

CULTURE / ART

Artist Ari Bayuaji materializes monsters from ocean plastic



Ari Bayuaji's artwork of the benevolent Bali god Barong is on display in a glass case on the ground floor of Hollywood Beauty Plaza. | JOHAN BROOKS

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Ari Bayuaji is utterly sincere when he leans in and says, "I'm very lucky to know what my purpose is in this life: to heal other people."

I don't get the impression that the 50-year-old Indonesian artist means something so banal as healing people through his art, but rather something much more direct, and at the same time, deep-reaching.

Speaking to me in a low-lit cafe in Tokyo's Roppongi area, Bayuaji cuts a compact, trim figure in round glasses and a cap, energetic with an easy smile. When we meet, his work is about to be installed in Roppongi Hills as part of the three-day Roppongi Art Night, and will stay up after the event closes, until Oct. 5.

On display in a glass case on the ground floor of Hollywood Beauty Plaza sits the benevolent Bali god Barong. His beard of green and blue threads is framed by a wild mane of bright yellow and orange, which drapes down over the white pedestal. Three-hundred-fifty kilometers away, in a dark former rice mill in Toyama as part of craft and contemporary art festival Go for Kogei, sits his nemesis, Rangda. "Barong is the good spirit and Rangda is the bad spirit. They're always having a fight," says Bayuaji, with an air of mischief. "At the moment, I'm very happy that both of them are in Japan."



"One-Eyed Rangda" is a mixed-media, roughly human-sized sculpture with an impressive coif of what appears to be colored thread but is, in fact, plastic. | JOHAN BROOKS



Ari Bayuaji employs Indonesian locals to gather and prepare the materials for his series "Weaving the Ocean." | JOHAN BROOKS

"One-Eyed Rangda" is a mixed-media, roughly human-sized sculpture with an impressive coif of what appears to be colored thread but is, in fact, plastic. In Balinese lore, Rangda is the queen of witches and a bringer of plagues. At the beginning of the pandemic, says Bayuaji, police in Bali wore Rangda masks to convey the danger of the COVID-19 virus.

Around the same time, he was walking the deserted beaches near his hotel in Bali, where he encountered two common sights: tangles of plastic choking mangrove forests and people out of work due to the pandemic. Bayuaji, a lover of found objects and the son of active community members, envisioned a new project.

In exchange for rice and money, he asked people to help him collect, clean and unravel the plastic ropes and nets from fishing boats that were getting caught in the root systems. Once

the ropes have been cut, they can't be reused, and Bayuaji could see that the thick blue and green cords, once unwound, contained bright colors inside. This is by design: The brighter hues signal quickly to boat crew that a rope has been damaged — but Bayuaji saw in the ropes' function their potential as a material for art. He repurposed the found plastic to create large woven pieces using traditional weaving techniques and built two likenesses of the witch demon for what would become his ongoing series "Weaving the Ocean."

"Rangda is almost like plastic," he says. "They'll both haunt us."



Ari Bayuaji's artworks were exhibited in Tokyo as part of the three-day Roppongi Art Night and will stay up after the event closes, until Oct. 5. | JOHAN BROOKS

Bayuaji, who splits his time between Montreal and Bali, has been something of a magpie all his life. Growing up in east Java's Mojokerto, he and his younger brother played on riverbanks where the 14th-century Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit kingdom once sat, buying found objects — glass beads, ceramics, terracotta — off of people collecting them.

"My father always told us, 'Money is everywhere.' So we didn't feel poor," he says.

Bayuaji studied civil engineering as an undergraduate, but on a formative trip to Germany, he was dazzled by the works of Paul Klee. Two years later, burnt out, he left his job in Bali and headed to Canada to study art.

But five years later, just a few classes away from graduating from Montreal's Concordia University, he quit his degree. "I read about Marilyn Monroe that she never finished school. She always felt that she would live more," he says. "It's very good that we feel incomplete because we will be more curious."

Bayuaji's father was a junior high teacher with a fondness for Japanese culture and his mother was a businesswoman. The two were active members in their community; they helped put other children through school who couldn't afford it, and Bayuaji's father volunteered to teach two days a week at a new school that couldn't afford to hire him. Perhaps that's why a sense of civic duty runs through Bayuaji and his artwork.

When he first decided to give up engineering for art, his mother said, “If with your job, you can work like a teacher or doctor, giving direct impact to the people around you... if you can do that with your art, you’ll be successful.”



Bayuaji’s work shows a desire to actively support the people around him. | JOHAN BROOKS

Bayuaji’s current practice is more like a small enterprise, led not by profit but by his desire to actively support the people around him. It’s art for work’s sake. In many ways, he seems to focus more on the people involved and the materials than the end result.

“I didn’t know what to do with the plastic to be honest,” he says of the early days of “Weaving the Ocean.” “I decided, ‘Let’s just continue.’ For me, the most important thing is to keep them working as long as possible.”

Bayuaji collaborates with Desak Nyoman Rai, who has been doing traditional Javanese weaving for decades. The two of them worked to figure out how to turn the thick plastic cords into something that could be woven in a loom. Another seven people work full-time and eight part-time to clean and unravel the plastic.



“One-Eyed Rangda” will be on display at Go for Kogei 2025 in Toyama, until Oct. 19. | JOHAN BROOKS

Bayuaji is decidedly not a minimal packer, moving around with loose found objects, like a small rock he picked up when he was 9 or 10, which he says looks like a monkey head, or a big plastic rope he found on the beach in Vancouver in 2008. Bayuaji waits for things to reveal their potential. “The material always tells me what to do,” he says.

He says that deep engagement with process and material is in part why he’s long felt an affinity with Japanese culture. When he was a child, his father, who taught Bayuaji about bonsai, kimono and Japanese gardens, told him, “Before you make art, you have to love your materials. You have to make a kind of romance with your materials.”

With his works on view in Japan now, says Bayuaji, “It’s like my artworks are going home.”

Ari Bayuaji’s works are on display at Hollywood Beauty Plaza in Roppongi, until Oct. 5 and Go for Kogei in Toyama City, until Oct. 19. For more information, visit roppongiartnight.com/2025/en/programs/1707 and goforkogei.com/en.
