



C-ARTS Digital Version is Top Sellers on zinio.com

by zinio.com

top sellers - art



ONLINE SUPPORT: Not online Online Now Not online

ARTICLES

2010-04-27

FX Harsono at SAM: How Exhibitions can Build the Canon

Iola Lenzi

The Singapore Art Museum, with Tan Boon Hui at the helm since late 2009, is training a more focused eye on Southeast Asian contemporary art these days. First in a series of single-artist exhibitions featuring the work of living regional creators who have contributed significantly to Southeast Asia's evolving art historical canon, SAM presents Indonesian practitioner FX Harsono, 4 March-9 May 2010.



Rewriting The Erased, 2009, installation and performance video

Titled "FX Harsono: Testimonies", the survey introduces the Singapore public to one of Indonesia's seminal practitioners of the last decades. Though shown as far back as 2004 in the Sculpture Square exhibition 'Reformasi- Contemporary Indonesian Artists in the post-Suharto Era', the artist, best known for his political commentary, has seldom been given space in the city-state's public galleries. 'Testimonies' therefore attests to a new willingness in mainstream institutional Singapore to explore politics—albeit the politics of others—as one of the key forces shaping regional cultural discourse.

Yet if famous for his political art of the 1990's that, along with work by Heri Dono, Arahmaiani, Dadang Christanto and others, actively anticipated Indonesia's regime change in 1998, FX Harsono has moved away from political commentary in recent years. As a result Indonesian curator Hendro Wiyanto, collaborating with TNAG's Seng Yu Jin and SAM's Tan Siu Li, aiming for balance, have sought to camp Harsono's socially vocal work within the frame-work of a long career. Thus 'Testimonies', tracing the artist's development and shifts over the course of nearly four decades, includes not only the iconic installations of the 1990's, but very recent work as well.

The whole, if somewhat cramped, is informative and as a document of art-history, successful. Divided into two clearly distinct sections, the show evolves chronologically, Harsono's socially critical installations, several re-made in collaboration with the artist for Testimonies, placed in the East gallery (1975-1998), and his 21st century work, more autobiographical, on the museum's West side (2002-2009).

Many of Harsono's great pieces are here. The best of these is still the 1993-1994 Voice Without Voice/ Sign, borrowed from the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. The mixed graphic and 3-D installation, displayed as it was originally at floor-level and complete with its period wooden stamp-props, like all key works of art, remains a formal and conceptual masterpiece however removed from the historical context of its early-1990's theme. With its nine black and white silk-screen on canvas panels depicting a silent hand spelling out 'demokrasi' in sign language, the installation's crisp power has as much to do with its formal command as its invocation of the word democracy, still a loaded concept in Southeast Asia today. Indeed, the piece, with its pitch-perfect marriage of formal acumen, cerebral conceptualism, and universally engaging iconography in the form of the human hand, manages not only to physically recall the first stirrings of change in early 1990's Indonesia, but provoke the goose-bumps of potential empowerment in a new generation of reformers. And this even in the cautious setting of a national art museum!

Other seminal installations figuring in this part of the show are the 1994 The Voices Controlled by the Powers—larger in size than when presented in the 1996 'Traditions/Tensions'—, Paling Top '75, and Rantai yang Santai. From the mid seventies, the

ADVERTISEMENT

Email to:
adv@c-artsmag.com

Email to:
adv@c-artsmag.com

ARTICLE

[Art Stage Singapore 2011](#)

[DEDDY KUSUMA: Puja vs Rodin?](#)

[THIN SKINS, THICK HIDES: ENTANG WIHARSO'S LOVE ME or DIE](#)

[Aung Myint Takes On The Globe](#)

[Speak, Memory!](#)

[Exposing Li\(v\)es: Sherman Ong](#)

C-ARTS
on

facebook

Click [here](#) to join

latter two were amongst the most conceptually nuanced and formally refined works of their decade. Moreover, this pair's importance on a content level cannot be overstated, made as they were at the height of the New Order when any perceived criticism of the Suharto regime—and here the criticism was quite palpable— attracted harsh punishment.

Of the late Suharto-period work, *Burned Victims* of 1998 is slightly disappointing. The piece, a performance conducted in the grounds of Jogja's art-historically seminal Cemeti Art Gallery (as Cemeti was known then), does not have the impact it should despite a large gallery wall devoted to the screening of the original performance. Though doubtless beautiful in the poignancy of its charred torsos, this version of *Burned Victims* is static, the material installation failing to dialogue with the video, the installation unable to re-create the tension necessary to transcend time and place. The error here is probably in the display: had the work been allotted a large, dim room of its own, the video would have had enough space to build drama and the charred torsos, without competition, would have shone austere, the re-constituted piece conveying the dynamic of the original. This being said, the gallery re-creation of performance art is a challenging business and SAM deserves credit for tackling the task in such a limited, shared space.

Beyond its focus on Harsono's socially-rooted art, the first part of the survey also tells something of the history of installation in 20th century Indonesia. *Paling Top '75* and *Rantai yang Santai*, both of 1975, illustrate the archipelago avant-garde's new espousal of three-dimensional art that was not sculpture. Some will assume that this mid 1970's emergence of installation was in some way inspired by contemporaneous Western and Japanese developments. Yet installation in Indonesia, more than a break away from the art school convention of painting and sculpture, was surely something else as well. The avant-garde of the period, not yet even aware of the label 'installation', and for the most part oblivious to then-emerging Western and Japanese practices, was drawing its own independent course. The confident experimentation of the time, in Harsono's case assured rather than groping, suggests a plastic and 3-D compositional methodology absorbed from the material culture of Indonesia far beyond art-school painting and sculpture.

However unconscious their sources, the seemingly spontaneous formal mastery and sophisticated spatial dynamic of some of Harsono pieces from Indonesian installation's infancy, point to a grasp that surely is derived, at least in part, from exposure to entrenched local art and architectural forms. The questions raised by these two early installations underline the necessity of determining our regional contemporary art's thematic, formal and aesthetic sources for the building of a coherent regional discourse. Exhibitions such as this one, offering opportunities for debate and research, show that the theoretical exploration of Southeast Asian art should begin in Southeast Asia rather than Western textbooks. It is hoped that as museum culture becomes more established—and hence more inclusive—in Singapore, exhibitions will be used as platforms to illuminate key issues such as these.

The second part of the show, boasting more painting and fewer installations, heralds an abrupt change of thematic focus and formal approach. Tracking Indonesia as the country's long repressed sectarianisms came to the fore after 1998, *Testimonies* follows Harsono who, by the beginning of the new millennium, had left behind the collegial world of artists as motors of social change to concentrate on himself and his own identity in a now openly fragmented Indonesia. An early self-portrait dating to 2002 *Tubuhku Adalah Lahan* depicts the artist both literally and metaphorically as a fertile zone of young growth, signaling Harsono's nascent interest in self-discovery. The result is a body of work primarily reflecting Harsono's experience and musings about life as a minority Chinese in Indonesia.

Even handed but perhaps overly neutral in their art historical appraisal, curators have allocated this autobiographical material and the seminal 20th century oeuvre equal gallery space.

Various themes co-exist at the heart of Harsono's 21st century production. The most obvious is the artist's identification of his Chinese roots and his equation of Chinese minority status with suffering. Bees and particularly butterflies, along with needles and fire, offer the artist an easily legible lexicon of signs referencing vulnerability and pain, these symbols recurring both in painting and installation. After the ideologically inclusive and often allusive pieces of the East gallery, those on the West side are more literal, narrow, and self-indulgent. A 2007 diptych, *Kuteropong (Watching the Wound)*, monochord on one side with its skewered-burning butterfly imagery, is arresting on the other with its view of the artist peering questioningly at the viewer through a crack in a wall. Both outsider looking in, and insider looking out, this icon, as well as its investigation of self, neatly encapsulates today's Indonesia of paradox and incessant shift looking simultaneously inward and outward. This diptych, that could have been excluded by curators for its proximity to auction and commercial gallery material of recent years, shows SAM to be willing to expose a broad cross-section of Harsono irrespective of a work's affiliations. This relaxed attitude, which might have come under fire in a Western institutional arena, is not without merit as it allows viewers to come to their own conclusions without the hindrance of curatorial bias.

The highlight of this part of the show both in spatial and conceptual terms is the single-room 2009 *Rewriting The Erased*. Titled in English rather than Bahasa, the performance of the artist writing, and the resulting floor installation, a blanket of white cards bearing Harsono's

calligraphic rendering of his Chinese name, is immediately appealing to Indonesia's Chinese diaspora, so firmly 'Indonesianised' during the Suharto years that even Chinese names were changed for local-sounding ones. The work does not project the brilliance of the best earlier installations but highly personal, is quietly dramatic as a performance, the artist's silent dignity

speaking universally for all the oppressed people of the world. Beyond its introspective aspect, *Rewriting The Erased* also serves to mark the difference between engaged art that takes risks, looks forward, and aims for change, as did so much of Harsono's Suharto-era production, and art that contemplates past grievances in a more passive, thoughtful way.

nDudah, a 21 minute video documenting the killing and massburial of ethnic Chinese during the late 1940's Indonesian war of independence, raises interesting questions about the definition of art and the curator's mission. *nDudah* is an important research work, contributing to our understanding of how history can be manipulated, or indeed erased, to suit ideology. Further, the piece is evidence of FX Harsono's growing interest in historical investigation and goes some way to explaining recent documentbased paintings such as *Preserving Life-Terminating Life # 1 and #2*, also in 'Testimonies'. But are boundaries between art and documentary so blurred that they do not exist at all? Much contemporary art appropriates the documentary, but to position *nDudah*, clearly a documentary rather than a work of art, in the middle of an exhibition and to give it an area as large as that occupied by the show's biggest installations without adequate commentary as to its purpose there, is problematic. For the public the world of contemporary art can be a complex one, not because the works themselves are inaccessible, but because clues regarding ways of reading are lacking. *nDudah* is a powerful testimonial and is legitimately included in 'Testimonies', but its status and role as a supporting document as opposed to a work of art, should be clearer.

'FX Harsono: Testimonies', small as surveys go, succeeds in conveying FX Harsono's seminal importance in regional art history. Because as much space is devoted to current practice as to previous decades' canonical works, and due too to the artist's active involvement in the exhibition, the show has a refreshing up-to-the-minute feel that surveys seldom possess, giving viewers a sense of Harsono's creative trajectories of the future. Though a larger catalog revealing the exhibition's curatorial strategy would have been justified, Singapore viewers should not miss a show that visually splendid and historically significant, can't fail to whet their appetite for more art originating in their regional backyard.

[0] Comment

Post a comment:

Name:

Email:

Comment: (500 Max)

Captcha

[What is Captcha ?](#)

