



THIS IS HISTORY

FX Harsono

BY HG MASTERS



(Previous spread)

PLYWOOD FENCE AND OUR FOREST,

1982, text, screen print on plywood, 120 x 15 cm,

length of installation: 600 m, installed at

Parangtritis beach, Yogyakarta, 1982.

(Opposite page)

KORBAN/BURNED VICTIMS, 1998,

performance-installation component,

burnt wooden torsos, metal frames,

burnt footwear, dimension variable.

All images in this article are courtesy the artist.

I find my ideas along the roads, in my bedroom, in workshops and theaters. There is no limit to the objects that can give rise to an idea, from the most unusual such as fences and doormats to the most generic such as flowers and women.

—FX Harsono, from the catalog for “New Visual Art of Indonesia 75,” at Taman Ismail Mazuki, Jakarta, August 2–7, 1975.

During the riots that swept Jakarta in May 1998, as the Suharto

regime crumbled, FX Harsono was living in an ethnically mixed neighborhood in the southern part of the city. Populist anger had turned the streets into dangerous places for members of the Chinese-Indonesian community—such as Harsono—who were perceived as having benefited from the protection and patronage of the authoritarian government. Amid a faltering economy, anti-Chinese riots had been occurring for the previous two years, and tens of thousands of Chinese, predominantly merchants and business people, had already fled the country. That May, more than 1,100 people were killed in Jakarta, many caught in the blaze when two shopping malls were set on fire; vandals and looters targeted Jakarta’s Chinatown and other Chinese-Indonesian businesses while carrying out a mass campaign of rape against Chinese-Indonesian women.

Although Harsono had been given an opportunity earlier that year to travel to Australia on an artist’s residency, he had decided not to leave home. He conceded in our recent conversation in Jakarta his conflicted feelings: “I wanted to watch what happened, but I was afraid to go out.” Just four days after the riots began, his mother passed away, and so he had to venture to the central train station—a journey that, in conversation, he didn’t describe directly. Instead, he paused to breathe, and an instant of remembrance flashed in his eyes, before saying only, “It was all right when I got outside of Jakarta.” Whether he had witnessed acts of violence that day, or was assaulted himself, Harsono has lived with brutal attacks and discrimination against the Chinese-Indonesian community for his entire life. These traumatic experiences have undoubtedly had an impact on his work, a fact that he does not try to obscure.

Just a few months after the riots, Harsono staged *Korban/Burned Victims* (1998), a performance-installation held at the nonprofit Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta. In a video of the occasion, assistants are seen dousing with gasoline nine armless, legless, raw wooden bodies attached to stakes. Then Harsono plants several placards in the ground, each bearing a phrase such as “*Dibuat Rusuh*” (“[They] Created Turmoil/Riots”), which he proceeds to scorch with a blowtorch, before turning around and setting the torsos themselves alight. He pauses a moment to let the bodies start burning and then crouches in front of them with a sign saying “*Siapa Bertanggung Jawab?*” (“Who Is Responsible?”), before walking and crawling in front of the blazing figures. When the flames begin to subside, he gets up and douses the bodies with more gasoline, reigniting the fires and further charring the surrogate bodies.

If this sounds like a brutal, angry protest against injustice and violence—like some depraved, cathartic ritual—it is. Yet Harsono himself retains a calm sobriety throughout. Later, for the exhibition, the scorched wooden bodies were placed horizontally in metal frames, each with a pair of torched shoes, to create a lasting memorial to, and condemnation of, Indonesia’s recurring scourge of communal violence.

Who Is FX?

FX Harsono is a kind, generous man. He smiles, he’s gracious and he’s accommodating. On a mid-May morning, he made a two-hour-long journey to a hotel in central Jakarta—through the city’s notoriously impenetrable traffic—to talk with me about his work, even though we’d never met and I’d called him only the day before. He’s patient and detailed as he explains to me the many historical references and nuances of his work. In addition to being one of the country’s first contemporary artists—that is, one who has broken with modernist practices, developing an artistic language that expresses a postcolonial and critical attitude toward history and society—he’s also a husband, a father, a teacher at the design school in Jakarta, and a mentor and role model to many younger Indonesian artists. When I saw him the following week in Hong Kong to continue our conversation, he was greeted everywhere we went with smiles and deference from others in the Indonesian art scene.

This sense of personal grace despite a lifetime of witnessing violence gets to the paradox of FX Harsono, whose artworks speak candidly but not belligerently about the Indonesian state’s perpetuation of discrimination and bloodshed. Born in 1949 in Blitar, East Java, Harsono came of age in the mid-1960s, a period that saw the tumultuous transition between the regimes of the socialist independence leader Sukarno (22 years) and the anticommunist “New Order” government of Suharto (another 31 years, until May 21, 1998). It was an era of sectarian and political violence, as communist political parties and groups affiliated with them were the targets of vigilante justice; more than 500,000 people were killed across the country during anticommunist purges in 1965 and 1966. The perceived sympathy of the Chinese-Indonesian community with the People’s Republic of China made it a target for the new anticommunist Suharto regime, which closed Chinese-language schools in 1966 and banned the use of Chinese characters in public places the following year.

While in his first year at a Catholic high school, in 1965, Harsono was asked by the military to come to a meeting to “prove” that he was not part of a Beijing-led conspiracy by agreeing to help maintain social order by any means. Other friends of Chinese descent from his neighborhood were forced to participate in brutal murders, but Harsono’s father saved his son by insisting that he stay at home on that day. Suharto’s policy was one of forced assimilation that pressured the Chinese-Indonesian community to demonstrate

its allegiance to the government in order to ensure its safety—a political and personal history that Harsono would circle back to more than 30 years later.

Despite his timidity and small frame, Harsono has always had a radical streak. His parents wanted him to go to medical school in Yogyakarta, but he made a surreptitious application to art school at the same time. He was accepted into the painting program at the Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia (ASRI), but not into medical school. Convinced that he would not be allowed to study art, he left home for Yogyakarta in 1969 to register in an engineering course for mining, and for less than a semester attended both programs. But he fell under the influence of Yogyakarta's cultural milieu, and particularly of the Sanggar Bambu arts collective, and started to concentrate solely on art—although “art” for him would quickly come to encompass politics, activism and social history.

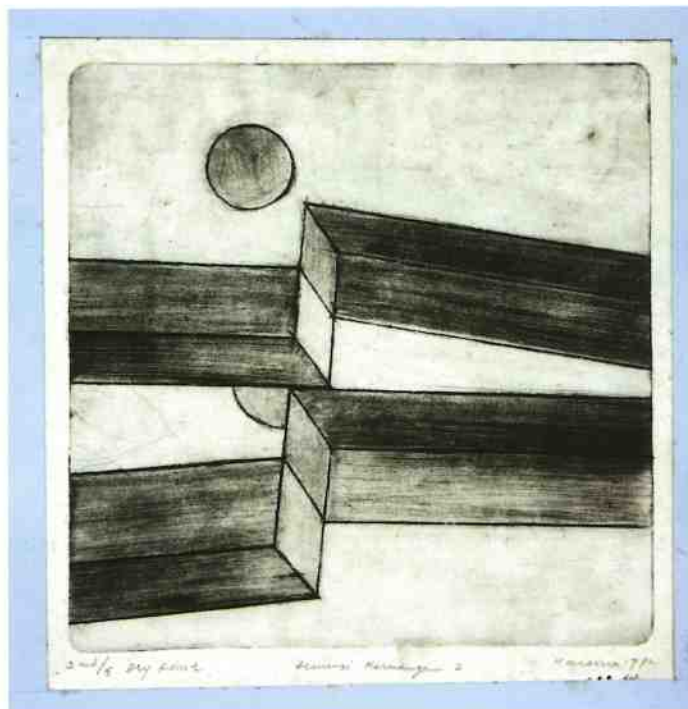
As with many young artists, Harsono's first artistic transgressions were against the strictures of representation. Under the guidance of the painter Fajar Sidik (1930–2004), Harsono made forays into geometric abstraction. Though very few of these works have survived, the drypoint etchings from his “Spatial Dimension” series (1972) reveal the tendencies of the period: a circle or two, perhaps like the sun or moon, rising or sinking between rhomboid forms that create the illusion of shallow fields of depth. He later remarked: “I wanted to make my own space that previously did not exist and is not an imitation of preexisting illusions of space.” Decisively nonemotional, and in striking contrast to the abstract-expressionist style prevalent in Yogyakarta's art scene at the time, the works are not revealing of the artist's “spirit.”

Meanwhile, as Harsono continued his art studies, mass student protests (and more anti-Chinese riots in Bandung, in August 1973) were roiling the country. Harsono quickly became deeply unsatisfied with his art's relationship to political events happening around him. As he told the Indonesian curator Hendro Wiyanto (an *ArtAsiaPacific* contributing editor) in 2010, “I felt my geometric style was very sterile and not grounded enough, as if I couldn't answer the call of the times.” In response, Harsono moved toward a real-world “arte povera,” adopting Dada-inspired tactics of employing simple daily objects, experimenting with cutting holes in his canvases and gluing found objects to their surfaces.

With fellow students Bonyong Munni Ardhi, Hardi, Nanik Mirna and Siti Adiati, he formed the Group of Five (Young Yogyakarta Artists), and engaged in fractious debates with other students and professors. In December 1974, Harsono joined a larger group in sending to the Jakarta Arts Council a floral wreath adorned with the ironic message, “Condolences for the Death of Indonesian Painting.” On the final day of that year, the Group of Five joined with eight other artists in signing the “Black December Manifesto,” whose five points included tenets such as, “It is the artist's calling to offer a spiritual direction based on humanitarian values and oriented towards social, cultural and economic realities.”

The ASRI faculty did not respond well to the upstart students' manifesto. Hardi and Harsono were suspended from the school—Harsono would never return—for the following reasons: “They [the manifesto's signatories] once exhibited bent sculptures including used underwear . . . Their Black December statement asking artists to orient their work towards socio-economics and politics, consists of words that should come from students of social studies and politics, not arts students. Mixing this up with politics is very dangerous.”

As Harsono explained to me, “After 1965—and the political trauma of that time—most of the artists were afraid of going to jail.” The art school's faculty, in punishing two of its students, was protecting itself. But there were also undercurrents of racism. At a hearing before his suspension, the examiner asked him, “Are you intending to destroy national culture?” Harsono's reply was: “We were in fact intending to open wider horizons.” In an era when artistic experimentation was construed as dissent, and perhaps rightly so, this was not taken lightly.



Of Their Own Invention

After his suspension, and without completing his studies at ARSI, Harsono left Yogyakarta in 1975, moving to Jakarta where he has lived ever since. He worked as a book designer at a publishing house and also organized the first exhibition of the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB, “New Visual Art Movement”) in Taman Ismail Marzuki in August 1975. It received a large amount of negative press and was the subject of opinion pieces throughout the country. As he recalled during our conversations:

From 1975 onward, we [GSRB] started to think about how to make an artwork that was not based on Western mediums, production processes and theory. Because, if we made a painting or sculpture, or any artwork, like a Western artist, the critics would say it's like a realist painting or an expressionist painting, and use the Western language to compare and critique us. So the question was how to indicate to people that all our artwork is not Western. We needed to find a way to talk about the situation now. We felt we could not only talk about Java or Bali or Sumatra; we wanted to present all of Indonesia. But the question was how? The political situation under the Suharto regime was the same across the country.

From this period comes work such as *The Most Top '75* (1975), a plastic-toy version of an M16 rifle vertically mounted in a wooden box, encased in chicken wire, with the title screen-printed on white fabric, forming a cross against the gun. Harsono chose the M16 because it was reportedly the best-selling weapon on the black market in Asia at the time; it was also a sarcastic rejoinder to the displays in Indonesia's military museums. *The Relaxed Chain* (1975)

(Opposite page)

SPATIAL DIMENSION 2, 1972,
drypoint, 20 x 20 cm.

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THE MOST TOP '75, 1975, plastic gun, textile,
wooden crate, wire mesh, 157 x 100 x 50 cm.
Collection of Singapore Art Museum.



is a sculpture comprising a mattress and pillows wrapped in chains; the meeting of metal and bare pillows suggests the violation of private space by an external rule. Speaking about those days, Harsono said in 1998:

My focus . . . was how presenting new forms can raise social issues using visual elements from day-to-day life, with the idea that:

- 1) daily objects (without changing their meaning) would easily be understood by observers, so they would be more communicative;
- 2) daily objects are visual elements that cannot be identified as a form of fine art; 3) daily objects can represent the spirit of experimenting and playing around.

Harsono, and his contemporaries, were effectively inventing their own form of postmodern art. Dada and Duchamp were popular inspirations, but, as most artists at the time could not read the English or other European languages in the few available art books, the ideologies or intentions behind the movements were unknown. They took their cues from the images and, seeing that traditional painting and sculpture had been rejected long before their time, they were emboldened to liberate themselves as well.

After a series of shows from 1975 to 1979, the members of the GSRB chose to disband the group due to disagreements. Reflecting on this dissolution, Harsono told Wiyanto in 1998: "I feel that the arts scene creates an imaginary world disparate from its community. From here I came to realize that I and my work had to be part of my society."

In an effort to make his work more socially constructive and to learn about political realities, he sought out community-activist groups and NGOs such as the Indonesia Environment Collective and Indonesia Researchers' Association. The first of his activist-oriented, research-driven works, *Plywood Fence and Our Forest* (1982), consisted of wooden sticks planted in the sand along 600 meters of the popular Parangtritis beach near Yogyakarta. Inscribed on one side of the sticks were statistics about the destruction of tropical forests. The mode of display—very public, and outside the confines of a gallery—was a kind of avant-gardism, yet the messages on the sticks were those of an activist.

Following on from this first piece of environmental art, Harsono co-organized the group exhibition, "Process 85," at Galeri Pasar Seni Ancol (today, the North Sea Art Space), assembling an environmentally focused display of artists' projects about the hamlet of Luar Batang in North Jakarta, where the residents had suffered from heavy-metal poisoning after eating fish from the harbor. "From 1985 onward," Harsono reflected to me, "I started to make works based on research"—this was a methodology that, in his case, instigated both artistic experimentation and political agitation.

Symbolic Power Plays

Between 1985 and 1994, the year of his first monographic exhibition at the National Gallery of Indonesia, Harsono delved not only into activist campaigns but also into the language of popular culture. He and other former members of the GSRB, including the artist (and later curator) Jim Supangkat, organized "New Visual Arts Project 1: Fantasy World Supermarket" in June 1987, a display that was meant to resemble a supermarket, with collectively produced posters based on Marlboro advertisements and other iconic symbols of a globalized marketplace. And, in the meantime, Harsono finished his schooling at the Jakarta Arts Institute, which allowed him to teach. He also taught himself graphic design and, already inclined to write forcefully about his own artworks, started a short-lived art magazine called *Dialog Seni Rupa*, published from 1990 until 1992. He attended a three-month residency in Adelaide in 1992, where his English improved and he learned more about global trends in contemporary art. Another important landmark was his inclusion in the first Asia Pacific Triennial, at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1993, for which Supangkat was a curator. Such events



gave him (and others) an opportunity to travel abroad, marking the beginning of the Indonesian art scene's involvement with a wider regional community.

In artistic terms, the 1990s heralded an increasingly emboldened Harsono, who had honed his ability to work with popularly legible symbols to fashion artworks that were also challenges to the politics of the day. The full force and clarity of his practice was realized in "Suara (Voice)," an exhibition held in 1994 at the National Gallery of Indonesia that Harsono reportedly had to fund himself, in part by selling his car, as well as by soliciting donations from local newspapers. The show was filled with works from the previous two years critiquing the structures of societal control. In *Power and the Oppressed* (1992), a chair is surrounded by barbed wire, while a single candle burns on the seat of the chair. In front are 20 piles of soil, on each of which is a white cloth splattered with red ink and broken branches. Hanging behind the chair are images of a *keris* (a Javanese jagged dagger) and the ornamental motif of fire. The broken, bloodied-looking sticks arranged on the piles of earth powerfully suggest an agrarian population broken through its obeisance to an authoritarian ruler. Recalling the installation, Harsono stated: "Our ability to evoke chairs as the symbol of a ruler is not merely an ability to interpret the symbol, but the ability of our imagination to find symbols to articulate an accurate social critique.

The broken branch is the symbol of an enforced will, followed by its power to destroy or extinguish others' will."

Harsono's protests against the state's suppression of popular expression at the time were made explicit in two of his most seminal works. A direct response to the government's closing of *Tempo* magazine for exposing corruption in the Suharto regime, *The Voices Controlled by the Powers* (1994) is an arrangement on a black cloth of 100 *Panji* masks—used in dance performances celebrating mythical heroes—all sawed in half at the mouth. Rows of the upper parts of the heads surround and trap the mouth pieces, just as the "eyes" of the state—of authority—menaced the voices. Similarly, the suppression of public calls for reform is the topic of *Voice without Voice/Sign* (1993–94), in which nine silkscreened panels, about one and a half meters in height, leaned against the wall, each bearing the image of a hand forming a letter in sign language. The hands spell out the letters D-E-M-O-K-R-A-S-I. In the final panel, the hand spelling out the "I" is shown bound in rope. In front of the canvases were stools and stamps with pads of paper, so that visitors could spell out the signed letters for themselves.

Harsono's penchant for research-based works continued in *Voice of the Dam* (1994), for which he interviewed residents of Sampang on Madura, a poverty-stricken island off the east coast of Java, where several residents had been killed after they refused to sell

their property in order to allow the government to construct a dam. The installation itself represents that community, and comprises five microphones on stands, each placed in front of an object: a chili tree, Maduranese clothes, the window of a mosque, wooden decorative panels and water pots. Harsono recalls, "I met with the Muslim leader and people there, and asked them what happened in the place in 1992 and 1993. I was asking more about cultural issues, not just political ones. Questions like: 'What do you think about the land?' So in the installations it seems like the pots are talking." The work is practically journalistic, like a documentary film deconstructed into sights and sounds that have been captured on location.

Yet the careful calculation embodied in these "Voice" works was replaced, just three years later, by a palpable anger. Harsono created his first performance, the bluntly titled *Destruction*, in April 1997, for "Slot in the Box," a group show at Cemeti Art House. The event was held in Southern Town Square, Yogyakarta, right before a national election, during the "silent week" when public assemblies are not allowed, and by his actions Harsono put himself at risk of arrest. Wearing a gray business suit, white shirt and red tie, Harsono played a tyrannical king from traditional *wayang* performances, painting his face in red with white fangs in the style of the demon-ruler Ravana. Wielding a blowtorch and an oversized chainsaw, he placed *Panji* masks atop three chairs to symbolize the three political parties allowed to stand for elections. Lighting up a blowtorch, he then set the masks and chairs on fire, before revving up the meter-long saw and hacking the scorched piles into pieces. In the video recording of the performance the machine is almost too powerful for the task, as it kicks pieces of the chairs toward Harsono. After the fact, Harsono said: "My aim was to illustrate to the audience, in the hope of an emergence of awareness, that all conflicts carried out with repression and militaristic means will have victims, and that the manipulation of information will give rise to the fabrication of history." In moving his practice into the realm of performance, Harsono was attempting not to produce an aesthetic object but rather to raise awareness of history.

Affirmation: Yes, I Am Chinese

At the Jakarta hotel, while Harsono was willing to talk about his past work, he was evidently filled with thoughts about his own heritage and the history of the Chinese-Indonesian population (known in Indonesia as *Tionghoans*). Both his parents were Chinese, though his maternal grandmother was Javanese. Harsono was born Oh Hong Boen—which, by coincidence, means "abundance of art"—but baptized as a Catholic, Fransiskus Xaverius, after the Spanish saint and cofounder of the Jesuit order who toured widely in southeast Asia. Harsono's family has lived in Indonesia for five or six generations, yet when he turned 18 he had to choose whether to take Indonesian citizenship, and select an Indonesian name.

At the end of World War II, after the Japanese surrendered in 1945, the Dutch tried to recolonize Indonesia, fighting against indigenous forces. And, because Chinese communities were believed to be working with the Dutch army, the Indonesian army along with vigilante groups rounded up and slaughtered Chinese residents in villages across the country. The cycle of violence would continue for the next half-century—Suharto's regime relied on the Chinese community for economic infrastructure while periodically turning popular sentiment against them. It was not until 2000 that the Indonesian state permitted public displays of Chinese culture and traditions, and another three years until president Megawati Sukarnoputri designated Chinese New Year as a national holiday.

As Indonesia's government removed restrictions on the Chinese-Indonesian community during the 2000s, this personal history and national cultural history became an increasing preoccupation for Harsono. Learning about the community's history fueled the creation of more artworks, beginning with something deeply personal. *Rewriting the Erased* (2009) is a video in which Harsono sits writing at

(Opposite page)

POWER AND THE OPPRESSED, 1992, branch, textile, soil, chair, barbed wire, dimensions variable, installed for ARX 3 (Artists Regional Exchange), Perth, 1992.

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DESTRUCTION, 1997, performance in Southern Town Square, Yogyakarta, for the group show "Slot in the Box" by Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta, 1997.

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DESTRUCTION, 1997, performance-installation component, burnt logs, metal frames, wooden masks, television, dimensions variable, installed for solo exhibition "Victim" at Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta, 1998.



a desk in a black room, surrounded by a grid of tiles with his name on it, as if he is practicing the characters (they are the only ones he can write in Chinese), or, more metaphorically, repeating some kind of trauma. Another spin on this idea, in reverse, is *Writing in the Rain* (2011), in which Harsono is seen through a large pane of glass on which he writes his Chinese name in ink. As he repeats the gesture, over the course of six minutes, the black ink obscures his face, like a cloud. All of a sudden, rain-like water begins to pour down the glass, removing the ink, though Harsono continues to paint his name. A puddle of black, ink-stained water appears at his feet, and the name is lost, perhaps the way the young Harsono himself lost the ability to write his own name.

As Harsono was telling me about Chinese history, he was also explaining his own family's relationship to what happened in Indonesia. In 1951, Chung Hua Tsung Hui, a Chinese-Indonesian NGO, formed a team to find the mass graves of those from the community killed around Blitar in 1947–48. Harsono's father ran a photography studio in the city at the time and documented the graves as they were uncovered. Harsono found these photographs and used them for the installation *Darkroom* (2009), a gallery bathed in red light like a photographer's developing area, in which his father's photographs float in chemical solutions. Harsono also took these same pictures of mass graves and paired them with contemporaneous portraits of his family—for instance, his parent's wedding, or himself as a baby—to create a painting series called "Preserving a Life, Terminating Life" (2009). In each, a line of red text runs across the middle of the canvas with words explaining the two simultaneous events, joining on the canvas the recovery of one generation of murdered Chinese-Indonesians with the establishment of the next. Harsono even made his own 21-minute documentary, *The Light of nDudah* (2009), showing him trying to locate the areas depicted in his father's pictures and interviewing surviving eyewitnesses.

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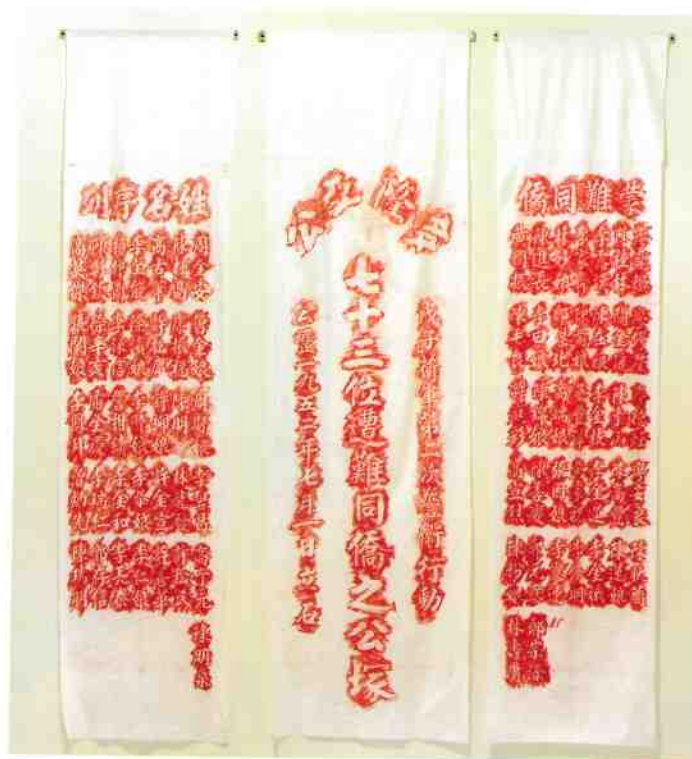
WRITING IN THE RAIN, 2011,
wooden chair and desk, television,
single-channel video, dimensions variable.

(This page, left)

DARKROOM, 2009, C-print on photo paper,
acrylic sheet, steel, plywood, lamp, dimensions
variable, installed for "The Erased Time" at
National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, 2009.

(This page, right)

REWRITING ON THE TOMB, 2013,
pastel rubbed on fabric, dimensions variable.



Out of Destruction

In early July, Harsono emailed me images of the works he had just completed for his new exhibition at the Jogja National Museum, "What We Have Here Perceived as Truth, We Shall Some Day Encounter as Beauty," curated by Hendro Wiyanto. The title is taken from a line in Friedrich Schiller's poem "The Artist" that Wiyanto has inverted to signal Harsono's interest in foregrounding ethics over aesthetics in his artworks. Indonesia's history as a multicultural nation is being forgotten, and this remains Harsono's primary concern: "How do we step into the future, if we don't know about the past? This exhibition is not just about identity; it's not only just my sentimental feelings for the Chinese, because I am Chinese. This is history, which is never shown to other people."

The artworks he created for Yogyakarta tell aspects of this story, as well as his own process of rediscovery. In *Journey to the Past/Migration* (2013), a boat is filled with red electric candles, and appears to have run aground on a pile of terra-cotta letters; a chair with a Chinese fan and a lamp above it look on, as if marking the lifestyles the immigrants brought with them. Harsono also showed me a video of the installation *The Raining Bed* (2013). The work features a Chinese-style bed frame, on which, in place of the mattress, are ceramic tiles. A steady rain falls above the bed, as an LED text display gives information about the history of the Chinese-Indonesian

community as it tried to establish a home in Indonesia. Another new work, *Rewriting on the Tomb* (2013), is a collection of frottages—red-pastel rubbings on fabric—of the tombs that mark those killed in the 1940s. In the exhibition catalog, Harsono writes:

History does not only serve as a source of inspirations for the creation of my artworks, but also provides me with a new sense of awareness about how to serve fellow humans and the Indonesian nation . . . A nation matures not because of the brilliant events and successes, but rather [because of] how the nation courageously recognizes their past mistakes and learns from them . . . At the very least I will demonstrate to the public that there is another version of history that has truly taken place.

For a generation of artists—not just in Indonesia but around the world—as countries have emerged into the postcolonial era into often regrettably nationalistic and repressive self-governance, the writing of history has fallen into the hands of artists such as Harsono. The thing is, that transition has been a struggle, not a beautiful process, and consequently the resulting artwork is often not beautiful either. Harsono has privileged ethics, politics and social history over aesthetics. It is something that, as Wiyanto signals, will someday be regarded as a beautiful struggle. ●