

Historical revelations

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To have been denied his original name is still a painful memory for FX Harsono, a Chinese Indonesian who faced severe discrimination because of his Chinese roots.

While reminiscing and searching for his identity, he unearthed detailed data on the mass murders of Chinese people between 1946 and 1948.

The 10th solo exhibition by FX Harsono titled “The Erased Time”, now on show at the National Gallery in Jakarta, may at first confuse those unfamiliar with the history of minority groups like the Chinese, who were forced to change their Chinese names, denied the right to write in Chinese and carry out anything to do with Chinese culture.

Initially, one might wonder what mass killings have to do with FX Harsono, for the images of mass killings of the Chinese in Blitar and the personal experiences of the artist are juxtaposed as if they were intricately connected.

In fact, Harsono explained, they are. His father, a photographer and a member of the exhuming team, actually took those pictures encompassing so much detail about the tragedy. He recalled often seeing those photos and hearing the stories from his father without paying due attention.

Recently, however, he started taking an interest in the mass killings, followed the trail left by the information scattered in the photographs, and went on a reconnaissance mission to Blitar and its environs.

He searched for — as well as met — relatives of the victims, and even saw some who had survived the horror.

He discovered that the Dutch, eager to regain power in Indonesia after the Japanese capitulation, had asked the Chinese to help them as agents (spies).

Although the Chinese Consul General in the then Batavia strongly rejected the idea, some of the Chinese did join forces with the Dutch.

The result was the decimating of entire families, amounting to 191 people, a mass murder that has so far remained in the confines of the group in East Java, with perpetrators of the crimes still at large to this day.

The five light-boxes featuring skulls and live people in a digital manipulation of the photographs made by his father, are probably the most stirring in the exhibition.

The installation of pictures resting in water basins with red lighting, titled Darkroom, is also very powerful. "I used to help my father in the process."

The exhibition also features a video installation showing Harsono sitting at a desk amid a large space covered with "tiles" on which his name is written in Chinese characters.

He was born in Blitar (1949) as Oh Hong Boen, but changed his name to blend in, given the unfavorable political climate for people of Chinese descent.

Intrigued by a sense of loss, he tried to write his name again and again, but could never capture the original flow, even when he had written it a hundred times.

"Those are the only words I can write in Chinese."

The process of losing one's Chinese identity is aptly conveyed in a sequence of five self-portraits accompanied by Chinese characters that become scarcer until they totally disappear in the last portrait.

In a distinctively documentary style, Harsono lists in one of his works the 191 names of victims with video testimonials of people connected the victims of the mass killing.

While the photographs of people related to the victims, or born in Blitar, as well as the list of victims could be of use for the National Commission of Human rights, they lack artistic value.

FX Harsono who was born in Blitar in 1949, is an artist known for his social and political commitment. A proponent of the New Art Movement in the 1970s, his works used to be highly critical of the dominating political regimes.

After the Reformasi, his works started to focus more on his personal experiences and feelings as a Chinese Indonesian who had to face discriminative regulations.

The Erased Time
Solo exhibition by FX Harsono
Galeri Nasional Indonesia
Nov. 1-14, 2009