



"Shadow of the Past": Indonesian artist Arahmaiani at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

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Arahmaiani's new exhibition "Shadow of the Past" explores Buddhist meditation in relation to ecological and feminist activism.

Arahmaiani's exhibition "Shadow of the Past" presents a new body of work conceived while living in a Buddhist community in Tibet. *Art Radar* takes a look at the performance artist known as much for ecological activism and sexual dissidence as for her art.



Arahmaiani, 'Descending Rainbow', 2016, mattress, pillow, bed spread, netting, table, candlestick with candle, book, book bag, photograph, belt, hat, robe, bag. Image courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art and the artist.

In 2014 Arahmaiani (b. 1965, Bandung) had her first solo exhibition in United States. Entitled "Fertility of the Mind" at **Tyler Rollins Fine Art** the exhibition surveyed a 30-year career in which the Indonesian artist has explored the architectures and techniques of representations of the body, sexuality, nature and faith through performance, installation and multimedia works.

Her current exhibition, also at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, entitled **"Shadow of the Past"** further demonstrates the way in which Arahmaiani's artistic practice is intimately entwined with her ecological and feminist activism.



Arahmaiani, "Shadow of the Past", 2016, installation view at Tyler Rollins Fine Art. Image courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Arahmaiani: A Muslim feminist artist in dialogue with Buddhism

"Shadow of the Past" is one of the many artistic products that have emerged since the artist began working six years ago in collaboration with Buddhist monks and villagers in the Tibetan plateau region. "Shadow of the Past" which was originally a performance work presented at performance art gallery Grace Exhibition Space in New York. The artist **released a statement** in August of 2016 stating:

My latest works in the form of paintings, videos, installations, and performance, are influenced by my research into the past cultures of Animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism in Indonesia, which left behind many temples – even the largest Buddhist temple in the world, Borobudur, which was buried for 800 years and was rediscovered around 200 years ago. Also there are very ancient books of Buddhist teaching, such as Sanghyang Kamahayanikan, which was discovered in the kingdom of Lombok when it was defeated by the Dutch military in the year 1900.

Furthermore, there is the relationship in ancient times between Tibetan Buddhism and local Buddhism in what is now Indonesia (which in the past was of the Mahayana/Tantrayana sect). A monk known by the name Lama Atisha, who became a reformer of the Buddhist religion in Tibet and who founded Kadampa school, once studied for twelve years in the Buddhist university in Sriwijaya (the ancient kingdom in Indonesia), where he received the guidance of a local master by the name of Dharmakirti, who in Tibet is known as Lama Serlingpa.



Arahmaiani, 'Pillows of Dukkha', 2016, 10 pillows embroidery on cotton fabric, 66 x 66 cm. Image courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art and the artist.

Many of the works in "Shadow of the Past" explore the artist's experience and research into Buddhist meditation. The exhibition begins with the installation *Descending Rainbow* (2016), which consists of a reproduction of a Tibetan monk's robe, a veiled meditation mattress and a mandala made from living plants. The installation is also the setting for a new performance work of the same title, which had its debut during the exhibition opening. *Pillows of Dukkha* (2016), referencing the Buddhist concept of suffering, is a work made up of a pile of grey pillows that have been embroidered with certain keywords relating to emotional states such as compassion, hate and greed.



Arahmaiani, 'Illumination', 2016, acrylic on canvas diptych each panel, 137 x 117 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

A series of diptych paintings, entitled respectively *Illumination* (2016) and *Sonam* (2016), are all in monochromatic gray, a color the artist associates with the quiet peace of a meditative state. A second video, *Shadow of the Past (Lasem, Java)* (2016), is based on the performance at Grace Exhibition Space, in which Arahmaiani covers herself with mud, evoking the long buried Buddha statues of ancient Javanese temples, and walks through the empty buildings of an abandoned Javanese town once inhabited by ethnic Chinese Indonesians. She wanders through the streets, stopping to meditate in various key locations, including an empty Buddhist temple.



Arahmaiani, 'Sonam', 2012, acrylic on canvas diptych each panel, 200 x 180 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Critiques of the work of Arahmaiani by secular spectators and religious commentators

Arahmaiani is an avowed Muslim. Her father is an Islamic scholar and her mother is Javanese Hindu-Buddhist. In [an interview with](#) Susan Silas and Chrysanne Stathacos, Arahmaiani explained in 2014 how she is often questioned by secular and Muslim viewers alike for the way in which her work is in constant dialogue with the histories and practices of Buddhism, stating:

I got some calls from people and they said, "Are you a Muslim?" And I said that I am. "Why are you bringing up this Buddhist stuff?" And I said: "Why not. It is a part of our history and it is also the heritage that I received from my ancestors and this is important for us." And I can go on and on about how important this history is for us, to learn about ourselves, to be able to go further.



Arahmaiani, 'Light', 2015, still from single channel video, 4:22 min. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Opposite from the initial work *Descending Rainbow*, sits a dimly lit installation containing a bench where visitors can meditate while observing Arahmaiani's video *Light* (2015), in which the artist and friends of different

nationalities and ethnicities take turns holding a lit candle and speaking a single word that is of spiritual significance to them. In the aforementioned artist statement she explains that it is precisely her encounter with diverse spiritual traditions and their leaders (citing Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Hinduism) as well as other figures in the art world and academia that have informed her outlook and are all at the centre of her practice as an artist.

In a statement [published as part of her participation](#) in the Brooklyn Museum's seminal 2007 exhibition "Global Feminisms", she spoke out against all kinds of conservatism, fundamentalism and dogmatism, whether that is coming from religion (a critique well incorporated into the western mainstream media) or from the globalised economy. It is in her acute "double critique" of various national, international and religious discourses that has earned her work interlocutors from diverse experiences and backgrounds. (A video of her 2007 presentation at this exhibition can [be seen here](#).)



Arahmaiani, 'Lingga-Yoni', 1994, acrylic on canvas, 182 x 140 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Imprisonment and death threats

In 1983, during the period of the Suharto dictatorship (1967 – 1998), Arahmaiani was arrested for one month after doing a public performance. She was released on the condition that she did not do any more exhibitions or public actions. She was also invited to work as an informant for the military dictatorship, something the artist declined to do and was subsequently motivated to leave the country, moving to Australia where she would spend the next three years.

In 1993 Arahmaiani had a solo exhibition in Jakarta, where her two works *Etalase* (1993) and *Lingga-Yoni* (1993) resulted in the artist receiving death threats. In the painting *Lingga-Yoni*, Arabic letters (the equivalent of ABC) are written across the canvas and at the top of the painting the phrase "Nature is a book" is written in an Arabic script modified for local languages in Indonesia. Her intentions were literal: to affirm nature as a text, or something "written".

This could itself be something blasphemous for various religious views, but it was the combination of these elements with the hindu script for *lingga* and *yoni* that caused the commotion, as for many viewers these symbols were simply received as images of the vagina and the penis. In the interview Arahmaiani stated the following in reference to this event:

I tried to explain to them that for Hindus this is a sacred kind of symbol. It has nothing to do with something derogatory or dirty. But they didn't accept this.



Arahmaiani, "Shadow of the Past", 2016, installation view of 'Light' and 'Pillows of Dukkha' at Tyler Rollins Fine Art. Image courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Arahmaiani and ecological activism

In the aforementioned 2016 artist statement, Arahmaiani describes the process and motives lying behind her decision to spend time making work in the region of the Tibetan Plateau:

Besides this, my activity with the monks and the laypeople in Lab village, in the Kham region of Tibet, over the past six years, with the goal of solving environmental problems, is also of course another source of fresh inspiration which has a relation to the past of Java, my place of birth. The Tibetan Plateau – which is also known as the Third Pole and Asia's Water Tower because it is the source of seven large rivers on which the livelihood of more than two billion people depends – is under the threat of draught. Climate change, also known as global warming, has caused the glaciers and even the permafrost to melt. There have been many disasters at the upstream areas of the rivers, such as floods and mudslides. Efforts must be undertaken to prevent larger disasters, particularly to answer the issue of the drying up of all the springs there.

Thus my new works might be more of a contemplation on the present condition of life, which is full of issues and challenges. Which is under the threat of ecological destruction. Or which is awash with the suffering of those who are poor and marginalized in this less than just economic system that tends to be profit oriented. I try to imagine a brighter future for life and try to change the direction of thinking that causes destruction and inhuman conditions.



Arahmaiani, 'Hantu Bule', 2016, acrylic on canvas, diptych, each panel 137 x 137 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

As the press release of the exhibition states, "Shadow of the Past"

constitutes an ongoing exposé of narrow dogmas, destructive patterns of thought and action, and misguided government policies, all of which plague humanity – a critique that is manifested in her peaceful, symbolically rich, and often hauntingly beautiful ceremonies, collective marches, and texts that instigate individual and collective vigilance against ignorance and injustice. They point to a common humanity that transcends divisions. Through her performances and other artworks, she acts as a formal and conceptual medium for communication, connectivity, and cooperation between individuals, communities, and nations.

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