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Three decades of visual experience & intelligence:
some notes on Malaysian Young Contemporaries (YC) 1974-2004

Roots of Diversity in
Philippine Contemporary Art

A Glimpse at the Contemporary
Indonesian Art Scene

RM10
A MALAYSIAN ARTISTS' PRODUCTION

CONTENTS

Contemporary Art...Art for Society

by M.Nasir Baharuddin

6 > 7

Three Decades of Visual Experience & Intelligence:

Some Notes on Malaysian Young Contemporaries(YC) 1974-2004 (PART I)

by Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin

8 > 11

A Glimpse at the Contemporary Indonesian Art Scene

by Rifky Effendy

12 > 15

Roots of Diversity in Philippine Contemporary Art

by Riel Jaramillo Hilario

16 > 18

Chinese Maximalism: A New Artistic Methodology?

by Sarena Abdullah

19 > 22

REVIEW

Stopover at a Performance in Malaysia

by Nazim Esa

23 > 26

Some Alternatives In The Malaysian 'Young' Contemporary Art Scene

by Zaslán Zeeha and Ise

27 > 29

Editor's Note

It has been an arduous and neurotic task indeed for our little group of believers to finally give birth to this publication. Based on just maximum optimism and strong moral support from our circle of networks, this first production relies on such a shoestring budget that we had no choice but to sell advertisement space. Many thanks to those who did buy space!

I take this opportunity to thank every institution and individual for having the confidence in our team: Rahime Harun, Zanita Anuar & Amerrudin Ahmad of the National Art Gallery Malaysia, Hasnul J. Saidon of Universiti Sains Malaysia, Rafizah of Galeri Seni Maya, Sharifah Nor Akmar & Nabil of NN Gallery, Shooshie of Artspace, Tengku Elina of Pelita Hati, Rifky Effendy, Riel Hilario, Sarena Abdullah, M. Nasir Baharuddin, Juliana Yassin, Nazim Esa, Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Syed Omar and Paiman.

SENTAP!, acronym for 'Seni Tanpa Prejudis / Art Without Prejudice', was chosen as the title for this occasional publication. The Malay word 'sentap' means 'to lift or bring out, especially with a jerk'. It was blurted out by Zaslán Zeeha (a Malaysian artist who was then right away appointed as our Marketing Executive!) during our very casual brainstorming session in search of a brand.

A guinea pig in fact for this team of practising visual artists, SENTAP! will hopefully create a positive platform for the multi-faceted and diverse entities of visual art, bridging gaps between artists, both local and abroad. Happy reading!

Chinese Maximalism: A New Artistic Methodology?

Sarena Abdullah

INTEREST by the EuroAmerica artworld on contemporary arts from China is not new. Works such as *A Book from the Sky* by Xu Bing for example, had invited various studies and different scholarships not only from the Chinese, but the Western scholarship as well. Despite the current frenzy and interest on contemporary art from Asia internationally, early writings on works by Asian artists are still framed by the oriental – occidental dichotomy. This outlook, however, is currently changing with the participation of more non-Western curators in organising art exhibitions at international level. This provides a better platform for the Western audience in understanding the cultural background of the works executed without having a preconceived Western perspective framed by Western curators, who sometimes might not be as sensitive in understanding local cultures in which these works came from.

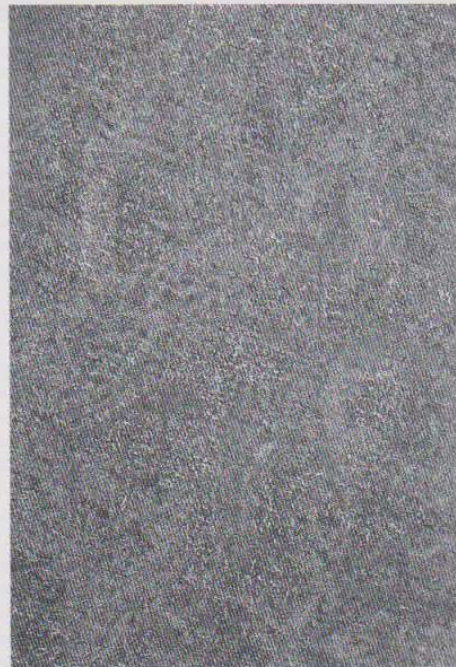
From 18 October 2003 until 31 January 2004, an exhibition entitled “Chinese Maximalism,” curated by Assistant Professor Gao Minglu was held at the Center for the Arts at the University of Buffalo Art Gallery. Gao is a lecturer at the University of Buffalo’s Department of Art History and a leading authority on Chinese art in the 20th and 21st centuries. The participating artists in the exhibition were Cao Kai, Ding Yi, Gu Dexin, Hong Hao, Lei Hong, Li Huasheng, Qin Yufen, Shen Fan, Song Tao, Wu Yiming, Xing Danwen, Xu Hongmin, Yang Zhenzhong, Zhu Jinshi and Zhu Xiaohu. This exhibition was a big contribution to the understanding of contemporary Chinese art practices as the essay that accompanies the catalogue portrayed the cultural frames in which these Chinese artists came from and examines the current artistic outlook in China.

In the exhibition catalogue, Gao theorises the current practice of Chinese contemporary artists into what he termed as “Chinese Maximalism.” In the essay, he explains that lately, a significant number of Chinese artists tend to overthrow the “meaning” of the artwork that they produced, making “meaning” insignificant and not central to these works. As a result, the art making processes of these artists tend to question the uniqueness of art objects as a privileged product of human culture. According to Gao Minglu, there are several factors that contribute to the employment of this artistic methodology. Since the 1990s, for example, there was “over interpretation” in discussing works such as Political Pop (*zhengzhi bopu*), Wang Shuo’s “rascal literature” (*pizi wenxue*) and Cynical Art in China. Besides that, the search for this alternative “metaphysical art form” could also be seen as a reaction towards the lack of methodology in Chinese contemporary art and as a reaction towards the “Orientalist” and “post colonial” assumptions often made in Western writings about Chinese contemporary art.¹

Even though, the term “Maximalism” was selected based on the dichotomy of the word Minimalism and Maximalism, Chinese Maximalism, however, is different from the practice of Minimalist Art in many ways. For example,

¹Minglu Gao, *Chinese Maximalism* (Beijing: Chongqing Publishing House, 2003), 20.

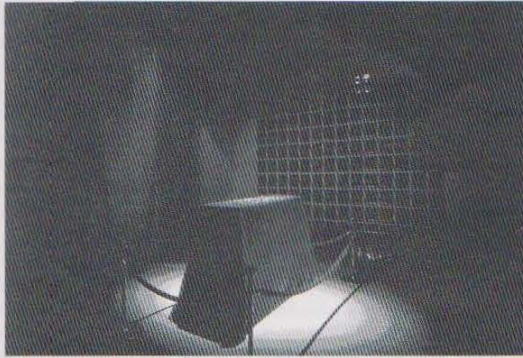
Chinese Maximalism emphasises the spiritual experience of the artist in the process of the artistic creation and their self contemplation outside and beyond the work itself. The spiritual meaning of these works cannot be interpreted by any physical manifestations, symbols or metaphors or simply from the existence of their external forms. According to Gao, the form, in this kind of work is an insignificant record of daily life. Therefore, it does not seek a certain comparison as a “complete structure” because they are restructured by many fragments, without any limits or visual completeness. Therefore, the form is not intended for the viewer, but takes responsibility for the life or artistic “logic” of the artist himself. The erosion or deconstruction of the form leads us not to the understanding of the work as a pure material object, but rather that it is a natural, fragmented, daily constructed “account-book of streaming water” (*liushui zhang*) or an everyday record of something extremely unimportant, micro-trivial and fragments of daily life. Chinese Maximalism, therefore, is indeterminately a long “time” or period of experience that could be regarded as never ending “meaningless” behaviour and labour. Within this process, however, lies the conception of “time” recording itself.



ZHU XIAOHE P55-60, *Three Court Ladies*
2002, Oil on canvas 150 x 110cm, Collection of artist



1997.6.16-1998.6.13 Performance
(Recorded on photo) 700 x 1000cm
Collection of artist



Gao enlists five artistic outlooks and praxis that underlie this group of artworks. The first praxis is that artists involved with Maximalism deny that "meaning" or content in a work should be given by the artist. The work they claim does not contain any "meaning," as it opposes self expression and representation of reality. Thus, these artists freeze their expressive desire by eliminating any intention they have during the execution of their work, compelling only to the usage of their hands, and not their brains. This is best exemplified by Wu Shanzuan's argument in the mid 1980s that "a work is like a plant, and the artist is soil. The essential nature of the plant will not affect the fertility of the soil, just as the artist's motivation will not change the meaning of his work."²

Ding Yi's Cross Series (2000-02) reflects this praxis. The paintings are neither a display of pure visual form, nor a representation of reality or nature; they are what Gao describes as "it is what it is". Removed from any humanistic connotations and therefore failing to suggest any cultural themes, the simple form enables the artist the possibility of continuous and monotonous manipulation as "what he had was only the feeling of making contact with something substantial such as brush chalk or canvas."³ The automatic colour selection and his crosses have no composition principle whatsoever -- he can start drawing crosses from one side and end up on the other or vice versa without any preconceived concepts prior to his work. The work is executed under the notion that the artists can get some spiritual release and inspirational experience, or as Ding puts it, "creative inspiration comes from the experience of continuous work; an endless, deeply engaged and open working condition makes the creativity of an artist separate from

the limitation set by his ideology."⁴

For the second praxis, Gao further underscores that there is no way of interpreting the meaning of an artwork (text) by the usage of another code (text). Since words and artistic images are regarded as two different language systems, any interpretation whether using image to illustrate words or vice versa, constitutes another text. According to Gao, the Chinese do not like to push the relation between interpretations and texts, words and images to the extreme. Hence, the usage of "the mingling of 'you' and 'I'" (nizhong youwu, wozhong youni), and the interpretive approach of "there is a painting in poetry just as there is poetry in painting" (guanshi duhua) and "viewing poetry vs. reading painting" (guanshi duhua) to bridge the gap between images and words, imagination and concepts. Zhu Xiaohe's "viewing poetry/reading painting" approach by employing colour and lines on canvas, instead of words on a page in works such as *Three Court Ladies* (2002), *Educating Children*, and *Some Night* exemplifies this notion. For example, another "text" or new painting is created by the traces formed by the crowded lines that are predominant in these works.

Gao then further highlights that these paintings do not have any consistent theme or narrative content. They only consist of painting elements such as strokes and colour fields without any semiotic function. Zhu claims that "the broken layers generated by the overdrawn lines are another form of thinking, the thought of seeing. It allows us to see, not understand. It is the expression of inner consciousness, feelings and beliefs, but the new feelings and experience of seeing."⁵ Zhu adds that "my writing (painting) is not one that is measured, expressive and has a purpose, but goes beyond writing, an overlapping writing, writing that generates another writing, which gives rise to complex and abstruse layers of small lines, making recognition and easy interpretation impossible. It transcends the clear, dull and simplified subject matter. The outer image became layers of confused lines, obscuring images, and the writing keeps overlapping and dismantling without being able to stop and coming to any conclusion."⁶ Hence, the employment of what he called "interpretive and complex writing" (jieshixing fuza shuxie), or "metaphysical operation" (xingershang yunzuo). Gao explains further that Zhu's "metaphysics," unlike Kant's, is a sort of automatic writing without any presupposition. Zhu's lines are neutral, without revolution or counter revolution, emotion, and tendencies. The local, center and overall conception leading to "de-ideologization" and the superficiality of "Chineseness" and "correctness," are resistance against the immediacy, subjectivity, conceptual representation, simple imitation and formalism in contemporary art.⁷

The third praxis of Chinese Maximalism lies within the contention that artists only pay attention to artistic process by completing the experience through different "labour" or "handicraft" forms, resulting in works which are only incomplete fragments of the "labours" or "handicrafts" forms. The incomplete fragmentation of this kind of art opposes logocentrism, a European and American tradition which seeks essence, oneness, truth and clear-cut consciousness.

² *Ibid.*, 24-25

³ *Ibid.*, 27

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28

These artists pay more attention to the process of creation and the uncertainty of meaning and instability in their work and not the final form of the work itself. Therefore, the meaning of the work is not reflected directly, because these artists believe that what is in their mind at the moment may not necessarily appear in their work. Hence, these artists, through repetitions and "meaningless" labouring repeat the same movement or form, are eliminating their desire for self-expression in order to reach the distillation of meditation and pure spirituality. Gao explains further that although continuousness, repetition, and monotonous "labour" constitutes the physical forms in their work, these physical forms always fail to convey ideas. This is because the meaning changes every moment, like a monk chanting the Buddhist Amitabha, in which every chant is a result of a moment related to the extent of his understanding of meditation. Therefore, meaning in Maximalism is never static, like a materialistic form imbedded in western influenced modern art and could never embrace the real meaning as the work is only based on experience.

Gao exemplifies this point by highlighting Gu Dexin's work 1997.6.16-1998.6.13, created from 1997 to 1998. The artist documented his act of pinching a piece of pork everyday until it dries. The unique and strange feeling in this action is shared with us through his photo documentation even though we can never directly relate to the experience. The photo documentation of the event was displayed neatly with the arranged pieces of dried pork as a part of the installation that commemorated the process. Even though the photos cannot cover the whole process of Gu's action, Gao highlights that from the installation we can imagine Gu pinching the "water" and "blood" out of dead life, while no sign of meaning, boredom, catharsis, nausea can be revealed to the audience.

The fourth praxis, as suggested by Gao, lies in the notion that the unfolding of the "meaning" of a work could be limitless to the extreme that it enfolds "nothingness" (*wu*). According to Gao, "nothingness" cannot be represented by any form, for "gigantic form is intangible" (*da xiang you xing*). However, Maximalism intimates infinity and endlessness of "numbers" by the usage of repetition of quantities. This is influenced by the concept of the One Thousand Buddha and cultural influences such as the Chinese laudatory phrases such as "long life" (*wan sui*, literally "live ten thousand years"), or "longevity" (*wan shou wu jiang*, literally "live forever"). So "many," besides implying infinity, also denotes something hollow and insubstantial in spite of the orderly, reasonable and neat appearances of the work.

Artists such as Hong Hao created a modern version of *A Dream Chronicle* of Dong Jing using digital technology. Using his scanner, he scanned all the articles that he uses everyday and arranged these images into a series of "abstract paintings" using computer software. From afar, the work is difficult to understand, but when one approaches the work, the "surrealistic" "useful things" break away from their utilitarian nature. But to the Chinese, the process of copying, manipulating, describing and counting these things is a kind of pleasure in and of itself, an enlightenment of the way that is both truth, and *wudao*.⁸

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35

Gao in his final praxis questions the possibility whether Zen is the final destination of Maximalism. This is because Maximalism has a close affinity with Buddhism as the separation of the artwork from its meaning is similar to the "not writing words" doctrine of the Chan (Zen) sect. Maximalism stipulates the understanding of work through the artists' personal experience is similar to "meditation," the belief that truth is nihilistic and meaning is groundless is similar to the ontological nihilism of Southern Buddhism, and the process of creation as repetitious "labour" and "production" is similar to the Confucian school of idealist philosophy of the Southern Song Dynasty. Gao claims that the theory of Maximalism is in agreement with the life principle that advocates a peaceful frame of mind, lack of desire, and aspiring to an almost "trivial" life and tranquil nature. The giant size and endless repetitive forms of Maximalist work, even though they seem to be in opposition to their artistic life and philosophy, are similar to the concept of "eternal space" and "infinite time" produced by Mao's ideology or they may even actually try to deconstruct previous Maoist ideology and avant-garde ideology such as idealism and anti-idealism. Gao further suggested that Maximalism can also be interpreted as a kind of reaction to the changing urban environment and social life in Shanghai, in which contemporary Chinese intellectuals and artists were strongly brought up within the domain of Zen philosophy, especially on the notion that Zen never lies in the romantic environment and the imaginative; rather it exists in the realities of everyday life.



HONG HAO, *My Things No. 15*,
2001-2003, 127 x 216cm (5 pieces)
Collection of artist

Shen Fan P96-101
96-P-15, 1996, Oil on paper
96 x 96cm (9 pieces)



Gao suggested that Shen Fan's artworks best describe this notion. Shen Fan's 96-P-15 (1996) painting does not integrate any abstract frame of thinking at all. His method remains the same; pressing canvas onto half-dried pigment or using a tube as a brush, directly squeezing pigment onto canvas. As pointed out by Wu Liang, Shen Fan's work has nothing to do with daily life whatsoever but features the philosophical nature of daily life in the real world through labour, repetition, overlapping, propagation, meaninglessness, helplessness, reclusiveness, and anti-heroic and unexpressive gestures in the execution of the work. These remarks resemble a "sweeping and cleaning courtyard all containing truth" and traditional Zen philosophy that in order to reach the level of Zen realm, one must keep doing the boring things not for a few days but for many years of one's entire life.³⁸

Gao claims that Chinese Maximalism should not be considered as an intellectual movement or a rigid style. This is because the artists involved are not intimately connected and there is no collective declaration of any artistic principles. It must be noted, however, that the importance of his essay lies in the way that he looks at the cultural frames in which these works were produced and suggests how these cultural frames influenced these artists and their art process. By highlighting these cultural frameworks, he defies the single Western universal concept in discussing contemporary art. Even though some of these works looks like Minimalist Art and even Abstract Expressionist styles, these artists actually do not employ the same artistic methodology as their Western colleagues. This is because their artistic reactions are derived from their own cultural and social experience in which they came from. Therefore, in discussing contemporary artworks by non-Western artists, reference to any Western styles should be employed cautiously. Most of the time, these artworks are not derived from the same reaction on the Western social changes or what is happening in the Euro America art world and their ongoing aesthetics discourse.

As contemporary art from non-Western countries start to gain attention in the international art world, new aggressive efforts should be taken especially by non-Western curators and art historians in understanding these latest developments. More serious and rigorous writings on certain artists or certain artistic outlooks should be investigated. Since the 1990s, the world has shifted to a new phase of information abundance and this new global happening has deeply touched the way we live in and affected the kind of lifestyle that we are used to. The advancement of technology and unfortunately global capitalism too are inevitable, certain artists embrace them, certain artists reject them and a few observe the societal change cautiously. This definitely affects, either directly or indirectly, the way artists look at the changing culture, society, economy and politics. Therefore, discussing the changes happening in the art world locally, regionally and globally is vital as it provides us a platform in understanding our changing culture. This definitely invites a new challenge in writing and understanding artworks and encourage us as art historians to counter the Western meta-narrative that long reigns the writings of world art history. ■

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 41

Note: This essay relies heavily on the Chinese Maximalism exhibition catalogue entitled Chinese Maximalism written by Gao Minglu, published in Beijing by Chongqing Publishing House in 2003. The exhibition was initially premiered at the Millennium Museum in Beijing. The University of Buffalo Art Gallery is the only United States venue of this two-stop exhibition. More than 65 works by 15 contemporary Chinese artists were exhibited in the collaborative exhibition between the UB Art Gallery and the Millennium Museum in Beijing, China.

SARENA ABDULLAH was born in Perak, Malaysia in 1976. She obtained her Diploma in Interior Design (Gallery Design) from the Mara University of Technology, Malaysia and B.Sc (Hons) in Interior Design (Museum Design) from the Science University of Malaysia (USM).

Sarena received her MA in Art History, University At Buffalo, New York and is currently a full time PhD student of Art History at the University of Sydney, Australia.