

# Life & Style

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## Indonesia as Resurgent Explorer at World Show

A piece seeks to turn the view of exoticism back to Europe, **Tunggal Wirajuda** finds

**T**he statue of the animal overshadowed visitors who filled the Lawangwangi Creative Art Space gallery in Bandung, West Java, for a recent sneak preview.

Known as "Trokomod," an aura of age-old myth surrounded the structure which was precisely the effect its creator, Indonesian artist Heri Dono intended.

"Trokomod" is a contraction of the terms Trojan Horse and Komodo dragon. The Trojan Horse in this sense serves the same purpose [as in Homer's Iliad] of being an 'intruder,' as well as an explorer whose presence symbolize the meeting of two cultures," Heri said.

"Instead of a horse, 'Trokomod' took the form of a Komodo dragon, as it is an icon of Indonesia. It also represents the diversity and eclecticism of the country's wildlife."

Now, "Trokomod" is heading to Italy, where its bound for its biggest stage yet at the 56th Venice Biennale, one of the world's largest events for contemporary art, for the duration of the event from May 9 to Nov. 22.

The installation art is Heri's second work in Venice, after his piece "Zone of Urgency" was showcased at the select Biennale Arte curator's exhibition in the 50th Biennale in 2003, making him the only Indonesian artist to be so honored.

"Trokomod" also affirms Heri's place as Indonesia's premier artist in the international art scene for over the past two decades. Since then, the 55-year-old has participated in 270 exhibitions including 27 biennales, such as "New Art From Southeast Asia" at Tokyo's Metropolitan Art Space in 1992, and "Blooming in Arms" at the Museum of Modern Arts in Oxford, Great Britain, four years later.

Measuring in at over seven meters long and more than three meters high, "Trokomod" reflects Heri's wish to make a literal and figurative statement at the Venice Biennale.

"Trokomod" is my challenge to Indonesia to be more assertive in the world. For hundreds of years this country has been a 'blank spot' in the world for others, particularly from the West, to explore in terms of its area and culture, while its lack of assertiveness or iconic stature makes it overlooked in the wider world," the 55-year-old artist said.

"Trokomod" is my way of turning the tables, namely by 'intruding' on the Biennale in much the same way as [Chinese explorer] Zheng He did in introducing Chinese culture to Indonesia in the 15th century. This intrusion is our way of 'exploring' the West, just as we were once

explored and 'intruded' by them. The work is also our way of asserting our distinctive identity, which has long been generalized with Chinese art due to their common Asian roots," Heri reiterated.

"Trokomod" casts a critical eye on contemporary art and the pervasive influence of New York in the field, as it is a critique of traditional aesthetics," curator Asmudjo Jono Irianto.

"The work is also interactive as its three-meter-wide facade can accommodate up to five people at a time. If anything, it reflects Heri's intent to encourage the public to literally enter his vision."

The element of exploration found in "Trokomod" reflects the 2015 Biennale's theme of "Voyage."

"Just as Western explorers highlighted artifacts that they found in Indonesia and other lands they deemed exotic, we chose to do the same with historical Western items, which can be viewed on a number of telescopes. These include 18th century costumes with their iconic wigs, a copy of Karl Marx's 'Das Kapital', as well as a prosthetic leg from World War I" Heri said.

"Trokomod" also nods to Indonesia's cultural heritage and identity, as several of the telescopes also highlight some of Sukarno's nationalist speeches. A running text will also highlight [Majapahit prime minister] Gadjah Mada's Palapa Pledge, his vow to unify the archipelago that is a benchmark of Indonesian nationalism."

Curator Carla Bianpoen agreed.

"Heri's use of symbolism extends to various facets of 'Trokomod.' For one, its ceiling features a tapestry of batik that symbolizes Indonesia's cosmology and its various religions," she said. "A figure of a pilot is found at the helm of 'Trokomod,' while nine 'Spirit Boats' accompanied the statute towards the future."

Featuring angel-like halos and kinetic flapping wings, the boats have long been a trademark of Heri's work, as are the Trojan Horse and batik motifs.

"Trokomod" came into being due to momentum from the recent awareness of our maritime identity, which came about from



The monolith and artist will both represent Indonesia at the 2015 Venice Biennale. The Peak Photos/Gugun Anggun/Suminar

the policies [of Indonesian Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti], as well as measures such as research in South Sulawesi on mercury poisoning in its waters," Carla said.

"This development is not only a departure from the government's emphasis on agriculture and industry, it's also a way for the nation to come full circle by evoking our maritime identity."

The Indonesian Institute of Art alumna's use of art as a critical instrument is nothing new. The Indonesian Embassy in London sought to halt his 1996 exhibition "Blooming in Arms," as it was deemed to criticize then-president Suharto.

Heri's use of symbolism in "Trokomod" is reflected in its materials as well as its ideas. "Trokomod" is made of scrap metal from junkyards in Bandung and Yogyakarta, as both places are Indonesia's leading center of the arts. The rust on the metal gave the work a facade

resembling wood that reflects the Venice Biennale's way of adhering to literally and figuratively recycling materials and ideas today and in the future, respectively" she said.

"Trokomod's" age-old yet technologically savvy structure also alludes to Leonardo da Vinci's blueprint for tanks and the Chinese invention of tractors."

"The symbolic significance of 'Trokomod' is perhaps found in Venice most of all, as it was the birthplace of capitalism as we know it, a fact Shakespeare addressed in his play 'The Merchant of Venice.' 'Trokomod's'



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Heri Dono, artist

venue in Venice's old armory and ship-building district, the Arsenale is also a way of coming full circle, as it was here that spices from Indonesia were stored after they were brought back by explorers, before they're sold to the rest of Europe."

The symbolic value of "Trokomod" lies beyond its artistic themes or venue.

"[Heri's] participation in the 2015 Venice Biennale particularly strikes a note, as it takes place in the 65th anniversary of Italian-Indonesian bilateral relations," Italian Cultural Institute director Michela Linda Magri said.

"Trokomod's" participation in the Venice Biennale reflects a rephrasing of Leonardo da Vinci's quote 'art well spent is long,' especially as its made for peace and with the purpose of uniting peoples."

Heri hopes that "Trokomod" will make as much of an impact in Indonesian art as it would in Venice.

"Awareness of contemporary art is still low among the Indonesian public, even though it addresses current issues," he sighed.

"Indonesia also hasn't made a gallery that can address the genre, or any other art form for that matter. I hope that 'Trokomod's' success [at the Venice Biennale] can bring about positive changes to contemporary Indonesian art. After all, increased awareness of the arts reflects a nation's tolerance and civilization."

The inclusion of "Trokomod" in the 2015 Venice Biennale is Indonesia's second consecutive time in the event after its successful participation in the 2013 edition, following a hiatus lasting nearly 60 years.

The Peak

