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New modern: Australia's Aaron Seeto leads Indonesia's embrace of contemporary art at Museum MACAN

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In the early 1990s Arahmaiani Feisal, one of Indonesia's most iconic contemporary artists, fled to Perth after receiving death threats from Islamic hardliners following a solo exhibition in Jakarta.

One of her paintings *Lingga-Yoni 1994* featured the Hindu image of male and female genitalia and Arabic script, modified for the local Indonesian language, which said: "Nature is a book."



Aaron Seeto at Museum MACAN with Arahmaiani Feisal's 1994 painting *Lingga-Yoni* (right). *Photo: Tatan Syuflana*

Arahmaiani, whose Javanese ancestors were animists, Hindus and Buddhists before converting to Islam, had found the image of the lingam and yoni on the entrance of a temple in East Java.

"My intention through that work is actually to explain the syncretism of culture in Java, where I come from," she says.



FX Harsono's *Writing in the Rain 2*, 2017. *Photo: Courtesy of the artist*

"I tried to explain [to the Islamists] but they didn't care. For them a phallus and a vagina is a symbol for something dirty and Arabic is something holy."

Arahmaiani escaped to Australia after senior artists and cultural activists warned her to leave.

A few years later, while living in Thailand, Arahmaiani desperately needed money and sold *Lingga-Yoni* to a friend, who later contacted her to say the painting was in poor condition.

"I didn't know what to do, I thought maybe it will be destroyed,' she says. "And then of course for me it was like it was already gone."

More than 20 years later Aaron Seeto, the Australian director of Museum MACAN – Indonesia's first world-class museum dedicated to international modern and contemporary art – told Arahmaiani the museum had purchased *Lingga-Yoni 1994*.

"We hunted it down and found this work," Seeto says. "It's really important to the history of contemporary Indonesian art."

Arahmaiani is still emotional when she speaks about it. "When Aaron told me Museum MACAN bought this one, you could not go inside my brain, I thought no, that is not possible. The work has very deep meaning for me, although it is also quite traumatic. I don't how to explain."



Arahmaiani Feisal's *Handle Without Care 1*, 1996-97. *Photo: Courtesy of the artist*

About four years ago Arahmaiani created a new version of the artwork for a solo show in New York, which is now in the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art. But this is not the same as a museum in Indonesia.

"It's New York, it's not my country," she says. "Now, when I heard ... this work is back in Indonesia and it will be in Museum MACAN – wow! It's really exciting."

There is no shortage of hype surrounding Museum MACAN, which will open to the public in early November. (MACAN stands for the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Nusantara, a term for the Indonesian archipelago.) The Guardian has included it in its top 10 new museum openings of 2017. The BBC asked whether Jakarta's new museum would put the "often crazy but artistically rich capital" on the map.

"We really hope we are part of that broader city infrastructure," Seeto says. "In the same way when you travel on holidays you will probably go to a museum, we want to be part of people's cultural experience of a city."

But more than that: Arahmaiani's elation over her art coming home is an example of what the museum means to Indonesian artists. "Artists want to have a place where their work can be seen and work can be cared for into the future," Seeto says. "Actually there is very little museum culture here in Indonesia. This will be the first of its kind."

Museum MACAN's founder is Indonesian businessman and philanthropist Haryanto Adikoesoemo, whose art collection comprises more than 800 works from around the world.

Haryanto, the president director of logistics company PT AKR Corporindo, began collecting Indonesian modern and contemporary artwork 25 years ago.

He was guided by a passion for art and a desire to support local artists but as his interests grew, his focus expanded internationally.

His collection includes the works of acclaimed Indonesian artists such as Raden Saleh, FX Harsono, Heri Dono and Affandi, renowned modern artists Damien Hirst, Mark Rothko, Andy Warhol and Jean Michel Basquiat and international contemporary artists Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami and Tracey Emin.

"He often talks about how art allowed him to think differently about how to do things in his day to day business life," Seeto says.

The purpose-built museum to share this art with the public – fully funded by Haryanto – will be in an office and residential tower in the Kebon Jeruk neighbourhood of West Jakarta.

"Even though we are privately funded we are actually a museum for Indonesia, a museum for the public, so alongside that there is a whole program for education, outreach, all of those things," Seeto says.

Museum MACAN follows a similar model to David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art, credited with getting Hobart humming, and Judith Neilson's White Rabbit Gallery in Sydney.

"There's some really great private collections, not just in Australia but popping up all over the world and especially here in the region," Seeto says. "The private sector has taken up a lot of the conversations that we in the West would expect the public sector to do. Also in parts of North America even, there is a much more fluid relationship between public and private. I think in Australia we are slightly sheltered from that reality."

Seeto is a veteran of the Australian art scene. Artist Lindy Lee described him as "one of Australia's most important Asian Australian curators and artists". "Not any more, that was another life," demurs Seeto when asked about his own art. (For the record, his photographic work included the series *Oblivion*, which reproduced internet-sourced images of the Cronulla riots as daguerreotypes to examine how they were reported and understood.)

For eight years Seeto was the director of 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney, where he worked with some of the Indonesian artists now featured at Museum MACAN.

It was there that Arahmaiani worked on a three-year project, *Edge of Elsewhere*, with Indigenous Australians, Muslim immigrants and Tibetan refugees.

She says Seeto will make a huge contribution to contemporary art in Jakarta.

"In Indonesia, that's what's lacking, we don't have that kind of [museum] infrastructure. Unless art can be explained in a historical context, she says, what has been done is lost and artists have to start again rather than further develop. It will be really really beneficial for the coming generation."

In 2015 Seeto moved to the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art to take up the role of curatorial manager of Asian and Pacific Art.

When Haryanto approached him almost two years later "it was completely out of the blue", he says.

The move was a tough decision: Seeto had a fascinating job, a young family, and would have to leave the stability of the public system.

"I was leading the team for the Asia Pacific Triennial [of Contemporary Art]. I wasn't looking for a job and I wasn't looking to necessarily move but it's very rare to have an opportunity to not just lead a museum but also build one."

Indonesia has a vibrant arts scene and an extensive network of private collectors but the works are often not widely accessible to the public.

Seeto says Haryanto's vision for Museum MACAN aligned with his own belief that art is something that can be appreciated by everyone and is "not just for certain kinds of elites".

"Arts transformation allows us to think differently about how we live, about our histories, how we engage with other people. Our conversations along those lines made us realise there were similarities between our world views and at least the way we believe art plays such an important role in society."

Museum MACAN's opening in early November has been deliberately timed to coincide with two of Indonesia's biggest art events – the Jakarta Biennale and Biennale Jogja.

In the lead-up to the opening, artists including Arahmaiani and FX Harsono will stage performance art previews at the museum in August and September.

Arahmaiani will go back to her roots: a performance exploring the Javanese religious tradition of *kejawen*, which syncretises aspects of different religions.

This year has seen a rise of Islamic conservatism in Indonesia, with radical groups spearheading massive protests against the former Christian governor of Jakarta, known as Ahok, whom they said had insulted Islam.

Ahok lost his re-election bid in the gubernatorial elections and was jailed for two years for blasphemy.

"In Java there is a kind of culture which now maybe is almost forgotten because of Islamisation and the hardliner conservative approach," Arahmaiani says.

Seeto says Arahmaiani's performance came out of their conversations about the way in which the museum had collected *Lingga-Yoni*.

"There is nearly 30 years' space between her original performance and her performance in a couple of weeks so we will be able to look at the big changes that have happened here in Indonesia and also look at the global attitudes and how they might have changed."