

Judul : After 50 Years, Still No Saner?
Penulis : Godeliva D. Sari
Tanggal terbit : 12 Juli 2009
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Nama media : The Jakarta Globe
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Godeliva D. Sari | July 12, 2009



The current retrospective exhibition at the Jogja National Museum in Yogyakarta, titled “Still Crazy After All These Years,” brings together 99 examples of the work of Agus Suwage, covering 24 years of his career as an artist.

“The exhibition is of 99 works,” Agus said, “but many of the works are made up of several pieces. This exhibition was meant to be held in April, for my 50th birthday, but getting it ready took longer because many of the works had to be loaned from collectors. The title of the exhibition was given by Enin Supriyatna, the curator, and it is taken from a song by Paul Simon.”

The exhibition was organized by Tita Rubi, who is Agus’s wife and an artist in her own right. She said: “Tempointeraktif.com said that the cost of the exhibition was around 500 million rupiah, but we have yet to calculate the cost. I suspect it will add up to more. We spent a lot of money transporting the works we borrowed from collectors. Then we had to purchase CCTV equipment so that we could monitor the works we borrowed 24/7. The images from the CCTV are uploaded in real time onto the Internet, so collectors can check on their work at any time.”

On July 5, the morning after the exhibition opened, Agus was early to get to work in his studio-cum-home in Ngadinegaran kampung in Yogyakarta. Some friends were there nursing their hangovers with black coffee, but Agus was busy showing a group of Singaporean curators around his studio upstairs, including Lily Phua, the gallery manager of the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, where Agus spent three weeks as an artist in residence in January and another three weeks in May.

“We would like Agus to have an exhibition in our gallery in September,” Phua said, “because he is an artist who is gaining stature in the region. I don’t know if the political content of Agus’s works will resonate among the Singaporean audience, because there we are still trying to educate the public.”

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Even though the works on paper Agus has prepared for his Singapore exhibition are mostly nude studies of beautiful women, in an Indonesian context they are highly political.

“The model I photographed for my ‘Pinksing Park’ installation rang me and said that if I wanted to use her images I had better take her pictures quick, because she was going to get married and, after the marriage, she wouldn’t pose nude anymore,” he said.

In 2005, the Islamic Defenders Front demanded that “Pinksing Park,” then on display as part of an exhibition in Jakarta, be dismantled.

“The theme of the exhibition was urban life,” Agus said, “so I made an installation that consisted of a pink swing made out of a becak , in a room with walls papered with a digital print of images of a male and a female model in the nude — with dots over their genitalia — in an artificial park-like setting.

“I meant to express how the traditional becak is now an exotic thing in Jakarta, and how beauty has become artificial. But the media jumped on the fact that there was a famous actor posing naked in my works. They blurred the dots that I had put over their genitalia, so that on TV it looked as if they were totally nude in the artwork. The models and I were reported to the police. Fortunately the lawyer Todung Mulya Lubis helped us out for free and in the end the charges were dropped. But we never got back the three meter-by-15 meter digital print of the nudes in the park. It was confiscated as evidence and as far as I know, it is still with the Jakarta Police.”

The artist’s retrospective occupies all three stories of the Jogja National Museum, with earlier works on the ground floor and more recent ones on the two upper stories.

The exhibition traces the development of Agus’s technique, from expressionist canvases, such as “Mama” and “Still Dancing Though Wounded,” to meticulous paintings on paper, canvas and linen, depicting icons in the world of music or skulls and skeletons.

“I draw all the time,” Agus said, “so I feel my drawing has become more and more fluent. I used to use charcoal, and then I got into watercolors. A lot of my oil paintings are painted using a wet watercolor technique. Lately I have been getting back into using a dry-brush technique, as you can see in my recent works on linen.”

In one room of the Jogja Museum are three figures in crucified positions. On the left is a representation of the Latin American icon Frida Kahlo, the arrows piercing her body reminiscent of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. In the middle is a silver skeleton placed in a cavity that appears to have been cut into the brick wall, with an electric halo around its skull. On the right is a pot-bellied male figure with cuts all over his body, wearing a balaclava over his face and a string dropping down out of his tiny penis.

“Look at this” said Agus, grinning as he pulled at the string and the balaclava was lifted up to reveal the

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face of George W. Bush.

Many of Agus's works are funny, but most often he is laughing at himself. In the "Toys 'S' Us" series he has figures of himself dressed as a circus clown in various positions on a tightrope. One particularly clever piece depicts Agus squatting, wearing a conical mask. The figure can be slid up the pole it is attached to, and as it drops down it makes a pecking sound and motion.

"I began to use that cone shape over my faces while I was an artist in residence in Japan. I thought of it as a mosquito's needle, with which I would suck up everything. Here I was, in Japan, given all sorts of conveniences and facilities, and I felt like a fake, like a bloodsucker."

Much of Agus's works do deal with death and pain, often with an existentialist take on the experience of living in Indonesia. "Luxury Crime" is a gold-plated human skeleton, nearly life size, lying in a stainless steel bucket of polished white rice. In this evocative work, Agus has brought together the idea of death while criticizing Indonesian society, where the disparity between the rich and the poor is ever widening. "This took 30 grams of gold to plate the brass skeleton," Agus said. Humor and death once more come together in his portraits titled "I Want to Live Another Thousand Years."

The images play on a famous photograph of the revolutionary poet Chairil Anwar, in which he looks sharply into the camera while drawing on his cigarette. The title is a line from Chairil's most famous poem, "I."

Agus takes Chairil's hand and cigarette and puts it on portraits of the feminist RA Kartini, the human rights activist Munir and even the late President Suharto. The words "King Liar" are printed across the top of Suharto's portrait.

Agus also gets inspiration from music. He often plays music with friends in his spare time and has a music studio in his home.

One of his most memorable works is a series of his favorite musicians, and he treats them with irreverence. One portrait of The Beatles depicts the Fab Four carrying parts of an animal's carcass and a mutilated doll. Like the title of his exhibition, Agus also often steals titles from songs he likes.

"This painting's title, 'Blues for Allah,' is from a Grateful Dead song," said Agus, pointing to a blue canvas, depicting himself in the nude, from behind, against lines and dots redolent of a musical score. Agus also has a fascination with pigs. In one installation he has dozens of pigs' skulls on roller-skates, going up a ramp into the wall. In the Central Javanese culture that Agus grew up in, pigs, which are unclean in Islam, are often associated with uncontrollable greed.

One of Agus's recent works further demonstrates his sense of humor. A whole room is put behind bars, as if it were a prison, and inside the prison are figures.

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“This is a work in progress,” Agus said, “in the future there might be more people behind bars. But these are people who put me, as a working artist, ‘behind bars.’ So I thought that for once, for a change, I would put them behind bars.” The people behind the bars are art collectors, a gallery owner and a curator. Musician Sawung Jabo, who was in town for the exhibition, commented that many of Agus’s works depict pain and death. “But his self-deprecating humor creates a lightness to balance the force of death that is so strong in his works.”

Still Crazy After All These Years

Selected Works: 1985-2009

Jogja National Museum

Jl. Amri Yahya (Gampingan) No. 1

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