

Inspiration from Themes and Concepts in Suzlee Ibrahim's Abstract Expressionism Painting

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ABSTRACT

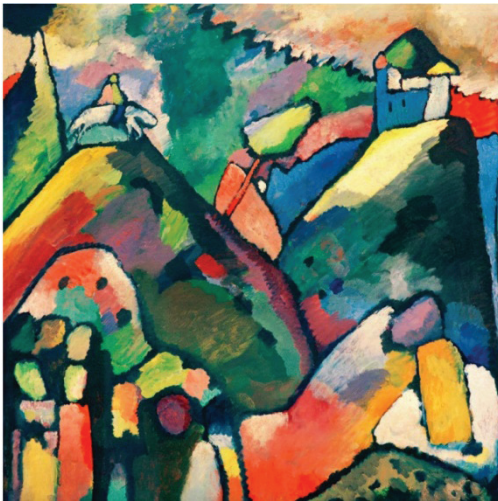
This article explores the themes and concepts in Suzlee Ibrahim's abstract expressionist paintings, emphasizing their significance in modern art. Abstract painting emerged as a pivotal movement in the early 20th century through pioneers like Wassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich, who used non-representational forms to communicate emotions and ideas. In Malaysia, abstract art gained prominence during the 1950s and 1960s, led by artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal and Latiff Mohidin. Suzlee Ibrahim, a prominent Malaysian abstract painter, has significantly contributed to this genre through his dynamic and expressive works. The article examines Suzlee's thematic inspirations, including nature, human emotions, social issues, movement, and spirituality. His works, such as Wall Series: Masterpiece 11 and Monsoon Series: Energy, utilize color, texture, and form to convey profound messages. As an action painter, Suzlee's gestural strokes and vibrant palettes reflect his emotional depth and cultural identity. His use of innovative techniques, such as layering and marbling, enhances the abstract quality of his compositions. Suzlee's paintings transcend visual aesthetics, fostering personal interpretations and emotional connections with viewers. By integrating local identity and universal themes, his art exemplifies the power of abstraction in exploring profound human experiences. This

article highlights Suzlee's contributions to abstract painting, emphasizing its role as a dynamic and evocative medium for artistic expression.

Key words: *Abstract expressionism, Suzlee Ibrahim, artistic inspiration, themes and concepts, Malaysian abstract art*

Introduction

Abstract art has been a powerful means of artistic expression in modern art ever since the advent of abstract art in the early 20th century (Pepe Karmel, 2020). Wassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich were some of the early abstract artists who aimed to create work with no recognisable imagery. Kandinsky was an artist who experimented with the gradual move into abstraction while hiding elements taken from nature. Malevich forms symbolic figures without any representational origin. Abstract art enables the artist to convey emotion, idea, and thought through composition, color, and shape, unrestricted by physical representation (David W. Galenson, 2006). Abstract painting compels the viewer to react to art intuitively, allowing both viewer and artist to interpret the work of art through their individual visions.



**Wassily Kandinsky,
Improvisation 9. Oil on
canvas 110 x 110 cm. (1910).
Source taken from:
Staatsgalerie Stuttgart,
Stuttgart, Germany**

Artists investigate several concepts that may motivate them in creating abstract paintings with different forms and aesthetics. Prevalent topics include nature, emotions, social movements, and spirituality. The proliferation of creative expression and the significance of 'gestures' render abstract painting a dynamic genre that provides artistic liberty, fostering profound personal connections and interpretations from both artists and audiences (Amber Creswell Bell, 2023). In addition, the techniques and methods used by abstract painters are also able to produce effective works, as well as how these concepts can be integrated in the art of painting that gives an impact to the visual view of the audience.

Abstract Painting in Malaysia

At the beginning of the 20th century, most of the artwork that was produced in Malaysia was achieved through the mediums of watercolour and oil painting. Most of the artwork was of the impressionist and realistic styles. However, during the 1950s and 1960s, they engaged in studies that ultimately resulted in works that were abstract and abstract expressionist. According to Chow Sow Yeng and Sarena Abdullah (2024), Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Latiff Mohidin, and Chew Teng Beng are some of the painters who were influential in the beginning stages of this trend.

Suzlee Ibrahim: Abstract Painter

A native of Kuala Terengganu, Suzlee Ibrahim was born in 1967 and currently serves as the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Art at ASWARA. It was more than thirty years that he had experience working as a lecturer. 1993 marked the beginning of his professional career when he began working as a part-time instructor at the School of Art and Design at Institut Teknologi MARA (ITM), which is now known as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). He

began his tenure as a lecturer in the Faculty of Fine Art at ASWARA in 2009 and continues to hold that position to this day. Suzlee Ibrahim has presented a total of 50 solo shows over the course of the previous 38 years, during which time he has been producing paintings as a serious form of artistic expression. More than forty countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States of America, China, Denmark, France, India, Japan, Singapore, Taipei, Tunisia, and Turkey, have witnessed his artistic creations on display.

His artwork is owned by private collectors as well as corporate organisations in Malaysia and other countries across the world. Balai Seni Lukis Negara Malaysia, Bank Negara Malaysia, Brooklyn Art Library (New York), Emaar Properties (Dubai), Remise Academy (Denmark), International Colony of Art Kicevo (Macedonia), Monastir Museum of Modern Art (Tunisia), Suleymanpaşa Municipality Tekirdağ (Turkey), Indonesian Art Institute (ISI Bali), Permanent Mission of Malaysia (Office) to the United Nations (New York), and Zervas Art Collection (Greece) are some of the institutions that are included in this list.

More than 100 pieces of Suzlee's work have been auctioned at international auctions such as Bruun Rasmussen Auctioneers Denmark, Sotheby's Auction Hong Kong, Sotheby's Auction Singapore/ Elephant Parade, Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers, Masterpiece Auction (Hong Kong, Singapore & Kuala Lumpur), The Edge Auction, KLAS Art Auction, Asian Ace Auctions, Raffles Fine Art Auction, Wells Art Auction and Capital Art Auction (Chesley John Skinner, 2023).

Basic Concepts of Abstract Painting

Works of art that are considered abstract are paintings that are not constrained by any recognisable shapes or pictures that exist in the actual world. On the other hand,

abstract painters make use of fundamental components like as colour, line, shape, texture, and space to communicate their meaning and emotions (Stanley Finger and Dahlia W. Zaidel, 2013). Abstract art is characterised by the marginalisation of objects or subjects that are often shown in realistic painting and the replacement of these elements with free form and expression.

In the book titled *Jackson Pollock: interviews, essays, and reviews* (1999), Jackson Pollock describes abstract painting as a situation in which the viewer is confronted with a painting that does not include a recognisable image. It has been argued by certain authors that Jackson Pollock's works do not have a beginning or an end; in which not as compliment, but rather reflects the inherent nature of the artwork itself. In the 1990s, Pollock's paintings were subjected to a great deal of criticism due to the diversity of their subject matter. According to Pepe Karmel (1999), his works have been subjected to a variety of interpretations, as well as psychological and philosophical analysis. These interpretations and analyses have always presented a challenge to researchers, both now and in the past, who are attempting to study and comprehend his works.

In addition, abstract painters frequently refer to organic and geometric components when they are making their paintings. Simple shapes in the field of geometry include squares, circles, and even triangles on occasion. On the other hand, non-geometric works are distinguished by the utilisation of shapes that are characteristically organic and irregular. According to Jameson Coleman (2024), one of the most prevalent mediums for abstract painting is the application of acrylic paint or oil paint on canvas. According to Michael Kerrigan (2015), some of Wassily Kandinsky's works are based on Russian folk art and fairy tales, which are then portrayed by a variety of colours and geometric shapes by the artist.



Suzlee Ibrahim. *Blue Wave No. 3*. 183 x 152 cm. Acrylic & oil on canvas. 2023

Source taken from: G13 Gallery, Kelana Jaya, Selangor.

Blue Wave No 3, a piece by artist Suzlee Ibrahim incorporates geometric motifs, whereas his work predominantly explores organic brush motions. The artwork additionally depicts an area with a planar surface in specific corners of the canvas.

Theme and Concept Inspiration in Abstract Painting

Abstract painting is not only about shapes and colours, but is also often applied to larger themes, which allows artists to express their views on the world and life. Some themes that are often a source of inspiration for abstract painting include nature, human emotions, social movements, and even spiritual dimensions (Dean Nimmer, 2014).

Suzlee Ibrahim also could not get away from those themes in the production of abstract works that he produced. He uses gestures to explore his feelings. As an action painter, Suzlee creates his artwork to convey a mode of energy and expression. His works are characterized by brush strokes and energetic splashes that display a dynamic force (Chow Sow Yeng & Sarena Abdullah, 2024).

Nature and Natural Life

Nature is often the main source of inspiration for abstract painters like Suzlee. Although abstract art does not aim to depict objects or scenes literally, many painters adapt elements of nature such as the movement of water, sky, mountains, or plants in their works. The use of abstract colours and shapes aims to create a more poetic effect and a deep feeling of nature.



Suzlee Ibrahim. *Wall Series: Masterpiece 11*. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 152 x 236.5 cm. (2008/09). Source taken from: Sotheby's Auction, Hong Kong (2018)

This can be seen in Suzlee's work entitled *Wall Series: Masterpiece 11* which was inspired by his visit to the Great Wall, China in June 2008. The history of the Great Wall, the courage of the people and their pride, and the texture of the wall were inspired in the filling. The red colour of the Chinese national flag is the main colour in paint (Asian Art News, Sept/Oct 2009).

The work also showcases the very abstract texture of the 'Great wall' building rock. Suzlee uses layers of overlapping colours and marbling techniques to create the effect of layers of rock, giving the audience a different experience than the usual realistic paintings they are used to seeing. Such works encourage the audience to engage not merely through visual observation, but to immerse themselves in the experience of nature via innovative visual presentation techniques.

Human Emotions and Psychology

Abstract painting is a very powerful medium to convey human emotions. Artists frequently employ intricate arrangements of colours and shapes to convey emotions that are challenging to articulate verbally. As a result, abstract painters are deeply engaged in representing a range of psychological states, from tranquilly to extreme tension. (Claudia Damiano, 2023). Human emotions may be conveyed through artistic creations. Some artists and art theorists believe that specific attributes of paint, particularly colours, lines, shapes, and compositions, can consistently convey feelings that are either 'objective' or 'subjective', contingent upon the observer's skill. Research indicates a consistent appraisal of emotional observers, particularly in abstract artworks (David Melcher, Francesca Bacci, 2013).



Suzlee Ibrahim. *Monsoon Series: Energy*. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 90 x 90 cm. (2009).

Source taken from: Henry Butcher Art Auction (2014)

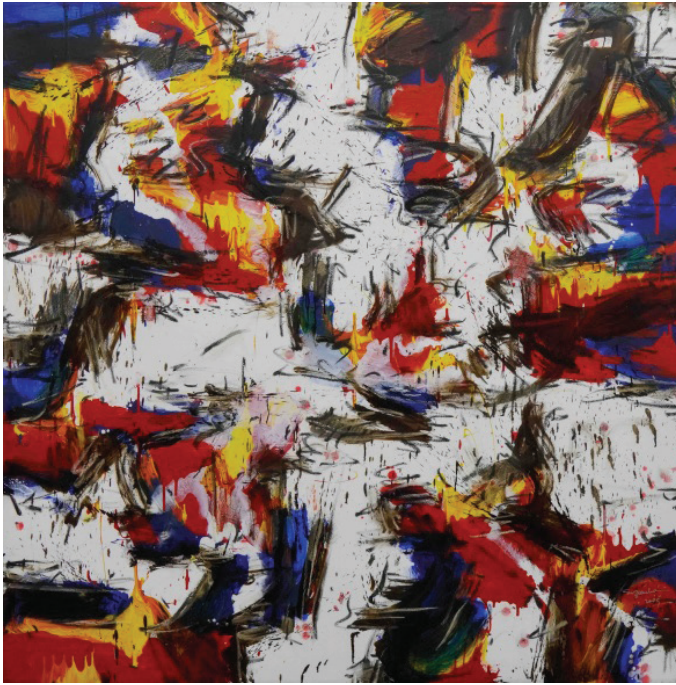
Suzlee is among the painters who utilise colour to convey emotions. His work of art, shown through the *Monsoon Series: Energy*, incorporates layers of vibrant and striking colours that express profound emotional depth (Henry Butcher Art Auction, 2014). Each hue evokes distinct emotional responses; red induces stress, whereas a touch of green fosters tranquilly. Suzlee believes that abstract art represents the profound interior human experience more effectively than representational art. In particular, the earthy yellow and red colours that are used in the *Monsoon Series* create a warm environment. When combined with the dispersion of black strokes, the energy appears to pulse in a tumultuous manner on the paint. Nevertheless, white predominantly occupies the top left, diminishing the pronounced impact. Suzlee use suggestive painting techniques to express his emotions and thoughts

as an individual embodying a Malaysian identity. Hence, his work demonstrates the enhancement of local identity, which is vital to local matters (Chow Sow Yeng & Sarena Abdullah, 2024).

Social and Political

It is also common practice to criticise social and political issues using the medium of abstract painting. It is possible for artists to express their opinions on issues such as social inequality, war, and injustice using the medium of abstract painting, without being constrained by imagery that are either literal or propagandistic. Artists possess the ability to communicate messages through nuanced visual symbolism or by employing contrasts in colour and shape to emphasise tension. Painters such as Kandinsky held the belief that the attainment of social ties in life could only be accomplished on an individual level through the use of an artistic medium. According to Tijen Tunali (2011), the nature of the coloured material is significant in contributing to the psychological impact that it has on the audience's perspective.

During the Cold War, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employed modern American art as a weapon. This included the works of artists such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko, among others. During more than two decades, the CIA fostered and promoted American abstract expressionist painting all over the world and endorsed this initiative in the context of the propaganda conflict with the Soviet Union. This emerging artistic movement could be presented as a testament to American creativity, intellectual liberty and cultural dominance. Consequently, this shows how Russian art, which is ensconced in the coat of communist dogma and incapable of competing (Frances Stonor Saunders, 22 October 1995).



Suzlee Ibrahim. *Lion Dance No 9*. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 153 x 153 cm. (2008).

Source taken from: G13 Art Gallery

In reference to Suzlee Ibrahim's artwork, *Lion Dance No 9*, he illustrates the multicultural social and cultural milieu of this nation through the colours of the Malaysian flag: red, white, yellow, and blue. Executed with a cohesive and systematic arrangement.

Movement and Dynamics

Abstract art frequently employs the principles of movement and dynamism. Abstract paintings can represent motions that are imperceptible. Artists like Jackson Pollock are renowned for their 'drip painting' style, which generates an impression of movement and energy through the application of 'brush strokes' and paint droplets on the canvas (Ellen G. Landau and Claude

Cernuschi, 2007). As a result, the artwork is a continually transforming artwork, characterised by overlapping layers of colour and lines that produce a dynamic appearance.



Suzlee Ibrahim. *Brande's Wind*. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 100 x 200 cm. (2002).

Source taken from: Bruun Rasmussen Kunstauktioner, Denmark (2012)

The combination of straight and curved lines can influence the motion depicted in the painting. Defined and structured lines illustrate tension or regulated motion, whereas more fluid curving lines evoke a sense of organic and spontaneous flow or movement (Gómez-Puerto G, Munar E, Nadal M. 2016).

Spirituality and Metaphysical Dimensions

Some abstract painters, such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, introduced spiritual, spiritual and religious elements in their works (Elezović, Nadežda. 2018). They assert that art serves as a medium to perceive and convey the transcendent experience or human connection with the universe.

Their creations are imbued with symbols, hues and forms that aim to represent a reality broader than what is perceivable by the human sight. Kandinsky for example, saw art as a form of visual music, where colour and form functioned as sounds and notes functioned in a melody. His creations, replete with intersecting colours and forms, seek to evoke a magical experience that can solely be apprehended via art (Renée B. Miller, 2014). He posited that colours harmonised to create a visual 'chord' that impacted the soul (McBurney, 2006).



Suzlee Ibrahim. *Melody Series: Spirit Like the Fire*. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 90 x 90 cm. (2009).

Source taken from: Henry Butcher Art Auction (2016)

In reference, Suzlee has also created works pertaining to music. This may be referenced in relation to his contributions to the *Melody Series*. As indicated by its designation, the Melody Series evokes either lively

or poignant music, contingent upon the emotional atmosphere during the painting process, whether it be intense or tranquil (Henry Butcher Art Auction, 2016).

Strategies and Techniques in Creating Abstract Paintings

It is not just the topics and notions that are crucial in determining the impact of abstract paintings; the techniques that are utilised by abstract painters are also highly important. According to Vicky Perry and Barry Schwabsky (2005), the production of abstract paintings can be explored through a variety of angles, and each of these techniques presents individuals with the opportunity to engage in a variety of visual investigations.

Experiment with Drawing Techniques

Abstract painters often experiment with various techniques to produce more interesting works. 'Pouring' paint onto the canvas, also known as pouring paint, is a method that is often used to produce patterns and textures that cannot be planned. According to Ellen G. Landau (2010), this technique, which is well-known for its representation in the works of Jackson Pollock, enables the paint to flow freely and produces an impression that is both incredibly spontaneous and energetic. The use of objects like as bits of canvas, cloth, or cardboard to provide texture effects is another way that is frequently utilised by abstract artists. Dry brushing, which refers to the process of painting with a dry brush, is another technique that is frequently utilised. Each of these methods gives the artist the opportunity to investigate a wide range of options in order to create compositions that are both intriguing and energising.

Use of Colour in Abstract Painting

Colour is a crucial component in abstract painting. Bright hues like red, yellow, and orange frequently

evoke sensations of activity and anxiety, whereas softer tones such as blue and green impart a sense of tranquilly and harmony. In numerous instances, the application of colour in abstract painting not only embellishes the canvas but also communicates profound feelings and ideas. Abstract paintings are designed to elicit emotional responses in the observer. Colour significantly influences visual perception; for instance, light hues are typically linked to happy emotions, whilst dark hues are associated with negative emotions. (Hibadullah, Wee-Chung Liew, & Jo, 2015).

Use of Form and Space

The use of shape in abstract painting is key to creating a strong visual impact. Regular and geometric shapes convey a sense of stability and consistency, whereas organic and free forms evoke a sensation of motion and transformation. This pertains to Wassily Kandinsky's exploration of organic abstract shapes, whereas Piet Mondrian focused on geometric forms in his oeuvre (Elezović, Nadežda, 2018). Compositional techniques, including the arrangement of elements inside the canvas and their interaction with one another, significantly influence the viewer's engagement with an abstract piece.

Conclusion

The abstract paintings produced by artist Suzlee Ibrahim are an art form that offers absolute freedom in expression and communication. Abstract painters utilise colour, form, texture, and composition to represent a range of profound subjects and concepts, encompassing nature, human emotions, and social and spiritual movements. Abstract painting, characterised by a more autonomous methodology than representational art, facilitates visual investigation and allows the audience to engage with and understand the artwork on a personal level.

The utilisation of compelling subjects and suitable methodologies is crucial in creating works that effectively convey a profound message and exert influence. As a result, abstract painting transcends mere paint, serving as a medium of visual expression rich with the capacity to engage the viewer both directly and emotionally.

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