

“Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now” is a joint exhibition held simultaneously at two museums, The National Art Center Tokyo and the Mori Art Museum, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations). This will become the largest Southeast Asian contemporary art exhibition ever realized in Japan.

In conjunction with this event and motivated by the love affair he has with contemporary Southeast Asian art, Mr. Mizuma from Mizuma Art Gallery asked me to curate a group show of Southeast Asian artists.

Southeast Asia Now

To emphasize the meaning of contemporary as “belonging to or occurring in the present”, please allow me to share with you some of the trending topics of daily conversation that occur in the present lives of Southeast Asian people.

The hottest one right now in Indonesia is about ‘Ahok’, the non-Muslim governor of Jakarta who is of Chinese descent. Ahok was fully committed and dedicated to improving the welfare of the people, and was the biggest enemy of corruption in the country. For many Indonesians, he was the symbol of hope for a new and improved Indonesia, but he was also hated by some Muslim fundamentalist groups and the majority of corrupt government officials. Following the last Jakarta gubernatorial election, the issue of his religion was brought up to impose upon Ahok’s unshakable political position. He was accused of blasphemy, based on an edited version of one of his speeches that was shown on Youtube. This issue has converted the nation’s political agenda into a heated discord of religions and races. Social media timelines were flooded with scorn and accusations from both sides, pros and cons, and much inappropriate language was thrown in as well. Wherever I went - in the office, in the taxi, in restaurants, watching TV, even around the dining table of my own home - I couldn’t

escape from conversations about this issue.

And now the topic continues into “season two”, as Ahok has been found guilty of blasphemy and was sentenced to two years’ jail time, even though the prosecutor’s demand was for one year’s jail time with a two-year probation period for charges of hate speech in public. Ahok’s proponents saw this verdict as an injustice mixed with dirty politics, while his opponents saw it as an enforcement of justice and the triumph of Muslim sovereignty in Indonesia.

The case of Ahok was just one example from the many demotivating and sad trending daily conversation topics on the Internet as well as in real life. There was also the case of mass killings and acts of terror toward the minority Islamic ethnic Rohingya citizens by the Myanmar military. Another case was the Philippine President’s war against terrorism and criminals by killing thousands of people in the country. Before that, there was the Jakarta Bombing incident. Not to mention that we are also constantly exposed in detail to horrific news from Europe and the US regarding acts of terrorism; the sad stories of Syrian refugees in France, Germany, and Turkey; school shootings in America; and the election of the most controversial president in the US who himself seems to support racism. I guess this devastating reality of life is not only something occurring in Southeast Asia, but is something we now share in common, globally.

Imagine

The sad realities of life and the decay of our contemporary society remind me of John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’, which I think is one of the most inspiring songs ever written in the history of pop culture. Several poems from Yoko Ono’s 1964 book ‘Grapefruit’ inspired John Lennon to write the lyrics of this song. Its words encouraged listeners to imagine a world at peace, without such barriers as national borders or divisions of religion and nationality, and to consider that humanity’s focus should be on living a life unattached to material possessions. It may sound like wishful thinking,

but more than ever I think this song is a truly relevant reminder of humanity’s misguided actions with which we are all confronted right now. At the very least, the song helps me to imagine that all of this madness will soon be gone and that life will be restored to order.

This song also reminds me that imagination is one of God’s greatest gifts to mankind. Almost all the great things in life begin with someone’s imagination; in fact imagination is what has led human beings to discover the marvelous inventions of our lives. Imagination gives us the ability to think beyond the boundaries of logical comprehension, and allows us to develop ideas free from the restriction of our current realities.

I believe that creative professionals, including artists from any discipline, are at the forefront of the imagination business. Their main responsibility is to imagine the many things that might inspire and influence people in terms of how they look at life, or even to shape a better future of humanity.

Please allow me to quote the opinion of a well-known contemporary artist, Olafur Eliasson:

“I believe that one of the major responsibilities of artists – and the idea that artists have responsibilities may come as a surprise to some – is to help people not only to get to know and understand something with their minds, but also to feel it emotionally and physically. By doing this, art can mitigate the numbing effect created by the glut of information we are faced with today and motivate people to turn thinking into doing.” <sup>1</sup>

We invited six prominent Southeast Asian artists - Agan Harahap, Angki Purbandono, Heri Dono, and indieguerillas from Indonesia; Robert Zhao Renhui from Singapore; and Mark Justiniani from the Philippines - to voice their imaginative visions of humanity, that we hope might motivate people to turn their own thoughts into actions.



Agan Harahap *When I Have to Fight Myself #3* 2016-17  
Type C-print 71.5 x 100 cm ©Agan Harahap

Agan Harahap

Born in Jakarta, Indonesia, 1980.  
Graduated with a BA in Graphic Design from STDI (Design and Art College), Bandung, Indonesia in 2005.  
Lives and works in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Agan Harahap is known for using Photoshop-edited photographs to create visual hoaxes. With the help of technology, he creates false realities out of his imagination which speak to some of the most pressing issues in society. His works are distributed to the public through the largest “galleries” in the world: those of social media, so his works are very closely related to the notion of mass audience. One of his recent works depicted Ahok holding hands with Habib Rizieq (the radical Islamic leader who organized the accusation of blasphemy against Ahok) (*Pictured*). We know that the situation would be rather impossible, but because it is presented in such a realistic manner and in the form of photography, which has been accepted by the public as the device that mirrors reality, the work makes us hope that it might have possibly have happened.

In this exhibition, Agan presents a series of photographs of a boxing match between Rocky Balboa vs Rocky Marciano, entitled “When I Have to Fight Myself”. This work is Agan’s imagining his own battle against himself in conquering his own anger, greed, and malice, and serves as a reminder that the biggest enemy of humanity may be humans themselves.



Agan Harahap  
*Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) with Muhammad Rizieq Shihab / Habib*  
Digitally-altered Instagram post, posted on 27th April 2017.  
©Agan Harahap

Mark Justiniani

Born in Bacolod, Philippines, 1966.  
Graduated with a degree in Art Education from the College of Fine Arts, University of the Philippines.  
Lives and works in Manila, Philippines.

Mark Justiniani is well known for his unique “Infinity” installation series, in which he creates an infinite depth of space by employing mirror reflections. In this exhibition, Mark presents his latest work “Debris”, in which he created reflections of small particles in a random formation that may look like the aftermath of an impact that happened in an infinite space, as if a resemblance of the universe. The laws of nature will heal the aftermath of this chaotic situation, but we must not forget our own roles in this universe, with the agency to be able to restore our lives.

Below is Mark’s own writing about his work “Debris” which I think is very poetic, so I would like to quote from it in concluding this essay.



Mark Justiniani  
*Debris*  
2017  
Mixed media (wood, aluminium, glass, electric device)  
165 x 43.2 x 59 cm  
©Mark Justiniani

Aftermath of collisions  
bodies forged by impact  
Floating pieces of meteor  
Stuff of heavens wandering  
In density of space  
Whirlpools of ember  
Glowing and melding.  
Time cools them down  
Slowly and patiently.

And us, specks in a symphony.  
Heir to nature's laws and methods.  
We've carried a question;  
Since we became conscious  
about being conscious.  
Who are we? Where do we come from?

Countless answers  
Many of them are forgotten.  
The question of origins  
is a never-ending question.  
It is futile to wage wars over it.

Life, dead stars' afterglow  
Emerges for a moment.  
A blink of an eye  
of an ever chaotic  
Ever-creative  
Universe.

Traces of the Future: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia

Heri Dono | Agan Harahap | indieguerillas  
Mark Justiniani | Angki Purbandono | Robert Zhao Renhui

2017. 6.21 - 7.15



Robert Zhao Renhui *Kings* 2009-17  
Type C-print on photo paper, diasec 150 x 100 cm (part of set) ©Robert Zhao Renhui



Angki Purbandono

Born in Cepiring, Indonesia, 1971.  
Graduated from the Modern School of Design, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 1994, and the Indonesia Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 1999.  
Lives and works in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.



Angki Purbandono Sorry No Pictures Today (3) 2017 type C-print on photo paper, lightbox 20 x 100 cm ©Angki Purbandono

Angki Purbandono is one of the pioneers of Indonesian contemporary photography. The main body of his work revolves around social interactions between photography and human life, and the role of photography in our everyday lives. He is well known for his “scanography” works, in which he replaces the role of the camera with a scanner, as a statement of the continuing advancement of human

civilization. In this exhibition Angki presents a series of photographs entitled “Sorry No Pictures Today”, in which he scanned the backs of old photographs he found in local flea markets. There are no pictures presented; instead, there are only texts and notes about the photographed events. Photographs do not exist only as a container of a message or a depiction of realities that took place. More importantly, there are

feelings and emotions embedded in the picture that might affect our state of mind and emotion, and moreover, might motivate us to action. Imagine if photography never existed: we would never be able to record moments in our lives instantly; we would not be able to share those moments with others; and all those moments would fade away with time.

Heri Dono

Born in Jakarta, Indonesia, 1960.  
Graduated from the Indonesia Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 1980. Later studied wayang kulit in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 1987.  
Participated in the International Artists Exchange Program of the Christophe Merian Stiftung Foundation in Basel, Switzerland, in 1990.  
Lives and works in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.



Heri Dono The Culture of Knives that Transform into Flowers 2017 Acrylic on canvas 150 x 200 cm ©Heri Dono

Heri Dono’s socio-political artworks executed in a wide variety of media have caused him to be one of the most internationally recognized Southeast Asian artists working today.  
In this exhibition he presents two of his latest paintings, of which one, “The Culture of Knives that Transform into Flowers”, tells us the story of human civilization’s centuries of support for wars and acts of violence. In this work the figure of a woman and her beloved dog symbolize Heri Dono’s imaginative vision of the Ratu Adil (first mentioned in *Pralembang Joyoboyo*, the set of prophecies ascribed to King Joyoboyo who ruled the kingdom of Kediri from 1135-1179). Ratu Adil was a figure believed to have been able to bring about universal peace, or in the case of this painting, to turn knives into flowers.



Heri Dono The Dance of the Angels within the Cosmic Balance 2017 Acrylic on canvas 150 x 200 cm ©Heri Dono

Another Heri Dono painting presented in this exhibition is “The Dance of the Angels within the Cosmic Balance”. This work was inspired by the balance between the macrocosm, symbolized by Pegasus, and the microcosm, symbolized by the figure of a child playing with the sun and the moon within Pegasus’s chest. Nymphs are dancing within the radiance of life that shines through an open window in Pegasus’ chest. On Pegasus’ back is a woman waving her scarf, and in front of her is an evil bird that always tries to disrupt the balance of the universe. Through another window in Pegasus’s body, we see a couple of lovers whose perpetual love serves to evoke the fight against malice in our lives. This is Heri Dono’s imagination of how we, humans, as part of one of the microcosmic elements of the universe, should exert the control to create and maintain a positive balance in the universe.

indieguerillas

**Miki Bawono**  
Born in Kudus, Central Java, Indonesia, in 1975.  
Graduated from Department of Interior Design, Visual Art Faculty, Indonesia Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

**Santi Ariestyowanti**  
Born in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, in 1977.  
Graduated from Department of Visual Communication Design, Visual Art Faculty, Indonesia Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

The artists live and work in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

indieguerillas, or the husband-and-wife artists’ duo of Miko and Santi, have gained international acclaim for works that often speak to the excessively consumerist behavior and crisis of local identity in Indonesian contemporary society. In this exhibition, their work “Living Immensely” depicts the heads of *punakawan* (the mighty servants of the gods and goddesses in traditional Javanese *wayang* puppetry stories), and two pairs of hands emerging from seven boxes adorned with logos of global brands. Inspired by Plato’s Allegory of the Cave <sup>2</sup>, in this work, indieguerillas suggest that life is too precious to be lived only in one box. We should live to embrace diversity, with nature as our teacher. There are no two things exactly identical within nature, since although it remains faithful to its laws, nature always allows spaces for difference and change. There are no flowers that are identical, nor flows of water. In nature, nothing is completely identical and nothing remains the same for all time. As our teeth grow strong before they turn yellow and finally fall out, so should our interpretation of the values in life be constantly growing and changing in line with the growth of the nature of our thoughts, though we must always stay faithful to our own law of nature: namely, compassion.  
In executing this work, indiguerillas collaborated with an artisan from Kotagede, the center for silver and metalwork craftsmanship in Yogyakarta, to try to revive the region’s traditional technique of hammered metal that is almost extinct.



<sup>2</sup> An allegory presented by Plato in his work *Republic* (c. 380 BC), intended to compare the effect of education upon human nature.  
In this allegory, Plato describes a group of people who have lived chained to a wall all of their lives. There is a fire behind them, and a blank wall in front of them - but they see the shadows of objects passing in front of the fire, and they mistakenly believe that these shadows are the entirety of reality. The allegory suggests that in order to experience the full entirety of the world, we must liberate ourselves from narrow ways of perceiving it.

Robert Zhao Renhui

Born in Singapore, 1983.  
Graduated with a BA in Photography from Camberwell College of the Arts, University of the Arts, London, UK, in 2008, and an MA (with Distinction) in Photography from London College of Communication, London, UK, in 2010.  
Lives and works in Singapore.

Robert Zhao Renhui is an artist at the forefront of Singapore’s contemporary art scene. His works are mainly photography, but he often adopts a multi-disciplinary approach by presenting images together with documents and objects. All of his works belong to the larger narrative of the “Institute of Critical Zoologists” <sup>3</sup>, a continuous study of the relationships between animals and humans in the context of cultural, political, economic and social values. He seeks to develop a Critical Zoological gaze that pursues creative, interdisciplinary research, embracing perspectives such as those of aesthetics, which are typically ignored by conventional animal studies; and to advance unconventional, even radical, means of understanding human and animal relations. The Institute also discourages anthropomorphism in the appreciation and understanding of zoology.  
In this exhibition, Robert presents a photographic work accompanied by documents, which comprise a single artwork is entitled “Kings”. This work is the result of months of camping in Japan’s Tottori sand dunes to find a particular species of white cockroach. These rare white cockroaches were extremely hard to discover as they tunnel deep into the desert floor. With the help of a team of scientists to develop a method to detect them, he ultimately captured a single specimen. Robert has always felt that cockroaches are one of the most misunderstood animals on this planet. Is there a way that we can think about cockroaches differently? Much of our relationship with animals is based on aesthetics. We love pandas and tigers, but not spiders or insects. If cockroaches were to simply look different, would we start to perceive them a little differently?

<sup>3</sup> A fictional Institute name of Robert’ s invention, encompassing many of his artistic projects which seek to explore mankind’ s zoological practices, and to question the relationship between mankind and animals.  
Link: <http://www.criticalzoologists.org/main.html>