

“Latiff Mohidin: Pogo Pogo (1960–1969)”

NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE

CURATED BY SHABBIR HUSSAIN MUSTAFA AND CATHERINE DAVID
WITH ANISHA MENON AND MELINDA SUSANTO

Kevin Chua

NEAR THE EXHIBITION ENTRANCE is a drawing, barely the span of one's hand, in which two spiky objects conjure up alternate lives as plants or shrines. The composition is split down the middle, with the object on the left done in black on white, and the one on the right in white on black. The drawing seems to have been done in a hurry, ink dashed onto paper. Rushing back to his room after an encounter with several Thai and Khmer artifacts at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin in 1961, Malaysia-born Latiff Mohidin, then a young student, knew he had something. A series of paintings would tumble out of this seminal moment, when the artist learned how to infuse ordinary things with a concrete mysticism. He would name the works by repeating the first two syllables of the German plural *Pagodens* to rhythmic, incantatory effect: “Pogo Pogo.” I still marvel at how he cast left and right halves into elemental light and dark, for that key move raised those prosaic objects to the level of the epic, and took them out of worldly time.

The “Pogo Pogo” paintings, made between 1960 and 1969, are the focus of this exhibition, on view since late March at the National Gallery Singapore. In each, a vertical

shape rises and looms—a plant arrested mid-bloom, or a shrine caught on the horizon. Curves mimic the upswept eaves of a Minangkabau house. But the metamorphic shimmering conceals a Goethean morphology: You attend to the visible surface of a plant form to penetratively apprehend some hidden, deeper process within. It's not that these shapes look like plants or shrines, but that plants and shrines both rise and fall by the same pulsing energy. Thick contour lines reinforce our sense of the planar; there is an unrelenting stillness to each work. The paintings' archaic playing-out of Southeast Asian cosmology feels utterly modern.

You begin to hear Berlin in these canvases, and to understand how Latiff Mohidin tapped into the crackling energy of the metropolis in the 1960s. Do the yellow fields trace the lights along the Kurfürstendamm? It still fascinates how the artist had the temerity to take the measure of German-Austrian post-Romantic poetry (Rilke, Trakl) and Expressionist painting (here, the scarified strokes of Beckmann; there, the pungent colorism of Kirchner). This was a Berlin still recovering from the devastation of World War II; he landed there in 1960, a year before a wall tore through the city.

Ever restless, he continued to travel, returning to Malaysia in 1964. Confronted by his mother about his lack of gainful employment, he responded by invoking *merantau*, a Minangkabau ritual that entails wandering in search of knowledge. He packed his bag for Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia, passed from friend to friend as he drew and wrote, observed and dreamt. Yet the question arises as to the meaning of *place* for him: There is the sense, in the deluge of sketches and poetic scribbles, that he wasn't simply describing what he was seeing, nor

merely recording the places he had visited, the people he had met. Metaphors don't help in describing his work—they're too abstract. Latiff Mohidin, I think, was inscribing place, registering it via bodily rhythm. His process evokes art historian George Kubler's insight that the “initial commotion” of making is encoded in a work's obdurate material form.

There is a temptation to think of Latiff Mohidin's wanderings as a backpacker's holiday. But in the '60s, much of Southeast Asia was in the throes of revolution. Nationalist movements were on the rise. As he made his way across Cambodia, groups that would eventually form the Khmer Rouge were on the march nearby. My guess is that he risked danger only to better sense and understand his environment, to will himself into becoming a lightning rod for the production of art.

The paintings' archaic playing-out of Southeast Asian cosmology feels utterly modern.

The exhibition originated at the Centre Pompidou, where it opened in February 2018 (Latiff Mohidin spent some time in Paris in the '60s), then traveled to the Ilham Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. How fitting that the exhibition followed the artist in his itinerancy. As in Singapore, the Pompidou iteration was tightly focused on the “Pogo Pogo” series, even though the artist continued to be productive after the '60s. This framing called attention to the diversity within the series (look how the placid frontality of *Sivalingga*, 1965, shuns the rotational abrasiveness of



Left: Latiff Mohidin, *Pagodens (Pagodas)*, 1961, ink on paper, 5 7/8 × 4 1/8".

Below: Latiff Mohidin, *PROVOKE*, 1965, oil on board, 38 1/2 × 44 1/2".

Right: Latiff Mohidin, *Pogo Pogo*, 1964, oil on canvas, 33 3/4 × 33 3/4".

All from the series “Pogo Pogo,” 1960–69.



Pago Pago II, 1965), while the minimalist exhibition design allowed the vibrancy and intensity of the individual paintings to shine through. However closely the curators hewed to works produced in the '60s, we weren't really stuck in that decade—the canvases channeled the German '20s, the Angkorean twelfth century, and many other eras.

The most important decision at the Centre Pompidou might have been the placement of Latiff Mohidin's work on the same floor as the museum's permanent collection (the exhibition was the first by a Southeast Asian artist in the In-Focus gallery). Many museums in Europe and America have responded to the challenge of global modernism by relegating non-Western artists to separate floors or rooms, which only perpetuates their marginalization. This exhibition's location, in contrast, placed a Southeast Asian artist's work on the same level as the Pompidou's core collection of European modern and contemporary art. This, indeed, was the better story: European modernists reckoned with artists from around the world less as strangers in their backyard than as neighbors commingling in the house-in-common. Such an inclusive strategy was mirrored in the National Gallery Singapore's practice of knowledge-producing curation: instead of mere canon expansion, deep historical rewriting and contestation (see, to wit, the museum's boldly revisionist 2016 exhibition "Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond," also cocurated with the Centre Pompidou). One did not feel, especially with the Paris iteration, a clamor for belonging. Instead, the exhibition modeled collaboration at the level of curation (between the two museums) and at the level of artistic practice (Latiff Mohidin's work, though individually made, was often the outcome of dialogue with fellow artists and writers).

At all three locations, there was a resistance to containing Latiff Mohidin's art. Instead, the exhibition embraced his itinerancy—his perpetual *merantau*—by proliferating the contexts for his work (the catalogue included personal recollections, primary documents, and one newly commissioned essay). Archival material on the artist was carefully sourced, and a selection of his poetry was thoughtfully integrated into the display of visual art. The Singapore iteration featured a section on the artist's childhood in the Malay neighborhood of Kampong Glam; this proved to be less an exercise in nostalgia than an opportunity for viewers in Singapore to understand the formative influence of that area on the artist. Overall, these strategies felt less like the studied filling-out of a biography than an attempt to provide multiple entry points into the artist's oeuvre.

Programming scheduled in conjunction with the exhibition included a panel reading—*cum*—reminiscence on Latiff Mohidin's art, poetry, and life in Paris in February 2018 and a symposium in Kuala Lumpur in December 2018. Yet despite the breadth and richness of their content, these events felt a bit too celebratory, fetishizing his biography to the detriment of his art. Few participants dealt with artistic form. The best speakers tackled his poetry, but here, as in the exhibition as a whole, one wished for a more critical unpacking of the politics of literature and art in '50s and '60s Malaysia and of the artist's place in that world. That Latiff Mohidin is often thought of as having practiced an apolitical abstraction in the '60s that departed from the engaged social realism of the '50s only forces the question: How do we think of abstraction as congruent with, and not necessarily opposed to, realism?

We are still trying to understand what drew so many artists and writers from around the world to Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Seeking knowledge, these voyagers ended up discovering—ironically, within the hegemonic center—a culture that was their own. Central to that journey was the meaning of modernity as it took shape, first in Europe, then around the world. Was it really social and economic betterment—that vaunted nirvana called progress—or something more vexing, like a vortex or a trap? Thwarted by the twin demons of colonialism and authoritarianism, countries in Southeast Asia are still asking that question.

Questions of form are necessary to understanding the politics of Latiff Mohidin's art, which seems, at first glance, abjuring of worldly concerns. Tracking his movements in the '60s provides us with a provisional answer. As '60s Berlin became the epicenter of the Cold War, that geopolitical conflict played out in a range of decolonizing struggles across Southeast Asia. In Malaysia and Singapore, the messy departure of the British was prolonged by a revolutionary guerrilla war, itself stymied by a government-imposed "emergency." Latiff Mohidin was deftly pursuing a cosmopolitanism in the midst of, and against, national self-definition. His attention to displaced people during his travels was a refusal of instrumental state politics. The timeliness and poignancy of this exhibition derive from the fact that the rich, cosmopolitan cultures of Malaysia and Indonesia are being swept away, as we speak, by Wahhabi Islam. Pagodas are, literally, vanishing. □

"*Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago (1960–1969)*" is on view through September 27. KEVIN CHUA IS ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF EIGHTEENTH- AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN ART AT TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY.



Left: Latiff Mohidin, *Pagoda II*, 1964, oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 39".
Below: Latiff Mohidin, *Sivalingga*, 1965, oil on canvas, 23 3/4 x 23 3/4".
Right: Latiff Mohidin, *Pago Pago II*, 1965, oil on canvas, 33 3/4 x 22 1/2".
All from the series "Pago Pago," 1960–69.

