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## The Collector: Ahmad Zakii Anwar

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By John Krich

Ahmad Zakii Anwar, known as "Zakii" to colleagues and countrymen, has become the main man of Malaysian contemporary art by remaining its odd man out.

The 54-year-old artist with the trademark white curls and sprig of a goatee has had shows around the world – including in Japan, Germany, Australia and Singapore – helping lead a boom in auction prices and recognition for what has been one of Southeast Asia's smaller and less-known artistic communities.

But Zakii has done it by taking his own path, "refusing to draw a fence around myself, always engaging other traditions," he says. Most of Malaysia's modern artists pursued a watered-down abstract expressionism, with many following somewhat controversial and ill-defined Islamic admonitions against depicting the human figure. But Zakii has made his m[acute]tier and obsession large, intensely charged, hypergraphic portraits, in both paint and charcoal. Earlier works referenced traditional masks, but most recently and memorably he's produced male nudes that combine strength with introspection.



"It's painting the body from the inside out," the artist says.

Photo by Sash Alexander

He has likewise eschewed the usual grab-bag quests for cultural identity and the easy pop symbolism that marks a lot of Malaysian protest art, though in practice he is perhaps the leading social activist in the arts community. In 1994 he founded Life Zone, which has pioneered community homes for AIDS patients and a needle-

exchange program for addicts to prevent the spread of infection. He continues to personally oversee it today, mixing time in the studio with the challenge of supervising a staff made up mostly of recovering addicts rescued from the street.

"I'd rather do social work than proclaim it in my art," Zakii quips.

Activism is a family tradition. The artist's father, Haji Anwar bin Abdul Malik, was a prominent politician credited with coining the name of the political party that has held power in Malaysia since the country's birth in 1957: United Malays National Organization, or UNMO. And his sister Zainah Anwar started and for two decades ran Sisters in Islam, Malaysia's most visible and persistent champion of women's rights within a Muslim context.

Zakii also broke from Malaysia's arts mainstream by leaving Kuala Lumpur and the country's most influential art scene at the age of 32 and returning to the leafy hillside in Johor Bahru where he had grown up. (He had moved to Kuala Lumpur at age 17 to study, and stayed on to work in advertising as a means of supporting his painting.)

Zakii jokes that moving back in with the family was an economic necessity, but one look at his childhood home, a Malay-style house that he has modernized and expanded with huge wooden decks, reveals a peaceful refuge and sanctuary.

Five kris with their scabbards: a Malay kris from Kelantan; a kris Tanjung from Pattani in southern Thailand; a kris Panjang, also called a long kris (used for executions, Zakii says); a Malay kris from Trengganu; and a Bugis kris from Sulawesi, Indonesia. Sash Alexander for The Wall Street Journal

"I can stay here until the world ends," he says with a chuckle of his cozily cramped, book-lined third-floor studio. Like much of his work, Zakii's house quietly brings the best of Malay handicraft into a 21st-century context. (Higher up the hill, he has upgraded a second building; it serves both as storage for his own paintings and a gallery that promotes the handful of other artists from Johor state.)

Antique objects, carvings and carpets are everywhere, yet never in a jumble. One type of item keeps popping up to predominate, on the glass shelves of specially made display cases or low-lying tables both indoors and out. Oddly enough, this groundbreaking artist has long been drawn to the mythology and craftsmanship of his home culture's most powerful traditional artifact: the kris (sometimes spelled "keris"). The dagger of choice across the greater Malay archipelago, it is said to have both ceremonial and spiritual powers.

## **What about the kris first attracted you?**

All weapons have two factors which I find extremely interesting. One is they are deadly. These are tools made for killing. The other part is that they are all beautifully made – so there is this mixture of beauty and deadliness. If something is just beautiful alone, it gets too yucky, too sweet. But when you mix that with its opposite, with something that contradicts it, you create something really intriguing.

## **How did you first start collecting?**

The first one I bought was from a friend of mine, very cheap. I'd always go to his house to look at them and finally he gave me the chance to choose one. Later, I went on my own to buy and got cheated a few times – sold fakes because I didn't know enough. The "ivory"...was fiberglass. Shops will always say they are 300 years old, most might be 80 or 90. Good lessons in life are always expensive.

## **How much do they cost?**

The world of the kris collector is a small world, but a fascinating world. There are people who are crazy about it. Once I asked the ticket-seller of the palace in Yogyakarta; he immediately called someone to replace him. He took me to his house to show me his collection and they were very costly. The prices can run up to several hundred thousand dollars.

## **What makes you choose your pieces?**

It's not just a piece of metal. You feel a connection, just like when you meet certain people. With the kris it's the same. If I see 10, there will be one that I have an affinity for – not necessarily the most beautiful. I don't like things too ornate, I like the simpler ones. Not embedded with jewels. And I've switched to the Malay kris from the Indonesian. They are rarer, harder to find. Many have Koranic inscriptions; the carving is a craft in itself. It's made by an empu, a blacksmith, but not an ordinary one. In Indonesia, if you are a nobleman, and you are marrying a woman of lower social rank, you don't have to attend the wedding, you can just send your kris.

And you commission them to be made for your station in life, but also for your character – because the kris has a soul. With some kris, the empu has to go on a fast, a bathing ritual, with many prayers, chants and verses from the Koran. When it's

done, he will sleep with the kris and receive a dream that indicates whether his work is successful. Otherwise he has to melt it down and redo it.

### **Where do you find them?**

Mostly from other collectors, up in Terengganu, or in people's homes. If you're lucky, maybe in a flea market.

### **How do you maintain them?**

If you are keeping them, you have to adhere to certain rituals, certain months to clean them – with lime and tamarind. And they are scented – because the spirit in the kris feeds on scents. Plus the Javanese put on arsenic. The blade is a mixture of iron and nickel that creates a pattern and the arsenic makes the contrast stronger in the pattern. Normally, I'll just do it when they are rusty. And I stick the blade into a pineapple for a few hours or a day.

### **And you're not afraid of their powers?**

A lot of people, Malays, are afraid of the kris. But I find them simply fascinating. I suppose I've got around 50. I used to have them hanging all over the place, but with the kids growing up, I caught them playing with them. So I keep them safely. But I've never painted a kris. I just don't feel that I can do justice to them.