

INTERPRETING ISLAMIC PAINTINGS BASED ON AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE THROUGH AN ISLAMIC AESTHETICS APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The activity of interpreting a work of art is an activity of art appreciation or art criticism. The works interpreted in this article are Islamic paintings that were exhibited at the KHAT artist network exhibition "FROM THE MIND DOWN TO THE HEART" in 2024. The activity of interpreting is not easy, it requires an aesthetic experience that is directly present and directly witnessing the work of art that will be displayed. interpret. Apart from that, interpreters also need sufficient theories so that the results of their interpretation can be understood by the general reader. The theory that the author uses is Islamic aesthetic theory. The three works that the author describes in this study are Agus Baqul's work entitled "Prayer for goodness in this world and the afterlife", Edy Santoso's work entitled "Little Guardian", and Kepin's work entitled "Malam Rindu". The author assesses these three works as having Islamic spiritual values. These values are present because they were built by concepts and spirits that were built together by artists who have a spirit of deepening Islamic values.

Keywords: aesthetics, art, painting, Islam, interpreting

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, contemporary Islamic visual art in Indonesia has gradually developed following the Istiqlal Festival in Jakarta in 1995, both through traditional painting and newer media, such as mixed-media painting. As a form of visual expression, painting has undergone changes not only in terms of techniques and technology but also in the ways audiences respond to artworks emotionally and intellectually. Painting can serve as a medium for expression and emotional processing for artists (Haniatussa'adah, 2022). Several Islamic art exhibitions began to re-emerge from 2009 to 2024. Although their number remains relatively limited, their emergence is important to discuss and investigate, as demonstrated in this study.

During the period from 2009 to 2024, an event occurred that changed previously established practices, namely the COVID-19 pandemic. By "previously established practices," the author refers to the conventional practice of appreciating exhibitions by attending them onsite. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, art appreciation activities were predominantly conducted online via the internet using applications such

as Zoom, Google Meet, and similar platforms. The transition of art exhibitions to virtual formats during the pandemic was considered to have reasonably good quality by participants (Hazmi, Zenmira, & Budyawan, 2021), while artists responded to this shift both positively and negatively (Fuadi, 2022). The development of digital technology has also transformed artistic practices and the ways in which the public interacts with artworks (Anggraini, Handayani, Rahayu, Suryandoko, & Sabri, 2024). At present, art appreciation has become increasingly blended, taking place both onsite and online.

This situation inevitably affects the aesthetic experience of art appreciators. Through this article, the author seeks to contribute to the study of Islamic visual art, particularly issues related to the appreciation of artworks. One important event in the development of contemporary Islamic visual art in Indonesia is the exhibition “Dari Akal Turun ke Hati” (“From the Mind Down to the Heart”). The exhibition was grounded in an Islamic spirit, namely worship and gratitude to God. The works exhibited consisted predominantly of paintings, including calligraphic works, although abstract works were also presented. This raises the question of how audiences respond to and experience Islamic paintings, particularly in relation to aesthetic experience in the contemporary context.

Studies of Islamic visual art in Indonesia have generally addressed its history, concepts, and the existence of exhibitions (e.g., Endriawan, 2024), whereas studies connecting the aesthetic experience of appreciators, art criticism, and Islamic aesthetics in the interpretation of paintings appear to remain limited. This article focuses on the interpretation of three paintings presented in the exhibition through Feldman’s (1967) stages of art criticism, interpreted through the framework of Islamic aesthetics. Visual aesthetic analysis of paintings itself is already common in painting studies (Probosiwi & Ardiyanti, 2022). The main contribution of this article is to propose a systematic approach to interpretation and to demonstrate the role of direct aesthetic experience in connecting the visual elements of artworks with Islamic spiritual values. This constitutes the novelty of the present study in relation to previous studies.

Islamic aesthetics in this article is understood in accordance with Asy’arie (2010) as an experience of beauty centered on refined feelings and culminating in gratitude and worship of Allah. From this perspective, beauty does not exist independently but is closely associated with spirituality and Islamic values such as gratitude and worship (see also Nasr, 1993; Leaman, 2004; Mukti, Mardiyah, Mahmudah, Al Bahry, & Azis, 2025). Aesthetic experience is understood as a holistic experience that emerges from the encounter between the appreciator and the artwork (Dewey, 1934; Sumardjo, 2000).

In this context, Islamic painting in this article is defined as painting whose concepts, content, and spirit are grounded in Islamic values. It is not limited to calligraphy and, in the context of this exhibition, follows the curator’s stipulation that living beings should not be depicted. This limitation is consistent with the development of modern Islamic art, which maintains continuity with tradition while remaining open to various new forms of expression (Ali, 1997).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method. The theories used were Islamic aesthetics and art criticism. Islamic aesthetics was employed in the process of interpreting the meaning of the paintings under study, while art criticism was used to provide a detailed description

of the objects of study, including description, formal analysis, interpretation (incorporating Islamic aesthetic theory), and evaluation.

The objects of study were purposively selected from the artworks exhibited, based on the following considerations: (1) they met the definition of Islamic painting described above and were included in the exhibition catalog; (2) they represented three different visual approaches, namely calligraphy (Agus Baqul), natural objects (Edy Santoso), and symbolic objects related to worship (Kepin); and (3) they were directly observed by the author at the exhibition venue. Data were obtained through direct observation at the exhibition venue, interviews with the artists, and examination of the exhibition catalog. Each artwork was analyzed through four consistent stages: description, formal analysis (color, form, and composition), interpretation based on Islamic aesthetics, and evaluation. At the interpretation stage, meanings derived from the artists' statements (from the catalog and interviews) were distinguished from the author's own interpretations. To further illustrate how the theories of Art Criticism based on Feldman's (1967) framework and Islamic Aesthetics were applied, see Table 1.

Table 1. Application of Art Criticism and Islamic Aesthetics Theory

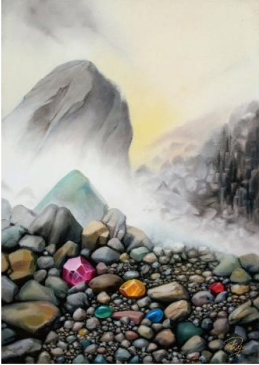
Artwork	Description	Formal Analysis	Interpretation	Evaluation
	Describes everything visible in an artwork as a whole. This stage is purely descriptive and does not involve analysis. The description includes the title, medium, year of creation, dimensions, and artist's name.	Describes the arrangement of the visible objects in an artwork. At this stage, an analytical process begins, but it does not yet make statements about, for example, a particular visual element having a particular meaning.	Explains the interpretation of meaning in an artwork based on the processes of description and formal analysis. Interpretation produces a particular understanding of the meaning of an artwork. In this article, the interpretation process is based on Islamic aesthetic theory.	Explains the final outcome of the processes of description, formal analysis, and interpretation, culminating in evaluation or justification. This stage contains statements regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the artwork.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As described in the Introduction, the motivation for this study is to contribute to the study of Islamic visual art, particularly issues related to the appreciation of artworks. The data were obtained from the exhibition of the KHAT Artists Network, "Dari Akal Turun ke Hati" ("From the Mind Down to the Heart"). The exhibition was situated within the context of Islamic visual art. The author identified three Islamic paintings from the overall body of works exhibited. Qualitatively, the author conducted interviews directly with the artists and carried out onsite observations by attending the exhibition in person.

Prior to the exhibition, the organizing committee held a discussion session in the form of an online religious study conducted via Zoom. The committee was based in Yogyakarta, while the participating artists came from various cities and regencies across Indonesia, including Bandung and Jakarta. The Islamic paintings selected as objects of interpretation from the exhibition catalog “Dari Akal Turun ke Hati” (2024) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Data on the Islamic Paintings Interpreted in This Study

Karya	Keterangan
	Agus Baqul Pumomo, Do'a Mohon Keabikan didunia dan akhirat 2023 AOC 90 cm x 80 cm Do'a Mohon Keabikan dunia dan akhirat adalah setiap muslim pasti akan selalu memohon kepada Allah untuk minta pertolongan atau permohonan keselamatan dan keabikan didunia dan akhirat 17 Curriculum Vitae (CV) berkesenian: Seniman Lulusan (SI) Yogyakarta, Pelukis Abstrak dan Kaligrafi kontemporer, sudah berpameran di Yogyakarta, Jakarta, Semarang, Bandung, Surabaya, Magelang, Bali dan Kalimantan serta berpameran di berbagai negara diantaranya ARTIADIE Olympic of Visual Art di Yunani, TERROR! di California, TENG-GARA, Novas Contemporary Urban Center di Liverpool dan London, Biennale Print and Drawing di Taiwan, PROKLAMASI di China dan Korea, COLOURS OF ASIA di Tokyo, RECTET / IQRAI di Malaga, HAD-HALD di Filipina, International Arts Exhibition to Glorify the 5th Cycle Birthday Anniversary of 1984 Princess Maha Chulabhorn di Thailand, MONUMENTAL SOUTHEAST ASIA di Singapura dan ART DUBAI, Madinat Jumeirah Dubai
	Edy Santoso Wali Kecil 2024 Cat minyak di kanvas 120 x 85 cm Kita sebagai pendengian kita hanya tertuju kepada ulama besar/ populer sebagai teladan, kita tidak menyadari sesungguhnya di sekitar kita ada banyak orang-orang mulia yang dapat kita teladani. Mereka tidak berjabah keulamaan, namun mereka memiliki kemampuan dalam berakal warna kehidupan. Mereka bagaikan batu-batu mulia yang berada di antara batu-batu kecil biasa, sedangkan batu-batu besar hanya kita sakikan dari keputihan. Bagi yang tidak bisa mengesalnya mungkin akan memelikan, menendahkan bahkan mengingjalkannya. Semoga kita memiliki kemampuan mengenali, mengambil, dan mengumpulkan pesona keindahan untuk mengisi pribadi kita. 34 Curriculum Vitae (CV) berkesenian: Hobi melukis sejak kecil, namun mengabdikan waktu lebih dari 25 tahun menjadi seorang Graphic Designer. Saat bekerja di Advertising membuat berbagai media promosi, iklan koran, majalah dan iklan TV. Kini lebih banyak bekerja sebagai Freelance di manca negara. Ada ratusan logo yang sudah dihasilkan tersebar di berbagai negara. Kini kembali memulai menekuni dunia seni rupa.
	Kepin Malam Rindu 2024 Akrilik di kanvas 80x80 cm disini saya menggambarkan mereka yang sedang jatuh cinta pada Al-Khalid, dimana mereka yang sedang jatuh cinta akan selalu memorkan dan menyebut-nyebut pujiannya, tak jarang tidurnya terganggu oleh rindu yang menggebu. Lantas apa yang lebih indah bagi para perindu selain jumpa? 69 Curriculum Vitae (CV) berkesenian: • Pameran bersama dengan "Palore Exhibition" • "Culture Mecca" 2023 • Mengikuti workshop workshop kesenian

Aesthetic experience can be understood as an experience that a person undergoes when encountering an aesthetic object, such as an artwork, or the beauty of nature. According to Jacob Sumardjo (2000), aesthetic experience is an experience undergone by an art appreciator or art recipient. Aesthetic experience occurs within a particular quality of experience that may differ from everyday experience. Such an experience can be experienced by both non-artists and artists. For artists, directly attending an art exhibition onsite can be particularly valuable because it provides an opportunity to experience artworks firsthand and can serve as inspiration for creating artworks.

Aesthetic experiences obtained online and onsite are, of course, different and may affect the process of interpreting an artwork. In this study, the author attempts to interpret

the meanings of the three Islamic paintings described in Table 2. The author observed the artworks onsite at the exhibition venue; therefore, the data obtained through interviews and observations involved direct sensory engagement with the artworks. This experience would naturally differ from experiencing an artwork solely through an online medium. The interviewee, Agus Baqul Purnomo, stated that creating calligraphic works in his distinctive style is an extraordinary spiritual experience and a form of worship to Allah.



Gambar 1. Penulis mewawancarai seniman kaligrafi secara langsung di lokasi pameran, Loman Park Hotel, Jogjakarta
(Source : Resercher, 2024)

Interpretation of Agus Baqul Purnomo's *Prayer for Goodness in This World and the Hereafter*

The process of interpreting meaning is conducted by examining each artwork individually so that readers can obtain a more comprehensive understanding. The primary Islamic aesthetics theory employed in this study is drawn from the book *Islamic Philosophy: The Sunnah of the Prophet in Thinking* by Professor Musa Asy'arie (2010), which contains a discussion of Islamic aesthetics.



Figure 2. Agus Baqul Purnomo's calligraphic artwork entitled *Prayer for Goodness in This World and the Hereafter*.

Source: Exhibition Catalog "*Dari Akal Turun ke Hati*," 2024.

The author experienced the artwork directly at the exhibition venue, which served as the basis for the author's aesthetic experience in interpreting the work. One of Agus Baqul's distinctive characteristics is his use of overlapping calligraphic writing. In this work, Agus visualizes a prayer asking for goodness in this world and the hereafter through Arabic script, using predominantly blue, with small amounts of green and cream. The painting measures 90 cm × 80 cm, is made with acrylic on canvas, and was created in 2023. In the catalog, Agus provides a brief narrative about the painting:

"Prayer for goodness in this world and the hereafter. Every Muslim will always pray to Allah for help, safety, and goodness in this world and the hereafter."

The arrangement of the visual elements causes the sequence of Arabic prayer text to appear overlapping and partially obscured. For viewers who have only recently learned to read the Qur'an, the text is therefore unlikely to be easily readable. Based on the author's interpretation, with a strong sense of optimism, the prayer referred to by the artist is likely the widely known prayer: *Rabbana atina fid-dunya hasanatan wa fil-akhirati hasanatan wa qina 'adhaban-nar*, meaning, "Our Lord, grant us goodness in this world and in the Hereafter, and protect us from the punishment of the Fire."

Based on Islamic aesthetic theory, the author considers human activity to be ultimately oriented toward worship of God. Agus Baqul, an artist who consistently maintains his distinctive style while working within contemporary calligraphy, appears to relate closely to this concept.

From a formal perspective, the Arabic letters are arranged in overlapping layers, creating a dense and multilayered visual field. Blue dominates the composition, while green and cream are used sparingly. The meaning of the prayer is derived from the artist's narrative in the exhibition catalog, whereas the identification of the specific prayer text is the author's interpretation because the writing is difficult to read. The density of the script may be interpreted as an expression of earnestness in supplication; however, this is the author's interpretation and may not necessarily reflect the artist's intention.

Evaluation: The strength of the work lies in the consistency of its calligraphic style and the correspondence between the content of the prayer and the spirit of worship. However, the low readability of the text means that general audiences may depend on the exhibition catalog narrative to understand its meaning.

Interpretation of Edy Santoso's *Little Guardian (Wali Kecil)*

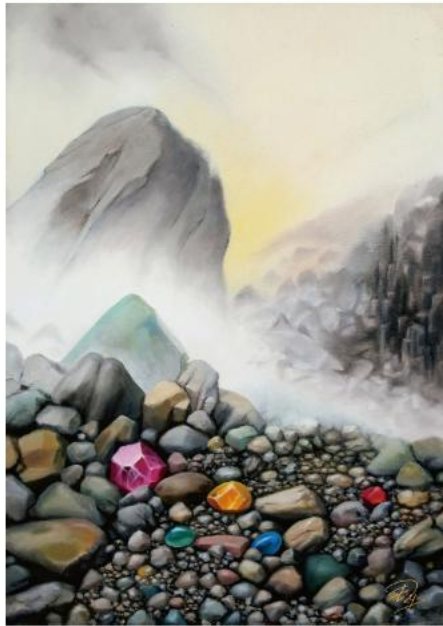


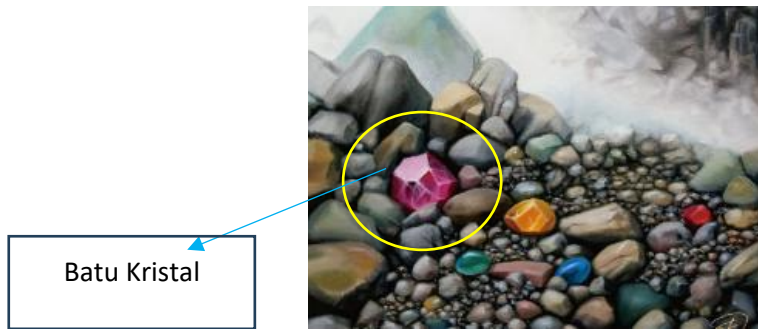
Figure 3. Edy Santoso's painting entitled *Little Guardian (Wali Kecil)*, oil on canvas, 2024, 120 cm × 85 cm.

Source: Exhibition Catalog "Dari Akal Turun ke Hati," 2024.

Figure 3 presents Edy Santoso's painting entitled *Little Guardian (Wali Kecil)*, an oil painting on canvas created in 2024, measuring 120 cm × 85 cm. The visual elements presented by the artist consist of stones ranging from the largest to the smallest. The stones are depicted in various colors, including shiny green, gray, red, bluish tones, pink crystal, and coral-like stones. White smoke appears between the stones. The stones are arranged in an orderly rather than chaotic manner, creating a natural impression.

Among the many stones depicted, one pink crystal stone appears distinctive from the others. This visual element seems to contain a particular indication. When associated with the title *Little Guardian*, the title appears to direct attention toward the crystal stone. The word *wali* in Arabic means leader, close friend, or protector, while *kecil* is synonymous with *cilik*, meaning small. Thus, the title can be understood as referring to people who may appear insignificant or unnoticed but possess dignity in the sight of Allah. Visually, the pink crystal stone is relatively small; however, crystal is generally considered more valuable than ordinary stone.

The author directly observed this work at the exhibition venue and found it aesthetically compelling. This experience also reminded the author of the story of the Prophet Moses, who considered himself the most knowledgeable, but was instructed by Allah to meet the Prophet Khidr, who possessed greater knowledge.



In interpreting this painting, the author relates the work to the thought of Professor Musa Asy'arie (2010), who argues that aesthetic experience is centered on a person's refined feelings and possesses an emotionally stirring quality. This process of emotional resonance occurs directly when a person observes or listens to an object of aesthetic value.

The direct aesthetic experience of observing an Islamic painting at the exhibition generated such an emotional response, particularly because the work was presented within an Islamic visual-art exhibition. Its primary purpose was to evoke gratitude toward Allah. The experience would be different if the artwork were encountered online or without being physically present at the exhibition venue, where the aesthetic atmosphere could be experienced directly.

From a formal perspective, the stones are arranged systematically from the largest to the smallest, with varied colors, while the pink crystal stone becomes the focal point because its color distinguishes it from the other stones. The interpretation of wali in this work is derived from the title and visual elements and therefore represents the author's interpretation. The story of the Prophet Moses and the Prophet Khidr is likewise an association made by the author rather than a statement by the artist.

Evaluation: The work is strong in creating a visual focal point that corresponds with its title. However, because its meaning relies substantially on the title and the viewer's associations, this interpretation requires further confirmation from the artist.

Interpretation of Kepin's *Longing at Night (Malam Rindu)*



Figure 4. Kepin's painting entitled *Longing at Night (Malam Rindu)*, acrylic on canvas, 2024, 80 cm × 80 cm.

Source: Exhibition Catalog "*Dari Akal Turun ke Hati*," 2024.

Figure 4 presents Kepin's painting entitled *Longing at Night (Malam Rindu)*, an acrylic painting on canvas created in 2024, measuring 80 cm × 80 cm. The visual elements include a yellow prayer mat and white rectangular lines with pointed ends. On the right side of the painting, there is a small red-and-white cloth resembling a napkin. Seven red rose-like objects are also depicted. In the upper-left corner, there is a circular, glowing object in yellow and white. A winding path extends from the lower-right corner toward the upper-left corner, transitioning from reddish black to red and white. Blue rectangular shapes appear on both sides of the path. Red and green are the dominant colors in the composition.

The arrangement of the visual elements creates an impression of a journey toward a particular destination. The painting style tends to be expressive, although the artist still considers the principles of perspective. Red roses have commonly been associated in society with funerals. A grave is a place that can evoke a spiritual experience for a person. When associated with the title *Longing at Night*, the author interprets the atmosphere presented in the painting as spiritual.

For Muslims, a prayer mat is used as a surface for performing prayer. One highly recommended voluntary prayer is the night prayer (*salat tahajjud*). The atmosphere of night can evoke a deep longing for the Creator, namely Allah. As stated in a hadith, "Establish prayer at night while people are sleeping, and enter Paradise in peace" (HR Ahmad, Ibn Hibban, and Hakim). A profound spiritual experience was also experienced by Umar ibn al-Khattab before he embraced Islam. When Umar heard the recitation of Surah Taha from the Qur'an, he experienced something extraordinary that led him to embrace Islam.

What the artist explains in the exhibition catalog corresponds with the author's interpretation that longing for the Creator is an incomparable form of longing. Musa Asy'arie (2010) states that the expression of creative emotional struggles with a spiritual dimension is what makes an artwork appear alive, meaningful, and enjoyable to those capable of understanding and absorbing it. Within the concept of Islamic philosophy, such artworks can essentially be regarded as forms and manifestations of gratitude to God.

The Qur'an, Surah Al-Furqan (25:61–63), states:

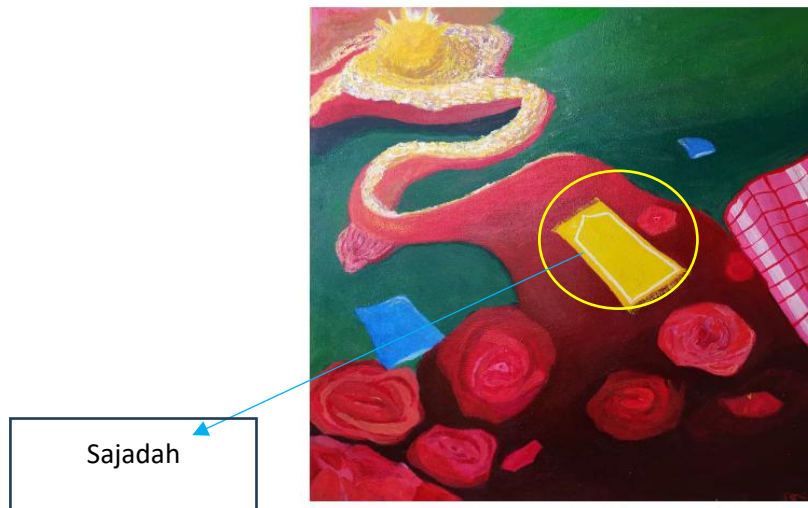
"Blessed is He who has placed constellations in the sky and placed therein a lamp and a luminous moon, and He is the One who has made the night and the day succeed one another for whoever wishes to take heed or give thanks, and the servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk upon the earth in humility, and when the ignorant address them, they say, 'Peace.'"

The expression of gratitude to God becomes a fundamental principle in the artist's creative practice, resulting in artworks with a spiritual dimension. In the exhibition of the KHAT Artists Network, *Dari Akal Turun ke Hati*, the curator and head of the organizing committee repeatedly briefed the participating artists that the content and concepts of the artworks should refrain from depicting living beings. The purpose was to avoid entering an ambiguous area. Thus, one of the works that can be appreciated within this framework is the Islamic painting *Longing at Night*, with the interpretation described above.

From a formal perspective, the winding path from the lower-right corner toward the upper-left corner guides the viewer's gaze toward the glowing circular form in the upper-left corner, creating an impression of a journey. Dominant red and green tones are combined with

yellow in the prayer mat and white elements. The longing for the Creator is the meaning explained by the artist in the exhibition catalog, whereas the association of the prayer mat with *salat tahajud* and the red roses with graves represents the author's interpretation based on cultural associations. Therefore, the work may be interpreted differently by other appreciators. Evaluation: The strength of the work lies in the integration of its symbols and title in creating a spiritual atmosphere, while its weakness is that the associations conveyed by the symbols are not entirely explicit.

Overall, the relationship between visual elements, aesthetic experience, and spiritual meaning in the three works is constructed through different symbols: the prayer text in Agus Baqul's work, the seemingly small yet valuable crystal stone in Edy Santoso's work, and the prayer mat and nighttime atmosphere in Kepin's work. The author's direct aesthetic experience at the exhibition venue helped capture the colors, dimensions, and spatial impressions of the artworks before connecting them with Islamic values.



CONCLUSION

The conclusions of this article are as follows. First, the aesthetic experience of an appreciator who is physically present at the exhibition venue differs from that of someone who observes the artworks only online (for example, through YouTube), and this difference affects the process of interpreting Islamic paintings. Second, the Art Criticism method, consisting of description, formal analysis, interpretation, and evaluation, is effective for examining Islamic paintings systematically. Third, in the three works examined, Islamic spiritual values are conveyed through the prayer text in Agus Baqul's work, the crystal stone as a symbol of hidden dignity in Edy Santoso's work, and the prayer mat and nighttime atmosphere as symbols of longing for the Creator in Kepin's work.

Based on the author's aesthetic experience and Islamic aesthetics, the three works can be regarded as Islamic paintings, supported by the curator's statements and the importance of their concepts in the contemporary context. Without direct aesthetic

experience and adequate theoretical support, the interpretation of an artwork becomes limited. Just as Indonesia has contemporary visual art, it also has contemporary Islamic visual art with its own contexts and concepts.

A limitation of this study is that the interpretation was conducted by a single interpreter and involved only three artworks. Future studies may therefore involve a larger number of artworks and include responses from multiple appreciators. This article also represents the author's effort to preserve and contribute to the study of Islamic art in Indonesia following the Istiqlal Festival in Jakarta, after a period in which Indonesian Islamic visual art was described as experiencing a significant decline in activity.

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