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Making Space for the *Ghaib* (Unseen)

SYAHEEDAH ISKANDAR

Abstract

This paper examines the diverse ways that the unseen is articulated in modern and contemporary art practices. Focusing specifically on Malay Singaporean artists, from the late Mohammad Din Mohammad and Salleh Japar to the recent practices of Zarina Muhammad and Fyerool Darma, it attempts to understand their mediation of the unseen stemming from religious, cultural and vernacular ideologies, imbued with and shaped from their own visual realities. On top of discussing ghaib as a mode of visual analysis, the paper explores ghaib as one way of rethinking our modes of seeing—whether from reading through connotations of identity to understanding the use of ghaib in making visible the politics of representation.

In an image-dominated world, humans are perpetually engaged in the seen, the visible. What then is the invisible? What is hidden? What is the *unseen*? When thinking about the unseen within the Southeast Asian paradigm, the concept is oftentimes centred in the supernatural realm: God, deities, angels, djinn (demons), the devil, the paranormal, mythology, mysticism, superstitions, omens, ghosts, ghouls, spirits, amongst others. Ideas about other worlds are ingrained in most Southeast Asian cultures where the frontier between the physical and metaphysical is blurred. Vernacular beliefs, as

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well as cultural customs that entwine religious and traditional practices comprising the unseen, inform us of a coexistence in our material plane, even though the immaterial escapes our sight. With these general conceptions, it is easy to relegate certain artistic practices to the 'spiritual' in approach, suggesting religious connotations centring on an artist's identity. While this may be true in some ways, visualisation of the 'spiritual' impedes the process of understanding these artworks as more than a representation of their beliefs.¹

This essay focuses on the Malay Archipelago² and the ideological concept of the unseen as articulated in different religious practices and vernacular traditions, allowing us to understand some ways in which cultural consciousness is projected onto contemporary art practices. This is not to say that these artistic practices simply represent an element of religiosity; rather their articulation of the unseen helps externalise or make visible their own realities. This essay attempts to discuss the problem of systemising practices of Malay Singaporean artists whose works are not just allusions to an element of 'Malay identity'. A methodology of approaching their practices through the concept of *ghaib* (the unseen), alongside other vernacular beliefs with similar ideologies, is expanded as an attempt to problematise the way one 'sees' this art. By examining the practices of the late Mohammad Din Mohammad (1955–2007), Salleh Japar (b. 1962), Zarina Muhammad (b. 1982) and Fyerool Darma (b. 1987), the unseen is explored in different ways that also go beyond religious conceptions of the non-corporeal, celestial body. Limited understandings and ways of 'seeing' these artists' works have often reduced them to tokenistic and simplified notions of 'Malay identity' and 'Malayness', or caused them to be seen as predominantly 'Islamic', when in actuality, they present a convergence of diverse beliefs and ideologies, culturally determined by each individual artist's living experience and visual field. These practices also provide insight in rethinking art as a product of mediation, a window, a liminal space between the material and immaterial world.

The Sixth Sense

The arrival of Islam in the Malay Archipelago is believed to have reached its peak transformation between the 13th and 16th century. Sufism, a mystical strand of the religion, is believed to have propelled Islam into the archipelago, alongside enduring pre-Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist and animist traditions, which eventually shaped some aspects of Malay culture.³ *Ghaib* derived from the Arabic *ghayb*, but little is known of when it was absorbed into the Malay language; nonetheless one can assume that the term would have been present

in manuscripts of Islamic narratives containing the ‘religious vocabulary’ of the *Al-ghayb*.⁴ Despite the term’s originary relationship to Islam, it has been absorbed in the Malay Archipelago to encompass all immaterial beings that remain invisible to the naked eye. Before expanding on these interpretations, it is essential to understand the term’s linguistic meaning in Arabic and its use in Islam:

The two connotations of the root are *ghāba* ‘an, to be absent, and *ghāba* fī, to be hidden. In current usage, *ghayb* (and especially *ghayba*) may signify “absence” (and *ghayba*, correlated with *shuhūd*, “presence”, may be a technical term of Ṣūfism); but more frequently *ghayb* may indicate what is hidden, inaccessible to the senses and to reason—thus, at the same time absent from human knowledge and hidden in divine wisdom. It is to this second meaning that *al-ghayb* refers, as a technical term of the religious vocabulary. It may then be rendered by “the mystery”.⁵

There is a clear distinction between *ghaib* (or *ghayb*) and *Al-Ghayb*, with the latter being associated with divine knowledge. It is worth noting how the term dominates other Malay words that have similar meanings, such as *luar biasa* (extraordinary), *anih* or *pelik* (weird), *ganjil* (odd), to name but a few. As adjectives, their use is limited to expressions that describe the unexplainable experience of the ‘unseen’. *Ghaib* envelops these terms with an overarching meaning that encompasses anything and everything immaterial. Interpretations do vary, and this is evident in the ways these artists formulate different terrains of *ghaib* according to their realities, and how the “the unseen haunts, affects, and co-produces the visible world in multiple ways”.⁶

Concepts underlying Malay identity, such as syncretism, Islam, and pre-Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist animism, are already perplexing notions to grasp altogether. Various terminologies that are often applied to the region’s art history, such as syncretism, hybridity and synthesis—all from Euro-American scholarship—have created an over-simplified interpretation of artistic practices in the Malay world. Such terminologies flatten the vernacular nuances affiliated with cultural histories when it comes to image-making in Southeast Asia.⁷ These perceptions remove the possibility for perceiving agency and continuity in the ways in which religious thought (Islamic and Hindu-Buddhist), as well as vernacular beliefs (folkloric and animist), inform the diverse cultures, traditions and practices of the region. Today, some aspects of these cultural and religious practices continue to disappear as they are seen as unorthodox.⁸ The institutionalisation of Islam has also contributed in many

ways to the limiting notion that Malay identity is synonymous with Islamic identity.⁹ This is especially problematic as not all Malays are Muslims. While colonial collecting in Southeast Asia was dominated by Hindu-Buddhist materials, Sufism in the wider Islamic world has suffered similar projections in Western ‘universalist’ philosophy. Sufis were regarded as “freethinkers who had more in common with Christianity and Hellenistic philosophy than with Islam”.¹⁰ Seen as separated from Islam by the Western world, readings valorising their practices should be read critically, even in the case of Southeast Asia. Simon Sorgenfrei describes how Euro-American scholarship projects Sufism as “positive expressions of Muslim culture”, while Islam is filled with negative connotations.

In Sunni Islam, belief in the unseen is ingrained in the six important tenets of faith that all Muslims must embody.¹¹ The belief in *ghaib* is intrinsic to engineering a reality that accommodates both irrational and rational understanding of the physical world. Concepts such as “*tawhid*, the fundamental idea of Oneness in monotheism”,¹² *zahir* (exterior), *batin* (interior truths) from Sufi ideology have been used to articulate Malay-Muslim artists and their practices as externalising their interiority. An exemplary artist who identified as a Sufi is the late Mohammad Din Mohammad.

Born in Malacca in 1955, Din Mohammad was known as an artist, a silat¹³ practitioner and a traditional healer. An accident in 1980 that left him unable to walk for two years was a significant juncture in his life. The aid of his silat master, whose traditional healing methods included the use of herbs, eventually set Din Mohammad on a path of restoration and propelled his own entry into traditional healing. In 2008, a posthumous exhibition mounted at the NUS Museum in Singapore presented a collection of artworks and materials the artist had collected from “medicinal animal bones and skins, roots and herbs, oils, knives and spears, rare stones, crafted wooden furniture, miniature *Qurans* and leather puppets”.¹⁴ Curator Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, drawing on his interactions with D.S. Farrer, an anthropologist specialising in silat, describes how Din’s Mohammad’s spiritual knowledge of silat made him a “‘transducer’ of divine power from the sacred to the profane realm”, an experience that impacted his art-making process.¹⁵ According to the artist’s wife Hamidah Jalil, Din Mohammad’s approach to art-making required a ‘surrender’ on his part. “The sacred to the profane realm” is attributed to being instrumented by God throughout the making of a work that he establishes by declaring his *niat* (intentions), prayers and *dhikr*. In short, Din Mohammad is the mediator, God is the artist, and the work is a physical manifestation of the *ghaib*.

While his paintings were much discussed, it is also essential to see the *ghaib* manifesting in Din Mohammad's sculptures. The artist's fascination with the Islamic narrative of the *Buraq*,¹⁶ pointed out by Hamidah Jalil, is worth considering. The *Buraq*, introduced by the archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad, is a supernatural creature-vehicle that transported the Prophet from Mecca to Jerusalem within an exceptionally short time. Din Mohammad repeatedly metaphorises this vehicle in different renditions to embody the journey of spiritual enlightenment (see Figures 1 and 2). In this sense, the concepts of *zahir* (exterior) and *batin* (interior truths) are insufficient as an explanation. The artist's reconciliation with the figurative is much more fluid and should be dissected further with Sufi thought: the physical, impermanent world is real, but the metaphysical, permanent world is the reality.¹⁷ What can be seen as an abstract, metaphorical representation of the vehicle, to the Sufi, is rational and possess a "living and dynamic reality".¹⁸ The fragmented disunity of the materials that Din Mohammad uses in both assemblages asserts an intention that is nonsensical to the secularly-trained eye. By uniting different fragments of materials like a bicycle or a computer stand, as seen in *Singa Kuda* (Lion Horse) and *Mystical Journey 1*, Din Mohammad gives them a new lease of life. This assemblage can be seen as a perfectly logical body according to the standards of the unseen, which one may never be privy to.

Similarly to Din Mohammad, the artist Salleh Japar implements a different type of *disassembling* as his visual language. Although Salleh stresses that his works dwell on Islamic philosophy,¹⁹ it is crucial to understand that his works do not necessarily fall under the category of Islamic art, but rather, within the artist's understanding of his own 'Islamicity'. This issue is a prevalent problem in classifying modern and contemporary Islamic art movements, for example, in Malaysia, where several art historians have pointed out the complexity.²⁰ To quote Malaysian art historian and artist Sulaiman Esa:

Does a depiction of a mosque, the use of *jawi* (Arabic script for writing Malay) forms in an optical squiggle, or the incorporation of the intricately graceful image of *awan larat* (a type of woodcarving motif) render a painting necessarily Islamic? What is the definition of Islamic art? What determines its Islamicity? How does it differ from Muslim art, sacred art or religious art?²¹

Salleh's use of symbols attests to a geographic fluidity that goes beyond state-constructed identities, and points instead to an inquiry into regional,



FIGURE 1: Mohammed Din Mohammad, *Singa Kuda* 1996–1999. Skull and tail of a horse, coconut, old carvings and computer stand, 90 × 160 × 30 cm. National University of Singapore Museum Collection.



FIGURE 2: Mohammed Din Mohammad, *Mystical Journey 1* 2001. Deer head and tail of a horse, squatting figurine, keris handle, head figurine of Arjuna on bicycle stand. Dimensions unknown. Image courtesy of Mdm Hamidah Jalil.

even global confluences. Salleh also attributes this impact on his practice to his exposure to indigenous Australian forms of art expression during his study in Australia. The diaristic, organic nature of Salleh's works intentionally blurs the clarity of the image. Mostly centred in signs and symbols, his approach tends to confound viewers who attempt to decipher the meaning and resists the compartmentalisation of the artist's practice within a fixed cultural identity.

One element that repeatedly appears in Salleh's artworks is the symbol of ritual structures with a central point of sacred power, such as mountains and the *axis mundi*. In Islam, the Kaaba in Mecca is one of such structures. Mountains are familiar iconography in Salleh's works. The artist describes them as "nails of the earth", a popular expression used by Muslims to mirror the Quran's description of mountains as "firm foundations".²² The notion of mountains being a symbol of the universe is a common concept around the world and has extensive iterations in Southeast Asia. As elaborated by Astri Wright, an art historian specialising in Indonesian art, mountains "resonate against millennia-old preoccupations with the soul and with spirit power, informed by indigenous animist, Buddhist and Hindu ideas".²³

How is this an interpretation of the *ghaib*? The mountain as a symbol appears in many varied and complex forms in Salleh's works. Painted with organic matter, his *Axis Mundi I-IV* (1995) series is one such abstract rendition, which includes a top view of the Borobudur (see Figure 3).²⁴ Places that tend to have architectures of *axis mundi* are typically sacred places of power.²⁵ The practice of *axis mundi* today is generally attributed to mandala rituals, but Salleh's work traces a commonality with other cultures and religions, and considers how *ghaib* is articulated throughout the history of the *axis mundi*. Apart from the Borobudur image and the titles of these works, signs in the form of triangles and circles offer little clarity about Salleh's intentions. The visual lightness of these works mimics the state of trying to retrieve a distant, lost memory. The *axis mundi* are, after all, a universe in which man occupies a central position, and they have functioned as a type of map, produced in various cultures around the world, for what Walter Mignolo describes as the "ethnic-rationalisation" of space and time in their environment.²⁶ Until the emergence of the *mappa mundi* (medieval map), people tapped into a specific mapping of the world whereby their societies occupy the centre and other societies (e.g. from another continent) are perceived as belonging to another universe. The *axis mundi* and their appearances in Salleh's practice showcase the 'pluriversality' of the world and the ways in which the *ghaib* is articulated through these sacred structures and their knowledge systems. Another intriguing example is his *Tangka* (Talisman)



FIGURE 3: Salleh Japar, *Axis Mundi I–IV* (series) 1995. Mixed media on canvas, 105 × 87 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

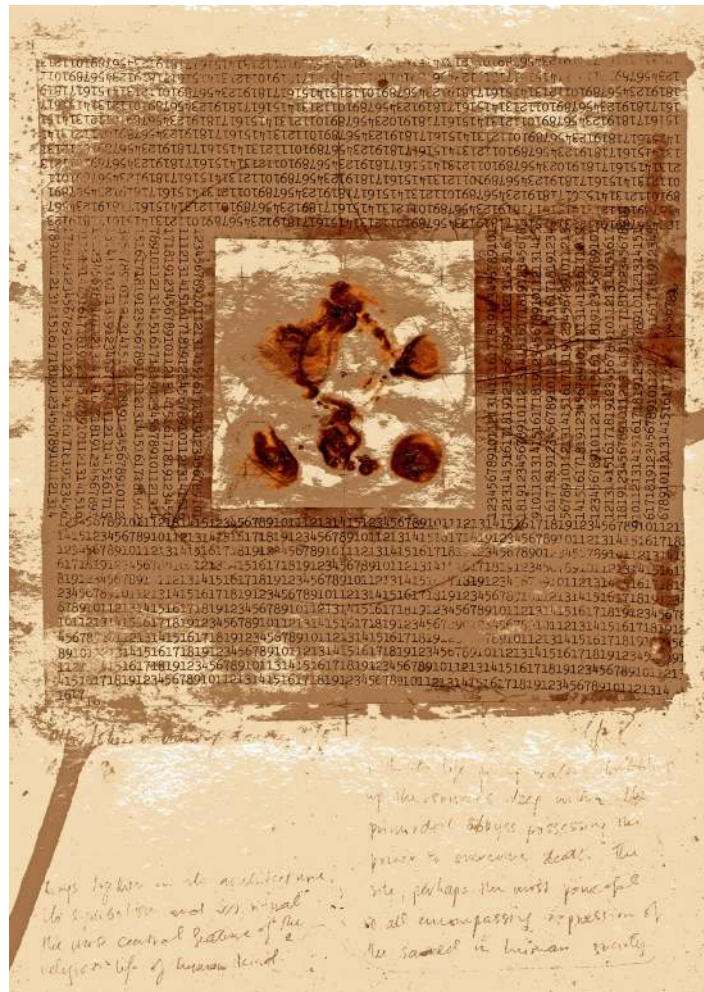


FIGURE 4: Salleh Japar, *Altar/Shrine (Siri Tangkal/Amulet Series)* 1996. Collage with rust traces on paper, 24 x 32 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

series (Figure 4), where Salleh utilises this symbol of Malay divination, also known as *azimat* and seen as amulets or charms. The use of *tangka* today is usually perceived as backwards, superstitious or un-Islamic.²⁷ When viewed close up, we discover the projection of the *axis mundi*, and where the charm would have been situated there are instead numbers circumambulating the centre.

Salleh's approach of finding commonality in different religious motifs and beliefs is a reflection of his own process of trying to understand his place in the region and in the world. The symbols of *axis mundi* and *tangka* in his work may seem puzzling for those unfamiliar with landscapes or divination practices from the Malay world, but by defying the clarity of the image, Salleh projects a counter-aesthetics in his works to deter the exoticised baggage that comes with this symbolism.

Tracing a Past: A Contemporary Mediation

It is easy to confine Din Mohammad's and Salleh's practices within the category of abstract works of art, but a familiar eye can also see reconciliation with the unseen, which is used to map ancestral movement in the region culturally. This is particularly important to note, considering today's diasporic, globalised world. The disjuncture in Din Mohammad's assemblages and Salleh's paintings mirrors a *melange* rather than an authentic perception of culture. As cultural traditions and practices continue to vanish in favour of a modern, rational worldview, *ghaib* as the unseen and a sixth sense becomes a type of mapping of the artists' relationships with the local, regional or global spheres.

Another notable element is Din Mohammad's use of figurines, an element of indigenous Javanese iconography, in his sculptures. In Figure 1, a Javanese *Singa* (lion) sits on the vehicle while a *Makara* (sea monster) envelops the leg. Figure 2 shows *Arjuna*, an ascetic hero in the Mahabharata epic, beside the iconic squatting figure²⁸ (an icon not limited to Java but found in many Austronesian cultures).²⁹ Javanese culture is also known to have many confluences of religions and traditional practices. While we are unable to assume connections with Din Mohammad's practice, it is worth noting that Javanese culture has its own similar practice of understanding the unseen: *Kebatinan*, known also as *Kejawen* (Javanism) or *Kapitayan*, which includes beliefs "that concern potency and the imperceptible world".³⁰ These are unique strands of Javanese religion that embody diverse religious beliefs, from folkloric to Hindu-Buddhist and sometimes Islamic. Such were the normalised views before Islam penetrated Javanese identity and became part of nationalist movements in Indonesia.

If an understanding of the *ghaib* is psychologically lodged into an individual's visual field and living experiences, is it possible to see *ghaib* appearing in droplet forms of embodied, lost knowledge? If *ghaib* is understood as what is hidden from us, can we consider ancestral knowledge as part of the unseen? Possibly. Lived experiences are also constitutive of the visual field and contribute to the understanding of *ghaib* as a sixth sense. Most Malay Singaporeans³¹ are descendants of migrants whose lineage encompasses the wider Malay world, notably Malaysia and Indonesia. This may manifest in the form of oral histories passed down from ancestors, or in the absorption of visual imagery by their ancestors or by themselves. Contemporary artistic practices such as those of Zarina Muhammad and Fyerool Darma project a shift beyond Islamic connotations of the *ghaib*, through their own individualised interpretations of the unseen.

FIGURES 5 AND 6: Zarina Muhammad, *not Terra Nullius* 2018. Mixed media participatory installation-performance. Part of *Fantastic Beasts and Man-Eating Flowers*, OH! Open House Emerald Hill, Singapore. Image courtesy of the artist.



From magico-religious belief systems, to ritual practices and sacred sites, Zarina's diverse approach to the medium comprises lecture-performances, participatory installations and rituals. The artist explores the various cultural biographies relating to objects and the region's provisional relationship to mysticism and the immaterial, against the dynamics of global modernity. For Zarina, exercising *ghaib* is making space for it. In her ritual-artwork *not Terra Nullius* (Land Belonging to No One) (2018) (Figure 5), Zarina integrates a Balinese concept of *sekala* (seen) and *niskala* (unseen), another articulation of *ghaib*. No boundaries exist between the two, so their embodiment of the in-between is a lived reality for the Balinese, who are predominantly Hindu. In this work, the participatory installation engages the audience to produce an offering as part of a Javanese *merti* ritual, which means to take care of or maintain (see Figure 6). In Zarina's conception of the work, these tributes were offered primarily for the comfort women who were held at 37 Emerald Hill during World War II, when Japanese forces occupied Singapore, as well as for the supernatural entities and folk spirits whose presence in Singapore long predated the writing of the nation's history. At the end of the session, participants were led by Zarina to two trees within the 37 Emerald Hill compound, wrapped in coloured threads coupled with miniature spirit houses that appease spirits of the land and seek their protection (see Figure 7), a common cultural feature found all over Southeast Asia.



FIGURE 7: Spirit house for the comfort women. Image courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 8: Zarina Muhammad, *Pragmatic Prayers for the Kala at the Threshold* 2018, mixed media. President's Young Talents 2018, 2018–2019, Singapore Art Museum, exhibition view. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

In the Malay language, the term *sekala* has a connection with time. It is also part of an adjectival phrase *sekali-sekala*, meaning 'occasionally'. Worth noting is Zarina's engagement with time once again in her exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum, titled *Pragmatic Prayers for the Kala at the Threshold* (2018–19) (see Figure 8). Among the many interesting elements in this work,



FIGURE 9: Zarina Muhammad, *Tree House for Kala*, *Pragmatic Prayers for the Kala at the Threshold*, 2018, mixed media. President's Young Talents 2018, 2018–2019, Singapore Art Museum, installation view. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

the artist's anachronistic engagement with *Kala* is the most notable. In Hindu cosmology, *Kala* refers to a deity known as "Time", who is, according to Zarina, "connected to fate, death and purification".³² *Kala's* image varies across Southeast Asia, and his form is mostly materialised as a protective amulet for a guardian of the gateway to sacred spaces. He notably appears as a gatekeeper at the threshold of each cardinal entrance of mandala rituals and architecture such as the Borobudur. Although rendered differently in various parts of Southeast Asia, *Kala's* image "reveals the legacies of storytelling" that have travelled from South Asia to other parts of Asia (see Figure 9). In the context of the Malay world, one form of storytelling involving *Kala* is found in sacred Javanese and Balinese ritual practices of *ruwatan*,³³ such as the *Murwa Kala* (Birth of *Kala*) dating to as early as the 16th century. The purification ritual includes a wayang (shadow puppet) presentation where the *dhukun* (healer) or *dhalang* (puppeteer) narrates *Kala's* origin story with a recitation of mantras, in order to rid the person of a 'bad destiny' afflicted by *Kala*. Anyone is allowed to attend the ritual presentation, even those who are unafflicted, so as to benefit from the purge.

Zarina's participatory mode of engagement with the audience is evident in most of her projects, where the role of storytelling is emphasised. Lined up

on the exhibition wall at *Pragmatic Prayers for the Kala at the Threshold* were effigies made by the artist's friends, whom she had invited to her home to create. Throughout the effigy-making process, participants were encouraged to intuitively create and make visible the guise of their *penunggu*,³⁴ whether as personal guardians or the guardians of their land. What underscores these endeavours is bridging the *ghaib* nature of time (which is 'illogical') and finding reconciliation beyond linear (or 'logical') time. The temporality in Zarina's choice of media places an emphasis on the site of the present, where the presences of the seen and unseen can convene. As a reflection of time, *Kala* overrides the realm of logic and the visual field of the 'seen'. No longer just a keeper of time, but a witness *throughout* time, *Kala's* embodiment remains uncontaminated by the violence of the physical realm or by histories of trauma. Through the effigies in Zarina's installation, *ghaib* in the form of ancestral histories becomes materialised into the visual field, connecting the time of the present to the past.

Zarina's introduction to the diversity of the Malay world is an attempt to make visible the cultural histories that make up 'Malay identity'. Apart from contesting official narratives in history, Zarina's approach confronts the onslaught of rationality stemming from Enlightenment thought and Western modernity. The process of seeing rationally has propelled the invention of terms such as "tradition, folklore, and myth" as a way to "dismiss differential knowledge".³⁵ Differential knowledge becomes subsumed into the irrational, the primitive and the backwards. Zarina counters this by giving agency to a suppressed history, typecast as negative 'primitive' practices, by pushing our own modes of seeing and revealing how perceptions embedded in rationality dismiss opportunities to understand our histories better, especially marginalised ones.

Although premodern Hindu-Buddhist art in Southeast Asia has primarily dominated Euro-American scholarship since the colonial period, prominent art historians like T.K. Sabapathy have pointed out the "neglect" of Islamic art in scholarship in Southeast Asia,³⁶ which remains prevalent in the study of Islamic art around the world. Notable scholar Avinoam Shalem has even proclaimed that "the most harmful ideas developed by historians of Islamic art is the myth of the unity of Islamic art".³⁷ Privileging certain narratives, whether Hindu-Buddhist, Islam or of other ideologies, downplays the momentous, intertwining histories that make them essential in the first place. These complexities are exacerbated when defining 'Malay identity', where it is assumed that "Malay culture is a fixed entity".³⁸ Shirlene Noordin, in her essay for the exhibition *Wahana* (2003), which explored ideas on Malay identity through art, stated: "it is important to understand culture as fluid

rather than given and ascribed. By not doing so, the concept of culture and identity become grand sweeping statements that would ring hollow under greater scrutiny.” Shirlene raises an important question that is as relevant today as it was more than a decade ago: “Is Malay identity today synonymous with Islamic identity to the point of rejecting the region’s pre-Islamic Hinduistic history?”³⁹

Of Seeing and Being Seen: From Invisibility to Visibility

As seen, Zarina’s approach uses many different elements in her ritual-artwork, such as organic materials like flowers, incense and rosewater, as well as textiles such as batik and serving trays weaved in a traditional manner (see Figure 6). These are visual cues for an unfamiliar audience to experience a vibrant culture that is also part of the Malay world and which is not rooted in Islam alone. Had Zarina not utilised these elements, would the meaning of her work change? Contesting histories and the politics of identity requires a “strategic essentialism”⁴⁰ on her part to make visible the invisible. Unsurprisingly, there have been occasions where locals have misidentified Zarina as Indonesian.⁴¹

In the context of Singapore, Malay people fall within the bracket of the minorities, despite being recognised as ‘indigenous’.⁴² The Malay Malaysian and the Malay Singaporean, although kindred, live in different visual realities and experiences depending on the role of the majority.⁴³ While Singapore officially identifies these descendants as Malay, their lineage and ancestry typically stretch beyond national borders into the wider Malay Archipelago.⁴⁴ Apart from Singapore’s multicultural policy, such as the CMIO framework, which systemises race with ethnicity and culture,⁴⁵ the notion of a pan-Malay identity projects a homogenous identity when, in reality, groups and individuals within the Malay community are heterogeneous and fractured. Malay Singaporeans officially register themselves as Malay, but their actual ethnic ancestry may encompass other sub-ethnic groups within the Malay Archipelago such as Baweanese, Bugis, Banjar, Minangkabau, Batak, Javanese and many others. By subsuming all sub-ethnicities of the Malay world under one umbrella term, Singapore’s racial policy has in some ways reconstructed an identity that supersedes past ancestral identities.

The misidentification of Zarina’s nationality is not a unique experience, but it brings forth the need to discuss how certain visual realities drive an artist’s visual language, as well as the lack of visual representation among the broader public of the diversity of cultures in the region. Positioned between two large states (Malaysia and Indonesia), whose ancestral histories



FIGURE 10: Fyeroool Dharma, *Portrait No. 12 (The sympathiser or the most cultured who ever wrote)*, of *Moyang* series 2017. Acrylic on canvas and burn wood, 125.5 × 140 × 5.5 cm. Photography by Matthew Teo. Image courtesy of the artist and Yeo Workshop.

intertwine with Singapore's, the Malay Singaporean identifies with but is also excluded from his/her past. What does it mean to be post-Malayan? What does it mean to possess an ancestry stretching from Malaysia and Indonesia? How do these experiences influence visual languages in art-making? If in the 19th-century colonial era, Malays were often seen as "indolent" and "lazy", and in the 20th century, are "reminded of their lack",⁴⁶ how do these stereotypes affect the visual field of these artists? And with the systemisation of racial categorisation as a form of visible marker, how does it affect the way one visualises the self?

As shown, unseen knowledge permeating the diasporic body integrates a multi-layered understanding of the *ghaib*. For Fyeroool Dharma, the *ghaib* consists of phantoms built from "unspoken words, rumours, perceptions, speculations, myths or fallacies of an event or someone or a particular being".⁴⁷ In his *Moyang* (Ancestors) series (2013–15) (Figure 10), the artist painted historical figures from the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago. Fyeroool's commentary on these figures, celebrated for their achievements, highlights instead their reduced visibility in the mainstream discourse, which gives precedence instead to other more recognised figures such as British colonial officer Thomas Stamford Raffles. Fyeroool questions the neglect of these stories in history textbooks and alludes to the marginalisation of certain



FIGURE 11: Fyeroool Dharma, *Monsoon Song*, 2017, Yeo Workshop, installation view. Artworks on view (from left to right):

There are no names like nirvana and samsara (terakhir), digital print with aerosol dust, 59.2 × 40 cm.

Those who linger by the berth savour your silence (biru), bleached canvas, 105 × 70 cm.

Our chants, they grace the skies as we wail with the monsoon (hitam), bleached canvas, 105 × 105 cm.

Those who linger by the berth savour your silence (orleng), bleached canvas, 105 × 70 cm.

Those who linger by the berth savour your silence, unlimited postcards, 14.8 × 10 cm.

Photography by Matthew Teo. Image courtesy of the artist and Yeo Workshop.

narratives in Singapore. Portraits containing these figures are painted in dull tones of black, grey and white, with the faces removed or heads decapitated from the canvas. Painted in a Western style and placed in ornate frames, the works are a commentary on the effects of colonialism and the part it plays in shaping histories and negative stereotypes today.⁴⁸

Recent projects such as *Monsoon Song* (2017) and *After Ballads* (2017–19) (Figures 11 and 12) project a different sense of the *ghaib* through the immateriality of phantom emotions—*jiwang*. According to Fyeroool, *jiwang* is not only an expression of lovesickness, but a type of intuition that comes from past phantoms of longing. It is an amalgamation of two words, *jiwa* and *angau*, with *jiwa* referring to the heart and soul while *angau* is defined as lovesickness or infatuation. Deriving from Sanskrit, the term *jiwa*, according



FIGURE 12: Fyerool Dharma, *[prep-room] After Ballads*, 6 October 2017–27 February 2019, NX2 Gallery, National University of Singapore Museum, installation view.

Artworks on view (from left to right):

Shredded and folded donated and artist textiles, inkjet print, synthetic quill, acrylic stand with emulsion on wall.

Photography by Hoong Wei Long. Image courtesy of the artist and National University of Singapore Museum.

to Fyerool, is used within Hindu-Buddhist philosophy in which the notion of “the immaterial” does not refer to the soul alone. The term *jiwa* is similar to *batin* (interior truths). It refers to the intangible components that make up an individual, including personal thoughts, emotions, and the energy of one’s spirit (i.e. faith, confidence, enthusiasm). Today, *jiwang*, as a modern vernacular term, is widely used to describe the sentimentality of Malay love ballads, particularly in rock music. It is also used to playfully chide someone as being overtly sentimental or romantic.

Instead of playing to a spectacle of ethnicity that would have leaned on specific cultural elements of Malay culture in his art, like the traditional clothing seen in *Moyang*, Fyerool’s practice makes visible the transcultural, contemporary Malay vernacular experience. A conflation of vernacular lingo, popular culture, sub-cultures, localised aesthetics, emblems and ornamentation are all drawn upon. Fragmented symbols, such as palm trees, flowers, textile, patterns, a *mat motor* (stereotype of a Malay man in love with his

motorcycle or scooter) (see Figure 11), are some of the idiosyncrasies that Fyerool illuminates as the “poor image”.⁴⁹ A term borrowed from Hito Steyerl, the original context of the “poor image” describes the proliferation of images copied and reproduced in mass media, particularly the Internet, which become eventually an “illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image”. Bordering between sentimentality and gaudiness, a transformation of his art practice sees Fyerool diminishing the excessive valorisation of ‘classical’ Malay aesthetics as projected in *Moyang*. The “poor image” Fyerool alludes to is the everyday, saturated images that have in ways shaped the contemporary reality of the ordinary person. Although he contests a puritanical, essentialised outlook on ethnicity, Fyerool’s approach ironically accommodates a “visual economy” that tries to cater to a global language.⁵⁰

The proliferation of images, including both culturally significant and mass-produced popular images, reflects the globalised environment we live in today. In order to analyse and understand the visual culture that Fyerool and his contemporaries (sometimes referred to as “Generation Y”) have been exposed to, it is important to remember that they have witnessed the rise of the World Wide Web, and have had access to “seeing” the world through the television, growing up with popular cultures dominating the screen.⁵¹ The experience of “seeing” beyond the shores of Singapore contributes to an individual’s visual field to *imagine* beyond the local landscape. By highlighting these confluences, Fyerool emphasises the need to acknowledge the contemporary body as shaped by cultural globalisation. Whether a person ought to be Malay or not to experience or access this visual aesthetics is not the main question, but the artist does hint at the need to analyse the conflation of identities from the visual field of a minority in a predominantly Chinese nation. Instead of contesting visual stereotypes of modern Malay culture in Singapore, Fyerool’s use of *jiwang* paradoxically embraces them.

Rethinking Our Modes of Seeing

What this paper has tried to discuss is the problem of systemising practices of Malay Singaporean artists whose works do not merely allude to Malayness. The terminology posits a problematic overview of their practices, which not only oversimplifies but also removes the artistic agency within these works. It becomes a burden of representation where artists are predetermined by one-dimensional conceptions of Malay identity. The methodological approach of using *ghaib* offers an opportunity for a diverse translation of Din Mohammad’s, Salleh’s, Zarina’s and Fyerool’s practices, and their own iterations of their identity. This does not suggest a sweeping identifier for all

artists within the Malay community of Singapore. This should be avoided, as it is, after all, the consequence of an oversimplified term such as ‘Malayness’. If anything, the adoption of the *ghaib* as a mode of analysis reflects the work that needs to be done outside of institutions; organic engagement is required to understand the broader framework and foundation on which these artists stand—beyond national borders and in the wider realm of the Malay world—while also considering Singapore’s position in the region. Using *ghaib* is a way to understand the visual field of these artists while considering the notion of ‘unseen’ as being embedded in their psyche and their realities. Making space for the *ghaib* is one way of contesting the systemised, hegemonic way of seeing rationally and considering other modes of seeing that have been left out. What these artists’ practices show us is the diversity of visual language, attesting to a myriad of living experiences that influence their visual field, from upbringing, class, race, gender, to sexuality. Rethinking our modes of seeing, or as Martin Jay advises, applying a “visual hermeneutics of suspicion”⁵² can allow us to interrogate our perceptions of these works, and if necessary, critically analyse our own prejudices and uncertainties.

BIOGRAPHY

Syaheedah Iskandar is currently undertaking her MA in History of Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London and was previously Curatorial Assistant at NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (2014–18). She continues to research on modes of visibility within the paradigm of Southeast Asia.

NOTES

- ¹ The writer would like to express her utmost gratitude to the following people who have shaped or contributed to the ideas of this paper: Vera Mey, for her invaluable mentorship, alongside Dr Suriani Suratman; the *SOUTHEAST OF NOW* editorial collective and donors, for their support, patience and generosity; Mdm Hamidah Jalil, for giving me the privilege to write about her late husband, Mohammad Din Mohammad's work; the artists Salleh Japar, Zarina Muhammad and Fyerool Darma, for allowing me to tell their stories; Dr Simon O'Meara, for his unwavering encouragement to pursue my interest in this topic; everyone else who has given me their time and shared their knowledge; and last but not least, to my parents for their unconditional love and support. These ideas would not have been ignited if not for my father, a silat practitioner himself, whose ideologies have influenced my way of seeing the world.
- ² The Malay Archipelago generally encompasses landscapes bordering on Malaysia, Indonesia, Southern Thailand, Brunei and the Philippines. This paper will pay specific attention to Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia (Java).
- ³ Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago*, Siri Pengetahuan Umum/ Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, bil. 22 (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1969).
- ⁴ It would be pertinent to look at Malay and Javanese manuscripts to find out when the term *ghayb* or *ghaib* first appeared.
- ⁵ D.B. MacDonald and L. Gardet, "Al-Ghayb", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., new ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1960), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0231.
- ⁶ Nils Bubandt, Mikkel Rytter and Christian Suhr, "A Second Look at Invisibility: Al-Ghayb, Islam, Ethnography", *Contemporary Islam* 13, 1 (April 2019): 1–16. Although this is an anthropological paper, the theories presented also look at the unseen as a methodological approach, while attempting to argue for the study of invisibility as a way to contest against the flawed 'hegemony of vision'.
- ⁷ T.K. Sabapathy, "Developing Regionalist Perspectives in Southeast Asian Art", in *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader*, ed. Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio (Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 47–61.
- ⁸ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "The Impact of Sufism on Muslims in Pre-Colonial Malaysia: An Overview of Interpretations", *Islamic Studies* 41, 3 (2002): 467–93.
- ⁹ Sharon Siddique, "Some Aspects of Malay-Muslim Ethnicity in Peninsular Malaysia", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 3, 1 (1981): 76–87. Although Sharon Siddique's paper is on Peninsular Malaysia, it is essential to map these networks with Malay Singaporeans, considering the shared history before the 1965 separation of Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia.

- ¹⁰ Simon Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden, Elected or Rejected: Sufism as “Islamic Esotericism”?”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 29, 2 (3 April 2018): 145–65.
- ¹¹ The six tenets comprise belief: in one God; Angels, devil and djinns; *Kitab* (Scrolls, the Psalms, Torah, the Gospel and Quran); Prophets; *Akhirah* (Day of Judgement); and *Qadar* (Divine decree). Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 65, Hadith 4777 and Quran, 4:136. See also Sunan Ibn Majah, Book 1, Hadith 85 on *Qadar* (Divine Decree).
- ¹² Avinoam Shalem, “What Do We Mean When We Say “Islamic Art”? A Plea for a Critical Rewriting of the History of the Arts of Islam”, *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (1 June 2012): 1–18.
- ¹³ Silat is an indigenous form of martial arts practised in Southeast Asia. According to Mdm Hamidah Jalil, the late Mohammad Din Mohammad held a ranking of a Guru (master) under the style and association of *Silat Kuntau Melaka*.
- ¹⁴ Shabbir Hussain Mustafa and Ahmad Mashadi, *Archives and Desires: Selections from the Mohammad Din Mohammad Collection* (NUS Museum, 2008), pp. 1–12.
- ¹⁵ Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, ““Pyramid of Souls” Fragmentary Notes on Mohammad Din Mohammad’s Treatment of the “Art Object” (2007–Ongoing)”, in *Tradition (Un)Realized: International Symposium, September 26–27, 2014*, ed. Hyunjin Kim et al. (Seoul, South Korea: Arko Art Center, 2015), pp. 100–5.
- ¹⁶ Undertaken in a single night, the miraculous Night Journey is told in two parts—the *Isra* and *Mi’raj*—which respectively describe Prophet Muhammad’s travel from Mecca to Jerusalem, followed by his ascension to the heavens. The narrative presents one of the most important components of Islamic literature (the Hadith), and demonstrates the validity of his prophethood and the religion.
- ¹⁷ Among the many readings of Sufi ideology, Shahab Ahmed’s book provides a comprehensive and provocative reading on Islamic culture. Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 32.
- ¹⁸ Mustafa and Mashadi, *Archives and Desires*, p. 4.
- ¹⁹ Venka Purushothaman and LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts, *Salleh Japar: Gurindam Dan Igauan* (Singapore: LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts, 2004), pp. 1–50.
- ²⁰ Modern and contemporary Islamic art movements are usually attributed to the aftereffects of the 1980s ‘Islamic revivalism’, in the wake of the Iran revolution (1979) and the National Cultural Congress (1971). For a better understanding, see Sulaiman Esa, “An Islamic Identity in Contemporary Malaysian Art: Achievements and Challenges” and Zainol Shariff, “Towards an Alter-Native Vision: The Idea of Malaysian Art since 1980”, in *Narratives in Malaysian Art*, ed. Nur Hanim Khairuddin, Beverly Yong and T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: Rogue Art, 2015), pp. 224–41, 279–97.
- ²¹ Esa, “An Islamic Identity in Contemporary Malaysian Art: Achievements and Challenges”, p. 238. See note 20 for full citation on published article.

- ²² Quran, 78: 6–7.
- ²³ Astri Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain: Preoccupations of Contemporary Indonesian Painters* (Kuala Lumpur, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 35–44.
- ²⁴ The writer is aware of the many scholarly debates regarding Borobudur as a ritual mandala. For the context of this essay, the representation of the Borobudur has no relationship to archeological findings.
- ²⁵ Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp. 219–58.
- ²⁶ See Mignolo, *Darker Side of the Renaissance*.
- ²⁷ There have been more efforts to understand these practices in recent years, with scholars noting that *tangka* are found in manuscripts accommodating Sufi ideologies with Malay divination. Manuscripts such as *Azimut (Power of Magic)*, first published in 1898, and *Tasawuf and Mantra (Sufism and Magic Charm)*, held in the British Library, are some examples. These manuscripts have been digitally archived and are accessible through the online catalogue of the British Library.
- ²⁸ Farouk Yahya, *Magic and Divination in Malay Illustrated Manuscripts, Arts and Archaeology of the Islamic World*, vol. 6 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 159–65.
- ²⁹ With gratitude to Zarina Muhammad for deciphering these figurines.
- ³⁰ Astri Wright, “Javanese Mysticism and Art: A Case of Iconography and Healing”, *Indonesia* 52 (Oct. 1991): 85.
- ³¹ With the exception of the descendants of indigenous groups comprising of the Orang Laut.
- ³² Taken from the artist’s statement shared with the writer.
- ³³ Stephen Cavanaugh Headley, *From Cosmogony to Exorcism in a Javanese Genesis: The Split Seed*, Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1–7. As Headley suggests, *ruwatan* in the Javanese context means “to be free” and is used primarily in purification rituals to rid one of a bad destiny. The closest word in English to describe such a process is exorcism, but Headley is against using this term because its cultural connotations are different.
- ³⁴ *Penunggu* directly translated refers to someone who waits. However, it is generally understood today to refer to invisible guardians, caretakers or spirits protecting a specific space, home or land.
- ³⁵ Walter Mignolo, “Chapter Five: The Darker Side of the Enlightenment”, in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options, Latin America Otherwise* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 206.
- ³⁶ T.K. Sabapathy, *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia, 1973–2015* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), pp. 361–76.

- ³⁷ Shalem, p. 9.
- ³⁸ Shirlene Noordtin, “Be(com)ing Malay—The Process of Identity”, in *Wahana*, ed. Balai Seni Lukis Negara (Malaysia) (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2003), pp. 5–7.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 6.
- ⁴⁰ Coined in the 1980s by postcolonial and feminist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, strategic essentialism is described as subalterns mobilising strategically by finding unity in a collective. In this essay, strategic essentialism is used to describe how Zarina makes visible the marginalised.
- ⁴¹ The artist informed the writer that during her exhibition, members of the public queried the gallery sitters if the artist was Indonesian. Such an experience is widespread in the Malay Singaporean community. The writer herself encountered similar questions throughout her life, whether in relation to her name or to explaining artworks by Malay Singaporean artists that she has collaborated with.
- ⁴² See also Article 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore.
- ⁴³ Ethnic Malays in Malaysia make up the majority, while in Indonesia, ethnic Javanese are the majority. In Singapore, ethnic Chinese are the majority.
- ⁴⁴ Indigeneity remains a complex issue in Southeast Asia. Malays in Singapore must be considered in relation to the Bugis, Javanese, Baweanese, Malay, Minangkabau, Batak and many others, even though these groups are all considered Austronesian cultures. In Singapore, while Malays are often seen as indigenous, this recognition should not overlook the Orang Laut and other “proto-Malay” groups, who are also considered aboriginal (*pri-bumi*) to the land.
- ⁴⁵ Implemented by the Singapore government, the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) model is a racial categorisation that was first utilised by the British from as far back as 1824. It is reflected in official documents such as the identification cards of Singapore citizens and permanent residents.
- ⁴⁶ Noordtin, “Be(com)ing Malay—The Process of Identity”, p. 5.
- ⁴⁷ From the personal journal of the artist, which includes his writings, thoughts and research.
- ⁴⁸ Alatas Syed Hussein, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: F. Cass, 1977).
- ⁴⁹ Hito Steyerl and Franco Berardi, “In Defense of the Poor Image”, in *The Wretched of the Screen*, *E-Flux Journal* 6 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), pp. 31–45.
- ⁵⁰ Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy, eds., *Empires of Vision: A Reader, Objects/Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 25–43. The term “visual economy”, first coined by Deborah Poole, was cited by Jay and Ramaswamy to describe the relevance of her argument (although relating to Andean

photography), about the systemisation of vision stemming from “social relationships, inequality, and power as shared meanings and community”. In Jay and Ramaswamy’s essay, “visual economy” relates to the proliferation of image and its role in manifesting a “sheer material presence” in today’s diasporic, globalised world.

⁵¹ The seminal role of MTV (established in 1981) is one such example of USA media permeating local cable television. Its Asian counterparts, MTV Asia, was launched in 1991 and MTV Southeast Asia, in 1995.

⁵² Jay and Ramaswamy, *Empires of Vision*, p. 618.

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