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A Glimpse Into the Larger Than Life World of Heri Dono

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'Comedy of Indonesia's Court Mafia' and other works reflect Indonesian artist Heri Dono's views of Indonesia's troubled social and political landscapes. (JG Photo/Tunggul Wirajuda)

Jakarta. The rows of winged creatures looked out impassively at passersby, much like the ancient statues of the Assyrian lamassu deity that inspired them.

Though they are much smaller in scale than their 1,000-year-old counterparts, the structures' imposing demeanor capture viewers' attention with their sheer power of intimidation, an element enhanced by LED lights, electronic, mechanical devices, as well as sound.

Titled "Riding the Tigeresh Goat," the five fiberglass sculptures by Indonesian artist Heri Dono silently allude to the 32-year period of military rule under late strongman Suharto or concerns of a military comeback under losing presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto. A pair of AK47 assault rifles on each statue — to give the impression that the winged creatures are poised to mow down the opposition — emphasize the point.

This heavy shadow cast by military rule is also emphasized in one of his latest work, “The Palace Guards.” Featuring three men in military uniform, the pieces perhaps address certain conservative elements’ determination to hold on to power. The statues seem hell bent on retaining control, even as their grip on the situation looks to be slipping, as symbolized by the wheels they sport instead of legs — as if the soldier-like figures are attached to wheelchairs.

“Riding the Tigeresh Goat” is one of 84 sculptures, installation art, as well as paintings and drawings that make up “The World And I: Heri Dono’s Art Odyssey.” Currently being shown at Jakarta’s Art1 Gallery, the exhibition is a retrospective of Heri’s art from 1984 to 2014.

“[The exhibition] is Heri’s effort to reveal his artistic journey from the early days of his career until today. By reading his works and his multifaceted creative process, the exhibition tries to reveal perceptions of contemporary art that continues to grow since the 1990’s until today” says curator Jim Supangkat in the exhibition’s catalogue. “Heri is one of a few Indonesian artists with extensive experience in international exhibitions. Over the years, Heri has accumulated experience in interacting with diverse cultural phenomena and forms — an experience that impacts his future [artistic] development.”

Heri reflects this premise best with his work “The Spiritual Guards” and “Flying Angels.” While the former resembles “Riding the Tigeresh Goat” in its imposing stance, the lamassu-like figures have little of the forceful connotations that mark the wheeled sculptures. Instead, the black-and-gold installation made out of fiberglass and wood looks more like Heri’s fanciful take on palace lions that stand guard over Chinese temples.

The structure also looks like the Buraq, a mythical being mentioned in the Koran that took the Prophet Muhammad on his journey to heaven.

On the other hand, “Flying Angels” highlighted a more ascetic, spiritual side to Heri’s art. At first glance, the composite fiberglass, fabric, bamboo and electronic installation art hovers both literally and figuratively over viewers like their spiritual counterparts are believed to do. But a touch of a button triggers the flapping of their wings, bringing the sculptures spectacularly to life.



“Flying Angels”. (JG Photo/Tunggul Wirajuda)

“Heri’s work leaves viewers with an awareness to understand the diversity of world cultures, as well as the ability to enrich our human dimensions,” Jim adds.

“They also live up to Heri’s premise that [artistic] collisions [in styles] will lead to an opportunity to understand something new.”

“The Golden S**t” sculpture similarly takes on this premise, but is markedly different because of its satirical bent. The golden feces left by dogs might be a reference to the golden egg laid by geese.

However, the foul way in which the dogs’ “gold” is created perhaps reflects the no-holds-barred approach taken by many people to gain wealth, such as corruption, embezzlement, and other unscrupulous financial practices.

His paintings, including his 2008 piece “Komedi Mafia Peradilan Indonesia” (“Comedy of the Indonesian Court Mafia”) and “The Indonesian Gift,” exude a similar theme. The works feature a style of painting that mark the medium in Javanese tradition. However, their critique of Indonesian life is palpable in the grotesque figures they bear.

The twisted subjects in “Komedi Mafia Peradilan” — an apt visual representation of disgraced public figures such as former Constitutional Court judge Akil Mochtar — are shown celebrating excessively with their ill-begotten power. In the “Indonesian Gift,” Heri depicts the inside of a volcano as it is on the verge of erupting to reflect

the shady back-room deals that have lead to political unrest in Indonesia.

But the proverbial icing on the cake for “The World And I” is Heri’s monumental “The Odyssey of Heridonology.” The 10-paneled triptych mural traces the 54-year-old’s artistic development and vision and how it allowed him to excel in events such as the Taipei Biennale and the Asia Pacific Triennale.

Heri says the work is guided by his premise of finding inspiration within himself, even if it means neglecting the more tangible, main themes of his art.

The sheer size of the installation dwarves visitors, reflecting the breadth of his artistic feats and vision.