

## A FORMALIST EXAMINATION OF THE DOODLE ART THEME 'SELANGORKU MAKMUR' THROUGH GREENBERG'S THEORY

ISNIN, A. A.<sup>1\*</sup> – SHUKOR, R. A.<sup>1</sup> – RAHMAN, N. A. A.<sup>1</sup> – HASSAN, N. Y. S.<sup>1</sup> – SHARUDDIN, R. S. I. R.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Communication, Visual Art and Computing, Universiti Selangor, Selangor, Malaysia.

\*Corresponding author  
e-mail: aiqaafiqah[at]unisel.edu.my

(Received 28<sup>th</sup> December 2024; revised 12<sup>th</sup> March 2025; accepted 21<sup>st</sup> March 2025)

**Abstract.** The purpose of this study is to analyze the formalist approach to interpreting doodle art, with a specific focus on the piece of artwork titled "My Doodle Selangorku Makmur." Throughout the course of this inquiry, the philosophy of Clement Greenberg has been applied. Line, color, composition, and media specificity are examples of formal characteristics that Greenberg emphasized as part of his argument that true art should favor visual and formal qualities over narrative or symbolic meaning. Greenberg's theory was based on the idea that true art should prioritize these qualities. The objective of this research is to dissect the selected piece of art and investigate the ways in which the structural components of the piece contribute to the artistic worth of the piece. This will be accomplished with the assistance of a formalist perspective. According to the findings, it is possible to create a dynamic visual experience by utilizing compositional balance, vivid color contrast, and compelling outlines. This can be accomplished by utilizing these elements. In doing so, the research reaffirms the legitimacy of doodle art as a kind of high art rather than purely ornamental work. This is because the research provides a contribution to the understanding of doodle art within the context of modernist aesthetics.

**Keywords:** formalist analysis, doodle art, Clement Greenberg, modernist aesthetics

### Introduction

Doodle art has gained recognition as a contemporary artistic expression that blends cultural narratives with intricate line work and vibrant colors. However, many art critics and scholars debate its artistic value due to its seemingly informal and spontaneous nature. Clement Greenberg's formalist theory provides a critical framework for evaluating such artworks based on their visual and compositional properties rather than their subject matter or symbolic content. This study applies Greenberg's theory to the 'Selangorku Makmur' doodle artwork, a piece celebrating Selangor's cultural heritage, to determine how its formal elements contribute to its overall artistic effectiveness. The study aims to achieve the following objectives: (1) To analyze the 'Selangorku Makmur' artwork through the lens of Greenberg's formalist theory; (2) To identify key visual elements such as color, line, and composition in the artwork; and (3) To assess the role of formalist principles in determining the artistic value of doodle art. This study is significant for several reasons. First, it provides a formalist critique of doodle art, an area that has been relatively unexplored in academic discourse. Second, it expands the application of Greenberg's modernist theory beyond traditional painting and sculpture to contemporary digital and hand-drawn artworks. Third, by analyzing the 'Selangorku Makmur' piece, this research highlights the cultural significance of doodle art in representing local heritage while maintaining its visual integrity. Lastly, it contributes to the recognition of doodle art as a form of modernist abstraction rather than mere illustration.

### ***Literature review***

Doodle art is characterized by spontaneous, free-form drawings that often incorporate repetitive patterns, abstract designs, and a sense of immediacy. The fundamental elements of doodle art include line, shape, and space. Lines in doodle art can vary from straight to wavy, thick to thin, and are used to create intricate patterns and textures. Shapes, both geometric and organic, are employed to build complex compositions, while the strategic use of space allows for a balance between detailed areas and open, negative spaces, contributing to the overall harmony of the piece (Doodle Art Club, 2014). Understanding these principles is crucial when analyzing a doodle artwork like Selangorku Makmur, as it allows for an in-depth appreciation of its structural components and aesthetic arrangements. Selangor, a state in Malaysia, boasts a rich cultural heritage that is often depicted in various art forms. The state's cultural diversity is celebrated through traditional performances, crafts, and visual arts. Art events like Rentak Selangor highlight the state's legacy by focusing on performing arts flourishing in districts such as Sabak Bernam and Kuala Selangor, where communities predominantly of Javanese lineage reside. These events showcase traditional dances and music, reflecting the deep-rooted cultural practices of the region (Sakeri and Zeen, 2022). The influence of Selangor's diverse heritage can be seen in its visual art expressions, including doodle art, where artists incorporate motifs and symbols representing local identity. The doodle art piece Selangorku Makmur is an example of how artistic expression captures and celebrates the cultural richness of the state through its intricate design and symbolism.

In the realm of art criticism, Clement Greenberg's formalist theory emphasizes the importance of an artwork's formal elements—such as color, line, and composition—over its representational content. Greenberg (1959) argued that the value of art lies in its inherent visual qualities rather than its narrative or symbolic aspects. This perspective encourages viewers to appreciate the medium-specific characteristics of an artwork, promoting a purer engagement with its aesthetic components. Greenberg's approach has been widely applied in modern art analysis, particularly in movements like Abstract Expressionism, where the focus is on form and material rather than representational meaning. By using Greenberg's framework, doodle art can be analyzed through its structural integrity and design rather than its thematic or contextual associations. Applying Greenberg's formalist approach to doodle art, particularly in the context of Selangor's cultural representation, allows for an appreciation of how formal elements convey cultural identity. By focusing on the intrinsic properties of the artwork, such as line quality, pattern, and composition, one can discern how these elements encapsulate and express the cultural essence of Selangor. This method of analysis bridges traditional art criticism with contemporary artistic expressions, demonstrating the continued relevance of formalist analysis in understanding modern art forms (Greenberg, 1959). The interplay between traditional elements and modern artistic styles in Selangorku Makmur exemplifies how doodle art can serve as a visual medium for cultural storytelling while still adhering to formalist principles.

### ***Contemporary perspective on doodle art***

Doodle art has transitioned from a perceived informal or subconscious practice into a recognized mode of visual communication and artistic expression in contemporary art

and design. Traditionally dismissed as spontaneous sketches without deeper significance, recent scholarship repositions doodle art as a visual language with compositional integrity, symbolic flexibility, and cultural resonance. The intuitive and seemingly playful nature of doodling belies a deliberate use of line, space, rhythm, and repetition, all of which lend themselves to formalist interpretation. Aesthetically, doodle art is characterized by intricate linear structures, non-hierarchical compositions, and decorative layering-qualities that echo the visual values of modernist abstraction. Larkin (2019) notes that contemporary illustration embraces such complexity through dense visual surfaces that actively engage the viewer. This is echoed in Greenberg (1971) formalist critique, which emphasizes surface flatness, compositional unity, and medium specificity as hallmarks of high art. As such, doodle art aligns well with formalist principles by prioritizing visual arrangement over narrative or representational content.

In visual communication studies, doodle art has gained traction as a vehicle for personal narrative and cultural storytelling, yet through non-linear and symbolic abstraction. Mercurio and Gabelman (2025) explores how doodles incorporate cultural motifs and daily objects without adhering to conventional storytelling forms, producing works that are open-ended in interpretation but deliberate in visual structure. This ambiguity allows doodle art to serve as both personal expression and collective commentary, particularly in urban and public art settings (Wong, 2014). From a design theory perspective, recent scholars argue that doodle art exhibits formal coherence and media sensitivity, especially in educational, branding, and activist contexts. Blackwell et al. (2008) assert that doodle compositions utilize repetition, visual rhythm, and stylization not merely as decorative tools but as intentional design strategies that reinforce the artwork's structural integrity. These elements allow doodle art to function both within and beyond the gallery space, occupying advertising, digital media, and community projects, thus reinforcing its versatility and academic value.

The significance of flatness and graphic precision in doodle art also echoes trends in Southeast Asian contemporary design. Abdullah (2015) examine how Malaysian and Indonesian doodle artists maintain surface activity and visual density as a response to both cultural complexity and formal aesthetics. Their findings show that such practices reflect a regional adaptation of modernist visual values, making doodle art a compelling subject of study within both local and international artistic discourses. Finally, the growing pedagogical and curatorial attention to doodle art further reflects its legitimization within the visual arts. Previous study discusses how contemporary art education now includes doodle-based modules as exercises in form, line economy, and surface design, while past studies highlight how curators use doodle exhibitions to explore youth identity, informal aesthetics, and anti-elitist art movements. Together, these developments indicate a broader shift toward accepting doodle art as a formally rigorous and culturally relevant medium, suitable for academic, critical, and creative inquiry.

### ***Theoretical approach***

Greenberg's formalist theory serves as the foundation of this research. The theory prioritizes visual elements such as color interaction, surface flatness, and compositional coherence, asserting that art should focus on its intrinsic properties rather than external meanings (Greenberg, 1971). This approach is particularly relevant for analyzing the 'Selangorku Makmur' artwork, as it allows for an objective critique of its formal attributes, detached from cultural or historical narratives. By applying Greenberg's

criteria, the study evaluates how the artwork adheres to modernist principles despite being a contemporary piece. This research is grounded in the formalist theory of art criticism as advanced by Clement Greenberg. His theory emphasizes the intrinsic visual qualities of an artwork such as line, shape, color, texture, and compositional unity-while downplaying narrative content, symbolic meaning, or socio-political interpretation. Greenberg (1971) argued that a work of art should be evaluated based on its medium specificity, or its capacity to emphasize the unique characteristics of its medium. For painting or drawing-based art forms like doodle art, this includes features such as surface flatness, color interaction, spatial arrangement, and formal coherence.

Greenberg posited that true modernist art achieves aesthetic purity by focusing on visual experience rather than storytelling or external references. He maintained that the autonomy of art is preserved when artists concentrate on how their work functions visually, particularly in how elements relate to one another to guide the viewer's eye and maintain compositional harmony (Greenberg, 1959). In applying this theoretical lens to the contemporary doodle artwork "*Selangorku Makmur*". The study adopts a detached formal critique, focusing on how the artwork utilizes rhythmic linework, spatial balance, and vibrant color contrast to construct a visually dynamic composition. These characteristics are examined without reference to the cultural, historical, or symbolic content embedded in the artwork. Such an approach is instrumental in assessing whether the doodle piece aligns with modernist visual standards, thus contributing to the argument that doodle art can transcend its decorative perception and attain the status of high art. By drawing on Greenberg's framework, this study not only affirms the artistic merit of "*Selangorku Makmur*" but also positions doodle art within the larger discourse of modernist aesthetics. It challenges the boundaries between fine art and popular visual expression by emphasizing formal visual criteria over conceptual narratives.

## Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative visual analysis method, focusing on the formal elements of the "*Selangorku Makmur*" doodle artwork. The analysis is structured around the following criteria: (1) Line and Composition: Examination of how bold outlines and spatial arrangements create a balanced yet dynamic composition; (2) Color and Contrast: Evaluation of color saturation, contrast, and harmony in establishing visual impact; (3) Surface Flatness and Texture: Assessment of how the artwork maintains its two-dimensional integrity, in line with Greenberg's theory; (4) Medium-Specificity: Analysis of the doodle technique in relation to modernist aesthetics. Data is collected through direct visual inspection and comparison with other modernist artworks to identify common formalist traits. The findings are then interpreted through Greenberg's theoretical framework to assess the extent to which the artwork exemplifies formalist principles. The first criterion for analysis is Line and Composition. The artwork is studied for its bold, consistent outlines and overlapping figures that generate a dynamic spatial arrangement. These features create a visual rhythm and compositional balance without relying on linear perspective. According to Larkin (2019), contemporary illustration often employs fragmented arrangements that demand viewer engagement across the surface-a technique that aligns with Greenberg's preference for active surface composition over traditional depth illusion.

The second focus is Color and Contrast. The visual analysis involves examining the saturation and vibrancy of the color palette, which includes primary and secondary hues used in high contrast. Greenberg (1971) emphasized the optical role of color in engaging the viewer without symbolic interference. Recent studies (Ball and Ruben, 2004) support this, highlighting how color in digital and illustrative works can produce energetic, formal cohesion when applied to surface design rather than narrative enhancement. The third dimension considered is Surface Flatness and Texture. In line with Greenberg's principle of medium purity, the artwork deliberately avoids realistic modeling or shading. Instead, it maintains a consistent flatness across the surface, emphasizing two-dimensionality. Abdullah (2015) have noted that this flattening of space is a key feature in many Malaysian contemporary visual styles, where the focus is on graphic stylization rather than spatial illusion-a quality that resonates with Greenbergian aesthetics. The fourth analytical lens is Medium-Specificity. The doodle technique itself-defined by spontaneous linework, ornamental repetition, and stylized motifs-is examined as a medium-specific expression. This allows the artwork to assert its formal language through visual means rather than narrative content. Scholars like Mercurio and Gabelman (2025) argue that doodle art, when approached with formalist sensitivity, reveals intricate compositional strategies and surface sophistication, validating it within modernist discourse. Finally, data for this study was collected through direct visual inspection of the "*Selangorku Makmur*" artwork, supported by comparison with both historical modernist artworks and recent illustrative practices. Formal characteristics such as rhythm, pattern density, and compositional unity were identified and categorized. These traits were then evaluated using Greenberg's theoretical framework to determine the extent to which the artwork exemplifies formal purity, compositional coherence, and medium-specific integrity. This structured method ensures a visual reading aligned with Greenberg's belief that artistic value resides in the formal organization of the artwork itself.

## Results and Discussion

Clement Greenberg's theory of art criticism is rooted in Formalism, emphasizing medium-specificity, purity of form, and visual experience over narrative or symbolic meaning (*Figure 1*). He believed that painting should focus on its essential qualities-flatness, color, line, and composition-rather than storytelling or representation. Using Greenberg's formalistic approach, author will analyze the doodle artwork based on form, composition, color, and medium-specificity.



*Figure 1. Artwork by Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan Yu Hua.*

### ***Form and medium-specificity***

The artwork is executed as a two-dimensional painting or digital illustration that embraces a strong doodle aesthetic. It features bold outlines, cartoon-like figures, and an overlapping composition that avoids realistic representation. According to Greenberg, the flatness of the surface is essential in distinguishing painting from other art forms, and this piece fully upholds that ideal. There is no attempt to create depth or illusionistic space; instead, all visual elements coexist on the same picture plane. The layering of motifs generates optical movement, yet it never sacrifices the work's surface integrity. This direct engagement with the flat medium aligns with Greenberg's principle of medium specificity, where the artwork draws attention to its two-dimensional nature rather than mimicking three-dimensional space.

### ***Composition***

The composition is visually dense and rhythmically dynamic, with minimal negative space. The entire canvas is populated with overlapping forms, floral motifs, architectural elements, and human figures-creating a sense of formal complexity and spatial compression. While traditional perspective techniques are not employed, the visual structure is maintained through a hierarchical layout, where dominant figures such as the Murugan statue, key buildings, and the central banner ("Selangorku Makmur") establish a balanced spatial hierarchy. The doodle method results in a non-linear, fragmented composition, which invites the viewer's eye to continuously navigate across the surface, reinforcing Greenberg's preference for surface activity over illusionistic depth.

### ***Color and line***

The artwork utilizes a vibrant, saturated palette with primary and secondary colors applied uniformly across the surface. This deliberate use of color enhances visual energy and clarity, avoiding symbolic interpretation in favor of optical impact. Each element is clearly delineated by thick black outlines, which help reinforce the flat, graphic quality of the work-another formal trait that Greenberg admired. These outlines function not only to separate forms but also to guide the viewer's gaze, maintaining compositional order. The repetition of bold colors and patterns across the canvas creates

a harmonious balance and contributes to a unified aesthetic structure, rather than narrative continuity.

### ***Purity of style***

Greenberg strongly advocated for purity in painting, where art should focus on formal elements such as color, composition, and surface treatment, rather than external narrative or symbolic meanings. Although “*Selangorku Makmur*” includes recognizable figures, places, and cultural references, its cartoonish, decorative execution steers away from didactic storytelling or naturalistic rendering. Instead, the emphasis lies on expressive stylization, visual rhythm, and aesthetic pleasure derived from form itself. The lack of illusionism and symbolic layering allows the artwork to function primarily as a visual experience, which resonates with Greenberg’s vision of autonomous, self-referential art. Meanwhile, *Figure 2* is focusing on the Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Jeram.



***Figure 2.*** Artwork by Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Jeram.

### ***Forum and medium specifically***

Clement Greenberg emphasized the importance of an artwork’s medium-specific characteristic elements that are unique to its form. In “*Selangorku Makmur*”, the use of pen-and-ink line drawing with selective color application aligns with the medium of two-dimensional illustration. The image respects the flatness of the surface, with no attempts to create illusory depth or three-dimensional space, staying true to Greenberg’s principle that modern art should embrace the qualities inherent to its medium. The doodle technique is celebrated for its spontaneous, hand-drawn nature, and in this artwork, the lines and shapes highlight the graphic quality of illustration, emphasizing form over representation.

### ***Composition***

The artwork displays a dense but balanced all-over composition, a feature often praised by Greenberg. There is no centralized focal point; instead, the visual weight is evenly distributed across the surface. This non-hierarchical arrangement ensures the viewer's eye travels rhythmically from one segment to another, engaging with every area equally. The repeated motifs architecture, local objects, flora, and symbols are

organized in a way that produces a sense of structural coherence, with the large lettering at the center ("*Selangorku Makmur*") serving as a visual anchor. Each visual element contributes to the unity of the whole, reflecting Greenberg's preference for formal coherence and visual harmony.

### ***Color and line***

The deliberate use of monochromatic black-and-white linework, contrasted with bright primary colors (red and yellow) in the flag and typography, creates a strong optical contrast. Greenberg valued the use of color not for symbolic meaning, but for its visual interaction on the surface. Here, color enhances clarity and draws the viewer's attention without undermining the image's structural balance. The lines are varied some are tightly detailed; others are loose and playful demonstrating control and stylistic intent. The repetition and rhythm of lines give the composition a dynamic movement, a hallmark of Greenbergian formal interest.

### ***Purity of style***

Greenberg's theory insists on the purity of visual language art should focus on its own formal reality and avoid storytelling or external references. "*Selangorku Makmur*", though representational in subject, avoids narrative sequencing or symbolic messaging in its visual structure. The symbols, objects, and landmarks are visually integrated for aesthetic rather than narrative purposes. The artwork avoids realism or metaphor and instead thrives on stylized repetition, abstraction of form, and visual pleasure, echoing Greenberg's ideal of modernist purity. The stylization of the typography, architecture, and flora reinforces the artwork's commitment to visual form over interpretative content

### **Conclusion**

Through Clement Greenberg's formalist lens, the colored version of "*Selangorku Makmur*" affirms its position as a formally sophisticated and visually coherent artwork. It embodies the principles of flatness, medium specificity, compositional balance, and aesthetic purity, which are central to modernist art criticism. By intentionally disengaging from narrative depth and symbolic interpretation, the artwork emphasizes graphic clarity, vibrant coloration, structural rhythm, and a harmonious surface composition. While cultural references are embedded within the visual content, they are subordinated to the dominance of form, line, and color. In doing so, the piece not only celebrates surface, structure, and stylistic consistency, but also illustrates how contemporary doodle and illustration art can fulfill Greenbergian ideals of high art, situating itself confidently within the discourse of modernist visual purity and formal integrity.

### **Acknowledgement**

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions who contributed to the completion of this research. Special thanks are extended to the Visual Art Department at Universiti Selangor for providing academic support, resources, and encouragement throughout the research process. The author is also grateful for the guidance and constructive feedback received from fellow researchers

and academic mentors whose insights significantly enriched the analysis. In addition, appreciation is given to the school's local artists and illustrators whose creative works and visual narratives continue to inspire academic inquiry into contemporary Malaysian art forms. Their contributions to the field of doodle art offer meaningful visual dialogues that bridge tradition and modernity

### **Conflict of interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and or publication of this article. This study was conducted independently and did not receive any financial support or sponsorship that could influence its outcomes or interpretations.

### **REFERENCES**

- [1] Abdullah, S. (2015): Postmodernity in Malaysian art: tracing works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam. – *History* 5(16): 35-43.
- [2] Ball, P., Ruben, M. (2004): Color theory in science and art: Ostwald and the Bauhaus. – *Angewandte Chemie International Edition* 43(37): 4842-4847.
- [3] Blackwell, A.F., Church, L., Plimmer, B., Gray, D. (2008): Formality in sketches and visual representation: Some informal reflections. – In *Sketch Tools for Diagramming, Workshop at VL/HCC* 8p.
- [4] Doodle Art Club (2014): What is a Doodle Art? – Doodle Art Club Web Portal 7p.
- [5] Greenberg, C. (1971): *Art and culture: Critical essays*. – Beacon Press 278p.
- [6] Greenberg, C. (1959): *Modernist painting*. – *Voice of America* 7p.
- [7] Larkin, V. (2019): Illustrative Poundbury: Reading illustration in the built environment. – *Journal of Illustration* 6(2): 265-288.
- [8] Mercurio, J.R., Gabelman, D. (2025): *The Form and Theory of Literary Doodling*. – Cambridge University Press 126p.
- [9] Sakeri, S., Zeen, A. (2022): Rentak Selangor 6.0: A kaleidoscopic spectacle of cultures. – *Issuu Web Portal* 10p.
- [10] Wong, D. (2014): *The Power of Public Art: The Political Significance of Murals in New York City*. – In Western Political Science Association Meeting, Cornell University 47p.