

Reviews

How Comfortable are We with Being "UNcomfortable"?

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Curated by Izat Arif and Rizal Sufar, *Hidup Terlampau Selesa* (Life is Too Comfortable) featured two young local artists: Engku Iman and Akmal Borhan. This exhibition was launched on 17th May 2014 @ Kedai_CO, a regular shop lot turned into a casual gallery at SS6, Kelana Jaya. Albeit this show was anchored on the theme of gender and sexuality, it was very much different from Errortica Exhibition which was held on December 2012 @ Publika. If Errortica Exhibition was a projection on the positive aspects of sexuality and sexual experiences – what it should be or what it could be, then some artworks from *Hidup Terlampau Selesa* took a wicked twist of what it should not be or what it must not be. If Errortica Exhibition gave the idea of pretty, colourful and almost fantasy like experience, then *Hidup Terlampau Selesa* was all the opposite.

In the Malaysian socio-cultural landscape, topics pertaining to sexuality—be it sexual encounter or sexual preferences—and gender identity has always been a "taboo"—neither discussed nor exhibited publicly. However, this exhibition was centered upon real issues that were plundering some quarters of the society here in Malaysia; and more importantly, issues that have become a "taboo", as explained by Izat himself. Issues in regards to sexuality and gender representation within the local society were brought forward to the viewer in its most crude yet truthful manner in this private gallery, which is managed by both the curators.

Admittedly, as Malaysians in general are more covert and shy when it comes to encountering matters pertaining to sexuality; perhaps it can be noted that, some of the illustrations were sort of disturbing; and maybe, yes, the illustrations depicted more than one would expect to see in a local exhibition. Nevertheless, what is more important was the content of the messages that these two artists were trying to get across to the audience – the reality and seriousness of what was happening everyday here in Malaysia.

Akmal Borhan's drawings generally dealt with issues pertaining to the male's sexuality. Part of his works were placed in the special peepshow box – complete with a metal circular cover of the glass peephole, that gave a sensation to the viewer as if he or she was peeking to see something that was hidden, mysterious and secretive. These series of black and white illustrations that were placed in the peepshow box emphasised on the fixation of the armpit. These explicit drawings showed how children were engrossed (sniffing, kissing) with the adult's underarm. More interestingly, the particular manner where the viewer would have to lean forward in order to view into these peepholes further complemented the overall experience of what they saw. The viewer could be anxious at the beginning—before he or she gets to peep into the unknown, followed by embarrassment upon the act of peeping into the box, and finally to feel aroused, disgusted or funny about what they had just seen and



Photo 1 Akmal Borhan's drawings that were cleverly displayed in this peepshow box required the viewer to "interact" in order to experience the artwork.

experienced. This perhaps can be related to how Duchamp had strategically planned and positioned the peepholes in *Given*, as Blau-DuPlessis (1942, as cited in Haladyn 2010) highlighted that the physical experience of looking closely or peeking into secret space suggested erotic feelings. However, in regards to this exhibition, the purpose was to get the viewers to participate or interact with the exhibit, and respond with any sort of reaction.

Other illustrations by Akmal—some of which were pegged into clear plastic bags and hung on a string, were much more bold and louder than those in the peepshow box. Again, these black and white illustrations were grouped into four categories: (1) *Jangan Takut* (Do not be Afraid), (2) *Bedal Je* (Just Wallop), (3) *Cepat Lah* (Hurry Up), and (4) *Oi, Sakit Tak?* (Oi, Does it Hurt?). For each of this category, there was one sexually explicit drawing and another two drawings based on the local social context such as breaking traffic rules, or encountering with ghost, or self-inflicted physical injury. Conversely, the explicit illustrations revolved mainly about sexuality of the male—whether it was a young male with an adult male, or a group of males or even a single individual male. Each of the illustration captured different sexual acts or encounter of satisfying a male's sexual needs in "appropriate" or "inappropriate" ways. There were no symbolic representations, aesthetically beautiful or eye pleasing artworks, or implied messages. Everything that was there to be seen, understood and interpreted was right there—LOUD & CLEAR!



Photo 2 These simple line drawings were bold, explicit as well as provocative to cause some amount of uneasiness as well as "uncomfortability".

Contrary to Akmal's black and white illustrations, Engku Iman's works comprised of molds made from wax, assemblage of mannequin on the floor of the gallery, black and white illustrations, as well as a painting and a photo montage. Three artworks that symbolised the female genital made up for the "*Seni V-na*" series by Engku Iman. One of the pieces for this series was a wax mold of two pairs of hands that gestured the female sexual organ. The remaining works within this series were line drawings; one showed a female with her arm folded upwards and her other hand emphasising the tuck that has been formed. At the first glance of the last artwork in this series, the viewer would recognise it as a curry puff—a local snack that is made from dough and comes with its filling. But upon moving closer and examining this drawing, the illustration portrayed a curry puff that has been split open and the detailing at the center described the female genital. It is vital to note here, the theme of everyday objects that were present within these artworks. The wax casts that can be found in shopping malls, curry puffs that are available almost any time of the day, and finally, the use of a female and her very own anatomy and gesture to represent the female genital. This was purposely intended by the artist in order to highlight the lack of awareness about female sexuality in our everyday lives.



Photo 3 Two artworks from the "Seni V-na" series by Engku Iman.

Notwithstanding this, as being part of the eastern culture, gender representation of female is often stereotyped and subjugated compared to the male. Furthermore, female sexuality are often repressed, not given acknowledgement and silenced along the way. As a consequence on the lack of sexual awareness and education within the local society, sexuality of women (and her own rights to it) and the sexual needs of women are often "silenced" if not totally eliminated from social interaction and learning experience. The downfall to this, however, may lead to more serious issues—such as unwanted pregnancies, abortion, sexually transmitted disease, trap in a relationship for the wrong reasons, sexual abuses, incest, younger children experimenting with sex; which in larger picture contributes to much bigger and serious social chaos. With this in regard, the existence of pre-marital sex or casual sex amongst local women—regardless of race and religion, must be acknowledged.

As a continuation from acknowledging the presence of female sexuality within our local society, few of Engku Iman's remaining artworks highlighted and criticised the social norm that is formed based on the perceived and believed gender representation of the female. For instance, in her *Angkat Kain* work, a semi portrait view of a faceless female with a head scarf holds a cigarette in her hand that turns back to "look" at the viewer. A female figure relaxing on a tube float with her *tudung* (head scarf) just enough to cover her breast paired with a bikini bottom is entitled "Islam Post Modern". In her much more satirical work—*Masa Depan* (In the Future); portrays a calendar girl in the year 2106. Here, the female figure with her head scarf (her back shown to the viewer) wears a blouse and short skirt with a slit at the back, and walks away from the viewer. And paramount to these works, is the wall drawing of three females anxiously trying to drape their head scarves; complete with a titled banner *Pertandingan Lilit Tudung* (Head Scarf Draping Competition) above it.

These artworks become slightly controversial as it goes against the social norm of the Malay Muslim female gender representation. It is not acceptable for someone to wear a head scarf and smoke, nor to pair it with a blouse and short skirt. It can be seen that the act of wearing the *tudung* (head scarf) is more out of social expectation than faith in religion. Notably, these illustrations are not intended as an insult or jibe or blame towards anyone or any party for the matter, but more as the actual realisation of what is happening. More importantly, it brings forward the issue directly of what is going on beneath the surface.



Photo 4 An act of religious faith that has been turned into a social competition, depicted in this wall drawing by Engku Iman.

A point to moot here would be on two significant elements: sex and gender. If sex can be defined as the biological structure that makes up the physical, emotional and functionality/physiology of an individual; then the gender of an individual is influenced by the culture and environment that further shapes the behaviour and psychological traits within a specific gender group—masculine/feminine (Torgrimson and Minson 2005). In other words, gender is the self-representation or projection of the male or female individual; or how society understands/ expects/accepts a male or female should be. It is vital at this point that gender must not be seen as equivalent to the biological sex of an individual. Unlike sex; gender representation is created, imposed and becomes the belief of what is the norm and accepted over a long period of time: gender-normative.

This is evident within the local Malay society, whereby the gender representation of the Malay Muslim female has always been a serious and sensitive matter. Old prejudices and outdated stereotypes are still very much present within the social norm when it concerns what a "PROPER" Malay Muslim female should be like. The local socio-cultural setting and politico-religious agenda inevitably creates the gender framework of the Malay Muslim female: from her dress code, to the way she carries herself, conduct of speech, choice of language used, occupation preferences, her daily interaction, sexual orientation and sexuality as well. However, the reality may differ especially in today's world, and this is being contested by Engku Iman's work on female gender representation. A certain dress code will not be able to oppress and contain one's sexuality and self-expression. Social stigma surrounds if one chooses to be different or go against the norm. The net result of this phenomenon; religion becomes politicised, while the ideologies on gender and sexuality are used to oppress, control and further silence women.

Moreover, based on the issues raised on the gender representation of the adult male by Akmal Borhan; is this the accepted gender representation (sexual manipulation, male domination, and homosexuality) that we allow our young children to understand, believe and accept? One's sexual orientation—lesbian or gay or bisexual or transgender—refers to

the person that he or she is attracted to romantically or sexually (American Psychological Association 2011). As much as homosexuality is present within local society, and to include these explicit illustrations with other illustrations that also reflect the blatant ignorance towards important issues in the society; gives more volume to the truth and seriousness of these issues. Consecutively, it also reflects the way we deal with these issues—with the pretense that we are a civilised society of moral virtues; accompanied with the ignorance that such misconducts do not happen within our family or social circle. Moreover, it is not our culture to acknowledge sexuality, what more to discuss it with another individual.

Despite the seriousness and the reality of these issues—fetish with armpits or homosexuality or breaking traffic rules for the matter; these issues are often ignored and treated with the pretense that they did not occur, especially if they existed within the family circle. More importantly, children—both male and female were portrayed as the "sexual victims" against an adult male in some of these illustrations. It is at this juncture that begs the question: Are our children aware of these "sexual misconducts" by his/her perpetrator? Or do these children acknowledge these acts as sexual misconducts/abuse and yet participate merely for the joy and satisfaction that they received from it? Or are they aware of their rights as children? Or are our children even being protected? Interestingly, how does one differentiate between 'normal' sexual acts compared to sexual offenses? If the term "sexual abuse" is to be placed on one end of a continuum and "sex play" on the other end; how would one differ from another? Furthermore, would we be able to distinguish and separate both these terms indefinitely without relating to one another. The subjectivity, sensitivity and preferences remain very much individualistic when it comes to sexual conducts and encounters. Proof that the need to educate the young, teenagers and even young adults on their sexuality, especially on their rights and responsibility, is ever so more pressing.

In order to take control of this situation, religious teachings alone would not suffice. But, health education, sexual education, human rights, individual responsibility established on religious guidelines could provide our society with some answers. Now, more than ever,

is the time to acknowledge women's sexuality and her rights to it together with gender representation; if we do not want to exacerbate the seriousness of HIV/AIDS cases, unwanted pregnancies, illegal abortions and baby dumping, that will eventually lead to rise in social crimes and the society's deterioration. To sum up, I personally believe that some of the sexual misconducts may not only be confined to a particular race or country. With the presence of human, along with their sexual desires as well as needs; race or religion or geographical location may not set limitation or boundaries of these sexual misconducts or inappropriateness or abuse. With the communication technology being ever present and open, it becomes vital to educate the young on the differences of rape, or sodomy or incest or homosexuality or adultery and everything else that can be related to their sexual health!

In closing, *Hidup Terlampau Selesa* created the necessary agitation and brought about awareness on issues that were considered "taboo" to be discussed about. This exhibition had particularly pushed the boundaries in portraying both the male's and female's sexuality explicitly in a serious tone, yet truthfully. All in all, this exhibition was both provocative and controversial to a certain extent if it were to be compared with other "safer" exhibitions and artworks that have been produced hitherto. Rarely, issues pertaining to sexuality that are considered taboo are brought forward with many specifics in any exhibition or discussion within the local socio cultural landscape. The black and white line drawings without exaggerated colours, motifs or symbols gave the viewer just what they needed to: SIMPLE yet HONEST representation of the naked TRUTH. Without doubt, they had also created a new platform for diverse and radical voices to be seen and heard! On a crucial note, they also question our position and reaction (how comfortable we are) on these "uncomfortable" issues that are very much present in our society. Or how much longer can we accept this "uncomfortness" and be comfortable about it?

NOTE

Although discomfort would be the appropriate usage instead of uncomfortable, the author had intentionally opted with the latter to give the necessary irritation and agitation to the language as well as the tone of the article.

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