

a solo exhibition by

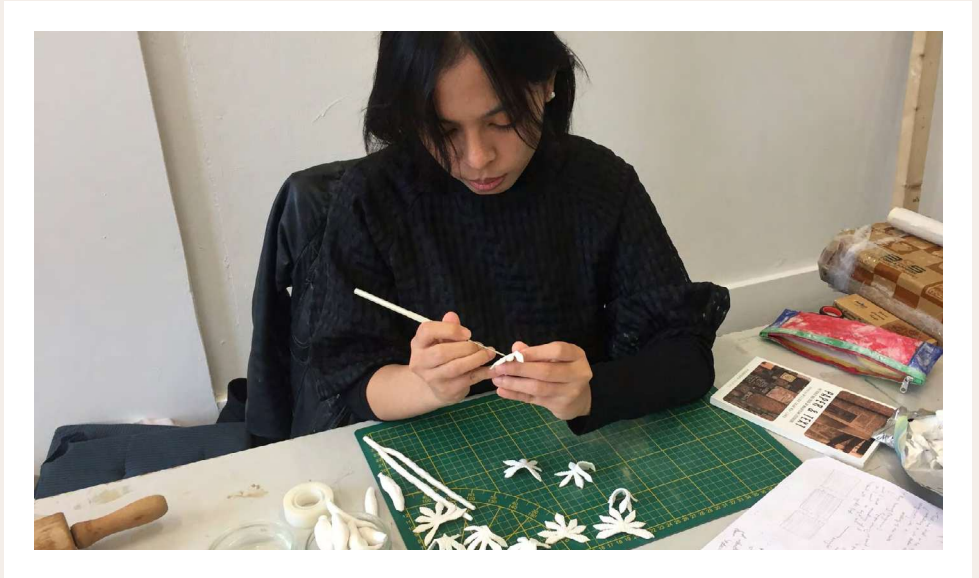
Ain



*Dalam
Lama Dah*

1 March — 25 May 2025

Artist



Nurul Ain Binti Nor Halim (2000), in short Ain, is an artist born in Bangkok, Thailand and raised in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Japan, which makes her have a diasporic identity and longing for belonging. Her practice includes videos, audio, and installations that focus on themes such as belonging, language, memories, and national and cultural identity. Her work reflects her interest in post-colonial discourses, such as cultural preservation, exoticism, craftsmanship, and archives. Besides that, she questions the position and role of artists in decolonization, with references to Aimé Césaire, “Man of Culture”, and how one embraces a post-colonial history and reconstructs itself through culture and arts.

Through Ash and Soil:
an email exchange between Ain and Hung Duong
about crafting home and molding memories

Foreword

In this email exchange between Ain, an artist based in Putrajaya, Malaysia, and Hung, an art writer in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, they discuss the creation of 'da lama dah,' an exhibition deeply rooted in the memories of home, family, and the artist's grandmother's battle with dementia. Their conversation explores how the artworks, ranging from ceramic plates to ash paintings, reflect the emotional journey of memory, identity, and the ephemeral nature of home.

Wed, Dec 25, 2024, 3:01 PM

Hi Hung,

Hope you are doing well. Happy holidays! I hope you're enjoying the holiday season.

I'm writing to you to tell you about my current works, or the ideas in my head. The first thing is I'm doing more ash paintings, smaller in size this time, with different series on display at the same time.

One series is about my grandma's (I call her Wan) stories and her memories. Particularly, about 'home'. I just found out recently that Wan was from a village named Kampung Pagar in Pahang, across a river named Sungai Lipis. When she was around 18, Wan worked as a midwife at a small hospital and had to travel by boat to go to work. These mundane stories Wan remembered are fading away as she has dementia.

Before I came to Penang this time, I went to see Wan at the care home before the year ended. When I saw her, she said, "Okay, let's go. I'm ready" (in Malay). I was so confused. I asked her, "Go, where?", to which she replied, "Home". I thought she was referring to the house in our hometown in Kuantan, which is far away and unoccupied at the moment.



To my surprise, she said, "No, your home." Even though this is not the first time she's asked to come 'home', she's always referred to our hometown, as that is where she has lived her life and formed precious memories. This time, she wanted to go back to my family's current house in Putrajaya.

It startled me because at some point, her idea of 'home' changed. I wonder what caused her to change. Could it be because she enjoyed the time when my dad brought her to stay at our house in Putrajaya, and I would occasionally chat with her for almost 4 hours?



Wan's request made me curious about the idea of 'home'. Whether it's the location, the memories, or our attachment to something called a 'home'. That's why I made these ash paintings of Wan's memories that I remembered from my conversations with her and my father about Wan's life. Along with the ash paintings, I am sending you some sketches of how I would like to present them. I'm thinking of displaying them on pieces of my family's old furniture. We have a lot of these classic wooden furniture and some of them have traveled with us to different places, even across countries. My parents wanted to throw some away since they were already breaking down, but I asked them if I could keep the pieces. I feel a kind of attachment lingering within these worn-out objects that have shared their lives with my family and witnessed us grow old together, especially when I saw them appearing in my family photographs! Well, my parents think I am just hoarding hahaha.



The old family photographs are also connected to my other ash painting series, in which the faces of people from the photographs are recreated. Even though these relatives are in my family photos, most of the people can't be recognised as there are not many people left who can remember them, even Wan. Of course, we can recognise my wan and atuk (grandpa) but the rest... who are they?



Thus, I wanted to paint their portraits, maybe as an act of remembrance. The colour choice was mostly intuitive. I just look at their faces and a colour would pop into my head, telling me that it is meant for this person. The ash also felt fitting, not because it's a medium that I've been experimenting with, but also because it speaks to the fading, or disappeared, nature of our

family's recollection of these people, even as I am painting to remember them.

I'll stop here for now, hahaha.

P.S. Sorry it's long. And if you can't tell, I was slowly getting tired. I'll update you with more photos later on too.

Happy holidays!

Ain

Jan 1, 2025, 1:52 PM

Dear Ain,

Happy New Year to you and your loved ones! May this year bring much needed reprieve and new opportunities for us to carve the life that we want. I have spent last week reflecting on the past year, and I have to say those quiet moments of solitude have put my mind at ease.

The first time that I saw your ash paintings at Blank Canvas in early 2024, I thought there was something vulnerable about them. An innocence in the way you build your fragile world from subdued color patches and coarse texture. The works conjure recollection of memories, as if filtered through a camera's grainy film, while the characters resemble cartoonish animation from a surreal TV show.

There is something homely about a grandparent figure, like an old house that has weathered under time's corrosion. When I held my grandfather's hand, and then my grandmother's, before they crossed over to the other side, I thought of a door. People always compare the eyes to the windows of the soul, but for me, someone's hand can equally tell their life stories. Gnarly and mottled palms, with crisscrossing lines that hold many mysteries—a joyful childhood here, a midlife heartbreak there. Holding my grandparents' hands therefore was not only a farewell gesture, but also a key to access unknown corners of their life. What do you think? Is the ash in your Stories series a symbol for the impending death that awaits all of us? Or the evaporation of memories?

Objects hold the power to activate memories, conjuring them from the river of forgetfulness. They also stir our imagination, prompting us to ask questions: Who did this belong to? Where was its home? What purpose has it served? Old furniture, to me, stands in for the people who used them. The bed where my grandparents used to share now lies like a ghost in their home's living room. We moved the bed there when my grandparents could no longer bear the trips up and downstairs. When I look at that bed now, I can still make out the faint silhouette of my grandfather's curved back, right next to my grandmother's unfurling gray hair covering one side of his shoulder. My childhood home used to have a lot of wooden furniture as well (one of the reasons why my mother banned pets in the house haha), and I would have flashbacks of childhood whenever I see them again.

Looking at the sketches of your exhibition layout, I felt as though your ash paintings were growing out of the furniture like mycelium pores! It is a nice allusion to the physical, and symbolic, disintegration of these objects, but also a rebirth: These vessels of memories transform into a nourishing source for your artistic labor. I will be curious to see these furniture displayed in Blank Canvas's exhibition space. Will the furniture be considered part of the work as well, or do you rather see them as a metaphoric base for the paintings?

Since my grandparents passed away, I have been

drawn to my family's old photos. Some people in those photos are long gone now, while some I cannot recognize at all. There is a sense of affinity (we were obviously photographed together at some family functions!), yet a sense of alienation remains, as I cannot for the life of me recall their name, or who they are. Like extras in a movie, their faces fade into the background. It will be interesting to see how you resurrect these semi-strangers in your ash paintings. Are you planning to render their images onto ceramics as well?

Now it is my turn to feel tired. The first day of the year has passed by without too much fizzle. I will go lay down, perhaps, a nice nap. Maybe I will dream about my grandparents.

Hung

Jan 9, 2025, 7:55 PM

Hi Hung!

Happy New Year to you too! I wish you the best of fortune and health this year!

Receiving your email got me thinking a lot actually, longer than I expected. So long that I almost forgot to reply!

I enjoyed the way you interpreted my ash paintings. The painted scenes combined recollected stories about Wan with my imagination. While I have been to some of the places where the depicted events occurred, I did not witness them directly. Thus, the scenes almost trigger a glitch of time, happening somewhere between the past and present, between fact and fiction. The way I drew the figures was also neither realistic nor unreal: a hybrid between shapely dolls and misty clouds. For me, memories appear powdery and fluid, disintegrating when touched. Initially, the ash was purely an accidental discovery, when I was experimenting with making my own ash glazes. I looked at it and I just thought,

“What would happen if I put this material on paper?”

It created a crumbly texture that easily evaporates when you move the paintings around. Perhaps that is what the ash means to me: Fragility and disintegration. I also tend to make delicate ceramics, which this ash-

painting technique aptly resonates with. But of course, I can't deny the connection between ash and death, and the impending disappearance of our memories. Honestly, I welcome such interpretations as my family stories and memories are indeed fading away.

I also agree that furniture is beings that bear memories of one's life, especially wooden furniture. Maybe it's because of their carvings that imitate organic shapes and forms. I'll share some photos of what I mean. Don't they look like shells, tiger claws, and hooves? It feels like these objects are breathing and growing old with my family. Interestingly, when I was organizing my old photographs, I noticed that the same furniture that I currently have also appeared in them. I was even more surprised when I realized that said photos were taken abroad, meaning that the furniture has traveled with my family as we moved around. That moment was when I realized how much memory furniture can hold.





ceramics will be housed inside a cabinet, while the old furniture will be stationed opposite, admiring them. I initially wanted to return to my hometown to retrieve my grandma's chair and nightstand. However, as I was arranging the dates to travel back, I received news that the house was robbed. The house gates were cut and the doors were unlocked. Fortunately, no one was hurt. While the thief's trespass caused me to postpone my visit to the house, it made me think:



"What a coincidence that I was making works about the idea of "home", and my grandma's home was invaded. What a coincidence that when I met my grandma recently, her perception of "home" changed from the house where she built her life with her husband and missed very dearly (our hometown) to the house I currently live in (in Putrajaya)."

A funny (prob, a bit graphic) story about one of my furniture, I got a scar on my forehead from this bench when I was little. I was playing underneath it and my father was sitting on it, reading the newspaper. He remembered how shocked he was as he saw so much blood on my face, yet I wasn't crying at first, more confused, haha. Now, this bench sits outside my house, where my father still smokes his cigarettes. I guess he will be reminded of that incident every time he sits on it.

After some thinking, I actually have made several changes to the artwork and exhibition layout space (I know, very typical of artists to constantly change our minds). Attached below is the hopefully final layout of my exhibition. The



For the ceramics, I have been experimenting with a laser printer to transfer images from the old photographs onto the pieces. The ceramics have these marks that were rendered digitally and I laser printed them on the ceramics. I was inspired by these souvenir plates in Malaysia, which printed people's holiday photos on the plates. When I was growing up, I always saw these family-holiday plates in every house that I visited. I find them funny, yet also intriguing, so I want to create a few of them with my family's old photos. However, I wanted the plates to be more personal, so I used the clay that I found behind my house to make them. It feels like I'm giving these photographs, particularly the people in them, a new land (plate) to live in. Maybe a bit far-fetched, haha. But it felt right and fun.

Oh, and I also wanted to add on. For the ash portraits, I want to display them in a photo album, almost similar to my old family photo album. It will be displayed on a pedestal behind these beaded curtains (that my grandma used to have), so the audience will pass through the curtains to enter an intimate space with the photobook. The audience can flip through the book to look at the portraits. But of course, as these paintings are fragile, if you are not gentle, the images will disintegrate and change. I enjoy this idea that every time viewers flip through the book, they run the risk of damaging the paintings. It's so fragile, akin to how our memories are. The work also takes on a performative aspect as it interacts with various audiences.

Jan 15, 2025, 2:12 PM

Dear Ain,

It has taken me longer than expected to respond to your email, since Covid has grabbed hold of my lungs during a flight back home from Jakarta. It has been a gruesome battle for the last 4 days, and I have just now recovered enough to pen this letter.

Last night, before resigning to bed and trying to suppress another violent chill in my bones, I looked at a photo of my grandparents, me, and my younger brother. We were floating in a swimming pool, bright smiles, faded innocence, and glowy texture. To my horror, I realized that my memories of my grandparents, particularly their appearance, have already begun to fade. I sat for a long time, trying to recall my grandmother's hair, or my grandfather's palm, the way they walk, talk, and laugh. Slowly, with much mental nudging, the memories came back, in fragments of course. I managed to cobble together a mosaic of my grandparents' portrait, a futile attempt though as the pieces didn't gel well together. In fact, they seemed to slip and slide, solidified here only to dissipate there. And, for the first time in a long time, I felt helpless: What will be left of us after we die? Fragility, ashes, nothingness. All of these things color so much of our life after death, yet we tend to push them away from our mind. I think that is why I enjoy your ash paintings: They don't try to make grand statements. Just fragile moments of bygone times that can only be conjured through imagination. And the ash of time, mixed with color to form a crumbly paste.

Placing the furniture in dialogue with the ceramic pieces is an intriguing choice in visual display! The wooden armchairs seem to act as capsules of tender moments that transpired between you and other family members. They play the role of silent witness, a mnemonic device. If only there is a technology out there to detect and measure the energy embedded within these senior pieces! And placing them directly in admiration of (love that word choice!) your new ceramic pieces creates a subtle and emotive dialogue between memories. Yet, these memories have now undergone a metamorphosis, a rebirth through fire (both physically and conceptually). Still bearing some resemblances of the photographs, the ceramic-photographs are now more oblique, more suggestive than indicative, thus appealing to a larger narrative than its previous life form. Having the furniture sitting next to these reborn memories, to me, is a method of opening different portals into stories once told.

Laser-printing old photographs on ceramic plates that you made from the clay behind your house is such a blend between the personal and the collective. And yes, I remember those plates as we too had them in our home growing up haha. My friends and I even printed our photos on mugs to give to one another as birthday presents or graduation mementos. I always find them cute yet kitschy. They seem so personal and affectionate, yet can be mass produced with technology. Anyone can own a mug like that, yet it is connected to you as your face

is on it. And the idea of using clay from your own home to make the ceramic is an emotive touch, as it grounds these plates into a specific site, although viewers won't readily see that. Memories travel far and wide, and they tend to dissolve after a while. Hopefully, with you giving them a new life through your work, they will find a haven somewhere to continue breathing.

The ash portraits slowly disintegrating under the touch of the viewers really bring out the need for gentle empathy when treating memories. I have always thought of memories as birds made of clouds, or dust bunnies haha. Squeeze them in your palm too tightly and they disappear, but leave them loose for too long they will slip away. Such a dilemma. In a way, the more we try to hold onto memories, or look at them, the more eroded they become, like burnt pages of a book. The more we try to touch a memory, the further we contribute to its eventual death. Maybe that is why working with memories always requires a certain level of adaptable imagination--they shapeshift within a matter of seconds. And the idea that the viewers themselves can lead to the death of an artwork by engaging with it has something to say about the state of contemporary art as well ;)

It has been fun doing this informal interview with you! Look forward to your next email.

Cheers,

Hung

Jan 30, 2025, 6:46 AM

Hi Hung,

I'm so sorry that this email took a very very very long time. I kept pushing it back and kept forgetting to reply. I tend to be more forgetful lately, which worries me too. But it's okay, I'll get by.

I'm sorry to hear you got Covid, and I hope that you feel stronger now. I had a friend who recently got Covid and she took 2 weeks to fully recover.

I don't think I have the right words to respond to your fading memories of your grandparents. I would say "I'm sorry to hear that," yet these words don't truly express the empathy and compassion that I feel hearing that. I think death is unavoidable, and it always comes when you least expect, to remind you of life and time. I'm glad to hear that the ash paintings manage to capture the honesty of these fading memories. When I created them, my purpose was not to immortalise these memories, but rather to temporarily materialise them, long enough to come to terms with them as they dissolve.

This sentiment echoes in the title of the exhibition, "da lama dah" (Malay) or "it's been too long" (English). I took the phrase from a recent conversation with Wan. She uttered these words as she longed for her home. I always find titling the hardest task: I rarely want to title my artwork because I fear that it'll frame the artwork. While conceptually framing the work might help the audiences navigate it, the title can also limit people from approaching the work as it is. I don't know how it is for you, but when I go to

see shows, I tend to walk around not reading anything first. Just observe and pause in front of artworks that speak to me, then read the wall texts and exhibition statements later. I find this approach more engaging, as it allows me to truly see artworks with fresh eyes. This is why I sometimes struggle with titling. Nowadays, I am getting better, but of course, there will always be difficulties.

I love how you've worded the relationship between the furniture and the ceramics. The idea of the wooden armchairs as "silent witnesses" is such a powerful concept; they hold space not just physically, but also emotionally and symbolically. It echoes what I've been thinking a lot about.

How objects are holders of our memories.

It's a matter of how you read the objects. Moreover, I also thought that placing the ceramic pieces alongside my grandma's furniture creates an interesting tension, almost like a quiet conversation between two different kinds of memory: one that's steady and grounded, and the other that's in constant flux, remade and open to new understandings.

I also find these plates printed with the photos of families kitschy and hilarious. When I was young, I always wondered why we put photos on plates haha. But as I grow older and move from house to house, I have grown more fond of them. It's something that gives a hint of a family's intimate

moment, which is nice to see. It may be mundane and odd, but I think it's how one tries to archive their family memories.

Recently, I was told that, in Malaysia, one thing that people will always ask (almost constantly), is whether you have eaten or not. Food connects people in Malaysia; it is our way of showing care toward another person. It is very fitting then that these photos are printed on plates (even though we don't use them to eat!). And yes, I do find it a shame that the audience will not easily figure that these ceramics were made from the clay that I dug from my backyard where my family and I currently reside, but I think it is important that I chose this material particularly that resonates with my art making process. I tend to put more emphasis on the process rather than the outcome, as I always tend to question and doubt the material that I use, and whether it is suitable to convey my intentions. In this case, I wanted the relationship between the material and the intangible memories to be as close as possible, which is why I dug a hole to get clay, haha. Pretty bizarre, ngl.

I truly enjoy the way you describe memory - "birds made of clouds or dust bunnies". It sounds very alive yet too fragile. When I read that line, I can imagine a caretaker for these creatures of memories, who is very mindful of their flies and hops.

I realize that I tend to create artwork that can change over time. For me, the artwork's expiration somehow means it is infused with life. Perhaps I was trying to create a second life out of the memories that I could gather from these old photographs and see how long will it last, how much change will it go through, and how will it be cared for.

P.S Unfortunately, no photos to share in this email :(I was at Singapore Art Week but I keep forgetting to take photos too caught up in the moment, every single time.

Kind regards,

Ain

Jan 31, 2025, 6:39 PM

Hi Ain,

It is okay to take your time and digest information before you reply. I think time plays a role in our conversation as well, an actor in this durational textual performance. I am all better now, no more Covid (crossing fingers it won't come back anytime soon!). I have just returned to Saigon from Hanoi after the Lunar New Year celebration. It was nice to get some chill days, but I still much prefer the southern sunny warmth.

Naming to me is a sacred act. When you birth something into existence, you seal its fate with a name. Our name, chosen by our parents without our consent, may as well be indicators for our unforeseeable future. Which is why giving your work its title is such a daunting task. I have always enjoyed artists who play with their title: perched somewhere between suggestive and definite, a word pun would be fantastic but can be corny if not executed well. Tricky matter, a title. "da lama dah" sounds like a quiet sigh uttered in the middle of the night, tinged with tiredness and a bit of nostalgia. Quite an old title for a young artist's show haha. But it feels apt, since most of your works deal with memories and staring back at the past. Events, when looked at in retrospect, do feel longer sometimes. Regardless, I think this poetic title is a nice prelude into the show.

I do think that whatever occupies our mind in this lifetime has a past-life connection to us. Since we haven't finished dealing with them in the past, they continue to return to us, silently requesting that we pay attention, acknowledge, and enter a dialogue with them. In a way, I think we unconsciously call out for them as well. Your

works are just waiting for you to give them a form ;)

As to makan makan, I think everywhere in Southeast Asia, a common greeting is to ask people if they have eaten. My grandparents would always ask me if I had had food when I came to visit them, and always ensured that I left their house with a full stomach! Which is why the vessels that we use to contain food can trigger very intimate memories. I appreciate the fact that you took something close to your home to breathe life into it. The soil remembers things that we have long forgotten: who lived there, who died there, how they passed, how they lived. All of these stories eventually sink into the earth and sleep there. In a way, the process of you turning the soil into ceramics is a form of reincarnation: These stories now don a new form, a new life. And don't worry, we always remember bizarre things haha

I think this conversation has been very enriching, and I truly want to continue it infinitely! Yet, I think we should leave some mysteries to the viewers, so they can explore them in their own way and form private connections. A work that is open to interpretation will live many lives and be remembered in different ways, which perhaps do them well. I look forward to your opening in Penang, to see your memory-vessels and listen to their whispers. It will be a delight to see you again in person!

Warmest,

Hung

Feb 4, 2025, 12:10 PM

Hi Hung,

Thank you for your email and hah! I got it early this time :D I was actually writing this on Sunday but then fell asleep by accident and poof, it's Tuesday, haha.

So glad to hear that you have celebrated your Lunar New Year with loved ones! I actually miss celebrating it with my friends in the Netherlands. We would get mooncakes and always try to find the best ones to share, as well as make dumplings hahaha.

This is not the first time someone has looked at my artworks and is surprised to realise that I'm a relatively young artist. Once, a viewer came up to ask if I was the artist behind my ceramic works. When I said, yup, she was surprised that I was very young, as she thought it was an old lady who did the intricate, quiet ceramic works. Another told me that artworks are "slow-burn" hahaha. I like how you describe naming artwork as almost similar to naming a human being; my friends and I have always had this conversation (or a debate per se) on how an artwork should be able to exist on its own without the artist, almost like the artwork can breath on its own using their name, materials and form. Artists should be an element that elevates the artwork, not necessarily its core.

Lately, when I was making my homemade clay with the dirt from my backyard, I felt almost in a trance. I enjoyed seeing the muddy murky water slowly clear up leaving the clay at the bottom of the jar. As I pour out the water, trying to do

it carefully so I don't get the clay itself out, I watch the cold water pour out creating a mini river to the drain. While the mini river flows out, my orange cat (Mango) would actually drink the flowing water. I read somewhere that cats love drinking flowing water more than still water. It felt like I was watching the clay's life cycle. Now I want to create an artwork about this process but that is for another day. Making clay is a fun process, tiring but very calming.

And no, thank you! Thank you for the email conversations! It has been so fun to read your writings, even though I take so long to digest them haha. I do apologise for taking a long time to reply, it's partly because I am also a teacher so my days are limited haha. Yes, I do agree, it'll be a good idea to leave some room for the audience to wonder and ponder. I too look forward to seeing you in Penang! Hope you have a lovely week!

(Cutting it short as I have to go and teach a class now, haha)

Kind regards,

Ain

Art Writer



HUNG DUONG is an independent writer, translator, and curator whose criticism on Southeast Asian contemporary art spans a diverse spectrum of forms and themes, addressing sociopolitical issues, ecological histories, and material transformation. He is an active contributor to both regional and international magazines, such as Artforum, frieze, ArtAsiaPacific, and Art & Market. His recent publications include translations of artists' writings in 'The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader' (published by National Gallery Singapore) and a hybrid essay on artist Trương Công Tùng for Post, the online journal of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. His website sea-through.net serves as a digital platform featuring artists and events across Southeast Asia, along with his personal projects.

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CANVAS

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2, Argus Lane, 10200 George Town,
Penang, Malaysia