

Mooi Indie and a new wave of Indonesian art hits our shores

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Mooi Indie – Beautiful Indies: Indonesian Art Now

Samstag Art Museum, Adelaide

Until October 3

Countries in the throes of social change always produce the most exciting contemporary art. This has been true of China for the past two decades, and it is one of the less recognised outcomes of South Korea's economic miracle. On the other hand, in places such as Australia or Scandinavia – well represented in this year's Sydney Biennale to so little effect – there is a general sense of complacency. Perhaps Tony Abbott will succeed in convincing everyone we're having some kind of crisis and create a more inspirational environment for art.

The nation currently riding the crest of a wave is Indonesia, which has been through a tumultuous series of political and social change since the end of the Suharto era. Although the first stirrings of a modern art movement date back to the 1970s, it was not until the Reformasi of 1998 that Indonesian art began to make an impact on the world stage. One gets the impression of a tightly coiled spring being released.

Mooi Indie – Beautiful Indies at the Samstag Art Museum in Adelaide is the most recent survey of new Indonesian art to be held in this country. It is sharing the gallery with Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan's remarkable installation, *In-Habit: Project Another Country* – a sprawling cardboard city that has continued to grow and mutate since it was first shown at the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation in 2012.

Mooi Indie may be Australia's most broad-ranging survey of the new Indonesian art, although there was a show at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2010, and the field has been well represented in successive Asia Pacific Triennials at the Queensland Art Gallery. Dealers such as Darren Knight in Sydney, and Brian Collie in Melbourne, have held solo shows by leading Indonesian artists.

The new Indonesian art is also making its way into the collections of public art museums, notably the QAG, the NGV and the Art Gallery of South Australia. As far as I know, the only major work by a contemporary Indonesian artist held by the Art Gallery of NSW is the installation, *They Give Evidence* (1996-97) by Dadang Christanto, who now lives in Australia.

There are large public collections of Indonesian textiles and artefacts, but this could be seen as a sign of our willingness to consider the region in anthropological rather than aesthetic terms. Western nations make art credited to heroic individuals; South-East Asian nations make artifacts assigned to nameless craftspeople. This mentality begins at home. The motif on the old one dollar note was treated as an anonymous design until David Malangi was identified as the artist.

Mooi Indie ("Mooi" pronounced like "Buoy") has been put together by the German dealer, Matthias Arndt, who has shown more enterprise than most curators in recognising the emergence of South-East Asia. The title refers to a well-known series of picturesque watercolours by Dutch artist, Fredericus Jacobus van Rossum du Chattel (1856-1917), who depicted the East Indies as a place of harmonious natural beauty.

Given the blood-soaked history of modern Indonesia – the massacres and the riots, the authoritarian governments and extremist politics – the concept of "beautiful Indies" must be taken with a huge dose of irony. It is a quality found everywhere in contemporary Indonesian art: irony and the most outrageous, black satire.

Like their Chinese counterparts, the Indonesian artists had to catch up with Western art with lightning speed. This meant a rapid progression through



Violating: Noise from the Fertile Land (Keributan dari negara subur) by Wedhar Riyadi. Photo: Queensland Art Gallery



Careful copy: Melting Memories –? Rereading Landscape, Mooi Indies #06, 2014 by Jumaldi Alfi.

the innovations of modernism, but with a particular affection for the directness of pop art and street art. Into the mix came distinctive regional forms such as batik and shadow puppet theatre. The best-known Indonesian artists, such as Heri Dono or FX Harsono, have made extensive use of local elements in their work.

Neither of these senior figures is included in this compact survey, which features five artists and one artist group. At least three participants – Entang Wiharso (b.1967), Eko Nugroho (b.1977), and Wedhar Riyadi (b.1980) – are known for the kind of wild, combustible imagery meant to smack audiences right between the eyes.

Nevertheless, the first work one encounters is *Rereading Landscape – Mooi Indie (I Know Where I Am Going)* by Jumaldi Alfi (b.1972) – is a careful copy of a Western-style "Beautiful Indies" landscape, presented within a set of concentric frames. Despite being handmade it is a conceptual piece, intended to reinforce the idea there is nothing "natural" about this kind of painting. It is not a window onto the world but a form that has its own ideological parti pris.

Equally subtle are a set of volcanic ash paintings by Arin Dwiartanto Sunaryo (b.1978). The artist gathered the ash from the site of the Merapi volcano, to the north of Yogyakarta – the city which also happens to be Indonesia's major art centre. Merapi's 2010 eruption resulted in the evacuation of 350,000 people – a disaster commemorated in Sunaryo's *Ashfall* paintings, in which the dust descends in steep vertical lines, turning to mist at the base of the panel. Ostensibly abstract, the paintings have an elegiac quality.

The trio, Tromarama, who specialise in animated videos, have contributed an elaborate wall installation of 30 ceramic plates, arranged in two circles around a central projection. The street scene featured in the video is commemorated in frozen details on the plates, which are painted in blue and white, like Delftware – a style originally inspired by Chinese pottery, then copied by oriental potters and exported to the European market. The animated image shows a truck and a bus passing by a nondescript modern western building, another disavowal of the concept of the "picturesque" Indies. Such urban drabness is one of the legacies of colonialism around the world. When treated as decoration the incongruity is unsettling.

This is the new face of Indonesian art, just as the work coming out of China today has abandoned heavy-handed references to Chairman Mao. But if you were to ask curators or collectors for their impressions of Indonesian art it is far more likely they would refer to the energetic, eclectic styles of artists such as Wiharso, Nugroho and Riyadi, who borrow images from many sources to create startling hybrids. Although all three artists move freely between two and three-dimensional forms, they share a strong graphic sensibility.

Riyadi admits to being influenced by many other artists, as well as comics, B-movies and record covers. He takes the detritus of popular culture and attaches it to images with completely different origins. In his works titled *Noise from the Fertile Land*, he paints grotesque heads and other appendages over figures from vintage photographs. The sedate and formal appearance of colonial life is violated by these viral additions that restore all the violence and madness the original photographer avoided in his portrayals of the age.

We don't see Nugroho or Wiharso at their best in this show, as both artists are known for extravagant large sculptures and installations. Wiharso has three complex works, two of them wall reliefs, but when I think of the over-the-top pieces I've seen elsewhere, his contribution to *Mooi Indie* seems modest. If Wiharso has a theme it is the interconnectedness of all life and belief. Figures in his work often seem to be joined by sinuous lines that look like organs that have left the body and turned into tentacles.

Nugroho's *La Rue Parle # 9* is also a modest work by his standards, made up of small, embroidered pictures of Paris. The artist produced the original images, but the embroidery was completed by a workshop he owns and runs. This shop makes both major pieces and small items that are sold through a retail outlet.

Nugroho's shop is another indicator of a scene that makes use of local traditions and expertise, but has its sights set on a global audience. One sees the same ambitions in Japanese artists such as Murakami and Nara, but there are very few Australians who have embraced the international market in this manner. The Indonesian new wave may have been late to arrive, but it has hit the shores of the so-called developed world with colossal force.

John McDonald flew to Adelaide courtesy of the Samstag Art Museum.