

Ismail Zain, *From There to Now*

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Ismail Zain, *From There to Now*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, triptych, 151.5 x 90.5cm (each). Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Ismail Zain (b. Kedah, 1930-1991) was initially an art educator and later undertook his artistic training at the Slade Academy of Fine Art in London during the early 1960s. Upon his return to Malaysia, he held several posts as an art administrator within the government. Besides practising as an artist, he was an intellectual with important insights into artistic and cultural disciplines including music, theatre and literature. Through his artworks, writings, lectures and the cultural festivals he organised, Ismail Zain displayed his investment in the meanings and implications of the modern. The painting studied here may be considered as a mature manifestation of this inquiry.

From There to Now is one of several paintings executed by Ismail Zain during the 1980s. In this painting, Ismail Zain explores the relationship between surface and pattern, the 'cut and paste' method of incorporating images of popular

culture, and the absence of any singular overt meaning, which highlight the artist's preoccupation with notions of 'collage', and 'culture' – consistent themes in his artworks from his studies abroad until his demise.

Collage

'Collage' is manifested in two ways. First, it is literal: as technique and medium. In *From There to Now*, it is seen in the play on depth and positioning of picture planes which serve to avoid flatness and a singularity of field.

Several techniques are present on each canvas, a recurring feature in Ismail Zain's paintings of this decade. Controlled painted stripes delineate space upon the canvas, and held between them are grids of canvas cut-outs collaged onto a larger,

background canvas of photo silkscreened lace-doiily motifs and morning glory flowers.

The geometry of form in *From There to Now* links closely to the artist's perceptions of modernism. Its careful symmetrical geometry follows the structural and economical rendering of space present in the artist's drawings and prints from his time at the Slade.

An earlier etching, *Totem* (1964), explores interlays between local and regional cultures through the idea of the monument: a phallic Siva Lingga structure stands atop a semi-circular base, referencing a historical bronze Đông Sơn drum discovered in Klang. Ismail Zain worked on this print at the Slade alongside a peer studying Vladimir Tatlin's unrealised *Monument to the Third International*, and cited this particular moment as one which contributed to a meditation upon geometric shapes and monuments as symbols of modernism.

'Collage' was therefore also a mode of artistic practice: as the consideration of various meanings amalgamating and intersecting on any one picture surface. While forms and motifs might appear as familiar in Ismail Zain's paintings, 'collage' taking the form of a demarcation of the picture surface ruptures any possible reading of the painting as a singular entity. Instead, it draws attention to the formal aspects of images contained within the canvas, prompting a reconsideration of their indexical properties. Here this is achieved with the employment of three separate canvases to reinforce separate planes. While *From There to Now* comprises solely acrylic paint on canvas, plywood strips carved by the artist slice up both subject matter and canvas space in other works of the same period and style.

Culture

From There to Now displays the artist's understanding of 'culture' as the core of his work, and indeed throughout his lifetime, Ismail Zain was involved in cultural sectors of the Malaysian government, holding positions of Director, National Art Gallery of Malaysia (1972-75); Director of Culture, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (1975-82); and Director-General of the National Film Development Corporation (1982-1985). In his earlier works, culture manifests as an interest in Malaysia's multicultural histories, and a deep awareness of the Malay identities that these informed. In *From There to Now* and other paintings of the 1980s, subject matter pertained to the impact of mass migration from rural to urban centres on understandings and expressions of Malay culture, which inevitably shifted with the moving populace. Ismail Zain expounded upon what he understood as a specifically "Malay" appreciation of art and culture at the time through the decorative: doilies and tablecloths become stencils which produce repeated patterns in tight symmetrical compositions on his canvases, at times recalling designs of traditional Malay garments. They convey the growing value placed on home and personal adornments within an increasingly affluent Malay population, against a backdrop of mass production and consumerism.

In paintings of this period, Ismail Zain also commented on the conflated identities of Malay/Muslim within the country during this time. To a certain extent, he regarded this as one reverberation of the Malaysian National Cultural Congress of 1971, which decreed that art and culture should foster a strong sense of national identity and unity through the endorsement of indigenous Malay and Islamic aesthetics and

practices. Mundane and commonplace forms encountered in the lifeworld of the 'Malay Malaysian' during the 1980s, such as the floral doily, are presented as alluding to the repeated, non-figurative motif of Islamic aesthetics.

These indexical possibilities intersect and overlap with a further layer of contemporary culture: the recyclability of images and their meanings brought about by new technological feats. Later, embarking on his digital prints, Ismail Zain would state that the computer and what it was capable of producing, and re-producing, could be termed as "culture material". Images could be drawn from their common associations, and as with collage, placed or displaced within new contexts depending on contemporary cultural understandings. Referring to Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Ismail Zain illustrated in his artworks that distinctions between artworks and images of mass culture were increasingly unclear. On his canvases of the 1980s, repeated motifs executed using stencil or spray-gun techniques point towards the mass replication of images made possible by printing technologies.

In *From There to Now*, silkscreened photographs of morning glory flowers denote a species commonly encountered across the region. Devoid of colour and triplicated with no explicit connotations, their inclusion adds to the open-endedness of meaning and interpretation, both of which Ismail Zain acknowledged as features and requirements of the modern condition. □

This text is informed by conversations with the late artist's wife and estate manager.

From There to Now is currently on display in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery 13 at National Gallery Singapore.