

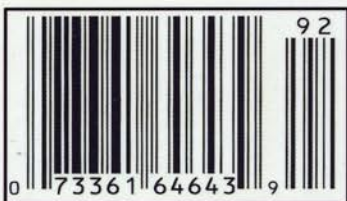
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Architecture Defining Sculpture

In a culture that turns away from an identification with the object, Malaysian sculptor Abdul Multhalib Musa draws on architectural models, Islamic decoration, and international abstraction, in defining a personal style that oscillates between an Eastern and Western aesthetic.

By Gina Fairley

Large-scale contemporary sculpture, by its nature, is universal. Its fabrication, materiality, relationship to human scale, and physicality in the environment place it more within the vernacular of architecture. Malaysia presents an interesting case for discussion. An Islamic state, it is almost entirely void of public sculpture, or a history, by “Western understanding,” of sculpture within its culture. The city today is a skyline of cement and glass cathedrals to the wonders of architecture. One could propose architecture equals contemporary Malaysian sculpture.

It is not unusual then that Malaysia's most interesting young sculptor trained as an architect. Abdul Multhalib Musa (b.1976) emerges from this complex cultural environment with a visual language that speaks to the international abstraction of George Rickey, Naum Gabo, and Harry Bertoia, and pays homage to the sculptural forms of Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava, and the deconstructivist designs of Zaha Hadid. Yet it is also acutely aware of Islamic geometry, calligraphic form, and the mathematical equations of nature. The slick forms of Musa's sculptures—from analytical, to skeletal, to centrifugal—celebrate the precision of geometry and technology.

Metal, a material synonymous with industrial development and “the new world,” is used by sculptors everywhere and allows contemporary expression through new techniques such as laser, plasma, and water-cutting. Musa finds in metal the precision of architectural design and a direct transition from his computer to the three-dimensional object. Yet, his

metal sculptures also embrace the randomness of an organic form; the chance play of surface and the anomalies that arise in fabrication—like clay thrown on a potter's wheel—the random is accountable physics. What has developed is a personal style that is a classic marriage of art and architecture. The two cannot be divided in Musa's work.

Studying architecture in Australia in the mid-1990s, Musa returned to Kuala Lumpur in 1998, a city rapidly shaped during the 1980s and 1990s by a tsunami of development and the fervor for nationalism.¹ His is a deeply conscious oscillation between these two places: an aesthetic emerging from a zone benign of borders.

Architecture writer Sabiha Foster says: “Architecture addresses our metaphysical, philosophical, and cultural identities within a material context... An evaluation of architecture must essentially be an evaluation of ourselves. And an evaluation of ourselves demands that we situate ourselves within the evolving meanings of our histories and traditions.”²

Musa has taken the self-referential verbiage that is the tenant of contemporary architecture and translated it into a sculptural dialogue. His sculptural forms give a physical presence to the phenomenology of geometry, neutralizing cultural associations and



Abdul Multhalib Musa, *Faltered Wings*, 2003, laser-cut mild steel with clear enamel coat, 115 x 125 cm. Selected for *Of Shadows & Images* group exhibition in Sweden and Spain, organized by National Art Gallery, Malaysia.

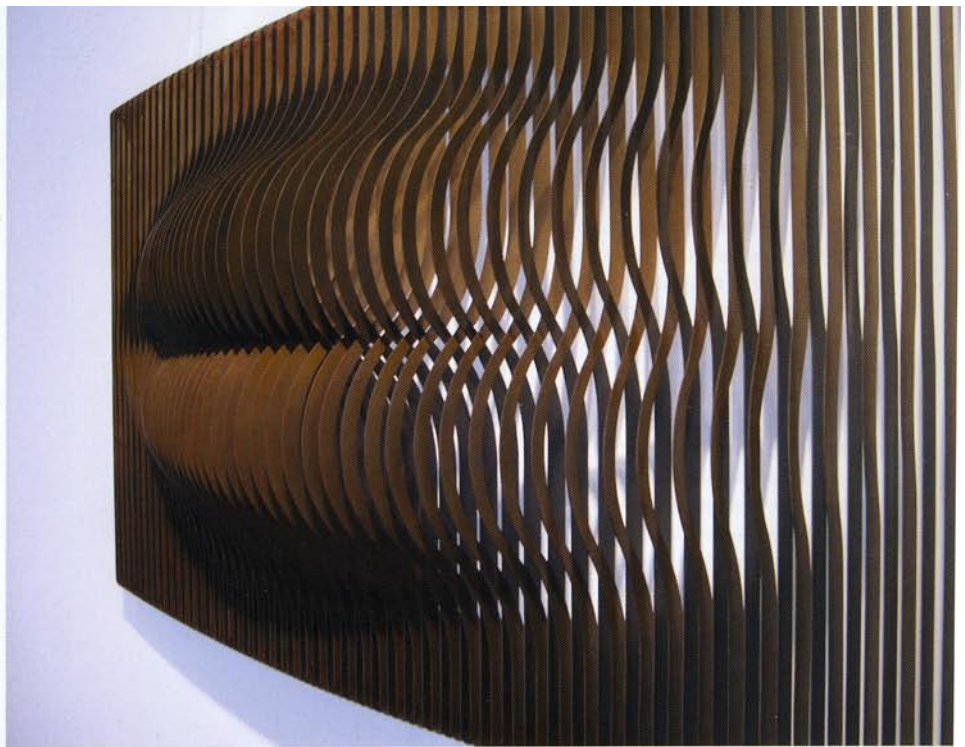
placing them somewhere between Eastern and Western art and architecture. He has taken design pedagogy and instilled back into it a sense of the hand—the artistic process—converging Musa the architect and Muse the sculptor. The resulting sculptures take on the vernacular of international abstraction.

This brings me to the conundrum that is the contemporary sculpture of Abdul Multhalib Musa. Technology has allowed us to embrace a 'global' style. Yet considerations such as *feng shui* in Asian culture; religious constraints in the Islamic world; the eroding nature of consumerism in the developing world, and a retro-modernism sweeping across contemporary design are mindful cultural markers that an artist must overlay—an extra set of parameters that define the work. Musa is astutely aware of such cultural codes living in the tri-cultural nation Malaysia, where 'protocols' are so entrenched in the fabric of thought that a non-offensive neutrality permeates everything.

"The demands of globalization have formalized my work. It lacks identity, but only because it is developed extensively through technology ... and technology is universal."³ "For me ideas, especially ideas that have no direct reference to culture or history, are universal and lack a sense of place."⁴

Musa challenges these ideas in his sculptures, attempting to draw a parallel equation of International = Modern = Islamic = Asian, rendering them neutral, existing in none, and each, simultaneously. If we look at Musa's sculptures from 2001 through to 2003, and his commission for the Westin Hotel *The Better Half* (2003), he presents a bold confrontation of these cultural protocols through their sharp linear points and open skeletal forms. In a society where the practice of *feng shui* is a keen player in the commercial gallery arena it was a decisive move by a young artist. Sadly, the Westin piece was eventually removed for "feng shui reasons," and Musa's recent series *Swirls* leaves little room for such irreverent considerations. However, I must say these early works have a definition to them that is exciting.

The early forms are constructed through the



Abdul Multhalib Musa, *Intertwined*, 2004, laser cut mild steel with clear enamel coat, 200 x 120 x 20 cm. WWF exhibition, Rimbun Dahan, Malaysia, 2004.

repetition of 'fabricated' individual lines. Each line permitted to float in space; the shadows binary to completing the work. *Faltered Wings* (2003) is a delightful piece that captures Musa's sensitivities to form, caught between something organic, skeletal, machine fabricated, science fiction, or even living—its shadows breathing life into the work as you move around it. His ability to animate technology, to transform a static weighty material such as steel into an object full of light and movement, demonstrates an intuitive understanding of the material and his adroit skills as a designer

and artist. Just as a child is overwhelmed by imposing dinosaur skeletons in the natural history museum, Musa's metal sculptures have a presence that invites us to unleash fantasy.

Similarly, animation can be approached from a spiritual consideration. A correlation can be drawn between Islamic teachings, geometry expressed as decoration, and simple mathematical equations that explain natural forms. Musa's work moves coherently across both vernaculars, on a sub-conscious and conscious level, as he explains, "... a simple formula is able to explain the orbit of planets, the arrangement of sunflower seeds, the formation of seashells, the ordering of colors in the rainbow... all of these events can be considered as random, but there is an ordering, a system that gives an explanation how they came about, and how they can be 'reproduced.' In a way I am looking into a 'formula' to produce a certain type of work."⁵

Take Musa's series, *Khat Islamic Calligraphy* (2003), as a case in point. How dissimilar really are these works to his *Swirls* and *Faltered Wings*? Calligraphy replaced by line? Each line in Islamic calligraphy is a careful mathematical calculation, just as the centrifugal spiral of Musa's *Swirls* follow a formula. These sculptures have many layers informing



Abdul Multhalib Musa, *Muhammad (Khat Islamic Calligraphy Series 11)*, 2003, stainless steel, 46 cm square. Collection of the Islamic Art Museum, Kuala Lumpur.

them, and it is this depth that gives them an inherent presence, a 'sublime' quality.

Bridget Riley was quoted as saying, in reference to her 'optical' paintings, that she draws from nature in her work... that nature is not landscape, but the dynamism of natural forces.⁶ There is a connection between Musa's sculptures and Riley's dizzying pictures. The vibration or shimmer in such works, just as the *rarking* in Australian Aboriginal barks, points to a spirituality or a closeness to the fundamentals of our biology. Riley refers to it as the forces of nature or the 'sublime.' Now, what happens when the realistic representation of nature is replaced by an abstraction that embraces natural forces—in Riley's case shimmer, in Musa's repetition and the purity of formula? Does this allow art to transcend the abstract to embody a deeper sublime force? Could then international abstraction parallel Islamic decoration at this level? Are the two so different?

For the atheists amongst us, maybe the consideration remains. Could not the shimmer in Musa's optical sculptures be a celebration of technology at its apparent pinnacle? The computer allows infinite repetition, drawn lines, and laser-cut elements that create visual aberrations through perfection. Disorder through order?

Musa positions entropy within the work: "While computer aided designs [are] good for repetition... the form is only virtual and lacks the inherent property of the finished material to create a spatial-temporal relationship between viewer and the work... I see them as a schematic trapped in the midst of their production."⁷

Identity enters back into the sculpture through the hand. Musa's most recent series, *Swirls* (2005), embraces a marriage of controlled fabrication and spontaneity in the finishing process. These works resonate with the polish and weight of technology. Their concentric compositions embody the perfection of a machine aesthetic. Yet the seemingly random placement of the layers and variegated rusting surfaces, have the vibrancy of an organic object. They are random. They are ordered. Viewing them, one is sent eddying off in an unbalanced spiral. Is Musa trying to animate physics or expose, through variation and repetition, a mathematical process?

"It's a controlled animation of the intellectual pro-



Abdul Multhalib Musa, Centrifugal Coaxal 5, 2005, mild steel with clear 2K coat, 120 x 120 x 8 cm. Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur, *Swirls*, 2005.

cess that appears random due to the infinite variants... like the formation of clouds," says Musa. "Some computers today can anticipate cloud forms... this intrigues me how someone can program this sort of complex algorithm... and 'recreate'

such a seemingly random event. Perhaps I want my work, like nature, to look random but you can almost tell that there is a certain ordering to it."⁸

In the end it is intuition and formula. The *Involute* pieces, in fabrication, become alive through their suspended movement. The works take on a random spatial dialogue.

Musa's sculptures activate the neutral space of the gallery. Their sharp spines, such as those of *Faltered Wings*, intrude aggressively into the viewer's space, yet remain resolved within their own form, in their own space. Similarly, Musa's wall pieces from the *Entwined* series (2004), engage the environment by using the voids of the sculpture to speak with the gallery wall—the physical palpability of their shadows as weighty as the steel structures themselves.

Intertwined (2004) playfully engages the viewer. As you move along the piece and across the pregnant swell of its belly, the positive and negative lines create a rhyth-



Abdul Multhalib Musa, Centrifugal 10°, 2005, mild steel with clear 2K coat, 120 x 120 x 8 cm. Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur, *Swirls*, 2005.

mic play of light. There is a kind of metronomic insistence to move back and forward along the piece in a tempo of engagement, curiosity and visual stimulation. The repetitious steel lines are aggregates that, like notes on a sheet of music, are a careful calculation of balance, rhythm, light, movement. This same form—a kind of tectonic swell that causes this steel armature to rise up and out of the gallery wall—Musa has constructed as large-scale public works in Oita, Japan, 2002, and at *Sculpture by the Sea*, Sydney, Australia, 2003. Interestingly, as this form comes off the wall and into the environment, the voids work in a different way; the wind moving through them and along the piece creates a spontaneous sound element.

Just as sound is considered, but random, so, too, is the way Musa addresses surface in his sculptures. It is not the primary consideration for him, which is surprising given their tactile quality. Material and surface are intrinsically linked. Musa feels: "...for me the finishing is just superficial—it doesn't affect the form of the work... there's a lot of room for me to tolerate if the surface is altered, whether it's affected by the weather and surrounding atmosphere... for me the form is more important... the strength is in the actual design... It's like whether you paint a building you've designed blue or yellow—it is just a paint job—it is not the actual building..."⁹

These elements—rhythm, spatial engagement, and surface—are sculptural considerations. They illustrate the move in Musa's work from design to the object.

So in the end the architect returns to the object. His sculptures are domestic-scaled architectural modules. "The primary consideration in the work is design, form, and composition. The other considerations are its scale, proportion, structural stability, relationship to the viewer, especially for works that have an optical illusion, and opportunity for shadow effect."¹⁰

Is this the voice of an architect or a sculptor? Musa's working process is one of an architect. His creative process, and the resulting work, is one emerging from a



Abdul Multhalib Musa, *Involute 10.0°*, 2005, laser-cut stainless steel, diameter 88 cm. Installation view at Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur, Swirls, 2005.

sculptural consideration. These works are from the studio of a sensitive and intuitive artist. They are more than just considered calculations or architectural folly.

When asked whether he saw his sculptures sitting within a language of architecture or within contemporary Malaysian art, Musa answered with a laugh: "I shall consider myself as an unemployed visionary doing sculptural work in an architectural manner," but on a more serious note, "It is my intention to highlight in my work some of the issues related to space and temporality, the integration of technology and inspiration, truth and illusion affecting everything that we perceive as tangible or implied, in a complex relationship between art and architecture."¹¹

Abdul Multhalib Musa's work suc-



Abdul Multhalib Musa photographed by Tony Twigg at Rimbun Dahan, Malaysia, 2005.

cessfully moves between design, art, complex cultural environments, and international style. His work has been exhibited in Japan, Sweden, Singapore, Spain, Indonesia, China, and Australia. It exists within an international framework. This framework allows his sculptures to float without being tethered to rigid 'definitions.' The sculptures become a balanced equation. As Musa concludes, "...sometimes the mathematical is too accurate."¹² Δ

Notes:

1. Abdul Multhalib Musa was awarded a Bachelor Degree in Design Studies, University of Adelaide, Australia (1996-1998) and a Bachelor of Architecture (Honors), MARA University of Technology, Shah Alam, Malaysia (1999-2000).
2. Sabiha Foster; "Multiplicity in Unity", in Islam + Architecture issue of *Architectural Design*, Vol.74 No.6, (London), Nov/Dec 2004, pg 5.
3. Interview with Yvonne Tan, *Asian Art Newspaper*, issue: 0404, 2004
4. Interview with Gina Fairley and Tony Twigg recorded at Rimbun Dahan, Malaysia, June 13, 2005. Multhalib's exhibition *Swirls* was on show at the Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur, at the time of recording.
5. *ibid.*
6. Bridget Riley quoted in *Art Monthly Australia*, # 178, April 2005 from "Working with Nature", Robert Kudielka's (ed.), published 1973, "The Mind's Mind: Bridget Riley, Collected Writing 1965 - 1999", pg 116.
7. Interview with Gina Fairley recorded at Rimbun Dahan, Malaysia, June 13, 2005.
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.*
11. Abdul Multhalib Musa; exhibition catalogue, Rimbun Dahan, Kuala Lumpur, (Malaysia), March 2002
12. Interview with Gina Fairley recorded at Rimbun Dahan, Malaysia, June 13, 2005.

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