

Ignorance is Bliss

By Eva McGovern

Happy Victims, the title of Indieguerillas latest solo exhibition at Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore, is a playful commentary on humanity's love affair with gross consumption and Capitalism. Focusing on urban aesthetics found in fashion, music and art as well as traditional Javanese motifs, Indieguerillas tell the story of our social obsession with brands and consumerism. It is well known that popular culture is inextricably linked with materialism and that society lustfully covets the products of its local and global economies. Media forces coerce us to believe how necessary and fulfilling these things are or more specifically the status and attitudes that surround them. As a result, this spectacle hijacks identity away from the traditional values of community and family in favour of superficial gains. Such shallow forms of entertainment create 'happy victims' of us all seemingly unaware of the larger economic forces at work controlling the way we experience life. Acutely aware of this paradox Indieguerillas observe the bright lights of our decaying moral fabric through their self-reflective style of contemporary cool.

Made up of Indonesian husband and wife duo Miko Bawono and Santi Ariestyowanti, Indieguerillas professionally began their collaboration in 2007 but have been informally working together since 1999. With a background in graphic design they incorporate international pop icons, comic books, Japanese manga, street art, skateboarding, bmx culture, tattoo and video game aesthetics, into elaborate compositions on canvas, sculpture, wall murals, animation and installation. Their use of strong lines and psychedelic blocks of colour are hypnotically theatrical and clearly influenced by the rock, heavy metal and hip hop music they often listen to whilst creating their work. Scrutinising contemporary life in Jogjakarta where the duo live and work, they draw from their own culture to create new and translated characters from historical Javanese stories who enjoy and question the absurd carnival of modern life.

Indieguerillas understand that they themselves are complicit 'happy victims' of materialism through their own lifestyle choices. Fuelled by an affection for popular urban culture their personal experiences also serve as inspiration for their visual parodies. Specifically, they comment on the cultural amnesia of the younger generation in Indonesia who readily discard their traditional heritage for the allure of Western/Global culture. Yet the pair avoid straightforward criticism in favour of more nuanced aesthetic flamboyance. By using play and humour as an accessible entry point into their work, they allow audiences to engage more easily with the discursive elements of their social observations. These are mediated by pop culture appropriation, the creation of hybrid icons and most importantly a

contemporary approach to traditional visual storytelling.

By lifting and restyling Javanese folklore and wayang (shadow puppetry) Indieguerillas display their personal sense of cultural pride whilst trying to appeal to younger audiences not to forget their own history. Rather than creating empty tableau however, the artists employ purposeful narrative intentions for their characters. *Happy Victims* incorporates three of their favourite protagonists from the Javanese version of the battle of Bharatayudha as described in the classic Sanskrit epic, the Mahabharata. From this story they have chosen and recreated their own distinct playful version of the Jester, a traditional dramatic device who despite his foolish behaviour is a source of wisdom for the main characters of the legend. Gareng, Petruk and Bagong are members of the Pandawa, one of the two major clans in the story, who appear again and again throughout Indieguerillas work. As the sons of the God Semar who also appears in the guise of a clown, and is believed to be the guardian spirit of Java, their playful antics and silly appearance provide guidance to the Pandawa knights on their quest.

In *Come Join Our Thrilling Supper* Gareng the oldest of the brothers appears on the left and Bagong the youngest, on the right. Their stylized cartoon like treatment complete with ~~Benday dots~~ⁱ—a homage to the influence of iconic American Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein and comic-book aesthetics—creates a signature blend of humour and tension. Emerging from their floating heads, sliced open by an unseen trauma, are sinister looking versions of the superheroes Captain America and Batman. Representing escapism, spectacle and Western pop culture they are now emasculated by their clownish red noses to become cynical revisionings of their previous invincibility. Gareng, with his tongue about to lick a small blue lollipop quizzically looks up at the demon in his head whilst Bagong blankly stares past his brother in a trance of blind submission. One seems to be a knowing 'happy victim' the other a simple casualty of Capitalism who has lost his own sense of individuality. They also appear in other works such as ~~Jaren~~ⁱ *Keyfunk* along for a wild ride of excess, chaos and confusion meeting strange mutated characters like Mao Tse Tung, Colonel Sanders, Astro Boy and bizarre distorted animal creatures. As perceived representatives of the grass roots their comic voices make them satirical yet deceptively wise participants/observers on the state of society.

Taking another inspiration from Javanese story telling, Indieguerillas use animals in their work to represent uncivilized creatures living under a chaotic system of 'jungle law'. Historically animals were depicted as less intelligent, greedy beasts in contrast to their more 'noble' human counterparts. However, Indieguerillas believe that at present humanity's gluttonous consumption is even worse than

animal behaviour. Like visual mad scientists they play with the heads and dislocated body parts of birds, octopus, cows, horses, deer and tigers creating a freak show of characters to represent the baser side of Mankind. Adding to this menagerie, the artists have also given life to sneakers, one of their most prized possessions in works such as *NAME OF ARTWORK*, *Sneakerhead*, *Vintage Suitcase and Jarenfunk*. Fashion is an important aspect to their lives and their practice quotes many elements from urban style with sneakers being a continuing source of inspiration. As highly desirable products sneakers can be so valuable that they become like animals, 'hunted' for their designs and rarity. Often they have characters or animal/human body parts emerging or riding inside them like a ghoulish cartoon vehicle. At times they possess mouths and hands, but without eyes and minds of their own the sneaker become a symbol for blind consumerism and a metaphor for the manipulation of society. By giving them deer horns and mounting them like taxidermy heads in *NAME OF ARTWORK* Indieguerillas ironically presents the contemporary trophies of popular culture. And like many prizes they are only as valuable until the next product appears tempting fickle minds for more superficial consumption in a brand-saturated world.

Due to their background in graphic design it seems natural for Indieguerillas to also question and interrogate the visual presentation of brand culture and its strategies for their own agendas. The name Indieguerillas is a shortened version of the word independent, and guerrillas represent tactics that favour viral communication and imagination rather than corporate clout. The artists have their own heart shaped logo and produce toys, t-shirts and other merchandise. Although a savvy form of marketing these products are part of their culture of fun and subversion that drives much of the artists's output. By playing with their own 'brand' and combining it with that of corporate giants and political/pop culture icons such as the Rolling Stones and Kentucky Fried Chicken, Indieguerillas reclaim their individual voices. 'Indie' is also a reference to Hindia/Indie, Indonesia's name during the Dutch colonial rule and this cultural awareness confidently inspires them to manipulate the commercialised social machine they live in. This is crucial when considering that graphic street and pop styles are still on the periphery of traditional notions of contemporary fine art. Artists working in this way need to be committed, persistent and often have other forms of income to survive. Therefore, the sense of fun associated with their subject matter and accompanying sub cultures are an important driving force for their practice. Play, like humour are powerful metaphors for human experiences. These more accessible strategies, unburdened by the need for academic validation allow the artists to unashamedly reveal the realities and contradictions of human life.

Happy Victims focuses on the corruption of tradition and morality by

aspirational consumption. Our contemporary reality whether located in Indonesia, Southeast Asia or the rest of the world, proudly allows the products of capitalism to define its social and financial success. This is the farce and tragedy of Indieguerillas's visual story. As the dalang, as they are called in Bahasa, or puppet masters of these rollercoaster wayang-esque narratives, the artists create a hybrid style of composition, colour and line. Such a psychedelic aesthetic serves to emphasise the excessive and superficial fool's game of society. This tension highlights the fragility of tradition and the need to re-examine the positive and negative effects of global culture on local identity. However, the exhibition is not a straightforward glorification of the past or vilification of modernity. Rather the artists aim to embrace local heritage, which is the foundation of their individuality, to promote this to wider audiences as well as celebrate new creativity that emerges from diverse international sources. Nevertheless as independent guerrillas playing with being cool, and the advertising of cool, the exhibition highlights that despite society's continuing evolution, ignorance is still bliss.

ⁱ Ben-Day Dots are named after the 19th century American illustrator and printer Benjamin Day. Small coloured dots are spaced together in various formations (similar to Pointillism) to create various colours and shading effects. Widely used in 1950s and 1960s American pulp comic books, the process was used widely by American Pop Artist Roy Lichtenstein who admired the accessibility and immediacy of mass media techniques.