

ARTSEEN

ENTANG WIHARSO

by Jonathan Goodman

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The flurry of reviews accompanying the opening of Indonesian artist Entang Wiharso's solo show indicates that the New York art world is now ready for an influx of culture from Southeast Asia. The market's epic gamble to flood New York with work from mainland China that is mythic in character but less than professional has, with certain exceptions, failed. Yet the allure of Asian art remains potent, with American writers and curators introducing work coming from artistic centers at some remove from Beijing, Seoul, and Tokyo. In New York, we are more used to art from these capitals of the Far East; Southeast Asia has only begun to be explored. But there is more to be said. The interest in Wiharso's work is not only important for aesthetic reasons—we have much to learn about Indonesian art; it also signals a market that craves novelty and untutored curiosity, attributes of the unknown that feed New York's frenzy for the auspiciously new. Wiharso's mixture of cartoon imagery, raw brushwork, and lurid colors shows us that he is well informed about the new internationalism in painting, while his low-relief metal sculptures bring out something new: a penchant for cultural complexity that seems to match the current politics of the artist's homeland.

Many of the paintings and reliefs involve Wiharso and his wife, who is American (the couple has two children and commute between Rhode Island and Yogyakarta in Indonesia). At first, the images feel like a study in relationships; the often nearly life-size figures of the artist and his spouse are portrayed in ways that emphasize their closeness. But trouble of one sort or another always seems nearby.



Entang Wiharso, "Inheritance" (2014). Graphite, resin, color pigment, thread steel, life-size installation. Edition 1 of 2

In "Double Protection: Invisible Threat" (2014), the atmosphere is ominous, despite a central calming image of the couple kneeling together in harmony. Still, we can't be sure that the picture is entirely harmless—Wiharso holds a long dagger, whether for protection or attack we don't know. Another prominent image, of a man with four eyes holding tubes that go nowhere, seems to relate to Indonesian spirituality, albeit in a threatening fashion. His head resembles guardian figures in Buddhist sculpture. Other male figures, standing, sitting, lying down emphasize a crowded urban landscape with pipes constraining the space in which the figures move. The painting belongs both to the past and to the future—to a time when the invisible threat of high technology and cultural internationalism will permanently erase Indonesia's historical traditions

"Tremor" (2014), a low-relief wall sculpture, also features Wiharso and his wife as the major figures; lying horizontally, they are colored a deep, dark blue, and are surrounded by a matte black tangle of lines. Violence is implied by a rifle on which three men rest, and at the bottom of the sculpture, a pair of crossed daggers. The composition seems to be of two notions—on the one hand, we see the couple, nearly sufficient unto themselves, but on the other, there is a maze of constricting tubes and the presence of weapons.

One hesitates to jump to a bigger social picture, but the persistence of disturbing images undercuts our confidence that the artworks are merely personal. It may well be that the fabric of Indonesia, its crowded cities and complex belief systems, is being embodied here as a kind of warning: the balance is precarious and in need of support. Nonetheless, many of the pieces, paintings and sculptures both, display the artist and his wife, symbols of a certain continuity and perseverance in the face of contemporary life. The criticism might be added that there is so much going on in Wiharso's art, it is difficult to know where to begin, or what the relations of the parts are to each other. Sometimes his realism is burdened with too much to say.



Entang Wiharso, "Tremor," 2014. Oil color, graphite, resin, thread, color pigment, 48 × 60 . Edition 1 of 2.

The artist's life-size installation, "Inheritance" (2014), consists of Wiharso, his wife, and their two sons posing at a dining table. The figures and furniture are painted black. On top of the table is a huge koi, or an ornamental carp, colored silver and red and with an open mouth from which a long tongue protrudes. Is the outsize fish beneficial or destructive in its embodiment of an Asian legacy that remains hard to define? "Inheritance" surely stands for something—likely the burden of the past as evidenced by the monstrous fish. It is clear from Wiharso's raw style that he prefers a realism in tune with the vulgarities of current culture, yet he also recognizes that the past is something to hold on to, even if its weight is overwhelming. The contrast between the modestly represented family and the immodestly sized fish makes it clear that the clash between old and new goes on.

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