

Dolorosa Sinaga, finding her own way

Dolorosa Sinaga's second solo exhibition, currently being held at Nadi Gallery, underlines her continuous engagement with social issues, which she explores primarily through the female form.

The human body in its female representation continues to be Sinaga's metaphor to express the plight of the socially marginalized, discriminated and repressed in society

While grief stood out in her first solo exhibition in 2001 — a retrospective of 20 years' active creative work — and was expressed through lines and texture, particularly prominent in the undulating folds of dresses, this time, the artist peels off the layers, if any, to reveal the bare facts, leaving the abstract — a stylized purity of form.

In her new collection, it seems Sinaga is making a statement — she has departed from her previous intense attachment to the legendary Kaethe Kollwitz — she is now following her own path.

In this sense, the sculpture titled *Will find my way* contains a double meaning.

If one wants to know the situation of women, one only needs to look at Sinaga's sculptures, which changes with the tenor of time and environment.

For example, from the lifeless surrender as depicted in

Olympia, through a woman in an enclosure, and in *Tragic Tendency* (1994), which depicts a lifeless female figure against the harsh lattice of a cage, Dolorosa Sinaga goes on to express pain, grief and immense suffering in the stirring dress folds and texture of *The Grief, Sister take me to dance with you*, a collection of sculptures in 2001.

But a growing strength has since then emerged from the depths of desperation, and women from all walks of life now stand together in a rare dynamic of solidarity as expressed in *Solidaritas* (2000), *Avante* (2001)..

Building strength from within did not happen overnight, but involved a long process of overcoming and transforming pain into a power that was to liberate the women from the shackles of desperation

*Resistan** (2006) reveals the process of this transformation, showing a woman desperately trying to squeeze out the pain in her breast with one hand, while her other hand, hardly visible behind her back, is clenched into a fist.

In just a few years, women have become visible, albeit with many constraints still. In the political arena, they have progressed with their

demand for a 30 percent quota for women legislators and, eliminating the age-old excuse that there are no women qualified enough to be in leading political positions, Cetro (Center for Electoral Reform) has come up with 100 highly qualified women who are eligible for the position of legislator.

The recent issue of Inul, who has been intimidated with religious arguments and the accusation that her "drilling" dance style may have caused an increase in rape cases, has met with strong support from the general public — and quite ironically for Inul's accusers, they are confronted with the fact that all their brouhaha appear to be counterproductive.

Artists, women as well as men, housewives and activists, the National Commission on Violence Against Women — and even former president Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid — came to

the defense of this village girl who had become victim to intimidation. If this is a sign at all, then we may as well assume with Sinaga, that new avenues have indeed opened up.

The sculpture *Will find my way* shows a woman going on her way with new determination, carrying her bag slung in a carefree manner over her shoulder. The piece represents woman's rise from suffering and grief, from being vulnerable and helpless to being strong and determined to go the way she has chosen, even if it means going it alone.

With some sculptures still exploring the depths of sorrow, the exhibition strikes the viewer as a procession of important moments, providing insights to the process a woman undergoes as she struggles within herself, finally to rise empowered with new hopes.

It is easily detected through the titles of the pieces, that posture represents a woman's moments of truth. *Avante*, a sculpture showing women still clinging to each other, but with a few pointing to a new direction, gave the signal for

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Will find my way by Dolorosa Sinaga

women to overcome their social shackles.

Will find my way may be a reassuring image when nervously stepping into the new, awkwardly holding a bag in *Crossing the line*. Proceeding further, the woman relaxes as other women follow suit, *Leaving home*. Holding each other for a while, as in *The Three Graces 2* and *Embracing*, they then each go their separate ways, *Walking alone*, and boldly as they *Fear no power*. Their courage is revealed as they challenge, *Try me*, and stand tall in *I, the witness*.

These skeletal, elongated figures with emaciated bodies radiate a spirit freed from heavy burdens, and they even dance on their way, in solitude as in *The Dancer*, or together as in *Tari Rebana*.

As Sinaga continues to use the female body as her vehicle of expression, this should not distract from the fact that it is the artist's metaphor to represent the human body to represent the human being that is discriminated, marginalized, trampled on, repressed and abused, the very same body telling the

story in different periods of time and through various stages in life. The artist underlines this with her sculpture titled *Satu kata saja: Lawan* (Just one word: Oppose), paying homage to Wiji Thukul, the grassroots human rights poet who disappeared without a trace during the Soeharto New Order era.

In *Via Dolorosa*, the title piece of the exhibition, Sinaga transparently shows whose side she is on. Challenging the world in the pieces *Fear no power, Try me*, and *Will find my way*, she is bursting with inexorable energy, and optimism, as she declares that truth will ultimately prove victorious.

The Nobel Prize Laureate for Literature of 1982, Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, has said that every great author always tries to write the same book over and over again — it just takes different forms. The core that compels the author or artist to create, is always the same.

It seems Dolorosa Sinaga, with her compelling oeuvre, is proving him right.

Via Dolorosa
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