



Indonesian Women Artists

the curtain opens

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DANCING STITCHES, 2006
CLOTH & CLOTH FILLING
INSTALLATION



[Arahmaiani]

Arahmaiani was born Rahmayani Feisal in the city of Bandung. She is an icon among Indonesian artists both here and abroad. Though better known as a performance artist, she also employs painting, drawing, installation, video, poetry, dance and music.

In the early 1980s, she began to create art works and put together collaborative art projects with fellow students from the Faculty of Fine Arts and Design at the Bandung Institute of Technology. Greatly influenced by both the earlier avant-garde spirit of Fluxus from the late 1960s and the Indonesian New Art Movement from the mid-1970s, Arahmaiani reacted against the constrained freedom of expression during the New Order era, when art students experimented with marginal, often provocative art happenings or events. As a member of *Kelompok Jeprut*, she frequently took part in the events of one such experimental group.

Her first artistic expressions in the street in the early 1980s led to her suspension from the university. Then, as a warning about the rising number of street accidents in her hometown, she wrapped the lampposts along Jl. Dago in Bandung with bandages smeared with "blood," stopped the traffic and distributed flyers with details of the number and types of accidents taking place along the busy street. She was considered too radical and excluded from participating in further exhibitions.

In the years that followed, she became a nomad, traveling from one country to the other: the Netherlands, Australia, Thailand and even Kazakhstan. Traveling, studying, reading and interacting with a variety of people from various disciplines, she became increasingly interested in the role of power relations. The knowledge she acquired confirmed her own belief in the theory of equilibrium and as she matured further, her works became even more poignant. Economic, industrial and gender issues shine through in her paintings, drawings, installations, poetry, dance-theater and musical performances.

Though Arahmaiani, as she is known, started out as a painter, the broadening of her personal vision over the canvas or paper became too small a medium for her to express her thoughts. Touching the deeper senses of humans, her performances and songs are known to have made a profound impression on her audiences.



In one of her earlier notable exhibitions, *Sex, Religion and Coca-Cola* held in Jakarta in 1994, she clashed with a high-profile Islamic fundamentalist group for making subversive and disturbing works that juxtaposed sacred images and religious items along with objects commonly regarded as obscene. In one of the works, bearing the same title as the exhibition, she placed the Qur'an, contraceptive devices and a bottle of Coca-Cola together in one display, drawing attention to the ambiguous moral standards of society regarding religion, sex and consumerism. Another piece, a painting entitled "*Lingga-Yoni*" (1994), depicts a vagina on top of a penis on a background of Arabic and Javanese scripts.

From the mid-1990s to early 2000s, Arahmaiani was prolific. She gained increased recognition abroad and traveled extensively, presenting her performance art at major international art events. She also initiated the Jakarta International Performance Art Festival in 1999, a controversial event that capitalized on the spirit of freedom that emerged after the 1998 political reformation.

LAPPEN WEDDING 2, 2004
PERFORMANCE



THE THREAD, 2006
SILK & STUFFING
INSTALLATION



Her daring, in-your-face critical style coupled with her showcase signifiers of locality were a breath of fresh air for the international art scene at a time when an increasing demand for art from the Third World perspective arose. She performed "Offerings from A to Z" (1996) at a religious site in Thailand. This work contained her critique on violence towards women and their victimization. She lay down on the ground, covered with white sheets, blood-red liquid smeared on her lower parts, while to her left and right rows of guns were aimed at her. She then walked slowly across a path that led to a Buddhist temple altar, and concluded by lying down on a tomb, to resemble an object of ritual sacrifice, surrounded by pornographic posters.

Arahmaiani's works always play with the limits of subversion, particularly in Indonesian terms. Though regarded by some as a mere sensationalist, she employs well-reasoned moral premises when creating her works. She uses her art to reflect all of society's problems in the widest sense, sex, gender, politics, religion, culture, moral values, social constructions, capitalism, nationhood—everything that demands revaluation by society itself. Political activism is strongly associated with her works as well as those of her generation of artists who emerged during the repressive New Order regime. Yet, as Arahmaiani says, her art is not actually about preaching a moral stance or promoting anxiety-driven political activism. Her works are intriguing sketches of life in action and leave viewers to reflect on that action. She provokes reactions that are based on contemplations.



She is reluctant to be considered a feminist, though many of her works display strong feminist tendencies. Yet, she does not deny her works are largely based on her own experiences of being a woman and the conflicts that surround that fact within a society in transition. Her ever-present sociopolitical consciousness grows along with the development of the world. Currently, she is focusing more on global issues and using project-based, interactive approaches. In "Exchange," presented in the 2002 Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, she performed a kind of gift-exchange game in which the audience participated. She is also working on community-building art activities in Indonesia.

Arahmaiani's fervent struggle against any form of repression or hegemonic power structures probably goes back to her childhood. She comes from a strict Muslim religious background. Her father was an ulema, or Islamic scholar, and reciting Qur'anic verses was a daily routine. She loved the stories about the Prophet, and was shattered when told she could never be one, being a girl. Her paintings from 1994—"Red Chest," "Golden Chest" and "Yellow Chest"—displayed as part of a series of boxes, hint at what is to come.

The rapes that took place in May 1998, which she saw as a consequence of an imbalance in power relations, and which manifested itself in the unequal struggles in the country, led her to create "Rape 'n' Rob," a series of 20 charcoal drawings that convey the extent and depth of the violence women suffered by women at that time. The images convey the artist's stance on gender injustice and that imbalance in power distribution, and are drawn in the fashion of the naïve. The works contain recurrent elements that capture the attention of viewers and ultimately lead them to reflect on the reasons for the violence.

"Kukorbankan Segalanya Untukmu" (I Sacrificed Everything for You) shows bodies lying flat on the ground, a burning house, and a dark threatening sky. In "Dipenisku Hanya Ada Kamu" (In My Penis There Is Only You) a female figure lies on the ground as a horned, masked figure holds his penis, drawn as a gun, while a nude sitting on a couch is on the verge of being strangled by a masked man shown behind the couch holding a knife in his right hand. In the background the artist adds a small house with a tiny door and smoke coming out of the top and the cynical title, "Aku Cinta Padamu" (I Love You). The figures are not sensuous. There is no reverie, no ecstasy, nor any flight of the imagination. What persists is a deep silence and the artist intends her audience to reflect upon the present state of affairs.

In "Come on Baby, Light My Fire," Arahmaiani depicts a female figure with her body still intact as her face vanishes into the smoke shown rising into black clouds in the sky. "This represents the vanishing face of women, as well as the nation's face that is smeared with overwhelming iniquities and injustices," says the artist. "The Ballad of the Matches," her installation of matches also shown during the 1998 exhibition, parallels this condition with that of the country, one of acute danger. Perhaps Arahmaiani became a prophet after all.