

Multiplicity: Group Show (2011)

This exhibition brings together a group of Malaysian artists, primarily print-makers, whose works reflect elements of repetition and multiplicity. As one of the principles of design, repetition has been used by artists to attain diverse and varied effects in visual arts, and this exhibition, entitled “Multiplicity”, aims to explore how these particular contemporary artists use this artistic tool in their work to shape the existing world into new worlds.

Repetition can be used on all visual elements through juxtaposing and overlapping, to achieve movement and rhythm. The history of the use of repetition in art can be traced back to Islamic art where geometric patterns were used to decorate many different surfaces including buildings, ceramics, textiles and books. These purely decorative patterns evolved as Islam spread to different regions all over the world, incorporating Greek philosophy, astronomy and mathematics, to form a distinctive style of art that expressed the logic and order innate in the Islamic vision of the universe. In the West, repetition has been used by artists to achieve rhythm and emphasis, to suggest organic continuity and biological patterns, to invoke experience and memory, and to comment on industrial standardization. Repetition is a way of providing the viewers the same experience over and over again, but with an element of difference. It is this ability to vary multiplicity that is both, a challenge, and an avenue for artists to express themselves.

The use of repetition can be found in the work of Dutch artist, M C Escher (1898-1972), who was primarily a printmaker with an interest in the mathematical relationship between forms. He depicted interlocking figures and reflections in various three-dimensional shapes in his tessellations. In the 1950s and 1960s Pop artists used repetition of blatantly commercial objects in a non-painterly style to represent society heavily influenced by mass culture and consumerism. Repetition took on a new meaning with Minimalist painters such as Frank Stella (1936), who establishes expectations of continuity and recurrence in his work by suggesting continuity of form beyond the edges of the canvas. Agnes Martin (1912-2004) uses

the same principle of design in a Minimalist manner to reflect meditative visual experience in unassuming, fragile grid paintings that communicate ideas of the Eastern philosophy of Taoism.

The artists participating in “Multiplicity” have explored various disciplines over the years but are predominantly contemporary printmakers with a keen interest in re-interpreting repetitive images, patterns and forms in their works. Using a range of techniques, from traditional silkscreen and line drawings to photography and digitally manipulated prints, each artist uses the instrument of repetition in their own distinctive way in order to express their perception of the world. Featured artists include Kim Ng, Yim Yen Sum, NurKhalisah Ahmad, Cheong Yuck Wai and Nur Ghaina Shah.

Kim Ng, initially a silkscreen painter, is an artist who likes to express his vision of the world and his attitude towards the complexity of his society and environment. He combines figurative and abstract forms, presenting the objective image in a subjective manner. He paints an intuitive and true picture of our living conditions, to reflect the relation between the past and present, between reality and imagination. He repeats and juxtaposes scenes and structures that confront him everyday until his composition reflect existing scenarios in imagined configurations.

Nur Ghaina Shah also combines the real with the imaginary in her surrealistic, intricately painted compositions of places she has visited in the past. She responds to her environment in a creative and imaginative manner, by exploring her personal relationship with particular places, reconstructing them by retracting information from memories. She recreates journeys taken in the past, formed by the repetition of rhythm and patterns of her movement in her vivid renditions of entire cityscapes. She uses fluid washes of bright inks to capture an illusory atmosphere in her works and then validates her created spaces with fine details, both imagined and real.

An artist who started his career with neo-photorealistic figurative works, Cheong Tuck Wai later made a progression to abstraction with compositions that address environmental issues resulting from the expansion of the urban sprawl. A mixed media artist, he expresses his concern over the destruction of the natural environment due to rapid growth and development of cities. In this artwork he incorporates materials that remind him of his past, comparing these fading personal memories to the gradually disappearing natural world.

Yim Yen Sum is an innovative, young Malaysian installation artist who likes to push the boundaries of her medium by actively involving the public to participate in her projects. She is also concerned about the negative impact of urban development, but explores this impact on the behaviour and attitudes of the people. Sensitive to the disparity between rural and urban populations, she successfully pulls the people of Kuala Lumpur away from their repetitive and mundane routines, by inviting them to contribute to her project. In this work she has combined small pieces of plaster painted by various people to form a pattern commonly found on the ventilating ducts of old Malaysian houses, symbolising unity.

NurKhalisah Ahmad is an exciting new artist who aims to eliminate the space dividing the viewer and her artworks by mesmerizing them with her alluring and mysterious multi-dimensional creations. Using an intricately drawn motif as a starting point, she traces, replicates and experiments with it to form multi-layered artworks. She invites the viewers to interact with the works, to find 'something in her drawings, as they are reminiscent of the natural.

Each distinctive artist represented in "Multiplicity" presents a unique, contemporary approach to the use of repetition and multiplication of forms, providing its audience diverse interpretations of a theme used often by artists in the history of art and design. We hope that this grouping of artists will encourage viewers to re-look a form which traces its origins to the foundation of design and form.

Atiya Hassan, 2011