

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH AHMAD ABU BAKAR AND IOLA LENZI

Tanah Ini Ku Punya (Land/Earth I Owned) (2012)

Presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

As part of Visual Arts

31 Aug – 30 Sep 2012, Jendela (Visual Arts Space)

Notice:

This interview was published in the programme booklet for *Tanah Ini Ku Punya (Land/Earth I Owned)* in 2012.

Minor edits have been made for clarity.

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Tanah Ini Ku Punya (Land/Earth I Owned) is an art exhibition by artist, Ahmad Abu Bakar (Singapore).

It was exhibited at the Jendela (Visual Arts Space), from 31 Aug – 30 Sep 2012.

Project Tanah, a new multi-media installation by Ahmad Abu Bakar

For *Celebrating Life*, the Esplanade has commissioned a new work by Singapore artist Ahmad Abu Bakar for the centre's Jendela space. Bakar, whose practice has evolved over more than two decades, works extensively with ceramics to make often large-scale installations. For Jendela, the artist has created *Project Tanah*, a site-specific, gallery-scale intervention that combines three media, fired ceramic, photography, and video projection. In July 2012, Singapore critic and curator Iola Lenzi discussed *Project Tanah* with Ahmad Abu Bakar.

Iola Lenzi (IL): For your new work *Project Tanah*, conceptualised for the Esplanade's Jendela space, you combine a number of different media. Please can you explain which is used in each of your installation's six parts (Works 1-6), and specifically why these media have been selected.

Ahmad Abu Bakar (AAB): For Work 1, I show a photograph of a paddy field, the piece of land I inherited from my parents. Next to this, I position three sets of ceramic objects that have a cloud/organic look. This project started with Malay texts *INI TANAH AKU PUNYA*, 'the Land that I owned', and *INI TANAH AKU BELI*, 'the clay that I bought'. So with this work I explore these two ideas with a photograph and porcelain forms.

Work 2 is a wall installation that includes 3 components: a photograph of a cloud being divided into 5 sections; 5 organic-shaped porcelain objects; 5 ceramic tiles that are inscribed with Malay text. With this work titled *Antara Langit Dan Bumi* or 'Between the Sky & Earth', I examine the reality of myself as Malaysia-born, but Singapore-raised, or 'Made in Malaysia But A Product of Singapore'. Through this work I also investigate issues related to lands.

Work 3 comprises 2 photographs and a wooden structure with two porcelain objects. In this part I look at the connections between myself as an Artist/Farmer to Art/Land.

Work 4 is a photograph on its own without any ceramic objects as the image itself looks very sculptural. Work 5 is a photograph with *Jawi* text written in neon light *SENI KU*, 'My Art'. The last bit, Work 6, is a video projection showing 10 ceramic objects inscribed with a Malay proverb

DI MANA BUMI KU PIJAK DI SITU LANGIT KU JUNJUNG, 'The ground on which I step shares the sky which I honour'. This projection records a performance I did in a well that I dug out to get the clay which I put on my face. This performance shows me gesturing in a way that suggests I am lifting the Sky.

IL: Your practice of the last two decades is dominated by fired ceramics, which you compose into installations. Some of these are site-specific, room-sized works. This new installation, however, is markedly different from past creations in that it includes video presentations and text. **Can you please explain what has inspired you to move beyond what you have done before, and what you wish to achieve with this shift of form. Also, the self-portrait is a repeated motif in this installation. Is this the first time you have used your own image in a work of art?**

AAB: A few years ago I collaborated on a project with Khai Hori, *Badang*, in 2006 at Substation, and *K & A*, in 2007 at LaSalle Gallery. In these projects I started to use an image of myself as a subject. Further to this experience, I saw ways to expand my art language. For *Project Tanah* I use a similar methodology, so enabling me to better translate my ideas and emotions.

IL: **This work has an autobiographical feel with its self-portraits, but also with its use of Malay text. Is this why you deliberately use Malay? Are there other reasons as well?**

AAB: Yes it has an autobiographical feel and my use of Malay text also allows the installation to be read more effectively.

IL: You use these snippets of text, or labels *Tanah Pusaka* (Land Inheritance), *Tanah ke Tanah* (Earth to Earth), *Tanah Air* (Homeland), *Tanah liat* (Clay), *Tanah* (Earth), to designate five small installations within the larger installation. But these labels are not random and in fact serve to enlarge the meaning of your choice of material. **You work with ceramics, but this part of *Project Tanah* shows your interest in clay beyond its material quality, and indicates your awareness of it as a symbol of identity, history, geography, all big Southeast Asian themes. Why have you opted to examine this relationship between the material, and intangible concepts related to heritage, home-country, and identity?**

AAB: The materials used-CLAY and texts *TANAH* that relate to the material itself, allow me to explore myself as 1: *owner of the LAND*; 2: *ceramist*; 3: *Muslim with the belief that from Earth you come, to Earth you'll go*. In another aspect of this work I'm very keen to examine or understand.

IL: You show yourself slathered in clay, these images both startling and poetic in their tactile quality. Looking at them, one can nearly get a sense of the clay drying and cracking on one's own skin. The photograph seems to convey a oneness with the earth, the land, and the idea that you both possess it, and are dominated by it. What is your intention with these pictures?

AAB: I feel close to the LAND that I have inherited and want to be close to it as it came to me from my late parents. Putting mud on my face in such a way makes me sincere in receiving it and true as a ceramist. This land is rich in clay, so this too amplifies my feelings of attachment.

IL: I read this work as a celebration of your preferred medium, clay, but also a vindication of ceramics' importance in local culture, its relationship with nature, and in turn nature's huge place in regional life, Southeast Asian heritage and mythology. **To me, this work reveals the sacred side of materiality in Southeast Asian art. Can you comment on my reading, and if you disagree with it, please explain why, and expand on the conceptual elements that form the basis of this installation.**

AAB: In a way the work does relate to your reading as the word *TANAH* itself has a strong significance for people in this region: *TANAH* can be interpreted as *wealth*, *shelter*, *power*, *security* etc.... Thus as you can see in many parts of the works I've used images of myself and the landscape, along with Malay text. This allows me to emphasise the relationship between me and the *LAND*, as well as the feeling or fear of losing it.

IL: I notice your use of *Jawi* script in part 5, spelling out *Seni ku* (my art). *Jawi* is the indigenous Malay version of Arabic script, today mostly reserved for religious uses by practicing Muslims. Why do you choose *Jawi* for this self-portrait's snippets of text?

AAB: I used *Jawi* script with the words *My Art* applied to my self-portraits. *Jawi* text was first used by the Malays before Romanized text, thus I felt the use of *Jawi* would allow the work to explore the connections between myself as an Artist, a Malay and a Muslim.

IL: In this same image, where you spell out *Seni ku* in *Jawi*, you also present yourself wearing typical Malay headgear. This is obviously a cue to your audience regarding your Malay identity. Why do you stress this Malay identity here? Is there any relationship between this emphasis, and Malays' minority status in Singapore?

AAB: Being a minority does not bother me. Putting on Malay headgear allows me to express and explore myself and my relationship to my Malay culture and tradition. As someone living in a cosmopolitan city-state such as Singapore, I am interested to look at myself and my relationship with my own culture and tradition.

IL: The landscape figures in part 1 of your oeuvre. There is an obvious link between landscape, the land, and your base material, clay. However, beyond the literal ties binding these three, do you wish to draw attention to a less tangible but perhaps more spiritual or ritualistic relationship between the three?

AAB: I hope to create a 'raw/organic' experience, as this will allow more dialogue between the installation and audiences.

IL: In *Project Tanah* you have opted for both video recording of performance, and photographic stills to convey your representational imagery. Is it because you wish to integrate the notion of time and change into your work? In turn, does this relate to the idea of clay as a mobile material, organic, always changing even if these changes are infinitely slow, invisible to the naked eye?

AAB: Yes, these ideas relate to clay, and to my art as well.

IL: The first part of the installation presents a photograph of a local landscape and next to it, a set of white ceramic balls, suspended in sets and bearing little spikes. These resemble organic, pod-like forms, and you tell me they also suggest clouds. So in this

part of the work, you juxtapose a literal reference to the landscape, as well as stylized 3-dimensional shapes that offer a less direct idea of the power of land and the elements. Is this confrontation between the literal and the more metaphoric deliberate, and if so, please explain what you are aiming to achieve.

AAB: As mentioned at the beginning of our discussion, this project started with the text *INI TANAH AKU PUNYA-INI TANAH AKU BELI*. So going back to this, with this work I examine the notion of ownership: a direct relationship between land and clay; but also a less direct one involving my ownership of the land as well as my HBD flat. So here again I've used the metaphor of Land meeting Sky to measure this reality.

IL: Your use of white porcelain in this work is very striking. Please explain why you have specifically chosen this material here.

AAB: I have chosen to work with porcelain as it's white in color and delicate, properties that allow me to express cloud or organic forms.

IL: Does *Project Tanah* signal a permanent new direction in your practice?

AAB: Yes, in a way, as this installation will set my practice on a new platform. I also intend to re-visit my previous work *Alif Series* with this new approach.

Iola Lenzi is a Singapore curator, critic, and lecturer specialising in the contemporary art of Southeast Asia. She is the editor of the Esplanade's quarterly visual arts review.