



Pop culture references abound in Indonesian art: curator Eva McGovern discusses Indieguerillas' Happy Victims and the Southeast Asian art climate

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INDONESIAN CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY EXHIBITION

Indieguerillas is made up of Indonesian husband-and-wife duo Miko Bawono and Santi Ariestyowanti, whose artistic skills stem from roots in the design industry. Known for their smooth blending of pop culture aesthetics, subtle social commentary and use of traditional Javanese folklore elements, Indieguerillas presented "**Happy Victims**", their latest solo exhibition, at **Valentine Willie Fine Art Singapore**.

The title "Happy Victims" reflects the fact that consumers have willingly but unconsciously become dominated by capitalist spending customs – people no longer spend only for pure necessity, but now spend to gain symbols of status and success. Touching on this popular subject, Indieguerillas' renderings are colourful and uplifting. A good sense of humour and playful attitude draw the viewer in to investigate the relationships between various elements in their works: sneakers, Mao's headshot, Astro Boy, Colonel Sanders, Javanese folklore characters.



All Hail the Choreographer, acrylic on wood, 2010.
Courtesy of artists and Valentine Willie Fine Art.

The Southeast Asian art scene is both fascinating and difficult, elements which are highlighted in "Happy Victims" and can be attributed to the area's diversity and rich cultural history. Art Radar Asia spoke with Eva McGovern, the exhibition's curator, to talk about Indieguerillas, the show, Southeast Asian art, and her experiences working in the region.

Can you describe the process of curating Indieguerillas' "Happy Victims"? How did you generate the idea?

As it is a solo show by Indieguerillas, the central idea of "happy victims of the capitalism and the material world" was generated by the artists themselves. The curator provides the support structure. One of my personal interests is in urban and youth culture and street style, so I got to know the two artists about 18 months ago and visited their studio. We discussed their idea together, taking inspirations from urban culture.

What's unique about the Miko Bawono and Santi Ariestyowanti working as a duo?

Miko and Santi have worked together since 1999 and formed Indieguerillas professionally in 2002. The husband-and-wife team usually conceptualise together for the overall big picture. Then, Miko usually makes the initial design and outlines the images while Santi creates the details. They share similar interests in urban and youth culture, which is a big part of their lives. Their works are the visual output of how they live their lives basically.

What's the unique quality of Indieguerillas' works compared to other contemporary Indonesian art? Is it their use of youth culture?

It is actually very popular in contemporary Indonesian art creation to incorporate urban culture elements. For example, there is a huge mural tradition in Yogyakarta [which is] common and well celebrated. Younger artists are very interested in this dimension and Indonesia is a very playful place. So lots of humour [and] social comedies can be seen in contemporary Indonesian art.

There are two striking things about Indieguerillas: first, the fact that they work as a husband-and-wife team; second, their proficient experimentation with multiple medium – paintings, installation, design, etc. They benefit from their position as designers by training. Graphic design influences the way they construct their works where there is a considerable amount of experimental energy. They do some commercial work as well, and operate between the two worlds – fine art and commercial art.

Can you elaborate more on the overlapping between fine art and design manifested in their works?

While design has an imbedded sense of usefulness and fine art is not about being useful, the line between fine art and design is a very flexible one. Indieguerillas do make merchandise and T-shirts, and customised sneakers. In terms of the show ["Happy Victim"], objects are fine art. It can be a bit dangerous trying to block down Indieguerillas in any camp. In this post-modern world, anything goes really.

Design is more acceptable in a way because it can reflect the pop culture we are in. People enjoy looking at design objects, which implies that power comes with an entertaining medium, so artists can convey their messages more effectively. Indieguerillas are not making political comments but simply observations, incorporating Javanese folklore. It is about how things meet and collide together. Even if no one gets the message behind, the beautiful design with its youth finish is pleasing to look at; viewers can just get a sense of enjoyment when looking at the execution of their works. Their works become a bit more sinister as you spend more time looking at it.

By lifting and restyling the Javanese folklore and wayang (shadow puppetry) and mixing them with comical and urban objects such as briefcase and sneakers, Indieguerillas display their sense of cultural pride while connecting with the younger audience.



Hunter-Gatherer Society III Javanicus Sk8erensis-Hi, mixed media, 2010. Courtesy of artists and Valentine Willie Fine Art.

Across contemporary Indonesian art, is it common that the traditional elements are reinvented to adapt to the new context?

The trauma of political events is still very resonating to people. Traditional culture is still very influential and you can never really escape it. The younger generation of Indonesian artists are more focused on asking themselves about their identities: what it means to be “Indonesian”, what it means to live in the 21st century.... They try to deal with these issues in an open-ended playful way. Indonesian art has many discourses around these issues, supported by solid academic writings.



The Marionette Faithful, screen printing on teakwood, aluminum plate and digital printing on acrylic sheet, 2010. Courtesy of artists and Valentine Willie Fine Art.

Can you share with us your views on the art scene in Southeast Asia and any regional differences you noticed, in particular, between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore?

It can be troublesome when trying to discuss generally and authoritatively such a complex region [as] Southeast Asia. If I were to make some observations, I would say:

Indonesia:

It is much bigger and has many more artists producing a huge volume of interesting art. There are many more art centres in the country too: Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta. The nature of the communities in the country is very creative and art is well integrated into daily life. Art and creativity is celebrated here.

There is stronger international funding compared to Malaysia and the country’s link to Holland is still very productive in terms of arts funding, cross cultural dialogues, residencies and exhibitions. Overall, Indonesian artists have more confidence about being “artists”.

Malaysia:

Having gained its independence in 1957, the country is much influenced by being more multi-racial. Malaysia has a challenging funding structure for the art, because it is not appreciated or valued as much. Institutionally, the country does not have an intellectual voice guiding or analyzing contemporary art. There are not enough curators and writers. Commercial galleries are leading the way of what kind of art is being bought and seen.

Since the 1990s, artists turned their preoccupation to social commentary and released their frustration in their works. There are several camps of artists: market-friendly traditionalists who are locally inspired and interested in abstract expressionist and realist painting, and the more international groups doing conceptual, performative and installation based work.

Singapore:

There are a lot less artists but the funding stream is well established. The country has a set of well integrated resources, such as biennales and art fairs. It is facing a top-heavy situation: it has an internationally influenced strategy on top, while due to the strict censorship, art creation is much more challenging in terms of producing politically critical work.

What is often seen is some beautifully crafted installation [work] and engagement with international critical theory and conceptual practice. Artists could be more provocative in terms of social commentary, but they are unable or don't want to do so in this slick and modern, and financially stable, country.

Can you share with us your personal experiences working in the region? How did you first start working in Malaysia?

I came to Malaysia in 2008. Prior to that, I worked in London at a major gallery for four years. I am half English, half Malaysian. Before coming back, I got interested in the burgeoning Southeast Asian art scene and was getting a sense of what is going on. In London, a lot of my time was devoted to facilitating other people's programmes and I did not have time to research on topics I was interested in.

After I came back, I started writing for a lot of magazines, so I forced myself to think critically. Then I started to teach Malaysian art history in Singapore. I was invited to be part of a group curatorial show on Southeast Asia in February 2009 in Hong Kong. I also work as the Managing Editor of Arteri, an arts blog that looks at Malaysian and Southeast Asian art. I was accepting a lot of opportunities coming my way in order to figure out what my true interests were. I will be joining Valentine Willie Fine Art to become their regional curator soon.

Back here, hierarchy is not as tight as in London or the US. One is able to connect with the artists and make tangible contributions. Unlike being a small fish in a huge over saturated pond, I feel I am part of a growing changing scene. I find it very inspiring and rewarding to work with people with shared experiences, who are committed to doing something great.