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F.X. Harsono, Reaping the Fruits of Pain

By **Carla Bianpoen** on 07:00 am Jan 26, 2015

Category **Arts & Culture, Life & Style**

Tags: **Indonesian artists**



F.X. Harsono receiving the Prince Claus Award. (Photo courtesy Prince Claus Fund)

On Dec. 10 last year, F.X. Harsono, one of the founders of the Indonesia New Art movement in the mid-1970s, was among the 10 awardees of the prestigious Prince Claus Award, handed out annually by the Dutch government.

Other winners included filmmaker, writer and educator Ignacio Aguero (Chile); curator, critical theorist and catalyst for contemporary visual arts across Central America Rosina Cazali (Guatemala); filmmaker Lav Diaz (Philippines); dancer, choreographer and inspirational teacher Lia Rodrigues (Brazil); performance artist, curator and cultural activator Tran Luong (Vietnam); painter, sculptor, video and installation artist and role model Gulsun Karamustafa (Turkey); Collective Museo Itinerante de Arte por la Memoria (Peru); multimedia resource center Sparrow Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women (India); and the principal award winner, Abel Rodriguez, a plant expert, visual artist and community elder of the Nonuya people (Colombia).

Based on its belief that "culture is a basic need," the Prince Claus Fund presents the awards to individuals and organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean for their outstanding achievement in the fields of culture and development and the positive effect of their work on their direct environment and the wider cultural or social field.

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The award was one of many recognizing Harsono for his lifetime of work serving as a social conscience during times of upheaval in Indonesia.

In October last year, Harsono received the Anugerah Adhikarya Rupa Arts Award from the Tourism Ministry, and last Tuesday won the inaugural Joseph Balestier Award for the Freedom of Art, presented by Artstage Singapore and the US Embassy in Singapore.

This award honors artists or curators in the Southeast Asian region who are actively committed to the ideas of freedom and liberty through their art.

Harsono's long track record of struggling against violence and repression is well-known. He started some four decades ago, when he joined the Manifest of Black December in 1974, then co-founded the Indonesia New Art movement together with other arts proponents of the time.

They broke down the then-widely held definition of art as consisting only of paintings, sculpture and graphic art. Embracing performance and installations and the use of found materials — while encouraging political criticism at a time when expressing dissent was dangerous — they came to be considered as ushering the beginning of contemporary art in Indonesia.

Much has been written already about Harsono's work, centering on his role as both artist and activist, locally and internationally. But while much of his oeuvre remains a haunting reminder of his struggle against authoritarian repression and discrimination, a few works stand out in my memory as denoting dramatic, personal emotions.

I remember vividly the angry young man who performed "Destruction" in the Yogyakarta town square, or *alun-alun*. The year was 1997, and the performance took place in the period prior to elections, during which public assemblies of more than five people were forbidden.

But Cemeti, the gallery led by Ninditiyo Adipurnomo and Mella Jaarsma in Yogyakarta, had called together artists from across Indonesia to take on the New Order's electoral fraud. They organized the exhibition "Slot in the Box," to which Harsono contributed with his performance denoting the angry zeitgeist of the time.

Dressed in a business suit, he set three chairs aflame. On each of the chairs was a wayang mask, representing each of the three political parties allowed to contest the elections. Then, using a chainsaw, Harsono set about destroying the burnt-up chairs, hacking away with gusto in a metaphorical dismantling of Suharto's iron grip on power.

Turning point

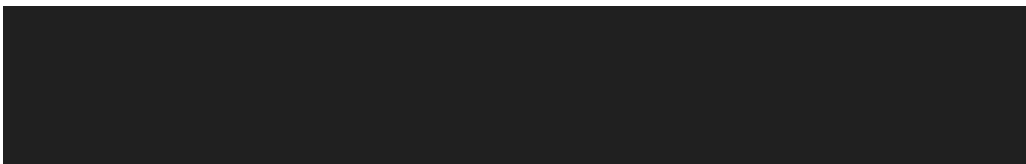
Born in 1949, the year the Dutch colonial masters finally acknowledged Indonesian independence, Harsono became a forerunner in the art world against all sorts of repression by the state, culminating under Suharto's rule.

But his passionately held national sociopolitical stance shifted radically around the turn of the century, which was spurred by the tumultuous and traumatic events in 1998, including the May riots and the horrendous victimization of ethnic Chinese, a minority group to which Harsono belongs.

Deeply shocked and disappointed, he wondered about what and who he had actually fought for. Feeling alienated from the people he had thought shared the same visions for change, he turned his focus to his own identity, exploring, pondering and reconnecting with his own self. His works shifted from the bold and angry, semi-realistic images, to the more subtle, yet strongly palpable, denoting an acute — albeit almost hidden — urgency affecting his entire being.

It is such images that tend to stick in my memory of Harsono's oeuvre.

One such work is the installation and performance video "Rewriting the Erased" (2009), which displayed in a darkened space of his show at the Singapore Art Museum, featured a solitary Harsono sitting at a desk while painstakingly trying to write his Chinese name in Chinese characters. Sheets of paper with failed writing lined the floor like neatly laid tiles. Dramatic lighting emphasized the meditateness and the poignancy of the artist trying to remember and reclaim what had been lost and erased through a government strategy aimed to fully assimilate the Chinese into Indonesian society.





F. X. Harsono performing 'Rewriting the Erased'. (Photo courtesy of F.X. Harsono)

Harsono said he did not know a single Chinese word except for his Chinese name — and even that he was unable to write properly. The same struggle is seen in the video performance "Writing in the Rain" (2011), in which his bid to write his Chinese name fails again and again as it is washed away by the rain, over and over.

Using needles, bees and butterflies, Harsono then focused on the pains endured over a long period of time. Compared to the charred and dismembered human figures of his earlier works, the acupuncture needles piercing his entire body as featured in the series "Needle of My Consciousness" (2003) were for some observers less effective in rendering the pain he wanted to convey. On the other hand, the almost abstract work of "A Thousand Pains" (2007), featuring thousands of bees pinned to the wall with tiny needles, subtly but poignantly conveyed a sense of intense suffering.

In the course of his explorations of the self, he discovered in his parents' house an album of pictures that his father, a photographer, had taken when he was involved in excavations and identifying skulls. His father's notes on the pictures described the genocide of Chinese-Indonesians in Blitar, East Java, from 1947-48.

Harsono made many trips to Blitar and its surroundings, interviewing survivors of the massacre and their relatives to listen to their stories that would go on to inspire his most recent body of work. In the video of these interviews titled, "nDudah" (Javanese slang for taking something apart again), Harsono brings to light the massacre of ethnic Chinese in his birthplace of Blitar and surrounding areas, at a time when the Dutch were trying to take back the newly independent nation by force, and the republic responded with a "scorched earth" strategy in places that the Dutch attempted to occupy.

Because a number of Chinese were suspected of helping the Dutch, Chinese-Indonesians scattered around the outskirts of the city were murdered by mobs.

Today, as he takes a break of his busy exhibition schedule, Harsono continued to dig into and reconnect with the past, focusing particularly on the mysteries behind hidden massacres that he will present as a continuation of his themes on pilgrimage in an upcoming series.