



# Tomi

Tomi Heri (b.1991) is a multidisciplinary artist based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The visual and conceptual aspects in Tomi's pieces, ranging from digital to installation works, are meticulously thought out.

As an artist, Tomi observes situational moments in which people or objects around him would interact or relate with one another. Based on these daily life observations as well as his past memories, Tomi would create kaleidoscopic worlds as a way of reaffirming his identities.

The environments that he creates are often filled with otherworldly characters, symbolisms, and narrations developed based on his personal real-life experiences. These elements are arranged and juxtaposed into dynamic multi-layered works. Using his art, he transforms the mundane into the unpredictable.

# Heri



Tomi graduated with a Bachelor of Creative Technology from University Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) and has participated in various group exhibitions across Malaysia, including at the National Visual Art Gallery and the Terengganu State Museum. On a regional scale, he has shown his work in Indonesia and South Korea.

Tomi has received several awards from both Malaysia and China; he was placed second in the 'International Collegiate Snow Sculpture Contest' in Harbin, China, consecutively in 2013 & 2014. He has also received the Sembilan Art Residency (2018) in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, as well as the Khazanah Nasional Berhad Artist Fellowship (2019) at Acme Studios in London, UK.

# Headwaters

## /HERI SG

**Tomi Heri graduated from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) in Bachok, Kelantan in 2014 with a degree in Creative Technology and Heritage. For SG., as preoccupied as it was with the idea of life flowing, of cycles, of circulation and of origins, Tomi Heri approached Haris Abadi, one of his lecturers during his formative years to write a few words on the exhibition.**

**TOMI, TO ME.**

To tell you the truth, I don't really mind about what kind of art Tomi is actually making now. Simply because I have really known him in character, and truly believe that whatever comes out of him will always be a result of high esteem, good thoughts and great skills.

I think I first met Tomi in 2011. I just got back from my study and started my career as an art lecturer in UMK. I didn't actually teach him in first year drawing class, but I remember meeting him several times while visiting the studio after classes. He is the kind of student who prefers staying in the studio - away from the warmth and coziness of a bed. To be honest, what I remember about Tomi is his determination to learn new things. I'll say he is kind of an underdog - didn't talk much during his early years, but his artworks usually stood out among others, which makes him to be easily known among lecturers.

In 2012, my colleague Issarezal and I was assigned by UMK to form a group of lecturers and students for an international entry in a Snow Sculpture Competition in Harbin, China. We called Tomi to join the group and asked him to find two friends, who he thought would be suitable for the rest of the snow-sculpting team. He then brought two other students to my office,

demonstrated their carving skills (on polystyrene) and two weeks later, we were somewhere in a freezing part of the world, carving snow in negative 20-to-30-degree Celsius. We won second place with our sculpture titled 'Hanuman' (from the Wayang Kulit character) and that experience became a booster for us, especially Tomi. This experience was also the reason for our close relationship until now.

One thing you should know, is that Tomi has never been formally trained in a Fine Art academic course. We (My Faculty) actually managed to establish a formal Fine Art department in 2016, right after he graduated with a degree course in Creative Technology and Heritage, majoring in Multimedia, in 2015. But during his course of study, I had several times stumbled upon him coming out of the library with art books in hand.

Last week, Tomi called me and asked if I could write a page of words for his upcoming solo exhibition. In reading his works - I will say - that I can't explain too much. But I'll try to summarize what I have known about Tomi all this while, in relation to his artistic journey. Personally I think he is someone who always dares to embrace his past, positively, as a way to go forward. If I am not mistaken, his nick "Tomi" is actually

taken from his late father's nickname. I remembered encountering some of his family visiting his studio when I was paying a visit in 2018. These positive bonds, to me, whether physically, morally or even psychologically, is one of the major reasons of his growth in character - and the main reason for his continuous success in the art scene.

After he graduated from UMK, Tomi often called me - usually with a random discussion about art, his work or even life. Through these series of calls, which I always glad to be receiving, I managed to keep up with his latest activity: in-house artist at TitikMerah, Publika, art residency at Sembilan, group shows and art events, his ever expanding art networks and all. He even called me from London during his residency at Acme studios, saying that he bought me a Nam June Paik major retrospective catalog. Tomi had genuinely taught me one important thing - constant re-connecting is not hard, and I have also made efforts to reach my lecturers through phone, ever since.

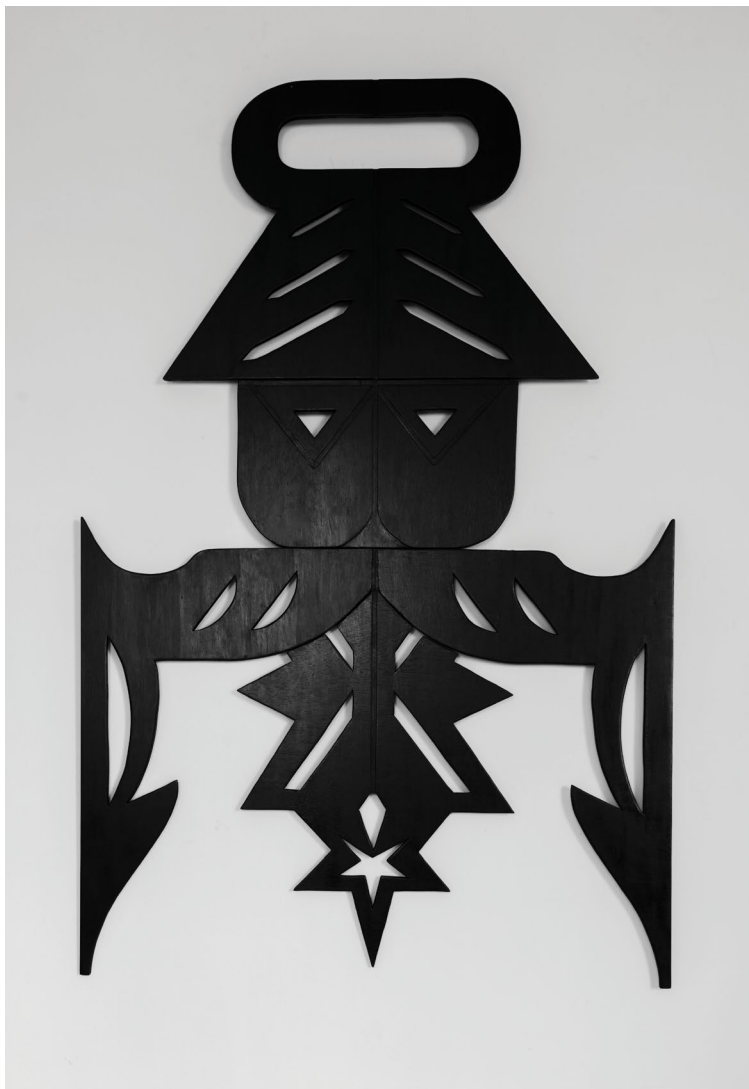
Back to his artworks - I found his paintings, drawings, cut-out images made of different materials, geometric characters and installations to be deeply rooted in personal experiences. His inspirations ranged from traditions to the most high-end subjects -

in eclectic and anachronistic ways. He has that capability to naturally avoid common art trends, paddling against the current with his usual confidence. Knowing him as a 'multimedia' student, I had always believed that he somehow managed to manipulate his previous experience with digital software 'toolbox' (like those in Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator) in building his whimsical, almost tribal, complex shapes and characters in the physical realm. While building up the visual language of these shapes, Tomi created links to the collective past - of his family, friends, memories, survival moments and cultural experiences. He even travelled back to Kelantan occasionally to meet some local craftsmen, woodcarvers or kite makers to enrich his creative vision. He is someone who is wholeheartedly aware of his complex and ever-changing roots, respecting them with pride.

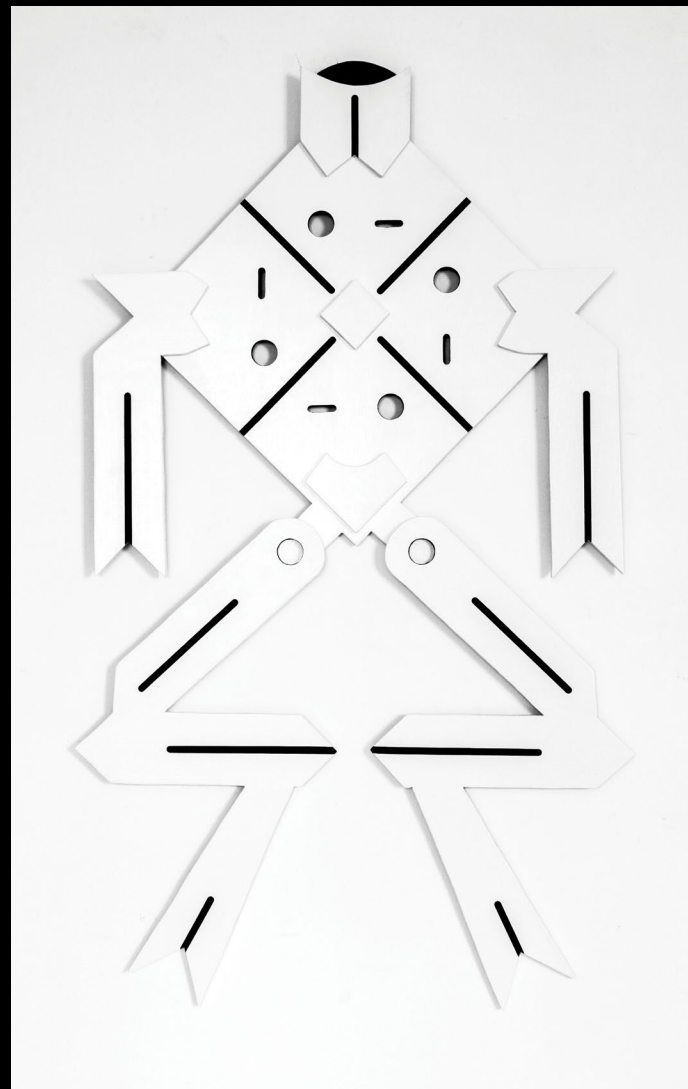
Again, literally, to tell you the truth, I don't really mind about what kind of art Tomi is actually making now. Simply because I have really known him in character, and truly believe that whatever come out of him will always be a result of high esteem, good thoughts and great skills.

Congrats Tomi!

Haris Abadi, Winter,  
Bachok, Kelantan 2020



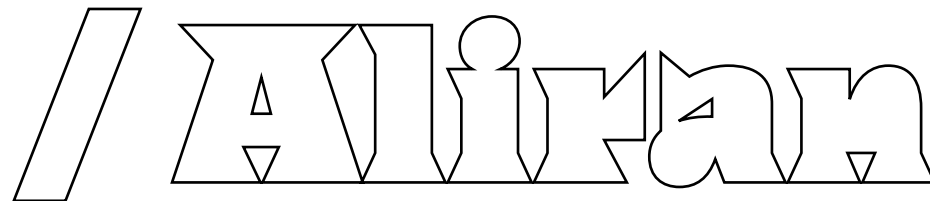
**K-II, 2020**  
Oil on wooden cut-out  
158 x 107 cm



**LAYANG, 2020**  
Oil on wooden cut-out  
131 x 75 cm

# Flows

Digitalising woodcarving motifs  
in the works of Tomi Heri



**An abbreviation for Sungai, or river, SG. —gesturing to a return to roots —metaphorically represents life. Indeed, Tomi Heri’s inaugural solo exhibition is a celebration of homecoming: All rivers have a starting point where water begins its flow. For Tomi Heri, the ribbon-like journey begins here and now.**

A multidisciplinary artist, Tomi Heri explores socio-cultural contexts by documenting events, objects, spaces, people and circumstances —the encounters in his daily environment.

These critical observations on the quotidian become the fodder upon which Tomi Heri builds into digital media, sculpture and installation visual narratives. There is an enduring fascination with iconography, motifs, and patterns: geometric symbolic patterns are carved out of acetate sheets, stencilled onto wooden panels, manipulated into digital media. In the artist’s hands, heritage coalesces with technology, form and representation are employed in distinct fashions to represent episodes of his life. Tomi Heri’s digital approach in creating

patterns is his way of paying homage to the generations before him who have skillfully handcrafted these motifs. Traditionally, these motifs were influenced by nature such as flora and fauna. Tomi Heri’s interpretation of symbols and patterns are coloured by the contemporary, constantly engaging with the daily rituals of modern life. He designs his “kamus hidup” or dictionary of life that reads like a visual manuscript; this is a project of building a visual lexicon that bends the strictures of form and time.

**SG.Data**, features a digital projection of cleverly designed logos projected onto white fabric constructed on totem-like pillars with bubu-inspired bases on each side – handmade by Tomi Heri – using giant bamboo or buloh betong collected from Sungai Dusun.

The installation flirts with ideas of “material”, “authenticity” and “origin” by manipulating natural materials while removing them from the cultural backdrops that provide context. By placing the locally sourced materials in a new environment, the piece engages with the politics and aesthetics of ‘locality’.

Every detail forms part of this engagement. Even in weighing down the projection cloth, teardrop dropshot weights traditionally used

as fishing tackle equipment are used to embellish the fabric. Meanwhile, digital media illustrates moving images of the characters in SG. accompanied by an endless static sound, or the sound of rainfall. Other stylised motifs are rendered in wooden panel cut-outs that feature amphibian, biomorphic shapes, silhouettes also featured in the video projection.

What is created is a tapestry that blends the old and new, fracturing the tightly segregated categories of heritage versus modern life, and provides the roots upon which many of the other works grow. The moving image in the video is made manifest; the digital pushed into the realm of the tangible. There is **K-11**, the wooden cut-out painted in black which features the motif of the protagonist. Then there is **M X P**, an acronym for motif and pattern, featuring a wooden frame measuring 33cm in diameter and a canvas cut-out that suspends beneath it. Inspired by Matisse’s cut-outs, it is an illustration of the patterning of flora and fauna.

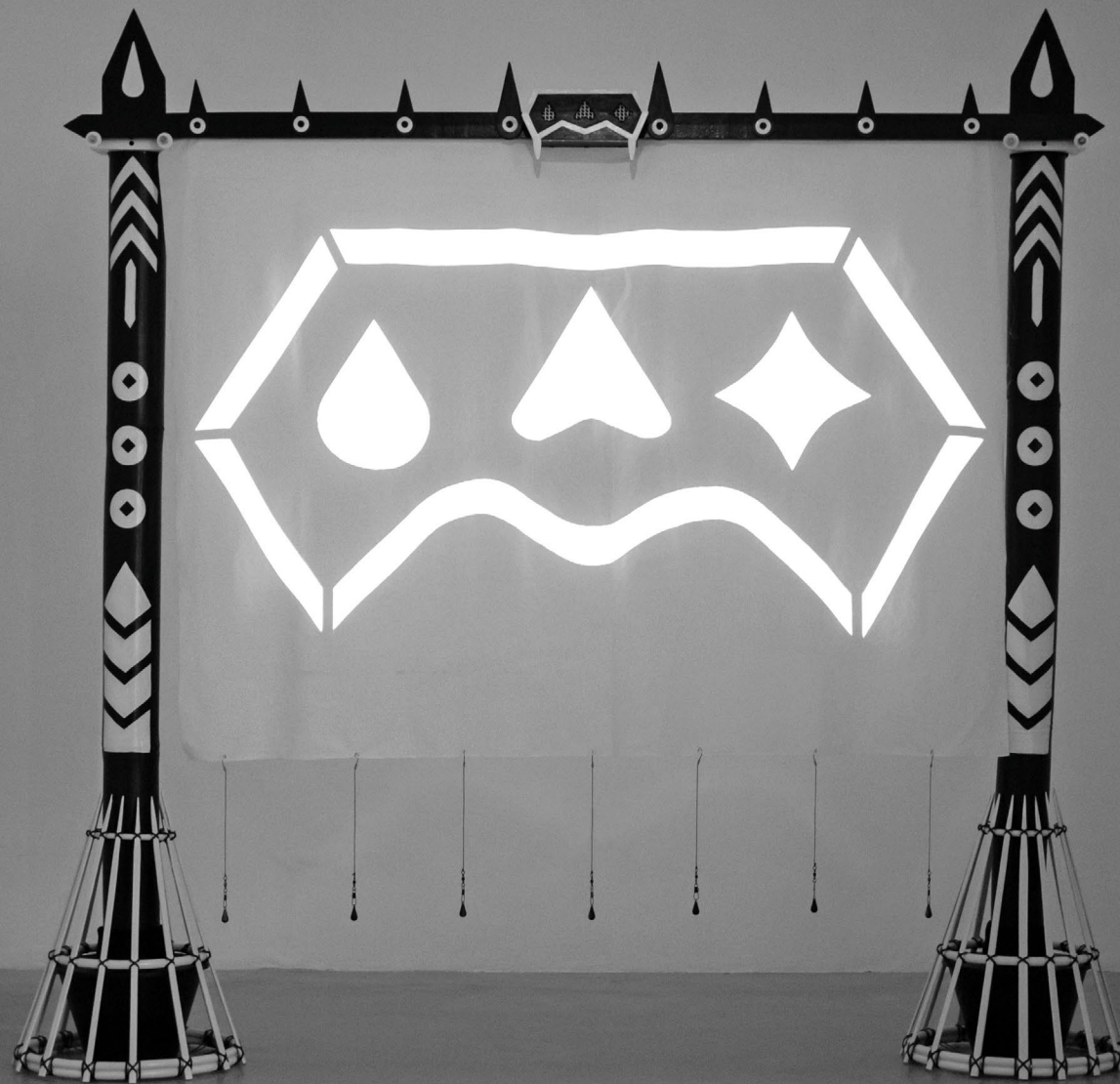
A stencil on wood titled **M.I.A.**, depicts the disappearances, big and small, that we go through in life; those which are lost to us, missing in action. Another motif eternalised from ‘life’ is a wooden cut-out wall sculpture

titled **LAYANG**, which is an amalgamation of a kite and an amphibian. Measuring 131cm by 75cm, this is unique wall sculpture in this show rendered in stark black and white.

Latent in this travel of the images from daily life, to journal, to digital media, to physical art, and back to daily life is the grand cycle with which Tomi Heri is preoccupied with —the circular economy of life. To re-cycle, to flow, to go forth and to return. His medium, regardless of digital or physical, is the symbol, the icon, the sign—that most potent distillation of history, idea, memory into a singular image.

The Back Room at The Zhongshan Building invites you to contemplate SG. from December 12, 2020 until January 10, 2021. Developed during his stint as a beneficiary of the third cohort for the Khazanah Nasional Associate Artist Residency Programme at Acme Studio in London in 2019, SG. is a culmination of Tomi Heri’s five-year milestone as a professional artist and a moment of introspection. Yet, as with how water must flow, so we honour the roots of the artist.





**SG.DATA**  
2020  
Single channel video installation

# SOWKES

## / Sumbat

Born on September 28, 1991, Tomi Heri spent his childhood in Sungai Dusun, Kuala Kubu Bharu, Selangor. Raised by his maternal grandmother, his carefree days as a young boy were spent outdoors filled with fun activities such as fishing or playing by the river.

One of his earliest memories of a school art project was a campaign to keep the Malaysian rivers clean. Initiated by the Ministry of Environment and Water (Jabatan Perairan dan Saliran) in 1993, "Cintailah Sungai Kita" (Love Our River) is a nationwide campaign to cultivate the interest of the local community towards loving the river. "I had participated in art competitions in primary school to illustrate the ideal poster of a clean river," says Tomi Heri.

The pre-university examination for the Malaysian Higher School Certificate prepared Tomi Heri for his tertiary studies at the Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) in Bachok, Kelantan for a degree course in Creative Technology and Heritage from 2011 to 2014.

The course offered "knowledge of heritage, culture, humanity, thinking, lifestyle, community art, management and more learning that focuses on the culture and heritage of the local community".

Tomi Heri's background in creative technology combined with heritage studies was crucial in the development of his practice as a young artist since graduating in 2015.

It was in university that Tomi Heri's interest in traditional Malay woodcarving and ornamental motifs was sparked. Pursuing a course in Creative Technology and Heritage at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, his education foreshadowed his engagement with the worlds of artisans and digital designers. Brimming with history as part of the ancient Langkasuka Malay kingdom, Kelantan became Tomi Heri's learning ground.

"I began poring over books written on Master craftsmen and traditional woodcarving specialists like Adiguru Norhaiza Nordin's Menelusuri Karya Seni Norhaiza; heritage researcher Azzaha Ibrahim's essays on Langkasuka; historian and cultural researcher Farish A. Noor and Eddin Khoo's Spirit of Wood: The Art of Malay Woodcarving: Works by Master Carvers from Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pattani; to name a few."

"I had not realised it then but when I was residing at Acme Studios in London, the book I had brought with me was Abdul Halim Nasir's Ukiran Kayu Melayu Tradisi," recalls Tomi Heri.

He became so intrigued by the abstract motifs and philosophical meanings behind traditional Malay patterns that upon returning home from London, he decided to return to Kelantan to meet with various traditional woodcarving master craftsmen.

This appropriation of traditional craft motifs is evident to Tomi Heri's creative oeuvre. A fine example is a digital media work titled **E-tik** Pulang Petang dated 2020, featuring a series of monochromatic stylised duck icons moving in a single file from left to right in an ornamental panoramic frame accompanied by "sci-fi" sound effects.

"The duck motif originates from the traditional woodcarving and weaving motif called 'itik pulang petang' (ducks returning home in the afternoon). The philosophy and meaning behind the motif are the duty to obey the leader in matters of knowledge," says Tomi Heri.

The work was a fine demonstration of the artist's sensibilities: a nod towards the precarity of the electronic, a collapse between the digital and traditional, and a re-orientation of age-old symbology into sometimes jarring, provocative contexts. And always, the idea of return.

# Current

## / ARTS

Between September and December 2019, Tomi Heri participated in his first residency programme outside of Asia at Acme Studios in London supported by Khazanah Nasional.

"It was an exhilarating experience and the idea for SG. was conceived there. There was so much to take in from their way of life, history to food and culture. Everything is documented from the day I arrived until my last day in my journal, which I have named SG. Data," says Tomi Heri.

Coincidentally, his studio was located close to River Thames, where he would cycle around the city everyday to absorb the city's fast-paced vibe and cityscape aesthetics.

"Being near a river in London reminded me of home. For this show, I have created a new digital media work with my interpretation of the river and to incorporate traditional motifs to symbolise life of human being," says Tomi Heri.

As a digital media artist, Tomi Heri was elated to have had the opportunity to witness visionary

artist, Nam June Paik's (1932–2006) major retrospective exhibition that featured over 200 works spanning a career of five decade at Tate Modern in London.

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me that could not have happened at a very opportune moment. I have always admired Nam June Paik's work in new technology and video art. The exhibition allowed me to conduct my research on his timeline," says Tomi Heri.

When asked about Tomi Heri's hopes for this debut solo exhibition, he answers: "My hope is that for my ideas and creations will continue to flow like water from river to river."

Indeed, the beginning of a river can often flow rapidly into a waterfall - slowing down into the middle course and meandering along a winding path then finally ending its journey at the mouth - a journey that emulates life, which in turn imitates art.

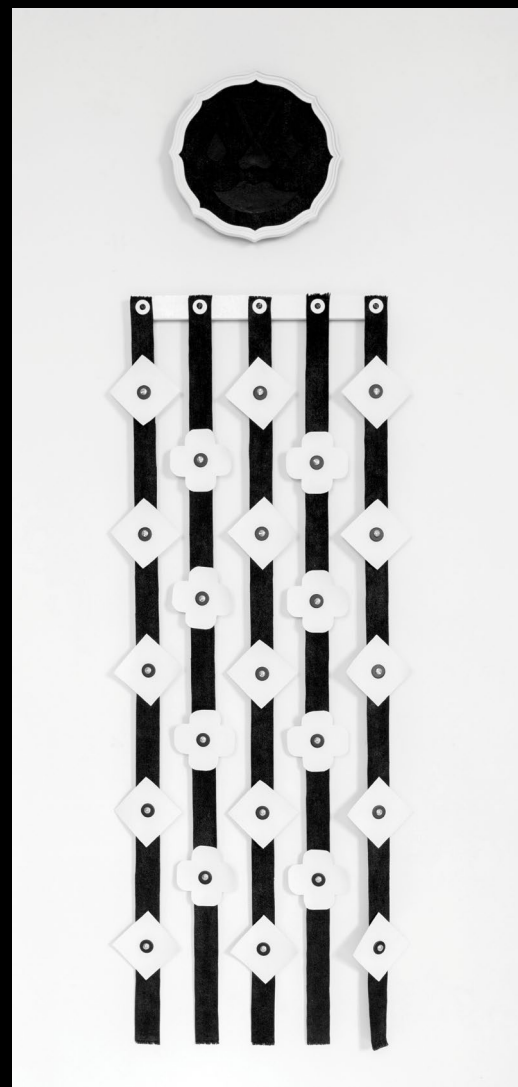
Sarah Abu Bakar





**M.I.A., 2020**

Stencil on wood, bolt and nuts  
46 x 30 cm



**M X P, 2020**

Canvas cut and pasted on wooden frame  
and canvas cut-out, bolt and nuts  
33 cm diameter; 122 x 50 cm



Installation shot of the exhibition  
Tomi Heri: SG.  
The Back Room, 2020

This publication accompanies  
the exhibition Tomi Heri: SG. at

The Back Room  
First Floor, 80A Jalan Rotan  
Off Jalan Kampung Attap  
50460 Kuala Lumpur  
Malaysia

12 December 2020 -  
10 January 2021

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Editing: Ong Kar Jin  
Design: Valenlim Studio  
Photographer: Alvin Lau  
Printer: Percetakan Kencana Sdn Bhd

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