

ARAHMAIANI shortlisted for Balestier Award

Arahmaiani is one of the country's most outspoken artists, known for her strong stances on tolerance and pluralism.



Photo by Carla Bianpoen

Carla Bianpoen
CONTRIBUTOR/JAKARTA

Art Stage Singapore will open its doors for the 2017 edition of the art fair on Jan. 11. But, in collaboration with the United States Embassy in Singapore, it will first host the Balestier Award for Freedom of Art expression.

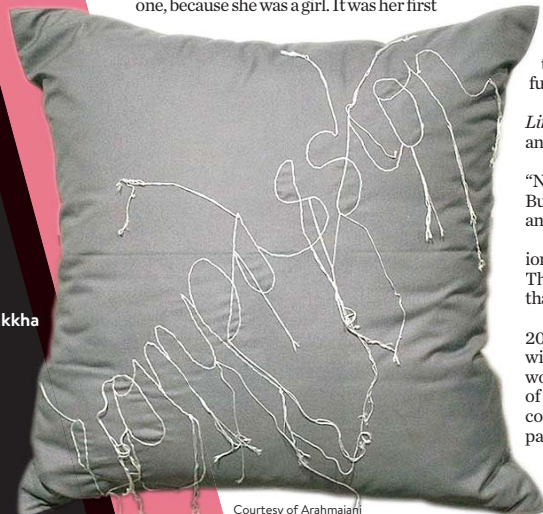
The third edition of the award has three finalists — Indonesian contemporary artist Arahmaiani, Myanmar's Aye Ko, and Vietnamese artist Chaw Ei Thein. The winner, which will be announced on Jan. 10, will also take home a cash prize of US\$15,000.

Born in Bandung in 1961, Arahmaiani is known as one of the country's most outspoken activist artists, whose fame stretches to the corners of Asia and the West. A rebel in the eyes of her adversaries, she has been lauded for her bravery and strength, daring to stand up against injustice, repressive fanaticism and discrimination of any kind.

She has featured in more than a hundred solo and group exhibitions around the world, including the Venice Biennale, the Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, the landmark 1996 Traditions and Tensions exhibition by the Asia Society in New York City, Gwangju Biennale, Sharjah Biennale, just to name a few.

In 2007, during the Global Feminisms exhibition held at the Brooklyn Museum Arahmaiani spoke out against all kinds of conservatism, fundamentalism and dogmatism, regardless if it was coming from religion or from the globalized economy. Her artwork has appeared in institutions in the US, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and Japan.

As a child, she loved to listen to stories about the Prophet which evoked a desire to become a prophet herself. However, she was told she could never be one, because she was a girl. It was her first



Pillows of Dukkha

Courtesy of Arahmaiani

confrontation with gender issues.

Her father, a modern Islamic scholar provided her a strict Islamic education and culture. Her mother's Hindu and Buddhist background, however, enabled her to learn Javanese dances, songs, legends, poetry, and customs. Her upbringing saw the coexistence of both convictions.

Tolerance and plurality became ingrained within her very being. Her name alone (Arahma-iani) was a compromise, she said. *Arahma* has its root in Arabic meaning "loving", while *iani* derives from "human being" in Hindi.

It seems only natural that she was averse to fanaticism, discrimination and injustice. Her cultural background also spurred her interest in researching the past cultures of Animism, Hinduism and Buddhism in Indonesia.

Her interest in Buddhist culture intensified when she learned that a reformer of Tibetan Buddhism had spent 12 years of study in the ancient kingdom of Sriwijaya. She was inspired to take her 2006 Flag Project to Tibet, where she worked with monks and villagers in the Kham region of Tibet, focusing on ecological issues.

Highly critical of uneven power relations in societies across the world, she has been incorporating the issues of capitalist power, the rise of consumerism, the imposition of gender relations and the rights of women and men into powerful performance art, inducing the ire of many but admired by just as many too.

Earlier on, in the 1980s, was her public debut, marking her first performance, protesting the rising number of accidents along the main thoroughfare in Bandung. She wrapped lamp posts along the main street of the city with blood stained bandages, stopped traffic to distribute flyers detailing the number and types of accidents that were increasingly occurring along this street.

She was jailed, expelled from art school at Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) and banned from taking part in exhibitions at the time. Increasingly considered a troublemaker, she left the country, became a nomad and lived the life of a street artist. But she also studied in Enschede, Netherlands, and Sydney, Australia, while enhancing her knowledge of art, culture and philosophy.

Exploring the issue of Muslim identity and its diverging ramification, her works were perceived as provocative, often to this dismay of fundamentalists.

Greatly inspired by Hindu and Buddhist culture, her 1994 painting *Lingga Yoni* aspired to put an accent on the sacred union of the phallus and the vagina.

Combined with Arabic letters covering a canvas denoting the phrase "Nature is a book", it became misunderstood as mere feminist activism. But today, she notes, it is being understood as the intrinsic need for balance in the world's power relations in order to achieve peace.

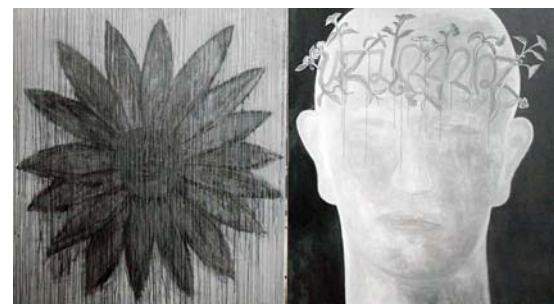
Passionate to show the human face of religion, she also created the cushions shaping the word Allah in Arabic letters (in *Stitching the Wounds*). These too were met with critical commentaries, which she defied insisting that the word Allah for her means "love".

Her Flag Project of community based performances, created in 2006, was a means of community dialogue and rebuilding. Starting with a flag featuring her design with the Arabic-derived Indonesian word *akal* (sense or cunning), other designs followed denoting issues of consumerism and capitalist power, such as names of multinational corporations like Freeport and Coca Cola. The project eventually expanded from Indonesia to Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philip-

Flag Project in Singapore



Courtesy of Arahmaiani



Courtesy of Arahmaiani

Shadow of the Past

pines, Japan, Thailand and then China.

Her successful collaboration with Buddhist monks to minimize ecological destruction in Tibet's plateau region also impacted on her revived understanding of cultural diversity and spirituality.

Informed by Tibetan Buddhism, her recent exhibition in New York, "Shadow of the Past", explored such issues of cultural syncretism, humanity's interconnectedness with nature, and the place of the feminine in religious traditions and in spiritual life in general.

A quality of calm and peacefulness is tangible in the monochromatic gray color of the *Pillows of Dukkha*, and the paintings feature women's faces, some crowned with inscriptions in Arabic and Tibetan.

A video titled *Lasem*, a Javanese town in Central Java where her grandmother used to buy batik, shows her face covered with mud, walking through the empty buildings in the abandoned Javanese town that was once inhabited by ethnic Chinese Indonesians.

It seems her passionate activism has crystallized into a depth of quality concerning the future of humanity and the future of the earth. Coming back to the concept of Lingga and Yoni, she reiterates it as basic principles for achieving peace in the world.