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ZAMAN EDAN: THE AGE OF CRAZINESS HERI DONO

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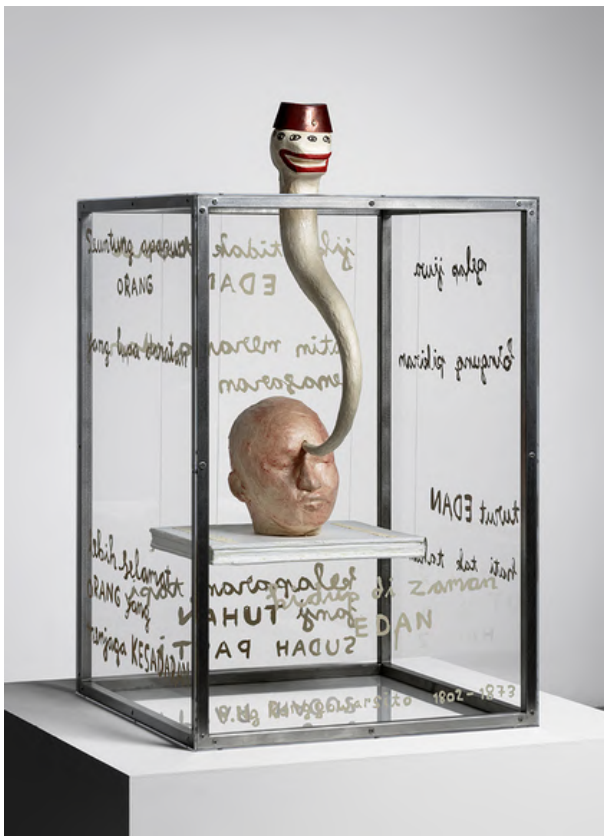


HERI DONO, *The Clown Who Lives in Macro Cosmos*, 2016, batik technique, acrylic on fabric, 137 × 119 cm. Courtesy the artist and STPI, Singapore.

Semar, the grotesque dwarf, capers among men and gods, confounding both good and evil. His absurdist antics (which include habitual farting) are legendary; yet he is a wise and powerful protector, bringing about balance in the midst of strife. Semar, along with a host of heroes and demons, appears in *wayang kulit* or traditional Javanese shadow-puppet theater. Together, they enact allegories of Indonesian history, morality and culture, colored by indigenous myths and classical Hindu epics. Semar inevitably restores chaos by forcing awareness, prompted by his vulgarities, gossip and barbed critiques of current events. Provocative, yet spiritually aware, the ribald Semar is the fantastic alter-ego of [Heri Dono](#), who is arguably Indonesia's most prominent contemporary artist.

Dono's idiosyncratic vision is rooted in the shadows of *wayang*, which informs his painting, sculpture, installation and performance art. At [Singapore Tyler Print Institute \(STPI\)](#), Dono is presenting 40 new works (all dated 2016) from his recent residency there, in an exhibition titled "[Zaman Edan: The Age of Craziness](#)," which is an extension of his ongoing critical forays into modernization, politics, violence and popular culture. Like *wayang*, Dono's sociopolitical commentary is couched in storytelling: his preposterous, symbol-laden works involve imagery that flows from traditional puppet-theater motifs (daggers, trees of life, demons) to cartoonish sci-fi (winged, helmeted "angels") to satirical pop art (weapons and paunchy, wheeled avatars). At STPI, the artist rebooted this eccentric language by experimenting with various print techniques for the first time, to produce a series of saccharin-colored, batik-based compositions and etchings on fabric, accompanied by several paper-pulp sculptures and installations.

Compared with Dono's usual solid colors and brawny kinetic assemblies, his print- and paper-works at STPI are, by virtue of the medium, more ethereal and intimate. Many of these are mounted dye-work "paintings," where Dono "drew" on canvas with gum arabic and then dyed and rinsed the material using a technique similar to traditional Javanese batik, generating washes of color in tints more profound than on-surface painting. By adding hand-painted detail over his paste-resist images, Dono's canvases become barely contained derangements. The following are the familiar pastiches that circulate throughout Dono's practice: delirious Semar as provocateur, along with tiny creatures who peer from within lascivious red lips; heart-chakra windows that open on demented, riotous scenes; flatulent, Semar-Batman-Superman heroes who brandish phallic pistols and flaming karaoke mics. In tangled works like *The Clown Who Lives in Macro Cosmos*, Dono's rhythmic swathes of color and constellations of symbols echo the more phantasmal efforts of Joan Miró.



HERI DONO. *Ronggowarsito Perspective*, 2016, papier mâché, cast paper, bees wax, copper plate, screen-print and collage, 97.5 × 57 × 57cm. Courtesy the artist and STPI, Singapore.



HERI DONO. *Papat Kiblat Lima Pancer*, 2016, collage of cast paper, acrylic paint, screen-print, copper plate, 80 × 72 × 72 cm. Courtesy the artist and STPI, Singapore.

In his works, beyond a focus on the personal (despite having come of age during Indonesia's political and military upheavals of the 1960s, which drive the intrinsic syntax of his work), Dono curates the cultural memory of Java itself, within a contemporary context. And, like Semar, Dono spices Indonesian myth with acerbic jabs at his country's history, past and present, via cultural and sociopolitical cues not easily read outside its borders—yet his vivid, recurring symbolism foists meaningful cadences upon the viewer to evoke a broader engagement. The installation *Ronggowarsito Perspective* is a sibilant head made of papier-mâché (garnished with a mocking serpent that sprouts from its forehead), tucked inside a Perspex cube painted with texty scribbles. The enigmatic work alludes, we are told, to a 19th-century Javanese poet and reputed prophet, whose writings rejected the hegemony of colonialism and predicted an “age of madness.” In an adjoining gallery, two paper-based “kinetic prints,” both titled *Papat Kiblat Lima Pancer*, depict four-legged sculptural beings, each “flown” by a single revolving pilot-head and recalling the Javanese belief of there being a multi-faceted consciousness within each individual. While Dono's referential titles and literary and philosophical imagery spark confusion and fascination, his repetitive iterations of symbolic angels (freedom), flames (*chi*) and guns and disembodied limbs (violence), for example, gradually shed explicit meaning and become more expressive. His weird, comic-ethno-pop hybrid creatures tend to morph into objects of power with attitude, including *Badman Who Wears the Batman Costume*, as well as flame-breathing winged dogs, and a voracious “self-portrait” embedded within *The Happiness of Dinosaurs DNA*. Unexpectedly, Dono's charming, irrational abandon begins to oddly make sense.

Dono also revives ancient notions of Javanese animism in a half-dozen inkjet and screen-prints on canvas, where he coaxes out spiritual portraits of various printing equipment observed in the STPI workshop. The artist overlays color images of staid mechanical apparatus with organic, graffiti-like scrawls of goofy aliens, airplanes and wheeled kings, all of which tweak an off-kilter sense of vivacious dimension. One of these curiosities, *The King of Dinosaur Holds the Fire* (2015), superimposes the figure of Dono/Dino over a metal grate. Multi-eyed with wheeled feet, and topped with an upended stool for a crown, it is a ridiculous image, yet the microphones it holds resemble the flame-like “tree of life” icon seen in *wayang* that links the mortal world to that of the spirits. Like Semar, Dono hints at clarity and meaning beyond his absurdist aesthetic. On the *wayang* stage, and in Javanese philosophy, there is no absolute truth; in an age of madness, “rightness” lies within the discourse between good and evil, between buffoon and shamanic guardian, among teasing *wayang* shadows.

Heri Dono's "*Zaman Edan: The Age of Crazyiness*" is on view at Singapore Tyler Print Institute until June 25, 2016.



HERI DONO, *The King of Dinosaur holds the Fire*, 2016, 138 × 94 × 3 cm. Courtesy the artist and STPI, Singapore.

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