

INDONESIAN CONTEMPORARY ART NOW

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Being socially very active, Astari is very much aware of what is going on in the different strata of Indonesian society. This has led her to question the role of women in contemporary society, an endeavor perfectly illustrated by the painting *Sporting Girls*, which was created especially for an exhibition at the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004.

Astari cleverly mixes one of the Olympic disciplines, the disco bolus, with another type of competition among women on the social level. The form-fitting traditional *kebaya*, tight bra and elegant purse give the woman on the right an opportunity to look fashionable and sporty. The beautiful batik design and the golden shine on her face and body give her a special aura and contribute to a sense of empowerment, excitement and assurance in her fashion competition.

Astari herself feels that this reminds her of the beauty pageants held in the 1940s or 1950s.

The lady on the left holding the disco bolus is truly competing on a sports level, and her outfit is a clear reference to the present fitness craze in the gyms of major cities. The foreground shows flashy colors that fittingly contrast with the more subdued background formed by ancient Greek columns and a dark sky.

By juxtaposing these two women, Astari encourages the viewer to think about the irony of competition between Javanese women. To fully grasp the humor in this painting, one needs to understand and see how intensely Javanese women compete with each other, and appreciate the elaborate effort that goes into sporting traditional attire, complete with an impeccable matching hairdo.

Although Astari is more an observer than a political activist, one can sense her desire to see women take a more dynamic role in society.

The real outsider in female Indonesian Contemporary Art is Arahmaiani. One has to admire her courage, her sacrifices and her relentless drive to advance the cause of Islamic women in the world. She lives a nomadic existence and makes a living through her performances, installations, communal activities and speeches. Despite her lack of recognition in her home country, she is an artist of world-class status and great integrity.

Arahmaiani was born in Bandung, West Java in 1961. As an art student she felt let down by the educational system in her native country because it did not connect her with real life. So she decided to create her own art on the streets and discovered in an intuitive way what performance art was all about.

Clashes with the military and political organisations over the years forced her to resort to "underground art", but also to travel and exhibit abroad, which enabled her to discover other values and to experiment with life and art. Life and art are closely intertwined, even inseparable, according to Arahmaiani.

For her, socio-political matters are the basic issues in one's life. She is skeptical about doctrines and beliefs and instead relies on her own experience, which forms the foundation of her philosophy and aesthetics.

She sees art as the catalyst of the understanding process, not only for herself but also for others. She believes, moreover, that art has a healing capacity as a ritual activity.

ADDRESSING FEMININE CONCERNS

Gradually she developed into a multifaceted artist. Her reputation is mainly for her performances and installations, but she also works with painting, drawing, poetry, dance and music. Her thematic material is far-reaching but centers on the following issues that she considers vital for the future of humanity:

- the oppression by military and political authorities
- the oppression of women by men
- the ill-defined and unclear role of religion in today's society
- the confused feeling of society towards traditional values
- the commercial imperialism of some Western countries
- the materialism that controls our lives and the resulting confusion in our spiritual lives
- the industrialisation and technological excesses that can be negations of human values

Arahmaiani's ambitious and unrelenting quest is to denounce violence and oppression and at the same time to fight for human rights and human dignity. Even after most of her male artist colleagues gave up their socio-political commentary, she remained undaunted but decided to change her strategy. She started to weave networks, to work with young artists in order to produce artworks that cross boundaries but aim at communicating and interacting with the local society in her own country and even abroad.

She fully realized that a 30-year-old system and its foundation had collapsed in 1998 and that a replacement needed to be found in order to guide society through the upheavals and the confusion of the Reformation era. Arahmaiani is a truly idealistic artist who rightly believes that artists still have the potential to help shape the multiple changes that society needs in order to restore its balance.

Her performance *Newspaper Man* was first staged in Bandung in the 1980s, and then again with artist friends in Jakarta at the end of the 1990s. The participants chose their own costumes and played the roles; the clothes, masks and even hairdo were of printed newsprint. The performance refers to the ubiquitous control of the Suharto government over the media and all information during an era when there was not even an Information Ministry, let alone freedom of expression or freedom of the press.

The installation *Do Not Prevent the Fertility of the Mind* (1996) refers to contraception tools and government policies. During the Suharto Era, information on sexual matters was taboo. There was no education on sexual practices or family planning, and many women thus became victims and had to resort to clandestine abortion.

The back wall of the installation is made of sanitary napkins to symbolize the menstrual cycle. The vial of blood on the stool is another symbol of femininity. The artist herself is shown in a photograph holding contraception tools as well as scissors, ready to be used for an amputation. On her forehead is a sanitary napkin with the Red Cross symbol in the middle.

The neon on top and at the bottom highlights the scene and gives it a contemporary look.