



LATIFF MOHIDIN

PAGO PAGO (1960–1969)

Opposite page

MARWAN KASSAB-BACHI

Das Licht

1973

Oil on canvas, 130 x 195 cm.

Courtesy Galerie Michael Haas, Berlin.

This page

LATIFF MOHIDIN

Still Life 62

1962

Acrylic on board, 37.8 x 67.7 cm.

Courtesy the artist.

German expressionist, great late colonial painter, modernist pioneer. Latiff Mohidin has been framed as all these things, due, in part, to the artist's attitude toward his identity. He readily admits: "The critics gave me numerous personifications: individualistic, romantic, nomadic, pessimist, existentialist. To every label, I said yes." However, in his iconic oil-on-canvas "Pago Pago" series (1960–69), we see how this all-embracing attitude is actually an act of resistance against polarizing anti-colonial discussions and the ideological turmoils of the Cold War. Created during Mohidin's training at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Berlin, as well as on journeys through the Southeast Asian tropics, the works feature natural and architectural tropes found throughout Malaysia-born Mohidin's home regions, conveying instead the artist's proclivity for a syncretic, regional consciousness.

The series was the subject of the exhibition "Pago Pago (1960–1969)." Co-organized by the National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and Centre Pompidou, it was the first show at the Parisian museum to spotlight a Southeast Asian artist. The concise body of exhibits, including over 70 canvases, sketches, archival materials and three-dimensional works, was an incision into the dominance of Western modernism in art history. Resisting romanticization and exoticization of the artist and his work, the show grounded viewers in the nine-year development of the series and the artist's prospecting of different ideas through its chronological layout.

The exhibition began with paintings from Mohidin's time in Berlin. An early work, *Still Life 62* (1962), already features several motifs that can be seen throughout the "Pago Pago" series. In a rectangular section on the right of the canvas, a leaf-like form is repeated into a pattern, bringing to mind the rich textures typically seen in the

artist's paintings of temples, shells, boats and plant-forms. Cutting horizontally across the composition is a dark line. Anchored to this base are varying outlines of vases, organized in an even, grid-like fashion that results in the components looking flat, as if pressed against the painting's plane. This lack of depth and compositional style is characteristic of the works, which straddle the border between abstraction and representation. While the horizontal line in *Still Life 62* denotes a table, an object foreign to Malaysian culture—Sabah-born artist Yee-I-Lann, for example, has explored it as a colonial symbol—in other works, such as *Pago Pago* (1964), the boundary becomes a surface that gives rise to an amalgam of shapes, resembling enlarged details of a pagoda structure, based on Mohidin's encounters with such forms in the Asian civilizations collections of Ethnological Museum of Berlin. *Tumbuhan Tropika* ("Tropical Growth") (1968), on the other hand, features a more organic tangle of loops, like the tentacles of a mystical beast, in a vivid palette of warm oranges and yellows that captures the heat of the Southeast Asian tropics. A group of related black-and-white ink sketches, *Ta Som – Angkor* (1966), reveal that the serpentine forms are derived from banyan trees in the region, which penetrate the walls of ancient temples, and are indicative of Mohidin's interests in the intertwined energies of earth and humankind.

As a male member of the Minangkabau people, the possessions of whom are passed down matrilineally, Mohidin's own perspective on laying down roots is contradictory. While he gladly embraces the tradition of *merantau*—in which the men venture to faraway lands to gather worldly wisdom—there is a sense of the artist's longing for home throughout the show. Lying on the sand in the middle of the canvas in *Two Boats* (1964) is an anchor, rendered with a thick, dark line, while his poem *Mekong River* (1966), published in the exhibition catalog, touches on notions of yearning as well as anxiety: "Mekong River / How tranquil your breath / How untroubled your gait / On your bank / a mother's voice calls forlorn for the voice of a lost son."

The "Pago Pago" series proposes a conception of modernity that bridges civilizations and nature, home and regionality, us and them. It is the enigmatic nature of his works that distinguishes Mohidin's artistic spirit—that, and his roving curiosity. As the circles peeping out behind the roots and pagodas suggest, for the artist, there is always a new day on the horizon.

CHLOE CHU

