

A Talk with the "Archaeologist"

In more or less this last one year at his home and studio, Handiwirman was occupied with working on several object art installations commissioned by the Novotel management, Bandung. It is true that in addition to it he managed to make some paintings to fulfill his promises to participate in some exhibitions. Yet it is obvious, from what I saw in my several visits to his home-and-studio, that he was mustering his creative energy and resources to accomplish the commissioned object art works.

In 2004, TEMPO magazine placed Handiwirman, with his various approaches to making works, among the most significant artists in Indonesia. Lately, his works have been increasingly drawn the interests of art lovers. Generally speaking, however, public attention has hitherto been given only to Handiwirman's paintings. Not much attention is given to the fact that Handiwirman is an artist with a strong inclination to compose objects, that what he offers in his paintings come from the fondness, intimacy and enjoyment he experiences in his contacts with various trivial objects around us.

Yet, Handiwirman's intimacy with trivial objects is just not trivial. He carefully

observes the visual phenomena of such objects, the natures of their materials and surfaces, and through the physical sensations as well as visual perceptions that effect from them when brought near to each other or arranged in a composition. When he paints objects that he already set together to give out different, unique new ones, he acts like a phenomenologist intending to purify the presence of objects around him. He once told me: *To tell you the truth, in those paintings I'm not expressing myself. Instead, I try hard to present the expressions of those objects as they are.*

Yet Handiwirman's relationships with those objects become complex as he also treats their presence as part of the process of his self-reflection. In another occasion he told me as follows. *In my adolescence I used to collect trivial objects like paper scratches, plastic bags, rubber bands, and so on. Such objects used to fill up my room. There wasn't any pop star poster, family portrait, and the like. When others keep memories of things and events in photo albums, I memorize them by means of such objects. But I remember everything about how those objects connect with significant, impressive events for me. I still have some clothes from my childhood years and remember*

important issues associated with them. Lately, I've been doing that in connection with my child ...:-) I keep a lot of objects connected with my child since birth up to now...

This exhibition becomes important and 'rare' as it exclusively focuses on Handiwirman Saputra's works of three-dimensional objects. I took part in convincing the artist that these works are worth showing openly to art public before they all disappear behind the walls of Novotel in Bandung.

I have decided to present here part of my conversation with Handiwirman that took place while he was preparing the display of this exhibition. Handiwirman that tends to be quiet, this time was willing to talk a lot about the processes of these latest works of his as well as other things connected with his artistic pursuits.

Enin Supriyanto (ES): How long is your preparation for these works?

Handiwirman Saputra (HS): *I began preparing these in the last fasting month. At first I went to check the location (Novotel, Bandung) to get to know the place. Yes, it's about one year.*

ES: How was the preparation?

HS: *Well, after I had surveyed the place, I began developing small-sized models. These I presented, in their small-sized, three-dimensional forms. Once I got the approval, I tried to find people (technicians, artisans) that could help me with the job.*

ES: So you began with three-dimensional models? Before that, hadn't you made the sketches or drawings?

HS: *No, I never make forms after sketches. I directly make the models using the same materials to be used for the real things to come. If they will come in resin then I take resin for the models; the same goes for metal.*

ES: In your professional career as an artist is this the first time you do commission works?

HS: *Yes, this is the first time.*

ES: Doesn't the customer specify any limitation? In terms of material, size, form?

HS: *No. That's why I took it; it's up to me.*

ES: What, do you think, is the important difference between doing a commission work like this and your regular creation process of object art or painting?

HS: *The alteration of the materials I use. I*

have to consider that the place is specific, a hotel. And then the issue of the setting up in relation with security; people mustn't find it easy to take away the works.

ES: What about the materials you've worked with so far?

HS: *In this case, I imitate the characteristic appearances of certain materials. I don't work with materials as they are. This is completely different from my regular approach. For instance, in these works I imitate sponge. Well, there are several specific characters of sponges irreplaceable by cast resin/fiber.*

ES: You mean to say that this time it merely looks like sponge?

HS: *Yes, while I usually feature sponge as sponge. So the whole process was time consuming as I had to find the right way to imitate the specific material in different materials. For example, I want a material that is white, clean, and glossy. It should be porcelain but that's impossible or hardly possible. And I've eventually found a satisfactory finishing technique that gives out the appearance of porcelain. But still, it is not porcelain ... Knock it and you won't hear it clink. :-)*

ES: Since long I've been curious about

where your 'unlikely' forms in your object art come from and feature in the early Kelompok Jendela group exhibitions. Then such forms appear in your paintings these last few years. Similar forms appear again here in your object art and installation works. Where do they come from, really? Those objects you work with, or the materials you pick – thread, ruptures of plastic bags, and sponge – are seldom used by other artists to make object art, aren't they? How do you make such unlikely forms out of those materials? Those forms hardly have any reference to objects and forms commonly found around us.

HS: *It's not altogether right to say that the forms of objects I make do not exist, or are never found, around us. In fact, I found them around me. I found them in my keen observation of various trivial objects. I seldom examine what is big. It's the small and trivial in most cases. Like this (picking up a fragment of a sugar paper sachet on the café table — we were chatting while having espresso at a café yard in a mall in West Jakarta. Handi loves black, thick coffee - ES.), laid next to an ash tray. Or a chair like this (pointing at one of the feet of the chair he sat on) ...Because the ground is uneven, a folded scratch of paper has to do the service. I'm fond of intensely observing things like these. To me, it is as*

if these objects in their situations were speaking, talking about something, just like human beings.

ES: So the objects and forms that get into your paintings also come from your observation of such objects. Is it true that you always first make the objects (models) then take pictures of them, then draw, transfer them onto canvas?

HS: *That's true; first I make the objects, and only when I'm satisfied with the forms that I transfer them to canvas.*

ES: What about the forms and objects for this project, which will be shown here?

HS: *Hmm... I visited the place to survey and observe the situation. I conditioned myself by imagining that I was staying at the hotel though I didn't. Well, I had the experience of staying at hotels any way. Now, these forms come from there, from hotel rooms. The ideas for the forms as well as the materials. Take for instance a piece of hair by a bar of soap, a bath tub, hangers, faucets, blankets, a tissue box, bars of soap; everything is from there. But then I try to approach them in my own way.*

ES: But eventually it effects in something like abstractions removed from the original forms of those objects?

HS: *Well, ... it may be so. But the point is that everything remains connected with a hotel room. Also in terms of impression and color. Clean, white, porcelain, metal, glossy, blankets, mattresses, a big bar of soap with a piece of hair sticking to it, in the bathtub... Though I had to change the design of the work (Di Tempat Mandi). At first I wanted to use metal but it didn't work. At last I changed the material and the design was changed and the size was reduced. But it still refers to the original bathtub.*

ES: When you evaluate your own creative course so far, what do you say about your achievements in painting and what do you get through object art?

HS: *Wow... they are very different. Object art gives me the most satisfaction. If I had to make a choice between the two, I'd take object art. But then I realize there are weak points in object art. I have a problem, for instance, about how to popularize the objects I make; it is the question of public presentation. I have made three or four exhibitions exclusively for my objects. The general response I got say my works are but rubbish or just odd. I showed them to the public because I wanted to popularize object art as I see many interesting points in it. But then, how to present or introduce it? An idea just popped out ... I thought*

painting might give the solution. Painting has already had its established value, rules as well as public recognition. Say, its tradition is well established already. So, if I do paint that is just to make use of the established status of painting to invite people to appreciate objects. So it is like selling object art that I package as painting. But certain unexpected things come up during the process... Say, for instance, the process of magnifying, reducing or adding when painting the objects. It all leads to different things in my paintings... As seen in my works for the exhibition "Pseudo Still Life"—curated by Hendro Wiyanto (Pseudo Still Life, Galeri Semarang, April 30, 2005 – May 14, 2005) — my paintings involve magnifying and so on that eventually makes sponge or cotton resemble some other, completely different objects. That is what I mean by unexpected things that come up when transferring my objects to painting.

ES: Have you ever shown your paintings side by side, reciprocally supplementing, with the objects from which the forms in your paintings come?

HS: *Yes. Just once. In Japan. I've never done it in Indonesia yet.*

ES: Really...? Wow, but since I first saw your paintings associated with your objects I've

always thought that showing the paintings and the objects side by side should be most interesting.

HS: Well, I don't know. They always ask just paintings from me.:~))

ES: So this project with Novotel is interesting, isn't it? It's just object art they ask from you!

HS: Yep, this is the first time. Really a joy of its own kind to me! :-) Before, I never thought of making big, permanent works of object art, but now it's accomplished through this project. So to tell you the truth I've grabbed the opportunity enthusiastically. Well, they are willing to provide the funding, and I can do whatever I feel like to. Yeah... there's no harm in taking this. Someone else pays for the pleasure I gain, that's it ...:~))

ES: What bliss this chance is for you!:-))

HS: O yes!:-)) But you know it doesn't come very often. I should say this kind of opportunity is rare in Indonesia :-)

ES: But why! This way your customers can get your works that come up from your most intense creative process with you pouring out your entire creative energy. Isn't that so?

HS: Yes, that's right. But when it came to

showing these works like this, I felt somewhat reluctant for some time. But then many friends said it would be a pity if I decided not to show these works.

ES: Won't you regret the fact that your works will be secluded, accessible only to people happening to visit the Novotel?

HS: No. I mean it ...:~)) I'm satisfied, I've done it and it's all over. In fact, there were occasions when I asked some collectors I know well to let me fill their places with my object art. But then they had to set specifications concerning the materials and forms and I was left with slight liberty. Well, it didn't happen. This is the first satisfactory deal for me.

ES: Let's talk about something else. Back to your process in creating works. You studied at the Craft Department of the ISI Indonesian Institute of the Arts. As I see it, craft tradition concerns with ornamenting the surfaces of objects or with producing daily, functional objects like, for instance, containers. But then look, the objects you create go off the functional track, don't they?

HS: I decided to enter the craft department at the Institute because I have a strong interest in artisanship, in the technical aspects of doing things. So I simply felt the

craft department fit me. But once I was in I soon began thinking of making works out of uncommon materials like sawdust, or whatever else, to produce others than containers and ornaments... I developed some, say, idealism of my own ...:~) I didn't want to make works by wasting the materials: wood is hollowed and carved to make containers and ornaments, and the rest of the material is thrown away. I decided to collect such wastes and make works out of them... I did a great part of my student assignments that way. I made powder out of wood shavings and processed it further to give out something else....

ES: Then, how did you come to take up different materials that you process and combine to give out various forms? Do you deliberately keep from making the representational forms of familiar objects in the daily life?

HS: No. I have no intention to deliberately avoid that. In fact, my intention is to tell stories, to convey something through these objects and forms. It is perhaps naïve for me to say that every object has its expression, has its story to tell...

ES: Just like an archaeologist finding different ruptures of objects in excavations, then trying to conjecture the story or history

imprinted on them?

HS: Yes...yes...that sounds suitable to describe what I do. But then many people feel there is no connection between the works I make and the titles I give them: What on earth is the relationship between this title and the visual form of the work? But actually they are all connected, those forms and their titles. To me everything about them has its own clear story. I can tell you a lot of things about my objects and their forms.

ES: I remember one of your paintings – in Agus Suwage's house if I'm not mistaken – that features a plastic bag with some objects in it...

HS: Oh, that one is very plain ... I want to say things about keeping. About what I do with various things that I keep as one collection, I feel good when the various kinds of trash are collected in one place. So I never deliberately seek for certain forms. It is the first time, for the sake of this project, that I deliberately familiarize myself with a given setting and its forms, and keep developing them ... Before this, well ... I just gave a go; ending up with any object, any form around me, was okay ...:-)

Perhaps I have an inverted way of thinking. I mean I see things from the other side. To

know the external form of something, for instance, I decide to examine the inside first. As the effect of this seam, for example (pointing to the tip of one short leaf of his T-shirt)... I'm just so excited to intensely examine the inside, what it is like, what makes it different. That is the excitement. People may say that's uncommon... well, that's my own way of seeing things. I call it research... Perhaps that sounds too serious: research.:-) Because if you think of the real, academic one, you'll say my research sucks. Sometimes I will just make visual observation, gazing longer at a subject, till I eventually get the idea to associate it with something else I don't know what. With no specific reference involved.

ES: So this project is different, isn't it? That is because you start with something definite: the forms and characters of objects in a hotel room. Which one is more enjoyable? Working without any reference, fully free, or with limit?

HS: I can enjoy them both. It's only that when I am free, without any preset reference, with liberty to use any materials, things will be easier; I can just do whatever I like. But this project is not like that. It's very different. I was sentenced before hand to have a limited territory to play in.

ES: What are other important points for you in doing this project? And what do you plan to do next?

HS: After this project, I think I will work along a process like this. I will set for myself some limit, make for myself a key, and first lock up the door to the territory where I'm going to play. Only then I shall try to find various possibilities just within the predefined territory.

ES: But why is it necessary to preset the limit? Won't it feel better for you to be free?

HS: :-)) For the time being, and on the question of making works, if I have to choose between being a free man and a prisoner, I must say I'll take the latter alternative. Why? Because I feel it too easy to be a free man. I have no rules to follow and everything will be very easy for me. If I am free in every respect, I won't have, say, the mischief of breaking the rules. I will lose all the desire to do it. But when I'm a prisoner, I'll keep in me the drive to break the rules imposed on me:-)) I'm a prisoner all right, but people don't know that I trick the prison's rules, something like that. That's exciting. So I can say that I'm a prisoner but it turns out that it feels good to be one ...:-)) But it is me, not any one else, punishing myself :-)) Like my experience with this project; I had to think about how

to make these objects permanent – I have to develop my own ideas... it was exciting, challenging.

ES: Now, let's divert a bit. You know that for this time being market is very enthusiastic to welcome your painting. But perhaps not too many people learn that what feature on your canvas have the origins in your objects that are also of great interest. Suppose in the near future market also got highly interested in your object art, what would be your response? Would you take it as a sign that people begin to understand and appreciate your objects? And, consequently, would you stop transforming them to paintings?

HS: *(Fell to silence for quite some time...)*
Well... Say, after the process I introduce my objects. So I'll be able to do what I like, even with my objects. Then, ... perhaps I can accept more commission projects, I can work on mature plans.

ES: Making children's playgrounds, something like that? ...:-))

HS: *Yes ...:-)) I'll be willing... Something more specific like that. Wow, that's inspiring. But for now I have to work for some exhibitions first. But the creative work part of a children's playground is very attractive to me. Or something connected with*

*providing means for introducing sciences to children ... I'll be very enthusiastic to do that. Making monuments are also interesting... But not in the forms of figures. For instance, a monument for Sudirman. No, I won't be making the figure of General Sudirman. I will be filling up the city with videos, pictures, and various objects. In short, the monument will be throughout the city; the whole city becomes an exhibition space of Sudirman:-)) *** 07.08.09 –16:10-18:35*

Enin Supriyanto
Curator