

## ***Surat-Surat Tak Terbaca (Unreadable Letters)***

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“..what artists see can tell us more about themselves than about us”.

Rene Richard, “The Radiant Child”, *Artforum* (1981)

According to well known Indonesian author, A.A. Navis (1999), there are three reasons why the *Minang*, a term used for the people of West Sumatera, migrate: to further their studies, to seek their fortune and to avoid personal conflict at home. Yunizar was born as a *Minang* and falls into the first grouping. After graduating in 1992 from the Fine Arts High School (*Sekolah Menengah Seni Rupa (SMSR)*) in Padang, West Sumatera, he moved to Yogyakarta, Central Java, and joined the Indonesian Art Institute (*Institute Seni Indonesia (ISI)*) a year later. He felt at home in Yogya and has, since his graduation, remained in the city with his wife and children. Although the ostensible reason for moving to Yogya was to continue his education, his greater aim was to enlarge and improve his painting skills. It was in this city, together with five other *Minang* peers, that Yunizar formed a group known as *Kelompok Jendela* (*jendela* = ‘window’ in Bahasa Indonesia).

Although he began painting in the 1990s, Yunizar’s works did not represent sociopolitical issues. This was unlike works by his peers in Indonesia at the time, especially those who flourished after the fall of Suharto’s regime in 1998. Yunizar’s aesthetic inclination towards non representational art became a unique trait, as artwork by many artists from Yogya in the 1990s tended to contain sociopolitical issues. This was interpreted as an effort to narrow the gap between the function and role of art in society. As such, Social Art paradigms had significant presence in Indonesian art practice towards the end of the 1990s.

Art was not always created to address or answer social concerns. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to question the presence of an artwork in terms of what it means or is about. By focussing on the definition and meaning of art, we are able to clarify the role and function of art.

Today, the creation of art bears its own irrationality, making the principles in formalism the only logical basis on which we discuss a work of art. The situation becomes difficult when formalism is unable to influence social structure as compared to science and technology.

‘Nobody understands art but the artist’ is a popular adage (or dogma) in modern art. This adage, often used to criticise art which is not understood, addresses a level of cynicism towards the artist. Even formalism – often described as the most logical principle of aesthetics – has not always been easily understood, particularly when the artwork’s formal character prioritises the substantive form and ignores its content. The meaning of a formal painting is not in its representation. Instead, it lies in its sensibility to form, rhythm, colour, line and composition that create a sense of balance, sensibility, harmony, comfort, etc.

Yunizar's artwork may be included in the formalist aesthetic mentioned above. Seen from the (perspective of) principles of formalism, the meaning in his art is almost impossible to determine or define, making his art interesting. The artist himself does not provide much explanation on his art, and does not seem overly bothered about it.

Artists do not typically elaborate on their artwork in great detail. At times, they are deliberately unwilling to explain their work, preferring to let the work 'speak for themselves'. This keeps the art public free from any direction from the artist, and enables the artwork to give rise to multiple interpretations. Even so, an artwork with multiple interpretations is clearly bound to contexts related to the artist himself, such as biographical experience, as well as the spirit, culture and sociopolitical context of the time the artwork was created.

We are unable to derive clear meaning from Yunizar's art due to the nonexistence of representational patterns. His paintings do not manifest synonym forms of specific associations, or perceptual lines that subsequently generate easily recognisable codes, signs, metaphors or symbolic meaning. Yunizar's artwork does not appropriate objects or forms that instantly correspond with the public's (appreciator's) perception. The shapes in his paintings are created 'organically' (naturally or instinctively), and do not correspond to reality, freeing his canvas from any tendency to narrate.

Yunizar admits repeatedly that intuition has a significant role in the creation of his work. Due to this strong force of intuition, his paintings present associations with the intuition, something that is difficult to explain in the real world. His 'internal stimuli' that he draws on to paint comes across as more dominant than the 'external stimuli' that we see around us.

Seen in this light, Yunizar's artwork has neither social aims nor political slogans. Nor do they convey any pretentiousness of aesthetics, techniques, objects and concepts. What we are left with is our sensation of a visual experience, akin to looking at graffiti on a wall, or seeing a mentally challenged man carve the surface of the ground with a stick. We are instantly reminded of a child's drawing, or a primitive drawing in caves - naïve, uncomplicated, and unrelated to 'proper' drawing skills.

In general, his paintings reveal a combination of lines and unusual objects as well as the light use of colour. These lines create a language, strands of letters that make a sentence. We see short stubby strokes that curve, showing rhythm and movement, but with no impression of any form. These strokes go in opposite directions, intersecting each other, occupying the majority of the lower part of the canvas. In some works, a group of lines is done intentionally and with a logical perspective. The lower lines on the canvas have 'lines and alphabets larger in scale, which became smaller as they go higher up the canvas. As a result, we have an illusion of a horizon or a landscape.

Yunizar colours his canvas minimally using a combination of contrasting colours like red and green. The presence of colour comes with undefined forms. The layering of oil pigment - brushed repeatedly on top of each other - creates the texture on the surface of his canvas. Yunizar admits that these layers are usually triggered by his dissatisfaction with the first or earlier layer. This gives rise to a different aspect as the layers are eventually enjoyed for their own aesthetics.

Yunizar paints without determining ratio, using his dominant force of intuition. In reality, he does not know himself the subject matter he is about to pour onto the canvas before him. He does not start his painting with a clear concept in his head, but with – as he once said himself – “the scribble of emotions, the play of aesthetics, something, letters, etc”. These are key words for the reading of Yunizar’s art, they do not however explain the meaning of his paintings.

It is no surprise therefore that we face difficulty when seeking to find deep meaning in his art. For Yunizar, what you see is what you get, or what you think is what you see. However, when analysed from the point of Indonesian art history, it seems that Yunizar is reminding us of the legendary painter, Nashar (1928–1994), with his three ‘non’s: non concept, non technique, non object.

Looking for a clear narrative or meaning in Yunizar’s paintings is impossible. Even if meaning is found, it could potentially be opposite to or different from the artist’s conception. However, the interpretation of Yunizar’s work can lead to a higher level of analysis – as in the study or observation of the context of contemporary culture. Assessed from this aspect, Yunizar’s paintings could be a critical parody of our literature phenomenon; or a parody of our interpretation system in the art world which has been superficial in interpreting artwork. Going deeper, we may assume that Yunizar’s paintings seem to reflect a subversion of the signs around us.