

Raafat Ishak's 'decadence'

Around 1994 Raafat Ishak and I were interested in the French word *décadence* and its local translation, which had been flipped to read 'decline', in the magazine *Art & Text*. The magazine's usage was 'The decline of the nude'. This became the basis for an exhibition where we re-flipped the title back to *The decadence of the nude*.

Installing though, Ishak didn't focus on the nude drawings he was first considering but instead painted a design directly on the wall down low in a corner of the gallery. The image was very stylised in the way that he was used to working except for this section where you could clearly see a kangaroo humping an emu.

I've often thought Ishak divides up the concepts in his paintings. His art is a strange collision of facts and feelings, but it's the facts he lays down most clearly first. With the *Decadence* exhibition he turned the sense of the word towards presumptions of contemporary nationalism and the identity cults and tropes around belonging that they oblige. (Not long after this show he painted 'send me home' in billboard-size letters on the outside wall of the same West Brunswick gallery.)

One of Ishak's very earliest paintings he's said is a painting of his mother and concerns another form of estrangement. I don't have a reproduction of the work but my recollection is that it is something like the second image I've included below (a photo I took yesterday on the highway to Johor Bahru in southern Malaysia). Ishak based his painting of his mother on signage, very much like this, for a women's toilet—although his was a red female design on a white canvas and copied from local toilets at the VCA or somewhere. The Ishak painting was a hugely sad existential work—something very hard to pull off these days—although I imagine some audiences could disagree and mistake the same components of the work as the product of a basic lack of empathy or inhibition.

Just recently, with his [2011 show](#) at Sutton Gallery, Ishak has come back to nudes. They are hidden under the miasma of 'a rigorous speculation on abstraction' (did I ever understand what this means? I'm not sure!), and he's named each painting after a soft-fleshed tropical fruit. The works are gorgeous but although it's hard to see what is going on exactly I get the sense there is a bit

of toilet humour here too: Mr Nude Descending a Staircase along with Mr Stinky R Mutt. And once again I think it's actually lower down (beyond?) the chain of reasoning that we might find the work's true feeling.



Raafat Ishak, wall painting, 'The decadence of the nude', Ocular Lab, 2004



Public toilet sign on the highway near Jahor Bahru, Malaysia



Raafat Ishak, 'Papaya', oil on canvas, 2011

