

a solo exhibition by

Hasanul Isyraf Idris

05.09–08.11.2026



Supported by

UOB

Love and Death in a Handful of Dust

by *Ellen Lee*

“Fruiting bodies” is the term mycologists use to refer to what we normally call “mushrooms”: that is to say, the reproductive structure of fungi that appears on the surface of trees, soil, and other damp places which are ripe hosts for fungal colonies. Fruiting Bodies, on the other hand, is a solo presentation by Penang-based artist Hasanul Isyraf Idris that comprises a collection of small paintings on paper (of zoological and mycological subjects) of the natural world displayed against a mural that spans Blank Canvas. The artworks are accompanied by a tactile presentation of actual fungal specimens and mycelium-based experiments, developed in collaboration with Dr Rosnida Tajuddin of the School of Biological Sciences at Universiti Sains Malaysia, bridging mycology with art.

What is a fungus? In the elevated realm of art, which ranks among the highest of human accomplishments and a mark of our superiority as a species, let us take a moment to consider the smaller things: the tiny living, breathing, feeding, and reproducing organisms that live among us and even inside of us. Fungi grow in incredible variety wherever suitable nutrients and environmental conditions allow, including within human bodily microbiomes. The air we breathe is filled with their spores, invisible to the naked eye. Fungi are closer to the category of animals than they are to plants, although mycology (the study of fungi and mushrooms) is often lumped in with botany. This fact may surprise those non-scientifically-inclined among us like yours truly, but it seems like something that is just intuitively known to Hasanul, who has been adopting and breeding animals since he was a child and has recently started cultivating fungi.

Fruiting Bodies can be interpreted as a later and more specialised accompaniment to *Bintang Hijau*, Hasanul’s solo exhibition with Richard Koh Fine Art earlier this year, and part of Hasanul’s ongoing interest in indexing all the living things he finds in his plot of land in Selama, Perak. In the forests of Selama, a small, rural district of Perak about a 2 hours’ drive away from Hasanul’s current residence in George Town, he and his family own a small piece of land on which they have begun developing a small holiday home and artist studio. The shrubbery and foliage that once covered the land has been cleared and pushed back to the edges but much wilderness still proliferates, not least among this backyard variety being many different species of fungi.



Left: Hasanul on his land in Selama.

Right: Bracket fungi growing on a tree trunk on Hasanul's land.

The paintings are the “fruiting bodies” of the show: the beautiful and intriguing forms that surface above a larger network of activity—in this case, years of study, observation, and research—underneath. Like biological fruiting bodies, the paintings are also the exhibition’s structures of propagating mycological knowledge to the wider world and perhaps imparting an interest in fungi within the audience’s minds that goes deeper than what is depicted in the paintings. It is a way to communicate to new audiences about a magical world normally hidden to urban dwellers but which flourishes pretty much all around us.

The central mural in the exhibition depicts a durian tree trunk and a cross-section view of the soil beneath it, which reveals a network of roots spreading out into the soil and interfacing with the mycelium of fungal colonies in what is known

in biology as a mycorrhizal relationship, a symbiotic relationship between mycelium and root in which certain fungi supply plants with water and minerals while receiving plant-derived carbon in return.

A variety of fruiting bodies are depicted in the paintings, including bracket mushrooms (Sample no. 12), artist's conks (no. 20, so called because their surface works like a linoleum sheet which can retain forms drawn on with a stylus), earthstars (no. 3), wood ear mushrooms (no. 21), lichen (nos. 5 and 13), and the cup and stem mushrooms (nos. 16, 32, and 34) that are the platonic ideal of what most of us imagine when we think of mushrooms. Each of them are titled in the form of a classification code which abbreviates where and when their samples were encountered by the artist. A series of wet on wet paintings offer an abstract interlude between the observational paintings: meditations on the form and textures of mushroom gills and tree bark and river currents, or perhaps painterly interpretations of a fungi's cell structure, or attempts to capture visually the harmonious relationship between death, decomposition, and reproduction in nature.

Mycelium is as prominent a subject in the show as fruiting bodies. The mycelium is the root-like part of a fungus that extends below the surface of the fruiting body and whose function is to seek out and absorb nutrients from the surrounding environment. It takes the form of a fine yet dense white web (refer to *Sample no. 11*) composed of branches which are called hyphae, each shooting off in random directions until nutrition is found, in which case they are absorbed and passed along the hyphae to be distributed over the rest of the mycelium.

Networks and webs are recurrent motifs in Hasanul's practice, having appeared in the series *Bintang Hijau* (as painted mindmap-collages), *Nightwalking* (as constellations and mandalas) and in paintings from *Confederation of Birds and Higher Order Love*, which have diagrammatic or network-like compositional structures. Interestingly, networks and the attempt to "map out" or schematise locales were also motifs in the works of the late Roslisham Ismail (a.k.a. Ise), who was a close friend and major influence to Hasanul. However, unlike Ise's work, which was more concerned in mapping out networks in an informative sense, Hasanul's work is more mystical, concerned with webs that connect to a shared centre, and the cycle of samsara. Ise's worlds were sprawling and annotated, but Hasanul's paintings depict a closed universe that yet contains everything, a mandala of the living and the dead.

Hasanul's experiments with breeding mushrooms at home and developing lab-grown "mycelium leather" are scientific ways of expressing the continuity of life and death, which partner with his paintings. For the past year, he has been cultivating mushrooms on old books which he has sealed into a plastic bag. The books were first boiled in hot water to thoroughly dampen them, then cuttings of oyster mushrooms were placed in them along with corn feed to inoculate the mushrooms and encourage new fungal growth from their tissues. Over time, the fungus began growing, spreading across the book and feeding on the cellulose derived from the paper's wood pulp. Within the sealed, damp environment of the plastic bag, the fungus began to colonise the book and lay waste to it for its cellulose, turning it back into pulp and removing any trace of the knowledge that it once contained. The artist likens this to his own devouring of knowledge from books, and among the books selected are exhibition catalogues (*Like Someone In Love*, a 2015 solo exhibition by chi too, who died unexpectedly in April of this year, among them) and books from his time as an art teacher in Sabah during his early 20s. These books, which symbolise different stages or entrypoints of knowledge in Hasanul's life, and have a particular symbolic significance to him, are slowly devoured into pulp by the new sprouting fungi, returned back to their natural essence. The plastic bag that seals this decomposing body is in some way a miniature grave.



Mycelium growing on the surface of the catalogue for *Like Someone in Love*, a solo exhibition by chi too from 2015.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

The mycelium “skin”, presented in acrylic cases, was developed in the biology lab of University Sains Malaysia’s Biology Department, with generous assistance by Dr Rosnida Tajuddin (Senior Lecturer in Mycology and Mycorrhizal Studies) and her student, Nur Afrina Amirah. The experiment was conducted with the aim to discover whether a form of leather crafted out of mycelium could be created. Two mushrooms were used in this experiment: the oyster mushroom (*Pleurotus ostreatus*) which also appears in the book experiment and the yellow-footed polypore (*Microporous xanthopus*, also known as *cendawan pengering* in Malay). For this experiment, a sample of a fresh fruiting body was taken to the lab and its internal tissues excised into small pieces distributed across several petri dishes containing agar in order to grow new hyphae (the individual branches of a mycelia) from the tissues. The tips of the new hyphae were then cut and transferred to new agar-filled petri dishes and fed with starch in order to aid their growth. Eventually, the mycelium across all the petri dishes were collected into a liquid culture and homogenised. Within this culture, the resulting lab-grown hyphae knitted together into a mycelia that floated on the surface of the culture, which made it easier to separate. It was then dehydrated and heatpressed in the hopes of creating a successful piece of mycelium-based “skin”. Various results of this experiment are displayed in the exhibition.



Mycelium growing on the surface of a liquid culture in one of the labs at the School of Biological Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.

The mycelium “skin” looks like preserved human skin, like something you could imagine flaking off a mummy if you unravelled its towels. Many fungi (though not by any means all) have a decaying property, and are often parasites upon the surface they grow in, leading to rot and, in severe cases of mould, permanent damage and infection in the human body. One vivid example is that of the cordyceps fungi, which reproduces and grows within the stomachs of insects that have consumed its spores. From the inside, the growing mycelium directs the insect to seek out conditions that are favourable to the fungal colony’s growth, whereupon the colony continues colonising the poor insect from the inside until a fruiting body eventually bursts out of the paralysed insect’s body like the alien in *Alien*. Shown here in the exhibition is a sample of a moth which had met such a fate, found by Hasanul in Selama.



A moth that had been colonised from the inside and turned into a breeding ground for a cordyceps mushroom.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

There is a strong symbolic connection between fungi and death. It is not merely that many wild mushrooms are poisonous if eaten, but something inherent in the nature of fungi that just triggers an awareness of death and decay. Black mould in homes is a disturbing sign of negligence and rot; yeast used in fermentation preserves foods in a sour, overripe stage; the sprouting of mushrooms often evokes a feeling of revulsion because it is a sign that some form of decomposition has started taking place. The spores of fungi are miniscule, and their work of colonising often begins beneath the surface, similar to most processes of decomposition and decay. A body decomposes when its organs shut down and bacteria that was once contained within the gut begins to spread into new tissues, eating it up from the inside. We could imagine that the property in cordyceps that allows it to override

the defense systems of insects (such as the poor moth) is the same found in “magic mushrooms” which alter states of consciousness and which, based on popular testimony, is said to induce states of “ego death”, a sense of one’s self dying and no longer mattering in the world. As tragic as the moth eaten from the inside looks to the outsider, might it actually have felt the moth equivalent of euphoria during the moment of its hallucinatory death? Euphoria that its ageing body will soon give way and a new, young, living thing will sprout from it, and shoot its spores out into the great big world; this is as good as any a metaphor for the cycle of samsara and for life being an eternal, deathless experience that simply continues on in other forms.

The experiments with developing a mycelium skin and of breeding fungal colonies on old books are ways of exploring the nature of death, decomposition, and the generation of something new out of the dying body. From his plot of land in the outskirts of Selama, living so close to natural wilderness, Hasanul is granted a richer perspective on the life cycle. Even in his little plot, a dense flurry of activity unfolds across a wide, wild range of flora and fauna: bracket fungi and lichen colonising a fallen tree trunk, fat black caterpillars eating holes through a plant while a mealybug weaves in and out on another part of its stem, seeking out new buds. Death, decomposition, and regenerated life take place in endless proliferation on this rich tropical soil. Through his art, Hasanul attempts to create form out of the cruel chaos of nature, and tries to impart some of his observations and experiences with death to those who are still living.



A black caterpillar, possibly of the impatiens hawkmoth, encountered on Hasanul's land.



Artist

Hasanul Isyraf Idris (b. 1978, Perak) is a Malaysian contemporary artist based in Penang. Trained at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), his multidisciplinary practice encompasses painting, intricate works on paper, sculpture, installation and video. His visually dense and surreal compositions combine personal memories with imagery drawn from local mythology, science fiction, comics, street culture and the natural world.

Among his most significant bodies of work are the ongoing *Higher Order Love (HOL)* series and *Spiritual Zoo*, which explore mortality, grief, spirituality, healing and the complexities of human existence through strange hybrid creatures and imagined ecosystems.

His most recent exhibition was *Bintang Hijau* (2026, Richard Koh FineArt, Singapore), which marked a development towards an ecologically grounded and research-oriented approach. Inspired by the Bintang Hijau forest reserve in Selama, Perak, the works combine meticulous observation, collected natural specimens and scientific inquiry with his distinctive surreal visual language. Presented during Singapore Art Week 2026, the series reflected on environmental change, fragility and the memory of the landscape.

Recent accolades include winning the 2024 UOB Painting of the Year (Malaysia) Award in the Established Artist Category with his work *Durio*.



Academic & Research Collaborator

Dr. Rosinida Tajuddin is a mycologist and researcher at the School of Biological Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), where she has been based since 2014. She began her career as a junior microbiologist at B. Braun Medical Industries Sdn. Bhd. in 2005 before receiving a scholarship from the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia and USM to pursue her Ph.D. in the United Kingdom. Her research focuses primarily on mycorrhizal fungi, particularly the ecology and distribution of macrofungi and ectomycorrhizal fungi in Malaysian rainforests, as well as nutrient transport in mycorrhizal symbioses. She also researches edible fungi, orchid mycorrhizal fungi, and mycoheterotrophic plant associations. She actively participates in scientific expeditions, public outreach, and mushroom cultivation workshops, promoting greater awareness of fungi's vital roles in forest health and ecosystems.



Writer

Ellen Lee is a writer based in Kuala Lumpur. Since 2018, she has worked with artists and institutions across the Malaysian art scene. She has previously written on the work of Hasanul Isyraf Idris for his solo exhibition *Nightwalking* (2023, Rissim Contemporary) and his work *Quarry* (2022, included in the ILHAM Art Show).



Thursday–Monday | 12pm–7pm

Free Admission

85, Lorong Soo Hong, 10200 George Town, Penang, Malaysia

WhatsApp +6016 246 6814
Website blankcanvas.my

Instagram @[blankcanvas.penang](https://www.instagram.com/blankcanvas.penang)
Email info@blankcanvas.my