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Entang Wiharso Mines the Discord in Indonesia's Diversity



Robert C. Morgan January 28, 2015



Installation view, 'Entang Wiharso' at Marc Straus (all images courtesy Marc Straus)

In a recent interview, the Indonesian artist Entang Wiharso proclaimed: “I depict the condition of humans who are often divided by complex, multilayered political, ethnic, racial, and religious systems: they co-exist yet their communication is limited and indirect.” At the moment, Wiharso, who works between his studio in Yogyakarta and his more recent residence in Rhode Island, is one of Indonesia’s most widely known artists. Over the past few years, he has been the subject of numerous museum exhibitions, both within and outside his native homeland, and he was one of the artists chosen to represent Indonesia at the 55th Venice Biennale, in 2013.



Installation view, 'Entang Wiharso' at Marc Straus (click to enlarge)

regard cynically and pessimistically as routine, run deep.

When Wiharso speaks about the complexity of difference in the archipelago of Indonesia, he is not being prosaic. The layering of distinctions in his country's population is extraordinary, representing a multitude of languages and cultures, each with its own interrelated history. Although the Republic of Indonesia has existed since 1945 and was recognized in 1949 as an independent state by the Netherlands (its colonial overseer for more than three centuries), its conflicts, dissension, and violent outbreaks, which many Indonesians

The diversity that Wiharso proclaims as the subject matter of his art is unavoidably accurate. His works on canvas or forged in metal and cast in resin are about social and political issues that contrast with the artist's proud Indonesian heritage and the deeply embedded psychic charges that inform his work. They combine metaphysical content with a surrealist and figurative expressionism. In sculptural reliefs such as "Friction" or "Under Protection for 24 Hours" (both 2014), the figures are physically knotted through hair braids or held together by mechanical hoses or conduits as they're entwined in a dream-like space. Both works point to the social and psychological bondage of everyday life, but subject to perverse exaggerations. Wiharso's work reflects the pain and tortured mindset of living in an archipelago where, from the outside life appears to be a paradise, but on the inside politics and economic corruption breed constant dissent, often enabled by legislation that reaches for superficial resolutions.



Entang Wiharso, "Double Protection: Invisible Threat" (2014), oil and acrylic on linen, 78 3/4 x 118 in

The two showstoppers in Wiharso's current exhibition at Marc Straus are a large painting on the first floor, titled "Double Protection: Invisible Threat," and a major sculpture on the second, titled "Inheritance" (both 2014). In the first, a series of kneeling and reclining (both prone and supine) torsos, as well as variously detached heads, are attached organically distended as if in a nightmare.

The partially nude male figure with a mischievous grin and quadrupled eyes, apparently verging on psychosis, seems to be the master of ceremonies, whatever ceremonies of eros, torture, and disfiguration they might be. One may be tempted to compare what Wiharso is doing with Bosch, but the two are worlds apart. Whereas Bosch created impossible hybrids between human and animal forms, Wiharso's figures are more brutal and aggressive, more given to assorted disfigurations and amputations that somehow suggest a bizarre normality in relation to an excessive, but oddly poetic, context.



Entang Wiharso, "Inheritance" (2014), graphite, resin, color pigment, thread steel, life-size installation, ed. 1 of 2

A similar paradoxical rendering applies to "Inheritance," in which a life-size family of four gathers around a dinner table. The father stands while the mother sits at the opposite end, and two children are seated on either side of the table. Is this Wiharso's family? We cannot say for certain. What we do know (and see) is that an oversized, blood-smeared fish occupies the table while the father holds a severed male head with related organs emanating from the inner neck. Has the fish coughed it up as a gift? Again, we cannot say. Part of the horror and extreme discomfort of the piece stems from its absence of a resolution, like a dream that's beyond access or understanding — or a political system that continues to withhold an equal standard of life from its population.

Entang Wiharso continues at Marc Straus (299 Grand Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through February 8.