

# BICARA SIFU

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*Artworks from the Public Art Institutions of Higher Education*

GALERI PETRONAS

## **KANDUNGAN CONTENTS**

- 7      **PRAKATA**  
Hartini Hj. Abdullah
- 8      **ILMU SENI, PARADIGMA DAN PENDIDIKAN SENI**  
Badrolhisham Mohamad Tahir
- 20     **IDEA DAN PRAKTIS PENYELIDIKAN BAGI PENCIPTAAN KARYA SENI**  
Prof. Dr. Tjetjep Rohendi Rohidi
- 26     **THE RELEVANCE OF CONTEMPORARY AND CRITICAL THEORIES IN  
ARTS-BASED RESEARCH**  
Dr. Izmer Ahmad
- 31     **THE RESEARCH AND THE ARTS PRACTICE – A SYMBIOTIC LIAISON?**  
Dr. Sarena Abdullah
- 35     **KARYA-KARYA**  
Artworks
- 91     **PENGHARGAAN**  
Acknowledgement

# THE RESEARCH AND THE ARTS PRACTICE – A SYMBIOTIC LIAISON?

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I would like to begin this essay by referring to a previous article which I wrote last year for a local art magazine.<sup>1</sup> The essay was entitled *The Predicament of Art Writings in Malaysian Art*. The general forms of art writings in Malaysia was discussed and the approach to these forms of art writings were examined. The concern highlighted was the insufficiency in delineating and explaining the expanding art scene in Malaysia in the last two decades. These forms of art writings usually published in art exhibition catalogues [for example] are general and lack critical thinking. It employs formalistic or descriptive analysis as a writing strategy to appraise the selected artworks for the art exhibition. This writing approach is generally acceptable on the basis that these essays aim at the general public and its main purpose is to introduce the works on exhibit to the public in an educational manner. In the essay, it was also pointed out that there is a need to re-strategize this opportunity to publish and convey a deeper meaning or approach in introducing, discussing or contextualizing the artworks under discussion. This essay will pursue this discussion further on the benefits and advantages of research and writing in the Art Academia<sup>2</sup> for art practices in Malaysia.

When writing about art, besides doing a formal or descriptive analysis, there are various ways in which we can derive meaning and understanding

of artworks. For example, through discussing the subject matter of the work, the study of iconography and iconology of objects/subjects, and recently through *Critical Theories* such as feminism, semiotics, post-structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis and postmodernism to name a few.<sup>3</sup> Through various publication opportunities, art writers and art critics should seek either book chapters, journals, peer-reviewed journals for example, to write and print an extended, in-depth essay grounded in proper research writing.

This is one of the main reasons why the Academia cannot be seen as unrelated to the artistic practice after one graduates from an art school. It is well-known that the relationship between the Academia and the fine art practices especially are in fact, inseparable. Most Malaysian artists attained arts education from the Academia, either at public universities or private colleges locally and abroad. Upon completion of the Diploma or Bachelor's level, graduates are assumed as able to 'practice art' while others further their post-graduates studies.

While the most fundamental art training or practice can be attained from these levels of education, the importance of doing a research on the arts for example, have often been a secondary focus. This has resulted in the

lack thereof in investigating and researching on the many burgeoning art practitioners in Malaysia. Given this scenario, serious writings and publication on Malaysian artists and art is very much limited. This shortcoming does not help in our study and documenting of the expanding Malaysian art scene especially in terms of contextualizing modern and contemporary artistic practices locally and regionally from a cultural context. Conducting proper and systematic research and writing is a credible solution especially at a postgraduate level whether it be at a master's or doctorate level.

Given this reasoning, significant contribution to the discourse of Malaysian arts should happen at university level education wherein the weightage between research and writing and studio practice should be balanced enough to produce a formidable learning outcome, key to the development and progression of documenting and writing about Malaysian arts. Beyond weightage is the quality and depth of research performed. Such issues are considerably significant matters to look into. Looking at the rate at which artistic practices have extensively evolved in the last few decades in Malaysia, it is poignant that discourse and research on the local art scene still fails to investigate and discuss many aspects of these changes.

If more focus on the fundamental basis of research is emphasized in the process of writing about Malaysian arts, coupled with the application of various methodologies and theoretical frameworks, then the current research and writing status can evolve into meaningful, substantial and definitive research and writing on Malaysian arts. Unlike in the Euramerica where study or research rooted in Art History, Theory and Criticism is fundamental to art and art theory, these disciplines are still raw in its application and practice in Malaysia. In Euramerica, there are ample methodologies to choose from based on previous research, various selections of artists to study, themes and discourses since the pre-modern period. There is also extensive research that employs multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary research approaches. The discourse on art in Euramerica has also moved on to address new perspectives on visual culture study from a wider art historical approach. These shifts as a discipline are still new and have not been explored extensively in Malaysia. Thus, the formalistic analysis or descriptive analysis is insufficient in developing a well structured research and writing on Malaysian art. Works in the form of installation, video art, interactivity in

art forms such as performance art, happening performances and flash mob, need to be discussed using suitable methodology for it to be contextualised through and understood from a local social, cultural, historical, economical and even political setting.

To perform a research within the structure of the academic practice involves in-depth readings of applied theoretical framework, communication skills in conducting research interviews, sourcing out informative material, keen eyes for observing and evaluating artworks, and most importantly, thorough, well-versed and persuasive arguments in the form of academic writing. Researchers need to employ an utmost skill to convince readers of their argument. Others also contend their own perspective based on a theoretical framework in their reasoning in an academic way. Therefore, researchers and research do not necessarily convey meaning of the artworks through the artists' perspective. They do use examples to support an argument based on a theoretical premises.

For example, in my own research,<sup>4</sup> it is pointed out that the Malaysian art scene since the late 1980s and the early 1990s has become so diversified and plural in its form, media and subject. Discussing this topic came under the theoretical framework of postmodernism in general and postmodern art in particular. The information deliberated is re-contextualized in what is termed as *situasi percamoden* (postmodern situation) The framework is based on four main observations: first, the proliferation various postmodern art strategies used by Malaysian artists; second, the figuration as making a comeback in Malaysian art; third, the emergence and the increase of alternative forms of art and even spaces; and fourth, the various subjects and thematic approaches taken up by these various artists.

A few significant postmodern strategies such as appropriation, parody and allegory have been employed by Malaysian artists. Zulkifli Yusof, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed and Roslilsham Ismail aka ISE are among the artists who have used appropriation as their main technique by juxtaposing images from various media and sources in their works. The usage of parody could also be detected in Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman's "The Code Series" (2006), "Challenger Series" (2007). His works can be discussed as works that are created to mock, comment on or poke fun at certain issues and Malaysian public figures. There are also works using allegory techniques such as in

Sharmiza Abu Hassan's "Allegory Ledang" (2004), Nadiah Barnadhaj's video "Beyond Recognition" (2006) and Yee I-Lan "Sulu Stories" (2005).

On top of these various techniques and approaches, we can find the attitude in relation to figuration in Malaysian arts has changed and improved. Among the artists who are known for their figuration and significant works realistically or semi-realistically are Wong Hoy Cheong, Eng Hwee Chu, Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Shia Yih-Yiing, Jalaini Abu Hassan, Noor Mahnun Mohamed and Ahmad Zakii Anwar. Realistic works by Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Ahmad Zakii Anwar for example, have been well received and sought after while being highly priced.

Since the 1990s, there was momentous diversification and exploration of various media in Malaysian art. This can be seen in the range of works produced beyond conventional art. Artists used new electronic based media and even produced collaborative works that converged practitioners from different fields. Liew Kungyu, Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Niranjan Rajah, Wong Hoy Cheong, Emil Goh, Nazim Esa, and Yee I-Lann are among artists who have contributed such works. Artists like Liew Kungyu and Wong Hoy Cheong for example, cleverly played with the boundaries of installation, video works, computer based art and performance in their art projects.

In contrast to conventional art groups established in the 1960s, alternative spaces or artist-run-spaces have also emerged and proliferated since the 1990s. Artists themselves have been the forerunners in providing these spaces. To name a few: Annexe Gallery, Rumah YKP, Gudang, Patisatustudio, SicKL, House of Matahati, Rumah Air and The Lost Generation Space.<sup>3</sup> Beyond these alternative real spaces, the internet has become a very important virtual space as it offers a very significant platform especially in terms of networking among artists and even various ways to promote art event. This could be seen from the establishment of various gallery websites that consistently post content from their current or past exhibitions. Art events can also be easily promoted through mailing-lists, web groups and social networking websites such as Facebook and even blogs. These technologies has helped Malaysian artists to find opportunities abroad through art residencies and artists exchange programs that have enabled them to collaborate and participate at an international level.

Furthermore, themes or subject matter undertaken by artists since the 1990s have addressed various issues from racial construction, urban and rural dichotomy, the critique of certain aspects of the degradation of societal values, a critique or re-evaluation of political and historical construction, and cross cultural references to Malaysian society. This could be seen in various works such as Hamir Soib's "Jawi Series" (1999) that question *Jawi* as an embodiment of Malay identity; Sylvia Lee Goh who draws from her sense of nostalgia for the Baba and Nyonya culture; and artists from East Malaysia who derive their artistic inspiration in the ethnic cultures of Borneo; and the questioning of identity becomes pertinent questions such as in Yee I-Lann's "Malaysiana Series" (2002) photo collection.

With modernization and development comes moral degradation. Hamir Soib addresses this problem among Malay youngsters in his installation "Tak Ada Beza" (*No Difference At All*) (2002). The urban and environmental degradation issues have been taken up by Chuah Chong Yong in his series of paintings and installations entitled "Pre-War Building for Sale Series" from 1996 to 2000. Political themes have been raised by Wong Hoy Cheong. The subject matter of his artworks contain political events or political names such as his early painting entitled "Detention Oct 1987 (*Tahanan ISA*)" (1989); "Lalang" performance/installation of 1994; and, "Vitrine of Contemporary Events" (1999) which is an installation of judges' wigs, police batons, objects collected from street reformation demonstrations in which the Federal Constitution is made of cow dung.

Art has been and is produced in many ways in Malaysia especially in the last two decades. This positive change in the Malaysian art scene has to be investigated thoroughly. My theoretical position might be insufficient in explaining some other aspects of the shift or change. Therefore, other researchers on other aspects and premises of Malaysian art are welcome to suggest their own understanding on Malaysian arts through their own theoretical framework. The most important issue here to create a positive, ongoing and burgeoning discourse on art and the research in the Art Academia following local and regional contexts. Though, theoretical frameworks from the West can help in terms of methodology, the most important aspect of research is to contextualize it within our own history and cultural construct. Research is a necessary application and practice to study both art from the past and of the immediate present as it will compose since it is the very fundamental aspect of who we are as a Malaysian society individually and collectively.

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Footnote

1. See Sarena Abdullah, "The Predicament of 'Art Writings' in Malaysian Art," sentApr, 03/09, Ipoh: Teratak Nuromar (2010).
2. The Academia used term is a simplistic term referring to the community of students and scholars engaged in higher education and research.
3. See Izmer Ahmad's essay in this catalogue.
4. See Sarena Abdullah, "Postmodernism in Malaysian Art," (The University of Sydney, 2010), unpublished PhD Thesis.
5. See Sharon Chin, Eva McGovern and Simon Soon, "Independent Spaces in Malaysia An Introduction," see [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2010/art\\_spaces\\_in\\_malaysia](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2010/art_spaces_in_malaysia); Internet; accessed 10 Feb 2011.