

# THE ENVIRONMENT AS A THEME IN MALAYSIAN ART<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

In recent decades in Malaysia, the subject of environment consciousness has become one of the main issues that has been raised by many people in Malaysia, from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) to various government bodies. In various ways, Malaysian artists have been affected by their realisation of the degradation of environmental qualities since the last thirty years. As such, this paper will focus and discuss more on the younger generation of artists such as Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Nirmala Shanmughalingam, Redza Piyadasa, Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Ilham Fadhly Mohd Shaimy, Hamir Soib, Kok Yew Puah, Wong Hoy Cheong, etc. They are among the few artists that have been producing works that are either directly or indirectly addressing this significant issue in their artworks. This paper will discuss their works especially those that are visual documents of the thoughts and feelings of the Malaysian artists on urbanization process and environmental changes in relation to the increasing awareness and interests on environmental concerns following rapid urbanization in Malaysia. Apart from this, this paper will also discuss, the awareness of the issue itself as the main theme and subject selected by the artists; and secondly, the materials of the artworks themselves as tools or examples of how art work should lead by example, namely by using recycled materials, etc.

*Keywords: Malaysia Art, environment, urbanization, landscape art*

## **Introduction**

Artworks that denote the environment and nature in art are not new among Malaysian artists. In fact, it remains among the popular subjects by those who draw and paint, besides other subjects such as still-lives and portraiture. For example, art that perplex the Malaysian environment can be traced even to early works by Ensign Caldwell, James Wathen, William Daniel, Thomas Princep, and John Turnbull Thomson (Lim, 1986). Though the motivation behind these renditions can be contested or discussed in a postcolonial context (Sarena Abdullah, 2011). These early works are important as they depict the early rendition of the Malayan setting and scenery in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Significantly important are the works that denote their Malayan background and typified by the works of prominent artists in British Malaya such as Lee Kah Yeow, Yong Mun Sen, Kuo Ju Ping, and Abdullah Ariff, either by drawing, Chinese ink painting, oil or water coloring (Tan, 1992). The drawing of the surrounding environment in either sceneries or nature of the country that have been depicted by these artists have given us the much needed visual information of the natural surroundings in the country during the first half of the twentieth century.

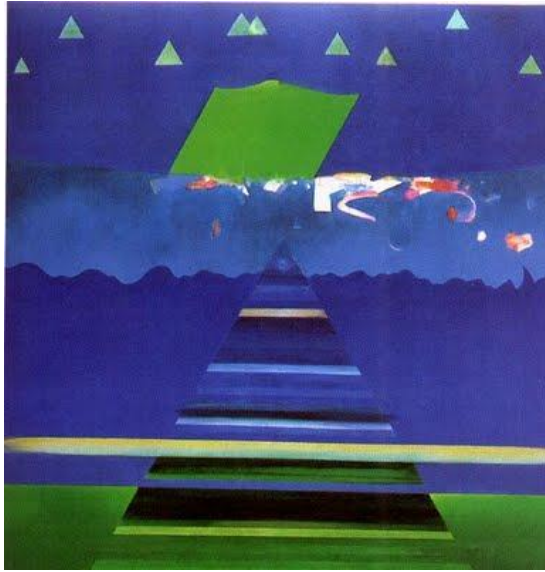
The same subject was taken by Malaysian artists in the early years of Independence (in the 1950s and 1960s) especially after Malaysian artists have returned from their studies overseas. The rendition of Malaysian environment and landscape<sup>2</sup> in general persists though an abstraction or an expressionistic form. This can be seen in Yeoh Jin Leng's "Rice Fields, Trengganu" (1963) (Figure 1), Syed Ahmad Jamal's "Gunung Ledang Series" (Figure 2) and Latif Mohidin's "Pago-Pago" series and also the works by few other artists. Though the same theme persists, these environmental and landscape renditions have slightly evolved. These works are not only mere landscape renditions but most importantly they actually exude a form of expression or feeling that the artists felt in the process of art making. However, this conclusion can be quite simplistic and should be problematized further in regards to the development of Abstract and Abstract Expressionist style in Malaysia. I would like to point out here that there is a huge disparity between the artists since the 1990s and the artists who have produced works that denote the environment and landscape that were mentioned previously.

**Figure 1: Yeoh Jin Leng, "Rice Fields, Trengganu" (1963), Oil on canvas, 82.8 x 102cm.**



(Collection: National Art Gallery Malaysia)

**Figure 2: Syed Ahmad Jamal, "Gunung Ledang/Tanjung Kupang" (1978), Acrylic on Canvas, 213 x 203cm.**



(Collection: Singapore Art Museum)

This is not to say, however, since the 1990s Malaysian artists have totally rejected all idealistic or aesthetic approaches that were commonly used in nature and landscape drawings or paintings. There are in fact many artists who either professionally or otherwise used these approaches when producing beautiful landscapes and natural sceneries of the country. Most of these works, however, were produced for commercial purposes -- that is, to be sold to the public, corporations, hotels, and interior decorators. Since the 1990s, there are artists who have been very critical. The landscape and environment are not the idealized subject anymore but as a way for them to convey their astute or critical observations on what is happening in Malaysia, especially on issues pertaining to the indirect result of a deteriorating environment and quality of nature in general. Therefore, Malaysian artists have moved away from nature as their source of "aesthetic inspiration" to "artistic inspiration." For example, instead of idealizing or only portraying the attractiveness of the local sceneries such as mountains, valleys, trees, rivers, forests, floras and faunas, these artists have started to produce artworks that reveal the actual changes of Malaysian environment itself. These artists begin to highlight their concern on the rapid changes of the surrounding locale and natural surroundings by highlighting issues that are either directly or indirectly argued to be the consequences of rapid urbanization. In the domain of Fine Arts, especially since the 1990s, changes or criticisms of Malaysian environment and landscapes have become a very popular genre among the younger artists. This is different from the artistic proclivities of Malaysian artists who produce art before.

## The Environment as Interest-Based and Artistic Concern

So, why does this happen? I have argued elsewhere that the development in Malaysian art should be discussed in light of the social and cultural changes that the country underwent since the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the subsequent New Development Policy (NDP) (Sarena Abdullah, 2005). In brief, the goal for NEP was to increase the Malay economic ownership from around 3% in 1971 to 30% over a twenty-year period. Through direct government intervention and economic support, aggressive training and educational strategies that were aimed and resulted in *bumiputeras* who have become the multitude of bureaucrats, company executives, technocrats, academics, accountants, computer-chip engineers, information technology specialists and other professions which demand specialist education and training (Shamsul, 1999: 100). Eventually, the NEP had resulted in a new social paradigm of the middle class, especially among the Malays, but unlike in the pre-1970s, where the middle class only came from the Chinese ethnic groups and a small group of Malays who were the government administrators. The post-1970s saw the expansion of a more multi-ethnic “new” middle class, mostly working in the private sector. Since the “new” Malay middle class are now generally managers and professionals, this position allows them to operate across economic, political, social, cultural and religious spaces along with other ethnic community groups. It also has subsequently created a new pattern of ethno-religious interaction and cultural dynamism among themselves. Gaik Cheng Khoo for example, have been associating the “new” middle class with languages such as how the “new” middle class consists of the Malay language elite and the English language elite and also those who are bilingual (Gaik, 2002: 84). However, it must be noted here that the distinction between the “old” and the “new” middle class was not striking in the Chinese and Indian groups because their younger generation already had a large urban origin and were not the product of ‘special’ education schemes that are mostly produced under NEP. Therefore, though the rural Chinese and Indians have largely missed out on the benefits of the NEP, the urban Chinese business groups have benefited greatly from it, for example by acting as business partners for the new class of Malay entrepreneurs (Smith, 1999: 132).

With the “new” middle class, there is also an “interest-based” link. For example, Shamsul A.B. explains the contemporary political culture in the context of Malaysia, that there is a shift away from the colonially inherited categories of race, ethnicity, and religion to “interest-based” concerns. This first emerged among Malays through the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) after the NEP was launched. The other NGOs have also emerged in Malaysia during the 1970s for example, where NGOs represented a variety of interests ranging from consumer protection, urban squatters, the Orang Asli (indigenous people), abused wives and children and the environment (Shamsul, 2001: 220-221). These traces of new politics based on interest-orientations have gone beyond class and ethnicity, and have now established new possibilities and broader circumstances that would require the involvement of all ethnic groups and classes in Malaysia. Summit K. Mandal, in his

study of the NEP generation, which includes producers, administrators, and business people who are engaged in performing arts, says “[T]he NEP generation reconsiders political community anew by providing a critique of ethnicism grounded in the real possibilities offered by pluralism in cultural life. They actively create new spaces and sources of cultural solidarity by producing artwork that crosses ethnic boundaries.” (Mandal, 2001: 156)

This paper investigates how Malaysian artists are part of the “new” middle class<sup>3</sup> who are involved in the process of reworking their social identities, especially in terms of how they used the “interest-based” issues in their works such as environmental concerns. It must be noted here, that the various changes in the economic development at the time, and the development of Fine Arts in the country have also been influenced by the subsequent changes in the government policy since 13 May 1969. The NEP, the implementation of the National Cultural Policy in the early 1970’s, followed by the Islamization Policy which was undertaken by the Malaysian government in the late 1970s, have largely influenced the development of Malaysian arts during the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, the promulgation of national culture, together with the upsurge of Islamic consciousness by the end of 1970s, had influenced the artistic output of Malaysian artists during the two decades and most of the artists have aligned themselves artistically to either continuing or exploring Abstract Expressionist style and/or produced Malay/Islamic-centered art. Therefore, the environmental and landscape did not become a significant theme during those decades but this does not mean that there are no works at all that engaged this issue and I will explain this later. After all, the environmental issues have become the highlight in the country since the 1970s.

With NEP, we can see that the changes in Malaysia’s economic structure since Independence and especially so with the five years *Rancangan Malaysia* or Malaysia Plan are very impressive. From a country which is dependent on commodity exports in the 1970s, it has grown its exports tremendously by the 1990s and the early decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the early 1990s, three areas were highly industrialized – Klang Valley, Pulau Pinang and Johor Bahru. Overall, these rapid economic developments have been followed by a dramatic increase in pace, scale, and intensity of environmental changes in the country. Human intervention through massive development projects had posed a significant threat to the natural environment of Malaysia which resulted in various environmental issues in the form of water and air pollution that have arisen as indirect results of high levels of industrialization, urbanization and energy use in the country. Massive expansion of agriculture, forestry and urbanization for example, had contributed to the destruction of forests, mangrove swamps and other thriving ecosystems in the country and landscapes. Among the many affected sectors are air and water pollution, which are widespread due to unchecked industrial activities and large forests areas being cleared for development projects, thus causing ecological imbalance. Most significantly, logging activities too have depleted these great tropical forests resources. The once lush green tropical rainforests have now been replaced by rows and rows of plantations, new buildings, technology parks,

industrial areas, housing sectors and the like. These massive development activities have also resulted in various habitat losses, threatening the survival of numerous plants and animals. Most profound, for example, is the mismanagement of land development, which resulted in various accidents due to improper use of land and geographical phenomena, such as landslides, and flooding in the Klang Valley area, along with haze, that stemmed out from the widespread deforestation. These issues have been widely reported in the newspapers and mass media.

A few of the main reasons why there is more awareness of environmental concerns among Malaysians is in the chapter on "Environment and Development" attributed in the Third Malaysian Plan (1976-1980). These concerns rose again in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Environmental Quality Act was prompted in part by the global rise in the global awareness that followed the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Environment held in Stockholm. Apart from that, I would also like to point out how the roles were played by the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Malaysia which have succeeded in creating awareness on the issue itself among the Malaysian public, especially among the "new" Malaysian middle class.

NGOs that are working on the environmental issues have even existed prior to Malaysia's Environmental Quality Act 1974 and the establishment of the Division of Environment (now the Department of Environment) in 1975 and among the early pioneer NGOs were the Malayan Nature Society, the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia, and the Worldwide Fund for Nature and *Sahabat Alam* (Ramakrishna, 2003: 116). Currently, there are about seventeen NGOs, which are involved in environmental issues. (Ramakrishna, 2003: 117). These groups have been involved in a wide range of environmental activities and campaigns, and also manage to raise various issues such as deforestation, housing development, timber plantations, oil palm plantations, roads, dams, etc.

These various NGOs working on environmental issues have done a lot from initiating change in policies, instigating and pushing the governments to be more active in addressing these issues but most importantly they have been persistently organizing campaigns and activities which involve community participation, environmental education and awareness among the Malaysian public with appreciating the earth, environmental protection, increased environmental awareness among the public by promoting activities that help to preserve and prevent further degradation of the environment through non-destructive activities and encourage, and develop policies to support sustainable developments (Ramakrishna, 2003: 118).

We could see that the awareness of the civil society and NGOs have increased throughout the Malaysian society at large. Over the years, NGOs have made important contributions to foster a more democratically inclined and socially aware citizens and their participation are not only limited to issues regarding the environment but also in the context of this paper, I would only focus on environmental concerns as the subject or theme in the arts. For example, as I will discuss later, Malaysian artists no longer depict the idyllic landscape or the

abstraction of the ideal nature as I have discussed earlier but in the last two decades, they have more persistently addressed, documented and criticized the real physical changes that encroaches Malaysia due to its rapid urbanization happening since the 1970s. As a result, instead of producing works that adhere to the idealized landscape, the environmental concerns have become a theme or interests that can be traced and discussed in the works of a few Malaysian artists.

There are however, a few early works that have been engaged prior to the 1990s such as works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam, which are "Pollution Piece" (1973) and "Statement Series". Nirmala Shanmughalingam's work "Statement I" (1973) (Figure 3) for example, consists of her written statements on pollution and environmental destructions including the twenty black and white photo prints on environmental pollution that capture the indiscriminate dumping of industrial waste and the destruction of the stream adjacent to the Old Damansara Road. The artist took more than six months to record and create the work as to express her urgent warnings about the current ecological destructions that are happening in the country. She also includes various forms of evidence such as charts, diagrams, photographs and even industrial waste and rubbish taken from the actual site as part of her series (Chu Li, 1997: 8).

**Figure 3: Nirmala Shanmughalingam,  
"Statement I" (Detail) (1973), Mixed media, 73 x 91 x 124cm.**

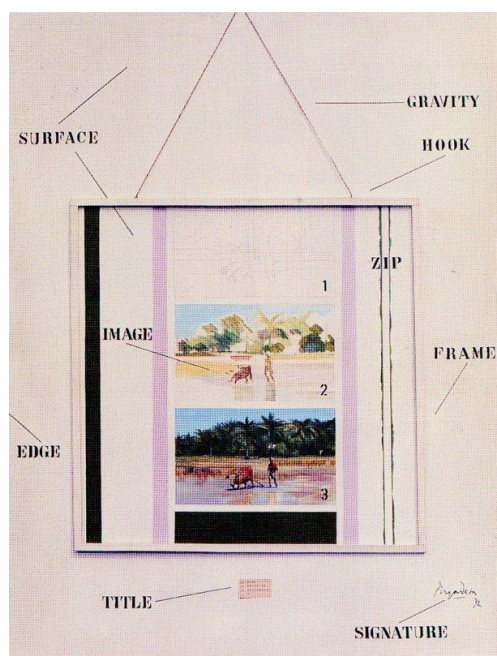


(Collection: National Art Gallery Malaysia)

Another early work that should be considered in this realm is "The Great Malaysian Landscape" (1972) (Figure 4) by Redza Piyadasa. Though the artwork was actually an entry for a landscape competition, the work was posited as a

different methodology in its execution. It uses metalanguage as its main strategy to invoke cynicism on the question “What is art?” or perhaps the more appropriate question would be “Is landscape art the only art form that is valid in Malaysia?” The work can be described as “a canvas within a canvas”, where the framed artwork is positioned in the middle of a larger canvas. The main work positioned in the middle is divided into three sections with a black border below. This work shows how most landscape paintings are completed in three levels – the perspective sketch, the rendering or painting process and the overall complete work. In this work, Piyadasa chose a common landscape scene of a Malay peasant ploughing the paddy field, which is a very popular subject at that time. In the work, words were stenciled on the canvas to point out the components of an artwork. Words such as ‘image’, ‘frame’, ‘title’, ‘signature’, ‘surface’, ‘gravity’, ‘hook’, ‘edge’, and ‘zip’ were among the terms or elements that were used which are important to a painting. Since then, paintings of landscape have been very popular among Malaysian artists in the early decades of modern art, this work can be suggested as the very important work that posited a very important aesthetics question about the ‘sacredness’ of landscape art as the only accepted art, especially among Malaysian artists.

**Figure 4: Redza Piyadasa, “The Great Malaysian Landscape” (1972), acrylic on canvas, painted wood, wire and paper, 230 x 179cm.**



(Collection: National Art Gallery Malaysia)

Since the 1990s, works that dealt with the environment or address the changes of the environment have become more escalated and this paper will



discuss the two main approaches that have been taken by these artists. There are two main approaches -- first, the artists either highlight these issues through the selected themes or subject matter itself. Second, the materials and techniques executed can be suggested as example of art projects that adhere to the idea of material reconditioning, parallel with the idea of using unexpected materials and techniques as part of the artwork itself.

### **The Environment as a Thematic Subject in Malaysian Art**

The first point is made based on my observation that artworks under discussion in this paper exude the awareness on the environmental issues and this consciousness has been chosen as the main theme or subject of the artworks. Unlike the work by Piyadasa which questions the preoccupation of Malaysian artists on landscape as his main subject, since the 1990s, a few Malaysian artists have concentrated instead on the message or themes that can be suggested as their commentaries or contemplations on what is happening around them in a visually critical way. In this respect, there are three common themes or subjects addressed by these artists. First, the artworks produced exude the artist's environmental concerns and/or criticism; and second, instead of an idealized landscape, artists have chosen to focus on the changing landscape or the state of the urbanscape as their main question.

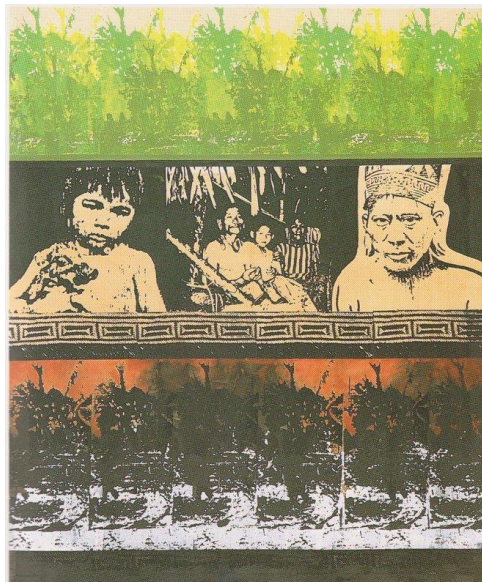
The first approach can be exemplified by works of Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed and Ilham Fadhli Mohd Shaimy. Besides Nirmala and her works that dealt with logging and illegal logging in Sarawak as I have mentioned previously, there is another artist who have raised his own concern on what is happening in Sabah and Sarawak. This could be seen in Bayu Utomo Radjikin's sculptural works like "Bujang Berani" (1991), "Lang Ngindang" (1991) and "Lang Kacang" (1991). "Bujang Berani" (1991) and "Lang Kacang" (1991) (Figure 5) for example, are sculptures that have been argued and discussed founded on angst of the local tribe. The audiences are moved as they view the facial expression of the semi-figurative sculpture, who is screaming into the void – disseminating his rage and despair, the essential essence of human emotions. The facial features of "Lang Kacang" are moulded only from a type of plaster from Paris, while the rest of the sculpture is constructed from welded pieces of metal and machine parts. Much detail is paid to the headgear, which is the symbol of traditional tribal power. These works are important not only on the issues and subjects raised in terms of the environmental theme but also in terms of figuration and semi-figuration introduced back by the artist to the Malaysian art audience that it has impacted what is assumed or accepted to be Malaysian 'national' art throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Even Nirmala Shanmughalingam's series "Membalak Jangan Sembarangan, Nanti Ditimpa Balak" (Do Not Log Carelessly, Lest Misfortune Befall You) (Figure 6) falls into this category.

Figure 5: Bayu Utomo Radjikin, "Lang Kacang" (1991),  
Mixed media, 141 x 104 x 120cm.



(Collection: Singapore Art Museum)

Figure 6: Nirmala Shanmughalingam, "Membalak Jangan Sembarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak II" (1990), Acrylic, ink, and *Mengkudu* Dye on Canvas, 122 x 102cm.



(Collection: En Nizam Razak)

There are also artists who posit environmental criticism to reiterating the concerns of the urbanites. For example, the works by Ahmad Shukri Mohamed that usually depicts his personal observation on the changing urban people and their lives, their likes and dislikes, the encroaching technologies upon their traditional way of life, the popular and the kitsch. Most of his works do not criticize the encroaching development as something negative and have to be rejected but his works are important as it portrays his keen observations on how the urbanites behave in the changing environment after migrating from the rural areas to the urban areas. As most urbanites actually migrated from other Malaysian states to the Klang Valley, the changes from their village lifestyles or rural lifestyles to the urban lifestyles will give a big impact to them. Ahmad Shukri has cleverly featured his observations in his various works in a way that conveys his concerns and/or criticism of the environment. For example, his installation work entitled “Urban Garden Series” (1998), which reiterates his observation on the sudden trend of the hydroponic cultivation during the 1998 economic crisis. In this work, the exhibition gallery was filled with arrays of hydroponic plants that were laid out in the gallery setting and reiterate his observations on the urbanites of sudden fascination with the way of farming that can be done in limited spaces of the modern residential.

**Figure 4: Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, “Warning Tapir Crossing 1” (2007), mixed media on canvas, 890 x 152 cm (5 panels).**



(Source: *Patisatustudio Warning! Tapir Crossing* (Puncak Alam: Patisatu Studio, 2007, 32-33pg.))

Ahmad Shukri’s reflection on what is happening to his changing of surrounding culminates in a very important exhibition at his home/gallery/art space/studio named Patisatu that he shared with his ceramic artist-wife, Umibaizurah Mahir. *Warning! Tapir Crossing* (2007) was a series produced and inspired by Ahmad Shukri’s encounter with five dead tapirs at a site near their new home in the newly developed area of Puncak Alam, on the way to Kuala Selangor. Similar to his approach in his artworks, Ahmad Shukri and Umibaizurah turn their home/studio cum project space as a space to mentor younger artists and also to advocate an ‘art ecosystem’. As explained by Hasnul Jamal Saidon, the space can be read as a form of ecosystem for the visual art scenes in Malaysia (Saidon, 2007: 13). The exhibition features Ahmad Shukri’s artwork that documents these dead endangered tapirs. Ahmad Shukri’s “Warning! Tapir Crossing I” (2007) (Figure 7) features a five panel works of five tapirs numbered from one to five – metaphor from the encounters of two development and nature itself. The confrontation between man and nature could also be seen in his other works including “Check

Mate" (2007), "Lost Diamond" (2007), "No Future" (2007) . All these have been presented in a very playful way with various juxtaposition of color used in the works and with images taken from the popular culture, daily products, cultural elements and symbols and etc.

Though Ahmad Shukri's works have been very playful in terms of its presentation as they can be seen in his usage of various colours, images selected and the ways of execution, but other artists have not been very optimistic instead in highlighting their concerns. This could be seen not only in the subject or theme of the work itself but also in a way on how the work is presented. For example, Hamir Soib's and Ilham Fadhli Mohd Shaimy's works have been very somber, dark and gloomy in terms of colour treatment. Hamir's work "The Unfinished Hour Glass" (2007) and "Sepat oh Sepat" (2007) were produced in the realm of what Nur Hanim Khairuddin described as the 'gothic-fantastic.' The 'gothic-fantastic' aspect in Hamir's series of works can be suggested on how Hamir uses monochromatic colours especially from the cold and dark spectrum to give off an unusual effect to the overall look of his works. This is also supplemented by how he used taboo, sadomasochistic and gothic objects to complete his surrealist, mystic and symbolic forms of artworks (Khairuddin, 2007: 12-13).

Figure 5: Hamir Soib, "Sepat oh Sepat" (2006), Oil on canvas, 150 x 240cm.



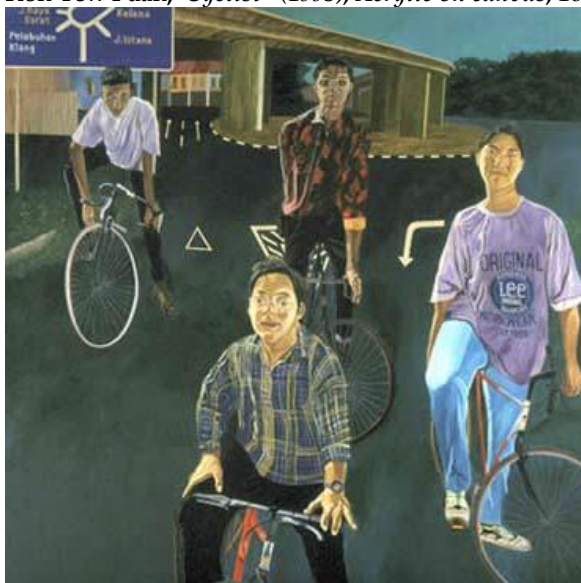
(Collection: Mr. Farouk Khan)

"Sepat oh Sepat" (2007) (Figure 8) is a painting of a transformed *sepat*. *Sepat* is a type of fish that is easily available in Malaysia and the work presented *sepat* as a symbol of the environmental decay or simply the mutation of the fish, after being raised in polluted water. In parallel, works by Ilham Fadhli Mohd Shaimy such as "Dog, Father, One, Two and Tree"(2010) and "Collapse 2" (2010-2011) were produced in a similar somber mode, with dark grey and somewhat twisting scenes

that portrays the disturbing scenarios insinuating the indirect result of ecological abandonment.

The second approach that we can see is that more and more artists have found their inspirations from urban scenes instead of landscapes. In comparison with the early decades of modern art in Malaysia, the landscape as in landscape that portrays the beauty of the country does not appeal as a subject anymore to these artists. Therefore, they looked towards urban scene as a source of their aesthetic inspiration. For example, Kok Yew Pua who made a comeback in the Malaysian art world after a long hiatus, painted the urban landscape around him before his untimely demise in 1999. In his works, he chose to paint his children and their friends by positioning them in a few selective urban scene of Klang in Selangor. Though it can be argued that his paintings are captured images with his 'camera lens', these works are also important as they highlight the local scenes that we usually take for granted. In "Temple Figures" (1997) for example, the artist includes the framing device of a camera in the work and 'capture' a picture of five youngsters standing in front of an Indian temple near his house. This work reiterates the artist looks and appreciates the environment and the uniqueness of Malaysia's urban scene that he conveys in a colourful manner. This could be seen as his large canvases are finely detailed with bold Malaysian colours of blue, red, yellow, grey, and green. Even concrete greys and glaring blue skies are juxtaposed with the bright tones of youth fashion, signages, cars, highways, and even colourful pre-war buildings. These contrasting colours have made his work stand out, insinuating the bold and striking nature of contemporary life and landscape.

**Figure 6: Kok Yew Pua, "Cyclist" (1995), Acrylic on canvas, 163 x 163cm.**



(Source: Kok Yew Pua: Klang and Beyond, Exhibition catalogue)

This could be seen in “Cyclists” (1995) (Figure 9) and “Urban Playground” (1994), where youngsters were counterpoised against the new buildings and new highways of the changing Klang environment. Unlike the works by Hamir Soib and Ilham Fadhli Ahmad Shaimy, Kok Yew Puah is definitely more optimistic and hopeful in terms of portraying his subject matters. His figures have always seemed to be more comfortable with the urban settings probably because the youngsters only know about the urban and nowhere else. Therefore, there is no hesitant or a sense of longing or even comparative feeling between the rural and the urban as they always consistently appear in Ahmad Shukri Mohamed’s works as I have discussed previously.

While Kok Yew Puah’s version of urban life is optimistically portrayed in his contented multiracial figures and colourful landscapes of Klang, Wong Hoy Cheong video work entitled “Suburbia: Bukit Beruntung, Subang Jaya” (2006) (Figure 10) is a two-channel looped video projection that was shot in comparatively two suburban landscapes -- the successful Subang Jaya and the less successful Bukit Beruntung. Unlike his previous work entitled “Trigger” (2004), a multi-channel DVD direction that was taken from a video attached to a horse, this work was shot from both the vantage point of a wheelchair and a remote control toy car that enables the video to go through with unrestricted movements in both suburbs. Although in both of these works, the artist experiments with the unusual moving perspective but unlike “Trigger”, “Suburbia: Bukit Beruntung, Subang Jaya” moves one step further by focusing on the disparity between the townships of Bukit Beruntung and Subang Jaya, two suburbs near Kuala Lumpur. Despite their locations, these two suburbs are actually different from each other.

**Figure 7: Wong Hoy Cheong, “Suburbia: Bukit Beruntung, Subang Jaya” (2006), 2-channel video projection (5 min 51 sec).**



(Source: Valentine Willie Fine Arts Online, see <http://www.vwfa.net/kl/exhibitionDetail.php?eid=14>)

Unlike its name (*beruntung* means having luck), Bukit Beruntung, a township, which is located near Serendah in Hulu Selangor district, is an unrealized township ambition. During the property boom in the early 1990s, Bukit Beruntung was a property hotspot but when the professed projects, such as an Islamic University and a new airport failed to take place, this suburb lost both its luster and land values. The prices of properties such as flats and apartments have dipped further and further. On the other hand, Subang Jaya is now a bustling and thriving suburb that is situated between Shah Alam (the capital of Selangor) and Kuala Lumpur. Unlike Bukit Beruntung, the demand for property in Subang Jaya has soared due to its strategic location, pushing the prices of properties upwards by as much as over one hundred percent. Screened together in this two-channel looped video projection, they form two very different portraits of the outcome of the Malaysian suburban dream and document, the success and the failures of urbanization and development projects of the country.

**Figure 8: Phuan Thai Meng, "Move forward 弃(2009), Acrylic and oil on canvas, 91 x 122cm.**



(Source: Valentine Willie Fine Arts Online, see <http://www.vwfa.net/kl/exhibitionDetail.php?eid=115>)

Since winning the Juror's Choice Award from the Philip Morris Malaysia - ASEAN Art Awards in 2000, another artist known as Phuan Thai Meng has since gained regional recognition for his realist rendition that explores the between-spaces within an urban environment. His strength as a photo-realist painter becomes very pertinent in the various series of works that he explores or rather sees the ironically urban realities that are happening in Malaysia. In his show exhibition entitled *Made in Malaysia* in 2009, the artist had produced several important works in this realm. In his work "Move Forward • 弃" (2009) (Figure 11), for example, the artist's photo realist acrylic brings us into a dilapidated warehouse

with a two oversized town-planning guide sitting in neglect in the hall and *"The Road to... • 腐"* (2009), illustrates the ambitious transportation infrastructure of the country in which the work had capture various elevated roads that seems to stretch out in various ways through in and out of the canvas. The audiences are reminded of the reality as they immerse in the pictorial scene as certain parts of the work reveal the plywood structure behind the painted surface. This three-dimensional art reminds us of the ever changing nature in the urban landscape in Kuala Lumpur, where houses and buildings have been demolished to make way for highways to cater for the massive traffic congestion in the city.

On the other hand, Chuah Chong Yong's works were inspired by the plight of the urban in terms of demolition of the historic and colonial buildings to make way for modern buildings and skyscrapers. As already known, with the rapid urbanization and the increase of land and property value in cities, there is the tendency towards more demolition of historic and colonial buildings such as old shop houses that make up the identity of towns in Malaysia. The works of Chuah Chong Yong reflects his concerns on the urban heritage of old towns in Malaysia, especially the heritage shop houses. His primary concern was articulated way before Penang and Malacca were conferred UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 2008. Chuah Chong Yong had produced a series of paintings and installations entitled *"Pre-War Building for Sale Series"* from 1996 to 2000 and in 2003, he continued his series on shop houses at Alor Gajah, Malacca. His works highlight his concern over the destruction of the heritage buildings in order to make way for modern buildings and the lack of concern on the importance of architectural heritage in Malaysia. The disregard for architectural heritage, as part of Malaysia's history, could be seen as how far the country gives in to corporate power, and capitalist ideal developments.

### **The Sustainability Strategies of Techniques and Materials**

The second approach that has been taken by Malaysian artists was by the various ways that they employ the techniques and materials used in executing the artworks. Besides the direct approach and as I have discussed above, there are several works of art that push the limit of techniques and details, and this strategy can successfully influence the audience in looking towards appreciating nature, environment and the Malaysian landscape itself. Examples are the captured scenes by Johan Marjonid and Zainurin Mohamad that were taken from the environment in the form of realistic paintings. Johan Marjonid's realist paintings of the tropical Malaysian rainforests invite the audience to appreciate the tropical nature and the environment. When positioned in a gallery setting, his large canvasses bring us to the deep tropical jungle that some of us evaded. His *"Preservation Series"*, *"Arca Alam Series"* and the *"Melebu Alas Jelebu Series"* are amongst the works or series that draw inspiration from his visits to his favourite locations such as Stong Mountain, Tahan Mountain, the National Park in Pahang, Endau-Rompin area, and other forests around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. In the same way Zainurin Mohamad or known as Ajis Mohamed brings us to the deep Malaysian ocean with



his realistic rendition of coral reefs in his various series on marine images. Duped as the “marine life artist” by local newspapers, Ajis is a qualified diver and has produced many representations of the tropical reef fishes and sub-aquascapes. His works are incredibly detailed and are prepared from a combination of sketches, based on photography and his own memories to recreate his diving experiences.

Besides, the subjects or themes that are being introduced by the artists, its usage or the use of various recycled media can be seen in the works by Fauzin Mustafa, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Choy Chun Wei and Yeoh Kean Thai. Although the usage of various media is not exactly something new in Malaysian art, what these artists do is not only highlighting the environmental issues but the work itself demonstrates how these artists use discarded materials as part of their own. Fauzin Mustafa for example, employs images of nature such as plants and leaves as signs, symbols and metaphors for their own expressions toward nature. The “Alam Fana Series” (1994) for example, pays homage to the natural world by juxtaposing all sort of objects such as dried leaves, pieces of wood and strings, tissue paper, papier-mâché and even ‘gold’ (foil from cigarette box) on plywood. Though his works are considered an abstraction in terms of style, he succeeds in using various non-traditional art elements to convey his feelings on Malaysia’s state of environmental decay.

As discussed previously, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed has used various non-traditional elements in most of his works. For example, his “Insect Diskette” (1997) work is produced from various mixed media composed of over two hundred computer diskettes. Most of his works are assemblages or paintings with imbedded collages from discarded sources like old newspapers, sacks, and boxes. Others like Choy Chun Wei are also one of the unique artists that really explore the possibility of creating art but not using any conventional art materials such as oil paints. Instead, he concentrated on using junks as his core materials. As part of his artistic process, the artist spends a lot of time in collecting and constructing, and as a result emerges a very unique artwork that looks like an expressionistic piece of art. But as you scrutinize the works further, the works consist of only small pieces of photographs, paint, ink, or other found materials built layer upon layer. This had resulted in a very unique landscape or urbanscape with various marks and textures.

Yeoh Kean Thai on the other hand, combines both realistic technique and discarded materials as part of his work. He painted realistically on wasted and unwanted rusting materials, and certain works are combined with the actual rusting metals itself. This could be seen in his work such as “An Iron Story” (2008) (Figure 12). In a few of his works, he uses discarded coal-iron that he renders with pointillist textures trying to simulate rusts. Some of his works also used chains and fence wires. His series has also developed and used images of tiffin carriers, oil-lamps, tins, pipings, wrenches, screws, fire hydrants, chain links and etc. These images or different metal parts juxtaposed or intertwined. In general, his works document the processes of disruption, corruption and manipulation of the environment through various products that were portrayed in his works.

**Figure 9: Yeoh Kean Thai, "An Iron Story" (2008), Paint on rusted metal found object, dimension unavailable.**



(Source: Shalini Ganendra Online, see [http://www.shaliniganendra.com/artist\\_thai.html](http://www.shaliniganendra.com/artist_thai.html))

## Conclusion

It must be noted that although this paper discusses the environment as a source of artistic inspiration, it does not totally mean that nobody else paints the landscape and nature in an idealized and beautiful way anymore. It is believed that landscape as an ideal or an idealized subject is still popular among many Malaysian artists as the subject is safe and most importantly, saleable. One first look into what the general audiences think of what art is. The popularity of landscape is not a surprise especially in an idealized rendition as these works are well sought to adorn the walls of private residencies, hotel rooms and lobbies, and corporate offices. This could still be seen in the contemporary works of Tay Mo Leong, Alisia Wan, Zainal Abidin Musa, Mohd Sani Md. Dom, Mansor Ghazali, Abdul Ghani Ahmad, and among some others. But what this paper has suggested is that environmental consciousness has influenced a few Malaysian artists and this has been reflected in their works. They have produced works of art which visually document the thoughts and feelings of artists about their surroundings in the context of urbanization processes and environmental changes. With the increasing awareness and interests on environmental concerns followed by rapid urbanization in Malaysia, it is about time that these works make an impact on the general public.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>This paper was presented at 10<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Asia Pacific Sociological Association (APSA10), Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, held from December 8 – 11, 2010. It was presented under the title "The Urban and Environment Concerns as a theme in Malaysian Art. The conference presentation was funded by Tabung Persidangan Luar Negara (TPLN), Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang.

<sup>2</sup>It must be noted here that the term “landscape” or “landscape art” that I use in this paper is not only limited to depiction of natural scenery such as mountains, valleys, trees, rivers, and forests but it could also include urban and sub-urban views of the surrounding environment. Therefore, I am using the term in a very general sense and in no means representing “landscape art” rooted to the Romantic interpretations of the English landscape found in the works of John Constable, J.M.W. Turner and Samuel Palmer.

<sup>3</sup>The artists under discussion are middle class intellectuals who make up part of this “new” middle class. A few salient characteristics of these “new” middle class in regard to Malaysian artists is that the new class historically had experienced a dramatic upward generational mobility in the last three decades and this intergenerational mobility was achieved through higher education to a large extent state-sponsored. I have discussed this previously in another paper entitled “Thematic Approaches in Malaysian Art” published by *Jati*, Vol. 16, December 2011, 97-113.

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