

## The Eye-Opener: Interview with Malaysian artist Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail | COBO Social

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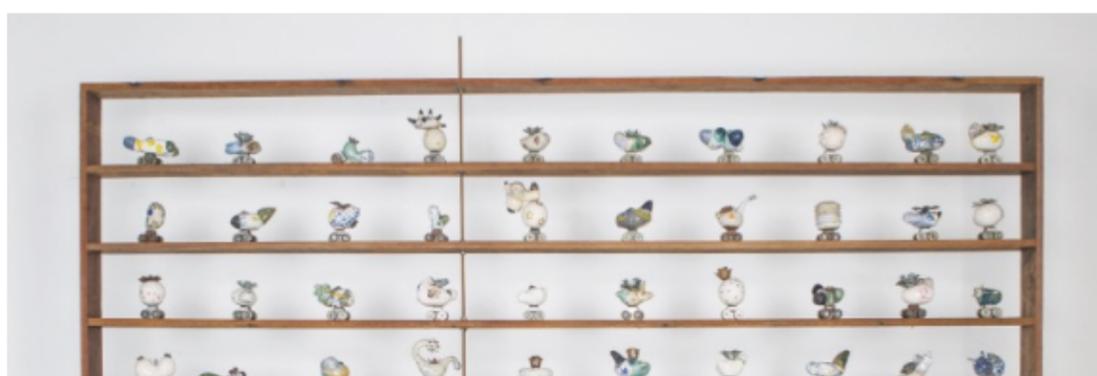
### The Eye-Opener: Interview with Malaysian artist Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail



Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail, Why is X so popular?. Ceramic on wood stand, 123 x 33 cm.



Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail, Unexpected Visitor #5, 2016. 62 x 25 x 25 cm. Ceramic and mixed media on steel disc.





Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail, Toys 'Gerabak, 2006-2007. Ceramic and mixed media.



Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail, Heavyweight, 2016. 45 x 35 x 30 cm. Ceramic and steel.



Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail, New Landscape "Hand In Hand", 2017. Water color, mixed media and Collage on a Reproduction photogravure paper, 90cm x 56.5cm x 3cm (with wood frame).

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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

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Playful, ironic and rich in symbolism, the art of Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail pushes the boundaries of ceramic work in Malaysia.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist



Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail, Why is X so popular?. Ceramic on wood stand, 123 x 33 cm.

There was a game among Surrealist artists in the 1900s called Cadavre Exquis. In this game players would sketch in turn on a sheet of paper, they would fold it to conceal what they have drawn, and then would pass it on to the next player. The aim was to collectively assemble a figure to be revealed only at the end of the game. The resulting drawings were obviously odd, funny and composed by disparate elements.

The ceramic work of Malay artist Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail are a bit like Cadavre Exquis realized by one person. They are similar to the songs of the Italian songwriter Rino Gaetano; his lyric appeared at a first hearing as nonsensical and disengaged. However, on closer listening, you could spot a red thread and a deep satire. In the same way, the playful art of Umibaizurah is a subtle commentary on Malaysian traditions, pop culture and contains political references.

“Since the beginning, I have always tried to push the traditional boundaries of ceramic work,” says Umi. “My work reflects the politics and economics of my country, community living, immigration and many other issues we faced today, both domestically in Malaysia and globally. As well as tackling the big themes, I also like my private identity to come across in the work.”





Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail, Unexpected Visitor #5, 2016. 62 x 25 x 25 cm.

Ceramic and mixed media on steel disc.

Being a mother, Umi is often inspired by the toys her kids would bring home from school: "I think my continuous research of a balance and harmony is also very visible in my art. The most important part for me in order to connect to the spectator, is to have a sense of playfulness."

Born in Johor and working in Kuala Lumpur, Umi didn't have art as a natural part of her upbringing. She develop her interest independently, and decided to take ceramics as a major, even though this was a medium that wasn't popular at all in Malaysia.

"It was very tough for me to enter the art world at first. In Malaysia I'm considered a bit of a "eye opener". I think I helped breaking a wall in terms of the usage of this medium. In late nineties, early 2000, I brought something new in the contemporary ceramic scene in Malaysia. I created hybrides of objects, species, imaginaries. It was something unconventional in Malaysia at that time, to talk about current issues and tradition in this way.



Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail, Toys 'Gerabak, 2006-2007. Ceramic and mixed media.

**Was the idea to become a full-time artist right there from the start?**

Not really. After finishing my studies, I had no place to work, so I applied for a position as a lecturer in the University and I got it. I was almost settling down for that kind of life, but a trip to Japan changed everything. I took a workshop there with 20 artists from all over the world. This was the first time I travelled as an artist, and I learned so much. That compelled me to quit my job. I had worked almost six years as a lecturer at the university and during that time I was starting to get invited to have local and international exhibitions in the region, and needed to concentrate and focus on ceramic work. So I quit my job and committed to art full time. But I won't lie, it wasn't an easy choice.

**How was collectorship in Southeast Asia at the time, compared to today?**

Back then there were no collectors in the art scene in Malaysia that would be interested in ceramics as an art form. They won't buy ceramic works, saying it's fragile, there is no value, it's not easy to storage. It was only after a series of show and exhibitions with other artists that collectors started noticing my work. From there one local gallery in Malaysia offered me to do

an exhibition, and it snowballed from there. Today my collectors are both young and more senior, and they come mainly from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Also a few institutions have collected my work.

**In your experience is the art community in Malaysia supportive?**

In Malaysia our art scene is still quite new, certainly compared to Europe, but also compared to other Southeast Asian countries, like Indonesia. Even though the scene is growing, artists working with ceramics are a very small minority; in the entire country there is probably no more than ten of us who are seriously committed to this medium. So we had to mobilize ourselves to build a network which won't be just local, but international. In 2007, when I build my studio we launched a ceramics exchange program which started in 2007, with artists mainly from Indonesia and Japan. They came here and worked for almost two months in our studio. At the end of the program we collaborated also with other private galleries to do a group show with them.



Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail, Heavyweight, 2016. 45 x 35 x 30 cm. Ceramic and steel.

**What is one aspect that needs to improve in the Malaysian art scene in your opinion?**

Our problem is that we have many artists but not enough art managers, curators or writers. For my shows I ask writers from overseas, like Gina Fairley and Tony Godfrey to write about my work.

**Do you work with series or more with individual works?**

It depends on the size of the work and what I want to say. I'd make a series when I feel one single work isn't enough to elaborate my idea. I usually work with assistants, who are university graduates or former students who are artists in their own right. In my studio I try to gather young people and push them to use clays as medium. Now there are more young artists interested in working with ceramics, which gives me a good competition and allows me to not rest on my laurels! (laughs)

**What are you currently working on?**

I have just been back from Singapore where I did a two man show with Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, who is my husband and a senior artists in Malaysia. Now it's my "hibernation" time of the year, where I stop doing shows and sit in the studio to research and develop ideas for the next solo. In June 2018 I will also do an exhibition and workshop in Frankfurt, working with the community. I'm really looking forward to it.



Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail, New Landscape "Hand In Hand", 2017. Water color, mixed media and Collage on a Reproduction photogravure paper, 90cm x 56.5cm x 3cm (with wood frame).

#### **About the artist**

Umibaizurah Mahir Ismail is a ceramic artist born in 1975 in Malaysia. Since 1997, she has participated in exhibitions in various spaces across Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Korea, Japan, and Pakistan. Umibaizurah represented Malaysia in the 2009 Jakarta Ceramics Biennale. She was among the Top 10 Winners of The Young Contemporaries 2006 by The National Art Gallery Malaysia, and was awarded Top 5 Winners for her collaboration with children in making clay sculpture at the Tokoname City Culture Hall, Aichi, Japan. Umi's works are collected by various institutions and private collectors: National Art Gallery Malaysia, Petronas Gallery Malaysia, Asia Arts Network Seoul Korea, and Aliya & Farouk Khan Collection, Malaysia.

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**Naima Morelli** is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of "Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione" a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

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