

People

# Pioneering Strokes

Makassar-based artist Zaenal Beta tells **Anne Pinto-Rodrigues** how by accident, he invented a unique art form - painting with clay.

How often is it that a random event dramatically alters the course of someone's life? Not often but that's exactly what happened with Zaenal Beta. One day in 1980, a young Zaenal inadvertently dropped a drawing paper into wet mud. When he picked up the mud-stained paper, his creative mind began to 'see' shapes and forms on it. This epiphany led to many experiments with clay as a substitute for traditional paints, and he has painted with clay since.

The left-handed artist is now famous, in and around Makassar, as the inventor of this distinctive style. He carefully chooses soil from various parts of South Sulawesi to use as paint. And instead of a brush, he wields a thin bamboo strip to create his rustic masterpieces.

Of late, Zaenal's inimitable style and mastery has been capturing the imagination of discerning art critics and collectors from around the world. He is Makassar's hidden gem.



Developing the clay paints is a laborious process.

Tell us more.

Finding the right soil and treating it to get the proper consistency is time-intensive. I process the soil for about three months in settling ponds to make them useable as paint. As the soil colour differs across South Sulawesi – purplish in Tana Toraja, red in Majene, and grey in Makassar – I collect them from several places. I have developed 12 colours so far but I mostly use red, yellow, black and grey in my paintings.



What are your favourite themes for your paintings?

I want to bring the South Sulawesi culture to the world through my paintings. That's why one of my favourite themes is the *tongkonan*, the ancestral home of the Toraja, an ethnic group in South Sulawesi. Another theme close to my heart is the *phinisi*, the traditional fishing boat of the Buginese and Makassarese. I want to highlight the courage and determination of these fishermen as they set out to sea. I also like to paint hard-working people like farmers and local women as they go about their daily lives.

Who supported you on your journey as a clay painter?

In addition to the unconditional support of my wife, the Makassar art community and the studio at Benteng Ujung Pandang (Fort Rotterdam) have been instrumental in my progress. I also have the patronage of groups like Indonesia's Sketchers, and the art departments at the State University of Makassar and Muhammadiyah University of Makassar.

What are you looking forward to in the future?

I wish to promote the culture of South Sulawesi by participating in exhibitions across the world. I also want to familiarise people with this special painting style I've invented. I hope the next generation of artists will be inspired by my work.

Visit Zaenal Beta at the art gallery of Fort Rotterdam, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia

