

#### Ambassador's Message

Japan Creative Centre, Embassy of Japan is delighted and honoured to co-organise this special exhibition with Master Potter Iskandar Jalil on his latest ceramic masterpieces.

This exhibition, In Pursuit of the Ethical Pot, is particularly resonant. It is the culmination of the honoured Master Potter's life and practices where he has embraced a long and profound relationship with Japanese culture.

Those who are familiar with Iskandar sensei's life will remember that he first went to Tajimi in 1972 on a scholarship in ceramics engineering. Through the years, he has strengthened a special bond with Japan and evolved an impressive and fine understanding of the legacies and language of Japanese "pottery culture".

This special bond is by no means a one-way relationship. As with all deep and genuine cultural exchanges, this relationship is a respectful and dynamic interaction. This experience has been a crucial catalyst, producing new forms of expressions and new world views that are possible only with such cross-cultural opportunities.

Iskandar sensei's significant contributions toward the cultural exchange and mutual understanding through pottery between Japan and Singapore was further recognised by the Japanese Government this year. He became the first Singaporean artist to be conferred the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Rosette on the occasion of the latest Spring Conferment of Japanese Decorations on Foreign Nationals.

Even as we discern the influence of Japanese aesthetics and philosophy in Iskandar sensei's works, we cannot fail to see the strength and vitality of his own cultural roots as a Singaporean Malay. We also perceive his great sense of adventure and openness – he has travelled widely and assimilated deeply in his pursuit of the "ethical pot". We acknowledge the influences of all the cultures he has journeyed with along the way.

In his essay for this exhibition, Iskandar sensei gives an account of his search for the ultimate "ethical pot". This is indeed a description that may seem enigmatic to many. The paradigm pot is not only technically formidable and aesthetically pleasing, but one that also embodies the cherished ideals and values of its maker and his community. It suggests that this pot is not just the product of the hand but also of the heart, mind and spirit.

Iskandar sensei elaborates on how the potter's journey has unfolded for him and what the pursuit for the "ethical pot" has meant for him. His philosophy is embedded and manifested in each vessel that has come to this exhibition. The Japan Creative Centre is indeed honoured to be part of Iskandar sensei's journey in facilitating how he shares his experiences, observations and insights by providing a platform to showcase the physical embodiments of his philosophy – the ethical pots of his life-long quest.

**Haruhisa Takeuchi** Ambassador of Japan to Singapore

ISKANDAR JALIL

"A hand working creates more new things than a pen on a drawing board or fingers at a computer keyboard."

~ ISKANDAR JALIL



# ISKANDAR JALIL

I have spent a lifetime in search of the ethical pot.

People here are astonished, even potters – they have never heard of this and they find it hard to accept that there is such a thing as a pot with ethics. We do not have extensive discussions on this subject in our local pottery culture. The idea of the "ethical pot" was made popular by the pottery icon Bernard Leach as early as the 1940s but it is virtually unheard of here.

The British curator of ceramics Oliver Watson explained that the ethical pot was the idea that if a pot was made, not just using the right technical skills but with the right attitude and values, this vessel would develop moral and spiritual dimensions<sup>1</sup>. The Japanese have long believed in michi ("the Way") that when we make or do something, it is more than the physical form or appearance itself. They have sado, the Way of Tea, shodo, the Way of Writing, kado the Way of the Flower or the more popular term ikebana. I have said this before<sup>2</sup>, that kado or ikebana is not just about arranging flowers but embraces a philosophy of aesthetics, a set of principles or ethics and something more spiritual.

So, for me, the ethical pot is the embodiment of the skills as well as values, ideals and convictions about pottery as well as about life that I, as a potter, have developed over the years.

I am still in pursuit of this "ethical pot" even after so many years of pottery. In fact, I started my search for this pot since 1959 when I was just a trainee teacher doing pottery for my in-service course at the former Teacher's Training College at Paterson Road and I continue my quest even today. Are there rules and guides to help me to produce or choose a piece of pottery that holds the ethics of its potter and what is going to help me make a good choice? Quite often, my students, who are adults, have the same questions. It's not as simple as we think. Should I follow the guidelines and criteria of the Mingei Japanese Folk Art Movement? Or should I follow the Scandinavian Fiskars who have given rise to beautiful ceramics from the village of Fiskars from Finland or the European guidelines of the Bauhaus? There are many shared similarities between the different traditions.

The Mingei Movement (1926-1945) during the time of Yanagi Sōetsu, Hamada Shoji and Kanjiro Kawai basically stipulates the principles of honesty and utility in the use of materials to be reinforced by the quality of naturalness. Pots were produced without being forced, they were not artificial or imposing. Lastly, the Mingei movement which means "arts or crafts of the people" has a consciousness of the user, which was the ordinary folk-person. Objects were affordable and functional for the purposes of this user. This could be in tea rituals or other simple everyday activities.

This type of pottery embraces the philosophy of wabi sabi that accepts imperfections and impermanence as an essential part of life and an essential part of beauty. It implies the opposite of "bourgeois fine art" and rejects extravagance or the perfect but soul-less work of factory manufactured objects.

Yanagi Sōetsu published The Unknown Craftsman<sup>3</sup> with ideas that were very influential. The anonymous craftsman was respected. The ideal potter was characterised by humility and did not strive for fame or to make a name for himself as is the case for some modern and contemporary ceramic artists. Another pillar of the Mingei movement was Bernard Leach who introduced its aesthetics and philosophy to British studio pottery as well as extended Mingei's influence to American ceramics.

Then there are the pottery traditions of the Scandinavian region of Denmark, Norway and Sweden and the Nordic countries such as Finland. The Fiskars Village in Finland for instance has a unique pottery culture and structure that I have personally encountered in 2012 with my wife Saleha. The village is linked with the Fiskars Company as well as the Fiskars Co-operative of artists and designers that own brands such as the famous Arabia line of porcelain. The village is located about an hour from Helsinki and is a centre for Finnish design and hosts international exchanges, workshops and residencies. The Fiskars brand had its origins in the ironwork factory in the village but is now global and offers Finnish designers a platform to showcase their work. Fiskars craftsmen, including its potters, have always been very disciplined and they produce clean lines without the brashness of some modern potters. Their creations are architecturally sound, functionally well-thought through and in simple words, very neat and technically perfect in concept and approach.

Another European ceramic tradition is the Bauhaus pottery school of the 1920s.Basically German in origin, Bauhaus designs suggest understanding functionality and rationality in the use of materials and their creations are quite often technically sound. Their designs were modern, functional and "classic".

Nowadays, much of contemporary pottery has gone haywire: it is no longer skill-focused or craft-orientated like the Japanese or dominated by clean lines like those from the Fiskars (Finland) and Scandinavian countries. Ceramic artists from the United States (of America) and some modern and contemporary potters are extremely unorthodox - anything goes as long as the art is made from clay. The clay need not be glazed or fired and can be part of an installation or performance art.

My travels to Europe, Japan, the Scandinavian countries, the Middle East and Southeast Asia made me aware of the characteristics of the pottery cultures in these locations. And for many years, you could say I was and still am, driven by the question, where is the ethical pot?

I admire the ethics of the Japanese and their belief in the anonymous craftsman and gravitate towards the clean lines of the Scandinavian approach as my personal taste. I have also concluded that the ideal potter must have his own identity and culture to arrive at his own "ethical pot".

We must explore indigenous materials and local techniques and combine this with timeless, elegant design. We cannot depend on traditional methodologies alone but must improve them with modern ideas and approaches.

Ideally, the potter must use local materials and motifs and evolve an aesthetic that expresses a sense of time and place as well as one's personal identity. For me, this means many things - being aware of my Singapore Malay identity, my spiritual life as a Muslim, my family and social life, the things and activities that I find joy in - gardening, music, motor-biking. I sometimes take clay from the earth found in Singapore or places I have lived in or travelled to; you will see Arabic decoration or the kendi form in my works while at other times, you see Japanese or Scandinavian influences; I often refer to popular culture from local bands to Western pop music to P. Ramlee films and use them in my titles.

The cultural impact of pottery culture is long-term in nature. It is necessarily stored in skills and one's understanding of one's own culture and one's actual life experiences. Pottery as an artistic craft is always individual, bearing the marks of its maker. Learning this is a process that takes a long time – lifelong learning, in the true sense of the expression. A manual skill that creates objects made by hand, an artistic craft is ultimately knowledge and a consciousness that cannot be taught academically. It has to be learnt and absorbed by doing it oneself and refined when you have developed as a person. It is an intellectual resource, a method of harnessing the accumulated resource but which has to be physically - and not theoretically - undertaken by the potter.

# A Life-Long Journey

There is no short cut for an apprentice or practitioner in pottery en route to becoming a pottery master although some have paired up with each other to "shorten" the journey.

To learn how to make pottery you only have to take a course from an institution or at a hobby centre. To learn about the history of pottery or to learn it scholastically we may look to some potter or be tutored by a ceramics academic. It is different if you want to master pottery — where you understand pottery in a most profound way - as a physical form but also as a philosophy about aesthetics and about life, humanity and nature. I have said this about Japanese ikebana or kado and it is similar with pottery.

It is a life-long journey. You have to be an apprentice for years to even get a grasp of the technicalities of the craft. You have to exchange glazes and ideas, immerse in clay culture, refine your skills and share many essential techniques with others. It is a memory stored in skills, maintaining the links between past and present.

Historically, it can be seen that most well-known potters partner or pair with another potter. Their store of knowledge is shared with one another and this sharing is a kind of catalyst. Doing it alone may sometimes be insufficient – one must galvanise and harness from other potters.

Bernard Leach and Hamada Shoji, Hans Coper and Lucie Rie are prime examples. The outcomes of their combined effort even though they were different individually have been tremendous. It shortens the life-long journey of learning.

My "partnership" with Takeshi Hibi is an example. I first met Hibi-san in the 1970s when he was a glaze scientist and technician and I was a student potter who arrived in Tajimi on my scholarship. We exchanged knowledge and experiments for many years. We often visited each other in Tajimi and Singapore. This kind of mutual sharing shortens the life-long learning journey and we have had these exchanges from 1972 right up to the present.

With each passing year, I believe more and more in the system of mentorship and apprenticeship. Perhaps the word "teaching" should not be used as the process is much more than the transfer and passing on of technical skills or knowledge. It is instead an interaction that develops moral fibre and character.

The apprentice assimilates not just methods, techniques and processes but also starts to understand and hopefully, adopt and internalise a set of beliefs and principles through the discipline and rigour of the apprenticeship. The daily interaction with one's sinsei means a daily exposure to his technical mastery, his daily regime and routine as well as his sinsei's ethics and principles.

Through this, the apprentice learns patience, conscientiousness, humility, discipline – not just to arrive at being a highly adept potter but also to arrive at being a person of integrity, of humility, of awareness, of compassion, of thought and of action.

When my apprentices go beyond technical competence and start to develop this essential moral fibre and consciousness, they will arrive at their ethical pot.

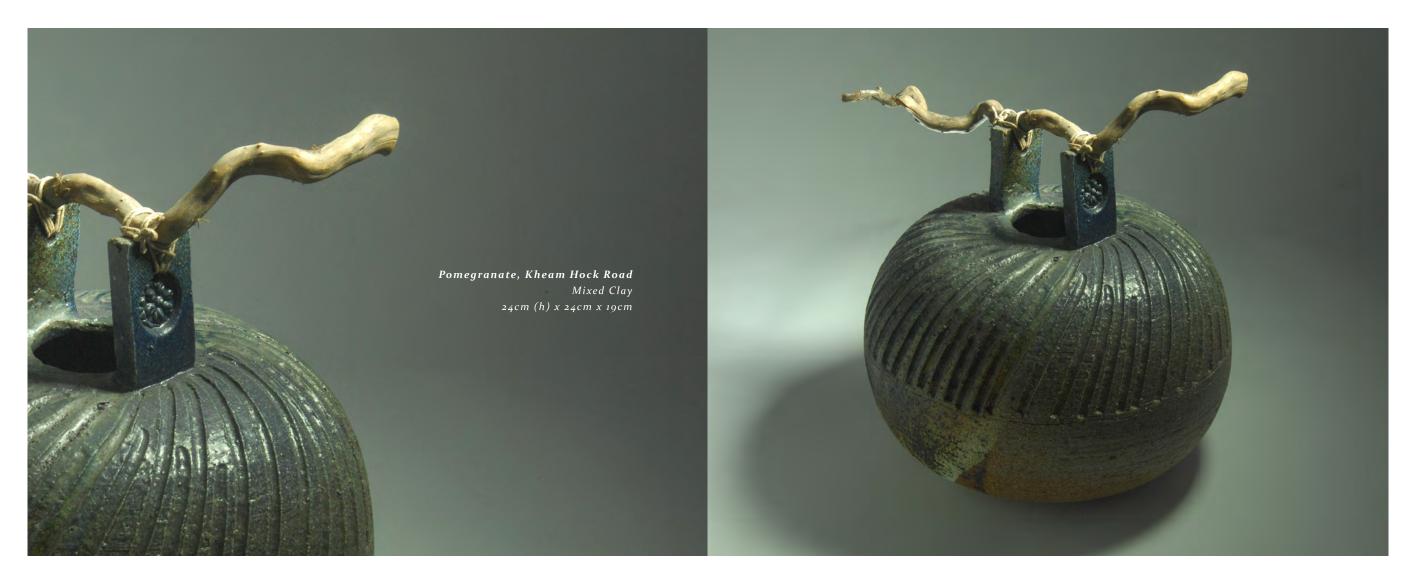
The Way of the pot, of pottery, is a long arduous journey - only the hardy can take it and can endure. No short cuts. We should remember that we should not work alone and that we do not walk alone.

This essay was developed from an original text dated 3 April 2015, handwritten by Iskandar Jalil and adapted to include excerpts and exchanges from oral interviews conducted with editor/writer Lindy Poh including an oral interview on 3 April 2015.

- 1 Oliver Watson propounded that "a pot, lovingly made in the correct way and with the correct attitude would contain a spiritual and moral dimension" in W. Oliver, Studio Pottery -Twentieth Century British Ceramics in the Victoria and Albert Museum, (Phaidon Press Limited, London 1990), pg 15
- 2 L. Poh & Iskandar J., Material, Message, Metaphor: The Pottery Voice of Iskandar Jalil (Art-2 Gallery Pte Ltd Singapore with the National Arts Council Singapore), pg 26.
- 3 S. Yanagi, S. Hamada, B. Leach The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight Into Beauty, (Kodansha International, Tokyo Japan, 1972)



Oval Form (Surface Relief) Mixed Clay 35cm (h) x 26cm x 26cm Round Form (Slip Decoration)
Stoneware Clay
25cm (h) x 22cm x 22cm





# ISKANDAR JALIL

Tingkat 'A', 'B' and 'C'
Grogged Clay
55cm (h) x 19cm x 16cm
68cm (h) x 15cm x 12cm
66cm (h) x 17cm x 13cm

# Bud Abbot / Lou Costello Stoneware Clay

27cm (h) x 24cm x 24cm





Teapot on a Pedestal (1)
Stoneware Clay
33cm (h) x 18cm x 15cm





Teapot on a Pedestal (3)
Stoneware Clay
31cm (h) x 17cm x 12cm

# Beauty and The Beast Stoneware and Grogged Clay 45cm (h) x 30cm x 22cm

In Pursuit of the Ethical Pot

Cylindrical Bowl with wooden handle [A]
Crank Clay
9cm (h) x 26cm x 21cm



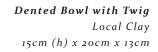
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Slab Form(Watercolour Surface)
Earthenware Clay
35cm (h) x 56cm x 14cm

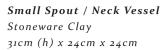


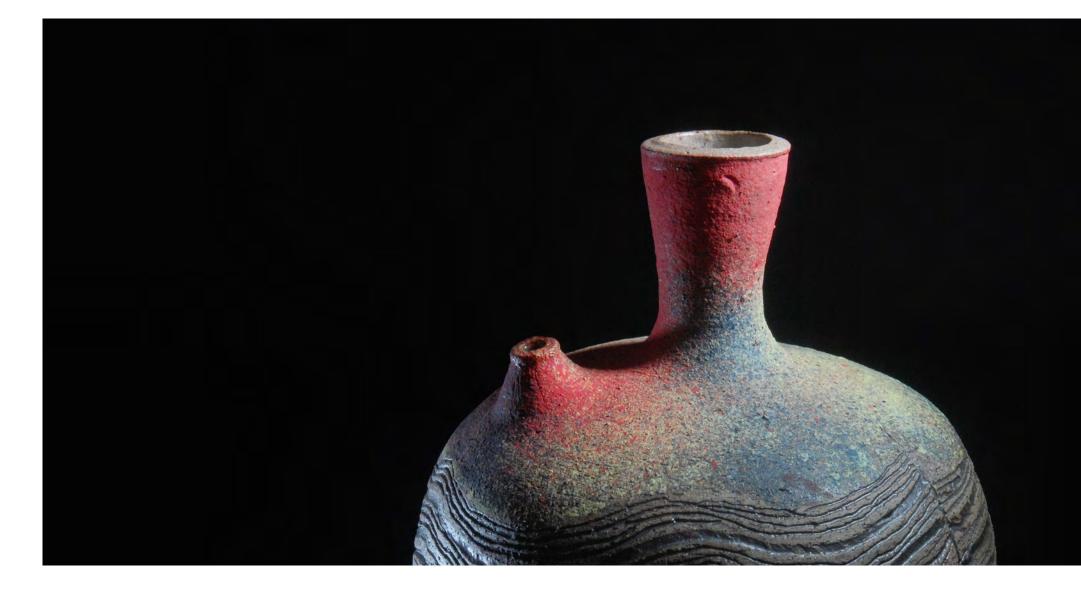


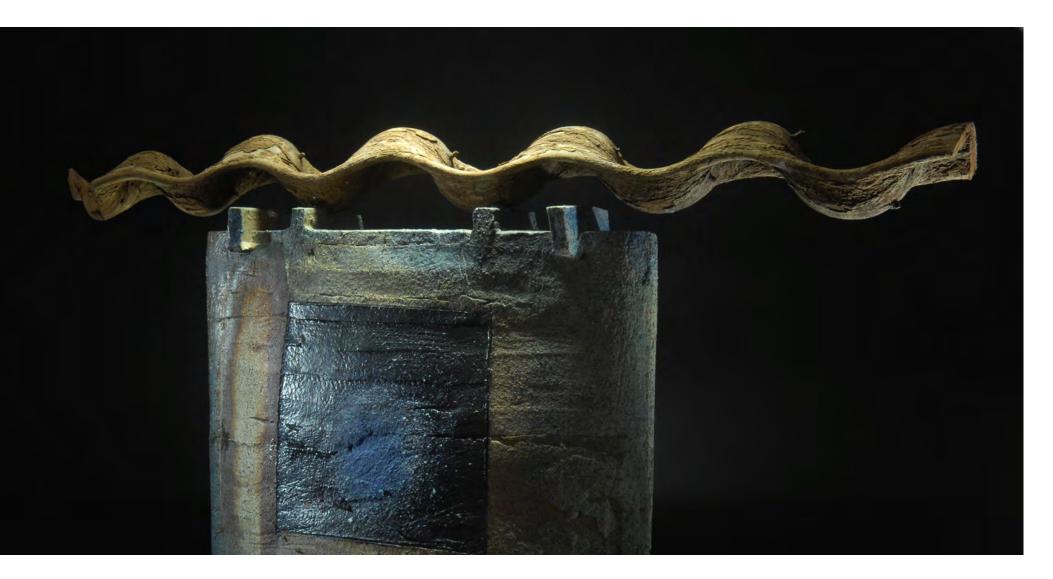












# Andai Di-kau Pergi

What will happen to me if you go? (After the Malay song of the same title by Indigo and performed by Saloma)

> Mixed Clay 40cm (h) x 80cm x 14cm

# ISKANDAR JALIL



Cylindrical Bowl with Handle 1 & 2, Finland

Crank Clay

20cm (h) x 26cm x 23cm

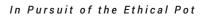
16cm (h) x 27cm x 23cm

# Shito Shito Picchan

In Pursuit of the Ethical Pot

The Sound of the Raindrops (After the theme song of popular Japanese manga & drama serial Kozure Okami (Lone Wolf & Cub)

Tajimi Clay 33cm (h) x 44cm x 18cm



Vessel with Ladle Local Clay and Crank Clay 26cm (h) x 18cm x 18cm





**Jari-ku Sakit Semua** Aching Joints (After the song of same title by P.Ramlee & Saloma)

Stoneware Clay 23cm (h) x 19cm x 12cm



### Curriculum Vitae

#### ISKANDAR JALIL

born 5 January 1940, Singapore

Iskandar Jalil (b.1940) is celebrated as Singapore's Master Potter and leading educator-mentor in ceramics art. His practice has enjoyed numerous accolades including the Cultural Medallion (1988) - the nation's highest recognition for artistic accomplishment. Iskandar received two Colombo Plan Scholarships - in 1966, for textiles studies in Maharashtra, India and in 1972 for Ceramics Engineering in Tajimi, Japan. His works bear the influence of different pottery cultures across the world. His characteristic works possess simple but strong structures with highly tactile and rich surfaces, often bearing twigs or branches for handles and deploying clays unique to particular locales or regions.

### **EDUCATION**

- 1972 Ceramics Engineering Course, Tajimi
  Design & Research Centre, Japan
  Colombo Plan Scholarship
- 1968 Pottery for Schools, Teachers' Training College, Singapore
- 1966 Textile Weaving and Spinning, India, Colombo Plan Scholarship
- 1962 Teacher's Training College, Singapore

#### **AWARDS**

- **2015** The Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Rosette (Japan)
- **2014** Japanese Foreign Minister's Commendation Award (Japan)
- 2012 National Day Award,
  Public Service Star (BBM) Award
- 2002 Achiever of The Year Award
  (Berita Harian & McDonald's),
  Singapore
- 1998 Pingat APAD (Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya), Award by Association of Artists of Various Resources, Singapore
- 1994 Fellow, National University of Singapore (NUS) Centre for the Arts
- 1988 Cultural Medallion (Visual Arts), Singapore
- 1977 Special Award, National Day Art Exhibition, Singapore

# SELECTED PRIVATE & PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Wee Kim Wee, former President of Singapore George Bush, former President of the United States of America Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister and Minister Mentor of Singapore CapitaLand, Singapore Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore, Singapore Changi Airport Group (CAG), Singapore Economic Development Board, Singapore (EDB) Embassy of Japan in Singapore Embassy of Singapore in Jakarta, Indonesia Embassy of Singapore in Phnom Penh. Cambodia Embassy of Singapore in Tokyo, Japan ExxonMobil, Singapore Governor of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Istana (Presidential) Art Collection, Singapore Keppel Shipyard, Singapore Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Singapore Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), Singapore National Arts Council (NAC), Singapore National Heritage Board (NHB), Singapore National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden National Museum, Singapore Orchard Hotel, Singapore Raffles Country Club, Singapore Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), Singapore Singtel, Singapore Swisshotel, Singapore Sultan of Brunei Collection, Brunei Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore Trade Development Board (TDB), Singapore

# SOLO EXHIBITIONS & WORKSHOPS

- 2012 Images of My Pottery Travels, MICA
  Artrium, Art-2 Gallery, Singapore
  (with the book Iskandar Jalil: Images
  of My Pottery Travels)
- 2007 Material, Message, Metaphor, MICA
  Artrium, Art-2 Gallery, Singapore
  (with the book Material, Message,
  Metaphor: The Pottery Voice of
  Iskandar Jalil)
- **2005** For Cambodia, Raffles Le Royal, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- 2001 A Potter's Life, A Potter's Thoughts

  MICA ARTrium, Art-2 Gallery, Singapore
  (with EDB's book Square One:

  A Potter's Journey)
- 1995 My Dialogue With Clay, Takashimaya Gallery, Singapore
- 1992 Ceramics, Bon Belta, Miyazaki Prefecture, Japan
- **1990** Potter's Journey, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
- 1984 Raw, Earthy and Pliable, Alpha Gallery, Singapore

#### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2015	Balance in Imperfections (with Temasek Potters) Japan Creative Centre, Singapore Tribute to Local Clay, Maya Gallery, Singapore	2004	New Zealand Festival of Arts, Wellington, New Zealand; Material Matters: Inaugural Exhibition, The Arts House at Old Parliament, Singapore Crossroads: Making of New Identities,
2013	Iskandar Jalil - A Lifelong Passion for His Craft and His Teachings, Japan Creative Centre, Singapore Encore!, Maya Gallery, Singapore JBCS Gallery Opening & Dragon Kiln, Singapore Shakei: A Pottery Exhibition, Glocal Connect Village Art Gallery, Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore	2002	National University of Singapore, New Paper Lifestyle: Dragon Kiln at JBCS, Jalan Bahar, Singapore  Ceramitivity: The Second Statement, NUS Centre for the Arts, Singapore
	Cancry, remaser rosyteesime, omgapore		Discovery Phase, Art-2 Gallery, Singapore
2012	6th Ngee Ann 3D Art Exhibition, Ngee Ann Cultural Centre, Singapore	1999	Ceramitivity: The First Statement, NUS Centre for the Arts, Singapore
2011	Raw Interpretations (with Temasek Potters), Art-2 Gallery, Singapore		Shifting Paradigms: Handmade, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore Feature 5, Art-2 Gallery, Singapore
2008	Inspirations of Kampong Gelam – Inaugural Pottery Exhibition, Malay Heritage Centre, Singapore	1996	Down to Earth (7 Potters), Art Focus, Singapore
2007	Reshaping Asia, 4th World Ceramic Biennale, Incheon Ceramic Centre, Korea Pots, Pipes and Other Pieces – Singapore Art Show, National Library, Singapore	1995	Singapore Art' 95, Suntec City, Singapore 4th International Ceramics Festival Mino, Tajimi Gifu, Japan Malay Artists, Petronas Art Gallery,
2006	Ceramics Beyond Borders: 40 years of Bilateral Ties between Singapore & Japan, National Library Jalan Bahar Clay Studios & Dragon Kiln Open House, Singapore	1994	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  Gane & Benge Meet Iskandar Jalil, Art-2, The Substation, Singapore
2005	Seven Masters, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore A Different Light: Works from Corporate Collections, Drama Centre, Singapore Ceramitivity: The Third Statement,	1002	Contrasts: Recent Clay Creations (with Ng Eng Teng), Takashimaya Gallery, Singapore  Hong Kong Festival of Arts, Hong Kong
	NUS Centre for the Arts, Singapore	1993	nong kong resuval of Arts, Hong Kong

# **SELECTED COMMISSIONS** & SPECIAL PROJECTS 1990 Pottery, Miyazaki, Kyushu, Japan

Clay Pieces, National Museum, Singapore

1990 Ceramics In Infinity, The Westin Stamford, Singapore

1989 Born of Fire, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

1988 Clay and Cloth, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

1987 Transformation Image - Contemporary Ceramics in

National Museum's Centenary Art Festival,

1986 Clayworks (19 Ceramists), Alpha Gallery, Singapore

1985 International Ceramics, Taipei, Taiwan

1976 Contemporary Singapore Sculpture,

1975 14 Singapore Ceramics Artists,

International Design, Osaka, Japan

1979 Ceramics and Sculpture, Gallery Asia, Singapore

National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

Singapore, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

Ying and Yang, National University of Singapore

Singapore

Basics: 5 Artists (with Chong Fah Cheong, Han Sai Por, T. Mabrey, S. Neumann) National Museum Art Gallery,

- 2009 Spice of Life, Mural, Singapore Pottery, National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden Embassy of Singapore in Vientiane, Laos Wall Mural for MUIS Headquarters, Singapore
  - 2004 Beneficence 3, ceramic vessels, Marina Barrage, Public Utilities Board (PUB), Singapore
  - 2003 Mural, National Trade Union Congress (NTUC), Singapore
  - 2002 Mitravam, Mural, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Singapore
  - 1995 Mural, Commemorating The Straits Times 150th Year, Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), Singapore
  - 1994 Gifts for Keppel Shipyard, Singapore Gifts Pan United Corporation, Singapore
  - 1992 Clock-tower, Miyazaki Prefecture, Japan Special gifts for International Design Forum Speakers, Design Centre, Singapore Special gifts for Sotheby's Singapore
  - 1990 Changi International Airport Terminal 2, Singapore
  - 1988 Mural, Tanjong Pagar SMRT station, Singapore

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1971 ASEAN Art Exhibition, travelling exhibition to ASEAN countries. Pottery & Ikebana, National Library, Singapore

"I realised that striving to create something beautiful out of fire, earth, water and air, is a noble thing to do. The work speaks to you if you stop long enough to listen to it.

A number of pots have a presence - they are impressive and beautiful."

~ ISKANDAR JALIL, 2015



## Acknowledgments

Japan Creative Centre with Iskandar Jalil jointly convey their appreciation to Guest-of-Honour Prof. Tommy Koh, sponsors and supporters, the galleries, the artist's family and friends, students, volunteers and the project team that made this catalogue and exhibition possible.

Guest-of-Honour: Prof Tommy Koh Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore

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 $R_{J^{pap}}$ 

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MULAN GALLERY Fine Art

Essay:

Iskandar Jalil, from the original text In Search of the Ethical Pot 2015 with additional material from oral interviews with Editor, 2015.

Ambassador's Message:

Japan Creative Centre with Editor.

Editorial:

Lindy Poh with Agnes Lim, Art-2 Gallery & Mulan Gallery

Photography: Lawrence Chong Design: Ivan Lee



The 4 'Musketeers'
20cm (h) x 12cm x 12cm
20cm (h) x 15cm x 15cm
18cm (h) x 15cm x 15cm
18cm (h) x 13cm x 13cm

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition Iskandar Jalil – In Pursuit of the Ethical Pot (27 August - 12 September 2015) at the Japan Creative Centre, Singapore.

For further details and information, please log into www.iskandarjalil.com

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