

FX HARSONO

GAZING ON IDENTITY

Contemporary artists are among today's thought leaders. Their ingenuity alerts us to pertinent societal issues. FX Harsono, with his progressive conceptualism, is one such artist and a prominent figure in Indonesian contemporary art. Harsono is a versatile artist who was classically trained in painting and drawing, but has adopted a more experimental practice. His sophisticated, complex installations fluidly communicate politically charged ideas, and his belief that artists carry the responsibility to challenge sensitive and contentious affairs. Since the 1970s, he has been doing precisely that, producing artworks that confront sociopolitical injustices and controversies in Indonesia. In recent years, however, he has shifted from overt critiques of the Indonesian government to art-making that focuses on matters of identity—particularly that of his Chinese ancestry and the place of ethnic Chinese within Indonesian society.

"Gazing on Identity," his 2016 solo show at Singapore's Arndt gallery, dealt with issues of personhood, segregation and belonging in postcolonial Indonesia. A mixture of installations, paintings and photographic prints—all created for this exhibition—were on display. The keystone was *Undisclosed Identity* (2016), an installation consisting of 59 LED lightboxes that illuminate digital prints of archival portraits and identification documents of Chinese-Indonesians. Twenty of the portraits rest on stools, one apiece, as if they were pictures on headstones. Up close, the large-scale creation, which was housed in a dimly lit enclosure, resembles a shrine that commemorates the ancestry of Chinese-Indonesians, who, as an ethnic minority, faced hardship, discrimination and ostracization throughout the country's history. A sense of somberness shrouded the gallery, driving home the oppression that must have been felt by the depicted men and women.

Undisclosed Identity appears to be a waiting room, where the souls of Chinese-Indonesians past lingered in the portraits. Through Harsono's treatment, their history of marginalization and persecution was brought to light. Additionally, above the portraits is a red LED ticker display, like those found in immigration office waiting areas, displaying announcements in Dutch, Chinese Pinyin and Indonesian Bahasa (in both the Van Ophuysen and Revised spellings), which were the languages used on identity cards assigned to residents of Indonesia during the early to mid-20th century. Perhaps this is a metaphor for the plight of the Chinese-Indonesians, who still exist in a liminal space within Indonesian society.

The marginalization of Chinese-Indonesians stems from the colonial legacy of the Dutch, who were wary of Chinese immigrants and their



economic prowess. In particular, the colonialists saw the Chinese as a threat to Dutch authority in Indonesia. The tenuous status and racial prejudice against Indonesia's ethnic Chinese population continues today—a holdover from when the government kept tight control and surveillance on the group through specialized identity cards and segregation. This policy has been somewhat reformed in recent times, but remains a controversial issue. These historical documents served as a common thread throughout the exhibition, appearing also as part of a large-scale composite of identity cards in a poignant painting titled *The Record of a Journey* (2016). Although resembling passports, they are more comprehensive—indicating the holder's name, birthdate, occupation, religion and ethnic heritage—and shows the viewer each individual's cultural and ancestral background.

In "Gazing on Identity," Harsono showed us the harsh truth of racial discrimination despite the prevalence of multiculturalism; the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia cannot escape categorization as an "other," even if their kin have been in the country for centuries. By using everyday objects, photographs and historical documents to highlight this issue, Harsono's artwork is relevant to contemporary Indonesian society, and even taps into a theme of ongoing ethnic friction that seems increasingly common in our world. Although "Gazing on Identity" focused on a concern specifically in his home country, the message is one that resonated with a global audience—namely, the urgency of determining one's roots, and the need to be aware of the trials and tribulations of those who share our bloodlines.

CHRISTINA ARUM SOK