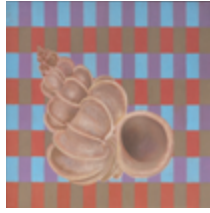
Grand Hotel, 2025
Oil on linen
20.5 cm × 20.5 cm



homework, 2023
Coloured pencil and graphite
on paper
42 cm × 29.5 cm



Atlas, 2024
Oil on linen
20.5 cm × 20.5 cm



Wentletrap, 2024
Oil on linen
20.5 cm × 20.5 cm



Straw (pink), 2025
Oil on linen
30 cm × 20.5 cm



honey, 2024
Graphite on paper
20 cm × 20 cm



take away, 2024
Graphite on paper
20 cm × 20 cm



baju kurung, 2023
Watercolour and graphite
on paper
31 × 41 cm



forest for homework, 2023
Watercolour and graphite
on paper
31 × 41 cm



wow #3, 2021
Watercolour on paper
20 cm × 20 cm



aureolin m, 2021
Watercolour on paper
20 cm × 20 cm



sky blue iii, 2021
Watercolour on paper
20 cm × 20 cm



indigo ii, 2021
Watercolour on paper
20 cm × 20 cm



penang tiles iv, 2023
Watercolour on paper
31 cm × 22 cm



penang tiles x, 2023
Watercolour on paper
29.7 cm × 21 cm



penang tiles xi, 2023
Watercolour on paper
29.7 cm × 21 cm



penang tiles xii, 2023
Watercolour on paper
29.7 cm × 21 cm

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my family

angela, hijjas, mun ching, suryani, andy, kenta, carmen,
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jonathan, bala, dj, lex, tim & david

mario, vanna, karin, alessandra & marco

in memory of john p koestler



YEO WORKSHOP