

## Indonesian Women Artists: Coming into Their Own

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From drawing to painting, from clay to bronze, from installations to performance art, Indonesian women are now producing creations that go well beyond the landscapes of RA Kartini, our foremost national hero, and Emiria Soenassa, the only female artist that stood out among her male colleagues in the national art movements Putra and Persagi (1938-1942).

Nevertheless, it is only in the last decade that women artists in general have emerged as capable of breaking the glass ceiling of their exclusion, although Arahmaiani (b. 1961) made her mark early in the 1980s. In this early art project where she was concerned by the alarming rise in accidents along the main road in Bandung, she wrapped the lamp posts along the main street of the city with blood stained bandages, stopped the traffic and distributed flyers detailing the number and types of rising accidents along this street. She became the first to undertake public performance art, but it caused her suspension from the university and exclusion from further exhibitions. It was the beginning of her enduring engagement with socially laden performance art which has led to her international recognition in biennales in Venice, Sao Paulo, Havana, Yokohama, Gwangju, Sarjah, the Asia-Pacific Triennial, as well as noted exhibitions such as Cities on the Move (various locations, beginning 1990) and Global Feminisms (Brooklyn Museum, 2007) in the last 12 years.

An icon in the Indonesian world of art and abroad, Arahmaiani's work is intertwined with her social activism. She greatly disapproves of the world being steered by capitalist powers, and is critical of trends within globalisation. For artists, she believes that art should not only create a nice surface but must also bring problems to public attention, provoking discussion and thought, and acting as a positive intervention in debates as a means to participate in the social processes of their country. Arahmaiani's art, whether painting, installation, poetry, dance, music, video or performance, is rooted in her refusal of repression, intolerance, fanaticism or discrimination of any kind.

In the case of gender and religion, she is an "enemy" of Muslim hardliners. When she made an installation in 1992, juxtaposing the Qur'an with contraceptive devices and a bottle of Coca Cola, some extreme Muslim factions threatened they would "drink her blood". An avowed Muslim, whose father is an ulama she rebels against militant interpretations of Islam. In Malaysia in 2006 she had to hurriedly flee the country after she was sought for blasphemy, having written the word "Allah" on a ceramic plate which she smashed against the wall. Her primary concern in such works is to challenge the weight given to symbols associated with religion that are read and misread in such a way as to distort the essence of faith to its practitioners and beyond.

Ironically, she herself became a victim of American intolerance and suspicion of Muslims as terrorists after the 9/11, because she was identified not only as female Indonesian artist, but also as a Muslim female Indonesian artist. She was on her way to Canada and waiting for a connecting flight in Los Angeles. She was interrogated and detained in her hotel room with a surveillance male officer guarding her in the same room. This was clearly against the rules for Muslim women, who are forbidden to be alone with a man, who is not her husband or muhrum. The guard, a Pakistani Muslim also knew that, but found that he had to follow the American rules. It was a shock similar to the one she experienced as a child when she was told she could never be a prophet because she was female.

Her activism against fanaticism and her efforts to build a new culture stretch beyond the borders of Indonesia, and finds her networking with artists in other countries as well. As an art consultant and artist of performance art, she travels around the world, perhaps the most known Malaysian artist abroad besides Heri Dono, building networks and taking risks. She engaged in a one year project *Stitching the Wound* working with Muslims from the Baan krua community in Thailand. As an artist and activist who observed the riots that took place in May 1998, and took part in demonstrations against it, she also held her solo exhibition of charcoal drawings *Rape 'n Rob* conveying the extent of women's suffering at the time.

Her solo exhibition at the Jogja National Museum in July 2008 was a broad retrospective survey of several key documented performances as well as new paintings that she has completed in 2008, including paintings taking Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse comics as metaphors to reveal her distress with American foreign and oil policy at the time. But it is her works of flags that are the most fascinating, in my opinion. Decorating these with Arab Malay calligraphy reading words like *Akal*, or names of multinational corporations like *Freeport*, or names of brands like *Coca Cola*, they represent her wide ranging interest for issues of local and of global nature. Her texts are also written in English, German, French, Italian, Hebrew, Japanese, Tagalog, Thai, Javanese, & Sundanese, and are bound to expand in the future.. Already in 2004, when 26 political parties in Indonesia contested for the presidential seat, at the *Sculpture Square* exhibition she made a sewn installation consisting of political flags re-configured to form a wedding dress as a critique of Indonesia's current political and geographical fragmentation. More recently however she has used flags to indicate *Life*. In 2006, when the villagers of *Bantul*, the hardest hit region by the *Yogya* earthquake, were in terrible distress, she worked with the villagers to uplift their spirits. A performance in the cemetery that should denote death, became an event testifying to an enduring beat of the heart, with flags swung around in a buoyant demonstration of vibrance and life.

Her installation of flags at the *Concours of the Esplanade* theaters on the Bay in May 2009 in Singapore titled *I Love You-After Joseph Beuys Social Sculpture*, revisits the issues

underpinning brand-culture and mass-communication in a globalised world. While Arahmaiani continues her work against fanaticism, violence, repression and the manipulations of those in power, her very personal experiences are in her black and white paintings which are almost always overshadowed by a blur, rendering it grey. These references are always present but one can only guess to what they refer.

Another performance artist is Melati Suryodarmo (b. 1969) who, unlike Arahmaiani, produces long durational performances is).

Having studied with Anzo Furukawa, the Master butoh dancer and choreographer who taught her that the body is the source of life, and the legendary Marina Abramovic, her work shows the influence of both, while firmly resting on her childhood training of Sumarah. Sumarah is a philosophy of life from Java, it is a form of meditation which develops sensitivity and acceptance through deep relaxation of body, feelings and mind. This training helped her overcome her grief when her mother was ailing and finally died.

She has performed extensively abroad, taking part in such prestigious biennales like Venice and Manifesta and in numerous international performance art events. In spite of this her work is generally less known in Indonesia, where her first performance took place in 2006 at the Goethe Haus in Jakarta. It was titled *Exergie* or *Butter Dance*. As a performance artist, Melati Suryodarmo believes that the body is an essential part of her work concept, as it is the medium for the realization of her ideas. In *Exergie*, Melati offers a contemplation on the ups and downs of her life, that took her from the country where she was born and spent her youth, to the center of Europe with a culture totally different from where she came from and it demonstrates her own response to this culture shock. Accompanied by atonal music from Makassar drums, Melati, wearing a tight black dress and red stiletto heels slowly sets her feet (or rather shoes) on bars of butter placed on the floor and starts to dance. This becomes harder as the butter melts, and breaking her balance, she falls several times. The scene soon changes from something comical for the audience to one which is unbearable full of tension. The artist falls and manages to stand up again and again, but she remains unhurt. Later Melati reveals that the most important thing here, as in life, is to keep one's awareness sharp and catch the right moment during the fall to protect oneself from being hurt. Typically she writes: *accident is just one moment/ silence is just one moment/ happiness is just one moment/ this is just one moment/ of being caught by the moment*. In her second performance in Jakarta, at the SIGI gallery opening in 2008, she was again dressed in a tight black dress, wearing high heels, she produced a long durational performance, lasting nearly 3 hours. Intense- poised, and indomitable, she held a 40 kg heavy glass plate with which she shuffled, pushed, shifted and held on to during the performance. As if in a ritual, she constantly moved slowly, crawling and pushing her limits in poetic grandeur, under the weight of the 40 kg heavy glass plate, all the time whispering the words 'I Love You'. She will also perform at the Incheon Biennale 2009. Melati often refers back to the spiritual or the myths and legends of her home country in a synthesis of physical and psychological aspects of the ancient rituals and her personal visions. This synthesis emerges among others in *Ale Lino* (2001) which she started developing by researching the *bissu*, or shamans, from South Sulawesi. Lately Melati has also started making videos and photography. She regularly comes home to Solo in Central Java to hold local and international workshops.

Of a totally different genre is the art of Astari (Rasjid), who has gained prominence amongst Indonesia's painters, but who is also a proficient sculptor and artist of installations. Her works

from the mid- 1980s to the present time, show her amazing path of development in her art going hand in hand with her becoming a woman in her own right. From images showing the sorry state and dependence of women in tradition, of female body parts to express the pain, to images revealing revolt as subtle as the Javanese culture in which she grew up, her work has evolved to speak of women's equality and political issues and to sculptures which reveal her keen observations on contemporary consumerism which she regards as similar to the traditional amulet that gives the wearer a feeling of security. Jean Couteau, the French critic based in Bali, says "Astari is a rare phenomenon in the Indonesian and East Asian artworld: a woman artist, guided by knowledge and intelligence, who not only juggles at ease with diverse places, cultures, economic and intellectual concepts, but also raises a set of new questions at the right time and in the right manner"

In 1999 her piece No U-Turn (1999) won an award in the Millennial global art competition held by the London based Winsor and Newton for its foresight into the dilemma faced by Java in the new millennium. Using Javanese symbolism as a metaphor for persistent feudal practices, she restated her vision for a democratic society in the representation of a woman's straight gaze (unusual in the Javanese tradition) and by using the same color and body height for the man and woman standing at each side of a door, combined with the lotus flower as a symbol for change and rebirth. Her latest series of paintings is called The Guilt Trip, which she explains as originating in her guilty feelings of not having enough and not having tapped the richness of her culture. Yet, these images of Batak women show how heavy tradition actually weighs on them and how hard it is to achieve a synchronising of tradition and modernity. Balancing modern life and lifestyles, with religious practice is an issue that she shows in Read a sculpted bag in bronze, containing a copy of the Wall Street Journal with the Koran as contemporary reading. Her sculpted bronze bags, in particular, continue to bring forward cultural, social and political issues which Jean Couteau so aptly described as "exposing the deceit inherent to all that traps [women], really and symbolically, into a subservient gender role: the bag, the women's attribute par excellence, is a "fake", because its symbolic content is fake, provoking the woman's anger (the pistol-carrying puppet in Fake), or better, because it entraps women through their own beauty (the pretty bird in its bag-shaped cage in La Victime), or because it makes them adopt male-associated behavior (exemplified by the buffoon of traditional Javanese theater brandishing a glass of beer in Drunken Bag)". With a twist of tradition and a breadth of humor, albeit grounded in critical thought and vision, Astari's finely finished works touch on everyday issues of gender and reveal key social and political issues about life in our local-global society.

By far the youngest, Ay Tjoe Christine (1973) is fast becoming a leading presence in the Indonesian art world, whose reputation is that of a serious artist with great artistic integrity. Drawing was her first love, being inspired by her mother, a self-taught artist who painted to decorate the house. But soon the dry point needle became her tool par excellence to express the turmoil of her feelings on the metal plate. She studied at the Faculty of Visual Art and Design at the Institute Technology of Bandung (ITB), which has a strong focus in graphic design, ceramics, sculpture and print-making. After graduating in 1997, Christine gained success as a fashion designer in a textile factory but decided to return to her artistic practice. Drawing the attention with her award-winning work The King of Pilem in 2001, she proceeded having sold

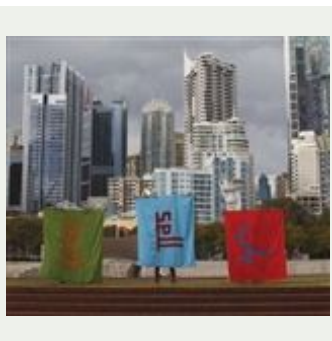
attention with her award winning work *The King of Pilgrim* in 2001, she proceeded having solo exhibitions that showed an increasing sense for exploration. From drawing, to dry point, to painting, installation and digital photography, she soon mastered all these techniques with an equal intensity. Continuously treading the path of excellence, her recent works are hauntingly sublime, compelling us to rethink life and our acts in freedom. Her 6th solo exhibition *Interiority of Hope* clearly showed she has a compelling command of painting, almost equal to her illustrious command of dry point. It seems Ay Tjoe Christine moves on all the time, with prints made during a residency at STPI and exhibited as *Excess Eating*, in which consumerism and excess consumption is represented as a monster. The very latest made for the Futures project of Art HK 2009 *I kill the first layer, and I find other layers living as Landscape, Landscape, Landscape* that netted her an Award and a Prize. Featuring two ancient typewriters – one large, one small – are placed upon a pedestal with feet. A pair of dead bees inhabits holes in books. A tattered, mysterious miniature doll is composed of a pair of humanoid figures that seem to merge with one another. A monochromatic tone pervades all these objects. An interactive installation, the audience is invited to type onto a sheet of aluminum foil that has been loaded onto the typewriter. The letters that normally occupy the typewriter's keyboard have been dismantled, replaced by a numeric system consisting of the numbers 0 to 9. But when one types on it, what is imprinted onto the roll of aluminum foil is not the corresponding numbers, and not whole letters either, because almost all the text imprinted has been tortured beyond recognition. There are only three letters that remain readable, and these are indeed meaningful letters selected by the artist, the intended answer to be discovered by those responding to the invitation to type: G – O – D.

While this article addresses only four Indonesia women artists, there are many more whose work could be discussed, Mella Jaarsma, for instance, whose works challenge perceptions of “the other”, Yani Mariani Sastranegaram whose large public sculptures and installations are making a mark, or Titarubi who explores the gendered body, Diah Julianti with her spirits inspired works on bark from Kalimantan, Tintin Wulia's videos and installations, Tiarma Sirait whose textile installations and fashion-based performances have transformed into paintings, Prilla Tania who juxtaposes soft textile applications of landscapes with video images. Together, they are participants in the vibrant art scene in Indonesia today. Yet, as revealed in a recent seminar on women and art in Yogyakarta, there are many upcoming female artists who are still

struggling with what gender means to them as a way to analyse their own condition. Small discussion groups initiated by Arahmaiani and Mella Jaarsma are now trying to address the questions raised by such artists.



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