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ART

Learning About Tactics of Resistance Through Southeast Asian Art

After Darkness reveals the multiple ways that artists from Southeast Asia have renegotiated painful histories.



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Installation view of Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai's "Travels" (2014) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

The exhibition *After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History* at New York's Asia Society takes a straightforward stance: while artists are informed by their immediate sociopolitical surroundings, they also exert a reciprocal impact. The exhibition, which gathers 41 works by seven artists and one artist group from Southeast Asia, takes its title from a book by the Javanese feminist Raden Adjeng Kartini, whose writings illuminate the quest for light, truth, and liberation. But instead of debating whether artists are capable of leading the unenlightened out of the cave, it is perhaps more interesting to look at the tactics of resistance they employ, how they navigate the position of "other," and their investment in the collective and individual body.

In the lobby area, one is greeted with FX Harsono's commentary on media and its discourse. Made in 1998, the work lines up 20 television stills, where a white circle obscures each politician or correspondent's face. By emphatically stripping the speakers of agency over their words, the work points to the political elites' empty rhetoric, and their failure to foster effective dialogue with ordinary people. The work sets the tone for the show, wherein the artist, attentive to the hierarchies and injustices of society, disrupts the normative flow of power in the mainstream realm.



FX Harsono, "Blank Spot on My TV" (2003)

Renowned as the father of activist art in Indonesia, Harsono is adamant on giving voice to marginalized social groups. His multi-media installation *Burned Victims* (1998) is a graphic rendering of a bloody uprising that took place in Jakarta, where hundreds of civilians perished in burning malls. (Under the military dictatorship of President Suharto, the police brutally killed four protesting students, causing chaos to ensue and dissolve into mass looting and killing sprees.) Charred wooden blocks resembling human torsos are horizontally strung up in eight metal scaffoldings, while an equally burned pair of shoes is placed in front of each "body," as if they had just been taken off. These gruesome objects are the products of a public performance in which Harsono incinerated the torsos, wearing a placard that read: "Who should be held accountable?"

Indeed, the answer is not quite so easy, as the impetus for violence and its enactment are ambiguously located in the collective body of the political regime.



FX Harsono, "Burned Victims" (1998)

Framing the entrance to the second-floor gallery, [Tintin Wulia's](#) short videos make use of everyday materials and witty metaphors to engage with greater social divides. *Violence Against Fruits* makes an analogy between the disembowelment of an imported persimmon and the targeting of Chinese-Indonesians in the Jakarta Riots. The seemingly innocuous imagery demonstrates how the simultaneous "othering" and victimization of the Chinese minority are embedded in mundane words and minute gestures.

[The Propeller Group](#), a three-person art collective established in 2006, shows how economic systems are forms of ideology. Set up in a cavern-like enclosure, the videos in *Guerillas of Cu Chi* show how the Cu Chi Tunnels — underground passageways that the Vietcong used to combat American troops — were appropriated by different forces in history. While one video features a propaganda film protesting the US's ruthless military assaults, the other illustrates the site's recent conversion into a tourism

spot, complete with gun ranges and other trifling activities. As the camera slowly pans to reveal giddy visitors playing with rifles and their smartphones, it recalls a Tarantino-like aesthetics of violence in which we all subconsciously participate. Like Harsono's work — although the results are gruesome, absurd, or incomprehensible — the perpetrator of violence is never clear. In lieu of pointing fingers, networks are forged and the profit-making system is highlighted.



Installation view of the Propeller Group's "The Dream" (2012)

One of the few younger artists in the show, Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai, inserts herself into marginalized communities and unveils their conditions of plight through documentary work. In 2014, she lived with Vietnamese refugees who have settled in a remote Cambodian fishing village. Without official status, these groups are suspended in terms of geography, nationality, and cultural belonging. Using building techniques taught to her by members of the community, the artist constructed a bamboo hut in the viewing space, and hung on its walls a series of colorful photographs. Observing closely, one discovers that the faces of these refugees are in fact Photoshopped onto well-dressed bodies and stock backgrounds featuring beaches, vacation huts, and status objects; gaudy elements are transformed into shimmers of hope and unattainable desires.

Nguyen again plays with what images do and do not say in her interactive installation *ID Card*, for which identity papers were printed on traditional fabrics sourced from the locals. Viewers can weigh in their hands the precarity of these people's existences, reduced to a makeshift document.

In *Shadows*, she photographed landscapes of the fishing village, yet blacked out each individual figure. The images outline the specter-like aspect of the refugees' day-to-day life, but also symbolically prevent them from being officially detected.

The show ends full circle with Harsono and his video *Writing in the Rain*, where the artist repeatedly writes his name in Chinese characters on a glass panel, while a shower of water washes the words away each time. As he desperately tries to perform his Chineseness, which he largely had no access to as a minority within Indonesian culture, identity remains ungraspable, fluid, and torn.



Detail of Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai's "Travels" (2014)

By selecting a diverse group of visually compelling, locally contextualized, and socially engaged works, *After Darkness* succeeds in showing the multiple ways that artists from Southeast Asia have renegotiated painful histories. It provides an arsenal of aesthetic

tactics as a useful frame of reference, from manipulating images to using the body to re-stage historical events. However, the title seems a little forced in setting up an easy dialectic between darkness and light, oppression and democracy, inequality and progress, implying that one necessarily follows the other. Similarly, the sense of rupture, discontinuity, and private space for grief and contemplation suggested by the phrase "in the wake of" seems inaccurate. Far from positing an optimistic or deterministic outlook on the evolution of history, these artists show that revisiting history is always also a reflection on the present. One's ethical responsibility to society is the fundamental starting place for art, even though what follows darkness is a vast cloud of ambiguity.

After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History continues at the Asia Society (725 Park Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through January 21, 2018.