

AGUS SUWAGE

ROOM OF MINE

Agus Suwage's exhibition "Room of Mine" at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York offered the art world a visual banquet of mind-teasers. At 58 years old, Suwage is one of Indonesia's highest profile mid-career artists and a master of many mediums and modalities.

In nine large works—four watercolor paintings and five installations, all from 2016—Suwage presented himself as an outrageous psychologist, absurd humorist and social satirist. Indonesian political references and cultural symbols mixed with universal archetypes and allegories, but this time there was something new. *Kama Sutra II* was inspired by a well-known image of an embarrassing United States presidential moment: the August 2000 photo of Bill and Hillary Clinton in the White House Garden, taken at the instant when their dog had jumped up and buried its head in the president's pants. Suwage's satirical interpretation is replete with sacred Balinese and Javanese symbolism—the Clintons are wearing traditional Balinese masks. Bill is Sugriwa, the monkey king who struggles to regain his kingdom. Hillary is Ganesha, the remover of obstacles. Her hand rests on the dog, but does not restrain it. Frangipani flowers, used in prayer in Bali, fall around them.

The title-piece installation also echoes Western references, playing off the Euro-American traditional hunting-lodge wall display. Hanging straight ahead as you enter the gallery, *Room of Mine* commands your view, well before you see any of the other works in the L-shaped gallery. The installation is centered on a large animal trophy head, but the surrounding images are not the usual photographs of hunters displaying their kills. Instead, small watercolor paintings are arranged around what at first appears to be a stuffed elk-head.

With his superb command of the figurative-realistic, Suwage's animal head is completely convincing: at a distance, you almost feel the fur on it. As you approach, you realize it is made of papier-mâché. Next you notice that the teeth are a grinning set of human dentures, complete with a gold tooth. Around this elk-human hybrid are a series of Suwage's self-portraits. Here, he switches body parts and roles with various animals in complex relational, erotic and carnivorous compositions. Themes of eat-or-be-eaten, survival or death, hiding or merging, and (literally) taking on each other's spots, keeps viewers on their intellectual and emotional toes.

Each of Suwage's works in this exhibition invited contemplation, recognition, puzzlement, deciphering, laughter and chills. We were brought into the artist's studio and bedroom, and the landscape of his birthplace. We were brought into his closet, where a papier-mâché model of the



artist was ominously perched, wearing a keffiyeh. We were offered enigmatic reflections on notable figures from the first three generations of modern Indonesian painters (Raden Saleh, Wakidi and Soedjojono). Two of the paintings feature three masked men in theatrical, charade-like stances. The scenes were dynamic, at times violent, set against backgrounds of the everyday (books on a shelf) and the timeless (an unchanged landscape). The psycho-personal and the sociopolitical, the self and the world, intermingled.

The largest installation, *Song Without Sound*, brought us onto the national stage. Here, the Indonesian national anthem is "played" across the wall, its sound visualized as dozens of antique bottles arranged like notes in a musical score. Into each bottle, an ear-like object has been stuffed, each one slightly larger than life, all in different shapes, sizes and colors. Again, we discover that the material is not flesh but papier-mâché. Have the patriotic lyrics become empty rhetoric? Or is this a graphic scripting of the notes that celebrate pluralism at a time when it is increasingly threatened in Indonesia and elsewhere, including the US? Suwage is not a simple moralist; he makes us decide. His artistic riddles cajole viewers of all nationalities into independent interpretation.

Having exhibited all over Asia and Australia for 20 years, and in Europe for 14, Suwage's introduction to the US is fairly recent—Tyler Rollins Fine Art had the distinction of introducing him to New York in 2011. This exhibition's catalog included an excellent, informed essay by Tyler Rollins and an interview with Suwage by Enin Supriyanto, who is among Indonesia's most talented art writers, proving that New York is finally catching up with the rest of the world and all it offers.

ASTRI WRIGHT



CA \$15  
GB £12  
JP ¥1667  
KR ₩4000  
NZ \$22  
US \$15  
AU \$21  
EU €14  
HK \$116  
KR ₩4000  
NZ \$22  
SG \$21  
0.2 >  
25274156736 2