

REVIEW: Reflecting on Malay-Muslim identity through contemporary art

Art works which attempt to uncover identity issues cannot possibly achieve their aim without breaking down preconceived assumptions and norms that are often related to them.

This can be achieved through provocative works with elements that instantly tug at the emotions.

There are also works that may not leave behind any immediate effect but instead give rise to reflection and self-examination.

Among these are the works of veteran local artist, Encik Salleh Japar, 57.

Some of his works exploring the collision of ideas, identities and traditions in the postmodern context are now on exhibit at the Brother Joseph McNally Gallery, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts.

Having delved into contemporary art for over 3 decades, Mr Salleh is a recipient of The Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry Visual Arts Award and Singapore Youth Award (Art and Culture).

Among the highlights of his involvement in the local arts scene is representing Singapore at the prestigious Venice Biennale, which is a major achievement for an artist.

MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PROJECT

Entitled *STILL*, the exhibition from 26 January to 27 February is a multi-disciplinary project by Mr Salleh and his fellow lecturer from LASALLE College of the Arts, Ms Joanne Pang.

Together with students from LASALLE's School of Design Communication, they explored the link between symbols, language and memory through the use of various media in the works that are on display.

Five of Mr Salleh's selected works, dating from the 1990s to the present day, reflect the special characteristics of his works, which are generally the use of mixed media techniques, combining painting, sculpture and drawing.

The balance between all of them is not centred on a single subject but on the use of symbols that represent meaning and philosophy.

Influenced by elements of Malay culture and Islamic thought, the symbols and motifs which are used in Mr Salleh's works, among others, derive inspiration from Islamic geometric art and Malay wood crafting.

This is most obviously seen in his current work on display at *STILL*, entitled *Apparition of the black flags*, 2018-19.

Filling up the largest space in the exhibition gallery, three pieces of black cloth hang from adjoining walls.

The term 'black flags' was sparked from current events that demonstrated the use of black flags by the militant group Daesh or ISIS.

Studying the symbolic meaning that is usually found in Mr Salleh's artworks, the mixed media work places Muslim identity in the middle of a current reality that often faces varied assumptions which link Islam to violence.

However, more than being a statement of current affairs, the reference to the black flags also discusses terms of reference or conventions that may be seldom questioned.

What is the first thing which crosses our minds when we hear the term 'black flags'? What do we assume about the symbolic meaning of the colour black?

Does it give rise to mystery, negative feelings or otherwise? Why and how have those assumptions been formed?

ENHANCE UNDERSTANDING

Art certainly does not exist in isolation and the historical, cultural and social situations behind each artwork can enhance our understanding of the message that each artist intends to relay.

This is contained in the historical elements of Islam's flag as depicted in the work *Apparition of the black flags*. Among other things, there is the crescent moon motif on the Tunisian flag before it was conquered and colonised by the Ottoman empire.

Also, the emblem on the sword Zulfiqar, which was connected to the Turkish flag from the 16th to the 17th century and the design of the yellow flag of the Mamluk empire.

On top of each black cloth that was hung was a prayer mat that marked the kibat or orientation.

All three appear to branch out from the centre – made of bright yellow fabric with an extract from Surah An-Nur – Nur Ala Nur. It means 'light upon light' and is often mentioned by the Sufis as a means of self-reflection about light within the self to continue to shine and seek direction.

All the symbols and motifs featured on the black fabrics simultaneously explore the collision of ideas, identities and traditions.

The prayer mats used ask the question, how do we determine direction and our personal path when confronted with various perceptions about Islam from outside.

For a work which had spiritual characteristics, Mr Salleh gained inspiration not only from Islamic thought and ideas but also from his own cultural heritage.

This can be seen from the motifs and emblems of Malay culture that exist in the decorative items as well as the tiles and carvings in the mosques and palaces in *Apparition of the black flags*.

ROOM FOR DIALOGUE

Another of Mr Salleh's works at the exhibition is called *Jammarat series*, 2018. Obviously different from the black which featured as the foundation for *Apparition of the black flags*, this work is made up of three white boxes depicting the ritual of throwing at the jamrah during the haj pilgrimage.

Shaped like pizza boxes made of cardboard, the work was inspired by 'take away' boxes to represent three 'take aways' or lessons.

The first box is a map for throwing the jamrah while the second box shows the path or direction.

The bottom of the third box is made out of pulp paper and has a coarse surface that simulates the walls of the Jamarat.

From the aesthetic aspect, Mr Salleh views the Jamarat as a sculpture that plays a role in an event (ritual) that follows conventions.

Three other works by Mr Salleh at the *STILL* exhibit are *Altar series*, 1989-90, *Between Tanjong Pagar and Calcutta*, 1998 and *Black sphere series*, 2000.

Even though it is not a grand exhibition, the works featured by Mr Salleh are not only important in that they question conventions on creation but also open room for healthy dialogue about religious life as well as issues of identity, diversity of traditions and tolerance.

Image Caption: The works of veteran artist Salleh Japar are in the *STILL* exhibit at LASALLE.
(Photos: Emilia Amin/BERITAMediacorp)

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