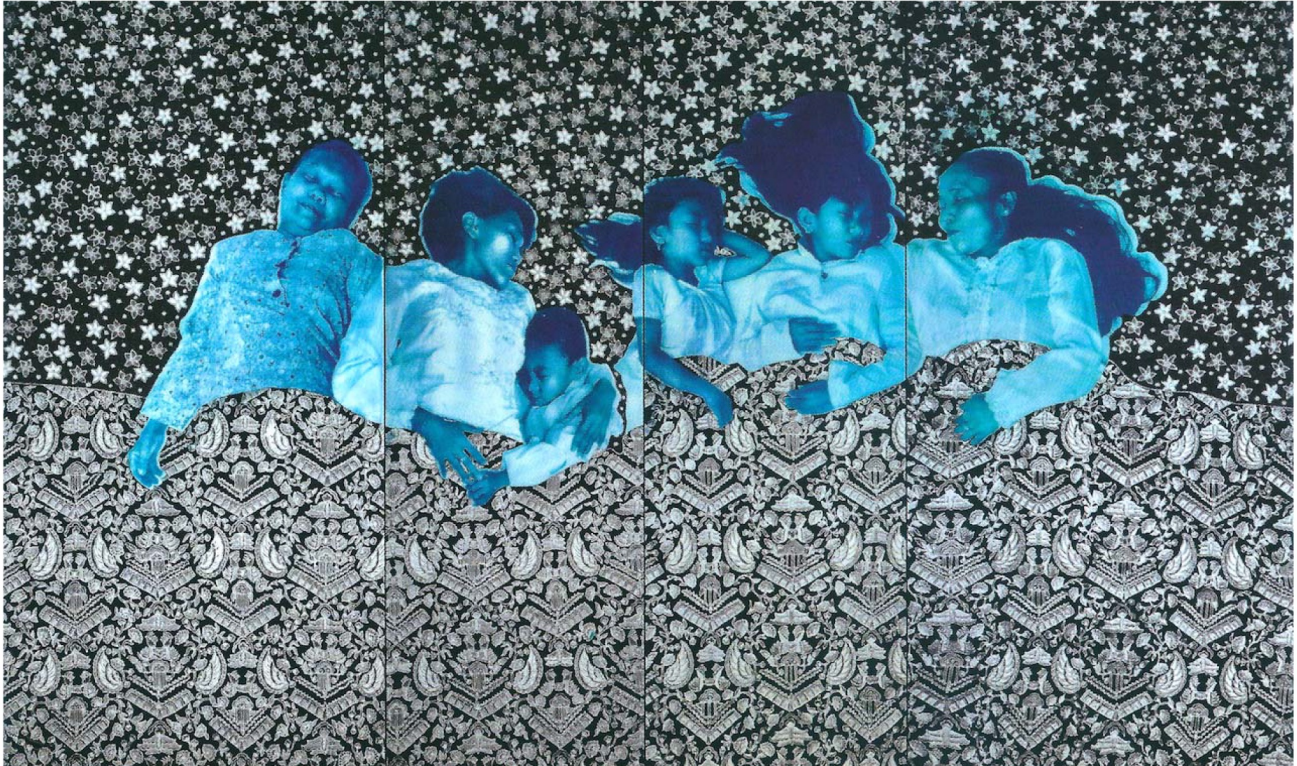


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Interview: Mintio and Kabul



Mintio (Samantha Tio) and Kabul (Budi Agung Kuswara) are internationally exhibited artists whose work has shifted profoundly since becoming parents. As the sexism and privilege of the art world presented new barriers, the two artists merged their separate practices into multimedia collaborations, including “[The Wax on Our Fingers](#)” and “[The Current/s We Call Home.](#)” They also founded Ketemu Project, a socially-engaged arts organization in Bali that allows them to operate beyond the commercial art world. Ketemu uses art to engage marginalized groups in the community, address environmental concerns, and support the work of fellow artists through a new family-in-residence program. When we spoke, the two parents were separated by the pandemic, with borders closed: Mintio working from home in Singapore with their 8-year old daughter, Ning, and Kabul in Indonesia, where Ketemu is based.

Cultural ReProducers is pleased to share a series of conversations with artists parenting in Singapore. This interview is part of a creative exchange between Cultural ReProducers and the artist-run gallery [CommaSpace](#). This partnership began in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, when connecting with artists meant juggling online conversations while caring for e-learning children at home. We’re so thankful for these conversations, which raise critical questions about support, culture, and creativity.



Cultural ReProducers: Mintio, you grew up in Singapore and Kabul in Bali, and you typically travel between the two when you're not grounded by a pandemic. How has this shaped the culture of your family and your creative community?

Kabul: I'm not a typical Balinese: my mom is Javanese and my dad is Balinese. I grew up in this mixed culture environment, so when I was younger my family from my mother's side, when I visited Java they brought me to a mosque to pray. And when I come here to Bali I would go to the Hindu temple to pray. Traditional Balinese they are really connected with daily cultural activities. When I went to Jogjakarta for 13 years - to study, and I had my studio based there – I felt comfortable because I had 24 hours my time to manage on my own. So when I met Mintio in Jogja, I don't see it as much different in terms of cultural background. But when I visited Singapore, I had ... a challenge to fit. Everything's really efficient in Singapore, but my work as an artist is not a "profession" there.



Mintio & Kabul, image from "The Wax On Our Fingers" series, cyanotype and wax on cotton.

Mintio: We are facing transnational issues in terms of Visas, and I think that's the biggest thing that we've been working out the entire of our parenting and family life. Reflecting on my own cultural identity, I see myself very much of an outcome of migration. I'm born to an immigrant family of Southern Chinese and, you know, this is not my land. Whereas in Bali, Kabul has his ancestral hall, and all the lineages and histories attached to the land. I'm this kind of floating entity. Kabul really has that status as a third-culture child, by having mixed parentage. So I'm wondering what's gonna be in it for [our daughter] Ning, as a third-culture kid.

In a sense, what we want to establish for our child is that you can be at home anywhere. You can be anything you define yourself to be. But of course that also involves a lot of scaffolding – it has to be very conscious and aware. So even as a very young child I talked to her about “What's the difference between your cultural identity, your nationality? What does it mean? Who are you?” Because these questions get thrown to her a lot in school here: in Singapore you are believed to have this very singular identity: you're either Malay, Indian, Chinese, or “Other.”

What grounds us culturally is art. We see art as that binding force in our family. That allows us to exist anywhere as a family – being nomadic, you know, we build our own kind of network as a family, creative community around the world. Kabul and I have a practice that, whatever we make, it has to fit into our luggage. Or it could be rolled or folded. That constraint gives a certain kind of liberty to where we can show – it has shaped the medium of our works. Ever since that we work a lot with tapestry, textiles, anything that can be folded. It could even be something that you could wear onto the flight, you know, like a really big jacket. The installation was about 100 meters square, but we fit everything into a self-bought bag that Kabul could take onto the flight.



CR: This cultural complexity informs your collaborative work. I know you work both separately and also together. Could you talk about that?

Mintio: We have our joint practice and we have our individual practices, and they are quite different. When we come together, we quite naturally turn to address the issues we are facing together. I think my own work is quite acultural because it's quite technical. But Kabul... recently it's become more cultural, but previously it focused more on socio-political issues.



Kabul: Yes, because my situation here also relates to... cultural consequences. Because my mother is Javanese and my father is Balinese from a certain caste, things happened to me as a child that didn't allow me to carry that caste. So when I am younger, this gives me a different treatment. For example, I can't share a cup with my family. In the beginning I see this treatment as something that really makes me sad. But after studying in university I moved to Jogjakarta, and I come to see this as a kind of freedom. I was able to see Bali more clearly, looking back. I start to learn about history, how Balinese culture formed. When I'm in Jogja I'm exploring social issues. Now that I'm back, I work closely with historical material and cultural practices that I tweak with my own understanding. For traditional Balinese they can't do this, because it's against their beliefs.

Mintio: Together we run an art organization called Ketemu Project in Bali. Ketemu means "to meet," so basically what we are doing is we are meeting each other. Katemu is this... other thing, so it's everyday work that people can connect to in Indonesia.

In our residency program, we have a family-in-residence, where we create the infrastructure to support entire families. That came from our experience being in residence at Bamboo Curtain Studios in Taiwan. We were invited as a family, so that was wonderful. Other than everybody being very welcoming, there were things like high chairs, open spaces for her to run around. Being with a child wasn't a taboo conversation. We would bring her to all our shows, all our workshops - she was always there. So it didn't seem like our parenting lives were separate from us throughout the entire residency.

We realized that ever since we became parents, we'd been cut off from many residency opportunities. Most residencies expect you to go alone for extended periods of time. You cannot bring a spouse – you definitely cannot bring a child. We find that framework really challenging for artists holding caregiving identities, and it defines artists in a really narrow way. So we were inspired and motivated to further support families through our own residency program, to support artists more holistically.



**Budi Agung Kuswara (Kabul),
"The Grateful Society," cyanotype
and ink on cotton paper**

CR: How did your practice change when you had a child?

Kabul: For me, what had to change is having to adjust to the idea of being a parent in Singapore. I never worked in an office, or worked for other people before. Luckily, my in-laws slowly accept me, but in the beginning, they asked me to find a job [there]. I tried to do that. I spent two years for experiment. I didn't come up with artwork that was final or ready. Sometimes I can say this artwork is "done," just to make myself happy – but I realized this is not maximal. This was a really important process as a step to develop my work now.

The biggest thing after having kids is, What art really can do, beyond the object? To achieve this we can't work alone. Ketemu is the infrastructure to support this vision. And what art can do, especially in this pandemic situation... the challenge in Bali is that the largest industries are shut down and no tourists can come, so what can we do? When we talk about art and creativity, it's becoming more and more relevant to social challenges. Ketemu can be a tool and it can also be a legacy. I adjust as someone who has to take care of other people outside of myself. I enjoy parenting very much. Since our daughter was born until she is 3, 4 years, I'm the one who gives her bath every day. Because that's how, here in Bali, parents take care. It was really rare for my circle here to have helpers to take care of their kids. But I think it will be different for Mintio.



Mintio photographing batik artisans for "The Wax on Our Fingers"

Mintio: I think parenthood really changed a lot. Prior to having our child, I was very much a career artist – I would do shows pretty regularly, I could draw regular income from my work. But that work was also very physically strenuous. The conditions of production, even on a logistical basis, are so different. I still have not managed to resolve it.

I photograph predominantly with the large format [camera], so I had all this really huge gear and I'd walk for hours, work alone for days at a time, with very little human interaction. Through my pregnancy I sustained a bad back injury that I'm still dealing with now, and I had to hire an assistant to carry my gear for me. It became very clear that this mode of production might not be able to sustain itself. The cost of hiring an assistant long term, and of production itself, was so high that I started to have that mindset of comparing the sheets of film that I will use to diaper money or milk powder money. And that held back... I didn't have that same degree of experimentation that I had while being single. It became a mental block.

So what was continuing to drive my work was collaborations with Kabul. There were times when we would fight, and I would wish I could just go back to my own personal practice. But there's also many wonderful, magical things that came out of it. We were able to travel together as a family, like the Bamboo Curtain residency. That was where the art community recognized our joint practice, and were able to give us opportunities based on that.

In Singapore I face a lot of discrimination for being an artist and a mother at the same time. When I was expecting, I applied for a scholarship to pursue my Masters. Having higher education beyond a Bachelors has always been my dream. I got good responses from the University, and got scholarships on the other end, but I needed scholarship here. The final round of interviewing came one, two weeks after I gave birth to her. I remember that day. It was pouring rain, I had to leave Kabul and Ning at home and went for my interview. The interview was scheduled to be around 3pm, and it ran late... it didn't begin until 6pm, and I didn't pump enough milk for her. When I got home, he was carrying her around and she was just crying. I was in tears, it was raining, it was really bad.

But what added to the whole negativity of my experience was that the whole interview became about my motherhood. When I came in, everybody clapped. And I was like “Why are you clapping?” And they said “You just gave birth, didn’t you?” And I was like “Yes...but what does that have to do with this interview?” (laughter) I was pretty anxious already, having left Kabul and Ning alone for so long. Lets get right to it. This male panelist said, “You just gave birth. What makes you think you can study?” Another male panelist was just sitting across from me doing this the whole time (leans on hand with a troubled expression, shaking her head). What they just couldn’t figure out was, how could you go do your Masters when you just had a child? It wasn’t information I gave in the application. I wasn’t being evaluated for my ability as an artist - more on the disability that I would face. I couldn’t believe that half the time of the interview I had to defend that. In the end I didn’t get the scholarship. I’ve always been quite stimulated by the academic setting – it’s a place I want to be. But I don’t even think that I could go beyond a Bachelors now, with all the challenges.



CR: It’s a little shocking how many people still assume a woman will stop her career once she becomes a mother, even if you’re actively parenting together with a partner.

Mintio: I’m very fortunate that my earlier works have still been circulating, going around to shows, globally. But I have not managed to make anything new, besides our joint works. There’s always this pressure as an artist that you need to constantly make new work to validate yourself. But only now, in the case of the pandemic, do I tell myself “It’s okay not to make work! It’s okay to take a pause. It doesn’t mean you won’t make work in the future.” There’s the anxiety of being forgotten by your collectors, that the art world will think you’re not active anymore and hence exclude you from any opportunities.

Shortly after the interview, I was at a festival opening, the Singapore International Photography Festival. There was a curator there that I really respected. He introduced me to some other guy as “This is Mintio, but she’s not very active now because she just had a child.” I didn’t know what to say. All these microaggressions, they ate into my self-esteem as an artist. When I was awarded a commission, I questioned myself. All my negotiations felt asymmetrical, and it became really unhealthy. It doesn’t seem to impact male artists in this way. They wouldn’t go up to a male artist and say “oh this is so and so, but he just had a kid, so of course he hasn’t been producing work.”

CR: Are there any artists you’ve been able to look to, examples of how to make it work as artists and parents?

Mintio: I did a lot of research, actually. I went to a lot of symposiums where mothers talked about what could be done. There was one artist who said “bring your child to work,” and there were all these tips being dropped. But the ability to do all of that comes with a lot of privilege. Our family is quite modest financially. We can't afford a caregiver or a helper, which I'm actually very thankful for. All these mothers being able to incorporate their kids, to have it all, there's all this privilege that you don't see. Maybe they have a hedge fund, or they draw rental income (laughter). So as much as earlier on there were parenting artists I want to emulate, in the end my earlier models were like “pffff” [makes a gesture of something going up in smoke].



Kabul and team molding banana fibers with Mintio's photographic prints into sail forms for "The Currents We Call Home."

Kabul: After we had Ning, we have been doing much more community-based work. We actually take care of many, many more people. So for me, it's been about activating my instincts of taking care. Maybe it will mean adding additional staff that I will have to deal with, but when I look at it as a life, something that I just enjoy – our lives have this perspective by seeing what I can do, and I can learn from other artists in the same way. For me this is all natural. I don't actually compare them. I really learn a lot, taking care of more people after we have kids.

Mintio: Instead of having this tangible end product, we think about how we can actually shape society in a certain way. It's all about changing mindsets and perspectives. Our recent project has been about disability and mental health. It was not a physical work that we could sell -- the work was about how we could impact our own communities. I don't know if you feel this way, but being a parent makes us aware of our own mortality. Like, what's going to happen to Ning if I die? And it also makes us think about our legacies: What do I want to leave behind? For a lot of families in Singapore it would be like, I want to leave behind excess: a house, some money for my children... but for us it is quite clear that we don't want to leave behind all that. So very clearly our work now is that we want to be able to leave behind a society that Ning could thrive in, where she can be herself and feel accepted.

