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FX Harsono's Rebellious, Critical Voice Against 'Big Power' in Indonesia

By SONIA KOLESNIKOV-JESSOP

SINGAPORE -- On a large black cloth, rows of traditional Indonesian theater Wayang masks with their bottoms half severed stand upward, looking inward toward their cut jaws that seem to emit silent screams. "The Voices Controlled by the Powers," the 1994 installation by FX Harsono, was made in response to the Indonesian government's banning of the magazine Tempo after it published an article exposing corruption in the Suharto regime. The work exemplifies the Indonesian artist's belief that artists have a social responsibility.

For the past four decades, Mr. Harsono has provided a critical voice against political and social oppression in Indonesia, creating powerful installations with clear social commentaries. Some of his seminal works are now on show at the Singapore Art Museum as part of "FX Harsono: Testimony," which runs until May 9. The exhibition traces the evolution of the artist's practice from his groundbreaking conceptual works in the 1970s through his politically charged installations and performances of the 1990s and his more recent investigations into issues of self and identity. The artist will also be part of a group exhibition of contemporary Southeast Asian art at the Wendt Gallery in New York from March 16 to April 30.

"He's an extremely versatile artist. He's done installation and performance, but he's also a very competent painter, as you can see in his latter works," said Tan Siu Li, the co-curator of the exhibition. "This body of works represents the shift of Harsono's practice over time, as he repositioned his own role as an artist and the kind of reality he addressed in his art."

Born in 1948 in Java and of Chinese descent, Mr. Harsono's rebellious streak against the establishment started during his university years. While the Indonesian Arts Academy in Yogyakarta favored decorative painting, embracing a conservative aesthetic, Mr. Harsono and some of his fellow students believed the sharp distinctions between painting, graphics and sculpture had to be eliminated so that artists could develop new forms of expressions.

In 1975, he and several other artists co-founded the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru, or New Art Movement. "We felt Indonesia art was too much influenced by the West in terms of subject matter and medium. We decided that if we wanted to talk about Indonesia, we had to talk about the people and their condition, their sufferings because of the government; and we thought we should

use the objects that we found in our daily life as a metaphor for the social and political problems," Mr. Harsono recalled in an interview while in Singapore for the opening of his exhibition.

The group disbanded in 1979, but by then it had played a significant role in the development of contemporary art in Indonesia, Ms. Tan explained. "Their ideas were quite radical; they wanted to break down traditional categories of painting and sculpture and look for new means of expression within the Indonesian context. Some of the artists' use of ready-made objects for example, the toy gun and wooden crate in Harsono's *Paling Top '75*, espoused a completely different way of making art.

"The *Gerakana* also sought to reflect certain social issues in their works, which was new at the time."

Under President Suharto's New Order regime (1965-1998), Indonesian art was deliberately de-politicized, but the enforcers focused more on the written word, Mr. Harsono recalled. "The military was fortunately not so clever at understanding the visual arts and interpreting the political connections."

"*The Relaxed Chain*," dated 1975, shows an installation of cushions gently embraced by chains, a commentary on the oppression facing every facet of people's lives, even when they are in their most intimate space. "With the chain being loose, one way to look at it is that we have grown so used to being controlled that we actually feel relaxed and comfortable in that state," Ms. Tan said.

In the 1992 installation "*Power and the Oppressed*," Mr. Harsono displayed small mounds of earth covered with cloths that looked bloodstained and small branches broken in two. Symbolizing the Indonesian people, they're arranged in a tight grid and face a chair, the symbol of authority, surrounded by a coil of barbed wire, a reference to the military.

In "*Voice Without Voice/Sign*," dating from 1993-94, the artist arranged nine silk-screen canvases in a row, each imprinted with a gesturing hand, his own. Collectively, they spell out the word D-E-M-O-K-R-A-S-I in universal sign language, with the last hand forming the letter "I" bound with rope. In front of each canvas is a small stool with a stamp and piece of paper for the public to spell out the letter. "I know a government spy came to the gallery to see the work, asking questions about the meaning, but I wasn't there, so I got lucky. The person in the gallery lied and told him he didn't know the meaning of the work," he said, laughing.

After Suharto was forced to step down in May 1998, the political changes Mr. Harsono had hoped for finally seemed to arrive, but the violence in Jakarta against his fellow Chinese-Indonesians that precipitated Suharto's fall left a profound imprint on him. "The ethnic Chinese have always been victims during social and political turmoil in Indonesia," he said.

In "*Burned Victims*," a video performance he created in 1998, the artist set fire to five wooden sculptures in the shape of human torsos, then walked around them with a placard with the word riot written on it. The work was a reaction to one incidence of civil violence in May 1998, when over

a hundred people were trapped in a shopping mall and burned to death by an angry mob. The charred wooden torsos used to create the video are now displayed in front of the screen showing the images as a haunting reminder.

In recent years, Mr. Harsono has moved away from head-on criticism of the government to focus more on the issues of identity and his Chinese roots. "After Suharto's fall I could see the political situation had changed, people were now free to talk, so I felt that as an artist I also needed to change my focus. At the same time, I started to ask myself questions about who am I, and then I thought I'm an Indonesian Chinese, and I have a lot of experience being discriminated against. But do I know Chinese culture? No, because for 32 years, the Chinese people could not practice their religion, could not write in Chinese, even had to change their Chinese names," Mr. Harsono said, recalling restrictions during Suharto's regime.

Butterflies and needles have become recurrent themes in his recent works. "After the 2002 bombings, the people in Bali and Jakarta felt that life was not very secure. But I had had that feeling for a long time: not because of big problems like the bombs, but because of small everyday problems. As a Chinese I feel I'm facing discrimination. So I use a needle as a metaphor of my pain; and the butterfly as metaphor for the fragility of people in the face of big power," he said.

In "Bon Appetit," dating from 2008, butterflies skewered on needles set on plates and in glasses at an elegant dining table are ready to be eaten.

While the discrimination against ethnic Chinese is not as strong as it used to be, Mr. Harsono contends it still exists in Indonesia. "Today, the Chinese can celebrate Chinese New Year and practice their religion, but there are still problems with local government," he said. "Only last week there was some story in the local press about people not being able to put Confucianism for their religion on their identity card."