What Is The Meaning Of Independence: Native Occupier Immigrant?

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Citing what Robert Rauschenberg once said, "the role of the artist is a witness to the history of time." Throughout his life, Suhaimi Fadzir has created artwork based on social comments on cultural diversity and global dialogue such as war, equal rights, nuclear disarmament, apartheid, economic development, the rights of artists and environmental issues which according to Suhaimi are themes worth emphasizing by contemporary artists. Suhaimi's "What is the Meaning of Independence: Native Occupier Immigrant?" 2010-2012 is not only an installation work, but also a social space that can generate dialogue about Malaysia's narrative history.

One can divide Suhaimi's installation into three segments. In the First Section is the assemblage work in a square format painting on the wall. In the Second Section is where the artist uses materials such as ladders, shovels, fish trap and rubber machine on the floor. And in the Third Section is a hanging installation of bird cages. These three elements create a visual language system that express the artist's view.

Famous Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan stated that "the medium is the message." The "What is the Meaning of Independence: Native Occupier Migrant" 2010-2012 installation can be seen as an artwork loaded with questions from the material culture perspective. In the First Section, Suhaimi has experimented with the placement of the object using the "find-select-paste" technique in an assemblage presentation. In the work, a printed poster of communist party leader Moa Tse Tung of China is juxtaposed with the image of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's first Prime Minister. In addition, in the top right, gasoline and oil lamps are synonymous to the light source before independence or before electricity were introduced in Malaysia.
In this format assemblage painting, Suhaimi portrayed the political system divide and rule made by the British Colonial Administration to facilitate their management style when dividing the three major races like the Malays as farmers and fishermen in the villages and coastline with fish imagery, the Chinese as tin miners with photo of Dredging Ship near the picture of Mao and the Indians as rubber tappers with rubber tapper knifes on the right of the painting to visualize the colonial ruling before independence.

Discussing Suhaimi’s assemblage techniques, it reminds me of an exhibition titled ‘The Art of Assemblage’ fostered by the William Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in 1961. He observed what artist Pablo Picasso first publicly utilized the idea of found art which used Found Objects with an artistic purpose. Experimentation artists from the Dada and Surrealist movements have used the object to bring the audience to their works and have changed the way work was produced. Ladder, shovels found objects of ‘Outside Art’ such as popular brands as Baba’s curry pastes, beer cans and wine bottles have been arranged in the row as a Pop Warhol print, the newsprint front page cover such as Utusan Malaysia, and photos of famous 60’s pop icon John Lennon and Yoko Ono are some of the materials used for the wall assemblage and can be interpreted as the replenishment of independence by the indigenous and cultural influences brought by immigrants into the local culture.

In the Second Part of his constructive assemblage work, Suhaimi plays with symbols and metaphoric economic activities such as rubber machine, rubber knifes, rubber sheets. These were the main economic resources during the occupation. The symbol of progress, development and hope can be interpreted with the presence of the ladder, shovels and printed sacred date of independence, 31.08.57. All of this artwork is presented in a simple and casual manner on the floor.

The Third Part consists of the three Bird Cages, the iconography of social freedom shown with real-life birds. The polemic exhibition ‘Towards to Mystical Reality’ by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa where in on es of the installation they had inserted the element smell of pigeons as a representation of freedom of art has been rarely used in Malaysian art. Suhaimi reintroduced the sense of smell and texture from the spotted doves and rubber sheets for the audience to experience it in the space.

When Marcel Duchamp first exhibited with the casual ‘Toilet Bowl’ and ‘Bicycle Wheel’
in the context of this gallery, it opened a new dimension to the visual art in the use of what has been said by Duchamp as ‘ready-mades’. Duchamp’s exploration is directly absorbed by post-avant-garde artists of such as America’s Rauschenberg where he had introduced “combine painting” that uses popular culture material in which was the phenomenon of ‘hybridity’ from 1954 to 1964.

Structural combination of architectural and painting or ‘archipainting’ according to Suhaimi, parallels with both Duchamp’s ‘ready-mades’ and Rauschenberg’s “combine-painting” but distinguishes itself in the context of the narrative. Local cultural elements and objects distinguishes Suhaimi’s style from the post Rauschenbergian and Post Duchampian styles because he uses everyday local materials in our lives to bring urban culture to contemporary issues of today. The materials used by him show as if he has created a political discourse that demands attention from the audience.

Overall, combination of multi-dimensional space as though his objects found by archaeologists that have been for 3000 years exhibited as a collection of fossils and artifacts of culture, social, political, and economics of Malaysia have transformed into a creation of a diverse contemporary dialogue between artistic practice, cultural objects, and audience as a complete social installation.

Note:
- Laura Hoptman, “Unmonumental: Going to pieces in the 21st Century”,
- The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 128-139.

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