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Enin Supriyanto

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I was in New York during that historic moment on November 4. Close to midnight, I sensed the atmosphere of change shared by so many young Americans in Times Square running in the streets yelling: Yes We Can! Yes We Can!

As an Indonesian, I tried to make sense of all this talk about change. I started to sense it during the presentation on Southeast and Indonesian contemporary art held with Carla Bianpoen and Melissa Chiu during a public lecture in the Asian Contemporary Art Fair, two days after the elections. I sensed it in some questions during our session; the attention on Southeast Asian contemporary art and culture, and at the same time, how little is known about it by most of those involved in the New York art scene. I sensed it even more when I finally met Tyler Rollins.



Opening night of Tiffany Chung's solo show in TRFA, Chelsea + TRFA gallery space

I'd met him before during the 2nd Singapore Biennale and at the art fair Showcase Singapore. I noticed that he already knew some of the most active and prominent galleries in the region. He stopped by and talked with the gallerists of the Manila-based Drawing Room, Jakarta-based Nadi Gallery, Ho Chi Minh City-based Galerie Quynh, and others. And, during that meeting in Singapore, I had a chance to talk to him about his enthusiasm and vision of the future of Southeast Asian contemporary art. We continued this exchange of ideas and information during my visit to New York.

After our public lecture program in ACAF, I decided to pass the cold rainy day by visiting Tyler Rollins Fine Art, his newly-refurbished art space in Chelsea, New York. Tyler Rollins was there in the space, inspecting—or more likely enjoying—his first Southeast Asian art exhibit, presenting new works by Thai artist Jakkai Siributr, a set of works with a collage of fabrics and embroidery, and installations. He gave me a brief guided-tour through these works—most are richly sewn with patterns and images of daily life and spiritual experiences as perceived by an artist living in a society which is still struggling with the flux of change.

We continued our discussion over lunch in a restaurant close to his gallery. He shared more of his vision and plans to bring more Southeast Asian art works to the New York art scene. We agreed to keep in touch and share information about our common interest in promoting Southeast Asian contemporary art in the U.S. and in this new global art network.

A week later, I was back in Jakarta, Indonesia. All the news coverage was still focusing on Obama's victory. While from my perspective what was more important was the need to understand the change it will bring to the global art scene. Then, I read a piece by Pico Iyer in TIME magazine. He stated that: "...from Jerusalem to Japan to Colombia—I've heard people essentially say that America is an overweight, white plutocrat who is not only out of touch with the world but also shows no signs of wanting to grow closer to it."

That's it! That's the change that I sensed during my public lecture session in ACAF. That's the change that I shared during my meeting and discussion with Tyler Rollins; part of America wants to get closer to the world. It may be a little wave, coming from the fringe of the 'most sophisticated art scene of the world'. But, any notable change is often small to begin with.

Here is part of my conversation with Tyler Rollins, formalised after my visit to his gallery, via e-mail.

Enin Supriyanto: How long have you been in the art business?

Tyler Rollins: I actually started out in the academic side of the art world and was finishing coursework for my PhD when I decided that I wanted to deal with the actual art objects themselves in a really physical rather than theoretical way. So about 10 years ago I began working in the business side. I had some amazing experiences working at Christie's, with a major art advisory, and as a private dealer myself before beginning to plan my gallery.

When did you decide to establish your own art space, and why?

About two years ago I decided that it was time to begin planning to open my own gallery. I felt it was so important to have a space in which to put on exhibitions that would engage in a dialog with the public. The opportunity to work with contemporary artists to create a well curated show for a specific physical space was very appealing. The creative dynamic between the artist, gallerist, and the public is something that is difficult to achieve without a permanent location that people can go back to again and again.

The New York art scene is vibrant and dynamic, yet very competitive. But, then, you want to focus on Southeast Asian contemporary art. Why?

The art scene here is indeed incredibly diverse and of the highest caliber, but I felt that there was a glaring lack of a steady presence of art from Southeast Asia. I have always been amazed by the stunning variety of the art scene there, and I noticed that so many well established, cutting edge artists of the region had never had solo exhibitions in New York, or the U.S., before. So I felt that there was a real niche that was not being filled. My vision was not just to create another Chelsea gallery, but to do something that would make a contribution, that would enrich and broaden the New York art scene as well as help expand the possibilities for Southeast Asian contemporary artists to gain a firmer foothold in the U.S.

TRFA has already hosted two shows of Southeast Asian artists, Siributtr and now Tiffany Chung. From these two shows, are you happy with results in terms of the reaction from the general art audience, collectors and gallerists? -- Aside from the fact that you get good media coverage.

Yes, I have been overwhelmed with the reaction. The art world here is very sophisticated, very curious about new things and willing to learn about other parts of the world. I've had such a positive response so far. I recall about a year ago I mentioned to a rather important critic about my planned gallery, and she literally exclaimed: "Do we really need another Chelsea gallery?" But when I explained that I had a major focus on Southeast Asian art, she immediately said: "Oh, well, that's different, that's really interesting."

We've met several times in different art events in Asia. You travel quite a lot to this region. What's your impression about the art scene there? Are you also working with some of the local galleries there?

The art scene in Asia is just overflowing with creativity, fed by the great diversity of cultures and artistic traditions. It is really multi-dimensional, not monolithic or dominated by one particular style or creative voice. Southeast Asia in particular is one of the most diverse regions of the world, and I think the art scene reflects that. It is truly an exciting place to be. I've been traveling throughout the region for over 10 years, and on every trip I always find something that surprises and excites me. That's what I want to bring back to the U.S. and share with collectors, curators and critics here.

You know and experience the NY art scene, or the U.S. in general—do you think that the art scene here is ready for Southeast Asian contemporary art? And, likewise, do you think that the artists from the Southeast Asian region are ready for this?

The answer is unequivocally "yes" and "yes"! As I mentioned, I think that people here in New York are so curious and open to the world. And I think that the recent rise of Chinese contemporary art has only increased people's desire to learn more about other parts of Asia. And Southeast Asian artists have been increasingly used to working on an international stage, working on projects throughout the region as well as in places like Japan and Australia. Everyone wants to show in New York at some point, and I think that there is a sense among artists that they really want to present their best work here, in a strong and coherent way. The pressures of the art world here can have a very positive effect on the process.

You have opened your space at a time of a global financial crisis which could be considered bad timing, but you seem to be well prepared for the worst. Any reasons for this optimism for the future of Southeast Asian contemporary art in the international art scene?

Well, I think it's pretty much a fact that, in general, Southeast Asian contemporary art is currently undervalued, particularly vis-à-vis art from China or the West. So I do not find myself in a situation where I am trying to sell art that is perceived to have reached, or to have passed, a peak in price. When you are dealing with art that is undervalued, with artists who are major talents but who have not yet achieved the kind of global recognition they deserve, then you have somewhat less to worry about during a period of market correction.

What's the upcoming show in TRFA? Are more Southeast Asian artists scheduled to show their works to the NY audience?

Yes, definitely! I have a whole roster of exhibitions planned out for next year. I'm going to be having solo shows of key artists from across Southeast Asia, such as Sopheap Pich from Cambodia and Ronald Ventura from the Philippines. I am so proud to be able to work together with them. It's going to be a very exciting year for all of us.