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THE DEPICTION OF ISLAMIC ELEMENTS IN THE ARTWORKS OF YOUNG CONTEMPORARY AWARD

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Abstract:

The National Art Gallery (NAG) introduced the Young Contemporary Award (YCA), also known as Bakat Muda Sezaman (BMS), in the early 1970s with the goal of improving the creative thinking of the art scene. The platform has resulted in a significant percentage of notorious local artists producing remarkable artworks. Nevertheless, with the fast advancement of the modern era in Malaysia, the intention of presenting national culture and traditions especially the Islamic values through visual art among the Muslim artists appears to dissipate. The new generation of Muslim artists' preference for western and universal styles led to the abandonment of Islamic symbols. They appeared to ignore their own cultural motifs and ideals without concerning the impact of their decisions on the next generation of Muslim artists. Thus, this paper will discuss the examples of Islamic elements depicted in the Young Contemporary Award artworks based on the principles from the National Culture Congress 1971 using the qualitative method. It is important for these visual arts to be studied for their contribution in Islamic art. These findings can be used as source of reference to improve the content of Malaysian art making.

Keywords:

Bakat Muda Sezaman; Islamic Art; National Art Gallery; National Culture Congress; Visual Art

Introduction

Malaysia's art landscape has grown dramatically over time, particularly after the establishment of the National Art Gallery (NAG) in 1958. According to Faizuan and Nasir (2016), the NAG

reflects the government's recognition of the visual arts. The goal of NAG is to become the primary source of visual artwork creation and home collecting, as well as the custodian of national artistic history.

In addition to its goals, the NAG has launched a variety of initiatives with the goal of sustaining and creating time-setting patterns. Young Contemporary Award (YCA), formerly Bakat Muda Sezaman (BMS), is a program that seeks young talent to satisfy a need in the visual arts. It is a national platform for young artists to submit and exhibit non-traditional work. This competition has provided a forum for young artists to create challenging and inventive works, such as installations, and to present them to Malaysia's mainstream art community.

Indeed, Malaysian visual arts entities such as the YCA, which has been in operation since the 1970s, have yet to have a substantial influence. YCA, on the other hand, has produced a lot of successful artists in Malaysia's visual arts sector. Since 1974, more than 20 editions of the Young Contemporary Award have been held. This platform has given birth to a slew of talented and well-known local artists who have produced amazing and visionary works.

In the foreword to YCA 2000, the National Art Gallery stated that they created this art competition specifically for our young artists in the hopes that they will be able to rise to the competition's challenges and generate opportunities for young artists to strive for higher levels of achievement in creativity in line with the new. The NAG further anticipates that the incentives will encourage our young artists to produce high-quality work, to break new ground, and to explore new possibilities in our country's art creation. As a result, the framework of the YCA competition emphasizes the difficulties that young artists experience in terms of space, publicity, and production time. As a result, the competition is held every two years in order to stimulate and develop more competitiveness among young people.

This was reflected by Yee I-Lan in her description of the Young Contemporary Award 2006 as a meaningful means to highlight the shifting and extending bounds of art creation, as well as to provide the groundwork for future readings and discussions. She stated it more precisely as follows:

As Malaysian artists, the Young Contemporary exhibition and prize are very important to us. It acts as a survey, a measure of progress, identifying new breakthroughs, vocabulary, and approaches in our modern arts. The Young Contemporary, a regular biannual event, reflects rhythms and grounds artists and art works in a sociopolitical time and place while also predicting potential future concerns.

Malaysian identities were altered as a result of the August 1970s National Culture Congress in Kuala Lumpur, which played an essential part in the formation of modern Malaysian art (Mohamed Ali, 2000). As a result of the formulation's many acceptances, three principles have been expressed as a result of NCC 1971; the first principle is that Malaysia's national culture should be established on the culture of the region's people. The second principle is that other relevant cultural features can be recognized as national cultural elements, and the third principle is that Islam plays an important role in the formation of national culture. This formulation was made by considering the historical facts of the region and the position of the country as a centre of civilization as well as a centre of discovery and trade for centuries.

Besides, there is also a process of interaction, identification, absorption and acceptance of various cultural elements (Zaliza & Norlin, 2009).

Furthermore, according to Redza Piyadasa (2001), since the National Culture Congress (NCC) in 1971, painters' understanding and enthusiasm to make culturally significant works has developed. Mulyadi Mahmood (2001) agreed, adding that in the 1970s, artists articulated a wide range of genres and issues centered on the issue of national, social, and cultural identity. According to Siti Humaini (2020), this type of cultural feature has been regularly seen in the artwork creation of artists even after the foundation of the NCC. As a result, the effects of this application may be seen in local artworks, particularly in the Young Contemporary, dating back to the 1970s.

The NCC's engagement in the development of the arts, however, is limited to the 1980s and 1990s, rather than the new millennium. According to Faizal Zailudin (2018), no current research connects and then evaluates the extent to which this approach is successful on visual works in this century, particularly in the modern age.

To address such a demand, a study and interpretation of the most recent Young Contemporary Award artworks from the perspective of national cultural features is required. In Malaysia, the Young Contemporary Award is a renowned venue that is seen as a representation of the country's visual arts' future. As a result, raising and examining these artworks is crucial in order to have a deeper grasp of their significance in the art world.

Problem Statement

According to Liza et al. (2014), in Malaysia's development of modern art, the idea of altering Malay culture and traditions in visual art has been disregarded. As a result, studies demonstrate a reduction in Malaysian artists' portrayal of concepts and techniques derived from Malay/Islamic symbolism between 2000 and 2003. The authors simply limit the period to three years and exclude 2004 and later.

Furthermore, Faizal Zailudin (2018) and Azian Tahir (2008) said unambiguously that there is a paucity of specific information about the form and relevance of the YCA winning works. This is seen in the failure to recognize YCA artworks, which are critical to the evolution of Malaysian visual art. Meanwhile, Faizal et al. (2018) discovered that the interpretation of form and meaning of national cultural features in artworks from YCA in a study titled *Interpretasi 9 Karya Seni Visual Terpilih Bakat Muda Sezaman Dari Konteks Teras Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*. The study, however, was restricted to certain artworks that exclusively displayed cultural components and does not apply to all winning artworks.

Sarena Abdullah (2011) discusses the impact of a thematic approach to theme, motif, and media among Malay artists. Changing artistic approaches to art have reflected changes in the structure and feel of Malaysia's "new middle class," to which these artists belong, since the 1990s. She does not, however, go into detail about how the national cultural features relate to the 1971 National Culture Congress. According to Liza et al. (2014), the movement of new-generation artists toward western and global styles has contributed to the abandoning and undervaluing of Malay cultural markers. In fact, it garnered little attention since no serious research was conducted to document the transformation.

Without a doubt, Mohamed Ali acknowledged the view that some of Malaysia's younger generations have been easily influenced and tainted by their own cultural background with all of the current art trends in his book *current Malaysian Art: Manifestation of Malay Form and Content*. They appeared to neglect their own cultural themes and concepts, adopting Western principles entirely without regard for the ramifications of their actions on the next generation of artists around them. Indeed, a lack of writing or journaling, according to Faizuan Mat (2017), relates to a paucity of art knowledge.

As a result, the current study sought to analyze the aforementioned problems. This study covers a research gap that has perplexed scholars: the lack of textual material surrounding the most recent Young Contemporaries artworks. Using the data provided, this study will determine how far national cultural components have been incorporated into Young Contemporary Award artworks from the first edition in the 1970s to the most recent in 2019.

Objectives

This research has two purposes. The initial goal is to discover formal elements in Young Contemporary Award artworks from 1974 to 2019. The second is to examine the artworks of the Young Contemporary Award from 1974 to 2019 that incorporate the framework of national cultural components. However, only four (4) artworks were chosen for identification in this paper.

The study will concentrate on YCA's artworks from 1974 to 2019. This prestigious competition is particularly important to Malaysian artists because it has been organized year after year. It is crucial in determining the growth of Malaysia's art scene. Thus, YCA remains important as a benchmark for Malaysian visual art within the concept of national culture (Firdaus Zailudin, 2018).



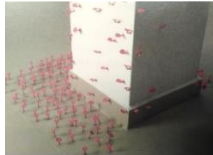

This analysis will provide a clear picture of whether or not the artworks implemented the aspects of national culture from the National Culture Policy 1971. The relevance of this study is to raise awareness and provide wider exposure, directly or indirectly, concerning artwork creation to society and art aficionados about Malaysia's Cultural Congress 1971.

It serves to promote and persuade young and veteran artists to use Malaysia's Cultural Congress concept of multiracial and multicultural components in artwork creation in order to retain our own local identity. A comprehensive awareness of the elements of national culture will be able to add value in the creation of mature and intellectual artworks.

Research Methodology

The subjects of the winning artworks are chosen using qualitative approaches based on two fundamental methodologies: observation and sampling. Then there was cataloguing, journal reading, and research paper reading. The researcher was able to be more selective in selecting artworks for the research sample thanks to the observations. The researcher chose only four (4) artworks to study for the sampling. The examination focuses on the formal aspects of the visual parts of these artworks.

Results and Discussion**Table 1: Artwork Analysis**

No.	Title	Sample of Artwork	Description	Subject Matter
1.	“Al Rahman”		Zakaria Awang, 1982 Mixed media Variable dimensions	-Calligraphy
2.	“Manifestasi Perpaduan”		Mokhzani Hairim Mokhtar, 2002 Wood, 292 x 40 x 58 cm	-Knot
3.	“Tumpang”		Azliza Ayob, 2006 Paper & paper clay, Variable sizes	-Tiny mushrooms scattered on walls
4.	“Pembukaan”		Mohd Fuad Arif, 2013 variable dimensions	-Audio of surah Al-Fatihah

Source: Bakat Muda Sezaman (1982, 2002, 2006 & 2013). Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery.

"Ar Rahman" by Zakaria Awang, for which he got the YCA Major Award in 1982, was one of the early pieces that demonstrated Islamic criteria and could be categorized as kinetic sculptures. Thread and tin are used to create the artwork. Because it is hanging and moving, the sculpture is mobile. Despite the fact that Al Rahman's work was categorized as mixed media, in the judges' report, Redza Piyadasa, who reacted on behalf of the panel of judges, described it as "sculptural":

The judges unanimously awarded the Major Award to Zakaria Awang for his extraordinarily poetic and delicate sculptural [my emphasis] compositions. His efforts to bridge the gap between eastern and western perceptions are both controlled and sophisticated. The artist's high level of technical modification and presentation style were especially lauded. Furthermore, his attempts to incorporate Islamic motifs in works like "Al Rahman" have obviously enlarged the spectrum of sculptural dedication in this country (Piyadasa 1982: 4).

Meanwhile, the work "Manifestasi Perpaduan" by Mokhzani Hairim Mokhtar is a wooden sculpture measuring 292 x 40 x 58cm. If examined, this work is a small piece (fragment) of wood that is joined into the form of a knotted rope that is placed in a vertical position. Using the knot of 'ikatan tindih kasih' and the site part of the work is made separately. This work talks about the impact of disunity in society. This can be seen through the term unity which is described through the form of a strong knot. The small wooden pieces represent the individuals that make up the community. While the joined pieces of wood show a message of unity in addition to the appearance of a 'tindih kasih' knot. This work promotes the positive values of Islam which is the spirit of unity. Furthermore, this work is a reflection on Surah Ali Imran: "Berpegang teguhlah dengan tali Allah, dan janganlah kamu berpecah belah".

Artist such Azliza Ayob have also incorporated Islamic elements in their work. The work is produced as installation using paper clay that forms small mushrooms. Her works are installed on several surfaces of columns and walls. The tiny mushrooms are colored in bright red and the artist allowed visitor engagement by picking the work (mushrooms). The visitor's involvement is a reflection of the sharing and tolerance between the artist and the appreciator. The subject 'mushroom' describes the nature of weakness and helplessness in accordance with the nature of mushrooms that depend on other plants for survival. The weak nature is highlighted well through the use of a fragile medium (paper clay). Hence, this work advocates positive values such as tolerance, tolerance and humility.

Fuad Arif's magnificent masterpiece was the 2013 YCA winning artwork. The chamber transports the spectator into a serene space because it can be viewed as a quantum-wave space or as a spiritual haven and refuge from a higher energy perspective. Fuad's art is not preachy, despite its spiritual connotations. The experience is best had alone, with a peaceful head and a submissive heart. When one enters the area, they are surrounded by a peaceful sound vibration of Bach's classic, "A & G string." The classical composition's melody, rhythm, timbre, pace, and tempo calm one's mental cacophony and emotional wave into a stable meditative state. Like natural breathing, it slips in and out of the emptiness. Each 'makam,' or line pause, is vacant, as if pushing the listener to empty their minds and return to a place of emptiness or origin. Nonetheless, we can expect the audience to experience universal calm and tranquility, albeit to varying degrees of intensity. Everyone is welcome to enjoy the art, regardless of background. It primarily communicates via the universal energy that underpins our mental, emotional, and physical experiences. This power is known by several names in various civilizations, including *semangat*, *chi*, and *prana*.

When we examine the formal elements, we can identify the themes from the analysis. The imagery of calligraphy and surah Al-Fatihah are featured in both works of Zakaria Awang and Fuad Arif's "Pembukaan" for the third principle in NCC 1971, Islam is an important component in the formation of national culture. Mokhzani and Azliza's work, on the other hand, employed symbolism and representation to explain the essence of Islamic beliefs. Then, a title like "Al Rahman" adds a lot to the artwork's concept.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the National Culture Policy was never intended to be an economic weapon, it is crucial to remember the context in which it was conceived: it began and was created at a time when the country sorely needed something to rally around. And the Young Contemporary Award remains the most prestigious national art competition for our young

artists, with many prior winners going on to become some of our country's and region's most recognized artists. Young Contemporaries is a platform provided by the country's leading art institution for artists to pursue innovative ideas, push the boundaries of convention, break boundaries, and assert their originality in an environment free of traditional restraints and obligations. As a result, their contribution to art should be recognized in Malaysian art history.

Young artists can use the YCA to develop their ideas two years in advance by critically assessing current art trends. With such foresight, the inclusion of their artworks in subsequent YCA series would undoubtedly demonstrate a special power in their messages and compositions. Hopefully, the YCA will continue to be a driving force in the country's visual arts sector's progress. Then, additional research and writing about Malaysian artists should be conducted. Malaysians, especially artists, will suffer if these thoughts and points of view are not preserved and documented. This research can be used to lay the groundwork for future studies on the added value and content of the country's cultural elements. As a result, it will provide a full visual art document for academics, students, art advocates, and artists to use in analyzing any artwork.

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