

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**MEANING AND MYTH OF VISUAL
REPRESENTATION IN PAINTINGS:
A CASE STUDY OF “PLAYING
GOD” EXHIBITION BY RUZZEKI
HARRIS**

FARAH AMELIA BINTI JASNI

Thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
**Master of
(Arts and Design)**

Faculty of Art and Design

September 2025

ABSTRACT

Contemporary visual art often served as a powerful medium to convey ideas, messages, and critiques of social issues. Art exhibitions, in addition to showcasing creativity, provided a platform to explore complex themes such as politics, culture, and ethics. The exhibition “Playing GOD” by Ruzzeki Harris exemplified a challenge to societal norms and values through visual representations that critiqued issues related to morality, ethics, and power. Despite its profound implications, there was a lack of research on this exhibition in academic discourse, especially regarding the understanding of meaning and myth in its visual representations. Through this condition, the objectives of this study were: 1) to identify the denotative meaning of the visual representation of the “Playing GOD” exhibition by Ruzzeki Harris; 2) to analyze the connotative meaning of the visual representation of the “Playing GOD” exhibition by Ruzzeki Harris; and 3) to understand the myth of the visual representation of the “Playing GOD” exhibition by Ruzzeki Harris. This study employed a hermeneutic approach adapted from the Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Circle through *dialogue* with the *text/tradition* (artworks in the “Playing GOD” exhibition and the curatorial essay) and *reflection* from the *interpreter* (the researcher). In the *reflection* stage, the researcher utilized Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory to interpret all the artworks in the exhibition, examining their denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of meaning and mythology in contemporary art, demonstrating how they function as reflections, critiques, and provocations of social reality. Through the concept of “Playing GOD”, the study highlights the critique of humanity’s attempts to exceed natural limits of control and responsibility, raising critical ethical and philosophical questions. The research also acknowledges its limitations, as the scope was confined to artworks within the “Playing GOD” exhibition and did not extend to other artistic practices. Nevertheless, this study offers a valuable theoretical contribution by proposing the hermeneutic approach, combined with Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory, as an effective framework for interpreting meaning and myth. Future research may apply this approach to other exhibitions, thereby enriching the broader discourse on contemporary visual art.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Allah for His grace and guidance, which have enabled me to successfully complete this thesis.

I would like to extend my highest appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Ishak Bin Ramli, for his invaluable guidance, continuous support, and insightful advice throughout the course of this research. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to work under a supervisor who has always been willing to help without hesitation. His wisdom and encouragement have significantly contributed to the smooth progression of this study.

I would also like to express my heartfelt thanks to my family for their unwavering love, understanding, and steadfast support throughout my academic journey. Their constant encouragement has been a source of strength and inspiration. To my friends, I sincerely thank you for your moral support, encouragement, and the moments of relief that have made this journey more meaningful. The friendships formed are a treasured gift.

Finally, I want to thank me. I want to thank me for believing in me. I want to thank me for doing all these hardwork. I would like to acknowledge all those who have contributed directly or indirectly to the success of this thesis, as well as the academic community for providing a conducive environment for learning and intellectual development. Thank you and Alhamdulillah.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CONFIRMATION BY PANEL OF EXAMINERS	ii
AUTHOR’S DECLARATION	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
LIST OF PLATES	xii
 CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	 1
1.1 Research Background	1
1.2 Problem Statement	2
1.3 Research Question	6
1.4 Research Objectives	6
1.5 Significance of Study	7
1.6 Scope and Limitations	8
1.7 Definition Terminology	8
1.7.1 Denotation Meaning	8
1.7.2 Connotation Meaning	9
1.7.3 Myth	10
1.7.4 Visual Representataion	11
1.7.5 Painting	11
1.7.6 “Playing GOD” Exhibition by Ruzzeki Harris	12
1.8 Research Ethics	13
1.9 Chapter Summary	13
 CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	 14
2.1 Introduction	14
2.2 The Overview of Contemporary Visual Art in Malaysia	14
2.2.1 The Emrgence of Young Contemporaray Artist in Malaysia	15

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

In the world of contemporary visual art, artworks are often used as a medium to convey ideas, messages, or social critiques on issues that are relevant in society. Art exhibitions are not just spaces for showcasing creative works but also serve as platforms for voicing opinions on complex issues, including political, cultural, and moral matters. One example of an exhibition that carries a profound message is “Playing GOD” by Ruzzeki Harris.

The Playing God exhibition explores a theme that challenges societal norms and values by depicting the role of humans as if they are taking on power and responsibilities beyond what they should. In his artwork, Ruzzeki Harris uses various visual elements to critique moral, ethical, and power-related issues. This approach not only attracts the attention of the public but also invites multiple interpretations based on the visual context presented.

The phenomenon of “Playing GOD” refers to human actions involving intervention in decisions or actions that are considered beyond the capacity of ordinary humans (John Lim, 2017). In the context of visual art, this concept can be seen as a commentary on humanity's role in determining fate and power, which often carries significant implications for society and the environment. Ruzzeki Harris’ works bring a critical dimension to this issue, especially in the way the visual elements are structured and arranged to provoke reflection among the audience.

To examine such visual narratives, the application of semiotics provides a critical framework for analyzing how meanings are constructed and communicated through images, symbols, and signs. This study applies Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory, focusing on the three orders of meaning: the **denotative level**, which reveals the literal or surface meaning of an image; the **connotative level**, which uncovers the cultural, emotional, and associative layers of interpretation; and the **mythic level**, where ideological messages and collective beliefs are naturalized into a seemingly universal truth. By situating *Playing GOD* within this analytical framework, this study aims to uncover how Ruzzeki Harris embeds multiple layers of meaning in his artworks,