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## Dadang Christanto: a calling to account

Allison Gray

The work of Dadang Christanto reaches beyond specific references and personal suffering to reflect on the universal. In *Count Project*, begun in 1999 and triggered by millennium celebrations, Christanto appeals to his audience for a more honest assessment of the past 1000 years.

Christanto, formerly from Yogyakarta, Indonesia, has lived in Darwin for 5 years since becoming a Lecturer at the Art School of the Northern Territory University. *Count Project* opened in early May at the NTU Gallery with a collaborative performance by local cellist Rebecca Harris. The exhibition featured large-scale works on paper with drawn, painterly and calligraphic marks in ink. These are new materials for the artist; a significant shift that he attributes to his passage from East to West in moving to Australia, experiencing an increased awareness of Orientalism and a new sense of his own identity. "Here I am Asian," he says.

In Australia the principle theme of his work has been counting the victims. His work is testimony to systematic violence and challenges the enforced silence

of all those who have been victimised throughout the 20th century. For Christanto, whose family lost a patriarch as a result of government orchestrated brutality, the rationale is intensely personal. There's a sense of urgency in his mark-making, bolstered by a skilled play of positive and negative space. Everywhere gestures seem to scratch against the page and outline the heads of numerous victims. How many wounded humans in the 20th century are there to count—not the victims of plague or natural disaster or famine but those who've died because of systemic violence?

The artist's process is evident everywhere in this exhibition. In part the work appears as a record of a performative, cathartic event. The heads of victims are rendered as if through semi-automated unconscious drawing. Christanto maintains control in the creative act in a deliberate attempt to distance the process and work from simplistic documentation or reproduction of violent acts. Intriguingly the marks are reminiscent of the energy of expert batik making, said to be a meditative act. Like many Javanese women of her

background, Christanto's mother traded cloth. As a young boy, his first awareness of art was in the batik textiles she sold.

Every work calls on a dynamic aesthetic that utilizes a limited palette of red, black and brown. A red or black line marks the head, the site of the body where memories are kept—Christanto refers to the memory of his father's abduction as a darkness that he must carry in his head. In 1965 and 1966 countless suspected members and sympathizers of the PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) were abducted and massacred in purges driven by the military. Their stories and those of their grieving families have been systematically silenced, and people connected with them strategically stigmatised as enemies of society. Increasingly Christanto's artwork is driven by this historical event of which very few photographs exist.

Click, click, click. The sound of the military boot on hard ground holds a very particular resonance. It is the sound that comes before the abduction. In the Christanto family home the sound still creates a wave of anguish. In

the artwork the military boot stamps dominant in the central field of the image. The boot carries with it a sea of disembodied heads. Images like these have become devices for preserving shared memories and honouring a collective history that lies beyond the scope of words. Christanto's work is driven by a confidence that visual art can heal social and personal wounds.

*Dadang Christanto's work is showing at the School of Art Gallery, ANU, August 7-31; performance at The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, August 8. His major work, They Give Evidence (1996-97) recently acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, will be the key exhibit in their new Asian Galleries opening October 25.*

*Count Project, Dadang Christanto, Northern Territory University Gallery May 6-16*

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