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## Entang Wiharso on Art in the Donald Trump Era

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*Image courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery*

We speak with Entang Wiharso, one of Indonesia's leading contemporary artists, on the occasion of his second solo exhibition, Promising Land, at Marc Straus Gallery in New York. The artist discusses his two hometowns of Jogjakarta and Rhode Island, and distancing himself from political propaganda. Keep reading to find out more!



Image courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery

***Your recent works consider the dichotomies of Jogjakarta, Indonesia, and Rhode Island, USA, between which you now split your time. Your works have always had a strong connection to Indonesian culture and history, how has living in the States changed your practice?***

*I don't feel my art practice has changed as a result of living in the US. It is true, I have always had a strong connection with the culture and history of Indonesia. It is in my blood, so to speak, and I want to assert that in my art. But there is no need to act "Indonesian" in my artwork because this is already an integral part of my identity and therefore is expressed in the work. I want to have complete independence in my art, that's what gives the spirit to the work. With art I can say "No" even if everyone says yes and I can say "Yes" even if everyone says no. That is what fuels me - it's about needs and desires. I started living in the US in 1997, and there has been a lot of dialogue with American culture and history through my artwork, which can be seen in paintings from the late 90s and early 2000s such as *News from the East* (1998, oil and collage on canvas) and *Me As Teddy Bear* (2004, oil and metal and resin collage on canvas). I traveled back and forth between Rhode Island and Yogyakarta, and America became my new home. Slowly the border between the first and second home became blurred. Both places are part of my identity. For 20 years I have dealt with American culture in my practice and now I feel a part of the American landscape. My work expresses my opinions as well as my experiences and can be seen as a dialogue with American life. The increased intensity of this exchange is evident in current works like *Portrait in Front Art History*, *Crush Me # 1 and # 2*, *Half Degree Separation: Under National History*, *Double Protection*, *Blue On Blue: Art History and Double Headed*.*

***You're living in America at a very interesting time in history, to say the least (and you even included an image of Trump in your Double Headed work). How has this affected your experience in the country and your works?***

*It is a very thought-provoking time. As artists our function is to grab at the things that are affecting and impacting history. I want to run while carrying bright neon pink spray paint and write "What about this???" America is a very interesting place and anything can happen. It is the Land of Possibilities. This characterization can be a great story line, or it can cause a great deal of disappointment. The Donald Trump Era (DTE) is a small fragment in history. One episode in a long story, like in a shadow puppet performance. A single character in the wayang story is a small piece of the larger narrative. I am happy to be a witness in the present, but we should not forget about the long expanse of history. I remember the days of Suharto, Gus Dur, Megawati, SBY and now Jokowi as well as Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. I am very fortunate to have witnessed several decades of American history. As an artist the current volatile condition provides a lot of inspiration. It's a time when artists can add something significant to the bigger picture by pointing to history, placing NOW on a longer trajectory. I don't want to be infected by a short narrative. What I want is to show others a larger and more nuanced story through the work I create. DTE is an aspiration that was dreamed and created by many people. It isn't a fight but rather a strong opinion being expressed by many. To me the most difficult aspect of this time is figuring out how to deal with frenzied and extreme opinions.*



*Image courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery*

***In previous works, you've used mostly Indonesian imagery, but in this recent series there is the jarring entry of typically American symbols in garish colors, like the bright yellow automobile in Home Sweet Home Traveler. Is this choice in color deliberate, to provide a juxtaposition between the two cultures?***

*My earlier work extensively looked at and played with both American and Indonesian cultural images, so I don't think it's accurate that the imagery was mostly Indonesian. Whether in my painting, sculpture, installation or performance art, there has been content from both cultures. Whatever imagery I bring forth creates an experience that reflects both sides, which are integral, and it is difficult to divide precisely these personal signals and visual codes. That is my identity now and I can't deny or reject either one. Most importantly to me: How do you feel? What can you taste? These are the questions that lead to an understanding, rather than asking "how is it made?" Some of the works like Portrait in Front of Art History, Home Sweet Home Traveler and Double Headed are, for example, a conversation or an association and reflect a desire to integrate with the American story through a connection with family history and art history. Portrait in Front of Art History and Home Sweet Home Traveler embody conversations with mega artists like Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly and John Chamberlain. Double Headed is a humorous look at myself, the two heads emerging because I have felt so many rejections and gifts from both sides. The background of this work is my American family history.*

***You have often incorporated text and words into your works, as a reflection of commentary on social and political situations. But this recent series contains very little text, despite the plethora of commentary on the current political and social situations. Is there a reason for this?***

*In the current conditions, I want people to feel my visual signals and codes rather than reading a specific text. At the moment there is so much noise and people are intoxicated by the political propaganda and marketing. I don't want to compete with this. That is why I don't want to inject a lot of text into my work at this time. I have a dilemma in my life right now. As an artist I feel confident and brave to address the craziness and confused orientation, the current danger posed by radical ideology, overwhelming political propaganda and unstoppable climate change. Yet I feel limp and scared as a husband and father. It is crazy isn't it? My choice now is to offer the audience an open proposition, a visual vocabulary that functions as an interpretable open text. There is a great deal of provocative imagery and visual code in my work exhibited in "Promising Land". I think slowing down quite a bit and having some distance from the noise is good because otherwise the work will fail and risk being overdone.*



Image courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery

***We last spoke to you during your residency at STPI in 2014, quite a while ago! Have you continued to incorporate the medium of paper and printmaking into your works since then?***

*My residency at STPI was an important experience – it is a special place – and I still remember that time well. It is an unparalleled playground for the artist. I would love to work there again in the future. I continue to use paper as a medium and printmaking techniques, but of course in a very different way than was possible at STPI. I have a large body of paper-based works which have never been shown and some day I want to have an exhibition of this work, maybe including some of my works created during my residency at STPI.*

***Your works vary between semi-realist sculptures, to fantastical creatures that contain human characteristics taken to an extreme, with intestines extending out, and a figure with three eyes. They also contain autobiographical elements, portraying yourself, your wife and your children. Is there a difference in the way you portray your own family, compared to some of the other figures in the works?***

*No not really. All aspects of my work are dictated by the ideas I'm trying to express. For example, in Portrait in Front of Art History, the pillar of figures on the left is a portrait of my family, a grouping of objects that come from an Indonesian gift shop. I flip that image by giving it an industrial finish, using car paint and an airbrush technique that is not associated with handcraft objects. In this portrayal, I am considering the dual reality and the clichés that govern the perception of identity, in this case with my family as the focal point. It raises questions about the exotic Asian, about Indonesian art being associated with hand-crafted tradition as well as the Indonesian diaspora. This way of imagining the portrait of my family shows the slippage in forming identity, where generalizations and prejudice rule.*

***This is your second solo exhibition with MARC STRAUS gallery. Do you find that the reaction to your works is different when presented in Indonesia or Asia, compared with the United States?***

*Every audience is unique and valuable so how can I answer this? I do not like making a judgment. Art without an audience is just nothing. There are, of course, different ways of seeing. Viewers always carry or use their experience and their background to see the artwork. They all make a contribution to my artwork whatever their reasons or motivations. Art dies when it is concretely, definitively understood. A consistent understanding or particular reaction to my work has never been a goal. Art is a tool to destroy borders, so I need an audience to activate my work. I believe that art is a single language, it is a universal language unto itself. There is no Indonesian art, or Japanese, American, German, British, Egyptian, Greek or Turkish art and so on.*

***What projects do you have planned for the rest of the year?***

*I'm continuing an earlier project, Wall of Nation # 2, that I started after the Indonesian Reformasi period. This project looks at the border issues from a different perspective and embodies a series of questions I have been considering for over a decade. Other plans include a cross country trip through the US, captured through plenty of photos and videos.*