

FX Harsono at Singapore Art Museum

By **Iola Lenzi**

FX HARSONO, who turned 60 last year, is amongst Indonesia's most important living artists. He is one of the archipelago's pioneer contemporary practitioners, breaking away in the 1970s from the constraints of Western-imported modernism. He is also one of Southeast Asia's seminal political artists. First introduced to Western audiences in the 1996 Asia Society exhibition, *Traditions-Tensions Contemporary Art in Asia*, curated by Apinan Poshyananda, in the late 20th century the artist was at the forefront of a generation of avant-garde Indonesian creators. This group, including Heri Dono, Arahmaiani, Dadang Christanto, and others, in vocally criticizing the Suharto regime, anticipated the dictator's spring 1998 ousting and the ensuing regime-change that eventually led to the building of today's democratic Indonesia.

Entitled *FX Harsono: Testimonies*, this Singapore Art Museum retrospective introduces the Javanese artist in an art-historically neutral way, giving Harsono's recent autobiographical production as much space as his formally ground-breaking and thematically riveting socially-critical installations of the 1970s and 1990s. In the context of Singapore,

where political debate in the Western sense does not exist, this is perhaps not surprising. Though shown as far back as 2004 in the Sculpture Square exhibition *Reformasi: Contemporary Indonesian Artists in the post-Subarto Era*, the artist, best known for his political commentary, has seldom been given a place in the city-state's public galleries. 'Testimonies' therefore heralds a new willingness in mainstream institutional Singapore to touch on politics – albeit the politics of others – as an essential force shaping regional cultural discourse.

Curated by Indonesian FX Harsono specialist Hendro Wiyanto, collaborating with The National Art Gallery Singapore's Seng Yu Jin, and Singapore Art Museum's Tan Siu Li, 'Testimonies' is the second regional solo devoted to FX Harsono, following on from the Galeri Nasional Indonesia's November 2009 Jakarta exhibition *The Erased Time*. While the Jakarta exhibition put greater emphasis on the artist's recent expression including the 2009 *Rewriting The Erased* (also presented in Singapore), 'Testimonies', though small, succeeds as compact survey illuminating nearly four decades of artistic production.

The show's most compelling works, both in form and content, are to be

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Needle In My Consciousness (2003), screenprint on canvas, digital photo on photo paper, 160 x 400 cm, private collection.
Preserving Life, Terminating Life #1 (2009), diptych, acrylic and oil on canvas, thread, 200 x 350 cm, artist's collection.
Preserving Life, Terminating Life #2 (2009), diptych, acrylic and oil on canvas, thread, 200 x 350 cm, artist's collection

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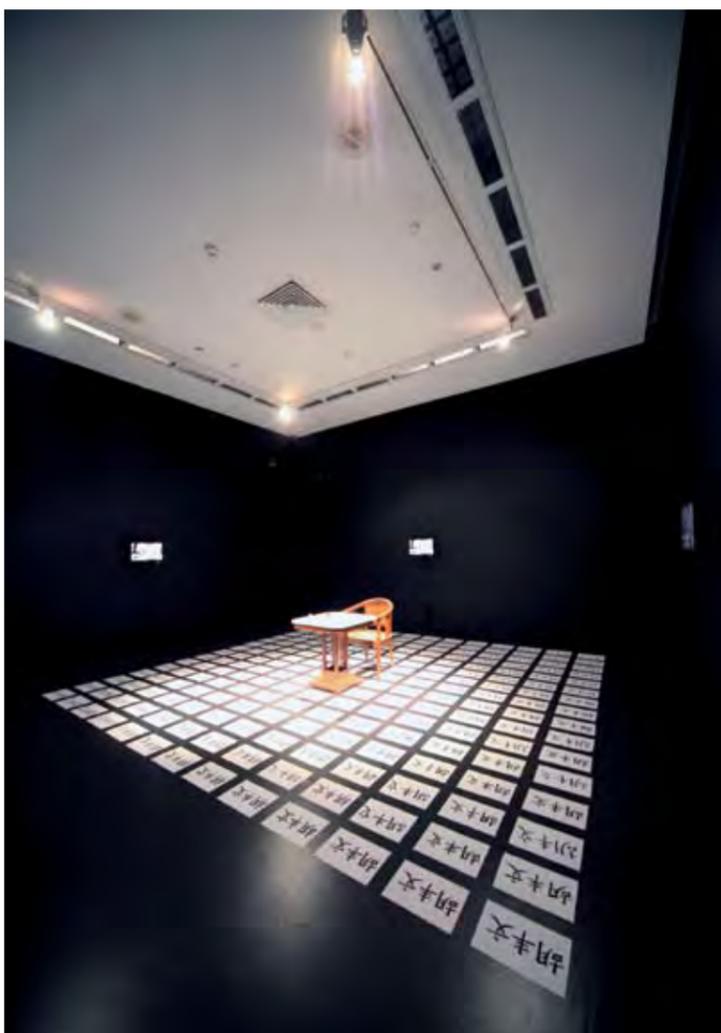
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Rewriting The Erased (2009), installation and performance video, artist's collection



Paling Top '75 (The Most Top '75), 1975, plastic gun, textile, wooden crate, wire mesh, 50 x 100 x 157 cm. Artist collection

found in the first part of the show. Split into two distinct sections, the art is displayed chronologically, Harsono's socially vocal installations (1975-1998), on one side, and his 21st-century pieces (2002-2009), predominantly 2-D works on paper or canvas, on the other.

The exhibition's layout is not its strongest feature. A fine selection of commanding 20th-century pieces is here. But despite several having been remade for 'Testimonies' at considerable expense, they are crammed together in two small galleries, some robbed of impact in the process. Curators, constrained by SAM's challenging floor-plan, opted to sacrifice Harsono's political art of the late 20th century – undeniably occupying a major place in Indonesia's art historical discourse – for the sake of recent work. The artist's direct involvement in the show, and the fact that as an active art maker he remains visible in today's lucrative Indonesian art market, presumably influenced space allocation. However, on the positive side, attributing current practice as much room as previous decades' canonical works does tilt the show towards the new, so giving it a refreshing, up-to-the-minute feel that retrospectives seldom possess. This strategy also provides viewers a sense of Harsono's creative trajectories of the future, so enlivening the survey genre.

Its display notwithstanding, 'Testimonies' packs a powerful visual punch. Boasting three of Harsono's most visionary installations of the nineties, as well as two forward-looking pieces of the mid seventies that are extraordinary in their art historical implications, the show assembles work offering rich opportunities for critical study. The 1993-1994 *Voice Without Voice/ Sign*, borrowed from the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, is still today a beacon of contemporary Southeast Asian art. The mixed graphic and 3-D installation, propped casually on the floor against a gallery wall as it was 16 years ago when first made, like all major works of art, remains a formal and conceptual masterpiece however removed from the historical context of its early-1990s theme. With its nine black and white silk-screen on canvas panels depicting a silent hand spelling out *demokrasi* in sign language, the installation's crisp power has as much to do with its formal command as its invocation of democracy, still a charged subject in Southeast Asia today. Indeed the piece, with its



Kuteropong (Watching The Wound), 2007, diptych, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 180 cm each, private collection.

Bon Appetit (2008), installation with table, cloth, chairs, tableware, needles and butterflies, dimensions variable, artist's collection



Voice Without Voice / Sign (1993-4), silkscreen on canvas (9 panels), wooden stools and stamps, 143.5 x 95.5 cm each panel, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum collection

pitch-perfect marriage of formal acumen, cerebral conceptualism, and universally engaging iconography in the form of the human hand, manages not only to physically recall the first stirrings of change in early 1990s Indonesia, but provoke the goose-bumps of potential empowerment in a new generation of reformers. And this even in the cautious setting of a national art museum!

Other historically relevant installations figuring in this part of the show are the 1994 *The Voices Controlled by the Powers* – larger in size than when presented in the 'Traditions/Tensions', the 1998 *Burned Victims, Paling Top '75*, and *Rantai yang Santai*. Both from 1975, these two are amongst the most conceptually nuanced and formally refined works of the period, and having anticipated by nearly two decades the sophisticated Indonesian installation art of the 1990s, must be recognised as fundamental to the canon. Moreover, conceptualised in the mid 1970s when neither Western nor Japanese installation art was known in the archipelago, the two tantalisingly suggest specifically Indonesian roots rather than a derivative Western genesis. Finally, in addition to their art historical primacy, the two works' significance on a content level cannot be ignored, made as they were at the height of the New Order when any perceived criticism of the Suharto regime – and here the criticism was quite palpable – attracted harsh punishment.



The Voices Controlled by the Powers (1994), installation with wooden masks and cloth, dimensions variable, artist's collection

The second part of the show, including more painting and fewer installations, heralds an abrupt change of thematic focus and formal approach. Tracking Indonesia as the country's long repressed sectarianisms came to the fore after 1998, 'Testimonies' follows Harsono who, by the beginning of the new millennium, had left behind the collegial world of artists as motors of social change to concentrate on himself and his own identity in a now openly fragmented Indonesia. An early self-portrait dating to 2002 *Tububku Adalah Laban* depicts the artist as a fertile zone of young growth, signaling Harsono's nascent interest in self-discovery. The result is a body of work primarily reflecting Harsono's experience and

musings about life as a minority Chinese in Indonesia.

Various themes co-exist at the heart of Harsono's 21st-century production. The most obvious is the artist's identification of his Chinese roots and his equation of Chinese minority status with suffering. Bees and particularly butterflies, along with needles and fire, offer the artist an easily legible lexicon of signs referencing vulnerability and pain, these symbols recurring both in painting and installation. After the ideologically inclusive and often allusive pieces of the 20th century, these current works are more literal, narrow, and self-indulgent.

The highlight of this part of the show both in spatial and conceptual

terms is the single-room 2009 *Rewriting The Erased*. Titled in English rather than Bahasa, the performance of the artist writing, and the resulting floor installation, a carpet of white cards bearing Harsono's calligraphic rendering of his Chinese name, is immediately appealing to Indonesia's Chinese diaspora, so firmly 'Indonesianised' during the Suharto years that even Chinese names were changed for local-sounding ones. The work does not project the brilliance of the best earlier installations but highly personal, is quietly dramatic as a performance, the artist's silent dignity speaking universally for the oppressed. Beyond its introspective aspect, *Rewriting The Erased* also serves to mark the difference between engaged art that takes risks, looks forward, and aims for change, as did so much of Harsono's Suharto-era production, and art that contemplates past grievances and memory in a more passive way.

A video documentary that the artist calls *nDudab* and that centres on the killing and mass-burial of ethnic Chinese during the late 1940s Indonesian war of independence, completes the exhibition in a didactic way, revealing the specific issues at the heart of Harsono's current artistic investigation.

FX Harsono: Testimonies is the first in a series of SAM single-artist exhibitions featuring the work of living regional creators who have contributed significantly to Southeast Asia's evolving art historical canon. Though comprising but 17 works, this survey succeeds in conveying FX Harsono's seminal place in Southeast Asian art history.

Until 9 May, FX Harsono: Testimonies at the Singapore Art Museum, 71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore 189555, www.singart.com. An exhibition brochure can be downloaded from the website.