

## JAVA SCRIPT

Despite being the planet's most populous Muslim nation, Indonesia produces remarkably little art with religious content. Agus Baqul Purnomo is a Javanese artist whose work goes beyond the usual written exclamation of God's name. He focuses on popular prayers and entire verses from the *Qur'an*, treating them in a way that has helped spread his message beyond his own country.

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 long been Valentine Willie Fine Art. Since VWFA is promoting Agus, there's a chance of a resurgence of spiritual art in Southeast Asia. Even the title of the exhibition gives a clear impression of what is coming next. *Recite! (Iqra!)* is the name of the show as well as being a root of the word *Qur'an*. It turns up frequently in the holy book and gives an immediacy to the *Qur'an* that is not found in all works of scripture; it is God's personal command to believers.

These are abstract works that incorporate calligraphy in an unconventional way. Rather than aiming



**AYAT KURSI** by Agus Baqul Purnomo (2009),  
acrylic on canvas, 200 x 180 cm

for the centre stage 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 a reed pen. Agus Baqul's 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 which makes them unique in 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. 'Recite! (Iqra!)' at Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur.

Until 5 September