

Khabir Roslan: Soul, Strength, and Humility

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Khabir Roslan. What can be said of this young emerging artist that hails from Pahang is the Malay word that I was introduced to by him — *mantap*. This word means excellent or awesome, but the Cambridge Dictionary describes it with the following words: *firm* — strong and steady; *sound* — having or showing good judgement or good sense; *stable* — firmly established and likely to last; *unfailing* — constant.¹ These Cambridge definitions of the word *mantap* perfectly encapsulates Khabir as a person and an artist. He has been unfailing in his commitment to his craft since the beginning, standing firm in his path. Qualities that (in my opinion) cement him as a stable and grounded presence in the art world. Though he may appear “wet behind the ears” due to his youthful looks, he is unassuming. In conversation with him, his thoughts, speech, wisdom, and intellect reveal a soul that seems to have lived a thousand lifetimes.

This exhibition, his first solo, bears a title in his mother tongue, Malay — *Sukma: Megah, Tundok* — which speaks to how personal this body of work is. *Sukma* means soul, *megah* denotes strength, and *tundok* expresses humility. Together, they tell the story of his journey, carrying the tension he feels being human. Khabir explains, “*It's like a soul that longs for greatness but is grounded by humility. This title is like a confession. It keeps me rooted while letting the world reach upwards because I always lack the material control over the world. As I said, I work with slowness and very organic(ally) because I use organic materials. It's much more of a conversation between time and decay.*”² These works trace Khabir’s journey from humble beginnings in his hometown, a fishing village on the east coast of Kuantan, to where he stands today. It is a continuous exploration of time, impermanence, and the quiet grace of slow transformation.

What makes Khabir’s work so compelling is how deeply human it is. It isn’t overly polished or perfect, and that’s the point. He is embracing imperfection as part of the process, as something to learn from. His materials have the propensity to break down over time, but rather than masking this, he allows the decay become part of the story. He has built this show on quiet, thoughtful reflections on life, change and the liminal space between strength and surrender, permanence and decay, ritual and rupture. His work is not a shout into the void but a series of murmurs stitched from the rhythms of a fisherman’s dawn. He speaks of his father waking before dawn to head out to sea, of his mother patching clothes and mending nets. All of these small unspoken gestures taught him that love doesn’t have to be loud. “*That the most powerful things are often the less seen, like roots underground or a prayer set in solitude. For me, humility isn't about shrinking. It's about standing in truth without needing to prove it.*”³ This is not art as spectacle, but as sediment — layered by time, slated with memory, and stitched with the unseen threads of survival.

Khabir's artistic practice is shaped by deliberation, stillness, and the sacred repetition of daily life. He wakes in the wee hours, in the darkness of dawn, as if in subconscious mimic of his father — when the world is still and quiet. He prepares his space by lighting incense as music ranging from Beethoven to Indonesian folk plays, doing small acts such as reflecting or reciting verses inwardly that help him enter a meditative state. These rituals aren't about performance. They are an act of grounding, gestures that bring him into presence with the work and himself. Be it stitching bandages or handling compost soil, his process flows more like a prayer than a plan. These early hours spent on his art offers clarity; the kind that only silence and Subuh prayer can bring. This is where his art emerges. Not from noise or ambition, but from attuned awareness, from feeling the world before trying to shape it. It's about being honest, staying grounded, and listening to what materials, time, and the world are trying to say.

What many might not know is that Khabir is also a *chef de partie*, working in a professional kitchen alongside his art practice. His daily routine reveals a quiet discipline: rising before dawn to create art, then heading into long hours of work in the kitchen. Yet, he pours the same care and attention into both canvas and cuisine. He often works in long, silent stretches until physical and mental fatigue sets in or until it's time to begin his kitchen shift. But far from being separate worlds, his life as a chef and artist are deeply intertwined. In both spaces, he works with his hands, his senses, and his heart. To him, food is akin to art — an offering. A way of showing care, of being present with another.

I asked him whether there were any similarities between making art and cooking, to which he responded with such clarity and poetry that his words ask to be quoted, not rewritten:

“Both are deeply sensory experiences, grounded in intuition and intention. In cooking, just like in art, I engage with crucial principals which are sense of sight, smell, taste, touch, and sound and each of these aligns with artistic elements and principles.”

For Khabir, art is a deeply sensory and intuitive practice. One that draws from the rhythms of daily life and the quiet intelligence of the body. He speaks of art not just as a visual experience, but as one that echoes across all senses: how colour and composition can guide the eye like a well-plated dish, how texture and form can evoke memory much like the crunch of something fried or the softness of a purée. He sees aroma as atmosphere, taste as tonal balance, sound as rhythm — all elements that shape how we feel, remember, and respond. These connections to cooking are not metaphors but lived experiences, grounding his art in real gestures of care. In both the studio and the kitchen, there is repetition, patience, and presence. Whether plating a dish or composing a visual piece, he honours process over perfection, finding poetry in repetition and patience in chaos. But more than just a balancing act, his dedication to his artistic practice despite the demands of a full-time job that was

taken up as means of survival speaks of the unwavering commitment that places art not as a luxury, but as a necessity of being.

Even in exhaustion, Khabir embraces his struggles as part of the path. There are times when the materials don't cooperate, or when kitchen duties take precedence over creation. Still, he lets the flow shift — like a river carving new paths when obstructed. Rest, he says, is not failure; it is part of the creative cycle. When feeling overwhelmed or burnt out, he returns to small, grounding actions. A sketch, a meal, a moment with loved ones. His art is a reflection of the care and love passed down through his family. Anchored in sincerity and faith in the unseen impact of small, sincere acts. Khabir reminds us that art is not separate from survival or the mundane; it is shaped by them. It is through these small, deliberate acts like touching soil, stitching cloth, and plating food that meaning is made, and the human spirit is honoured. Despite being physically drained, it is these seemingly mundane routines and ordinary moments that are what reminds him he is alive and connected.

Through it all, he remains committed to showing up. Not because he must, but because this is what keeps him whole.

References

¹ Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). *Mantap*. In *Cambridge Indonesian-English Dictionary*. Cambridge Dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/indonesian-english/mantap>.

² Vanan, M. [Mikhail Vanan]. (2025, June 7). *Episode 53: Khabir Roslan Traces the Body and Spirit in his First Solo, 'Sukma: Megah, Tundok'* (Wei-Ling Gallery Podcast) [Audio podcast snippet, 00:01:08-00:01:18; 00:01:50-00:02:20]. Wei-Ling Gallery. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3HczRwsUOcudU9SNIHN5sG>.

³ Vanan, M. [Mikhail Vanan]. (2025, June 7). *Episode 53: Khabir Roslan Traces the Body and Spirit in his First Solo, 'Sukma: Megah, Tundok'* (Wei-Ling Gallery Podcast) [Audio podcast snippet, 00:08:11-00:08:26]. Wei-Ling Gallery. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3HczRwsUOcudU9SNIHN5sG>.