

## Memories & Flowers

Mouth of Flowers review by Sharon Chin, 2008

### Gabrielle Bates, Mouth of Flowers

'MOUTH OF FLOWERS'; a beautiful phrase that rolls off the tongue and lends itself curiously well to local translation: as in *bermulut bunga*, or *mulut berbunga*. In both languages, the phrase retains connotations of silence and silencing, suffocation, beauty and a sense of communication becoming something other than what is directly expressed.

All of these themes are present in Australian artist Gabrielle Bates' evocatively titled exhibition. In a series of mixed media paintings, assemblage and video animation, the artist develops a personal visual vocabulary with which to navigate Malaysia's highly coded social fabric. The vocabulary is diverse, including embroidery, altering the materiality of paint with water from Rimbun Dahan's lily pond, bells, synthetic flowers and graphic illustration.

Central to Bates' enquiry is the idea of patterns. In her portraits, visual patterns become metaphors for the ways in which individuals conform to or are defined by psychological patterns in society. The visual motifs appear to be ethnographic in nature, stemming from henna, batik and wood carving designs. Taking a cue from their essentially decorative function, these motifs clothe the people she depicts, giving protection and identification.

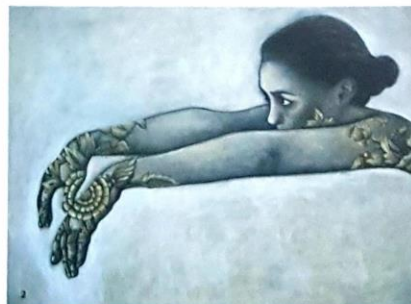
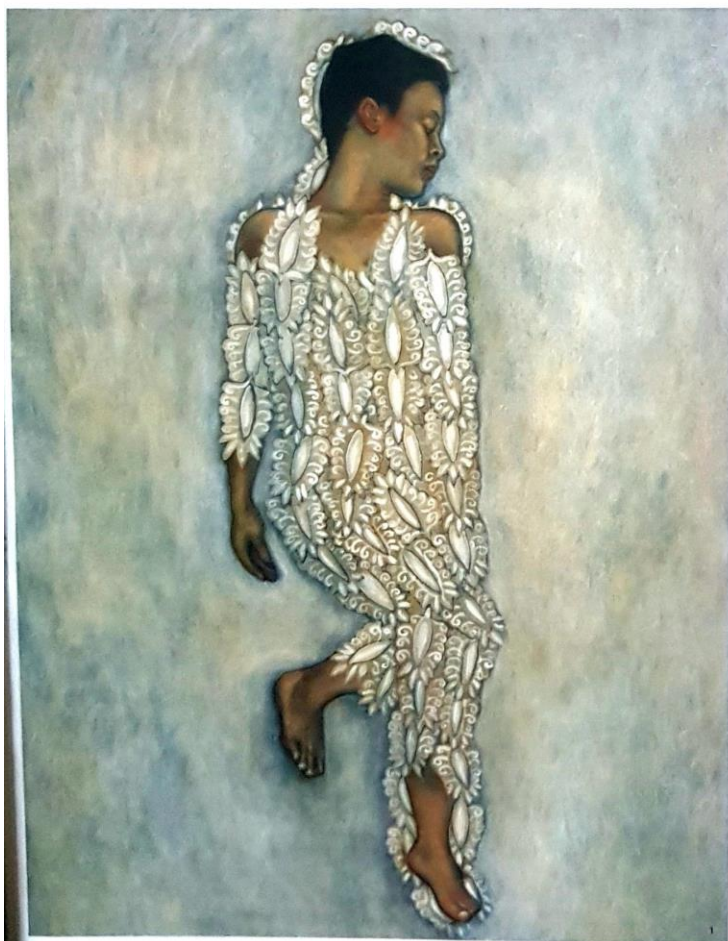
This juxtaposition of the graphic and the psychological works best in paintings where visual patterns fuse closely with the bodies of her subjects. In *Stir #1*, for example, a profusion of bunga pisang (banana flowers) covers dancer Donna Miranda like second skin. In *beCik*, a floral motif is etched onto the teeth of Shaffudin Mamat, becoming bone;

in *Mat Gothic*, the arms and shoulders of Bilqis Hijjas appear tattooed with flowers, permanent and indelible. Incidentally, these are all straightforward paintings, sustained by nothing but strong and poetic imagery. They are beautiful, sensitive portraits that suggest the complexities of living with and adapting to social conditions which may or may not have anything to do with who one really is.

The juxtaposition does *not* work well in the mixed media paintings, which suffer from an overload of visual cues. In *Stir #2* and *First Cut #2*, Bates paints a watery figure with a mix of paint and pond water. The weak, seeping image is echoed in a stark graphic drawing filled with intricate floral motifs. It is these motifs that are problematic, because they are devoid of any sense of relationship to her painted subjects. Thus, they veer dangerously close to being used as a convenient signifier of exotic ethnicity. Likewise, embroidery with metallic threads recalls the traditional craft of songket weaving, but employed literally to 'stitch up' the figures, it becomes a crude metaphor for social constraints.

*Mouth of Flowers* is weakest where ethnographic visual devices are used in a way that does not shed their exotic, decorative surfaces. Where this happens, the figures become passive subjects, blanks upon which the artist inscribes her own patterns and representations, rather than excavating the complex and hybrid one that lies at the heart of us all.

19th Rimbun Dahan Residency Exhibition was held at Rimbun Dahan Gallery, Klang, Jan 13-27. More information: [www.rimbundahan.org](http://www.rimbundahan.org) or email [rimbundahan@gmail.com](mailto:rimbundahan@gmail.com)



1 *Stir #1* (Donna Miranda), 2007, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 90cm. 2 *Mat Gothic* (Bilqis Hijjas), 2007, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 120cm