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# THEMATIC APPROACHES IN MALAYSIAN ART SINCE THE 1990s

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## Abstract

This paper discusses on the impact of thematic approaches taken by Malay artists in Malaysia since the 1990's. Malaysian art has become increasingly diverse in terms of its approach, subject, theme and media. This growing artistic diversity is discussed within a postmodern framework and is representative of a shift in tendencies away from a purely Malay/Islamic-centred artistic tradition to a more postmodern approach that is inclusive of Malaysia's emerging middle class. Since the 1990's, works produced by Malay artists have taken a more critical perspective aligned with the postmodern situation or *situasi percamoden* in accordance with Malaysia's leapfrog into modernization. Through their works, Malay artists raise concerns and issues pertaining to the consequences of development and modernization, and explore themes ranging from social problems, environment and urbanization, and contemporary issues thereby employing postmodernist approaches in their art. What is obvious is, that Malay artists are concerned with the immediate and near future, rather than looking back or glorifying the past. These artistic tendencies epitomize the challenges, divergences and even connections of perspectives that define the growing Malaysian middle class especially in the context of the construction or even deconstruction of Malaysian society.

*Keywords (five):* Malaysian art, Malay artists, postmodern art, postmodern situation, *situasi percamoden*

The late Redza Piyadasa had observed in his papers "Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period,"<sup>1</sup> and "Modern Malaysian Art, 1945-1991: A Historical Overview,"<sup>2</sup> the increasing tendency towards postmodernism in Malaysian modern art. This was the first time that he employed the term 'postmodern' in relation to developments in Malaysian art and in both papers he traced several isolated artistic shifts that he argued could be considered postmodernist -- from the postformalist art activity by Sulaiman Esa and himself in "Mystical Reality" in 1974<sup>3</sup> to Ismail Zain's "Digital Collage" exhibition in 1989. Piyadasa in both of the essays that was mentioned above, provided examples of performances, installations and video art works such as Wong Hoy Cheong and Marian D'Cruz performance-type presentations and Wong

Hoy Cheong's video composition entitled "Sook Ching"(1990), installation-type art-cum-performance "Two Installations" (1991) by Liew Kungyu and Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin, and Zulkifli Yusof's "Power Series" installations as illustrative of this early shift.

Malaysian art has become increasingly diverse in terms of its approach, subject, theme and media since the 1990's. I have argued elsewhere<sup>4</sup> that developments in Malaysian art should be discussed in light of the social and cultural changes that the country undergo since the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the subsequent New Development Policy (NDP) and not merely within the framework of postmodern art. Therefore, the shift from a Malay/Islamic-centred art to a postmodern artistic approach since the 1990s, as noted by Redza Piyadasa, will be discussed with respect to Malaysia's burgeoning middle class that the NEP and NDP produced, especially among the ethnic Malays. An additional point of discussion in this paper is the artists' concern and issue in terms of thematic approach, which is similar to the interests of this new Malaysian middle class from which the artists themselves have evolved.

Economically, the goal of the NEP was to increase Malay economic ownership from around 3% in 1971 to 30% over a twenty-year period through direct government intervention and economic support, aggressive training and educational strategies aimed at bringing the *bumiputeras* (i.e. ethnic Malays and other indigenous native in Malaysia) into the modern urban economy.<sup>5</sup> This has resulted in the creation of a multitude of bureaucrats, company executives, technocrats, academics, accountants, computer-chip engineers, information technology specialists and other professions, which demand specialist education and training.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the NEP produced a marked paradigm shift among the middle classes, especially among the Malays. Studies of the middle class, especially in the Malaysian context, have been discussed by several researchers using a variety of methods.<sup>7</sup> While these studies will not be discussed here, it is worth noting that many of the Malay artists discussed in this paper, were graduates of the MARA Institute of Technology (ITM or now known as University Technology MARA, UiTM) and are the by-product of the NEP. This is because UiTM is one of the earliest tertiary institutions designed to support the economic, social and cultural engineering policy of the NEP. Throughout this paper, the focus will be primarily on those artists who have graduated from UiTM since the mid-1980s, as they are more reflective of the burgeoning Malay middle class that the NEP produced and were born after Malaysia's Independence from British rule.

The observations of Hasnul Jamal Saidon of the economic background of Malaysian artists that participated in the *Takung* exhibition<sup>8</sup> that he curated can give us a very general idea of the economic aspects of Malaysian artists that have mostly remains un-discussed. He observed,

"The political and economic backgrounds of the participating artists are difficult to probe and explicate due to the fact that the subjects may perhaps be a bit sensitive and private for many artists. Six members of the whole gang including the one who writes this essay

are government 'servants' with stable income, therefore can be technically defined as part-time artists, double-act, semi-pros. ... Others are self-employed, or define themselves as full-time artists, while a few work full-time whilst soliciting the greener pasture of private sectors as well as residency programmes. ...

Generally, one may assume that all the participating artists in TAKUNG are 'not poor' and many are committed in acquiring "financial comfort" from the midst of the local "art market." Other than a fortuitous spill-over from the public sector (National Art Gallery), the economic setting for this exhibition was shadowed by an entrepreneur stance erected by the 'newly-revised' UMNO-oriented corporate and business class. The shadows of private sectors as well as NGOs (other than YKP) are blurry, perhaps intended.

The economic setting during the eighties until late nineties in Malaysia has helped in creating competitive visual arts 'reservoir' – aggressive, progressive, innovative, thriving, heated and never short of ironies and polemics, all of which cramped within a small pool or market. From being marginal initiatives that rely on government funding, the Malaysian visual arts practices have gradually diversifies into a thriving business enterprise before the balloon burst in late 90s. ...<sup>9</sup>

If the artistic interests of Malay artists during the 1970s and the 1980s were mostly rooted in Malay and/or Islamic aesthetics or what could be termed as "Malay/Islamic-centred art," the shifting artistic approaches in art since the 1990s, reflects the changes in the structure and feeling of the "new" middle class in Malaysia to which these artists belong. Abdul Rahman Embong for example, highlighted that the country's "new" middle class had tripled; in 1970 it only comprised of 5.9% and increased to 15.2% in 2000. The "marginal" middle class on the other hand, comprised of 23.9% in 1970 and only grew to 28.0% by 2000, while the "old" middle class was estimated by Abdul Rahman to be at 3-5% in 2000.<sup>10</sup> The salient characteristic of this "new" middle class, according to Abdul Rahman, is dramatic generational upward mobility over the past three decades; largely as a result of heavy state-sponsored investments into higher education. This "new" middle class comprises of the most educated sector of Malaysia's society and has been dubbed as the *nouveau riche*, its economics basis reliant on a salaried income, dependent on financial systems of credit and loans, and increasingly consumer-oriented.<sup>11</sup>

The term 'Postmodern Situation' or *Situasi Percamoden*<sup>12</sup> was used in describing the social and cultural changes among the Malays who form the "new" Malaysian middle class. The term denotes how Malay society seems to be both fragmented and rooted in multifaceted cultural influences such as tradition, Islamic beliefs and modern or progressive ideals at the same time. This is the result of the

cultural and social changes due to the drastic modernization efforts imposed on them since NEP. Consequently, the Malay's are faced with a situation in which traditionalism, Islam and modern ideals coexist, sometimes peaceably and sometimes discordantly, and these contestations are reflected through new symbols, social and cultural practices. This dialectic initiated a subsequent shift in thematic approaches to art as will be discussed in this paper. Farish Noor's views on contemporary Malay society in this regards is very enlightening:

"The Malay of today is a product of modernity in every respect, living in exile from the past. He is the inheritor of a tradition of secular Modernity as taught to him by the West, and also an inheritor of the tradition of Modernist Islam as taught to him by his elders. Living as he does in a thoroughly modern world, he cannot help but share the prejudices and fears of the Modern age. Beguiled by the charms of Modernity he places his faith in science and rationality, hoping that they would in turn shed light upon the darkness. A convert to positivism, he looks ever forward to the future, certain that it will bring him closer to enlightenment and safety. His dialectical approach to all that is Other ensures that he can only view the past as a dark world full of irrational and incomprehensible forces. A solipsist who lives in a monochromatic moral universe, he regards all that goes against his modern Islamic values as *khurafat*, *syirik*, inferior bizarre, chaotic, irrational, and/or contaminating."<sup>13</sup>

During the 1970s and the 1980s, with the proclamation of the national culture and the parallel resurgence of Islam, Malay artists began to channel their interest in Malay culture and the Islamic religion into art as ways of expounding their identity. This was especially true among the Malay artists studying or teaching at the School of Art and Design at ITM. Works by Sulaiman Esa and Mastura Abdul Rahman for example, exemplifies these previous tendencies. "Nurani" (1983) by Sulaiman Esa, is an artwork that perpetuates traditional Islamic arabesque design based on Islamic spiritualism. The arabesque design employed in the work wedded the experience of harmony and archetypical reality through the reflection of The One (Allah the Almighty) and the concept of unity or *tawhid* (in Arabic). The octagonal shape of this work can be argued to be derived from "the octagonal shape of the dome that symbolizes the Throne and Pedestal and also the angelic world"<sup>14</sup> which is a pertinent element in Islamic architecture. In discussing Islamic spirituality, Syed Hoessein Nasr argues that there is "a special link with qualitative mathematics in the Pythagorean sense" in Islamic art, "a link which results from the emphasis upon unity and the intellect (*al-'aql*) on the one hand and the primordial nature of Islamic spirituality on the other."<sup>15</sup> This is the quality that Sulaiman Esa tries to evoke in his two-dimensional work.

Sulaiman Esa's use of colours also reflects the inner dimension of Islam. According to Nasr, white (which circulates at the inner pointed edge of the work) in Islam "symbolizes the unity of undifferentiated reality and the colours which

result from the polarization of light represent the manifestation of the One in the many and the dependence of many upon the One.”<sup>16</sup> Sulaiman Esa uses each colour of the spectrum at the centre of this work, a technique that may symbolize a state of light instead of a particular colour only. The use of black that circulates the perimeter of the octagon also has meaning in Islam. Black is the colour of the family of The Blessed Prophet and also the colour of the *kiswah*, the cloth that covers Kaabah, the centre of the holiest place of worship in Islam.<sup>17</sup>

Works by artists such as Mastura Abdul Rahman can also be argued as being influenced by the Malay/Islamic aesthetic ideals. In her “Interior No. 29” (1987) (Figure 1), the work clearly demonstrates how the artist merged the flattened decorative elements derived from the traditional textile into the interior domain of the traditional Malay house. Imbued with a deep blue and purplish colour, her work is filled with Malay flavour and essence through the all-encompassing decorations that highlights the spatial interior ambience of traditional Malay houses. An “Islamicness” reading can also be made of this work through the manifestation of Unity on the plane of multiplicity. Mastura’s design, based on nature, leads your eyes to nowhere in particular, trying to enmesh any focal point that screams for attention. The eyes have to adjust and absorb the pattern and colours of the surface before they begin to pick up, one by one, and the architectural elements seen from the bird’s eye view. The purple door, window and border define the floor and the wall of the house. A few rectangular mats and a circular mat are in place at various positions of the room. A *congkak* (a traditional Malay game) and some newsprint lie near the window, both waiting to be cleared and put aside. Since the decorative nature of this work is more dominant and all encompassing, the perspective of the interior is suppressed and flattened into two-dimensional form.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, such aesthetic approaches in art declined. The significant shift from Malay/Islamic-centred art to a postmodern art approach have been discussed and situated as a direct or indirect consequence of *situasi percamoden*.<sup>18</sup> This is pertinent when Malaysian artists, as part of the new Malaysian middle class, began to reiterate the concerns, interests and even championed some aspects of their class’ concerns rather than aligning their artistic interests along limited racial demarcation lines. As Johan Saravannamuttu points out,

“Evidence from various studies shows that middle class political actors have been driven to champion various causes connected to social democracy, human rights and the environment. The argument is advanced that middle class politics of this sort provides an alternative discourse to ethnic-centric, as well as class-centric perspectives. Further it is contended, that middle class political actors on the Malaysian scene have developed a multi-ethnic, multi-class praxis of sorts galvanising civil society to resist excessive state surveillance, dominance and outright repression over the citizenry”<sup>19</sup>

With the widespread adoption of postmodern artistic techniques by many artists, the thematic orientations of the personal aesthetic and the restricted cultural interests of the Malays pertaining to Malay/Islamic-centred art began to decline. Malay artists began to question their social and cultural position in a wider historical, social, and cultural construct of the nation and global context. In "Al Kisah" (1988) by Ismail Zain, the images of the Ewing family of the hit TV drama "Dallas" are juxtaposed in front of a traditional Malacca house. The work might seem playful; but it evokes a response to the penetration of global mass media, reaching deep into traditional villages and affecting Malaysian local culture and consciousness. In discussing the response to the exhibition, the artist appropriates various contemporary images from local and foreign contexts, mostly from mass media, and confronts the audience with a new reality of modern Malaysia. In regards to this appropriation strategy, Krishen Jit asserts that,

"The juxtaposition of images also put Ismail in the forefront of post-modern thinking. What fascinates and instructs most of all is Ismail's sentiment toward his chosen images. I find him to be entirely free from criticism. One image is not pitted against another in a posture of heroism, surrender, despair, or alienation. Both realities are palpable, dappled in light, and effusive in sentiment. The strategy of the blocking of the images, I am tempted to say, the *misc en scene*, lends a performative dimension to the production. They are performances that create juxtaposed moods: of horror and farce, tragedy and comedy, sense and nonsense. This kind of performance strategy raises them from the mundane and the sentimental and places them in a reflective realm."<sup>20</sup>

Not only Malay artists began to adopt postmodern artistic strategies such as appropriation and the use of multimedia in art, the thematic concerns raised by these artists occupy a more universal interests and liberal position than before. The ideas and ideals raised by these works advocate values such as rationalism, individualism, democracy, and secularism, and manifest a concern for human rights, the environment and the rule of law, ideals usually associated with middle class interests. Among the thematic subjects which are popular among these artists are social and moral misdemeanours and issues pertaining to the environment and urbanization. Though several artists still remain inspired by the Malay culture, history, values, myths, legends as well as literary sources, the artistic forms, aesthetics principles and artistic technique and sensibilities are somewhat different. Their works are no longer restricted to the purely aesthetic aspect of such elements, but are infiltrated with subtle nuances on contemporary issues.

Bayu Utomo Radjikin, in the early 1990s shocked viewers with confronting images addressing the issue of child abuse and abandonment. In "Newspaper" (1993) (Figure 2), he uses collages of real objects such as tubes and drips attached to the figure of the child on his work. The figure of the child with burnt hands, a bandaged face and tubes surrounding him are drawn on a collage of newspaper

cuttings. The collages of newspaper headlines imply that the suffering of these abused children is known only through the media.

A decade later, Hamir Soib's still reminds us of life's grim realities in a more confronting manner, especially among conservative Malaysian Muslim society. His installation, "*Tak Ada Beza*" (No difference at all) (2002) addresses the subject of abortion. He installs a huge painting of a family of pigs sitting together in harmony (Pigs are regarded as *haram* (unlawful) and Muslims are not allowed to touch or eat them). Underneath the work is a mass of "umbilical cord" and at the end of the cord; a papier-mâché sculpture of a stillborn human baby is deposited in the toilet bowl at another part of the installation. His work suggests that those who abort babies have far worse character than even pigs, with no faculties of reason or compassion. The work is an allegory of society's moral decay. As Nur Hanim explains,

"The serene ambience projected by the pig family portrait appeared to be incongruous with the wicked in humanity taking place on the floor and in the washroom. The contrasting impression presented an allegory concerning mankind's moral decay in comparison to the animal sense of family bonding. Hamir's clever application of the beauty of pigs in composing a pictorial sermon moreover was motivated by his desire to subvert the politics of Malay-Islamic art and its pious adherence to a non-figurative, 'halal' iconography."<sup>21</sup>

Hamir Soib also produces works with titles apt to his concerns about the moral and social degradation in the Malay society. Among the titles which he has selected for his works are "*Haruan Makan Anak*" (Haruan Fish Eats it Babies), "*The Rempit*" (Illegal Motorcycle Race), "*Telur Buaya*" (Crocodile Egg) and "*A Board Game*," these works serve as a visual narrative to express his concerns for, what he observes to be a failing society.

Zulkifli Yusof is also critical of the reality of a certain section of Malay society. In his series, he highlights the social ills and issues regarded as taboo in Malay culture. In "*Ahmad Pulang Bawa HIV +ve*" (Ahmad Came Back with HIV +ve) (1997) he narrates the plight of the Ahmad who contracts HIV from an airline hostess. Unlike Malay/Islamic-centred artwork that invited audience to appreciate the aesthetics elements of the works in a comfortable gallery setting, works by Bayu Utomo, Hamir Soib and Zulkifli Yusuf are very confronting and disturbing to the general public. In Zulkifli's graffiti-like work, he even displays huge expletive words across the canvas.

With drastic development and urbanization taking place in the last thirty years, a few Malay artists have also begun to address issues pertaining to the environment and urbanization. For example, "*Insect Diskette*" (1997) by Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, is a mixed media assemblage composed of over two hundred computer diskettes. These are arranged in a grid across four plexiglass panels and are overlaid with representations of butterflies, palm trees, beetles, and other 'specimens.' He does not criticize or abstain from the technology brought by

modernisation and development, but rather he advocates balancing technology and nature. To illustrate, images of a fragile butterfly are repeatedly painted on parts of the diskettes, reminding us that both nature and technology are not necessarily in opposition, but can actually merge to provide for and contribute to the progress of humankind either in the present or for subsequent generations. Gregory Gilligan explains that,

“... Insect Diskette is no simplistic sermon on the ills of technology and the glories of nature. On the contrary, the work holds both technology and nature in balance, suggesting how elements – flora, fauna, humanity, and its collected data – are equally situated in the world, and perhaps co-dependent of each other.”<sup>22</sup>

Ten years later, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed with his ceramist wife Umi Baizurah still address the nexus between development and nature in the couple's 2007 exhibition “*Warning! Tapircrossing*”. This exhibition was inspired by their discovery of five dead tapirs in the newly developed area of Puncak Alam, which is located outside of Kuala Lumpur on the way to Kuala Selangor. Puncak Alam is the site of their new home and their alternative art space name Patisatu Studio. The title itself refers to the encounter between development and the tapir, as a metaphor for nature.<sup>23</sup>

Johan Marjonid on the other hand, does not dwell on or lament on the depletion of Malaysia's tropical rainforests, but instead he generally appreciates and promotes nature and the environment through his realist paintings. He has produced several series of works since 1994, such as “Preservation Series” (Figure 3), “*Arca Alam Series*” and “*Melebu Alas Jelebu*”. He draws inspiration from visits to his favourite locations such as Stong Mountain, Tahan Mountain, the National Park in Pahang, Endau-Rompin area, and other forests around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. His works are realist paintings of sprawling Malaysian tropical forests depicted from various angles. These beautiful forest-scapes entice the viewers to immerse themselves inside the deep Malaysian rainforest and appreciate the tranquillity of nature.

Several works by Malay artists though still seem to be inspired by Malay cultural values and forms; however, it can be argued that their artistic forms, aesthetics principles, technique and sensibilities are different from the earlier works of Malay/Islamic-centred art. Raja Shahrman Raja Aziddin sculpture can be argued as one such example. The strength of his work such as in the “Gerak Tempur Series” (1996) lies not in the romantically *bersilat* poses of the figures but in the careful detailing of human anatomy of the aggressive-looking sculptures. Raja Shahrman's depictions of the Malay *silat* (a form of martial arts in the Malay Archipelago) warrior have been depersonalised and dehumanised and his sculptures are stripped bare of any forms of pretension creating the impression of strength, although the movements captured seem to remain soft and gentle at the moment before the figure strikes. In another series of sculptures, the “Langkah Hulubalang Series,” Raja Shahrman again pushes the boundaries of his



capabilities to shape metal pieces. Although each sculpture in “Langkah Hulubalang” has a strong individualistic character, every form also displays elegance and grace. Without a doubt, these sculptures are well calculated and demonstrate precision in form and balance. As Nurhanim Khairuddin claims,

“By means of artistic treatment, he strives to wed thoughtful perception and ascetic contemplation to construct an awareness of the order of things cloaked by postmodern metanarratives, paradoxes, ironies and metaphors. For him, art and life are not disparate elements; even on the surface, he seems to be enthralled by two conflicting intuitions: his angst-filled materiality and sadistic looking imagery rather at odds with his refined attributes and tranquil piety. ...”<sup>24</sup>

Hasnul Jamal Saidon also describes Raja Shahrman in terms of his battle with his self-enigma as an artist,

“...This enigma is riddled by contradictions, paradoxes, and clashes. Intended or not, it epitomizes the crisis of the third millennium – parody and abnormality, pluralism and the crisis of identity, ethnocentrism and globalism, popular culture and virtual ecstasy, consumerism and spiritualism, mainstream media and the internet Sufism and fetishism, media fiction and subversive semiotic, high (bourgeois) art and low (proletariat) art, socialism and individualism and many more.”<sup>25</sup>

Unlike the works of Malay/Islamic-centred art that are celebratory in nature, artists such as Jailani Abu Hassan extend their artistic themes into the animism aspects of Malay traditional practices which does not sit comfortably with the contemporary Malay-Muslim identity. The works comprising of the “Mantera Series” (2004) range from various rites, which draw on special prayers, words, charms, or in other words *mantera*. The work “Mantera Buka Gelanggang” for example, refers to a ritual preceding traditional performances or games to appease the spirits, or to ensure a smooth run of the event and the safety of participants. It depicts an elderly *bomoh* performing the ritual of ‘opening the stage or court’ before the commencement of a game or performance. “Bomoh Hujan” (2004) features a rain doctor who is sometimes called upon for big events and gatherings, such as major sports competitions or *kenduris* (a gathering of either religious or non-religious festivities, to celebrate important life events such as birth, circumcision and marriage) to ensure dry weather.

Works by Malay artists have also begun to explore more challenging deconstructionist themes such as deconstructing or questioning official historical and even political narratives. Several issues raised in the media for example, even invites interpretation and perspective from artists’ point of view. In 1999, Hamir Soib produces “Jawi Series” (Figure 4) an installation work that questions Jawi (Arabic alphabets adapted for writing the Malay language) as an embodiment of

Malay identity. As part of the installation, silk-screens of Jawi scripts were hung throughout the exhibition space and Jawi scripts were even written encircling on the floor. The first impression, looking at the installation, is that the audience are faced with the issue that persists with the usage of Jawi script – which we need to do more in reviving the usage of this Malay script. On the other hand, upon further scrutinizing and reading the Jawi scripts written throughout the installation, the audience will then realise that that the Jawi script says, “Ini Cuma Tulisan Jawi” (This is only Jawi writing). As Nur Hanim Khairuddin suggests, through the work the artist is actually addressing the alienation of Jawi script in (Malay) society, whilst simultaneously contesting the script’s aesthetic idealism and its alleged sacredness. She explains that Hamir, “... by installing his Jawi series in a secular context, especially in scribbling Jawi ‘graffiti’ on the floor, wrests its cultural values from the domain of ‘holy’ discourses and altogether ‘blasphemously’ nullifies its religious undertones.”<sup>26</sup>

Nadiah Bamadhaj’s “147 Tahun Merdeka Digital Prints Series” (2007) on the other hand, posits the possibility of a different future trajectory for Malaysia. The artist juxtaposes images though digital manipulation in order to imagine what Malaysia’s institutions would be like 100 years from now. This collaborative effort features nine large format digital prints of major Malaysian institutions or buildings such as Istana Budaya, Angkasapuri, Putrajaya, Tugu Negara, and commercial buildings like IKEA, as well as a commemorative arch along the highway and newspaper front-cover headlines.

Ahmad Fuad’s “Recollections of Long Lost Memories” (2007) on the other hand, produce work that deconstructs dominant historical narratives of the Malaysian nation. In this series of work, he blends landscapes and scenes from Malaysian past with contemporary figures. This artwork consists of a slide projection of 71 historic photographs taken between 1860 and 2003, into which he digitally inserts a modern-day figure. These works are divided into two parts -- paintings and slides -- painting old photographs onto huge canvases and additionally including a contemporary figure. Ahmad Fuad’s digital manipulation questions in a visually literal fashion Malaysia’s own historical images and their relevance to contemporary life. Through Ahmad Fuad’s work, Carmen Nge highlights the nature of memory,

“History is false memory because history is selective; the saying that history is written by the victors is certainly true in our own nation. Why do we remember Tunku’s “Merdeka” cry but not the bombing of the Tugu Negara in 1975? What deal did the ruling elites strike with the British to gain independence? Those of us who lived through the events of 1957 remember it very differently from those of us yet to be born. But discrepancies exist, even among those who experienced similar events. Humans are adroit at forgetting details they’d rather not remember. Who preserves our nation’s memories and to what end? And do younger Malaysians really care?”<sup>27</sup>

As discussed in this paper, a major paradigm shift in the artistic approach of artists in Malaysia can be observed since the 1990s. While Malay/Islamic-centred art is inwardly and aesthetically focused, Malay artists since the 1990s who have adopted a postmodern perspective are outwardly focused and addressed on ongoing social and political concerns. They do not work or live in a vacuum; but are dependent and inextricably included in Malaysian society as reiterated in the thematic approach of their work. Unlike works pertaining to Malay or Islamic ideals, these works of art do not need to be beautiful, representational, or realistic. They conflate images from high and low culture and from traditional and modern life. Innovative applications of media and techniques such as collage, montage, photographic imaging, digital manipulation, resist rigid formal and structural conventions. The use of collisions, collage and fragmentation open our eyes beyond the limited perception of art and its role in society. By denoting this shift in Malaysian art development with the term 'postmodern situation' or *situasi percamoden*, it would be argued here that this paradigm shift has little to nothing to do with the discontinuity with the earlier phases of the modern period as implied in the term 'postmodern' or "after modern." The 'postmodern situation', as being used here, describes the cultural condition, which has occurred, especially among the new Malaysian middle class, as the result of Malaysia's launch into the modern economy engineered by the government through NEP and NDP. As a result, the cultural conditions are not only fragmented but most importantly the Malay middle class have been pulled in various directions creating very conflicting and even a very contradictory society and these are reflected in the works by the artists discussed earlier.

APPENDIX

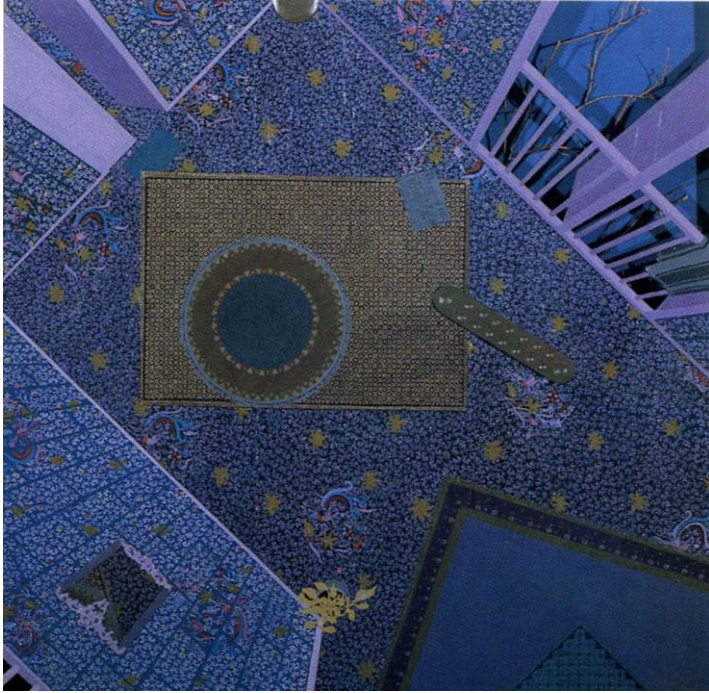


Figure 1: Mastura Abdul Rahman, "Interior No. 29" (1987), Mixed media, 115 x 115cm. (Source: *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987-1997*, Kuala Lumpur, National Art Gallery (1998))

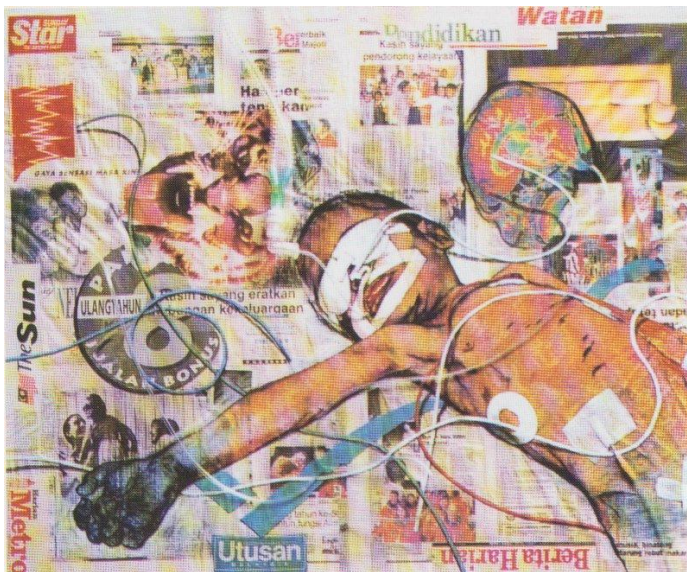


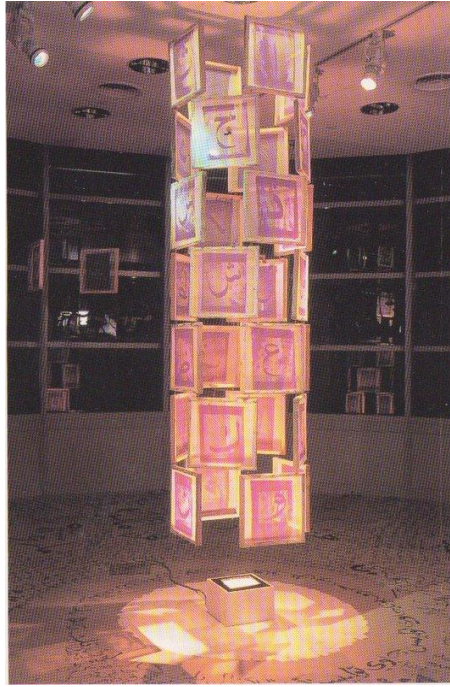
Figure 2: Bayu Utomo Radjikin, "Newspaper", Mixed media, 1993, 90 x 122 cm.

(Source: *Rupa Kata*, Ipoh: Yayasan Kesenian Perak, 1996)



**Figure 3: Johan Marjonid, "Preservation Series" (1995), Acrylic on canvas, 121 x 182.5cm  
(Source: *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery)**





**Figure 4: Hamir Soib, "Jawi" (1999), Acrylic on the floor, Silkscreen and Plaster of Paris.  
(Source: Matahati PL, Kuala Lumpur: Petronas Gallery, 1999)**

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Redza Piyadasa, "Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period," in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Broadway, NSW: Wild Peony and The University of Sydney East Asian Series Number 7, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Redza Piyadasa, "Modern Malaysian Art, 1945-1991: A Historical Review," in *Tradition and Change*, ed. Caroline Turner (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See Redza Piyadasa and Suleiman Esa, *Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Suleiman Esa* (Kuala Lumpur: 1974).

<sup>4</sup> See Sarena Abdullah, "Postmodernism in Malaysian Art" (Unpublished thesis, University of Sydney, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 141.

<sup>6</sup> A.B. Shamsul, "From Orang Kaya Baru to Melayu Baru," in *Culture and Privilege and Capitalist Asia*, ed. Michael Pinches (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 100.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Abdul Rahman Embong, "Malaysian Middle Classes: Some Preliminary Observations," *Jurnal Antropologi dan Sosiologi* 22, no. (1995); Abdul Rahman Embong, *State-Led Modernization and the New Middle Class in Malaysia* (London: Palgrave, 2001); Joel S. Kahn, "Constructing Culture: Toward an Anthropology of the Middle Classes in Southeast Asia," *Asian Studies Review* 15, no. 2 (1991); Joel S. Kahn, "The Middle Class as a Field of Ethnological Study," in *Critical Perspectives: Essays in Honour of Syed Husin Ali*, ed.

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Muhammad Ikmal Said & Zahid Emby (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Social Science Association, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> An art expedition and exploration to at Lake Banding in 2005 organized by the Perak Arts Foundation (Yayasan Kesenian Perak). The Malaysian participating artists were Ahmad Saiful Razman, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Ahmad Azrel, Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Fairus Ahmad, Hamir Shoib, Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Ili Farhana Norhayat, Masnoor Ramli Mahmud, Mohd Kamal Sabran, Mokhzaini Hairim Mokhtar, Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin, Nurul Aida Mohd Noor, Rahmat Haron, Raja Shahrman Raja Aziddin, Rozita Zakaria, Suzlee Ibrahim, Syahrul Niza Ahmad Zaini, Tan Vooi Yam, Teoh Joo Ngee, Umi Baizurah Mahir, Zaslán Zeeha Zaini and Zulkifli Yuof.

<sup>9</sup> Hasnul Jamal Saidon, "Mengocak Takung -- Stirring Takung," in *Takung* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2005), 34-35.

<sup>10</sup> Abdul Rahman Embong, "Beyond the Crisis: The Paradox of Malaysian Middle Class," in *Southeast Asian Middle Classes*, ed. Abdul Rahman Embong (Bangi Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001), 86.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-90.

<sup>12</sup> Abdullah, 80.

<sup>13</sup> Farish A. Noor, "From Majapahit to Putrajaya: The Keris as a Symptom of Civilizational Development and Decline," in *From Majapahit to Putrajaya: Searching for Another Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish, 2005), 60.

<sup>14</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Suffolk: Golgonooza Press, 1987), 50.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See Abdullah, Chapter Six.

<sup>19</sup> Johan Saravanamuttu, "Is There a Politics of the Malaysian Middle Class?," in *Southeast Asian Middle Classes*, ed. Abdul Rahman Embong (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001), 104.

<sup>20</sup> Krishen Jit, "Digital Collage," in *Digital Collage -- Suatu Pameran Perseorangan Oleh Ismail Zain (One Man Art Exhibition by Ismail Zain)* (Kuala Lumpur: 1988), 19.

<sup>21</sup> Nur Hanim Khairuddin, "Hamir Soib: In Search of the Essence of Gothic-Fantastic Angst," in *Matahati* (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 2008), 198.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory Galligan, "Asean Arts Awards," *Art AsiaPacific* 1998, 25.

<sup>23</sup> Azman Ismail, "Overview of Recent Works by Ahmad Shukri Mohamed and Umibaizurah Mahir @ Ismail," in *Patisatustudio: Warning! Tapircrossing* (Puncak Alam: Patisatu Studio, 2007), 18-19.

<sup>24</sup> Nurhanim Khairuddin, "Nafas Asyik: The Reality of Aesthetically Ecstatic Self," in *Nafas Seni Arca Raja Shahrman -- Nafas Sculptures of Raja Shariman* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 2004), 16.

<sup>25</sup> Hasnul Jamal Saidon, "Semangat Besi: Retrospection of an Enigma," in *Raja Shariman: Semangat Besi Retrospektif Sebuah Enigma* (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 2002), 32.

<sup>26</sup> Khairuddin, "Hamir Soib: In Search of the Essence of Gothic-Fantastic Angst," 194.

<sup>27</sup> See [http://www.rimbundahan.org/art/artists/ahmad\\_fuad\\_osman/](http://www.rimbundahan.org/art/artists/ahmad_fuad_osman/) (accessed June 4, 2009)

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