

AZIMUTH (FROM PASIR SALAK TO KUALA KANGSAR) : A QUESTION OF BEAUTY AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT

A regard for beauty have always been a fundamental in appreciating the arts. In this short article I am trying to discuss its importance and the elements that created the perception in defining beauty and its criteria. Beauty maybe considered as a very subjective element as for most of us and as the saying goes – beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

The topic in my study consist the elements and principles that constructed its language, the use of colour and how we perceived beauty according to our culture and belief. Through my observation there are also scientific approaches that were used to observe and understand the characteristic of design in art.

By the way, the aim of this article is also to recognize how the design and images produced by artists reflects the personal forms of beauty that existed in their minds. The significance of this paper is also to explain the meaning of beauty through different kinds of definitions in hoping to bring understanding to the reader in this world full of different kinds of aesthetic.

Key words : Beauty, Art Appreciation, Culture and Belief

“Art does not lie down on the bed that is made for it; it runs away as soon as one says its name, it loves to be incognito. Its best moments are when it forgets what it is called”.

Jean Dubuffet

A regard of beauty is always the factor in appreciating the arts. To defy beauty in our culture is an anathema to every aspect of sensibility that had been built in as Malays, Muslims, Malaysian or even Asians. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder or maybe there are questions raised beyond its metaphorical boundaries.

Art is about modes of perception – how we see as much as what we see. We build up constantly changing models of the world from multitudes of random thoughts and images. Artists are able, with practice, to build this information into structures with meaning; they make things fit together. Artistic modernism have long preceded the concentration camps, the nuclear bomb and the Cold War but there is an undeniable fact that since the Second World War social political conditions have for many artists given their creative dilemmas a special urgency.

When the Cold War ended new modes of thinking appeared. But one set of barbarians at the gate having sent of, in our contemporary psyche another slips easily into its place, an ecological disaster, perhaps, or an Aids epidemic. Tradition is ransacked for allusions and references, but not for imitations of beauty or for providing foundations for judgments of values, which are unselfconsciously meant. Apparently how can one create or teach unless one is prepared to make judgments of value, and without irony? With the current status quo, what can be the source of one’s creation and valuing but the past and the discoveries of the past? When a culture is threatened it usually takes steps to protect itself in order to maintain balance and sense of self. In most cultures this takes the form of conscious revitalization by going deeper into its creative well for inspiration. The works of its contemporary artists have to sense this highly intentional direction of ground itself in a highly identifiable culture rather than play the game of culture hybrids. The question is how one use the past as well as the living present to make a statement about the human condition and to sensitize other people to what one perceives?

Society is, as Burke teaches us, a partnership between those who are dead, those who are living, and those who are to be born. And so is art, or so should it be. Artistic

creation, like procreation, is an act of hope; in their performance, both acts tell us that something is worth living for, that there is some hope. An art which denies its own worth and denies hope is an existential contradiction, as is an art which deny its place in tradition from which it derives its meaning. Even as an intelligible only within the language and framework of value established within it. As a result, the dichotomous existence of Modernism or Post – Modernism in an environment which is not entirely in equanimity with its canons of the west has not only proven to be problematic, but, in extreme cases, also leads to cultural delusion.

Regarding the Self

The biologist Johannes von Uexkull has written a book about a critical revision of the principles of biology. Biology, according to Uexkull, is a natural science which has to be developed by the usual empirical methods – the methods of observation and experimentation. Wishing to avoid all psychological interpretations, he follows an entirely objective or behaviouristic method. He found out that life is perfect everywhere; it is the same in the smallest as in the largest circle.

“And He it is Who hath set for you the stars that ye may guide your course by them amid the darkness of the land and the sea. We have detailed Our revelations for a people who have knowledge. And He it is Who hath produced you from a single being, and (hath given you) a habitation and a repository. We have detailed Our revelations for a people who have understanding.”

Surah Al – An’am (Cattle) Verse 98 – 99

Every organism, even the lowest, is not only in a vague sense adapted to (angepasst) but entirely fitted into (eingepasst) its environment. According to its anatomical structure it possesses a certain “Merknetz” and a certain “Wirknetz” – a receptor system and an effector system. The cooperation and equilibrium between these two systems are vital for the survival of an organism. The receptor system by which a biological species receives outward stimuli and the effector system by which it reacts to them are relatively closely interwoven. They links in one and the same chain which is described by Uexkull as the “functional circle” (Funktionskreis) of the animal.

In the human world we find a new characteristic which appears to be distinctive mark of human life. Man has, as it were, discovered a method of adapting himself to his environment. Between the receptor system and the effector system, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the "symbolic system". As compared with the other animals man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new dimension of reality. Undeniably, there is a difference between organic reactions and human responses. In the first case a direct and immediate answer is given to an outward stimulus; in the second case the answer is delayed. It is interrupted and retarded by a slow and complicated process of thought. At first glance such a delay may appear to be a very questionable gain. Many philosophers have warned man against this pretended progress. "L' homme qui medite", says Rousseau, "est un animal deprave": it is not an improvement but a deterioration of human nature to exceed the boundaries of organic life.

Syed Muhammad Al – Naquib Al – Attas concludes the nature of man:

A "double associate": possessed of a dual nature of soul and body, the soul rational and the body animal; that he is at once spirit and physical being, and that he has individuality referred to as the self; that he has attributes reflecting those of his creator. We say specifically that he has knowledge of names of things, and knowledge about God; that he has a spiritual and rational organs of cognition such as the heart and the intellect; that he has faculties relating to physical, intellectual and spiritual vision and experience; that he has the potentiality to contain within his self guidance and wisdom, and that he has power and capacity to do justice to his self. We also say that he is forgetful by nature and hence subject to disobedience, injustice and ignorance. In him both qualities, positive and negative, contend for supremacy; but in him also is sealed the means of salvation in true religion and submission.

Man's outstanding characteristic, his distinctive mark, is not his metaphysical or physical nature - but his work. It is this work, it is the system of human activities which defines and determines the circle of "humanity". Language, myth, religion, art, science, history are the constituents, the various sector of this circle. Language, art, myth, religion are not isolated, random creations. They are held together by a common bond but not as a "vinculum substantiale", as it was conceived and described in scholastic thought; it is rather a "vinculum functionale".

In the Field of Vision

" It mathematizes..... visual space, but it is still visual space that it mathematizes; it is an ordering, but an ordering of visual appearance. And in the end it is hardly more than a question of emphasis whether the charge against perspective is that it condemns "true being" to the appearance of things seen or that it binds the free and, as it were, spiritual intuition of form to appearance of things seen. Through this location of the artist's subject in the sphere of the phenomenal, the perspective view closes to religious art the territory of magic within which the work of art itself the wonder worker..... but it opens to religious art..... the territory of the vision, within which the wonderful becomes the immediate experience of the spectator....."

Erwin Panofsky

The history of painting for example is nothing but history of vision – or seeing. Technique changes only when the mode of seeing has changed; it only changes because the method of seeing has changed. It changes so as to keep pace with changes of vision as they occur. And the eye changes its method of seeing according to the relation man assumes towards the world. A man views the world according to his attitude towards it as time is infinite, the only change is the ambience of the situation.

The act of seeing and appreciating a work of art is not a nonsensical act. It lies between the virtues of contemplating and pondering; it can be transcribe into words or emulate its effects onto other ideas because a painting carries more than an imitative value but also its ideals and empirical notions. The work of art is not always created exclusively for the purpose of being enjoyed or, in a more scholarly expression, of being experienced aesthetically. Poussin's statement that 'la fin de l'art est la delectation' was quite revolutionary one, insisted that art, however enjoyable, was also, in some manner, useful. But a work of art always has aesthetic significance (not to be confused with aesthetic value): whether or not it serves some practical purpose, and whether it is good or bad, it demands to be experienced aesthetically. In the case of man – made objects which do not demand to be experienced aesthetically, are commonly called 'practical', and may be divided into two classes: vehicles of communication, and tools or apparatuses. A vehicle of communication is 'intended' to transmit a concept. A tool or apparatus is 'intended' to fulfill a function (for example

the production or transmission of communications, as in the case with a typewriter or a traffic light. Where the sphere of practical objects ends and that of 'art' begins, depends, then, on the 'intention' of the creators. This 'intentions' cannot be absolutely determined. In the first place 'intentions' are, per se, incapable of being defined with scientific precision. In the second place, the 'intentions' of those who produced objects are conditioned by the standard of these 'intentions' are inevitably influenced by our own attitude, which in turn depends on our individual experiences as well as on our historical situation. Finally, one thing is certain: the more the proportion of emphasis on 'idea' and 'form' approaches a state of equilibrium the more eloquently will the work reveal what is called 'content'. Content, as opposed to subject matter, may be described in the words of Peirce as that which a work betrays but does not parade. It is the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – all this unconsciously qualified by one personality, and condensed, into one work. In the sense of a Malay culture, the content of the idea of beauty permeates into our everyday life because of the cultural stance that amplifies it through ritualistic behaviour that beckons accountability from every thing that we produced both physically and spiritually.

One main aspect of order in a work of art is unity; unity of some kind is necessary for our restful contemplation at the work, of art as a whole since if it lacks unity we cannot contemplate it in its entirety and passed it to other things necessary to complete its unity. In a picture this unity is due to balancing of the eye about the central line of the picture. The result of this balance of attractions is that the eye rests willing within the bounds of the picture. Dr Denman Ross of Harvard University has made a most valuable study of the elementary considerations upon which the balance is based in his "Theory of Pure Design". He concludes his results in the formula that composition is of value in proportion to the number of orderly connections which it displays.

Dr Ross wisely restricts himself to the study of abstract and meaningless forms. The moment representation is introduced forms have entirely new set of values. Thus a line which indicated the sudden bend of a head in a certain direction would have far more than its mere value as line in the composition because of the attraction which a marked gesture has for the eye. In almost all paintings this disturbance of the purely decorative values by reason of the representative effect takes place, and the problem becomes too complex for geometrical proof.

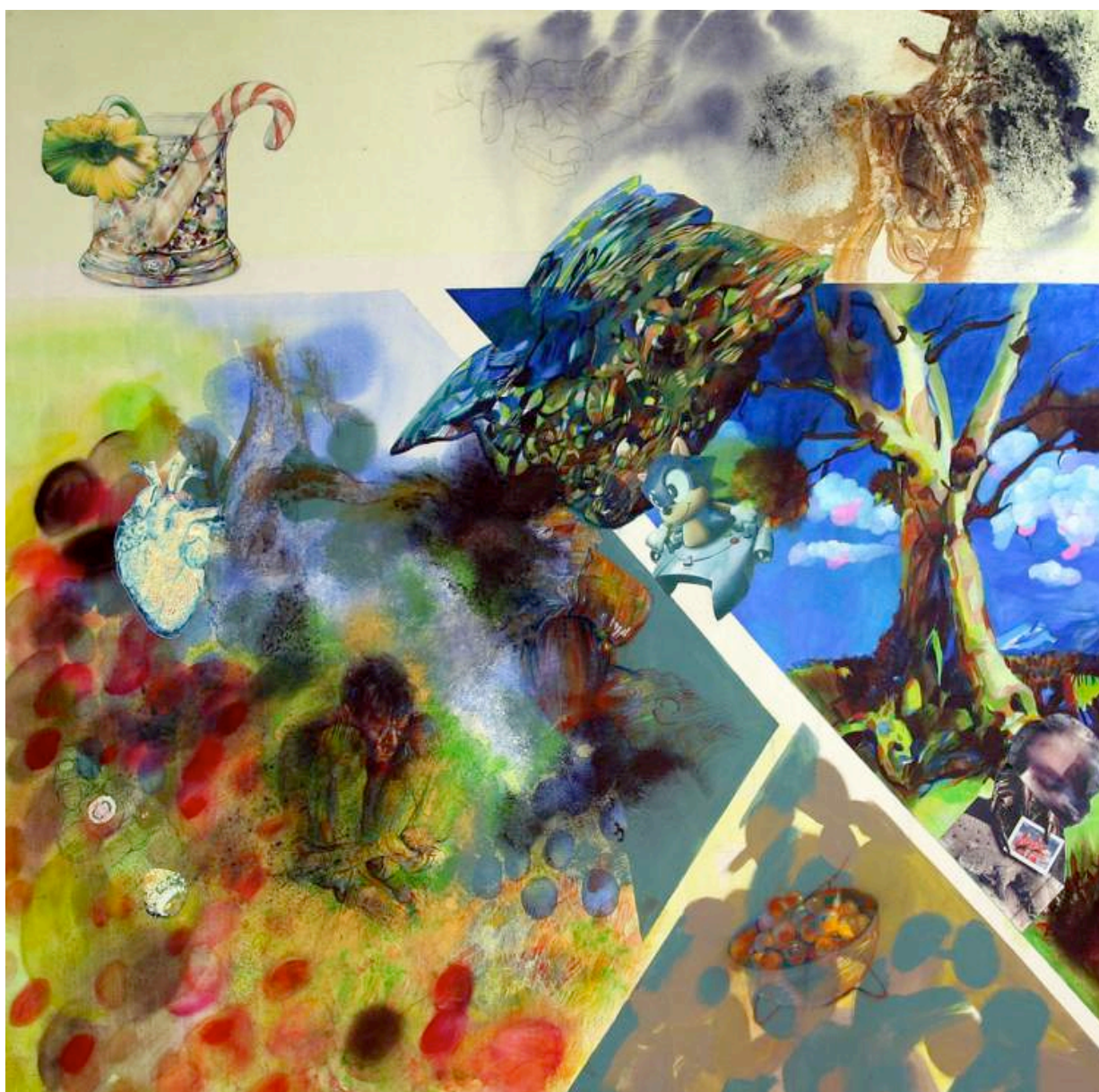
What does that represent?

In the field of painting, imitation of an object had value in itself, any picture by anyone at all that imitative character would have pictorial value. When we call a figure in an Italian Renaissance picture 'plastic', while describing a figure in a Chinese painting as 'having volume but no mass' (owing to the absence 'modeling'), we interpret these figures as two different solutions of a problem which might be formulated as 'volumetric units (bodies) vs. unlimited expanse (space)'. When we distinguish between a use of line as 'contour' and to quote Balzac, a use of line as 'le moyen par lequel l'homme se rend compte de l'effet e la lumiere sur les objets' [the means by which man takes account of the effect of lights on objects], we refer to the same problem while placing special emphasis upon another one: 'line versus areas of colour'.

Fernand Leger wrote in his paper 'The Origins of Painting and its Representational Value' made a clear cut point that the realistic value of a work is completely independent of any imitative character. Posited as the truth he used the word 'realistic' intentionally in its most literal sense, for the quality of a pictorial work is in direct proportion to its quantity of realism. In painting constitutes what we call realism?

From one point of a view, a pictorial realism is simultaneous ordering three great plastic components: Lines, Form and Colours. Leger believed every epoch has produced such works, which despite, all the talent they involve, remain simply period pieces. They soon become dated; they may astonish or intrigue present generations, but since they do not have the components needed to attain to pure realism, they must finally disappear. For most painters who preceded the impressionists, the three indispensable components that he mentioned earlier were closely linked to the limitation of a subject that contained value in itself. The impressionists were the first to reject absolute value of the subject and to consider it to merely relative.

That is the tie that links and explains the entire modern evolution. The impressionists are the great originators of the present movement; they are primitives in the sense that, wishing to free themselves from the imitative aspect, they consider painting for its colours only, neglecting all form and line entirely.



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Azimuth - Pasir Salak (Mixed media on canvas)

As every history of vision must lead beyond mere art, it goes without saying that such national differences of the eye are more than a question of taste: conditioned and conditioning, they contain the bases of the whole world – picture of a people. That is why the history of art as the doctrine of the modes of vision can claim to be, not only a mere (supernumerary) in the company of historical disciplines, but as necessary as sight itself.

Where there is a radical imbalance between sensation and language means that the experience of colour will largely associational. Colour has always lent itself very readily to association and symbolizing, whether on the general of identifying the sensuous, unstable, indeterminate characteristics of colour as such with the female, as opposed to the determinate, stable, male element of line and form; or grouping individual colours into categories such as 'warm' and 'cool'; or characterizing colours as, for example, 'cheerful' or 'sad'. But the course of the nineteenth century developments in the physiology of the nervous system, in experimental aesthetics, increased the tendency to detach colour – expression from association, and to see colour as evoking immediate physical and mental responses.

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