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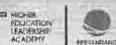" Innovation and Transformation in Art & Design
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# ISMAIL ZAIN -- THE AMBIVALENCE APPROACH AND HIS SHIFT TOWARDS THE POSTMODERN

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## Abstract

This paper will discuss a few works of Ismail Zain in the larger context of ambivalent aesthetics and artistic approach that can be suggested in the reading of his earlier works prior to "Digital Collage" (1988). Ismail Zain (1930 - 1991), was born in Alor Setar, Kedah and educated at Ravensbourne College of Art, United Kingdom and Slade School of Art, London University. He was the former Director of the Malaysia's National Art Gallery; Director-General of Culture, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports; and Director-General of the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS). Despite his demanding and hectic career, Ismail Zain was never out of touch from the Malaysian art world and in his life, he has produced a significant number of art works that holds great importance in the Malaysian art history development. This first part of this paper will discuss Ismail Zain's works that employs the ornate and floral motives and how his works need to be contextualised and understood within the inclinations of Malay/Islamic-centred art inherent during the 1970s and 1980s and also within the incoming of postmodern art tendencies in Malaysia. Hence, I argue here that through these works he negotiated his artistic and aesthetics position within these two proclivities. The second part of this paper will discuss briefly the artistic strategies of his more renowned work in the context of postmodern art approach.

## INTRODUCTION

Not much is known about Ismail Zain, perhaps he is mostly known by his peers and friends in the Malaysian art world. I, myself have not known him personally or any of those close enough to him, and this may be due to the fact that I belong to another generation of art aficionado. There is a possibility that it is just due to the fact that I do not belong in the Malaysian artistic circle or perhaps oftentimes I refuse to become personally close to the subject of my research interests. What interests me most in my researches are that the art works that these artists produce and the contextual circumstance that either directly or indirectly can be suggested in influencing the production of the works. I read and interpret art works, analyse it, not only for its aesthetic values or its symbol but most importantly as an art historian, I see that it is pertinent to contextualize these works in the larger Malaysian art historical development. It must be noted that art is not universal culturally but it actually derives its particular meaning within specific cultures. Therefore, art works must be read and understood contextually within not only the culture that produces it but the social and political aspects as well. As Dele Jegede argues, the decontextualization of an art work dismantle itself from its most significant properties conferred by its role in specific cultural practices (Jegede, 1993).With this in mind, this paper will investigate several artworks produced by Ismail Zain that need to be reassessed and re-discussed within the understanding of the development of Malaysian art especially in the context of proclivity of the Malay/Islamic-art influence and the advent of postmodern art in Malaysia.

Ismail Zain was born in 1930 in Alor Setar, Kedah. He was educated at Ravensbourne College of Art, United Kingdom and Slade School of Art, London University. Besides producing a few significant artworks throughout his life, the late Ismail Zain was the former Director of the Malaysia's National Art Gallery; Director-General of Culture, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports; and retired as the Director-General of the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS). Despite his demanding and hectic career, Ismail Zain was still an artist at heart and therefore, despite his commitment as a government administrator career, Ismail Zain had managed to produce a significant number of art works that is important in the development of the Malaysian.

Despite the fact that Ismail Zain's "Digital Collage" (See *Digital Collage -- A One-Man Art Exhibition by Ismail Zain*, 1988) has been exemplified by Redza Piyadasa as a sample of a postmodernism shift in Malaysian art (Piyadasa, 1993a, 1993b) this paper will discuss and argue that the works that Ismail Zain produced throughout his life should be read and interpreted at a more complex level. A few significant works that he produced prior to "Digital Collage" (1988) are multifaceted and can be posited as having an 'ambivalent position.' These works can be read as they are seen as connected to the Malay/Islamic influence on Malaysian art and yet if we were to read these works deeply it can be argued that it also adheres the postmodernism traits.

The second part of this paper will discuss further the shift in Ismail Zain's artistic endeavour that have been well informed and directed by his critical thinking that could be inspired by his interests in semiotics. His 'ambivalence' as an aesthetic strategy and his interests in social-cultural aspects and his subject and technique in his infamous "Digital Collage Series" – it demonstrated how his thinking and artworks should be read and understood within the larger complexity of the Malaysian art.

## THE AMBIVALENCE AS AN AESTHETIC STRATEGY

This section will discuss and argue that a few of Ismail Zain's artworks and the aesthetic strategy that he chooses for these works can be read as ambivalent. This could be seen in the works especially the works that were produced prior to "Digital Collage Series" (1988) that represent various floral and ornate motives such as in the works "Ku Bunuh Cintaku" (1970), "On a Clear Day you can see Quinlin Mountains from Terengganu" (1983), "Morning Glory" (1988), "Meanwhile Tam Came in her Mother's Laced Kebaya" (1990), "There was this Garden" (1990), and "The Marriage of Sultan Mansor Shah" (1991) and a few others.

The aesthetics approaches that could be seen in these works seem to be rooting on the influence of the National Cultural Congress in 1971 due to the usage of floral and decorative motives which I will discuss later. It is arguable that these assumptions on the outlook of these works and the context that these works were produced should be problematized. This is because, unlike other artists who have been largely influenced and aesthetically directed towards the Malay/Islamic art influence in Malaysia art (See Sarena Abdullah, 2005) since the Congress, Ismail Zain was very much influenced by critical thinking and he was also reading the works of a few critical thinkers of that time. The late Piyadasa noted that Ismail Zain has since the 1970s referred to Marshall McLuhan, Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and John Berger in his conversations (Jit, 1995). Marshall McLuhan, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes are key figures in semiotics or the studies of the role of signs as part of social life. Whereas John Berger is an art critic who wrote *Ways of Seeing* (Berger, 1972) – a seminal book that have been a key text at British universities. Ismail's different way of thinking that was influenced by semiotics and postmodernism in general is reflected in his thoughts on modern Malaysian art. The influence of these readings on Ismail can be seen in the text that he wrote for Tun Seri Lanang Lecture Series (1980) in which he argues that there is a need to study Malaysian art history based on "structural analysis" on the study of signs and symbols (Ismail Zain, 1980). On top of that, I would like to suggest that his thinking was also influenced by Lyotard's argument in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Lyotard, 1993) – the book, a seminal reading of postmodernism, analyses the epistemology of postmodern culture as the end of "grand narratives" or metanarratives. Ismail Zain for example, in his essay published in the *First ASEAN Symposium on Aesthetics*, he criticized the metanarrative of Malaysian art history. He pointed out that,

"... In Malaysia, for instance, since the claim for modernistic attitude in the arts has never been matched with correspondingly equivocal attempts to grapple with its political, social and aesthetical repercussions on the national level, the battle cry has remained to be no more than rhetorical. As a result, the dichotomous existence of Modernism in an environment which is not entirely in equanimity with its canons of the West has not only proven to be problematic, but, in extreme cases, also leads to cultural delusion." (Ismail Zain, 1989, p. 23)

`He further observed that,

"The present desperate eclecticism of taste is partly the result of this dementia. Thus, the Malaysian experience shows that in the absence of a sound philosophic base entrenched within a system that operates on a national level and the consequential epistemology arising therefore, the pervasive attitude is to value the more prosaic and explicit aspects of Modernism such as ensuing academism, styles, the art market, opening speeches and the seemingly democratic institution of art bureaucracy comprising a new class of bourgeoisie and artists/officials who sit on panels or committees and makes incongruous decisions about art. In the nature of Hegelianism, 'modernism' in a developing country truly seeks itself in its other; except where it really matters." (Ismail Zain, 1989, p. 23)

The most interesting aspect of Ismail Zain's work that I would like to argue here is not only limited to his last series "Digital Collage" even though the significance of the work in relation to the emergence of electronic art in Malaysia could not be questioned. In this paper, however, I would like to argue that Ismail Zain's interests that finally amassed in his "Digital Collage Series" should be traced to his earlier works. These works used floral and ornate motives that have been read as reflecting the Malay/Islamic art proclivities that were prominent as aesthetics approach by the Malaysian artists throughout the 1970s and 1980s as I have pointed out above. At this point, I would argue that Ismail Zain have negotiated his artistic and aesthetics interests and produced works that can be read as well as accepted by both sides -- those who promulgated Malay/Islamic influences as their aesthetics ideals and those who are more influenced by the trend of the international art world -- namely postmodern approach in the arts such as conceptual art and hard edge abstraction that was propagated and introduced through exhibitions such as "The New Scene"(1969), "experiment '70" (1970), "dokumentasi 72" (1972) and "Towards a Mystical Reality" (1974).

Of all the works that he has produced, a few demonstrate or reiterate the Malay/Islamic influences that I would claim as having an ambivalent aesthetics approach. This ambivalence is evident in the "Ku Bunuh Cintaku" (1970) that was produced right after the May 1969 racial riot – a period that witnessed many new developments in the Malaysian arts scene. This work was produced for "Manifestasi Dua Seni" exhibition that was held at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1970. It was an event that attempted to bring the Malay writers and the visual artists together in an exhibition (Piyadasa, 1995, p. 40) and Ismail Zain had chosen to interpret Anis Sabirin's poem entitled "Kubunuh Cinta" (published in Usman Awang & Ismail Ahmad, 1979) through this work. The ornateness of "Ku Bunuh Cintaku" (1970) reminds us of traditional Malay decorative elements or textile patterns although it only uses motives taken from plastic doilies. Although Ismail Zain can

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translate this poem in a very literal way, it can be suggested here that his artistic inclination urged him to treat the subject matter differently.

The work is undeniably highly ornate and decorative, evocative of *songket*, a traditional Malay textile weaving, but as if resembling the verse written by Anis Sabirin "Kubunuh cinta dalam hatiku pisau tajam berkilau!" he paints across the highly ornate piece with three horizontal stripes to artistically detach the flow of the motives.

Within the same realm, Ismail Zain produced other works such as "On A Clear Day You Can See Quinlin Mountains from Terengganu" (1983), "Morning Glory" (1988), "Meanwhile Tam Came in her Mother's Laced Kebaya" (1990), "There Was This Garden" (1990), "The Marriage of Sultan Mansor Shah" (1991) and a few others. The same motives and techniques were applied in these works. As he was possibly inspired by his official cultural visit to China, Ismail Zain produced "On a Clear Day You Can See Quinlin Mountains from Terengganu" (1983). Located by the Lijiang River, Quilin is located in the northeast of the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous Region and is a world-renowned tourist city, with its unique mountains, rivers and karst caves. In this work, the ornate floral motives are located at the centre and the impressionistic image of Quintin mountains appear at the top part of the work. Vertical stripes adorn the work at the left and right side with an array of the ornate floral motives which appears again at the top part of the work.

In the same realm that "Morning Glory" (1988) was produced, the morning glory flowers adorn the top part of the work, the vertical stripes however now appear in the middle part of the canvas with the ornate floral motives flanking the vertical stripes on the left and right. Another series of layers of thin vertical stripes frames the work at the left and right part of the canvas. "Meanwhile Tam Came in her Mother's Laced Kebaya" (1990) also implements the same technique – vertical stripes in the middle part and another set of these stripes flanking the canvas at the left and right with the decorative motives at both left and right side of the work – it reminds me of the cutting of the *kebaya* with its front line and lace trimmings. The name Tam alludes to Malay lady that appear in the title of another work – "The Detribalisation Of Tam Bte Che Lat" (1983) which I will discuss later.

The technique of these ornate artworks however is quite a surprise as Piyadasa explained that Ismail Zain has used motives taken from a plastic table mat or doilies as the main source of these decorative patterns. The designs of the table mat or doilies have been carefully stencilled onto the canvas using a spray gun, while three black horizontal bands help to emphasize the two-dimensionality of the work. The use of spray gun successfully eliminates all gesture qualities in this work, yet the work still manages to retain local and ornate characteristics (Piyadasa, 1995, pp. 40-41). Due to these different techniques that these works need to be re-read, it must be noted that the works that I have discussed above were produced during the times when the fascination and interests of Malaysian artists are very much being influenced by the Malay/Islamic art. One aesthetic approach that was popular and was been well accepted and used are local and regional motives that have been used expansively in the realm of fine arts. This can be seen in the works by artists such as Mastura Abdul Rahman, Siti

Zainon Ismail, Fatimah Chik, Noraini Nasir, Khatijah Sanusi, Mohamed Najib Dawa, Syed Shahabudin Syed Bakeri, and Ruzaika Omar Basaree that uses the underlying principle of Islamic theology resulting in the form of "decorative'" art (Sarena Abdullah, 2005, pp. 55-56). The works produced by these artists place great emphasis on the decorative elements of Malay textile such as *batik*, carvings, or Islamic design conventions. Artist such as Mastura Abdul Rahman in "Interior No. 29" (1987) for example, employs both architectural and decorative elements in her work. The work clearly demonstrates how the artist merged the flattened decorative elements derived from the ornate traditional textile tradition into the interior domain of the traditional Malay house. Imbued with a deep blue and purplish color, her work is filled with the Malay flavour. Within these realms, I argue that the works by Ismail Zain as I mentioned earlier need to be discussed. These works can be read and have been read as promulgating Malay/Islamic art as espoused by various Malaysian artists after the National Cultural Policy.

But despite the inherent floral and ornate motives alluding to the proclivities Malay/Islamic-centred art that have somewhat become the mainstream during the 1970s and 1980s, I would argue that Ismail Zain's works were actually mocking the fascination of Malay artists towards to all things inspired by the Malay culture and/or Islamic art. This is based on his explanation his interest on these motives or images is not in their natural meanings but in those meanings that are given to them. As I have pointed out earlier, Ismail Zain has always been interested in semiotics and this is inherent in one of his earlier works such as "Woman Crossing the Stream - After Rembrant" (1967). Despite the works that appear to be abstract work, Ismail pointed out that he has been toiling with the idea of the idea and not of mimesis and in the same paragraph he explains about the usage of the plastic doilies or the table mats that he used throughout the series.

> *"Like I said when I used Rembrandt's 'Woman Crossing a Stream' (sic) in 1967, I didn't do it because it was there as an existing visual vocabulary nor as a metaphor I was interested in it as an icon. It was the same with Tam binti Che Lat or the Quelin (sic) Mountains or the Wayang or those plastic doilies that I used a great deal in the eighties and the morning glory flowers. The interest in them is not in their natural meanings but in those meanings which we ourselves have lent them....." (Noordin Hassan & Ismail Zain, 1988, p. 23)*

This statement therefore reflects the intention of the artists in producing the works that he produced not only limited to the works that employ the ornate and floral motives but other works such as "The Detribalisation Of Tam Bte Che Lat" (1983) and "Sarada" (1983) and his "Digital Collage Series" (1988).

## SHIFTING TOWARDS THE POSTMODERN

Besides the works that I have discussed above, in 1983 Ismail Zain produced "The De-tribalisation of Tam binte **Che Lat**" and "Sarada," though it was presented in a very abstract and impressionistic way these works can be suggested as highlighting the social concerns of Malaysia's rapid progress in particular and Asia in general. Although the works that I have discussed previously are quite ambivalent in its aesthetics position, these two works on the other hand, can be argued as marking Ismail's shift towards his bracing of the social and cultural aspects – one of the themes or subjects that usually supported by postmodernist artists. Even though Ismail only produces these two works in this genre – it later enables him to move on and produce the "Digital Collage Series" – an important series of work that either directly or indirectly marks the official shift of Malaysian art development towards postmodern proclivities. In "The De-tribalisation of Tam binte Che Lat" we can see that the work juxtaposes an image of an old Malay woman from the kampong in the foreground against the images of a modern, urbanised, middle-class home environment from the grille gate to, rattan settee, a sensual belly dancer, a tennis player, interior plants and flowers, to weekend readings of Mingguan Malaysia on a rattan rocking chair. It can be suggested that the work implies that the old woman and the older generation more generally are out of place in the new Malaysian reality characterized by the urbanized middle-class privacy. On the other hand, Ismail Zain positioned his work "Sarada" (1983) against a larger Asian framework. An image of a woman and her baby is juxtaposed against the grille and on her right is an electric fan. As Piyadasa suggests,

> "Ismail makes a subtle commentary on the two Asian extremes – the extremely rich and the extremely poor. He draws the attention to a new kind of post-colonial Asian socio-economic reality. The work was produced retrospect, at a time when the celebrated notion of the new Japanese superstate as an invincible economic juggernaut was at its very zenith." (Piyadasa, 1995, p. 44)

His interest in highlighting the concern and effects or urbanization is also in aligned with another Malaysian artist – Nirmala Shanmughalingam. Nirmala, for example, find her sources of inspiration from current issues or themes that are happening around her -- environmental degradation, poverty, illegal logging and war. This could be seen in her early works such as in her "Statement Series" (mid 1970s), "Africa Series" (1980s), "Membalak Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak" (1980s), "Vietnam Series" (1980s) etc.

Undeniably, Ismail Zain's 1988 exhibition "Digital Collage" represents one of his most significant contributions in the Malaysian art scene. Significantly, Ismail Zain's have been noted and mentioned as the visionary of the Malaysian computer art. Although he was not the first to apply digital imaging technology, he was without doubt the first to produce a consolidated body of work in the new medium. His "Digital Collage Series" can be argued as having a postmodern theoretical framework embedded in terms of his techniques, subjects and his critical disposition. For this series, Ismail produced highly sophisticated artworks by using computer programs. Although the final products of his works were

actually computer prints instead of painting, what is important is that he appropriates various images taken from local and foreign contexts, and even from the mass media. Appropriation is an important and popular technique by postmodernists where artists juxtapose images from taken various media, building layer upon layer of the images and mixes these visual elements in their work.

This technique can be seen in the works of Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Joseph Kosuth, Jeff Koons, Barbara Kruger, Greg Colson, and Malcolm Morley. In regards to the appropriation, 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, the mise 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." (Jit, 1988, p. 19)

In 1997, through *Pameran Seni Electronic Pertama* (First Electronic Art Show) by the National Art Gallery and curated by both Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah – the curators have listed computer art as early as 1983 when Kamarudzaman Md. Isa used BASIC computer programming language to construct the first few digital artworks in Malaysia such as "Self-Portrait" (1984), "Cini" (1987) and "Tribute to Bapak" (1987). Apart from this, the authors uphold Ismail Zain's "Digital Collages Series" in 1988 as an important work that introduced computer prints as artworks  (Hasnul Jamal Saidon, 1997, pp. 10-17).

Besides the fact that Ismail uses the computer and printer instead of the conventional paint and canvas to produce these series must be noted and how Ismail brought forth the subject of the impact of globalisation to Malaysia must be remarked. It must be noted that the Malay/Islamic influence on the artistic and aesthetic interest of Malay artists were still very strong during the 1980s – therefore, to have one artist introduced the aspects and impacts of globalization in the form of computer artworks are significant. Ismail highlights the impact of global popular mass-culture and pop culture on the Malay consciousness. This could be seen in the way he appropriated and juxtaposed the images and popular cultural such as the Ewings of the TV Series Dallas in front of traditional Malay house in "Al Kesah" (1988). Even though the work seems to be playful but it actually highlights the penetration of global mass media into the Malaysian local culture and consciousness.  Other works of the same realm includes the digital portraits of Malaysia popular singer Sharifah Aini and Sahara Yaakob in "Nasyid" (1988) and "Penyanyi Pujaan" (1988). and Hollywood star, Joan Collins in "My Friend Lisa" (1988). Ismail Zain revealed his grasp of the semiotic implications of the digital image, by shifting from using manual photo collage to the computer generated collages. The ability of the computer and its software allowed him to dissolve the structural aspect of the play of signs and develop new images.

As a whole, this series sets out to be a challenge to the contemporary practice of Malaysian artists at that time. Through these works, it can be suggested that Ismail Zain was very critical of the heroic status of the artist and Malaysian art in general as I have quoted in the earlier part of this paper. Therefore, it can be argued that he was pointing and raising the descendant mobility of the artist that results from the computer's indifference to the skills of the artist. This was reflective of the acceptance of the works, Piyadasa noted that,

> "The initial response of more traditionally-minded artists on the present exhibition seems predictable enough. Ismail Zain's new works will be dismissed in some quarters as not constituting 'original art works' because they lack the gestures and marks produced by 'the artist's hand.' Or else, the artist might be accused of 'mechanical gimmickry.' The absence of that mystifying absence called 'soul' in these machine-produced works will no doubt be commented upon. Such accusations can only point to a sense of inability to accept that which is truly innovative and inventive when these features of creativity manifest themselves now and again." (Piyadasa, 1988, p. 7)

Since then, many artists have used various images and elements of contemporary life in their work. This is not unprecedented for, as the rise of the Malaysian middle class also entailed the rise of consumerism and a shift in lifestyles especially among urbanites. Consumerism eventually became a powerful force as Malaysian middle classes became the consumers of various products and able to shop in large and various shopping malls for imported branded products. Certain artists begin to observe this phenomenon and used the observations on the changing Malaysian lifestyles by noting these consumerist shifts in their art work. This can be seen in the works of artists like Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Yee I-Lan, Zulkifli Yusof and Roslisham Ismail's usage of kitsch as part of their work.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, as an artist Ismail Zain was a forerunner who criticized the modern art practice and history in Malaysia in his own ways, his critical thinking and aesthetics approach are way beyond the artists contemporary of his times. Even though the works that he produced in his life were quite limited compared to other more prominent Malaysia artists, directly or indirectly, the impact in the works that he produced could be traced to some of the works that younger Malaysian artists have produced since the 1990s. Although he has started off with a more ambivalent strategies in a few of his earlier works, his interests towards the study of signs and a more pluralistic approach in terms of techniques and subjects that can be read as adhering to the postmodern strategies that were evident in his later works. He even proclaimed that,

> "... You can look at my work since the sixties you may not find any example of self-indulgence, at least, not in the manner that I mean it. I don't subscribe to expressionistic mode as a basis of art. Nor do I consider scenography, whether it is mental or temporal, a serious justification for artistic involvement. I think that sort of attitude as central to art is

long dead and gone. This conclusion is true whether you want to look at it from the point of view of western art historicism or try to find its validity from the standpoint of our own cultural history. I am more deliberate and dialectical in my approach to art." (Piyadasa, 1988, p. 7)

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