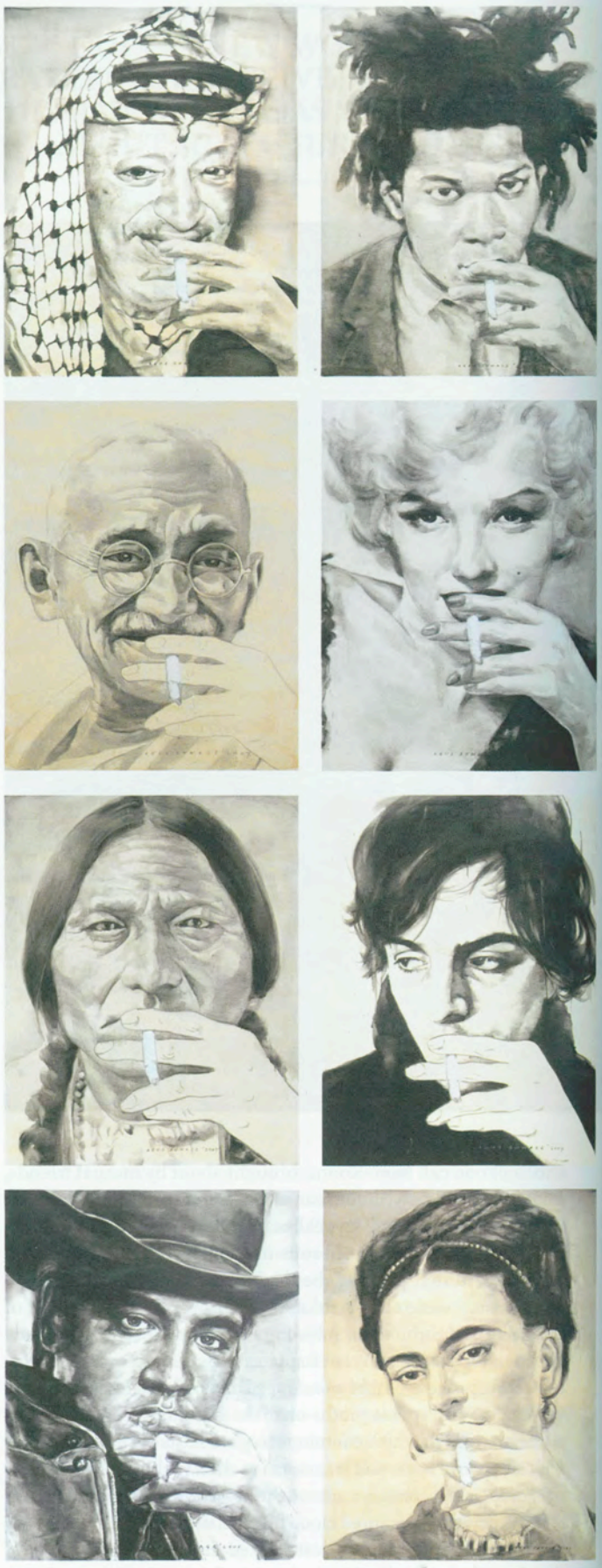
AGUS SUWAGE

ALL THINGS MUST PASS

Fusing wit and cynicism, the artist conveys the shifting identity of multicultural Indonesia through his self-portraits and appropriations of cultural, religious and political iconography.

By Ashley Rawlings



"As a teenager, I had ambitions to become a musician," Agus Suwage said in a telephone conversation with *ArtAsiaPacific* in November 2009. This admission is not so surprising given the prominence of musical icons in his paintings, from the Beatles to Bob Dylan to Thom Yorke; Suwage has even used their lyrics as titles for his work and exhibitions. "At first, I would buy albums by Western and Progressive Rock musicians," he continues. "I think their music is more challenging to listen to and study, as opposed to ordinary pop music. But now I listen to any kind of music—I'm more open-minded."

Suwage's black-and-white portrait series "I Want to Live Another Thousand Years" (2006–07) is in part a pop and rock hall of fame, with the likes of Syd Barrett, Kurt Cobain and Elvis Presley in its lineup. However, these giants of 20th-century music are displayed in rows alongside other deceased legendary figures from all walks of life: Bruce Lee, Mother Teresa, Saddam Hussein, Mahatma Gandhi, Marilyn Monroe, the Mona Lisa and rebellious Indonesian poet Chairil Anwar, all shown smoking cigarettes. It was a black-and-white image of Anwar taken circa 1948 by artist Baharudin MS that inspired Suwage, and his poetry that provided the work's title. The original image showed Anwar holding a cigarette in his right hand, but Suwage flipped it—introducing an element of visual disturbance to Indonesian viewers, who are very familiar with the portrait—and then superimposed the new "left"

All images in this article are courtesy the artist.

From left to right, top to bottom: Yasser Arafat, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Chairil Anwar, Bruce Lee, RA Kartini, Kurt Cobain, Mahatma Gandhi, Marilyn Monroe, Sukarno, Ayatollah Khomeini, The Mona Lisa, Benyamin Sueb, Sitting Bull, Syd Barrett, Mother Teresa, Rembrandt, Salvador Dalí, Munir Said Thalib, Elvis Presley, Frida Kahlo, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Saddam Hussein, David Hockney, Jawaharlal Nehru.

I WANT TO LIVE ANOTHER THOUSAND YEARS, 2006–07, oil on canvas, 24 pieces from a series of 27, 120 x 150 cm each.

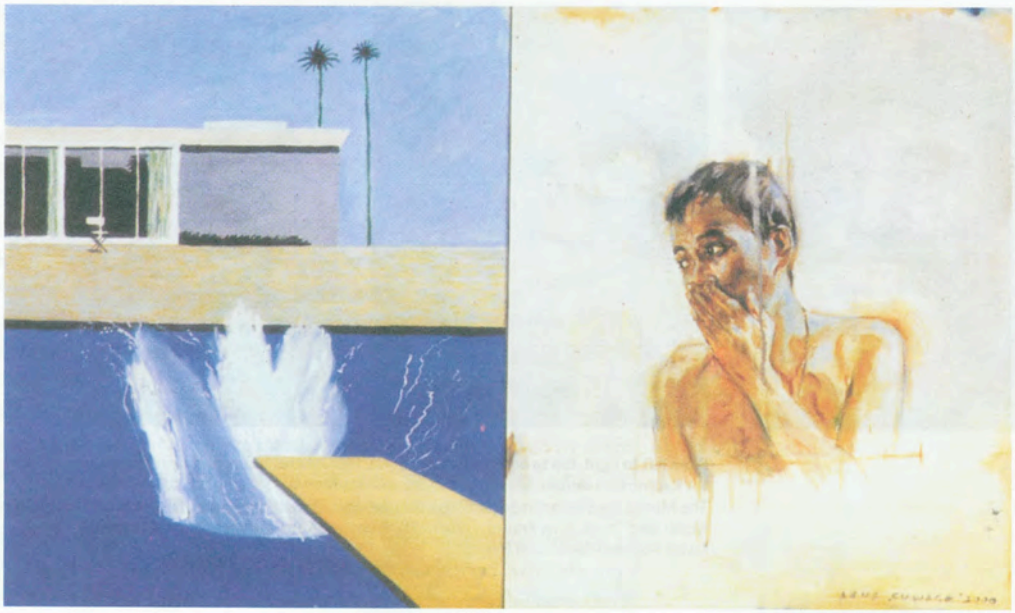
ICONOFASISMO, 1999, watercolor on paper, 79 x 54 cm.

THE MATURATION OF SUWAGE'S ART COINCIDED WITH INDONESIA'S TRANSITION FROM AUTHORITARIANISM TO DEMOCRACY.

hand onto the other portraits, regardless of whether the figures were smokers or not. "In recent years, tobacco companies have been focusing on Indonesia as a growth market," the artist explains. The work takes its strength from the dissonance between its cheekily iconoclastic portrayal of figures whose influence on history has already been canonized, and its discordant hint at the less explicit forces shaping Indonesia's present.

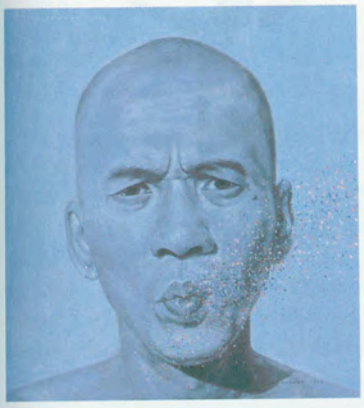
Drawing from politics, religion, pop culture and art history, Suwage's work is the product of his omnivorous taste for iconography and symbolism, suffused with an unsettling mix of morbidity and irreverent wit. This pluralistic outlook on life was shaped by his upbringing. Born in 1959 to Javenese and Chinese parents in Purworejo, Suwage grew up in a Tionghoa (Indonesian-Chinese) community, a minority within the world's most populous Muslim country. He was raised Catholic but converted to Islam before marrying his wife, the artist Titarubi. Though Suwage does not see himself as a political artist—the intensity of the political content in his work varies according to the piece—the maturation of his art during the late 1990s and early 2000s did coincide with Indonesia's sudden transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. During that time, Suwage's imagery became an evermore elaborate and sophisticated reflection of the nation's shifting identity.

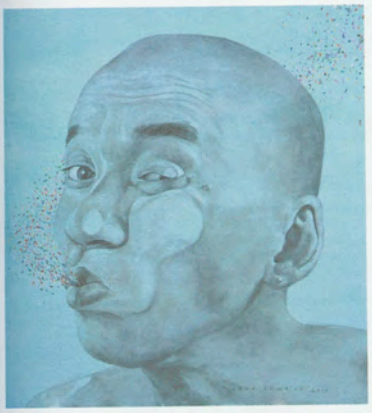
After graduating in graphic design from the Bandung Institute of Technology in 1986, Suwage began his career as an artist in the midst of General Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime (1966–98). The somber but charismatic leader's impact on Indonesia was enormous. Having come to power after defeating an alleged communist plot to overthrow his predecessor, president Sukarno, Suharto severed ties with China, purged Indonesian communists and invited foreign investment, which quickly won him the support of Western governments during the Cold War. Though he shored up domestic support by steering Indonesia's rapid economic growth during the 1970s and 1980s, bringing with it higher median incomes,

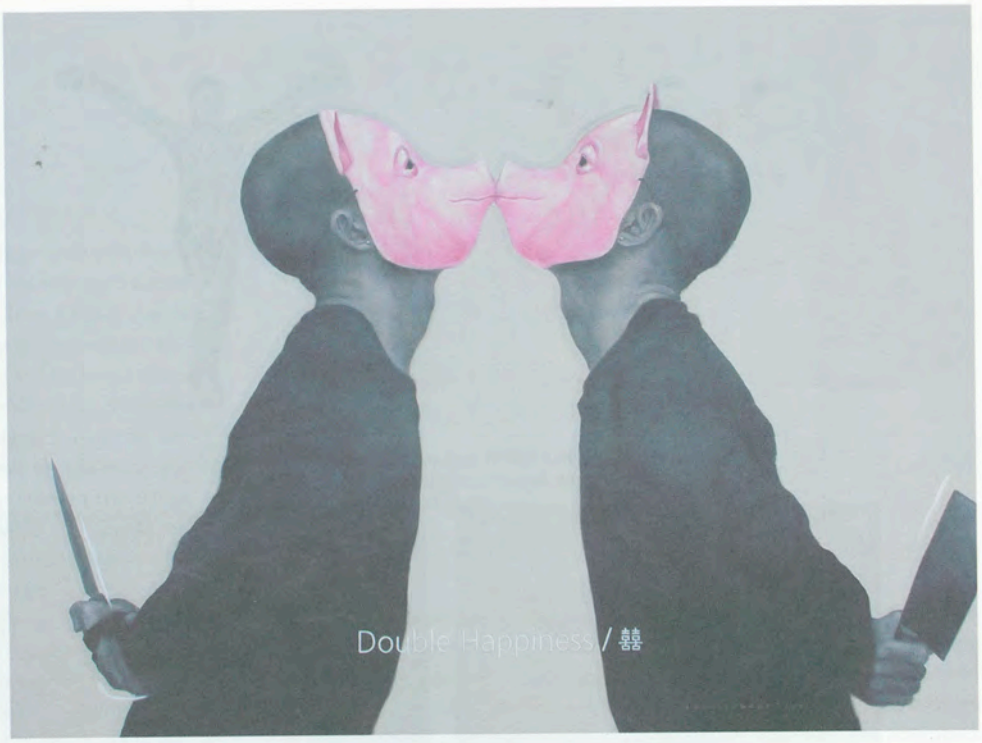


WOW. . . BIG SPLASH!, 2000, oil on canvas, diptych, 60 x 100 cm overall.

MERAYAKAN SENI KONTEMPORER I & II, 2003, oil on canvas, 150 x 140 cm each.







DOUBLE HAPPINESS, 2003, oil and acrylic on canvas, 150 x 200 cm.

literacy rates, life-expectancy and modern infrastructure, his rule was also synonymous with corruption, greed and strict control over party life. Extending his family's stake in forestry, petroleum, natural gas, mining, transportation infrastructure, real estate and food processing, Suharto made himself the sixth-richest man in the world at the time. He also targeted regional Chinese minorities with draconian social policies that included a ban on Chinese script, relocation and assimilation into big cities, and the adoption of Indonesian names. "We sometimes encountered discrimination," Suwage recalls. "I remember we had to pay more for an identity card, which had to have a special mark on it because of our ethnicity. The Suharto regime was too strong. It controlled everything."

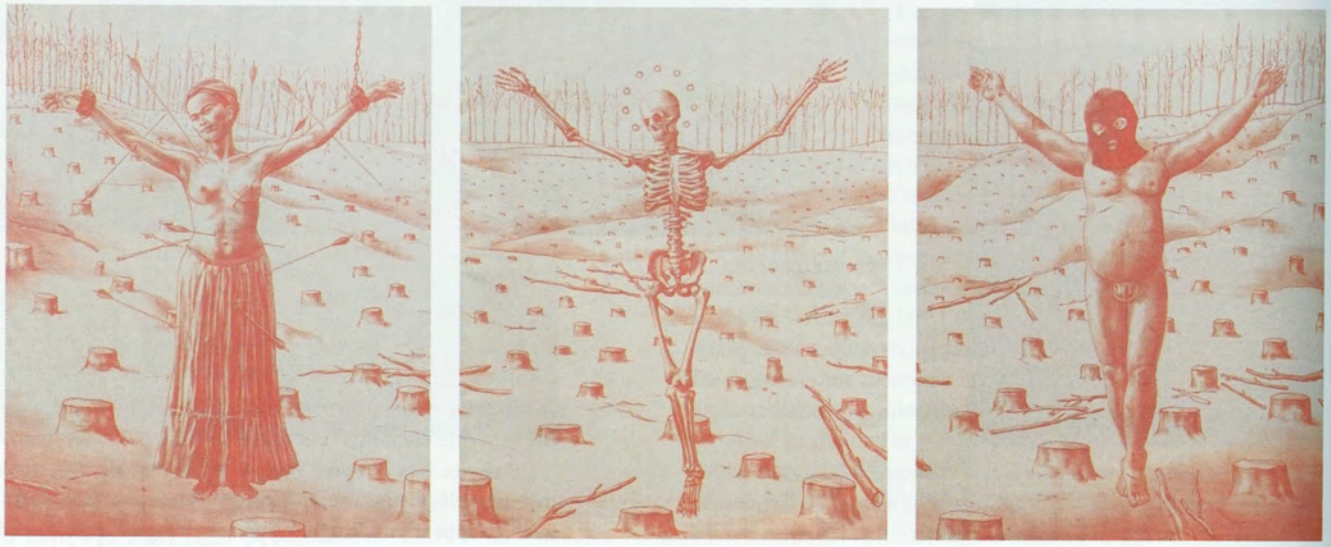
In Suwage's melancholic early drawings on paper from the mid-1990s, he portrays symbolic archetypes such as angels and serpents, as well as political and art-historical icons, ranging from John F. Kennedy to Vincent van Gogh. Not rooted in any specific sense of time or place, these works convey a mood of oppression and anxiety: rendered in somber blacks, grays and browns, they show clusters of rocks drifting in the air over barren lands and scenes of bodily suffering and torment.

In *Wounded Frida* (1994), Mexican artist Frida Kahlo is depicted armless, like an ancient Greek statue, with dozens of arrows piercing her body—in turn a reference to the iconography of Christian martyr Saint Sebastian. Suwage was inspired by Kahlo's devotion to her work despite a serious physical disability. Her image recurs throughout his oeuvre, as it does through Kahlo's. The various motifs that make up images such as these have specific cultural and historical contexts, but brought together in a single composition they tap into universal concerns. Suwage describes the process as a stream of consciousness: "I don't know exactly why I create these images, but they come out automatically. Maybe it's because I hate violence. Before I knew it, drawing these images was a kind of therapy for me. In the end, I am sure that birth, life and death are the separate elements that make up the essence of mankind."

Suwage has become renowned for exploring these themes through self-portraiture. In an early watercolor, *Iconofasismo* (1999), Suwage appears wearing a soldier's helmet, tilting his head back and staring maniacally ahead. His chest is a metal frame, like a bird cage, with a five-star military epaulette on his left shoulder and a lick of flame on his right shoulder. Inside the cage he appears again, as an angel, covering his eyes as though weeping or shielding himself from the world's torment; in the upper-right corner of the composition is an image of Suwage's baby daughter, also with her hands over her eyes. This gesture is a recurring motif in Suwage's work, as seen in triptychs such as *No Evil Co. Ltd.* (2002), which shows the artist covering his eyes, mouth and ears in an enactment of the Japanese pictorial maxim of the "Three wise monkeys," who see, speak and hear no evil. These images advocate the virtues of good mind, speech and action while also implying that in the midst of any crisis there are always those who choose to feign ignorance.

In late 1997, Indonesians watched in horror as stocks plummeted during the Asian Financial Crisis, which precipitated the end of

NO EVIL CO. LTD. I, II & III, 2002, oil on canvas, 150 x 140 cm each.



Suharto's rule the following year. With the demise of the country's relative prosperity in 1998, a year that saw the economy contract by 14 percent, Suharto's sole pillar of legitimacy collapsed. Although the advent of multiparty democracy, greater freedom of speech and a boom in Indonesia's cultural scene fostered a sense of national jubilation in the immediate post-Suharto years, corruption, albeit decentralized, remained endemic. "At the end of the 1990s, I was really bored of the mass euphoria," Suwage reflects. "I tried other themes besides politics. It was a difficult transition, but I was relieved that finally I was moving forward, little by little."

Believing that, ideally, he should criticize himself before criticizing somebody else, during the early 2000s Suwage greatly diversified the tone of his self-portraiture, largely eschewing the torment of the previous decade for a theatrical palette of slapstick, bemusement and self-deprecation. Working from photographs of himself and rendering them in oil on canvas, he was prolific in his output, producing dozens of images in which he is variously pinching his nose, peering at the viewer while a large blue flower blooms from his mouth, pressing his face against a wall with a lit fuse protruding from the back of his head, exhaling hundreds of tiny multicolored fragments, and grimacing as beige liquid trickles down his face. One delightful diptych from 2000 shows a reproduction of David Hockney's *A Bigger Splash* (1967) on the left-hand panel, with a topless Suwage on the right-hand panel, his hand covering his mouth as he looks on, wide-eyed with amazement. Impish and irreverent, the work is entitled *Wow . . . Big Splash!*

SUWAGE'S EXPLORATIONS OF THE BODY AND SEXUALITY CLASHED WITH RIGHT-WING ISLAMIC VIEWS IN THE MID-2000s.

VOX MORBIS, VOX ORBIS, 2009, life-size sculptures, mixed media, aluminum, silver plated, resin, oil paint.

VOX MORBIS, VOX ORBIS, 2009, oil on linen, triptych, 250 x 600 cm overall.

TOO YOUNG TO DIE, TOO OLD TO ROCK 'N' ROLL I, II & III, 2007–09, acrylic, cigarette butts, capsules, fiberglass and alumninum, 52 x 119 x 16 cm each.

Although Suwage was exploring themes other than politics, it remains a persistent subtext in his work, even in his self-portraiture, much of which remains laced with cynicism. In a 2003 series of oil paintings, shown at the National Gallery of Indonesia and Gallery Nadi that same year, Suwage is depicted in black and white wearing a pink pig mask on his face. He explains that he chose the animal because worldwide it has been given negative attributes, ranging from sloth to gluttony to stubbornness, and as such, the pig was a suitable symbol for his critique of the human condition. The symmetrically composed *Double Happiness* (2003) shows two identical figures facing each other with their lips touching in what could be construed as an act of intimacy were it not for the knives they conceal behind their backs. In works such as this, the use of the pig mask is an overt metaphor for humankind's hypocrisy, and yet, having been born in the Year of the Pig, Suwage also wishes to show solidarity with the much-despised beast. Meanwhile, *Playing the Fool 2* (2004), a sculpture composed of four of Indonesia's ubiquitous *becak* pedicabs facing each other, linked by a four-player chess set in the middle, suggests that the push and pull of vested interests and strategic clashes exist at the everyday level.

Recognizing that his self-portraiture had a strong performative aspect, Suwage began to study the work of other performance artists from around the word. After reading about the influence of performance in feminist art, Suwage began the "Pause/Re-play" (2004–05) series of drawings and watercolor reproductions of works by internationally renowned figures such as Marina Abramović, Carolee Schneemann and Yoko Ono, as well as lesser-known figures such as Jakarta-based Arahmaiani. Once he realized that there are relatively few female performance artists, he expanded his subject matter to include their male counterparts, such as Zhang Huan, Hermann Nitsch and Seiji Shimoda. Thereafter he further broadened the scope of "Pause/Re-play" to incorporate Nan Goldin, Sarah Lucas and Rineke Dijkstra's photographs exploring male, female and transgender sexuality. The resulting wall-mounted panorama of 50 images is a nostalgic ode to feminism, the history of gestural and bodily expression and its connotations of liberation from authority and regulation.

This tribute was all too timely as Suwage's artistic explorations of the human body and sexuality clashed with right-wing Islamic views on the representation of the body in the mid-2000s. The flipside of Indonesia's transition to democracy is that the nation has suffered protracted bouts of violence, ranging from ethnic conflict between indigenous Dayak tribesmen and settlers in Borneo's South Kalimantan province to government forces waging war against separatist movements in Aceh. The economic woes of the post-Suharto years have also provided Islamic fundamentalist groups with easy opportunities to recruit disaffected youths and promote armed violence as a means to purge the country of vice—a trend that caught the world's attention with the Jemaah Islamiyah network's bombings of beach resorts in Bali in October 2002 and the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta in August 2003.

This growing intolerance of perceived indecency crept into the artistic sphere in September 2005, when Suwage and photographer Davy Linggar's collaborative installation *Pinkswing Park* (2005), displayed at the second CP Biennale in Jakarta, became the focus of controversy. Responding to the Biennale's theme of "Urban/Culture," Suwage and Linggar created an Eden-like garden of fake grass, with a pink swing made from a *becak* at its center. A meditation on the loneliness of individuals in big cities and the tendency of urban

PAUSE/REPLAY, 2004–05, installation of 50 drawings, and watercolor on paper, approx. 350 x 900 cm.

dwellers to cocoon themselves in the man-made environment of their homes, *Pinkswing Park* was conceived as an artificial utopian world. The walls were covered with composite digital images of a forest populated by the nearly naked, frolicking figures of Anjasmara, the handsome star of the Indonesian soap opera *Sinetron*, and Isabel Yahya, a model and fashion-magazine editor. The subjects were not actually nude when Linggar took the photographs, but the suggestion that they were was created with white circles obscuring their genitals—a deliberate comment on censorship in light of anti-pornography legislation that conservative Islamic parties, such as the Prosperous Justice Party and the Crescent Star Party, had been attempting to pass since 1999.

The pre-existing media fascination with Anjasmara drew more attention to the installation than there might otherwise have been, and television reports on the work—in which it was hard to tell whether the white circles were part of the installation or the broadcasters' own on-screen censorship—incited the indignation of the Front Pembela Islam (FPI, the Islamic Defender Front), which declared that the nudity in *Pinkswing Park* was offensive to Muslims, particularly in the month prior to Ramadan. FPI supporters reportedly demanded the removal of the work, threatening to destroy it; aware of the FPI's violent history, the biennale's curator, Jim Supangkat, closed off the installation before they arrived. The work had been on public display only for ten days, and the CP Biennale has yet to be held again. Although it has never been officially stated as such, it is widely believed in the Indonesian art

PINKSWING PARK, 2005, modified pedicab, digital print on paper, stone, dimensions variable. Made in collaboration with Davy Linggar.

THE TONE OF SUWAGE'S RECENT SERIES OF PRINTS HOVERS BETWEEN THE MELANCHOLIC AND THE IRREVERENT.

world that the threat of violence in reaction to *Pinkswing Park* caused the Biennale's organizers to halt subsequent editions.

The anti-pornography bill eventually passed in October 2008. Under the far-reaching law, which aims to protect women and children from immoral influence, the possession or distribution of pornography is punishable by four years in prison, and any display of nudity or a sexually suggestive performance can result in a USD 500,000 fine or a ten-year jail sentence. However, the law's vague definitions of "bodily movements" and its invitation to "civil society" to help enforce it has led many, primarily those within the nation's ethnic and religious minorities, to fear that it will give legal validation to Islamic vigilantes and represents a first step toward the imposition of Sharia law. The provinces of Bali, Yogyakarta, Papua and North Sulawesi, however, with their large non-Muslim populations, have rejected the law.

"So far I see no significant effect of the anti-pornography bill on Indonesia's art scene," Suwage told *AAP*. "But the greater problem is about multiculturalism and pluralism in this country. We have to find a way to keep mutual tolerance and stay free from the politicization of these issues."

Suwage reprised the imagery from *Pinkswing Park* in January 2009, during a six-week residency at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI), where local experts helped him develop a new body of 50 large and richly textured lithographs, half of which he exhibited in a solo show, "Circle," at the STPI in September. The body of work is diverse in its stylistic range, and yet it contains two consistent subjects, Isabel Yahya and excerpts from the anti-pornography law. These excerpts are rendered in both handwritten and typed text, running over and behind Yahya's naked body, as do the numbers of the bill's 44 articles, either floating freely in the picture plane, or locked down in a grid. Some permutations of the prints, with their blacks and whites reversed, look like photographic negatives, while others, with cutout floral patterns snaking across the composition, are more reminiscent of traditional craftwork. However, what unites many of these variations is a single circle—sometimes superimposed, sometimes cut out—in place of the model's genitals. While the stylistic flourishes of this series frequently render Yahya's form unrecognizable, showing her in silhouette or obscured by numbers and text, the circle maintains

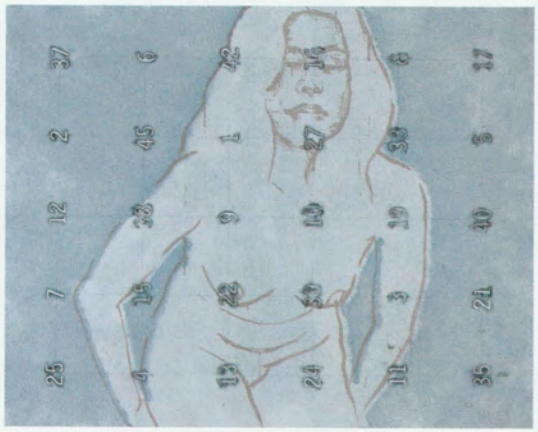
I SPEAK, 2009, lithography, etching, pigment-stained and stencil-washed STPI handmade paper assembled on Fabriano paper, 128.9 x 102.9 x 1.9 cm.

8 CHAPTERS 44 ARTICLES #10, 2009, lithography, two layers of hand-cut, pigment-stained and stencil-washed STPI handmade paper, 128 x 101.6 x 1.3 cm.

8 CHAPTERS 44 ARTICLES #4, 2009, lithography, embossing, spray paint, pigment-stained and stencil-washed STPI handmade paper, 127 x 101.6 cm.

PINKSWING PARK, 2005, detail of digital print on paper from mixed-media installation. Made in collaboration with Davy Linggar.

RAIN DOT 2, 2009, lithography, etching, aquatint, acrylic and STPI handmade paper, 102 x 128 cm.

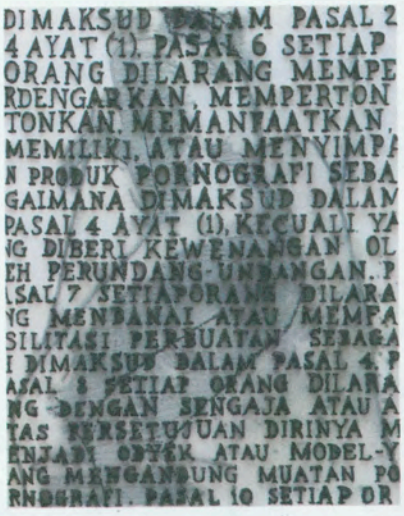


(Left) **RAIN DOT 1**, 2009, stencil, airbrush, acrylic-and pigment-stained STPI handmade paper, 102 x 128 cm.

(Right) **NUMBER**, 2009, lithography, toner, hand-cut and pigment-stained STPI handmade paper, 103 x 128 cm.

CLOUDY, 2009, mixed media assemblage of STPI handmade paper, cotton pulp and pigment, 133 x 168 cm.

44, 2009, mixed media assemblage of STPI handmade paper, cotton pulp and pigment, 170 x 131 x 2 cm.



TEXTUAL, 2009, mixed media assemblage of STPI handmade paper, cotton pulp and pigment, 169 x 133 x 4 cm.

SUWAGE HAS BY NO MEANS LOST HIS SENSE OF HUMOR, BUT FOR NOW HIS WORK HAS HIT AN UNEASY NOTE OF RESIGNATION.

an unmistakable visual and conceptual connection with the original imagery of *Pinkswing Park*.

The tone of these works hovers between the melancholic and the irreverent, with three of the prints—entitled *I Hear, I See* and *I Speak*—showing Suwage's face in the circle, gesturing that he hears, speaks and sees no evil. Yet, given the current political climate in Indonesia, the motif of Suwage with his hand over his mouth now carries the unfortunate connotation that he can no longer operate fully on his own terms and has, at least in part, been silenced by his critics—a particularly bitter irony to befall an artist in newly democratic Indonesia.

Suwage nevertheless remains a highly respected figure, and in July 2009 he was given a major retrospective, "Still Crazy After All These Years," at the Jogja National Museum in Yogyakarta. Suwage and the show's curator, Enin Supriyanto, named the exhibition after the 1975 Paul Simon album and song, as the spirit of the title reflects the 50-year-old artist's ongoing dedication to his work. The morbid streak in his early images of Frida Kahlo is back in force in several new paintings and installations featuring a topless Kahlo hanging Christ-like from chains and her body pierced with arrows. Other works ruminating on mortality included *Luxury Crime – 3rd Edition* (2007–09), a gold-plated stainless-steel skeleton bathing in a tub full of rice, and *Too Young to Die, Too Old to Rock 'n' Roll* (2009), a set of three transparent acrylic guitar cases filled with cigarette butts, orange pills and realistic replicas of human bones.

Suwage has by no means lost his sense of humor—he says he is currently developing a cage-like installation that he will fill with the likenesses of Indonesian art-world figures—but for now his work has hit an uneasy note of resignation that is eerily appropriate in multicultural Indonesia. No matter one's birthplace, appearance, status or beliefs, death is the great leveler—something we all share in common. As Indonesia enters a new decade, it faces growing uncertainty over whether its social cohesiveness and national unity can survive ongoing separatist conflicts and violently enforced religious dogmatism. Through his art, Suwage is likely to continue reflecting these anxieties while also offering his own idiosyncratic and bittersweet antidote.