

ELITISM FOR ALL ART RE PUBLIK

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THE OF DONKEY

FEAT.
HERI DONO / ENTANG WIHARSO
HANDI WIRMAN SAPUTRA
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IRWAN AHMETT & TITA SALINA
JATI WANGI ART FACTORY / JOMPET
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**THIS ISSUE'S
COVER STAR,
THE ACCLAIMED**

HERI

**BY
CARLA
BIANPOEN**

NOVO

**TALKS ABOUT HIS
STAGGERINGLY MONUMENTAL
CREATION
FOR THE
INDONESIAN
PAVILION AT THE 56TH
VENICE BIENNALE**







Previous page: Portrait of Heri Dono.
Photo by Fendi Siregar.

Facing page and above: Installation
view of the Indonesia Pavilion,
Voyage, Venice Biennale 2015.

For over thirty years, Heri Dono (b. 1960) has enticed the world with images from a wildly imaginative amalgam of Javanese-Hindu wayang and pop culture morphed with memories of myth, legend and pre-historic wildlife. At once critical and futuristic, comical and tragic, playful and ominous, his works explore human behaviour as well as social and political conditions based on the concept of the mandala and cartoons – where boundaries between subject and object are non-existent. In May, at the 56th Venice Biennale, he showcased his latest and perhaps greatest work, *Voyage – Trokomod*, to critical acclaim.

A major part of Dono's oeuvre started with a series on angels, which for him, became an early metaphor for freedom. "Angels are free to fly wherever they want," he would say. Stories about angels made him want to fly himself, and together with his unbound imagination and fascination of Flash Gordon comics – who reached the moon ahead of Neil Armstrong – freed him from conventional boundaries in creating art. The fleet of wayang golek angels in one of his first works, *Flying Angels*, served as Dono's medium for critical commentary that reflected the ups and downs of freedom of speech and the socio-political situation in his native Indonesia.

Early in his career, Dono proclaimed that art should be like the world of cartoons where not only humans, but also animals and objects, have life and feelings. He asserted that although they show violence, they never hurt. He discovered a similar spirit in the concept of the mandala – the geometric designs representing the universe that are used in Buddhist and Hindu meditation. Dono was convinced there should be no hierarchies. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he distanced himself from modern Western modes of expression, embracing his cultural roots such as the wayang shadow play, while drawing inspiration from myths, legends and the changing spirit of culture.

As such, learning from the revolutionary Javanese-Hindu wayang master Sukasman, his distortion of man and animal figures resulted in the strange and frightful monsters that filled his canvases as he observed human life and nature around him. However, despite their horrifying looks, they have an element of humour that brings a smile to their viewers.

Most of Dono's oeuvre are critical commentaries. In them, he sees himself as Semar, the demi-god of wayang stories, a clown who uses humour to challenge the gods. "In Indonesia, I am Semar, which means clown," he proclaims. Indeed, like Semar, his visual commentaries against the repressive and violent authority are layered with hilarious wit, dark humour and satire. As an artist, he sees it as his duty to highlight certain truths about this world to the people.

"In my former life, I was dinosaur – that's where my name came from," he says in jest. Not surprisingly, Dono's images mimicking these terrifying giant lizards with horns, crests, spikes or frills are metaphors for his criticism of abhorrent political issues and situations.

Since the September 11 attack, Heri Dono has included the Trojan horse to his visual critique lexicon. For the 50th Venice Biennale's 'Zone of Urgency', he created a large bovine puppet – the Trojan cow – and a painting inspired by the film *Mad Max*. A commentary on the American invasion in Iraq, the painting depicted George W. Bush (holding a jerry can) and Tony Blair as toy soldiers, and a head belonging to Saddam Hussein. The cow, Dono says, represented the people whose voices are never heard.

Although people are central to his works, they are often shrouded in many layers of understanding. His iconic work is the 'Wayang Legenda', which he first unveiled in 1988. Wayang is typically considered as exclusively Javanese-Hindu, but Dono severs it from its origins by highlighting the culture of the locale where it would be performed, thus making it more accessible to local audiences. In the 'Wayang Legenda' for North Sumatra, for instance, he adapted a Batak folktale as narrative

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Above, from left to right: *Ceremony of Superheroes*, 2012; *Garuda Extraterrestrial*, 2007; *Mati Ketawa ala USA*, 2011; *Merdeka atau Belum*, 2011. All works, Heri Dono. Images courtesy Rossi & Rossi.

and puppets that looked nothing like the Javanese wayang puppets.

Dono's extensive body of works spanning three decades, along with his evolutionary thoughts, have culminated in the 'Voyage' and a giant Trokomod – a Trojan horse-Komodo dragon hybrid – which was presented at the Indonesian Pavilion at this year's Biennale.

A TROKOMOD'S VOYAGE

The concept behind Voyage: Trokomod is one of exploration – of Indonesia and Dono's artistry – in the context of the world map. For too long Indonesia has been a blank spot on the map of nations, Dono says; now is the time to come forward.

The Venice Biennale presented Dono with a unique platform to air his world view. Working with his belief in the relevance of cartoons and the mandala, he built a giant Trojan horse fused with aspects of the Indonesian Komodo dragon both in physical appearance and conceptual content. Trokomod, an amphibious hybrid animal that towers at 7.5 by 3 by 3.5 metres, recalls the Trojan horse, which breached the line of defence as a symbolic peace offering but one that was filled with an invading troop. In Dono's work, the Trokomod is a tool for infiltrating organisations and institutions, and crossing boundaries, under the guise of art.

"I started using the Trojan horse in 2001, after the WTC attack, which many people thought was an attack from inside the country," Dono explains. For him, the Trojan horse is like "the Western infiltration in which violence and repressive policies are implied". There is a notion of

a counter-attack against traditional Western notions of the East, such as 'exotic', and 'mere ethnographic'. Heri declares that he tends to be more aligned with the peaceful infiltration that Admiral Zheng Ho launched in Southeast Asia – as it is more in tune with his belief in non-hierarchy and non-violence.

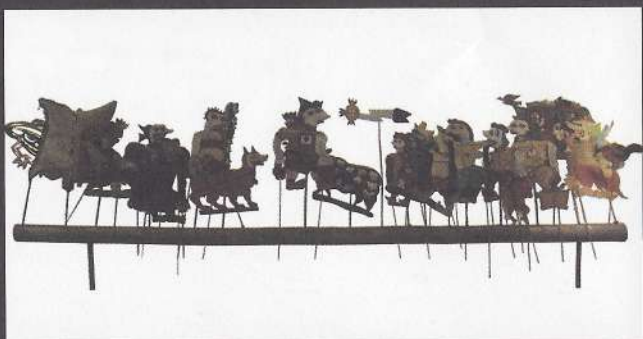
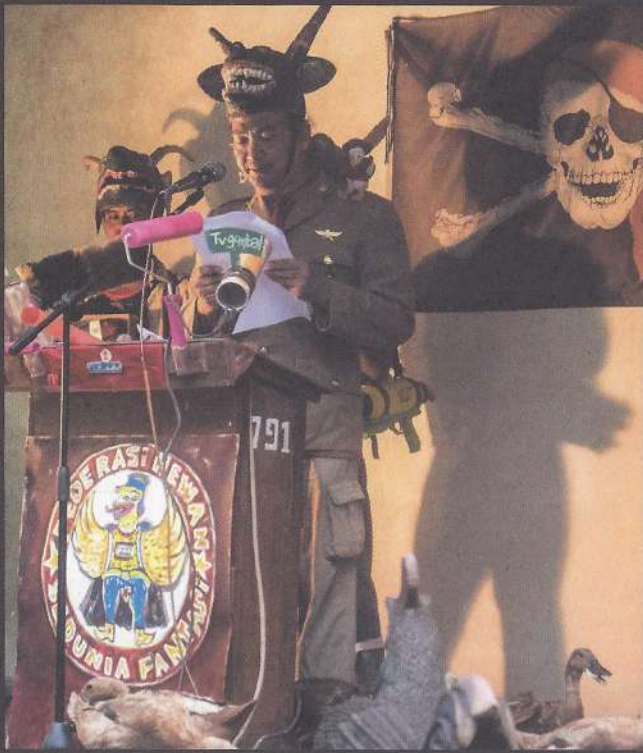
Trokomod looks like an ancient animal that has been resurrected from the past. Although it is equipped with wheels, its body is like the hull of a ship that allows it to navigate the waters to different continents – a weird, fantastic creature conceived with futuristic imagery.

The creature carries with it its ballast of the past shown represented by artefacts and cultural images of the West as perceived by Asians, including references to Charlie Hebdo, issues of gender equality, free sex and human rights, as well as the swastika. At the same time Heri Dono wishes to highlight contemporary realities that are making a mark in Indonesia. Along with the Trokomod, Dono has also presented sketches of his vision of the World of the Future (the theme of this year's Venice Biennale).

The public can experience Vision: Trokomod by stepping into the body of the sculpture, which accommodates four to eight persons at a time, where they can look into one of nine telescopes and a central periscope, as well as a video screen on which significant contemporary images flash.

An installation of traditional vessels from the past – the Perahu Arwah or Spirit Boats – that have mutated over time accompanies the Trokomod. Recalling Indonesia's maritime identity, they are reminiscent





of angel with haloes, whose flapping wings suggest paddles that propel it forward.

Art Republik sits down with Heri Dono to find out more.

What is your philosophy for art creation?

I am aware that what is called art is bound to have an artificial context, but artificial, in my understanding, may differ from the usual meaning of the word. Here it has to do with Art for the common good. As an artist, I try to reveal what's going on in the world, my world and the one beyond it.

What's important for me is to inspire as an agent of change, to link my art to the universe, and to explore how it can be useful and inspiring to other people – not only for daily life, but beyond the limits of our own little world. I aspire to make people aware of the importance of cultural values, and I hope my work can be easily understood by the wider public.

You have joined many international biennales, and apparently you enjoy participating in them. What is it that attracts you to these international events?

Joining world-scale biennales opens up opportunities to explore and discourse the theories I have studied learned through explorations made by other participating artists. Experiencing biennales can trigger new ideas that consciously or unconsciously morph into a new vision for creating art that can be read and understood globally.

You have participated in the Venice Biennale in the past. How do you compare your current and previous participations?

In 2003, I was invited by then biennale director, Francesco Bonami, along with others. My work was part of the overall show titled 'Zone of Urgency', which was curated by Hou Hanru. It was an honour, especially as I was the only Indonesian contemporary artist invited to the grand exhibition. My work, *The Trojan Cow*, was a commentary on American politics during the term of President Bush.

My involvement in the current biennale is different. As my country's representative, my work, *Trokomod*, is the only piece in the Indonesian Pavilion, so it comes with greater responsibility. I am proud and honoured to have been selected. My work the Trojan Komodo, or 'Trokomod' for short, physically unites the Trojan horse with the Indonesian Komodo dragon, and conceptually elaborates on an idealist vision of a world without hierarchical order.

The work has gone through a long process but was completed in a relatively short period of less than six months. I'm fortunate to have the full support of the artistic director and producer Ibu Restu Imansari Kusumaningrum of Bumi Purnati, as well as the assistance of a full artistic and technical team.

You were recently in a residency programme at Singapore-Tyler Print Institute (STPI). What can we expect?

Actually, I've not completed my residency yet because of time constraints. In August, I will fulfil the remainder of my residency. During my brief stay in March new ideas came up which have been discussed with the experts at STPI. They included the possibility of incorporating other materials and kinetic morphing to works made with papier-mâché. For now, this is all I can reveal. **FR**

This page, from top to bottom: Heri Dono in performance parody, *No Man's Land*; *Fermentation of the Mind*, installation view, the Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle, Netherlands; *Wayang Legenda 88*, 2015. All works, Heri Dono.

Facing page: Installation view of the Indonesia Pavilion, *Voyage*, Venice Biennale 2015.