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## THE SYMBOLISM OF THE COVID-19 EVENT IN THE ARTWORK OF ISSAREZAL ISMAIL

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### ABSTRACT

Artwork is an expression of an artist inspired by thought and experience that encompasses issues and questions, including events, history, social, disasters, and psychology. This study was conducted to analyze and explain the signs and symbols on 20 works by Issarezal Ismail from two exhibition series entitled *Wake Me Up When It's All Over*. The artworks from this exhibition were inspired by the artist's own experience stranded in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah during the COVID-19 outbreak. The approach of this study is in the type of *art study* where it sits under a qualitative study that focuses on descriptive and holistic explanation. A conceptual framework was constructed based on the relevant concepts used by the researchers as a guide to analyzing the symbolism of the COVID-19 pandemic events in the work of Issarezal Ismail. The results of the analysis show that this series of works entitled *Wake Me Up When It's All Over* tries to reveal personal symbols from the artist's personal experience while dealing with movement control (MCO) situations. Due to the implementation of MCO, the artist's plan to move to Perak was disrupted, and he had to rent a cramped room while waiting for the MCO period to end. The results from the analysis found that each of his works uses signs and symbols such as humans, everyday objects, and elements of space, size, and material.

**Keywords:** Symbol, Signs, Artwork, COVID-19, Issarezal Ismail.

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak is a tragic event that will be etched into human history. The first case of the COVID-19 attack was reported in December 2019, originating from Wuhan, China. This epidemic has caused a worldwide uproar and has spread so quickly that it has crossed international borders. As a result, the World Health Organization (WHO) has assessed that COVID-19 has been declared a pandemic (Ghebreyesus, T.A.,2020). To date, the whole world is still facing this COVID-19 pandemic, where there have been more dangerous variants since then. Recent data shows a total of 320,944,953 people worldwide were infected with the COVID-19 virus, with 5,539,160 total deaths, while 264,105,068 people had recovered as of January 2022 (*Worldometer*, 2022). In Malaysia, the government has implemented the

Movement Control Order (MCO) to curb the spread of this pandemic as a first step. The MCO includes a comprehensive ban on public movements and gatherings throughout the country, including religious, sports, social, and cultural activities (Sinar Harian, 2020). After going through several phases of the MCO, Malaysia is entering the National Recovery Plan. In addition, the government has launched the National COVID-19 Immunization Program (PICK), which uses this program as an initiative to curb this pandemic. The COVID-19 vaccination enables humans to build immunity against SARS-CoV-2 (Badiani et al. 2020). Every citizen needs to take the vaccine to achieve group immunity in the community. In addition, the community is advised to take booster doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to ensure better protection against COVID-19 infection. This pandemic has undoubtedly changed not only the economy, tourism, industry, and trade but also social activities and norms. In the context of the visual arts, artists are also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions from the Movement Control Order (MCO) have changed the atmosphere of working only indoors. Physical exhibitions cannot be held during the MCO period. However, artists still use their ideas and expressions to create even if they are locked in the house. They did not miss out on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. If seen on social media, initially the work produced was more about solidarity to fight COVID-19 and over time it became a more personal issue. In addition, many murals were created to raise awareness and remember the sacrifices of the front line in the fight against COVID-19. In the context of the creation of artwork, professional and amateur artists have produced various forms of artwork in their responses to the COVID-19 events.

The production of artwork is based on ideas from multiple contexts, including self-expression, experience, observation, and as a token of appreciation for the sacrifices of front-line workers against COVID-19. The artwork produced consists of paintings, sculptures, and murals by experimenting with various media, techniques, and styles. Therefore, a detailed study needs to be done to discover the ideas, symbols, and meanings of the work area in the COVID-19 event. Based on the above explanation, this study focuses on the symbolism of COVID-19 events in the work of Issarezal Ismail. The objective of this study is in line with several questions which need to be addressed, namely, (1) What is the idea behind Issarezal Ismail's work in the context of COVID-19 events? (2) How is the idea expressed in the form of a work of art? (3) What are his artwork's symbols and meanings? The results of this study will benefit the academic and practical fields. The academic field, for example, can expand the knowledge of COVID-19-themed arts and events. In addition, this study can also generate ideas and pave the way for similar or related studies in the future. Finally, this study can inspire artists who want to work on the same theme in the practical field.

## **Literature Review**

Scholarly studies are still new and undertaken by local academic writers, especially in art and events. However, there are also previous studies that have discussed themes that are similar to some in this study. For example, in a study by Issarezal Ismail et al. (2021), they studied the symbolic message in a visual artwork titled *Wira* by Haris Abadi Abd Rahim in the context of the COVID-19 phenomenon. This study uses a descriptive and holistic qualitative approach through a conceptual framework constructed based on relevant concepts as a method to analyze the work. The meanings of the symbols in Haris Abadi's digital print work from the COVID-19 era show how much the artist appreciated the fight and sacrifices made by those on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Azian Tahir et al. (2015) discussed the symbols of European colonial historical events through printmaking artwork in the Malay states from 1786–1890. This qualitative study uses a literature review in which data collection is done through analyzing documentary evidence from archival, library, and gallery studies. Historical symbols in printmaking depict colonial events covering European society and culture, including technology, lifestyle, behavior, the economy, etc.

The symbols revealed represent colonial power and the pinnacle of European civilization. Azian Tahir et al. (2021) conducted another study on the historical events of British ruling in Sarawak using visual prints from the National Visual Arts Gallery collection. This qualitative study uses documentation in printed books, portfolios, photography, and historical recordings as research sources. The analysis of the symbols in the printed paper of the study shows a recording of the events of ethnic diversity, community culture,

customs, and natural beauty in Borneo. This shows that Borneo has a special charm that makes artists, researchers, and travellers want to sketch and record drawings of this community. Saiful Akram Che Cob (2019) has discussed visual propaganda as a symbolic antithesis during the events of the Japanese colonial era in Malaya (1942–1945). This qualitative study used a formalistic analysis of seven visuals: posters, pamphlets, magazines, illustrations, and newspapers. The findings of the symbols displayed in the propaganda visuals can be seen in events where Japan persuaded the people to support Japanese policies involving various aspects, namely the use of the Japanese language, the symbolization of integration, education, religion, the economy, and western anti-imperialism. The visual propaganda symbols were revealed to carry the meaning of the hard work done by Japan to gain the support of the people of Malaya against its rule. In line with that, Shaliza Dasuki et al. (2016) have conducted a study on newspaper cartoons to convey the community's voice on current socio-political events that occur in Malaysia. This qualitative study uses formalistic analysis through the theory of Feldman (1994), which focuses on four steps: description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. The analysis of the symbols in this cartoon found that important events related to politics, socio-culture, and socio-economics of the Malay community are the themes used as ideas in the art of drawing cartoons.

The meaning behind the use of these symbols shows the uniqueness of the art of cartoon drawing, which is entertainment. On the other hand, cartoons can influence human thoughts and opinions, especially on issues related to politics, the economy, society, and religion. In a study by Nur Nazirah Musa and Harozila Ramli (2014), they discussed paintings by Syed Ahmad Jamal in the context of events related to the artist's own experience. This qualitative study uses a formalistic analysis of five paintings by Syed Ahmad Jamal. The findings of the event symbols in the work entitled *Gunung Ledang Tanjung Kupang, 1978* display the Tanjung Kupang event, which killed a good friend of the artist himself, who was involved in the tragedy of the MH653 plane that crashed in Tanjung Kupang. The work entitled *"Gunung Ledang Visited 1992"* brings events or happenings based on the artist's expression on the subject of Gunung Ledang. The artist has translated an event into the form of a painting so effectively through his direct experience. Based on the literature review discussed above, the study of visual artwork in the context of events is still developing and continues to gain momentum among academicians. If viewed in detail, the study of art and events encompasses historical, political, environmental, personal, social, and cultural events. Therefore, this study can fill a gap in a study that has not been done before, especially in art and events.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study belongs to the type of art study where it sits under qualitative research based on descriptive and in-depth explanations. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) say that qualitative studies focus on text-based delivery systems that try to approach, understand, and explain the meaning of behaviors and the results of human-made products. Qualitative research is a way to learn about people's experiences in depth. It uses a certain set of research methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, observation, content analysis, visual methods, and life histories or biographies (Hennink, 2020). Since the study of art focuses its research target on works of art, the study of art has properties that are slightly different from other qualitative studies. First, the study of art requires a deep sensitivity and a high appreciation of the researcher for the phenomenon of the art under study. The researcher must be able to collect data about the artwork from the artist's perception with an inside view. Therefore, the data collection method involved observation of the artwork and interviews with artists. Data collection also involves literature review, including articles, books, and exhibition catalogs. During an interview, tools like notes, cameras, audio recorders, and video recorders are used to help collect data.

### **Methodology and Conceptual Framework**

In order to understand and clarify all the questions in this study, a review that contains concepts from several related disciplines is discussed below.

### **Symbol**

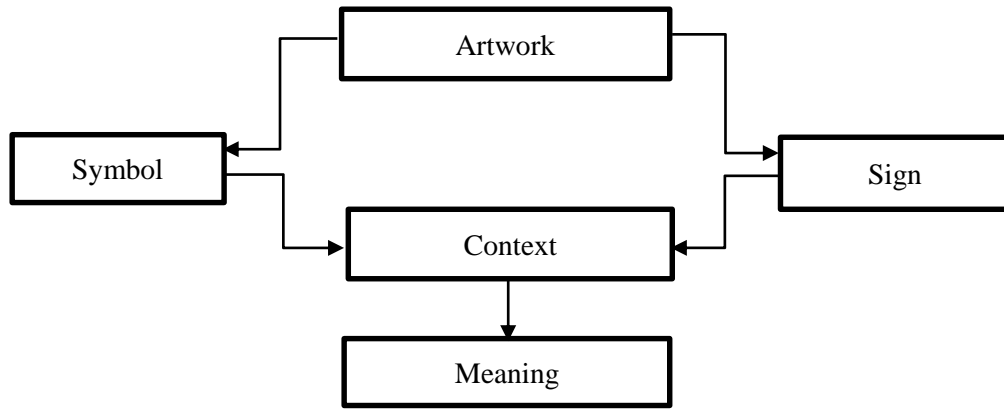
A symbol is an object, picture, speech, behavior, or anything else resulting from human action and representing something other than its literal existence (Dillistone, F.W, 1986). The meaning here is that symbols exist in human life that includes various aspects such as objects, the environment, speech, movement, beliefs, and so on. A group of people creates symbolic images with multiple meanings. A symbol carries different meanings according to the context, changing times, background, and understanding of a group of people. Symbols function as a form of communication or as a means of conveying a message. In a work of art, a symbol serves as a tool to give meaning to an object so that it becomes more profound. The artist's use of symbols in the artwork has more than one personal and general meaning level.

### **Event**

An event is a thing; an occasion that happens (attracts attention); things like the declaration of independence of the Federation of Malaya is an important thing in the history of this state; language, like an event related to the development of language; the history of important events in history; historical events; historic days due to the occurrence of important events (Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 2022). Based on the above definition, an event is an important occasion that occurs in a particular space, location, or place. Events also have times where the period and time of the event have already occurred in the past. Independence Day, for example, involves independence figures and scenes such as processions, independence cries, rallies, and so on. Events are also looked at from a historical, cultural, economic, political, social, environmental, or religious point of view. Events such as historical, for example, serve as lessons and reminders from the experiences of previous generations for current and future generations. Likewise, when making works of art, the primary sources of ideas and inspiration are known to be events and feelings that the artist himself has gone through.

### **Artwork**

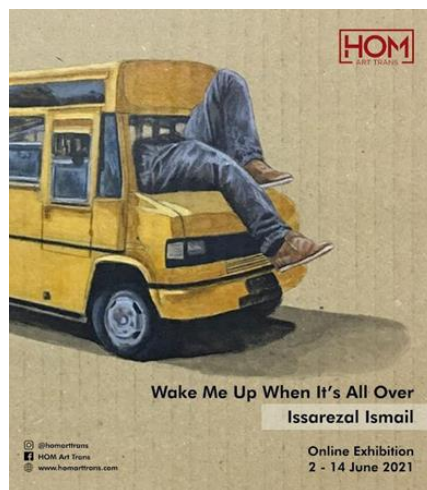
Artwork is ideas from life experiences expressed in visual form through the skill of manipulating a medium (Ragans, 2005). Patriansyah (2021) suggests a work of art is a reflection of the artist's perspective of the events or issues in his surroundings, which contributes to the inspiration for the artwork. The definition explains that artwork is produced through the artist's life experience. Artists' expressions are translated by using their skills on a surface to make a mark. In the creation of a work, an artwork only exists when there are media and techniques. Among the mediums or materials that artists use to create artwork are oil paint, ink, watercolor, pencil, and charcoal. The artwork has several functions, such as recording important events, communication tools, and artistic value. For example, a significant historical event can be documented in visual form as historical material information. The COVID-19 event, for example, is one of the milestones that shocked the whole world with the spread of a pandemic that resulted in the loss of many lives. Each individual must have gone through their own experience while dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, the artwork that will be analyzed in terms of its symbols and meanings is based on the artist's experience with the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the above-mentioned and considering the relationship between concepts, everything can be simplified in a conceptual framework as below. Researchers use this conceptual framework as a guide to figure out what the COVID-19 event means in the work of Issarezal Ismail.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework

Based on the conceptual framework above, the artwork is a creation inspired by the artist based on thought and experience. Artists create visual language by combining the elements and principles of art using media and techniques. Elements of art consist of line, shape, color, texture, form, and space. A principle of design is a way to organize art or visual information in a piece. Some examples of the principles of design are rhythm, balance, contrast, harmony, proportion, movement, and variety. Analyzing a work begins by identifying each sign and symbol found in the artwork. Signs in a work of art are not limited to objects or things only but include events, people, texts, and behaviors that are described in a representational or abstract way. Thus, a sign has a direct relationship with the sign it represents, and the meaning of each sign is based on the relationship of the visual elements in visual artwork. On the other hand, symbols are independent and not directly tied to what they symbolize. The interpretation of the meaning of a symbol must be seen in its context, which involves various aspects, including culture, the artist's experience, events, social, psychological, and economic. Therefore, the meaning of a symbol will depend on the context of what is being looked at in the work. Symbols can have more than one level of meaning. After interpreting signs and symbols in context, the meaning of a work of art can be deciphered. The meaning of work refers to what the artist wants to convey in his work.

## RESULTS



**Figure 2.** Exhibition Poster by Issarezal Ismail, *Wake Me Up When It's All Over*, 2021, Source: HOM Art Trans (2021)

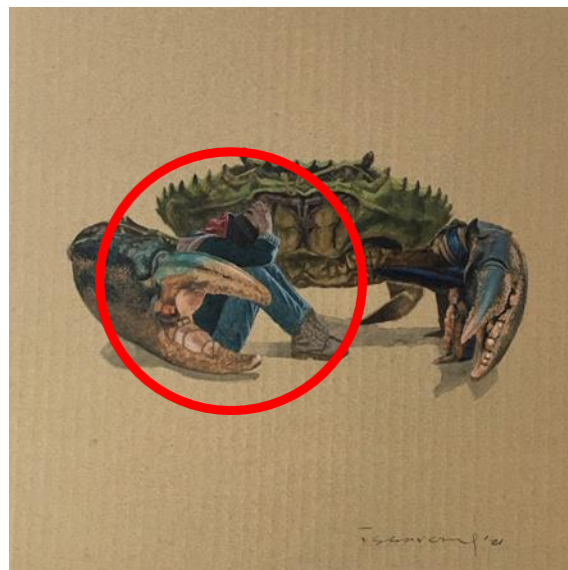


**Figure 3.** Exhibition Poster by Issarezal Ismail, *Wake Me Up When It's All Over*, Volume II, Source: HOM Art Trans (2021)

The works analyzed in this study are a total of 20 works from two exhibition series entitled *Wake Me Up When It's All Over*. In general, the work in this exhibition is inspired by the artist's personal experience, who was stranded in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, during the COVID-19 event. The first series of this exhibition took place from 2 June until 14 June 2021, while the second series took place from 2 October until 9 October 2021. Hom Art Trans Gallery organized the show. The exhibition took place when the country was still facing the COVID-19 situation; at that time, the government took steps (MCO) to curb the pandemic from spreading. At the time of the exhibition, the artist was already in Seri Iskandar, Perak. The overall size of the work in this exhibition is around 36cm x 36cm. In every painting by Issarezal, a visual figure of a man is seen lying down, and some are also seen sitting down (refer to the red circle in Figures 4 & 5). The visual sign at least indicates a human being at rest. If observed, the figure of the man is composed lying without a mattress, pillow, or anything else to show a resemblance to a prisoner sleeping in prison or a homeless person sleeping on the side of a building. Based on his experience, this depicted sign of rest and poverty reflects the bitterness of his life of only being able to lie down and sleep all day to spend the day in a small room he inhabited. The painful situation occurred when the artist was stranded in Sabah, following the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO), where a total ban on movement was enforced. As a result, all individuals had to stay at home.



**Figure 4.** Issarezal Ismail, *Wake Me Up When It's All Over #30*, 2021, Acrylic on Carton Box  
Source: HOM Art Trans (2021)



**Figure 5.** Issarezal Ismail, *Wake Me Up When It's All Over #20*, 2021, Acrylic on Carton Box  
Source: HOM Art Trans (2021)

In the context of psychology, actions such as those mentioned above are considered symptoms of depression (Viatrix, 2021). Based on that context, it is not an exaggeration to say that the image of a sleeping man is a symbol of escape. Sleep, for the artist, is an attempt to escape everyday life's problems. While going through this challenging situation, the artist is more willing to sleep than be awake because there is not much to do. Therefore, sleep was the only way for the artist to escape the reality of life at the time. The work above shows one of the artworks by Issarezal, which refers to the above discussion. The works analyzed also found that the appearance or face of the male figure appeared to be disguised and not shown in its entirety. The man's figure is composed of hands covering the front, turning the back of the face, covering the head with a hood, wearing a hat, and covering the face with everyday objects. Such visual cues can reveal that the artist does not want to be known for his situation when facing a bitter one. If associated with the artist's situation at the time, he is a new occupant of the place and has no acquaintances or friends. At the same time, when MCO was implemented, the movement was controlled, and he did not meet with



people around him and only made up their descriptions.

Next, in Issarezal's works, the figure's relationship with the daily objects processed as a place to take refuge can be seen. The daily objects composed are made up of objects in the artist's environment in the form of food such as canned sardines, instant noodles, dried fish, crabs, durians, and canned drinks such as coca-cola and livita. Some things look like cars, buses, and tires, as well as face masks, matchboxes, pencils, colored tubes, shoes, rolls of toilet paper, and dried leaves. The work below is one of the daily objects visualized by Issarezal in his work, which is a dried fish. In general, dried fish is a very simple dish that can be cheaply prepared. In a social context, it is not an exaggeration to say that the object of dried fish is a sign of food for the poor or the less fortunate and can symbolize poverty. This situation can be linked to the experience of the artist at that time, who cannot work, and one of the dishes he can afford is dried fish. Sardines and instant noodles are also a sign that represents the artist's daily food, which he can still afford at a reasonable price at that time.



**Figure 6.** Issarezal Ismail, *Wake Me Up When It's All Over #4*, 2021, Acrylic on Carton Box  
Source: HOM Art Trans (2021)

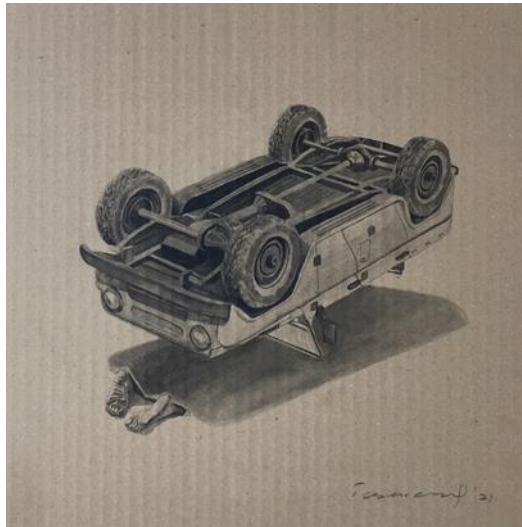


**Figure 7.** Issarezal Ismail, *Wake Me Up When It's All Over #31*, 2021, Acrylic on Carton Box  
Source: HOM Art Trans (2021)

Cars are also one of many everyday objects that Issarezal has sketched in his work. The artist has portrayed a car which is upside-down. The wheels of the car are seen facing upwards, while a male figure



is sketched under the shadow of the car. What the artist wants to convey in this work can be interpreted by the sign of the wheel itself, in which our life can be likened to a spinning wheel. Sometimes we are on top, comfortable, happy, and sometimes we are at the bottom, difficult, painful, and sad. Such is the artist's experience when unexpected events befell him, but it is a norm in life that everything that happened must have a silver lining.



**Figure 8.** Issarezal Ismail, *Wake Me Up When It's All Over #16*, 2021, Acrylic on Carton Box  
Source: HOM Art Trans (2021)



**Figure 9.** Issarezal Ismail, *Wake Me Up When It's All Over #23*, 2021, Acrylic on Carton Box  
Source: HOM Art Trans (2021)

In this particular painting by Issarezal, a blank background is shown. The artist focused only on two images, namely the figure of a man and an everyday object in each of his work. This blank space mark can mean nothing. This might depict the situation of the artist at that time, who was short on necessities such as mattresses, pillows, furniture, or simply himself. This situation can be attributed to the artist's experience, who had to rent an empty room and the condition of the room in a confined environment. The

size of the room rented by the artist was only 3 meters by 3 meters when he was stranded in Sabah. When looking at the empty background of an artwork, we can somehow feel the bitter situation experienced by the artist. The depiction of male figures and daily objects in Issarezal's works are portrayed contrary to the nature of their actual size. This can be seen through the size of the male figure, which is just slightly smaller than daily objects as if humans lived in a dwarfed realm. If observed, these artworks contain the elements of Surrealism, whose stylistic ideas are from the human subconscious mind (Diyanto, 2013). Through surrealism, an artist can express elements that are indicators of hidden 'inner truths' (Wango, K. 2021). Issarezal's work is a detailed sketch of subconscious images and imaginary worlds. This is done by looking at objects' colour and size and figuring out what the shapes on the objects mean. Finally, the artist used cardboard as a surface for his work. The approach to using cardboard differs from other works that usually use canvas and paper. Typically, cardboard is used to assemble boxes to store and pack items. Therefore, the meaning behind the cardboard in Issarezal's work might be symbolic of displacement whereby the artist, who was unable to go back to Perak since the government had placed the movement control order to curb the spread of the virus.

## CONCLUSION

A work of art is a creation inspired by an artist based on thought and experience. Typically, in visual art, the artist uses visual language encompassing elements and principles of art with aesthetic value. An artwork is a communication tool that conveys a message to others. Using signs and symbols as a connection, the artist can convey a message to the community about various issues, including events, history, social, economic, disasters, and politics. Art is also a way to record important events and things that have happened visually as historical material. A series of works entitled *Wake Me Up When It's All Over* by Issarezal is inspired by the personal experience of the artist who was stranded in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, during the COVID-19 event. The display of signs and symbols in his work consists of human beings, daily objects, and elements of space, size, and material used to produce the artwork. The meaning of the symbols can be found in various contexts, including experiences, events, disasters, psychology, and society. The signs and symbols expressed are inspired by the artist's own experience. The artist's work shows that the MCO changed his plans to go back to Perak, thus he had to rent a cramped room while waiting for the MCO period to end.

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