

ART AS IDENTITY: INTEGRATING *KERIS* BLADE PATTERN FEATURES INTO CONTEMPORARY ABSTRACT SCULPTURE

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ABSTRACT

This practice-based research investigates how the symbolic features of the Malay keris blade patterns can be translated into contemporary abstract sculpture. The study aims to explore the potential of traditional Malay symbolism as a source of formal innovation in sculpture, using the keris as a subject matter. The methodology combines visual research (museum observation, sketching, and photography), dialogic engagement with traditional keris smiths, and hermeneutic analysis of Malay craft philosophy. Studio inquiry involved iterative cycles of drawing, material experimentation, form testing, and critical reflection, guided by the conceptual framework of pamor (blade patterns). The outcomes are a series of abstract sculptural forms. These formal outcomes not only embody traditional meanings but also recontextualise them for modern visual discourse. This research contributes three key findings to the field of fine art practice: (1) a practice-based methodology for translating intangible heritage into tangible form; (2) a demonstration of how abstract sculpture can convey and sustain cultural narratives; and (3) the formulation of adaptable design principles for use in public art and heritage-driven creative industries. The artwork positions the keris as a living cultural signifier and proposes new avenues for integrating Southeast Asian craft traditions into contemporary art and design practices.

Keywords: abstract sculpture, cultural heritage, contemporary art, keris blade pattern

INTRODUCTION

The keris, a traditional asymmetrical dagger of the Malay world, is widely regarded not only as a weapon but also as a cultural and spiritual object (Al-Mudra, 2009; Nurulliyana et al., 2014; Norman et al., 2015; 2016). Its form, particularly the *bilah* (blade) and the *pamor* (blade pattern) etched through layers of iron and nickel, reflects a deep cosmological and symbolic language rooted in Malay philosophy and craftsmanship (Ismail et al., 2021; Yusof et al., 2022). As an artefact, the keris transcend its materiality,

functioning as a signifier of identity, authority, and metaphysical belief across generations and regions in Southeast Asia (Rashid et al., 2022). In recent years, the discourse surrounding intangible cultural heritage has expanded into artistic and design practices, emphasising the need for innovative strategies to reinterpret traditional knowledge systems within contemporary contexts (Maryono, 2012; UNESCO, 2020; Jamaludin et al., 2024). In the realm of fine art, practice-based research offers a methodologically grounded pathway to engage with cultural forms through processes of making, reflection, and interpretation (Nelson, 2022). Within this paradigm, the translation of keris blade patterns into abstract sculpture allows for the symbolic essence of the object to be reimagined in a new visual language, one that resonates with present-day material culture while honouring traditional epistemologies.

This study positions the blade pattern not merely as a decorative feature but also as a visual system that encodes meanings such as protection, resilience, and hope, each interpreted through structural elements of the blade. By mapping these symbolic geometries into sculptural form, the research addresses broader questions of how heritage can inform contemporary artistic practice without diluting its cultural depth. The aim is to investigate how abstract sculpture can serve as a vessel for cultural transmission and, in doing so, to contribute to ongoing discussions in visual heritage, material culture, and identity-based art practices in Southeast Asia. Frey (2003) explored the keris as a mystical weapon in the Malay world. His study focused on its cultural, spiritual, and symbolic significance, examining how the keris was not only a weapon but also a revered object imbued with supernatural powers. Frey highlighted the role of the keris in rituals and its association with Malay identity and heritage. Haryoguritno (2005) studied the cultural and symbolic significance of the keris in Javanese society, examining its role as both a weapon and a spiritual object. He explored the balance between mysticism and reason, highlighting the keris as a symbol of power, identity, and supernatural beliefs in Javanese tradition. Effendy (2008) examined the role of the keris within Riau Malay culture. The study highlighted its cultural, symbolic, and spiritual significance, emphasising its function in rituals, social identity, and traditional practices. Wibawa et al. (2024) and Hardoyo (2025) demonstrate the feasibility of classification for blade pattern, *dhapur* and *tangguh*, while an expert-system prototype using forward-chaining logic identifies Javanese *dhapur* variants from user-supplied images. These efforts address a dwindling pool of human experts and underscore the potential for algorithmically curated reference corpora that designers and artists can mine for formal inspiration. Renewed ethnographic attention foregrounds the Keris as a living emblem of personal and communal identity. The communicative patterns embedded in forging mantras situate the blade within a continuum of ritual practice, offering fertile symbolic material for artistic re-interpretation. As to contextualise the sculptural interpretation of blade pattern philosophy in contemporary Malaysian art, this section reviews three notable artworks by established sculptors whose practices align with themes of Malay identity, metaphoric form, and heritage materiality.

The artwork Raja Shahrman's "*Lok #4, Kilat Menyambar*" directly engages with the visual and symbolic dimensions of the Keris. The sculpture's twisted blade form references the lightning-like *lok* of a kris, embodying chaos and transcendence. In fact, the upward movement of the blade signifies aspiration and divine orientation, echoing the metaphysical reading of blade pattern *harapan* (hope) explored in this study. The

torso, formed by rib-like structures, mirrors the protective core of the keris wielder and offers a formal analogue to blade pattern *pendinding*(protector), which symbolises protective energy. Through formalist abstraction, Shahrman's work revitalises Malay semiotics for contemporary audiences. The artwork Mad Anuar Ismail's "*Perentas Ribut #18*" translates autobiographical memory into a symbolic narrative of struggle and resilience. The muscular figure navigating tidal waves draws parallels with the blade pattern *pertahanan* (defence) philosophy, where angularity denotes resistance against adversity (Sidik, 2019). The sculpture channels the artist's childhood experiences as the son of a fisherman, infusing form with emotional and cultural depth. This embodiment of strength and perseverance resonates with the defensive symbolism in keris morphology and philosophy, enriching the discourse on sculptural storytelling rooted in local cosmology. Anassuwandi Ahmad's "*Trap Series*" exemplifies the abstraction of functional heritage objects into aesthetic forms. Inspired by the traditional Malay fish trap, the work bridges craft and sculpture, echoing the processual ethos found in keris forging. The incorporation of bamboo, iron and natural materials mirrors the artisanal layering seen in blade pattern production. The skeletal rhythm of the trap form corresponds to the repetitive strata of the blade pattern, asserting that traditional systems of making can inform new aesthetic vocabularies. Like the sculptural maquettes in this study, Anassuwandi's work foregrounds the continuity of material knowledge through experimental abstraction. The three artworks reviewed, Shahrman's symbolic verticality, Mad Anuar's muscular resilience, and Anassuwandi's material abstraction, demonstrate distinct strategies for embedding Malay identity into sculptural form (Naim, 2012). Each artist draws from intangible cultural elements and transforms them into aesthetic experiences that resonate across time and audience. These works substantiate the viability of translating blade pattern values and hope, protection and resilience into abstract sculpture (Johnson, 2011; Aviv, 2014). As such, they provide precedent and validation for the methodology adopted in this study, where blade pattern morphology is not merely represented but re-materialised through new material and formal logics.

This triangulation between artwork, tradition and abstraction affirms the Keris as both icon and interface within contemporary Malaysian sculptural discourse. Besides, the reflection from the process of analysis of related artwork, where early study from Feldman (1994) presented a framework for practical art criticism, outlining systematic methods for analysing and evaluating artworks. The study emphasised four key steps, like description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment, to guide viewers in understanding both the formal qualities and the meaning of art. Feldman highlighted the importance of structured critique in enhancing appreciation, communication, and informed discussion of artistic works. Cupchik and Gebotys (1988) examined how individuals interpreted art and assessed its quality. They investigated different interpretive styles and how these influenced judgments, highlighting the role of personal meaning-making in evaluating visual artworks. Therefore, in sculpture, Carter (2001) examined sculpture within the broader field of aesthetics, discussing its formal qualities, expressive potential, and role in artistic experience. The study highlighted how sculptural works convey meaning through form, material, and spatial relationships, emphasising their significance in aesthetic evaluation. Abdullah (2013) examined abstraction and abstract expressionist art in Malaysia, situating it within local cultural

and historical contexts. The study highlighted how Malaysian artists adapted global abstract art movements, exploring their expressive strategies and contributions to the country's contemporary art scene. Jamal (1992) explored the relationship between form and spirit in art, emphasizing how artistic expression reflects both aesthetic qualities and deeper cultural or emotional meanings. The study highlighted the integration of visual elements and conceptual depth in understanding Malaysian artistic practices.

METHOD

This study employs a practice-based research methodology, integrating visual research, studio experimentation, and philosophical interpretation to explore the symbolic and formal reimagining of *keris* blade patterns through contemporary abstract sculpture. Rather than presenting a descriptive case report, the research follows a structured and iterative inquiry that generates knowledge through creative practice.

The methodological process consists of four interconnected stages in Figure 1:

1. Visual Research: Observation and analysis of museum-held *keris* specimens, including sketching and photographic documentation, to identify key formal and symbolic elements of *pamor* (blade patterns).
2. Studio Research: Material experimentation using wire and concrete, involving cycles of sketching, maquette-making, and critical reflection. This phase explores how traditional forms can inform abstract sculptural expression.
3. Philosophical Interpretation: Engagement with Malay craft philosophy and conversations with *keris* smiths to interpret the meanings of blade motifs (e.g. circularity for hope, angularity for resilience, ovality for protection).
4. Formal Reimagining: Integration of visual and philosophical insights into the development of new sculptural forms that abstractly echo the *keris* while establishing a contemporary artistic language.

This approach demonstrates how cultural symbolism can be transformed into new visual expressions, offering a model for recontextualising Southeast Asian heritage in contemporary art practice.

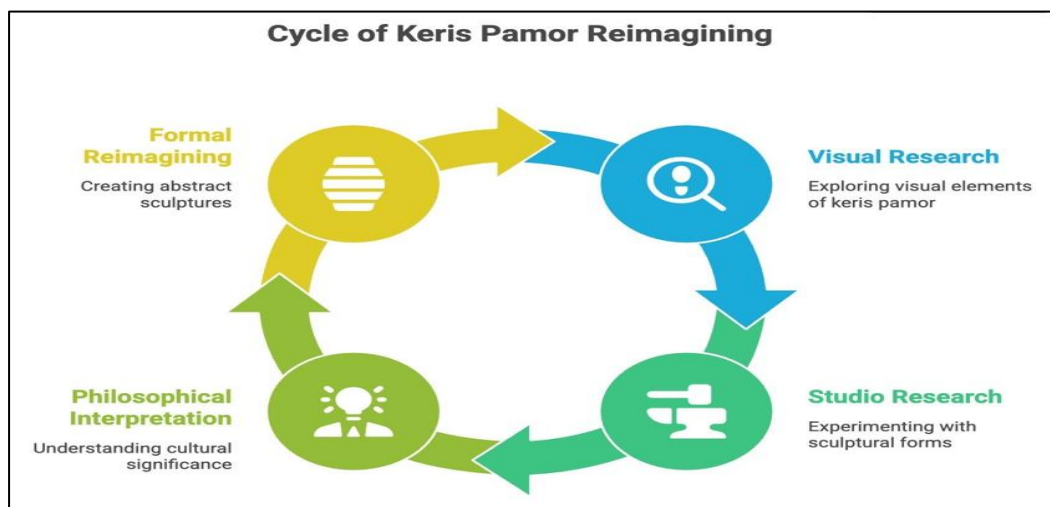


Figure 1: This diagram illustrates a cyclical methodology comprising four interconnected stages: Visual Research, Studio Research, Philosophical Interpretation, and Formal Reimagining

Visual Research

The visual research stage represents the foundational phase of the methodology, driven by the systematic collection, observation, and interpretation of the visual language embedded in the keris blade. This phase adopts an ethnographic and art historical lens to examine the keris not just as a weapon or artefact, but as a semiotic vessel laden with metaphysical, spiritual, and sociocultural meanings. Fieldwork was conducted through multiple engagements, on-site visits to museums, private collections, and dialogue sessions with traditional *pandai besi* (keris artisans). These interactions allowed for high-resolution image documentation and direct tactile observation, enriching the research with material nuances often overlooked in secondary visual sources. The documentation process focused on capturing the *pamor* (stratified iron-nickel layers), the *luk* (silhouette of the blade), and the *ganja* (hilt interface), isolating each visual component to enable close reading of its aesthetic and symbolic register. The collected visuals were systematically categorised into typologies based on the *pamor* (blade curvature motif), and decorative detailing. This taxonomical approach, aligned with Yusof et al. (2023), ensured that the aesthetic variations of *keris* ranging from geometric precision to organic abstraction, were acknowledged and mapped. This analytical phase was not limited to visual form; it also included layered interpretation rooted in Malay cosmology, where circularity suggests spiritual ascent, angularity denotes defence, and ovality signifies protection.

Visual sketches and analytical drawings produced during this phase served a dual purpose: (i) as epistemological tools for deep observation and interpretive thinking, and (ii) as conceptual bridges toward studio experimentation. Each drawing abstracted key visual traits of the keris, gradually transforming them into motifs suitable for contemporary sculptural adaptation. This aligns with Nelson's (2022) view of drawing as "thinking-through-making," where the act of visual translation contributes directly to the emergence of new knowledge. Importantly, this phase also marks the transition from documentation to interpretation—a liminal space where the artist-researcher begins to discern which aspects of visual heritage can be transposed into new material vocabularies without compromising their cultural integrity. In this sense, Visual Research is not an isolated phase, but an active dialogue between tradition and innovation, setting the stage for the subsequent Studio Research phase and informing every stage of the cyclical creative process.

Studio Research

The Studio Research stage represents the engine room of transformation within the cyclical methodology, where defined. The process was directly on the insights gathered during visual research; this phase operationalises the interpretive act through hands-on making, material manipulation, and iterative experimentation. It is here that conceptual ideas begin to materialise as sculptural form through a process of sketching, modelling, and critical reflection.

The initial stage of studio research began with exploratory sketches, developed to translate the symbolic qualities of the keris blade circularity (*harapan*/hope), angularity (*pertahanan*/defence), and ovality (*pendinding*/protection) into abstract visual language. These sketches were not decorative in nature, but functioned as spatial propositions, exploring relationships between movement, rhythm, and mass. Analytical drawings followed, delving deeper into the structural logic of the keris, particularly its layered texture and sinuous curvature, as illustrated in Figures 2 to 4.

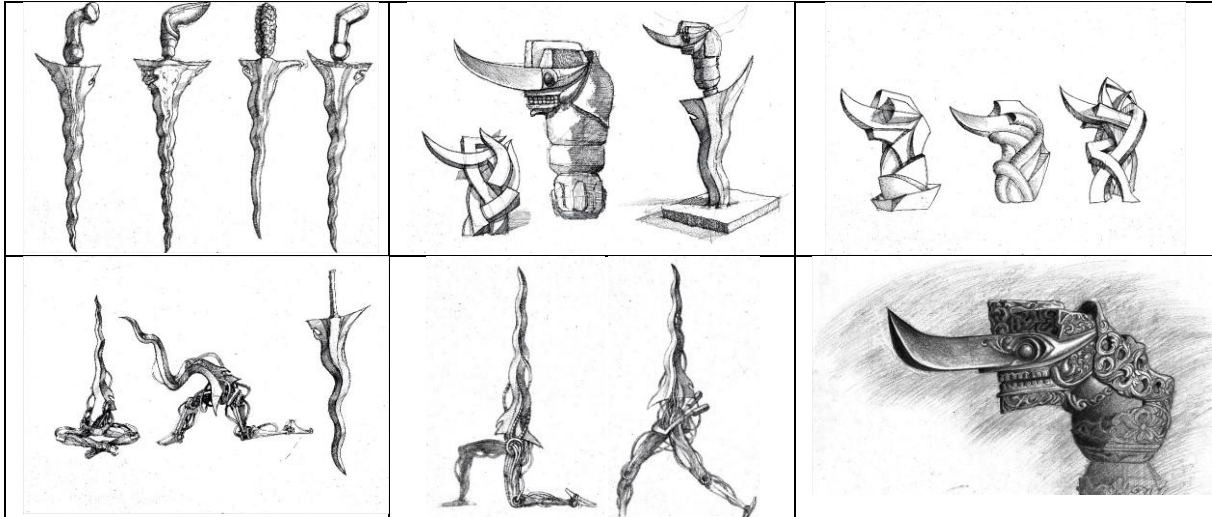


Figure 2: A study of four different form of Keris blade and hilt sketch. Pen & Ink on paper, 42cm x 30cm. (Source: Saiful Imaan Sharonee)

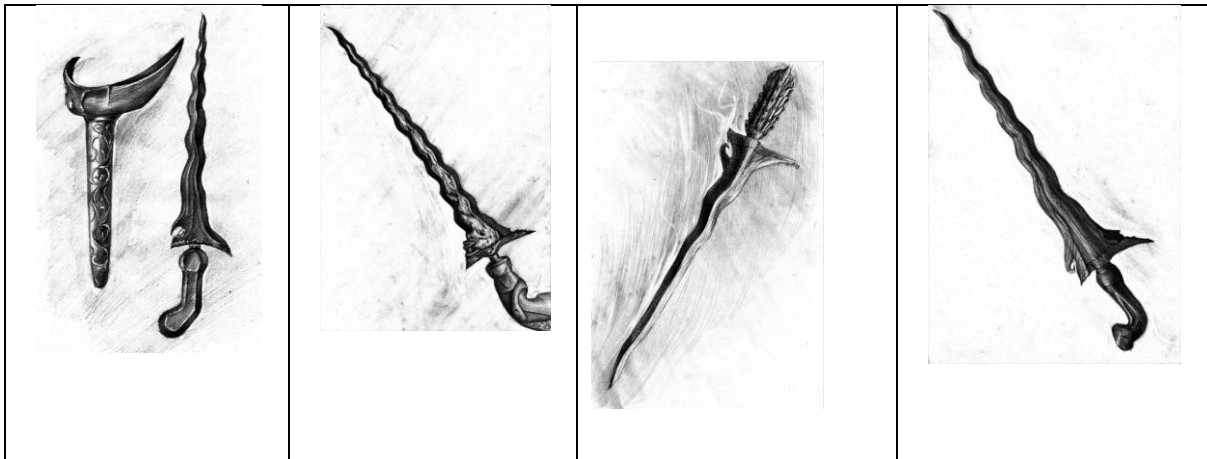


Figure 3: A drawing study of four different forms of Keris. Pen and ink on paper, 42cm x 30cm. (Source: Saiful Imaan Sharonee)

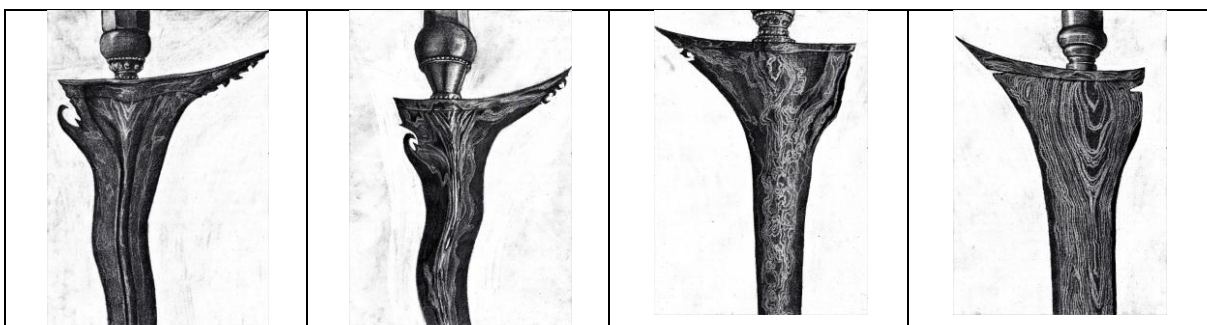


Figure 4: Close-up drawing study of four different forms of Keris and their blade pattern. Pen and ink on paper, 42cm x 30cm. (Source: Saiful Imaan Sharonee)

Material experimentation was central to this phase. By engaging with contemporary materials such as wire, concrete, and metal rods, materials that contrast the traditional iron-nickel keris form, the project embraced a dual dialogue between legacy and innovation. These

materials offered flexibility in terms of form-building while enabling the artist to articulate tactile metaphors of strength, resilience, and rootedness.

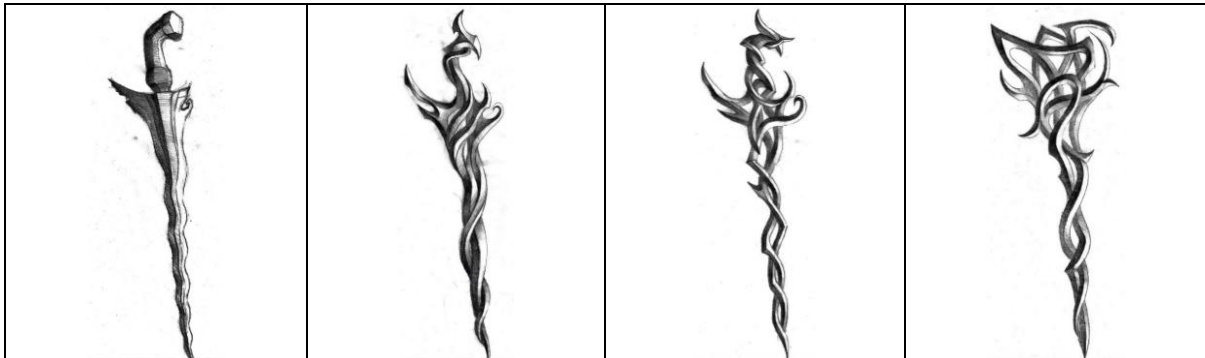


Figure 5: Creative development process. Pen and ink on paper, 42cm x 30cm.
(Source: Saiful Imaan Sharonee)

The ideation process (see Figure 5) mapped a four-stage conceptual evolution: imitation, denaturalisation, stylisation, and abstraction. This framework, common in visual arts pedagogy, was adapted here to progressively distance the sculptural propositions from literal keris representation while retaining symbolic resonance. In its final phase, the studio process culminated in a set of resolved maquettes, *Harapan*, *Pendinding*, and *Pertahanan*—that embody the philosophical tenets and formal logic of the keris within a distinctly contemporary sculptural idiom.

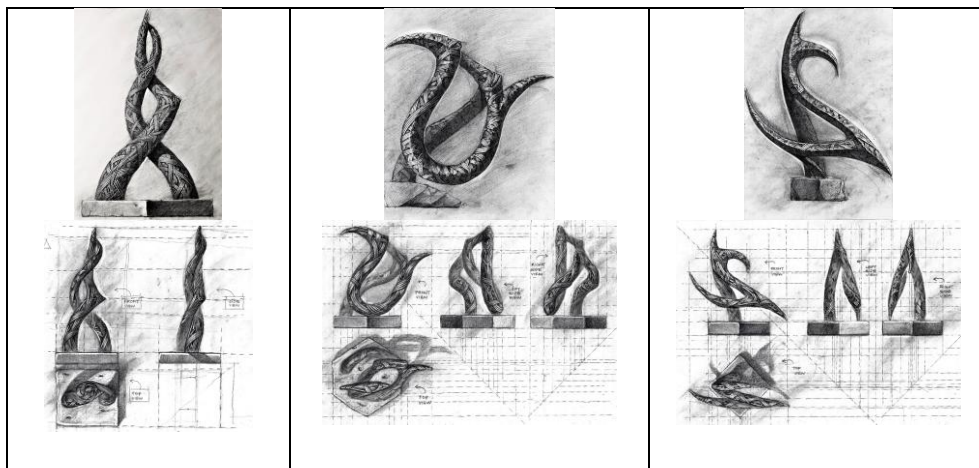


Figure 6: The chosen forms for the final sculpture proposal. Graphite powder and pencil on paper, 30cm x 42cm.
(Source: Saiful Imaan Sharonee)

In line with Nelson’s (2022) assertion that studio research produces knowledge through the act of making, this phase bridges the intangible with the tangible, transforming cultural insights into spatial and sensory experience as shown in Figure 6.

Philosophical Interpretation

The Philosophical Interpretation stage of the methodology anchors the visual and material explorations within a culturally embedded metaphysical framework. This phase revisits the collected data, not only through an aesthetic lens, but through the cosmological and symbolic schema of Malay thought, which views the keris as a vessel of encoded meaning, ritual, and power.

Drawing where the study defines three key philosophical concepts derived from pamor blade motifs:

- a. **Harapan (hope)**: encoded in circular or spiralling forms, representing continuity, cyclical life forces, and upward spiritual aspiration.
- b. **Pendinding (protection)**: symbolised by ovular or shield-like configurations, interpreted as metaphysical barriers against harm.
- c. **Pertahanan (resilience/defence)**: expressed through angular motifs, signalling strength, endurance, and strategic resistance.

These ideas are not arbitrary artistic choices but are rooted in long-standing Malay craft ontologies that view the act of making as a dialogue between the physical and metaphysical realms. The keris, forged through mantra-infused processes and layered metallurgy, becomes an extension of the maker's niat (intention) and the spiritual qualities invoked during creation. By layering these symbolic dimensions into the sculptural process, the work resists surface-level aestheticism. Instead, it proposes a relational understanding of form, where each sculptural gesture is charged with cosmological significance. This philosophical stage acts as a cultural compass, ensuring that the contemporary artworks remain tethered to the epistemological worldviews from which they draw.

Formal Reimagining

The formal reimagining phase represents the resolution of the research cycle—a point at which cultural insights, material experiments, and philosophical meaning converge into coherent sculptural works. In this stage, the symbolic visual elements of the keris are no longer quoted but transmuted into original formal vocabularies that speak in contemporary artistic idioms while echoing ancestral traditions.

The three final sculptural maquettes Harapan, Pendinding, and Pertahanan demonstrate distinct reconfigurations of keris principles through contemporary abstract language. These forms retain the cultural charge of the source material but avoid mimicry, instead offering symbolic equivalents:

- a. *Harapan* ascends through a spiralling cylindrical motion that evokes spiritual emergence.
- b. *Pendinging* envelops space with protective curvature that shields while inviting.
- c. *Pertahanan* asserts angularity as a formal metaphor for steadfastness.

Crucially, this phase is not the end point but a re-entry into the cycle. Each completed artwork generates reflective insight that loops back into renewed visual research and studio iteration, keeping the process dynamic and open-ended. This aligns with contemporary understandings of cyclical creativity in practice-based research, where outcomes feed future inquiries rather than close them

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Exploratory Design Based on Moditional Concept

This outcome-based exploration aims to deconstruct the formal and symbolic structure of the completed sculptural series, contextualising each work in relation to keris blade pattern ideology, Malay metaphysical thought, and the principles of practice-based research. By anchoring form to symbolism, the series offers insight into how cultural essence and emotional meaning can be translated into contemporary sculptural language, as shown in Figure 7.

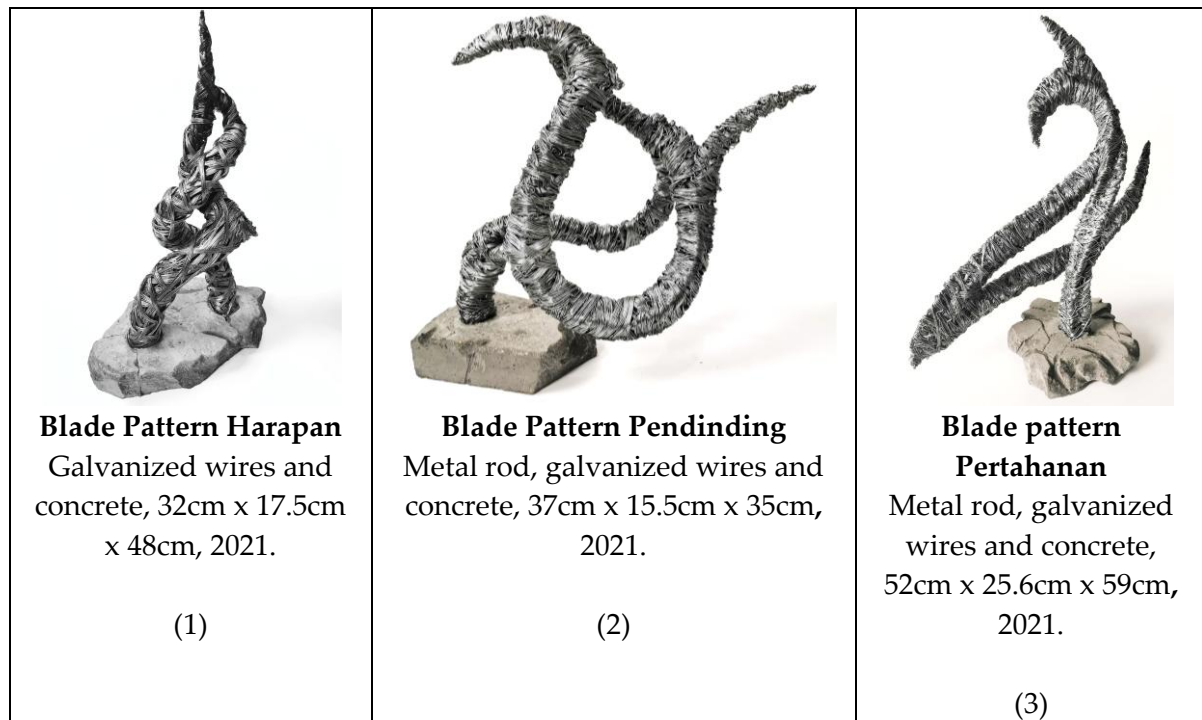


Figure 7: Final artwork based on the outcome of the initial concept.
(Source: Saiful Imaan Sharonee)

Blade Pattern Harapan: *Galvanized wires and concrete, 32cm x 17.5cm x 48cm, 2021*

The first sculpture embodies the keris quality of hope, interpreted through the semiotic lens of the blade's coiled pattern. The overlapping layers in the blade's pamor design are abstracted into a cylindrical, upward-moving form, symbolising the circular Malay cosmological idea that spiritual and physical nourishment begins from the earth and ascends toward enlightenment. This interpretation draws from Malay metaphysical philosophy, which positions circularity as a sign of continuity and divine motion. The concrete base represents the material origin of creation (soil, stone, water), while the galvanised wire spiral illustrates ascension and continuity. The sculpture aligns with the craft divinity concept and reflects a culturally rooted optimism shaped by heritage. Through the lens of practice-based research, the sculptural form becomes a vehicle for translating intangible beliefs into tangible structure.

Blade Pattern Pendinding: *Metal rod, galvanized wires and concrete, 37cm x 15.5cm x 35cm, 2021*

The second sculpture draws inspiration from the keris feature belalai gajah (elephant trunk), a curved extension associated with spiritual protection. The sculpture's oval structure is central to conveying the idea of shielding and defence against unseen forces, representing the concept of pendinding or "protector" in Malay thought. Formally, the upward twisting lines symbolise both resilience and guardianship, while the use of sturdy wire and concrete materials adds to the narrative of structural strength. This visual interpretation is deeply embedded in the semiotic reading of the oval shape, which in Malay cosmology signals the encompassing safety of the divine. As in the first piece, the concrete base symbolises earthly origin, reinforcing the concept that spiritual protection must be grounded in ancestral belief systems. The sculpture demonstrates how material semiotics and practice-based abstraction can make traditional values legible in a modern sculptural context. The creative process follows a cyclical methodology rooted in visual research, studio experimentation, symbolic interpretation, and formal reimagining (Figure 1). The resulting sculptures are not literal replications of the keris but are shaped by semiotic translation, where visual motifs are reimagined as material expressions of cultural philosophy. Each artwork embodies a core symbolic concept—hope, protection, and resilience—derived from the traditional pamor patterns and realised through formal abstraction and material experimentation.

Blade Pattern Pertahanan: *Metal rod, galvanized wires and concrete, 52cm x 25.6cm x 59cm, 2021*

The final sculpture represents an abstraction of the keris component known as the ganja, (a structural guard between the blade and hilt). This part is traditionally associated with endurance and resilience, and here it is interpreted through a series of angular, ascending forms. Angularity, in this context, reflects strategic resistance and strength, both physical and spiritual. Titled Pertahanan (meaning "defence" or "resistance"), the sculpture echoes the protective and assertive posture of the keris while introducing new formal vocabularies. The upward jutting forms are framed by a semiotic approach to material language—each edge, fold, and rise referencing the defensive logic of the blade. Grounded in Malay metaphysical symbolism, the artwork expresses the concept that cultural identity must be defended and sustained through both form and intention. Here, Nelson's practice-based theory is evidenced by the use of material and spatial exploration as a method for generating culturally embedded knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This study presents a substantive contribution to the field of contemporary art and cultural heritage by introducing a creative process model for contemporary sculpture creation inspired by traditional artefacts—in this case, the Malay keris. Developed through a practice-based research framework, this model outlines a distinctive artistic methodology (artistic workflow) that facilitates the reinterpretation of cultural symbols into abstract sculptural form while preserving their embedded meanings. The model comprises four interrelated stages:

1. **Visual Research:** This initial phase involves systematic observation and documentation of traditional artefacts, including direct engagement with keris specimens, museum collections, and cultural practitioners. Visual elements such as the blade form, pattern, and symbolic motifs are analysed and categorised as the basis for conceptual development.
2. **Studio Research:** Building on visual insights, this phase initiates material experimentation through drawing, sketching, and maquette development. Using contemporary media (e.g., wire, concrete), traditional forms are abstracted and transformed, allowing for tactile exploration and structural innovation beyond historical constraints.
3. **Philosophical Interpretation:** At this stage, symbolic meanings from the *keris*—*harapan* (hope), *pendinding* (protection), and *pertahanan* (resilience) are aligned with indigenous Malay metaphysical beliefs. These concepts inform both form and *niat* (intention), ensuring that the sculptural output remains connected to cultural cosmology.
4. **Formal Reimagining:** This final phase synthesises the prior stages into completed sculptural works. The artworks are not replicas but contemporary embodiments of cultural identity. They reinterpret ancestral motifs through a modern artistic language while retaining their spiritual and symbolic integrity.

The findings of this creative model offer a theoretical and practical framework for artists, designers, and cultural researchers aiming to engage with traditional knowledge systems in innovative ways. More than a technical method, it represents a creative epistemology, a way of thinking, knowing, and expressing through form. Importantly, this model contributes to the strengthening of local cultural identity in the contemporary era. By offering a structured pathway for reimagining heritage artefacts, it provides a sustainable model for cultural continuity. The process affirms that tradition can evolve without erasure, and that contemporary art can serve as a powerful interface between past wisdom and future expression. This model may be adapted or expanded in future research across various disciplines, including digital fabrication, installation art, design education, and cultural policy, supporting broader efforts to revitalise and recontextualise intangible heritage through creative practice.

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