



CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC ART: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACED IN THE MALAY WORLD

¹Muhammad Faiz Sabri, ²Muhammad Fadli Zulkapli, ³Mumtaz Mokhtar

¹Lecturer, ²Lecturer, ³Associate Professor

¹Department of Art and Design Education,

¹Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Puncak Alam Campus, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Abstract: Contemporary Islamic art in Malaysia has long been documented and it was usually developed within the Malay culture that was based on an Islamic understanding of concepts and teachings. The years between 1980 and 1990 shows a significant impact towards contemporary Islamic Art in Malaysia due to the reaction from the National Cultural Congress that was held in 1971. Islam became the main cultural root and that period can be considered a revival period of Islamic art in the country and became one of the main art forms developed by Muslim artists those days. However, due to some influence from the western country has impacted the ideology of Malaysian artists, especially towards finding their own cultural identity in Malaysia. The emergence of new expressions based on this issue lead the artist to produce Islamic artworks that illustrate some crisis of identity. Therefore, this paper was conducted to discuss deeper the view of contemporary Islamic art in Malaysia particularly focusing on the issues and challenges faced by Muslim artists. Four samples of Malaysian artworks have been selected to discuss its content and significant meaning. It is hoped that this conceptual paper will make some small contribution towards guiding Malaysian artists, researchers, and art historians about the issues, crises and challenges faced by Malaysian artists in the Malay world.

Index Terms - Contemporary; Islamic art; Contemporary Islamic art; Malaysian contemporary art; Issues and Challenges.

I. INTRODUCTION

To understand further the definition of contemporary art, it has to be well defined what is the meaning of "contemporary" first. According to Silka (2016), the word contemporary is referring to the current situation or what is happening during this moment. In the context of art, the term contemporary refers to art that is produced by the artist who is living and practising in the current era, approximately to the period from the 1970s to the present. This statement has supported by Mahamood (2018), who declared that contemporary art started during the 1970s until now. He has categorized contemporary art into three main categories. First is the time of the creation, which refers to the artwork. Secondly is the place where the art is being produced and last but not least is regarding the style that the artists portray in their artwork. These three categories become the important factors that help the artist to understand how contemporary art is illustrated.

After defining three categories that have been stated above, it can be seen the contemporary art by looking at the subject chosen, the approach to making, and the material that the artist works in producing their artwork. For this time being, contemporary art tends to be assessed thematically and subjectively, drawing on an expanded range of theoretical and practical disciplines. It is also can be determined by both theory and ideas and characterized by a blurring of the distinction between art and other categories of cultural experience, such as television, cinema, mass media, entertainment, and digital technology. The period from the 1970s onwards is also described in terms of Postmodernism, a social, cultural and intellectual movement characterized by a rejection of notions of linear progression associated with modernism, favoring an interdisciplinary approach, multiple narratives, fragmentation, relativity, contingency and irony (Saidon, 2008).

In the book written by Richard Meyer in 2016, entitled "What was contemporary art", he wrote that contemporary Art could be defined as a work of art that conveyed any particularly modern quality or spirit of innovation. He also mentioned 66 contemporary artworks as a work of art that belongs to a particular period. In that sense, any work of art that is produced in any particular period could be considered as contemporary art. He also mentioned in his book, over the most recent couple of years, a few researchers and critics have agreed 'the contemporary' is a different period in the growth of art and culture. An art historian Alexander Alberro explains, "The contemporary" may now be traced to a particular source and a date of beginning. The years following 1989 have seen the rise of another historical period. In the context of fine arts, the new period has come to be known as "the contemporary."

For Alberro, this "new period" has uprooted past standards of twentieth-century art, especially the ideas of modernization and the avant-garde: New types of art have crystallized in the previous two decades. These new structures have come to be informally built as 'the contemporary.' There is no doubt that they owe a lot to their modernist innovator, and that there is much that continues into the present. In any case, since the late 1980s, these new modes have outstripped their compulsion to the past, and the authority of the contemporary currently should be perceived.

In doing as such, it draws on the fact that the term 'contemporary' has not generally been understood by the quality of being up-to-date, current, or extremely recent. As indicated by the section, the variation 'co-temporary' was used during the seventeenth and eighteenth hundreds years and turned out to be so famous during that time. To be exact, the first definition of the word 'contemporary' given by the Oxford English Dictionary belongs to the same time, age, or period; living, existing, or happening together in time" or passes on conjunction as opposed to originality. (Meyer, 2016).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Faizuan & Mohd (2016), conducted a study to investigate the thinking of arts and the current circumstances of contemporary visual arts to reveal the problem of art knowledge (implicit) development in contemporary visual arts of Malaysia. Their study shows several findings; for instance, the artists appear to have fewer discourse activities and insufficient intellectualism values. Also, the lack of scholars in the field of visual arts creates a gap in the visual arts scene in Malaysia. In their study, the researchers uncover several major issues regarding visual arts in Malaysia.

Among the issues are understanding and interpretation of thinking, impact factor, paradigm shift, and lack of research and reading. There is a lack of interest among the younger generation in art theory and philosophy. According to Faizuan & Mohd (2016), there is insufficient intellectualism in the Malaysian contemporary art field, and therefore, it is very important that the necessary knowledge such as art critics has to be developed. Faizuan & Mohd (2016) also argued that the production of art objects in recent years did not reveal the impact or even a paradigm shift from the thinking brought by contemporary visual artists. According to them, art communication failures or imperfections in a big problem in Malaysian contemporary visual arts, and this resulted in the society being unable to gain any benefits in terms of art knowledge and intellectualism from the artists.

According to the Oxford dictionary (2013), it has defined contemporary is an adjective word which means living or occurring at the same time, for example, the painting was painted by a contemporary artist who is living in the contemporary era. It is also related to modern ideas in style or design; for example, the building structure has been constructed in a contemporary form. On the other hand, the definition of contemporary as a noun that it is a person or thing living or existing at the same time as others, for example, Rashid and I were contemporaries at college. Apart from that, contemporary art is "the art that has been and continues to be created during our lifetimes." In other words, contemporary to ourselves where its period is from the 1960s until now. Also, contemporary art is the art of the twenty-first century that is formalized by artists who are existing in the same century. It helps the contemporary artist to react to the current social and political issues in the community and the surrounding world (Definitions - Art Education - NYU Steinhardt. (n.d.). Retrieved October 5, 2015). Some scholars explain that contemporary art reveals a huge range of resources, broadcasting, and technologies. Artists of today express thoughts, perceptions, and questions, define the present day, and visualize and envision the coming future. According to a dictionary of modern and contemporary art, contemporary art is an unspecified term used in art that has been produced currently and is considered spiritual art in its time.

Contemporary art also refers to art that produces nowadays. It includes painting, sculpture, photography, installation, performance, video art, and many more. Though seemingly simple, the details surrounding this definition are often a bit unclear, as different individuals' interpretations of "today" may widely and wildly vary. Therefore, the exact starting point of the genre is still debated. But, many art historians consider the late 1960s (the end of modern art, or modernism) to be an adequate estimate. However, there is still an unsettled discussion between scholars and artists regarding the issues that are faced in contemporary art today. In the context of Malaysian art scene, Nur Hanim Khairuddin (2013) was one of the judges during the exhibition of 'Bakat Muda Sezaman,' which was held in 2013. She has written in the article pertaining to the issues and challenges that contemporary artist is facing in the art scene nowadays. Among the issues which have been written were regarding the cultural sensitivities of local communities and the paradoxical art of Islam. According to Nur Hanim, both of these issues have contributed to and became the main factor that led to the emergence of many controversial artworks in the Malaysian art scene.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study only covers the discussion of what are the issues and challenges faced by Malaysian artists particularly focusing on its significant meaning. This research is also merely focusing on discussion from the perspective of its philosophy, function and meaning of the selected artworks. This study has found their reactions towards the crisis of identity are illustrated through the selection of some controversial subject matter. Results from this study would help to increase awareness and understanding, especially towards finding our own cultural identity.

In terms of the data collection, this research employed a case study as a methodology particularly focusing on a literature review and some discussions with selected experts made by the researcher in order to answer the initiatives of conducting this research. Creswell (2003), defined a case study as a "researcher explores in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals". This method is suitable to be used either by referring to a single case or a case bounded by time and place (Creswell, 1998). Creswell also suggests that the structure of a case study should be the problem, the context, the issues, and the lessons learned. The data collection that collected for a case study in general and comes from several sources including site visits or direct participant observations, interviews, archival records or documents, physical artefacts, and audio-visual materials. This method usually lets the researcher spend their time on-site while observing the materials or artefacts that desire for completing the research. Hence, the report would include lessons learned, or patterns found that connect with theories. The research design used for this study is exploratory research design as it addresses a topic that has a high level of uncertainty and ignorance or when the problem is not very well understood. For instance, this study addresses the issues and challenges faced by the artists which are not familiar and understood by everyone in general (Wyk, 2012).

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 below shows an example of artwork that tells a social-cultural crisis in the 19th century by Sulaiman Esa. He has given a big impact on the Malaysian art scene with his work entitled 'Waiting for Godot'. This artwork was produced in 1977 with a dimension of 76 x 62 cm, as shown in the figure below.

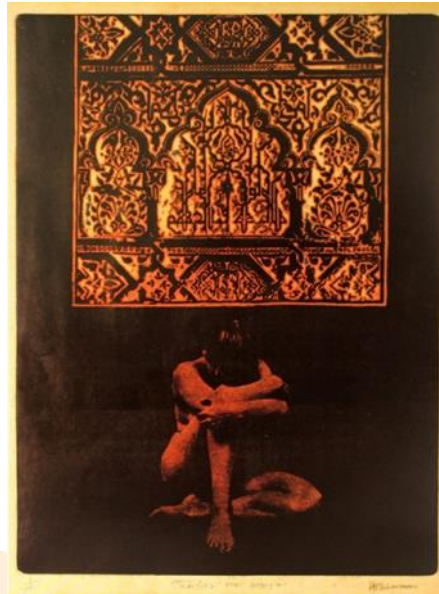


Fig 1. Artwork by Sulaiman Esa, 'Waiting for Godot', 1977, 76 cm x 62cm

This masterpiece tells a crisis of his life not only impressing the story of the art identity crisis but trying to display the country's cultural crisis in the 1970s, especially to the Muslim Malays towards western influences. This piece of work is a representation of Islamic identity that filled in the culture and life of western societies, where the main aim is to highlight the issues and challenges faced by Muslims. This artwork was produced in the form of a semi-nude female image combined with decorative motifs that decorated on Kaabah. This is a question mark for all art and community activists at that time which wondering about the issues and the meaning that he wants to convey. Some people do not agree with his artwork, but according to him, that is the reality of the picture or the fact that the crisis of identity that had once happened by a Malay community living with western culture during those days.

Apart from that, there are also artworks produced in line with the issues and challenges faced by the Malay community. It has illustrated by the Muslim artist namely Mohd Fuad bin Arif which entitled 'The Opening.' This artwork was exhibited at the Bakat Muda Sezaman in 2013.

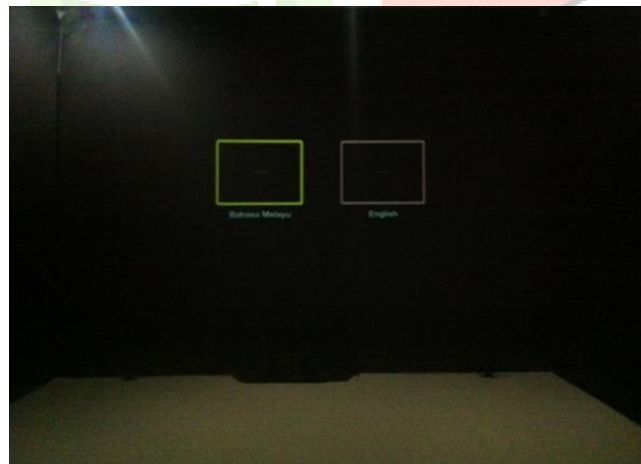


Fig 2. Artwork by Fuad Arif, 'Pembukaan', 2013

This piece of work describes the connections between Islamic art and western art combined in the form of video and sound. Fuad Arif features a sense of Islamic artwork with western-influenced by combining surah al-Fatihah and western music as a piece of background music for this artwork. For him, this was the circumstances and situation of the Malay community who lived in the 20th century, which was influenced by ideology and western understanding. Meanwhile, some of the works produced by new emerging artists were portrayed as controversial works that touch on the issue of Islamic admission and the works have been removed from public displays. The work was produced by Izat Arif, as shown in the table below.



Fig 3. Artwork by Izat Arif, 'Fa Qof', 2014

According to Nur Hanim Khairuddin (2013), among the issues which have been influenced by Malaysian artists are the cultural sensitivities of local communities and the paradoxical art of Islam. Nur Hanim also agreed that both of these issues had become the main factors that contributed to the emergence of many controversial artworks produced in the Malaysian art scene. These types of issues can be seen in the artwork portrayed by Izat Arif above. Besides that, there is also a controversial artwork being presented by J. Anu, which was produced in 2013, as shown in the table below.



Fig 4. Artwork by J.Anu 'ABC for the Middle Classes', 2013

This artwork was displayed as part of an exhibition for Malaysia Day in 2013. ABC for the Middle-Age Middle Classes is a body of work produced by prominent local artists, namely Anurenda Jegadeva or known as J. Anu. The "I is for IDIOT" gained the attention of Malay society with the skull-and-crossbones striped flag, a monkey riding a bicycle, and a Quranic verse, 'Bismillah' (In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful) that printed in reverse which gives a significant impact to the Malaysian art scene during that time. This is what contemporary art is illustrated in Malaysia during this particular period. But not all the Malay artworks presented this kind of controversial artwork. This might be a reason why the artist produces this type of artwork. It may be the artwork produced the reason to react to the current social-political circumstances in Malaysia.

On top of that, living in the contemporary period, science becomes one of the most important foundations of modernity. The concept of modernity is set up by the principles of modern science, such as rational and secular. To achieve development through modernization, science, and technology is considered as the best tool for achieving this goal. The process of modernization also will influence the structure and the social system through the enhancement of the understanding of science and technology. In contrast, it has an impact on politics, economics, and the thought in Muslim society. Thus it will give an understanding of the role of modern society regarding the norm of traditions, which leads to secularism and also becomes a challenge for the Muslim community living in the contemporary era. According to (Nasr, 1994), there is a change of paradigm during the scientific revolution. This fundamental change has brought the identity that led to secularism in science since the 17th century. This secular thought influences the main framework of modern science's thinking, which contributes to the changes that affect the pattern of human action.

One of the main key features of modern science is the separation between knowledge and sacredness in the secular nature of science. Therefore, it can be interpreted that modern scientists are able to study nature without any divine knowledge, thus separating their scientific activities from religious beliefs and practices. Eventually, today's modern science has no longer become a symbolic

and metaphysical significance because the basis of modern science is based on modern philosophy that emphasizes the separation between knowledge and God.

V. CONCLUSION

In the context of the visual arts in Malaysia, Malaysian contemporary art usually extended from the last ten years. It is tremendously imperative in a broader context as it resembles directly with the growth of the nation as a developed country as well as a successful liberal and progressive Islamic state on the world stage. Contemporary Islamic art emerges when the artists seek ways to produce new expression, which is influenced by the “modern” and reinforcement of the Islamic identity through contemporary artworks (Islamic Identity in Malaysian Visual Arts: Achievement and Difficulties, 1992). Nevertheless, when the artwork is manifested in a new visual language, the misunderstanding towards the basic meaning and principles that have been portrayed will only destroy the beauty and authenticity of traditional art (Haron, & Shariff, n.d.). Consequently, modernization will categorize the arts as the position that loses the essence of the soul in Islamic art. The view of the people regarding the meaning of contemporary nowadays will make them far away from the realization of God's authority. However, not all Islamic artworks are influenced by these particular issues in the modern development of the era. Therefore, this research was carefully conducted to see the issues and challenges happening in the contemporary era by selecting some artworks that show a significant meaning. However, there are still some limitations in preventing these issues and challenges but this could be easily overcome by doing some discussion and appreciation.

5.1. Recommendations

Based on the discussion and findings of this research, the researcher would suggest and recommend more research and writings pertaining to these issues to be conducted as it could uplift and enhance the awareness of the reader especially in understanding this matter. Apart from that, all higher and lower institutions including universities and schools must play an important role in uplifting these events by continuously organizing the events and seminars in their places. It seems to be a slowdown, especially observing the growth of the understanding and appreciation of this particular topic when the new generations of artists who have influenced themselves by western ideology. Therefore, it is very important to be highlighted more on this topic in order to educate our new generations about this topic.

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