



The Perception of Multiculturalism in Malaysian Visual Art University Students' Paintings

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Abstract

Malaysia's diverse population has influenced people's lives in many areas, from fashion and cuisine to art and interpersonal relationships. The country's diverse atmosphere has shaped the perspectives of young artists from different ethnic backgrounds, affecting their artistic expression and their ability to incorporate multicultural themes in their works. This study aims to find out how multiculturalism is perceived by young Malaysian artists from the country's major ethnic groups - Malays, Chinese and Indians - and the feelings they express in their artworks. This study adds to the body of knowledge on multiculturalism from the perspective of young Malaysian artists by examining their visual perceptions. The study examines the works of these artists through a formal and contextual analysis. While the contextual analysis explores themes such as people, architecture and cuisine, the formal analysis focuses on visual components such as line, colour, texture and composition. The integration of these approaches helps to identify the preferences of the participants (the artists who created these paintings) and the cultural elements that appear in their works. The results of this study have shown that young Malaysian artists have frequently used symbolic colours to represent the different ethnic groups in Malaysia, along with repetitive motifs that show the connection and unity between different cultural elements. These findings show a new generation's perspective on multiculturalism and provide an insight into the way young Malaysian artists perceive and communicate the complexity of diversity and how it manifests itself in the visual arts. These artworks show the harmony between diversity and unity and the influence of Malaysia's multicultural society on the artistic output of the country's youth.

Keywords: multiculturalism; intercultural art; ethnicity; visual analysis; visual art

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INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism is one of the fundamental characteristics of Malaysian society, stemming from the country's history of migrations, colonialism and diverse cultural interactions. The three main ethnic groups in Malaysia - Malays, Chinese and Indians - are the main pillars of this cultural diversity in Malaysia. This unique

blend of cultures has influenced all aspects of Malaysian life, including the visual arts. The confluence of these cultures provides a fertile platform for artists to express the concepts of identity, belonging and cultural harmony. As Isa (2006) states, art is a powerful and omnipresent force that shapes behaviours, beliefs, and values. Therefore, art is considered a factor that can strengthen communication between

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different cultures. However, despite the importance of multiculturalism in shaping Malaysian visual culture, there is little research on how young contemporary Malaysian artists perceive this dynamic and express it in their creative works.

While most research has focussed on the broader social and political approaches to multiculturalism in art, there has been no careful examination of how it is represented in the works of young Malaysian artists. Becker (2018) points out this problem and believes that young artists play an important role in reconstructing cultural narratives, but comprehensive studies on their works are limited. Most research focuses on famous artists or collective art movements rather than the voices of young art students.

In the context of Malaysia, studies such as those by Gudeman (2002) and Shamsul (1996) focus more on the understanding and reception of multiculturalism and emphasise social areas such as media, literature and social discourse. Young Malaysian artists' artistic techniques, styles and narratives to express their multicultural experiences remain largely unexplored. Moreover, existing research mostly focuses on thematic or narrative analysis without giving equal importance to formal visual elements such as colour, texture and composition.

Although there is extensive literature on the concept of multiculturalism in Malaysia, especially from the perspective of sociological and cultural studies, there is a significant gap in research that explores how young Malaysian artists internalise and express multiculturalism in their works. The lack of studies on the intersection of visual arts and multiculturalism in the Malaysian academic environment reveals an important gap in the literature. Moreover, some research refers to formal visual analyses, while quantitative studies integrate both formal and contextual analyses to gain a comprehensive understanding of how emerging artists express multiculturalism visually. This gap is particularly important because university

students will shape Malaysia's future art world. These young artists live in a multicultural environment and present new and creative perspectives in the field of cultural diversity. Their artistic creations provide valuable insights into how the new generation understands and embraces multiculturalism in a globalised world. There is a clear need for research to understand how these young art students portray the ethnic elements of their background in their creative works and express their feelings influenced by living in a multicultural environment.

Yusof & Esmaeil (2017) point out the challenges faced by multiculturalism in Malaysia and state that visual culture plays an important role in rebuilding a multicultural society by enhancing intercultural understanding, tolerance and acceptance. By emphasising the understanding of multiculturalism from the perspective of arts students in Malaysian universities, this research adds appropriate information to this area of study. While previous studies have tended to focus on famous artists, this research looks at the new generation of art students who are future artists. By combining formal and contextual analysis, this study sheds light on how to use visual elements (such as line, colour, background and composition) and thematic backgrounds (such as the depiction of people, architecture and cultural symbols) to enrich the order of visual translation of the theme of multiculturalism in Malaysia. This focus is important because it enables a deeper understanding not only of what is shown, but also of how it is shown. For example, while symbolic colours can be used to represent different ethnic groups, the formal aspects of how these colours are arranged on the canvas or how to achieve visual harmony and contrast also play an important role in conveying messages about unity and diversity. By looking at the aesthetic and conceptual aspects of artworks, this study aims to provide a more detailed analysis of the role of visual arts in expressing the complex multicultural identity in Malaysia.

The main objective of this study is to examine how young Malaysian artists from different ethnic backgrounds understand and visually express the concept of multiculturalism in their paintings. In particular, this study seeks to understand the formal and thematic elements that these artists use to depict their personal experiences and reflections on living in a multicultural society. This research was conducted on selected students from three universities in Malaysia - UPSI, AWARA, Taylor. Formal and contextual analysis is used in this research and thus not only the social and political approaches are investigated but also the aesthetic and artistic approaches used by these young artists.

Multiculturalism in Malaysia

In a multicultural society, recognising and respecting different cultural norms is crucial to promoting social health and peaceful coexistence. Malaysia is an example of a multicultural society made up of three major ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians, in addition to many small, localised ethnic groups on the mainland, including Borneo. These large ethnic groups also have religious diversity within them, so like the Malaysian Chinese, they follow different religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and Baha'i. The Malaysian government has supported and promoted a policy of multiculturalism, especially since the 1990s, which increases the potential for more collaboration between artists of different ethnicities in Malaysia. As a result, the artistic influence of Chinese and Indian Malaysians has had a greater impact on the Malaysian artistic landscape.

According to Liu et al. (2019), multiculturalism refers to the coordination of the complementary characteristics of a society that involves the shaping of civil tolerance with equal social participation to emphasise the benefits of cultural diversity. According to Bakar (2018), each multicultural conversation in a community has unique characteristics. Osman describes Malaysia's multiculturalism as

a unique endeavour that explicitly draws on the country's rich cultural diversity and decades of multicultural experience. The Malaysian government pursues a policy of multiculturalism to ensure harmonious interaction between culturally diverse populations. Although this has worked for several decades, Bakar warns that certain necessities, such as religion, have not yet matured in Malaysian culture. Conversely, religion can sometimes lead to sporadic aggressive outbursts of religious extremism (Bakar, 2018).

Gudeman (2002) argues that the era of British colonialism in Malaysia drew clear cultural boundaries between the three major ethnic groups. The three, namely Malays, Chinese and Indians, retained their distinct cultures and languages and were hardly interrelated. Over time, the imaginary walls dissolved after independence and created an environment where the three groups could coexist or interact freely, with increasing demands to live together in a peaceful multicultural society. According to Liu et al. (2019, p. 32), "Malay culture conveys the importance of harmony, reciprocity, non-competition, deference to superiors and frugality." In categorising the dominant and recessive cultures in Malaysia, Shamsul (1996) assigns great weight to the specific means of oral and visual media in Malaysia, which include magazines, newspapers, photographs, and books. All types of human societies have ultimately regarded art as a significant and effective expressive aspect of civilisation. Multicultural societies have had a positive impact on the practises and work of artists. As a result, it has always been the best mediator for indirect communication.

Multiculturalism and Fine Arts

The visual arts can have a good relationship with multiculturalism because they are capable of arousing sympathy or empathy. Artists working in this field can build a constructive relationship with cultures different from their own in a multicultural environment by preserving their cultural identities. This has led to cultural

exchange and constructive dialogue, helping to break down destructive and pessimistic stereotypes and opening a path to sympathy and, at a higher level, empathy. Furthermore, it serves as inspiration, as knowledge of different artistic traditions and aesthetics inspires and often expresses the development of artworks rooted in different traditions. In this way, artists search for common ground, break down stereotypes and find an artistic way to convey mutual respect. In this sense, they contribute to cultural exchange and a better understanding of the traditions and lifestyles of others. Such art can be a driver for cultural change in terms of identity – be it personal, ethnic, sexual, etc. – etc. –immigration flows, social justice, and cultural heritage.

This perspective is perhaps best epitomised by Gonçalves and Majhanovich (2016), who describe the almost spiritual importance of culture for meaningful social interactions, focusing on the collaborative nature and receptivity of culture as manifested in art. As Gonçalves and Majhanovich (2016, p. 35) explain, “multiculturalism is synonymous with the recognition of an infinity of cultural codes on the one hand and interculturalism with the simultaneous application of these codes on the other”. At the same time, a multicultural artist who is the first to create a cultural artefact engages in intercultural dialogue: The artist absorbs and expresses the cultural codes of other ethnicities. Liu et al. (2019, p. 16), for their part, argue that “acknowledgement is the steppingstone towards acceptance” “and that ““The essence of interethnic understanding lies in intercultural communication” (Liu et al., 2019, p. 19). In other words, intercultural communication provides the foundation for understanding and acceptance to unite multiple ethnicities or cultures. This argument could emphasise the enhanced potential impact of intercultural art.

Art can be analysed simultaneously or accordingly through two lenses that reflect or support each other: personal and social. In our intercultural dialogue with another individual, we only use the social

aspect of this model. Liu et al. (2019) state that culture is not something inherent but is achieved through communication with other people, and therefore culture and communication are inextricably linked. From this point of view, Preziosi (2009) claims that the communicative exchange of an artist is characterised by his social and historical context, his ambitions, his ethics, his concepts, and his political convictions, which permeate his work with different levels of meaning. John Dewey (2001) proposes to understand the symbols and images in art as expressions of creative social endeavour, reflecting a human experience that is deeply embedded in ongoing history and gains meaning as it unfolds. Isa (2006) points to the role of art in illuminating not only the consciousness of foreign nations, but also within our cultural and human identity. The artwork also develops shared cultural values and identity. Preziosi (2009, p.9) emphasises the communicative power of artworks by describing them as “vehicles through which emotions, ideals, political messages or the artist’s intended meanings derived from their social and historical framework are relayed, either intentionally or accidentally to the perceived (or accidental) viewers”.

The existence of differences between cultures is a phenomenon that is to be expected. However, the question of how differences are dealt with in a multicultural environment is of interest in this context. Creating a harmonious multicultural environment starts with recognising and appreciating the diversity of cultures. The practical application of a diverse environment leads to a productive form of intercultural communication, which in many ways promotes understanding and cooperation between people from different cultures (Liu et al., 2019). In this regard, Cantle (2014) views multiculturalism as a product of experiencing the diversity of cultures. He states that an intercultural model is urgently needed to consolidate a national identity; otherwise, diversity defines a multiculturally orientated country. Tolerance and sincerity towards these dif-

ferences enable a country to build a strong foundation for social harmony, peace, and tolerance. Cattle said that understanding culture as an instrument of cooperation can help differences become a source of unity and create a strong society based on the pillars of peace and tolerance. This will prevent any attempt to turn differences into a means to divide people on the basis of ethnicity and thus unite people in respect for differences.

Establishing a relationship between art and multiculturalism can lead to the development of freedom of expression, raising awareness of global artistic activities and cultural interaction. According to Gonçalves and Majhanovich (2016), artistic creativity as a universal tool is already capable of promoting diversity. However, this does not work on its own – proactive creativity is needed to stimulate creativity and arouse interest and empathy (Lähdesmäki Tuuli & Koistinen, Aino-Kaisa, 2021). Thus, every artist is increasingly challenged to create new forms of self-expression that truly engage modern society. In this way, this change can enable the realisation of the principles of diversity, which also gain full meaning.

Multicultural arts education involves an in-depth consideration of art and the role of art. Such an approach to the nature of art involves the view that art is a symbolic language that produces numerous hypothetical figures of the world and of one's possible place in the world for further attempts at expressing identity in it (Bersson, 1987; Chalmers, 1987; Sullivan, 1993), emphasising the specificity of experiences, cultural origins and a social environment from which unique images of the world are eventually constructed. Similar to them, Liu et al. (2014) focus on the common themes of citizenship and diversity that emerge from communication patterns. It is argued that these themes are like the themes of arts-based education: diversity, citizenship, multiculturalism and national identity; intercultural communication is seen as an essential tool for understanding representatives of other cultural groups

(Liu et al., 2019). This seems important as art can also be presented as a form of communication. Each artistic work represents the creator's experiences, viewpoints and identity, including their membership of a particular cultural group in a multicultural society. Lähdesmäki and Koistinen (2021) arrive at a more sophisticated construction of the pattern – the general “safe common space” is created. It is defined as a place where one can express oneself freely and controversially enough to inspire creativity and lead to the growth of tolerance. Art can be defined as self-expression through which the individual and the landscape of their life, as well as mind and soul expression, co-exist. A similar view is taken by Gonçalves Susana & Majhanovich (2016), who focus on the energising nature of the art portrait. They explain that this transcendental language involves interpretation, emotion and reflection, so that it can be understood even though it is felt.

When considering multicultural art education, Delacruz (1995) emphasises that it leads to the understanding that no universal aesthetic is the only source of great creativity, but that different cultural parameters determine the norms and values of each individual art group. Different aesthetic standards are not just random exposures of people's creativity but certain perceptions that identify the exposure that is reinforced by one's cultural dreams. This statement provides a valuable context for the arguments of Bersson (1987), Chalmers (1987) and Sullivan (1993), who emphasise the intertwining of art and human existentialism. In demonstrating that the unique capacity of art to harbour symbolic expressions of human existence in the universe should significantly inform the curriculum and pedagogy of multicultural arts education, the present statement undoubtedly plays a key role. The confluence of different cultures in Malaysia has greatly inspired artists. Their art therefore not only appeals to aesthetics but sends out a particular cultural message that has more to do with living in a multicultural society than merely adhering to certain notions

of what this means. This reveals a specific multicultural world that permeates it and makes its source authentic.

Art and Multiculturalism in Malaysia

Living in a state with a mosaic of vibrant cultures, Malaysian artists, regardless of their ethnicity at birth, are strongly influenced by this background. Their lives and personal stories, including unique memories, unforgettable highs and miserable lows, are shaped by the multi-ethnic world around them. This influence is expressed in diverse and intense emotions, including feelings of love, security and nostalgia associated with their multicultural existence. The artists' primary approach to the official, state-mandated approach of promoting a hopeful and bright position is sometimes coloured by nostalgia for their ancestral countries, such as China and India, or highlights social differences. The artists also present their ideas in the space of possible peaceful coexistence. Reza Piyadasa, a prominent emerging artist of Malaysian origin, worked on a series of mixed-media panels depicting portraits of people from both dominant and culturally marginalised ethnic communities. According to Abdullah (2008), the author worked to present notions of peaceful ethnic life through images of Malays, Chinese and Indians. The peaceful life of ethnic groups is visualised in Malaysian art through architecture. For example, Chan (2009) mentions in his book that in one of the busiest shopping centres, the Pavilion in Kuala Lumpur, there are three fountains with blooming hibiscus flowers -*bunga raya*- at the entrance of the shopping centre, representing the country's national flower. It is a symbol of a peaceful life, of workers, of love and at the same time the embodiment of the "1 Malaysia" concept.

Another Malaysian artist, Wong Hoy Cheong, depicted the trials and tribulations of the Chinese immigrants more dramatically, but no less vividly. In his series aptly titled 'Migrants', a group of vibrant, intricate works, he highlights the disheartening conditions under which some of these men

leave their homeland. Nervously clinging to rickety boats, they embark on a journey to an unknown land - Malaysia - and one senses their discomfort, anxiety, and constant danger. The irrevocable and arduous migration process of these people reveals the pragmatic nature of such migrations; it reveals fear, discomfort and the inherent risk of migration and differentiation that many multicultural experiences try to hide. It should be noted, however, that this is a rare case, at least in the examples examined in this paper. It seems that most of the works examined do not consist of a critical problematisation of the Other, but of an idealistic emphasis, perhaps in favour of a 'friendly view' of multiculturalism as a form of existence.

Besides high art, a significant realm equally illustrative of the multicultural atmosphere in Malaysia is the realm of what can be referred to as popular or public art. Apart from visual arts, in another context more related to the field of public art and street art, many artworks can be seen in all corners of Malaysia, especially in busy places such as shopping centres on various occasions such as festivals and cultural and religious events by Malays, Chinese and Indians with artworks and performances from different cultures such as Deepavali and Chinese New Year.

Although there is much research on the social impact of multicultural art, there is a lack of research and information on the personal approach of artists studying (and becoming influential future master artists) in fine arts faculties in Malaysian universities. This study aims to fill this gap and explore the ways in which emerging artists express and integrate the experiences of multiculturalism in their work. We aim to uncover the personal and cultural factors that affect their creative expressions that reflect and influence the image of a multicultural nation.

METHOD

The main aim of this study is to examine the general understanding and inter-

pretation of 'multiculturalism' in a limited group of carefully selected art students in Malaysia. We emphasise here that the artists' intention as a result of their artistic creation can be an effective field to create a conducive dialogue for various forms of cultural exchange. We examined the quality of the artworks produced in relation to this dialogue, i.e. form and content. Our focus was on the nature of the artists' vision in relation to intercultural communication and the sense of multiculturalism, the forms of expression of these visions by the artists and the sense of interpretation in this respect.

After the revival of iconographic and iconological interest at the turn of the century, iconography and iconology took different but interdependent paths of development. Iconography is concerned with the identification and description of images. The main focus is on articulating the characteristics of the content or message, identifying the motifs and symbols of the content and emphasising what is special within a similar work of art. Iconology is about peeling back the layers of sign and meaning to find the content or substance. This approach focuses on the spirit of the message and the spirit that drives a particular group. It goes deeper than just the visual and attempts to ask questions about what the society the art represents feels or believes (Larsen & International Peace Research Institute, 1993). In this study, the iconography of the paintings studied is about understanding the core aspects of each work that make it unique, while iconology is about understanding more than just the literal interpretation of the work. We need to understand what is going on in the minds of the artists in terms of their demographic information such as their ethnicity, religion and upbringing and how living in a multicultural society has influenced their work. This information influences the outcome of the art and makes it subjective, i.e. unique in the eyes of the creator.

Several approaches were used in this study, building on the previous methods

for perceiving, formally and contextually analysing visual art. With the aim of developing an understanding of multiculturalism in Malaysia, twenty-nine students from various visual arts faculties contributed to paint a canvas for this study in which they willingly participated. Nevertheless, some of those who wished to release the works, twenty-nine of them had successfully passed the entrance examination and produced artworks. This group of students consisted of 10 ASWARA students, 10 UPSI students and nine students from Taylor's. In addition, the participants were also from different ethnic and religious backgrounds: 55% were Malay Muslims, 7.5% were Indian Hindus, 22% were Chinese Buddhists, 11% Christians and 4.5% identified themselves as other minorities. In order to interpret the coded messages encoded in the communicative visual individual art expressions, an analytical framework formulated with an understanding of the formal analysis of painting was used to examine the photographs. In the first phase, the analysis examined the visual elements: line colour, shape, texture, and composition. This also aimed to gain an understanding of how the students interpret 'diversity' and 'unity' as the pillars of multiculturalism and apply this in their artwork. The guiding principles that supported the study in the subsequent stage of formal analysis were balance, harmony, rhythm, movement, variety, contrast, emphasis, and pattern. Formal analysis was used to see how they are used in the paintings to convey 'diversity' and 'unity' – the concepts of multiculturalism. Finally, the genre of the painting, the primary and secondary focus, and the artistic strategy of representation were analysed to understand the artist's message.

Each of these works forms a unit that is considered from the perspective of the artist's attitude towards both specific phenomena and the field of contemporary visual art in general. Accordingly, the research design is more of a cross-sectional type. This is precisely the case when the human characteristics for each unit of edu-

cation are examined. In other words, a unique, vivid image on the painted or drawn canvas helps to understand how the world appeared to the artist in a virtual moment. The research can therefore focus on the cross-sectional type because the intended name is a provocation that acts on the research subject.

Fifty students from these three universities were invited to an online project launch - due to the coincidence with the Covid pandemic - and thirty of them volunteered to participate in this project; one person withdrew in the middle of the work, leaving twenty-nine people. Participants were given a questionnaire with questions on ethnicity and religion to support the quality of the conclusions in the research. They were also asked to explain the reasons for the choice of form and content of their painting according to the theme of the research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As far as the visual components are concerned, colour seems to be the most remarkable element that artists have used to symbolise the multi-religious character of humanity. Notably, almost all artists relied heavily on the symbolic framework that used certain colours to associate them with a particular ethnic group. For example, the Chinese were depicted using the colour red, the Indians - in yellow, and the Muslims - in white. As for the formal components that create an illusion of the unity of humanity, the simultaneous drawings that contained the norm of a connecting or overlapping line seemed to convey such a feeling. Images of people from different cultures implicitly show a connection or a bridge between them, suggesting that people from different cultures are not isolated from each other. In other words, the artists have employed the principle of a global mosaic in these patterns - different cultural components combine to form a harmonious whole. This principle is central to a multi-faith perspective, as this art conveys the message that everyone is uni-

que and everyone has a place in the world that needs to be connected for the sake of common humanity.

The multicultural experience of Malaysians is often associated with a thoughtful look into the past. There is something nostalgic and wistful about the way multiculturalism is often viewed in Malaysia. This theme is seamlessly expressed in 'Beauty of Us' (Figure 1), a work created by one of the participants of this study Chiang Xin Yee. The artwork connects aspects of Malaysia's past by placing traditional symbolic imagery alongside the more modern KL Tower and Petronas Twin Towers. 'Beauty of Us' perfectly captures the power that comes from combining contemplation on the state of the past and the daily reality of life today. It tells the story of how Malaysia has evolved from humble beginnings to the greatness it is today.



Figure 1. Chiang Xin Yee, *Beauty of Us*, 2022, acrylic and oil pastel on canvas, 60 × 80 cm.

Following Gonçalves & Majhanovich's (2016, p. 30) postulate that our "...endeavour to unite different aesthetic-cultural codes in the same space aimed to blur boundaries and challenge conventional values", we unveil an excellent example of this assertion in the painting

titled “Abstract Batik” (Figure 2) by one of the study participants – Mohd Azuan bin Abdul Rashid, an art student at ASWARA. Malaysia’s national flower – the hibiscus – portrayed with incredible realism. Its official name is *Hibiscus Rosasinensis*, or bunga raya in Malay, and it became the national symbol of Malaysia in 1960 (Haron et al., 2014). The predetermined and careful selection of colours in this work has a dual purpose: to reflect the colours that Malaysia is associated with – the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians – while also affirming the vibrant and colourful lifestyle of Malaysia’s tropical habitat. The Indian population is depicted in blue, the Chinese in red and the Muslims in yellow. The green colour of the leaves, on the other hand, may refer to the green and the breathtaking expanses of the Malaysian tropical panorama – the common denominator with which the original shines through. The colour meanings that represent the ethnicity of Malaysians and their vibrant green dwellings into the painting come from the personal accounts and narratives that the interviewees shared with us. These stories and narratives provide a rare insight into the participants’ views and perceptions of Malaysia’s multicultural society.

Another visual principle we discovered at the second phase of our study was the contrast as a primary strategy for diversity representation. In the formal disciplines, contrast is often achieved using different colour tones and shades. Another visual principle is also the layout’s balance, which in turn unites the previously contrasted elements to create a sense of the whole. The use of balance in ‘Bloom’ (Figure 3), created by Yong Jin Ning is evident. One of the interpretations of this work highlights the invisible axis which divides the image into two equal halves, one symmetrical from the top to bottom and in which the painted faces are positioned. This divider can be interpreted as a stem, which is blossoming with heads. This stem brings together different people from different ethnicities, and the way it is

positioned serves as a visual metaphor for balance in terms of diversity. This duality of unity and diversity represented in this image is emphasised with strong contrast, especially in the use of colour. Malaysian flag’s colors are present in this work, mainly regarding the representativity of skin colour, to offset the contrast and underline the importance of balance.

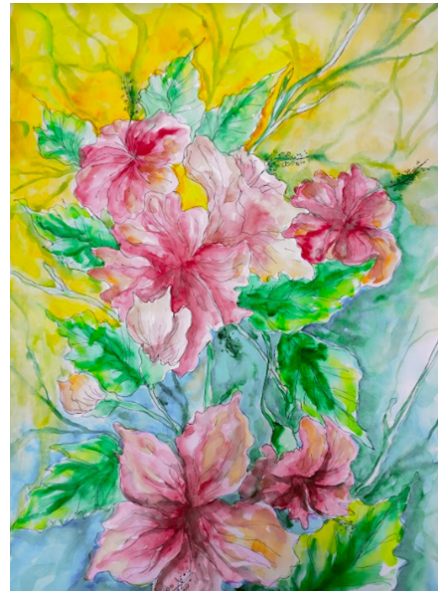


Figure 2. Batik Abstrak, Mohd Azuan Abdul Rashid, 2022, Batik Canting, 50 × 70 cm.

In the work by Jae Yin (Figure 4) – the name of the digital image – the author has attempted to show the three skeletons leaning against three sides of the work in a balanced, co-centric manner. This harmony is emphasised by the equal position of all three skeletons: Each has an equal position, but they have different shades of colour that fill out the balance in the work. It shows that at their core, people are made of the same substance – bone, regardless of what colour you are as a person outside of the skeleton and skin-. Such a calm and powerful message is expressed through the triple representation of three skeletons with metachromatic colour tones that differentiate the phases of the skeletons. The superb harmony and balance of the image show that behind the superficial differences between different ethnic groups, we are all made of the same stuff. This sense

of agreement is reinforced by the repetitive symmetrical patterns that run throughout the work: it emphasises the invisible bond that unites us all equally. The choice of colours is diffuse, but we cannot miss the specific hues – including some found in the flag of Malaysia. This once again emphasises the relevance of the subject matter in terms of multicultural analysis and identifying the counter-arguments of multiculturalism. This work is unique in that it highlights the negative effects of multicultural societies. The aspect illuminates that people who are differentiated by their outward colouring and forced to die are inaccessible to each other. The opposite side of this argument is an appeal to violence – the ideal society in which whites and blacks are recognised and accepted regardless of outward differences. Even if it is difficult to realise due to potential and existing social animosities, it is necessary to strive for it.



Figure 3. Yong Jin Ning, Bloom, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 29.8 x 39.8 cm

Mandal (2004) argues that the fine arts hold the promise of cross-ethnic unity and the voluntary co-operation of all in overcoming their racial and cultural roots

and bridging their differences. Therefore, a unified national identity is within reach. Furthermore, Goh et al. (2009) point out the endemic discrimination and deep-rooted barriers to open debate on racial and religious issues manifested in high levels of self-censorship and external sanctions against critical debate. In light of the above studies, it is indeed high time that the complexities of multiculturalism and discrimination in the social and academic language space in Malaysia are vigorously addressed.



Figure 4. Cheryl Loke Jae Yin, Flesh, digital media, 60 x 60 cm.

In the third phase of the analysis, the above-mentioned artworks were analysed more thoroughly, focusing on the primary areas of subjectivity. As can be observed, there is a certain balance in terms of proportions between two primary artistic approaches – portraiture and still life. The least pronounced artistic approach is abstraction, which is due to the fact that the works studied express a certain personal and human realism that is not idealistic but recognisable. In terms of subjectivity, it is not surprising that the human body – especially the torso and the face – received the most attention in terms of overall quantity. This fact emphasises how identity is paramount for these two multicultural cultures and highlights a certain

narcissism that cannot be considered a bad thing given the many negative cultural contingencies of the modern world. In the next phase of the analysis, it emerged that food is also a central aspect of many of the works, suggesting the role of community, hospitality, mutual identity and the commonality of simple things among the people concerned. In terms of artistic styles, realism is the most significant and is often associated with symbolism. This connection is an indication of the artists' intention to depict their works on canvas as tangibly as possible while at the same time imbuing them with profound meanings that also deal with the aspects of physical being and metaphysical concepts.

"Together as One", another artwork shown in Figure 5, shifts the message through the compelling depiction of human torsos whose heads are skilfully merged with the heads of others by artist Mariyam Yoocha Ahmed. The very starting point of the work conveys a clear message: the different ethnicities must unite in Malaysia. The artists have also chosen to think beyond the three most common groups in the country, as demonstrated by the man from the island of Borneo depicted. The real feather on his head is a significant detail within an artwork. A central aspect of the painting is the concentric rings in the background that run through the work. The symbolism of a circle as a tree is closely related to the rings, as these generally represent the stages of tree growth. The same metaphor is used for the development of the nation, where the leader of the whole - which could be interpreted as the unified identity of the nation - is depicted as a series of rings that expand with the nation. The main concept is the sense of continuous development and inclusivity, where the rings continue to grow and expand as they fill each other out and meet at the same distance. This metaphor and its essential elements are an expression of the message of dignity and respect expressed in the title *Together as One* - an expression of identity and belonging.



Figure 5. Mariyam Yoocha Ahmed, *Together as One*, 2022 watercolor on canvas, 45 × 60 cm.

As can be seen in the atmospheric work 'Multiculturalism Cuisine' by artist Ng Royine in Figure 6, the artist aims to evoke joy and pleasure in the viewer through the depiction of various traditional Malaysian foods and desserts. Adding value from aesthetic viewing to depicting shared cultural experiences is important in making a statement about the common interest in food that can unite all Malaysians regardless of ethnicity. Through Royine's unique artistry, her subjects are portrayed in a way that makes them seem more lifelike and intimate. The dishes and desserts in her work are not simply conglomerations of elements. She has masterfully woven them together in such a way that their vibrant diversity is captured through overlaps and juxtapositions. The interplay between the different elements, created by the overlapping and juxtaposition of the different elements, reflects the multicultural diversity of Malaysian food culture. This perspective serves as a guiding metaphor for the natural fusion of so many ethnicities, each bringing their own characteristics and benefits to the larger society. As the unique flavours of each food contribute to the ove-

rall character of the meal and create a savoury sensation in the mouth, food nationalism transforms its diversity into a rich meal that reflects the richness of Malaysian culture. Royine's precious 'Multiculturalism Cuisine' is, therefore, much more than a painting but a commentary on the power of a common interest that initiates unity between otherwise divided people. It serves as an important artistic insight into one of the most diverse themes in Malaysian cuisine, as food nationalism becomes a source of unity and disunity in the larger society. Malaysia is home to various faiths, cultures, and religions, and as Perry (2017) asserts, the country's food culture is often reflected in its diverse and inclusive food. The author believes that food is the best example of strong cultural unity and that painting gains understanding through Malaysian food culture. Food is also emphasised in Malaysian literature as a powerful force in promoting reconciliation and food nationalism. Amin's "This End of the Rainbow" and Kow's "Deep Fried Devils" discuss the power of food in not only making people smile, but also asking them to eat across cultures, to yearn for their roots. The two stories are about the interplay between food and cultural identity, which is often a matter of pride and possessiveness. The literature, therefore, gives a flavour of the power dynamics and possible ethnic incidents in a nation that thrives on diversity. To summarise, the portrayal of Malaysian food culture highlights the role of food nationalism in celebrating and undermining nationhood.

Mamak shops are a common sight in the local Malaysian neighbourhood, but they are not just food establishments. They are full of people – they never sleep and usually operate around the clock. Mamak shops are also meeting places where customers can eat, drink and socialise at any time. What attracts visitors is the variety of delicious yet reasonably priced cuisine and the pleasant atmosphere. Artist Mohamad Aiman Hakim Bin Nezri has captured the essence of the Mamak experience in his work "Hangout Mamak" (Figure 7).

The painting is framed in such a way that it appears as if the viewer is eavesdropping on the trio's conversation, mesmerised by the mates and the fragrant kettles and pot in front of their glasses of frothy drink, the local Malaysian *teh tarik*. The artist deliberately refrains from wanting the subject of the painting to be original. Perhaps the most ambiguous feature of Bin Nezri's painting is the lack of visible faces in the subjects. This could suggest that the Mamak shops are simple restaurants where everyone is the same. Without faces, the customers might as well be anyone, and Bin Nezri subtly emphasises that they are – it is not their specificity that brings them together, but their love of food and entertainment and each other in the melting pot of Malaysian culture. Thus, his painting can be seen as a representation of the egalitarian society of Mamak culture.



Figure 6. Ng Royine, Multiculturalism Cuisine, 2022

Cheah Sek Meng, a prominent Malaysian artist, often uses the themes of simplicity, honesty, and the way of life of children in his paintings, which show friendship between different cultures as an effective means of promoting intercultural competence. One of his most famous works, "Children of the Nation" from 2016, for example, shows children with

different skin colours standing bare-chested and shoulder to shoulder. This painting is a powerful image that underlines the fact that groups, even if they differ in their skin colour, customs and upbringing, have a common bond that unites them all. Or rather, as Młynarczyk (2022) said about this type of subject matter, it is a testimony to the spirit of unity inherent in different communities. Another painting with a vivid cultural narrative is “The Miracle of The Cultural Tree” (Figure 8) by Nur Ainun Solehah Binti Azman. Unlike Meng, Azman’s painting depicts children from different ethnic groups playing the age-old game “London Bridge Is Fallen Down” or “jambatan sudah runuh”. The choice of game in the painting is special. According to Młynarczyk (2022), children between the ages of four and seven begin to become aware of ethnic and racial differences. In this context, the game is not only a shared outing but also a valuable learning tool to stimulate a gentle discussion about intercultural diversity through subtle indication. In essence, these artworks by the artist are powerful visual narratives that reflect and celebrate Malaysia’s multicultural experience.

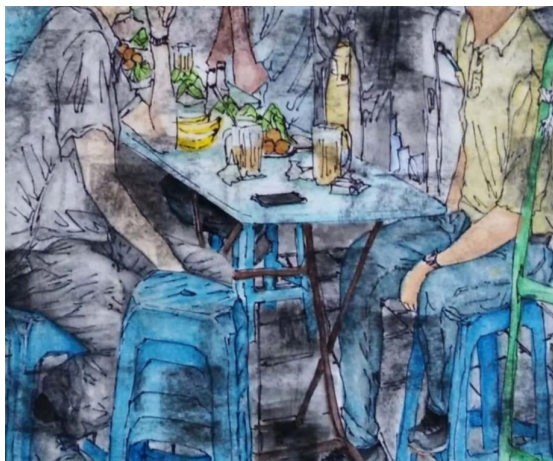


Figure 7. Mohamad Aiman Hakim Bin Nezri, *Lepak Mamak*, 2022, watercolour, marker pen, and charcoal on paper, 22.5 × 27.5 cm.

Re-contextualisation” demonstrates the images reframed and reused in a new context, Gonçalves and Majhanovich claim. This technique is creatively employed

in Muhammad Akif Nabihan Bin Aely Ahmad’s painting *LRT dan Masa* or *LRT and Time*. For this painting, the artist carries the inspiration from Salvador Dalí’s melting clocks in *The Persistence of Memory* and ingeniously re-contextualises them to portray the temporal liminality of conventional landscapes and swiftly developing modernity. The painting offers a powerful commentary on time as applied in an epoch of rapid technological advancement. Ahmad’s symbolisms are instrumental for the message, with LRT and modern high-rise buildings being the icons of modernisation. Nevertheless, in the background of urban development, Ahmad features a powerful nostalgia. The *bunga raya*, or red hibiscus is depicted in the painting in bright, vibrant color. The colour red stands for a compelling and enduring custom among technological advances. This direct contrast among images beautifully encapsulates how tradition and modernity mix harmoniously in today’s community. Ahmad implies that even as life keeps moving on, transferring yards into advanced modernisation, it is always well-planted in its heritage, vividly indicated by the ever-blooming flower in the painting.

One of the most crucial elements and common threads among various art is symbolism. Often, artists use their works to convey a more profound personal story and cultural commentary. While issues of bias, according to Mahadir et al., still exist in Malaysia — the obsession with the Malay culture sometimes causes other ethnic groups to feel isolated — the country’s numerous ethnic symbols are still widely used and praised at various Malaysian events and festivals. This undercurrent appears in Figure 10: *Finding Diversity* of Beatrice Ana Anak Stewart, who uses her canvas to project her multiple layers of identity. Stewart has mixed heritage; she is the descendant of a Chinese man who married into the Iban family. Although she was born in Sarawak, Stewart self-identifies with Johor Bahru, her birthplace. Her artwork reflects this intricate background, as if she were on an identity journey. “Fin-

ding Diversity" (Figure 10) displays a mother and son – representative of Steward and the generations that followed suit. The mother, a stand-in for the artist, is wearing a 'Kain Benang Johor,' a Johorean version of the national Malaysian dress 'Kain Sarung.' The son wears a Pua Kumbu, the traditional Iban dress, symbolising the adventurer and stayer of home. On the left edge of the canvas lays a Chinese jade piece approximation, a Sarawak ring, and the Johor pattern representation, identified as the *gambir* leaf and black pepper. The painting uses the Art Nouveau style of art where organic shapes and lines and stylised floral patterns abound, closely resembling phyllomorphy – the floral style of Borneo. Stewart's house of cultural knowledge spans traditions, musical instruments, and visual cues, and her art subtly states that no matter the geography and culture rooted, the love of a mother and the mother of a young nation remains traditionally important.



Figure 8. Nur Ainun Solehah Binti Azman, *The Miracle of The Cultural Tree*, acrylic and glitter powder, 50 × 70 cm.



Figure 9. Muhammad Akif Nabihan Bin Aely Ahmad, *LRT dan Masa*, 2022, 40 × 60 cm, acrylic on canvas



Figure 10. Beatrice Ana Anak Stewart, *Finding Diversity*, acrylic; oil; and marker on canvas, 45 × 61 cm.

CONCLUSION

The present study has investigated how artists use the basic elements and principles of art to convey diverse facets of the Malaysian cultural mosaic. The ability of the artists to play around the core aspects of art was essential in communicating their feelings and opinions, but at the same time, their renditions reflected the delicate balance and harmony articulating what a collective community looks like. Among the visual elements, these artists have mainly used the colour element in a symbolic way to give meaning to their works, and meanwhile the element of texture must not be forgotten, which in some works has found a beautiful connection with the concept of multiculturalism. As far as formal principles are concerned, harmony and balance as well as contrasts are highly recognisable in these works. In re-

lation to the subject matter in these works, we came to the conclusion that the tendency to use the human figure, either full body or half body or even just the head, is seen to a significant extent in these works and in the section related to the objects mentioned in these paintings, the presence of food and drinks, which are considered to be very important cultural areas in Malaysia, are significantly more than other objects in these paintings. The present study has shown that art has a crucial role to play in showing how rich and beautifully distinctive Malaysian society is, indicating that the stories demonstrated often do not capture all aspects of multicultural living. In future endeavours, we will explore how art can be a robust medium for exploring the difficulty of living in a multicultural society instead of just providing ideal drawings of what such a society should look like.

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