

To Awareness, Past – Present – Future Three Generations in Visual Language

Text

Preface in the exhibition catalogue
by Lely Oei, May 2009

Exhibition

AWARENESS, Indonesian Art Today

Gallery

Canvas International Art,
Amsterdam

Period

6 June–4 July 2009

In 2004 I went to Indonesia and Singapore for the presentation of *Exploring Modern Indonesian Art*, a book about Dr. Oei Hong Djien's collection. I was also there to explore possibilities for bringing contemporary art from Indonesia to the Netherlands. Although developments within Indonesia's art scene were happening fast, I wasn't quite convinced that I was ready to accept this challenge. After my return last summer I had a powerful sense of new dynamic from young artists with a fresh, more universal artistic vision. I felt it immediately: the time is now! Fortunately Martijn Kielstra felt the same way when I showed him a selection of artworks during a visit to Canvas International Art. Behold the result of our collaboration: *AWARENESS, Indonesian Art Today*.

I'd been following the development of contemporary art in Indonesia for a long time, from the Netherlands, during visits there and via conversations with my uncle, cousins and others. I'm choosing not to write 'Indonesian Art', because this term is too often associated with nostalgic images, 'tempo doeloe' and folklore or 'tourist art'. Indeed, the question often arises whether such an exhibition isn't better suited to the ethnographic Tropenmuseum. This exhibition is proof of the change and evolution that has occurred in the art world in Indonesia in the past few decades.

My choice of artists reflects different generations and the development of their visual language. Made Wianta (1949) and Arahmaiani (1961) both completed part of their studies in the Netherlands and Belgium. It is partly due to their many travels that each artist's vision is accessible to an international audience. Pupuk Daru Purnomo (1964) and Nasirun (1965) completed their respective art studies in Indonesia and, until 2001, rarely left the country. In Nasirun's work, and to a lesser extent in Pupuk's, this Indonesian heritage is visible. Javanese themes are present in Nasirun's work but this does not mean his is 'local art', craft or folklore. Ay Tjoe Christine (1973), Jumaldi Alfi (1973) and Andy Dewantoro (1974) make use of an international visual language. Their work isn't bound by place or time and specific knowledge about Indonesia isn't necessary for a thorough appreciation of their work. Globalisation and rapid developments in media and technology over the past decades mean these artists are able to access art from around the world.

Made Wianta

The thing I find so captivating about Made Wianta's work is his ability to renew himself time and time again. On numerous occasions I have been curious about the name of the artist of a particularly striking work. To my surprise, the artist in question was Made Wianta every time. His abstract pieces portray strength and also a sensitivity for details.

Above all, I recognise in his work my own passion for Wushu (Taiji), in which you can explore an apparently simple movement repetitively, a movement which continues to take you to deeper levels and new experiences. The power of repetition. The control becomes and seems perfect, but beyond 'the perfection' lie new pathways and sensations. Made Wianta is a master of 'the line' and is able to rediscover this line again and again.

Arahmaiani

In 2008 I attended a large solo exhibition by Arahmaiani, 'slow down bro'. I was gripped by her social involvement and her ability to express this in different ways in her work. From performance to video art, from humorous cartoons to poetry carved in stone. The work that touched me the most were her sensitive, intimate portraits in grey. Although Arahmaiani has earned her international reputation as an engaged artist, I decided that these works deserved more attention in a 'non-political/social' setting. These new pieces demonstrate that her art also shows the more subtle side of the inner human being and shows her vulnerable side.

Pupuk Daru Purnomo and Nasirun

In 2001 I travelled to Paris together with Nasirun, Pupuk and Dr. Oei Hong. With little in the way of language in common I slowly got to know the artists. The somewhat introverted Pupuk was an observer, and one could only guess at his thoughts. While the perpetually jolly Nasirun occasionally wandered off in wonder, he would quickly seek us out again with a start; we were his guides in this overwhelming city of lights. I recognise their characters in their work. Pupuk's skill at observation is apparent in his exhibited work. His paint strokes are always expressive but the details are just as important. They are each given just the right amount of attention to create his trademark atmosphere. The capacity for interpersonal observation is the theme of the triptych 'Introspection'. As you can read in his descriptive note, it's all about communication between man and woman. He writes: 'In my life I sometimes looked for a situation where a decision could not be made, this introspection brought me to a point where communication seemed never to be on my side.'

Nasirun has both a rich fantasy and the ability to transform them into strong, warm, colourful images. Although he predominantly works in (very) large format in order to tell his stories, you can see in this exhibition that he also knows enough to work with other people's work in his Invitation -series. Nasirun's work is exuberant. I observe his ability to create beautiful, modest work daily, when I look at a small modest portrait of a woman in red and black that was given to me by the artist. It is composed, and so beautiful that it will always please me. Whoever can do that is a true artist!

Jumaldi Alfi

Last summer I arrived in Alfi's studio, situated between the rice paddies, straight from the airport in Yogya. Besides two enormous canvases there was little to see in the space with fluorescent lighting. I was wondering two things: 'How can anyone work in this light?' (I wasn't actually able to get a good impression of the work) and 'What's all the fuss about this artist?' Until I found a spot in the furthestmost corner, from where I immediately saw that it was good work and was hooked. I subsequently saw more of his amazing work. But I really only got it later that year, when I stayed with family and sat facing one of his huge paintings for the duration of every meal. His work is a voyage of discovery. There is always something new to see and some new detail that demands attention. At the same time the work exudes tranquillity and also retains something intangible.

Ay Tjoe Christine

Ay Tjoe Christine is the only artist in this group that I haven't met but the moment I saw a pair of her early works I knew she belonged in this exhibition. Furthermore I believe it is important to show the work of women artists from countries like Indonesia. Her work is often a mix of figurative and abstract, spacious and simultaneously claustrophobic, but always sensitive. Two of her abstracts are on show in this exhibition, both focusing on her deeper understanding of water.

Andy Dewantoro

While searching for the current state of affairs of art in Indonesia and the corresponding emerging artists, I visited the Cultural Centre Taman Budaya in Yogya. A huge exhibition was being held, providing an overview of works by numerous young, dynamic and established artists. As soon as I walked in my attention was caught by a scene of eight small, composed landscapes of trees and/or buildings. It was already sold, like most of the other work I was interested in. As soon as I left I asked myself the question my uncle always asked me when I travelled in my youth: 'What did I like the most and why?' The piece that stayed with me, even after so many other impressions, was 'Nowhere or Anywhere' by Andy Dewantoro. A landscape almost entirely black, large but not oppressive or melancholic, instead rather relaxing. Beautiful in its simplicity. Strangely enough this painting had not sold. Now I begin and end each day with the painting and I am regularly surprised by the new 'quality' the black has assumed.

I later discovered that the eight miniatures were also his, as was a piece I had regularly seen at Dr. Oei Hong Djien's which had a number of different features such as a bright red segment and a solitary human figure. Looking back at his work from 2007 and 2008, one finds experiments with or without colour, with human figures, vehicles or indeed empty, roughly sketched or tight compositions. In the work on show in this exhibition he has found his course and has eliminated almost all colour from his work. The tighter work combined with drip-painting works best in the larger pieces while the rough sketches work best in the miniseries. Andy Dewantoro's career is just beginning but it is a most promising start!

Visitors to Indonesia often have the experience of the Indonesian people as friendly, but difficult to judge. In this exhibition you will see that the artists no longer have difficulties to transpose their inner world into images. By expression, like in Nasirun's work, but most of all by introspection, like Pupuk's, as one of his works literally is called. Nothing has to be veiled, like in the age of Suharto, and nothing has to be necessarily taken as a subject, like in the period after the reformation. The Indonesian art world has matured and grown up. The artists follow their own artistic way, from their inner consciousness.

While preparing this exhibition I was often asked what is it exactly, art from Indonesia? My hope is that this exhibition will not only introduce you to the world of contemporary art in Indonesia but will above all arouse your curiosity, inspire and stimulate/provoke so your interest in the art of this fascinating country will continue to grow in the future!