

News

FX Harsono 'NAMA' at Tyler Rollins Fine Art

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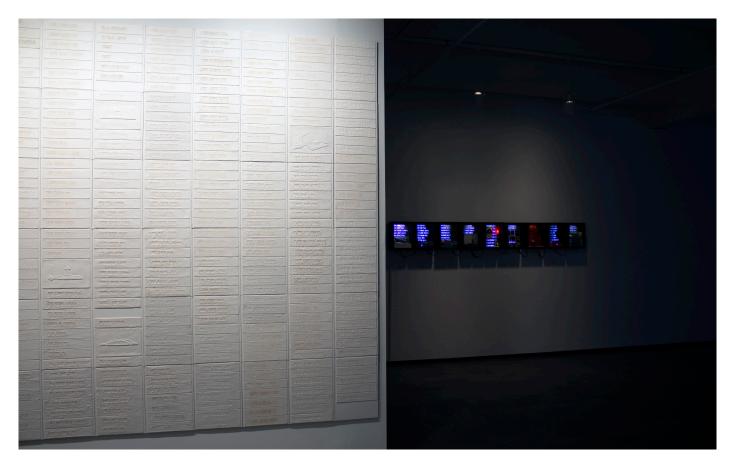
Protest, loss and remembrance

By Ian Tee



FX Harsono, 'NAMA' (video still), 2019, single channel video, 5.1 surround sound, 12 min, edition of 10. Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

FX Harsono's latest exhibition 'NAMA' (names in Indonesian) at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, focuses on Chinese Indonesian names and their politics. The veteran artist had the name Oh Hong Bun until 1967 when legislation required Indonesian Chinese to change their names to more typical Indonesian ones. While hostility towards the minority Chinese in Indonesia had been present since its colonial era, the Suharto regime marked a key period of forced assimilation that was guided by a narrow concept of nationalism. For Harsono, this look into personal history is connected to his discovery of photographs taken by his father. The images documented excavations of a mass grave in his hometown Blitar, where hundreds were massacred during the unrest of the national independence movement.



'NAMA', 2019, exhibition installation view. Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

'NAMA' pays tribute to the victims and survivors of this dark history. The exhibition's centrepiece is a video in which Chinese names are recited as a litany before the chorus replaces them with Indonesian ones. It is a gesture that is decidedly contemplative, opting for healing in the face of violence. "It was difficult for me to gather information about the mass murders in different towns," Harsono says. "It is a very sensitive topic to talk about in public and people are afraid for their safety if they do."

The other works on display reference various physical forms that names can take, such as memorial inscriptions, written signatures, official documents, and even embroidery. These elements come together in collages that honour the stories of specific individuals while giving voice to a collective past that would have otherwise been kept in the shadows.



FX Harsono, 'NAMA from the Last Survivor / NAMA Dari Penyintas Terakhir', 2019, collage, hand embroidery, crochet on tablecloth on canvas, pencil drawing and acrylic on kebaya encim blouse on canvas, 2 pieces 105 x 115 cm each. Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

For more than a decade, TRFA has been the only gallery in America focusing on art from Southeast Asia. Their programme centres on strongly themed solo exhibitions, representing prominent names from the region such as Sopheap Pich, Pinaree Sanpitak and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, among others. In many instances, the gallery was the first to introduce their works to the American audience and have continued to work with them over the long term. "Collectors here are looking globally in terms of the scope of their acquisitions," says gallery owner and director Tyler Rollins. "There is a growing recognition of Asian contemporary art scenes in recent years and we are also pleased to have made quite a few important sales to major American museums."



Installation view of 'Writing in the Rain' featured in Times Square, NY for Midnight Moment, January 1 - 31, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Notably, the gallery hosted Harsono's first solo show in the continent 'Writing in the Rain' (2012). The main video from that exhibition, which shares the same title, depicts the artist with an ink brush writing his name in Chinese characters as rain slowly washes the ink away. Harsono calmly perseveres in his efforts despite the constant erasure. In many ways, this seminal work poetically captures Harsono's perspective on the role of the artist in society and the recurring themes of protest, loss and remembrance in his practice.

In 2018, 'Writing in the Rain' was featured in the public art programme 'Midnight Moment', where it was screened nightly on the billboards at New York City's Times Square for one month. Yet whether displayed in front of millions of people at the world's most iconic square or set within the intimate spaces of a gallery, Harsono's message for the public remains consistent. It speaks to the global importance of recovering repressed histories, cultures and identities. "Humanitarian problems are universal," the artist adds. "My work is not made to show anger nor to blame anyone for this mass murder, but to remind us that this should not happen again in the future."

'NAMA' is on view till 29 June 2019 at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.