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Media Release

**50 Years of Master Potter Iskandar Jalil's Work
Presented for the First Time at National Gallery Singapore**

Singapore, 29 August 2016 – Cultural Medallion recipient Iskandar Jalil's artworks will be on display at the National Gallery Singapore in its latest exhibition, *Iskandar Jalil: Kembara Tanah Liat (Clay Travels)*. The exhibition is the first comprehensive survey of Iskandar Jalil's career from the 1960s to the present, featuring close to 180 ceramic pieces by the Master Potter.

Kembara is a Malay term for “travelling” which conveys notions of exploration and discovery. *Tanah liat* means “clay”, referring to Iskandar's life-long dialogue with the materiality of the medium. *Iskandar Jalil: Kembara Tanah Liat (Clay Travels)* showcases artworks inspired by Iskandar Jalil's artistic journey through his travels and his role as a teacher.

“I advise my students to travel extensively but always tell them – do not explore like a tourist. Take the road less travelled and go off the beaten track, stay longer and immerse in different pottery cultures. These interactions will lead you to develop exciting glazes, new forms and bodies of work.” – Iskandar Jalil on being a global craftsman¹

The exhibition highlights his deep connection with clay and belief that the material embodies the local identity and culture of the land. It also helps bring to light the importance of ceramics in the modern history of art in the region through its reinvention of materials, pictorial idioms, language, forms and ideas.

“This survey exhibition of Iskandar's works is part of the Gallery's ongoing research efforts on key Singaporean artists who have contributed to Singapore art history. Not only did Iskandar constantly push the boundaries of ceramic art, he also contributed immensely to arts education in Singapore as a teacher over the years. We hope that the exhibition will extend the discussion on Singapore and Southeast Asian art beyond our permanent

gallery exhibitions, and offer visitors a deeper understanding and appreciation of our important Singapore artists,” said Low Sze Wee, Director of Curatorial, Collections & Education, National Gallery Singapore.

Iskandar Jalil: Kembara Tanah Liat (Clay Travels) is curated by National Gallery Singapore’s Senior Curator Seng Yu Jin and Assistant Curator Syed Muhammad Hafiz. The exhibition will run from 1 September 2016 to 28 February 2017 in The Ngee Ann Kongsi Concourse Gallery and Concourse Gallery 2, located at Basement 1 of National Gallery Singapore. Admission to the Concourse Galleries is free.

For more information on the exhibition, visit www.nationalgallery.sg.

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Annex



The first space at **The Ngee Ann Kongsi Concourse Gallery** draws on the creative tension between modern art and traditional craft. Besides including an archival display, the gallery also presents six themes that are central to Iskandar Jalil's practice namely, *Anchoring Home*, *Beauty in Imperfection*, *Communicating with Clay*, *Modelling Architecture*, *From the Region and Travelling to Know Who I Am*. Visitors are invited to join Iskandar on his travels in Southeast Asia and beyond as they examine how these diverse cultural traditions are reinterpreted and reimaged in his ceramic works.

1. Anchoring Home

Iskandar believes that a potter must develop an aesthetic that expresses his or her identity. He insisted on using local clay and modelled his works on objects he encountered in everyday life, such as this tiered food container which is commonly used in Asia. His work thus embodies his sense of "home" in its very material and form.



[Not Titled] (Mangkuk Tingkat)
Undated
Stoneware, metal and wood
Collection of the artist

Mangkuk tingkat (stacked bowls) is a Malay name for the tiered food containers used in several parts of Asia. Stacked atop each other, separate circular containers are supported by handles that keep them locked in place. Iskandar's elegant, sparsely decorated version is too heavy to be functional, but demonstrates the artist's interest in everyday material culture.

2. From the Region

Iskandar's extensive travels in Southeast Asia were a rich source of inspiration for his ceramic forms and philosophies. This section explores the meanings behind the regional motifs that feature in Iskandar's work, such as the *tongkang* (riverboat) and *buyong* (water vessel).



[Not titled] (Sculptural Work, Wheel of Fortune Series)
Undated
Stoneware
Collection of Singapore Economic Development Board

One might naturally connect a traditional potter with a potter's wheel. Iskandar's works that evoke wheels, however, may reflect the influence of quite another type of wheel. He has owned various motorcycles since the age of 18, including a 1000cc Harley that he has ridden on countless journeys, including ones to collect clay from all over Singapore and Malaysia.

3. Beauty in Imperfection

Although he is known to be a perfectionist, Iskandar accepts "beauty in imperfection" in his practice. This teapot was created when a lump of clay fell on it during the firing process. Instead of discarding it, Iskandar valued the work for its incidental quality. This philosophy is inspired by the Japanese aesthetic sensibility of *wabi-sabi* which embraces imperfection arising out of chance and spontaneity.



[Not titled] (Teapot)
Undated
Stoneware
Collection of the artist

This teapot was created when a lump of clay from the kiln in which it was being fired fell on it. Instead of discarding the work, Iskandar kept it to be valued for this incidental, even accidental, quality. This is especially striking considering his reputation for discarding works which failed to meet his high standards of craftsmanship, and attests to his belief in the *wabi-sabi* approach to aesthetics that affirms "beauty in imperfection".

4. Modelling Architecture

Architectural forms, structures and decorative patterns from different cultures have consistently featured in Iskandar's ceramic works. Regional forms like the kelong (off-shore platforms, typically made of wood) are reflected in wave-like design elements, while doors and stairs such as the torii gate from Japan are reimagined as symbolic gateways leading to the sacred.



[Not titled] (Sculptural Work with Kelong Stilt Motif and Coiling)
Undated
Stoneware
Private collection

Inspired by a key feature of regional architecture, the stilt, Iskandar Jalil covers the lower section of this work with this motif. It strongly suggests the structure of a traditional kelong, which are offshore homes favoured by fisherman throughout coastal Southeast Asia. These structures are built on a raised platform secured by wooden piles driven into the sea bed. Besides the stilt motif, the elaborate sculptural element at the top of this work also has some architectural qualities, perhaps relating to the hand-carved details which often decorate traditional rumah Melayu.

5. Communicating with Clay

This section delves into Iskandar's lifelong dialogue with clay. His thoughts and concerns intimately and intuitively shape the clay; and the unique characteristics of the clay, in turn, determine the form the vessel takes. This interaction, steeped in humility, discipline and integrity, is central to Iskandar's practice.



Alamak Netball Again
1988
Clay mounted on cork
Collection of Singapore Art Museum

Iskandar spent much of his career as a teacher, and taught a variety of subjects alongside art. This early wall relief ceramic piece forms a whimsical observation that he made when teaching netball during Physical Education lessons at secondary schools. An avid sportsman, he demanded discipline and commitment from his sports students, much like he did with his art students. This porcelain work was originally installed as a wall plaque in a one-off exhibition in 1988 with his wife, Saleha, who showed her handmade quilts.

6. Travelling to Know Who I Am

In his lifetime, Iskandar has lived in a few countries and travelled to many more. These journeys have shaped his distinct worldview and artistic practice. For instance, the clean lines and simple forms of his sculptural works are rooted in the Japanese shibui philosophy and his signature blue glaze, sometimes known as "Iskandar blue", was informed by his travels to Scandinavia.



Tuna for Sashimi "N"

2007

Stoneware

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

Iskandar studied ceramic engineering in Nagoya, Japan from 1972 to 1973 under a Colombo Plan scholarship. He also travelled around the country to learn about Japanese approaches to aesthetics and craft. His ceramic sculptures seem to reflect this experience, and have been inspired by Japanese daily life and popular culture. This work, for instance, captures the delicate and soft textures of tuna sashimi in the coiled swirls on its surface, and is also shaped like a fish.

Concourse Gallery 2



The second space at Concourse Gallery 2 brings us the idea of “home” and features a commissioned work by Singaporean contemporary artist Gerald Leow. Titled *Some of you will be asked to leave*, the work echoes a dwelling in the style of a *rumah Melayu* (Malay house) and is inspired by Iskandar’s deep interest in architecture. As visitors walk through the various spaces within the house structure, they will happen upon rarely seen works from Iskandar’s and his family’s private collections placed in situ. Inspired by the *Mingei (Folk Art) Movement* in Japan, the presentation aims to highlight the tension between the domesticity and functionality of Iskandar’s ceramic pieces and their status as fine art.



Edzra & Elena
Undated
Stoneware
Collection of the artist

This work alludes to Iskandar’s own children, after whom the work is affectionately named. Prior to being exhibited here, Iskandar kept this work in his bedroom as a personal piece.

ABOUT NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE

National Gallery Singapore is a visual arts institution which oversees the largest public collection of modern art of Singapore and Southeast Asia. The Gallery is dedicated to collaborative research, education and exhibitions, highlighting the importance of modern art in Southeast Asia in a global context. The Gallery also provides a unique visitor experience through its art presentations and innovative programming, positioning Singapore as a regional and international hub for the visual arts.

Situated in the heart of the Civic District, the National Gallery Singapore has been beautifully restored and transformed from the former Supreme Court and City Hall buildings – two important heritage buildings of Singapore’s nationhood – into an exciting new visual arts venue. Opened in November 2015, the Gallery will be a leading civic and cultural destination established for the enrichment, enjoyment and engagement of Singapore residents and visitors from all over the world. Information on the National Gallery Singapore is available at www.nationalgallery.sg.

ABOUT ISKANDAR JALIL



Image credit to Lawrence Chong

Iskandar Jalil is one of Singapore and Southeast Asia’s most prominent and recognised ceramic artists.

Iskandar creates organic, textured works of clay that marry Japanese discipline and philosophy with Southeast Asian motifs and inspirations from his travels. His works feature in many public and private collections, including those of the National Museum of Sweden, Sultan of Brunei and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

He was awarded two Colombo Plan scholarships, to study textiles in India (1966) and ceramic engineering in Japan (1972), which started him on the road to a highly successful career as a potter. Iskandar Jalil was awarded the Cultural Medallion for Visual Arts in 1988, and is the first Singaporean artist to receive the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Rosette bestowed by the Emperor of Japan in 2015. He was conferred an honorary doctorate, Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*), by the Nanyang Technological University in July this year.

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