

Malaysia Digital Artwork: Issues and Trend in National Integration

Mohd Farizal Bin Puadi, Mohd Zahuri Bin Khairani, and Ahmad Nizam Bin Othman

Abstract—Malaysia is a country where its people are diverse. Generally knowing the origin of Malaya is made up of Malays. The result of the British intervention on Malaya made Malaysia a country covered by various ethnicities. At the same time, to create a stable atmosphere between ethnic groups requires the hard work and the exact same ethnicity. This paper discusses visual artworks in forming a bond between ethnicity and digital media based artworks produced by Malaysian artists based on current issues of national integration in Malaysia. The discussion in this paper is solely focused on a collage digital artwork entitled *Al-Kesah*. This artwork contains some elements of national integration through the images it contains. The reading and interpretation of this artwork is to use a post-modern approach in contrast to the old approach of modernism. The new approach to the interpretation of this artwork will open up a larger context and indirectly open up new and exciting perspectives.

Index Terms—Multiracial, integration, identity, visual culture, digital artwork.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian society is comprised of the three largest ethnic groups, namely Malay, Chinese and Indians. Statistics show that the number of Malaysians is 32.4 million; 69.1% of the total were ethnic Malays, 23% ethnic Chinese, 6.9% ethnic Indian and 1% others [1]. The uniqueness of Malaysia's diversity is reflected in the way we live, think, social and political stratification. These nations share one language and life under the same flag. Artwork is a key element in which the issue of national integration is constantly raised in the visual artworks. The question here is how the issue of national integration has been adopted into an artwork that has characteristics of national integration of Malaysia. In this context, digital artwork has been chosen as the topic of discussion.

II. VISUAL CULTURE

Visual culture plays an important role and seeks to create a national identity as well as avoidance of inter-racial conflict. Some conflict events between ethnicities in Malaysia can be seen from the very beginning until now [2].

The May 13 incident involving racial riots has resulted in the destruction and death of many Malaysians. This has indirectly left a profound effect on the harmony of society in Malaysia [3]. The impact of this event was also born at the

National Cultural Congress at the University of Malaya to discuss National

Cultural Policies which emphasized three principles, were set as follows:

- The National Culture must be based on the indigenous culture of this region.
- Suitable elements from the other cultures can be accepted as part of the National Culture.
- Islam is an important component in molding the National Culture.

Visual culture moves in tandem with the development of modern Malaysian art in the 1930s through artists such as Abdullah Ariff, Yong Mun Sen, O. Den Peris and Penang watercolor painters [4]. The production of these works can indirectly be used as a guide and used in building a multi-ethnic culture. The history of Malaysian paintings also proves that these produced artworks have significant significance in forming a national identity based on ethnic diversity. Of course, cultural display will indirectly exist in the work produced [5].

It is important for us to rebuild the cultural diversity of our community from the conflict in visual culture. This shows that the role of visuals is very important in promoting racial harmony in Malaysia.

In the context of visual art history, ethnic identity can be seen in the creation of visual artwork. This is because the artists are made up of various ethnicities that translate through artwork. The post-colonial questions in the art space were mainly the pursuit of artistic identity that has been evident since the 80's [6].

Since the colonial era, the colonialists have given the people a certain degree of occupation with certain titles. This is a trait that invaders often practice over their occupied territories [7]. The consequences of this correction have actually led to a negative justification. For example the British colonialists were calling Malays as a people who are lazy [8]. These titles like this in a sense is actually an identity marking the Malays themselves.

The diversity of society in Malaysia is comprised of various races that will eventually lead us to a quest for Malaysian identity. Works produced in the past; before and after independence is very important not only from the point of view of art history but involves many aspects such as the sociopolitical background of multiracial society and religion, as well as works produced in the spirit of independence [9], [10].

The diversity of society in Malaysia is comprised of various races that will eventually lead us to a quest for Malaysian identity. These early artworks can serve as a guide and be used in building the nation's culture. Malaysian art history proves that these artworks have their own

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significance in shaping the nation's identity. It is certain that cultural displays will be indirectly present in the artwork produced [11].

III. DIGITAL ARTWORK

The early development of digital art in Malaysia can be said to begin in 1970 along with the development and introduction of new technology (computer). Digital works are classified as artworks produced by manipulating and painting using computers and computer software [12], [13].

Current art developments in Malaysia have also changed the definition of more digital art towards both computer and software. This is because digital art is now in line with the development of technology that can be used as a new medium in the production of works. The emergence of the term electronic arts, video art or anything related to hi-tech is parallel to the development of new technologies that can be utilized by a new generation of creators in the work [14].

Starting from the use of new media, digital art (computer, video, electronics and others) has become a concern for young artists in the work. Even artists who are exploring digital art are only a small number because of technical issues. Only truly passionate and committed artists are willing to explore whatever possibilities can be made with existing technology [15], [16].

IV. ISSUES AND TREND

With the influx of foreign immigrants as a result of the British intervention transformed Malaysia from a Malay-owned nation to an ethnically diverse nation [17]. This entry process eventually creates a country of ethnic diversity. Stability and harmony are important elements and should be taken seriously without compromise, because without which this element of a nation will be chaotic, and depressed [18], [19].

Issues of racial tension certainly cannot escape from a country whose community is made up of several ethnic groups. Maintaining ethnic harmony is the responsibility of the government of the chosen country. Malaysia for example has established various policies aimed at maintaining unity and integration among ethnic groups to prevent incidents such as race riots, hatred and hostility [20], [21].

The responsibility to maintain harmony through ethnic integration in Malaysia lies not only in the responsibility of the government but to be played by every citizen in various ways. This perspective gives a general impression that visual art also has its own way of contributing to the idea of integration through the artwork approach [22].

This paper is the first step to postulate the idea of national integration that being showing in local artwork. Arising out of this the focus of study is accumulate the technique, symbol, icon of digital artwork reflection on national integration in Malaysia.

V. ARTWORK

This selected artwork is an artwork created using computer software or media technology. The selection of this digital

artwork is also due to the use of the digital medium in the production of artwork in the country at the time as it was not yet explored as it was a new technology at a very expensive price back then [23], [24]. The selection of this work is because the content it contains is very significant to the topic that you want to discuss.

The first painter who uses a computer (Macintosh) as a medium to produce artwork is Ismail Zain. 1988 was the beginning of Malaysia's digital art history because during the year an exhibition titled 'Digital Collage' (A One Man Art Exhibition by Ismail Zain) was held by the Kuala Lumpur Art Gallery [25].

He is a great talent and ahead of time, because the works produced by computers are a new way of producing the work at that time.

Digital artworks have opened a new chapter on the definition of digital works because Ismail Zain explores the use and potential of computers in producing works. Images obtained from various sources are arranged and organized to fit the context of the environment with him based on issues of social issues, cultural economic, entertainment, religion, etc. [26].

Ismail Zain is a Malaysian painter educated at the Ravensbourne College of Art, United Kingdom. Art works (especially digital collage series) are a very critical work with the situation that took place in Malaysia at that time. Thinkers such as Marshall McLuhan, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes indirectly influenced Ismail Zain in his artwork. The result is the digital collage series produced using computer technology and critically from thought-provoking characters marking the entry of the postmodern era in Malaysia [27], [28].

VI. DIGITAL COLLAGE

One of the works of digital collage produced by Ismail Zain is *Al-Kesah*. This artwork shows the dominant image composition of the image, foreground and background. The image in front consisting of actors for the drama series of the 80's in the backdrop of a traditional Malay house.

The compositions in this artwork show two imaginations arranged up and down. The top consists of images of traditional Malay houses at night and a full moon in the upper left. While the lower part is a series of images of the cast (the soap opera TV *Dallas*, popular in the 1970s) [29].

Ismail Zain's digital collage artworks have a significance with the post-modern world of art because of artwork using new media (computer use) that paved the way for the birth of electronic artworks (First Electronic Art Exhibition) in 1997 [25].

This work was widely reviewed as a work that opened the space for exploring new media (digital) and receiving digital works as much as this [23]. Also added in 1970, digital artworks were also reviewed as borrowing approaches from concepts from the fields of anthropology, linguistics and mass media culture [30].

The resulting digital collage works are based on the cultural discourse Ismail Zain is trying to convey. This is because the digital collage's artwork opens a question of how to accept the local community on current technology acceptance. This digital collage artwork is also influenced by

McLuhan with his main ideas about realities in shrinking in global village [31].

The Al-Kesah is an artwork that is full of semiotic disciplinary use in the production of artworks that use socio-cultural aspects, subject and technical approaches to work [25].

This artwork is also a manifestation of the artist on the Malay culture and is the approach adopted with the use of symbolism as a metaphor that gives purpose and meaning to the work produced. This concept is described in traditional Malay culture with writing a poem as the largest of the Malay Archipelago to the world of universal literature. The collage approach felt to be the most similar and close to the rhythmic structure [29].

VII. CONTEXT

This digital collage is a very significant artwork on the development of Malaysian visual arts. So it is not surprising that the artwork produced by Ismail Zain is very interesting to comment. As a result, this work has always been a discussion as written among historians and art critics. For discussion in this paper, the construction of new narratives, discussions should be carried out in the new context as discussed by [32].

First, the composition of Al-Kesah's work can be seen from the use of symbolic images used. That is, the image of a traditional house clearly means 'Malay' or represent the Malay symbol [33]. While the composition of the front compositions is the epitome of the cast of the Europe. The symbolic composition of the back in the artwork depicts Ismail Zain's identity as a Malay, while the front composition is symbolized as an outsider (non-Malay).

Such composition opens a new perspective space to this work by looking at how Ismail Zain's acceptance of the 'outward' nation. In the context of ethnic relations in Malaysia, acceptance of something to another is difficult even after decades. This paper seems to justify that national integration would not apply if ethnic relations were not welcomed and accepted by other ethnic groups. Conceptual coercion (front and back) conceptually and theoretically is easy, but how in reality. So how did the British bring 'out' ethnicity into Malaya and the forced ethnic mixing in Malaysia [19].

Secondly, this artwork was produced in the 1980s which refers to the ongoing globalization process. This process directly gives Ismail Zain a new perspective in describing the manifestation of Malay artist in the construction of a plural society. Ethnic acceptance can be analogous to the acceptance of that time technology in producing this digital collage. The use of current technology as a new medium to produce such works as a multi-ethnic community acceptance. It symbolically also creates an indefinable space of debate about the social contract between ethnic groups before Malaya reaches independence [20].

Third, the use of technology (digital collage artworks) as a medium to unite ethnicity. This means that works produced by artwork and become rational and have their own purpose in the context of each artist's intentions. The function of the artwork reflecting on inter-racial issues.

Fourth, the use of the Al-Kesah title gives meaning that is an event. This entire work illustrates a story about related images in this work. Stories like state matters, social relationships, globalization, identity, culture and technology.

This digital collage is a work of art resulting from his reading and his point of view but he has no problem

translating it because the medium he uses helps him to come up with these ideas. Arguably the collage's digital art evokes pop culture or is popular with its easy-to-understand and close-up iconography. Symbolism used was an orderly and well-grounded in nature symbolizes 'make-up persona' of the Malay community that weathered the current modernism and post-modernism [29].

VIII. AL-KESAH

Al-Kesah an artwork created in February 1988. It was first performed by him during a solo exhibition entitled 'Digital Collage' at the Citra gallery, Shangri-La hotel Kuala Lumpur. This artwork was created using computer software (Macintosh) using the digital dot matrix method. The artwork was later printed on 75.5 cm × 64.5 cm paper and printed in 15 editions [25], [29].

The approach that he used in producing this artwork was in fact a method that others artists have rarely explored that time.

The artwork presented in this collage's digital solo exhibition (including works by Al-Kesah) is the result of an experimental image editing by Ismail Zain using computer and technology media. This indirectly placed him as the artist introducing a new theoretical framework in the development of contemporary art. However, some artists also experimented with same medium during the late 1980s, include Kamarudzaman Md. Isa, Ray Langenbach (and his Students at Universiti Sains Malaysia-USM) and Liew Kungyu [23], [24].



Fig. 1. Digital collage of artwork.

IX. CONCLUSION

Collage digital works by Ismail Zain produced in 1988, is a work full of the storytelling and statements that are to be submitted. As a visual artwork across the future with the current technology available at the time and of course Al-Kesah's artwork on the topic of discussion in the use of digital media (technology). It is from one point of view that this artwork is related to current national integration issues.

This view may be contrary to the writings of digital collage artworks such as Abdullah [25], Saidon [26], Piyadasa [27], [28], Rajah and Saidon [23], Malek and Ramli [30], Ismail and Sabana [31] as above. However, their views are analyzed by Ismail Zain's digital collage based on anthropology, linguistic, mass media, semiotic, media technology, ideas, social issues, cultural economics, entertainment, and religion.

Existing writings on this artwork are widely drawn from

the same perspective using modern approaches. In a broader context, a new post-modern narrative approach has been implemented in interpreting and reading the images contained in this Al-Kesah artwork. Several approaches should be adopted to dig into the meaning of a work that has been viewed because a larger perspective and knowledge will be gained if the artwork is evaluated using several such approaches.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Mohd Farizal Puadi is the main researcher in this paper title mean while Mohd Zahuri Khairani act as a supervisor and also Ahmad Nizam Othman act as a second supervisor.

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