

FX Harsono and the Complexity of NAMA

FX Harsono explores the present implications of identity through examining the fate of an ethnic minority, rendering NAMA – his new solo exhibition presented at Tyler Rollins Gallery.

Text: Barbara Pollack

Images: Courtesy of Tyler Rollins Gallery and the Artist.



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, Image Courtesy of Tyler Rollins Gallery and the artist.

FX Harsono has been a towering figure in Indonesian contemporary art for more than four decades. His harrowing political works and performances created during the dictatorial Suharto regime were the pinnacle of bravery. Since then, he has turned his attention to more personal matters, namely his Indonesian-Chinese identity, but still with an eye towards the political situation of this embattled community.

In this exhibition, titled NAMA, the Indonesian for “names”, he memorializes and commemorates the fate of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia who suffered violence and discrimination despite having lived in that country for generations. During the Suharto administration from 1967 to 1998, they were forced to give up Mandarin and their culture, including a mandate that they change their names from Chinese to more typical Indonesian monikers. But, this community had suffered going back to massacres that occurred during the national independence movement of the 1940s when they were accused of siding with the Dutch. Both periods are the focus of Harsono’s latest exhibition.



NAMA that Flow within History / Nama yang Hanyut Dalam Sejarah, 2019 , collage, hand embroidery on paper mounted on aluminum, Image Courtesy of Tyler Rollins Gallery and the Artist.

Using collage, installation, video and lightboxes, Harsono creates an environment of mourning. A key to understanding the overall exhibition can be found in the series of framed collages, titled NAMA that Flow within History/NAMA yang Hanyut Dalam Sejarah, 2019, in which pairs of names—Chinese translated to Indonesian—are embroidered over identity documents from the 1940s, news accounts of the discovery in 1949 of mass graves as a result of the massacres and photographs of the reburial of the bodies at memorial sites around Java. A large installation, Monument of NAMA/Monumen NAMA, 2019, highlights the names of 174 victims of the massacres, each on a small rectangle of paper mounted on aluminum, like ghostly bricks filling a wall. From Ang Ke Biok to Liem Thiam Hok, the white text on white background cannot quite convey the scale of the violence, but provides a site for contemplating loss.



Monument of NAMA / Monumen NAMA, 2019, Debose home made recycled paper mounted on aluminum, Image Courtesy of Tyler Rollins Gallery and the artist.

Other works also serve as reliquaries such as the series of nine lightboxes, NAMA in the Box of Memory/NAMA Dalam Kotak Ingatan, 2019. Each one contains candles and tea cups and secret objects wrapped in silver paper placed in front of vintage photographs of long lost ancestors, similar to shrines typically found in Chinese homes. Here, the works pay homage to the dead with names cut into black backgrounds shimmering in the dark.



Nama in the Box of Memory / NAMA Dalam Kotak Ingatan, 2019, 9 box wall installation, Image Courtesy of Tyler Rollins Gallery and the Artist

But the highlight of the exhibition is the moving and thoughtful video, NAMA, 2019 in which a choir of young Indonesian singers bring the names of lost ones back to life. The performers are dressed in white shirts and blue-and-white batik skirts, characteristic mourning-wear for ethnic Chinese living in Indonesia. They begin by chanting out the proclamation by General Suharto in 1966 requiring Chinese citizens to change their identities. They then proceed to sing out names, first in Chinese, then in Indonesian, finally offering the name's original meaning, all to the chords of Catholic liturgy. (Harsono himself is Catholic.) The faces of the performers speak volumes about the fluidity of national identity while their mournful voices provide a funereal soundtrack to all the other works in the exhibit.



NAMA, 2019, single channel video, 5.1 surround sound , 12 min, Image Courtesy of Tyler Rollins Gallery and the artist.

As a representative of the Chinese-Indonesian community, Harsono explores his own identity through these works and expresses his personal sense of loss of a rich culture that has been subjugated by political forces. Forever an “other” in the country of his birth, he has created a powerful statement from this position and once again places himself at the forefront of Indonesian contemporary art.

About the Artist

Harsono has been a central figure of the Indonesian art scene for over 40 years. In 1975, he was among a group of young artists who founded Indonesia's Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (New Art Movement), which emphasized an experimental, conceptual approach, the use of everyday materials, and engagement with social and political issues. Over the course of recent decades that have seen enormous transformations in Indonesia, Harsono has continuously explored the role of the artist in society, in particular his relationship to history.

In recognition of his decades long "commitment to art and to freedom of expression in art," Harsono was awarded the Joseph Balestier Award for the Freedom of Art in 2015, presented by the US embassy in Singapore, and in 2014 he was given the Prince Klaus Award honoring his "crucial role in Indonesia's contemporary art scene for forty years." His work has been shown in over 100 exhibitions around the world, including the seminal *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia* at Asia Society in New York (1996), and the first Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, Australia (1993). The Singapore Art Museum mounted a major mid-career retrospective, *FX Harsono: Testimonies*, in 2010. He presented his first solo show in the United States, *Writing in the Rain*, at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in 2012; and in 2018 the main video from that exhibition was featured in a month-long screening in New York City's Times Square. In 2017 his work was included in two major survey exhibitions: *SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo; and *After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History* at Asia Society in New York.

Barbara Pollack has written on contemporary art for such publications as The New York Times, the Village Voice, Art in America, Vanity Fair and of course, Artnews, among many others since 1994. She is the author of the book, The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China and has written dozens of catalogue essays for a wide range of international artists. In addition to writing, Pollack is an independent curator who organized the exhibition, We Chat: A Dialogue in Contemporary Chinese Art, currently at Asia Society Texas and she is a professor at the School of Visual Arts in New York. She has been awarded two grants from the Asian Cultural Council as well as receiving the prestigious Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writer Grant.

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