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WHERE ART HAPPENS • PIYADASA - OBOR YANG TELAH PADAM • THE FIRST INTERNET ART IN MALAYSIA



a malaysian artists' production

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Ooi Kok Chuen

The Early Postmodern Artistic Strategies in Malaysian Art¹

Sarena Abdullah

FROM the 1990s, a plural tendency emerged in Malaysian arts practices. A new breed of young artists had discarded the pursuit of national identity despite the implementation 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 began to be produced. Works about non-Malay culture and different lifestyles began to be exhibited in the National Art Gallery (NAG) and entered in the Young Contemporary Awards (Bakat Muda Sezaman). Such developments have been associated with the development of postmodern art in the international art world. These postmodern outlooks however, are not new. As I will argue in this paper, postmodern artistic tendencies in the development of Malaysian art can be traced to as early as the late 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, a few Malaysian artists began to advance the idea that the contemporary

art works produced should be based on the "cerebral" rather than "emotion," or forms of expression that place an emphasis on mental and analytical discipline rather than emotional and manual dexterity.²

In the context of the development of Malaysian art, this new preoccupation and emphasis on the cerebral and the conceptual aspects of art making should be investigated in the context of the prevalence of works that falls under the rubric of "Abstract Expressionist." The stylistic approach of the "Abstract" and the "Abstract Expressionists" were regarded as the "mainstream" of Malaysian art for almost three decades from the 1960s till the late 1980s. T.K. Sabapathy explains that during the 1960s, such development was understood in relation to the Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism approach parallel with the international art practice at that time. He explains that during this time,

1. This paper was presented at Australian Centre for Asian Art and Archaeology (ACAAA) Seminar Series and Public Lectures, Department of Art History and Film Studies, University of Sydney, 22nd October 2008.
2. Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, *Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa* (Kuala Lumpur: 1974), 6.

"... Expressionism attained a singular climax in the West. The emphasis was on an experimental and intuitive approach to the processes of perception, and the use of formal and material elements. Art activity was regarded primarily as an expressive act. Painting presented itself as an art of gesture, consisting of fluent or amorphous structures and beckoning with large individual liberties. It could be understood as the record of an act, for the vital signs of personal involvement and spontaneous involvement and spontaneous invention were left conspicuously visible. The artist's preoccupation with the process rather than the finished product was conveyed by agitated brushstrokes, fragmented forms and internalised imagery."³

Though such an approach was dominant among the newly returned artists during the 1960s, the approach was further reinstated since the 1971 Malaysia's National Cultural Policy and the late 1970s Islamisation Policy.⁴ As TK Sabapathy observes in 1994,

"In the production of art itself, the hold of Abstract Expressionism appears to be strong despite the changing times and the emergence of alternative gestures. New art manifestations that arose in the 1970s, expressed for example in the Redza Piyadasa-Sulaiman Esa exhibition called "Towards a Mystical Reality", have not been sufficiently compelling to inspire dissenting art movements powerful enough to nudge Abstract Expressionism from its hegemonic position. Art reflecting the global Islamic revivalism in the 1980s has either aligned itself with tendencies in Abstract Expressionism or found kinship with decorative art."⁵

It must be noted that the term "Abstract Expressionists" has been used to describe various artists and works of the New York School, from Pollock's "action painting," to Willem de Kooning's violent and grotesque *Women* series and to Mark Rothko's colour field paintings. Similarly, the term has also been used loosely to describe the works of Malaysian artists that are spontaneous, automatic and filled with emotional intensity, moving towards abstraction or non-representational art. Jolly

3. T.K. Sabapathy, "Introduction," in *Modern Artists of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1983), 14.

4. Sarena Abdullah, "The Shaping of Modern Art Identity in Malaysia" (Unpublished thesis, SUNY at Buffalo, 2005). See Chapter Three.

5. T.K. Sabapathy, "Introduction," in *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 7.

Syed Ahmad Jamal

The Bait

1959

Oil on board, 122 x 154cm.

Collection: National Art Gallery Malaysia





Redza Piyadasa, *Terengganu 3*, 1969, Acrylic on Plywood, 168 x 154 x 45 cm. Collection: National Art Gallery Malaysia

Koh argues that though the stylistic idioms of Malaysian artists of late 1950s and 1960s were mainly Cubism and Expressionism, these artists were actually heterogeneous. Syed Ahmad Jamal's "expressionists" (FIGURE ONE) work were more cheery and colorful in comparison with Latif Mohidin's dark and brooding Germanic mood. Though Yeoh Jin Leng and Jolly Koh's own work have been associated with Mark Rothko's works, he argued that both he and Yeoh Jin Leng were influenced by the English landscape tradition. Ibrahim Hussein on the other hand has been argued to have been influenced by the Pop Art through his mixed medias and realistic and semi-realistic rendition. The association of these artists under the general description of "Abstract Expressionists" first culminated in a group exhibition called "GRUP" in 1967 at the then

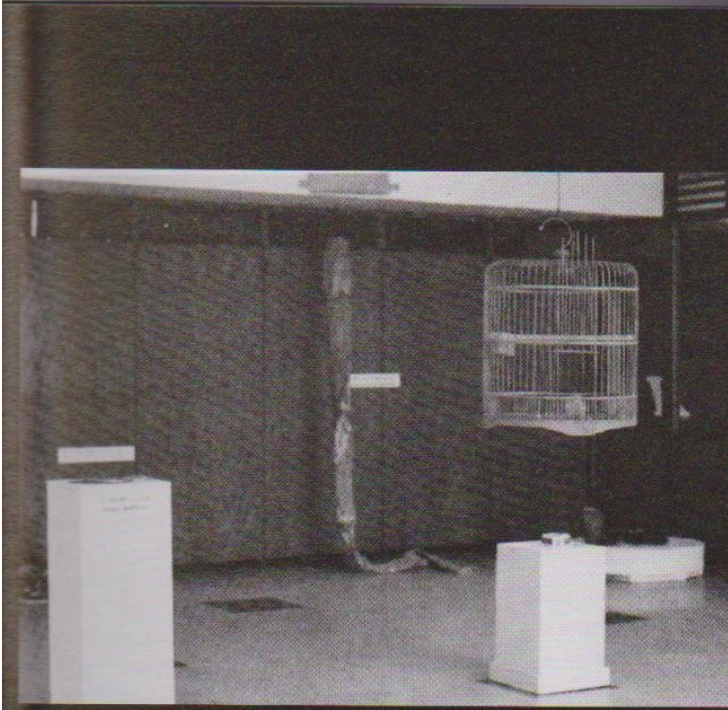
AIA Insurance Building on Ampang Road,⁶ and subsequently in 1974, an exhibition entitled "The Expressionists of the 1960s" was held.

In the decades that followed, "Abstract Expressionism" as an aesthetic strategy was well accepted with the advent of 1971 National Cultural Policy that is based on Malay culture and Islamic beliefs. For example, Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff observes that Islamic reading can be easily imposed on "abstract" works that shunned figurative representation. This is not, he argues, necessarily because of Islamic interdiction but because they are very much influenced with the abstraction of the international avant-garde.⁷ In the subsequent decades of 1970s and 1980s, works that employed the "Abstract Expressionists" strategies proliferated. Artists like Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir, Yusof Ghani, Mohd Fauzin Mustaffa, Ismail Abdul Latif, Tajuddin Ismail, Khalil Ibrahim are among those who were consistently working with such an approach. These artists worked with abstracted forms and imagery, using colours, stressing lines, and emphasises on the simplification of forms. An argument can be made that such consistent engagement of Malay artists with an Abstract Expressionists approach is that such style enables artists to explore their personal interests by abiding by Islamic tenets, as the approach shuns any realistic rendition such as of human and animal figures.

Despite the so-called dominance of Abstract Expressionism from the late 1960s towards late 1980s, the early 1970s witnessed a few "alternative aesthetic" attempts in Malaysian art. Artists who promoted these perspectives were those who arrived in Britain in mid-60s, a time that coincided with the change in the principles of art education in that country. A few of these leading English art colleges, introduced the "Basic Design" subject founded upon "Bauhaus" pedagogy. The *Bauhaus* teachings emphasise the analytical and investigative aspects of visual perception and the structural properties of visual design rather than the emotive-intuitive approach of previous academic traditions. Consequently, a course in the "Dynamics of Basic Design" was made required to all students and a cluster of subjects under Liberal Studies were introduced. Though the new approaches were not implemented uniformly and simultaneously in all the colleges of art in England, much of the agitation for changes in art education was initiated by Hornsey

6. Dr. Jolly Koh, "Some Misconceptions in Art Writing in Malaysia," *sentAp! 5* (2007): 6.

7. Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff, "Towards an Alter-Native Vision: The Idea of Malaysian Art since 1980," in *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 84-85.



Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa,
"Mystical Reality", 1974, View of the Mystical Reality exhibition held at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1974.

College of Art in London in which two Malaysian artists, Sulaiman Esa and Redza Piyadasa were enrolled.

Redza Piyadasa quite consistently initiated the so-called "alternative aesthetics" for almost the whole decade of the 1970s. The New Scene (1969), eksperimen '70 (1970), Dokumentasi '72 (1972) and *Mystical Reality* (1974) were the few early exhibitions that attempt to challenge and displace the Abstract Expressionist aesthetic values that was dominant in the practices of the newly returned artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal and Latif Mohidin. Redza Piyadasa, alongside Sulaiman Esa, Tan Teong Eng, Tan Teong Kooi, Tang Tuck Kan, and Choong Kam Kow, were the few early artists that posit art works, rather than be emotive or intuitively based such as the "Abstract Expressionism," should on the other hand, employ analytical and logical strategies. In these early exhibitions Tan Teong Eng, Tan Teong Kooi, Tang Tuck Kan,

and Choong Kam Kow's were very much influenced by the Hard-Edge Abstraction approach. Sulaiman Esa and Piyadasa on the other hand, were moving towards a conceptual approach.

Syed Ahmad Jamal highlights that,

"The first "New Scene" exhibitions was an important art event which took place in 1969 and appropriately gave the signal for the end of an era which emphasised gestural emphasis in Malaysian painting, by introducing the new generation of artists. The "New Scene" Exhibition was intentionally committed to inject an awareness of changes that had to take place." (SAJ unpaginated)

The exhibition posited itself as the counter reaction to the subjective emphasis of the Abstract Expressionists tendencies consolidated in the GRUP exhibition.⁸

8. T.K. Sabapathy, *Piyadasa: An Overview, 1962-2000* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2001), 40.

9. "The New Scene: The Idea," in *The New Scene* (Kuala Lumpur: 1969). Cited in Sabapathy, *Piyadasa: An Overview, 1962-2000*, 39.

*"An apparent notion here is that Abstract Expressionism is the only valid art form, that any work which does not blatantly display the artist's emotions or the subconscious workings of his mind is inferior art. Our show aims at reinforcing the concept that works which are entirely the outcome of the conscious workings of the intellect are an equally valid art form."*³ (My emphasis)

The exhibition exemplifies the artists's concern to investigate aspects of art and artworks in a self-referential way. Piyadasa's investigation of two art categories – painting and sculpture can be seen through his "Trengganu Series" (FIGURE TWO). The kinetic aspects were played out as the box, built to specifications, was painted and the colors were arranged in distinct patterns, appearing to flow freely along the planes and turning around the angled corners smoothly. This series combined and integrated two categories – painting and sculpture, questioning its identity. The Hard-Edge Abstraction influence could be seen in Choong Kam Kow's work, that emphasised the hard geometric form, scale, and colour, Tan Tuck Kan's visual acrobatics with perspective, and Tan Teong Eng's investigation with optical rhythm. These were some of the major contributions to make the challenge to the 1960s pulsate with interest. In 1970, the same group of artists with the exception of Jolly Koh joined together for an exhibition entitled "experiment '70" held at Gallery11 at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka from 7th -17th September. However, the catalogue does not provide any photographs of the work except for statement of each artist indicating the continuity of the 1969 exhibition.

The next two exhibitions witnessed the participation of only two artists Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa. In dokumentasi' 72, both artists were investigating the definition of painting itself. Sulaiman Esa proposed the idea of the scroll painting. Through his work, he questions the conventional acceptance and preconceived notion of what a painting is by stretching the limits of painting through the physicality of the material. His works reject the traditional elements of painting by defying the use of framing support and the flat surface of painting. By doing this, he questions the validity of flat surfaces in painting by emphasising the "object-ness" of the physicality of the cloth itself. In "Textured Surface '71", he investigates the optical (visual) reality of colour and the physical reality of the material.



Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa,
"Mystical Reality", 1974, Discarded raincoat found at a Klang rubbish dump at 4.23 p.m. on Sunday 13th January 1974 that must have belonged to someone (discarded after the exhibition).

Redza Piyadasa on the other hand, questions the relationship between the wall and painting in his works "Open Painting" (1970), "Tryptych" (1970), "Situational Painting" (1972). Redza Piyadasa's fascination with the concept of "reality" and his fascination with Zen as the premise of his work can be traced in this exhibition. He claims,

*"There is something very religious about my obsession with actual space. It is almost metaphysical. The emptiness and the detachment is reminiscent of the spirit of Zen. The Zen garden, sand arranged in furrows and a few rocks, is the image of stillness. The more still our position and the less disturbed the immediate environment, the greater the possibility of the deepest penetration of reality. This is exactly what meditation is really about. ..."*¹⁰

As these artists were very much being influenced by the shifting attitude towards painting happening in Euro-America, it does not come as a surprise that they were attracted by the emerging conceptual aspects of art making. Even in eksperimen '70, Redza Piyadasa had used the term "conceptual,"

*"My work is conceptual in nature and my sculptures are necessarily primary. They exist as visual documents. The idea of emphasising volume and form without having to resort to mass excites me. I have used the stripe to explore this end. What happens when a stripe exists on two or more planes simultaneously? ..."*¹¹ (My emphasis)

The partnership of Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa concluded with the exhibition "Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Suleiman Esa," in 1974 held at Sudut Penulis (Writer's Corner) of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (FIGURE 3 & 4). The exhibition was accompanied by their 31-page manifesto that was divided into 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 existing developments in Malaysian art at that time.

Though the manifesto claims that they rejected all developments that had taken place in Malaysian art (such as the Abstract Expressionists and the New Scene artists), the exhibition still aligns itself along the cerebral aspects as in the manifesto, as such their engagement with Conceptual have been highlighted. The manifesto even draws attention to their emphasis on anti-formalist and anti-aesthetic stance:

*"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, Tingneley (sic) 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. ..."*¹² (My emphasis)

Through the manifesto the artists had taken over the role of the critic in terms of framing their own propositions, ideas, and concepts through their writings. As Meyer highlighted in her discussion of Conceptual Art, the premise of art has changed, "Art as idea, art as knowledge, documentation, elimination of art object – eliminates the concern with "style," "quality," and "permanence," material properties and aesthetic qualities are secondary."¹³ Advocating the idea of "reality", the artists put up everyday objects in the exhibition space, advocating the temporality aspects of time-events based on Zen/Taoism. 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 the visual or retinal. There is no doubt however, that the exhibition was postmodern in its essential sense. First, by employing the conceptual approach and secondly, by deconstructing what makes a work "art" in the West by suggesting an alternative aesthetics based on Eastern Zen/Taoism philosophy. The Zen/Taoism philosophy that they presented views the object as an "event" rather than as "form" and presupposes the objects existence within an interrelated field or continuum."

10. Redza Piyadasa, "Statements by Redza Piyadasa About His Work," in Dokumentasi 72: Recent Works by Sulaiman Esa and Redza Piyadasa (Kuala Lumpur: Samat Art Gallery, 1972), unpaginated.

11. Experiment '70, (Kuala Lumpur: 1970), unpaginated.

12. Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, page 9.

13. Meyer, page xv.

The series of exhibitions that I have discussed, can be argued to be one of the earliest postmodernist artistic tendencies in Malaysia based on the fact that it venerates the concept or idea involved in art making and rejects the concern of aesthetic and style of Malaysian artists at that time. "Mystical Reality" for example, criticizes the idea of "uniqueness" of the artist by organizing a joint exhibition "to play down individualistic considerations as far as that was possible." The exhibition also reacted against the commodification of art by discarding the works after the show, emphasizing that the idea is more important than the artifact.

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