

# Indonesian artist gets inaugural freedom award

By LISABEL TING

THE inaugural Joseph Balestier Award for the Freedom of Art was conferred on Indonesian artist FX Harsono yesterday evening.

Presented by the contemporary art fair Art Stage Singapore and the Embassy of the United States of America in Singapore, the award recognises an artist from South-east Asia who is committed to freedom and expresses it through his or her work.

Joseph Balestier was the first American diplomat accredited to Singapore, and was appointed US Consul to Singapore in 1836.

The award ceremony was held at the residence of US Ambassador Kirk Wagar, who presented the prize with the fair's director, Mr Lorenzo Rudolf.

Harsono, 65, was recognised by the organisers as "his critical installation and performance work spans pro-democracy dissent to explorations of the experiences of ethnic minorities".

One of the Jakarta-based artist's best-known works is *The Voices Controlled By The Powers* (1994), featuring rows of traditional Indonesian masks severed in two, with the upper halves of the faces arranged in a square, staring silently at the pile of upturned mouths in the centre.

It was a response to the Indonesian government's ban of the magazine *Tempo* after it published an article exposing corruption in the Suharto regime.

Aside from a trophy and certificate, Harsono received a grant of US\$5,000 (S\$6,700) to continue his artistic work.



Artist FX Harsono, who was conferred the Joseph Balestier Award for the Freedom of Art, also received a \$6,700 grant. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

He was one of seven nominees who made the shortlist, along with Singaporean artist Lee Wen.

The award has been greeted

with scepticism by some, who find it ironic that the award was given out in a country where artistic expression is seen as highly regulated.

The Art Newspaper, an international monthly based in London and New York, recently quoted prominent Malaysian art dealer Valentine Willie as saying: "It is mind-boggling that (the award) is being given in Singapore." He added that the award's credibility depends on the transparency of the selection process.

In response, Mr Rudolf said that the article "did not really understand" the award, and added: "If someone asks me, why are you giving out the award in a region where there isn't freedom everywhere? Then I say, that is exactly why we have to do it."

✉ [lting@sph.com.sg](mailto:lting@sph.com.sg)