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## Filming Visual Artist Biopic: Reflections on the Making of Short Documentary *Dark Drawings Unpacked*

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### Abstract

This article reflects on my experience in making the short documentary *Dark Drawings Unpacked* (2019). The documentary explores the life of a Malaysian artist, Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim after a stroke attack. Essentially an artist biopic, the documentary traces the various implications of stroke pertaining to the artist's life and work, including immobility and post-stroke depression. The documentary also unpacks the underlying themes of the artworks *Dark Drawings* as well as advances understanding on the artist's struggles with stroke, sanity, and God. Finally, the documentary emphasizes the importance of art as an effective medium of expression for the chaotic and creative minds. This paper further attempts to reflect on the ways in which me as the director tackled challenges such as the artist's personality representation, visualization of the artistic creation process, the relation between the style of the documentary and that of the artist portrayed, and the challenges of audio narration and editing. Finally, the article concludes that the documentary serves as a cinematic history of the artist, captures the universality of his experiences, and illustrates the many ways in which art was, and remains, a powerful medium for healing and expression.

**Keywords** Documentary; Artist biopic; Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim; Malaysian visual artist; Post-stroke depression

### Introduction

In the late 2018, prolific Malaysian visual artist, Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim exhibited a suite of ink-drawings at the National Art Gallery. Entitled *Dark Drawings (Lukisan-lukisan Gelap)*, each of the twelve pieces of the drawings act as the artist's visual journal of incidents and imaginations after suffering from a full-blown stroke attack few a years ago (Tengku Sabri, 2018, p. 12). In an interview with Kosmo Online (2018), Tengku Sabri explained that the drawings were made to fill up the time of recovering from stroke as well as to drive away his

loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Throughout the early stages of recovering from the illness, Tengku Sabri displayed few symptoms of post-stroke depression, although they were in mild severity, frequency, and duration. In a post published on his personal Facebook account dated 13 July 2017, Tengku Sabri reflected on his condition, "...extreme fatiqueness [sic], acute anxiety, lesser confidence, excessive grumpiness... no! I am not in depression. Nor am weakened..." (Tengku, 2017).

Where there is depression and suffering, art often seems to follow – sometimes great art. Using the good right arm, Tengku Sabri worked on the Dark Drawings suite every morning during the first few months of post stroke attack. According to exhibition producer and organizer Fergana Art, "The Dark Drawings are extremely personal, a painful but measured chronicle of faith, hope, fears, good, bad and ugly of the Self...clearly a contemplation of uncertainties beyond the sick bay" (2018, p. 11).

My interest in visually documenting the narrative of Tengku Sabri emerged when I was required to produce a research project for the program Master of Media Studies at University of Malaya. This article stems from my reflections – the exegesis of the research project – on the filmmaking process and the challenges experienced in making this short filmic biography. In Malaysia, considerable efforts have been made in the fields of medicine, education, and economics to document the experiences of stroke survivors in managing their post stroke life. The main goal of the documentary is to contribute to the discussion by highlighting the experience of a Malaysian creative mind in relation to creative works, something that is still scarce in Malaysia's scholarship of literature and cinematic productions. In the words of filmmaker Brown (2016), documentary is a teaching tool in "understanding patients between the lines and getting better at knowing their stories." Indeed, to best understand Tengku Sabri's life stories, we need to look inside his creations and his work, because in there lies something closest to the truth of who he is.

### **Background of the documentary**

Entitled *Dark Drawings Unpacked* (Tengku Intan Maimunah, 2019), the short documentary explores situations most transcendental to human beings which are the effects of pain and sickness. In under 10 minutes of runtime, the documentary features the role of art as a medium of expression in relation to illness in the life of a Malaysian artist, Tengku Sabri.

There are three stages of documentary production: pre-production, production, and post-production. The pre-production stage of *Dark Drawings Unpacked* involved many aspects including concept development, finance, securing artist, equipment and crews, locations scouting, production schedule, shot lists, and planning for the rest of the project. The following was production stage which involved filming and interview recording at three locations: National Art Gallery, the artist's art studio, and the artist's home library. The final stage of

the documentary was post-production. It started with transcribing interviews, first assembly, rough cut, colour correcting, colour grading, and sound mixing. Good editing is the art that disguises art, as done in the fine cut. Finally, the documentary undergone marketing and distribution phases which were done through the popular platform, YouTube. The three stages of the documentary production took about six months. As a product of a one-year Master's degree program, the documentary creation and completion had to remain within the academic year timeframe.

As an artist over the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Tengku Sabri is known for his derivations of the *keris's* hilts (the Malay dagger) and other forms into modern sculptures. His artistic styles developed in the 1980s, during the time which Malaysian art and cultural scenes were lively with themes of 'identity consciousness', 'cultural heritage' or 'questions of identity' (Tengku Sabri, 2010). He has extensively explored conceptual forms and installation art in the 1990s, and by the end of the decade he ventured into video making and created small experimental multimedia works. As an educator, Tengku Sabri taught sculpting, drawing, humanities, and media arts subjects in various public and private Malaysian universities.

The full-blown stroke attack in the late 2014 paralyzed Tengku Sabri's left side of the body and impaired his speech. All these led him to retirement as a senior lecturer after about three decades of teaching. He could no longer hold chisels and other tools to make sculptures and other arts. Since then, he has suffered from physical dysfunction and mental regression such as post-stroke depression, agitation, and frustration. After many years of scheduled hospital visits and physiotherapy sessions, he has now observed a significant improvement in health, speech and motor skills compared to when he was first diagnosed with stroke.

This documentary traces the events leading up to, during, and after the stroke attack that involves with the making and exhibiting the drawings. The question 'How does art-making help artist's post-stroke' was the main point for the filmic inquiry. By focusing on an individual artist, Tengku Sabri and his specific feelings about arts, *Dark Drawings Unpacked* captures the universality of his experiences, and illustrates the many ways in which art was, and remains, a powerful medium for healing therapy. Ultimately, the documentary testifies the ability of art to express hopes and dreams of people in general and stroke survivors in particular to strive and live their life to the fullest.

By weaving in-depth interviews, recollections, and footage together, the documentary also serves as a cinematic history of the artist. Therefore, this paper explores my experiences involved in filming the complications of post-stroke depression, as well as the application of expressive arts as a therapeutic and communicative practice. The article invites scholars to reflect on the cinematic interpretation of visual art forms.

Ultimately, it also appeals to a broader audience by relating to them on a personal level human's universal aspirations to attain something that seems unattainable (i.e., managing and surviving life post stroke).

### **The documentary**

*Dark Drawings Unpacked* traces the various implications of stroke pertaining to the artist's life and work, including immobility and post-stroke depression. The documentary also reveals the underlying themes of the Dark Drawings suite as well as advances the understanding on the artist's struggles with stroke, sanity, and God. Finally, the documentary emphasizes the importance of art as an effective medium of expression for the chaotic and creative minds.

The documentary opens with a series of 'poetic' scenes with heavy and sombre soundtrack to elicit subjective impression of the topic. It starts with a close up of an LED projector that emits dim lights. Subsequent shots in black and white show the artist watching the projector screen that runs the montage of Dark Drawings. The screen changes as the documentary title *Dark Drawings Unpacked* appears in white block letters with black background.

The scene abruptly cuts into Tengku Sabri's art studio. Tengku Sabri's voice-over, spoken with voice-of-God authority emerges as he speaks about his life story prior to the stroke attack. This is the artist at work scene, in which the artist sits and sketches on the desk by a wall of countless drawings. The following shots are close ups of tools and materials such as pens, pencils, sketchbooks, and art books. Subsequently, forms of sculptures that embody the artist's surreal and creative imaginations appear on screen. Observational scenes then appear, watching and observing the actions of Tengku Sabri's assistant. The assistant uses a variety of woodworking tools such as saw, file, and axe to make a sculpture. The narration continues about the artist's love of woodcarving and carpentry, a specialty inherited from his father and grandfather. As Tengku Sabri explains about the elements that constitutes artistic works and his source of inspiration in creating art, the documentary proceeds to show the artist's library that is full with books, sketchbooks, and lecture notes.

In an abrupt shift of time and space, the documentary cuts to the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, where the Dark Drawings were exhibited from October until December 2018. Tengku Sabri sits on his wheelchair as he observes the exhibition curator explaining the artworks to the attentive crowd. The narration introduces Dark Drawings for the first time, as the screen shows the grandeur of the exhibition hall with wide and long shots. The following visual sequence are full shots and close ups of the drawings while the artist narrates the titles and stories behind each of the twelve pieces.

The following section of the documentary presents the artist's reflection on the whole ordeal, his faith in God, and his future resolution. Backed by the steadily rising background music, Tengku Sabri reiterates the importance of art as expression of feelings and therapy. Another poetic scene emerges on the screen, as the projector runs the montage of Dark Drawings in the background again. Subsequently, photographs of the artist appear with an overlay blend of his authored book to highlight his life achievements. The documentary then cuts to a fast sequence consisting of Dark Drawings static shots to recap the stylistic and theme of the entire series of work. Tengku Sabri is then seen to be contented in his library, while he sketches another piece of art. In his concluding narration, Tengku Sabri remarks on his life post-stroke, "I wish never to stop making art".

The documentary closes with expository white text on a black background to address the audience directly by stating information about Dark Drawings exhibition and the artworks' current whereabouts. Besides that, Tengku Sabri's motivation and perseverance in recuperating from stroke and determination to continue making art are also informed. Finally, the documentary features a website link for audience to find out more about Tengku Sabri's artworks.

### **The themes**

The scenes in *Dark Drawings Unpacked* provide exposition through the social actor's voice-over, identifying titles, and contextual editing. Three themes have emerged from the documentary: the impact of stroke, the themes of Dark Drawings suite, as well as art and expression.

### ***The Impact of Stroke***

In his recollections, Tengku Sabri talks about his unhealthy lifestyle and imbalance diet that led to the full-blown stroke in the late 2014. The attack began when he was about to deliver a lecture in class. He recalls losing balance, fell down to the ground, and pain was felt on his left-side of the body in front of the shocked and terrified students. He was hospitalized for five weeks. He then decided to retire from work as a senior lecturer to focus on his recuperation.

The stroke paralyzed Tengku Sabri's left-side of the body, thus making him unable to walk on his own, as shown in a few stills of him on a wheelchair and in one of the Dark Drawings titled 'The Wheelchair Accident'. The stroke also impaired his speech and can be heard through the stammered and inconsistent tone of voice throughout the documentary narration. It took him about two years of medications and physiotherapy sessions before he could walk again, albeit for a short time without the assistance of a walking stick or a wheelchair.

Glamcevski and Pierson (2005) stated that one of the correlations of post-stroke depression is the failure to return to pre-stroke activities, besides the increasing age and poor performance in activities of daily living. All these correlations are found in the documentary *Dark Drawings Unpacked*. The post-stroke depression indeed affected the emotional state of the artist, but only to some extent. The depression is only notable in the artist's early stages of post-stroke attack and being bedbound. Tengku Sabri recalls his biggest fear, "I'm not happy as I think that I won't be able to get up and do my art again". As an artist that produced mainly sculptures and installations for decades, he was distraught when he could no longer use both of his hands to hold chisels and other tools. He reflects, "Will this paralysis end my career as a sculptor?" in the drawing 'The Sculptor's Nightmare'.

In spite of the illness, Tengku Sabri strives to return to pre-stroke activities by making art with his good right arm. He sketches and writes his ideas on papers. For more demanding tasks like sculpting and woodworking, he employs an assistant to help. Clearly, the stroke does not stop his innate desire to create art. Once he started to make art again, the post-stroke depression slowly disappeared. In commenting about his current wellbeing, he states,

"At the moment, I am happy that I am able to do my daily activities. I can do my work. There is an assistant to help me to execute my sculptures. I can do drawings. I can do my writing, as well as I can read. So, I'm quite happy now."

As Tengku Sabri strives to make his post stroke life more meaningful, he is planning for a one-man art exhibition as well as looking into publishing his writings. Indeed, the stroke attack impacted his life in various aspects, however, he regained his motivations and seeks for wellness.

### ***The Themes of Dark Drawings***

Proponents of the expression theory of art claim that art should be viewed as the artist's expression of any kind of conscious and unconscious experience—intellectual, emotional, or imaginative. The Dark Drawings act as Tengku Sabri's visual journal, documenting every incident that happened after the stroke attack, thus expressing his experience.

The first theme emerged from the drawings is the impact or consequences of stroke in the artist's life. These are portrayed in the Dark Drawings, such as 'First Night on the Sick Bed' (the artist felt the staggered blood flow in his impacted left-side of the body), 'A Painful Night' (the artist's left arm was dislodged and he screamed in pain), 'Wearing of a Diaper' (the artist had to wear diapers because he was not able to get up to

use the washroom), ‘The Wheelchair Accident’ (the artist lost his mobility and had to use wheelchair to move around), ‘Under the Jackfruit Tree’ (the artist longed to read books under the tree after being bedbound for a long time), and ‘The Fall’ (the artist’s shocking experience of falling in the hospital’s washroom).

The second theme emerged is sanity. It involves horrifying imaginations and various monster forms in the artist’s series of nightmares when he was sick. It can be seen in the drawings ‘A Visit by 2 Cigarette Djinn’ (the artist was laughed at by Djinn for no longer being able to smoke cigarettes), ‘The First Massage and the Djinn of Stroke’ (the artist was told about a smoky Stroke Djinn with red eyes), ‘A Hole in the Wall’ (the artist got curious and crawled up into a hole on his bedside wall), ‘A Frightful Night’ (the artist managed to kick the Stroke Djinn resulting in its red eye lying on the bed), ‘Night Creature’ (the artist kicked a strange creature after his left limbs almost being eaten by it), and ‘The Sculptor’s Nightmare’ (the artist was bedbound and various sculptural forms fell onto him from the sky).

Finally, the third theme emerged is God. As a Muslim and a believer in God, Tengku Sabri has faith in God’s compassion and mercy. He believes that God will grant him what he needs and wants, in this case, to be healed from sickness, as long as he surrenders to God’s will. Tengku Sabri believes that the illness that befell him was a test from the supreme being, and it challenges him to be a better person in life. His faith in God gives him strength—spiritually and physically—to not give up to the illness. In talking about the drawing ‘The Sculptor’s Nightmare’, Tengku Sabri says that “I must get up and work hard to rehabilitate myself fast! God willing”, implying that his recuperation efforts will not work unless God wills it and that His will supersedes all human will. Tengku Sabri also states that “I always feel that I can be well again” when asked about his greatest strength throughout the whole ordeal.

Through *Dark Drawings Unpacked*, Tengku Sabri’s Dark Drawings are seen as ‘art proper’, that is a form of communication that is able to express authentic emotions in a way that will create deeper human connection in those who witness it. This is expanded from Collingwood’s idea of art proper (1938). When the audience view Dark Drawings and analyse the underlying themes of stroke, sanity, and God, they are viewing the artist’s emotions at its point of clarification. Even if the understanding is partial, the audience are able to understand and imaginatively re-experience the emotion of the artist at their own terms.

### ***Art and Expression***

In the discussions about art as a medium of expression, Collingwood (ibid) refuted the ‘technical theory’ of art to arouse emotions in the audience, but instead he believes that the aim and function of art is to express the emotions of the artist. Collingwood also speaks of how in expressing an emotion, the artist is actually able to come to terms with, understand, and deal with it (ibid, p. 109). In explaining the role of art-making in his life,

Tengku Sabri claims, “Art for me, is to express my feelings and thoughts about life.” As the son of Malaysia’s Master Craftsman in woodcarving and carpentry, Tengku Sabri has had a deep appreciation for the art discipline and training necessary for creative growth since he was little. In the documentary, he opens up about his artistic process and his sources of inspirations.

He further explains the key elements to take into consideration in artmaking, “The lines, colours, shapes, themes...need your consciousness to compose them into beautiful and meaningful compositions. Be it a painting, a sculpture, a poetry, or a piece of music.”

Tengku Sabri further reiterates the role of art as a medium of expression in relation to illness and the chaotic minds,

“When we are sick, our mind strays away to negativity, confused, or depression. Art can play an important role whereby you can use it to express your feelings, and hopes to get well again. It is a kind of healing therapy.”

Stuckey and Nobel (2010) wrote that “[research appears] to indicate that creative engagement can decrease anxiety, stress, and mood disturbance.” Essentially, art-making complements the biomedical view by focusing on the holistic nature of the person, instead of on the sickness and symptoms. To keep the post-stroke depression at bay, Tengku Sabri poured out his feelings, thoughts, and imaginations on sketchbooks, thus produced the series of the Dark Drawings. Through his expressive art, Tengku Sabri not only works through his demons of stroke, but also inspires the audience to do the same. He states, “I wish never to stop making art as I think that is my occupation, my job, as an artist.”

### **Reflections on filming art documentary**

The relation between art and cinema is closely intertwined due to the fact that cinema is capable of bringing art closer to a wider audience. Jacobs (2011) demonstrates how filmmakers in 1940s and 1950s such as Kracauer, Bazin, Malraux, Emmer, Storck, and Resnais championed the genre of the art documentary as a means “to investigate the boundaries of film by juxtaposing movement versus stasis, narrative versus iconic images, and cinematic space versus pictorial surface” (p. 31).

As a researcher-filmmaker, two questions became particularly important to me in producing *Dark Drawings Unpacked*: How do I materialize the artist’s thoughts and ideas into a thrilling cinematic experience? Will this cinematic visualization be able to increase the expressive powers of the artworks? The words of



filmmaker Resnais resonated with the type of cinematic exploration of art and artist attempted in *Dark Drawings Unpacked*:

“there is nothing like looking at a painter’s work through a camera viewfinder to judge the cohesiveness of his painting as such. That was how I came to see through Gauguin, for example – he just didn’t stand up – but it’s also how I came to appreciate the formal values of Ernst.” (Burch & Resnais, 1960, p. 28)

As such, at the end of filming the art documentary of Tengku Sabri and his artworks, several elements are noteworthy of reflections. These include the representation of the artist’s personality, the visualization of the artistic creation process, the relation between the style of the documentary and that of the artist portrayed, and finally, the challenges of audio narration and editing.

### ***The Representation of the Artist’s Personality***

Scholars such as Kris and Kurz (1979), and Adriaensens and Jacobs (2015) have demonstrated the notion that artist biopics are frequently based on narratives emphasising the psychological and social isolation of the artist. These recurrent cinematic portrayals of artists can be interpreted as “society’s reactions to the mystery and enchantment that were often invoked by artists” (Adriaensens and Jacobs, 2015, p. 487). To a certain extent, I would argue that the depiction of artist, Tengku Sabri in *Dark Drawings Unpacked* conforms to this romantic stereotype of the tormented and alienated artist.

Throughout the documentary, Tengku Sabri’s loneliness is visualized quite literally, placing him mostly alone in shots. For example, the poetic opening shot shows Tengku Sabri alone in the frame in close-up and medium shot of his shadows. Drawing on Nichols’ (2010) typology of the modes of documentary, this poetic scene highlights the aesthetics of fragmentation, emotionalism, expressiveness, and ambiguity surrounding the art and artist. The partial framing of Tengku Sabri’s face and his shadows evoke an almost tormented and haunted atmosphere. The heavy and sombre music score underlines the nightmarish conundrum of the stroke recovering artist, echoing the visual moods.

In a related scene, the artist projects his shadows on the studio’s wall as the projector plays *Dark Drawings* montage. It is as if he is ‘facing’ the ‘demon’ in him – his own traumatic artistic expression. This scene lasts a notable fifteen long seconds, as a means to emphasize the surreal elements of the artist’s work.

The loneliness element also applies to the scenes that took place in his library and studio where he works and reads alone. In a brief scene at the art gallery, he is seen observing the crowd from afar, while the exhibition curator explains about the Dark Drawings.

However, I would assert that the isolation depictions of Tengku Sabri are not of social isolation or being outcaste by society. In fact, the scenes exemplify the appreciation of solitude and of serenity in the life of the artist – something that is in line with his introvert personality – where he is content being alone with his thoughts and ideas, reads books, and creates arts. At the end of the documentary, the camera zooms out from Tengku Sabri being alone in his library, sketching on an easel while the narration indicates his hope of never stop making art in life.

### ***The Visualization of the Artistic Creation Process***

According to Jacobs (2011), one of the characteristics of artist biopics is to show famous artist at work, thus making the static artworks interesting for cinema. Consequently, in *Dark Drawings Unpacked*, I wanted to bring into attention the laborious aspects of Tengku Sabri's process of artistic creation. By visualizing this process, it enables me to bring the artworks cinematically to life.

In the documentary, Tengku Sabri is shown at work at his studio, Studio Pohon Rendang. The lively mixture of close-ups, medium shots, and 'over the shoulder' shots are able to show the process of creation and the technique used by the artist, for example his hand positions and hand motions. At this location, the scenes were shot with visual depth, properly composed, and lit well. This location provides not just a glimpse, but a full access to the artist's inspirational creative workspace. The juxtaposition of the artist sitting and sketching on the desk by a wall of countless drawings was incredibly interesting to me, as it shows the immersion of the artist in his own world.

Besides the act of sketching, the laborious aspect of the artistic creation is also shown by the act of sculptural woodworking using tools such as saw, file, and axe by Tengku Sabri's assistant. In my conversation with Jaafar Ismail of Fergana Art, exhibition producer and curator, he stated that "A lot of traditional sculptors don't like assistants. He [Tengku Sabri] could rationalize himself, that it is okay to use an assistant. That's the difference between a sculptor and an artist" (Jaafar Ismail, 2018).

In the documentary, the scene at the studio also shows the many forms of Tengku Sabri's sculptures hung on the wall, on the ceiling, and propped on the desk. The sculptures were made from various materials such as wood, wire, and pewter. The documentary also provides an exclusive preview of the artist's new and to-be-exhibited sculptural project made from wax. Indeed, the visualization of Tengku Sabri's artistic creation

process shows his no-nonsense craftsmanship and solid work ethic in spite of his psychological unease and physical decay.

In the case of the Dark Drawings suite, as the artworks were already completed at the time of filming this documentary, I am more invested in visualizing moments of artistic inspiration of the artist. In one of the documentary scenes, Tengku Sabri reads a book contently in his library. As an avid reader, he owns over hundreds of books ranging from the subjects of arts, music, literature, philosophy, anthropology, history, and fictions as shown in the documentary. When asked about his source of inspiration in art-making, he cited “...nature, and stories that were told to me as a kid.”

### ***The Relation Between the Documentary Style and Artist Style***

The attempt to achieve a correlation between the style of the film and that of the artist has provided an interesting aspect for me to explore. As a character-driven documentary, the narrative arc of *Dark Drawings Unpacked* centres on the social actor – Tengku Sabri’s experience. His setbacks, aspirations, and triumphs invoke a broader exploration of stroke survivors, post-stroke depression, and artistic expression. All of these in the hope to communicate and resonate with spectators.

Throughout the documentary, the artist’s subjugating ‘voice of God’ off-camera narration assumes a structuring function. Meanwhile, the still images and footage played the role of merely backing up what is said. Any engagements between me and the artist during the semi-structured interviews (such as my responses and probing questions) were edited out from the final documentary to form a clean narration. Instead of resorting to the common interview ‘talking head’, I wanted the artist to seem to be speaking from his interior life, rather than addressing a camera or the director. One could be left with the impression that, through his voice, the subject of the documentary, Tengku Sabri displaced my agenda and voice as the director. However, through the interviews, my distinctive voice as the director was evident, which were both of admiration and praise for the artist’s talent and perseverance. An example of this was when the artist talked about his ambitious future plan of doing a solo exhibition and to get his writings into publication.

In terms of visual style, the colour of the documentary gravitates from neutral towards warmer, as well as dark and contrasting colours. These deliberate artistic choices are used to mimic the palette and composition of Dark Drawings suite. Besides that, photographs and news clippings play an important role as they provide a historical account of the artist, thus lending a sense of realism and authenticity to his credibility and to the documentary’s structure. Ultimately, the photographs and news clippings further illustrate specific points being made from the narration. For example, a news clipping of the artist about his pewter sculpture in collaboration with Royal Selangor was shown with an overlay blend of his authored book. Adding to the artist’s prestige were

the photos of him giving lectures in class and in public, assembling art installations at local and international exhibitions, as well as meetings and collaborations with Malaysia's renowned individuals in the art and creative industry such as Latiff Mohidin and U-Wei Haji Saari. Another notable example is the close up shot of the artist sketching with a superimposition done during post production with a photo of him giving a lecture about art. On the lecture note, it was written "Art: Tell/Relay, Share, Communicate", implying the power of art to disseminate ideas and reach out to people.

At the National Art Gallery where the Dark Drawings were exhibited, the establishing shot of the gallery interior shows that the lighting drew attention to the artworks, thus created a dramatic effect for the scene. However, this posed a challenge for me to film the details rendered in close-ups of the drawings because the lighting were reflected on the drawings' glass frame. A way to circumvent this problem is by using animation techniques to simulate camera movements. The effects of panning and zooming à la Ken Burns were applied to each of the drawings. Consequently, static images of the drawings are brought to life. Indeed, through camera movements and editing, film added movement to the static artworks. One by one, the drawings flash into view while Tengku Sabri narrates his stories. The 'camera' movements guide spectators to 'read' the drawings. Through this scene, the documentary showcases itself as an 'appreciation film' that attempts to penetrate into the meaning of each of the drawings, by moving the camera all over to analyse them, thus unpacking the underlying themes and stories beneath. Moreover, it allows spectators to analyse the style, composition and iconography of the artist.

### ***The Challenges on Interview / Narration Audio***

Throughout the duration of filming and completing this documentary, several challenges arose that should be acknowledged. These include the need to learn the discourse of filmmaking, as well as the need to manage finance and time. However, the main challenge would be the unclear speech of the artist throughout the interview/narration. Tengku Sabri's speech pattern is inconsistent due to the effects of stroke. For some interview questions, multiple retakes were needed, not by my request, but by Tengku Sabri's own wish as he realized that his stammer will impair the quality of the documentary. Besides that, he had to take frequent breaks in between interviews as he gets tired quickly, in which I willingly obliged. After all, I am honoured by his approval and permission to film him and his artworks. This experience has taught me to be more empathetic, flexible, and perhaps should have planned to conduct the interview in a few segments in a span of days.

The process of audio editing for the documentary was time-consuming due to the removal of expressions such as "uh", "um", "-lah", elongated pauses, stammering while contemplating answers, and repetitions of words within the same sentence. The question arises, for me as the director and editor, whether to keep the natural speech pattern of a stroke recovering patient in the final documentary thus potentially causing audience

to disengage with the material, or to edit it out to form a polished and coherent narration. In the end, I decided to edit the slurred speech for brevity and to achieve a concise statement on the given topic. I believe that the edit was necessary and did not lessen the authenticity of the artist's 'voice' in any way.

Inevitably with such a short time frame of under 10 minutes, not all the interview with Tengku Sabri was used. The interview transcription took about three hours to complete and the total word count came out to be approximately 2600 words. Those words that did make it into the documentary were largely the stories which succinctly encapsulated the documentary's themes. Indeed, the hardest achievement in any art form is having the confidence and ability to say a lot through a little. The short duration is arguably one of the documentary's strength as it emphasizes the documentary's accessibility for a wider distribution, particularly online.

### **Conclusion**

In *Dark Drawings Unpacked*, the tragic nature of Tengku Sabri's post stroke life is indeed the crucial topic of the documentary. However, the documentary is also interspersed with moments of the artist's resilience and resolution. The documentary has explored new understandings on the impacts of stroke in the life of the artist, identified and analysed the themes of the Dark Drawings, and reiterated the role played by art as an effective medium of expression. Evidently, the artist Tengku Sabri has long conveyed his feelings and messages through his many forms of artworks.

The scenes in *Dark Drawings Unpacked* provided exposition through the 'Tengku Sabri's voice-over, identifying titles, and contextual editing. In my efforts as director to represent Tengku Sabri's personality on screen, the artist is seen mostly alone throughout the documentary. Although this conforms to the romantic stereotype of alienated artist in many biopics, my vision is actually to represent the artist's appreciation and embrace of solitude and serenity. Meanwhile, the laborious aspects of artistic creation are shown through the artist-at-work scenes, by the visualizations of sketching and woodworking actions. The audio-visual styles employed in the documentary attempt to relate to the artist's style, that is through off-screen narration, colour palette, the usage of photographs and newspaper clippings, as well as animation techniques of the Dark Drawings. Finally, the article posited the main challenges in completing this documentary which is the multiple retakes of interview/narration, as well as the time-consuming audio editing due to the artist's inconsistent speech pattern.

After the successful exhibition in Kuala Lumpur, the Dark Drawings found their home in Singapore Art Museum (Studio Pohon Rendang, 2019). Meanwhile, Tengku Sabri continues to work on his oeuvre by producing more drawings, sculptures, and writings. As with many other artist biopics, *Dark Drawings Unpacked* serves as a cinematic history of the artist, of Tengku Sabri. The cinematic representation prompts people – viewers in general and stroke survivors in particular – to think about the questions of pain, healing, art-making,

and living life contently. It is hoped that viewers would be inspired from the documentary, and other filmmakers to produce local artist biopics that are accessible and relatable to a wide audience.

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