

Albert Yonathan Setyawan

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Contemplating the material and metaphysical embodiment of clay

By Yvonne Wang



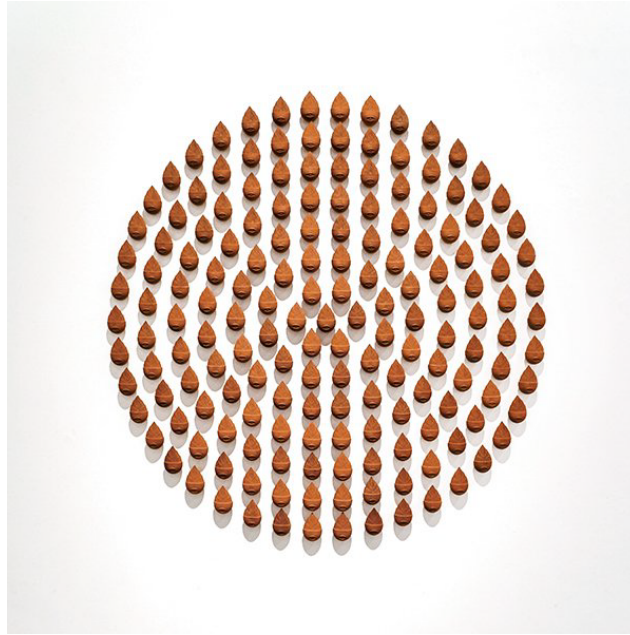
Albert Yonathan Setyawan, 'Helios', 2017, ceramic, 900 x 500cm (2,002 pieces), dimensions variable. Exhibition view at Mori Art Museum. Photo by Kiozu Keizo. Image courtesy of Mori Art Museum.

The beginning of Albert Yonathan Setyawan's career as an artist coincided with a rupture from his Christian upbringing. The trauma of his mother's untimely death during his first year in university left an open wound in the young artist. He found himself increasingly at odds with the dualistic worldview of his evangelical background which divided reality into two realms: the spiritual and the material. By the time he received his BFA in Ceramics in 2007 from Bandung Institute of Technology, Indonesia, he felt exhausted mentally and spiritually. "I left the church and just wanted to focus on being an artist," said Setyawan, in conversation from his studio in Tokyo.

In his search for meaning and purpose to his artistic practice, Setyawan chanced upon discourses on Buddhism through the Theosophical Society, an esoteric organisation that promotes open-minded inquiry into world religions and philosophy. He took up meditation practice, experimenting with different styles and techniques. His encounters with Eastern religious and philosophical thought would significantly inform his studio practice.

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Albert Yonathan Setyawan, 'Chrysopoeia', 2018, terracotta (127 pieces), 115 x 115cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Gallery.



Multiple terracotta objects next to slip-casting molds in Albert Yonathan Setyawan's studio in Tokyo, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Gallery.

Setyawan is a multimedia artist who uses clay, an organic and pliant material that is rich in history, as his primary medium. His creative process for ceramics begins with doing rather than thinking. He makes clay objects that reference organic and man-made symbols, traditional ornaments, and historical sites across diverse cultural and religious traditions, reflecting his syncretic sensibility. He challenges the perceived boundary between art and craft, high and low culture, through his deliberate use of slip-casting, a low-cost method of manufacturing ceramics into complex shape. He produces vast quantities of ostensibly identical, palm-sized, low-fired ceramic objects, sometimes in the hundreds and thousands, and arranges them into intricate geometrical configurations that frequently resemble the mandala structure.



Albert Yonathan Setyawan, *'Cosmic Labyrinth: The Bells'*, 2011, terracotta, approximately 250 x 250cm, dimensions variable. Exhibition view at the 'Biennale Jogja XI', Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Image courtesy of Biennale Jogja XI.

The mandala, meaning “circle” in Sanskrit, is a symbolic representation of the universe, wholeness, and unity. It appears in various cultural and spiritual traditions, particularly in Hinduism and Buddhism. Embodied in the definition of mandala is the concept of movement or change that Setyawan probes in his work. In *'Cosmic Labyrinth: The Bells'* (2011-2012), he arranged hundreds of terracotta bells in mandala-like formations on the floor. The installation was featured in several shows including the 'Biennale Jogja XI 2011' in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. In the final staging of the work, he smashed the bells with a hammer, thus, in his own words, “freeing the mandala from its binding”. It reflects the artist's preoccupation with the transient nature of existence and our evolving relationship with the physical world.



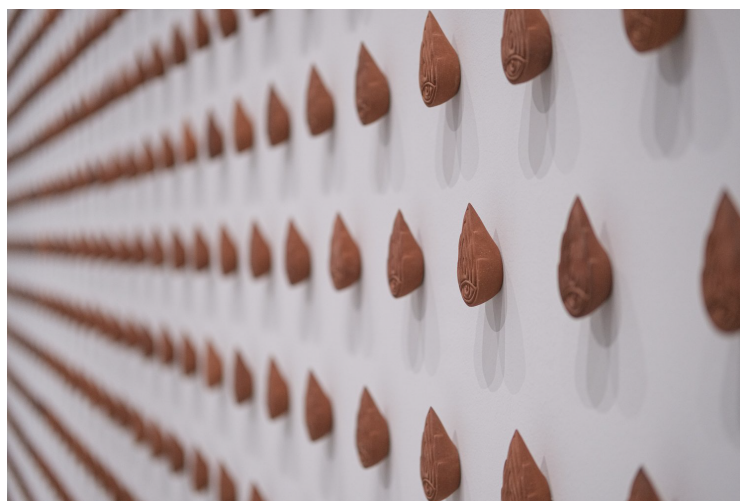
Albert Yonathan Setyawan, *'Cosmic Labyrinth: The Bells'* (Performance), 2012, terracotta, approximately 250 x 250cm, dimensions variable. Exhibition view at Galeri Soemardja, Bandung. Image courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Gallery.

Influenced by French phenomenological thinker Gaston Bachelard, whose work explores the poetic or imaginative dimensions of our relationship with objects and spaces, Setyawan similarly believes in the power of objects to bring about inner transformation. Repetition is a salient device he employs to provoke shifts in perception, bridging the dualistic gulfs between the sacred and the profane. By making the same object over and over, he transforms the repetition of action into a meditative practice. In so doing, he also challenges the conventional subject-object dyad in art-making by blurring the distinction between subject/maker and object/product. Like Bachelard, Setyawan does not view our interactions with objects as static. "I've been making ceramics for 15 years thinking that I am the subject that makes the object, but then it dawned on me that it's actually the opposite," the artist explains.

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Albert Yonathan Setyawan, 'Cosmic Labyrinth: The Bells', 2011, terracotta, approximately 250 x 250cm, dimensions variable. Exhibition view at the 'Biennale Jogja XI', Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Image courtesy of Biennale Jogja XI.



Albert Yonathan Setyawan, 'Infinitude', 2022, terracotta, 400 x 1700 x 3cm (2552 pieces). Image courtesy of Mind Set Art Center, Taiwan.

Viewed individually, his small clay objects evoke an immediate sense of closeness and intimacy. Yet, in a large-scale agglomeration, they induce a sense of ineffability that intimate grander revelations. Large installations like 'Helios' (2017), composed of 2,000 ceramic objects individually handcrafted by the artist and spanning the entire gallery wall, have the capacity to overwhelm viewers and draw them in. They evince at once the immense labour, mental and physical, involved in their undertaking. Setyawan is seduced by the immediacy of clay – the way the tactile medium responds directly to the hands. "When you look at each object closely, you realise that they are all different," he remarks. "That's the beauty of it. The fact that they are different is because every single one of them came through my hands." He sees clay as an extension of the human body because it so readily captures the tactile consciousness of the maker, rendering each touch present and palpable.

Perfectly captured in Setyawan's work is French theorist Gilles Deleuze's concepts of repetition and difference. According to Deleuze, repetition is not mere duplication but involves variations and differences. Setyawan is similarly drawn to the internal multiplicity and variation within each object. "I'm interested in the idea of using my body as a machine to produce the same thing over and over again", shares the artist. "I try as hard as I can to achieve the same results but obviously, I fail because I can't make them the same each time." He gives the example of the straight lines in American painter Agnes Martin's work to illustrate that even when something appears to be repeated, there are always differences that make each repetition unique. For Setyawan, sameness and difference are not binary oppositions but expressions of the same underlying reality.



Albert Yonathan Setyawan, 'Cosmic Labyrinth: A Silent Pathway', 2013, terracotta, 700 x 700 x 30cm (1,200 pieces). Exhibition view at the Indonesian Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale. Image courtesy of the artist and Bumi Punarti.

Setyawan's employment of restricted palettes, geometric elements, modularity, serial arrangements, and common material in the form of terracotta shows an affinity towards the visual strategies of Minimalism. However, he disagrees with the perceived diminishing role of the artist and the art object that the movement has heralded. It is not hard to see why he cites Wolfgang Laib as an influence. The German artist creates installations with raw materials like pollen and beeswax that he painstakingly collects from the countryside near his home. His ritualistic and intensely focused art-making process seem to parallel Setyawan's practice. Like Laib, Setyawan is interested in the physical encounter with the materiality of the world and how it shapes our consciousness. It is through repeated action that the spiritual reality of Setyawan's work becomes embedded in its materiality. Rather than being separate, the sacred and the profane are, in fact, two sides of the same coin.

[Click here](#) to read the full interview between Yvonne Wang and Albert Yonathan Setyawan as part of Mizuma Conversations.

Setyawan's upcoming exhibition, 'Capturing Silence', will be held at the Jogja National Museum in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, from 6 October to 5 November 2023. Curated by the artist, the survey exhibition will feature more than 90 works spanning 15 years of his artistic practice. **[Click here](#)** to know more.