

ART & CULTURE

Nasirun: Prayers on canvas



Perahuku Samudera (My Boat, My Ocean) by Nasirun (JP/Tarko Sudiarno)

Tarko Sudiarno (The Jakarta Post)

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This year's Ramadhan was profoundly meaningful for painter Nasirun, who at the age of 53 completed his fasting duties by day and painted throughout the night.

Nasirun's latest paintings reflect his deep religious contemplation.

"I fasted during Ramadhan this year. Every night, I offered wirid [personal prayers] on the canvas. That was how I spent the holy month, praying through my artwork. I was so enthusiastic that I produced one painting each night of my fast," said Nasirun at his house-cum-studio in Bayeman, Yogyakarta.

His Ramadhan inspired works are currently on display at Natan Art Space, Kotagede, Yogyakarta, from July 1 to July 20. Entitled Wirid on Canvas, the exhibition features 29 oil paintings of various sizes that were created from dusk until the break of dawn each night. Nasirun said the idea of holding a solo exhibition came to mind at the end of Ramadhan.

"I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw my works, it was as if they weren't mine. Every time I woke, I was surprised by a wet canvas oil painting, even amazed by the sight, which prompted me to do the same thing the following night. So I prayed without pause each night, while moving the paint brush along the canvas," he related.

His brush strokes were accompanied by prayers and praise to the omnipotence of God, as one would do with prayer beads. Spiritual themes therefore emanate from the paintings of Nasirun, whose Islamic faith has Javanese and Sundanese backgrounds. Wishing to share his spiritual experiences with his friends, he spontaneously decided to display his Ramadhan creations.

"I had remarkable experiences during Ramadhan this year, seemingly enlightened every night as I gazed at the moon in the sky. There seemed to be a full moon each night, which charged my soul. I wonder whether it was *lailatul qodar* [the night of revelation]," recalled Nasirun, who will also open another show in South Korea.

These spiritual occurrences are made manifest in Nasirun's expressive and imaginative paintings of traditional objects, which unfold like a serialized story. He began the creative process with *padusan*, a cleansing ritual practiced before fasting. He observed the bathing room from a distance, perceiving the long purification process. The painting he created is called *Tempat Padusan* (Cleansing Ritual Site).



Ketika Tangan Berbicara (When the Hands Speak) by Nasirun (JP/Tarko Sudiarno)

Through purification, according to Nasirun, one can reflect during Ramadhan. It was through this reflection that Nasirun found the inspiration to create several artworks, namely *Perahuku*, *Samuderaku* (My Boat, My Ocean), *Larut Pada Zaman* (Adrift in the Times), *Sembahyang* (Praying) and *Bulan Diatas Rumah* (The Moon over the House).

The moonlight he looked upon each night seemed to trigger his recollections of deceased close friends including Slamet Gundono, a grass-puppet performer from Surakarta, Central Java, and Ki Entus Susmono, a famous shadow-puppet master from Tegal, Central Java. The artists were great inspirations to Nasirun, as captured in his painting *Selamat Jalan Sobat* (Farewell My Friends).

Nasirun was also reminded of a dancer from Banyumas, Central Java, called Riyanto, who has risen to fame and now resides in Tokyo. The transgender artist, known for his performances of *Lengger Lanang*, a traditional Banyumas dance, is portrayed by Nasirun in his *Menari Diatas Purnama* (Dancing Over the Full Moon), an expression of admiration for Riyanto's total creative freedom.

During his imaginative Ramadhan journey, Nasirun also visualized his mother's face, conveying his mental image

in *Ibu Malaikat Tak Bersayap* (Mother the Angel without Wings). She was the one who introduced him to the spiritual world of Sundanese Wiwitan, a belief in ancestral and natural powers, which is always on his mind whenever he gazes at the full moon.

For him, the full moon is a focal point in the darkness of the night, and people can gain tranquility by observing it. This mystical atmosphere was transferred to canvass by Nasirun in *Tawaf di Bulan Ramadhan* (Circumambulation during Ramadhan).

During the nights of Ramadhan, the modest painter was shaken by the eruption of Mount Merapi. For the



Tawaf di Bulan Ramadan (Circumambulation during Ramadhan) by Nasirun (JP/Tarko Sudiarno)

Javanese, each eruption of the volcano provides a sign as to the country's coming situation, which urged him to paint *Erupsi di Bulan Ramadhan* (Eruption during Ramadhan).

The anxiety felt by the Kroya, Central Java,-born artist, who studied at the Indonesian Arts Institute (ISI), Yogyakarta, was not without reason. He sees the tremendous power social media wields on society, a power that can be unleashed with the touch of a fingertip. Though he does not use a cell phone, Nasirun's concern drove him to paint *Ketika Tangan Berbicara* (When the Hands Speak).

Out of this concern, Nasirun appealed for everybody to continue praying and demonstrating their resignation to God through his work *Ana Kidhung Ing Wengi* (A Ballad of the Night). The artwork is an invitation to pray, as taught by Sunan Kalijaga, one of the earliest Islamic preachers, to ward off evil spirits.