

A Fragment of Indonesian Contemporary Art

Text
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In this exhibition titled AWARENESS; Indonesian Art Today, seven prominent Indonesian artists present their contemporary works. This small number of participants cannot represent the entire Indonesian contemporary art map. The items displayed are limited to two dimensional works.

The seven artists selected for this exhibition by the curator Lely Oei had their education at the art academy in Jogja, now known as ISI Yogyakarta, and Faculty of Fine Art & Design, ITB in Bandung. The Bandung school is the oldest art academy founded by the Dutch artist Ries Mulder in 1947 while the Jogja school was founded in 1950 known as Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia (ASRI). The teachers of ASRI were mostly self-taught artists.

The schools were in the past two opposite poles. The Bandung school was considered as the laboratory of the west while the Jogja school was very nationalistic. There is no more strained relation between the two now.

Made Wianta, Nasirun, Pupuk Daru Purnomo and Jumaldi Alfi are graduates from the Jogja school, Arahmaiani, Ay Tjoe Christine and Andy Dewantoro are from the Bandung school.

Made Wianta is the most senior of the group and is regarded as modern and contemporary artist. He graduated from STSRI ASRI (now ISI) Yogyakarta and is living in Bali, his place origin. He has a long artistic journey behind him, traveling and exhibiting around the world in prestigious galleries and art events like the Venice Biennial 2003. Made Wianta is basically an abstract painter and has had three major periods before, the Karangasem, Pointillism and Calligraphy period. The Karangasem period is an early period when Wianta was doing explorations with his drawings; Karangasem is a village in Bali. But in fact there are more than that. He has been continuously experimenting, producing various kinds of works which have never been shown to the public. His strength lies in his line; the most elementary in painting. Therefore is his skill in drawing amazing. The works of the Karangasem period with the delicate intertwining lines using ink or pencil show this high skill of Wianta. In these last years he has produced works which are totally blank without lines, often without colours or creating just black and white elevated shapes.

Made Wianta is always thinking big. You can observe these from his colossal happening art. His installation art is provocative. The small sized works in this exhibition are his newest creation. He is showing back his strong lines by using pencil, making voluminous drawings resulting in imaginative objects which he features as the waves. The waves have rhythm and rhythm is a part of Wianta's paintings. I think his music background has its contribution. Compared to the Karangasem period these drawings have a better three dimensional aspect and a more universal spirit. The works are grey in tone and significant parts are left empty.

Nasirun has a Javanese cultural background. The Javanese culture is obvious in his works, be it in the form of puppet stories, myths or legends. Using puppet figures as metaphor in political, social or other daily life subject matter is Nasirun's habit. He does not follow the mainstream artists who are engaged in the Chinese style popular art. The Javanese culture content makes his work unique as an Indonesian contemporary artwork. This strong local nuance is considered by some people as not contemporary; the contrary is in fact. The daring strong red colour is typical Nasirun. It is hardly possible to get this colour precise in a print. You should see it in real. This exhibition does not include a painting with this red. In the two paintings titled Terima Kasih Wieteke van Dort and Caleg Senirupa with means Legislative Candidate for Fine Art the dominant colour is orange. The first painting has a playful nuance. Nasirun was impressed by the act that the Indonesian folk songs were sung by an Indo Dutch singer Wieteke van Dort and not an Indonesian while the popular songs amongst the young people in Indonesia are the western songs and love songs. He thanks Wieteke. He bought the CD when we were

traveling together in Holland in 2001. He used the CD cover for this painting and added the "Punokawan" (4 popular Javanese puppet figures) to join the singing. The second painting is a parody triggered by the recent campaign for the election of the Indonesian parliament members. He is cynical about this happening. No one put forward the issue of culture and art. Nasirun used his silhouette as the candidate for the fine art legislative member. In this scene he added a traditional figure as his campaigner who danced the dang-dut, a very popular sensual dance in his country. The artist's coming works will show his silhouette as metaphor to replace the puppets. Nasirun's paintings have an expressive power and are full of delicate details as decorative ornaments. The composition is often complicated. But these two aspects are not well represented here. He has a sense of humor in his work. This versatile artist is not only doing paintings but also three dimensional works. His creativeness and technical skill is amazing. He is able to work in all circumstances and is often telling stories in his works. Therefore he often needs a huge canvas for his painting. These paintings are for practical purposes not exhibited here. The third work on exhibit is a serial of 30 exhibition invitation cards. Actually he has done hundreds of this kind. In the last 2 years there were so many exhibitions of contemporary art. The essences of the exhibitions are featured in the invitation cards. Nasirun tried to interpret these exhibitions in his own way by repainting these cards. These small works can be displayed as a unity or as single pieces. It is for the first time that he put these works on exhibit.

Pupuk Daru Purnomo is a classmate and close friend of Nasirun. I brought these two artists traveling around USA, Holland and Paris visiting museums. The trip has been very fruitful to them especially to Pupuk. He has made a tremendous progress since then. This expressionist painter has always been interested in doing human figures since he was student, particularly woman figures. His strongest side is faces, although his greatest success in the sense of the most appreciated works by the public are his cityscapes with old buildings and interiors. In the last development he uses faces as metaphor. His self portraits series which do not show any similarity with his face are used as vehicle to express his inner mood in different periods of his life. He also develops a new technique, totally apart from his usual style. This new style is basically realistic but after he finished the work the surface is overlapped with semi transparent layer. The result is fascinating. Unfortunately this style is not included in this show. Pupuk shows two works in this exhibition, one triptych titled introspection which depicts two seated figures supposed to be husband and wife with a closed wooden door in between. The two people are looking away from each other. They have a serious problem with no way out (the closed door). They need deeper introspection to solve the problem. He said that introspection does not make communication easier. The second work is a diptych in black and white. The expressive faces were depicted from the relief of Angkor Wat which he observed and explored intensely on the spot and then manifested with full desire through his spontaneous and expressive brush strokes.

Jumaldi Alfi whose origin is West Sumatra graduated from ISI Yogyakarta. The West Sumatrans, known for their ease to leave their homeland to look for better opportunities in education and socio-economical welfare can adapt easily with the environment. Artworks of West Sumatran artists often do not show any trace of their cultural roots. Alfi with five other contemporary artists who came from West Sumatra and studied at ISI Yogyakarta formed a group called "Kelompok Seni Rupa Jendela" in 1996. Kelompok means group, seni rupa is visual art and jendela means window. Through a window you get fresh air and you can see the outside world. You will succumb in a house without a window. When artists of their age were engaged in political issues, this group took a different course. They were painting objects, real or fantasy objects, doing scribbles or abstract works, exploring with their intuition to satisfy themselves. Alfi said in his book that every single piece of his work deals with the past, not the future. He said that he cannot paint if not on edge. His paintings are mostly abstract or abstract filled

with objects like stones, cactus plants, small figures, letters, numbers or other tiny objects as accents. There was a period when he used his own portraiture as subject matter. I have followed Alfi's development since he was student and he was never as good as now. In this exhibition he shows his paintings series without any conceptual pretension like usual. In the white-greyish and black-reddish paintings the approach is just doing paintings. The letters do not have any meaning, it's just esthetic elements. A typical approach of the "Kelompok Seni Rupa Jendela" with successful results.

Arahmaiani from the Bandung school who is residing in Jogya, has been active abroad for many years and is internationally known for her installation art and performance art. She also participated in the Venice Biennial 2003. Arahmaiani, known as an activist, has always been vocal against discrimination. Discrimination of the woman gender, discrimination of the minority. In the US after 9/11 she experienced unfair treatment as a Moslem, in her own country she is seen as a "non Moslem" Moslem. This artist is in the last years actively defending human rights for the Moslem women. Not long ago in Thailand she was engaged in a workshop with a minority group of Moslem women working with silk fabrics. They got support from an American and the project was successful. So she wants to say that people from different race, nationality, culture, religion, gender could actually work together and live in harmony.

Since two years ago she started experimenting with the grey coloured figure paintings. Two works are exhibited here. The precursors of these lineless grey figures were her drawings. The grey tone according to her gives a peaceful feeling. The grey could emanate subtle changes caused by the radiance of its surroundings. This is truly an intense peaceful experience for Arahmaiani. After so many years being active fighting for her beliefs all around the world, which often required her presence amongst a protesting crowd, interrogated by the security or even threatened to be killed, Arahmaiani is now longing to live in solitude to be with herself. These paintings are free of concept, she just let her feelings and intuition flowing. She is seeking self satisfaction without any other goal. When I spoke to her while she was finalizing the works she said that she does not know how far she can go with her new exploration of the grey colour. She does not want to be burdened with any target. The anti climax of her grey figure paintings are her colourful funny and cynical cartoon paintings base on her observation of the happening around her, particularly in the political world.

Ay Tjoe Christine, another woman artist from the Bandung school belongs to the top Indonesian woman painters. She was initially a graphic artist and her graphic works are excellent. In 2000 she started doing painting using mixed media on canvas and she is also very successful with this media. In fact there is a similarity between her graphic works and the paintings because her strongest part is obviously the lines which are powerful and expressive but subtle and artistic. However, there are paintings totally deprived of lines but maintain the unique character of Ay Tjoe's works. It is easy to appreciate her works visually because of its esthetic aspect. But it is difficult to discover what is concealed beneath the visual part. It could be her most private feelings but could also be her perception of the outside world. There are two kinds of works, the figures and the landscapes. The figures are deformed, never painted complete. Sometimes you only see the head; other times just body parts protruding from an amorphous mass. The landscapes are mostly abstract. You are required to use your fantasy to get an idea of the landscape. She uses pastel colours for her works on canvas and paper.

Ay Tjoe Christine wrote about the work "Pemandangan Berair" which means Watered Landscape: I strongly wish many things to change, including the way to see "landscape" in front of the eyes. Water which has its source from within us, from the eyes, is one of those that cause changes.

Andy Dewantoro, the only male artist from the Bandung school, the youngest of the group is making use of the computer, chooses the urban or suburban

scenery as his subject matter. His sceneries have a serene atmosphere. The curator Jim Supangkat indicated it as "The Silent City" or "The Silent World" of Andy Dewantoro. It is not the city he wants to represent but the atmosphere, not necessarily the atmosphere of the site but his inner feelings. Andy uses mostly black and white colours in his current paintings. He started to experiment with these black and white colours in the beginning of 2008. He takes his objects not from real scenes but by searching in the internet, magazines and old pictures done by him or others. He does not simply copy the picture but redesigns the composition, makes additions and reductions to fulfill his desire. By so doing he creates a new picture with the computer which is transported to canvas by using acrylic paint. But he can also process it directly on the canvas. In the future he is going to execute the pictures himself to intensify his feel about the object. His works have a western nuance and are easy to absorb. In the black and white scenes you cannot find any human being which makes the atmosphere even more tranquil like an abandoned city. Indeed he told me that he finally prefers the black and white paintings because he pursues more tranquility. The glittering lamps which form a significant part of his cityscapes are signs of optimism and symbolize his dream. In his previous works the human being is still there although very rare. His work can be a one big canvas piece or consists of many small canvasses. Both kinds of works are represented in this show. The mini series work is composed of many small works with similar concept, arranged in a pictorial harmony.

The Indonesian artists like these seven people have left the political subject matter which before or right after the reformation was a dominating scene. If they still do like Nasirun or Arahmaiani in her unexhibited works, they just make fun of it. They do not have serious messages because they are cynical towards the current condition and the political leaders. So many people want to become parliament members and so many political leaders want to become president.

Lely Oei has done a smart selection. The artists' works have a universal nuance and therefore easy to be appreciated by the western art community. Nasirun is the only artist who uses traditional elements in his works which distinct him from the others.

Mono chromic colours seem to be increasingly appealing to the artist, particularly black and white, and grey. Wianta and Arahmaiani are exploiting the grey tone. It is interesting because life is most of the time moving in the grey area rather than black and white. Grey can be considered identical with tolerance, subtleness and realistic attitude while black and white is non negotiable, dogmatic and intolerant. What is on show is just a fragment of contemporary Indonesian art. Hopefully this exhibition will arouse your interest in knowing more about the contemporary Indonesian art.

