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ASIA

& THE ASIAN DIASPORA





Clockwise from this image: Artist Thania Petersen; an amuse-bouche at the Happy Uncles; the dining room at the Happy Uncles



SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Cape Town's innovative artists, designers, and chefs are bringing attention to the city's Cape Malay heritage

TO SEE WHERE Cape Town's cool kids hang out, stop by the Pot Plant Club. Set amid the Victorian row houses on trendy Bree Street, the boutique, cofounded by Salik Harris in 2022, doubles as a social club for locals, who linger at the shop's café and rifle through racks of oversized jackets and denim. The emporium's collection includes emerging labels like Asa Sadan, the Paint Company, and Yarns Worldwide alongside Harris's own streetwear brand, Leaf Apparel. All were founded by talents from the Cape Malay community, a South African ethnic group with a huge impact on the city's cultural life.

"I always found Cape Malay people to be so creative," says Harris. "We resonate with Black people, we resonate with white people. We're in the middle of all the chaos." Cape Malay is something of a misnomer, a blanket name assigned to a layered identity unique to the tip of the African continent that developed as the result of Indonesian and Malaysian exiles mixing with Africans, Europeans, Indians, and Arabs over the centuries. "The term *Cape Malay* is used to describe a Creole community, a community that is completely mixed," says artist Thania Petersen, who explores her heritage through photography, painting, textile, and performance. "We don't exist anywhere else in the world."

For most visitors, brushes with Cape Malay culture are limited to Bo-Kaap, a warren of rainbow-bright houses and mosques on the



Above: Igshaan Adams surrounded by his artwork. **Right:** *Rampie and Layer II*, a textile by Thania Petersen



Malay silhouettes; this year his work was included in the “Africa Fashion” exhibition at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum.

Today, creatives across Cape Town are exploring their complex identities through fashion, art, cuisine, film, and music. In an unassuming industrial space in the Salt River neighborhood east of the city—once a hive of textile factories—chef Anwar Abdullatief artfully reimagines Cape Malay staples in an eight-course tasting menu at the Happy Uncles, Cape Town’s first halal fine-dining restaurant. Filmmaker Amy Jeptha amassed global accolades for

slopes of the iconic Signal Hill. Tour buses regularly choke Wale Street to disgorge passengers for quick selfies or to sample koeksisters, plump pastries steeped in cardamom and dusted with coconut. But the scale of influence this community has had on South Africa is often overlooked on the tourist circuit.

Pot Plant Club’s streetwear brands may be rooted in Cape Town’s current sartorial moment, but they have strong ties to the city’s past. For generations, Cape Malays were, as tailors and factory workers, at the forefront of a once booming textile industry. “We never owned the businesses, but we were the hands that grew these businesses,” says designer Imran Mohamed in his studio in Woodstock, a suburb that’s emerged as a creative hub. “We never saw people like us in this space. I wanted to portray our people in that luxury-fashion context.” In 2021 the Central Saint Martins alum launched Asa Sadan, a high-end streetwear label named for his grandmother and inspired in part by Cape

her 2020 Afrikaans comedy, *Barakat*, which follows a family gathering for Eid. And South Africa’s best-known rapper, YoungstaCPT, often dons a fez in his videos and imbues his lyrics with Cape Malay references. “His songs are focused on repositioning Cape Malay culture within the context of South Africa,” says visual artist Imraan Christian, who collaborated with the rapper to direct provocative music videos like “Young Van Riebeeck.”

Art is the discipline for which Cape Malays have amassed the most acclaim, at home and abroad. “I think the rest of the world has realized that African art is not just about traditional masks,” Igshaan Adams observes at his atelier in Cape Town’s celebrated Zeitz MOCAA museum as he nears the end of a seven-month residency. His *Salat Aljamaeat Min Bonteheuvel*, a pastiche of timeworn prayer mats from his hometown in the Bonteheuvel township, was one of the most striking installations at the inaugural Islamic Arts Biennale in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, this year.

A few floors above the Zeitz MOCAA at the Silo Hotel, elevator doors slide open at the 10th-floor penthouse suite to reveal a striking photographic collage: Petersen, the heritage-minded artist, swathed in a voluminous red dress, documented herself in 25 poses from the Indonesian dance of 1,000 hands. Amid the hotel’s landmark collection of contemporary African art, this work commands a moment of repose and wonder. “I tried to teach myself this dance to reconnect with our history, as a way of literally and physically facing our past,” she says. But Petersen’s oeuvre speaks firmly to the present: “You cannot come to Cape Town and not smell us, see us, taste us. I mean, we are embedded in the DNA of what Cape Town is today.” SARAH KHAN