

Artist Nurkholis reflects on art as a mirror

One of the important functions of art is to serve as a mirror — reflecting upon, questioning and interpreting current social attitudes, trends or events.

It shows us ourselves in images, which we can recognize. Sometimes those images are confronting, and part of society does not like what it sees, reacting in a kind of angry denial. But with the wisdom of hindsight, the artist's eye is often recognized as having shown true and valuable insight, and these artists may become the famous names in the art history books.

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Yogyakarta artist Nurkholis has been experiencing his own version of this as he has explored the psychological/spiritual relationship of human beings with their own bodies in the past three years.

He believes the human body is energy, and tries to express that on canvas. He knows God's creation is perfect, and wonders about the widespread dissatisfaction,

embarrassment and shame people seem to demonstrate about their physical self.

In Nurkholis' eyes, all bodies are beautiful in their own uniqueness, and he longs for the time before we became ashamed of them.

"Our body is our only definite reality. Everything else is other. How did we become so repressive about our bodies?" he said.

He is shocked by the wide exploitation of the body and he also questions media-promoted conventional standards of beauty, making the quest for this "perfection" an industry in itself.

Nurkholis says, "Whatever

you are is your beauty."

During his artistic exploration of this very human issue, Nurkholis developed a way of using the actual physical body as a painting tool, and in the process of using the physical, is showing us the spiritual.

The images often look like they might be capturing the astral body itself on the canvases. The physical is metamorphosed to show us the purity and sanctity of humanity to demonstrate that we are a fusion of the physical and the spiritual.

However, like other artists before him, Nurkholis has found out that the society



CP Open Biennale

A detail from the triptych *Nega-Posi of Movement and Passion*

around him was not yet ready for his message, even though he was recently honored with a prize in Japan.

In his homeland, there has been criticism of his methods and of his images, saying that using naked bodies is immoral and not appropriate for this society, and exploits the female model.

According to Nurkholis, there are those whose imaginations are running wild as they think about the naked body creating the impressions on the canvases, as if this might be some kind of pornographic process.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In actual fact, a complex and deeply considered artistic technique is required to achieve the dimensionality in the images. The body printing process is complicated and physically demanding, and therefore requires a clear understanding, and mental discipline from the model and absolute artistic professionalism from Nurkholis himself.

He is rather like a film director who is also acting in his own movie, as his own body is part of the process. He is directing the physical action, which is a series of complex and precise horizontal postures, then standing back from the result and analyzing it as it is in process.

He is not only depicting the human form, but he is using the naked human form to depict itself! In the fundamental Islam observed in some Middle Eastern countries this is forbidden, but in Indonesia the ban has never been strictly observed.

But there was negative reaction from people in both the Muslim and Christian communities, from collectors, art dealers — who suddenly became jittery in the climate of controversy — and even from other artists.

Nurkholis' concept is that the body itself is art and for him it is also the tool to create his art. "I have never felt a contradiction between my religion and my art," he said.

From the age of nine to 15 years, he had a conventional Islamic education at an Islamic boarding school. During his earlier artistic period he often participated in Islamic art exhibitions, showing Islamic calligraphy, which was often combined with his surrealist style.

The theme of his work was decidedly spiritual, the works also containing other Islamic visual symbols. However, at a certain point, he observed that his calligraphy paintings were being purchased for impure purposes relating to business and materialism, sold into corruption, so to speak.

The conflict of purity and hypocrisy bothered him so much that he ceased doing this work.

Nurkholis says that during his three previous art "periods" his work always sold well. However, he had become bored with what he was doing. He wished to go deeper with his mental/spiritual explorations and had to find a new technique to do so.

Ironically, the technique came to him out of his frustration. He found himself in a period of introspection, which led him to his present

work — a contemplation of the human condition. One of his children asked him why he was not painting anymore and this painful question caused him to kick out at a wet canvas nearby.

Then he saw the clear impression of his foot and leg and realized that he had found the way to express his thoughts about being human.

When he changed to the "body imprinting" art he needed the support of his artist wife, Hety Nurani, also a graduate of the Yogyakarta Institute of the Arts.

Refusing to compromise in his work despite the professional and financial pressures, which have been on him for the last year or so, Nurkholis' exploration of the human relationship with the physical body continues.

He is also integrating other techniques into the body imprinting works — collage, and some brush painting in realistic style, and the works frequently contain social commentary.

For the important CP Open Biennale currently at the Galeri Nasional in Jakarta, he has defiantly created his largest work to date — a nine-meter triptych, affirming his determination not to be influenced by anything but his own artistic inspirations.

"My art is like a river that is always flowing, always trying to find ways to enter into and pass through obstacles. There will be no compromise because of business thinking or commercial pressures. For me it is totality of art. It will be examined by time, who is the true artist and who is not," he said.