

ENTERTAINMENT ART & DESIGN SPECTRUM

OPINION

Review: Indonesian artists grapple with identity and freedom

By John McDonald
July 12, 2019
11.45 pm

When the *Reformasi* era began in 1998 Indonesian art burst out like a tightly coiled spring released from its bonds. It wasn't just artists who rejoiced in their newfound freedom – the entire population was now able to imagine itself as a citizenry of the world rather than subjects of Suharto's corrupt, oppressive regime. Matters would grow more complicated over the following decades, but that moment of liberation remains engraved on people's hearts.

In the catalogue for the National Gallery of Australia's landmark survey, *Contemporary Worlds: Indonesia*, the atmosphere post-1998 is captured most succinctly by the writer, Antariksa, in a discussion of the work of Jompet Kuswidananto. He points to "the problematic legacies of colonialism, and the tension between the celebratory mania and confused cacophony at the sudden freedom, weight of choice and responsibility ..."



Zico Albaiquni's *For evidently, the fine arts do not thrive in the Indies* (2018) YAVUZ GALLERY, SINGAPORE

Under Suharto there was no "weight of choice", as everyone's options were limited by what was permitted. With new freedoms came a whole new raft of problems as artists began to grapple with issues of identity. If they'd looked at Australia they would have seen that almost a century after Federation we're still struggling with those issues.

As with China, where an era of reforms ushered in a wave of sociopolitical art, post-1998 Indonesian work was heavily involved with politics. The NGA exhibition skims over a lot of that art to look at new developments with more formal or even surreal associations. Once again this is right in line with China, where much of the art post-2000 has broken free of overt political themes.

Nevertheless, to remove all such commentary would be to paint a false picture of Indonesian contemporary art. There is an obvious political dimension in the work of many of the most celebrated artists in this show, from Eko Nugroho's theatrical paintings and sculptures, to Entang Wiharso's towering installation, *Temple of Hope: Door to Nirvana* (2018), which acts as an overarching celebration of difference and a plea for tolerance.

One of most directly engaged pieces is Kuswidananto's *Staging Collectivism* (2013). In the back of a truck we find a group invisible figures, distinguished only by their headscarves, shoes, and silently clapping hands. It's a powerful representation of those faceless supporters of a political party ferried in to cheer on demand. Kuswidananto is highlighting the hollow spectacle of politics conducted as if were a football match, regardless of policies or ideologies. By implication he is asking his audience to think more deeply about their choices.



FX Harsono's *Gazing on collective memory* (2016). NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA

Other politically charged works have a retrospective cast. Akiq AW satirises the Suharto regime's family planning program, which used pictures and jingles to try and convince parents to have only two children. FX Harsono takes on a more sombre theme in his installation, *Gazing on Collective Memory* (2016), which has a deliberately funereal aspect, being a shrine of photos and small objects connected with the Chinese community. For Harsono, himself of Chinese-Indonesian origins, it's a vital, ongoing task to preserve the memory of the brutalities inflicted on the Chinese who have served as scapegoats with every new wave of political unrest, most notably the massacres of 1965-66 when the effort to exterminate "communists" resulted in wholesale victimisation, murder and plunder.

All of this is a long way from Handiwirman Saputra's immaculate, absurd sculptures, which draw on the detritus of everyday life, such as rubber bands and bamboo shoots. These radically ambiguous objects hover on the brink of recognisability, but remain essentially abstract. They alert us to another way of looking at the most humble items, but also emphasise the ambiguities of art in which a perfect representation of the world is never achievable.

In *Shelters* (2018-19) Albert Yonathan Setyawan has created a meditative floor-piece that brings together the simplified forms of 1800 small ceramic buildings that relate to different religions. It's described in the catalogue as "a three-dimensional mandala", and I can't improve on that. The meditative aspect is emphasised by the sheer repetitive labour involved, as Setyawan has hand-crafted each component of a model City of God(s), which has an ideal order missing from any earthly city.



Albert Yonathan Setyawan's *Shelters* (2018-19) NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA

With any survey of the contemporary art of one country, there will be a massive amount left out, compared to what is included. Curators, Jaklyn Babington and Carol Cains – with more than a little help from their Indonesian friends – have chosen to focus on the here-and-now, leaving the immediate historical background to the catalogue essays.

It would be impossible to do such as show without figures such as Agus Suwage and Melati Suryodarmo, let alone the dynamic 'Hahan' Saputra, whose large-scale deconstructions of the art market grow more ambitious and scabrous with each iteration – a mixture of Dionysian frenzy and university research project. It's also great that the show includes Tisna Sanjaya, who has been a mentor to two generations of artists in Bandung, including his son, Zico Albaquni, whose vibrant, neo-Pop paintings are also on display at the NGA.

Many of the exhibited works have been acquired by the NGA, including Melati's performance piece, *Transaction of hollows*, in which we were able to watch the white-uniformed artist fire 800 arrows into the pristine white walls of a gallery. It was an endurance feat, but by Melati's standards one of her less extreme efforts.

Although each artist in this exhibition understands the need to create a memorable first impression there are multiple layers to be negotiated – an ongoing engagement with local history and a reflection on the way Indonesian art relates to the grand narratives that were already well established at the time of *Reformasi*.

What one discovers is a powerful sense of inclusiveness, and a defiant rejection of the nationalist rhetoric that is blooming in all parts of the world nowadays. In Indonesia the scars are still too fresh of a system in which national pride was manipulated by power and privilege, where dissent might be met with paramilitary force.

Indonesia is still a wildly stratified society with a concentration of wealth in a small number of hands and religious debates that forever threaten to burst into conflict. On the positive side, the country has just re-elected Joko Widodo, who has established himself as a progressive, albeit cautious, political performer.

There's no doubt about where the artists line up in their view of Indonesia's future. There may be room for satire, for social critique and spectacle, but there's probably nowhere in the world today where the 'art community' better deserves that title. There's an optimistic spirit in this show at odds with what we find today in Europe, America or Australia. It's born of a feeling that although the road ahead may be strewn with obstacles, history has finally turned in the right direction.



Contemporary Worlds: Indonesia

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Until October 27.

John McDonald flew to Canberra courtesy of the NGA