

APOTHEOSE

by Tunyaporn Hongtong

By the Chao Phraya River early summer last year, I had the opportunity to sit down and chat with Albert Yonathan Setyawan. At that time, Albert had just finished installing his work at the Jim Thompson Art Center Bangkok and the following day he was about to fly back to set up Enshrined, his solo exhibition at Mizuma Art Gallery Tokyo.

In the cool breeze of the river, however, we didn't talk much about his art. Instead, the artist discussed his life, the kind of music he loves, his favourite books and his interest in spiritual journey.

After his arrival in Tokyo and while installing Enshrined, he texted me describing an idea he wanted to propose to an art gallery in Bangkok and a new plan he wanted to do right after the opening of the exhibition.

So, I teased him, "I guess you don't know how to stay still, right? Or do you have any problem with free time?"

Of course, Albert said he still needs those quiet moments sometimes but then he gave me an interesting insight "But somehow there's this kind of drive that keeps me thinking of what to do all the time".

As a writer (I also consider writing as a form of art), I think I understand what he said

quite well. The 'drive' he mentioned has nothing to do with fame, wealth or success, it occurs when he realizes something - thought, feeling or both - and this awareness is gradually transformed into a 'message'. Once this happens, it can no longer be kept to oneself but needs to be expressed. I also believe that, like many artists, while mulling over and creating his art, Albert can sense freedom and his existence. It's even possible that this 31 year-old artist from Bandung, Indonesia, cannot live in peace without creating art.

Well, you may be thinking that the above sentences are overstated and somewhat trite descriptions of what art is about. Your criticism is fair, I admit, but the reason I still dare to write these words down here is that I had experienced his art and its process before and I also know some of his life story. Both of them make me confident that what I just said about him is true.

On the river bank that evening, Albert told me he had once been a devout Christian but as he grew up, his faith in religious institutions disappeared. He began to think that "believing in God isn't about going to church everyday or strictly following any religious doctrine or dogma. It doesn't matter how often you go to church or how strict your religious practice is. If you truly believe in God, you should be able to explain your belief through your personal experience of Him". This is why he left the Church and embarked upon a more contemporary spiritual journey that

ultimately led him to art.

"Art is the answer for me but art doesn't offer answers like science does. Instead, art is about looking at the same thing from different perspectives and putting it in a different context to create meaning. I created art from my surroundings, things that inspire me and things that misguide me sometimes. For me, art is no different from meditation because meditation is the practice of the mind and my art requires the same practice".

The meditative aspect of art is evident in many of his works, particularly the Cosmic Labyrinth and Mandala Study series. These are installations that evoke the atmosphere of sacred ritual through the arrangement of several ceramic objects with a same shape in the form of labyrinth (he emphasized that it has to be a labyrinth and not a maze.

Labyrinth is not meant to trap people, because it has a clear sign for entrance and exit and both are actually located in the same spot), with the repeated sound of a metronome in the background or sometimes the sound of a bell accompanied by incense smoke. However, these details are only minute references to the notion of meditation.

The meditation already comes into being since the artist chooses to produce these ceramics in the same shape and size in a large number. This creative process is considered a repetition where, there is no room for thinking, but only pure

concentration of what is at work in front of him. And, at a certain point during this repetition, one can get lost.

The meditation also continues through the process of arranging each ceramic in a form of labyrinth or mandala. And in one of his installations, Cosmic Labyrinth: The Bells (2011-2012) at the final stage of his performance he smashed each of his ceramic bells into pieces as a form of meditative practice.

"I'm interested in repetition," Albert told me a year later during a brief visit to Bangkok while on his way to Bandung to prepare his latest show Apotheose for Mizuma Gallery Singapore. Then he was going back to Kyoto to complete the rest of his works before travelling to Singapore to install the exhibition. "I think this may be the reason why I like playing the drums or heavy metal music because it features repetitive rhythms. It's like you do something. You do it and do it again. You keep going until you reach a point where you cross over to something else - some kinds of transition.

"What's interesting is that repetition can be found in nature and in our lives. Breathing in and out is repetitive too. The novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being by Milan Kundera talks about life as a repetition in an interesting way. In the story, the main character's life evolves in one famous German's saying "Einmal ist keinmal," meaning that what happen just once might as well not have happened at all." I find this fascinating because that means 'If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all'. It really impresses me".



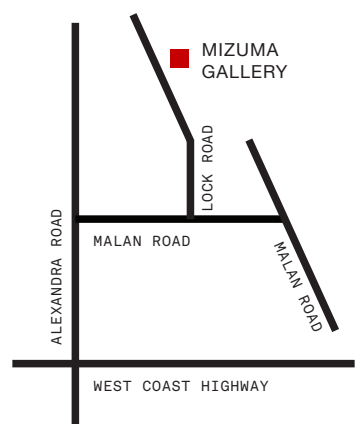
"Unknown Sanctuary"
2014, Ceramic, 360 x 21 x 6 cm

About the artist

Albert Yonathan Setyawan graduated from Bandung Institute of Technology, majoring in ceramic art in 2007 and finished his master degree in 2012 at the same university. Since end of 2012 he moved to Kyoto, Japan to continue his study in contemporary ceramic art at Kyoto Seika University and now finishing his master degree in ceramics craft department and will proceed to doctoral course in next year. He had participated in several important group exhibitions in Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Italy and Japan, including the 55th Venice Biennale as one of the artists representing Indonesian Pavilion. His last solo exhibition was at Mizuma Art Gallery Tokyo, entitled Enshrined.

cover : "Incandescence", 2014, Ceramic and Decals, 65 x 95 x 3.5 cm

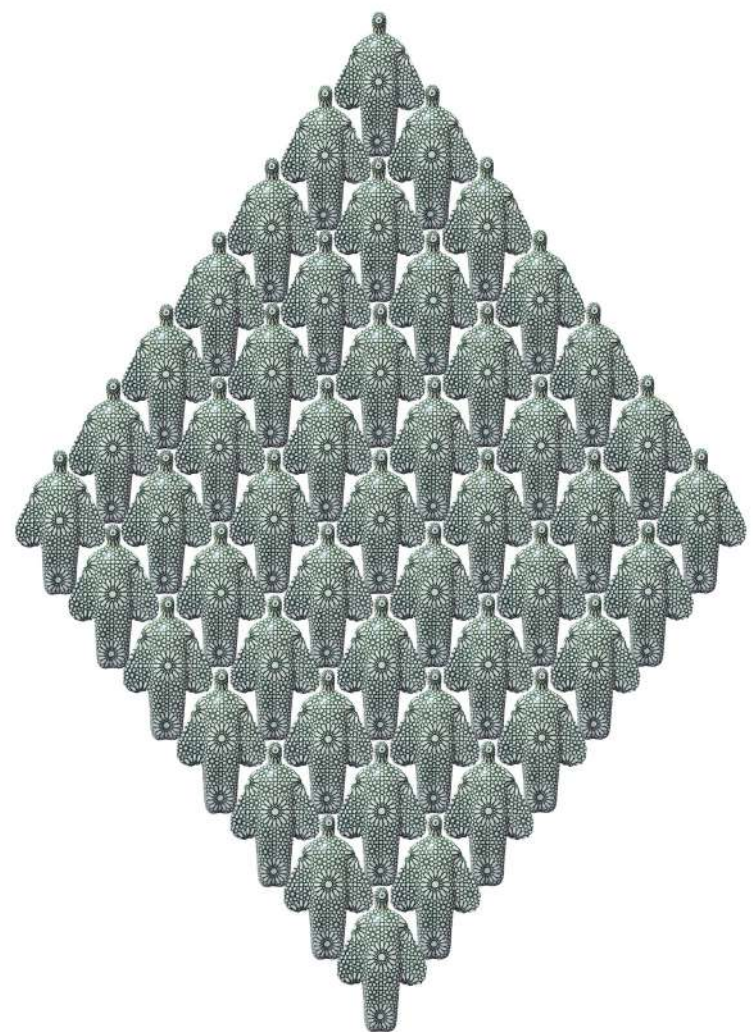
MIZUMA GALLERY



22 LOCK ROAD
#01-34
GILLMAN BARRACKS
SINGAPORE 108939

T. +65 6570 2505
F. +65 6570 2506

WWW.MIZUMA.SG
INFO@MIZUMA.SG
FACEBOOK.COM/MIZUMAGALLERY



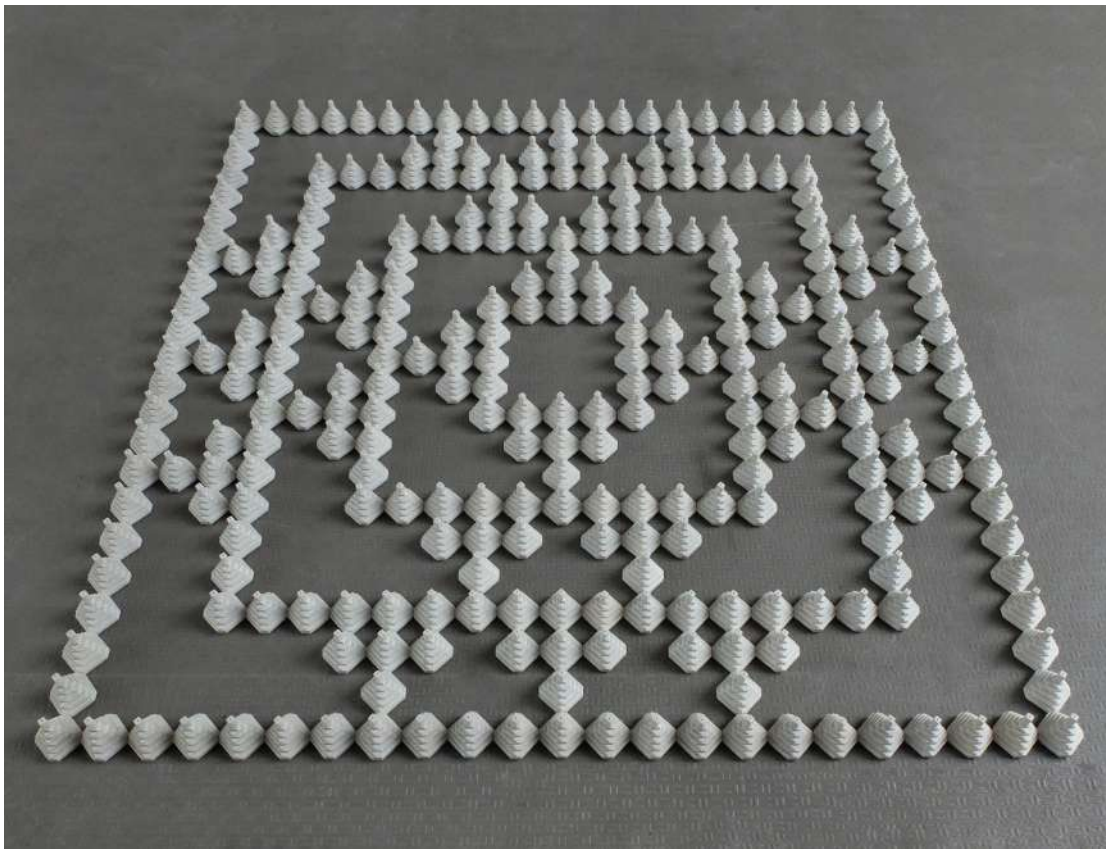
APOTHEOSE

A solo exhibition by

Albert Yonathan Setyawan

10 April - 17 May 2015

MIZUMA GALLERY



"Mandala Study #3"
2015, Ceramic,
300 X 300 cm

Meditation, repetition and the feeling of a sacred ritual all prevail in Apotheose. But like what he has always done in his previous works, this time Albert is also taking his ideas to the next step. For example, Metaphor of the Human Condition: Meditation on Silence - The Dissolving Bowl (2015), a video piece showcases the artist's interest in philosophy, the meaning of existence and spiritual journey; it is, perhaps, also an answer to the question that emerged in his previous works of how to access a balanced spiritual life. Albert has sculpted containers in the same form but of different sizes and has placed them on top of each other, from the biggest size at the bottom to the smallest size at the top, to create layers of circles similar to Mandala Study: Bowls and Bells (2012). However, this time he has made these containers using nothing but his hands and a measuring tool and he has not fired them. So, when water is poured onto the containers they slowly melt into one mass.

A metaphor for the labyrinth's entrance becomes its own exit, these containers thus return to their origin, clay.

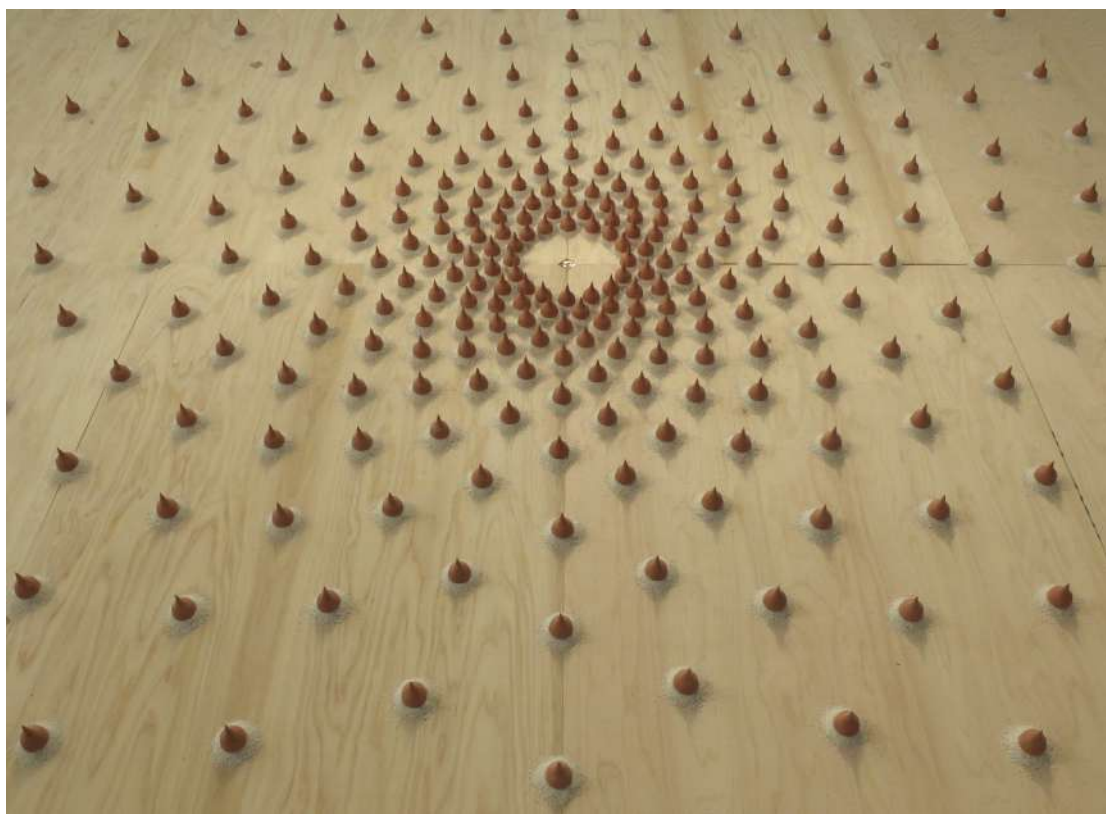
However, the most important new aspect of Apotheose is the exhibition's title itself. It's as if the artist has chosen the word "apotheosis," which means divination or the glorification of a subject to the divine level, to encourage the viewer to examine the following question: if you feel that his art bears a resemblance to religious or spiritual ceremonies, is this just because the artist has specifically created that sacred atmosphere or is it because you have developed some experience with the work? This demonstrates how Albert does not put his faith in the institution and precepts but how he believes that an individual needs to learn from experience in order to get his or her own 'answer.'

The meaning of apotheose/apotheosis that suggests how institutions create suppositions as traps also indicates that Albert has only used ceramics and shapes as a medium that takes the viewer and himself to some understanding. However, the artist attaches no value to the ceramics nor does he treat them as supreme art objects. If he had done so, he would not have chosen a repetitive process to devalue the singularity of ceramic art and decided to smash the ceramics into pieces or transform them back into clay.

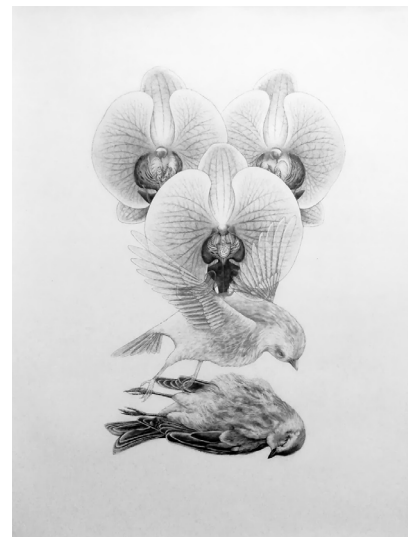
The only things Albert values in art are his experience gained through working and what each viewer perceives when spending time with his work.

... And in case you still wonder, this is probably the drive that keeps him making art.

Tunyaporn Hongtong
Summer 2015, Baan Nonthaburi



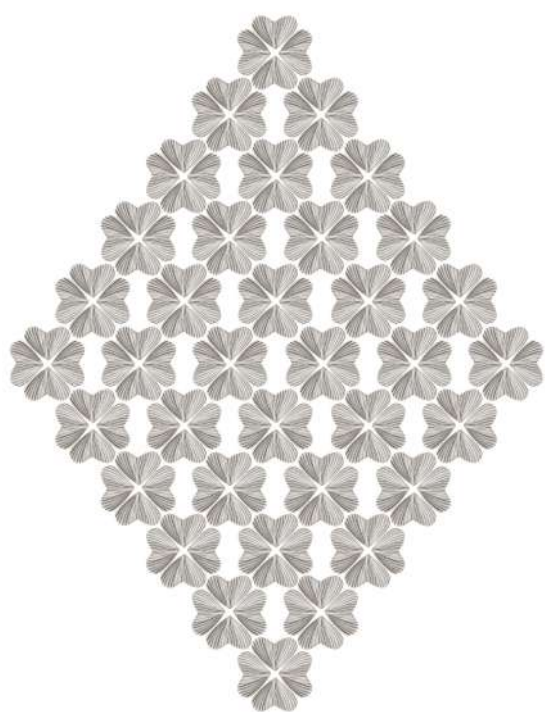
"Mandala Study #4"
2015, Terracotta and Marble sand,
Variable Dimensions



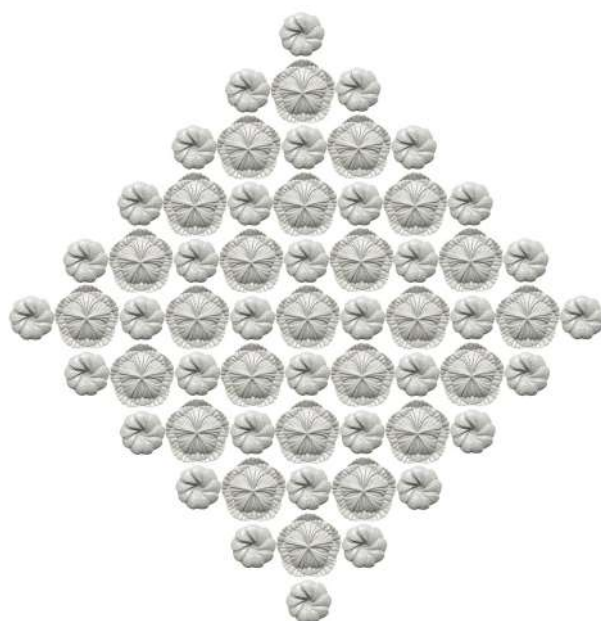
"When The Sparrow Died",
2014, Pencil on Paper,
67 x 50 cm



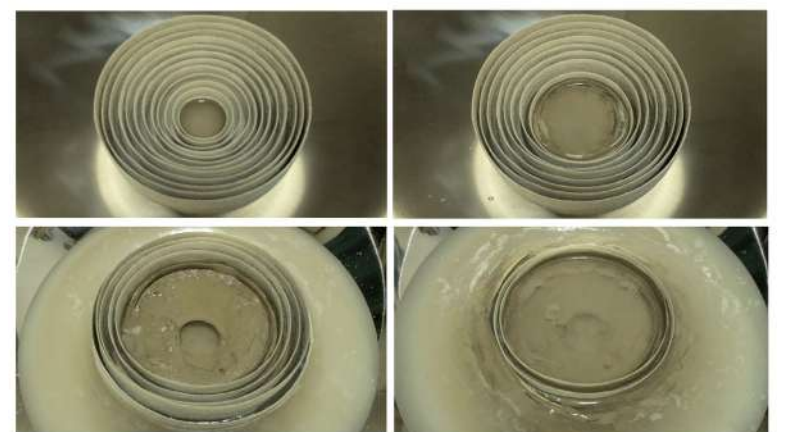
"Lunar Meditation",
2014, Pencil and Ink on Paper,
63.5 x 48.5 cm



"Mystic Flowers", 2014, Ceramic, 100 x 130 x 3.5 cm



"Nature's Scintilla", 2014, Ceramic, 100 x 100 x 5 cm



"Metaphor of the Human Condition:
Meditation on Silence - The Dissolving Bowl "
2015, Video Installation, durations 60'