

Reflections of National Cultural Elements in Young Contemporary Award Artworks

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Abstract. The Young Contemporary Award (YCA) or also known as the *Bakat Muda Sezaman* (BMS), has been established by the National Art Gallery (NAG) and set out to be a reflection of Malaysia's visual art scene. However, the idea of displaying the Malay culture and traditions in visual art has been forsaken through the development of contemporary art in Malaysia. The tendency of the new-generation artists to prefer western and universal styles have further contributed to the abandonment and less emphasis of the cultural symbols. This conceptual paper will discuss the framework of the reflections on the national cultural elements in YCA artworks. Methods used in the study include observations and gathering sources from books, journals, research papers, and catalogues from the NAG. Interviews were also conducted involving several academicians and artists who are relevant for the field of study. Hence, this findings can be used as documentation and reference to improve more on the value and content of the national cultural elements in Malaysia's visual art field.

Keywords: Cultural elements, Malaysian art scene, Young Contemporary Award

1 Introduction

The Malaysian art scene has undergone significant development over time, especially with the establishment of the National Art Gallery (NAG) in 1958. Faizuan & Nasir [1] have explained that the creation of the NAG is a symbol of recognition for the visual arts by the government. The mission of the NAG is to become a key visual artwork creation and home collection center and a trustee for the national artistic heritage.

With the idea of preserving and making time-setting trends, the NAG has produced numerous programs alongside walking with its objectives. Programs such as the Young Contemporary Award (YCA) or known as the *Bakat Muda Sezaman* (BMS) have been created to look for new talents to fill the void in the visual arts scene. In fact, visual arts in Malaysia, as in the YCA, has existed since the 1970s but has yet to create a significant effect. However, the YCA has produced many prolific artists in the Malaysian visual art scene. For the past 40 years, there have been more than 20 editions of the Young Contemporary Award programs being held since 1974 until 2019. Such platform has produced many talented and renowned local artists with fine and visionary artworks.

In the meantime, the National Cultural Congress (NCC), which was held in Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s, played a vital role in developing the modern Malaysian art for decades.

The congress policies shaped the direction of Malaysian art through the continuous search for a national identity. As stated by Azian & Rosiah [2], the National Cultural Congress 1971 was held for the first time by the government that subsequently introduced the National Cultural Policy. The outcome of this application can be seen through the local artworks. Thus, as stated by Muliyadi Mahmood [3], the 1970s has witnessed a range of styles and themes that revolved around the issue of the national, social and cultural identity portrayed by the artists. However, the implication of the NCC towards arts development was only focused in the eras of the 80s and 90s, not through the new era of 2000s. This was proclaimed by Firdaus Zailudin [4], who affirmed that there has been no continuous study that connects and subsequently evaluates the extent to which this policy has been effective on visual works in this century.

Hence, to fill in the gap of such demand, this paper will discuss the artworks of the Young Contemporary Award program from the perspective of their reflections of the national cultural elements. The Young Contemporary Award is such a prestigious platform in Malaysia, and it is seen as a reflection of the future for the country's visual arts. Therefore, it is very crucial for these artworks to be raised in status and analyse the understanding of its role towards the art scene.

2 The Role of the National Art Gallery (NAG)

According to Faizuan & Nasir [1], the National Art Gallery (NAG) was established before the country gained independence. Even though the NAG is a body with a wide-ranging and influential effect, its maturity does not need to be disputed. Mubin Sheppard and Frank Sullivan were the driving forces behind the concept, which was born between 1954 and 1956, under the auspices of the Malaya Arts Council. The National Art Gallery was founded to show the government's support for the visual arts. The vision of the NAG is to become a leading developer and collector of visual art, as well as a caretaker of the national artistic heritage. Its mission is to collect, conserve, preserve, and display high art, as well as to raise public awareness, understanding, and appreciation of it.

Furthermore, the National Art Gallery is responsible for collecting, arranging and reviewing contemporary works of art. In the introduction of the catalogue for the National Art Gallery 1958-1983, Syed Ahmad Jamal, as the former Director of the National Art Gallery, had stressed that the NAG must be a model institution of its type, a cultural organization that upholds the tradition of serving the society while at the same time setting trends, a preserver of the heritage and a catalyst for the new, working within the framework of duty and dignity of its social role, acting with wisdom and courage, and mindful of the changes in society, in light of the reality of a living community.

As Faizuan & Nasir [1] said, the NAG has generated a number of programs in order to preserve and set time-setting patterns, in addition to walking with its aims. The Young Contemporary Award (YCA) or the Bakat Muda Sezaman (BMS) programs has been established to find new talents to address the void in the visual arts field.

3 Young Contemporary Award (YCA)

After 40 years of organization, this platform has succeeded in producing many famous artists who are now pioneers in the Malaysian and regional visual arts arena. Since the 1970s of its establishment, this platform also works in order to find new talents within the local visual scenes. Faizuan and Nasir [1] have mentioned that it is a competition or award that honors new talented artists and may be the driving force behind the creation of local art.

As proclaimed by Faizal Sidek [5], the Young Contemporary Award (YCA), or known as the *Bakat Muda Sezaman* (BMS) is a visual art competition organized by the country's most prestigious National Art Gallery. Moreover, as he said, according to Sulaiman Esa around the 1960s, this platform had been inspired from the Young Contemporaries Exhibition in London. And due to the increasing number of young artists graduating from art institutions, they need a special space to showcase their abilities and results of training at the institution, to introduce their creativity to the public. The results of their imagination, valued at the YCA, were first exhibited to the audience and then criticized by the group and art thinkers. Indeed, the idea of showcasing the graduates from art school's insights has given a profound impact on the art scene since the late 70s.

Again, Faizal Sidek [5] has firmly stated that this competition plays a critical benchmark in measuring the quality of products produced by art institutions; whether they are relevant according to contemporary needs or still strong with rigid academic requirements. In 2011, Faizal Sidek [6] had also stated that the YCA's main objective is to enhance the provocative, contentious, daring, and lucrative debate for contemporary art, which in turn will increase people's interest in the respect and admiration of contemporary art in our country.

Every year, various issues concerning the YCA arise, and new artists are enthralled by the prizes on offer. The essence of the YCA, on the other hand, is not like sports games where the winner is determined solely by brute power. It is based on a shift in thought that can cause confusion, which can then be used to create ideas for more art studies. Nasir [1] has written on this subject in his jury report, stating that it is unfortunate if many people believed that the YCA competition is simply a competition to find a winner. The jury would like to see some changes in comparison to the previous YCA competitions, not only in terms of the materialization of new 'styles' or types, but also in terms of the manifestation of paradigm shifts and conceptual processes in framing something 'old' as 'new.' Faizuan [1] has enunciated as U-Wei wrote notes on the Young Contemporary Award in 2006 to track the YCA development, which started in the 1970s, with the advent of conceptual art, installation, conversion, and widespread recognition of the art movement in the international arena; despite the fact that most of the participants were drawn to 2D drawings. Moreover, sculptures, photography, video art, and performance art received few exposures.

Yee I-Lan [7], as the jury of the YCA in 2006, commented that this competition allows artists to showcase their work to a wider audience outside of the confines of a commercial gallery space. It offers continuity to our colleagues of the past and future due to its tradition and connections with the National Art Gallery. The Young Contemporary Award, as a biennial gathering, represents rhythms and grounds artists and artworks in a socio-political time and place, while also anticipating future concerns. This is significant for our larger community because it demonstrates the changing and evolving boundaries of art production and serves as a starting point for further discussion and reading. When mentioning about the YCA competition in 2006, Yee I-Lan [7] stated:

It acts as a survey, as a barometer, to celebrate new developments, new language and approaches in our contemporary arts.

Meanwhile, John Xaviers [8], in his report on the YCA 2019, has proclaimed that it is commendable that a national art institution regularly hosts a prestigious art prize for young artists through a straightforward mechanism that is highly pedagogic for young artistic minds. It also highlights how young contemporary art serves as a silent observer of the socio-political shifts in statecraft.

Hence, the National Art Gallery has served as a steppingstone for a new artists to progress in visual arts. However, Faizuan and Nasir [1], have warned that if upcoming artists continue to think at the old stage, there will be little progress in the creation of visual art. New artists should be more cautious in bringing up topics that need to be discussed, so that art awareness can be continually expanded especially in prestigious competitions like the Young Contemporary Award.

4 Cultural Elements in Young Contemporaries

The government has formulated the formation of the national cultural policy, which has become a guideline, as an effort to form a united nation with a unique and superior national identity. Indeed, these non-economic government policies have succeeded in ensuring that the development of the country can run smoothly and perfectly. Culture is important as a tool for the progress or development of a nation and country [9]. The rapid process of national development will definitely lead to changes in the value system, behavior and institutions of the Malaysian society. As mentioned by Zaliza and Norlin [10], if any changes occurred regardless of continuity and changes in the cultural and societal life, it would cause problems of cultural gap or residual behavior problems or prolonged dysfunctional social habits.

Upon receiving numerous acceptances from the formulation, three principles have been outlined as a result of the NCC 1971: first, the national culture of Malaysia should be based on the culture of the people of the region; secondly, other appropriate cultural elements can be accepted as national cultural elements; while the third principle is that Islam is an essential element in the formation of the national culture. The outcome of this application can be seen through the local artworks of the National Department for Culture and Arts [9]. Thus, as stated by Mulyadi Mahmood [3], the year of 1970s has witnessed a range of styles and themes that revolved around the issue of the national, social and cultural identities portrayed by artists.

Redza Piyadasa [11] has pointed out that starting from the National Culture Congress(NCC) 1971, the understanding and excitement of painters to produce works that are culturally elemental has been increasing. Siti Humaini [12] also argued that even after the formulation of the NCC, this kind of culture elements have been widely seen in the artwork making among artists.



Catan Orang Kampung IV (1985)

Works by Jalaini Abu Hassan [13] and Mastura Abdul Rahman for example, exemplified these previous tendencies. "Catan Orang kampung IV " (1985) by Jalaini Abu Hassan, is an artwork that perpetuates creative characteristics that are not associated with the current trend at that particular period. With a hunting patina of nostalgia, the work elicits provocative social and cultural connotations especially for the Malays. The subject that was implied in the artwork is a *jawi* newspaper with a *tikar* in the background. Thus, while observing the subjects, this artwork falls into the second principle of the NCC, which states that other appropriate cultural elements can be accepted as national cultural elements. Meanwhile the use of media and motif is completely devoid of all glitz and glitter, conveying the message in a straightforward and modest manner.

Artists like Mastura Abdul Rahman [14], has used the Malay/Islamic aesthetic elements in their work. The artist's winning piece, "Harmonious Interior" (1986), shows how the artist incorporated flattened ornamental elements from traditional textiles into the interior realm of the typical Malay house. Her artwork is filled with Malay flavor and personality through all-encompassing decorations that highlight the spatial interior ambience of traditional Malay residences. The expression of oneness on the level of plurality can be seen as an "Islamic" interpretation of this work. Hence, the second principle of the NCC can be clearly observed in her work.

With the era of globalization, our art scene especially has outgrown the conventional and welcome more contemporary works and style. Besides, Firdaus Zailudin [4] has enunciated that contemporary works have been colored with a range of issues and themes. Also, with the intention of providing an interpretation of the world of contemporary art in the sense of Malaysian culture.

On top of that, Firdaus also explained that Malaysian culture is known for its unique characteristics through the diversity that exists in its plural society. And because Malaysia is a multiracial country consisting of three major races, namely the Malay, Chinese and Indian, each ethnic group has its own culture and traditions. Hence, elements of local culture and society have long become a theme in Malaysia's fine artworks. Redza Piyadasa [11] has also supported this notion by saying that many viewpoints have emerged to get to know the roots of the Malaysian race by researching the Malaysian culture, cultural beliefs, myths, legends, arts and visuals, aesthetics, technique and sensitivity of paintings.



Bujang Berani (1991) metal & Plaster of Paris, 55cm x 100cm x 100cm

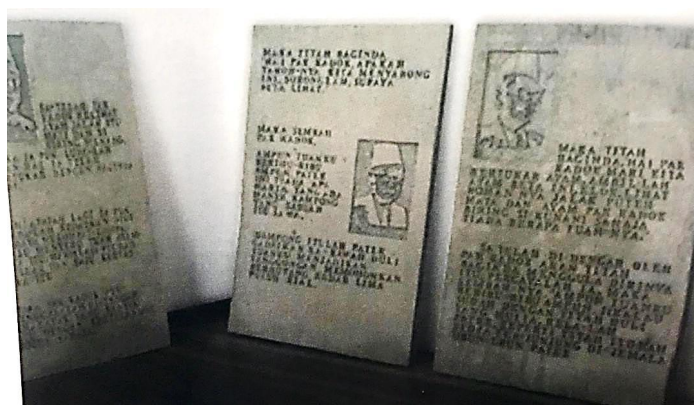
This statement can be proved by Bayu Utomo Radjikin, in the early 1990s, when he came out with his stunning winning artwork. In "Bujang Berani" (1991), he used a mixture of metals and plaster of Paris. The sculpture, which is also categorized as the second principle in the NCC, indicates a form of a warrior. Sarena Abdullah [14] has argued that this artwork is one of the sculptures that have been debated and discussed based on the local tribe's angst. The viewer is moved by the semi-figurative sculpture's facial expression as he cries into the void, disseminating his anger and sorrow, the essential core of human emotions. The artwork's facial features are made entirely from a form of plaster from Paris, while the majority of the sculpture is made up of welded metal pieces. The headgear, which is a sign of traditional tribal influence, is depicted in great detail.

Thus, Mandal [15] in his writing, *The National Culture Policy and Contestation Over Malaysian Identity*, explained that culture turned out to be a hotly contested arena because it was through language, cultural icons, and the arts that mutual pain and outrage were articulated. The NCP began as an attempt to investigate the meaning and means of establishing a national identity, in a country marked by historical differences along ethnic and linguistic lines, through various artistic and cultural forms. In comparison to many other former colonies, Malaysia vigorously pursued independence after it had been granted. As a result, the NCP was a late attempt to find a national identity in the arts.

Besides, E.A. Nida [16] has mentioned that one can appreciate the form and uniqueness of the Malay culture development within a given period and it shows that it is an effort which Malaysian artists should pay particular attention to, that is to have a solid foundation for their contemporary art making. In fact, these origins of thought and language for contemporary works of art have not been completely explored by modern Malaysian artists. Sarena Abdullah & Siti Khadijah Elham[17] have asserted that:

Any creative activity capable of preserving culture, ethnic unity, and national stability is important and significant enough to be preserved now and in the future.

Alongside its present purpose, it plays a significant role in preserving the good taste and beauty of culture, providing a firm foundation for future growth. Hence, Malaysian artists' search for identity is characterized by this sensibility, which has succumbed to modernism. And, working within the conventions of painting, sculpture, and printmaking (as well as photography by technical extension), their response to the imperative of national or cultural identity is primarily oriented toward style. Their sense of self is articulated inadvertently and innocuously within the same framework that threatened to overshadow their indigenous community in the first place.



M.O.U: Takkan Melayu Hilang Di Dunia (2004), cement and mixed media, 244 cm x 244 cm x 145 cm

In "M.O.U: Takkan Melayu Hilang Di Dunia " (2004) by Hazrul Mazran [18], the work responds to the present by referencing the past while also foreshadowing the future. In the sense of the Malays, his sentiment often reaffirms the hypocrisy of globalization and free market capitalism. Hasnul Jamal Saidon [18] has commented that this piece resonates with the Malay nationalistic attitude of "under attack" that was so popular in the 1980s. Hazrul argued that, in the name of forging a cohesive national identity, a full concept of a Malay race has been reduced to a mere ethnic entity, devoid of what he claims are inherent cultural values. Complicated by globalization's imperatives, Hazrul went on to say that the Malays' claim to independence is increasingly becoming a flimsy one as they continue to be intellectually, economically, and culturally imperialized (or paralyzed for some) by the ebb and flow of free market capitalism. Despite the fact that his point of view is debatable, his work appears to

have a reasonable 'weight' to it (literally and metaphorically). This impressive work by Hazrul was pulling into the second principle of NCC of other appropriate cultural elements.

Nonetheless, T.K Sabapathy [19] has voiced that a transitional culture's social and ideological anxieties are undoubtedly a cause for concern, particularly in cultures where artistic practices do not simply "represent the frameworks of certain forms of life," but are themselves part of those forms of life—they are neither representations of life nor things intended to be reflected upon. However, in the final decades of the twentieth century, the danger of culture being marginalized, if not extinct, is real.

For some artists, the issue of Malaysian art is more than a clash of Western and indigenous cultures—a fight for dominance. Although this challenge is significant, the "Malaysian situation" appears to be more important. Art must be placed in a sociological sense, both in terms of recognition and active practice. Whatever the result, Malaysian art must emerge organically from the country's circumstances. Sabapathy believed that the influence of Western society is not something to be praised nor is it something to be absolutely condemned. Given the conventional "subservience" to trends in the Western society and the training of artists in the West, post-modernist demands of modernism's tyranny is admittedly helpful in this case (who come back to become teachers). Sabapathy [19] also suggested that changes in understanding, on the other hand, are as much Western as they are otherwise.

5 Conclusion

In summary, although the National Culture Policy was not intended to be an economic tool, it is important to note the context in which it was conceived. It was started and established at a time when the country desperately needed something to rally around. One such scheme was the National Culture Policy [21]. The lauded effect of the National Culture Policy and Islamization policies on Malaysian art creation (particularly Malay/Islamic arts) is debatable when viewed in this light, based on the two points discussed earlier: To begin with, not all Malay/Islamic-themed artworks created by the Malay/Muslim artists at the time adhered to or were influenced by the government's National Culture Policy and Islamization policies; and, to gain a deeper understanding of the art scene, it is important to scrutinize artists, artworks, and curatorial teams included in Malay/Islamic-themed exhibitions in the 1980s.

And for our young artists, the Young Contemporary Award is still the most prestigious national art competition. Many of the previous winners of this competition have gone on to become some of our country's and region's most prominent mid-career artists. Among this group of leading artists are Zulkifli Yusoff, Ponirin Amin, Haron Mokhtar, Mastura Abdul Rahman, Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman and Hasnul Jamal Saidon. Young Contemporaries is a forum offered by the country's premier art institution for artists to pursue innovative ideas, push the limits of conventions, break boundaries, and assert their uniqueness in an environment free of the normal demands and requirements [20]. Young artists may take advantage of the opportunity offered by the YCA to plan their ideas two years ahead of time by critically analyzing current art trends. By using such a foresight approach, the appearance of their artworks in subsequent YCA series would undoubtedly demonstrate a clear strength in

their messages and compositions. Hopefully, the YCA will continue to be a driving force in the development of the country's visual arts scene.

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