

MINDFOOD

ARTIST AGUS SUWAGE DEFIES INDONESIA'S CONSERVATISM

Four years ago, Agus Suwage was hauled into parliament, where lawmakers accused him of blasphemy and of producing pornography dressed up as art.

BY SUNANDA CREAGH | OCT 01, 2009

Indonesian artist Agus Suwage knows what it is like to run up against the religious conservatives. Four years ago, he was hauled into parliament, where lawmakers accused him of blasphemy and of producing pornography dressed up as art.

Today, facing an even more restrictive climate in Indonesia, Suwage refuses to be silenced and has made those restrictions the focus of his art.

His latest exhibition, which opened at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute this month, highlights what he sees as a growing conservatism in majority Muslim but officially secular Indonesia.

Many of the works probably could not be shown at a big public exhibition space in Indonesia following the passage of a controversial anti-pornography law last year.

"Art and this law cannot be reconciled. There is art and then there is this law and they are very far apart," Suwage told Reuters in an interview.

"There are more important things to address in law than pornography, like education. But everyone wants to win a political point and on this issue the politics come easily."

Suwage's latest works are a series of prints of female nudes overlaid with the actual text of Indonesia's 2008 anti-pornography law, under which a person can be charged for any public activity that "incites sexual desire."

Members of Indonesia's arts community have warned that the law could be used to crack down on traditional artforms such as Balinese or Papuan nude statues, as well as contemporary artists like Suwage.

In several of his new prints, the area around the nude's genitals has been cut out completely. In a nod to the issue of censorship, the cut-outs in three artworks have been filled with images of Suwage covering his eyes, ears or mouth.

Suwage says most Indonesians in the predominantly Muslim country are still moderates who practice a broad-minded form of Islam, but he realizes that only a handful of galleries would dare to exhibit his new works.

"I think there would be some who are brave enough."

The artist has already had a taste of what it's like to fall foul of the hardliners and extremists.

In 2005, Suwage's installation, Pinkswing Park - which depicted a man and woman frolicking nude in an Eden-like garden, and featured a pink swing fashioned from a rickshaw carriage - led to threats from the Islamic Defenders Front, or FPI, a vigilante group known for smashing up bars and clubs.

"The FPI approached the exhibition organisers and threatened them. They said, 'If this artwork isn't covered, we will attack with 250 people'," said Suwage. The curators complied, even though the genitals of Suwage's subjects were already covered by modest white circles.

"But then, the FPI went to the police to report that the work was against the law and against religion. I had to sit in hearings in parliament and make my case with my lawyer," he said.

The police eventually dropped the case against him but for Suwage, the issue is still very much alive.

Indonesia has traditionally been a bastion of moderate Islam, where Islamic beliefs are often adapted to fit local customs and even animist traditions.

However, in the 10 years since repressive ex-President Suharto stepped down, a flourishing culture of free expression has also meant a stronger voice for religious conservatives, some of whom have found support in lawmakers wanting to appear more pious.

"Some parts of Indonesia are getting more strict," Suwage said, pointing to parts of the country where women have to wear headscarves or are not allowed to walk alone at night. "Why is this happening in Indonesia?"