

THE DYING KING & I

January 28 - February 11, 2008



Foreword from the Gallery

Happy New Year of 2008! May the blossoming art market of last year get more sensible and meet with the proper response of the ever-improving quality of the works by our artists this year onwards.

Nadi Gallery has held Heri Dono's solo exhibitions several times. The solo exhibition "*Humor Rumor (di) Republikartun*", 15 September — 1 October 2000, marked the official opening of Nadi Gallery's operation. And now Nadi Gallery's exhibition agenda for 2008 begins with Heri Dono's solo exhibition "The Dying King and I".

Presenting Heri Dono — one among the Indonesian artists most frequently appearing on the international stage for art — to open the current year, Nadi Gallery wishes to get contaminated by the artist's verve and hard working in promoting Indonesian contemporary art in the international art community. As the initial step, Nadi Gallery already plans to take part, beginning this year, in a number of art events abroad.

It has been a long time since the current exhibition was planned some one and a half years ago. Because of Heri Dono's extremely tight schedule, however, it is only now that we can have the exhibition here. In this exhibition Heri Dono presents his new works, which are installations and his "diary" in the form of painting.

Thank you to Heri Dono who amidst his busy schedule abroad was willing to spare time for the very serious preparation of this exhibition. Thanks also go to Enin the curator for the cooperation. And I thank Butet Kartaredjasa as well for his presentation opening the exhibition.

Biantoro Santoso

Heri Dono, *The Dying King and Us*

While this exhibition was being prepared, Indonesian mass media was – and is – obsessed by the single news item of Suharto the New Order leader being seriously ill. It seems like everyone busies her/himself checking and discussing it. The news of Suharto's illness beat other news about the life of the many facing a lot of adversities: the mudflow in Sidoarjo remaining unsolved, to be coupled with floods and land slides afflicting different parts of the country, with people's lives, possessions and agricultural land lost and destroyed. Then the problem of food: soybean scarcity makes tahu (a kind of soybean curd) and tempe (made from fermented soybean) difficult to find and expensive, triggering tahu and tempe makers to organize a demonstration in front of the presidential office in Jakarta. Think about it: the people inventing tempe, producing and consuming it as the world's largest producers and consumers, find it hard to get the raw material. Isn't this a very serious matter? But it has to be rendered less important than the sickly and, perhaps, dying Suharto.

Such situation contributes to the atmosphere of the preparation of this exhibition of Heri Dono's latest works. In fact, a large part of Heri Dono's works has so far had something to do with the issue of ruthless, corrupt and unjust, or absurd power, including that of Suharto. As far as it concerns me, I, who in my student years suffered Suharto's repression and was jailed, have "something to settle" with Suharto. So, curating the exhibition, I am quite sensitive and enthusiastic to be immediately involved in exciting discussions with Heri Dono on any topic concerning Suharto. Such discussions were of course inserted by jokes and laughter as we were talking about his paintings that in some way present criticizing allusions to Suharto or other authorities.

Before dealing with the works by Heri Dono shown in his forth solo exhibition, in collaboration with Nadi Gallery, I'd like to discuss briefly some issues immediately related with Heri Dono's creative approach and visual codes. It is true that the subject has been often dealt with since Heri Dono's entrance to the stage of Indonesian contemporary art in the 80s with his painting, performance and

various visual resources and methods known in the realm of popular culture – coming from both foreign and local cultural institutions – ranging from comics, animation film, wayang puppetry, and through various skills in material processing, craft, performing art, also popular music – he works on and presents in his various art works.

Two issues are I think relevant to deal with here, after some twenty years of Heri Dono's activities in contemporary art both in the country and abroad. The first one is how to take the changes and developments of his works, paintings particularly. Many people see that Heri Dono's painting has eventually come to the phase of "just repeating things". Perhaps such judgment comes because people do not try to know and comprehend the central idea that provides the main energy driving Heri Dono to keep painting. The central idea is easily identifiable from Heri Dono's own remark on "why he paints" or "what painting means" to him as an artist.

In a conversation with Hendro Wiyanto, the curator of Heri Dono's solo exhibition "Heri Provokes Heri" (Nadi Gallery, 26 June – 7 July 2002), the artist said, "Yes, I have a theory on (my) painting. In essence, painting is the same with personal letters. Painting provides a medium for individual expression, done individually, not expecting others to join by adding things and suggesting ideas". I brought the same question when I visited him at his studio recently. The answer he gave doesn't change much. This time he said: "My painting is like my journal on various issues." Being a journal, a diary, it may concern anything. But everything there is personal in nature. As for installation and performance, Heri Dono sees them as different kinds of work: their nature is collaborative and they often represent interactive responses to the themes of given events, spatial conditions, occasions, and social settings when the works are made or presented.

With that in mind we can see that, indeed, Heri Dono doesn't change much. He still firmly holds his idea of painting. But this also explains that our expectation to see him change is perhaps

"personal letters" and "notes in a diary"? ("Letters" and "notes in a diary" here refer to the "old fashioned" ones that are handwritten in ink and not typed as e-mail or web-blog entries.) Obviously, it is too much if we expect to see some drastic change in the type of the visual appearance of someone's personal letters and diary. The shape and the way of writing naturally don't change much from time to time. Perhaps, even the way he works with language in his writing doesn't change a lot too. But certainly, the changings must be on the issues contained in such notes and also, perhaps even his views of an issue that shift and develop with the passing of time.

The same goes for Heri Dono and his paintings. The way he paints, technically speaking, as well as his language of expression, maintain his characteristic hitherto known: Heri Dono's "handwriting" and "idiolect". The figures and beings filling the field of his canvas keep on traversing, somersaulting, their round eyes popping, mouths grinning or laughing or unclosed or opening widely to show protruding lines of teeth or canines. Those figures and various beings seem so familiar with violence. They are often present with weapons inserted here and there on their bodies. This is coupled with organs, or parts of the body, that can extend to reach and grab anything with pointed claws, or spurred heels.

Those bodies with their various parts are able to grow wildly – the eyes, ears, tongues, hearts, livers, bellies, sex organs and others – seem to have their own vitality in Heri Dono's painting – apparently highlighting Heri Dono's view of the dark side of humans still carrying the traits of the savagery of prehistoric animals. Heri quite frequently features the dinosaur, which he twists to "Donosaur", as a scornful personification of prominent figures notorious for their being cruel and authoritarian. With their all unlikely forms, weapon-equipped and savage, the bodies of the beings and figures in Heri Dono's painting are those that manipulated by desire & greed, bodies that merely move as lust machines. So their tongues can extend and transform to fire or to have heads of still other kinds of beings, wanting to lick or gulp anything. From the heart or the belly, huge horrifying hands emerge and reach out. The male sex organ seems to keep dripping something, like the gushing of unquenchable libido.

I think the images of such beings and figures can be taken as a logical consequence of Heri Dono's viewpoint of humans, life and the surroundings. He often calls his viewpoint "animism". His own version of animism, of course. This animistic view renders everything as containing life. In animated film and cartoon he's fond of, life provides the prime issue. Anything can be alive in the absurd cosmology of cartoon. Furthermore, anything may happen to cartoon characters but they never die. Even if they should die, they come to live again in various ways and for various reasons. The cosmology presented in Heri Dono's painting is similar to that: everything can live and has the right to live.

From this point we move to the second issue regarding this exhibition. Why do Heri Dono's paintings keep offering socio-political issues – in a broad sense – and power in particular? Or, more specifically, how is Heri Dono's cosmology of "animism" related to the various disorders in the social world as the result of the ruthless political practices by a cruel, authoritarian and corrupt ruler – which eventually connect Heri Dono and "the Dying King"?

Being realized or otherwise, the "animistic" cosmology of Heri Dono's art – which accepts and treats life as omnipresence – seems to be parallel with the Foucaultian idea of power. Foucault sees that power is also pervasive, omnipresent in the social sphere. Seen this way, there is parallelism between "animism" in Heri Dono's art works and the liberty to deal with various socio-political themes as the most visible manifestations of various kinds of the contest for power in social life.

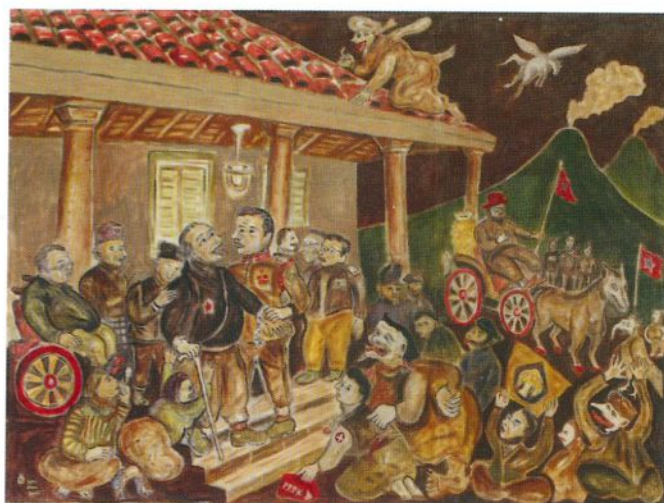
Obviously this doesn't mean that we have to treat Heri Dono's works as some resistance of the power of the government, for instance. Power, like life, cannot be just imagined and treated as something negative, oppressive. It is far more worthwhile to think that through the narrative in works, Heri Dono actually offers a modest discourse, presented to the public space, as a way to enrich the existent discourses. Knowledge and discipline, for instance, are forms of power domination that reveals how contests, on the discourse level, is controlled and driven toward the fulfillment of the interest of a

certain power. Critical observation of the common viewpoints concerning Suharto, currently as he is dying, for example, may reveal the dominant discourses remaining effective all around us. In his own way, which is full of mockery – that is sometimes silly – Heri Dono opens the door for various discourses. A contest among discourses is also a contest of power.

Following the clamorous *Reformasi* at the end of the 90s, Indonesia began entering an era of political practice that is more or less democratic. Yet, if we look at what has been happening lately regarding the sickly Suharto, it seems that Suharto's power remains omnipresent. Even before his death, his ghost already wanders to scare many people. Talking about his wrongdoings in governing when he was president is still a taboo for many, including even political leaders that are in power. Even to make the decision for Suharto to go through the legal process to prove he is guilty or not – a most natural process in a democratic system – becomes complicated, protracted, and blurred. It seems that in this country, even after the *Reformasi* (reformation), discussing Suharto's wrongdoings is as taboo as discussing the negative aspects of a King in an absolute monarchic system. In comparison, even in China with its government remaining centralized in the Communist Party of China, we can see how the great leader, Chairman Mao, presents in various styles and types of contemporary art works.

With the developing social atmosphere in Indonesia today, we can see that there is a kind of dominant discourse that hinders the potential exchange of open and democratic discourses in public space when discuss things about those in authority and their power. This time Heri Dono's works just offer themselves to be the media of such exchange.

In the work "*Salah Tangkap Pangeran Diponegoro*" (2007)*—parodying the famous painting "Penangkapan Pangeran Diponegoro" ("The Capture of Pangeran Diponegoro") (1857) by Raden Saleh — Heri Dono's wickedness and sense of humor are obvious in offering a "different" viewpoint concerning the (fictive) trial or capture of Suharto. He describes how politicians kneel like



Salah Tangkap Pangeran Diponegoro, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 200 cm.

loyal servants lamenting or protesting the "wrong capture". The captured, Suharto, is shown as being taken by a cop in the uniform. Meanwhile, Pangeran Diponegoro, who manages to escape, is on the roof of a building, laughing at the event of "wrong capture". Like Raden Saleh that gave himself a cameo role in his painting, Heri Dono appears in his.

In another painting, Suharto looks cheerful among his relatives and family. They are enjoying riding the carousel ("*Komedi Putar Bahagia Indonesia*", 2006). Meanwhile, the people, or the victims of his New Order regime – in the forms of upside-down heads – are only watching from afar. In Heri Dono's version, Suharto proudly wears clothes with "Freedom" written on!

The various socio-political problems we've been facing recently, which are more or less, directly or indirectly, connected with the way those in authority implement their power, are dispersed in several other paintings of his. The clamorous appeal to nationalism, for instance, is ridiculed in "The King Who Sells His Country" (2007). The nation's leadership crisis, marked by the appearance of the

* Exhibited in "The Bicentennial of Raden Saleh: Illusions of Nationalism", Jogja Gallery, Yogyakarta, 18 August-9 September 2007. Heri Dono made improvement on it for the current exhibition.

same old presidential candidates from time to time, is given a silly representation in "Try to Find the New King" (2007). Environmental destruction and various natural disasters in Indonesia, often explained along mysticism, are brought forward in "Yellow Submarine dari Gunung Merapi" (2006). Heri Dono even brings forward the power of monitoring technologies and communication networks increasingly threatening people's privacy – Google Earth, for instance – in the representation of a mighty giant having numerous telescopes and spying devices ("Detektif Romantika", 2007). Endless horizontal conflicts ever getting more violent are given representation as perplexed Goddess of Justice as she finds herself being endangered by violence ("The Peace Vehicle who is Intimidated", 2007).

However, there is a streak of optimism in all this gloom. Heri Dono dreams of a better future to come up somehow, not from out of the centers of power in big cities filled up by corrupt politicians but, instead, the interiority of this vast archipelago ("Tanah Harapan", 2007).

With all his black humor on canvas as well as his installations ("Kuda Troya", 2006; "Puppet Watching Puppets", 2007; "Dono-Saurus", 2008 and "Don Quixote", 2008) Heri Dono keeps bringing forward the various discourses that enrich our perception of life and the various issues all around us. Power is indeed omnipresent, including in us. Power doesn't only operate negatively, destructively, and repressively. In many cases, power behaves so because we don't attempt to manage our own power so as to produce some alternative discourses, critical outlook, or some "different" attitudes.

Therefore, it is very helpful that Heri Dono maintains his ability to offer different narratives, his fertile sense of humor, wether concerning the power of a king or our own absurdity.

Enin Supriyanto
Curator

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