



GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

Pioneering culture-building networks

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

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**ABOUT THE
e-JOURNAL**

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

Editorial

Shalini Amerasinghe Ganendra – Guest Editor

BA, MA Hons (Cambridge.), LL.M.

Cultural Leader, Scholar and Founder of
Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur

BIOGRAPHY



Shalini Ganendra's impact on cultural development has been defined by over two decades of informed cultural engagement. Through programming, research, publication and an overarching commitment to transnational connection, she has furthered recognition of, inter alia, the distinct and longstanding creative practises of Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

Some notable projects include: Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur with its Luminary Programme featuring international and local creatives in dialogue and presentation, pioneering exhibitions of Sri Lankan modern and contemporary art in Kuala

Lumpur, London and New York, and research with publication on cultural practices.

Shalini is Sri Lankan born. She was educated in the US and UK, graduating secondary from Phillips Exeter Academy where she is a Harkness Fellow, after which she read law at University of Cambridge, Trinity Hall. She obtained an LL.M. from Columbia University Law School and is a qualified Barrister and New York Attorney. She has been awarded Visiting Fellowships by Oxford and Cambridge Universities to further cultural research.

FOREWORD

Culture celebrating difference. Culture complimenting commerce. Pioneering culture – The Story of Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur

Developing appreciation for and bringing greater accessibility to culture as a whole and visual art in particular, has been the foundation on which Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) has developed, over a meteoric five years, reflecting evolution and invention. Culture complimenting commerce. Culture celebrating difference. Culture as the creative. Starting out as a prayer, a dream, GWKL has steadily and organically grown, embracing free participation and access, presenting a dynamic platform of multi-disciplinary content. GWKL has been a mechanism through which Malaysia can reconnect with its own cultural landscape (both traditional and contemporary). The cultural marquee has introduced valuable local culture to global audiences; facilitated global exchange; and bridged cultures and disciplines to deliver engagement and project development. As such, GWKL has critically become about the culture of encounter.

The term ‘gallery weekend’ is somewhat of an anomaly for this marquee because the duration now spans two weeks. This longer period offers the opportunity for guests to participate in all offerings and for cultural stakeholders to derive more value through programme build-up. GWKL remains an immersive and intense cultural experience.

Our goal has been for the long-term development of cultural appreciation (local and global), coupled with the creation of a sustainable and appreciative cultural ecosystem through which audiences develop a greater appreciation for the creative. Such appreciation fostered through talks and viewings inevitably sprouts economic support. As a platform, GWKL complements art fairs and biennials, taking the best features from all such events, and presenting them over a shorter period of time with mainly free programming. Since 2016, GWKL has been supported by a wide array of cultural

stakeholders and endorsed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture. We have partnered with major local museums including the National Art Gallery and Islamic Art Museum Malaysia, in addition to including more than 30 select project spaces, galleries, collection venues and cultural spaces annually.

The GWKL Luminary Programme, consisting of public talks (panel and individual) presented by a diverse range of creative talent, has been the anchor feature of GWKL and has defined the gravitas of the marquee. Over these five years, we have hosted more than 30 Luminaries from over 12 countries, including curators, museum directors, auction experts, artists, journalists and collectors. Twenty-two luminaries, a major foundation participant, one moderator and one observer are represented in this publication.

Their form of contribution, whether through essay, interview or presentation format, provides a vibrant glimpse of the diversity of topics, experience and outlooks presented over the past five years– covering art practise, craft, curation, museology, markets, architecture, design, collecting and more. I thank each of these amazing personalities for their valuable insights; editorial assistant, Yung Lo, for adeptly ordering and coordinating these submissions; and Lindy Joubert, Director of the UNESCO Observatory, for quality endorsement of GWKL.

When GWKL launched in 2016, the Art Newspaper wrote “The next Berlin? Kuala Lumpur launches gallery weekend. Dealers and museums join forces to put the Malaysian capital on the art map.” In fact, GWKL has gone beyond being just another “gallery weekend”. Rather, the connectivity that the marquee offers has enriched many thus far with the promise of growing returns through increased awareness and appreciation. In 2020, the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic propelled us to innovate and deliver what turned out to be one of the most successful Luminary Features virtually, where everyone had a front-row seat. The high attendance was a testament to a growing realisation that culture can be the pivot to recovery. “GWKL continues to pioneer culture-building bridges and networks. It applauds creativity and provides a platform for dynamic discussions that continue long after the event itself closes. Likewise, this UNESCO Observatory ‘Arts in Asia’ publication extends this culture of connectivity for greater reach and duration. GWKL continues to pioneer culture. We hope you enjoy the read.

'Bricolage', Urbanisation and the importance of Art Collectives

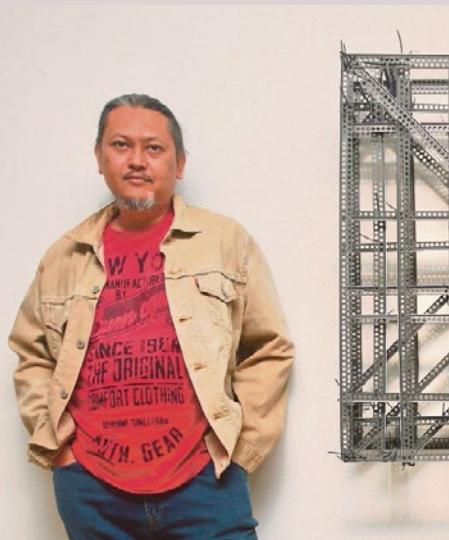
AUTHOR

Elias Yamani Ismail, Malaysian Artist and Founder of Satu Creative Collective

BIOGRAPHY

Elias Yamani Ismail is a Malaysian artist, with degrees from UiTM, Lim Kok Wing University College of Creative Design and Multimedia, and Universiti Sains Malaysia. In 2008, he founded Satu: Creative Collective which supports, promotes and creates a platform for visual arts programmes.

It also initiated several programmes under segments titled Nuqtah, Transit, and Saloran



Seni: Malaysian Visual Arts Channel. Driven by his vision to make art accessible to the public, he would later go on to establish an NGO known as Pertubuhan Pengkarya Seni Kuala Lumpur dan Selangor (Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Artists Organisation) and PJ Arts and Culture Centre. Ismail is also a researcher; he is currently carrying out comparative research on visual arts, thinking processes and practice, mainly in a Malaysian context.

His works have been acquired by institutions all over Malaysia, as well as private local and foreign collectors from Japan, Canada, Germany, and Australia.

He was a panel speaker for the Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2020 *Luminary Forum II: Reconnecting – Museums, Creating and Events*.

‘Bricolage’, Urbanisation and the importance of Art Collectives

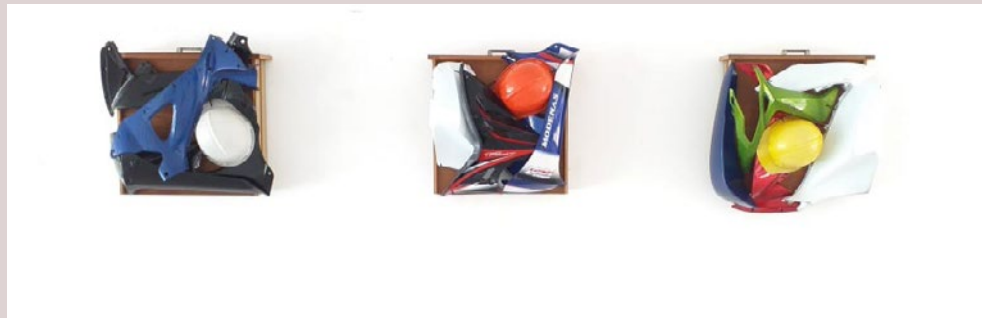
Personally, I would like to describe what I am practising as a journey of self-discovery instead of a career. While artists these days are concerned with developing their artistic career, I am more inclined towards discoveries as a human being. I saw my practice as a gradual process of understanding how art functions. As an artist, I look up to amazing talents out there in the creative field and I would consider myself as a fan of the profound thoughts in their works. I was exposed to the foundations of art when I did my bachelor’s degree in fine arts at MARA Institute of Technology (UiTM), completed in 2000. In this early stage, I felt that it was more of an exploration of technique. After a while, I felt that there was a lack in terms of the sophistication of thought. In my quest for sophistication in my art practice, I realised that research is a vital component. I humbly feel that I still have a long way to go and that there are still a lot more to be done. I Invested and prepared myself to be more knowledgeable in this field. From 2004 to 2007, I was appointed as an assistant researcher at Cultural Centre, University of Malaya, where I had the opportunity to work under Associate Professor Redza Piyadasa, acclaimed Malaysian art historian, and Professor Ghulam-Sarwar, a scholar in traditional Malay arts and South-East Asian theatre. Their guidance and wisdom cultivated my interest in the trove of Southeast Asian knowledge. I buried myself with books that I could now easily access in the university library. I learnt how to write academic papers for journals and research methods.

During this period, I befriended Uwei Hj Saari, famed Malaysian filmmaker, even though we have already known each other previously. He has collected a lot of my works and remains a great source of support throughout my artistic journey. In 2004, I manage to stage my solo exhibition at Stonor Centre, Kuala Lumpur. After working hard for the past two years, it felt overwhelming to be able to finally prepare for this exhibition. After I left my post at the University of Malaya, I established Satu: Creative Collective, about which I will elaborate further on in this essay. From 2008 onwards, my works were exhibited locally and internationally, but after some time, I felt stagnant about my artistic output and that it was generic. Therefore, I decided to enrol myself in graduate school. This was important to me because I wanted to gain the appropriate knowledge that reflects on contemporary art practice. I earned the opportunity in 2015 to further my studies at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). It was there that I was introduced to practice-based research because I saw the many options research methods and possibilities in acquiring knowledge.

I deeply appreciated the experience I gained during this period; I was active in writing academic papers, presentation and making art. I had the time to reflect and ponder about what I have been making prior and what will subsequently take over in my art practice. I had the chance to rethink, strategize and make a necessary intervention with this new form of understanding that will shape my future art practice.

The practice-based research method commonly used by professionals in the creative field is relatively new. This form of research was introduced in the art departments of selected local universities a decade ago. This method emphasises the importance of discoveries by approaching studio practice as a significant contribution to knowledge. Through this process, the researcher is required to formulate their own understanding of their art practice. He or she had to have clarity in their research objectives, questions and the contribution to knowledge. In my case, I was obsessed with the idea of reality, for example, my very own situation, my environment and my roots. As a person growing up in an urban environment, an affection for materials that already existed in my earlier practice found its way in my new body of work. I tried to make sense converging these two aspects into one cohesive idea that I want to commit myself to in my research.

Figure 1: Elias Yamani Ismal, Projek 10, Mixed Media, 56x58cm, 3 units, 2018.



While researching contemporary art practice, the word ‘bricolage’ came to my attention. This concept was formulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, a French philosopher and anthropologist, during his fieldwork with communities in Brazil, India and the Caribbean. ‘Bricolage’ is defined as a do-it-yourself practice, where one builds or repairs things with the tools and materials readily available on hand, puttering or tinkering as it were, while a ‘bricoleur’ is a person who works primarily with their hands using a diverse range of materials. Lévi-Strauss was fascinated with the artefacts found in these indigenous communities which were made from materials found in the surrounding environment. Adopting from the anthropology studies, contemporary artists are now able to explore possibilities with this mode of artmaking.

In my own research, I utilised objects that are found in abundance, or ready-made and used materials from my environment which carry the symbolic meaning of urban development. My current body of work is about conveying the idea of density by employing the ‘bricolage’ method. Urbanism is a part of globalisation affecting all societies. Certain issues arise when discussing urbanisation, such as gentrification, migration, and pollution. I retain the density of the elements caused by urbanisation in my works, but I make sure they are rooted in local contexts and values.

I continued to immerse myself in research. I went to Hong Kong twice (2016 and 2017) because I wanted to experience how it is like to be amongst the densest population on earth. Aside from that, I used the opportunity to visit two major events, which were Hong Kong Art Basel and Art Central, along with other galleries, art spaces and events that took place concurrently. I gained first-hand experience looking at the current trends in art. This trip to Hong Kong is one of my most cherished travels. From 2016 to the current exhibition, I managed to translate my newly gained knowledge into my practice by exploring these new ideas. In the first exhibition series titled ‘Extending Ideas’ (2016), of which I was offered assistance from The Goethe Institut Malaysia, I explored the idea of ‘bricolage’ with five other artists. In the 2018 exhibition ‘Constructed Environment and Shared Experience,’ I invited five artists to interpret the theme urbanisation. In the following year, ‘Urban Experience: Lisbon & Kuala Lumpur’ was held at the Museum of Asian Art, University of Malaya. It explored the binary comparison between living artists from two continents, but who were both born and raised in the city. The current exhibition now deals with issues regarding rapid urban development with a ‘bricolage’ approach in artmaking. In ‘Transition Transformative: A Visual Experience,’ artists are encouraged to produce work outside their conventional practice in order to be exposed to the other possibilities that they might discover through this process.

I was an active participant in the Malaysian art scene since 1998. Being visible in the art scene is important as an emerging artist at the time. Through this experience, I felt that one big hurdle is that young artists struggle to get their works exhibited. ‘Satu: Creative Collective’ is a platform that I created in 2008 after a discussion with some close friends. We felt that it was crucial at the time to set up an initiative that aims to encourage fresh ideas from emerging artists. We set up our own exhibitions in public art spaces that are open to hosting an exhibition. We wanted to garner a diverse audience for our works. In the early stage, we did not have a clear direction aside from the spirit of fostering friendships and collaboration.

Through this process, we learnt how to prepare a proposal, how to create promotional materials and adopting the ‘gotong-royong’ approach in every exhibition we organised. Everyone voluntarily helps each other to prepare and set up the exhibition, meaning that artists are not only welcome to join the event but also have to participate in the hanging of their works and share the rental cost if needed to. This is not conventionally practised here. Usually, the gallery will handle all necessary aspects of the exhibition. We do not have that usual gallery support. We prefer to create opportunities rather than waiting for opportunities to come to us.

After gaining experience and knowledge from organising a few exhibitions, we realised that we needed a clear vision for the future of this collective. This was how we arrived at the creation of the experimental exhibition titled ‘Interpretasi Pembinaan Bermula’ (2012). We prepared the setup and strategies for this exhibition as early as a year prior. This exhibition comprised an eclectic collection of materials such as found objects, ready-made, and light fixtures, all used and unconventional medium. Nine artists were invited to exhibit their works with their artistic expression and presentation of choice. Accompanying the exhibition was the published catalogue consisting of different views expressed in four essays. With the success of this exhibition, we became more convinced in the direction that we want to move forward with. Satu: Creative Collective-organised exhibitions must have a strong theme and an underlying research component. To date, we have independently organised twenty art exhibitions, multiple workshops, talks, dialogues and published six catalogues. I truly believe that art collectives play an important role in bridging the gap in the creative ecosystem.

Figure 2: Ady Ezwan Nordin, Pembinaan 2, Various, 2020.



Figure 3: Fakir Mohamad Md., Nor, Erosion, Digital print, synthetic paper, 42x42cm (8 units), 2020.



Figure 4: Mat Ramli Mansor, Refleksi, Mixed Media, various sizes, 2020.



Figure 5: Sukor Romat, Beban Orang Putih, 35x38.5x10cm, 2020.

