

obtained Western educations in Holland formed a Javanese nationalist movement, which became the embryo for Indonesian nationalism.

At the end of the 19th century signs of change began to emerge. A group of liberals held sway in the Dutch parliament and opposed the repressive political policies and monopoly of the Dutch East Indies government. This liberal group, which was supported by industrialists, demanded that modernization be undertaken in the Dutch East Indies, through, among other things, the opening up of investment opportunities in the colony for the private sector. In 1860, this liberal group initiated the Ethical Politics Movement that insisted that the Dutch colonial government introduce modernization among the natives and stop repressive politics. In 1901, this liberal group won the bulk of their demands.

The Ethical Politics Movement motivated the advent of modernization among the local populace, howbeit in very limited circles. In the 19th century, a number of local native figures emerged in the Dutch East Indies who exhibited modern ways of thinking. Among them were the romanticist painter Raden Saleh, the photographer Kassian Cephas, female emancipation thinker R.A. Kartini, and the scholar/philosopher Ronggowarsito, who studied on their own how to resist Western education. They were among the first moderns the Dutch East Indies, and were, by chance, all natives.

At the beginning of the 20th century, modernization, which had been concentrated on the island of Java, spread to other regions. The groups of people who had been receiving Western educations since the 18th century began introducing ideas about an Indonesian nation and people, fanning nationalism and eventually forming a movement for demanding independence.

The culture of this group of people that brought Indonesia to independence reflected the developments emerging from cultural inter-mixing. These developments followed along on the coattails of the patterns of colonial imperialist politics. Because the center of the Dutch East Indies colonial government was on the island of Java, this cultural inter-mixing developed mostly within the Javanese kingdoms, creating a culture known as the Javanese Classical Culture. As the power of the Dutch East Indies government expanded, the mixing of cultures began to occur in other regions as well. With the expansion of this cultural inter-mixing, emerged the concept of Indonesia, which at first lived only within the world of ideas.

The developments ensuing this inter-mixing of cultures exhibited continuity, from the Classic Javanese Culture to the culture of Indonesia. Viewing this process within the context of Indonesia, this narrative of development can be seen to contain links in a chain of thought that can be read as "Indonesian modernism." In this narration can also be see the

development of art in the Western sense.

In the Classic Javanese Culture, the adaptation of art in the Western sense gave rise to the term *kagunan*. As I have set forth in other seminars of this sort, the term *kagunan* exhibits an awareness of the need to identify art that did not reflect art within the context of the Javanese ethnic culture. Art within that ethnic cultural context, as I understand it, did not include a tradition of identifying or defining art. Delving into the meaning of the term *kagunan* itself, it is apparent that any translation would have to start with the term *mousikê techne* originating from the language of ancient Greece, which is also the root for the formulation of the term “art” in the English language. This term, however, has developed and expanded in meaning.

The adaptation of art in the Western sense at the beginning of the 19th century led to the emergence of the romanticist painter Raden Saleh, who besides studying art in Holland, had traveled to Germany and France. Although the adaptation of art in the Western sense was already apparent in the early 19th century, there was a feeling of ambivalence about it. Ronggowarsito, an expert in Javanese culture who was known as an advisor on Javanology to the colonial government of the Dutch East Indies, took issue with the term *kagunan*. He viewed the understanding of *kagunan*, which carried the meaning of capability in the production of art, as bringing with it a sense of pride and the desire to be acknowledged.

This philosophical view of the scholar Ronggowarsito, who was known as a Widyantara philosophy, then infused *kagunan* with more meaning. This philosopher brought into play the matters of morality and efforts toward achieving good, which were prioritized within the Javanese culture.<sup>6</sup> In the *Baoesastra Djawa* dictionary, which reflects the Classic Javanese Culture, the understanding of the term *kagunan* contains the views of Ronggowarsito. *Kagunan* is detailed as the expression of a feeling related to morality and the achievement of goodness.<sup>7</sup> This is the ideology of the terminology *kagunan* that indicates a shift in ideology occurring in relation to the translation of art in the Western sense.

In the midst of the modernization occurring in the 20th century, the inter-mixing of cultures continuing from the 18th century gave birth to the Indonesian language as a part of the advent of nationalism. This Indonesian language was a modern language, which did not originate in the Javanese language, and was also not one of the 500 dialects utilized by the 300 traditional ethnic groups in Indonesia. In the Indonesian language there then emerged a number of new expressions that also could not be found in any of the 500 local dialects existing in Indonesia.

Among these new expressions or terminologies was the term *seni*, which was more or less identical in meaning to the word “art” in the English language, and also the term *seni rupa*, which was a translation of “fine art.” Even so, the understanding of these terms covered not only the

understanding of the words an “art” and “fine art” as they existed in the English language.

Because the emergence of the Indonesian language was a part of the continuation of the development of the inter-mixing of cultures that had been formulating since the 18th century, the terms *seni* and *seni rupa* also took on the understanding of *kagunan*; in particular the ideology of *kagunan*. Within the development of art in Indonesia, this ideology based in morality can be felt as the basis for all of the ensuing developments in art, whether those of modern art in the 20th century, or those of contemporary art, which emerged in the 1980s and '90s.

The difference between the ideologies of art based in the morality defined above and that of art as set out by Stephen Davies, which makes no reference to morality, is immediately apparent. This ideological difference is what makes the translation of art, which is linked to morality and social conventions, more dominant within the development of Indonesian art than the modernist discourse, which is relatively more difficult to understand, and for that reason was never translated.

Taking into consideration this framework of thinking that I have discovered, I do not see any relevance in comparing the development of Cubism with the emergence of Cubist artworks in Indonesia. The formalistic Cubism of the works occurring within the development of art in Europe and America can be perceived as important because, basically, they exhibit the noun-ish sense of the English notion of “art.”

While, the issue of Cubist shapes in the works of Indonesian artists is only a matter of idiom, which, in fact, ignores the “thingness” of art as noun. These works follow the understanding of the term *seni rupa* which is adverbial. The Cubist forms in the works of Indonesian artists carry an expression of the aesthetic, and are imbued with meaning and an emphasis on experience linked to a sense of morality. The tendency to work and use Cubist forms in this manner is certainly not special, and really is no different than the tendency to utilize any other idiom that is not Cubistic.

Notes:

1. William R. Everdall, *The First Moderns* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.79.
2. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, pp.493–494.
3. André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” in Philip Alperson, ed., *The Philosophy of The Visual Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.279.
4. Stephen Davies, “Non-Western Art and Art’s Definition” in Carroll Noel, ed., *Theories of Art Today* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p.201.
5. J. De Loos Haaxman, *Verlaat Rapport Indië* (’S-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1968).
6. Old Script *Pustaka Purwa Raja*. The publisher and the date of publication are both unknown.
7. W.J.S. Poerwardarminta et al., *Baoesastra Djawa* (Groningen-Bnatavia: J.B. Wolter’s, 1939).

## Translucent Traces of People: Peasant and Proletariat in Philippine Cubism

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The idyll was one of the dominant scenes that typified the Philippines in the American era. It was framed by the romantic-Realist vanguards of what is known as the conservative school of Philippine painting, led by the revered masters Fabian de la Rosa and Fernando Amorsolo. Its bastion was the University of the Philippines, an institution founded in 1908 to support the agenda of benevolent assimilation in which America reared the erstwhile Hispanic post-colony in the ways of democracy. This effort to craft the Philippines in the image of a neo-colony and in the guise of a republic under imperialist auspice took deep root in the fields of government, education, and popular culture. The fixation on peace and prosperity inherent in such a policy, which incidentally the American president would invoke as the model of restructuring Iraq in our own moment, motivated the interaction between the pastoral of liberation and the frenzy of expansion. Curiously, in the discipline of art, the polemics between conservatives and moderns, initiated in the late 1920s and lasting through the 1950s, played out in a milieu that nurtured both aspirations.

Central to this imagination was the figuration of labor, of people tilling the terrain, cultivating plentiful nature into a provenance exemplifying the “Philippine.” We note that Amorsolo’s pictures were not confined to paintings; they circulated in calendars, textbooks, advertisements, and newspapers. This representation of labor would be challenged by Victorio Edades, who studied architecture and painting at the University of Washington and was acutely influenced by the controversial 1913 Armory Show. The work *The Builders*, which formed part of his homecoming exhibition in 1928, created a stir in the establishment, having deviated from the tableau of work that congeals into rustic spectacle to settle on the fleeting circumstance of working that lays bare the elements of its hectic drudgery: distorted bodies of considerable heft, disfiguring grime and grit, workers fleshed out through an accretion of substance, of a mass that is basically undifferentiated. It is this mass of labor that has been organized and contracted through wage relations courtesy of capitalism, generating the proletariat of a developing nation-state and the inhabitants of its cityscape. In this technique of building, painting as an instance of facture produces the modern and becomes a detail of its technology; it ceases to be merely a modern invention. This watershed oeuvre infused the movement acknowledged as modernism,



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which was pursued by the triumvirate of Edades, Carlos Francisco, and Galo Ocampo. We draw the art-historical nexus to Cubism against this background.

Two paintings are salient in this regard. Carlos Francisco's *Orasyon* (Prayer) and Galo Ocampo's *Brown Madonna* (1938, fig.1) evoke a spiritual climate; in the former, farmers pause to pray at dusk and in the latter, the Madonna and Child iconography assumes local habilitment. The figure of the peasant is foregrounded in both, lodged in a rural economy and inscribes the codes of lore and ritual, which convey signs of colonial inheritance and native entitlement. In these instructive intimations of province, the trope of the "folk" emerges as a personage constituted between dignified survival and the critical transition toward self-consciousness. The notion of the folk, therefore, modifies the strictly economic framework insinuated by the concepts of the peasant and proletariat that are mainly premised on the method of surplus extraction: exchange for the former and the conscription of labor through a production mechanism for the latter. This travail of the folk, who were being decisively transformed into a "working class," is cogently put across in Cesar Legaspi's *Gadgets* series (1948, 1949, 1952) in which people mediate machines but are not overwhelmingly dehumanized and in Galo Ocampo's Surrealistic *Bayanihan* (1955), in which cooperative toil within the locale of village life is esteemed. It is in the constitution of the "folk" that traces of people are delineated as workers reified from their humanity, on the one hand, and as agents cherishing their local moral world, on the other.

Vicente Manansala, who learned from the socialist Fernand Léger, would cast Cubism in light of these contexts. A member of the 13 Moderns, an informal coterie of modernists gathered by Victorio Edades in 1941 only to be dispersed by the Pacific War, and a luminary of the postwar Neorealists (1949), who tried to venture beyond the post-Impressionism of a foundational modernism, Manansala sustained the discourse of the folk that was introduced by Carlos Francisco and Galo Ocampo. But he was committed as well to take it to another level by way of Cubism. Thus, while his *Angelus/I Believe in God* (1948) resembles or nearly imitates Francisco's stroke and flair (Paras-Perez, 1980), his *Madonna of the Slums* (1950, fig.2) reinterprets Ocampo's intuition of locality; it does not only mark a shift of locus and livery, it also conceives the intensity adequate to an asymmetrical social situation. *Madonna of the Slums* may be regarded as the paradigmatic and programmatic mode through which Cubism in the Philippines would be grasped to reveal the strain in the ties between the peasant and the proletariat, the idyll and the city, the ideal and the misshapen, the common folk and the distinct Filipino. In Philippine painting, this disproportion condenses in the lumpen character, neither peasant nor proletariat, roaming the daunting



fig.1: Galo Ocampo, *Brown Madonna*, 1938, oil on canvas



fig.2: Vicente Manansala, *Madonna of the Slums*, 1950, oil on lawanit board [color plate 9]

streets: the vagrant.

The critic Leonidas Benesa asserted that the Neorealists were “united under the aegis of cubism.” (Benesa 1978, n.p.) Cubism served as the vehicle through which they were able to express a world ruined and reconfigured by the war, the American campaign to reclaim the Philippines from the Japanese, and the period of reconstruction. Within this horizon appeared sights of dispossession and restoration. H.R. Ocampo and Cesar Legaspi would limn the theme of hunger amid affluence with severity and Neorealists of the Philippine Art Gallery (1951) like Romeo Tabuena, Ang Kiukok, and Nena Saguil would carve out of Cubism the edge and angle of dislocation and uncertainty to sharpen their expressionist dispositions.

But it was H.R. Ocampo, a self-taught painter and writer, who most convincingly embodied the profound longing to imagine the temper of a fractured state and the antagonisms that agitated it. Belonging to the artist’s proletarian phase (1934-1948) is a work titled *Calvary / Three Crosses* (1948, fig.3); it depicts the crucifixion of Christ alongside the smokestacks of a factory, and so links the Catholic pieties of suffering and sacrifice to the exhaustion of industrial advancement. It is a depiction that coheres well with the artist’s fiction such as *Bakya* (Wooden Clogs), which keenly portrays the anguish of a mother who finds her husband dead in the picket line of striking workers, and *Rice and Bullets*, where “the hungry and the destitute hurl the first stones, assaulting the forces of law, and barging into the mighty storehouse, heedless of bullets.” (Reyes 2004)

Gleaning from the corpus of H.R. Ocampo, the city becomes a site of uneven developments where the peasant and the proletariat live within a new space that recombines their respective customs and disproves the rigid dichotomy between them: migrants from the countryside, like Victorio Edades and Vicente Manansala themselves, found their places in Manila and the islands around the archipelago were being gradually assimilated into a network of urban centers. Manansala once confessed, “I am not an intellectual. I am a peasant. I do not paint from the mind. I paint from the heart.” (Reyes 1989, 22) He was raised in Pampanga, north of Manila, but moved to the capital after the war, lived in the slums, and sketched the portraits of American soldiers to get by. The Neorealists refocused their vision on this feeling of habitation that was instilled among dwellers who clustered around railways in their improvised shelter and poached on land that was not their property; Cubism offered a language that articulated this experience and may have envisaged the city as, in the words of Susan Buck-Morss (1995), a “dreamwork and catastrophe.”

A key aspect here was a kind of hybrid architecture contrived in war. The *barongbarong* was and continues to be the popular term for the shanty made of scrap materials found in the environment. It is pieced together



fig.3: H.R. Ocampo, *Calvary / Three Crosses*, 1948, oil on canvas



fig.4: Vicente Manansala, *Barong-  
Barong Number 1*, 1950, oil on canvas

like an assemblage, with diverse elements continually being appended as the need arises. Its structure takes after the indigenous hut, or the *bahay kubo*, literally translated as the cube house, a single-room affair of many extensions. The *barongbarong* found its way to many Neorealist paintings (fig.4), perhaps because it was a reference to the blight of the prewar and postwar landscape, which inevitably conceded to the City Beautiful neo-Classic design suited to America's tropical empire.

A complement of this peculiar translation of the Cubist conception through the morphology of a makeshift abode is the phrase "Transparent Cubism." Departing from the prominent stylistic traits of its source, such as rigorous fragmentation and limited chromatic possibilities, Transparent Cubism facets the surface to disclose crystalline planes without violating the integrity of the figure or subject matter. This expression favors rhythm and harmony, local color, and a lyrical effect in which the work tends to shimmer or sparkle as light touches the facets of the surface. The term "transparent" is based on this interplay as well as on the overlapping of planes that penetrate each other. This quality is more translucent and diaphanous than transparent, flirting with the tension between opaque matter and streaming light, an impression that can be observed in delicate, see-through festival ornamentation, from Christmas lanterns to rice-wafer chandeliers; gossamer fabric of pineapple fiber; and shell windows filtering glare to furnish interiors with pearly luster.

The materialization of the Cubist in the Philippines thus can be described by the layers of light that give rise to a condition of being apparent, of being between obvious and seeming. This principle relates to both space and a strategy of remaining "human." It has been proposed that the resistance of Philippine Cubism to the total dissolution of the subject is an attempt to restore well-being in the face of aggressive alienation. It is an outlook that is, on the one hand, stark as can be seen in how the *barongbarong* indexes political economy; on the other, it is ambivalent as it impersonates Cubism but forsakes its analytical or synthetic rationality through an excess of adornment, which renders a folk ethos lively and resilient amid the rubble. Ang Kiukok's indignant faces and heaps of junk and Anita Magsaysay-Ho's rural women of angular visages who wear white scarves of sisterhood betray these mixed tendencies of critique and concord, a creative transposition of Cubism into a Philippine visuality suspended in luminous sheerness. This uncertainty, however, has also prompted writers to suspect that artists of Cubistic inclination only "incorporated into...figurative paintings...fragmented images...They're still Amorsolo." (Reyes 1989, 97)

Apart from translucence, an idiosyncratic Philippine Cubism also appropriated the mural as a means of addressing a wider public of either spectators in the art world or citizens in a civic realm. Relevant in this discussion is the early collaboration of Victorio Edades, Carlos Francisco,

and Galo Ocampo for a large work commissioned for Juan Nakpil's Capitol Theater. *Rising Philippines* (1935, fig. 5) is an allegorical tribute to the rebirth of the nation with the founding of the institutions that vested the Philippines with supervised sovereignty as the Commonwealth government of America and with the ascendancy of film as the century's premier medium. This work bears the influence of Art Deco, the emerging style of a modernizing Philippine architecture that imbibed the Jazz Age, Hollywood, and an eclecticism mingling an array of inspirations, from Cubism to exotic primitive archetypes (including Filipino motifs) to aerodynamic machines. According to Edades, "The painting was very symbolic; it showed a figure of a woman surging upwards, and on either side of her we tried to show the Spanish civilization which taught us religion and the American civilization which taught us how to work." (Reyes 1989, 7) This sympathy to the eclectic vocabulary of Art Deco resonates with the projection of the city as a utopian dreamscape reveling in narcotic admixtures but dispelled by war; painted in the year Marcos declared Martial Law, Vicente Manansala's charcoal opus *Group of Nude Figures* (1972) about an orgy in a drug den may allude to such a decadent ambience.

Important murals that cite Cubism include Francisco's *Filipino Struggles Through Philippines History* (1964), which narrates the history of the Philippines in a mythic register; Manansala's *Stations of the Cross* (1957) for the University of the Philippines Catholic chapel; and H.R. Ocampo's *Genesis* (1966), which was woven into a tapestry by Japanese artisans to serve as the magnificent curtain of the main theater of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. These works were entangled in conflicting political desires. We note that before Manansala pursued Cubism with devotion, he was interested in exploring social issues as can be discerned in the mural *Freedom of the Press* on the predicament of journalism for the National Press Club. With this, Cubism assumed a public-ness and declared a longing to at once represent and rouse the spirit of what may be interpellated as mass subjects and designated as the people. It was through this populism that Cubism lent itself well to the species of nationalism fostered by leaders of a peripheral nation-state like Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970s; concomitantly, the art market intervened to herald Cubism as the signature of modern taste. In a setting where state and market were coordinated by the patronage of a dictatorship like in the Philippines, Cubism inevitably converted into a specimen of kitsch spoilt by the art trade and a variety of propaganda exploited by the state to ratify its status as a custodian of identity deserving of consensus and an engineer of development worthy of international recognition. At this turn in the career of Cubism, modernism drifted toward becoming hegemonic, in contrast to its oppositional impetus in its incipient foray, setting itself as the norm of the latest, albeit already belated from the



fig.5: Victorio Edades / Carlos Francisco / Galo Ocampo, *Rising Philippines*, Capitol Theater mural, 1935, oil on canvas



Euramerican estimation. We only have to notice the discrepancy between Vicente Manansala's *Madonna of the Slums* and its version in *Mag-ina* (Mother and Child) in 1975 to reckon how the symptom of scarcity would mutate into suspicious affectation over the years, with a vagary in history becoming nothing more than a vogue and the modernist patriarch being reduced to a "society painter" on whom an authoritarian regime confers National Artist honors. Inevitably, the modernists, along with Amorsolo, would conspire to ensconce the Philippine picturesque and secure for the hardened but sanguine folk its currency as Filipino, modernity's expectant apprentice.

This is probably why governments of autocratic and third-world nationalist persuasion harnessed the potentials of public art, an option carried out quite indirectly through Cubism. The Marcos administration, through the frivolous schemes of Imelda, enlisted the talent of modernists to satiate the impossibly fraught requirements of modernity foisted on a post-colony: to locate an origin and to demonstrate originality, to preserve an essence and to catch up, to pose as native and national and to prime a polity for global enterprise. Manansala was asked to paint a mural extolling the achievements of Imelda as mother of Filipinos for the Philippine Heart Center (fig.6), and Cesar Legaspi's *Bayanihan* (1976) was executed as an outdoor work for the First Lady's whim to decorate Manila with art for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development V (UNCTAD) meeting in 1979.



fig.6: Vicente Manansala, Philippine Heart Center mural, 1976, oil on canvas [color plate 11]

It is uncanny that the mural, an indispensable presence in Latin American Marxist-inflected art, was greatly deepened by Diego Rivera, a Cubist in Paris from 1915-1917 before he returned to Mexico. We can tentatively explore a lateral encounter between the Latin American mural movement and Southeast Asian modern art through Cubism, which had an eccentric relationship with public art. In Indonesia, for instance, there is a story of Soekarno, the charismatic leader of the Indonesian revolution in 1945 and the first President of the Republic, inviting Diego Rivera to visit. Though we could not confirm this anecdote, we find in the extensive Soekarno art collection a work of Rivera, *Woman with Flowers* (1955), of an Indonesian lady in traditional attire. Moreover, in 1954, Rivera met Soemardja, the founder of the cosmopolitan Bandung Institute of Technology, which was the channel of Cubism in Indonesia through Ries Mulder; according to art historian Jim Supangkat, Mulder was primarily a stained-glass artist of Art Deco leanings. Recent research by art scholar Alice Guillermo likewise tells us that Carlos Francisco, the foremost muralist in Philippine art, frequently mentioned Mexican murals in letters to his daughter and looked up to Rivera; Victorio Edades had earlier acquainted him to Pre-Columbian motifs, which may have heightened his interest in popular mural conventions through Art Deco.

This preliminary investigation into the contact between Cubism

and nation-building, partially via Art Deco that flourished in Manila and Bandung in the 1930s, may draw our attention to the ways in which the Cubist promise would be upheld or frustrated as a testimony to a usable modernity and an appeal to the labor of the folk multitude, peasant and proletariat, that conjured the nation. We can identify, for instance, the allure of abstraction (Zaelani 2004) and of simultaneity or dynamism that may have mediated the project of progress — or revolution — and enabled a Cubist sphere to exist and endure within postcolonial nations anxious about autonomy and the prospects of amelioration. As Thomas Crow (1996) reminds us, “The Cubist vision of sensory flux and isolation in the city became in Art Deco a portable vocabulary for a whole modern ‘look’ in fashion and design... (The Art Deco style was also easily drawn into the imagery of the mechanized body characteristic of proto fascist and fascist Utopianism.)” Exemplary in this regard is the poster designed by Leo Visser in 1933 that advertises the telephone link between the Netherlands and the East Indies: on the left are typical Dutch scenes; on the right are commonplace images of the colony. It is a juxtaposition that may be detected in the early mural collaboration on the *Rising Philippines* of the pioneer Filipino modernists in 1935.

The ruin of postwar Manila and post-Independence Jakarta (Kusno 2000) and the comprehensive plans through which they would be mended and later refurbished in the New Society/New Order rule of Marcos and Soeharto was the materiality that may have concretized a Cubist semblance, or dissembling. It was this procedure of wrenching modernization that provided the means of, in the neoliberal parlance of our day, an exceptional makeover true to totalitarian and capitalist pretenses. Cubism may have secured for Philippine and Indonesian modernity an idiom that crosses the gap between the memory of a “selective tradition” and the rupture with retrogressive habitude, between cohesion and multiplicity, between the renunciation of underdevelopment (or the affirmation of innovative industrialization) and the orientalist nostalgia for quaint virtues of kinship and solidarity. In so doing, it may have finally prefigured the complex convergence of nation, state, people, and the emancipatory fantasies of postcolonial passage.

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## Nanyang Modernism: Between Idealisms

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When Liu Kang (China 1911 – Singapore 2004) asserted that the location of his practice is “not ... Paris, not ... Beijing, not ... Rome and not ... Tokyo ...,”<sup>1</sup> he was not merely attempting to distinguish his art from those that developed elsewhere. But rather he aimed to emphasize a cultural consciousness, one that recognized the engagements and the continuities of art development across geography and over time. *Painting Kampung* (1957, fig.1) is both about marking affiliation (a belonging to a caucus of modernity referenced to Paris and Shanghai) and distancing (staking the idea of the original by way of its “original” Southeast Asian subject and the re-positioning of the traditional ink-scroll landscape conventions, advancing newer notions of “tropicality” and “oriental pictoriality”).

Born in China in 1911, Liu spent his childhood in Malaya, studied art in Shanghai under Liu Haisu in the late-1920s and later Paris in the early 1930s, taught art upon his return to Shanghai, before moving to Singapore in 1937. The Sino-Japanese War that erupted in 1937 made Liu Kang’s move permanent, foreshadowing the migration of others — including Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng and Georgette Chen — after the Second World War. They came to Singapore having spent their formative and maturing years either in Shanghai or Paris, and hence looked at Singapore as a location where the modern trajectories in their artistic practice may be continued and sustained. These developments taking place outside of post-1949 China are interesting. Ralph Croizier, in his article on modern art in Shanghai remarked:

The Communist rise to power in 1949 wrote a definitive end to a period in modern China’s art history and cultural interaction with the West that was already over ... Not until the 1980s would the names and styles of European modernism — Matisse, Picasso, Fauvism, Cubism, and all the rest — re-enter the Chinese art world.<sup>2</sup>

Here, China is regarded firstly as a geo-national entity. Yet, the transmigration of intellectuals and artists during the period during and after the War, involuntary or otherwise, had generated a range of practices outside of China. For Liu Kang, the question of continuity and change in modern



Ahmad Mashadi



fig.1: Liu Kang, *Painting Kampung*, 1957, oil on canvas

Chinese art (conceived here extra-territorially) was to be addressed by asserting the discursiveness of his practice to earlier developments in China. His comments on Xu Beihong, a frequent visitor to Singapore during the late-1930s and early-1940s is indicative:

The 20th century is a major turning point in history. Western art has entered a new state in creative concept, technique and material. Witness the Impressionist's analysis of light, the psychological element on Post-Impressionists' style, the colour of individuality in Fauvism, the method of re-organising forms in Cubism, and the influence of music on Abstract Expressionist style. All these are indeed glorious happenings in the art world. Living in the midst of new inventive waves, Beihong, instead of welcoming them with open arms, criticizes Cézanne, the forefather of modern art and, Matisse, leader of Fauvism by calling them gangsters. That shows how outdated his thinking is!<sup>3</sup>

Here, Liu refers to the well-known debate between Xu Beihong and Xu Zhimo initiated in 1929, during which time Liu was a student in Shanghai. Xu Beihong in his article entitled "Doubt" denounced Cézanne, Matisse as deviants from the great tradition of Western art, and "ridiculed their Chinese followers in abusive terms that equally mixed scorn and outrage."<sup>4</sup> Xu Zhimo's calculated response in "I also Have Doubts", stated a case for the Chinese modernists, further entrenching the modernists' claim in assuming the mettle in advancing Chinese art. Liu's regard for Xu Beihong was strategic. Practicing in Singapore since 1937, it was critical to correlate his practice in relation to earlier discourse that took place in China. By the 1950s, the modernist project within China had begun to wane, and one may speculate that it was important for Liu to suggest that the criticality of artistic practice may be identified through the diasporic dispersion of Chinese modern art, including the developments taking place in Singapore. At other times, Liu refers to his Chinese-ness. He stated, "I paint with Western painting material and tools, but my style and substance are Chinese, ... the realm of my painting is typically Oriental." And this was also be cast in civilizational terms: "Only when one has fully grasped the essence of one's culture and is proud of one's ethnicity that one can thoroughly understand the essence of other races' traditions and penetrate their minds."<sup>5</sup>

This presentation focuses the thoughts and perspectives of a group of ethnic-Chinese artists — chiefly migrants — that emerged into prominence during postwar colonial Singapore. To emphasize the range of aesthetic idealisms, we shall make references to the statements made by

the artists and also claims made on their behalf. The statements and remarks provide significant insights into the thoughts and attitudes of artists, as form of artistic voices that render art historical readings dynamic, linking and comparing intentionalities with outcomes. This is necessary to measure the conceptual and formal inflections that take place as aesthetic devices are adapted and put in use within specific contexts and with varying points of entry.

These group of ethnic-Chinese artists were known collectively as the Nanyang (Southseas) artists — a term that gained great currency by the 1950s — referenced geographically and culturally to China. The artists mentioned earlier, Liu Kang, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng and Georgette Chen are commonly grouped together given their preponderance toward styles associated to Western modernism. Among them, the practices of Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng during the 1950s showed a greater propensity towards the Cubistic idiom. Cheong's *Malay Woman* (1950, fig.2), *Bali Beach* (1955), *Brook* (1953, fig.3) and Chen's *Couple* (c. 1950s), *Dance* (1954, fig. 4) and *Four Herds* (c. 1950s) are conducive for further investigations. In these paintings, the Chinese-ness or the notion of Self is rendered present by representations of the Other, through the artist's fascination for the primitive and the idyllic. The Nanyang or Southeast Asia and its peoples were after all, new to these migrant artists. *Malay Woman* provides an enigmatic dual imagery of seduction and repulsion. *Brook* and *Four Herds* exude a resonance of an exotic land. For Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi and Chen Chong Swee, Bali — its landscape and women — more than other subjects, offered a rich cultural imaginary. Their famous trip to Bali in 1952 had been canonized as a critical turning point in the development of the Nanyang iconography. But Bali as a cultural imagery emerged in Singapore as early in the late 1930s. A Belgian artist Jean Le Mayeur (1880-1958) held a solo exhibition in Singapore featuring works completed in Bali. In attendance was his beautiful Balinese wife Ni Pollok — who would have appeared mysterious, exotic and enchanting. Chen Chong Swee, overwhelmed by the impressionistic exuberance of the Belgian's paintings and his wife wrote:

A Belgian artist who settled in Bali put up an art exhibition in Singapore in 1938. This Belgian artist originally wanted to go to Tahiti as he had a yearning for the type of life led by the Post-Impressionist artist Gauguin. On his way there he passed through Bali and found that there was no place on earth like Bali — its dancing and singing so soul-stirring and its women so vigorous and graceful. ... Before the opening of the exhibition, the Belgian consul held a reception on his behalf ... Figures dominated his Bali



fig.2: Cheong Soo Pieng, *Malay Woman*, 1950, oil on board [color plate 14]

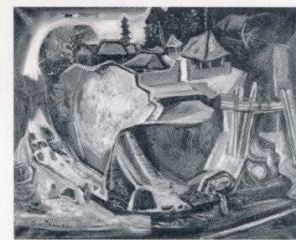


fig.3: Cheong Soo Pieng, *Brook*, 1953, oil on canvas



fig.4: Chen Wen Hsi, *Dance*, 1954, oil on canvas

paintings. His works be they sketches done in light colours or bright coloured oil paintings, showed that they were inspired by the bright and clear tropical sunlight. His brightly clad energetic and graceful dancers, dancing to the beat of the drums and bells, or his weaving women, kneeling beside the loom weaving sarong cloth, fully demonstrated the tranquil and fine life of the Balinese. The painting partner [Ni Pollok, who later became his wife] he brought along, attired in traditional Balinese costumes, was on hand to receive guests. She offered herself for photographs bare-breasted. This created quite a stir in Singapore.<sup>6</sup>



fig.5: Liu Kang, *Artist and Model*, 1954, oil on canvas

In *Bali Beach* (1955) and *Artist and Model* (1956, fig.5) represent a popular regard for Bali as a Nanyang subject. The Other — the sitting or reclining women of Bali — offers no voice. It is silent and docile, unconcerned by the encroachment or gaze of the artists. It fulfils Ni Pollok's earlier promise and more. While it is common to regard these excursionary interests as impulses to “transform ‘primitive’ art to formulate a new artistic language” connected to the “aesthetic value and practice with roots in the West”,<sup>7</sup> Bali as “inspiration” also symptomised the necessary inflection prompted by streams of modernity advanced earlier through Prewar China. Hence, the Balinese subjects — completed in diverse modern styles Fauvistic, post-Impressionistic, Cubist and Realist — become a symbol of the appropriated Nanyang, indexed to Chinese diasporic modernity. Artists' conceptions of the Chinese-ness of their formalistic devices are indicative. Chen Wen Hsi (China 1906 – Singapore 1991)<sup>8</sup> regarded his use of Cubistic idiom as part of a general move towards abstraction. Like Liu Kang, he considers that his re-articulation or adaptation of the “Western” form is inflected by a natural, an innate and internalized notion of Chinese-ness and sense of civilization. He wrote:

This leads me to the controversial subject of abstractionism, ... on account of an increased tendency in man's endeavours to seek mental and psychological freedom. More and more, the artist deviates from objectivism, but tries to express inner thoughts and ideas ... On the other hand, if you studied the history of Chinese art, you will find that as long as nine centuries ago, there was a theory of painting being expressive of thought more than shape, as was expounded by the great scholar Su Dong-po, that “judging a picture by physical likeness is being juvenile, and that a true poet does not permit his writing to be restricted by the rules of poetry”. I believe that my endeavours in Art of painting have been largely influenced

by Ba Da Shan Ren of early Qing Dynasty, and Huang Sheng of Kang Xi years. For more recent source of impact, I owe much to Wu Chang-shuo, Qi Bai-shi and my teacher Pan Tian-shou. I was inspired by their simplicity, elegance and almost effortless appearance.<sup>9</sup>

That dynamic interaction between categories considered Western and traditional was also a theme that was often used to read into the works of Cheong Soo Pieng (China 1917 – Singapore 1983).<sup>10</sup> Loke Wan Tho, a prominent collector and patron during the 1950s described Cheong:

Soo Pieng is, undoubtedly, the most versatile of the many gifted people who practice the graphic arts in this country. ... He is an artist who has many strigs to his bow, or many brushes in his painting box: thus, at one moment, he is Chung Say P'un, painting in the techniques which are traditional to the Chinese artist: but more often he is Soo Pieng Cheong, or Soo-Pieng Cheong, or Soo Pieng Choong, or even S.P Chong, a painter who is deeply influenced by the artists of the West — Gauguin, Picasso, Modigliani, Vlaminck, Braque.<sup>11</sup>

From the discussions so far, one may draw several broad speculations about Cubistic tendencies in Singapore during the 1950s. Firstly, it is one of several idioms being developed by modern artists. Cubistic works were produced alongside others that appear Fauvistic and Impressionistic. These styles were not regarded in any particular hierarchy or engaged sequentially. The use of Cubistic elements was seen as part of a general move towards abstraction. Not burdened by strict Western theoretical precepts, Cubistic and other modernistic elements co-mingled with traditional pictorialities found in Chinese ink painting. Given this peculiarity, “the Cubistic” may be conflated into “the modernistic”, allowing us to develop broad assumptions about modernism on Singapore art which may be characterised as non-hierarchical, open and adaptive in its regard for Western modern styles, hybridized, and stabilised by specific pictorial and thematic considerations rooted in tradition and the region.

Secondly, in the absence of a pre-existing dominant style, the Cubistic idiom was introduced to cultivate a proposition of the modern filling a weak, if not a vacuum of critical practice. The vacuum of critical practice was circumvented by references to art historical precedents or discourse that took place in mainland China, hence creating a proposition of a discursive continuum across geography, as a form of virtualities of modernity arising from but independent from those originating from



China, each cultivating its own grounds through engagements with localities and contexts. This is significant in shaping critical reception amongst art writers and patrons of the period.

Thirdly, arising from localities and contexts, the modernistic or Cubistic project in Singapore seem to privilege landscape and genre. The figure is sustained in its readable form. Total fragmentation hardly occurs. A “primitivist” regard for local cultures made subject matters such as the village and village-life congenial as expressive interests. In the works of Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi, the island of Bali and its people (fig.5) were transformed into a catalogue of iconographic themes for the Nanyang artists.

Fourthly, these factors contribute to the popularity of the modern or Cubistic style in the art market with Cheong and Chen enjoying record sales during the 1950s. Combined with the critical acknowledgement they enjoyed, by default the modernists occupied a dominant or an incumbent position against which other avant-gardist positions may be staked.

The period of the late 1940s and 1950s intersected with an emerging discourse of nation in Malaya and Singapore. Colonial Singapore, during the immediate years after the War, was also a conducive ground for the reception and development of political ideas. For many of the Nanyang artists who spent a large part of their formative years in China in the 1930s and 1940s, the cumbersome question of politics — at least in its agitative form — would have been something they would have regard in ambivalent terms. After all, the triumph of the Left in China in 1949 had rendered “modern practices” problematic. Yet, for the younger artists emerging during the postwar colonial Singapore, the continuing struggle against imperialist values in mainland China would have found resonance in the context of a broad campaign for Singapore’s independence. Despite the banning of the Communist Party in 1948, Singapore remained opened to leftist ideals, as student and labour movements became new fronts for political engagements. The complexities of the emerging ideological struggles can perhaps be reflected in the term Nanyang artists. It may be loosely regarded as a cultural pointer or signifier, referring to a community of overseas Chinese artists who spent their formative years in China but later migrated to Malaya, or those that were born in Malaya, but maintained clear emotional and intellectual ties with China, represented by its emergent and diverse ideologies and histories. The end of the Second World War had encouraged the emergence of newer political thoughts as colonies, radicalized by the events of the War, began to reassess their relationships with their respective colonial powers. Development of overseas Chinese identity in Southeast Asia, concepts of citizenship, education and culture within the years following the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Sino-Japanese

War prompted many intellectuals and artists to flee to the Nanyang region.

To facilitate these interests we can consider the following three works: Chen Wen Hsi's *In the Museum* (1956, fig.6), Lim Hak Tai's *Riot* (1955, fig.7) and Chua Mia Tee's *Epic Poem of Malaya* (1955, fig.8). The dates for these works are not coincidental. They were painted during the most challenging period of Singapore social and political history, highlighted by political agitations and riots.

*In the Museum* (fig.6) is one of Chen Wen Hsi's most accomplished cubo-expressionistic undertakings completed during the 1950s. The canvas surface is rendered into grids, most visible at the upper left of the painting. Elements are organized in compartments and compacted tightly, without a total fragmentation of the subjects depicted. The natural structure of the animal bones provides a strong Cubistic motif for the artist, which he deploys advantageously as angular patterns repeated across the canvas. Chen's work exemplifies a proposition for a universalist notion of aesthetic ideals. In his own words:

... what we are seeking in art is not just physical likeness of shape of shape and form, but the composite image and spirit, the overall beauty and cohesion of the painting. The artist apportions the space of his picture into various parts, and creates images of different features and objects in several parts. These parts, these features, these objects are so designed that there is balance, harmony and complementation among them, and they produce a total image of the concept of the artist. Likewise, he may construct his lines in different ways, whether straight or slanting, continuous or broken, central, symmetrical or oddly located, whether simple lines or forms or geometric design, — they all lend together to produce a symphonic effect of the beauty and message intended by the artist.<sup>12</sup>

By juxtaposing the common man against the rarified field of zoological and anthropological investigations of the colonial museum, Chen Wen Hsi may have well introduced an access to a critique on colonial dominance vested through its taxonomic exercise in ordering and disciplining oriental cultures. Contrast this subtlety against Chua Mia Tee's (China 1931-) *Epic Poem of Malaya* (fig.8). The Realism of Chua's work is startling. It is a powerful imagery of optimism and anxiety. A group of Chinese students sat transfixed, listening to a reading of a nationalist poem, oblivious of the incoming storm that sweeps across the iconic landscape of tropical vegetation in the background. But the dark clouds are also ominous in its declaration of an impending transformation. A



fig.6: Chen Wen Hsi, *In the Museum*, 1956, oil on canvas



fig.7: Lim Hak Tai, *Riot*, 1955, oil on board



fig.8: Chua Mia Tee, *Epic Poem of Malaya*, 1955, oil on canvas

shaft of light piercing through the clouds onto the gestured hand testifies to this. Interestingly, it is not the “progressive moderns” that were usurping the “Realists”; it is the other way round. While younger, Chua may be seen as Chen’s contemporary. Chua belonged to a group of artists consisting of young Chinese middle-school graduates, who were oriented to the political left. This is not surprising, the intellectual ties that the overseas Chinese community maintained with mainland China throughout the late 1940s and 1950s through a system of privatised education, facilitated the transfer of political ideas, fermented by anti-colonial sentiments and the need to sustain cultural pride and identity. Acting as a catalyst, the living conditions in Singapore in the first half of the 1950s were poor. A quarter lived in poverty, characterized by poor housing and high unemployment, and exacerbated by the colonial neglect for the educational needs of the Chinese. Through paintings and woodcuts, the Social Realist depicted urban hardships, destitution, political suppression, the valiant struggles of the working class, distinct from the landscape and figurative genre of the modernist.<sup>13</sup> As a political avant-garde, the philosophical roots of the Social Realists including Chua and the Equator Art Society (established in 1956) may be traced to the developments in China during the 1930s inspired by the ideas of Lu Xun, gaining prominence among overseas Chinese when the Sino-Japanese War erupted in 1937. In Singapore in 1938, Ma Ge whose writings focused on development of the concepts of Nanyang identity, called for a nationalist awakening amongst the overseas Chinese:

The present state of silence when it comes to the discussion on the direction of artistic efforts should not continue ... I call upon the Malayan and Singapore Chinese arts circle to actively discuss the obligatory responsibilities of the visual arts forces in this great age ... This is no longer a time “for art.” Even if it is “for art,” there is a need to recognize the social context of art, in order to grasp the spirit of the time.<sup>14</sup>

By the early 1950s, with the question of China resolved, younger artist turned their attention towards an emerging anti-colonial movement. For these artists, “art belongs to society — it is public, and should serve the public.” They “are prepared to commit all ... efforts to help Malaya gain her independence and her process of nation building.”<sup>15</sup> Given the modernist dominance and the ambivalence towards the anti-colonial cause, these artists were able to take up an avant-gardist position. Their position against the modernists is clear:

The so-called Cubist Art is actually a type which denies the

heritage of tradition, discards humanity and truth in art, and emphasizes hypocrisy and anti-realism. Reason, progress, love for humankind, peace and harmony are forsaken and replaced by a decadent art which tries to propagandize bestiality, violence and anti-humanist ideas. Every art worker has a responsibility to denounce and expose the true nature of this contagious and diseased art. As Malayan art workers, we should not only possess a keen eye for painting, but should at the same time have a sharp discretion for politics. Our criticisms should be unprecedentedly and closely committed to realism. All rash actions will undoubtedly lubricate our enemies' weapons and cause a hindrance against our own art. This will not only be a loss to the art world; it will be a cultural loss and the loss of all Malayan citizens!<sup>16</sup>

It seems that the "symphonic effect of the beauty" of self-expression as expressed by Chen Wen Hsi cannot be reconciled with the strident position of the Realists, where "anything that belongs to or connotes beneficially to the opposite social classes should be isolated and a painful blow delivered to the head so as to destroy it completely."<sup>17</sup>

Lim Hak Tai (China 1893 – Singapore 1963)<sup>18</sup> in his work entitled *Riot* (fig.7) attempted to bridge the divide. Here he depicted the violent labour and student riots of 1954 and 1955, depicting these events using a Cubist language. As an educator and leading personality of the art scene in the 1950s, he was more concerned with the task of consolidating the diverse efforts of ethnic-Chinese artists working in Singapore. His own practice as an artist reflects the many trajectories of art making taking place during the mid-1950s. As an artist living in a period of tumultuous change sympathetic to the political activism of his young students, many of his own works showed interests in promoting social concerns, reflective of the preoccupation of other socially engaged artists of the time. Yet as an educator, he was also concerned in advancing the language of art making. He advocated an opened engagement with a diverse range of thoughts and traditions:

..... Marinetti, a pioneer of the Futuristic style advocated discarding all the set moulds left behind by the Classicism school so artists could create works that are in tune with the times. And he had good reasons for thinking so. The 20th century is a scientific age of advanced social thinking and education, everything is in flux, it is good time to start with any engagement as long as our have a sound background, system and education. ... How does the artist

create? Does he go through a long period of unceasing practice before he reaches his zenith of his art? I do not think we should discard all that our predecessors left behind indiscriminately. Rather, I am all for a flexible way of integrating the essence of art of the masters, Oriental and Western, and taking from them aspects that are most suitable for the Nanyang region.<sup>19</sup>

Lim Hak Tai proposed an open, adaptive, and concurrent explorations into a range of aesthetic and conceptual concerns:

1. The fusion of culture of the different races
2. The communication of Oriental and Western art
3. The diffusion of scientific spirit and social thinking of the 20th century
4. The reflection of the needs of the local people
5. The expression of local tropical flavour
6. The educational and social functions of fine art<sup>20</sup>

While these idealisms — co-opting the diverse and often contradictory interests of the modernists and Realists — seemed to be nothing more than a mediatory attempt to appease the contesting parties, they reflect a general duality of anxiety and optimism surrounding the period, and in particular the question of identity formation among the ethnic-Chinese community in Singapore. It coincided with the continuing attempts by émigré ethnic-Chinese artists to define their cultural identity in relation to political and cultural developments in China, and at the same time, an increasing resonance of nationalist tendencies in art as an outcome of the anti-colonial struggles in Singapore linked to the question of citizenship, language and Chinese education. This concurrence of the search for cultural and national identities provided the complex basis for art development during the time. Continuing interests and engagements with China as a contemporary and historical/civilisational entity must be seen as necessary recourse to critically examine and synthesize newer propositions and localities.<sup>21</sup> Critically here in the case of Cubism, it allows a transnational mapping, tracing the complex circulation and evolution of ideas across time and space within Asia, and its interactions with other simultaneous developments.

By and large, Cubism is commonly privileged as a Western art movement. Its use or adoption by modern Asian artists — whose practices are lacking in their contributions to specific foundational discourses of modernism in Europe — is seen to be problematic. Confined to limited concepts of originality and authenticity, questions into the merits and value of the Asian engagements were often raised. Yet, a critical consider-

ation of history allows for the appreciation of discourses that bifurcate and evolve in conjunction to differing contexts and situations, located within “wider histories of cultures and state units” as expressed by John Clark, producing “constraints, institutional structures, and the resource base for developments within art.”<sup>22</sup> Lim Hak Tai was well aware of this even in 1955:

No one can deny the fact that the fine art of Nanyang has its distinctive traits — it is located at the meeting point of East and West; it enjoys rich natural resources and a multi-racial background which facilitates cultural exchanges; a unique tropical flavour informs its distinctive style. The only shortcoming is that it is shackled by the colonial ruler in its efforts to move into modern times. Nevertheless, the wheels of time rumble on and after the two World Wars, the colonies are waking up to fight for independence.<sup>23</sup>

By locating our discussion in relation to movement of peoples and ideas, and their encounters with localities and hence constraints, we may locate “Cubism” as part of a larger cultural and artistic negotiation with shifting and evolving concepts and imaginaries of modernity, heterogenous, predicated by specific discourses of self, society and nation. Disciplined by social and political circumstances, the hegemonic centrality of Modernism or Cubism as a Western precept dissipates, and its place a proposition of a dynamic interlocking of modern visions within Asia. Here too, the emerging post-colonial attitude need not only be read in relation to the divergent or differentiated positions between the imaginaries of the West and the East, but also — as seen in the works and statement making of artists like Liu Kang, Chen Wen Hsi and Lim Hak Tai — the strategic modulations between East and East (between Nanyang and Chinese modernities), the former informed by the latter, but sustained to address the latter’s lack of continuity and but yet affirming the historical and rhetorical relationships.

Notes:

1. Liu Kang, quoted in Kwok, Kian Chow, “Liu Kang and Singapore Art”, in *Journeys: Liu Kang and His Art* (Singapore: National Arts Council and Singapore Art Museum, 2000), p. 15.
2. Ralph Croizier, “Post-Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai: The Juelanshe (Storm Society) and the Fate of Modernism in Republican China”, in John Clark, ed., *Modernity in Asian Art*, University of Sydney Asian Studies Number 7 (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1993), p.152.
3. Mo Zhai, “A Pillar in the Southern Sky: The Position of Liu Kang in Modern Art History” in *Journeys: Liu Kang and His Art* (Singapore: National Arts Council and Singapore Art Museum, 2000), p.38.
4. See Croizier, op. cit., p.135.
5. See Zhai, op. cit., p.39.
6. Chong Swee Chen, 1969, quoted in Kwok, Kian Chow, *Channels and Confluences* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996), pp.30-31.
7. Kwok, *ibid.*, p.40.

8. Chen Wen Hsi was born in Guangdong Province, China. He graduated from Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts in Shanghai in 1932 and taught at South China College in Shantou from 1946 to 1947. He settled in Singapore in 1947 and taught Chinese traditional painting at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in Singapore from 1951. Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, Chen worked consistently in oils, producing semi-abstract compositions exploring the qualities of line and colour. By the late 1970s, he began to cater his attention increasingly towards Chinese ink painting, but by this time, infusing Abstract and Expressionist elements into his ink works.
9. Chen Wen Hsi in cooperation with E.L. Pan, "Half A Century's Life of an Artist", in *Chen Wen Hsi Retrospective* (Singapore: National Museum, 1982), unpaginated.
10. Born in China, Cheong Soo Pieng studied at the Amoy Art Academy and Xinhua Art Academy. He came to Singapore in 1946 and taught art at the Chinese Art School and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). Throughout his practice, Cheong had shown a remarkable to adapt and innovate. In 1950, he became was one of the first to experiment with Cubo-Expressionistic techniques while continuing to explore the tropical environment around him. In 1952, he went to Bali with Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang. On his return, he created a distinctive style of figure and landscape painting, characterized by stylization and lyrical compositions. He continued to develop his distinctive Balinese themes throughout the 1970s, increasingly applying elements of ornamentation. He also excelled in Chinese brush paintings, often combining traditional pictorial traditions with Cubistic elements, emphasizing lines and subtle tonal values. As a lecturer at NAFA, he was extremely influential.
11. Loke Wan Tho, Speech, October 10, 1956, quoted by Kwok, 1996, op. cit., p.45. See also Loke's description of Chen Wen Hsi: "Mr Wen-Hsi, of course, began his career in China, and so we would expect him to be influenced by the emphasis which that country's artists have always placed on nuance, and the swift, sure and sentient line. In this form of expression he is, of course, as master. But he is also able to peer through that window which opens onto the Western world, and with his imagination thereby enriched, he in turn enriches us with the product of his fancy abroad" Loke Wan Tho, Speech, December 23, 1958, quoted in Kwok, *ibid.*, p.61.
12. Chen Wen Hsi, op. cit., unpaginated.
13. The young social realists were not alone in raising concerns against modernistic tendencies. Chen Chong Swee, who enjoyed a preeminent status in Singapore art since the late 1930s, lamented in 1967: "Surely there is no excuse for a piece of art to be incomprehensible! Art is not just for self-expression or self-gratification. ... It is to enlist sympathy for the downtrodden. Still another piece of art may portray joy and happiness; again it contains an invoice to rejoice with the artist. Hence all works of art are created with another person in mind that is the reader, the listener or the viewer. ... Therefore the works of the so-called expressionists, being incomprehensible, are treated merely as decorative art. They at most adorn the parlours of the rich. It is unavoidable that such works will be eliminated and destroyed by the passage of time."
14. Ma Ge, "Zhi Mahua huajia men" (1938) in Fan Xiu, ed., *Mahua xin wenxue daxi* (Singapore: Shijue shuju, 1972) v. 8, pp.510-514, quoted by Kwok, op. cit., p.27.
15. Foreword, from exhibition catalogue of Singapore Chinese High Schools' Graduates of 1953 Art Association, 1956.
16. Lee Tian Meng, "Three Reasons Against the Ideas of Pablo Picasso", 1956.
17. Ah Si, "The United Front of Art Must Rid Formulaic Art Ideas", 1956. Even in 1966, several years after the severe purging of the political left in Singapore, the artists of the Equator Society remained uncompromising: "The value of the genuine school of art lies in the fact that it does not lose its integrity amidst the ugly commercial dealings belonging to the decadent bourgeois." See Equator Art Society 5th Exhibition, Catalogue Foreword, 1966, quoted by Kwok, op. cit., p.72.
18. Lim Hak Tai is one of the most influential figures in the development of art in Malaya. Born in China, Lim was a teacher at Xiamen Academy of Art and the Jimei Teachers' Training College, China, specialising in mathematics and art education. He arrived in Singapore in 1937, and proved to be influential in the development of modern art activities in Malaya. Amongst the many students that studied under him in China was Cheong Soo Pieng, who later joined him in Singapore. In 1938, together with the Singapore Alumni of Jimei Teacher's Training College in Xiamen, China, he initiated the establishment of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). His contribution to the Nanyang Style is difficult to define. As an educator and leading personality of the art scene in the 1950s, he was concerned with the task of consolidating the diverse efforts of ethnic-Chinese artists working in Singapore.
19. Lim Hak Tai, "Art of the Young Malaysians", 1955, reproduced in Imprints, op. cit., pp.26-27.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Ethnicity as a dimension in art historical investigation may also be advanced through the framework of multiculturalism and the formation of ethnic and national identities. For example, the political struggles of the minority Malays since the end of the War in Malaya — characterised by attempts to secure greater political concessions, argued in 'primordialist' terms, seen in the eventual formation of Federation of Malaya in 1957 — may be located in the artistic practices within specific and cross-referential manner. Inter-ethnic engagements offer a rich ground for investigation, especially given the widespread popularity of the village landscape and village life as a theme among the Nanyang artists. Inter-ethnic engagements can also be investigated through mediatory institutional frameworks like the multi-cultural Singapore Art Society (established in 1949).
22. John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998), p.19.
23. Lim, op. cit., pp.26-27.

## Discussion

Moderator (Hayashi Michio): We have about one hour for the discussion session. Three papers were given in the afternoon which raise many issues and if I may randomly pick up some of them, the first issue which really interested me is the formation of a counter-discourse against the Western notion of art, which was most typically addressed in Mr. Supangkat's paper. I think the issue of the concept of *kagunan* may provide a good entry point for our discussion.

The second issue that I think is very important is, to put it broadly, a sort of anxiety and optimism concerning the reception of modernism in Asia. Mr. Mashadi was the one who addressed this issue in his paper, but this is really a common thread that runs through all of the three papers given in this session. And if we take the case of diaspora artists in Singapore as an example, we can find an interesting negotiation with this anxiety of modernism by resorting to the strategy of hybridity in which artists create a strange, almost schizophrenic, synthesis between Cubistic idioms and Chinese landscape tradition. I think this question of how to cope with the anxiety of modernism underlies all the papers.

The third issue I want to draw your attention to is the question of the medium or media most typically manifested in the use of murals in the Philippines. I mean the use of a Cubistic style in public art, including murals, played a very significant role in transforming the significance of Cubism in the postwar period in the Philippines. The process of "kitschification," Cubist style turning kitsch in the 1970s under the Marcos regime, is particularly interesting. This process seems to correspond to the transformation of Manansala's style in the 1960s and the years thereafter. If we look back on the Singaporean case, to a certain extent, similar things seem to have happened in the history of the Nanyang School. But it has to be emphasized that the situation of the Philippines seems somewhat exceptional. Compared to other Asian countries, somehow the Cubism or Cubistic style continued to play a significant role in the Philippines as a basic artistic vocabulary for a long time although its connotation might have changed from avant-garde to conservative. This longevity of Cubist style in the Philippines seems to be unique in Asia. I don't know if there is any easy explanation to that, but it may be an interesting topic for our discussion.

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Having said that, now, maybe we should start with Mr. Supangkat's paper. I really want to ask the question about this *kagunan*, the concept which you mentioned in your paper. The fact that it was not derived from a pre-modern indigenous tradition is what surprised me. That it was rather invented as a sort of counter-discourse to resist the notion of "art" imported in the process of modernization / Westernization. So, Mr. Supangkat, could you elaborate a little bit more on the concept of *kagunan*?

Jim Supangkat: Thank you for the question, Professor Hayashi. The term *kagunan* is not related to modernism or modern thinking. It emerged in the 18th century and describes the intermixing of Javanese culture and the Western culture brought in by the Dutch colonial people. This definition developed within the Javanology Institute established by the colonial government.

So the term *kagunan* did not exist before the colonial times and was invented by Javanese culture after adopting many aspects of Western culture. The term is a translation of the Greek term *mousikê technê*. In aesthetics, the term *mousikê technê* is the basis of fine art or High Art, and related to the effort of identifying art as part of spiritual activity or sensitivity. The term does not define art practice, but inquires, "What is art?"

Moderator (Hayashi): And did the term have this nuance of ethics or morality from the beginning or did it gradually acquire that dimension?

Supangkat: We have yet to find clear proof, but when it appeared in the Javanese texts of the 19th century, the term *kagunan* was discussed in a progressive manner, and clearly used in the context of morality. There were several attempts of different readings of the term, but they did not develop into a polemic. Exploring the relationship between *kagunan* and contemporary developments is not popular. As I mentioned in my paper, the term for art in Indonesian is *seni*, and not *kagunan*. *Seni* means art in a broad sense and *seni rupa* means visual art, more or less. Considering the definitions and the history of these terms, it is quite clear that these terms in Indonesian are related to the definition of *kagunan*, which has a more philosophical meaning.

Since the term *kagunan* emerged in the very early stages of adopting Western culture, I see it as something related to the ideology of art in the Western sense in Indonesia. It's not an interpretation of what art is, but an ideology or the basis of an art tradition. I tend to compare it with the ideology of art in Western art.

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Moderator (Hayashi): It is currently used by young artist and art critics in Indonesia?

Supangkat: Artist and critics nowadays use the term *seni*, not *kagunan*. But if you look at works in Indonesia, from both the “modern art period” and the “contemporary art period,” they show similar perceptions of what art is. This similarity transcends beliefs about what art is, and, therefore, does not show a particular belief in today’s art developments. It is neither a matter of definition nor a matter of interpretation. To me it is quite clear that this perception is a common ground in understanding art in the Western sense among Indonesian artists and critics.

Moderator (Hayashi): Mr. Mashadi, please.

Ahmad Mashadi: I just want to follow up with my question. If *kagunan* can be deployed as a concept or as an idea by which artworks being produced by Indonesians can be interpreted, then do you think that the artworks produced by the Bandung School (artists from the Faculty of Fine Art and Design at the Bandung Institute of Technology are known as the Bandung School) will be congenial to an interpretation based on *kagunan*, because the notion of *kagunan* as you had highlighted it will be based on utility, morality, and doing good?

Supangkat: Yes. I think it’s quite clear that even in the Cubistic works by the Bandung School, we see this kind of morality that could be related to *kagunan*, as in the work of Ahmad Sadali. So when they started producing Cubistic paintings, they all used themes that went back to moral considerations of human life, social justice, and so on.

Moderator (Hayashi): But in 1954 when the Bandung School artists exhibited together in Indonesia, they were harshly criticized for being Westernized and believers in “art for art’s sake” or the autonomy of art. So what you’re proposing is that you can probably reevaluate what the Bandung School did, not from the viewpoint of Western modernism, but from the viewpoint of *kagunan*? Is that what you are proposing?

Supangkat: In some sense you are right. While the majority of artists in Indonesia can be immediately related to *kagunan*, its relation to the Bandung artists is comparatively obscure. The fact that the Bandung artists were modernists and the others were *kagunanists* is not the only cause for the rivalry between the Bandung artists and the rest.

The rivalry was heightened because the Bandung School had

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developed from an educational system supported by drawing teachers during the colonial times. It was not at all an art academy and thus could not be considered as part of an art infrastructure. In colonial times there was no art infrastructure: no art museums, no art academy, no art journals, no critics and no art historians.

Hence, education by drawing teachers became the only institutional source of art development. Those who practiced art and gave private drawing and painting lessons were considered artists at the time. Their opinions, which they claimed to be based on academic considerations, became qualifying standards for works of art. Consequently, this qualification discriminated against works by self-taught artists, and this became the basis of the rivalry. Self-taught artists who were mostly nationalists, accused artists who were educated by drawing teachers of being colonialists.

The rivalry continued even after the education system of drawing instruction in Bandung developed into the Faculty of Fine Art and Design at the Bandung Institute of Technology. Self-taught artists later founded an art academy in Yogyakarta in the years after Indonesia's independence.

The polarized rivalry could be seen as a conflict between concepts of art underlined by Soedjojono, the pioneer of modern art in Indonesia, and concepts taught by Ries Mulder, a Dutch stained-glass artist who became the "guru" at the Bandung School. Srihadi Soedarsono, the most renowned painter in Indonesia today, was once a Soedjojono follower. When he entered the school in Bandung, he faced difficulties because Ries Mulder criticized his painting and advised him not to treat morality or ethical problems but to concentrate on formal issues. This is just an example to illustrate a hypothesis, so further research is necessary.

Moderator (Hayashi): Is there anybody who wants to follow up on this issue?

Mashadi: I have one more comment on this issue. Of course many ideas and concepts have emerged in Indonesian art circles since 1945. You have as early as 1946 the statement by Gelanggang, a group of artists led by Darabin, and then later in 1963, the Manifest of Kebudayaan, which again claims or deals with universalistic ideals. How compatible do you think these idealisms are, Gelanggang and Manifest of Kebudayaan, in relation to this concept of *kagunan*?

Supangkat: As I mentioned earlier, it is not relevant to see *kagunan* through conflicts of idealism and beliefs that emerged in art history.

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Problems related to *kagunan* do not reflect the contradiction between traditionality and modernity. As presented in my paper, the problem of *kagunan* is an ideological matter based on particular ideological differences that show how the translation of art in the Western sense, outside the Western world, has resulted in a different understanding of art.

For example, very basic perceptions in Western art tend to see the “thingness” of art; art as a noun-ish phenomenon. During the process of translation, the perception outside the Western world did not follow this sense. The influence of *kagunan* in the understanding of art today in Indonesia shows this tendency; the terms *kagunan*, *seni*, and *seni rupa* are adverbial. This is why artists in Indonesia tend to carry an expression of the aesthetic in their works and imbue them with meaning. The words emphasize experience linked to a sense of morality.

Moderator (Hayashi): Thank you. Professor Tsuji, please.

Tsuji Shigebumi: It may not be appropriate to make a generalized comment at this point, but as I listened to this afternoon’s session, it seemed that there is always a spiritual and cultural movement in the different backgrounds of the Cubism that emerged in different locations at different times, in a way that is quite different from how we understand Alfred Barr’s Cubism. I may be making remarks that foreground Session 4, the session I am moderating tomorrow, but before Cubism emerged in France, there were several movements similar to that of William Morris; movements related to artistic spirit and community solidarity. They placed a strong emphasis on morality.

When Cubism emerged in Japan — and it is a pity that we do not have adequate information on Yorozu Tetsugoro’s position on this — the Shirakaba group, among other movements in Japan, was eagerly finding a personalist character in the works of post-Impressionist artists like Cézanne. But Yorozu chose to use Cubism from the several avant-garde movements that were introduced in his time.

I would assume that there was an aspiration for a kind of pan-human morality at work, rather than artistic and formal endeavors among the Salon Cubists. So, Cubism was not simply disseminated from one location to another, as understood in a traditional art historical framework, but emerged in close sequence with a kind of spiritual aspiration that peaked at different times. As Professor Clark pointed out, different discourses, so long as they are discourses, they may be concerned with spiritual and moral aspirations, rather than just formalistic achievements.

John Clark: Well, I would like to ask Professor Flores, if I may, about art

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and the Philippines. There is a high level and varied modern art in the Philippines. When we look at Cubism in the Philippines, why is it that you see avant-garde or reactionary or decorative Cubism? Cubism did create a major trend and historical conditions in the Philippines. Why were those conditions met? In other words, it must have had a very high level of art from the outset.

Moderator (Hayashi): Well, then, let's hold the morality issue for the moment and talk about the special situation in the Philippines. Why was Cubism widely accepted and appropriated in various methods and fields? What are the conditions which made it possible for such a long-lasting use of Cubism in the Philippines, Professor Flores?

Patrick Flores: That is a difficult question. I think there are many ways to address the issue, and one factor is that modernism in the Philippines was interdisciplinary at the outset. The modernists who were at the forefront of the movement were not just visual artists, so their kind of modernism reached a wider public beyond the confines of the art world. H.R. Ocampo, for instance, was a fiction writer who wrote fiction in Filipino, in the vernacular. Neorealist Ramon Estella was a filmmaker and Impressionist Juan Arellano was an architect of the neo-Classical tradition. So I think this is one way of tracking the development of modernism and marking the multiple publics within which it operated.

Also, I think the polemical debates in the late 1920s up to the 1950s stimulated an environment of critique. There were debates between the Amorsolo School, the conservative school, and the Edades group, which later became the Neorealists in the 1950s. The intelligentsia supported the modernists, so they were allowed to ventilate their views in newspapers and in public. Those debates made their way to the front pages of some newspapers. So art was in the air at that time because of these polemical debates. I think this is to partially answer the question on what kind of urgent texture that Filipino modernism had taken on.

Moderator (Hayashi): Let me ask you a very simple question, Professor Flores. Looking at the development of Manansala's art, you compared his early piece, *Madonna of the Slums*, and the 1975 Madonna which are very similar in style but completely different in terms of connotations. In the early Cubistic works in the Philippines by artists such as Legaspi and Manansala, they all deal with the issue of the sufferings of the proletariat and laborers. So, I wonder if the suppression of Marxist thought in the postwar period had something to do with this change of the use of Cubistic style in later periods.

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