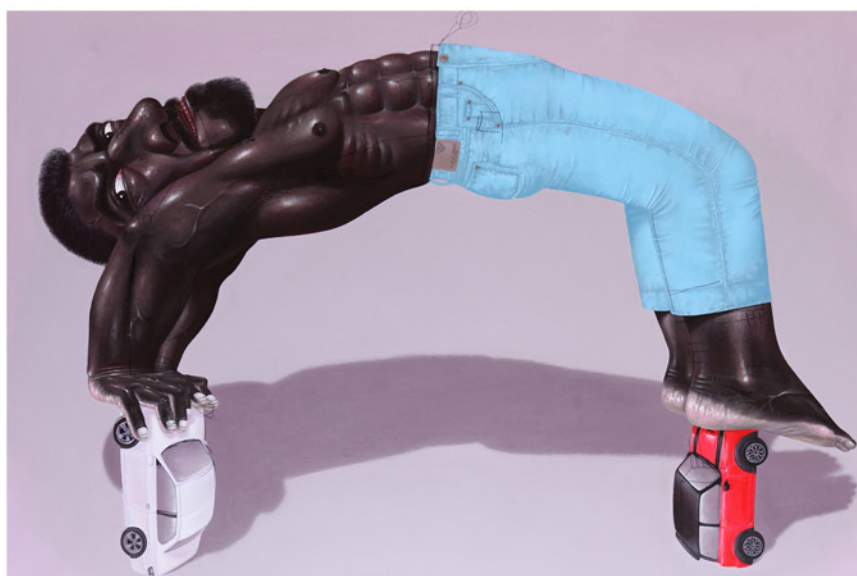


ONE ON ONE

Ashley Bickerton on Nyoman Masriadi



I had long heard of the work of Nyoman Masriadi, and seen in magazines the odd small image here and there.

What was most striking was the decibel level of all the surrounding hubbub, a lot of it quite bewildering to me as an artist who had come up through a very rigid system of ascendancy in the New York art machine. It seems Masriadi was creating a sensation in both the Southeast Asian art community and, even more noticeably, its attendant market in the West. What was most peculiar from my perspective was that this phenomenon—complete with a stratospheric price structure—had come about without a single one-person gallery show and indeed caused no small amount of grousing and conspiracy speculation among certain (possibly competitive) parties. This was unheard of in any art world I had known up to that time, but it has always been my policy as an artist to take the nonjudgmental approach to new art experiences. Gather data as you go and do not take a position until the weight of evidence is overwhelming.

And that can transpire quickly. This is exactly what happened at the 2009 Hong Kong auctions. I came around the corner in the packed Convention Center and suddenly I was confronting my first Masriadi painting in the flesh, and I had my socks

blown off clean. It was his *Master Yoga (Yoga Master)* (2009). I stood in front of it just shaking my head. All the yakking voices, all the nay-saying, just went out the window; this thing was an absolute and unquestionable beauty. I could tell instantly I was dealing with an enormously good artist. The work simply outshone everything around it. In fact, I walked away from that rather formidable collection of art with the work of three artists clearly imprinted in my skull: some shockingly good Nam June Paiks, a stupefyingly elegant Cai Guo-Qiang gunpowder painting and the graphically commanding canvas by the young Indonesian upstart Nyoman Masriadi. From that moment on, any debate about whether this was all hype—a manufactured market phenomenon—was rendered mute. Clearly Masriadi could hold his own among the likes of the two historic giants, and hold it well.

Since then I have become fascinated with the iconography and language of his work. Having lived for 18 years on his native island of Bali, and having essentially spent my adult life in the international art world, I am riveted by the clashes I see taking place in his imagery. Although it is clear that he has beaten a hard and fast path into a universe of his own invention, it is also clear that some very ancient rhythms and memes run through his work. He has managed to do what I was beginning to doubt was at all possible—create thoroughly envelope-pushing contemporary work while maintaining a very visible “Indonesianness.”

Viewing his work, one is immediately aware of the recurrent use of stark blacks and whites that play out like the graphic dualism of Bali’s traditional *kain poleng* (the black and white checkered textile that symbolizes the dual realities of good and evil, the physical and the spirit worlds). The sharply delineated and stylistically animated figures echo with the pulse of Bali’s ancient Kamasan paintings. Here we also see a dynamic descendant of the great Indonesian social-realist tradition, the bubbling *mélange* of the street, albeit, in this case, colored with a distinctly sardonic and mordant wit. Yet with all these arteries running backward into history, Masriadi’s work is decidedly of this moment. This is Indonesian art coming clearly into its own. Although I see many artists working in today’s increasingly interconnected world succumbing to a convergent globalized style, Masriadi’s work has managed to fuse many divergent and distinct rhythms and languages into one of the clearest and most Indonesian of voices.

NYOMAN MASRIADI

Master Yoga (Yoga Master)
2009

Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 300 cm.
Courtesy Gajah Gallery, Singapore.