

When Art Becomes Unforgettable: Three Encounters with Contemporary Indonesian Art



Iwan Effendi, The Visitor #20, 2019, rattan, wood, plywood, cloth, papier-mâché, aluminium, 100 x 30 x 20 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Gallery.



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28 Feb 2020

TEXT: Denise Tsui

IMAGES: Courtesy of various

CoBo Social Managing Editor Denise Tsui shares three of her favourite practicing contemporary Indonesian artists and artist duo, recounting how she came to discover each; and how their works have stayed close to her heart.

“I just don’t understand their aesthetics,” a friend said to me when I asked how he liked the artworks in front of us. We were at Art Jakarta, a contemporary art fair in Indonesia, and I could hardly contain my excitement and delight, but for my friend accompanying me, it was all rather perplexing. His exposure to art had largely been typical textbook Western and East Asian. In a fair where Southeast Asian art—and in particular, Indonesian art—was at its centre, his frustrated face said it all. Where does one start?

Appreciating contemporary Indonesian art has, for me, always come more so from the heart than the mind. Engaging with the artists, hearing their stories and learning more about their culture is what has helped shape my passion for Indonesia. It isn’t the type of art practice we should be applying strict academic theories to, and trying to relate to them within the context of the Western art historical canon rarely leads to success. So here are three encounters with contemporary Indonesian art that have stayed with me closely, each so distinctively different, yet I find they all arise from a deep grassroots level of engagement with their heritage, religions and community.



Portrait of Mujahidin Nurrahman. Image courtesy of the artist.



Installation View of Mujahidin Nurrahman's Persecution series at the booth of Lawangwangi Creative Space during Art Jakarta 2019. Image courtesy of the artist and Lawangwangi Creative Space.

Mujahidin Nurrahman [@mujahidin_nurrahman]

The first time I encountered Bandung-based artist Mujahidin Nurrahman's work was at Art Stage 2016 in Singapore, where he presented the installation *Chamber of God* (2015). Walking into the enclosed space of the installation, I was struck by a wave of emotions. Behind paper screens and surrounded by framed paper cut-outs of fragile, web-like patterns, stood a ghostly figure whose head was comprised of a gas mask and a bust made of paper. Hanging like lanterns, wartime photographs sealed in jars hung all around. It was truly an image that spoke a thousand words.

So, it was to my delightful surprise to discover Nurrahman's work again, without conscious realization, at Art Jakarta in 2019. I walked into the Lawangwangi Creative Space booth, magnetically drawn to the skeletons and skulls carved from paper. Haunting and beautiful, the delicate collage of arabesque patterns cut in paper and charcoal bones were nothing short of mesmerizing. "Look close, they are AK-47s," said the artist as he approached me.

I later sat down with him and his wife and came to understand the depth of his practice. Titled "Persecution," the series of hand-cut paper and mixed media works address what Nurrahman perceives as the dual persecution facing Muslims and non-Muslims. Born to a devout Islam family, and now raising a young son with his wife, the stigmatized image of Islam globally is a genuine concern close to their heart. The painstakingly crafted paper cut-outs, which he insists must remain cut by hand to achieve accuracy that even laser technology cannot attain, portray the fragility of beauty and the darkness of fear.



Portrait of Iwan Effendi. Image courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Gallery.



Iwan Effendi, *The Visitor #20*, 2019, rattan, wood, plywood, cloth, papier-mâché, aluminium, 100 x 30 x 20 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Gallery.

Iwan Effendi

[[@daydreaming_face](#)]

Based in Yogyakarta—otherwise known as Jogja—Effendi is both a visual artist and co-founder and co-artistic director of award-winning Papermoon Puppet Theatre, which he founded with his wife and partner Ria Tri Sulistyani in 2006. I first encountered Papermoon Puppet Theatre in 2013 in Jogja through Finding Lunang, a large-scale puppet carousel installation, which was commissioned that year for annual visual arts festival ARTJOG. The carousel was accompanied by the live performance *Laki Laki Laut (Men of the Sea)*, recalling 14th and 15th century mythical tales of adventure seekers on their quest to find Nusantara, now modern-day Indonesia. I was enamoured by this contemporary reinvention of wayang puppetry—one of Java’s oldest traditional art forms that is still much loved.

When I met Effendi again in 2019, he welcomed me with the most infectious smile. It was a reunion long overdue. Effendi told me excitedly that in the last few years, since the birth of their son, he has been able to devote more time to his own practice.

Just a few months prior, a solo exhibition of new works was mounted by Mizuma Gallery in their Singapore space, featuring works on paper as well as puppets like those used in their theatre productions. At the heart of the exhibition was the expression of Effendi’s “day dreaming face,” which he explains came about when he was creating the puppets for Papermoon and found that this expression was the most expressive and versatile. It was an adaptable expression—it could be blank, tearful, smiling, or evening cheeky and secretive. The glassy eyes that stare back at you have soul and give the puppets life.

As we chatted over coffee and Nutella donuts about all the forthcoming explorations he is keen to do—including further study on traditional Javanese puppet-making methods—Effendi’s passion for designing Papermoon’s puppets is abundantly clear. His art practice is, without a doubt, inextricably intertwined with his love for Papermoon.



Portrait of Indieguerillas. Image courtesy of the artist.



Indieguerillas, Warung Murakabi, 2019, variable dimensions, social intervention, social-hacktivism, installation. Image courtesy of the artist and ARTJOG.

Indieguerillas [@indieguerillas]

The colourful and playful iconography of Jogja-based Indieguerillas is unmistakable. The husband-and-wife team, Miko Bawano and Santi Ariestyowanti met during art school and have been inseparable since starting their own graphic design company in 1999. Their work is now synonymous across visual arts as much as design. Their unique visual vocabulary draws upon the pair's interests in pop culture, rock and roll music and comic books while staying close to their roots by contemporizing Javanese culture and motifs.

Recently however, the duo has turned their attention towards an exciting new project that seeks to bring the community together while working towards local sustainability efforts. The "Warung Murakabi" project, which was shown as part of last year's ARTJOG at the Jogja National Museum, resembles a road-side cart shop like those commonly found in Indonesia. Selling groceries and produce from wine, coffee, rice and fresh fruit juice to beauty products and more, some 90 per cent of the products are sourced and made in their neighbourhoods. All packaging is designed by Indieguerillas themselves and during the exhibition period, vendors were invited to be present to share the stories behind their products with visitors. According to the artists, it was immensely popular and they are now looking for a permanent site to start a small shop as an ongoing initiative. "We want to make a connection between the consumer and the producer of the goods," said Indieguerillas.

The artists mentioned here, and the brevity in which I have spoken about them, barely scratch the surface of their artistic practices. What continues to excite me is the new encounters that await.