

The elasticity of a golden thread

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Our lives are filled with pattern: The patterned regimentation of our actions; our personal 'style'; the family that frames us; our cultural fabric; conservatism and beliefs. We wear an invisible code that defines who we are, our DNA. Collectively, this is *our* pattern.

Gabrielle Bates has long used quasi-ethnographic motifs as a device to transfer information about the people she paints. In her earlier portraits the sitter reverberated across the canvas, floating on a flat colour field. Like a print slightly out of register, their ghost-like repetition, or *flaw*, reaffirmed their humanity. Bold black outlines held *their* pattern allowing us to decode who they might be.

While these early portraits offer a clear trajectory to these new works, the **Mouth of Flowers** series comes from a very different position: psychologically, emotionally and culturally. Their patterning goes beyond a descriptor to physically consume the form. The body and pattern have fused as one.

Malaysia's hybridity makes an indelible impression on every artist visiting Rimbun Dahan. For Bates that engagement was filled with multiplicity: it offered an organic tangibility to the work spawned from its bounty of pods, natural patterns and pond water; it provided the solitude to rediscover embroidery, sewing a personal and emotional narrative; and it offered the gift of insight, journeying beyond perceptions.

Finding Malaysia's *pattern* is complex. At an elementary level it lies in its graphic traditions of batik, henna decoration and Islamic geometry. At a cerebral level it is the patterning of socio-political / religious striations of a nation at a time when it is asking 'what is its contemporary identity?' Bates' work traces a thread across these ideas, oscillating

between reverie and bounce. Remove the exotic pattern' and it is a narrative caught in a web of time, territory and transition.

Bates found this narrative in a coterie of artists, dancers and musicians who explore the peripheral through their creativity. The narratives are dense but less self-effacing; the 'outlines' have become diffused. She replaces ethnographic patterning with a floral fragility, caught between romantic apparition and an earthy reality. Often clothed in little more than an organic epidermis, her players are exposed. But these characters are not vulnerable. If we look at the painting *Armour*, banana flowers (*bunga pisang*) rise up like a noxious weed, beautiful but threatening, clutching at a woman's neck rendering her speechless. But she does not turn away; her gaze does not flare in distress – it is a knowing censure.

In *Stir* she sleeps enveloped by the same flowers. Is it the peace of submission, death or sleep? Is she weightless or weighted by her floral shroud? Paired with a mirror-image caught between cartoon and apparition, it sits against a brave white ground acting as a stark alter-ego to the velvety, painterly background of the sleeping figure. It is a kind of intermezzo between figuration and the ephemeral.

KL-ing Me Softly is equally charged from the outset, challenging protocols and permissions. But there is an inherent softness that sits counter to any overt act or statement. It mixes memory and ambivalence with a restless exoticism. These works are about a visual psychology. Just as a Rorschach drawing triggers association but has no one reading, Bates has moved beyond the clarity of descriptors to an elasticity of meaning. She pushes us beyond the desire to *translate* and give over to poetic nuance.

The materials of these new works take on a symbolism we have not seen before. Her stitched portraits have a latent violence or emotional trigger. The act of piercing the surface of a painting has that same duality as a tattoo; it is branding and an aesthetic expression. *First Cut* captures this tension, the thread's assertive lines slashing the canvas. The figure turns from himself but is denied a freedom, anchored by his own voice. Rendered speechless, we ask who has the power of censure over this voice? Caught in the strain between a sewn and brushed mark, it is a courageous embrace of new materials.

Bates similarly plays off the organic purity of seed pods against lurid plastic flowers and synthetic thread. The pods disgorge their floral centres, over-ripe with fleshy fertility. These are incredibly sensual objects that Bates lashes into control. The synthetic materiality of the flowers beg the question, are we fooled by beauty? Is it another veil seemingly 'natural' yet contrived, controlled and plastic?

Many of these works teeter on the edge where things are raw and flirt with the unknown. To quote writer John Barrett-Lennard, "Accent can be thought of as a kind of excess, a disturbance in the smoothness of sound and communication."¹ An accent, like a pattern, has a personal intonation. It is about reading between the lines; it is the place of hyphens. Sometimes it is barely audible; sometimes it has the gentleness of a lover and at others the affirmation of belief. **Mouth of Flowers** is a place to hear things.

1. John Barrett-Lennard *Here and Now* catalogue essay for Simryn Gill, PICA exhibition, Perth 2001.