

Hanging With The Puppet Man

Ebony Dalimunthe spoke to Iwan Effendi, renowned puppet artist from Yogyakarta.



Iwan, congratulations on your solo exhibition at the Mizuma Art Gallery in Singapore, which featured a display of your beautiful puppetry characters. What is the message behind these sculptures and how did you come up with the idea?

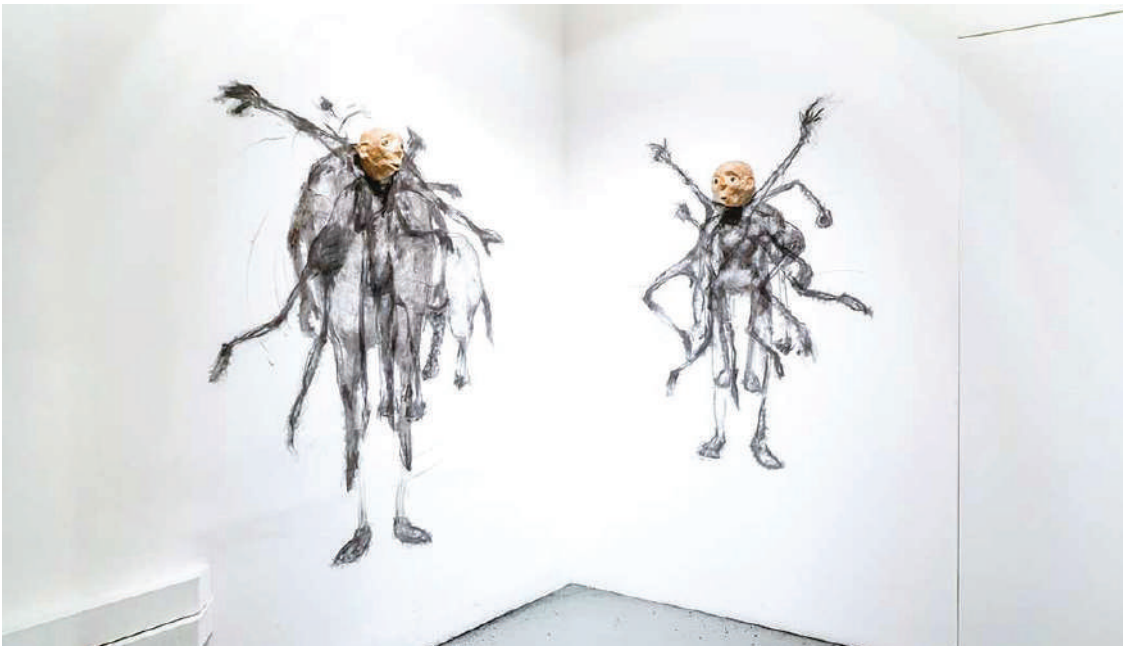
There is no particular message in my work; there is no narration. Basically, I just wanted to share the puppets I designed. I wanted to create an expression that I call the 'daydreaming face'. It's a kind of in-between emotion; it's flat, but it can express happiness or sadness at the same time.

My drawings share the sentimental value of daydreaming faces. From my work, the audience may relate to such an expression or feel reminded of someone.



Could you tell us a little about your background?

I've lived in Yogyakarta for my entire life. My father was a car mechanic and my mother was a tailor. I started my career as an illustrator. I took art school in UPI Bandung and ISI Yogyakarta, in the fine art and painting department, but I dropped out of both schools.



When did you first realise you wanted to become an artist?

I've loved drawing since I was a kid. My grandfather was a dance teacher, as well as a puppet master, but I realised I wanted to become an artist when I met many art people in the art scene in Yogyakarta and Bandung. I thought it was fun to live as an artist.



You are the co-founder and co-artistic director of Papermoon Puppet Theatre in Indonesia. Why do you have such a passion for puppet making?

In the beginning I didn't have any idea about puppet making and puppet performances. I only knew Wayang Kulit, a traditional form of puppet-shadow play, and some puppet shows on TV in the late 80s and 90s.

In the beginning of my artist life, I loved to draw comics and characters in fantasy in a surrealistic way. But in 2006 when I helped Ria (the founder of Papermoon Theatre) design and make the puppets, I started to see my drawings come alive. It felt amazing. Although I don't really like to be on stage, I'm always amazed when the puppeteers start to give life to the puppets that I designed and built.



Besides that, I also found the engineering aspect interesting, such as choosing the material, constructing them, and connecting them to make the body.

Papermoon Theatre also had the opportunity, through the artist residency program, to stay for six months in NYC to observe puppetry, artistically and aesthetically. Since then I have always been curious and passionate about puppets and puppet performance-making, and I realised this medium was not only for children.



Imagine your puppets have come to life. What do you think they would say to you?

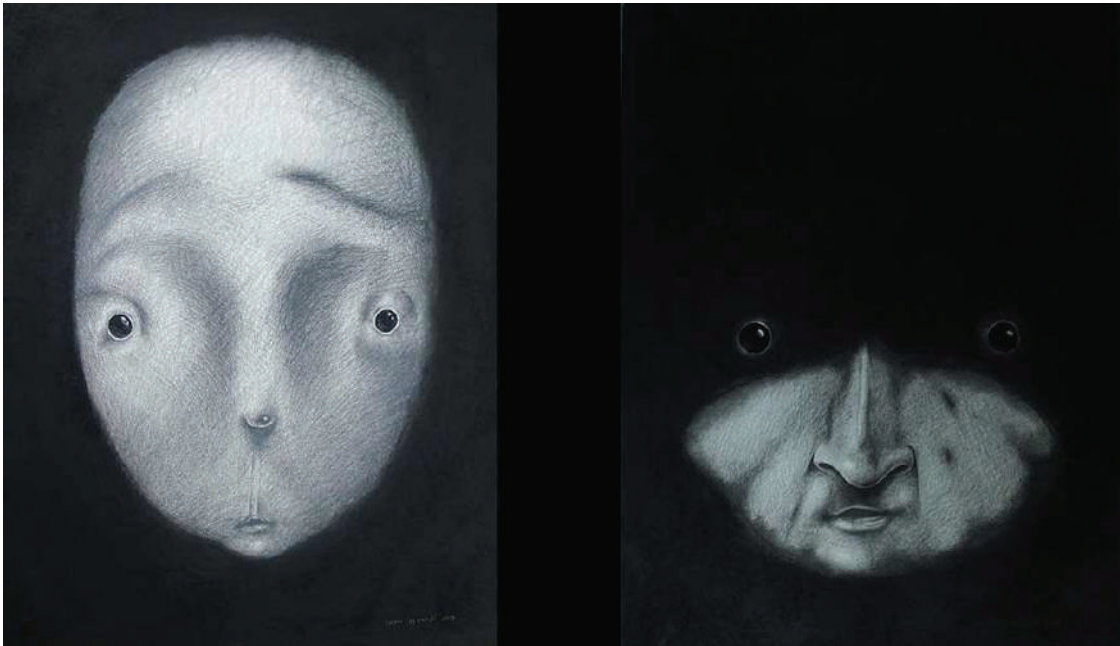
The life of a puppet is always endowed by the puppeteer. So, for me, they're all like visitors from another world; reinventing the ordinary, to tell their story about us. They never say anything, but the material, the face and the size will definitely say something to you – it will tell you “how to animate me”.



What is one story behind one of your puppet shows that really speaks to you?

“Mwathirika” is a Papermoon production based on my family story on the 1965 genocide in Indonesia. It is a story that my mother, aunty and uncle always told; how they suffered so much because of that event. My grandfather was actually jailed for 13 years, and it is a story that has always been significant to me.

The story focuses on the impact of political turmoil upon a family, thus reflecting the wider picture of society and politics in Indonesia. This is a very sensitive topic to talk about in Indonesia.

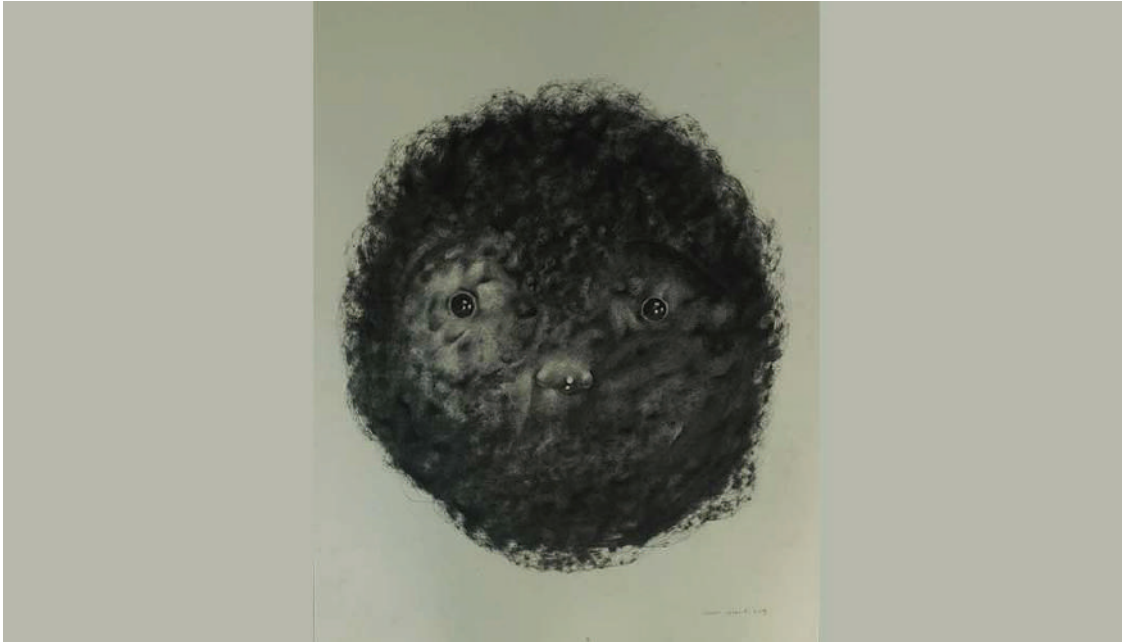


Who is your biggest inspiration?

William Kentridge. He is a South African-based artist who owns a handspring puppet company. I have always loved his work with drawing, puppetry and animation, but what really inspires me is how he speaks on bigger issues, such as South Africa’s apartheid.

If you could go back in time and give your 18-year-old self one piece of advice, what would it be?

Just do whatever you believe in. If you start to lose your belief, meet more people who have a similar spirit.



Finally, what more can we expect of Iwan Effendi for the rest of 2019?

I will be sharing more of my daydreaming faces, and more figures of people to mirror.

<https://www.papermoonpuppet.com/>