

IN THE HOUSE OF YUNIZAR

The House

“Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house.” So Gaston Bachelard writes in that book much loved by artists, *The Poetics of Space*.ⁱ Having asked himself what the chief benefit of the house can be, Bachelard answers, “the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.”ⁱⁱ When I look at one of Yunizar’s recent house paintings, *House and Sunflowers*, Bachelard’s words come to mind. These images of houses seem dream-like, visionary even, but also nostalgic. In their frontality and skewed perspective they inevitably echo those images of houses that children draw. In England even children who live in tower blocks draw the same stereotypical house with a door in the middle and windows to either side – though they always add a chimney on top - not a requisite feature in a hot country like Indonesia.

“...the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. The binding principle in this integration is the daydream...Without it man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of heaven and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being’s first world....And always in our dreams, the house is a large cradle.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Bachelard continues. These houses of Yunizar are drawn with loving care: they are places we would be happy to be – refuges against bad weather and vicissitudes of everyday life, the porch a view point from which we can survey that world. They are also sites for reverie, daydreaming.

At the top of the house are two carved wooden cockerels; presumably these have the same function as the straw cockerels or squirrels the thatcher will add to a roof in the part of England where I come from where houses have roofs of straw: to identify and humanise the house. Or perhaps these are real birds perched there to

proclaim the harmony of man, architecture and nature. Likewise, the flowers grow happily all about the house: they and the house and the inhabitant of the house all belong in this world. We note too that the houses have a good deal of ornamentation in the tracery of the windows and that the ornamentation is derived from nature – to proclaim again its oneness with the world. Perhaps this house has something of the Minangkabau communal long houses and also traditional Islamic architecture.^{iv} The house is the house of a person or a family but it also represents communal values.

In one respect these houses suggest nostalgia, but in another they suggest a desire. To quote Bachelard a final time: “Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the dream house is opposed to the childhood home. Late in life, with indomitable courage, we continue to say that we are going to do what we have not yet done: we are going to build a house. This dream house may be merely a dream of ownership, the embodiment of everything that is considered convenient, comfortable, healthy, sound, desirable, by other people.”^v Most of us will have on occasion drawn our ideal house on a sheet of paper and imagined ourselves there.

In some paintings of Yunizar’s paintings the house is very large and here it seems more like a long house than a regular town or country house. We may ask whether these houses are attempts to blend the two types of dwelling: the communal and the nuclear family house. We should remember that Yunizar is Minangkabau and came from Talawi in Sumatra and returns there annually though he is now wholly settled in Jogja. When I ask him whether I should go to Talawi to understand his work better he says “No. I am not a local artist.” What he is expressing or making into paintings are universal experiences though, perhaps paradoxically, one of those universal experiences of place – of belonging in a particular place.

We look together at a larger house painting, *Big Houses*, where a man stands in the porch. “Is it a story?” I asked Yunizar when I met him first in 2009. “No,” he

replied, “a general hope.” “When we paint hopes are we painting paradise?” “No. Earthly hopes.” “But it is a peaceful world?” “Yes.” “He is a good man?” “Yes.” “Is it a world in harmony?” “A beautiful one.”

One of these larger house paintings is called *The Talawi Museum of Contemporary Art*. No such building exists of course - nor is likely to. What would be in such a museum? Yunizar does not tell us: we have to imagine. Firstly, we must say, Indonesia, and especially Sumatra, has too few museums: artists lack venues – they long for such venues. Secondly, many – perhaps all - artists have ideal collections of art in their head which include their favourite works of art, those that have influenced them and those that are models. A few artists, such as Degas, even collect actual works for a museum, and a very few, such as Donald Judd, actually build their own museum. The museum is more than just a store: it is a homage to art and also, however indirectly, it is a statement about what art is. In the classical art of memory one used rooms and building to associate things with and hence remember them.^{vi} If we remember one thing as being associated with the window frame we will begin to remember the things associated with the wall beside it: an orator would remember his entire speech by imaginatively going around his memory house. This painting of a museum can also protect our memories: we can fill it in our imagination and the painted image of the museum then will help us retain those imagined memories. I have filled it with the paintings of Yunizar and eight of the nine galleries have a different type of painting: houses, people, portraits of heads, animals, scribbles, abstracts, trees, still lives. The ninth gallery would be for his friends to come and show their work: one knows that the museum of Yunizar is a social place: he too will stand in the door way to welcome his friends and guests.

Finally, for me, these paintings of houses above all recall the way in which Duccio and Giotto and other Italian painters of the thirteenth and fourteenth century painted Jerusalem - as just a few simple, but perfect, houses. They painted it

especially at that moment when Jesus enters Jerusalem. The monet when things are blessed. It is an imagined, totally practical but ideal world. These buildings are blessed. (I am aware here that my references are Christian and that Yunizar is a devout Moslem who prays five times a day– but in much that we discuss we are talking about things shared by both these Abrahamic religions. Indeed these are universal human desires and hopes.)

Now this is not the sort of subject we are used to in the tough and often cynical world of contemporary art. Domestic bliss is not normally a valued subject in contemporary art. Stay at homes are dulls. When Crosby Stills and Nash sang “My house is a very, very nice house/ With two cats in the yard/ And everything is cosy/ Cos of you....” back in 1970 it was hard not to snigger, but hard not also to yearn for this simple life. It is important, vital even, in a world where we do not build our own flats and houses to imagine what they could be: to imagine the house as a projection of our body and personality. Here we can compare Yunizar’s work to the way other contemporary painters, Maureen Gallace and Peter Doig for example, work with the semiotics and aesthetic of the house to make images of cohesion and harmony – where beauty is connected to a sense of belonging in this world. We can contrast it too with the fascination for urban paranoia of a painter today such as Daniel Richter or Jonathan Meese.

I want to emphasise that this is not faux naïf schmaltz like Camille Bombois or Grandma Moses. These paintings have a darkness and depth missing from theirs or, for example, from Widayat’s work. Yunizar is an instinctual but intellectual artist. If an unsympathetic eye sees his paintings as childlike or pretty they are wrong: his is a tough and complex oeuvre. Like the paintings of Jean Dubuffet – to whom we shall return – they are about being rooted in the physical world.

The Tree

Who did not want to live in a tree house when they were a child? Who did not imagine running away to live in the forests like Robin Hood or an independence fighter? In Shakespeare when people have to hide in the Forest of Arden it is also to make a better, more harmonised society. As always Hollywood has manipulated this desire by making an absurdly big tree for the aliens to inhabit in the movie *Avatar*. Their giant tree is like an organic tower block.

How do we compare this to Yunizar's recent painting *The Tree Story*? Unlike the big blue people in *Avatar* we do not live in trees, but we all have fantasised at some point about having a tree house. Why? I think it is because it can represent community and nature simultaneously. Once I went to visit the widest tree in the world (in Mexico's Oaxaca province) what was truly amazing was to realise how many birds live there...a whole eco-structure – a whole complex community. Likewise the birds that gather in the trees in Singapore on Orchard road at the junction with Bideford road every sunset and whose noisy jabber is louder than that of the traffic are a community. The trees house and shelter them.

Again the floor below the tree is filled, animated with endless creatures. This is not a case of *horror vacui* or a compulsive desire to fill in: it is about the richness of life. On the one hand it is very contemporary: he represents the world as flux where everything is in constant motion, where things are not composed with a stable, static foreground, middle ground and backgrounds – and he is happy with this world of constant movement and activity. On the other hand it could be seen as consistent with the richness of overall pattern and decoration in Mughal miniatures or Mille Fleurs tapestries.

In the house there are not trees but flowers. In recent paintings these are painted forcefully: they are surrounded by a decorative border, but with almost brutal severity. To ram the point home, in one painting the flowers are kept in a jar labelled "poison". They are as structurally strong as trees; surprisingly, reminders of how vigorous nature is, how persistent.

Light

In a painting called *Sunshine* there is no colour other than black painted lines and the parchment coloured ground. Except for one vital thing: the sun, which is a bright yellow. Nowadays we think of light as white because we have white pages in books and white computer screens and electric light bulbs that we misread as white. But before the age of electricity and bleach many people intuitively understood light to be yellow – or golden. In old Christian traditions this gold was the colour of heaven, the colour of the divine.

Beneath the sun in this painting the world is a plain filled, quite literally with animals, dogs, cats, chickens, snakes, fish, an elephant, butterflies and many other creatures that are difficult to categorise. This is no exact zoological diagram. They fit together, either not touching one another or just touching. Each is in its own space under heaven. They are all drawn with a fast vigorous brush to emphasise their vitality, their liveliness. Is this the sixth day of creation when God created all kinds of animal? Or is the world in a constant state of creation?

The composition is simple, simplistic even: the sky is the top tenth of canvas with the sun dead middle: below is filled, like a jar with sweets. But this is not the real composition: the **true** composition is the flux of animal life below. This is a composition more akin to cells dividing and re-dividing in a petri glass than any cunning concoction of the golden section.

And they all have their mouths open: they are singing. There is an element of humour here: Yunizar has a robust sense of humour – but one that is uninflected by irony. But there is also, I would argue, a religious aspect: they are singing of the joy of creation.

Texture

The rough textures of his paintings emphasise that this may be a warm world but that it is also a tough one. Like the best French wines they have the taste or smell of the *terroir* – the actual soil they came from. The surface of the paintings is very particular as if this were a very real and particular place. Even though his figures are universal figures, often without, or beyond, gender, they are each very particular – they have personality.

We feel the world: we touch the table before us, feel the grain of the wood; our feet feel the uneven ground beneath us; we bite into the chicken we have cooked and drink the cold water from the stream: we want to transcribe those experiences of touch and taste that we feel into the dominant sense of vision so that we can share it with others.

When I ask him about the cracked surfaces in many of his paintings, he says he likes it that way: it reminds him of a wall with its cracks. The cracks in a wall tell us of its history: of how it has expanded and contracted by heat and cold, of how it has been eroded. The cracks are where life happens, where soil gathers and plants grow, where lizards hide and nest.

Let us think about his painting *Fragrance* and how he uses it as a title for a landscape. A painting smells of nothing – at least once it is dry. To call a painting *Fragrance* is to invoke synaesthesia: that these images will evoke smells: the scent of grass and flowers, straw and ripening fruit, cow dung, the sound of a clear-watered river bubbling by – a sound that feels like a smell.

To emphasise the textural is to stand against the merely voyeurist pleasures of fashion mags, tourism and pornography. It is about re-uniting the body with the eyes and the mind. In late capitalism the worker's pleasures are reduced almost exclusively to the visual. Yunizar's paintings are home cooked – they are the absolute opposite of Pop or Neo Pop. (If he painted a restaurant it would have a cook making the food, not warming up pre-packaged gunk as in McDonalds.)

Just as in the house paintings, in *Fragrance* the two figures standing in the doorways of the two houses are happy men, happy with their houses, happy with their families who look out from the windows. The two house already enough to form a community where responsibilities and efforts can be shared – *gotong royang*.

How do we relate the paintings of Yunizar to those of Dubuffet? They have many superficial similarities: an appeal to the direct, the child-like, to the textural. Jean Dubuffet made his reputation in France after the Second World War with paintings that were notable for their directness and their materiality. He was influenced and collected what he called *Art Brut* – raw art or the art of outsiders. Outsider artists are repetitious, obsessive compulsives, but Yunizar like Dubuffet is constantly trying new things, sometimes focussed on subject matter, sometimes on technique. They both have a concern with textures: Dubuffet would sometimes pile his canvases high with *matiere* or *haute pate* – sand, tar or gravel as well as thick and heavy paint that he would gouge with his fingers: Yunizar never needs to do this: he is content as yet to work with acrylic. Where Dubuffet worked in series: Yunizar is less programmatic: he returns periodically to the same types of painting. Where Dubuffet's father was a wine merchant, Yunizar's was a coal miner. Dubuffet came from a large town – Le Havre – Yunizar from a *kampung*. The more we look they less they are like each other, but one point is worth making: that Dubuffet's work though little written about in English has been profoundly influential on many European painters because of its technical innovativeness, but also because it represents something vital: *terroir* and the life of the body. Yunizar is a less overtly intellectual artist than Dubuffet – he is instinctual but not naïf – his friends are other painters rather than *rive gauche* writers and *philosophes* – his work is less programmatic – but his work represents – or, more correctly, makes manifest – the union of body and mind in this world.

Talawi

When I asked Yunizar if I would understand him best if I went to Talawi he said no, but I am nonetheless filled with the desire to walk through his village – his *kampung*. And again I am aware that it will be nothing like the landscape of his painting, for that is both a visionary one and an everyday one available to anyone. It is a state of mind.

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ⁱ First published as *La poétique de l'espace*, 1958. Translated into English by Maria Jolas and published as *The Poetics of Space*, Orion Press, 1964. Reprinted by Beacon Press with new foreword in 1994. All references are to this later edition of the English translation

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 2

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p.6-7

^{iv} In this he may have been influenced by Farjar Shidick his one time teacher who sought to blend Islamic calligraphic and patterning motifs into abstract paintings.

^v Ibid. p. 61

^{vi} See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London. 1966