

**GALERI PETRONAS**



**PETRONAS**

# AL-KESAH

Homage to Ismail Zain  
Penghormatan kepada Ismail Zain

Art for everyone



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# Ismail Zain: Pendekatan Ambivalen dan Peralihan Ke Arah Seni Pascamoden

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## ABSTRAK

Kertas ini akan membincangkan beberapa hasil karya Ismail Zain dalam konteks pendekatan seni dan estetika ambivalen yang lebih luas yang boleh disarankan untuk pembacaan karya-karya awal beliau sebelum "Digital Collage" (1988). Ismail Zain (1930 -1991) dilahirkan di Alor Setar, Kedah dan menerima pendidikan di Ravensbourne College of Art, United Kingdom dan Slade School of Art, London University. Allahyarham merupakan mantan Pengarah Balai Seni Lukis Negara; Ketua Pengarah Kebudayaan, Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan; dan Ketua Pengarah Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Negara Malaysia (FINAS). Walaupun dibayangi kerjaya yang mencabar dan sibuk, Ismail Zain tidak pernah mengasingkan diri daripada dunia seni Malaysia dan semasa hayatnya, beliau telah menghasilkan banyak karya seni yang memberi impak besar kepada kemajuan sejarah seni tanah air. Bahagian pertama kertas ini akan membincangkan hasil karya Ismail Zain yang bermain dengan kerawang dan motif bunga serta bagaimana karya beliau harus diberi konteks dan kefahaman dalam skop kecenderungan seni berlatarkan budaya Melayu/Islam pada tahun 1970-an dan 1980-an, dan dalam skop kecenderungan seni pascamoden baru di Malaysia. Oleh yang demikian, hujah saya adalah menerusi karya-karya seninya, beliau mencari posisi seni dan estetika dalam ruang lingkup kedua-dua kecenderungan ini. Bahagian kedua kertas pula akan membincangkan secara ringkas akan strategi seni pada karya beliau yang lebih popular dalam konteks pendekatan seni pascamoden.

Kata kunci: Seni Malaysia, Ismail Zain, Seni budaya Melayu/Islam, ambivalen, seni pascamoden

## PENGENALAN

Tidak banyak yang diketahui tentang Ismail Zain mungkin beliau lebih dikenali oleh para pengkarya dan rakan-rakannya dalam dunia seni Malaysia. Saya sendiri tidak mengenali beliau atau mereka yang dekat dengan beliau secara peribadi dan ini mungkin disebabkan saya datang daripada generasi pencinta seni yang berbeza. Ada kemungkinan juga kerana saya bukan sebahagian daripada karyawan seni Malaysia atau atas alasan tersendiri

yang tidak mahu terlalu rapat dengan subjek yang menjadi bahan kajian saya. Dalam kajian ini, saya lebih tertarik kepada karya-karya seni yang dihasilkan oleh pengkarya ini dan keadaan konteks yang boleh dianggap mempengaruhi penghasilannya secara langsung atau tidak langsung. Saya membaca dan mentafsir karya seni serta membuat analisis mengenainya bukan sahaja dari sudut nilai estetika atau perliambangannya tetapi yang lebih penting sebagai seorang sejarawan seni, saya dapati ianya amat signifikan untuk mengkontekskan karya-karya ini dalam skop kemajuan sejarah seni Malaysia yang lebih meluas. Perlu diambil perhatian bahawa seni secara budayanya bukanlah bersifat universal tetapi ia mendapat makna yang tertentu daripada budaya yang spesifik. Oleh itu, sesebuah karya seni haruslah dibaca dan difahami bukan sahaja dalam lingkungan konteks budaya penghasilannya, tetapi aspek politik dan sosial juga. Seperti yang dibicarakan oleh sejarawan seni Dele Jegede, dekontekstualisasi sesuatu karya seni melenyapkannya daripada sifat-sifat yang paling ketara yang diberikan oleh peranannya dalam amalan kebudayaan yang khusus (Jegede, 1993). Berdasarkan hujah tersebut, kertas ini akan menyiasat beberapa hasil karya seni Ismail Zain yang harus diberi penilaian dan perbincangan semula mengikut kefahaman pembangunan seni Malaysia khususnya, dalam konteks kecenderungan pengaruh seni Melayu/Islam dan kebangkitan seni pascamoden di Malaysia.

Ismail Zain ditahirkan di Alor Setar, Kedah. Beliau menerima pendidikan di Ravensbourne College of Art, United Kingdom dan Slade School of Art, London University. Selain menghasilkan beberapa karya seni penting sepanjang hayatnya, Allahyarham juga merupakan mantan Pengarah Balai Seni Lukis Negara; Ketua Pengarah Kebudayaan, Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan; dan bersara sebagai Ketua Pengarah Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia (FINAS). Walaupun kerjaya beliau dalam pentadbiran kerajaan semestinya menuntut komitmen yang tinggi, Ismail Zain ternyata seorang seniman sejati kerana beliau masih mampu melahirkan banyak karya yang besar maknanya kepada kemajuan seni tanah air.

Meskipun karya Ismail Zain berjudul "Digital Collage" (Rujuk Digital Collage -- A One-Man Art Exhibition by Ismail

Zain, 1988) telah diangkat oleh Redza Piyadasa sebagai contoh peralihan pascamodernisme dalam seni Malaysia (Piyadasa, 1993a, 1993b), kertas ini akan membincang dan membahaskan bahawa karya seni Ismail Zain yang dihasilkan sepanjang hayatnya hendaklah dibaca dan diterjemah pada aras yang lebih kompleks. Beberapa hasil karya penting beliau sebelum lahirnya "Digital Collage" (1988) mempunyai pelbagai wajah dan boleh ditempatkan sebagai memiliki 'posisi ambivalen'. Hasil karya ini boleh dibaca dari sudut kaitannya dengan pengaruh seni Melayu/Islam kepada seni Malaysia dan jika disoroti lebih mendalam, kita boleh katakan bahawa karya ini juga mematuhi ciri-ciri pascamodernisme. Bahagian kedua kertas ini akan membincangkan lebih lanjut tentang peralihan dalam usaha pengkaryaan Ismail Zain yang begitu jelas, dipacu oleh pemikirannya yang kritikal, mungkin atas minatnya kepada semiotik. Sifat 'ambivalen' sebagai strategi estetika, minat mendalam dalam aspek sosio-budaya dan subjek serta teknik dalam karya terkenal beliau "Digital Collage Series" – semua ini menunjukkan bagaimana pemikiran dan karya seni beliau harus dibaca dan difahami dalam seni Malaysia yang lebih meluas dan kompleks.

#### **AMBIVALEN SEBAGAI STRATEGI ESTETIKA**

Bahagian ini akan membincangkan dan membicarakan bahawa beberapa karya seni dan strategi estetika pilihan Ismail Zain dalam karya seni tersebut boleh dibaca sebagai ambivalen. Ini dapat dilihat terutamanya melalui karya-karya pra "Digital Collage Series" (1988) yang mewakili pelbagai motif bunga dan kerawang, umpamanya karya seni "Ku Bunuh Cinta" (1970), "On a Clear Day you can see Quintin Mountains from Terengganu" (1983), "Morning Glory" (1988), "Meanwhile Tam Came in her Mother's Laced Kebaya" (1990), "There was this Garden" (1990), dan "The Marriage of Sultan Mansor Shah" (1991) serta beberapa karya lagi.

Pendekatan estetika yang boleh dilihat dalam Karya-karya seni ini menular daripada pengaruh Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan 1971 berikutan penggunaan motif bunga dan hiasan yang akan saya bincangkan nanti. Anggapan yang sedemikian mengenai sudut pandang karya-karya seni itu dan konteks penghasilannya suatu permasalahan yang

boleh dipertikaikan. Ini adalah kerana, tidak seperti seniman-seniman lain yang sebahagian besarnya dipengaruhi dan secara estetikanya lebih menjurus kepada pengaruh seni Melayu/Islam dalam kesenian Malaysia (Lihat Sarena Abdullah, 2005) sejak Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan, Ismail Zain lebih dipengaruhi oleh aliran pemikiran kritikal dan beliau juga sudah tidak asing dengan pembacaan karya beberapa seniman pemikir zaman itu. Alaharham Redza Piyadasa tergolong dalam kalangan seniman-pengaruh pemikiran kritikal dan beliau turut membaca karya beberapa pemikir kritikal tersebut. Beliau menyedari bahawa sejak 1970-an lagi Ismail Zain telah merujuk dan menyebut nama-nama seperti Marshall McLuhan, Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, dan John Berger di dalam perbualan beliau (Jit, 1995). Marshall McLuhan, Claude Levi-Strauss dan Roland Barthes sememangnya figura utama semiotik atau kajian berkenaan peranan tanda-tanda sebagai sebahagian daripada kehidupan sosial. Manakala, John Berger ialah seorang pengkritik seni yang menukikan *Ways of Seeing* (Berger, 1972) – buku yang cukup berpengaruh dan menjadi teks utama di universiti-universiti Britain. Corak pemikiran Ismail yang dipengaruhi oleh semiotik dan pascamodernisme secara amnya terpancar menerusi buah fikiran tentang seni moden Malaysia. Pengaruh daripada pembacaan ini boleh dilihat di dalam teks beliau untuk Siri Syarahan Tun Seri Lanang (1980) yang menyaksikan beliau membicarakan keperluan mengkaji pensejarahan seni Malaysia berdasarkan "analisis struktural" ke atas kajian tanda dan perlambangan (Ismail Zain, 1980). Sebagai tambahan, saya ingin menyarankan bahawa pemikiran beliau juga dipengaruhi oleh perbincangan Lyotard di dalam bukunya *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Lyotard, 1993) – buku rujukan hebat untuk bacaan seminal tentang pascamodernisme, yang menganalisis epistemologi atau teori ilmu budaya pascamodern sebagai akhiran "naratif besar" atau metanaratif. Ismail Zain sebagai contoh, menerusi esei beliau yang disiarkan di dalam Simposium ASEAN pertama tentang Estetika, mengkritik metanaratif pensejarahan seni Malaysia. Beliau menegaskan bahawa, "... Di Malaysia, misalnya, oleh kerana tuntutan bagi pemodenan sikap dalam seni tidak pernah digandingkan dengan cubaan yang sepadan untuk bergelut dengan kesan politik, sosial dan estetika seni pada peringkat

kebangsaan, maka laungan perjuangannya tinggal sekadar retorik. Hasilnya, kewujudan dikotomi Modernisme dalam persekitaran yang tiada ketenangan sepenuhnya dengan peraturan-peraturan di Barat yang bukan sahaja terbukti bermasalah, malah, dalam kes ekstrem, juga membawa kepada khayalan budaya." (Ismail Zain, 1989, ms. 23)

Beliau seterusnya menyatakan, "Cita rasa eklektisisme yang terdesak pada masa ini sebahagiannya adalah akibat demensia ini. Oleh itu, pengalaman Malaysia menunjukkan bahawa dalam kelompangan landasan falsafah yang kukuh dan berakar berumbi di dalam satu sistem yang beroperasi di peringkat kebangsaan dan epistemologi berbangkit yang timbul, maka sikap yang meluas adalah untuk menghargai aspek Modernisme yang lebih membosankan dan tersurat seperti akademisme berikutnya, gaya, pasaran seni, ucapan pembukaan dan birokrasi seni yang nampak seolah-olah suatu institusi demokrasi yang terdiri daripada kelas baharu borjuis dan seniman/pegawai yang menganggotai suatu panel atau jawatankuasa dan membuat keputusan janggal tentang seni. Dalam sifat Hegelianisme, 'modernisme' di negara membangun benar-benar mencari dirinya dalam yang lainnya; bukan di tempat yang sebetul-betulnya." (Ismail Zain, 1989, ms. 23)

Pada pandangan saya, aspek yang paling menarik tentang hasil karya Ismail Zain tidak terhad kepada siri akhir "Digital Collage" nya sahaja walaupun sumbangan besar karya ini kepada kebangkitan seni elektronik di Malaysia memang tidak dipersoalkan lagi. Walau bagaimanapun, dalam kertas ini, saya ingin membicarakan bahawa minat mendalam Ismail Zain yang sarat terpancar di dalam "Digital Collage Series" seharusnya dijejaki kepada hasil-hasil karya beliau yang terdahulu. Hasil-hasil karya ini banyak menggunakan motif bunga dan kerawang yang dibaca sebagai menggambarkan kecenderungan seni Melayu/Islam yang cukup ketara dalam pendekatan estetika para seniman di Malaysia zaman 1970-an dan 1980-an, seperti yang saya nyatakan di atas. Di sinilah saya merasakan Ismail Zain telah menggabungkan kesepakatan minatnya kepada pengkaryaan dan estetika sehingga lahir karya seni yang boleh dibaca dan diterima oleh kedua-dua belah pihak – mereka yang mengisytiharkan pengaruh

seni Melayu/Islam sebagai estetika yang ideal dan mereka yang lebih menjerus kepada dunia seni antarabangsa – yakni pendekatan seni pascamoden seperti seni konsepsi dan 'hard edge abstraction' yang diperkenalkan dan disebarluaskan menerusi pameran seperti "The New Scene"(1969), "experiment '70" (1970), "dokumentasi 72" (1972) dan "Towards a Mystical Reality" (1974).

Di antara semua hasil karya beliau, terdapat beberapa karya yang memaparkan atau menekankan pengaruh seni Melayu/Islam yang saya anggap mempunyai pendekatan estetika ambivalen. Ini terbukti dalam "Ku Bunuh Cinta" (1970) yang beliau hasilkan selepas peristiwa rusuhan kaum Mei 1969 - satu tempoh yang menyaksikan banyak perkembangan baharu dalam dunia seni Malaysia. Karya seni tersebut dihasilkan untuk pameran "Manifestasi Dua Seni" yang berlangsung di Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka pada tahun 1970. Acara ini cuba menyatukan para penulis Melayu dan seriman visual di dalam satu pameran (Piyadasa, 1995, ms. 40) dan Ismail Zain memilih untuk mentafsir bait-bait puisi Anis Sabirin bertajuk "Ku Bunuh Cinta" (diterbitkan dalam antologi Usman Awang & Ismail Ahmad, 1979) melalui karya seninya itu. Selirat kerawang pada "Ku Bunuh Cintaku" (1970) mengingatkan kita kepada unsur-unsur hiasan tradisional atau corak tekstil Melayu walaupun sekadar menggunakan motif daripada alas meja plastik atau doilies. Walaupun Ismail Zain boleh menterjemahkan puisi ini secara harfiah, namun kita boleh mengatakan kecenderungan seninya mendorong beliau menggarap subjek itu dengan cara berbeza. Hasil karya ini tidak dapat dinafikan begitu sarat dengan kerawang dan hiasan bagaikan corak tekstil tradisional Melayu pada tenunan songket, tetapi lagaknya seperti menzahirkan ungkapan puisi Anis Sabirin "Kubunuh cinta dalam hatiku pisau tajam berkilau!" apabila beliau 'mencantas' bahagian kerawang yang indah itu dengan tiga jalur melintang untuk mengasingkan aliran motif tadi secara berseni.

Dalam skop yang sama, Ismail Zain menghasilkan karya seni seperti "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) dan beberapa lagi karya.

Motif-motif dan teknik-teknik yang sama digarapkan pada hasil-hasil karya ini. Lawatan kebudayaan rasmi beliau ke China mungkin telah memberi ilham kepada Ismail Zain untuk menghasilkan "On a Clear Day You Can See Quinlin Mountains from Terengganu" (1983). Quilin di tepian Sungai Lijiang yang terletak di bahagian timur laut wilayah autonomi Guangxi Zhuang merupakan sebuah bandar pelancongan yang terkenal di seluruh dunia dengan keunikan gunung-ganang, sungai-sungai dan gua-gua kars. Pada hasil karya ini, motif bunga kerawang diletakkan di bahagian tengah kanvas manakala imej impresionistik pergunungan Quilin dipaparkan di bahagian atasnya. Jalur menegak menghiasi karya di sebelah kiri dan kanan dengan susunan motif bunga kerawang yang muncul lagi di bahagian atas karya.

Dalam skop penghasilan karya "Morning Glory" (1988), bunga kembang pagi menghiasi bahagian atas karya, tetapi kali ini jalur menegak muncul di bahagian tengah kanvas dengan motif bunga kerawang mengapit jalur menegak di sebelah kiri dan kanan. Satu lagi lapisan dibuat dengan jalur nipis menegak untuk membingkai karya di bahagian kiri dan kanan kanvas. "Meanwhile Tam Came in her Mother's Laced Kebaya" (1990) turut menggunakan teknik yang sama – jalur menegak di ruang tengah dan satu lagi set jalur ini mengapit kanvas di sebelah kiri dan kanan diiringi motif hiasan di kedua-dua belah kiri dan kanannya – ini mengingatkan saya kepada potongan kebaya yang dibelah tengah dan dihiasi sulaman berenda. Nama Tam merujuk kepada seorang perempuan tua yang muncul dalam karya seterusnya yang bertajuk - "Dot-Tribulization Of Tam Binte Che' Lat" (1983) yang akan saya bicarakan kemudian.

Teknik karya seni hiasan ini agak memeranjatkan seperti mana Piyadasa menjelaskan bahawa Ismail Zain telah menggunakan motif yang diambil dari lapik meja plastik atau doily sebagai sumber utama corak hiasan berkenaan. Reka bentuk lapik meja atau doily telah distensil dengan teliti ke atas kanvas menggunakan pistol semburan, manakala tiga jalur hitam yang mendatar memberi penekanan kepada karya dua dimensi ini. Penggunaan pistol semburan berjaya melenyapkan semua kualiti isyarat dalam karya ini, namun karya ini tetap berjaya

mengekalkan ciri-ciri tempatan dan hiasan (Piyadasa, 1995, ms. 40-41). Disebabkan teknik-teknik yang berbeza inilah yang memerlukan karya-karya ini dibaca semula. Perlu juga diambil perhatian bahawa karya-karya yang saya bincangkan di atas telah dihasilkan tatkala pesona dan minat seniman Malaysia amat dipengaruhi oleh seni Melayu/Islam. Satu pendekatan estetika yang popular dan telah diterima dengan baik serta digunakan adalah motif tempatan dan serantau yang telah digunakan secara meluas dalam bidang seni halus. Ini dapat dilihat dalam karya-karya oleh seniman seperti Mastura Abdul Rahman, Siti Zainon Ismail, Fatimah Chik, Noraini Nasir, Khatijah Sanusi, Mohamed Najib Dawa, Syed Shahabudin Syed Bakeri dan Ruzaika Omar Basaree yang menggunakan prinsip asas teologi Islam terhasil dalam bentuk seni hiasan (Sarena Abdullah, 2005, ms. 55-56). Karya-karya yang dihasilkan oleh para seniman ini meletakkan penekanan besar kepada unsur-unsur hiasan tekstil Melayu seperti batik, ukiran, atau konvensyen reka bentuk Islam. Seniman seperti Mastura Abdul Rahman dalam "Interior No. 29" (1987) misalnya, menggunakan kedua-dua elemen seni bina dan hiasan dalam karyanya. Karya-karya ini dengan jelas menunjukkan bagaimana seniman menggabungkan unsur-unsur hiasan leper yang berasal daripada tradisi tekstil hiasan tradisional ke dalam ruang dalaman rumah Melayu tradisional. Warna biru pekat dan keanguan menjiwai karya beliau yang sarat dengan cita rasa Melayu. Dengan itu, dalam ruang lingkup bidang ini, saya berpendapat bahawa karya-karya yang dihasilkan oleh Ismail Zain seperti yang saya nyatakan sebelum ini perlu dibincangkan. Karya-karya ini boleh dibaca dan telah pun dibaca untuk menyebarkan seni Melayu/Islam seperti yang ditekankan oleh pelbagai seniman Malaysia selepas Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan.

Walaupun motif bunga dan hiasan yang wujud dan merujuk kepada kecenderungan kesenian Melayu/Islam yang menjadi arus perdana semasa tahun 1970-an dan 1980-an, saya tetap mengatakan bahawa karya-karya Ismail Zain sebenarnya mengusik pesona seniman Melayu terhadap segala yang diilhamkan oleh budaya Melayu dan/atau kesenian Islam. Ini adalah berdasarkan kepada penjelasan beliau bahawa minatnya kepada sesuatu motif atau imej bukan dalam erti semula jadinya tetapi dalam makna

yang diberikan kepada motif atau imej tersebut. Seperti yang telah saya tegaskan sebelum ini, Ismail Zain sentiasa berminat dalam semiotik dan ini wujud dalam salah satu daripada karya-karya yang terawal seperti "Woman Crossing Stream - Selepas Rembrandt" (1967). Walaupun karya-karya kelihatan abstrak, Ismail mengatakan beliau telah bermain dengan banyak idea dalam idea dan bukan peniruan. Dalam perenggan yang sama juga, beliau menjelaskan tentang penggunaan plastik doily atau lapik meja yang digunakan di keseluruhan siri ini.

"Seperti yang saya katakan apabila saya menggunakan Rembrandt 'Women Crossing a Stream' (sic) pada tahun 1967, saya tidak melakukannya kerana kewujudannya sebagai satu perbendaharaan kata visual yang sedia ada mahupun sebagai satu metafora. Saya lebih menyukainya sebagai sebuah ikon. Ia adalah sama dengan Tam binti Che Lat atau Quelin (sic) Mountains atau Wayang atau plastik doily yang banyak saya gunakan dalam tahun 80-an dan bunga kembang pagi. Minat di sini bukan dalam makna asal mereka tetapi dalam makna yang kita sendiri telah pinjamkan kepada mereka...." (Noordin Hassan & Ismail Zain, 1988, ms. 23)

Kenyataan ini mencerminkan niat seniman-seniman dalam menghasilkan karya-karya yang beliau sendiri hasilkan adalah tidak terhad kepada karya-karya yang menggunakan motif hiasan dan bunga tetapi karya-karya lain seperti "Dot-Tribulization Of Tam Binte Che' Lat" (1983) dan "Sarada" (1983) serta "Digital Collage Series" (1988).

#### **BERALIH KEPADA PASCAMODEN**

Selain daripada karya-karya yang telah saya bincangkan di atas, Ismail Zain telah menghasilkan "Dot-Tribulization Of Tam Binte Che' Lat" dan "Sarada" pada tahun 1983. Walaupun karya ini dipersembahkan dengan cara yang sangat abstrak dan impresionistik, kedua-duanya merupakan karya yang menonjolkan keprihatinan sosial pada kemajuan pesat Malaysia khususnya dan Asia amnya. Walaupun karya-karya yang telah saya bincangkan sebelum ini agak ambivalen dalam kedudukan estetikanya, boleh dikatakan kedua-dua karya ini menjadi titik permulaan bagi peralihan kepada penerimaan beliau dalam aspek

sosial dan budaya – iaitu salah satu tema atau subjek yang biasanya disokong oleh seniman-seniman pascamodenis. Walaupun Ismail hanya menghasilkan kedua-dua karya dalam genre ini – karya ini telah membolehkan beliau untuk maju dan menghasilkan "Digital Collage Series" – satu siri karya unggul yang sama ada secara langsung atau tidak telah menandakan peralihan rasmi pembangunan seni Malaysia ke arah kecenderungan pascamodenis. Di dalam "Dot-Tribulization Of Tam Binte Che' Lat" kita dapat melihat aturan seiring (juxtapose) imej seorang perempuan tua Melayu kampung di latar hadapan dan dibelakangi oleh imej persekitaran yang moden, pesat, suasana rumah kelas pertengahan; dari pintu jeriji kepada bangku rotan, seorang penari gelek, seorang pemain tenis, pokok bunga dalam rumah, sehingga bacaan hujung minggu Minggu Malaysia atas kerusi malas rotan. Karya ini boleh membawa maksud bahawa perempuan tua dan generasi terdahulu sudah tiada tempatnya dalam realiti baharu Malaysia yang digambarkan dalam kebebasan peribadi urbanisasi kelas pertengahan. Sebaliknya, Ismail Zain meletakkan kedudukan "Sarada" (1983) pada kerangka Asia yang lebih besar. Imej seorang ibu dan bayinya yang diatur seiring di hadapan jeriji dan sebuah kipas elektrik di sebelah kanannya. Seperti yang diterangkan oleh Piyadasa, "Ismail membuat ulasan bijak pada kedua-dua ekstrem Asia – yang sangat kaya dan miskin tegar. Beliau menarik perhatian kepada realiti sosio-ekonomi pascakolonial Asia yang baharu. Karya ini diterbitkan secara retrospek, pada masa apabila tanggapan negara gah Jepun baharu diraikan sebagai raksasa ekonomi kebal berada di kemuncaknya." (Piyadasa, 1995, ms. 44)

Minat beliau dalam mengetengahkan keprihatinan dan kesan atau urbanisasi juga sejajar dengan seorang lagi seniman Malaysia – Nirmala Shanmughalingam. Sebagai contoh, Nirmala mencari sumber inspirasi beliau dari tema atau isu-isu semasa yang berlaku di sekeliling beliau – pencemaran alam sekitar, kemiskinan, pembalakan haram dan peperangan. Ini dapat dilihat dalam karya-karya awal beliau seperti "Statement Series" (pertengahan 1970-an), "Africa Series" (1980), "Membalok Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak" (1980), "Vietnam Series" (1980) dan lain-lain.

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Tidak dapat dinafikan, pameran "Digital Collage" Ismail Zain, pada tahun 1988 merupakan salah satu sumbangan beliau yang paling besar dalam dunia seni Malaysia. Secara signifikan, Ismail Zain telah dinobatkan dan disebut sebagai seniman yang berwawasan dalam seni komputer Malaysia. Walaupun beliau bukan yang pertama menggunakan teknologi pengimejan digital, tidak syak lagi beliau merupakan seniman pertama yang menghasilkan karya penggabungan dalam teknik baharu ini. "Digital Collage Series" beliau boleh dikatakan sebagai mempunyai kerangka teori pascamoden yang mempunyai penggabungjalinan teknik, subjek dan penyusunan kritikal beliau. Untuk siri ini, Ismail menghasilkan karya seni yang sangat canggih menggunakan program komputer. Walaupun produk akhir karya beliau sebenarnya adalah cetakan komputer dan bukannya lukisan, apa yang penting adalah beliau membuat apropriasi pelbagai imej yang diambil dari konteks tempatan dan asing, juga dari media massa. Apropriasi merupakan satu teknik penting dan popular yang digunakan oleh pascamodenis di mana karyawan menyatukan imej dari pelbagai media, kemudian imej ini dibina lapisan demi lapisan dan menggabungkan elemen-elemen visual dalam karya mereka. Teknik ini boleh dilihat dalam karya-karya seni Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Joseph Kosuth, Jeff Koons, Barbara Kruger, Greg Colson dan Malcolm Morley. Krishen Jit menegaskan mengenai apropriasi dengan mengatakan bahawa, "Penjajaran imej juga menempatkan Ismail di hadapan pemikiran pascamoden. Apa yang paling mempesonakan dan menunjuk arah adalah sentimen Ismail terhadap imej yang dipilihnya. Saya dapati beliau adalah seorang yang bebas daripada kritikan. Satu imej tidak bertarung dengan yang lain dalam posisi kepahlawanan, menyerah, putus asa, atau keterasingan. Kedua-dua realiti adalah ketara, berbelang-belang dalam cahaya, dan berlebihan dalam sentimen. Strategi sekatan imej, saya tergoda untuk mengatakan, *mise en scene*, meminjamkan dimensi performatif untuk produksi. Ini adalah persembahan yang mewujudkan perasaan berjajaran: seram dan sandiwara, tragedi dan komedi, rasa dan karut. Strategi persembahan ini mampu mengangkat mereka dari yang biasa dan sentimental kepada suatu tempat di alam reflektif."

(Jit, 1988, ms. 19)

Pada tahun 1997, melalui Pameran Seni Elektronik Pertama (First Electronic Art Show) yang dianjurkan oleh Balai Seni Lukis Negara dan dikurasi oleh Hasnul Jamal Saidon dan Niranjan Rajah - Kedua-dua kurator ini berpendapat bahawa seni komputer telah mula terdapat seawal tahun 1983 apabila Kamarudzaman Md. Isa menggunakan bahasa pengaturcaraan komputer BASIC untuk membina beberapa karya seni digital pertama di Malaysia seperti "Self -Portrait" (1984), "Cini" (1987) dan "Penghormatan kepada Bapak" (1987). Selain daripada ini, ramai penulis menegaskan bahawa hasil karya "Digital Collage Series" oleh Ismail Zain pada tahun 1988 sebagai satu karya penting yang memperkenalkan cetakan komputer sebagai karya seni (Hasnul Jamal Saidon, 1997, muka surat 10-17).

Di samping kenyataan bahawa Ismail Zain menggunakan komputer dan mesin pencetak dan bukannya konvensional seperti cat dan kanvas untuk menghasilkan siri ini dan bagaimana beliau membawa perihai impak globalisasi ke Malaysia seharusnya dicatat dan diberi perhatian. Perlu diingat bahawa pengaruh Melayu/Islam terhadap kepentingan seni dan estetika seniman Melayu masih tegap kukuh pada tahun 1980-an. Oleh itu, ianya amat signifikan apabila seorang seniman memperkenalkan aspek dan impak globalisasi dalam bentuk karya seni komputer. Ismail telah menonjolkan impak global popular budaya massa dan budaya pop atas kesedaran Melayu. Ini boleh dilihat di mana beliauropriasikan dan menjajarkan imej dan kesenian popular seperti Ewings dalam siri TV Dallas di bahagian hadapan rumah Melayu tradisional dalam "Al Kesah" (1988). Walaupun karya nampak ceria dan bersahaja, tetapi ia sebenarnya menonjolkan penembusan media massa global ke dalam kesedaran dan budaya tempatan Malaysia. Karya-karya lain dari dunia yang sama termasuk potret digital penyanyi popular Malaysia, Sharifah Aini dan Sahara Yaakob dalam "Nasyid" (1988) dan "Penyanyi Pujaan" (1988) dan bintang Hollywood, Joan Collins dalam "My Friend Lisa" (1988). Ismail Zain mendedahkan pengetahuan beliau tentang implikasi semiotik imej digital, dengan beralih daripada menggunakan kolaj foto secara manual kepada kolaj yang direka oleh komputer. Keupayaan komputer dan perisiannya memberikan beliau peluang untuk membubarkan aspek struktur penggunaan tanda-tanda dan membangunkan imej baharu.



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Secara keseluruhannya, siri ini menjadi satu cabaran kepada amalan kontemporari seniman Malaysia pada masa itu. Melalui karya-karya ini, boleh dikatakan bahawa Ismail Zain sangat kritikal tentang status wira seniman dan seni Malaysia secara umum seperti yang telah saya sebutkan pada awal kertas ini. Oleh itu, boleh ditegaskan bahawa beliau telah menunjukkan dan meningkatkan mobiliti penurunan seniman akibat daripada sikap acuh tak acuh komputer terhadap kemahiran seniman. Ini mencerminkan penerimaan karya-karya, Piyadasa berkata,

"Tanggapan awal seniman yang lebih berfikir tradisional mengenai pameran ini memang boleh dijangka. Karya-karya baharu oleh Ismail Zain boleh diketepikan dan tidak diendahkan dalam kalangan beberapa sebab ianya tidak merupakan 'karya seni asli' dan karya-karya ini tidak memiliki gerakan dan tanda yang dihasilkan oleh 'tangan seniman'. Tambahan juga, seniman tersebut mungkin akan dituduh 'gimik mekanikal'. Ketiadaan 'jiwa' dalam karya-karya yang dihasilkan secara mekanikal ini akan tetap mendapat komen dan debat. Tuduhan tersebut hanya dapat menunjukkan rasa ketidakmampuan untuk menerima bahawa yang benar-benar inovatif dan inventif adalah ketika ciri-ciri kreatif ini menampakkkan diri berkali-kali." (Piyadasa, 1988, ms. 7)

Sejak itu, ramai seniman telah menggunakan pelbagai imej dan unsur-unsur kehidupan kontemporari dalam karya mereka. Ini tidak pernah berlaku sebelum ini kerana, kebangkitan kelas pertengahan Malaysia turut menyaksikan kebangkitan kepenggunaan dan perubahan dalam gaya hidup terutamanya, dalam kalangan warga kota. Kepenggunaan akhirnya menjadi satu kuasa yang kuat apabila rakyat Malaysia kelas pertengahan menjadi pengguna pelbagai produk dan mampu membeli-belah di pusat membeli-belah yang besar untuk mendapatkan pelbagai produk berjenama yang diimport.

Sesetengah seniman mula memerhatikan fenomena ini dan menggunakan pemerhatian tersebut ke atas perubahan gaya hidup rakyat Malaysia dengan menampakkkan perubahan konsumerisme dalam karya seni mereka. Ini dapat dilihat dalam karya seniman-seniman seperti Ahmad

Shukri Mohamed, Yee I-Lan, Zulkifli Yusof dan penggunaan kitsch oleh Rostlisham Ismail sebagai sebahagian daripada karya mereka.

#### KESIMPULAN

Kesimpulannya, sebagai seorang seniman, Ismail Zain adalah seorang pelopor yang mengkritik amalan dan pensejarahan seni moden Malaysia dengan caranya sendiri, pemikiran kritikal dan pendekatan estetika beliau menjangkau lebih daripada seniman pada zamannya. Walaupun karya-karya yang telah beliau hasilkan dalam hidupnya agak terhad berbanding seniman lain yang lebih menonjol di Malaysia, secara langsung atau tidak langsung, impak daripada karya-karya beliau dapat dikesan dalam beberapa karya seniman Malaysia yang lebih muda sejak tahun 1990-an. Walaupun beliau telah bermula dengan strategi yang ambivalen dalam beberapa karyanya yang terdahulu, minat beliau terhadap kajian tanda-tanda dan pendekatan majmuk dari segi teknik dan subjek yang boleh dibaca sebagai mematuhi strategi pascamoden yang lebih ketara dalam karya beliau yang terkemudian. Beliau juga menyatakan bahawa,

"... Anda boleh melihat karya saya sejak tahun 60-an lagi tetapi anda tidak boleh mencari apa-apa contoh kerakusan, sekurang-kurangnya, tidak dengan cara yang saya maksudkan. Saya tidak melanggan mod ekspresionis sebagai asas seni. Dan saya tidak menganggap scenography, sama ada mental atau temporal, justifikasi yang serius untuk penglibatan kesenian. Saya rasa bahawa sikap itu sebagai pusat untuk seni telah lama hilang dan terkubur mati. Kesimpulan ini adalah benar sama ada anda mahu melihat dari sudut pandangan sejarah seni Barat atau cuba untuk mencari kesahihannya dari sudut pandangan sejarah budaya kita sendiri. Saya lebih bersengaja dan dialektik dalam pendekatan saya kepada seni." (Piyadasa, 1988, ms. 7)

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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.

Keywords: Malaysian arts, Ismail Zain, Malay/Islamic-centred art, ambivalence, postmodern art

## 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 contextualise 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 decontextualisation 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 problematised. 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 criticised 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 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, Quinlin 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 Quinlin 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 stenciled 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 Rembrandt" (1967). Despite the works that appear to be abstract work, Ismail pointed out that he has been toying 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 characterised by the urbanised 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 of urbanisation 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"

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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 *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 Nirnanjan 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 globalisation 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 Pujaaan" (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.

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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 criticised 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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