



In Wayang, Indonesian Artists Aditya Novali and indieguerillas Find a Launchpad

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Singapore. Think of the richness and depth of contemporary art in Indonesia, and the idea of wayang, the centuries-old Javanese art of shadow puppetry, seems an anachronism.

Yet there it lies, at the thumping heart of the inspiration that drives the contemporary artists Aditya Novali and indieguerillas, finalists at this week's prestigious Prudential Eye Awards in Singapore. (Both were nominated in the category "best emerging artist using installation," but the prize in the end went to Huang Po Chih of Taiwan.)

"I was a puppet master, a *dalang*, when I was a child," Aditya, from Solo, Central Java, tells the Jakarta Globe at the ArtScience Museum in Singapore, where works by the 15 finalists for the awards are on display. "I grew up as part of the same generation as the sons of famous dalangs, and maybe that's how I first encountered the cultural traditions of Indonesia."

So far, so good. But then, the way Aditya tells it, he pushed away from the art world.

"I don't know why, but I decided I wanted to study architecture," he says. "I like technical things, I like mathematics, I like everything calculative, logical. So I thought it would be a good foundation for me to think.

"Maybe I knew since the beginning that I wanted to be an artist," he goes on, "but I always challenged myself: Could I not be an artist, you know, by taking a different field of study?"

After his architecture studies at Parahyangan University in Bandung, Aditya went on to get a master's degree in conceptual product design at the Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands.

"But apparently all those things brought me back to the arts. So I guess it's the path of my life," he says.

If the path was preordained – Aditya had been entering into, and winning, drawing

competitions since he was 4, and held his first exhibition at age 10 – it wasn't all that clearly marked out. Upon returning from the Netherlands in 2010, armed with new skills, ideas and inspirations, Aditya found himself at a loss as to how to break back into the local art scene.

"I'd done exhibitions before, but when I came back it was a totally different situation," he says. "I was thinking, 'how can I get in?' I didn't know anything, anyone, anywhere."

So he did the only thing he knew: "I joined an art competition."

Three of them, in fact: the Bandung Contemporary Art Award, the Jakarta Art Award and the Sovereign Asia Art Prize in Singapore. He duly won the prize for best artwork in Bandung, took third place in Jakarta, and was named a finalist for the Sovereign Asia award.

"I got lucky," Aditya says with honest understatement. "Since the beginning I've always loved to join competitions, because for me it's about the adrenaline."

And so began his "comeback," as he calls it. Since then he's held exhibitions in galleries around the world, including an ongoing residency at Tokyo Wonder Site (formally the Institute of Contemporary Arts and International Cultural Exchange) in Japan, which runs through March this year.

Architecture and design continue to influence his works, as evidenced in the clean-cut geometry, sparing use of color, and repeated patterns found in his various paintings and installation pieces.

Asked whether he will still be doing art five to 10 years from now, Aditya pings a now-familiar fixer: destiny.

"From my experience, I think yes. Even if I don't want to do it anymore, it's always pulling me back," he says with a laugh.



Dyatmiko Lancur Bawono, left, and Santi Ariestyowanti, the husband-and-wife team of indieguerillas, look at their work 'Taman Budaya: Face Off Face Dinner' at the ArtScience Museum in Singapore on Tuesday. (JG Photo/Hayat Indriyatno)

Like Aditya, the husband-and-wife duo of Dyatmiko "Miko" Lancur Bawono and Santi Ariestyowanti, who make up indieguerillas, grew up in the Central Java heartland where the wayang tradition holds sway.

Miko professes a sense of shame at not knowing all that much about Javanese culture, but says that through their art, he and Santi are trying to re-educate themselves with their native traditions.

He points to the Punakawan, the series of jester characters from wayang, who recur throughout indieguerillas' works. "If we're coming up with a character based on a Punakawan, then we have to understand the original, the idea behind it, so that it's relevant to what we're trying to make," Miko says. "So what we're doing now is actually a process to learn more about our own culture."

"We're also laughing at ourselves," Santi adds. "As artists we want to critique, but we're not righteous; we're also part of the group we're trying to critique."

Their approach, then, is a brand of self-deprecating humor that makes the audience complicit in an act of introspective soul-searching – the very role that the Punakawan characters such as Semar and Petruk have long served in the wayang tradition.

That their work is a kind of therapeutic outlet is an idea that the couple emphasizes over and over.

"For us the process is more important than the outcome," Miko says. "We do the art for ourselves. If it's acknowledged by a lot of people or gets nominated for a prestigious award like this, then that's amazing for us. Whether we win or not is beside the point; what matters is the process. From making the art until it gets exhibited here, all that matters is that we're happy."

The name indieguerillas, which they came up with in 1999 for the graphic design outfit that they established after graduating from the Indonesian Institute of Art (ISI) in Yogyakarta, attests to that spirit of the journey being the destination. The "indie" part can stand for either "independent" or "Indonesia," Santi says, while "guerillas" is a reference to their refusal to work for a company and instead seek out commissions from the thriving art community in Yogyakarta.

From these commissions, and their constant contact with artists, they began to develop their own interest in the arts, delving into the scene full-time by 2007.

Miko is particularly proud of the tradition of *gotong royong*, the spirit of community cooperation, that drives the Indonesian art scene – from veterans supporting newcomers, to collectives helping raise funds for their members to put on exhibitions. The government, he notes, while no longer cracking down on creative expression as it did under Suharto, is far from supportive of artists and their work. (Santi points out that state funding for sports far exceeds that for the arts.)

"Indonesian artists are known for being self-sufficient, which is something we have over artists from other countries," Miko says. "We can create artworks and we can put on exhibitions without any involvement from the government. That's because we support one another."

If anything, he says, the government needs to ease up, especially when it comes to the logistics of shipping artworks out of and into the country for exhibitions. He cites numerous cases of artists having their works held up at random by the customs and excise office, even though they are clearly meant for cultural purposes and not commercial use. Conversely, when it comes to organizing exhibitions and arts-related events in the country, the government is largely absent, leaving the community to fend for itself.

Where indieguerillas do have faith is in the Indonesian public and its growing appreciation of art.

"Art will always be a trigger for people to think, to ask questions about what's happening around them," Miko says.