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Cover Image : **Archipelago 3** . 91.5 x 91.5 cm . Relief Print & Collage on Canvas . 2008  
Inside Cover Image: **Tree** . 94 x 173 cm . Relief Print & Collage on Canvas . 2008



**Top Left:**  
**In The Name of Peace**  
102 x 127 cm  
Relief Print & Collage on  
Canvas  
2007

**Top Right:**  
**In The Name of Religion**  
102 x 127 cm  
Relief Print & Collage on  
Canvas  
2007

**Bottom:**  
**In The Name of Love**  
102 x 127 cm  
Relief Print & Collage on  
Canvas  
2007



# WHERE ARE YOU?

by Amanda Katherine Rath



Upon entering Izan Tahir's studio that was once her childhood home, I was surrounded immediately by various series of works to be included in her second solo exhibition at Wei-Ling Gallery. Immense masks of papier-mâché covered with skins of printed text on tissue paper hung from the rafters, silently hovering over the conversation that commenced. A printing press stood to the right, above which hung a series of butterflies colorfully outlined on transparent tissue paper that fluttered in the breeze from the fans. Behind the masks and to the left of the room stood a mountain of printed words heaped in a pile on a table. It was a collection of words, sentences and passages the artist had painstakingly hand-carved into lino-cuts and printed onto brightly coloured tissue paper. These are the base materials for the artist's large collages that she then cuts and pastes onto a myriad of surfaces such as papier-mâché and canvas. All around were works in progress, others in various stages of completion and experimentation. Over the next few hours, we talked over hand-rolled cigarettes and I drank a few cups of her brilliant espresso, often finding common ground as two women feeling foreign in a place they have chosen to live yet find difficult to achieve a sense of identity, and genuine connection, and belonging.

Having returned to Malaysia from the UK a few years ago, Izan Tahir has become a dynamic presence and force of innovation in printmaking in Malaysia today, both as a practicing artist and university lecturer. She encourages experimentation among her students, and opens her studio to them as a mentor and advisor.

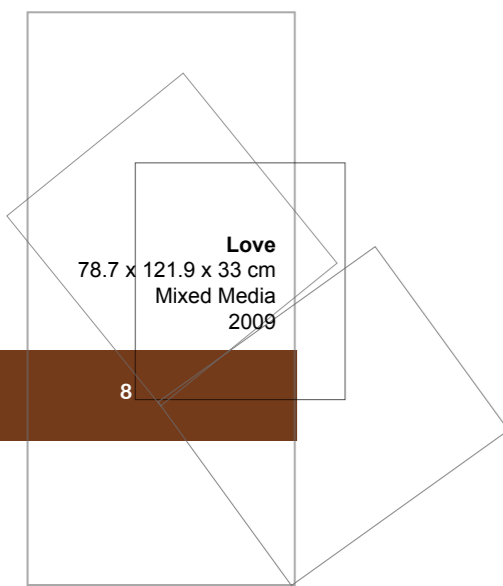
**Come My Friends**  
91.5 x 91.5 cm  
Relief Print & Collage on  
Canvas  
2008



One of the conventions against which the artist has balked has been the assumption of printmaking in Malaysia and elsewhere as the production of editions on paper to be sold singly as numbered copies of a supposed original plate. Izan has taken printmaking out of such traditional or conventional parameters to explore its techniques and apply these to different materials, blending the conventions of installation, sculpture, painting and printmaking. Each piece, while genetically related to the others within a series, is unique.

Izan's work often plays the tension between a personal desire to connect and relate to other human beings and the loss of deep contact and intimacy through distance on the one hand, and current means of communication on the other. For example, in some of her works she collages passages from love letters sent to her and pages from her personal diaries. Such works contain within them a sentimentality that all of us have experienced, as well as a way of gathering around us the love we have or have had with or from another person. Reproducing passages from personal letters and diaries, the artist shares with us something deeply personal, yet universal: the joyful and painful life of love and loving, of being together and living apart. By reproducing the passages onto transparent strips of acid free tissue, and pasting these side-by-side, sideways, backwards, and overlapping layers, she demonstrates the limits of language, in this case in the written word to give expression to our emotions and feelings. The format of collage serves her well here in structuring what in the end becomes something like deep sediment and repository of memory. They are testaments to the impossibility for the word and memory to be enough to hold onto that precious feeling, that brief moment of relating. The pieces taken as a whole then serve as a monument of one trying to hold onto and remember something that can so easily be lost and slip into the murky realm of forgetting.

In the 'love letter' works, and others, Izan's technique involves collaging pieces of lino-cut printed tissue paper onto canvas. The process is hands-on and time consuming. In a way the very process is ironic when remembering that printmaking processes have historically been designed to make reproduction quick and potentially infinite in number. Instead of creating numbered editions, Izan creates mountains of printed text and imagery from lino-cut templates that she hand carves. From this amazing mountain of colorful words and images,





she proceeds to hand cut them and paste them onto the surface of the canvas. Such time-consuming layering is quite apt to her attempt to replicate or physicalize how thoughts come and go, layer and combine. The artist likens some of her work to a visual mind map.

In many of her works, what at first glance appears to be an abstract painting, replete with the high key tones common to Malaysian abstract painting, upon closer inspection a series of interwoven 'maps' emerge. Maps, generally based on an aerial or imagined 'bird's-eye' view of something, give direction by way of abstracting the place or site to its essential information. On the one hand, the world below becomes unfamiliar if not unknown. On the other hand, seen from above, the landscape seems all the more navigable; lacking the confusion we may often feel 'on the ground'. In many of Izan's works in this exhibition, we encounter something like an aerial view of a landscape, a kind of 'map' from the artist's imagination. Such an imaginary world begs the question the artist has asked herself countless times: "Where are you?" Izan has created a series of personal maps that reflect her own sense of wanting to find 'place' or to give herself 'place' after relocating to Malaysia after having lived her adult life in England. It is as if the viewer is asked to engage the artist and her thoughts on a more personal level by first breaking through the initial layer of 'babble' and act of (mis) recognition to encounter and empathize with the artist's attempt to find a sense of place and belonging.

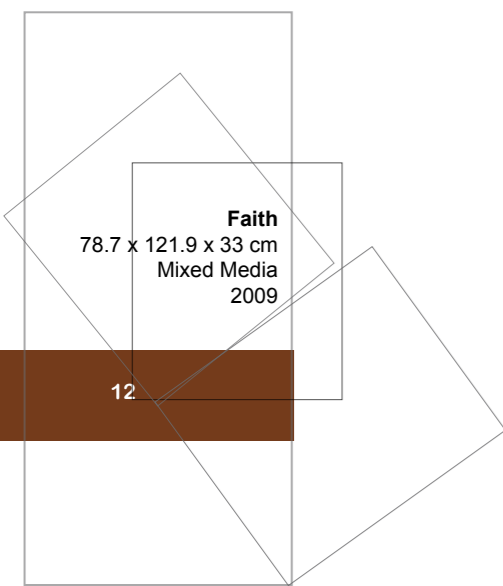
Put simply but all too simplistically, Izan is an ethnically Malay, and hence muslim, woman who has spent the better part of forty years in England, and moved back to Malaysia after the death of her father in order to care for her mother. Culture shock would be putting it mildly in describing the types of experiences Izan has gone through in the past few years. In her work, she expresses her at times psychologically painful readjustment to a culture and mindset that for decades she had carried with her whilst in England, but that increasingly had become something impossible to absorb and maintain totally in mind and spirit (keeping in mind that all cultures today have been globalized, meaning hybridized anyway).

**Pride**  
78.7 x 121.9 x 33 cm  
Mixed Media  
2009

The artist comes to the culture of her parents and childhood with a verve for life and love and acceptance. Yet, she has also faced the often monumental challenges of finding a place for herself and Self in a society that possesses a different register of emotionality and self-expression; a register that itself is largely governed by adat, religious law and gender bias. She is now subject to different kinds of scrutiny and laws, cultural, religious, and otherwise. This is not to say the artist does not regard or respect such customs and beliefs. Her great respect and love for her Malay culture and background is what often drives her to ask deep questions about culture, religion and society. However, she does not do so to make grand statements through her work. She does not engage the perennial issues and invention of a national, ethnic or religious identity. Rather, she deals with such large and looming issues of identity and belonging on a intimate level of personal experience; a level from which she then hopes to connect to the viewer who might also share similar feelings of familiarity in the strange, of strangeness in the familiar.

In working through her ambivalence and the cultural complexities in making the move back to Malaysia, Izan embarked on a series of works that underscore the role current modes of instant communication play in social relations and the ambiguity that often accompanies the desire to 'connect'. Distance no longer kills relationships or communication ('out of sight, out of mind'). Technology allows us to communicate with others around the globe anywhere and anytime. SMS and Email can serve as virtual lifelines. Izan's collaged text messages and emails textually and visually replicate the massive proliferation of communiqués out there. They also seem to suggest that inasmuch as we are technologically connected to other people more than ever before no matter where they or we happen to be, communication itself lacks depth and the individual person has never been or felt more alone.

Today, in an age of the text message, email, and now twitter people can instantaneously connect with friends, loved ones, clients and colleagues. We are connected to vast networks of faceless throngs as never before. Such conditions bespeak of, as well as encourage, our basic need to connect, relate, and belong to some kind of social organism. However, this basic need to communicate is increasingly lacking in substance and intimacy. This is not a fuddy-duddy call for the return of the written letter or evenings





**That Place**  
137 x 162 cm  
Relief Print & Collage on  
Canvas  
2008



spent with family instead of in front of the Telly or computer or in the chat room. What this is meant to suggest is that to the degree the means by which we can communicate have proliferated, the ways we communicate and at what depth has changed. What and how much can and may be said, for instance, in an email message, Short Text Message, and now the one line Twitter? People's general capacity to express and read anything longer than a few lines, and this in acronym and abbreviated lingo, has experienced a more than perceptible deficit. In as much as human beings see themselves infinitely interesting, and feel the need to share that immense 'interestingness' with anyone logged on, such narcissism has not really done much for the idea of deep relations. But this is how so much of the world does 'relating' – connection without depth.

In the series and concepts discussed above, IZAN's work plays the tension between actual and imaginary place; the cartographies of the land and those of the socially and individually imagined landscapes; the desire and need to connect, to belong. In the above discussion, her work places a certain emphasis on the question of "Where are you?" in terms of the actual, imaginary, psychological, and virtual sense. In her most recent series of works, she adds the to her matrix of self-searching for place and belonging the unanswerable question of "Who are You?"

This is evidenced in her painted and collaged series of costumes, which at first glance look like basic recognizable forms taken from Asian costume, the shapes of which have been filled in with brightly coloured camouflage patterning. However, again the viewer is asked to go beyond the surface (dis)information to get down to the layer of mapping, (mis)direction, to get 'lost in translation', to have a sense of 'mistaken identity'.

The artist explores similar notions in her recent foray into social, cultural, ideational aspects of 'mask' and the mask as artistic object and artifact. In her engagement with masks, we see a rapid progression in her use and experimentation with materials. This includes massive masks made from papier-mâché, the surfaces of which have been covered with her signature technique of collaged lino-cut passages printed on tissue paper. Here, the ideas of place

**Archipelago 1**  
91.5 x 91.5 cm  
Relief Print & Collage on  
Canvas  
2008

and sense of belonging in her new/old home, as well as the simultaneous refusal to carry the conventional, at times seemingly immovable, cultural, social and religious markers of identity required to obtain 'place'. She carries the hybrid markings of the diasporic and cosmopolitan identity and membership/citizenship of a global society, but also those of a local stranger.

Yet, masks are not just to conceal what lies within. Nor are they meant in Izan's work to suggest the 'gift' (given or enforced) of an identity, or the taking up of an identity for the sake of personal survival. In some cases, the mask is a means of commemoration, as well as the artifact after-the-fact of an existence that has long been lost to living memory.

In some parts of the world, it was thought that a person continues to exist after physical death so long as their names and deeds were still told. In other words, a person still exists as long as they are remembered. One's continued existence depends on living memory; hence the importance of the storyteller. Painted portraits and sculptures have been used as a visual means of providing a lasting impression and memory of the lost loved or revered one. Masks too have been used throughout human history as a means of permanent record of one's existence well after he or she has died.

Izan seems to play with these questions of memory, impermanence and forgetting in her installation of plastic masks. Produced from plastic vacuum molds, each mask differs from the rest, showing a different aspect or personality trait. Here, the artist is not trying to suggest how chimerical the human personality is, but instead alights on the process of forgetting. Over time, we lose the capacity to hold the images of people we encounter and even loved ones in our mind's eye.

In a way, all memories are false and fragile.

In a sense, Izan's body of work for this, her second, solo exhibition at Weiling Gallery, speaks to the artist's overarching questions of our interrelated need to connect and the problems of a 'genuine' encounter due to the means by which we have to communicate and the masks behind which we hide.



**Archipelago 2**

127 x 101 cm

Relief Print & Collage on  
Canvas  
2008



Her work examines not only her sense of isolation and need and/or desire to make contact and to belong, but also to those things which we voluntarily or otherwise carry with us that impede and impair our very ability to do so on a most human and genuine level.

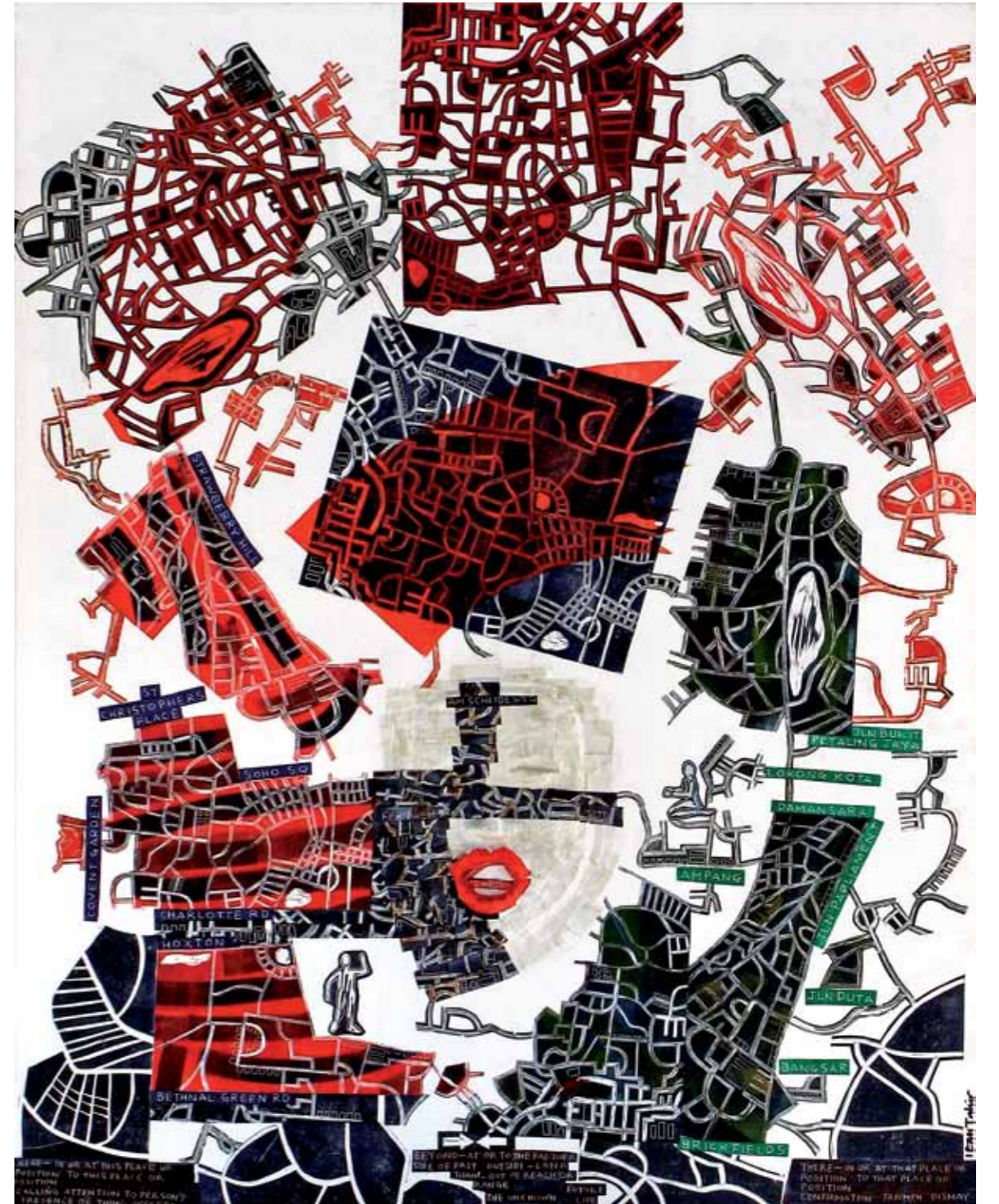
As artist, lecturer, and mentor, Izan Tahir has also innovated the field of printmaking in Malaysia, demonstrating an interdisciplinary and hybrid approach to art making and to cultivating a contemporary art practice.

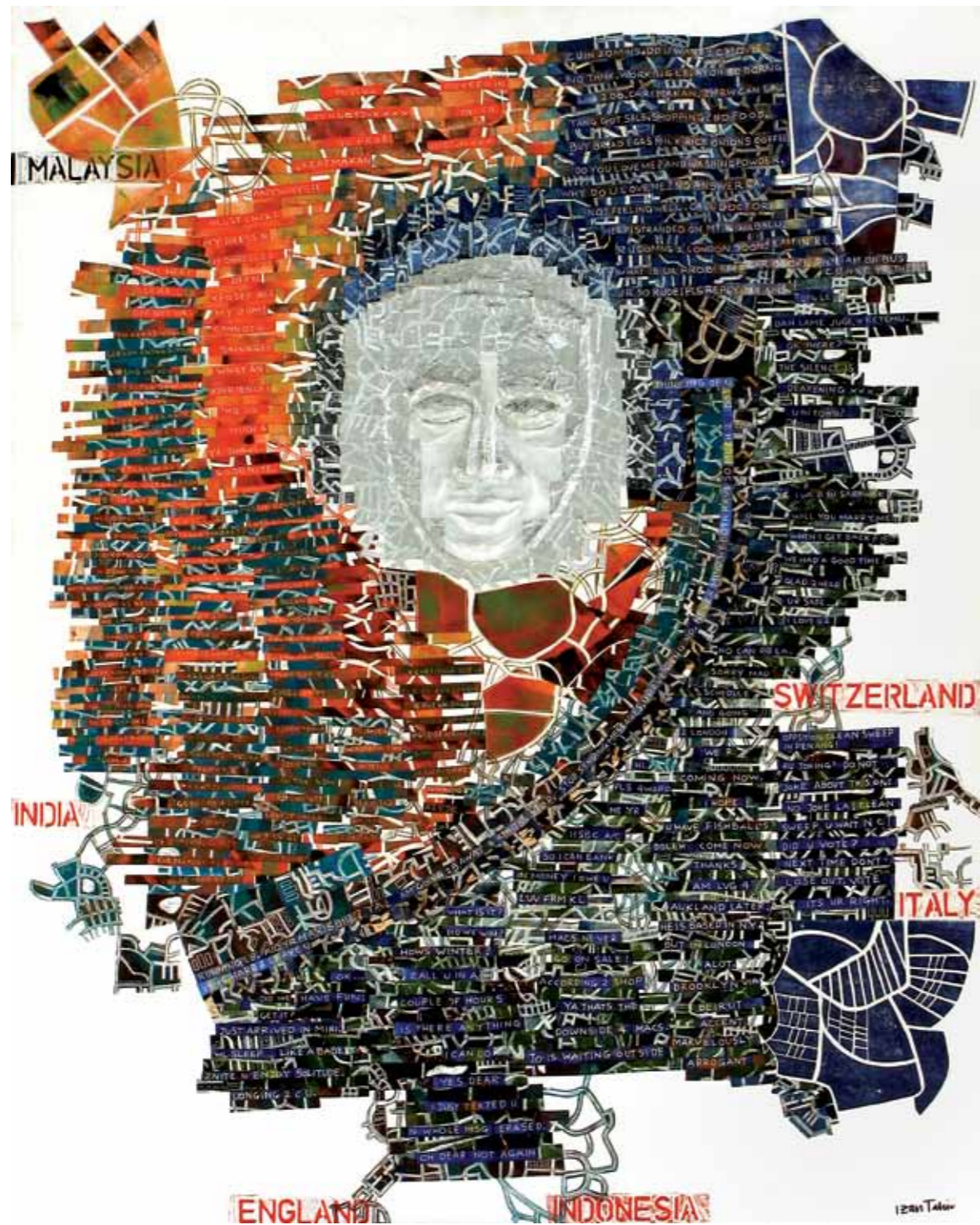
Amanda Katherine Rath

Amanda has been researching and writing about the contemporary art of the region for over a decade, and has recently completed her doctoral thesis on the subject. After living and working in Malaysia for the last three years, she recently moved to Frankfurt, Germany. There she will be a Research Fellow in the Dept. of Southeast Asia Studies, University of Frankfurt.

**Archipelago 3**  
91.5 x 91.5 cm  
Relief Print & Collage on  
Canvas  
2008

**Two Places**  
127 x 101.5 cm  
Relief Print & Collage on  
Canvas  
2009





**In Touch**  
152 x 122 cm  
Relief Print & Collage on  
Canvas  
2009

# CURRICULUM VITAE

## Education

**1971** Bachelor of Arts (Art & Design), *London College of Printing*, London, UK

## Solo Exhibitions

**2009** *Where are you?*, *Wei-Ling Gallery*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*Go Block*, *Galeri Petronas*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**2008** *18@8 Vice & Virtue*, *Wei-Ling Gallery*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*Solo*, *USM (University Science Malaysia)*, Penang, Malaysia

**2006** *18@8 Kuala Lumpur - Karachi*, *Wei-Ling Gallery*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*Recollections*, *Wei-Ling Gallery*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**1998** *Solo*, *Malaysia High Commission*, Tourism Malaysia, Johannesburg, South Africa

**1994** *Rice Cake Samurai*, *Richmond Riverside room*, Old Town Hall, Surrey, UK

## Selected Group Exhibitions

**2006** *In Print Exhibition*, *National Art Gallery*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**1996** *Print Europe 1996*, *Royal Exchange*, Manchester, UK

**1995** *Federation of British Artists, National Print Exhibition at the Mall Galleries*, *The Mall*, Admiralty Arch, London, UK

**1994** *St Albans Art Fair*, *Teddington*, Middlesex, UK

**1993** *Queen Charlotte's Hall*, Richmond, Surrey, UK

**1992** *Orleans House*, Twickenham, Middlesex, UK

**1991** *Shaftsbury Gallery*, Richmond, Surrey, UK

## Private and Public Collections

The Aliya & Faroukh Khan Collection, Malaysia

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