

# Interpreting the Symbolic Message behind Bayu Utomo Radjikin's 'Ada Apa Dengan Tengkorak'

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Received: 25 January 2025 | Accepted: 7 March 2025 | Published: 1 April 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajress.2025.7.3.13>

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**Abstract:** *Visual art serves as a medium of communication that extends beyond mere visual representation, conveying messages or meanings the artist aims to share with the audience using specific signs or symbols. This study aims to explore the symbolic messages in Bayu Utomo Radjikin's artworks, specifically in his solo exhibition Ada Apa Dengan Tengkorak (2015). The main objective is to examine the structure, content, and functions of the message, with a particular focus on the key signs and symbols present in the artworks. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative art study analysis, incorporating in-depth observation and interpretation based on a conceptual framework which was built from several relevant concept. Data collection focuses a detailed examination of the visual aspects in the artwork, supported by literature from fields such as culture, history, sociology and philosophy. The analysis reveals that the skulls in Bayu's works transcend their physical form to symbolize life's impermanence, the endurance of legacy, and the balance between strength and vulnerability. The antler-like structures intertwined with the skulls reinterpret traditional notions of dominance, reflecting interconnectedness and shared human struggles. The use of dark, minimalist backgrounds further enhances the introspective tone, drawing the viewer into an exploration of identity, survival, and existence.*

**Keywords:** symbolic message, visual art, interpretation, bayu utomo radjikin

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the landscape of visual art in Malaysia has experienced a profound transformation, marked not only by stylistic innovation but also by a deeper engagement with the socio-cultural and political dimensions that shape the nation's collective consciousness. The visual art scene in Malaysia, once dominated by abstract expressionism and nationalistic themes, has shifted towards more contemporary forms of artistic expression. This evolution reflects a broader cultural shift, where artists are increasingly exploring complex issues that resonate on both a local and global scale (Koh, 2006). Issues such as gender, political dynamics, social justice, economic inequality, technological innovation, and environmental challenges now occupy center stage in the works of Malaysian artists, pushing the boundaries of what art can communicate and how it interacts with societal discourse (Sulaiman, 2009).

This movement toward more complex and nuanced forms of visual expression reflects not just a change in artistic preference but a deliberate break from the dominant visual narratives that characterized the earlier part of the 20th century. According to Chia (2008), The traditional modes of abstract art and expressionism have given way to figurative works and installation

pieces that embrace the dynamism of contemporary life, reflecting the growing awareness of artists to the world around them. As Turner (1999) notes, contemporary art arises from the intersection of artists and the socio-cultural phenomena of their time, emphasizing that the art produced is intrinsically linked to the specific era in which it is created. This deeper connection between art and society highlights the transformative power of visual art as it responds to the rapid changes and challenges of the modern world.

In recent years, a significant shift in Malaysian art has been the resurgence of figurative art. Artists who once embraced abstraction are increasingly turning to the human form to address deeper societal issues. This new approach moves away from past depictions that focused on the aesthetic beauty of the body and instead uses the human figure as a symbolic tool for societal critique. The figurative works now presented often tackle pressing issues such as economic hardship, political unrest, gender inequality, and the impact of globalization.

By integrating these complex themes into their art, Malaysian artists are transforming the role of visual art. What was once merely decorative is now a powerful vehicle for social commentary and advocacy. Through this shift, artists are encouraging viewers to engage with and reflect on the challenges of contemporary society, using the human figure to convey urgent messages about the complexities of the modern world.

At the forefront of this figurative revival is Bayu Utomo Radjikin, a pivotal figure in contemporary Malaysian visual art. As a co-founder of the Matahati art group, Radjikin played a fundamental role in shifting Malaysian art away from abstract and expressionist styles towards a more grounded and socially conscious figurative approach. His work, especially his iconic piece *Bujang Berani* (1991), marked a definitive turning point in the art scene. Winning the top prize in the *Contemporary Young Talent* competition that same year, Radjikin's work demonstrated a shift towards deeper engagement with the socio-political realities of Malaysia. His works, which often feature bold, figurative elements, engage with themes that reflect his concern with the shifting cultural landscape and the human experience within it.

Radjikin's art transcends the mere representation of the human body; it is a medium through which he explores the vulnerabilities and contradictions of society. As Barrett (1982) suggests, visual art serves as a platform through which artists communicate personal reflections, societal concerns, and intellectual inquiries. For Radjikin, his works do not simply depict figures—they provoke a dialogue with the viewer, inviting them to interrogate the broader societal issues symbolized within the artworks. By using the human form as a vehicle for social critique, Radjikin contributes to the larger conversation about how art can engage with societal realities and act as a catalyst for change.

A particularly striking aspect of Radjikin's oeuvre is his use of skeletal imagery, which he explored in his 2015 solo exhibition *Ada Apa Dengan Tengkorak* (What's with the Skull?), hosted at Hom Art Trans Gallery in Kuala Lumpur and Chan Hampe Gallery in Singapore. The skull, as a symbol, carries profound connotations of mortality, decay, and the passage of time. Yet, Radjikin's use of the skeleton moves beyond these basic associations, drawing attention to deeper societal issues such as the fragility of life, the human condition, and the socio-political forces that shape individual and collective destinies. The skeleton in Radjikin's works serves as a vehicle for the expression of loss, trauma, and societal disintegration, while also inviting reflection on the cultural and political forces at play.

This study seeks to examine the symbolic use of skeleton imagery in Radjikin's *Ada Apa Dengan Tengkorak* exhibition, investigating the complex messages these symbols convey. The study will address the following research questions: (1) How is the visual structure of the skeleton employed in Radjikin's work, and what role do signs and symbols play in its meaning? (2) What interpretations arise from the use of these visual elements, particularly in relation to contemporary societal issues? (3) What functions do these symbols serve within the broader social context, and how do they engage with the challenges faced by modern Malaysia?

This research is expected to contribute significantly to both the academic discourse on visual art and the broader social understanding of contemporary artistic practices. From an academic perspective, the study will offer new insights into the symbolic dimensions of visual art and its capacity to communicate complex societal messages. Socially, the findings will deepen public engagement with contemporary Malaysian art, fostering a greater appreciation for its role in addressing critical issues. By exploring how symbolic imagery in Radjikin's work interacts with the socio-political context of Malaysia, this study aims to reinforce the vital role of art as a medium for dialogue, reflection, and advocacy in a rapidly evolving world.

## 2. Methodology

This study, which centers on visual artworks, is situated within the domain of art studies, as defined by Rohidi (2014). Art studies represent a specialized subset of qualitative research, focusing on the interpretation of symbolic meanings embedded in human or cultural activities and objects, including visual artworks. By examining the symbolic content within these works, art studies aim to uncover the deeper significance and cultural narratives that inform artistic expression.

Like other qualitative research methodologies, art studies employ research strategies such as in-depth observation, flexible interviews, and the systematic collection of relevant documents, with the researcher acting as the primary instrument of data collection (Creswell, 2014). The researcher's direct involvement in the field is essential to capturing the subtleties and complexities inherent in the subject matter. While the primary focus is on the analysis of visual artworks, the results are typically presented in textual or descriptive forms, where the researcher's aesthetic sensitivity and interpretive expertise are crucial in unpacking the layers of meaning conveyed through visual representations.

In addressing the research questions related to the depiction of the skeleton and its symbolic significance in Bayu Utomo Radjikin's artworks, this study integrates key concepts from relevant scientific disciplines into its conceptual framework. These concepts are synthesized to create a research model that facilitates the interpretation of the signs and symbols central to the analysis, ultimately uncovering the underlying messages embedded in the visual artwork. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic language used by Radjikin and the cultural contexts that shape his artistic expression.

### Message

A message can be defined as a structured collection of signs or symbols that humans use to convey specific intentions to others (Changara, 2007). This definition highlights two key components: the structure, which refers to the deliberate arrangement of signs or symbols to convey meaning, and the content, which encompasses the ideas, emotions, and experiences represented by these signs. Together, they form the foundation of human communication, allowing complex human thoughts to be expressed through a range of symbolic forms.

Messages can be communicated in two primary forms: verbal and non-verbal. Verbal messages utilize universal verbal symbols, such as written or spoken language, while non-verbal messages rely on visual, auditory, or physical symbols, such as paintings, dance, or music. Tassoni (2006) notes that non-verbal messages are often culturally specific, with their meanings shaped by the cultural contexts in which they are both produced and interpreted. These different modes of communication allow for a rich diversity of expression and understanding across varied social and cultural settings.

The functions of messages vary depending on their intended purpose. Mufid (2009) categorizes the primary functions of messages as informative, persuasive, and coercive. The informative function aims to provide knowledge to help individuals make informed decisions, while the persuasive function seeks to influence emotions and attitudes, encouraging voluntary behavioral changes. The coercive function, on the other hand, often uses pressure or authority to compel specific actions. These functions demonstrate the diverse roles that messages can play in shaping human behavior, reflecting the complexity of communication in both personal and societal contexts.

### **Symbol in Art**

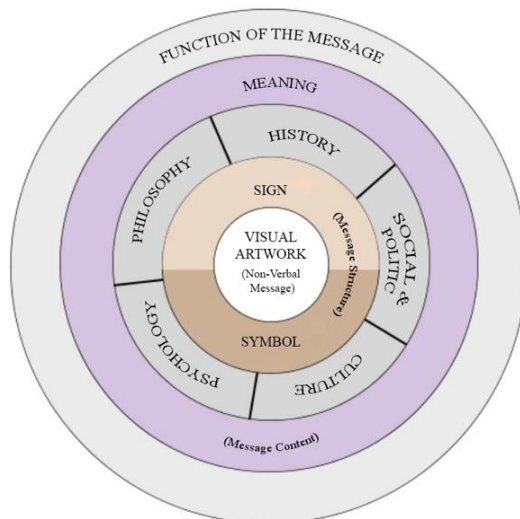
A symbol is defined as any object, image, sound, text, or human creation that signifies something beyond its physical form, representing abstract concepts such as thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and desires (Dillistone, 2002). Symbols bridge the tangible and intangible, allowing for the expression of complex human experiences in visual and other sensory forms. Saidi (2008) elaborates that symbols can function in multiple ways: as a noun, verb, or adjective. As a noun, a symbol refers to tangible entities; as a verb, it represents or signifies something else; and as an adjective, it conveys abstract meanings that go beyond the literal interpretation. This multifaceted nature of symbols enhances their capacity to communicate layered, nuanced meanings.

In the context of visual art, symbols manifest through various elements such as representations of humans, animals, and objects, as well as through formal artistic components like lines, shapes, and colors. Rohidi (2000) classifies these symbols into two types: iconic symbols, which resemble their real-world counterparts, and abstract symbols, which invite more flexible interpretations. This categorization reflects the versatility of symbols in art, as their meanings shift depending on the context and viewer perception. The function of a symbol in art is to mediate between the physical world and human experience, allowing it to carry complex and layered meanings that extend beyond direct representation.

Symbols in visual art serve as critical tools for artists to communicate deeper meanings to their audience. Ogden and Richards (1989) argue that symbols inherently carry meanings rooted in specific concepts, often influenced by human experience. While some symbols reflect societal understandings, others convey personal or individual dimensions. This dynamic nature of symbolism allows art to contribute to the development of an evolving symbolic language, in which artists innovate and create new symbols to express emerging ideas or concepts that do not yet have established visual representations.

To analyze the symbolic use of skeleton imagery in the works of Bayu Utomo Radjikin, this study develops a conceptual framework that examines both the visual and symbolic dimensions of his art. The skeleton, traditionally associated with death and decay, is used by Radjikin to convey more profound societal critiques and personal reflections. By focusing on the interplay between visual elements and symbolic references, this framework aims to uncover the complex

meanings embedded in Radjikin's use of the skeleton as a symbol. The analytical framework thus provides a tool for understanding how Radjikin's artwork communicates its messages, exploring the societal and personal dialogues that inform his work and deepening our understanding of the broader cultural narratives that shape it.



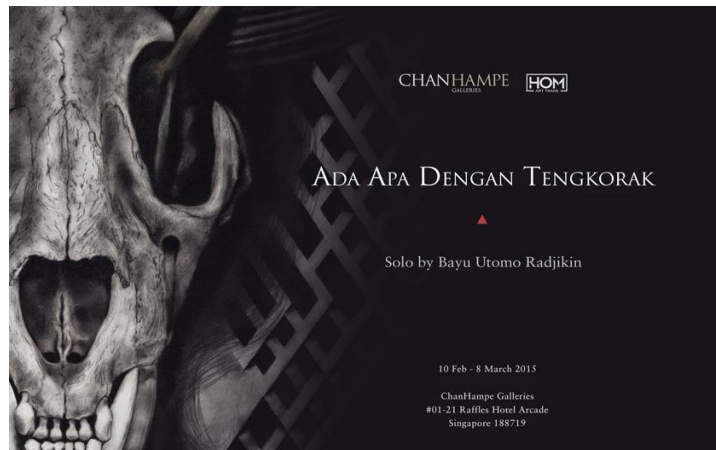
**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Symbolic Message in Visual Artwork**

The research model presented in Figure 1 emphasizes visual artwork as a form of nonverbal communication, positioned at the center as the primary object of analysis. This artwork contains signs and symbols, including both iconic representations, such as images, and abstract qualities, such as lines, colors, textures, contrast, and repetition. These elements form the basis for examining the symbolic language embedded within the artwork. The analysis begins by examining the structure of the message, focusing on signs and symbols that depict the human figure within the artwork, linking the visual elements to the event's space and time.

A sign can evolve into a symbol, which is inherently arbitrary and does not have a direct or natural connection to its reference. Unlike signs, which are typically more straightforward in their meaning, symbols derive their significance from the context in which they are placed. This context encompasses various factors such as psychology, social dynamics, politics, history, and culture, all of which contribute to how a symbol is understood. The meaning of a symbol is not fixed but rather shaped by these contextual elements, making it a complex and layered form of communication. Through the analysis of these signs and symbols, one can uncover the deeper messages they convey. By considering the context and the various influences at play, a comprehensive interpretation can be achieved. Once the meaning is fully understood, the function of the message can be determined, whether it is intended to inform, persuade, or even coerce its audience. This process allows for a more nuanced understanding of how symbols influence and shape societal attitudes and behaviors.



### 3. Analysis and Discussion



**Figure 2: ‘Ada Apa Dengan Tengkorak’ Solo Exhibition Poster (2015)**

Bayu Utomo Radjikin’s solo exhibition *Ada Apa dengan Tengkorak* (2015), presented at HOM Art Trans in Kuala Lumpur and ChanHampe Galleries in Singapore, showcased a striking collection of large-scale paintings that reflected his distinctive artistic approach. Known for his ability to blend bold compositions with intricate details, Bayu’s work in this exhibition exemplified his unique skill in combining organic forms with symbolic elements. The series invited viewers to engage deeply with its complexity, continuing his tradition of offering innovative, visually captivating pieces that challenge the viewer’s perceptions. As a prominent figure in Malaysian contemporary art, Bayu’s exhibition reaffirmed his mastery and individual artistic vision.

The paintings in the series immediately capture attention through their large size and the intricacy of their intertwining forms. Dominated by skeletal and antler-like structures, the artworks exhibit Bayu’s exceptional control over line, texture, and composition. The dynamic and fluid forms appear alive, twisting and overlapping with precision. Executed in monochrome palettes, these forms are heightened by vivid bursts of color, which enhance the dramatic tension in the compositions. The contrast between dark and light tones creates an intense visual presence, deepening the complexity and engagement of each piece.

Each artwork is set against a minimalist, dark background, isolating the intricate forms and heightening their impact. This stark contrast focuses attention on the dynamic energy and fine details of the skeletal structures, while simplifying the overall composition to enhance its intensity. The large scale of the paintings, some extending beyond life-size dimensions, amplifies their immersive quality, enveloping the viewer in their visual depth. With their dramatic interplay of light, shadow, and scale, the works evoke a sense of movement and tension, ensuring that *Ada Apa dengan Tengkorak* delivers a visceral and unforgettable experience, showcasing Bayu’s extraordinary talent and innovative contributions to contemporary art.



**Figure 3:** Bayu Utomo Radjikin, *Interwine*, 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 76cm x 151cm

As shown in the painting above (Figure 3) antlers are recurring visual element in Bayu Utomo Radjikin's solo exhibition. This focus highlights Bayu's deliberate artistic choice of subject matter and his distinctive approach to form and composition. The intricate and bold use of organic shapes, such as antlers or horns, is consistently seen throughout the works in the exhibition, demonstrating his refined craftsmanship and attention to detail. In her curatorial writing, Khairuddin (2015) identified antlers or horns as a key feature in this series, emphasizing their visual significance and their central role in not only shaping the overall aesthetic of the artworks but also suggesting that they can symbolize masculinity.

The connection between antlers and masculinity is deeply rooted in natural and cultural contexts, establishing them as strong symbols of power and dominance. In the animal kingdom, antlers, primarily seen in male species like deer, elk, and moose, serve critical biological functions. They are used during mating seasons to assert dominance, compete for mates, and defend territory. Larger, well-developed antlers often signal health and strength, acting as visual indicators of genetic fitness. These structures also play a vital role in territorial battles, ensuring access to resources (Bubenik & Bubenik, 1990). This natural association with strength and survival has linked antlers to traditional notions of masculinity.

From the cultural context, antlers have been tied to traditional ideas of masculinity, symbolizing resilience, authority, and the primal instincts associated with survival and dominance. As stated by Roux (2003), across various societies, they have been revered as emblems of leadership and status, often adorning ceremonial headdresses, crowns, and trophies. Their presence in rituals, art, and symbolic objects reflects their enduring significance as representations of male prowess. The combination of their natural function and cultural symbolism has embedded antlers deeply into narratives of masculinity, where they continue to represent qualities such as power, endurance, and the ability to overcome challenges in human worlds.

However, in the painting titled *Intertwine* (2014), the intertwining antler-like structures challenge traditional notions of individual power. Their chaotic entanglement suggests a shift from solitary dominance to a dynamic, interconnected complexity. The overlapping and twisting forms become metaphors for shared struggles, mutual reliance, and the intricate nature of human relationships. This interpretation emphasizes the balance between strength and vulnerability, illustrating the delicate interplay between individuality and collective interdependence.

The antlers, with their fluid and serpentine forms, convey a sense of motion and tension, as if caught in a constant state of negotiation. Their interwoven nature symbolizes how relationships and connections shape strength, suggesting that power is no longer an isolated entity, but something constructed through collaboration and shared experiences. The entanglement reflects the multifaceted dynamics of human connections, where cooperation and support coexist with conflict and struggle.

The chaotic arrangement of the antlers also speaks to the complexity of maintaining individuality within the larger framework of interdependence. While each form retains its distinct shape, the overlapping structures emphasize that no single element exists entirely on its own. The painting portrays power and identity as products of these relationships, where unity fosters resilience but also requires compromise and adaptation. Through its bold depiction of entangled forms, it invites viewers to reflect on the complexities of connection, illustrating how relationships both define and challenge individual strength. The painting explores the idea that true power lies in embracing interdependence while navigating the tensions it creates.



**Figure 4: Bayu Utomo Radjikin, *Grin*, 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 82cm x 200cm**

Aligned with the title of this solo exhibition, works like *Grin*, (2014) feature animal skulls visually combined with antlers on both sides, showcasing Bayu's distinctive artistic approach and cohesive presentation within the series.

This painting showcases a detailed and visually striking depiction of a skull, rendered with remarkable precision. The elongated structure of the skull is crafted with an emphasis on its anatomical complexity, featuring lifelike textures and shading that highlight the contours of the bone. The sharp, prominent canine teeth are a defining feature, indicative of a carnivorous species, and lend a sense of power and intensity to the composition. The delicate rendering of the bone structure captures subtle details, from the smooth curves of the jawline to the hollows of the eye sockets. The deep-set eye sockets create a stark contrast against the surrounding bone, enhancing the overall depth and dimension of the skull. The meticulous attention to detail in the textures and tonal contrasts conveys a realistic yet dramatic portrayal of the form, establishing it as a commanding focal point within the painting.

Khairuddin (2015) remarked on the visual portrayal of skulls in this series, explaining that they symbolize the fleeting nature of earthly existence and glory in both humans and animals. Despite this transience, their enduring presence encourages contemplation of virtuous actions during life, as such actions leave a lasting impact that resonates beyond physical death. This



idea aligns with the Malay proverb, “*Harimau mati meninggalkan belang, gajah mati meninggalkan gading, manusia mati meninggalkan nama*,” which translates to “A tiger dies leaving its stripes, an elephant dies leaving its tusk, a person dies leaving their name.” This analogy, at the very least, with the visual representation of the animal skull in Bayu Utomo Radjikin’s painting, which resembles that of a carnivorous creature.

The skull has long served as a powerful symbol of legacy, existence, and glory (Kearney, 2002). As one of the most enduring parts of the body after death, the skull represents the transience of life while simultaneously emphasizing the lasting impact of one’s actions and choices. It reflects the duality of mortality and permanence; while existence is fleeting, the impact of a life well lived can resonate beyond death. Legacy, in this sense, pertains to how individuals are remembered and the enduring mark they leave behind. Glory, on the other hand, is associated with achievements and recognition during life that carry meaning long after physical existence ends. The skull, therefore, embodies both the inevitability of mortality and the potential for transcendence through meaningful actions.

In Bayu Utomo Radjikin’s *Grin* (2014), the depiction of the animal skull reflects this duality. Its detailed rendering and prominent canine teeth suggest strength, survival, and the primal essence of existence. The intricate contours and textures of the skull emphasize its permanence, serving as a powerful reminder of the transience of life. As one of the most enduring elements of the body after death, the skull symbolizes the lasting impact of one’s actions and choices. While life itself is fleeting, the skull represents the potential for a legacy to endure beyond physical existence. This juxtaposition of mortality and permanence highlights the tension between the fragility of human life and the strength of the legacy one leaves behind, embodying the essence of glory and survival within the passage of time.

The skull’s grin, paired with glowing red eyes and expansive antlers, forms a striking and powerful symbol. The sharp, exposed teeth in the grin convey irony and defiance, as if the skull is mocking the inevitability of death itself. This expression reflects both an awareness of life’s fleeting nature and a refusal to succumb to its limitations. Rather than submitting to mortality, the skull projects resilience and strength, challenging death’s finality. Its fierce, unyielding stance suggests a defiant embrace of life’s struggles, emphasizing perseverance and determination. The combination of these elements serves as a visual representation of overcoming adversity, embodying the spirit of resilience even in the face of life’s ultimate truth.

The glowing red eyes, set deep within the hollow sockets, further enhance this intensity, drawing the viewer’s focus and adding a striking contrast to the otherwise pale bone structure. These vibrant eyes suggest a lingering vitality or an enduring spirit that continues to exist beyond the confines of physical decay. They introduce an almost supernatural element to the skull, imbuing it with an energy that transcends the boundaries of life and death. Together, the grin and glowing eyes create a striking duality, balancing the acknowledgment of mortality with a bold display of vitality and persistence. The combination of these elements transforms the skull from a mere anatomical representation into a dynamic and thought-provoking focal point, captivating the viewer with its dramatic and symbolic presence.



Figure 5: Bayu Utomo Radjikin, *Thru*, 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 80cm x 200cm

In addition, several works in this solo exhibition such as *Thru* (2014), feature human faces that at first glance, resemble self-portraits of the artist himself. This painting presents a dramatic and highly expressive human face, dominating the composition with its bold presence. The face is rendered in striking detail, with a reddish-pink hue accentuating the contours and textures of the skin. The expression is intense and emotional, with tightly closed eyes and a wide grin that appears to express a mix of tension, defiance, and inner turmoil. The careful rendering of wrinkles, pores, and subtle shading adds lifelike depth, bringing the portrait an almost tactile quality.

The long, flowing hair frames the face, cascading downward in fine, deliberate strokes that suggest movement and vitality. The word “Life” is prominently inscribed on the forehead, subtly drawing the viewer’s attention to the face as a central focus. The dramatic lighting and bold contrast between light and shadow amplify the emotional intensity of the portrait. The vivid tones and textured application of paint emphasize the raw and visceral qualities of the face, making it both personal and universal, compelling the viewer to engage with its expressive power.

This self-portrait can be seen as a symbolic exploration of masculinity and existential reflection, emphasizing the tension between inner vulnerability and outward strength. The intense expression, with its tightly shut eyes and wide grin, embodies the struggles often associated with traditional notions of masculinity which are resilience, defiance and the expectation to confront challenges without showing weakness. The exaggerated features amplify this narrative, portraying a raw and unfiltered depiction of a man grappling with the weight of existence.

The word “Life” inscribed on the forehead anchors the portrait in existential contemplation. It suggests an awareness of life’s fleeting nature and the pressures to find meaning and purpose within it. The distorted, almost strained expression hints at the internal battles of identity and survival, capturing the conflict between societal expectations of masculinity and the personal quest for authenticity and understanding.

In the context of masculinity, the portrait challenges the traditional idea of unwavering strength by focusing on a deeper, more nuanced perspective. It moves beyond the conventional associations of physical power and dominance, emphasizing the inner complexities and struggles that define the human experience (Cornell, 1995). The depiction suggests that

masculinity is not confined to outward displays of strength but is also shaped by the ability to face and endure existential challenges. By framing the subject in this light, the self-portrait becomes a broader symbol of the human condition, inviting reflection on the multifaceted nature of existence. It transforms the self-portrait into a universal symbol of the human condition, framed through the lens of masculinity and existential reflection.



**Figure 6: Bayu Utomo Radjikin, *Twig*, 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 75cm x 151cm**

In this series, Bayu frequently employs dark-colored backgrounds that evoke a somber and moody atmosphere. These backgrounds play a crucial role in enhancing the focus on the central subjects while setting a tone that complements the overall composition. The use of dark and textured elements creates a sense of depth and isolation, allowing the intricate details and dynamic forms in the foreground to stand out prominently. This approach minimizes visual distractions, guiding the viewer's attention toward the complexity and precision of the primary motifs. The choice of a subdued, shadowy backdrop not only frames the central elements effectively but also amplifies their visual impact, reinforcing the dramatic and introspective qualities of the paintings.

In “*Twig*” (2014), for example, the background is composed of subtle hints of color and texture, offering a minimalistic yet engaging setting that quietly supports the composition. The delicate tonal variations create an understated atmosphere, enhancing the overall balance of the artwork. In “*Thru*” (2014), the background features smoky textures and soft gradients, giving the piece a sense of depth and atmosphere. This textured backdrop adds a dynamic quality, lending the painting an air of tension and movement that complements the dramatic expression of the central figure.

In “*Intertwine*” (2014), the background is almost void-like, rendered in deep, dark tones that establish a stark and intense contrast with the entangled organic forms. This sharp juxtaposition heightens the sense of chaos and complexity within the foreground. Meanwhile, in “*Grin*” (2014), the textured darkness dominates the composition, creating an intense and foreboding atmosphere. The subtle nuances within the dark backdrop intensify the skull's dramatic presence, evoking mystery and reinforcing the overall mood. Across these works, the backgrounds share a moody, shadowy tone, employing various textures and depth to contribute to the atmosphere and amplify the visual impact of each piece.

The subdued and minimalistic backgrounds in Bayu Utomo Radjikin's works symbolize the quiet endurance and self-discipline deeply rooted in Malay cultural ideals of masculinity. In Malay tradition, masculinity often embodies resilience, introspection, and the dignity to face



life's challenges. The textured blackness in these paintings evokes depth and introspection, representing the inner struggles and complexities men endure but seldom reveal. This dark backdrop frames the central elements without overpowering them, directing attention to the perseverance and strength displayed amidst adversity. By doing so, the backgrounds emphasize a culturally grounded interpretation of masculinity, one defined not by the absence of hardship but by the ability to confront and navigate it with composure and fortitude.

This interpretation resonates with the cultural value of *berdikari* (self-reliance), a principle in Malay culture where strength is understood as more than just physical power (Mahani, 2006). It emphasizes the ability to endure challenges with dignity and maintain composure in the face of adversity. The subdued backgrounds, devoid of unnecessary distractions, reflect this ideal by fostering a sense of focus and introspection. The simplicity of the background reinforces the notion of restraint, suggesting that true strength lies in self-control and disciplined reflection. This minimalistic approach mirrors the cultural importance placed on inner fortitude and the quiet resilience required to navigate life's complexities. Together, the restrained backgrounds and focused compositions evoke the enduring spirit of *berdikari* in a visually compelling manner.

The darkness can also be read as a metaphor for life's uncertainties and struggles, a space where inner battles with identity, strength, and legacy unfold. In Malay proverbs and teachings, these struggles are often met with perseverance and a stoic acceptance of fate, or "takdir" (Ismail, 2000). The atmospheric blackness in these works resonates with this philosophy, suggesting that masculinity is not defined by the absence of hardship but by the ability to confront and endure it. Thus, Bayu's backgrounds encapsulate a nuanced representation of masculinity, one that balances strength with vulnerability and endurance with introspection.

At an informative level, the works provide insight into the artist's exploration of mortality and identity, presenting the skull not merely as a symbol of death but as a representation of continuity and legacy. At a persuasive level, the series encourages viewers to introspect about their own lives and the marks they leave behind, resonating with the Malay cultural values of *berdikari* (self-reliance) and virtuous living. Finally, at a contemplative level, the textured darkness and intricate forms in these paintings evoke a sense of mystery and introspection, compelling viewers to engage with the emotional and existential weight of the imagery.

Overall, the series communicates profound messages about human existence, emphasizing the balance between fleeting life and the enduring resonance of one's name, actions, and legacy, deeply rooted in cultural and existential themes.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study highlights the exploration of symbolic messages in Bayu Utomo Radjikin's *Ada Apa Dengan Tengkorak*, emphasizing the role of art as a medium for communication. Through the visual interplay of skulls, antlers, and dark, minimalist backgrounds, Bayu conveys complex ideas surrounding mortality, legacy, and existence. The visual elements in his artworks transcend their physical forms, serving as metaphors for resilience, interconnectedness, and the nuanced balance between strength and vulnerability.

Employing a qualitative art analysis approach, the study integrated observation and semiotic interpretation within a conceptual framework shaped by relevant concepts from various fields. The findings reveal that the symbolic messages in Bayu's works function on multiple levels.



Informatively, they offer insights into life's impermanence and the enduring impact of legacy. Persuasively, they encourage viewers to reflect on their own identity, strength, and interconnectedness. Contemplatively, the artworks provide a space for introspection, inviting an emotional and intellectual engagement with existential themes.

This research underscores the ability of Bayu's artworks to deliver layered symbolic messages that resonate with universal and culturally specific concerns. By decoding these messages, the study illustrates how contemporary Malaysian art bridges personal and collective reflections on identity and existence. Bayu's innovative use of symbolism not only provokes introspection but also fosters dialogue, reaffirming the significance of visual art as a transformative medium for communicating profound messages about life, legacy, and human connection.

### Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Universiti Teknologi MARA (Cawangan Perak) for providing the academic support and resources essential for the completion of this research. Special thanks are extended to our co-authors for their invaluable contributions and collaborative effort throughout the study. We would also like to express our appreciation to Bayu Utomo Radjikin for his inspiring artwork, and to HOM Art Trans for hosting the *Ada Apa dengan Tengkorak* (2015) exhibition, which served as the foundation of this research. Their support has been crucial in bringing this work to completion.

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