



Detail of Ashley Bickerton's *Wahine Pa'ina*, 2015

NAVIGATING ENTROPY

When you enter a contemporary art exhibit, where does your mind go?

Typically, the spotlight is on the polished, finished work, proudly standing on a pedestal, or hanging on a well-lit wall. If you are a curator or simply a curious visitor, you might want to read about the cerebral concept driving the piece, or the dramatised lives of the artists written about in a glossy catalogue. Or, if you are a collector searching for the perfect work to hang in your home, your eyes may be keenly, subtly scanning for the price tag.

But beneath the painstakingly clean and pristine atmosphere of a gallery space, there is another, larger world that alas, often goes unseen: the grueling, unglamorous side underlying the artistic process, crucial to the art's existence. Audiences are rarely told about the sleepless nights spent sketching and conceptualising; the tireless experimentations and worn hands resulting from playing with mediums and materials; the meticulous communication with craftsmen and cultural workers for more collaborative pieces; and the patient, monotonous work coloring the weeks, months, and even years, preceding the sweet taste of gratification in finishing a group of works fit for a single show.

In other words, much time is devoted into illuminating the *whos*, the *whats*, and the *whys* in contemporary art, but there is little that informs us about that elusive, complicated *how*.

THE HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF YOGYA ART LAB (YAL)

When Gajah Gallery's director Jasdeep Sandhu, together with the established Yogyakarta-based artist Yunizar, founded the Yogya Art Lab (YAL) back in 2012, they were determined to turn the spotlight on this sorely overlooked, innately messy and experimental side to art-making, vitalizing the practices of many artists working in Southeast Asia. Wherein normally, the raw, initial processes behind the production of an artwork take place within isolated artists' studios, the founders of YAL aimed to take that creative space, and make it collaborative. They set up this space in Yogyakarta, arguably containing one of Asia's most vibrant and communal art scenes, and employed specialised craftsmen to work hand-in-hand with artists—making these craftsmen an indelible part of the process and finished work. Dedicated to mastering and expanding the potentials of materials and mediums in artists' oeuvres, YAL initially focused on papermaking and aluminum casting, but has since evolved to a foundry specialising in the bronze medium.

Today, the foundry embodies a 'laboratory' for artists in every sense of the word, forming an intimate environment equipped with all the tools to get dirty, innovate and create: whether they're crushing stained glass; pouring molten metal into a cast; molding strange forms out of soft clay; or watching in awe as elements and materials—such as metal, fire, and ash—meet and interact, unfolding organically beyond the artist's imagination and control. YAL's meticulous focus on material and process has thus nurtured that needed safe space for artists to dive into radically new territories in their art practices, as

experienced craftsmen walk them through the oftentimes daunting process of taking these big, experimental leaps. Artists who had previously focused purely on paintings had been pushed and challenged to create bold, sculptural pieces. Artists who had largely worked in the solitude of their studios were now growing accustomed to the inherently different process of collaboration, and the close involvement of many hands.

The fruits of these risks have so far been immeasurable. Co-founder Yunizar, in the year after YAL was launched, began producing his commanding cast bronze sculptures of life-size, arresting figures with their large eyes and akimbo stances—a distinct departure from his more abstracted, enigmatic drawings and paintings. Philippine-based Jigger Cruz similarly grew engrossed with the process of molding clay and transforming them into grotesque, bronze sculptures in the foundry—a natural progression from his already tactile, relief paintings. Singapore-born Suzann Victor expanded her iconic series covered in crushed-glass with the invaluable help of the craftsmen and machinery at YAL, who assisted in growing her glistening, ethereal sculptures to span up to two-meters tall.

Featuring 11 contemporary artists from across Southeast Asia, namely Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia and China, *Navigating Entropy* gathers together these milestone works created by both burgeoning and veteran artists during their residencies at YAL. Ranging from bronze, glass, paper, to cement and wood, the pieces on display are fundamentally diverse, exploring wide-ranging themes and mediums distinct to the artists' contexts and concerns. Yet despite their differences, they were all produced in the same unique environment, and are thus bonded by the same philosophy that drives the foundry: embracing the chaos that comes with trial-and-error; the organic and uncertain transformations of materials and forms; and the humility of allowing radical, uncomfortable change enter into one's practice.

And so, in an effort to make his or her artistic process more fruitful, each artist has, in one way or another, surrendered to disorder.

DWELLING IN YOGYAKARTA'S ARTISTRY AND CHARM

Beyond YAL itself, we must address the wider context of Yogyakarta, which continues to color the lab with its unique, creative spirit. Dotted with treasured ancient temples and pulsating with a community of silversmiths, puppet makers and batik artists, the city, deeply rooted in culture and tradition, possesses a warm, welcoming atmosphere for contemporary artists to dwell and thrive. Over the last few decades, independent, alternative spaces have sprouted alongside its historical sites, in which artists from both Indonesia and across the globe live together and form collectives; expand their networks and engage in multidisciplinary practices; and set up artist-run exhibits, fairs, and biennales that move beyond orthodox artistic structures. This thriving, energetic local arts scene, forming the perfect breeding ground for artists to play with unconventional practices, may in a way be rooted to the place's artistic history. Curator Jim Supangkat, in his essay *Yogyakarta's Place in Indonesian Contemporary Art*, drew attention to a group of young artists from Yogyakarta that once resisted certain Western traditions in painting, and rebelled against the convictions of their senior art educators.¹ Profoundly tied to its social history, Yogyakarta's impassioned art history may be connected to the culture permeating the city at present: where boundaries are blurred between tradition and modernity, and the art and the everyday.

In an interview with Ocula back in 2017, YAL's foundry director James Page observed how in Yogyakarta, people who would not normally identify themselves as artists, such as welders or carpenters, already possessed a raw, natural talent in the making and understanding of art.² This deep sensitivity to what they are creating is perhaps what makes the craftsmen

at YAL naturally adept and adaptable in working with artists, seeing themselves as co-makers of the works. Page shared how, in making the artists comfortable working with the craftsmen, he allows them to partake in the patient process of understanding the unique working styles of each artist—aiding them as they stop and start again, respecting their freedom if the artists are more hands-on, or need more support.³ Initially accustomed to a more solitary practice, Malaysia-born artist Kayleigh Goh noted how because the team at YAL was deeply caring and took initiative, she grew more confident in coming out of her comfort zone and asking for help.⁴ Singapore-based sculptor Jason Lim shared how he respects and trusts the craftsmen who assisted him—seeing them as his equals. Depending on the team to source materials and even simple meals was, to him, a humbling experience.⁵



1.



2.

Furthermore, witnessing how raw materials were sourced and prepared proved profoundly illuminating to these artists. Growing up in the city, Goh had only known materials in their “end product” forms. Yet, watching the way craftsmen, for instance, poured metal or casted cement blocks with a manual machine sparked in her the curiosity to explore sculptural possibilities in her paintings, turning more sensitive to the shapes and forms of her canvas.⁶ Lim learned how the supply of brick is seasonal and intrinsically linked to the cycle of padi planting and harvesting, which deepened his appreciation for the complex and intricately intertwined life in Yogyakarta—a radical change from Singapore, where he says everything is “compartmentalized, imported, and desensitized”.⁷ While it may not directly affect his artistic production, Lim shares how this seemingly trivial knowledge was in fact one of the most meaningful things he’s learned at YAL.⁸

COMMANDING SPACE IN SINGAPORE

As a foundry specializing in bronze, fabricating sculptures is undoubtedly one of the fortes of YAL. And just as understanding the culture and history in Yogyakarta has been crucial to understanding the production of these sculptural works in the foundry, it is just as revealing to take a brief peak into the contrasting context of Singapore, which Lim hints at earlier. In 1991, eminent art historian T.K. Sabapathy claimed in his essay *Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction* that sculptures in Singapore paled in comparison to paintings, which had then dominated the art world. He credits this to the fact that painting had long been more commercially viable, easily blending into walls as opposed to sculptures, which unsettled by their mere presence.⁹ Quoting former National Museum curator Constance Sheares in her assessment of the state of sculpture in Singapore back in 1976, Sabapathy also highlighted how back then, there was a lack of access to proper facilities and more affordable materials to create sculptures.¹⁰

Considering these observations made by Sabapathy and Sheares in the latter half of the 20th century, it is vital to note how this exhibit coincidentally responds to the concerns they had raised, thus doing its small part in the evolution of the acceptance and production of sculptures, both in Singapore and the region. The exhibit unveils in a gallery space in Singapore—promoting three-dimensional forms in a platform very much embedded in the commercial aspect of the art world. The works were created in a space devoted to producing high-quality sculptures in Southeast Asia, equipping artists with the proper technology and assistance to help them realise their sculptural curiosities. Most of all, it is telling that four artists participating in this exhibit—Jane Lee, Jason Lim, Kumari

Nahappan, and Suzann Victor—are distinct and revered Singaporean artists in their own right, who have carved laudable artistic careers in making three-dimensional pieces central to their oeuvres.

In the same essay, Sabapathy draws from the writings of the British art critic Herbert Read to initiate his discussions on the values and ideas upheld by some sculptors in Singapore at the time.¹¹ While he highlighted that their positions were not fixed nor static, he found important connections between the beliefs of Read and several of the sculptors participating in the exhibit at the National Museum Art Gallery. To Read, vitalism in sculpture was of utmost importance—where the aim is not merely to represent or imitate life, but to enter into an intuitive journey of “continuous formation and transformation”.¹² The goal was to produce three-dimensional pieces that organically grew in accordance with their materials. He observed that sculptors such as Ng Eng Teng and Chong Fah Cheong sympathised with such ideals, absorbed by the life and essence of the forms and contents of their sculptures.¹³ Ng noted that arriving at that precise essence was not at all simple, and required a great amount of dedication and reflection.¹⁴

Jason Lim dismantling brick kiln, 2019

RAW, ORGANIC BEAUTY



While his abstract earthenware pieces inspired by nature are a significant departure from the more solid, figurative works of Ng and Chong, Lim may be understood as holding a similar philosophy, seeing the natural progressions of his materials as integral to the outcome of his forms. Lim is drawn to what many would deem ‘insignificant’ fragments in nature compared to, say, the majesty and totality of mountain ranges—objects like rocks and stones, which, to him, have a life of their own. Working with the clay material is his way of collaborating with the unpredictability, and ultimately, fragility of natural things. Transforming this material through fire, he aims to solidify its energy and capture its essence—a metamorphosis that provides him profound satisfaction. He likens the experience of dismantling the brick kiln at YAL to the act of opening a present: filled with both anxiety and excitement. He has learned to welcome failures and imperfections in the outcome, finding strange beauty in the ugly. Looking to his surreal sculptural pieces *Hair in the Wind*, *A Mountain*, and *A Brief Rest* featured in the show, you might find this strange beauty in the subtle convergence of both the bizarre and the familiar. The pieces somewhat resemble shapes you might find on soil or trees, but morph into these otherworldly objects of delicate, abstract patterns and movements, marked with accidents and chance. Despite being inanimate objects, these alien qualities make the sculptures appear very much alive.



Jigger Cruz discussing framework of sculpture, 2019

A similar abstract, accidental aesthetic can be found in the sculpture pieces of Jigger Cruz. It was at YAL where Cruz evolved his oeuvre from roughly textured paintings to three-dimensional bronze pieces, formed into raw, grotesque shapes. According to Page, it was a particular pleasure to watch Cruz play with the clay medium for the first time, and adjust to his preference of working at night—outdoors in the yard, with music playing.¹⁵ The unconventional, free-flowing quality of his work ethic may bear some semblance to his finished pieces, which seem to rebel neatly defined outcomes. In *Untitled (2020)*, you will find three phallic forms with differing characteristics, from smooth to rugged, joined together at the bottom to form one organism. With its oozing surfaces, rough textures and dents, and absence of identifiable forms, the sculpture looks as if it were still in the process of being formed in soft clay—resisting the final and ‘monumental’ qualities usually associated with the bronze medium. Instead, like Lim’s works, the pieces highlight the unconventional beauty in messy ephemerality, in evolution. His other bronze piece *Untitled (2019)* resembles a jagged, flimsy creature, whose limbs and parts knot and tangle together. The result resembles a more abstracted version of Giacometti’s iconic slim bronze figures—but made eerier and more unsettling, as the alien figure appears as if it were in the middle of morphing into another strange, surreal body.

Like Cruz, Handiwirman Saputra similarly employs an unrefined aesthetic to his bronze sculpture *Upside Man*, depicting a raw bust likewise appearing as if it were in the

process of being made. Known as an adept sculptor and painter who moves seamlessly between two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms, Indonesia-based Saputra established his signature practice through his poetic, paradoxical depictions of the ordinary, abject and discarded objects around him. In his previous sculptural pieces, for instance, the artist would inflate pieces of garbage to monumental sizes, forcing viewers to contemplate them beyond their functions; and to see metaphor, irony and absurdity in the everyday. He is thus keenly observant of how formal aspects like scale, line, and craftsmanship can profoundly impact one’s perspective on these unspectacular, ubiquitous objects. In his recent work displayed in the show, however, Saputra appears to turn his gaze towards the more monumental rather than mundane, as the sculpture’s shape recalls iconic busts in western art history, long associated with Greek and Roman statues of powerful figures. Yet, Saputra moves us to view such iconographies in a new light as he strips his subject of any distinctive colours or definitive features: its face is loosely and roughly carved, revealing only a faint formation of eyes, nose, and lips. Inverted upside down, its head similarly appears displaced, as if it did not belong to the torso it was placed in, or the high pedestal in which it stands. Without recognisable details, the sculpture thus seems to commemorate no specific authority, but rather, the more ordinary, anonymous man. Unpolished and veering away from meticulous technique, the sculpture’s unfinished form and craftsmanship likewise evoke not an idealised, ‘master’ artist, but instead, a sculptor in progress—paralleling YAL’s philosophy grounded not in perfection, but in seeing artistry in the messy, unglamorous, and arguably more human aspect of art-making, including the team of artisans involved in the creation of a piece. Thus, in context of show, a bust that makes a monument out of the ordinary man holds even more weighted meaning.

BETWEEN REALITY AND FANTASY

Known for her big, bright and bold seeds and chili sculptures planted in public spaces around Singapore, Kumari Nahappan's bronze sculptures resemble more refined, figurative shapes compared to the rawer works of Lim, Cruz and Saputra. Nahappan admits that while plays and experimentations are crucial to her practice, she feels a sense of accountability towards the outcome of her pieces—merging both agency and chance in her process.¹⁶ The mystery, to her, lies in her chosen subject matter: seeds. In past interviews, she has repeatedly pointed out the unknowable quality of seeds, particularly in how they possess a kind of potential energy. We know seeds are meant to grow, but we never know the exact forms and shapes they will take, with no two fruits, flowers or plants ever completely the same. Her signature seeds thus serve as metaphors for this anticipatory kind of beauty. Like Lim, Nahappan is absorbed by nature—but her sculptures are not mere imitations or representations of natural things. Not only does she depict things with potential energy, but these subjects seem to radiate energy themselves—at times making actual fruits or plants look as if they were dancing, or gleefully playing instruments. Her work in the show, *Movement*, holds a similar kind of fantastic quality. A tiny plant sprouts from its seed, shooting from an elegant, elongated stem. The long stem is curved and forms a perfect C-shape—but, from a distance, the shape brings to mind the position of a human hunching over a computer, or resting on a bench after a long, exhausting run. Charged with humour and metaphor, Nahappan's provocative seeds move us to imagine

the wild possibilities of injecting characters and stories to the natural objects around us, responding to the allure of their mysteries.

Solid and confronting, Yunizar's bronze sculptures in this show similarly veer on the whimsical and absurd, as he produces creatures that straddle the line between the natural and make-believe. His *Monster* sculptures in particular, with their rough, crocodile-like skins or sharp sets of teeth ready to devour their preys, are softened by their playful, endearing allure—rather than being grand and frightful, they appear as little, comical or terrified themselves. His work *Little Monster* moves a step further in novelty and fantasy: painted in colourful and intricate dots and patterns, this 'monster' radiates an even more blatantly outlandish, vivacious energy significantly different from his older sculptures that maintained their natural bronze, old world colour. Even as Yunizar depicts more true-to-life human characters in his sculptures, he imbues them with similar charm and wit. *Fisherman*, for instance, depicts a man with an impish grin, proudly holding up a large, meaty fish he freshly caught. While seemingly straightforward, the story behind the work reveals a sly, cheeky critique. Yunizar was initially asked to create a fierce, imposing sculpture inspired by the piece *Neptune fighting with an octopus* by Antonio dela Bitta, which stands in the middle of a monumental fountain in Rome. In this sculpture, Neptune appears strong, muscular and mighty as he wrestles with the octopus. Yunizar's



Detail of Yunizar's *Induk Monster* (Mother Monster), 2017

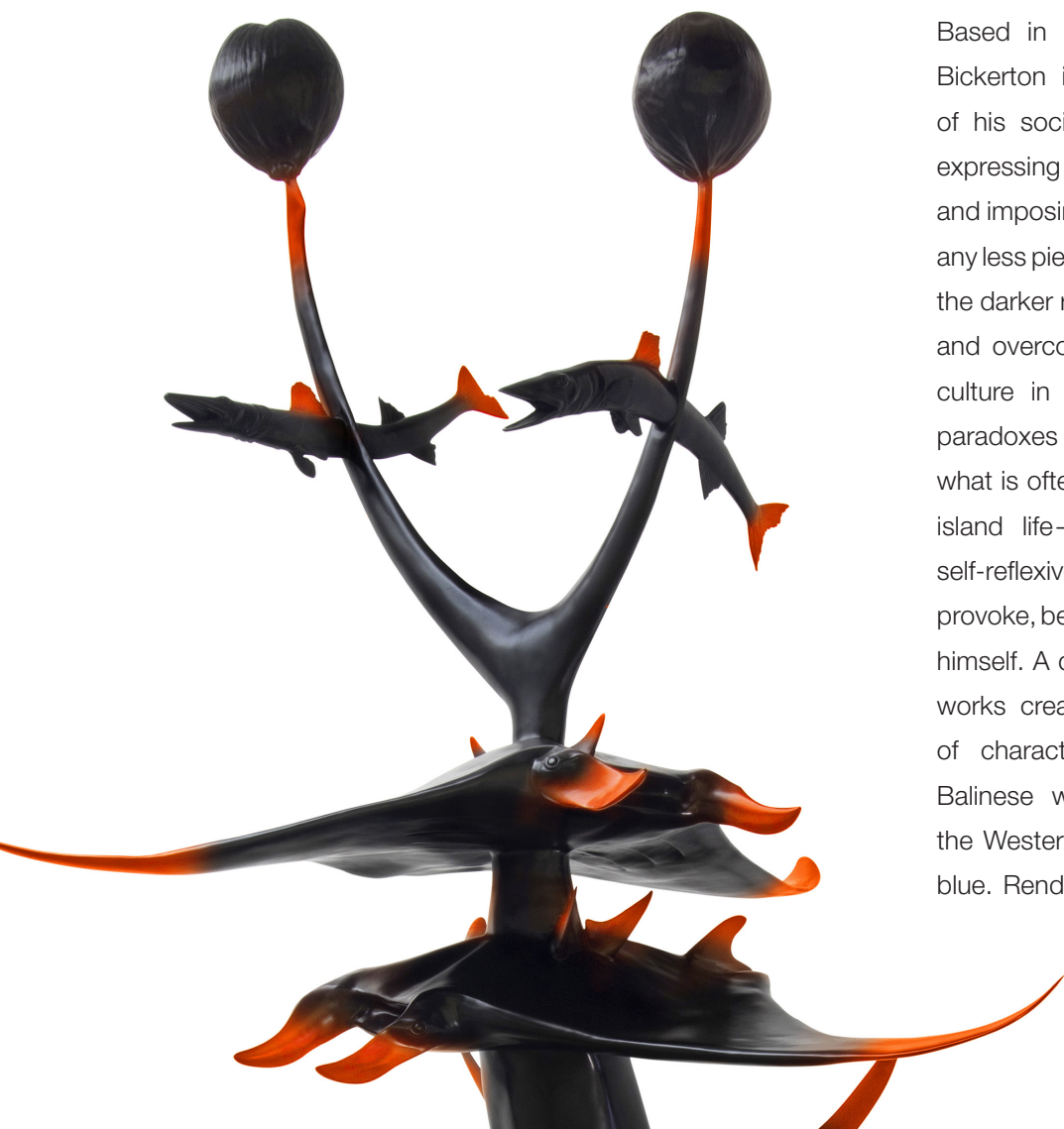
finished sculpture, by contrast, shows a humble fisherman with lean arms. Veering away from the initial inspiration imposed on him, the artist consciously chose not to commemorate a divine hero removed from his reality, but an everyday workman—someone closer to home. Bringing childlike wonder into ordinary subject matters, Yunizar’s sculptures in the show are testament to the artist’s ever-expanding imagination, which is firmly rooted in his daily life. To this day, Yunizar proclaims that his immediate, everyday world is a limitless source of inspiration, where he can make even the simplest things appear eccentric. Criticising the bigger worlds of politics or society was never in his interest as an artist.¹⁷

Detail of Yunizar’s Fisherman, 2016



THE SCULPTOR’S CRITICAL GAZE

Contrary to Yunizar, the other Yogyakarta-based artist featured in this show, Uji ‘Hahan’ Handoko Eko Saputro, is known for his bold, upfront criticisms on a myriad of socio-political concerns that span his local tradition in Indonesia, popular culture, to the global contemporary art world. Incorporating elements from punk and street culture into his work, he produces a unique visual language that does not just communicate a narrow message of rebellion for the sake of rebellion, but rather, complicates our perceptions of the subcultures and social structures around us, inviting us to see their more dizzying juxtapositions. For instance, his perpetual fascination with the tensions of artists navigating the global art market—something that can at once be beneficial, intoxicating, yet demanding and exclusive—is reflected in both his sculptures in the show. *Standing Up in the Markets’ Barrels* depicts an alien-like muscled creature, with its arms flexed and legs squatting, resembling a champion weightlifter. From the creature’s head to the bottom of its torso, several faces reappear wearing the same wide grin, in which the three largest faces have different currencies—yuans, euros, and dollars—as their eyes. The character stands atop a stone-shaped base, wherein various recognisable logos referencing major art world institutions, such as MoMA, LACMA, and Palais de Tokyo, are engraved. Looking quite literally blinded by money, the creature personifies the art world’s consumptive culture gone overboard: while it may outwardly appear glossy and gaining, the creature’s weight appears to exponentially grow too heavy for its own body—showing how at any moment, it could burst. Hahan’s other piece, *Lobster*, similarly seems to mock a sense of monetary banality as it plasters a Louis Vuitton pattern



not on a bag or article of clothing—but the hollow shell of a lobster. Associating the ubiquitous high fashion icon and the lobster symbol, relatedly evoking high-class cuisine, with the art object keenly comments—and perhaps, resists—the art market phenomenon that tends to turn artists and their work into brands, valued solely for their name or monetary gain.

Based in Bali since the 1990s, Ashley Bickerton is likewise strongly perceptive of his social and cultural environment—expressing his criticisms through less overt and imposing messages, but which are not any less piercing and profound. Confronting the darker realities of hedonism, exoticism, and overconsumption polluting the expat culture in Bali, Bickerton lays bare the paradoxes and messier truths beneath what is often neatly packaged as an idyllic island life—unafraid to immerse in the self-reflexive tensions these explorations provoke, being an American man living there himself. A distinctive feature of Bickerton’s works created in Bali is his satirical set of characters: the nude, silky-skinned Balinese women painted in silver; and the Western foreigner painted in alien-like blue. Rendered in a polished, hyperrealist

manner, they often interact in clichéd tourist spots on the island: drinking away in a bar or riding a scooter along the shores of an immaculate beach. The native women are sometimes portrayed as partaking in the self-indulgent escapism of the foreigner—but often, their expressions are somber, jaded, and, at times, lifeless. Transformed into an aluminum sculpture in *Wahine Pa’ina*, this enigmatic woman adorned in flowers and carrying a plate of tropical fruits now commands presence in a different way, as she intrudes space. No longer is she a mere character trapped in a picture, but her life-sized, sculptural form makes her feel more hauntingly real. Yet, her perfect, pristine form makes her appear hollow, almost non-human—moving us to ponder how women like her have long been objectified and othered, treated as mere background or decoration to another’s fantasy. Bickerton likewise provokes audiences to look beyond island stereotypes and dig deeper into the cultures that may be foreign to others in his other sculpture featured, *Shark*. Weighted with layers of meaning, the shark is not only that lethal creature lurking in the sea and waiting to devour its next prey—in places like Hawaii, where Bickerton once lived, sharks are revered like ancestors, even deities. Depicting a thin and sensuous shark form floating upright, Bickerton strips away the fear typically associated with the animal—and, in highlighting its sleek and refined three dimensional form, unveils the elegance of its curves, the grace of its movement, the enigma of its sacred air.



Ashley Bickerton with clay modeller in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 2018

Opposite page:

Detail of Ashley Bickerton’s *Shark*, 2019

Through her exquisite, delicate sculptures, Suzann Victor similarly critiques long-held beliefs in a subtle manner—pulling you in first with the glistening beauty of her works, then leaving you mystified and searching as they reframe our ways of seeing. Displaying wings and hearts meticulously wrapped in finely crushed glass, Victor examines how dominant mindsets and systems of knowledge had long been shaped and imposed through Western aesthetic spectacles. In this sense, the material of stained glass, long associated with adorning iconic, historic architecture in Europe, plays a crucial role in the concepts of her work. With the close collaboration of YAL’s craftsmen, she performed an act of protest through shattering stained glass into miniscule pieces, then reusing them to create intricate sculptural works that present glass in pieces rather than as whole planes—moving us to us to evolve our perspectives on how we see certain ubiquitous iconographies. The corporeal, human heart, for example, is typically depicted as cold and clinical in Western scientific tradition. Yet, Victor’s *Double Happy* opposes such portrayals through a vulnerable heart bursting with raw and wild arteries, and made ethereal through its shining glass material—arguably truer to the more complex, emotional and uncontainable nature of both physical and metaphorical hearts.

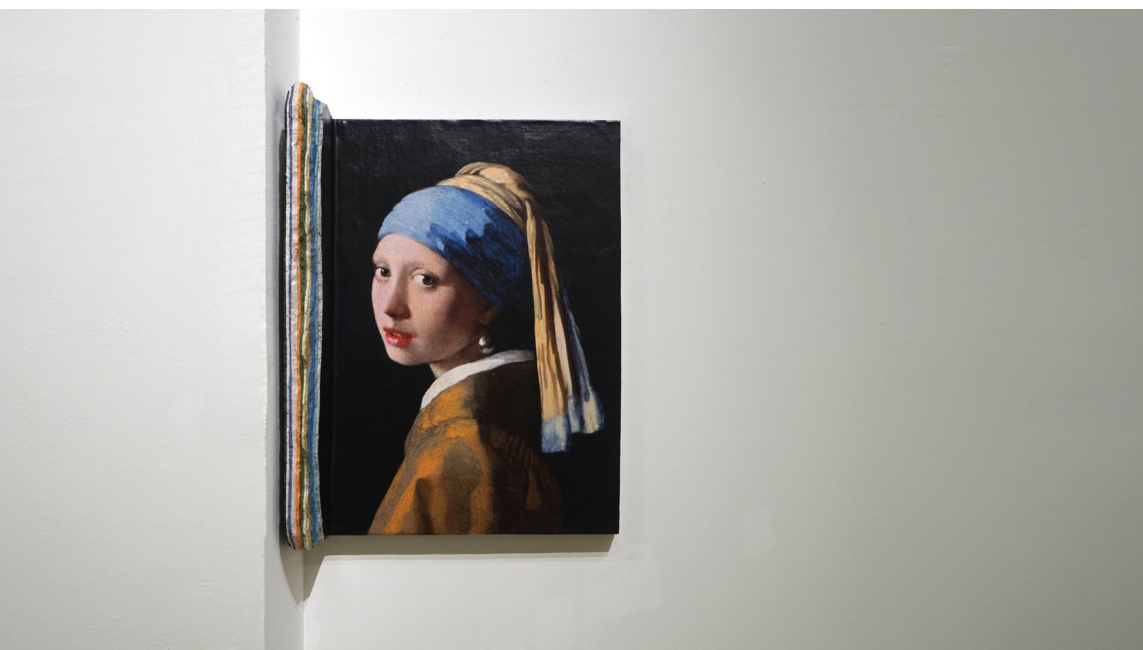


Detail of Suzann Victor's *She's Dearer than You Think*, 2019

BLURRING SCULPTURE AND PAINTING

Though her more recent works in show appear closer to two-dimensional paintings, Victor uses the more sculptural lens material as crucial aspects to their concepts—like with the glass medium, these lenses move audiences to question their perspectives and see deeply entrenched narratives in a fresh new light. In this sense, her two new pieces in this show appear more like relief works—straddling and contesting the line between painting and sculpture. In *Unequal Innocence* and *She's Dearer than You Think*, Victor recreates black and white portraits of women across Asia found in colonial-era postcards and photographs, by painting and transforming them into intricate assemblages adorned in flowers and foliage. She then covers these painted canvases with layers upon layers of overlapping circular magnifying lenses—creating a disorienting interface that ultimately distort our visions of the women, as they either blur, magnify or obscure our sight. Provoking us to move around and view the portraits from varying perspectives, Victor resists the tendency to present a fixed and static view of these women, whose complicated lives had long been silenced or simplified in grand histories. In a similar act of subversion, she allows the lenses to mask most of these women's bodies, which had previously been positioned to appear meek and docile in the original photographs. Instead, Victor creates burnt holes and apertures in the lenses to reveal only glimpses and slivers of the women's actual faces, focusing on their more defiant, enigmatic gazes. The works thus invite us to dig deeper into the lives and subjectivities of these women—to 'see' them outside depictions of subservience, but instead as icons of strength and resilience; as women holding complex identities and histories, which have yet to be learned and revered as monuments in their own right.

Like Victor, Jane Lee invites us to rethink enduring narratives and representations in religion, philosophy, and history; also employing a broken, fragile aesthetic to reframe their meaning. During her residency at YAL, she started a series



Installation view of
Jane Lee's *That Girl
with the Pearl Earring I*,
2019

that appropriated popular iconography and works of ‘masters’ in western art history—from Da Vinci to Mondrian; refined, classical flower still lifes to rough, impressionist landscapes. But she does not merely, mindlessly resurrect or remix these pictures for the sake of association—the changes she makes are careful and conscious, maintaining these masterpieces’ identifiable characteristics, yet imbuing them with subtle provocations. In this series, she turned popular paintings into sculptural works made of concrete, employed torn and worn frames and canvases, and transformed the woman in Mona Lisa into a pious icon, rendered in a prayer position. In *That Girl with the Pearl Earring I & III*, she appropriated Vermeer’s haloed portrait *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, but stripped it of any ornate frame, transferring it instead on an unassuming, L-shaped canvas installed on a corner wall. The left and right edges of the piece appear as if they were slowly disintegrating, exposing blue, yellow, ochre, and green shades taken from the original painting. Contrasting the work of Vermeer with a frail, crumbling form, the piece challenges its immortal place in history—inviting us instead to contemplate its vulnerability. Rather than deifying these ‘masterpieces’ further, Lee closes the distance between their human makers, and human viewers.

Diverging from the bolder, more confronting and critical sculptures in the show discussed above, Kayleigh Goh’s quiet, minimalist pieces are a powerful respite. One of the younger, burgeoning artists in the show, Goh has built her signature oeuvre by creating vast, poetic paintings of indoor spaces—inviting viewers to briefly escape from the noise of the world, and immerse in this meditative atmosphere. Partaking in her YAL residency, however, marked significant shifts in her practice: instead of expanding her works, she decided to turn small-scale; and apart from producing paintings, she added sculptural elements to her works through thick cement frames, allowing both real and illusive shadows to shape the spaces she creates. In these new works, she invites viewers to find consolation somewhere deeper, and more internal: in our memories. Painted in nostalgic shades of rose, beige, and grey, her pieces in this show, through their small sizes and paled shades, radiate a dreamlike charm akin to faded old photographs. She intentionally leaves us not with a complete and vivid picture, but teases us only with fragments and traces—asking us to fill in the larger world beyond her canvas through own unique stories. In *Clear Afternoon Sky*, there is no sky in sight—only a sliver of a bare room or hallway, framed by a thin doorway. The canvas itself is inside a hollow cement frame and installed in



Installation view of Kayleigh Goh’s exhibition *The Scent that Lingers*, 2020

a diagonal position, creating the impression as if one were entering a private scene. Suddenly, there is life—depending on the moment you recreate in your head, you may hear the sound of jazz music playing from the room; smell the scent of your grandmother’s perfume; or feel the warm, healing heat of a bright, summer day. Contrasting these smaller works, however, is one large-scale, horizontal painting entitled *Deep Breath of Sunlight*. Rendered in Goh’s quintessential cement and wood mediums, the piece depicts a long, vast hall, which is then cut at the rightmost edge by the thick walls of a narrow room, wherein light sharply pierces through an end window. Though the painting does not contain sculptural elements like the aforementioned small-scale pieces, its scene, size, and use of light nonetheless create a poignant illusion of entering into a three-dimensional space—blurring the lines between physical and abstract states, as it evokes, through its enigmatic emptiness, a serene, wistful feeling.

Detail of Kayleigh Goh’s *Clear Afternoon Sky*, 2019



WHEN PAINTING IS A PHILOSOPHY

Juxtaposing the largely sculptural show are Yunizar’s paintings made in 2012 and 2013, the former being the year that YAL was founded. These paintings on paper serve as a profound reminder of YAL’s roots and evolution as a ‘laboratory’, having started first as an experimental art space that explored the possibilities of the paper medium—showing how, as early as then, it had already offered a crucial space for artists to expand their processes and mediums; and navigate new territories, missteps and growths. Just as the paper pieces reveal the fluidity of YAL’s space, they are also testament to the diversity and complexity of Yunizar’s oeuvre. Standing as independent rather than preparatory or transitory works in their own right, Yunizar’s paper paintings significantly differ from his prior paintings on canvas, and what would be his future, solid bronze sculptures. The paintings created at YAL reveal the artist moving beyond solely using traditional materials of acrylic and oil, as he incorporates mixed media onto the paper surface—adding

texture and ‘extraordinary’ details and outlines to his rather ordinary subjects. His plays with colour are similarly more pronounced, as seen in work *Burung Hitam (Black Bird)*, in which Yunizar breaks away from his more signature faded and ancient colours. Contrasting the dark blackbird at the centre of the piece, the bold and bright red background causes vivacious life, character and emotion to radiate from the otherwise crude, childlike bird. Yet, at the same time, the paper works also reflect a sense of continuity with the artist’s overall idiosyncratic practice: by putting strong focus and emphasis on one subject, Yunizar continues his ongoing quest to capture the ‘rasa’ or essence of his subjects; and the interiority and richness of his everyday life. The work *Saya Terkembang*, loosely translated to ‘I have evolved’, is particularly provocative in this respect, as it depicts an ambiguous black creature—appearing part bird, part human—with a baffled expression on its face, and against a dark red background covered in bright, textured dots. While the subject remains open to interpretation, one thing it plausibly communicates is precisely this sense of evolution, and the artist subtly opening up and welcoming in change. As we ponder the subject’s expression longer, his initial shock seems to transform into wonder.

Serving as the poignant end to an essay are Wei Ligang’s contemplative, deeply expressive abstract paintings. Far from decorative, they exude thought, mastery, and a deep-rooted philosophy. Having both studied mathematics and trained under the pioneers of Modern Chinese calligraphy, Wei has mastered the perfect marriage of raw spontaneity and structure on his canvases—leaving anyone who encounters his paintings with a renewed sense of balance, and a strong desire to linger longer. From a distance, *Azan Yogya* appears like a neat assembly of Chinese characters, rendered in monochrome and organized in defined vertical lines. But upon closer inspection, one becomes absorbed with the loose, intuitive movement of his strokes, and their strong resemblance to pictorial, figurative forms. Juxtaposing this monochrome piece is *Peacock Jades of Pearl*, wherein bold, textured circles fill up the canvas, rendered in vivid shades of purple, red, white and black against a light beige background.



The circles are similarly roughly painted, possessing rugged, formless edges—yet, like *Azan Yogya*, they are neatly lined together, forming a cohesive and orderly image if seen from a far. Perhaps the serenity that exudes these two canvases may be grounded in Wei’s state of mind during his stay at YAL. Wei shares that the ancient soul of Yogyakarta, still ruled by a king, had inspired him, and the chaos of the tropics felt nostalgic, bringing him back to his childhood days.¹⁸ Even when he encountered new challenges, he solved them calmly and patiently rather than with panic. This openhearted acceptance of a fresh, foreign environment to him aligns with an

Detail of Wei Ligang’s
The Village of Qilin, 2017

ideology he claims to live by: a sense of ‘universalism’ that is directed at exploring the infinite and the mysterious, “so as to move forward, set foot on uncharted territory, and improve”.¹⁹

While they were used to describe his distinct philosophy, Wei’s words are a fitting ending to this essay, and the perfect starting point to experiencing the works in this exhibit. As an artist, creating works outside the comforts of your studio, in a foreign environment, and surrounded by a team of strangers may naturally come with a tinge anxiety and fear—thus, partaking in a residency, whether in YAL or elsewhere, always necessitates an unspoken kind of bravery. Likewise, the challenge of exploring unorthodox, sculptural media is particularly compounded in the context of Singapore, where artists persist to face limitations in this respect, such as material expenses and the storage of their pieces. At the end of his 1991 catalogue essay *Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction*, which accompanied an exhibition at the National Museum Art Gallery, Sabapathy noted the distinct approaches of the participating artists, analysing the already existing nuances and differences in philosophies among artists who engaged with three-dimensional forms at the time. He loosely divided the artists into those who were concerned with producing tangible, sturdy and autonomous art objects in space—works that, upon encountering them, stimulated viewers into contemplation.²⁰ He identified another group of artists who were more fascinated with analysing the art-making process and engaging with issues connected to social identity and cultural values—artists whose practices were not confined to single mediums, and whose works provoked viewers into more participatory interactions, in which “decisions and choices have to be made.”²¹ As mentioned earlier, it was in the same essay that Sabapathy noted the challenges that sculptors faced as early as the 1970s, amid an art market that disproportionately valued paintings over three-dimensional forms. And yet, the fact that such a show existed, gathering a wide range of active artists that tested the boundaries of their present circumstances and environments, serves as witness to the inherent desire and tendency of artists to expand—both figuratively and literally—their art.

The artists in the show arguably continue to build upon this heritage and history, similarly revealing through their sheer range and diversity how devoted investigations into form, material, concepts and values concerning three-dimensional media are alive and vibrant, continuing to organically grow both within Singapore and across Southeast Asia. Enduring, imposing sculptures along with works that provoke critical gazes into context and place are only some of the evident parallelisms to the pieces in the earlier 1991 exhibition; yet, at the same time, this show reveals fresh, contemporary investigations. From emphasising the rawness of forms over polished perfection; exploring new mediums and allowing their organic, unexpected transformations play a central role in their finished work; sculpting whimsical, fantastic creatures to see the surreal and comical in everyday environments; carving bold, dramatic sculptures to test and contest dominant beliefs and stereotypes within particular cultures; breaking boundaries between sculpture and painting to provoke new ways of seeing fixed icons and image, promoting instead a fluidity and multiplicity of perspectives; to investigating colour, texture, and spontaneity on flat surfaces, exposing unique ways in which surprise and evolution can be expressed in painting—the art pieces in this exhibition are testament to how when artists are given the facilities and freedom to experiment in their practice, as platforms such as YAL have provided, infinite creative possibilities abound.

As it turns its gaze to the past, the show also hopes to move audiences to look towards the future, and ponder how support for artists in Singapore and Southeast Asia desiring to expand their practices can continue to improve in all aspects of the art world, from the commercial to the institutional—such that it need not necessitate so much resilience from artists to liberally explore their creative potentials. Encouraging audiences to similarly partake in YAL’s ongoing quest to complicate artists’ approaches to art-making, *Navigating Entropy* aims to continue and enrich ongoing conversations tackling what it means to test limitations in material and medium; foster fruitful creative collaborations that empower both artists and craftsmen; and ultimately, make art communities in the region more dynamic, nourishing and inclusive.

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ENDNOTES

- 1. Jim Supangkat, "Yogyakarta's Place in Indonesian Contemporary Art," in Outlet: Yogyakarta within the Contemporary Indonesian Art Scene, ed. Melissa Larner (Yogyakarta: Cemeti Art Foundation, 2001), 12.
- 2. Elliot Albrecht, "James Page on Yogyakarta Art Lab." Ocula, 8 May 2017, <https://ocula.com/magazine/insights/james-page/>.
- 3. James Page. Email interview. 02 January 2020.
- 4. Kayleigh Goh. Email Interview. 15 April 2020.
- 5. Jason Lim. Email Interview. 15 April 2020.
- 6. Kayleigh Goh. Email Interview. 15 April 2020.
- 7. Jason Lim. Email Interview. 15 April 2020.
- 8. Ibid.
- 9. T.K. Sabapathy, "Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction", in Singapore (Singapore: National Museum Art Gallery, 1991), 22.
- 10. Sabapathy, "Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction", 25.
- 11. Sabapathy, "Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction", 10.
- 12. Sabapathy, "Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction", 11.
- 13. Sabapathy, "Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction", 12.
- 14. Ibid.
- 15. James Page. Email interview. 02 January 2020.
- 16. Kumari Nahappan. Email interview. 26 March 2020.
- 17. Yunizar. Email interview. 13 April 2020.
- 18. Wei Ligang. Email interview. 17 April 2020.
- 19. Ibid.
- 20. Sabapathy, "Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction", 27.
- 21. Sabapathy, "Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction", 28.

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- 2. Goh, Kayleigh. Email Interview. Conducted by Nicole Soriano. 15 April 2020.
- 3. Ligang, Wei. Email interview. Conducted by Nicole Soriano. 17 April 2020.
- 4. Lim, Jason. Email Interview. Conducted by Nicole Soriano. 15 April 2020.
- 5. Nahappan, Kumari. Email interview. Conducted by Nicole Soriano. 26 March 2020.
- 6. Page, James. Email interview. Conducted by Nicole Soriano. 02 January 2020.
- 7. Sabapathy, T. K. "Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction", *Sculpture in Singapore*. National Museum Art Gallery, 1991.
- 8. Supangkat, Jim. "Yogyakarta's Place in Indonesian Contemporary Art," *Outlet: Yogyakarta within the Contemporary Indonesian Art Scene*. Cemeti Art Foundation, 2001.
- 9. Yunizar. Email interview. Conducted by Nicole Soriano. 13 April 2020.

Opposite Page:
Detail of Wei Ligang's *The Shadow of the Bamboo and the Kasaya*, 2017

