

Indonesian artists portray issues of development

YOGYAKARTA (JP): Japan and Australia are supportive homes to the mainstream movement of contemporary art development in the Asia-Pacific region.

A number of Asian contemporary arts exhibitions have been organized since the second half of the 1980s in Tokyo, Fukuoka, Osaka and Hiroshima. Asian artists have also taken part in exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art and

the Fukuoka Art Museum. This tradition continues as five Indonesian artists show their works alongside 11 artists from Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines in *Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future*, organized by the Asia Center and the Japan Foundation. Opening today at the Museum of Contemporary Art in

Tokyo, the exhibition runs through June 1.

It will continue at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art from August 2 to Sept. 15.

The featured Indonesian artists are Dadang Christanto, Semsar Siahaan, Moelyono, Arahmaiani and Agus Suwage. They are known as contemporary artists who are inspired by social and political problems of the surrounding community.

Their selection was in accordance with the exhibition's themes of ethnic culture, individual identity and social and political issues.

The theme was derived from Southeast Asia's rapid and far-reaching development in this decade, which has been accompanied by social upheaval, including the depletion of agricultural land and destruction of the environment.

Conditions may vary in each country but there are the same characteristics in the blend of traditional culture, Western colonial culture and immigrant culture.

The artists in Southeast Asian countries produce extraordinary pieces of work evincing social and cultural realities in their search for a form of expression of their own. This is unique compared to the works of American, European and even Japanese artists.

In this region, the position of art and artists is apparently different from that in the West and in Japan. Many Southeast Asian artists work amidst community life, as a consequence tending to base their work on morality. At a basic level, this is reflected in the formal aspect of their works.

The exhibition, according to these themes, comprises three distinct artistic elements. The art that refers to the uniqueness of ethnic culture elements translated in their contemporary meaning, art based on the inner world and individual identity, and

art that is connected with the problems of the realities of life, including social and political environment.

Grouping

The curator has grouped four Indonesian artists in the theme of social and political problems, with Agus alone categorized based on the theme of individual identity. Semsar displays paintings, while Moelyono and Arahmaiani show installation works.

Dadang Christanto, 40, an installation artist, explores themes of violence arising from pressures of the social and political structure. He is inspired by the fate of the common man weakened and marginalized by the pressures of the system.

Christanto's contribution is an installation piece entitled *They Testify*. It consists of 20 statues representing male and female figures, which are made of a mixture of fiberglass and terracotta clay. The male figures are 2.5 meters high and the female ones 1.95 meters. They stand upright with their arms bearing human figures without heads, arms and legs.

"They are the victims of violence," says the artist, who now lives in Yogyakarta.

The work appears to be a continuation of *Manusia Tanah* (Men of Land), which was exhibited on Jakarta's coast in 1996. In the earlier work, the naked figures of males and females depicted the naivety of the lower classes who are objects manipulated by the system. They look straight ahead, open-mouthed but unable to speak. In their hands are people lying powerless, the victims of violence.

For Christanto, the figures testify to the systematic employment of violence. In his eyes, violence is not just a form of individual behavior but has become the language of power. The eviction of slum inhabitants in

urban areas, raids against traders in the informal sector, and random checks on identification papers in cities have all undermined the bargaining position of the lower classes, Christanto says.

His installation works usually do not explore complex themes. For example, his *Violence I* consists of heads made of terracotta which are placed on a pyramidal structure.

This work was displayed in New York last year and will be exhibited in the Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada, from April 26 to July 6.

Christanto also explores aspects of violence in the physical form through the destruction of human heads shaped from terracotta. This work was presented in an art performance held at the Cairns Regional Gallery,

Queensland, Australia, in August of last year.

"The art show is the manifestation of direct physical violence," says the graduate of the Yogyakarta's Indonesian Arts Institute.

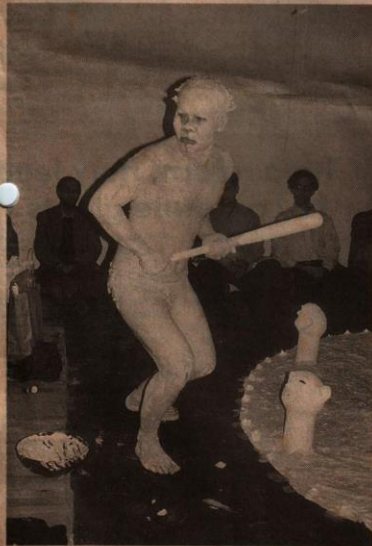
For him, physical violence and structural violence can be represented through his two artistic expressions.

The simple symbols in Dadang's art apparently represent

his wish to communicate to the society at large.

His work is not merely art dominated by the exploration of artistic elements only, but display a strong awareness to build communication with the people. The only drawback is that this approach can easily descend into the pro-seltyzing zeal associated with messages in pamphlets and posters.

Dadang Christanto's work entitled *They Testify* features an installation of statues of male and female figures made from a mixture of fiberglass and terracotta clay. They stand upright with their arms bearing human figures lacking heads, arms and legs.



JPR, Fadri

Dadang Christanto's work also includes the performance art piece *Violence in Soho*, New York.



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