

# FX Harsono's Legacy of Brutality

Retrospective of legendary Indonesian contemporary artist explores the themes of violence, control and the search for self

Report **Thomas Hogue**

**F**ew artists are as central to the development of contemporary art in Indonesia as FX Harsono. He was a founding member of the groundbreaking Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru, or New Art Movement, in 1975, and his works commenting on some of the most tumultuous decades of Indonesian history have been an influence on almost every socially conscious artist who came later. "He is one of the senior artists who is respected by the younger generation because of his commitment to such art practices," said Arahmaiani, a well-known contemporary artist who counts Harsono as an early inspiration on her own career.

Now a retrospective exhibition of 18 works at the Singapore Art Museum takes a look at Harsono's development since he first emerged on the Indonesian art scene. "This exhibition presents FX Harsono's artistic journey, and his most important works over three decades are exhibited here," said Hendro Wiyanto, curator of the show.

The earliest two pieces are "Paling Top 75" ("The Most Top 75") — a toy M-16 rifle in a box — and "Rantai yang Santai" ("The Relaxed Chains") — chains laid out on what looks like a prison bed. These are raw, blunt statements about the twin threats of authoritarian power — the gun ready to be wielded and the chains ready to confine.

The rawness here reflects the birth of an art movement that was still struggling with what it wanted to say and how it wanted to say it. Harsono and his GSRB colleagues from Yogyakarta and Bandung were still new to making art that was politically and socially relevant.

The problem with the other art being done at the time in Indonesia was that it was "based on Western theories and references that didn't show any Indonesian identity," Harsono said in an e-mail reply to questions.

By opening up the definition of art to found objects, installation pieces and other imagery, Harsono and GSRB felt they could "liberate art from elitist attitudes" and speak more directly to "the problems of society [which] are more important than individual feeling," as declared in their manifesto of 1975.

We see a more confident portrayal of central themes when we jump to 1994. First, in "Voice Without Voice," nine panels of a signing hand spell out in sign language the word "D-E-M-O-K-R-A-S-I." In the last panel, ropes bind the voiceless hand and emphasize its powerlessness.

In more brutal imagery from 1994, "The Voices Controlled by the Powers" is made of unpainted traditional masks cut in half, with the upper halves of the faces arranged in a square to look inward at the mouths and jaws piled in the center. Both horror and violence are conveyed as these mute, silent witnesses stare at their own mutilation, unable to scream.

Then there is an end to these righteous blasts against an authoritarian regime. The "enemy," Suharto, falls, and while this ushers in new freedoms, it also brings



Clockwise from above: A feast of butterflies in the ambiguous 'Bon Appetit'; 'Rewriting the Erased' brings the journey inward; In 'Voices,' masks convey mute horror at their own speechlessness; 'Burned Victims,' a blunt indictment of mob violence. JG Photos

**'FX Harsono: Testimonies'**  
Ongoing until May 9

Singapore Art Museum  
7 Bras Basah Road  
Singapore  
Tel: 65 6332 3222  
www.singaporeartmuseum.sg

Admission: Adult S\$10, Child S\$5  
Hours: Mondays to Sundays 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.  
Fridays 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.  
(Free admission on Fridays 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.)

bitterness for Indonesians of Chinese descent such as Harsono because of the violence directed at the Chinese community in the riots of May 1998.

The strongest statement against this mob violence is the piece "Burned Victims," presented as blackened wooden torsos suspended in rectangular frames. In front of each charred body, a pair of shoes gives a personality and character it wouldn't possess on its own.

A work from 2002 shows a more general disillusionment with the freedoms of the post-Suharto era. In "Open Your Mouth," a man's face is depicted with someone's hands trying to make the already open mouth larger. The eyes, nostrils and mouth are a blank white, as if nothing is inside.

"Anyone ... is now forced to speak and say just about anything," Hendro said. "It is as if people are simply saying something, although what they say is useless and cannot be used to solve any problem."

Ambiguity creeps in when we turn to pieces from 2003 to 2008. The motif of a butterfly transfixed by a needle is often used, implying pain, but from what and because of what is less clear.

The butterfly could represent freedom, or as Hendro suggests, a "weak person" unable to stand up to the turmoil of the period. The installation "Bon Appetit," with its meal of butterflies skewered on needles, suggests that even with Suharto gone, the strong still dine on the weak. Then a series of works from 2009

rounds off the exhibition, even if still leaving things on a slightly ambiguous note. Harsono's disorientation in the post-Suharto period has finally brought him to delve more directly into the question of who he is.

Ironically, his search leads him to another episode of violence. In the years following World War II, when Indonesia was fighting for independence from the Netherlands, there were rumors that the Dutch were using the Chinese as spies, and this resulted in several incidents where Chinese-Indonesians were targeted.

One of these incidents took place in 1947-48 in Blitar, East Java, where Harsono himself was born in 1948. Though his family escaped the violence, his father was made official photographer of a 1951 expedition to find the secret graves of 191 of the victims, and his father's collection of photographs of the reinterment project was something Harsono had often seen as a child growing up in the city.

In his search for his roots, Harsono decided to go to Blitar last year and interview eyewitnesses, families of the victims and survivors of the massacre. The resulting video-documentary is shown here along with two paintings that focus on pictures from his father's photo album. The paintings, "Preserving Life, Terminating Life," numbers 1 and 2, juxtapose images of disinterred skulls with photos of ordinary family life. These represent the two possibilities of life and death, it seems, not only for Harsono and other Chinese-Indonesians, but for everyone else as well.

The final piece, "Rewriting the Erased," is perhaps the most eloquent of all. A chair and table sit in a room with black floors, walls and ceiling. Three video screens show Harsono sitting at the same table and writing the characters for his Chinese name, Oh Hong Boen, over and over again on the pieces of paper that now neatly cover the floor.

Harsono is searching for the very essence of himself in the pictograms. It is a search, he seems to be saying, that all of us must make, no matter what violence might have accompanied our birth.



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## From Dirty Walls to Pristine Halls

His signature squid-monster designs have graced Jakarta street tunnels, overpasses and walls of empty lots and vacant buildings — that is, until they are washed off or painted over by authorities.

But this month, after six years of painting on the sly in the dark of night, dodging the cops and paying them off to let him work, graffiti artist Darbotz celebrates his first solo exhibition at dGallerie in South Jakarta.

"Monster Goes Out at Night" showcases Darbotz's graffiti work on canvas, wood, video, fiberglass installations and various merchandise, including T-shirts, sketchbooks and a pair of Nike sneakers. The lively exhibit introduces the artist's previously elusive Cumi character, an intricately designed monster squid in black and white, who is featured in all Darbotz's works.

Known to friends and fellow artists by his street name Darbotz, the 28-year-old Jakarta native is a graphic designer for an advertising agency by day. He won't reveal his real name, saying it is through his art that he presents himself to the public.

"My work is my alter ego. This is the other me," he said.

Accustomed to keeping this other identity under wraps, Darbotz said he was honored to have his work displayed openly on gallery walls. "This is the next level for me — to have my work appreciated and recognized by the fine-art community."

Until now, Darbotz has worked under much different conditions. Armed with cans of spray paint, he would head for the

streets around midnight, usually with friends and other graffiti artists. "You have to go out at night to avoid trouble with the police," he said. "You have to finish quickly before someone catches you, and you have to be careful where you paint."

Some of his friends who were caught painting near government buildings were jailed for a day. For his part, Darbotz said he has endured only minor harassment from police and paying them a few thousand rupiah usually sends them away.

"They yell at us like we're criminals. But we're not criminals, we're just doing art," he said. "I like to paint on a dirty wall to make it beautiful, to make it more interesting than just a dirty wall."

Alia Swastika, the curator of Darbotz's exhibit, said she first saw the artist's work three years ago under an overpass in front of Cilandak Town Square (CITOS) in South Jakarta. She had already heard of Darbotz from other artists, but was instantly struck by the boldness of his black-and-white designs that set his paintings apart from the multicolored work typical of other graffiti artists.

"It's a very distinctive pattern, and the way he plays with the limitations of black and white is very interesting," Alia said.

At the gallery, Darbotz explained that the gnarled giant tentacles characteristic of his Cumi monster are representative of the chaos of Jakarta. One untitled painting that takes up an entire gallery wall betrays an edge to the usually playful Cumi.

"He's always smiling, but he's also angry," Darbotz said. "He's angry at the traffic, the government, the pollution, the corruption. As a regular citizen I can't do anything about these things. But I can express my feelings through this work."

Another painting, "I Come in Peace," depicts the monster squid with hands stretched wide in a gesture of embrace.

"This is for the art community," Darbotz said, noting the significance of his first exhibit in light of "the gap between street art and fine art."

Esti Nurjadin, owner of dGallerie, said



**'Monster Goes Out at Night'**

Exhibition runs until March 26

dGallerie  
Jl. Barito I No. 3  
Kebayoran Baru,  
South Jakarta

Tel. 021 739 9378

Left, opening night for the solo graffiti exhibition 'Monster Goes Out at Night' at dGallerie. Below left, Cumi Blok S (2007); right, Cumi Pondok Indah (2008). Photos courtesy of Darbotz

'I like to paint on a dirty wall to make it more interesting than a dirty wall'

**Darbotz, Jakarta graffiti artist**

this gap was partly due to public misconceptions about street art. "Street art is often misunderstood and misrepresented. Many people don't think that street art can also be a fine art"

Alia said she wanted to showcase graffiti art to offer a new perspective. In London, New York and Japan, the graffiti movement has grown markedly in recent years "as the market has begun to accept the work of graffiti artists."

"But collectors in Indonesia still don't think of graffiti as fine art," she said. "Just starting a dialogue about this could mark a new step in Indonesian contemporary art." **Rachel Rivera**

