

Abdi “Zet” Setiawan:

Depicting the Indonesian in Urban Setting

*The phantasmagoria of the flâneur:
to read from faces the profession, the ancestry, the character.*
• Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, *The Flâneur* (M6,6)

In the development of modern sculpture in Indonesia, the representation of the human body is almost predominant. The human body and face as featured in sculptures sometimes take forms as the abstraction of formal distortion of the body, or the idealization of the anatomical structure of it – often referring to the woman body in waving, dancing stylization or the muscular man body, for instance. This tendency seems to be the continuation of one among the central exercises in sculpting education in Indonesia that obliges the students to familiarize with and work on the form of the human body, the torso in particular. Beyond such academic tradition, the human body and figure in various stylizations have also been presented in the forms of bas-reliefs and statues as significant parts of temples in Java since 600 BC. Given the two points, it is not very hard to understand the tendency of the predominance of the human body representation in Indonesian sculpture until today.

The general tendency is to be coupled with the note that with regard to the materials, methods, and, more importantly, concepts and ideas, innovations are limited. A few significant and interesting development occur just as a number of artists tried to set themselves free from the confine of traditions with respect to the techniques, materials, methods and approaches known to conventional sculpture. In the latest development, what is now called object art, for example, doesn't render the form and discourse of the body predominance. Greater importance is given to ideas and forms as well as various possibilities of materials and presentation modes rather than to the search for patterns in giving abstract representation of the body.

Generally speaking, we can see there is a gap between the developments in contemporary painting and in contemporary sculpture in Indonesia. Painting, since at least over two decades ago, has been effective in breaking free from

various styles and “isms” that are sterile and rigid. Different approaches and styles can be mixed up in such a way to bring painting back to the representational tendency, after for a long time the canvas was only filled up with the style and approach of abstract expressionism. Realism, which is said to be a painting style at the point of crumbling¹, is now being revitalized and extended. The tendency has proved to be capable to encourage the realistic style regain its position as a vital language of expression in contemporary art. Works by Jendela Group, for instance, show how the techniques of realist painting – in order not to sloppily call it Realism - remain potential as a means to ‘read’ various esthetic questions while searching for their visual solutions in painting.

Abdi Setiawan’s sculptures shown in this solo exhibition here reflect a similar tendency: they reintroduce the tradition of wood carving in the realist style and at the same time adopt a new realist viewpoint in approaching themes and central ideas. Now when sculpture – which relies on manual skill in directly working with materials and forms – is giving way to objects art marked with the playing with and processing of different materials and forms, Abdi Setiawan returns to the skill of woodcarving while deploying his entire imagination and perception to depict the Indonesian human figure.

A work by Abdi Setiawan, nicknamed Zet, attracted Indonesian art audience at the CP Biennale “*Urban/Culture*” (Museum Bank Indonesia, Jakarta, 2005). The work took form as a spatial arrangement, installation – complete with dim lights, cheap and seedy furniture, loud music from the CD player, a large vase with plastic flowers, newspapers, the obtrusive smell of cheap perfume – which profoundly and appropriately presented the atmosphere of a city corner that tended to be just fancied and discussed in secrecy: a brothel. In the room there were eleven life-sized wooden figures: several men, customers to the brothel, prostitutes in garish, sexy outfits, pimps, *becak* drivers, and others – in their various poses. More interestingly, all the figures were in real clothes. With all

¹ See Dede Eri Supria, *Realisme, Gaya Seni Lukis yang Nyaris Bangkrut*, in Jim Supangkat, *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia*, Gramedia, Jakarta, 1979. Pp. 88-89.

that, Zet offered the fictional atmosphere, the simulation of a brothel waiting room with those statue figures as the main actors.

He then presented a similar work at the Jogja Biennale VIII, 2005. The work that is called "*Transit*" (mix media, life size, 2003-5) presented 4 figures in a setting of a waiting room of a bus terminal or railway station, complete with trunks, suitcases and their own packages. There was no abstraction, nor exaggerated formal distortion and any complicated concept in the work. Zet represented a fragment of the activities of city dwellers – which wait, come and go – just wryly. And just because of that, the work appeared fresh. The realistic rendering of the Indonesian figure pokes us with satire so that we smile away our embarrassment in recognizing our own behavior reflected.

Quoting the two important works of his is enough for us to notice at least three strong points in Zet's art. In the first place, he is not burdened with Modernism tradition that

tends to give primacy to intellectualizing ideas focused on the presentation of formal abstraction. Moreover, he is not burdened with any idealization of the body as often reflected in our sculpture. Secondly, Zet recognizes then maximizes one of his strong points as a visual artist: the potency for visual recording. He can quickly and precisely record the manners, styles and characteristics of Indonesians in daily life. Thirdly, Zet is not burdened with hunting for abstract thematic issues to work on. He picks things around him that he can recognize as issues in daily life. He takes the city, human beings in city life, with the consideration that he needs and wants to know it well by representing it in his works.

In his own way, with the sensitivity of an artist, Zet is able to uncover one among the most serious problems the world is facing: urbanization. Today's urbanization is also globalization. World's metropolises are closely interrelated in the economic-political network. Many cities in the developing countries are speeding up to become megalopolises with over a dozen of million population, forced by the interests of global economic-political collaborative networks. In consequence, the policies and practices of their developments are often

irrelevant to the needs of the urban populations. Many urban centers are enhanced to grow so fast so that they easily disregard and bypass their own citizens. A similar problem, in a different scale, is facing us in big cities in Java.²

Today's life and culture are those of the city – with all its complex problems: population explosion, and the insufficient dwelling space, transportation and the excessive energy consumption, pollution and environmental destruction, crimes and poverty, etcetera. The advancement of modernity and its concomitant humanitarian problems are becoming obvious in urban life. Those problems made Walter Benjamin went around Paris, pondering on various issues around “the 19th century capital” which later appears in his masterpiece “The Arcades Project”. Benjamin's focus of interest, urban life, turns to remain relevant with our conditions today. Right at this moment, more than a half of all the world's population lives in urban areas, and the number will be ever increasing. Today's *Homo sapiens* — as said in a report in *The Economist* — should be more properly referred to as *Homo urbanus*.³

Actually, Zet's decision to adopt the particular approach and theme was already made when he was taking his final exams at the ISI Jogjakarta Institute of the Arts in 2003. For his Student Final Assignment, he took the atmosphere of a prostitute's life as his subject and represented it by means of a simulation of the physical setting as well as the atmosphere of a brothel waiting room/lobby. He created his work based on his research to several brothels in Jogjakarta. He knew the atmospheres of those places and he built rapport with the people living in such a setting so as to understand their views and problems. Later on, he modified the work and sent it to the CB Biennale 2005. The depiction of figures of definite and realistic characters, and then the representation of them, or, to be precise, the presentation of the atmospheric simulation of the characters' setting, marks Zet's artistic approach so far.

Direct involvement in attempt to familiarize himself with the atmospheres of

² Jo Santoso, *Kota Tanpa Warga*, KPG, Jakarta, 2006; particularly Chapter 2, *Urbanisasi dan Globalisasi*, Pp. 39-61.

³ The Economist, 3rd May 2007, Special report, *The world goes to town*.

certain corners of the city as well as the characters of the people there almost always prevails in Zet's process in making works. One year ago, as I was talking with him regarding his solo exhibition which is now taking place at Nadi Gallery, I asked him what he would prepare for it. Zet explained that he would be touring Jogja to watch people busily running around in different parts of the city and catch the atmosphere. That's all.

I remembered the *flâneur* figure, the stroller that becomes a central figure in Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* I mentioned above.⁴

A *flâneur*, a traveler in town, is basically involved in a dialectical process: an outsider at some distance; but while being so, he/she is also part of things he/she is observing. In other words, he/she isn't detached in the full sense of the word from the reality he/she is facing. A *flâneur* is inside it, experiencing it. The *flâneur* is the reflection of the urban life itself. He/she is an observer cum participant at the same time. Having such a position, a *flâneur* to Benjamin, is a figure that is really perceptive, absorbing everything going all around town streets: weathers, building facades and architectures, the physiognomy of the faces of unknown people, lights, parks, shop windows, snack hawkers, operating transportation, etcetera. All are rolled up to happen in a single action and scene: strolling the downtown. Obviously, not everything is absorbed into profound reflection. A significant part of it will only be casually absorbed in passing. That's why *flâneurs* in general are perhaps dilettantes — lacking the opportunity to understand things specifically. Still, undeniably, he/she absorbs and experiences many things simultaneously, as many as the steps taken by a crowd of pedestrians. That way, he/she eventually moves to the rhythms of things that maintain the city's pulse. He/she flows with the city's life.

In the position of just a *flâneur*, how could Zet to understand the emotional experiences that have shaped the characters of the figures he intends to present by means of his sculptures? However, in the making and finishing of his works Zet attempts to transcend just the experiences and observations of a

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin, transl.), Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, part M, *The Flâneur*, pp. 416-455.

flâneur. He knows he needs to add his personal interpretations and judgments to the various recorded physiognomic data of his figures. Similar to what he did in working on his Student Final Assignment, he gets to know his figures, talks with them so as to learn the nature of their life. In that way, the physiognomic records will not stop as just precise visual recording; instead, the artist tries to get into some sympathetic understanding, or even empathy, with respect to other people's life. This is to say that at the final point, in the execution of the work in process, Zet ceases positioning himself as just a *flâneur*. He reclaims his humanitarian intention and interest to critically understand what is going on around him. And, in the end, he has to deal with the greatest challenge facing him as an artist: discovering and defining the various formal aspects in his works to contain all his ideas and thoughts. At this point, Zet is an artist who is successful in introducing emotional empathy to his sculptures. We see these figures, immediately recognize them, and are soon stirred to learn about their life experiences.

Watching Zet's figures provides the experience of watching the faces around us, and our own faces, as they are, with all their idiocy and funniness, with all their innocence and bitter life. If you happen to be familiar with comic books and know the character of Mat Som created by Lat from Malaysia, I think you will agree with me that Zet succeeds in featuring the Indonesian face and figure just as Lat successfully features the Malayan face and figure in his comics.

Furthermore, Zet's perceptiveness in making visual records is actually the one that makes his works have such effects on us. With his visual recording ability, Zet carefully calculates the elements to represent them in his sculpture figures. The teak wood he carves roughly so as to produce unlevelled surface, the acrylic colors enforced to mix on the surface of the wood thus effecting dullness, the detailed accessories and clothing, and through gestures and poses (arms akimbo, arms crossed, gripping a hand phone), facial expressions, gazes and glances – all add to the rich physiognomic images in his works. Also because of that, when viewing these figures we recognize the Indonesian figures we meet in dusty city roads and streets: hawkers on the street crowded with people and passing vehicles, the hooker in a corner of the town that is as bleak as her

future, and the hoodlum in his fierce stance by the marketplace corner capitalizing on his strong built body embellished by tattoos. As we try to identify those individual figures as some definite characters, we begin conjecturing their experiences and ways of life: one figure looks damp and exhausted from trying to escape from the police and pollution; another is preoccupied with beautifying herself, spraying perfume or perspiring in filthy places; and still another one pretending to be relaxed, absent-minded, or alert, grinning at a lucky chance. Given these strong points, we can understand that for this exhibition Zet doesn't feel the need to give his figures their life sizes. He has already arrived at the plane where he gives prominence to rich physiognomic images rather than merely anatomic precisions.

In addition, Zet also seriously considers the ways in presenting his works. Like what he has often done, arranging and displaying his sculptures in some specific settings, in this exhibition he groups a number of sculptures as an effort to give more life to the individual characters. Hence those characters are present in the atmosphere of the city streets where several people, in various ways, are interacting. In effect, by means of his sculptures in the exhibition space this time, Zet is inviting us to stroll along the city streets, just like *flâneurs*.

Enin Supriyanto | *Curator* | September 2007