

# SIMON SAYS

## ASK AN ART HISTORIAN

**Question:** Should Malaysian Art be defined by an art historical canon?

The question of whether Malaysian art should be defined by a canon is tricky to answer without first unpacking the concept of an art historical canon. A canon is formed when a body of work becomes recognizably foundational to the discussion of art within a specific community. Many Malaysians may have heard of modernist painters like **Ibrahim Hussein** or **Latiff Mohidin** as their names are prominent enough to appear in mass media and even in school textbooks. Thus, their fame is not limited to the realm of art. The canon may already exist and is largely determined by the ideologies of the greater public and their views of Malaysian art.

What does a canon do? In many ways, a canon provides assurance of the existence of base-line knowledge in order to build a community with a shared interest in art. Canons define the contours of Malaysian art and decide which works of art are included and conversely excluded. Over time, these exclusions help produce a relatively stable canon. For example, one may find it hard to discuss modern Malaysian art without mentioning collectives like the **Wednesday Art Group** or artists like **Syed Ahmad Jamal**.

Nevertheless, the appearance of stability is often subverted with each succeeding generation as old biases come into view, and new contestations might challenge them. Broadly speaking, there are two forms of contestations. One is through the enlarging of the canon. This can be seen in discussions that revolve around feminist art. Art historians have brought greater recognition to women artists who have been underappreciated when compared to their contemporary male counterparts. This expands the list of artists associated with a particular time period, and also acknowledges the biases of past studies that have primarily canonized male artists.



The second form of contestation deals with the ways in which we consider something to be of artistic value. **Yee I-Lann** in collaboration with the female **Bajau Sama DiLaut** weavers has blurred the boundary lines that separate fine art from craft, or contemporary from traditional art. Decolonial theories, for example, further prompts us to rethink the very system and format in which art is produced, distributed, and consumed. This may prompt us to revise the criteria by which we evaluate the cultural significance of a work of art.

These revisions to the canon might lead us to consider who has the power to write art history. Questions of power are not only relevant to those who run prominent public institutions - whether in academia, museum, or a gallery. Power is also a pertinent factor within the artist community, activist platforms, commercial gallery associations, collectors, museum trustees, or a political community.

While the criteria are mainly determined by professionals in the field - namely art historians, prominent artists, curators, and even politicians- the majority of the canon emerges through a form of discourse (i.e. debates and conversations). Neither a single person nor a single institution can determine which pieces are excluded or included within the canon, and although the community that defines the Malaysian art canon is an exclusively limited circle, it is not entirely closed. The constantly shifting circle has widening parameters that are fueled by discourse. This both enriches and complicates our understanding of what Malaysian art can encompass.



## Images

1. **TIKAR/MEJA 3**, Yee I-Lann, 2018-2019, Bajau Sama DiLaut Pandanus weave with commercial chemical dye and matt sealant, Edition 1 of 2, 86 x 112 cm
2. **TIKAR/MEJA 17**, Yee I-Lann, 2018-2019, Bajau Sama DiLaut Pandanus weave with commercial chemical dye and matt sealant, Edition 1 of 2, 97 x 126 cm
3. **TIKAR/MEJA 14**, Yee I-Lann, 2018-2019, Bajau Sama DiLaut Pandanus weave with commercial chemical dye and matt sealant, Edition 1 of 2, 88 x 124 cm

## Further Readings

Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price. 2020. Decolonizing Art History. *Art History*. February, 8-66.

Roger Nelson. 2019. *Modern Art of Southeast Asia: Introductions from A-Z*. Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 30-31.

Yee I-Lann. 2020. *ZIGAZIG ah! Manila:m Silverlens*.

<https://www.silverlensgalleries.com/exhibitions/2019-12-07/zigazig-ah>

Yvonne Low. 2015. *Becoming Professionals: Women artists in Singapore, Malaya, and Indonesia*. Ph.D. Thesis. The University of Sydney.

# SIMON SAYS

## TANYA PADA SEJARAHWAN SENI

**Soalan:** Patutkah Seni Malaysia ditakrifkan berdasarkan canon atau kanun sejarah seni?

Persoalan sama ada seni Malaysia patut ditakrifkan berdasarkan kanun agak rumit untuk dijawab tanpa membongkar konsep kanun sejarah seni. Canon atau kanun terbentuk apabila tubuh karya diangkat sebagai asasi kepada perbincangan seni untuk komuniti yang khusus. Ramai di antara kita pernah mendengar tentang pelukis moden seperti **Ibrahim Hussein** atau **Latiff Mohidin** dimana nama mereka ini sangat dikenali untuk disiarkan di media massa dan juga buku teks sekolah. Jadi, kemasyhuran mereka ini tidak hanya terhad di dalam dunia seni. Kemungkinan kanun sudah pun wujud dan kebanyakannya ditentukan oleh ideologi dari umum dan pandangan mereka terhadap seni Malaysia.

Apakah fungsi kanun? Antaranya, kanun menjamin kewujudan pengetahuan asas dalam membina komuniti yang berkongsi minat dalam seni. Kanun menggariskan kontur seni Malaysia dan menentukan karya mana yang harus dimasukkan dan dikecualikan. Lama-kelamaan, pengecualian ini membantu menghasilkan kanun yang stabil. Contohnya, sukar untuk membincangkan seni moden Malaysia tanpa melibatkan kolektif seperti **Wednesday Art Group** atau artis seperti **Syed Ahmad Jamal**.

Walaupun bagaimanapun, penampilan yang stabil selalu digugat oleh generasi yang berikutnya apabila mempersoalkan pandangan lama, saingan baru terbentuk untuk mencabar pandangan ini. Secara umumnya, ada dua bentuk saingan. Satu melalui usaha untuk meluaskan kanun. Ini boleh dilihat di dalam perbincangan seputar seni feminis. Sejarahwan seni telah mengangkat artis wanita yang selama ini tidak diberikan penghargaan yang sepatutnya berbanding dengan artis lelaki kontemporari mereka. Ini meluaskan senarai artis yang dikaitkan dengan satu-satu tempoh masa, dan mengakui terdapat kecenderungan kajian lampau yang tertumpu untuk mengangkat artis lelaki.



Bentuk saingan kedua ialah bagaimana kita mempertimbangkan nilai artistik. Kolaborasi **Yee I-Lann** bersama penenun **Bajau Sama DiLaut** telah mengaburkan garisan yang memisahkan seni dan kraf, atau seni kontemporari dan tradisi. Seperti contoh, teori dekolonial menggesa kita untuk memikirkan tentang bagaimana sistem dan format seni dihasilkan, diedarkan dan dikonsumsi. Ini juga menggesa kita menyemak semula kriteria dalam menilai kepentingan budaya sesuatu karya seni.

Semakan kanun ini mungkin akan mengunjur kepada pertimbangan siapa yang mempunyai kuasa untuk menulis sejarah. Persoalan kuasa bukan sahaja relevan kepada sesiapa yang menguruskan institusi awam – sama ada dalam akedemik, muzium atau galeri. Kuasa juga merupakan faktor penentu di kalangan komuniti artis, platform aktivis, galeri komersil, pengumpul seni, pemegang amanah muzium atau komuniti politik.

Walaupun sebahagian besar kriteria ditentukan oleh bidang profesional – sejarahwan, artis terkemuka, kurator dan ahli politik – majoriti kanun terbentuk melalui wacana (cth. debat dan perbualan). Tiada satu individu atau institusi yang boleh menentukan apa yang patut dikecualikan atau dimasukkan dalam kanun, dan walaupun komuniti yang mengtakrifkan kanun seni Malaysia ialah golongan yang kecil dan eksklusif, namun ianya tidak tertutup. Peralihan lingkungan telah meluaskan parameter yang didorongi oleh wacana. Ini memperkayakan dan merumitkan ladi kefahaman kita terhadap terangkuman seni Malaysia.



## Imej

1. **TIKAR/MEJA 3**, Yee I-Lann, 2018-2019, Bajau Sama DiLaut Tenunuan Pandan bersama pencilup kimia dan bahan penghadang matt, Edisi 1 of 2, 86 x 112 cm
2. **TIKAR/MEJA 17**, Yee I-Lann, 2018-2019, Bajau Sama DiLaut Tenunuan Pandan bersama pencilup kimia dan bahan penghadang matt, Edisi 1 of 2, 97 x 126 cm
3. **TIKAR/MEJA 14**, Yee I-Lann, 2018-2019, Bajau Sama DiLaut Tenunuan Pandan bersama pencilup kimia dan bahan penghadang matt, Edisi 1 of 2, 88 x 124 cm

## Bacaan Lanjut

Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price. 2020. Decolonizing Art History. Art History. February, 8-66.

Roger Nelson. 2019. Modern Art of Southeast Asia: Introductions from A-Z. Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 30-31.

Yee I-Lann. 2020. ZIGAZIG ah! Manila:m Silverlens.

<https://www.silverlensgalleries.com/exhibitions/2019-12-07/zigazig-ah>

Yvonne Low. 2015. Becoming Professionals: Women artists in Singapore, Malaya, and Indonesia. Ph.D. Thesis. The University of Sydney.