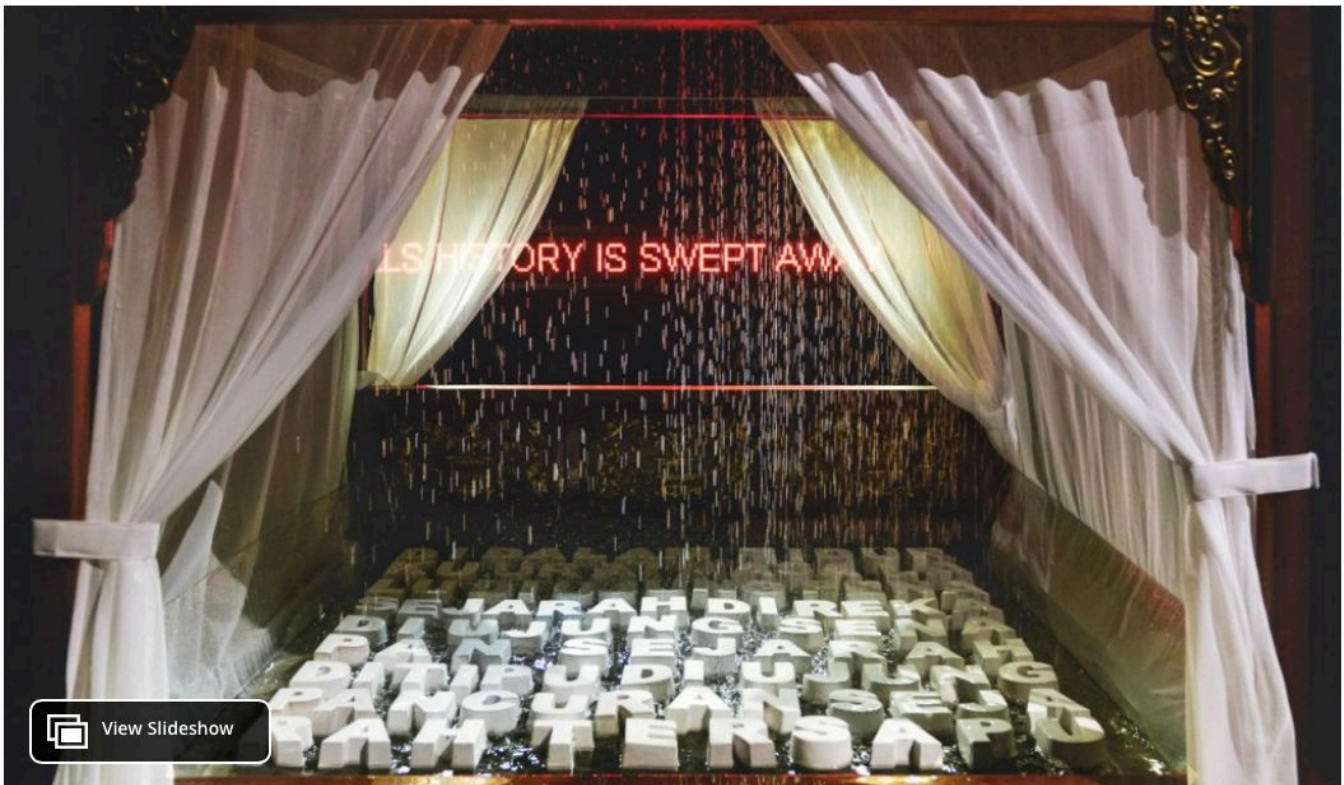


20th Sydney Biennale Q&A: FX Harsono's Poetic 'Raining Bed'

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | MAY 22, 2016



FX Harsono, Ranjang Hujan (The Raining Bed), 2013, wooden bed, stainless steel, pump machine, water, ceramics, fabric, LED running text, 200 x 250 x 200 cm. Installation view (2016) at Carriageworks for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy the artist and ARNDT Art Agency, Singapore and Berlin. Collection of John and Cheryl Chia, Singapore. Photograph: Leila Joy

The 20th Biennale of Sydney “The future is already here — it’s just not evenly distributed” presents more than 200 works by 83 artists from 35 countries across seven venues or “Embassies of Thought” as well as multiple “in-between spaces” around the inner city. Curated by Stephanie Rosenthal, Chief Curator at the Hayward Gallery, the 20th Biennale of Sydney is on show from March 18 – June 5, 2016.

Throughout the duration of the Biennale, BLOUIN ARTINFO will feature a series of interviews with participating artists. In the interview below, Indonesian contemporary artist Fx Harsono discusses his multifaceted installation “Ranjang Hujan (The Raining Bed)” 2013 in the Embassy of Disappearance at Carriageworks (more info here).

As the title of the installation suggests, the main structure of the work is an ornately carved traditional Peranakan bed. Within the bed a cascade of water rains down upon one of the artist’s poems in ceramic letters, while on the bedhead a scrolling LED sign depicts the text of the poem in both Indonesian and English. The poem reads:

“Dalam tidur kuurai masa lalu, di ujung pena sejarah direka, di ujung senapan sejarah ditipu, di ujung pancuran sejarah tersapu.”

“In my sleep the past unfolds / At the tip of the pen history is invented / At the tip of the rifle history is fooled / by the end of the falls history is swept away.”

Could you describe the work that you will be presenting at the 20th Biennale of Sydney 2016 and the motivation and inspiration behind its creation?

“Raining Bed” is a reproduction of a Chinese bed, although the ornamental elements indicate a mix of Chinese, European, and local culture. This is to depict a Chinese culture that has developed in a new area, always mixing with local culture so it becomes a Chinese culture unlike the original culture that was brought by the ancestors. This is what is referred to as Peranakan Chinese culture.

History does not only serve as a source of inspirations for the creation of my art works, but also provides me with a new sense of awareness about how to serve fellow humans and the Indonesian nation. This reality was the source of inspiration for the creation of “Raining Bed.” The bed and bedroom are a person’s most private place. The bed is not only the place where all of a person’s private activities take place, but also the space for peaceful rest and for contemplating what has taken place.

How does the work you are presenting at the 20th Biennale of Sydney connect with your ongoing practice and the interests and preoccupations that form the basis of your work?

I am interested in the issue of Chinese identity and history in Indonesia since 2005. Prior to that I made works that highlight social and political issues in Indonesia, where at the time Soeharto’s regime with military support ruled a repressive government. There was no freedom of speech, among other things. After the fall of Soeharto in 1998, I began to highlight the theme of Chinese identity and history, as it is related to myself as an Indonesian of Chinese descent. Since 2005 I have carried out research on issues of the Chinese in Indonesia. My current project researches the Chinese who were massacred during 1946-1949 in Java Island.

The 20th Biennale of Sydney 2016 is presented at seven main venues conceived as “embassies of thought.” In what ways does the work you are presenting reflect and connect with the theme and context of the particular embassy in which it is situated?

Disappearance is very much connected to my work theme in that it highlights the repudiation of the Chinese role in the Indonesian national history. Within the national history of Indonesia, the Chinese are considered to have no role, because the Chinese, although they had already become Indonesian citizens, are still considered as foreign or not true Indonesians. Therefore their roles are considered to be insignificant and not deemed worthy to be included in the history of Indonesia.

One of the key ideas that this Biennale explores is how the common distinction between the virtual and the physical has become ever more elusive. How does your work engage with this idea?

There is often a gap between the Virtual and the Physical that causes the audience difficulties in understanding the work. This is mainly caused by the audience’s ignorance of the background of the work’s production process and also on the historical background from which the idea grows. This matter becomes highly apparent when artworks adheres to the context of social and cultural issues. To bridge the gap, I tried to describe the historical background of which the work is created. Also, I consider the use of text in work production process as important. In contemporary art, the use of text is common, not as information but rather as an expression of thought as well as visual expression. Where text usually helps a lot for the audience to understand the work.

Furthermore, the metaphors and symbols I chose are closely related to the context of issues and the historical context – for example, by the representation of the artifacts, archives, or data with layout or combination to other objects that I deem able to bring new values to the artifacts, archives, or objects. The forms and purpose of the artifacts, archives, or found objects are already familiar to the public so their meanings will be more easily understood. The representation of these objects enables the audience to more easily understand the meanings of my work.

What do you want to convey and/or express with the work you are presenting at the 20th Biennale of Sydney 2016?

With the work I want to show that historical narrative is not singular, that truth is not singular. Each individual, each ethnicity, and each community has different historical backgrounds. Small historical narrative must remain to be seen as the truth of a certain society. Small historical narrative and its linkage to the grand narrative cannot simply be written off. Therefore I consider the role of the Chinese in building the sense of nationalism and their roles in the war of independence against the Dutch colonial empire cannot simply be written off. Even if those roles are deemed unimportant, they still existed.

(Source: May 22, 2016 <<http://ca.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1409059/20th-sydney-biennale-qa-fx-harsonos-poetic-raining-bed>>)