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Made Wianta: Painting History

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Made Wianta

Balinese artist Made Wianta is an artist of exceptional versatility.

Born in 1949, the maestro of modern Balinese art has been painting since his youth using far-ranging mediums — with styles ranging from calligraphy to surrealism to expressionism — to convey his take on life.

Having first studied traditional Balinese painting, his fascination with modern, Western art prompted him to visit Europe in 1975, which, in the end, greatly influenced his style of art. Wianta drew inspiration from European surrealism and developed his own style.

As he has used the shapes and methods found in different artistic traditions, his works throughout his career can be classified in terms of different periods, such as the dots period, the triangles period, the calligraphy period and the mixed media period.

Wianta is not above using unconventional materials for his art, such as actual pieces of concrete wall, or unconventional methods, such as mixing the radically different styles of calligraphy and triangles.

His wife Intan Wianta speaks highly of his unique painting methods. More than just a multi-talented artist, having pursued dance, music and prose, he usually paints whimsically while dancing or singing.

“When he was creative, he put his entire body and entire spirit into it,” Intan said.

Sadly, Wianta, 68, is currently suffering from an illness that makes it difficult for him to walk — he was wheelchair-bound at the time of the interview with Intan — and even talk.

Nevertheless, his wife and Emmo Italiaander, the curator of the Ciptadana Art Program, are more than happy to vouch for Wianta’s art.

An ongoing exhibition, entitled “Run For Manhattan,” showcases the artist’s wide versatility of styles

in works that interpret an overlooked but highly important part of Indonesian history.

Held at the Ciptadana Art Space in Central Jakarta, the exhibition, which runs until Dec. 8, showcases 42 pieces of art from Wianta, including paintings and sculptures, some of which relate to the topics of his older work to help round out the collection.

The exhibition showcases Wianta's personal, artistic depiction of the history of Run Island in eastern Indonesia's Banda Islands in the 1600s, when the Dutch were involved in a spice war.

Curator Emmo describes Wianta's art style as soft and reactive to social issues, such as the 1998 Jakarta riots, thus allowing the viewer to understand the message.

"What is great about *Pak Wianta* is that he is very reactive in his protest works and does it in a soft way. His high level of sensitivity is always in use, and his protest art is not as vulgar and provocative as contemporary art," he said.

Run Island was, at the time, an incredibly valuable piece of real estate, as it was the only place in the entire world where the prized spice nutmeg was naturally available. Dutch colonists were so eager to hold a monopoly on the spice trade because, then, spices were worth more than gold due to their uses in anesthesia and food preservation.

As a result, the Dutch made a deal with the English, who also eyed the Banda Islands, giving the then Dutch-owned New Amsterdam in North America to them in exchange for control of the Spice Islands. New Amsterdam, today, is known as Manhattan, a major borough of New York City.

Made himself interpreted the deal as one "surreal cosmic joke" due to the respective relevance of both locations in the current era. Therefore, the exhibition is part of the artist's effort to interpret that period of history in his own way.

Emmo said the exhibition was also designed to serve as a compilation and retrospective of Made Wianta's versatility.

Intan said the idea for the exhibition came following a visit to Run Island six years ago, when Made was inspired by its legacy and history. Further inspiration for the exhibition came when Wianta was invited for a cultural event at the 2004 Athens Olympics, only to feel that Indonesia was treated merely as a third world country.

"It is a shame that, while Manhattan became a global symbol for prosperity, the Banda Islands have been abandoned," Intan said.

"With this exhibition, [Made] is trying to remind us all of the worth and the significance that Indonesia had in shaping the world as it is today. He believes in all his heart in the worth of Indonesia and its significance to how the world is now."

— Photos by JP/Bangkit Jaya Putra