
Local Characteristics in Contemporary Malaysian Art Creation

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary art in Malaysia is a visual representation of Malaysian culture, and its artistic style and characteristics have been formed with the development of Malaysia, presenting a multicultural characteristic. Exploring the local characteristics of contemporary art creation in Malaysia is an important dimension for observing and understanding the spirit of Malaysian culture. This study is based on the contemporary art environment, using cultural symbol analysis methods and style analysis methods to analyze the artistic works of Malaysian contemporary artists from three aspects: theme, style, and characteristics. From the perspective of cultural semiotics, Malaysian contemporary art is expressed and summarized in the main three symbol series, discovering and summarizing the local cultural accumulation, the initiative of Malaysian artists, and Islamic culture. The promotion of the art market has profound significance for the localization construction process of contemporary art creation in Malaysia, and provides some inspiration for current art creation.

Keywords: Malaysian contemporary art, artistic identity, local art, diverse exploration

INTRODUCTION

With the development of the economy and the increasingly close exchange of world cultures, Malaysian art has emerged with more possibilities since the 1990s. The creative forms of the new generation of artists have become more diverse, and some art forms have obvious cross-media tendencies. It is worth acknowledging that the change in artistic concepts among artists is a significant innovation in Malaysian art and a reflection of its expansion. The preferences of Malaysian ethnic culture and Islamic culture have always played an important role in Malay society, and have a deep-rooted influence on artistic creation. Although contemporary art in Malaysia has more possibilities, this does not mean that Malaysian art has lost its uniqueness, but rather enters a diverse and inclusive world. In recent years, the topic of contemporary art in Malaysia has maintained a certain level of research enthusiasm, such as Sarana Abdullah is focused on contemporary Malaysian and Southeast Asian Art, and has conducted more than 70 studies in this field, she provided a detailed explanation of the value of Malaysian art and the contribution of Malaysian contemporary artists (2021). Stephen Poon examined society's views and awareness of graffiti art in *Talent & Tagging in Harmony: A Study of Graffiti Art as Subculture & Aesthetics Expression of Urbanization in Malaysia*, explaining that street graffiti art is a visual expression of modern urban conditions by artists, and establishing the artistic status of youth-subcultural symbols through this dissemination of culture (Poon Stephen, 2023). Thani, Wan presented strategies for the sustainable development of art and culture from a Malaysian perspective, providing detailed and effective planning for the sustainable development of art and culture in Malaysia (Thani, Wan, 2021). The above studies have all focused on a certain aspect of Malaysian art or a review of the history of Malaysian art, without involving the study of localized artistic characteristics in contemporary Malaysian art. This study is based on previous research and aims to fill the gap in the localization characteristics of contemporary art creation.

In the Malay art world of this study, the characteristics of art research and creation integrate the artist's ethnic characteristics and cultural memory. Artistic identity can be understood as the pursuit of individual artistic identity by individual artists, and the pursuit of collective artistic identity by artists with similar styles. There is a profound and implicit internal connection between artist culture and art form, which always runs through the history of art and is closely related to artists. It is always carried out in a special and complex art field, and both artists and work forms are influenced by the artistic context composed of many factors such as the art system, art market, and art policy guidance.

they are in. This study places the process of constructing the meaning of artistic works in a context composed of one or more cultural attributes and explores how Malaysian art emphasizes "self" consciousness and achieves its artistic construction in contemporary art creation, starting from the initiative of the artistic creative subject and the confidence of local ethnic culture.

Preliminary Construction of Localization of Contemporary Art in Malaysia

Malaysia is a rapidly rising Southeast Asian country in terms of economy. After the period of new economic policies, agriculture has moved towards modernization, and the overall economy has constructed an industrial system, approaching the level of emerging industrialized countries. The ethnic integration policy implemented by the Malaysian government has also achieved certain results. The coexistence of multiple ethnic groups, religions, and languages constitutes a unique artistic and cultural form in Malaysia. Due to the long-term coexistence of multiple ethnic groups, a diverse and inclusive cultural characteristic has been formed, and many traditional arts and cultures have been preserved through the efforts of various ethnic groups. The progress and development of society and economy have provided a good foundation for the integration of Malaysian ethnic groups and the development of art and culture.

Malaysian art was mostly influenced by Chinese painting and Western modern painting schools, and its cultural and artistic development presented a diversified appearance. Under the policy guidance of the Malayan government at the early time, while respecting and valuing the integration of various ethnic art styles, various foreign arts continued to follow the local customs, seek changes, gradually localize, and endow Malaysia with local color and style, pursuing artistic uniqueness and promoting local culture has become the driving force for Malaysian artists to create. (Paul Boey, 2016). In the early stages of the development of Malaysian art, Chinese painters gradually transitioned from the ideas of overseas Chinese to shaping Nanyang art with local colour and first established the "Nanyang Calligraphy and Painting Organization" in Kuala Lumpur. Subsequently, Lin Xueda established the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore. It has derived a pioneering school of art style based on Nanyang and Malay literature, as well as Malay Chinese literature and art. During this period, the artists' dedicated exploration and expression of Malaysian themes led to a qualitative change in traditional ink painting in Malaysia. Representative painters include Chen Chong Swee and Chen Wan Hsi, and Sin Chew Daily has created a series of ink paintings with Malaysian colour. In addition, Zhong Sibin is known as the founder of the Nanyang School of Painting and plays an important role in the Art history of Southeast Asia (Jane, 2017). The establishment of the Malaysian Institute of Art and Kuala Lumpur College of Art ultimately replaced the art education status of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore and officially became the core institution of art education in Malaysia. These two specialized art schools uphold the educational spirit of localizing art in Malaysia, introducing art from the past elite art field into folk education, blurring the gap between art and the general public, and expanding the local artist community and art audience. This is undoubtedly a significant turning point for local art education in Malaysia.

From the perspective of cultural studies, the power operation of cultural institutions plays an undeniable role in individuals or groups participating in the learning, understanding, and identification of culture and art. The visual reproducibility of art intuitively reflects the current situation and has the function of confirming social value, organizing, and condensing groups. Under the interaction between local artists and art institutions, these functions of art are maximized, effectively stimulating individual and collective enthusiasm and creativity, and establishing connections between groups, condensing the important role of various members of society and artist groups in the localization development of art.

The formal formation of the localization of contemporary art in Malaysia

If the artistic style of the Malayan period is only a preliminary exploration of Malay local consciousness, then it was not until the 1970s that the stage for the display of Malay local artistic style officially arrived. As is well known, the National Culture Congress of Malaysia was held in 1971, which introduced the three basic principles of national cultural policy, further clarifying the creative foundation and development direction of national culture and art, and more firmly demonstrating the unshakable status of indigenous culture and Islam. For non-Malay Malaysian artists, this policy undoubtedly helps them achieve faster localization of artistic creation. For local Malay and Muslim artists, this policy helps them establish Islamic aesthetic ideas and creative views and strengthens the belief that brings creative motivation. These measures have not only promoted the improvement of Malaysia's economy and the continuous rise of its international status but also helped to alleviate cultural integration among different ethnic groups through social and economic stability, which has given Malaysia more room for development in terms of contemporary art and cultural diversity. Under the influence of these policies, many excellent painters mainly focused on expressing local consciousness were born. Shed Ahmad Jamal, in his early days, liked to use abstract techniques to depict the Malaysian landscape, with bold composition, rough brushstrokes, and rich emotions. He was the first person in Malaysia to create abstract compositions. After the cultural conference, he injected new concepts and content into his works, combining historical legends and fables, and expressing deep and religious local culture through symbolism and metaphor. The painter Khali Ibrahim is a native Malaysian painter. He studied in the UK in his early years and laid a solid foundation in painting, with precise control over character proportions and visual structures. He is particularly skilled in using batik paintings, oil paintings, and watercolor creations to portray the image of Malay ethnic girls. The composition of the

images in the work is precise, the proportion of the characters is coordinated, the posture is beautiful, and there is a dynamic stretch, vividly showcasing the comfortable, free, and beautiful lifestyle of the Malay people to the audience.

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The subjective construction of local consciousness in contemporary Malaysian art

A. Artists' Initiative and Cultural Confidence in Islamic Culture

In the development process of Malaysian society and art history, the expression of ethnic culture and the localization of artistic style in artistic creation are the driving forces for artists to create and also reflect their pursuit of self and collective artistic identity. The creation of artists or a certain art genre often reflects their identification with their own national culture, and the deep connotation of their works is also the most often emphasized. Stuart Hall believes that the identity of culture has multiplicity and uncertainty, therefore it also has plasticity. The factors of cultural belonging, local identity belonging, social status, etc. contained in cultural symbols are always constructed and reconstructed in possible practices, relationships, and existing symbols and concepts. He also believes that discourse shapes the way specific objects are discussed, represented, or recognized. Different discourses generate specific and often different initiatives and identity positions. Passively, continuously, and dynamically construct discourse, and shape and form a sense of cultural identity (Stuart Hall, 2021).

Art, as a representation form of cultural symbols, inevitably has the same nature. From the perspective of historicism, the localization of art can be seen as the construction of discourse. Artists internalize their emotions towards the nation, their perception and expectations of social culture into self-artistic expression, that is, the discourse construction of local art. Such artistic expression can be understood as the transmission of artistic symbols. These symbols in the Malay art world can be things such as Malay indigenous culture, baldi, clothing, calligraphy, etc. that have a certain era characteristic or symbolize a certain identity, belief, cultural customs, and internal meaning. Artists can convey their confidence and inner feelings towards ethnic symbols and local culture through their artistic representation or symbolic expression. For Malaysian artists, indigenous Malay culture and Islam undoubtedly helped them successfully shape this emotion in the art world. For example, Zakariah Noor was a typical early Malayan painter with an Impressionist tendency, with a rigorous and unparalleled position. His artistic works mainly focus on cultural relics, Islamic aesthetics, and international and personal issues as creative elements, fully showcasing Malayan characters and landscape characteristics. Dr. Choong Kam Kow believes that actively exploring and studying the cultural roots and characteristics, connotations, and forms of local ethnic groups, and applying these roots and elements, is an important measure to build Malaysia's artistic identity. At the same time, it has also inspired some Malay art historians and painters to delve into Islamic civilization, striving to seek creative inspiration in the form, connotation, and style of Islamic art. As a typical local artist in early Malaysia, he has also created many excellent works that highlight the local flavor of Malaysia. He is skilled in expressing the local scenery of Malaysia in the form of oil painting and ink painting. His early paintings used thick and heavy colors, and the representation of scenes was extremely abstract, with a strong German expressionist style.

Malaysian artists have unique characteristics in studying the relationship between native culture and local art, with their ethnic characteristics. They express themselves in a poetic way and rise to a spiritual level, providing us with richer perspectives and dimensions to understand contemporary art. Malaysian artists have indeed effectively integrated Malay indigenous culture and Islamic culture into their artistic creations, starting from aspects such as indigenous culture, forms of expression, and ethnic characteristics, adding mysterious religious connotations to their artworks. This is a fusion of traditional culture and contemporary culture, and a bold attempt to promote art localization in the contemporary process. For example, Sulaiman Esa is committed to the artistic expression of Malay culture and excels in utilizing traditional Islamic aesthetic ideas and elements in Malay creation (Wan Soliana, 2021). Especially geometric patterns, Malay, Arabic, calligraphy, etc., through the recombination and design of these symbolic elements, combined with bright colors, have replaced the technical dependence on Western painting in traditional art. He followed the aesthetic principles of Islam towards perfection, balance, and symbolism in his works, elevating Malay art into a visual art form with its national characteristics, and conveying the spiritual significance of traditional Malay aesthetics. Besides that artist Zakaria Awang studied modern sculpture at the San Francisco School of Art in the United States. He deeply understood the meaning of the Quran to demonstrate his service to Allah, and combined the content of the Quran with his Western-style sculpture works, giving the audience a new visual experience and re-examining and reflecting on the experiential content (Muhammad Faiz Sabri, 2019).

In summary, mainstream local artists in Malaysia aim to strengthen the localization status of contemporary art in Malaysia through the symbolic expression of Islamic religious culture and indigenous culture. The artistic style of their works has typical regional characteristics and national local consciousness, which is an important process of integrating Malay local culture into contemporary art and a bold attempt to integrate local and modern, sacred and secular. Artists release strong emotions towards national culture through artistic forms, which reflects the confidence and promotion of individual artists towards collective cultures such as the country and ethnic groups, thus finding new perspectives for artistic development in the constantly changing era.

B. A Diverse fusion of Malaysian contemporary art

The pursuit of art localization by contemporary Malaysian artists can be understood as their relationship with a certain culture. The deep cultural connotations in their artistic creations involve the construction of art localization and the process of artistic individualization, with social dynamic characteristics and diversity. Homi Bhabha provides a concept of cultural identity for cultural differences and interprets core concepts such as "third space" "ethnic minorities" and "hybridity". He believes that the cultural differences under the coexistence of diverse cultures in Malaysia make the development of its national art and culture rich and colorful (Homi K. Bhabha, 2004). In the contemporary Malaysian art world, artists are following the trend of the rise of multiculturalism, echoing the above views and beginning to explore more artistic possibilities. Modern and contemporary art in Malaysia depicts local customs and traditions to express a sense of national identity. Nowadays, its unique style and diverse content have attracted more and more attention from art critics and collectors. On the one hand, they need to cope with the constantly changing aesthetic and artistic forms of the times, to seek continuous breakthroughs in personal art; On the other hand, Malaysian artists have always been influenced by the West in terms of painting techniques and education, especially in the rapidly changing social environment of contemporary times. Some representative art schools have had a fierce collision with traditional culture, forcing them to urgently seek a new way to integrate traditional culture with contemporary art, to seek a path of coexistence. The new generation of young artists has devoted their horizons to art spaces with distinct visual appeal, such as installations, media art, videos, graffiti, and comprehensive materials.

The pursuit of new ideologies and creative concepts by Malaysian artists is not an abandonment of Islamic aesthetic ideas and indigenous culture but rather follows the process of time and social development, as well as the unique nature of multi-ethnic integration and multiculturalism, resulting in new changes. This indicates that the Malaysian art world has entered a more inclusive art space. Each independent artistic individual has flowing and changing artistic characteristics and style attributes, which are reflected in the mixed and ambiguous artistic styles expressed in the artist's works. It also reflects the changes in the artistic creation environment, social factors, and cultural factors of the artist at different times. Malaysian artists seem to possess a strong sensory receptivity and profound thoughts like a natural talent. All kinds of joyful, religious, humorous, critical, speculative, and conflicting qualities can be transformed into visual and fluent artistic language in the melting pot of the mother culture and the artist's deep elastic transformation ability (Yang Liping, 2010). Contemporary Malaysian artists have coincidentally formed a mainstream direction: from an internal perspective, re-examining and reproducing daily life and community images with distinct local characteristics. Artists have the discourse power to interpret Malaysian art in cultural representation forms, namely in artistic creation, and have shaped open and diverse local artistic characteristics in artistic creation and reflection.

From the current perspective, people's material needs and consumption views are also changing with the times and environment, affecting the artistic creation of young artists, thinking about how to achieve harmony between traditional and contemporary art, and changes in the values of aesthetic audiences. In the era of diversified development of contemporary art, their visual artworks are not constrained or limited to the creation of certain visual character images. To some extent, they break through outdated artistic taboos and limitations and express symbolic elements with local and ethnic characteristics through rich and diverse art forms to explain their characteristics as members of the Malaysian art world. And how the identities of individuals and art groups in contemporary art are constructed and developed in the current art field, promoting Malaysian art to gain broader artistic living space in contemporary society.

Yee I-Lann is a creative artist whose diverse artworks reflect her attitude toward the real world. It is worth mentioning that in 2005, she created a series of works on the Sulu Stories, which expressed her views on the recognition of the sea and land, as well as the sense of belonging of the people. This is not written, but based on a deep understanding of the land and watershed, and expressed through artistic forms. Ponilin Amin is highly skilled in printmaking, with proficient techniques and distinct themes. He particularly likes to introduce Islamic elements into printmaking works, such as geometric patterns, churches, etc., using religious symbols to metaphorize social reality problems or phenomena.

Malaysian artists also enjoy exposure to contemporary trendy cultures, such as installations, sculptures, graffiti, new media, and other popular art forms to express their views on real social culture and construct their artistic identity. The new generation of artists can also easily obtain creative materials and information from new media technologies and the internet, and incorporate certain traditional elements into their works, such as Baldi batik, Islamic elements, shadow puppetry, as well as non-visual cultural symbols, as proverbs and idioms, in an open art form to stimulate viewers' common memory and reflect on the cultural connotations behind the works, To construct their artistic identity and identify with national culture. Ahmad Fuad Osman is known as the "King of Concepts" and his works are renowned for their interdisciplinary and multi-genre groundbreaking characteristics. He excels in various forms of art such as painting,

installation, and sculpture, and showcases his artistic identity and historical attitude in the atmosphere of his works. Its representative work is "Fatamorgana 2 The State Of Fusion". Abdul Multhalib Musa is a well-known contemporary sculptor in Malaysia. His works are based on his inner feelings and aesthetic experience, and he also draws inspiration from the surrounding natural and architectural environment (Zena Khan, 2015). They are reflected in conceptual and fragmented forms in sculpture, and he also utilizes geometric shapes and vortices, which are common aesthetic concepts in Islam. He adheres to the creative concept of transforming two-dimensional into three-dimensional, to establish a connection between the audience and the sculpture, and to understand the work at different levels, thereby explaining certain characteristics of human beings. This is a pioneering work in Malaysian sculpture art.

C. Art Market Promotes Art Development

The globalization of art has put pressure on contemporary art creation in Malaysia to homogenize and simplify. On the one hand, people are attempting to explore the diversity of cultural forms on a global scale; On the other hand, the innovation and uniqueness of art tenaciously pursue its own personality and unique development trajectory. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the art market in Southeast Asia has begun to rise, with an increase in cross-border art exhibitions and international competitions, becoming an important part of the world art market system, undoubtedly broadening the path for art development. To be precise, the localization process of contemporary art in Malaysia cannot be separated from the operation of internal market discourse. The various rules of market operation have consciously or unconsciously become the means and medium for the development of Malaysian art. Malaysia has some famous traditional arts, crafts, and trade. They connect people with the cultural roots of Malaysia and establish the characteristics of Malaysian artists. Because Malaysian artists are striving to maintain the vitality of their cultural heritage. The operation of the Malaysian art market helps local artists achieve their creative dreams and sets them on the right career path. There is a positive relationship between the art market and the economy. The existence of the art market provides a convenient platform for the display and sale of artworks, while also posing challenges to artists and stimulating their creative enthusiasm. With the development of the Internet era, especially the rise of communication facilities and internet transactions, calligraphy and painting auctions, and digital media art, the traditional art market has changed, bringing more opportunities and rewards to artists. A significant change in the Malaysian art community today is that many people have successfully pushed their art overseas. This means that Malaysian artists' works are beginning to gain recognition in other countries, rather than Malaysians seeking artists to showcase their works overseas. Datuk Ibrahim Hussain and Khalil Ibrahim have achieved success in other countries, and it is certain that many other Malaysian artists will continue to promote their artworks in other countries (James, 2012). Malaysian artists must now push the standards further towards where they should showcase more Malaysian elements in their works, rather than using Western techniques with Malaysian themes.

In summary, Malaysian artists are still actively exploring and constructing local art in the development of contemporary art. They span differences in style, culture, and habits, still express the same artistic themes, injecting appreciation and positive suggestions for their local identity through various artistic forms. These creative themes stem from their recognition and love for the region and society they live together, as well as their beautiful expectations for the unity and harmony of various ethnic groups and the harmonious development of culture. Artists are more likely to express their ideas in contemporary new art forms, utilizing new technologies and means to strengthen their ways of expressing local culture, and seeing new social forms and internal development levels in the changes in painting styles. The essence of their works is to reveal and reflect the current social situation and problems, establish connections between cultural groups, and express the central relationship between individuals, groups, and countries, Enhancing the cultural identity of Malaysian society. Malaysian artists have gone through the sedimentation of history and the return of their hearts. Despite their diverse styles, they have made a strong collective and localized voice through the replication of local social and historical landscapes. Artists strive to stand in a comprehensive, positive, and inclusive position, creating an art world that is adapted to the Malaysian social background and all Malaysian ethnic groups.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study analyzes the pursuit of localization of contemporary art by artists in the Malaysian art world and summarizes the four main factors in contemporary art creation in Malaysia, namely national cultural policies, artist initiative, religious beliefs, and art market development. This study explores how Malaysian art achieves localized construction in contemporary art creation, starting from the initiative of artists in creating and their confidence in local culture. From the perspective of cultural semiotics, contemporary Malaysian art can be expressed as three main series of symbols: firstly, contemporary Malaysian art creations representing the mainstream art and cultural construction since the establishment of Malaysia, especially after 1971, with Islamic aesthetic concepts and local works as the main content and containing some modern interests, operating through art education institutions, national museums, and exhibition systems as the basic carriers. Secondly, the cross-cultural and diverse art that has developed and grown since the 1990s, the integration and development between Malaysian indigenous culture and other ethnic cultures, the mechanism of work evaluation, work circulation, and the logic of aesthetic taste evolution, form a symbolic and interesting difference that is both comparative and related to mainstream art culture. Thirdly, under the influence of Western modern art, Malaysia's "contemporary art" has emerged. The characteristics of artistic and cultural symbols generated in Malaysia's domestic and international contexts, as well as their correlation with mainstream culture and multiculturalism, continue to change. Since 2000, the official cultural and artistic media and art research institutions in Malaysia have partially accepted the

use of media, conceptual expression, and language methods for this type of art, promoting the cross-interaction between local art symbols and multicultural symbols. The representative Malaysian artists generated from it have had a significant influence in the international art environment, and have also promoted the localization construction process of contemporary art in international media. The diversity of art and culture is a prominent feature of Malaysia, and the construction of national cultural identity has always been an important concern for Malaysia. Based on reviewing the National Cultural Policy of 1971, the government proposed a new concept of national cultural construction in 2021, emphasizing the essence of national multiculturalism and calling for promoting the unity of diverse ethnic groups in the country through the construction of national culture. This undoubtedly brings a broader future for the development of culture and art, which is progressive and worthy of continued attention in the future. With the government's emphasis on cultural and economic development, the rise of the art market has gradually developed into an economic growth point. In the context of the globalization of the art market, the external dissemination and sales functions of the art market have strongly promoted the process of shaping local art images, which is conducive to shaping external art images. This study is based on an examination of the development trends of contemporary art in Malaysia and does not represent the future development direction of Malaysian art. Therefore, the author will continue to pay attention to this topic in future research.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Malaysian artists engage in purposeful artistic creation based on their aesthetic thoughts and interests. The localization construction of contemporary art in Malaysia is not defined, but rather a spiritual direction that truly reflects the pursuit and exploration of the path of art by human beings, that is, to express symbolic elements with local ethnic characteristics through rich and diverse art forms, to explain their true artistic feelings as members of the Malaysian art world. In the contemporary art world of Malaysia, all foreign and emerging art forms need to be integrated into a certain structure of local culture to gain recognition and acceptance from new audiences and quickly take root. Only this unique fusion form and spiritual charm can inject new vitality into the development of contemporary art in Malaysia, and its artistic expression will continue to innovate on this basis, creating a new era of art that belongs to Malaysia.

Any ethnic culture should adapt to the development of the times and engage in a movement to bring forth new ideas. Artists use their works to showcase a diverse and three-dimensional cultural image. These works contain rich emotions of ethnicity, era, and personality. Malaysian ethnic art with deep core values inevitably requires its rich ethnic experience cultural modernity and creativity to express the world. In the process of continuous dialogue and interaction with world art, and the process of external dissemination and acceptance, it forms a dynamic artistic construction that transcends time, space, and borders.

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