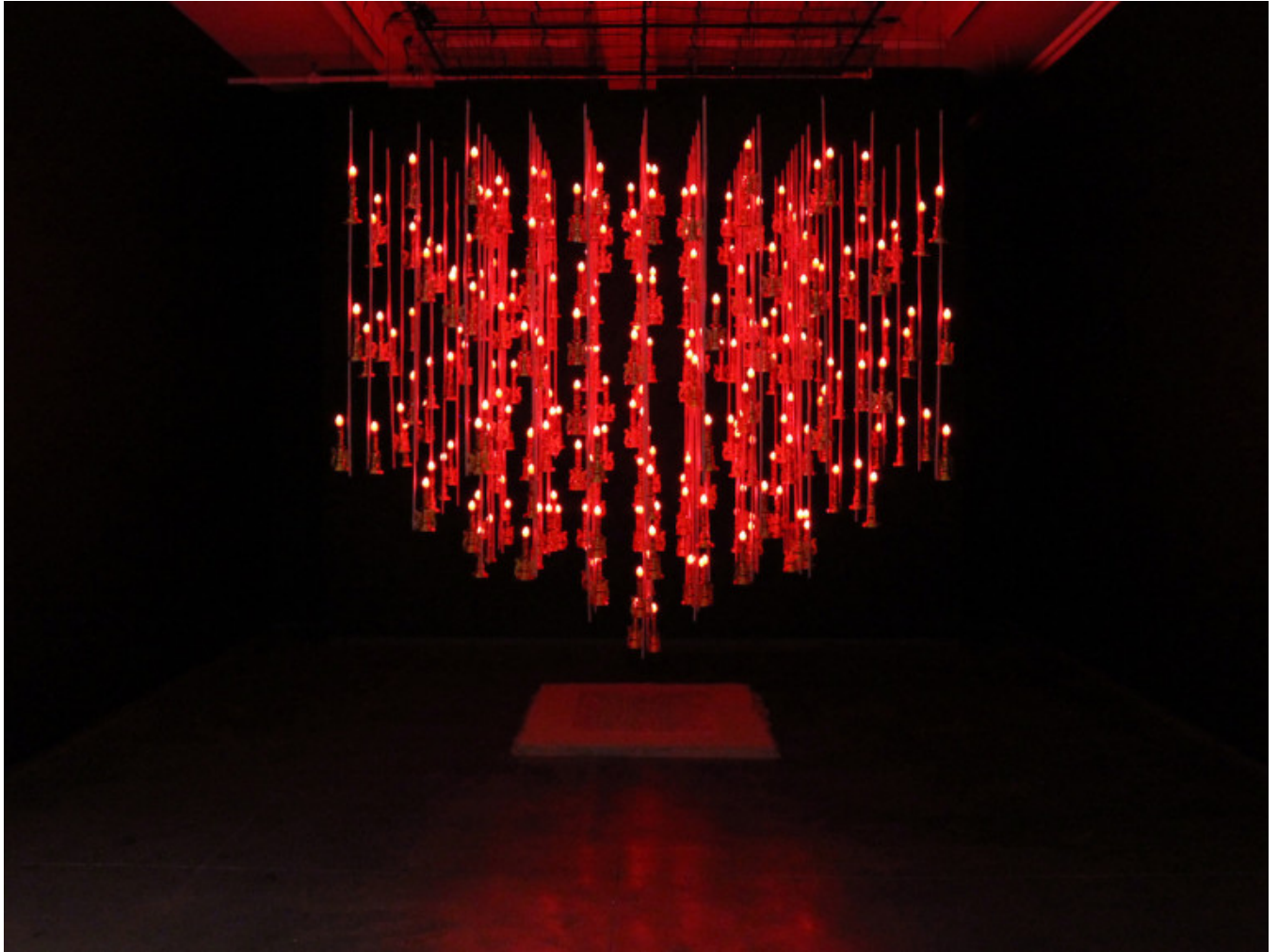


Retrieving the History of Indonesia's Massacred Chinese Community

by [Bansie Vasvani](#) on April 6, 2016



FX Harsono, "The Light of Spirit" (2016), installation view, plastic electric candles, LED bulbs, sand, cast cement, wood, 86 ½ x 82 ½ x 118 in. (all images courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art)

For [FX Harsono](#), art is activism. Over the past four decades, performance, sculpture, and painting have become his means of nonviolent protest against government autocracy and ethnic strife in Indonesia. In his current exhibition *The Chronicles of Resilience* at the Tyler Rollins Gallery, New York, Harsono pays homage to the [massacre](#) of his own Chinese minority community between 1947–49, prior to Indonesian independence from the Dutch colonizers in 1949. From the very first influx of Chinese immigrants in Indonesia to the country's recent torching of Chinese businesses in 1998, Chinese have been long targeted by native Indonesians. In his work, Harsono revives Chinese identity in the region by reprising lost history, archival records, and suppressed memories.

Hardly known in the US, but well-established in Southeast Asia, Harsono's art uses archival materials to realize the atrocities of history. For instance, in "Memorandum of Inhumane Acts" (2016), there are

33 pieces of digital prints of documents filed by the Chinese, titled “Acts of Violence and Inhumanity Perpetrated by Indonesian Bands on Innocent Chinese Before and After the Dutch Police Action was Enforced on July 21, 1947,” that Harsono found during his research in the Netherlands. Over these documents, Harsono has made graphite and charcoal drawings of Chinese people from the era (inspired by photographs taken by the artist’s father and others from the community) surrounded by and holding exhumed skeletons. Spread out over the length of a wall, Harsono’s sepia-toned digital prints, combined with the spectral drawings, make his palimpsest come alive.



FX Harsono, “Memorandum of Inhumane Acts” (2016), installation view, pigment-based digital print on acid free paper, graphite, charcoal, watercolor, 33 pieces, each 13 ½ x 15 ¾ in.; total dimensions 41 x 174 ¾ in. (click to enlarge)

The work reminds me of the Malaysian theater actor and director [Mark Teh](#)’s 100-minute-long performance *Baling*, which was recently shown at the Sharjah Art Foundation’s March Meeting in the United Arab Emirates. By using actual documents from the [Baling Talks](#) of 1955 between the British colonial government and Chin Peng, the leader of the Malaysian Communist Party, Teh redacts history, like Harsono, with a renewed urgency to educate the viewer. By making the documents accessible in the public realm, history is disinterred and reexamined in a different light.

Similarly, in “Rewriting on the Tomb” (2013), which hangs alongside the single-channel video “Pilgrimage to History” (2013), Harsono rubs Chinese characters from tombstones in memory of the deceased. Described as “a form of national expiation and healing,” the act of rubbing for Harsono is also reminiscent of the Korean artist [Do Ho Suh](#)’s performative rubbings of his apartment and personal objects as a way of instilling memory and identity. Like Suh, Harsono’s highly aesthetic process makes his columns of red characters appear like elaborate embroidery from afar. Resembling quilts replete with lost memory, Harsono’s visually appealing objects resonate long after the viewing.



FX Harsono, “Memory of the Survivor” (2016), installation view, wooden furniture, fused deposition models, standing lamp, ceramics, sound recordings, radio, video projection, batik fabrics, dimensions variable

Nearby, “The Light of Spirit” (2016), a glowing chandelier comprised of more than 200 red electric candles that dangle above a single gravesite marker, simulates votive offerings lit for the deceased. Like the quiet suffering of Japanese artists, such as [Ruth Asawa](#), who were interned in the United States during World War II, Harsono commemorates the lost history and individuals of his Indonesian-Chinese community without being “violent, angry, or vengeful.” Instead, he effectively recasts the past with understated but stirring art.

Nostalgia takes centerfold with “Memory of the Survivor” (2016). Period furniture filled with white, 3D-scaled models of tombstones, memorabilia, and found photographs adorn the space. Different soundtracks — especially one from a vintage Dutch radio broadcast proclaiming Indonesian independence — transport the viewer to a bygone era. Placed in the center, a wheelchair with a video projection of Harsono interviewing one of the survivors from the 1947 massacre persuasively sets the pensive tone for the exhibition.



FX Harsono, "Rewriting on the Tomb" (2013), series of digital prints on textile dimensions variable

Without being overtly heavy-handed, Harsono's empowerment of a discriminated minority in his country opens up a larger conversation on exclusion and nationalism around the world, making his activist practice particularly relevant in the current climate fraught with renewed ethnic violence.

FX Harsono: The Chronicles of Resilience continues at the Tyler Rollins Gallery (529 W 20th St # 10W, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 16.