Art from behind prison confines

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A STINT in prison changes a person, for better or worse. For Indonesian artist Angki Purbandono, 42, it marked a new direction in his art-making, and the art that resulted is a visually stunning installation with poignant stories behind the works.

The Swimmers by Angki and his collaborators in the Prison Art Programme (PAP) are not just crafty objects put together to make one feel good that prisoners are being gainfully occupied and creatively stimulated, but tells stories of life in prison as it is.

"It's about how we lived and survived being far away from loved ones. In my experience with my fellow inmates and listening to their stories, I think of the inmates as swimmers who are looking for shore so they can carry on with their lives," said the artist in an e-mail interview from Jogjakarta, about the title of the show.

Angki was incarcerated in 2012 for possession of marijuana. He finished his one-year term last December. The long story can be read in *The Swimmers*' catalogue, but the short of it is that after a few weeks in jail, he felt a desire to work and approached Yhoga Aditya Ruswanto, the head of the narcotics section who turned out to be a compassionate and supportive conspirator – one of the good guys – who encouraged Angki's desire. He wanted to give the penitentiary a positive image, and not that everything is bad as painted by the media, he recounted in the catalogue.

The artist was allowed to bring in a scanner and a computer, and under close supervision, started on his art-making as Indonesia's premier artist specialising in scanography – by producing digital images with an ordinary flat-bed image scanner.

Arresting piece: *'Absolut Dry'; digital images of objects collected in prison are made using a flat-bed image scanner*

With the scanner, images were made of objects that Angki collected while imprisoned. These included torn strips from sachets of soap, shampoo, and snacks; rubber bands scattered on the floor; ping pong balls with markings and signatures; and half-eaten goldfish, the remains of some inmates' pets. Angki's cellmates first complained about the rubbish that he was bringing into his cell, but as his work (the scanning) took shape, he found wrecked balls placed besides his bed, collected by the same cellmates.

Even under the surveillance, Angki managed to smuggle in kitchen knives to be scanned (as a tribute to those who worked there), and rice rations also became a work of art – as "3D object work with organic materials".

The scanned digital images are mostly mounted in light boxes in the installation at Mizuma Gallery – creating a colourful space with its monumentalised ordinary objects drawing you into the stories behind.

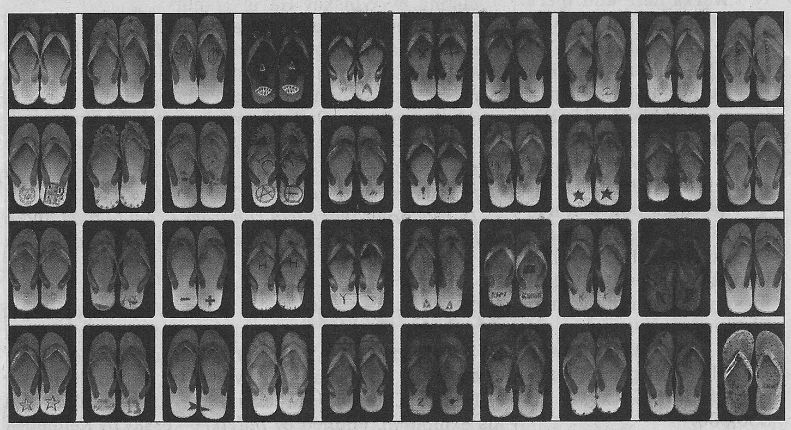
As an artist, Angki did not push any production boundaries, but used his previous methods, he said. "But art as I knew it was appropriate for the context, so 'prison art' was born as new boundaries to define what is prison art all about," he shared.

"I took a new ideological approach, while working with my fellow convicts who had art in them even though they weren't artists," he added, highlighting *The Sandals United* as an example because it is a collective work.

Each inmate had to mark their sandals to signify ownership, and there is a natural sense of creativity or artistry in them, he said, and they represent a portrait of the prison inmates.

Angki and a few of his friends made there are now released from jail, but they intend to continue the programme that they started, with an annual exhibition, merchandising and workshops.

'The Swimmers' will be on show at Mizuma Gallery, 22 Lock Road #01-34, Gillman Barracks, until March 23. Tel: 6570-2505



Group effort: *'The Sandals United' is a collective work where each inmate had to mark their sandals to signify ownership*