



## Issues and Problems in Malaysian Contemporary Visual Arts

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**Abstract.** In Malaysia, there is a question in term of intellectualism activities in the context of visual epistemology. Therefore, this paper revealed the problems that linger in the Malaysian contemporary visual art scene. In fact, Malaysian contemporary artists appear to have insufficient intellectualism values and less discourse activities. The lacks of scholars in the field of visual arts create a gap in the visual arts scene in Malaysia. The question of this study was to uncover the main problems in Malaysian visual arts that led to the problem of art intellectual development. In addition, this paper presents the awareness of the valuable contributions in the intellectual development that able to enhance the communication in the art object.

**Keywords:** *art knowledge; art object; contemporary art; interpretation; perception;*

### 1 Introduction

In Malaysia, the art knowledge (implicit) of contemporary visual arts is something questionable. It seems they have a crisis of thinking and the position of thought in Malaysia visual arts. Making of art is not merely the formation of an object but also the formation of complex ideas. But this complex idea is still a question on the situation of contemporary visual arts in Malaysia. There is no art criticism process to evaluate new artworks in order to build strong contents for all Malaysian visual artists. In Malaysia, we can describe the condition of being known about formalistic aspect in visual arts by many people. However, the intellectual value of artworks and the contribution is a question. The thought behind the artworks is a question need to reveal as mentioned by Nasir [1] regarding 'impact factor'. We cannot deny the technical process and skills in painting or installation. Indeed, our artists are very capable and talented regarding elements and principle of art. However, references and resources needed by the students related to the epistemology of art were disappointed due to the insufficient visual art study. According to Badrolhisham [2] there is imbalance between arts graduated and art publication in Malaysia. Their justification of art never mentioned except the existence of them in the arena of contemporary art as continuity chain. Comments, criticism, explanation, description, analysis, and any other matters on the corner of intrinsic and

thoughts should be plenty rather than stripping on the technical aspects, skills and the elements and principles of art. This happened probably because the study of issues that artists try to convey may not be deep process and may not be underpinned by appropriate methodology. Therefore, this study is to investigate the thinking of arts and the current circumstances of visual arts in order to reveal the problem of art knowledge (implicit) development in contemporary visual arts of Malaysia.

## 2 The Lack of Art Education

The education system in the 60s, 70s or the millennium has left us for quarter century. We are still looking for the right system to educate its people in the face of current technological advances are getting busier. Product education must be evaluated before use in educating students. Similarly, arts education is increasingly considered essential in educating the public. Visual arts in this country are very demanding for the discussion of art criticism, art appreciation and debating about art. Art criticism does not exist in Malaysia. In fact, art criticism and appreciation never taught in depth by the existing art institutions. According to Abu [3] schematic idea of arts education not only takes into account the content and disciplinary procedures only. But also underlines the importance for the understanding and art appreciation in line with the creation of art knowledge. Lowenfeld [4] have seen art is not only appreciation on the involvement of creative development but it should be more concerned with understanding the content and educated about the arts. Such understanding and the content shelled by the various disciplines comprising the field of creation or production of art, art history, art appreciation, art criticism and aesthetics [5].

Nonetheless, learning and teaching of art criticism as not giving any impact on the arts industry in Malaysia. According to Azman [6] recent development of local visual arts, there is unbalance between the production of art works and criticism till art works cannot be assessed the advantages or disadvantages as a whole. Visual arts critic in this context is the role to consider the work and give professional solutions for the empowerment of a work. Arts institutions should play a more aggressive role in providing the curriculum to produce a skilled for art critic. The curriculum in local universities needs to be reconsidered in order to solve arts criticism problem. Azman [6] also states that this (lack detractors) are the major issues in the visual arts of Malaysia today. Not many art critics are truly competent and able to dominate the field of criticism with good and effective.

Dr. Mohd. Najib Ahmad Dawa former Director of the National Visual Art Gallery (NVAG), in *Utusan Malaysia* as state by Azman [6] said that the problem arose because we did not have a strong foundation in the field of visual arts criticism in terms of publications or institutions. There is only a point to report and comment only. He stated further that the weak areas of criticism in this country becomes more severe when the institutions of higher learning, Public Institution of Higher Education (IPTA) did not offer specific criticism in the field of visual arts to students. Local universities today do not have a specific field of art criticism as well as private institutions. In fact, they only offer courses how to paint, and mastered the techniques of the visual arts in

formal education but no specific criticism. According to him, the curriculum at the institution it's a caused of the imbalance between the developments of Malaysian contemporary art criticism to the field.

This represents a loss to the development of local visual arts when the arts are moving away in the postmodern discourse in the hands of a composite of young artists. However, 'art criticism' is the core that brings up another issue in visual art. When less art criticism activity in the visual arts arose, the main problem occurred is thought or idea that artist try to convey. Therefore, the institutions whether public or private need to reconsider they curriculum in order to produced graduates who are able to become art scholars in the field of visual art.

### **3 National Visual Art Gallery of Malaysia (NVAG)**

National Visual Art Gallery was established before the country achieved independence. Maturity does not need to dispute even NVAG is a body that has the effect of the widespread and influential. The idea sparked its inception in about 1954 to 1956 under the Malaya Arts Council is anchored by Mubin Sheppard and Frank Sullivan. Establishment of the National Visual Art Gallery (NVAG) is a government's recognition for the visual arts. NVAG vision is to become the premier development and home collection of visual artwork and a trustee of national artistic heritage. Its mission is to collect, conserve, preserve, and exhibit, promote, awareness, understanding and appreciation of high art to all levels of society.

The original name for National Art Gallery is Balai Seni Lukis Negara, BSLN but on September 26, 2011 according to Kamilah [7] the Minister of Information, Communication and Culture, Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim has launched the National Visual Arts Gallery 2011 which led to the change of name from the BSLN to NVAG. The new act will enable the galleries display sculpture, photography, ceramics, sculpture which has its own identification in this artwork.

The objectives of NVAG firstly are acquiring the work of the Permanent Collection of Visual Arts Heritage creativity and aspirations that reflect the cultural arts in the country and also from abroad. Second is to conserve, document and investigate the Permanent Collection of Visual Arts Heritage and national art historiography. Thirds, to promote and improve the quality of the visual arts by hosting national exhibitions, seminars, workshops, competitions and art activities in and outside the country and the last one is to create awareness, foster understanding, appreciation and respect towards art. However, there is another objective that should be given attention is the sharing of knowledge and knowledge development. This objective is to develop knowledge and skills thus intelligent partnerships in the visual arts.

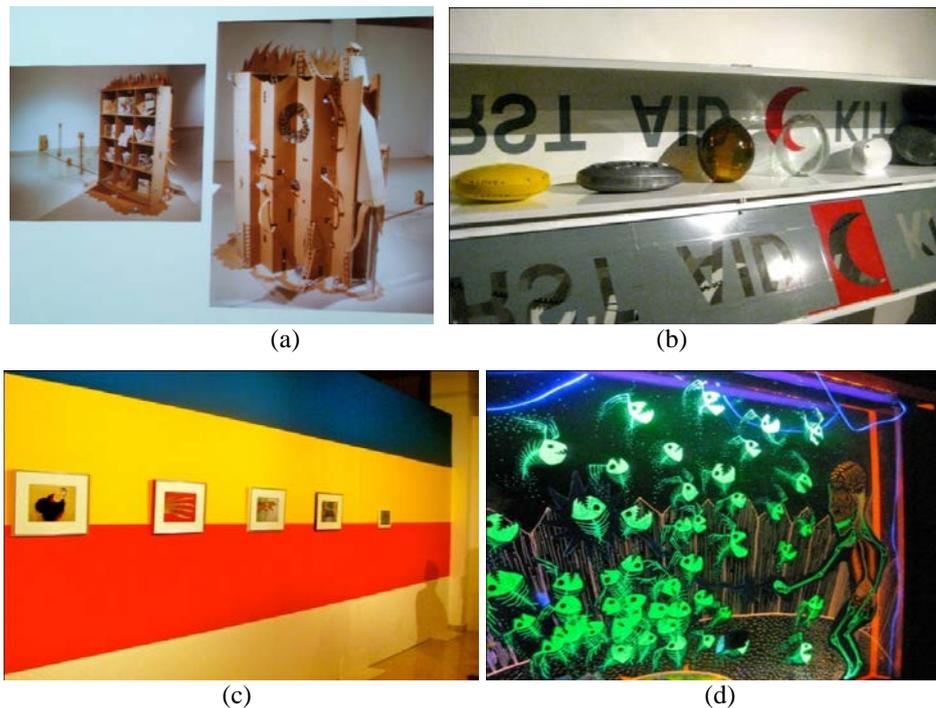
NVAG has produced programs such as Young Contemporary Awards (YCA) to search for new talent to fill a gap in the visual arts. In fact, YCA that has existed since 70s has yet to give a big impact in the visual arts in Malaysia. YCA has produced many talented artists in the visual arts scene in Malaysia. However,

knowledge of the arts in Malaysia is still voids and unfilled. Visual arts in Malaysia need not only talented artists but also requires art thinkers, writer, curator who able to write about art. In order to reach the organization's goals, there is a lot of improvement that needs to be done by NVAG in increase the activity of writing about art knowledge. Hasnul [8] give the question whether contemporary art in Malaysia rely only on 'talented artists' alone? He believes YCA should also emphasize talents in researching, writing, editing, publishing, printing, designing, critiquing, judging, arguing, debating, discoursing, discussing, evaluating, curating, teaching, educating, collecting, managing, organizing, promoting, marketing, branding, etc. He also said that contemporary art in Malaysia needs more than 'Young Contemporaries Art Talent'.

Indeed, Singapore was ahead of us with arts programs such as Singapore Biennale 2011. In Singapore Biennale is held programs like Art Young Writers Program is aimed to stimulate critical and creative thinking around contemporary art, and to encourage aspiring young art writers, the Singapore Biennale has developed a new initiative to respond to artworks in the exhibition. Such program can also be held in Malaysia in order to generate more extensive knowledge of art. With the new act of exchange, NVAG should consider another awards in stead of the Young Contemporary Awards (YCA). From interviews conducted, very few respondents gave an explanation of NVAG.

#### **4 Young Contemporary Awards (YCA)**

The Young Contemporaries established since 1970 to find new talents of local visual arts. It is a competition or an award that recognizes the new talented artists and could become the driving force for the development of local art. According to Faizal [9] the idea of YCA is to prepare the field for the exhibition of young artists who had just stepped out from art institutions. The results of their creativity valued at YCA before shown to the audience and then get criticism from the community and art thinkers. It is considered the highest and most important award in visual art of Malaysia. Therefore, YCA is the best platform to see the development of visual arts in Malaysia. Yet, the existence of YCA in the contemporary world has not given a shift in existing paradigms. National Visual Art Gallery (NVAG) and its important role in generating ideas for the development of the visual arts should be praise. Faizal [9] also state that YCA is primarily intended to improve the provocative, controversial, daring and profitable debate for contemporary art, which in turn can increase people's interest in contemporary art appreciation in our country. Indeed, the NAG has provided a bridge to a new artist to move and advance through the visual arts. However, the increase in the development of visual art cannot be achieved if upcoming artists are still thinking the old level. New artist should be more prudent to come out with issues that need to be addressed, and then the knowledge of art can be expanded continuously.



**Figure 1** Jury's Award Winners (YCA 2010): Major Awards: (a) Haslin Ismail, Title: The Way it All Works, 2010; Jury's Choice Award: (b) Diana Ibrahim, Title: First Aid Kit, 2010; (c) Tan Nan See, Title: Rupa Malaysia: Jewellery, 2010; (d) Helmi Azam Tajol Aris, Title: Sudah Terang Lagi Bersuluh, 2010. (Source: <https://tsabri.wordpress.com> [10])

According to Arham [11] that Zanita Anuar as a jury for YCA 2002 raised the concern of young artists is seen not be able to give new motivation or unusual artworks. Her concern is actually not only derived from the competition at that time but also in Asia where the younger generation of artists in the 20th century from Malaysia seen cannot put their names in Asian contemporary art. Tsabri [12] been reported as a head jury of YCA 2010 that new artists are not engaged in organized forums (see Figure 1). Attitude and responsibility of the artist is in dispute. Various problems present whether these artists just grab the prizes or the knowledge that is sought. Therefore, YCA system and the importance of this should be reconsidered after dozens of years leading to the same. Efforts have been made by the NVAG is very much appreciated, but the attitude of the new artists need to be changed in attempt to achieve a new paradigm in the visual arts scene in Malaysia.

Various issues concerning YCA happens every year, new artists are very excited by the prizes offered. However, the nature of YCA is not like sports games that should be the winner based on physical strength alone. It is based on the change of thinking that could trigger chaos that puzzle and then generate ideas for art studies further. This issue has reported by Nasir [1] in his jury report by states that it is very unfortunate if many people presume that YCA competition is simply a contest to search for a winner. The jury would like to witness that some progress is achieved in relation to previous YCA competition; not just to view the materialization of new 'styles' or forms but particularly the

manifestation of paradigm shifts and intellectual processes in framing something 'old' as 'new'. To see the YCA progress, U-Wei wrote Notes on Young Contemporary Awards in 2006 began in the 70s the emergence of conceptual art, installation, conversion and widespread awareness about the art movement in the international arena even though most of the participants attending the 2D drawings. There were not many exposures for sculptures, photography, video art or performance.

In 1980s, with the addition of YCA regulations which introduced a theme we see the reverse for 2D work on the wall in the 1983-1987 periods. The jury report during that time is the artist must be brave enough and is not vague and weak in addressing the social context without simply by adhering to Western ideologies. During 90s, especially in 1994 there is no award was given because the jury felt unable to find any work that was accomplished for the main award. The jury also felt confused with an understanding of the postmodern by artist and jury prejudice the commercial aspects of the artist and skeptical about young artists. In 1996-1997 the YCA successfully brought forth two woman artists with individual strength. From 2000 till now not much change in obtained from the flask. The same thing was repeated, still talking about the direction, the role of artists and others. Every time YCA held questions about arts work does not reach its targets to reflect a great work for the country. The role of NAG has a lot to help the young artists to advance their career journey as an artist. However, reform should be made to the YCA for young artists in order to produce intellectual elite, not only the skin but also on its contents. Therefore, the YCA format should be revamped in order to produce quality young artist that can contribute to the art knowledge rather than empirical expression.

## **5 Non-Government Organization (NGO)**

Non-Government Organization (NGO) has been taking place to support growth and development of visual arts in Malaysia. There are many NGOs involved in the development of visual arts in Malaysia, such as MATAHATI, NN Gallery, Valentine Willie and many more. These organizations assist in promoting and exhibit the works of artists for public viewing. MATAHATI also greatly contributed to the growth of new artists through its own fund which is called MATAHATI Art Fund (MAF). The fund is specifically appointed as an effort to provide and support the talented artists who emerged in term of financial support and welfare of artists in need. It is also used as grants for artists to start art projects and activities. MAF is one of the existences of drugs in healthy Malaysian art scene, such as implanting a new blossoming artists and art activities and public-oriented projects. MAF is also organizing such YCA, they named it as Malaysian Emerging Artist Awards (MEAA) is an awards or the competition is to search for new talent in contemporary visual arts in Malaysia. Other galleries also organize competitions like the Starhill Gallery Visual Arts Awards, Philip Morris Malaysian Art Festival, and so on.

However, cooperation from the government and NGO are expected to strengthen the visual arts in Malaysia. NN Gallery by Fouzia [13] has voiced the problems they face as such require attention and concerted initiative of all

quarters, especially from the KKEKWA (Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage) for a more active role in promoting the visual arts, apart from initiatives to promote the performing arts as well as dance and cultural arts. Although art exhibitions are increasing today, each month there will be art exhibitions held. However, the research and writing about art is still too shallow. The NGOs also have to play a role in improving their knowledge of art among neither the artists nor the public good.

## **6 The Problem of Understanding and Interpretation**

There are several major issues that we can highlight in the visual arts in Malaysia. Among the issues is about the understanding and interpretation of thinking, impact factor, paradigm shift, less reading, less research, no development and others. I-Lann [14] did not find any explosion in the work of art in (YC). With regard to impact or explosion in the arts is nothing new. Indeed, this issue has been long time in our art scene; there is no improvement in our visual arts. In *Sidang Ribut Akal*, Siti Zainon Ismail stated that our art scene do not have the explosion, only explosion in soul [15]. Meaning that, our art scene has a derivative art works and does not offer anything new. In Malaysia, the object of visual art has a confusing paradox interpretation. Interpretation of art object is merely superficial and descriptive. Thus, it is a solely presentation or documentation of descriptive. This problem arises due to the lack of research or the influx of artists rather than the intelligent writer and curator. According to Badrolhisham [2] there is imbalance between arts graduated and art publication in Malaysia. Their justification of art never mentioned except the existence of them in the arena of contemporary art as continuity chain. Comments, criticism, explanation, description, analysis, and any other matters on the corner of intrinsic and thoughts should be plenty rather than stripping on the technical aspects, skills and the elements and principles of art. This scenario gives an indication that the lack of interest of young generation to the art theory and philosophy. Thus, it can be insufficient intellectualism documentation in Malaysian contemporary art. In this case, it is clear that knowledge of the arts is very important to be developed especially on the interpretation part.

Indeed, Malaysian contemporary visual arts have yet to arrive at this point. As states by Badrolhisham [2] that our art scene now in a crisis of arts knowledge. He believed that the 'mysterious' phenomena of the art are able to offer more of what we expect. It turns out the progress of the visual arts in Malaysia will be located on the intellectual artists. Knowledge of art should be explored further in the work of art in order to create the impact in terms of thinking. However, not many studies about the knowledge of art made by artists, academicians, curators, or any person involved in the art fields. The interpretation problem will lead to the weakness of institutional thinking in the community of Malaysian visual art. Thus, it raises a paradox to the Malaysian visual art development. In Malaysia, we also have the potential of art objects and have the ability to continue to reach new paradigm. Openness we claimed in the realization of an empire of critical thinking in our art scene. In the western world, the study of art objects has been happening and we should also continue to make these art objects as subjects. Through the discipline of anthropology

and philosophy, we may be able to widen the study of knowledge in the art. Savedoff [16] states that we can see an object as a work of art because of the ideas that hover around it and these ideas also determine the direction of interpretation that can be taken from the work of art. In other words, an idea is knowledge in the art that will serve the community, audiences, researchers and the owners.

Nevertheless, these art objects are best viewed as something that is not art, the art of status cannot be purely physical. Therefore, it certainly emphasizes on the importance of theory, context and knowledge of art. So, do we ever produce our own art theory and use in institutional thinking in Malaysia? There is research that dwells on the role of art objects in offering knowledge in the west. Diamond [17] considers the role of art objects with contemporary world is confusing paradox. The emphasis that we provide may only be bound to the technical skills. Finally, the importance of knowledge in the art in Malaysia seems ignored by our community. Production of art objects as a product of culture has been more and more produced. However, it is not yet a strong impact in terms of thought or the birth of a new paradigm.

## **7 The Crisis of Thought in Malaysian Visual Arts**

Everybody acknowledges the fact that the state of affairs of this country's visual arts is in limbo, often controversial, intermittently gloomy, and sporadically lively. Sometimes it manages to stay at the top; occasionally it seems pushed to the periphery [18]. Regarding to this statement, we acknowledges that the visual arts in our country seems to have a confusing direction and experiencing a crisis of thought. The emergence of young artists does not contribute to the generating thought in order to bring about certain explosion paradigm in the Malaysian visual arts. Through Young Contemporary Art Competition (YCA), we can observe the visual arts movement in our country is like no impressive progress, the level of thinking as well as formalistic aspect still like ten years before. We want to see the intellectuals thought from Malaysian artist through their artworks. Malaysian visual arts experiencing a crisis of thought in order to generating the knowledge of art it caused by the lack of research from the artists and discourse may be able to explore the extent to which 'art-criticism' occurs.

Nasir [1] state that "Malaysian young artist must be capable of generating critical views and producing more interesting works that not only deal with significant technical manipulation but also works that manage to bring about certain kind of paradigm shifts either through their treatment of media, language or surrounding contexts". Regarding the crisis of thought, this matter become critical is caused by the lack of research among artists. Badrolhisham [2] believes that any knowledge that regardless of our critical assessment as a result there is no questioning of the knowledge that should we received. More painful yet, when we are not sure how that knowledge becomes knowledge. Finally, we continue to learn and teach the technical issues only. Not surprisingly, in our art scene is lack of research. From this manner, questions of 'art for what' highlighted in order to find the significance of the visual arts production.

## 8 A Paradox in Malaysian Art Criticism

Art criticism means discourse towards artistic work in either oral or written form [19]. Art criticism is evaluation, discussion, and intellectual exercise involved counterexamples, counterargument about visual art. Art critics often criticize art in the context of the theory of aesthetics or beauty. The purpose of art criticism is pursuing a rational basis for the appreciation of art. And then, a goal of art criticism is to reveal the potential, possibility positive towards artworks, alongside the attempt to cast ideas to the artists in order to improve their work. However, the activity of art criticism is nearly dead in Malaysia.

According to Hafiz [20] the importance of art criticism in Malaysia, especially visual art is still considered new. Art criticism activities may be considered not important by a few artists or the community. He added that the lack of authors serious in criticism, especially in talking about paintings. Community of artists might also not convince of the role of art criticism in the development of art in Malaysia. Syakir [21] states that art in Malaysia occurred with relatively slow due to the lack of art criticism. In the meantime, he cited the Badrolhisham Mohd Tahir writing in 'Working Title 2008', which says not much we know about the art thought that can contribute to the development of art but it is more regarding artists with his problem. Of utmost importance when there are no ratings or reaction that can be simultaneously caused anything to be true simply because no one is able to record and criticizing art and ideas developed. "Thus it is understandable that the lack of art criticism resulted paralyzed in the development of art itself. The growth of new artists is not in line with art criticism activities. Therefore, discussion of thoughts or ideas that artists attempt to convey reaches a stalemate. Yet, the thinking impact did not reflect to visual arts development. How do we want to talk about beauty, art theory, idea, conceptual, and many other issues where there is no art criticism? This may be the reason why artists in Malaysia failed to create his own art theory. Hasnul and Badrolhisham [22] in a discussion of the *Sidang Ribut Akal* (Brainstorming) have mentioned "We might have art historians, but not art theorist". Here we see the role of art institutions in developing the art theory subject. There is a confusing in the arts syllabus in the universities for failing to emphasize the subject of theory and philosophy. These matters need to be reviewed by the parties concerned. As mentioned by Dr. Najib Dawa that the weak areas of criticism in this country becomes more severe when the institutions of higher learning (IPTA) did not offer specific criticism of the field of visual arts to students.

According to Michelle [23] that she studied Southeast Asian contemporary art including Malaysia was motivated by the relative lack of curatorial and scholarly attention to the thriving contemporary art practices of artists from the region. Contemporary artists in Southeast Asia are feature less prominent on the international stage compared than East and South East. She added that the lack of Malaysia in *DiAAAlogue* is a reflection of the lack of critical discussion in Malaysian contemporary art. This is one phenomenon that contributed to the lack of art criticism activities in Malaysia. Art criticism will lead us to the exploration to the mind and thoughts of the artist. In Malaysia, it can be said that we only saw the surface and does not explore the idea of the artist try to convey. This brings us to the so-called 'reviewing'. Criticism and reviewing is

something different. Art criticism can enhance critical thinking. There are ways to improve the quality of thought through art criticism. The lack of art criticism activity is related to syllabus issue in public and private universities. This study is an attempt to expose the problem.

## 9 Conclusion

In summary, the contemporary visual arts in Malaysia have a diversity of problems that we can reveal. Primarily concerned with the thought that has always been a major topic of discussion. However, the matter must be reviewed and further validated whether artists in Malaysia have a problem with the thought. In fact, thought will lead to changes in the art works created by artists, especially upcoming artists. Thinking through the arts does not linger in the environment of art itself. Indeed, thought is fundamental to the development of the art knowledge in the community.

Production of art objects in recent years did not reveal the impact or even a paradigm shift from the thinking that brought by the contemporary visual artists. However, the values of formalism are still providing the potential to go further. Therefore, the problems and issues that become diseases in Malaysian contemporary visual arts are the art communication failures or imperfections. Therefore, society seems unable to reach any benefits in terms of art knowledge and intellectualism from the artists. In fact, it is the time for Malaysian contemporary artists to consider how to bridge art communication and society.

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