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The Localization of Abstract Expressionist Style in Malaysian Art

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Abstract. This paper discusses the early Abstract Expressionist work in Malaysia with regards to how the styles have been localized and adapted into the Malaysia art context. The early association of the artists labeled as Abstract Expressionists during the 1960s culminated in a group exhibition called "GRUP" in 1967 and another exhibition entitled "The Expressionists of the 1960s" in 1974. It has since then been associated with artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal and Latiff Mohidin. Since the 1970s the style has been well accepted and most importantly localized in terms of its subjects and thematic approach inherent to Malaysia's cultural context.

Keywords: Malaysia art, Abstract Expressionism, Syed Ahmad Jamal.

The term "Abstract Expressionists" has been used significantly in describing the works of Malaysian artists since the 1960s. These artistic tendencies have also gained acceptance among Malaysian artists since the 1971 National Cultural Policy and the Islamization Policy. Though the terms "Abstract Expressionist", "Abstraction" or "Expressionism" are terms which are loosely used to describe work that moves towards abstraction or non-representational art communicating emotional and spiritual states, any investigation of these tendencies must be made within the Malaysia's artistic development.

In Malaysia, the name Syed Ahmad Jamal for example, is synonymous with this artistic tendency. Born in Bandar Maharani, Muar, Johor in 1929, Syed Ahmad Jamal received his primary and secondary education in the Malay and English medium, respectively, in Johor Bahru. His formal arts education was from Chelsea School of Art (1951-1955), Institute of Education, London University (1955-1956), School of Art Institute Chicago (1963-1964) to University of Hawaii, Honolulu (1973-1974). In 1995, Syed Ahmad Jamal was awarded the National Art Award in 1995 by the Malaysian Government, which honoured him as a National Artist.

Even as an art student, he was drawn to the theoretical writings of Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. He took an early interest in the works of artists such as Emil Nolde, Kirschner and Max Beckmann.² In his book *Kunang-kunang: Kenang-kenangan*,³ he lists the three important exhibition that influenced him – a Mexican Art exhibition that exhibited the works of Diego Riviera, Orozco and Siqueiros, a German Expressionism exhibition and the American Modern Art exhibition in London. However, he does note how the American Art exhibition had influenced him most in terms of his Abstract Expressionist influence especially the exhibition of American Art held in Tate Gallery. The impression of art as a form of expression through the sense and the imagination, the emotive and mystical qualities through the exteriorization of the feelings caused a reaching effect for him.⁴

Though he has discussed his affinities with the Expressionist style, I would like to argue that his work is rooted in abstraction instead; unlike his colleague Latiff Mohidin whose work can be argued to be founded in

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² Radza Piyadasa, "Syed Ahmad Jamal," in *Modern Artists of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1983), 85.

³ Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Kunang-Kunang: Kenang-Kenangan Syed Ahmad Jamal Seniman Negara* (Ampang/Hulu Kelang: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1999), 67-69.

⁴ *Retrospektif Syed Ahmad Jamal*, (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1975), unpaginated.

expression rather than abstraction. Such ambiguity in terms of stylistic derivation is not surprising as the important aspect of Abstract Expressionist work in Malaysia is that it emphasizes local subjects and themes rather than delving into formalistic issues.

If one mentions Abstract Expressionists, one is reminded of Clement Greenberg, an American art critic closely associated with Modern art in the United States who promoted the abstract expressionist movement. Greenberg's version of Modernist art culminated in the non-representational paintings of the Abstract Expressionists⁵ of the New York school of the 1950s and early 1960s such as Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Frank Stella and others. Greenberg proclaims that paintings are just flat surfaces made of paint on canvas. He points out that artworks should emphasize the flatness of the picture's surface and reject any form of illusion such as shaded modeling and perspectives, brush strokes, using harsh colors rather than subtle tonal change, stressing line, using geometrical forms and simplifying forms. Greenberg's judgments were made on formal grounds. According to Greenberg, the quality of modern works of art depends on the acknowledgement of the medium that is being used.⁶ This premise however, cannot be applied in discussing Malaysia's form of Abstract Expressionism.

What distinguishes Malaysian Abstract Expressionism from Greenberg's Abstract Expressionism is that the latter regards extrinsic characters such as literary or theatrical qualities such as narrative, realism, description, subject matter, or drama to be impure and detrimental to Abstract Expressionism. Though the term has been used widely in Malaysia, it must be pointed out that the kind of Abstract Expressionist approach undertaken by Malaysian artists is not exactly the same kind of Abstract Expressionists that Greenberg practices. As Wong Hoy Cheong observes,

"Many of the artists working in the abstract mode have never given a thought to the roots of the movement, to the writings of Hans Hoffman and Clement Greenberg. They have absorbed the technique without an understanding of the philosophy that underpins it all."⁷

His statement is supported by Safrizal Shahir's observation. Safrizal explains,

"*Senario Seni Rupa Malaysia sebenarnya tidaklah mengalami secara "benar" gagasan yang melatari era Modernisme dalam tradisi Seni Rupanya melainkan ia lebih bersifat sensasi penggayaan dan bentuk semata-mata. ...*" (The Malaysian art development does not actually undergo the "true" progression underpinning the meaning of Modernism in visual art tradition, except in the form of stylistic sense and form only...) (My translation)⁸

In Malaysia, the term Abstract Expressionist is applied loosely to describe the kind of work that moves towards abstraction or non-representational art. The forms and colors employed are used to communicate or reflect an arousing spiritual state about certain issues or themes and subject matter experienced by the artists. The themes and subject matter form the crux of this localization. Here, I argue the localization of Abstract Expressionism can be seen at two stages – first, localization of Abstract Expressionist associated with Malaysia's (then Malaya) independence in 1957 and second, localization as an indirect consequence of the 1971 National Cultural Policy and subsequent Islamization Policy.

It is primarily Syed Ahmad Jamal himself who associates the "expressionistic" with the spirit of Independence.⁹

"The Merdeka (independence) artists of the fifties and sixties subscribed mainly to the aesthetics of abstract expressionism. The immediacy and mystical quality of the mainstream art of the 1960s appealed particularly to the Malaysian temperament, sensitivity and cultural heritage, and with the tradition of calligraphy found the idiom the ideal

⁵ Abstract expressionism was an American post-World War II art movement. The term was first applied to American art in 1946 by the art critic Robert Coates but it was first used in Germany in 1919 in the magazine *Der Sturm* and in the USA, Alfred Barr was the first to use this term in 1929 in relation to works by Wassily Kandinsky. See Barbara Hess, *Abstract Expressionism*, ed. Uta Grosenick (USA: Taschen, 2005).

⁶ See Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper and Row, 1982).

⁷ Karim Raslan, "Looking for a New National Direction," in *Malaysia Art Open 1994* (Kuala Lumpur: Art Salon & Petronas, 1994), unpaginated/unavailable from copy.

⁸ Safrizal Shahir, "Modernisme, Seni Moden Dan Seniman Moden: Satu Pemahaman Antara Ideologi Asalnya Dengan Pengalaman Malaysia," *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 3 (2004): 88.

⁹ For more discussion on "Merdeka" and the arts in Malaysia, see T.K. Sabapathy, "Merdeka Makes Art or Does It?," in *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994).

means of pictorial individuation. Malaysian artists struck rapturous rapport with the bold gestures of Kline, Soulages, Hartung, Marthieu, Sugai and the delicate gestures of Zou-wuki [sic]. The gestural qualities on their works have an obvious affinity with the traditional art of calligraphy, which is a cultural heritage of Malays and Chinese; a visual language immediately felt and perceived by Malaysians. ...¹⁰ (My emphasis).

This "expressionistic" feeling can also be associated with the idea of the "nation." In the 1960s, the Abstract Expressionist tendencies emerged in the works of artists who returned from their studies abroad during late 1950s and 1960s artists.¹¹ During this period of sojourning abroad, it can be argued that a sense of nostalgia for the homeland confronted these artists, especially at the height of *Merdeka* (Independence). Syed Ahmad Jamal laments,

"Yet, much as I enjoyed my stay in Chelsea I still feel that I do not really belong to the place. The time has come, I believe, when I should say good-bye. If I stay longer I might begin to dislike it. That would be sad. Apart from that, I do not believe I am capable of creating meaningful works until I return home – home to Malaya. Chelsea is charming but I do not find it inspiring. The years I have spent here have been an education to me. It will be a sad occasion for me to leave it, but I feel I must."¹²

During Syed Ahmad Jamal's sojourn in England, the leafless tree during winter in Kirby inspired some of his significant works such as "Angin Dingin" (Winter Wind) (1959), "Umpan" (The Bait) (1959), "Payung Biru" (Blue Umbrella) (1957) and "Chairil Anwar" (1959). Redza Piyadasa for example has heralded two of Syed Ahmad Jamal's work "Angin Dingin" (Winter Wind) (1959) and "Umpan" (The Bait) (1959) as an abstraction breakthrough.

"... Winter Wind (1959) is a dramatic, gestural work that metaphorically evokes the full fury of a raging wintry gale. Dramatic, swirling, abstracted forms rendered within the highly expressive Abstract Expressionist mode exist on a white, neutral ground. Drawing influences from Far-Eastern Chinese painting and the fluid essences of oriental calligraphy, the artist produced an emotional work that is both poetic and an elegant work of abstraction... The Bait (1959), by Syed Ahmad Jamal carried the artistic breakthrough encountered in "Winter Wind" further. The artist employs a wider range of colors and reaffirms his interest in the abstract metaphorical approach. His interest in bold, swirling shapes and forms continues. The emotive gestural approach is reaffirmed. ..."¹³

The localization of Syed Ahmad Jamal's work is inherent in his formalistic approach that Piyadasa posits is influenced from both the East and Western world. His abstraction is also very much rooted in the cultural context of his work, although he was living abroad at that time. His other works "Duel in the Snow" (1956) for example, is inspired by an epic battle well known in Malay society between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, set against the surreal backdrop of snow and sleet. "Chairil Anwar" (1959) displays his affinity with Jawi (an Arabic alphabet adapted for writing the Malay language) though in his retrospective, he claims that the references to calligraphy were incidental to the expressionistic manner that he evokes in his work.¹⁴

Since the 1971 National Cultural Policy and the Islamization Policy undertaken by the Malaysian government, the localization of Abstract Expressionism in Malaysian art has not declined, but has rather been further reinstated. 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-Suleiman 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

¹⁰ Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Seni Lukis Malaysia - 25 Tahun* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1982), unpaginated.

¹¹ Beginning with Tay Hooi Keat, Syed Ahmad Jamal and Anthony Lau who studied in England in the early 1950s, the subsequent years witnessed more artists went to further their studies abroad. Between 1957 and 1959, Yeoh Jin Leng, Lee Joo For, Ibrahim Hussein, Ida Talalla, all went to the United Kingdom, followed then by Grace Selvayanagam and Anthony Lau again for the second time. Then, Ismail Zain and Jolly Koh went to the United Kingdom, Abdul Latif Mohidin and Sabtu b. Yusof went to Germany, Chia Chian went to France, Tay Mo-Leong to Taiwan, Cheong Laitong, Choong Kam Kow and Ibrahim Hussein (for the second time) went to the United States.

¹² Anandendra Jegadeva, *On and Off King's Road: 10 New Paintings by Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal* (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 2006), 8.

¹³ Redza Piyadasa, "Early Modern Art Developments in Malaysia and Singapore, 1920-1960," in *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movement* (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997), 233.

¹⁴ See *Retrospektif Syed Ahmad Jamal*, unpaginated.

reflecting the global Islamic revivalism in the 1980s has either aligned itself with tendencies in Abstract Expressionism or found kinship with decorative art.¹⁵

In the subsequent decades of 1970s and 1980s, artists prescribing to the Abstract Expressionists pursuits proliferated. Artists like Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir, Yusof Ghani, Mohd Fauzin Mustaffa, Tajudin Ismail, Suzlee Ibrahim, Awang Damit Ahmad, Lee Joo For, Tajuddin Ismail, Rafiee Ghani and Fauzan Omar are among those who have been argued to have worked with such approach. These artists worked with abstracted forms and imagery, using colors, stressing lines, and emphasizing the simplification of forms. What is important is that although some works appear to be engaging with formalistic considerations, they are still inspired by local political, social and cultural concerns.

Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff for example, points out how the readings of Islamicness can be made of Abstract Expressionists works as Islamic readings can be easily made on works that shunned on figurative representation since many of the works are abstract in form and content.¹⁶ The consistent engagement of Malay artists with Abstract Expressionists style enables them to explore their personal interests through producing modern art works and yet still abiding by Islamic art principles. This is because the Abstract Expressionist style emphasizes the abstraction of human and animal figures.

Even Syed Ahmad Jamal's usage of colors and light in his "Ledang Series" has been argued to be derived from Islamic scholarship.

"The Spirit of Ledang has over the years undergone a series of evolution in respect of the artist's use of colors. The artist used darker colors in his early works, which he changed to warmer reds, yellow and oranges as well as the explicit use of white, which produces powerful intonations of energy. This use of light that literally pours out of his paintings is not limited to a visual impact. According to the artist's interpretation, it represents the spirit and commitment required for the life's vicissitudes

In Islamic art, the concept of light is fundamental as representing the Supreme Spiritual Guidance and its importance to life. This truth has been part of Syed Ahmad Jamal's life since childhood and he recalls his fascination with light's mystical beauty and light of fireflies. ..."¹⁷

Artists like Yusof Ghani explore other possibilities in terms of a thematic approach. In discussing Yusof Ghani's "Tari Series" (Dance Series) (1983, 1989) Mulyadi Mahmood remarks that though technically Yusof Ghani was exposed to elements of abstract expressionism in New York through the works of Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Hans Hofman and Gorky. Like most of these artists, Yusof also emphasizes action or process as the subject. But he went further than those abstract expressionists by including social commentary elements through his various bewildering and aggressive line qualities.¹⁸

His abstract composition ranges from various color, depth and tone generating a strong feeling for flow and movement. His abstract forms superimpose or incorporate stylized abstraction of dancing figures. In his "Topeng Series" (Mask Series), his work confronts the viewers with a sense of threat and danger that he exudes in his rendition of masks that can be traced from pre-Islamic roots of the nation's culture to Hinduism and Buddhism to animistic elements. Even reading of Islamicness have also been made of his "Hijau Series" (Green Series).¹⁹

The difference between Malaysian Abstract Expressionism and Greenberg's Abstract Expressionism is that the art works produced by Malaysian artists are not solely about unraveling the medium to its pure form. Rather, it must be discussed in the context of localization of the style within the culture in which it materialized. As Syed Ahmad Jamal observes of the Abstract Expressionist during the 1960s,

¹⁵ T.K. Sabapathy, "Introduction," in *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 7.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ "Alight," *Vox*, September 17 2000, 11.

¹⁸ Mulyadi Mahmood, "Yusof Ghani Dalam 'Siri Tari'," in *Seni Lukis Dalam Peristiwa. Kuala Lumpur Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka*, 1995. (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1995), 113-114.

¹⁹ See Mohd Sapuan Salit, "Manusia Dan Alam: Pengembaran Pancaindera (Man and Nature: Tour of the Senses)," in *Yusof Ghani: Hijau 1998-2002* (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 2002).

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¹⁷ "Alight," *Vox*, September 17 2000, 11.

¹⁸ Mulyadi Mahamood, "Yusof Ghani Dalam 'Siri Tari'," in *Seni Lukis Dalam Peristiwa. Kuala Lumpur Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka*, 1995. (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1995), 113-114.

¹⁹ See Mohd Sapuan Salit, "Manusia Dan Alam: Pengembaran Pancaindera (Man and Nature: Tour of the Senses)," in *Yusof Ghani: Hijau 1998-2002* (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 2002).

"The new way of looking at things, of the break with traditional ways of presenting the image of the seen world by means of representing the perception of the nature of the world, runs parallel to the impending break from the bonds of colonial patronage. Although one might argue that the form or rather the convention is in reality a perpetuation of Western cultural tradition, the spirit in which it was expressed is completely new. The new art form graphically reflects the new mood of the people."²⁰

He further reiterates that,

"... In Malaysian context, it is the adapting of the concept that is important and presenting it in a particular manner. ... There was an absence of any form of directive or 'guidance' from the authorities as to the ingredients that constitute the art form which was acceptable to the ruling power. The total responsibility lay in the hands of artists and art organizers. Malaysian artists enjoyed a condition of complete freedom. By the time the momentum was reaching the ultimate goal of independence contemporary aesthetics had become universal norm. The form and idiom of contemporary aesthetics had become the universal norm. The form and idiom was contemporary and universal, yet the spirit was national. A work of art in the contemporary sense must be intellectually referential, historically relational, and culturally contextual. Art in Malaysia was free from any political ties. ..."²¹

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²⁰ Jamal, *Senilukis Malaysia - 25 Tahun*, unpaginated.

²¹ Ibid.