

# Undergraduate Teaching of Art History in a Studio Context

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At Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), art history papers are offered as core papers to Fine Arts students at the School of the Arts. Thus, I have developed Art History courses for Fine Arts, rather than Art History students. This required me to re-strategize the approach and learning outcomes of my classes to suit the needs of studio major students. Most of these Fine Arts students are accepted based on their Form Six Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) results or diploma certificates. Besides their academic qualifications, they are screened by way of a drawing assessment and an interview process. Thus, developing art history pedagogy subjects for Fine Arts students required further consideration of whether their backgrounds and interests are based on studio rather than art history.

Every year, around 30 students majoring in Fine Arts have to take ‘Introduction to Fine Arts’ and ‘Theories and Methods of Art History’ courses, both of which I teach. As these classes are the first few introductory classes to fine arts and art history, building knowledge on an already established knowledge of art and art-making can be slightly challenging.

First, most first-year students majoring in Fine Arts have a very limited knowledge of art history and, in particular, Malaysian art history. As a case in point, their knowledge of modern artworks and Malaysian artists are limited to a few artists like Hoessein Enas and Dzulkifli Buyong—the former was a realist painter who is mostly known for his realistic portraiture, and the latter rendered his childhood memory of playing with boats and the common night scene of siblings putting up a mosquito net in the room at night. As for

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international artists, the only name that is known by most of the students is Leonardo da Vinci, which I suspect is due to the Mona Lisa and perhaps the movie *The Da Vinci Code*.

Second, their knowledge of the mediums used in visual arts is limited to drawing and painting. Hence art is merely seen as representation-making, rather than as an attempt of media exploration or visual communication to portray critical and conceptual thinking. Thus, it is very common for a first-year bachelor degree student to not have any idea what installation, conceptual and performance arts are. Their knowledge of art and art-making does not go beyond producing likenesses and cartoonish and/or manga-like sketches—as seen in their high school portfolios during entrance interviews. Cartoons and manga are the more popular forms of ‘art’ among teenagers. Their knowledge in crafts-making techniques is also limited and fundamental; thus art appreciation, aesthetic discourse and knowledge are very limited in their first-year of studies.

As a way of re-strategizing my approach and to make art history relevant and interesting to studio students, I had to approach Art History pedagogy by systematically building on the students’ own experiences and knowledge of art and art-making. Art history pedagogy has to be built around their limited studio knowledge of the first semester of undergraduate studies. In the first semester, ‘Introduction to Fine Arts’ is set as a survey that looks into both studio practice and art history in general at a very fundamental level. In the second semester, another course called ‘Theories and Methods of Art History’ introduces students to a few main theories that underline and discuss what art is, and the changes of the meaning of art through several selected readings, such as Plato, Hegel, Danto, Pollock and others. On top of that, students are also introduced to the writing of research papers: elements such as citation, references and bibliography are discussed and practised in exercises to equip students with the skills that are very much needed at a tertiary level. In both of these classes, the theories and histories of Asia/Southeast Asian/Malaysian art are not directly included in the curriculum; nevertheless, a few Malaysian examples are included in the ‘Introduction to Fine Arts’ class.

The twofold Malaysian Modern Art course is offered in the second year. The first part of the course is to introduce modern Malaysian art in terms of historical periodization—from the visual renditions already produced in the late 19th century in local Malay manuscripts and early print media, to the forms of current practices of modern and contemporary art. The second part of the course, with a special focus on Malaysian art since the 1990s, concentrates on discussing Malaysian art practice in terms of mediums used, subject matters and thematic approaches. Although this second section does not concentrate

on situating the post-1990s practices in a regional or international context, the idea of a Malaysian 'art world', especially in the relations between artists, dealers, curators, critics, collectors and auction houses, is introduced.

Besides the usual lectures, presentations and discussions, students are given a major group assignment that involves fieldwork. If theory classes provide students with an introduction to several theoretical approaches in art, as well as the academic aspect of writing, this assignment introduces students to fieldwork. These Fine Arts students interview artists or other figures who play a significant role in Malaysian art such as curators, gallerists, art historians, etc. This fieldwork is not only for the sake of doing research—getting first-hand information—more importantly, it exposes the students to various visual artists, their studio practices and the Malaysian art scene in general. Although this seems like a simple task, it actually exposes the students to the idea of becoming professional artists. Thus, an art history course actually boosts their studio practice knowledge and exposure to the different kinds of art scenes out there.

Another class that I am teaching at the level 200, 'Modern Asian Art', is yet another take on the building of these scaffoldings of knowledge. As these students have prior knowledge of Malaysian art history and the Malaysian art scene in general, this class tries to expand and link their knowledge in the context of Asia, or Asia-Pacific at least. Besides the active learning that requires students to present their understanding of assigned readings, students are asked to investigate the functions of art galleries and art museums across Asia. Of course, because these students cannot afford to travel far, the coursework tasks have been designed so that the students find out about various galleries and museums by way of the Internet. They are required to examine the websites of three to four selected museums and/or galleries, then present their findings in class. As such, the students would learn about the programming of these institutions—past and upcoming exhibitions, educational activities, administrative structures and others. Although this exercise does not require the students to examine any artworks in particular, they are exposed to how works circulate and the economical exchanges in the art market. On top of that, the value of art in a collection and the question of loans between institutions is discussed in class.

Besides the main approach of assignments for each class as discussed above, other pedagogical approaches, such as flipped classrooms and even the use of technology, are also applied. Students are required to upload their research on an assigned art history topic in the form of three-minute video presentations on YouTube channels. Whether we like it or not, various technologies are here, and sometimes alternative approaches can be more relevant

and effective to art students who can be quite poor in writing. Synthesising and communicating their research on art history can be more challenging through this exercise, as they have to converse and display their comprehension verbally through videos that could be viewed by others on online platforms.

After undergoing art history courses at 100 and 200 levels, students have to take a 'Western Modern Art' course at the 300 level, and subsequently an internship in the same academic year. Although I do not teach at this level, it is hoped that the base of knowledge of art history acquired in my classes enable the students to see themselves working and partaking in the Malaysian art scene, even if they decide not to pursue their artistic endeavour after graduation. It is hoped that the discussions on galleries, art institutions, art markets, exhibitions and others, will open their minds in seeking internship placements and subsequently job opportunities within the industry.

As I have discussed here, various approaches in teaching art history to Fine Arts students are needed to sustain their interest and, most important of all, to place their art history knowledge in the context of studio practice. Although assignments such as research-based term papers are still required, the approach of art history studies must not be limited to the analysis of artworks or to an art historical study through discussions of art styles and movements. As these are trained fine arts studio students, for whom art history and art theory subjects are seen as uninteresting, a slightly different approach in teaching art history has to be introduced.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Sarena Abdullah** is an art historian and current Deputy Dean (Research, Innovation and Community-Industry Engagement) at the School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). She was awarded the inaugural London, Asia Research Award, by Paul-Mellon Centre and Asian Art Archive in 2017. She was also recipient of 2016, 2017 and 2019 CAA-Getty Travel Grants. Her book on Malaysian art, *Malaysian Art since the 1990s: Postmodern Situation* (2018), was published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. She is also co-editor of *Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art 1945–1990* (2018), published by Power Publications and National Gallery Singapore. She writes on Malaysian art for various academic journals and platforms.