

Dolorosa Sinaga: Artist, role model

Dolorosa Sinaga has been very often defined as a feminist. But in fact she is also an artist, role model and activist.

Her sculptures represent women's experiences. Grief, loss, anger as well as joy are some of the emotions present in the kaleidoscope of her production. She explores women's body movements as well as community emotion and human connection.

The women she features are those victimized but not defeated. They fight and draw strength from each other. A sense of "togetherness" is tangible and consistent in her work.

In Indonesia more than half the population are women but they are still considered inferior to men. In such a society it is easy to see why Sinaga is considered a feminist. It all comes down to identity.

Althusser, a 19th century French philosopher, defined identity as the "image we have of ourselves, and according to which we respond when called". Here a gender-biased educational system, and a macho socio-cultural apparatus shape woman's identity. Unsurprisingly, television programs stereotype women as dependent, cooperative and passive.

Sinaga begs to differ. Her work offers women a different identity, with no figures representing virginal purity, or sensual temptresses. Her women live in today's "real" world, impregnated with difficulties, and most importantly they fight.

Her contribution to the women's cause has been noticed. In 1994 she was presented the Krida Anodya



DOŁOROSA SINAGA

Fabio Scarpello

Contributor
Jakarta

award for her outstanding achievements as a woman sculpture by the minister of women's empowerment.

But women are just a metaphor to her. She is far from the angry, hairy feminist who burns her bra.

Her ideology goes deeper than that.

"I am an artist who is against injustice in society. In Indonesia women are a target of injustices and that is why I give them a voice."

Her experiences abroad were instrumental in forming her ideology. After graduating from the Jakarta Arts Institute (IKJ) in 1977, Sinaga moved to London where she lived for three years and obtained a Mas-

ter's degree at the prestigious St. Martin School of Art in 1983. At Berkeley, near San Francisco — where she lived for a year — she studied the Finest Method of Bronze Casting.

"London and San Francisco gave me a means of comparison. Living there certainly widened my perspective; I came into contact with the people's movement and realized how great a political pressure they can apply. Over there, the lower classes are aware of their social rights, and I realized how this helps them close the gap with the middle class. When I came back to Indonesia I could not accept anymore the social inequalities and injustices."

But she is an artist and not a politician. Her message is clear and strong but the medium she has chosen to propagate it is sculpture and not the legislature. But her impact is equally effective.

To Sinaga, art is a mean of social progress.

"Art is the best tool to make minds productive and to make people ask questions. Especially to children it can be a mind opener. I don't expect every child to become an artist, but I believe that every child should be in contact with a creative environment. Art allows children to experiment. Results — of any level — bring pride, and proud people aim higher. This, in time, would make a chain reaction from which society as a whole would benefit, becoming more productive."

Here are not empty words. Sinaga makes things happen and involving the young generation has been a constant in her life for years.

She is currently dean of the School of Arts at the Jakarta Arts Institute. Students gain from her experience and enthusiasm. Some of them work in her studio and their works are proudly displayed next to hers. Also when she exhibits, there is always a space reserved for children where they can dirty their hands with clay.

She does not just wait for people to come and experience art. She is well aware of the cultural and economical barriers of the lower classes, so she takes art to them. Together with a close group of like-minded friends, she takes regular workshops for underprivileged children at Sanggar Akar, an organization concentrating on improving children's basic education and widening their opportunities through various art forms.

But in the final analysis, an artist is judged on the aesthetic merit of his artwork. Sinaga's "auteur signature" is evident in the reoccurring themes of her art in relation to time (the present) place (here) and subjects (women's experiences).

The common denominator is the fluidity and energy oozing from them. More than just viewing Sinaga's art, it seems to invite you to partake in the dance, in the protest, in the grief. The visual messages transpiring from her works stir emotion in men as well as in women across the world.

Her art may be rooted in Indonesia but her message cannot be limited to a country. She represents the pinnacle of Indonesian sculpture because her art transcends gender-appeal, cultural limits and local identification.