



Features

AWDB SPOTLIGHT: Interview with Albert Yonathan Setyawan

AWDB speaks to Indonesian artist Albert Yonathan Setyawan on the occasion of his current solo exhibition at Tumurun Museum in Surakarta, Indonesia, titled ‘Transitory Nature of Earthly Joy’.

The exhibition progresses from his survey show ‘Capturing Silence’, held last year at Jogjakarta National Museum (JNM), and the title is taken from one of the works shown in the earlier presentation. The exhibition centers on the idea of transition, transformation, impermanence and the materiality of clay, and presents 12 new works created from raw clay, compost soil, seeds, plants, terracotta, and other organic materials.

Setyawan’s work underscores the notion of form that is progressively being transformed by natural conditions into something that is impermanent and unpredictable. The always-evolving nature of the works peacefully summons the sense of transience in nature, which he considers to be contrary to the established qualities of ceramic-making—that is to attain the “permanent” characteristics of the material for either technical or aesthetic means.

Would you please describe for us the artworks you are presenting for this exhibition?

There are 12 works presented in this exhibition. Nine of them are objects made of earthenware clay, organic compost, and various seeds contained in nine individual glass cases. The other three are ceramic (terracotta) installations. The majority of the objects are replicas of urns, altar sets and ancestral tablets, or name plates, commonly found in Chinese religious or spiritual practices. Serving as the central focus of the exhibition, all the clay objects can be seen as living metaphors that speak of the idea of embodied time. I am fascinated by the question of time and how time can be made concrete in a process that involves growth, and that will make the physical state of the work gradually change over the course of the exhibi-

tion. Another work in the exhibition that also speaks about the transitory nature of matter is the terracotta work called 'Annica: Statues'. The work is a result of the process of replicating one individual object (found object) through a slip-casting technique using plaster mold. There is only one mold being used to reproduce the object indefinitely. Because of the repeated act of slip casting, the interior of the mold slowly begins to degrade and loses all the details and the identity of the object, slowly and gradually transforming the object into being unrecognisable. I am trying to look at how these ideas of impermanence, embodied time, and living metaphors can be translated into different contexts by choosing different objects to be replicated that may generate different associations in the audiences' mind.



'Transitory Nature of Earthly Joy' (Karekimata Project). Photo courtesy of the Artist

You have exhibited similar works in the past that “grow organically”, for example, in 2018 at the ‘Karekimata Project’ as part of Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale 2018. How does this exhibition differ from that presentation and others? =

This project differs from the ‘Karekimata Project’ in several aspects; one of them that is the most recognisable is in the type of objects I chose to replicate. In ‘Karekimata Project’, it was a set of early farming tools from prehistoric Japan where the agricultural technique of growing rice was developed. This time around, I chose to make replicas of objects related to Chinese religious practice, or spiritual beliefs.



'Transitory Nature of Earthly Joy' installation at Tumurun Museum. Photography by Angga Bakti Efendy, courtesy of Tumurun Museum

How did you choose the seeds and plants, and other materials for this exhibition? Are they different for each installation and/or do they vary from show to show, depending on any environmental, or cultural factors?

They are always different in each iteration depending on the context and specific themes I want to address. Most of the seeds are aquatic plant seeds, such as water clover and under-water grass, that are meant to be grown in a very wet and humid environment. There are also ferns that I have collected from the surrounding area of the museum, transplanted into some of the clay objects.

Your clay works contain harmony in their uniformity. When creating these uniform and repetitious works, would you share with us how the meditative experience is for you, as the artist and give us an example of how this body of work embodies your own spirituality and culture?

In my experience so far, the works are always seen as meditative as the final result in a gallery setting, and yet during the process of developing it in the studio, it always feels very "normal", meaning that it is just like any other type of work that requires repeated action. I have never felt that the process is highly meditative in a studio setting or in a gallery setting, such as these clay works that have to be made in-situ.

I myself don't see my work as spiritual. To me it has always been about my fascination with the materiality of clay, about matters and physical substances and how they react with each other and inspire our imagination to forms metaphors. I think our being in the world is complex and fascinating enough without any sort of faith and religious or spiritual beliefs.



'Transitory Nature of Earthly Joy' installation at Tumurun Museum. Photography by Angga Bakti Efendy, courtesy of Tumurun Museum

What message do you hope to communicate to the viewers with this body of work?

I am never aware that there is a sort of “message” to communicate through the work. I always see my work as a way to reflect on some philosophical issues regarding our being in the world. I see my practice as a form of thinking through making.

'Transitory Nature of Earthly Joy' is on at Tumurun Museum in Surakarta, Indonesia from 7 June 2024 to 25 January 2025. For more information, please [click here](#).

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