

Conversation with Khairullah Rahim and Ahmad Abu Bakar

Rafi Abdullah

I must admit that I was wary when Khairullah first approached me to contribute to the exhibition catalogue. I hadn't been able to share it then, but I had been ruminating on the kitsch, colloquiality, gaudy-ness, or as he puts it: the *obiang* and *orbit*.¹ I had observed (what in my opinion is, however I have no moral authority to conclude for a matter of fact) a growing romanticism of the *obiang* from a perverse gaze of its visual vernacular. This, for the most part, is frequently appropriated and manifested into curated online (and even offline) personas and practices. This co-option — often employed by actors that are far removed from the consequential realities of such a vernacular — veils itself, unnoticed if one is not attentive, as an expression of counter-normativity.

But somehow I was certain that Khairullah's fondness of the *obiang/orbit* did not come from such a place. In our conversations, he had emanated an acute sensitivity towards that which he references and an astute awareness and careful consideration of his gaze of and position within the *obiang/orbit*. Our conversation was also littered with his sincerity, whether in his unfettered admissions of his genuine love for the quirks, eccentricity and 'extra-ness' of Bollywood; or his adoration of the unadulterated beauty of commonplace objects that he encounters in his locale.

I recall him having shared that at home; he would have no say whatsoever on what colours the walls would be painted and that it was always up to his mother's whims. This familiar anecdote had made me stop to reconsider the value of aesthetics, or simply 'taste'. My mother could not care about recent trend developments in art and design. Her habit of totting and hoarding disposed furniture from the neighbourhood (be it used beds, refrigerators, or even washing machines) is driven by an unbridled 'pragmatism'. When I complain about the mess and resulting lack of space, she would argue that someone would always have a need for it in the near future. Whether the just-out-of-prison uncle sorting out his next rental apartment; a runaway cousin seeking temporary refuge from their abusive partner whilst in the midst of a lengthy divorce; or even the single aunt evicted from her unit for falling short on rent...

Who has autonomy over the *obiang/orbit* then? When are gestures representation, and when are they an act of appropriation? How can one exercise sensitivity when mining from such a space? These were some questions, amongst others, that had cropped up in our conversation. That Khairullah had extended the conversation to Ahmad Abu Bakar and myself, a flocking of thoughts and conversations if you will, is indicative of the artist's desire to map an affinity. Some excerpts from our conversations, parts of which have been translated from Malay:

¹ *Obiang* and *orbit* are terms meaning 'out of fashion; in a bad or dubious ostentatious style or taste' in informal, colloquial Singaporean-English.

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Khairullah's Goodman Arts Centre Studio
Saturday, 22nd February 2020
10:00AM - 12:00 PM

Rafi Abdullah (RA): Thank you Khairullah for having us at your studio today. Maybe to begin with and to set some context, perhaps you could share with us what were the influences behind this new series or some of your thought processes when conceptualising the works?

Khairullah Rahim (KR): When I was initially developing these works, my plan was to respond to my new surroundings because I had just moved to Boon Lay. I was interested in exploring my relationship with this peculiar neighbourhood that was new to me. I was taking references from personal religious altars, typically found outside of Chinese and Indian households; and for Malay households, those seasonal embellishments such as *Hari Raya* decorations. These references formed the basis of this format. The materials and objects I used were mostly sourced from the vicinities of my neighbourhood.

Many of these materials also speaks indirectly about the ideas of how and why these objects are hoarded. Some of us cannot afford a lifestyle like the Kardashians, or adopt a very Zen and minimalistic styled house. That is one of many reasons some people resort to hoarding based on my observations. They must be resourceful. So the idea of hoarding, and dense mess is quite apparent in this series of works...

However as I was developing the works, I came to discover that they started to adopt characteristics of a specific social class. It is made up of a social demographic: lower income families, old folks, migrant workers and so forth. I was also interested in the visual languages of activities — such as *Geta*² performances, void-deck weddings and community parades — that took place within the enclave.

I sort of combined these things. So if you observe closely, some of the characteristics that I incorporate, are *orbit*... Such as gold and yellow, florals, kain batik, beads, labuci ... But how do I empower these things through the act of beautifying and then making them look like altars? It feels like it's quite a negotiative process, so as much as I want to embellish and go over the top, I still want to retain the beauty of these things.

I think the main thing I'm also trying to show is a kind of subtlety through noise. That when you look you will be overwhelmed by it, but upon closer inspection you'll come to find that there are very commonplace objects that are familiar to very specific communities. I didn't want to overthink, because initially it really was about my relationship with my new surroundings and this very peculiar neighbourhood.

A lot of people think that these neighbourhoods don't exist anymore... I was just reading online and Mothership just shared an article about how photographs are being captured of these nostalgic houses that are very common in the 60's and 70's"... L shaped and two room houses. But these houses are still so common now. There are many of these houses around, so why is there a need to romanticise these things, because these are actually still around. If you look at things like the Malay wedding *dias*, it's very *orbit*. But it's still there if you look at the void decks.... People will think of it being very old fashioned. But it's a kind of empowerment. Maybe what I'm trying to do is reflect my reality and the conditions that I am living in. When

² *Geta* literally translates from Chinese as "song stage", and is a form of vernacular entertainment often performed in Hokkien involving live performances of music, song and dance.

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I moved from a 5 room flat to a 3 room flat, the contrast was quite interesting and I just wanted to make works that for me can reflect that.

So there's always the addition an object for decorative purposes... But for some of them, such as these washers, they were objects that served certain functions. And the function has been mooted. So those are the kind of things that I feel resonate with me but I don't see enough of these things.

So the difference between these, and my older works are, I think especially for this series (to be quite honest I'm still quite uncomfortable, I will need time to get used to it), is strong essence of *orbit* and *obiang*. I have tried to remove that essence, but it's very tricky because I know that this is what I'm going for, and no longer about finding the comfort zone in between, It's about combining the beautiful and the *obiang*. So hopefully I can find a middle ground...

For the longest time, I have observed that our ideas of aesthetics very much lean towards a Westernised understanding. I have been quite shy to admit that for most of my life I have been an avid fan of Bollywood cinema.

Ahmad Abu Bakar (AAB): Quite surprising. Because I ingat your generation won't listen to Hindustan.

KR: No, no, no! I actually do listen to Hindustan songs, and outdated 90s rock *kapak*³ you know such as Slam, Zamani, Jamal Abdillah...

These things actually inform some of my sensibilities. I think it will be a disservice for me to pretend otherwise, or to avoid embracing it. If you really think about it, the idea is very simple, it's about our different ways of seeing, and my experience of my surroundings. But when we speak of experience, then our personal background will all come into the picture.

Every work process will have some kind of working parameters and sensibility. For instance, if I'm influenced by a more maximalist sensibility, then I shouldn't have to match up with the tempo of a sensibility that isn't... And I feel this applies to aesthetics too. So I think this series of work is also my way of countering my resistance towards embracing my own background and visual language.

I watch a lot of Hindustan films and music videos, you know like Bollywood is not even Indian. It's Indian, but it is exaggerated. Bollywood is known to have inaccurate depictions of things. For instance, there was this meme of a scene where a Bollywood actress was playing basketball, but with a netball, and in the middle of a football field, in a tennise attire... It's this quintessential aesthetic of Bollywood that appeals to me. I feel like too much credit is given to the West, for example how assemblage is contemporary and uncommon in the region. But I think we should reconsider that misconception that assemblage is not common here. You can find it in our culture. If you think about it, *nasi padang*⁴ is a form of assemblage.

For example also how people immediately assume that using ceramic is very traditional. But you see people who still use the medium can also choose to present very contemporary issues in their works. And

³ Translates to 'axe rock' and refers to a style of Malay rock music in the mid 80's to early 90's that infused ballad into rock music of that time.

⁴ A Malay dish where steamed rice is served with various choices of pre-cook dishes that one can mix and match.

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not just issue wise and idea wise, but in terms of aesthetic sensibilities also. Who would think Ahmad, going in to his 60s, would use neon colours... It's so easy for people to associate neon colours to a younger artist. Something beautiful is immediately by a female artist. But I think artists for the longest time have already tried to go against these kind of stereotypes. I think this is also my way of resisting and negotiating with my reluctance to embracing my background.

AAB: But to me, very strongly, your series seems to me very painterly. It's just that you are painting using objects.

KR: I think it's very easy to say and think that it's sculpture, because of the form, it's very straightforward.

AAB: So your colours are materials. All the objects, are the forms. Because, I don't know... This time round, your approach towards assemblage, feels more sculptural (pointing to several recent assemblages in the studio) ... But these ones (referring to altars), are more painterly.

RA: But I think Ahmad brought up a very interesting point. Was there anyone else that had remarked similarly? About how your sculptures are very painterly?

KR: There has been a few. But I think the funny thing is that sometimes people, usually the viewers, are the ones that like to do this... The labelling or classification of a work. Because for us artists, sometimes we're not too preoccupied with those things... If midway I feel like breaking these assemblages and turning that into a video performance, then there's no stopping that. I think it's not an important thing for me. I think for any viewer, it's only natural for them to try to make sense of what they're seeing.

So for instance, Ahmad he sees it like I'm using objects as materials. I think I can agree, but maybe pushing it further, I realised that if I look at my paintings, I feel my paintings are not painterly. My paintings have very strong design influences. In terms of the flat colours? Maybe even collages and drawings... But also one more thing people like to say is that oh these new works are moving away from painting. But in my head, I think also to me this is coming back to what it was initially.

AAB: Yes, it is.

KR: If we look back to our education, even back to our primary school education, we're all taught drawing and painting. But I've already started playing with art making. Maybe even back when I was five years old? I don't come from a very well to do family. So my toys were makeshift. For instance, my father will cut out a picture of a dinosaur from a magazine and let me play with it. We couldn't afford to buy superhero figurines. I worked around that and made my own ones by sculpting hoarded plastic bags that I could find at home. I think those intuitions were already developed before going to school. And when you go to school, that is when the ideas of drawing, representation, accuracy, and all those things; start to be ingrained and enforced on us. That is why I think we grow up and think that the basis of art is always painting and drawing.

It would be interesting if we truly let children develop freely, and we can start to see what other forms of art can exist with that. Even when you think about drawing, why are we told that we must draw on paper, when as a kid, we would just draw on walls without a care. So when I'm making my work, I don't think about categorizations of painting or sculptures..

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For the symbols, in my head, the silhouette had always been an altar. But I wouldn't call these pieces an altar, I like to think of them as almost-altars. Because why would you pray to this when it is not an altar. It takes up the form and shape of an altar but is not an altar. I think that line of thought is interesting because Ahmad also references into all these things like the *batu nisan*⁵. And you also mentioned your earlier works you were looking into stupa. I think silhouettes are very important and comes across as something quite visible in our approaches. I think it would be quite interesting to later listen to Ahmad speak about those things. If we were to speak of altars, the only thing I'm interested in is two things: one is the fact that it is the object that I encounter, so the significance of the object is that it's so visible and I'm referencing to this. And secondly is the form, I would like it to appear as an altar.

But actually when I was thinking of it, it's not just simply about altars. The fascination could extend to things such as electrical box housings, or framed photos of deities. Somehow it always has this standardized form, always in a portrait shape.

RA: It's not so much about the religious connotation then?

KR: It's not. We know how especially in Singapore, where space is constraint, and you have only a limited amount of space along the corridor to personalize and make it your own. These things almost serve like a landmark. For example, when someone comes to visit, you would use these objects as markers to navigate. "My unit is next to the one that has a red *tanglong*⁶ hanging." It gives a kind of character to every unit. I think that's why I was also quite particular that I wanted them to be the same size, but some of them could be like broader, some could be placed higher.

Some visitors have mentioned that some of the works "looks" more Indian, and others more Chinese. I guess I can see where they are coming from? But it's not something that I'm interested in fleshing out. It's just because, instinctively I've already been looking at these references that are quite all over the place. Like in my phone, I have some images of Chinese funeral procession vehicles. They are very decorative, with the ribbons and neon colours. So I think it's quite interesting that I'm actually very drawn to specific sensibilities, but they come from various influences from the same environment. It's really I think, for once I'm trying to present something that's a bit more realistic to my reality... I don't own a house that's very zen or black and white and minimal. And somehow people have that idea of artists... I might be an artist but at my house, if my mom wants to paint the walls orange and green, it is her choice ultimately!

RA: And this also applies to whatever odd and mismatched furniture that she would want to place wherever she wants in her house too right?

KR: Yes! Especially those frilly white cloths that are commonly placed on top of TV sets...

RA: My mom as well... She would hoard to whatever kind of furniture our neighbours would throw out, always justifying it with the fact that it might come in handy one day...

KR: Even for those furniture.... When I walk past the corridor, I am very acquainted to them. For example, my neighbours arowana fish, or another neighbour's pet dog, someone else's wall clock... If one day they were to rearrange it, I would mistake it for them having moved. In a sense, I've also developed this very accidental relationship, not on a personal basis but just in terms of familiarity. Even for example, my

⁵ Malay for gravestones.

⁶ Chinese lantern made from thin, folded, coloured paper.

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neighbour would spit out loud early in the morning when he is showering and I will always hear it. I'm not saying I have a relationship with him, but there's this sense of familiarity because of proximity. In a sense, these are the characters around my surroundings. But these are the things that I so called discovered when I was making the work. Because then I realised, that actually all the works are very layered without having to express everything... Like I said previously, what really triggered me was this event of me moving to Boon Lay... Suddenly I'm absorbing all these things...

When I was making, I started to notice that I was resisting this whole minimalism aesthetic and why I'm doing it. It's not just a matter of taste. It's also, like I've said, about practicality. I think those are the kind of things that I would like to raise discussions about in the work. But if they're not present, I don't like to....

RA: Articulate it?

KR: Yes, because the works already so loud and so noisy. Sometimes artists have too much they want to say. I think it's good for people to look and come to their own realisation. If they come close, viewers will start to recognise the objects, like the door stopper commonly found behind doors, or these poles, or these spoons. These are very recognizable forms and features but they have been transformed into something very beautiful. I think it's very *passee* but people don't give enough credit to beauty. Just because something is beautiful or pretty, it becomes less important. It's very different when you call a painting a handsome painting, instead of a pretty painting. Pretty almost immediately comes with the common connotation of decorative.

But people also need to unlearn these things. The idea of decoration, and embellishments can be quite complex and very compelling. It's not just for the sake of it, and I don't think it's just one layered or its very trivial. For instance, if you look at my Singapore Biennale piece, the one that I was using jelly moulds. People commented that it's so pretty and beautiful... Exactly, because I was trying to address the issues faced by the domestic helpers. They're only allowed to put on makeup, lipstick and perfume every Sunday... Only every Sunday! Because of that they will do all of it on excessively. But it is something very powerful then, the idea of beauty and make-up is very powerful. We cannot look at this only from a very singular perspective.

AAB: But actually, listening from what you've just shared with us.... Now when I look at it, it's almost like you are decorating a wedding dais. You are setting an objective... Your objective is an altar, but the point of end is not an altar, but to me it's almost like a wedding dais. And this wedding dais, is not for a bride but it's about your experience of a Singaporean living in Boon Lay.

KR: [laughter] True!

AAB: It's a story telling about how you embrace, how you live, how you engage to this environment and how you want it to be celebrated. So that's how it's happening. And that's why you call it an altar. People pray to the altar to boost their confidence. But for you, you want to endorse your own step in that environment, so this is your reaction., so this is how you react.

KR: It's quite interesting to think it that way! It's almost like putting it into an object, this is to officiate, that I am a resident of Boon Lay!

AAB: Almost like, I am a resident of Boon Lay and I am proud of it!

KR: I won't deny it. I was quite reluctant to move to Boon Lay at the start...

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- AAB:** I've been working with prison inmates, and if you ask them where they live, many will respond with Boon Lay. And I'm not surprised every time I get that answer. I know a lot about that area from their stories over the years. But I've heard that the officials have been working hard to create a new image of Boon Lay. It's interesting to note that you are also responding to such a situation.
- KR:** But the reality I think now is still not very different, you go there you see a lot of Malaysian workers there.
- AAB:** But it has a character...
- KR:** It does, and it's something that I'm trying to kind of navigate.
- RA:** But I think it's quite important to think about the *niat* (intent), of reshaping the perception of Boon Lay. Perhaps the government is coming from a different set of agenda, but what you're attempting to do is to embrace and come to terms with its 'quirks' on a personal capacity.
- KR:** Exactly.
- AAB:** You're looking at things from a different perspective .
- KR:** But I won't be surprised if now people are more willing to not just engage with the works preoccupation, but to think about it. Because if we were to talk about aesthetics, these kind of art has been stamped with approval. I question what is approved and what is not... Why are muddy colours a no-no? But we can't we play with that? What if you compare muddy colours and something? I don't know... These kind of pairings it could work. Especially when we talk about beauty, it's so subjective. And different cultures have very different ways and perceptions of what beauty is. Why must we subscribe to the idea of complementary colours? I think as a basis, even if I want to say that it's okay, it's still quite problematic.
- AAB:** Because the problem is we are formally educated.
- KR:** I think we need to understand that as much as there are class and categories, and what is this and what is that, it is also important for us to be able to unlearn those things.
- RA:** You mean the formal distinctions?
- KR:** For example, when people comment that a painting is so effeminate. Why do we associate pink as a effeminate and 'weak'?
- AAB:** I think the idea that pink is a feminine colour... It is most likely because the school has taught us so. In reality, based on your experience now, if you were to really think about is pink really 'soft'? I don't think so. It actually has symbolism behind it. It has a narrative behind it, about a story in regards to all the other ornaments being introduced into this work, so it's no longer being soft. And this is actually based on how, one experience the work. It should not have to be related to your 'schooling', or your taste. I think we have to be very careful about schools.
- KR:** Experience and perception I suppose? Sometimes as an educator myself, I would think back and reconsider in hindsight, if what I'm teaching my students is accurate...
- AAB:** For me, I'm encouraging students to make decisions. It can be a 'wrong' decision. I think it's okay. But the problem is that students do not dare to make the wrong decisions. Because they think wrong is wrong, it has to be right. Because being right, is where you get marks. And that's problematic and as an educator I think.

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- KR:** And there is the reward system...
- RA:** Like it's not really an actual process of learning.
- KR:** Say Ahmad, your series *Langit Bumi Tanah*, you use — I'm just gonna pin point one thing here — say colours. What prompted you to use those very fluorescent colours?
- AAB:** Looking at my work right, I really wanted it to be bright and confrontational. Because it's already so minimal, so if I were to be so bland, the works will just disappear. So if you have to create that contrast, in terms of how a work should be dealt with. And also, looking at my practice, it is always very subtle. So I thought why not this time round, be a bit louder?
- KR:** Colours are already one thing, and then I recall the sheen too. But I'm also thinking about the references... You know like *batu nisan* (tombstone). To be honest, while I was sourcing for the exhibition, I passed by a store selling batu nisan and I found it to be quite 'attractive'. But in my head, it would be tricky... I think that people are already so uncomfortable looking at these things... I was thinking, in my case, is the kain kafan appropriate...? Would I do that...?
- AAB:** Because death is always a taboo for us. Part of it is right now, for the past two or three years, I started to ask myself, why must I always feel fear, when confronted with such imageries? But when we converse, we can easily say it lightly that everyone will face death. But the reality is that we're afraid. I think about these even as I'm walking along Jalan Bahar. The word Jalan Bahar is always linked to three things: Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Civil Defence, and the cemetery. When I'm at the National Institute of Education (NIE) and looking out, I would think to myself like that's where the *kiblat*⁷ where my father in law is facing and some of my friends who are quite close and that have already passed on in the past few years... I gain more confidence when dealing with that whole notion. When I created works that made such a reference, it allowed me to confront from a distance, the whole ideas about death. Lately also, I will make efforts to watch burial processes when it happens. So I'm no longer grappling with it, when considering my work... The whole idea is about the form, and because it's an object and not so much about the symbolism. But the references are there... Because when you look at tombstones, they are all very monumental. I'm interested in the whole idea of a gigantic and monumental experience... Such as when you encounter stupas. When I was at *Pulau Penyegat* in *Tanjung Pinang*, this small island that has strong links with the history of Malay literature, I went to view the *makam* (tombs) there and they were huge. They were made of marble, and being an artist, I was especially so awestruck by them.
- KR:** That's the thing, sometimes as an artist it is difficult to not look at it formally.
- RA:** It's quite strange then, because you would think that enlarging an object symbolising death would make it much scarier. But here, it does quite the opposite...
- KR:** I wonder about your relationship with superstition. Are you superstitious?
- AAB:** Not really...
- KR:** If we look at it, perhaps it's easier for us to detach those connotations from the form then. So like for you Ahmad, when you presented the tombstones in the gallery, do you think your detachment from these kinds of superstitions allow you to work better in a sense?

⁷ The bearing and direction of the Mecca that a Muslim faces when he or she is praying. A deceased is also buried facing the *kiblat*.

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- AAB:** I think it does. If I were superstitious, I wouldn't have used all of these. If I had not clearly mentioned that part of my references included stupas, no one would've asked about it...
- RA:** But do you think that there are some personal levels to your explorations? Is there a line somewhere that you would draw?
- AAB:** I look at it as a form. I look at it as an architecture, I don't look at it as a religious symbolism. And that allows me to overcome that.
- KR:** I think if you set it clear at the start, it becomes easier perhaps. You know yourself that you are not trying to cross the line to the point of being disrespectful. I think it's fine that others would have their set of perception, as long as you know your intention.
- RA:** I take it that drawing these boundaries applies to your practice too?
- KR:** I think I'm not as bold. There are certain silly things that I still struggle with and second guess. Even some materials, like chopsticks, I don't want it to be arranged in a manner where it's mistaken as joss sticks. But I don't articulate these things...
- AAB:** But it's nice also to articulate it as such because that's when more dialogues are created with regards to how the material is being used and how the material has been reinterpreted. That is quite important to me. Mine is more towards the symbolism, in terms of the cultural significance, so it's murky whether it should be articulated or not. But I think for your approach it should be articulated, because you're making many references to the materials and because the material is basically outsourced within the perimeters of your environment. It's quite important to articulate the sensitivities.
- KR:** I think it's still a process for me. I'm still trying to maybe hopefully in the future be bolder in making these kinds of decisions. But I'm always concerned of being offensive, especially if the cultural significance of the materials are not from my own culture.
- RA:** I think it's perhaps important to take those risks. Otherwise, the taboo will remain and the meaning associations to certain objects remain and don't move so to speak.
- KR:** That's why I think in a sense it comes with experience. I think it's way easier for Ahmad to work like this because of all the experience that he has. For me, there's still a lot of restraint I admit. There are things I want to do but I'm afraid. Maybe I will probably push this. But at the end of the day, if it's clear for me that I'm not referencing the religious connotations, I should be able to use this freely and interpret and embrace. Even when approaching the *obiang*... I want the works to appear *obiang* but at the same time I want it to be palatable. It's almost always back and forth, I am quite fickle too!
- RA:** This goes back to one question I had in mind, about your relationship with materials. Like you've mentioned earlier, that if you take on other communities' cultural references, you have to be sensitive about some of your decisions. What do you feel about that kind of relationship with the material? Do you feel like you should privilege a relationship towards it? I'm thinking perhaps in the traditional sense, like if you are in the practice of making clay and sculpture, you need to have a relationship with the medium. You need to have a relationship for years to fully understand, for example, how malleable clay is.
- I'm also recalling, Ahmad, your long standing relationship with *tanah* (land)... Whether in thinking through your practice and artistic premises, or your lived experience when considering your personal narratives of

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inherited land and living as a dual citizen between two neighbouring bodies of land. There are differences in the spectrum and types of relationship towards the medium for the both of you and it would be interesting to see the confluences.

AAB: It's quite straightforward for me because I use clay and it is a more traditional material. I think it would be more interesting for Khai as he is working with materials that have cultural significance.

KR: I think it touches on social class significance. Sometimes I wonder if I were to go to a wealthy person's house, would I be able to find some of the commonplace objects that I use in my works? They won't have these very brittle and bendable spoons that I incorporate.

AAB: That's a really good observation. I think at the end of it, it's about how you take responsibility towards the object or the material that you use in your work.

RA: But how do you think you can do that as an artist? How can you be responsible?

KR: I feel now that because I actually live in Boon Lay, I feel more comfortable talking about it. If this reality is so far away from my lived experiences, it can come across as disrespectful. Because it may come off as me romanticising people's living conditions. But even though I am living there, it is not about Boon Lay, it is about my experience and my 'gaze'. It is also about being aware. These objects are very relatable to a specific demographic. We can't just conveniently insert it in a work. The work cannot romanticise or beautify a community's suffering. If anything, I'm speaking about empowerment.

RA: For me, the idea of the relationship with the medium also comes back to the idea of conventions. What prompted both of you — because I think it's quite apparent or at least others have made that observation of both your practices — to go against conventions?
Like for Ahmad, when we were doing the show at The Private Museum, you had already shared about it in the interview with T.K Sabapathy. You know, the whole history of how you deviated from a certain school. But maybe we can start to see the differences, like for you Khai, maybe the intention for your separation from conventions might be different from Ahmad's. It'll be interesting for us to spend some think to talk and think about that...

KR: Firstly, I don't think I had planned at all that I wanted to break conventions. Perhaps it's because I initially trained in the genre of painting, whatever that means. I will not go as far as to say that painting is not enough; it has worked for so many other artists, but for me, painting alone did not allow me to fully reflect what I want to make and what I want to present and show. So I started introducing other materials, but not clay or the like. I specifically wanted to use objects. Even though I stopped making works on canvas, and adopted wooden boards and objects instead, the painterly qualities of my earlier works are still evident in these mixed media assemblages. I feel like I'm not so much breaking conventions, but more that I'm innovating new methods and approaches.

RA: Did you develop these methods because you thought painting was limiting for you?

KR: Painting as a medium, is not limiting. But clearly it wasn't quite working out for me too. I can't explain it, yet!

AAB: That's kind of true I suppose. From how I see it, we are all artists. So we have the tendency to be adventurous. Because being an artist, you're taught to be adventurous. But I guess you set a platform and objective, with regards to how adventurous you want to be...

KR: So like when you brought up conventions, I think it's more like Ahmad has a lot more to say. It's easier today,

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because there's the category of assemblage. Assemblage somehow is perceived as being quite contemporary. But if you think about clay and ceramics, there's always an immediate categorising of it being ceramic pieces, vases, cups and pots. I think Ahmad would probably have a lot more to say about this?

AAB: That's why when you talk about clay, people would think about pottery. Working with clay, you would always be seen as a potter or a ceramist. Here, that is why I've always said don't call me a potter, don't call me a ceramist, but call me a visual artist. The reason for it is because I want to see myself as someone who practices art making. Here, already I'm trying to create various ways how I can practice. By creating such variations of opportunities or directions for me to move around, that itself will encourage me to be more adventurous. That is why I keep on challenging, not only myself, but my audience.

It's like I say, now you don't call these ceramics or pottery, and you should call this a sculpture. But yet I will give you one of the most traditional materials, that is clay. I will give you one of the most traditional techniques, that is throwing. It's almost like a push and pull... But again, there is a tension you see. And that tension is very interesting to me and that is my adventure. For now, I want to understand the problem that I'm creating and I want to go further with regards to how this can be a point of direction for my next journey. In such where I will keep challenging, within the materials and techniques, where eventually it will open up another direction for me, or another vocabulary in terms of ceramics practice. And I don't even want to use the word ceramics... Perhaps another perspective, where we can look at it as another approach by this person, another possibility.

RA: But for Khai, it was an immediate break away from. That is quite an interesting difference....

KR: I was just going to say that. Maybe it could be a matter of generation' mindset? I will only say this for myself, when there is a problem, there are instances where I abandon it. Change! But for Ahmad, where there's a problem, it is quite apparent he'd be more inclined to complicate and challenge it.

RA: I think perhaps it's the generational difference? The medium of clay as a material has a very long history and its own baggage. To think about it, it could potentially predate back to even when cavemen were using clay to make the first few cups. For Ahmad, he still wants to navigate that discourse and spectrum. But for you, let's just throw clay away and use something else. So that's a very interesting point that came out from this conversation....

AAB: So true ... But my works, they become very minimal, it becomes a new vocabulary. But for Khai, when you complicate it, it becomes one more vocabulary.

RA: At the end of it, the intention is the same: to navigate this tension. But the approach is different. But of course there remains some similarity... Which is also why I wanted to ask, why did you choose Ahmad as the interlocutor for this interview? Was there anything in particular about Ahmad's practice that you felt resounded or you could resonate with?

KR: Firstly, I was thinking of my works as sculptures, and that it would be great to include someone who has valuable experience in that terrain. Ahmad came to mind and I thought it was a very logical choice. I felt that there were potential parallels within our works. It would be easy to classify and associate us through our medium and material, but I feel like for the both of us, the bigger component of our art making and thinking process is actually the narratives and intent that inform our practice.

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- AAB:** Sorry, I just want to add to Khai's comments about medium — as much as the medium appears to be unimportant, it actually is important. It is the constant that challenges our practices. For me, I use the medium to provoke the whole issue. You use the medium within the problems. Some of the materials within the medium have cultural connotations but yet you cross all those boundaries. And the medium itself is a challenge for you in that perspective. I guess that is the commonality and our adventure in regard to, whether we defend or we fight, within that perspective towards our medium.
- KR:** Challenge and adventure is something that we as artists in general take on.
- KR:** We need to create more problems for ourselves. Otherwise, it'll be too easy. And there's something also about why we make things difficult for ourselves. But, I think it's not about inconveniencing ourselves, I think when we complicate things, I think it's more enriching for us, in terms of thinking.
- AAB:** It is more stimulating!
- KR:** You discover new possibilities in the midst of figuring out things. Like for Ahmad with the material of clay, he didn't want to be limited by being labeled within the parameters of ceramics, and yet by trying to stay within it, he discovered new discussions about ceramics. I started off from a humble and simple intention of moving houses and wanting to make new works out of that circumstance. But while making the works, I'm also confronting visual aesthetics and how we glorify certain Western viewing experiences. Recently I read about artists having difficulties searching for inspiration. But why should we be seeking out inspiration, when it is already there?
- AAB:** I always remember something about the singer M. Nasir. When people discuss ideas, I will always recall this statement that he made. "Idea? Idea *dekat mana-mana beb*" which translates to, "ideas? Ideas can be found anywhere." And I like that, because it's very true and honest. Probably we are pretentious. If you don't have an idea, it's alright... You yourself are an idea.
- KR:** Like when they imagine getting ideas from looking at the sunset...
- AAB:** I guess we shouldn't be too sentimental about our conditions. We shouldn't romanticise that idea should be very heavy or strong.
- KR:** And this is reminding me about how there's always a clear distinction between craft and concept. But I think in this sense, they can always intermingle. I don't think that they should be separated. I think conceptual work can be very crafty and even within craft itself, you can even decipher a lot of concepts.
- AAB:** With regards to this, I always like to share that perception amongst some... The whole idea about craft and art has always been argued about. For some ceramics, is a material that is always related to craft. So I'm reminded of this lecturer of mine when I was studying in Australia, who made a beautiful work. He made a typical head dress that you can see in a Chinese wedding, but out of gold. And he called himself a jeweller and a craftsman. But he constructed the work like a gold frame, and in the middle was suspended a condom. So like for me, it was very conceptual. But for him, he will never regard himself as an artist or a sculptor; but he regards himself as a jeweller and a craftsman. What I learned from there is you actually just have to be very conscious of who you are and how you want to be represented.
- KR:** And people don't even have to decide for you.
- AAB:** And you don't have to worry about it. And so what I learnt here is, it's not about art or it's not about craft. It's about whether it's a good art or it's a good craft respectively. A good craft is equivalent to a good art. It

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needs a certain ingredient to make good art and good craft. There is no hierarchy. And in my work, craft is very important. Without craft, there is no aesthetic, without aesthetic, there is no art...

- KR:** The concept becomes very weak. It becomes less visible with bad craftsmanship, which is a very important aspect of our work. Not to say that all artists use craft.
- AAB:** Even the act of conceptualising requires some kind of craft. So how can we deny craft, we would be hypocritical if we deny craft. Sometimes, in some ways and somehow, we are trying to be too puritan, thinking that craft is bad. I've travelled to Indonesia, and it's a place that's very rich with their *seni* (art), and when you look at all the artists and their works, their craftsmanship is superb. Even in Malaysia, Thailand and even the Philippines. So why are we ashamed of this idea of 'craft'... Sometimes we come up with too many reasons...
- KR:** This is being discussed a lot, people like to bring 'art', 'craft' and 'concept' together.
- RA:** Maybe distinctions like that shouldn't exist?
- KR:** I actually think that sometimes it could be useful.
- AAB:** There is good craft and bad craft, good art and bad art. But at the end of the day, any work should just be good....
- RA:** I think maybe we can sum it up with one last question? Earlier on Ahmad, you mentioned about growth and pushing your methods and approaches... I'm curious to know if both of you have any expectations or anticipate any future developments — perhaps just on a personal level even — within the terrain of sculptural art?
- AAB:** What's important is that I should never ever feel satisfied. I should always be hungry for new possibilities. I think it's very important to be curious. I always share with my students that they should always be curious about their journeys. As long as you are curious, there are no full-stops, there will be continuous commas. It will keep you alive as a person, and that person will feel alive as an artist. At the end of the day, you want to satisfy your *jiva* (soul) as an artist and create a beautiful journey that is subjective to you and not others, a journey that you will come to terms with.
- KR:** Something that is truly meaningful... For me, I've nothing to say. Ahmad is an *otai* (old-timer).
- RA:** But surely within your practice itself? How else, moving forward, do you imagine yourself pushing your approaches?
- KR:** This might come off as a bad habit, but, for the longest time I've been very comfortable being based here in Singapore. My home is here, and my family is here. So I've never thought of looking outside of, not just my environment, but perhaps even out of my country. I've been to some residencies thankfully, but I feel that now especially, our artists should be curious to look at other forms of art elsewhere, those new visions and experiences will probably help you to grow in terms of your craft and your practice. Hopefully I will be able to absorb more in the future. I liken artists to sponges: it's not exactly a good thing if we keep absorbing the same things. Especially here in Singapore, because the ceiling is only so high, it's very important for us to look outside.
- AAB:** Again, we have to continue to be curious, otherwise we'll reach a dead-end.

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Ahmad Abu Bakar (b. 1963, Malaysia) graduated from LASALLE College of the Arts with a Diploma in Fine Arts (Ceramics) in 1989 and received his Bachelor of Fine Art (Sculpture) from the University of Tasmania in 1995. His sculptural practice explores personal conceptions of land, identity and providence. Since 2009, Ahmad has dedicated his time to working with the Singapore Prison Service as an art instructor, where he mentors inmates in 3D Studies. Currently, he is an adjunct lecturer at Nanyang Polytechnic (Singapore) and the National Institute of Education (Singapore).

Rafi Abdullah (b. 1991, Singapore) graduated from the BA(Hons) Arts Management programme at LASALLE College of the Arts. His research interest lies broadly in contemporary art vis-à-vis the politics of aesthetics, with a current focus on thinking through/of cultural institutions as dis-imagination machines. He recently curated *Poor Imagination* (2019) at Sullivan+Strumpf, Singapore, and continues to live and work in Singapore.

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