



## Conversing with the Past - The Social Realism of Agan Harahap

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Category: Review

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the history of art has been a series of reactions one after the other against the precedent set before—sometimes even before the precedent has had time to “set”. Given the speed at which new art manifestos and styles developed in the last hundred years, it is no surprise that “Modern Art History” is often characterised in terms of “Movements”.

What is taken for granted, however, is the fact that this History is often Eurocentric. Did Southeast Asian art history have a “20th Century Modernism” in the way that European art history did? More importantly, should we even look at 20th Century Modernism in this part of the world in terms of a linear progression of Movements?

After seeing Agan Harahap’s solo exhibition at Mizuma Gallery, entitled *The Social Realism of Agan Harahap*, the most probable answer is... it’s complicated. Central to this exhibition is Harahap’s point-blank reference to seminal paintings from Indonesian Masters of the 20th century. On one hand, for his art to resonate, it is necessary to address the history of Indonesian art in terms of Movements. But on the other hand, Harahap’s work succeeds in demonstrating the development of art as anything but linear—especially in a country as diverse as Indonesia.



Agan Harahap, *Mentjari Kutu Rambut*, 2017, C-print on photo paper, diasec, 100 x 150 cm, edition 1/3 + 1AP / Agan Harahap, courtesy of Mizuma Gallery



Each artwork is accompanied with an image and label of the particular work the artist is responding to. In picture: Kerokan. Image courtesy of Mizuma Gallery.

Take, for example, the oxymoronic nature of the exhibition's title. It's not just Social Realism, but it's *The Social Realism of Agan Harahap*. The title claims both the work of a collective "Movement" spanning two decades from 1940-1960, and the work of an individual artist practicing decades after 1960. But in claiming both, it is also claiming neither. Unlike his forefathers, Harahap is not reacting against the past and developing a manifesto for a Movement of today. Rather, he is incorporating the past, presenting the history of 20th Century Indonesian art for the multiplicity it inherently encompasses.

"In my vision, if societies outside the West could chart their modernism [...] we would possibly find a pluralistic modernism, based on Nations, societies, or even groups of people. I have identified this predicted condition as being in a space defined as multimodernism."

- Supangkat, Jim. *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*. Jakarta: The Indonesian Fine Arts Foundation, 1997. Print.

Social Realism as a Movement in Indonesia began just around the time of its independence from the Netherlands, in 1945, when artists such as S. Sudjojono, Hendra Gunawan, and Affandi established organisations for young painters. Their intent, broadly speaking, was to support the independence cause and use art as a means to represent the lives of "real" people. However, as it happens in a newly independent country, the project of art became closely tied with the project of Nation. These artist organisations were supported by factions of the government at the time in the form of funding and art-making facilities. As such, by the 1950s, art made under the impulse of Social Realism started to appear more and more Communist. In 1966, Suharto's New Order regime which was infamous for its purging of anything remotely Communist, came to power. With this, Social Realism as it was defined and practiced by artists from the 1940s to the 1960s came to an obvious end.



On left: Agan Harahap, *Maka Lahirlah Angkatan '66 (The Birth of Generation '66)*, 2017, C-print on photo paper, diasec, 100 x 76 cm, edition 1/3 + 1AP/ Agan Harahap, courtesy of Mizuma Gallery. On right: S. Sudjojono, *Maka Lahirlah Angkatan '66 (The Birth of Generation '66)*, 1966, oil on canvas, 98.5 x 84 cm. Image courtesy of IVAA.

More than just referencing works from this movement, Harahap re-contextualises paintings of the past to represent his understanding of Indonesia's social conditions today. Harahap's *Maka Lahirlah Angkatan '66, (The Birth of Generation '66)* is a reworking of Sudjojono's painting from 1966 of the same name. Sudjojono's painting of a young man holding a can of paint and a paintbrush was a celebration of the hope held in Suharto's New Order Regime. It represents the feelings of an era seeking a change in their governance. Harahap's version shows a young man holding a flag and flowers, perhaps today's symbols of youth activism, blinded by a pair of hands clad in formal batik sleeves—an indication suggesting that the blinding hands belong to an upper class bureaucrat or politician.

Moreover, the young man is covered with references to “American” media, such as the Steve Aoki and Diplo logo on his shirt, his Nike shoes, and the alien emoji on his cap. Here, not only do we see a clash of classes, Harahap also nods to the seepage of American mass media in the lives of young Indonesians. Perhaps the criticism here is that being modern today is defined by the degree to which one consumes Western commodities, regardless of where they live or belong. In his repurposing of a painting from 1966, Harahap shows the importance for an artist to demonstrate an understanding of their place in their historical context if their art is to have any resonance with society today.



Agan Harahap, *Kuda dan Pemandangan*, 2017, C-print on photo paper, diasec, 100 x 76 cm, edition 1/3 + 1AP/ Agan Harahap, courtesy of Mizuma Gallery.

Although his focus is primarily on paintings from 1940-1960, Harahap also incorporates works by much older Indonesian masters such as Raden Saleh—with whom the timeline of Modern Art in Indonesia “begins”. Whereas Social Realism was a reaction against elitism and prior artists’ ties to colonial powers, Harahap’s Social Realism brings artists from the beginning of the 20th century until the 1960s to a level playing field. In this sense, the exhibition does not delineate one Movement from another. Instead, it shows all art from the 20th century as a representation of what that artist believed was their social reality at that time.

Harahap’s artwork creates a visual dialogue between past and present. Each piece brings forth a conversation between Harahap and the traditions carried by artists that came before him. Where the artists of the past used oil on canvas, Harahap uses the most representative medium of our times—photography and digital manipulation. He takes advantage of the affordances offered by our postmodern environment of art production—the environment of the internet and social media—to demonstrate the multiple layers and facets embedded within the history of 20th century Indonesian art.



Exhibition view of *The Social Realism of Agan Harahap*, image courtesy of Mizuma Gallery.

Coming back to the title of the exhibition, it seems to me that it is the artist's intention to complicate the way we approach Art History. Art can be many things at once, and the attempt to put its history into a narrative of Movements may take away from seeing all of the complex socio-political conditions embedded within. Perhaps, we should see art in terms of individual artists and their representations of how they see their world at a particular moment in time. In this way, as much as art will continue to change, it will also remain the same.

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*The Social Realism of Agan Harahap* is showing at Mizuma Gallery until 21 May 2017. Admission is free. [Click here for more information.](#)

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