



MOOI INDIE – BEAUTIFUL INDIES

INDONESIAN ART NOW

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MATTHIAS ARNDT

We use Western technique. We use oil and acrylic, but still you can feel it is not Western. It is not Western because when we start working, we don't use our brain first. We use our feeling, it's about feeling. If we are inspired, we work. If not, we stop.¹

These words by contemporary Indonesian artist Jumaldi Alfi illustrate the importance of presenting Southeast-Asian art as a counterpoint to Western domination of our culture. The exhibition *Mooi Indie – Beautiful Indies: Indonesian Art Now* features artworks by five contemporary artists and the artist collective Tromarama. It is the first presentation in Australia to show works by so many of Indonesia's foremost contemporary artists.

When it comes to East Asia, discussions of the region's art are primarily conducted in terms of archeology and anthropology; therefore, it is of significant importance to enlarge from the common scientific interest of these two fields. Contemporary Indonesian art with its political messages, deep cultural roots, and most importantly, its historical development – provides a compelling example of the complexity of the art of this region.

The generation of artists that came to maturity during the period of upheaval and reform that occurred in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, with the subsequent fall of the Suharto regime and the transition of democracy in Indonesia, take part in international art discourse. In doing so, they have built their own cultural heritage, using traditional media such as batik, reliefs, textiles and embroidery, whilst formulating a universally legible contemporary language within Indonesian art.

The title for this exhibition, *Mooi Indie*, is the Dutch term for 'Beautiful Indies', and first referred to the title of a series of reproductions of watercolour paintings by the Dutch artist Fredericus Jacobus van Rossum du Chattel (1856–1917), depicting harmonious scenes of the East Indies. After Sindu Sudjojono (1913–1986), the main voice of the Indonesian visual arts before and during independence, derided and degraded those painters who portrayed only pretty and beautiful things about the Indies, the term 'Mooi Indie' became well known. Today the expression is identified with romantic colonial genre paintings, typically landscape scenes showing volcanoes, mountains, river valleys and villages immersed in golden sunshine. These works are currently among the most expensive in auction, representing Indonesian modernism. In fact, this Mooi Indie movement can be seen as a 'cultural colonisation' of Indonesia; even the art history has been partly written by the colonisers.

From the late sixteenth century when the first Dutch ships arrived in the Indonesian archipelago, until the declaration of independence in 1945, the local art scene had to overcome extremely difficult circumstances. Whilst most Mooi Indie painters were Dutch colonialists, in the 1930s and '40s the local art scene changed dramatically. Then, in search of identity, the formal art education of Indonesian art developed during the '50s. Two decades later, the importance and gravity of restoring one's own culture led modern Indonesian artists to the trend to explore primitive and traditional art. A diversity of creations and an efflorescence of activity followed. The downfall of the Suharto government in 1998 gave contemporary artists the opportunity to express a new dynamic Asian modernism. As a result, the number of artists, art collectors and galleries rose simultaneously. If we observe the journey of Indonesian art from the colonial era to the present, we can conclude that modern Indonesian art is a reflection of the struggle of local artists to achieve freedom, not only from colonialism, but also from Western domination.

The artists and collective presented in the exhibition *Mooi Indie – Beautiful Indies: Indonesian Art Now* each have an individual or particular point of view, yet they are united in their passion for modern Indonesian art and culture.

Jumaldi Alfi (b.1972), for instance, is, in his important series *Melting Memories – Rereading Landscape Mooi Indie*, approaching the earliest modernist movements. With his subtle conceptual approach, Jumaldi Alfi is representative of the new generation of Indonesian artists in the way he rewrites art history in favour of Indonesian contemporary art, reclaiming the Mooi Indie component of Indonesian art history and culture. He does this by re-appropriating the Mooi Indie movement, adding new masterpieces to the existing Mooi Indie works. For example, he does drawings and sketches of major existing works and paints from some early masters. By doing so, he rewrites this part of Indonesian modernism into a contemporary chapter of conceptual Indonesian contemporary art. His series provides the perfect appellation for the exhibition *Mooi Indie – Beautiful Indies*.

Alongside Jumaldi Alfi are further Indonesian contemporary artists presenting artworks with a global and historical impact. **Eko Nugroho** (b.1977), a socio-political Indonesian artist, presents his sculpture *Under Pillow Ideology*, 2009, and one of 24 embroideries from his *La Rue Parle* series, *La Rue Parle #9*, 2012, which he began while staying in Paris. Much to his surprise he discovered that the so-called First World has similar issues to the so-called Emerging Countries. The ongoing central theme of his work is modern life in urban areas, and he is deeply engaged with the culture of his time. As a symbolic part of his artwork Nugroho uses masks which are an element of the traditional culture in Java. They give his portraits anonymity and connect him to his own heritage.

The artist **Wedhar Riyadi** (b.1980) primarily explores the psychological depths of pop cultural imagery. He creates strange, rather macabre, fantasy worlds populated by figures that are at once playful and disturbing. Riyadi is a master of line drawing, and his works show a powerful inspiration from contemporary street art, graffiti and comics. Riyadi explores themes of consumerism, politics and cultural identity, with violence being a recurring element in his works. At the same time he tells personal stories about his idols, hobbies or peers. The series, *Keributan Dari Negara Subur*, shows two styles simultaneously, those of realism and fantasy, by exquisitely rendering found historical photographs of a man posing in Western style, and then irreverently overlaying them with his trademark cartoon violence. To him 'the juxtaposition of these styles symbolises traditional versus modern, local versus global and public versus private'.²

Arin Dwiheartanto Sunaryo (b.1978) displays two new volcanic ash diptychs. Sunaryo is famous for his rejection of a paintbrush in favour of direct application with his hands. He mostly experiments with pigmented resin and ash. In their natural form, both elements connect with age-old methods of preservation. His paintings capture shifts between solid and liquid, static and animated, synthetic and natural, and are rooted in the embrace of chance.

Entang Wiharso (b.1967) is one of Indonesia's most provocative artists. His paintings and installations combine personal, Western and Indonesian mythologies. To him art is a way to understand the human condition, to perceive, feel and comprehend human problems, such as love, hate, fanaticism and ideology. Notwithstanding, he casts a critical eye on international politics, environmental issues and cultural stereotypes. Recently, an increasing use of written text has entered his work. Wiharso combines primitivism with a cartoon-language account of his contemporary life, being able to transport primitivism into his actual reality.

The artist collective **Tromarama** (founded in 2004) was formed by Febie Babyrose, Ruddy Hatumena and Herbert Hans. Tromarama is interested in contemporary urban culture and they have chosen stop-motion animation as their principal medium of expression, as this allows them to imagine how daily objects might move as if they were alive. As cheerful as their work seems, they often have a critical undertone. They do not overly focus on artifice, they simply use art as an uninhibited avenue for experimentation.

The activities of the Indonesian art market today have served as a motor that carries Indonesian works of art forward and brings them into global distribution. Contemporary Indonesian Art is one of the most current, vital and exciting art scenes in Southeast Asia. *Mooi Indie – Beautiful Indies* is an exhibition to celebrate the diverse, culturally aware, and socially engaged art that is the product of the energetic art scene that thrives in the cities of Australia's nearest neighbour: Indonesia.

MATTHIAS ARNDT

July 2014

Curator

Mooi Indie – Beautiful Indies

Indonesian Art Now

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Jumaldi Alfi, 'What is Indonesian style? Jumaldi Alfi on the art, style and Jogja – Interview', *Art Radar*, <http://artradarjournal.com/2009/11/25/what-is-indonesian-style-jumaldi-alfi-on-the-art-style-and-jogja-interview/>, posted 25 November 2009, accessed 24 July 2014
- 2 Wedhar Riyadi, 'The Juxtaposition of Indonesia the Modern and Traditional: A Chat with Wedhar Riyadi', interview, +SixTwo, <https://plussixtwo.squarespace.com/wedhar-riyadi-interview/>, accessed 24 July 2014

LIST OF WORKS

Eko NUGROHO

Under Pillow Ideology, 2009
fibreglass, patchwork pillows,
batik patchwork quilt, facemask
130 x 110 x 100 cm

La Rue Parle #9, 2012
machine embroidered rayon thread
on fabric backing
series of 24 embroideries
40 x 31 cm each

Wedhar RIYADI

Noise from the fertile land
(*Keributan dari negara subur*) no. 1, 2011
oil on canvas
250 x 180 cm
Purchased 2011
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

Noise from the fertile land
(*Keributan dari Negara subur*) no. 3, 2012
oil on canvas
250 x 180 cm
Purchased 2012
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

Noise from the fertile land
(*Keributan dari Negara subur*) no. 4, 2012
oil on canvas
250 x 180 cm
Purchased 2012
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

Entang WIHARSO

Licker, 2009
aluminium, car paint
240 x 120 cm

Under Protection for 24-hours, 2014
aluminium, resin, colour pigment,
thread, acrylic mirror
190 x 122 cm

Wagon for Double Protection, 2014
brass, resin, colour pigment, thread
165 x 150 cm

Jumaldi ALFI

Rereading Landscape – Mooi Indie
(*I Know Where I Am Going*), 2014
acrylic on linen
175 x 250 cm

Arin DWIHARTANTO SUNARYO

Ashfall no. 4, 2014
pigmented resin, merapi volcanic ash
mounted on wooden panel
3 panels
166 x 122 cm each

TROMARAMA

Ons aller belang, 2012
stop motion animation, 30 decals
on porcelain plates
250 cm diameter

Bandoeng Waterleiding, 2014
video projection and 8 napkins
720 x 205 cm

Mooi Indie – Beautiful Indies Indonesian Art Now

1 August – 3 October 2014

Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art

University of South Australia
55 North Terrace, Adelaide, SA 5000

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University of South Australia
GPO Box 2471, Adelaide SA 5001
T 08 8302 0870
E samstagmuseum@unisa.edu.au
W unisa.edu.au/samstagmuseum

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Editor: Margaret Farmer
Design: Sandra Elms Design

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Beautiful Indies exhibition artists for their vision
and inspiration.

Cover image: Alfi JUMALDI, *Rereading Landscape, Mooi Indie (I Know Where I Am Going)*, 2014, acrylic on linen, 175 x 250 cm

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