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CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EASTERN SOCIAL REALITY INTO GLOBAL ART IN SINGAPORE BIENNALE

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UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to investigate the artworks of contemporary Middle Eastern artists in Singapore Biennale regarding to the social reality issues. The subjects within the research context were the role of Middle Eastern artists in responding to the issues of social reality and the uniqueness of their artistic representations. The research also looked at the contribution of the artworks within the concept of glocalization that challenged the stereotypical representations of social issues. The methodology used in this research was qualitative content analysis, which categorized the phenomenon of social reality into a coding framework and interpreted their symbolisms according to the Iconography and Iconology theory. The research samples were 11 artworks as well as the documents analysis method. The research revealed that the contemporary Middle Eastern artists focused their criticized mainstream social representations regarding gender role, cultural identity, political conflicts, and diaspora. The research explained the thematic connections between social issues and Singapore Biennale where the artworks significantly combined the themes and contributed to the global art, through an authentic representation of social issues while criticizing the stereotypical images in media. The overall interpretations indicated that the Middle Eastern art appears in manifest and latent manners depending on the seriousness of political situation. This research portrayed the impact of contemporary art on the critical representation towards the act of stereotyping social issues. This research contributed to existing knowledge by perceiving the social representations in the Middle Eastern contemporary arts in reality phenomena.

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REALITI SOSIAL KONTEMPORARI TIMUR TENGAH DALAM KONTEKS SENI GLOBAL DI PAMERAN "SINGAPORE BIENNALE"

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji karya-karya kontemporari pelukis Timur Tengah dalam pameran "Singapore Biennale" melingkupi isu-isu realiti sosial. Subjek utama kajian ini ialah peranan pelukis Timur Tengah dalam tindakbalas mereka terhadap isu-isu realiti sosial dan keunikan persembahan karya seni mereka. Kajian ini juga melihat sumbangan pelukis dalam konsep glokalisasi yang mencabar konteks stereotaip isu-isu sosial. Metodologi dalam kajian ini adalah analisis kandungan kualitatif yang mengkategorikan fenomena realiti sosial ke dalam kerangka kod (coding frame) dan ditafsirkan menerusi teori Ikonografi dan Ikonologi. Kajian menggunakan instrumen kaedah analisis dokumen dan sampel kajian adalah 11 karya seni. Kajian ini secara signifikannya mendapati bahawa pelukis kontemporari Timur Tengah memberi tumpuan kepada representasi sosial menerusi kritikan terhadap isu-isu jantina, identiti kebudayaan, konflik politik dan diaspora. Penyelidikan ini menjelaskan hubungan tematik antara isu-isu sosial dan pameran "Singapore Biennale" dalam aspek eksplorasi tema yang menyumbang kepada seni global, melalui representasi isu-isu sosial semasa di samping mengkritik penggunaan imej stereotaip media masa. Keseluruhan tafsiran menunjukkan bahawa karya-karya pelukis Timur Tengah memaparkan isu-isu nyata secara kritikal yang menyentuh dan menghubungkaitkan permasalahan sosial, budaya dan politik yang didasarkan kepada keadaan situasi dan konflik semasa. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada kefahaman representasi kritikal terhadap jaringan dan perhubungan kompleks dalam eksplorasi stereotaip isu-isu sosial dalam konteks Seni Halus. Kajian ini juga menyumbang kepada perkembangan pengetahuan sedia ada dalam merepresentasikan permasalahan isu sosial di dalam seni kontemporari Timur Tengah menerusi fenomena realiti.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This dissertation explores the Middle Eastern art within the global art scene. It focuses on analysing the current social reality issues represented by the Middle Eastern artists in Singapore Biennale, which collects international artists from all over the world. Those international artists exhibit their artworks side by side in the same level of significance. Singapore Biennale is a model for the global art exhibitions where contemporary artists meet in one place to share the same global concerns from different perspectives.

The research investigates the relationship between Middle Eastern artists and their current social realities, while it identifies the philosophy of Singapore Biennale

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in gathering international artists and exposes them to the global art scene. The international biennale is a place where artists from different cultures meet and exchange ideas to keep up with the contemporary issues (Eric, 2006).

Furthermore, the research identifies the contributions of Middle Eastern artists in Singapore Biennale to explore the social issues. They are from Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries, which share common features though they do share some differences. Differences and similarities affect the social reality issues in each country, which accordingly affect the arts. This reason leads the study to investigate the dynamics of social realities which every artist live through (Sloman, 2009).

Artists review the current situations in their communities, through criticizing the social issues. Therefore, they represent the real Middle East to other people from other regions, in order to give a real understanding of it. Artists take steps further than their own local society; they become a link between the local and global arts. In international art events, the social reality reflects local issues and contributes to the global art ideologies (Filipovic, van Hal & Ovstebo, 2010).

1.2 Research Background

This research will analyse the representations of social reality issues of the Middle Eastern artworks in three Singapore Biennales. The first exhibition happened in the year 2006 under the title of "belief", then the second exhibition took place in 2008

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under the theme "wonder", and after three years in 2011, the third Singapore Biennale chose the theme "open house".

Focusing on social reality issues, this research reviews contemporary Middle Eastern Art across different international biennales, to give deeper insights into the social art in Cairo Biennale, Istanbul Biennale, and Sharjah Biennale. Those biennales are inside the Middle East. On the other hand, the study reviews the Middle Eastern art in international biennales outside the Middle East, which are Venice Biennale, and Bangladesh Biennale, to explore the varieties of social representations according to the different themes in each biennale.

Singapore Biennale is a cultural phenomenon interacting with the international artworks coming from different countries; this cultural phenomenon took different venues across the city. The biennale is an international multicultural event in a multicultural city, which is a part of completely multicultural region. The region of Southeast Asia gave philosophical background for the biennale, for the multicultural practices that appear in most of its countries, especially Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Raihanah, 2009).

The Southeast Asian multiculturalism is taking an international attention. The significant philosophy of Singapore Biennale inspires artists to contribute with challenging ideologies while investigating religious, political, social, and cultural themes, which need a multi-cultural space to shift them from anthropologic and ethnic contexts to the contemporary reality.

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Artworks in Singapore Biennale represented social issues from different countries. They freely represent different symbols that portray political, religions, and cultural narratives. Artists protested against mainstream values in their communities. The issues of local art and global art interact in Singapore Biennale, although there is no particular element in the artwork that makes it global or local. Art does not belong to a certain group of people, unless if an artist uses some indigenous symbols to represent some political, social or cultural issues. In this regards, the artist selects individual or collective thoughts to examine mainstream ideas in a particular community, where the artist focuses on the self-individuality to make a significant artwork.

According to Nanjo (2006), local Art becomes global in the context of Singapore Biennale, which adopts the cross-cultural philosophy of Southeast Asia, which has been noticeably influencing its surrounding regions, as it has active countries in fields of research and development, and one of the significant things about this development is the cultural plurality. The cultural environment of this region gave ground for multi-cultural practices on daily life basis.

The biennale represented the local culture of Southeast Asia as part of the global culture, by showing its ability to adapt and integrate with other local cultures from other regions of the world, to make local cultures universal. This is the ideology of the biennale in bringing the individual thoughts represented by the artists from localism to globalism.

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Each culture has its own aesthetics and its own social reality. Therefore, artists investigate certain issues and reflect it according to their understandings and perceptions. The modern society affects the individual creativity because the artist reflects the social values of his collective culture.

The conceptual framework of this study depends on the political and cultural Themes, which has a major influence on the Middle Eastern social reality. The Middle East has a complicated landscape of social politics, while the cultural theme includes issues such as gender, cultural identity, and ethnicity. However, these issues have different dimensions according to the country. Themes of social reality generate different representations in the Middle Eastern contemporary art. These representations have some similarities, but they reflect different political and cultural dimensions (Ali, 2003).

Cultures and politics affect the contemporary identity, where the concept of developing cultural politics becomes a trend. While making the traditional values universal, globalization affects communities to follow the latest developments in life aspects. The issues of identity, Diaspora, and nostalgia have narratives that appear in the artistic representations, evoking the concepts of collective thoughts versus individual thoughts. The individual creativity critique the common norms of the society, when the intellectual person challenges the collective or mainstream thoughts of his community (Barakat, 1995).

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1.3 Problem statement

Middle Eastern artists lack the possibilities to challenge mainstream conventions in their communities, since the Middle Eastern galleries, art institutions, and biennales avoid exhibiting the arts that challenge political and cultural principles. On the other hand, contemporary artists are concerned with social issues since most of them believe that politics and cultures affect art. Thereby they need to evoke social issues to develop the multicultural understanding among people, by critiquing the political and cultural situation on ground, while they compare it with the media representations.

International biennales challenge politics and mainstream cultures, while the Middle Eastern biennales tend to exhibit mainstream arts that match with local aesthetics. Most of the contemporary artists challenge traditional local aesthetics on daily basis to integrate them with the metropolitan life style, which is strongly affected by the daily politics and cultures. The Middle Eastern biennales avoid exhibiting arts that challenge the local conventions because they depend on the government support (Wineger, 2006; Yusuf, 2014).

Artists search more possibilities to explore their social realities. Singapore Biennale provides a multicultural space for them to evoke social issues without offending the political and cultural values. The themes of Singapore Biennale draw on the issues of social reality and invite the artists to investigate their local aesthetics and explain it in the international arena of Singapore Biennale, creating a glocal phenomenon in art.

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Local and global aesthetics negotiate in Singapore Biennale, where the artists analyse politics and cultures in a creative order. The regulations in the Middle Eastern biennales may not allow the artists to go as far in criticizing the social issues as they do in Singapore Biennale. Most of Middle Eastern artists represent social issues because the society is full of issues that need more interpretation, understanding, and reconsideration for integrating the values of the local communities with global urbanisms.

1.4 Research Objectives and Questions

1.4.1 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study will relate the problem to the Fine Arts studies, and build up a rationale background, then; it will set up the main questions of the research according to the following objectives:

1. To locate the role of the Middle Eastern artists as a collective idea, in responding to the issues of social reality that reflect the themes of the exhibition.

2. To investigate the relationship between differences and similarities, within the varieties of representations that illustrate the components of the social reality in the Middle East.

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3. To study the artistic contributions made by Middle Eastern artists, while they integrate the concept of 'glocalization' within the context of the international art scene.

1.4.2 Research Questions

1. How did the Middle Eastern artists interpret the theme of the Biennale within the context of social reality?

2. To what extent did the Middle Eastern artists represent daring issues from their social realities without provoking others in the context of Singapore biennale?

3. How did the artists share same issues in Singapore Biennale while presenting the individual differences and similarities?

4. How did the issues interpreted by the artist reflect the current social reality in the Middle East?

5. How did the artists contribute and developed issues of their social reality by participating in global events?

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1.5 Research Significance

The research established new perspectives by investigating the Middle Eastern artworks in Singapore Biennale. Those perspectives focused on the artworks from three points of view, which were the social studies as well as the fine art studies and the Middle Eastern contemporary visual arts. The impact on the social studies emerged because the research focused on the current social reality issues, which were visualized by the Middle Eastern artists in international art event outside the region. This research is important in the field of fine art studies because it explained how the Middle Eastern artists developed the social concepts in the installation arts, video arts, as well as photography, painting and drawing. The significant achievement in the field of contemporary art made new interpretations of the social narratives symbolized in the Middle Eastern artworks in the contexts of contemporary global art events.

The research is significant from the "Middle Eastern art's point of view" because it located new artistic contributions in Singapore Biennale, where the artists represented the current social issues to reflect to the biennale's theme. The artists combined the social symbolisms with the themes of the biennale. They developed their methods to portray the cultural and political issues in different creative art forms to represent the Middle Eastern imagery, through significant visual impacts. Therefore, the artists in this context created new artistic representation to reflect the Middle Eastern current situation.

The research is significant in the visual art' field because it locates new art experiences created by Middle Eastern artists in international art event. The artists

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shared similar forms and contents across different cultures, regions, and occasions. The Middle Eastern artists visualized the social issues in significant manners, where they represented personal narratives and symbolisms to reflect the current situations. The research detected the role of the artists in criticizing the social stereotypes established by mass media. It is significant to hear their own voices when they described the real situation from the Middle East, rather than depending to the mass media, which may not convey the real image. Therefore, this study presents new creativities in the field of visual arts.

1.6 Limitations

The scope of this research is to study the Middle Eastern artists' contributions in Singapore Biennale. The capacity of this investigation will be limited to the social reality issues represented in the artwork itself.

The research investigates 11 artworks, participated in Singapore Biennale, which are distributed across three exhibitions, where four (4) artworks were exhibited in the year 2006 under the theme "belief"; followed by five (5) artworks in year 2008 under the theme "wonder", and finally there were two (2) artworks in year 2011 under the theme "open house". This research does not include the latest Singapore Biennale in the year 2013 under the theme "if the world changed" because it did not host any artist from the Middle East.

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