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A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON SOCIAL COMMENTARY PAINTING OF THREE DIFFERENT ERAS IN MALAYSIA

Muhammad Afiq Hanafiah¹ and Mohamad Kamal Abd. Aziz²

¹Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA(UiTM), Malaysia

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Corresponding Author:

afiq94hanafiah@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

With over decades, social commentary painting has become a crucial approach for artist discontentment towards political, economic, society, culture, humanity, and global issue. The artist is like contexture in time and location, become eyes and the ears of the culture. It is very important the artist play its role in line with the development of the nation. The painting approach will define the timeline as socialize civilization in that three different eras which is Malaysia pre-independence era, Malaysia post-independence era, and the Malaysian millennium era. The research will focus on trend of the content and context in selected social commentary painting and summarize inline with Malaysia era. This study will arrange using qualitative research, which is primary data will be collect base on interview with artist, curator, art writer, art gallery staff, art educator and art student with artwork sample. The secondary data will be collect using books, journals, unpublished journal, articles, news clip, exhibitions catalogue, and seminar paper. The conclusion is this research will justify the flow history of social commentary in Malaysian painting. This will benefits to source of influence academician study, writer, art student, and art educator. This study also can be source for curator, art gallery and higher institution as well as the general public.

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1. Introduction

Part of social commentary community is role by artist that never been highlight in news especially in Malaysian social commentary scene. Being artist is not just making a painting for sale, but the idea behind aesthetic image, from the subject matter, composition or even brush stroke can be define the deep content over the context of the painting. The artist is like contexture in time and location, become eyes and the ears of the culture. It is very important the artist play its role in line with the development of the nation. As the comparative study on social commentary painting of three different eras in Malaysia will show from the Malaysian pre-independent eras, Malaysian post-independent era, and Malaysian millennium era. The comparative study in these three eras also shows the development and the changes of the idea or issues raised by the selected artist.

2. Malaysian Timeline And Social Commentary Painting

As mention, most social commentary panting that has been publish in National Art Gallery were basically the result or reflected in what happened in that particular time. Zabas was mentioned that art is usually controlled by system of social and ideological production of certain communities. (Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff, 2008, p. 21). In example, one of the iconic Dzulkifli Buyong painting, *Membakar Semut* (burning ant), 1967, in figure 1, shows the reality how the primary student spending their time as hobby which is burning ant during the year 1967. For some reason, we can assume how poor the society during that time, most of the Malay race live far from the developed city.



Figure 1: Dzulkifli Buyong, *Membakar Semur* (Burning Ant), 1967

Meanwhile Chinese dominated the economy after the Malaysia independent day. Clearly, Zulkifli Mohd. Dahalan express his concern about this situation, as Malay race toward happened in year 1973, in his painting *Kedai-kedai* (shops) during that time, shows in figure 2, most the shops in town dominated by Chinese and Indian people. As artists, they can't do anything to change the government policy, unless this discontentment towards the economic issue shows through painting to urge government to do something as well unite the Malay society to involve in Malaysia economy.



Figure 2: Zulkifli Mohd. Dahalan, *Kedai-kedai* (Shops), 1973

Therefore, one of the New Economic Policy (NEP) began in year 1971-1975 is to minimize the level of poverty in the country. The NEP was conceived as a two-pronged strategy for eradication

poverty for all Malaysians as well as reducing and subsequently eliminating identification of race by economic function and geographical location. Kedai- kedai (shops), 1973, by Zulkifli Mohd. Dahalan was form as the artist influence discontentment toward his surrounding. This is the 'picture' what happened in certain period between 1967-1973 in Malaysian timeline and social commentary painting.

3. Art Writing In Social Commentary Context

Malaysian also known as a rapidly developing country. So many changes are in the past 50 years of development especially in government policy, economic, even lifestyle of the society. There are a lot social commentary painting produced since Malaysian pre- independent era. Unfortunately, to date, in the Malaysian art writing, there is a less topic has been discussed or published especially in social commentary painting. The art writer in Malaysia, unfortunately, has less of servant's profession of art writer become a problem in education art documentation. According to Serena Abdullah (2012), the lack of professional art critics and the multiple roles played by writers, artists, art historians and arts manager are among the main reasons for the present art criticism and art writing scenario in the country. This maybe result from the Malaysian society restrict form custom and culture, which these writing "commentaries" issue don't want rise a provocation towards among the others. As the art historian this is responsibility to understand deeply about the art and the culture itself, especially in the social commentary painting.

4. Iconography As Method

As Ahmad Suhaimi ever mention, art criticism can develop mind which enhance the art literature to define a new objective of nation art among people.(Ahmad Suhaimi Mohd. Noor, 2007). Feldman' theory (1994), interpretation is an important element in explaining the meaning of the subject, theories, experience and facts. The importance of interpreting is giving the meaning and purpose of the artworks. Interpreting is trying to grasp, to understand, to engage with or to read, whether it is passive, or 'readerly', and the other is more active, or 'writely'.

In some of Panofsky arguments, he borrowed heavily from others, but he defined those issues that mattered particularly to him by his own innovation, which contributed largely to the rapid development of visual perspective in the arts. Panofsky iconological perspective is still very much in the foreground of debates in critical theory from a variety of disciplines. Some of the essays presented in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* were pioneering in the way they skillfully related an abundance of detail to the life and work of individual painters and their times. Certainly, a comprehensive understanding of Panofsky's iconological interpretation of an artwork is not easy. Thus, this method can contribute a lot in understanding and interpretation Malaysia social commentary painting

Erwin Panofsky defines iconography as "a known principle in the known world", while iconology is "an iconography turned interpretive". According to his view, iconology tries to reveal the underlying principles that form the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical perspective, which is modulated by one personality and condensed into one work. According to Roelof van Straten, iconology "can explain why an artist or patron chose a particular subject at a specific location and time and represented it in a certain way. This method strongly as base interpretation of these social commentary painting. An iconological investigation should concentrate on the social-historical, not art-historical, influences and values that the artist might not have

consciously brought into play but are nevertheless present. The artwork is primarily seen as a document of its time.”

Warburg used the term “iconography” in his early research, replacing it in 1908 with “iconology” in his particular method of visual interpretation called “critical iconology”, which focused on the tracing of motifs through different cultures and visual forms. In 1932,

Panofsky published a seminal article, introducing a three-step method of visual interpretation dealing with [1] primary or natural subject matter; [2] secondary or conventional subject matter, i.e. iconography; [3] tertiary or intrinsic meaning or content, i.e. iconology. Whereas iconography analyses the world of images, stories and allegories and requires knowledge of literary sources, an understanding of the history of types and how themes and concepts were expressed by objects and events under different historical conditions, iconology interprets intrinsic meaning or content and the world of symbolical values by using “synthetic intuition”.

The interpreter is aware of the essential tendencies of the human mind as conditioned by psychology and world view; he analyses the history of cultural symptoms or symbols, or how tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes due to different historical conditions. Moreover, when understanding the work of art as a document of a specific civilization, or of a certain religious attitude therein, the work of art becomes a symptom of something else, which expresses itself in a variety of other symptoms. Interpreting these symbolical values, which can be unknown to, or different from, the artist’s intention, is the object of iconology. Panofsky emphasized that “iconology can be done when there are no originals to look at and nothing but artificial light to work in.”

5. Conclusion And Future Works

This research could give an impact in understanding deeply in social commentary painting not just create assumption the context of the painting image. But also to be art criticism based on iconography and iconology. In fact, these both can contribute a lot in Malaysian art history \documentation especially in social commentary painting. All academician include, writer, art student, and art educator, curator, art gallery and higher institution as well as the general public well share the benefits of the study. The question is,

[1] How radical the artist react through social commentary painting in future event?

[2] Different approach in sculpture or the new media give the same impact to the society?

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