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Understanding the Meaning and Symbols of Animals in Visual Artwork: A Case Study of Five Selected Works in the SI + SA 2020 Exhibition

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ABSTRACT

Visual artwork is a platform to convey the meaning of the theme chosen in producing the work. However, it is difficult to understand the meaning through the symbols highlighted by the artist. Based on that situation the objective of this study is to collect information on visual artworks that apply animal symbols in the SI + SA 2020 exhibition. Five artists have been identified using animal symbols in the production of their artwork. This study is based on qualitative research approach using four types of data; namely the study of literature that explains the meaning and symbol of animals from the point of view of previous scientific writing. The second method is based on information obtained from the artist statement in the SI + SA 2020 Exhibition catalogue. The third method, the researcher interviewed (partially structured) five artists who have been selected using animal symbols in their artwork. The fourth method is to use the theory of Edmund Burke Feldman (1994) which has four stages in the theory, namely description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation. Triangulation (qualitative) studies are conducted to obtain more data and the validity of the findings obtained. The result shows an understanding of the meaning and symbol varies according to the needs of the individual or society. Some artists associate symbols in the context of personal experiences or observations of an event. Symbols can also carry meaning in the context of social sciences. In the production of their artworks, the use of symbols is a method to convey a message and an easier way to communicate. Conclusion clearly shows that the meaning of these animal symbols depends on different personal perceptions different from the references studied. It can reveal to the general public that the use of animal symbols applied in the work can carry various meanings. Researchers suggest for future studies to conduct comprehensive research on the use of symbols in contemporary visual arts Malaysia.

Keywords: Work; Symbol; Meaning; Animal; Triangulation Data.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Art has existed since prehistoric times. It is based on the discovery of objects in the form of prehistoric artefacts from primitive society groups as well as the discovery of paintings produced on cave walls. The rational of society in the past was so creative and subtle exposed to its creations. These factors are due to the influence of the universe and inspire the ancient society in creating and creating art products.

According to Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), art means a work created with full talent or efficiency and the result of a creation such as paintings, poems, music, sculptures and others. Visual, on the other hand, means visible, that is, something that can be seen with the senses. According to Liza, Hamdzuan, Abdul, Ahmad & Jasni (2015), human beings create art as one of the necessities in daily life and are also used as a method of communication by producing visual art symbols based on experience, feelings and observations. According to Clive Bell the artwork produced is an expression of the inner soul of the artist. From the process of the work of art he tries to stimulate the observer to evaluate, feel the artist's emotions and aesthetics resulting in his work. Observer of a work is evaluated based on three characteristics, namely ideas, materialized form and content. These three features are a union to represent the symbol of art. (Liza, Hamdzuan, Abdul, Ahmad & Jasni, 2015)

As an observer in appreciating a visual artwork apart from the value of beauty seen, the use of symbols also plays an important role in conveying the meaning to be expressed either indirect or covertly. According to Izzah, Tengku & Salina (2015) each selection of images or symbols used to represent a real meaning or idea, it is not taken at will, but chosen based on the suitability of the idea, even for some individuals it is used as a metaphor full of symbolic elements. Eizah (2019) also shared her view stating that ambiguity is a symbol because it can be explained more than one meaning and not bound. Symbols also change from time to time according to the circumstances and goals of the community.

In the context of art, artists such as painters, sculptors and printers make art to express their feelings. Symbols from nature such as plants, animals and the universe become an inspiration to artists in the search for ideas and then adapted according to the will felt. This shows that human life is so close to the universe. The use of animal symbols is also widely used by the world community. In Malaysia, animal symbols are widely used in proverbs, poems, spell bound, visual artwork and more. According to Susanne Langer animal life is represented by feelings while humans are represented by concepts, symbols and language. Animals give signals in the form of signs, but humans need more than just signs which need a symbol that is "an instrument of thought". From the point of view of meaning Langer sees it as a complex relationship between symbols, objects and meanings involving logical and psychological aspects. (Shukur, Iskandar & Cut, 2017). Therefore, the use of animal symbols or any type of symbol applied can be interpreted in various meanings.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to collect visual artwork that showcases animal imagery as a symbol and to analyse the meaning of animals that exist in the five visual artworks selected in the SI + SA 2020 Exhibition.

3. RESEARCH METHOD



The method of this study is more on case study of selected artworks in the exhibition SI + SA 2020. There are five artworks have been identified using animal imagery as a symbol. This study uses the first four methods by doing a literature review to get the meaning of each animal symbol used in the work. The second method is based on the description given by the artist. The third method is to conduct a semi-structured interview with each selected artist. The fourth method uses the theory of Edmund Burke Feldman (1994) through four steps of description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation. The descriptive process refers to the materials and subjects exposed to the work. The analysis explains the design elements and principles. Interpretation, on the other hand, describes the meaning of the work and evaluation is a method of evaluating the artist's work whether successful or not referring to ideas, materialized form and content. Critique of this art to help analyze the work more accurately on the meaning and processing in the work. By using this method, the author can analyze the symbols and meanings contained in the work. As a result of the findings from the information obtained, qualitative triangulation studies were conducted to obtain more than one piece of data and the validity of the findings obtained.

4. ANIMAL AS SYMBOL

The use of animal as subject matter in artwork especially visual artwork has spread widely. Referring to Ernst Cassirer (1929), human beings are basically seen as "symbolic animals", by understanding the signs and arrangement of expressions between them and everyday life. In seeing the symbol as a function of human thought and letting it overcome the same linear logic scheme, it seems to go beyond the rational view of human nature thus describing the human nature as an animal. This can be seen the use of this animal subject is also raised as the primary subject in the work. Among the painters who raised the use of animal subjects in visual artwork such as Jalaini Abu Hassan in his artwork entitled "Babi Harus" (Piq Definitely), the artwork of Samsudin Wahab entitled "Manusia Setengah Dewa" (Half God Man) and Ahmad Zakii Anwar entitled "Kerbau" (Buffalo).



Literature review is one of the approaches to obtain meaning in search for information in works that use animal symbols. Here are five animal symbols studied in terms of meaning that are closely related in the work of SI + SA 2020 Exhibition.

4.1.1 Rat

Rats are closely related to the culture of a nation or society. According to Isabelle Leong (2020), she states in Chinese society, rats are raised as a symbol of perseverance and wisdom. It is very significant because in 2020, the rat zodiac is a new beginning in the cycle of 12 Chinese astrological animals. Meanwhile, according to the statement of Saidatul & Rasdi (2013), the rats are considered as lower-class castes or groups dominated by superpowers. It can be seen here how the rat is symbolized according to different points of view that are built from the results of important events that occur in a group of people of that nation.

4.1.2 Rooster

From the point of view of Tri, Monika & Rizki (2019), the history of the starting point in the use of this symbol of rooster is triggered when there is a process of domestication or taming process. In this socio-cultural context, this rooster is introduced as an image that symbolizes power, greatness and strength. In addition, this chicken is also described as strong, masculine and brave. Meanwhile, when viewed from the perspective of totemism, this rooster from the mythical realm is seen as an animal that brings blessings, an indication of the presence of angels or a sign of the end of the dark age.

Adri (2018) gives a view that is personal semiotics, despite the human nature which is categorized as a perfect creature, human beings have a nature that is similar to the nature of chickens. This is because, the nature of the rooster that is not enough or satisfied in finding a life partner which is not faithful to one. This is related to the process of raising his offspring and giving birth to a new offspring, the nature of this rooster that the intention himself will not stop looking for a new heir. It is clear that, this rooster is only known in the breeding of his offspring but has no responsibility in the outcome of his behavior. The meaning of the symbol of the rooster can be seen in the researcher's observation of the relationship between the behavior of the animal itself. It is symbolized as a way to show strength and power but the side of the divergence does not have a responsible nature.

4.1.3 Cat

According to Saidatul & Rasdi (2013), a cat is a symbol to the figure of a leader, principal or an influential fortress. From the point of view of Febi & Diella (n.d.) states that cats especially black cats are one of the superstitious symbols that symbolize bad things in certain countries. Both authors' point of view shows that there are differences in meaning referring to the use of cat symbols. Although cats are seen close to the human heart and always give a good perception for individuals, a society or a nation. Some portray the cat as a symbol of the leader who leads while others also symbolize it as a symbol to the supernatural and terrifying.

4.1.4 Hen

In contrast, hens are considered responsible and independent animals. Hen are fully responsible for the process of caring for offspring, the process of laying eggs, finding food for their young, and teaching their offspring in the process of self-defense and the struggle to find food sources. At the same time, these hens have the patience to wait for the incubation process and wait for the process of hatching their eggs to turn into chicks (Adri Fernandes, 2018). In this context, hens are symbolized by a positive, pure character, providing protection to children. This statement is supported by Wan, Abdul & Nazri (2016) who stated that animals have some similarities with human behavior.

4.1.5 Fish

According to the Kamus Pelajar Edisi Kedua defines fish as living creatures in cold-blooded water that uses gills to breathe and fins to swim. In the cultural life of the community of Malay History often observe the reaction of the fish prior to catch it and make the fish behavior as the subject to Malay daily life. Regardless mean to benchmark good or vice versa (Junaini, Nor Hasimah & Wan Nurasikin, 2015). While, according to Sunaryo (2009) on the other hand, the image of fish carved in the traditional house of the Nias community; symbolized as dexterity, intelligence and livelihood. In socio-culture, fish is a symbol of sustenance. Indirectly, it is a source of livelihood and economy of a society and a country.

5. THE MEANING OF ANIMAL SUBJECTS BASED ON THE ARTIST INTERVIEW SESSION



This work is a response to the theme of SISA which consciously or does not contain a summary of the letters that form part of the sentence from my own name if re-composed which is ISSA. I processed it in a simple way by utilizing the surface of the box material (recycled material) as a symbol of the personal life cycle that has been completely rotated when I returned to the place where I studied a while ago even now as a teacher. From the visual aspect, the autobiographical experience of going back and forth I drew through the image of a rat coming in and out through the middle field of the perforated box surface. I deliberately took the laboratory rat as a subject where it could at least represent the challenges, trials or tests that I would travel as an academic at this time as I had previously tested as one of the students of this faculty once upon a time.

Artist Interview

The artist states that in the process of creative output, the rat symbol is used on the basis of his experience which is quite financially limited. He had to move to the Peninsula from Sabah and rent with his partner in a shophouse that was only presented with a rubber mat. The incomplete atmosphere of the house and the many rats roaming around his house has been his inspiration in the use of the animal symbol. In addition, artists feel laboratory mice or test mice have similarities to it. Based on his interpretation, the rat was his representative who entered or was accepted to study at UiTM Perak and then left as a former student. However, after leaving UiTM Perak for many years, he is now appointed as an instructor. In the minutes of life on earth facing the COVID-19 Pandemic issue, the artist was also impressed with the aspect of financial income for three months. Judging from the artist's understanding, he symbolizes that the rat resembles himself who survives and struggles to survive by selling some of his personal belongings. At the same time, the artist also stated that these mice when viewed from a cultural context, are labelled as a dirty, disgusting and fond of stealing food. Meanwhile, he thinks that if these rats are seen from a political point of view, these rats are considered as politicians who like to eat corruption.



Subjects



Plate 2

Title: Hero Kampung Name: Mohd Fawazie Bin Arshad Medium: Aquatint Size: 25cm x 25cm Year: 2020

Artist Statement

The theme of SISA (Seri Iskandar, Shah Alam) has inspired artists to produce a work entitled 'Hero Kampung'; which is a conventional aquatint print technique represent the migration of artists who are in the academic world back to their hometowns. In this work, the use of Rooster is a symbol to academician at the same time as an artist. While the stairs of an old house or wood symbolize the hometown (seri iskandar) for someone who has migrated. The conventional use of color in aquatint for this subject shows the freshness and the artists who are active in art making even though they are far from the art centre.

Artist Interview

The artist chose the image of a rooster because he considered the character of this rooster to be a powerful figure and he said that this rooster is a champion. In the meantime, the artist manifests himself as a rooster. This is due to, his childhood growing up in the countryside while facing the challenges of life during his youth in the big city. In essence, he returned to the countryside and continued his life as an educator. The artist also knows the meaning behind the selection of the image of the rooster which represent provess, adventure, strength, and abstinence challenged.

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Subjects



Plate 3

Name: Syahrul Nizam Shaari Title: 'Looking Forward' Medium: Acrylic on Canvas Size: 122cm x 91cm Year: 2020

Artist Statement

Seri Iskandar, 2020 + Shah Alam, 1993 ... (SI + SA) tells my artistic and career journey. This is where it all started, where I gained knowledge, honed my talents and sought experience. After I gained everything here, I shared all my knowledge and experience with my students in Seri Iskandar. Now (2020) I am returning to Shah Alam with 3 latest works (SI + SA). It is impossible for me to be able to fulfil all this without being educated by my teachers in Shah Alam. Thank you Tajali teacher, Prof Dr Muliyadi, Khalil Amran, Pn Jahani, Wan Ahmad, Hj Yusof Ghani, Shukri, Nur Hanim, Suzlee, Suhaimi Tular, Nazri, Prof Dato 'Raja Zahabuddin, PM Aris, PM Mazlan Said, Prof Dr Ruslan , Dr Kamy, Shahrul Azman Shahbudin, Che Mat Azhar, Ali Mohd, Prof. Dr. Syukor Hashim & PM Dato 'Shariff Mustapha ... thank you thank you.

Artist Interview

For the prospect of the artist, the selection of cat subjects is due to the environment and the main contributing factor is his family members. The artist makes cats as companions and entertainers. From this interview, the artist produces symbol of the cat does not see the meaning of the Malay perspective.



Subjects



Plate 4

Name: Nurul Syifa @ Siti Aishah Binti Ahmarofi Title: Rezeki Medium: Acrylic on plywood Size: 2ft x 1.5ft Year: 2020

Artist Statement

"REZEKI" is my memory while continuing my studies at UiTM Shah Alam at the undergraduate level around 2009 to 2011. It is one of the sketches of my ideas on the issues I brought during my studies there. However, now this work has been processed with more relaxed issue and not the same as the issue I brought while at UiTM before. Nevertheless, I still retain the composition and some subjects in this work. "REZEKI" records a scene of life seeking and enjoying sustenance together. Each of us has already written his fortune and all of us whether human or animal, all of the creature try to find "REZEKI" and get it for survival.

Artist Interview

The artist feels that the selection of hen symbols is based on her experience while studying in higher education institutions. In addition, in the process of producing her work does not put any meaning but she thinks that the subject of hens shows the responsibility of a mother who seeks sustenance for her children.

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Subjects



Plate 5

Name: Mohd Nafis Bin Saad Title: Spreading Cluster Medium: Linocut Size: 12 Inci X 7.5 Inci Year: 2020

Artist Statement

My work is more about to visualize the COVID-19 Pandemic spreading in Malaysia. The images and symbol that I create in the artwork reflected based on the social media and news during outbreak recovery. Most of the images that I find for the artwork are projected from my observation. The objects such the COVID-19 wristbands, a fish, the hand, dandelion seeds were symbolize as an issue that people always discuss in social media. Construction and arrangement images are intended to bring visual interest through interaction. By working with printmaking techniques which is linocut allows me to construct and connect the images using various shape and lines to show up interaction between these subjects. The result from this process, suggest a passage of time and recollection of Malaysian Pandemic memory.

Artist Interview

From the artist dimension, the use of fish symbols in works is related to his life. Therefore, his life routine that often goes to the market and has the opportunity to observe various types of fish and has an interest in defending pet fish; Gapi fish. Thus, the artist relationship with the fish is so close and the beauty of the fish scales as well as the agile character of the fish in the water is observed as a result of his observations on the animal. Meanwhile, the symbol of the animal when viewed from environmental factors is also relevant due to his childhood experiences of frequent fishing in the village. Indirectly, the activity of playing with siblings in the same area gives a special feeling toward the fish. In comparison, the artist thinks his feelings may be more or less the same as anyone who loves cats.



6. THE MEANING OF THE SUBJECT BASED ON THE RESEARCHER PERSONAL VIEW

Subject	Personal View (Edmund Bulke Feldman Theory)
Rat	Based on picture 2, this work produced in 2020 entitled $IS + SA = $ 'Keluar Masuk' was painted by Issarezal Bin Ismail. He uses paper box material as well as acrylic media in his paintings. The size of this work is 48 centimeters wide and 96 centimeters high which is produced in two dimensional shapes. These two works are arranged in adjacent positions. In this work there are two mice that come in and going out from the hole.
	From the picture 2, the line and texture elements that are displayed a scratch effect on the surface of the box to show a straight line on the inside of the box.
	Geometric shapes such as rectangles are arranged in the middle of the work as well as organic shapes such as torn paper on the surface of the box visualized in this artwork. The balance of composition occurs when the artist places the subject of the rat in and out of the hole in the middle of the work. The artist adds elements of light and shadow in the painting to show the position of the mice moving in and out of the perforated place.
	The artist uses the subject of mice as a symbol to be visualized in this Si + Sa exhibition. This mammal class is a smart, fast animal and likes to live in dark areas. In addition, the subject of rats is also used in the Malaysian calendar. Based on Chinese beliefs, rats carry positive meanings and symbols to fertility. The selection of white mice subjects was chosen as the content framework for the storytelling of the work. Usually, these white mice are used as experimental animals or laboratory animals.
	The researcher's view argues that rat subjects are presented as metaphors; the narrative is related to the survival of the living in an unexpected situation. Perhaps in an urgent situation, the rat is looking for a potential space to be used as a gateway to a place that he feels is safe from the complicated exterior.
Rooster	Based on picture 3, this work was produced in 2020 and entitled Hero Kampung was drawn by Mohd Fawazie Arshad. He produced printed works using aquatint techniques. In this work, it is depicted a rooster standing on the stairs in a residence while looking to the right of the work. In addition, this work is produced in two dimensions with a size; 25 centimetres wide and 25 centimetres high.
	Elements of line such as horizontal, vertical, diagonal are seen on the stairs, pillars and walls of the house. While organic lines can be seen on the subject of rooster. This work is dominated by black and white compared to the colors found on the neck and feathers of the rooster which is red and yellow. Perhaps with this black and white color selection, the artist tries to tell the story of his childhood. Aquatint technique also helps in the production of three-dimensional visual effects through the effects of black and white tones.
	The use of a rooster in this work may symbolize this animal as a symbol of a man growing up. It is further strengthened by the composition of the combination with other subjects such as standing on a wooden ladder while facing the door of the village house. The position of this rooster looking to the right, may tell of a hope for the future.
	This work recalled a nostalgic narrative between the rooster and the atmosphere of the village environment through the preparation of appropriate composition. It is because the visual succeeds in making the researcher memory regarding the story in the village. Therefore, the symbolized of animals in this work can be seen as a journey of life who has long left his hometown.

Cat	Based on picture 4, the artist uses the image of a cat that has a spoiled and cute character. The subject is sketched on the surface of the canvas using only black and white acrylic colors. Clearly exposed, this work provides a central focus on the eyes of these tame animals. The application of dark and light shades on the eyes of these spoiled animals managed to make the pair of eyes as a focal point. In addition, the artist managed to illustrate the spoiled mimicry of this cat by placing the subject at close range. The subject looks like an artist's own pet. In the researcher's view, through the paintings produced, the artist is a loving and loyal person. The nature of a cat that is agile, cute, spoiled and at the same time able to highlight the fierce character that indirectly reflects the personality of the artist.
Hen	Based on picture 5, Rezeki is the title for the work of Nurul Syifa @ Siti Aishah. She uses an acrylic medium on a wood surface that looks calm in terms of color application. But at the same time, the artist is able to prioritize the subject of a group of hens as the main focus in the work. This is because, the artist is ingenious in using fine and soft lines to put the subject in front of the work. In addition, the artist embodies an element of texture that looks as if it is ground as a background and the texture dominates the whole work. Researchers' views of hens drawn in groups with chicks such as looking for food may want to be described by the artist about female characters. Each hen is coloured in a different color each may convey a different side of life. The use of color on hens in the work symbolizes emotional and spiritual. The artist composes the composition by including side images such as a wire fence and a rooster that help to create a storytelling in the work. Therefore, the researcher perspective that the narrative in this work revolves around individuals, especially women, who are also able to be independent without relying on men.
Gold Fish	Based on picture 6, From the researcher's point of view, this work reflects the goldfish as the dominant subject in the middle part of the work. However, goldfish appear to be semi- natural due to the relatively overly eye-catching rate of ordinary goldfish. The concept of the work that uses the Linocut technique only shows neutral colors namely black, grey and white. In addition, there are side subjects in the top position of the work that is thick and fine wavy hands and lines. Meanwhile, the dashed lines that form the background of the work depict the character of calm water. If interpreted from the aspect of interpretation, this work may be described in the dream world or the subconscious world. The subject of the fish looked like scared and wanted to escape being caught by the foreign hand. Most likely, the fish will be eaten as a meal. Recently, the world is facing a COVID-19 Pandemic to some extent affecting the economic sector. The justification, maybe the owner of the fish had to sacrifice his pet fish and used as a source of food to continue daily life.

7. TRIANGULATION DATA



Figure 2: Triangulation Data



7. 1 Triangulation Data About Symbols

Subjects	Literature Review	Artist Statement	Artist Interview	Researcher's Personal View
Rat	Subordinate class caste	Nil	bribe, impurities	Life sustainability
Rooster	Strong, strong, masculine, brave	Hero kampung,	Mighty, great	Jaguh kampung
Cat	Leader	Nil	Spoiled, life companion	Spoiled, agile, cute
Hen	Responsible, independent	sustenance	Responsible	About women, Independent
Gold Fish	Agility, ingenuity	Nil	wealth	Spoiled, lively

Table 1: Triangulation of Data Regarding Symbols

7.2 Symbols in Artist's Work According to Personal Perspective Or Universal

Table 2: Symbols in Artist's Work According to Personal Or Universal Perspective

Subject	Personal	Universal
Rat	\checkmark	
Rooster	\checkmark	
Cat		✓
Hen		✓
Gold Fish	\checkmark	

7.3 Symbols Relation in the Social Science Category

Subject	Social Science
Rat	economy
Rooster	sociology
Cat	sociology
Hen	economy
Gold Fish	sociology

Table 3: Relation of symbols in the Social Science category

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this case study, the findings from literature review, artist statements, semi-structured interviews and interpretations from the art of theoretical critique of Edmund Burke Feldman (1994) can be concluded that symbols are not rigid in one meaning. It can vary according to the wishes of the individual or society that evaluates the symbol. The results of the triangulation of data collected from the four methods found that the symbols and meanings in the five works of the SI + SA 2020 exhibition are related in the field of social sciences which includes eight categories namely anthropology, economics, linguistics, etymology, sociology, psychology, education and communication. From the findings obtained based on the five selected works there are two categories namely sociology and economics. In conclusion, the animal symbol used in the narrative processing of the work is a self-reflection on the understanding and experience of the artist. Researchers suggest for future studies to conduct comprehensive research on the use of symbols in contemporary visual arts Malaysia.

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