

frieze

Agus Suwage

ARNDT, Berlin, Germany

Agus Suwage is one of Indonesia's most well known artists. In 'Cycle #3', his first solo show in Berlin, Suwage presented a suite of sculptures and paintings related to bodies of work shown in two previous exhibitions, 'Cycle #1' at Nadi Gallery in Jakarta (in April 2012) and 'Cycle #2' at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York (in Spring 2012).

Like his younger Indonesian peers, Eko Nugroho and Entang Wiharso, Suwage is now a prominent international figure, often showing outside the Asian art scene. As the leader of a new wave of Indonesian art quite different from the previous generation of artists, which included FX Harsono and that key figure of the past two decades, Heri Dono, Suwage is well aware of the politics of images and identity. Unlike his predecessors, he is not principally concerned with the duty of being an artist or that role's moral responsibility and politics. His interest, typical of this new generation, is in play and bold, graphic experimentation.

That is not to say that Suwage isn't engaged with the politics of religion, a matter of daily concern in the world's most populous Muslim country. He played with religious icons throughout the show, though nowhere more charged and ironically than in the small work *Social Mirror #3* (2013), in which a small figure faces a life-size trumpet while blocking his ears. The seemingly charming recorded tune issuing forth is the Islamic call to prayer played on a real trumpet. In other works, there is a finely tuned mockery of the global art system – its icons, myths and histories. In this show it was Anthony Gormley – his winged-men, those angels – while in other exhibitions it has been iconic figures like Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic and Bruce Nauman.

In much of his earlier work Suwage used the self-portrait as a mode of contemplation and theatricalization. In those works, most of which are documented in the massive catalogue *Still Crazy After All These Years* (2010), which accompanied his retrospective at Indonesia's National Art Museum, Suwage often made himself into a figure of fun, while always retaining a sense of the existential. The show 'Cycle # 3' contained no self-portraits and few overt references to art history. There was only one work that parodied nationalism, using that gargantuan icon of Indonesian flora, the Rafflesia: the largest flower in the world, which on blooming smells like rotting meat. Suwage's black *Super Flower* (2013) every so often expelled a strange, artificial scent.

About this review

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By *John Mateer*



Agus Suwage, *Social Mirrors #2*, 2013, trumpet, copper, wood and car audio systems 118 x 24 x 70 cm

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Suwage's preoccupation is always with icons and graphic simplicity. He works with the emblems of religion – the figure *Ave Maryam #3* (2013), which represents the Virgin Mary and is 'ironized' by the symbol of a burning heart crowned with thorns, wears a dress constituted of what appears to be an Islamic pattern and a headscarf. And then there are the icons of contemporary art: here, a burning, flying statue that more than resembles a sculpture by Gormley. These works are not so much used to make statements as to play with the idea that art should be declarative and ideological.

In contrast to the ideological politics of Indonesian art of the '80s and '90s, Suwage's politics are querulous and comic, visually bold and warmly provocative. As with many of the artists who have come to prominence in the past decade, he shares that particular Indonesian respect for the figurative and the cartoon, often seeing humour in images that would otherwise be disturbingly paradoxical. This is especially true of the most striking work in the show, *The Monument that Protects National Defence and Security* (2013). Consisting of a masked, sword-bearing skeletal angel standing atop a cone of green bottles of beer, this work ridicules the small-minded radicals who use the notion of *hankamnas* (defence of the nation) and Islamic outrage as an excuse for attacking bars and other entertainment venues. The figure is at once an angel, a warrior and a kind of terrorist. Yet, as the gallerist Matthias Arndt remarked in his introduction to the show's catalogue, the figure is also a kind of quotation of the famous angel known to all Berliners, as well as those who have watched Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987), as the Victory Column, an icon of silence and security. There is also the suggestion that those bottles could belong on a large replica of Marcel Duchamp's 1914 *Bottle Rack*.

A parallel may be drawn between the work of this new wave of Indonesian artists to which Suwage belongs and that of Chinese artists of the past 20 years. Both are the product of art histories in which the logic of Modernism doesn't have a place: there is no abstraction, no tension between scientific and imaginative representations, nor a fascination with subjectivity. Both are often focused on the iconicity of the nation and experiment with its inevitably political images. Suwage's powerful work is indeed startling, and especially enlivening when compared with so much contemporary European art. Like China's 1990s Cynical Realism, it is ironic, bold and engaging work – an art always on the edge of the sinister.

John Mateer

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