

FX Harsono: Exposing the beauty of ugly truth

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FX Harsono. JP/Tertiani ZB Simanjuntak

The best art is personal, so the saying goes. Indonesian seminal figure in contemporary art Franciscus Xaverius Harsono, however, begs to differ.

“Art is about research. Artists have to be able to thoroughly understand the issues through a lot of references and discussions if necessary.

“I’m concerned about young artists nowadays who are creating art just to satisfy the market, not really exploring what their works would mean to society.”

That in mind, Harsono, who will turn 66 this year, has initiated Exi(s)t together with graphic designer Hermawan Tanzil, which focuses on scouting for Jakarta’s own artists.

“The name of the project is a combination of two words: exit and exist. We expect young Jakartans to get out and find their art and to make it

in the industry as well,” said the laureate of the Prince Claus Award in 2014.

The annual project, not to be mistaken with a heavy metal album or a badminton club in Jakarta, had its third exhibition from Dec. 17 to Jan. 7 at Dia.Lo.Gue gallery café in South Jakarta.

Only seven selected young workers in the diverse creative industry had been accepted in the workshop that preceded the exhibition.

The first project batch consisted of 12 people; while in 2013 there were only eight, who were shortlisted from 70 applicants.

Four of the 12 first graduates have become recognized names in the contemporary art scene at home and overseas, including photographer Stephany Yaya Sungkharisma, also known as Yaya Sung, who created installations to commemorate murdered human rights activist Munir Thalib.

“I hope someday we can witness the rise of young artists with a good approach to art,” said the enthused Harsono, who was named the winner of the inaugural Joseph Balestier Award for the Freedom of Art.

The award, which came with US\$5,000 grant, honors an artist or curator from the Southeast Asian region who is actively committed to the ideals of freedom of art, expression, and liberty, and through their work, continually seeks to express these ideals.

Harsono said mentoring the budding artists is his new project, after over three decades of encouraging experimentation in the arts field and creating socially committed art.

His works have been exhibited overseas and found homes in collections in museums in Japan, Singapore, Australia and China, when not sold to private collectors through Sotheby's or Christie's.

Only last year, the Indonesian government awarded him the Anugerah Adhikarya Rupa in appreciation of his work.

Harsono has always made his works socially constructive and, in a bid to do so, integrated in them social, economic and political realities.

Through his installation works, Harsono has criticized the military as the extended arm of the regime to depoliticize the people, the destruction of tropical forests, the forced evacuation of people to build dams and even the election; risking being banned and arrested.

With the change of regime, his works have taken another focus - the unresolved issues of human rights.

“I'm more into raising up to the surface issues of people who have fallen victims to past incidents where the impact is still resonating even today,” said Harsono, citing examples of discrimination against Indonesians of Chinese descent and the massacre of those of Chinese descent in 1948-1949 in many cities in Java, from the eastern-most Banyuwangi to the northern tip in Tangerang.

Instead of a show-off of his sentimentality toward ethnicity, as he himself is of Chinese descent, Harsono's works can be seen as re-mapping the history of Indonesian diversity, unraveling the hidden truth.

His stance has been a natural progression rather than a forced departure from what he was known for during the early years of his career.

There were still glints behind his a la John Lennon eyeglasses when he talked about his rebellious heydays.

A fifth generation Indonesian of Chinese descent, Harsono was born as Oh Hong Bun on March 22, 1949, in Blitar, East Java. It could be a coincidence that his Chinese name could also be read as “harvesting art” in the Hokkien dialect, because he doesn't believe that artistic skills could have been passed down in the family.

In his early teens, in 1963, he wanted to hone his drawing skill and intended to join Sanggar Brantas, a painting workshop owned by Lekra, an art and literary wing of the now defunct Indonesian Communist Party.

Fortunately, a friend talked him out of it, as in later years those associated with the organization became political prisoners.

Harsono set aside his dreams when, after years in an all-boys Catholic school, he became acquainted with girl schoolmates in high school, although later he learned how to paint from an old painter in Blitar whose name he fails to recall.

When he turned 18, he had to register himself as a citizen with the Ministry of Justice, where he was advised to change his birth certificate to Feb. 22, 1948, and to use an Indonesian name to avoid the repercussions of a dual-citizenship agreement between the Indonesian and Chinese governments.

As most Indonesians, he used a single name, adding his name given at baptism later on.

"I was too young at that time to realize what had happened. I was politically immature. It affected me, but I didn't mind."

His father, a photographer who was a part of the exhumation team for the mass Chinese graveyard, was sort of laying the foundation for his turning point.

"My father wanted me to enroll in a school of medicine or chemical engineering, but I was not interested. I took the admission test at the Gadjah Mada University School of Medicine in Yogyakarta, but at the same time enrolled at ASRI art academy, as advised by a friend."

As a consolation gesture to his parents, Harsono also studied mining at APTN technology academy, also in Yogyakarta, but could only last about three months.

He started as a painter but realized that the medium of art had insufficient dimension to deconstruct the regime and society back in the 1970s.

Being exposed to avant-gardism, Harsono and fellow artists used to hang out at Senisono art center, which was behind the Black December 1974 incident, a landmark in the Indonesian art scene.

The incident led to his suspension from ASRI. Harsono moved to Jakarta and continued his studies at the Jakarta Institute of Arts while forming Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (New Art Movement) in 1975.

The movement was also partly triggered by a polemic between abstract painter Oesman Effendi and realist S. Sudjojono, questioning whether there was so-called Indonesian art.

The group insisted that local traditional arts could not represent the multi-ethnic Indonesia and that arts were not a product of mere intuition, emotions or the feelings of the artists, as often seen in decorative paintings.

The movement, which soon gained followers in younger artists in Yogyakarta and Bandung, made headlines as they invented their own postmodern art.

"Critics had their field day at that time, they said our work was not art, some said it was vandalism, pornographic even."

The group was dispersed in 1979 due to an internal conflict, when one of them committed the cardinal sin of intervention in another's work.

"We still have good relationships with each other," he said.

Previously earning a living as a graphic designer in major publishing companies, Harsono sees his other life dimensions as a visual artist, lecturer and a father of three (his youngest, who studied architecture, had better drawing skills, he said) and has found his next project to

institutionalize Exi(s)t by organizing intensive classes in Yogyakarta.

"It's going to the next level," he said.

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