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Agus Suwage



Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York
An installation view of Agus Suwage's "Happiness is a Warm Gun"



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"The End Is Just Beginning Is the End"
Tyler Rollins Fine Art, 529 West 20th Street, New York
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A pair of life-sized fornicating skeletons welcomes the viewer into Tyler Rollins Fine art. Not your traditional off-white medical figurines, they are decrepit, fashioned from cold gray sheet metal with sharp snarling edges and corroding rust spots. And also — they also have tails. Via a brightly lit speech bubble attached to one of the two figures locked in skeletal love/lust issue the words "Teruksan! Makin Sakit Makin Bait" (meaning "Keep going on! The more painful the better!"). "Happiness is a Warm Gun" (2011) as this piece is called, is coital, animalistic, and rusty. It is perhaps the most disturbing work in a show of uncomfortable images by Agus Suwage, a well-established name in Indonesia, here in his first solo show in the United States at Tyler Rollins Fine Art. It's worth the visit to see how an artist from a distinct culture treats a chilling topic that universally fascinates: death. This sculptural skeleton introduces a disturbing collection of works, predominantly painting, where imagery of skeletons, skulls, and bones abound.

All are painted onto rough-and-ready zinc panels, once discarded, now given new life as moderately sized paintings — each one roughly 3 feet by 4 feet. Cold gray metal contrasts against burnt brown rust spots which are left as natural aesthetic touches, sometimes working into the image, at other times standing apart, disrupting the continuity of paint. Based in a country comprised of over seventeen-thousand islands, it's no surprise that Suwage paints many of his deathly figures against the backdrop of pristine beaches, ubiquitous to the Indonesian landscape. In "Landscape with Man and Skeleton" (2010), a figure clad in black and gray glances back over his shoulder to the rolling waves behind, as he picks a bone up from the remains of an oversized human skeleton. Suwage leaves the mottled zinc surface bare, representing the sand into which bones appear to be sinking, like a the debris of a shipwreck washed ashore. The lone man is either saving them from a process of slow internment or destroying the remains.

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Humans are not the only things in some stage in the cycle back to the nothing-ness from whence we came. In "Still Alive" (2010), a rusted guitar looks as though it has been literally cut out of a garage-band scene and

materialized in 3D on the floor below the painting, as a sculpture, forming a hybrid painting-object. Images of an amplifier and couch flank the empty cut-out shape of a guitar left in the painting. It is an anomaly in this exhibition filled with death and bones, and seems a bit out of place. Suwage's personal obsessions with death and music dominate this painting. But an attempt at a valid point is being made; that death comes to everything eventually — even motionless objects when they are no longer useful.

Does this work unsettle more because, aesthetically, the painted works are rather quiet, contemplative and skillfully painted? Exposed surfaces of mottled gray give way to rust spots juxtaposed against masterfully detailed areas of oil painting. The human flesh Suwage paints looks so real that it seems certain to be warm to touch against the cold gray patina of zinc. Skulls and bones are rendered life-like (or death-like?) in the many shades and slightly varied hues of black and white.

Is this fascination an indication of Suwage's own personal struggles? Multiple beach scenes bear the title "An Offering to Ego," as though whoever is offering up this gift wishes to be rid of it. Is it catharsis, or a unhealthy obsession? Suwage's themes have always ranged from the curious to the perverse, merging personal concerns with societal obsession through self-portraiture and familiar pop-culture imagery. Past works have incorporated images appropriated from the Abu Ghraib torture photos, famous portraits of well-known artists and political figures, and his own head being drilled into by an electric screwdriver, wearing only a slight expression of discomfort. The overriding theme in all this seems to be foregrounding what will make the viewer most uncomfortable, taking on the things we find it difficult to discuss.

Yes the works in his "The End Is Just Beginning Is the End" show at Tyler Rollins are more disturbing still — because they are tranquil and beautiful. The never-ceasing march into decay is taken in stride. Here, Suwage is considering death and accepting it as inevitable, making it clear that we are all in a process of decay, no matter how hard we fight against it or try to ignore it. The images confront us with the quiet truth that despite our struggle, all will be as it ever was — an eternal movement towards death. There is a morbid kind of beauty in that.

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Another view of the exhibition

Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

