

## Heri Dono: Rebel from an early age

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Black-colored puppets depicting Trump and Hillary Clinton by Heri Dono (JP/A. Kurniawan Ulung)

From being a university dropout to becoming one of Indonesia’s most internationally recognized contemporary artists, Heri Dono is the epitome of a true storyteller unafraid to swim against the tide.

For Heri Dono, United States President Donald Trump is like Bagong, a character in Javanese mythology portrayed in wayang (shadow puppet) plays.

“Bagong is direct in speech and if he makes mistake, it still sounds hilarious,” the 57-year-old said.

The US presidential election in 2016 grabbed Heri’s attention because it reminded him of chaotic political scenes in Gotham City in the Batman comic books. He then created two black-colored puppets depicting Trump and Hillary Clinton.

The puppets were on display during a group exhibition titled nDalang (Puppeteer), held in at the Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) cultural center in Central Jakarta in November.

Heri is arguably one of Indonesia's most seminal artists. In the early 1990s, he made history as the first Indonesian to break into the global art scene. Having held over 50 solo exhibitions and participated in over 216 group exhibitions at home and abroad since 1982, he is known for artworks presenting strong criticisms of violence, and social and political turmoil in Indonesia.

In 1996, he raised eyebrows within the New Order regime with his installation Blooming in Arms, which depicts the story behind the 1965 massacre of alleged supporters of the now-defunct Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Upon returning to Indonesia after living in the United Kingdom, he was arrested and interrogated for three days.

Heri became even more vocal after the fall of former president Soeharto.

For example, he created the installation The Palace Guards, which questions whether Indonesia is truly independent. The work comprises three statues depicting Soeharto, founding president Sukarno and Army general Soedirman.



The Palace Guards by Heri Dono (JP/A. Kurniawan Ulung)

During the nDalang exhibition, he also showcased a wayang puppet depicting Soeharto.

For him, the era of Soeharto is no different from the age of colonialism, because power was held by the military with the support of political elites. Although Soeharto's regime is over, discrimination against minority groups and religious intolerance still remains.

“Many people are still confused about the definition of tolerance. It is understood [as a definition], but has yet to reach the people's hearts,” he said.

Heri compares practicing tolerance to playing gamelan (traditional Javanese orchestra), in which where different instruments are played in harmony. He regrets that gamelan is no longer taught in many schools.

The artist learned to be critical through favorite folklores that are also thick in sociopolitical commentaries, such as *Cerita Panji* (Panji Stories), a collection of heroic stories about Raden Inu Kertapati and Dewi Sekartaji during the Kediri Kingdom dating from the 13th century.

Heri said his passion for painting emerged early in his childhood. His father, who served as the adjutant of president Sukarno in the 1960s, used to bring him to Bogor Palace, where he would be mesmerized by the collection of world-class paintings and statues on display.

At school, he told his elementary school teacher that he wanted to be a painter.

“My friends laughed at me. Unlike me, they wanted to be a doctor, pilot or architect,” said.

In 1980, Heri managed to realize his dream to study at the Yogyakarta-based Indonesian Academy of Arts (ASRI), which was the first fine arts campus in the country and is now known as the Indonesian Art Institute (ISI). However, seven years later, he decided not to finish his studies.

“My parents were sad. They wanted me to have a [university] degree,” he said, adding that he believed an artist did not need to have a certificate or a degree to work.

Heri said he took full responsibility for his decisions, saying that being a dropout was not a big deal for him. The fifth child among seven siblings, he conceded that he was considered the naughtiest and least successful child in his family. The image did not discourage him, but was rather liberating.

“Because I was deemed unsuccessful, I felt no burden in my life. I regret nothing,” he said, then laughed when recounting that he had failed fifth grade for frequently skipping school.

He liked to play in the rice fields during school hours, he said, adding that his parents did not scold him because they didn’t want him to run away from home.

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In high school, he continued to skip class because he liked to do other things as head of the student body organization (OSIS). He would also receive bad grades in art class because his drawings often contradicted the instructions of his teacher. In his final high school report, he got a 4 in art.

“My teachers even threatened to give me score of 3 if I still refused to follow their instructions, which meant I wouldn’t graduate. I told them I was not afraid,” he recalled.

As a talented artist, Heri has been awarded numerous art distinctions, including the UNESCO Prize at the Shanghai Biennale in 2000. For him, learning is a lifelong process that can be conducted anywhere. Even though he is considered a successful artist today, he said he would never stop learning.

He recalled that his parents were surprised after learning about his exhibition and lecture at Oxford University in the UK in 1995.

“They wondered how a dropout could speak about art at Oxford University,” he said.

For aspiring artists who want to have an international career, Heri advises them to have a deep understanding of not only global issues but also history, culture and the country’s traditions.

“To go international, we do not need to change our identity. If we have character, we will be seen as unique by artists from other countries, because we do not try to imitate them,” he said.

“We should stop thinking that [Indonesia] is always being left behind and that other countries are always better. We are great because we have a rich culture.”