The Malaysian Art World

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Abstract The aims of this article are to analyse the current situation in the art world and market in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The methodology used was a sociological analysis based on oral history interviews and field observation. The theoretical perspective was developed by the author in the book, *The Australian Art World: Aesthetics in a Global Market*. The Malaysian art world is based on professional artist education in tertiary institutions, and the market for art is predominantly a dealers' market. Some artists and dealer galleries are linked with international collectors but the focus of the National Gallery of Art of Malaysia and the market is on the national art world. Artists are not organised into effective professional associations and there are no specialised tertiary education programs in arts management; art history, critical theory and journal publication; and curatorial and museum studies.


Introduction

The Malaysian art world is now concentrated in Kuala Lumpur. The shift from Penang to Kuala Lumpur is a sign of the developments in Malaysia since independence in the 1960s. Kuala Lumpur is the centre of government, and the financial and business centre of 21st century Malaysia. The concentration of wealth and power among the educated elite always drives the art market and Malaysia is no exception. There are at least forty galleries in Kuala Lumpur but two areas stand out, the city-centre galleries and Bangsar Baru. In the city centre, the Gallerie Petronas is in the Petronas Towers, there are also galleries on the second floor of the City Square building and some corporate galleries. Close to the central business district there are some beautiful villa and shop house galleries such as Taksu and NN Gallery. Bangsar Baru, is a residential and commercial district of terrace type town houses, where restaurants and bars, boutique shops and a popular weekend market are located. There are about ten galleries in Bangsar Baru, of which the most well known is the Valentine Willie Fine Art.

During the British colonial period Penang was an important centre, and artists, mostly working in watercolour, developed a Penang style, which can still be found today. Penang also had many more galleries than the handful that are important today. In the first half of the twentieth century, Malaysian artists sold their work in the region in which they lived, often to collectors who aimed to ‘help the artist out’. These early purchases which were not bought for investment purposes are now quite valuable. Immediately following independence in the 1960s there was economic hardship, and a loss of confidence by artists.
An exhibition at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia in February 2005 of the artist, Abdullah Ariff, illustrates some of the tendencies in both the colonial and post-colonial period. Abdullah Ariff (1904-1960) was widely known as the first western influenced Malay artist, and the first to be made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Artists (FRAS). Abdullah Ariff was a self-taught artist painting landscapes predominantly in watercolour, and supporting himself as a black and white artist drawing political cartoons, most of them critical of the British administration. Ariff also took a more directly political role as one of the architects of independence. The exhibition at the National Gallery in Kuala Lumpur was based on both these aspects of his role. The context of Ariff’s work was artistic as well as political and included developments across Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. It would be good to have an exhibition and a catalogue that examined more broadly the work of artists of the 1950s and 60s whose themes and subject matter could be compared to the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art of Singapore in the same period. The role of the Nanyang Academy is now receiving some scholarly attention through exhibitions and collections at the Asian Civilizations Museum and the Singapore Art Museum.

Artists and Dealers

The developments in university art schools in and around Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Penang is influenced by staff who have studied in Australia, Singapore and the United States, as well as in Malaysia, so that art practice is linked to global trends as well as local concerns. However, there are rifts in the orientation of artists that are based on the ‘separate communities’ policy that was adopted after the political unrest of the early 1970s. The University of Technology, Mara (UITM) is a Malay only institution located at Shah Alam in Selangor, which is comparatively close to Kuala Lumpur. There are also a number of commercial galleries in Selangor. The Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA), and the Central Art Academy (CAA), both in Kuala Lumpur, were established as private institutions for Chinese-Malay students. There are also linguistic differences, because part of the Bumiputra policy was to make Bahasa Malaysia, the language of institutions, while English has remained as the language preference for the education of Chinese and Indian students.

I observed the difficulties that artists and senior art students who lack confidence in using English in seminars or public debates encounter. English is now as dominant in the high art world across the globe as it is in popular music. There is a problem, too, in curriculum design, as students enter UITM for a five year program, including a foundation and degree program, all of which is taught in Bahasa Malaysia. At present there are two separate authorities for tertiary accreditation, one for private providers, and another that administers Malay universities, so there are limited opportunities for students to move between institutions, or for universities to articulate their programs to make some specialised postgraduate programs in art administration viable.

Malaysia, with a population of 26 million people, and a rapidly growing economy has the social and economic potential to develop a strong art world. There are many galleries, including at least a dozen that are comparable with professional galleries in Australia or the United States. The exhibition, display of works, and catalogues provide good documentation, which augments the catalogues produced during an earlier period. Collectors are now more knowledgeable about art, and more interested in the investment potential of the artists they are collecting. Malay and Chinese professionals as well as wealthy business people collect art, textiles such as Batik from Indonesia, antiques and designer furniture. For example, NN Gallery had an exhibition of artist-designed furniture made from old timber from Melaka shop houses which were being demolished. There are also some corporate collections and galleries, such as the Siemens Collection. The dealers’ market is the dominant market in Malaysia as it has no national auction house for art and antiques, and there appears to be no interest in the role of the auction market. In addition, Christie’s recently closed the office and salesroom it ran in Singapore that was important for the market of art from South East Asia.
The National Gallery of Malaysia

The Malaysian National Gallery of Art is located in a prime position, high above the city, off the same ring road, Jalan Tun Razak, as the Museum of Islamic Arts and the National History Museum. The building was built as a private-public partnership arrangement whereby the investor built the building then on-sold it to the government in the 1990s. The major drawback in this arrangement was that the building was not purpose-built as an art museum, so that curatorial and architectural design specifications developed through a study of equivalent museums was not part of the architectural brief. There are only four major galleries suitable for art as the A-line roof structure (with its metaphorical reference to the Malay House) and the central ramp take up much of the interior space. There is extensive use of glass, similar to many corporate buildings, which is unsuitable for the light, heat and humidity control required for the conservation of works of art. In a major public gallery more than fifty-percent of the collection is in storage rather than on display, but the National Gallery of Art of Malaysia does not appear to have the large storage capacity that would enable the collection to grow.

The National Gallery of Malaysia is central to the art world, because the aim of most artists and their dealers is to exhibit there. Exhibition and collection of a work by the National Gallery ensures the works aesthetic and financial value, as the artist becomes part of the official history of the country. The new director, Mr. Rahime Harun, and the deputy-director, Ms. Zanita Annuar, are aware of the importance of their institution in the local art world. In early 2005, the exhibitions showing were Takung, installations by a young Malay artist group, the ASEAN OCCI Photography Competition, and a selection of the best graphic design work from 2004, as well as the exhibition of Abdullah Ariff. The Takung exhibition was organised to raise funds for the Perak Art Foundation Arts Resource Centre and to raise awareness of the environment and of communities in Grik, Perak, a nature conservation area. Artists spent time camping in the area and collaborated on a number of projects for the exhibition.

The National Gallery management is however, under pressure from the local elite who regularly travel abroad, to import blockbuster exhibits such as “The Impressionists” and to acquire a Henry Moore sculpture for the exterior garden. In other words, to generally conform to the model of countless state galleries in the United States. The irony of this situation is that there is no gallery foundation, or business committee for the arts comprised of citizens who contribute time, money and expertise to the development of the National Gallery of Art of Malaysia. The budget is modest and it does not allow for the payment of fees, transport and insurance of art works for imported exhibitions. Nor is there an alternative policy, such as in Australia whereby a Federal Government indemnity of important works of art, and transport by the Royal Australian Air Force makes major imported exhibitions possible.

The Singapore Art Museum experienced the same pressures, and its renovated 1990 colonial building is to be replaced by a larger building in the next few years. The difference is that the Singapore Art Museum has access to far larger financial resources. Its major exhibition for 2005, Botero in Singapore documented the many Botero sculptures adorning the front lawns and plazas in the city. Botero, of course, is the favourite sculptor for United States corporate buildings. It caused some chagrin in Malaysia when the catalogue for this exhibition which is to be shown only in Singapore, included several major Malaysian corporations as sponsors.

In the art world, the national and state galleries, or major public galleries are important in determining aesthetic values for the artists, historical movements and art tendencies or styles which they collect, exhibit and document through catalogues. At present, there are too few staff at the National Gallery to undertake these tasks, and to write the history of art in Malaysia. There is a Master of Arts and Design program at Uitm, and a Master of Arts program at the University of Malaysia, but the latter may close after the current coordinator retires in the next two years. The development of art writing,
curatorial skills and arts management programs at the postgraduate level are needed to provide professional arts development suitable for the local context. Only a few Malays have studied abroad. For example there is one graduate from the Graduate Program in Arts Management at Columbia University in New York. This means there is little awareness of the specificity of arts education and little comparative understanding of development models in other countries, or research and evaluation of arts management and museums.

The Role of Museums in Heritage and Cultural Policy

A comparison of the National Art Gallery, the Museum of Islamic Arts and the earlier National Museum of Malaysia, located on a hill in the old colonial precinct are revealing. The Museum of Islamic Arts is located in a new, purpose-built museum where white walls, mosaic tiles and cupola are based on middle-eastern, particularly Wasabi-Saudi mosque designs. A professional curator from Iran was brought to Kuala Lumpur to develop the collections and plan the galleries and exhibits. The collection covers most aspects of Islamic culture in south west Asia, the Ottoman Empire, Indonesia and Malaysia, but traditional Malay culture is only a minor part. There are galleries for rugs and other textiles, brassware and ceramics, jewellery and architectural models of famous mosques. The collection is well displayed and labelled in two languages, so that the viewer learns a lot about the context of the object, and also the inter-cultural influences and trade that were so important in the Muslim world. There are no interactive screen facilities for audience education or public programs in the galleries but there is a theatre, a large shop and a café.

The National Museum of Malaysia was built after independence and opened in the early 1960s. It was renovated again in the 1980s. The National Museum provides most of the cultural content on the diverse Malaysian nation that is not evident in the Museum of Islamic Arts. The National Museum is arranged around the concept of ethnic communities, which includes, the Malay majority, the largest minority group, the Chinese, the Indian and South Asian group who migrated under the British Empire to take up professional, commercial and administrative roles, and the indigenous peoples of the Malay peninsula, the Orang Asli, and those of Sabah and Sarawak. The ethnographic collections are rich and complex, and deserve better conservation. There is a tendency to exhibit all the collection and to overload the visitor with detailed information that cannot readily be absorbed. Also there is no catalogue to take away and read at leisure. Nevertheless, the Museum makes good use of ethnographic film and on command screen exhibits; although sometimes there are too many competing sound tracks so more curatorial selection is required. The National Museum requires another renovation to re-conceptualise the emphasis on historic and separate communities that is presented in a prescriptive tone not appropriate for contemporary audiences, and to explore the cross-cultural and inter-cultural complexity of Malaysian development.

The surprising aspect of the Malaysian art world, museums and galleries, as well as the tourism promotions is that not enough attention is paid to the potential of ethnic diversity. The craft skills and museum collections provide an obvious resource for the development of sophisticated contemporary art practices and for the development of art school programs for artist-craftspeople. In Vietnam for example, the culture of the multitude of ethnic minorities is promoted for cultural tourism, and is a major subject for Vietnamese contemporary artists. Tours organised around visits to Sapa in the North, Danang and Pleiku in Central Vietnam are very popular, often involving trekking or bicycle trips to reach inaccessible areas which enable tourists to visit the environment of the semi-nomadic groups of Vietnam, Laos and China.

In Malaysia, in comparison, the Government led by the United Malay National Organisation, UMNO, emphasises the Malay majority with quota policies for educational institutions, employment and cultural representation applied to the minority ethnic groups. As quotas are not regularly enforced, diversity is not always represented
and encouraged in postcolonial Malaysia. The Chinese, Indian, and the indigenous people of the Malay Peninsula, the Orang Asli, and those from Sabah and Sarawak are acknowledged in an ethnological context such as the National Museum of Malaysia and the opportunity to configure postcolonial diversity is lost across other institutions.

### The professional artist

Arts policy, too, is still directly under the control of the National Government, and no moves have been made to establish an Arts Council type organisation that can operate by peer review and arms length-funding similar to the Australia Council and the Canada Council. There was some discussion early 2005 about the possibility of grants for performing arts organisations which require large budgets for venues and programs, but no competitive grants for individual artists are planned. There have been artists in residence at the National Gallery of Art in Kuala Lumpur. There are also a number of artist-run spaces. However there are no grants to support young or emerging artists and no public artist spaces to which artists can apply for an exhibition. The art market in Kuala Lumpur is primarily a dealers’ market and there are some attractive and professional dealer galleries.

In a discussion at the National Gallery of Art chaired by the Director, Mr. Rahime, other aspects of cultural policy such as Intellectual Property Law, arts law, contracts, artist’s moral rights were raised with a large cross-section of artists, dealers, curators and administrators. Intellectual Property Law exists in Malaysia and there was some discussion about Droite de Suite but it is not widely supported. The Australia VI$COPY collection agency was of interest to the audience and a similar agency could eventuate. The concept of Artists Moral Rights and a Per Cent for Art policy levied on new building developers was also of interest, especially in the context of rapid urban development in Malaysia, and the changes of taste that inevitably follow a developing society and culture, changes that can result in the loss of historical art work such as sculpture and murals. The concept of an Art Bank, such as the one in Australia which leases art to corporations, was also discussed as a means of supporting artists.

As in many countries in South East Asia, the concept of the professional artist and an artist’s career is still evolving. In countries, such as the United States and Australia in which there is an arts policy framework, research on artists’ careers, and arts management postgraduate programs there is a more complex understanding of the relation between the stages of an artists’ development, the potential market for their work and appropriate pricing policy. The practice of arts law, models of contract between an artist and their dealer can all smooth the relationships on which the art world functions. Instead, in Malaysia, artists and dealers have to negotiate on an individual basis. Many artists do not understand the role of the dealer as their representative, so they will place work with a number of galleries and sell work directly to collectors thus undercutting their own prices in the dealer’s gallery. In addition to facilitating sales and commissions, the dealer can play a role in educating collectors. A more focused art education policy could be developed in Malaysia to support the art world and market. A well educated audience attending exhibitions at commercial galleries and the National Gallery of Art, reading about art and collecting in the national art market is actively involved in the establishment of aesthetic as well as financial values.

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