

Arahmaiani

'Fertility of the Mind'

Tyler Rollins

529 West 20th Street, Chelsea
Through Feb. 22

The Indonesian artist Arahmaiani Feisal, who uses only her first name, was in Asia Society's 1996 "Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia," a show that first alerted many New Yorkers to the reality that there was contemporary art being made in Southeast Asia. Now, 18 years later, she is having a first gallery solo here, in the form of a condensed, bare-bones retrospective.

In her own country, she is considered a radical figure, and she has forthrightly waded into political hot water. Even at Asia Society, you could tell bold ideas were afoot. A painting there, like an almost identical one at Tyler Rollins, took the traditional Hindu religious image of the lingam and yoni — symbolically an upright phallus inserted into a prone vagina — and flipped it around so that yoni was on top, balanced on the lingam. As if that bit of sexual legerdemain was not enough, she surrounded the image with Arabic script, which carries associations with the Quran.

Ms. Feisal was raised Muslim, though she has taken the hybrid nature of Indonesian Islam, with its roots in Buddhism, Hinduism and animism, to mix images from across the religious spectrum. And her wide travels have made her a world citizen. From the start, she has approached art as a form of political activism used to



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART

"Do Not Prevent the Fertility of the Mind," 1997-2014, by the Indonesian artist Arahmaiani at the Tyler Rollins gallery.

shake up orthodoxies of faith, gender and class in a country that has experienced increasingly political repression and bloody religious sectarianism.

Her public performances in particular over the past three decades — dealing with subjects like prostitution, environmental degradation and what we call market terrorism — have incurred the wrath of religious and secular authorities alike.

To understand the meaning and depth of her provocation re-

quires learning something about the contexts she works in, but that knowledge is well worth seeking out. Among other things, it is a reminder that, in many parts of the world, contemporary art, far from being market fodder, is an incendiary device. This show, organized by Leeza Ahmady, an independent curator, gives a sense of that, and marks the welcome return of this dynamic and courageous artist to New York.

HOLLAND COTTER