

The background of the cover is a complex, layered artwork. At the top, there is a horizontal border with a repeating red and black geometric pattern. Below this, a grid of small, square panels contains various figures and symbols, some in blue and brown tones. A large, prominent feature at the bottom is a large, colorful geometric shape, possibly a stylized mountain or a traditional architectural element, composed of multiple layers of red, blue, and black patterns. The overall composition is rich and textured, with a sense of depth and historical or cultural significance.

Soul, Spirit, and Mountain

Preoccupations of Contemporary
Indonesian Painters

Astri Wright

European and American art. He developed an affinity for the work of Karl Appel, Lucebert, Constant, and Jorn (members of the Cobra group) and deepened his old liking for artists like Kandinsky, Klee, Miro, and Chagall.⁶ What Nindityo liked about their work was their spontaneity and honesty. His own work became increasingly large-scale, focusing on only a few figures. Colour began to play a more important role than line in his work. Subject-wise, Nindityo was no longer as involved with the outer world. It seems that his serious involvement with themes and figures from Javanese mythology, such as Ganesha or Bima, began during this time (Spanjaard, 1987).

Since then, Nindityo's paintings have developed into dynamic abstract works, with forms that, upon closer investigation, yield interpretations of a personal-symbolic nature. The large canvases are generously covered with colours like blue-grey, dark ochre, sea green, orange-red, blue-red, and black, occasionally cut through with a primary red or yellow, all laid on in thick impasto with the palette knife. An original development has been the addition of carved and painted wooden beams, either as asymmetrical frames or, more often, as separate sculptural pieces that in different ways complement and enlarge on the presence and meaning of the painted canvas.

When Nindityo Adipurnomo returned to Indonesia in 1987, Mella Jaarsma returned with him as his wife. Since the founding of their gallery in February 1988, they have played a central role among the young artists in Yogyakarta. CEMETI Gallery is dedicated to showing the work of talented younger Indonesian

⁶The Indonesian artists cited in my 1988 questionnaire as his favourites are Nashar, an eccentric abstract painter in Jakarta, and Iwan Koeswanna, one of the young artists of the CEMETI group.

artists. The owners also exhibit young Western artists who have some connection with Indonesia. With monthly solo exhibitions eleven months out of the year, CEMETI plays an important role in Yogyakarta's art world, where only a handful of places occasionally exhibit works of modern art and where it is difficult for younger artists with no previous exhibition experience to be shown. To exhibit locally in CEMETI, a gallery run on a very low budget with a good public relations network and a mailing list that reaches across the nation, can be a stepping-stone to securing gallery space and sponsors in Jakarta, where national recognition and the larger art market beckon. Certain interrelations in art and thought exist among the young artists active around CEMETI, which, besides Mella and Nindityo, include Eddie Hara, Heri Dono, Iwan Koeswanna, and others. In their works, themes of mythology and folklore mix with more universal ideas about the pure art of children and commercial arts, such as cartoons (Plate 79).

Throughout 1988, many of Nindityo's semi-abstract paintings bore titles that referred to mythological characters and philosophical ideas from the Hindu-Javanese epics. Ganesha appeared frequently both in his drawings and in his paintings. Nindityo said that he identified with Ganesha in his role as protector, a role which underscores the solidarity and connectedness which he cherishes as part of interpersonal and neighbourhood relations in Indonesia. The figure of Bima—the second and the strongest of the five Pandawa princes from the *Mahabharata* epic, to whom ancient pre-Hindu cults are believed to have transferred their worship after the arrival of Hinduism (Stutterheim, 1956: 105–43)—also figures in Nindityo's work from this time. The story of Bima's dangerous descent into the world ocean

150. Dede Eri Supria, *Pushing a Burden*, 1984, oil on canvas, 140 × 160 cm, collection of the artist. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)



collectors. Highly respected among younger generations of artists and art students, he stands as something of a legendary rebel against the institution of the art school.¹¹ Many attempt to paint in the same style, but no one manages to copy successfully his powerful combination of stylistic and thematic elements and colour.

Experiments in Culture: Heri Dono

Heri Dono (b. 1960) (Plate 151) is among the most experimentally minded of the youngest generation of artists in Indonesia. Born too recently to be part of the New Art Movement, the ideas that

¹¹Dede is the subject of at least one *skripsi*, the baccalaureate-level thesis written by students at the art academies.

were considered radical in the mid- to late 1970s are today part of the modern Indonesian art heritage. Born in Jakarta, Heri was raised in a military family in Semarang, capital of Central Java. Wanting to be an artist since first grade, and painting since he was seventeen, he attended the art academy in Yogyakarta from 1980 to 1987, and has been active with the group of young artists around the CEMETI gallery.

Heri Dono's imaginary world seems to be the offspring of a community of images: Picasso's *Guernica*, Monty Python, New York graffiti, Western cartoons (both popular and avant-garde), New Order Indonesia, and his own laughter and nightmares. In his work, common human activities are contrasted with outrageous monster forms, often in the process of metamorphosis or



151. Heri Dono, 1988.
(Photograph Astri Wright.)

dismemberment, threatening each other with guns, teeth, and claws. The familiar and the fantastic, the ridiculous and the horrible, exist in a single medley of entwining forms in pictures which are sometimes absurd, sometimes cynical, and which range from the political to the erotic and the scatological. To respond to all of this with laughter, Heri says, is not merely the Javanese way of smoothing over potential social embarrassments. Laughter, he says, is an active healing agent in the therapy that everyone needs to deal with the realities of living. However, laughter can only be healing, if one learns to see things the way they are, including ugliness, around as well as within, and to acknowledge the absurdity of ourselves and others and the beasts with which we populate our internal and external worlds.¹²

Frequently collaborating with other young artists, Heri crosses boundaries

between art forms and media, at times infuriating the traditionalists. He has done installations, environmental art, and multimedia performances which radically transform the *wayang* shadow puppet tradition. To Heri, nothing is sacrosanct. He feels that problems of culture are the responsibility of the artist. Interested, committed, and experimental are key words in his discourse. Artists, he says, should strive to realize the national motto 'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika' (In Diversity, Unity), albeit in a different way than the approach taken by national television: 'What you see on TV is only museumizing the old days, things which are not relevant anymore. Just preserving it so they can put it in the museum ... where the only response is: "Oh! Good" or "Oh, terrible!" That is not active involvement ... that is not culture.'

Heri admits to strong influence from Western artists, from hours of looking at their work in the library of the art academy. He mentions Picasso, Joan Miro, and Van Gogh as artists he has studied closely. He sees the process of seeking inspiration in other artists' work as a natural one, part of the creative dialogue. 'From these books I know that many of the artists in the West also tried to be influenced by something different than their own culture.' Now, however, Heri feels it is more important to look to 'everything that is in Indonesia' for his inspiration. This does not mean, however, that he will only be looking at traditional crafts or classical performing and visual arts.

Munni Ardhi's comment in the debate around the New Art Movement is illuminating here:

Older people always judge us by contrasting West and East. The understanding of [what is]

¹²Where nothing else is noted, all quotations are from interviews with Heri Dono, Yogyakarta, May–December 1988, and correspondence up to late 1992.

the East is their own. I suspect whether they themselves really know about the East, or if they only know via tourists. For example, [in my sculpture] I use mannequins—which are always called ‘Western’. I use them as objects which I have seen here in Indonesia ever since I was little, until today (TEMPO, 1977a).

The year 1988 was a very prolific one for Heri. After his first solo exhibition at CEMETI in Yogyakarta in March, he held his second in June, this time in Jakarta. In August, he participated in an exhibition entitled ‘Wayang Kreasi’ (Creation Wayang) at the Purna Budaya in Yogyakarta, and travelled with the exhibition to Solo. In September, his ‘Wayang Legenda’ was performed in the Seni Sono building in Yogyakarta; he was producer, puppet-maker, writer, and chief narrator.

Heri’s involvement with *wayang* started when he became acquainted with Sukasman, a local puppeteer (*dalang*) and puppet carver. He is popular with younger generations who find his slightly eccentric puppets, cast in traditional characters, and his incorporation of coloured shadows into his performances exciting (Wright, 1988f). Even his most conservative critics cannot deny Sukasman’s wide knowledge of the history, symbolism, and methods of making *wayang* puppets. Combining knowledge of tradition with experimental freedom also characterizes Heri’s work.¹³

I am not worried about Javanese culture disappearing because of the influence of Western culture. . . . In my opinion it is not possible for a culture to fade or disappear, as long as there are people there who are actively creating. If there are no such people, why then the culture is already dead! (Wright, 1988f).

¹³Other artists are also experimenting with the medium of *wayang*, both creatively reworking traditional characters and stories, and incorporating new material. This was demonstrated at the ‘Wayang Festival’ in Jakarta in August 1988. However, none cross over as completely as Heri to a modern idiom.

Rather than explore the psycho-cultural dimensions of his own regional or ethnic group, as many Indonesian artists do, Heri scans all of Indonesia for ideas and inspiration. Giving contemporary formulation to the long-standing nationalist search for an Indonesian identity, he draws on ideas from cultures ranging from Sumatra to Irian Jaya, mixing and merging them with Javanese traditions and his own idiosyncrasies. This approach is clearly illustrated in two self-portraits which he has produced as postcards. One shows him as the Buddha, seated in meditation posture, his shoulders draped with cloth, and his hair gathered into a bun. The other shows him prostrate on a mat, wearing a sarong, his loose hair and head on a level with three skulls—a reference to the indigenous practice among Asmat and other peoples of honouring the skulls of dead ancestors and enemies by sleeping with them. Such eclecticism also characterizes Heri’s approach to the quintessentially Javanese form of *wayang kulit*.

To me, *wayang* is only a medium for expressing a story. And folk-tales, legends, and various types of folklore are widespread throughout Indonesia. Why do we only perform stories from the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and *Panji* epics? As an Indonesian, I feel the responsibility to make a contribution in the field of art. Say that each of twenty-seven provinces in Indonesia has five folk-tales. How many folk-tales could then be made into *wayang* performances? Wouldn’t *wayang* then truly become the property of the Indonesian people?¹⁴

¹⁴*Kedaulatan Rakyat*, 1988; no date on clipping supplied by the artist; author’s translation. The idea of expanding on the form and function of *wayang kulit* does not originate with Sukasman or Heri. Possibly for centuries, *wayang* has been used as an allegorical vehicle to ridicule and criticize leading figures in the community. After Independence, many experiments were carried out attempting to employ *wayang* as a tool for both educational and political work. To some extent,

152. Heri Dono, scene from 'Wayang Legenda', 1988. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)



The idea of using a Batak folk-tale arose from Heri's feeling that the characters of the classical *wayang* repertoire were not immediately relevant to daily life. There were other characters and different moral and dramatic situations that could be equally or more relevant. Heri, whose conversation is studded with references both to Western and Asian art, culture, and history, therefore chose a story which revolves around the legend of incest which explains Batak regulations for marriage. He read several versions of the legend before allowing characters and plots to begin to take shape in his mind. He made the puppets of cardboard, with grotesque and hilarious deformations hinting at Picasso, cartoons, and the patterns on Batak carvings and textiles. The week before the opening date, he had to shut himself in his room in order to finish the

puppeteers are still pressured to incorporate government propaganda into their performances, for example, in regard to family planning.

cutting and painting of the sixty-odd puppets, some of them still wet when the collaborative performance began. The use of two screens and two puppeteers rather than one, synthesized music rather than *gamelan*, and the highly original puppets, all combined to create a unique performance experience.

Besides retaining some of the timeless quality of the Batak legend, Heri's reformulation of it injects a sense of freshness, interspersed with both humour and melancholic poetry (Plate 152). The sensual and humorous puppet of the young woman is reminiscent of a primitive sculpture. The old shaman is as crooked and bent as only the full-time practice of magic can make one. The court dancers who perform for the lovelorn king have long arms and cowhorns but no legs, and the old woman who keeps asking the shaman to restore her youth and beauty so that she can find a young husband, is a delightful caricature of traditional female *wayang* servant characters.

Picasso and the cubists liberated the elements of the face and body from realism and three-dimensionality, pioneering new expressive possibilities for later generations of artists. Classical *wayang* figures, depicted in profile with great stylization of the human form, usually employ a single large eye for expression.¹⁵ In Solo, however, the convention is to show a part of the second eye on the other side of the nose bridge. As a modern artist, Heri Dono feels free to draw on all of these traditions: he blithely places two eyes on one side of a nose seen in profile, thereby adding more expressive power to the puppet's face.

In his paintings, Heri's concerns are, at the same time, more personal and more global. Reflecting such wide-ranging issues as the Chinese occupation of Tibet, hunger in Africa, the torture of political prisoners, unemployment and crime, the effects of gambling, drugs, and drinking, the state lottery, and violence in the media, his work exhibits an agenda beyond the purely aesthetic. One work Heri chose not to exhibit at his solo exhibitions was painted after hearing his friend tell how imprisoned student activists were forced to eat excreta. Other titles were *On Good Terms with Iron Hands, It's Probably Sir Corrupter, Shooting Hero, Pollution, Satan Looking for a Good Lottery Number, Face of Tibet, Kiss (War)*, and *Gifts from Bali*.

With his titles Heri seeks to add an important perspective to the reading of the work. Otherwise, he says, the work might not be perceived as speaking about something specific but only expressing his own feelings. 'An artist is someone who wants to serve art—but more important to me is, how can art serve humanity! That's what drove me to become an

¹⁵Deformation (*Deformasi*) is the term usually used by Indonesian artists for what Western art writers call stylization.

artist.' He admits, however, that the title may be more important to the artist than to the viewer, who will also bring his or her own experience to the work.

Stylistically, Heri's paintings are done in a zany, densely overlapping cartoonish style that does not suggest the subject directly, thereby demanding closer scrutiny. Indeed, the titles are frequently necessary to enable a reading out of chaos; this view posits that the artist, indeed, has the right to direct the viewer's mind in a certain direction through the employment of words. Often what looks funny at first glance has a nightmarish quality when studied more closely. Here is amputation, including castration imagery, a theme that would seem to warrant special investigation in a culture that has worshipped human potency in the form of the *lingga* and *yoni* for so long. There is surreal metamorphosis, and there are monsters and aliens who, through the titles, are connected directly with specific and real horrors occurring both locally and globally.

My obsessions are especially concerning problems of humanity. Before—I remember the problems of earlier times, such as political problems, social problems, etc. Since then I have matured and become more directed towards problems of humanity in general. I use humour in my work. Imagine, a person who doesn't look deeper into my paintings will laugh, see my work as an expression of hilariousness. But someone who enters into it might cry.... I am not only involved with problems of visual art. I am involved with tragedy.

Watching TV (Colour Plate 63) shows a small, illuminated square within a densely composed canvas, before which sits a group of three alien-like beings. Heri is here, among other things, playing with the image of E. T. from Spielberg's famous movie. The figures and their television are set against a ground of bright overlapping red, yellow, and orange areas. Two of the figures, monster

versions of mother and child, are involved with each other, one reaching for a plate on which lie the remains of a meal. The biggest monster is glued to the screen, mesmerized. His eyes are bulging; in one eye is reflected a small gargoyle head and in the other, a skull. On the television screen, a spiked boot becomes a hand, then a snake, and finally a double-barrelled gun. The gun shoots a bullet down the throat of a screaming, terrified, and helpless being who is begging for food under a burning red sun. To the side lies a femur bone, indicating that this is not the first victim.

At first glance, one's impression is that

of a science fiction cartoon. Then one starts reading the violence intruding into the domestic setting, where it is either not paid attention or not comprehended, the television functioning like a trance inducer. Neither the theme nor the style is entirely new. The interesting thing here is that this was not painted in Berlin or in New York. It was painted in Yogyakarta by an artist who had never been outside his native island and who was drawing on his own first-hand experience and general literacy.

Violence recurs in Heri's work, as in *Lebanon* or in *Killing Field*, and, more subtly, in *Campaign* (Colour Plate 64).



153. Heri Dono, *Spraying Mosquitoes and Smoking*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 100 × 100 cm, collection of the artist. (Photograph Astri Wright.)

'I am not involved in political or social problems, if you will—but my paintings, maybe they are identical with politics or with society. The main thing is that the social structure must be turned around 180 degrees.'

Another style of Heri's in the period 1985–7 appears to be inspired by Miro. Working with flat colours, isolated forms, and no shading, the figures, which are more abstracted and less indebted to the international commercial cartoon monster genealogy, are set in a two-dimensional and evenly lit world. In *Spraying Mosquitoes and Smoking* (Plate 153), strange creatures with thick bodies and thin limbs appear in isolation 'against a grey ground. The theme establishes the moment before disaster. A hand coming out of nowhere turns out to be a toy. Linked to another toy hand by a

thread, it is holding a spray can which emits a little puff of poison, depicted as a 'cute' little cloud. Mosquito-like creatures fall down, choking. The poison wafts into the open mouth of a strange beast standing on a boat, where another creature is calmly lighting up its pipe in the highly inflammable atmosphere.

Heri's imaginative forms are never more deceptively playful than in this style, where the multitude of strange beings and interactions emerge more clearly than in the densely overlapping style of the works above. Combining the two styles is *Between the Desire for Good and Bad* (Plate 154), where a single winged figure dominates a symmetrically composed canvas. The figure is painted in the humorous manner of the cartoon style, but its outlines stand out clearly against a neutral rather than a busy, layered background. Over the figure's right shoulder a blue parrot-like demon emerges; over his left, a more feminine figure grasps a flower. The expression is one of hesitation before a choice. The creature stares out at us, lost in the confusion of the moment, as he clutches his chest just below a small heart emblem.

Regarding the future of Heri Dono and other experimentally minded artists, the question is whether they will be able to find patronage in the predominantly conservative Indonesian art world.¹⁶ In

¹⁶Like people everywhere, most Indonesians do not tend to go to an exhibition unless the artist is well-known or some kind of sensation surrounds the work, such as in the case of the New Art Movement or Semsar. Similarly, the critics are not looking for new talent, even though the number of exhibitions in the 1980s was so small that anyone interested in art could easily make the rounds in a couple of hours a week. At Heri Dono's 1988 exhibition in Jakarta, attendance was fairly poor and no paintings were sold during the first six of seven days. No Indonesian critics reviewed it. On the sixth day, my review of the exhibition appeared in English in the *Jakarta Post*; on the last day of the exhibition, Heri sold ten paintings, nine to

154. Heri Dono, *Between the Desire for Good and Bad*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 100 × 100 cm, collection of the artist. (Photograph Astri Wright.)



1992, Heri returned from art and culture studies in Basel, Switzerland, and successful exhibitions there, in Holland, and in Germany. In late 1992, he was invited to Japan. If he can find patronage at home, it is clear that the Indonesian art world will continue to be enriched by the type of experimental creativity that Heri Dono's work represents.

Summary of Part II: Roles of the Artist

It remains for us to look at the roles perceived to be played by artists who participate in the perception of the mountain as an image of society, structured hierarchically, and who focus on that section of society that constitutes the largest part of the 'mountain'—the common people.

These artist roles are variations on the theme of what has been called the politically or socially engaged artist, although a widespread avoidance of the first formulation by Indonesian artists is well-ingrained. Traditionally, in the South-East Asian archipelago, overt and directed criticism has a tenuous place, always masked in humour and raucousness, as in, for example, the Javanese *wayang's* *goro-goro* sections. Here, the clown-retainers traditionally performed a critical function, comparatively safely because they spoke in low Javanese and not in the deliberate, proper, and 'refined' syntax and vocabulary of high Javanese. The avoidance of the label 'political' for art in Indonesia has been encouraged since the beginning of the New Order, both from official hold and inspired by personal memories of the political battles that

foreigners and one to an Indonesian painter. The prices ranged from Rp 50,000 (c.US\$28) for a 40 × 50 cm drawing, to Rp 4 million (c.US\$2,273) for a 300 × 200 cm oil-painting. None of the larger paintings were sold.

took place during the last years of the Sukarno regime and the violent end to the Old Order out of which emerged the New.

None the less, the first generation of modern Indonesian painters, emerging within the nationalist movement's sustained challenge to the traditional avoidance of challenging authority, did see their roles as political and activist. They were charged with the new idea that art could be a tool in political awakening, mobilization, and in the shaping of a national identity. S. Sudjojono, Affandi, Hendra Gunawan, Sudjana Kerton, and many others were frontline artists, whether participating directly in armed struggle, sketching on the battlefield, or making posters for the resistance movement. Also after Independence, their sense of identification with the Indonesian people manifests itself in different ways in their art.

This is also evident in the work of Djoko Pekik, who, although too young to have participated directly in the war of Independence, is old enough to have clear memories of it and, through his experiences with life in the impoverished countryside, to partake in a similar perspective. Semsar, although of an even younger generation, is conceptually related to these artists. His art is self-consciously radical, employing an iconography of political caricature with links both to European expressionists and Western and Asian leftist movements of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

Many of the painters in their late thirties and early forties refer to themselves as 'socially engaged', an engagement which embraces social, political, and aesthetic dimensions. These artists are protesting against the older generation's definitions of art, aesthetics, and 'Indonesian-ness'. In their art they attempt to express reality as they see it rather than according to the idealist and romantic modes of representation they

see prevailing in the established modern Indonesian art world. With the New Order avoidance of overt social or political criticism, some of these painters find absurd and surrealist styles to be most appropriate to their message. Their work reflects contemporary life in Indonesia, with its commercialism, its urban-rural polarities, and what they experience as increasing social alienation.

The 'mountain' is here at its furthest remove from the traditional image of cosmic-terrestrial order and harmony. Art can now function as a form of protest, though it is not always clear at whom it is directed and what its agenda for social action, if any, would be. A few painters, such as Dede Eri Supria, concentrate on depicting the encroaching

of an urban environment on an essentially rural culture. A few, like Heri Dono, approach the question of identity in novel forms, drawing on a pan-Indonesian catalogue of visual forms. Fewer still, like Moelyono, locate themselves in processes of change by creating collaborative works that speak to solidarity with those layers of Indonesian society who are felt to have no political representation.

Stylistically and conceptually, the younger artists are more in touch with the whole range of contemporary international styles than the first two generations of artists were. This has, since the 1970s, resulted in the inclusion also of conceptual art into the range of modern Indonesian expressions.