

Arts

This artist discovered a way to turn ocean trash into treasure

Visit a re-creation of Ari Bayuaji's studio at the Biosphère in Montreal



[Leah Collins](#) · CBC Arts · Posted: Nov 27, 2023 5:15 PM EST | Last Updated: November 28, 2023



Artist Ari Bayuaji is photographed with a piece from his ongoing series, Weaving the Ocean. His work is the subject of an exhibit appearing at Montreal's Biosphère through September 2024. (Courtesy of Ari Bayuaji)

Earlier this year, Ari Bayuaji packed up the contents of his studio in Bali and shipped it to Montreal. There, bit by bit, the artist re-built his workshop inside the Biosphère, the science museum that occupies one of the most iconic structures in the city: the Expo '67 dome.

The artist's re-created studio is appearing there as part of an exhibit that opened on Saturday, and the space reveals a lot about Bayuaji's personality — even if you only see it in pictures.

The installation is filled with wooden carvings, big and small — heaps of green glass, beach rocks, sun-blached coral. Bayuaji is, by all appearances, a collector. But it's his most unusual collection that inspired the art project he's best known for, Weaving the Ocean.



Ari Bayuaji. Installation view of *The Offerings (Through the winds and waves)*, 2021-2023. (Courtesy of Biosphère)

Bayuaji is a collector of plastic fishing rope — beach trash, really — material that he transforms into textile works and tapestries. Several pieces from his *Weaving the Ocean* series are now installed at Biosphère, curated by the museum's Julie Belisle.

In some works, Bayuaji uses the rope as-is; it's knotted like macramé — occasionally strung from other reclaimed objects such as weathered oars or branches.

But it's especially beautiful when it doesn't appear to be rope at all. With the help of weavers Bayuaji met in Bali, he developed a method of transforming found plastic twine into a uniquely iridescent fabric. Photographs don't accurately capture its lustre, but his tapestries tend to suggest an abstract ocean landscape — a nod to the work's origins on the beaches of Sanur, Bali.



Ari Bayuaji. Installation view of *The Offerings (Through the winds and waves)*, 2021-2023. (Courtesy of Biosphère)

Born in Indonesia, Bayuaji worked as a civil engineer before moving to Montreal in 2005 to study art at Concordia University. To continue working on *Weaving the Ocean*, he now splits his time between Canada and Bali. But during the early part of the pandemic, he found himself stuck on the Indonesian island indefinitely.

Bayuaji had travelled there in late 2019 to prepare for an art exhibition, but wound up stranded when the borders closed due to COVID-19.

"I had nothing to do," Bayuaji tells CBC Arts. "I had no exhibition, nothing. So I just decided to go to the beach every day."

Even before the lockdown, Bayuaji would take daily walks, noting things he'd see on the shore. Bundles of plastic fishing rope were a common sight. It would become snarled around mangrove trees along the beach, and over time, the tangles would act like nets — catching even more garbage, and threatening to pull the trees out from their roots.



An example of the colourful fishing rope (among other things) that Ari Bayuaji collects from the beach in Bali. (Courtesy of Ari Bayuaji)

When COVID-19 hit, the beach trash began to accumulate even more. Pre-pandemic, the sand was cleaned every morning by the local hotels and resorts. But with no tourists, all those operations had shut down. So with nothing better to do, Bayuaji would aimlessly clear the beach himself, gathering piles of rope.

His hobby caught the attention of locals, many of whom were suddenly desperate for work. "Almost everyone in Bali depends on the tourism industry," says Bayuaji, so he hired a few assistants, paying them out of his own savings.

"I had no idea what I was going to do with the plastic rope after we cleaned it, but then by accident, I saw how rich and how beautiful the colours were."



Bayuaji was curious whether the rope could be made into fabric somehow, so he hired a neighbour who ran a weaving workshop, Desak Nyoman Rai.

A loom isn't designed to weave fabric from gnarled plastic thread, so producing even a small patch of fabric proved to be a massive challenge. Still, what she created sparked Bayuaji's imagination, and the two began working together daily, piecing together the process that would become foundational to Weaving the Ocean.

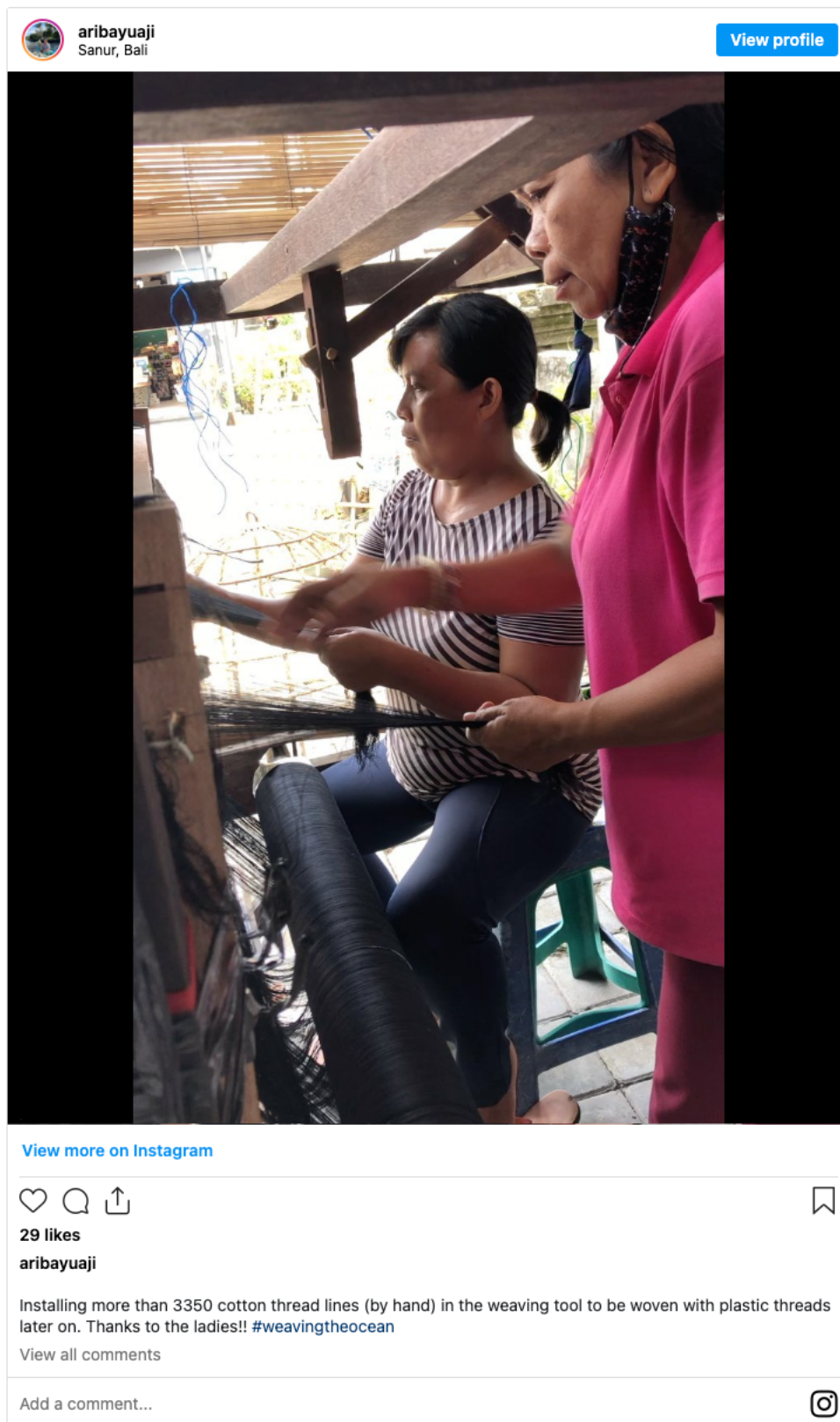
About that: their method involves days of hard labour. When you're working with literal garbage, there's going to be a lot of cleaning involved, and when Bayuaji finds ropes on the beach, they're washed right on site — first in the ocean, and then again at his workshop using second-hand water from washing machines or whatever's available. "We don't want to spend too much fresh water," he says.



Once it's cleaned and dried, the rope must be unravelled. That's all done by hand. And because the threads are rarely long enough to be strung onto the loom as-is, they're knotted together and then rolled onto spools (read: repurposed water bottles).

After all of that, the thread is ready for the loom, and Bayuaji collaborates with the weavers, outlining his vision for the fabric's colour composition and dimensions. He later embellishes the tapestries, often drawing designs in thread, or adding small found objects or textural swatches of fabric.

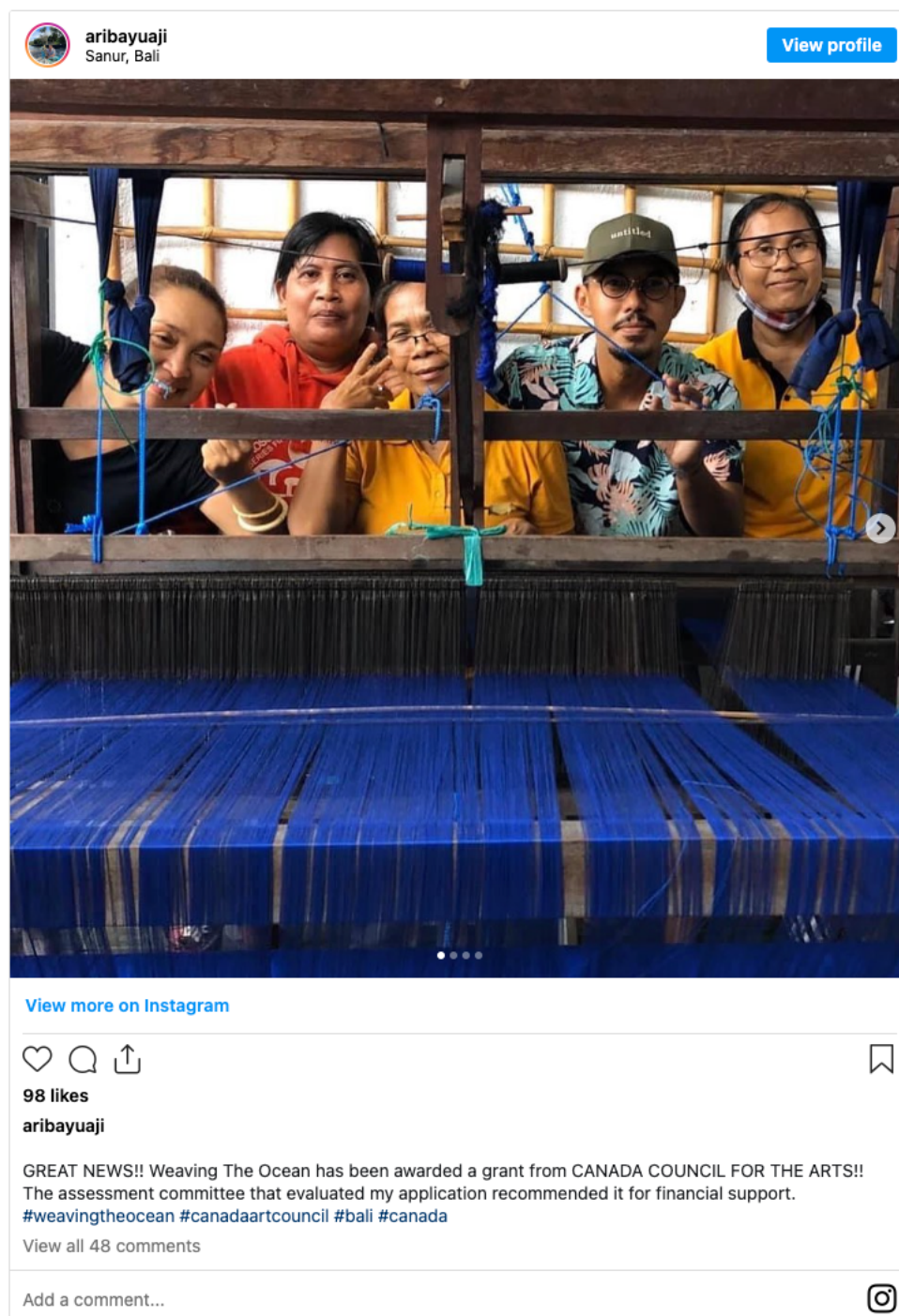
"Basically, the textile is imitating painting work, like abstraction," says Bayuaji. "It's all about the materials. I really want people to realize that readymade objects — found plastic ropes — can be transformed into something really, really high art."



As part of the exhibit happening at Biosphère, visitors may soon have a chance to unravel the plastic rope themselves. A rep for the museum says they're planning to include a hands-on activity inside the exhibit, and Bayuaji will be there to lead a workshop on March 2. (Further info is to be announced. Check the museum's calendar for information.)

The exhibit was developed with support from the Canada Council's Explore and Create program, and grants have kept Weaving the Ocean afloat since its second year, says Bayuaji. He's responsible for a team of 20 in Bali, 12 of whom are full-time assistants: people who collect, clean, unravel and weave the rope.

"I funded the project myself for almost a year, until my savings were completely empty," says Bayuaji. Now represented by galleries in Japan, Singapore and Canada, he hopes the sale of Weaving the Ocean artworks will keep the project sustainable in the long term.



He's careful to frame Weaving the Ocean as an art project, first and foremost — one that's also keeping local weaving traditions alive. Weaving, as a trade, is often undervalued in Bali, which has made younger generations hesitant to keep the tradition going.

"With the community — with my weavers, my assistants in Bali — I always talk about this as an art project," said Bayuaji. "I don't want them to treat what we are doing as a kind of factory."

"I'm very transparent with them about how we market the artworks," said Bayuaji. "Telling them how the art business works, people — they're very happy to work on this project and they can value themselves highly."

Beyond the current show in Montreal, which will be up until September 2024, Bayuaji is already working on two more international exhibitions of Weaving the Ocean. He'll bring the project to the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial in Australia next year, and he's preparing a solo exhibition for the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo for 2025.

Its popularity around the world is perhaps no surprise. Weaving the Ocean taps into craft traditions native to Bali, but Bayuaji says its themes are applicable to every country on the planet. "I want people to be inspired by their surroundings," says the artist. At its core, the work is a story about transformation and finding the potential for something beautiful, even in the middle of a crisis.

Weaving the Ocean: In Ari Bayuaji's Studio. Biosphère, Montreal. To Sept. 8, 2024. www.espace-pourlavie.ca