

HYPERALLERGIC

An Indonesian Artist Paints Fundamentalists as Buffoons and Monkeys

Agus Suwage's deeply personal works never stop questioning and working to upend oppression.

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Agus Suwage, "Room of Mine" (2016), paper mache, dentures, watercolor, tobacco juice. 160 x 290 x 41 cm (all images courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art)

Activism has become an increasingly potent form of protest against oppression in Southeast Asia. The onset of globalization in the 1990s brought about a new social landscape that saw the rise of the middle class and urbanization, while simultaneously creating a new population of deprived urban poor. This disparity between the well-off and the dispossessed gave impetus to artists like Agus Suwage from Indonesia to challenge the existing conditions. Alongside fellow artists such as FX Harsono and Henri Dono, Suwage's practice has become what the historian Iola Lenzi refers to as the "vehicle of popular empowerment."



Agus Suwage, 'Room of Mine,' installation view

Suwage's third solo exhibition, [*Room of Mine*](#) at the Tyler Rollins Gallery, is comprised of watercolor paintings and papier-mâché sculptures, and it continues the artist's role as an agent of social change. Yet his protest against the status quo is accompanied by his own personal investigation of identity and self. Ever since a democratic government replaced Suharto's military dictatorship in 1998, the tenuous condition of plurality in Indonesia's vast territory of multiple ethnicities and the recent rise of Islamic fundamentalism has resulted in work that, for Suwage, is as introspective as it is a commentary on the social conditions of his country. For instance, in "Room of Mine" (2016), a series of portraits explore Suwage's relationship with animals. Here a number of watercolor paintings of animal heads mounted on human bodies surround a large papier-mâché sculpture of a buck with dentures. Referencing the artist's reverence for animals and the raw, untainted purity of their actions, the images project his longing for a world in which some sense of social order and peace prevails.



Agus Suwage, "No Evil and Co. - After Soedjojono" (2016), watercolor, ink, tobacco juice on paper, 122 x 225 cm

However, Suwage's use of humor through the inclusion of masks injects an element of levity in his works that undercuts the actions of fanaticism. In "No Evil and Co. II – After Soedjojono" (2016), three self-portraits with monkey masks imitate the three Chinese monkeys that neither see, hear, nor speak evil. In the far background, the rugged landscape painted with different shades of beige tobacco juice recreates the style of the Indonesian modernist Soedjojono, while a bomb appears to explode behind the monkey man covering his eyes. Helplessness, fear, ridicule, and strength are intertwined through this humorous but unnerving painting that both showcases and undermines the severity of terrorism in Indonesia. Similarly, "Icono Fascismo II – After Wakidi" (2016), three masked self-portraits that resemble members of the Ku Klux Klan hold an accordion, a microphone, and a human skull while bombs detonate in the background. Appearing like puppets on a stage, these figures representing fundamentalists can be seen as buffoons as well as prototypes of demagogues who manipulate and control.



Agus Suwage, "Icono Fascismo II – After Wakidi" (2016), watercolor, ink, tobacco juice on paper, 122 x 225 cm



Agus Suwage, "Kama Sutra II" (2016), papier-mâché, gouache, water color, tobacco juice, 223 x 242 x 7 cm

While Suwage's papier-mâché sculpture "Dogma Bertumpuk" (2016) references the dogmatic misrepresentation of Indonesian history, paintings like "Fragmen Tempat Tidur" (2016), which is set in the intimacy of Suwage's bedroom, alludes to his inner conflicts regarding sexual expression through words like "lust," "decadent," and "*Roman Picisan*" — a movie about star-crossed lovers in Indonesia. Complex issues of sexuality might also have

inspired the papier-mâché sculpture “Kama Sutra II” (2016), which is ostensibly based on an image of Bill and Hillary Clinton, fitted here with traditional Hindu-Javanese masks.

Suwage’s conversion to Islam and his interfaith marriage make him an ideal proponent for plurality. His appeal for mutual respect and tolerance is expressed through his installation “Song without Sound” (2016), which is made of numerous recycled glass bottles containing inkjet prints of multicolored human ears that are arranged in the form of the musical score for the Indonesian national anthem. The song’s motto, “unity in diversity,” conveys the artist’s advocacy for a society that runs counter to the current far-right politics that have come to the fore the world over. Unlike FX Harsono’s more strident form of activism, Suwage’s deeply personal self-portraits, combining personal conflicts with larger concerns, never stop questioning and working to upend oppression.



Agus Suwage, “Song Without Sound” (2016), used bottles, ink jet print, ink, tobacco juice, 230 x 450 x 7 cm

[Room of Mine](#) continues at the Tyler Rollins Gallery (529 West 20th Street, 10W, Chelsea) through April 1.