

ESSAY FOR ALBERT YONATHAN -ON THE EXHIBITION SPEAKING IN TONGUE JUNE 2022, AT MINDSET ART SPACE

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In his seminal writing in *The Poetics of Space* in 1958, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard succinctly wrote “Baudelaire writes: In certain almost supernatural inner states, the depth of life is entirely revealed in the spectacle, however ordinary, that we have before our eyes, and which becomes symbol of it” Here we have a passage that designates the phenomenological direction I myself pursue. The exterior spectacle helps intimate grandeur unfold.” These few lines shed light on the thematic direction of Bachelard which is that of the application of the method of phenomenology to architecture. To Bachelard the study of architecture should be based on lived experience and the understanding of the designs and forms of the architecture should be rooted in their natural contexts. He focuses on a personal and emotional response to buildings and spatial spaces. Phenomenology in architecture proposes a move away from a direct metaphysical or empirical investigations of objects to an investigation of the very framework of meaning and intelligibility that corresponds to Bachelard’s own preoccupation with the realm of dream and imagination; in brief that intangible sphere of the poetics.

It is this intangible sphere of the poetics that Albert Yonathan Setyawan aspires to reach out to. Sharing the same belief as Bachelard that “exterior spectacle helps intimate grandeur unfold”, Albert anchors his practice on the expression of this ‘intimate grandeur’ which he translates to a sense of spirituality that is stripped of any trace of institutional religion. In short, a spirituality that is void of religiosity. In the foreword of his PHD dissertation *From Matter to Spirit: Analyses of Materiality, Spirituality and Rituality in Hendrawan Riyanto’s Artistic Practice* (2020, Kyoto Seika University), he quoted James Elkins, “Art is inescapably religious, so it is said, because it expresses such things as the hope of transcendence or the possibilities of the human spirit” (James Elkins, foreword in *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, 2004, Routledge). These words hinted at Albert’s own position on the issue of religiosity in contemporary art. Whilst Elkins writes to address an issue of a lack of common language between the believers and non-believers in the contemporary art scene hence the lack of such a discourse, Albert sees no need for such an attempt. He nevertheless takes the point of art being ‘inescapably religious’ further and sharing an affinity with Bachelard, would see him adopting the same psychoanalytic and phenomenological approaches to his subject matter, and in his art practice, they are both the object (ceramics) and the space where his finished works are installed. The core of his art practice therein lies

in the subliminal realm that is attained; a realm that is reached by the materiality of the malleable clay that after firing would retain the traces and flaws of the artist's hand thus recording the ritual and process of making and finally with the full installation of the pieces in repeated formations; thence transforming the objects and space into a holistic experiential latitude in which the omnipresence of a transcendent world is made accessible.

Albert writes "Hendrawan discovered spirituality through the materiality of objects in the study of material culture. (...He) saw the materiality in ceramic especially low-fired terracotta – the most basic type of materials in ceramic – as a source of metaphor for conveying the transcendence of the spiritual." Whilst Albert is in definite agreement with Hendrawan on materiality as a vassal of sort, to him the sense of awe and spirituality of his works conveyed at final installment is an analogy to a sense of mindfulness and consciousness that might be akin to divinity but not quite. If Hendrawan studied and researched on Javanese mythology and ceremonial rituals to enrich the materiality and rituality of his objects, Albert on the other hand focuses on his own making and working of the material, in sum his own phenomenological approach that places paramount importance on the lived experience with his material or subject. He is intensely aware of the religious connotation that could be associated with his works as he employs repeated forms referencing religious iconography such as temples, mandalas and stupas but he is adamant in resisting the convenient reading of religiosity in his work. Perhaps it is for this show of resistance that he establishes his own orthodoxy of icons, sourcing them from diverse cultures and origins evidenced by his own comments on one of his iconic works to date, Helios (SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now at Mori Museum, Tokyo October 2017) "In Helios, I wanted to invoke a sense of infinite repetition and represent a metaphor of the sun or the light, that is ever present and connects all living entities. The word "Helios" from the Greek means the "sun". The installation consists of two different individual forms, the seraph and the flower-like shape. The seraph in Christian mythology is an angelic being that is associated with light, ardour, and purity. While the flower-like shape was meant to represent the radiance of light. I have always been inspired by how pattern-making and geometric design are used to express spiritual ideas or beliefs such as in Islamic arabesque patterns found on many mosques which make up the memories of my childhood neighbourhood. It invokes a sense of awe in us, or may remind us of the underlying order, some sort of cosmic order that lingers beneath our immediate surroundings. (Artist's statement on Helios@albertyonathan.com) Just in one work, Albert congregates icons and imageries from Greek mythology, Christianity, Islam and blends in common beliefs of folklore to convey his disbelief in one superior being of any order. In this gesture the icons and symbols become forms of anthropological interests, and in their excess of presence as accentuated by the repeated formations, they become icons that not to be worshipped but regarded as a material means of grace in which a spirituality could be mediated through the sensual. What the artist is proposing to his audience is that one could have an active relationship with the objects before them, through contemplation and meditation, one could experience the objects both in their metaphysical forms and in their aura.

"I was drawn to relationship between complex geometrical patterns and human psychology or religious beliefs." (Interview with Albert Yonathan Setyawan, January 2022). Imbuing each formation with the essence of a constructed austerity and orderliness that come inherently as an aesthetic choice by the artist; the repetition of the formation is compounded multifold as every individual piece is a replica of another in the composition. A pattern forms within a pattern and multiply itself within the scale as outlined by the artist and within this realm the artist invites the viewer in. Simultaneously powerful and gentle, the art that Albert has offered us with unstinting consistency are imageries of anything; at once material and immaterial, at once metaphysical and spiritual; curiously the patterning of each small ceramic piece in forming a larger composition becomes evocation of light in the process, each transmitting an individual issuance of ethereal rhythms and together they are cadences of light, form and colour. It is a cliché to say that Albert seeks to capture the ethereality of existence and to evoke an emotional response through repetitive structure and subdued tones, because the artist does more than that. His advocacy of a phenomenological methodology in his practice binds him to create each and every piece of the ceramics in his works by himself, steadfastly believes in his own investment in time and effort would constitute a part of the intangible aura of the ceramic pieces. The ceramics pieces in this regard, become a reminder or record of the artist's process, and his ideas about finding forms in nature and religious icons and their relevance to the eventual formation he has in his mind. Though the final composition is always meticulous and perfect, but a closer examination of the ceramics pieces always exposed the hand of the artist, steady as it may well be but it is inherently deficient because of his humanity. Therein lies the core of the art by Albert Yonathan Setyawan, whose gaze is not fixed upon divinity but has an unwavering conviction in the aspirations and potentials of humanity. Hence this eschewal of mechanical means or assistance in favour of the search for mindfulness through his own disciplined but imperfect hands. Every touch and maneuver that are visible on the surface of the objects come around with slow contemplation and visual discovery imbuing a sense of kinship in these pieces that links the audience to the artist. It is therefore, despite the rigidity of his repetitive patterns, the liminal nature of his technique transforms his installments into ethereal visions: weightless, synesthetic planes unmoored from the traditional binaries of figure and ground.

Speaking in Tongues is the artist's latest rendition which he worked on for the last 2 years (2020-2022). The title which is of a biblical origin does not have a religious connotation as intended by the artist; but it is also his intention to lead his viewer into a ground of word play effectively staging a pun. Well aware of the overt religious undertone of the title, he however borrows the metaphor only to highlight that one's spoken language needed to be unpacked and be decoded. For Albert his practice which involves ceramics making, drawing and performance constitute a mesh of icons, symbols, imageries, myths, legends, truths and half-truths begs to be interpreted and deciphered. "I could explain the origin of the symbols I used in each work, or specified a certain forms I adopted and point to the origin of my inspiration, however words always fail to convey the entirety of my thoughts and sensation of the work. For me the experiential aspect of making the work, the monotonous act of making,

moulding and firing do not just complete the meaning of the work but forms an integral part of the core of the art." (Interview with Albert Yonathan Setyawati, January 2022). As the artist explains this persistent gap he feels with verbal explanation thence giving a twist to the title which is simultaneously a metaphor and a tongue in cheek, not unlike the nuanced and layered aura transpired by his art that could only be experienced in presence.

Ultimately this play of words is also a play of the conscious mind, the psychoanalysis of a physical entity that so obsessed the artist, and constantly motivates him to teeter between the opposites; it is perhaps why his works are both concrete and evanescent, solid physical entities that hover perpetually on the brink of dissolution, staying true indeed to the words of Bachelard "It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality." (Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1994.)