

YOGYA ART LAB: ORIGINS & EVOLUTION

Based on interviews with Jasdeep Sandhu (Director of Gajah Gallery), James Page (Technical Director of Yogya Art Lab, and Vindi Tri Yusmana (Foundry Manager of Yogya Art Lab)



Facade of Gajah Gallery's Yogya Art Lab (YAL), Bantul, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

FOUNDING YOGYA ART LAB (YAL)

Most collectors and cultural workers in Singapore and Indonesia are by now familiar with Yogya Art Lab (fondly referred to as YAL), as the production house responsible for the fine bronze, aluminium and other sculptural works which have drawn attention internationally at art fairs, museums, public and private collections. Many may know that YAL was co-founded by Gajah Gallery's director Jasdeep Sandhu and the Indonesian artist Yunizar, as they sought to provide a space for artists to experiment with new mediums and ensure access to high quality materials. Over the years, YAL has become a world-class foundry and production house, a place where many artists have been able to realise new dimensions in their work.

What is often overlooked in the story is that Yunizar owns the space in Bantul, Yogyakarta where YAL is housed. This small fact contributes significantly to the development of the humble yet influential foundry, and how Yunizar himself has shaped the culture of YAL.

According to Sandhu, Yunizar offered the space as part of his fulfilment of the Minangkabau tradition of merantau, commonly (if not crudely), known as 'male-out migration'. Merantau is a practice in which men are encouraged to leave home and 'wander' (or explore) other communities, in the pursuit of personal growth through education and civic engagement; and to share the benefits of their learning with the community upon return. Though Yunizar grew up in West Sumatra, he gained his formal art education in Yogyakarta; thus, offering his own property as a space for an unconventional art 'laboratory' could be seen as an effort to give back to the community that nurtured him and crucially honed his artistic potential.

In the early 2010s, the arts scene in Indonesia had for many years been largely underfunded, leading to talented artists often lacking resources and access to quality materials that would enable them to create enduring works. Sandhu recalls that once the art economy started picking up, he and Yunizar seized the opportunity to respond to this lack—using their newfound capital to develop the quality of production in the local arts scene.

EARLY YEARS OF YAL

At the beginning, Sandhu was expressly interested in producing high quality, large-scale paper for artists. As a gallerist, he was well-acquainted with the challenges posed by the material, and wanted to explore the possibility of creating paper that would be better suited to the region's humid climate. He also wanted to give the Gallery's artists an opportunity to work with high quality paper material in a non-formal setting, as an alternative to the prestigious but somewhat exclusive Singapore Tyler Print Institute's (STPI) residency programme—which was at the time, the only other institution in the region with such production capabilities.

Under the guidance of Richard Hungerford, who had previously been master papermaker at STPI, YAL was opened in 2012 and a team of artisans began to explore these objectives. During the early days, Yunizar closely observed the processes at YAL, and embraced the experimental nature of the lab—creating a number of large, impressive works on paper, some of which incorporated solid materials such as Swarovski crystals, lead dripping, and iron plate prints.

Here are some paper materials created at YAL, which Yunizar illustrated upon:



1.



3.



6.



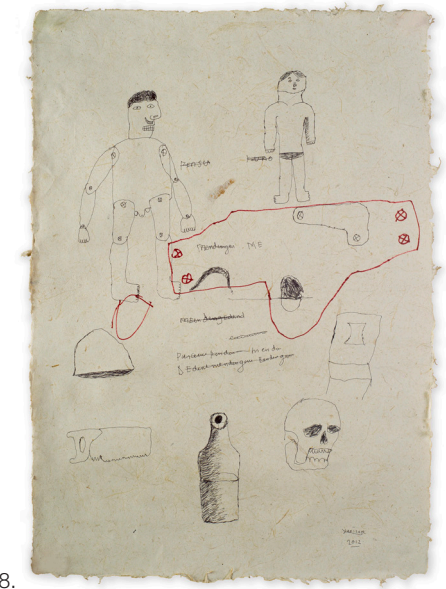
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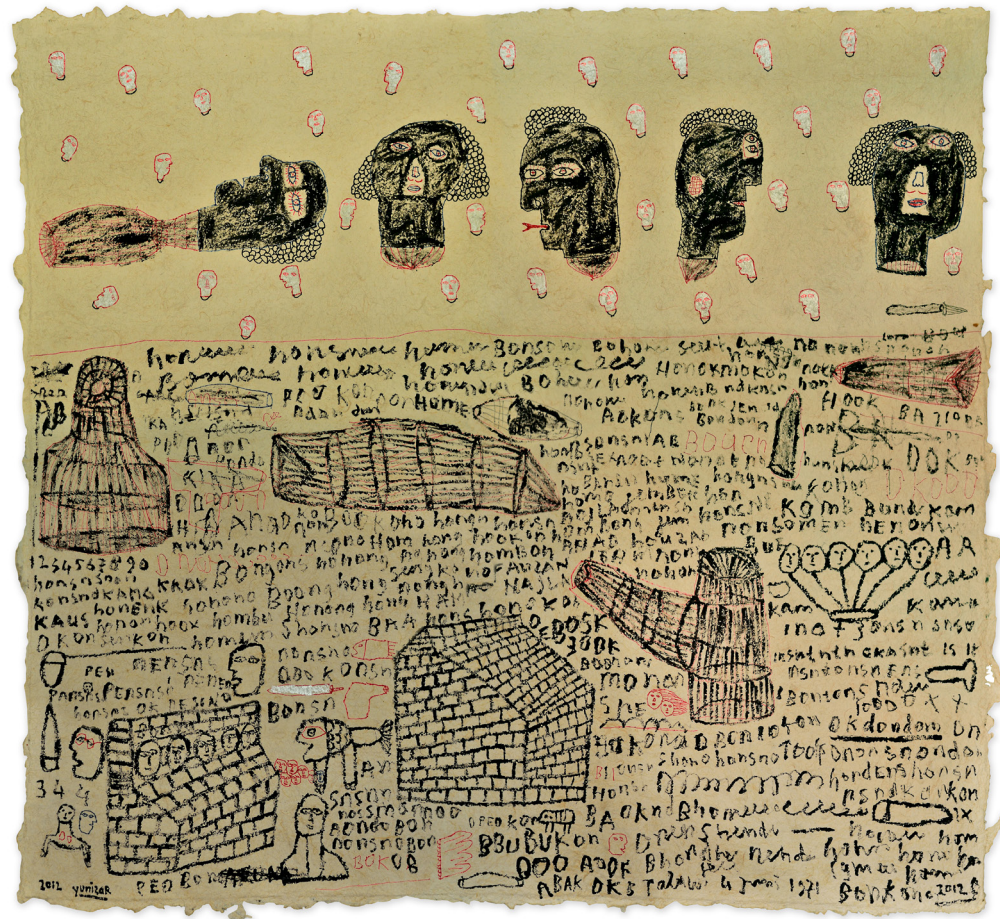


5.

Images 1 - 6 : Selection of works on handmade paper, 2012, acrylic, marker, pen, pencil on paper, 44 x 31 cm. Private Collection

Images 7 & 8 : Selection of works on handmade paper, 2012, acrylic, marker, pen, pencil on paper, 60 x 42 cm. Private Collection

These were the initial works Yunizar created, applying conventional materials on the large paper (2m x 1.8m) produced at YAL:



Untitled, 2012, acrylic and pen on handmade paper, 185 x 203 cm



Untitled, 2012, acrylic and pen on handmade paper, 186 x 205 cm

Here are the paper works in which Yunizar incorporated unconventional methods and materials:

1. *Bunga Kuning* (Yellow Flower), 2012, outline of flower in dripped liquid lead with pigments on handmade paper, 218 x 196 cm

2. *Burung Hitam* (Black Bird), 2013, outline of bird in dripped liquid lead with pigments on handmade paper, 196 x 218 cm.
Collection of Yeap Lam Yang

3. *Saya Berkembang* (I have Evolved), 2012, outline of bird and dots on paper in dripped liquid lead with pigments on handmade paper, 218 x 196 cm.
Private Collection

4. *Bunga Biru* (Blue Flower), 2013, corner Curves with iron plate print, centre of flowers filled with Swarovski crystals, flower outline and border dots in dripped liquid lead with pigments on handmade paper, 218 x 196 cm.
Private Collection



1.



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4.

As word spread and YAL introduced their paper experiments to other artists at the Gallery, Bali-based artist Ashley Bickerton voiced his interest in creating sculptures through aluminium casting. This sparked YAL's initial venture into three-dimensional works.

Though Hungerford did not have experience in working with aluminium, several of the workers at YAL had various levels of expertise in handling mixed metals, which led to an interesting dialogue between artistic and practical training. The team began to research and experiment, acquiring the necessary machinery and learning each process from scratch, eventually facilitating the creation of Bickerton's sculpture by employing lost wax casting techniques.

Here is the first Ashley Bickerton sculpture produced at YAL in aluminium with acrylic paint and resin eyeballs.

Creating such works in the early years was undoubtedly challenging for the YAL team: it took them one year to make the first aluminium piece for Bickerton, who in that time had already lined up two other sculptural works for an exhibition in a New York gallery. Though production was slow and rife with setbacks, it was clear even then that YAL's focus



Ashley Bickerton's *Untitled*, 2013

was gradually shifting to three-dimensional artworks, and that they would need to seek out new experts to foster this growth.

Sandhu recalls that though the paper works produced under the guidance of Hungerford were undoubtedly successful, the space seemed to evolve in response to the visions of

the Gallery artists, naturally progressing to sculpture. As paper production decreased during the transition period from 2013 to 2014, YAL parted ways with Hungerford, and re-established itself publicly as an experimental foundry.

While the aluminium casting for Bickerton was ongoing, Yunizar would visit the space regularly and reflect on his own interest in creating sculptures. Prior to YAL's founding, he had created two sculptures in resin, but lacked the facilities to properly pursue the medium. Inspired by the activity at YAL however, Yunizar sought to refine and expand his sculpture practice. According to Sandhu, the artist unexpectedly showed up at the lab one day with some small maquettes in hand, instructing the team to make it, and they did.

The dedicated team at YAL successfully created Yunizar's maquette, which Gajah Gallery then exhibited for the first time at Art Stage Singapore 2013, where it was well received. After this, Yunizar began making more sculptures at YAL, casting with three types of metal: aluminium, brass and bronze. Though Yunizar's works may aesthetically appear as spontaneous, the artist premeditates these expansions in his practice, deeply thinking about and studying materials and processes before making a major artistic decision.



Yunizar's first maquettes, 2013

TRANSFORMING INTO A BRONZE FOUNDRY

After playing around with the sculpture medium, Yunizar decided that his works best suited the bronze material, particularly because of the way it captured the strong characters in his work, along with his desired textures and colours. Sandhu welcomed this exploration, and invested resources into the team at YAL so they could adapt their production methods.

In 2014, Sandhu invited James Page, a celebrated art director for film, theatre and television productions in Singapore, to help improve the quality of work at YAL. The addition of Page as Foundry Director, though unconventional, effectively broadened the knowledge base and level of professionalism at YAL. Sandhu notes that he chose Page in particular because of his uncompromising attention to detail. Page would not sacrifice quality for shortcuts or easy fixes, which was crucial to producing top-notch, durable sculpture pieces - and rare among existing foundries at the time.

Opposite page:

1. Skull & Bones (double sided), 2013, cast bronze, 55 x 15 x 65 cm.
Edition of 3 + 2 Artist Proof
Private Collections

2. *Preman Kampung* (Plebeian Gangster), 2014, cast bronze, 72 x 27 x 65 cm.
Edition of 3 + 2 Artist Proof
Private Collections

3. *Veteran Bintang* (One Star General), 2014, cast bronze, 51 x 29 x 75 cm.
Edition of 3 + 2 Artist Proof
Private Collections

During those early stages of experimentation, the team at YAL worked mainly in paper-making and rudimentary aluminium casting, with minimal experience in bronze. Due to Yunizar’s choice of material, YAL initially attempted to outsource the bronze casting to a local foundry, yet Page observed how this would inevitably cause them to lose control of some crucial aspects of the casting process—from determining the purity of bronze, the quality of the patina, to the colour of the finished sculpture. Thus, aiming to fully oversee every step of the casting process and production quality, the YAL team decided to move the casting in-house, and transform YAL into a full-fledged foundry.

The next pages are the first three sculptures that Yunizar produced with the outsourced foundry:



1.



2.



3.

As YAL transitioned into taking full control of the casting process, the team encountered various challenges while experimenting with the patina on their own, such as determining the heat level of various layers. This would result in changing colours of the patina, causing the team to start over and conduct a time-consuming, trial-and-error process whenever they encountered a glitch with colour. During this time, Page engaged in extensive research into bronze patination with the support of Sandhu and Yunizar. However, he discovered that most resources would not disclose detailed information on patinas, as patina artists tend to obscure their individual processes in the same way chefs guard their recipes. The gap in technical ability the team was facing required another expert to come on board at YAL.

The next pages are the first sculptures created when YAL moved the bronze casting to in-house:

Opposite Page:

Pose Preman Kampung (Plebeian Gangster Pose) [Double sided],
2014, cast bronze, 105 x 30 x 170 cm
Edition of 3 + 2 Artist Proof
Private Collections

Next Page from left:

Pose Boedjang Ayam (Playboy Rooster Pose) [Double sided],
2014, cast bronze, 102 x 30 x 166 cm
Edition of 3 + 2 Artist Proof
Private Collections

Pose [Double sided],
2014, cast bronze, 105 x 30 x 163 cm
Edition of 3 + 2 Artist Proof
Private Collections





TRAINING UNDER PATINA EXPERT PATRICK KIPPER

Page then encountered the work of Patrick Kipper, an internationally renowned patina expert specialising in silicon bronze, who, unlike other patina artists, gave step-by-step instructions on how to prepare bronze and explained in detail the specific chemicals required. Though Page initially contacted Kipper in the US to arrange a training course there, rather serendipitously, Kipper instead offered to fly to Yogyakarta, expressing a fondness for Borobudur which he had visited many years prior. Sandhu and Kipper agreed that in exchange for covering Kipper's trip, Kipper would conduct a private course for the team at YAL.

Kipper brought vital lessons to the team on specific, highly-specialized bronze processes. Page recalls how Kipper was instrumental in teaching them how to successfully weld metal and finish sculptures, sandblast at the perfect time such that the bronze would not tarnish, and properly apply lacquer and wax. This training cut their trial and error process in half. Kipper also gave the team important tips on how to achieve a broad range of patina colours with consistent results.

This initial visit to Yogyakarta in 2015 forged the beginning of a fruitful relationship between YAL and Kipper, who continues to consult on various projects. With the breadth of experience and knowledge shared by Kipper, the team at YAL has since been able to expand into bronze conservation and restoration as well, both of which are much needed services in the tropical climate.



Patrick Kipper at YAL, 2015

**YUNIZAR’S SUPPORT IN EXPANDING YAL
AND HIRING EXPERIENCED STAFF MEMBERS**

These major transformations at YAL were instigated in part by Yunizar’s explorations into sculpture, and certainly would not have been possible without his support. Having strongly encouraged the decision to go in-house, the artist allowed the team to take over more space in his building. From inhabiting the bottom floor and a portion of the second floor at the start, the space expanded to include a former carwash and bar/restaurant area, before eventually taking over the entire building, when Sandhu proposed to create a gallery on the second floor.

Yunizar also encouraged the team to hire more experienced staff members, so Page visited various foundries in Yogyakarta and the surrounding region to recruit the most skilful artisans he could find.

With the expert training and expanded new team, YAL began to explore the sandcasting method with very positive results, but Yunizar wanted to push further—believing that sandcasting still did not quite capture the precise intricacy he hoped to achieve in his sculptures. Yunizar was thus instrumental in the decision to pursue lost wax ceramic shell casting—a process that had never previously been done in Yogyakarta. In order to accommodate this technique, Yunizar had to allow his roof to be cut, a wall in the building to be removed, and a hole dug into the ground. In a literal sense, old ground would have to be cleared to make way for the new.



Pouring of the silicon bronze into ceramic shell molds.

TRANSITIONING INTO LOST WAX CERAMIC SHELL METHOD

Sandhu supported this direction to explore the lost wax technique. He believed that if he were to pursue a fine arts foundry in Southeast Asia, he would want the space to be comparable to foundries across the world. Focusing on sandcasting alone would not match the standards and capabilities of the best foundries abroad, many of which offered the ceramic shell technique.

The ceramic shell technique has been used for millenia, and is known to capture a near-perfect amount of detail, but is not commonly found in Indonesia as it requires much time, effort, and expense. The wax and ceramic shell can only be used once, and it takes roughly five to six days to apply the slurry. By contrast, in sandcasting, the use of resin is much cheaper and can be reused a number of times. Furthermore, humidity and temperature must always be controlled during the wax stage.

Transitioning to this approach at YAL inevitably took some time and posed many challenges for the team, but they were equipped with experience and greatly benefitted from the expertise of Kipper. Today, Page is proud to say that the processes at the foundry meet a roughly 95% success rate, with improvements made every year.

These major changes—and the struggles that came along with them—proved to be worth it, as Yunizar continued to make sculptures that became more complex with the lost wax technique. He enjoyed seeing not only his own sculptures evolve, but other artists' work too—such as Bickerton's shark sculptures, which spanned up to three-meters high, and Uji 'Hahan' Handoko's highly detailed bronze pieces, which could only be achieved because of the ceramic shell method.

**CONTINUING TO CREATE
OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE
LOCAL COMMUNITY IN
YOGYAKARTA**

Yunizar takes pride in the homegrown community fostered by YAL. With the exception of Page, all the workers employed at YAL and the attached gallery are from Yogyakarta. Apart from providing them a livelihood, YAL has also allowed these local staff members to train with world-renowned experts and increase their knowledge in various production processes. At the same time, the team is constantly on the watch for young, fresh graduates from local universities to train and offer employment opportunities. Because of YAL's success, the workforce has significantly expanded from three to four staff members to around ten full-time employees, who fill varied roles ranging from manager, to welder, to cleaner.

Yunizar's understated, yet crucial contributions to YAL's foundation and ongoing development are rooted not only in a desire to foster a space to make high quality works of art—but to tap into and nurture the vibrant art community in Yogyakarta. Though Yunizar is no longer at YAL everyday, nor closely involved in the logistical ins-and-outs of the foundry, he has played an indelible role in the development of YAL into the rare space it is, taking risks and making significant sacrifices on his part—such as letting go of multiple pre-existing businesses—in order to let the team at YAL organically grow and fulfil an unforeseeable potential well-beyond its small beginnings.

NICOLE SORIANO

Yunizar working on Cat sculpture, 2019

