

## Making Sense of Fazrin Abd Rahman's Maze

Milestones are precious to anyone, be they a first job, the birth of a child, or any other event that signals a marked change in one's life. For artists, these milestones come in various forms, but there's no doubt that the first solo exhibition is a particularly special one. *Maze* is precisely that for Fazrin Abd Rahman. The inaugural solo exhibition for the artist, *Maze* signals a newfound maturity in Fazrin's career and a move into artistic terrain that's more engrained in linking method and thought, as well as experimentation with media and materials.

### The Maze-Maker & His Local Language

Understanding the 12 works in *Maze* does demand some acquainting with the maze-maker himself. A Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) graduate, Fazrin's works in *Maze* do bear hint to his time majoring in sculpture. Aluminium dominates as the chief material, and the immediate impact felt by his works are its strong geometric qualities and the flat surfaces that deceive the eye; from afar, the works appear to be paintings, but closer inspection reveals the use of materials and markings that hint at the language of sculpture.

Whilst each work's individual character comes to life by way of subtle changes in formal arrangements and colours, the unifying element in all of Fazrin's works are the maze-like designs. It's a form that hints loosely at the workings of minimalist works from the 1960's, but mostly, Fazrin's chosen aesthetic professes an affinity for the traditional forms found in local designs. "Influences from my own life have had a big influence on my works," admits Fazrin, who cites the traditional art of rattan weaving, specifically the use of woven rattan sheets in the interiors of traditional Malay kampung houses, as a driving influence in his latest body of work.

This is a direct narration of Fazrin's own past. Hailing from Batu Pahat, Johor, Fazrin once worked as a craftsman specialising in traditional woven goods and this personal reference has been present throughout all his works thus far. Indeed, the artist's works that precede *Maze* also feature tile-like arrangements that resemble the square blocks of woven surfaces. However, today's works don't just embody the physical qualities of weaving, but also contain meaning that lie deeper beneath the surface. "All weaving starts with many separate pieces, but once these disparate elements are arranged and pieced together, the final woven object becomes a reinforcement that's sturdy and difficult to tear apart," explains the artist.

Fazrin's reference to weaving hasn't been a mere exercise in dipping into his own personal pool of experiences, but also a conscious effort to inject more traditional local elements into the art

scene – something, which he feels, has been sorely missing. This personal mission has also informed his choice of colours, which lean towards the organic dyes used in traditional Malay craft. Audiences will see this in the contrasting pairings of red and green in the work *Maze 2*, or in the varied mix of hues in *Maze 5* that loosely recall the palette of batik textiles.

But if all this seems to be an exercise in the pastoral, be warned that this isn't the case. "I do see some link between the art of weaving and contemporary lives," argues Fazrin. Times have changed and the artist's choice of adopting industrial techniques and materials more commonly used today correspond to this shift; reinforcements for building structures are no longer made from bamboo or natural materials, but forged from steel and concrete.

Could this be a link to our own lives and how interpersonal relations – human connections – are increasingly shunned for conversations via digital interfaces, or for augmented reality via smartphones? Or, does the lesson in Fazrin's works lie in the fact that strength comes from unification and adaptation with change?

### **The Maze-Maker's Metaphor for Life**

These questions are rhetoric for the lessons that we can glean from history and how poorly-woven parts in society – leadership or economic decisions, for example – can lead to a disjointed and troubled mess. But to truly understand Fazrin's body of work, consider another route which can be found by traversing a different path in *Maze*. This path links the works' formal properties – its meditative qualities with each work drawing the viewer's eyes across the mazes' many turns and curves – and how Fazrin uses the maze as a metaphor for life.

"The maze designs symbolise the start of any difficult or confusing journey in life, which essentially exists to challenge our ways of thinking and strategic skills," he explains. "Mazes were created with the intention to confuse, but if we were to throw a positive spin on this, they were also designed to test our minds and make us more courageous, optimistic, and forward-thinking," he continues, ultimately, speaking for himself and the process that he's undergone for this landmark exhibition. "The whole journey towards this solo exhibition has not been without its challenges, as I've grappled with many tough decisions whilst trying to achieve my best. It hasn't been easy, but on the flipside, it's these type of challenges in life that only make us braver and stronger, and even when the long and windy road looks most difficult, we can take comfort in the fact that there's always a straight path ahead and opportunities to take a breather and to reassess the next steps to take."

This metaphor that Fazrin's mazes represent is what he hopes for all of us to carry in our own lives. "Everyone in our society is also on a rocky road due to situations wrought by our leaders, but if we looked at this situation from a different angle, it can be seen as a blessing in disguise. We will only come out stronger from this," he says. Perhaps Fazrin's works don't bear disparate meanings after all. Instead, *Maze* is Fazrin's personal milestone and a reminder of some of life's most important truisms: that there's a light at the end of every tunnel, a triumphant sense of accomplishment at the other end of every journey, and that if every moving part of a puzzle sticks together like a tightly woven piece of reinforcement, we'll make it out at the other end just fine.

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