

A3 EDITORIAL | Entang Wiharso

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A3 Editorial interviews acclaimed Indonesian artist Entang Wiharso about his professional career path that is strongly intertwined with his fascination in the human condition.

Viewing Indonesia as a nation in transition, Wiharso cites this notion of flux as a trigger, and also inspiration for his work. In the transfer from one medium to the next, and regular travel between America and Asia, this re-assessment of materials and roaming geographical perspective informs the artist's thought-provoking work. Describing his practice as "full of tension and awareness", Wiharso's visual language often engages in critical global issues, at once, enlivening curiosity and disturbance in the viewer. Articulating ideas in paint, sculpture, performance and video work, the artist talks to A3 about the power of recurring symbols and his interest in the language of different materials.



ENTANG WIHARSO AT BLACK GOAT STUDIOS, YOGYAKARTA, 2016

Can you discuss your evolution as an artist?

I have strong memories of growing up and living in Indonesia. The strongest memory is always of being in transition and moving. Indonesia is classified as a developing country and during my life, it has been in transition from an agricultural to an industrial nation. My parents also transitioned during that time from being farmers in rural Tegal to entrepreneurs, opening a food stall in Jakarta. This was not only a physical change, moving from one place to another, but it was also a mental paradigm shift. For college I moved to Yogyakarta and later moved to the US. Now I travel frequently while living between two countries. I believe this condition of living a life that is shifting supports the way I work. Each transition brings an entirely different feeling in my life and art.

Have you always worked in different art forms?

I love working with different materials and mediums because it gives me lots of opportunity. I studied painting in art school, but when I was a child, I created three-dimensional work first because my material came directly from nature. I didn't have paper until I went to elementary school. My mind was always working in ways that didn't fit with the system that I was being taught in. When I was in art school, painting, sculpture and printmaking were all separate departments. I was in the painting department but I always wanted to mix painting with sculpture or objects and I did a lot of experimenting even with painting itself. The ideas always felt urgent, so there was a rush to express in my early works. But the curriculum discouraged this approach. I felt like I was standing at the starting line, but couldn't cross it. I remember traveling on a bus, thinking about these issues and this idea came into my mind and it resulted in a work that combined drawing and painting on carved wood; a synthesis of painting and sculpture.

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From the beginning I liked to experiment. Each material gives me opportunities to express my ideas with a very specific purpose. Also, each material has its own language, which also allows me to make a strong, nuanced statement. I feel like my paintings come from my subconscious. I take a lot of information that I see around me and I process it on the canvas. There is freedom in painting and it is a very responsive process. Sculpture and installation rely on a technical, step-by-step process that slows things down. There is more opportunity for editing the visual concept. I always feel like I am moving around, going from place to place, so the way I work with a range of media is a reflection of this reality.



ENTANG WIHARSO, "FEAST TABLE – BEING GUEST" (2014), ALUMINUM, STEEL, GRAPHITE, RESIN, COLOR PIGMENT, THREAD, CAR PAINT, 180 CM X 400 CM X 170 CM

Is it an easy process for you to translate your ideas in different media?

I like to resolve or deal with problems when working and the challenge of working across media keeps me focused and passionate. This condition steers my practice as an artist. It is a reflection of my mindset and the way I live on this planet. I believe that there are no limits and the consequence of this outlook is that I deal with the unexpected and therefore do not rely on a set way of working. I try to create a state of being which is full of tension and awareness.



ENTANG WIHARSO, "BORDERLESS: FLOATING ISLAND" (2011), GRAPHITE, RESIN, STEEL, BRASS, PIGMENT, THREAD, 350 × 750 × 140 CM, EDITION 1 OF 2 + 2AP

You have commented that you are interested in exploring the human condition through figuration. Can you elaborate on this and perhaps provide examples of some key works?

Every day I deal with my interaction with people and also my interaction with global situations. I want to bring that knowledge and feeling, and also my own opinion and concerns into art. My art is a form of evidence. It is evidence of my experiences and thinking about the world. Part of the evidence I try to capture utilises imagery of the human figure.

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In my work I want to talk about the structure of society. For example when I did the large installation “Indonesia: No Time to Hide” for the Venice Biennale in 2013, I used distortion of the human figure to talk about questioning what is real and what is perception. When I distort portraits of former leaders, I change the orientation of the portrait. Also, people become more curious because there is something disturbing and attractive at the same time. There is an uncomfortable feeling that arises from looking at these portraits. Another example is the way I portray figures in my paintings. I always create figures that are naked to show the marks on the body and psychological impact of events. You can see the skin and through the skin to the blood vessels, muscles and bones. This is a way to show my deepest feeling through a visual code.



ENTANG WIHARSO, "CRUSH ME # 2" (2012), GRAPHITE, THREAD, PIGMENT, LIGHTBULBS, ELECTRICAL CABLE, STEEL, 340 × 650 × 90 CM

What other key themes do you hope to convey in your work?

The human condition is an endless story. It is like standing in front of a mountain and deciding to explore every rock. For a while I've been looking at issues of migration and geography as a way to understand the historical underpinning of our current situation. Much of my recent work has an autobiographical content, some of it obvious, while some of it more hidden. The work is about something coming to me or something already inside of me, like history, experience, family, geography, people, politics, culture and so on, and how to deal with that. Those factors run through all of us, they change us and define us.

Are there recurring symbols that you draw upon in your work?

I've been creating bodies of work over time that draw on a visual language and set of codes that carry specific meanings. One example of a recurring symbol in my work is that of the table, which you can see in my paintings, sculptures, performance and video work. I've spoken about the table many times, but what I continue to find most interesting and useful about it is that it is an extremely familiar object. It is present at so many important moments in human history and in individual lives. It's a site of negotiation, of coming together, of sharing. Its design over time reflects cultural norms, fashion and politics. So while it is simple and common, it is quite flexible and can act as a stage upon which I create action. Another recurring symbol, particularly in recent years, is the car which also functions as a platform or stage in my work.

How important is it for your work to include an Indonesian context?

I never think that I want to include an Indonesian context in my work. I do not need to perform my "Javanese-ness" or "Indonesian-ness" in my art because it exists inside me. I think the presence of an "Indonesian-ness" can be a form of resistance to the uniformity of global art. An Indonesian context is not a strategy to explore identity issues or to create a sense of "localness", or a negotiation with the market. It is a dissection of the issue of history and tradition through a new investigation, a new survey. Through my work I want to apply history and tradition in a new formation. Even when I travel far away from my home, or move around the planet for my work, people want to tie me to an Indonesian context. This is a heavy burden for me as an artist. I don't want to be put into a box or have people create borders around me. In my work, I resist the ways that tradition and history are normally perceived, explained and used to frame my identity and ideology.



ENTANG WIHARSO, "EXPANDED DREAM #2" (2011), BRASS, ALUMINIUM, RESIN, COLOUR PIGMENT, THREAD, 62 × 200 × 57 CM, EDITION OF 2

““I don't want to be put into a box or have people create borders around me.”

What are some of your proudest career moments to date?

There is no doubt that participating in the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013 was an important and historical platform. The interesting thing for me is that all these stages are important. When you get there it is a real achievement, but once you get there, you have to move on. I am always looking forward and thinking about how to engage and create a dialogue with the audience. I think today artists have to be free thinking and ready to work in a variety of ways and take risks.



ENTANG WIHARSO, "INDONESIA: NO TIME TO HIDE", INDONESIAN PAVILION, 55TH VENICE BIENNALE, 2013

What do you attribute the recent rise in interest in Southeast Asian contemporary art to on an international scale?

The platforms have changed. People recognize that the centres of production that they understood to exist 30 years ago are no longer isolated or dominant, either geographically or economically. And so they are finally curious to look beyond the familiar.

You founded Black Goat Studios based in Yogyakarta in 1993. Can you explain a bit about it and what you hope to achieve through this initiative?

Black Goat Studios is a mechanism and framework to accommodate my creative practice in both the US and Indonesia. The name came about through work I was doing around issues of identity. I was thinking about my status in both these countries and my inability to fit into either comfortably. It was a way to change my feeling of being an object to being a subject.

My studio is a flexible institution because it is personal and transformable; it can expand and contract to suit my projects and needs. My studio is a laboratory for work in progress, where I conduct experiments, make observations, analyze and collaborate. The function of my studio is also more than a workspace – it is an office, library and workshop. In my creative process I often use my studio like a laboratory, testing materials, making observations about my data, analyzing and experimenting to make well-developed conclusions that support my intentions. I also support my community in Yogyakarta by creating projects that facilitate other artists' practice.



ENTANG WIHARSO, "COALITION: NEVER SAY NO" (2015), ALUMINIUM, CAR PAINT, 200 X 300 CM