RISSIM
CONTEMPORARY

# Form(s) of Prayer(s)

A Solo Exhibition by
**Paul Nickson Atia**

19th December 2019
until 9th January 2020

# An Act of Faith

Sarah Abu Bakar

The obsessive rendering of miniature squares serves as Paul Nickson Atia's central motif in his latest solo exhibition entitled Form(s) of Prayer(s) at Rissim Contemporary in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur from December 19, 2019 until January 9, 2020.

Executed in Chinese ink with fine paint brushes or tree twigs on large unprimed canvas, his subject matter and preferred paraphernalia unravel personal narratives that reflect his cerebral pursuits.

Expanding from a body of work called Obsesi that was showcased in his first solo - Jari Berlari: Tlinjuk Bi'koduh, a process-oriented presentation that featured spontaneous sketches and drawings at Rumah Lukis, Kuala Lumpur in 2018 – Form(s) of Prayer(s) pays homage to the act of orison through a series of 10 large-scale paintings.

## Say grace

In an artwork titled Obsession: Reformation, there are approximately 36,000 cubes measuring a square centimetre each that covers the entire canvas surface, which measures 244cm by 152cm. Representing a prayer, each monochromatic square is marked in varying intensity that mirrors his emotional state of being at the time.

Stepping back to see the big picture, one is presented with a barrage of grids and patterns. Devoid of any specific imagery, only visions of chants, prayers or zikir are depicted in fluctuating gradients.

Nonbelievers in search of meaning may ask: can we see God? And those of us with faith, trust that the Almighty is with us.

"The Obsession series is like a formation of a new faith and a reaffirmation of faith," says Atia.

"I am interested in the idea of Divinity, particularly the history of the three main monotheistic traditions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, along with Buddhism and Hinduism. Karen Armstrong's A History of God is a good reference point."

Akin to the Islamic Tasbih and the Roman Catholic Rosary beads, Atia's miniature squares can be perceived as a device used to keep count of his recited prayers. Or little boxes that contain his mood and spirit of the day.

**Obsession:**
**O, Perpetual**

Chinese Ink on Canvas
152cm x 426cm
2019

Obsession: O, Perpetual - a colossal work that measures 152cm by 426cm – is the largest work in this series. Executed in triptych format, the conceptual framework of presenting an artwork in three panels is significant.

Historically, paintings from the 15th and 16th century by Netherlandish artists with religious context were presented in three panels and was referred to as "paintings with doors".i

Scholars have noted the format's practical functions as altarpieces and made "tacit acceptance that the format was symbolic of the Trinity."ii

For Atia, Obsession: O, Perpetual provides space for contemplation within the realms of prayer. A blank rectangular shape is placed perpendicular in the centre making it a focus for devotion and contemplative prayer.

i. "Opening Doors: The Early Netherlandish Triptych Reinterpreted", Lynn F. Jacobs, Penn State Press, 2012, page 1.

ii. Ibid.

**Line of symmetry**

In Obsession: Cerebration I, II and III, Atia introduces vertical and horizontal lines at the lower part of the canvas in addition to the recurring miniature squares that occupy the upper section.

“This method of demarcation indicates openings or ventilation blocks,” explains Atia.

Equipped with architectural knowledge, Atia incorporates certain elements in his work to achieve the desired aesthetics. Admiring the work of renowned architect, Peter Zumthor, Atia appreciates his minimalist and atmospheric approach in designing a building.

Atia works on butter paper as part of his artistic process – a method commonly practiced when employing manual drafting technique - and scribbles inscriptions on the reverse of his canvas as a way of note-making.

“I apply the rule of thirds in my composition so that in an artwork, viewers are able to get a sense of space,” explains Atia.

In Cerebration II, the perpendicular lines on the lower section of the canvas are illustrated using tree twigs that Atia collected from his family’s orchard in his hometown Bau, a gold mining town in Kuching, Sarawak.

“Deriving from the Syzygium genus plant, the canes are used by my family to build the traditional ‘A’ frame structure for runner beans. I have been gathering the excess twigs to be used in my work for the past five years,” says Atia.

The raw treatment of the perpendicular lines acclimatizing with the markings of the tree twigs inadvertently suggests an image of a wooden cage.

As Atia progresses from one Cerebration to the next, his broad linear grids have become more refined. What we see in Obsession: Affirmation; Obsession: Reaffirmation; and Obsession: Binary offer an indication of a reactive approach.

## Running high

Relating his impelling force of the will with "the running scene" from the classic American film Forrest Gump starring Tom Hanks, Atia finds himself in an identical situation as Gump.

In the movie, Gump began to run across America for three years and two months only stopping for food, sleep and the lavatory. When journalists asked him: "Why are you doing this?" Gump simply replied: "I just felt like running."

Similarly, there is no coherent answer for "why is Atia obsessively painting tiny squares?" An unknown forceful urge within compels him to. And in so doing, relieves a sense of euphoria.

"I experience a kind of metaphysical growth when working on this series. Each square may be exactly the same size repeated in the same manner, but every one of them is different. In my mind, subconsciously, I want to create patterns," says Atia.

## Bidayuh culture

Originating from the Bidayuh community of Borneo, Atia's cultural background exposes him to the utilitarian and agrarian crafts such as basketry and tikar kelasah, a traditional Bidayuh mat weaving using rattan and tree bark.

"Bidayuh's craftsmanship is minimalist in style. Even our traditional costume, which mainly uses black, red, white and yellow colour is less intricate as compared with the Iban's," explains Atia.

Perhaps Atia's subconscious motive is a visual memory of his childhood. His agricultural family cultivates a paddy-field and harvests rice for their consumption. Tikar kelasah is often used by the community during the drying process of the rice crop.

These "patterns" that Atia yearns to create unwittingly appear in Obsession: Facilitation and Obsession: O, Perpetual.

In Obsession: Facilitation, the vertical rectangular format measuring 180cm by 60cm is divided equally in three parts. The miniature boxes in variable intensity are framed by three blank squares aligned precisely in the centre of the composition. These blank spaces allow viewers a moment of quiet introspection.

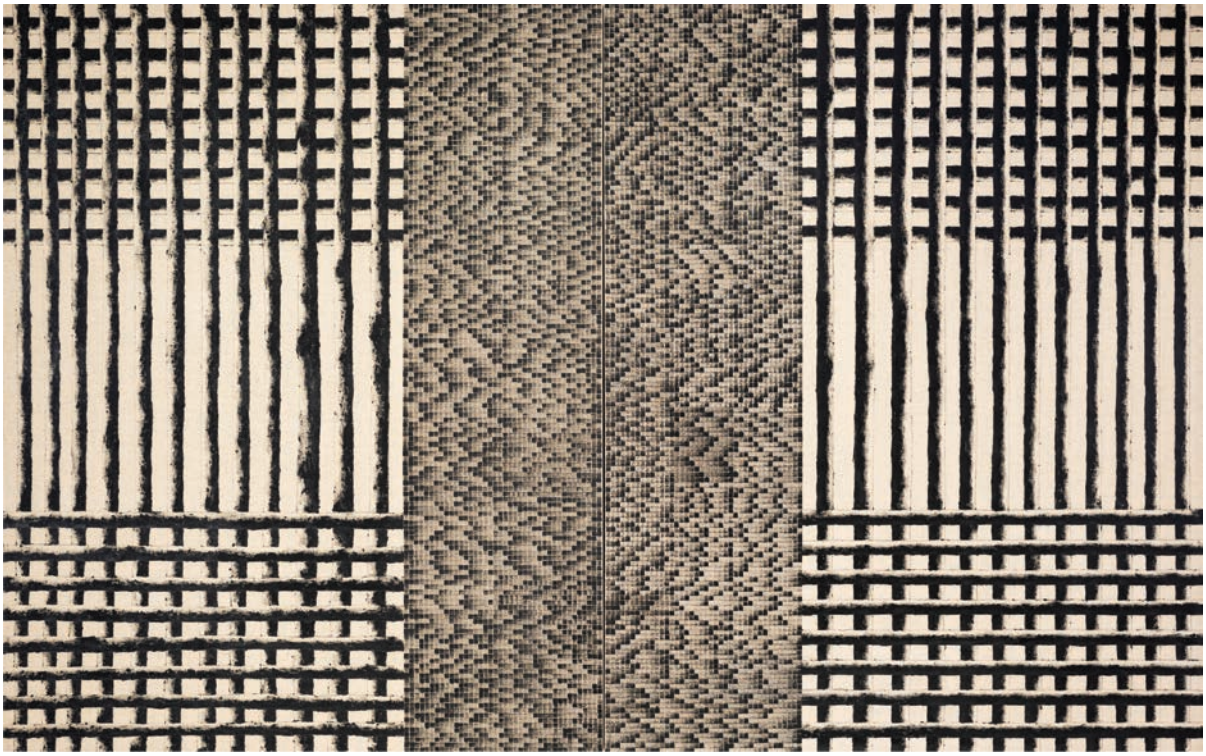
The obsessive execution of miniature squares is a form of prayer for Paul and so is the act of looking at them. For me, a wheel of emotions is activated with a sense of self-reflection from Atia's visual penance.

# In the Name of-

Affendi Salleh

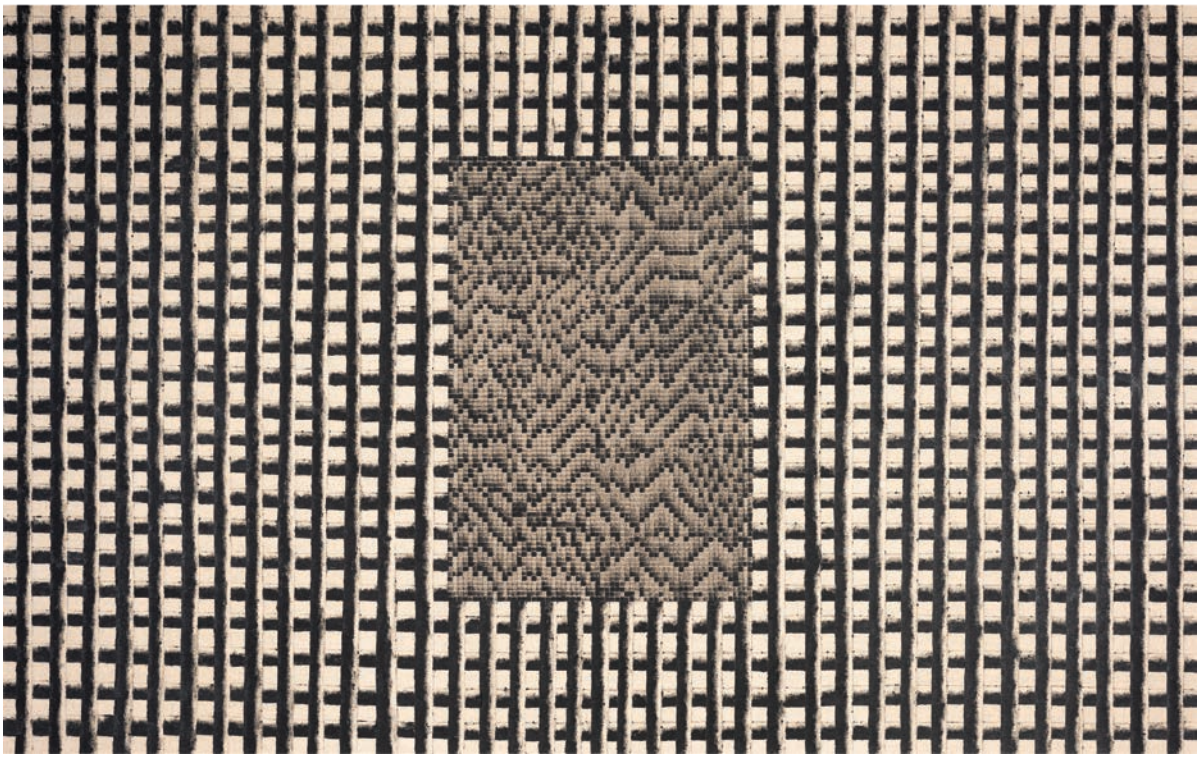
## 1

Aku tak kenal Paul Nickson Atia. Kau tak kenal Paul Nickson Atia. Hah, memang tak ramai orang yang kenal Paul Nickson Atia. Dia contact aku, melalui media sosial, dan minta aku tulis berkenaan hal art dia. Aku jawab (dalam hati), siapakah mamat skinny bertattoo ini? Tidakkah dia tahu yang aku ini seorang arkitek profesional yang hanya ambil projek dengan kos RM100 juta minimum? Tidakkah dia tahu bahawa pemaju hartanah bayar fee aku sekitar 7 angka? Oh, tapi nasib dia baik. Sebab tahun ini: zaman post-euphoria Malaysia 'Baru' selepas GE 14, perang dagang Trump-China tak nampak hujung, kemelut Brexit dan demonstrasi Hong Kong, semua indicator tunjuk recession ekonomi sedang berarak, projek hartanah makin kering, jadi aku tak ada banyak kerja, aku sedang relaks, maka aku balas mesej dia, 'Bring it on.'



**Obsession; Affirmation**

Chinese Ink on Canvas
152cm x 244cm
2019



**Obsession; Reaffirmation**

Chinese Ink on Canvas
152cm x 244cm
2019

## 2

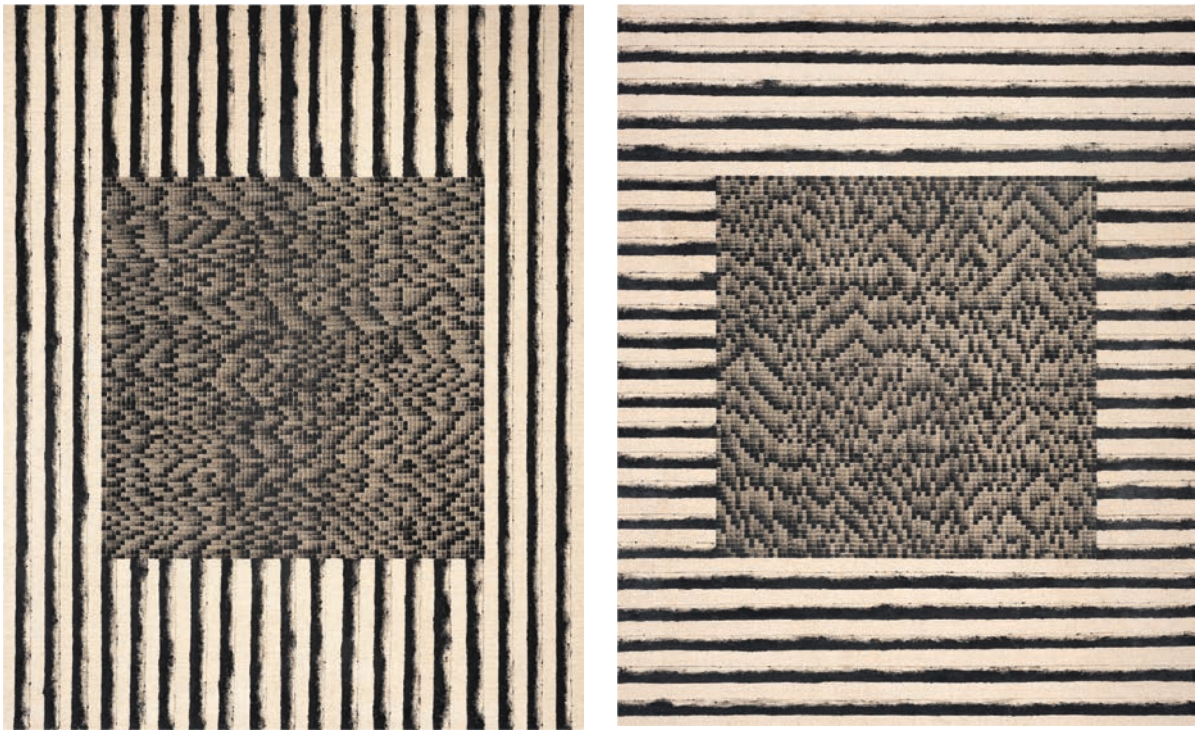
Jadi sekarang aku sedang cuba untuk tulis pasal art dia. Dalam cara yang aku tahu: iaitu menggunakan honesty. 'There is nothing to writing,' kata penulis Red Smith, 'all you do is sit down at the typewriter and open a vein.'

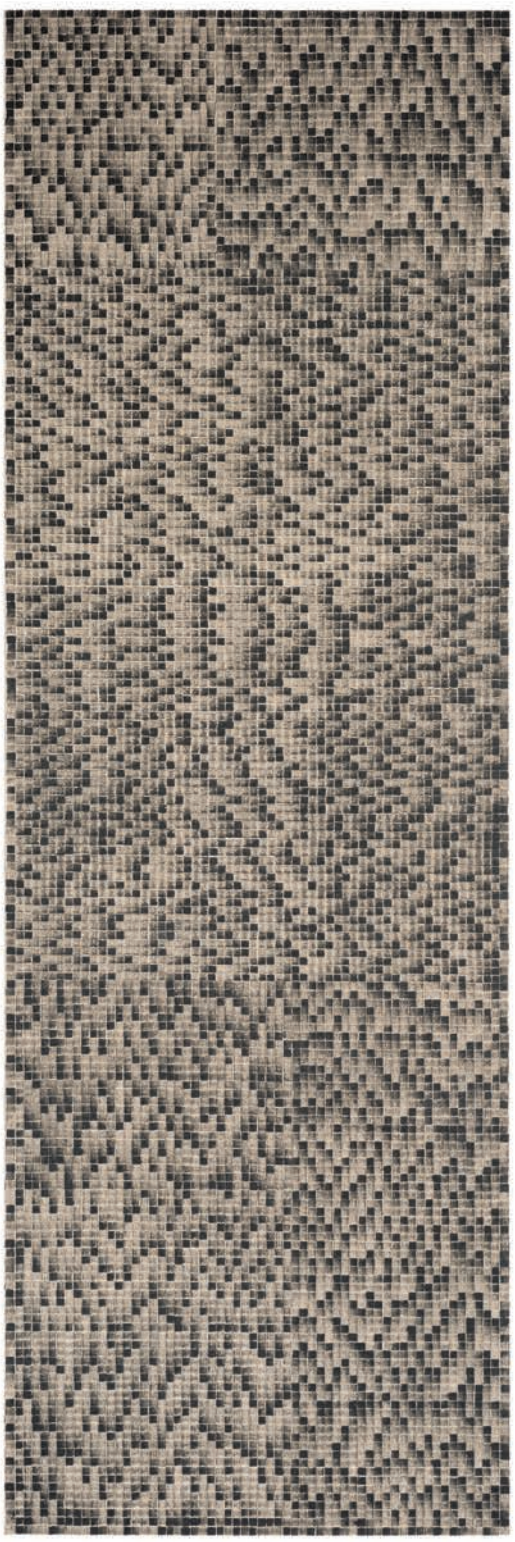
## 3

Prayer. Itu kata Paul Nickson Atia. Bahawa dia buat art ini untuk meresapi semangat 'prayer'. Bahawa setiap pengulangan, setiap disiplin, setiap pergerakan, setiap restraint, setiap desakan untuk jadi orderly, setiap nafas, setiap struggle, setiap keputusan yang ada dalam art dia ini: adalah kerana 'prayer'.
Aku tanya; 'Paul, prayer apa? Apa yang kau sedang doakan? Religion apa yang kau rujuk?'
Dia jawab, '...art ini adalah persepsi paling dalam dari diri saya terhadap konsep prayer. Ia tak rujuk kepada mana-mana agama. Imej art ini bukan berkenaan doa per se, tetapi berkenaan obsesi saya terhadap pengulangan doa.'
Goddamnit Paul, are you tryin to mess with my head now?

**Obsession; Binary**

Chinese Ink on Canvas
Diptych
152cm x 244cm (each)
2019





**Obsession; Formation**

Chinese Ink on Canvas
180cm x 60cm
2019

## 4

We may well realize,' tulis Konrad Fiedler, 'that the eyes is there not only to furnish us with images of things present outside ourselves, but with that the act of perception, something emerges within ourselves which is capable of independent development by ourselves.'

Kita sebagai audience sedar, bahawa imej yang dilukis oleh Paul Nickson Atia berusaha untuk beritahu hal yang infinite melalui bahasa yang finite. Ini adalah strategi semua conceptual art, di mana idea adalah lebih penting berbanding cara ia dipraktiskan. Objek visual buatan Paul Nickson Atia ini cuma berfungsi sebagai mediator. Baginya, garis dan rupa atas kanvas adalah instrumen estetik untuk beritahu naratif yang lebih besar. Dan naratif itu adalah kisah perihal doa manusia kepada entiti di luar diri manusia. Atau mungkin, perihal doa manusia kepada dirinya sendiri.

## 5

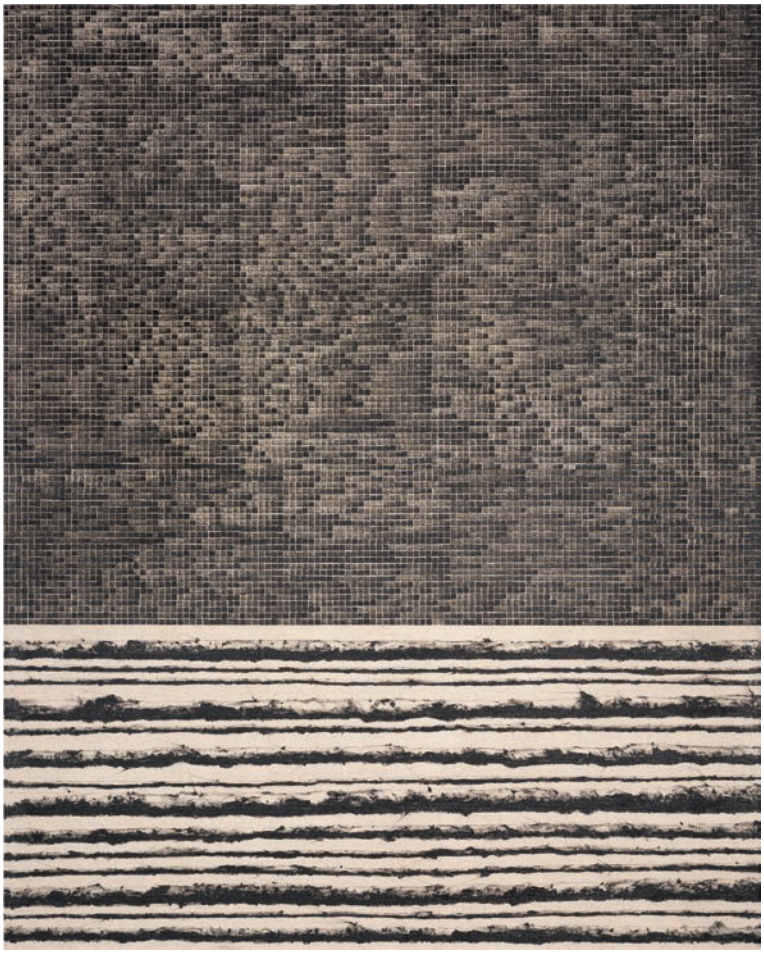
Sekarang kau datang dekat. Ke mari, lagi dekat. Biar aku bagitahu engkau naratif apa yang tak ada dalam art Paul Nickson Atia. Ia tak ada kontras. Tak ada pertentangan. Ia tak lirikal. Tak ada dialektik. Tak ada emosi. Tak ada warna selain hitam. Tak ada kelaparan. Tak ada kekenyangan. Tak ada jeritan.Tak ada amaran. Tak ada provokasi. Tak ada figura. Tak ada aku dan tak ada engkau. Kau mengerti?
Dan sekarang biar aku bagitahu engkau naratif apa yang ada dalam art Paul Nickson Atia:
Ada Paul Nickson Atia sedang berdoa minta kau lihat Paul Nickson Atia.
Kau jangan pandang tempat lain. Pandanglah ke arah visual ini yang sedang berusaha dalam doanya untuk bagi kau Order.
Quietness.
Melalui Appearance Yang Tak Cantik.
(Aku minta maaf Paul, tapi mata aku tak nampak beauty dalam erti yang konvensional dalam art kau).
TAPI.
Paul kata dia tak mahu cari beauty dalam prayer.
Dia cuma mahu cari humility. Humility KERANA the absence of beauty.
Aku rasa dia jumpa.

**Obsession; Reformation**

Chinese Ink on Canvas
244cm x 152cm
2019

**Obsession; Cerebration (i)**

Chinese Ink on Canvas
152cm x 122cm
2019



## 6

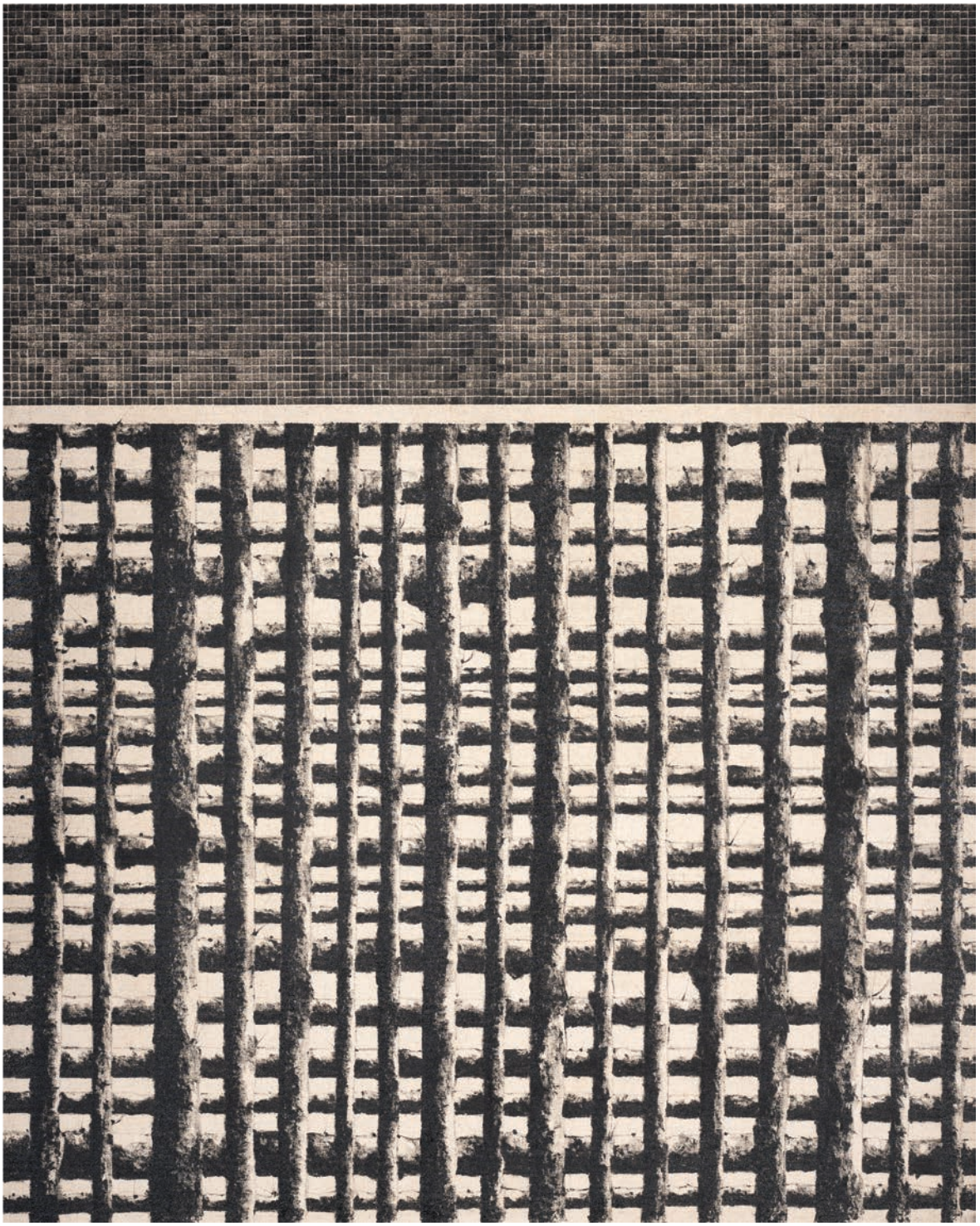
Paul Nickson Atia gunakan poverty untuk buat art dia. Pertama dia guna permukaan belakang kanvas, unprimed. Kedua dia guna dakwat cina. Ketiga dia guna berus buatan sendiri dari dahan kayu yang rupanya macam kayu tumpul orang purba Paleolitik guna untuk tikam babi hutan. Studio kerjanya berbau seperti bau struggle. Selain speaker bluetooth yang sedang main Sigur Ros ad infinitum, tak ada luxury lain di sekelilingnya. Poverty yang aku maksudkan ialah sikap reductivismnya yang diwujudkan secara pilihan.
Mungkin inilah keadaan destitution yang dialami oleh agamawan, monk, priest, holy man, wali keramat waktu mereka berdoa. Mungkin poverty material Paul Nickson Atia adalah material penting untuknya, untuk mengukuhkan act of asking nya.

**7**

Ada order matematikal yang ketara dalam karya-karya ini. Grid mosaic-nya ditandakan dengan rapi. Pengulangan elemen vertikal dan horizontal diatur agar tak ada ukuran arithmetik yang lari. Brushstroke-nya dihadkan untuk wujudkan keseragaman. Variasi intensiti dakwatnya juga diminimumkan. Keseluruhan dimensi karya Paul Nickson adalah flat, two-dimensional. Sekarang, sebelum kau kata 'secara keseluruhan teknik ini boring', aku defend dia dan katakan: teknik ini adalah satu penghormatan kepada idea 'prayer'. Sebab dalam prayer tak ada superfluousness, tak ada flamboyance. Monolog dalam prayer adalah bersifat direct, concise dan humble macam humble abdi. Kalau kau extravagant dalam doa kau, itu bukan prayer.
Itu namanya bagi instruction.

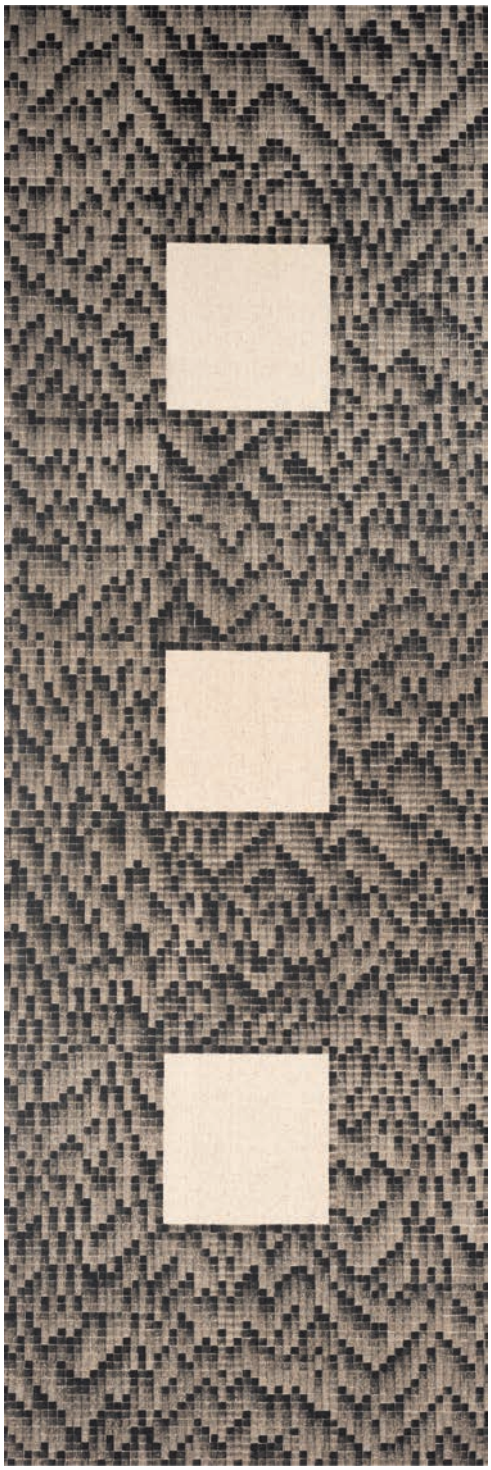
**Obsession; Cerebration (ii)**

Chinese Ink on Canvas
122cm x 202cm
2019



**Obsession; Cerebration (iii)**

Chinese Ink on Canvas
152cm x 122cm
2019



**Obsession; Facilitation**

Chinese Ink on Canvas
180cm x 60cm
2019

**8**

Pengulangan catan kotak demi kotak demi kotak demi kotak demi kotak macam rupa mosaic memunculkan stuktur asas yang mendasar dalam kotak fikiran Paul Nickson Atia, seperti aksi push/pull terhadap ideologi, antaranya. Maksud aku, dia bermain dengan subject matter yang ada konotasi ugama, tetapi dalam masa yang sama ingin berada di luar struktur ideologi ugama. Act ini sudah tentu tidak menjadikan dia malaikat, jauh sekali menjadi syaitan, tapi aku percaya, act ini adalah usahanya yang tulus untuk menjadi manusia.

**9**

Aku bias. Aku suka art aliran minimalism dari minimalist macam Daniel Buren. Lucio Fontana. Donald Judd. Art yang maximum punya minimum. Jadi pastilah aku boleh faham dengan mudah apa yang Paul sedang buat ini. Tetapi adakah aku, dan engkau, akan cari perkaitan antara kerja modern masters sebegitu dengan art Paul Nickson Atia? Sudah tentu tidak, kerana sekarang belum masanya. Kalau begitu, dalam kerangka art apa patut kita letak karya Paul Nickson Atia ini?

**10**

Kalau lukisan Paul ini cuma ada satu layer, adakah Paul juga seorang jantan yang satu layer?

Kalau lukisan Paul berulang-ulang gunakan motif yang sama, adakah Paul juga sedang berulang-ulang cakap benda yang sama?

Kalau lukisan ini sifatnya tenang dan tidak provokatif, adakah maknanya Paul jumpa ketenangan dan fulfilment dan redemption dalam dirinya?

Do we even care?

Hell, mungkin kita patut kisah. Sebab sekurang-kurangnya, ini jadi satu lagi bukti bahawa art boleh menyelamatkan jiwa manusia dari chaos.

**11**

Pada tahun 1973, Roland Barthes tulis, 'To be modern is to know what is no longer possible.' Melalui takrifan ini, aku isytiharkan, walaupun Paul ini millenial kids, dia bukan jantan modern. Dia primitif. Ideanya, rasionalnya, emosinya, tekniknya, materialnya, semuanya primitif, anti-modern. Dia tak jumpa jalan untuk jadi kontemporari, tetapi dia jumpa laluan sunyi untuk reverse ke masa lampau,dan bertemu kembali dengan dirinya yang sedang berdoa, berkali-kali, menanti.

**12**

Aku email kepada dia write up ini, dan aku tulis; Paul, all the best. May nothing but happiness come thru your door.

Affendi Salleh adalah seorang arkitek profesional dan visiting critique di sekolah-sekolah senibina. Dia tak kenal Paul Nickson Atia pun sebelum ini.

## Biography

Paul Nickson Atia

Paul Nickson Atia (b. 1992) is a young artist from Kuching, Sarawak and currently based in Kuala Lumpur. Upon completing his degree in B.Sc. Architecture from University Of Malaya (UM), Paul went on to practice at PORT25, a local architecture firm and as a part time tutor at Taylor's University School of Architecture & Building Design for several years before turning his artistic pursuit towards paintings and drawings.

In his debut solo show "Jari Berlari" at Galeri Rumah Lukis in 2018, Paul exhibited a series of drawings and sketches of buildings and cityscapes around Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Kuching as his major work. "Jari Berlari" also marked the introduction of his "OBSESI/OBSESSION" series in which he further explores in his current body of work, FORM(S) OF PRAYER(S). Paul's interest and obsession on the concept of prayers has resulted in the use of repetitive elements in his works, in which he manifests as a tribute and an act of paying respect towards prayers- the reaffirmation of faith or formation of new faith.

## Acknowledgements

This catalog is published in conjuction with "Form(s) of Prayer(s)", a solo exhibition by Paul Nickson Atia, co-curated ny Hanif Idris and Saiful Razman.

Held at Rissim Contemporary from 19th December 2019 to 9th January 2020

**Artist**
Paul Nickson Atia

**Curator**
Rissim Contemporary

**Writer**
Affendi Salleh
Sarah Abu Bakar

**Graphic Designer**
Outerspace Studio

**Photographer**
Dinn Diran

Rissim Contemporary would like to thank:

Affendi Salleh
Sarah Abu Bakar
Zariq Zin
Dinn Diran
Fadhli Ariffin

**Opening Hours**
Tuesday - Sunday
11am - 5pm

**Rissim Contemporary**
No 30-2 (2nd Floor) Jalan Telawi 2,
59100 Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur

**e.** info@rissim.com

RISSIM
CONTEMPORARY

**Opening Hours**
Tuesday - Sunday
11am - 5pm

**Rissim Contemporary**
No 30-2 (2nd Floor) Jalan Telawi 2,
59100 Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur

**e.** info@rissim.com