POSTMODERNISM IN MALAYSIAN ART

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by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to investigate the meanings of Malaysian modern and postmodern art through the understanding of social and political conditions that shapes the emerging middle class in which the artists belongs. Malaysian art that is presumed to be postmodern can either be one that evokes a conscious racial or religious identity, art that manifests or highlights class interests, and art that loses its locality and inheres a sense of cosmopolitanism as it crosses borders. Drawing from the fields of art history, cultural history, sociology and Malaysian Studies in particular, this dissertation investigates the forms of postmodernity in Malaysian art, discussing the shift from modern to a postmodern outlook in the context of situasi percamoden, or Malaysia’s ‘postmodern situation.’ Central to my argument is that postmodern artistic tendencies in Malaysia generally happen as an indirect result of the cultural and social changes and drastic modernization that Malays had to go through under the modernization drive headed by New Economic Policy (NEP). As part of the new Malaysian middle class, artists are faced with various situations the ‘postmodern situation’ brings and this is inherent in development of art in Malaysia since the 1990s. This dissertation aims to explore how Malaysian artists’ preoccupation has shifted from Malay/Islamic-centric artistic tendencies to having a more postmodern outlook. Firstly, this can be seen in postmodern artistic strategies and the proliferation of art, and second, in the thematic approaches and subjects that concern artists being reflective of the changing Malaysian demographics.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................ 1 

TABLE OF CONTENTS ............................................................................................................. 3 

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................... 5 

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ........................................................................................................ 11 

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... 13 

INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................................... 14 

CHAPTER ONE: THE ART SITUATION IN MALAYSIA AND ITS POSTMODERN JUNCTURE ................................................................................................................................. 22 

  The Usage of the Term 'Modern Art' .......................................................................................... 27 
  The Writings and Research Context of Malaysian Art ............................................................... 29 
  Historical backdrop of Malaysian Art ....................................................................................... 34 

CHAPTER TWO: THE CONTEXT OF MALAYSIA'S POST MODERNITY ........................................... 46 

  Finding the Context of Postmodernity in Malaysia .................................................................... 47 
  The General Reception of Postmodern Discourse in Malaysia .................................................. 60 
  Literary Postmodern Discourse in Malaysia ............................................................................. 68 

CHAPTER THREE: POSTMODERN SITUATION or SITUASI PERCAMODEN ..................................... 75 

  The New Malaysian Middle Class ............................................................................................ 79 
  The New Malaysian Middle Class and its 'Postmodern Situation' ............................................ 84 
  or Situasi Percamoden ............................................................................................................. 84 
  The Changing Social, Cultural and Political Identity of the ...................................................... 95 
  New Malaysian Middle Class ...................................................................................................... 95 

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MODERN AND POSTMODERN IN ART ...................................................... 104 

  Investigating the Postmodern ................................................................................................. 104 
  Postmodern Art in Malaysia .................................................................................................... 104 
  The Early Postmodern Artistic Strategies of Malaysian Art ...................................................... 118 
  Abstract Expressionism and the Malay/Islamic-centred Art as Mainstream ................................ 126 

CHAPTER FIVE: POSTMODERN ART STRATEGIES AND THE PROLIFERATION OF ART FORMS SINCE THE 1990s .............................................................................................................. 139 

  Postmodern Artistic Strategies ............................................................................................... 140 
  Figuration in Paintings ............................................................................................................ 156 
  New Media, Multimedia and Alternative Art Spaces ............................................................... 159 

CHAPTER SIX: STRATEGIES OF IDENTITY IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT ............................. 173 

  Identity and Cultural Concerns ............................................................................................... 178
Social Issues and Cultural Constructions/Deconstructions ................................. 187
The Urban and Environmental Concerns ............................................................ 194
Beyond the Official Narrative ............................................................................ 198
Contemporary Images and Representations ....................................................... 203

CONCLUSION ........................................................................................................ 208
FIGURES ................................................................................................................ 219
BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................... 267
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Wong Hoy Cheong, “The Nouveau Rich, the Elephant, the Foreign Maid, or the Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie” (1991), mixed media, 228 x 304cm. ...

Figure 2: Hamir Soib @ Mohamed, “Tak Ada Beza” (No difference at all) (2002), installation...

Figure 3: Chuah Chong Yong, “Pre-War Building for Sake – The Gold Rush” (1996), acrylic on canvas, 198 x 198cm.

Figure 4: Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, “Insect Diskette Series” (1996), mixed media on plexiglass, mouse and chair, 190 x 170cm.

Figure 5: Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, “Warning Tapir Crossing 1” (2007), mixed media on canvas, 890 x 152 cm (5 panels).

Figure 6: Joseph Tan, “Love Me in My Batik” (1975), acrylic and collage on canvas, 203.2 x 71.1 cm

Figure 7: Ibrahim Hussein, “Senyum Seorang Monyet” (1970), acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 152.5cm.

Figure 8: Ibrahim Hussein, “Pak Utih” (1970), acrylic on canvas, 153 x 306cm.

Figure 9: Tay Hooi Keat, “The Haji Ship” (1966), oil, 94 x 70cm.

Figure 10: Photograph of artist participating GRUP Exhibition in 1967. From left: Cheong Laitong, Anthony Lau, Jolly Koh, Latiff Mohidin, Syed Ahmad Jamal and Ibrahim Hussein.

Figure 11: Redza Piyadasa, “Terengganu 3” (1969), acrylic on plywood, 168 x 154 x 45cm.

Figure 12: Tan Tuck Kan, “49 Squares” (1969), acrylic on canvas, 203 x 203cm.

Figure 13: Redza Piyadasa, “Marakesh IV” (1970), acrylic on plywood, 237 x 26 x 94cm.

Figure 14: Redza Piyadasa, “Open Painting” (1970), acrylic on cloth and polka dot cloth, incorporating actual wall surface, 105 x 77cm.


Figure 16: Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, “Mystical Reality” (1974). Discarded raincoat found at a Klang rubbish dump at 4.23pm on Sunday 13th January 1974 that must have belonged to someone (discarded after the exhibition).

Figure 17: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “Pohon Nipah” (Nipah Palms) (1957), oil on canvas, 89 x 59cm.
Figure 18: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “Winter Wind” (1959), oil on plywood, 121 x 100cm.
Figure 19: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “The Bait” (1959), oil on plywood, 152.4 x 122cm.
Figure 20: Latiff Mohadin, “Pago-pago, Bangkok” (1996), mixed media, 13 x 21cm.
Figure 21: Latiff Mohadin, “Bukit-Lurah Lowlands-Highlands” (1997), oil on canvas, 122 x 259cm.
Figure 22: Latiff Mohadin, “Teluk Kumbar – 1” (2005), oil on canvas, 153 x 137cm.
Figure 23: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “Duel in the Snow” (1956), oil on canvas, 71 x 91.5cm.
Figure 24: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “Gunung Ledang” (1992), acrylic on canvas, 173 x 239cm.
Figure 25: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “Chairil Anuar” (1959), oil, 76 x 22cm.
Figure 26: Yusof Ghani, “Siri Tari III” (1984), oil on canvas, 145 x 193cm.
Figure 27: Lee Kian Seng, “Mankind” (1972), metal, 160 x 220 x 140cm. Installed at the entrance of the National Art Gallery Malaysia from 1973 to 1983.
Figure 28: Lee Kian Seng, “Process in Poker Game” (1974), installation, metal, wood, and plywood, card sizes 142 x 101 x 1.8cm.
Figure 29: Lee Kian Seng, “Off ‘Image, Object, Illusion’ – Off Series Mechanism” (1977), installation that includes a painting on canvas, flag, 30.5 x 51 x 61cm podium with lighting.
Figure 30: Redza Piyadasa, “The Great Malaysian Landscape” (1972), acrylic on canvas, painted wood, wire and paper, 230 x 179cm.
Figure 31: Redza Piyadasa, “Entry Points” (1978), acrylic on wood, 152 x 136cm.
Figure 32: Ibrahim Hussein, “Are You Alone Up There?” (1969), printage, acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 152.5cm.
Figure 33: Nirmala Shanmughalingam, “Vietnam” (1981), acrylic on canvas, 102 x 201cm.
Figure 34: Redza Piyadasa, “Mamak Family, Penang” (1988), collage on board, 97 x 57cm.
Figure 35: Redza Piyadasa, “Indian Mother and Child” (1994), mixed-media and collage on board, 90 x 56cm.
Figure 36: Latiff Mohadin, “Pago-Pago and Full Moon, Kuala Lumpur” (1967), mixed media, 10 x 16cm.
Figure 37: Redza Piyadasa, “Malay Narrative IV” (1996), mixed media and collage on board, 152 x 101cm.
Figure 38: Ismail Zain, “Ku Bunuh Cintaku” (1972), acrylic on canvas, 123 x 92cm.
Figure 39: Ismail Zain, “Al Kesah” (1988), computer print, 121 x 30 cm.

Figure 40: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “The Challenger I Page III” (2007), mixed media on paper, 84 x 59cm.

Figure 41: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “The Challenger I Page IV” (2007), mixed media on paper, 84 x 59cm.

Figure 42: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “The Challenger I Page V” (2007), mixed media on paper, 84 x 59cm.

Figure 43: Roslisham Ismail aka ISE, “Export” (2007), digital print on paper, 55 x 82.5cm.

Figure 44: Roslisham Ismail aka ISE, “The EST” (2007), duratrans, lightbox, 93 x 126 x 15cm.

Figure 45: Nirmala Shanmughalingam, “Friends in Need” (1986), acrylic and collage on canvas.

Figure 46: Sharmiza Abu Hassan, “Alegori Ledang” (2004), mixed media, various sizes.

Figure 47: Nadiah Bamadhaj, “Beyond Recognition” (2006), video projection and film stills.

Figure 48: Yee I-Lan, “The Archipelago” (2005), digital print on Kodak Endura paper, 61 x 183cm.

Figure 49: Yee I-Lan, “The Archipelago” (Detail) (2005), digital print on Kodak Endura paper.

Figure 50: Eng Hwee Chu, “The Great Supper” (1999), oil on canvas, 166 x 162cm.

Figure 51: Wong Hoy Cheong, “In search of faraway places” (from 'Migrants' series) (1996), charcoal, photocopy transfer and collage on paper scroll, three panels: 204.5 x 151cm (each); 204.5 x 453cm (overall).

Figure 52: Bayu Utomo Radjikin, “Lang Kacang” (1991), Mixed media, 141 x 104 x 120cm.

Figure 53: Eng Hwee Chu, “Cry Freedom” (1995), acrylic on canvas, 217 x 151cm.

Figure 54: Shia Yih-Yiing, “Homage to the Vanishing World” (1996), acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91cm (2 panels), 168 x 122cm.

Figure 55: Ahmad Fuad Osman, “Imitating the Woods” (2004), oil on canvas, 239 x 150cm.

Figure 56: Tan Chin Kuan, “Blue Night II” (1989), mixed media, 549 x 303 x 305cm.

Figure 57: Zulkifli Yusof, “Dari Hitam ke Putih” (1989), mixed media, 850 x 240 x 240cm.
Figure 58: Wong Hoy Cheong, “Re: Looking” (2002-2003), installation at the 50th Venice Biennale. ................................................................. 247
Figure 59: Nirmala Shanmugalingam, “Kenyataan 3” (Statement 3) (1975-79), mixed media, 128 x 53cm........................................... 247
Figure 60: Ismail Zain, “DOT – The Detribalisation of Tam binte Che Lat” (1983), acrylic on canvas, 122 x 183cm.......................... 248
Figure 61: Ismail Zain, “Sarada” (1983), acrylic on canvas and collage, 122 x 92cm........ 248
Figure 62: Lucy Liew, “Hornbill #53”, oil on canvas, 152 x 152cm.............................. 249
Figure 63: Lucy Liew, “Hornbill #55”, acrylic on canvas, 152 x 244cm...................... 249
Figure 64: Sylvia Lee Goh, “Nyonya Koay (Kuih Muih)” (1990), 127 x 96.5cm........... 250
Figure 65: Sylvia Lee Goh, “The Nyonya Altar” (1995), 91.5 x 122cm....................... 250
Figure 66: Liew Kung Yu, “Cheng Beng Festival” (1996), photomontage, wood and glass, 140 x 216cm................................. 251
Figure 67: Tan Chin Kuan, “The Broken Stage for Young Artists” (1994), oil on canvas, 380 x 250cm........................................ 251
Figure 68: Wong Hoy Cheong, “Some Dreamt of Malaya, Some Dreamt of Great Britain” (from 'Migrants' series) (1994), charcoal and photostat collage on hanging paper scrolls, 190 x 150cm........................................ 252
Figure 69: Redza Piyadasa, “Bentuk Malaysia Tulen” (1980), bromide image and acrylic on canvas, 106 x 70cm.............................. 252
Figure 70: Yee I-Lan, “Kerana Mu” (1/4) (2002), digital photography print on Kodak Professional paper, 165 x 114cm.................................... 253
Figure 71: Simryn Gill, “A Small Town at the Turn of the Century” 13 (1999 – 2000), type C photograph, 91.4 x 91.4cm.................. 253
Figure 72: Simryn Gill, “A Small Town at the Turn of the Century” (34) (1999 – 2000), type C photograph 91.4 x 91.4cm, 101.6 cm x 101.6 cm (paper size)...................... 254
Figure 73: Shia Yih-Yiing, “Vase of Words” (2006), oil and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91cm. ................................................................. 254
Figure 74: Shia Yih-Yiing, “Vase of Unity” (2006), oil and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91cm. ................................................................. 254
Figure 75: Shia Yih-Yiing “Vase of Prayer” (2006), oil and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91cm. ................................................................. 255
Figure 76: Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin, “Gerak Tempur 18” (1996), metal, 50 x 70 x 47cm.................................................. 256

8
Figure 77: Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin, “Gerak Tempur 3” (1996), metal, 39 x 32 x 60cm.

Figure 78: Hamir Soib, “Jawi” (1999), acrylic on the floor, silkscreen and plaster of paris, various sizes.

Figure 79: Bayu Utomo Radjikin, “Newspaper” (1993), mixed media, 90 x 122cm.

Figure 80: Wong Woan Lee, “Hope of the Lonely (Reality and Delusion)” (2002), oil on canvas, 168 x 133cm.

Figure 81: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “Cleansing Ritual I” (2008), monoprint on paper, 112 x 70cm.

Figure 82: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “Cleansing Ritual II” (2008), monoprint on paper, 112 x 70cm.

Figure 83: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “Cleansing Ritual III” (2008), monoprint on paper, 112 x 70cm.

Figure 84: Kok Yew Puah, “Urban Playground” (1990), acrylic on canvas, 139 x 185cm.

Figure 85: Kok Yew Puah, “Temple Figures” (1997), acrylic on canvas, 144.5 x 144.5cm.

Figure 86: Johan Marjonid, “Arca Alam Royal Belum - The Conqueror I” (2006), acrylic on canvas, 69 x 175cm.

Figure 88: Wong Hoy Cheong, “Vitrine of Contemporary Events” (1999), installation.

Figure 88: Ahmad Fuad Osman, “Mullet: Syhhh...! Dok diam-diam, jangan bantah. Mullet hang hanya boleh guna untuk cakap yaaaa saja. Baghu hang boleh join depa... senang la jadi kaya!” (1999), oil on canvas, 244 x 244cm.

Figure 89: Sharon Chin, “Executive Toy” (2007), dimension unavailable.

Figure 90: Sharon Chin, “Executive Toy” (2007) (Detail).

Figure 91: Ahmad Fuad Osman, “Recollections of Long Lost Memories” (2007), slide projection, dimension varies.

Figure 92: Nadiah Bamadhaj, “1965 Membina Semula Monumennya” (2001), installation detail.

Figure 93: Nadiah Bamadhaj, “1965 Membina Semula Monumennya” (2001), installation detail.

Figure 94: Susyilawati Sulaiman “Emotional Library” (2007), performance at ‘documenta 12,’ two diaries with watercolours “Anna” (1996) and “Botanical Garden” (1996), each 15 x 21 x 1cm.

Figure 95: Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, “Cabinet V” (1991), assemblages on wood construction, 183 x 183cm (two panels).
Figure 96: Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, “Urban Garden LIFE” (1999), Installation. 266
Figure 97: Liew Kungyu, “Cemerlang, Gemilang, Terbilang” (Excellence, Glory, Distinction) (2007), installation. 266
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABIM</td>
<td>Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia ( Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALIRAN</td>
<td>Aliran Kesedaran Negara (National Consciousness Movement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APS</td>
<td>Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung/Angkatan Pelukis SeMalaysia (Peninsula/Malaysia Artists Movement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASAS 50</td>
<td>Angkatan Sasterawan ’50 (The Generation of the Literati Scholars of the 1950s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASRI</td>
<td>Angkatan Senirupa Indonesia (Indonesia Visual Arts Movement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMS</td>
<td>Bakat Muda Sezaman (Young Contemporaries Award (YCA))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BN</td>
<td>Barisan Nasional (National Front)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSLN</td>
<td>Balai Seni Lukis Negara (National Art Gallery (NAG))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>Consumer Association of Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCM</td>
<td>Council of Churches Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENFAD</td>
<td>Centre for Advanced Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRC</td>
<td>Catholic Research Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPSM</td>
<td>Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAPENA</td>
<td>Gabungan Penulis Nasional (Malaysian National Writers Association)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAKAM</td>
<td>National Human Rights Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INSAN</td>
<td>Institute for Social Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIUM</td>
<td>International Islamic University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISA</td>
<td>Internal Security Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITM</td>
<td>Mara Institute of Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUST</td>
<td>International Movement for a Just World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARA</td>
<td>Majlis Amanah Rakyat (The Council of Trust for Indigenous People)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCA</td>
<td>Malaysia Chinese Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCKK</td>
<td>Malay College Kuala Kangsar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIC</td>
<td>Malaysia Indian Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>MNS</td>
<td>Malayan Nature Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPSI</td>
<td>Maktab Perguruan Sultan Idris (Sultan Ismail Training College)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSC</td>
<td>Multimedia Super Corridor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCC</td>
<td>National Cultural Congress</td>
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</tbody>
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NCP     National Cultural Policy
NEP     New Economic Policy
NDP     New Development Policy
NOC     National Operative Council
PBUH    Peace Be Upon Him
SAM     Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth Malaysia)
SGS     Selangor Graduates Society
SUARAM  Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian Voices)
TWN     Third World Network
UiTM    Universiti Teknologi Mara (Mara University of Technology)
UMNO    United Malays National Organization
UNIMAS  Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Malaysia University of Sarawak)
USM     Universiti Sains Malaysia (Science University of Malaysia)
WAG     Wednesday Art Group
WWF     World Wildlife Fund
YKP     Yayasan Kesenian Perak (Perak Arts Foundation)
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INTRODUCTION

Even though interest in Asian antiquities has deep roots in art history and theory, there is little attention paid to the immediate past and present of Asian art. It is only since the 1990s that there has been interest in contemporary Asian art in Europe and North America. The proliferation of international art exhibitions and forums such as The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, the Kwangju and Cheju Biennale in South Korea, the Asian Art Show in Fukuoka and the Regional Artists Exchange (ARX) in Perth are among a few art events, which have contributed to the interest in modern art from Asia. Besides these, several exhibitions on Asian contemporary art have been held in New York such as Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions¹, curated by Apinan Poshyananda and Inside Out: New Chinese Art², curated by Gao Minglu, both organised and co-organised by the Asia Society. These new networks have developed in a way that art begins to cross national threads when curators and exhibitions develop projects that concern and included the art of other countries or other regions.

Though these developments were definitely positive and welcomed, reactions to contemporary art produced in developing countries in the context of Asia were not as encouraging. As modern art produced in Asia still carries a connection to the tradition of Western art, to Western eyes, Asian modern art is mostly derivative and utilises the worn-out ideas of Euramerican art. Asian artists were stereotyped as Second or Third World artists who produce third-rate art. John Clark discusses this,

"Because many parts of Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were forced to redefine themselves via their reaction to contact with and often depredation at the hands of an ‘other,’ the forms of modernity its cultures adopted seemed to many Euramericans to be derivative, secondary, disingenuous and inauthentic. The zone of autonomous cultural energy which drove their adaptations was ignored;"

NOTE 1: I have chosen to employ the racial demarcation that is well-known in Malaysia – Malay, Chinese, Indian and other races throughout this dissertation. This recognizes racial demarcations in Malaysia where inter-marriages are rare.

NOTE 2: There are many different conventions regarding the construction of names in Western and non-Western system that affects in-text referencing and in footnotes. For example, traditional Chinese names usually position the family name first (e.g. Yeoh Jin Leng) and the Anglicized Chinese names follow the Western convention (e.g. Jolly Koh). In Malay/Muslim traditions, there are no family names therefore, the father’s name becomes the son or the daughter’s end name for example, Mohd Ali Abdul Rahman in which the name of the author is Mohd Ali and Abdul Rahman is the father’s name. Due to these various conventions and to avoid confusion, I have decided not to use the Western system in general but instead I decided to use full names in footnotes and wherever applicable throughout this dissertation to avoid confusion.

their own developments and re-positioning of ‘other’ forms were forcibly concealed beneath the iron mask of Euramerican ignorance.”

In a context of international exhibition like the Biennale of Sydney, Virginia Spate also observes,

“... when audiences are confronted with recent art from Asia, the chasm of knowledge is such that they often experience it in terms of nationalistic stereotypes coloured by the old assumptions that such art is inevitably derivative, merely decorative, or a destructive debasement of ‘traditional’ art. ...”

Another perspective posited by Apinan Poshyananda is that many Western viewers feel welcome to art shows on Asian art as they contain soothing qualities of ‘strange’ exoticism and the nostalgic yearning for exotic culture, fitting in with their nostalgic longing to rescue some sort of ‘authenticity’ from destructive historical change.

The history of Euramerica’s inability to accept as authentic what Asian cultures have, in various ways has something to do the central privileging of origin. Clark argues that,

“For Modernism is a discourse which privileges a linked series of artistic developments for a group of Euramerican cultures which had become modern according to primarily political, social, or cultural criteria. But modernity in Asia, certainly in its art discourses, has involved the acceptance and local transformation of art forms, which had originated as modernist in Euramerica. This took place sometimes in a society which was not yet modern according to other criteria. Moreover, Post-Modernism which in Euramerica is the extension and critical relativisation of Modernism is doubly relativised in Asia, since that was already the relation of the cultures of the region to Modernism.”

With a slightly different view on the relationship of Euramerican artists with Asian art, David Clarke argues there was actually a long history of engagement by modern European and American artists with premodern Asian art and artistic encounters. It is only,

“(t) he full extent of American art’s engagement with Asia has not always been acknowledged, however, in part because art critic Clement Greenberg’s hegemonic account of American modernism taking the baton from earlier European modernism had no place for it. A consideration of American interest in East Asian culture would have been incompatible with myths of the Americanness of American art, and with the idea that modern art had one clearly defined mainstream within which progress occurred through an internal logic of formal self-criticism.”

Even though Greenberg’s narrative has long been discredited and with the massive high-speed flow of information in the current electronic age and globalisation, it is hard to

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4 John Clark, 5-6.
point out any European or American artists who feel that they have anything to learn from contemporary Asian art. Unfortunately, the asymmetry of knowledge still exists, as Clarke further highlights, it is usually the Asian contemporary artists who know what his or her American counterpart is doing and still not the other way round.8

Even though modern art works produced in Asia were created within the realm of different context, historical, geographical, social and cultural condition, this has not been the subject of art historical scholarship until quite recently. Art historians, critics, and theorists in international art circles have never taken modern art in developing countries seriously, especially in terms of academic interest. Western art critics have largely been interested only in the development of Western ideas in Asian art by judging its integration with Western tradition, but these cultural assumptions limit the various possible accounts of Asian art approaches. Modern art principles for example, can be interpreted to have many different implications and meaning in another cultural context. Astri Wright, in discussing contemporary Indonesian art highlights the differing implications,

“The phenomenon of such a ‘catalogue of ready-made styles’ being received into an Asian context has a very different significance than in the West, where premium is placed on originality. It may have reinforced cultural predispositions to emulate forms of behaviour from figures of authority, also in the realm of artistic production where the master’s work was the model for the apprentices. Furthermore, the relative absence of references to purely formal pictorial problems in the conversation and writings of Indonesian painters may indicate that they have found it more significant to focus on problems of symbolic meaning, narrative content, and identity.”9

Although with the recent interests on Asian contemporary art, writings on art in Asia have moved from a singular notion of modernism towards a more open interpretation of modernism, the study of modern art in non-Western societies is still in its early years, particularly in the case of Southeast Asia. Although there are a few publications, exhibition catalogues and studies of Southeast Asian art, it is still being developed from perspectives outside the region, such as Japan,10 Australia11 and the United States. Important as these are, it is nevertheless necessary for similar studies to be made from within the Southeast Asian region with Southeast Asian insights and in the case of Malaysia, with a Malaysian insight.

8 Ibid.
11 The Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) is the Queensland Art Gallery’s international contemporary art event established in 1993. It has focus exclusively on the contemporary art of Asia, the Pacific and Australia. APT1, 2 and 3 for example has provided contemporary Malaysian artists to exhibit in an international platform though later APTs have given more attention to Chinese and other diasporic artists. See http://qag.qld.gov.au/exhibitions/apt; Internet; accessed 29 December 2008.
In the case of Malaysia, even though various developments in art occurred over the last two decades, most art writings still mostly persist in reportage form and limited to those written for exhibition catalogues. Critics and reviews are very limited. An early attempt includes *Modern Artists of Malaysia* by T.K Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa in 1983 and recently Ahmad Suhaimi Mohd Noor’s published a book entitled *Sejarah Kesedaran Visual Malaysia* (2007) in which he traced the early development of art by expanding his premise on what art is including illustration.

In terms of the development of postmodern art in Malaysia, such shifts have only been briefly discussed and there is much room for investigating such positions. Redza Piyadasa for example, in his two writings in 1993, signals the shift in the Malaysian art development from modern preoccupations to a postmodern one. Although the usage of the term is not new, but in essays delineating an art historical account of Malaysian art, a changing tendency has been marked. Piyadasa highlighted that the new generation of young artists since the 1990s seems to be dissatisfied with the aesthetic operations of many established artists. They seem to be discarding the pursuit of national identity despite the emphasis on the Malay/Islamic\(^\text{12}\) based culture as the basis of national identity as supported by the government. Art works produced have begun to become more diverse, resisting the Malay/Islamic artistic approach. Multi-dimensional art forms such as installations, performances and electronic medium such as video and cameras have begun to be used. This can be seen in the works like Ismail Zain’s *Digital Collage* (1989), Wong Hoy Cheong’s and Marion D’Cruz’s performance presentations, Wong Hoy Cheong’s video art entitled *Sookching* (1990) and the collaborative effort of Liew Kung Yu and Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin in *Two Installations* (1991), an installation cum performance artwork.

If previously, art works produced by artists were deemed to be Malay/Islamic inclined, works about different cultural background and lifestyles began to be exhibited in the National Art Gallery (NAG) and enter the Young Contemporary Awards (Bakat Muda Sezaman) held by the National Art Gallery every year. Works that portray Chinese culture, celebration, or lifestyles have begun to enter the Malaysian mainstream art, as evinced by artists such as Liew Kung-Yu, through his work, “Chinese Festival” (1996) and “Cheng Beng Festival” (1996). An Indian artist, J. Anurendra, also brought Indian culture forward. His “Looking Forward” (1997) depicts the annual Thaipusam festival where devoted Hindus expose

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\(^{12}\) The term Malay/Islamic is used in this dissertation to refer to Malaysians of Malay descent with Islamic affiliation. Since Malays in Malaysia are all Muslims, the term is used here to insinuate the interchangeability of Malay and/or Islamic identity. Please refer to Chapter Three for more discussions on sectorial or racial classifications used throughout the context of this dissertation.
themselves to pain in order for their sins to be forgiven. Artists from East Malaysia like Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Kelvin Chap Kok Leong, and Shia Yih-Yiing reiterate visual images and themes from tribes from Sabah and Sarawak, and even Sylvia Lee Goh, pursued an interest in the fading culture of the Baba and Nyonya minorities.

It is on this premise that this dissertation rests. It explores the context and understanding of postmodernism and postmodern art in Malaysia by raising the question -- what is postmodernism and what is its significance in countries and nation-states which do not go through modernity and the Western Enlightenment in the first place?

Even in the context of Euramerica, the term has become one of the most insistently used terms in the cultural debates of the recent years, but it is a term that has often been used with a great deal of imprecision. Since the word 'modern' itself does not have the same range of meaning in English, French, German or other languages, the 'post-modern' extensions diverge as well. The term is employed in many different senses, depending on its application to history and culture. For some intellectuals, post-modern equates with 'nihilistic' or 'anarchic,' for others, it refers to a culture dominated by televisual representations. In the explosion of poststructuralist theory in the 1960s and the 1970s, one commonality is that it recognizes pluralism. Such is the situation of Malaysian arts and cultural interest since the 1990s.

In discussing modern art and postmodern art outside of Euramerica, it must be noted that there are differences of degree in understandings of such terms. This is because readings and understanding of works of art need to be contextualized in their own historical and cultural terms. This is very true for art produced in developing countries, even though such terms are used in discussing art works frequently, its peculiarities, genealogies, concepts and understandings are quite different from those in Euramerica.

As Clarke highlights,

"There is a need to recover the meanings of Asian art in the local context for which it was made, and in which it plays an active and often culturally specific role. To argue this is not, of course, to say that art can only have meaning at its point of origin or that the context of making is the only one which throws light on a work of art. To emphasise the local, furthermore, is not to argue that the local context is somehow more real and concrete than any other, nor it is an attempt to deny the existences of forces of globalisation in cultural as in other spheres of life. The conception of the local being proposed here does not imagine a space of residual culture as yet untouched by globalisation, but sees the local as relatively distinct context within which the forces of globalisation are mediated and even some sense resisted." 13

13 David Clarke: 239.
In Malaysia, pluralism in ethnic cultural expressions persists in the form of songs, dance, poetry, theatre, and short stories, which have begun to be more diverse and multicultural. Even in the last twenty years, there has been a shift of artistic pursuits based on interest-oriented issues such as consumerism, environmentalism, and gender. Some works have also questioned civic issues, such as social justice, freedom of expression, human rights, and democracy in Malaysia. The merging of various disciplines of arts has also influenced the direction of Malaysian art as more and more Malaysian artists begin to abandon painting and sculpture and instead, adopt or incorporate new approaches and media in their work.

As a postcolonial nation-state, Malaysia’s social, political and cultural context is built from a different history and reality. Thus, I argue that any issue relating to postmodernism and modernism must be discussed in this milieu. Within this context, this dissertation explores several questions -- Can the postmodern outlook and the emerging plural tendencies in art be seen as a nascent postmodern tendency in Malaysia? If so, what are the forms of postmodern tendencies that these artists embrace? If not, how should we define the pluralistic outlooks in Malaysian arts and culture in the larger context of Malaysian nation building, recent globalisation and the erosion of national borders?

Drawing from the fields of art history, cultural history, sociology and Malaysian Studies in particular, this dissertation investigates the forms of postmodernity in Malaysian art, discussing the shift from modern to a postmodern outlook in the context of percamoden, or Malaysia’s ‘postmodern situation’ that I relate to the significantly merging Malaysian new middle class. It explores how Malaysian artists’ preoccupations have shifted from Malay/Islamic-centric tendencies to having a more postmodern outlook and employing postmodern artistic strategies. It also surveys the possible reasons behind these changes almost two decades after the instigation of Malaysia’s National Cultural Policy. By using the term percamoden, it helps to create a sense of periodizing concept in Malaysian art as well as understanding the structure of feeling relating to the new Malaysian middle class that the works under discussion reflects.

My argument will establish that works since the 1990s, especially those posited to be ‘postmodern’ are not just copies of an artistic approach from Euramerica, but must be examined in or out of the context of Malaysian cultural engineering that has become the national agenda since the 1970s. This is because the comparable aspects that frame the background of these artists are their evasion of nationalistic concerns, which previously preoccupied most Malaysian artists. It must be noted that this dissertation will not necessarily be a postmodern critique of the arts situation in Malaysia or use its critique in
discussing the political and social situations in the country, but it rather traces the discourse in Malaysian art.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first three chapters discuss the premise of postmodern art in Malaysia. The second chapter will discuss the understanding and the reception of postmodern discourse. The third chapter will address the ‘postmodern situation’ or situasi percamoden in Malaysia by looking at how the Malay society, especially the Malay middle class, has had to undergo various social and cultural changes as they are pushed to embrace modernization and various development ideals. This section will discuss how the transition from traditional/feudalistic practices to Islam and modern ideals do not go smoothly from one phase to another, at times; they co-exist harmoniously but at other times, they are full of contradictions and conflict.

Chapter Four will trace the early development of postmodern art in the 1970s and investigate Malaysia’s early postmodern art work in relations to the Abstract Expressionist style adopted by a few of Malaysian artists during the 1960s and the emerging Malay/Islamic artistic tendencies of the 1970s towards the end of late 1980s. Chapter Five will concentrate on the strategies employed by artists such as appropriation, figuration and allegory. It also discusses the proliferation of art and some of the important multidisciplinary work that have been produced. This is followed by a discussion on the emergence of work that crosses discipline from installation to performance art and the emergence of alternative and artist-run-spaces. Chapter Six will discuss the development of Malaysian art since the 1990s that I plan to argue here as reiterating the concerns of the mostly urbanized Malaysian middle class that I have discussed in the context of situasi percamoden in Chapter Two. In this chapter, I argue that certain themes can be read as works that reiterates the structure of feeling relating to the new Malaysian middle class. This can be seen in artworks such as racial construction, urban and rural dichotomy, the critique of certain aspects of the degradation of societal values, a critique or re-evaluation of political and historical construction and cross cultural references in art.

This dissertation will eventually provide a further understanding of Malaysian approach of nation building and its unexpected consequences. It must be noted that for many postcolonial societies, the nation as both political project and lived reality remains a central aspect of life, but this paper will highlight that new possibilities can occur due to extensive flows in capital, culture and people.

It is hoped that this dissertation will contribute to debunking the idea of a single modern Asian art and the one-way flow of influence from the West to Asia in general, and will prove
that the persistent complex ebb and flow of information and transformations, of diverse forms of modernisms and postmodernisms, do in fact, interact. By building an understanding of postmodern art in the context of situasi percamoden, I hope I am meeting the challenge posited by Marian Pastor Roces:

"The challenge is in fact to create new intellectual tools that can perhaps go beyond the terms ‘syncretic’, or even perhaps ‘hybrid’, and certainly beyond that sad word ‘influences’, into terminology that can nuance the level of co-optation by the modern vis-à-vis the levels that some other systems of meaning that managed to grow and survive violent encounters with global hegemonies—though they may have managed to do so invisibly, or beyond the adequacy of dominant systems of representation to register. A calibrated terminology, therefore, that can also register the total extinctions of culture caused by the modern machine, and therefore, allows us the ability to mourn." 14

CHAPTER ONE: THE ART SITUATION IN MALAYSIA AND ITS POSTMODERN JUNCTURE

In 1993, the late Redza Piyadasa wrote two essays on Malaysian art. The paper “Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period,” was first presented at the conference held by the Humanities Research Centre and the Department of Art History, Australian National University, Canberra in 1991. This was later published in Modernity in Asian Art, (ed. John Clark) in 1993. The second paper, which is similar to the first was published under the title “Modern Malaysian Art, 1945-1991: A Historical Overview” in Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific (ed. Caroline Turner). The book boasted of being the first major publication to survey contemporary art of the Asia-Pacific region and it coincided with the first Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, by the Queensland Art Gallery in the same year.

Redza Piyadasa (1939-2007) is a well-known figure in Malaysian art. He was known to many in the Malaysian art scene as an artist, art theorist, art historian, critic, lecturer, writer, curator and he also served as advisor on a number of art museum boards at national and international level. He attended Malayan Teachers College in England and later London’s Hornsey College of Art. In 1977, he attained his Master of Fine Art in Sculpture and Asian Art History Studies at University of Hawaii. He wrote a weekly art column for The Business Times from 1992 to 1997.

His first two early significant curatorial works were Pameran Retrospective Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang and Pengolahan Lanskap Tempatan dalam Seni moden Malaysia 1930-1981 (The Treatment of Local Landscape in Modern Malaysian Art 1930-1981) for which he wrote some parts of the exhibition catalogue. In 1983, Redza Piyadasa co-wrote with TK Sabapathy, Modern Artists of Malaysia. Over the years especially in the last decade of his life, Piyadasa contributed several essays and curated several exhibitions for the National Art Gallery (NAG, or in Malay, Balai Seni Lukis Negara (BSLN) such as Vision and Idea:

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Relooking Modern Malaysian Art,¹⁹ Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987-1997,²⁰ Rupa Malaysia: Meninjau Senilukis Moden Malaysia²¹ and he had selected works and curated the exhibition Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia.²² The National Art Gallery (NAG) organized all of these exhibitions.

I am bringing attention to the 1993 essays because it was the first time Piyadasa posited Malaysian art development as having postmodern impulses. Piyadasa had written quite a significant number of essays delineating the development of modern art in Malaysia since the 1970s, but in both "Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period,"²³ and "Modern Malaysian Art, 1945-1991: A Historical Overview,"²⁴ he observed a shift in Malaysian modern art towards having a postmodern inclination. Significantly, however, both essays were almost the same, where the only differences were some rephrasing of words and different versions of sentences. Only in the second paper does Piyadasa underline the development of modern art under sub-headings.

As in his other published essays,²⁵ Piyadasa traces the development of Malaysian art from the modern art activity in British Malaya, which began with the arrival of a small group of Chinese émigré artists in Singapore (from 1945 to the end of 1950s), to the international orientations brought back by the newly returned Malaysian overseas-trained artists in the mid-1950s to the early 1970s. From the mid-1970s to the 1990s, Piyadasa outlined the emergence of neo-nationalistic and pan-Islamic tendencies among Malay artists as an outcome of the First National Cultural Congress in 1971. He highlighted works by Malay artists, which were inspired by Malay-Islamic revivalist concerns. The neo-regionalist

²² Redza Piyadasa, Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2002).
²³ Redza Piyadasa, "Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period."
tendencies emerged from the early 1980s to the 1990s, which he argues as embodying two particular aspects, first, a reconsideration of the Malaysian reality and its history in the rapid modernization process, and second, the link to neo-regionalist aspirations derived from a broader Southeast Asian identity.

Finally, in an argument that forms the interest of this dissertation, Piyadasa discussed the “Postformalist and Postmodernist” development in regard to Malaysian art. This was the first time that he discussed the term ‘postmodern’ in relation to developments in Malaysian art and explored several isolated artistic shifts that he argued can be consider postmodernist -- from the postformalist art activity jointly initiated by himself and Sulaiman Esa called Mystical Reality in 1974 to Ismail Zain’s Digital Collage exhibition in 1989. Piyadasa suggested that the exhibition was postmodern, based on the media used by the artists and the approach of the work in which he claims to be ‘impersonal,’ ‘highly mechanized,’ ‘juxtapose[ed] with images from mass culture’ and ‘questioning previously accepted modes of perception and cognition.’

Piyadasa provided further examples of performance, installation, and video art work such as Wong Hoy Cheong and Marian D’Cruz performance-type presentations and Wong Hoy Cheong’s video art entitled “Sook Ching” (1990). Piyadasa also noted another ‘installation-type art-cum-performance’ “Two Installations” (1991) by Liew Kungyu and Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin. He also mentions Zulkifli Yusof’s “Power Series” installations that question the myth of the political.

It must be noted that as bold as Piyadasa’s proclamation on the shift of the development in art were, such observations were not isolated. In 1989 for example Ismail Zain, in his postmodernist approach had tried to deconstruct and criticize the general understanding of modern Malaysian art.

‘... In Malaysia, for instance, since the claim for modernistic attitude in the arts has never been matched with correspondingly equivocal attempts to grapple with its political, social and aesthetical repercussions on the national level, the battle cry has remained to be no more than rhetorical. As a result, the dichotomous existence of Modernism in an environment which is not entirely in equanimity with its canons of the West has not only proven to be problematic, but, in extreme cases, also leads to cultural delusion.’

He observes further,

“... In Malaysia, for instance, since the claim for modernistic attitude in the arts has never been matched with correspondingly equivocal attempts to grapple with its political, social and aesthetical repercussions on the national level, the battle cry has remained to be no more than rhetorical. As a result, the dichotomous existence of Modernism in an environment which is not entirely in equanimity with its canons of the West has not only proven to be problematic, but, in extreme cases, also leads to cultural delusion.”

styles, the art market, opening speeches and the seemingly democratic institution of art bureaucracy comprising a new class of bourgeoisie and artists/officials who sit on panels or committees and makes incongruous decisions about art. In the nature of Hegelianism, “modernism” in a developing country truly seeks itself in its other; except where it really matters.”

Besides Piyadasa’s initial observations of the changing art scene, Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff also noted the complex context that younger Malaysian artists emerged from:

“….Multicultural Malaysia was not inclined towards offering easily solutions. And there was also the factor of Islamic resurgence, understood sociologically to be inextricably enmeshed in ethnicity. Society was clearly stratified. The plight of the ‘aborigines’ (people of the ‘Fourth World’), and ‘other’ indigenous groups came to the fore amidst irreversible advance of industrialization and technology. So did the issues of gender and sexuality – from being something of a social fad, women’s position and rights in society came to be seen as sociological fact. And if that was not enough, the deterioration of the natural environment emerged as a matter of global concern, cutting across national boundaries, and in implicating the economy and national sovereignty; it became unavoidably imbedded in international and national politics.

Meanwhile, the validity of modernism in art (and life) itself was being questioned. In the West, a new age of post-modernism was heralded – not that was agreed on what post-modernism was in the first place, or what ‘modernism’ was, for that matter.

This was the socio-cultural and political background against which a new breed of young artists emerged, artists who seemed to be dissatisfied with the apparently facile and passive aesthetic operations of established artists. Manifestly, these artists did not appear too engrossed in the pursuit if superficial identity in art. ..”

Significantly, such observations have been made more and more frequently. Hasnul Jamal Saidon has further observed the trend in the Malaysian art scene in the last fifteen years as “having been predominantly preoccupied by changing realities brought about by globalisation, capitalist free marker liberalism, information revolution and digital technology.” Postmodern encounters, he further asserts,

“... have been framed by the overlapping discourses of post-structuralism, post-colonialism, deconstruction, feminism and gender theories. In the contemporary Malaysian art scene, the discourses have been fueled by issues related to diasporas, imperatives of multiculturalism and pluralism, crisis of representation, cultural alienation, cultural authority and contestation, critique of history, media imperialism, hegemony and control, critique of popular culture and rampant consumerism, critique of globalization, crisis of urbanization, and critical exposition of new media and its influences.”

In regards to the Young Contemporaries Award (Bakat Muda Sezaman), he observes,

“(a)rtworks that carry prevailing modernist formalism and romantic expressionism are pitted against those fueled and informed by post-modernist contexts. Modernist’s faith in universality, authenticity and artistic progress is pitted against post-modernist’s deconstructive and skeptical

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28 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
tendencies to turn everything (even artists and artworks) into texts, mythologies and fictional characters
(with pre-fabricated codes and meanings ready to be appropriated and assembled.)”

In the subsequent Young Contemporaries Award 2004, he again scrutinizes this further,

“Cynicism, sarcasm, mockery and parody that have somehow become a standard ‘house style’ or
notes plucked by many loud installation artists, still reverberate as a rave of post-modernism (and
perhaps internationalism) for the Malaysian contemporary art. Through such notes, rapid urbanization is
cautioned, materialism and blatant consumerism are busted, free market capitalism is suspected,
globalization is lamented, new media is mystified, the Malays are warned (and mocked), the United
States of America is scorned, the state of contemporary art is healed and Islam (or the problems in
interpreting and implementing of its law) is highlighted. Institutions related to the mainstream political
and cultural (even religious) establishments still retain their position as popular and cliché targets. To be
fair to the spirit of the young, such notes or attitudes are tolerated (and sometimes welcomed or
encouraged)!”

As this issue ‘what is postmodern art?’ confronts us, other questions could also be
initiated along the same lines -- what does postmodernism means in Malaysian context? Is
there such a thing as Malaysia’s postmodern condition and how does it influence
contemporary artistic practice?

This dissertation argues that artistic tendencies in Malaysia generally occur as an
indirect result of the cultural and social changes and drastic modernization that Malaysians
have had to go thorough under the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the Islamization Policy
since the 1970s. As an indirect result, the new emerging Malaysian middle class are faced
with various situations in which traditionalism, Islam and modern ideals coexist
harmoniously and sometimes discordantly. This is what I describe as situasi percamoden or
the ‘postmodern situation’ as I will further explicate in Chapter Three. Within this context,
that art deemed as postmodern in Malaysia enfolds.

The term ‘postmodern’ nevertheless, has nothing to do with the discontinuity in the
erlier phases of the modern period in Western societies, the social condition brought about
by the spread of Western mass consumption industry, or as a form of cultural excess. It is a
term that I am using to describe the cultural condition, which has developed especially among
the Malaysian middle class as the result of Malaysia’s sudden participation in the modern
global economy. The association of class element in the general discussion of this

32 Hasnul Jamal Saidon, "Post-Modern Encounters," in Young Contemporaries 2002 (Kuala Lumpur:
33 Hasnul Jamal Saidon, "In the Name of (Borrowed) Times," in Bms 2004 (Kuala Lumpur National Art
Gallery, 2004), 6-59.
dissertation is parallel with Akbar S. Ahmed’s opinion on postmodernism: “[t]here is a class element in postmodernism, and democracy is a pre-condition for it to flourish.”

The Usage of the Term ‘Modern Art’

With this shift in art development in Malaysia that I have just discussed, suddenly we are confronted with the possibility that postmodern artistic strategy had slowly encroached upon the fine arts realm -- this has happened without an exhaustive attempt to resolve what is modern art in the first place. The fact is that the general understanding of what is ‘modern art’ in Malaysia has not been agreed on or explicited extensively. Generally, the term has been used very loosely to describe artistic activities such as oil and watercolour painting as early as the 1930s, and has been adopted in employing the Western-based modern system modelled by the practice of eighteenth century of the arts including the grouping of five arts -- painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry and music. Similarly, the term ‘fine art’ has implied beauty, skill superiority, elegance, perfection, and an absence of any utilitarian value.

In the book Modern Artists of Malaysia for example, T.K. Sabapathy claims that ‘modernity’ can be read on behalf of the works of Yong Mun Sen, Abdullah Ariff, Lim Cheng Hoe, Tay Hooi Keat and Khaw Sia in the 1930s and artists after the Second World War. He put forward this argument based on the reason that the artists totally relied on visual data derived from the observed world and transcribed it into images consisting of a blend of impressions and concrete images. The use of watercolour he argues is suitable for landscape as a medium for direct transcription of such observation, though there were also some works in oil. Though the early watercolour works by these artists did not advance any formal or aesthetics directions, T.K. Sabapathy suggests “… the nucleus of notions that are generally identifiable with modern art as such, are discernible in their works. The expansion and consolidation of such notions are the results of the institutional grounding of art education and art activities”.

With the recent discoveries of work by Low Kway Song entitled “Lynx” (1921) and O. Don Peris “Portrait of My Wife in Her Wedding Dress” (1933), Jolly Koh for example, has argued that such paintings were ‘Western-styled’ rather than ‘modern.’ In his argument, he

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uses the term 'modern art' to denote 'Modernist art.' Koh argues that, "... Modern art in Malaysia did not begin until the late fifties with the paintings of Tay Hooi Keat and Syed Jamal (sic), two artists who had their formal training in London. Before these two artists, Modern Art simply did not exist in Peninsular Malaysia."37 He further argues that Modern art is a specific term used by art historians referring to a group of artists and art movements which began in the twentieth century, connected by the post-Impressionists, Cubism, Expressionism and Surrealism.38 Such were the few examples of context and contradictions in understanding of what is modern art in Malaysia.

I would like to argue here that ‘modern art’ is a general term used loosely in Malaysian art writings to differentiate art produced for contemplation for example, works in watercolour or works that are rooted in the easel tradition basically embedded in the fine arts practice, from art which is rooted in the utilitarian based Malay tradition (seni tradisi). Utilitarian art or crafts have played an important role in the lives of the Malay society. This can be seen in the nature of such craftworks which are textile related such songket weaving, batik, woodwork such as work carvings of timber house, boat making, weaponry and metalwork for example jewellery making.

The usage of the term ‘modern art’ I argue here does not mean that the artwork labelled as such embodies the aesthetic modernism as espoused by Baudelaire or Clement Greenberg. Therefore, the term used does not necessarily mean ‘Modernist art.’ The term ‘modern art’ is generally used to refer to art produced within the realm of the ‘fine arts’ institution, be it paintings, sculptures, ceramics etc. and it exists in relation to the modern art institution such as the educational institution, the supporting institutions of galleries and patrons. As Mohamed Ali Abdul Rahman observes, the advent of Merdeka or Independence from British rule on August 31, 1957, heralded a more visible role for artists as they found themselves occupying an unprecedented relevance in the new contexts of a modern nation-building. The formation of National Art Gallery in 1958 was a momentous development, signalling the new legitimisation of the modern artists in Malaysia.39 Though it was perhaps in a slightly smaller scale than the few monuments such as Parliament building, National Mosque and Stadium Merdeka built as symbols of the new nation.40

38 Ibid.
Even though artistic depiction of Malaya can be detected since the late nineteenth century through the aquatints prints and drawings of Malaysian landscape done by foreign artists between 1786 and 1824 – landscapes of Penang and Malacca - these activities were limited to British officers and proof of involvement by local artists has not yet been found or established. In terms of illustrations however, Ahmad Suhaime Mohd Noor has argued that the earliest illustration works can be seen in the book Hikayat Abdullah published in 1849 and illustration has persistently and significantly played a role in local publication of schoolbooks, story books, newspapers, magazines since pre-Independence.

As with the changing scene in the international art world, several other terms have also been used loosely in discussing the realm of the arts in Malaysia such as ‘contemporary art’ or seni seza man. Dolores D. Wharton for example, has used ‘Contemporary art’ in her book entitled Contemporary Artists of Malaysia in 1971. The book is a biographic survey of Malaysian artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In her words, the book is written, “to present a systematic view of the contemporary artists, rather than the art of Malaysia.” The term ‘contemporary’ too for example, have been used as the new of the biannual art competition organized by the National Art Gallery – Young Contemporary Arts or Bakat Muda Seza man, inspired by the Young Contemporaries Exhibition in London during the 1960s. In both cases, the term ‘contemporary’ denotes the idea of being ‘up to date’ rather than referring to any specific style or discourse. Only in recent writing, such as by Safrizal Shahir in discussing Ahmad Fuad Osman’s work has the term ‘contemporary’ or seza man been insinuated as a contemporaneous art discourse.

The Writings and Research Context of Malaysian Art

To discuss art development in Malaysia, an analysis of the reality of the situation of art writings and research of Malaysian art is inevitable. This enables us to understand the discourse or lack of discourse in the art historical field especially of modern art. The general

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42 See Ahmad Suhaime Mohd Noor, Sejarah Kesedaran Visual Di Malaya (Tanjung Malim: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 2007).
43 Dolores D. Wharton, Contemporary Artists of Malaysia (Petaling Jaya: Published for the Asia Society by the Union Cultural Organization Sdn Bhd., 1971).
44 Ibid., vi.
observations made of Malaysian art writings and research is that it has never developed into a progressive field or even been seen as important as the work of art itself. In 1994, the panel members of the exhibition, *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art*[^47] were in agreement that no one person or group had seriously ventured into investigating the dynamics of modernism in Malaysian art since the publication of *Modern Artists of Malaysia.*[^48] It was concluded during the discussion amongst the essay contributors and curators of the exhibition that only T.K Sabapathy’s introduction to the book was significant in terms of its examination on the formal aesthetic spirit and properties produced by modernism in Malaysian art.[^49] Since the publication of the book, rapid and profound changes had occurred in Malaysian art but circumstances of art writings were still primarily registered in generalized and sketchy writings of art reporting, with an emphasis on the background of artists, a general overview of artistic development and descriptive approach of the current art work under study.

Eddin Khoo lamented about this poor state of literature,

"If a broad review of critical and historical Malaysian writings were conducted, the inevitable discovery would be a gathering of shards, fragments of writings confined principally to catalogues, articles and reviews and expressed in a vocabulary largely anecdotal and rooted in collection. And even within these, there is really little attempt at locating the making, production and staging of Malaysian art works in a critical and historical perspective."[^50]

Most major writings of Malaysian art were written for catalogues accompanying exhibitions either by the National Art Gallery or by private galleries such as Valentine Willie, XOAS, Wei-ling Gallery, Pelita Hati, and Galeri Chandan to name a few. Such exhibitions and writings can be divided by their curatorial approach. The essays can range from various approaches to the collection exhibited – from historical narratives and thematic perspectives. This could be for group shows, retrospectives, invitational exhibitions, competitions and recent acquisitions of collections. Essays were also written for specific artists for their solo show catalogues. It must also be noted that a catalogue however will accompany not all exhibitions and not all catalogues will have an accompanying essay. This depends on the financial allocation of the organizer or the particular art gallery. Flyers and pamphlets are

[^47]: The panel members were T.K. Sabapathy, Krishen Jit, Redza Piyadasa and Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff.


very common and a cheaper alternative to catalogues. It should be observed however, most of the catalogues/pamphlets/flyers are produced in both Malay and English to accommodate readers of both languages. There are also publications in conjunction with certain conferences, seminars and art events such as for Pekan Seni Ipoh (Ipoh Arts Festival).

There are several arts publications or local journals that engage with arts, culture and design discourses such as the *International Journal of Art and Design* published by MARA University of Technology (UiTM) and *Wacana Seni: Journal of Arts Discourse* published by Science University of Malaysia (USM). Local literary publishers such as Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka have also published arts and culture magazines such as Dewan Budaya and Dewan Sastera which discuss mostly literary works but sometimes also includes visual arts, theatre and performance. There are a few newspapers columns on arts events or exhibitions. Writers such as Ooi Kok Chuen, Laura Fan, Adeline Ooi, J. Anu and Redza Piyadasa are among the key figures that have written for such sections.

Besides art history, there is also a lack in art criticism in art reviews. Perhaps this can be traced to Asian society’s emphasis on the need to ‘keep face.’ Ming Chua agrees with Joyce van Fenema in her book *Southeast Asian Art Today*, that there is an inherent need for Asians to keep face about their own and others’ position in the society. Since the word ‘criticism’ has a negative connotation and nuance, art criticism through art critical writing has not been widely encouraged. Ming Chua points out that, “Not only was a passing commentary on a piece of art work impossible, it is perceived as wrong. . .”\(^{51}\)

There are a few art magazines published but unfortunately, such publication remains unsustainable due to a very small readership and limited market. Both *Art Corridor* and *tanpa tajuk* (2 issues) were the few magazines that had to face such conclusion. Currently, gallery websites, blogs by artists, art groups or writers, Facebook profiles and online sites such as kakiseni.com have played a bigger role in disseminating information on arts events and reviews, creating an extensive and various networking possibilities. Entertainment and art magazines such as “KLue” and “Off the Edge” have also assisted in communicating art events to local audiences and sometimes review them.

In October 2005, Teratak Nuromar of Perak Arts Foundation (Yayasan Kesenian Perak) published “sentAp!” (acronym for *Seni Tanpa Prejudis* – Art without Prejudice). The Malay word for ‘sentap’ means ‘to lift out, especially with a jerk.’ “sentAp!”, though a young magazine, it enfolds freshness and sense of urgency in discovering new ideas and new

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\(^{51}\) Ming Chua, “Literature, Criticism and the Fine Arts: Can We Handle It?,” *Art Corridor*, July-Sept 2003, 16.
expression. Its casual tone allows Malaysian audiences to be more engaged with quality art criticism to regional and international audiences.

On the other hand, the dire state of urgency in art writings and scholarly engagement with contemporary art should also be seen as the consequence of the non-existence of art historical and criticism scholarship in Malaysia. Art history only exists as an elective or compulsory subject offered to complement a Fine Art major and does not stand on its own as a department in either in MARA University of Technology (UiTM), Science University of Malaysia (USM), University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) or in private institutions. At undergraduate and diploma level, courses in fine art are being offered but not Art History. Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM)\textsuperscript{52}, or previously known as Institut Teknologi Mara (ITM) Faculty of Art and Design (FSSR), offers diploma and degree courses in the fields of Graphic Design and Digital Media, Textile Design, Fine Metal Design, Industrial Design, Ceramics, Fashion Design, Photography and Creative Imaging, Fine Arts, Footwear Design and Technology, and Printing Technology. Though it also offers Master and Doctorate programs in Art History and Cultural Management, it is only by research.

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) School of the Arts (Pusat Pengajian Seni which used to be known as Pusat Seni) offers undergraduate programs in its Design, Fine Arts, Drama & Theatre, and Music Department.\textsuperscript{53} The Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts (FACA)\textsuperscript{54} of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak’s five main disciplines are painting, printing, 3-D sculpture, photography, and electronic art. Besides such public institutions, Malaysian Institute of Arts

\textsuperscript{52} UiTM Faculty of Art and Design was founded in 1967. It was initially known as the School of Applied Arts, the Faculty of Art and Design was originally adjoined to the School of Architecture, Planning and Land Survey. The first batch counted 33 students enrolled in the foundation course and the following year, three programs of specialization were created, namely Fine Arts, Graphic Design and Textile Design. Several more programs were added in 1973. The School of Applied Arts became known as the School of Art and Design (Kajian Seni Lukis dan Seni Reka, or KSSR). When Institute Teknologi Mara became a university, KSSR becomes FSSR, as the School becomes a Faculty. See \url{http://www.ad.uitm.edu.my/}; Internet; accessed 5 May 2008.

\textsuperscript{53} See \url{http://www.usm.my/art/html/home_intro.htm}; Internet; accessed 5 May 2008.

\textsuperscript{54} Faculty of Applied and Creative Art (FACA) at UNIMAS was established in September 1993 and opened for enrolment in the July session, 1994/1995. The Fine Arts programme and course curriculum is design to be multi-disciplinary and contemporary through the Fine Arts domain. The educational approach of the program gives emphasis on the theoretical and practical aspect for the purpose of education and research. The theoretical aspect covers study on media research, history, appreciation, interpretation, and aesthetic and art criticism. The practical aspect focuses on the exploration of new media and technology, mastery of medium and application of relevant techniques in the studios and field-work. It must be noted that UNIMAS is situated in East Malaysia and its impact on Malaysian art scene on the Peninsular demands another research altogether. See its website at \url{http://www.faca.unimas.my/}; Internet; accessed 6 May 2008.
or MIA, a private art institution offers a range of three-year Diploma courses in the fields of fine art, music, illustration, and design (textile and fashion, graphic, industrial). Other private institution includes CENFAD (Centre for Advance Design) and Limkokwing University of Creative Technology.

With such limited specializations mostly concentrating on practice, there is very limited interest about discourse and research aspects of the field. The National Art Gallery through its catalogue publications generally presents the most consistent position in publication attempts on modern art. Though these attempts are commended, the direction of the national institution can perhaps be argued to be wayward and undirected, sometimes functioning more of a government institution rather than a gallery.

In an art scene in which writings and writers on art are scarce, there are situations in which artists turn into writers, private gallery owners into curators and writers on art, artists run private spaces/galleries, gallery owners/curators become art historians, and art writers turn into artists etc. Such conflicts of interest emerge when artists themselves becomes art critics/art journalists and discuss their own work without disclaiming their direct involvement. Another instance is when those who were engaged in the art market as patrons publish and write about art, there remain elements raising the market value of certain works and promoting a certain kind of art market. Though any attempts in discussing art and writing about them are very welcome, we can see that such conflicting and ambiguous multiple sites between those in involved in the art, artists, and the institution do not provide a better outlook on art writings in Malaysia. These multiple roles are inevitable when some artists are not only the producers of art, but they also become the disseminator and writers of art. As Pakharudin explains, "(t)here was some self promotion, ..., but you didn’t have a choice when there was no existing art writing. .."

Writings by artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal and Redza Piyadasa himself could be seen as in such a contradicting and conflicting position. In the case of Piyadasa, it must be noted that his writings form a valuable repository of information and analysis of the Malaysian arts from its early years to 2007. Besides several publications of exhibition

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58 Adeline Ooi and Jason Tan, 39.
catalogues by the National Art Gallery, he has written for the popular press in Malaysia, contributed essays for international exhibitions, as well as given seminar presentations. Piyadasa’s authority in the arts on the other hand, was amplified by his different position in the field; he was an artist, art critic and art historian and was at one point running a gallery. This multiplicity of roles allowed him to occupy different sites of power – the academy, the arts, the art market and the government, at times simultaneously. One might raise the ethical issues of an art historian writing about his own work, especially in the case of Syed Ahmad Jamal, within his capacity of being the Director of the National Gallery, hailing the Abstract Expressionist idiom as reflective of the Independence spirit in catalogues published by the National Art Gallery. With only a very few writers to contradict or offer different perspectives on Malaysian art, art historical accounts by these writers are regarded as an important insight to what is happening in the development of modern art. Piyadasa’s opinion for example, since his collaboration with T.K. Sabapathy in writing Modern Artists of Malaysia, may have gained extra dimensions, and developed the appearance of totalising discourse.

**Historical backdrop of Malaysian Art**

In order to gain a better understanding of Malaysian art development, it is necessary to undertake a brief historical survey of post-Independence political development of the country in order to provide a wider framework of the changing social structure in the country and to situate the development of modern art in the context of Malaysia’s political and social conditions.

Although Malaysia’s geographical location is unique and racially and ethnically related to its neighbours, Indonesia, Brunei, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, Malaysia’s art historical developments are relatively short. For example, in the Philippines the history of modern art can be traced back as early as late nineteenth century, specifically to the miniaturismo painting. Later the beaux arts tradition of the European academies to which nineteenth century artists like Juan Luna, Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo and sculptor Guillermo Tolentino were exposed. Apart from that, there were others like the local Academia de Dibujo y Pintura de Manila (established in the 1830s) and the Amorsolo School. 59 For Indonesia, the beginning of modern Indonesian painting is usually dated back to Raden Salleh

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It was only in the first decades of the twentieth century did indigenous painters like Abdullah Surjosubroto, Mas Pirngadi and Wakidi paint actively in a style similar to Raden Salleh, which later came to be known as the Mooie Indie (Beautiful Indies) school. Such paintings were more oriented towards European art styles and patrons. These artists produced romantic landscapes of volcanoes and rice paddies for Dutch expatriates and tourists.  

In the case of Malaysia, it is quite strikingly different. Marco Hsu highlights that,  

"Malaya has no painting tradition. She does not have abundant and rich traditions such as Buddhists wall murals found in Siam and India. Patterns on batik sarongs can be said to be most Malayenised, but they are considered an applied art and not an accepted painting tradition. Local Indian paintings are simple and ordinary as they do not relate to or continues from art trends in the mother country. Chinese painting, though important in the realm of art, is only limited to interests of the Chinese community. The only art form which can be appreciated by all races in Malaya thus far is Western painting, and this has become the main medium for art instruction in her schools. Many excellent artists owe the status they enjoy today to a primary education in western arts, after which they are able to develop more mutually acceptable local styles. Malay artist have also expressed their artistic abilities using the western painting medium. Western modern art allows for personal expressions at any location, unfettered by any particular tradition of that place. The real Malayan painting tradition is hence a use of themes with strong local colours, flavours and characteristics using western painting methods, a beginning which can be traced back to twenty or so years ago."  

It must be noted that although Hsu only refers to the painting tradition, Malaysia’s early societies have been involved in making tools and objects for utilitarian purposes. Objects such as pottery, woven fibres and stone tools were crafted for the needs of early societies either in the Malay Peninsula or the Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak) and the movement of people around the region helped to inspire the creative process in various ways. Significantly, Malaysia is on the major sea-lane from the West to the East and has been the recipient of multifarious cultural elements from the great civilizations of the world – India and China, as well as the Middle East and the West. Some cave paintings were found in Tambun Caves in Perak, believed to have been done in the pre-historic era, and with statues of Buddha and the ruins of the Tatrayana in Santubung, Sarawak can be found to exemplify the Hindu/Buddha era. The Islamic Era also brought various influences in terms of cultural forms and motives besides the changing beliefs and law. On top that, Malaysia has an abundance of craft traditions, initially developed to fulfil the needs of early societies. Hindu, Buddhist and Islam influence works such as pottery, woven fibres and tools. Immigration and cross-migration between the Malay Peninsula and its neighbours influenced local technique and designs in

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61 Marco C.F. Hsu, A Brief History of Malayan Art, trans., Lai Chee Kien (Singapore: Millenium Books, 1999), 63-64.
batik, metal ware and wayang kulit for example. Other factors are the colonization by Portuguese, Dutch and British in Malaysia. Chinese and Indian migrants to the Malay Peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak also added to the diverse range of crafts and arts.

It is only in the painting traditions that Malaysia’s history is quite recent, though the depiction of Malaysia, then Malaya, by European travellers and colonials and Chinese traders are limited mainly to Penang, Kedah and Singapore. Early landscape paintings were generally documentation of the land, sea, flora and fauna and such artistic activities functioned either as cultural pastime or as anthropological documentation by British officers. Though what exactly ‘representation’ and ‘visual representation’ could mean in various nineteenth century Southeast Asian contexts especially in Indonesia and the Philippines can be debated, Malaysian art historians believe that modern art did not develop prior to the twentieth century. It is only circa the 1920s that artistic activities have been detected in British-Malaya by early art ‘pioneers’ such as Yong Mun Sen, Abdullah Ariff, Lee Kah Yeow, Khaw Sia, Tai Hooi Keat, and Kuo Ju Ping. Besides the individual artistic activities by these artists, there were also several pre-war art associations in urban centres formed mostly by Chinese immigrants along with certain British citizens. A community of expatriate painters also formed the Penang Impressionists (a group active between 1920-1939). These artistic developments were isolated and do not have any cohesive drive forming any overall tendencies or outlook. Painting was just a past-time activity and only after the 1950s did the development of modern art in Malaysia gain momentum.

The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore founded in 1938 by Lim Hak Tai, was the first art college in British Malaya to offer fulltime courses in painting and sculpture. It is the first generation of Nanyang artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng, Georgette Chen Li

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65 This perspective is highlighted by T.K. Sabapathy in his “Introduction” in the book Modern Artists of Malaysia (1983). For discussions on some of the early artists in Malaya, see also Tan Chee Khuang, Perintis Perintis Seni Lukis Malaysia (Penang: The Art Gallery, 1994).

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Ying, Chen Wen Hsi, and Chen Chong Swee, who have not only been exposed to traditional Chinese painting but also trained in beaux-arts type of art academies in Shanghai, Canton, and Amoy in the 1930s, and were exposed to modernist influences such as the School of Paris, as modernizing reforms took place in China.

Ahmad Suhaimi Mohd Noor on the other hand points out that the early history of visual arts in Malaysia should also consider other artistic achievements such as in the realm of illustration. The contributions by Malay teachers such as Mohd Said b. Haji Hussain at Sultan Ismail Training College (now Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris), Saidon Yahya, illustrator and editor of Majalah Guru, other illustrators and painters such as Nora, Idris b. Haji Salam and Abdullah Ariff in the first half of the twentieth century should be discussed in the context of modern visual history in Malaysia. He even traced early illustration work done between 1840 until 1890 by Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir and Said Ahmad Al-Kadri. Between the year 1920 and 1940, there was even a polemic on art in Malaya between Syed Sheikh Al Hadi and conservative parents who rejected art subjects and Pertukangan Tangan (the subject of hand skills) in Penang schools. Ahmad Suhaimi also points out that the establishment of Sultan Idris Training College in 1922 had also produced a few artists with Malay viewpoint. Then only later in 1938 was the Nanyang Academy of Arts in Singapore established, and this academy was established with Chinese viewpoint.66

Unlike some other British colonies, Malaya achieved independence in 1957 in a relatively peaceful manner. One of the conditions to be met before the British would relinquish its colonial rule was that there should be cooperation and unity among the Malays, Chinese and Indians living in the country at that time. This compromise was established by the unique amalgamation of the three major political parties in Malaysia: United Malays National Organization (UMNO) representing the Malays, Malayan Chinese Associations (MCA) representing the Chinese, and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) representing the Indians. Together these parties formed the Alliance Party, now known as the Barisan Nasional or National Front party, and agreed on the ‘historic bargain’ of the Merdeka (Independence) Constitution of 1957. Generally, through UMNO, the Malays granted Chinese and Indians easier access to Malayan citizenship. This on the other hand was in return for the guarantee of Malay special rights and the recognition as the bumiputeras

66 Ahmad Suhaimi Mohd Noor, 4-6.
(sons/daughters of the soil) in the Constitution. In the course of uplifting the economic and social condition of the Malays by these special rights, the Chinese and Indians were given freedom to play their roles in business and economic activities in Malaysia.

In Kuala Lumpur, the arts scene started to gain momentum when Peter Harris, an artist and art educator from Britain, came to Malaya in 1951. He was the first Superintendent of the Arts for the Federation of Malaya, and the first education officer to engage seriously in arts education in the Federation of Malaya at that time. He formed the Wednesday Art Group (WAG), an evening painting and drawing classes, which was mostly attended by teachers and even some students in a small studio in the Education Department compound. Several acclaimed Malaysian artists had their first introduction to modern art through these classes such as Cheong Laitong, Patrick Ng Kah Onn, Dzulkifli Buyong, Jolly Koh, Ismail Mustam, Ho Kai Peng, Hajeedar Abdul Majid, Sivam Selvaratnam, Ahmad Hassan, Janet Ng, Liu Siat Moi, Long Thien Shih, Anthony Lau and Renee Kraal. Works by the artists in this group vary. Dzulkifli Buyong explored his childhood experience, while the work by Cheong Laitong, Patrick Ng, and Jolly Koh displayed an Abstract Expressionist outlook in their work and Ismail Mustam attempted several different styles of that time.

Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung (APS), a group for Malay artists, was formed on 24th March 1956. Initially known as Majlis Kesenian Melayu, the name of the group was formally changed to Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung on 15th April, 1958, and later to Angkatan Pelukis SeMalaysia in 1968. Although the group later opened to non-Malay members, Abdullah Kassim claims that initial advocacy of the APS was based on a resurgence of Malay nationalism in the 1950s, as the early members of the group were Malays. The APS was formed on a basis similar to Angkatan Senirupa Indonesia (ASRI). ASRI promoted the idea that local painters should produce 'national' and indigenous artwork, stemming mainly from their emotional and dogmatic identification with Indonesia and its people. Based on academic realism, impressionism, and even the integration of both styles, the subjects undertaken by the members of these groups were definitely the Malay people and Malaya in general. Hoessein Enas and Mazli Mat Som, known for their portraiture, and members such as Zakariah Noor, Yusof Abdullah, Mohd Sallehadin, Ahmad Hassan, Idris Salam and Sabtu

69 Ibid.
Mohd Yusoff produced genre scenes, landscapes, historical events, myths, natures scenes and still life.

The 1960s witnessed the return of Western-trained artists (most on government scholarship to study arts) who brought with them formal artistic experiments to be enmeshed with past cultural references. Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin, and Yeoh Jin Leng however, adopted the Abstract Expressionist style in depicting local and regional landscapes while Ibrahim Hussein came back with some Pop Art influence in some of his work. The New Scene artists such Redza Piyadasa, Choong Kam Kow, Sulaiman Esa, Tan Teong Eng, Tang Tuck Kan and Tan Teong Kooi, provided some alternative approaches in art making in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Artists such as Chuah Thean Teng, Tay Mo Leong, and Khalil Ibrahim on the other hand, are synonymous in the adoption of Malay craft traditions through their batik painting and Nik Zainal Abidin was the proponent of wayang kulit themes and subjects.

The racial riots on May 13, 1969, however, were the definite turning point that shaped Malaysia’s policies, approach, and ideology in negating its inter-ethnic relations. The riots have been attributed to many causes, but Malay dissatisfaction over non-Malay threats and challenges to Malay rights, Malay political primacy and discontent about the economic power of the non-Malays are seen as the primary factor.  

Before proceeding into the next chapter and taking a closer look at the postmodern premise of this dissertation, I will discuss here a few government policies and cultural changes with the general implications on the arts in Malaysia. Since May 13, 1969 racial riot, the government embarked on vast political and economic reform through National Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP was set out on two principle objectives; first, the reduction and eradication of poverty, irrespective of race, through facilitating access to land, physical capital, training and public amenities for the Malays. Second, restructuring society by increasing the Malays ‘and other indigenous groups’ share in the corporate sector and reducing their dependence on subsistence agriculture could eliminate identification of race with economic function. Economically, the goal of the NEP was to increase Malay economic ownership from around three percent in 1971 to thirty percent over a twenty-year

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71 Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, 302-316.
period, through massive government effort and interventions in order to bring the bumiputeras into the modern urban economy.\textsuperscript{72}

The NEP marked a new turning point for Malaysia’s politics, economy and social relations as it influenced other similar pro-Malay policies. The implementation of the National Cultural Policy in 1971 and the Islamization Policy through penerapan nilai-nilai Islam or the implementation of Islamic values followed suit. The Malay intellectuals convened at the University of Malaya from August 16\textsuperscript{th} until the 20\textsuperscript{th}, 1971 to formulate the country’s policy on national culture based on three principles: that the national culture must be based on the culture of the Malays, as the native people in the region, Islam as an important source in determining the form of national culture and lastly the acceptance of elements of other cultures as long as it is does not conflict with the Malay culture or Islam.\textsuperscript{73} I will discuss the implication of this policy in Malaysian art shortly.

Even though Islam was selected to be the official religion of the country, Malaysia is not an Islamic state. In the late 1970s, Islamization policy was undertaken by the current Prime Minister at that time, Mahathir Mohamad. The government supported the building of many mosques, the organization of Quran recitation competition, the formation of the Islamic Bank and the International Islamic University (IIUM), and the marking of the Islamic celebrations such as the Hijrah (marking Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) migration to Medina) and a more pro-Muslim foreign policy.\textsuperscript{74}

As it happened, the emerging artistic development was later stunted by the May 13, 1969 racial riots, and has been influenced by the implementation of the National Cultural Policy since the early 1970s, and the Islamization Policy in the 1970s. During the 1971 National Cultural Congress, Redza Piyadasa and Syed Ahmad Jamal (who presented papers on fine arts during the Congress) subscribed to the view that artistic practices in Malaysia are rooted in pluralistic reality. This view was infamous in comparison to the popular view at the time that called for creative activities to be rooted in the social, political and economic realities\textsuperscript{75} or ‘art for society’s sake’ prescribed by the Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (ASAS 50 or The Generation of the Literati Scholars of the 1950s). Despite these initial protests, artists

\textsuperscript{72} Cheah Boon Kheng, Malaysia: The Making of a Nation (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 141.


\textsuperscript{74} For further discussion on this matter, see Hussin Mutalib, Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990), 127-152.

began the difficult and painful process of rethinking their positions, and began to recast their perceptions of various important issues regarding their own identity and the Malay culture, language, race, state, nation. Malays were faced with the question of what Malay tradition is and their relationship with modernity.\textsuperscript{76}

In the realm of visual arts, works produced begin to take interest in Malay culture and Islam. Malay themes became persistent in the works by artists such as Jalaini Abu Hassan, Amron Omar, Mad Anuar Ismail, Raja Shahriman Raja Azidin, and Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim. Artists like Sulaiman Hj Esa, Zakaria Awang, Ahmad Khalid Yusof, Hamdzun Haron, Ponirin Amin and Sharifah Zuriah AlJeffri, who took a different stance as they positioned themselves in a larger world Islamic \textit{ummah} (society). Also emerging at this time was decorative art. Such works overtly use Malay forms but the underlying principle may be suggested to have derived from Islamic theology. Artists such as Mastura Abdul Rahman, Siti Zainon Ismail, Fatimah Chik, Noraini Nasir, Khatijah Sanusi, Mohamed Najib Dawa, Syed Shahabudin Syed Bakeri, and Ruzaiqa Omar Basaree fall into this category. Their works place great emphasis on the decorative elements of Malay textiles such as \textit{batik}, carvings, or Islamic design conventions.\textsuperscript{77}

Since then, the mainstream Malay artists have been more interested in Malay and/or Islamic elements in their work. These tendencies seem to be very dominant up to the late 1980s. Despite the implementation of the National Cultural Policy early 1970s and a further strengthening by the Islamization Policy, artists’ engagement with Malay or Islamic aesthetics interests however, as I will discuss further in this dissertation, began to wane after two decades.

The 1990s marked a turning point as Mahathir launched a new program for Malaysia’s continued development and modernization – Vision 2020. As highlighted by Hooker, in the context of national ethnic unity, the aim of this Vision are much more ambitious that the 1970 Rukunegara (Articles of Faith of the State).\textsuperscript{78} This thirty-year plan was designed to replace the NEP and create a united Malaysia in which all its citizens live in prosperity and harmony in a technologically advanced society, which values knowledge, economic success and dynamism, inspired by the values of tolerance and compassion. It

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{78} Virginia Matheson Hooker, "Reconfiguring Malay and Islam in Contemporary Malaysia," \textit{Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs} 34, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 16.
seems that these ‘people’ in the Vision have been renamed, creating a new race/nation in
which the Malays are seen as no longer the pivotal ethnic group in Malaysia. However, the
National Development Policy (NDP) replaced the NEP but the government continued to
pursue most of its NEP policies. The government argued that though the Malay share of the
economy is substantially larger, it was not near the thirty percent target according to
government figures.

The 1990s saw some physical aspects of the Vision beginning to develop. The
infrastructure for a Multimedia Super Corridor linking Kuala Lumpur with the new ‘smart
city’ constructed and foreign investors were urged to join in developing a Malaysian version
of Silicon Valley named Cyberjaya. This decade also witnessed the completion of various
debated ‘mega’ projects such as the Petronas Twin Tower, Kuala Lumpur International
Airport at Sepang and the Formula One car-racing circuit. The economic crisis of 1997
somewhat curtailed some of these developments and stunted several other ‘mega’ projects
that had been lined up.

The changes which have been happening in Malaysia’s cultural domain since at
least the 1990s are significant. There is a striking development in linguistic, cultural,
educational and artistic spheres, especially in terms of its pluralist outlooks, images and
values. Ethnic cultural expressions in the form of song, dance, poetry, theatre and short
stories have begun to be more diverse and multicultural. The 1990s also brought upon
Malaysia the advent of globalisation and high technologies such as the Internet.

If previously, art works produced by artists were deemed to be Malay/Islamic inclined,
works about non-Malay culture and different lifestyle began to be exhibited in the National
Art Gallery and entered into the Young Contemporary Awards (YCA or in Malay, Bakat
Muda Sezaman (BMS)), held by the National Art Gallery at least once every two years.
Works that portrayed Chinese culture for example, the celebration or lifestyles, began to enter
the Malaysian art mainstream, as evisaged by artists such as Liew Kung-Yu, through his series,
“Chinese Festival” (1996) and “Cheng Beng Festival” (1996). An Indian artist, J. Anurendra,
also brought subjects from Indian culture forward. His “Looking Forward” (1997) depicts the
annual Thaipusam festival where devoted Hindus expose themselves to pain in order for their
sins to be forgiven. Artists from East Malaysia like Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Kelvin Chap Kok
Leong, and Shia Yih Ying reiterate visual images and themes from Sabah and Sarawak tribes

\[79\] Ibid., 16.
and even Sylvia Lee Goh, a late bloomer artist, highlights the fading culture of the Baba and Nyonya minorities.

There was also a shift to artistic pursuits especially based on interest-oriented issues such as consumerism and environmentalism. Some works may be seen to question civic issues, such as social justice, freedom of expression, human rights and democracy in Malaysia in a more overt fashion. The merging of various disciplines of arts also have influenced the direction of Malaysian art as more and more Malaysian artists are beginning to abandon painting and sculpture and adopting or incorporating new approaches and media into their work.

In literature, the usage of English for example, was no longer perceived as a threat. Beside older writers such as K.S. Maniam, Lloyd Fernando, Krishen Jit and Wong Phui Nam, a younger generation of writers was also emerging. The usage of English was not only employed by non-Malays writers such as Rahel Joseph, Leow Puay Tin and Charlene Rajendra, but also Malay writers such as Huzir Sulaiman, Karim Raslan, Rehman Rashid, Amir Muhammad and Dina Zaman who used English as their preferred language in their writings. Even the judging panel of the 1995 ‘New Malay Novel’ competition partly sponsored by GAPENA (Malay acronym for Malaysian National Writers Association) commended the author of Pelangi Tengah Hari, Saloma Lajis for displaying high intellectual achievement, which was expressed through ‘excellent Bahasa Malaysia and good English.’ As Hooker asserts, the 1995 judges seems to have accepted English as part of the ‘New Malay Novel.’

There was also a shift in the theatrical field. Lo asserts that unlike the 1980s, the 1990s saw a diversification in the different artistic forms and directions in contemporary English-language theatre and this ranged from the work of Five Arts Centre, Instant Café Theatre, Akshen and Repertory 21. I would like to highlight how the diversification of the racial composition of the members of these groups promotes diversity and creativity as a possible alternative platform.

The Five Arts Centre, a theatre group formed by Chin San Sooi, Krishen Jit, and Marion D'Cruz, is a collective of artists and producers declaring themselves to be “generating

80 Jacqueline Lo, Staging Nation: English Language Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 35-38.
82 Jacqueline Lo, 166-169.
alternative art forms and images in the Malaysian creative environment."" 83 Formed in 1984, the company has since grown to include thirteen members from five generations of arts activists and practitioners such as Anne James, Chee Sek Thim, Chew Kin Wah, Ivy N. Josiah, Janet Pillai, Jerrica Lai, Krishen Jit, Lew Chee Seong, Marion D'Cruz, Ravi Navaratnam, Suhaila Merican, Sunetra Fernando, and also includes a youth theatre collective called Akshen. This group had taken an interdisciplinary approach as the company's activities include drama, dance, music, young people's theatre, and the visual arts.

This form of pluralistic affiliation in the Malaysian cultural scene can be seen in the Actors Studio Malaysia, set up in 1989 by the husband and wife team of Joe Hafsham and Faridah Merican. Joe Hafsham was born in Lebanon and raised in Australia and has lived in Malaysia since 1984. The company stages mainstream Western theatre as well as Malaysian English-language plays and has recently staged selected Malay plays in an effort to nurture further cross-cultural relations between English language and Malay theatre streams. 84

Besides these, The Instant Café Theatre (formed in 1989) is a professional revue company specialising in political satire and Kualiworks (established in 1994) has the distinction of being the first all-female arts company specializing in theatre, television and publication. On the other hand, Dramalab, established in 1993, aims to nurture emerging theatrical and technical talent through writing and training workshops besides its own theatrical production.

Despite the success of the affirmative action in terms of economic gains of the bumiputeras, the NEP has created concern over national integration and a united society, a concern that became increasingly more pervasive especially in the post-NEP period. Even though the policy had strengthened and consolidated Malays position economically, and warranted the Malay culture and Islam as a religion as the country's core, it had in most ways altered the cultural contexts within which the nation operated. After Mahathir Mohamed stepped down, UMNO's dominance was consolidated once more by Mahathir's successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, overwhelming victory in the 2003 federal elections before the office was handed to Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak.

The 1990s also saw the emergence of a few private art galleries such Valentine Willie Fine Art Gallery, Pelita Hati, NN Gallery, XOAS Gallery and Wei-Ling Gallery to name a few. Valentine Willie Fine Art has also bought the work of foreign artists to Kuala Lumpur,

83 Five Arts Centre, "About Five Arts Centre," see http://www.fiveartscentre.org/about.php; Internet; accessed 14 October 2005.
encouraging dialogue, stimulating critical debate, and set up an extensive resource room in Malaysia. Malaysian artists have also begun to frequently participate at international biennales such as the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, Gwangju, Singapore, Shanghai, and the Asia Pacific Triennial. Such international exposure has influenced the work of many young Malaysian artists, such as sculptor Nadiah Bamadhaj, Yee I-Lan, Abdul Multhalib Musa and Sharon Chin. There is also a growing number of alternative spaces and collectives such as Matahati, Gudang, Rimbun Dahan, Rumah Air Panas, and Lost Generation Space, offering new alternative spaces that enable dialogue with digital media, performance, and installation in the context of fine art practices.
CHAPTER TWO: THE CONTEXT OF MALAYSIA’S POST MODERNITY

Before we discuss postmodern art in Malaysia, I would like to briefly survey how the term came to being and the context of its usage within Western academic discourse. It is true Malaysia is not a Western, developed country, therefore, claiming that Malaysia has achieved or attained some sort postmodern status needs further clarification and justification. As this chapter will further suggest, this consequently leads to problems that arise in blindly employing this term in understanding the Malaysian arts specifically and Malaysia’s history, social and culture in general.

Western culture has changed constantly and rapidly over the last hundred years or so and throughout this time; at the heart of this modern West was the Enlightenment. In Europe and the United States, the idea of a unitary humanity, the individual as the creative force of society and theory, western superiority, the idea of science as Truth, and the belief in social progress were definitive. This culture however, is currently in a state of crisis as cultural turmoil can be seen everywhere from religious fundamentalism, declining authority of the state as the key to social institutions, the frail political ideologies and parties and even the cultural conflict in literary, aesthetic canons and knowledge. The debate on the postmodern captures at least certain aspects of these social changes, which have transpired almost exclusively in France and the United States and to a lesser extent in the Great Britain, Germany and Australia.

Postmodern critique has been developed and adopted by every discipline, from the social sciences, humanities, philosophy, art, architecture, literature, music, cultural studies, geography and of course art history. Besides that, the term has also spawned a whole new approach in the academic field such as cultural studies, feminist studies, women’s studies, but gay, lesbian studies, and queer theory by Western academics. As the term has been used for so many different purposes and has been applied to many different things and fields, there is no common juncture or agreement of what this term means; as such, the meaning and understanding of the term begins to multiply. What postmodernism means in philosophy for example, is not necessarily contiguous with what is meant in the social sciences. In the arts and architecture as a case in point, the postmodern style is regarded as the collapse of the hierarchical distinctions between high art and popular art, eclectic mixing of aesthetic codes, nostalgia for the past and local traditions, a playful and ironic attitude instead of the moral seriousness of the modern aesthetics. An attempt to search for a single, essential meaning of
the term perhaps would be a misunderstanding to the postmodern idea itself. Since the term ‘postmodern’ is very complex and complicated in all layers and all fields, the usage of the term ‘postmodern art’ used by Piyadasa as I have discussed in the previous chapter needs to be problematized and scrutinized even more.

Finding the Context of Postmodernity in Malaysia

As I have generally explained in the previous chapter, there is no common juncture or an agreement to what this term means; perhaps the main problem is the fact that the term has been used for so many different purposes and has been applied to many different things and fields. It could also have a huge emphasis on the playful and ironic attitude instead of the seriousness embodied by the modern aesthetics. This is matter is further intricate, especially in the context of searching the relevance of the discourse in Malaysia, as I will discuss next.

Generally, one finds that the ‘post-modern’ reveals a discontinuity with earlier phases of the modern period in Western societies. This can be seen in the intellectual field, socio-culture, ideas and methods during the 1960s in the West (North America and Europe) as they differ from the characteristic of almost one hundred years of modern culture. This discontinuity is apparent and regarded by theorists as signalling an ‘end’ of the modern or new phase within the modern itself. The term ‘postmodern’ is ambiguous. The prefix post-means after, and the word modern derived from the Latin word modo means ‘of today,’ current or up-to-date.

The chief signs of modernity have not actually disappeared totally. Traits such as free market; secular culture, liberal democracy, individualism, rationalism and humanism are still here. If in the West, modernity is in crisis, in most parts of the world, modernization remains the chief social goal. Third World countries for example, are absorbing modernizing technologies and ideologies. Their forms of modernity today are related to the new machine technologies, modes of industrial, and transportation, building technologies and modern infrastructure and facilities. This has been described as ‘modernization’ or ‘development.’

Now we are back to the question: can postmodernism take place in Malaysia since the country is still a developing country? How can we explain the shift in the arts since the 1990s? Basically, postmodernism in Euramerica can be seen as happening at two ‘levels.’ First, postmodernism as a social and economic event brought about mainly by the spread of mass

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industry and second, postmodernism as an artistic style in which the relation of culture (arts) and the politics are always intimately tied.

In 1984, Fredric Jameson’s article “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism?” was published and his book of the same title followed this. Jameson proposes that postmodernism is the cultural logic of the current stage of (late-) capitalist growth and he implies that everything produced within it is postmodern in character as they are inherent representations of their historical circumstances. The broad capitalist shift began with market capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, based on industrial growth within individual nations, to monopoly capitalism in the mid-nineteenth to the mid twentieth century when capitalism profited from the creation of more foreign markets for the production and consumption of goods.

It is in the current stage of multinational capitalism, also known as ‘consumer,’ ‘late’ or ‘post-industrial’ capitalism that he argues postmodernism persists as a dominant culture. The growth of international markets in images and information, global telecommunications networks and media marks the complete commodification of physical and human nature. Representations and data have become commodities; the cultural has become economic, whilst the economic and political have been turned into many forms of culture. Jameson argues that postmodernism is the periodizing concept that serves to correlate the emergence of these new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order. This period emerged in the late 1940s or early 1950s for the United States and late 1950s for Europe. The 1960s however, was when postmodernism hereafter developed the clear features of high modernism – self-consciousness, disruptive of narrative forms, cultural eclecticism and sense of parody.

David Harvey had a similar argument, tying the economic with cultural changes. He argues that the advent of postmodernity reflected the contemporaneous break with the post-war model of capitalist development. The recession in 1973, Fordism, the increase global competition, declining corporate profits and increasing inflation, these few factors plunged the United States into a long-delayed crisis of over accumulation. As a result, a new regime of ‘flexible accumulation’ emerged as capital increased its room for manoeuvre across the board. This new period saw greater flexibility of labour markets, manufacturing processes; commodity outputs and most importantly deregulated financial operations in a single world

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market for money and credit. It was this restless speculative condition he argues, that made up the existential basis of the various forms of postmodern culture, whose reality and novelty was closely related to the dematerialization of money, ephemerality of fashion and the surplus of simulation.  

In Euramerica, it is undeniable that the economic processes of capitalism brings with it social transformation and new modes of experience. Postmodernist theorists like Jameson and Harvey have both suggested that the expansion of the capitalist economies has gathered such a momentum and scale that it creates new kinds of perception and cultural formation. This is strengthened further by the fact that capitalism is left as the only dominant global economic form in the world.

What about non-Western, Third World developing countries? If Jameson proposes that postmodernism is the cultural logic of late-capitalist growth, can the cultural changes brought by the late-capitalism in the Third World be categorized as postmodern? Can the changes to culture and lifestyles be counted as postmodern even though these countries are the producers of multinational products (exploited by multinational companies for cheap labour and raw materials) and not the primary consumers? It is a fact that the construction of history in term of Western progress and linear temporality is inappropriate when applied to Malaysia or any other Third World countries as the idea of chronology is perfectly modern, so how does this fit into the postmodern condition?

The formation of the Non-western States is not necessarily the result of successful replication of the path traversed by the Western states. Postcolonial states like Malaysia were thrust directly into the processes of modernity through capitalism, internationalisation, economic growth, and development. If in Euramerica, the economical chronology has reached late-capitalism, Malaysia is far from it. Even Malaysia’s modernity or modernization process is not complete. Regarding capitalism, Aijaz Ahmad contends,

"With the colonial relationship broken, the newly independent states were expected to combat imperialism with their nationalist ideologies, regardless of what classes were now in power and irrespective of the utter inadequacy of the nationalist ideology as such, even at its best, to protect a backward capitalist country against the countless pressures of advanced capitalism, so long as the confrontation takes place within an imperialist structure – which is to say on capitalist terms."  

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Although his argument has a resonance with the Malaysian condition, Malaysian capitalism however, is 'planned' and Malaysia does not pertain to the form of modernity characterized by free market, secular culture, liberal democracy, individualism, rationalism and humanism derived from Euramerica. The dissimilar form of modernity in non-Western countries has made some scholars no longer as quick to see modernity as always inevitably a western phenomenon, hence opening the way for a more wide-ranging understanding of modernization. 

If previously the Malaysian government adopted free enterprise or the laissez-faire philosophy in its economy, the NEP’s implementation resulted in a massive direct state intervention aimed at creating a Malay capitalist class. The state became an expansive provider, diverting state revenues and resources to vast array of federal government agencies, state economic development corporations, state-owned companies, *bumiputera* trust funds, private Malay corporations and Malay individuals. The state itself became an aggressive entrepreneur, especially after its revenues were boosted by petroleum income from the mid-1970s. Therefore, the form of capitalist enterprise propagated by Malaysian government is not the free market, capitalist economic structure premiered by the First World.

In Malaysia, to be 'modern' is to be 'developed.' Malaysia’s preoccupation with economy and development had started since the 1970s, and was even more so under the administration of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed. Since the 1950s, for example, concepts, classifications, categories, theories, and approaches related to the modernization project have entered the Malaysian epistemological space. Shamsul A.B. asserts that through the modernization project, sponsored by the U.S. within the Bretton Woods framework, terms such as ‘development,’ ‘development projects,’ ‘economic growth,’ ‘equal distribution,’ ‘entrepreneurship,’ ‘social justice,’ ‘modernity,’ ‘tradition,’ ‘stages of growth,’ and ‘rural development,’ have become part and parcel of the government’s top-down plan and procedures. In such a manner, Malay terms such as *projek pembangunan* (development

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project), *projek kerajaan* (government project), or simply *projek* (project) have also become household words.  

This ‘developmentalist’ ideology has even become more pronounced since the 1970s, in concurrence with the implementation of the NEP. This phase as defined by Maznah Mohamad is one of “economic and political transformation chartered by *dirigisme*, with the state driving the market rather than led by it.” Since the early 1970s, Malaysia has transformed itself into an export-oriented industrial country. More than one-quarter of the population now work in the manufacturing industry, which until recently was largely concentrated in states on the west of the Peninsular. The government however, has now created fourteen ‘free industrial zones’ along with two hundred other industrial estates across the country. Much of this has been driven by electronics multinationals that have used Malaysia as an assembly base. Recently, the government has been making efforts to have more manufacturing take place in Malaysia and use higher levels of technology.

The state-driven market has moved the country’s economy from an agriculturally based to a manufacturing and industrially based economy since the 1980s. The manufacturing industry produces automobiles, electronics, cigarettes, tires, sawn logs, and cement. Crude oil is an important export. Malaysia is the world’s largest producer of rubber, palm oil, tin and timber. Agricultural production has fallen and Malaysia is now a net importer of rice. Production of rubber, long a major export, has also been declining -- though partly because plantations have switched to the more lucrative palm oil, of which output continues to expand. Other mineral resources include bauxite, iron ore, and copper.

The government announced a move towards an information technology-based industry in 1998. Mahathir’s administration developed a series of mega projects inline with this move including the cyber city of Cyberjaya and the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). The MSC was carved out of land that was previously either jungle or palm oil plantations. This was slow to take off but by mid-2003, it had attracted 892 companies employing 21,000 workers. In terms of economic success and infrastructure of the country before the 1997 currency crisis, the GDP almost quadrupled from US$27 billion in July 1991 to more than US$100 billion in 2002. The annual per capita income increased from less than US$2000 in 1981 to US$4500

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in 2002, and the poverty rate was reduced from fifty percent thirty years ago to seven percent in 2002.  

Malaysia’s move towards modernity has had a slightly different outcome. Even though Malaysia’s state-driven progression towards modernity has produced a dramatic new social outlook, class changes and political landscapes, these transformations have not brought about the growing commitment to freedom, individualism, human rights and democracy. Instead they have been both a growing commitment of state authoritarianism in which the democratic legitimacy outlook somewhat masks the fact that coercion had been used as a state strategy. Institutionally the Malaysian system qualifies as a democracy but observers and analysts hesitate to call Malaysia a democratic country. Democracy in Malaysia has been described as ‘democracy without consensus,’ a fettered democracy, a quasi democracy, a modified democracy, or a semi-democracy or a modified authoritarian state.  

What I have outlined above shows that Malaysian form of capitalism and democratic practices not only does not fit the postmodern late-capitalist theory of Jameson or post-Fordist theory of Harvey, but Malaysia does not even fit the Western modernization form. Besides this, Islam plays a major role in the country even though Malaysia is not an Islamic State. It must be emphasized that by constitutional and legal definitions, a Malay is and must be a Muslim, speak Malay language, and practice the Malay customs, cultures and beliefs. Thus, in Malaysia, to be born Malay is to be born a Muslim. Since the 1970s, this fact became more and more defining as an Islamic resurgence took place in Malaysia’s early development process. New blue collar and white collar workers entered the workforce during a period in which the international profile of Islam was rising as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict, increasing oil prices and the revolution in Iran.

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96 Cheah Boon Kheng, 189-190.  
102 Harold Crouch, "Authoritarian Trends, the Umno Split and the Limits to State Power," 21-43.  
At home and abroad, young Muslims became more and more aware that Islam could play a much greater role in their personal and national life and demanded that the government take a more Islamic approach in its governance. In addition, Chandra Muzaffar argues that any religious resurgence could happen as an outcome of rapid urban development and modernization and with Malaysia’s ethnically divided society, it is inevitable that there persists a strong desire for the Malays to seek out a common identity especially through religious identity.\textsuperscript{104}

If the ‘postmodern’ reveals the discontinuity with the earlier phases of the modern period in Western societies, then post-modern tendencies in Malaysia are much more delicate and not an easy matter to decipher. Although the arts since 1990s perhaps suggest that, the postmodern condition was here in Malaysia (at least in the cultural field), it remains that this materialization might not be as easy to theorize.

In a sense, Lyotard and Foucault have carved a new mode of critical thinking and made a major contribution in postmodern theory. Lyotard’s formula for postmodernism is the ‘incredulity towards metanarrative.’ His book \textit{The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge} has led to Lyotard’s name becoming more widely known in the English-speaking world since it was first published in 1979 as a report for Quebec’s Conseil des Universités entitled \textit{La Condition postmoderne}.\textsuperscript{105} He uses the term to describe the changing domain of science, literature and the arts in advanced countries since the end of nineteenth century, which he claims to be in ‘crisis of narrative.’ Lyotard’s main concern is knowledge and the problem of its legitimacy in advanced societies. He discusses how forms of knowledge came into being, which controls and had access to them and how they become accepted as valid.

In his work, he does specifically talk about art but directly and indirectly critiques a range of philosophical perspectives on the issue of knowledge, although he discusses scientific knowledge in particular. He argues that scientific knowledge is made possible by a universal, grand or master narrative. This grand narrative provides coherence by covering up various conflicts, which arise in the history of a society. A grand narrative operates as a metanarrative by providing a framework in which all other cultural narratives find their grounding and acquire their meaning and legitimacy. Lyotard exposes the idea of universality underlying these grand narratives and postmodernism is heralded when these grand narratives lose their credentials and little narratives proliferate; perhaps the Malaysian

story is one of the many little narratives. Lyotard’s work made a huge impact as it solidifies the postmodern as a social condition and not only just as a new creative style or a body of theory.

Foucault’s theory on the relations of power aligns him with postmodern critique. Like Lyotard, Foucault is suspicious of any claim of universal truth. Even though he does not directly refute the idea of an Enlightenment’s universal truth, his work seems to position him in that way as he historicizes the grand abstractions employed by modernists. Foucault attempts to locate and analyse ‘the genealogy of the modern subject,’ or the discourse and practices dealing with the subject, knowledge and power especially in the context of the treatment of marginal social groups such as the criminal, the insane, and the sexually deviant. He demonstrates how shifts in discourses and power become constituted through the order of knowledge, categorization systems, beliefs, and practices. He claims, “the subject is objectified by a process of division either within himself or from other” and that modern society is operated largely through this increasingly integrated, extensive, and scientific exclusions. He demonstrates his argument through the immense technological apparatus on classifying and disciplining people such as the isolation of lepers, the confinement of the poor and the insane, new classification of disease and the practice of clinical medicine in early nineteenth century in France etc. Human subjectivity, or the controllable ‘subjects’ are the result these processes. This is what he substantially argued in Madness and Civilization, The Birth and the Clinic and Discipline and Punish. In The Order of Things, Foucault shows how the discourses or life, labour and language were structured into a discipline.

For Foucault, the notion of the self in actually bound up and inseparable from the workings of structures and institutions. Thus, none of us actually can escape from the exercise of power through these structures and establishment. Power circulates through individuals and their actions and practices and power is not merely something that individuals, groups, or classes exercise but are discursive formations are networks of power within which we are all enmeshed. Knowledge too is not neutral. Foucault asserts that knowledge did not “slowly detach itself from its empirical roots, the initial needs from which it arose, to become pure speculation subject only to demands of reason. … Where religions once demanded the

sacrifice of bodies, knowledge now calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge."  

Foucault’s work addressed and affected psychiatry, medicine, linguistics and literary analysis, social science and history of ideas, criminology and the theory of justice, and ethics and had an enormous impact on a wide range of fields, including history, sociology, literary criticism, and gender studies.

If we are to adopt a postmodern strategy and position Malaysia in terms of its usage of power, the situation is beguiling and has become more and more problematic as Malaysia plays its role differently at different levels. Kahn raises the question, what are the universalising beliefs and practices for the ways in which modern societies cope with diversity? To understand this, he outlines two inclinations of modernists’ belief. One, for those who maintain that modernity is broadly understood to constitute an antidote to racism as well as other regimes of domination based on colour, gender, sexuality, culture etc. And two, those critics of modernity who have tended to see particularizing impulses such as racism as arising out of the very processes of universalization that have been associated with modernization, as intimately bound up with modernity itself. Thus, Malaysian authority employs a binary position both as having elements of racism as arising out of the very processes of modernization and justify that what it is doing as a part of decolonisation, in which racial inequalities contributed by the British had to be corrected.

According to Wong and Blaskett, the postcolonial state in Malaysia, far from withering away or being subordinated, is an active agent in consolidating, augmenting and increasing its power and space. The government usually resorts to the use of authoritarian power to back up its manoeuvring and justifies it as necessary to meet the danger of inter-communal conflict. At the same time however, authoritarian powers have also been used to restrict the activities of the opposition parties and other critics. For example, under the emergency provisions of the constitution, it has been used twice to overthrow state governments. Apart from that, the Internal Security Act (ISA) has been used to detain without trial not only communists and nationalists but government critics, opposition activists and nonconformist members even in UMNO. Whilst the Sedition Act and the Official Secrets Act have been

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109 Joel S. Kahn, 6.


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used to deter public debate even when the media such as radio, television and newspapers are part of government monopoly or owned by individual BN parties.\textsuperscript{111}

For example, Wong and Blaskett explain the condition that even though Malaysia must take account of international criticism, the development of the Malaysian state’s internal power, economic growth and political stability has increased its international recognition and quest for a greater role in the international arena. Not only have its internal policies been defended against international criticism through counterattack by labelling its critics ‘imperialists,’ ‘biased,’ ‘arrogant,’ and ‘naïve,’ throughout the latter part of the 1980s. In this respect, Mahathir made political use of Western media attacks on Malaysian policy to argue that Malaysia should not be judged by standards set by First World countries, claiming that the Western media, largely through their slanted reporting, sought to undermine Malaysia and other Third World countries. In publicizing its views, the Malaysian government attempted to legitimise its democratic and human rights records. Essentially, it is contended that Malaysia is democratic, but not to be judged by ‘certain particular (i.e. Western) yardsticks’ that have defined democracy too narrowly.\textsuperscript{112}

Even in the situation of an economic downturn, Malaysia has rejected the International Monetary Fund (IMF) rescue package. This could be seen during the 1997 economic crisis, in order to avoid the long-standing national political framework and ideological priorities. Far from ingratiating to foreign criticism of its policies, Malaysia has sought to champion Third World states’ rights to determine their own political futures. In this way, it has manipulated its political space by restricting the scope of civil society at home and simultaneously expanding its voice in the global arena.\textsuperscript{113}

As I have highlighted above it is very obscuring to discuss Malaysia postmodernism in the same way as postmodernist theorists. Malaysia’s modern social and economic transition has not been resolved and will never be resolved according to the linear development towards a universally embraced social, political and philosophical goal, set out by Enlightenment thinkers. How would postmodernism, as an artistic style in which the relation of culture (arts) and the politics are always intimately tied seems to make its mark in Malaysia?

Jameson argues that postmodernism ought to be understood as a ‘cultural dominant,’ a notion that allows for ‘a range of every different, yet subordinate, features’ rather than a

\textsuperscript{111} Harold Crouch, "Malaysia: Neither Authoritarian nor Democratic," 137-138.
\textsuperscript{112} Loong Wong and Beverley Blaskett, 182.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 175.
single style or mode. He underscores that this historical period should not be understood as enormous, single, bounded entity, but as the presence and coexistence of a variety of alternative and competing features. In other words, not everything is ‘postmodern’ but postmodernity acts as “the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses ... must make their way.”

Jean Baudrillard’s postmodernism too points somewhat in the same discussion of cultural excess. According to Baudrillard postmodernism is often applied to a cultural condition established in the advanced capitalist societies since the 1960s. This condition is characterized by an abundance of disconnected images and styles in television, advertising, commercial design, and pop videos. Baudrillard’s conception of postmodernity is founded upon these three principle ideas – simulation, hyper reality, and implosion. He suggests that all kinds of representation have submerged the reality and the postmodern world is one in which the model of production has been replaced by the cybernetic model of simulation. In this new era, labour is no longer a force or production but is one sign among many, while commodities no longer contain use-value as defined by Marx but must now be understood as signs as defined by Saussure.

Thus, postmodernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, simulacras and superficiality. In a midst of abundance signals, the traditionally valued qualities of originality, coherence, meaning, depth, and authenticity are abandoned or dissolved. As a result, there is no simple, direct relationship between reality and its expression either in words or in pictures. Jean Baudrillard describes media culture as being consumed by what he calls ‘an effect of frantic self-referentiality’ and the image “bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.” Unlike the previously modern societies that are organized around the production and consumption of commodities, current postmodern societies are organized around simulation and the play of images and signs, denoting a situation in which codes, model and signs are the organizing principle.

With the advent of globalisation and Malaysia’s willingness in its participation and move towards an information technology-based industry, such changes should be anticipated. Malaysia’s private and satellite TV stations have increased and the Internet and website has become the alternative channel to purport unorthodox views. The sacking and the imprisonment of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 and the subsequent mass

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114 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 4.
115 Ibid., 57.
movement for social justice known as reformasi (reformation) may have been spurred on by the use of the Internet as an alternative medium of communication. Jacqueline Lo highlights that Sabri Zain’s diary of reformasi events and news sites such as Malaysiakini.com have become crucial media for the free exchange of views and information. During Anwar’s trial, the idea of konspirasi or the conspiracy theory circulated. It was proposed that the court, the judge, the media and the government were all involved in creating a conspiracy in convicting Anwar. Everywhere there was a sense of distrust of the superstructure and what is ‘real’ came into question.

Modernity too has always been intimately linked with the idea and practice of writing. Postmodernity on the other hand, is concerned on the question of establishing meaning and proposes the destabilization of meaning. Influenced by the structuralism themes, postmodern critique claims that knowledge or discourse has its own condition of ‘textuality.’ The never-ending signs for example, deny any discourse an authoritative and final meaning. Derrida’s deconstructive readings of texts express this semantic flux. He argues that no concept is self-sufficient or exists independently from the generative process of differentiation and he also emphasizes how the meaning of texts can be plural and unstable rather than fixed. He argues that meaning is partial in very diverse ways and can never be fully established, as it is both divided internally and deferred in time. The term différence articulates this spatial and temporal difference.

Derrida’s understanding of language as a system of differential relationships has influenced cultural and literary studies. Derrida’s method, ‘deconstruction,’ has become a new set of strategies of reading texts. Postmodernism operates similarly to deconstruction but it rejects the idea of things having a single basic meaning and unsettles binary positions – such as male/female, Occident/Orient, sane/insane dominant in structuralism. The postmodern reverses the binary order by elevating the inferior above the superior term and dissolving the conceptual field by foregrounding the elements of undecidability. Postmodernist deconstruction primarily aims at combating the supposition that culture and society – understood as texts – still follow a historically and politically determined direction. Through postmodernism, these establishments of the hierarchies have been annulled.

Foucault and Lyotard’s work might not necessarily be directly relevant nor concern Malaysia or non-Western countries but the postmodern is deeply suspicious of the idea of

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117 Jacqueline Lo, 169-170.
‘universal history’ or metanarrative, arguing that human direction does not necessarily follow a historically and politically determined direction. This has opened up new possibilities for the Other.

The notion of the Other implies a hierarchy. The Other is viewed as marginal and only trivial in the grand narrative of universal history. According to Heartney, postmodern multiculturalists seek the origin of racial and ethnic Otherness in the way in which history is constructed. They point out the distortions created by modernism, which envisaged history as a linear development towards a universally embraced social, political and philosophical goal, which was used to justify the European colonization of Africa, Asia, North, Australia and South America.119

The postmodern has generated a new wave of interests in non-Western art. Whether this interest is genuine or still falls under the Orientalist perspective is beyond the concern of this research but there are increasing Bienniales and Trienniales held in the Asia Pacific region in recent times. Since postmodernism is deeply suspicious of ‘universal history’ or metanarrative and prefers the ‘local,’ these new interests are not surprising.

There are several criticisms of postmodernism. Richard points out that “postmodernism defends itself against the destabilizing threat of the ‘other’ by integrating it back into a framework which absorbs all differences and contradiction. The centre though claiming to be in disintegration still operates as a centre: filing away any divergences into a system of code whose meanings, both semantically and territorially, it continues to administer by exclusive rights.”120 However, it should be observed that we must look beyond the centre/periphery dichotomy and see that without postmodern discourses there are various interests in non-Western academic fields among local scholars. Moreover, the work that they produce is still legitimate even without postmodernist discourse. There is much research done on Chinese art by Chinese scholars for example. Richard claims that even though postmodernism offers room for non-Western space; the ‘decentred’ space of the peripheral subject is faced with a crisis of centrality. However, is centrality or decentrality pertinent to postmodernism?

I would like to suggest that postmodernism should have multiple centralities instead and the centre is not where postmodernism should be. As postmodernism dismantles the distinction between centre and the periphery, it should not nullify its own significance and by any means become ‘undifferentiated.’ When stress is placed on specificity regionalism, social

119 Eleanor Heartney, Postmodernism (London: Tate Gallery, 2001), 65.
minorities and political projects, the various possibilities of discourse opens and becomes more and more complex and need further investigation.

During also contends that “[p]ostmodern thought also recognizes, however, that the Other can never speak as the Other.” It is true that an American art historian can never speak or could not speak as an Indian or a Chinese art historian, but this does not mean that they could not contribute to widening discourses. Postmodernism too ‘legitimises’ (not that our knowledge is illegitimate or secondary) works done in the non-Western region in the modern academic world. Not that we are truly desperate for this legitimacy or acceptance but with more interest, a whole new discourse can be generated in a whole new light.

During also highlights that the postmodernity concept has been constructed in terms, which in its basic intensions wipe out the possibility of post-colonial identity. “The obliteration of post-colonial condition,” he argues, “is actually pertinent to any argument attempting to show that ‘we’ are now living in postmodernity.” Even though he does make a valid point, I would like to suggest that not all nation-states produce or dwell on the issue of the colonial centre in terms of culture in their processes of decolonisation. As I have highlighted the early Malay modern fictional narrative preoccupation, does not foreground the tension of the imperial power or emphasize their differences from the colonial centres. In Malaysia, the term postcolonial is just used as a temporal or historical category signifying the end of colonialism and sometimes the term ‘post’ is used in the sense of being a condition or product of colonialism rather than posterior to it. Of course there are British legacies in Malaysia that are still evident from its colonial buildings to the judiciary and law, but a nation-state like Malaysia has resisted identification with colonial power through its campaign or policies. In the 1980s for example, Mahathir’s ‘Buy British Last Policy’ and ‘Look East Policy’ had resisted Malaysia’s tie to the British power.

The General Reception of Postmodern Discourse in Malaysia

One big factor that we must remember in discussing the Malaysian situation is the major role Islam plays. Islam came to the region in the fifteenth century and provided a sense of religious identity among the Malays. However, it was only in the late 1970s that Malaysia began to experience an unprecedented religious resurgence. Mosques, religious schools,

122 Ibid.
123 Virginia Matheson Hooker, Writing a New Society: Social Change through the Novel in Malay, 13.
124 Jacqueline Lo, 5-6.
devotional programs, Islamic books, magazines, and newspapers developed and a new style of religious activism has taken root. According to Hefner, the new discourse of renewal is oriented towards the needs of a broad, mass-educated public rather than a narrow circle of religious followers in its conception of Islam in modern, quasi-ideological terms as a source of a practical and systematic knowledge. For new Muslim intellectuals, Islam must entail more than personal piety and public devotion; it must provide an alternative model for politics and provide moral discipline in the face of the anarchy and hedonism of the market.  

“In spite of the flood of literature in the West – on art, architecture, literature – postmodernism has not made much impression on Muslims” generally and on Malaysians specifically. As Akbar S. Ahmed asserts, the perspective of Muslims on postmodernism has been generally negative – destructive, who see it as a symbol of Americanisation, nihilism, anarchy and devastation in which America is regarded as the Devil. As a result, Islam has been the core factor that has rejected any potential discourse of postmodernism in Malaysia.

This rejection, not to mention fear, have generally occurred because postmodern beliefs are often discussed as incongruent with Islamic practice and are associated with the negative aspects of globalisation, Western media and values. These rejections, as will be discussed later, are further increased by Mahathir’s often-reiterated anti-Westernisation perspective. Akbar S. Ahmed describes the general Muslim impression of postmodernism, “... it is difficult to relate Islamic postmodernism to Western postmodernism in any coherent or direct manner, or even to establish a causal relationship between the two. Although Muslims may employ some of the conceptual tools of François Lyotard or Jean Baudrillard for analysis, there must be a parting of company on certain crucial points. While the Muslim appreciates the spirit of tolerance, optimism and the drive for self-knowledge in postmodernism, they also recognize the threat it poses them with

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126 Akbar S. Ahmed, 28.
cynicism and irony. This is the challenge to the faith and piety which lies at the core of their worldview."131

Hanapi Dollah sees the postmodern as the extension of modernism. He highlights that the Muslim reaction towards modernism is somewhat different than postmodernism. Muslims see modernism as a challenge to conquer knowledge, technology and industry. He claims however, that the modernization phase ends with the hardship of normal citizens since the easier life brought by modernity often belongs to the elites, especially those in power. As a result, the main reaction among the masses is rejection and refusal of any form of modernity; they long to return to their traditional values. Therefore, he claims that the discourse of postmodernism among Muslims has to be discussed in the context of modernism, as Muslims’ reactions are more agonized and fearful of the former.132

Malay scholars such as Zakaria Stapa assert that since postmodernism has rejected all fundamentalism and denied belief in the ultimate reality of God’s utterance, postmodernism endorses an anti-religious or anti-Deistic belief, thus it is also an extension of western secularism. This is regarded as specifically dangerous to an Islamic worldview.133

Siddiq Fadhil too highlights that postmodernism can bring about negative implications towards the essential teachings of Islam, its worldview, epistemology, tawhidic principles (unity principles) and the ijmak concept (consensual agreement between the ulama or religious leaders). Postmodernism does not support any other worldviews or metanarratives, since postmodernism is multi-faceted, local, and temporal and does not have a clear foundation in philosophical theory as religion. Fadhil asserts that his concern is how postmodernism can deconstruct ideology, such as what happened when Feminist Theology was applied to Christianity. Even though revision, evaluation and criticism of certain features of Islamic teachings are relevant, what Siddiq fears most is that such criticisms are made and accentuated by those with no religious background at all.134

Md. Salleh Yaapar in his book Ziarah Ke Timur (Visit to the East),135 discusses some postmodern features, which he felt are somewhat dangerous, problematic, and incompatible with Malay values, and produce several negative implications for the Malay society and

131 Akbar S. Ahmed, 5-6.
Muslims generally. On the theme of the death of the subject, he contends that the subjects in question here are those who privileged their own mind, their rationalism and their abilities. This notion should not exist in an ideal Muslim society because in Islamic teachings the subject is the Muslim, he/she is the servant and caliph who is subservient to Allah and uses his/her mind, thought and senses according to Al-Quran and Hadith (Prophet Muhammad’s sayings). Instead of being put to death, the positive aspect of the subject should be enriched and fortified. For Yapar, ‘the death of the author’ either in fiction or reality can lead to ‘the death of the Muslim subject.’ Such ideas are not suitable to the spirit of ‘renaissance’ that sweeps across Asia. For western society that has gone through the social anxiety rooted in the idea of positivism, rationalism, pragmatism and intrepidness, these changes may have long been awaited. Nevertheless, these postmodern ideas, Md. Salleh claims are not favourable and can destabilise the renaissance of the Asian spirit.\(^{136}\)

Second, the denial of reality or ‘the end of the real’ – concerns theories, which set out to raise doubts about the relationship between reality and representation, and claims that there is no simple, direct relationship between reality and its expression in words or images. Md. Salleh argues that if metaphysical and spiritual reality is obliterated, physical reality will diminish since metaphysical reality is the basis for the world’s existence (especially in a religious sense). In the context of Islam, the denial of nature and physical life would have a very negative implication, as Muslims would then be exempted from their predetermined status and mission because their operational sphere is the physical world. If the world’s life and reality were doubted then the Muslim’s predetermined status and mission would not be suited to his or her function as a subject anymore.

Third, postmodernism is concerned with the question of meaning and proposes that meaning is unstable, thus marking the end of transcendental signified meaning. Even though meaning exists, it is deemed to be plural, unstable and void of any unified meaning that is accepted and understood by all. As an ideological principle, this idea would lead to confusion and the loss of religion guidance. It concerns Md. Salleh that eventually texts like the Quran will be regarded like a postmodern poem or text and will be treated as if they do not have any definitive meaning. This will lead to various discrepancies among Muslims about the meaning and understanding of the Quran.\(^{137}\)

Four, on the demise of meta/grand narrative and the denial of Truth, Md. Salleh admits that there is a positive implication when all narratives will be considered equally as little or

\(^{136}\) Ibid., 9.  
\(^{137}\) Ibid., 12-13.
local, such that there would be elements of accommodation, democracy, equality, humbleness and rejection towards any hegemony. This however, will be at the expense of the search for the ultimate and universal truth, the very essential element of life. This notion absolutely means the rejection of any metanarrative claim by any religion because at its core, religious belief is alleged to have own universal and eternal value.138

Aminuddin Ruskam has a different take on this issue. He observes that as postmodernism diminishes religious beliefs, pluralism and relativism has been widely accepted. Such influences increase with the function of mass media. The media acts as the new power, new religion and new God, determining the rightful and wrongful doings in the world. He disagrees with the idea of hyperreality proposed by Marshall McLuhan and Baudrillard since such ideas can demolish the system and institutions based on Truth. Islam’s rejection on the idea of hyper reality is because Islam has the highest regard for the concept of truth in its intellectual and education system with the emphasis of ilmu (knowledge) as the truest knowledge. Therefore, there are no such things as ‘true knowledge’ and ‘fake knowledge.’139

Postmodernism has often been discussed in parallel with the negative aspects of society brought by globalisation like moral decadence,140 and a borderless world. It has also been discussed in regard to the danger of Western feminism, secularism, capitalism, Orientalism and modernization.141 Central to this theme is the media. Akbar S. Ahmed underscores, “[p]ostmodernism coexists and coincides with the age of the media; in many profound ways the media are the central dynamic, the Zeitgeist, the defining feature, of postmodernism.”142

Zakaria Stapa asserts that globalisation processes brought about by information, telecommunication and satellite technology disseminate processes of postmodernism. Even though not all programs that electronic media broadcast are negative, what worries him is that negative themes in TV programs and on the Internet (such as unrestrained socialization, homosexuality, hedonistic programs and easily attained pornography) can be readily absorbed and acted out by children and teens. Parents often have a harder time inculcating positive values in their children as they are more influenced by TV programs, movies and

138 Ibid., 14-17.
140 See Ibid., Chapter 4.
celebrity lifestyles. Ghazali Darusalam argues that this is the major challenge that must be faced by Muslims especially in the electronic media. Western media for example, often only portray the ‘negative’ aspects of Islamic practices in some Islamic countries. Western media also often highlights Islam and Muslims as an uncivilized religion and people through the portrayal of Muslims as violent, poor, warring, or consistently facing natural disasters. Siddiq Fadzil asserts that globalisation through mass media is in practice one-sided. Globalisation, he argues, works more towards the universalization of Western culture because cultural flows are very much related to the discourse of political and economic power. His major concern is not with the absorption of external cultures but how such cultures fail to harmonize with local values.

Such a negative and wary attitude towards postmodernism does not come as a surprise since the debate over the importance, primacy or alleged superiority of Asian values over Western ones and vice versa has been raging for more than a decade. Asian leaders like Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew said that they had discovered unique paths to modernism, firmly rooted in moral/religious/cultural values that are in some sense uniquely Asian. These cultural traditions as have been discussed by Mahathir Mohamad are rooted in strong government, attachment to family and unity and the important role of religion in public life.

Mahathir Mohamad has consistently assumed a distinctively ‘anti-West’ international posture. This can be seen from the ‘Look East’ campaign in his early days of administration and his ‘Buy British Last’ policy, the banning of English companies from tendering for Malaysian government projects in 1994. Even in the situation of the economic downturn, Malaysia rejected the International Monetary Fund (IMF) rescue package during the 1997 economic crisis in order to preserve the long-standing national political framework and ideological priorities. Far from ingratiating itself to foreign criticism of its policies, Malaysia has sought to champion Third World states’ rights to determine their own political futures.

As Farish Noor points out,

143 Zakaria Stapa, 8-10.
144 Ghazali Darusalam, 7.
145 Ibid., 13-14.
"The manners in which Malaysian (and the Malays in particular) have adapted and responded to the imposition (what are perceived to be) negative ideas and values of secular modernity has always been characterized by the tendency to conflate the latter with 'the Other,' or, as is more often the case, ‘the West,’ ... As such, the engagement with the negative aspects of modernity has always been framed against the backdrop of conflicts between East and West, Asia and Europe."

With such a negative perception of what is deemed to be Western reiterated repeatedly together with the valorisation of Asian values, it does not come as a surprise that postmodern discourse or postmodern ideologies have not been widely accepted in Malaysia.

The government has often seen western pop culture and cultural imperialism as a threat of increased Westernisation of Malaysian society. Criticism of Malaysian NGOs and citizens groups has often been justified by the argument because these organizations are promoters of Western concepts and values.

Its internal policies have been defended against international criticism through a counterattack, which labelled its critics ‘imperialists,’ ‘biased,’ ‘arrogant,’ and ‘naïve.’ Throughout the latter part of the 1980s, Mahathir made political use of Western media attacks on Malaysian policy to argue that Malaysia should not be judged by standards set by First World countries, claiming that the Western media, largely through slanted reporting, sought to undermine Malaysia and other Third World countries. In publicizing its views, the Malaysian government attempted to legitimise its democratic and human rights records. Essentially, it contended that Malaysia was democratic, but that it could not be judged by ‘certain particular (i.e. Western) yardsticks’ that defined democracy too narrowly.

Thus, Malaysians are reminded over and over, of the dichotomy of ‘East’ and ‘West,’ ‘Asian’ and ‘Western’ not only through leadership figures like Mahathir but by authors like Ruhanie Hj. Ahmed. Ruhanie emphasized the dangers of neo-imperialism and emphasized how Malaysians should be united under Malaysian patriotism instead.

The postmodern is known for its disturbing paradoxes -- a questioning of materialism on the one hand, and an insatiable desire to join consumer society on the other, individuals enjoy rights and privileges and yet the state has never been as all-powerful. In all this, we find a rejection of established religion alongside one of the most powerful revivalisms of the major religions in the world. With the anarchy of change, the plurality of discourses,

150 Loong Wong and Beverley Blaskett, 182.
postmodernism has positive and exhilarating offerings, and brings to us the importance of diversity, the need for tolerance, the necessity for understanding each other.

Perhaps, it is good to reiterate Akbar S. Ahmed’s words here,

"[w]e need to interpret postmodernism in a positive manner; what tends to be emphasized in the flood of the postmodernist literature is its sense of anarchy, rootlessness and despair. What is missed out are its positive sides, like diversity, the freedom to explore, the breakdown of establishment structures and the possibility to know and understand one another. Postmodernism need not be viewed as an intellectual conceit, an academic discussion remote from actual life in literary salons, but as an historic phase of human history offering possibilities not available before to such large numbers; a phase that holds the possibility of bringing diverse people and cultures closer together than ever before."

Despite this positive attitude, others are still wary and cautious as proven by recent events in world politics. Siddiq Fadhil asserts that the notion of pluralism emphasized by postmodern ideology might have some positive implications for Islam as it will give Islam more room to coexist with other religions and civilizations in this world. This is despite the fact that recent happenings reflect the fact that the world will not allow a plural condition. He asserts further, in a certain framework, that the pluralist spirit is suitable for Islam as it accepts non-Muslims and ahli kitab (people of the Book) within an Islamic society, however, inappropriate pluralism such as the notion of having many kinds of Islam cannot be tolerated.153

Scholars such as Mana Sikana and Haji Nakaie Haji Ahmad have even suggested strategies with regards to the advent of postmodern ideology. Mana Sikana asserts that postmodernism, whether we like it or not, has to be faced by the Muslim world. He even stresses that perhaps we should refer to Hassan Hanafi’s ideas of a revival of a system of Islamic education and that we should revise the traditional Islamic epistemology to make Islamic studies appealing and relevant to the changing world.154 Haji Nakaie highlights too how Islamic scholars are still stuck between very traditional and very secular and value-free Western thinking. He also emphasizes how traditional epistemology is confusing and stagnant but Western epistemology on the other hand is very aggressive, practical, progressive, real, based on impressive empirical theories. Muslim scholars and ulama (religious leaders) still seemed to be overwhelmed by the opposing pull of these two forces.155

154 Mana Sikana.
As I have argued above, postmodern discourse has not been well or widely received or even positively discussed in Malaysia. Azman Awang Pawi notes there have only been a few studies on this discourse by Salleh Yaapar, Abdul Rahman Embong, Abdul Rahman Yusof, Mana Sikana and Siddiq Fadzil, and for the most part they merely apply postmodernism within their own fields. At the same time, postmodernism has not been discussed specifically in the realm of fine arts, drama, design and music. He highlights his concern as to whether Malaysia is backward in debating or understanding this latest academic discourse, unlike Indonesian academic circles.156

It is only Malay literature, in all its genres, that has indisputably entered the postmodern phase especially in terms of its creative writing (aspek kepengarangan).157 Kamaruddin M. Said highlights that there are two levels of modernity faced by Malays, especially those in the Malay peninsula (West Malaysia), which must be understood in order to understand the premise of postmodernism in Malay literature. First, colonial modernity introduced by the British such as in its administration and its policies, the army, the modern economy in agriculture, mining, and trading. This form of modernity can also be seen in its education approach and the media, such as newspapers and literature. The British colonial powers introduced an Orientalist narrative could be seen in writings by officers and researchers, including Wilkinson, Winstedt, Clifford, Blagden Tregonning, and Gullick. These new symbols of modernity were also introduced by the colonial-driven agriculture, mining and trading industries. Malay traditional and rural-based economy was consequently marginalized.

Moreover, Kamaruddin asserts that the migration of labour from India and China entailed its own modernity and psyche, as distinct from those of the Malays. The Chinese immigrant community has its own powerful internal economy, and are dominant in terms of architecture and urban planning, given the Chinese elite led the shift towards urbanization under the colonial powers. Symbols of colonial modernity are manifest in colonial

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architecture whereas, for Indian immigrants, the symbols of colonial modernity were in the colonial control exercised over the agricultural social structure.\(^{158}\)

The rural modernity (modeniti desa) of the Malays can be identified as another form of modernity. It can be divided into two groups, those holding to the cultural, values and tradition of rural society, and those of the Malay (urban) elite. The urban elite can be understood to be composed, for example, by those who graduated from the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK), private school established in 1905 to educate the Malay elite. These include royal children and the sons of Malay nobility working in specific Government services. Maktab Perguruan Sultan Idris (MPSI or in English, the Sultan Idris Training College) on the other hand, was established to produce Malay teachers who could teach Malay children to have better education than their parents.\(^{159}\) In the fields of journalism and literature, writers, journalists and teachers who were mostly graduates from MPSI, managed to introduce some form of modernity to Malay society. This form differs from the colonial modernity, which was upheld by the elites of various ‘races’ in the Malay peninsula of that era.\(^{160}\) Two kind of narratives were produced– the Western/colonial narrative, which was maintained by Abdullah Munsyi and those in alignment with his beliefs; and secondly, narratives introduced by writers and teachers such as Ishak Haji Muhammad, Abdul Rahim Kajai, Za’ba, A. Samad Ismail and those affiliated with the Jabatan Karang Mengarang Melayu of the MPSI (The Malay Writer’s Department under Za’ba between 1924-1936). After World War Two, debates on modernity and the Malay national struggle persisted through a group of Malay writers of Angkatan Sasterawan ‘50 (ASAS 50, The Generation of the Literati Scholars of the 1950s).\(^{161}\)

Mana Sikana observes that the general history of modern Malay literature began circa 1920s and 1930s in the genres of the poem, novel and short stories, although it was only in the 1960s that drama became modernised. Hikayat Faridah Hanum and short stories by A. Rahim Kajai was the marker for these early tendencies. Literature under this modernist impulse is usually written within the style of realism, consisting of stories of daily events described as realistically as possible.

Since Independence, realism has become an important style of writing in efforts to convey issues such as rural Malay society, the backwardness of the Malay economy and the

\(^{158}\) Ibid., 406-407.
\(^{159}\) Ibid., 407.
\(^{160}\) Ibid. It must also be highlighted that there were also influence from Middle East from of modernity based on Islam.
\(^{161}\) Ibid., 408.
conflict between Malay tradition and urbanization. Realism itself according to Mana Sikana can be divided into several types; normal realism, protest realism, socialism realism and *batin* (self-internal) realism. Among significant realist poets are Masuri S.N. and Tongkat Warrant. Realism in novels is evident in the work entitled *Musafir* by Hasan Ali and *Salina* by A. Samad Said. In *Salina*, the author describes the life of Salina based only on daily events that the author himself encounters. The language used is usually direct, short and upfront. Other realist novelists include Salmi Manja, Wijaya Mala, Arena Wati, Ruhi Hayat and Abdullah Hussain. Notably short stories written in the style of realism include “Pahlawan Lembu” by S. Othman Kelanatan and “Jalan Lain ke Syurga” by Yahaya Ismail. Drama is the least advanced of all the textual genres in the country. Realism in Malay drama only emerged during the early 1960s. An early example, Kala Dewata’s *Atap Genting Atap Rembia*, is about the confrontation between the rural and tradition with urbanization, modernization and industrialization context of the country.\(^{162}\)

Since Independence, the concept of Malay ascendancy had to be negotiated with other races. Several policies have since been implemented such as the National Language, National Education Policy, and National Cultural Policy. This post-colonial Malay modernity has emerged to modernize Malay minds, although this has not without contestation from either Western and Chinese forms of modernity. Significantly, post-colonial Malay writers consistently take as their theme the impoverished lives of Malay farmers and fishermen. However, it must be noted that it was neither the intent nor the outcome that narratives of the English, Chinese and Indian speaking communities to be marginalised.\(^ {163}\)

Another way to investigate the country’s metanarrative was suggested by Kamaruddin M. Said by investigating the works of Malaysian National Laureates, such as Keris Mas, Shahnon Ahmad, Usman Awang, A. Samad Said, Arena Wati, Muhammad Haji Salleh, Noordin Hassan and Abdullah Hussain. Shahnon Ahmad for example, dwells on rural farmers of the Independence era, A. Samad Said reflects upon the poverty, anxiety, sadness and nostalgia of Malays in the cities, Arena Wati relates the good and the sad lives of ordinary people and Abdullah Husain conveys the narrative of unity and Islam in Malay society. Kamaruddin argues the Malay narratives told by Malaysian National Laureates did not create a sense of insecurity or anxiety, and as such, there no need was felt to deconstruct


\(^{163}\) Kamaruddin M. Said, 408.
them. This however, does not mean that deconstructive or postmodern thinking did not feature in Malay literature.¹⁶⁴

As Kamaruddin M. Said points out, in the early 1980s, postmodern as an idea was not well-received among Malay scholars. Even in the mid-1990s, the postmodern concept had been rejected as it was feared that such an ideology would challenge the national cultural conceptualisation rooted in Malay and Islamic forms. Only in the late 1990s was it possible for a postmodern narrative to emerge without provoking any fearful responses. Even in this period, the Malaysian National Laureates were influenced by the postmodern condition. This can be seen in several of Arena Wati’s works entitled Bunga dari Kuburan, Kuntum Tulip Biru and Sakura Mengorak Kelopak. The postmodern nature of these novels is evident in the plot, which goes beyond the conventional Malay cultural and social context. In her work Kuntum Tulip Biru (1987), Arena Wati creates several characters and deposits them in places such as Cornell, Leiden and Kyoto in which readers are posed with questions about what the experience of these characters means with respect to geography and time. Kamaruddin argues the narrative contexts of these three novels by Arena Wati are very different from the narratives of Malay cultural and society pertinent in realism novels.¹⁶⁵ In discussing Sukma Angin by Arena Wati, Kamarudin M. Said suggests the novel also reflects the author’s experience and understanding that in Malay society, there are limits to the idea of unbounded possibilities, especially in regards to religious matters. Accordingly, in his work, Islamic characters that practice an uncompromising religious obedience coexist alongside promiscuous and hedonistic characters.¹⁶⁶ In could be seen as aligned with the development of postmodern approach in Malaysian art that as I will discuss in Chapter Five and Six to have significantly made its mark since early 1990s.

Similarly, Mana Sikana has a stronger defined argument relating to postmodern literature in Malaysia. He argues that Malay literature entered a postmodern period from 1993 onwards. This period is marked by the emergence of creative texts which employ strategies such as magic realism, the use of semiotics, writings in the form of metahistoriographic and metafiction, the use of kitsch, pastiche, the unreal, parody, and the intertextual.¹⁶⁷ The occurrence of a shift can be identified from the 1960s and the 1970s, when literary works were dominated by realism, to the 1970s, which saw works taking the forms of anti-realism, such as surrealism and absurdism. Among the works to emerge from this period, include

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 409.
¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 409-411.
¹⁶⁷ Mana Sikana, Sastera Melayu Pascamodenisme, vii.
**Sampah** (1974) by Shahnon Ahmad, *Citra* by Arena Wati, unconventional short stories by Anwar Ridhwan and Othman Puteh, poems by Suhaimi Haji Sulaiman and A. Ghafar Ibrahim. Dramatists such as Noordin Hassan, Dinsman, Johan Jaafar, Hatta Azad Khan and H.M. Aziz number among those who created texts of absurd-surrealism in nature. As Mana Sikana points out,

> "Perkembangan tersebut bukanlah, diluar pengetahuan kita, ia telah dibincangkan secara meluas, tetapi yang cocok dengan perbincangan ini ialah perubahan itu sebenarnya sebagai suatu unsur kehadiran teks pascamodenism dalam kesusasteraan Melayu."  

(This development is not beyond our knowledge, it has been discussed extensively, but in terms of this discussion, these developments are actually elements of postmodern text in Malay literature.)

*Sampah* by Shanon Ahmad takes as its subject a beggar named *dia* (him) looking for eternal peace through death. Given that living in this world seems to offer only emptiness and suffering, the characters achieves great satisfaction with death. *Sampah* is an investigation of the philosophy of begging and beggars themselves. The story is filled with elements such as dreams, images and imagination, which drive the plot, but unlike Shanon Ahmad’s previous novels, the plot is slow and weak. However, Mana Sikana argues that absurd novels do not place much emphasis on the plot. Rather, the more important aspect of the story is in the uncertainty of how it will unfold and the thoughts of the characters.  

Mana Sikana has also discussed Arena Wati’s novel *Citra* in the context of Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory, Shahrom Hussein’s dramas and Zam Ismail’s prose in the context of textual analysis and finally, Awangku Merali’s short stories using a New Historicisme approach.

In the domain of drama, Mana Sikana asserts the importance of works by Noordin Hassan, especially *Bukan Lalang Ditiup Angin* (1970) that was staged in Kuala Lumpur and Tanjung Malim. Mana Sikana provides five reasons as to why this drama can be read as a postmodern text -- first, the drama reflects the writer/director’s intellectual capability and courage to deconstruct the realist narrative of Malay society; this is to say that rather than dwelling on issues such as poverty, the drama take its theme based on primitive thinking and corruption in politics. Second, the theme of the drama was also more based on a philosophical context, and third, the drama includes Islamic beliefs as part of its themes alongside Malay tradition, fourth, unlike realism dramas, *Bukan Lalang Ditiup Angin* is a drama within a drama -- multilayered with events, filled with elements both obvious and

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168 Ibid., 123.  
169 Ibid., 451-467.  
170 See Ibid.
obscure, real and unreal, and finally, the drama is filled with elements of parody, the dialogical, and the semiotic. 171

In terms of poetry, ambiguous stylistics characterized poetry produced since the 1950s by Noor S.I, A.S. Amin and M. Ghazali. These could be seen as paralleled by the emergence of avant-garde poetry in France. Like French avant-garde poems, these poems could be interpreted in the critical field using approaches such as structuralism, psychoanalysis and inter-textual semiotics. For example, A. Ghafar Ibrahim became popular on the basis of his use of 3V 'verbal-boka-visual', signs, symbols and metaphor, all of which constitute elements of an avant-garde poem. Suhaimi Haji Muhammad also produced surrealist poetry of note.

It must be noted that literature and fine arts did not significantly influence one another in Malaysia even though events were organized in which both writers and painters participated such as Manifestasi Dua Seni in the 1970s. The usual cooperation is based on personal friendships in which writers would attend art openings to support artists, and in turn, artists would assist in designing the sets for theatres and dramas. Thus, as I discussed in Chapter One, critical discourse in art is very limited in comparison to the more extensive literary discourse and criticism, which is well supported by institutions such as Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and the Ministry of Education more generally.

The disparity between fine arts and literature was arguably shown more clearly in the 1971 National Cultural Congress. Redza Piyadasa and Syed Ahmad Jamal (who presented papers on fine arts during the Congress) argued the unpopular view that artistic practices in Malaysia are rooted in the pluralistic reality. Most of the writers called for creative activities to be situated in the social, political and economic realities as upheld by those in the literary field. 172 The slogans Seni untuk Masyarakat (Art for Society) and Seni untuk Seni (Art for Art’s Sake) were prominent especially among literary scholars of ASAS 50. Some of the Malay literati believed in the concept of Seni untuk Masyarakat, in which they claimed they would create a more focused artistic work by uplifting the Malay reader’s social consciousness. Syed Ahmad Jamal, summarizing this polemic, claims that the Seni untuk Masyarakat motion was opposed strongly by artists who believed it was an attempt to curb artistic activity in the country. After two hours of debate, the decision was made based on a

172 T.K. Sabapathy, "Merdeka Makes Art or Does It?", 71.
vote. Malaysian artists who attended the Congress mostly aligned with Seni untuk Seni, were outnumbered and they left the NCC en masse in protest.\textsuperscript{173}

Nevertheless, as this dissertation will further demonstrate, that the shift from modern literature to a postmodern approach happens in parallel with shifting approaches in the Malaysian art scene. These ‘postmodernistic’ tendencies in art should be seen as parallel to the advent of the new Malaysian middle class to which most of the artists under discussion belong. This social context will be discussed in the consecutive chapters and the situation and artworks under discussion will be discussed further in Chapter Five and Six.

I have highlighted in the first chapter how a general shift in Malaysian culture and specifically in the fine arts began to take place in the 1990s. I have pointed out elsewhere that despite strong state intervention through the NEP, National Cultural Policy and the Islamisation Policy, these various Malay-centric government policies eventually failed to monopolize the outlook or the artistic activities of the Malaysian art world. In fact, such state-initiated policies have led, among other things, to an unexpected flourishing of pluralism once again in Malaysian art.\footnote{Sarena Abdullah, unpublished MA thesis. See Chapter Four.}

I am arguing in this chapter that these 'postmodernistic' tendencies should be seen as parallel to the advent of the new Malaysian middle class in particular, to which most of the artists under discussion belong. It must be noted that generally Malay contemporary art practitioners, especially those graduated from the mid-1980s afterwards, are the by-product of the NEP as most Malay artists graduated from the MARA Institute of Technology (ITM or now University Technology MARA, UiTM), one of the tertiary institutions designed to support economic, social and cultural engineering since May 13, 1969. Of course, previous art graduates from ITM during the 1970s and the 1980s may be argued to have been a by-product of NEP, however most of the artists under discussion were born after the Independence. They have different life experiences under a post-Independence rapidly modernizing Malaysia and have emerged as part of the new Malaysian middle class as a direct result of the NEP. Apparently, the shift towards a more postmodernist and pluralist development in arts, or what I term as the \textit{situasi percamoden} seems to be in parallel with the growing Malaysian middle class but not limited to Malays or \textit{bumiputeras} only but non-Malay and non-\textit{bumiputeras} as well.\footnote{In Malaysia, the majority of the population is made up of ethnic Malays while the minorities consist of southern Chinese (e.g. Hokkien and Cantonese), southern Indians (mainly Tamils), non-ethnic Malay indigenous peoples (e.g. Iban and Kadazan), as well as Eurasians. The term \textit{bumiputera} refers to the Malay and the non-ethnic Malay indigenous peoples (e.g. Iban and Kadazan) from the state Sabah and Sarawak, the term non-\textit{bumiputera} refers to the Chinese, Indian, and those categorized as Eurasians and \textit{lain-lain} (others). Alternatively, the term Malay and non-Malay is also used in this dissertation especially in dealing with issues pertinent to the Malays especially in West Malaysia.}

I would like to argue here that the association of art development and class could be made especially in regards to artistic development since the 1990s as reiterated by Clive Kessler,
“Class occurs and expresses itself in the lives of individuals (if it didn’t, it wouldn’t mean much at all). But the world in which it does so, as Durkheim rightly insisted long ago, is a world that, while built upon individuals, does not consist solely as individuals. Individuals are the indispensable substratum of the social but not its essence nor its exclusive, even primary, manifestation. On the contrary, it is everything that emerges among individuals from out their common association and mutual interaction, but which is not purely individual in its nature or origins, that is the quintessence or core of the ‘social.’ Mutatis mutandis, ‘class.’”  

As I have discussed the postmodern approach in the field of literature in Malaysia in the previous chapter, this dissertation will further discuss Malaysia’s context of postmodern art in terms of its strategies and themes in both Chapter Five and Chapter Six. This argument lies in the fact that since the 1990s, there was a shift from Malay/Islamic-centred art to art works that uses postmodern strategies especially in highlighting the concerns and interests of the changing demographics in Malaysia marked by NEP. Several young artists have begun to produce works that deal with universal issues, such as consumerism, environmentalism, and gender. Some works may be seen to question civic issues, such as social justice, freedom of expression, human rights and democracy in Malaysia in a more overt fashion. The ideals of ‘civic nationalism’ combined with the advent of globalisation and the push for Information Technology has allowed a more multi-ethnic space to emerge in Malaysian art.

As Johan Saravannamuttu points out,

“Evidence from various studies shows that middle class political actors have been driven to champion various causes connected to social democracy, human rights and the environment. The argument is advanced that middle class politics of this sort provides an alternative discourse to ethnic-centric, as well as class-centric perspectives. Further it is contended, that middle class political actors on the Malaysian scene have developed a multi-ethnic, multi-class praxis of sorts galvanising civil society to resist excessive state surveillance, dominance and outright repression over the citizenry.”

For example, Wong Hoy Cheong’s ‘The Nouveau Riche, the Elephant, the Foreign Maid, or the Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie’ (1991) (Figure 1) best exemplifies this position. In this mixed media work, Wong Hoy Cheong can be argued as reflecting the obtuse materialism of the multi-ethnic Malaysian middle class. The work is divided into three sections. The middle part presented a canvas drawn with groups of figures in a cocktail party and the left and the right part of the work are mirrors that reflect the audience as part of the work. With drinks in hands, the characters that the artist presented in this event cross racial boundaries. The man in the batik shirt and the lady in the baju kurungs (Malay dress) were holding drinks in their hands. The Chinese man in a suit and tie and her lady friend in her

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177 Johan Saravannamuttu, 104.
black cocktail dress sitting crossing her legs on the left are also holding up their drink. In the background, another couple is seen sitting, the lady in the green dress holding up her drink. Behind these scenes, a portrait of a man (presumably the artist himself) is embedded with the Malaysian flag at his left and right, with Doric columns flanking these images.\(^{178}\) The work reminds us that the Malaysian middle class has finally emerged and come together driven by lifestyle, money and consumerism aspiration rather than being racially segmented.

Bayu Utomo and Hamir Soib are among the artists who have been driven to champions causes and concerns on social degradation especially among urban Malays. Significantly, in the 1990s, Bayu Utomo’s works confronts us with contemporary realities that besiege certain section of these Malay urbanites. His realistic figuration together with his mixed media approach confronts us the realities of unmarried mothers, abandoned babies, abused children, drug addiction, and the various problems of Malay urban youth. This could also be seen in the work of Hamir Soib work that were were entitled crudely and cynically such as “Tak Ada Beza” (No difference at all) (2002) (Figure 2) and “A Board Game (Back to the Roots)” (2005-2007). Other title includes “Haruan Makan Anak,” “The Rempit” (Illegal Motorcycle Race), “Telur Buaya” (Crocodile Egg). These works were titled and painted in sombre tone mostly with bitumen to reflect his concerns and observation of the failing Malay society especially in regards to societal values.

Another theme that reflects the concerns of the Malaysian middle class is environmental degradation and excessive development especially in urban areas much to the benefit of developers. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the idea of being ‘modern’ in Malaysia is to be ‘developed.’ This has produced an unintended effect of over developed and uncontrolled development issues that have effected state land management. They are unappreciative of architectural heritage as more and more buildings have been demolished to give way to high-rise building projects. Artist like Chuah Chong Yong for example, expresses his regret at the crumbling state of the architectural heritage in Malaysia. His “Pre-War Building for Sale Series” (Figure 3) is a reference to the loss of these cultural heritages. He later embark on his solo show entitled “Storeys” in 2003 that highlights us to the existence of Alor Gajah pre-war shop houses through his drawings and installation works in Rumah Air Panas, an alternative art space run by a group of artist in which he is a part of.

Another artist, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, a member of Matahati group, has also persistently contributed to raising awareness around environmental issues through his art.

\(^{178}\) Greek columns has become a kitsch in Malaysia homes.
His early works such as his “Target Series: ‘Camouflage 1’” (1994) comment on environmental exploitation with butterflies images stencilled on packaging crates, to his “Insect Diskette” Series (1997) (Figure 4) and his fascination of ayam Serama or dwarf chickens phenomenon among urbanites denotes his observations and concerns on the effects of urbanization to Malaysian life and lifestyle. In his 2007 exhibition entitled Warning! Tapir Crossing with his wife Umibaizurah Mahir, he had pursued environmental theme again as he and his family had their first hand experience seeing the result of an encroaching new housing development project on local forests and wildlife. The work entitled “Warning! Tapir Crossing I” (2007) (Figure 5) for example, testifies the discovery of five dead tapirs in the newly developed area of Puncak Alam, where the artist lives.

Even works by several female artists have been read and highlighted based on gender issues. In her exhibition wOm(b): Shia Yih Yiing, the artist dealt with the theme of womanhood. Nur Hanim Khairuddin points out that the exhibition,

“... is a visual manifestation of the journey in womanhood, visual expression of the trial and tribulation of motherhood to understand the 'metaphysics of substance' of the female gender via artistic processes. Integrating proper choice of images, themes, the arrangement of objects and the use of space, she creates an interesting visual text; hers constitutes an autobiographical narrative which happens to be shared and felt by many mother-women. The deployment of specific materiality (the iconographies, the colours, the space, the medium) needs to be read in relation to the intertextuality of Shia Yih Yiing's simultaneous experience as a woman and a mother-of-three artist, and her sense of mother's jouissance.”

What the artist did was set up the space by appropriating the visitors into a woman's 'womb.' The work that the artist produces herself signifies the conception of life, the gestation period, and the birth by understanding the feminine mystique instead of her physique. It has been pointed out that the exhibition explores the artist's world as a site of social, sexual, religious, political and cultural identity, this is not a conventional theme in a very conservative country like Malaysia. I would like to point out here that Malaysian artists have further explored and discussed various such issues that concern the Malaysian middle class in general which I will describe further in Chapter Six.

Malaysian society is not made up of a uniform ethno-religious entity therefore, despite strong state intervention through the NEP, National Cultural Policy, the Islamization Policy, and even the Information Technology campaign, the Malaysian art development subsequently could not be influenced by any ideals propagated by these government-backed policies.

180 See Ibid.
The New Malaysian Middle Class

As I have mentioned briefly in the Chapter One, Malaysia since its independence in 1957 has always been described as a plural society consisting of three major races, the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. This plural outlook was the result from British colonial rule in which the demand for labour to serve the colonial economy resulted in an influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants from the middle of the nineteenth century until the 1930s. This influx of immigrants transformed the mono-ethnic indigenous society into a plural society comprised of indigenous people, who were mainly Malay, and the immigrants, who were Chinese and Indian. One of the conditions to be met before the British would relinquish its colonial rule was that there should be cooperation and unity among the Malays, Chinese and Indians. The three major political parties in Malaysia: United Malays National Organization (UMNO) representing the Malays, Malayan Chinese Associations (MCA) representing the Chinese, and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) representing the Indians formed the Alliance Party or now known as the Barisan Nasional or National Front party and have agreed on the ‘historic bargain’ of the Merdeka (Independence) Constitution of 1957. According to the bargain, the Malays granted Chinese and Indians easier access to Malayan citizenship in return for the guarantee of Malay special rights and the recognition as the bumiputeras (sons/daughters of the soil) in the Constitution. Later the term bumiputeras also includes the natives of Sabah and Sarawak.

The differing perceptions and various dissatisfactions among the Malays and the Chinese however, resulted in a deep tension on May 13, 1969 as the worst racial riot broke out in Kuala Lumpur. In the recognition of the continuing imbalance between the bumiputeras and the non-bumiputeras, the government embarked on vast political and economic reform through its National Economic Policy (NEP). Economically, the goal of the NEP was to increase Malay economic ownership from around three percent in 1971 to thirty percent over a twenty-year period. This would be achieved through massive government effort and interventions in order to bring the bumiputeras into the modern urban economy.\textsuperscript{181} The NEP’s push to create a ‘community of Malay entrepreneurs’ has resulted in a revamped education policy, which positively discriminates in favour of bumiputeras. Besides direct government intervention and economic support, an aggressive training and educational

\textsuperscript{181} Cheah Boon Kheng, 141.
strategy had been taken up to create a much-needed professionally trained Malay work force in 'mental production' fields of the commercial sphere. This has created bureaucrats, company executives, technocrats, academics, accountants, computer-chip engineers, information technology specialists and other professions, which demand high or specialist education and training.\textsuperscript{182} It must be noted however that the success of the NEP has not diminished the capitalist and middle class among other Malaysians especially the Chinese\textsuperscript{183} but it had resulted in a new social paradigm of the middle class, especially among the Malays.

Several researchers using several methodologies have discussed studies of middle class especially in the Malaysian context\textsuperscript{184} but in the context of this dissertation, I would like to draw Abdul Rahman Embong’s occupational approach in the studies of Malaysian middle class.\textsuperscript{185} He discussed that the Malaysian middle class can be divided into three sections: the 'new' middle class, the 'old' middle class (those with some capital and may or may not have control over labour) and the 'marginal' middle class (lower grade with collar employee supporting the hierarchy for the new middle class). Unlike the pre-1970s in which the middle class only came from the Chinese ethnic group and a small group of Malays who were government administrators, the post-1970s saw the expansion of more multi-ethnic 'new' middle class comprising of managers, doctors, architects, lawyers, lecturers, technologists and other professionals mostly working in the private sector.

The artists under discussion are middle class intellectuals who make up part of this 'new' middle class. Their works, which I will discuss in Chapter Six, are reflective of the structure of feeling of this section of Malaysian society. I would like to highlight here of Hasnul Jamal Saidon’s observation on the economic background of Malaysian artists that participated in Takung exhibition\textsuperscript{186} that he curated. I posit that such observation is


\textsuperscript{186} An art expedition and exploration to at Lake Banding in 2005 organized by the Perak Arts Foundation (Yayasan Kesenian Perak). The Malaysian participating artists were Ahmad Saiful Razman, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Ahmad Azrel, Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Fairus Ahmad, Hamir Shoib, Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Ili Farhana.
important in understanding the economic condition of either full-time or part-time artists of Malaysian art in general.

"The political and economic backgrounds of the participating artists are difficult to probe and explicate due to the fact that the subjects may perhaps be a bit sensitive and private for many artists. Six members of the whole gang including the one who writes this essay are government ‘servants’ with stable income, therefore can be technically defined as part-time artists, double-act, semi-pros. ... Others are self-employed, or define themselves as full-time artists, while few work full-time whilst soliciting the greener pasture of private sectors as well as residency programmes. ...

Generally, one may assume that all the participating artists in TAKUNG are ‘not poor’ and many are committed in acquiring ‘financial comfort’ from the midst of the local ‘art market.’ Other than a fortuitous spill-over from the public sector (National Art Gallery), the economic setting for this exhibition was shadowed by an entrepreneur stance erected by the ‘newly-revised UMNO-oriented corporate and business class.’ The shadows of private sectors as well as NGOs (other than YKP) are blurry, perhaps intended.

The economic setting during the eighties until late nineties in Malaysia has helped in creating competitive visual arts ‘reservoir’ – aggressive, progressive, innovative, thriving, heated and never short of ironies and polemics, all of which cramped within a small pool or market. From being marginal initiatives that rely on government funding, the Malaysian visual arts practices have gradually diversifies into a thriving business enterprise before the balloon burst in late 90s. 187

According to Abdul Rahman Embong, the expansion of Malaysian middle class especially the ‘new’ middle class is placed against the backdrop of Malaysia’s rapid change in economy and society. First, from an economy of agricultural and commodity producers to an industrialized country, second, the evident decline in labour force, third, rapid urbanisation in the last three decades from agricultural society into a predominantly urban society. In 1970 for example, of a 10.4 million population only 26.7 percent lived in urban areas, whereas in 1998 of a population of 22 million, 59.8 percent lived in the urban areas. 188

Abdul Rahman Embong discusses three groups of Malaysian middle class -- the ‘new’ middle class is off the main concern of this dissertation. The country’s ‘new’ middle class had three-folded, in 1970 it only comprised 5.9 percent but it had increased to 15.2 percent in 2000. The ‘marginal’ middle class on the other hand, were at 23.9 percent in 1970 and at only 28.0 percent in 2000 and the ‘old’ middle class was estimated by Abdul Rahman to be at 3-5 percent in 2000. 189 The few salient characteristics of these ‘new’ middle class in regard to Malaysian artists is that the new class historically had experienced a dramatic upward generational mobility in the last three decades and this intergenerational mobility was


188 Abdul Rahman Embong, "Beyond the Crisis: The Paradox of Malaysian Middle Class," 83-84.
189 Ibid., 86.

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achieved through higher education to a large extent state-sponsored. The ‘new’ middle class is the most educated class in Malaysia’s society and had also dubbed as *nouveau riche* or its economic basis relies on salaries and dependent on financial systems for credit and loans and they are also consumer-oriented.\(^{190}\)

With regards to the studies by Abdul Rahman and other researchers on the definition and methodological approach in summing the characters of Malaysian middle class, Johan Saravanamuttu explains that whichever way one chooses to define the Malaysian middle class, the trajectory is that Malaysian society will be predominantly middle class at the juncture of the 21st century.\(^{191}\) Since the new Malay middle class now are generally at a level of managers and professionals, this position allows them to operate across economic, political, social, cultural and religious spaces along with other ethnic community groups. It has subsequently created a new pattern of ethno-religious interaction and cultural dynamism among the recent Malaysian middle class. Gaik Cheng Khoo posits that the new middle class consists of the Malay language elite, the English language elite and also those who are bilingual.\(^{192}\)

It must be noted however, that the distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ middle class was not striking in the Chinese and Indian groups because their younger generation already had largely urban origin and they were not the product of ‘hothouse’ education schemes for children of rural peasants. The rural Chinese and Indians largely missed out on the benefits of the NEP although urban Chinese business groups have benefited greatly from it by acting as business partners for the new class of Malay entrepreneurs.\(^{193}\) In fact, the income levels of the Chinese increased steadily in the 20 years NEP span. From RM 394 in 1970 to RM 1582 in 1990, and the share of corporate equity of the non-Malays (mostly Chinese) rose from 32.3 to 46.2 percent during the same period.\(^{194}\) Heng Pek Koon highlights,

> “Although the NEP years were undoubtedly stressful times for the Chinese community, its political leadership succeeded in protecting most of the basic Chinese interests, despite setbacks represented by the National Cultural Policy and the New Education Policy. These frustrations

\(^{190}\) Ibid., 87-90.

\(^{191}\) Johan Saravanamuttu, "Is There a Politics of the Malaysian Middle Class?," in *Southeast Asian Middle Classes*, ed. Abdul Rahman Embong (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001), 107.


notwithstanding, and despite continuing unhappiness about being cut out of the political mainstream, the end of the NEP and its replacement by the National Development Policy (NDP) in the mid-1991 has bred cautious optimism, particularly within Chinese business circles that better times might be in store.\textsuperscript{195}

Hek Peng Koon also points out that the Chinese community as a whole made progress by successfully deploying other ‘NEP by-pass’ strategies. In education for example, Chinese companies established private colleges with ‘twinning programmes’ to enable Chinese students who failed to enter public universities to pursue the education in United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Among such colleges are Kolej Damansara Utama set up by See Hoy Chan Cooperation and TAR College, the funds were raised by MCA (Malaysia Chinese Association) and were met by the state ringgit to ringgit.\textsuperscript{196}

As a social group, the Malaysian middle class has also been described as a fractured social force,\textsuperscript{197} fragmented, contested,\textsuperscript{198} plural,\textsuperscript{199} and even twisted.\textsuperscript{200} Clive S. Kessler also has discussed Southeast Asian middle class as having divided consciousness, dualism or being Janus-faced,

"... On the one hand, many of them recognise that they have enjoyed advantages which they wish to hold onto and are reluctant to imperil, and they largely recognise that they largely owe their enjoyment of many of these benefits to government policies and sponsorship. At the same time, as they become habituated to their middle-class position and its accompanying attitudes and habits of mind, the more sceptical many of them tend to become of government paternalism, even authoritarianism..."\textsuperscript{201}

In tying up the relationship between class and postmodernism, this dissertation admits that there are significant dangers in superimposing on contemporary Asian societies concepts and ideal types that were developed in the West. However, class differences and relations as this dissertation will unfold, may help to understand artworks and artistic practices in Malaysia. This is because artistic development reflects the changing local and regional situation of the practitioners and the changing society that he or she is in, and artists as argued in this dissertation are grounded in a social transformation of individual identities that is

\textsuperscript{195} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{201} Clive S. Kessler, 31.
catalysed by a collective class experiences. This could be seen in my discussion of a few works by these artists in the early part of this chapter. I will further discuss this in terms of postmodern art strategies in Chapter Five and some of the thematic approaches undertaken by these artists in Chapter Six especially in the context of Malaysia’s ‘postmodern situation’.

The New Malaysian Middle Class and its ‘Postmodern Situation’

or Situasi Percamoden

As it is widely known, Malaysia has been widely promoted (in tourist brochures and campaigns) by the existence of the various ethnic groups such as the Malays, Chinese, Indians, and by other ethnic minorities, such as the Ibans, Kadazans, Murut, Bajau, Orang Asli et cetera. Earlier studies in the 1960s and the 1970s show that ‘communalism’ is a dominant manifestation of a Malaysia’s multi-ethnic society.202

The Malays dominated in various spheres especially in politics and culture based on the notion of ketuanan Melayu, or Malay ascendancy. To non-Malays it represents an unacceptable, unconscionable and direct declaration of absolute Malay rule in which Malays enjoy more rights than the other ethnic communities; more rights than even the other bumiputeras (like the aboriginal Orang Asli or the natives of Sabah and Sarawak and other non-Malay indigenes). Unlike the other bumiputeras, the Malays have their sovereign rulers who, under the Malaysian Constitution, are required to extend their special powers and privileged to protect the Malays and the ‘natives of Borneo.’203

The standard description and definition offered for the term ‘Malay’ and ‘Malayness’ are based upon what has been written in the Malaysian constitution and refers to a person who professes Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and who has at least one ancestor from the Malay Peninsula or Singapore.204 Though the terms have been widely accepted and used at all levels, but this does not mean that the term has never been problematized. Shamsul AB for example, argues that the term ‘Malay’ was

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created for the purposes of British colonial administration in 1891 when the first census was conducted.

"Subsequently, these terms came to be naturalized and accepted by the social actors themselves through their application in various colonial policies that impinged upon the livelihood and the general social life of the actors. The postcolonial state adopted these colonial-created social categories and expanded their scope for policy purposes." 205

Central to my theoretical premise dissertation is that Malay society, as the main beneficiary of the NEP, has had to undergo various social and cultural changes as it is pushed into modernization or development ideals. Such changes from tradition/feudalistic practices, Islam and modern ideals do not smoothly transfer from one phase to another, but they co-exist at times harmoniously but sometimes full of contradictions. Since the jump from a feudal society towards a modern one has occurred in a very short time, it has resulted in very conflicting variety of values – ones enmeshed with the traditional, Islam and the modern, which produces a situation I will address as the situasi percamoden or ‘postmodern situation.’

It must be noted that the term perca-moden has been used in a writing by Hasnul Jamal Saidon to describe pascamoden or post-modern.206 The usage of the term percacamoden here however, suits my idea that the current structure of feeling inherent in these section of Malaysian society seems to be the fragmented but rooted in tradition, Islamic beliefs and modern or progressive ideals. Perca means fragments. Therefore, rather than using pasca that means ‘post,’ I believe perca is more well suited in the context of the theoretical framework that I am putting forward here in this dissertation.

The term ‘postmodern’ or percamoden that I am using is not a periodizing concept such as where postmodernity comes after modernity, but I am using it to describe the structure of feeling of the Malays who makes up most of the new Malaysian middle class. As such, the term ‘postmodern situation’ or situasi percamoden here means the cultural and social changes that the Malays have had to undergo due to the drastic modernization efforts imposed on them. As a result of this leapfrog into modern life, Malay society in general has not only begun to look back at its cultural roots and religious beliefs but most importantly, it has created a contested situation in which traditionalism, Islam and modern ideals coexist sometimes peaceably and sometimes discordantly. Such contestations are reflected through new symbols, and social and cultural practices and in the case of this dissertation, artistic practices among Malaysian artists.

So, what are these ‘postmodern situations’? Malay societies have three major influences—traditionalism, Islam and modernity. By traditionalism, I mean cultural beliefs and practices from the pre-Islamic, pre-modern period for example, feudalism, animism, Hindu influences etc. There are two significant junctures in the influence of Islam: Islam’s arrival in the Malay world and the 1970s resurgence of Islam. Modernity too has its junctures; secular modernity was introduced through British colonialism and the modern brought by State-led development through the drive into the world capitalist economy, especially since the 1970s. Malay society has experienced various changes and contestation in its values and worldview. These changes were more abrupt in the last two hundred years and became more significant after Independence, resulting in various tensions in the Malay society. A Malay person may be pulled towards their Malay identity and its cultural practices and values; they are pulled towards his/her Islamic beliefs; and lastly they are pulled towards the modern ideals that they are exposed to through education, mass media, various communications means and in relationship with other people from beyond his/her society.

In discussing the Malay mind, Zainal Kling for example, reiterates that Malay thinking has several phases or periods reflecting the reciprocal relationship to the customary phase (fasa adat or what I term as the traditional phase), Islam, modernization and the overlapping periods of these three phases. This enmeshed, conflicting and sometimes very confusing mixture of culture, social practices and worldview can happen vertically within society or it can even occur diagonally across the social structure.

One important example of this contradictory situation is that in politics, Malay political practices have a very different background from western democratic practices. Clive S. Kessler argues that the political relationships between Malays as subjects and their rulers were cultural relationships centred upon an identity, which is political and grounded in the Malacca historical experience, and the political model that followed suit. The polity of a kerajaan (government), as argued by Kessler, is not only a ruler’s domain but rest on his subjects’ socio-cultural condition, that of having a raja (king) which is the central basis of

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207 Hanapi Dollah discusses these influences in the relation with materialism and spiritual beliefs upheld by Malay societies. See Hanapi Dollah.


210 For further information see Anthony Crothers Milner, Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule (Tucson, Arizona: Published for the Association for Asian Studies by the University of Arizona Press, 1982).
Malay social existence. Aboriginal or ‘tribal’ people, pirates, and slaves only have an indirect or mediated involvement and are not autonomously contracted into the culturally paradigmatic relationship between ruler and the ruled. Kessler asserts that,

“These central political relations were not derivatively economic (within some system of Oriental despotism, for example), nor were they essentially legal-political (since the ruler’s powers of command and domination were often far from absolute), nor were they even primarily religious (though that was an important aspect of them). Rather, in origin and content they were entirely cultural. It was the symbolic recognition exchanged between the two parties that made the ruler a ruler and the subject, by virtue of his recognition of political relationship to a Malay ruler, a Malay.”

Such practices can be seen in the still significant daulat (majestic) belief which is of the magical or supernatural character of legitimacy, pingat (medal), the traditional and the modern system of royally awarded titles, the significant power of royalty motifs and the highly ceremonialized form of all political occasion like an UMNO party assembly in which the members are required to adhere to a certain ‘traditional’ form of Malay dress, manners and speech.

Farish A. Noor also makes a similar observation. He notes that interestingly, the only word for government in the modern Malaysian language (Malay) is kerajaan. Like Kessler, he argues that the modern kerajaan of Malaysia bears many features similar to the kerajaans of the old. The style of leadership and protocols of governance in the post-independence era are akin to the traditional feudal system of the past, where emphasis is placed on values like loyalty, obedience, and deference to superiors. The manner in which the government utilizes public funds, the machinery of state, and the organs of the ruling party also resemble the attitudes and practices of the rajas of the earlier kingdom. Noor argues that the modern political system too is still very much influenced by the values and beliefs of the traditional era. This can be seen through how the contemporary Malaysian politicians conduct their activities and carry themselves in public and the cult of leadership, which has been a feature of post-Independence Malaysian politics.

As Kessler notes, Malay political culture is neither a culture of deference, not a ‘culture of silence’ nor a culture of blind obedience, but “a culture, if one is to survive, of necessary, often ambivalent, and at times even dissimulating deference.”

212 Ibid., 137.
214 Farish A. Noor, 162-163.
Such enmeshed and overlapping values in a modern nation state can be seen in campaign songs like Lagu Setia (The Loyalty Song) in which the song denotes one’s position with regards to the Malaysian modern state. Kessler posits that “... Lagu Setia was itself inspired and inspiring, a master stroke of political genius. It reimagined and reinvented loyalty as something modern, subtle, low-key; it made the unfashionable attractive. It modernized the tradition and archaized the modern.”

Its lyrics consist of words clustered on several notions of loyalty like bakti (devoted, loyal or faithful service), setia or kesetiaan (loyalty, obedience, allegiance), khidmat (service), taat (obedient loyalty), korban (sacrifice, readiness to sacrifice or subordinate oneself to a cause), and amanah (trust, charge, security). The song also centres Malaysians as the objects or beneficiaries of this categorical allegiance, which can be seen from phrases like negara yang tercipta (the beloved homeland or modern nation state), pemimpin (the leaders or the modern political leaders), raja (the traditional royalty, the customary state rulers or sultan), agama (religion or the Islamic religion in particular) and bangsa (race, nation, or people generally but with some implication of the primacy of the Malay people). Kessler underscores that Lagu Setia “remains a puzzling and paradoxical creation. However, even as the song was sung invoking a tradition of loyalty, its visual accompaniment on television were largely images of modernity, of modern nationhood and the appurtenances of the nation-state.”

The arrival of Islam brought significant changes to the Malay world. Farish Noor highlights that for centuries, there had been no radical paradigm shift under the rule of the traditional elite in the Malay world but the arrival of Islam led to the introduction of new ideas and practices that altered the Malay world and its value. Some of these new ideas and values are the right to ijtihad (independent thought), the profane, and the transient nature of dunia (the world), the primacy of reason, and the equality of all human beings. The human being too, regardless of gender, race, or rank, is fundamentally a rational human being capable of self-development and achieving perfection (al-Insan ‘ul-kamil) and each individual was God’s vice regent (khalifatu ‘llah) on earth.

The arrival of Islam did not mean that the older metanarrative of values in the Malay world was replaced with a radical, new one. As pointed out in the discussion of the contemporary kerajaan, there was never a moment of a radical or final paradigm shift that completely eradicated the pre-Islamic values and practices of the past with the advent of

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216 Ibid., 155.
217 Ibid.
218 Farish A. Noor, 152-153.
Islam, neither has there occurred an eradication of Islamic ideals with modernization. Due to its location and function, Islam has become and still is the core of the beliefs of all Malays and their centre of the existence. However, the arrival and consolidation of Islam also did not prevent the emergence and arrival of a Western colonialist secular approach to life. The function and the centrality of Islam still continue into the modern phase, even though the Malays have had to adapt the influences and changes brought by modernization. This is reflected in the way that between this new Malay middle class and the influence of resurgence or *dakwah* is felt most. This is not homogenous as there are certain sections, which can be categorized as ‘moderate’ modernist or a ‘radical’, and there is a non-*dakwah* faction known as the ‘ordinary Muslims’.

This religious piety can be seen in the concept of prayer room (*bilik sembahyang*) adorning an urban house. In comparison to a village house, a prayer room is a new concept for any room that can be a room for prayers in the village house. Wazir Jahan Karim argues that the association of an urban Malay house with a *bilik sembahyang* implies that one room is at least consistently clean and uncluttered, a kind of sacred space emulating the prominent corner in a Hindu house, where a shrine or holy pictures are hung. Although Muslims do not have shrines or holy pictures, the emphasis on prayer rooms reaffirms the centrality of the family’s piety and spirituality spirit.

The spiritual element of the Malays has also not changed very much with modernization. Malays began to discard spiritual practices, which were not in line with Islamic beliefs. The spiritual side of the Malay society is dominant, even though some primitive elements such as the concept of *semangat* (spirit) and *penunggu* (evil spirit) still exist in the modern world, albeit with less and less popularity. Islam does not deter the remaining spiritual aspects of pre-Islamic Malay society, since Islam itself does not separate the material and the spiritual elements of the world and world-after. Thus, the spiritual and material can and still coexist together in the modern Malay society.

On modernity on the other hand, Farish A. Noor asserts,

> “Western colonialism brought with it the tools of secular modernity and introduced into the Malay world ideas and notions that had previously seemed alien and antithetical to the Malay-Islamic worldview. The division between state and religion, inaugurated by the Pangkor Treaty of 1874, brought about a discursive and institutional rupture within the religio-political framework of Malay society. The ideology of colonial capitalism, which was the main ideological tool that rationalized the exploitation of the colonized Malay kingdoms, also introduced notions and values that were novel and radical in his

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221 Hanapi Dollah: 59-62.
pursuit of private wealth, the belief that instrumental rationality could overcome and shape the forces of nature, the atomization of traditional society through the introduction of contractual relations and new modes of production and consumption—all of which contributed to an upheaval within the value framework of Malay society.”

Farish A. Noor affirms that the radical change in the racial balance in the country did not lead to a radical change in its dominant value system during colonization. The colonial policy of divide-and-rule was simply transplanted onto the plural economic system, where different ethnic groups were kept in isolation from each other with the British colony power at the top of the political hierarchy. When power was returned to the Malays, the British ensured the continuity and ascendancy of the Malay ruling elites and Malay political culture, enabling the values in Malay society to be essentially Malay and Islamic, although many of the elements and ideas set up by the colonial power were adapted and incorporated.

In modern times especially since the implementation of NEP, the Malays have had to adopt drastic changes, from a feudal society to a modern one especially with the drive of entrepreneurship and modernization promoted by Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. As Anwar Ridhwan asserts,


(The Malay mind significantly changes about a decade after the May 1969 tragedy after a few national policies were embarked on. Slowly the Malay agrarian mind entered a ‘new’ dimension of industry and the corporate world. The basis or the pathway towards the ‘new’ dimension is the modern education – which had been received by the Malay younger generation at the increasing number of local higher education institutions and also overseas. However, as have been exemplified by a few happenings, the Malay industrial and corporate worlds are not always peaceful and have a growing graph. This signifies that the Malay minds are learning and will keep on learning the complex industrial and corporate ‘culture.’) (My translation)

With the implementation of NEP, the Malay mindset has had to undergo drastic changes in embracing not only the physical elements of modernization but most importantly in having to restructure the Malay thinking within the new modern ideals. Based on Mahathir’s books the Malay Dilemma (1970) and Menghadapi Cabaran (The Challenge)
(1978) and also his speeches, the government have pushed for an entrepreneurship programme. This is central to Mahathir’s belief that ‘the entrepreneur’ is the cornerstone of modernity and Malay’s progress.225

The Malays have been forced to adapt to the needs of modern life based on this entrepreneurship drive. Books such as Revolusi Mental226 for example, suggest that the Malay mind, values and worldview have to be changed if Malays wanted to be on a par with other races. The book was thought, formulated and executed by UMNO Malaysia in 1971 under the Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. Senu Abdul Rahman who was the Head of the Youth UMNO at that time established a committee in writing and compiling the thoughts of Malay leaders on what can be done to shift the paradigm of the Malay thinking. This book was then promoted to all Malays to build their confidence and especially to highlight the needed attributes that can propel to be relevant especially with the introduction of the New Economic Policy.

The criticisms that underlies in the book are based on three themes – that the Malays have a strong feeling of takut (being afraid of) as in afraid of taking risks, producing or having no vision and afraid of making new initiatives or malu (feeling embarrassed or ashamed) like shame for being regarded as stingy (even though the fact is that one has no money). Therefore, he/she is willing to go into debt just to fulfil their social and family obligations such as organizing or helping out with other people’s wedding celebration. The Malays usually wish to be considered rendah diri or humble. They are often regarded as not being exertive enough or not want to put themselves in the frontline. Therefore, during the 1970s, the Malays were asked to be kurang ajar (literally without parental teachings or basically ‘ruthless’) if they wanted to succeed.227

More than two decades later, there were criticisms of the suggestions made through Senu Abdul Rahman’s book. Norazit Selat draws attention to how it underscores the criticism made by Western researchers or officers in charge of the Malays during the years of colonization. He refuted Senu Abdul Rahman’s criticism of the Malay society that some values regarded as negative and discussed in the book in fact had some positive effect on the Malays and their society. For example, takut should not be seen from only its economic aspects but in the social context, such as being afraid of God, authority, parents and elders

which were encouraged in Malay society at that time. *Malu* should not be seen negatively since Malay society emphasizes *malu* as very much related to one’s *maruah* (pride) and self-value, for example, one should feel embarrassed to be living in poverty and should strive to get out of it, and one should be embarrassed in making mistakes that bring shame to one’s family and society. Selat also questions if *rendah diri* or humbleness indicates the values that retard Malay participation in the economy. The lack of these good values was regarded as one of the source for why the moral steadfastness of Malay youngsters had declined.

Zainal Kling asserts that the modern education system has implanted a rational form of thinking in the minds and hearts of the Malays, resulting in the rejection of traditional thinking and even in society, the beginning to refuse and question its own traditional system. In parallel with ethics, just/fair and universalism values have begun to be accepted as contemporary thinking. Fairness for example, is no longer determined by power but by egalitarian values. Democratic values and humanism have spread as the basis of the new modern state according to the European model. Consequently, a well-educated Muslim middle class has begun to raise questions about characteristically modern concerns, including the role and rights of women, the challenge of pluralism, the merits of market economies and the relationship of religion to state.

Even Islam have been presented as a ‘civil religion.’ Virginia Matheson Hooker for example, highlights how in speeches by Mahathir Mohamed and Anwar Ibrahim in 1997, Islam was reconfigured and presented as a source of ‘moral value’ and an ethical code. She argues that in their speeches, Muslims are described as inferior to non-Muslims but there is an assurance that if Islam were to be implemented as a system of values for individual guidance, then Muslims would be able to participate fully in the modern world. Therefore, Islam can simultaneously be acknowledged as the religion of the Malays and at the same time be presented in a manner which non-Malays (non-Muslims) might find more understandable and less threatening. She argues that presented as a moral code, Islam could serve as the basis for a civil religion that unites rather than divides Malaysia. The press report used in Hooker’s study also highlight that traditional Malay values were not chosen by the Malaysian

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228 Ibid.
229 Zainal Kling, 41-42.
230 Robert W. Hefner, 5.
232 Ibid.: 15.
leaders as the cure for Malay social problems. Islam instead is underlined as the vehicle for moral reform.233

With modernization, certain Malay communal characteristics also have begun to deteriorate and the Malays have become very individualistic, especially those living in the urban centres. At all levels of Malaysian society, consumerism became a powerful force. As consumers, they have an interest towards and constitute the new market for Western products like fast food, fashion, computer software, educational services, films and satellite TV, besides their ownership of Proton cars and their ability to shop in large shopping malls.

Hanapi highlights that modern individuals have begun to be attracted to material things and begun to conspicuously display these interests. Malays have begun to accumulate furniture, decorative objects and motor vehicles, in addition to houses and land. Extra incomes have not been invested in the form of ceremonial events like weddings or in helping each other out. Individual needs become more and more important than communal needs. Hanapi asserts that such an importance placed on material aspects of life has facilitated in pushing the Malays to get their equal share of the modern economy driven by the NEP policy. Malays have to realize that Malaysia is theirs too and they have to be economically rich by grabbing any opportunity, like the Chinese do and have.234

For the Malays, since post-Independence, it the pre-modern traditional structure of having sultans and kerajaan has become quite irrelevant in modern Malaysia as their function is very minimal at least in their context of day today living. This political paradigm became more complex with the infiltration of the Indians and Chinese, leading to accommodation politics and a new sensitivity of political thinking, followed by social engineering. Due to the social polarization created by the British and persisted through government policies such as the NEP, sociologically, each ethnic began to ‘othering each other.’

On top of it, the global surge in capital flows in the late 1980s and early 1990s is related to global trends towards privatisation and economic deregulation have had a great impact on Malaysia. Consequently, the adoption of new policies of economic deregulation and privatisation under the auspices of the National Development Policy (a similar policy replacing NEP), coupled with the inflow of unprecedented levels of foreign direct investment and of finance capital, contributed to rapid growth, new economic activities, and employment prospects in Malaysia. The NEP has undeniably contributed to the increase of the Malay middle class and to their ownership of economic resources, yet it must be noted that the NEP

234 Hanapi Dollah: 63-64.
policies have not diminished the capitalist and middle class among other Malaysians. In fact, the rapid capitalist growth in the country has allowed the Chinese community to expand its new middle class as well.

The relationship between the Malays and the Chinese in particular has also improved especially between the capitalist and the middle class. The Ali-Baba type of partnership is consequently being replaced by ‘genuine joint ventures’ (usahasama tulen) involving two equally active partners, the bumiputra and the Chinese, in which each partner brings his share of capital, skills, and know-how. This collaborative relationship first became evident by the late 1990s. Chin Yee Whah reported that some of the reasons that make this encouraging relationship possible are due to the fact that the Malaysian government have encouraged the growth of the manufacturing sector and invested in the training and tertiary education of bumiputra youths since the NEP. Secondly, the perception of the Chinese business community towards the bumiputeras took a positive turn following the emergence of the bumiputra middle class. Chin contends that while Ali-Baba partnerships still exist, this new type of cooperation between bumiputra and Chinese entrepreneurs is displacing them. This cooperation is now class based rather than ethnicity based.

Besides economic and development issue, the Malays were also confronted with language issues. Significantly, there is a huge push in the use of English at the turn of the century. This contradicts to the government’s attitude towards the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. The National Language Act in 1967 had privileged the status of the Malay language reducing English to a ‘second language’ and after the Constitutional Amendment Act was passed, it was made illegal to dispute or question the status of the national language as provided in Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution. This does not come as a surprise as Malay ethnic nationalism views English as the language of continuing economic and socio-cultural dominance of the Chinese and Indian immigrants who have been educated in English by the British. Therefore, the Malay majority felt that the language and culture of the Malays and not English should provide the basis or foundation for national identity and unity in a pluralistic, polyglot Malaysia. Following the institutionalisation of Bahasa Malaysia, Sastera Melayu (Malay literature), because of its symbiotic relationship with the language, became

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235 In the early years of the NEP, the Ali-Baba partnership was common. Baba, or the Chinese partner is the more active partner in business partnership in which he brought his capital, skills and technical know-how. Ali, the Malay partner was regarded as less active and more of a ‘sleeping partner’ in the relation. See Whah Chin Yee, "Ethnicity and the Transformation of the Ali-Baba Partnership in the Chinese Business Culture in Malaysia," in The Challenge of Ethnicity: Building a Nation in Malaysia:, ed. Cheah Boon Kheng (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International, 2004).

236 Ibid., 55-56.
the national literature while other creative writing in other languages spoken in the country i.e. English, Chinese and Tamil, were accorded the status of *kesusasteraan sukuan* or ‘sectional literature.’

After more than twenty years, there was quite a sharp transition in Malaysia’s own exercise of identity through language. The hostility towards the English language has healed considerably with time and pragmatic measures are being taken to fulfil Malaysia’s vision of attaining developed nation status by 2020 and to fulfil Malaysia’s ambition in the global financial and technological hub, Malaysia began to lower its hostility to English language as a medium. In December 1993, the government first announced that it intended to allow English to be used as a medium of instruction in universities. This was followed by a fuller announcement by Mahathir in December 1994, that the government was exploring ways to improve the teaching of English in universities as it is regarded as essential in stimulating the nation’s growth. Several measures have been taken. The MUET (Malaysian University English Test) was also introduced as a prerequisite for entering local universities. In 2002, it was also announced that the medium of instruction of sciences and mathematics in schools will be changed to English starting from 2003 with the Year One, Form One and Form Six students being the pioneers, followed by the rest in the following years.

*The Changing Social, Cultural and Political Identity of the New Malaysian Middle Class*

The change in the social, cultural and even political identity seems stark as the new Malay middle class and the Malaysian middle class grows overall. If in the 1980s Malaysia was infiltrated with the symbolism of ‘traditional Malay culture,’ since the mid 1990s Gaik Cheng Khoo argues that Malaysian cultural representations have shifted. In some new Malaysian films (like *Jogho* by auteur U-Wei Haji Saari) and literature (*Jhara* by S. Othman Kelantan on which the movie was based) challenge the discourse that has idealized the notion of Malay community rooted in the Malay village or *kampung* posited earlier by Joel S. Kahn.

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238 The decision to revert back to Bahasa Malaysia in national schools and mother-tongue languages in national-type schools for these subjects however, has been announced in 2009, reverting to Bahasa Malaysia from 2012 onwards. There have been calls from various groups for the policy to revert and the issue has seen a rare alliance between Malay and Chinese educationists, who are against the switch.

The idyll of the *kampung* as a place of communal cooperation, harmony and other positive traditional values, and the city as a place of corrupt values and greed for example, have always been the dominant theme in Malaysian cultural representations seen in films and literature in the 1970s and 1980s.

For Gaik Cheng Khoo works such as *Bukak Api* (documentary film) and *Face-Off: A Malaysian Reformasi Diary* represent a more contemporary alternative multi-ethnic community in contrast to the stereotypical *kampung* image. She also points out how some Malay writers and filmmakers have begun to question the usefulness of continuing certain traditional values espoused in the works of the Malaysian woman filmmaker Shuhaimi Baba. Shuhaimi’s films such as *Layar Lara* (1997), *Selubung* (1992) and *Ringgit Kasorrga* (1994) are urban-centered, serving to reassure viewer that modernity, individualism and urbanization can coexist with *kampung* communal values. Gaik suggested how Shuhaimi Baba’s work exemplifies how alternative communities can be located inside as well as outside the *kampung* realm. In *Mimpi Moon* (1999) Shuhaimi blurs the urban and *kampung* distinction in this first English-language Malaysian film with multi-ethnic casting of very cosmopolitan English-speaking Malaysians. It is important to understand how Malaysian cultural expression has begun to move away from *kampung* or Malay-centered life to a more multi-cultural urban-centered life since the 1990s. It must be noted such texts are largely the expression and perceptions formed by the Malay middle class who are English educated and most often bilingual, therefore it can be seen the producers are critical and conscious of positions outside tradition and inside modernity.  

The weakening of ethnicity as the dominant factor in the self-identity among Malays could also be seen in their home interior decorations. Smith notes how it became a fashion in the 1980s for urban new-rich Malay families to decorate their homes with Chinese rosewood/pearl-inlay furniture and wall panels. In another context she argues although there may be antipathy between the Malays and the Chinese, the furniture is installed because it looks ‘expensive’ and this is more important than the fact that it looks ‘Chinese.’  

Modernity and industrialization not only allows the Malay woman to have her own modern house and become the *suri* (queen of the house) but as a wife and a waged woman. In this context, her control and participation in the modern world goes beyond ethnic boundaries and becomes more visible as she stocks up with, say, Arcopal crockery, Queen Anne and Bohemian silver to advance her status in urban society. Besides this, she might want to have

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240 Gaik Cheng Khoo: 81.
241 Wendy A. Smith, 112.
an extension to her kitchen, patio and an indoor garden even with a pond containing colourful Japanese carp!\textsuperscript{242}

In theatre, while traditional Chinese and Indian theatre troupes are almost non-existent in Malaysia, only the English-language theatre is preoccupied with crossing ethnic barriers. It however, plays mostly to Malaysian middle-class in Kuala Lumpur and on occasions in other cities such as Penang. English serves as a lingua franca among the different ethnic groups but as Catherine Diamonds notes, it evokes overtones of colonial rule and appeal to a particular class. On top of that, it runs counter to any attempt to develop a national identity based solely on Malay language and culture. Malay theatre on the other hand according to Diamond, has been unresponsive to representing other ethnic minorities and mostly focused on issues within the Malay community or played on its nostalgic backward glimpses. This is because theatre written and performed in Malay is consciously involved in nation building and is integral to the government’s larger plan to contribute to a Malay national culture.\textsuperscript{243}

It must be emphasized how the growth of the new middle class has resulted in the emergence of several prominent public interest non-governmental organizations based on the ideal of 'civic nationalism.' There are groups pushing for political reform like ALIRAN (Aliran Kesedaran Negara or Malay for National Consciousness Movement which aims to raise social consciousness and uphold equality and democratic rights as well as racial and religious tolerance) and JUST (International Movement for a Just World). Other groups are like ABIM (the Malay acronym for the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) which is a group basically promoting urban Malay middle class concerns with Islamic interests, groups concerned with the environment (like WWF, formerly known as the World Wildlife Fund and The Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia), consumer interests (The Consumer Association of Malaysia), human rights (SUARAM (Suara Rakyat Malaysia or the Malaysian Voices) and HAKAM (National Human Rights Society)), women’s rights (Tenaganita), Chinese-language schools interest etc.

The function of various NGOs and their ‘civic nationalism’ ideals combined with the advent of globalisation and the push for Information Technology has allowed a more multi-ethnic space to emerge in Malaysian politics. This is reflected in the removal of Anwar Ibrahim from his Deputy Prime Minister post in September 1998. Following this event, there were six weeks of political demonstrations in the streets of Kuala Lumpur, in open defiance

\textsuperscript{242} Wazir Jahan Karim: 124.
of the authorities. Several of these demonstrations also involved clashes with baton-wielding and water cannon-equipped Malaysian police both in uniform and in civilian clothes.

Jason Abbot244 argues that the Anwar affair may have begun as a struggle among the Malay elite but soon become the focus for grievances and discontent among both the Malay community and the Malaysian populace as a whole.

"... Anwar’s dismissal from office certainly acted as a catalyst for the expression of popular discontent. Economic growth, a growing middle class and an increasing number of students who had studied abroad all contributed to the growing autonomy of civil society from the state. While economic liberalization did not stimulate civil society further, the region-wide economic crisis that began in 1997 did trigger serious divisions within the ruling elite."245

The factors which contributed to the emergence of this coalition, were the growth of non-governmental organizations and alternative media which themselves are by-products of Malaysia’s buoyant economic development under Mahathir’s premiership. The Internet component of the campaign became a powerful tool for thousands of Anwar’s supporters to express their opposition and rage. There were about thirty different websites such as Aliran, FreeMalaysia, The Malaysian, Sabri Zain’s Reformasi Diary, Not The New Straits Times, and Malaysiakini detailing the event. Demonstrations that began in the streets now expanded out to be conducted in these ‘cyber corridors.’

Cyberspace seems to allow Malaysians to exercise their right of free speech. Wendy Mee argues that “at the very least, such technologies can intensify nationalist sensibilities, even through the process of building extra-national relations.”246 Mee sets out to demonstrate that instead of destabilizing the nation-state, globalising technology like the Internet can also enable and foster an imagined community based on multiculturalism.247 As expressed by Sabri Zain on the Kuala Lumpur streets there is a sense of commonality and bonding that he felt with other fellow protesters, having shared the experience of tear-gas, water-cannons and police brutality. There is also a sense of shared purpose and solidarity as he bonds with a driver honking in support.248 The book provides numerous examples of individuals coming together, strangers helping each other on the streets during the police crackdown, united under a common desire for justice. Into Sabri’s cast of characters at the demonstrations come the middle classes including non-Malays, taxi drivers, bus drivers, clerks, security guards,

245 Ibid.: 296.
247 Ibid., 232.
fast food restaurant supervisors, elderly pensioners, children, men and women, university students, veiled Muslim girls, middle aged housewives, couples and rockers in leather jackets. 249

Even though during this time, the government also tried to scare the Chinese community by drawing parallels between the Malaysian Reformasi demonstrations and the anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia, Sabri remarks that no Chinese-owned shops or Chinese demonstrators were killed or raped at the Malaysian Reformasi gathering. "I myself saw dozens of ‘Free Guan Eng’ 250 banners and posters next to the ‘Free Anwar’ posters at these demonstrations. This did not seem anti-Chinese to me." 251

I would like to point to Kessler’s observation during the Anwar Ibrahim crisis in Malaysia,

"... The problem in this sense is not Anwar Ibrahim as an individual but the emergence of an entire new generations of Malaysians, with its talents and dreams as well as its impatience and resentments, is a new social force that needs to be recognized, conciliated, and included—not alienated, rejected or excluded, kept waiting outside and marking time in the anterooms of national power and eminence.

... A new, forward looking approach is needed to reconcile, accommodate and co-opt this new rising generation, its aspirations and energies, its impatient enthusiasm and mounting discontent. To that end and to extricate themselves from the present impasse, Malaysia and its leadership must again find "the way forward"—a new way forward for and with this entire generation of Dr. Mahathir’s and the New Economic Policy’s ‘children.’" 252

The changing demographic of Malaysian society and its class-consciousness could be seen for example, in the 1997 Anwar-Mahathir conflict. Shamsul A.B. notes that Malaysia’s ‘new politics’ is “informed not only by colonially generated knowledge and ethno religious concerns,” “but more and more by pluralistic and universal idioms and concerns.” 253 In his opinion, this is because “Malaysia society is not made up of uniform ethno religious entities but of diverse ones capable of highly divergent trajectories and developments.” Therefore, despite strong state intervention, “the state-elite does not have a monopoly over power and

249 Ibid., 13 and 70.
250 Lim Guan Eng is currently the Chief Minister of Penang from the opposition party DAP. He was arrested in 1994, under the Sedition Act 1948 and Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 following his criticism of the government’s handling of allegations of statutory rape of one of his constituents by former Chief Minister of the state of Melaka, Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Tambi Chik. After a series of appeals, he was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment but was released after 12 months on August 25, 1999.

political space; nor is the material-market interest the only motivating factor in Malaysia’s contemporary realpolitik.”

It must be noted that I have been discussing some elements of contestation and fragmentation among the Malaysian middle class. As I have posited earlier, such a condition is what I call the Malaysian ‘postmodern situation.’ I do not welcome the use of the term ‘postmodern’ by itself, as it would generally reflect a very Eurocentric meaning for the term. Loh and Kahn too have asserted that Malaysian cultural fragmentation should not be considered a result of the postmodernist tendencies, which are happening globally.

“In a very different context Frederic Jameson (1984) has described a phenomenon at least ostensibly similar to this one of cultural fragmentation as a characteristic of ‘postmodernism’ and, further argued that postmodernism represents the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism.’ One reason he offers for the proliferation of competing visions is that they have been allowed to develop largely, perhaps, because the late capitalist State no longer requires a dominant and pervasive discourse or ideology for its own reproduction. Being no longer a threat to the viability of State power, particularistic visions can now be allowed to proliferate.

But one should be wary of too quickly transplanting at least this vision of modernity into the Malaysian context. For whether or not it can be argued that the Western States have abandoned universalistic discourses, and whether or not this can be said to have given rise to a democratisation at least at the level of culture as the postmodernists understand that term, such has not been the case of Malaysia.”

By using the term ‘postmodern situation’ or situasi percamoden in describing the Malaysian situation, I am suggesting that the term has nothing to do with the discontinuity with the earlier phases of the modern period in Western societies, or concerns a social condition brought about mainly by the spread of Western mass industry, or simply a form of cultural excess. The ‘postmodern situation’ as being used here describes the cultural condition, which has occurred especially among the new Malaysia middle class especially the Malay middle class as the result of Malaysia’s launch into the modern economy. The term ‘post’ does not mean ‘after’ but denotes parallel-ness rooted in the social fragmentation of the Malay society and the term ‘situation’ here signifies that there is a different condition or context to Malaysia’s premise of postmodernity itself. Due to this drive engineered by the government, the cultural conditions are not only fragmented but most importantly the Malay middle class have been pulled in various directions creating very conflicting and even a very contradictory society. This has happened simultaneously along with various modernization projects promoted by the government.

254 Ibid.
As Cheah Boon Kheng observes,

"Nationalism, that engine which knits together different peoples into different directions, is still alive and working in Malaysia, but it is both a creative and destructive force. There is rival nationalism pulling people into different directions. Malay ethno-nationalism is still the strongest force in Malaysia, relying on Malay nationalist ideologies and Islam to weld the Malay peoples together. Opposing it are the rival ethno-nationalisms of other indigenous groups, like Dayaks and the Kadazandisuns in Sarawak and Sabah respectively. There is also the appeal of multi-ethnic Malaysian nationalism, preferred by most Chinese and Indian citizens to weld peoples of all races and ethnic groups together into one united Malaysian nation, or Bangsa Malaysia."  

This leads us to the question of what universalising beliefs and practices there are for the ways in which modern societies like Malaysia can cope with diversity. Joel S. Kahn outlines two tendencies in the modernists’ beliefs. One, those who maintain that modernity, broadly understood, constitutes an antidote to racism as well as other regimes of domination based on colour, gender, sexuality, culture etc. Two, critics of modernity have tended to see particularizing impulses such as racism as arising out of the very processes of universalization which have been associated with modernization, as intimately bound up with modernity itself. Malaysia, driven by its early Malay nationalism, seems to employ a binary position of having both elements of racism arising out of the very processes of modernization, and also arguing that what it is doing is to be justified as a part of the decolonisation process in which racial inequalities because of British colonization have to be corrected.

Abdul Rahman Embong posits that,

"(...) democracy and freedom are not heaven-sent but the result of long drawn out struggles. Modernization theory has it that as a country undergoes modernization and as the middle class develops, there is a greater tendency towards universalism and democracy. This theory – based on the Western European model – sees modernization and democracy as inseparable twins. ...

The rise of the Southeast Asian middle class on the other hand was part of post-independence capitalist economic development which in the main is state-driven. However, the modern state is most of Southeast Asia is the creation of western colonial powers upon their retreat with the granting of national independence to the new states. The agenda of the post-colonial state is nation-building and capitalist economic development, including the creation of the indigenous business and middle class. ..."  

Loh on the other hand underscores that the,

"... contemporary Malaysia is characterized by a very fragmented vision. By this we refer in fact to a number of related phenomena which, taken together have resulted in the proliferation of discourses and/or cultural practices which are either implicitly or explicitly particularistic, and which seek to replace

257 Joel S. Kahn, Modernity and Exclusion, 6.
or resists the imposition of universalistic value systems generally assumed to accompany modernization.  

The ‘postmodern situation’ or situasi percamoden reflects the changing Malay society, its relationship with Western liberalism and for the Malays, its pull towards Islamic values and a wider ummah, its reaction towards non-Malays and towards the end of justifying Malay hegemony. Recently, there have been some films produced which denote a more realistic inter-racial cultural condition in Malaysia. Film like “Sepet” by Yasmin Ahmad sets out to imagine and construct a romantic vision of Malaysian society. This film brings to light the existence of a racial divide in Malaysian society where the different races, though living and working more tightly together, seem to occupy separate social spheres especially in regard to intimacy or intimate knowledge of each other. “Sepet” became very controversial due its portrayal of Malay characters that alternately speak in Malay and English with some Cantonese words and phrases, and with attitudes and views depicted which were not deemed to fit into Malay values. Another film with a similar appeal is “Gol dan Gincu,” even though the story is more about teenage issues and dilemmas. The film very closely reflects the inter-racial relationship of urban middle class teenagers within the plot revolves around social issues.

It is important to revisit Clive S. Kessler’s observation on the Malay political culture, “Malay culture is an insistently political culture, but what its politics are, especially under modern competitive conditions, is multivocal and open-ended, not definitely specified or foreclosed by the past from which they are held to stem. Tradition and traditionalism have no single, necessary political import or direction once the presuppositions of dominations have been relativized by the fracturing of historical continuity. Rather, their meaning is reached, and always reached anew, through interpretation: not so much discovered, as something already immanently ‘there’, via ‘hermeneutic’ interpretation but actually constructed in a constitutive process in which people interrogate and, with the accents and emphases of the present, create or invent an appropriately serviceable past.”

This dissertation does not claim to understand all the contradictions and contestations within the Malaysian middle class or have a definite suggestion of what constitutes these fragmentations. Besides Malay middle class, it does not also deny that there are other contradictions and contestations among non-Malay section of the society. This dissertation highlights that to understand the shift occurring in the Malaysian art, it is necessary to comprehend and acknowledge the fragmentation and segmentation of these Malaysian middle class since artists and artworks, which will be discussed later, responded to the ‘postmodern

259 Francis Loh Kok Wah and Joel S. Kahn, 3-4.

102
situation' or situasi percamoden background. Therefore as I will further discuss in Chapter Six, these percamoden experiences that could be seen in the thematic approaches in Malaysian art are not only limited to artworks by Malay artists, but works by non-Malay artists as well.

Postmodern art strategies employed by these artists has enabled tacky and controversial issues to be addressed within the realm of fine arts in Malaysia. As the postmodern questions the metanarratives, Malaysian artists begin to engage with polemical discourses that raise concerns of the social, cultural and political situations in Malaysia. To have more openness in the discussion of that has been regarded as off-limits such as ketuanan Melayu (Malay ascendancy), race and religion, education is the key. With the NEP policy, Malays have been able to attain it with wide-ranging tertiary education provided by the government. The increase of (Malay)esian middle class has in a way enabled an exchange that crosses racial boundaries be made without scepticism and distrust. With the influence of technology and globalisation embraced by the government, Malay artists in particular and Malaysian artists in general have crossed the nationalistic concerns and issues by participating in various international arts discourses and engaged in wider regional themes, something that the policies may not have anticipated. Perhaps it is appropriate to quote Farish A. Noor’s views on contemporary Malay society to conclude this chapter,

"The Malay of today is a product of modernity in every respect, living in exile from the past. He is the inheritor of a tradition of secular Modernity as taught to him by the West, and also an inheritor of the tradition of Modernist Islam as taught to him by his elders. Living as he does in a thoroughly modern world, he cannot help but share the prejudices and fears of the Modern age. Beguiled by the charms of Modernity he places his faith in science and rationality, hoping that they would turn in turn shed light upon the darkness. A convert to positivism, he looks ever forward to the future, certain that it will bring him closer to enlightenment and safety. His dialectical approach to all that is Other ensures that he can only view the past as a dark world full of irrational and incomprehensible forces. A solipsist who lives in a monochromatic moral universe, he regards all that goes against his modern Islamic values as khurafat, syirik, inferior bizarre, chaotic, irrational, and/or contaminating."²⁶²

²⁶² Farish A. Noor, “From Majaphit to Putrajaya: The Keris as a Symptom of Civilizational Development and Decline,” in From Majaphit to Putrajaya: Searching for Another Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish, 2005), 60.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE MODERN AND POSTMODERN IN ART

Investigating the Postmodern

Before I proceed in discussing the art development in Malaysia within my theoretical premise of ‘postmodern situation’ or situasi percamoden, I would be helpful for me to outline and discuss the context of early postmodern art works emerged from. This is because the fact is that, in the development of Malaysian art, postmodern art strategies that are employed by artists since the 1990s is not exactly something new. Postmodern art as an artistic strategy has only since the early 1990s been widely accepted and employed, especially by young artists entering the Malaysian art world upon graduation as I will discuss in the next chapter. If we trace the development of postmodern art in Malaysia, one can argue that as a strategy, postmodern art approach had already made its appearance by the late 1960s and early 1970s in Malaysia, although these early developments were largely rooted in Conceptual Art. These early attempts however, were cut short by the proliferation of Malay/Islamic-centred art as will be discuss at the end of this chapter.

To trace the early beginnings, these postmodern artistic tendencies must be discussed in relation to what is termed in Malaysia as the ‘Abstract Expressionist’ style. Abstract Expressionism, Abstract or Expressionism are a few terms which have been used to discuss emotional, expressive and gesture-based works introduced in particular by Malaysian artists who had recently returned from abroad in the 1960s -- works by Syed Ahmad Jamal and Latiff Mohidin are strongly affiliated with such artistic approaches. Early postmodern art strategies however, began to appear in a series of exhibitions starting with The New Scene ‘69 (1969) and concluding with Towards a Mystical Reality (1974). These series represent the antithesis of Abstract Expressionist approach, as they centre on a cerebral approach, or what is generally understood as Conceptual art. I will discuss this premise in order to understand the early development of the postmodern artistic approach in Malaysia followed by the final section of this chapter in which I will discuss the Malaysian Abstract Expressionist in relation to the Malay/Islamic-centred art that had become the mainstream until the late 1980s.

Postmodern Art in Malaysia

In Euramerica, the term postmodernism gained usage in the art world around the 1980s, although strategies rooted in postmodern art had already begun to surface in the 1960s with
the emergence of trends like Pop art, Minimalism, Conceptualism and performance. It can be identified as early as the Dadaist movement and Marcel Duchamp’s ‘readymades.’ In essence, postmodern art rejects the idea of the mainstream and recognizes artistic pluralism. However, many critics observe that although pluralism also applies to modernism, pluralism in the postmodern era has been accepted as the manifestation of a more culturally heterogeneous age.

Besides persistent strategies such as bricolage, appropriation, irony, parody, camp, kitsch and humour in postmodern works, another important aspect of postmodern art is that it rethinks the relationship between art and popular culture, and the differences between works of art and consumer goods. It upholds that all cultural production is involved in complex social relations and criticizes aspects of culture from within. For example, Andy Warhol’s work on Marilyn Monroe can be read as a piece of modernist criticism, a picture of a film star, an advertisement or all of these simultaneously. In the 1960s Warhol, a former commercial artist, began making pictures based on mass-produced images such as newspaper advertisements and comic strips, then Campbell's soup cans in 1962. His works range from images of Coca-Cola bottles, sculptures/installation made of Brillo soap-pad boxes, to the series of Marilyn Monroe pictures, Elvis Presley, Elizabeth Taylor and other celebrities. In keeping with this outlook, he used screen printing which allowed infinite replication of illustrations from the mass media; turning his studio into a site of consumer goods’ manufacturing and even calling it ‘The Factory.’ Significantly, the plural coding of his work recognizes that the meaning and definition of art depends on its location, the spectator and the background. Besides Warhol, other American artists who have been positioned as postmodern include Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl, David Salle, Sherri Levine, Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Allan McCollum.

Postmodern art strategies have diversified over the years as works increasingly address, engage and comment on the contemporary human condition from social, racial, sexual, ethnic, political, gender, environmental, urban, or rural standpoints. A statement by artists, highlighting the artist’s intent, is usually provided in accompaniment to a work. However, the most important thing is that the viewers are provided with the opportunity to ‘author’ the meaning of the work itself, enabling them to engage in a creative dialogue as they seek to understand the relationship, meaning and significance of the work.

In painting, postmodernism reintroduced representation into the arts. Figures and nudes, backgrounds and landscapes, or motifs and images from the past appear in more recent works. In other areas of the arts, works began to cut across different fields of definition. For example,
the term visual art was coined to describe the work of painting, although it could also denote a sculptural form or an installation. New media, such as photography, computers, video and television and other unconventional material have come to comprise the many different ways of presenting art ideas. In an art setting, a viewer may be confronted with unconventional bounding frames and flat surfaces; a combination of differently shaped panels with protrusions, or even with separate sculptured forms. Paintings and sculptures can be positioned as a part of an installation that consists of a number of television panels or video projectors. These collisions of images or various elements are sometimes intended to produce a sense of unease or uncertainty, creating contradictions and ambiguities, which the artist does not resolve.

In order to decipher the context of postmodern art in Malaysia, it is helpful to discuss the possible influence of postmodern art in relation to the ‘history’ of postmodern art centred in Euramerica. First, I will consider postmodern art as an outgrowth of pop art – from postmodern attitudes in Marcel Duchamp and Picabia’s art works; to the European Dadaists in 1915-1923; to New York artists of the 1950s and 1960s who delve into Pop art, such as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol.263 Second, I will consider postmodern art to be anti-modern art, in opposition to Modernist art as defined in particular by Clement Greenberg.264

While such ‘history’ may be a possible basis to begin an investigation of Malaysian postmodern art, this approach is problematic and limited, as this discussion will demonstrate. For example, it is not feasible to discuss Malaysian postmodern art as an outcome of Dada and Pop art movement. There are only a few works which have been described as having been influenced by the Pop art idiom; for example, Joseph Tan’s work “Love Me in My Batik” (1968) (Figure 6), an acrylic and collage of batik textile and newspaper on canvas that uses commercial advertisement element with bold colours in the work. Syed Ahmad Jamal writes, “Joseph Tan however, realized a rare Malaysian Pop painting, “Love Me in my Batik”


264 I am referring to Ellen Johnston Laing’s methodological approach in investigating the advent of postmodern art in China. She outlines the two major historical frameworks of the development of postmodern art in the West and traces the parallel possibility of China’s advent of postmodern art with the West. She also argues that tracing China’s postmodern art in such a way is not feasible. See Ellen Johnston Laing, "Is There Post-Modern Art in People's Republic of China?" in Modernity in Asian Art, ed. John Clark (Broadway, NSW: Wild Peony and The University of Sydney East Asian Series Number 7, 1993). In this case, Laing considers postmodern as a style and not a position of modality, as asserted by John Clark in the introduction of the same book. See John Clark, "Open and Closed Discourses of Modernity in Asian Art."
with a witty visual and semantic pun, achieving a high level of sophistication. This idiom however, was not realized fully in Malaysia."265

Another artist whose works has been argued to be influenced by Pop art is Ibrahim Hussein. In a few of his early works, William Willets highlights that the ambiguity inherent in Ibrahim Hussein’s works may suggest why his work can be regarded as Pop art. He founds his argument on art, which confronts spectators with several interpretative possibilities, such as the works of Patrick Caulfield, Delvaux or Chirico’s work, Hepworth-Moore’s sculptures and Warhol’s Brillo boxes.

Willets argues that the ‘ambiguity of meaning’ (kesamaran maksud) is dominant in Ibrahim Hussein’s work. The usage of text taken from newspaper prints (symbol of education) to adorn the clothes of an illiterate farmer in “Ayahku” (My Father) (1969) for example adds to this ambiguity. Other works, such as “Senyum Seorang Monyet” (The Smile of a Monkey) (1970) (Figure 7), toys with the irony of the term seorang (a person) and not seekor (for animal), which Ibrahim Hussein uses to denote a monkey. Willets argues it as if this work literally compares a monkey with a human. Willets points out that in the work the monkey is not only a symbol of humour but also rather a symbol of dignity even in the event of hardship -- the monkey is just like us humans. From another perspective, Willets also suggests that maybe the artist identifies himself with the subject of his work, or that the work is actually a self-portrait. From another viewpoint, the monkey can be argued as to be both symbol of human and humanity in general.

Willets also highlights the strong social elements and political cynicism in Ibrahim Hussein’s work. “My Father and the Astronaut” (1969) for example, explores the theme of spatial distance between his father who lives in a Malaysian village and the exploration of men into space. In this work, Ibrahim associates images of his father and an astronaut, making a comparison between the life of ordinary human with that of an astronaut who is seemingly nameless and without identity or humanity in his spacesuit and helmet. A reflection of the green paddy field appears on the astronaut’s helmet reminds us of the importance or unimportance of such events to people in general that are still struggling in their day-to-day living.

Although I concur with Willets’ argument in general, I would like to add here that in terms of technique, the pop-ness of Ibrahim’s work is based on the use of what Ibrahim term as ‘printage.’ Unlike Warhol’s collage techniques, Ibrahim Hussein’s ‘printage’ enables

materials from newsprint and published photographs to be fixed on the same physical plane as the rest of the work; unlike in collage where the source and the identity of the material are retained.\textsuperscript{266} For example, in “Pak Utih” (1970) (Figure 8) the printage technique can be seen on the left hand side of the work, where images from newspapers are embedded in the work. The deployment of such printing techniques which use elements from popular media does not come as a surprise, as Ibrahim Hussein was himself was in the United States for three years in the midst of Pop Art frenzy.\textsuperscript{267} I will discuss in the next chapter, Malaysian artists who used ‘printage’ and silk-screen techniques, manage to create a sense of history and reminiscence, implying a sense of threat and danger in their work.\textsuperscript{268}

Safrizal Shahir on the other hand, in his discussion on the lukewarm reception of Pop art in Malaysia, notes that all good art in the context of Malaysia are usually works that have emphasized formalism and Greenberg’s version of Modernist art, or in other words, adhere to Abstract Expressionist nuances. He argues that art, in order to be judged as good art, the work must explore and emphasis its formalistic and aesthetic principles, rather than its contexts. These Abstract Expressionist artistic tendencies in Malaysian art have been so comprehensively accepted that other forms of artistic approach did not thrive.\textsuperscript{269} This is the main argument that I will discuss here.

The term ‘Abstract Expressionists’ has been frequently used to describe the work of Malaysian artists, especially those working in the 1960s. Safrizal Shahir for example, suggests that Abstract Expressionists style is strongly associated with the art critic Clement Greenberg. For Greenberg, Modernist art culminates in the non-representational paintings of the Abstract Expressionists 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.\textsuperscript{270} Greenberg views modernism as a continuous, self-critical tradition concerned with ‘purely optical experience’ beginning with Edouard Manet and the Impressionists. He argues that

\textsuperscript{266} William Willets, "Senyum Secorang Monyet" Bentuk Manusia Durjana," \textit{Utusan Malaysia}, 17 July 1975. The article was written in Malay language.
\textsuperscript{268} The same technique has also been explored by Jeri Azhari, another generation of artist, yet with same approach who uses assemblage, and various postmodern strategies such as parody, camp and kitsch in his work. See Safrizal Shahir, "Matriks Budaya, Jeri Dan Seni Pop Dalam Sebuah Wacana Pengantar," in \textit{Karya Installasi 2006: Pameran Solo Seni Pop Jeri Azhari} (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2006).
\textsuperscript{269} Ibid., unpaginated.
\textsuperscript{270} The term ‘Abstract Expressionism’ was first applied to American art in 1946 by the art critic Robert Coates but it had been first used in Germany in 1919 in the magazine \textit{Der Sturm} in regard to the German Expressionism. In the USA, Alfred Barr was the first to use this term in 1929 in relation to works by Wassily Kandinsky. See Barbara Hess, \textit{Abstract Expressionism}, ed. Uta Grosenick (USA: Taschen, 2005).
modern art can only progress through the process whereby artists struggle to reach the level of art’s essence and genuine quality, especially in terms of media. For Greenberg, Modernism is also characterised by a drive for ‘purity’ and a dissociation of fine art from other arts.

“The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself – not in order to subvert it, but to entrenched it more firmly in its area of competence.

... The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might be conceivably borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered ‘pure’ and in its ‘purity’ find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. ‘Purity’ meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.”

Greenberg calls to attention that paintings are simply flat surfaces, made of paint laid on canvas. There is a huge emphasis on the flatness of the picture’s surface and the rejection of any form of illusion, such as shaded modelling and perspectives, brush strokes and use of harsh colours, rather than subtle tonal change, stressing line, use of geometrical forms and simplification of forms. ‘Flatness’ for Greenberg is the most important feature of painting, since its two-dimensional characteristic renders it like no other art. Extrinsic literary or theatrical qualities such as narrative, realism, description, subject matter, or drama were regarded as detrimental and impure.

Greenberg’s judgments are made on formal grounds, thus binding Modernist art to its own reductive system. According to Greenberg, the quality of modern works of art is based on technical innovation and depends on the acknowledgement of the medium. For example, Greenberg proclaims that Abstract Expressionism and Jackson Pollock in particular, represents the epitome of aesthetic value. He supports Pollock's work on formalistic grounds in which Pollock’s painting is ‘purer’ and more concentrated in what is ‘essential,’ that is the making of marks on a flat surface.

Several broad characteristics that generally characterise modernist artists of Euramerica are as follows -- artists demonstrate a tendency towards abstraction either through representing recognizable subject matter in a distorted manner, creating a completely abstract, or non-representational art, or art that seems to communicate exclusively through formal means as line, shape, space, colour, and texture. Works emphasise the physical processes through visible brushstrokes or chisel marks, while the adoption of new techniques and

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272 See Ibid.

materials break down distinctions between art and everyday life and question the nature of art itself.

As I have observed earlier in my discussion of the term ‘modern art’ in the first Chapter, modernist impulses had already appeared in Malaysia, particularly in the early works of Yong Mun Sen, Kuo Ju Ping, Tay Hooi Keat, Lee Cheng Yong and the Nanyang School of Arts teaching staff who had been exposed to the modernist influence through the ‘School of Paris’. Early attempts synthesise ‘western’ and ‘Chinese’ artistic influences, termed as the Nanyang style, through the use of oils on canvas.

Such early modernist tendencies were only taken up by a few artists. They were marked by a propensity for abstraction, cubism, presentation of recognizable subject matter in a distorted manner, and abstract or non-representational art. Trained as modern artists, these artists adopt modern solutions of pictorial compositions deriving from the strength of both traditional and modern elements, creating their own style and identity mostly rooted in local depictions or renditions.

For example, Tay Hooi Keat was posted following his return from England to Penang in 1952 and remained there until 1956. His paintings during this period depict the physical environment of the bustling city and the local villages scenes such as “Perak Road” (1952), “Penang Swimming Club” (1953), “Hawker’s Stall” (1952), “The Old Railway Pier” (1954), “Penang Road” (1955), “Mitchell Pier, Penang” (1955), “Fishing Village” (1956) and “Beetlenut Picker” (1958). As Redza Piyadasa argues,

“Only in a small number of drawings produced around this period do we find an indication of the sophisticated paintings to come. ‘The Malay Hut,’ 1952 is a line of the tree trunks which camouflage the hut, point to a conscious attempt to construct planar relationships. Reality has been fragmented. Space has been flattered. The interest is in surface tensions. Hooi Keat’s interest in Paul Cezanne is finally beginning to reveal itself. The artist is beginning to find himself.”

The impressionist character of Tay Hooi Keat’s work is created by dramatic compositional effect; its handling of colour and rhythm with vigorous and animated brushstrokes. In “The Haji Ship” (1966) (Figure 9) for example, the medium is applied thickly and expressively, resulting in a textural affect of the figures in the foreground and the ship in the background. Only upon closer scrutiny, the audience can associate these two

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images. Work such as this exemplifies Keat’s interest in the physicality of the oil medium, enabling him taking an impressionist approach to his subjects.

In the 1950s, the Wednesday Art Group, headed by Peter Harris, also contributed to the introduction of the modernist approach into art. This group promoted freedom of expression and the investigation of new ideas in Harris’s evening painting and drawing classes. Piyadasa argues that for Harris, there should be no definite aesthetic position. Harris encouraged every artist to develop their individual self-expression and growth in order to find their own style or artistic expression. In the absence of any hard and fast rules concerning a definite aesthetic position, works by artists during this period varied not just stylistically but also by its theme and subjects. The adoption of Western styles, such as Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Cubism and Impressionism, was not grounded in any concrete theoretical, intellectual or philosophical position but merely for the sake of self-exploration and experimentation with various styles, media and technique.

Only during the 1960s did discussions begin to associate a modern art style to art produced by Malaysian artists. In Euramerica, the modern period is classified as falling between the end of the Enlightenment and the middle of the twentieth century. Only by the 1930s did the term ‘Modernism’ comes to refer to a particular institutionalised movement. An aesthetic understanding of art for example, was shaped by the critical writings of Clement Greenberg in essays published between the 1930s and 1960s. Modernist art as heralded by Greenberg influenced the outlook of Malaysian art though in a different form. Before I present this argument further, I would like to point out here that the notion of ‘modern’ also needs to be investigated within the idea of the ‘nation.’ Historian Khoo Kay Khim has suggested that during the inter-War years, Malaya’s political consciousness took two noticeably different forms. First, it was orientated towards more universal political ideologies and second, in the case of the Malays, it was governed by concerns over the direction and change, which they felt, might lead to the displacement of the indigenes within the land that they considered to be their own as a birth right. This can be seen for example, in Harun Aminurashid’s poem “Semenanjung” (Peninsula) (1929), which urges Malays to be conscious of their lack of socio-economic opportunity and to safeguard their native land,

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which would otherwise be dominated by other ethnic groups. *Sajak* or poems produced between 1933 and 1941, which address nationalistic concerns. The themes relate to the predicament of the Malays, love for the native land, and calling for other the Malays to become involved in the struggle in safeguarding their future in their own land. The Malay political novel *Putera Gunung Tahan* (1937) written by Ishak Haji Muhammad criticises the existing British administration and Malay elites, who had, in his view, abandoned their responsibilities towards the rest of the Malay people. \(^{281}\)

Although other art forms such as novels, poetry and short stories existed prior to Independence, little is known about the extent to which artists were directly or indirectly influenced by their ‘national’ environment in their attempts to portray such aspects in their art making. As Syed Ahmad Jamal asserts,

> "Malaysian art 'history' has been compressed within the last thirty years to produce a tradition which in other cultures has taken a long time. By the beginning of the fifties, Malaysia already had a few established and committed artists – Abdullah Ariff, Yong Mun Sen, Chuahe Thean Teng, Cheong Soo Pieng, and Khaw Sia, among others but they were almost unknown in the context of the national art circles. The Malay literati were aware of Tun Seri Lanang, Abdullah Munshi, Za’ba, Syed Sheikh Al Hady; and their masterworks. But in the contemporary arts there was a vacuum: there were no national figures. Exhibitions were rare, and hardly anyone bought works of art." \(^{282}\)

Only after Independence did art became significant at a national level. Several important art commissions include large public murals for the new Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and National Museum buildings, the building of National Monument at Parliament House and the establishment of the National Art Gallery. As Piyadasa claims, “For the Malaysian artists, the formation of the Gallery was to prove consequential indeed. It had marked the new government’s official recognition of a modernist art tradition in this country.” \(^{283}\) Such achievements had also begun to assume a more institutional role from the mid-1950s and 1960s as networks of art agencies emerged, such as patronage, educational and exhibition facilities and media which facilitated critique, communication and international connections. Official agencies like the National Art Gallery began to promote modern art by organizing exhibitions, collecting, documenting and evaluating modern art productions. \(^{284}\)

At the same time, Modernist art as heralded by Greenberg took on different form in Malaysia especially in regard to the trends that surfaced in Malaysian art in particularly after

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\(^{281}\) Ibid.
\(^{283}\) Redza Piyadasa, *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia*, 18.
the return of Malaysian artists from their studies abroad during late 1950s and 1960s. Art historians such as T.K. Sabapathy observed that the new art of the 1960s should be understood in relation to Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism style in Euramerica. During this time,

"... 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 internalized imagery."  

In addition, writings by Syed Ahmad Jamal published in three major catalogues by the National Art Gallery played a major role in heralding the Abstract Expressionists tendencies as the ‘mainstream’ of art in Malaysia. The National Art Gallery has also discussed these writings in the catalogue Vision and Idea published in 1992. Syed Ahmad Jamal for example, associates the ‘expressionistic’ with the spirit of Independence, explaining that,

"The Merdeka 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 means of pictorial individuation. Malaysian artists struck rapturous rapport with the bold gestures of Kline, Soulages, Hartung, Marthieux, 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. ..."  

Even non-Malay artists of a different generation such as J. Anu make similar observation in regards to this situation,

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285 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 travelling to further their studies abroad. Between 1957 and 1959, Yeoh Jin Leng, Lee Joo For, Ibrahim Hussein and Ida Talalla all went to the United Kingdom, followed by Grace Selvanaganam and Anthony Lau once again. Ismail Zain and Jolly Koh then went to the United Kingdom, Abdul Latif Mohidin and Sabtu b. Yusof travelled to Germany; Chia Yu Chian to France, Tay Mo-Leong to Taiwan, Cheong Laitong, Choong Kam Kow and Ibrahim Hussein (for the second time) went to the United States.


287 See Syed Ahmad Jamal, Senilukis Malaysia - 25 Tahun; Syed Ahmad Jamal, Senilukis Malaysia 57-87; Syed Ahmad Jamal, Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia. These writings are however, similar except for a few additions here and there.

288 For more discussion on Merdeka and the arts in Malaysia, see T.K. Sabapathy, "Merdeka Makes Art or Does It?"

289 Syed Ahmad Jamal, Senilukis Malaysia - 25 Tahun, unpaginated.
"The influence of nationalism in my work began while I was still in art school. By my final year, even though I had not been home I was mixing with many Malaysian law students who were involved in the drive for Independence and I was painfully aware of the nationalist zeal that existed at home."290

Such associations of Independence and 'nation' can perhaps be traced to the notion that a modern nation must produce Modern art. While landscape drawings are not a new subject for Malaysian artists, the approach to the expression of nature and landscape experienced a shift. This occurred not only in terms of the stylistic approach but also more importantly in terms of the feeling that was evoked, as few of these artists confronted different landscapes in Western countries such as the United Kingdom. Whether they realized it or not, it is clear these foreign landscapes prompted them to reminisce about the archipelagos landscape back at home. These feelings are significant for those who live under British colonization, experienced the turmoil and understand the negotiations that had to be made to secure Malaysia's Independence. Their identification with that origin or their kampong for example, persisted through images or subjects, which consistently reminded them of home and the idea of a newborn nation.

For example, although Latiff Mohidin’s early works and sketches were produced in Germany and his works ranged from still life to thematic landscape, his “Pago-pago Series” demonstrated that he still consistently derived his subjects from Southeast Asia. In his book Line: From Point to Points he reflects about his early impression of life,

"Nature unfolds before our eyes, to be known and remembered. Everyday, light floods and seeps to the earth through leaves, vegetation, plants. And sudden showers make everything fresher and greener. Every child, unknowingly, is an explorer. Moving so actively about, he often comes in contact with a myriad vibrations of energy movements in Nature, created by the Supreme Creator.

And again, he came across these specks of light. One movement: lying in the shade on the ground, the next: sparkling among the luxuriant leaves on the trees. This time, he just gazed at the play of light-rays before his eyes. Scrutinized the movements of the specks as they grew and merged. And how later they lengthened, widened, and moved away from the area around the house."291

From the quote, it can be argued that the impression of his early surroundings forms the primary subject for most of his work despite living far from home. This could be seen as the artist describes the ideas that he had for his free expression class during his studies in German,

“This week is free expression ... New students were asked to draw as far away as possible from the studio ambience ... To draw whatever we like, however we wish, so long as we have something to show The Teacher at the studio next Monday (...) And my themes have their objects far away in South-East Asia: A Mengkuang Clump (emphasizing points of light on the thorny leaves), Bangau-bangauan of

little boats and *Rupa-ruapan* of Balinese carving (particularly the up-curling lines at the prows or the tips) ..."292

Therefore, despite his visits to various museums in Europe, it can be pointed out that the Southeast Asian subjects and his own personal upbringing and memories play a big role in the kind of art that he produces. He further writes,

"Kulmbacher Strasse ... Autumn ... Today I complete three oil paintings, 44cm x 66cm. The first is entitled *Pesta Laut* (Seafest), the second *Rumah dalam Pohonan* (House Amidst Trees) and the third *Pagoda*. Yesterday I completed two *Pohon Rumbia* (Rumbia Trees) and *Persembahan* (Gift) ... Without conscious volition, themes from life in South-East Asia emerge again as the main choice – though my experience visiting galleries, art houses and museums in cities like Paris, Amsterdam, London and Brussels during the two months' holidays was highly stimulating."293

Syed Ahmad Jamal on the other hand, is more direct in expressing his feelings. Towards the end of his studies, he explains,

"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."294

When these artists returned however, they were struck once more, about how different things were, and were forced to initiate changes in their approaches and techniques in art. Yeoh Jin Leng for example, remembers how during the taxi trip from Kuala Lumpur to Ipoh he noticed how exotic the landscape was compared to that of England. He explains, "But here I was looking again with new eyes at the harshness of the sunlight and the colour drenched natural surroundings."295

Similarly, Syed Ahmad Jamal registers the new feelings he had as a newcomer back in his home country.

"Back home after five years abroad, I reacted to the *nipah* palms of Batu Pahat – swordlike, glinting in the sun, tropical vivid – as I would never could react to the gentle English poplars. I observed the landscape, everyday; it was very different from English meadows, grasslands, and wheat fields. The sprouting *nipah* palms, rising directly from the river, stiff, glinting in the bright sun; it was impressive.

These impressions struck me as though I was a newcomer, so to speak; in fact I was reintroduced to the landscape because I was not aware of these things before when I was living in Johor Bahru. I did not know, as I did not notice."296

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292 Ibid., 56. Also see page 73 and 78.
293 Ibid., 74.
Latiff Mohidin too records his observation,

“... Firms, colours, and spaces of the force of life in my homeland, in the South-East Asia region ... are no longer products of imagination or memory, as they had been when I recorded them in my paintings in Germany. Now I am face to face with them and breathe them in straight from the source in the Nature of Nusantara, the Malay world ... Directly shaping the forms: bamboo shoot, rumbia palm, shellfish and boat ...” 297

Although such works may appear to be Abstract Expressionist and artists like Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin and Yeoh Jin Leng graduated abroad, it should be recognised that works which have been labelled as Abstract Expressionist in the Malaysian art context are not merely a derivative of America’s Abstract Expressionism. These artists have persistently localized such stylistic approaches in accordance to their feelings in the process of dealing with the local reality/identity/landscape under the construct of the new nation. Therefore, while the media and technique is Western, the subjects are nonetheless rooted in the Malay Archipelago, in search of Malaysia’s identity. As Dorothy Wharton observes, “for some of these foreign trained artists, their exposure to foreign influences resulted in their returning to Asian-Malaysian motifs with even more ingenuity than ever before.” 298

In this sense, although the term ‘Abstract Expressionists’ has been used to describe the tendencies of a particular group of Malaysian artists working during the 1960s, the approach taken by these artists is not in fact the kind of Abstract Expressionism that Greenberg asserts it to be. The term Abstract Expressionist in Malaysia is employed loosely to describe the kind of work, which moves towards abstraction, or non-representational art that seems to communicate exclusively through formal means of line, shape, colour, space, and texture and physical aspects such as brush strokes. These abstracted forms and colours are produced to communicate their emotional and spiritual states. The association of the artists labelled as Abstract Expressionists culminated in a group exhibition called GRUP in 1967 (Figure 10) at the former AIA Insurance Building on Ampang Road. This was followed by another exhibition entitled The Expressionists of the 1960s in 1974. Syed Ahmad Jamal heralded the GRUP Show in 1967,

“The ‘GRUP’ Show in 1967, by seven of the top painters in the country created a stir in the Malaysian art scene. The artists were Abdul Latiff Mohidin, Anthony Lau, Cheong Laitong, Ibrahim Hussein, Jolly Koh, Syed Ahmad Jamal, and Yeoh Jin Leng. They were in a sense the ‘magnificent seven’ of Malaysian art of the time.” 299

297 Latiff Mohidin, 147.
298 Dolores D. Wharton, 6-7.
299 Syed Ahmad Jamal, Senilukis Malaysia - 25 Tahun, unpaginated.
The Expressionists of the 1960s on the other hand, included the participation of nine artists -- Abdul Latiff Mohidin, Anthony Lau, Cheong Laitong, Ibrahim Hussein, Jolly Koh, Syed Ahmad Jamal, and Yeoh Jin Leng, Ismail Zain and Grace Selvayaganam.300 Although there were a number of artists participating in such exhibitions, the term Abstract Expressionism does not apply strictly to each artist who participated in the exhibition.

In the same way Greenberg’s discussion of Abstract Expressionists is limited to a few artists working (mostly) in New York who had quite different styles.301 The term in Malaysia is also selective and is used to describe works, which appear to be abstract and/or expressionist. 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.”302 This is well-supported by Safriza Shahir who further explains,

“Senario Seni Rupa Malaysia sebenarnya tidaklah mengalami secara ‘benar’ gagasan yang melatari erti Modernisme dalam tradisi Seni Rupanya melainkan ia lebih bersifat sensasi penggayaan dan bentuk semata-mata. . . .”303

(The Malaysian art scene did not actually undergo the ‘true’ progression underlining the meaning of Modernism in visual art tradition, except for the sensationalization of its style and form only. . . .)

Safrizal argues further that we must question the context of Syed Ahmad Jamal and Latiff Mohidin’s work -- more specifically, whether they are a part of the New York School and if they produce work on the same condition, environment and profile as others from that group. He draws attention to the fact that Syed Ahmad Jamal was in England from the end of 1950 to 1956 and was very much influenced by Abstract Expressionist exhibitions, especially the American Art Exhibition held in Tate Gallery. Syed Ahmad Jamal then followed these nuances in the context of the Malaysian environment and socio cultural condition upon his return to Malaysia. In this context, Safrizal argues Syed Ahmad Jamal’s Abstract Expressionist approach represents more of a ‘stylisation borrowing’ or in his words, peminjaman gaya. Safrizal contends that the philosophical ideology of the movement actually

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300 Ibid.
does not concern Syed Ahmad Jamal because he was not a part of the movement in America.  

In an almost identical observation of Abstract Expressionism style in Malaysia, Jolly Koh argues that although the Malaysian artists of the late 1950s and 1960s drew mainly on the stylistic idioms of Cubism and Expressionism, they were actually heterogeneous. He explains Syed Ahmad Jamal’s ‘expressionist’ works were more cheery and colourful in comparison to Latif Mohidin’s dark and brooding Germanic works. While Yeoh Jin Leng and Jolly Koh’s own work have been associated with Mark Rothko’s, he argues that both he and Yeoh Jin Leng had been influenced by the English landscape tradition. On the other hand, he also points out that Ibrahim Hussein’s mixed media and realistic and semi-realistic renditions reveal the Pop Art influence in the artist’s work.

Yeoh Jin Leng too expresses a similar sentiment in regards to the usage of ‘Abstract Expressionism’ in describing art,

“... It is attractive to relate artistic activities in Malaysian artists to contemporary artistic movements elsewhere, particularly New York, the epicentre of the art world in the postwar period. Whatever is done here in K.L. (Kuala Lumpur) is seen and evaluated through the West-window and interpreted as a result of direct influences. Art criticism in this country seems to take delight in pigeon-holing artists in stylistic groups. Artists of the 60’s were conveniently grouped as Abstract Expressionist even though the basic drives that launched American Abstract Expressionists are quite different from those of the Malaysian ‘group’ categorized as ‘Abstract Expressionist.’ Lumping them together on mere technicality or the gestural character manifest in their work is to me, a superficial exercise for students in art schools. The inner quality and differentiated perceptions of the individual artists are not examined but passed over, for these detract the design and schemes of a postured concept of philosophy.”

Despite this, there were artists working during that period whose works do not fit into the Abstract Expressionist narrative of Malaysian art history. Chuah Thean Teng, Khalil Ibrahim, Nik Zainal Abidin, Syed Tajuddeen, Tay Mo Leong, Dzulkifli Buyong and Zulkifli Dahlan are among those who do not fit into the Abstract Expressionists narratives that have been highlighted in many writings.

The Early Postmodern Artistic Strategies of Malaysian Art

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304 Ibid.: 102.
305 Jolly Koh: 6.
307 Some parts of this section have been presented at NAF ASA SYMPOSIUM, Singapore on 1-2 Ogos 2008 and Australian Centre for Asian Art and Archaeology (ACAAA) Seminar Series and Public Lectures, Department of Art History and Film Studies, University of Sydney, 22 October 2008. It was also published in Sarena Abdullah, "Malaysian Postmodern Art and its Strategies", New Asian Imagination, Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 2008 and Sarena Abdullah, “The Early Postmodern Artistic Strategies in Malaysian Art,” sentAp!, 01/07, Ipoh: Teratak Nuromar (2010).
As I have mentioned earlier Abstract Expressionists as a style adopted by a few Malaysian artists has become the juncture in which postmodern art tendencies as introduced by Conceptual art or what is termed as ‘alternative aesthetic’ emerged late 1960s. At that time, a few Malaysian artists had begun to advance the idea of an ‘alternative aesthetic’ based on the premise that art should be cerebral-centred rather than emotion-centred; in other words, art should be based on conceptual rather than emotional or manual dexterity rooted in Abstract Expressionist tendencies.

Artists promoting these perspectives included those who had arrived in Britain in the mid-1960s a time that saw a change in the principles of art education in that country. Several leading English art colleges introduced the ‘Basic Design’ subject founded upon ‘Bauhaus’ pedagogy. 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’ became mandatory for all students and a cluster of subjects under Liberal Studies was introduced. While these new approaches were not uniformly or simultaneously implemented across all art colleges in England, much of the agitation for change in art education was initiated by Hornsey College of Art in London, in which two Malaysian artists, Sulaiman Esa and Redza Piyadasa were enrolled.

Redza Piyadasa consistently initiated the so-called ‘alternative aesthetics’ in almost all his works, especially those produced during the 1970s and an earlier series of group shows in which he had participated and initiated. *The New Scene’ 69 (1969), experiment ‘70 (1970), dokumentasi 72 (1972) and Mystical Reality (1974) are the few early exhibitions which attempted to challenge and displace the Abstract Expressionist aesthetic as exhibited in the GRUP exhibition and *The Expressionists of the 1960s. Redza Piyadasa, alongside Sulaiman Esa, Tan Teong Eng, Tan Teong Kooi, Tang Tuck Kan and Choong Kam Kow number amongst some of the few early artists who argued that art works should, rather than being emotively or intuitively based, employ analytical and logical strategies instead. In these early exhibitions Tan Teong Eng, Tan Teong Kooi, Tang Tuck Kan, and Choong Kam Kow’s were said to be influenced by the Hard-Edge Abstraction approach. It is evident that Sulaiman Esa and Piyadasa on the other hand, were moving towards a conceptual approach.

In discussing these early attempts, Syed Ahmad Jamal highlights that,

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"The first ‘New Scene’ exhibition was an important art event which took place in 1969 and appropriately gave the signal for the end of era which emphasized 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."

The New Scene’69 exhibition positioned their approach as the counter reaction to the tendencies consolidated in the GRUP exhibition.  

"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." (My emphasis)

The works in The New Scene ‘69 exhibition exemplify the artists’ concern to investigate aspects of art and artworks in a self-referential way. Piyadasa’s exploration of two art categories – painting and sculpture can be seen in his “Trengganu Series.” In “Trengganu 3” (1968) (Figure 11) the kinetic aspects of the work are played out as the box, built to specifications, is painted boldly and the colours were arranged in distinct pattern. The dark and light bold stripes appear to flow freely along the planes and turning around the angled corners smoothly. This series combines and integrates the two categories -- painting and sculpture. In doing so, the work questions their respective identities. The influence of Hard-Edge Abstraction is demonstrated in Choong Kam Kow’s work, which emphasises the hard geometric form, scale, and colour, Tan Tuck Kan’s emphasis on visual elements as the main aspect in his art (Figure 12) and Tan Teong Eng’s experimentation with optical rhythm in his work.

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 7-17th September 1970. Though the catalogue does not provide any photographs of the work, it includes a statement from each artist. The self-referential investigation of the nature of art indicates a continuity from the 1969 exhibition. For example, Choong Kam Kow explains,

“My shaped canvasses are designed to emphasise the primary forms and the implied spaces that they occupy. The combination of elementary geometric shapes and vibrating colours repeated in every canvas is an attempt to clarify and optically enhance the basic planes which exist within the predetermined structure.”

Tan Teong Eng too writes,

309 Syed Ahmad Jamal, Senilukis Malaysia - 25 Tahun, unpaginated.
312 Experiment ’70, (Kuala Lumpur: 1970), unpaginated.
"Mine is with space and rhythm. The space is the illusion of it in front of the canvas surface and the rhythm is the result of placement. Colour, being the controlling agent is primarily used to heighten (to the desired degree) the optical effects of both. My paintings are partially programmatic. First, I decide on the structural relationships between the compositional elements and do the fine adjustment of colour as I paint along. It is an attempt to dramatize the power of static forms and colours to stimulate immediate visual responses." (His emphasis)

Piyadasa’s “Marakesh IV” (1970) (Figure 13) was also included in the exhibition. T.K. Sabapathy for example, highlights how the work actually poses the question: “When does a sculpture cease to be a sculpture in a traditional sense?” The work actually uses planes rather than volumes. Sabapathy points out how the artist rejects the use of a pedestal to display the work and uses the ground instead. Thus, integrates the floor as well as the wall in terms of its planar position.314

Piyadasa’s early interest in investigating the breakdown and relationship between painting and sculpture are explained by the artist himself years later,

“My arrival at Conceptual art engagements by the mid-1970s were prompted by the need to transcend the limitations of a Painting/Sculpture dichotomy as defined by Western art historicism. The attempts to break down separations between painting and sculpture were central preoccupations of the 1960s, very much part of my generation’s concerns. My earlier constructivist productions and painted Minimalist sculptures are symptomatic of this move. My training at Hornsey had been in the areas of painting and sculpture and, perhaps, this had something to do with my interest in both areas. I became interested in the middle-ground between the two. . . .”315

The next two exhibitions witnessed only the collaboration of Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa. In dokumentasi 72: recent works by sulaiman esa and redza piyadasa, both artists explore the definition of painting itself. Sulaiman Esa more specifically engages with the medium of the scroll painting. His works reject the traditional elements of painting by defying the use of framing support and the flat surface of painting. By emphasising the physicality of the material, the work thus questions the conventional acceptance of what a painting is. Work such as “Textured Surface ‘71” (1971) challenges the validity of flat surfaces in painting through an investigation of the visual reality of colour and by emphasising the ‘object-ness’ of the cloth-material of the work itself. In his statement published in the catalogue, Sulaiman Esa explains the concept of his ‘scroll painting’ and the three stages of his work – first, by abandoning the concept of ‘picture,’ the idea of easel painting is negated. Thus, the viewer is heightened by the reality of the material i.e. the fabric

313 Ibid.
itself. Second, by manipulating the surface of the material by crumpling, crinkling or just folding the material, the surface is no longer two-dimensional but actually is three-dimensional, challenging the idea of painting as a two-dimensional reality and the final stage, by using a transparent material, the artist shows that colour, light and the material exists in actual time and space and the work does not not limit itself to being looked at, but most important is that it should actually be looked through.  

In the same exhibition, Redza Piyadasa questions the relationship between the wall and painting in his exhibited works, such as “Open Painting” (1970) (Figure 14), “Tryptych” (1970), and “Situational Painting” (1972). These works further highlight Piyadasa’s interest in exploring new relationships between the wall and physical properties pertaining to painting. In his statement for example, Piyadasa explains that his works examine the involvement of actual space in art and deny any attempt to create symbols, emphasizing on the fact that he is only interested ‘reality.’

“In the past the picture-frame used to function, as a kind of demarcation line which separated the ‘pictorial’ space of the painting from the actual space occupied by the painting. My frames succeed in linking the two. My ‘windows’ are not demarcation line. There are no demarcation lines between illusion and reality.”

From such explanations, it could be argued that Redza Piyadasa was already fascinated with the concept of ‘reality,’ a concept that he would further explore in his next exhibition with Sulaiman Esa. Even his interest in Zen, which formed the basis of his later work, can be traced in this exhibition. In this catalogue he explains,

“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. ...”

It does not come as a surprise that they were attracted by the emerging conceptual aspects of art given the fact that these artists were very much influenced by the shifting attitude towards arts in Euramerica. Redza Piyadasa even uses the term ‘conceptual’ in the catalogue of experiment ’70 -- “My work is conceptual in nature and my sculptures are necessarily primary. They exist as visual documents. ...” (My emphasis), he says.

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316 Experiment ’70, (Kuala Lumpur: 1970), unpaginated.
318 Ibid.
319 Experiment ’70, unpaginated.
The conceptual aspects of these works I would like to point out here can also be seen in the fact that ‘Artists’ Statements’ were included in the catalogues, advancing the particular propositions or investigations undertaken by the artists. Ursula Meyer points out,

"An essential aspect of Conceptual Art is self-reference; often the artists define the intentions of their work as part of their art. Thus, many Conceptual artists advance propositions or investigations. It is in keeping, then, with Conceptual Art that it is best explained through itself, i.e., through the examination of Conceptual Art, rather than through any assumptions outside itself. ..."

The partnership of Redza and Sulaiman Esa, in their effort to provide an alternative aesthetic to the Abstract Expressionists tendencies finally culminated in the exhibition *Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Suleiman (sic) Esa* in 1974 held at Sudut Penulis (Writer’s Corner) of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Figure 15 and 16). Through its conceptual approach, *Mystical Reality* represents a very clear example of conceptual art, as has been discussed by Ursula Meyer in her documentation of Conceptual Arts and artists’ statements published in 1972.321 She observes that in the idiom of Conceptual art, the functions of critics and artists have been eliminated. Conceptual artists have taken over the role of the critic in terms of framing their own propositions, ideas, and concepts; this proposition was set out in the catalogue or the manifesto published in conjunction with the exhibition.

The *Mystical Reality* exhibition was accompanied by a 31-page manifesto, which correlates with Meyer’s observation on Conceptual art. Similar with Sulaiman Esa’s statement in *dokumentasi 72*, the manifesto extensively outlines its structure, in which the artists frame their own propositions, ideas and concepts. Divided into six parts it comprehensively details the reasons for the exhibition, the problems in Malaysian art, their own position on anti-formalist and anti-aesthetic and their proposed solutions.

The manifesto explains both of the the artists’ opinion of Malaysian and general Asian art, claiming that Malaysian and Asian art employed idioms and styles derived from Western art movements not indigenous to its own cultural traditions. The writing also criticizes the serious absence of any intellectual and polemical environment within the Malaysian art scene. Notably the absent of discussions on aesthetic and philosophical aspects and the lack of understanding of Art History and history of ideas among Malaysian artists.322

321 Ibid.

123
Though it may be argued that such conceptual attempts had already begun with *The New Scene '69*, the *Mystical Reality* manifesto claims to reject all previous developments in Malaysian art. However, despite this claim, various aspects of the exhibition and the manifesto reveal that the exhibition was nonetheless still an extension of *dokumentasi '72*, and to an extent *experiment '70*. This is particularly evident when considering the premise the artists promoted -- a context of art concerned with actual space, time and light and its reference to Zen and the premise of Conceptual art approach, which had been flagged by these two previous exhibitions before.

In the exhibition, the artists put up everyday objects in the exhibition space as a means to promote the concept of ephemerality of these time-based works based on Zen/Taoism ideology. They advocated a new way of confronting reality based on how the audience should 'conceive' reality through concepts rather than 'seeing' things through the visual or retinal sphere. There is no doubt however, that the exhibition is postmodern in its essential sense, as it involves in deconstructing what makes a work 'art' in the West by suggesting an alternative aesthetics based on Eastern Zen/Taoism philosophy. The Zen/Taoism philosophy which underpins the exhibition views the object as an 'event' rather than as 'form' and presupposes the objects existence within an interrelated field or continuum.

"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 SPECTATOR. THE FORM TRANCENDS 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."

The artists manage to make the ideational premise of the work known through their manifesto, in contrast to other art of that time which attended almost exclusively to its appearance. As Meyer observes on Conceptual art, the premise of art had changed; “Art as idea, art as knowledge, documentation, and elimination of art object – eliminates the concern with 'style,' 'quality,' and 'permanence,' material properties and aesthetic qualities are secondary.” The manifesto further supports the postmodernist approach by criticizing the idea of an artist's 'uniqueness' a joint exhibition in order “to play down individualistic

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323 Ibid., 6.
324 Ibid., 19.
325 Ibid., 20. The artists emphasizes through the manifesto using CAPS.
326 Ursula Meyer, xv.
considerations as far as that was possible." They also reject the commodification of art by discarding the works after the show, emphasizing that the idea is more important than the artefact.

Although the exhibition should be credited for its intent, the artists’ adoption of Conceptual art strategy contradicted to their espoused intention and criticism in the manifesto. In general, Conceptual art is a term that emerged in the 1960s and was later categorized as part of postmodern art approach. It describes art in which the concepts or ideas of a work take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. The term itself is coined to draw attention to the intellectual processes involved in its construction. Unlike Marcel Duchamp’s ‘ready-mades’ (which have been usually cited as precedents of Conceptual art), the difference is that ‘ready-mades’ aesthetic and formal choices of objects are based on its displacement from its usual surroundings. Therefore, Conceptual art is characterized by a suppression of formal influence on the physical aspect of the work.

Ironically, in regards to the manifesto by both Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, the manifesto calls attention to its anti-formalist and anti-aesthetic stance by acknowledging the influence of Conceptual art on the exhibition,

“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, Pierro 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. ...”

This statement therefore suggesting that both artists contradicted to their own criticism of the Malaysian and the Asian art scene that they had commented upon.

The series of exhibitions of the late 1960s and early 1970s that finally concluded with Mystical Reality can be argued to be one of the earliest manifestations of the postmodernist artistic approach in Malaysia, based on the fact that it venerates the concept or idea involved in art making and rejects the emphasis on aesthetic and style of Malaysian artists at that time. Although the premise of the works suggested a basis for the revaluation of art especially Abstract Expressionism upheld by other artists at that time, the strategies of the exhibition still emulate and derive from Euramerican art development. While the ‘manifesto’ may be faulted for its inconsistency and for forwarding unsupportable claims and assertion, it must

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327 Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Suleiman Esa, 12.
328 Ibid., 9.
be noted that the exhibition itself succeeds in confronting, offending and attacking notions held by artists at that time.

Even during the opening of the exhibition, with fifty artists, writers and students as witnesses, Salleh ben Joned unzipped his trousers and urinated in another corner of the exhibition space as part of his protest of the premise of the exhibition. 330 One year later, polemics on the event was published in Dewan Sastra in writings by Siti Zainon Ismail, Redza Piyadasa, Ponirin Amin and Salleh ben Joned voicing their opinions about the event.331

Although I am discussing a series of exhibitions, which is important to the early development of postmodern art in Malaysia, it must be pointed out that there are also other perspectives, which can also be put forward under the premise of postmodern art strategies. This can be seen in the works of installation art (often categorized as mixed-media) and the usage of techniques techniques such as ‘printage’, collage and silk-screen, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Abstract Expressionism and the Malay/Islamic-centred Art as Mainstream

I have mentioned in the early part of this chapter that the early postmodern art approach should be discussed in relation to what is termed the ‘Abstract Expressionist’ style in Malaysia. It has been used to discuss emotional, expressive and gestural-based works introduced in particular by Malaysian artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal and Latiff Mohidin. It must be noted that Malaysian artists have been very much been influenced by art in the Western world, through readings, communications, mass media and especially their Western art education abroad. This section will discuss how artists have warmly accepted Abstract Expressionist and Malay/Islamic-centred art up despite Redza Piyadasa, Sulaiman Esa and a few other artists early attempts in shifting the perception of what art should be.

Two important names associated with this style in Malaysia are Syed Ahmad Jamal and Latiff Mohidin. Syed Ahmad Jamal was born in Bandar Maharani, Muar, Johor in 1929. He received his primary and secondary education in the Malay and English medium, respectively, in Johor Bahru and attained his formal arts education from Chelsea School of


As an art student, he was already drawn to the theoretical writings of Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. His early interests in art were the works of Emil Nolde, Kirschner and Max Beckmann. Discussing Western influence during his student days, he states that three important exhibitions influenced him – first, the Mexican Art Gallery that exhibited works of Diego Riviera, Orozco and Sequeros, second, German Expressionism at the Tate Gallery and American Modern Art in London, while the final and the most influential exhibition was the American Art exhibition at Tate Gallery.

"I think one of the most impressive experiences in my stay in Europe was the exhibition of American Art held in Tate Gallery, some time towards the latter half of my stay as a student in England. I believe basically, in art as a form of expression for perception through the sense and the imagination, and the immediacy of the kind of presence that was expressed in Expressionism, the directness and the close relationship of purpose and means. The main impact of Abstract Expressionism, that of the emotive and mystical qualities, of the exteriorization of the feelings and the sense, as a kind of direct form of mediation which telegraphs the intenseness of feeling, of thought and imagination through plastic means. This caused a very impressionable and for reaching effect on me,..." 

Unlike Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin was trained in an earlier period in West Berlin during the early 1960s. This is reflected in some of his work, which demonstrates affinities with the German Expressionists such as Kirchner and Max Beckmann. Born in 1941 in Lenggeng, Negeri Sembilan, he was called 'Boy Wonder' from the age of 11. He was sent on a (DAAD) German Academy Student Exchange Scholarship to Germany and studied at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin in 1960. In 1969, he took up printmaking at Atelier La Courriere, Paris, and Pratt Graphic Centre, New York. Not only he is an artist, he is also an acclaimed poet.

Both artists appear to engage with a similar artistic approach and as such, have been described as Abstract, Expressionist and/or Abstract Expressionist in terms of their art style. The differences between their styles however, are quite stark, with each marking two significant tendencies; with Syed Ahmad Jamal more towards abstraction and Latiff Mohidin more towards expression. As I will further argue, most artists in Malaysia whose works have

been described as Abstract Expressionist do not necessarily confine themselves to one tendency. Rather, most artists deal with both proclivities in different works or in different series of art works. Abstract Expressionist inclinations in Malaysia are very much rooted to its local cultural context, regardless of whatever inclination artists may have in terms of personal style and expression through art.

Syed Ahmad Jamal’s early abstraction tendencies can also be seen in a few of his earlier works such as “Mandi Laut” (Bath at Sea) (1957), “The Duel in the Snow” (1956) and “Pohon Nipah” (Nipah Palms) (1957) (Figure 17). Whilst in England, his works such as “Angin Dingin” (Winter Wind) (1959) (Figure 18) and “Umpan” (The Bait) (1959) (Figure 19) were heralded by Redza Piyadasa as an abstraction breakthrough. Piyadasa explains,

“In 1959, Syed Ahmad Jamal produced two works that achieved the intellectual breakthrough to abstract art. Both these paintings were painted in England. The artist was by then teaching in a teachers’ training college in Liverpool. Both these paintings were inspired by nature, but were essentially metaphorical, alluding to the inherent, vitalistic forces existing in nature. The attempt was towards capturing abstracted essences rather than the projection of recognizable as aspects of the physical reality. ‘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.”

On “The Bait”, he argues further,

“‘The Bait’ (1959), by Syed Ahmad Jamal carried the artistic breakthrough encountered in ‘Winter Wind’ further. The artist employs a wider range of colours and reaffirms his interest in the abstract metaphorical approach. His interest in bold, swirling shapes and forms continues. The emotive gestural approach is reaffirmed. The white, neutral ground derived from traditional Far-eastern painting is rotated. ‘The Bait’ is more resolved and accomplished than ‘Winter Wind’. ...

In retrospect, both these pioneering breakthrough abstract paintings already signalled a more matured art-making approach in this country. These two works had connected Modern Malaysian Art directly to the contemporary artistic developments taking place within the international global art context. These two paintings by Syed Ahmad Jamal were world-class artistic productions of their time. They already indicated a new involvement with contemporary, international frames of reference. ...

While Latiff Mohidin may have taken an abstraction approach to his important work “Pago-Pago Series,” (1964-1969), ‘expressionism’ appears to be his primary artistic strength throughout the years. This is especially evident in his later series “Gelombang,” “Rimba,” and “Kembara.” Although his “Pago-Pago Series” (1960s) made an early appearance while he was still in Germany, they were abstract forms of organic renditions of pagoda, stupas, and lingams of the Southeast Asia region. The title itself is coined from the amalgam of pagoda

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337 Ibid.

128
and the slang *pagar* (pronounced ‘pago’), which is not ‘fence’ but refers to the wooden beams across old Malay houses. ‘Pago’ is also the name of an exotic island though Latiff admits that he has never been there before. In the series, Latiff experiments with expressive language of colours, gestures, forms, and his highly energized strokes. In “Pago-Pago, Bangkok” (1966) (Figure 20), bamboo shoot-like forms rise vertically and are composed of interlocking units, deriving from various motifs such as leaves and bamboos. His works in this series, as can be seen in his book *Line: From Point to Point,* range from drawings, etchings and linocuts, including countless of detailed studies from the simple forms of snail's shell, leaves, flowers, bamboo shoots, butterfly cocoon and sea-shells. It is clear he draws his influences from the most ordinary forms, which he finds around him, particularly the natural, organic, and architectural forms local to the Southeast Asian region.

Although “Mindscape” and “Langkawi Series” seem to be unperturbed and more emotionally detached, the expressiveness of Latiff’s more recent series such as “Gelombang” (Wave), “Rimba” (Forest) (Figure 21) and “Kembara” (Journey) (Figure 22) is suggestive of Harold Rosenberg’s definition of ‘Action Painting.’ In this movement, artists would theatrically express their personal anguish on a blank canvas paying little attention to form, style, or subject matter. In can be argued that Latiff Mohidin’s paintings in such series, are an autobiographical act of self-creation and the expression of his personality and journey into nature that he expressed on blank canvas. As Rosenberg states, it is as if, “the painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter.”

Latiff’s “Gelombang Series” uses broader brushstrokes, swathes of colour and layers of oil paint. The lines are still dynamic and full of movement, possessing an energy of immediacy. The paintings are filled with layers of texture.

The vigour in creating this work also characterises “Rimba Series”, as he explains, “... The challenge was to develop a new technique that could transmit, consolidate a sense of urgency, vigour; the challenge was to do the best work possible, as if it is to be the last painting!”

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339 Latiff Mohidin.
341 Ibid.
As in the case of artists of the Abstract Expressionist movement in America, Latiff Mohidin’s interest lies in the expression through formalistic aspects. He explains,

“When working in a series it gives me room to find what it is that distinguishes quality, how one picture realtes to and influences another. All these can come together in one picture; sometimes they appear in several pictures, leaping from one to another in varying combinations. Sometimes I do things purposely to create differences; sometimes I take the brush and leap into the unknown. ...”

It can be argued that the localization of Abstract Expressionism, which appears through the style or outlook of the work of these artists, can be argued as similar to American Abstract Expressionism. The content and context of the work however, is actually different since most works dwell on certain themes, feelings or experiences, which are inherently local in context and largely autobiographical. One important aspect about Malaysia’s Abstract Expressionist style is that the work is not about itself; that is, the emphasis is never on reducing itself to its medium. Malaysian artists appropriated the Abstract Expressionism style in order to convey their self-identity or self-exploration of certain themes, feelings and even circumstances. This is supported by Syed Ahmad Jamal’s observation of that time,

“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 from 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 from graphically reflects the new mood of the people.”

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. ...”

The proclamation of Malay and Islam as the core of the national culture during the 1971 National Cultural Congress (NCC) also affected the development of modern art in Malaysia. To most Malay artists, this represented new dimension, which catalysed the difficult and painful process of rethinking their positions and recasting their perceptions of various issues, such as culture, language, race, state, nation and their own identity.

343 Ibid., 26.
344 Syed Ahmad Jamal, Senilukis Malaysia - 25 Tahun, unpaginated.
345 Ibid.
346 T.K. Sabapathy, "Merdeka Makes Art or Does It?" 71.
As a result, the subsequent decades witness the proliferation of Malay/Islamic-centred art that has dominated the art scene in Malaysia. I have discuss elsewhere that the Malay/Islamic-centred work which was subsequently had been produced can be categorized as Malay-centric, Islamic-centric or both, Malay-Islamic centric. Although work by Syed Ahmad Jamal can be understood to be part of Abstract Expressionists pursuits, it must be noted that Abstract Expressionist is well suited and well received with the Malay/Islamic-centred art premise. Syed Ahmad Jamal’s abstractions are very much rooted in the local themes, myths and cultural contexts that are evident in his few early works, from “The Duel in the Snow” (1956) (Figure 23), “Pohon Nipah” (Nipa Palm) (1957), “Mandi Laut” (1957) to his “Gunung Ledang Series” (Figure 24). His endeavours in looking back at Malay culture and values manifest in his “Tumpal Series” and “Sirih Pinang” (1982). In “Chairil Anuar” (1959) (Figure 25) for example, the work can be read as an expression of his interest in Jawi or a variety of Arabic calligraphy, although in his retrospective exhibition in 1979 he claims that this interest in calligraphy was purely coincidental.

“On the surface there is the superficial connection, in some way related to the manner in which a presentation of calligraphy on a flat surface was in a way related to the use of the brush stroke, but the extension of that possibility, where calligraphy ceases to be pure calligraphy per se and becomes something else, as a means of feeling and thoughts of the individual without, the limitation of set patterns or presentations, I think in that way that’s where it took off, so that the Orientalness or Easternness or the Malaysianess, or the Malayness, is there perhaps in relative terms. But the primary purpose was mainly in the expressive idiom, I might have chosen other types of calligraphy. I think it was as pictorial material which I happen to find at that time of significant enough importance for me to use in painting, so that’s where it came in.”

In the 1970s, he also began to produce work, which alluded to Malay cultural references and literature. This does not come as a surprise as he himself was the curator for Rupa dan Jiwa at the Asean Museum of Art of University Malaya in 1979. His interest in Malay literature such as Sejarah Melayu and Hikayat Hang Tuah for example, had inspired the execution of the “Gunung Ledang Series.”

Although the NCC was held in 1971, interest in Malay aesthetics only intensified following the Rupa dan Jiwa exhibition curated by Syed Ahmad Jamal at the ASEAN Museum of Art of University Malaya from November 17th to December 9th, 1979. Artists began to explore the possibility of using Malay and/or Islamic aesthetics in the context of their modern art practice. Simultaneously, from 30th November to 2nd December, 1979, a

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348 Retrospektif Syed Ahmad Jamal, unpaginated.
seminar entitled “The Roots of Malay Indigenous Arts and Present Developments” was organized by the School of Art and Design at Mara Institute of Technology, Shah Alam.

Other artists who have since derived their artistic inspiration from Malay cultures include Din Omar, Amron Omar, Mad Anuar Ismail (known for his “Storm Rider Series”), Anuar Rashid and Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim, just to name a few. Since for the Malays, being a Malay is synonymous with being a Muslim, certain artists had subsequently begun to produce work, which delved into issues of their identity as Muslims. For example, Sulaiman Esa, Zakaria Awang, Ahmad Khalid Yusof, Hamdzun Haron, Ponirin Amin position themselves in a larger world Islamic ummah (society). These artists base their work on the established and recognizably Islamic design conventions, such as shunning of human and animal figuration, employing Islamic design conventions through the usage of Arabic Script or Jawi script, calligraphic motifs and the Arabesque, and displaying verses from the Quran or the Hadith or epithets praising God’s supremacy. It must be noted that ‘modern’ artists, as I have argued, do not restrict themselves to particular traditional media but rather their Islamicness is rooted in their adoption of Islamic aesthetics or philosophy into their art.350

Works of Malay/Islamic-centred art also characteristically appear to use Malay forms but actually used underlying principles of Islamic theology. This aspect can be identified in certain forms of ‘decorative’ art. Works by artists such as Mastura Abdul Rahman, Siti Zainon Ismail, Fatimah Chik, Noraini Nasir, Khatijah Sanusi, Mohamed Najib Dawa, Syed Shahabudin Syed Bakeri, and Ruzaika Omar Basarree arguably fell within this domain. The works produced by these artists placed great emphasis on the decorative elements of Malay textile such as batik, carvings, based on Islamic design conventions.

Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff makes the important observation that the batik patterns produced by artists such as Fatimah Chik, Syed Shaharudin Bakeri, Khatijah Sanusi, and Mohd Najib Ahmad Dawa reflect the curious relationship between Malayness and Islam. The abstractness of batik that derives its motif from nature and plants for example contributes to the ‘Islamicness’ of this work of art.351 Even the curator of the Fukuoka Art Museum, Masahiro Ushiroji, observes that, “Decorative art is not a pejorative term in Southeast Asia,” and moreover, “Such paintings shouldn’t be dismissed summarily, because decorative paintings are an important part of the art tradition, especially among Malays.”352

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351 For further discussion see Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff, 87-94.
352 Karim Raslan, unpaginated/unavailable from copy.
The intensifying interest in art since then began to be reviewed from the perspective of Malay society in art history discussions. Sulaiman Esa for example, provides a different perspective on art in Malaysia. He argues the modern Malaysian art which emerged after the 1930s brought with it an underlying philosophy, attitude and rationale which was essentially secular and materialistic in nature, anti-religious and anti-spiritual, contradictory to the values of Malay society. He highlights that modern art movements such as Realism, Impressionism and Expressionism, which had found support among many Malay-Muslim artists, are not actually value-free but actually infused with the secular spirit.\(^{353}\)

Besides that, he also points out that the British, by marginalizing the political and economic hegemony of the Malay Sultans, had severed the Malay craftsmen from their economic source through royal patronage. In addition, the creation of plural society by the British effectively destroyed the social and cultural dominance of Malays, which indirectly displaced the viability of traditional arts. Furthermore, the replacement of traditional religious education with humanistic and secular education by the British displaced spiritually based traditional art.\(^{354}\)

The general perspective on Islamic practice and arts in Malaysia on the other hand varies. On one hand, a number of artists felt they should retain their ethnic and spiritual vocabulary so that Western viewers could understand Islamic art and Islam; on the other hand, different artists felt that using Western visual vocabulary in modern installation was acceptable so long as it adhered to Islamic content.\(^{355}\) The latter perspective however, allows most contemporary art to be read in such a way that is appropriate to the framework as espoused by the Malay/Islamic art tendencies. For example, Coombes tackles these issues by basing the premise of his curatorial endeavour on ‘Islamic art’ and ‘Muslim art’ in the exhibition *Art & Spirituality* in 1995. He suggests ‘Islamic art’ is a term that can be used in works whose main concern is with the transmission of the sacred text of the Word of God by using calligraphy, illumination, geometric pattern or arabesque design. ‘Muslim art’ on the other hand, consists of works produced by Muslims which stand outside of Islamic tradition, but nonetheless do not transgress the bounds of decency and decorum proper to Islam, for


example work which uses contemporary vocabulary but is essentially guided by Islamic sensibilities.\textsuperscript{356}

The openness and inclusiveness of what is regarded as Islamic art and Muslim art has resulted in an overlap of categorization of artists and their works. For example, in Animah Annette's perspective there are two groups -- first, those who make direct use of traditional Islamic art and whose interest lies in Islamic aesthetics (such as Ahmad Khalid Yusof and Abdul Ghaﬀar Ibrahim who uses \textit{khat} in their paintings); whilst the second group can be understood as more serious about general Islamic concepts but who also interested in art concepts from other civilizations, exemplified by the works of Latiff Mohidin, Annuar Rashid and Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir.\textsuperscript{357}


With the emerging interest in Malay culture and Islamic aesthetics, artists working in Abstract Expressionist style find their works have been interpreted or viewed from the

\textsuperscript{356} Harun Abdullah Coombes, 18-19.
\textsuperscript{360} See Sulaiman Esa, \textit{Identiti Islam Dalam Senirupa Malaysia: Pencapaian Dan Cabaran}.
\textsuperscript{364} \textit{Alam Melayu}, (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara and Galeriwan, 1999).
Islamic perspective. Even Syed Ahmad Jamal’s usage of colours and light have been seen as deriving from an Islamic perspective,

“...The Spirit of Ledang has over the years undergone a series of evolution in respect of the artist’s use of colours. The artist used darker colours 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... The dominance of light in Syed Ahmad’s later works points to his spirituality identifiable through his string Islamic scholarship.

It was when he retired from all his public positions in 1991 that he began reading the Quran with greater care, finding out that much is written on our relationship with the land. 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...”

Although there are multiple readings of the development of Malaysian art, especially in the context of Malay/Islamic tendencies, what must be noted here is that Abstract Expressionism as a style mushroomed and thrived within development of Malay/Islamic art. In this sense, Abstract Expressionism in Malaysian art has not experienced a demise but rather, has been further reinstated. As T.K. Sabapathy observed 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 reflecting the global Islamic revivalism in the 1980s has either aligned itself with tendencies in Abstract Expressionism or found kinship with decorative art.”

This is generally because it is presumed that artists can still abide by Islamic tenets, especially in terms of non-figuration or abstracting figuration, yet also explore their artistic stylization in the modernist tradition. Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff highlights how manifestations of Islam can be easily identified in works which shun figurative representation, such as in Abstract Expressionism. However, he adds that this is not because of these artists’ Islamic interdiction against representation of the human form, but more because of their empathy with the abstraction of the avant-garde. Since many of the works are abstract in form and content, he argues, it is not difficult to read ‘Islamicness’ into them, although some works do include conventional symbols of Islamic connotations. Therefore, Malay artists’ consistent engagement with Abstract Expressionist approach shows that the style enables

367 Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff, 84-85.
artists to explore their personal interests yet still abide by Islamic tenets, since the approach shuns any realistic renditions of human and animal figures, for example. 368

In the subsequent decades of the 1970s and 1980s, the number of artists who engaged with Abstract Expressionism, especially in terms of stylistic outlook, proliferated. Artists such as Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir, Yusof Ghani, Mohd Fauzin Mustaffa, Tajudin Ismail, Suzlee Ibrahim, Awang Damit Ahmad, Tajuddin Ismail, Rafiee Ghani, Fauzan Omar and even Chinese artists like Lee Joo For and Chang Fee Ming numbered among those who arguably worked in alignment with such an approach. These artists worked with abstracted forms and imagery, using colours, stressing lines and emphasizing the simplification of forms.

As I have pointed out, some of those who were categorised as Abstract Expressionists in actuality fall between either expression and/or abstraction.

Awang Damit Ahmad and Yusuf Ghani are two figures synonymous with this approach. As aforementioned, the adoption of the Abstract Expressionist style by Malaysian artists must always be contextualized in the local and regional context. In reminiscing upon his first encounter with Yusof Ghani’s work, Syed Ahmad Jamal states,

“I remember my first experience in confronting a painting in 1985 National Art Gallery Open Show. The painting undeniably had a presence which attracted immediate attention. Here was something familiar yet with a refreshing personality and the stamp of individuality. Every work of art has its genealogy – in this painting, the dancing lines remind one of Pollock and the swatches and cleavages of form and space obviously inherited from De Kooning. The American flavour was there – loud and strong, yet there was a uniqueness about it. Who was this artist?” 369

While completing his Masters in the United States in 1983, Yusof Ghani participated with a radical group of artists in Washington DC who were protesting against American interference in the internal affairs of neighbouring countries, particularly in Nicaragua and El Salvador. In the exhibition Yusof submitted his paintings from his “Protest Paintings,” series. However, his “Protest” paintings failed to fit in with the work of other Malaysian artists who were intent on developing a national identity for Malaysian art. Rather than acquiescing on the same theme, he then pursued his interest in ‘cultural dance’, which he had explored in his

368 Though in the exhibition entitled Aku 99, Sulaiman Esa contends that the prohibition is conditional rather than absolute. If the human figure is rendered in the abstract, stylized and denaturalized manner and thus avoids the principles of realism and naturalism, then its usage is permissible. But if it is rendered in conformance with the principles of naturalism and thus results in a life-like rendition, then the sanction will come into operation. With regard to the intention or purpose behind the creation of the figurative image, if it is meant to glorify or venerate certain personalities such as superstars or political leaders etc. then the action is considered unlawful in Islam. Similarly, this condemnation is also applied to those who create semi-nude or nude figures which can arouse sexual desires and feelings on part of the viewer. However where the usage of the figural image can contribute to the development and enrichment of the material, social, moral and spiritual well-being of Muslims, then it is undoubtedly permissible. See Sulaiman Esa, "An Islamic Perspective on Figurative Representation," in Aku 99, ed. M.Z. Atan (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 1999), 29.

MA thesis, eventually expanding it into the fundamental theme of “Siri Tari” (Dance Series) (1984 – 1992) (Figure 26).

Awang Damit Ahmad’s work in “Alun-alun ke Marista Series” on the other hand explores his inner experience and emotions in regards to his childhood experience in Sabah. Awang explains,

“Contextually the Marista Series is a journey of the self, searching for an active, constructive, and progressive aspect of a culture. It reveals a complex and ambiguous yet controlled painting within the duality of figuration and abstraction, being both intimate and expressionistic. Imagery from everyday life and essence of childhood experiences become integral and determine the potential visual structures.”

In the series, using formalistic aspects, he plays with cultural symbols/images, which reminded him of growing up in his village. The artist does not try to recreate the childhood experience of his village but rather seeks something less tangible yet more enduring of the world that meant a lot to him. This is perhaps an attempt to convey the half-remembered shapes and forms which lurk in his memory, in the form of semi-abstraction of sea-gulls, fishes, nipah palms, sago plants, fishing nets, fishing boats, baskets and fish-traps, and even elements of the flora and fauna. The title also refers to the lives of fishermen and farmers such as “Nyanyian Sang Pelaut” (Fisherman’s Song) (1991), “Nyanyian Petani Gunung” (Mountain Farmer’s Song) (1991), and “Saging dan Pucuk Paku” (Saging and Fern) (1993).

Awang was moved not only by personal memories but also by world events and the feelings they evoked in works such as “Utusan Pada Dunia” (Message to the World) (1981), “Poskad pada Dunia” (Postcard to the World) (1981), “Harapan” (Hope) (1981) and “Tragedi Al’Azzatar” (The Tragedy of Al’Azzatar) (1983). As Muliyadi Mahmood explains, 

“...di tangan Awang, abstrak ekspresionisme tidak lahir sebagaimana asalnya, tetapi telah disesuaikan dalam konteks budaya tempatan. Awang tidak bersandar pada abstrak ekspresionisme secara total, sebagaimana yang diamaikan oleh Pollock ataupun Mitchell, yang menjadikan proses berkarya sebagai subjek utama kesenian. Awang melangkah lebih jauh, menerapkan simbol-simbol peribadi dan universal dalam konteks sezaman, lantas memperkaya iconography karyanya, bukan bersofat formalistik semata-mata. ...

(... in the hand of the artists, Abstract Expressionism was not born as the actual style, but have been suited in to the local cultural context. Awang did not rely on Abstract Expressionism in total, as was Pollock or Mitchell, who made the artistic process as the main subject. Awang moves ahead further but implementing personal and universal symbols in the context of contemporary art, thus, enriching his artistic iconography and not formalistic aspects only. ...)

Despite the initial attempts by Redza Piyadasa, Sulaiman Esa and a few other artists who have introduced an ‘alternative aesthetic’ through the Conceptual art approach in their work, their attempts have been hampered by the shift of interests in Malaysian art towards a more Malay/Islamic-centred art. However, Abstract Expressionist styles have proliferated and been well accepted within this new shift at least until the late 1980s. In the early 1990s, a turning point in the history of Malaysian art scene could be observed as artists began to produce work reiterates the ‘postmodern situation’ or situasi percamoden as I have initially discussed in Chapter Three.
CHAPTER FIVE: POSTMODERN ART STRATEGIES AND THE PROLIFERATION OF ART FORMS SINCE THE 1990s

In Chapter Three, I have discussed the term ‘postmodern situation’ and the use of the term *situasi percamoden* to reflect the changing tendencies in Malaysian art in accordance with the changing social and cultural values of the Malay society. It was also pointed out that the term ‘postmodern situation’ and *situasi percamoden* in the context of this dissertation does not imply neither the phase after the modern nor an anti-modern stance, but rather to reflect the ongoing social and cultural changes occurring in parallel with process of modernization in Malaysia. It also coincides with the challenges of building or searching for the right form of national identity in postcolonial Malaysia. At the centre of this argument is Malaysia itself, which is situated at the periphery of the Euramerican center. It is still a developing non-Western country, exposed to multiple models from both East and West, North and South, developed and still developing countries. Therefore, the values of Malaysian society are constantly in flux. This could be clearly seen in the Malay society which makes up most of the new Malaysian middle class. They are influenced by their own traditional values, which underpin Malay culture and society, Islamic practices and beliefs, as well as the modern and democratic ideals promoted by Euramerica.

This is evident not only in the cultural field as discussed generally in Chapter Three. But this shift of interests to various issues and thematic approaches pertaining to Malaysian middle class could be seen in Malaysian art, as I will further discuss in the next chapter. Artists like Zulkifli Yusof, Tan Chin Kuan, Wong Hoy Cheong and the Matahati group among the early few who generated popularity of these strategies and produce work that are reflective of *situasi percamoden* newer tendencies. Though it can be argued that their works are rooted in socio-political observations and emphasize the conceptual premise rather than emotion, it must be noted that these works are also firmly embedded in the local day to day reality of these ‘new’ Malaysian middle class. These works remind us of the cultural and social changes experienced by Malaysians brought about by the NEP. However, this is not surprising as Margot Lovejoy remarks, “Artists’ vision and artist’ responses to the world are dominated by the conditions and consciousness of a particular time period.”

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This chapter will concentrate on several observations that can be made in addressing the shift in artistic development among Malaysian artists especially since the 1990s rooted in the postmodern art premise. This is because the premise of 'postmodern situation' or *situasi percamoden* and its application in the context of art development are there because of at least three changing scenarios in Malaysian art in terms of postmodern art approach. This chapter, will highlight and discuss, these three changing outlooks in Malaysian art -- first, the employment of postmodern art strategies in artworks, second, the position of figuration in paintings and third, the emergence of multimedia, new media and alternative art spaces as a new premise of art.

*Postmodern Artistic Strategies*

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the artistic shift from modern art (represented by the Abstract Expressionist tendencies) to postmodern in Malaysian art did not advance consistently, having been interrupted by sudden developments of interest in Malay/Islamic-cantered art. Despite the new preoccupation with Malay nationalistic ideals, a few artists have continually used, explored and even pushed the boundaries of what now is labelled as 'postmodern.'

It is inaccurate to assert that postmodern art strategies were not employed in Malaysia after the few early exhibitions such as *The New Scene* and *Mystical Reality*. Several artists since the 1970s have consistently produced work using postmodern art strategies, even though these works were never discussed in these terms before. These works were produced not only by Redza Piyadasa, Sulaiman Esa and those participants in the *New Scene* exhibition, but also artists such as Lee Kian Seng, Nirmala Shanmughalingam and Ismail Zain. These artists as well as those working in the last twenty years initiated what is now known as installation art, metalanguage, appropriation and techniques such as printage, silkscreen and collage, parody and allegory in a more complex and indirect way.

As aforementioned, since the 1970s until the late 1980s, Malaysian art was dominated by Malay/Islamic-cantered art and the popular adoption of Abstract Expressionists' aesthetics approach but several Malaysian artists still pursued their art using postmodern strategies. In addition to the works I discussed in the previous chapter, which were produced with a systematic Conceptual approach in mind, other works were also in the form of Installation art, although this was usually termed as 'mixed media.'
Given that an installation is defined by spatial location rather than by the materials which constitute the work, the physical possibilities of Installation art are limitless. It also enables more works to be discussed within such a premise, as it is an artistic genre that is either site-specific or three-dimensional works that are designed to transform the viewer’s perception of space, either temporary or permanent. Therefore, installation artworks can be constructed in exhibition spaces such as museums, galleries, public or private spaces incorporating various materials from everyday items to natural materials. It could also include various media lately such as new media, video, sound, performance, the internet etc.

Several works produced in the 1970s can be categorized as installations such works exhibited in Mystical Reality since objects in these works were installed and assembled in the gallery space. On top of that, Piyadasa’s works such as “Wall Piece” (1966), his “Trengganu Series” and “Marakesh Series” (1968-1970) that focus on the fundamentals of the formal properties of art, can be regard as installation. Even his later works such as “Two Chairs” (1976), “Bacon’s Chair” (1976), “Situational Pieces 3” (1977), “A Matter of Time” (1977), “Situational Piece 4 – For P.N” (1977) are as an investigation into the perception of time within the context of art, can be regarded as installation works.

Besides Piyadasa, Lee Kian Seng is another artist who was working in the realm of two-dimensional and three-dimensional form. His works such as “From the Windows of Red” (1972), “Mankind” (1972), “Male and Female” (1973) are notable for his initial attempts in handling a spatial and sculptural relationship. “Mankind” (1972) (Figure 27) for example, is a metal construction that depicts the pictograph of Chinese script ‘Yin’ and ‘Yang’ representing the ‘female’ and ‘male;’ chained and locked to symbolise ‘mankind’ (on Earth) and produced as a sculpture.

Subsequently, Lee Kian Seng produced “Process in Poker Game” (1974) (Figure 28), with which he won the Bakat Muda Sezaman (Young Contemporaries Award) in 1975. The work uses various sizes of cards, metal, wood and plywood, which he assembles, in the form of large poker cards. The work juxtaposes three-dimensional plastic forms and two-dimensional elements to create interplay of positive and negative elements. Similarly in “Resumption and Consumption” (1975) Lee Kian Seng plays with positive and negative elements dimensionally, which is demonstrated in the movement of the apples, as they appear

376 Ibid., 38-45.
and disappear from the square columns. Though we can argue these are the forms of installations, it must be noted that Lee Kian Seng’s early efforts were not founded in any conceptual premise. Rather, as in the case of Piyadasa’s “Trengganu Series,” Lee Kian Seng was merely investigating formalistic properties such as positive and negative elements in three-dimensional works.

Only with “Off ‘Image, Object, Illusion’ – Off Series Mechanism” (1977) (Figure 29) did Lee Kian Seng’s work comprise a proper installation that included a painting on canvas, flag, white podium, a canvas on the floor and lighting for shadow effects. As Mrs P.G. Lim explains,

“This work described as ‘Mixed Media’ won the top award in an Open Art and Graphic Print Competition. To me - a neutral but interested observer of the art scene, it represents early tentative attempts by the artist to explore the limits and dimensions of painting on canvas which began in 1972 with his “From the Windows of Red” which won a major award, and “Mankind”. (1972), a minor award followed in 1975 by “Permainan Poker” or “Process of Playing Poker” (1974) - a major award. Fortunately, three of these works are in the collection of the National Art Gallery (Malaysia). His successes bespeak the perspicacity of the National Art Gallery judges of that period to have recognized creativity and new directions in art development towards three dimensional works, for in the seventies, works such as these in the art world defied categorisation. In Malaysia, they were variously described as mixed media or multi media or simply being variously described as mixed media or multi-media or simply ‘campur’. Internationally, installation art did not acquire its name as such until 1980s.”

Even Latiff Mohidin, who is mostly known for his Abstract Expressionist work, had become artistically inclined towards three-dimensional forms in the 1970s. His “Langkawi Series” (1976-1979) have been suggested as a merging of painting and sculpture. Zakaria Ali, uses the term ‘Wall Sculpture’ to describe his works;

“A wall sculpture does not purport to break the barrier between the painting and sculpture. Rather it is the combination of the two, taking some characteristics of both. Appreciating a wall sculpture depends on knowing what painting and sculpture are supposed to be. ... A wall sculpture averts the essential aspects of both painting and sculpture. ...

A wall sculpture exemplifies the exclusiveness of product resulting from an inclusiveness of process. It involves the joined skills of both painter and sculptor, a synthesis of two kinds of sensitivity. It is not surprising that a wall sculpture generates a fluctuation of identities, at times blurring one to clarify the other. Viewed from the front, it resembles a non-representational painting by virtue of its flatness. Viewed from the side, it resembles a stylised sculpture by virtue of its depth. ...”

Besides artists like Piyadasa and Lee Kian Seng, Nirmala Shanmughalingam’s work “Statement I” (1973) can also be categorized as an installation. It consists of her written statement on pollution and environmental destruction, as well as a series of 20 black and

white photo prints on environmental pollution, the indiscriminate dumping of industrial waste and the destruction of the stream adjacent to Old Damansara Road. The artist took more than six months to record and created the work to express urgent warnings about current ecological destruction occurring in the country. In her work, she includes evidence in various forms such as charts, diagrams, photographs and even industrial waste and rubbish from the actual site.

Even Sulaiman Esa’s work entitled “Manusia dan Alamnya” (Man and his World) (1974) could also be discussed in this context. This work consists of a simple display of newspapers and daily objects belonging to the artist, including his sejadah (prayer mat) and his shoes to signify his existence in the world. In discussing this work, Syed Ahmad Jamal notes that the work,

“... emphasising the spiritual reality, through the presence of matter, projected the role of the artists as social commentator by focusing on Man and objects related to his existence and their interrelational significance and values. It was a rejection of the age-old practice of easel-painting of art gallery tradition...”

The Bakat Muda Sezaman or the Young Contemporaries Awards is another platform for young artists to submit and exhibit their non-conventional work at a national level. This competition has become an opportunity especially for young artists to produce new and non-conventional work challenging works such as installation into the Malaysian mainstream art. Early installation works which that have won prizes in this competition include Zakaria Awang’s “Al-Rahmah” (1982), Ponirin Amin’s “Alibi di Pulau Bidong” in 1983 and followed by more installation and conceptual based works since the 1990s with artists such as Zulkifli Yusof and Tan Chin Kuan.

Besides installations, other strategies, which have been used by artists since the late 1960s, include meta-language, for example, Piyadasa’s “Self Portrait of the Artist as a Model” (1977). Piyadasa uses the works to make statements about the work itself by questioning the role of the model in art. The text reads, ‘The reader may ask, “What is a model?” Alternatively “What models are we talking about?”’. As the self-portrait of this artist is represented in the painting itself, the work raises two questions: whether the artist is

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382 Syed Ahmad Jamal, Seniukis Malaysia - 25 Tahun, unpaginated.
referring to actual models transformed in visual form, or if the work of art is serving as a model for other works of art. 383

“The Great Malaysian Landscape” (Figure 30), which was actually an entry for a landscape competition, is a work that provokes multiple readings through its metalanguage. Piyadasa writes,

“My entry entitled The Great Malaysian Landscape was in fact parody of the whole competition but it nevertheless earned me the major prize. Incorporating the spatial ideas that were inherent in my ‘frames’ and employing the use of stencilled words on canvas for the first time in my schemes of things, I was in fact parodying painting itself and, with it, pictorial space. In the attempt to reduce everything within the work to the level of ‘facts’ about painting jargon, I was quite simply trying to de-mystify painting itself. Further, the attempt to create a ‘painting-within-a-painting’ situation on the large canvas forced attention on a peripheral rather than a central mode of perception. Clearly, the work is contextual to the history of modern painting itself and superficial comparisons with the work of Larry Rivers and Arakawa are indeed inevitable.” 384

The work leads us to question, “What is a landscape?” or “What is this?” ‘Image,’ ‘frame,’ ‘title,’ ‘signature’ are among the words stencilled on the painting, explicating each of the elements of a landscape painting in general. The framed middle section of the work encapsulates the framed landscape painting at three levels – the perspective sketch, early rendering and the complete work of a common landscape scene of a Malay peasant ploughing the paddy field. The use of the frame establishes the boundaries of the self-contained ‘landscape painting’ that exists within a larger work.

It must be noted that Piyadasa also used appropriation as the work also encompasses one painting in another painting. Appropriation is the usage of borrowed elements such as images from various sources such as another person’s artwork or even images from popular culture and kitsch, using materials and techniques from non-art contexts is another popular technique. “Entry Points” (1978) (Figure 31) is an important work by Piyadasa that not only takes on a similar metalanguistic approach but in this work Piyadasa appropriates an original oil painting by Chia Yu Chian, a Nanyang artists of the 1950s. Therefore, Chia Yu Chian’s work “makes a contextual entry into 1978 as a consequence of the intervention by Piyadasa.” 385 The appropriation of Chia Yu Chian’s work by Piyadasa enables it to enter another specific art historical context, and in this case in Piyadasa’s work entitled “Entry Points.” This is further strengthen as below Chia Yu Chian’s work, Piyadasa has stencilled

384 Ibid., 26-28.
385 Ibid., 53-54.
words of George Kubler’s approach to art history: “Art Works Never Exist in Time, They Have Entry Points.”\(^{386}\)

In terms of two-dimensional works, appropriation of various images can be seen in works which use different printing techniques such as ‘printage,’ silk-screen, collage and the recent appropriation of images using photography and digital manipulation. Besides direct appropriation as in “Entry Points” (1978) (Figure 31), appropriation as a technique is quite popular among other Malaysian artists although it has never been discussed in such terms.

Appropriation is a postmodern art strategy that raises the questions of originality, authenticity and authorship rooted to the long modernist tradition of art that questions the nature or definition of art itself. In other words, to appropriate means to adopt, borrow and recycle aspects of visual culture, or as a practice or technique of reworking images or styles contained in earlier works of art. This is especially to provoke critical re-evaluation of previous work by presenting them in new contexts, or to challenge notions of individual creativity or authenticity in art. In Malaysia on the other hand, appropriation techniques are seldom used to re-evaluate previous work or to challenge the idea of authenticity in art, but it is used in order to create work that comments on aspects of cultural and social issues and to a certain extent commenting on art historical premise like Piyadasa’s “Entry Points.” Though appropriation as a strategy have not been discussed theoretically in Malaysia, what is obvious is that this strategy has been quite popular among a few artists through the usage of a few techniques such as ‘printages,’ silk-screen, and collages.

Ibrahim Hussein’s early works for example, have used what he terms ‘printage,’ when “… materials such as newsprint and published photographs are fixed onto the same, actual plane on which the rest of the composition in painted. In this manner, the extraneous character of the materials is minimized; the picture surfaced appears to be homogeneous. …”\(^{387}\) This technique is evident in works such as “Anda Seorang Diri Disana?” (Are You Alone Up There?) (Figure 32) (1969), “Pak Utih” (1970), “Ayah Ku” (My Father) (1972), and “Hari Ini Kita Dewasa” (1975).

Another popular technique used is silkscreen or serigraphy. Two artists who have used this technique are Nirmala Shanmughalingam and Redza Piyadasa. The former uses this technique when appropriating images taken particularly from newspapers. This technique enables Nirmala to depict images of suffering and death, especially those concerning women.


and children. For example, in “Vietnam” (1981) (Figure 33) Nirmala uses the silkscreen technique to merge the text and images of war children and mothers taken from newspapers and juxtaposes these with her broad brushworks. The juxtaposed images and text are set against her broad raw brushstrokes to distort the rectangularity of the images. With a limited palette, Nirmala succeeds in creating works, which are serious and somber in tone, signifying hopelessness and the futility of war. As Nirmala said in relation to her technique, “I had to resort to photo silkscreen because I wanted my brushwork to show through, not because Rauschenberg uses them. If I collaged an image, my brushwork would be lost underneath. Hence, the use of silkscreen was mainly technical solution to a problem…”

The use of silkscreen technique in portraying women as sufferers and victims in Nirmala’s work is similar to the use of silk-screen in Warhol’s work. Crow explains, “The screened image, reproduced whole, has the character of an involuntary imprint. It is memorial in the sense of resembling memory: powerfully selective, sometimes elusive, sometimes vividly present, always open to embellishment as well as loss.”

Since the 1980s, Redza Piyadasa’s interest in art had shifted, though still rooted in postmodern endeavours. He had started to appropriate local imageries, found in half-forgotten mementos of family collection such as ancestral photographs, into his collage and silkscreen work for his “Malaysian Series” (Figure 34 and 35). As Rod Paraz-Perez asserts,

“Serigraphy, especially the photographic silk-screen process is the medium used by Piyadasa as his starting point. This means photographing a photograph – a process that places the image at a point twice removed from reality. By using a combination of artistic approaches, including collage, he arrives at images that assert the surface of the painting – its flatness, its physical aspects – but also re-affirms the individuality, the personality of the subject. ...”

Some of the work in the series, which were created in the 1980s, uses repetitive images. As T.K. 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 form 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.”

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388 Chu Li, 10.
The technique enables the artists to produce their works in an array of series or replications. However, the whole work is not repeated. Piyadasa chooses to differentiate one work from another through fragmenting figures, composition of the work, choice of colour schemes, shifting picture planes and collages from various sources. In addition, the artist silkscreens images on different coloured sheets of paper, which creates various moods and visual responses and introduces textured effects and tonalities by using various brushstrokes and even crayons to differentiate himself from Warhol and Rauschenberg. Piyadasa’s interest in collage technique does not come as a surprise, since the usage of collage and appropriation can be traced to previous works such as “The Great Malaysian Landscape” (1972), “Four Propositions” (1977), “Entry Points” (1978), “Cebisan” (Pieces) (1980) and “Bentuk Malaysia Tulen” (1980). It must be noted that although Latiff Mohidin had also used collage in a very early work “Pago-Pago and Full Moon” (1967) (Figure 36) he did not explore the possibility any further beyond those works.

In his “Malaysian Series,” he consistently uses collage and juxtaposes motifs from batik and songket in a few of his works. However, in his “Malay Narrative IV” (1996) (Figure 37), he also appropriates cultural icons such as images of pop figures including Ogy Ahmad Daud and Erra Fazira, as taken from magazine front covers. The array of magazine cover images on the left and right framed two images taken from his own previous work which had previously appeared in “Two Malay Woman” (1982, 1988 and 1997) and “The Haji’s Family” (1990, 1990 and 1994). It can be suggested that he use collage in appropriating period photographs and magazine covers to insinuate how Malay society has changed over almost a century.

Of all the artists discussed, Ismail Zain’s work is the most unclear or ambiguous in his strategy. Although his strategies can be seen as postmodern, some of his works have also been understood as possessing formalistic and Malay/Islamic tendencies. Piyadasa notes that Ismail Zain has since the 1970s have referenced Marshall McLuhan, Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and John Berger in his conversations. On top of that, in regards to his artistic approach, Ismail Zain even claims that in his work he is not interested in mimesis or grammatology. He explains,

"Like I said when I used Rembrandt’s woman crossing a stream in 1967, I didn’t do it because it was there as an existing visual vocabulary nor as a metaphor. I was interested in it as an icon. It was the

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392 T.K. Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa, 34.
393 Zainun Abdullah in her discussion of Ismail’s work “Untitled” (1990) fails to discuss the semiotics of this work and only have pursued only a formalistic discussion. See Zainun Abdullah, "Ismail Zain,“ tANPA tAJUK 2 (2001): 15.
same with Tam binti Che Lat or the Quelin Mountains or the Wayang or those plastic doilies that I used a
great deal in the eighties and the morning glory flowers. The interest in them is not in their natural
meanings but in those meanings which we ourselves have lent them. ...”

Ismail Zain even proclaims,

“... You can look at my work since the sixties you may not find any example of self-indulgence,
at least, not in the manner that I mean it. I don’t subscribe to expressionistic mode as a basis of art. Nor
do I consider scenography, whether it is mental or temporal, a serious justification for artistic
involvement. I think that sort of attitude as central to art is long dead and gone. This conclusion is true
whether you want to look at it from the point of view of western art historicism or try to find its validity
from the standpoint of our own cultural history. I am more deliberate and dialectical in my approach to
art.”

It must be highlighted that his works can sometimes be ambiguous; in one sense they
appear to be in line with the Malay/Islamic-centred art, however his approach and technique
suggests otherwise. For example, the ornateness of “Ku Bunuh Cintaku” (1970) (Figure 38)
reminds us of traditional Malay decorative elements or textile patterns. However, the artist
from a plastic table cover has actually appropriated these decorative patterns. The work is
undeniably highly ornate and decorative, evocative of songket, a traditional Malay textile
weaving, but the designs of the table mat have been carefully stencilled onto the canvas using
a spray gun, while three black horizontal bands help to emphasize the two-dimensionality of
the work. The use of spray gun successfully eliminates all gesture qualities in this work, yet
the work still manages to retain local characteristics.

Ismail Zain’s 1988 exhibition “Digital Collage” represents one of his most significant
contributions in the Malaysian art scene. In this series, Ismail produced highly sophisticated
artworks by using computer programs. Although the final products of his works are actually
computer prints, what is important is that he appropriates various images from local and
foreign contexts, and even mass media. In regards to the appropriation, Krishen Jit asserts
that,

“The juxtaposition of images also put Ismail in the forefront of post-modern thinking. What
fascinates and instructs most of all is Ismail’s sentiment toward his chosen images. I find him to be
entirely free from criticism. One image is not pitted against another in a posture of heroism, surrender,
despair, or alienation. Both realities are palpable, dappled in light, and effusive in sentiment. The strategy
of the blocking of the images, I am tempted to say the, the mise en scene, lends a performative dimension
to the production. They are performances that create juxtaposed moods: of horror and farce, tragedy and

395 Ismail Zain and Noordin Hassan, "Noordin Hassan Interviews Ismail Zain," in Digital Collage --
Suatu Pameran Perseorangan Oleh Ismail Zain (One Man Art Exhibition by Ismail Zain) (Kuala Lumpur:
1988), 23.
396 Ibid., 21.
397 Redza Piyadasa, "Ismail Zain, the Artist," in Ismail Zain: Retrospective Exhibition 1964-1991(Kuala
comedy, sense and nonsense. This kind of performance strategy raises them from the mundane and the sentimental and places them in a reflective realm.”

In “Al Kesah” (1988) (Figure 39) for example, the images of the Ewing family of the hit drama “Dallas” are juxtaposed in front of a traditional Malacca house. The work seems playful but it evokes a response to the penetration of global mass media into Malaysian local culture and consciousness even into villages. In discussing the response to the exhibition, Piyadasa notes that,

“The initial response of more traditionally-minded artists on the present exhibition seems predictable enough. Ismail Zain’s new works will be dismissed in some quarters as not constituting ‘original art works’ because they lack the gestures and marks produced by ‘the artist’s hand.’ Or else, the artist might be accused of ‘mechanical gimmickry.’ The absence of that mystifying absence called ‘soul’ in these machine-produced works will no doubt be commented upon. Such accusations can only point to a sense of inability to accept that which is truly innovative and inventive when these features of creativity manifest themselves now and again.”

Other artists like Zulkifli Yusof, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed and Roslisham Ismail (popularly known as ISE) had also begun to use appropriation in their work from the 1990s onwards. They have employed such strategies especially in terms of juxtaposing images from various media. Each artist builds layers and mixes visual elements in their work, from Ahmad Shuri Mohamed’s “Cabinet Series” and the “Target Series,” to Zulkifli Yusoff’s “Amuk di Pasir Salak” and Ise’s “Keluar 60 Hari.” These artists’ works are unique in terms of their visual language and appropriation of media and images. For example, Zulkifli Yusoff expresses himself through many different mediums ranging from painting, drawing, print-making, to sculpture and installation. Over the years, he has committed himself to exploring each of these areas, never limiting him to one particular form of expression. ISE’s “Keluar 90 Hari” (Go out for 90 days) (2006) is a collage of images or a visual diary of his four-month residency at Gunnery Studios, Sydney in 2006. In this work, he appropriates various memorabilia, from supermarket receipts and ticket stubs, bus schedules, newspapers, magazines and posters as a way to document his daily journeys and encounters during his residency. The final product was also published in the form of book.

Parody is another approach that has been undertaken by Malaysian artists. The contemporary usage of parody in art can be seen in works that are created to mock, comment on, or poke fun at an original work, its subject, or author, or other target. Oftentimes by

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149
humour to make social and political points, and sometimes it can be done with respect and appreciation of the subject involved. The relationship between parody and postmodern lies in the fact that parody foregrounds quotation and self-referentiality of the work. Two artists namely Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman and Roslisham Ismail, otherwise known as ISE appear to be consistently engaged with this approach. Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman has produced a number of series of artworks which document various quotes from the mass media. Though his early works such as “Sky Kingdom” (2005) and “Cleansing Ritual” (2008) were serious in terms of their photographic approach, his more recent works such as “The Code Series” (2006), “Challenger Series” (2007), and “MALAYSIA 365 days of 2008” (2008) are more light-hearted and use parody as its main strategy. For example, in the “Challenger Series” (2007) (Figure 40-42) the artist plays with social mores and politics through sly comments and witty quotes from different sources in the mass media, such as newspapers clippings or books. In trying to recap some of the reporting and statements in the media by some of the country’s top newsmakers, he also paints various images to accompany such coverage. Drawn mostly from his imagination, Noor Azizan’s drawings are absurd, imaginary, child-like and stylistically naïve sketches. These comical, jovial, and funky quotes with such drawings induce multiple readings and meanings to this series of works.

A similar approach is also employed in “MALAYSIA 365 days of 2008” (2008). He still includes quotations taken from newspapers, magazines and other media sources familiar to Malaysians with humorous series of drawings and paintings, which are executed in the thinnest washes of garish colours. Only this time, as indicated by the title, the artist chooses to produce the work on pages taken from an Islamic diary, introducing an additional layer of meaning to the work. On each work or page of the diary, an Islamic prayer heads and ends each page of the diary, as well as an excerpt from one of Prophet Muhammad’s disciples. In the middle of the page, he draws his imaginary figures and underneath it he writes the quote that he finds that day.

Roslisham Ismail (popularly known as ISE) is another artist who uses parody in his work. “Export” (2007) (Figure 43) is a parody ala-Marcel Duchamp’s “L.H.O.O.Q” (1919). ISE appropriates the ‘wanted’ poster of Azhari, the late Malaysian terrorist who was killed in Indonesia and mocks it with graffiti. Though the work is crude, and unsophisticated, he manages to satirize and mock a serious issue of regional safety. In the spirit of Malaysia’s ‘everything is possible’ attitude (Malaysia Boleh!), ISE’s duratrans and light box work is also more literal in terms of its parody in the “The EST” (2007) (Figure 44). The work highlights the message -- ‘The flawless, the greatest, the first, the biggest ... The time is now, the place
is Malaysia, Malaysia welcomes the world,' as collaged on the work. His work appropriates Malaysia’s historical reality and the spirit that has driven it over the past decade. “The EST” juxtaposes images from the tallest tower, to the tallest twin tower, the largest ferris wheel and the first astronaut; projects that, although ambitious, have not influenced citizens’ attitudes. This is reflected in the caption included at the bottom of the work, which is taken from a local newspaper and reads, ‘Beaches dirty due to poor attitude.’ Reading ISE’s “Export” work in relation to “The EST,” it is ironic that besides all of Malaysia’ superlative achievements of the last decade, Malaysia had also managed to produce and export another outstanding product in the form of mastermind of a regional terrorist network.

Allegory, as a characteristic of postmodernist work, has never been mentioned in the existing and limited discussion of postmodernist art in Malaysia. However, it must be noted that the concept of ‘allegory’ should not be seen as a totally Western phenomena, since other cultures have similar concepts in their literature, such as folk stories and folk theatre. It is important to mention that Malay language is full of elements such as peribahasa (proverb), simpulan bahasa (metaphor) and kiasan (allegory). A traditional Malay society is not confrontational or assertive in nature; in this context, these forms of analogy are deployed in delicate situations: to express one’s feeling or opinion, to give a compliment, to give advice metaphorically or to convey a deeper or 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 appropriate to Malay audiences.

As a postmodern aesthetic strategy, Craig suggests allegory is “an attitude as well as a technique, perception as well as a procedure.”⁴⁰⁰ Owens claims that since allegorical structure are “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.”⁴⁰¹

Therefore, allegory is a form of extended metaphor, in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative are equated with the meanings that lie outside the narrative itself.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.
Furthermore, the underlying meaning usually has moral, social, religious, or political significance. As Owen further argues, "In allegorical structure, the, one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest."\(^{402}\) Owen asserts,

> "I am interested, however, in what occurs when this relationship takes place within works of art, when it describes their structure. Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other (\(\text{allos} = \text{other + agoreuei} = \text{to speak}\)). He does not store 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 so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement. This is why allegory is condemned, but it is also the source of its theoretical significance."\(^{403}\)

Wayang kulit (shadow puppets) have been a source of inspiration to several artists, one of which is Nirmala Shanmughalingam. Her work "Friends in Need" (1986) (Figure 45) strikes a controversial note due to its allegorical nature. "Friends in Need" (1986) was removed before the opening of "Side by Side: Contemporary British and Malaysian Art" in 1986, as well as another of her works "Save the Seed That Will Save the Black People" (1986). "Friends in Need" (1986) is an anti-war statement against the US bombing of Libya supported by Margaret Thatcher. The characterisation in this work is inspired by Nirmala’s research into the arts and crafts of Southeast Asia at that time, particularly shadow puppet theatre. Accordingly, the wayang kulit character the Raksasa Tjakil, the arch villain on the left, personifies Ronald Reagan. Raksasa Tjakil was chosen for Reagan because the character is a war-like creature that wears two keris (a Malay dagger which signifies warring tendencies). On the right, Margaret Thatcher is depicted as a bare-breasted wayang kulit figure called Raseksi, the demon's wife in the wayang kulit story. Nirmala has chosen Raseksi because the creature has a strong physical likeness to the British Prime Minister. These wayang kulit figures are juxtaposed with photographs of a child killed in the attack and a newspaper cutting from which the title was derived.\(^{404}\) Therefore, it can be suggested that through this work, Nirmala Shanmughalingam allegorises the characters from the wayang kulit to make a criticism of international political events.

In the work "Allegory Ledang" (2004) (Figure 46) Sharmiza Abu Hassan was also inspired by the abundance of allegory in bahasa kiasan Melayu (Malay allegories), which is slowly being forgotten by modern Malays themselves. She represents the legend of Puteri

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\(^{403}\) Ibid.
Gunung Ledang by presenting Puteri Gunung Ledang’s request from Sultan Mahmud in its literary form to a visual art 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 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 which are familiar to the Malays, such as the kacip (nut cracker), kuali (wok) and tudung saji (food cover), by exploring the concave/convex shape of the cast iron wok and wiremesh. She invites the audience to sift through their literal understanding of the legend and think through the symbolic meanings behind them. The kacip for example, is a tool that is traditionally used in Malay weddings and engagements as a part of betrothal and wedding gifts to the bride. The story is interwoven with history, legendary figures and fables with morals about challenging the mindsets of those in power. The requests made by Puteri Gunung Ledang to Sultan Mahmud can be allegorically interpreted as an indirect criticism of leaders who lack endurance, courage, ingenuity and most of all reason. In other words, it is the kind of artwork that has both an obvious and a deeper sense or meaning; its layers of meaning seem to contradict each other yet coexist in the work. In this way, the work never comes to rest on a single interpretation, especially when it is read in the context of Malaysia’s political climate.

The work of Nadiah Bamadhaj’s video "Beyond Recognition" (2006) (Figure 47) superimposes text from Joseph Conrad’s novel, "The Lagoon" (1896) (first published in Cornhill Magazine in 1897) onto the landscapes of the Faroese Islands for the Living (in) the Postcolonial Exhibition organized by the Faroe Islands Art Museum in 2006. The Faroese Islands are an island group situated between the Norwegian Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, halfway between Scotland and Iceland and are now a part of the Kingdom of Denmark. Given the diversity of its own colonial history, it can be suggested that the work itself allegorises intersections with the colonial history of Malaysia and Indonesia through the work. "The Lagoon" is a short story about a white man, referred to as Tuan (‘Lord’ or ‘Sir’), who travels through an Indonesian rainforest and is forced to stop for the night with a distant Malay friend named Arsat. Arsat tells Tuan a story of sadness and betrayal, the inescapability of death and his illusions of ‘true love.’ Nadiah highlights how she introduces this idea of ‘continued colonialism’ through incorporating these forms and Conrad’s texts into the
Faroese landscape. The idea of 'continued colonialism' can be identified in the in the story as it unfolds,

"We are of a people who take what they want--like you whites. There is a time when a man should forget loyalty and respect. Might and authority are given to rulers, but to all men is given love and strength and courage.... I said, I take you from those people. You came to the cry of my heart, but my arms take you into my boat against the will of the great!' 'It is right,' said my brother. 'We are men who take what we want and can hold it against many. We should have taken her in daylight.' I said, 'Let us be off; for since she was in my boat I began to think of our Ruler's many men. 'Yes. Let us be off,' said my brother. 'We are cast out and this boat is our country now--and the sea is our refuge.' 

It can be suggested that the artist allegorizes the story itself as she juxtaposes elements of Malaysian and Indonesian architecture of her digital prints. In the video, the text taken from "The Lagoon" is silently 'grazed' on the mountainous landscape alien to Malaysian/Indonesian audiences. Nadiah explains,

"The project introduces elements of Malaysian and Indonesian architecture and literature into the Faroese landscape. My selection of architecture and literature is based on how in an attempt to embark from the elements of European colonization of the previous centuries; it inadvertently mirrors the grandeur and the social and symbolic alienation of those colonial structures. Ironically, this renders it both incongruous to its surroundings and a form of colonization in its own right.

I push this idea of 'continued colonialism' by incorporating these forms and texts into the Faroese landscape. The incongruity of the architectural forms and written text in the Faroese landscape acts as a metaphor for how the forms are perceived by me in their original state. And the imagined political colonization of the Faroese by Malaysia and/or Indonesia is an attempt to reflect how I perceive the mechanizations of government in my own national and residential experience. Postcolonial departures are perceived as a continued colonization in different form, and – in this case – different spaces."

Yee I-Lan is another artist who traces her roots and allegorizes the stories she grew up with in her work, such as “Sulu Stories” (2005). She explains in her statement,

"... My first memory related to Sulu was the story about the dragon that lived on Mount Kinabalu in Sabah. Its favourite plaything was a giant pearl 'the size of a tennis ball' that came from the Sulu Sea. An oyster had swallowed a tear from the moon thus producing a pearl of extraordinary size and beauty. Later whilst in Palawan I told this story to my hostel host Majika. She proudly told me her brother owns a pearl farm that trades pearls with the Japanese jewelers Mikimoto and that the Sulu Sea produces the highest quality pearls of the largest size. I felt I had been given affirmation – stories (histories), legend, memory (lane) would lead me into Sulu and its unique landscape/scascape/memoriescape."

Her works take the audience to various physical vistas, the sea, the sky, and the islands as she uses these early memories and libraries of information relating to Sulu. Her works are a juxtaposition of those images pertaining to her stories. In the "The Archipelago" (2005) (Figure 48 and 49) for example, the large tree is a Caesalpininae introduced to Asia from

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408 Ibid.
South America and was photographed at the Fallen American Soldier Cemetery in Manila. The mounted soldier on the horseback represents Sultan Jamalul Kiram II, the last Sultan of Sulu who died in 1936. The Sultanate of Sulu was a Muslim state formed in 1450. At its peak, it stretched over the islands and was bordered by the western peninsula of Mindanao in the east, the modern Malaysian state of Sabah (formerly North Borneo) in the west and south, and Palawan in the north. It outlasted two colonial powers: the Spanish followed by the United States. The artist painstakingly takes the photographs and manipulates images of the bits and pieces of coral and stone gathered on the coast of Palawan and Sabah in order to depict what seem to be islands in the foreground.\(^{409}\) The advancement of computer technology enables images to be easily manipulated, thus expanding the possibility of appropriation strategy. As Lovejoy explains,

> "Although a digital image looks like its photographic counterpart, it is very different from the light sensitized granules of film or the variation of light intensities in video. A digitized image is composed of discrete elements called pixels each having assigned or discrete numerical values, which determine horizontal and vertical location value as well as a specific gray-scale or color intensity range. Such a structure of pixels is controllable through a series of enormously complex effects. ..."

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> A digital photographic image is then, a representation made through logical, numeric based mathematical language structures achieved through encoding information about the lights, darks, and colours of reality captured and digitized through any kind of lens or scanning procedure. The computer reads electronically scanned (digital) information about a scene and transforms it into numerical data which can be made visible as imagery. Once an image’s structure of lights and darks, its “information” has been digitized by the computer into its numerical data space, its picture elements or pixels can be controlled individually. They can be altered, manipulated, weighted, warped, or repositioned to create not only a simulation of a photograph, but also an artificial or parallel “virtual” reality.\(^{410}\)

Since the 1990s, the usage of allegory and appropriation in art has become more complex. Works are more fused and enmeshed, becoming complex, personal and offering multiple readings as have been produced by Yee I-Lan in “The Archipelago” (2005). For example, “The Great Supper” (1999) (Figure 50) by Eng Hwee Chu can be seen as an attempt to adopt a broader approach to artistic creativity as artists are more exposed to discourse and issues relating to postmodernism, globalisation and pluralist understandings in the contemporary artistic world.

Several montages of images telling stories that are personal to the artists dominate the work. In the centre, an image of a crab-eating red woman has been juxtaposed with the figure of a toddler on her lap looking upwards at her. Physically, the woman (which could be a self portrait of the artist herself) is present, yet her image subsides into the dark background,

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\(^{409}\) Matt Cox, *Littoral Drift* (Sydney: UTS Gallery, 2009); Exhibition catalogue.

\(^{410}\) Margot Lovejoy, 154-156.
creating a silhouette of her that trails away at the left edge of the work. On the right, a mirror and a Chinese family group eating a big supper can be understood as the artist’s cultural identification with the Chinese society to which she belongs. The mirror at the top of the work reflects the audience, as if to suggest these women are automatically born with gendered roles and must uphold this cultural burden. The thick walls and the bars on the left side of the work further reiterate this. By highlighting issues related to the self and the ‘Other,’ notions of women and minority identity, multiethnic cultural values and cultural dislocation, Eng Hwee Chu’s work uses both allegory and appropriation, inviting various interpretations and readings in order to understand the multiracial and multicultural realities of modern Malaysia.

**Figuration in Paintings**

The issue of direct representation of the figure occupies an uneasy position within Malaysian fine art practice. It has polarised the viewpoints and actions of art practitioners, especially within UiTM. Since late 1980s and early 1990s, we can find that the attitude in relation to figuration in the arts has changed unlike during the 1980s as I have discussed in the previous chapter. Both Malay and non-Malay artists have begun to oppose the rigid approach to figuration in paintings. It can be argued that this changing approach was initiated by a group of students from the Fine Arts Department, who call themselves the Matahati. As Laura Fan observes of the early development of Matahati,

“Under pressure to adhere to more polite aesthetics and abstraction, its collective embrace of the figure was initially viewed as subversive. Abstraction dominated the curriculum at ITM (now Universiti Institut Teknologi Mara or UiTM). In fact, their student work confirms their confident use of the style of abstraction as practised by painter Awang Damit Ahmad. References to Latiff Mohidin also appear in early works. Fundamentally, the young artists chose to pursue aesthetics that commented on society, emotions within themselves and also current events.

Pursuing an expressive style of painting that included realism, they made a forceful argument against the refined (halus) and accessible aesthetics that prevailed in commercial art. Their works weren’t pretty but no one doubted they were real. Significantly, they represent a generation that moved from the countryside and were wholly educated within the Malaysian arts establishment.

Since the 1990s, painting practices have diversified not only in term of technique, but most importantly, figuration made a come back.”

On the other hand, Simon Soon points out that choosing to paint figures can be viewed as a politically motivated choice for Malay artists as it could be interpreted as a rebellion against the Islamic tradition. Non-Malay artists, on the other hand, found in figuration a

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visually powerful means to narrate their cultural alterity from which they could draw upon specific socio-cultural experiences to draw attention to the complexity of living in a multicultural society.\textsuperscript{412}

Wong Hoy Cheong also argues along the same line, reiterating that,

"If I want to say all of them rebelled because they want to assert themselves in the mainstream, I would not do justice to them. Some are conducting a genuine rebellion, particularly the young artists from ITM. They are tired of doing art totally through the traditional and Islamic perspective. They are not against Islam as much as they are against the non-orthodoxy figure. The MIA and KLCA (Kuala Lumpur College of Art) art students have no such problems with orthodoxy. For them, taking up the figure is much less of a rebellion."\textsuperscript{413}

Among the artists who use figuration, either realistically or semi-realistically in their works are Wong Hoy Cheong, Eng Hwee Chu, Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Shia Yih-Yiing, Ahmad Fuad Osman, Jalaini Abu Hassan, Lee Swee Keong, Chong Siew Ying, Kow Leong Kiang, Chan Kok Hooi, Noor Mahnun Mohamed, and Ahmad Zakii Anwar. In discussing why he undertook figuration at the height of Malaysia’s Abstract Expressionism, Wong Hoy Cheong argues,

"I felt so different. It was strange for me to see many abstract artists in Malaysia. The scene was so alien to my own personal experience and to what I thought Malaysian art was and ought to be. I never imagined it could be so ingrained in the universal, cosmopolitan abstract tradition.

In reaction to this, I asked myself: How does one represent injustice and violation of rights through abstract art? One of the arguments put forward by the first generation abstract expressionists is that a brushstroke can convey a stronger political message than a whole political manifesto. Another way to deal with this is through the title of the work as Robert Motherwell had done. But the abstract art is so nebulous that one can read almost anything into it – zen, pure anergy and colours, Islam, love, nature. The only way to say something communicable, for me, is through text and figure. Figurative and textual art are more plebeian, accessible, and not so caught up in the realm of rarefied aesthetics."\textsuperscript{414}

His early semi-realistic charcoal appears in his “Migrant Series” (1994) (Figure 51). The childlike and naïve treatment of the figure and the portrait drawing combines simplicity with an extensive use of light, shadow and perspective. What is important is that the artist is able to express his concern on his social consciousness through this semi-figuration. As Wong Hoy Cheong explains,

"So, when I left abstract art and returned to the figure in the States, I did so because I felt that abstract art could not speak of what I wanted to say about my political and social concerns. My concern was and is making statements about the world. ..."\textsuperscript{415}

\textsuperscript{412} Simon Soon, "Returning to Painting as Painting", Valentine Willie Fine Arts, see http://www.vwfa.net/tukarganti; Internet; accessed 22 Jan 2009.
\textsuperscript{414} Ibid.: 104.
\textsuperscript{415} Ibid.
Other artists also use figuration, especially to highlight socio-political, socio-economic and socio-ecological conditions. Early works by Bayu Utomo Radjikin for example, such as “Bujang Berani” (1991) and “Lang Kacang” (1991) (Figure 52) must be noted. The audience is moved as they view the facial expression of the semi-figurative sculpture, as if the figure is screaming into the void. Although these sculptures are not realistic, they convey the essential essence of human emotions; the rage and despair of the Borneo tribe. The facial features of “Lang Kacang” are moulded only from plaster from Paris, while the rest of the sculpture is constructed from welded pieces of metal and machine parts. Much detail is paid to the headgear, the symbol of traditional tribal power. The work possesses vibrancy and excitement as well as being forceful and violent, and invites the audience consider the source of “Lang Kacang”’s despair.

Several artists have also used figuration to portray themselves and the people they encounter in a variety of ways. Eng Hwee Chu for example, has produced painstakingly autobiographical paintings in “Cry Freedom” (1995) (Figure 53). The artist herself is painted as the figure with the red skin, with her own shadow lurking behind her. The chequered floor reveals a connection to her husband artist Tan Chin Kuan, who also produces very stark and disturbing figuration work ranges from monks to skin-head punks, menacing, being defiant and pained expressions suggesting alienation and strangeness. Tan Chin Kuan’s figuration suggests that figurations also range from a record of a person’s features to a representation of their character. On top of that, his figuration also allows him to present the complexity of human relationships and the bond of emotion. Shia Yih Ying’s figuration in “Homage to the Vanishing World” (1997) (Figure 49) on the other hand allows the artist to portray the ordinary aspects of her life and the people she knows in a reflective and introspective way as she delves deep into her role in her family though symbolic and nostalgic way.

Besides a few of these figurative aspects that I have discussed in the few works in this section, I would like to address here the subject of nudity in art, especially Malaysia art. Nudity is a taboo in the Malaysian context and the majority of artists who produce nudes usually do so in sketches or small-scale works. Ahmad Fuad Osman however, has broken down this barrier in terms of mainstream art. I agree with Carmen Nge, “(i)n the context where nudes are seldom represented, Fuad’s exploration of the male nude indicates his willingness to push the limits of what is acceptable for a Malaysia art audience.”

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“Vermont Series” (2004) (Figure 50) were produced in his residency in Vermont, USA. It can be argued here that the fact that Ahmad Fuad does not eroticise the male figure in his paintings is perhaps why the series did not receive any criticism from the very limited art public in Malaysia. The series actually depicts a lone naked man encountering a bleak, white, wintry landscape neither aestheticized nor idealized. Carmen Ng views the artist and the work as such,

“A stranger in a foreign locale, Fuad himself as unused to the harsh, wintry climate; this alienness is well-represented by the naked male body, depicted standing and lying forlornly in barren, white surroundings. Yet, despite the obvious vulnerability in works like ‘Gazing At The Sun’, ‘Imitating The Woods’ and ‘Imitating The Mountain’ the naked body also signals an openness, a willingness to shrug off prior affiliations and identities so as to embrace the new environment.”

It can be suggested that the artist himself had reservations about the work which he mentioned in an interview regarding the nude figures in regards to Malaysian society,

“I do feel slightly uncomfortable. That’s why it is easier for me to work with male nude. There is more to conceal in working with the female nude. I guess I am working with my own limits of ease and unease and of course, within the context of what is acceptable in Malaysia.”

New Media, Multimedia and Alternative Art Spaces

Since the 1990s, Malaysia has witnessed the diversification and exploration of media and themes in Malaysian art. This can be seen in the range of works produced beyond the traditional categorization of art (such as painting and sculpture) and towards those that crosses fields and/or use new media, emerging as collaborative works. Art has expanded from solely painting or sculpture to various hybrid forms such as installations, computer, video, internet and other electronic works, performance art and various collaborations. The unprecedented expansion of new media into the realm of fine art practices in Malaysia has contributed, at least in part, to the alteration of the very category of ‘fine art’ into ‘visual art.’ While discourse around the shift from ‘fine arts’ to ‘visual arts’ has not been properly explicated in the context of Malaysian art, the term ‘visual arts’ is increasingly used in recent debates or writings on Malaysian art. The forms of art which I would like to discuss here ranges from installation, new media, multimedia, video works, performance, alternative collaborations, and alternatives spaces that have changed the outlook of Malaysian art scene since the 1990s.

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417 Ibid.
I would like to point out here that any investigation of installation art must be prefaced with a discussion of sculptural practice in Malaysia. Sculpture as an artistic field is actually quite limited in Malaysia in terms of artists who have significantly engaged with it. A few early works include Latiff Mohidin’s “Burung Cenderawasih” (Bird of Paradise) (1968), Anthony Lau’s “Ayam Jantan” (Cockerel) (1964), Lee Kian Seng’s “Berdua” (The Pair) (1969), Lim Nan Seng’s “Kesakitan di Ibu Kaki” (Pain at my Foot) (1959), Syed Ahmad Jamal’s “Perhubungan” (The Link) (1964), Syed Shahrudin Bakeri’s “Yo-yo-yo-yo” (1976), Cheong Laitong’s “Penambul” (Acrobats) (1961).

Baharudin Mohd Arus points out that although there were sculptural works produced in the 1960s, these early efforts were not taken seriously by artists and consequently, there were not many which could be considered to be good. Moreover, in comparison with painting, the nature of sculptural works itself is time consuming, difficult, and unspontaneous in the sense that they need to be well planned. These are the reasons, which have been suggested as to why sculpture, as an artistic premise has not appealed to Malaysia artists. The few early exhibitions which attempted to show works under the category of ‘sculpture’ included works which ranged from assemblages, installations, welded materials, and even wood carved figures by orang asli (indigenous people) made for cultural and religious reasons.

What must be emphasised here is that since the 1970s the approaches or definitions of sculptural works have expanded and diversified. In the 1980s, in parallel with Malay/Islamic artistic tendencies, sculptures with local regional character began to be produced by a few artists. The sculpture-based works of Mad Anuar, Ariffin Ismail and Zakaria Awang are some of the examples, which could be associated with such a premise.

Presently, artists engaged in sculptural practice include Ramlan Abdullah, Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim, Raja Shahriman Raja Aziddin, Abdul Multhalib Musa and Sharmiza Abu Hassan among others. Ramlan Abdullah’s work uses materials ranging from metal to concrete, fibre-optics, resin and stone, although his favoured material is glass. Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim’s work such as “Pandir Daik” (1991) and “Pawang Gunung Daik” (1990) are made of carved wood assemblages. Raja Shahriman’s series of sculptures are made from wrought iron. The figures, which he sculpted and welded, are aggressive, sharp and

positioned in war-like stances. On the other hand, Sharmiza Abu Hassan cleverly uses domestic objects such as beetle nutcrackers, knives and particularly compasses in her “Alegori Ledang” Series as I have discussed previously.

Baharuddin Mohd Arus argues that only since the 1980s did there emerge a new group of ‘sculptors’ such as Zulkifli Yusof, Ramlan Abdullah, Zainon Abdullah, Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin, Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Liew Kungyu, Wong Hoy Cheong and Tan Chin Kuan. Here, I would like to highlight that the array of names which Baharuddin puts forward as sculptors are actually artists who worked mostly in the domain of installation.

Therefore, I would argue that the definition of sculpture in Malaysia has expanded and extended beyond the traditional understanding of sculpture. The idea that explores the relationship of space and form – whether this be through the use of light, contrasting materials, suspended objects, or the interweaving of everyday domestic materials of work – is actually more appropriately discussed under the premise of installation. Therefore, works that engage with such physical possibilities are actually limitless and cannot be confined to sculptural definition only.

As I have argued in the early part of this chapter, there are several works that have been categorized as ‘mixed media’ but can also be considered as installation. Examples of these early works include Lee Kian Seng, Nirmala Shanmughalingam, Zakaria Awang’s “Al-Rahmah” (1982), and Ponirin Amin’s “Alibi di Pulau Bidong” (1983). In the late 1980s, two recipients of the Bakat Muda Sezaman (BMS) award began to influence the work of installation art in Malaysia. These artists were Zulkifli Yusof and Tan Chin Kuan.

Zulkifli Yusof had won the major prize in 1988 with his installation work “Tanpa Tajuk” (Untitled I) (1988), whilst in 1989 both Tan Chin Kuan’s “Blue Night II” (1989) (Figure 51) and Zulkifi Yusof’s “Dari Hitam ke Putih” (From Black to White) (1989) (Figure 52) also won major prizes. In 1990, Tan Chin Kuan secured the major award with his installation work “The Moral Means Behind Visit Malaysia 1990” (1990). Since then, Tan Chin Kuan consistently drew inspiration for his work from his Chinese upbringing. These two artists have continued to produce thought-provoking works in the same vein. For example, Zulkifli Yusof’s “Dialogue 2: Don’t Play During Maghrib” (1996) includes some printworks, painting, drawing, typography and even sound effects, and went on to represent

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421 Baharuddin Arus, unpaginated.
Malaysia at the Venice Biennale in 1997. Drawing on Malay cultural history, Zulkifli explores the metaphor of *Maghrib* in Malay society in the work.

Since the 1990s, installation, new media and multimedia such as video arts, computer and internet for example, have multiplied. Video arts, computer and internet have since been used as part of installation or exist on its own or it can include performance art elements. Strong interest in technology amongst Malaysian artists does not come as a surprise. The computer has the capability of combining sound, text, and image within a single database and which previously artists have questioned the issues of originality and authenticity through photography, now the possibility of photograph’s information to be processed or changed by manipulating or warping its structural light components in the computer to create images which are complete simulations.\(^{422}\) These new premises and possibilities enabled by computer, video and digital manipulation has attracted several artists to multimedia practices such as Liew Kungyu, Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Niranjan Rajah, Wong Hoy Cheong, Emil Goh, Nazim Esa, Yee I-Lan and others. Even artists known for their work in other mediums have also tried to incorporate electronic elements into their work.

The documentation on electronic arts in Malaysia started with the exhibition and catalogue for the 1997 *Pameran Seni Electronic Pertama* (First Electronic Art Show) by the National Art Gallery and curated by both Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah. The catalogue dates computer work in art to as early as 1983 when Kamarudzaman Md. Isa used BASIC computer programming language to construct the first few digital artworks in Malaysia such as “Self-Portrait” (1984), “Cini” (1987) and “Tribute to Bapak” (1987). Ismail Zain’s “Digital Collages Series” in 1988 as was discussed in the early part of this chapter followed this.\(^{423}\) The exhibition was historically important as it was the first time that in a large scale a historical review and an overview of the use of electronic media such as video, video installation, computer print, computer animation, CD-ROM projects, internet works, Smart board/VRML ‘painting’ and computer animation/performance were presented in a large scale. Writings by Niranjan Rajah, Hasnul Jamal Saidon and more recently Roopesh Sitharan have delineated the development of electronic art in Malaysia in a more systematic way.

Other early works in this domain include Ponirin Amin’s 1991 “Al-Insyirah”, in which the computer is used to produce woodblock printing and Bahaman Hashim uses Adobe

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\(^{422}\) Margot Lovejoy, 157.

Photoshop Software to produce silk screens. Suhaimi Tohid on the other hand, uses photographic screen capture, computer image editing and silkscreen printing to freeze rapid sequences of television images in a comment on cross-cultural influences on local broadcast media in his 1994 work “Dalam Seminit” (In One Minute).424

Though in most early computer works, they were used to produce prints and digital manipulation, they later began to explore animation, the usage of CD-ROM, internet and particularly digital manipulation. For example, animation work by Zulkifli Che Harris entitled “Domino Theory” (1994) highlights the devastating consequences and the destruction of rainforests. Faizal Zulkifli’s work “No Art Please (1996) uses single desktop editing software to highlight the status of art in children’s art education. Similarly, in “Road Runner” (1996) Faizal uses the analogy of electronic games to depict the urban rat race and its obsession with speed. “Real Time” (1999), directed by Fong Wan Loong, uses 3D animation to launch a critique of our contemporary media generated reality.425

Other significant works include Niranjan Rajah’s “Failure of Marcel Duchamp/Japanese Fetish Even!” (1996). The work was available online and was first presented as an online installation at Petronas Gallery as part of X’plorasi exhibition in 1997. The work explores the Internet as a medium for artistic practice and attempts to identify the cultural order of the supposedly unbounded terrain of the Internet. Roopesh Sitharan notes that,

“The intention is for the audience to deal with the possibility of accessing culturally inappropriate content in public space, transgressing cultural taboos and even perhaps the national obscenity legislation. What becomes obvious is that the reading of an online image is bound by the context of its appearance and contingent upon the audience in the physical site of reception.”426

Other works of Niranjan include “Video Reflux” (2007) and “La Folie de la Peinture” (1998). In projects such as “Upload: Download – Fukuoka: Kuala Lumpur Young Artists’ Online Collaboration” (2003), Hasnol Jamal Saidon engages in downloading, manipulating and uploading data by participants both in Fukuoka and Malaysia. More specifically, the project includes four aspects -- interfaces (stills), BrancoNT TEXT animation, gif sequence, power point slides, CITYstream (video) and soulBITS (sound).427 In other works such as “Mirror, mirror on the wall” (1994), “Hyperview” (1997) and “Siri Hijab Nurbaya” (2003),

425 Hasnul Jamal Saidon, 38, 45.
Hasnul Jamal Saidon used the new media to addresses questions of gender and identity within the global mainstream media.

Both Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah who are the two main figures in promoting these new technologies have significantly explored and even created an online database called “E-art Asian Online,” which was an early initiative to provide a resource for electronic art in Southeast Asia,428 way before online forums and networking through social sites become popular. “Malaysian Art Online,” curated by Niranjan Rajah as part of “Pekan Seni Ipoh 1999,” have also marked the introduction of a new generation of web artists to the mainstream art scene. The exhibition also took the form of an online essay with hyperlinks and networks of computers for the audience to view the work.429

Besides computer based art, video works have also had an impact on art production in Malaysia. The cinematography techniques in the video medium enable for example, multiple possibilities of viewpoints and complex juxtapositions of images moving in time. As Lovejoy asserts,

“Film (and video) offer a deepening of perception, for they permit analysis of different points of view and they extend comprehension beyond our immediate understanding by revealing as did the microscope and telescope in the Renaissance entirely new structures of a subject beyond those available to the naked eye alone.”430

She argues further that,

“The new apparatus separated itself from traditional representation by opening the way to exploration of a completely new way of communicating, involving elements of time and space, use of sound and performance, audience participation, and use of a moving camera, which, although video could not be edited at that time, could show different angles and vantage points form close-up distant views.”431

The possibility of video varies, as it enables artists to direct the camera at themselves to explore personal narratives, record a performance, body art or real events as part of political statements or as experimental documentary interpretations. Installed in a closed circuit gallery setting and using a delayed feedback loop, the video camera could confront and interact with the viewer in a new dialogue, which places the spectator within the production process as part of the formal conceptual intentions of artist. Combined with sound, music, or

428 The project however, was later temporarily deactivated due to weak human resources and funding. See Hasnizam Abdul Wahid, "The Culture of Art and Technology in the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, University Malaysia Sarawak", Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, see http://www.symbiosisonline.com/aug05_art.htm; Internet; accessed 20 April 2009.
430 Margot Lovejoy, 3.
431 Ibid., 101.
spoken dialogue and text, the medium opens up new aesthetic ground for exploring
time/motion/sound/image relationships in a broad range of contexts.432

With that said, we can observe that Malaysian artists too have started to explore such
possibilities offered by the usage of video. Initial attempts however, have always been in the
form of installation art in which video was incorporated, or performance was recorded as a
video work and there were performance-forming part of an installation consisting video work.
A few early video works includes Ray Langenbach’s “The Language Lessons” (1989), a
synchronized video installation consisting of two ‘talking heads’ or television monitors,
mounted on modelling torsos from rattan facing each other across a cycling of neon lights
and Baharudin Arus’s “Untitled” (1989) mobile video sculpture also utilizes multi-channel
sources and multiple monitors, including live input from a mobile camera.433

In regards to performance practice in Malaysia, artists usually engage performance art
either as part of another artwork they are presenting, as an extension of their message or as a
collaboration of techniques and ideas. Salleh ben Joned’s zen-like ritual of urinating in a
corner during Redza’s Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa’s 1974 *Towards a Mystical Reality*
exhibition can be regarded as performance art. Performance art in Malaysia, however, hold
no monetary value or return except for basically making a statement on an issue and
reiterating a perspective or multiple perspectives on a subject.434

Nevertheless, what is important is that the boundaries between installation, video
works, computer based art and performance are blurry. Artists such as Liew Kungyu and
Wong Hoy Cheong for example, have in particular blurred these boundaries in their own
works. Liew Kungyu’s “A Passage of Life” (1988) used a TV monitor to display the image
of a dancing figure (Marion de Cruz, a Malaysian dancer) overlaid with text within the form
of a broken egg. A white cloth wrapped around the monitor emerges from the egg and rises to
the ceiling, articulating the space between the sculpture and its site. His other work entitled
“A Passage Through literacy” (1988) comments on the generational gap between the old and
the younger generation who were influenced by the mass media.435 Similarly, the video
work/installation “Sing a Song for Ah Kong and Ah Ma,” (1994) used a multi channel video
installation in the setting of domestic television viewing highlighting the cultural gap of
family under the same roof. Liew Kungyu’s video work “The Arrival of Puteri Oriental”

432 Ibid., 99.
433 Hasnul Jamal Saidon, 19.
434 Nazim Esa, "Stopover at a Performance in Malaysia -- Performance Art in Malaysia,” *sentAp!* 1 (Jul-
Oct 2005).
435 Hasnul Jamal Saidon, "Cabaran Praktis Seni Elektronik Dalam Era Maklumat,” *Wacana Seni: Journal
of Arts Discourse* 2, no. (2003).
(2000) on the other hand highlights the consumerist culture through the performance and video work. In the video, Kungyu wheels a beautiful *puteri* (princess) in a shopping trolley, played by the dancer Aida Redza, into an unsuspecting crowd in a shopping mall. Whilst the public is entertained by the dances and the antics of the “Oriental Princess,” upon closer examination the dancer’s exotic dress is revealed to be made from kitsch and constructed from cut out photographs of various high fashion brand names and logos, including McDonalds and Versace. Liew Kungyu’s work that defies the traditional boundaries of installation, video work and performance art invites us to re-define what is art actually.

Wong Hoy Cheong is also produced art works, which cross media boundaries. His early work “Sook Ching” (1990) is a documentary approach video-work that employs multi-dimensional performance and documentary-like video to highlight the sufferings of individuals during the Japanese occupation of Malaya in the Second World War. “Lalang” (1994) is another work that includes an installation of rhizomes at the National Art Gallery and performance as part of the work. He then killed the rhizomes by spraying them with weed killer, cutting and burning them as a cultural, historical, and political metaphor of Operasi Lalang 1987.

The intersection of installation, video and the internet is unmistakable in another significant work by Wong Hoy Cheong entitled “Re:Looking” (2002-3) (Figure 58) which was produced for Venice Biennale 2003. The work itself is actually a collaboration with two parties -- Arifwaran Shaharuddin for the video works and Chimera Design for the website created as part of the work. In the work, Wong Hoy Cheong creates the setting of a living room of a middle-class Malaysian household and stages a fictional history of Malaysia’s colonial annexation of Austria from 1683 – 1955. Through the multi dimensionality of the work that includes video documentary, website, installation of objects and images, the artist compiles an account of this fictional colonization and scrutinizes the issue of post-colonial identity in Asia as the colonial history is being satirized as an inverted fiction.

In a similarly hybrid approach, Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman and Suhaila Hashim’s “On Air” (2003) further challenges the boundary of installation, performance and video work. The work comprised a mobile radio station that doubled as a dwelling for a willing artist-in-residence or its acronym, A-I-R. Vinyl records and individual portraits of Ponirin Amin, Ismail Zain, and Redza Piyadasa, key figures in Malaysia art, were framed and hung in the interior of the radio station cum (art history) recording studio. The work also included a small TV camera and microphone placed inside the room, which picked up any action or discussion
inside the booth. This conversation was then aired to those who surveyed voyeuristically from the outside via an externally positioned TV monitor and speakers.

It must be noted that only quite recently have video works been produced solely as single channel video art. Video art’s intention can be varied or just as an exploration of the boundaries of the medium itself. In fine arts, video art attacks the viewer’s expectations of video as shaped by conventional cinema. In single-channel works, video works are much closer to the conventional idea of television where a video is screened, projected or shown as a single image. Nazim Esa “What’s happening Right Now” (2005) is a single channel work that play a tale from taking place in inner Damansara Jaya. Nazim Esa’s “Kami” (2007) and Vincent Leong’s “TITLE” (2003) explores their personal documentation by blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality. However, Emil Goh’s “Between Seoul” (2004) on the other hand, investigates filmmaking conventions of 360° video panoramas by perching a rotating miniDV camera on windowsills. Since then, Emil Goh have produced been two other similar videos in the series, one in Hong Kong and the last one in Seoul. Roslisham Ismail’s “3m x 3m x 3m = 27m3” (2004) on the other hand, is a two channel video presentation that forms a response to the rules and regulations of Young Contemporaries Award.

Sharon Chin on the other hand used a different technique in her work “Making Night” (2006). The work is based on a constellation of stars, which are visible above the skies of three cities Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Jerusalem at 10pm on the first night of Ramadhan month of 2006. What is unique about the work is that the video was actually made by a mobile phone videocam placed in a shoebox with the lid shut.

Significantly, collaborative works are becoming a stronghold in the art world. For example, “Wayang ’Virtual’ ” (1996) was pioneered by both Khairul Aidil Azlin and Hasnizam Abdul Wahid, and was generally inspired by the tradition of storytelling of wayang kulit or shadow puppet of Southeast Asian. The project represents an experimental attempt at combining traditional wayang kulit together with 3D models using IRIS showcase running on Silicon Graphic software and together with real time Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) performance and traditional wayang kulit.

Hasnul Jamal Saidon’s “Borrower of Light” (2003) is another example of an 11min video comprising an interactive multimedia performance, installation and 3-D animation and the work itself includes computer music composition by Wan Marina and Johan Othman. Another artist, Kamal Sabran has produced “Sonic Cosmic” (2006) as part of his residency program of ‘art-meets-science’ that was pioneered by the Agensi Angkasa Negara (ANGKASA), Ministry of Science and Technology Malaysia. The work was a scientific
research project based on real signals, which came from outer space and Kamal Sabran developed a musical composition based on these galactic radio noise. The composition was later staged along with visual projection on electromagnetic waves.436

Art also was organized in the form of art events. Artist Yee I-Lan with architect Nani Kahar for example, organized community-based events under the banner of DNA Studio/LabDNA. “Blue Skies” (1994) was an illegal, controversial experimental arts event that was organized to celebrate the freedom of mind at the infamous Pudu Prison. The event included 70 installations and performance artists, eight digital musicians, two dance floors and a speaker’s corner administered by Joe Kidd & The Republic of Brickfields and ex-inmates, experimental films and two microphones for general use. “To Catch A Cloud” (1996) was another multimedia experimental theatre event staged at the Planetarium Negara by the duo. The experimental theatre comprised a live stage, film narrative, experimental animation, multiple X/Y axis slide presentation, surround sound, art exhibition and a publication of art works and writings related to the theme. In 1997, they organized two events “Suburbia Panic” and “Urban Paranoia.” “Suburbia Panic” (1997) was held on 4th of July 1997 at Kapitan’s Restaurant and Bar. This art experience like their two other events and included an experimental music night, digital musicians, art installations, experimental video and even a local burger man. “Urban Paranoia” (1997) was held on Independence Day at Menara IMC, Kuala Lumpur. A rave party incorporated experimental music, live computer digital sound and image manipulation, and the showing of experimental films.

It is evident that since the 1990s more cross-fields and hybrid forms of art have emerged. As I have discussed throughout this section, it is clear that these collaborative efforts does not only involve fine artists but most importantly it had crossed between fine arts, music and the various forms of technological involvement.

On top of that, we can see that alternative art groups or spaces have emerged significantly. It must be noted that art groups are not uncommon. Among some of the early significant groups in the early development of arts in Malaysia were Wednesday Art Group, Thursday Art Group, Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung, Selangor Art Society and Equator Art Society. These groups however, acted primarily as a premise of artistic exchange based on sharing artistic education and information.

Despite these few early groups, since the 1990s the artistic premise offered through art groups have changed. Though producing art by a single artist is still important and valued

for these artists, we can observe that artists in the last twenty years do not live in their own world but rather take on active roles, networking off-line and recently on-line via Internet. Since the last decade especially, alternative sites and activities have diversified and concentrated around networking, sharing information and updates on recent discourse through talks and seminars.

For example, in the 1990s the most notable group was Matahati. It is actually an art collective formed in the late 1980s by Ahmad Fuad Osman, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Hamir Soib @ Mohamed, Masnoor Ramli Mahmud and two other artists who later left the group. The different between the group members is that they are not bounded by any united aesthetic/artistic ideals or a collective pursuit of working collectively as a group but the members’ insights are primarily concerned with identity and their social responsibility through their art. As Laura Fan puts it, “Their works weren’t pretty but no one doubted they were real.”437 She argues further,

“Significantly, they represent a generation that moved from the countryside and were wholly educated within the Malaysian arts establishment. Unlike the first generation of ITM graduates who continued their studies in the US and the UK, the Matahati members generally stayed in KL and maintain important ties with their communities. Hailing from Kelantan, Kedah, Johor and Sabah, they represent a cross-section of heartland Malaysia...”438

The success of the group member’s collaboration over the years enables them to also established House of Matahati (HOM), which is a self-funded organization that delivers all the programmes planned by the group. HOM consists of a studio and a gallery space that caters for exhibitions, art meetings and workshops located in Ampang. Since its formation, HOM has produced three significant projects including MAGER, an art group exchange residency program with Indonesia and Philippines, ARTRIANGLE, an art fund raising exhibition, with artists participating from Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore and also MATAHATI Art Residency for young local artists.

Another group, Rumah Air Panas (R.A.P.) began as an artist’s studio in a spacious single-storey house in Setapak, Kuala Lumpur in 1997 under the auspices of photographer Phuah Chin Kok and artist Liew Kungyu. There were 15 founding members of the R.A.P. collective, and although the venue ceased to operate after 2006, the initiative has moved on to become a registered association in August same year going by the name Persatuan Seni

437 Laura Fan.
438 Ibid.
Rumah Air Panas or R.A.P. Art Society. The group’s two main objectives are to promote dialogue between art practitioners through information sharing, networking and collaboration to enable the exchange of critical ideas on socio-political and cultural issues. The second objective is to bring the art to public. This will be achieved through discussions, newsletters, and art events. In other words, the activities are held to explore and bring together visual arts and other cultural practices through collaboration in exhibitions, projects, documentation and exchange of ideas in discussion.

Since the late 1990s, alternative spaces or artist-run-spaces have emerged and proliferated. Artists themselves who have been the forerunners in providing these spaces include Hamir Soib who owns Gudang, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed and Umibaizurah Mahir who own Patisatustudio, and Juhari Said who owns Akal di Ulu. Artist Sooshilawati Sulaiman even organized an art exhibition entitled Rumah and invited the public into her dwelling space in order to provide an alternative reading of the open house concept (rumah terbuka) popular in Malaysian culture.

Another important alternative space is The Lost Generation Space, established in 2004, in a Robson Heights bungalow, Kuala Lumpur. It is converted to provide space for artistic exchanges, an exhibition space for various forms of arts and a venue for various artistic events. The Lost Generation Space also organised the ‘notthatbalai’ art festival. Parallel to its alternative function, the title of the festival itself implies a small art festival that can be read as subversive, challenging, and protesting the function of ‘official’ art institutions – the National Art Gallery. The festival is another site where it provides a site for arts from various field -- installation, performance, video, conceptual art, graffiti, sub-cultural music, experimental noise, protest poetry, body art, graphics, etc.

As Nur Hanim Mohd Khairudin explains,

“The prefix ‘balai’ in Malay phrases like ‘balai raya’ (community hall), ‘balai polis’ (police station), ‘balaisah’ (mini-mosque), ‘balairong seri’ (palace hall) brings to mind the institutional structures and codes of conduct that dominate the society. In constructing social reality and maintaining social dynamic, ‘balai’ exploits corpus of traditional, conservative, usually politically-motivated and religious-nuanced conventions which are accepted and practiced by majority of the people. ‘Balai’ connotes the canon that commands the society’s uniformity, the power that controls its homogeneity, the super-mythology that shapes its conformity. It is the seat of authority, capital and ideology that influences the mass towards particular agendas. ‘Balai’ additionally, are public spaces whose discourses document and

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celebrate official histories but ignore and erase peripheral stories of those subalterns, undergrounders, outsiders, subcultists, subversives, counter-culturalists. 

I am in agreement with Nur Hanim Khairudin in the context of the Malaysian art scene, the name ‘notthatbalai’ conjures up the image of Balai Senilukis Negara (BSLN), the Malay name for the National Art Gallery (NAG). This is an institution mandated by the government to guide, develop and promote Malaysian modern-contemporary art as the governing and defining aspects related to national visual art. As she points out, “The bureaucratisation and commodification of cultural life, which cover a multitude of economic and aesthetic sins and defuse critical consciousness, are issues to which the concept and subtext of notthatbalai are bound.”

Though, in Malaysia’s art development the term ‘alternative’ as an artistic premise has been used before, its context must be noted as T.K. Sabapathy points out in the event of *The New Scene, experiment ’70 and dokumentasi ’72*,

“Even as the ambition of the artists in The New Scene, experiment ’70 and dokumentasi ’72 were unilaterally trained at pushing the prevailing paradigms to their limits and at fostering conditions for generating ‘alternative aesthetic,’ these did not take place in alternative spaces as such. On the contrary, their productions were accommodated by established institutions and presented on their sites; their ideas and proclamations were endorsed by persons entrenched in the art establishment. For that matter, the artists who propagated the alternative are themselves ensconced in institutional agencies and are actively engaged in developing those agencies. It is in these circumstances that the alternative emerged and staked positions.”

He then adds,

“The alternative is not conceived in adversarial or oppositional terms; it is conceived as actualised along reciprocal lines. Artists who advance alternative aesthetic ideologies maintain a watchful, even longing, eye on institution; the gaze is returned, perhaps not always matched in all particulars. This is not to say the lines are not snarled, do not diverge and are not entangled in tense configurations. It is to say that the laterative is prospected in relational circumstances, entailing institutions and artists jostling towards interdependent positions, in complex and slippery juxtapositions.”

This observation is actually still applicable in the context of recent development of Malaysian art. What is more important is that the postmodern artistic tendencies that have influenced this recent development have reversed the general assumption of the ‘artist’ as a ‘hero.’ As Piyadasa observes in regards to the Abstract Expressionist influences on Malaysian art,

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441 Ibid. Program Book.
443 Ibid., 47.
"...It is worth noting that their artistic attitude was influenced by a notion of the creative process as constituting a 'heroic' undertaking. The artist viewed himself as a 'unique agent' responding emotively to his environment and these 'feelings' needed to be transferred onto a canvas in a direct and spontaneous manner. The dependence on 'gestural' marks only reiterated as essentially cathartic approach toward creativity. The paintings produced were, as such, highly personalized emotive statements."^444

Collaborative networks that bind artists since the 1990s are very different from the position and role of 'artist' as 'hero' that Piyadasa observed. This could be seen in the account of Latiff Mohidin in which T.K. Sabapathy has highlighted a common series of assumptions -- first, that Latiff Mohidin is unique as both artist and a person, second, he is imbued with an extraordinary artistic talent and third, he is different and indefinable and lastly, he appears to inhabit a world that is flawless and wondrously integrated – removed from the reality of fragmented conditions realms in which that the rest of the society is living.^445

Beyond these alternative spaces, the Internet also offers a very significant platform especially in terms of networking and even promotion. Gallery websites consistently post content from their current or past exhibitions, artists can easily look up art residencies and artists exchange programmes, especially those held abroad. Art events can be easily promoted through mailing lists, web groups, and social networking websites such as Facebook, and the blogs. These social networking sites have made it possible for many initiatives and opportunities in collaborative work much more comprehensive and probable.

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CHAPTER SIX: STRATEGIES OF IDENTITY IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

As I have discussed in Chapter Five, the premise of ‘postmodern situation’ or situasi percamoden and its application in the context of art development are based on the fact that of the shift in artistic strategies as discussed in the previous chapter. Mostly importantly however, the premise of percamoden or postmodern situation as I suggested in this dissertation are based on the thematic aspects of the works produced since then that have shifted to the context and content of the work that I would argue here as reflective of situasi percamoden. As a postcolonial nation-state, I have mentioned that Malaysia’s social, political and cultural context is built from a different history and reality. Therefore, any discussion on the context of Malaysian art must be discussed within the construct of Malaysia’s social, cultural and even political conditions and in the context of this dissertation, the structure of feeling relating to the new Malaysian middle class.

As I have explained in Chapter Three, artists born after Independence and who for the most part have no recollection of May 13, 1969 in particular have created the art works that is under discussion in this dissertation and in particular, in this chapter. Therefore, they are the by products of the NEP and have live their life under the pro-Malay policies that have touched on the lives almost all Malaysians. As intellectuals, whether they are aware of this or not, artists are part of the collective consciousness of the new Malaysian middle class created through the NEP policies. This structure of feeling could also be seen in other socio-cultural domain reflect the experiences by this segment of Malaysian society such as in films, theatre, television and popular culture through new symbols, and social and cultural practices.

Similarly, in the arts, as I will discuss in this chapter, certain themes in artworks such as racial construction, urban and rural dichotomy, the critique of certain aspects of the degradation of societal values, a critique or re-evaluation of political and historical construction, and cross cultural references reflect the structure of feeling relating of these new Malaysian middle class. This section of Malaysian society also appear to embody universal interests -- being more rational, more individualistic, democratic, secular and concerned with issues such as human rights and justice. Such themes have also inspired these artists under discussion and in this chapter; I will discuss such works that reflect we the concerns of the new Malaysian middle class.
Fauzan Omar and Safrizal Shahrir for example, had extensively discuss the changing social and cultural condition that has provided the backdrop for artists under discussion in this chapter such as Ahmad Shukri Mohamed,

"If we give critical consideration to the attitudes, ideas and behaviour prevalent in Malaysian society from the 1990s until now, we can easily conclude that many obvious changes have occurred in the mindset and behaviour of a society that is inhibited by modern and post-modern changes. The clash in values between the holy or civilized and the pragmatic based on materialism has given rise to many attitudes, environments and conducts that are totally new. As a society that grew collectively in an environment of Eastern cultural values and beliefs, the existence of a ‘new’ mindset and behaviour has slowly changed the direction of the members of that society towards a new ‘philosophy of life’ with new values that are practised together with the old." 446

They also highlight that,

"... what is happening now is actually the expression of a new culture that is subconsciously being created. The absorption and practice of this new culture can be interpreted as representing contemporary culture within a context. It is obvious that this new culture is being adopted by our society. From our lifestyle dominated by accessories and materialism to our leisure activities, society is upholding new cultural values or rather the apparition of a mixed culture composed of disparate values. Consumerism and urbanization are the main factors behind the practical expression of that culture and its values.

What is more interesting is that this version of contemporary culture appeared within the local framework, which obviously makes it more complex to describe. The purpose of life now seems to have changed to an emphasis on efforts based on pragmatism and rationalism according to the capitalist mould. The new values place more importance on cravings or habits that must be satisfied through attacks of desire that are sometimes shallow and superficial. At the same time, we witness the emergence of a dilemma to maintain the cultural nuances and values passed down through tradition and religion. There is a large range of ironies, paradoxes and choices in the practice of a culture that is socially adapted to the reality of today’s life. The construction of the social landscape is happening very fast and it depicts a social situation related to tastes and social choices regarding life and lifestyle. This social landscape can also be described as the Malaysian version of contemporary popular culture, which offers a wide variety of plots, episodes, themes and characters to be observed, assessed or watched." 447

Such observations reflect the situasi percamoden; these conditions and situations have become the primary context of art practice since the 1990s. It must be noted however, that although art that I have discussed under the context of postmodern appears to be very similar to Euramerican postmodern art, only a few early works by Piyadasa actually engage with the idea of art works as self-reflection of artistic process in Conceptual art as I have discussed extensively in Chapter Four.

Though postmodern art strategies characterises most of the work, it must be highlighted what are the differences between these works from those postmodern art created in

446 Fauzan Omar and Safrizal Shahrir, "Mobilizing Imagery: Reasserting and Repackaging Contemporary Local Culture and Attitudes: The Idea of Ahmad Shukri Mohamed’s Art from the 1990s to the Present," in Matahati (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 2008), 111.

447 Ibid.
Euramerica is that these works concentrates in highlighting the local themes or issues rather than dwell on artistic or aesthetic discourse. Art that touched on social issues however, has sparked the interest of several artists in the early 1970s, only these proclivities were quite limited to the works of a few artists. There was for example, the brief emergence of ‘Equator Group’, which was a small network of Chinese-educated artists comprised of writers, poets and artists who raised social concerns during the period of Communist insurgency in British Malaya, and a few early works which have be discussed in this context are those by Ibrahim Hussein, such as “Ayahku” (1969), “Senyum Seorang Monyet” (1970), “My Father and the Astronaut” (1969), “Hari Ini Kita Dewasa” (1974), “Are You Alone Out there?” (1969), and “Pak Utih” (1970). Even Fred S. Armentrout has dubbed Ibrahim Hussein as an ‘activist artist’ and in regards to his work, T.K. Sabapathy also explains,

"The contents of his work are shaped by the world of human actions and events. The affinity between the source and the ensuing paintings is not direct or literal. Ibrahim is not concerned with the portrayal of a particular event in all its concreteness. It is through the filter of emotion that he gauges his reactions to persons, events, and conditions. He reaches out towards generalised, universal statements. Events and actions are distilled and transformed by pictorial means in order to convey movement and rhythm. The human figure is abbreviated and condensed in order to symbolise the enormity of weight and physical power. The works also disclose his mastery of the medium."

Such observations are important although Ibrahim Hussein’s work has generally been labelled later as Abstract Expressionist especially for works such as “Rumble” (1962), “Figures in Landscape” (1964) and his series of works that feature lines drawn with graphic pens such as “Dance of Life” (1982). It must be noted though that Professor Ungku Aziz notified the limited number of works that reflected the social consciousness in Malaysia when he judged Salon Malaysia in 1968. He commented,

"(t)here seems to be a relative lack of consciousness about social, economic and political tensions, that in the national and international aspects, compose the matrix of the Malaysian nation. Socially conscious art is one thing, social protest is another. Patriotism or heroism or pessimism are another examples of emotional conditions that our artists and their patrons may yet arrive in their full maturity."

Only a few artists since the 1970s have consistently worked in this premise. As I briefly discussed in the previous chapter, issues such as the plight of women and children, urbanisation, and the destruction of nature have become the main concerns of artists such as

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Nirmala Shanmughalingham. Her work such as “Kenyataan 3” (Statement 3) (1975-79) and “Pollution Piece” (1974) is a series of works that raise issues about environment and development. “Kenyataan 3” (Statement 3) (1975-79) (Figure 59) is a documentary-like work that appropriates photographs of children taken from Mile 4 Village, Damansara Road both in 1975 and 1979. These are arranged in a comparison to photographs of the development of Damansara Hill and Bangsar in 1975. The work even became a subject of controversy when the National Art Gallery rejected it on the grounds of it being too socialist.

“The art of Nirmala seems to be too discomforting and embarrassing for certain authorities to accept. Her works don’t wear well as the national banner in the ’70s and ’80s. But the writers and artists however did not hesitate to support her. To protect her sponsors, she volunteered to remove this controversial piece from her solo exhibition, but it was the poet Baha Zain whose interest and courage finally decided that the work should stay and be exhibited together with the others at the Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka in 1981.

As result this has become a landmark in her artistic development. The importance of ‘Statement III’ in Malaysian art history is that, it is not only a documentation of an artist’s social comment and changing role of an artist in her/his willingness to listen to the voice of conscience and with sincerity and integrity willingly record the history of the country through visual art.”

Although the work is presented in a straightforward manner, the use of photography prints as a part of visual art was relatively new to Malaysia at that time and should be seen as an important breakthrough. Postmodern theorists such as Craig Owens have always linked the usage of photography with allegory in postmodern art. He claims that due to the impermanence of site-specific works in postmodern art, a work is often preserved in a photographic form, stating, “As an allegorical art, then, photography would represent our desire to fix the transitory, the ephemeral, in a stable and stabilizing image.”Therefore, Nirmala’s site-specific ‘photo-documentations’ not only attain the artist’s original viewpoint through the lens but most importantly, the work preserves the site, the time-specific condition of these children and that time into ‘an emblem of transience’ and ‘the ephemerality of all phenomena.’

The pragmatic and timely methodology of this ‘photo-documentation’ approach was appropriate to the artistic atmosphere in Malaysia at the time. Consequently, Nirmala’s work was understood to be a more acceptable form of postmodern art and in this sense, should register as an important breakthrough in the context of postmodernity in Malaysian art. It employs both strategies and refers to concerns, local subjects and issues regarding the effects and reality of rapid urbanization.

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452 Chu Li, 10.
454 Ibid., 206.
Her work from the 1980s also pursue other themes which convey her heartfelt empathy and solidarity with the human suffering around her, ranging from the wars in Vietnam, Beirut, Bosnia, to the indiscriminate logging in Endau-Rompin and Bakun in Sarawak, Chu Li points out,

“But in all these years, Nirmala as artist, had never consciously planned to express her art in a socio-politico voice, nor aspire to become the conscience of her times. However, it was inevitable that when an artist involves herself so extraordinarily in matters that touch her heart and stir her mind, and expresses her care and concern for the victim and the defenseless so eloquently in her work, it would only be a matter of time before her work becomes a formidable challenge against injustice and inhumanity. As an artist she takes a firm stand and upholds truth and integrity with great faith. And without the slightest intention of doing so, Nirmala has extended the parameter and given new meaning to the role of an artist in Malaysia.”

Besides Nirmala, a few of Ismail Zain’s works from 1983, such as “The De­trabalisation of Tam binte Che Lat” (Figure 60), can also be argued as highlighting the concerns of Malaysia’s rapid progress during this time. The work juxtaposes an image of an old Malay woman from the kampong in the foreground against images of a modern, urbanised, middle-class home environment from the grille gate to, rattan settee, a sensual belly dancer, a tennis player, interior plants and flowers, to weekend readings of Mingguan Malaysia on a rattan rocking chair. The work implies the old woman and the older generation more generally are out of place in the new Malaysian reality characterised by urbanized middle-class privacy. On the other hand, Ismail Zain positions his work “Sarada” (1983) (Figure 61) against a larger Asian framework. An image of a woman and her baby is juxtaposed against a grille gate and on her right is an electric fan. As Piyađasa suggests,

“Ismail makes a subtle commentary on the two Asian extremes – the extremely rich and the extremely poor. He draws the attention to a new kind of post-colonial Asian socio-economic reality. The work was produced retrospect, at a time when the celebrated notion of the new Japanese superstate as an invincible economic juggernaut was at its very zenith.”

Since the 1990s, artworks produced aligned with Nirmala Shanmughalingam and Izmail Zain’s proclivities and interests have proliferated. Not only these newer works employ postmodern art strategies as I have discussed in Chapter Five but most importantly these works took a critical stance and made overt critical commentaries on various aspects of social, cultural and even political themes contemporary of today’s issues. What is more important is that these works significantly reiterate the concerns of the new Malaysian middle class as this section of Malaysian society have grown. As I will further discuss in this Chapter, aligned with these concerns some artists highlight issues such as socio cultural location or dislocation

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455 Chu Li, 5.
456 Redza Piyađasa, "Ismail Zain, the Artist," 44.
within the construct of the nation since Malaysia’s independence, other artists affected by the NEP-driven economic raise concerns and issues pertaining to consequences of development and modernization and even growing concerns of social problems among youngsters, abandonment of babies born out of wedlock, illegal motorcycle races, social and moral misdemeanours. Other themes include the questioning of political realities and historical narratives and even consumerism among the society. I will discuss here that what signifies this recent shift is that both Malay and non-Malay artists seem to be concerned with the immediate and near future, rather than looking back or glorying the past. It can be suggested that these tendencies epitomizes the challenge, divergence and even connections of perspectives that define the growing Malaysian middle class life in Malaysia especially in the context of the construction or even deconstruction of Malaysian society as perceived by them. This chapter will discuss a few themes of interests to these artists.

Identity and Cultural Concerns

As I have discussed in Chapter Four, the cultural heritage of a society, nation or country have played a key role in artistic development in Malaysia. This could be seen in the two decades of preoccupation with Malay and Islamic content and preoccupation with the Abstract Expressionist style in search of a national artistic identity in the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, the interests in Malay/Islamic cultural identity of Malay artists have also sparked similar interest in other culture and background by non-Malay artists. It can be argued that the artistic preoccupation of Malay artists with their search for identity was a significant source of inspiration for non-Malay artists to examine their very own identity in terms of their own religion and culture. As I have discussed elsewhere,\(^{457}\) although the NEP is a successful form of affirmative action, this policy marks a turning point in Malaysia’s politics, economy and social relations in which society became increasingly ethnically homogenized, or in Maznah Mohamad’s words, ‘hyperethnicized.’\(^{458}\) As a result, a diversified vision of racial and cultural identity in Malaysian art developed especially since late 1980s as Redza Piyadasa observes,

"As if in reaction to the Malay-Muslim artists’ new preoccupations with abstract works dealing with Malay-centered motifs and decorative sensibilities, a number of Chinese abstract artists incorporated Chinese-derived motifs and other artistic influences into their abstractionist products."\(^{459}\)

\(^{457}\) Sarena Abdullah, “The Shaping of Modern Art Identity in Malaysia”, 74-77.

\(^{458}\) Maznah Mohamad: 87-88.

\(^{459}\) Redza Piyadasa, Rupa Malaysia: Meninjau Senilukis Moden Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Senilukis Negara, 2001), 35.
A few Chinese artists for example, have drawn inspiration from their own culture in their artmaking as early as the mid-1980s. Artists "alluded to a Far-Eastern artistic sensibility, more specifically, the traditional Chinese culture," making references to the Yin and Yang relationship, ideograms derive from the I-Ching, and more universal Chinese cultural shapes and symbols. Artists such as Lim Eng Hooi, Tan Tong, Tan Hon Yin, Chew Teng Beng and Choong Kam Kow depict traditional and philosophical interests as a way for Chinese civilization to assert its own cultural identity. Although works with Chinese elements were not new during this time, these preoccupations are significant as it happens simultaneously with the Malay/Islamic proclivities in art. The Chinese elements used however, are more universal, do not directly relate or refer to Chinese culture or context in Malaysian.

Besides Chinese artists, artists originally from Sabah and Sarawak such as Awang Damit Ahmad and Jack Ting have also searched for artistic inspiration in the various cultures of tribes of Borneo. For example, Kelvin Chap's have also taken an anthropological interest in their cultural subjects and reproduced this in the form of art works. His "Belawing and The Great Mamat Series" (1996) investigates the totems of Dayak warriors. The images of these tokens were produced in prints or mixed media works. Within the premise of 'art,' Ooi Kok Chuen claims that Kelvin Chap's works,

"...are a celebration of the tribe's inherent philosophy of life in death and death in life. He attempts to demystify the subject only emphasizes the mystical more – through the interplay of quaint forms of the belawing (totems) and costume pattern (such as the hornbill motifs and life-generating spirals)."  

Another artist who sources her inspiration from the Iban tribe culture and lifestyle is Lucy Liew. Of Chinese-Melanau descent and now working in San Jose, California, she is inspired by animal symbolism and traditional native art motifs, especially those of the Iban tribe. The rhinoceros hornbill became the subject of her work because the hornbill is believed in Iban mythology to be a messenger to the high God, symbolizing wealth, health, and prosperity. She explores such themes in her work "Hornbill Series" and the "Monochromatic Hornbill Series" of the late 1990s. The "Hornbill Series" (Figure 62 and 63) series portrays birds as idealized, elegant creatures in many variations in a way reflecting the diversity of the human experiences. Her "Monochromatic Hornbill Series" on the other hand, was also inspired by ancient cave paintings on the same theme. Accordingly, the paintings in this series are more primitive in form, rely on simpler colours and have a greater emphasis on the

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460 Redza Piyadasa, Rupa Malaysia: Meninjau Senilukis Moden Malaysia, 35.
461 Ooi Kok Chuen, "Foray into an Ethnic Dimension," New Straits Times 1996.
tonal line, value, texture and rhythm. On top of that, she is also interested in the intricate tattoos of the Ibans. In Iban culture, tattoos function not only as mere decorative embellishment, but define a person's gender and status and help to secure the bearer's identity afterlife.462

As an observer, Lucy remarks,

“What the artist finds most fascinating, she says, is that these natives have flourished in isolation from technology and modern civilization and have developed a culture beautifully adorned by ornate designs and deeply rooted in numerous traditions. Although the artist's palette for this series is mostly dark, points of illumination in each painting give viewers a glimpse of the mystery of a culture progressively fading from the heritage of its younger generations.” 463

Artists like Sylvia Lee Goh on the other hand, delve into a more personal sense of loss of another important section of Malaysian society that have lived in Malaysia since pre-colonial era. Born of Peranakan ancestry, Sylvia's paintings draw from a sense of nostalgia for an era of the Baba and Nyonya culture that is rapidly fading in Malaysia. Sylvia's paintings deal with womenness based on Baba and Nyonya heritage for inspiration and relevance. In works such as “Nyonya's Secret Recipe” (1990), “Nyonya Koay (Kuih Muhi)” (1990) (Figure 64), “The Nyonya Altar” (1995) (Figure 65), Sylvia captures on canvas the items pertaining to her daily life but are actually also emblems of her cultural existence. These various Peranakan paraphernalia that dominate her work either as motifs, symbol, subject or themes were painted in a way that it conveys an overwhelming sense of loss. Zakaria Ali explains,

“In many ways, these works acknowledge that the Baba culture has a reached a stage that many of its supporters believe to be stagnant, or dying and dying fast. The reasons are complex and hard to pin down. Those who want to preserve it are less than those who couldn’t care less. As the years go by, the fewer gets fewer. As though setting the stage for its ultimate demise, the Penang Museum has opened many of its halls to exhibiting Baba objects, categorised as artefacts, which in art history is another name for things left by people who no longer exist, or on edge of extinction.” 464

Since the 1990s, various postmodern art strategies have been used by artists to present their critical or alternative perspectives on cultural construction either overtly or implied. Aligned with the interest in other cultures, there are various attempts to project the Chinese and Indian points of view through art. This could be seen in Liew Kung Yu’s “Cheng Beng Festival” (1996) (Figure 66). Cheng Beng Festival is a Chinese festival for the dead. On the

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463 Ibid.
day, the family visits and cleans up graveyards and pay homage to their dead ancestors and relatives with offerings and burning of incense paper. The centre panel depicts for example, a Chinese tombstone with family members and various paraphernalia used for the festival surrounding it. On the glass, the artist has pasted a conversation commonly heard during this festival time ironically in English. The conversation is of an elder instructing the younger person on how and what to do on the day of Cheng Beng festival. It is interesting that these are written in English as opposed to Chinese, Piyadasa even suggested that the poignancy in this choice of language, in that it indicates the cultural dislocation taking place in the Malaysian Chinese community. He positions this cultural dislocation as a dilemma and asks, “Will the old beliefs, rituals and customs survive?”

J. Anurendra too delves with the reality of the Indian society in which he comes from. The “Running Indians and the History of the Malaysian Indian in 25 Clichés” (2001) consists of six large horizontal panels featuring images of Indians in Malaysia. The work displays paintings of athletic figures in singlets and sarongs and the centre of the six panels are he painting of two lovers. If we scrutinize these images on the panels the Indians painted by J. Anurendra here are running with closed eyes and do not appear to be going at any particular direction. Under the panels, a row of 25 smaller square canvasses are position as part of the whole work depicting the daily life of an Indian and what seems to be the general cliche of who they are. As Veronica Shanmugham in a way suggested, this perhaps implies the political and social reality of Indian society is not progressing, after 50 years of Malaysian Independence. The 25 small squares depict the day to day life of Indians in Malaysia – a woman praying to the Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, a picture of an old barber’s chair, a statue of Ganesh, an old woman standing in front of a Barisan national campaign poster, a bowl of latex, Deepavali greetings card with a Hindu oil lamp in adorning it, pregnant women and a mango denoting fertility. By juxtaposing such images, J. Anurendra’s work provides a more specific perspective on ethnic Indian in Malaysia either culturally or politically. In a way, the work is a reminder to us that as we progress in the pursuit of development, there remain some sections of our society that have not achieved much living advancement or improvement since Independence.

Tan Chin Kuan however, approaches the issues of his racial identity/racial marginalization based on his own personal experience creating paintings and installations that are highly emotive, driven by personal dilemmas of his identity and place, especially in

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465 Piyadasa, Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia 156.
Malaysia’s socio-political reality. Brought up in a Chinese family, he attended the Chinese school system, managed to get into Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA) for his art education and eventually worked as a lecturer at MIA with his artist-wife Eng Hwee Chu.\(^{467}\) It must be noted that aesthetic training, his interactions and life as an artist in Malaysia affected the way he produces his works, which range from mixed media, paintings, sculptures, reliefs and installations.

His works, such as “Blue Night 4” (1987), “Tragedy of the Wooden Horse” (1992), “The 26 Year Old Monk” (1992) and the sculpture/installation “A Boat Full of Visions” (1995), are autobiographical and personal. “The Broken Stage of the Young Artists” (1994) (Figure 67) features fragmented figure models as a metaphor for the broken ‘Venus de Milo.’ The work, set in a twilight ambiance of a ‘stage,’ juxtaposes elements such as moving curtains, black figures in theatrical masks, a suspended nude woman, bodies and limbs and a white horse. As Laura Fan explains,

“...the work expresses his anger and frustration brought on by having been disqualified from the National Art Gallery’s Young Contemporaries competition – a last minute amendment ruled that those who had won twice would be barred from entry. As it turned out, only two artist Tan and Zulkifli Yusoff, were affected by this ruling. Crushed, Tan turned his attention to his solo exhibition at the Creative Center, adjoining the National Art Gallery, where he exhibited the work.”\(^{468}\)

Tan Chin Kuan’s personal anguish and reservation on his position in the realm of fine arts in Malaysia must understood in context as Laura Fan points out,

“Given however, that memories and emotions are subjective, Tan’s narratives are sometimes too personal to be understood and accepted as universally shared emotions. At times, the stories are so keenly felt and refer to such individualised moments that they defy empathy. True appreciation of Tan’s work is only possible if one can feel a kinship with Tan’s perspective. Without that, we cannot fully appreciate his work.”\(^{469}\)

If other artists focus on constructing or deconstructing race and their cultural background in their works, Wong Hoy Cheong on the other hand, invokes his ancestral journeys and family histories to remind us how the early twentieth century immigrants from China and India make up modern Malaysia. Instead of highlighting the reality of Malaysian society, the artist highlights the history of this early multiracial makeup. As the son of a second-generation Chinese immigrant of working class origins who married into a wealthy Chinese family, the artist probes the complexity of his cultural allegiances in contemporary time in his “Migrant Series” (1994-1996). In his ‘Artist’s Statement’ he explains,

\(^{467}\) Ooi Kok Chuen, "Nightmare World in Chin Kuan’s Art," New Straits Times, 1 April 1997.
\(^{469}\) Ibid.
"I grew up listening to stories. Stories told by my father and mother, grandmothers, aunts, and uncles. They were stories of remembrance layered with wonder and pain, conflict and reconciliation, mystery and miracle. My paintings ['Migrants' series] take these stories as a starting point. I am interested in how the histories of people are made, how the individual "I" becomes the collective "I" and how the easily forgotten dreams of one person become the dreams of a people. 'In search of faraway places' looks at the migration of people, their paths, their continuous ebb and flow from land to land searching for a better life and their eventual indigenisation in a new homeland. I am interested in the rude ironies of British colonialism and the emergence of a modern Malaysia, the clash and convergence of cultures and classes, the hopes and failures of society."\(^{470}\)

"Of Migrants and Rubber Trees" for example, consists of four works, a triptych and ten charcoal portraits under the title of "New Migrants." The four works are titled "Some Dreamt of Malaya, Some Dreamt of Great Britain" (Figure 68), "She was Married at 14 and Had 14 Children," "Marriage of a Girl Dressed as Virgin Mary in a School Play" and "Aspirations of the Working Class" and the triptych is titled "In Search of Faraway Places" (Figure 51). Through a visually rich and complex pastiche assemblage of people, cultural objects and colonial artefacts, Wong Hoy Cheong narrates the stories of his paternal grandparents' journey to Malaya, class inequality and dreams that subsequently turn not to China but of Western countries.\(^ {471}\) Though the series is an important breakthrough in Malaysian art, Johari Said criticizes it because the artist's work seems to omit the British manipulation of race relations for political gain in Malaysia.\(^ {472}\)

Under "New Migrants," Wong Hoy Cheong draws the charcoal portraits of new migrants from Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines, and Indonesia. As Valentine Willie points out, in these large charcoal portraits of the new immigrants, Wong Hoy Cheong challenges us to put aside our prejudice and look at them as we look at all the rest of the generation of immigrants who came to the country at the turn of the twentieth century.\(^ {473}\) It must be noted that while the older migrant generation is seen as becoming increasingly frail and old population, a set of new migrants from Indonesia, Philippines and Myanmar (Burma) has begun to look to prosperous Malaysia as a promising place for them to have a meaningful future. This work in a way, posits the question of what will be the positions of these new migrants in thirty, fifty or one hundred years from now.


\(^{473}\) Valentine Willie, 9.
The question of race and ethnic construction or deconstruction have been raised by Piyadasa in the early 1980s through his “Malaysian Series,” and in another early work, “Bentuk Malaysia Tulen” (1980). “Bentuk Malaysia Tulen” (1980) (Figure 69) is an important work that addresses the urgent questions amidst the idea mooted of a ‘pure Malay art form’ following the Rupa dan Jiwa exhibition in 1979. Piyadasa recalls that at the time, it was not just artists who were preoccupied with Malay art and crafts influences but there were even nationalist politicians demanding that Romanised Malay street signs be replaced with Jawi script. Piyadasa explains, “The non-Malays, whether they like it or not, were experiencing a sense of marginalisation and alienation. Further, the newly-emergent calls for the Islamic state in Malaysia, by some hard-core Malay politicians, which surfaced during the same period, only added to the non-Malay feelings of insecurity.”

“Bentuk Malaysia Tulen” (1980) can be argued was produced out of this insecurity. The Jawi script and also selected a green colour was chosen to symbolise and herald Islam and yet the Jawi script reads “Apakah ini satu bentuk Malaysia yang tulen?” (Is this a pure Malaysian form?), contradicting to the messages that can be read through the visual elements. By using metalanguage, Piyadasa questions the notion of a ‘pure’ Malay cultural and artistic tradition, given his scepticism if there is a pure and unadulterated Malay cultural history or reality. In the middle of the work he even posit his own enlarged, half-tone self-portrait, standing still suggestive of a soldier standing upright or a good Malaysian citizen standing still while the national anthem is being sung, except the fact that he himself is a non-Malay Singhalese. To those who understand the content of the work or know the artist’s background they are confronted with the question -- what ‘pure’ form is being implied? The artwork, the standing figure or the Jawi script? This reflects a new preoccupation with the issue of identity, which would continue to surface in Malaysian art for years to come.

Piyadasa continued to produce “Malaysian Series” (Figure 34 and 35) from the 1980s until his death in 2007. The idea of “Malaysian Series” on the other hand, is based on old Malaysian photographs, which Piyadasa transfer into painting by using silk-screen techniques as I have discussed in Chapter Five. Unlike Malaysian tourism brochures, the visual images in this series tells the reality of the larger and different communities which actually make up Malaysia’s unique and modern nation despite the Malay/Islamic cultural emphasis on the nation’s endorsed national identity. Piyadasa refuses the idea that Malaysia is primarily comprised of three major races – Malays, Chinese and Indians. Therefore, he also produces

works on other races such as the Eurasians, the Ibans, the Kadazans and the Muruts, amongst others. The use of silk-screened period photographs successfully highlights the recent ways in which ideas are expressed about Malaysian community, history and memory. As Zainol Abidin Ahmad Sharif asserts,

"His mixed media collages incorporating silk-screened 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 in 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."

Asked about why his artistic strategy shifted from conceptual art to his “Malaysian Series,” he explains,


(I myself in 1960s and 1970s championed the Western–isms. Conceptual art. Eventually I admit that I reached a dead end. At last I came back to myself, myself as an Asian, Southeast Asian. I believe I found something more meaningful, more entrancing. Enthralled. I was not bored for example, using subject and image of Southeast Asian history, the Indians, Baba and Nyonya, the Malays. There is beauty, an aesthetic there.)

It must be pointed out here that although the “Malaysian Series” does not continue with his initial interests in Conceptual Art, the postmodern strategies and the issues raised in it reflect the prevailing concerns of the Malaysian middle class in terms of identity, cultural and issues. Other artists have taken up such themes later, for example, two decades later, in a similar way, the audience is confronted by an array of reproduced photographs in Yee I-Lan’s “Malaysiana Series” (2002). The mass of studio photographs was reproduced from a small selection of photo negatives from Pakard Studio in Malacca circa 1977 - 1982. Unlike Piyadasa’s “Malaysian Series,” her work is a reminder that racial affiliation is actually a social, cultural and historical construct and at the end of the day, we are all human beings, despite differences in colour, looks and appearance. This photo collection raises the question as to whom we are within a larger Malaysian society. The titles in the series also invokes

\[476\] Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff, 82-83.
clichéd terms the facts that Malaysians grow up with – “Kerana Mu” (Figure 70), “Member-member” (Friends), “Menuju Kejayaan” (Towards Success), “Harijadi” (Birthday), and “Rakan Muda” (literally Young Friends, it is also a name of a youth program organized by the government). The work asks us to reminisce about our life from childhood to adulthood and examine who we are within a larger social and cultural construct.

The interest of Malaysian artists in the notion of identity does not come as a surprise as Malaysian artists have raised pertinent questions and embarked on searches for identity since the NCC. It is only from the 1990s that these forms of ‘national’ identity in terms of visual forms and in the context and reality of a multiracial Malaysia have been questioned or been raised as identity is not given entity but is an open concept for all to discuss. In Malaysia, since the issue of identity is very much rooted to the idea of national identity, it does not come as a surprise that the postmodern idea of identity as an unstable entity allows Malaysian artists to create work that deconstruct Malaysian’s preoccupation with race and identity of all these years. This also does not come as a surprise since in the premise of ‘postmodern situation’ the new Malaysian middle class have contested racial markers or boundaries, especially when the relationship between the three major races began to improve. In the context of “Malaysiana Series” (2002) by Yee I-Lan, the work deconstructs our national census of the three major races in Malaysia. In her arrays of photographs, some of the figures could not be easily categorized as being Malay, Chinese or Indian at a glance, suggesting that racial boundaries can sometimes be not so clear-cut and well defined.

Simryn Gill’s “A Small Town at the Turn of A Century” (1999-2000) (Figure 71 and 72) too deals with the deconstruction of racial identity. The work features a series of forty-nine portrait and group photographs. As a Malaysian artist, living and based in Sydney, Simryn Gill is more apt and alert to the notions of identity and questions them in this work through the masks of racial identity. Unlike Yee I-Lan’s photographic assembly of multiracial subjects, Simryn masks the (racial) identity of those photographed with ‘headdresses’ made from tropical fruit: jackfruit, rambutans, mangosteens, durians, watermelon and even petai. In this work, the artist fabricates the identity of the posers by putting on fruit headdresses on them suggesting that self-identity are something that can be fabricated. Therefore, the audience is unable to discern the subjects’ race, although in certain photographs clues can be found based on where the photographs were taken. In general however, the audience can only scrutinize the skin colour of the poser; which is quite discomfiting, especially when it is realized that we are looking at the identity of these is based on skin colour. It must be noted that Yee I-Lan and Simryn Gill are two artists who are
very well versed and conscious of recent discourse in the international art scene. They have both participated in international art exhibitions and work across national borders. Therefore, able to understand and address the issue of race in a very open ended and obscure way, whereas other artists seem to address racial issues in a more direct way such as in Shia Yih-Yiing’s “Vessels of Art, What is Your Equipment?” (2006) (Figure 73-75).

The work is a series that deals with the issue of identity directly within Malaysia’s national construct. In the series, the artist paints on the canvas images of various races living in Malaysia onto Chinese vases (or vessels) and vests. For example, in her work entitled “Vase of Prayer” the images of various religious sites are drawn on the surface of the vase and in “Vase of Unity” images of children playing traditional games in their traditional attire are drawn amidst flowers such as the lotus. The usage of the vase and vest as the main objects portrayed in the work can be suggested as implying breakability and fragility, though at the same time the images were based on ‘the unity in variety or variety in unity’ concept through its intricate patterns on the vase and vests’ surface. Unlike the works by Yee I-Lan and Simryn Gill, Shia Yih-Yiing’s series seems to be more optimistic and aligned with government’s vision of a unified Malaysia despite the various races and religion of its citizens.

Social Issues and Cultural Constructions/Deconstructions

If non-Malay artists have become assertive in highlighting the reality of Malaysia’s minority and their social and cultural construction in the mainstream art, Malay artists on the other hand, have started to have a more critical approach in arts especially in its theme. Clive S. Kessler asserts that although historically most of the Malays who make up the new Malaysian middle class has been state-sponsored, consequently they adopts a more critical attitude towards the state but at the same time very cautious in terms of attitude as they cannot evade from being appreciative of many things the state has delivered. This is what Kessler describes as the middle class that embodies or having divided consciousness, dualism or simply as having Janus-faced as I have pointed out in Chapter Three. This divided consciousness is even reflected in the shifting concerns of Malay artists as evident in their

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chosen subjects and themes. For example, several Malay artists though remain to be inspired by Malay culture, history, values, myths, legends and literary sources, their artistic products, forms, aesthetic principles and artistic technique and sensibilities on the other hand, can be argued as somewhat different from the previous proclivities of the Malay/Islamic-centred artists.

This could be seen in the works of a few artists such as Sharmiza Abu Hassan, Zulkifli Yusof, Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin and Hamir Soib's "Jawi Series." As I have discussed in the previous chapter, Sharmiza Abu Hassan's work "Alegori Ledang" (2004) (Figure 46) is an interpretation of a Malay legend/literary source into art that she presented in the form of sculpture/installation. This legend, popular among the Malays, revolves around a princess who allegedly lived on Gunung Ledang in Johore, Malaysia. The Sultan Mahmud of Melaka had heard of her beauty and wanted to marry her but she set seven impossible conditions for him. He was to bring to her -- a golden and a silver bridge for her to walk to Malacca from the mountain, seven jars of virgin’s tears, seven bowls of betel nut juice, seven trays filled with hati kuman (literally means hearts of germs), seven trays filled with the ‘hearts of mosquitoes,’ and a bowl of the blood of the Sultan's young son. In the work, she uses and re-molds recognizable domestic objects, such as the base of a kuali (wok), to form the main foundation of the work. Other elements include beetle nutcrackers, knives, compasses, magnifying glass, coloured glass, wire mesh, copper-tubing, copper plate callipers, cast iron, galvanised iron, wood and brass.

But most importantly, the work suggests that people in power sometimes lack endurance, courage, ingenuity and most of all reason in pursuing their personal needs and gains. By weaving these domestic objects into her thoughtful and unique work, Sharmiza not only firmly locates herself both within her past and everyday life, but more significantly reminds the audience how power can be abused by those who possess it for their own personal ends. The theme of power or criticism of power is also a very contemporary issue. The Malaysian middle class have always been persistent in questioning and critical on the abuse of power by certain political figures. Therefore, it can be argued that the work insinuates the artists concern, observation or even as a reminder that such power abuse still happens in modern Malaysia.

In the case of Zulkifli Yusof's "Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah" (2003), literary texts on Malay society are his primary source of inspiration. His work is based on his reading and response to the book Hikayat Pelayaran Munshi Abdullah (The Tale of Abdullah's Voyage) was written between 1840 and 1843 and published in 1849. The book documents the travels
of Munshi Abdullah through the Malay Peninsula and his observations of the political and cultural events of his life, particularly the activities in Singapore, which was slowly changing under British rule from a sleepy fishing village into a major centre of world trade. Munshi Abdullah is renowned for his criticism of the Malay political system of kerajaan (Malay kingdom) and pursues the idea of modernity and excellence amongst the Malay community. Another text that has been of interest to Zulkifli Yusoff is a book written by Frank Swettenham in the nineteenth century entitled *Malay Sketches*. The book also provides some of early insights into Malay character and social life. In Zulkifli Yusoff’s work, a number of the themes in the book appear in his new works through various media such as layered format, silk-screen, painting, photographic transfers, drawings, embossing and fibreglass. The reinterpretation of texts in a form of art is interesting and allows Zulkifli Yusoff’s work to be read in multiple ways as his artistic endeavour differs from the previous proclivities of the Malay/Islamic-centred artists.

Raja Shahriman Raja Aziddin has also been working in the context of Malay cultural forms but has also built contemporary issues around it. Although his work reflects Malay/Islamic-centred art tendencies like Amron Omar’s drawings of bersilat (Malay self-defence) but Amron Omar’s figures are romanticized and invoke the heroism of Malay men and powerful patriarchal Malay societies. Raja Shariman on the other hand, explores these bersilat movements in the form of sculptural forms by using metal parts resulting in a cyborg-like figures recognizably in silat poses.

The strength of his work, such as the “Gerak Tempur Series” (1996) (Figure 76 and 77), lies not in the romantically bersilat poses of the figures but in the careful detailing of human anatomy in aggressive-looking sculptures. Raja Shariman’s depictions of the Malay silat warriors are depersonalised, dehumanised entities, which remind us of cyborgs rather than the flesh and blood legendary Malay warriors of Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat. His sculptures are stripped bare of any forms of pretension creating the impression of strength, although the movements captured seem to remain soft and gentle, at the moment right before the figure strikes. In another series of sculptures, the “Langkah Hulubalang Series,” Raja Shahriman again pushes the boundaries of his capabilities to shape metal pieces of strong individualistic character, and yet every form also displays elegance and grace. “Killing Tools” on the other hand, shocked the art scene with his sharp and dangerous sculptural

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482 Sarena Abdullah, “The Shaping of Modern Art Identity in Malaysia,” 49.
pieces that can actually be used as weapons. Nur Hanim Khairuddin also observes that the artist and his work could be seen as part of the postmodern situation,

"By means of artistic treatment, he strives to wed thoughtful perception and ascetic contemplation to construct an awareness of the order of things cloaked by postmodern meta-narratives, paradoxes, ironies and metaphors. For him, art and life are not disparate elements; even on the surface, he seems to be enthralled by two conflicting intuitions: his angst-filled materiality and sadistic looking imagery rather at odds with his refined attributes and tranquil piety." 483

An argument of postmodern approach of the artist's work can be made further as Nur Hanim observes in conceptualising and creating the works, the artist,

"... (re)combines three reality generating mechanisms, which are divided by the cult of modernity and its dichotomous separation of secularism-spiritualism: science, art and religion. By integrating steel technology with the aesthetic logic of sculpture, he ignites religio-spiritual light in his art creations to illuminates the shadowy presence of sign-signified- that enshrouts the reality of name-form in the 'absolute space' in the 'region of soul.'" 484

Similarly in the catalogue of *Semangat Besi* exhibition, Hasnul Jamal Saidon describes Raja Shahriman in the line of a postmodern artist and the artist's enigma,

"...This enigma is riddled by contradictions, paradoxes, and clashes. Intended or not, it epitomizes the crisis of the third millennium – parody and abnormality, pluralism and the crisis of identity, ethnocentrism and globalism, popular culture and virtual ecstasy, consumerism and spiritualism, mainstream media and the internet Sufism and fetishism, media fiction and subversive semiotic, high (bourgeois) art and low (proletariat) art, socialism and individualism and many more." 485

Besides criticising society's condition, works of certain artists have also focus more on issues that have been consistently politicised. For example, the issue of Jawi script 486 has been revisited by Hamir Soib in his "Jawi Series" (Figure 78) exhibited in the *Matahati PL* exhibition in 1999. Unlike works of Malay/Islamic-centred art, such as those by Ahmad Khalid Yusof and Zakaria Awang, Hamir Soib's work questions Jawi as an embodiment of Malay identity. In the 1999 exhibition at Petronas Gallery, silk-screens of Jawi scripts were hung throughout the exhibition space; he even wrote using Jawi scripts encircling on the floor. When viewing the installation, one cannot help but feel that Jawi writing in (Malay) society needs to be revived – as that is the politically correct response when we are questioned with issue since the usage of this script has disappeared from contemporary life. On the other hand, upon further scrutinizing and reading the Jawi scripts the audience realises that it says, "Ini

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484 Ibid., 19.
486 Jawi is an adapted Arabic alphabet for writing the Malay language which has since been replaced by the Roman script and relegated to usage for religious and cultural purposes.
Cuma Tulisan Jawi” (This is only Jawi writing) implying another premise of interpretation of the work. It must be noted that in this work, the artist addresses the alienation of Jawi writing in (Malay) society, whilst simultaneously contesting the script’s aesthetic idealism and its alleged sacredness. Nur Hanim Khairuddin explains that Hamir Soib, “… by installing his Jawi series in a secular context, especially in scribbling Jawi ‘graffiti’ on the floor, wrests its cultural values from the domain of ‘holy’ discourses and altogether ‘blasphemously’ nullifies its religious undertones.”

I would like to point out here that Malay artists who I argue are part of the emerging new Malaysian middle class, are not afraid to produce works which highlight and criticise the political, social and cultural problems of society, especially those among Malay themselves. This is not to be seen as uncharacteristic but as being as Malay is synonymous to being a Muslim, it can also be pointed out that such critical approach can be interpreted as artists also being a responsible Muslim. For an instance, Mohd Nasir Baharuddin raises that, “… we should challenge Western art on its own ground using for instance, the Western visual vocabulary of modern installation work but with an Islamic content.”

I would argue here that in alignment with situasi percamoden, it is not surprising that Malay artists still source their work from Malay/Islamic visual and cultural elements and in this case, Malay and Islamic vocabulary and content have been adopted to explore issues of identity, both social and personal, for contemporary Malay artists. More recently, it has emerged in a more unrestrained, unedited form and more open to the imagination and can be argue as a form of visual commentary. Artist like Bayu Utomo Radjikin has taken up these commentary issues for example, who in the early 1990s took up the task in transforming newspaper headlines addressing the issue of child abuse and abandonment into artwork. I have pointed out in the works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam in the previous chapter of how her works conveyed her feelings of war and the plight of women and children in her works, Bayu Utomo’s work on the other hand exerts the local and urgent contemporary Malay socio-cultural dilemma by highlighting the themes of unmarried mothers, abandoned babies, abused children, drug addiction, and the problems of young disaffected Malay urban youth.

In “Newspaper” (1993) (Figure 79) for example, the artist confronts the viewers with collages of real objects such as tubes and drips attached to the figure of the child drawn on newspaper collages in his work. Touched by issues of baby abandonment, the image of an innocent child who suffers with burnt hands, a bandaged face patched and tubes surrounding

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488 Harun Abdullah Coombes, 25.
him confronted us. With collages of newspaper headlines juxtapose on the work, it implies how the suffering of these children are only known through the media or it can also be suggested that as unwanted babies, they themselves are wrapped in newspapers and left to die in the trash area, in the drain, by the side of the road and other unforeseen places most of the time dead.

Hamir Soib also reminds us about life’s grim realities in grotesque way by defying the usual form of art in a typical gallery setting. In his installation “Tak Ada Beza” (No difference at all) (2002) (Figure 2), the installation addresses the subject of baby abandonment in a confronting manner. He installs a huge painting of a family of pigs sitting together in harmony (pigs are regarded as haram (unlawful) and Muslims are not allowed to touch or eat them), amongst a heap of umbilical cords and at the end of one cord, a papier-maché sculpture of a stillborn human baby is deposited in the toilet bowl. Instead of focusing on the ill-fated circumstance of the baby like Byu Utomo, Hamir’s work suggests that those who abort babies are worse than pigs, human with no reason or compassion. Even the herd of family of pigs are superior to the morally and religiously corrupted human who would kill their own baby. As an allegory of society’s moral decay, Nur Hanim Khairuddin writes about the work,

"The serene ambience projected by the pig family portrait appeared to be incongruous with the wicked in humanity taking place on the floor and in the washroom. The contrasting impression presented an allegory concerning mankind’s moral decay in comparison to the animal sense of family bonding. Hamir’s clever application of the beauty of pigs in composing a pictorial sermon moreover was motivated by his desire to subvert the politics of Malay-Islamic art and its pious adherence to a non-figurative, ‘halal’ iconography." ⁴⁸⁹

Hamir Soib has been very much concerned with moral degradation especially among Malay youngsters. Besides “Tak Ada Beza” (No difference at all) (2002), in his Imbasan (2007) exhibition titles such as “Haruan Makan Anak,” “The Rempit” (Illegal Motorcycle Race), “Telur Buaya” (Crocodile Egg) and “A Board Game” insinuates the dark reality of certain section of Malaysian society that he address. Using postmodern strategies such as parody and allegory, he juxtaposes such strategies in his dark bitumen paintings, as a way of expressing his concerns of the failing society.

Zulkifli Yusof also has been critical of the reality of a certain irresponsible section of Malay society and uses this as the main subject of his work. In his series of work, he highlights the social ills of ‘Ahmad’ -- a Malay name picked by the artists as a metaphor for

“Old-World Malay” or *Melayu Lama*. For example in “Ahmad Fuck” (1997), the canvas displays a visual of English expletive, repetitively printed on one side of canvas, and in “Ahmad Pulang Bawa HIV+ve” (Ahmad Came Back with HIV +ve) (1997) the artist narrates the plight of the Ahmad who contracts HIV from an airline hostess. The intention of Zulkifli’s criticism is noble in highlighting several issues regarded as taboo Malay society and even in his strategy in employing the graffiti-like work displaying huge expletive words written is quite confronting for the audience, but in the context of the work, such response is expected and even welcomed.

Not only Malay artists, Chinese artists such as Wong Woan Lee have also highlighted her social concerns of *warga emas* (literally the golden citizens or in other words, pensioners or aging citizens) as they approach old age. In her “Hope of the Lonely (Reality and Delusion)” (2002) (Figure 80), she painstakingly drew an image of a realistically aged Chinese man that is reflective of the dilemma faced by these generations. It must be noted that although it is customary for three generations to live under the one roof in many households among Chinese society, radical urban changes in Malaysia have normalised the set of nuclear family, leaving the frail old parents to fend on their own, as a result, loneliness has subsequently become a problem that accompanies old age. The work exemplifies the point as it portrays an illusion of the old man’s imagination perhaps as he envisions being surrounded by his granddaughter as seen in three little girl figures in the work. The painting also shows us a glimpse of another room, which provides an unhindered view of yet another room. The room at the back depicts a figure, which could be either a visitor or a reflection of the old man himself, while a young couple, perhaps his children, look through the window. This work asks the audience to reflect back on how we treat parents: do we leave them on their own, as we get busy in our own lives? Is there something we can do to convert this lonely illusion in real life? Can our society only modernise and develop at the expense of our older generations and even younger generations?

While some works appear to explore Malay cultural forms, most works by Malay artists go beyond the celebratory function or idealistic aspects of Malay culture. Works by Jalaini Abu Hassan for example, can be aligned with this tendency. Better known as Jai, the artist’s drawings and paintings essentially revolve around objects either as symbols or forms derived from his personal memory or the artefacts of his daily life. While his early charcoal works

490 Iola Lenzi, "Zulkifli Yusoff," *Art Asia Pacific (Australia)* 1997, 90.
focus on monumental natural forms, his more recent paintings have been concerned with the relation between everyday objects and the memory of objects in an open narrative and as a Malay himself, subjects from the Malay culture are of course significant source of his artistic inspiration.

Jai’s work in “Mantera Series” (2004) however, delves into the animistic aspects within Malay traditional practices. Beliefs in spirits, charms and black magic, bomoh and pawang (both are terms for Malay traditional healers) for example, are not associated with Islam and do not sit comfortably with Malay/Muslim identity. This juncture makes Jai’s work differ from those works of the Malay/Islamic tendencies. His “Mantera Series” (2004) is drawings and paintings that range from these various rites of special prayers, words, and charms, in other word, mantera. The work “Mantera Buka Gelanggang” refers to a ritual preceding traditional performances or games to appease the spirits, or to ensure a smooth run of the event and the safety of participants. It depicts an elderly bomoh performing the ritual of ‘opening the stage or court’ before the commencement of a game or performance. “Bomoh Hujan” (2004) features a rain doctor who is called upon for big events and gatherings, such as major sport competitions or kenduris (a gathering of either religious or non-religious festivities, to celebrate important life events such as birth, circumcision and marriage) to ensure dry weather.

On a different level, “Cleansing Ritual” (2008) (Figure 77-79) is a series of work by Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman based on the concept of samak in Islam. The term samak means the cleaning of skin, once using mud or earth mixed with water, and then using clean water for the next six times. Muslims must carry out this method of cleansing, especially when dealing with najis (things regarded as ritually unclean) obtained from dogs and pigs. Though the term samak refers to Islamic practice, the artist’s work is very contemporary. As in his previous works such as “Code” and “The Challenger,” in this work the artist draws quotes from the mass media, especially of public figures or politicians on the issues of cleansing or proving once’s innocence that have consistently been raised in 2008 in Malaysia politics. However, the difference is that where in this work he instead takes photographs of himself undergoing the process of samak.

The Urban and Environmental Concerns

Other significant themes, which have been taken up by Malaysian artists, include their responses to Malaysia’s rapid urbanization and uncontrolled development. As I have
discussed previously, Nirmala Shanmughaligham’s collage/photo-documentation from the 1970s stands as the first initial attempt to document environmental issues in terms of artwork. This was followed by her silk-screens pertaining to illegal logging in Sarawak in the 1980s. Since the 1990s however, more and more artists have taken up such themes. This could be seen in Bayu Utomo Radjikin’s sculptural works “Bujang Berani” (1991), “Lang Ngindang” (1991) and “Lang Kacang” (1991) follow in Nirmala’s steps. These sculptures portrays the anguish and torment of tribes living in Sarawak through the screaming chieftains. These sculptures are only partially complete, perhaps implying the weakening position of the traditional social structure of Iban culture and their way of life and cultural displacement.

Since many artists work in urban or suburban areas, another issue that have been of concern of these artists are the problems created by rapid urbanization and the deteriorating wildlife and environment. Be it in a positive way or not, development has changed our urban landscape. Kok Yew Puah was an artist who painted the urban landscape around him. He chose to paint his children and their friends by positioning them in a few selective urban-scape of Klang in Selangor. He did not paint portraiture or landscape views but he voyeuristically painted these landscapes with a tourist’s eyes, capturing them with his ‘camera lens.’ His large canvases are finely detailed with bold Malaysian colours of blue, red, yellow, grey, and green. Concrete greys and glaring blue skies are juxtaposed with the bright tones of youth fashion, signages, cars, highways, and even colourful pre-war buildings. These contrasting colours make his work stand out, insinuating the bold and striking nature of contemporary life and landscape. In “Cyclists” (1995) and “Urban Playground” (1994) (Figure 80), these youngsters were counterpoised against the new buildings and new highways of the changing Klang environment. In “Temple Figures” (1997) (Figure 81), he includes the framing device of a camera in the work and ‘capture’ a picture of five youngsters standing in front an Indian temple near his house.

While Kok Yew Puah’s version of urban life is optimistic portrayed in his contented multiracial figures and colourful landscapes of Klang, Wong Hoy Cheong potrays another aspect of urban realities by contrasting urban landscapes in Selangor, the most developed state of West Malaysia. Through his video work entitled “Suburbia: Bukit Beruntung, Subang Jaya” (2006), he presents a two-channel looped video projection shot in two suburban landscapes -- the successful Subang Jaya and the less successful Bukit Beruntung.

“Filmed from the vantage point of a wheelchair and a remote control toy car, Hoy Cheong’s 2-channel video flirts with the speed of mobility and its anti-thesis, the deprivation of unrestricted movement. Yet, the stereotypically sluggish wheelchair zips along in the right frame, navigating and maneuvering with fluid ease. The two slipper-encased feet focus our eyes to a mobile median whereas
From these two different settings, the artist highlights the disparity between Bukit Beruntung and Subang Jaya. It must be noted here that despite its name (beruntung means having luck), Bukit Beruntung is an unrealized township ambition, while Subang Jaya is a bustling and thriving suburb between Shah Alam (the capital of Selangor) and Kuala Lumpur.

Another aspect that was affected by rapid urbanization and the increase of land and property value in cities are the demolition of historic and colonial buildings such as old shop houses that make up the identity of towns in Malaysia. Chuah Chong Yong is an artist who conveys his concern with heritage issues of pre-war buildings in Malaysia. He produced a series of paintings and installations entitled “Pre-War Building for Sale Series” from 1996 to 2000, and in 2003, he produced a series of works on pre-war buildings at Alor Gajah, Malacca. Some works in “Pre-War Building for Sale” feature enlarged, photocopied images of buildings, which have been partially destroyed, abandoned or fallen into disuse. These images are wrapped around metal rods, which are assembled in the manner of constructed, reinforced pillars. In “Pre-War Building for Sale: Mural Painting” (1996) for example, the work consists of images of facades of buildings painted on the wall, while on the floor are placed bricks salvaged from a demolished temple included in these images. In “Pre-War Building for Sake – The Gold Rush” (1996) (Figure 3), the artist “... depicts a large pre-war building that has a torrent of liquid gold lunging its way out of the building, destroying walls and windows, seeping through cracks that become fissures. A metaphor for the destruction of heritage buildings to make way for twenty-storey skyscrapers in Penang, the painting confronted viewers with the ugliness unchecked greed produces.”

His “Pre-war Building Series” highlights the crumbling state of the architectural heritage in Malaysia in the face of corporate power, and capitalist development and land value. In a way, his work refers to cultural loss and as a persistent reminder that there is an urgent need for careful preservation, permanent and consistent effort in retaining and maintaining not only pre-war buildings but also cultural heritage in general.

Ahmad Shukri Mohamed on the other hand, focuses on environmental, wildlife and urbanization effect. “Insect Diskette” (1997) (Figure 4) for example, is a mixed media assemblage composed of over two hundred computer diskettes. He represented this in a grid
across four plexiglass panels and are overlaid with representations of butterflies, palm trees, beetles, and other 'specimens.' It must be noted that Ahmad Shukri Mohamed does not position himself as criticizing or abstaining from embracing the technology brought by modernisation and development, but through his work he advocates balancing technology and nature. Images of fragile butterflies are repeatedly for example, are painted on parts of the diskettes, as a reminder that both nature and technology are not necessarily should be in opposition, but can actually merge to provide for and contribute to the progress of humankind either in the present or for subsequent generations.

On top of that, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed with his ceramist wife Umi Baizurah in their 2007 exhibition Warning! Tapir crossing pursue another nexus between development and nature. The exhibition was inspired by their discovery of five dead tapir at the site of their home in the newly developed area of Puncak Alam, which is located outside of Kuala Lumpur on the way to Kuala Selangor. Ahmad Shukri’s “Warning! Tapir Crossing I” (2007) (Figure 5) features five panel works of five tapirs numbered from one to five. On the lower part of the panels, he juxtaposes the figures of hundreds of cars in all shapes and sizes arranged at random.

Not all artists however, deal in the same way with the erosion of nature due to development. Johan Marjonid does not dwell, lament or highlights the depletion of Malaysia’s tropical rainforests, but his realist paintings promotes the tropical nature and the environment. His “Preservation Series,” “Arca Alam Series” (Figure 86) and “Melebu Alas Jelebu Series” for example, are amongst the work or series that draws inspiration from his visits to his favourite locations such as Stong Mountain, Tahan Mountain, the National Park in Pahang, Endau-Rompin area, and other forests around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. These works are actually realist paintings of sprawling Malaysian tropical forests depicted from various angles enticing the viewers to immerse themselves inside the deep Malaysian rainforest and appreciate the tranquillity of nature.

Similarly, though with a different stylistic approach Fauzin Mustaffa deals with the subject of nature and forest. His “Alam Fana Series” (1994) pays homage to the natural world by juxtaposing all sort of things such as dried leaves, pieces of wood and strings, tissue paper, papier-mâché and even ‘gold’ (foil from cigarette box) on plywood. The series reiterates the concern of a lot of people as a result of rapid urbanization in cities like Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Bahru.

"... many Malaysian children who live in cities probably will not recognize a rubber seed or an oil palm frond if they saw one. With the future generation becoming more and more estranged from the
natural world, there may come a time when the only opportunity for them to come face to face with common Malaysian flora and fauna is in museums, zoos or when viewing his collage."

**Beyond the Official Narrative**

Since the 1990s, we could see that some artists have developed and expanded their artistic strategies in several ways. This is enabled by their interaction internationally which was made possible by various electronic networks and also by their participation in international art exhibitions such as Documenta, Venice Biennale, Biennale of Sydney, Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, and the Asian Art Show in Fukuoka. A few artists began to explore challenging themes pertinent to postmodern discourse such as center-periphery, representation, postcoloniality, globalisation, cosmovolcanism, cultural paradigm issues, questions of border, transnationalism, transculturation etc. As the postmodern idea is deeply suspicious of the idea of ‘universal history’ or metanarrative, artists, influenced by postmodern strategies begin to create works that attempt to deconstruct or question official narratives, especially the official historical narrative of Malaysia. It must be noted here that perhaps the international art scene had influenced the process of art making in Malaysia but the shift in artistic strategies as embodied by many artists since the 1990s had allow various questions on politics, social, culture and even history to be raised at least in Malaysian art scene. Therefore, postmodern art strategies have enabled artists to engage with more all-round issues pertinent among Malaysian middle class including politics.

Artists begin to attempt in voicing their opinions about political happenings in Malaysia, Wong Hoy Cheong is one of the artist that is significant in this effort either through his artwork or through his activism in APA (acronym for Artis Pro Activ). APA was established in 1998, to unite artists, as “… a loose coalition of people from the Malaysian arts community united in the belief that questions must always be asked.” The manifesto enlist the intentions and position of APA as follows,

"WE BELIEVE that it is time for the arts community of Malaysia to come together again to take a more concerted, pro-active role in developing a more open society for our country, without fear or favour. VIA performances, publications, exhibitions, screenings, workshops, campaigns and other events, TO PROMOTE freedom of expression and association for people in the arts community, TO ENCOURAGE the free flow of ideas and information, TO PROMOTE recognition that members of the Malaysian public have the intelligence to make up their own minds and should be encouraged to do so."
The group’s activities range from performances, publications, exhibitions, screenings, workshops, and campaigns on issues of human rights, freedom of speech and anti-ISA campaign\(^ {497} \). The exhibition of *Apa? Siapa? Kenapa?* (What? Who? Why?) for example, opened on 27\(^{th}\) October 1998 to mark the 11\(^{th}\) anniversary of ‘Lalang Operation,’ an operation when the Malaysian government arrested 116 people without trial under the ISA. In November 1998, “The APA APA Fest” was also held as a multidisciplinary arts festival and other events includes a Postcard Campaign in March 1999, in which postcards designed by Wong Hoy Cheong were produced with the theme on rights of Malaysian citizens, Anti-ISA T-Shirt and Art Auction in May 2001. Michelle Antoinette’s points out that,

“APA was established expressly in response to the volatile economic and socio-political conditions that erupted in Malaysia during 1998. APA’s art is, in this sense, undeniably political. Central to the group’s formation was a belief in the transformative potential of creative practices, one which is geared specifically towards social and political change. ...”\(^ {498} \)

Although APA made an impact on political awareness especially late 1990s due to the political circumstances in Malaysia, the influence and the success of APA in implementing its agenda however, is still questionable and merits further in-depth investigation and research.\(^ {499} \)

As I have mentioned previously, Wong Hoy Cheong himself is an activist-artist who has produce several works informed by political events or imbedded with political names. His early painting entitled “Detention Oct 1987 (Tahanan ISA)” (1989) and his “Lalang” performance/installation of 1994 are among his early works that adheres these messages. For “Lalang” (1994), the artist produce an installation/performance at the National Art Gallery to draw a comparison between the resilience of rhizomes and that of the opposition party during 1987’s ‘Lalang Operation.’ In the gallery, he examines the meanings and uses of *lalang* by using drawing and texts in a documentary or museum-like presentation. The display includes botanical information about the plant, how it flourishes, how it can be killed and how it resists death and outside of the gallery compound, he grew *lalang* (a rhizomic weed) and burnt it a week later. The events of the end of the 1990s\(^ {500} \) also inspired Wong Hoy Cheong

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\(^{497}\) ISA is acronym for Internal Security Act that allows for the arrest of any person without trial.

\(^{498}\) Michelle Antoinette, ed., 240.


\(^{500}\) 1998 witnessed the political struggle between Malaysia’s Prime Minister at that time and his deputy Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar Ibrahim was fired from Cabinet in September 1998 and faced sodomy charges. Anwar’s supporters mobilised in response to the trial and protests broke out across Malaysia in 1998 and 1999, precipitating a political and social crisis.
to produce more work of a political nature. “Vitrine of Contemporary Events” (1999) (Figure 87) is an installation of judges’ wigs, police batons, objects collected from street reformation demonstrations and a section of the Federal Constitution made of cow dung. Similarly, “Tapestry of Justice,” on the other hand, is a work in progress that assembles thousands of thumbprints from Malaysia, Denmark, United Kingdom and Finland, to signify the appeal for the Internal Security Act (ISA) to be abolished in Malaysia. Visitors to this work are also encouraged to demonstrate their support by stamping their thumbprints on the work.

Although other artists may not be as political in their approach as Wong Hoy Cheong, a few artists they have nonetheless produced works in relation to series of political events and issues happening in Malaysia. Ahmad Fuad Osman for example, has produced a series of four gigantic canvases of self-portraits as part of his response towards the political developments in Malaysia at the end of the 1990s. Titles such as “Mulut ‘Syhhh...!’ Dok diam-diam. Jangan bantah. Mulut hang hanya boleh guna untuk cakap YAAAA saja. Bagu hang boleh join dengan depa.... ...senangla jadi kaya!” (Mouth: Hush... Sit quietly. Don’t object. Your mouth is only for saying ‘yes.’ Then, you can join them.... ...and get rich quick.) (1999) (Figure 88), “Telinga ‘Hooi, Hoi! Apa ni? Dia kata hang salah. Hang kata dia tak betoi.... ...sapa yang salah, sapa yang betoi? Hangpa ni sebenarnya nak apaaa?” (Oil: What’s this? He says you’re wrong. You say he’s wrong... ...who’s wrong, who’s right? What do you really want?) (1999), and “Mata: ‘Sudah Laa! Jangan dok berlakon lagi... aku dan (sic) meluat nak tengok ” (Eyes: Enough. Stop acting... ...I’m fed up of watching) (1999) and “Hidung ‘Isssh! Busuknya! Hangpa bawak (s)apa ni?” (Nose: Yuck! It smells! Who are you bringin’ in here?) (1999) reflect the confusion, annoyance, and anger of ordinary Malaysians on what is happening in Malaysia politic.

Other works appear to be more indirect but still refer to the political reality in Malaysia. Ahmad Shukri’s “Sidang Rakyat Series #1” (2002) for example, insinuates the political scenario in Malaysia. The installation consists of hundreds of boxing gloves cast in plaster and set atop a low table covered in a patchwork of textiles. At a glance, the boxing gloves suggest on patches of textiles immediately reminds us of the sparing nature of politicians especially in the context of Malaysian parliamentary and political debates especially in parliamentary sessions. The term “Sidang Rakyat” itself means ‘citizen’s discourse’ or ‘meeting’ and it is a term that refers to Malaysia’s parliamentary session.

Sharon Chin’s “Executive Toy” (2007) (Figure 89 and 90) on the other hand, is a clever work modelled after ‘Newtown’s cradle,’ a series of identically sized metal balls suspended in a metal frame. In the original ‘Newton’s cradle,’ the metal balls are attached to the frame
by two wires of equal length, so that when one ball is pulled away from the rest and then returns to hit the next ball, the kinetic energy is transferred to the last ball in line which will bounce out and come back. Cleverly, the artist’s version of the “Executive Toy” instead of using metal balls like the original version, the 27 balls in the work are made from ceramics to represent the various political parties in Malaysia and each of these balls bear a logo of these parties. The ceramic balls are fragile and breakable. Therefore, ineffective and cannot be set in motion without the risk of breakage. This reminds us of the condition and the relationship between Malaysia’s political parties, fragile and breakable.

On a different note, Nadiah Bamadhaj’s “147 Tahun Merdeka Digital Prints Series” (2007) addresses Malaysia’s future. This print series was actually developed out of the artist’s discussions with labour activist Tian Chua. The work consists of digital images to portray Malaysia’s institutions would be like 100 years from now in the form of nine large format digital prints of major Malaysian institutions or buildings such as Istana Budaya, Angkasapuri, Putrajaya, Tugu Negara, and commercial buildings like IKEA, as well as a commemorative arch along the highway and newspaper front-cover headlines. The manipulation allows the artist to superimpose a possible reality to one’s perspective on the current institutional symbol or sites in digital prints.

Besides politics and political situations, other artists have also begun to produce work that deconstructs or questions the ‘official’ historical narratives of the Malaysian nation. Ahmad Fuad’s “Recollections of Long Lost Memories” (2007) (Figure 91) for example, blends landscapes and scenes taken from historic moment of the past with contemporary figures either in his paintings or slides. For his paintings, the artist paints old photographs onto huge canvases and inserted a contemporary figure into the work and for the slides, the artist produced 71 slide projection of historic photographs taken between 1860 and 2003, then he digitally insert a modern-day figure. Ahmad Fuad’s manipulation of these historical images questions in a visually literal form of Malaysia’s own history and their relevance to contemporary life. Carmen Nge for example highlights the nature of memory that are raised in this work,

“History is false memory because history is selective; the saying that history is written by the victors is certainly true in our own nation. Why do we remember Tunku’s ‘Merdeka’ cry but not the bombing of the Tugu Negara in 1975? What deal did the ruling elites strike with the British to gain independence? Those of us who lived through the events of 1957 remember it very differently from those of us yet to be born. But discrepancies exist, even among those who experienced similar events. Humans are adroit at forgetting details they’d rather not remember. Who preserves our nation’s memories and to what end? And do younger Malaysians really care?”

Nadiah Bamadhaj’s “1965 Rebuilding its Monuments” has also raised the question of memory and official narrative. Instead of concentrating on local topic, Nadiah has broach the subject of her work across the border of Indonesia by questioning the events of 1965 which took place throughout Southeast Asia -- the overthrow of Sukarno by Suharto, the murder of suspected Communists in Java and Bali, the split between Malaysia and Singapore, and the foreign construct of the domino theory in the region. To do this, the gallery space at Petronas Gallery was divided into four sections -- the first featured sets of plaster casts of the songkok (Malay headgear) representing the political elite involved in the event (Figure 92); the second highlights Muslim gravestones to mark the slaughtered victims; the third consists of bullets arranged in the form of the sickle and hammer to represent communist ideology (Figure 93); and finally, a stack of five domino pieces on checkered floor tiles to symbolise the domino theory. The thematic approach of Nadiah’s work is characterised by a haunting sparseness, lacking of figures and colours, reliance on monochromatic tones and even an unfamiliar arrangement of gravestones. Although the interest of the artists in the events that happened in Indonesia is because Nadiah’s own brother was killed in the 1991 massacre in Dili, East Timor, this work is not about East Timor. The strategy of the work however, is to position itself as challenging Indonesia’s strategy (or that of people in power) of using violence as a political solution. Even she suggested that “(e)motion becomes the key to political involvement, reminding us of the suffering caused in the name of politics.”

History and memory has also been the subject of a few other artists internationally. These themes have never been broached as a subject before and proclivities by artists in delving with such matters can be argued as part of the influence of a postmodern discourse and the international art scene on Malaysian art. In the Sydney Biennale 2006, Hayati Mokhtar and Dain-Iskandar Said for example, explored the relationship between geographical documentation and the people in Terengganu, Malaysia. The film “Near Intervisible Lines” (2006) that they produced is about shifting perceptions of the landscape along the East Coast, a sand spit at the intersection between the Setiu River and South China Sea in particular. Erosion however, forced the villagers out and all visible markers of the

504 This discussion was published in Sarena Abdullah, “Biennale of Sydney 2006,” sentap!, Issue 5, Nov 06-Jan 07.
settlement have subsequently been erased. The film set to indicate, that the sandy terrain cannot hold onto its past, what is left are only trace of what was once there, which has been charted by modern records and memory as narrated by the locals in the film. The work creates a sense of displacement and nostalgia with the sound of the waves in the background. As a film, the work is presented across four-screens with the final screen playing the scene depicting the oral tradition of local villagers, with figures wandering in and out of the frame, with sounds of haunting songs and memories of their experience of the area.

At another international art scene, we could see that Susyilawati Sulaiman’s also employ the same approach in her participation in the 2007 ‘documenta 12’ exhibition in Germany where she brings about a set of work that involves language, history and memory. The work includes installations, drawings, books and collages such as her two small diaries entitled “Anna” (1996) and “Botanical Garden” (1996). The diaries consist of her own personal notes, images and collages. At the same time during the exhibition, she also ‘performed’ “Emotional Library” (2007) (Figure 94) by reading the diaries out loud in person during the first month of the exhibition or as one-on-one readings and discussions with gallery visitors.

Besides politics, narratives, history and memory, an artist like Wong Hoy Cheong also employs postcolonial strategy in his work. A graduate with a literary degree, Wong Hoy Cheong aptly employs postcolonial strategies cleverly in his artistic practice. His "Map of Buckingham Street and its Vicinity" (2004) and “Map of Downing Street and its Vicinity” (2004) for example, employ the cartographic style from the 15th-17th centuries to create new maps. In these works, Wong Hoy Cheong attempts to invert or question the colonizer and the colonized position as he interweaves the streets and landmarks of Penang and London on the juxtaposition of the maps. In “Colonies Bite Back” (2001), the artist brings the issue out further by feeding termites with the pages of two British school textbooks and the Malaysian Constitution. This work cleverly suggests the slow disintegration of colonial power and the destruction of its memory as the termites that the artists ‘breed’ in the installation setting consume the pages, creating blank spaces in these books.

Contemporary Images and Representations

Unlike the Malay/Islamic centred art that sources its visual references either from Malay and/or Islamic subjects, themes or aesthetics, artists since the 1990s have merged contemporary images taken from various sources. As I have discussed in Chapter Four, one
characteristic of postmodern art is its conflation of high and low culture through the use of materials and pop culture imagery that can be achieved with through collision, collage, and fragmentation of either previous works or images or visual elements from these various sources. This strategy is also popular among a few artists that use these conflating images of high and low cultures as a form of visual commentary to comment on the changing lifestyles from rural to urban-centred driven by consumerism and market experienced by the new Malaysian middle class.

Ismail Zain as I have discussed earlier, had contributed to a significant analysis of the impact of global popular mass-culture and pop culture on the Malay psyche in terms of images and popular cultural icons. This can be observed in his computerised prints in his “Digital Collage Series” -- we could see the images of the Ewings of the TV Series Dallas in front of traditional Malay house in “Al Kesah” (1988), the digital portraits of Malaysia popular singer Sharifah Aini and Sahara Yaakob in “Nasyid” (1988) and “Penyanyi Pujaan” (1988), and Hollywood star, Joan Collins in “My Friend Lisa” (1988). Since the 1990s, many artists have used various images and elements of contemporary life in their work. This is not unprecedented for, as I have pointed out in Chapter Three, the rise of the Malaysian middle class also entailed the rise of consumerism and a shift in lifestyles especially among urbanites. As I have mentioned in Chapter Three, with modernization, certain communal characteristics also have begun to deteriorate and the society become very individualistic. Consumerism eventually became a powerful force as these new Malaysian middle classes became the consumers of various products and able to shop in large and various shopping malls for imported branded products. Certain artists begin to observes these phenomenon and display such themes by addressing these consumerist shifts in their work.

Besides work that highlights environmental and urbanization issues, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed also delves into the mindset and behaviour of Malaysian society. This could be seen in his series that juxtaposed images of contemporary cultural productions that is frequently regarded as common and trivial. Ahmad Shukri Mohamed appropriates various icons, symbols, and signs, from traditional batik motifs, butterflies, cabinet shelves (Figure 95), to food covers, flowers, barcode, and even cartoon characters such as Ninja Turtles and Ultraman. Although these images are familiar to the Malaysian public, the presentation of these images in a new of context of Ahmad Shukri Mohamed’s work enables the viewer to read and see them as part of the changing socio-cultural conditions in Malaysian society. Ahmad Shukri’s installation work entitled “Urban Garden Series” (1998) (Figure 96) for example, comments on the issue of hydroponic cultivation by city and country dwellers.
during the 1998 economic crisis. His “Incubator” (2001) and “Odyssey” (2001) investigates the popularity of ayam serama or dwarf chicken among Malaysian urbanites that became the subject of his work. These chickens however, are not intended for brawling but are rather judged by their beauty. Therefore, in which case their owners must monitor nutrition and living conditions and even provide suitable mates for beautiful serama chickens to be produced. Not only that, the price of these seramas can sometimes reach tens of thousands of ringgit.

Perhaps the seramas represented in Ahmad Shukri’s work can also be argued as also representing a link between the rural and the urban. After all, most Malay urbanites are those who left their own villages to attain higher education and eventually work and raised their own families in the cities. Perhaps these seramas in a way are an inner connection of the Malays to their rural upbringing. Afterall, in the work, the artist represents the eggs as having a hard rotund shell and symmetrical oval shape (although some appear more elongated) to imply perfection and beauty. Unlike the real serama eggs, each of the eggs in the work differs from one another in their texture, colour, shade and pattern. There are even collages of aluminium foil, imprints, silkscreen, and textile collages from material such as batik, satin and saree as his way to explore and represent the complex social structures of the Malay community in the cities.

Yee I-Lan’s work in International Contemporary Art Fair (Arco) in Madrid 2002 on the other hand, not only demonstrates her ability to manipulate kitsch and ordinary items into art works but most importantly as comments of the aspect of consumerism of modern societies. Her collection of bags is made from billboard fabric which embodies the advertisement, marketing and capitalist focus of her work. This could be seen on the bags that feature images of two Asian children with a speech bubble stating ‘Buy Me.’ Other bags also incorporate branded names and corporate trademarks such as Barbie, Coca-Cola, Pampers, MTV, CNN, Nescafe, Britney Spears, Pokemon and Ultraman. Her installation consists of 85 bags priced at 208 Euros (then about RM600) each, which were among the cheapest art pieces in the show for sale!

In contrast to the works of Ahmad Shukri Mohamed and Yee I-Lan, Liew Kung Yu uses the government slogan ‘Cemerlang, Gemilang, Terbilang’ (Excellence, Glory, Distinction) (2007) for his work (Figure 97). His work juxtaposes icons familiar to Malaysians such as Petronas Towers, the first Malaysian astronaut, Malaysian-owned Proton motorcars arranged in the shape of a pohon beringin or ‘tree of life’ used in wayang kulit (shadow puppet theatre) performances. The word Merdeka, meaning independence or
freedom, is placed against this montage, while another slogan ‘Malaysiaku Gemilang’ (My Glorious Malaysian) can be found at the bottom of the work. The image of *pohon beringin* is perforated with a series of holes and slits which allow light to pass through them, casting an image onto the floor’s surface of the Demon King Rawana, a traditional character from *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theatre). According to the artist, in some versions of the Ramayana epic, Rawana is a greedy but good villain who loves to show off.  

The collages of images of modern kitsch with elements of traditional *wayang kulit*, perhaps pose us the question do these icons and symbols reflect our greediness in our never ending consumerist and modernist drive?

Lastly, Sharon Chin’s cynicism about consumerism is demonstrated in her installation “Pole Positions” (2007). The viewer is faced with a pair of prayer carpets ‘cut-out’ in an architectural form in the gallery setting. The prayer carpet ‘cutout’ infers to the mosque as a religious symbol and this is further supported by prayer calls and videos of the minarets. It is then revealed however, that the mats are actually the outline plan of Kuala Lumpur’s Petronas Twin Towers. Subsequently, as the viewer kneels on the prayer mat to put on the headphones, they realize that they are actually paying homage to the centre of Malaysian consumerism and not to religion as symbolized by the mosque, suggesting how easily we can be skewed by a religious symbol though it might actually mean something else.

My discussion of works in this chapter shows that the strength of Malaysia art since the 1990s lies in the process of defining, redefining and understanding the misunderstanding of various aspects of political, social and culture. This is made possible the openness in terms of attitude of these new Malaysian middle class that have attained higher education and advancement provided and supported by the pro-Malay policies through the implementation of NEP especially. If mooted works previously rooted in a Malay/Islamic-centred approach and Malaysian Abstract Expressionism were enclosed in its own internal aesthetic approach as could be seen in the works of Syed Ahmad Jamal and Latiff Mohiddin for example, Malaysian artists who were exposed to *situasi percamoden* employed postmodern art strategies and engaged this further in a dialogue between art and Malaysia society.

When viewers are faced with these works that I have discussed, they must ask themselves “What does it have to say?” Art works such as these can be investigated as documents or visual research, but the non-exhibited qualities of work are also equally important as the relationship between elements within the work itself must determined either

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a work is successful or not. The discussion of artwork in this chapter demonstrates that these works must be read beyond their historical, rhetorical and philosophical contexts in order to grasp their meanings. The themes of the artworks are not about the categorisation of postmodern or anti-modern art, the exploration of Conceptual art as a means of examining the nature of art, or about the kind of art that reworks previous styles or art works. The strength of these works resides in the idea and local subjects that they sought to address, nominalising their aesthetic emphasis. The idea and local subject relies on the fact that the country’s social, economic, political and cultural landscape have changed vastly in the last 50 years and even more so in the last 30 years. These artists have addressed these facts.

As I have discussed here and the previous chapters, we can observe that there is a major shift in the artistic approach of artists in Malaysia from the 1990s. While Malay/Islamic-centred art and Malaysian Abstract Expressionism are inwardly and aesthetically focused, artists who adopt a postmodern stance are outwardly focused and address ongoing social and political concerns rooted in the situasi perkamoden. They then create original work by arranging pre-existing images and signs. They do not work or live in a vacuum but are dependent on and inextricably a part of Malaysian society. Consequently, they produce art that touches us in a most profound way. Unlike works pertaining to Malay or Islamic ideals, these works of art do not need to be beautiful, representational, or realistic. They conflate images from high and low culture and from traditional and modern life. Innovative applications of media and techniques such as collage, montage, photographic imaging, digital manipulation, resist rigid formal and structural conventions. The usage of collisions, collages and fragmentations to open our eyes to our perception of art and its role in society.
CONCLUSION

As pointed out in the introduction to this dissertation, the discussion of modern and postmodern art outside of Euramerica needs to be contextualized in each nation’s own historical and cultural terms. I have pointed out in the Introduction that since the social, political and cultural context of Malaysia, a postcolonial nation-state is built from a specific history and reality that differs from other countries, therefore, any issue relating to postmodernism and modernism in Malaysian context must be discussed within this milieu.

In this dissertation, I have discussed the shift from modern to a postmodern outlook in the context of *percamoden*, or Malaysia’s ‘postmodern situation’ that I argued as related to the significantly merging new Malaysian middle class. I have argued that the works since the 1990s, especially those posited to be ‘postmodern’ are not just a copy of an artistic approach from Euramerica and I have be examined this in the context of Malaysian cultural engineering which has become the national agenda since the 1970s.

Besides the premise of *situasi percamoden* or postmodern situation that I have discussed in this dissertation, we must further question the changing tendencies in art since the last two decades means to Malaysian art and Malaysia in general. This is important as we need and should understand that not only the past but also the immediate present and the future, either in history, culture and art, constitute the very fundamental aspects of our understanding of who we are in life. History and culture for example, help to give us a sense of identity, informing us of who we are, where we are from and where we are going. If most markers of history surround us in the form of architecture and monuments, which adorn our cities, art should not be relegated to the side, because in the form of the visual elements, artworks had proven to be a consistent form of reference or reflection for us to understand the culture and the society it represents. Therefore, it is important for us to understand the generation of Malaysian artists born between the 1960s and the early 1980s and the art that they produced as it reflect the concerns of the changing reality of Malaysian society. In the context of an international art, one day there will come a time that these artists’ exuberance, confidence and aesthetic optimism and participation in the globalizing world will not go unnoticed.

Furthermore, the need to understand Malaysian art arose out of and was marked deeply by a heightened awareness of various global developments, both from the local art scene rooted in identities either through the national construction or deconstruction and also the sphere of international art. Despite the thematic discourse of postmodern art and postmodernity that has been suggested throughout this dissertation, the significant fact about
Malaysian artists is that they have long grappled with the issue of identity, whether they are well informed with postmodern theoretical discourse or not. Malaysian artists have been grappling with the issue of identity since Independence and their exploration or search of individual or racial identity cannot escape from the construction of the ‘state-nation.’ The idea of ‘nationalism’ and ‘nation-state’ in the context of Third World and developing countries, as Rejai and Enloe point out, takes a variety of forms and carries various political consequences. The interplay between ‘nation’ and ‘state’ is usually a relationship between national integration and political sovereignty. In contrast, in most of the currently underdeveloped, newly independent countries, this is reversed. Authority and sovereignty on the other hand, have run ahead of self-conscious national identity and cultural integration. Therefore, they suggested that Europe produced ‘nation-states,’ whereas Asia and Africa have produced ‘state-nations.’

The ‘nation’ can be understood to be a relatively large group of people who feel they belong together by virtue of sharing one or more traits, such as a common language, religion or race, a common history or tradition, a common set of customs, and a common destiny. According to Rejai and Enloe, even if the empirical observation of these traits does not actually exist, it is more important that the people believe they do. It is important to remember that the Benedict Anderson’s concept of ‘an imagined community’ too relies on the idea that although citizens are often strangers to one another, they share the idea of the nation and what it stands for.

While this is the general perception of what or who constructs a nation and in the context of Asia and Africa, ‘state-nation,’ Shamsul A.B. on the other hand argues that Malaysia is actually a nationless state. Although there appears to be a rhetoric of ‘national integration,’ ‘national unity, and ‘national identity’ consistently propagated in government policies and various government led campaigns through media such as state-controlled television and major newspaper, there are also significant contestations of this official version of national identity. Shamsul A.B. argues that at the ‘authority-defined’ and bumiputera-dominated level, the question of identity is perceived by the government is a non-issue because its basis and content has been spelt out in a number of policy documents within the framework of the Malaysian Constitution. The bumiputera-defined identity as concluded in

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507 Ibid.: 141.
the NCC privileges many aspects of bumiputera culture as the ‘core’ of the national identity, whilst also recognising the cultural symbols of other ethnic groups. But this ‘authority-defined’ form of national identity has consistently been challenged by those who have a different ‘nation-of-intent’.

Other versions of ‘nation-of-intent’ includes those who prefer a more ‘pluralised’ national identity, in which the culture of each ethnic group that lives in Malaysia or native religion of the non-Muslim bumiputera is accorded an equal position to that of bumiputera. Even the radical Islamic bumiputera group offers their own version of ‘nation-of-intent’ based on Islamic perspective.

On top of that, Shamsul A.B. argues that the former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamed’s Wawasan 2020 or Vision 2020 itself implies that Malaysia is still ‘one state with several nations.’ He argues that through Mahathir’s vision, in a general sense, Malaysia is a coherent variant of a capitalist entity, but in terms of political and ideological context the country is still searching for its parallel coherence, especially in terms of the idea of nation. This is because there exists a number of competing ‘nations-of-intent’ that are still being entertained amongst Malaysia’s citizens. This has resulted in the unending question of national identity that persists among Malaysians.

Shamsul A.B further points out that these dissenting voices are present and consistently heard especially in regard to their ‘nation-of-intent.’ While the government may be controlling the mass media this does not automatically mean that, as many foreign observers claim, these voices are muted are silenced. He explains,

“The lack of lively intellectual discussions in the main English-language press, which have been the main source of information for the foreign observers, perhaps have made them arrive at this conclusion. However, dissenting voices in Malaysia are articulated in minor vernacular dailies, such as in the Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, Kadazan or Iban language; yet others can be found in the form of cassette and videotapes, pamphlets, ‘poison letters’, political party manifesto, and the like, hence inaccessible to most of these observers, whose dependence on English-speaking, Kuala Lumpur-based, middle-class Bumiputera or non-Bumiputera is a well-known fact.”

Shamsul notes that the concept of ‘nation-of-intent’ first appears in Rotburg’s (1966) study on ‘African nationalism’ and has been applied to the Malaysian context by Rustam A. Sani (1975). Shamsul explains that by ‘nation-of-intent’ he means, “...a more and less precisely defined idea of the form of a nation, i.e. its territory, population, language, culture, symbols and institutions. The idea must be shared by a number of people who perceive themselves as members of that nation, and who feels that it unites them, but it does not necessarily imply an aspiration for political self-rule on the part of the group of people who are advancing for their nation-of-intent. It depicts an idea of a nation that still needs to be constructed or reconstructed. ...” See Shamsul A.B., “Debating About Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis,” in Cultural Contestrations: Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysian Society, ed. Zawawi Ibrahim (London: Asean Academic Press, 1998), 26.

Ibid., 24.

Ibid., 25.

Ibid., 26.
The 'authority-defined' efforts can be seen in initiatives taken by the government to create a sense of nation-ness in national day parades and various songs pledging love to the king and state played on radio and television. To successfully create this sentiment though, the development of a national language, national culture and common values must go beyond the purely symbolic level. This account for the failure of the National Cultural Policy as an ideological production of the state. This could be seen that in the late 1990s despite the National Cultural Policy, the government called for the preservation and protection of Malay language and culture and raised concerns over the possible erosion of Malay cultural values with the approaching end to the century.\footnote{Sheila Nair, 93.} However, the state's effort to construct a national identity through the NCC has produced a sense of alienation, not only amongst non-Malays but also amongst Malays intellectual and elites. Therefore, although the framework has been laid out through the NCC, the feasibility of its implementation is still questionable. Perhaps this can be argued as one of the many reasons why, despite the NCC promulgated since the early 1970s, the shift of aesthetics and thematic interest in Malaysia art still happened.

Especially in Malaysian art, Malaysian artists have continually raised pertinent questions and embarked on searches for identity, particularly in terms of visual forms and in the context and reality of a multiracial Malaysia. It must be noted that the initial attempts at nation building in the context of the NCC itself have not been well received by Malaysian artists. Syed Ahmad Jamal however, pointed out that following the proclamation of the NCC, a number of artists eventually committed themselves to addressing the question of identity, at least in their own personal quest to understand the Malay cultural context, which had been sidelined for many years. He asserts,

"... The National Cultural Congress held in 1971 brought to light some aspects of this important issue, such as origin, characteristics, norms, values, ethos, image and other fundamental points. A new nationalism is realized."\footnote{Syed Ahmad Jamal, "Contemporary Islamic Art in Malaysia," Arts and The Islamic World 5, no. 1 (1988): 47.}

Even Sulaiman Esa pointed out that Independence holds multiple meanings for many Malay artists. The first is that it denotes the liberation of their 'body,' and second, on a socio-cultural and socio-religious level, it denotes the liberation of their 'mind and spirit' from Western domination.\footnote{Sulaiman Esa, Identiti Islam Dalam Senirupa Malaysia: Pencapaian Dan Cabaran, 26.} I would like to point out here, however, in the context of liberating oneself from Western domination; we can also be dominated by a 'national' construct. Such contestations will always occur and the question that have been posited through this
dissertation is that are nationalistic ideals are still relevant to Malaysian artists after two decades of NCC? The promulgation of the NCC for example, has not deterred voices from espousing concerns of those from non-Malay society. Karim Raslan raises his perspective on this issue,

"... the issue of national identity faces a dead end for two reasons -- first, since the Malay-dominated bureaucracy has decided that Malay artists should determine what constitutes the Malaysian identity and the prevailing ethos is one of introspection, cultural purity and a disdain for the non-Malay, the exercise is unneeded as the ‘Malaysian’ identity here is seen purely in terms of what is ‘Malay’ to the exclusion of all else. Secondly, there is a very real danger that when art is harnessed to the needs of the nation and a politically driven theme – such as nation building – the work created will lack honesty and integrity. The art is not inspired by the artist’s own creative impulse.”

Zakaria Ali on the other hand also observes,

"Sepintas lalu, seni dan pluralism itu berkait rapat sehingga sebilangan isu yang terbit dari perkaitan tersebut boleh dirumuskan seperti berikut: perbezaan bangsa, agama, budaya memerlukan penyuaraan cita rasa yang berbeza pula. Maka dengan sendirinya seniman pelbagai kaum, sama-sama menghadapi masalah agar karya seni yang mereka hasilkan itu, benar-benar mencerminkan cita rasanya. ...

... Paradoks seni moden Malaysia ialah selagi tekan kita mencari identity nasional yang difinitif, maka selagi kerap berundur ke belakang kubu etnik. ..." 517

(At one glance, art and pluralism is very close that a few of the issues that emerge from that relationship can be concluded as such: the differences of race, religion, and culture need a different form of expression. Therefore, artists of various races, together are confronted with the same issue so that their art work that they produce, really reflects their taste. ...

... The paradox of Malaysian art is that the more diligently that we search for a definitive national identity, the more we were to go back behind ethnic barrier. ...)"

Not everyone is sceptical and suspicious of the NCC, as Mohd Ali Abdul Rahman points out that the attempt to highlight the traditional myths; legends and cultural values of the Malay are a most appropriate way to unite the people of Malaysia. In fact, while the non-Malay artists practice their own racial and ethnic cultural heritage, they may also at the same time adopt the Malay traditional heritage (which consists of other cultural heritage too) as their national identity in art. He points out that there should be no reason for any agitation or sense of crisis amongst the non-Malay artists. He explains that the unfounded uneasiness is due to the non-Malay artist’s ignorance and their unfamiliarity with Malay culture that could be more appreciated if other artists know the meaning and the content of the Malay-centred artworks.

516 Karim Raslan, unpaginated/unavailable from copy.
After all, he points out that the idea of placing Malay cultural identity, as the core activity above other racial and ethnic cultures is to bridge the differences amongst the people who live in separate cultural compartments. It should become a unifying form of expression for all Malaysians, transcending the various cultural barriers of a pluralistic society. Similarly, like the recognition of Islam as the official religion of Malaysia, it does not mean that all other religions cannot be practiced. Therefore, he argues the same case should also be applied in terms of art in which the recognition of Malay form and content should be the foundation of art activity in Modern Malaysian visual art.518

Despite the various perspectives on 'nation-of-intent' that happens to persist in the visual forms, what is new and particularly significant for Malaysian artists working since the 1990s is that their artistic expression not only shifted to the concern of the new Malaysian middle class as I have discussed in this dissertation. Besides being a voice of Malaysian middle class, these artists are now required to reposition themselves in a more global context. Globalisation, the Internet and the influx of various media and information have all become a larger influence on Malaysian artists and arts not only in terms of art making but networking as well. The evolution of technology and the idea of a 'borderless world' for example, mean that artists have had to redefine their position and reevaluate their role within this new construct. Of course, not all are in agreement about the benefit of technological advancements. Zakaria Ali for example, explains his wariness that should be taken into account in regards to globalisation,

"... I silence the throbs of trepidation by insisting that changes wrought by this creature called Information technology in the art world are only the hint of a beginning. The worse is yet to come. Over the next 30 years, our taste would be largely uniformed, inculcated by images of works hung in the British Museum, the Louvre, the Hermitage, the MoMA readily accessible in the Internet. We would be deluded in thinking that we are the true heirs to this largely alien tradition when in fact we are not. Some observer fear that such an acquisition spells death to our culture because it is an illusion, rooted in cyber space. To maintain it requires much time and energy that otherwise could be used to cultivate the genuine feeling of rootedness, identifying with the reality of who we are, in light of what we have, becoming an audience willing to appreciate our cultural heritage from a common sense point of view."519

Public access to the internet also means that various activities can be explored beyond the purview of the state. Artists are free to choose which community or communities they wish to engage beyond the physical border of nation-state. Given this fluidity of the border construct, notions of identity have to be constructed or reconstructed once again. As Niranjan

Rajah asserts that the challenge to the nation is that both the government and the citizens should learn how to operate in this fluid information environment. The government must learn that political and cultural direction can no longer be applied in a paternalistic manner and the citizens on the other hand have to learn to discriminate and make their own judgements in this overwhelming influx of information. Niranjan reminds us that it is not an easy task especially when the ‘open’ information environment cannot evade from the global forces at play, both financial and political that is more powerful than anything within the Malaysian borders.520

As I have discussed in this section, the influence of the international scene and the global discourse of postmodernism on the works of Malaysian artists cannot be denied. For example, Malaysian contemporary artists have made their mark on the international art scene since the early 1990s. This includes artists such as Zulkifli Yusof, Wong Hoy Cheong, Liew Kung Yu, Nadiah Bamadhaj, Simryn Gill and Yee I-Lan. More recently, Nor Azizan Rahman Paiman, Bibi Chew Chon Bee, Kah Bee Chow, Yap Saubin, Chang Yoong Chia, Azliza Ayob, Shooshie Sulaiman and Hayati Mokhtar and Dain-Iskandar Said have made regular appearances in the international art biennale/triennial circuits.521 While this is all very positive, a few voices have raised concerns that such selections for the triennials and biennales circuits do not actually reflect the artistic outlook in Malaysia. A few have argued that selections were based on what fits into the framework of international curatorial selection. Michelle Antoinette observes that there is a lack of international attention to the Malay/Islamic-centred art in the international art world except for the “Universes in Universe” online magazine, or now known as “Nafas”.522

Gina Fairley also pointed out the reception of artwork by Malaysian artists at international level. She highlights two readings made of work by Malaysian artist Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman’s work at the fifth Asia Pacific Triennial. His series “The Code” which depicts public figures disguised as cartoon characters, monsters and anti-heroes, is mixed with quotes from government-approved tabloids. Though the work have been positioned at the APT as a controversial play on politics and social mores, she points out that

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the artist himself is emphatic that he is not an activist and that the perception of what is political is actually imposed by the viewer. The artist explains that claiming, "I am Malay [culturally] for me this is a polite way of expressing myself." Therefore, she suggests that Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman's work is capable of being read differently in both the domestic and international sphere. For Gina Fairley, other artists whose work inheres this duality of meaning includes Wong Hoy Cheong and his series of work that addresses race, migration and class, Hayati Mokhtar and Dain-Iskandar Said for their multi-screen projection “Near Intervisible Lines” for the 2006 Sydney Biennale and Yee I-Lan “Malaysiana Series” (2002) and “Sulu Stories” (2005), shown in the Singapore Biennale. The similarity across these artists according to Fairley is in their hybrid identities -- born in Malaysia, educated overseas, and now showing their work internationally.523

Hasnul Jamal Saidon has also voiced the wariness towards such skewed perceptions of Malaysian art in several of his writings on contemporary issues of art in Malaysia.524 Not only skewed perception or interpretations happens from an outsider’s perspective but Hasnul Jamal Saidon points out that there are also certain ‘artist-hero’ types who claim to be marginalized and oppressed on account of their skin colour and were denied any special status in Malaysia. Such claims were reiterated in efforts to raise their international profile and stardom, with the international audience or curators as their specific audiences.525

Jim Supangkat, an art historian from Indonesia too has cautioned against this new and interesting turn in interests in Asian contemporary art in general. In the context of the recent inclusion of many Asian socio-political art works in international circuits, he questions to what extent international curators and art historians really understand the socio-political commentary in Asian contemporary art, or the social life and political struggles, and their subsequent transformation into artistic expressions. He argues,

“Placing too much emphasis on the socio-political content of artwork when observing the creations of Asian artists will inevitably return to the domination of the Euro-American perception. This perception show signs of the formation of a kind of stereotype in Euro-American views; namely the idea that Asia constitute of repressive states in which democracy cannot develop or expand. This stereotype will become a set identity which, in fact, reflects the situation of the bipolar thinking in post-colonial era, which has follow along the lines of the divisions of the colonial era. Whereas there was once a distinction

523 Gina Fairley.
made between ‘modern society’ and ‘traditional societies’ using progress as parameter, now the division is that of ‘developed societies’ and not-yet-‘developed societies’ using democracy as parameter.”526

However, he does highlight that, in comparison with Modernist art, contemporary art is more open for mediation of discontinuity. Contemporary art also serves as a good platform for the world to reach a mutual understanding that there can be differences within the art world though talks on how the importance or relevance of differences itself has not yet yielded fruit. This is because the identification of differences was so concentrated on seeing the difference of cultural backgrounds that it has become easily confined to the confrontations of the traditional and the modern. Supangkat points out that the cultural backgrounds in Asia were always consistently seen as related to traditions and ethnicity of its ‘uniqueness’. He fears that the analyses of differences of this art will be trapped in elaborating otherness. On top of that, this situation can be misinterpreted because in Asia itself cultural background has become a tool to show national identities or other defensive identities. Therefore, the world contemporary art discourse faces another confrontation of being too trapped in the international art thinking and having to include too many cultural differences.527

From a local perspective, even artist like Jolly Koh has disagreed with the recent artistic development in Malaysia albeit for different reasons. He explains,

“..., I would like to start by crossing swords with the current approach to art which I believe is in the wrong track, and that is to approach art cognitively. The general approach to art is too intellectual and dwells in the search for meaning and truths. Art should be responded to emotionally – one should first and foremost get an emotional high; an aesthetic thrill. Unless that happens, then its raison d’être is lost.”528
He even advises artists,

“Do not succumb to the present fashion of the artist acting as a moralizer or a social protestor. They are arrogant positions to assume – it is far humbler to be an artist. ... My view does not preclude any artist from using political themes in his work. Instead, my claim is that the core value of a work of art is its aesthetic qualities, and not its possible political message. Whatever political impact the work might have pales in comparison with that which can be achieved more effectively through other means, such as the mass media or direct political action. For us art-lovers, a good or beautiful paintings of something as insignificant as a bottle is better than a bad painting concerning some significant political issue. ...”529

Concern surrounding the purported plurality of the modern and postmodern discourse is not only being voiced by regional artist and scholars but has also been reiterated by other international scholars. As Thomas McEvilley points out, Modernist internationalism is

527 Ibid., 34.
529 Jolly Koh, “Notes to a Young Artist and Some Others Here and There,” Art Corridor, Apr-June 2003, 55.
actually another deceptive designation for Western claims of universal hegemony. He explains that in hopes of entering the international art discourse, a non-white or non-Western artist was to repress his or her inherited identity and assume a supposedly universal one but that ‘universal’ identity he argues was just another tribal cult that temporarily had the upper hand.530

In regard to postmodernism, Daryl Chin also remarks that the Euroecentric egos do proclaim that if the recognition of the validity of ‘otherness’ must be accorded, if there is total equivalence or an absolute breakdown or distinction, then nothing else is important. She explains,

“Hidden in the agenda of postmodernism is, I think, a rebuke, an insult, a devaluation. Instead of recognizing the status of ‘the other’ as an equal, there is the undermining of ‘the other’ by a declared in indifference to distinction, while attempting to maintain the same balance of power. In fact, the very designation of ‘the other’ is one such manoeuvre.” 531

Even John Clark posits an aligned skeptical perspective regarding postmodernism. He observes that,

“Postmodernism as a cultural condition indicates a break within a centredness of the Euramerican world, but this is disturbed only in terms of the categories internally mapped by that world. Postmodernism does not genuinely indicate the re-mapping by reference to other-centred schemes introduced from without. This is because the centre’s recognition of site specificity and cultural difference supposedly avoids totalisation, the voice from the centre claims there is no centre, precisely when it is only the centre which can afford to be without one. In the era of global information and image diffusion, only the centre can participate in the exchange of referent-free signs.”532

The question is -- how should Malaysian artists respond to the recent international interest in art from Asia and how should they approach their own exploration of identity within national and/or transnational premises? To conclude this dissertation, I would like to highlight several positions that Hasnul Jamal Saidon posits not only in relation to his identity as a Malay-Malaysian but also as an artist in the globalising world. In his article entitled “Prelude 2000 -- Epilogue for the 20th Century,” in Wahana (2003) he underscores several positions which I believe all Malaysian artists must consider in their artistic endeavour. He positions himself as an artist, as a Malaysian artist, as a Malay Malaysian artist, a young Malay Malaysian artist, a young and well-informed Malay Malaysian artist and a young well-

informed and highly networked 21st century Malay Malaysian artist living at the end of a century.\textsuperscript{533}

It is particularly important that Malaysian artists ponder upon these positions that Hasnul Jamal Saidon asserted in order to produce work that is relevant and meaningful not only to themselves, but also to the society and culture that they reflect. If previously Malaysian artists have responded distinctively to the realities of the postmodern situation or *situasi percamoden* in relation to the arts. Now, they also need to create new art forms in accordance with our artistic tradition and contemporary needs as they confronted the cultural challenges that are brought upon by the changing way that the world operates.

FIGURES

Figure 1: Wong Hoy Cheong, “The Nouveau Riche, the Elephant, the Foreign Maid, or the Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie” (1991), mixed media, 228 x 304cm.

Figure 2: Hamir Soib @ Mohamed, “Tak Ada Beza” (No difference at all) (2002), installation.
Figure 3: Chuah Chong Yong, “Pre-War Building for Sake – The Gold Rush” (1996), acrylic on canvas, 198 x 198 cm.

Figure 4: Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, “Insect Diskette Series” (1996), mixed media on plexiglass, mouse and chair, 190 x 170 cm.
Figure 5: Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, “Warning Tapir Crossing 1” (2007), mixed media on canvas, 890 x 152 cm (5 panels).

Figure 6: Joseph Tan, “Love Me in My Batik” (1975), acrylic and collage on canvas, 203.2 x 71.1 cm
Figure 7: Ibrahim Hussein, "Senyum Seorang Monyet" (1970), acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 152.5cm.

Figure 8: Ibrahim Hussein, "Pak Utih" (1970), acrylic on canvas, 153 x 306cm.
Figure 9: Tay Hooi Keat, “The Haji Ship” (1966), oil, 94 x 70cm.

Figure 10: Photograph of artist participating GRUP Exhibition in 1967. From left: Cheong Laitong, Anthony Lau, Jolly Koh, Latiff Mohidin, Syed Ahmad Jamal and Ibrahim Hussein.
Figure 11: Redza Piyadasa, “Terengganu 3” (1969), acrylic on plywood, 168 x 154 x 45cm.

Figure 12: Tan Tuck Kan, “49 Squares” (1969), acrylic on canvas, 203 x 203cm.
Figure 13: Redza Piyadasa, “Marakesh IV” (1970), acrylic on plywood, 237 x 26 x 94cm.

Figure 14: Redza Piyadasa, “Open Painting” (1970), acrylic on cloth and polka dot cloth, incorporating actual wall surface, 105 x 77cm.

Figure 16: Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, “Mystical Reality” (1974). Discarded raincoat found at a Klang rubbish dump at 4.23pm on Sunday 13th January 1974 that must have belonged to someone (discarded after the exhibition).
Figure 17: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “Pohon Nipah” (Nipah Palms) (1957), oil on canvas, 89 x 59cm.

Figure 18: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “Winter Wind” (1959), oil on plywood, 121 x 100cm.
Figure 19: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “The Bait” (1959), oil on plywood, 152.4 x 122cm.

Figure 20: Latiff Mohidin, “Pago-pago, Bangkok” (1996), mixed media, 13 x 21cm.
Figure 21: Latiff Mohidin, “Bukit-Lurah Lowlands-Highlands” (1997), oil on canvas, 122 x 259cm.

Figure 22: Latiff Mohidin, “Teluk Kumbar – 1” (2005), oil on canvas, 153 x 137cm.
Figure 23: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “Duel in the Snow” (1956), oil on canvas, 71 x 91.5cm.

Figure 24: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “Gunung Ledang” (1992), acrylic on canvas, 173 x 239cm.
Figure 25: Syed Ahmad Jamal, “Chairil Anuar” (1959), oil, 76 x 22cm.

Figure 26: Yusof Ghani, “Siri Tari III” (1984), oil on canvas, 145 x 193cm.
Figure 27: Lee Kian Seng, “Mankind” (1972), metal, 160 x 220 x 140cm. Installed at the entrance of the National Art Gallery Malaysia from 1973 to 1983.

Figure 28: Lee Kian Seng, “Process in Poker Game” (1974), installation, metal, wood, and plywood, card sizes 142 x 101 x 1.8cm.
Figure 29: Lee Kian Seng, "Off 'Image, Object, Illusion' – Off Series Mechanism" (1977), installation that includes a painting on canvas, flag, 30.5 x 51 x 61cm podium with lighting.

Figure 30: Redza Piyadasa, "The Great Malaysian Landscape" (1972), acrylic on canvas, painted wood, wire and paper, 230 x 179cm.
Figure 31: Redza Piyadasa, “Entry Points” (1978), acrylic on wood, 152 x 136cm.

Figure 32: Ibrahim Hussein, “Are You Alone Up There?” (1969), printage, acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 152.5cm
Figure 33: Nirmala Shanmughalingam, "Vietnam" (1981), acrylic on canvas, 102 x 201cm.

Figure 34: Redza Piyadasa, "Mamak Family, Penang" (1988), collage on board, 97 x 57cm.
Figure 35: Redza Piyadasa, “Indian Mother and Child” (1994), mixed-media and collage on board, 90 x 56cm.

Figure 36: Latiff Mohidin, “Pago-Pago and Full Moon, Kuala Lumpur” (1967), mixed media, 10 x 16cm.
Figure 37: Redza Piyadasa, “Malay Narrative IV” (1996), mixed media and collage on board, 152 x 101cm.

Figure 38: Ismail Zain, “Ku Bunuh Cintaku” (1972), acrylic on canvas, 123 x 92cm.
Figure 39: Ismail Zain, “Al Kesah” (1988), computer print, 121 x 30 cm.

Figure 40: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “The Challenger I Page III” (2007), mixed media on paper, 84 x 59cm.
Figure 41: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “The Challenger I Page IV” (2007), mixed media on paper, 84 x 59cm.

Figure 42: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “The Challenger I Page V” (2007), mixed media on paper, 84 x 59cm.

Figure 43: Roslisham Ismail aka ISE, “Export” (2007), digital print on paper, 55 x 82.5cm.
Figure 44: Roslisham Ismail aka ISE, “The EST” (2007), duratrans, lightbox, 93 x 126 x 15cm.

Figure 45: Nirmala Shanmughalingam, “Friends in Need” (1986), acrylic and collage on canvas.
Figure 46: Sharmiza Abu Hassan, "Alegori Ledang" (2004), mixed media, various sizes.

Figure 47: Nadiah Bamadhaj, "Beyond Recognition" (2006), video projection and film stills.
Figure 48: Yee I-Lan, “The Archipelago” (2005), digital print on Kodak Endura paper, 61 x 183 cm.

Figure 49: Yee I-Lan, “The Archipelago” (Detail) (2005), digital print on Kodak Endura paper.
Figure 50: Eng Hwee Chu, “The Great Supper” (1999), oil on canvas, 166 x 162cm.

Figure 51: Wong Hoy Cheong, “In search of faraway places” (from ‘Migrants’ series) (1996), charcoal, photocopy transfer and collage on paper scroll, three panels: 204.5 x 151cm (each); 204.5 x 453cm (overall).
Figure 52: Bayu Utomo Radjikin, “Lang Kacang” (1991), Mixed media, 141 x 104 x 120cm.

Figure 53: Eng Hwee Chu, “Cry Freedom” (1995), acrylic on canvas, 217 x 151cm.
Figure 54: Shia Yih-Yiing, “Homage to the Vanishing World” (1996), acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91cm (2 panels), 168 x 122cm.

Figure 55: Ahmad Fuad Osman, “Imitating the Woods” (2004), oil on canvas, 239 x 150cm.
Figure 56: Tan Chin Kuan, “Blue Night II” (1989), mixed media, 549 x 303 x 305cm.

Figure 57: Zulkifli Yusof, “Dari Hitam ke Putih” (1989), mixed media, 850 x 240 x 240cm.
Figure 58: Wong Hoy Cheong, “Re: Looking” (2002-2003), installation at the 50th Venice Biennale.

Figure 59: Nirmala Shanmughalingam, “Kenyataan 3” (Statement 3) (1975-79), mixed media, 128 x 53cm.
Figure 60: Ismail Zain, “DOT – The Detribalisation of Tam binte Che Lat” (1983), acrylic on canvas, 122 x 183cm.

Figure 61: Ismail Zain, “Sarada” (1983), acrylic on canvas and collage, 122 x 92cm.
Figure 62: Lucy Liew, “Hornbill #53”, oil on canvas, 152 x 152cm.

Figure 63: Lucy Liew, “Hornbill #55”, acrylic on canvas, 152 x 244cm.
Figure 64: Sylvia Lee Goh, “Nyonya Koay (Kuih Muih)” (1990), 127 x 96.5cm.

Figure 65: Sylvia Lee Goh, “The Nyonya Altar” (1995), 91.5 x 122cm.
Figure 66: Liew Kung Yu, “Cheng Beng Festival” (1996), photomontage, wood and glass, 140 x 216cm.

Figure 67: Tan Chin Kuan, “The Broken Stage for Young Artists” (1994), oil on canvas, 380 x 250cm.
Figure 68: Wong Hoy Cheong, “Some Dreamt of Malaya, Some Dreamt of Great Britain” (from 'Migrants' series) (1994), charcoal and photostat collage on hanging paper scrolls, 190 x 150cm.

Figure 69: Redza Piyadasa, “Bentuk Malaysia Tulen” (1980), bromide image and acrylic on canvas, 106 x 70cm.
Figure 70: Yee I-Lan, “Kerana Mu” (1/4) (2002), digital photography print on Kodak Professional paper, 165 x 114cm.

Figure 71: Simryn Gill, “A Small Town at the Turn of the Century” 13 (1999 – 2000), type C photograph, 91.4 x 91.4cm.
Figure 72: Simryn Gill, "A Small Town at the turn of the Century" (34) (1999 – 2000), type C photograph 91.4 × 91.4cm, 101.6 cm x 101.6 cm (paper size).

Figure 73: Shia Yih-Yiing, "Vase of Words" (2006), oil and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91cm.
Figure 74: Shia Yih-Yiing, “Vase of Unity” (2006), oil and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91cm.

Figure 75: Shia Yih-Yiing “Vase of Prayer” (2006), oil and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91cm.
Figure 76: Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin, “Gerak Tempur 18” (1996), metal, 50 x 70 x 47cm.

Figure 77: Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin, “Gerak Tempur 3” (1996), metal, 39 x 32 x 60cm.
Figure 78: Hamir Soib, “Jawi” (1999), acrylic on the floor, silkscreen and plaster of paris, various sizes.

Figure 79: Bayu Utomo Radjikin, “Newspaper” (1993), mixed media, 90 x 122cm.
Figure 80: Wong Woan Lee, “Hope of the Lonely (Reality and Delusion)” (2002), oil on canvas, 168 x 133cm.

Figure 81: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “Cleansing Ritual I” (2008), monoprint on paper, 112 x 70cm.
"I know that I could not win legally before the previous government but my prayers were answered today, as I was given the moral victory. So tonight, everybody can say the moral victory is now being given to me."

TUN SALLEH ABAS

Figure 82: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “Cleansing Ritual II” (2008), monoprint on paper, 112 x 70cm.

"If you are innocent, what is there for you to address? I am not a politician and I am not running for any post. I’m just the wife of a politician."

ROHANI MANNUM

Figure 83: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “Cleansing Ritual III” (2008), monoprint on paper, 112 x 70cm.
Figure 84: Kok Yew Puah. “Urban Playground” (1990), acrylic on canvas, 139 x 185cm.

Figure 85: Kok Yew Puah, “Temple Figures” (1997), acrylic on canvas, 144.5 x 144.5cm.
Figure 86: Johan Marjonid, “Arca Alam Royal Belum - The Conqueror I” (2006), acrylic on canvas, 69 x 175cm.

Figure 87: Wong Hoy Cheong, “Vitrine of Contemporary Events” (1999), installation.
Figure 88: Ahmad Fuad Osman, "Mulut: Syhhh...! Dok diam-diam, jangan bantah. Mulut hang hanya boleh guna untuk cakap yaaa saja. Baghu hang boleh join depa... senang la jadi kaya!" (1999), oil on canvas, 244 x 244cm.

Figure 89: Sharon Chin, "Executive Toy" (2007), dimension unavailable.
Figure 90: Sharon Chin, "Executive Toy" (2007) (Detail)

Figure 91: Ahmad Fuad Osman, "Recollections of Long Lost Memories" (2007), slide projection, dimension varies.
Figure 92: Nadiah Bamadhaj, "1965 Membina Semula Monumennya" (2001), installation detail.

Figure 93: Nadiah Bamadhaj, "1965 Membina Semula Monumennya" (2001), installation detail.
Figure 94: Susyilawati Sulaiman “Emotional Library” (2007), performance at ‘documenta 12,’ two diaries with watercolours “Anna” (1996) and “Botanical Garden” (1996), each 15 x 21 x 1cm.

Figure 95: Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, “Cabinet V” (1991), assemblages on wood construction, 183 x 183cm (two panels).
Figure 96: Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, “Urban Garden LIFE” (1999), Installation.

Figure 97: Liew Kungyu, “Cemerlang, Gemilang, Terbilang” (Excellence, Glory, Distinction) (2007), installation.


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