



Swirling numbers cover in this work titled Vortex

Abstract works of calligraphy

By LUCIEN de GUISE

AFTER the community-bonding surfboards of the Sydney suburbs, I have spent the past two weeks looking for something a little less mystical to write about. Preferably with no spiritual content at all.

And then came a preview of work by Agus Baqul Purnomo. Irresistible.

Despite being the planet's most populous Muslim nation, Indonesia produces remarkably little religious art. Agus is a Javanese artist whose work goes beyond the usual formulaic written exclamation of God's name. He focuses on popular prayers and entire verses from the Quran, treating them in a way that has helped spread his message beyond his own country. Maybe not that far though, as Malaysia is about as close as you can get to Java and still be crossing international frontiers.

It is as rare for contemporary art of an Islamic nature to be displayed in Malaysia as it is to find it being created in Indonesia. The most regionally aware gallery in Kuala Lumpur has for a long time been Valentine Willie Fine Art. Since VWFA is promoting Agus, there is a genuine chance of spiritual art receiving a wider audience in Southeast Asia. However, this gallery did put on a bold display of Filipino art with religious element a few years ago, and it can't be said that Catholic aesthetic fervour has swept through the region like swine flu.

The title of the Agus Baqul Purnomo exhibition gives a clear impression of what it's all about. Recite! (Iqra!) is the name of the show as well as being a root of the word Quran. The word Iqra turns up frequently in the holy book and gives an immediacy to the Quran that is not found in all works of scripture; it is God's personal command to believers.

Agus' paintings are abstract works that incorporate calligraphy in an unconventional way. Rather than aiming for the polished finish that calligraphers tend to seek for their writing, there is more of a rough-and-ready approach. The result is a greater sense of movement than is usually seen with Arabic script. An essential difference between the two civilisations that have placed the greatest importance on writing as art - China and the Islamic world - is the instrument of calligraphy. Chinese art, being written with a brush, has usually been a more fluid expression than Arabic, which is traditionally executed with the doughy but rigid reed pen.

Agus' work exudes the energy of graffiti. The

formation of the words with a brush, in acrylic, gives them a rare spontaneity and, at two metres high, the canvases have an almost wall-like quality. The combination of texture and rhythm creates a look of artfully arranged mayhem that makes them unique among contemporary artists of the Islamic world. Not even in Iran, which has done more with calligraphy than might be thought possible, has the same sense of movement been accomplished with words that are usually set in stone.

Unfortunately, we can't show them here. Malaysia's religious authorities are way ahead of the game when it comes to showing respect for the physical manifestation of God's word. In some parts of the Islamic world, any surface is fair game for an expression of devotion. Saudi Arabia and the Sudan, for example, can get tough on other religious improprieties. In those lands the dangers are seen as coming from women drivers or trouser wearers.

In Malaysia there is a more benevolent attitude towards such activities. However, as mentioned in this column quite recently, there is close supervision of where the word of Allah ends up. Bumper stickers and other disposable media, including newspapers, are not on the approved list. So, to provide a visual taste of Agus' work requires showing some of his other paintings, which are the images that accompany this article.

The visual effect is similar, but the spiritual element is missing. Among the many dynamic canvases that he has painted is one that lists the names of luxury cars. There is Audi, BMW, Mercedes and a few non-German brands too. His use of colour is exemplary, and no doubt there is a message contained in a work such as this. It even contains a sense of movement. Still, it doesn't move in quite the same way that his transcendent religious phrases do.

Agus has selected the verses that are most beloved in Indonesia, and for once the Indonesians are not heading in an entirely different direction from the rest of the Islamic world. Some of the most recognisable are prayers of universal significance. Others are those parts of the Quran that tend to impress readers of any religious persuasion, such as Surah 96, verses 1-5: "Read in the name of your Lord who created, created man from a clot. Read, for your Lord is most Generous. Who teaches by means of the pen, teaches man what he does not know."

This is a good one for understanding why the written word is so important to Muslims. As the religious custodians approach supervision of the written word with extreme diligence, the best way to see the work of Agus is to visit a gallery. Making up for the lack of pre-launch visual publicity, the artist himself will be present at the launch on Wednesday. Recite! (Iqra!) at Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur ends Sept 5.

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Names of luxury cars on canvas in Automania

Lucien de Guise is curator of the

