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Sarena Abdullah

malaysian postmodern art and its strategies

Abstract

Since the 1990s, there has emerged a plural tendency in Malaysian arts practices. A new breed of young artists had discarded the pursuit of national identity despite the implementation of and emphasis on the Malay-Islamic based cultural preferences endorsed by the Malaysian government. Art works produced began to become more diverse. Multi-dimensional art forms such as installations and performances, and electronic media such as video and cameras began to be used. Works about non-Malay cultures and different lifestyles began to be exhibited in the National Art Gallery (NAG) and entered into the Young Contemporary Awards (Bakat Seni Sezaman). These outlooks can be discussed, and have been suggested, to be postmodern as they are almost parallel in time line, or have the outlook of Western postmodern art. These postmodern outlooks, or rather the plurality of Malaysian art, however, are not new. Redza Piyadasa, in discussing Malaysian art development in Malaysia argues that there were a few postmodernists in the mid 1970s and one of them was an exhibition entitled "Towards a Mystical Reality". This paper will discuss three postmodern art strategies in Malaysia, conceptualised through "Towards a Mystical Reality," allegory and appropriation.



Introduction

This paper will try to fill the gap in understanding "Malaysian postmodern art" as proposed by the late Redza Piyadasa (1939-2007) in two of his papers published in the early 1990s. The first paper was presented by Piyadasa at a conference held at Australian National University, Canberra in 1991 and was later published in *Modernity in Asian Art* (ed. John Clark)¹ in 1993, and the second paper, which is similar to the first, was published in *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific* (ed. Caroline Turner)².

In both papers, Redza Piyadasa discussed the chronological overview of the developments in Malaysia art from about 1945 until the 1990s. Though presenting the chronology of Malaysian art was not new in his writings,³ what interests me is that for the first time he closed his chronological development by touching on the issue of postmodern art in Malaysia under the topic of "The postformalist and postmodernist from mid-1970s to the 1990s". In this section Piyadasa mentions that Malaysian artists have not been much involved in postmodernist pursuit except for a few isolated developments in the mid 1970s, basically through his joint exhibition with Sulaiman Esa entitled "Towards a Mystical Reality" in 1974.

To date, the postmodern artistic approach in Malaysian art has never been investigated comprehensively. Generally, Malaysian art works have somewhat adhered to abstraction and the Abstract Expressionist style since the 1960s. These tendencies are doubly entrenched after the 1971 National Cultural Policy and the 1970s Islamic resurgence in Malaysia as these sty-

1 "Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period" was presented by Redza Piyadasa at the conference held by the Humanities Research Centre and the Department of Art History, Australian National University, Canberra in 1991. The paper was later published in Redza Piyadasa, "Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period" in *Modernity in Asian Art*: John Clark (Ed), Broadway, NSW: Wild Peony and The University of Sydney East Asian Series Number 7, 1993.

2 The second paper, which is almost similar to the first, one was published under the "Modern Malaysian Art, 1945-1991: A Historical Review," in *Tradition and Change*, Caroline Turner (Ed), St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1991.

3 See Redza Piyadasa, "Perkembangan Seni Lukis Malaysia Kini" in *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan: Menghadungi Kertaskeja Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan Darul 16th Digos - 20th Digos 1971* Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan, 1973; Redza Piyadasa, "Modern Malaysian Art" in *Festival: Contemporary Asian Art Show*, Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1980; Redza Piyadasa, "Modernist Art Developments in Malaysia and Singapore 1920-1960" in *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia*, Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1998; Redza Piyadasa, "Modern Malaysian Art - an Introduction" in *Contemporary Malaysian Art*, Tokyo: Asian Cultural Centre, 1992.

listic approaches were employed by mainstream Malay artists as they recognised the need to exalt Malay cultural roots and their Islamic belief in their work. As a result, postmodern stylistic approaches that have emerged since the 1970s have been sidelined and not well discussed in the context of Malaysian art history to date.

There is a huge need for discussing the post-modern tendencies in Malaysian art development. Since the 1990s, artistic approaches having such tendencies have been prevalent. In both essays, for example, Piyadasa may be argued to be highlighting some works to be postmodern based on the usage of media. For example, he posits late Ismail Zain's "Digital Collage" exhibition in 1989 as postmodern based on the media and the approach of the work. He claims it is "impersonal", "highly mechanised", "juxtapositioned with images from mass culture" and "questioning previously accepted modes of perception and cognition".⁴ Piyadasa further exemplifies several works such as Wong Hoy Cheong and Marian D'Cruz's performance, Wong Hoy Cheong's "Sook Ching" (1990) video work, "2 Installations" (1991) by Liew Kungyu, and Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin and Zulkifli Yusof's "Power Series" installation works. At that time he wrote "[f]or the most part, however, post-modernist concerns seem peripheral in the story of modern Malaysian art" and "Post-modernist concerns seem, as yet, a fairly new development within the Malaysian art scene".⁵

Since then, development of Malaysia art has flourished with various artworks produced by artists graduated from local and overseas universities or art institutions. There are a lot of art activities through exhibitions and collective events, art groups that provide alternative or artist-run galleries have burgeoned, and there are more international exhibitions and residencies opportunities that expose artists to global trends. If we look back at the past 20 years, contemporary Malaysian art has become an exposé of subtle criticism of the changing Malaysian society. Sometimes painting is blurred into sculpture or made into an installation. New media such as photography, computers, video and television, and other unconventional material were used as artists began to explore various possibilities. The "aura" from works, especially among younger artists, has changed from the generation that espoused Malay and Islamic aesthetic ideals. Some artists produce montages of images and paintings that create a sense of unease or uncertainty and if some of the representational genres seem to be drawn from traditional cultural elements, such elements have been worked or reworked, creating a distinctly new visual and emotional experience. Sometimes subtle comments were made by the title of the work and statements to provoke dialogue about the social, political or economic situation in Malaysia. The current theme seeks to address the contemporary Malaysian condition or experience from the social, racial, ethnic, gender, political, environmental, or urban viewpoints. With the changing aesthetic and artistic approach, these changes need to be evaluated and examined.

4 Piyadasa, "Modern Malaysian Art, 1945-1991: A Historical Review", 70.
5 Ibid. and Piyadasa, "Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period", 181.



The term postmodern, as employed by Piyadasa in his two essays, is apparently not about the confrontational sequence to modern art or the reaction to modern art's obsession with purifying its form or a reference to the art produced after the "death" of modern art. Postmodern art as advocated by Piyadasa in his essays is deeply rooted in Malaysia's local and regional condition as it employs different strategies from the mainstream artists who employ a celebratory approach of Malay culture and Islam in their work. Three of the major strategies underlining works that can be deemed to be postmodern are the conceptual approach, allegory and appropriation, which will be discussed further in this paper.

The earliest work that is dubbed to be postmodern is "Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Suleiman Esa", in 1974. It is, first and foremost, the artists' reaction towards Malaysian art especially and Asian art generally. Malaysia art, they suggest, can only become productive and creative when artists begin to function on a different level.⁶ The artists argued that Malaysian modernist artists today, as well as Asian modernists, "are beset with the dilemma of having to employ idioms and styles which are not together indigenous to their own cultural traditions".⁷ The artists engaged in a postcolonial discourse through the exhibition, by insinuating the dilemmas of artists in postcolonial countries, by provoking the need to contest and reject Western art history, and by borrowing from Asian philosophies. The aim of the exhibition was to raise these questions and provide some alternative solutions to this artistic dilemma.

The exhibition and its conceptual approach was a very clear example of conceptual art as discussed by Ursula Meyer.⁸ The "manifesto" even draws attention to its anti-formalist and anti-aesthetic stance, and underscores the influence of Conceptual art:

6. Suleiman Esa and Redza Piyadasa, *Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Suleiman Esa*, Kuala Lumpur, 1974, 5.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc, 1972.

We were at that time fully aware of the "anti-formalist" developments which had taken place in the west during the 1960s... Our attention was inevitably drawn to such "anti-art" artists as the Dadaists, Marcel Duchamp, Yves-Klein, Piero Manzoni, Tinguely and John Cage (the composer of "silent music")... The realization that it WAS POSSIBLE to jettison all formalistic and aesthetic considerations from the work of art drew us quite inevitably to the notion of art as Conceptual experience.⁹

Meyer highlights that "(a)n essential aspect of Conceptual Art is its self-reference; often the artists define the intentions of the work as part of their art. Thus many Conceptual artists advance propositions or investigation."¹⁰ The "manifesto" advanced their proposition in six parts, from highlighting the problem in the first part, to their proposed solution in the final part. By doing so, they are both artists and art critics, eliminating that division by framing their own propositions, ideas and concepts, and criticising the existing Malaysia art development at that time.

The exhibition put up everyday objects in the exhibition space, advocating the temporality aspects of time-events based on Zen/Taoism as an alternative to the Abstract Expressionist and Constructivist tendencies happening in Malaysia art in the 1960s. They adopted an anti-formalist and anti-aesthetic stance and advocated a new way of confronting reality based on how the audience should "conceive" reality through concepts instead of "seeing"

things through visual or retinal images. There is no doubt, however, that the exhibition was postmodern in its essential sense, as it expressly involved deconstructing what makes a work "art" in the West by suggesting an alternative aesthetics based on the Eastern Zen/Taoism philosophy. The Zen/Taoism philosophy that they presented views the object as an "event" rather than as "form" and presupposes the object's existence within "an interrelated field or continuum":¹¹

It seems necessary at this point to state that all our works, whilst remaining static are nevertheless "kinetic" for they encompass time/space considerations. The time factor in our works is very much a "mental" time. The experience of the fourth dimension exists in the mind of the form transcends the "object-ness" and exist primarily as documentations of "events." we are not interested in the formal and aesthetic considerations. we are interested in the processes that they are. whereas the western artist approaches art in terms of "spatio-temporal/sensorial" considerations, we are approaching art from a "mental/meditative/mystical" standpoint.¹²

Through the manifesto, the artists had managed to make the ideational premise of the work known, a contrast to other contemporary art of that time attending almost exclusively to its appearance. As Meyer highlighted, the premise of art has changed: "Art as idea, art as knowledge, documentation, elimination of art object

⁹ Redza Piyadasa and Sulrman Esa, 9.
¹⁰ Meyer, vii.

¹¹ Redza Piyadasa and Sulrman Esa, 19.
¹² Ibid., 20.



- eliminates the concern with 'style', 'quality', and 'permanence', material properties and esthetic qualities are secondary."¹³ "Mystical Reality", by approaching the problem pertaining to Malaysian art conceptually, succeeded in being the earliest postmodernist art in Malaysia as it venerates the concept or idea involved in art making, and rejects the concern of aesthetics and style of Malaysian artists at that time. The postmodernist tendencies are further supported as the "manifesto" criticises the idea of "uniqueness" of the artist by organising a joint exhibition "to playdown individualistic considerations as far as that was possible"¹⁴ They also reacted against the commodification of art by discarding the works after the show, emphasising that the idea is more important than the artifact. Though the "manifesto" may be faulted for its inconsistency and for forwarding unsupportable claims and assertions,¹⁵ they succeeded in confronting, offending or attacking notions held by artists at that time.

It must be noted that Malaysian artists may not see themselves as postmodern artists, but some aspects of their art making is arguably influenced by the Euro-America postmodern strategies. In the limited discussion of postmodernist art in Malaysia, allegory as the characteristic of postmodernist work has never been discussed or mentioned. However, it must be noted that the concept of "allegory" should not be seen as a totally Western phenomenon because other cultures have a similar concept in their literatures, folk stories and folk theatre. It is important to mention that the Malay language is full of elements such as "peribahasa" (proverb), "simpulan bahasa" (metaphor), and "kiasan" (allegory). Traditional Malay society is not confrontational or assertive in nature, thus, these forms of analogy are used in delicate situations: to express one's feeling or opinion, to give a compliment, to give advice metaphorically, or to convey a deeper and personal intent. Besides language, traditional forms of entertainment such as *wayang kulit* (Malay shadow puppet theatre) and Malay folk tales have also been widely used to advise and disseminate moral lessons suitable to the Malay audience.

13 Meyer vs.
 14 Redza Piyadasa and Suleiman Esa. 12.
 15 TK Sabapathy, *Pjyadasa: An Interview, 1962-2000*. Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara. 2001. 55.

As a postmodern aesthetic strategy, Craig suggests allegory is "an attitude as well as a technique, perception as well as a procedure".¹⁶ Owens claims that since allegorical structure is "one text read through another", allegorical imagery has become appropriated imagery in which an artist "lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hand the image becomes something other (...). He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does only so to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement".¹⁷

In *wayang kulit*, the stories that are being narrated in the shows are allegorical in nature and have become a source of inspiration for artists like Syed Thajudeen in his works. Most of Syed Thajudeen's paintings are lyrical and romantic in nature and as a result act as a reminder of the glorious past. Nirmala Shanmugalingham's work, however, managed to strike a controversial note.

Friends in Need (1986) was removed before the opening of the "Side by Side: Contemporary British and Malaysian Art" show in 1986, along with her other work, *Save the Seed That Will Save the Black People*. *Friends in Need* (1986) is an anti-war statement on the US on the bombing of Libya, supported by Margaret Thatcher. As a result of Nirmala's research into the arts

and crafts of Southeast Asia, especially shadow puppet theatre, Ronald Reagan is personified by the *wayang kulit* character Raksasa Tjakil, the arch villain on the left. Raksasa Tjakil was chosen for Reagan because the character wears two keris (a Malay dagger which signifies warring tendencies) and is a war like creature. Margaret Thatcher on the right is seen as a bare-breasted *wayang kulit* figure called Raseksi. She is the wife to the demon in the *wayang kulit* story. Nirmala chose Raseksi because the creature has a strong physical likeness to the British Prime Minister. These *wayang kulit* figures were juxtaposed with photographs of a child killed in the attack and the newspaper cutout from which the title was derived.¹⁸

Sharmiza Abu Hassan too was inspired by the allegorical abundance in "Bahasa Kiasan Melayu" (Malay allegories) which is slowly being forgotten by modern Malays themselves. She presented the legend of Puteri Gunung Ledang, turning Puteri Gunung Ledang's request to Sultan Mahmud from a literary form to a visual form:

Membina jambatan emas dan Jambatan perak dari Melaka ke Gunung Ledang, Menyediakan hati nyamuk tujuh dulang; hati kuman tujuh dulang; air mata setempayan; air pinang muda setempayan; darah Raja semangkuk dan darah anaknya, Raja Ahmad, semangkuk.

A bridge of gold and silver from Melaka to Gunung Ledang; and for a betrothal gift let there be

16 Craig Owens, "Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism" in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Eds), UK and USA: Blackwell, 1992; reprint, 1995, 105-1.

17 Ibid.

18 Ahmad Fauzi, "The Very Private Nirmala", *New Straits Times*, 2 October 1986.



seven trays of mosquito hearts, seven trays of the hearts of mites, a vat of the tears of virgin maidens, a vat of water from dried areca nuts, a cup of Raja's blood and a cup of his son's blood.

By using common materials and forms that are familiar to the Malays, like the *kacip* (nut cracker), *kuali* (wok) and *tudung saji* (food cover), Sharmiza explores the concave/convex shape of the cast iron wok and wiremesh. She symbolically invites the viewers to sieve through their literal understanding of the legend and think of the symbolic meanings behind them. The *kacip*, on the other hand, is a tool that is traditionally used in Malay weddings and engagements as a part of the betrothal and wedding gifts to the bride. The story is interwoven with history, legendary figures and fables with morals about challenging the mindset of those in power, as the requests made by Puteri Gunung Ledang to Sultan Mahmud can be allegorically interpreted as an indirect criticism of leaders who sometimes lack endurance, courage, ingenuity and most of all reason. In other words, it is the kind of artwork that has both an apparent and a deeper sense or meaning, or works with layers of meaning that seem to contradict each other but yet coexist and are apparent together in the work, so that the work never comes to rest on a single interpretation, especially when it is read in the context of the Malaysian political climate.

Owen further suggests that the link between allegory and contemporary art could be seen from works of "artists who generate images through the reproduction of other images. The appropriated image may be a film still, a photograph, a drawing; it is often itself already a reproduction. However, the manipulations to which these artists subject such images work to empty them of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning".¹⁹ So in discussing postmodern art strategies, one cannot avoid discussing appropriation as another strategy that has been used ingeniously by several Malaysian artists.

Nirmala Shanmugalingham has used appropriation techniques in manifesting social and political concerns. In addition to the work that I have discussed previously, Nirmala's appropriation has its early roots in her

¹⁹ Owen, 105-154.

mixed media and montage work, from *Glimpses of Civilisation* (1967), *Statement 1* (1973) to her silk-screen prints of children and war themes in the 1980s. In the visual arts, the term appropriation refers to the use of borrowed elements in the creation of new work. In Nirmala's work, these borrowed images were mostly from photographs and newspaper prints. In the case of Nirmala's *Statement 3* (1975–79), photographs of children from Mile 4 Village, Damansara Road in 1975 and 1979 were arranged comparatively with photographs of development in Damansara Hill and Bangsar in 1975. Though the work was presented straightforwardly, the usage of photography prints as a part of a visual artwork was still relatively quite new in Malaysia at that time and should be seen as an important breakthrough that leads to other appropriating techniques employed by other artists.

Piyadasa's Malaysian Series has taken a step further in appropriating photographic images into his mixed media and collages on boards. In the series, Piyadasa appropriated old portraits and family portraits of Malays, Chinese, Indian and other communities who make up the history of modern Malaysia. Some of the works in the series created in the 1990s used repetitive images. As TK Sabapathy highlights:

In Mamak Family, the intentions are markedly different. The means are mechanical; the scheme on register is similar; differences are registered by altering tonal values in each frame. The mechanical reproduction of imagery in single or multiple forms serves to devalue the image as uniquely created aesthetic entity and diminish its aura; it

is a process which serves to consolidate the material presence of the image in a stubborn, insistent, unyielding sense.²⁰

Since the 1990s, Piyadasa has also used cultural images, such as those on batik, in his composition material, and also some aspects of popular culture like magazine cutouts. His work is filled with colours, cutting and pasting, mixing and matching, photographs appropriated from different periods and histories and presented in a different time. As Zainol Abidin Sharif asserts:

His mixed media collages incorporating silk-screens of old photographs emerged amidst the government's Islamisation programme. And if Piyadasa was not deaf to the calls from the minarets, he also was not blind to the obvious connections between ethnicity and Islam echoing in the country. His images of recent ancestors of present-day Malaysians are aesthetic reaction echoing the latent and manifest fears of Malaysians, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, of political and social marginalization. They offer us reminders of the historical background to present-day Malaysian social make-up; of multi-cultural realities; of migration and cultural assimilation; of traditions and heritage; of political and social history. They beckon Malaysian to confront their past—The Baba Family, The Indian family, The Haji Family, in their frontal photographic depictions, all look the viewer in their eye.²¹

20 Sabapathy, 93.

21 Abidin Ahmad Shariff, "Towards an Aligned-Native Vision: The Idea of Malaysian Art since 1980" in *Visitor and Idea: Refashioning Modern Malaysian Art*, Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994, 87–83.



The issue of Malaysianness has also been raised by another Malaysian artist with digital appropriation. Yee I-Lan's *Malaysiana Series* (2002) appropriated collections of negative documents belonging to Pakard Photo Studio in Melaka from 1977 to 1982. Through the mass of studio photographs, the artist allows the audience to see themselves represented through the constructs of the studio genre. In her statement, she claims, "This fascinating collaborative theatre created by the photographer and the photographed make a fabulous composite of Malaysian-ness. This rare collection of negatives documents archives us and our histories; they permeate and haunt our popular culture with an innocent coarseness and permanence."²²

The artist puts the audience in the position of questioning whose photographs they are. Who is the author or artists? Are the photos a socio-cultural document? What does the representation mean to the public? The work offers multiple possibilities for an understanding of authorship. It is postmodern in the sense that it dismantles the distinction between the centre and the periphery, and challenges the ideas of originality, the social sources and the uses of art.

Since the 1990s, the usage of allegory and appropriation as a procedure in artwork has become more complex. Unlike in the 1970s and 1980s, works done since the 1990s are more fused and enmeshed and have become complex and personal, offering many readings. The *Great Supper* (1999) by Eng Hwee Chu, for example, could be seen as an attempt to adopt a broader approach to artistic creativity as artists are more exposed to discourse and issues related to postmodern, globalisation and pluralism understandings in the artistic world today. Highlighting issues related to the self and the "Other", notions of women and minority identity, multiethnic cultural values, and cultural dislocation, Eng's work used both allegory and appropriation, inviting various interpretations and readings in order to understand the multiracial and multicultural realities of modern Malaysia.

²² *Malaysiana Series* Through Rose-Colored Glasses, Artist's statement.

The work is dominated by several montages of images telling stories that are personal to the artist. In the centre, the image of the crab-eating red woman had been juxtaposed with the figure of the toddler on her lap looking upwards towards her. Physically the woman (which could be a self-portrait of the artist herself) is there and yet not really there as her image subsides into the dark background, creating a silhouette of herself that perhaps trails away at the left edge of the work. The mirror and the Chinese family group eating the great supper on the right side could be seen as a cultural identification of the artist with the Chinese society in which she belongs. The mirror at the top of the work is reflective of the audience as if suggesting those women are automatically born with gendered roles and to uphold a cultural burden. This is further reiterated by the thick walls and the bars on the left side of the work.

This work by Eng Hwee Chu reflects how post-modern aesthetic strategies have become more complex, intricate and needed to be understood and explicated, especially to a Malaysian audience, and I hope this paper has in some way highlighted some strategies that can be considered, especially in understanding artworks that have been produced in the last twenty years.



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