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An Overview of Selected Yusof Ghani Abstract Expressionist Painting

Mohd Jamil Mat Isa¹, Zaim Durulaman²

¹ Fine Art Studies College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam 40450 Selangor Malaysia

² Fine Art Studies Faculty of Communication, Visual Art and Computing, Universiti Selangor,
Jalan Timur Tambahan, 45600, Bestari Jaya, Selangor Malaysia

jmi@uitm.edu.my, duzaim@unisel.edu.my,
Tel: 013 4899669

Abstract

This review analyzes Yusof Ghani's painting, which is recognized with the abstract expressionist character. The selected painting was chosen from the private's collection, then captured into a digital mode which will assist in the analysis of the content and context of the painting. This artwork appears to be very successful in its presentation. This study clearly shows the appropriate features of abstract expressionist style applied by the artist in his painting. The selected painting, through the analysis, depicts the exploration of movement that was attached to the technique, which is associated with the style and contexts.

Keywords: *Abstract Expressionist, Painting, Analyze*

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1.0 Introduction

The objective of this study is to analyze by review and show a comparison between the works. Although, focusing on different topics but fundamentally, by utilizing the Art Criticism Strategy (Description, Analysis, Interpretation and Judgement) introduced by Edmund Burke Feldman will be used to analyze the selected painting, there is no substantial difference in composition. This is evidenced by the fact that this review is presented. This review is also essential since it may be used as reference material, particularly for the future researcher, to have a more in-depth familiarity with the works of abstract expressionism.

The painting of Yusof Ghani, known for having an abstract expressionist quality and style, is the subject of this review, which is an examination. The piece of art was selected from the artist's collection and then taken in digital format. This will help with the process of study on the content and context of the artwork. The presentation of this piece of artwork has been quite successful overall. The findings of this study make it abundantly evident which characteristics of the abstract expressionist style were utilised by the artist in the production of their artwork. The investigation of movement attached to the technique adopted for the painting through the study demonstrates this exploration, which is associated with the style and the surroundings. Yusof Ghani is a Malaysian painter, was born in 1950 in Pontian, Johor. His work has spanned over three decades, which has led to the creation of a variety of series that use an abstract expressionist style and are inspired by motifs from Southeast Asia. Painting and drawing are combined into a single visual entity in his works, which also feature a controlled play of sculptural and collage components.

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Although his works are frequently associated with the global style of abstract expressionism, Yusof Ghani's work process underlying structures that are local and regional. Inspired by the systematic traditional art, discipline and formal elements become the basis of his works. Externally, his works appear to be global, but internally the works project local values that are concerned with humanity. They might appear universal, but the iconographies are Eastern and local (Mulyadi Mahamood, 2014).

2.0 Literature Review

Robert Coates used this term in 1946 with reference to Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and others. It was officially recognised in the 1951, Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*. The term embraces work of diverse style and degrees of reference to content or subject, emphasizing spontaneity of expression and individuality (N. Stangos, 1994).

Abstract Expressionism has been used since the 1920s to describe the early abstraction pieces by Kandinsky; it has since come to refer to a group of American-based artists who were prominent during the 1940s and 1950s. Robert Coates introduced the term in an article in 1946 about the work of Gorky, Pollock, and De Kooning; it was only one of many terms of the period (Dempsey, A, 2004, p 188).

Abstract Expressionism was a coalescence of the three major movements that peaked by the 1930s: Expressionism, Abstraction, and Surrealism. Some deeper roots can also be traced to the influence of Post-Impressionism (Ocvirk et al., 2012).

Abstract expressionism is an umbrella term for multiple styles of art to have at least one of these common characteristics:

1. **Action painting:** Art critic Harold Rosenberg coined the term "action painting" in 1952 to identify the busy artworks of painters like Pollock. Action painting is typically chaotic, with splashes of paint and drippings covering the canvas.
2. **Automatism:** Common in the movement was automatism, a technique in which painters let their subconscious lead the way in their art. US American painter Robert Motherwell championed the method.
3. **Color fields:** Unlike action paintings, which are busy visually, color field paintings are simple expanses of color on canvas. Examples of this technique include works by Mark Rothko, such as the *Seagram Murals Series* at the Tate Modern. Color field paintings are still abstract, typically with a cohesive and monolithic look.
4. **Large scales:** While abstract expressionists did not invent large-scale pieces, their use of large canvases became commonplace. Pollock's paintings were so large that he preferred to use the floor rather than an easel.

Quoting an article on the MOMA website, Abstract Expressionist artists explored new ways of creating art, reinvigorating, and reinventing the medium. They changed the nature of painting with their large, abstract canvases, energetic and gestural lines, and new artistic processes. Many artists experimented with nontraditional materials, such as commercial paints and brushes. Artists also developed new techniques to apply paint, such as moving the canvas from the easel to the floor. With these unconventional ways of painting, the Abstract Expressionists sought new forms of self-expression and personal freedom in their work.

Mohd Jamil Mat Isa, (2018) mentioned, to the art historian of art, style is an essential of investing. He studies its inner corresponds, its life history, and the problems of its formation and change. (Shapiro, 1953). Mulyadi Mahamood (2001) states that in the history of art, style refers to the value in forms that express meaning. Forms and meanings reflect the approach of an artist. Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone, and Cayton, (2006) defined style as;

"The specific artistic character and dominant trend of form noted during periods of history and art movements style may also refer to artists' expressive use of media to give their individual work character" (Ocvirk et al., 2012., p. 248).

According to Yusof Ghani, during an interview in his studio (2021), when he was a little boy, he lived in a village in Johor, and there was a family member who ran a tiny movie theater not far from his home. He used to spend a lot of time there watching movies. Early on, he developed an interest in painting by visually depicting movement and incorporating a feeling of time into his paintings, which he attributes to watching Western films like cowboy films. Yusof Ghani began his career as a graphic artist in Malaysia between 1969 and 1979. In 1979, he received a scholarship from the government of Malaysia to study graphic arts at George Mason University in Virginia. This was the beginning of Yusof Ghani's transition into the field of fine arts. There, he became acquainted with Walter Kravitz, a professor of painting who would go on to expose him to the world of fine arts.

Soon after, he developed an appreciation for the abstract expressionist works of artists from the United States, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Yusof pursued a degree in Fine Arts after being awarded the Dr. Burt Amanda Scholarship for the most excellent art student. He ultimately earned a Bachelor of Arts degree after completing his studies. After that, he resumed his employment with a Master named Nakashima, who instructed him in the more nuanced aspects of painting. During his time as a student at Catholic University, he struck up a friendship with the Malaysian artist Awang Damit Ahmad, whose work is characterised by Abstract Expressionist tendencies.

His *Protest Series*, which protested the U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and El Salvador then, was well received and even drew rave reviews from the Washington Post's art critic – Jo Ann Lewis. After he finished his master's degree, he had his first solo exhibition at the prestigious Anton Gallery in Washington, D.C., which was a very successful solo exhibition.

Yusof continued working on a series of collections after returning to Malaysia. These collections are titled *Tari*, (1984-1993), *Topeng* (1992-1996), *Wayang* (1996-1998), *Hijau* (1999-2002), *Segerak* (2003-2006), *Biring* (2006-2007), and *Wajah* (2007-2009). Yusof is presently working on *Ombak* (2008-2014).

His mature works currently deal with contemporary issues concerning Malaysian society, such as social issues regarding famine and injustice, the nation's history, distortions of Asian motifs, and depictions of visual energy. These issues include social issues regarding famine and injustice, the nation's history, and depictions of visual energy.

Yusof Ghani, a well-known and respected social commentary artist in Malaysia. Yusof leaves a lasting impression in the audience's mind with his distinctive works of early *Siri Tari* (Rusli Hashim, 1997). He has had several solo and group exhibitions that have been quite successful locally and abroad.

"Segerak is an organising principle, a blueprint, and a culminating point of Yusof's artistic development since 2002. It depicts a journey for Yusof, perhaps a transformation, an evolution, a maturing of the man as an artist, or an artist as a man" (Habibah Asri, 2019, p 75).



Figure 2: Segerak – Deer Hunter (2003), 122 cm x 185 cm, Collection of Dato' Richard Wong, Kuala Lumpur.
(Source :Segerak Yusof Ghani. pp 62)

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3.0 Methodology

This research will use qualitative methods, based on primary and secondary data. The data was collected from text and images from the exhibition's publications. The primary data consists of an analysis of painting from the selected series by an artist named Segerak (2003). The secondary data will include a literature review on style and abstract expressionist.

According to Borg & Gall, (1989), the qualitative research is descriptive, and the information was collected in the form of writings, transcripts, photos, historical documents, notations, and interviews relevant to the research. Descriptive research is unique in the number of variables employed. Like other types of research, descriptive research can include multiple variables for analysis (Mat Isa, M.J. 2022).

According to Basak, in his edited book *Art Education - An Overview* (2021), it was stated that the method that was used for the visual analysis of selected artwork was referred to the Edmund Burke Feldman (1994), where the inquiry was with a clear description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment, which allows for a systematic investigation of works of art produced in almost every period, movement, and style as a technique of art criticism (pg. 59). In this analysis, the discrepancy is based on the classification of images and three distinct kinds of grounds to present an exhaustive explanation of the process by which the work was produced. For this reason, a few pieces of artwork from the series *Segerak* (2003) were chosen to be evaluated, and one of those pieces was given the title *Deer Hunter*. The image is broken up into fragments and assigned a digital appearance to make analysing the content and context of artwork easier to complete. As seen from the straightforward four-step process mentioned above, the analysis procedure is quite simple.

Art Criticism strategy introduced by Edmund Burke Feldman namely Description, Analysis, Interpretation and Judgment, will be used to analyze the painting (MJ, Mat Isa, 2018).

Four stages by Feldman are;

- i. *Description* means "a process of taking inventory, of nothing that is immediately presented to the viewer. We are interested in avoiding, as far as possible, the drawing of inferences. We wish to arrive at a simple account of "what is there," which any reasonably observant person would agree. Inventory is the critic's function to find what is objectively presented in work" (Feldman, 1967, p.473),
- ii. *Analyse*, "In a formal analysis, we endeavor to go behind the descriptive inventory to discover how the things we have named are constituted. We want to know how the works have been organized as shape, form color as form. We describe qualities of line, shape color, and illumination that are responsible for the existence of the things" (Feldman, 1967, p. 473),

iii. *Interpretation* is the crucial third stage of art criticism: "By interpretation in art criticism, I mean a process through which the critic expresses the meaning of the artwork under scrutiny. All works of art require interpretation to deal with them critically. Explaining a work of art, which may be understood as interpreting the work, involves discovering its meanings and also stating the relevance of these meanings to our lives and the human situation in general" (Feldman, 1967, p. 447),

iv. *Judgment* is the evaluation of whole works of art. "Evaluating a work of art by critical method means giving the work a rank about other works in its class-deciding the degree of its artistic and aesthetic merit. This aspect of art criticism is much abused and is for some purposes unnecessary if a thorough and satisfying interpretation has been carried out" (Feldman, 1967, p. 486).

4.0 Discussion

4.1 Description

Yusof Ghani, a renowned Malaysian artist who works in abstract expressionism, created the painting entitled *Segerak - Deer Hunter* in 2003. Yusof's work is characterized by his use of the Malay word for "deer hunter." The overall dimensions of the picture are 122 centimeters across the horizontal dimension and 185 centimeters high along the vertical dimension. It is protected within the extensive collection that belongs to Dato' Richard Wong, an art collector based in Kuala Lumpur.

There are five hazy images of a figure that have been painted incorrectly and are positioned so that they reach out to a canvas in various ways. Four individuals give the impression that they are facing outward; however, one of the figures appears to be partially looking in the opposite direction. The only primary colours used in this painting are yellow, red, blue, and white, and it was also created by combining different shades of those colours. The usage of broad yellow appears to be predominating, seemingly encompassing the entirety of the space in the picture. Similarly, the blue brush strokes go in a horizontal direction, whereas the red brush strokes go in a vertical direction.

4.2 Analysis

Through the usage of this picture, it is abundantly clear that Yusof Ghani is interested in investigating figurative movement. Five shadowy figures indicate fluid movements among the colours coming from the background region to then traveling towards the left side of the canvas before looping forward and then forth, moving towards the right side of the canvas as though to capture human actions in fast motion. These five figures are scattered around the picture's surface, primarily in the middle and top areas. On the other hand, the lines and colours emphasized on a figure placed in the foreground appeared to be more distinct and vivid than those emphasized on figures placed in the middle ground. This symbolises an aesthetic distance (gap) that may be seen between the image in the forefront and the image in the background. The composition has a balanced tonal range due to the equal amounts of blue brush strokes on the upper left surface and red brush strokes on the suitable bottom surface.

Similarly, the yellow brushstrokes on the upper surface of the canvas appear to flow reasonably to the correct region. In contrast, the yellow brushstrokes on the lower surface flow pretty much to the left section of the canvas. A combination of colours and space molds the human form.

i. Foreground

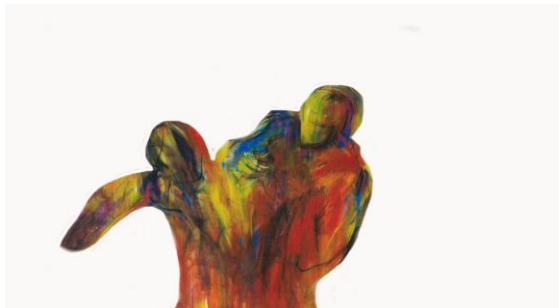


Figure 3: Image of foreground.
(Source : *Segerak* Yusof Ghani. pp 62)

Two figures are positioned in the foreground area, which has predominantly red colours across the space. It appears strong brush strokes were used to paint horizontal bands of red. Even though they are only gestural marks, the spontaneous intermittent outlines on the figure disclose the actual structure of the human form. The figure's head was well painted in a bright yellow, which undoubtedly makes a difference to the composition, and blue and red were added to the torso, which contributes to the composition. Similarly, the yellow brushstrokes on the upper surface of the canvas flow pretty much to the correct region. In contrast, the yellow brushstrokes on the lower surface flow to the canvas's left section. A combination of colours and space molds the human form.

ii. Middle ground



Figure 4: Image of middle ground.
(Source : *Segerak Yusof Ghani*. pp 62)

Two figures have been put in the central ground, and it appears they are staring in opposite directions and blocking out the light for one another. Even though blue appears less predominant in this region, the horizontal component of this colour exudes an intense brightness. The importance, when it comes to sculpting a human shape, is given to the intermittent lines of gestural traces. The space is formed by a combination of yellow on the left side of the canvas and a few brush strokes in red that overlap each other.

iii. Back ground



Figure 5: Image of background.
(Source : *Segerak Yusof Ghani*. pp 62)

There is a figure sketched somewhere in the middle of the upper surface of the painting. One gets the impression that the figure is disappearing and is almost completely obliterated by the predominating golden colours. The backdrop colour and the human shape are differentiated from one another by the few lines that create the head and shoulders of a figure. In addition, the left side of the canvas appears to include an aggressive application of blue paint, which creates a striking effect.

iv. Space and Composition

The similarity of approach in creating space and composition in the body of work of both abstract expressionist painters, Awang Damit in *Jejak Waktu- Memori Kelabu* (2011) and Yusof Ghani in *Segerak - Deer Hunter* (2003), is revealed through every six segments of compositions; whereas three segments are apparent on the upper surface and a different three segments on below surface of the painting; and whereas every six segments of compositions are obviously revealed through each six. The three sections that make up the underside of the artwork each appear to dominate the space below them. Nevertheless, both paintings have a sense of capture and equilibrium in terms of space and mood. In the artwork titled *Segerak - Deer Hunter* (2003), the colour yellow appears to predominate almost the entire composition, whereas in *Jejak Waktu - Memori Kelabu* (2011) the colour combinations of white and grey appear to predominate the painting. Consequently, the section on the bottom left surface of both paintings occupies a more substantial portion of the canvas. According to the late art historian Redza Piyadasa, even though every artist is unique in terms of style and approach in making art, in general, they comply with the academic rules of Western Art, mainly concerning space and atmosphere. This conclusion can be drawn from the fact that each artist's work is easily identifiable. He continued that the construction of the works of art was only an idealistic interpretation; it was not an accurate display of an optical illusion.



Figure 6 (a): Awang Damit, 'Jejak Waktu –Memori Kelabu'
Mixed media on canvas, 153 x 244 cm, 2011
(*Dari Iraga ke Payarama: Awang Damit 2003-2014 (2014,pp56)*)

Figure 6 (b): Yusof Ghani, 'Segerak – Deer Hunter'
Mixed media on canvas, 153 x 244 cm, 2003
(*Source : Segerak Yusof Ghani, pp 62*)

Figure 6: Space and Composition

v. Circling

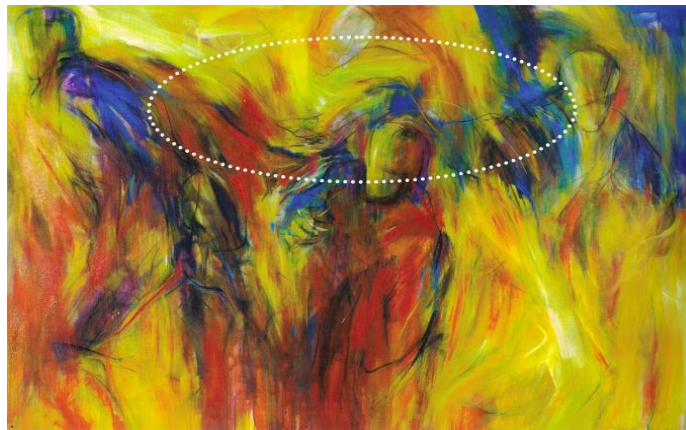


Figure 7: Image of Circling
(*Source : Segerak Yusof Ghani, pp 62*)

The atmosphere of the artwork was underlined by the predominance of yellow, which appeared to be spiraling upward in space. Images of five persons appear in every part of the painting. This is intentional and is meant to reflect a swift motion of figurative movement and the nuances of human body language. The continuity of rotation in a clockwise direction demonstrates the cycle of life. We frequently go through the same motions weekly or daily regarding our everyday routines. These day-to-day activities, which include our responsibilities toward the Supreme Being, society, our families, and even ourselves, have evolved into the central focus of our lives.

vi. Style and comparison

Both paintings are figurative in nature and share similarities in style and composition. Therefore, both paintings bring lines that convey emotion to the forefront (refer to figure 8). The lines and strokes on the piece of artwork titled *Woman 1* (1952) by Willem de Kooning appear more spontaneous and aggressive, and the artist does not appear to be too concerned about the figure's anatomy. On the other hand, the painting by Yusof Ghani entitled *Segerak - Deer Hunter* (2003) reflects a more casual approach to style but places a great deal of emphasis on the proportion of the figure.

According to Piyadasa (2018) in one of his articles, the artist views himself as a one-of-a-kind instrument that should communicate his passion in a way that is both spontaneous and continuous (direct). This leads to the production of works considered to be "highly personalised statements" at that time. Approaches with forceful brush strokes, considered "gestural marks," describe the catharsis process that occurs during the development of an abstract expressionism work. These approaches may be found in abstract expressionism works.



Figure 8 (a): Willem de Kooning 'Women 1'
Oil on canvas, 192.7 x 47.3 cm, 1952
(source: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79810>)

Figure 8 (b): Yusof Ghani 'Segerak – Deer Hunter'
Mixed media on canvas, 153 x 244 cm, 2003
(Source : Segerak Yusof Ghani. pp 62)

Figure 8: Image of style and comparison.



Figure 9: The detail.

(Source : Segerak Yusof Ghani. pp 62) and (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79810>)

4.3. Interpretation

This painting has a history and a recollection that Yusof Ghani has engraved in the depths of his subconscious mind. The novel's events revolve around the life of a man who lives in a village someplace in Pontian and is revered by the people for his skill in hunting deer. The villager's life provides the setting for the story. Pak Ayob, an avid hunter who specialises in deer, goes on a hunting trip every weekend, and has never returned without having brought at least one piece of his prey. He successfully brought back a total of two deer from a single hunt on a few occasions. Yusof Ghani, a young teenager then, would frequently look through Pak Ayob's hunting gun. He had the ambition of learning how to hunt from him and earning a reputation as a successful hunter in the future. During a weekend in Kota Tinggi, the locals, as is customary, would frequently wait for Pak Ayob and his companions to return from their excursion on a hunting mission. However, unfortunately, on that same evening, the trapped deer was not the one that was coming from the automobile. Pak Ayob was killed by one of his hunting companions who, due to a tragic turn of events, mistook him for a deer when he moved erratically through the dense forest's branches and foliage. The hunter fired and killed Pak Ayob. Is this an indication that the animal is under a curse? A deer is shown in certain instances as a creature that lives in the otherworldly realm.

The spontaneity of the brushstrokes, which is evident in the painting's expressive use of vivid colours, is where the painting's strength is exhibited. In this painting, the investigation of lines and arrangement of space, in addition to the colours, serve the role of revisiting memories and transmitting the feelings that are expressed through figurative movements. These movements of five figures in *Segerak* may explain in unrest emotions of the fellow huntsmen of the thick forest who had mistakenly shot down Pak Ayob, or perhaps it was the representation of an unrest emotion among the villagers who anxiously waited for the return of Pak Ayob and the huntsmen. Either way, these movements of the five figures in *Segerak* may explain in unrest emotions of the fellow huntsmen of the thick forest who had made mistakes.

Yusof Ghani is exceptionally skilled at generating expressive marks and lines that constitute the basic framework of a figure showing the figurative movement and postures. His work can be found in a variety of exhibitions and publications (Muliyadi Mahmood (2004), *Segerak* Yusof Ghani, p. 144). However, expressive impacts were seen to be less overwhelming, even if they were successfully

conveyed through the curves of lines. Through the painting titled *Segerak - Deer Hunter* (2003), the Malaysian artist Yusof Ghani demonstrates his investigation into graphically capturing figurative movements within an environment.

4.4. Judgment

Overall, this painting successfully presents harmonious warm colours and the projection of figurative images visually moving among the colours, seemingly forming a soft, undulating rhythm. Both aspects contribute to the overall success of the painting. The viewers can deduce, even from a cursory examination of the painting, that the painter is a highly accomplished artist who has worked extensively within the abstract expressionism movement. The painter looks skilled in his controlled play of frigid colours composed horizontally integrating into the warm colours as if to tempt the viewer's eyes to travel through the visual entity in complete focus. This is also referred to as "eye travel." Figures visible in the action of a rotating movement were also compelling the eyes of the spectator to respond responsively to the rotations that were going in a clockwise direction. It is a fact that the painter Yusof Ghani meticulously planned the production of this picture and that Willem de Kooning, an activist in the abstract expressionism movement, influenced the painter's style.

5.0 Conclusion

Overall, the artist has succeeded in his desire to discuss the theme of *Segerak*, which is about human attitudes and nature in various contexts and situations. The abstract expressionist approach, the artist's choice, can also raise the *Segerak* theme when the painting is loaded with artistic elements. An artist from the second group who championed the style of abstract expressionism has created his style where lines of various qualities and spontaneous brushstrokes become his identity.

Referring to Mulyadi Mahmood (2014), although Yusof Ghani often associated with global style, his work still projects the pure values of the local community.

6.0 Acknowledgement

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