

Umibaizurah Mahir - Hybrid (2009)

Despite her long and internationally successful career, this is Umibaizurah Mahir's (Umi) first solo exhibition in Malaysia. Titled simply "Hybrid," this single word captures the kind of potent, multi-layered readings that we have come to expect from Umi's contemporary ceramics.

Introducing several new series in this exhibition, Umi continues to push the traditional boundaries of her medium and probe Malaysia societal constructs with a strong environmental message. These are far from fragile ceramics. While her precursor series "Excavators," "Trespassers" and "Fireflies" delivered a tale of globalisation with very specific local translations, these new works arguably take a greater personal risk. They have become more painterly and free in the application of glazes, Umi for the first time drawing back into the object adding to the narrative of the work. Furthermore, the trace between the physical object and its conceptual underpinning has become more challenging and offers an even greater departure from the traditional foundations of ceramics.

Umi adopts a particularly current reading of hybridity for this show, one that speaks to a fusion of green energies against Malaysia's car culture, for example, or the razing of kampong communities and natural forests with the self-appointed question 'What is hybrid in contemporary Malaysia?' racial striation. It is a natural progression from her earlier toy works and, in its hybrid version. These accoutrements to play move further towards a 'plastic nation' - the hermetic state of global culture, or cloning. To understanding hybridity in Umibaizurah's vocabulary is an extremely textured reading.

This fusion is perhaps best illustrated in Umi's new body of work "Sitting with the Genii", intimate objects that sit oddly between figuration, toy and a mechanic's workshop collage. Perched atop a lofty stool is a 'hybrid' being - part animal, part human, part synthetic. Key is its presentation on a small timber block salvaged from an old kampong house and acting as a kind of ballast. Without these bases the ceramic would fall over. Is Umi reminding us that we need remnants of the past to anchor our future?

This confluence of crafted object [ceramic] and found object [pedestal] is an interesting one when considered in terms of the works spatial engagement and what that might mean. Scale is important here. The object's vertical stacking could allude to the hierarchies or systems that we operate within today, where the object becomes almost jewel-like on its oversized-stool elevating the status of the hybrid as the more aspirational object - a kind of evolution from kampong history to genetically modified futures.

Take as example "Sitting with the Genii #16" (2009), a child's toy bear that has been grafted with the appendages of metal piping and a drainage fitting as a crown. The bear becomes 'mechanical' with the application of a metallic glaze, any childhood nostalgia swiftly removed through its blatant disfiguration. In the same series, "Sitting with the Genii #2" (2009) Umi similarly plays with childhood narrative using the vernacular of super hero culture through the addition of a painted glaze-mask and arming this character with a flower sword. This hybrid is also branded tattoo-like with an insignia on its chest, somewhat reminiscent of a maiden on an ancient ship charting unknown territories. It evokes an individual spirit for adventure, a boundary rider - a little like Umi herself in her art making.

Umi consistently pushes beyond popular preconceptions of her chosen medium, extending 'ceramics' to sculpture and installation. Presentation has always played an important function in the display of traditional ceramics - we just have to think of a celadon bowl displayed on a carved rosewood stand. With a similar cognoscente of the object's need for 'completeness', Umi pays particular attention to the way her hybrid ceramics are presented, their concrete pedestals of the past and in this exhibition recycled timbers act as triggers to Umi's concerns for the desecration of the environment in the wake of commercial interests.

Using a similar scale to the Genii works is the "Road Runner" series. While they may take their cue from Umi's earlier "Endeavours" - stoneware play-horses mounted on large rubber wheels - these new works move beyond childhood nostalgia into a kind of freak-show alley display of the (un)natural. These are more intimate objects, presented in groups of three within glass vitrines on timber pedestals. Still playing off the consumer interests of the toy industry through their 'display case' presentation, these mobile hybrids also speak of

Malaysia's as an affluent and aspirational kinetic society, one that is equally erosive environmentally.

"Road Runner #2" (2009) is a stunning example from this series, bejeweled with a painted chandelier as a choker and romantic floral decals as the skin to the object. Similarly in "Road Runner #4" (2009) Umi paints a bluebird and a rain cloud over decaded florals evoking Victorian botanical studies. However, these object are far from Victorian in sentiment. It is a constant push and pull between idealism and reality. With a ghastly pasty green face and an ambiguous crown adornment with slight sexual undertones, Umi has become more cavalier in her mixed references to disorientate us. This is further underlined by Umi's decision to use her paintbrush as the axel for the wheels, suggesting that it is creativity that drives us forward.

What must be mentioned is that it is delightful to see Umi's sense of hand entering the work – a slight naivety in its articulation but one that adds a very personal stamp to her rigorous ricochet in the work between the crafted and fabricated object. It becomes particularly apparent in the larger scale works where her confidence in the painted gesture grows to match the form.

Perhaps the most surreal amongst these new works is the series "Hand's Up" where Umi has cast blow-up plastic toys. Presented on individual pedestals the figurines stand on a round wooden chopping board, which in turn balances upon a packing crate that is branded with barcodes, handled with care stickers, and outlines of the figures which perch above. Umi again plays with our expectation of materiality: the machine-seams of a plastic toy's fabrication celebrated in its crafted clone. Umi plays off notions of preciousness through surface, material and the everyday elevated to 'high art'. She celebrates the flaws or ugliness of fabrication against concepts of beauty and purity. For her these pieces are about renewal, to start afresh, accept and correct as we move forward.

This is a huge exhibition and I have only but touched on its depth. There is a maturity that comes with a willingness to experiment and to find one's own voice in these works that has little to do with traditional ceramics. Umibaizurah Mahir is foremost a superb artist and

technician. Her ability to usher the viewer through the passage of time, transformation and constructs of cultural value has a humanity to it, and while an abstracted narrative, it pulls on simple 'connectors' like a blow-up toy or kampong timbers, for example, that anchor this journey we are all on. These new works are terribly exciting for the brave leaps they make. She is a true Malaysian visionary.

Gina Fairley, 2009