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Jakarta. From F. X. Harsono's rain-soaked performance, Melati Suryodarmo spitting a mouthful of ink, to Tisna Sanjaya's body printing on prayer mats, the partly furnished building of Jakarta's Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Nusantara was full of life for one day.

Although its launch is still three months away, Museum MACAN in Kebon Jeruk, West Jakarta, opened its doors to the public for a one-day-only preview on Aug. 12 with an exciting performance art program featuring renowned artists – mostly Indonesian.

Once Museum MACAN is launched, the focus will clearly be on visual works, but performance art is considered important for the museum's preview because of its engaging nature.

"Performance also exhibits life, meaning that you deal with it in the moment, you deal with it one-on-one and it can be really personal but it can also be really transformative," Museum MACAN director Aaron Seeto told the Jakarta Globe.

"People from all walks of life can be involved in this particular piece or they get to see something that is quite strange but may change slightly how they think about the world, so performance art, not performing arts, is really very much about the encounter with the unknown and that's exciting."

The preview kicked off with "Washing the River," which involved Chinese artist Yin Xiuzhen arranging blocks of ice made of water from Jakarta's Pesangrahan River. Visitors were invited to "wash" the ice – a symbolic act to raise awareness of the importance of taking care of the environment.

Internationally acclaimed painter F. X. Harsono – a member of the '70s Indonesian New Art Movement – was up next with his very first live performance of "Writing in the Rain." The piece was previously showcased as a video performance in 2011.

Harsono's performance started with him writing his Chinese name on glass again and again until water sprayed from above and the ink on the glass faded, though not completely.



F. X. Harsono's 'Writing in the Rain' depicts dealing with his identity as an Indonesian of Chinese descent. (Photo courtesy of Museum MACAN)

Like many Indonesians of Chinese descent, Harsono was given a Chinese name at birth, but rising anti-Chinese sentiment during the New Order era forced him to give up the name and stick with his Javanese name. His Chinese identity was buried so deep that there was a point when he forgot that he ever had that name.

"It was like, as time passed, my identity naturally changed. I wanted to emphasize that yes, I had that name, but then it was written off by the rain, as though it was a natural process. The rain wiped out the old identity into a new one," Harsono told the Jakarta Globe.

"[The rainwater] left smudges, but actually it was all done. The past is the past. What's done is done. With my present identity, I feel I am, above all, an Indonesian but I can't change the fact that I am of Chinese descent," he said.

After a recollection of his past, Harsono did not experience an existential crisis because he already accepted his current identity. He even admitted that although he has kept learning about the history and struggles of his own community, he has not been in touch much with Chinese culture and does not seek to revive it.

Another artist performing a thought-provoking piece was Tisna Sanjaya with "Self Portrait as a Hypocrite." The performance originates from his concerns over the rising threats against Indonesia's religious diversity, especially caused by hardline Muslim groups. Instead of voicing his concerns through protests, he uses art as an inward approach to reflect as a Muslim.

"I didn't point out to anyone but myself as a Muslim. It wasn't intended to criticize the religion, but the attitude of the believers instead," he told the Jakarta Globe.

Tisna's two-hour performance featured mixed media and audience participation.

His performance started with several prayer mats laid out and two canvasses against a wall. The performance involved a repeating pattern of Tisna putting glue on a mat, then laying down in various positions, before inviting audience members to pour charcoal and spices over his body. After that, he asked them to write something, either on the mat, or on one of the canvasses. The result was miscellaneous body prints on the mats.

Tisna, who is a lecturer at the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) in West Java, specializes in graphic art, is used to experimenting.

"Graphic art is not just about advanced machines. Our body and nature are also 'machines.' The 'machines' are not static. They can be plants, charcoal, dust, spices, everything. In Indonesia, the materials are abundant to make graphic art beyond formal methods," Tisna said.

He added that bending down on the mats, even doing the sujud (prostration) which is a key movement in Islamic prayer, signified self-reflection and attempt to re-internalize spiritual values.

Meanwhile, one of the writings on the canvass was "Satungtung néangan kulon, wétan deui wétan deui," a Sundanese saying by poet and Muslim cleric Hasan Mustapa, which means "The more I look for the west, I keep finding the east."

"It has a universal meaning. The more I seek God, it is the self I find," said the artist who grew up in a Sundanese Muslim community where religious values and local culture go hand in hand.

Other artists also performed. Melati Suryodarmo drank and spat a bowl of black ink for three hours in "Eins und Eins," imagining herself as the embodiment of a disgruntled nation, filled with oppression, aggression and violence.

"The Plan Needs Not Be Accurate So Long as It Shows the Disposition of the Rooms" by Reza Afisina put together domestic objects and waste materials from the museum's construction, questioning how objects could obtain the status as art.

Last but not least was "Sri: A Biography in 65 Words" by Agung Kurniawan who "conducted" the audience into an impromptu choir, where they read given words made up a biography of a fictional former court singer named Sri.

Promoting Indonesian Contemporary Art

Besides enjoying live performances, visitors also got a sneak peek at the museum's collection. Yayoi Kusama's "Infinity Mirrored Room" was open for people to spend 12 seconds in a room full of colorful round lamps.

The museum has more than 800 works, all of which form part of founder Hariyanto Adikoesoemo's collection.

According to Seeto, half of the works were obtained from Indonesia; a quarter from Europe and America; and the remainder from the rest of Asia.

Seeto said the museum seeks not only to exhibit but also preserve artworks. It also seeks to pave the way for Indonesia's contemporary art scene to strengthen its global presence.

"The Indonesian contemporary art scene is very important, not just for Indonesia, but also for the Southeast Asian region. It has really great artists, a very important independent scene, and various strong collectors, but what has been missing is a museum culture. Our role is not only to present but also preserve artworks, not just for now, but for the future," Seeto said.

Harsono, on the other hand, said Museum MACAN is vital because the country's art scene is driven by the market and the platforms are dominated by commercial galleries. Museums are not always reliable as platforms for exhibitions because many are poorly managed.

Therefore, if an artwork doesn't fit in with the market's taste, it will struggle to mark its presence.

"If the market determines the value, then all they care about is the economic value [of the artworks]. But there are actually other values that should also be taken into account, such as humanity and intellectual values. There are many things involved in determining the quality of an artwork, but according to the market, those indicators are not as important as the commercial value," Harsono said.

Museum MACAN, with its professional management, is expected to balance out the commercial environment.

"This [museum] is one of the art institutions that don't put forward commercial values, but discourses that contain values the market fails to accommodate. We really need this type of museums," Harsono said.

Museum MACAN will host another preview on Sept. 9 before the officially opening on Nov. 4.



In Melati Suryodarmo's work, 'Eins und Eins,' she imagines herself as the embodiment of a disgruntled nation, filled with oppression, aggression and violence. (Photo courtesy of Museum MACAN)